

A CAVALIER OF NAVARRE

A Tale of Pikemen and Musketeers

BY
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THE ACE OF BLADES



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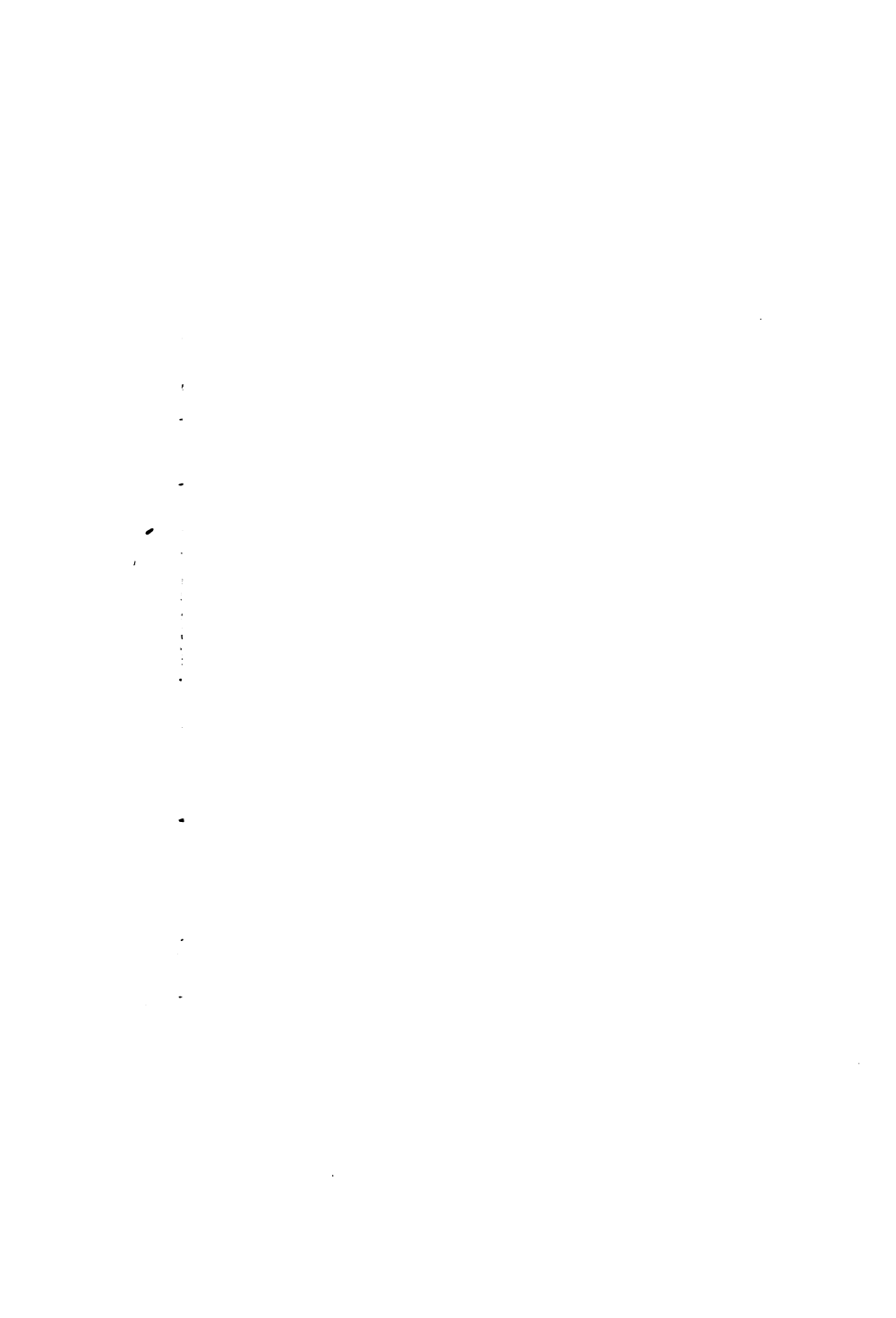
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A CAVALIER
of NAVARRE



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CHAPTER I

WE HUNT A GRIM BEAST

“**S**HADOWS are gathering, and clouds, too. Let us turn homeward, Hilaire. It is time. Come; we shall see no wolf.”

So spoke my younger brother, Moise, while the peasant lad, Jacquou Coudriet, stood and blinked at us stupidly out of his little, deep set black eyes, and the two shivering dogs lifted first one paw and then another from the cold snow, and doubtless wondered why we were standing there.

And I, looking up through bare tree tops at the leaden, wintry sky and the low hanging snow heads hovering above the peaks of the Ardennes and threatening to roll over and burst upon us, could not but agree in my heart with Moise. But I was ever a stubborn dolt, and unable to endure the thought of leaving unfinished that which I had begun.

“Nay, we will go on,” I replied. “If you have not the stomach for it, go you home, Moise, and sit warm by the fireside. Come Jacquou.”

Therein I did Moise a raw injustice, and I knew it. He was never lacking in spirit; but there was in his nature a broad strain of caution, with which at times I had scant patience. Besides, I was the elder, and liked but ill to follow any suggestion which did not come from me.

Not answering me with sharp words as he had provocation to do, but with a reproachful glance only, Moise moved forward, taking the lead, and we began the ascent of one of the steep, wooded hills which shoulder up brusquely above the pass which is known as the Gorge of the Red Deer.

It was a chill November day, and the first of the winter's snow, which had fallen that morning, creaked and slipped under our feet. In the upper air a bitter wind was singing, and occasionally reaching down and dislodging white sprays from the forest branches, which fell to the ground softly as vapors, and sometimes clung for a moment to our garments, or to the backs of the dogs.

Our breath trailed over our shoulders; and both Moise and myself were glad for the high boots which our father had given us—albeit they were too large for us by sizes. Assuredly we did not envy Jacquou his clumsy wooden shoes, stuffed with hay; though it was a question if his great jerkin of sheepskin were not warmer than our curt shoulder capes of wool.

We three had come into the forest for a twofold reason. Firstly: the season's first snowfall lay two inches thick upon the ground; and I was minded to try if the new dog which my father's English man-at-arms, Mark Fletcher, had brought me from Rocroy, were as famous a hunter as was my huge red terrier, Tite. Secondly—and this reason hinged upon the first—Jacquou, the Walloon lad, had brought to the château in the morning a tale of a monster wolf which had made bold forays among the sheep folds of the peasants around about the village of Flize, in the valley below us.

Three men had seen the beast, Jacquou declared, and other had found its tracks in the snow. Even discounting the exaggeration to which these peasants are prone when excited or frightened, the description of the wolf had fired

my imagination, as they had made it out a grim, gray giant of its kind; and Jacquou's tales had stirred my hunting blood to the point where nothing would do but that I must be out and after it.

Our father, Regnault Duhamel, who rode much abroad in all seasons and weathers, had left home in the gray of the morning, long before old Silvie was wont to summon Moise and me from our blankets. For that reason, Moise had demurred to this hunting, because we had no permission.

But I had silenced Moise by pointing out that we could not very well ask our father when he was not at home to be asked; that such absence was most certainly not our fault; and that in the meantime it was an excellent day for forest tracking, and if we delayed, the wolf might be gone about its business.

So we lads, of whom my nineteen years made me the eldest, had set out with the dogs to trail the savage wolf. We carried an array of weapons for the affair whereof the thought to-day makes me to smile. Doubtless the wolf would have laughed aloud could he have seen us coming.

I could not come at a musket, because my father had taken the precaution to lock the storeroom in which they were kept; so I had taken a light pistolet, of which I had found a brace after diligent search in his bedroom. With it I had my dagger, a good enough Italian blade. Moise carried the twin to the pistolet, and a stout oaken cudgel besides; and Jacquou bore across his shoulder a formidable pitchfork, which certainly was the most dangerous piece of equipment in the party, and in his belt a broad bladed knife such as butchers use.

We had left the château soon after our breakfast, and Silvie had provided us with a supply of cold venison and bread for our wallets. In the late afternoon, when Moise

first counseled a return, that store had long ago been eaten by us and the dogs. We had tramped many miles over rude going, and were weary and hungry and cold—and we had met with no wolf, or track of one. Decidedly, Moise's counsel was wisdom; still I would not listen to it.

Times not a few we had come upon rabbit tracks, in which Tite, the terrier, had displayed a lively interest; but we were all for the wolf, at least I was, and we scorned less noble game. Coming upon such again a half hour after my rebuff of Moise, and the sense that he had the right of it beginning to penetrate my stubborn brain, I determined that before yielding I would test the quality of the new dog, Leo, which had trotted in leash at my side.

This was a beast of which Mark Fletcher had boasted much, doubtless because it had come from his England. A bulldog, he called it, which was a breed new to me. It looked fit and ugly enough for almost any exploit. It was a squat, broad brute with bowed legs, not so tall as Tite by three inches, but with powerful shoulders and a great barrel of a chest. Its color was white, splotted with brindle patches as large as my hand.

Its eyes were red rimmed and sullen; and its lower jaw projected to such a degree that its lips could not conceal its fangs, which were displayed in front in a manner to frighten the timorous, though the animal had seemed docile enough, and had taken kindly to my mastering.

"Wait," I said to the others; "here are rabbit tracks which are fresh. I will try the dog," and I unleashed him and set him upon the trail.

Instead of leaping forward, as Tite would have done, he stood spraddled on his crooked legs, looking up at me and wagging his stump of a tail.

"Perhaps it is that he needs an example, and will hunt

with Tite," Moise suggested. He slipped the terrier, which at once bounded a few feet along the trail and halted, whining eagerly, to wait for us to come up.

To this the white dog paid no attention; nor did forcing his muzzle down to the fresh tracks arouse in him any apparent desire to follow them.

"Perhaps it is that he must be spoken to in English," suggested Moise again, whereat Jacquou burst out with a bellow of foolish laughing, fit to send scurrying any game within half a mile.

My temper began to rise. With good will I could have laid a whip across the brute's back, with a touch of the same for Jacquou. I bethought me then of the hissing noise which Mark had told me would encourage the bulldog to action.

"S-s-s/ Leo. S-s-s/!"

There was no need to have hissed twice. At the first sound of it Leo went forward as if he had been set from a spring, the snow flying up behind him and a deep growl issuing from his throat—forward, not upon the rabbit tracks to be sure, but to hurl himself murderously at Tite, quietly waiting for us.

After the first surprise of it, Tite met the onset willingly, and alone did snarling enough for two dogs; for after his first warning growl, the English brute was strangely silent.

Moise cried out and ran to stop the fighting; but I would not have it so. Tite was much the larger, big boned and active, and a doughty fighter that no dog ever had put to shame.

"Stop!" I shouted. "Let them be! Let the stupid learn the lesson which Tite will teach him quickly." For so I thought.

Not to detail at length that sorry battle, which continued for some five minutes, it required the combined strength of us three lads, with the leverage of Jacquou's

pitchfork handle, to pry that red-eyed demon from the grip which, defaulting the throat, he had fastened on Tite's shoulder.

Though he was at no time on top, the bulldog was undeniably the victor—which Tite admitted by not flying at him again, as he most certainly would have at any other dog. Poor Tite! I do not think that he ever had the same conceit in himself thereafter.

"At the least, if he cannot hunt, he can fight," I grumbled breathlessly, feeling a sour pride in the bulldog's prowess, even while I was still buffeting him across his bloody muzzle, and relishing the new respect for him which showed in Jacquou's eyes.

"*Hé!* If we could bring him to grips with the wolf, it would be rare sport to see, eh, Master Hilaire?" replied Jacquou, grinning.

Moise, who was feeling of the terrier's torn shoulder and consoling him for his lost battle, said nothing; but he cast a glance of little favor at the bulldog. Presently we went on.

When we reached the extreme crest of the hill above the pass, I would have swung to the north, along the timberless ground at the brink of the pass, over which was the shortest way to the plateau beyond, and so on home. But Jacquou balked.

"Do not go that way, Master Hilaire," said he, hanging back.

"But, why not?" I asked, though I began to guess.

"It would take us past the glen in which Tête Grise, the sorcerer, has his den." And at his own mere mention of the name of Tête Grise, Jacquou's cheeks lost some of their ruddiness, and he lowered his voice fearfully.

From time to time, mostly from Jacquou, I had heard of this wizard, whose repute was strong and wide among the peasants of the district. None of them could be led

to talk much of him, having an unwholesome fear of his powers. Now seemed a fruitful opportunity to learn more.

"*Pah!* Who is afraid of *Tête Grise*? Not I," I said tauntingly. "Come." And I made as if to move forward.

"You can go, and it likes you, Master Hilaire. I will not—even though you beat me for it afterward," he grumbled. What surprised me more, I saw that Moise was of the same mind, Moise, who, for all his gentle ways, I knew to be not timorous.

"But what does this sorcerer do that is so frightsome?" I persisted.

"Fearful things, master!" Jacquou's voice sank almost to a whisper. "He has the evil eye. He takes the tongues from living men and puts them into the mouths of dead cats—and they answer him such truths as he wishes to learn from the devil."

At that I laughed, and loudly; but it had a hollow sound. Despite that my upbringing at the hands of my father, who was stern against such foolishness, had been such as to engender little superstition in me, this talk had a mighty evil smack. Secretly I was glad that I had not engaged myself more strongly to pass by the abode of *Tête Grise*.

"Ah, well, if it is two against one, I will forego it this time. We will go back by the other way, though it is a good bit longer and more toilsome." This I said grandly, but not daring to put more of acid in my words, lest Moise should be moved to make me eat them. We turned back along the brow of the hill.

Would to God that I had not been turned by Jacquou's idiot fears! Had I persisted in my design, bravado though it was, much might have been made clear to me which it was to take me days to comprehend.

"Let us hasten," Moise said. "See, the snow is begin-

ning to fall. It will be late and dark when we reach home. Our father will be there—and you know, Hilaire, how well he likes to be made to wait. Belike we shall be flogged.”

“Ho, ho, flogged, indeed!” I flung at him; for it was two years and more since my shoulders had known the taste of my father’s whip. “I am grown too old and large for such child’s beatings, Moise. Besides, I am strong. Never again will I abide the lash, not even from my father. See?”

At my feet lay a chestnut branch. I caught it up, and though it was green and half the thickness of my wrist, I snapped it between my outstretched hands.

“Could Mark Fletcher himself do as much?” I asked proudly, and cast the fragments from me.

“Yes, you are strong, Hilaire,” Moise put in gently; “but see what comes of using your strength foolishly. You have torn your hand.”

As I flipped the blood from my finger tips, and sought words to make a clever reply, Jacquou, who was in the lead, halted suddenly. He lifted his hand.

“Listen,” he said. “Do you hear it, masters? They are fighting down yonder in the pass.”

We strained our ears. Faint and far, we heard it: a shouting of men and a tinkling like distant sheep bells, which we knew for the music of meeting blades.

CHAPTER II

THE SHOT IN THE GORGE

WHO can it be?" Moise whispered.
"Mayhap it is Black Simon, robbing a party of fat travelers," replied Jacquou, grinning. "Let us go and look."

Five minutes earlier the hulking lad had quaked and paled at mention of a sorcerer's mummeries. Now he went blithely down the slope toward the lip of the gorge, curious and unfearing, in the hope of catching a glimpse of a very material robber.

Yet Jacquou had an excuse for his fearlessness in this instance. This Black Simon, robber and highwayman though he was, had the name of being a friend to poor men. Far more likely was Simon to toss a gold piece to a peasant than to take anything from him; and when he did take, he paid. At least, such was his repute.

In consequence, these lowly ones idolized him and applauded his exploits. Few there were of them who would not have risked much to shelter or to aid him.

Myself, thinking of my father's silver mounted pistols, carried by Moise and me, and of the good ring, set with a green stone, which was upon my finger, was less confident of a possible encounter with the redoubtable rider.

Still, the fame of Simon was great, and I was curious to clap eyes upon him. I followed Jacquou, and Moise in turn followed me.

It is perilous to approach the gorge brink above the Pass of the Red Deer in winter time, when the rocks are slippery with snow and ice. The sides of the great pass are sheer as walls, and from the brow of the hill to the narrow roadway below is full five hundred feet. We lads ran as far as we dared. Then we went down on all fours and crawled.

Before we reached the precipice, a pistol shot echoed up from the gorge, and the singing of steel ceased.

As may be supposed, the report of the pistol hastened our movements; but for all our frantic scrabbling, we met with disappointment.

What fighting had been was over with when we, at the risk of our three necks, craned them over the edge and peered down into the pass through a swirl of fast falling snow.

To the northward a party of six horsemen was riding slowly through the pass. We had barely time to count them, and to catch the flash of a scarlet cloak which one of them wore, before they disappeared around a shoulder of the rock.

South the road lay straight for a long distance; and that way we made out the forms of two riders, galloping at speed, and close together as lovers.

"This way the travelers, with lighter purses," announced Jacquou triumphantly, pointing north; "and out yonder rides Black Simon with a bag of gold." The lad broke into one of his gusts of foolish laughter, cut suddenly short when Tite, the terrier, threw his muzzle skyward and howled long and dolefully.

"Now what does that mean?" said Jacquou fearfully, staring at the dog.

"Why, that he is hungry, you fool!" I answered. "And so am I. Come."

We clambered back to the hilltop, which was much

/

easier than coming down. While we were chattering among ourselves, surmising out of our imaginations details of the encounter which our eyes had missed, Jacquou raised a shout which drove all thoughts of evil wizards and bold Black Simons from our heads.

"The wolf!" he cried. "See, masters! Yonder he goes —by the big oak! *Pardieu*, what a monster!"

On the further slope, not five hundred yards from where we stood, I saw a gaunt, gray form cross a patch of open and slink shadowlike among the trees. As I looked, the beast came to the trail which we had made, paused for an instant, and then leaped high across it and went on up the hillside.

"He is headed for Trap Glen!" exclaimed Moise. "If he enters there, we shall have him; for the way in is the only way out!"

We began to run across the valley.

By branching diagonally from the course which we had followed toward the pass, we crossed the upper end of the hollow between the two hills, saving ourselves much needless running. Our aim was to cut in on the trail of the wolf far up the hillside above the spot where we had seen it last. This we presently did, and found the beast's tracks, where he had proceeded up the rising ground in long leaps.

"If he goes into the Trap, good," grunted Jacquou; "but if he does not, then a pleasant journey, M. Wolf. See how he has run? He must have heard us."

"He would be a deaf wolf indeed not to have heard that bull's bellowing of yours, Jacquou," I said sharply. "Now save your breath, my boys, and run."

To set them a fair example, I threw my weight forward against the slope and began to stretch my long legs in earnest. I soon distanced them; but I could hear them puffing and floundering along behind me, and occasionally

the crack of Jacquou's pitchfork handle as it struck against the trees.

"Clumsy oaf!" I thought. Never again would I have him hunting with me. He made as much noise in the forest as a legion of old women gathering their firewood.

With my elbows pressed into my sides and my lips tight closed, I ran easily. My boots held to the hard ground below the snow, so that I slipped but little. Beside me leaped the white bulldog, panting somewhat as the pace became strong for his crooked legs, and now and then catching up a mouthful of snow as he ran.

Thicker and thicker fell the storm. Before us the tracks of the fleeing wolf were ever partly filled with snow, yet ever fresher on ahead, so that they were plain to follow.

At the top of the hill the timber thinned again, and there I was forced to abate my pace, by reason of many boulders and masses of rock, which the wolf had overleaped with ease, but which I must go around. I kept on as fast as might be, hoping hard that the beast would refuge in the glen of which Moise had spoken; for if it should not, it would be vain to continue the chase with night so near.

This day of which I write was fated to hold much of both good and evil for me and mine. It was a part of our misfortunes that my hopes concerning our quarry were realized. When I reached the narrow mouth of the Trap, there were the big tracks leading fairly up the center of it.

There was need of no further haste or silence; so I sat down upon a stone to take breath, and shouted to Moise and Jacquou that all was well. In a few minutes they joined me, both of them sadly winded.

While we rested and made ready our assortment of weapons, Moise was hard put to it to restrain Tite from

tearing away his leash and rushing on into the glen. The terrier had scented the enemy long before, and forgetful of his wounded shoulder, was frantic to begin the fray. He danced around Moise's legs quite like a wild thing, every separate red hair bristling.

Leo, on the contrary, was placid and uninterested.

A few paces in from its opening the glen began a series of twists and corners, through which we advanced cautiously, picking our way around the fallen rocks with which the floor was strewn.

At no place was the gully more than fifteen feet across, and there were portions of it where I could touch both its walls with my extended hands. As we went on, the sides were steeper and higher and the rocks more difficult to pass.

What with the storm, the natural gloom of the place, and the gathering darkness over head, the Trap was an ill spot in which to attack an enemy so active and desperate as a cornered wolf.

All things, good and bad, have an end, and so had that accursed pocket of a gully. In little more time than it has taken me to pen it, we turned the last corner and saw before us the loom of the wall, where the glen terminated as squarely as a blind corridor.

There, too, was our wolf.

As we came around the rock, he leaped up snarling and faced us upon a table or ledge which extended out from the wall the full width of the glen and was breast high to a man.

He was an old wolf, and a truly magnificent beast, with his rough and heavy gray coat, his powerful shoulders, and his huge head with its upstanding ears and sharp muzzle. His eyes glittered like twin candle flames as he surveyed us, and below them his wicked white fangs were bared in a grin of rage and hatred.

There he crouched, at bay and dangerous, and we stood and gaped at him.

Then I heard a rumbling growl beside me. The leash tightened in my hand, and the white bulldog strained forward until he stood shoulder to shoulder with Tite. Leo's scent was poor enough, but his eyes and ears were good. He had seen and heard the foe, and he was become as eager as the terrier, though not nearly so vociferous.

"But shoot, masters, shoot!" muttered Jacquou, shifting his grip on his pitchfork.

Moise and I pressed triggers together. His weapon did but flash in the pan. My ball flew true enough; but there had been only a light charge of powder behind it. It struck the wolf somewhere in the neighborhood of the shoulder. Far from crippling him, it but served to transform him into a raging, slaving fury, that leaped and danced at the edge of the rock, and threatened to hurl himself down at us and the dogs, which at last the sound of the shot had driven to frenzy also.

What was worse, neither Moise nor myself had powder or balls wherewith to recharge our feeble pistols.

"The dogs! Loose the dogs!" bawled Jacquou, who, to give him his due, at the moment showed more head than either of us; and I think he pattered a prayer.

"Nay; Tite has taken enough ill usage to-day," said Moise through set teeth.

His usual caution gone to the winds, the lad flung himself at the rock with only his oaken cudgel.

CHAPTER III

A GRIM ENCOUNTER

“**M**OISE! Take care! Back, you fool!” I shouted all in a breath.

It was useless. If the lad heard me, he did not heed. Already he was at the edge of the rock, striking over it at the wolf with his foolish club.

Level with his face, the maddened beast, snarling hideously and clashing its fearful fangs, avoided his blows and waited its chance to launch itself at his throat. Tite, who had followed Moise, clawed furiously at the foot of the rock, but because of his weakened shoulder could not clamber up.

I stooped to unleash the bulldog. So hardly did he strain against the tether, that I could not loose the snaffle from the collar ring; so I cut the thong off short with a dagger stroke, and Leo went forward with such energy that he struck the rock like a bullet.

My pistolet was useless. Letting it fall, and clutching my keen Italian blade, I took the run, and leaped with all the strength of my legs for the rocky shelf which the wolf had made its citadel.

Though narrowly, I cleared the ledge; and then, as I felt the firmness of the rock beneath my feet, the heels of my boots slipped, my legs flew from under me, and I fell on my back with a force which jarred the breath from my body and most of the sense from my skull.

At once the wolf quit Moise and flung upon me as I

lay helpless. I saw the cruel snout above me, the gnashing jaws hungering for my throat. Though my limbs seemed weighted with lead, I summoned strength to lift my dagger arm, not to strike indeed, but to fend off those gleaming fangs.

Luckily my short cloak rose with my arm. The brute's jaws closed upon a fold of it, and I felt the stout cloth rent like paper as he worried it, searching deeper for the life blood. Hot froth from the black lips dripped upon my cheek.

But Moise had come onto the ledge. I saw his pale face appear over the beast's shoulder, and I heard the thwack of his cudgel as he brought it down on the great gray head.

That stroke saved me; though, for all the harm it did the wolf, Moise might as well have battered the rock beneath us. The brute whirled, its bush of tail sweeping my face. Breath and the power to move were returning to me. I rolled partly upon my side, and my eyes followed the battle.

Twice more Moise struck, springing back from the wolf's assaults. His fourth blow fell short, and the beast, its leap unchecked, seized his arm and dragged him down. He cried out once as the sharp teeth entered his flesh, and then lay still.

A demon of carnage seemed to possess that wolf. No sooner had he floored Moise than he charged back across the ledge at me, who was struggling to rise, snarling as he came. I had one elbow under me and had raised my shoulder a few inches from the rock, when a weight coming on me from behind pressed me back.

It was the English bulldog clambering over me to meet the wolf.

Either because of the difficulties of the place, or because of Tite's frantic performance around him, Leo

had been unable to mount to the ledge, and had raged at its foot until Jacquou, taking heart of grace, had come on and hoisted him up by his collar.

At sight of this new adversary, where he had thought to find an easy prey, the gaunt forest runner pulled up so violently that his paws slid along the rock. With back arched and head sunk between his shoulders, he awaited the advance of the dog. In the twilight of the glen his unwinking eyes shone like balls of green fire.

Leo knew nothing of the fancy trickery of fighting. From the instant when he felt his four feet planted on the ledge, he did not hesitate or turn aside, but lurched steadily toward his foe by the most direct route, which was across my helpless body.

At a distance of less than a yard both beasts sprang. The huge gray bulk and the smaller, compact white one met and rolled together. As they struck on the rock, I saw the snapping fangs slash Leo across the shoulder. A widening smirch of crimson appeared on his white coat.

Severe as was that punishment, it drew no complaint from the dog. In the *mêlée* he obtained a hold on his antagonist, though where he had fastened, I could not at once discover, so swift was the whirling tangle of the intertwined bodies. It was not the throat; for there began to issue from it a succession of the most appalling howls that I ever in my life had heard.

This way and that pitched the wolf, now rolling completely over, now rearing erect on his hind legs and toppling backward, and again plunging on his belly, as he sought to crush his adversary beneath him. Madly as he tossed and struggled, he could not shake the grip of the bulldog's jaws. Each time that his powerful throes carried him clear of the rock, there was the stocky white form hanging below his frontlet like a millstone to drag him down again.

He must have realized at last that his method of battle was fruitless; for he quit it. Settling himself rigidly on his legs, he set to work deliberately to slash the dog's back to ribbons with his fangs.

It was then that I saw that Leo's hold was on the inner side of his enemy's right foreleg, just above the knee joint. The bulldog's eyes were closed, and he was breathing heavily; but his only response to the torture which gashed his back was an occasional twitch of his massive head as he sank his locked teeth to the bone.

Moise still lay quiet at the far end of the ledge. My breath had returned, and I was essaying dizzily to rise to my feet, when Jacquou floundered up beside me and assailed the wolf with wild jabs of his pitchfork.

When it felt the bite of the steel, the savage devil thing began again its mad dancing, though not so strongly as before. Leo's weight and the pain of that crushing grip were beginning to tell. Jacquou's clumsy lunges, however, were as much a menace to the dog as to the wolf.

"Here!" I cried, laying a hand upon his shoulder. "If you harm that dog I will break your back with my hands!" For I thought then, and so think still, that the pluck of that English brute had saved the lives of all three of us.

While I stood swaying drunkenly and striving to master the vertigo which spun my brain, Jacquou let fall his unwieldy weapon, and watching his opportunity, stooped and laid hold of the wolf by the tail.

Immediately he had done it, the lad was affrighted by his own temerity; but he dared not let go. The wolf whirled frantically in an effort to come at him, dragging the dog along; and Jacquou's only safety lay in either tumbling ingloriously from the ledge, or in hanging fast and keeping behind, which he did, blubbing and calling lustily to me to come and help him.

Weighted in front by the dog, and with the desperate Jacquou clinging to his tail, the wolf was in evil case; and presently I sent a blow of my dagger home behind his left shoulder which finished him his business.

About that time Moise sat up and asked dreamily who had pitched him out of the window. He had struck his head on a knob of the rock when he fell; so it was little wonder that he was hazy as to his surroundings.

When we had reassured Moise and persuaded Leo that the fight was ended—which it cost us no little pains to do, so pertinacious was his hold—we sat us down on the body of the fallen monster and felt our hurts and exulted. That is, Moise and I sat on his body, allowing to Jacquou the tail, which was his by right of conquest.

In the upper sky the last gleams of the day were fading, and the snow came swirling down in ever-increasing volume. Tite howled mournfully at the foot of the ledge. The battered bulldog crept across my knees and thrust his muzzle against my cloak, wagging his tail feebly, but making no plaint, not even when I fingered his raw wounds.

I could have wept over the plight of the poor beast. His broad collar had saved his throat and neck; but across head and shoulders and loins he was laced with deep gashes, which bled freely until I bethought me to rub snow in them. The vital drain had weakened him so that he scarce could stand.

"Master Hilaire," said Jacquou earnestly, "under a flat stone in a corner of my mother's cabbage garden I have hidden three golden crown pieces, which I found in the Raucourt road last *mardi gras*. They are all the treasure I have. I will give them for the dog."

"'Tis likely that you would, fool!" I replied tartly.

"Keep them wherewith to buy yourself cakes next Easter."

Three crowns, indeed! A hundred would not have moved me.

I stood up and stretched my arms.

"My boys, we have done finely. The wolf is dead, and we are all alive. He makes a splendid corpse. Let us skin him, and go home."

"Dirty beast!" exclaimed Moise, kicking at the carcass with his heel. "He has bitten my arm nearly to the bone. 'Twill be stiff for a fortnight. But darkness is coming, Hilaire. Let us take the skin another time."

"Ho, ho, ho!"

Moise and Jacquou came jerkily to their feet.

In the gloom above us some one had laughed!

"May the good God save us!" whispered Jacquou. "What was that thing?"

As he spoke, the laugh sounded again.

"Ho, ho, ho!"

Laughter in plenty have I heard in my time, both gentle and rollicking, aye, and angry, too; but never have I heard cachinnation from human throat with such power to raise the hair and send the fear chills rippling up one's spine as had that soft, low chuckle which came down to us from the glen top through the drifting snow.

On Jacquou its effect was prodigious. He leaped from the ledge as though he had felt hot iron, cast one scared glance over his shoulder, and set off through the glen at a clumsy gallop.

I jumped to the floor of the gully and looked up.

Forty feet above me, at the brink of the wall, stood a tall, indefinite figure, dimly outlined against the lowering sky.

It made no move or further sound—if it had, I think it would not have been so terrifying—but stood motion-

less, staring down at me with eyes that flickered through the dusk like dying embers.

Moise clambered down beside me. I heard him groan as he struck his injured arm, and then draw in his breath as he, too, looked upward.

"What is it, Hilaire?"

"I know not," I answered through chattering teeth. For the recent affray, and now this ghastly thing upon the cliff with its mocking laughter, had clean unmanned me. "At least, it shall not have my dog!"

I dragged Leo from the ledge and shouldered him, and we ran for the open ground, and did not look back.

We soon came up with the slower Jacquou, whom a blind man could have trailed by the infernal din he was making. A thong of one of his wooden shoes had broken as he ran, and the shoe had come off his foot, yet dangled by the other thong from his ankle, and rattled and clacked against the stones at his every step like a dry and empty skull.

"Is it coming, masters?" he stammered, redoubling his efforts at speed when he saw us draw alongside of him.

"Nay," I replied, looking over my shoulder; "and I have half a mind to return. Some one is making game of us, and will spread a rare tale of three lads who slew a wolf, and then ran from a shadow."

"Do not go back, master," advised Jacquou between gasps. "It is either the devil or Tête Grise, his servant, back there. Perhaps the wolf was his familiar, and he is angry because we killed it."

Jacquou shuddered and indulged another burst of speed.

"You will not go back, Hilaire?" said Moise. "See how late it is. We can come to-morrow and skin the wolf."

Truth to tell, my stomach was none too keen to make good my bravado, and I agreed.

In the outer valley Jacquou left us, still running heavily, and followed the path which led to his mother's bit of farm, half-way to Flize.

At the end of another hour's buffeting through the storm, in which the dog became a sore weight upon my shoulders, Moise and I saw the lights of Château Duhamel.

"What will our father say," Moise whispered as we stole across the court. Tite had run ahead, and was scratching and whining at the door.

I shook my head dubiously. Now that the time was near to face my father, all the insolence had oozed out of me. The thought of his silver mounted pistolet, which I had left lying in the snow near the dead wolf, did not lighten my mind.

CHAPTER IV

WHAT THE STORM SENT

S EVEN hours and a half was the time marked by the Swiss clock of wood which hung on the wall, as we pushed open the door and entered the château hall. With us thrust in a gust of wind which carried an eddy of fine snow across the floor and set dancing the flame of the big brass hanging lamp.

In the wide fireplace at the end of the room a maple log was flaring cheerfully. Our father's carved chair with arms was drawn near the hearth, where he loved to sit on winter's nights. Beside it lay the notched board, wherewith he was used to draw off his jack boots by the heels. Under the lamp, the table was laid, as usual, with covers for four.

But the chair was empty; the long boots were not steaming in their place by the fire-irons; and no one had sat at table.

"Mayhap he is still at the stables with Mark," said Moise. "If we hurry we can mind the dogs and get the blood off us before he comes and sees us."

Silvie, who had heard the noise of our entry, came bustling in from her kitchen, and made a fine to-do because of our sorry appearance, and because the supper was spoiled by overwaiting, and for other reasons which old women find to fret them. And what would our father say? she gabbled, nodding her white cap at us portentously.

"My father—he has come, then?" I asked.

"Nay, Master Hilaire; he, too, is late this cursed night, but will come soon; and then——"

"Hasten, Moise; hot water, quickly, and the good liniment from the cabinet. Let us care for the dogs, and—Why, what ails the lad?"

Moise had left me and gone to the seat in the ingle nook, where he sat all slumped over, his face as white as parchment.

It was his arm, and I had forgotten it.

Four deep gashes I found, midway between wrist and elbow, where the wolf's fangs had torn his flesh. Blood had caked on the wounds and soaked through his shirt and doublet and frozen there, so that I had to cut away the sleeves. I called Matthieu, my father's horseman, from the kitchen to help me; and between Moise and the dogs, our next hour was busy.

All the while Silvie kept up her dolorous clacking about the noble joint which was spoiling; and still our father came not.

"In the name of God, Silvie," said I, at last losing patience, "fetch on your joint, and control the one whereto your tongue is hinged!"

Up went her hands.

"What, then, Master Hilaire—not wait for your father!"

I stared at her until she went sniffing off to the kitchen and fetched the meal. Perhaps it was our forest bred appetites; but neither Moise nor I could see that the joint had suffered a whit for waiting.

We had nearly finished eating when there came to us a stamping of horses in the courtyard.

"Our father and Mark at last!" cried Moise, and ran to the window. While he was rubbing himself a peephole on the frosted pane, a heavy knocking fell on the door.

I opened it, and a strange man, a burly fellow, so caked and hung with snow and rime that he seemed made solid of them, staggered wearily across the threshold.

"I seek shelter for my master," he said, peering at me from under his icy brows. "We be strayed from the road these four hours, and nigh frozen. There is a *demoiselle*——"

"We crave your hospitality for the night, young sir," put in another and more suave voice from behind him. A small man, swathed to the ears in a long, dark cloak, stepped in from the swirl of the storm. In the courtyard I could see the shapes of other riders and horses.

"We were wandering, and like to perish in this tempest, when we saw your light," went on the last comer.

As he spoke, his features formed what doubtless was meant to be an ingratiating smile, but which had a peculiarly unpleasant effect upon me. Judging from his manner of speaking, and the tip of a costly scabbard which showed below the skirt of his cloak, I guessed rightly that he was the master.

He wore a black velvet *toque* crushed down over his brows and tied with a scarf. Beneath it large and restless brown eyes danced continually. His nose was long and drooping and fleshy at its tip. He wore an upturned mustache, which was jet black, as was a short, pointed beard which concealed his narrow chin. His lips were thick and full and brightly red.

"Eh, well?" he continued.

I had stood gaping, but found my tongue.

"Certainly, *monsieur*. Come within. Our place is small; but to such as we have you are welcome," I said, as I was sure my father would have done; and I ordered Matthieu to go out and see to stabling the horses.

"You are good, *monsieur*," the stranger replied quickly. "Doubtless we shall fare very well." I saw him look

hungrily toward the table, where Silvie's joint was sending up a most tempting steam into the draft of cold air from the door. "I am an old campaigner. My men carry somewhat of provisions with them. Besides, I can pay well what damage we do your stores." He clinked a well filled purse underneath his cloak.

"Nicolas," he said to the sturdy varlet who had preceded him, "fetch in *mademoiselle*, and bid the others hasten to get in, too. We shall let in half the evil of the night if we stand here and keep the door open."

I stammered something to the effect that we were not peasants, and that there would be nothing to pay. He paid me scant attention, but walked briskly toward the fire, drawing off his gloves.

Nicolas came in directly, carrying in his arms what at first sight I took to be a child, and followed by two other men-at-arms, all of them very red of nose and shivering.

But when the serving man had set her down, I saw that the supposed child, though of little more than child-like stature, was a woman grown, of something near my own age.

She, too, was muffled in a great riding cloak, the hood of which had fallen back on her shoulders. Above its collar of martens' fur her chin showed round and firm, and white as marble from the cold. Her small, sweet mouth, too, was pinched, and her lips were blue.

From upper lip to brow her features were concealed by a mask of black silk. Her hair was covered by a wide blue scarf; but some strands which had strayed from under it to her forehead were of the color of ripe corn.

"Ah, a fire! It is good! It is good!" she exclaimed, and ran to the hearth, holding out her hands to the blaze. She moved across the floor so soundless that Moise and I stared in wonder, not knowing that her

shoes were covered with boots of soft fur. She seated herself in my father's chair, and was so small in stature that her dangling toes, which she kept swinging back and forth ceaselessly, did not quite reach the floor.

As the warmth of the flames beat against her, she removed her scarf and threw back the cloak from her shoulders. Its lining was a brilliant scarlet, at sight of which I stared harder still.

One of the stranger's followers had gone to the stables with Matthieu. Counting him, there were six in the party. Six had been the number of the riders we lads had seen traveling northward through Red Deer Pass in the afternoon—and one of them had worn a scarlet cloak!

Decidedly Jacquou had been wrong in his estimate of the encounter, if this were the same party. The clinking purse of the gentleman disproved the theory that his gold had gone to enrich Black Simon. What then was the meaning of it? Perhaps the two horsemen who had galloped south had been the travelers, and these——

My eyes flashed from the girl to the chief of my guests.

He had laid his hat and cloak on a bench and stood with legs wide spread and back to the fire, regarding me, I thought, with curious intentness.

Absence of his hat did not lend to the attractiveness of his countenance. His forehead was too low, though he was bald above the temples. The more I saw of his narrow, pursy-mouthed face, the less I liked it.

He was clothed in sober colors; but his garments were of a richness of texture such as I had never seen. Besides his sword and dagger, two pistols swung from his belt, and he wore light shoulder and breast armor over his doublet, with a broad collar of white lace which fell across the steel. His servants, too, were overly well

armed, it appeared to me, to sustain their rôle of peaceful travelers.

These reflections passed through my mind too rapidly for concrete thought. As though he had divined my perplexities, the gentleman interrupted them by saying:

"I am Jean Louis de Nogaret of La Valette, and this"—waving a hand toward the *demoiselle*, "is my cousin, Mlle. Serene de Lorme."

The girl, on whom the warmth of our fire had produced a beneficial effect, sprang from her chair with extraordinary vivacity of movement, and made a singularly graceful curtsy. She had not removed her mask; but what parts of her face I could see were beginning to glow prettily. I remember thinking that her little ears, which showed under the masses of her crisped and turned back hair, were like tiny, exquisite shells. She had laid off her gloves, and I saw that a number of rings sparkled upon her fingers.

Though I felt myself a boor, I could not keep my eyes off her, and words were slow in coming.

"And who is our host?" continued M. de Nogaret in a voice which he strove to make affable, but which was tinged with an accent of tetchiness.

It appeared to me that he was more anxious for my answer than its importance warranted.

"This is the château of the Sieur Regnault Duhamel, who is from home, but who is expected soon," I replied, bowing my best. "I am Hilaire Duhamel, his son, and this is my younger brother, Moise. You are very welcome here, *monsieur* and—*mademoiselle*."

Both of them bowed again, and *mademoiselle* murmured, "Thanks, M. Duhamel," in tones of such silvery timbre as astonished me, who had seen little of gentlefolks. She resumed her seat by the fire.

I fancied that she had looked rather longer at Moise

than at me, and it disquieted me, I knew not why. True, she had reason enough, if it were so, Moise being fair and lightly made and graceful; whereas I am a hulking fellow, in build like my father, and favoring him, too, in my almost Spanish swarthiness.

Matthieu and the fourth of De Nogaret's men came stamping in from the stables. Old Silvie laid fresh covers on the table for our two guests, and Matthieu stood by to serve them; for our household was small, and we had no table varlet. The men-at-arms trooped noisily off to the kitchen in the wake of Silvie, all save the burly, black bearded Nicolas, who seated himself on a bench to one side near the fireplace. Like his master, this fellow regarded me from time to time with an attention which did not escape my notice.

M. de Nogaret came willingly to the table, where Moise and I reseated ourselves to bear him company. But *mademoiselle* would not leave her seat by the fire. Several times her cousin urged her to come to the table and join us. She continuing to refuse, he gave over with a shrug of his shoulders, and addressed himself to our roasted joint and pasties with an appetite which was out of all measure to the size of his body.

I sent Matthieu to the cellars to fetch a flask of our father's choice *juranson* wine. Under its heady influence our guest waxed jovial, and fell to talking somewhat of the politics of the time—which was as so much Greek to Moise and me. We gathered that he had traveled widely through France, and was acquainted, at least by repute, with many great persons. Twice he spoke of King Henri III, who we knew of as "Le Mignon," in a manner that was almost familiar.

"You have been, then, to Paris?" I asked, that wonder city having been uppermost in my dreams for the future since I had begun to dream them.

"Times without number—though not of late," he answered. He frowned as if something had displeased him, though my question had been harmless enough. "But I expect to be called thither soon again," he added after a minute of moody silence, in which he had considered his empty wine-glass.

In a lapse of conversation which followed, Moise arose from table, filled a plate with meat and cakes and a bit of Silvie's famous conserve of Anjou pears, and carried it with a glass of wine to Mlle. de Lorme.

"*Mademoiselle* must be hungry after her long and bitter ride," he insisted, pressing his offering, while M. de Nogaret looked on amusedly, and Nicolas stared.

Mademoiselle shrank in refusal, then thought better of it and took the plate and glass, favoring Moise with a low, "Thanks," and a smile which must have been, adorable, though her mask hid two-thirds of it.

Moise would have carried his gallantry to the loan of his dagger for her to eat with—the new Italian table tools known as "forks" had not yet made their appearance in France—but *mademoiselle* produced a neat little poniard of her own, with which and her pretty fingers she ate as daintily as one could wish to see.

M. de Nogaret pushed back his chair a little way, in sign that he was finished, and taking up a slab of meat and part of a loaf, tossed them over to Nicolas as one might cast food to a dog. The man-at-arms caught them as featly as any mountebank, and set to work upon them at once, rolling his eyes wishfully at the tall wine flask, which, however, his master showed no disposition to abandon. Moise, instead of returning to table, had lingered near the fireplace.

Quite unaccountably, for I loved the lad, I was of a sudden wroth with Moise because of his courtesy. Why could not I myself have thought of this easy byway to

the favor of the little *demoiselle*? Almost in that hour I hated Moise for his blond locks and fair skin and soft ways.

"Moise," I said harshly, "go to the door and see if you can discern our father returning. I thought I heard a noise of horses"—which was a lie.

M. de Nogaret transferred his amused smile to me, seeing which, I felt more than ever heated, and said in defense:

"I know not what may be keeping our father. He should have come these three hours back. Though he rides much from home on business, he was never known to fail in coming when he had set the hour for his return."

"And what is the *Sieur Duhamel's* business?" asked M. de Nogaret.

"He is a dealer in horses."

"Does he ride a star-faced chestnut mare?" cut in Nicolas, pausing with a chunk of beef poised halfway to his mouth.

"Fanchon!" exclaimed Moise, turning from the door. "You have seen him then?"

Crash!

It was *mademoiselle's* plate and glass, which had smashed in ruins on the hearth stones.

CHAPTER V

I ATTEMPT A FOUL DEED

MDE NOGARET whirled in his chair and rested upon his servitor a long, cold, steady stare. Rough and devil-may-care as Nicolas was in appearance, he wilted visibly under that scrutiny; nor did he answer Moise, or attempt to say a word.

"And what, pray tell us, Nicolas, are your reasons for surmising that the Sieur Duhamel rides such a horse?" his master asked at length. His voice was as icy as his eyes.

Nicolas glanced this way and that shiftily.

"Why—why, I have been in these parts before, and seen such a mare, with a rider on her who looked enough like the young master here to be himself grown older," he mumbled.

"Ah! And when was this, Nicolas—how long ago?" pursued De Nogaret, his countenance beginning to lighten.

"It was four months ago, my master. I met him in the Raucourt Road."

"Then it was before you entered my service. I thought it must have been; for I remember no such rider; and I have an excellent memory, Nicolas. Why, I recall the face of a poor devil of a robber whom I once saved from the headsman at Dijon, as though 'twere yesterday."

M. de Nogaret relaxed into his chair with a laugh and reached for the wine.

Moise approached the hearth and began gathering up the fragments of *mademoiselle's* plate and glass.

"Pardon me," she said. "It was very clumsy of me to let them fall so."

"I will fetch you others at once, *mademoiselle*," replied Moise.

"Nay, nay! Do not, I pray you!" Her voice trembled with vehemence. She arose from her chair and stood looking at M. de Nogaret. "I cannot eat. I——"

"You have had a hard ride, my cousin, and are weary and unnerved," he supplemented, but with little cousinly cordiality in his tones. He drew out a great gold watch, the first I ever had seen, which he wore suspended from a neck chain inside his doublet. It was as large as my palm. Its appearance explained a curious clicking which had proceeded from him, and which had puzzled Moise and me as we sat at table.

"*Peste!*" he ejaculated. "It is already the tenth hour! My own eyes are becoming heavy."

At these hints I called Matthieu and Silvie and bade them kindle the fire in the upper hall and make ready two of the guest chambers. It was the first time within my recollection that we had had occupants for them, though four of them had always been furnished.

"My varlets have their blankets. They will ask no better than to spread them here by the fire," said De Nogaret. "We are sorry, *monsieur*, so to disturb your household and put you to inconvenience. To-morrow you shall be rid of us."

Again I assured him that he was welcome; but that time it was true so far as concerned one member of his party only.

"We bid you good night, *messieurs*," he said as he saw the flicker of Silvie's candle at the stair head. He arose

and offered his arm to *mademoiselle*. They bowed to us and ascended.

Moise and I did not long delay to follow. As we went up the staircase we heard the clattering of the boots of De Nogaret's men-at-arms, coming from the kitchen to lay their blankets. Over my shoulder I saw the rogue Nicolas drain the last swallow of wine which his master had left in the bottle.

The chambers wherein Silvie had bestowed our visitors lay on opposite sides of the upper corridor at its north end, with the fireplace between them. The room of Moise and me was at the other extremity of the hall, well out of earshot when all doors were closed.

I sat upon our bed, and Moise upon a stool, and we looked at each other.

"What think you of these guests of ours?" I asked him; for though he was two years my junior, in my quieter moments I did not scorn to consult with Moise, whose head was much more level than my own.

"I know not what to think, Hilaire," he answered; "and what I might guess at, it would perhaps be a great wrong to say; so I will not say it."

"What I guess at, I will say, whether it be wrong or no," said I. "I make the guess that the Château Duhamel harbors to-night Black Simon, prince of robbers; and I declare that I like him not."

"And *mademoiselle*?" Moise queried gently.

"That is what puzzles me," I replied.

Acquainted so little with the world as we were, it was inconceivable to either of us that Mlle. de Lorme could be the consort of such a rogue as Black Simon.

"And our father's absence, and this talk of Fanchon—what make you of that, Moise? Remember what we saw in the pass—the pistol shot."

"I think we are both overwrought because of strange

happenings, and fretting where there is no need. More men than our father ride star-faced chestnut mares. Tomorrow he will come and laugh at us."

Moise's answer probably was right, I thought; but it was not convincing. And I knew that in the mind of each of us were dark imaginings which we dared not put into words.

Because of the pain in his arm, I was forced to help Moise undress. The two of us rolled into our blankets, and, despite the weight upon our minds, we were soon asleep; for we were young and very weary.

Two or three times in the night I was partly awakened by Moise tossing and pitching against me. Each time I heard a furious gale howling without and dashing sleet against our window panes.

On the morrow I saw at once that we were not to be rid of M. de Nogaret that day. Instead of abating, the tempest had doubled in violence overnight, so that none might venture in the face of it without peril. Seeing which, M. de Nogaret swore many strange oaths and seemed generally to be in a villainous temper.

All of us passed the day indoors. *Mademoiselle* did not show herself below stairs, but kept to her room, where she was served by Silvie. And though I have no doubt that she grumbled much to herself as she clambered up and down the stairs, for such was her way, the old woman was overjoyed to have such a charge. This coming of visitors to Château Duhamel loomed a very large event on the limited horizon of Silvie's colorless existence.

De Nogaret's men lounged around the kitchen, gossiping and pitching dice, except Nicolas, who was continually at his master's elbow, like the black shadow of something blacker still.

In the afternoon, in his restless pacing about, De Nogaret came upon a draught board which belonged

to Moise and me. He seized upon it at once, and challenged me to a game.

Draughts is a form of contest wherein I have some skill in a dashing, reckless way, but little patience. A steady and careful player who knows his game seldom fails to beat me. M. de Nogaret was such, and he defeated me three games while Moise looked on and pitied me.

I suppose that the man became wearied by my lack of skill, for presently he challenged Moise; whereby he caught a tartar, as the saying is. Moise, who is careful in the handling of his men, revenged me my three losses and took two other games besides. He would have taken another, but in the midst of it M. de Nogaret rapped out an oath and spilled the pieces from the board with his hands. He at once apologized for his haste, but did it with poor grace.

"I fear that I am a poor loser," he said, and would play no more, but resumed his uneasy striding up and down.

All of the day I was worried about Moise. He was flushed of cheek and too bright of eye. Except in the course of his draught games, he was not his usual self. He ate little. At one moment he would be gay beyond his wont, and the next he would be gloomy as an owl.

I ascribed his condition, and rightly, to the wounds made by the wolf. He had taken a fever from them.

Still our father did not come; though the chance that he was held somewhere because of the tempest partly allayed my anxiety on his account.

To what length Moise's fever was going I did not realize until in the middle of the night I was awakened by his tossing, and found him in a hot delirium, moaning and tearing at the blankets.

As I sat over him, not knowing what to do, he began

to talk, in the most pitiful voice, I think, that I ever heard.

"Why did the beautiful *mademoiselle* let fall her plate?" he asked. "Why did you, *mademoiselle*? Did you see blood upon it—the blood of my father? Ah, not that! Say that it was not, *mademoiselle*?"

At that, my hair began to rise, and I trembled; for I thought the lad possessed.

"Hush, Moise!" I said; and I went to the window and fetched snow and laid it against his temples. But he would not hush, and went on speaking in his low, agonized tones, as though the words were being wrung from him on the rack:

"That man—M. de Nogaret—he is not a man! Open his breast, and you will find no heart within it. He is a machine. Inside he is like a great clock. Can you not hear him—*click-click, click-click*? I tell you that he has no heart or soul! Oh, our poor father! How could they have seen him riding the chestnut mare four months ago, when he bought Fanchon and fetched her home only two months ago? *Mademoiselle*, why, ah why, did you let fall your plate and wine?"

I started, and a cold sweat broke out upon me. Now that the lad was in a delirium, what had been in his mind was coming out. And it was true about the mare! Our father had owned her for two months only.

From the cold damp of fear I passed then to the heat of an anger which was wilder than Moise's fever. I ground my teeth together, and against the blackness in the room I saw red flashes of flame that shook and swayed like curtains in the wind. I put on my clothing hastily, my fingers quivering so that I scarce could lace my points.

I found my dagger, and, leaving poor Moise still groan-

ing and muttering on the bed, I stole out along the corridor to M. de Nogaret's door.

The tempest at last had broken and died. The house was still. I had not thought what to do should I find the door barred. I had thought of nothing, save to come at this man and slay him as I had slain the wolf. Had there been ten Messieurs de Nogaret, each with a regiment of soldiers to hedge him around, I would have faced them all with my dagger only. My mind and my faculties were dominated by one purpose—to avenge my murdered father. Beyond that I did not look.

But his door was not barred. It stood a little way open, doubtless to admit the warmth from the hall. The embers in the fireplace cast a flickering glow across the corridor. I stepped through it, pushed against the door, and entered and stood still.

In my mind I rearranged the details of the chamber as I had seen them last: where was the bench, and the big chest with its mirror, and which way the bed stood. I would make no noise of blundering, and no mistake to cheat me when my blow should fall.

CHAPTER VI

MADEMOISELLE'S OATH

WHILE I stood, intent on murder, before M. de Nogaret's door, there came to me out of the darkness the steady ticking of the great gold watch which had so fired Moise's fancy; and then I heard the man's even breathing. How well he slept! His respiration was calm and unhurried. I heard him stir slightly on the bed—and of a sudden my knees began to shake and tears leaped into my eyes.

It was murder that I had been about to do—and I could not do it. No matter what he had done, I could not slay him thus. Step by step, more cautiously than I had entered, I withdrew from the chamber.

When I reached the corridor and turned from the door, Mlle. de Lorme was standing before the fireplace. She was without her mask, and her face was beautiful as an angel's.

Stupidly I went toward her.

She saw the naked dagger in my hand, but she did not shrink.

Instead, she advanced a step to meet me; and as we stood face to face, she raised her hand and struck me across the mouth. And the sheer surprise of it was near to laying me at her feet.

"Murderer!" she said in a low, tense voice. "Ah, I had thought better of you! But you have murdered him! You have killed a sleeping man!"

Strength for denial came to me. I held out the knife.

"No, *mademoiselle*, it is not so," I whispered. "See—the blade is clean. I have not killed, though God knows that he deserves killing at my hands—and I meant to do it. But I cannot do murder."

To my astonishment, she leaned against me, covered her face, and burst into tears. Uncertain what to do, but feeling, even in the midst of my own trouble, a great desire to comfort her, I passed an arm around her and stood stupidly, my dagger in one hand, feeling her shake and sob against me. It was only for a moment; but I was never to forget it. Then she drew back. All the courage had come out of her with the tears. She looked up at me out of frightened eyes, which seemed ashamed to meet mine.

"*Mademoiselle*, you were in the pass yesterday," said I awkwardly. "A shot was fired. There was fighting. My father rode a chestnut mare with a star upon its forehead yesterday. He has not come home. You understand, *mademoiselle*? This man—Black Simon, for all that he calls himself De Nogaret—has killed my father, and I must kill him.

"No, no!" she answered. "It is not so! What you have discovered, M. Duhamel," she went on, with some return of dignity, "I do not know. But this I tell you—will swear it if you like—the man who is sleeping in there is my cousin, M. de Nogaret, as he told you. If ever he has been called Black Simon, I know nothing of it—though he is black enough, and well deserves his death!" she ended with a sudden vehemence.

"And my father?"

"I swear to you, *monsieur*, that M. de Nogaret has not killed your father, and that I did not see your father die."

I asked her then Moise's question:

"*Mademoiselle*, why did you let fall your plate?

"I cannot tell you, *monsieur*! Oh, do not ask me more! I cannot——"

She turned from me and fled into her room, and left me standing there before the fire. Presently I went back to Moise.

In our own chamber I drew a stool to the bed and sat me down by Moise. After a time his fever seemed to abate. Soothed by my voice and presence, he slumbered heavily.

My own thoughts as I sat in the darkness and listened to his breathing were a whirling confusion, wherein I found no light or comfort. *Mademoiselle's* cryptic replies, and more than that, what she so manifestly knew and had held back from me, made my bewilderment more hopeless than before.

More than ever certain was I that some evil had befallen my father.

Despite his sometime sternness, I loved Regnault Duhamel—had always loved him, since my earliest memories of standing by his knee while he sat with one hand resting on the pommel of his sword, and heard me say my lessons.

My mother was only a beautiful memory. Who she had been, or aught concerning her life with my father, I knew not. I knew only that on a knoll in the grove of beeches beyond our upper meadow was a white stone, under which my mother lay. She had died when I was four and Moise but two years old.

When I had questioned my father about our family, if he had brothers or sisters, and if we lads might not have grandparents and cousins living somewhere, he had never answered. He had only shaken his head, and looked at me in a manner which forbade me to press my queries. Always I had known him as a man of singular silences,

one who was ready to smile, but who seldom laughed; who spoke well but shortly when speech was needful, and at other times held his peace.

Repeatedly I reënacted in my mind the happenings of the last two days, until my head ached from the effort to come at the solution of the puzzle. What had happened yonder in Red Deer Pass?

Who was this M. de Nogaret, if he was not Black Simon? What could there be between him and my father? For that they were known to each other, and that they had met in the pass, I found it hard to doubt. Circumstances all seemed to prove it, from Nicolas's question about the mare and his subsequent replies under the stern eyes of his master, to the strange agitation of *mademoiselle*.

And who was *mademoiselle*, and why did she ride with this cousin whom she so hated? Both her words and manner had proclaimed that she *did* hate him.

In the morning, I told myself, I would somehow have it out of De Nogaret. At least I would know from him what had been the outcome of his meeting with my father.

It grew cold in the chamber. Fully dressed, I crawled onto the bed by Moise and pulled a blanket over me. The morning came and found me in deep sleep.

A slant ray of sunshine which shone in through the south window fell upon my face and wakened me. As I lay staring dreamily at the rafters I heard a muffled trampling of horses in the snow of the courtyard. That roused me quickly enough.

I ran to the window and pushed open the casement. The tempest had gone, indeed, and the sunlight was dazzling on fields of shimmering snow.

Two of M. de Nogaret's men-at-arms were riding toward the front of the château, and leading the four

other horses of the party. As I looked, they disappeared around the corner of the building.

So M. de Nogaret was giving me the slip!

Anger came upon me; but it differed from my blind rage of the night, which had sent me groping forth to do a murder. I hurried into the corridor and paused at the head of the staircase.

The doors to the chambers in which our guests had slept were open. Below I could hear voices in the hall and the scraping of feet, and then Silvie's voice upraised in shrill thanks.

Except my dagger, I had no weapon. As I hesitated, seeking to determine what I should do, my eyes fell upon the long bar of iron which was used to turn the logs in the fireplace. Matthieu, when he had made the fires, had left the bar lying in such a fashion that its handle extremity rested across one of the fire-irons, and its other end was thrust deep among the embers.

"*Parbleu*, the very thing!" I thought, and I went and fetched it. For a foot from its end the iron was glowing red.

Softly on my bootless feet I went down the stairs.

Three of the serving men were already out and mounted, and *mademoiselle* had been set upon her horse. M. de Nogaret, booted and cloaked and ready to ride, stood by the table. His back was toward me; but I could see by his elbow motions and the cant of his head that Matthieu had been to the cellars again. Nicolas lingered close by his elbow, doubtless in hope to snatch a swallow or two of the *jurançon* for himself when his master should have finished.

In the doorway to the kitchen corridor Silvie was bobbing her cap and calling down blessings upon both *mademoiselle* and *monsieur*, who evidently had dealt generously by her.

But for that watchful dog, Nicolas, I had passed my enemy unseen. Nicolas either heard the padding of my feet along the floor, or saw me from the tail of his eye; for he whirled about, plucking at his belt and calling to M. de Nogaret. I ran around both of them and paused at one side of the door, where I was out of view from the court, and could bar both ingress and egress with my red-hot poker.

Nicolas presented a pistol at me, but did not fire, watching me and his master with eyes which twinkled like a weasel's.

M. de Nogaret, after one glance in my direction, continued to sip his wine with composure, paying not the slightest heed to my menacing attitude or the formidable weapon wherewith I had barred the doorway. I gripped the iron bar and waited. When he had drained his glass, he turned toward me.

"Ah, M. Duhamel, I see that you have come to speed your guests," he said quietly, still ignoring my silent threat as though it had not been. "The urgency of my affairs compels me to hasten upon my way, now that the storm has passed. Indeed, the mildness of the morning decided me to an early start. I instructed your servants to thank you in the names of Mlle. de Lorme and myself for the extreme kindness of your hospitality, but not to cause you further inconvenience by awakening you.

"But now that I see you, I am delighted to take the opportunity to thank you in person, for *mademoiselle* and for myself. You have been most kind. We shall not forget. Ah, yes, and present our compliments to *mon-sieur*, your brother."

All this was said with a cool suavity calculated to make me feel my youth and futility.

He bowed and came toward me, negligently folding his cloak about him. But though his audacity astounded me

and put me at disadvantage, I was not so to be disarmed and thrust aside.

"Stop," I cried out at him hoarsely, "or I will spit you like a pullet!"

I shifted my grip on the bar and held it ready to strike.

Silvie, who this while had been staring at me with popping eyes, recovered use of an active tongue, and shrieked:

"My God! The young master is crazy!"

But curiosity mastered her fear. Instead of fleeing to her kitchen, she knelt in the doorway and prayed for me in a loud, quavering monotone.

Indeed, I must have seemed an object for her fear and commiseration, with my clothing disordered as I had slept in it, my tangled hair, and the red-hot iron.

"What is wrong? Are we needed, master?" called one of the men-at-arms from the court.

"'Tis nothing; remain where you are," their master replied.

Halfway to me M. de Nogaret paused. He set his foot upon a bench and crossed his arms over his lifted knee so that his hands hung down. In that attitude he considered me thoughtfully, his gaze traveling over me from hair to heels, so searchingly that my skin tingled under the appraisal. It was as though he had that moment discovered a new phase of me which challenged his attention and study.

"I am ready to shoot at any time, my master," put in Nicolas from behind him.

CHAPTER VII

MY FATHER COMES HOME

“PUT up your pistol, Nicolas,” commanded M. de Nogaret without removing his eyes from me. “You are too free with it. If you value your skin, you will do no harm to M. Duhamel—either now or hereafter—unless I shall order it. Now what is the meaning of this—hysteria, M. Hilaire?” he asked me.

Tears of rage and vexation smarted under my lids. He chose to treat me like a peevish child.

“*Monsieur*, what have you done with my father?” I stammered. I strove to keep my voice steady, but could not, and my words gathered headway as I went on.

“I was on the hill above the pass when you met him, *monsieur*. I did not see all; but I heard the shot. My father has not come. Where is he? Aye, you may smile at me; but I *will* be answered! I know you, M. de Nogaret, and know your other name to be Black Simon, robber and rider of the roads——”

M. de Nogaret interrupted me by setting his palms against his thighs and bursting into a gale of laughter.

“Ha, ha, ha!” and “Ho, ho, ho!” he roared. “So I am Black Simon, eh? That is rich; that is rare! My faith, but Henri must hear of this! How De Quelus would have relished it! *Ha, ha, ha!*”

Nevertheless, methought his merriment somewhat empty, and he did not cease to regard me intently.

"Robber! Soul of the dirt! Scoundrell!" I flung at him, my temper breaking bounds before his laughter. A glow of heat showed in his brown eyes, and he quit laughing.

"Fie then! Such language ill beseems a gentleman, M. Hilaire," he reproved.

"If to be a gentleman is to be such as you, then I shall pray to remain what I am," I retorted. "But answer my questions, M. de Nogaret."

"A part of your talk is beyond my comprehension," he said. "I choose not to be cross-examined. And now, *monsieur*, truce to this folly. I am in haste to be gone—and I am going."

He removed his foot from the bench and walked toward me until the tip of my extended bar was near to scorching the front of his cloak.

"Let me pass." He did not raise his voice; but his eyes had not ceased to sparkle. It was evident that he curbed his natural irritability by a strong effort.

"I will not be laughed at or awed down!" I rejoined violently. "There are two ways to pass me, *monsieur*, either bid your servant shoot me, or give me the satisfaction I demand!"

"*Sacré bleu!*" he rasped, his control beginning to desert him. "That may soon be attended to!" He slipped out of his cloak and handed it to Nicolas.

For the first time he paid apparent heed to the weapon which confronted him. His lip curled.

"Most assuredly I do not intend to cross my sword with your villainous poker, my boy," he said. "Nicolas, lend your sword to *monsieur*. He seems to lack one." He drew his own blade.

I cast my bar into the fireplace and took the sword which Nicolas proffered with a grin.

As we stood ready to fall to, a light, quick step crossed the porch. Mlle. de Lorme slipped through the doorway and stood against the wall.

"So you are again at your favorite trade, Jean," she said, her voice keen with scorn and anger. "What are you going to do to this boy?"

"Merely to give him a lesson in the use of the sword which he has insisted upon, my dear cousin—nothing more."

"Ah, *mademoiselle*, you will prevent it! For the love of the good God, do not let them fight!" wailed Silvie, quitting her prayers to heaven and extending her clasped hands toward the girl. "The young master has gone quite mad! He is too young! Too young!"

"Be you quiet, Silvie!" I commanded, further exasperated by the general assumption that I was both an infant and crazed.

"Jean," continued *mademoiselle*, "if you kill this lad, I promise you that you shall rue it all your days!"

"Plague! Who talks of killing?" De Nogaret replied. "I will not kill him. But I shall teach him a lesson, and he shall remember it. On guard, *monsieur*!"

"That lesson may be—and may not be," said I shortly. Twice *mademoiselle* had called me a boy, and I liked not the sound of it. "I thank you, *mademoiselle*; but I do not fear this assassin."

In truth, now that I faced him with the sword, I did not fear him. My father had taught me somewhat of the management of the blade, and I had confidence in my strength of arm. I would kill this man; and Nicolas could then shoot me afterward, and it suited him.

But at my last word M. de Nogaret lowered his point.

"That is an ill word upon your lips, M. Hilaire," he said, tugging at his beard. "I was awake last night, or did I

dream it?—that a certain lad crept into my room, who methinks came not to caress me.” He chuckled.

I was furious. The fox had not been asleep then? He must have heard all that passed, that was the reason for this early departure. And now he was laughing at me again.

“Look to yourself!” I shouted, falling into position. “At least, I will try to kill you now!”

The blades rang together.

“*Pah*, the man is easy!” thought I after a moment of fighting. And I had some warrant for the thought. My first fury of attack had pressed him back to the foot of the stairway. I wondered if the girl were watching, and how she thought the “boy” fought. I had not yet learned that mere strength is of little avail in sword play.

“Why, lad, you *do* know one end of a blade from the other,” remarked M. de Nogaret coolly.

“It seems to me that your defense is somewhat weak,” I taunted, though I had not touched him.

“Nevertheless, it once was complimented by the late Bussy d’Amboise,” he replied; “but I admit that my attack is better.”

Until then he had turned my thrusts but feebly—still he had turned them. Now there came a change. He gave way no farther. A new rigor stiffened his steel. I found myself skipping back to avoid it.

I became confused. My sword seemed controlled by a power not my own. It wavered. I saw M. de Nogaret’s glittering blade glide through the opening. It buried itself in my right shoulder. My sword fell on the floor, and I followed it. Through the blackness which oppressed me I could hear Silvie screaming steadily.

Something pressed upon me, and I opened my eyes.

My vision cleared. M. de Nogaret was kneeling upon my breast and holding my wrists with his hands. His exertions seemed not to have disturbed his breathing even. Attracted by the clash of steel, his serving men were grouped at the doorway.

"Remove *mademoiselle*," he commanded them; and to Nicolas: "Fetch that poker."

"No, no! Jean—you devil!" shrieked *mademoiselle*, beating with her hands at the men who laid hold of her. Struggling and weeping, she was carried from the room. Nicolas had brought the still hot iron and stood beside his master.

M. de Nogaret looked down at me.

There was anger in his eyes, and triumph, and the excitement of fighting. But back of these there was something else, which I could not define. It seemed to me that I saw two spirits in those eyes, the one of which looked through the other; and that one which was behind was in an agony of emotion. It was not pity; for to him pity was a foreigner; but it was akin to pity, and I hated him for it.

"Because of the blood which is in you, I have spared you," he said. "You do not understand; but you may some day."

"Spare not!" I groaned. "Assassin!"

The softer light fled his eyes.

"The iron, Nicolas. So—touch him lightly."

Over my face appeared the heated bar. It dipped closer. I stared at it until the air from it scorched my eyes, and I was forced to close them. I felt it touch and sear my flesh.

"Enough!"

De Nogaret arose from me. I rolled upon my side, clutching at my forehead. Just above my left brow the

iron had touched and branded me. The mark of it will be there always—a small, white, arrow shaped scar, pointing upward, which reddens when my blood is high, and turns purple when I am angered.

M. de Nogaret wiped his sword blade upon a napkin from the table and returned it to its scabbard. Nicolas laid the poker on the hearth, recovered his own blade, and helped his master with his cloak.

At the door De Nogaret turned.

"Not having been a welcome guest here, I will pay my score," he said, and cast a handful of gold pieces upon the threshold.

Despite my weakness I scrambled to my feet and reeled to the doorway, and kicked the gold flying after him into the snow. Nicolas, who had helped him to mount, would have picked it up; but he laughingly bade him let it lie.

"Adieu, M. Hilaire," he called gayly, waving his hand.

I leaned against the door jamb, while court and riders and the fields of sunlit snow spun before me. Then I saw *mademoiselle's* face, and for a moment it steadied me. Tears were upon her cheeks, and her eyes were piteous.

"Good-by, M. Duhamel, and—forgive me," she said; though what I had to forgive her, I did not know.

"I shall see you again, *mademoiselle*," I replied; "and—you—too—*monsieur*!"

Weakly I shook my fist at De Nogaret, and fainted across the door sill.

Matthieu and Silvie dragged me in and laid me upon the settle, where they bandaged and tended me. It was a half hour later when I fully regained my wits. Matthieu was sitting by me. Silvie had stepped out, I believe to rescue De Nogaret's gold from the snow.

Of a sudden we heard her scream so fearfully that, weak as I was, it sent me staggering to the door again.

Mark Fletcher was riding into the courtyard—and he did not ride alone.

Strapped fast and sitting upright in the saddle of the chestnut mare was Regnault Duhamel, my father, dead!

CHAPTER VIII

THE FOG GATHERS

THEY told me afterward—and it must be so, though I have no memory of it—that at sight of my dead father I went quite mad; that I approached him and took his hand and spoke to him as though he were still alive; and that then I drew one of the pistols from his saddle bow, and weak and wounded as I was, I started toward the road along the trail which De Nogaret's horses had left in the snow.

Mark followed and reasoned with me. Reason failing, and seeing my state, and that I was mad indeed, he gathered me up in his arms and carried me back to the *château* as he would have carried a willful child.

From that time until the day when memory once more took up the tale of my existence, my brain was a chaos of dimly recalled confusion, wherein strange vagaries played out their evil dramas, and familiar thoughts and things were monstrously distorted.

By turns and periods I was the unresisting victim of fierce heats which withered me and of icy colds which froze my very spirit; and then of whirlwinds of frenzy, when I fought my shadowy foes in desperation, with never an outward move of muscle to indicate to those who watched me how fearful was the combat.

In my visions my father often appeared and moved and spoke—which was the most terrifying of all my hallucinations; for even in the delirium I knew that the

once beloved presence was a corpse, and I shrank from it, seeing always the hole in his corselet where a bullet had crashed through and blood had run down the steel.

At other whiles I was a little lad again, and played with Moise; or the scene would change, and I talked with Mlle. de Lorme and felt her weeping against me. Then the hateful face of De Nogaret would come slipping between us, and I would feel again the searing touch of his branding iron upon my brow. In such moments flesh as well as spirit entered the struggle, and I must be held down upon my bed.

Very ill I was, and near to death, and must have been a deal of trouble to those who cared for me and saw me through it.

Early in my sickness Mark, despairing of his skill to cope with my malady out of such remedies as were known to him and Silvie, rode down to Raucourt and fetched up through the snows a physician, who came sorely against his will, but yielded to Mark's arguments, which I fear me were more of force than persuasion.

I have dim memories of that bolus mixer, a small, querulous, thin voiced man, continually wrangling over this and that; and who in his scientific zeal let so much blood from me that Mark eventually became wroth, and took him back home again, swearing that if I had to die, it should be without his aid.

Recollections I have, too, of another presence, tall and gray headed and bearded, that seemed always to soothe me with the tones of a deep, low voice, and whose hand upon my brow had power to cool and quiet me in my most violent moments.

With the coming of that man, who bled me not, but nourished me with healing potions, and, contrary to all accepted notions of the time, fought the fever from me with repeated baths of icy water, I began to mend.

Came at length a day when my brain rid itself of its diseased fancies, and with conscious eyes I saw a bar of sunshine which lay along the floor, and then Moise, somewhat pale and worn, sitting beside my bed, and behind him the fiery face and fierier hair of Mark Fletcher.

"By St. George!" swore Mark, leaning forward eagerly. "There is something more than emptiness in his eyes to-day! I believe he knows us! Do you, master?"

I tried to give assent with a nod, but found it difficult business, I was so weakened.

"You were fevered. How fares your arm which the wolf tore?" I questioned Moise—and had the impression that, though I had willed the words and moved my throat to pronounce them, another voice had spoken.

Yet the sound I made was recognizable to some ears; for over the edge of my bed my bulldog, Leo, thrust his scarred head and licked at my wasted hands; and out in the corridor old Silvie Coutant sent up a shrill prayer of thanksgiving, and pattered off to fetch me a posset.

"My arm? 'Twas nothing. 'Twas healed long ago," Moise answered.

The action of the dog had drawn my attention to my hands. The bones showed through the flesh of them in a manner to frighten me.

"I have been ill—how long?" I asked.

"It was the 20th of November—" Moise paused awkwardly, and then hurried on: "Day before yesterday was Christmas, Hilaire."

Memory struck me then a cruel buffet. It was the 20th of November—more than a month before—that our father had come home. The horror of it poured over me in a bitter flood. I closed my eyes and groaned, while the scalding tears rolled down my cheeks. I heard Moise sobbing quietly and Mark cursing in whispers.

Silvie came in with her hot posset, and I swallowed it,

for I wanted strength. When she had gone I turned my eyes to Mark.

"Tell me about it," I commanded.

"No, master; wait until you be stronger," he objected. "You have been parlous ill, and 'twill not do to stir you so."

"But which will be the hardest to endure, think you," I asked, "to know the matter fully, whereof I already know the worst, or to lie here and burn my brain with speculations? Tell me."

Mark looked at me with doubt and hesitation in his pale blue eyes, and a strange uneasiness also, to which I paid scant attention at the time, but remembered afterward.

"Tell me," I insisted. "I shall not rest easy until I have heard it."

"Well, then, I will tell you," he answered; and he pulled at the collar of his shirt and cleared his throat, for he was not an easy talker.

"We had ridden down to Raucourt, the master and I, as you know, to look after the sale of horses which the master had in stable there. We had a noble dinner at the Blue Fox Inn, though there was over-much garlic in the pasty for my taste. Master Regnault then finished his business with Dibault—the rascal tried indeed to cheat him on the price of one black gelding, making claim that it was blind of an eye; but the master saw through the game with his two. Come mid-afternoon and we jogged back again, well content.

"When we reached the uplands below Red Deer Pass, we saw that it was coming on to snow, and we pricked forward at a good pace. Well, the snow came, and a screaming gale to drive it, so that one could see scarce six rods ahead.

"'More speed, Mark!' the master called to me as we

rode into the pass. 'I would reach home before the dark.' So we set the beasts to the gallop.

"Holy blue! but it was gloomy in the pass, and the wind blew through it cold enough to raise goose pimples on the devil in hell. Halfway through—you know where, for Master Moise has told me that you saw part of the thing—we came up with a party of riders. Six there were of them, five men and what I took to be a boy—her cloak hid her petticoats—all humped over their horses' necks, and blue with cold.

"We were nearly past them when I saw one of them—a little rat faced devil with lips like a cracked apple—stare at the master, and then jump in his saddle as though he had sat on a bee. Next instant he had clapped the spurs to his horse and slewed the beast across the way.

"What he said to the master, I did not hear; for my beast was nearly on its haunches from the sudden stop, and he did not say it loudly; but I heard Master Regnault reply:

"'One does not forget the blackest heart in France—not even in sixteen years. I knew this day would come; and now that it has come, it is welcome.'

"And they both drew their swords. By that time I had pulled my Harry alongside of Fanchon and showed a pistol. They were five to two, and one black bearded hound—whom I will fry in his own grease if ever I can find him—was already fingering his.

"But the master, who had quicker eyes than most folk, saw what I was about, and called to me to put up my iron and fall back.

"'This is a private matter between *monsieur* and me. Do not interfere,' he said. I obeyed him. May I be cursed for so doing!

"They had been at it less than two minutes, the blades ringing merrily, and the master beginning to have a

shadow the best of it, though the little man handled his sword as though he had been born with it, when that same black bushed cutthroat—may the devil run off with his soul!—let fly with his pistol.

"The master had it, and had it hard. He reeled in his saddle. But he was a strong man. He did not fall or drop his sword.

" 'This was to have been expected of you, of course, *monsieur*,' he said to the little man, who had lowered his blade and sat looking at him with a queer, twisted smile.

"Before I could do anything—and I would have given my soul to have laid hands on the cowardly dog who had fired that shot; aye, and on his master too—Master Regnault backed Fanchon alongside of me and threw an arm across my neck to keep himself from falling.

" 'Ride! Ride!' he said in my ear; and we whirled, and off we went through the pass. I do not think he realized at first where we were going. He put his sword into my hand. 'For Hilaire,' he said, and then I think his wits took flight.

"When we were out of the pass he raised his head a little and said: 'To Tête Grise—quickly, Mark!' So we took to the hills above the pass and rode to the sorcerer's glen. The master was unconscious when I carried him in.

"Tête Grise was from home, and I could not leave the master there alone and dying. He had been shot through a lung, and I knew that his time was short—else I think I would have gone on and made some living cowards into dead ones. Master Regnault died a little before midnight."

Mark paused and stood with bowed head looking down at me; and I think a tear or two from his blue eyes splashed upon the floor.

"But did he say nothing more—leave no message for me or for Moise?" I asked.

"Until near the end he was unconscious. Then he roused a bit and called for you. He seemed not to know where he was. Tête Grise had come in a few hours after our arrival. When the master saw him he said farewell to me and sent me into the outer room while he talked with the sorcerer. When Tête Grise called me in a few minutes later it was all over with Master Regnault.

"Then, because I would not leave him, and because I did not think it seemly to bring him home through the tempest, we stayed at the home of Tête Grise until the storm was done.

"That is all I know, Master Hilaire. If you want to talk more about it, it must be when you are stronger. That hell's fire is burning in your cheeks again." And Mark shook his red head at me and left the room to remove temptation.

"Where have you buried him?" I asked Moise.

"In the beech grove—beside our mother. And, oh, Hilaire, my heart nearly broke when I heard the earth falling in atop of him!"

I lay and considered the things which Mark had told me, turning them over in my mind, and presently I fell asleep.

From that day my recovery was certain, rapid even, considering the violence of my malady; though it was well after the New Year before I was able to be dressed and to totter down the stairs. Once I was on my feet again, strength flowed into me.

It was not until that first day below stairs that I talked with Mark again. I had seen little of him in the meanwhile, and it came to me afterward that he had appeared to avoid me more than the circumstances had warranted. I thought at the time, if I gave it thought, that he felt that he had told me all he knew, and that

'further discussion of the painful subject in my weakened state might harm me.

This English Mark was a tall, square built fellow of a strength little common, red of skin and hair, blunt in his language—as all Englishmen are apt to be—but loyal to the core. Ten of his three and thirty years he had passed in the service of Regnault Duhamel, to whom he had been constant companion, and whom he knew, alas, far better than we, his sons, had known him.

Before he had come to France, Mark had been, I think, what is called a "beef eater," or yeoman of the guard, in the London Tower—a period of his career about which he was exceedingly reticent.

On this day I mention I sat in the inglenook in the lower hall, and was most mighty glad to be there after the long weeks abed. Mark squatted by the hearth, caressing the English bulldog; for he was fond of all animals, and they of him.

"Have you not guessed, Mark, who was the man who fought my father, and then came here and gave me this?" I asked, fingering the white arrow mark upon my forehead.

"No, Master Milaire; some enemy of his youth, I take it," Mark replied, glancing up and then quickly down at the dog again.

"Then I have guessed to better purpose than you," said I. "He called himself Jean Louis de Nogaret; but it is plain to me that he is Black Simon, the robber."

Mark had been twisting at Leo's ears; I saw his hands twitch, and they closed so hardly that the dog recoiled from him in surprise. For a moment he did not meet my eyes, but stared at the floor. Then he lifted his head and looked at me. There was such an odd expression on his ruddy face that I was moved to say sharply:

"What ails you? Do you find then aught so wonderful in my guess?"

"Why, no, Master Hilaire," he answered haltingly. "Only—I had not thought of that. It is likely enough." He arose to his feet, whistling, and left the room.

I sat and gloomed at the leaping flames. I began to suspect that Mark had not told me all of the truth—that something was being held back from me. Always I hated mysteries, and this one maddened me—though I would have blistered my tongue sooner than have asked Mark another question concerning it. Besides, I knew that red hot pincers would not drag from him that which he had determined to keep to himself.

Much I pondered, but talked little, while I lounged about the *château* during my convalescence. A growing inclination to thought and reticence was one of the first indications by which I recognized that De Nogaret's branding iron and the fires of my fever had burned away my boyhood, and I was become a man—raw yet, and only partly shaped, but nevertheless a man.

Responsibilities began to come to me. The servants were more deferential. Regnault Duhamel's few tenants came to lay their petty affairs before me for judgment. Mark Fletcher looked to me for orders, though he did so sullenly, methought, and oftentimes with a covert sneer. Even the attitude of Moise underwent a subtle change, and he no longer sought to advise or restrain me.

Uppermost in my mind through those long days of inaction was the mist which circumstance had closed around me, and which irked me by its seeming lack of reason.

I was the son of Regnault Duhamel, small country gentleman of Champagne, who had chosen to live a quiet, eventless existence. He had had the misfortune to meet a robber who held a grudge against him, and he had been slain.

Why, then, should my father's trusted servant favor me with strange, uneasy looks? What had Black Simon—for so in my thoughts I named De Nogaret—meant by his allusion to the blood in me? What long bond of deadly enmity had there been between the rider of the roads and my father?

Why should the Sieur Duhamel have chosen the home of Tête Grise, the buffoon and sorcerer whom he must have despised, in which to die; and why should he have made of the wizard his deathbed confidant? Who—I confess that this question was most frequent of all—was the brave little *demoiselle* with the red gold hair?

Were it not for these complex and pestering queries, how simple had been my course; to hunt the robber down and slay him, and so make an end of the matter!

To one or two of them at least the answers lay ready to my hand. On a pleasant afternoon in early February I bade Matthieu saddle the chestnut mare, and I rode out alone across the plateau lands to the glen of the sorcerer.

CHAPTER IX

I VISIT TÊTE GRISE

NEVER before had I penetrated to the abode of the wizard, our expeditions usually having taken Moise and me in the opposite direction, through the thicker forests; but it was not hard to find. Less than an hour and a half of slow riding from Château Duhamel brought me to the place, an open area some half acre in extent, a few hundred feet in from the mouth of a narrow, rockbound defile. On a knoll close to the wall of the gorge was a small dwelling, a mere hovel of two rooms, but strongly built of logs. I tethered Fanchon to a sapling at the foot of the slope, and went up and struck upon the door with my whipstock.

"Enter, Sieur Duhamel."

At sound of that voice I started, for it thrilled a sleeping memory within me. It was a powerful voice, not sonorous, but deep and calm and low. Somewhere I had heard it before. I pushed open the door and entered the cabin.

Because of the transition from the sunlight on the snow to the interior twilight of the hut, my eyes at first could see but little, and that dimly.

Before me was a square table of oak, from under which a small black dog thrust its head and regarded me curiously. At the left of the room was a dividing wall, in which were fireplaces, open to both sides of the partition, and a door. The walls were hung with blankets and skins

of beasts. A kettle simmered above the embers, and an enormous yellow cat reposed on the hearth, making its toilet.

At sight of that animal I recalled the foolish talk of Jacquou; but this cat was live enough, and quite peaceable. Near the angle of the farther wall beyond the fireplace was a window; and by its light a man sat reading from a big, leather bound book. As I stood blinking, he arose, laid down the tome, and came toward me.

He was tall and gray, with a long dark beard, in which white hairs glistened like silver. He wore a peasant's smock and wooden shoes.

At once I knew him. He was the soothing presence which had calmed my fevered dreams and healed me of my sickness—the second physician, of the smooth, cool strength and the wonderful voice.

"Where is Tête Grise?" I asked. "And who are you? And how did you know me before I had opened the door?" For the window by which he had been sitting did not command that reach of the glen through which I had ridden.

"I am known as Tête Grise," he answered, inclining his head slightly; "but to you, M. Duhamel, as I was to your father, I am Jerome Torinaz. I knew you because of two reasons—few of those who seek me come boldly as you came and—I expected you."

"You—Tête Grise!" I stammered. "Why——"

"You have heard the foolish talk of simple folk, doubtless, and thought to find a monster," he interrupted, smiling. "No, I am human."

I bethought me then of my debt to him, and I would have thanked him, but he raised a hand and checked me.

"Your father was my friend," he said. "I could do no less. That I see you recovered is both thanks and

recompense enough, M. Duhamel. You have come to me now to talk about your father, is it not so?"

I nodded.

"Folette!" he called.

The small black dog trotted to him and looked up into his face with bright, intelligent eyes.

Tête Grise opened the door. "Go out and watch, Folette," he commanded. "Watch well."

The dog dropped her muzzle and trotted sniffing down the slope.

"It is well that what we have to say shall not be overheard," Torinaz explained, closing the door. "Despite her name, Folette is wise. None can enter the glen that she will not warn me."

"She did not bark at my approach," I said rather foolishly.

"But she had not then been placed on guard," he replied. "Come." He led the way to the inner room.

It was a small chamber. Even with its scant furnishings of table, two or three benches, and a low bed, it was crowded. There was one window; but it was high in the wall and narrow, so that most of the light came from the fireplace.

Across the table was thrown the skin of a gray wolf, which, from its size, I recognized at once. Two human skulls, the one large and the other that of a child, were set atop of the pelt, where they gleamed white against the thick fur. Beside them were an hour-glass, a globe of crystal, and a number of glass jars, their contents strange to me, but looking most unlovely. In short, the sorcerer was provided with all the customary trappings of his profession.

Torinaz signed me to one of the benches, and himself sat upon the bed.

"It was here that your father died—in my arms," he

said gently, laying a hand upon the blanket beside him.

And I, looking into the soft, steady gray eyes of Jerome Torinaz, and listening to his voice that was calm as the flow of a deep, tranquil river, I ceased to wonder that my father had chosen him for a friend. Despite the man's repute and the mystic fripperies upon his table, which I scorned, I felt my heart warm toward him with a feeling for which the gratitude I owed him did not entirely account.

I had come with the design to have the truth from him, by rudeness if need be. Instead, I bespoke him almost humbly:

"There are circumstances connected with the death of my father which I cannot understand—a mystery. I thought that he might have left a message for me here. Can you help me?"

His reply was wide of the question.

"Did the Sieur Duhamel speak much with you concerning the affairs of France?" he asked.

"But little," I replied in some surprise. "He said that true men should support the state and honor the king; but he laid no stress upon the latter. I have heard——"

"He did not then speak with you concerning policies in particular?" interrupted Tête Grise.

"No; I think that he considered me too young and thoughtless for his confidence," I answered, with a shade of the bitterness which I felt creeping into my voice.

"Still, you must have heard how France is divided, and of the strife between a weak king and powerful nobles, whereby the people suffer?"

"Truly, I know that we are ruled by a king of whom little good is said, who fled hither from Poland at the death of his brother, with the Polish gentlemen chasing him across their borders, and who has since lived a life that does him little credit; but I thought it was treason to

say these things. The king—well, he is the king, is it not so?"

M. Torinaz had listened to me, drawing his fingers through his long beard.

"If the unworthiness of the king menaces the welfare of his people, I do not believe that it is treason to say so," he answered.

"But what has this to do with my father?" I demanded, wondering whither this talk was tending.

"This: the Sieur Duhamel believed that a change was coming—was necessary. He was working for it. He——"

"That is to say that my father was a traitor!" I stopped him fiercely, standing up from my seat. "By God, *monsieur*, be careful!"

"Be seated, M. Duhamel, and listen," rejoined Torinaz, unmoved. "You have put a word in my mouth which I did not imply. Treason and Regnault were as day and night. No, M. Hilaire, he was a true patriot, far seeing, and ready to give his life and goods in support of a cause which all men will one day recognize as the best for France."

I sank back on the bench. "A cause?" I repeated. "Why, what cause can there be but that of the king?"

"That of a better king," said Torinaz quickly—"of one who will be a father to his people, and not their oppressor."

"Explain; you are talking to me in riddles."

"You know how the people of France have groaned for years under the Valois rule. Well, have you heard of Henri, Duke of Guise?"

"Surely." Who had not? Did we not live in the very stronghold of the Dukes of Guise and Lorraine? Guise was the organizer and leader of the powerful fraternity of

the independent nobles, which was known as the League. Surely I had heard of Guise.

"Henri de Guise is dead—assassinated in Paris on the 23rd of December," said M. Torinaz calmly.

"Assassinated!"

"Yes. Some say that he died by the hand of the king himself. If that is not true, it is certain that it was with the king's connivance.

"Now look you: the death of Guise will not go unavenged. The days of Henri de Valois are numbered. When it shall please God to remove him from the throne of France, then will arise the situation which your father foresaw, and for which he had been preparing for years. In the midst of his work death found him. He *did* leave a message, M. Hilaire. This is the dying message of Regnault Duhamel to his son."

Deeper and deeper had grown the voice of Torinaz. He now stood up, towering over the table, and his tones were those of a prophet.

"There is in France a man with the will and the spirit to heal the wounds of which she lies bleeding. Though he is the champion of a faction, he is the enemy of no man, unless that man be an enemy to France. When the wounds are healed, he will extend an equal hand to all factions, in the name of France—a free and undivided France. When Henri de Valois shall die, that man will be his rightful successor; for he is of the blood of St. Louis by direct line. His name is Henri de Bourbon, King of Navarre!

"He will find great forces arrayed against him. He will have to fight for his kingdom. But he *will* fight for it. His mother, Jeanne d'Albret, sang when she gave him birth, and he is the bravest man in France.

"Say to my eldest son, Hilaire, that I, his father, had vowed that when the day should come on which Henri of

Navarre should draw his sword to strike for his kingdom, the sword of Regnault Duhamel should leave its scabbard also, and that I would support him with all my strength and will and soul—to the last drop of blood in my veins and the last sol in my purse!

“Say these things to my son—and give him my sword. May God guide him to serve dear France!”

I, too, was upon my feet; for it was as though Regnault himself had spoken to me. With his last words Torinaz extended his hands and laid in mine my father’s belt and sword. I looked down at them through a mist which made the bright steel dim. Never had I so realized the man my father had been as when I felt the weight of his sword in my hands.

While I sought the words to reply to this voice which had come to me across the grave, Torinaz spoke again.

“It is not right that you answer now, *monsieur*,” he said gently. “Your father would have had you take time for your decision. He knew well what a perilous undertaking it will be for a man of north France to stand under the banner of Henri of Navarre, whose cause, though it will be strong in justice, will be pitifully weak in other resources. Besides, the day has not come, though it is near. But when you do decide, come then to me; for I shall have more to say to you.”

Other questions crowded back into my mind.

“But my father’s death—who killed him—and why?”

“That I do not know. I think he was coming to that; but his end overtook him before he could finish. What I have told you he deemed more important. He did not name the man; but I think that it was an affair of a private quarrel, and had nothing to do with the welfare of France.”

“Is our name really Duhamel?” I questioned, thinking of the words of De Nogaret. “Did he tell you that?”

M. Torinaz shook his head.

"The Sieur and your mother came here when you were small," he answered. "They had passed through some great peril. I know that. It may be that your father took another name than his own; but the one you bear is the only one I know."

"One decision I have made already, M. Torinaz," I said firmly. "I think that the man who slew my father is Black Simon, the robber. Their words, which Mark Fletcher has told me, prove that they were ancient enemies; but it would not be the first time that a gentleman had turned highwayman. My first duty is plain to me. It is to hunt this Black Simon and slay him. After that I will turn me to my father's work, and do my poor best."

But Torinaz considered me sadly, and offered no approval to what I thought fine and right.

"Before you act, perhaps rashly, M. Hilaire, I counsel you to try and understand your father. He had a larger object than mere revenge and the seeking out of enemies to destroy them—though his enemy found him out."

"What are you? You talk more like a preacher than a—" I hesitated, glancing at the paraphernalia on his table. I had spoken with some contempt, for my blood was warm.

"Than a sorcerer and a charlatan," Torinaz completed for me. "'Tis true that I give harmless receipts for the growing of crops; that I have some skill in the divining of hidden waters; that I destroy noxious insects, mend broken bones of man and beast, draw fevers, and recommend the good herbs for their occasions; and that I aid the cows, the ewes, and the she goats in the delivery of their young.

"Yes, I am a sorcerer, if you like, and I say the good adventure to the credulous who seek me. But before all

that I am a thinker and a student—and more than all, I am a man of the people.

“I tell you, M. Duhamel, that your father trusted me. In giving me his confidence he gave me also a part to play in the events which are coming to France—and I shall play it.

“Now, let us not quarrel, M. Hilaire. You will doubtless hear many arguments to shake your mind against what I have said. Henri of Navarre already is being presented to the people by his enemies as a danger and a traitor.

“Go, think, and be deliberate. But when you have decided, fail not to come to me. This I demand of you, in the name of your father.”

CHAPTER X

MARK AND I STRIKE HANDS

ASSUREDLY, my mind lacked not for employment as I rode back to Château Duhamel, bearing my father's sword. I had gone to the sorcerer to clear away a mystery; but on some scores 'twas thicker now than before.

So Tête Grise had been my physician, and had healed me, and had been my father's trusted friend besides. Surely Mark knew these things. Why had he not told me? How far did Mark and Torinaz understand each other, and how much did the English man-at-arms know of the hopes and plans for which my father had worked? I could not understand Mark. And I came to the conclusion that, as he had been secret with me, so would I be with him, and would follow my own counsels and keep them hidden.

Only to Moise did I speak of my visit to the wizard's glen; nor did I tell him but the part of what had taken place there. At least he was not in the league of the mysteries; he had not known that the physician and sorcerer were one.

"So that was really he—Tête Grise—who laughed at us from the rock on the night the wolf was slain, and scared us so?" he said when I had told him of seeing our wolfskin in the cabin of Torinaz.

"I did not ask him that—there were weightier matters to be discussed," I answered; "but it must have been."

"I will be bound that there is something else which you did not ask him, Hilaire—and which I shall when next I see him. I shall ask him what made his eyes so shiny."

And by that simple remark Moise unconsciously revealed to me how widely I had grown apart from the lad in thought in a few short weeks. He was still the boy. I had become a man.

My twentieth birthday came and passed, and February drew nigh to March; and still I idled and moped the most of my time about the *château*. Nearly every day I rode out upon Fanchon; and on those occasions when I was alone, I often dismounted, and, clinging to the stirrup leather, would put the mare to the trot and run beside her, trying out my waxing strength. It had come back to me slowly, as it does when one has been racked by fever; but it came steadily, and at length I felt that I was once more whole; and I was glad, for I had much to do.

In these weeks there passed no talk of significance between Mark and me. Small matters were discussed freely enough; and several times, when he had ridden abroad on unfinished business of my father's, he made report thereon to me, and paid over moneys which had been owing.

But for the most part we rather avoided than sought each the other; and there was no abating of his sullen reticence or my proud and injured reserve. For I took most ill this attitude of Mark; though I would not make it cause for quarrel with him. I use the word advisedly. Mark's position in my father's house had been something more than that of a mere servant, with whom, of course, one does not quarrel.

One morning when I came down from my chamber, where I had been making ready to ride, I found Mark

sitting on a bench before the fire, furbishing up his armor. His sword and dagger lay on the floor beside him, already polished bright as new silver; and he had set to work upon his steel cap, rubbing away with a bit of woollen rag, which he dipped from time to time in a box of fine black sand, and humming an English tune to himself as he swung his arm.

He heard me on the stairs, glanced up, and muttered a greeting, and at once bent his head over his work again. I stood regarding him idly for a moment as I drew on my gloves. On my way to the stables it came to me that he had been dressed in his best blue hose, and wearing the long boots of Spanish leather by which he set great store, and which he seldom donned. At the stables I made other discoveries.

Mark's black horse, Harry, had been groomed and saddled and harnessed in new leather; and near the stall lay two large packets. Curiosity moved me to stir these with my foot. One contained a mixture of chopped oats and barley for the horse. The other gave forth a clinking sound.

From its bulk and outlines, I judged it to hold the better part of all Mark's earthly belongings. Against the partition of the stall leaned the great English halberd which had been a part of his equipment when he served as yeoman of the guard at the Tower of London.

Sight of this last confirmed my dawning suspicions. Never before had I known him to take the weapon from the *château*. It always had hung from its wooden peg in his chamber, except when he had taken it down to oil it, or to exhibit it to us lads.

Mark was going away!

I thought no more of my ride then. I went back into the hall and stood at Mark's elbow. He did not look up, but continued to furbish his helmet, humming the

while his endless English ditty, as if I had not been within a league.

"So you are leaving, Mark?" I asked at length and with effort; for I was angered.

"Yes; it seems so, Master Hilaire," he replied gruffly, still keeping his head bent low.

"Why? And why, if you must go, do you go like this, without explanation or farewell? It smacks neither of honesty nor fairness."

His breath came with a catch in it, and I looked for a sharp answer; but his voice was a stubborn grumble when he spoke:

"There is work to be done elsewhere, master—and I am going to try to do it. And why should I remain here, where I am so little needed, and shall be missed less? As for farewells: I said my farewell over yonder a few weeks back to the only man who ever cared a hair whether I lived or died," and he jerked his head toward the south. "Silvie would have told you when I was gone."

"Mark, I know right well that I am not, or ever shall be, the man my father was," I said thickly, for he had touched me on the raw. "But—curse it, man, stand up and face me! Needs not to sit there hangdog!"

At that he came to his feet readily enough, and stood looking at me with a somber light in his pale eyes.

"Give me your hand!"

Wondering and half reluctantly he thrust forth his right hand, and I laid hold of it. It was big and red and powerful like the rest of him; but mine, too, was largely framed and long fingered, and they fitted well.

Slowly, for I did not wish the advantage of taking him unawares, I tightened my grip. He understood my purpose then. I felt his muscles harden and his fingers begin to close viselike around my own.

For a long minute we stood motionless, each putting his whole strength of muscle and of mind into the effect of straining wrists and fingers. Perspiration started to my forehead; my arm went numb to the elbow; but my hand did not crumple, or my grip weaken. I looked steadily into Mark's face. When I saw surprise and then unwilling admiration dawn in his blue eyes, I was content with my pain.

"By St. George!" he swore under his breath.

By common consent we loosed that bitter clasp. I looked down at my hand. The marks of his fingers were white around it, with ridges of red between, and blood was oozing from beneath my nails. But his was in similar plight, and I was content.

"By St. George!" ejaculated Mark again, staring from his bleeding finger tips to my face. "I had not thought it in you, master! You have your father's hand for sure. I shall not truss my points with comfort for a week to come."

"Nor I, either, old bear!" I cried, laughing, my anger gone from me. "That hand of yours on the devil's tail would set all hell to echoing. Now come and get your horse and ride with me, for I am not yet finished with you."

He followed me to the stables without further comment; and I saw that by that foolish handclasp I had done more to win him than I might in long hours of tongue argument.

We took a way which had been much traveled by me of late, so much that Fanchon followed it without guidance—across the upper meadow and among the beeches to the little knoll where my mother and Regnault Duhamel were sleeping.

I had brought my father's sword. While Mark sat his horse, his steel cap resting on his saddle bow, and the

wan February sunshine setting his red hair ablaze, I stood the long blade upright in the snow at the foot of my father's grave, and knelt before it.

With my hands on the cross of the hilt, I swore aloud before God and my father's spirit that I would go on with his cherished work to the best of my poor ability; that I would fight for a free France and for King Henri of Navarre so long as my life should last and there be need of my arm.

The form of the oath meant little to me, for I never was deeply religious. It was rather a promise which I made to my father—and from my childhood I never have held my promises lightly.

When I had done, I turned to Mark.

"This work of which you spoke—it was to seek my father's slayer, was it not?" I asked.

"Yes, partly that, master," he responded; "and then to fight for France.

"Look you, Master Hilaire; before I was English I was French; that is, my forefathers were. One of my ancestors was vassal to Hugh d'Avranches, called Hugh the Wolf, who sailed with Duke William of Normandy, and who received Cheshire in fief for his share in the fighting against the Saxons. Cheshire is the home of my folk, the Fletchers; and Fletcher once was Fletcher—which in English and French have the same meaning: maker of arrows.

"There are reasons why I care not to go back to England. I have lived so long in France that she seems like my home now. So I am minded, if I live, to strike a blow for her with this Henri of Navarre, who, though he is a little man, they say is the very devil at fighting."

Mark paused to take breath.

"Have you heard any more of this Black Simon?" I asked.

"No, master, not a word. I think that it is likely that he has taken himself from these parts."

I lifted the long sword from its place.

"I wish to learn the use of this, Mark," said I; for the memory was sore of how De Nogaret had played with me; "and I know of only one man who can teach me. Then if the time has not come to strike for France, as my father has laid it upon me to do, I shall ride to find Black Simon. Do you still wish to leave me, Mark?"

He gave me a long and searching look; then down he came from his saddle with an oath, and we struck hands again.

From then there was no more talk ever of Mark leaving me; and the friendship I had won was never shaken or shadowed.

CHAPTER XI

A MESSAGE FROM PARIS

EACH day thereafter Mark and I passed a number of hours at sword practice, using for the purpose one of the upper chambers of the *château*, which had served as a fencing hall on such occasions as my father had found the time for my instruction.

His teaching I soon found to have been but my apprenticeship at the blade.

True, in a little time I handled the *Sieur Duhamel's* long and heavy sword with both ease and speed; but when I was facing Mark the intricacies and niceties of fence seemed ever far beyond me. While I made a great show of effort and much noise with my steel, I wore myself out in vain attempts to touch him; and he, standing cool and motionless, except for the play of his wrist, was able to point me at will.

Moise came always to watch us, and to take his turn with the blade when I was weary. It appeared to me that the lad was more feat in his performance than was I, though he had not had so much practice, and that added to my discouragement. It was little consolation to know that he would never have my strength. As for Mark, he was never wearied.

"Plague! I shall never master it!" I cried disgustedly one day, yielding the sword to Moise and flinging myself into a chair. "Either I am monstrous poor, or you are a very wizard!"

My clothing was wet with perspiration, I was panting for breath, and my arm ached from shoulder to finger tips.

"My true weapon is the red hot poker, and I had best stick to it," I added.

"And properly used, that weapon is not to be sneezed at, master," said Mark, leaning upon his point and grinning at me. "But come, be not discouraged. You were no ninny with the blade when I undertook your education; and though you think yourself so poor, I tell you, and I do not flatter, that you need not to-day doff your bonnet before any ordinary swordsman."

"By the blue! I cannot see it," I replied, concealing my delight; for it was the first time I had heard a word of praise from him. "How good then was my father?"

"A very good bladesman indeed," Mark responded judicially; "but one who, to my manner of thinking, depended overmuch on his armor for his defense. The day of armor is passing, master. My theory of the sword—and I learned under a famous master, though he was not a Frenchman—is that it should be both sword and armor, too. One of my pupils, if he have the eye and heed my teachings, need not fear to face an armored man, though he himself fight only in the skin God gave him.

"And then, Master Hilaire, it takes time to make a swordsman such as I would have you be. For some a lifetime is not enough. Take heart; you are learning. One of these days your accumulated knowledge will come upon you unawares, and you will wonder how you got it. Remember that, added to quickness of nerve and eye, you have strength beyond most. We will harden that strength into endurance, and then we shall see." And he turned to take up the game with Moise.

Times without number since then have I had cause

to remember gratefully the wisdom and the patience of that red-headed fighting machine. And that I owe my life to the skill which he in time *did* teach me, counts as a little thing beside the far more valuable gift it preserved and won for me.

After my decision as to my future course, I began to take a lively interest in the events which were shaking France. But though we were little more than one week's ride from Paris, the scarcity of reliable news which reached us was amazing. On a number of occasions when I rode with Mark to Raucourt, we found the town agog with wild rumors.

Among the sanest of these was the report that the king had broken with the League and was going to besiege Paris itself; and that in revenge the opposing nobles were plotting to deliver the kingdom into the hands of Philip of Spain.

Twice in as many weeks I went to the wizard's glen, but did not find Torinaz. On my third visit I heard the barking of Folette long before I sighted the cabin, and the sorcerer came to meet me. I saw that a horse was tethered to a tree near his door; and I guessed that he had a guest whom he did not wish me to meet.

He took the matter of my decision as a matter of course.

"I had foreseen it," he said. "I needed not to be a sorcerer to know that your father's son could not do otherwise," and he smiled at me. In response to my mouthful of rumors, he smiled again.

"Be not disturbed; Philip of Spain shall not have France," he replied. He told me then that he had true information of how matters stood.

Guise, he said, had been slain at Blois, whither the king had fled, and not at Paris. Paris was in a ferment, and the doctors of the Sorbonne had declared the people

of France free of allegiance to the Valois king, though the parliament had remained faithful. For which, fifty of the counselors had gone to prison.

Finally, the king, not daring to return to his capital, had set up his court at Tours and called Henri of Navarre to his aid. It was reported that Swiss, Low Country, and German support had been promised the two kings; that Spain would send her armies to fight under the banners of Charles de Mayenne, now leader of the League; and that Elizabeth of England would put troops across the channel to help the two Henris, partly to flout Spain, whose Invincible Armada had been vanquished in the preceding year by her captains and a storm, and partly in her own interests.

"But if Navarre is in the field, is not the time come to support him?" I questioned eagerly, and with the thrill at my heart which mention of that champion never failed to evoke; for the little Bearnais had appealed strongly to my imagination.

"You would be fighting for Henri de Valois," Torinaz answered, shaking his head. "If he were to be victorious, matters would be more uncertain than they are now; for he is capable of being ten times traitor to any cause. But I tell you that he is a marked man.

"When he is dead, then Henri of Navarre, if he would be king of France, must declare himself—and then will he have sorest need of aid; for many of those who now support the combination of the two kings will not accept him as their king.

"Through various channels I keep myself informed, and when the time comes I shall not delay to tell you. In the meantime I would advise you that it is not well for you to be seen here, *Sieur Duhamel*. It is putting a needless danger upon both of us."

With June came a crisis in my affairs which was no part of my father's plans; nor had it aught to do with Henri of Navarre.

Though I had spoken to none about her, I had not forgotten Mlle. de Lorme. A thousand times I had wondered vainly concerning her, who she was, and what had been her fate. To what dark purpose was she designed by Black Simon that he should force her to ride with him on his perilous wanderings? I had promised her that I would see her again. Had she cared for that promise, or had she laughed and forgotten? Would I ever keep it?

From much pondering and dreaming, I arrived to realize that, though France and Henri of Navarre held a place next my heart, the little *demoiselle* with the fair hair and the steady eyes had entered its very citadel and taken possession of it; and her image would brook no rivals.

So when the crisis came, it found me not unprepared.

On a Tuesday near the middle of the month, as I rode in to the *château* from a gallop through the forests, Moise met me in the courtyard, waving a folded paper.

"A message, Hilaire—for you!" he sang out, his eyes dancing with excitement. "A message from Paris!"

"From Paris, say you? How can that be? I know no one at Paris."

Without dismounting, I took the paper from him. I was as excited as he was.

The paper, which once had been white, was dingy and travel worn. It had been folded into a square and sealed on its reverse with two splotches of yellow wax, in which were stamped the impressions of a ducal coronet and a complicated blazon, which I could not decipher. On neither side was there any writing.

I turned the thing in my fingers, hesitating to break the seals. Who could have sent it, and what might it contain?

"Who brought this, and where is he?" I asked Moise. "And how know you that it is for me? There is no address upon it."

"A single man-at-arms, who would not dismount or tarry," my brother replied. "He rode to the door an hour back, and asked if this was the Château Duhamel, and then if you were in—and he seemed not ill-pleased to find that you were from home."

"‘Tell the Sieur Hilaire Duhamel that this comes to him from Paris,’ he says, thrusting the paper at me; and as soon as he sees it in my hands, *pouf!* he claps spurs to his nag, and away he goes at a gallop in a cloud of dust."

"More mystery," I grumbled, and opened the paper.

When I saw what it contained, I sat gaping. For the moment France, the Château Duhamel, yes, the very horse between my knees, were as remote as the stars.

Moise, coughing discreetly, brought me to myself. I jumped from Fanchon and cast him the rein.

"Take her to the stable, there's a fine fellow," I said. Disregarding the disappointment in his face, I pushed by him and went indoors.

In my own chamber, behind a locked door, I spread the papers—there were two—upon the counterpane of my bed, drew up a bench, and sat down to study them, my chin upon my hands and elbows on my knees.

The inclosure which the sealed paper had held was a small square of pale blue, stamped near its top in gilt with the same coronet and blazon which was upon the seals. Its message—if message it might be called—had been written in a small, tremulous hand immediately

under the crest. It was of five words only, beginning with a dash and ending with a tear blot:

—for I am very unhappy.

SERENE DE LORME.

It would be foolish in me even to attempt to set down here the dreams I dreamed on that long June afternoon as I sat and stared at that bit of blue paper and its piteous appeal—for to me it *was* an appeal—the more touching because of its very brevity.

CHAPTER XII

THE CITY OF MY DREAMS

IN fancy I kissed the fingers which had trembled when they penned that message; and I took a solemn vow that I would find the little *demoiselle*, and that, if it lay in my power to bring it about, she should never more be unhappy.

Ah, dreams of youth! How foolish and yet how dear you are! And how grim and dull and musty this old world would be without you!

Once Moise came and tapped at my door. I did not answer, and he went away. Several times Leo, that had followed me to the room, arose and stretched himself and came and peered into my face, wagging his stubby tail and whining, as though to seek the cause of his master's strange silence. I heeded him not.

It was not until the shrill summons of Silvie announced our evening meal that I burst the bonds of that delicious reverie and condescended to think on earthly things. I hid my lady's message in an inner pocket and went down.

"I ride to Paris to-morrow," said I to Mark as we three, he and Moise and I, sat upon the porch that evening and watched the shadows creep across the northern hills.

"Eh?" he answered with a start, and then in his ordinary tones: "We had best be on our way at sun-up, master. By good riding we can reach Rhétel before he hides his nose again, and there lie safely our first night."

"And am I not to go with you, Hilaire?" Moise asked.

"Not this time; I go on an affair of my own," I told him. "When the big time comes, then you shall go." For so I had promised him.

Of a sudden I thought of Torinaz. I could not leave without telling him.

"Best to go to-night," counseled Mark, when I had spoken my thought, and he arose to go with me. There was a fine moon, and by its light we rode across the plateau and through the rocks to the wizard's glen. We found Tête Grise in his cabin, poring by candle light, as usual, over one of his huge volumes.

"You have had a message—and are going to Paris?" he repeated after I had told him briefly the object of my visit. From whom the message had come, I had not chosen to say; nor did he ask. But he bent a searching look upon me, and I thought that he smiled rather sadly.

"Paris is an unholy place, *monsieur*, and just now doubly perilous," he objected. "Be sure that your message is not a trap. The sons of Cain were intolerable in war and vehement in robberies, saith the learned Josephus, and Paris harbors a multitude of them. Beware!"

"I am going," I responded stubbornly. "I shall return so soon as may be."

"Hades is a place in the world not regularly finished, the learned Josephus saith," he resumed. "I think that he would have meant Paris, had he known it."

"Begging your pardon," Mark broke in, "but Paris is a fair city of great promise, and its wines are good. I have tasted them."

I think that Mark was jealous of Torinaz's influence both with my father and with me; for he seldom let slip a chance to gainsay him.

"M. Duhamel, I fear that you go with revenge in

your heart, and to seek an enemy," continued the sorcerer, ignoring my henchman.

"If it is so, I pray that I may find him," I answered; and "Amen to that prayer," grumbled Mark.

"You should forgive your enemies. The good fight which we are to make is not to be for private revenge or punishment, but for freedom and justice." It was a rebuke.

"Fore God, you are a strange sorcerer!" Mark exclaimed. "You and I be of a different kidney. When my enemy is frying merrily in hell fire and bawling to the good God to come and cool him, then talk to me of forgiveness, and I will consider it. Nor shall we fight any less stoutly in the good fight for having hunted him. Besides, it seems to me that the good fight is long in coming."

Torinaz made no answer, but arose and stepped into his inner room, whence he returned with a leathern bag, which he handed to me.

"There is money for your journey," he said in an altered voice. "May God speed you and bring you safely back. Nay, take it; it is not mine, but from a store which your father left in my keeping."

Early the next morning we left Château Duhamel. Moise stood on the porch and watched us, his face wishful; and the dogs howled dolefully from their kennels near the stables, because they were chained and could not go along. Silvie had left her pots and pans, and was bobbing in the doorway, and Matthieu stood, hat in hand, by the gate.

Not a word as to our destination had been said before Silvie; but she must needs tune up with:

"You are going to find the blue-eyed little *demoiselle* then, my master. The good God send that you bring her

back before I die! She is unhappy—and she was very good to me!”

Whereat, I sternly bade Silvie hold her tongue, and see that she kept the house to rights while I was away.

I struck my heels into Fanchon's ribs, and rode briskly out of the court, feeling my ears hot, and wondering how it was that old women always seemed to know so much of what was none of their business.

We reached Rhétel as Mark had predicted, and thereafter pushed on through the valley of the Aisne at a pace which each day put a goodly stage behind us, yet did not use up our horses.

For the journey I wore my father's armor, of which a smith at Raucourt had mended the shattered corselet plate. Mark was similarly equipped, for the times were rude, and we knew not what mischance of thieves or bullies might befall us along the roads. Our other clothing we carried in our saddle bags.

At the first village where he could procure it, Mark purchased a length of crimson ribbon, and cozened the approving shop woman to make it up into two rosettes, which she pinned upon our sword baldrics.

“There,” she said as she patted them into place, “those are the last touches to two proper gentlemen—not but what one of you was not already provided with the right colors by his mother.” She glanced meaningly at Mark's flaming hair. For the compliment he promptly smacked her on the lips, advising me to do as well, for she was a comely lass. I did not do it.

Crimson was the color of the League, and I, who expected to wear the white of Navarre, was loth to don it.

“We are going into Paris, master,” Mark argued. “Just now the standing of every man who enters the city will be in question. These bits of ribbon will do us no harm,

and may save us a deal of trouble. And if we are questioned, why, we are a pair of the northern followers of De Mayenne, going to Paris, where our master is likely to have need of us." Mark had reason.

We had left Château Duhamel on Wednesday. In mid-forenoon of the following Thursday week we sighted the great white church of Montmartre on its lofty hill; and an hour after noon we entered Paris by the Porte St. Antoine, rode past the gloomy towers of the Bastille, and were in the city of my dreams.

When Tête Grise and Mark had argued the merits of Paris, I had been in entire agreement with my outspoken follower. Now that I was in it I found it to exceed all my expectations, and in only two regards to disappoint me. One of these was its great offense and punishment to my fresh country nose.

Never by any performance of my imagination could I have conjured up such an infinite variety of fearsome odors as lay in wait for one at every turn, each of them striving with ill success to worst its neighbors. For the sewage ran in open trenches or canals at the sides of the streets, often to such a depth that a man must have drowned had he fallen in unawares, and there been none at hand to help him up their slimy sides.

Parisians, accustomed all their lives to these things, I suppose paid little heed to them; and strangers might in time become accustomed to them. I never did.

Truly this was a city of magnificence and filth indescribable. The buildings were wondrous, especially the churches and the great *hôtels* of the nobles; and I, who had seen nothing but small towns and mean villages, I fear me that I rode with mouth agape and eyes bulging, and paid but scant attention to what was beneath my horse's feet.

A thing which displeased me was the strife. A city

so fair to the eye, if not to the nostrils, it seemed should have been more peaceful. But there was no peace.

Discord began at the very bottom. The birds, which gobbled up the creeping insects and the worms which came up from the ground, were in turn preyed upon by the prowling cats. The dogs worried and slew the cats with great ardor; and ever and anon some irritable burgher would poke a musketoon across his window sill and stretch a dog kicking in its blood. Everywhere the soldiery plagued and quarreled with, and even murdered, the burghers and the tradesmen. The clergy rebuked and flouted the soldiers. And when some powerful noble became offended, then the life of nobody was safe.

The city was in a ferment. Soldiers were everywhere. The inns and taverns echoed with their oaths and brawling by day and by night; they marched by companies through the streets; they lounged by scores in the courts of their masters' *hôtels*, of which each was a fortress—and, at the hours of mass, they thronged the churches, their armor clanking an accompaniment to the intoned chants of the priests.

On all tongues was the latest in gossip and surmise as to the moves and characters of the leaders of the opposing factions which were swaying the fate of the kingdom. No one had a good word for the king. To take the word of a Parisian, Henri de Valois was first cousin to the devil, and proud of the relationship.

We were hard put to it to find lodgings; but we finally obtained them in an inn known as the Three Rabbits, in the Rue St. Honoré. It was at best an unpretentious hostelry; but it could furnish accommodations for ourselves and our beasts; and it was passably clean. Indeed, Mark declared that we were lucky, in that our bed blankets did not abound with the small but determined

disturbers of the night's peace which he said swarmed in most of the Parisian inns.

On our first night in Paris there was no moon. For the double reason that the streets were dark, and that we had been warned that bands of desperate cutthroats lurked by night in the narrow alleys, ever in wait to trap the unwary, and because we were weary, we remained indoors.

With morning came renewed eagerness on my part to pursue the quest which had brought me riding from Champagne. I began, too, to question what I was going to do, now that I was in Paris. I had come riding briskly to the aid of my lady. But what means had I of helping her?

I began to see just how mad my venture had been.

CHAPTER XIII

I FIND MADEMOISELLE

WITH my other perplexities, I was under some apprehension of the severe strain which I must lay upon Mark's loyalty and patience, in admitting to him that I had come to Paris hunting *mademoiselle*. For thus far I had let him take it for granted that the object of our journey was to seek De Nogaret. Nevertheless, sooner or later he must know; so while we were dressing I told him, and made the tale as short and plain as I could. To my surprise, it moved him not at all.

"I had suspected something of the sort, master—not being blind," he answered. "And what's the blame? *Pardieu!* I have not myself outgrown my tender feelings for the maids, nor hope to for many a long year." After a moment he added: "Besides, where she is, there is *he* likely to be found, too."

I had still to discover the place whence Mlle. de Lorme had written her message; but that, I counted, would not be difficult. Nor was it.

At mealtime the night before I had noticed among the guests of our inn a certain soldier called Onfroï, whose face had attracted me by its mixture of good humor and worldliness. Finding him idling in the tap room when I went down, I took opportunity to call him to one side and show him the seals on the cover

of my message, asking him if he could tell me of what noble house they were the insignia.

"Heavens! You must be green to Paris, *monsieur*, if you know not that!" he exclaimed, laughing.

For all his merriment, methought that the fellow eyed me with a new respect.

"Well, whose is it?" I persisted.

"That is the blazon of His Highness the Duke d'Epernon."

That news caused me a sudden sinking of the heart. Evidently this duke was a great personage. What could Mlle. de Lorme be to the Duke d'Epernon?

"He is one of the great nobles, then? What do you know of him?" I asked, putting away my paper, at which Onfroï was staring with all his eyes.

"Yes, he is great enough—peer of France, and second only to princes of the blood; though they say his father was only a notary. For his repute—'tis refreshing to find one who has not heard it. He is said to have fought more duels, wooed more dames, and piled more gold in his coffers than any man in France. But why do you wish to know, *monsieur*?"

"I have been summoned to Paris on business which concerns him," I evaded, and felt my answer weak enough. "Where may one find him?"

"Why, in his hôtel in the Rue St. Antoine, to be sure," rejoined Onfroï, "the which you may find easily enough, for it is the largest of them all and the best fortified—and its soldiers are the noisiest and most quarrelsome."

I thanked him and went to my breakfast, conscious that he continued to regard me curiously. Presently I saw him shrug his shoulders, as if dismissing me and my affairs; and he called for a mug of wine.

Most of the morning Mark and I strolled through the streets, gazing at the gorgeous shops and rubbing our

elbows with others of the crowds on foot, and with them hugging the walls and staring when some noble and his armed escort chanced to come clattering by, which was often. They showed a fine disregard for the poor devils of subjects, did those Parisian nobles; and I think they would liefer have ridden them down than passed them by.

After our dinner I dressed myself with care in the best clothes which I had brought from Champagne, brushed my black mane of hair, and set a plumed bonnet atop of it. Mark preferred to remain as he was, in armor; and so we wended to the Rue St. Antoine.

After Onfroi's description of it, the Hôtel d'Epéron was not long in the finding. In truth it was a veritable fortress, with cannon peeping from their embrasures on the walls, and armed warders in the towers.

An insolent captain at the duke's gate was inclined to accord me scant courtesy indeed; but when I had shown him the seals upon my paper he became suddenly obsequious.

While Mark tarried by the gate and bandied rough wit with the guards, I followed across the courtyard in the wake of a ponderous lackey, whose calves bulged in their yellow hose like well-packed sausages, and who grunted and puffed with every step.

To another flunky at the main door of the hotel I boldly presented my name and station, and asked him to convey my compliments to Mlle. de Lorme, and inquire if she would see me. He studied me in great doubt; but I managed to dispel it as I had vanquished the insolence of the gate captain, by flourishing my paper with its all-powerful seals, and declaring that I had been summoned.

The flunky bowed and took himself off up the stairs, leaving me at the door with the one of the swollen shanks.

While I was idly wondering whether these might not blow up if a pin were thrust into them, and how the owner would comport himself under such circumstances, the door servant returned and showed me into a parlor of such vast dimensions that a corporal might have drilled his squad in the space between table and fireplace.

In a far corner of this great room sat a little old lady with white hair; but whether she was knitting or napping, or merely watching, I could not tell; for she was partly in shadow. At all events, she paid me no apparent attention, for which I was thankful, for I felt in much the frame of mind which had used to come upon me when my father had summoned me to lay his whip about my shoulders; and I grew more uneasy with each passing moment. Had the situation continued for any lengthy time I believe that I should have bolted ingloriously.

I stood studying the pattern of a large rug which was spread before the hearth, when the touch of fingers at my elbow caused me to start so that my sword buckles jingled.

"Mademoiselle!"

So softly had she come across the floor that I had not heard her.

"Monsieur! Oh, M. Duhamel, what are you doing here? Why are you in Paris?"

She was pale and trembling as she had been when last I had seen her, and there was a note of real pain in her hurried questions.

"Why, mademoiselle, I—I came—I came because you sent for me," I stammered. "I——"

"I—sent for you!"

Her eyes widened, and she caught with her fingers at the soft lace about her throat. *"But I do not understand at all, monsieur. Mon Dieu, that you should come and find me here!"*

Tears were coming into her eyes.

Bewildered, I was on the point of making some halting explanation, when a clock above the fireplace struck the hour of three. Mlle. de Lorme grasped my wrist.

"You must go, *monsieur*, go at once!" she whispered almost fiercely. "You must not—you *shall* not—be found here! You have been trapped, M. Duhamel!"

"But, *mademoiselle*——"

"Listen." All the while she was urging me toward the door. "To-morrow afternoon at three o'clock I shall be walking in the gardens of the Louvre. Approach me then, *monsieur*, and bespeak me as though you knew me well. We can talk there—but briefly. And get your other clothes— Nay, I mean not to offend, M. Hilaire, but you are not dressed as Parisian gallants are; and it would be remarked and dangerous. For I am watched, *monsieur*—watched constantly."

We had come within earshot of the massive flunky who had brought me across the court.

"Until to-morrow, *monsieur*," she whispered; and then she broke into a gay laugh and waved her handkerchief at me coquettishly, though I could have sworn that she was weeping.

My thoughts mazed and whirling, I crossed the court and found Mark, and we went thence.

There was no bottom to my misery as I walked down the Rue St. Antoine through the glorious sunshine of that late June day, and saw it not. Nor was my trouble of a sort which I might lighten by sharing it. I could not say my thoughts to Mark.

"You saw her, master?" he ventured, after we had proceeded for a way in heavy silence.

"Yes, I saw her."

"And this rascal of a De Nogaret—is he in Paris, too?"

"I had no time to discover—I am to see her again to-

morrow. God send that he is!" I responded bitterly, feeling that if aught were wrong Black Simon was behind it, and my score against him was doubled.

One thing was clear. Her actions proved it. *She had not sent for me!*

And one question repeated itself again and again with the dull persistence of a throbbing pain:

Why was Mlle. de Lorme in the hôtel of the Duke d'Epernon?

Into my mind crept those words of Onfroi, hateful now:

"He has fought more duels, wooed more dames——"
I groaned.

CHAPTER XIV

AND MY ENEMY

AS I owed Mark some explanation of my visit to the Hôtel d'Epéron, I told him that I had found Mlle. de Lorme in deep trouble, of which I had not learned the cause; and how she had set the appointment to meet me at the Louvre.

"Be not downhearted, master," he consoled me. "Be-like she is much the same as other maids—who ever make parlous vexations for themselves and for others out of nothings. I mind me of a Scottish lass in London Town who put herself in such a sore temper that she was like to have slit me my ears—and for what reason, think you? Just that she suspicioned that I had given a bit of gay ribbon to an Irish colleen; which I had, with maybe a kiss or two besides—nothing to make a pother about. They be much alike, fine ladies and barmaids."

To which philosophy I offered no reply.

"That was well thought of, though—about the clothes," he went on with a chuckle. "I will lay the guess that Tête Grise's leathern pouch will suffer a pretty bleeding when it falls among these thieving shopkeepers, who stand in their doorways like so many crows, their very eyes picking holes in your pockets. I'll not complain, either, master. The pouch has crowded me inside my corselet until I'll warrant that I have the prints of good crown pieces clean across my front ribs."

Because we durst not leave the gold at our inn, Mark had carried it for me, stuffing it inside of his armor.

"Let us to the thieves, then, and have done with," said I.

We visited one of the shops which we remembered, near the Place Royale. The shopkeeper met us at his door—an oily, cringing, bold eyed rogue, who came toward us carrying a shears large enough to have cut down a man-at-arms. I let him have his will of me; and he shored me indeed, as is the custom of his kind when dealing with the innocent.

From him I learned what materials are required, and what the cost, to make a man in Paris.

I came forth from his lair brave in a shirt of soft white lawn, curiously stitched and plaited; a pourpoint of blue sarcinet; black silk Venetian hose with rosettes of green at the knees; a Spanish cloak of tawny velvet; shoes of the same color and material; a black velvet cap with a scarlet feather, encircled by a narrow silver band; and a broad sash of crimson silk entwined about my sword baldric.

Besides the purse of Tête Grise, I had a considerable sum in gold, which I had taken from the strong box in my father's chamber; so that Mark and I between us must have mustered close to one thousand crowns. The exact sum which Master Hardie—the knave with the shears—took from us I cannot now recall; but when we returned to our inn, and Mark had counted what remained to us, he gasped, and was moved to say:

"My God, master! Unless we can learn to cheat our bellies of their dues, our stay in Paris will be brief. The dirty robber has not left us enough to cover the leather!"

And with it all, my array was only modest when I compared it with the raiment of the young dandies whom

we saw in the streets; though to my inexperience it seemed gorgeous enough.

This matter of the clothes buying having somewhat restored my spirits, I went with Mark in the evening to a fair in the Quartier St. Germain, where we saw all manner of oddities, from ugly little black men no higher than one's knee to a monstrous, gray, four-cornered beast from the far Indies, which had a tail both before and behind.

At this fair, too, were divers gaming booths, at one of which Mark engaged in a dicing bout, and played so shrewdly that we were glad to attach ourselves to the train of a gentleman returning to the city, lest we be followed and our throats slit by the losers.

"By St. George, I have found a way to feed us, master!" Mark exulted. "Now let shopkeepers gull us as they may; we shall not starve."

Some time before the appointed hour next afternoon we entered the gardens of the Louvre and wandered through their lanes and alleys, all bordered with hedges of stunted evergreens, which the king's gardeners had trimmed and trained into fantastic shapes. On every hand were statues, huge urns of flowers and shrubs, perfumed alcoves, grottoes, and artificial ruins.

"What fools men be—to build stout walls where they be of no earthly use, and then push them over," was the unfeeling comment of Mark, on whom the beauties of the place were wasted.

My eyes were alert for Mlle. de Lorme. Other loiterers in the gardens were numerous, and that fretted me; for I feared that when I should find her we would have no privacy. Presently I saw her and my heart both rose and sank.

She was accompanied by a maidservant, and was parrying wit with three young jackdandies of the court, who

were tricked out like the butterflies of Solomon, and quite put to shame my own display of cloths and colors, which I had thought so brave.

But I approached her as she had bidden me, boldly, and she laughingly rid herself of the gallants as I came up, and took my arm. We strolled down a narrow green avenue to a stone bench, where she seated herself, and I stood looking at her. We had both been silent. Mark had fallen behind and engaged himself in conversation with the maid.

I remember that just back of where *mademoiselle* sat was a great figure in white marble of a cavalier with a broken sword, staggering and clutching at his heart, as though he had received a mortal thrust.

Mademoiselle was gay in a gown of soft sky blue, and a diamond star gleamed in her turned-back hair; but she was pale, and methought that her blue eyes had been weeping again.

The more I looked at her, the more I was afraid. What presumption in me, the son of a poor country gentleman of Champagne, to raise my eyes to the great lady she was!

"We have but a little time, M. Duhamel," she said at length, after waiting vainly for my tongue to untie itself. "Tell me quickly how you come to be in Paris. What meant you in saying that I had sent for you?"

I gave to her then the square of blue paper and its wrapper.

"Is not that your hand, *mademoiselle*?" I asked.

She caught at it, stared, looked up at me and down again, and I saw her ears turn pink.

She crumpled the papers in her fingers.

"And because of this—this only—you have ridden all the way from Champagne to Paris?" she murmured.

"Yes, *mademoiselle*—and blithely would have ridden

much farther, if by so doing I might serve you," I replied stoutly, losing some of my diffidence at the sight of her confusion. "But is it not your hand? Did you not send it?"

She blushed deeper still.

"It is my hand, M. Duhamel; but I did not send it. It is a trick to fetch you to Paris, for what purpose I cannot guess. This is the second page of a letter which I had written to a kinswoman, but which I did not send. I thought that I had destroyed it. It must have been stolen from me."

"A trick! You did not send it!" I stammered emptily.

Mlle. de Lorme looked down at her feet. "Yes, a trick, *monsieur*—the trick of a very wicked man. Oh, forgive me that I should even have played an unconscious part in it! I fear that some harm threatens you."

"But what it says is true?" I persisted. "You *are* unhappy, *mademoiselle*?"

She did not answer. A second tear left its blot on the blue paper.

"*Mademoiselle* I know not what is your station here," I went on desperately. "You are unhappy. Nothing else matters. I will get a horse. You shall come with me from Paris. I——"

"Hush!"

Mademoiselle sprang up and faced me, and I saw a world of misery in her brimming eyes.

"You do not know what you are saying, M. Hilaire. If you *did* know my position here, you would not speak to me. You would shrink from me; for—for—you are honest, *monsieur*."

"What mean you, *mademoiselle*?" My throat had become suddenly dry, and I felt my knees shake violently.

"I will tell you, *monsieur*—for I too have some poor honesty. I was brought here to be a detestable thing,

a decoy—a toy to be dangled before the eyes of one who oftentimes is amused by—such toys.”

She had tried to make and keep her voice cold and hard and her eyes steady; but the one trembled pitifully, and in the blue depths of the others I saw what they could never hide from me: honesty, childlike frankness, purity.

No matter what her tongue might tell me, I would believe those eyes—even though I had found her in the Hôtel d'Epéron.

“You shall not turn my faith in you, Mlle. de Lorme—you cannot do that,” I replied. “You are in trouble, and I would serve you. Come with me. I will take you at once to a place of safety—whither you will.”

“*Mon Dieu!* for me there is no place of safety!” she cried softly, wringing her little hands. “It is impossible, *monsieur*—even did I wish it so, it is impossible. I am sped upon. My own servant yonder would betray me. We should be taken, and you would be slain. But this is useless talk. You forget where I am, and why. I have told you the truth. You are led on by a boy’s dear folly, and would regret——”

“*Mademoiselle,*” I interrupted solemnly, and this was not a boy’s folly, “any service which I can do for you, now or hereafter, I shall never regret. You did not send for me. So be it. But I am here; and I think that you have need of me, *mademoiselle*, and—I love you!”

“No, no!” She shrank back upon the stone seat and covered her eyes.

“But it is true, *mademoiselle*. I felt it when I first saw your face—that night. Through the months it has been growing, and it will never die. Had this message never come, I should have ridden one day to seek you.

I could not stop loving you now, dear *mademoiselle*—no matter what happened.”

But she shuddered as though my words had caused her physical pain.

“Stop—I must not listen to you—it cannot be,” she said, her voice all broken by sobbing. “You must leave Paris at once—if indeed you *can* leave before he finds you— No, no! I command you!” For I had seated myself beside her, and would have taken her into my arms.

My own fell at my sides.

“It is De Nogaret that has done this thing,” I said, slowly, measuring how great was the debt which I owed this man. “He is here?”

Her silence did not gainsay me.

“I will find him.”

“You must not! You must not harm him! There are reasons why his blood must not be upon your hands, or yours upon his.”

“But the blood of my father is already upon his hands, *mademoiselle*.”

Mlle. de Lorme raised a pale, startled face.

“You mean your father—*died*?”

“Yes, *mademoiselle*.”

“Oh, *monsieur*, how sorry I am for you! You will believe that, M. Hilaire. But M. de Nogaret did not—have you not learned that I told you truly? It was not he who slew your father.” She glanced sideways toward Mark.

True, it was the dog Nicolas who had fired the shot; but I held his master equal in the blame.

“If he had not sought my father’s life, and put his mark upon me, which is hard to forget, there is a still greater sin for which he shall answer to me, *mademoiselle*,” I answered gently.

“Nay, I——”

Mademoiselle paused suddenly, and pushed me from her.

A group of young *demoiselles* had turned into the lane, and came running toward us, calling out and laughing.

"Go, M. Hilaire! May the good God be with you! Leave Paris, and forget me!"

She sprang from the bench and turned to greet the *demoiselles*, and there was a laugh upon her lips. I strode away with lowered head. Forget her? I began to realize that I was a very stubborn, headstrong man.

"Who is he, Serene? Who is he?" clamored one of the girls, as they stared after me. "Aha, Mistress Slyboots!" taunted another; and a third exclaimed: "I do verily believe that he has made Serene weep—which is unheard of!"

I did not hear her answers, but took myself out of the lane so soon as might be. I was near to weeping myself.

So Black Simon had sold her to the Duke d'Epéron? I would not leave Paris, I swore, until both of them had rued their bargain, or I was buried there.

"De Nogaret is in Paris," I told Mark, as we left the gardens, where I had no heart to linger.

"By Saint George, then you found out more than did I, master!" he exclaimed. "That maid is a clever baggage at the holding of her tongue. Do what I could with her, the best I had from her was a kiss. She was free enough with that."

"Let us go where there is noise—and wine," I said. For I was turned reckless, and in my folly thought to drown my wretchedness in more folly.

We were passing by a great inn, whence the sounds of song and laughter and the clinking of bottles had given me my notion. We turned and entered.

It was a splendid hall with many tables for drinking

and gaming. Scented rushes and clean, white sand were thick upon the floor, and paintings and tapestries hung about the walls, their worth proclaiming, without the evidence of the magnificent roysterers who thronged it, that it was a drinking resort of the nobility.

But for none of these things had I an eye. Hardly was I across the doorsill ere I perceived at a table half-way up the room a small man in black and yellow velvet, who sat at a table, conversing with a number of other richly garbed cavaliers.

Even as my eyes saw him, I heard his hateful laugh, which I should have known in the blackness of the pit of hell.

It was De Nogaret!

I shouldered my way toward him through the crowd, my fingers wrapping themselves about my sword-hilt.

CHAPTER XV

HIS THIRD NAME

I DID not stop to wonder, as I might have done, at finding Black Simon, robber and rider of the Champagne roads, playing the gentleman here in Paris, and in such company. After all, it was not so strange. As I once had said to Mark, it would not by any means have been the first time that a French gentleman in straitened circumstances had replenished his purse by emptying others along the highways.

But none of these speculations was in my mind as I pushed through the noisy, laughing assembly in the crowded drinking hall of the Golden Eagle, my face aflame and my hand upon my sword.

Whoever he might be, he had been my father's deadly foe; he was my own bitter enemy—and, most of all, my lady's. For the death of Regnault Duhamel and my humiliation beneath M. de Nogaret's branding iron counted as small beside the wrong which he had attempted upon her—all her declarations and the evidence of my own eyes had not convinced me that he had succeeded in his vile designs; else she had not looked me in the face with those brave, steady eyes.

De Nogaret did not perceive my approach. One arm flung across the low back of his chair and the other resting upon the table, where his fingers toyed with a wine glass, he was talking with animation as I came up behind him.

"—and why should he not aspire? He is a gallant gentleman, of the highest blood in the land," I heard him say. I touched him upon the arm.

"And you, M. de Nogaret, or Black Simon—whichever suits you best—are an unspeakably vile thing in the shape of a man," I said loudly, my voice quivering with the rage which was mastering me, "an assassin, a trickster, and a coward!"

"Blood of God and Saint Mary!" he screamed, whirling about to meet me.

All those at his table, some six or seven men, leaped up with much scuffling of feet and scraping of chairs. Swords grated in their scabbards. A flask fell on the floor and crashed to pieces. Voices began to hum with astonishment from nearby tables. "Peace, *messieurs*! Peace!" bleated an anxious landlord. Had I wished to create a sensation, I could not have chosen better.

De Nogaret's hand had flown to his sword as he arose; but when he saw my face, his jaw dropped, and he hesitated to draw. A silence fell upon the gilded lords about us.

I think that even after my words he was striving to conquer his anger; for I saw his mouth twitch into a sorry attempt at a smile; but he was a man of quick passions, and I had driven him too far along anger's road—and was minded to urge him farther.

"Yes, draw the blade to which you are a disgrace, as you are a foul blot against the very name of gentleman," I went on recklessly; "you, who are so base and infamous that you would sell your own kinswoman into shame for gold!"

"Saint Denys, the boy is mad!" cried one of the gentlemen who had arisen; and to a lackey who came running up, "Haste, and call in the guard!"

Too far gone in rage to trust himself to speech, M. de Nogaret lifted a hand in negation.

His hesitation past, he tore his sword from its scabbard, and it crossed my waiting blade with a vicious clang.

Another of the gentlemen stepped forward a pace, as though to intervene; but the one who had first spoken stopped him.

"Let be," he said with a sneer. "Now that the blades are out, there is no danger. Why he wishes to fight with this fool, is beyond my comprehension; but the fool will lose his ears—Saint Denys!"

His exclamation was caused by a trick I had learned from Mark, and which nearly wrenched De Nogaret's weapon from his hand. He recovered his grip of it, however, and with it the use of his tongue.

"You know the sword better than when last we met," he rasped, pressing me fiercely for his lost ground.

"Yes; and do not forget that then you wore armor, and I none," I retorted. "It is more equal now—unless you have Nicolas waiting to shoot me in the back."

"Fret not about your back, my master," said a cool voice behind me. "I am here and watching."

I had clean forgotten Mark.

"So you walked into my little trap—and come wearing colors which I hate to soil," rejoined De Nogaret, referring to my crimson sash.

"You have already soiled them, in wearing those like them," I answered him. With my left hand I tore the silk from me, and I trampled it under my feet as I fought.

A general murmur of anger around me told me that I would have other enemies besides De Nogaret to reckon with, if I should succeed in vanquishing his blade—which I doubted; for he was a master of fence, and

I was fighting thus far with more desperation than confidence.

"I will warrant that you have seen Mlle. Serene, and harkened to her mewling," was his next fling. "I had not looked for you to come so soon, or this had never happened, Hilaire. I had not counted upon your boy's hot stomach. Now you force me to do what I do not desire."

He was becoming momentarily cooler and more dangerous. The knowledge of it steadied my wrist in a manner which surprised me.

"God's wounds! who taught you the sword?" he ripped out in wonder, as I turned over my shoulder a wicked thrust which he had aimed at my cheek, and my *riposte* sent him skipping backward.

I thought that I heard Mark chuckle.

"But you still wear my color, *monsieur*—on your forehead, where I put it. It is flaming now," De Nogaret continued, thinking to madden me again; for I too had cooled to steadiness.

He failed. I was not to be baited into unwariness. My rage, for being cold, was more deadly, and I felt myself master of my sword. He could not play with me as he had played before, at Château Duhamel. He realized it before I did, and he transformed his blade into a shield, and all his skill into a close defense, behind which he waited for me to make the slip which should be his opening.

Knowledge of this came to me at last, and with it a thrill of wild joy. I pressed him relentlessly, giving him no respite.

Of the events of my life, and they have been varied, that fight in the hall of the Golden Eagle is one of the clearest limned in my memory: the vivid colorings of the splendid hangings and of the costumes of the human

pageant; the painted portraits upon the wall looking down with changeless faces; the living men below, almost as still, strained forward with eyes and mouths agape; my enemy slowly giving way before me, doubt and then a frightened amazement in his hot brown eyes; the silence, broken only by our singing blades and panted breathing.

Down the length of the table I drove him; and his friends stepped to one side to make us way.

Of a sudden his courage broke; for though he was brave enough to a point, and even reckless, he had not the fortitude to face and fight inevitable defeat.

"Sacred God!" he snarled, "the lad must not kill me!" and then, "Save me, my friends! Save me!"

I laughed to hear that wail for aid, and behind me I heard Mark laughing also.

As De Nogaret's friends leaped forward to his cry, his sword faltered, and I thrust him fiercely through the forearm. His steel fell, and he reeled back with a howl of pain, and fell to dancing and cursing with a fluency and steadiness I never have heard equaled by any camp follower.

Other blades clashed against mine. I became the center of a crescent of eager swordsmen, each seeking to stab me as he would a rabid beast. From the tail of my eye I saw a horde of lackeys and pages springing in toward my flanks like dogs from leash.

"Stand off, you dogs of hell!" blared a great voice behind me. "I learned my trade of throat slitting while the most of ye were in your diapers!" A yelp of anguish followed; and the steady clanging of steel told me that Mark was busy, and I need not fear for my back.

De Nogaret, wringing his arm and hopping with agony, called out between his curses not to slay us, but to take

us alive; and through all the clamor which had arisen he made his voice heard and obeyed.

The lords fell away from us and left us to the lackeys; but not before I had cut a gash across the cheek of that one who had sneered at me, that it would take a hand's-length of court plaster to hide. I could have killed him; but my quarrel was not with him; and I must own that he had reason in doubting my sanity.

Ill had it fared with us among those lesser blades, there were so many of them, had it not been for M. de Nogaret's order, many times repeated, to harm us not, but take us. As it was, I came by several cuts from them in their frantic attempts to disarm me.

Resolved was I, and Mark likewise, not to be taken. Rather to go down fighting than be reserved for some more shameful end. Yet was I sorry for these mean curs who yapped and bayed us; for they were but doing their master's bidding. A number of times I held my hand when it might have sped a life, hoping that one of them, over eager, might finish me with a chance thrust. I was quite hopeless of continuing my existence; and with my lady lost to me, I cared not.

Mark was ruled by no qualms of forbearance. In a glance over my shoulder I saw that he had slain two luckless wretches outright; and half a score of the others bore red evidences of the vigor and ruthlessness of his blade. Because of his skill and his armor, he was still untouched.

"Kill all of them you can, master, say I," he grumbled as they gave back and we had a breathing space. "This is like to be our first and last fight together; for they have sent for soldiers. Best to make it one to be remembered."

The lackeys came on again with howls and revilings,

and I felt my comrade's broad back against mine as they pressed him.

The big doorway of the inn, which had been choked with onlookers from the street, was cleared suddenly, and a double file of soldiers, led by a captain, entered at a run and charged shouting up the room through the lane which was opened to them. Then our unarmored assailants gladly quit the field, and the open space around us was filled up by men in shining steel.

"Time to say farewell, Master Hilaire," said Mark. "I had not thought to find another master to suit me as your father did; but so it is, and I be glad to have served you. By St. George, I would burn ten years in hell for two more thrusts—one at the coward who is slinking yonder, and the other at his varlet Nicolas!"

Mark's loyal words brought a choking to my throat. I reached for his sword fist and shook it. "Good-by, then, Mark, my friend," I said; and then the soldiers came.

Their captain was a shrewd fellow. Learning how matters stood, and that we were not to be harmed, he sent a dozen of his men rushing at us to distract us, while as many others caught up one of the long drinking tables by its legs, and drove at us, holding it in front of them, broadside on.

Such an onset was not to be withstood by human flesh and bone. When that many legged battering ram struck us, we were swept back, pinned against another table, and finally borne down.

Behind their table a wave of sturdy rascals followed and flung themselves at us, seizing us wherever there was space for a hand hold. My sword was torn from me, my face ground into the sand of the flooring, and—which, absurdly enough at such a moment, I minded far more—my fine garments were soiled and trampled

upon. As I continued to struggle, one of my captors beat me over the head with his iron glove, nigh battering the senses out of me.

I was out of the battle; but my red headed companion was not.

Despite all the weight of men upon him, Mark heaved himself up from the floor, and I saw his fiery face, his blue eyes popping in their sockets from his efforts, rise above the struggling mass. His vitality was marvelous, his strength terrible. Kicking, striking and twisting, he tore himself from the clutches of his foes, and for a moment stood free.

He, too, had lost his sword. As his assailants leaped at him, he caught the foremost under the armpits and pitched him clean over his head, to fall with clashing armor many feet behind him. Then, using his fists after a fashion he had learned in England, he sent down three men-at-arms with as many blows, stretching them on the floor like fallen ninepins.

That was the end of his fighting. A soldier struck him from behind with a heavy stool, and while he staggered, dazed, they dragged him down and tied him with ropes. I had been similarly trussed.

They stood us upon our feet, and M. de Nogaret, his arm in a silken sling, came and looked at us. He had recovered his composure, and was smiling.

"By St. Peter, you are a better man than I had thought you, M. Hilaire!" he exclaimed. "Eh, well; good blood will tell, even though 'tis badly mixed. I will not withhold it from you, my boy—you play the prettiest blade that I ever have encountered."

I was sick and dizzy, and I would not answer. Mark cursed him roundly, and was smitten across the lips by a guardsman.

"We shall meet again," continued M. de Nogaret, bowing to me ironically.

"Take them to the Conciergerie—and see that they be treated well," he ordered.

"Who is that, *monsieur*?" Mark asked of one of the guards as they led us away.

"Holy blue! You do not know him then?" The man laughed as if he had cracked a clever jape.

The captain had heard the question, and he laughed, too, being in high humor, now that he had us fast. He took it upon himself to answer:

"That is his highness, the Duke d'Epemon."

CHAPTER XVI

I REFUSE FREEDOM

MARK twisted around and looked at me, and I at him. The words of the captain had stunned me like a blow.

"The Duke d'Epernon!" I stammered.

"Yes; and you are lucky, my lads, after your doings of the day, that he did not order you flayed alive," responded the captain briskly. "He may yet do so; for that was a fine fracas you raised back yonder, and the Duke d'Epernon by custom is neither tender of heart nor forgiving. What devil sent you hunting trouble there, of all places—too much wine, or just moon madness?" he asked curiously.

"We had a score to settle with a man of another name, and thought we had found him," Mark replied.

"*Umph!*" grunted the captain, unbelievably, and added with sincerity: "I wish ye well out of the business, my friends; for you are two rare fighting men. St. Christopher, one of my boys tossed like a sheaf of oats, and three others stretched witless by an unarmed man!"

He laid an arm across Mark's shoulder.

"An' ye get not good treatment during such time as may remain to you, 'twill not be by fault of Valentin André, who has a respect for bravery, see you, wherever he finds it." And he nodded and passed on to the head of his company.

This captain was a slender, tawny bearded man of

middle age, with pleasant eyes. I have none but friendly memories of him, though he did wear the colors of Mayenne.

For a little distance our guard was escorted by a con-course of the curious, who had followed from the Golden Eagle, seeking to learn the cause of the uproar there, and to lay eyes upon those who had started it. Getting only short answers from the soldiers, and none from us, they soon gave it up, and the remainder of our march to the Conciergerie was unnoticed. Soldiers and prisoners were too common a sight in the Paris streets to draw a second glance.

But had all the wolves of France howled at my heels, I doubt if I should have heeded them, so filled was my mind with my own concerns. For the entire structure of my surmises had fallen about my ears.

If Black Simon were M. de Nogaret, and he in turn the Duke d'Epéron, then what had Mlle. de Lorme meant me to understand, and where lay her trouble? I had thought that De Nogaret had sold her into the power of d'Epéron; but, seeing that they were one and the same—whom she had declared to be her cousin—by whom *was* she menaced?

I could find no loose end to that skein—and only cause to laugh at myself, when I reflected that I had attacked a peer of the realm, and made love to his cousin. And who was I; and what meant the duke by his twice repeated allusion to the blood in me?

On these puzzles I presently had ample time to meditate; for our walk from the inn to the Conciergerie was the last time that Mark and I breathed free air for many days.

At the prison, on the representations of Captain André, we were put to share one cell. His men took the ropes

off us and left us, the captain promising to come from time to time to see how we fared.

Mark looked after my trivial slashes, and then got him out of his armor.

"What do you think of it all? What does it mean?" I asked him.

"Why, as I look at it, master, we had a quarrel with one M. de Nogaret, and now we have it with the Duke d'Epéron—and thus far he has the best of it," he answered, sitting on a bench and ruefully considering his battered knuckles, which were so swollen from his jaw cracking exploits that he could scarcely remove his gauntlets. "And I think that we shall hear from him again before long."

The Conciergerie was a noisome hole enough, with little light by day, and oftentimes none at all at night; and withal abounding in vermin, both two-legged and four—and another sort, of which I never counted the legs, but can vouch for the jaws thereof.

Foul as was the place, there have been worse prisons. No irons were put upon us; nor did I see a prisoner in shackles in the course of our confinement there. Neither were we nor the others kept mewed in our cells, but had the run of the buildings and the court quite freely, to do what pleased us, so long as we did not approach too closely the walls or the gates. These last were strong and high, and most vigilantly guarded—reasons, I suppose, for the apparent laxity within them.

Captain André kept his promise and came to see us frequently. Because of his friendliness, our gold was not taken from us, and we were allowed such minor comforts as we could cozen a guard to go and buy for us, with now and then a bottle of wine. The captain even extended his good will to the sending of a man to our

inn, who paid our score there and fetched us our belongings.

"I have your horses, too," André told us. "If it be the will of God and the Duke d'Epéron that you ever leave this place free, they shall be yours again. If not, they shall have good masters; for, look you, I like you, though we be of different politics."

On one of his visits I asked the captain if he ever had heard of Black Simon.

"Yes, a rider of the north, and a brave man, if the tales of him do not lie," he answered. "Methinks though that I have heard that he is dead."

"The Duke d'Epéron, too, has ridden in the north," said I. "I met him in Champagne in November."

"Ah-ha! I thought that there was something between you!" André exclaimed, wagging his head, and in pride at his shrewdness, missing my inference. "He was from Paris at that time. When Henri of Guise returned, against the will of Henri de Valois, after hammering the Germans, M. d'Epéron was banished for a time; for the Balafré loved him not. He came not back until after Guise was murdered—which was a black deed, and may the Mignon burn for it." And André swore heartily.

"And before that—D'Epéron was much in Paris?"

"Certainly! 'Tis strange, even though you be from the provinces, that you know so little of him. He was one of the most famous of the king's minions. He it was who, with De Quelus, arranged the great duel between the minions and the gentlemen of the king's brother, the Duke of Anjou, in which stout Bussy d'Amboise got his death.

"M. d'Epéron has always been the king's man—though after the death of Guise, and when the king dared not himself show his sickly face in Paris, back came the duke, as bold as you please. Though he is

of the king's party still, they say, yet he has dealings with Mayenne, and he is in Paris as much as at Tours, where the king is hiding and flirting with Henri of Navarre. M. d'Epernon is the only man I know of who is able to stand with a foot in each camp, and not get his neck stretched."

"Ah, he is a fox, is the duke. Whoever comes out on top, M. the Duke, see you, will not be at the bottom."

"Black Simon has been riding in north France for many years," said I to Mark, when André had left us; "therefore the Duke d'Epernon cannot be Black Simon."

"I never thought that he was, master," replied Mark composedly, and thereby put me out of patience with him.

In my heart I apologized to Simon for the insult I had done him.

On an afternoon some three weeks after our incarceration in the Conciergerie, a guard entered the cell, where Mark and I were pitching dice, and called me out, bidding Mark remain.

"You have a visitor," he said.

I thought of Mlle. de Lorme, and my heart leaped as I followed him. It fell again when he led me into the courtyard, and I saw the small, nervous figure of D'Epernon pacing to and fro by the gate. Hot as was the day, he was swathed in a cloak and wore a mask. But I recognized him at once; and my hands itched with the temptation to seize and break him.

The guard left me, and I halted at some distance from my visitor.

"Come hither, M. Hilaire, where we may be as far as possible from any ears," said he, seeing recognition in my eyes. He led me to the center of the court, whence I saw that the guards had hustled the other prisoners,

When we were placed to his liking, he spoke hurriedly, watching my face:

"My affairs draw to a crisis, *monsieur*. It is likely that my stay in Paris will be brief. I have come to offer you your freedom—on conditions. Will you forget your spite against me, and join me?"

I gaped at him, too dumfounded to reply at once. His gaze took in the sober garments which I was wearing; for I had resumed the costume which I had brought from Champagne.

"I can take you out of this," he went on. "You shall have fine clothes to wear, yes, the finest, and you shall play a man's part in great events which are about to happen—if you will don the crimson sash again and be my man. I can forgive you your hotheadedness. 'Twas but the folly of a raw boy. I can give you advancement and riches. Can you not in turn forget your grudge against me? I did not kill your father, Hilaire; and believe me, though he attacked me, I regret his death, and I have punished the rascal who presumed to interfere and slay him. As for the iron, I have no defense but my temper. Forgive it."

I did not trouble to tell him that he lied, as, from Mark's version of the affair in Red Deer Pass, I knew that he did. For a moment curiosity conquered the anger and aversion with which his presence always inspired me.

"M. d'Epéron, why do you seek me?" I asked earnestly.

"God knows," he answered with a short laugh. "Because I sometimes am a fool, I suppose."

"Who am I? What is the blood in my veins, of which you have prated?"

"There are many things which you do not know, my boy. If you will be my man, I will tell them to you."

If you will not, I will be cursed if I tell you anything."

"And—Mlle. de Lorme?" I ventured.

Below the mask I saw his lips smile.

"Why, I have other plans for her, my boy; but they might fall through—who knows?"

"M. d'Epéronon," said I then, "the price you ask for your knowledge is too high. I must seek it elsewhere. You are the king's man, they say. When I fight—if fight I do—it will not be for you and your he-harlot, your pitiful minion king, nor yet for Mayenne and the League, but for a man—for Henri of Navarre! I will not wear your devil's livery!"

Instead of taking fire, he answered craftily:

"That may come, too, all in good time. I may yet be fighting on the side of the Béarnais."

"By the blue, if there is anything which could turn me against him, it would be to find you for him, M. d'Epéronon!"

"God's wounds!" he began savagely, but checked himself, and strode up and down the court for half a dozen turns, finally halting in front of me again.

"Boy, I know not how it is that you have such power to anger me, who would not be angered with you. May we not be friends?"

"Not in this world, *monsieur*—and my Christian teachings lead me to expect that we shall not meet in the next."

"Mayhap the red hot boots would alter your opinions," he suggested, his mouth writhing.

Though my stomach revolted at thought of that frightful torture, I would not let him see that he had moved me.

"After enduring your presence they would be a welcome diversion," I retorted. "You but waste your time,

M. d'Epernon. I have not the trick of turning my coat, in which you are so skilled; and I prefer the company which I find here to yours."

"Death of my life! Stay here and rot then!" he snarled. He stamped away and left me. All the way to the gate I heard him cursing to himself.

CHAPTER XVII

IT IS THRUST UPON ME

ON the fourth day after my visit from D'Epernon, Captain André came to us in a rare fever of excitement, and bearing news which warranted it.

"Fighting is coming at last!" he exclaimed, his eyes dancing at the prospect. "The king has quit dallying at Tours, and marches upon Paris with forty thousand men, and Henri of Navarre comes with him! There will be a fine siege!"

"And those be fine tidings to bring to men lying behind prison stones," growled Mark morosely, though he had pricked up his ears.

"Eh, well, if you are here, you will not be upon the beaten side," André consoled him; "for, look you, the League cares not a flea for the two Henris and their forty thousand. Mayenne will blow them away like dust."

"It is well to liken Mayenne to the wind," Mark retorted; "for he in all conscience is windy enough—and dust has a way of blowing back again, and making eyes to smart. Plague! I would give three fingers at this moment to be in the saddle once more, and under the banners of the Béarnais."

"Your digits be safe enough," said the captain. "But I am forgetting—M. the Duke d'Epernon left Paris this morning, and the good God knows when you will be let go now, if he ever intended to let you go—which I had

begun to think possible, seeing that he had left you your heads so long.

"Why it is permitted, I cannot understand," he went on, "for he clattered out through the Porte St. Antoine at the head of his eight hundred riders, and 'tis gossip that he goes to join the king. Where is the sense, look you, if one has a wolf in a trap in setting it loose again to bite one? But doubtless my lord of Mayenne——"

"You saw him go?" I interrupted.

"Yes; and that is another thing I came to tell you. I have been transferred to duty at the Porte St. Antoine—which is how I came to see him—and I know not when I may come to see you again, my friends."

"Was there in the company of the duke a small *demoiselle* with hair of gold?" I asked.

"A *demoiselle*!" André repeated after me, looking at me round eyed. "May a stroke take me if I can make you out, M. Hilaire! You come from the provinces. You know not the Duke d'Epernon, and yet you have a quarrel with him—and now you ask about his *demoiselles*! But then, look you, 'tis none of my affairs. No; I saw no such *demoiselle*; though among so many riders one might have slipped past me."

Thereafter the visits of André ceased, and we missed him mightily.

His tidings had been true. On the evening of July 30 the two Henris appeared before Paris with their army; and that night there was a continual clamor and passing of soldiers through the streets, so that we in the Conciergerie had little sleep.

As the darkness fell, our guards called down from their towers that they could see the long line of the besiegers' camp fires in a vast crescent on the left bank of the Seine.

Paris, surprised in spite of its warnings, became furious

and prepared to fight. Still no assault was made next day, or on the day after that.

But before it was light on the morning of August 2, a prodigious uproar arose in the city. Bells were rung in all the churches; bonfires were lighted; cannon were fired; and the townsfolk crowded into the streets, shouting and singing as though gone mad. We in the prison thought surely the attack had been begun, though the tone of the din puzzled us, being more of rejoicing than of apprehension or anger.

Two of the guards who had been out in the city came in presently, tossing their arms and yelling crazily:

"The king is dead! The king is dead! Live the League! Live Mayenne! Down with Henri of Navarre!"

The prisoners rushed from their cells and crowded about the gates, and in the excitement and rejoicing no one took thought to shoot them for it.

When the guards subsided to coherent speech, we learned from them that one Jacques Clément, a young fanatic, who believed that he had been sent by God, had gone to the headquarters of the king at St. Cloud, presented a spurious letter to Henri of Valois, and stabbed him while he was reading it.

The king had retained his wits long enough to see his guards stretch the assassin dead at his feet, and then to summon Henri of Navarre, name him as his successor, and cause those present to swear allegiance to the Béarnais. Having thus accomplished the best deed of his miserable life, the last of the Valois kings had gone into the shadows, and had died in the night.

Whether Navarre would now come on and attack Paris, said the guards, none appeared to know or care; but already a number of the nobles who had followed the king were returning to the city, refusing to support the Béarnais.

When I heard that, I recalled what D'Epernon had said—that he might yet be found on the side of Navarre—and I wondered if he had deserted or stayed; and I wondered, too, if the killing of the king, his master, was one of the “great events,” to which he had referred, and if he had had a hand in it. I could well believe it of him.

For more than a week the Parisians celebrated with a continuous round of fêtes the murder of their king. Some of the lesser prisoners at the Conciergerie were even given their liberty in honor of the event.

I sought in vain to discover what was to be done with us. I obtained an interview with the governor of the prison, who received me kindly enough, but did not know—or professed that he did not—what was to be our disposition. Without naming their source, he said that he had received orders which he was bound to obey: to hold us and to treat us well, “both of which I shall continue to do, *monsieur*.”

In the meantime we heard that Henri of Navarre, deserted by the hostile nobles, and also by numbers of his own southern faction, on whom he had counted most strongly, had been urged by his advisers to flee to the south. His besieging army had dwindled to less than half its first strength, and Mayenne was preparing, but slowly, to go out and destroy the remnant; but the little Béarnais had answered stoutly that he would stay in the north and fight it out, if he had to fight alone.

On the day we heard that news, Mark and I retired to our cell, where for a time we conducted like caged beasts.

Our hour had struck. Henri of Valois was dead. Henri of Navarre had begun his struggle for the throne of France, and sorely needed aid—and we, who were sworn

to aid him, were penned helpless in a noisome prison cell in the midst of his deadliest foes!

Fool, and thrice a fool, I named myself. Why had I come to Paris?

Liberty, when it came, fell upon us like a thunderbolt.

On the 17th of August, shortly before the time for our evening meal, which we ate usually at seven o'clock, one of the guards came to inform us that we were to pack such belongings as we wished to carry; for we were to leave the Conciergerie at once.

We chose to don our armor, which was easiest carried in that manner, and having made packets of our other clothes, we were taken to the office of the governor, who returned us our swords and daggers, shook hands with us, and bade us farewell.

"But where are we to go?" I asked.

"To the devil, for all that I care," he answered good humoredly; "only take yourselves away from here."

"But I do not understand. By whose orders are we released?"

"By those of the one who put you in here, I suppose, *monsieur*. Nay, mention no names," and he frowned; for he had made this a forbidden topic.

"Are we to have passes from the city?" I persisted, reflecting that our position abroad in Paris at this time would be no certain one.

He shook his hands at me.

"My God! One would think that you did not wish to leave, to hear you fret—and you are lucky dogs! I know naught of passes. Get ye gone! I wash my hands of ye!"

He waved us toward the door, laughing at our bewildered faces; and we thanked him for his courtesies and went our way.

Glad enough we were to quit the precincts of the Palais de Justice—but where to go?

“Let us to the Porte St. Antoine,” said I. “Captain André has stood our good friend. Peradventure he will help us now.”

So we shouldered our bundles and tramped off across the great Pont Neuf—then still unfinished, and piled with heaps of builders’ stone—to the right bank of the Seine.

Little, very little, of our gold was left to us; but I soon found means to repair our wasted finances. Seeing a shop where such matters were dealt in, I entered and disposed of my gallant’s finery—gay feathers, which I had worn but once, and which had brought me so little luck. I had been robbed when I purchased them, and I was robbed again at parting, the shopkeeper giving me something less than one-quarter of their cost; but I did not complain, and was glad to see the last of them.

Around us seethed the life of Paris, carefree and gay as though the corpse of the king of France were not hardly cold in its grave, and the kingdom torn by war and in peril of passing to the Spaniard.

Merry gallants swaggered, singing and laughing, through the streets; masked gentlemen hastened on secret missions—perchance to the gaming tables; ladies, their faces concealed also by the prevalent and well named “wolf” of black silk, and attended by pages and men-at-arms, passed furtively on errands still more secret. Groups of soldiers ruffled by in clanking armor; lackeys, students from the University of Paris, and tradesmen’s lads strutted and aped their betters, and quarreled noisily among themselves. Impudent beggars exhibited their spurious sores, and bellowed loudly for alms.

Honest burghers and their ladies hugged the walls, and gave a wide road to all the others. Occasionally a priest, with downcast but haughty mien, paced sedately through

the crowds, his passing greeted with hushed respect from all the ingredients of the motley concourse.

I doubt not that our lack of colors—for we would not don the scarlet again—must have caused Mark and me considerable annoyance, if not worse, had it not been that many of the soldiers who had come over from the camp of Navarre were in similar case; so that we passed unnoticed.

Our way to the Porte St. Antoine took us by the Hôtel d'Epéron. Its gates were closed and it had a deserted air; still I was suddenly minded to make sure whether or no *mademoiselle* had left Paris, and I knew not if I should have another opportunity of getting the information.

Long pounding upon the gates with our steel gloves brought a response at length, in the shape of an enormous pistol, which was thrust through a wicket window in one side of the gate, and within a few inches of our noses. A tremulous voice demanded of us our business.

I edged around, and back of the pistol I saw the wide pink countenance of the lackey with the sausage calves. He did not at all recall me, and his pistol, which was at full cock, shook so violently that I feared each moment lest it might explode and terminate all my earthly plans and aspirations.

"Monsieur the Duke is absent from Paris?" I asked.

"Yes."

"And Mlle. de Lorme?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell me where *mademoiselle* may be found?"

"No."

Crash went the wicket, and we heard the footsteps of ponderous M. Brevity retreating across the stones of the court.

CHAPTER XVIII

ALL GATES CLOSED

“**I**F D’Epernon is still from Paris, who, in the devil’s name brought about our release,” said I, as we turned away from Hôtel d’Epernon; “and why, indeed, should he have released us, anyway?”

“But we *are* out, master,” was Mark’s reply, “and beyond that I shall not look until I have under my belt the best collop and bottle which Paris can provide. My stomach his telling me that we were kicked out of the Conciergerie supperless.” He caught at my arm. “Would see the whip hand of the League, master? That is he yonder—on the roan horse.”

A group of cavaliers came riding up the street, followed by a jingling company of mounted men-at-arms.

In the midst of the gentlemen rode a big shouldered man of huge girth of paunch, whose waxed black beard spread fanwise across his pourpoint nearly to his waist. As he passed opposite me, I saw that he had deepset, gloomy eyes and a wide, thin mouth. He was Charles de Mayenne, the man who dared not seize the throne of France, though he wanted it; and then made the mistake of setting upon it the Cardinal de Bourbon, and thereby recognizing the right of succession of the house of which Henri of Navarre was the head.

“One pistol ball well aimed would save France and the Béarnais a deal of trouble,” rumbled Mark, scowling

after him; "but I have not a pistol, nor would I use it if I had. It is better to win in the open field."

By luck, we found Captain André at the Porte St. Antoine; and rarely surprised was he to see us there, and to learn how it had come about.

"Now you shall have your horses, *messieurs*, as I promised you," he said. "They are not far from here." He sent a sergeant to fetch them.

"And when we have them?" questioned Mark, looking wishfully through the gateway, which was open but guarded, to the dusty road and the wide green fields beyond.

In truth, in the slant rays of the descending sun, it was a pretty and alluring prospect that offered; though for us 'twas framed in the grim stone of that forbidding gateway.

André's face fell.

"You wish to leave Paris," he replied, "and I know not how you are to do it. Now, see you, were you on the other side of the wall, I could blithely let you in. But you are on this side, and there's the plague of it. You cannot pass unless you can show proper papers. I am main sorry—you know I bear you a friendliness—but we be on different sides of a big matter, and I know it.

"Orders are that none goes out of this gate without permission. And, look you, I am faithful to the League, whose man I am, and I will not let you go. And you will find it the same at every gate. You will be taken again if you try."

We could not blame André for being a true man—such be rare enough—and we told him so, whereat he seemed much relieved. We asked him then for the news, which he told us readily.

It was that Henri of Navarre had gone into Nor-

mandie with what remained of his army; and that Mayenne, having proclaimed Charles de Bourbon king, was, in his usual leisurely way, raising an army to pursue the Béarnais, having promised Paris that he would bring the upstart king back tied neck and heels, or drive him into the sea.

"If I know aught of this little Béarnais, M. the Duke of Mayenne, big and fat as he is, has set his teeth in a larger chunk than he will ever get down his gullet," commented Mark. "France is likely to see less of delay and more of action in the next few months than even she is used to."

While we talked, the sergeant reappeared, leading Fanchon and Mark's big black Harry. They had had excellent care and were as sleek as cats; and they were no less glad to see us again than we them.

When we had them once more between our knees, I saw Mark look longingly through the gateway again. It was guarded by perhaps a half score of men-at-arms. I knew what he was thinking:

One dash, a few sword strokes, and with luck——

"Do not think of it, my friend," said André softly, patting Harry's black muzzle. "If you should try it, why, look you, I should have to give the order to shoot you—which would pain me as well as you. You could not win through my lads yonder; and if you were taken alive, the League would not deal with you as kindly as has your private enemy."

I winced. It was not pleasant to think that I was beholden to D'Epernon for gentle dealings.

"If you can get free without my connivance, I wish you well," continued André. "Come here to the gate and visit me at any time; and if you have need of money——"

"Now there is an honest fellow," Mark said, as we turned back into the gathering twilight of the streets.

"Harry's ribs here prove it." He smacked the horse with his palma. "Let's hunt an inn. And afterward—I tell you, master, we are going to leave Paris, if I have to turn rat and gnaw a hole through the wall!"

Not desiring to face the questions and consequent complications which were possible, we did not return to our first inn, that of the Three Rabbits, but betook us to a tavern known as The Salamander, in the Rue Ferronnerie, and there appeased our stomachs.

What the dishes were, I do not now recall, except that there was a juicy leg of young lamb and wine of Asti, and that both were excellent, and we sat long at table.

It was not that we had been starved at the Conciergerie. Due to the governor's favor, and because we had the money to pay, we had fared well enough there. But somehow that first meal eaten in comparative freedom had a vastly different smack to it.

"Whither now?" I asked, as we stood before the door, clearing our teeth with splinters of wood, and waiting for a varlet to fetch our horses.

Mark looked up at the sky.

"There is a bright moon, with flying clouds," he answered. "Perchance the gates will not be closed. Let us go and see. We ride good horses. If, by some trick, we can get us through, why we can chance the rest, eh?"

We decided to go first to the Porte St. Denis, which was nearest to the northern road which we wished to follow.

Most of the streets which we traversed lay north and south, and were so narrow and closely built that the light of the rising moon, shining over the eastern roofs and striking only the upper faces of the buildings opposite, gave them the curious semblance of half streets, wherein foundationless houses floated upon nothingness. Below them and in the thoroughfares was the darkness of the

pit, except at the cross streets and alleys. There the bright rays of the moon lay across the way like fallen pillars of silver.

At one of those lighted crossings we met a cavalier, whom, though seen for a moment only, I at least have never forgotten.

He was a young man, beardless, and with long fair hair, more fair than that of my brother Moise, which fell in curls across his shoulders. From the plume in his hat to the heels of his shoes, he was clad in white, spotless and gleaming. His doublet was of silver tissue; his hose were silk, and his shoes satin; his cloak was richly embroidered and lined with cloth of silver, and gems of price shone frostily in the folds of his hat. One touch of color alone he showed, a small shoulder-knot of crimson, pinned on his cloak with a diamond clasp.

The horse which he rode was milk white, too, and was tricked out in white-enameled harness and trappings, trimmed with silver, so that horse and rider emerged into the moonlit space of the crossing from the Egyptian darkness beyond it like a statue of ivory and argent thrust through a velvet curtain.

The cavalier rode unattended, nor could I see that he carried arms, except a slender court rapier, which swung at his hip in a white velvet scabbard.

As he rode, he hummed softly to himself the refrain of a popular ditty. Passing so close to me that our elbows nearly touched, he cast me a merry glance from twinkling eyes and nodded his head, without ceasing his music.

So gallant and striking was that figure that Mark and I instinctively turned about in our saddles to observe it. We had but a glimpse of a glittering back, a fluttering cloak, and a tossing spray of snow white plume; and the bright rider had vanished like an apparition into the gloom whence we had come.

"*Hé!* yonder goes a dainty butterfly," said Mark. "Did you catch the wind of him, master? He is scented like a thorn bush in full flower. Hark to him sing!"

Out of the darkness behind us rose a high, clear voice of compelling sweetness:

"J'ay nom sans bruit,
Foeuille sans fruit,
Le jour m'est nuit—" *

The voice died away on the wind and was gone.

Often and often have I wondered since who and what was that horseman who came riding in white and singing so debonairly in the darkness and perils of the Parisian night, that he might have been the embodied spirit of all that was carefree and light and graceful in Paris.

Careful lest we break our necks or the legs of our horses in the treacherous sewer runnels, we threaded the northward streets, and turned finally into the Rue St. Denis a little way below the gate.

There Mark left me to stand with the horses in the shadow, while he went forward silently on foot to reconnoiter.

* Lines of Martin le Franc, an old-time French poet. Translated:

"I have name without sound,
Foliage without fruit,
The day to me is night—"

—EDITOR'S NOTE.

CHAPTER XIX

WE FIND A STRANGE KEY

AS I sat waiting, my ears were attracted by a succession of curious sounds that proceeded from the mouth of an alley which we had passed, and which doubtless I had not heard before because of the motion of the horses.

One may hear—and I had had experience of it—many strange noises in Paris at night; yet these were of an oddity which stirred my curiosity.

They consisted of a continuous glucking and gurgling, as of wine poured from a jug into a roomy and sonorous cask, interspersed at whiles by a dolorous groaning in a human voice, and at other whiles by a prodigious *Urmph!* in tones which were not human, or, if they were, thought I, must proceed from the throat of an enormous and very petulant giant.

Mark presently returned and made report of his findings. The gate, he said, was indeed open; but it was guarded by at least a score of wakeful men-at-arms, a part of whom were provided with horses.

“Now the decision rests with you, Master Hilaire,” said he. “The odds be heavy, and I like not the look of their muskets. Still, we might cut through them, taking them by a dash and unawares; and our— What the devil!”

An *Urmph!* louder and more fretful than any which

had preceded it, had belched from the depths of the alley.

"Did you hear yon, master? What is hiding there?"

"I should like to know," I answered. "Ever since you left me, I have been listening to a woeful concert, of which that has been a part."

The doleful moaning began again, and in a moment or two was punctuated by another stupendous grunt.

"*Pardieu!*" Mark muttered. "Were it possible for a building to take sick, I should declare that yonder a castle at least is trying to disgorge its indigestion."

At that instant a new voice entered the dismal controversy, and at sound of it Mark started again. It was thin, twanging, and querulous; and its words were English, of which, from long association with Mark, I had a smattering.

"Murrain seize you, you sottish pagan swine!" it complained. "Thrice have you wakened me from my honest slumbers with your vile whinings! How, think you, is a body to sleep amid your melancholy clamor, unless he be as drunk as you are? Which I devoutly wish I were! I was dreaming that both my thumbs were joint deep in a steaming venison pie; and then your accursed miauling must needs break in upon me and banish the good dish ere I had sampled it! Me, who for two days have for hunger drawn my belt so tight that 'twould but girdle a dame's wrist! Plague upon this thribbly damned city of Paris; and all therein contained! May——"

Urmph!

"Peace, Empress, peace! I know your troubles also, poor beast, and would mend them if I were able! Was ever man so bedeviled since the days of Job the Prophet—or was it Sir Jonah? Curse Mayenne! Damn the League! Blight of Holy Trinity upon all their works! May the fire loving Beelzebub fly away with me—any-

where, so that he takes me out of these, my troubles! Harken, Ali; an you wake me again before cock crow, I'll lash your bare back until your brown toes curl, so sure as my name is Jonathan Hobbs—now mark it! *Heigh-ho!* Woe's me! God help us!"

The voice ceased, and we could hear only a subdued whimpering, and the gurgling noise which had first arrested my attention.

Plaint, malediction, threat and adjuration, inextricably tangled, had followed one another in that high, droning singsong without change of tone or scarcely pause for breath; and though its owner's woes might be real enough, his recital of them was withal so ludicrous that Mark and I, despite our own plight, held our sides for laughter.

"In yonder, master, is an Englishman," said Mark, when he could control his voice. "Whatever his ills—and he seems to have them in plenty—he has cursed Mayenne, and so perforce is our ally. Let us go and discover what ails him."

On foot and leading our horses, we pushed into the alley. A wrack of cloud had drifted across the face of the moon, and it was so dark that we must grope our way. As we proceeded, a breath of breeze floated against us, and brought to our nostrils a heavy and not too pleasing odor, which, no sooner had I smelled it than it plagued my memory to recall where I had met it before. Our horses sniffed it, too, and began to snort and tug at our elbows.

Our advance was overheard.

"*Hi*, Ali! Bestir yourself, you hound of Mahound!" sang out the unseen voice. "Something is afoot yonder in the dark! Belike 'tis thieves! Nay, I forgot." The voice became a groan. "We have nothing left to lose! Come on, sir thieves, an it likes ye. If ye can find aught

here that is worth the taking, beshrew me, but I'll force ye to share it with me."

"Jonathan Hobbs, so be that you have emptied your vessel of curses—and it must be of truly remarkable capacity if you have not," said Mark, laughing, and speaking in English, "mayhap you will stand forth and tell a fellow countryman the particular sort of trouble which afflicts you, and what manner of companion you are consorting with yonder, which so offends both my ears and my nostrils."

"Who speaks? If you are one with authority, I pray that you will graciously overlook and pass by my maunders of the moment; for I be nigh beside myself with vexations; and truly I meant no harm," whined the voice, and then changed to defiance. "If you are not, may the devil take you and your English tongue! I be the only honest Englishman in all Paris."

We had emerged from the alley into an open space in the rear of the buildings, where it was a bit lighter, though still murky. A dark figure of a man confronted us a few feet distant.

"Nay, come not nearer, on your peril!" he said with a nasal snarl, skipping back from us. "Empress shall set foot upon and crack you like rotten eggs!"

Beyond him we saw then the dim outlines of a great bulk reclining on the ground, above which something writhed and tossed like an awakened serpent. As if to emphasize the menace which had been uttered, the mass stirred uneasily, and from it proceeded another monstrous *Urmph!* which set Fanchon and Harry to dancing.

"There is odor enough abroad hereabouts which lacks not the cracking of eggs," retorted Mark, peering and sniffing. "Whoa, Harry, you'll have my arm! Why, sir, I did but inquire in common courtesy the cause of your grievous outcry."

Just then the clouds slipped from the face of the moon, and her brightness flooded the place.

On the ground a few feet from us lay the same huge gray beast which I had seen at the St. Germain fair. Its forelegs were stretched out before, and its hinder ones spraddled behind, while its elongated nose, which once I had mistaken for a second tail, was twisting uncannily through the air above its enormous head.

Between the giant knees, and half pillowed across one of them, lay a nearly naked brown man, sleeping heavily, and moaning as he slept. From time to time the animal lowered its flexible snout, and with it smelled at and cuddled the man, at such times giving vent to its discontented grunt.

In front of this group stood the fellow who had spoken, a bony, loose jointed knave, with a mane of grizzled hair and shrewd, close set black eyes, which glittered like glass beads. He was clad in garments which once had been fresh and gaudy, but now were worn, soiled and bedraggled.

One feature he had in common with his beast, and that was the longest and most crooked nose that one can imagine thrusting out from a human countenance. When he talked, he spoke through this trumpet; though why one should choose to send his voice at cost of much effort through such a roundabout and devious byway, I could not guess.

He stood with his hand on a big knife at his belt, and in the new light eyed us doubtfully.

"Which of ye speaks English?" he asked. "Ye are not spies seeking to undo me?"

"Nay," replied Mark, laughing again as he took in the scene. "It seems to me that has already been done. We heard your complaints, and our hearts warmed toward

you because of your hearty cursing of Mayenne and the League—to which we offer our amen.”

M. Hobbs appeared to be somewhat mollified, and quit fingering his knife. We tethered the horses to a dismantled gate; and he and Mark fell to talking together at such a rate that I could only follow them in parts.

I gathered that M. Hobbs had roved much, and that he had purchased the beast, which he called an elephant, with its native driver, at Constantinople, thinking to turn its exhibition before the curious to his account. But latterly his affairs had languished. Political fever in Paris had closed the fairs, and also closed the gates of the city on M. Hobbs and his caravan, leaving them, like us, on the wrong side.

His money was spent; he had been turned from his inn; he was hungry; and—which seemed his greatest sorrow—he had nothing to feed to the elephant, for which he appeared to cherish a true affection, despite its smelliness and unmannerly grunts and belchings.

“She has eaten us from under our roof, Empress has,” he said with a sort of melancholy pride. “Two hundred-weight of green and dry forage is required daily to fill her belly, and since yesterday she has not had it, poor beast, though I spent my last *sol* upon her, and not upon myself. Ali is drunk through charity, for which his prophet will curse him; and I have allowed Empress to suck up her fill of foul Seine water to drown the lack of more substantial provender.

“Three mortal weeks have I been striving to get us out of this accursed and flea ridden city, so we might hie away to Italy or Spain. But because they are all mad here; and because I be an Englishman, and Queen Bess, they say, has a leaning toward the cause of this Henri of Navarre, I’ve been balked and made sport of. From one addle pated flunky to another I’ve been bandied,

and have been both browbeat and threatened. I can get no pass.

"To-day I've tramped wearily from one gate to another, the plagued city round, hoping to find a kindly captain who would let us pass out. But they are all alike, dogs and the sons of dogs; and their soldiers have laughed at and derided me.

"Now we be homeless and starving here, we three, Empress, and Ali, and me. God's wounds! Starving! And just beyond the walls lie the good green fields, where Empress could pluck her sustenance, like the dainty lady she is! I mind not the case of Ali and myself so much. He is a heathen, and is already damned, and I have known hunger before; but, mighty as is an elephant, it cannot long endure without food, and I would not lose my Empress."

There were tears in M. Hobbs's voice.

"What care I about the wranglings here?" he broke out anew. "Let Queen Bess kiss and coddle your French Henri, and marry him an she likes; or let her turn to and help these other dolts to hang him—'tis all one to me."

"You shall not starve at any rate!" exclaimed Mark, and he fetched from our saddle bags a part of the bread and meat which we had purchased at the tavern and stored against our attempt to escape from the city.

Then was I witness to a display of kindness of heart which made me respect this M. Hobbs, though I could not like him and his strange ways.

He took the food gratefully from Mark; and his first action was to separate carefully the bread from the flesh, and give the whole of the former to his elephant, which thrust its proboscis forward, groping and sniffing, and seized the offering and stuffed it into a vast red maw, which opened to receive it, and in which it seemed but

a crumb. The meat M. Hobbs divided, reserving by far the smaller portion for himself, and offered the other to the brown man, shaking him by the shoulder and dinning into his ear:

"Awake and eat, son of Apollyon! God sends you meat. Ask not if it be swine or kine, but eat."

Ali stared about him stupidly until his nostrils caught the savor of the food, whereupon he snatched it with a cry of "Praise Allah!" and fell to rending it wolfishly with pointed teeth. He did not quit his station between the knees of the elephant, and he took no notice of us. When he had finished the meat, he cleaned his fingers by running them through his long black hair, and at once relapsed into slumber.

Moved by curiosity, I made to approach the elephant, and its immense wrinkled snout, which was all of eight feet in length, came writhing to meet me.

"Have a care, young sir!" cautioned M. Hobbs, seizing my shoulder. "If you have about your person so much as a single pinch of the vile concoction which they call the queen's herb,* sheer off! Empress will detect it, and will tear you limb from limb if she can lay hold of you. Some weeks ago a hollow skulled gallant contrived to ply her with some of the stuff at the fair when I was not watching, and he was like to have been slain in consequence—and she has the devil's own memory for all such affronts."

But I had none of the stuff on me, and Empress suffered me to be friendly, and to stroke the thing which M. Hobbs called her trunk, and which was softly tipped with pink flesh and provided with a curious, fingerlike appendage, wherewith she caught at my hands and explored me all over.

*Tobacco snuff, so called in France because of the late Queen Catherine de Medic's inordinate fondness for it.—EDDOR'S NOTE.

What a bulk she was as she lay there, and must have been all of ten feet high at the shoulder when standing erect! She was further equipped with two tusks of thick, yellow ivory, which projected from her skull at each side of her mouth, and which were two-thirds the length of my body.

"You call your beast a female," said Mark, noticing these; "but she has tusks, which I had thought were borne only by the males of her kind."

"She is an African beast, and not an Asian," M. Hobbs replied, "as one might know from the swell of her forehead and the size of her ears—and those of Africa bear ivories, both male and female."

"She is very strong?" I asked.

"Aye, young sir, and she knows not the extent of her own powers, else would she be difficult to manage at times. As it is, a chain which is to her as a hair will yet hold her safely."

"But such a huge bulk must be slow," I continued.

"You are deceived. An she will, Empress can put a fleet horse to his best paces to keep alongside of her."

Suddenly sprang into birth in my mind an idea which must have been simmering there. How simple it was! *Mon Dieu*, how simple! Why had neither of us thought of it?

"If you wish so very much to leave Paris, M. Hobbs," I said, "why do you not set the beast at one of the gateways, and go riding merrily through?"

M. Hobbs stared at me; but Mark smote his steel glove upon his steel thigh and cried:

"By St. George, and why not? And we two to slip through behind you in the confusion! Well thought, Master Hilaire, oh, well thought! Thunder of the devil, yes!"

He turned to the Englishman.

"Would your beast face armed horsemen?" he questioned. "And would you risk it?"

"Why, ones of her kind have done so ere now in the ancient wars," replied M. Hobbs thoughtfully; "aye, and have battered over walls of wood, and some of stone, as though they were paper. As for the risk in it: if she remains here, she will starve miserably; so what's the odds? I will confess that in my desperation some such thought already had occurred to me.

"But, see you here, sirs, you, too, must have some weighty stake in play, to father such a wish. Now I—" He hesitated, his manner grown wheedling.

Mark understood, as did I. We opened our pouches, and into M. Hobbs's willing palm we counted twenty pieces from our store of gold. His hesitation vanished like mist.

"When—" he began.

"This moment, man!" Mark interrupted. "There will never be a better time. The Porte St. Denis stands ajar, with but a score of guards to defend it, and only half of them mounted. We——"

M. Hobbs in turn interrupted.

"Ali!" he shouted in the brown man's ear. "Up and put Empress in motion! Haste! Aid, sirs, to place my belongings upon her," he asked.

We helped him to lift upon the broad back of the elephant a boxlike structure which was packed with bundles; and as she rose slowly, one end after the other, under the urgings of her driver, who had clambered astride of her neck, M. Hobbs buckled a broad girth of leather beneath her. He then scrambled up by it, and popped into the box.

"Will you ride with me?" he asked, thrusting his head over the edge, and grinning down at us like a wooden fox.

"No, my friend—but close behind," Mark answered. As the beast stood swaying, her interior gurgled and bubbled like a cauldron.

"What is the cause of that noise in her inside?" I asked. M. Hobbs thrust his head from the box again.

"That is the bellyful of Seine water which she has swallowed. Mayhap I'll yet show you a trick with it," and he chuckled.

"Forward, Ali!"

The brown man prodded the animal with a sharp wand of steel which he bore, and she swung off with long strides through the alley. We forced our reluctant horses in her wake; and we had to marvel at the stillness with which she managed her going; for they made far more noise than she.

"Faster, Ali!" M. Hobbs commanded, as the elephant turned into the Rue St. Denis.

"Now—full speed! God help you, Empress—to the green fields and the marshes—and the devil receive those who bar your way!"

With her trunk tossing aloft and her great ears flapping like blankets, Empress headed down the street toward the Porte St. Denis.

CHAPTER XX

THE DRUM OF NAVARRE

EMPRESS'S movements were awkward. She seemed not to have any knee joints, but to swing her towerlike legs straight from shoulders and thighs. But when she applied herself to her stride, she made a pace which led Fanchon and Harry their best gallop. And though she lifted her feet but a few inches, the ground shook when she set them down.

While we had dallied with M. Hobbs, the moon had sailed high; but a great part of the Rue St. Denis between us and the gate was still in deep shadow.

It was not until our gigantic ally, with us lurking close at her flanks, careered into the light of a crossing a few hundred feet from the gate, that the guards perceived her; though they must have heard the clattering of the horses; for they were clustered closely before the archway.

A chorus of yells greeted the appearance of Empress. Those who had mounts scrambled for their saddles. Before they could take form for resistance, the mighty beast was upon them, charging across the brightly lighted space of the gate approach.

"Halt!" shouted the voice of the gate captain. His men raised their muskets.

At sight of the leveled muskets, I think that the heart of Ali failed him, and that he would have stopped or turned the beast. But M. Hobbs, despite his whining

ways, was of a different kidney. I saw him lean from the front of his box and set a dagger point between Ali's bare shoulders, and hold it there.

What he said, I know not; but it stopped Ali's flinching. With a shriek of terror, the miserable creature struck deeply with the steel goad, and launched his living battering ram at the dark arch of the gateway.

Mark and I had drawn our swords, I supposed to fend ourselves; but it seemed that a different idea had laid hold of him. Heedless of the danger of the muskets, he suddenly spurred in ahead of me and began belaboring lustily with his blade across Empress's enormous hams—though I noticed that he used the flat of it—and bawling "Stop! Stop!" at the top of his voice. That maneuver attained its object. It so confused the musketeers that they dared not fire lest they hit us, who might be friends.

While they hesitated, Empress, without slackening her stride, reached and ploughed through them, scattering them like leaves, and leaving two overthrown horses rolling upon their luckless riders.

She had further contrived to run her nose down her throat and recover thence several gallons of the River Seine, which she discharged to right and left with great force at the moment of her onset, squealing the while like a tempest, as though she knew and enjoyed her mischief.

No sooner were we through the archway than Mark shouted: "Ahead! Ride ahead, master; for now they will fire!" and we pricked our horses to a scampering run, and took the lead.

A volley followed us indeed, and a number of the balls thumped loudly on Empress's vast stern; but their only effect was to hasten her gait and cause her to give vent to a hoarse scream of annoyance.

We tore madly through the Faubourg St. Denis toward the open land beyond.

M. Hobbs from his eminence watched the road behind. At the end of a mile he bade Ali halt and turn the beast. Six of the ten horsemen at the gate had taken heart of grace and come galloping after us. They rode good horses; while Empress, running on an empty belly, was tiring.

When they saw her turn to face them, caution chilled the guardsmen's zeal. They drew together in a clump and pulled up. One of them fired a pistol.

At the command of Ali, the elephant raised her trunk to its full height, and advanced upon them down the moonlit road, trumpeting so that the air shook. That sealed their indecision. They put about their dancing horses and scurried away, doubtless consigning us all to the devil.

For a mile or two farther we kept company. M. Hobbs declared himself in little fear of recapture.

"If I am taken," said he, "I shall say that ye two are rogues who set upon me to rob me, and that then the beast went mad and ran whither she listed. Never fear; I be an apt liar."

He reached down and patted the back of the elephant.

"By my soul, you did conduct rarely, Empress! I wish no better sweetheart—for what woman could have done as much for her lover? Didst nearly drown the rogues, eh, girl?"

But Empress proved herself a capricious mistress. Coming to a marsh some way farther on, she turned from the road despite Ali's goad and M. Hobbs's cajoling, and wallowed in it to her shoulders.

"Now well do I know what is coming!" cried the Englishman, clambering from the box in a most sprightly manner. He was too late. Empress had plunged her

trunk into the water. She suddenly erected it, turned its nozzle backward, and jetted its black contents across her shoulders and back with a noise like that of a released mill-race. The streams passed over Ali, who lay prone; but M. Hobbs and M. Hobbs's box of goods were treated to the same dose which he had served his enemies.

In fear lest the lady should be impartial with her favors, Mark and I called our farewells as best we could for laughing, and rode on.

The last we saw of M. Hobbs, he had wiped the mud and frog-slime from his eyes and was standing on a firm bit of bank in the morass, alternately sputtering curses and kicking vigorously at his sweetheart's ribs—and disturbing her not a whit by either.

"We have come safe through a peril, Master Hilaire," said Mark, after a time, in which we had ridden thoughtful. "Our stars must be fair pleased with us, else the rat faced duke had not spared us, or the elephant come to our aid. By Saint George! I would give two crown pieces to know what passed through the brain of yonder gate captain when we rode him down. All the same, I should not like an elephant for a playmate. Next time we go to Paris, I ween, we shall be riding behind Henri of Navarre; and all the rabble will be howling 'Live the king!' to crack their throats. Now it is hey for home."

"Home!"

That word gave me a sudden sickness for Moise and my dogs and old Silvie's clacking tongue.

For a moment the thought was with me that if I were once more safe in Château Duhamel—if only *mademoiselle* were there with me, to pull the roses in summer and smile across the hearth in the snow time—I should little care what king reigned in France.

But *mademoiselle* was lost again; and it was to be a weary time before I again set foot across the threshold

of my home, a weary time. Another turn in fortune's road awaited me at Epernay, which we reached at dusk of our third day of riding.

As we sat at a late breakfast in the tap room of our inn the next morning, a noise of a jeering rabble passed down the street and halted before the door. From where we sat we could see through the doorway the van of a red faced, gesticulating mob, gathered in a semi-circle a few yards from the front of the inn. Cursing and yelling, the crescent narrowed, closing in upon a point which we could not see.

Then the obscene clamor was drowned in the mellow thunder of a lonely drum.

We ran to a window. Through its lattice we looked down upon two dust covered riders. The first was a leather faced sergeant of cavalry, who sat his horse at the left of the door steps, and faced the threatening villagers as indifferently as if he were on parade. Beyond him the drummer, a slender, brown haired lad, younger than Moise, fronted the crowd as courageously as his companion, but with less composure. On his face was a set smile; but his cheeks were flushed with something more than the effort of beating his drum. This last was a huge instrument, so big that he sat slewed in his saddle, letting it dangle against the ribs of his horse.

Something more I saw, with a catch in my breath. Both trooper and drummer wore white sashes across their breasts.

"*Pardieu!* they are Navarre's men, Mark!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, master. It does one's eyes good to see those colors, eh? But they are mad to flaunt them here."

The throbbing music of the drum ceased. The ser-

geant straightend in his stirrups and lifted a powerful voice:

"Our most gracious liege lord, King Henri of France and Navarre——"

He got no farther. The howling broke out afresh. A flung stone clanged loudly on his armor. Another struck the side of the lad's drum and set it to rumbling. The reviling voices merged into the cry:

"Down with the rebels! Down with Navarre! Live Mayenne!"

Weapons other than stones began to appear. And yet there were many in the crowd who did not join in the shouting, but hung doubtfully and watched with troubled eyes.

Part of this we saw from the window, and part from the steps. The groaning crescent widened hastily before the leveled barrels of our four pistols as we stepped in front of the horsemen.

"What's to do?" exclaimed the sergeant with a loud laugh. "Is there then loyalty here that dares to proclaim itself? Thanks, fair comrades, thanks—but do not drive our friends yonder too far. I have that to say which a part of them at least should hear."

From the rear of the crowd a coward hand cast another stone. It struck the sergeant at the corner of his mouth and drew blood.

"Plague!" he ejaculated, wiping his cheek with the back of his glove and spitting; "there's a knave with a shrewd aim. He has widened what already was wide enough to speak the king's business."

He laughed a hard laugh, cast a glance at the front of the inn, and spoke to the drummer:

"Here's an affair which needs bravado, Michel, lad. Do you ride up and take station in the doorway, and

I will bespeak them from the steps. Then shall we be placed to parley or fight, as the case may demand."

The doorway to the inn was both broad and high. While those in the street gaped at him and grumbled at our pistols, the drummer set his horse at the steps, rode up them, and turned in the tap room.

When he was framed in the doorway above us, still smiling fixedly, he flourished his sticks and beat a rolling tattoo on the drum, which filled the street with its music.

The sergeant swung from his saddle, tossed the bridle rein over a rosebush, and mounted the steps. Suddenly his own pistols flashed in his hands.

"Now harken, my friends," he shouted, as Michel quit his pounding; "and whoever wishes lead in his liver, let him be the first to start bawling!" He grinned down at them affably, despite his damaged mouth.

His methods had gained him a hearing. From the street scarcely a murmur answered.

"First of all, I am no rebel, but as loyal a Frenchman as any of ye that stand scowling there. Henri of Navarre, whom may God shield, is rightful king of France, which none may truly deny. He is of the cloth and cut that a king of France should be—the good old Capet blood. Oh, I'll admit that it ran to weakness in the last of the Valois stock; but I have yet to hear of a Bourbon who has not been a man.

"Those who deny him shall presently be convinced of their error—I speak of certain dukes whose castles are not a thousand miles from here. Little King Henri is going to give them a drubbing, my friends—and after the drubbing he will forgive them."

He paused and grinned down at his audience, which was beginning to stir uneasily again.

"Tell me," he said, "any of you who are French—do

you want to see France thrust into the pocket of Philip of Spain?"

A chorus of dissent answered him.

"No, I think not; but that is where she is going, as sure as the devil is a sinner, if we of France do not wake up; and the little Béarnais knows it. That is why he is in the field. He is to-day fighting, not only for what is his by right, but to save every mother's son of you here from what has happened in Holland. But to make a fight, he must have men.

"Wherefore, believing that there are still in north France loyal men who are not owned bodies and souls by Mayenne and the Guises, he has sent the Duke de Longueville into Picardy and Marshal d'Aumont here to Champagne to hunt them up and call them to his standard.

"My friends, this is no man's cause, but the cause of France herself against her enemies. The time is short and the need is great. Now who will be the first man in Epernay to strike a blow for France with our little King Henri?"

Forgotten was my sickness for home. I had heard the drum of Navarre and his call for aid through the rough eloquence of the sergeant. It was my heart that spoke with my voice as I turned toward him and answered:

"I am not of Epernay; but, God willing, I will ride into Normandie now, who had meant to go later."

"King Henri says 'Thanks,' comrade," replied the sergeant. He raised his voice again:

"Come, friends! Here is one who will go with me. I see many a stout lad among you whose sweetheart should blush for him if he turns a deaf ear when our lady France is calling."

"Go on, Hugues."

It was an old woman's trembling voice. She pushed a hulking youngster forward.

"Go, and mind not Pierre Fabre's black looks. I be your mother, and the good God knows that I love you and hate war—but France is the mother of us all. Go."

"God bless you, mother!" sang out the sergeant, doffing his cap of steel. "Hugues shall come back to you as good as new when we have set King Henri in the big chair in the Louvre. Who marches with stout Hugues, my boys?"

Other young men began to edge forward. Some few slunk away cursing. But there was no more stone throwing.

"What about your promise to Tête Grise, māster?" muttered Mark, and his face was troubled.

"You will have to keep it for me," I replied. "I will ride into Normandie. Go you on home and fetch Moise to me as soon as may be, and tell Torinaz what has befallen."

CHAPTER XXI

THE STAR-LIGHTED GARDEN

ANOTHER day after Mark had left me, I passed in the neighborhood of Epernay with D'Aumont's lank recruiting sergeant, Jean Perrault, and his drummer lad, Michel.

Perrault was a man of tact and resource, for all that his trade was fighting. He fulfilled a dangerous mission skillfully; and he won adherents for King Henri's cause where many another man would have won only blows and perchance death; for in north France were the deadliest enemies of Navarre.

As for Michel, I do not believe that in the two days of our acquaintance I heard him utter a dozen words. Whether success or peril showed him its face, always he smiled his fixed, rapt smile, and made his big drum speak for him.

I was not possessed of Perrault's address and ready tongue in the face of difficulties; and I was not well versed—nor ever have been—in the art of holding my temper when affront offered. So I fear that I was more of a hindrance than an aid to the bluff sergeant. In truth, in a clever way, he as much as told me so at the end of our second day together; so we parted company, and I rode on across Normandie to Dieppe, where Perrault said King Henri's forces were fortified to await the coming of the army which Mayenne would lead against them from Paris.

It was not a cheerful ride for me. I doubt if there was a glummer cavalier to be found in France.

Serene—my Serene, so I called her, though since Paris she seemed less mine than ever—was gone; so what mattered anything else? I knew not where to find her, nor had her last words offered promise that she would welcome me if I should.

Eh, well, thought I, I would go fight for Henri of Navarre, win myself a marshal's baton at the very least, and either die gloriously on the field of battle or live to be a stern, hard old man, much feared by my servants and hating the very name of woman.

So I rode with head held down through the green summer of the good God's fairest country, and found little that was good wherever I went. Truly I might have sung with bitter meaning the words of the white clad cavalier's song:

The day to me is night.

The red sun was staring into my face on the late afternoon of the tenth day of my journey when I rode through the faubourgs of Dieppe, having passed the outposts of Navarre's camp. Finding all the inns filled, I was faced by the alternative of making camp in the open, hunting a lodgment among the townsfolk, or throwing myself upon the hospitality of the soldiers. Eventually I chose the middle course, and had the good fortune to establish myself with a family named Trumeau in the Rue Montmagny—for which I was thankful, being tired of inns and prisons.

Next morning as soon as I had breakfasted, which was early, for I was eager, I rode out from the town to the heights of Arques, east of Dieppe, to seek the headquarters of the king's cavalry, which in my ignorance of army affairs I thought to find there, and enlist myself.

With the knowledge of horses and horsemanship which was my legacy from Regnault Duhamel, I knew that in the cavalry I could make myself most useful. And in Fanchon I had a mount hard to equal.

Swarms of footsoldiers were laboring like ants upon the heights, throwing up the system of intrenchments which was to resist the Leaguers when they should come; but of cavalry I saw not a sign.

A hurried young lieutenant, with an air of supporting the fate of the nation upon his narrow shoulders, told me finally that I would find what I sought at the White Bear Inn in the city; so I rode back again.

I found the inn, and also a grizzled Burgundian captain named Urbain Turney, who was very glad to accept me and my mount as recruits for his troop, and then to drink a bottle of wine with me to bind the bargain. Under the warmth of the wine his cordiality increased rapidly, and when I told him that I would serve without pay he welcomed me like a brother.

"Thousand thunders! That's the talk I like to hear!" he roared, smiting upon our table. "Only, hark you"—and he lowered his voice and grinned—"all of my men are doing likewise, and I with them—but not from choice.

"You belong to me, then," he said when the bottle was emptied. "Report to me here each morning. I have a mind to make you cornet. I need one, having lost the last one in the brush to Rouen t'other day. You be big enough and long enough in all conscience to carry the horned banner." He wiped his mustache and stood up.

"But my duties?" I asked.

Captain Turney showed his teeth.

"Duties, my lad, will come in plenty, once we take the field. But for the now 'tis to be a sit-down war, with the horsemen all turned footmen, and burrowing away like moles out yonder. So there is nothing for you to

do—for I'll not have my cornet, if I make you cornet, set to grubbing with pick and shovel. Fret not, but take your ease. Find a pretty little town's lass to help you pass your time; and buy yourself and her an occasional bottle of wine, if you can afford it. Many of us cannot."

He sighed and looked thirstily at the one which we had emptied.

Diplomacy prompted me at once to invite him to crack another; and besides I wanted to hear about the brush at Rouen, in which the cornet had been slain. Turney accepted the invitation with alacrity, and we cracked not one more, but three. Before they were done I knew that I was going to be cornet—lieutenant, perhaps, if my gold held out. Also, Turney told me much that was new to me.

With some consternation I learned that the entire force of the king was little more than seven thousand men; and that the brush at Rouen had been an attack made immediately after he had quit Paris, and in which he had been beaten off by the Leaguers who held the city.

How, then, I wondered, and asked Turney, could the king hope to withstand the great army which Mayenne would lead against him from Paris.

"You do not know the little Béarnais yet, my friend," the captain laughed. "'Tis true that our prospects now seem not of the brightest—and that affair at Rouen, I grant, was unfortunate. We were beaten when one victory for the king would have fetched men springing up about his standard like new grass. We must have a victory, and he knows it. The best we can hope to do here is to hold fat Mayenne at his distance.

"The nation is watching and doubtful; but if we can hold Mayenne off here at Dieppe, we shall gain support. If we should be driven from here, I know not

how the thing would fall out—but we shall not be. We will hold on by the nails of our feet.

“Cheer up!” he exclaimed, noticing my black looks. “We be not equipped for the taking of towns; but they cannot drag or push us out of here—and once let the little Béarnais meet the enemy in the open field, no matter how great the odds, and the devil and all of hell’s black angels shall not prevail against him! Have faith, cornet. You shall see.”

I saw then that the little king had one strength which was great—the blind confidence of his followers.

In the main I followed my captain’s advice, except that part of it relating to a maid. I had no heart for maids. But I ceased to worry. Of what use for me to fret? I reflected, who had come hither to get myself made glorious or killed, with the presumptions greatly favoring the latter. Until it should come time to die I resolved that I would be comfortable.

Often I hunted up Turney, and we would dine and drink at my expense, for which he was truly grateful, being—he said it himself—as poor as a flea on a stone dog.

In my rambles about the town I passed often through the Rue des Chataigniers, a long, quiet avenue not far from the quarter where I had my lodgings. This street was lined by the tall, dark trees which had given it its name; its houses were far apart and well back from the roadway, and it was pervaded by an air of brooding quiet which attracted me.

Especially was I drawn by the grounds of a deserted mansion halfway down the length of the street. It was a large *château* with extensive gardens, the whole inclosed by a high wall of stone. The gateway before the building was closed with massive gates of oak and iron, so that one passing in the street could see naught within

but the tops of two round towers against the sky. But there was another arch in the wall, opposite the garden, and it was barred by a grille of rusted iron only.

Through this I often peered curiously into the close, all wild and tangled from long neglect, its alleys choked with weeds and its statuary draped by creeping vines.

A fine spot in which to wander and dream, mused I, a spot where dreams might come which would reflect my own gloomy fancies. For my brain in those days was akin to those of normal men only as much as that wilderness of a garden resembled its well kept neighbors, with their grass cut short and their trees and hedges trimmed into the fantastic symmetry in which their gardeners delighted.

One night when I had been about two weeks in Dieppe a more than usually strong desire to be alone drove me to roam the streets by starlight. I saddled Fanchon and rode forth. Almost without my knowledge, though I suppose that I must have guided her, the mare took me to the dark and silent mouth of the Rue des Chataigniers.

Since my arrival in Dieppe I had laid aside my cumbersome armor, and I carried no arms but my sword and dagger, as there was little to be feared in the town, especially on nights like this, when moon and stars were on sentinel duty.

"Eh, well," thought I, discovering where I had come, "I will go and look at the old garden by the light of the stars."

At the first arch in the wall a surprise awaited me. The gates were open, a sentry was pacing in the shadow of the archway, and a part of the *château* was lighted. My house of dreams had opened its dusty halls to a tenant. Well, I had no intention of disturbing him; and I did not think that he would begrudge me a peep at his garden.

I rode on to the second gateway, dismounted, and tethered Fanchon to the ironwork, and stood with my elbows resting against the grille.

But hands had been busy in the garden, too. Some of the alleys had been cleared of their jungles. The scent of newly cut grass came to me on the evening breeze, along with the faint perfume of belated flowers.

Disappointed—for I felt that the spot hallowed to my fancy had been marred and desecrated—I was about to turn away, when the flutter of a white gown along one of the shadowy paths caught and held my gaze.

A small figure came slowly out from the shade into an open space. The starlight shone upon a fair head of golden hair.

As though my feet had been turned to marble, I stood, and I gripped the iron bars before me so tightly that they hurt my palms. Every pulse in my body ceased to beat.

The one bright being of my dream world was walking there in the garden. It was Serene de Lorme on whom the stars shone down!

CHAPTER XXII

I RUN AFOUL OF NICOLAS

BREATHLESS I stood, fearing that if I moved she would distintegrate and vanish like some glamour of the starlight. Then the cutting of the iron bars in my grip recalled my senses, and I knew that it was no vision. It was indeed Mlle. de Lorme in the flesh, and she was alone in the garden. God was good!

She lingered for a moment, plucking at the leaves of a shrub beside her. Far above us a wandering night hawk shrieked. She looked up at the glittering heavens, and even from the distance at which I stood I thought that I saw their radiance reflected in a teardrop on her cheek. She turned to go; but I broke my spell of speechlessness.

"Serene!" I called softly. "Mlle. de Lorme!"

At the sound of my low hail she gathered up her skirts as if to run, then paused and looked timidly toward the gateway.

"It is I—Hilaire Duhamel," I said, raising my voice as much as I dared.

She started violently, glanced in the direction of the *château*, and made a gesture toward her lips.

Above my head there was a space between the top of the iron grille and the masonry of the arch. It was wide enough so that an active man might pass through it. I clambered upon Fanchon, stood erect on the saddle, and could barely reach the upper ends of the bars. Pray-

ing that the rusted structure would hold my weight, I swung myself up and over. In another moment I had dropped to the ground and run across to join *mademoiselle*.

"You are mad, *monsieur*!" she exclaimed as I came up to her. At the same time she took my hand and drew me after her among the shadows. How cold her fingers were!

"Yes, I am mad," I answered, clinging to her hand; "mad with the joy of finding you again. Ah, if you but knew——"

"But what is the good of finding me, M. Duhamel," she interrupted, "seeing that you must always lose me again? Search for me will bring you only misfortune, as it has already. I told you to forget me, *monsieur*."

"And I cannot. Until you shall tell me that you despise me, or that you love another, I shall never cease to seek you, *mademoiselle*."

"I cannot tell you that," she said, looking away from me and withdrawing her hand; "but—I do not, cannot, love you."

There was a little break in her voice, which somehow made her words unconvincing—and lovers grasp at thistle-down. My heart leaped.

"Besides, M. Duhamel, I have told you what I am. Oh, it could never be—never be!"

Into my mind came the riddle which had confronted me in Paris.

"What hold over you has this Duke d'Epéron, your cousin?" I asked.

"You know, then?" She looked quickly into my face.

"I only know that M. de Nogaret, as he called himself, is not Black Simon, the robber, but the Duke d'Epéron, who is much worse than a robber—and that knowledge is more puzzling to me than was my former ig-

norance. I thought you in peril in the house of M. the Duke, and that De Nogaret had placed you there."

"So I was, in great peril—peril of my soul," she answered; "but not just as you thought, *monsieur*. I spoke to you of a man who sometimes was fond of—toys. He was my peril. He is dead."

Light began to come to me. D'Epernon had been the favorite of the minion king.

"*Mon Dieu!* it was the king!" I ejaculated.

Mademoiselle nodded slowly, her eyes never wavering from my face.

"But the danger died with him!" I pursued eagerly.

"And now there is another king to be amused," she rejoined bitterly; "and a far greater danger; for 'tis said that he is a rare hand for such amusements. Oh, you do not know the depth of M. the Duke, my cousin. I am only one of the pieces in a game which he plays. He is on all sides, and on none. He plays for high stakes—all for M. the Duke. He hopes presently to play me to checkmate fortune. That is why he has brought me here. It is my fate. There is only one way to escape from it. I can be saved by no one but myself."

She shuddered.

Her words stirred my memory. Had not Captain André told me that D'Epernon was the one man who stood safely in both camps? Had not M. the Duke declared to me himself that he played for high stakes, when he visited me in the Conciergerie and tried to cozen me into his game?

What part he had intended for me was a puzzle gone stale, and interested me no longer. But I saw now the part he demanded of Mlle. de Lorme. With the king what he was—and the amours of Henri of Navarre were the gossip of France, the one deep flaw in an otherwise noble character—M. the Duke possessed in Mlle. de

Lorme an incomparable argument for the royal favor. This was what he had meant when he told me that he had "other plans" for her.

In that moment of enlightenment I was near to hating the man to whose service I was sworn before the spirit of my dead father.

Mademoiselle watched me while I thought.

"Now I am quite certain that I shall kill this Duke d'Epemon," I said.

"No, no—above all things, not that!" she broke in vehemently. "There is a bond between you two, M. Duhamel, of which I would tell you if I could; but I cannot. I have given my promise. You must not spill his blood. Besides, though he is vile and deserves his death, he is my cousin.

"He is a curious man. He has good qualities, too. But each of them is counterbalanced by an evil which destroys it. He is brave, but terribly cruel. He is wise and far-seeing, but so quick to anger that in a moment of haste he wrecks the designs which he has been months, perhaps years, in making. He is ambitious, but he is so unscrupulous and treacherous that none who helps him trusts him. Through all his life he has been faithful to one man only—himself.

"You, too, are one of his pieces, M. Duhamel. Besides the bond of which I spoke there is something else. You are important to some plan of his, else he had never sought you as he has. What it is I cannot guess, but I know that he would be friendly with you, if you would let him."

"Friendly!" I echoed. "He has taken strange ways to show his friendliness."

"Yes; and he has regretted it bitterly when it was too late. His anger has led him to deeds which I think he would give his right hand to undo."

"I will be no pawn of his, and have told him so," I replied; "and this other plan of his shall fail—through me. It shall never be! I swear it! Bond or no bond, be what it may, sooner than let him do this thing I will kill him. I love you, Serene."

She caught her breath.

"Love me! After all that has been said—that will be said—you love me?"

"Tongues did not make the world. They shall not spoil it for you and me." I pointed upward. "Serene, I will believe in you and love you while the stars shine yonder!"

Mademoiselle's eyes followed my pointing finger.

"And when the clouds come and cover the stars, foolish boy?"

"They shall not cloud my faith or love, Serene! I do not see how it is going to be done, but as sure as those stars are shining I am going to save you. I know that God will help me do it."

Quite suddenly she nestled against me, and I held her, as once before I had held her at Château Duhamel—which seemed so long ago.

"Take me, then, dear, foolish lad—if you can. God send that you can, and soon! For I do love you, Hilaire!"

And later, after certain converse which I shall not write, she said:

"The danger to me will not be yet, not until your king is victorious—if victorious he shall be, which I think is likely; for I hear that he is a very valiant man, and he has the common people with him. Until then do not fear for me, for"—the hard note returned to her voice—"Jean deals only with winning men. I do not know the purpose of this visit to Dieppe; but I know that I am not concerned in it.

"But when the time does come I shall place all my trust in you, Hilaire—and it will mean my life, dear boy.

In the meantime, fret not for me; but do your duty, and serve this king of yours your very best. Who knows"—and she laughed shakily—"you may win fame and power, so that even Jean will fear you.

"Nay," she went on when I would have protested—for I would have taken her then, and ridden blindly, I know not where, "you must leave me as I am. We must wait. Jean is often not unkind to me. I shall be safe, but very lonely."

She drew me down to her and kissed the scar which D'Epernon's iron had left upon my forehead.

"Oh, my dear! You are all that I have in the world, Hilaire!"

Brave words she had spoken, and meant to give me a hope which she could not share, I considered afterward. For what could she have hoped from a poor cornet in Navarre's fugitive army, in a matter where kings and dukes were concerned?

But I—in the foolhardiness of my youth—I dared to believe her and to hope; and from my world a gloomy curtain was withdrawn.

Came a rustling in the shrubbery beside us. Serene cried out and grasped my arm to push me toward the gate. Some one struck me a violent buffet over the head.

I swept Serene behind me; but found that the bushes were alive with creeping foes. Half a dozen men sprang up at me. We struggled along the garden alley, they seeking to pinion my arms, I to draw my sword—for I no longer had any desire to die.

Then in the moonlight I glimpsed the ruffianly face of D'Epernon's hell hound Nicolas. I wrenched my right arm free and struck at it with all my strength, and he went down.

One of his fellows beat me over mouth and nose with his pistol butt; and why he did not let me have the

ball of it, I did not know. Another heavy blow upon my head stretched me on the grass.

As darkness closed in upon my senses, I heard Nicolas cursing with a damaged voice which was music to my ears, and *mademoiselle* weeping, while another voice which I knew well was raised in hateful laughter.

CHAPTER XXIII

I SUP WITH THE KING

“**S**HADES of the philosophers! A young sir Anak has here been overthrown! By the look of him, he has been engaged in a most spirited debate, and if not convinced, has at least been silenced.”

These words, in a deep, musical voice, reached my ears faintly, as from a distance. At the same time I felt hands grasping my elbows.

I opened my eyes, and through the one of them which still remained serviceable I made out that I was being lifted from the roadway under Fanchon's nose. Wondering hazily how I came to be there, and why I ached so, I caught a glimpse of the grilled gate, and beyond it the garden, empty and peaceful in the moonlight.

I remembered then, and I groaned with rage as well as pain. Nicolas and his ruffians had been too many for me, and had opened their gate and flung me into the street like the carcass of a dead dog.

With difficulty, for I was heavy, and as yet lacked power to help myself, the men who had found me stood me upon my feet and balanced me. By the light of a couple of torches I saw that a half dozen riders were sitting their horses before the gateway.

“Is he dead, Chicot?” asked one of them, a little man who bestrode an immense roan stallion.

“Nay; he still has breath to groan,” replied the man who had first spoken. “I think, too, that he is trying to curse, which is hopeful.

“The devil!” he exclaimed as the light from one of the torches flared upon my ill used countenance. “He

has had a decoration hung upon him for sure! And mark the nose, gossip! He must have seen yours and mine and become jealous of them. He need not be for long. At the rate 'tis swelling, in a quarter hour he will have the nosiest nose in all the kingdom. Can you stand alone, my friend?" he asked me kindly, jogging my elbow.

"I—I think so," I answered, my head clearing fast, for I had been but lightly stunned. "Thanks; I can find my way home now."

"Not to-night, my lad," cut in the little man on the roan. "You come with us. Chicot here is a clever fellow with sops and bandages. He shall mend you—of which you stand in sore need. Besides, I have a curiosity to know what has happened you. *Ventre Saint Gris*! No one man did all these things to you, I'll warrant."

When I heard that oath, which was a byword in Navarre's army, a dawning suspicion gave way to certainty. I twitched free of the hands which held me.

"Sire!" I cried, and would have knelt.

"Stay on your feet," he commanded quickly. "I did not invent the dust; nor do I crave to see a fellow being wallow in it. Besides, you had already embraced it sufficiently before we found you. Who are you?"

"I am Hilaire Duhamel of Champagne, sire, cornet in the fourth troop of your majesty's horse, Captain Turney."

Henri gazed curiously from me to the iron barred gate, from which one of the men-at-arms was untying Fanchon; and I thought that he smiled, though it may have been the flicker of the torchlight.

"Well, mount and ride with us, Duhamel. I will hear your story later. Just now I am parlous hungry."

I saluted and obeyed.

At the first gateway in the wall Henri pulled rein and

asked the sentry on duty there if he had noticed any disturbance in the street.

It was evident that the man knew the king's voice. He stood at rigid salute and answered promptly:

"Yes, sire; the servants of M. the Duke found a skulker in the gardens. They beat him soundly and threw him out."

Henri turned in his saddle and stared back at me. I heard him clear his throat and mutter: "So-o?" under his breath.

"Commend me to your master," he said, returning the sentinel's salute; and then we rode on.

"Your explanation is already made, my friend," muttered in my ear the man called Chicot. "Methinks there was a lady in the garden. Mark me, Henri will question you no farther. He has a tenderness for such affairs."

To my surprise and relief, that proved a true prophecy. My adventures in M. the Duke's garden were not made the subject of inquisition.

We rode to a mansion in the Rue des Poiriers, which previously had been pointed out to me as the royal headquarters. There Chicot led me to the kitchens to seek remedies for my swollen face.

"Have him up with us when you are finished with him, Chicot," called the king from the stairs.

"What does he mean?" I asked incredulously.

"I see that you know little of Henri of Navarre, friend," he replied. "He is more of a king than most kings; for he is a man, and treats other men like men. He is going to have you to sup with him, just as any neighborly man might do, who found a gentleman in distress."

Despite the much which I had heard of Navarre's democracy, this was almost beyond my comprehension. I, Hilaire Duhamel, was going to sup with a king! And what a man he must be, indeed, who could treat a humble

soldier in his ranks, as Chicot said, like a neighbor in distress.

I began to view this adventure with feelings strangely mixed. I had sworn to serve the king; but, since what I had learned an hour ago, it had seemed scarcely probable that I should have any great love for him. What a trick of fate the whole situation was! Within a year I, the son of a small gentleman of Champagne, had fought a duke, wooed his cousin, and now was threatened with the King of France for rival!

Under cover of the bandage which Chicot was applying to my cheek I smiled. And could I have foreseen what further complications were in store, I should have shrieked, indeed.

Chicot, though he refrained from questions, did, while he worked at me, quote somewhat from the ancients in sly allusion to my plight. His accent betrayed a Gascon.

"Empedocles tells us that love hates necessity. In your case, friend, methinks the two must have come to grips," was one of his japes; and another, "Out of fire and water divine Aphrodite fashioned unwearying eyes, saith the same Sicilian master. What now would he have said to this purple one which the goddess has given you?"

Unusual in face and figure, as well as speech, was this Chicot. He was nearly as tall as I, and his arms and legs were inordinately long. He seemed to be all nerves, muscles and bones, and he moved with the elastic agility of an ape. Black, curling hair flowed over his shoulders. His face was bony, with a big, hooked nose, as large as that of the king himself, which I had noticed was not trivial. His wrists and hands were hairy to the second joints of his long, thin fingers.

He had a voice which could blare like a trumpet when he chose to exert it; but his laughter, and he was ever laughing, was a silent contortion of his features, accom-

panied by a quick expulsion of his breath through his nostrils. He wore garments of a lightish blue, and about his neck hung a chain of heavy gold links, which he frequently fingered.

When he had finished with his liniments and drolleries, he conducted me to a large room on the second floor of the house, where we found the king and two other men. Henri stood by the front windows, looking down into the street. At a big table beside him a stoop shouldered man with a pale, earnest face was bent over a pile of maps and papers. By the light of a copper lamp he was writing at a furious rate, and was so engrossed with his work that he did not look up as we came in. A tall, dark, sober faced gentleman, whose body seemed all sharp corners, was pacing stiffly up and down the room, glancing from time to time at the king's back, and shaking his head and muttering to himself.

"Come, Matthieu, quit your parchments," said Henri, whipping around. The startled scrivener jumped up, dropping his pen, and saluted. "One day you will fall into your inkhorn, Matthieu, and drown—and so die happy, in a brave spatter of ink," went on the king, laughing. He tossed his hat on the floor, seated himself at a smaller table at the side of the room, and rapped smartly upon it with his knuckles.

"Let us have supper, Max—supper, man!" he roared, and beckoned to us.

Max stalked silently from the room. I was to learn that this was Maximilien de Béthune, Baron of Rosny, later created Duke of Sully.

"*Ventre Saint Gris!* a rare scolding is in pickle for me, I can see," Henri said, gazing after him ruefully. "Max is swollen like a toad with it. But I'll not have it spoil our supper. God speed the cook! Come, Matthieu, and join us; for the once let history wait on hunger."

Matthieu seated himself at the foot of the table and contemplated his ink stained hands. He was one of the most silent men I ever knew.

"Now lad, it is your turn to talk a bit." Henri turned to me. "Nay; I'll not ask you about your gardening. I've but just come back from a small adventure of my own which is no other man's business—which is what is troubling Max. Come, sit down here, and tell me about yourself. Who are you? Any man from Champagne who is serving in my army is worth my curiosity. Are there any more there like you; and can I get them?" He motioned me to a bench opposite him.

I told him again who I was, with something of my history, and that I had lost my father; and doubtless would have told him much more, but for the appearance of two servants with the beginnings of the supper. When I saw that his attention was wavering betwixt me and the dishes, I desisted. Presently came Max and Chicot and sat with us, Max beside the king, and the Gascon at my side of the table.

Henri of Navarre was a little man. About Mark's age I judged him, perhaps a few years older. White hairs were beginning to show in the curling brown locks above his temples, and others in his crisp, thick beard and shaggy mustache. All of his features were pronounced and strong. His brows were arched and bristling; his cheekbones prominent; his mouth wide, with heavy lower lip; and his nose, bony and curved, had a fleshy, flexible tip, which had a trick of twitching when he smiled, and when he laughed of drawing downward, as though to meet the projecting upcurved chin, which refused to be hidden by his beard.

Sun and wind had tanned him to an even brown, and there were numerous small wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. But it was certain that care had not graven them.

Never saw I countenance more carefree and merry, for all its picturesque strength, or one which bespoke more intelligence of brain behind it. Its features were continually animated. If the mouth was not talking, it was smiling and showing firm, white teeth, while the nose performed its curious antics, the brows tilted, and the gray eyes snapped and sparkled. He spoke with a strong Spanish accent, and when he was excited, he stammered.

His dress was far from kingly. Pourpoint and hose were faded; his boots were worn, and his hat was battered and shapeless. The only new and jaunty thing about him was an ostrich plume of dazzling whiteness, which was pinned in his hatband, where it flaunted in upstart fashion, disdainful of its station.

For all that he was somewhat frayed and unkempt, and with dust on his beard, there was about the man an air of wholesome, honest cleanliness, both of body and spirit. One felt that he could be a good comrade and a stanch friend.

When we were all seated, Henri looked up from his steaming platter of meat pie to say to me:

"Now, Duhamel, you may look upon the king of France and his three masters—his councilor, his historian, and his fool. Presently one will deride me, another will sigh for great deeds wherewith to smear his parchments, and the third will chide me as one would a naughty child that has run away to play. Poor devil of a king! Eh, Hilaire?" And he laughed.

"Only three masters, gossip," Chicot chimed in; "but as to mistresses—who may count them!" He rolled his eyes and began numbering silently on his bony fingers with great rapidity.

"Would that he were more careful of himself for the sake of the one named France," said Max somberly.

Henri made a grimace at him, and answered Chicot:

"Gossip, for the short time that you have served me as fool, you know much about my affairs, 'twould seem."

"A fool's first business is to learn his master's follies—and then to teach him wisdom," retorted Chicot. "I shall have my hands full with both."

"And I'll grant that you *have* wisdom in that long head, my Chicot, for all that men call you fool."

"Sh-h-h!" Chicot seized himself by beard and hair, and wagged his head to and fro with an air of extreme tenderness for it. "Seeing that you have discovered the contents of this head of mine, I pray you, gossip, be discreet. If the rumor gets out, some curious fellow will be chopping it off and cracking it to see what's inside that is so rare; and then 'twould be of no further use to either you or me. I wish not my wits to serve me as did those of one Sotades, of whom 'tis told in Master Amyot's translations of Plutarch, that with a jest whereby to promote laughter in others he purchased a long time of mourning to himself."

"By Saint Denys, this is a noble supper!" exclaimed the king, seizing a dish of pear conserve and transferring a liberal helping of it to his gobbet of bread by the aid of his dagger. "I shall eat my fill of it, even though, like your Sotades, I purchase to myself a season of sorrow."

The jester, who had been peering into his wine-cup remarked:

"Plutarch saith also that constant feeding together is a great means to heighten the affection mutually betwixt any persons. Doubtless that is why pigs are so clannish. Do you not feel your heart warm toward me, gossip, under influence of this good cheer?"

"Aye, that do I, my Chicot—and toward all other men. And you?" The king leaned across the board and tapped familiarly upon the fool's shoulder.

"Gossip, I love you *a capite ad calcem*," Chicot replied,

"which I will construe freely as from hair to toenails; or, to put it more elegantly, I shall love you *in secula seculorum*, which is to say until time shall die out in neverness."

"Truce to your Latin, man!" cried the king, shaking his finger, "else we shall quarrel and fall out. Eh, what's this? Death of my life! Melons! melons! round and ripe and juicy, and with hearts of gold!"

One of the servants had come in, bowed under the weight of a basket of the fruit, which he set creaking upon the table.

"Ah, next to my friends and a maid, I believe I love a melon," and the king set down his wine and seized one of them. He cut the fruit with a skillful sweep of his dagger that told of long practice, spilled seeds and center onto his emptied platter, and attacked the yellow flesh with a zest which proved his fondness.

When he had eaten two of the fruits and was well through the third, he paused, stared at the basket, and then at Max.

"But whence the price of this Lucullan extravagance?" he asked, with a puzzled expression. "How is it that we have melons, worthy treasurer? I thought you told me our money pouch was so starved that it scarce had strength to give us bread."

"So it is, sire, so it is," answered Max. Disregarding Chicot's signals to be silent, he pointed to the gold chain which the jester wore. "If you will observe closely, sire, you will notice that your gossip's chain has shrunk by a link. 'Twas that which paid for the melons, and for some other touches to our good cheer which came in bottles. Chicot wished to do honor to your home coming."

Henri looked at the fool, and his eyebrows twitched.

"Why, gossip, you are squandering the gifts of your former master on a most graceless successor," he said,

with an attempt at a smile; but his eyes were moist. "I wish not to dine upon your adornments, man. Curse it! why did you do this?"

"Plague upon Max for a teller of tales," said Chicot, his eyes cast down, as though he were ashamed of his generosity. "Let not the gold of the chain taint the gold of the melons, gossip; but eat; for I believe that you care more for them than I for gold. As for my chain; it has not the virtues of the anodyne necklace of Claudius Galenus, the learned physician, which he claimed would alleviate all the ills to which the flesh is heir; but it seems to have the magic property of tickling my master's stomach; so, for that, it is a good chain."

He ran his fingers over the massive links, which had been given him by the minion king.

"But it grows smaller at every tickle, Chicot," warned Henri, once more laughing. "I forbid you to sacrifice it further."

"*Sic transit gloria mundi*," quoted Chicot sonorously. "Do not forbid me, gossip, not only for your dear stomach's sake, but for mine own. Shall you then prevent me from emulation of Diogenes, who, by ridding himself of all earthly vanities, made it impossible that anything should be taken from him—and so was happy?"

"*Ventre Saint Gris!* it was that same Diogenes who went hunting by candlelight in the daytime to find him a man," rejoined the king. "I have the best of him; for here is what he sought, sitting across from me in the lamplight. But the ban stands, Chicot. Fritter away no more of your chain—and for the link with which you have parted, I will give you one set with a diamond, when I be really king."

Chicot bounded from his seat, hand upon heart, and bowed to the melon basket.

"Melons, Chicot thanks you," he said solemnly. "Not

only have you brought to Chicot this night gold and gems in words, of which he was little deserving; but you have brought promise of future benefits which are not to be sneezed at. Henceforth, *durante vito*, I shall never fail to doff my cap when I meet a melon patch."

"Hilaire," said the king, when he was done laughing at the jester's last whimsy, "you say that you are of north France, and yet rode here willingly to serve me. What brought you, love of France, hope for gain, or mere love of adventure, say?"

"Why, I would serve you, sire—and later myself," I made bold to say; "and my father believed that your cause was just, and that you would free France."

Henri's nose drew down, and he laughed.

"Truthfully spoken, my boy—and I love the truth; though I do not find it often. And you had a good father. I shall keep an eye upon you."

"He loves truth, but does not find it often," muttered Chicot. "*In vino veritas*, gossip—and you are no stranger to it," and he pointed to the tall bottle at the king's elbow.

"Eh? More of your accursed Latin, gossip!" Henri menaced him with the bottle. "Yes; I will admit that there is truth in wine—you see I have not forgotten how to construe—and in you, and Max. Ye two be brutally truthful. Doubtless 'tis in Matthieu, too; but he never lets it out, unless he writes it. How about it, sir Matthieu the silent: do you write the truth?"

"I try, sire," the historian answered meekly. It was the first time he had spoken since the meal began. The king groaned audibly.

"Then I forbid you to publish your history until I be safely dead."

Again he turned to me.

"What, lad—you are nodding! Away to bed with him,

Chicot. Nay, you shall stay here the night. And remember, Hilaire, we have a welcome here for men who have much to gain and little to lose. I hope you have some money, lad; for I have none to give you. You will have to serve for love of dear France until better times shall come."

"Such is my wish, sire," I answered. "I can provide for myself."

And so much had he won me that I would gladly have divided my few goldpieces with this strange little king; but I durst not make the offer.

"To bed with him, Chicot! And where's the wine, you rogue. I have a thirst from so much talking that only a deep draught of the truth will quench." He waved a hand at me kindly, and reached for another bottle.

Chicot put me in a small chamber on the ground floor, where was a clean bed; and I was glad to ease my bruised bones into it.

Before I slept, I lay long considering my fortunes and misfortunes. Especially did I ponder on this king whom I had found. Wherein was his greatness? I asked myself.

I had looked to find a hero. I had found a small, homely, careless and lightsome man, who, though report said he was brave enough, was inclined to play the buffoon; a good comrade, but lacking in the dignity which tradition teaches should hedge a king; a wine drinker and gay incontinent, who, by his own confession, had thoughtlessly left camp and councils to go frivolling after some fair Aspasia.

And yet— And yet——

I remembered, too, the laugh which I had heard in the garden as Nicolas's men had beaten me down.

Mon Dieu! how much was I to bear from M. the Duke d'Epéron?

CHAPTER XXIV

BLACK SIMON!

NEXT morning, though sore, and with a swollen face and a ring about my left eye wherein all the colors of the rainbow vied, I had no envy to lie long abed. While I was dressing, a servant brought me my breakfast, and I ate it, wondering still more at the thoughtfulness of the king, and went out.

My chamber was off a long corridor on the lower floor of the house. As I proceeded toward the front, who should come popping in through the street door but M. the Duke d'Epernon.

To reach the staircase which led to the second floor, he would have to meet me; for I had passed it. Matters had come to the pass where the mere sight of this man drove all caution from me. I placed myself in his way, my hand upon my sword. Affecting not to see me, he came on, humming a little tune.

I was about to accost him, when a pair of long arms encircled me from behind and drew me to one side.

"This is the king's house, my friend," murmured Chicot's voice in my ear.

D'Epernon paused then and looked at us, smiling acidly.

"But that man—" I began, struggling.

"Is your enemy," interrupted Chicot in the same low tone, "and mine, and all honest men's. I have a quarrel with him which is certainly older than yours, M. Du-

hamel; but I do not press it here and now, and for good reason."

"Have a care what you are saying there, vile fool!" exclaimed D'Epernon, coming a pace nearer. "I owe you something for the assiduity with which you defamed me to your former master. I am minded to pay you with a taste of my point."

He, too, touched his sword.

Chicot released me and regarded the blustering little duke, coolly.

"Why, that would be as easy for you as the breaking of a worm's knee," he said quietly. "M. the Duke accuses me of having defamed him. All who know M. the Duke well are aware that such a thing would be impossible."

D'Epernon's features twitched spasmodically.

"If ever I have you where I would like to have you, look not for any mercy from me, you big nosed, grinning ape!" he snarled.

"I would as soon look for milk from a vampire bat, M. the Duke," retorted the imperturbable Gascon. "And as for my nose; though 'twas not moulded by Phidias or tinted by Apollodorus, still 'tis a worthy nose. It pries not into the affairs of others; and it can smell a traitor as far as mine eyes can see him—and is at this moment grievously offended. *Phew!*" He clapped a hand over the organ in question with a gesture of disgust.

D'Epernon went white, choked, sputtered, stamped, and—passed on. His feet struck viciously upon the stairs as he ascended them.

Chicot laughed silently.

"Yonder goes a man who certainly will betray the king, if ever he has the opportunity," said I.

"Yes—and the king knows it. He has the measure of M. the Duke, never fear," Chicot replied. "But I am for—

getting. You are to go at once to the White Bear Inn, M. Duhamel. Friends of yours await you there."

"Friends?"

"Yes. A big red fox of a man with pale blue eyes and a slender young lad with lady's curls have been turning the town upside down in search of you this morning. I was early astir, and overheard them questioning one of the patrols. I said I would send you."

Mark and Moise!

I thanked the jester for his kindness, got Fanchon from the king's stable, and galloped off to the White Bear, careless that my swollen face and mournful eye drew me many curious looks as I passed through the streets.

Long before I drew rein at the inn I saw the sunlight on the flaming poll of Mark Fletcher, where he stood under the sign of the White Bear, watching the street beneath his palm. He recognized Fanchon, and I saw him toss his arms above his head and call to someone within.

But when I dismounted and turned my battered countenance toward him, he looked doubtful, for which I could not blame him. Myself had seen it in a mirror that morning, and had found it little familiar. But Mark was in doubt for a moment only.

"What devil—" he began, looked closer, and roared: "By Saint George, it *is* the master!"

Heul! it was good to feel the grip of his iron fingers again! Then Moise flung himself upon me, talking and laughing and nearly weeping, all at once. The lad seemed to have grown by inches since I had last seen him.

While the three of us stood there, giving little heed to what we were saying, but each of us saying it at the top of his voice, I felt a tugging and scratching at my bootlegs; and there was my white bulldog, twisting him-

self nearly double for joy in the smell of me, and making desperate efforts to clamber up my legs to my face.

"What, Leo—you, too?"

"Yes, Hilaire. All the way from Château Duhamel he has ridden in a basket," Moise said. "Leo is off to the wars, wearing the king's colors. Have you seen the king, Hilaire? Of course, you have. What is he like? And, Hilaire—I can refrain no longer—what, in the name of heaven's stars, has happened to your face? It looks as if a butcher had chopped meat upon it, hitting the roast but rarely."

"I have been wondering the same," Mark put in. "By the look of it, 'twill be a long story. Before we sit down to it, as we presently will, Tête Grise here is burning to deliver himself from a responsibility."

"Tête Grise!" I echoed.

A tall figure in armor had come to the door of the inn, and stood looking down at us. Under his cap of steel the mild gray eyes of Jerome Torinaz seemed oddly out of place.

"Torinaz!" I gasped. "I had not looked for you—and in armor!"

He smiled, pulling at his long beard, which covered most of his corselet.

"But this is the cause of France and the people, M. Hilaire. I told you that I was a man of the people. Shall I not fight for them as well as any other man? Now, M. Hilaire, can you lead us to Henri of Navarre so soon as possible? I have a weighty duty to discharge, which was laid upon me by your father."

"We will go at once," said I, wondering. "I think that he will see us. I have met him and have found him kindly." I could not forbear to add with some pride: "I am a cornet in his cavalry."

"A cornet!" ejaculated Mark. "*Pardieu!* after to-day

he will make you a colonel at the least. See here, master."

He stepped into the roadway and whistled shrilly upon his fingers.

The White Bear was a roomy and rambling old structure, with extensive stables behind. Mark's whistle had not ceased to echo when I heard a noise of scuffling hoofs and men getting hastily to horse. Around the corner of the building, two and two, rode forty horsemen, and ranged themselves in the street, sitting at salute, as proud as princes.

Neighbors of mine they were, all of them, sons of my father's tenants and of the peasants about Flize. Among them I saw our oldtime hunting companion, Jacquou Coudriet, he of the fresh cheeks and beady black eyes. He had changed his wooden shoes for jack-boots, and sat his horse straight as a lance, though his eyes rolled toward me, and he grinned sheepishly.

In the midst of the company were four sumpter mules, laden heavily with sacks.

"But what is this?" I asked.

"It is the contribution of the Sieur Regnault Duhamel to the cause of Henri of Navarre," replied Torinaz, "to be led by his eldest son, Hilaire. Now place yourself at our head, M. Hilaire, and take us to the king. There is another matter, which is pressing."

Much bewildered by this turn of events, I mounted Fanchon, and we rode to the Rue des Poiriers. Moise trotted beside me; but I noticed that Mark and Tête Grise rode one on each side of the burdened mules. Leo ran barking under Fanchon's nose.

Henri of Navarre was always accessible. I had no difficulty in conducting Moise and Tête Grise past the sentinel at his door, and up to the council chamber. Baron Rosny came to the door to meet us. His face was

clouded. Master Matthieu was there, as usual, busy with his parchments. Chicot was absent.

From a smaller room beyond the chamber I heard the sound of voices, the king's and the Duke d'Epemon's. In the excitement of the arrival of my party I had forgotten the duke. I understood at once the cause of Rosny's temper, and I smiled grimly. That rat faced little blusterer of a D'Epemon seemed endowed with almost superhuman powers for trouble making.

While I was explaining to Rosny an errand which I did not half understand myself, the king came into the chamber and closed the door behind him. He, too, looked disturbed; but he grinned and came forward when he saw the three of us at the doorway.

"What now, Duhamel?" he said, which made Moise stare; and then, "*Ventre Saint Gris!* here's the strangest head I ever saw sticking out of a steel shirt!" He advanced toward us, smiling and looking at Tête Grise. "It would better adorn a pulpit, my friend."

I presented the sorcerer under his name of Torinaz, without mention of his pursuits; and as Henri would not let him kneel, he bowed deeply, and said:

"I bring a contribution to your cause, sire. Allow me to order it in." He called a command down the stairs, and immediately we heard a stamping as of men bearing heavy burdens. Two sturdy troopers came in, bent under the weight of one of the sacks from the mules. Others followed until eight, heavy, clinking sacks lay upon the floor. Torinaz sighed as the last pair of bearers withdrew.

"It has been a heavy responsibility," he said. "I am glad to be rid of it."

"But what is it, man? questioned Henri, looking from one to another of us, and finding in my face at least, a perplexity to match his own.

Rosny, who had stood by, very watchful, kicked at one of the sacks. His face brightened at the music his toe evoked.

"It has a right good sound, sire," he said. "Suppose we see."

He slit the neck of one of the sacks with his dagger. A torrent of goldpieces gushed out upon the floor. Torinaz had seen what he was about to do, and had held his tongue, having some love for the dramatic. He now spoke:

"Sire, the treasure, which is in both gold and silver, and the men who are down in the street, are sent you to be used in the cause of France, as you may see fit. A dead man gathered the treasure; and I, with a part of it, raised and equipped the men. Through my lips the Sieur Regnault Duhamel of Château Duhamel in Champagne, the same being these ten months dead, gives them to you freely, and with them his two sons." Torinaz bowed toward Moise and me, and stood back.

Rosny had cut open the other sacks. The gold and silver lay in a great, glittering pile upon the floor. It drew even Master Matthieu from his table; and he came and stood over it, rubbing his hands as though to warm them.

"But this is a fortune!" cried the king. "I cannot——"

"Sire," broke in Torinaz, "Regnault Duhamel labored for fourteen years to bring this day to pass. If he could, he would rise out of his grave to urge his gift. It is for France, sire—and he said that you were the hope of France. Ask his son."

"It is true, sire," said I, starting from my daze. "My father left a message consecrating all that he possessed to the service of Henri of Navarre, to be proffered when

the way should be opened to him to strike for the throne of France."

But I was struck with amazement at the amount of it. Still, I did not grudge it; and I saw myself advanced a longer step in the king's favor. It was worth it.

Henri considered us. He seemed to be at a loss for a reply.

"*Ventre Saint Gris*, this comes like a miracle to-day!" he muttered. "But let me see these lads from Champagne," he said suddenly, starting toward the windows; "they be worth more than gold, I ween."

Outside the windows was a small balcony. As we stepped out on it with him, I indicated the king to Mark. He roared an order.

Forty swords leaped from their scabbards and flashed to the salute; and the Champagne lads made the street ring with their "Live the king!"

"Thank you, my children!" shouted Henri, snatching off his hat. He leaned over the railing, his gray eyes shining. "You have brought me no greater treasure than your loyal hearts." At that, they cheered him again.

We returned to the room, where Rosny had mounted guard over the treasure; and Matthieu with his tablets already had set about the work of counting it.

"*Ventre Saint Gris!*" swore Henri again, looking from the golden heap to me, "you do commend yourself to me in various ways, Hilaire. Would that this father of yours had lived. I would——"

"You might have hanged him, sire," cut in a rasping voice. "*He was known in north France as Black Simon, prince of robbers, highwaymen and cutthroats.*"

It was D'Epernon. He had come unperceived from the inner room and crossed to the outer door. Bending a look upon me wherein anger was mixed with sardonic amusement, he bowed.

"You will have no need now for my purse, sire," he continued, with a wave of his hand toward the treasure heap. "As we do not seem to agree, perhaps it is as well." He bowed again and disappeared.

Struck dumb by this latest perfidy, I had gaped foolishly. But when I saw him escaping, I tore at my sword. Heedless then of the king, or of anything in the world save that calumny against my father's memory, I sprang toward the doorway.

Torinaz caught and held me with a quiet strength that I had not thought was in him.

"Let me go!" I shouted furiously. "Yonder toad has spat his last foul lie! I will choke it back with my sword!"

But the sorcerer only held me the tighter.

"I am sorry for you, M. Hilaire," he said gently; "but what that *monsieur* said is true."

CHAPTER XXV

REGNAULT DUHAMEL

TRUE! This dastardly accusation was true! With a moan, I wrenched myself around in the sorcerer's arms. Had he not continued to hold me, I should have struck him down. But truth was in his face; and with it a great compassion. All the strength went out of me. He let me go, and I staggered to the wall and leaned there, panting and quivering.

Moise came and stood beside me. His lips trembled, and tears stood in his eyes; but he betrayed no surprise.

"Hilaire," he faltered. "Poor Hilaire."

"You—you knew this?" I asked.

He nodded. With an intuition far keener than mine, he had guessed it long ago—at the time when the Duke d'Epéron had come to Château Duhamel—but he had kept silent.

This then was the mystery which Mark Fletcher had kept from me; and Torinaz and my brother had aided him.

My father, Regnault Duhamel, had been a thief!

All my dream castles thundered down about my ears. What future could there be for the son of a thief? What woman——

"It seems that there is a tale to be told, and I will hear it," said the king, who had watched all curiously, but without comment. "Do you, Hilaire, dismiss your troop, and then return."

I stumbled down the stairs and sent the Champagne riders back to the inn, all save Mark. Him I bade remain and come with me.

He glanced at me keenly as he dismounted.

"There is trouble afoot, master, I'll be bound," he said. "Just now I saw the devil's own cousin, the Duke d'Epéron; and troubles buzz around him like bees around a sugar pot. But that he came from the king's house, I would have given him a lead breakfast."

"Yes, there is trouble," I replied bitterly. "The truth is out—the whole truth. Why, in God's name, have you kept it from me? 'Twould not have been so cruelly hard now."

Mark shook his red head and whistled, but found no words to answer, save a mumble of cursing, which he mouthed as we ascended the stairs.

Henri insisted that the four of us be seated at his table, and he sent for wine.

"Be not downhearted, my lads," he said. "Why, were half the nobles of France to examine closely into their lineage, I doubt not that many a Black Simon would be found. *Ventre Saint Gris!* I am not sure that my own family is altogether free of them. Proceed, M. Torinaz; for I see that you hold the key to this riddle. I be well interested." His glance strayed to the heap of gold, which Rosny and Matthieu were steadily counting.

"It is ten years ago that I first met the Sieur Duhamel," Torinaz began, running his fingers through his long beard, and meeting the king's eyes with his level gaze. "I am a man of the people, sire, but have been since my youth a student, and somewhat of a physician. Because of my knowledge of simple matters, and because I have chosen to live solitary, I have gained the reputation of a sorcerer—and of late years, partly because of the things which I shall relate, perhaps I have done some things to encourage the belief. My repute helped me to become the coworker of Regnault Duhamel.

"Who he was before he came into Champagne I do not know, sire. He never told me that. But he had been

engaged in some matter of a quarrel with powerful enemies, and had been forced to flee them. He took up the business of a dealer in horses, purchased land with the moneys which he had brought with him, and built him a *château*. From whatever it was that they had been through, Mme. Duhamel never recovered. She died.

"These things had happened before I met him. I think that after her death the *sieur* became just a little mad. He was a man of strong passions, as well as of great courage and powers of body. Something had stirred him to the roots of his being. He began to ride the roads. He became Black Simon.

"But he was no ordinary robber, sire. He took only from the strong among those whom he deemed to be the oppressors of his country. He hated the nobles and the rich, who grind the people down. He devoted himself to the cause of the people. He molested no poor man ever, nor did he deal harshly with women.

"And not a sol of all that he took did he apply to his own uses, but held it in trust for the coming of a liberator who should free France. Moneys which came to him through his legitimate dealings sufficed him and his family.

"It chanced that I, whose position put me in the way of knowing many hidden things, stumbled upon his secret; and he surmised that I had guessed it. He sought me out, and instead of slaying me, he became my friend. We had many thoughts in common. He came to trust me, even to making me the repository of his treasure.

"Sire, the learned Josephus writes that of old the Jewish chieftains preyed upon the proud Philistines, and were held blameless therefor by God. The treasure which we have brought to you to-day, less the sums expended to raise and equip the troop of horse, represents the *Sieur* Duhamel's efforts in fourteen years of spoiling the Philistines of France.

"Little by little he brought it and confided it to me. 'Some day Black Simon may be cornered,' he used to say. 'On that day Regnault Duhamel will disappear; for I will die as Black Simon. But the treasure shall not be lost. It is to be put to the use of the man who will arise out of the turmoil and free France from persecution. If I die, you, Torinaz, shall take it to him when the time comes.'

"We were agreed of late years, sire, that you would be that man. An ancient enemy of the *sieur* found him out, and he got his death from the meeting. I have kept the faith, sire. I may be blameworthy in so thinking, but I do not think that God will deal harshly with Regnault Duhamel, who took only from the strong and arrogant to help the oppressed, who avoided blood letting, and who was ever gentle with women and children."

"That, *pardieu*, is true!" growled Mark in sudden animation; and, forgetful of the king, he crashed his fist upon the table so that the winecups danced. "I, who was Regnault Duhamel's lieutenant for ten years, say it, though I lose my head for it."

"Pshaw! Talk not of the losing of heads, friends," said Henri. "My own is none too secure on its neck. Thunders of God! This that I have heard has the sound of a fairy tale: a gentleman turned highwayman, not for his own profit, but to gather aid for his king and people, and, *pardieu*, made the nobles to pay for it"—and Henri chuckled—"and an honest wizard. I have much to thank you for too, my friend." He bowed to Torinaz.

"Cheer up, Hilaire. I will say it again: I wish that I had known your father. As I see it, he was not a robber, but a gallant gentleman and a patriot, who forestalled me by a few years in his declaration of war against the enemies of France. Peace be to his memory. I accept his gift as a trust. The good God is witness that my need of it is great."

With a wave of his hand he cut short the thanks which we would have showered upon him.

"Am I not the debtor?" he asked, pointing at the gold.

"What think you, Max?" he asked of Rosny. "Shall we not at once make partial payment of the moneys which be owing the soldiers?"

"By all means no—not yet," responded Rosny hastily. "Pay them not a sol until they have won a battle for you."

"And why not?"

"Because, sire, the men whom you owe will strike twice as hard for hope of what is coming to them—and if any desert you, their debt will be canceled."

"*Ventre Saint Gris!* You have a hard philosophy there, Max," laughed Henri; "but do according to your judgment."

He turned again to me.

"I will have your story now, Hilaire. I see that there is something deeper than mere garden wandering in this enmity between you and the Duke d'Epernon. How did he know about your father, and why did he denounce him?"

I told him then my tale; and while I will not say that I withheld nothing, in the main I told him it as it has here been written. When I had related the coming to Château Duhamel of the little man who had called himself M. Jean de Nogaret, and who was the Duke d'Epernon, Henri slapped his thigh and interrupted, laughing:

"Horns of the devil! He told you the truth, my boy—which surprises me. Look you here, Max; for once D'Epernon has been fairly caught at telling the truth. Why, Hilaire, that man would rather lie than quarrel, and rather quarrel than eat—and he loves his eating nearly as well as do I myself. But his name, as he told you, is Jean de Nogaret, and his father was a wealthy notary of La Valette."

The king's interest grew as I described my ride with Mark to Paris, the trick of the stolen letter, and my encounter with the duke in the Inn of the Golden Eagle, when I denounced him as Black Simon. When I had capped it with the tale of our treatment in the Conciergerie, D'Epernon's visit and attempt to win me, and our release, Henri swore again in astonishment.

"Some mystery of your origin intervenes here, Hilaire," he said. "M. the Duke had a powerful reason for his forbearance—and has it still. If he had not, never would you have come safe from his clutches three times, as you have, after the affronts you have put upon him. Who was this father of yours, I wonder, and what the feud between him and D'Epernon? Eh, well, time may tell you, lad.

"In the meantime"—and he drew his shaggy eyebrows together, and a note of sternness came into his voice—"I'll have no more brawling between you. Let him go his ways. Greatly as he has injured you and yours, he is too high for you to fly at."

"Sire, if chance offers, I shall kill the man who slew my father," I replied stubbornly, and waited for an outburst of wrath.

Henri's face clouded.

"*Ventre Saint Gris!*" he began. "But hold! By your own tale, D'Epernon did not slay your father. 'Twas his varlet Nicolas. So be it. Kill this Nicolas as many times as you have a mind; but do you keep hands off his master. I command you as your king; for in this both France and I have something at stake."

Because I must, I bowed my head; but I was far from acquiescent. So I sat moodily, the king watching me.

Suddenly he arose.

"Come hither, Hilaire," he said, and led me to the room from which D'Epernon had come.

CHAPTER XXVI

A ROYAL SOUL

IT was a smallish chamber into which I followed the king. It was plainly furnished, and with none of the traditional luxury of royalty apparent in it. It contained two beds, a table, and a number of chairs and benches. On one of the walls hung the skin of a black bear, and a number of pelts of wolves were scattered about the floor.

"I have ever been a great hunter—when I have not been hunted," Henri remarked, seeing me looking at these trophies. He closed the door and bade me be seated, and himself sat at the opposite side of the table, upon which he began to drum with his fingers.

"This tale of your father and of this faithful man, Torinaz, has moved me strangely," he resumed presently. "Regnault Duhamel was a man with an ideal to which he was steadfast. I do not think him mad; and, without regard to the means which he used, I honor him for his vision and for the singlemindedness with which he wrought for it. As a small return for the double service which he has done me—double because he has put inspiration in my heart as well as gold in my pocket at a time when both were needed—I would help his son.

"You are young, Hilaire—a great, overgrown boy—and you find yourself in a tangle which bewilders you, as a bear is bewildered when he seeks honey and finds the bees too many for him. But you have in you the making

of a man, I know. I like you; and I am going to speak to that man part of you in a way I seldom speak, but as I think Regnault Duhamel might have spoken.

"'What!' you think. 'This little mountebank is going to be serious? That cannot be!'

"Needst not to deny it, lad. You were sadly disappointed in your king when you found him last night. You have thought him a man of light ways, a merry idler, tossing himself upon the table of great events as a careless gamester would toss a card. I will not deny that all of the appearances are so. I am by nature merry and careless. I pull no long faces, and I love not to be serious.

"But for all that, I have an ideal, to which I, too, am steadfast. I am called to tread a difficult path, against which my feet rebel. Why, one might ask, do I so? Why should I not have remained in my little kingdom of Navarre, where I might have lived unmolested among the people and pursuits which I love? I will tell you why.

"I am a Bourbon of the house of Capet. It is a proud family and of long lineage. It is six hundred and two years since Hugues Capet, Duke of France, Count of Paris and Orleans, and Abbot of St. Martin de Tours, was proclaimed king at Senlis and crowned at Noyon. What has been the history of that dynasty of Capet? You may have read it in the records, and you have had the patience. But I will tell you.

"Wars have been fought by it and for it and because of it. To keep it upon the throne of France tens of thousands of lives and treasure uncounted have been spent. And what has it done in return? What, I say, has any king of the Capet line, barring only the great Saint Louis, done for France, that any other man of any other family might not have done far better, so be that he were a good man and had the will and opportunity? And the Capets have had the opportunity.

"Is it not time, think you, that a Capet began to repay some of the debt which the Capets owe to France? I think so, and as God hears me, I mean to be that man!"

Henri had quit his drumming upon the table top, and leaned across it, his swarthy cheeks flushed and his gray eyes afire. His face, almost grotesque in its homeliness, had become ennobled. His stammering voice and its foreign accent were forgotten in his words, which, though not loud, rang in the narrow chamber like trumpet calls.

"To whom should that debt be paid?" he asked. "What is France? The fairest land God ever gave to unworthy man. But without man, what is she? Hills, mountains, rocks and rivers; a spot where the sun and moon and stars shine down, where the rains and the snows fall, and the winds blow; where all that comes up out of the ground will flourish and cover the land, and the beasts and birds will multiply. But that alone is not a country,—'tis a wilderness.

"So, then, France is the French people. There are three estates in France. To which is the debt of the Capets owing? To the nobility? French nobles have fought and died for French kings since France's beginnings—when they have not been conspiring and fighting against them. They have lived off the fat of the land, oftentimes overshadowing the kings themselves in magnificence. With a free hand they have plucked those below them. There is nothing owing to them. They have had it already.

"What of the middle folk? Honest people—some of them—tradesmen, money lenders and the like, living as well as they can and dare—and they, too, taking the most of their substance from those below them. They are not France.

"Banish the king, drive the nobility into the sea, send the middle folk away, and you would still have a France,

my son. There would still be the common people—and they would be vastly happier, doubt it not, for the riddance.

“The poor skin clad mountaineer of the north and of the Pyrenees, the grape stained toilers in the vineyards of Languedoc, the peasant of Champagne or Poitou or Picardy, with wooden shoes upon his feet, pottering among his cabbages, the charcoal burner of the forests of Berri—these are France. These have filled the coffers of the tradesmen, made the magnificence of the nobles, kept the Capets on their throne.

“France is what she cannot do without and still be France. She can do without king, nobility, and middle folk.

“Ask any man, be he who he may, to follow back along the road of his lineage. If he follow far enough, he will find that in the beginning his folk were peasants and tilled the soil. Church, state, the nobility, the army—all rests upon that humble, plodding, suffering, almost uncomplaining foundation.

“One may never realize the whole of his dream; but, an God allow it, I will bring about the day when every peasant in France can walk the roads head up and in fear of no man, and can put a pullet in his pot on Sunday. For I would rather hear some toothless old woman mumble, as she dips her black bread in the soup, ‘God bless our Henri!’ than to have mine ears smitten by the blare of a thousand trumpets and the hollow shouting of ten thousand fat nobles, crying, ‘Long live the king!’

“That is why I will fight, my son—not to king it yonder in Paris, though I shall be king; not to conquer new lands; not to punish my enemies; but to make them friends to France. I desire peace—and peace I will have, though to gain it I have to fight as never King of France has fought before!”

He stopped, and the rapt expression slowly died from his face. When he spoke again it was in his ordinary manner.

"There, my boy, Henri has preached you a sermon upon Henri, and, *Ventre Saint Gris*, it has been out of all proportion to the worth of its subject! Few have understood me, Hilaire. Max is one—and there, mark me, is a faithful man with much wisdom, and destined to be great. Chicot is another. And, for all his quips and pranks, the fool, too, has in him the elements of greatness. Either one of them would make France a better king than I; but unfortunately they were not born heir to its throne; I was; so I must make the fight, and my friends must help me.

"I, too, was a boy once, Hilaire, and received a buffeting from fate. Over yonder in Paris my mother was poisoned. I have forgiven it. Once I had many friends. They were all killed yonder in Paris. Yet when I am king I shall redden no headman's ax in their memory. If I can forgive these things for France's sake, do I then ask so much of you?

"Look you, lad, I know this D'Epernon is a rogue, a villain and a traitor. For every evil thing which you can say of him I can add ten. He will conspire against me—is at it even now, though you saw him here to-day to proffer treacherous aid, which the arrival of your father's gift saved me from accepting. Were an assassin to take my life to-morrow, I doubt not that D'Epernon's gold would be in his pouch. He can be true to no man. Treachery and conspiracy are his breath."

"Then—then, why?" I stammered, puzzled.

"Why not rid myself of him when I have the chance, or let you do it for me? you would ask. Because he represents a faction, a large faction, which I hope eventually to win to France. At present 'tis neutral.

"Were I to have M. the Duke slain—or were you to slay him, which would be laid at my door—he would be made out a martyr, and this faction would be pushed into the arms of my enemies. He has not openly borne arms against me, and that is a part of his strength. Did I even have him imprisoned, I should lose his faction irrevocably. So, though he is more dangerous to me than two armies in the field, I must put up with him.

"And though your grievance is bitter, you must not compromise France, Hilaire. You will not?"

And I had to tell him no.

Whatever might be the human failings of this little king, I knew that I had stood face to face with a splendid soul.

Henri laid a hand upon my shoulder as he led me to the door.

"You are a good lad. Do you serve France and me to the best of your ability, and when the time comes ask me what you will that I can grant you, and it shall be yours," he said.

CHAPTER XXVII

ARQUES AND IVRY

AT any rate, there was some satisfaction in knowing that my father's aid to the king had wrecked one of the designs of the waspish duke.

On the afternoon after the arrival of my friends, as Moise and I were strolling in the town, we saw D'Epernon ride out at the head of some twoscore men-at-arms and household servants. Mlle. de Lorme rode beside him. She did not see me; nor had I any means of attracting her attention.

In my first dismay at learning of my father's pursuits, I had thought my love for her made hopeless; but the kindliness of the king had given me new heart of grace; and I reflected, too, that the career of Regnault Duhamel, robber though he had been, was much more honorable than that of her cousin, M. the Duke d'Epernon.

One thing I noticed as the duke's riders filed past us which gave me no small measure of satisfaction. Nicolas, who rode close behind his master, was conspicuous for a heavily bandaged jaw. That sight was more healing than Chicot's balms to my own bruised countenance.

Though I was not, as Mark had fondly predicted, made a colonel, I found upon reporting to Captain Turney that I was no longer cornet of his troop. My Champagne riders were made the nucleus of a new troop of horse, for which I received my commission as captain, with

Moise and Tête Grise as my lieutenants. I made Mark cornet.

On the afternoon of the 20th of September, Mayenne's army, twenty-five thousand strong, crossed the plains to the east of Dieppe, and the next morning delivered its first attack.

As this fighting promised to be more of a siege than a battle, the king had dismounted his entire force of men-at-arms, of which there were less than one thousand, and thrown them into the fortifications to support his artillery and foot soldiers. My troop was given a redoubt to hold at the summit of a steep road up the heights of Arques near the southern end of the fortifications. With us was a battery of four small cannon.

In the chill of the morning, through the mists which rolled up the hillsides from the plain, we could hear the hum of Mayenne's unseen army preparing for its assault. We breakfasted hurriedly around our fires, and all along the line stood ready for what might come up against us out of the murk.

As I leaned shivering in a corner of the redoubt, peering down into the shifting fog, a horse's head was thrust over the parapet beside me, and a friendly hand fell upon my shoulder. I looked up into the smiling face of Chicot.

"Eh, well, M. Duhamel, the hour has come," he said.

The jester was in full armor. Beads of moisture had formed on his corselet and plates, which reflected the light like thousands of diamonds.

"Down yonder is Mayenne's *omnium gatherum*," he continued, pointing over the wall. "I hope that M. the Duke has brought a good appetite for fighting; for, by the beard of Pluto, lord of Hades, we shall give him a bellyful!"

"I would that we had not to fight with Frenchmen," I rejoined.

"Ventre Saint Gris, that is well wished!" spoke a voice beyond the Gascon. "Half the joy is out of battle when one knows that he has to fight his own brothers. But, as it must be, let us do the job thoroughly."

Over Chicot's saddle bow I could see the king on his great roan stallion. Beside him was the lean, angular figure of Baron Rosny, and the boyish Prince of Condé. All three were in complete steel. Rosny wore a drawn and anxious face, and that of the boy prince was sober; but if Henri had cares or fears, he did not show them. On his crest waved jauntily that same white plume which I had seen in his hat, and which had been a gift from his cousin, the minion king.

"Herakleitos hath a thought which is pertinent to the moment, gossip," Chicot replied. "He says that it is opposition which brings things together. Our brothers shall be more than ever brotherly after we have given them a sound drubbing. But hearken!"

Along the line of fortifications ran a wavering cry:

"They are coming!"

A puff of wind shook the billowing curtain of vapor, lifted it, rolled it up, and dispersed it. Around us the musketeers blew hard upon their matches, and the gunners stood to their cannon.

From the plain to the heights, column upon column, Mayenne's infantry was clambering. At the point of each of the slowly moving columns waved its banners; and under each of the tossing silken emblems marched a company of nobles and knights in glittering armor.

Below, the plain behind them was white with tents; and to right and left of the camp were drawn up clouds of cavalry, ready to charge in and engage us, should we attempt a sortie.

Silently the attackers had come up through the mists, hoping doubtless to surprise us. Indeed, they had nearly

succeeded. On the left the head of one column had advanced more than three-quarters of the way up to the earthworks.

When the breeze tore away their concealment, and they heard our discovering cry, they raised a roaring battle shout of "Live the League! Mayenne! Mayenne!" and pressed furiously up the slopes.

From the thin lines on the hill slopes was flung back: "France! France! Live the king!"

Of a sudden our front blazed and thundered, as the fifty-nine cannon which the king had brought from the south delivered their first volley.

"Bravo!" shouted Henri, standing in his stirrups to note the effect of the fire. "We have said good morning and sent them their doughnuts. Max, order up my color bearer, and see that he follows me. I want M. the Duke to know where to find me, in case he shall decide to pay a call. Just at present it will be at the left, for there the dance promises to be merriest."

He glanced around at us in the redoubt. His nose drew down and his teeth gleamed through his mustache.

"Well, my children, yonder comes the entertainment for which ye have waited. Enjoy yourselves. If at any time ye shall be hard pressed, send for me, and I will come."

We answered him with a shout. He turned his horse and, followed by his escort of mounted nobles, galloped off along the heights toward the threatened left wing. All the way thither we could trace his course by the cheering. Before he reached it, our artillery fire had shattered the heads of so many of the columns that their commanders deemed it prudent to retire them.

Mayenne's first assault had failed. So did his second and third, and all the rest in the three weeks of almost constant battle which followed. In vain the fat duke

sent his best battalions against us. Once he led them in person; but the result was the same, and he did not risk that again. His forces outnumbered ours by four to one; but we had been shrewdly placed, the city behind us was loyal, and he could not come at us to crush us.

Through those days of fighting the king was everywhere. He seemed never to sleep. Often those who kept the night watches would hear the stamping of hoofs and find him riding among them on his big stallion, and sometimes he would dismount at their fires and sit with them, joking and telling tales of his former campaigns. In the daylight hours, wherever the battle was thickest, his white plume was sure to be waving.

On one occasion, when a determined drive by a column of Mayenne's infantry had won them a footing in one of our central redoubts, the little Béarnais charged them recklessly at the head of his handful of personal attendants, and drove them out at the point of the sword.

Again, when a massed attack threatened us upon the right, the king dismounted, took up the musket of a fallen man, and fought there for hours, until the danger was past, bringing down with his unerring huntsman's aim man after man of the attackers.

Another incident is likely to be a tradition in the royal artillery. One of the gun crews becoming short in the midst of a general engagement, Henri cast off part of his armor, seized a swab, and helped serve the piece, sweating and swearing among his cannoneers until he was as begrimed as the blackest of them. That cannon, which is still a part of the ordnance, will be known as "Mme. Navarre" so long as it shall hold together.

Should my descendants, for whom this account is intended, desire the details of the five years' fighting which followed, they will find it all in the fine big book which Master Matthieu has published. For reasons which I

shall make plain here, they will not find any mention of Hilaire Duhamel in Matthieu's chroniclings. That is why I have taken it upon myself to write my own story, which none shall see until long after I and the rest of us who lived through those stirring days are gone.

A brave game of hide and seek we played Mayenne. As he failed to crush us at Arques, so Henri and his English allies, which Queen Elizabeth had sent him, failed to take Paris, at which he struck quickly when Mayenne's back was turned. Philip of Spain took a hand in the game and sent a powerful army south from the Low Countries, and the Béarnais marched south to winter at Tours, which he left again early in the spring, to besiege Dreux, in the hope of decoying Mayenne once more from Paris into the open.

He was successful. On the night of March 13 the Béarnais and Mayenne once more faced each other on the plain of St. André, near Ivry, on the left bank of the River Eure. Henri had for battle eight thousand foot and three thousand horse. The duke had led sixteen thousand men from Paris.

Doubtless those seasoned veterans to whom the hazards of war were but a part of a well learned game, slept well that night. I know that Mark did; for he was near me, and he snored abominably. I know that others of us did not. The issue was too big. The odds were heavy, and this was our first pitched battle.

There had been no time to make a camp worthy of the name. I lay in the open near our fire, wrapped in a blanket, and with my saddle for a pillow. Around me were strewn the figures of my comrades, and beyond the rim of the firelight was the dark line of the picketed horses.

Moise lay a few feet from me. He tossed and turned as though he, too, were wakeful and anxious. Pride kept

us both from speaking. I held myself still and made pretense at sleeping, and found it wearisome business.

In months I had had no word of D'Epernon and my lady. What stake, I wondered, had the duke in the morrow's battle? With which camp was he trafficking now?

Presently I fell to considering the stars, which, because I had plighted myself by them, always brought me thoughts of Serene. What was she doing? Would God spare me to see her again, and to respond to her call in her hour of need? I prayed that He would. Then a calm came upon my spirit, and I slept. The last thing I sensed as I drifted was Leo snuggling closer into the folds of my blanket, and whining in his sleep.

When I awoke it was gray morning. Mark was bending over me.

"It is time to be stirring, Master Hilaire," he said. "They are making ready over there, and the king's infantry is forming."

I jumped up and shook the sleep from me. Around the fires my men were eating stolidly and talking in hushed tones. Poor fellows! For many of them it was the last breakfast. I swallowed a few mouthfuls, but was not hungered, and I found more comfort in a pull at a flask of red wine which Mark fetched me than in the victuals.

From where we were camped we could hear the tramp of feet and see the long files, ghostly in the dawn light, of Navarre's infantry marching to their positions.

Above us the sky flamed pink, and the gray of dawn turned to green and gold. I gave the order to saddle, and donned my corselet and helm. Mark was helping me with my lacings when an aid-de-camp galloped up.

"Captain Duhamel, you will take your troop at once to the center, there to form with the other cavalry—and

hold yourself in readiness to charge!" he shouted, saluting, wheeled his horse upon its heels and was gone in a flurry of cheering.

Mark flung his halberd into the air and caught it.

"Charge!" he roared. "That's the talk! Death of God! I would like to see Mayenne's face when he sees us coming. He has been told until he believes it that we dare not face him in the open."

We rode out in the fast growing light, and down the front of the ranks of infantry, who were making ready their pikes and muskets. They sent a growl of encouragement after us.

"Go it, my braves!" bawled a fat sergeant from Provence. "If they chase you home again, tell them to bring their knapsacks along!" This in allusion to our shortness of rations.

The king's forces were drawn up in the shape of a triangle, of which the tip, pointing toward the foe, was to be formed of our three thousand horsemen, armed only with swords and pistols.

Baron Rosny himself saw to our disposition.

"By express orders of the king, captain," he said with a smile, as he directed me to place my troop at the point of the wedge. It was the station of splendid perils. My whole being thrilled as we rode out to it; and I swore in my heart that I would justify the confidence or die.

We could see the enemy plainly now. They too were forming in haste, into a huge crescent, with cavalry at each of its horns. Directly opposite us was the dark mass of Mayenne's Walloon lancers, their long and heavy weapons bristling along their front like a forest of branchless trees. They were flanked at each side by detachments of Spanish musketeers.

It is my experience of battles that the most trying part of them is the waiting. We found it so that morning as

we sat our horses on the plain, while troop after troop pounded across the field and fell into position behind us. I could sense, or thought that I could, a growing, wordless uneasiness in the men around me. Something was wanted to divert and inspire them; and luckily an incident came up which served that purpose.

From somewhere among the foe bounded forth a big, buff colored dog of the mastiff breed, which began to gambol clumsily up and down the field, baying at our lines.

In the shadow of a great event, a small one oftentimes looms out of all proportion. So it was with the appearance of that foolish dog. A murmur of irritation ran through our ranks.

Had the brute been within pistol range, assuredly it would have been riddled; and back among the footmen I could hear captains angrily restraining their musketeers from firing.

Then near me someone hissed, and a small white figure emerged from under the horses' noses and trotted across the open.

It was Leo, going forth in true knightly fashion to meet the challenger.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE WHITE PLUME

I HAD missed Leo upon arising, and I had supposed that he was foraging among his friends for his breakfast. In the later excitement I had forgotten him, else he would have been tied safely at the rear. He had followed the troop into the field, and it now devolved upon him to strike the first blow of the battle of Ivry.

Mark had set him on, not being able, as he said afterward, to endure that other dog crying "Mayenne!" so loudly in our teeth.

Leo and his prowess were known to all our army, and the waiting soldiers, seizing upon this trifle, cheered him wildly as he went out. I truly believe that had he been vanquished by the mastiff, many a stout campaigner would have gone into battle with wet eyes.

From the Leaguers arose a gale of laughter and derision as their great mastiff, urged on from their side, charged roaring like a lion upon the smaller dog. Cheers and jeers died into silence as the two came to grips near the center of the field; and there was presented the spectacle of two armies, upon whose fighting possibly the fate of a nation hung, standing breathless to watch a dog fight.

So still was the battlefield that all could hear the growling of the enraged mastiff, and presently his death rattle; for Leo, true to his traditions, had fastened grimly upon his enemy's neck, and did his work in silence.

And when he came trotting back to us, his chest smeared

red, and his stumpy tail wagging with the consciousness of a duty performed, I thought our brave lads would have broken ranks to run out and embrace him.

On the other side, Mayenne's soldiers took the defeat of their champion with poor grace; and several of them were so unsportsmanlike as to fire upon Leo, but happily did not attain him.

A clump of horsemen rode down our front from the left and pulled reins at the peak of the triangle.

"*Ventre Saint Gris!* you have there a noble dog, Duhamel!" called a laughing voice. "If his exploit proves the augury for the day, he shall have from his king a collar of gold and brilliants. Now detail a man to take him to the rear. He has done his part for France, and I would not have him lost."

In armor, but bareheaded, the king wheeled his roan stallion, advanced a few paces before the ranks, and lifted his arms to the sky, gilded now by the sun. His face was suddenly solemn.

"Lord, Thou knowest all things!" he exclaimed. "If it be for Thy glory and my people's good, favor my cause and prosper the work of my hands!"

A mighty "Amen!" speeded the prayer.

At Henri's call, Chicot rode to him and helped him to don his helmet. I saw that the well remembered white plume was waving in its crest. He turned toward us a face flushed with excitement, in which his unflinching gray eyes shone like twin stars in the firmament.

"Now by the great St. Louis, whose blood is in my veins, I will make this charge with ye, my hearts of gold!" he cried.

"But, sire!" interposed Rosny, aghast, "this must not be! What of France if you should fall to-day? This is a great moment, and——"

"I know that it is, Max, and you shall not rob me of

my part in it. It is so great a moment that God in high heaven is leaning from His throne to see. If He favors the work I wish to do, He will not let me die. If He does not, then is my life to me of the least value of anything in the world.

"Gentlemen of France, ride with me. Let us show them yonder that the brave old days are not done."

The group of nobles who had followed him rode forward. He extended his arms toward his squadrons.

"My friends," he shouted, "keep your ranks in good order. If you lose your ensigns, cornets, or guides, this white plume that you see on my helmet will lead you always on the road to honor and glory! Are you ready?"

With the answer mingled the clash of closing visors and the creaking of saddle-leathers.

"Trumpeters, sound the charge! Forward! France! France!"

At the first notes of the trumpets, the king touched spurs to his stallion, and was off across the field, two lance lengths ahead of all others.

Already formed for their own advance, the Leaguers had not dreamed that we would dare to launch our three thousand horse in the face of their hosts. Above the drumming of the pounding hoofs, we who rode could hear a thin, shrill shout of wonder, that grew in volume to a roar as we swept down upon them.

Halfway across St. André's plain; and all other sound was lost in the thunder of Mayenne's cannon and the answer of King Henri's. Three quarters; and we could see the rolling eyeballs of the Walloons, crouched low behind their fifteen foot lances to receive us.

From each side of them the musketeers of Spain played a deadly fire upon us. Stricken horses reared screaming and fell, hurling their riders under the trampling hoofs that could not pause; riders slipped groaning from their

saddles, and their steeds rushed on without them. Death marked well the trail we left behind.

Still, we kept on. And ever in front of us, swift and unswerving, plunged the roan stallion, above whose floating mane beckoned our guidon of hope, the white plume of Navarre.

Surely, God's angels threw the mantle of His protection around the little king that day. A thousand musket balls sped screaming to meet him; full half the nobles who had followed him lay unhorsed or dead behind him; but he was untouched, nor was his charger scathed.

Low bent in his saddle, his long sword gleaming in the sunlight, and his cry of "France! France!" rising clear and exultant above the din of war, he flashed arrowlike under the Walloon lances, which splintered upon his armor in vain attempt to stop him.

After him swept our first wave of horsemen—what was left of it. *Crash!* we were into it! Along the meeting lines, grim welded by the terrific shock of our onset, sounded the screech of rending wood and the ring of smitten steel. Pistols emptied were flung away. Swords were out, and it was cut and thrust, hack and slash, with no time for parry.

For an instant only the lines were locked and swayed. Then the weight of that desperate charge told. Shouting the king's battle cry, "France! France!" the wave broke over the first rank of lancers and engulfed it.

Moise I saw, unhorsed and unhelmed, running beside Fanchon, his fair hair streaming behind him. I called to him to go back; but he laughed and flung himself forward, even as I had seen him fling himself at the grim gray wolf in the glen.

I tried to follow and protect the rash lad. Others were ahead of me. Tête Grise and Mark spurred past me, and my brother disappeared into the ruck of battle with a

steel clad figure riding close on each side, and the horned banner of our troop floating over him. For Mark held the ensign high in one hand, while with the other he swung his heavy English halberd, smashing the Flemish lances as though he were gathering firewood.

Presently, with a lancer striving hopefully to poke me from my saddle with his ironshod pole, and a Spaniard clinging to my boot leg in manful attempt to drag me within reach of his dagger, I became too busied to take note of matters which did not directly concern me.

My arm had come to its full pith, and Regnault Duhamel's sword was heavy. When I got a fair swing, the Spanish morion did not stay it. Fanchon reared, neighing wildly, and trampled down the lancer.

Our front ranks had suffered fearfully; but those behind came on in good order. The Walloons, though they fought bravely, were broken and pressed back. The Spaniards, hardy veterans who had fought under the Duke of Parma, made a more stubborn resistance; but at length they, too, retreated. On all sides Mayenne's soldiers raised the cry that the day was lost.

And, indeed, it was. The battle had not ended; but that charge had broken Mayenne's center. Before the severed and writhing halves of his crescent could be reunited, the orderly lines of Queen Elizabeth's English footmen marched across the plain as coolly as if on parade, and came to our support. This I did not see, nor did I learn until afterward that Mayenne had thrice sent his own cavalry from each horn of the crescent in furious counter charges, only to have his squadrons shattered against the firm front of King Henri's pikemen and musketeers.

As we pursued the disordered Walloons and retiring Spaniards, we came upon the king. His noble stallion had been killed under him, and he was sitting upon its

carcass, a ring of his gentlemen around him. His armor was dented and crimson-wet, and the white plume was white no longer. He was nursing his right arm across his knees.

"*Ventre Saint Gris!*" I heard him swear, "I have lost a good horse, and my arm is numbed from nails to shoulder; but we have pulled Mayenne's long nose—and I think, my braves, that we shall go to Paris soon.

"*Pardieu*, Max, 'tis a pretty rag you have there!" he exclaimed, springing up, as Baron Rosny rode in and laid at his feet the white flag of Lorraine with its black crosses, which he had wrested with his own hands from the duke's standard bearer. "We must have been close to one of the old foxes. Would that we had him as well as his brush."

One of the nobles led up another horse, and helped the king to mount.

"Max, see that this order goes out, and quickly," he commanded: "To the Spaniards, death—as many of them as ye can come up with—but quarter to our brother Frenchmen."

My troop had been sadly scattered in the charge and the subsequent fighting with the Walloons and Spaniards. Where Moise and Mark and Torinaz were, I knew not.

They, with the most of my Champagne lads, had disappeared into the tangle of battle, now rolling across the plain toward Mayenne's tents near the river. I would have turned that way; but Rosny halted me.

Under his orders, I collected such of my men as remained within call, and joined them with the remnants of other troops until I had nearly two score riders.

"Go to the bridge which leads to Anet, captain," said Rosny. "Take it and hold it if you can. I will send others to help you as soon as possible. Remember—death to the Spaniards; but spare all the French who will lay down their arms."

We rode off the plain at a gallop. One of my men declaring that he knew a short cut to the bridge, I ordered him to lead that way.

As we entered a patch of woodland not far from the river, I raised in my stirrups and looked back.

On St. André's Plain the bright sun was shining down. The guns had ceased their thunder, and their smoke had rolled away. Above the field where lately Mayenne's host had awaited our onset so confidently, the banner of the King of France was waving. Northward the battle still raged desperately around the League camp. Farther to the east the Spanish musketeers were retreating in orderly ranks, and fighting for their lives a furious rear guard action.

Still farther east, the space between the plain and the shining ribbon of the Eure was filled with fugitives, single, and in groups, clumps and entire companies, in headlong flight toward Paris. Near us, galloping hard, came a solitary horseman, and I thought that I recognized Torinaz.

That was the last I saw of the great battle of Ivry. The wood closed round about us; and in it was the foul dusk of treachery.

We had nearly reached the bridge, when the man who had offered to guide us thither—and he was a sergeant in my own troop, who had joined it at Tours—reined his horse in beside me and threw his arms around me.

"Now, comrades, down with these others!" he shouted.

Before I could free my arms, his weight had dragged me from the saddle, and we rolled struggling among the dead leaves on the forest floor.

Came a rush of horsemen to my aid; but the sergeant had allies. My own troopers, almost to a man, turned upon the others who sought to help me, and began to cut them down.

Too late I understood why these fellows had hung by me so closely in the battle. Ah, then for my true Champagne blades! But they were far away out yonder on the plain.

I reached indeed the bridge which led to Anet, but it was as a prisoner, trussed in Fanchon's saddle, and with my hands bound.

"We have done a good day's work this day, captain, my mates and I," said the traitor sergeant, grinning, as we rode onto the right bank of the Eure; but he would answer none of my questions as to the meaning of this treachery. In a fierce struggle at the bridge head, his followers had turned back those who sought to effect my rescue.

I wondered what had become of Torinaz, if it were he whom I had seen galloping toward me across the plain; but he did not put in an appearance.

All the rest of that day my captors rode steadily eastward; and in the early evening we entered Paris through the *Porte Dauphine*, and—which surprised me not—they took me to the *hôtel* of M. the Duke d'Epéron in the Rue St. Antoine.

CHAPTER XXIX

AN ASTOUNDING QUESTION

AFTER a brief parley with the sentinel at D'Epernon's gate, we were admitted to the courtyard of the *hôtel*. A few minutes later out came M. the Duke himself, accompanied by a brace of torch bearers, a half dozen of varlets, and his inevitable body servant, Nicolas, who carried a heavy leather bag.

At sight of me sitting there like a well bound sheaf, M. the Duke allowed himself as agreeable a smile as nature would permit, whereat I began to prepare for the worst.

"You have done well, Vidal, excellently well. I congratulate you, indeed," he said to the sergeant. "Give him the bag, Nicolas; he has earned it."

Nicolas passed it up, and the sergeant weighed it with a satisfied grin, and saluted.

"Ah, I told you that this would be a rare day's work, captain," he chuckled in my direction; and the knave had the impudence to salute me also. He and his comrades clattered out of the court, and I never laid eyes upon them again.

Three of D'Epernon's servants lifted me from Fanchon and carried me into the *hôtel* through a side entrance and up to a chamber on the second floor. There they gave me in charge of an obsequious valet, whose eyebrows went up to meet his hair when he saw my bonds. He at once cut them from me, and began to help me out of my armor. So dumfounded was I by this treatment that I let him proceed without comment.

"*Monsieur* will allow that I disrobe him?" he asked

timidly when he had removed the last of my plates.

"But certainly not, varlet," I replied so harshly that he jumped back from me. "I have no wish to be put to bed like an infant. What are your orders concerning me?"

"Why, *monsieur* is to sup with M. the Duke," he answered. "It was the thought of M. the Duke that *monsieur* would desire a bath and a change of garments."

With one hand he indicated the open door to a dressing room, where stood a steaming tub, and with the other a complete outfit of garments, which were laid out upon the bed. I approached and looked at them, and found that they far outdid in magnificence those of unhappy memory which I had purchased upon my first visit to Paris.

"Judas rags!" I named them to myself, and was about to tell the fellow nay.

But my humor changed. Here was I, for better or for worse, and no present way out of it. Resistance certainly would not improve my case. If M. d'Epéron had the whim to wine and dine me and trick me out in gay apparel before he hanged me kicking at the end of a rope, why, so be it; I would see the adventure through.

Moreover, since my scanty camp breakfast of the morning I had eaten nothing. I felt that I should hang more comfortably upon a full stomach.

"Very well," said I; and the varlet set to work.

When he had done with his soaps and scissors, razors and other matters, I walked out of the chamber trimmed and scented like a bridegroom. Right well could I imagine Mark's comments had he been there to get to windward of me. How different this, thought I, running my fingers over my smoothed cheeks and chin, to the valeting which Nicolas had given me when he caught me in his master's garden at Dieppe.

Eh, well, yes, I will confess it; some of my complaisance

was due to the reflection that I might chance to meet Serene in the house of the duke—and if it was to be my last meeting with her, I might as well make a good appearance.

So I followed the valet boldly down the stairs, and I even found that I could smile. At least I would not cringe before D'Epernon; and I would endeavor to meet death jauntily, even though he should come wearing the red hot boots.

In that vast room below, where once before I had been so lost and frightened, the valet left me. D'Epernon was nowhere to be seen, and for a moment I thought that I was alone.

"Hilaire! Oh, Hilaire!"

It seemed that my heart had quit my breast and gone leaping to meet her, as Serene came running forth from the shadows at the far end of the room. Beyond that cry our greeting was wordless for a full two minutes. Then she lifted her head from my brodered waistcoat, held me at her small arms' length, and surveyed the work of M. the Duke's man-maid.

"Indeed but we are brave, Hilaire! I thought 'twas some fine court dandy come to call!" And then she pouted.

"I am not at all sure that I like you so, Hilaire." To myself I cursed the valet. "You are too big and strong for these foolish things." She picked at the flowing lace which hung about my wrists, and I was sorry that I had yielded to the temptation to play the peacock.

"Jean said that you would come one of these days, Hilaire; and I thought 'twas said to plague me. What *does* it mean, your coming, dear? He said——"

She hid her face again, and did not complete the sentence. Looking down, I saw that her little ears had turned pink.

I knew then the refinement of D'Epernon's torture, and it took some of the pluck out of me. To bring us thus together, and then— My arms tightened around her.

"I do not know the meaning of it, Serene," I answered; "but M. d'Epernon may be assured of one thing. All unwittingly he has permitted me a foretaste of heaven which he can never take from me. I——"

"You will now return to earth, M. Hilaire," broke in the dry voice of M. the Duke.

He had come treading softly across his thick carpet, and stood a few feet behind us, smiling and pulling at his tuft of beard.

"But if certain matters which we have to discuss to-night shall come to a happy conclusion," he went on, "I promise you, faith of a gentleman, that you may return to your paradise and there remain until the saints translate you.

"Ah, my dear cousin, you would not believe when I told you that I would fetch your captain. But I have done so—and a pretty sum it has cost me to bring it about.

"Now, pray, I beg of you, that he and I agree, and you shall keep him always—though I see little doubt of an agreement in face of such powerful arguments as those white arms of yours and what I have to offer him.

"Eh, M. Hilaire, but you are a lucky lad, a lucky, lucky lad! Before many minutes I shall have convinced you who your friends are. Now *mademoiselle* must excuse you for an hour. I have a supper waiting for you, too; and my cooks have done their best. Come."

Now, if ever sincerity spoke in a man's voice, it had spoken in that of His Grace the Duke d'Epernon, and I began to be terribly afraid. Grim experiences had taught me that there are a number of things in life which are worse than death. Sincerity from the lips of M. the

Duke filled me with a presentiment that I was about to taste one of them.

As he turned his back to go, I kissed Serene again, with the inward prayer that it might not be the last time. I think he heard it—not the prayer—for I saw his shoulders twitch impatiently. Except where his own interests were concerned, M. d'Epernon was little sentimental.

He did not take me to his dining hall, but under the staircase and through a long corridor to a small cabinet room in a wing of the *hôtel*. There a table had been laid for two, and a fire was burning on the hearth.

D'Epernon waved me to a seat, and a table varlet began the service of the meal.

True to my resolve, I ate heartily, nor fretted if the meat might be poisoned. The duke sat opposite me, and though he did not eat, excusing himself on the ground that he had supped shortly before my arrival, he was attentive to a tall bottle which stood at his elbow.

To give his cooks their due, it was an excellent meal which they had prepared for me. The more I ate of it the more my heart took courage; for I have ever noticed that the stomach of a man is his heart's very closest ally, lacking whose support his heart will oftentimes fail him.

"Now," said D'Epernon, when the varlet had cleared the dishes and fetched more bottles, and been sent about his business—"now I will talk to you, my young friend, plainly and frankly, and withholding nothing, where before I have withheld much.

"Once before I tried to convince you that your interests were one with mine. Well, I failed. 'Twas my own fault. By giving way to my accursed temper, I had alienated you. Enough of that. My need of you was not very great. But now it is—and I warn you that I have a

grip upon my temper to-night which you cannot and shall not disturb."

I was glad to hear that. It would be a battle, then, to see which of us could first upset the other. We would be well matched; for I, too, had taken my passions and my hatred of the man under firm control. My curiosity also was alive; and I was reckless of dangers, seeing the worst of them all, so far as concerned me, already had befallen.

D'Epernon filled his glass, and over it his hot brown eyes appraised me. He moistened his pursy lips furtively and went on:

"I would have offered you advancements. I have a son who has been a disappointment to me. In a way you would have filled his place. It would have pleased me to have procured for you what he, poor fool, has neither brains nor purpose to succeed in. Besides, it was to my interest to keep track of you—and that, in divers ways, I have done."

I could not gainsay that. I sat before him in proof of it. He had paused as if expecting me to question. But I put him none. Time enough, thought I, to tweak his temper when he should have spilled his secrets to me; and now at last, it seemed, they were coming out.

"But now all is changed again," he resumed. "There is a new combination upon the board, to which you are indispensable. I can offer—aye, and procure—something, of which in your wildest dreams you could not guess; for I know that you know nothing of it. Hilaire, what would you——"

The words seemed to choke him. He swallowed at a gulp the half his glass of wine, and the words came from him like a freshet:

"What would you say, Hilaire, if I told you that I could make you King of France?"

CHAPTER XXX

I AVENGE MY FATHER

THOSE words shook my aplomb from me, to be sure, and stiffened me in my chair. I gazed into M. the Duke's restless eyes; but the madness which I looked for was not there. They were alive with excitement, 'tis true; but they were sane and earnest, and they watched me keenly.

Warned by that watchfulness, I relaxed. He was playing me for some purpose. I poured myself a glass of his wine, and under cover of that simple action recovered the equanimity which he had jarred from me.

"Why, I should think, *monsieur*," I replied as I set down my glass, "that you had told me a most amazing lie."

I, too, was watchful; but I could not detect that I had stirred a flicker of his temper.

He smiled across at me, almost genially, then proffered me his snuffbox, an ornate affair of ivory and gold, with a picture upon its lid which any decent man should blush to look upon. I refused. He tapped the box and inhaled deeply. I saw that his fingers were shaking. Whatever was his hidden purpose in this cryptic parley, he was as intent upon it as a terrier at a rat hole.

"I promised to speak plainly, Hilaire," he said. "I will. There is a story to be told—and when I have told it, you shall judge whether I have lied. Listen. When my late master, Henri de Valois, died, 'twas said and believed in France that the Valois branch of the Capetian house died with him. And so 'tis dead and done with

indeed—to all save me. I can, if I will, resurrect it—and I *do* will.”

He checked my exclamation of disbelief.

“Contest me not, but listen. Henri II, the late king’s father, and the son of Francis I, left four sickly sons. Three of them in the last thirty years have sat upon the throne of France, and all of them are dead without issue. Wherefore, the crown passes of right—I’ll not deny it—to the Bourbon branch of Capet. That is the face of the matter. But behind that face stand I, D’Epernon; and I declare that the house of Valois is not extinct.

“Here is the story. In his youth, before they married him to the Italian woman, Catherine de Medici, for whom he cared little, Henry II had another wife—mind, I say *wife*—for whom he cared much. She was the daughter of a poor peasant. He met her while he was hunting in the forests of Berri. Fool that he was, who had but to reach and take her, he married her.

“Such conduct on the part of a king’s son could have but one result. The matter came to the ears of his father, and was cause for a stormy scene or two between Francis and his hot blooded son. Steps were taken, of course, to set the marriage aside. But—and here is one point of the tale—before it could be done, the girl, poor weakling, learning that she was to lose her lover, took sick, gave birth to a son, and died.

“You may well believe that that embarrassing infant had little chance to survive. A hundred means were at the command of Francis to rid him of his undesired grandson. The marvel of it is that all failed. The father of the girl, a shrewd varlet and hard of head, peasant though he was, took the child and the gold which the prince had given them, and fled. Nor could all the agents of the king, or later of King Henri, ever find them.

"He grew to manhood, that lad. I know it and can prove it. He was a wanderer. He lived much among the Romanies (Gypsies), and of them learned their tricks with horses. His peasant grandsire kept their secret, and kept the gold, until he died.

"Eventually the wanderer whose blood was half kingly caught the eye of the daughter of a wealthy notary, and she left her father's house and wedded him. Her relatives pursued them, and would not let them rest; but he outwitted them, and for years they lost him. Children were born—two sons."

D'Epernon paused. His eyes seemed to burn me.

"Well, M. Hilaire, how do you like the tale?" he asked.

"What has this—if it be true—to do with me?" I demanded, ignoring the interference which had set my heart to thumping and my breath to coming fast.

"Why, only this, my lad." M. the Duke leaned forward and tapped his finger upon the table to accompany his words. "That peasant grandsire gave to the lad the name of his mother, and a common enough name it was. The name of the girl was Jeanne Duhamel, and her son was named Regnault!"

I sprang up from my chair and tramped the cabinet, and D'Epernon's eyes followed me to and fro, as he sat with a well satisfied smile upon his face, and plucking at his beard. My brain was boiling, and yet I felt that I must keep my coolness. The man was playing upon me like a harp, in spite of me; and only by coolness should I get to the bottom of his lies. They must be lies.

Presently I turned back to the table and drank another glass of wine; and this time it was my hand which trembled.

"You spoke of proofs," I said. "What proofs can there be of this mad tale?"

"I have them, doubt it not—good and sufficient proofs of all which I have said," he answered. "The story of the peasant grandsire, set down by himself; certain letters from the prince to his daughter; even the page which the old man filched from the parish register. Oh, that peasant was a shrewd man. He kept those things, though he dared not use them. When the notary and the notary's son drove Regnault Duhamel and his wife from their home and burned it after them, they found those things. In time they came into my possession."

While he spoke I had forced myself to think.

"And Regnault Duhamel—did he know these things?" I asked.

"Yes; but he was crazed with the notion that his mother had been ill used. He chose to prate of 'the people's rights'—as if they had any which we, the nobles, do not give them. He pretended that he cared naught for his origin, and——"

"But you, knowing these things, why did you hunt my father and desire his death?" I interrupted.

"Because Henri of Valois was my master, and I always served him well."

Here certainly was a flaw in his story. I pressed it.

"Then why did you not do the thing thoroughly, and kill the two sons of Regnault Duhamel also?"

"I was tempted to. But I was sure that you did not know what only I could prove. Neither of you had reached the age to be trusted with such a perilous secret. Some day, thought I, these lads may be useful to me. And then there was another reason. I was the notary's son."

"What, you! You are——"

"Yes, I am your uncle, my lad."

And delivering this, the most hateful to me of all his

information, M. the Duke took snuff again and smiled placidly at me.

"Lies!" I shouted back. "Lies! You could not have treated me so!" Of instinct my hand went up and touched the mark which his iron had left upon my brow.

"Pshaw, lad! I have naught to do with foolish sentiment, I tell you. I hated your father. I hated that part of you which was your father. You drove my temper beyond bounds. Besides—and I will avow it frankly—I wished you to fear me a bit. If ever you were to be useful to me it was well that you should fear me. He who serves through fear serves best of all. But it seemed that I could not scare you much. But enough of this. I have told you but the prelude. Now for the meat of the matter."

Amazement had done all to me that it could for the moment do. I reseated myself and rested my elbows upon the table and my chin upon my palms, and listened. But all the time my brain was busy.

In proportion as I grew calm, M. d'Epéron became animated. He clawed at the board and leaned forward so that he was half upon it. His elbow overset his wine; but he did not heed it. He spoke quickly, in short sentences.

"I foresaw the death of Henri de Valois. The killing of Guise had sealed it. I decoyed you to Paris to have you near me. Well, Henri died. Following his death there were two combinations, that of Henri of Navarre and that of Mayenne and the League. Mayenne, who has much fat in his brain, as well as upon his paunch, thought that he could crush the Béarnais, and he would not listen to any counsels of mine.

"Seeing that I could do nothing with him, I turned to Navarre. I found him difficult. He has too much of this 'for the good of my people' in his head to suit me.

"Still I was progressing with him, but slowly, when you came with Regnault Duhamel's gold and played me an evil trick. I forgive you. It has turned out well.

"Now the people are rising for Navarre. They see that he is for them. He has won a pitched battle against great odds. He is becoming a hero. In a few months more it will be all up with the League; and only death or the Duke d'Epéron can prevent the Béarnais from sitting on the throne of France.

"Cardinal Charles de Bourbon, Mayenne's phantom king, is ill and dying. In placing him upon the throne, Mayenne acknowledged the rights of the Bourbon house. The people will not suffer the kingdom to pass to Spain. Everything favors Navarre.

"Mayenne realizes these things now. He is at his wits' end, and will listen to anything.

"But Navarre's strength is our strength also, Hilaire. For, look you, what will the people say if I put forward a man proved of the old Valois blood, but whose mother and grandmother were women of the people themselves—one the daughter of a notary, the other a peasant?

"By St. Denys, lad, the middle folk and peasants would raise a cry that would rock the kingdom! Navarre's followers would fall away like dry leaves. A few promises from us, which we can do as we like about afterward, and France is ours for the taking!"

M. the Duke sat back, breathing hard. "Now think you that I am so mad, nephew Hilaire?" he demanded.

"And what will be your part in this game, my uncle?"

"Why, you shall make me your chancellor, or, better yet, your superintendent of finances—the latter perhaps would serve best—and listen to me in all affairs of state. I do not conceal from you that when I have made you King of France I shall expect to be well paid for it. I will attend to that, my boy."

"And *mademoiselle*—Serene?"

"Why, you shall have her, most certainly. I had intended that. And she is the most beautiful woman in all France, nephew."

His attempt to beam upon me benignantly was a horrible failure.

Serene! A kingdom! But most of all, Serene! My senses were dizzied as by wine. Aye, and this little hornet man could do it, too! I had it within my power by a word to change the history of France and write my own pages in it!

Back of the whirling glitter and glamour of it all there was a part of my brain which stood cool and saw clearly. I knew what I had to do.

"And by God's thunders, I will do it!" I muttered to myself.

"You spoke of proofs of my birth!" I said aloud. "Let me see them."

D'Epernon looked into my shining eyes and nodded. From a strong box which was built into the wall of the cabinet he fetched a small iron coffer, took out a half-dozen yellowed sheets and three letters, and placed them in my hands.

I pored over them to their ends; and when I raised my face again, I know that my cheeks were wet. They were as he had said, and in order. My grandsire the notary had seen to that.

"How many know this thing?" I asked, gazing up at M. the Duke, who had hovered at my elbow.

"Why, Regnault Duhamel and Pierre de Nogaret, your father and mine, knew it," he replied, "and now their two sons. That is all. It is not a thing to gossip about nephew, unless one is going to make use of it."

His hand rested familiarly upon my shoulder. *Mon*

Dieu, the man, judging all others by his own vile self, suspected nothing!

"So only you and I know it?" I persisted.

"Yes. To-morrow I will go to Mayenne, who, since Ivry, will be ripe for this."

I sprang to my feet, striking down his hand and sweeping him back.

"You will go to no one, my sweet uncle!" I cried.

"You and I alone know this thing. No other ever shall—for no one would believe us without these!"

And I threw the yellowed sheets into the leaping fire.

With a shriek that was little human, M. the Duke hurled himself to seize them. I caught and held him. By turns he wept, cursed, kicked, and even sought to bite me. Then he grew calmer, and over my arm stared as if fascinated while the papers flamed steadily to ashes.

When they were quite consumed, I released him. He shook himself, drew a deep breath, as if to speak, but did not. He slumped onto a settle by the hearth and gazed to where the ghosts of his dead ambitions were dancing lightsomely above the red embers. Looking into his eyes, I knew that I had avenged the death of Regnault Duhamel.

"Did you call me, my master?" asked a voice at the door, and the burly Nicolas insinuated himself into the room.

D'Epernon pointed to me.

"Take this young man away, Nicolas," he said in a weary voice. "Keep him safe until I decide what disposition shall be made of him."

Nicolas fetched some of his varlets in, and they led me away. I made no resistance. As we were going out, my uncle roused himself to call after me:

"Fool, I can still play the girl against Navarre!"

CHAPTER XXXI

THE SORCERER'S MAGIC

DOUBTLESS there were dungeons in plenty beneath my precious uncle's residence. Perhaps they were already filled. At any rate, Nicolas did not take me thither, but bestowed me in a gloomy room in the stone stables behind the *hôtel*. Its one window, which looked out upon a narrow alleyway, was barred, its door was thick, and it answered all the purposes of a cell.

Moreover, I was under the eyes of the horse guard, which M. the Duke maintained both day and night in true military style. Nicolas had a pallet fetched and placed in the room, locked the door, and gave the key into the keeping of the sentry, and left me.

I had not seen *mademoiselle* again in our passage through the *hôtel*, nor did I desire to see her. She was lost to me now through my own act, and I dared not face her with that knowledge in my heart. Women are apt to take such things strangely, and the course which is plain to a man they do not always see so clearly.

As for myself, I was certain that my uncle would grandly revenge himself upon me, and it mattered little to me what form his spite might take. I only prayed that the end might come quickly; for in truth my life had become a burden almost heavier than I could support.

All that night I sat upon my bed, my head clutched in my hands, and my brain a bitter and aching chaos.

My reflections turned ever to the same point: I had lost Serene!

That cooler, saner me, which had ruled my decision, was not silent in the conflict which raged within me.

"Regnault Duhamel knew these things," it whispered to me. "He counted them as nothing, but did his work for the people of France, proud that he was one of them. You have kept faith with that iron spirit."

True; but Regnault Duhamel could not have been king had he so wished, his pretensions would have gotten him only a speedy death, and—he did not have Serene to lose.

"You have been true to the king whom you swore to serve," said the inner voice; "and he will make a better king for France than you could have. What could you have done for your people's good, if you had become their king, bound to such a counselor as M. the Duke d'Epemon? You would not have been a king, but merely the glittering empty shell of another man's authority."

That, too, was true; and if those thoughts were powerless to console me for my loss, or to make my brief future brighter, they finally did steady me. Though I might die a fearfully unhappy man, I at least would die an honorable one.

A servant brought me my meals; but my captivity had no other visitors. By day I could hear the clattering life of the *hôtel* servants beyond the end of my alley; by night I lay and listened to the stamping of the duke's horses, for my sleeping was fitful.

Three weeks passed.

From the random gossip of D'Epemon's soldiers I learned how crushing had been Mayenne's defeat at Ivry, and that King Henri had come on and laid siege to Paris. Indeed, I could at times hear the thunder of the siege guns. My friends were just beyond the walls.

Late one night I heard the horse guard hail some passer before my cell.

"So you are the new fool our master has to amuse him?" he said. "Julie, the cook's wench, has told me that you are also a right good one at the telling of fortunes. Say, now, will you tell me what you can see in this tough old hand? I have need of some good luck to cheer me, and would know in advance that it is coming."

"Nay, not to-night, friend," answered a voice at sound of which I started from my bed. "I have a misery in one of my jaws which for three nights has not let me sleep, but drives me wandering. Any fortune which I might say while so afflicted I fear would be to no man's liking. But I will remember you, comrade. Are you here every night?"

"Yes; curse my luck!" grumbled the sentry. "Every night must I idle about here alone while the others be at their songs and bottles, and like an owl sleep all my days away. Plague upon Captain Pierre. He has a spite against me for a matter of winnings at dice, and is making me pay through my nose. I doubt not he'll keep me here another fortnight."

"I shall remember, and I shall come again."

By that time I had reached my window and caught a glimpse of the owner of the voice which had roused me. I had thought that I knew it, but at once I saw my error. He was tall and lean, clad in the particolored motley of a fool, his black hair cropped below his ears, and his face smooth shaven.

For an instant, until I saw him, I would have wagered that the voice was that of Jerome Torinaz, though its accents were more brisk than those of my sorcerer lieutenant.

Next night he passed that way again, and the next, each time pausing to gossip with the sentinel. His tooth-

ache still persisted. On the third night he came not at all, but on the fourth I heard him again; and as the sentry persisted in his desire to know the future, the soothsayer consented to try his skill at telling it.

"Nay, I want not your hand, friend," he said. "I have a better way than that. You shall read your fate in my eyes. Here, tilt the torch this way a bit—so. Now look, and tell me if you see aught that concerns you."

Silence followed, in which I could imagine the soldier, a thick-set, red faced fellow, staring hard into the fool's lean face in search of fugitive romance.

"Why, the devil's in this, comrade!" he muttered in awed surprise. "I see Julie, little rogue, as plain as plain can be! Enough! Let me go! I be afeared! This is the devil's black magic! My God! My God!"

From amazement the man's voice had run the gamut to abject terror, and his last words were rather moaned than spoken. I tiptoed to my window and looked out; and my own hair stirred upon my scalp.

A torch was burning in its cresset on the alley wall. In the red flare below it I saw the face of the sentinel. It was vacant and horrid, its jaw fallen, and its eyes rolled upward so that only their whites showed. Because of the shadows I could not see his body, and that dreadful face had the appearance of floating in the red torchlight, as though it had been plucked from him in the midst of some frightful dream.

This was bad enough; but there was worse beyond it. The countenance of the soothsayer was in the shadow; but 'twas all alight and livid. A greenish radiance wavered athwart its lined features. The man's skin seemed to be burning in some slow fire. His eyes shone like those of a monster cat.

While I gazed at this unholy tableau, a pair of hands thrust into the light, seized the sentinel by the shoulders,

and pressed him back against the wall. Both faces disappeared in the shadows. I heard a clink of keys, and then the voice of the soothsayer.

"Sleep—sleep well," it said in low, compelling tones. "Sleep and, sleeping, march. And when you wake, forget!" I heard the sentry sigh, and his feet began to march.

A dark figure flung across the alley to my window.

"Captain Duhamel!" it called softly. "Captain! Are you awake? Up quickly and make ready to go! There is not a moment to be lost."

This time I knew the voice for sure. 'Twas that of Torinaz. A key turned in the lock. That terribly luminous face hovered above the threshold and came toward me. I take no shame to say that I shrank away from it.

In the light from the window the sorcerer saw me; and I heard him chuckle to himself.

"The devil is not with me, captain," he said; "and this fiery face of mine is but the effect of a simple cause. Come, hasten! I will explain all later."

I pulled on my doublet and hose, and, shoes in hand, I followed him through the alley. We skirted the main courtyard to the front gate. The great leaves of oak stood open, and the arch was barred by its hinged grille only. Beyond it a sentinel was tramping up and down.

"Go out and pass him, paying no attention," Torinaz whispered. "Above all, see that you touch him not. Hide in the shadows down the street. The hardest part of this night's work is yet to come. If I join you not within the half of an hour, or if you hear any disturbance or outcry here, then take to your heels. You are a good swimmer, I know. Perchance you can avoid the patrols and escape the city by the river. Go." He turned back into the gloom.

The grille was unbarred. I passed it boldly. For a

moment I stood hesitant in the arch. Twice the sentinel went by me, so near that I could hear him breathing.

But he paid me no heed. At his second turn I saw that his eyes too were fixed and staring, and he breathed like a man in heavy slumber. His pace was that of a man of wood. By St. Walaric! That marching automaton that was yet a man made me to shudder. I slipped by him on his third turn and went and hid myself in the angle of a buttress farther down the wall.

Twenty minutes later a cloaked and plumed figure issued from D'Epernon's gateway, leading two horses. There was a little light from the heavens, and I saw the star upon Fanchon's forehead. Both man and horses came toward me soundlessly. The man was Torinaz. He had bound the horses' hoofs with pieces of sacking, and strapped their muzzles so that they might not whinny. He handed me a hat and cloak.

"Your armor I could not manage, captain," he said; "but here is Regnault Duhamel's sword."

I buckled the long blade about me, and once more I felt myself a man. We rode through several streets in silence, then halted in a deserted alley and removed the mufflings from the horses. I noticed Torinaz rubbing hard at his face, and that afterward the palms of his hands glowed and flickered curiously. He was breathing hard and his legs shook.

"Before we go farther, tell me the meaning of that devil's mummery back yonder," said I, and spoke sternly. For I liked not to think that I had purchased my body from the designs of the Duke d'Epernon at the expense of my immortal soul.

"Here is the secret, captain." Torinaz exhibited a small phial. "'Tis but a few drops of the luminous water which one ofttimes finds in a stagnant swamp, and from which the will-o'-the-wisp flames arise."

"But the other—what did you to that mān, that he marched and saw us not?" I demanded.

"That too is simple, my captain, though not so simple as the fiery water. I swear to you by the good God, in whom we both believe, that it is a harmless trick."

I had watched him keenly, and saw that he did not flinch in pronouncing the holy word.

"It is a trick of the ancients, whereby one man, catching another unawares, may impose his will upon him for a time, and make him see things which have no existence outside his own fancy. Why, I could teach you the——"

"Nay," I interrupted him hastily, "I will have naught to do with it. But," I added eagerly, "if you can do these things, can you not take a city gate and let King Henri's army through?"

"Would that I could, captain—though they burned me for it in the Place de Grève afterward. But I cannot. The thing cannot be done except I have one man alone and can first fix his attention—and sometimes not then."

"But, speaking of the city gates: we have yet to pass one of them before we shall be safe. And in this you will do better than my poor magic. Here."

He thrust a paper into my hands.

"What's this?" I asked.

"'Tis a pass, writ out in as fair an imitation of M. the Duke d'Epéron's hand as I could manage after many trials. And 'tis sealed with his seal. I have been well-nigh three weeks in the getting of it. Let us to the Porte St. Denis, where there is no fighting, and there do you present it. God send that it will serve us."

To the Porte St. Denis we rode at once. When I saw its archway, I remembered the last time I had passed it, riding behind the mighty Empress; and I wondered what had become of M. Hobbs and his long nosed beast.

A sergeant of the gate guard received us civilly enough, and did not quibble over our pass, but bade his men undo the gates. But as luck would have it, our parleying aroused the captain of the gate from his slumbers, and he called to the sergeant that he would look at the pass. As he came from the tower I saw that he was Captain André.

"Now ride!" I shouted, and jammed my heels against Fanchon's ribs. She plunged snorting at the half opened gateway. Torinaz followed.

Behind us André ordered his musketeers to fire. The archway blazed with powder flame.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE SPLENDID FOOL

AS we dashed down the roadway through a perilous hail I heard the thud of a striking bullet. Beside me Torinaz rose convulsively in his saddle and groaned. But he at once shouted across to me that it was nothing, and continued to urge his mount vigorously.

Some way farther on, finding that no pursuit had been sent after us, I drew rein. "You were hit," I said. "Where, and how badly?"

"Only in my Josephus, captain," he replied. "I could not leave it behind to fall a prey to those who would not appreciate it, and now it has requited me."

He fumbled beneath his cloak and dragged forth a bulky, leather bound tome, which I recalled having seen before, strapped to his saddle. There was a bullet hole through one of its covers.

Torinaz thumbed its pages over and found the flattened lead.

"It has been pierced from 'The Antiquities of the Jews' clear through to the 'Discourse Upon Hades,'" he said ruefully, after examination of the volume in the light from the stars. "Doubtless 'twas Hades which stopped the bullet. I wonder now if I owe the devil something for that?"

"I think that your doings of this night have canceled the debt," I retorted; and then I repented, and thanked him warmly for the devotion he had showed.

It seems that he had come up in time to see the treacherous attack upon me in the wood, and then had trailed my captors on to Paris.

For two or three days he had been puzzled as to how to get himself into the service of D'Epemon in a capacity which might serve me. Then he had heard that the duke had slain his fool.

Though that information was little encouraging, he nevertheless had presented himself to fill the dead man's shoes, first cropping and dyeing his gray hair, shaving his beard, and providing himself with motley.

My troop we found at Meudon, in command of Moise, and both of us were welcomed as from the dead. The king himself sent for the two of us, and heard our story with many surprised oaths—though, as far as concerned me, he heard but a part of it. I told him my relationship

D'Epemon, and that the duke had thought to make use of me; and there I let it rest. Nor until to-day, when I confide it to the silent paper, have I ever breathed a living being the tale which my uncle told me.

Beaten off from Paris by the intervention of the Spaniards from the Low Countries, Henri, in November, threw his entire strength against the city of Rouen, determined to cut Paris off from Normandie.

Under the walls of Rouen occurred a lamentable event, the thought of which never comes to me without sincere sorrow. In the afternoon of the fourth day of the siege I was sitting before my tent on the meadow, chatting with Moise, when I heard a shout, and Rosny, Chicot and two or three other gentlemen came galloping up, all waving their arms.

"To horse! To horse!" Rosny shouted. "They are tempting a sally against the guns!"

It was so. The fiery Villars-Branca, governor of Normandie, who commanded in Rouen, had launched a sur-

prise cavalry sortie from the eastern gate. It was coming on at a furious pace, its long curve indicating that it was indeed the guns which were threatened.

As one may guess, there was a mighty scrambling on the part of the king's horsemen to drive these presumptuous fellows home again. Rosny and the other gentlemen made the counter charge with us. Despite our haste, those of the sally party reached one battery and disabled it before we intervened and chased them helter-skelter to their gate.

The gateway was narrow, the fleeing cavalry became jammed in it in their haste to enter, and a fearful tangle of men and horses ensued, with us hanging fiercely upon their flanks.

Some of them turned upon us, among them, noticeable for his energy and daring, a slender, red plumed knight whose silver inlaid armor denoted him a personage of consequence. Him Chicot engaged in sword play.

His long arms and singular agility made the jester redoubtable with any weapon. He might easily have slain the knight, but made no attempt to do so. Spurring his steed against the other's, he struck up his blade, wound an arm around him, and dragged him from his saddle. Chicot then rode out of the press with his captive dangling head downward across his saddle bow.

Our fighting ended when the besiegers, getting the battered horsemen inside, successfully slammed their battering gate upon our noses. We rode back across the meadow.

"Whom have you there, that does so kick and squint and curse?" called Rosny, catching sight of the jester and his prisoner, who was indeed doing all three with exemplary vigor.

"Let us see," replied Chicot. He dismounted and seized the knight upon his feet. "Who are you, *monsieur*?"

A confused sputter of oaths came through the close

helmet. The knight threw back his visor, disclosing a dark, high featured countenance, which doubtless was handsome enough, but just then was so contorted by rage as to make it fiendish.

"By the blue, 'tis Count Henri of Lorraine himself!" ejaculated Rosny.

"Yes," said the knight, grinding his teeth, "it is. And to what ruffian of the ragged Bourbon's brigand army am I to yield?" He glared at Chicot.

"To the ragged Bourbon's fool, M. the Count," retorted the jester, baring his own face, and laughing in his silent way at the other's discomfiture.

"God's blood!" shrieked the count, stamping his feet. "To be taken by you! But you shall not mock me, foul fool!"

He had managed to retain his sword. Carried away by rage, he suddenly raised his arm and struck the jester on the temple with the pommel of the weapon.

"Ha, there's death in the pot!" muttered Chicot. He staggered a pace or two and fell senseless.

In the moment which followed, the life of M. de Lorraine was not worth a maravedi; for Chicot was generally beloved. But Rosny restrained us.

"This is a matter for the king," he said, and sternly to Lorraine: "A most unknighly blow, M. the Count; and count that you are, and I were king, you should lose your head for it if this man dies. Give me your sword."

"No; I'll yield the blade to none of you!" Snapping it across his knee, the count cast the fragments from him. "You can do with me as ye like. I hope the fool dies."

"Take him away," ordered Rosny.

I had raised Chicot. As my tent was not far, Mark and I carried him thither and took off his armor. Tête Grise, who knows more of such matters than many doctors, attended him.

We built a pile of blankets into a comfortable couch and laid the stunned man thereon. He was so still and limp that I feared that he was dead; but Torinaz said no. Mark fetched a flask of brandy, and I aided Torinaz to pour a few drops of it into Chicot's mouth. Torinaz also dampened a bandage with the powerful liquor, and bound it around the jester's head.

"It is all that I can do," he said. "The rest is with the good God." He listened at the injured man's heart, shook his head, and then, wizard though he was, he knelt and began to pray.

Hoofs pounded on the turf outside. The king and Rosny entered. Henri glanced at the still form on the blankets, and a spasm of grief shook his features. He bent and took the jester's lean hand in his. "Chicot, man; Chicot, my dear friend, do not leave me!" he cried. Seeing Torinaz praying, he asked quickly: "Is he dead then?"

"No, sire," Torinaz answered gently; "but I fear that he is going."

"*Ventre Saint Gris*, this is a bitter pill!" groaned the king. "If he dies, I lose the life of a true and noble friend, and a better man than I."

Though the jester's mind was straying in the mists on death's dark borderland, his master's voice had power to reach him, and he responded. His limbs moved feebly, and he opened his eyes.

"Thanks, gossip!" he gasped, smiling wanly. "Thanks—Chicot never expected to hear you admit so much."

"He jests!" exclaimed Henri, between laughter and tears. "Surely if he can jest thus, he cannot be dying."

"*Sic itur ad astra*," quoted Chicot, his rich voice gaining strength. "Yes, dear sire, death stares the poor fool in the face—but the fool is not afraid of him."

He stirred on his pillow and fixed his eyes, as though

he would meet proudly the chill regard which he felt was fixed upon him.

"*Deo volente*, I shall not wholly die—*non omnis moriar*, as the Latin has it. For, as saith Herakleitos, I have been ere now a boy and a girl, a bush and a bird, and a glittering fish in the sea; and I shall live again—I know it. So death, I fear you not at all.

"Hold fast my hand, dear sire, until the end comes and the darkness turns to light—for your Chicot has loved you, sire."

He lay for a time silent, looking into the king's face; and the king could not bear his wistful gaze, but bowed his head and wept unrestrainedly.

"Be not vexed that I am going, sire; for I tell you in the words of Marcus Aurelius that it is according to nature, and nothing is evil which is according to nature—and to be vexed at anything which happens is a separation of ourselves from nature. Of human life the time is a point, and the substance is a flux—and life is a warfare and a stranger's sojourn, and after-fame is oblivion."

Again his mind wandered, and he walked with his beloved ancients; so that we who heard his voice knew not if it were Chicot who was dying or the souls of those long dead who spoke to us. Before the end he came back to us. His grip tightened on the king's hand.

"Will you grant Chicot a boon—if it please you, sire?" he asked.

"Anything, Chicot, anything!"

"Say then that you will not on my score punish M. the Count de Lorraine. He was over hasty, that is all. You would only make yourself powerful enemies should you punish him for the death of the poor fool—and the fool forgives him freely. You will promise?"

"I promise—even that," Henri answered brokenly.

"Listen to me, dear sire. Mortal light is fading; but

my eyes are turned elsewhere, and I speak to you as one to whom it is given to see the bottoms of the cards. You shall be King of France, sire—the greatest king of them all—and so long as there shall be kings of France, they shall be of your seed.

“You have been hammered long upon the anvil of adversity, and a great soul has been forged within you. See that its temper be not drawn in the softer days of your triumph. Be merciful then to your enemies, sire—stir not fire with a sword—so shall your name endure in greatness while men keep records.”

He shuddered through all his long form, and struggled to sit upright. The king aided him and held him.

“It is the end!” he cried in a strong voice. “*Vale*, sire!”

Suddenly his face became stern. He extended his hand, accusing those whom we could not see.

“Will ye not cease from this accursed slaughter!” he cried. “See ye not that ye are feasting upon one another in the thoughtlessness of your hearts?”

His rigid arm fell. His head leaned heavily upon King Henri’s shoulder. The soul of the splendid fool had departed.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE STARS ARE CLOUDED

IN the spring after the siege of Rouen my troop was detailed as garrison for the town of Argueil, while the king's army was battering the Duke of Parma and his Spaniards between the Seine and the sea at Yvetot. We had our headquarters in the village hall of Argueil, where I had turned two of the tribunal rooms into barracks for my men.

On the afternoon of the 19th of May, as I rode in from a gallop with Moise across the fresh countryside to the east of the town, Jacquou Coudriet came running to meet us.

"There is a lady waiting to see you, captain," he informed me, grinning. "She came in haste with two servants an hour ago. She is now at the Black Fish Inn. She said you must come at once to see her. She is a very grand lady, captain, and gave me two pieces of gold, and—" Such liberality would have made her a duchess to Jacquou.

What more the lad may have said I did not hear, for the reason that I was on my way to the Black Fish Inn as fast as Fanchon could carry me.

In all of France I knew of only one lady who might come seeking me. Thought that it might be she set my heart to galloping faster than Fanchon's hoofs.

In the tap room of the inn a pair of weary looking serving men, splashed from heads to heels with mud, were

drowning over their wine cups. They started up as I entered.

"Are you M. the Captain Duhamel?" one of them asked; and on my answer he led me to an inner room.

A small figure closely wrapped in a hooded gray cloak sprang from a chair near the window and came forward.

"M. the Captain Duhamel," announced the servant, and backed out, bowing.

I hastened across the room.

"*Mademoiselle!* Serene!" I cried, extending my arms, and near to tears in my gladness.

But the little figure raised a detaining hand and burst into shrill laughter, which stopped me short, with my arms dangling foolishly. I saw that the hand was thin and withered.

"*He, he, he!* No, no, captain! Gallant captain! I swear that you will be horribly disappointed if you kiss me!" exclaimed a mocking elfin voice from the shadow of the hood. "I am somewhat past the season for young men's kisses, unless they be very charitable young men indeed. But I find your constancy commends you strongly, *monsieur*. So you still think of her sometimes—this little Serene, eh? *Mon Dieu!* I had not thought to find a cavalier so faithful. They are mostly a sad lot nowadays. But why don't you say something?"—as if she had given me any opportunity. "Has disappointment cleft your tongue?"

"But—but—you are not Serene," I stammered.

"That is quite evident," she remarked dryly.

"But you come from her?"

"Remarkable man!"

"With a message?"

"Admirable! I do, *monsieur*. Now tell me who I am, and I will cry your perspicacity from the housetops."

She threw back her hood, disclosing silvery white hair

and a small, bloodless, wrinkled face, in which danced and twinkled the blackest, liveliest eyes that mortal ever looked out from or into. They were quick and malicious as a sparrow's; and like a sparrow she set her head on one side and peered at me.

At once I saw that face, I began to rack my brain to recall where I had seen it before; for seen it I had, somewhere.

"Yes, *monsieur*; you have seen me before," she said, laughing. "Think; 'twas in a very large room, where you and I were left scandalously alone for a time; and you looked very much lost and frightened. Think; I was knitting."

"It was in the Hotel d'Epernon, in Paris!" I exclaimed.

"Yes; I see that you have not such a bad memory after all, *monsieur*—when it is helped. But come, come! A truce to this foolish baiting."

Her face and voice sobered.

"I come to you from a foolish girl, who still has faith in men—faith, but little hope. Although it is true that you did run away from her once, *monsieur*, she thinks that you had reason, and she still has faith. Tell me, what would you do for this little Serene, big captain, if it were necessary? No; do not tell me that you would die for her. That would be nothing original; nor would the accomplished act do the maid any good. But tell me if you would risk danger, the wrath of your king, disgrace—I will not say dishonor—would you risk any and all of these for her? Consider well, my brave captain. I am not speaking lightly."

She paused and looked at me, tapping the while with one foot upon the floor. I saw then that her whole body was trembling with fatigue. I remembered the worn appearance of the men who had come with her, and contrition seized upon me; for she was very old.

"Pray be seated, *madame*," said I. "You have traveled far to——"

"Thanks; I will," she interrupted, and sank sighing into a chair. "But your answer, captain?"

"If the time has come of which Serene and I once spoke—if a danger threatens her—then will I gladly risk any or all of the things which you have mentioned, *madame*," I responded. "Even to the king's anger—for I love her."

"Pardieu! I believe that you do!" piped up the astonishing old lady. "By St. Mary! I begin to see that Serene is not so foolish as I thought her, and has not sent my old bones on an altogether crazy errand."

"Listen, Hilaire—you shall shortly know why I address you thus familiarly—the time *has* come. Serene bade me tell you that the stars are covered thick with clouds, and the night is dark."

When I heard that I knew that this messenger was indeed from my love; and that the message was this time no trick of D'Epernon. I knew, too, that in front of me was looming a darker trouble than any which I had yet encountered.

"What is the peril?" I asked.

"M. the Duke d'Epernon——"

"My uncle."

"*Eh?* So he told you that, did he? Well, your Uncle Jean, then, who quite belongs to M. the Devil, has been coquetting again with the favor of this King Henri of yours. Thrice of late the king has visited him; and Jean, to gain his desires, has skillfully dangled Serene before him as a bait. The bait has been taken. *Mon Dieu!* This Béarnais, for all his kingly ways, is a fool where a pretty woman is concerned! 'Twill yet ruin him, now mark me. What bargain Jean drove, I know

not; but two days ago he made ready to pay by sending Serene to the king."

I groaned.

"Yes; and curse him, too, if you have a mind, Hilaire. I will say amen."

"But Serene?"

"Told him to go to the devil, to be sure—which was quite superfluous, he having been there this long while—and only got her behind a locked door until the escort should be ready to ride with her. And then——"

She paused, and gazed into her lap, where her fragile hands were fretting with her kerchief.

"And then, *madame*?" I asked, who had listened breathless to this unfolding of a worse imbroglio than I had conceived; for that the king had seen and coveted Serene, increased our perils by an hundredfold. Well I knew how deep and disastrous was this one flaw in the otherwise noble character of Henri of Navarre. And Serene, as D'Epernon had reminded me, was the most beautiful woman in all France.

"Eh, well; and then an old woman who has been too long under the thumb of M. the Duke resolved that she would try to do one good act to commend her to the saints. But, truly, Hilaire, I know not if my meddling has bettered matters by a whit; certainly it cannot have made them worse. Tut! I am keeping you on tenter-hooks. That night I set her free."

"God bless you for that, *madame*!"

"I hope He will. She dared not try to reach you, fearing capture; so she fled and took refuge with Osmont d'Orsang, Viscount de Belleforêt, an honest man, who long ago sought her in marriage. He is twice her age, and ugly as sin itself, Hilaire; but, once wedded to him, her honor at least will be safe."

"She will wed him!" I cried in dismay. The thought was like a sword through my heart.

"Not if there is a help for it, my boy. That is why I, who am nearing my sixtieth year, have ridden twenty leagues since yesterday noon to find you. I delayed only long enough to learn what Jean would do. He is furious.

"Unfortunately, in her anger, Serene had threatened to appeal to M. d'Orsang; so Jean guessed at once whither she had gone. Yesterday morning he demanded her from the viscount; but M. d'Orsang defied him. As the viscount has powerful friends in the League, Jean dared not himself proceed against him. He has sent a message to the king, advising him to come at once, or to send men to take Serene. There is little time to be lost, Hilaire. Jean's riders may have passed me upon the road; but I think not. I killed one horse. There, I have told you the whole of it. Now what can you do?"

"What, indeed? To leave my post would be desertion. To oppose the king might mean my death. One ray of comfort there was in the coil: Whatever I might do would make the lot of my dear lady no worse than it already was. I considered rapidly.

"Where is this Viscount de Belleforêt to be found?" I asked.

"At Rambouillet."

"I will go then to Rambouillet."

"You will need armed men. M. d'Orsang is a stubborn dolt; and though he is, as I said, an honest man, I doubt that he will yield freely what he will consider is fairly his."

"There are some few who I believe will aid me. He shall yield her."

"You will have the king to reckon with. Beware! I tell you he is infatuated with the little maid!" Under their white brows the bright eyes watched me keenly.

I might have retorted that already I had foregone much for Henri of Navarre; but that was a buried thing.

"So be it; I have made up my mind, *madame*. I will start at once," I replied.

The old lady sat up straight in her chair, and struck her hands sharply together.

"*Pardieu!* I know a man when I see one!" she said with spirit. "You have much of Regnault Duhamel in you. Had such a one come seeking me forty years ago, should not now be what I am."

I stooped and kissed her hand.

"But who are you, *madame*? Surely you are our guardian angel."

"Nay, Hilaire, not *madame*; and by no means an angel"—she laughed rather shakily—"but merely a silly old maid, who would undo some of her brother's evil deeds, and see two young people gain a happiness which has been denied her."

"Your brother! What mean you, *mademoiselle*?"

"Why, that I am your aunt, my boy. I am Dorothée de Nogaret, your mother's sister—and now you may kiss me, Hilaire."

When I had done so, she pushed me from her.

"You must hasten. Remember that other messengers are riding. There will be time enough to think of your old aunt when you have saved your dear love. God forgive me if I am sending you to your death, lad—but I love her as I never thought to love a living creature. So."

"But you, dear Aunt Dorothée——"

"God bless the boy! But it has a good sound; it has good sound, Hilaire." A tear fell from one of the right eyes. "Fret not about me. I will stay here and rest me a bit. I have been so jounced and tumbled on

that accursed saddle that every separate bone in my old body is cursing and complaining.

"But it has been worth it, if only to see my sister Jacqueline's eldest son and hear him say 'dear Aunt Dorothée.' Before you go, send me hither your brother Moise, with the hair of gold and the soft voice, of whom Serene has told me. Mayhap he will say it, too, and I shall be doubly repaid."

"Farewell, then, dear Aunt Dorothée."

I left her and rode back to the village hall, to learn if there were faith in friendship.

CHAPTER XXXIV

I BECOME A REBEL

WITH my authority as captain, I had but to order my troop to follow me. My men would obey me without question, go whither I listed. Such was my intention as I left the Inn of the Black Fish.

Conscience struck me then a staggering blow. With a sickening sense of helplessness came the thought that I had no right to lead ignorant men, who were sworn to serve their king, to risk their necks on a private enterprise of my own, which would most certainly rouse Henri's anger against me, and which might be construed as desertion and treason for all of us.

If ever cause were just, I felt that mine was; but I could not ask others to share it blindly. Though I tried to strangle conscience, and cursed myself for a weak, over scrupulous fool, I could not do that.

In the little room which Moise and I shared in the village hall I found my brother at work upon his reports. Above his desk hung a portrait of the stern old Chancellor Michel de l'Hôpital, who had died of a broken heart because the promises which he had made had been broken by his sovereign. The iron face seemed to frown down at me forbiddingly.

Briefly I told Moise of my dilemma. Though he did not say so, I saw that he viewed the matter as did I. He wrung my hand.

"Whatever you may decide, you know that I will go

with you," said he. I knew that he should *not*, should I have to tie him to prevent it. I would not have him in this trouble, too.

While every thought and nerve of me cried out for haste, I forced myself to deliberation. I sent Moise off to see Aunt Dorothee, and Jacquou to call in Mark and Tête Grise. These two I knew would second my hand in anything, and from Torinaz I hoped to get wisdom.

Each of them saw the matter by his own light, and answered after his fashion.

"By Saint George! the thing looks plain to me, matter," spoke Mark, tossing his red mane. "You are the captain. It is bugles, trot, gallop, a sword for this viscount if he will not harken to reason, and then away over the border to Italy or some other where. When the king's stomach has cooled, as it will, we can come back again. And if we cannot, why, many a prince would pay handsomely for the services of a troop of horse."

There spoke the rider of the roads, who had been lieutenant to Regnault Duhamel.

Torinaz was slower to speak. He shook his head.

"Captain," said he, after a time of thought, "you are about to break military law in obedience to that which is higher than military law. The act which will succor the maiden and at the same time save a great man from his sin surely has the sanction of God. Still, it is by military law that you and those who may abet you will be judged."

"My advice is that you take as few men as you can get with, leave your post well guarded and in charge of Lieutenant Duhamel, your brother, and trust the rest to the good God. I would suggest further that you lay the matter before the men whom you may wish to follow you, letting them decide for themselves, and that you appeal only to your own men from Champagne. If trouble

should come of it, they would be less open to blame than others, for having followed their natural leader."

"And afterward—after we have rescued *mademoiselle*?" asked.

"You wish my full mind, my captain?" I nodded.

"Then I would say to wed the damsel, convey or send her to a place of safety, and return with all speed to your post. So will you have satisfied duty and honor so far as is humanly possible."

"Name of a name! you are counseling him to thrust his head into the lion's mouth," Mark objected. "The lion will snap it off first, and then think to be sorry afterward."

"The king may be sorely vexed, doubtless will be," replied Torinaz steadily; "but he is great hearted. I have set the matter out as I see it. We have served King Henri well. I think that he will remember that and forgive."

I had found the wisdom which I sought. When I looked up, it seemed to me that the rugged countenance of Hôpital no longer frowned at me from its frame.

In an upper room a few minutes later Mark marshaled the men from Champagne, and they drew up in two lines before me.

Mon Dieu! what fine fellows they were! Picked men indeed, straight and lean limbed, with bronzed, alert faces. And it seemed but a short time ago that I had seen them file in from Champagne, raw, awkward lads with pink and white cheeks. Ah me, but it had been three years since then; and of the forty, fourteen were lying under the sod on King Henri's battlefields, and four others had returned to their homes, broken and crippled wrecks of war.

Many of them I had disciplined, when discipline had been necessary; but there was not one of them of whom

I could not recall some good or brave deed. I had striven to be fair in all my dealings with them. Would they remember that now? How wholly dependent upon their good will was the entire fabric of my future happiness! And how near to them my trouble had brought me!

In the realizations of that moment I lost forever any inclination to play the grand gentleman. Most of these lads were sons of my tenants, and by the traditions of French gentlemen, they were mine to do with as I willed. Folly! they were men like myself, and by them I must stand or fall.

Feeble enough were the words which rose to my lips as I faced those orderly lines:

"Comrades, I speak to you not as your captain, but as Hilaire Duhamel, hard hit by great trouble, and in sore need of aid. You know that M. the Duke d'Epernon brought about the death of my father. For the sake of the king, and for other reasons, I have foregone the vengeance which I would have taken. Now that same man threatens the honor of the lady whom I hope to make my wife. He would sell her to another man, basely, and as cattle are sold.

"She has sent a messenger to me with a call for aid. I ride to-day to try to save her. Until I have done so I renounce my allegiance to the king, and in this one thing become his enemy—for it is to the king that M. the Duke would sell my lady.

"Alone I can do little. Yet I cannot ask any soldier of the king to peril his head in my behalf. But if there be among ye any who think my cause deserving of his aid, I will accept it gratefully, and will do my utmost to take upon myself full responsibility before the king."

I stopped short. It was all that I could say.

"I ride with Captain Duhamel," said Torinaz, advancing beside me.

"And I," growled Mark, "as any fool might know," and he stood at my other elbow.

The men stood staring at us and uneasily kicking their heels. One Lazare Doury, son of a farmer on my lands, a careless, rather loose tongued fellow, usually, was the first to speak; and his face was earnest.

"My captain, we all know that the Sieur Duhamel, your father, was a just man, and you are like him. We left our homes to fight for France, and for the king, because we thought that he would do the right for France. We knew that some of us would not go home again; for that is war.

"Now in what you have told us you are right, and the king is wrong, and what is right cannot harm France. There is danger, too, you say. Eh, well, then it is the same. By God and His throne, I would as lief go jogging home and tell my old mother and my sister that I had in truth turned traitor to France as that I had failed the Sieur Duhamel and his lady in such a case!"

"And I! And I!" cried the others, their assent merging into acclamation. I saw their honest, eager faces through a sudden mist.

"Can't you see how it is, my captain?" sang out Jacquou Coudriet. "We would all be blithe to ride through hell with you, but know not how to tell you so."

"So it is bugles, trot, gallop, after all!" blared Mark.

"Come, my braves; let us be getting the saddles on!"

While we were making ready, Moise returned from the inn. It cost me no little argument to make the lad see that he would best serve me by remaining with the troop; but I convinced him.

"Aunt Dorothee would say another word to you before you go, Hilaire," he told me. "My faith! what a wonder-

ful old lady she is—all love and fire,” he sighed; and I knew that she had been petting him and talking about our mother.

Our way lay by the inn, and I stopped there. Aunt Dorothée was at a window, and mentioned to me not to dismount. She had been counting my men like a general.

“You may need more aid, Hilaire,” she said, as I rode near. “I have thought of something. ’Tis a good thought, too, if only because it will plague Jean.” She chuckled maliciously.

“On your way to Rambouillet, go to Epemon, which will be little out of your way. Say boldly to Jean that you have been sent by the king to take Serene, and demand aid in the king’s name against De Belleforêt. The fact that you know of her plight will be your warranty. He will never suspect that I, whom he deems a fool, have dared to hunt you. He thinks that I am with her.

“Nor will he credit you with daring to run counter to the king. He will be compelled to aid you, which will vex him; and when he finds that he has been tricked, he will rave until his tongue grows weary, and I shall laugh at him.

“Now farewell, and may God bless and speed you, dear boy!”

She leaned from the window to pat my shoulder, and once more I kissed her hand.

Brave old Aunt Dorothée! I never saw her again, for she died soon afterward. I hope that she is happier among her saints than ever she was down here.

CHAPTER XXXV

AN OLD SCORE PAID

DUSK was falling when we clattered out of Argueil and down the southern road past the wondering pickets of the garrison which we were deserting. Shortly after midafternoon of the next day we were trotting along the east bank of the River Eure. Below us on the other side of the stream we could see the spires of Rambouillet thrusting up through the green of its surrounding forest.

We had come twenty leagues. We might have traveled faster; but by any reckoning I knew that we must be hours and miles ahead of the king's riders; and I had wished to save the horses against our later need. Early in the morning we had halted, and again at noon, and rested both beasts and men.

Audacious as it was, I was minded to abide by the plan of Aunt Dorothée. If I knew aught of my uncle—and I flattered myself that I did—it would give him such spiteful pleasure to find me come on such an errand, that he would do nothing to interfere with me, but chuckle to see me so punished.

So we asked the way of a peasant, and passing below the bridge of Rambouillet, turned southeast toward Epernon.

Ten miles ride from the river brought us to the great estate which the minion king had given to his favorite.

There, in the midst of wide fields where peasants were toiling, was the *château* of M. the Duke, an immense pile

of gray stone with four round towers, the whole doubly girdled by wall and moat, and with a thick and stately wood behind it.

It was evident that the duke knew how to keep and care for what was his. One looking at his prosperous acres and the solid walls of his castle-like *château*, found little difficulty in believing the reports that he was one of the richest men in France.

Soldiers about the gate stared truculently at my little troop; but the gate captain came running out with the air of one who expected us. He nodded when I told him that I had come from the king.

"M. the Duke will see you at once," he said.

From the gate to the *château* I was convoyed by the same massive lackey whom I had twice encountered in Paris. He remembered me not; but I did him, though the monstrous calves which once I had been tempted to puncture with a pin were encased in green instead of yellow. Being springtime, I suppose that they had not blossomed.

Within its walls the place was even more impressive than it had been from the outside. The court was a stone paved field; and around its borders were enough barracks to accommodate a small army.

The lackey led me through the hall and into a large eight sided room, the walls of which were hung above with blue velvet and cloth of gold, and below were wainscoted with panels of gilded leather, and into which the sunlight shone through the colored panes of many millioned windows.

My uncle sat by a table in converse with a white robed Dominican father. I smiled grimly to see how he came up out of his chair when his flunky bawled:

"M. the Captain Duhamel, your grace."

As his eyes fell upon me, he made a gesture toward

bell cord, but instantly mastered himself, and relaxed into his seat.

"Captain," he repeated. "By God, in return for all the money which your father stole, the king should have done better for you. I should have made you a baron at least."

This was no more than I had expected; but it sent the blood to my face.

"M. the Duke," I said with what dignity I could command, "I am just from Normandie. I come to you from the king."

D'Epernon jerked out of his chair again, with a warning look in his eyes. He bowed to the Dominican.

"Good Father Valerien, I will continue the discussion with you later. At present I pray that you will excuse me. I must find out what presumption leads Henri of Navarre to send a messenger to me."

"But certainly, my son," returned the monk, rising, albeit reluctantly, I thought. He included us both in an inclination of his head, and swept off down the room, vanishing like a tall, pale ghost into the dusk of an apartment beyond. The instant his back was turned, the duke laid a finger across his lips. Nor was he satisfied to speak to me until he had made the round of all his doors, to make sure that there were no listeners.

"Fool!" he snarled. "To speak before him of the king!"

I felt my calm returning. I had made him one return for his thrust about my father; and I was beginning to vex him.

He paused in front of me, tugging nervously with both hands at the gold chain which hung across his breast.

I had not expected to hear from the king so soon," he went on. "My courier must have ridden well. Did he return with you? What are your instructions?"

"I did not see your courier, M. the Duke. I heard that he had been pitched from his horse and had broken an arm," I lied readily. "My instructions were brought me by a rider from Yvetot, where the king gives battle to the Spaniards. They were to take what men might be spared from the garrison at Argueil and to ride hither in haste to act as escort to a certain lady. I was further instructed to call upon you for aid to recover the lady from where she is."

"Plague! Does he expect me to do that, too?" M. the Duke was very vexed indeed.

"Yes," said I; "I have only twenty-five men."

"Eh, well"—he shrugged his shoulders—"I will find you the men if I must; but 'tis dangerous business. Know you who the lady is?"

He leered up at me wickedly.

"Yes; she is Mlle. Serene de Lorme, your grace's cousin," I said, as indifferently as I could manage. My apparent unease pleased him vastly. He sat down again.

"What devilish tricks fate plays with you, to be sure, nephew," he resumed, putting the tips of his fingers together. "Your respected father, the horse trader, turns out to be a robber; there is another matter, of which I will not speak even to you; and now you are sent by the king to fetch to him the little turtle dove, for whom, if I mistake not, your own heart has been hankering these three years. Poor boy!"

"You have omitted the greatest of all my misfortunes," I replied, maintaining my coolness, when I could cheerfully have strangled him.

"And that is?"

"That M. the Duke d'Epernon is my uncle. I can conceive of no disgrace more humiliating than that."

He sprang up, quivering. But he, too, restrained himself.

"Tut, we must not be flying at each other's throats! First of all comes the king's affair. As for the rest of it, it seems that I have all the best of you, nephew."

"You will give me men?" I asked. "Time presses."

"Yes; you shall have a score or so of my varlets. But there is not so much haste. I expect an agent from Rambouillet at any moment, to report on the course of events there. Another thing: the deed must be done by daylight, so that M. the Viscount can see for himself that I have no part in it. It was not in my understanding with the king that I should embroil myself with the League—not yet. You shall go to Rambouillet to-morrow. Bring in your men and house them here for the night, nephew; and if there cannot be peace between us, let there at least be truce."

I would have laid down considerable gold sooner than pass a night under my uncle's roof; but I saw no way out of it. I went out and fetched in my men. Torinaz, by his own suggestion, rode on to Rambouillet, to lie there for the night, and keep his eyes and ears open.

While we were stabling the horses, D'Epernon's flunky came seeking me. I found with his master none other than that burly assassin Nicolas, who greeted my appearance with an air of mingled uneasiness and bravado.

"Nicolas is an excellent spy," commended his master. "He says that M. d'Orsang is to be wedded to-morrow afternoon, and will at once set out with his bride for Paris. So, as the king doubtless will prefer a maid to a wife or a widow, you had best go in the morning and take her."

"Thunders of heaven! I regret that I shall not be there. It were worth while to watch both of you—and *mademoiselle*, too, when she learns what business her former cavalier is about."

The vile old pander combed his beard with his fingers,

and laughed heartily at the picture which his spite conjured up. "That is all, Nicolas."

"And I need not return to Rambouillet to-night, master?" asked Nicolas; and he appeared monstrously well satisfied when he was told that he need not.

M. the Duke would have had me to sup with him, doubtless foreseeing more entertainment to be had from baiting me; but I disappointed him and ate with my men in the kitchen hall of the *château*.

While we were eating, I saw to my intense surprise that Mark was fraternizing with D'Epéron's men as though he were one of them. I actually saw him clinking cups boisterously with Nicolas!

After I had disposed of my men for the night in the duke's barracks, where I stayed with them, I felt no call of sleep, but fell a prey to the doubts and apprehensions, which, on the eve of a desperate venture, are prone to seize upon one who has too keen an imagination. To add to my fretfulness, Mark had disappeared, and none of his fellows knew whither. I knew the capability of my big henchman to cope for himself against either bottle or battle; nevertheless, his absence worried me. It was after midnight before I slept. When I awoke in the early morning, there lay Mark among the others, slumbering like a wintered bear.

I began to question him as to his doings of the night; but he made me a mysterious sign to desist. Later I heard him bawling loudly that some knave had stolen his bridle; and he ended by purchasing one from D'Epéron's farrier.

M. the Duke gave me thirty men, instructing them to obey my orders as they would his own, and on no account to return to Epéron within a week. He had intended to send Nicolas along; but that worthy was no

where to be found; though his master cursed, and the fat lackey shouted himself hoarse and purple.

While that was going on I chanced to meet Mark's eye, and he winked at me portentously. As we trotted off along the Rambouillet road, he brought his black horse alongside of Fanchon.

"Well, master," he said in a low voice, "one score is settled. Nicolas—may his bed be warm!—will do no more murders."

"What!" I exclaimed. I had been prepared for a revelation of some sort; but this information startled me.

Mark twisted himself in his saddle and pointed back the way we had come.

"See the tall pine yonder, master—the one which tops all the rest in the wood back of the *château*? Well, Nicolas is dangling from one of its branches, waiting for the crows to come and pick him."

I thought that Mark had taken leave of his senses, and so told him.

"Not the least in the world, master," he answered, wagging his head and grinning. "Nicolas was main glad that he was not sent back to Rambouillet last night, for cause that he had a tryst with a lass of the neighborhood. I overheard his mates japping him about her. Then I was glad, too.

"Having helped coax considerable wine into his skin, I set a watch on Master Nicolas. There is a postern door in the rear wall, to which he had a key, and there is a boat in the moat. I passed through the postern behind him, and with a tap on his sconce from my pistol I persuaded him to allow me to ferry him across.

"When he had his wits again, I conversed with him concerning the evils of his past life. He was a hard rogue, and unrepentant, master; so I hanged him neatly to the big pine, for which purpose I had taken with me

the bridle off Harry here. He is done for. Returning that way two hours later, I felt of him, and he was as fine and cold a corpse as one could wish to see."

"Returning, say you!" I gasped, astounded by this grim midnight tale. "Where had you been?"

"Why, to keep his tryst with the maid, master. Having deprived her of her lover's society by hanging him, I felt bound to supply her lack. Besides, I feared that she might come hunting him. I told her that he had been sent on a long journey, and that he had begged me as a friend to make his excuses and console her.

"She proved a reasonable maid. Not finding what she had looked for, she was e'en content with what fortune sent her. He had a keen eye for maids, had Nicolas. I know; for there was good moonlight."

Mark chuckled at sight of my blank face.

"If trouble ever comes of it, remember that we had the king's permission to hunt Nicolas," he reminded me. "Would that I could have swung his evil little master up beside him!"

Although the taking off of Nicolas was a pleasure which I had long before promised myself, I was not altogether displeased to learn that Mark had deprived me of it.

As we came to the approach of the Rambouillet bridge under which the Eure was foaming in springtide freshness we heard on its floor the hollow thunder of hoofs in desperate haste.

It was Tête Grise who came riding thus furiously, his gray hair whipping about his ears.

"Ride! Ride!" he shouted, wheeling his rearing horse beside me at the bridgehead. "The priests are on their way to the viscount's *hôtel*!"

With a leaping heart I raised myself in the stirrups and gave the order to gallop.

CHAPTER XXXVI

A STUBBORN BRIDEGROOM

A FIERY current of madness, swift and stormy as the flooded river, flowed through my veins as we pounded across the bridge and down the tree lined road to Rambouillet. On its crest my black doubts of the night and my cowardly hesitation were forever swept away.

Imminence of danger and action had roused me and set my spirit free, and it shouted within me. I echoed its call with my voice. My men stared at me. Then they, too, took fire, and rode shouting with me. Swords leaped from their scabbards, and above our heads the sunlight flashed and shimmered on a wave of scintillant steel.

In the wake of that heady frenzy my mind became clear with a cool recklessness, and my purpose steadfast.

No longer was I the king's captain and bound by his laws. I was his cousin, proud of the blood which I had from my father, and I would make my own law.

Ahead of me, my dear lady was waiting; and I swore by God and His bright angels that I would not fail her. She still believed in me. She had called me, and I was coming. Disgrace and death might lay their chill fingers upon me afterward, and let them; but dishonor should never touch her! Henri of Navarre should be cheated of his toy. D'Epernon should have nothing to smile and nib his hands over.

Rambouillet's villagers and their dogs and pigs and chickens scurried helter-skelter from our path as we dashed headlong through their narrow streets.

D'Orsang's *hôtel*, a fair villa of red stone, lay at the

western outskirts of the town. It was our good fortune that his grounds were not walled. His wide lawns were separated from the street by a fence of iron palings only. A crowd which was gathered before the gates gave way to us in loud alarm.

We whirled in through the lane they made for us, and along a curving driveway flanked by beds of flowers and vaulted by noble trees. Standing in my stirrups, I caught a glimpse over the shrubbery of the front doorway of the *hôtel*, and of the flutter of priestly garments entering in, and I knew that I had come in time.

As we rounded the last curve of the drive, a sharp military command rang from the front of the building. M. d'Orsang had anticipated that his nuptials might not be peaceful. Besides setting forward the hour of the ceremony, he had further prepared himself against disturbance.

A score of mounted musketeers were ranged before his porch. Behind them a clump of household servants armed with miscellaneous weapons held the steps, and the lower windows of the mansion bristled with firearms.

Near the corner of the building next the drive a groom was holding the bridles of a sorrel war-horse and a lady's palfrey with a cushioned saddle.

So furiously had we ridden in that when I reined Fauchon on her haunches in the gravel, there was scarcely a lance's length between me and the leveled muskets of the men-at-arms.

Warned by the cries which had greeted our arrival, a group of gayly clad gentlemen issued from the hall, and completed the viscount's battle front with a half circle of drawn rapiers before his door.

At each side of me my men filled up the open space in front of the *hôtel*, and formed in steady line of charge confronting the threatening muskets. The noise of tramp

ling hoofs ceased, and there came an interval of silence, broken only by the panting of winded horses and the ominous clicking of pistol locks.

Then from within the house came a merry peal of women's laughter. M. d'Orsang's fair guests knew not, or were careless, that death had paused at the door.

"We be ready when you are, master," muttered Mark at my right.

"Can we not parley, captain, and prevent bloodshed?" breathed Torinaz at my left.

I had seen the priests enter the *hôtel*, and I was minded that my parley should be brief.

"I must see M. the Viscount on the instant," I said, addressing myself to the gentlemen who guarded the doorway.

"*Monsieur* shall have that pleasure," replied a harsh, roaking voice from the hall. "I am coming."

A broad shouldered man in complete armor pushed through the swordsmen and advanced to the head of the steps.

"I am M. d'Orsang, *monsieur*," he said, bowing, and to the leader of his men-at-arms:

"Thiebaud, train a brace of your surest muskets on this young man. At the first sign of disturbance, shoot *him*. M. the Duke d'Epernon has insolently dared to send an invasion. Very well; it shall return to him peacefully, or leaderless."

With admirable coolness in the face of a superior force, Thiebaud ordered two of his musketeers to give me their undivided attention, which they did at once, aiming at me between their horses' ears.

Despite the grim surveillance of those two dark musketeers, I sat easier in my saddle. It was patent that while M. the Viscount was on his front porch talking to me, he could not be in his parlor marrying Serene. No suspicion

of a trick—that this might be other than he—entered my mind.

"Ugly as sin itself," Aunt Dorothée had described him. *Mon Dieu!* my dear aunt had libeled sin by the comparison! There could not have been an uglier man in France.

Nature had been unkind to him in the beginning. Accident and the hand of man had completed the desolation. Large as was his face, beauty had been crowded of it altogether. It was a collection of enormities, of which green eyes, badly mated; a mouth like a thief's pocket; and a horrible scar were the most outrageous.

A sword cut had deprived him of his left eyebrow and passing downward had split his nose, divided his lips, and cleft his chin. The features thus severed had reunited unwillingly. The scene of their reluctant agreement, poorly curtailed by a tawny mustache and beard was hideous.

He was tall, and his body was of ungainly strength. His arms borrowed from a far larger man; and one of his legs had been broken and twisted so that it formed the half of a right angle at the knee. When he walked this deformity caused his shoulders to swing like those of a marching ape.

"Well, *monsieur*, with what commission did M. the Duke d'Epernon invest you?" he inquired, having satisfied himself that his musketeers would not miss me. "And why did not M. the Duke come himself?"

"But I do not come from D'Epernon, *monsieur*," replied. "I am Hilaire Duhamel, captain of cavalry in the army of King Henri of France. My commission is from him. It is to find Mlle. Serene de Lorme, and to escort her hence at once."

"Eh, what! From the king, say you?" The viscount started, and there was a noticeable movement among the gentlemen behind him. His discomposure was momentary.

"Henri of Navarre is not yet the king of France," he continued; "but if he always acts with the celerity which he has shown in this affair, I will not gainsay his chances.

"Nevertheless, it will be impossible for you to execute your commission, Captain Duhamel, for the very excellent reason that within half an hour Mlle. de Lorme will have ceased to exist, and will have become Madame d'Orsang, and so as such will accompany me to Paris. Now, if *mon-sieur* will excuse me, we will proceed with the ceremony. Afterward we will endeavor to find refreshment for *mon-sieur* and his men."

He bowed to me with perfect aplomb.

"Thiebaud, see to your muskets," he cautioned.

M. d'Orsang was about to swing upon his heel, and to order a charge in spite of his muskets, when the descent of swordsmen at the doorway was broken again.

"*Hilaire! Hilaire!*"

In bridal white, with flowers in her shining hair, my lady came running to the top of the steps, a small, palpitating, dancing figure, weeping and laughing at once, and holding out her arms toward me.

M. d'Orsang stared.

"*Hilaire!* You have come for me! Praise be to God! Praise be to God!"

At that cry my heart vibrated like a smitten drum.

She saw then the menace of the guns, and she went down on her knees, clutching at the wondering viscount's hand.

"Ah, for the love of the good God in heaven, M. d'Orsang, do not bid them shoot him!" she implored. "Let me go, M. d'Orsang! Let me go with him! We will bless you all the days of our life!"

M. the Viscount raised her; and I saw that the uncouth thing could be both gentle and courteous.

"Captain Duhamel shall come to no harm through me,

my dear lady—so long as he is reasonable," he said. "But do I understand that you ask to go with him? He comes from Henri of Navarre."

Serene cowered at mention of that name. She looked down at me; and I think that she read my eyes.

"But I will go with Hilaire anywhere," she answered with proud trustfulness. "Forgive me, M. d'Orsang, for the unmaidenly trick I have played you! Tell me that you forgive me, and let me go!"

"Trick!"

D'Orsang looked from her to me, bewildered. His fearful face had turned white, and he swayed as if a club had smitten him.

"Mother of God! here is something which I understand not at all," he muttered. He drew a hand across his brow. Aware of the curious glances of his guests and soldiers, he straightened upright.

"Will *monsieur* do me the honor to come within?" he asked, beckoning to me.

"Be not mad, master!" hissed Mark in my ear.

But Aunt Dorothée had named this viscount an honest man, and my own observation seconded her belief. I slipped from Fanchon's saddle and passed through the line of men-at-arms. On the steps I felt a touch against my elbow. Mark had come with me.

A parlor on the lower floor which looked out upon the side lawn had been decked for the wedding. Three priests stood by an altar under a bower of sweet smelling spring blossoms. Midway down the room was gathered a group of brightly gowned women, their faces pale and anxious. They started toward us; but the viscount waved them back, and led us to one of the windows. Mark turned by the hall door.

"Explain, I pray you," said M. d'Orsang, "how it is that *mademoiselle*, having claimed the protection of a

name to escape Henri of Navarre, now wishes to leave me and go to him. I do not understand."

There was a look in the man's green eyes which made me pity him, and the pallor had left his face. It promised to be awkward, this explaining. I took the resolve to be honest with him.

"I am a captain in the king's army, as I told you, *monsieur*," said I; "but I was not sent here by the king. This is my dear lady, and I have come to save her from the king."

"So it is not Henri of Navarre, but Henri of Navarre's young captain, to whom you wish to go, *mademoiselle*?" D'Orsang asked. "And why did you not go to him before?"

In a misery of remorse at the pain she caused him, Serene told him our little tale of love, and how, when her hopes had been dashed by D'Epernon's shameful bargain with the king, she had been driven to desperate remedies.

"And I hope that you can forgive me, M. d'Orsang," he ended; "for, oh, I know that I have treated you very ill."

"I believe that you have, *mademoiselle*," he assented, looking at her with some sternness. "So, if your gallant had failed you, then, sooner than yield to Henri, you would have done me the honor to become my wife?"

"Yes, *monsieur*," Serene answered weakly; "but—but, Hilaire has come."

D'Orsang plucked at his mustache and stared gloomily from the window at the soldiers outside.

"*Mademoiselle* would have done best by telling me the whole truth when she came to me," he said. "'Twould have been painful, but—not like this."

Serene bowed her head; nor did I know what to say to him. The man was right, and he was honest, and I was sorry for him.

"But you will let us go now, *monsieur*?" she pleaded softly. "You see, we love each other."

"I see. What a sweet, fair thing this love can be! I've now had some small measure of experience with it. A sweet cup—with a dash of poison in it!"

He laughed, and it was a hard sound, and deep in his throat.

"Eh, well, I forgive you, *mademoiselle*, and doubtless I shall recover from it in time. But you, *monsieur*——"

He whirled on me and thrust his face close to mine.

"You, my young captain, I cannot forgive so easily. I cannot forgive you your tall, straight body, your comely face, and your pleasant voice. You shall have your *mademoiselle*—if you can take her from me."

"You mean?"

The viscount touched the hilt of his sword.

"No, no! You shall not!" Serene cried. "Why should you fight? I have earned your contempt, M. d'Orsange. Reproach me as you will; I deserve it; but do not fight with Hilaire! He is blameless!"

She reached to take his hands; but he shrank away from her, continuing to regard me.

"What says the captain?" he asked.

"That I have no wish to fight you, M. the Viscount—and besides, see little hope of mending matters by the shedding of our blood."

"Will this be necessary?" He raised his hand.

"Blood of God, *monsieur*!"

"Very well, then. There is a room across the hall. Come."

Serene ran after me to the door.

"Do not harm him, Hilaire!" she implored; "and oh, my dear, do not let him harm you!" *Mon Dieu*—the things a woman will ask of a man!

CHAPTER XXXVII

M. D'ORSANG'S GIFTS

IT was a small room to which we went to fight. "We shall require no witnesses," M. d'Orsang said, glancing at Mark, who had followed us and stood in the doorway.

Mark looked to me for orders. I nodded, and he closed the door and went away, whistling under his breath. A couple of moments later I heard his voice at the front door of the *hôtel*, bidding my men to sit tight, as the master had "a small matter to arrange."

M. the Viscount and I were alone in the little room. Bookshelves were on its walls, and a table by the windows was piled high with volumes. Near one end of the table stood a tall harp with a frame of dark wood, a stool, and a stand with music on it. Seeing these things, I wondered more at the strangely mingled character of this man whom I was to fight.

"Shall we lay aside this cumbersome frippery and fight it out like men, captain?" he asked, striking a hand upon his corselet.

"As you will, *monsieur*," I replied, and I began to unlace the fastenings of my helmet. He eyed me with somber approval. Presently he came and helped me to remove my corselet, and I helped him with his.

When we stood in our leather shirts and hose, M. d'Orsang turned his sleeve back from an arm which was like the root of an oak.

"There is good light here in front of the windows, captain," he advised.

It was excellent. We fell into position there, and our blades crossed.

I was not keen for this fight; but a look in the viscount's mismated eyes had put me upon my mettle. I was resolved that I would let him do me no mischief; nor would I harm him if I could avoid it.

Before we had made a half dozen passes, I knew that I was called upon to exercise no forbearance on his account, and before a score, that I had met a master swordsman; and if I would save my skin and see my lady again, I must go my best pace.

And it was better so. If I must—as sometimes it has happened—meet a man in the debate where steel is the argument and the eager point its eloquence, I love that we shall be fairly matched. Too great advantage in skill eliminates all chance, and, pressed to its conclusion, is little less than murder.

Mon Dieu! I had my liking in that ogre of a viscount! His ape-like arms gave him the reach of me; and in five minutes of fighting I learned that his misshapen frame was as strong as my own. He had, too, the temperament of the perfect bladesman—a composite of fire and ice.

No chance which offered seemed too desperate for him to take; and he guided his blade with an exquisite coolness of control which turned his lost strokes into defense in a manner to make me marvel.

In one respect only did I feel any superiority: His crooked leg prevented him from moving about lightly. When his wrist should begin to tire, I told myself, my greater activity would enable me to press him and attain the end I sought, which was to disarm him.

Occasionally, as we fought, I caught glimpses of a

wooden clock which hung upon the wall. Five minutes passed, and ten. The irregular clangor of the steel which had marked our opening, as we felt each his way to the other's strength, had given place to a steady, almost rhythmic, cadence. So closely were the blades engaged that there was scarcely an interruption of that vibrant diapason.

Twenty minutes; and the tune was still playing. The viscount's wrist was unwearied. Nor had my smartest rallies forced him to give back a step.

I was, and am, a good swordsman. I say it without boast; for the proof has been made.

I had been taught the art by Mark, who never met his peer, and three years in camp and field had seasoned me. But I was not iron.

As the twenty minutes lengthened toward the half hour, I began to feel the strain of that unremitting contest. My muscles were losing their spring. Perspiration ran from me in rivulets. My breathing had become a pain.

Opposite me, scarcely moving an inch from his stand, the viscount was fighting as coolly, to all appearances, as though he had just stepped from his bath.

Every trick at my command, and they were not few, I had tried and repeated in the effort to beat down his sword. Some of them had troubled him—I had seen that—but all of them had failed.

I gave up the attempt. There was only one recourse. Summoning my waning strength and failing breath, I concentrated all my skill in a fierce attack. If I must I would kill him—if it were not too late. Fool, to have delayed so long!

Along his blade M. d'Orsang felt my change of play, and understood its purpose. He laughed harshly.

"Now, you have begun to fight, captain," he said.

"The rest was mere fencing. I have been waiting for this."

"God knows that I do not wish to kill you," I gasped, sending in at the same time a thrust at his neck which ill accorded with my declaration. He parried it as he had parried all the others.

"I *do* wish to kill you, *monsieur*," he replied; "but I shall not——"

"So!"

Caught like a straw in a gale, my blade was whirled wide. An irresistible pressure wrested its hilt from my fingers, and it clanged upon the floor.

The viscount's point described an odd pattern in the air, so close to my face that I felt the wind of it, then sank and rested at his feet.

Breathless, I stared at him, and wondered at the tingling pain which coursed from wrist to shoulder of my sword arm.

"An accident, captain." M. d'Orsang's scarred features writhed into the unlovely semblance of a smile. "Pick it up."

"*Monsieur* is too generous," said I, swallowing my humiliation; for I knew that it had not been an accident. "If he does not intend to kill me, why continue the matter?"

"Take up your sword!"

There was a bitterness in the command which stung me, as no doubt he meant it should. Without further word, I recovered my blade and fell upon him furiously for the first time fighting with real temper. The tune of the swords became a wild, uneven discord.

This was not fencing. It was fighting.

By sheer reckless impetuosity I drove him back a little, but not far—and in doing so discovered his weakness. Balanced in one spot, and with his length of arm

and his undoubted skill, M. d'Orsang was the most reliable antagonist with whom I ever crossed blades. At the fencing, of which he had spoken with contempt, he was incomparable; mounted, he would have been well nigh invincible.

But pressed from his position by a man who had the hardihood to dare his point, and the skill to use his advantages, he was less to be feared.

In my own rash confidence, I had met him on his favorite ground, had fought him foot to foot—and got my lesson.

With temper thrilling me, my play was different. My weariness forgotten, I leaped and skipped, attacking now from one side and now the other, and forcing him to turn to meet me.

In one of our close rallies he tried again his master stroke—a combination which I have never fathomed—but he bungled it. My blade slipped out of its embrace. Before he could recover from the surprise which this confidence had led him into—for he thought that it was over—with a favorite trick of Mark's I engaged his hilt, and sent his sword ringing against a bookcase.

My point stood against his breast so that he felt the prick of it—almost it had gone home. He did not flinch; and, my senses returned to me, I backed away from him and fell panting upon a bench.

“By Saint Denys, I should not care to meet you on horseback!” I said.

“You have beaten me fairly,” he responded, speaking with some difficulty, and ignoring my remark. He had not looked for this outcome. He had meant to play with me again. I saw it in his disappointed eyes.

“Nevertheless, I made my gifts,” he went on; “for you stood before me once unarmed.”

“Gifts?” I echoed.

"Yes, *monsieur*—your good looks, which I might have marred, your life, which I might have taken. I wished to give them both to *mademoiselle*, and I have done so. Between you, you have taken from me all that I value most. Permit me to add these. You are free to leave my house in peace, captain, you and *mademoiselle*. But you will not forget me, M. Duhamel. You may never understand me; you may never like me; but by God's throne, you can never despise me!"

That was truth; though I thought him somewhat mad.

"Our armor," he said; "and then let us go out to *mademoiselle*. She will be uneasy. Some day you will tell her of my gifts, *monsieur*. She does not love me—it was not to be expected that she could. My dream was foolish. But I would have her think of me sometimes. Treat her gently and fairly always, M. Duhamel. If you do not, so sure as there is a world where men live and are unhappy, I will hunt you to its borders!"

We helped each other to arm, and M. d'Orsang limped ahead of me into the hall.

Guests and priests, who had heard the song of the swords, were gathered in a frightened knot about the parlor door. Serene stood clutching at its casing, her face as white as the silk of her bridal gown. At sight of the viscount she moaned, then saw me following, and ran to meet me, and in her joy bruised her tender arms on my steel shell.

Mark was leaning against the wall of the corridor, and trying to appear unconcerned. He gave me a strange look. Long afterward he told me that by listening near the door he had followed the course of events in the little room. "And I would give a hundred crowns to know the stroke which disarmed you, master."

I would give a thousand.

M. d'Orsang sent a servant to tell Thiebaud that he might put his muskets down.

"There is a palfrey outside," he said to me. "It was to have carried Mme. d'Orsang"—his rough voice broke a little—"to Paris. Permit that I present it to *mademoiselle*. I——"

A tremendous din at the front of the *hôtel* interrupted him. Oaths and loud cries were mingled with the trampling of many hoofs on the graveled drive. Through the doorway and into the hall came first the viscount's gentlemen guests, and behind them a jostling rabble of servants and men-at-arms, M. d'Orsang's and my own.

Tête Grise was one of the first to reach me.

"The king has come," he said.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE STARS SHINE CLEAR

“*THE king!*”

A dozen voices near me echoed the words. I ran to one of the parlor windows.

Two companies of the royal horse, led by captains whom I knew well, had entered the viscount's grounds. One troop was deployed across the lawns in a semicircle which included the *hôtel* and its drive. The other had dismounted and was forming in good order for an advance toward the building. Detached troopers were catching the horses which my men had abandoned. At one side the thirty riders whom D'Epernon had loaned me sat their saddles in a disordered group, astonishment writ large upon their faces.

Beside the captain of the men who were preparing to march across the lawn was a small, wide shouldered man whom I had followed too often not to recognize him.

These things I saw in a glance, and my soul sank within me. I had failed. My high resolves had come to nothing. We were trapped.

Had we been in the saddle and upon the road, there might have been a chance to escape; for the king's horses were weary and ours were fresh. But fighting here could mean only defeat and death.

It was the stubbornness of the viscount that had done

; and in my heart I cursed him for it, not knowing how soon he was to make amends.

Serene—the king would take her! By God, he should not!

At my feet lay a musket, left there by one of M. d'Orsang's servants. In my madness I stooped and seized it.

"*Hilaire!* My god, not that!"

Serene had followed me to the window. She seized my wrist and clung to it with the strength of a man. In my unreasoning frenzy I tried to shake her grip. Two other hands closed upon the musket barrel and arrested the weapon from me.

"Not if you kill me, my captain!"

It was the voice of Torinaz. He pitched the musket out into a flower bed.

Over the sorcerer's shoulder I saw the confused medley of wedding guests and fighting men standing tense as statues, every eye upon me.

"See, captain," Torinaz continued, "though we have failed, we have still one hope."

"What—a miracle of God?" I laughed in his face.

"No; but one of His sacraments."

Torinaz waved his hand toward the priests. In my excitement I failed to take his meaning, and glared at him wildly. My lady took my hand.

"He means, Hilaire—oh, surely even the king would respect your wife!"

M. d'Orsang had come near us and had heard.

"She has reason!" he exclaimed, and in a lower voice meant for me. "This makes my gifts complete."

He turned to one of the priests.

"Marry them, father," he said. He bowed toward his priests. "I invited you to a wedding, my friends. You shall not be cheated of it."

"By Saint George!" roared Mark, comprehending the trend of events. "Tie the knot! I will keep them back out there!" And he hastened to the front door and stood there with his sword like a red-headed Saint Michael.

I looked down at Serene. For the first time that day there was color in her cheeks.

"Do you consent?" I asked her.

"Foolish Hilaire—why, pray, did I send for you?"

I am quite sure that I kissed her.

"You are welcome to all my poor trappings here," said M. d'Orsang, pointing to the bower and altar opposite the door. "I will engage that you shall not be disturbed." He limped rapidly into the hall.

Events had been crowding rather fast for my poor head; but I mustered wit enough to lead my lady to the altar, behind which the priest had betaken himself. I would gladly have stood behind it, too, to hide the trembling of my legs.

Hardly were we in place when a loud voice on the lawn summoned Mark, as the only visible garrison, to give up the doorway. Then we heard the rasping tones of the viscount:

"This is my door, my fine fellow, and I will protect it."

The priest began the marriage service.

From the doorway M. d'Orsang's harsh croaking sounded again:

"In five minutes you may come in. Before that time no man shall enter—not even you, M. the Béarnais."

"Thousand devils! But I say that I will enter now," answered the king. "Stand out of that doorway, M. d'Orsang!"

"Not for five minutes."

A clash of steel followed, and I knew that the king and the viscount were at it.

Not for any business less important than what I was about would I have missed that swordplay. As it was, my attention was divided. Twice I felt Serene tug at my hand impatiently; and I knew that I must have been making a mess of my responses.

But I got through with it somehow. With the "amen," one of M. d'Orsang's friends called the word to him, and he let fall his sword.

"You may come in now," he said.

I tucked my wife under my arm and passed to the rear of the altar, where I could have a wall behind me. Mark had come in, and he and my men ranged themselves with me. In a quick glance around I saw only determined faces and shining eyes. Brave fellows! Whatever fate should be mine, they were willing to share.

The viscount's friends and servants drew away toward the lower end of the parlor. The priest who had married us remained at the altar.

Steel shod feet clanked along the corridor. The room began to fill with the king's troopers. Two of them led in M. d'Orsang. He was bleeding from a slight gash in the cheek.

A quick step approached the doorway. At each side of it the soldiers stood at salute; and the arms of my men were lifted also. The king came in and paused in front of the altar.

The dust of many roads was thick upon his armor and in his beard, and his face was haggard from weariness; but his keen gray eyes were bright and restless, with a glint of anger in them.

Around the room they shifted, from the priest at the altar to the viscount's guests and soldiers, and then to the group of us against the wall, where I stood with an arm around Serene.

"*Ventre Saint Gris!*" he swore with a short laugh. "I

have traveled shorter distances to more cordial greetings. What has happened here?"

"A wedding," answered M. d'Orsang.

Henri's glance flashed to Serene, and I felt her tremble under his regard. He strode over toward the viscount.

"Unhand him," he commanded. The troopers obeyed.

"So you have married?"

"No, *monsieur*"—the viscount would not call him sire—"not I, but your young captain here," pointing to me. "He interrupted my nuptials. His own were more fortunate. You and I are two disappointed men."

"So-o? I thought that I had a quarrel with you D'Orsang. It seems that another has taken it upon himself."

"Am I a prisoner?" the viscount asked.

"No; I forgive you the sword practice. *Ventre Saint Gris!* It is something to have touched you."

"Thanks. I will be going."

"Whither?"

"To Paris."

"So shall I—some day." Henri laughed again.

"I shall help prepare a welcome for you," retorted the fearless D'Orsang. He moved toward the door, his friends following.

"I doubt not that 'twill be a warm one," the king flung after him.

In the doorway the viscount paused, and bowed to Serene.

"*Madame* is welcome to make my home her own so long as may please her," he said; "and *monsieur*, too, if the Béarnais is generous. I will leave orders."

"And me—am I welcome, too?" inquired the king ironically.

"Yes—when I am gone." The viscount bowed again and disappeared.

Henri stepped around the altar and confronted us. He paid me no attention, but bent his eyes upon Serene. Again I felt her shrink, and I tightened my clasp of her waist.

"So, to escape me, my pretty one, you would have married *him*?" He jerked his thumb toward the door. My God, how you must hate me!"

"No, sire." Serene straightened upright and faced him boldly. "I hate you not at all. But M. d'Orsang is an honest man; and I would sooner be wife to such a man than mistress to a king."

Henri folded one arm across the other and gazed at her, pulling at one of his ears. Of a sudden he snapped his eyes to me.

"And you, Captain Duhamel," he said sternly; "I find you guilty of desertion and rebellion. *Ventre Saint Gris!* catch you at it red handed! What say you?"

"I sent for him, sire. I alone am to blame," interposed Serene, squeezing my hand to keep me silent. But I would not keep silent.

"Rebel and deserter I am, if you choose to say it, sire," I answered; "but if a man may not protect his own from dishonor, this is not free France."

I met his eyes and waited for the lightning. Instead, they began to twinkle. The tip of his nose twitched down, the corners of his mouth flew up, and he began to laugh, this time without irony.

"God's blood! When I learned from D'Epernon what you were about, I had envy to hang you, as you hanged Nicolas—and as I think M. the Duke would hang you if he could catch you, for all that you are his nephew. How he did rave when they found his varlet swinging!

"*Ventre Saint Gris!* You have been a busy man these last twenty-four hours, my boy! You have deserted your post, incited some of my best soldiers to

rebellion, hanged a man without trial, and made your king wait upon a doorstep while you were being married. Now I suppose that you will tell me that I am to blame for it all.

"Good; I am going to punish you."

Serene held out her hands in quick appeal.

But I was no longer afraid. The king had laughed at me; and by that token I knew that his great heart had conquered both passion and anger, and I had little to fear of his punishment.

"Your penalty," he continued, "is dismissal from my army for one year, which you will pass in close confinement on your estate in Champagne—with *madame*."

A shout which shook the windows went up from the soldiers, my lads from Champagne cheering loudest of all.

"And you too, my children," the king said, nodding to the line of them. "You have served me faithfully for three years, and have earned a rest. In the north the Spaniard is beaten, and we shall take time to breathe."

They cheered him again for that.

Serene pulled at my hand to have me kneel; and though I knew how he disliked it, I started to comply.

"Not that," he objected, holding out a hand; and then, quizzically: "But think you not that I might kiss the bride?"

When he had touched Serene's lips, he held her for a moment by the shoulders, then pushed her gently toward me.

"*Ventre Saint Gris, madame!*" he exclaimed ruefully, "you make me wish that I had hanged him"; and he sighed and turned away.

The remainder of that day and that night we tarried at Rambouillet. Long after dusk had fallen, we sat, my lady and I, by one of the upper windows of the Hôtel

Orsang. Below us in the darkness the king's horses stamped upon the lawn, and we could hear the tread of his sentinels on the walks.

Serene nestled close and hid her face against my cloublet.

"Are the stars shining, Hilaire?" she whispered.

And I answered: "They are all out, every one."

How the king was crowned at Chartres, and was received at last into Paris; how the League was broken, and Mayenne made his submission; these things have all been told by Master Matthieu.

In many of the aims which he set out to accomplish Henri has succeeded. He is a good king, the best France ever had. Most of his people love him. But there are malcontents, some of them great and powerful. Among them is my turncoat uncle, M. the Duke d'Epemon, grown more rich and powerful than ever—as I have noticed the wicked often do.

I was with Navarre when he went to Paris, and I fought for him again in the north at Amiens. Moise is with him yet, and is in a fair way to both fame and wealth; and I hear that a young court beauty has set her cap for him.

When the day came on which the king offered me a title and a place at court, I, having made up my mind so it long before, refused them. I am content to remain here at Château Duhamel with the blessings which have been vouchsafed me. Court is no place for a man with a pretty wife, especially if he be the father of three children.

Besides, I long before had refused a higher title than any within the king's gift. In that knowledge I am well content to remain the Sieur Duhamel.

Torinaz has established himself at Raucourt. Since his

return with honors from the wars, his name of Tête Grise has fallen into disuse. He is known now as Dr. Torina.

Mark, dear old Mark, his red poll somewhat grizzled now, is with us.

Fanchon is still in my stables; and Leo, grown older and rusty in the joints, lies much by the hearth, where I have bidden Silvie keep her broomstick off him.

On occasions—when we entertain guests of note, or one of the children has a festival—Serene clasps around the dog's white throat a collar of gold, set with brilliants.

'Tis the gage he won at Ivry, the gift of a man so great that he would keep his promise to even a dog—King Henri of France and Navarre.

THE END

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