

THE SUBMARINE'S TREASURE, A COMPLETE NOVEL

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The shrill note of a reed pipe sounded. In came men carrying images of animals; and upon the flat rock were laid the simulated beasts, while dancers went through the olden ritual. . . . Murmurs of amazement sounded as Elaine was recognized, now without hump or scar, slender and perfect and lovely. (Drawn by John Richard Flanagan to illustrate "The Dance of Life", page 4)

The Dance of Life

By

H. BEDFORD-JONES

Illustrated by John Richard Flanagan

First published *Blue Book Magazine*, June 1940.

A dreadful and beautiful story of the Dark Ages—the third in the series “The World Was Their Stage.”



Kettleman took me home with him to see a suppressed film.

One of the great Hollywood directors, Kettleman is a queer genius, experimenting in queer directions. To all the accusations and criticisms hurled at the movies, he has one very true answer: “We make what we must; since ninety per cent of the public ignore intelligent pictures, as they ignore great symphonies, we give ’em what they demand.”

“That answer,” I told him, “is perfectly true; but it is not the truth at all.”

He grinned faintly. “I guess so; it’s a good excuse for making damfool pictures that are slipshod, historically incorrect and so forth. The one I’m going to show you is part of an educational program I dreamed of turning out.”

“Why was it suppressed? Sex?”

“Heavens, no!” he rejoined. “It was to be a panorama of the theater in technicolor, but that fellow Donald, up in the studio, finally junked the idea. He claims people aren’t interested in anything about the theater, that they want blood, romance, action! Funny thing is, this picture

has all of these—and something more. It deals with the survival of acting and the stage in the darkest medieval ages. Donald saw only the opening, a vista of hilltops in Normandy, and turned thumbs down without seeing the rest.”

“Nothing very dramatic about hilltops,” I commented.

“The greatest drama in all history was played on a hilltop outside Jerusalem,” he snapped. I told you the man was singular; his mental flashes were always at an angle, somehow.

Kettleman had a private projection-room in his big house. He took me in, supplied a drink and a cigar, and began to fuss with his projector. The room lights flicked off. On the screen facing us appeared a “still” in technicolor, a landscape aglow beneath a round silvern disk which, in another night, would be the fullest of full moons. A landscape, a hilltop interspersed with huge jagged bits of rock; in the distance a castle tower and the glint of water.

“Hang it! The projector’s stuck—have it fixed in a minute,” said Kettleman. “A curious fact; the earliest French mystery plays went by the name of *puy*. Why? Because the word signified a hilltop. It was a reminiscence of earlier dramas back in pagan ages. Here you see a hilltop in Brittany, by the sea, in feudal days of blood and fire and universal war, when the drama was preserved in the hearts of common folk as a joyous relief from the horrors of an intolerable existence.”

“I didn’t know there was any drama then,” was my comment.

“The Dance of Life, the most ancient of all pageants, that of fertility, the earth-mother, an old pagan survival! Then, remember, the people were oppressed and ground down and trodden underfoot like weeds, by their lords and masters. The people of the earth were like wild beasts, in that period.”



A kindly soul, with a heart for the maids who were sport for soldier and noble!

“That same period,” I objected, “gave us the most glorious of romances—look at the story of Tristan and Yseult.”

“Bah! Look at the story of Jehan and Elaine!” he barked. The machine began to click; the film moved; the scene moved. Needless to say, it was a sound-film.

Yet for a space there was no sound. The figure of a woman, a girl, appeared like a wood-nymph girl with fluttering moon-glints and garlanded with pearls. Her figure grew more clear. She was actually clad in rags and tatters; twined in her flowing red-gold hair were flowers. She moved with such symmetry, such utter grace, as apparently to mount upon the very moonbeams.

Dancing about those jagged ancient stones, approaching the flat central rock, she came to sudden frightened halt. She stood at gaze, transfixed. The high white moon etched her lissome shape, her masses of flower-starred hair, her profile of purest beauty and nobility. Behind her evident terror was a nervous strength; one sensed in her a singular desperate courage, as though she were faced by some unavoidable terror, and yet fronted it with heart unquailing.

“No, no!” A gasp broke from her. “You are dead—it cannot be you—”

From the central mass of rock, a shadow detached itself, stood out clearly, and came toward her. The girl’s fright died. An incredulous cry of joy broke upon her lips, and her arms lifted eagerly.

“Jehan! Dear Jehan—you’re real, alive, flesh and blood!”

“And can prove it. Elaine!” said he, as his arms went about her. They clung together, wordless, lip to lip and heart to heart.

“They said you were dead,” she murmured. “All the village thinks you dead. Your poor mother died last month. And I—I have had no heart left.”

He was a young man, but shaggily bearded, clad in ragged garments, marked by hard travel and privation. Unlike the average peasant, there was no cringing in his manner; he held his head high, and the harsh lines of his features held a resolute, indomitable expression rarely found among the people of the earth. As they stood together, he turned the girl and pointed to the distant mass of the castle.

“And they think me dead also,” he said, a bitter menace in his voice. “The noble Lord of Fécamp, his slender voluptuous ladies, his knights and men-at-arms—aye, they think me dead. Here, little heart, sit down and rest, while I tell you about it.”

He drew her down on the great flat rock, where in olden days the Druids had performed their mystic rites. She nestled beside him, tremulous, still incredulous of his reality.

“You know how my sister was taken to the castle yonder, and how she killed herself after the Lord of Fécamp had finished with her and gave her to his soldiers,” he said. “You know how I cursed them, how they came and seized me and took me to the castle; there they whipped me and loaded chains on me and made me a beast of burden.”

The girl shivered, and touched his cheek with pitying finger. Yet there was nothing unusual in all this; the serfs of chivalry were born to such a destiny.

“An English knight visited the castle two months ago,” he went on. “He won me at dice from the Lord of Fécamp, and took me when he left for England. The ship was wrecked on the coast below here, for a storm seized us. Most of those on board were drowned; only a few escaped to tell of it. So I was accounted dead with the rest.”

“We heard,” murmured Elaine. “They mourned for the English knight.”

Jehan laughed harshly. “He did not drown; I killed him, took his money and clothes, and got ashore. Elaine, it’s wealth! Money, real money of silver and gold, clothes, arms! All hidden and waiting for us. I came to take you away from this horror, to the country of Eldigonde the sorceress.”

The girl lifted herself and drew back, horrified.

“Jehan! Are you mad? Poor Jehan—you have suffered—”

He broke into a swift, joyous laugh, and kissed her strong fingers.

“No, no, I’m quite sane, my dear! Far below here on the Breton coast, is a land of safety for you and me. The country is wild, densely wooded, a tangle of rocks and trees; no feudal

lords own it. Instead, it's inhabited by free people of the earth who have fled there. In that wild land they live safely, freely, joyously! And the wise old woman, the sorceress Eldigonde, is the only ruler, for her wisdom is great. All the wealth for which I paid in blood and flesh and tears, is waiting there. I came to take you back with me. A boat is hidden here at the shore, below the castle. You'll go?"

"Yes, yes! It seems like some dream, Jehan—yes, of course I'll go!" she exclaimed in stammering haste. "I can't believe it's real. . . . But, Jehan! I can't leave until after tomorrow night. It is the festival, you know; the dance of life."

He nodded. "Aye. The dance of life, that we celebrate in secret to the moon! And God help us all if they find out about it, there at the castle. You remember how the Sieur de Courcelles burned eleven of his people alive, three years ago, for celebrating the festival?"

"There's no danger here, Jehan," said the girl. "Everybody at the castle will be drunk tomorrow night; the Lord of Fécamp is to celebrate his birthday, and has invited a crowd of gentry in. Besides, Felipe Brieux will be ready to touch off a signal-flare if there's any riding from the castle. No, it's safe."

"And you, my dear?" Jehan stroked her glossy hair. "Do you still wear the hump on your back and the scar on your face that Nanny Dubois taught you to paint on?"

She shivered slightly. "Yes, of course. Marie Lianceau was married last week to Pierre, and he had to take her to the castle for—the *droit de seigneur*. Oh, Jehan, it was terrible! She was out of her senses for two days afterward. Two of the castle officers were riding by the field where I was working, and saw me, and came over for a closer look; luckily they saw the scar and the humped back, and went away. But I was frightened."



“I—I am only a peasant. Messire Pierre,” she said. “I am no lovely lady.”

“May heaven blast all these rulers of earth!” cried out Jehan passionately. He launched a torrent of curses, in a blaze of shaking wrath. “These lords and seigneurs who oppress and torture us, who own us body and soul—some day they’ll be swept away! Their castles will be razed, they and their brood drowned in their own blood—you’ll see!”

“Hush, Jehan! They’d hang you for saying such words!”

He laughed bitterly. “I’ll say worse before I’m dead. But now, little heart, I must get away and find hiding over tomorrow; I dare not let another soul know I’m back. I did hope to see my old mother; but you say she’s dead, so let it pass. She’s resting at last, poor soul! I’ll meet you here tomorrow night, after the festival. Then we’ll go quickly.”

“With all my heart, Jehan,” she replied. One last embrace, one clinging, eager kiss of rapture, and he was gone, melting into the shadows whence he had come.

And high time. As the girl stood staring after him, a scuffle of *sabots* and the murmur of voices reached her; a dozen other girls of the village and district around had arrived to join her in a rehearsal of the dance.

They greeted her joyously, half fearfully, all in a tumult between terror and excited anticipation; there was one screw-backed old hag from down the shore, who hobbled along importantly. It was her place to see that the ancient ritual was followed, the dances and the songs rightly given, for thus they had been handed down from forgotten days.

So, laying off the wooden *sabots*, the girls circled and sang, postured and tripped among the rocks that the forgotten Druids had left behind. All was done blindly, in passive obedience to the croaked directions of the old hag; she herself did not know the meaning of the words uttered, for to her they were only sounds, just as the gestures and actions were meaningless things, relics of the dim past.

But luck followed upon the festival. When it was neglected, pestilence and bad crops came, and war. The old gods were forgot, their very names blown nowhere with the dust of centuries, their fanes all crumbled and their memories grown black beneath the stars; but racial instinct still preserved the rites of ancient days. To these poor folk, crushed under such oppression as the world has seldom seen, this yearly festival was a symbol of hope and beauty, an escape from the horrors of daily life, a prayer, half-realized, to the primal earth-gods and the forces of nature.

None the less, it constituted a fearful risk. In the eyes of chivalry, they had no right to happiness; woe betide them if they were caught at it! Then would rise the cry of "Sorcery!" with tortures and burnings and mutilation to follow. The Black Death and other fearful plagues had not yet come to sweep away nine-tenths of all people, rich and poor alike, and make human chattels valuable; the land was crowded; serfs were thick in field and village, to be mauled or killed or hunted down like wild beasts in drunken riot.

Late under the moon, Elaine stole home to the thatched cottage, still in a fervent riot of thought, and tucked herself away. Weary as she was, sleep came hard. Jehan alive, here, within reach and touch! This in itself was a miracle; but what lay beyond seemed utterly incredible. That there should be any place beyond the reach of tyranny and cruelty was to her a fantastic vision, beyond the power of the brain to comprehend; yet Jehan had come to take her there!



“You’re no peasant lass, nor any sorceress neither!”

If, indeed, it were all real and not a dream. . . . She awakened in the morning, suddenly to clasp hands to bursting heart. True or real? She could not credit it, until she found on her finger the circlet of gold Jehan had put there at parting. A gold ring! She stared at it, then hurriedly tore it off and hid it from sight. There was no such treasure as that anywhere in the district; only a knight might hope to possess a gold ring, or one of the pretty beauties at the castle.

“Up, slut, up!” came the voice of her bent and twisted father, roaring angrily. “Our lord’s overseer has commanded that the entire upper field be finished today—up and out!”

Elaine had scant love for her father, who viewed her innate delicacy with sneering derision. He was a brute like most of his kind, warped by hard labor and torments. Perhaps there was truth in the story that she sprang not from him, but from that night when her mother, a bride, was handed over to the lord of Fécamp. This “right” had instilled new blood in many

a peasant family; and amid the cringing, tortured serfs was to be seen many a head held proudly, such as that of Elaine or of her lover Jehan.

She dressed swiftly. Her father looked on with an evil grin while she donned the false hump she had invented for safety's sake, tying the straps over her shoulders and below the budding round of her breasts. Over this, her ragged robe. Then, while he taunted her about the good price he should get for betrayal of her ruse, she swiftly applied the magical paint Nanny Dubois had given her, making a red ugly scar that drew her cheek and lips askew. A kindly soul, old Nanny, with a heart in her shriveled deathly corpse for the poor maids who were sport for soldier and noble!

A swallow of thick soup, a rush for the field, and the work was forward, with clump of wooden shoe and drip of sweat, and many a groan for aching back and loins.

Today, however, aches and pains were forgotten, in the glorious vista that spelled an end to barbarous oppression. Freedom and safety! It seemed too good to be true, in this nightmare of a life.

Afternoon brought guttural cries of warning flitting across the fields, from hovel to hovel. Armed men were riding from the castle! They came—the Seigneur himself, a band of visiting knights and lords, ladies on their palfreys, men-at-arms in helm and chain-coat, pennons flashing and gay laughter ringing as the dun deer fled before, and the horns sounded high. A stag broke from covert and fled across the field of springing grain; with shout and horn, the riders plunged after, hounds baying wildly. It was the natal day of the Lord of Fécamp, with a stag of ten hurtling to the kill!

Elaine ran with the others, all scurrying like frightened quail as the rout headed for them. She saw her father trip and fall. The dogs went over him in a rush, but one of them turned to spring at him; struggling up, he fought the beast frantically. With a torrent of oaths the Seigneur himself rode down the panic-stricken man, lashed him with a whip, and sent the men-at-arms to finish him. A lance went through him, and another. The twisted body relaxed, and the laughing ladies kneaded it into the mud as they galloped over the poor clay.

Two of the castle riders wheeled their horses as Elaine ran, screaming, to the side of the dead man. They reined in, laughing, but as they sighted her scarred face and the hump between her shoulders, they put in spurs and went on at a gallop, with a coarse exchange of jests. The other folk crept out from hiding and bore the spattered corpse home.

“Lucky they didn’t take a notion to ride all of us down!” said somebody.

Grief? Elaine felt none, pretended none. This father of hers had been her chief potential enemy, in fact. Now she was alone, but not for long; tonight would end all of that, forever. So her father was laid under the earth. Before the grave was filled, the castle overseer arrived and gave orders that she was to marry a widower of the district, on the morrow. Hump or no hump, she could breed new serfs to labor in the fields.

“And,” he added with a laugh, as he departed, “when the ceremony’s done, you’ll go up to the castle for the usual entertainment. You’re no proper quarry for the Seigneur, my lass, but the men-at-arms are not over-particular.”

Elaine assented humbly, and repressed a shudder. What if Jehan had not come back last night? Fate would have been hard at her heels.

The long afternoon dwindled into sunset, and she ate a lone supper and thought of Jehan, hiding somewhere along the rocky shore. Her father’s death would make no difference to the

celebration of the festival; the dance of life was something that rose above mortality and human chance.

With darkness, there was a hush and a stir over the whole countryside. From near and far, shadowy figures were stealing along the winding roads and across the fields, toward the hilltop where the ancient rocks thrust up toward the stars.

In the vague starlight, they wended toward their goal, slipping from bosque and covert to converge on the one point, silently enough, like animals. Only, now and again, a clucking of tongues sounded as crones and wise women from scattered points came together; old outcast hags like Nanny Dubois, who practiced wizardry of nights, and brewed herbs to make the sick well, and afforded the poor folk shrewd but subtle advice in all problems of their wretched lives.

On the hilltop, along the hill flanks, dim serried ranks of half-seen figures gathered. They waited tense, expectant; they had stolen away for this one night of freedom and joyous celebration in secret. Grouped beside one of the great rocks, Elaine and her companions bided motionless the moment of their appearance, for other things came first.

The first orange light of the rising moon trembled up the eastern sky. From all that assemblage came a murmurous gasp of greeting, a breath that passed along the hillside and died into silence. Shapes appeared in the dim, slowly growing glow, capering amid the high rocks; grotesque shapes, clad in the guise of wild beasts.

The Dance of Life had begun.

It was an eerie, uncanny thing; for as yet the golden round of the moon was not up. Monstrous shapes disported themselves, masques of wicker and fur which had been long weeks preparing in hidden places. All was done in silence, save for hoarse breaths and pantings of effort. Closer to the great central stone worked the rhythmic movement until, as the circle of the moon lifted gradually, all that wild company stood revealed for one moment, full-etched in horn and hoof and claw and bestial ecstasy.

The shrill note of a reed pipe sounded. Suddenly and completely, the strange figures separated, leaped away, and scurried into cover. They vanished, and in among the rocks came men clad in skins, to the thin tremulous music of many reed pipes, dancing and weaving in upon the flat central stone.

They carried burdens, images of animals; in olden days, no doubt, these had been real animals for sacrifice, but now the creatures of earth and sea were too hard to come by, too utterly valuable, for such offering. Upon the flat rock were laid the simulated fish and beasts, while the dancers went through the olden ritual of oblation and festival. It was a strangely wild and vivacious thing to see, and mightily stirred the hearts of the watchers, so that ejaculations and eager voices began to rise on all sides.

Everywhere the grain was springing in the sown fields, life was stirring anew in leaf and beast; and here beneath the moon was the festival of fertile earth and joy. The men drew back; the thin pipings changed to a different air. Elaine sped a quick word at her companions, and the tattered gowns were flung aside. She leaped forth, and they after her, clad in little besides the flowing disarray of floating hair and twisted ropes of flowers.

What a dance this was, beneath the flooding golden light of the risen moon! The slim figures swept among the old monoliths in steps of wild abandon; murmurs of amazement sounded as Elaine was recognized, now without hump or scar, slender and perfect and lovely. "A miracle, a miracle!" swept the murmured words, but she heard them not, nor cared. For,

somewhere in the outer darkness, she knew that Jehan watched, hidden, and she flung herself into the jocund exhilaration of the piping music and the floating steps.

The steps quickened; the music quickened, as the dancers neared the central stone, their lissome shapes transfigured by the moonlight and lifted afar from everyday semblance. Never had those drear-eyed watchers beheld such grace and beauty, except at this annual festival; as the reedy pipings struck into swifter rhythm, as the voices of the dancing girls took up the ritual of strange unknown words, the men dancers joined in.

And suddenly all was a wild ecstatic rapture, the dancers bursting into evasion and pursuit among the jutting rocks, the watching throngs swept by a contagious frenzy into hoarse cries and panting exclamations—until, without warning, a fearful frozen silence struck them all.

One wild and terrible scream, from the moonlit spaces beyond the hilltop, wailed across the night, and was followed by the blare of a hunting horn.

The awful realization smote one and all, as a rushing clatter of hooves sounded. The watcher had failed, the castle folk had surprised the festival! Shrill and despairing shrieks flared up, to be drowned in a roar of shouts and clarion cries. The phantom watching figures melted like mist, as knights and men-at-arms came charging, with glint of mail and flutter of pennon and thrust of red-tipped lance.

“Kill!” rose the shout. “Kill! Sorcery—kill!”

There was killing enough, without mercy, amid frantic fleeing and mad pursuit. Old Nanny Dubois was plucked up bodily by a spear and hurled atop one of the jagged rocks, to shriek away her life. Swords glinted; horses trampled.

But the little group of girls, shimmering golden in the moonlight, could not flee, for the circle of armed men had ringed in the hilltop and came plunging at them, with wild fierce laughter and eager hands. Hither and yon they drove in terrified flight, to be run down or pulled down by knight or squire among the Druidic stones.

Elaine, crouching in blank panic, was aware of a wild ringing voice above her, a man stooping from the saddle, his arm circling her body. She was lifted, scooped up, held in an iron grip despite all struggles; while the rider, with a voice triumphant, thrust in his spurs and sent the powerful destrier plunging down the hillside and away, through the silvery blood-smear moonlit night.

The stark cries lessened; the roaring laughter died away upon distance; the great steed slowed his pace and halted. The rider, holding her in his arms, leaned forward and kissed her, and looked laughingly into her face, and then looked again, his hot mirth dying out.

And she, staring up helplessly, saw that he was a stranger, a young knight handsome as a god, no doubt one of the Seigneur’s guests. There was no cruelty in his face, no barbaric fury. Instead, he seemed gentle and bright with youth.

“What!” he exclaimed. “Here’s a prize if ever was one, but not what I thought. You’re no peasant lass, nor any sorceress neither! That is, unless I’m bewitched myself.”

“Have mercy, have mercy!” Her voice fluttered at him wildly. “I’ve done no wrong—let me go, I pray!”

He caught sight of the golden ring which she had put on her finger. The soft moonlight concealed her work-hardened hands and feet; she lay in his arms, her flower-starred hair flowing about him, her heart palpitating against his own, her warm fresh loveliness all real and glowing.

“Maiden, who are you?” he demanded curiously. “Some sweet naiad from the land of Prester John? Some nymph crept out of the sea to dazzle men with her beauty? Perhaps the Lady Morgana herself, come from the morning star to find a lover among men? Quick! Your name!”

“Elaine,” she gasped out, her eyes wide upon his smiling features and glorious youth. She had never dreamed a man could be so nobly handsome.

“Elaine! A name of poesy, of old romance!” he said, and suddenly gripped her hard, and kissed her lips. They were not brutal kisses, but most sweet and lingering, so that the terrified heart within her melted, and a silver fire like moonlight coursed through her veins. Then his head lifted.

“Come, sweet lady, your promise!” he said, breathing hard as he looked into her eyes. “I am Pierre de Louhac, your very humble servitor and liege knight; for my sins, I am a poet, with a lute at my saddle-bow where a helm should ride. Promise me that you’ll not fly away upon the moonbeams, or glide into the water, or vanish in the thicket—swear it, by the True Cross! Then I’ll set you down, and if we kiss again, it shall be of your own free will.”

“I swear it, I swear it!” she panted desperately.

He gently let her slide to earth, and dismounting, took the cloak from his shoulders and fastened it about her throat, so that it enfolded her slim body. And he sighed a little as he stooped and kissed her hand.

“Now for my lute, and you shall tell me whence you came, Lady Elaine. For I wot well you are no mortal creature, but some lovely lady come from the bounds of fairyland. Even though you be some fair sorceress—but that cannot be, since you swore by the Cross. Therefore you must be all gentle and lovely as you look, since it is impossible that so rare an ornament of heaven itself could have sprung from earthly stock.”

She stood trembling, knowing too well, alas, that she was no fine lady at all, but a poor humble peasant girl with a fate worse than death awaiting her in the Seigneur’s castle.

They were in a craggy desolate spot above the shore, a lonely place with the world shut out and only the silvern meadows of the sea sparkling away below. She watched with eyes of wonder as Pierre de Louhac loosed a lute from his saddle bow, and the great horse arched its heavy neck and muzzled him lovingly. She did not know that man and beast could feel love and friendship; she had not known that any belted knight, born to oppress and rule and kill, could be so gentle as this man before her.

“Be seated, sweet lady!” he exclaimed, smiling at her as he strummed upon the lute. “How beautiful you are, with flowers in your hair, and your eyes like two stars! Come, sit on this high rock looking toward the sea!”

She complied, not certain whether he were a bit insane, or playing some cruel jest, or just what he seemed. Soon, however, she perceived that there was no guile in him, and no cruelty at all.

“I have come from the south, Lady Elaine,” he said, “where the wine and the heart is sunny, where people of the earth are not slaves but free. I rode with the Lord of Fécamp tonight to the hunt, little dreaming that the hunting was of poor folk making merry! No blood is on my hands this night; but when I saw you, destiny came upon me; and I knew that I, Pierre de Louhac, had been fated to capture some sweet queen from the land of the fays, and so I took you.”

She comprehended his compassion, his youthful fervent ardor, his imagination; and she held forth her hands to him, smiling faintly. The music of his voice was wondrous to hear, and there was naught to fear from him.

“I—I am only a peasant, Messire Pierre,” she said; “I am no lovely lady.”
He laughed aloud.

“Nonsense! When did a peasant lass wear a golden ring? When did ever a peasant have such beauty beyond the world as yours?” He swung a hand toward the far-glinting sea. “Look out yonder, Lady Elaine, and tell me whence you came! From some far land of Lyonesse, it may be, or from a palace glorious, on some far mountain crest; or did the dancing moonbeams bring you from heaven itself to delight the hearts of men?”

Under his glowing words, something of the rapt ecstasy of that hilltop dance, so terribly checked, crept back into her heart. She laughed, and shook back her hair; when a flower fell, he caught it up and crushed it against his lips.

“A song for a flower, then; and perchance another kiss, to make you mortal maid!” said he gayly, and fingering the lute, struck into song.

What he sang, she knew not, for the words were strange; but she nestled in the warm cloak and gave herself up to enchantment and dream as his voice rose in golden glory.

Dream? Enchantment? She knew it could not last, and abandoned herself to the moment with a surge of venture audacious. The frightful vision of Nanny Dubois writhing and dying upon the high rock died away. To her lips came all the old stories of elves and sprites, of mermaids from the sea and the gently-caressing nymphs in forest depths; as she murmured of these things, Pierre de Louhac listened, entranced.

“It is like the tale of Tristan, who died so happily for fair Yseult!” he exclaimed. “You came to me tonight, sweet Elaine, like a benison to heal inward hurts. All this land is adrift with evil and dark cruel things, and the only sure kind touch from any hand is that of Death. Look: tonight I was in sorrow and wonder that such things could be, and you have made all life bright for me! What was the dance we interrupted?”



“Thus,” he cried, sweeping the strings, “and thus! A salute to life! A salute to life and love and ecstasy!”

“The dance of life,” she said. “I know not what it means, for it has come down from olden times, but that is the name given to it. The dance of joyous life and hope and springing leaves and fertile fields.”

“Kiss me,” he said, looking up at her, a glow in his face. “Kiss me, and then dance for me alone—just a step or two! Throw aside the cloak, and dance.”

She leaned forward. Her white arms found him, and her lips. Again that wondrous singing fire coursed through her veins; and springing suddenly upright, she let fall the cloak and

danced with a burst of heedless happy rejoicing. She danced as never before, in glorious abandon—and suddenly caught up the cloak, laughing, and whirled it around her body.

“Ah, to die upon such loveliness!” sighed Pierre de Louhac, with the look of one rapt in dream. “You are my captive, fair Elaine, but I am yours a thousandfold! Will you ride with me?”

“Ride with you?” She stood staring, brought back to earth. “Whither?”

“Across the world!” Laughing, he flung out a hand. “Mount and ride! You shall be my lady fair, clothed in silks and satins and jewels; I will ever be your true and loyal knight, singing your praises under every roof we reach! We’ll go to the Lord of Fécamp’s castle here and now, and I’ll uphold you as queen of beauty!”

“No, no!” She shrank; that name abruptly broke the charm, the thought of that castled keep of terror and doom. “Oh, you are mad! And I’m mad to let you bewitch me!”

She crumpled, in a flood of tears.

He, not knowing all that lay in her heart, was bewildered and all astray. He could not know that she was in tears for her friends and companions, the girls who had danced, now taken to the castle. And Jehan, far-wandering in the night, lost and desolate, or perchance dead!

Perplexed, he touched his lute, and sang a plaintive, tender little song that went straight into her heart. Her sobs quieted; presently her head lifted, and she spoke to the youth, very sweetly and sadly.

“Dear Messire Pierre, I must tell you the whole truth: I am no lovely lady from sea or moonbeam land; I am just Elaine, a serf of the Lord of Fécamp, a laborer in his fields, a chattel of his hand. Tonight was the festival, and we who danced were his serfs. You saved me from those wolves, and I am grateful; but now mount your horse and ride away. You know the truth. It is a sad and sordid truth, and all your dreams are nothing. I am a peasant, and you are a knight, and the little play is ended. Ride away, and scorn me.”

Pierre de Louhac stood up, and smote his lute joyously.

“Not so, by the loving wounds of God!” he said, with earnest impetuous words. “Gentle lady, that man is lonely and desolate and old, who looks upon life with bitter disillusioned eyes, and sees things at their worst. May the blessed saints preserve me from being such! Your loveliness is the most rare and beautiful thing I have found in this life of evil. You are Elaine from across the sea, and I shall hold you so until I die.”

“Will you not listen to reason?” she exclaimed. “I can never be one of your fine ladies—”

“No, for you are above them all!” he broke in hotly. “Reason? It’s the curse of all mankind. As you danced tonight the dance of life, so we two shall go through the world, joyous and triumphant, not looking with gloomy dark eyes upon things as they are, but touching them with poesy, lifting them into what they should be! When you touch my cheek with your hand, it is an angel from heaven who comes down to inspire me to song; when you ride behind me, it is all the beauty and mirth of the world perched at my shoulder.”

“But you are a poet, dear Pierre,” she said, smiling.

“And you shall be one too, if you love me a little,” he replied.

“You are like a dream,” she answered. “You are not like other men I have seen.”

He fell to laughing. “Why, that’s love, no less! Ho! Sweet Elaine, you’ve hit upon the very truth of life and youth and love! A kiss upon it!”

She leaned to him, and he caught her in his arms, his finger-tips caressing her fair body as his lips caressed hers. She clung to him, yielding and abandoning all reason, in this embrace

that blotted out the whole world.

But the great horse, forgotten, whinnied shrilly in the moonlight, and shook himself with a clank of gear. Pierre de Louhac leaped up, and caught at his lute, laughing.

“Thus,” he cried, sweeping the strings, “and thus! A salute to life! A salute to life and love and ecstasy! There shall be no grief and evil in the world; the sunlight shall shimmer upon every heart. You and I, fair Elaine, shall go down to the golden ways of romance hand in hand. Hark, how good gray Ramon summons us!”

Indeed, hearing his name, the powerful destrier shook himself again, and turned his head, looking upon his master. Elaine came to her feet, and drawing the cloak more closely about her, shivered. From afar came a riotous blast of horns, a shrill distant sound of savage voices. A harsh, clanging bell rang thinly.

“Something has happened!” she exclaimed in quick alarm. “Listen! It’s the tocsin from the castle—something has happened!”

Pierre de Louhac laughed aloud.

“Aye, this has happened; you and I have met!” he cried, while his fingers touched the lute at his breast. “All the world shall ring wild peals, but they have naught to do with us. Ours is the dance of life, sweet Elaine; let the whole dreary earth reëcho to the dance of death, and we shall behold it not. For ours is the springing tender blade of green, the song in the morn, the smile of the sun on the budding earth, love in the heart and a brave salute, a salute to life—”

His words ended upon a jerk, that shook his whole body.

The lute was riven asunder with a splintering, rending crack. Out of the dark dusky wood close by, came the ringing twang of a bowstring. Pierre de Louhac spun around, and clutched once at the feathered shaft which stood out of his heart, and out of the riven lute; he looked at Elaine, and tried to speak, but no words came. Then he fell, and she stood in palsied, stricken horror.

From the dark covert sprang a swift lithe figure.

“So you’re safe, Elaine!” It was Jehan, strong and resolute, in his hand a long English bow of yew, longer than himself. “I’ve had the devil’s own time tracking you here. I put a shaft into that hound of hell—aye, through the Lord of Fécamp himself! Hear the tocsin and the horns? They’re riding and killing this night, to make up for it.”

The girl’s lips were loosened. She broke in upon him with a long and wailing shriek that was echoed from the rocks and smothered by the trees and the moonlight.

“You’ve killed him! Jehan, Jehan, you’ve killed him! And he was so kind, so gentle—Oh, it can’t be true. Not you, Jehan, not you!”

“Faith, you seem sorry to see me!” said he, with his quick, harsh laugh.

From her lips came another cry, wild and incoherent. She collapsed, all of a sudden, and lay quiet in the moonlight; her bare arm protruded from the cloak, and her hand touched the dead hand of Pierre de Louhac as he smiled at the moonlight.

“Now, here’s a queer business for you!”

And wagging his shaggy unshorn head, Jehan came forward, unstrung his bow, and stood looking down at the silent, senseless girl. Gradually his face softened.

“Poor child!” he murmured. “Poor frightened, hunted lass! It’s just as well, and saves a power of trouble. The boat’s close by, and ere dawn we’ll be far down the Breton coast. Poor

lass! The devil's paid out; and this fine noble lord is another heartless tyrant gone to hell—two in one night. Lucky I came along just in time to save her from him!”

With which, he went to Pierre de Louhac and took everything of value from the body. Then, shouldering the senseless figure of Elaine with scarcely an effort, he strode across to the shadows and plunged out of sight. For a little, the crashing of brush could be heard as he made descent to the shore and his hidden boat; then silence.

Across the silvery moonlit stage a slow figure moved. It was the massive shape of the horse, coming to the man who lay on his back in the streaming light, a feathered shaft pinning the broken lute to his breast. Upon this stage the moving figure ceased. The horse stood with head drooping, its questing muzzle nudging the white still hand that would finger the lute no more.

The film had run to its end. A snap, and the room lights whipped on. Kettleman turned to me.

“Like it?”

“Of course. But where does it link up with the theater?”

He waved his hands excitedly.

“Confound it, everywhere! This pageant or instinct from pagan days, was essentially theater. It kept the stage alive; upon this pantomime, mimicry and ancient ritual was based the sense of drama that later flowered into being. From a naked hilltop came a naked stage, which in course of time evolved painted scenery!”

“But why make a tragedy of it and kill off the poet and dreamer?”

“They're always killed in real life,” he said testily. “You dullard, couldn't you see any symbolism in the thing?”

“Well, all I could see was that the girl lost her vision and was carried off to fulfill a barbarous destiny of motherhood to a lot of starveling brats.”

“Isn't that the fate of every woman?” he cried triumphantly. “And like every woman, she retained the most precious, the rarest, the most beautiful thing in life—a secret memory!”

“Hm! Well, maybe,” I admitted. “All the same, perhaps it's just as well that the picture was never released. Ideas, they say, are dangerous unless explained fully.”

Kettleman has not spoken to me since that day.

[The end of *The Dance of Life* by Henry Bedford-Jones]