

SWORD PLAY



by CHARLES B. STILSON

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SWORD PLAY
BY
CHARLES B. STILSON

AUTHOR OF
THE ACE OF BLADES,
A CAVALIER OF NAVARRE, ETC.

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Sword Play

CHAPTER I

A ROADSIDE ENCOUNTER

Warm sunshine of an afternoon in early May shone through the leaving branches of gnarled English oaks and yews, and cast its varied patterns upon the greenest grass in the world. In the sheen of it a curving, well-worn road on the long slope of a rolling hill became a pathway floored with powdered gold, such as legend tells leads on to the realm of the fays. Near to the roadside the drifting dust had settled on blades of grass and leaves of plants and trees, and bronzed their green to the soft, dull gleam of that impalpable luster which glamors the wings of butterflies.

On every breeze that blew from the countryside was the invigorating scent of the springtime, the scent of newness and of growing things swelling to the birth of blossoms and of fruits—that perfume which is so faint but so subtle and persistent; that summons which, though voiceless, is so compelling; which calls to the man of the wandering foot and bids him leave the winter’s fire to die upon his hearth and to fare forth along adventure’s road; for the old earth is awaking once more, and he will miss great happenings if he tarries softly at home.

At the foot of the hill the road became a street and wandered and was lost among other streets of a town which spread crescentwise about the rim of a blue bay.

It was a busy town with bustling streets, and the harbor was thick with slender masts. From the wharves a long mole of gray stone jutted out across the water. Beyond it ships with sails of white and dun swung in toward the quays, while others, outward-bound, met and passed them, to disappear around the rocky head of an island which lifted square shoulders from the sea and sheltered the harbor’s mouth.

Not one of those ships now sails the seas. Their sturdy timbers, scattered throughout the world, were long ago rotted into nothingness. Their stout-hearted mariners, under the sod or the waves, are like the yellow dust of the hillside. But the island, the bay, the hill above it, and Portsmouth town below, are there still. And perchance a scanty few of the hard-grained oaks

still stand to welcome the sunshine of other Mays, or to sway their strong old branches in creaking defiance of winter blasts, as they stood on that tenth of May, in the year sixteen hundred and seventy-nine, when the second Charles of the Scotch Stuart line was king in England.

Halfway up the hill's long slope a beggar sat at the roadside, his back against a stone, his legs thrust out in front of him across the dusty grass. Perhaps in a dim way he heard the calling of the young springtime; but it had no savor for him, and he did not heed it. He was very old.

Neither fortune nor men had used him kindly, nor had time itself been gentle with him. The rickety shoes which clad his feet were bound with twisted withes of osier to prevent them from falling away. His hose of gray wool were tattered so as to expose his withered and none too clean shanks. His brown breeches were in little better case, and were buckleless and splayed open below the knees. Though he sat where the sun shone full and warm upon him, he was muffled to the chin in a great cloak of what once had been fair green camlet cloth, but which now was a wreck of nondescript color, frayed and foul with dirt and stains.

It had been a noble garment in its days. Assuredly its buttons had been of gold, and its clasp set with a jewel. But it had fallen from its estate, and had been stripped rudely of its gauds, and had passed on from hand to hand, from worse to worse, until a beggar wore it, caught about his shrunken frame with mean hooks of rusted iron.

Man and cloak were well assorted in their misery. He, too, had once been young and tall and strong. The shoulders, which folded in upon his hollow chest, had been broad and powerful. His eyes had been keen and merry. Now one of them was set and sightless, covered with a bluish and unlovely rheum and the lid of the other drooped upon his cheek. An uncombed mane of hair fell forward over his shoulders and mingled with his beard.

Both were of the same hue, the yellow of unwashed fleece. Such part of his skin as was exposed was creased and grooved and lined until it resembled russet Spanish leather, patterned in sport by a mischievous apprentice with his master's graving point. In the desolate prospect of that face the only upstanding feature was the nose. High and curved and bony, it thrust out from the general ruin with a pride which made it insolent.

Crown-downward between the knees of the old man sat a rimless, battered remnant of a hat. Anon as passersby fared up and down the hill, he

shook it so that the pair of copper farthings which it held chinked together. He accompanied the dolorous music with the whining plaint:

“Mercy, gentlefolk! Charity for a wretched sinner who is blind!”

On those who heeded his appeal he called down blessings, which, issuing from his lips, were hardly less fearsome than the mumbled blasphemies which pursued those who did not give. Such coins as the blessed wayfarers let fall he retrieved at once and pouched hastily within the folds of his ancient cloak, on the shrewd assumption that too great a display of affluence would turn the thrifty from him or tempt the thievish.

The hands with which he took the coins up were frightful instruments, knotted, veinous, taloned, and each lacking its thumb, which at some time had been torn away, leaving hideous scars.

As the afternoon wore on, affairs languished. The beggar nodded drowsily.

Basket on arm, a girl came swinging up the hillside, a crofter’s sturdy lass, with the ease of rolling meadows in her gait. Black-browed and swarthy as any Spaniard she was. Her hair was bound in a yellow snood. A bit of blue ribbon flaunted beside her ear, and a gay rosette of scarlet adorned the bosom of her brown kirtle. As she walked she sang a Whig ditty of the period, which had lately strayed from London town, and in which was scant respect for the Scottish monarch, whose father had lost his head:

Halloo! The hunt’s begun;
Like father, like son!

At the sound of her voice the ancient mendicant’s thin nose twitched, and he stirred into sudden action. With a single, furtive motion of his adroit fingers he removed the farthings from his hat and held them clutched within his cloak. The girl saw the gesture, and laughed as she paused in the roadway before him.

“What luck of the day, Gaffer Hatshaw?” she asked teasingly. “How many the honest folk have ’e cozened of their blunt?”

“Whoy, it be Tom Peake’s Bess, for sure,” quavered Hatshaw, with well-feigned surprise. “Eh, lass,” he continued, raising his seamed face eagerly, “what be a happening in Portsmouth town this day? Say, lass, there was a crowd in the marketplace, I warrant.”

“Aye, and a plenty of jolly sailor lads in the streets,” returned the girl; “and out yonder at the end of the mole lies a ship from the far seas, the

Indies or the like. She have on board a copper-red heathen body who walks the deck naked to his belt and wareth breeches of leather all fringed along the seams, and hath his shoon decked bravely wi' colored beads, and——”

“Aye, I have seen his like. Happen the ship comes from the Americas,” broke in Hatshaw with impatience. “But in the town, lass—in the marketplace? There was a deal of honest bartering, and good pieces passing from hand to pouch, say?”

“Oh, aye; the same as other market days,” answered Bess indifferently.

“And my place, my seat by the church-step on the square?” persisted Hatshaw, his beak twitching convulsively. “Doan’t ’e go for to say as how another has my seat, lass. Nay, Dick Teviston would not have that. May the fiend blow hot fire in his entrails!” snarled the old man in an access of senile rage. “A murrain on him, bailiff though he be, for turnin’ of me from my seat in the square, the which I’ve held in fair weather and foul ten years come Whit Monday!”

Bess shook her blue ribbon and considered Hatshaw out of her bold black eyes.

“Now that I mind, there *was* a mumper by the church-step, a legless sprat from St. Alban’s, wi’ a little lad standing by to call for him,” invented the girl maliciously, and with surprising effect.

An inarticulate screech of such concentrated rage burst from the gaffer that Bess, hardy as she was, sprang back a pace in alarm. Seizing a long staff which lay beside him, the beggar heaved himself upright with an amazing energy, and stood mowing and yammering like a thing possessed.

His ire wrought another strange transformation; for the lid of his rheumy eye closed, and the one which had drooped upon his cheek opened wide, disclosing an orb as black and sparkling as Bess’s own. His mustache and beard separated, and in the rift between appeared a writhing tongue and half a dozen fangs, jagged and yellow as those of an ancient hound.

“Hell’s fire!” he shrieked, recovering his voice. “Blight of Holy Trinity up’n Dick Teviston for a foul and lying knave! A legless waistrel, say ’e? Ag-h-h! Natheless, he shall dance! I’ll teach him to take my place i’ th’ marketplace!” And Hatshaw, leaning heavily upon his staff, tottered toward the roadway, recking naught that he trod his hat into the turf.

Bess’s fear was of short duration. Setting her hands to her hips, she laughed heartily at the storm which she had aroused.

“Whither now, Gaffer Hatshaw?” she queried.

“To bash the head of this master Jack-no-legs, to be sure!” spat the old man; “and Dick Teviston’s after him!”

“Nay! set ’e down again, old gander-shanks. I did but pleasant ’e. Noan has thy seat, after all.”

“Whoy—Bess—lass——”

A spasm of coughing choked Hatshaw’s utterance, and he sank, weak and breathless, into his former position against the stone. While he coughed he shook his mutilated fists at his tormentor.

“Tha brass-faced huzzy!” he wheezed, frowning at her with his solitary piercing eye. “Ha! Make no doubt tha coomst fairly by thy double tongue—and thy dark looks as well.” He grinned evilly. “I mind, I do, the black-avised sailor-man wi’ golden rings in his ears has trailed thy mother round about before she wedded red Tom Peake——”

A stone flung by a willing but unskilled hand buzzed past his ear and shortened Hatshaw’s scandalous relation. It was the wrath of Bess that was flaming hotly now.

“Hold thy clack, tha ruddled old bag-o’-bones!” she screamed furiously. “An’ tha’s an ounce o’ red juice in thy wizen carcass, I’ll let it form ’e at tha neck!”

“Nay, Bess, stay thy hand, lass!” Hatshaw laughed soundlessly at the success of his repartee, at the same time shielding his face apprehensively with lifted arm. Bess sought another stone.

“Peace, lass! We be but quits!” he called, as she found it and poised for her aim. “Come, buss me, lass, and we’ll be friends once again. Tha’rt a winsome baggage, Bess,” he wheedled, chuckling into his beard.

“I’d liefer buss a six-months’ corpse!” responded Bess. But she was somewhat mollified; for she let fall the stone.

Despite his great age—Hatshaw might have passed for a disreputable cousin of Jonah the prophet—the gaffer’s ears were keen. A noise on the highway at the brow of the hill drew his attention, and he inclined his head to listen.

“Tsst!” he hissed; “here be gentles a coming on horses!”

He hastily composed the folds of his cloak, rehabilitated his crushed hat, and spread his maimed hands on his knees, where they would show to the

best advantage.

“Them as goes on four feet be ever twice as free i’ th’ hand as them as rides shank’s mare, lass,” he muttered as he made those preparations. “Now stow thy gabble, mayhap I’ll give ’e a farden, if they prove kind.”

Two horsemen rounded a turn in the roadway and came down the hill at a slow trot. Hatshaw appraised them in a flashing glance of his good eye ere he closed it and opened the sightless one. He lifted his horrible hands.

“Pity, gentles!” he cried out in his droning, professional whine. “Charity for an old soldier o’ king and realm, that Providence have stricken blind.”

“Wait a bit, Concino,” called one of the horsemen in a clear young voice. He drew rein and gazed down at the beggar with curiosity, not unmixed with repulsion. His comrade halted beside him.

He who had spoken was young, not out of his teens. He was of medium height and finely made, with small hands and feet. From under a wide hat fell on his shoulders dark auburn hair, which a great dame might well have envied him. The countenance which the hat-brim shaded was delicately featured. It might have been almost girlish but for the salience of the cheek-bones and a certain hardness of the square chin, which betokened a determination which was anything but effeminate. The eyes, which, to match the hair, should have been blue or brown, were gray, and though merry were extraordinary level and direct.

The cavalier was clad in good cloth of sober blue, with a showing of lace at wrists and collar. A single white plume curled around the crown of his hat, and its brim was caught up by a silver clasp. Above the tops of his light riding-boots, buckles of the same metal adorned his breeches. At his side swung an antique rapier of unusual length, the grip of which gleamed in the sunlight with the glow of something more precious than silver.

His companion was a sturdy fellow of about his own height, but much more broad and thick of chest. The lines in his swarthy, foreign face told him as of middle age, though there was not a thread of white in his curling, dark hair, and he bore his body with all the swing and flexibility of youth.

Judged by his plain brown habit and his bearing, he was not a gentleman; but he was assuredly more than a mere servant. At his side swung the twin to the rapier carried by the lad. As he pulled up his horse, it was to be seen that the first joint of the little finger of his left hand was missing.

“Soldier——” repeated the younger horseman in a voice that betrayed a slightly foreign accent, and he continued to gaze down at Hatshaw, whose crippled paws seemed to fascinate him. “And what mischance of the wars cost you such a mutilation, old man?”

“You see before you, gentles, Anthony Hatshaw, taken by the murdering Spanish dons while a-fighting for good King James at Cadiz, in October of the year o’ grace 1625, and by them maimed, tortured and put to divers trials o’ soul and body, and now driven to beg bread by the roadsides when he be nigh five-score!” chanted the gaffer, in his high sing-song, without pausing to take breath. “Charity, gentles! Charity!”

Sudden pity shone in the eyes of the lad, and his hand sought his purse and drew forth a piece of silver.

“A worthy man, I doubt not, Concino,” he said half apologetically to his fellow rider. He poised the coin.

Bess, who had hovered near, between curiosity and a slender faith in Hatshaw’s promise to divide the spoils, had eyed the young man with frank and growing approval. When she saw the glitter of the silver, she loosed a treacherous tongue to spare the object of her admiration from what she deemed a foolish waste.

“Doan’t ’e believe th’ lyin’ rogue, my young lord,” she interposed hastily, and bobbed a curtsy with finger at chin. “An’ truth mun be said, he lacketh thumbs for that he drew too skilled a bow on the king’s red deer these many yearn ago. He be blind o’ one eye right enow; but tother have looked upon a deal o’ mischief.”

“May the fiend fly away with ’e for a meddling besom!” shrilled the beggar, “and me likewise, an’ I warm not thy smock!” Gripping his staff, he struggled to his feet, and in his anger confirmed at least a part of Bess’s treachery by opening his piercing eye to glare at her.

“Nay, nay!” cried the young man, looking from one to the other of them and breaking into a ringing laugh. “Such a wrangle is not seemly. Peace! Here’s the sixpence for you, old man—and one for you.” A coin fell in the gaffer’s hat, and another spun through the air toward Bess, who caught it adroitly in her basket.

So absorbed were the four in their parley beside the road that they did not, until it was close upon them, notice a cavalcade which swept down the hill at breakneck speed. First around the turn of the road came four outriders, urging their lathered horses at a run, and stirring up a brave cloud

of dust. Behind them galloped a half-dozen young English bloods, shouting, laughing and laying wagers upon their steeds.

With cries of “ ’Ware! ’Ware! Make way!” the servants, crouched low in their saddles and riding in a clump, dashed past the group at the roadside and on down the hill. Those behind rode more recklessly. Strung out irregularly, they filled the highway from side to side, and did not seem inclined to yield the road.

Concino called a warning and urged his horse in under the oaks and out of harm’s way. But the younger man, either because of stubbornness or because he feared injury to the beggar and the girl, who stood gaping scarcely a yard from his horse’s shoulder, continued to sit calmly in the path of the oncoming riders; although he turned slightly in his saddle to observe them.

Foremost was a tall young man in a scarlet coat astride a powerful roan horse. He rode well to the side of the road and made no attempt to turn to one side; but with a laugh and a curse drove straight on until the roan, better-sensed than its master, veered, despite him.

The man in the path, seeing that it was coming to a matter of skin-bruising, with mayhap broken bones as well, swung his leg over his saddle and leaped nimbly to the ground beside Hatshaw.

Too late, he of the red coat attempted the same maneuver. The toe of his boot struck against the withers of the other horse as he passed. The impact lifted him free from his own animal and pitched him, sprawling headlong, in the soft dust, where he rolled over three times before he came to a stop, and narrowly escaped being crushed under the hoofs of his companions’ horses. His bones were solid, for he was up again in an instant, though his eyes goggled dizzily and his step was somewhat unsteady.

Seeing his mishap, his comrades pulled up their horses and rode back up the hill, followed by the servants, all of them crying a chorus of excited questions. One of the grooms led back the fallen man’s horse.

As they drew rein beside him, a big green coach, drawn by four horses, rumbled down the hill and came to a stop twenty yards above the spot where the riders were gathering. The head of a young woman, whose features were shadowed by the rolling brim of a broad hat, and further concealed by a mask of silken scrim, was thrust out of one of the windows of the vehicle. At her command, a footman left the coach and ran forward to learn the cause of the mêlée in the highway.

“By St. George, Roger, that was a perilous fall!” cried one of the returning horsemen, a thickly built youngster with a pleasant face and a shock of curls as yellow as wheaten straw. He sprang from his saddle and seized his discomfited friend by an elbow. “I thought to have found you with your back cracked clean in twain!”

Roger’s wits had been jarred sadly. The touch of his friend’s hand brought him back to himself. He spat out a mouthful of dust and frowned darkly.

“No bones cracked, Harry,” he growled. He looked down at himself. His face, which the sudden peril had paled, reddened with a wave of angry blood.

His gay, scarlet coat was rent across the breast, and it and his thick black hair was powdered with dust. His hat was gone. His waistcoat was all awry, and his shirt was soiled and torn. At his feet lay what had been a magnificent gold watch, which a pounding hoof had smashed into irretrievable ruin. Mechanically he lifted it by its fob and dangling seals and stowed it in his pocket.

“No bones cracked,” he repeated; “but shall be presently, that I trow!”

His anger mounting at every step, he strode back and fronted the man in whom he saw the cause of his downfall.

“Why did you block the road, sirrah?” he demanded fiercely. “Could you not see that it was a race?”

Gray eyes, cool and steady, with just a hint of apprehension in them, looked into brown eyes which were insolent and furious, and reddened by recent wine. It was a duello of glances.

With fingers that trembled slightly, the smaller man stroked the muzzle of his horse.

“There were these others to be considered, *monsieur*,” he replied quietly, with a nod of his head indicating Hatshaw and the girl; “and, besides,” still more quietly, with a quietness that was not fear, “*monsieur* and his friends already had all of the road that was their right.”

“‘*Monsieur!*’” echoed Roger, his voice thin with fury, and the veins standing out upon his forehead. “Gods blood! The insolence of you Frenchmen passeth all understanding! Why, for a scurvy beggar and a silly wench you would have had me break my neck! You do need a lesson,

Frenchman! I care not if, as gossips tell, Charles Stuart *is* spending Louis Capet's gold, you shall not lack it for long! Humphrey!"

"Aye, my lord," answered one of the grooms who had come up.

"Lay me your whip about the ears of this upstart cockerel, and see to it that you lay on smartly!"

"Yes, my lord."

Humphrey rode forward with whip uplifted to do his master's bidding.

CHAPTER II

THE MAD RIDER

In the moment which followed the giving of the order a strained silence gripped the members of both parties, broken only by the thudding of shifting hoofs and the champing of bits. The gay young Englishmen fell suddenly sober and looked askance at their enraged leader. The servants stared woodenly. Hatshaw, leaning on his long staff, watched the scene with an inscrutable expression in his solitary eye. The only moving figure in the tableau was that of the advancing Humphrey.

Bess Peake was first to put the general sentiment into words.

“For shame, your lordship!” she exclaimed, “and him such a proper gentleman, too!”

“Easy, Roger, easy!” cautioned the cavalier with the yellow curls, bending from his saddle to whisper in Lord Roger’s ear. “The lass is right; he is no common fellow.”

“Let be, Harry,” grumbled Roger, with an impatient twitch of his shoulders.

Humphrey, the groom was a stocky rogue, squint-eyed and otherwise ill-favored of countenance. As he urged his horse forward, his lips curled and his cheeks widened into a grin which betokened an evil relish for his commission. But when he came closer and got a square look into the face of the man whom he threatened, the groom hesitated and his whip-hand faltered.

Entirely oblivious, it seemed, of the approach of Humphrey and his whip, the young Frenchman looked not at all at the groom, but at the groom’s master, who had sent him, and with such a white and concentrated fury in his steady regard that it was small wonder that Humphrey, riding in from the side and seeing it, was seized with a sudden distaste for his business.

Lord Roger, meeting that level, baleful stare, and seeing the gray eyes turning into cold steel, himself sensed an uneasiness to which he was a stranger; for he was in nowise a coward. He noted, too, that the lad had quit caressing the nose of his horse, and that the fingers of his right hand were wrapped about the hilt of his rapier in a grip which whitened their knuckles.

At this juncture, when Humphrey, torn between two fears, but fearing his master most, was about to bring down his lash, a quiet voice with a quaint Italian accent cut in from under the oaks:

“Unless my lord would have the brains of his servant heavier by three leaden slugs than they already are, he had best recall that order.”

All eyes turned to the source of the unlooked-for interruption.

“By St. George!” cried Henry, “the villain holds us all in play!” and he laughed merrily, his apprehension lost in relief at the diversion of his friend’s design.

While the attention of the others had been riveted upon the center of the quarrel, the man Concino had been left free to act according to his own fancy, and he had done so with the promptitude of one who greets danger as an old acquaintance and who knows exceedingly well how it should be met.

He had turned in his saddle, letting his reins fall upon the pommel. His extended left hand held a pistol of formidable proportions, the barrel of which, steady as a rock, pointed at the head of the groom. In his right hand, peeping across his saddle-bow, and continually in motion, the mate to the weapon was directed in turn now at one and now at another of the men in front of him, menacing all and ready to speak with any. Hostile as was his demonstration, Concino was smiling, though a fleck of color burned dully in each of his swarthy cheeks.

Humphrey saw that dark, unwinking, unwavering muzzle staring into the middle of his ugly countenance, and he yelled in fear and let his whip fall in the roadway. Considering himself incontinently absolved of a performance for which his heart had grown small, he backed his horse in haste to a safer distance. Nor was there a man of those whom the second pistol covered who did not feel disquieting qualms in his insides each time that he became the object of the weapon’s regard—for Concino aimed low.

Stiffer stuff was in the groom’s master, and with it a wild, headstrong courage which recked little of hindrance or threat. The interference but added fuel to the fire of his rage. He caught up Humphrey’s fallen whip from the dust, flourished it with a vicious crack, and took a step toward the lad.

“By God’s thunders! I will e’en chastise you myself, as I would a stubborn hound!” he grated between clenched teeth.

That same pistol which had driven Humphrey into retirement swung into line against his broad chest. From behind the leveled weapon Concino spoke

again, and this time there was a hint of metal in his soft, southern tones:

“Hold your hand, or, *por Dio*—be you thrice a lord, I will let the sunlight shine through your ribs! Strange manners you have here in England,” he went on. “Is it, then, your custom to raise a lash against your equal when the both of you wear good steel at your sides?”

To only one word of the speech did Lord Roger give heed.

“Equal!” he echoed with a sneer and a scornful glance at the modest garb of the youth before him. “Equal! What jape is this, varlet? Is young Sir Silence here perchance a prince of the blood? *Pah!*”

“Beyond the water yonder,” retorted Concino, with a shake of his head toward the tossing blue of the channel, “the young *maestro*, Raymond Jehan du Chêne, is the Vicomte de Mervalles—of a family which bred courtly gentlemen when this land of yours bred naught but bulls and barbarians!”

“Well answered, *damme!*” laughed Harry, still seeking to turn the quarrel into the ways of peaceful pleasantry. “Put up your villainous pistols, man!” he called to Concino; “and do you, Roger, drop that whip, unknit your black brows, and get to horse. Bethink you, the Lady Jean will rarely warm your ears for so delaying her coach. Come!”

But Lord Roger owned an ill-conditioned temper. Though he threw down the lash readily enough, he laid a hand on his sword.

“Have done with your quips, Harry,” he replied testily. “Am I to be belittled by an insolent springald and bullied by his groom, and have no satisfaction?”

Whereat Harry shrugged his shoulders and gestured with his hands as though he washed them of the entire matter. Roger addressed himself to the vicomte.

“Mayhap your varlet lies,” he said; “but I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt. It appears that you have swallowed your tongue; but I hope, sir, that your sword-arm hath not been stricken with palsy. I am Roger Marsden, Earl of Templeton. Come; out with it!” And he drew his own blade and fell into posture.

From the instant when he had heard Lord Roger set on the groom with the whip, the young Frenchman, with the exception that his hand groped and found the hilt of his sword, had stood silent and motionless as a frozen man. The muscles of his cheeks and jaw had contracted, straining his fresh young face into lines and furrows, which seemed as though wrought with a chisel

on something hard and unyielding. His eyes had never left the face of his adversary; and in them glowed an anger which by comparison made the blustering wrath of the Englishman puny and futile.

His face, which had gone ghastly white at mention of the lash, had flushed again when he heard Concino speak for him. He had striven to muster words to answer for himself; but they choked him, and he could not free them. Then Marsden's blade shone brightly in the sunshine before him.

There—and *le bon Dieu* be thanked for it with great praise—was something to which he *could* reply. His lithe body whipped forward like a released spring. The gold-hilted rapier seemed to leap from its scabbard of its own volition, and met the sword of the earl with a harsh, stern clang that struck sparks from the crossing steel.

“Roger playeth one of the shrewdest blades in England—but he is over prone to make proof of it,” muttered Harry. “Poor lad, I——” He straightened suddenly in his saddle. “St. George! Where learned the lad his tricks?” he shouted. “He swordeth like a very Bayard! Well thrust! And, oh! well parried! One second slower, and he had tickled your rib-bones that time, my Roger!”

It had seemed an hour; yet it was scarcely five minutes since Raymond Jehan du Chêne, with a laugh on his lips and peace in his heart, had paused on the hillside and tossed a coin into the beggar's hat. He had been a boy, carefully reared, all unprepared as yet to meet the world. But strange, swift transmutations may be wrought by the alchemy of circumstance. Stirred by an anger such as he had never known, in the five minutes the boy had become a man, and was playing a man's grim game, with a wild, fierce thrill in his blood and a song in his brain attuned to the clashing of the swords.

Never again in all his life would the Vicomte de Mervalles stand speechless in the face of insult.

What a blade he wielded!

At the quarrel's beginning the Englishman had considered him with pity, mixed with a bit of contempt of his tongue's failure, but pity uppermost; for Marsden was a famous swordsman. Before half a dozen thrusts had been sped and parried, they were bending breathlessly from their saddles, watching with widening eyes the play of a blade which flashed and darted like summer lightning, almost too swiftly for mortal gaze to follow.

When his rapier first left its scabbard, Raymond let his bridle rein fall from his arm. Concino, returning his pistols to their holsters, rode forward

and took it. The Italian had viewed with anxiety and annoyance his comrade's lack of initiative; but once the swords were making music, his face had cleared, and he sat nodding his head and muttering delightedly to himself.

“*Santissima Madonna!* Would that the Wolf were here to see this cub that he has sired! A little slow at the beginning—but then, it is his first fight. And, *por Dio*—he makes up for it now! Ah, young one, four of the greatest masters of the sword that the world has ever known are pointing your blade for you! Old Philibert taught me; Philibert and I taught the Wolf; and the Wolf and I taught you. Well I call to mind the Wolf's first fight, and how he wept on my shoulder at the end of it. Ah's me! Nigh twenty years have passed away since the night!”

So Concino dreamed aloud; and though he dreamed, his quick brown eyes lost no detail of his pupil's performance.

For a little space the lad fought as though possessed of a devil, leaping in and out with the agility of a wild thing of the forests, and thrusting so closely and continuously that it seemed that he would, by the sheer fury and swiftness of his attack, beat down the Englishman's guard and end the fight ere it was fairly begun.

His hat with its curling white plume flew from his head and lay upon the grass; his auburn hair streamed over his shoulders and in the sunlight seemed a floating flame. Straight-armed and with supple wrist, as a proper swordsman should, he managed his long rapier; and so marvelously swift was his fence that to the confused watchers not one but three whirling blades appeared to be held in its antique hilt of gold. Marsden thought at times that he saw even more.

Black Roger, with a fleck of foam on his lips and mad fury burning in his bloodshot eyes, somehow met and withstood the whirlwind; for he, too, was a splendid bladesman, and long of reach and powerful of arm. He had meant to finish the matter soon, had Roger, to run the youngster through the shoulder, or, better still, to mar his handsome face with a gash across the cheek. Instead of the rough attack which he had meditated, he found himself from the very first on the defensive, with every ounce of strength in him and all the sword wiles he knew called into service to keep his skin whole.

As he warmed into the work, Raymond's set features relaxed, and he smiled as he fought. With the smile came a modification of his fighting. Though his attack was none the less resolute, it slackened in its intensity,

and the lust of death went out of his stinging thrusts. He became more careful.

Marsden felt the change, and misread it. He thought that his antagonist was tiring. So from the defense he in turn passed to the attack with all the skill of which he was master. He rushed, and for a time by his superior strength pressed the lighter man before him. They left the roadway. Step by step Raymond gave way, until he stood by the beggar's stone, and his blue coat rubbed elbows with Hatshaw's faded cloak. There he elected to stand, nor could all of Roger's heady, ruffling pressure drive him an inch farther.

With his change of mood the lad regained his speech.

"My lord earl handles his sword as his lackey does his whip," he said tauntingly. And presently: "*Monsieur* would have me whipped—for which I shall nick *monsieur's* ears."

"I'll nick your heart, sirrah!" groaned Roger, and he redoubled his efforts.

Then—and despite the warning he had had, Marsden thought it an accident; but such accidents make the glory of great swordsmen—the long blade of the rapier glided past his guard, and its keen point touched the lobe of his left ear. So steady was the hand which directed it, that it neither gashed nor scratched the flesh, but nicked it at the edge of the lobe so that scarcely a full drop of blood was drawn.

"*Monsieur* must wear the mate to that ruby," said Raymond coolly. He would have made the promise good; already the invincible blade was feeling for its opening, when one of his spurs caught in a wisp of brushwood. He tripped, staggered, and his point went wild.

Perhaps a more generous opponent—Lord Harry March, for instance—had not taken full advantage of that mishap. But Roger had little chivalry in his soul. He was brave enough, but proud, unforgiving, and brutal; and to his manner of thinking he had been ill used. He saw the opening. His eyes lighted with fierce triumph. With a shout he shortened sword and sped a deadly thrust at Raymond's unprotected throat.

Came the thwack of hard wood meeting harder steel. Marsden's blade, deflected, passed harmlessly through the air above the head of the vicomte, who had fallen to one knee.

Mayhap, as the girl had said, Anthony Hatshaw had been a poacher among the king's deer. Perchance his own tale was true, and he had been a soldier. He had lived years enough to have been both, and many other things

beside. Be his past what it might, his aged heart had not outlived the warmth of gratitude. That Raymond had tossed him a sixpence counted little.

But the young man had interposed his body and that of his good horse to shield the beggar, and because of it the quarrel had followed. With Hatshaw that counted for much. He had watched the fighting with a kindling flame in his wicked old eye and a mumbling of his shriveled lips which a keen ear might have interpreted as applause for his champion.

When he saw that champion down and target for a foul stroke, the gaffer could contain himself no longer. He was holding his long staff in the grip of his crippled hands as quarter-stave men grasp their weapons. Without thought of consequence, he whirled it up and parried Roger's blade so smartly that he almost struck it from the young man's hand.

Beside himself with rage, Marsden wheeled on the meddler.

"That for your tampering, you accursed worm!" he roared, and ran the beggar through his shrunken breast.

Hatshaw let fall his lifted stave and crumpled in a choking, gasping heap across his stone. A spurt of dark blood jetted from his mouth and stained his white beard.

Hardly had he disengaged his sword when Marsden heard a cry which rang in his ears like a smitten silver bell.

"To your place in hell, my lord coward!"

A searing pain tore through his vitals. The sunlight turned into a red mist before him, in which swam a bitterly contemptuous face. He saw a hand and a sword-hilt moving away from his broad chest. Wonderingly he realized that it was his own body from which the blade was departing. All light failed. He pitched backward and lay drumming with his heels upon the sod.

For the space of a heart-beat there was silence on the hillside, the silence of staring eyes and bated breath. One of the fallen man's comrades broke it with the cry:

"He hath slain Templeton! Take him! Take him!"

Horses and men surged forward.

Raymond, looking down at the work of his hand, became aware of a pressure against his shoulder. It was his horse. Across the saddle Concino called:

"Quick, *maestro*! Mount and ride! They be too many for us!"

Aroused, he swung into the saddle. It seemed for an instant he meditated cutting his way through the Englishmen who held the road and the hill; for he faced that way, and his gray eyes began to blaze. But Concino's hand gripped his bridle and swung his horse around.

As he turned, Raymond had a confused glimpse of plunging horses, the big green coach beyond, and midway between, a small young woman with the upper part of her face concealed by a mask, who stood in the road and stamped her foot and shouted angrily. He caught the gleam of indignant eyes through the slits in the silken screen. What she said, he could not understand, and none of those to whom she shouted paid any heed. It was only a fleeting picture that Raymond saw; but it stayed in his memory long afterward, and often he wondered who the small, imperious lady might be.

Again Concino shouted to haste. Raymond clapped spurs to his steed and rode down the hill beside the Italian in a swirl of yellow dust. Behind them thundered and shouted the pursuit. Pistols began to crack. A ball hissed over the vicomte's shoulder and shore away a lock of his tossing hair.

Concino turned as he galloped and let fly with one of his miniature cannon. One of the pursuers—it chanced to be Humphrey the groom—tumbled, bawling, from his saddle with a broken elbow.

Most mightily surprised were the good folk of Portsmouth town when the mad steeplechase from the hill tore through their streets, crowded with the market-day gathering. Across the main square raced pursued and pursuers, shouting and shooting, and the townspeople scattered and scuttled like scared rabbits to make way for the pounding hoofs. Some of them in their panic scrambled and clawed their way into the stalls which lined the marketplace, and made sorry wrecks of the carefully piled early garden goods which were on display.

One red-faced burgher's lady of great weight and thickness dived head first into the center of a pyramid of fall cabbages and brought down upon herself an avalanche which covered her wriggling body so that she stuck fast with a brave show of waving red woolen hosiery. Despite the seriousness of his predicament, Raymond must needs shout with laughter as he rode past that ludicrous salad. A moment later he ducked to his horse's mane and shrieked again.

A monger of dairy products, seeing that the fleeing horsemen evidently were foreigners, and wishing to do his part for England, no matter what the quarrel might be, poised and cast a ripe cheese with such vigor and good aim that it struck Concino's saddle-bow and shattered there, to the detriment

of the rider's small-clothes, and his temper as well. It was one of those hard-shelled affairs with a soft and sticky center, and of a composition which, as soon as it is cracked, sends silent news of the event to every nose within a furlong.

"Mother of God!" cried the Italian; "let us out of this, and quickly!" And he rode with averted face.

Both of the fugitives knew Portsmouth well from former visits; but the Englishmen behind them rode good horseflesh and pressed them so hardly that there was no opportunity to double and throw them off the trail. They left the market-square by a short, straight street which led to the quays.

Ahead of him Raymond saw the stone stretch of the mole which jutted into the harbor, and at its end a long dark ship with brown sails. The gang-plank of the ship already was in the air. She was departing.

It came to the mind of the lad that even if they should succeed in distancing their pursuers, which seemed a matter for doubt, England was no longer a safe place for him, now that he had slain a British earl.

With a shout: "The ship! The ship!" he spurred his horse down the sloping street, and its steel-shod hoofs rang loudly on the stone flagging of the mole, from where there was no retreat. Muttering an appeal to the saints, Concino followed.

Ten feet of water lay between the brink of the stonework and the low decking of the ship's waist when the daring young rider reached the end of the mole. Well for him that the courage of his steed matched his own. Gathering its legs under it and neighing wildly, it took the leap. A thousand eyes on ships and shore saw its dark bulk silhouetted against the sky. A gasp of wonder went up from half a thousand throats when the watchers heard the hollow shock of hoofs on the decking that told that the perilous feat was accomplished and the first rider was safe on the ship. But what of the second?

Concino's mount was faint-hearted. Snorting with affright, it shortened stride when it was still a dozen yards from the end of the mole, set its feet stubbornly and slid to a stop on the flagstones. The Italian slipped, cursing, from his saddle. Along the mole galloped his enemies, shouting triumphantly and sure now that one of their quarry could not escape them. On the deck of the ship the vicomte cried loudly in consternation, sprang from his horse and ran toward the rail, determined to rejoin his comrade.

In the wink of an eye Concino saw these things—and more. At his feet lay a pole nearly fifteen feet in length, the unstepped mast of a dory, light and slender. To see was to act. He caught up the pole and ran forward.

Where a rough, shallow crevice marked the junction of four of the flagstones, he set the end of his shaft and vaulted high in the air. For an instant he paused at the height of his arc, and the prodigious leap seemed a failure. Then, while the sailors still stared open-mouthed at the advent of Raymond among them, Concino crossed the gap and alighted beside him.

Vainly the baffled Englishmen shouted from the end of the mole, demanding that the master of the ship put back and render them the fugitives. The only answer to their angry cries was an ironic: “*Bon jour*” from Raymond, accompanied by a wave of his hand.

The land breeze filled the big brown sail. The ship wore on, out of the harbor.

CHAPTER III

THE WILLFUL LADY

Echo flung back the clamor of pursuit along the reaches of the hill road. Harry March knelt in the grass under the swaying oaks and took Marsden's head on his arm.

Reasons three had held Lord Harry back from the chase of the fleeing swordsman. There was a chance, a slender chance, that the blade which had passed through Roger's body had not severed the thread of life. Secondly, there was in the young Englishman an abiding sense of fairness. He deemed that the quarrel had been most unjustly thrust upon the victor; and though it perhaps had cost the life of his friend, he had no desire to see vengeance done.

Third of the reasons was that the girl from the coach had called out to stay the pursuit, and Harry had heard and understood her. Though gossip linked the names of Lady Jean Henrietta Murrie and Lord Roger Marsden to the tune of wedding bells, there was in the heart of March a white inner shrine where her image stood, and where he worshiped hopelessly but faithfully. In all honorable things he would obey her to the death.

So faithful was he in friendship, so unselfish in love, that his mind had not for one instant harbored the thought that the passing of Roger would leave his own path cleared. It was no rival who bent over Marsden and felt for his wound with eager, hastening fingers, but his boyhood's friend, sincere in the hope that he would not die. And when the groping fingers hovered over the seat of life and felt a regular throbbing there, March's joy in the discovery was unreserved.

While he looked after the condition of Marsden, Bess Peake had made shift to drag Hatshaw from where he lay face downward across the stone. She stretched the gaffer's wasted limbs upon the sward, opened his frayed cloak and ragged shirt, and with a bright kerchief attempted to stanch the flow of blood from the gash which Roger's rapier had made in his chest.

Informed by one of the grooms as to the cause of the brawl, the footman who had been sent by Lady Jean from the coach had borne the news to his mistress, whereupon she had alighted from the vehicle and come down the road on foot. Her intent had been to intervene; for she was wont to carry

things to her liking with a high hand, and she had no fear of Roger in his blackest moods.

Very decidedly she had marched in her small, square-toed boots, her hands clenched and her mouth set with the intensity of her purpose. Then she had glimpsed the vicomte's face—she saw it first at the moment when his constraint left him and he smiled as he fought—and she had paused.

Something in the splendid youth and courage of him called to her own high spirit like a well-beloved voice. While her soul listened and made answer to that summons, her mind forgot its purpose.

Unseen by the fighting men and those who watched the combat, she stood fascinated in the roadway, her eyes shining, one hand fluttering at her throat, and the scarlet petals of her lips forming unconscious whisperings. Forgetful, too, that he was the foe of her lover—Marsden was not yet her fiancé, despite the gossips' tongues—her whole being plighted allegiance to the stranger and wished him victory. When he slipped and faltered, and the wings of death seemed to be folding around him, she screamed with horror and knew not that she did so.

All in a moment the duel was done, black Marsden lay in the grass, and the other, in whom her heart already took a proud proprietorship, was in the saddle and away. God speed him, wherever he might go! was her prayer, and she called fiercely to arrest the vengeance of lead and steel which swept after him. When her commands were unheeded, she stood with clasped hands and breathlessly traced the course of his flight through the streets below. She saw him gallop reckless of danger, on the stone pathway of the mole, and her heart stood still when he set his horse to its mighty leap.

It was not until she saw him safely on board the receding ship that she returned to control of herself. Crossing the sward, she stood beside Lord March.

There was little pity in the gaze she bent on Roger's still face, but rather the awakening and the relief of one who for the first time sees clearly and is glad for the vision.

"Archie!" she called.

A number of her men had come from the coach and stood staring. From among them a bare-legged, black-bearded Highlander of great stature stepped out at the summons of his mistress.

"You have skill in the care of wounds and the like, Archie MacGregor. Look to these men," she commanded. "Nay—the old man first," she

interposed sharply as the Scot started to kneel at Marsden's side.

With grave courtesy the giant waved Bess Peake aside. His big, hairy hands, gentle as those of a woman, for all their size and power, explored Hatshaw's injury.

"This yin is fair dune for, ma leddy," he said in a deep bass growl, looking up after a brief examination. "Puir body, the bit steel has made a hool i' his bellows whaur I could pit ma two thoombs. He'll be winnin' awa' sune." And feeling himself in the near presence of death the MacGregor removed his flat tam-o'-shanter from his black locks and laid it on the turf.

Jean crossed herself; she was a good Catholic, and her father, the Earl of Raasay, was a friend of the Duke of York. "You may attend my Lord Marsden now, Archie," she consented to her henchman's look of inquiry. MacGregor left the dying beggar to the continued ministrations of Bess, and turned his attention to Roger. He inspected the sword-gash in Marsden's breast and then felt at his back, where the point had pierced through.

"The deil has stood by his ain," he said with Scottish frankness when he had done—for he had scant liking for Roger. "The laddie's blade has passed atween heart an' bowels. Gin he has gude care he'll be a' fit to handle steel again i' the fortnicht." Having passed judgment, Archie stood up and wiped his hands with a wisp of grass.

Almost immediately Roger proved the correctness of the diagnosis by sighing and opening his eyes. The only face within his range of vision was that of the Highlander.

"I came by an ugly tumble, Archie, man," he said weakly.

"So ye did, ma lord; ye hae fa'en frae the pathway o' honor—an' that's a lang, unco' wicked fa'," observed the Scot dryly, and he turned his broad back. Chief of a clan in his own wild hills, the MacGregor was a man who spoke his opinions freely and without fear; likewise his eyes and understanding were passing keen. He had noted the change in his mistress.

Marsden's brows wrinkled uncomprehendingly. He stirred in March's arms, groaned and clutched at his breast. His hand came away wet. When he looked at it, memory came back with a rush, and anger along with it.

"How—how sorely be I stricken, Harry?" he asked of his friend.

"'Twas a clean thrust, and marred no vitals," replied March. "You'll be sound as a tree again before the June roses blow."

“I’ll live, then, to see that rake-helly brat hanged! Have they taken him—the French harlequin? Have him fetched hither.”

Before Harry could answer, the bass tones of MacGregor were heard from the background.

“Oh, ye’ll leeve, ma lord; but I’m thinkin’ ye’ll no see the neck o’ yon laddie streechit, sune or at a’. He’s gangin’ the noo for a lang voyage ower the bonny blue sea. An’ he’s nane the warse for it a’—your sword an’ bullets, an’ the ootlandish titles ye hae——”

“Hold your tongue, Archie!” Jean broke in.

“Aye, I’ll haud ma clackin’ maistress—gin ye tull me, but not for that yin. Natheless, an’ for a’ that, yon’s a boony bit laddie as ye varra weel ken yersel’, an’ I canna thole to hear him misca’ed by——”

“Be quiet, or I’ll lay my whip about your bare shanks!” threatened Jean with a stamp of her boot.

“Aye, I’m quietin’,” returned her displeased follower. Still grumbling into his beard, he moved off in the direction of the coach. In the roadway he met Humphrey, come groaning up the hill with his shattered arm. The Scot, lapsing into grim silence, bound up the injured member, and was none too gentle in his surgery.

Ordinarily the irascible young earl would have raved at such criticism as MacGregor had made free with; but in the grip of the larger anger provoked by Raymond he let the insolence of the big clansman go unchallenged.

“’Tis true—what the Scottish loon saith?” he questioned of March. “The whelp got away, clean and scatheless?”

Lord Harry nodded. Despite the pain of his wound, which was like red-hot iron, Roger struggled into a sitting position. Again he burst out, fury lending strength to his voice.

“Accursed wasp! And right finely did he sting me with his sword-juggling! But he’s not the match for Roger Marsden in fair fence, Harry! ’Twas a craven stroke that grassed me!”

When she heard that astounding declaration Lady Jean gasped and her eyes flamed through her mask; and even Lord Harry raised his eyebrows and twisted his mouth as though it held something distasteful.

“I’ll even that score, though it take me half my days—by God, I will!” stormed Marsden. “I’ll——” He broke his words suddenly; for Jean had

stepped forward where he could see her. "Ah, my dear lady," he went on rather shamefacedly, "you see me laid by the heels. 'Twas a mishap of slight moment. I'll be lacking in attendance for a few days—not many. I will pass them thinking of pretty speeches for your ear—when we do meet again."

"I'll have none of your speeches, my Lord of Templeton," retorted the girl, her voice so choked with passion that it was scarcely recognizable. "And I shall take good care, sir, that your attendance on me shall be lacking through *all* your days! Not only have I heard you this day heap unmannerly abuse upon the head of a man whose only mistake was to treat you like a gentleman until you showed him his error; but you have the brass to speak of a craven stroke, when my own eyes saw you strike two of the foulest which ever dishonored a sword! By all the saints, sir, were I a man, and were you not already chastised, I would call you to account, and speedily! Now you speak of revenge! You had much better get down on your knees and give thanks to the good God who spared you today—and why He did so He alone knoweth!"

"Jean! Why, Jean!" exclaimed Roger, overwhelmed and bewildered by the torrent of words which she had let loose upon his head. But she had only paused to take breath.

"Dinna ye Jean me mair!" she caught him up, in her excitement falling into a burr as broad almost as that of Archie himself. "I hae dune wi' ye henceforth an' for aye! Frae the noo ye'll be gangin' your ain ways, my lord, and I'll be gangin' mine. Mayhap I could hae put oop wi' your black ways and your deil's tempers, for God kens that I fear you not—but Jean Murrie o' Raasay will hae nocht to do wi' a coward!"

Her voice had risen high. Out in the road MacGregor, on his way to the coach, heard it and paused to listen. He chuckled delightedly.

"Aye, Archie, she bade ye haud your tongue," he murmured; "but isna she juist goin' it gran'ly hersel'! Oh, mon!"

Marsden groaned.

"For the sake of an unknown devil's brat is every one to turn against me?" he said bitterly.

"Gin he waur what you misca' him, he wad be ain brither to you," retorted Jean with spirit, "but he's a braw an' gallant laddie wha I hae hopes to see again."

"I will take it upon me to engage that you shall—at the swinging end of a rope," grated Roger. "Praise God, I still have the ear of the king, and he in

turn hath that of Louis of France, whither the mountebank doubtless hath fled.”

“An’ for ilka leein’ ward you whisper i’ the ear o’ King Charlie, my faither, the Earl o’ Raasay, will speak him twa truthfu’ anes—to which, an it needs, I’ll add a third my ainsel’,” was Jean’s parting thrust. She turned away, glad that she wore a mask; for tears of vexation were wetting her cheeks, and she would not for much have had Marsden see that he had so moved her. As she went she tossed a gold piece to Bess.

“To gie the auld mon a proper burial,” she explained.

“I have not done with you yet, you jilting jade!” Roger flung after her. “You double-tongued Highland cat! You——”

What further term of insult he might have uttered was stifled into inarticulate babble by the hand of Lord Harry March, which closed over his mouth and remained there until the girl was out of earshot.

Ashamed that she had stooped to bandy words, she hastened on, passed the grinning MacGregor, and clambered into her coach, where two maids and a small, dark, frightened-looking kinswoman from Raasay were waiting.

From Tunbridge Wells Jean had set out on the preceding day to pay a visit to her friend, Lady Anne Smedford, at Portsmouth. Marsden and his companions had forsaken the gaming tables at the Wells to ride as her escort. It had been a two-day riding, broken by a night at Brighton, where the party had been the guests of George Cavendish, the young baron of Windon, who had entertained his guests nobly and then ridden on with them.

Now, when she was so near to the end of her journey, Jean felt a sudden distaste for the projected visit. She bethought her that Lady Anne was but a tiresome baggage, after all, with her soft ways and bubbling tongue. Besides, the friends of Roger in all likelihood would bear him to the home of Sir John Smedford, there to lie until he was whole of his wound. Jean had seen all that she could endure of Roger for many a long day. She decided that she would not go on. So she ordered her driver to turn his horses. He was obeying when the men who had pursed the two fugitives came straggling up the hillside.

Cavendish, unaware of the turn affairs had taken in his absence, and somewhat puzzled, rode up and looked into the coach window.

“The fox slipped us,” he laughed. “We did not run him to earth; but, nevertheless, we lifted his brush.”

Before Jean's eyes he dangled a long tress of red hair, dusty from its fall in the road.

"Ah; give it me!" And Jean reached from the window and snatched the trophy. She gave the order to drive on, and rode away without another word to Cavendish, who sat looking perplexedly from his empty fingers to the back of the receding coach.

"Ods fish!" he exclaimed, shaking his head. "Now what may that portend?" A moment afterward he spurred alongside the coach again.

"I know where the fox hath his lair when he's at home," he called.

Jean gave instant heed.

"Where?" she asked.

"A league or thereabouts to the south of Godalming in Surrey," was the reply. "His father calleth himself the Comte de Mortemart, and hath, 'tis told, the friendship of the great King Louis of France, although for some hidden reason he doth abide in exile from his native land."

"Countless thanks for your courtesy, my lord George!"

Cavendish turned his horse back, marveling at the sweetness of the smile which her lips had given him, though he could have sworn that not many moments before her eyes had been weeping.

Back under the oaks Lord March took his hand from his friend's mouth when Jean was gone.

"By the blood of God! You shall answer to me for that, Harry March!" sputtered Roger furiously when his lips were freed.

Sunny-tempered and forbearing as March was, his forbearance had been worn thin.

"When and where it shall please you, my lord," he answered coldly. He laid Marsden on the turf and went to direct the grooms to fetch up a horse-litter from the town. Roger glared after him.

"When I be down they all flout me," he muttered. Born of his weakness and peevishness, two tears rolled slowly down his cheeks.

The day had yet another irritating buffet in store for Roger.

After MacGregor had turned away from Hatshaw, the girl Bess had resumed her station, hanging over the beggar's body keeping up a continual whimpering and sniveling. This was partly pretense to draw attention to

herself, but partly real; for she was both affrighted and angered, and somewhat touched besides by the sudden taking-off of her ancient crony. Albeit, she had missed nothing of the transactions around her.

Hatshaw had lain very still. But though he was drifting rapidly into the shadows, the gaffer loosed his hold on the thread of life stubbornly. The marvelous vitality which had sustained him through nearly a hundred years flamed up with a renewed strength at the end.

To the terror of the girl, he suddenly wiggled upright and pushed her from him with astonishing vigor. His one eye shone with its old-time fire. Hawking and wheezing, he cleared his throat and mouth, spat out a great gout of blood, and spoke.

“Quit thy mewling, wull ’e, lass,” he said testily. “Tha wull not let a man die in peace, plague on ’e! Ah’s me, I *be* a-dyin’! I want not to die, lass,” he lamented with senile tears. “It be so fine to sit in th’ good God’s sunlight an’ hear th’ bees an’ th’ birds, an’ th’ clink o’ good money-pieces a-fallin’ in th’ hat.”

His tone changed, and he straightened proudly, though the effort wrung from him a groan of agony.

“Whoy, lass, I’ll not complain no more. I be dyin’ by th’ sword—like as a man should die! I never thought to face bared bilbo again.” He lowered his voice confidently.

“There’s a store of silver-pieces, Bess. Seek unner the girt hearthstone where I bide, an’ find it. ’Twill buy me a place to lie in the churchyard mold down yonder—an’ a good bit left beside. See to it, Bess, woan’t ’e? See that I be buried well, wi’ a girt green mound atop me—bigger than t’ one atop Jammy Chalkstone as they planted last St. Thomas’s Eve. An’ put a bit o’ wooden cross at th’ head on’t, lass—an’ mayhap at whiles a posy, when they be in season. Promise, Bess.”

Bess promised tearfully.

“Whoy now, tha’rt a goodly lass, when all’s said. Mayst keep th’ rest o’ th’ brass, Bess, for thine own.”

Another interest crossed the gaffer’s mind.

“Where be the lad—the Frenchman?” he queried.

“He be safe gone in th’ ship from furrin’ parts—joomped his horse aboard her like a flyin’ angel,” Bess told him. Hatshaw nodded his approval. His roving eye for the first time discerned Marsden lying near him. Their

glances crossed. Hatshaw pointed to him with one of his aged, crippled hands.

“Did *he* serve yon as yon served me?” he asked eagerly.

“Aye,” replied the girl; “but they do say as how his ludship wull not die, though he be thrust fair through his midriff, like to ’e.”

Hatshaw bent forward and considered his fallen slayer. The eye of the ancient was glazing fast. He began to sway. But he still had something to say, and he *would* say it. Summoning his failing powers for a last effort, he extended his thumbless hands toward Marsden.

“Curse ’e!” he shrilled. “Th’ black blight lie on thy rotten soul in thy down-settings an’ thy up-gettings, waking and sleeping, through all thy nights an’ days! Curse ’e, I says!”

His voice weakened.

“Thy time—be a-comin’, I be—a-goin’. I—wull—not see. But th’—lad—mark—what—I tulls ’e, *He’ll—send ’e—to hell—when—thy—time—coomst!*”

The last words were pronounced with prophetic emphasis. Though Marsden sneered and tried to laugh, his face blanched; for all his effrontry was not proof against the solemn curse of a dying man.

It was the last flare of Hatshaw’s stubborn will. Bess stooped over him as he fell back.

“Whoy—th’ sky—be—settlin’!” he whispered wonderingly. A shiver ran through his frame, and his chin fell.

CHAPTER IV

THE HOUSE OF THE WOLF

Jean did not follow the highway that led back toward Tunbridge Wells, which she had meant to do. In response to the urge of a half-formed project which Cavendish's information had made definite, she questioned her coach-driver of the roads, and found that he knew them well.

To the surprise of her escort and the almost tearful consternation of Mistress Mary Murrie, she bade him turn northward at Arundel, with Godalming as the goal. The coming of night found the party deep in the Sussex hills.

"Save us a'! What new madness hae ye in that loon's heid, Jean Murrie!" protested Mistress Mary, gazing fearfully into the shadows at the side of the way. "Ye'll no be satisfied till ye get a' our necks thrawn by the wild hill bodies!"

"Hush, now, Mary! Haven't we six stout gillies of Raasay—to say naught of Archie MacGregor, that's himself the match for half-score footpads?" Jean reassured her. But Mary was uncomfortable.

"Aye, I ween that he'd ootrin them a' wi' the lang lugs o' him—the muckle sumph!" she replied.

Archie, riding by the coach-wheel and overhearing the calumny, thrust his face close to the window.

"Gin we meet oop wi' ony highwaymen, Maistress Jean, juist ye loose the tongue o' Mary Murrie till them," he rumbled. "'Tis a mair fearsome weepoon by far than the claymore o' Lang Dugal' o' Rona. I'm fair scairt o' it mysel'." And MacGregor withdrew hastily to forestall the retort which followed him into the darkness.

"Dinna ye threep lees till me, ye insolent randy, ye! Gin I leeve to speer Raasay, firth again, me sax brithers wull teach ye to hae respect for decent fowk!"

Despite the gloomy forebodings of the Highland woman, the party reached the town of Petworth unmolested, though late in the evening, and put up for the night at the Bush and Bough Tavern, where their arrival was

celebrated by no end of a stir and the untimely deaths of at least a dozen plump pullets.

By the light of the candles in her room that night, Jean carefully brushed the dust from the auburn trophy of which she had despoiled Cavendish. That done, she tied it with a bit of blue ribbon and sat by the open window, caressing it with her fingers. These proceedings were viewed with black suspicion by her traveling companion. Mary stood it in silence until her feelings compelled speech.

“Cast that weesp o’ red wickedness frae the weendow, an’ let your perdeeetious thochts gang oot wi’ it,” she adjured.

Jean gave her a look in which mischief was mingled with a sentiment engendered by the moonlight of the night and the mystery of the thoughts which clung about the keepsake with which her fingers were toying.

“Ah, ’twas a bonny, bonny head that bore that tress, Mary,” she said dreamily. “I think I could follow it to the end of the world, and be happy every step of the way.”

“Save us, the lassie’s gane gyte!” ejaculated Mary with uplifted hands. “Fairst she maun don sword an’ breeks an’ gae ram-stammin’ i’ the den o’ the evil one, whaur the feckless callants mak’ sinfu’ waste of gude siller wi’ cairts an’ siccan; an’ noo she maun gae a-rinnin’ after the fairst gaberlunzie’s gangrel that gangs the kintra! Wull ye nae hae dune wi’ sic fuleeshness, Jean? Ma heart’s feared for ye. Fine tales o’ your gaun’s-on I’ll hae to tull your faither!”

“But you’ll not tell him, Mary dear,” returned Jean sweetly. “You know you won’t—just because *you* are Mary dear.”

A snort was the little woman’s only answer to this wheedling; but the lines about her lips unbent as she went bustling around the room, delving into the dark clothes-press and hunting under the bed, after the fashion of womankind the world over when they find themselves in a strange sleeping-place. Mary was loyal to her core. She might—often did—speak her mind with jarring frankness; but red-hot pincers could not have dragged from her a single whisper of threachery to her cousin and mistress—and Jean knew it.

A sudden ringing burst of laughter caused the older woman to stop short and face the girl with arms akimbo.

“An’ what’s it noo?” she inquired.

“I was but thinking of the gaming-room at the Wells—and of the expression on my Lord Marsden’s face when I won his gold-pieces from him,” replied Jean. “Roger loseth with most uncourtly grace. A little more, and methinks he would have sought a pretext to call me out for’t.”

Again Mistress Mary snorted.

“Aye; yin o’ these days ye’ll dee wi’ breeks on—an’ a rare fine scandal ’twill be,” she grumbled. For Mary had scant sympathy with this exploit in which her young mistress found so much amusement.

Tunbridge Wells was still agog with talk of the boyish cavalier whom Lord Harry March had one evening introduced in the gaming-rooms as his cousin, Lord Castledown of York, and who had disappeared overnight after a most phenomenal run of fortune at the tables.

From the window the girl looked across the Sussex meadows, all soft and wan under the light of the moon, with here and there the shadowy line of a hedge and the deeper velvet outlines of clumps of beech and pine. In the courtyard a tavern groom with a flaring torch led the Scottish gillies to their beds in the stable straw; for there was no room for them within the inn.

Presently the tall form of Archie returned alone across the yard, carrying a great armful of hay. Jean heard the narrow stairs creak under his weight as he ascended. The padding of his feet sounded in the corridor, and the hay rustled as he disposed it outside her door. A little afterward his deep breathing apprised her that the chieftain was sleeping like a faithful watchdog across her threshold.

She had removed her hat and mask. The face which she revealed was of a startling, almost elfin beauty.

Her complexion was olive, almost gipsy-like, but so clear and translucent that the ebb and flow of the hurrying blood glowed through it. Her brow was broad and low, and her cheek-bones were rather pronounced. A dimple lurked at each corner of her small, scarlet mouth, ever ready to play at hide and seek with the mischief of her tip-tilted nose, or to be banished on the occasions when she set her square chin.

Her hair was black as the night shadows under the pines, and her eyes matched it. Bright eyes they were, for all their darkness. Ofttimes a glint of impishness danced in them; sometimes they were lighted with a shrewdness that was the heritage of her blood; but at whiles they became deep and mystic as hidden cavern pools.

But it was not in these features, alluring as they were, that the charm of Jean Murrie lay. They were the playground merely of an unresting spirit that was seldom sad. So changeable was their expression that one might look upon the girl's face half a hundred times and still not be able to say that he truly knew it, or would recognize it the next time he saw it. Jean would have been a wonderful actress.

Yet, with all her bewildering variations of mood, Jean's nature was neither trivial nor unstable, as those who had the good fortune to be numbered among her friends had reason to know. No matter how astonishing her whims or how wild her vagaries, they had come to learn that back of them was the same Jean, leal-hearted, noble, and dependable. They swore that there was none like her. Small wonder that the young English lords swarmed about the Earl of Raasay's daughter like bees around a woodland rose.

Mary, in a pink nightshift, with her hair in a braid, broke in upon a cloud of colorful fancies, wherein the hero had gray eyes and handled his swords like a veritable paladin.

"Are ye nae coomin' till your bed the nicht?" asked the Scotswoman; "or wull ye set moonin' there like a lovesick coo until the cocks croo?"

"Have I heard it told, or did I dream it, that there once was a certain Highland lassie who loved a Westmoreland lad—and would have gone to the kirk with him, too, and he with her, in spite of the growling and gully knives of all Clan Murrie?" said Jean softly.

Mary did not answer; but she came over to the window, and she too gazed out into the moonlit silence.

"Muckle a pack o' shaggy gillies kenned o' the ways o' a lassie's heart," she murmured after a time, speaking more to herself than to Jean. "Ah, he was a braw laddie—an' a brave. Noo he's under the sods o' Flanders this lang time syne, whaur he fell fechtin' wi' Jock Churchill, an' it's a' dune wi'. Oh, Geordie, laddie, your ain Mary's heart's sair wi' the greetin' for ye!"

Jean looked up quickly and saw that her kinswoman's cheeks were wet with tears.

"Mary! Mary! Forgive me!" she cried in quick contrition; "I didn't mean to, dear!"

"Nocht to forgie at a', lassie," responded Mary, drawing the back of her hand across her eyes. "It does me gude to theenk on it yince in a while—

keeps me frae gettin' auld an' hard as the stanes. Noo, let's be gettin' atween the sheets. I'm fair fordune." And she knelt for a brief prayer and clambered into bed.

Jean followed soon after. When she had extinguished the candles and while she knelt in the darkness, the girl hid away the lock of auburn hair in that sacred repository where a maiden keeps her most cherished tokens. Nor did she omit in her invocation of the Most High to beseech guidance and protection for the head from whence it had been shorn.

Weariness is the best of sleeping potions. It was late in the following forenoon when Jean and her party once more set out upon the northern road. They found the hill traveling slow, and often they were forced to inquire their way; for one Thomas Wilkin had promised something more than he could perform when he so confidently had announced himself acquainted with the roads. Once, through misunderstanding of directions, or sheer stupidity, he strayed aside a matter of miles before a farm lad set him right, for which Tom received a berating from his mistress which made his ears to tingle.

The sun was riding high on its western arc when they paused for luncheon in the shade of a spreading beech tree on the warm side of one of the foothills to the east of Hazelmere in the county of Surrey. Two hours later Wilkin leaned down from the driver's seat and with his whip pointed ahead along the white road to where the spire of a stone church stood against the sky.

"Yonder is Godalming," he announced triumphantly, and pulled up his horses.

"Perchance it is, Master Tom," Jean replied rather acidly, for she was tired; "but after the chase you have led us, I am not so sure that it may not be Jerusalem or the city of the Grand Turk."

Eastward and distant a few miles from the highway stretched a shaggy range of densely wooded hills. To the left was an expanse of gently rolling downs and fair green meadows, with an occasional grove of lofty oaks. A few hundred feet ahead of the spot where the coach had halted a small stream which stormed down from the hills purled under an old stone bridge and meandered quietly through the meadow lands, its course marked by a winding double ribbon of darker green. Bordering along the western side of the road and sloping down to the banks of the rivulet, were the orderly fields of a small estate, and still farther on a mansion of gray granite, all overrun with climbing ivy, stood in a grove of stately trees.

“Gracious Mary send that yonder be our destination!” thought Jean when she saw it. A farm yokel in soiled blue smock edged by along the roadside, staring round-eyed at the dusty coach and the bare shanks of the wild Highland riders. Jean hailed him.

“Can you tell me, my man, if in this neighborhood is the home of the Comte de Mortemart?” she asked.

“Aye, your ladyship,” the hind answered, bobbing and pulling hard at his forelock; “it be just t’other side the bridge. Wolf’s Rest, we name it hereabouts.”

Wilkin cracked his whip. Jean tossed the countryman a small piece of silver, an extravagance which caused a contraction about the lips of thrifty Mary Murrie, to whom the gift seemed out of all proportion to the service. As they passed along the road, they saw that the mansion was set in the center of a park-like close surrounded by a low wall of stone. Between the carved pillars of a tall gateway they turned into a driveway bordered by a double row of poplars of recent growth.

As the coach neared the house, a gentleman came from the garden enclosure near the south wall of the park and advanced to meet it. Then a lady came down the grassy slope from the side of the house, and the man, seeing her, crossed the drive ahead of the coach, and they stood together, waiting for it to come up.

One glance at the two assured Jean that this indeed was the place she sought. The man was in his early middle age, but lightly touched by his years, for his figure, which was a little above medium height, was straight as a young tree, and in his black hair were no threads of silver. Right well did Jean know those level gray eyes. Did not her memory carry their counterparts? Only—the thought was not without prejudice—she decided promptly that the son was handsomer than the father. That decision might have been open to argument if made known to the lady of the mansion who stood by her husband’s side, and in whose wealth of auburn hair the afternoon sun played tricks of fire—hair from which the lock which lay in Jean’s bosom might have been pilfered, it was so like.

When the coach halted, Jean stood up to alight, and Archie swung nimbly from his horse to assist her; but the master of the house was before him. With a bound he stood at the step and offered his arm with a graceful gesture.

“Permit me, *mademoiselle*,” he said. His voice, too, was so like his son’s that it thrilled the girl. Though both the Comte and Comtesse de Mortemart must have wondered at the cause of the visit, no hint of curiosity or surprise was visible on the face of either of them.

“I bring you news of your son,” announced Jean simply, as she faced them.

A shade of anxious inquiry passed across the beautiful features of the comtesse, and was reflected in the countenance of her husband, and then was at once effaced, though it lingered in the lady’s hazel eyes.

“*Mademoiselle* must come within; she is fatigued. We will hear her news when she is refreshed,” was the only comment from the comte. With a murmured excuse, he turned and gave orders concerning the housing of the party to a number of his servants who had made their appearance.

“I had not thought to stop——” Jean began; but the comtesse raised her hand.

“We cannot allow it, that *mademoiselle* should take the roads again this day,” she protested. “It grows late, and, *mon Dieu!* these English roads at night!” she shivered. “Come.” And she led the girl to the house.

And yet this same soft-voiced woman with the red hair, who, before she was the wife of Denys du Chêne, Comte de Mortemart, had been Charli Vaucrain, Comte de la Mar, once had ridden far and fast both by night and by day over roads that were much more to be feared than those of Surrey and Kent, and had counted their perils as a little thing.

Though the hearts of host and hostess must have been strained with anxiety because of the lad who had not come home, courtesy was paramount. Jean and Mary were shown to a room, where they enjoyed a luxurious scrubbing away of travel grime. It was not until the end of a dinner served in the mansion hall and enlivened with rich wines of Champagne, that the comte and comtesse signified that they were ready to listen.

Jean told them then the tale of the quarrel and duel at Portsmouth. Daughter of a people that had been noted for its eloquence the girl was herself a splendid raconteur; and, besides, had a keen personal interest in the matter whereof she told. In her mouth the transaction took on epic proportions. Never had relator a more sympathetic hearing. Such things as had happened before she reached the scene of the quarrel, and which she had

learned from Harry March, she described as though she had seen them, and they lost nothing by her telling.

When she told how Raymond had held the road against the rushing horsemen to shield the beggar, Comte de Mortemart nodded approvingly; but when he heard of the insults which had been pressed upon his son because of the kindly deed, Denys's gray eyes began to smolder, and the hand which lay on the table before him closed hard, as though it were grasping the hilt of a trustworthy blade.

In their mind's eyes the pair saw the whip of Humphrey raised above their dear lad.

"He would have *dared!*" gasped Charli, and in the hazel eyes leaped a flame as hot as that in the gray ones across from her.

"But he exacted payment—that I'll warrant," muttered the comte. Jean, who was unfolding her tale in the order of its happening nodded. Her own eyes had taken fire, and her cheeks were flushed. Quick to take note of these signs, Charli watched the girl with a new curiosity, mixed with a bit of apprehension, and exchanged a glance of understanding with Mistress Mary which Jean did not see.

At the intervention of Concino, Denys laughed shortly.

"There spoke my old sword-brother!" he exclaimed; "but why was the boy's blade idle? Pardon, *mademoiselle!* Your tale moves me to forget myself."

Followed then the duel upon the hillside. Both of the girl's auditors fell silent and hung breathless upon her words; for in the telling of it she surpassed herself. When it was done, so vivid had been her description, that it seemed to them that they could hear the echo of the crash of the hoofs of Raymond's horse alighting on the deck of the stranger's ship, and see Concino vaulting high from the stone pier to join him.

"*Ventre Saint Gris!*" cried Denys. He sprang from his chair and paced up and down the room with shining eyes and muttering to himself. Presently he seated himself again and looked at his wife. The same thought was in the minds of both, and she voiced it.

"He will be gone to France," she said. "He has dreamed of it so many years."

"*Oui*—to France," replied Denys. It seemed to Jean that he dwelt wistfully upon the last word. "He beginneth young," he continued. "At his

age I had not yet slain a man.”

“Nay,” Jean spoke up; “he hath not slain any one. Lord Marsden liveth, but will be laid by the heels for yet some time to come.”

“So! Think you, *mademoiselle*, that this Marsden will desire to go further with the matter?”

The words were spoken softly, but they had iron in them.

“That I cannot tell. Roger is a hot-livered fool, and hath a long memory. He made threat to carry the affair to his majesty’s ears, and through him to the king of France. But fear not for the outcome. My father shall intervene to see that the scheme be cut off in its bud. He hath great influence with Charles Stuart.”

“And I some little with Louis Capet,” Denys answered, and added: “I do not think that he has quite forgotten his wolf.” To his wife he said: “I must take horse tomorrow and ride to Portsmouth. Hugues Banel will be wondering at Raymond’s delay. My son was to have met an agent who fetcheth us revenue from certain lands which we hold in France,” he explained to Jean. “While I am there, I may discover more concerning the ship on which the lad and Concino sailed. But make no doubt of it, Raymond is off for France in search of adventure. *Ciel!* I wish that——” Denys completed his sentence with a sigh which made its meaning clear. “*Ventre Saint Gris!* To think that the rapiers of Philibert Chalon are once more going into France!” He sighed again.

Poor Charli looked at it otherwise. It was her only son that was gone from her, and her mother-heart was anxious. She could not conceal it.

“Take heart, *madame*,” said the comte, observing her woebegone face; “he will not come to harm. Concino is with him. We shall hear from them ere many days, I’ll wager. As for this itching for adventure, it is in the blood and must be satisfied—as we two well know; for he hath it from both of us.”

Charli smiled bravely, but still was anxious.

When they had gone from the hall to the parlor, and lights had been fetched to drive away the deepening shadows of the falling night, Jean pressed her host hard for a tale in return. From a few stray words which had been let fall the girl guessed that the former life of the comte in his beloved land across the Channel had not been lacking in the high spice of adventure. He was loath at first to speak; but when he finally yielded smilingly to the girl’s importunity, she was more than repaid for her efforts.

While they sat before a mighty hearth in which the embers of twin yew logs glowed cheerily, for the night had fallen chill, Denys told of the great days in France when, as an unknown lad, with that same sword which Raymond wore, he had won the friendship of a king, the title of nobility, and, what was of far greater moment to him than all else beside, the love of a woman.

Slowly the tale moved at first, for the comte was modest; but under the urging of the girl and the artful prompting of Charli, who seemed to take more pride in his exploits than he did himself, he warmed to the recital and spoke with a fire and color which rivaled the eloquence of Jean.

With bated breath and many a grasp and handclap of enthusiasm, the warm-blooded Scotch lassie heard the story of how Denys, pupil of old Philibert, the swordmaster, hunted the king's enemies and crumbled to dust the conspiracy of the League of the Twenty, which would have set another king on the throne of France; and how in the doing of it Denys had made enemies from which even the power of the king could not shield him, so that for the peace of his lady he had exiled himself these seventeen years from France and dwelt quietly on the lands which he had purchased in Surrey.

"Oh, I know you now!" Jean cried when he ceased and sat back, somewhat shamefacedly. "My father was at the court of Louis le Grand in those days, and he has told of you. You are the Black Wolf of Picardy!"

Denys bowed acknowledgment of the title. "Yes, *mademoiselle* is in the Château du Loup," he said.

On the morrow Jean fared back to Tunbridge Wells, whither the news of Roger's mishap had preceded her, along with sundry other gossip. She had been a devotee of the pleasures of the famed resort; but a dream in her heart had staled them, and she found they had no more savor for her. One morning soon after her return she summoned MacGregor to her, and when he appeared had speech with him that was short and pointed.

"Airchie MacGregor, are ye feared to gang to France wi' me?" she asked banteringly, but wholly in earnest. As a further inducement she added: "There might be a chance at fechtin'."

"God kens I'm feared o' nocht—not even ghosties," rumbled the Highlander; "but——" He paused and looked at her suspiciously. "Does your faither ken?" he inquired. "The anger o' Roderick o' Raasay be warse to face than a' the bogies o' the Blue Glen Morna."

"Gin ye are feared, Airchie, I'll gae me lanes—for I'm gangin' ower."

MacGregor opened his mouth for a mighty oath, remembered in time where he was, and closed it again.

“Ye’ll no be gangin’ alane, mistress,” he said.

Jean wrote two letters. One of them was destined to scandalize and afflict Mistress Mary Murrie, the other to make the Earl of Raasay at London both laugh and curse.

Two days later the girl left England on a French packet-boat from Bexhill. MacGregor and his six gillies went with her.

Jean too had cast her gauge of battle at the feet of adventure.

CHAPTER V

MASTER NED'S AMBITIONS

Poised at the ship's side and ready to leap into the sea and return to the rescue of his friend, Raymond relaxed and laughed merrily when he saw Concino come hurtling toward him through the air like an immense brown bird. "*Pardieu!* Messer Pazza, you have neatly fooled them! You leap like a grasshopper in the springtime!" he cried, as the Italian, letting his pole slip back over the rail, alighted on the deck with a grunt.

"But I grow old for such boys' tricks," said Concino ruefully, and he bent at once and rubbed with solicitude at his knee-joints. He found the damage not so serious as it felt. "We are here—by divers methods," he remarked more cheerfully, straightening up; "the next matter for concern is, can we stay? Methinks the answer cometh."

Nearly all of the sailors on the decks had let fall whatever they had in hand and had run to stare at the two men who had come among them in such unheard-of fashion. Those aloft, finding curiosity more pressing than their business, deserted their posts and came swinging and leaping from the shrouds like monkeys. Within the clamorous half circle which they formed stood Raymond and Concino and the trembling horse.

"Hell's embers!" bawled a hearty voice somewhere in the rear. "Get back to your places, ye scum of the scuppers! Damned lunkers! dy'e want to get us fined for drifting broadside-on like a water-logged hulk and cracking some of these harbor cockle-shells? Jump, scuts! *Jump!*" The last word was accompanied by a swish and a howl of pain.

Alternately cursing and swinging a rope's-end, a wide-shouldered young chap pushed through the gaping crescent of seamen and spun on his heels to face it, using rope and fist with a ready impartiality that set the sailors to scurrying and their fingers to fondling sore spots.

Melodiously as a bull-calf the newcomer roared commands at the fleeing laggards, then flung the rope's-end after the last of them, and turned, grinning, toward the rail.

"What's the moil, sirs?" he asked good-humoredly, advancing to the horse's head and patting the beast's nose. "First the devil's own farrago breaks loose in Portsmouth town, with hell a hunting and powder burned,

and then you board us breakneck, break-deck.” He pointed smilingly to where the planks had splintered under the steel-shod hoofs. “Have you spitted a bishop, or kissed the wrong wench, or what have you done to stir up such a squall?”

Much relieved by the caliber of man with whom he had to deal, Raymond made answer in the same vein:

“I had the fortune to enter into argument with another cavalier concerning the width of the road,” he said; “and though he is, I believe, persuaded, his friends yonder are not.”

“Aye; and you gave him a bellyful of your persuader.” The sailor nodded toward the bloody rapier, which the vicomte had not found time to sheath.

“May we trespass upon your courtesy to the extent of setting us ashore at a French port, captain?” Raymond continued. “I do not think you the man to turn us back yonder. My word for it, the quarrel was fairly settled. We will pay our passage well.”

“You advance me too rapidly, young sir,” returned the sailor. “Jem Berks of Bristol be captain of the *Bristol Maid*. He lieth at this moment in his berth, drunk as a hog, while a better man than him sails his ship. I be Ned Wadgett, the first mate; but I make bold to say as you shall remain with us. God send that Jem keeps to the bottle, and I’ll put you ashore as you desire—and naught to pay at all, sir.”

It was at that juncture that Raymond, after thanking Wadgett, waved his ironic adieus to his balked pursuers, who were storming and threatening from the end of the mole. Glancing up the hillside, he fancied that he could descry there a small feminine figure that stood by the side of the road, and he thought that her face looked his way. He laid his hand on his heart and made a low bow.

“Farewell, Mlle. Mystery,” he whispered.

“Hark to ’em! Zounds! But one on ’em be a right rare hand at cursin’!” exclaimed the mate enviously. Lifting his voice, he shouted across the water to the men on the pier, and gave them a plenteous sample of his own powers in that direction.

“Go back, and be damned to ye; ye’ll get naught from Ned Wadgett but toad with an R!” he bawled coarsely; for though he had scant knowledge of the quarrel, the looks of the fugitives had enlisted Wadgett’s sympathies, and the sight of the many against the two had stirred his sense of fair play. Jem Berks willing, Ned was resolved to deal well by his new-found friends.

Should the captain prove recalcitrant, as Wadgett, knowing him well, thought highly probable—well, the mate had in his curly head certain plans of his own which such a situation might rather aid than hinder.

With a final shake of his fist toward the men on the pier, Ned quit his cursing and turned him back to the less pleasurable but more necessary business of wearing his ship out of harbor. Bidding his guests make free of the decks, he ran forward, the echoes of his stentorian orders resounding from bow to stern.

For all his rough ways and rougher tongue, it was to be seen that the mate was a prime favorite with the sailors. Scarcely a man-jack of them but would have stood stoutly at his back in no matter what undertaking.

“Fortune holdeth well,” remarked Raymond, smiling at Ned’s bellowings. “She provideth me that way to France for which I have prayed, and she hath this day sent me my first fight—which I hope with sincerity will not be my last.”

“Have a care, *maestro*; he that rideth in quest of trouble seldom tireth his horse,” rejoined Concino dryly. “When you have seen as much as have I of the jade Fortune’s sendings, mayhap you will look back with regret to the quiet home and peaceful bed you are leaving. I would rather at this moment be digging in my garden than on my way to France, which holdeth, I trow, enough of troubles to cool even your hot stomach. And what will your lady mother say? She will be sorely worried when you come not home to her tomorrow, *maestro*. A pest upon the English milord, say I!”

His spirits suddenly dashed, Raymond sat down on a coil of rope and fell to wiping the blade of his rapier with a bit of frayed cordage.

“True; I had forgot,” he said contritely, returning the sword to its scabbard. “She’ll not know a night of peaceful rest until she hears—— We must find a way to send her news, Concino! How shall it be managed?”

Rather stiffly, for his leap had shaken him, the Italian crossed the deck to the horse and fetched and tethered the animal to the rail. While he walked he revolved matters in his mind. It was the nature of Concino to see things first on their dark side and then to turn them.

“When we be missing—tomorrow, or the day after at the latest—your sire will journey down to Portsmouth,” he replied. “There will he meet Hugues Banel, and doubtless will hear from him or elsewhere the tale of our mishap—for the town will still be agog with it. Then will he instruct Hugues as to our disposal in France—whither the Wolf will know you will be

headed. So your mother will learn of your whereabouts, and we will be provided by a refuge, should the matter of the quarrel hound us beyond the Manche. We shall have but to be careful, and to find Hugues.”

Raymond nodded vaguely. The thought of his mother had stilled the lad.

None is more curious than a sailor. Every man on every craft in the harbor within eye-shot of the doings on the mole was sore ridden to know the meaning of them. Volleys of queries beset those who worked the *Bristol Maid* as she spread her wings to the breeze and headed out to sea. From the foredeck Wadgett met and parried the brunt of questioning, replying after his fancy with a deal of caustic vulgarity. When he found no answer pat to his tongue, he consigned the inquirer to the nether regions; and so, to his manner of thinking, had always the best of it.

It was not until the ship had rounded the Isle of Wight and stood well out in the channel that Ned returned to bespeak the guests in whose behalf he had done such doughty verbal battle. In the meantime under his orders both carpenter and cook had been busy. The one had knocked together amidships a stall for Raymond’s black horse Tonnerre; the other had kindled his galley-fire and prepared a meal. It was to this latter refreshment that Wadgett came to invite the travelers.

As he approached, his face alight with good intentions, he chanced to step leeward of Concino, and at once sheered off, his jovial countenance contorted with the reflection of quite different sentiments.

“What, i’ God’s name——” he began, backing hastily.

Raymond, noting the abrupt change of face and the twitching nostrils, and guessing at the cause, roared with laughter.

“Of your courtesy, good Master Ned!” he cried when he could control his voice. “Let Messer Pazza have a bucket of water, and with it the strongest soap you have in store; for in sooth he hath need of the strongest wherewith to counter the perfume of that flower of the marketplace which he weareth.”

“*Sapristi!* Yes!” groaned Concino. “I have not drawn an easy breath since the vile varlet back yonder heaved it upon me—may the fiend have him!”

“But what *is* it?” questioned the puzzled mate, edging gingerly around to windward. “I had thought to be acquaint with all the stinks in the category, being a seafaring man; but never hath my nose been so offended since first I sailed the seas.”

“What, Master Wadgett! you an Englishman, and not know the aroma of a Hampshire cheese when you meet it!” laughed Raymond.

“Nay; I be a Northumberland man,” protested Ned. “Forby, I’ll wager that the cow from which that came ne’er grew in England. Belike the stuff is Swiss, or made in Germany, where they have the trick of such foulness.”

After the bucket had been fetched, and Concino had removed the malodorous bouquet, the mate led them to the cabin below. While they sat at meat, which the vicomte insisted he should share with them, they brightened the eyes of Master Ned with the tale of the day’s adventures.

“Zooks!” roared the sailor, thwacking with his fist on the table, when he had heard the story through. “I would ha’ given a finger to see you peck the scurvy ear! The time be coming, masters, when our fine lords will not make so free a riding down common folk and putting their swords into ’em. Such time has been afore, and will be again, now mark me; for us commons will not endure it.

“Be you Tory, Whig, or Trimmer?” he asked of Raymond; “not that I cares a louse; but these days politics be about all a body hears when he be in port.”

Raymond answered that English affairs had no great interest for him, seeing that he was French by birth and sympathies; but that he was for the king’s party in any land, providing that the king proved himself a man and ruled wisely.

“Why, for that matter, so be I,” rejoined Wadgett. “Charles Stuart would do well enough; but he be overburdened with advisers. What with Godolphin and Sidney Hyde riggin’ him one way, and Shaftesbury and Essex haulin’ him t’other, and Halifax and Sunderland stirrin’ in atween, and with James of York droppin’ a lump in the stew now and then—what, ’twixt ’em all, I asks, is the poor man to do? I’d clap ’em all in irons and souse ’em in the bilge, an I were king, so I would, damn ’em!”

Perhaps Charles Stuart and his England had been much happier had the king adopted the remedy prescribed by the poor, outspoken sailor lad, and “soused” the wrangling ministers.

“So you be from France,” went on Ned, reaching for a wine bottle. “I had thought ye furrin’. You do well to return across the channel after what has passed today. Though they be a making of new treaties yonder at Nymwegen—and time enough for hell to cool whiles they be at it—the Commons be just now sore against the French; though they do say as the

kings understands one another, and that Louis of France be privately greasing Charles Stuart's palm, spite of William of Orange, who liketh it not."

Another pull at the bottle, and Master Wadgett grew more confidential.

"To pot with politics, says I," he remarked, wagging his curly head sententiously. "Such pother be for idle lords with time and money to fritter. Meanwhiles a poor man must fend for himself, and shrewdly. We be bound for Marseilles with a hold full of sundries, to fetch a cargo of Provence wines; but we be lately from Jamestown and Manhattan in the Americas. There one heareth marvelous tales of the rich lands far to the south, where Carlos of Spain hath an empire——"

He broke off and studied his listeners keenly. His voice fell to a hoarse whisper, and he bent tensely across the table:

"What say ye, masters, to a v'yage to them waters for a whack at the dons' gold?"

The vicomte and Concino returned his gaze uncomprehendingly, thinking that the wine had mounted to his head. But Ned was still sober, and he did but fit his mouth to a plan that had lain next his heart for many months. His next words made the matter clearer.

"My greatgran'ther sailed with Drake. Many the tale I've heard him tell from his ingle-seat when he was ripe in years, of the taking of great treasure galleons of the Spaniard."

Wadgett's eyes rolled and glistened over the memories which he had evoked.

"Galleons still be a sailing, masters, and need only stout hearts for the taking. The crew of the *Bristol Maid* be with me to a man. Needs but to clap Jem Berks in irons—or, for the matter of that, put a knife atween his ribs—and away we goes to the southern main. Ye be men of spirit, masters; will ye come? You," pointing his thumb to Raymond, "to lead, and stout Ned Wadgett to sail your ship, and to bear his part when the guns begin to play. We be excellent well-gunned and provided. I like ye, masters! 'Tis a king's chance I offer ye! Say, will ye do it?"

Stirred by his own imagination to red-faced excitement, the sailor rose and leaned on his knuckles on the table.

It was share in piracy which he offered, nothing less; there was no gentler word for it. But in those days the Spaniard on far seas was fair game,

and the Englishman who returned successful from the southern main was thought none the less of if he had founded his fortunes by sending a few looted galleons of the enemy to the bottom. If he was unsuccessful, however, he did not return, but made fruit for a yard-arm or a tree.

Carried away by the rude, powerful imagery, Raymond felt his nerves tingle and a thrill run up his spine. With anxiety Concino saw a leaping flare in the lad's eyes that answered the call to adventure which the sailor had sounded. Wadgett saw it, too, and deeming his case won, was about to bring his fist thundering down on the boards. The Italian moved uneasily in his chair. From the tail of his eye Raymond saw the motion, stole a glance at Concino, and haled his fancy back to earth. He shook his head slowly in disapproval of the project.

Wadgett unclenched his hand let it fall in disappointment at his side.

"Nay, Master Ned; it cannot be," replied Raymond. "I be set to go to France, where I was born, but which I remember not. But *ciel*, man almost you had persuaded me!"

"I knows it," grumbled Ned, casting a sulky glance at Concino. Immediately he brightened again. "An ye won't, ye won't; so there's the end on't. And I knows you'll not say a word to do me harm. Ye be not of that kidney. Natheless, I would ha' loved right fine for ye to go. One of these days *I* be a-goin', now mark me!"

Shortly afterward Wadgett donned his jacket, lighted a cutty-pipe and went on deck. A brighter Irish cabin-boy entered soon after the mate's departure and cleared the table.

"I think I shall go up and see that Tonnerre wanteth for naught—poor beast," said Raymond, breaking a moody silence in which he had been thinking of his mother, and Concino had been nodding drowsily.

"Sure, yer warship, an' if ut's yer hor-se ye mane, ye nade not, for Oi just done thot same meself," spoke up the cabin-boy. "He be all fed an' bedded, sor, the foine big black divvle thot he be."

Raymond gave the lad a coin, for which he bowed to the planking.

"Plaze yer warship, sor," he said. "Masther Wadgett tould me as yer honors was to turn in here whin ye would slape," and he indicated bunks at the side of the cabin. "An' he said if ye should be hearin' anny noises from beyant there," pointing to the partition which separated the adjoining cabin, "yez are not to moind thim, sor; for 'twill be naught but th' cap'n. He do see

all manner of fearsome crathurs whin he be in liquor, sor, an' at toimes they frights him so thot he do squale an' groan like unto a banshee."

With a grin and a bob of his head, the lad departed. The weary travelers were not long in following his suggestion, and their slumbers were profound. If the brandy-imps bedeviled Jem Berks in the small hours, his neighbors never knew it.

CHAPTER VI

QUIDOR BORROWS A DAGGER

Not until the Irish lad came thumping at the door in the early morning with a bucket of cold water for them, did the occupants of the cabin bunks awake.

“Perchance the coast of France will be in sight!” exclaimed Raymond eagerly. He struggled into his clothes with all the speed he could muster. Concino followed his example, but more slowly, and with not a little inward groaning; for the exertions of the previous day had left a stiffness in the Italian’s joints.

Still winking the sleep from his eyes, the vicomte tumbled up the companion-steps, then stopped short on the deck with a cry of amazement, at sight of a bizarre, blanketed figure which leaned against the mainmast, with arms folded and inscrutable eyes fixed on the tossing reaches of the sea.

“*Voyez Concino—c’est un vrai peaurouge!*” The lad’s pointing finger directed the attention of the Italian.

At the words, the swathed form turned, its somber eyes suddenly alight with intelligence. Clanking chains sounded beneath the blanket as its wearer quit the mast and stepped forward.

“*Eugh!*” came in a surprised, guttural ejaculation from the broad chest.

It was indeed a true red-skinned son of the wilderness that stood on the English deck. Emaciated, dirt-stained, and bearing other marks of ill-usage, for his captors had not dealt kindly by him, the savage yet bore himself with a dignity which proclaimed that in his native forests he had been a personage.

He was a young man, not more than twenty-five, of a noble, high-featured comeliness which all the ill-treatment which he had endured had not been able to destroy. His straight black hair was unkempt and tangled. Below the frayed edges of his shabby blanket, furred leggings showed; and his feet were clad in the worn and shapeless remnants of what had been gaily-beaded moccasins of deerskin.

If the young French vicomte was astonished at his first view of a man with a red skin, the Indian was no less surprised. It was the first time in his life that ever Quidor, the Huron, had laid eyes upon a man with hair of fire—for Raymond's long locks, with the morning sun shining through them, appeared to the astounded savage to be a living blaze.

"*Eugh!*" he grunted again, staring at what he deemed not the least of the many wonders he had seen since the winged canoe of the pale-faces had floated him across the salt sea water.

Mixed with his wonderment was a keen delight caused by the lad's exclamation in a tongue which the Huron knew well. So he continued to advance with a halting, awkward step until he was within a yard of the vicomte. Letting the blanket slip back from his naked shoulders, he raised his right arm in salute.

"*M'sieu, est un français?*" he asked with a gravity which only half concealed the eagerness he felt.

It was the turn of Raymond to start at the sound of French words.

"*Oui,*" he replied; and to Concino in the same tongue: "A strange thing—the red man speaks French!"

"In the land across the big water," said Quidor, "the sons of Onontio^[1] and the red Hurons are as brothers. They dwell at peace. Together they track the deer and hunt the great bear. Together they go on the war trail against the accursed Yengees (English—Yankees). So Quidor learned the tongue of Onontio. Quidor is a chief. He was taken in battle; but first he killed three of the Yengees braves. There is mourning in the Yengees lodges because of his deeds. Now the Yengees take Quidor in their big canoe across the stinking water. They beat him and starve him; but they cannot make fear grow in his heart. Doubtless they will burn him at their council-fire. Then they will learn how a Huron can die.

"But how is it that Quidor finds a son of Onontio in the big canoe of our enemies?" he asked. "He is not a captive like Quidor. He wears his knives," pointing to the vicomte's rapier and dagger, "and his limbs are free. Is the hatchet buried or——" The Huron hesitated, and his brow clouded.

"There is peace between the English and the French," answered Raymond. Quidor's face cleared.

"It is well. Quidor liked not to think that his brother with the hair of fire was a traitor. I have heard that the land of the Yengees and the land of

Onontio lie not far apart," he went on eagerly. "Say, my brother, where is the wonderful land of Onontio?"

In the surprise of meeting the red man, Raymond had forgotten his purpose in coming on deck. The question recalled it. He turned to the east.

A league and a half across the water rose a line of white headlands, from which a great spur jutted into the sea. Beyond was a wavy belt of deepest green. It was the coast of Normandie, and the promontory was Cape de la Hague.

To Raymond it was the coast of a thousand dreams. Beyond those shining headlands stood Adventure and Fancy, and beckoned to him with shadowy fingers. His heart swelled, and a sudden mistiness of his eyes dimmed the dear prospect before him. He pointed with a trembling hand. The voice which answered the Indian was both reverent and triumphant:

"C'est la France!"

Quidor, bending his haggard eyes upon the Frenchman, seemed to divine his emotion. Drawing his blanket around him, the Huron hobbled back to his station by the mast, where he, too, became absorbed in contemplation of the Normandie coast-line.

It was due to the clemency of Ned Wadgett that the Indian's arms were free, and only his legs shackled. The mate had taken advantage of the protracted drunkenness of Berks to give the miserable prisoner partial liberty, by the removal of his manacles. The captain had purchased the Huron from a Virginia planter, and purposed in turn to sell him as a curiosity at some foreign port, and turn a pretty penny for himself.

Warned of the wild temper of his captive, Berks had taken the precaution to have him ironed heavily. A man of merciless ways, cruel when sober, brutish when in his cups, the captain had fallen into the habit of venting his spleen on the helpless red man. Quidor's broad back was scored with unhealed welts from the lash, which he had received without complaint, but which had left yet deeper scars in his memory.

His lips slightly parted, and a spot of color glowing in each cheek, Raymond gazed long at the cliffs and hills of Normandie. Concino, his habitual half-smile on his swarthy features, watched the lad.

He had seen that rapt expression before, had the Italian, on the face of another well-loved comrade, years ago. It had presaged high deeds then. What would happen, Concino wondered, before he could take this spirited eaglet back to the eerie?

A lady who is as old as the human race, who is known of all men, but whom none has ever seen, rested a hand on the faithful companion's shoulder and whispered in his ear: "Such souls belong to me. You must let him follow me for a time, my friend." Concino sighed. The lad was so very young. "Not younger than was the Wolf when first he hearkened to my voice," whispered the lady, and passed on, leaving Concino thoughtful.

After a little time Raymond emerged from his reverie and went on to the mast, where he resumed his conversation with Quidor. The plight of the young savage, exiled and miserable, aroused the Frenchman's sympathy, even as his words had stirred the vicomte's imagination.

As they talked, a light of admiration grew in the Indian's dark eyes. Quidor felt that he had found a friend. He who had prepared for death took a step backward from the shadowy kingdom.

In his measurement of his new acquaintance, the eyes of the Huron lingered longest on the haft of a dagger which the vicomte wore at his belt, just below the baldric which supported his rapier. It was a straight, keen, well-balanced blade. Billy Huggs, the smith at Godalming, had forged it for Raymond. Its hilt of ebony, carved and inlaid with a pattern of ivory leafwork, was the handicraft of Concino.

Again and again the glance of the Indian returned to the dagger, as the breeze flapped the vicomte's coat and exposed it. Quidor would willingly have given his left hand in exchange for that knife; but he dared not ask for it.

Wadgett came bustling up.

"Keep a weather-eye on the redskin, young master," he advised Raymond; "his likes be treacherous as wasps."

"I do not believe that he would work me harm," Raymond replied. "Poor wretch; can naught be done to make his lot easier?"

Quidor hated and despised the English so much that he had troubled himself little to learn their speech—their whips he understood only too well—but he knew enough of the language to comprehend the vicomte's expression of confidence and the words of pity which followed.

"*Le Cheveu de Feu* (Fiery-Hair) and Quidor are brothers," he said gravely in French. At the same moment his chance came.

Raymond's back was partly turned. He stood between the Indian and the mate. Concino was looking elsewhere. The hand of the Huron glided like a

serpent to Raymond's belt. When the vicomte faced him again, Quidor was standing as impassive as before; but deep in his eyes was a flicker of triumph. The coveted weapon was hidden beneath his blanket.

Wadgett shook his head in answer to the question.

"He be the property of Jem Berks," he answered. "While Jem be captain, I durst not meddle."

The cabin-boy came to announce that breakfast was waiting. Ned went below with his guests. Wind and weather holding, the mate promised that he would land them at St. Malo before the fall of night.

In the midst of their meal they heard a violent outburst of cursing in the adjoining cabin. Something struck hard against the partition and fell with a crash and tinkle on the flooring. Again and again the sound was repeated.

Wadgett paused with a clasp-knife cargo of bacon halfway to his lips.

"There he be," he grudged. "Damn his yellow liver! Hark till him a breakin' bottles because they be empty."

Another salvo of profanity was followed by the slamming of a door and the thumps of heavy feet along the passageway. Ned sprang up, quitting his unfinished breakfast.

"Apollyon be loosed, gentles—and presently will he make his hell yonder on deck," he grinned; "but sit ye quiet." He hurried from the cabin and ran for the deck.

"*Peste!* I like not this captain, though I have seen him not," said Raymond. He pushed back from the table with a gesture of disgust. "Everything on the ship smacketh of him—and the smack be most evil. Now he cometh to breakfast with us and spoileth the taste of my good bacon."

"Not mine," said Concino, continuing to eat with relish.

When he had finished, the two betook themselves to the deck. Before they were halfway up the companion, they heard a sailor cry out in pain, and they judged that the hell which Master Ned had foretold was already boiling right merrily. An instant later the man met them at the companion head. He was stumbling blindly and holding his hands to his face, from which the blood was streaming. Raymond's mouth tightened.

In the ship's waist, near the improvised stall of Tonnerre, a group of men was gathered about a bony figure in a soiled red coat. An unremitting flow of profanity came from the man's throat. Across from him stood Master

Wadgett, flushed and anxious, with all his good-humor gone. The two comrades turned that way. Quidor left the mast and limped after them.

“By the blood of God! Ned Wadgett, perhaps art not so much the fool as I called thee! ’Tis as fine a piece of horseflesh as ever I did clap an eye to. Passage money, forsooth! I’ll sell the beast in the market at Marseilles, damme if I do not! A pretty handful of gold ’twill bring me.”

The voice was a slow, grating drawl. It, as much as the words, called the angry blood to Raymond’s face.

“Pardon, *monsieur*,” he said, stepping forward, “the horse is mine—and it is not to be sold for any price.”

Jem Berks turned quickly. He was not a sight to delight the eye: a lean, angular man with a long, deeply lined face, wherein small blue eyes, set close together, glared from under an overhang of shaggy brow, and a broken nose brooded over a cruel mouth. His eyes were inflamed and his face blotched from drink. His hair was the color of hay. He measured the vicomte with a long, insolent stare, and his lips writhed back like those of an angry dog.

“A comely boy, by God’s rood!” he drawled; “comely as any wench. Ha, Ned! A monstrous witty quirk cometh to my mind! I’ll do it, by God! I’ll sell the redskin to some white lord, and—ha! ha! ha!—the milk-and-rose lad I’ll sell to a blackamoor in Barbary! ’Twill be out of our way; but ’twill be worth the voyage. Beshrew me, young man, you may yet do well. Some Moorish princess may take a fancy to thy pretty face and make thee her garden-companion—if her lord doth not make thee chief eunuch!”

Berks leered. His cheeks grew purple with horrible laughter.

“*Sangdieu!*”

The oath and the rasp of steel as his rapier left its scabbard were the vicomte’s answer.

Berks wore a sword. Never ceasing his laughing, he drew it. The long blade flashed toward him. His men fell away.

“Oh, aye, come on!” he sneered; “I can play at this game as well as any gen——”

The sentence was never completed. The swords never crossed.

A yell of savage exultation arose behind Raymond. Something bright that turned as it flew, hissed past his shoulder. The keen point of the ebony-

hafted dagger struck the captain fairly in the soft of his throat, and he finished his laughter elsewhere.

Slowly and haltingly in his chains, Quidor had crossed the deck. For an hour the Huron had been weighing and balancing the dagger under his blanket. His aim was true, and his arm strong.

Berks let his sword fall clattering, clutched at his throat, and swayed backward. A jet of bright blood dyed the planking where he fell.

[1] Onontio was the name by which the Indians designated the French governors of Canada.

CHAPTER VII

THE WOMAN OF MYSTERY

Sword-arm extended and body lunged forward to the attack, the vicomte paused in his stride. With mouth agape and staring eyes, he saw his adversary go down before him, nor did he for the moment comprehend whence had come the fatal blow.

As Berks' head thwacked on the deck, the Indian's lips opened again in a wailing, tremulous cry. So fierce and eerie was the ululation that it chilled the blood of those who heard it. It was the war-whoop of the Hurons. At the sound of it a confused outcry arose among the sailors, who had stood like men of wax.

Raymond lowered his point and turned on the Indian.

"Why did you interfere when I was about to fight?" he asked sternly; "it was my quarrel."

"The death of a dog would add no honor to my brother's sword," replied the Huron. "Quidor struck to revenge older wrongs. See!"

He let his blanket fall to the deck and swung around. All down the muscular bronze back, deep written in the flesh, was the tale of the captain's whip.

Ned Wadgett came out of the daze which events had put upon him. Small love had the mate cherished for the captain; but the sudden taking-off of the man with whom he had trod the *Maid's* deck for four years thrilled Ned with horror, though he was not a squeamish man.

On the deck near the stall of the horse lay a sledgehammer which the carpenter had left there. Ned caught it up and ran at the Huron, cursing heartily as he went. Before any one could move to stay him—Raymond did indeed shout, but his cry was unheeded—the wonderous weapon swung over the Indian's head, threatening to crack it like a shell. Quidor heard the danger coming and swung to face it.

As he had boasted, the red man was without fear. With folded arms he met the death which he read in the sailor's eyes, and he answered the oaths of the mate with the keening death-song of the Hurons.

Had Quidor blenched in the slightest degree, had he shown by the least quiver of an eyelash that he felt fear, that moment had been his last. But he did not. Already the hammer was descending, when Wadgett, struck by sudden admiration for that unquailing courage, let go his hold with a shout. Such was the power in the mate's arms that the formidable iron flew many feet through the air ere it crashed on the planking. Ned gazed from it to his reprieved victim, and swore with surprise at his own forbearance.

"I give you thanks, Master Ned," said Raymond; "he had not merited the stroke."

"Why, so it seemeth, sir," the mate replied; "but damme if I can tell why he did not get it—unless it be that I have not heart to strike a man who looketh upon death as do I upon an emptied flask."

Another thought laid its grip upon Wadgett. He smote his hand on his thigh at the bigness of it, and went into action at once.

"Where be the bo'sun?" he bawled.

"Here, sir."

"Pipe all hands aft!"

From decks and rigging the sailors came hurrying to the whistle's call.

When all were gathered on the afterdeck, Ned clambered upon a cannon and stood with his back to the sea. He was flushed and eager.

"I be no hand at fine words; but whiles the iron be hot I strikes," he began, with a toss of his curly head. "Jem Berks be a lyin' dead yonder, and God above or Sir Satan below hath his soul. The *Bristol Maid* be lacking a captain. Now, I either takes her on to Marseilles, or back to Bristol harbor, or _____"

He stopped and studied the upturned faces. What he read there seemed to satisfy him, for he nodded and went on:

"I have sounded the most of ye, one time and another. Ye know my mind." He pointed to the south.

"Down yon path old Sir Francis sailed—and sailed home again with chests of good red gold! 'Twas a noble game. The Indians dug it, the dons stole it, and stout Englishmen fought for it and fetched it home. There be more a-plenty where it came from. Drake's drum be soundin', lads! The *Maid* be good as any craft that ever sailed the main! Are ye with me, lads?"

"Hurroo!"

It was the Irish cabin lad, Michael O'Toole, who yelled, leaping high from the deck and tossing his ragged cap in the air. His shrill piping was lost in the full-throated roar sent up by the sailors. Not idly had Wadgett said that the crew was with him to a man. Never did men hail piracy with heartier greeting.

Down from his cannon sprang Captain Wadgett, to disappear in a wave of men, who milled around him, seeking to press his hand and call him by his new handle.

"Easy lads, easy—my fingers be but flesh and bone," grunted the highly pleased Ned, shouldering himself a way through the crowd. As he went his bull's voice shouted orders.

"Jack Bayles and Dickon Peebles advance from second and third mates to first and second! Third mate's berth shall be diced for by them as thinks they be man enough to fill it! Ben Oaks, broach a keg of rum—two kegs! You, Minton, get thy needles and canvas, lad, and sew Jem Berks a sailor's winding-sheet! We'll heave him off the plank with a cannonball at each end of him!"

Each command was received with a roar of approval by the members of the crew, especially that one concerning the kegs. Wadgett was proving himself a Roman. When he had disembarrassed himself of his followers by sending them about their respective businesses, he approached the two guests, to whom, in a way, he felt that he owed some share of his new fortunes.

"Ye had best to reconsider, young master," he said earnestly to Raymond. "Say but the word, and we two will go sea-dogging together, with your colors at the mast."

Again the vicomte thanked him, courteously, but with finality. Stretching his hand toward the French coast, he said: "My heart lieth yonder, Master Ned. I shall not forget your kindness or your offer; but our ways lead apart."

"So be it," replied the sailor, not hiding his disappointment, now more keen than before, in that his ambition was partly realized. "A day's sailing more or less counts for naught now," he volunteered after a moment of moody silence. "I'll 'bout ship and set ye ashore at Havre at the mouth of the Seine. Nay," waving his hand when Raymond protested that he would be troubling himself too greatly, "'tis as easy as to make St. Malo; besides, Le Havre is the port nearest to Paris—which is accounted the world's center by all Frenchmen."

He at once gave orders to turn the ship.

Quidor came hobbling up with the dagger, which he had taken from the body of the slain man and carefully cleaned of its stains. He solemnly returned it to the vicomte. Catching sight of the Indian, Wadgett sent for the ship's smith.

"Strike the irons from off the heathen, Billy Greaves," the captain ordered, when the leather-jerkined functionary put in an appearance. "He hath served me a good turn this day," Wadgett said to Raymond. "If the chance offereth in my voyaging, I'll set him ashore in New France. He pretendeth not to understand English. If it please you, tell him from me that if he worketh mischief on any man on this ship I'll break every bone in his red carcass, and have him hanged to boot."

"Quidor slew a dog. Between the Hurons and the Yengees the hatchet is buried. Quidor will not dig it up," responded the Huron with dignity when he had heard the translation. The first use he made of his liberty was to bathe; and therein he set an example which some of the Christians on the ship might have profited by.

Behind England across the channel the sun had hours gone down when the *Maid* dropped anchor inside Cape de la Hève, and the voyagers saw the lights along the wharves of Le Havre twinkling like fireflies at the edge of the water.

Blindfolded, trussed and tied, which he liked not, and with his hoofs padded so that they might do no damage, Tonnerre was swung from the deck in a canvas sling and lowered into one of the longboats. Wadgett himself and a dozen of his men manned the boat.

Short as their acquaintance had been, the English sailors saw the departure of the young vicomte and his companion with regret. A hearty farewell cheer and a shower of good wishes followed them over the side.

At this moment of leave-taking Raymond looked in vain for Quidor. The Huron was nowhere to be seen.

Noiselessly as possible, for Raymond had no desire to draw the attention of the authorities of La Havre to his landing in France, the party crossed the harbor and lay the longboat alongside of a deserted jetty. The sailors hauled the black horse from the boat. The lifting of Tonnerre was a task which strained the energies of all the twelve; for the position was awkward for lifting, and the animal tipped the beam at sixteen hundredweight. With much subdued cursing and grunting they managed it, however, and set Tonnerre

on his feet on the pier and stripped the lashings from him, as much to his relief as their own. Straightway he shook himself, and would have greeted all France and the people thereof with a ringing neigh had not Concino forestalled him by clapping both hands about his muzzle.

Wadgett turned from superintending the landing of the horse. In the half-light, Raymond saw the big hand of the captain thrust toward him.

“Will ye shake it, young sir?” asked Ned a bit huskily. In turn, the vicomte and Concino wrung the hard fingers.

“I be main sorry to lose ye, sirs; ye have brought me luck. Fare ye well.”

Ned leaped into the boat. The last they saw of him was a dark figure which stood in the stern-sheets and waved its hand as the longboat slipped away into the gloom of the night.

Poor Ned; his golden days were short. The “luck” of which he prated did not prevent his dangling at the end of a rope of Spanish hemp in the market-square at St. Augustine the following December. Be it told for their soul’s satisfaction that the ghosts of Wadgett and those of his crew who perished went to their appointed place escorted by a column of shadowy Spaniards which outnumbered them by three to one.

Late as was the hour, it was the advice of Concino that they quit Le Havre at once and strike cross country to Lillebonne, there to lie until the morrow, and then go on to Paris by way of Rouen. The Italian knew that if a search had been set on foot for the fugitives in France, it would be the sharpest maintained at the ports of entry.

So, very quietly, with Concino leading Tonnerre and Raymond walking ahead, they traversed the length of the jetty and stood at last on French soil.

When his boots ceased to strike on the planking and he felt soft earth under him, the vicomte paused. With the glamor of his dreams of the morning yet upon him, he knelt on the land of his fathers and breathed a short prayer. Honors, adventure, advancement, and service were among the things he asked for—yes, and fighting, too; his hand was on the hilt of his sword as he prayed. Above him perchance the old and beautiful lady bent low and smiled, and perchance her fingers caressed his hair with a touch as soft as that of a wandering breeze of the night. It is certain that the faithful companion at his back smiled down at him with a shake of his head.

Hardly had Raymond finished his brief orison when a prodigious hubbub of oaths and shouting belched out from a narrow, crooked street which gave on a crossway some two-score yards from the jetty. Steel clashed on steel.

The rich, contralto voice of a woman cried loudly on the saints, and then for human aid.

All caution banished by the urgency of that call, the vicomte ran like a hare toward the dark maw of the street, tugging at his rapier as he went. Stopping only long enough to cast Tonnerre's bridle over a mooring-post, Concino followed.

In the first reach of the street all was darkness when the two entered it; but at a turn a little way ahead a flicker of light played on the faces of the buildings. In that direction sounded the din, momentarily swelling louder. Windows began to open, and folk alternated queries as to the cause of the uproar with lusty bawls for the watch. But it was a poor, dark quarter of the town; and the watchmen, if they were awake, wisely minded their own affairs.

Sword in hand, and still running, Raymond rounded the corner into a flare of torches, and was like to have run a woman through, who came with almost equal speed from the opposite direction and who rushed violently into his arms, knocking the breath out of both of them.

As they recoiled from the shock, the vicomte had time to see that she was tall, slender, clad from head to heels in black silks, and wore a veil of gauze, through the meshes of which her eyes glittered like opals. Then she was upon him again, seizing his arms and nearly dragging him from his feet.

"*Sauvez moi! Sauvez moi!*" It was the same deep contralto that had called before. "In the name of Heaven, *monsieur*, aid a French lady who is beset by ruffians! The saints will bless you! Ah, hasten! Poor Baptista is down! *Mère de Dieu!*"

Two serving-maids, scared out of their senses, caught up with their fleeter mistress and fell upon their knees, clutching at her skirts and screaming.

Thirty feet farther on a coach had been backed across the street in such fashion that the narrow way was more than two-thirds blockaded. Under the horses' noses the battle was waging, four sturdy chaps doing their manful best to hold back a dozen who strove to press through, while the coachman, erect on his box, was wielding both sword and whip-stock to defend his position. A fifth of the defenders had reeled out of the fight and leaned against a doorway, nursing a punctured arm.

The woman threw up her veil. She was dark, queenly, and beautiful, with a beauty that went to the bewildered lad's head like strong wine. Vainly

Concino caught at his elbow with a word of caution. He bounded recklessly down the street where the torches were flaring and the swords playing. Concino, not by nature a leader, but one of the best followers man ever had, shrugged his shoulders and sped after him.

Just before they reached the coach the valiant Jehu on the box, struck by a pistol ball, threw up his arms with a wail and pitched headlong at his horses' heels. Through the breach left by his fall scrambled the leader of the attacking party, a young man, the richness of whose dress, no less than the quality of his language, proclaimed him no common ruffler. He wore a waistcoat of pea-green velvet under a coat of pink satin, and a heavy gold chain gleamed among the ruffles of his shirt.

"*Allons, mes enfants!*" he shouted, standing on the coach and brandishing his sword. "*A moi!* Hasten! We have the *canaille* taken both front and rear!" and he leaped over the wheel.

"*Malora!*" groaned Concino when he saw this figure come into the light; "it is in my mind that we are on the wrong side of this affair!"

Right side or wrong side, it was too late to change coats. Already the vicomte had crossed swords with the man in the green waistcoat, the noise of whose elegant cursing sent profane echoes scurrying up and down the alley. Concino shrugged his shoulders again and hunted him up a man to fight.

Such were not difficult to find. Following the example of their leader, men began to clamber over the coach. Some crawled through it.

"*Mort de ma vie!*" swore the young dandy, making his sword serve him in two places at once; "here is a dog of a different breed!" Just then he felt that the rim of the coach-wheel was pressing against his splendid coat. "Room, fellow! Give me room! So," as he drove Raymond back a pace and a half. "Now, the rest of you stand clear. This one to me; for, *heu!* This is fighting!"

The emphatic was occasioned by the fact that, to save his skin, he'd given up half the ground he had gained.

What might have been a very pretty duel was terminated early for the reason that both swordsmen were pressed for time. The defenders were giving ground before weight of numbers. The attackers feared that their quarry would escape them. It would have been terminated earlier, but that the vicomte was not fighting to kill. His adversary *was*.

"*Coquin*, you practice your sword like a gentleman," confessed he of the green waistcoat, beginning to breathe audibly.

"*Merci*," bowed Raymond, "*vous aussi*." The gallant's eyes widened.

"Mother of God and St. Denys! Almost you had me that time! It must be the vile light! Ah, *prenez ça*!"

He knew a shrewd thrust, low-aimed and most deadly. With the words he sped it.

"*Sacré bleu et Ste. Marie!*"

Weaponless he stood in the roadway, wringing his fingers. His sword broke a window across the street and fell back in the road. That downward turn of the weapon had made the opportunity for which Raymond had waited.

Came then a rush of men, which Raymond leaped back and avoided. He glanced about him and found that he and the Italian were facing the foe almost alone. For at this juncture the fellows who had been defending the coach took to their heels as by common consent, all save that one who lay under the heels of the horses. They had made mincemeat of him. Seeing no profit in fighting twain against ten, when they knew not even the cause of the quarrel, the two followed.

With torches waving, the larger party came swiftly on. The battle had become a pursuit. At the turn in the street the fleeing serving-men pulled up and faced about to make a stubborn stand for their mistress, who had stayed there, for the reason that she knew not where to go. Short, swarthy men were they, who chattered excitedly among themselves in a tongue which caused Concino to prick up his ears and to think that mayhap the quarrel was worth while after all. It was Italian.

No longer shielded by the bulk of the coach, the case of the hunted fast became desperate. After pounding vainly at the door of a burgher who was safe under his bed, they crowded the three women into his shallow doorway and formed a half-ring about them. The man Baptista had bound up his arm, and again took a hand in the *mêlée*; but he handled his weapon awkwardly and at once went down again with a gash in his throat which no bandage would ever heal.

The young leader had recovered his sword, and with it a desire to wipe out the disgrace of its loss. But this time it was Concino who engaged him. The narrow street rang like an armorer's shop.

All at once one of the torch-bearers, who was so placed that he could see up the street toward the harbor threw his light on the ground and with a squeal of terror took himself off in the opposite direction as fast as his legs would carry him. His fellows were surprised at his defection. An instant afterward they were all elbowing each other in their mad haste each to be first in following his example.

Magically the hard-pressed defenders of the door found the air in front of their citadel free of thrusting steel. The fighting narrowed down to the single combat between Concino and the dandy, who, though he hallooed in rage at the desertion of his myrmidons, did not for a moment cease his efforts to open heaven's road to the Italian.

Not long unaccounted for was the sudden dispersion of the foe. Around the crook of the street passed an apparition which caused the legs of the lady's servants to quake and their eyes to goggle, and the maids to hold their agitated tongues—proof positive that it was fearsome indeed. Even the brave French exquisite, who alone had tarried to fight, fell back with a whispered oath when he saw it, but at once fell on again with a loud one after a second look.

A sable horse of extraordinary size, shadowy and gigantic in the flickering torchlight, a phantom steed, whose hoofs made no sound on the earth and stones where they struck; a ghastly rider, a man of metal—so it seemed, for his naked body reflected back the light like a statue of burnished copper—who sat straight as a lance in the saddle. This was the frightful wraith which struck fear to the hearts of all beholders.

Up and down the street windows rattled and shutters banged to in desperate haste. Why not, since the devil in person had come riding in off the sea to Le Havre, and might be seen plainly in the street outside, where none wished to see him? Raymond himself shrank before the vision for an instant, with awestruck face. Then a voice said in passable French:

“Let Quidor, who has no weapons with which to fight, take the woman.”

It was the Huron.

Quidor had not bade farewell to the vicomte on the ship for the sufficient reason that Quidor was minded to see something of the land of Onontio, and meant to follow his new friend thither. The devilish phosphorescence of his skin was due to the fact that he had followed by water and had just come out of the sea. In the wake of the longboat he had struck out for shore, and had reached the jetty immediately after Raymond and Concino quitted it. He had

trailed them, seen the fighting, and then run back and fetched Tonnerre. The mufflings which had been left on the horse's feet had added the last ghostly touch.

Hardly had the Indian spoken when Concino, as forbearing as Raymond had been, disarmed his opponent.

The vicomte seized the fallen rapier, snapped it across his knee and threw the fragments over a wall.

"The boat, Francisco! Can you find the boat?" asked the lady in an undertone, coming forth from the shadow of the doorway, but not showing any inclination to share the saddle with Quidor.

"*Si, contessa,*" replied one of her men. "We had best hasten, lest those rogues come back again."

"Come, young sir, you and your servants," the lady called to Raymond. "This way to safety."

Francisco knew the way well. Two minutes later the darkness of the quays had swallowed them up.

They left behind them a man who cast himself upon his face and groaned and wept; nor minded in his rage and shame that his waistcoat of pea-green velvet and his satin coat were fouled by the earth and worse matters of the street.

"Mother of God! to be disarmed twice in one night—and each time by a *roturier!*"

For this young man had a reputation to sustain, and he had not sustained it.

He esteemed himself to be the most skillful swordsman at the court of Louis the Grand, which was France.

Many others had taken his word for it.

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN FRANCE SHUDDERED

Led by Francisco, the fugitives stumbled on through the darkness, threading innumerable alleys.

The unveiled woman took Raymond's arm and hurried along, saying nothing. The warm pressure of her hand sent a thrill through the lad. His arm trembled. The woman felt it quiver, and under her veil she smiled. Speech was not necessary, speech which might lead to explanations; and perhaps she was weary of lies.

Behind the party in ghostlike silence rode the Indian on Tonnerre.

Francisco turned at length, and whispering to the others to await him, crept out upon a wooden pier. In a few moments he returned.

"The boat is waiting, *contessa*," he muttered.

"Come!" The lady dragged at the vicomte's arm. "But *monsieur* will have to leave his horse. The boat is too small. The voyage will be long."

"Nay, *madame*—*mademoiselle*—" stammered Raymond.

"*Madame*."

"*Madame*, I but now landed in France. I would not leave it so soon. But I will go with *madame* to the boat."

"*Comme il vous plaire*," she replied with a shrug; and though she was relieved by his decision, she was feminine enough to be piqued by it also.

At the end of the pier a boat with two sailors in it was moored. The lady extended her hand, which Raymond gallantly kissed.

"I know not how to thank you——" she began.

"Do not—'twas nothing."

"Oh, *oui*, but it was! Never shall I forget your fighting! Perhaps you will one day learn how great is the service which you have this night performed, and the knowledge will be more eloquent than any poor thanks which I can utter." As she spoke, she bent on the young man an enigmatic smile, which he did not see for the dark. "Farewell, *monsieur*."

"Farewell, *madame*."

He handed her into the boat, where the rest of her party had bestowed themselves. The craft shot rapidly away from the pier. Concino and Raymond stood for a moment to watch its departure. As they turned to go, something swished through the blackness from the water and fell at the vicomte's feet. He picked it up. It weighed heavily on his hand. Its contents chinked pleasantly. It was a purse of gold.

"Now by the holy St. Denys!" he ejaculated, half hurt, half angry, and made as if to hurl the gift into the sea. The Italian laid a gentle but restraining hand on his impulsive wrist.

"Bethink you, *maestro*, we are like to need gold, and that badly, ere we find Hugues Banel," he remonstrated. "Keep it, or give it me. I have no scruples."

"Take it, then." Raymond thrust the purse into his hands, adding: "Perhaps we will meet the lady again, when I shall repay her loan."

"If you do not, she can well afford it," rejoined Concino. For all his readiness, the Italian crossed himself when his fingers touched the gold.

"What! You know her?" queried Raymond.

"*Maestro*, we have this night rendered service to a very great lady, and—a dark presence is leaving France," replied Concino. Again he made the holy sign. "Unless my eyes be turning very bad, that lady is one of the nieces of the *feu*, His Eminence Cardinal Jules Mazarin, though which one of them, I know not. It is a score of years ago that I saw them at Fontainebleau, when they were in their youth. They are all as great as they are evil."

But Raymond, remembering how beautiful she was, and how she had stood straight and tall in the doorway and disdained to cringe when the swords were playing before her, could not believe that she was a thing of evil.

"We shall have to be doubly careful now, *maestro*," continued Concino. "Unless I be mistaken mightily, those fellows that we fought wore the livery of the new police which King Louis is organizing as another arm to maintain peace within his realm while he makes wars outside it. We shall be as well hunted in France as we were like to have been in England."

"Concino, you do croak like a crow at whiles!" exclaimed the vicomte impatiently; and later begged pardon of his faithful follower for saying it. They rejoined the Huron.

"What spirit of the sea wafted you hither, Quidor?" Raymond asked.

“Quidor’s manito bade him follow the brother who had been kind to him,” the Indian answered. “Quidor will go with his brother.”

“The devil you will!” thought Concino, and aloud: “We must get clothes for him, *maestro*. Him with us in that guise, we shall be marked men, and as easily followed, as an army with music.”

The Italian knew the lay of Le Havre passably well from previous visits. Making their way by the shortest route to the fields beyond the city, the three adventurers lay for the rest of the night under a rick of straw in the open. The next morning they took the road to Paris.

Horror brooded over the great city that was the beating heart of all France, and from that throbbing center was pulsed like a malignant disease through the country’s veins to the uttermost confines of the realm. Sister lands looked on aghast, fearing the dread infection.

For one of the most insidious evils in the history of humanity had begun its malevolent work in France, and none knew the limits of its daring, or where it might stop. The higher, the wealthier, the more powerful the man or woman, the more was the hideous enemy to be feared. Even Louis the Grand trembled on his gilded throne, whom no man or combination of men ever before had made to quail.

A word of six letters told the story:

Poison!

“Paris was inundated with murder. No precaution sufficed for safety. Death lurked in every object of daily use—a glove, a perfume, a glass of water, or a missal, each in its turn did the work of the conspirators.

“Friends shrank from receiving the gifts of friends; fathers looked with suspicion upon the hospitality of their sons, and sons shrank from grasping the hands of their sires; the young beauty shuddered at the cosmetics upon her table; and the grave matron at the relics of her rosary; the soldier could not handle his weapon without suspicion, and magistrates bent with dread above their parchments.”^[1]

Some years before, two Italians, Exili and Destinelli, who had wasted their resources in vain labors with a German chemist to discover the fabled philosopher’s stone which should transmute the baser metals into gold, had endeavored to recoup their shattered fortunes by the manufacture and sale of

subtle and deadly poisons. They were found out and imprisoned in the Bastille, where Destinelli soon died.

Unconvicted, untried, but unreleased, Exili continued to live in the prison, and there was allowed to receive the visits of his former associates, to whom he contrived to impart the secrets of his draughts of death.

By means of those secrets, and through the machinations of jealous courtiers and a banished unspeakable, the Chevalier de Lorraine, Henrietta of England, wife of *monsieur*—Phillipe duc d’Orleans, brother to the king—was foully murdered on the twenty-ninth of June, 1670.

By those secrets, Marie Madeleine d’Aubray, Marquise de Brinvilliers, poisoned her father, her two brothers, and a sister; and for her crime was tortured, beheaded, and her body burned to ashes in Paris on July 16, 1676.^[2]

For a little time after the terrible death of the marquise the plague slumbered. But the serpent had been scorched only, and not killed. It writhed back to horrid life again and stung with redoubled fury, and the miasma of its hideous venom overshadowed the entire kingdom. Mysterious deaths multiplied. The terrors of the Borgias of Italy paled by contrast.

The public mind might long have remained in ignorance and doubt, had not the confessional enabled the Grand Penitentiary of Paris to ascertain the use of poisons in a number of instances. So alarming became the increase of the practice that he deemed it his duty to inform the authorities of the city.

There was in Paris at that time a celebrated pythoness and fortune teller, Catherine des Hayes, known as La Voisin, who was the vogue with all the high nobility of the realm, and who had often been personally consulted by members of the immediate household of the king, and even by the queen herself.

La Voisin had obtained the secrets of Exili. She soon saw the value of this diabolical traffic as an adjunct to her other nefarious pursuits. Expectant heirs found that her predictions of the deaths of wealthy relatives came out so well, that she soon became immensely popular, and was forced to take on an assistant, another fortune teller, called La Vigoreaux. Fiendish results followed the association.

Aroused by the tales which his police brought up to him, Louis took personal charge of the investigation of the poisonings, and a *Chambre Ardente*^[3] was established at once, with full powers to try and to punish all suspected persons. Parliament complained of the powers of this exceptional assembly as an encroachment upon its privileges. Louis answered that, as

many of the most exalted personages of his kingdom might prove to be implicated, it was necessary that the tribunal should hold its sittings with as much secrecy as those of Venice and Madrid. It was established in the arsenal of Paris, not far from the Bastille.

La Voisin and La Vigoreaux had formed an association with two unscrupulous men, Lesage and Davot. The extreme popularity of their establishment at length aroused suspicions. On the twelfth of March, 1679, hardly a month before the landing of Raymond and Concino in France, the king's police had descended on the nest of the quartette of unclean birds, and they and various of their accomplices had been arrested. It was discovered that their place was the center of seduction and intrigue, and that their traffic, apparently so trivial, was in reality a dread barter of death for gold.

Late in the morning of the day following the adventures of Raymond among the alleys of Le Havre, the members of the *Chambre Ardente* were bending their bewigged and voluble heads above the documents on their long table of deliberation. In their vast white periwigs, they much resembled a pack of fluffy poodles growling and worrying over a very large bone.

A door at the end of the apartment was opened. Two men entered. The first was a short, rotund, but exceedingly dignified gentleman, richly dressed, and with the finest periwig in all the kingdom shadowing a long nose, and a full, florid, tired face. The second man was a trifle taller, considerably less magnificently upholstered, and his square, hard-bitten, countenance was much more tired and worn.

Jean Baptiste Colbert was wearing himself out in the service of one of the hardest masters a faithful servant ever had.

Marquis de Louvois was first of those at the table to perceive the pair.

“*Messieurs!* His majesty the king!”

As the light of the somewhat wearied royal countenance shone on them, the poodles—pardon—the councilors—arose from their chairs like obedient dolls all pulled by the same wire.

Louis bowed acknowledgment of their salutations, and proceeded to the head of the table. The position of the chair which had been placed for him did not seem to suit, for he kicked it back a bit with his knee before he seated himself. Colbert, glowering at his ancient enemy Louvois, took his stand behind his master.

His majesty had not attended the sessions of the tribunal for a number of days; so M. de la Reynie, lieutenant of police who presided at its sessions,

addressed to him a brief summary of its proceedings.

During this, Louis sat in approving contemplation of his legs, which he had stretched in front of him. Age and overfeeding had left little else that was shapely and admirable of his once trim figure but his calves. Perhaps he had moved the chair back so that he might have an unobstructed view of them; or perhaps it was so that he could more readily speak in asides to Colbert—which he continually did—and not be heard by the other councilors.

Behind his seeming abstraction, the king, as usual, was keenly alive to all which passed about him, and he missed nothing of the import of the proceedings which de la Reynie reviewed.

“And the witch-woman, Des Hayes, has she revealed aught that may serve us?” Louis asked, when he had finished.

“Nothing, sire.”

“And the other—I fail to recall her name—has she confessed?”

“La Vigoreaux preserves also a contumacious silence, sir. She has confessed nothing.”

“Have been questioned with skill?”

“Both have been put to the ordinary question, sire—La Voisin to the extraordinary, as well—but without avail.”

At this reply of De la Reynie, one of the two of the younger and greener members of the council shuddered. For the “extraordinary question” meant that nearly every bone in the wretched prisoner’s body had been broken, besides the administration of other excruciating tortures.

“A pest upon their stubbornness!” exclaimed the king aloud; and in a whisper to Colbert: “And yet methinks I find their silence more endurable than might be their disclosures.”

“Her grace of Bouillon has been apprehended, and M. le Duc de Luxembourg has given himself up. They now await the disposal of the tribunal, sire,” announced Louvois. The war minister pronounced the second name with ill-concealed satisfaction, and flashed a glance of triumph at Colbert. Marshal de Luxembourg had incurred the bitter enmity of Louvois—and for that reason, if for none other, must be the friend of Colbert.

“No others?” asked the king quickly, and with an almost imperceptible trace of apprehension in his tone.

“None, sire—though we had hoped to have the Comtesse de Soissons in custody ere now. Agents of M. de la Reynie are in search of her.”

Louis raised his handkerchief to conceal a sudden spasm of his lips.

“Let us have the Duchesse de Bouillon before us for examination,” he commanded.

Of all the nobility of the kingdom who had had traffic with the poisoners—and they had been many—only the three whose names Louvois had mentioned had been cited before the *Chambre Ardente*. The accusation laid against the Duchesse de Bouillon was absurd, that against the marshal no less so. The visits of both to the house of the fortune tellers had been impelled by innocent curiosity. The Comtesse de Soissons—with a soul as black with guilt as her face was bright with beauty—was Olympe Mancini, niece of the late Cardinal-Minister Mazarin, and sister of that Mary Mancini who had been the young king’s first love in the old days before he came to power. And there had been a time when Olympe herself had been not without influence over the monarch’s heart.

Escorted by two of the agents of M. de la Reynie, of whom she was as utterly oblivious as though they had been flies upon the wall, the Duchesse de Bouillon was brought into the room. The assembled councilors, who bent stern looks upon her, drew hardly more of the lady’s notice; but she curtsied to the king, and then stood very straight and looked at one of the windows, where the sun shone in. Without deigning to glance at De la Reynie, she answered his questions in a low, clear voice and with perfect assurance of manner.

She had, she admitted, paid two visits to the house of La Voisin, the first time “to learn what the stars had in store for her”—she smiled faintly when she said it—the second time to accompany a friend, who also had a mind to be diverted by the fantastic mummeries of the seeress.

“*Madame*, the vile sorceress is accused of having on divers occasions conjured up the apparition of the devil,” pursued the police lieutenant gravely; “did you see him?”

“No, sir; I had not previously seen him, but I do so at this moment; he is very ugly, and disguised as a minister of state,” replied the intrepid duchesse.

De la Reynie frowned and chewed hard on his nether lip. Others of the council cast dark looks at the lady. Still others tittered audibly, and when they saw that the king was laughing behind his handkerchief, their mirth

broke out and shook the windows. The duchesse stood unconcerned, watching the sunbeams playing on the floor. The examination was not pursued. The lady was set at liberty.

When the duchesse had departed and the council had regained its composure, Francis Henri de Montmorency Boutville, Duc de Luxembourg, peer and marshal of France, was led into the chamber. He had been brought from the Bastille, where, due to the spite which Louvois bore him, he had been forced to occupy a dark and narrow dungeon only six feet in length. But he brought his courage uncramped from those strait quarters.

The first question addressed to him was even less fortunate than that which had been put to her grace of Bouillon.

“You are accused, M. le Duc, of having entered into a compact with the devil in order to effect the marriage of your son with the daughter of the Marquis de Louvois,” stated De la Reynie; “what have you to say?”

“Sir,” replied the marshal with a gesture of supreme disdain, “when Matthew de Montmorency married the widow of Louis le Gros, he did not address himself to the devil, but to the States-General, who declared that to secure to the infant king the support of the Montmorencies during his minority, the marriage was a matter of necessity.”

At this retort, which pointed a finger at an incident in the political genealogy of the king himself, and carried the hearers back five hundred years and more, Louis at first scowled and then struck his hands together with an oath:

“*Ventre Saint Gris!* Enough! If any of the Montmorencies has had aught to do with the sovereign lord of hell, it is the soul of the devil and not his works that has profited therefrom! Reconduct M. le Duc to the Bastille.”

The marshal was acquitted on the instant; but, due again to the contrivances of Louvois, his captivity continued for many months.

This farcical “trial” of two innocent persons terminated the attempt of the *Chambre Ardente* to bring to penalty any of the high nobility of the kingdom who had trafficked with the prisoners. The frightful tragedy of the Marquise de Brinvilliers was not reenacted; for none of the truly guilty was summoned before the tribunal. In default of blue-blooded victims, however, there remained the common people—and upon them the hand of the *chambre* fell heavily. All who were convicted of having had dealings with the two witches—some of them had, and some had not—were summarily put to death. Thus Louis le Grand satisfied justice—and averted scandal.

With a great rustling of parchments and an air of weighty duties well performed, the learned councilors of state were about to call it a day and go to their dinners, when a disturbance broke but in the anteroom to the chamber and caused them to pause. Voices were heard calling loudly in surprise. There was a rush of feet. The door was flung open, and a young cavalier ran into the room, followed by a number of musketeers of the king's guard who had sought to detain him. His hair was disordered, his face streaked with dust and perspiration, his eyes stared wide from want of sleep, and his coat of pink satin was stained drab with a mixture of mud and foam.

“De Sarsay!” cried M. de la Reynie, recognizing in the wild figure of the youth one of his sub-lieutenants. “What is the meaning of this unceremonious entry, sir? Why are you in such dishabille?”

De Sarsay caught sight of the king, and fell upon one knee.

“Madame la Comtesse de Soissons, sire! She has escaped!”

[1] Quoted from Miss Julia Jardoe's history: "Louis XIV and the Court of France."

[2] From Dr. Brewer's "Historic Note-Book."

[3] The *Chambre Ardente* was a meeting established in each parliament by Francis II for the extirpation of heresy, whose sentences were beyond appeal, and in most cases put immediately in force. The tribunal of poison under Louis XIV assumed the same name from the fact of its awarding punishment by fire.—AUTHOR'S NOTE.

CHAPTER IX

THE KING IS PLEASED

Louis caught his breath. "Escaped!" he echoed. "How has that come about—and whither?" There was a note of relief in the king's voice that accorded but ill with his next words, which were addressed to De la Reynie:

"It seems, *monsieur*, that your vaunted police are insufficient—or inefficient."

"It would seem so, sire," replied the lieutenant, with a stern glance at the kneeling figure. "I should have gone myself. This matter shall be sifted to the bottom. Come, *monsieur*, your story."

"We had traced *madame* to Le Havre last night, had come up with her, would have taken her; but she got herself aid at the last moment, eluded us, and took ship in the darkness—whither, I know not," gasped De Sarsay, all in one breath.

"Le Havre!" exclaimed his superior incredulously. He looked at his watch. "Why, Le Havre is two hundred miles as the crow flies! Last night, said you—and you here?"

"Part of the night and all of the morning have I ridden by relays of horses, to make report," De Sarsay answered proudly.

"That is noble riding—to report failure," cut in the king. "And the matter of this aid of which you have spoken? What was it, pray?"

"We had come up with the coach of *madame*. Another moment and the fugitives had been ours, for we outnumbered them by three to one, but for the intervention of two cavaliers, who seemed to spring from the earth, and who took sword for the defense of *madame*. Even then we had prevailed—we had them cornered and were wearing them down—when appeared the apparition of a naked man on horseback, dripping as if he had ridden from out of the sea. With loud cries that it was the devil, my men fled——"

"You see, sire," broke in the police lieutenant. "What can my men do against such agencies—imps of blackness who spring from the very earth, belike from hell itself, and the lord of all demons, who comes riding from the sea to their relief? Curse the sorcerers!"

De la Reynie crossed himself piously.

“Stuff!” said the king. “You, M. de Sarsay, do you think that this intervention was supernatural?”

De Sarsay stole a scared glance at his superior, but the young man was fairly honest.

“Nay, sire, the men were mortal,” he answered, “and withal, superlative swordsmen, else—” He paused. His honesty would not go quite so far as to confess that they had twice disarmed him; that, his men told for him afterward. “As for the man on the horse; he, too, was no ghost—though the strangest figure of a man that ever I have looked upon. I shall know them all again—and I shall find them.”

The session of the *chambre* broke up for the day.

“Now am I well pleased with the turn of events,” muttered Louis to Colbert, as they walked to their carriages. “I did privately send word to Olympe that she was about to be arrested, and that, if she felt herself guilty of the charges which were about to be brought against her, she had best to leave the country without delay. To which she replied that, though she was innocent, she had such a horror of a court of justice that she preferred banishment to submitting herself to its power.

“Humph! She was near to submitting, nevertheless,” remarked Colbert. “There is evidence that she visited the witch more than thirty times, and even had her to her own apartments on numerous occasions. The death of her husband, M. de Soissons, was too sudden, and has never been explained.”

“Notwithstanding, and for the memory of the cardinal, I am well pleased,” said Louis.

The pleasure of the king did not, however, lead him to interfere in behalf of De Sarsay, whom M. de la Reynie that day relieved of his commission in the police, a station much coveted by the young bloods.

From that moment De Sarsay had but one object—to find again the men who had been responsible for his disgrace and fall from favor.

CHAPTER X

THE RUNAWAY LASSIE

With a tress of auburn hair worn over her heart, and a cloud of roseate fancies in her head, Lady Jean Murrie landed in France at Dieppe and proceeded to Paris by way of Beauvais. It was to be her first visit to the city since she had been a small girl, but not her first to France. She had been educated by the nuns in a convent not far from Amiens in Picardy, and she spoke the language like a native.

As the English and Gaelic of MacGregor was too little to serve her in France, Jean employed at Dieppe one Paul Fougas, who had been a sergeant in the armies of the Great Condé, and who carried three saber scars on his face in proof thereof. Besides being as brave as a lion, Fougas, on no provocation at all, swore with admirable vigor and fluency, and was a splendid hand to bring innkeepers to terms. Yvette, a maid, also hired at Dieppe, completed Jean's entourage.

Definite plans the headstrong young Scotswoman had none when she started. Nor had she considered that the course which she was taking was one to cause propriety and the conventions to join hands and flee together in holy horror.

She had seen the man she wanted. Circumstances had ordered that he must go away before he had opportunity to discover that fact. It seemed one of the most natural things in the world just to go after him and give him that opportunity.

Not that she ever meant to tell him. Certainly *not!* He must want her, and want her very badly, and he must say so, probably several times. It was nice, being proposed to. Jean knew, having undergone the experience not once, but repeatedly. Had she kept record on a notched stick of the amatory vessels which she had scuttled, as her Highland ancestors had of enemies slain, her stick would have borne seventeen notches, one of them standing for a duke.

But the best proposal of all, of course, would come from the man to whom she meant to answer yes. There could be no harm then in repeating that pleasure, surely. Jean had an amiable notion that she would allow Raymond du Chêne to increase the record and make it an even score.

But how, in the name of the seven sad sisters, was he to be brought to it, when he was in France, and did not know even that such a desirable little person as Lady Jean Murrie existed in the world, and the said Lady Jean was in England?

So Jean went to France to jog fate's elbow, lest the goddess should forget her.

From what she had seen and heard of the young vicomte, Jean expected fully as much of him as he could possibly of himself. He was not the fashion of man to remain long in obscurity, no matter where he was placed, thought Jean. He would not be hard to find in France. In that land all things worth while happened in Paris, or thereabouts. He certainly would go to Paris. So Jean went to Paris, too, Sergeant Fougas leaving venerated memories of his obfurgatory powers at every inn along the way, and getting his mistress excellent service in consequence thereof.

Jean found no garlands hung in honor of Raymond's arrival at Paris.

But the center of the center in the life of France was the court of Louis the Grand, where everybody that was anybody—which is to say the nobility of the realm—all lived together in one big, jealous, petty, squabbling family.

Louis liked his nobility—and liked it under his hand, where he could watch it and see that it made him no mischief. So he built him houses large enough to hold it, and kept it in the family. When he went traveling, it went with him. Only death was an excuse for absence from court, and even that excuse was accepted grudgingly. Any other incurred the royal displeasure, which entailed unhappy consequences to the absentee—sometimes jail.

In time, argued Jean, the owner of the red hair was sure to make his appearance at court. That would be a good place to wait for him. And when he came, if Jean Murrie could not hold her end with the French beauties who would be sure to want him, and carry the prize off from under their snippy noses—but she could!

Having thought these things out in her shrewd little brain, Jean had plenty of plans for the future. She knew court life. She had been with her father to the court of Charles Stuart, and she knew that the court of Louis Quatorze could be no worse. How was she to pry her way in? Easily.

With her purpose in mind, the first visit she paid in Paris was on the morning after her arrival, and took her to the residence of the English ambassador.

Montague received her with some show of near-sighted surprise, kissed her hand, sent a brace of embassy scriveners to the right-about, cleared his throat to tell her the latest court scandal, bethought himself in time that it was too scandalous for her to hear, and showed her instead the new gold snuff-box which the king of the French had given him.

In the course of time it penetrated the elderly head of the ambassador that his fair caller might have some reason for her call.

“In what can I serve the daughter of my old friend?” he asked.

“Present me at court, and give me a hand-up until I be firm in saddle,” promptly replied the confident Jean.

“Oh, ah, er—but it’s a sad place, my dear,” objected the ambassador, rather lamely, at the same time remembering the sensation which his visitor had made at Whitehall.

Sad enough, indeed, had been the court of Louis for the ambassador, what time he had been there, since the day two years before when the Grand Monarque had received news of the sudden marriage of Princess Mary, daughter of the Duke of York, and niece of the English king, to William of Orange, sworn and indefatigable enemy to the head of the house of Capet—news which Montague later had reported to Lord Danby the French sovereign had received “as he would have done the loss of an army.”

It was only recently that Montague had been restored to the full royal favor, witness the present of the snuff-box.

But the representations of Montague, and the reasons which appeared to dictate them, did not daunt Jean, and she said so. After a little wheedling, the ambassador became an unwilling party to a compact that, three days thence, “if naught in the mean time shall intervene to prevent,” he would take her under his fatherly wing at court.

Having wrung that promise from him, she went away satisfied, intent upon an expedition through the Parisian shops, there to provide herself with the materials of war.

When her skirts had rustled out of his room, Montague flapped his fingers helplessly.

“Now is not my bag full enough and to running over with troubles without this addition which Roderick Murrie so debonairly stuffeth in atop the rest?” he said fretfully, addressing a reproachful heap of parchments on his desk. “How be I to manage it, I’d like to know!” He pulled a cord which

summoned an underling, and issued instructions which sent the man hurrying forth. Then the worried ambassador took from a drawer and read for at least the seventh time a letter which had reached him on the preceding day along with other papers by special messenger from London.

Jean had traveled without haste. While she had been sailing and coaching from Tunbridge Wells to Paris, her letter had gone swiftly to the hands of her father in London. Somewhat of her intentions she had exposed in the letter; her father had guessed at more. The Earl of Raasay had had experience of his madcap daughter, and he was not less shrewd than she.

Unable to leave his duties at Whitehall, where he was representing the interests of James of York, he did the next best thing he could: wrote a letter to his friend Montague, and slipped it in a parcel of documents of state which was about to leave for France.

Kings' messengers wasted little time when on their masters' affairs. Montague had one day's warning of Jean's descent upon him.

"Humph!" he grunted, reviewing the troublesome epistle. "'Send her packing home again at once.' Easier for you to write than for me to accomplish, Roderick my friend. 'Have a care that she guess not at thine intentions until thou hast her safe. She is an artful baggage, and may give thee the slip. Keep thine eye upon her.' *That*, at least, I can manage—or rather the eye of William, which is keener than mine. William is a sly dog. She won't give him the slip, I'll warrant me. But what to do—what to do! Damme!"

Jean had chosen Fougas for her escort that day. She was engaged in important affairs which lay between herself and a shop-woman in the famous *magasin* of Maître Custarde in the Rue St. Honoré, when the sergeant bent his scarred face over her shoulder and, reverently averting his eyes from the matters which she had in hand, whispered hoarsely: "A word in your ear, *ma princesse*." Fougas was well paid, and gave title in proportion.

"Well?" asked Jean when she had with some impatience drawn apart from the shop-woman.

"We are followed, *mademoiselle*," said Fougas, affecting to draw the attention of his mistress to a glittering heap of rose-colored silk on a table near by.

Jean pricked up her ears. "By whom?" she questioned, falling in with the sergeant's mysteries.

“By a lop-eared, gimlet-eyed rogue who has a general air of being owned by the devil, and whom I saw hanging about the antechamber at the house of the ambassador,” replied Fougas. “Shall I rid you of him, my lady?”

Jean thought quickly. She remembered the reluctance of Montague, for which he had not good reasons. “So he meant that something *should* intervene,” she mused, recalling his words when he had promised her. Her next reflection was a short, sure jump: “I’ll wager that my father has thrust a finger in the pie! Foolish me, not to have foreseen it!”

Fougas was waiting for his answer.

“Aye, an’ you can do so and not embroil us, do so,” she commanded.

“Never fear, *ma princesse*,” replied the ready soldier. “Do you await me here, and I will lay the rascal by the heels, and neatly.” He moved away, seeming to be much occupied with the displays of goods on all sides of him.

Montague’s William, of whom the sergeant had given a most faithful picture, was loitering near the entrance of the shop, dividing his attention between the party which he was trailing, and a table of various knick-knacks presided over by a young woman who was exceedingly anxious to negotiate a sale.

Fougas, coming from the other side, managed to pass near him unobserved by either William or the girl. Presently William, finding the young woman becoming importunate, and not minded to waste any of his none to large earnings outside of an ale-house, moved on to another stand. Fougas at once took the place which he had vacated.

“*Mademoiselle*,” he opened, gallantly lifting his hat, “ ’tis easy to be seen why this shop is the most frequented in all Paris.”

“Why, indeed, Maître Custarde does choose his wares right tastefully,” replied the girl.

“But has a better taste in choice of *demoiselles* to sell them,” returned Fougas, and drew both a smile and a blush.

“One who has that opinion should be a good customer, and so help them to keep their places,” countered the thrifty young woman. “Now here are rare perfumes from the land of the Turks. Your lady-love will smile on you an’ you fetch her such a gift.” She held a vial up. “The price? A mere trifle of twenty livres.”

Fougas was trapped but ’twas worth while.

“Nay; I have no lady-love, unless——” he answered, flinging down a coin. “So there, you keep the scent and wash your pretty hands and feet therewith, sweetheart. But hist!” he continued to the delighted girl. “Would you know a sure way to the favor of your master here?”

“Assuredly—but what mean you?”

Fougas sunk his voice to a whisper.

“*There’s thievery going on here!*”

“*Oui—monsieur* is trying to steal my heart.”

“Nay; in all seriousness. That English lout who was before me—did he buy aught?”

“Not to the value of a sou”—contemptuously; “nor did he trouble to spend a pretty word, either—squint-eyed *canaille!*”

“Then here’s to the favor of your master, *mademoiselle*—but pray you, you will not mention me. I wish not to be haled in witness, for I love not law-courts. You will not?”

“No,” promised the mystified girl, still only half convinced that the quick-tongued soldier was not jesting.

“Then the Englishman’s the thief.”

“What!”

“*Oui*. Go and tell the *maître* that the rogue has at this moment a fair comb of silver in his pouch, and that you saw him put it there. You may trust me. It’s there. I saw the deed.”

Quickly the girl’s eyes took stock of her wares, and found that the comb, indeed, was missing.

“*Merci!* M. Soldier. Go, I will, at once.”

Fougas returned to his mistress. Hardly had he reached her when Maître Custarde in great emotion came bustling from the rear of the shop, accompanied by two sturdy ledger-men, and laid violent hands upon William.

In vain the Englishman protested his innocence and boasted his connection with the embassy. The comb was his accuser, and his story did but make matters worse for him. He was haled away to prison in short order.

Jean, with all thoughts of shopping gone from her head, left the shop at once.

It was late in the evening before William contrived to get word to his master of the predicament he was in.

Next day when, by diligent search, the agents of Montague had found out Jean's lodgings, the birds had flown, and the landlord could not tell whither.

Jean had left Paris the night before. Moreover, the Jean who rode out through the Vincennes gate with her six Highlanders and her Frenchman would not have been recognized by near-sighted old Montague, nor yet by cross-eyed William.

Had Roger Marsden been there to see the trim and youthful figure in beaver, boots and breeches, with rapier swinging, he would have sworn that 'twas young Lord Castledown of York, cousin to Lord Harry March, and a prodigiously lucky gamester besides.

She had meant to reach Vaux that night; but when the party was still some miles from that town, a violent storm with rain and thunder came up and forced them to seek shelter elsewhere. With lightning spitting and thunder rolling overhead, they rode at top speed through a driving downpour, keeping a sharp lookout on all sides for a light.

In one of the intermittent flashes Fougas pointed out a dark mass ahead, and to their left, and some distance back from the roadway.

“ 'Tis the abandoned château of the Marquis de Villetrin!” the sergeant shouted in his mistress's ear.

“An' you fear not the ghosts which are said to dwell there, 'twill serve as shelter in lack of better!”

“I fear not ghosts; but I do fear thunder and lightning, and that most mightily!” she called back. “Ah-h!” She cowered in her saddle before another flare and its crashing detonation.

They turned in and swept down a long avenue of elms to the château gates.

Torches blazed suddenly before them, and they saw a group of armed men ringed about the yawning darkness of the gateway.

Fougas thought of the ghosts he'd mentioned, and tried to draw rein and to cross himself at the same time.

Then a young cavalier flashed forth, from the murky depths of the portal, and the light of the torches shone full upon him. He carried a long rapier, with which he menaced the soldiers before him.

Jean saw, and cried out in wonder. Then she set spurs to her horse and drew her sword.

“Forward!” she shouted wildly.

CHAPTER XI

THE TIGER-LILY

In his straw-rick in a field along the Lillebonne road, Raymond awoke with the early morning sun shining in his face. For a minute or two he lay still, trying hazily to account for his surroundings. His memory soon reasserted itself, and he looked for his two companions.

A yard or two away lay Concino, so burrowed into the straw that only the top of his dark head was visible. He was still slumbering heavily. A little farther on, the nest which Quidor had made for himself was empty. The Huron had disappeared. Raymond sat up and rubbed his eyes. At his movement, Tonnerre, who was tethered in the grass of the meadow a few yards distant from the rick, raised his head from his munching and whinnied a good-morning to his master.

Just then the vicomte was made unpleasantly aware that his sleeping-place had been shared by other than human bed-fellows. Certain small insects which are wont to inhabit second year's straw-ricks had discovered in the night that providence had sent them food which was much more toothsome than the dry fodder on which they had been living. The discoverers had not delayed to spread the glad tidings among their relatives and neighbors, and the tribes had crept on to the attack with enthusiasm.

"Mon Dieu! I feel as though an army were maneuvering upon me!" exclaimed Raymond, and he rolled disgustedly out of the warm straw, and commenced an examination. His ejaculation aroused Concino, who sat up with a sleepy "What's to do?" and at once began to scratch manfully.

"Oui," responded Raymond, who had opened his shirt; "it's a wonder that there is anything left of us. Methinks they must have devoured the Huron, body and breeches; for there is no trace to be seen of him." Here the lad caught one of the tiny tormentors and held it up to his eyes. "Pah!" flinging it from him; "dirty vermin! And yet I envy them the ease with which they satisfy their cravings for a breakfast. Myself, I am so hungered that I could begin upon you, Concino, tough as you are. But I thought I saw the glimmer of a pond hereabouts last night by the stars' light. I'm for it and a bath at all risks, to try and drown out this invasion."

He strolled down the meadow. Not far from the edge of a patch of woodland he found the pond. As he neared its banks he caught sight of

Quidor. The Huron was squatted on his hams in the grass by the side of the water. He was bending, with his attention concentrated on a contrivance which he was working vigorously with his hands. A thin ribbon of smoke coiled up over his shoulder. Beside him lay a heap of something which at the distance looked like snow.

Raymond approached. The white stuff proved to be the feathers of a great goose, which, neatly plucked and drawn, lay on a napkin of lily-leaves. Quidor was industriously twirling a dry, pointed stick between his two palms. The point of the stick was set in a notch in a flat piece of wood which the Indian held down beneath his knees. As Raymond reached him, the dust of the wood smoked furiously and burst into a tiny point of flame, which Quidor blew into a blaze with his breath, and plied twigs upon.

Quidor was preparing breakfast the quickest way he knew.

While the red man nursed his fire, the vicomte stripped and plunged into the pond. It was icy cold. He soon clambered out of it and crouched shivering by the leaping blaze, where he dried himself, and at the same time exposed his garments one by one to the heat to drive out their unwelcome colonists. The double ordeal of water and fire rid him of most of the pests.

“Where got you the goose?” asked the Italian, coming up with the horse.

“Over there.” Quidor pointed vaguely across the fields to where in the east three or four slender columns of smoke were ascending from the stone chimneys of as many farm cots. “There are many more there.”

“*Sapristi!* You have robbed a hen-roost, eh!” Concino exclaimed with a grin; “and have chosen nobly, too. Some goose-girl will mourn today the loss of a patriarch of the flock. But come; here is not the place to be a-cooking. We are too near to the roadside. We may be seen. Fetch it into the wood.”

The Huron seized a blazing brand, kicked the rest of his fire into the pond, and with his fat booty slung across his shoulder, marched into the thickets. In a small clearing in the depths of the grove he spitted his victim on a length of green twig, and soon had it turning over a blaze.

“By St. Anthony! You are a traveling companion worth having!” said Concino shortly afterward, mumbling his words somewhat, for his teeth were set in a juicy thigh-piece. “No need to go hungry while there’s a roost in France. You do rob them with the skill and discretion of a fox.”

Though they had no salt for it, the appetites of the trio were sauce in plenty for the goose. Soon naught was left of the poor bird but white, clean-

picked bones.

When he was sure that not another morsel was to be scraped from the remains, Concino bade the other two await him in the wood while he mounted Tonnerre and rode into Lillebonne.

In his absence Raymond made up for lost sleep. Quidor, more restless, roved through the forest, and successfully snared a brace of plump hares for their dinner.

Shortly after noon the Italian returned. He had made good use of the lady's broad gold-pieces in town. Behind Tonnerre he led two good horses, besides which he had fetched a complete outfit of clothing for the Indian, two hams, a couple of dozen new-laid eggs, a packet of salt, a jug of milk, and a half-dozen flasks of wine.

"There," he said with a sigh of satisfaction, when he had spread his lighter purchases out upon the grass and cracked a bottle of wine, "we need go neither naked, footsore, nor hungered. I think it best that we should journey on toward Paris with discretion, keeping to the fields and forests as much as may be, and traveling at night."

Quidor lost no time in getting himself into the finery that was his. Barring a few excusable errors, such as mistaking the sleeve of his coat for the leg of his breeches, a desire to wear a shirt which was colorful outside of a waistcoat which was plain, and the putting of his left boot on his right foot, he did fairly well, accepting with grave thankfulness all the suggestions which his laughing companions offered freely.

When he was all arrayed, from the plumed chapeau which sat on his black locks to the rapier at his side—Concino had fetched him both sword and dagger, and a brace of pistols, too—the pride of the red man in his new apparel was without bounds. Up and down the forest paths he strutted; and once must needs steal out upon the meadow to the edge of the pool, where he stood so long, lost in admiration of his reflection in the water, that his friends were fain to call him in for caution's sake.

"Why, he's as vain as any maid with her first ballgown," said Raymond, laughing.

"And looks not too badly, neither," added Concino. "I've seen Spaniards that were more swarthy.

"Nay; not that way! Do not let your rapier so dangle between your legs!" he called to the Indian. "Wear it so," and he adjusted it properly.

His old and scanty apparel Quidor consigned to the flames of his fire without regret, all save the moccasins. Them he did up in a parcel and stowed away in his saddle-bag, thinking at some future time to relieve his feet, which the new boots plagued sorely.

That night the three left their hold in the woods and proceeded on toward Paris, traveling cautiously, and avoiding the highways when they could find byways to serve them. It took them the better part of a week to reach the city, and such appetites did their mode of going engender that Concino had several times to forage for them in villages along the way.

His ally provided with weapons, nothing would do the Italian but that he must learn their uses. Quidor already understood the handling of pistols; and had he not, he would have got no practice at them, for they dared not fire them for fear of drawing attention. With the dagger he was a rare expert—of which he'd made proof. But of the management of the "long knife," as the Huron dubbed his rapier, he knew nothing.

So Concino took him in hand, and they passed many an hour at their chance stopping-places in play with the rapiers. Quidor took to this new game with fierce eagerness. Indeed, he sometimes forgot that it *was* a game, and fought so tigerishly that any but a swordmaster like Concino would have run the risk of being skewered in his mad rushes and lunges.

"Old Philibert used to say that it takes years to make a proper bladesman," remarked Concino at the close of one of his last bouts with his pupil before their journey's end; "and he was right. But you, my red game-cock, will hold your own with any ordinary sworder before many more lessons are done."

All roads must have an end, be they good or be they bad, and the three travelers had not found this one ill. In the gray morning of the sixth day they rode into the city of Raymond's dreams; and very vast and confusing he found it, who had been used only to small villages and quiet country-sides.

In Paris, in the Rue des Peupliers, Master Hugues Banel had established himself a number of years before. Beside acting as agent for the estates of the Comte and Comtesse de Mortemart in Poitou, Limousin, and Champagne, Master Hugues carried on a business for his own account, dealing in fruits from the provinces.

One of the first things in Raymond's mind was to call upon Hugues, if he had returned from England, replenish his purse, and find out how matters

lay across the Channel in regard to his escapade there, and to get the news from home.

“It is far too early to be hunting Hugues, if he has come,” advised Concino. “The tall rogue loves his bed, and will not be afoot for hours to come. Let us hunt an inn first.” The Italian further volunteered that he knew of a place where they might bide quietly and yet fare well, he having heard its praises sung by a friend.

They rode on through the interminable streets and avenues, past wondrous mansions and churches and still more wonderful palaces. Raymond stared and exclaimed with a frankly boyish delight. Concino was hardly less demonstrative. Paris had grown tremendously under the reign of the Grand Monarque, and was no longer the Paris which the Italian had known in his youth.

Even the hereditary stoicism of Quidor was not proof against the marvels, which his eyes looked upon, and he greeted them with occasional grunts of astonishment. Oddly enough, it was the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris which impressed the Huron most of all.

“*Eugh!*” he ejaculated when he saw the mighty pile of that work of seven centuries, and he pointed to the two great towers which stood against the sky. “Is that, then, the lodge of Onontio?”

“What?” said Concino, and then, understanding the allusion, he answered: “Nay; but it is the home of Onontio’s god.”

Quidor, nodded comprehendingly, and drew a smile to the other faces by remarking that he thought it fit to be the house of a manitou, and inquiring: “May one see him if one goes there?”

It was explained to him by Raymond that the Christian God, though He dwelt in His temples, did not show Himself to the eyes of His followers.

Again the red man comprehended. “The manitou of Onontio is like the manitou of the Hurons,” he commented. “Perhaps they are the same.”

In the Rue des Cinq Angles, Concino found the place he sought, the Inn of the Golden Skull, and drove a bargain with its landlord for lodgings for the cavaliers and stable room for their steeds.

Time had been, a score of years before, when the street had been in the purlieus, and L’Auberge du Crâne d’Or a place of ill-repute, notorious as the den of one Le Marcou, a famous leader in the underworld of Paris. But years and the growth of the city had lifted the Rue des Cinq Angles from the mire,

and with it the inn had struggled into respectability. Le Marcou had disappeared and was only a memory; but in the room back of the big fireplace of the inn was still pointed out an iron spike in the wall near the door, on which it was said Le Marcou was wont to hang the steel-tipped lash which was his favorite weapon, and which he wielded with such deadly skill that no swordsman ever was known to stand against it.

In the afternoon a visit to the shop in the Rue des Peupliers found Hugues in, and exceedingly glad to meet again the son of his old patron, and Concino. From the hulking soldier-lad of Turville in the old Picardy Wolf days, Hugues had grown into a portly, ruddy-faced man, easy in speech and suave of manner, as became a prosperous merchant. He had little news for Raymond, as his interview with Denys at Portsmouth had been of the briefest, his ship having been about to sail when they met.

He had instructions to hold at their disposal such moneys as they might need: and—which counted just then for more than money with Raymond—he had two letters. One was from the vicomte's mother, and the other from the comte. It may be guessed which of the two Raymond opened first, and with what moistened eyes he read its closing lines:

—and oh, my dear lad, when this fever of adventure has burned low—*Dieu* grant that it may be soon—come back to us. You cannot know how we miss you. Remember that you are our only son, and keep your dear life safe for our sake.

Poor Charli; there was love in her heart for twenty sons, had she had them; but she had not, and so it all was wrapped about this one.

From his father Raymond learned that he had not slain Marsden; that in fact the wound was less serious than the young lord's friends had thought it, and he would soon be on his feet again. Denys wrote also of what Charli had not mentioned: of the young woman who had visited the Château du Loup, and who had promised her good offices to avert the displeasure of the English king.

The news recalled to Raymond's mind once more a picture that had oft appeared there: the small, dominant figure with the masked face that stood in the road and shouted indignant orders to his pursuers as he rode down Portsmouth hill. So her name was Lady Jean Murrie. Would he ever meet her again, he wondered. He hoped so. He had not seen her face; yet somehow the memory of her always brought a thrill.

Knowing right well this son of his, Denys had written:

I do not expect that you will come back at once. One must have a little career first, *hein*? But do not be too long. Go to the Marquis de Heronaye. He is an old friend, and I think he may obtain for you a place in the royal guards. Himself he has a captaincy in the *Becs-des-corbins*. There, an one be worthy, is advancement quickest met. Heronaye may be trusted entirely; but it is best, for the reasons of which you know, that you shall appear to others as Raymond du Chêne, simply, and not as the Vicomte de Mervalles or the son of the Comte de Mortemart. May the quarrels which you will have be honorable, and—stick to them like wax. If ever you are in dire trouble, tell your tale to Colbert.

Well supplied with money, and knowing where he could get more at need, Raymond left Hugues, promising to see him often. He proceeded at once toward the Palais Royal, where were the offices of the *Becs-des-corbins*.

Concino, who thought it unwise to remain in France now that they were assured that they might safely go home again, argued in vain against the younger man's resolve to stay. Seeing him determined, the Italian advised that it were well to follow the Wolf's suggestion without delay.

"Etienne de Pontigne, Marquis de Heronaye, is indeed a true and honorable gentleman," said the Italian, "and he owes the Wolf much for deeds done in his behalf in the long ago. Besides, it is well to obtain the patronage and protection of one with influence so soon as may be."

Concino had learned in gossip of the streets that it was, indeed, Olympe Mancini, Comtesse de Soissons, whom they had befriended at Le Havre, and why she had fled the king's justice. So far as he could ascertain, no hue and cry had yet been set afoot for the men who had aided her escape, the impression seeming to be that they had accompanied her to Brussels, whither she was said to have gone. Nevertheless, the Italian was secretly worried, and carried his sword loose in its scabbard whenever they ventured abroad.

But they did not find De Heronaye. He had gone north to his estates near Charlemont, and was not expected for a fortnight or more.

In the interval of waiting, Raymond saw much of the city. He was at first cautious in his goings and comings; but finding himself pass everywhere unchallenged, he grew bolder, and wandered whither he listed. He also expended some of his money on garments in keeping with the prevailing

fashions, though, not being foppish, he eschewed the more ridiculous features.

On an afternoon, as he loitered with Quidor along the Quai d'Orleans on the Ile de St. Louis, they heard a clatter of galloping hoofs. A cry swept down the street!

"See! The Tiger-Lily! The Tiger-Lily!"

Folk ran from all directions to line the street, and then crowded into doorways and against buildings to make room. Crowded and jostled, Raymond turned to look for the cause of the commotion.

Down the street from the direction of the Pont St. Louis, pair by pair, came eight white horses, caparisoned in scarlet leather, so studded and bossed with silver and hung with ivory that it seemed more like jewelry than harness. Behind the prancing steeds rumbled a splendid, shining coach. A driver in gorgeous livery cracked his long whip over the backs of the mettlesome horses. Two footmen equally resplendent rode behind. The blazon of a *duchesse* gleamed on the white doors of the coach.

At the window of the vehicle appeared the face of its owner, that of a young and beautiful woman, inundated by a profusion of golden-red hair under a wide hat with floating feathers, and radiant with pride and happiness as she watched the effect which her splendor produced upon the crowds, and listened to the cries of "Tiger-Lily!" which accompanied her progress.

"Some very great lady," muttered Raymond to the Huron as they backed out of the way and halted on the edge of the crowd to watch the equipage pass. But it did not pass. As it came opposite to them, the young woman, who had been scanning the spectators with eyes which missed no tribute to her beauty, called an order to her coachman. He leaped to his feet, flung his weight on the reins, and brought his horses to a stop so suddenly that the leaders reared and slashed the air with their pawing hoofs, and the wheel-horses sat back upon their haunches.

His mistress leaned from her window, looked straight into Raymond's astonished eyes, and beckoned.

"*Oui*, you—with the red hair—come hither," she commanded, laughing at his puzzlement. He stepped forward hesitantly.

"By my eyes, you are *un bel garçon*! Come closer, I won't bite."

Raymond advanced to the carriage window and looked into the eyes by which she had sworn. They were deep, soft sea-blue—but too bold. She

knew how to use them. They dazzled and startled him, so that he was at a loss for words. A diversion in his favor was created by a small black dog, which flew at him from the depths of the coach, barking snappishly. Raising a hand which fairly blazed with jewels, the girl cuffed the pet so smartly across its snout that it fled, yelping, and burrowed into the carriage robes.

“Pert beast! He’s as forward as a courtier, and—as you are not.” She raised her face to Raymond’s again.

“’Twas your hair caught my eyes,” she rattled on; “’tis so like my own. See.” She reached out swiftly, caught a lock of his hair and mingled it with hers. “We are both of the fox breed—only yours is darker, and finer. Plague on it! I wish mine were like that.”

“But yours is much the finer, *mademoiselle*,” Raymond found voice to answer.

“Hush! Don’t lie to me. *Pardieu*, but you’re a pretty boy! Who are you? Where are you from? What is your name? Have you been at court?”

“I have but lately come to Paris. My name is Raymond du Chêne——”

“What else? Your title?”

He shook his head.

“Not noble?”

“No, *mademoiselle*.”

“Pish! what’s the odds? Neither was I two months ago; so don’t pull a long face over it. I got one—for my good looks—and so may you. I like your pretty ways, *pardieu*! Come and see me some day, and we’ll talk about it. The old man can be fooled easily. Now, *au revoir*. Nay; any one in Paris can tell you where to find me. Ask any of these gaping ones.” She waved a hand toward the crowd. “*En avant, André! Vite!*”

The coachman cracked his whip. With a tremendous clatter the eight horses sprang forward. A flash from her eyes and a toss of her hand, and she was gone on her triumphant way. Down the street echoed the cry: “The Tiger-Lily!”

Raymond began to shoulder his way in the opposite direction. He became aware of a man who stood a few feet away from him, and who was making signs. He stopped.

Through the crowd, edging daintily so that he might not disarrange his costume, came a young Parisian dandy of the first water. He wore a lustrous

white peruke, so large that his hat would not go over it, and so, perforce, he carried that article under his arm. His face was powdered and adorned with a number of fancifully cut *mouches*, and his eyebrows were delicately penciled.

The lace at his cuffs was fully a foot long. The seal of a watch-fob dangled from each pocket of the outer of three magnificent waistcoats. Coat and breeches were blue as the shell of a robin's egg, while his hose were white, and his square-toed shoes maroon. A ridiculously small sword swung at his side. In revenge he carried under his arm along with his hat a walking-stick of polished and inlaid wood as thick as his wrist.

With a graceful bow he came to stop before Raymond and eyed the young man benignantly, twisting the while at a wisp of mustache that was like a rat's tail.

"You are in luck, *monsieur*," he said softly; "the *duchesse* spoke with you."

"So it appears, *monsieur*," replied Raymond, bowing also. He wanted to laugh.

"But pardon, *monsieur*, have I not seen you at court?"

"No, *monsieur*, I have not had the fortune to be there."

"But *monsieur* is—noble?"

"No, *monsieur*."

"Ah-h!" The penciled eyebrows retreated into the shadow of the periwig. The gentleman shifted his weight uneasily from one foot to the other.

"Ah-h—I bid you good day, *monsieur*."

Again he bowed ceremoniously, and moved off down the street, steering a careful course, in care that his silken garments should not come in contact with common folk. As he went he pulled a silver comb from his pocket and nonchalantly drew it through the ripples of his great peruke.

Raymond was left free to laugh, which he did, and the crowd with him.

"All the same, *monsieur* is in luck," remarked a rough-looking chap in a soldier's jerkin.

"Who was the lady?" asked Raymond.

"The Duchesse de Fontanges, the king's new favorite, whom Mme. Montespan fetched from Provence to make Mme. Maintenon jealous—and

of whom Montespan now is more jealous than she was of Maintenon.”

Raymond indeed was fortunate—but in a way that neither he nor the fop nor the soldier dreamed of. The chance meeting with the Tiger-Lily was to have a strange sequel.

CHAPTER XII

MAÎTRE GAUTIER'S PICTURE

"Let be, let be, M. Amédée! 'Tis enough! *Mon Dieu!* 'Tis more than enough! I'll have you go no farther with it!"

Fat Jules Gautier, landlord of the Golden Skull, stood on the paved hearth of the wide fireplace in his big tap-hall, and turned a pink, perspiring face upward. One hand, the fingers of which resembled a cluster of plump, mottled sausages, rested on the shaft of a short ladder which had been erected against the wall. The other plucked nervously at a bunch of keys at his girdle. On his flat, greasy countenance was an expression of mixed wonder, disapproval, and superstitious fear.

From the rungs of the ladder, M. Amédée, a slender youngster with long brown curls falling on the collar of his artist's smock, looked down in surprise, a stubby paint-brush poised in his hand.

"What ails you, Maître Gautier?" he asked, somewhat pettishly. "The work comes on finely. The ancient recipe works to a marvel. Is it not fair done?"

"Fair done or no, I'll have no more of it," persisted Jules. "*Ciel*, how foul and ugly! Hideous! *Pardieu!* it might be Le Marcou himself—only they say it hung there long before his time. Nay!" stamping his foot, as Amédée turned once more to his work, "come down on the instant! It would ruin me!"

"How now, Maître Gautier!" Amédée twisted about on the ladder. "Do you then rue you of our bargain? Well, then, I'll remit you the half of the named price, and continue the work just for the love of it. Why, man, 'tis an example of the old masters which you have here! Never have I seen better coloring. Or do you fear that I'll harm the picture? Not so; I use a choice restorative, a concoction which Pierre Mignard, my master, who paints for King Louis at Versailles, had from a celebrated mixer of pigments at Florence. It will restore your ancient canvas so that you would swear that the artist had finished it but yesterday, nor harm it in the least."

And he made as if to apply his brush.

"An you come not down from there instanter, I'll tip the ladder," threatened Gautier stubbornly. He laid hold of the rungs and jiggled it.

"*Peste!* be careful, man! Stop! or I will spill the contents of my bucket upon you—and that will cost you dear. Stop, I say!"

Half in jest, half earnest, the painter shook his brush. A few drops from it fell on the upturned face of Jules. He backed away, rubbing at it.

"*Faugh!* it has a most evil odor; evil enough wherewith to evoke the devil—as I half believe you have done yonder on the canvas." He crossed himself. "Now come down, there's a good fellow. As for thy fee, I'll pay it gladly, with something over; only go no farther. Think you that I could hold custom to my inn with such a face glaring down upon my tap-room?"

"Why, for that, he's no beauty, I agree," said Amédée, reluctantly preparing to descend. "Still, I see nothing so evil about him as you seem to."

"Belike you are too near to him to catch the effect," returned Jules. "Come, stand by me."

Amédée clambered down. Together they stood and looked at the picture.

It was a canvas the height of a tall man, and half again as wide, set in a heavy frame of oak. How long it had hung there, who had painted it, what it represented—no man remembered these things. Twenty years before—long before Jules Gautier had become landlord of the Golden Skull—the picture had been what it was now: a grimy, soot-blackened blank, to which the smoke and grease of each new winter's fires had added a new layer of oblivion.

Then had come Amédée, pupil of Pierre Mignard, with his curiosity and his Florentine restorative; and Gautier had hired him to remove the curtain which time had spread across the canvas. He had begun near the frame at the left, and, working with care, had cleared a patch some eighteen inches square when Jules had halted him.

Through the mists of the years a man's face had peered down at the watching landlord, momentarily clearer and clearer—a long, thin face with high cheek-bones, a smoothly curved nose, compressed lips, and terrible eyes. It needed not the tuft of hair on the lower lip, the upturned mustaches, and the bristling, pointed eyebrows to put the stamp of fiendishness on that countenance.

Alone the eyes would have done it. Painted though they were, there came from their depths a baleful yellow glare, instinct with malignant life.

Terror was in them, too, and made them terrible—an incredible, overmastering terror, as though the brain behind them struggled with the memories of unspeakable horrors, and sought to cast them out through its windows.

Brush-craft of a master was on that moldering canvas. For he had depicted with oils and colors a man—fancy or portrait; if the latter, God help him—before whom living men must shrink and think on evil things. Presently the painter shuddered as if with cold.

“By my faith! I see him as you do now,” he almost whispered. “Was ever aught so fearsome? The face of a damned soul, one would say.” Amédée made the holy sign. Then, the enthusiasm of the artist fighting against superstition. “But it was right masterful art, so to paint him. I wonder whose the work, and what more that age-dimmed canvas holds. I would——”

“Let us go on wondering, then—and not seek to know. I’ve seen enough,” Jean interrupted. He raised his voice. “Petit Jean!”

“Oui, mon maître!”

“Go fetch me a square of black crape. Hasten!”

When the painter had been fed and was gone, the landlord climbed the ladder and, not without shivering, tacked his crape to the oaken frame so that it fell across the frightful face. He did the work cunningly. At a short distance the crape could not be distinguished from the blackened surface with which kind time had concealed the painting.

“There,” he said, standing on the hearth when it was done, and shaking his fist upward, “remain hidden, Maître Devil, and vex not the ways of honest men who have their own affairs to mind.”

A few hours later Maître Gautier became busy. The fall of night brought custom trooping through his doors. Listening to the cheery chink of coins in his till, the tinkle of friendly glasses, and the hum of conversation in his tap-room, he forgot the sinister presence which the painter Amédée had partly resurrected upon his wall.

The hall was long and wide, and held nearly two-score tables. From near its center an iron-studded door opened upon the street. At the lower end of the room the fireplace was flanked by two doorways. One led rearward to the stairs and the kitchens, the other to the chamber which was known as “Le Marcou’s Den,” the windows of which overlooked a back court and the stables. The drinking hall was lighted well by lamps of brass, which depended by chains from the ceiling-rafters.

When Jules had taken the place, its decorations, besides the indecipherable painting, had been a few crossed pikes, festooned upon the walls between the high windows, and an array of leather drinking jacks hanging on pegs above them. Maître Jules had bronzed the pikes and burned the jacks. He had hung tapestries of fair worth upon the walls, and here and there a modest painting.

A carpenter had built for him a number of lightly partitioned stalls about the rim of the hall, and he had curtained them in such fashion that gentlemen wishing to take their wines in semi-privacy could do so there. Near the main door was his own stall, a thick railing which enclosed a low, square desk, where he could sit and make his change and keep an eye upon the place, secure in the feel of two good pistolets which swung against his knees.

It was a good night for the Golden Skull. Not since the celebration of the victory of the fleet over De Ruyter and the Spaniards off Syracuse three years before, could Maître Gautier recall having seen a better.

He was a careful man, ambitious for wealth, and knowing that the way to it lay through pleasing service. Steadily the reputation of his place had grown, and the character of its patronage had improved. Young gallants from the court circles came often now—occasionally a high official—to sit and quaff their wines and smoke tobacco from the Americas in their long-stemmed pipes, while jest and song and story went their merry rounds. Sometimes ripe bits of scandal were breathed across the tables; and the higher placed was the relator, the higher flavored was his relation sure to be.

Jules loved these pleasant fellows; they were making him rich, and providing him with rare entertainment at the same time. Ofttimes he waked in the night and shook his bed with laughter at jokes cracked hours before, the comprehension of which had just reached him.

“*Mais, hola* there, Antoine! A table for M. du Chêne and his friends! Yonder is one that is open, near the fireplace. Good evening, *messieurs*.” Maître Gautier bowed and smiled as his three lodgers came in from the street. They returned the greeting and followed Antoine to the table.

It was the eighth day of their stay in Paris. In that time they had seen most of its wonders, and now were accustomed to sit for a time each evening in the tap-room of the inn, to crack a convivial bottle or two before going up to their beds.

“A curse upon this waiting, with naught to do!” grumbled Raymond, flinging himself into a chair. “Almost am I minded to—but no, I will not

that.”

At this cryptic fragment of speech Concino stared questioningly. Raymond saw the look, and he flushed. He had been thinking of the Tiger-Lily.

“Let us talk,” he said. “Let us talk about home. I wonder what *madame*, my mother, may be doing now?”

So they talked of home until Raymond fell silent and moody, and ordered a third bottle, and then a fourth, which was contrary to custom. Though he would not have admitted as much to Concino, the vicomte was growing very homesick indeed, and for some reason, more so on that particular night than on others. Little urging would it have taken then to have him turn his face toward England again.

Quidor sat silent; but his dark eyes lighted up, as they had a way of doing when he had wine in him, and his breath quickened.

Raymond was aroused by the tense grip of Concino’s fingers at his wrist. The Italian was leaning his body across the table.

“Do not turn or look, *maestro*,” he whispered; “but the party that has just come in—they sit at the fourth table from the street door—the young *macaroni* whom we met at Le Havre is there!”

It was De Sarsay. Relieved of his commission and duties in the police, he had kept himself in sullen seclusion for a day or two; then had been coaxed out of it by certain wine-loving companions of former days. Chance took him on that night to the Golden Skull.

“Let us go up to our rooms at once, *maestro*,” advised Concino. “If we walk directly from here to the door of the corridor, we need not offer him our faces. *Allons*.” He started to rise.

Raymond stirred in his chair. A flush of impatience overspread his face.

“Why should we flee?” he muttered. “We did but aid a lady in seeming distress—and we knew naught of her misdeeds, if indeed she had committed such. That should be excuse enough.”

“You know not how such things are managed over here, *maestro*,” replied Concino, almost pityingly. “Our word would count for just nothing—if we were allowed speech. The lady escaped through our connivance. That is enough to settle us our business. Until we shall gain protection and influence, we are in hourly danger. Come, *maestro*, do.”

But the vicomte would not yield the point. Anger replaced impatience in his face, and with it stubbornness. "I will not play the sneak before any man," he said, his voice rising incautiously. "My word is good. Let yonder gilded popinjay hunt me further at his peril!"

Concino shrugged and sat back resignedly. Immediately he became tense again. His hand sought the pommel of his sword and loosened the weapon in its sheath. "Too late now, I fear, *maestro*," he said with a slow smile. "He looks this way. His glance is fixed. He is remembering. We must fight or run for it." With the words, the Italian rose hastily to his feet and kicked back his chair to give him room.

"Sacré bleu et Ste. Anne d'Auray!"

De Sarsay, whose roving eye had picked up first the countenance of Concino and then the red hair and profile of the vicomte, leaped up so precipitately that he overturned the drinking table before him.

"Par le sang de Dieu, messieurs!" he cried to his startled companions, "yonder are the very rascals of whom I have told you!" Tugging his rapier from its scabbard, he started forward, raising the cry: *"Les empoisonneurs! Les empoisonneurs! Help me to seize them, comrades!"* In his mind's eye De Sarsay saw himself restored to favor if he should be successful.

"Oui; we will help you fast enough," replied the Sieur des Mirres; "but needs not to fill our laps with wine and broken glass," and he shook from himself the débris of revelry. Cooler headed than De Sarsay, he called to a lackey near the door: "Run and fetch the watch, fellow!" and to a soldier: "and you, *mon garçon*, get men and hold the door!"

Little need was there to summon the watch. De Sarsay was known to many in the inn as a lieutenant in the Parisian police. The cry which he had raised: "The poisoners!" was a slogan known and dreaded in all Paris and through all France. Everywhere in the big room men who heard it sprang to their feet and drew their weapons, scowling with suspicion upon all persons who were unknown to them. From the clinking joviality of a drinking-place the Golden Skull became in an instant a farrago of confusion, bristling with hostile steel.

When he heard that hated cry, and knew that the hunt was on, and he was the quarry, Raymond turned pale with fury and clutched at his sword-hilt. Then the blood flowed back into his cheeks and coolness to his brain. Leaving the rapier in its sheath, he ran into the open space on the big hearth

and faced the fracas, through which De Sarsay, still cursing and shouting, was pushing his way.

“No poisoners are we!” cried the lad, lifting his weaponless arms in an effort to gain for himself the attention of the room. “A mistake has been made!” He would have said more; but it was useless. The uproar drowned his voice. A glass thrown by a retainer of De Sarsay struck him on the shoulder and fell in tinkling ruin at his feet.

First Concino and then Quidor tore through the crowd which had eddied about their table and stood beside him.

“No use trying to explain now, *maestro!*” the Italian shouted in his ear. “They will spit us like so many cats, and ask for explanations afterward!” The Huron already had sword and dagger out, and crouching halfway to the floor, fixed his burning eyes on the men before him, seeking which he should strike first.

Another glass, better aimed, struck the vicomte on the chin. A bottle hurtled through the air and broke against the wall of the fireplace behind him. He gave up then all thought of peace and made ready for fighting.

Ready enough, too, had been every man in the room to lay on and help drag the poisoners down; but in the confusion they had been uncertain whom to attack. De Sarsay and his friends struggling toward the fireplace removed the doubt. The crowd surged across the hearth in a wave.

“To the door!”

Backward and to the left the vicomte leaped. With a sweep of his arm he ripped down the curtains from the doorway to “Le Marcou’s Den,” and in the entrance the three took their stand, where none could outflank them.

“Tonnerres de Dieu et mort du diable!”

De Sarsay of the strange oaths had reached the open at last. Recklessly he flung forward. “Disarm me this time if you can, poisoner!” he blared, speeding a thrust at Raymond.

“Assuredly,” replied the vicomte, parrying nimbly. With a cool laugh and a twitch of his arm, he sent his adversary’s sword flying over the heads of the crowd.

“Wizard son of the black beast!” raged De Sarsay, and would have fallen upon his enemy bare-handed had not his friends seized him and hustled him back.

“Choose your language more carefully, *monsieur*, and—*do not come again!*” Raymond sang after him.

Again the lad would have offered explanations to the men who were pressing forward; but they were in no mood to listen. His words were unheeded. A dozen swordsmen elbowed for room to stretch their blades. Half of them found it. They rushed the doorway.

But both of the long rapiers which Philibert Chalon had fetched from Spain were in the air now, and could not be passed. Straight-armed and smiling at each side of the doorway, the lamplight gleaming blue on their shining blades, Raymond and Concino met and turned the hail of steel which drove in against them. Crouched on the floor between them—there was not room for three swords in the doorway—Quidor fought his own battle. Ill fared the silken shins which came within reach of his point.

From his desk Maître Gautier floundered and shouldered toward the front. He fetched his pistolets with him. “Let me get at these poisoners!” he brayed when he found himself wedged in where he could get no farther. “I have pistols here! Let me shoot them; or do one of you *monsieurs* take them and shoot. They are loaded with leaden slugs and broken glass!”

Luckily for the defenders, the landlord was unheeded. In the mad struggle to use steel, fat Jules and his pistols were unnoticed.

Heedless of the vicomte’s warning, De Sarsay recovered his sword and once more forced his way into the *mêlée*. Moaning and sputtering with fury and humiliation, he dragged one of his friends back to give him room. Raymond saw him coming. The smile left the vicomte’s face.

“This is the last time, *monsieur!*” he called, bending slightly to meet him.

“Poisoner!” shrieked De Sarsay. He lunged so fiercely that his blade, which the vicomte deflected, drove deep into the door-casing and quivered there. He tore it out to thrust again. “By the holy St. Valery!” It was his last oath. The saint did not help him. His blade was beaten down. Raymond’s steel passed through his throat. At the same time, Quidor seized him by the knees and drew him forward and downward.

Then echoed in the tap-room of the Golden Skull what never before had been heard in Paris. Piercing through all the din of the fighting rose the tremulous, unearthly war-whoop of the red Hurons.

His savage nature fully aroused, the Indian laid hold of De Sarsay’s periwig. It came away in his hand. With a grunt at this phenomenon, Quidor

cast it from him and twisted his fingers in the unfortunate Frenchman's hair. A circular sweep of the practised hand that held his dagger accomplished his purpose. He pushed De Sarsay's body back on the floor. Again rose his wild war-cry, shrill and triumphant, as he flourished the dripping scalp before the faces of the opposing swordsmen.

A cry of horror answered the deed. The rapiers ceased to clash. The struggling crescent of men, sick and staring, swayed from the doorway.

"Mother of God! What manner of men are we fighting?" gasped Des Mirres.

Occupied in guarding his head, Raymond had not seen what had passed at his feet. When his enemies fell away, and he saw the mutilated head of De Sarsay and the horrid trophy brandished in the hand of the red man, he started back. Then with a fiery oath, he shortened his sword and would have driven its point through Quidor's breast. But Concino parried the thrust, crying:

"Mercy for him, *maestro*; he does but follow the custom in his own land!"

What answer the vicomte might have made was lost in a howl of abject terror which went up from the group of men in front of him. Before the astonished eyes of the defenders of the door, their assailants melted away, the very ones who had been foremost to dare the swords now tearing each others' garments in headlong eagerness to be first to the door.

As they went, they cast panic-stricken glances over their shoulders, not at the men whom they had fought, nor yet at the fell work of the scalping-knife; for it was neither of those that had appalled them. Those who were bold enough to look behind directed their horror-filled eyes at a point on the rear wall of the tap-room, above the fireplace—and they did not look twice, but ducked and ran the harder.

For a face had thrust at them out of the blackness of the ancient picture which hung there—a lean, hideous, hellish face, that glared down at them with yellow, ghost-haunted eyes, and contorted its features in frightful grimaces as the flickering light from the swinging lamps passed athwart it.

No one knew, or cared, who had seen it first. In the end all saw it, and the terror which it inspired was wild, unreasoning, and unanimous. The scalping of De Sarsay had shaken their nerves; the second apparition completed the wreck. Every man who looked up at that dreadful countenance felt wings on his heels, and used them.

Luckily the door was wide. In a trice the kicking, clawing mass of men had squeezed through it, leaving in its wake only fat Maître Jules, who was broad and substantial enough to withstand the torrent, and moreover, not scared by the cause of the common panic—a stray gust of wind from the door had done the trick, lifted and flung back the crape which he had tacked there.

What he saw on the floor did frighten Jules, though. He let his pistols fall and waddled for the kitchens as fast as his thick legs would take him.

“What—in God’s name?” asked Raymond, staring at the empty tap-room.

He was answered by a yell from Quidor. The Huron had taken a step out from the doorway and chanced to glance up at the wall. Head down, he plunged between Raymond and Concino, leaped at the first window he saw, carried it with him, glass and sash, and fell in the courtyard beyond.

In turn Concino stood out to see. After one look, he whipped around, shuddering, and gripped the vicomte by an arm.

“It is a picture, I ween,” he said; “but the most fearful man ever saw. Don’t look at it, *maestro*, an you would sleep well. *Sapristi!* But it has stood friend to us tonight, though. *Allons*; let us follow the Indian.”

They jumped from the window which Quidor had broken in his flight. They found that the Huron had mastered his fear to the extent of fetching the horses from the stables. A moment later the three of them were whirling down the Rue des Cinq Angles. In neighboring streets they still could hear the shouts of affright of men who were putting distance between themselves and the demon of the Golden Skull tap-room.

Back in the tap-room the fiendish, painted face on the wall and the blood-dabbled, dead face on the floor regarded each the other in silence until the brazen lamps burned out.

Early in the morning Maître Gautier set up his ladder again, climbed it, and resolutely ground the charred end of a piece of firewood into the hateful face, obliterating its features forever. Then he set himself to win back his custom. It was up-hill work. Many a time, when he counted the diminished receipts in his till o’ nights, he cursed M. Amédée and his Florentine picture-restorative.

CHAPTER XIII

THE IRON MASK

Through devious ways known to Concino, the three horsemen, riding in silence, reached the outskirts of Paris, and then the fields beyond the city. Light of the stars showed them their way for a time; but shortly after they had come into the open the sky became overcast with clouds, and they were left in darkness. They halted in a clump of woods.

“Now, *maestro*, is an end to all thought of service in the king’s guards,” said Concino; “if we may win free of the net which will be spread for us, let us take ship and fare back to England.”

“*Oui*, Concino; nothing else seems left to do. Let us put as many leagues as possible between us and the city yonder. It seems fated to be unlucky for us. We will ride into south France and take ship from there around Spain. On our way we will stop at Vezy in Limousin. I am minded to see the home of my ancestors before I am hunted out of France.”

As he said, a journey to Vezy would not take them much out of their way; and south France would be safer traveling than north France—if any part of the realm could be said to be safe for the fugitives. Concino offered no objections to the plan.

Raymond sat him down at the roots of a tree and leaned his back against its trunk. His reflections were bitter. They were not long in leading him to a conclusion.

“Concino!”

“Yes, *maestro*?”

“I have been a fool, Concino.”

The Italian did not dispute the verdict. “The *maestro* is very young,” he said.

Raymond removed his hat and rested his head against the rugged bark of the tree. Presently he slept. He was awakened by the crowing of a cock in a distant farm roost. Tall and ghostlike in the gray gloom of the morning, Quidor stood before him.

From the moment when the vicomte had fiercely turned his sword on him in the tap-room, the red man had scarcely spoken. He stood now with

folded arms and bent head, looking down at the man whom his heart had elected as friend and master. He had been standing there in the same attitude for many minutes. When he knew by his changed breathing that Raymond had awakened, the Huron stirred slightly.

“What is it, Quidor?” Raymond asked, getting on his feet. He spoke coldly; for he could not so soon forget the deed of savagery which had so horrified him.

For answer the Indian unbuckled his belt, drew his rapier, and threw the belt with scabbard and dagger upon the grass. The sword he extended hilt-foremost to the vicomte.

“If Quidor has done that which has offended the Fiery-Hair, so that his face is turned from his brother, then let the Fiery-Hair pierce the breast of Quidor with Quidor’s sword—and not soil his own,” said the Huron with mournful dignity.

Raymond pushed the proffered weapon aside.

“A gentleman of France does not do murder,” he replied; “neither does he shame his hands and blacken his soul by mutilating the bodies of his dead enemies.”

“Sons of Onontio in New France, who go on the war-path with their brothers, the Hurons, against the hated Iroquois, take Iroquois scalps, and sell them for yellow wampum to the big white chief at Quebec,” rejoined Quidor. “In the land of Onontio it seems that they do differently. Quidor did not know.”

“That is the truth—more shame to them; but it is true,” put in Concino, who, slumbering in the shelter of another tree, had been awakened by the dialogue. “He knows no better.”

“’Twas a foul deed, and did put a stain upon our honor,” retorted Raymond hotly. “And they who do so in New France are not French gentlemen, but ravening beasts.”

“Quidor is sorry.” The Huron turned away, his bronze features working. “If the Fiery-Hair will not do the deed, Quidor will himself go to the manitou. Farewell, my brothers.”

He set the pommel of the rapier against the ground, and like a Roman, would have fallen upon its point; but Raymond caught him by the shoulders.

“Nay; you shall not!” There was a catch in the vicomte’s voice. “You have served us well—we are friends. I should have remembered that one

does not arrive from savagery to the heights of civilization in a day, or yet a year. Put up the sword.”

“Does the Fiery-Hair forgive?”

“*Oui*—and freely.” Raymond wrung the red fingers in token of amity restored. The Indian buckled on his belt and sheathed the rapier.

“*Eugh!* Now Quidor go steal goose.”

He was as good as his word.

It was a dense tract of woodland in which the fugitives had taken refuge. When they had breakfasted on the fat fruit of Quidor’s roost-robbing, they penetrated farther into its depths and there passed the day, the woodcraft of the Indian providing them with food in plenty, though unseasoned.

Midway in the afternoon the clouds which had all day lowered overhead, gathered thick and black, and premonitory rumblings in the heavens foretold the rising of a storm. Night came on early and gloomy. In the dusk the three left their retreat and rode southward through the forests, paralleling the road which led to Vaux.

They had not proceeded many miles when the darkness under the trees became well-nigh impenetrable. Ominous mutterings from above, and a chill, damp wind below, warned them that the approaching storm must soon break upon them, and that it promised to be violent. The horses kept up a continual, frightened nickering as they stumbled forward.

“It is in my mind that presently we shall be getting a rare skin-wetting,” observed Concino, pulling up his horse after some time of this unsatisfactory progress. “They who hold the big buckets up yonder will soon be tipping them upon us.”

“So I have been thinking this time back,” said Raymond. “*Peste!* This wind has the dampness of the grave. Would that we had safe shelter.”

“There is a lodge over yonder among the trees,” spoke up Quidor, who had been staring intently into the murk at his right.

“Which way? I see nothing but the night’s black blanket,” Raymond asked. Both he and the Italian strained their eyes in a vain attempt to pierce through the gloom; but their civilized senses were no match for those of the forest-bred Huron.

“If there is a dwelling there, which I much doubt, it must be empty, else a light would show,” was Concino’s conclusion. “And, if ’tis empty, ’twould

be safe shelter. Few folk are likely to venture abroad on a night like this. We would not be disturbed.”

Quidor slipped from his saddle and passed the reins to the Italian. “Let my brothers wait here, and Quidor will go to the lodge,” he volunteered, and melted into the night like one of its own shadows. He was gone nearly half an hour, and his companions were becoming uneasy when he reappeared as silently as he had departed.

“Big stone lodge yonder,” he reported. “Empty. Its fires have not burned for many moons.”

Heartened by the prospect of a roof over their heads, Raymond and Concino dismounted, and the three turned their horses and worked their way through a tangle of undergrowth, two of them groping and stumbling, the third walking straight and sure.

At length they reached a wall and moved along its base until they came to a breach, where the stones had tumbled outward and inward. With difficulty they forced their snorting horses to clamber through the fissure. Ahead of them the two white men could see dimly, then, the outline of another, higher wall, and the loom of an irregular mass of buildings against the sky; and they marveled at the eyesight of the red son of the wilderness, who had descried it from the depths of the woods, despite the storm and the night.

“Let my brothers be careful where they place their feet,” the Indian cautioned them. “There is a hole in the ground.”

There was a “hole,” both wide and deep, and with water at its bottom, as they learned when a disturbed stone splashed into it. It proved to be the ancient moat of the château; for the hole which they had stumbled upon had been built to withstand sieges in the days when neighbor made war upon neighbor, and each must have a castle of thick stone wherein to keep safe, while the poor folk between dwelt like rabbits in holes in the earth.

Along the edge of the big ditch the three men crept, dragging their unwilling horses, and stood at length before the front gate of the château. There they found the moat crossed by a bridge of stone, which in more modern times had replaced the antique draw. The big gate of wood swung open, its oak timbers still stanch and firm, though the irons with which they were braced were rusted deep.

Trees grew within the court, and grass had pushed up between the stones of its pave in such quality that the horses could, and did, graze their fill.

When the animals had been staked out by their tethers, the Huron built his fire. He chose a spot against the wall of the building itself, under the shelter of a stone *porte-cochère*, and laid a fireplace with flags pried from the *trottoir* which bordered the wall. The light of the blaze disclosed the surroundings.

The court was a quadrangle of more than an acre, around three sides of which extended the unbroken mass of masonry which formed the *château*. To right and left of the gateway were the crumbling remains of low, wooden buildings, which might have been barracks or stables. The gatehouse itself was of stone. Within it the great wheel which operated the valve of the gate still stood in its place, and appeared serviceable.

Above the vaulted arch three culverins frowned down from their embrasures, and fellows to them were set at intervals along the ramparts. But these old dogs of war were harmless now, corroded into red rust which one might almost pick apart with his fingers.

Not far from the *porte-cochère* was a covered well. When Raymond, making a tour of investigation, came upon it, he found a sturdy, iron-bound bucket standing upon its ledge, though the rope of it had long ago rotted to dust. Attaching the three bridle-reins together, he lowered the bucket and brought it up filled with sweet water.

Quidor's snaring of the day had netted him half a dozen hares. In an unbelievably short time he announced that two of them were ready for eating.

"A stronghold," commented the Italian as Raymond approached the fire. Concino had been running a knowing eye over the defenses of the place. "Twoscore men might have held it against an army. Look at the strength of those keeps." He pointed to the three square towers surmounted by battlements which stood one at each end and one in the center of the structure.

The welcome task which the roasted hares offered having been accomplished, their ensuing drowsiness urged the travelers to find them a sleeping-place. With torches from the fire to light their way, they stepped from the porch above the *porte-cochère* through glassless windows into a large hall.

There were a few bits of broken furniture on the floor, strips of moldering tapestry upon the walls, and a heavy rack of beams near the door,

which once had held pikes and muskets. The rest was emptiness, wherein their footsteps echoed lonesomely.

In the next room beyond, which also looked down upon the court, they had better fortune. Parlor or drawing-room it had been. Under a litter of lighter débris which had been tossed hither and yon were the outlines of three or four great divans upholstered with leather that had stood the test of time. These the self-bidden guests dragged forth in triumph. They kindled a blaze in the fireplace and fed it with shattered furnishings and tatters of bygone fineries until it leaped and roared.

Concino was moved to explore farther, and penetrated as far as the kitchens and the buttery appended thereto. There was a store of exceedingly musty and dusty grain in one of the chests which he opened; but he found no long-necked bottles, which were what he had hoped for; and he did not feel equal to an exploration of the cellars, fearing that he might be lost, or that rotten floorings would fall upon him.

His ransacking was not entirely without result; for he returned to his companions in high glee over the discovery of two tall wax candles which he bore with him. The impious wretch had been at the altar supplies in the chapel.

“I think that the Virgin can spare us them,” he said; “besides, some one else was there before me. I found the box wherein they were stored newly broken, and all its contents gone save these. Belike children of the farm folk hereabout stray hither and play at being lords and ladies.”

First making sure that their gleam would not be seen through the gateway, he kindled the tapers and admired their soft radiance until he nodded off to sleep upon his divan. The Indian had set him the example some minutes before. Raymond alone remained awake. A fresh access of homesickness had gripped the lad, and he could not sleep.

For a time he tossed and wriggled; but 'twas useless; the shadowy horse which he wished to mount would not come near him. Thinking the lights might be contributing to his wakefulness, he arose and extinguished Concino's tapers. The fire had burned away to embers, which glowed softly in the cavernous fireplace. When the lad crept noiselessly back to his divan, save for that glow, the room was quite dark. Still the steed eluded him. He could hear the wind whistling and wailing about the old turrets, and an occasional hiss and patter, as it dashed a flurry of rain against the walls, though the storm had not arrived.

Then came that plague of the sleepless—an itching and tickling of his face, as though an unseen hand were drawing cobwebs across it. Again he arose disgustedly, this time crossing to one of the windows which overlooked the court. It had glass in its frame. He pressed his nose against the cold pane and gazed moodily into the gloom beyond. Then he started and rubbed his eyes, and looked again.

From a window on the third and top floor of the château wing opposite him a faint light was shining!

His second thought was that it was a reflection of the embers in the fireplace. A glance showed him that the angles were such that it could not be. The blaze which Quidor had kindled in the court had burned out. Perhaps the wind had fanned it into life again. If not——

Raymond buckled on his sword and dagger. Picking up his boots, which he had removed, he stole across the floor in his stocking-feet so quietly that even the keen senses of the Indian were not aroused by his going. As he went he picked up one of Concino's tapers and a tinder-box. Through the outer hall he felt his way to the broken window by which they had entered, and stepped out upon the porch. All was blackness below him. There was no fire. He raised his eyes. From where he now stood he could not see the light as squarely as he had at first; but it was there—a soft, yellow, unflickering glow.

Perhaps, had he been one of those who looked the night before at the fearful face upon Maître Gautier's wall, the vicomte would not have done what next he did—at least not alone. But the sight which had sent Quidor crashing through a window, and shaken Concino's nerves of steel, had been spared Raymond. He was a fearless man, and free from most of the superstitions of his times. He meant to ascertain the cause of that light without delay.

He did not awaken his companions; nor did it occur to him that he should do so. Because it was wet in the courtyard, he sat down on the topmost step of the porch and pulled on his boots. On tiptoe, and stepping with care, he started across the quadrangle. He had groped his way as far as the old well, and his eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness, when he heard the trampling of the horses, which the Huron had stabled in one of the tumble-down structures near the gate. The sound reminded him that he had left his pistols in the saddle-holsters. He changed his direction, went thither and fetched them.

By the time he reached the end of the opposite wing of the building he could with medium lucidity discern the objects nearest him. A gust of the steadily rising wind tore across the dark chasm of the quadrangle, battered down the brim of his hat, clutched mischievously at his garments, whistled at him in derision, and went shrieking out through the gateway.

There was no porch here, as at the other entrance to the château. A short flight of hewn stone-blocks led up to a porticoed door. Raymond paused long enough at the foot of the steps to draw off his boots. He ascended. The door yielded to his pressure, swung open to admit him, and closed softly into its frame behind him. The darkness beyond it was absolute. He stood still in the velvet black.

Why he continued to stand there, motionless, breathless, or how long he so remained, Raymond did not know. He was not afraid, only—waiting. Time seemed to whisk by him in that impenetrable obscurity with curious swiftness. It was less than ten minutes since he had left his companions sleeping in the room across the courtyard. It seemed a much longer time than that, and they a far greater distance.

Then it came—what he had been waiting for—a faint, rasping, grating, metallic whisper, from far in the upper gloom.

At once the odd tension relaxed, and he breathed easily again. He was not afraid, had not been afraid. It was as if subconsciously he had heard the sound when he first had opened the door, and subconsciously had awaited its repetition. He struck his tinder-box and lighted the taper.

With the wax roll held high in his hand, he looked about him. The room was a hall, smaller than the other hall, more bare, and with no windows. At his right, along the wall, a massive staircase of dark wood led upward, beyond the pale frontier of his candlelight. The vicomte laid his boots on the floor and unsheathed his rapier. With the naked weapon in his right hand, and managing in his left a pistol and the taper, he ascended the stairs. He went lightly, but unhurriedly.

From time to time as he proceeded, Raymond heard above him that peculiar, metallic *snar-r-r*. Sometimes it was continuous for a period of seconds, or became intermittent, or ceased entirely for a moment's space, to begin again directly. At no time was it loud; but it was penetrating.

When the vicomte emerged on the second floor and began to traverse the corridor which lay before him, the sound was still above him, and noticeably more distinct.

He passed the doorways of numerous rooms; for the passageway was long—the entire length of the wing in extent. Some of the doors were open. Some were shut. The quiet chambers were for the most part empty and dismantled. One or two of them contained crazy wrecks of furniture and tattered ruins of decorations that had been gorgeous long ago. Once he caught sight of his own moving image in a dusty pier-glass, and his teeth clicked sharply and he half slued around to meet it, then went on with a grim smile.

At the end of the corridor he found another and narrower staircase. He entered it, carefully shading the candle flame.

When his head came above the level of the flooring he paused. His eyes commanded the stretch of the upper hall. Halfway toward the front of the wing a light was shining across the passage from an open door. The rasping sound had its source there.

Raymond tilted his candle, spilled a few drops of wax on the floor at the head of the stairs, and affixed the light there, to serve him in case of retreat. With infinite caution he crept along the hall, keeping well to the middle, where he might have room for the use of his rapier. He reached the bar of light and stopped. Warily he thrust his head around the door-casing.

Opposite the door and with his back turned toward it, a man sat before a dressing-table, his head thrust forward between two lighted candles. Aided by the lights, the mirror, and a rusty file, he was engaged in what at first glance seemed to be a determined effort to remove his right ear.

Immediately the vicomte's head appeared around the door-frame, the man at the table saw it reflected in his mirror. He whirled about on his chair.

His face was covered by an iron mask!

CHAPTER XIV

THE BETTER SWORDSMAN

For a matter of seconds the bizarre tenant of the moldering old chamber and the intruder stared each at the other in silence.

Raymond, his brain a whirl of fantastic thoughts, gripped his rapier and pistol hard. The other held his file poised in the air and with the other hand picked nervously at the lace of his shirt-front.

Through the holes in the strange face-covering Raymond could see the man's eyes glitter in the wavering candlelight. The mask left mouth and chin exposed, and they, with the eyes, were remarkably expressive, considering that the remainder of the face to which they belonged was hidden to the roots of the hair.

Alarm, suspicion, anger, irony—one after the other flitted across that fragmentary countenance, two-thirds of which was blank and polished metal, and one-third flesh and blood. Irony came latest and lingered longest. The stranger was first to regain his composure. He lowered the file to his lap.

"Bon soir, monsieur," he said.

"What—who are you?" As he spoke the vicomte advanced a step into the chamber.

"Monsieur, then, does not know?" The query had in it a sharp, eager note.

"No." Raymond shook his head wonderingly. The lips below the mask smiled. What was going on behind that unreadable shell of iron above them? Why should the man think that his visitor might know him? It was a puzzle.

"Doubtless *monsieur* is relieved to find that I am not a ghost." The smile grew wider. The vicomte could not see the joke.

"Who are you; and what are you doing in this place?" he asked.

"If *monsieur* will aid me in the matter which I was about when he interrupted, I think that *monsieur* may be enlightened." The stranger held up the file. "I find it most awkward to handle," he continued; "but I think that the work is almost done. *Monsieur*, I am unarmed; you may lay your weapons down."

The last words had a certain ring of authority in them, mixed with an irony which brought a flush to Raymond's face. Not only was the man unarmed, but he was much smaller than the vicomte. The vicomte laid rapier and pistol on a rickety chair near the door, and crossed the room.

"What is it, then, that *monsieur* was doing?" he asked.

"Removing this bit of adornment, to which I had unfortunately lost the keys," replied the unknown, indicating the mask. "I found the file below at the old forge in the stables."

Raymond took the instrument and set to work.

It was a curious contrivance, this of which the stranger wished to be rid. The plate of metal which covered the larger part of his face was thin and had been beaten or molded to accommodate the features which it concealed. It was held in place by a flat band which passed around the head above the ears. From the band, and behind the ears, two small bars extended down at each side and were joined fast to a hinged collar which fitted closely about the neck. The collar in turn was made fast under the man's right ear by a flat hasp and lock, in which were two small keyholes. Despite that wherever the frame pressed against the flesh the metal was covered with a lining of thick black velvet, the cage must have been an uncomfortable encumbrance. Raymond did not wonder at the wearer's eagerness to escape it.

"But why the devil should he be wearing it at all?" thought the vicomte.

Under the angle of his jaw, close to the lock, the prisoner of the Mask had bitten the metal-collar nearly through by dint of patient filing. It had been an awkward place in which to work. The rough file had scratched the skin many times, until the blood had oozed through; but he had persisted.

As he wielded the rasp, Raymond had opportunity to observe the stranger's person. He was below medium height, not more than five feet, three or four inches. His figure, though inclined to corpulency, was graceful in outline, and he carried it well. His hands were long and aristocratic, and would have been soft and white, but that the use of the file had stained them with rust. He was clad in dark garments of rich texture; but they were much travelworn, his shirt was rumpled, and his shoes were gashed and tattered. He was owner of an exceptionally shapely pair of legs. The hair which flowed down over his shoulders was plentiful, dark brown in color, streaked with gray.

Two-score strokes of the file sufficed to complete the cut in the iron collar. The hinge fell open.

“It is done, *monsieur*,” said Raymond, and stood back, file in hand.

With something very like a shudder, the unknown lifted the cage from his head and set it on the table, cast a quick glance at himself in the mirror, heaved a tremulous sigh, and turned toward the vicomte. Picking up one of the tapers, he held it so that the light shone across his face.

“Does *monsieur* recognize me—now?” he asked.

The face he disclosed was of extreme pallor. It was oval in contour, full, with long nose and high forehead. The eyes, set well apart, were deep blue, and gave an impression of mildness which veiled hidden strength, an impression which was sustained by a rounded but firm chin. The finely-cut mouth denoted both will and selfishness.

It was an interesting, nay, a commanding face; but—it was not known to Raymond.

“*Eh bien?*” queried the little man after a moment of waiting, in which he held the candle steadily.

Raymond shook his head.

“I have never seen *monsieur*.”

A sudden flicker of impatience and dismay leaped in the blue eyes of the stranger.

“*Ventre Saint Gris!*” he ejaculated. Half to himself he added: “Have I then so changed?”

He turned again to the mirror and with the aid of the candle subjected himself to sharp scrutiny. What he saw appeared to restore his confidence. He faced Raymond with a smile.

“You are a Frenchman?” he asked.

“*Oui*—but have passed nearly all my life in England. I am in France for the first time since my childhood.”

That information delighted his interlocutor apparently. He struck his hands together.

“That makes all clear, *monsieur*.”

It was not at all clear to Raymond. Struggling between curiosity and a wish not to offend this strange personage, who, if he were not a very great liar, was doubtless a very great gentleman, the lad asked:

“Is it permitted now to know who *monsieur* is?”

This time the question caused no annoyance. The stranger seemed to be finding enjoyment in the situation. He toyed with it.

“I know nothing of you,” he countered, smiling.

“My tale is short: I am Raymond du Chêne, born in France, raised in England, now traveling for the first time through my native land, and driven by a storm to take refuge in this deserted castle—where I find *monsieur*.”

“Du Chêne,” echoed the other, catching up the name. “’Tis a name not uncommon in France, and one of its families is very old.” He looked inquiringly at the vicomte. Raymond, recalling the caution of the Wolf and the reasons therefor, shook his head.

“I am not a noble, *monsieur*.”

The lad waited a return for his confidences. It did not come. Another interest had caught the stranger’s fancy. His eyes had strayed to the chair where the vicomte had laid his weapons.

“Yours seems a splendid rapier, *monsieur*. I have ever an eye for such. ’Tis of the ancient Spanish style—or an imitation of it. May I examine it?”

Without hesitation Raymond reached the sword and presented it hilt-foremost. The man was still seated. Did he meditate treachery, the vicomte could count upon his youthful agility and the pistol.

“It is genuine.” The man turned the long blade so that the candlelight flickered up and down its polished surfaces. “It is worth its weight in the metal of which its hilt is fashioned.” He sighed over it and added wistfully: “It is a—some time since I have handled such a good weapon. Would that there were two of them. Nothing would please me more than a little bout with you, *monsieur*.”

He arose from his chair and with a graceful gesture returned the rapier. As his fingers relaxed from its blade, he cried out with sharp pleasure:

“St. Denys! There *is* a sword!”

Some former occupant of the long-disused chamber, imbued with a fancy for martial things, had affixed a fan-shaped festoon of weapons to the wall opposite the windows, and where it might be seen over the foot of the canopied bed which stood at that end of the room. Time had turned back the rotting tapestry from the wall, and a *lambeau* of faded colors had sagged

down and nearly hidden the warlike array. Projecting from the hanging fragment was the hilt of a rapier.

With a light, quick step the stranger crossed the room and took the weapon down. He brought it to the light. The years, which had dealt so harshly with nearly everything in the old château, had used it kindly. Its blade was tarnished, but not rusted, cause of which was apparent when the man bent it in his hand, and a shower of flakelike lacquer fluttered shimmering to the floor.

He set the point against the planking and pressed down the hilt until there was hardly the space of a foot between tip and pommel. “A good blade, *pardieu!*” as he relaxed the pressure, and it straightened like a bended spring. “A trifle shorter than the one you carry, *monsieur*, but ’twill serve. An’ you are willing to afford me the pleasure, I shall be most glad to give you a little lesson.”

Raymond’s skill in swordsmanship was a thing of which he did not boast; but nevertheless he knew his powers; and at that word “lesson” he could not keep back a faint smile.

“Most willingly, *monsieur*,” he agreed.

“Then on guard!” The stranger fell gracefully into position. But he had seen the smile and guessed its portent. As the blades crossed, he fetched a watch from his waistcoat pocket, and without in any way interrupting his first *riposte*, he glanced at its dial.

“It lacks six minutes to ten,” he announced tranquilly. “Before they are passed, *monsieur*, we shall know who is the better swordsman.”

For an instant the eyes of the vicomte were fiery, but for an instant only, and then he smiled again. What was there to be angry over? The vanity of his strange opponent was ridiculous. He had but to smile at it—and prove it futile. He resolved to shorten that six minutes to three. So he pressed his attack with his utmost skill.

It seemed for a short time that the task would not be difficult. His adversary, playing the defense, managed his weapon, not awkwardly, but with restraint, as of one who knew his game, but hesitated to risk the play. Even his defense was halting. Each thrust that the vicomte sped seemed sure to pass his flimsy guard, yet none did so.

Never had Raymond seen a sword held as this man held it. There seemed no firmness in his grip of its hilt. The vicomte could have sworn that the muscles of his fingers were not flexed. The weapon hung in them with the

dainty poise of a brush in the hand of an artist. A single sharp contact of the steels should have struck it from them. But there were no sharp contacts; that was the singularity of the stranger's fighting. It allowed none of the clash and clang of ordinary fencing, only a low singing and rasping of the meeting blades, which would scarcely have been audible in the adjoining chamber.

Faster and faster Raymond fought; the other blade, sinuous, writhing, elusive, almost twined about his own, turning it, yet evading it.

One minute passed—two—three!

"*Monsieur* gives me great pleasure." The unknown flashed a glance at his watch. "He has had his fair half of the time."

For the first time the vicomte felt the opposing blade rigid. His own rang against it. The air vibrated. The corridor flung back the echoes.

Concino's studied, subtle defense, the lightning-like vigor of the Wolf's attack—both of these Raymond had mastered, and had thought that they comprehended all known fashions of sword-play. But a blade now came against him the intricacies of whose method he could not fathom, and which, though shorter than his by an inch, forced him to give ground and skip like a dancing-master.

Four minutes—five—five and a half!

In mid-air the blades locked. The vicomte felt a violent cramp in wrist and knuckles. His rapier clanged on the floor.

Steady as a steel finger, the point of the other sword rested against the fourth button of his waistcoat.

From the steel, which seemed to fascinate him, Raymond looked to the face of the stranger. Its pallor was relieved by deeply flushed cheeks, and its eyes shone like diamonds. Amazed and chagrined he could not help being; but the lad was great-hearted.

"*Monsieur*," he said between gasps, "without—knowing you—I salute—the better swordsman."

A white flash of lightning split the heavens above the château. Its flare paled the candle flame and lighted the room like day. As the crash of thunder which followed died away, a man leaped through the door from the corridor. It was Concino.

“What—” he began. Then he saw the face of the stranger, and he fell upon his knees. “Mother of God! *It is the king!*”

CHAPTER XV

LORD CASTLEDOWN ARRIVES

The pistols which the Italian had brought ready for use thudded upon the floor. In the doorway Quidor, who had nearly stumbled over Concino's legs, caught at the casing to steady himself. As the significance of his companion's words penetrated his brain, the red man also knelt, though he continued to stare with all his eyes.

"*Eugh!*" he grunted. "Onontio!"

Raymond fell back a pace. From his late antagonist he glanced to the kneeling men, and back again.

"You? The king?" he cried. Then he remembered himself, and he, too, bent his knee to the floor. "Forgive me, sire! I did not know!"

Of the four, the king alone was entirely at his ease. He made a gesture of his hand to quiet Raymond, and addressed himself to Concino:

"So you recognize your king, fellow? Who are you? I do not recall your face. You are not French by the look of you, nor the fellow there behind you, neither."

"I am Concino Pazza, an Italian, sire, but born a French subject. This other is Quidor, a red Huron from your majesty's dominions in New France. I was sword-brother to Denys, who once served your majesty under the name of the Black Wolf of Picardy, and whom you made Comte de Mortemart; and this young man——"

"Enough!" With a wave of his hand the king interrupted the recital. "Methinks I recall some part of the affair," he continued vaguely. "It suffices that you are loyal subjects. Arise. *But not you, monsieur,*" he added, with a quick motion signing Raymond to remain kneeling.

"He remembers not," thought Concino, getting to his feet. "*Sapristi!* The memories of kings!"

The king raised the ancient rapier and advanced threateningly upon Raymond.

"As for thee, young rogue," he said in a shaking voice, "thou hast dared to face thy rightful sovereign with bared steel. Justice must be done for that,

sir; justice must be done.” He bent and struck the lad lightly on the shoulder with the point of the sword.

“Raymond du Chêne, I dub thee knight!” The king’s shaking voice broke into a roar of laughter. “*Ventre Saint Gris!* Didst think thou wert about to be spitted? For two things there is something owing to thee, my lad. One: you have given your king a rare bit of entertainment. *Ciel!* I had not thought there was a swordsman in the kingdom who could bring the sweat to my brow as thou didst. Secondly, thou didst lose nobly—and it hurt thee, lad, it hurt thee. Arise.”

He caught the vicomte familiarly by the shoulder and aided him to his feet.

“And now,” he continued chuckling, “lead thy king to a supper; for he is truly famishing. If it be a good one, and enough of it, mayhap I’ll make thee a *marquis*.”

Ere they left the chamber, the king caught up the iron mask from the dressing-table, and with a warning glance at Raymond, hid it beneath his coat. Concino took the tapers. His was lighted for him by the three men whom he appeared to have accepted as retainers and body-guard, the king descended the stairs. He took with him the sword he had found.

“But how—why—sire—you here in this abandoned place, and unattended? I do not understand it,” stammered Concino.

“Nor is it needful that you should,” was the tart reply. “It is the sequel of a most ill-conceived joke—for which some heads shall lie uneasy. Question me no further; but serve me well, and I shall not forget.”

But Concino thought that he would not trust too greatly in the memory which so soon had forgotten the services of the Wolf.

When the door was opened at the foot of the second staircase, a gust of damp wind puffed through and blew out the tapers. But there was no need for their feeble light to see to cross the courtyard. While Raymond had been adventuring, the storm had broken in all its fury. The gale was driving the rain before it in sheets. Overhead the thunder-crashes seemed to shake the stout walls of the château, and every cranny and corner of the quadrangle was lighted by the white flare of almost continuous lightning.

Heads down, the four men started across at a run. Raymond offered his arm to their royal guest; but it was repulsed. The king ran, laughing and leaping like a boy.

As they came opposite the yawning cavern of the gateway, an immense black dog ran out from the arch and sprang at them, barking furiously. They heard the shouts of men beyond the bridge.

“They have tracked us down, *maestro!*” cried Concino. He turned on the animal; but another was before him.

By the light from the storm-swept heavens, the king met the brute with the unwavering point of the old rapier, and laid it kicking in its death-struggle.

“Ha! So you are fugitives?” he said. “*Damme!* it matters not; I am also, for the time. Into the arch here and close the gate, and I will consider the matter later. Du Chêne, do you and the Indian hold the gateway. Let none of your pursuers pass, on whatever pretext. Above all things else, remember I do not want it known that I am here. You, Pazza, aid me with the wheel in the gate-house. If it will respond to its duty, we shall gain time.”

None too soon did the vicomte and the Huron take their position at the front of the arch. The men who had followed the dog, eight or ten stout chaps in dark uniforms, came running across the bridge. A lightning flash showed them that two swords barred the way. They pulled up.

“Make way—in the king’s name!” shouted one, who appeared to be their leader.

“You cannot enter here, *messieurs,*” responded Raymond.

The storm was abating its fury, and its flashes were more intermittent.

“We are on a matter which brooks no delay, *monsieur!*” called from the darkness the man who had first spoken.

“You cannot enter.” Raymond thrust his arm behind him. He hoped at each instant to feel the mass of the oak gate swinging shut. In the wheel-house the king and Concino tugged and sweated, and the king swore royal oaths. The wheel was rusted in its bearings and was hard to budge.

“Jean! Guilbert! A fire along the wall there—quickly. Light torches! I like not to fight by lightning!”

Sharp and soldierly the orders were given. Obedience was prompt. A flicker of fire shone in the shelter of the wall, and was at once beaten out by the wind. Perseverance and cloaks for a shield succeeded, and a blaze was kindled in a tangle of small brush and dried weeds close to the wall, which had escaped wetting. The party was provided with oil *flambeaux*, which, once alight, were not easily quenched.

“*Peste!* There are only two!” cried the leader, when he could see what was ahead of him, and that there were indeed only two men in the arch. “Down with them, lads!”

Raymond saw as the ring of swords closed in that the attackers were splashed from their heels to the roots of their hair with mud, their garments had been torn in the thickets of the forest, and they were ready to drop from weariness. Nevertheless they came on with determination. Behind them were a couple of peasants who had acted as guides. One of them held another dog in leash.

Still the gate delayed. Raymond stepped out from the shadow.

“I tell you, *monsieur*, there are reasons why you must not enter here,” he said in an attempt to gain time. “We whom you seek will give ourselves up later, if——”

“We do not seek you, but another.” The chief of the band, a lean, wiry man with a gray beard, looked sharply at Raymond as he interrupted. “But I guess *monsieur knows*,” he added with a harsh laugh. His rapier leaped up.

“*Sangdieu!*”

Hoofs pounded on the stone bridge. An English voice cried:

“Forward!”

Eight armed riders burst through the ring, scattered its fragments, and halted their panting horses in front of the arch of the gate. One of them leaped from his saddle, picked up a torch which had fallen, and whirled it into a blaze.

Confused by this new turn of events, the vicomte had withdrawn into the shelter of the archway, where he and Quidor crouched against the stones at each side. He sprang out again with an exclamation of astonishment. A voice had spoken his name.

“*M. le Vicomte!* M. Raymond!”

Where had he heard that voice before? “Who calls me?” he asked, struggling to remember. He looked quickly from one to another of the mounted men, who were clustered indecisively before the gateway. None of their faces was familiar.

“It was I, *monsieur*.”

A young man swung his horse’s head into the arch. Raymond saw the merry, mischievous face of a youth of about his own years, somewhat

flushed with the excitement of the conflict.

“You may not pass,” said the vicomte, resolutely barring the way. “Who are you?”

“Lord George Castledown of York. I—I come from your father, the Comte de Mortemart, *monsieur*. Please let us in. It is very wet out here.”

At last the stubborn wheel had yielded. Shrieking on its rusted hinges, the gate began to close. Near the bridge the officer in command of the foot party was rallying his scattered men for a new attack. One of them had reprimed a pistol with dry powder. Its flame split the blackness. The ball grazed one of the horses and flattened against the wall. The injured animal squealed and plunged.

“De’il take the wull-cat hullion, he’s shot ma nag!” screeched the bare-legged rider, hopping in his saddle and shaking his fist.

Raymond hesitated no longer. There were friends out here. They were exposed to danger. Their password was his father’s name. So he disobeyed the order of the king.

“In, and hasten!” he said. “The gate is closing.” They clattered past him, and he and the Huron followed. The gate shut solidly into its frame behind them.

So Lady Jean Murrie and her company fared into the deserted stronghold of the Marquis de Villetrin.

CHAPTER XVI

NO EASY TASK IS SET

When he heard the eight riders clatter through the arch of the gateway and onto the stones of the court, the king cried out that the gate was forced, and the swordsmen must be down. The clang of the ponderous mechanism in the archway responded that, no matter who was in or out, the gate was shut. Seizing the sword which he had laid down, Louis ran to the end of the gate-house platform, and narrowly missed running the vicomte through the shoulder as he came up to make explanations.

Hardly had the lad succeeded in convincing the king that there had been good reasons for his disobedience of orders, when the men outside began a mighty clamor on the gate with stones and pistol butts.

“Within there! Open, in the king’s name—unless ye are all traitors!” their leader shouted.

“We seem to have come up at a merry moment,” remarked Castledown with a laugh. “What does the fellow mean by his cry of traitors?”

“I know not,” replied Raymond. “This is becoming a puzzle. He told me out yonder that he was not in pursuit of me; and yet——”

“And yet—you had reason to fear pursuit, *monsieur*,” Louis finished for him.

“That is true, sire.”

“*Bien!* It is my order that you open not. And now let’s to shelter from this miserable rain—and to that dinner which you promised. *Ventre Saint Gris!* I’ve earned it! I nearly cracked my back on that accursed wheel.”

“Open, or it will be the worse for you!” roared the voice outside.

“Run away, my fine fellow, and call again tomorrow!” retorted the irrepressible Fougas. “Shall I give him a belly full of lead, sire?” he asked lowering his voice. “It may be done handily from the gate-tower up there; and I have my pistols ready.”

“Who is it calls me sire?” exclaimed the king, peering from the platform.

“Paul Fougas, one-time sergeant in Louis of Condé’s infantry, sire. Twice was I present when your majesty reviewed the troops at Compiègne,

and I would know your voice among ten thousand.”

“But would you, rascal!” exclaimed Louis, much pleased. “Nay, mind them not. They can do no harm without ladders. I know this place. Now let us in, in the name of God, and for my stomach’s sake. An’ you have the wherewithal to appease it, I’ll show you that the Bourbon appetite does not belie its fame.”

Show them he did a short time afterward. Castledown’s party had not come empty-handed of provisions and wines from Paris, nor had Quidor’s larder given out; but both suffered sad depletion before the Bourbon appetite was appeased. Concino found a small table in one of the château rooms and set it in the parlor, and there Louis ate, with the vicomte and the young Englishman to serve him.

In the hall beyond, the others of the party made themselves comfortable, the six Highlanders at one side of a roaring fireplace, and the Frenchman, the Italian, and the Indian at the other; and it was not altogether clannishness which divided them; it was rather linguistic difficulties.

“St. Denys!” The king thrust back from the table and rested his hands on his satisfied stomach. “My cooks would be scandalized to hear it; but never did dinner at Fontainebleau, Versailles, or the Palais Royal have better taste than this one.” He drained a wine bottle and sent it whirling into the fireplace. Then he took snuff and stretched out his legs with a sigh.

“M. du Chêne, I will now examine into the heavy tale of your misdeeds,” he said.

Briefly as he could, and, as he was a wise lad, omitting the incident of his meeting with the red-haired *duchesse*, Raymond told what had happened him from the day when Roger Marsden rode against him on Portsmouth hillside to the moment when he had seen the flicker of a light in the wing opposite and had gone and found the king.

Though the tale was stirring enough, it must be confessed that Louis nodded over it in parts; for he was warm and weary and well-filled; but he comprehended the most of it. Castledown followed every word with flushed intensity. The king roused up at the end of it.

“*Parbleu*, M. du Chêne, you have not been an idle fellow,” he remarked grinning sleepily. “In something less than three weeks you have—let us see,” counting on his fingers, “laid by the heels an English duke—France can forgive you for that; she has had her fill of English dukes; you have killed, or caused to be killed, the captain of an English ship—another small

matter; you have aided and abetted poisoners—that is serious, *monsieur*; and you have resisted and slain a lieutenant of our police, which is high crime indeed. If there was more, I missed it through sleepiness.” He yawned.

“What punishment do you think he merits?” Louis put the question to Castledown, and accompanied it with a glance so keen and knowing that the young Englishman went red to the tips of his ears, and made an involuntary gesture of terror with his hands. To his amazement and further confusion, the king winked solemnly with the eye which was farthest from Raymond.

“Why—why, your m-majesty,” the flustered youth stammered, “c-considering that *M. le Vicomte* came to France with intent to serve you well, and only was twisted from his good designs by circumstance, would it not be fair and kingly to give him credit for his first intentions, and forgive him his slips?”

Louis’s eyes twinkled. While with one hand he stifled a yawn, he shook a finger of the other at Raymond.

“So be it; but hark you: let not the temper which goes with that red head of yours lead you to play the devil further in my realm. I’ll not have it. And hark you further.” His voice grew stern. “To all the world Louis the king sleeps tonight in Paris. Think what it shall please you of the reasons for my being here, and you too, my lord of Castledown; but let not your tongues wag, nor those of your servants. Tomorrow I must reach Paris and the home of—but nay, I’ll tell you that when the time comes—without it having come to the knowledge of any that I have been here. I leave it to your ingenuity, *M. du Chêne*, to bring that result about. Do so, and I’ll forgive you all. Fail, and I’ll not answer for what may happen.”

The king rose and stretched. “I appoint the two of you officers of the bedchamber,” he said, laughing; “but for all I care, you need keep no watch. There is naught to be feared—until tomorrow.” He lay down on one of the divans and flung his arms above his head. Almost immediately he was asleep.

Raymond and Castledown looked at each other. When the depth and melody of the royal snores left no room for doubt that the king slumbered, the Englishman spoke.

“By my faith, he spoke truly when he said that you had not been idle. And I give *M. le Comte*, your father, right, in that he said it was in your blood to love danger. *Ma certes*, you do fly to it like a homing pigeon to its cote.”

Frank admiration was in the words and tone. The vicomte stirred uneasily.

“My adventures have not been of the kind one boasts about,” he replied. “Ill luck has dogged me hard; but I trow I’ll shake it off tomorrow. But you said you had come from my father. Did he send you? And did you see my mother? Was she well? Was she worried?”

“She was well, and she was worried. And your father—he did not send me, *monsieur*.” Castledown’s voice faltered, and he again turned very red.

“How mean you?” asked Raymond. “I thought——”

“I saw your fight that Marsden forced upon you,” Castledown broke in. “It was most ill of him. Sir George Cavendish told me where your home was to be found. I rode there to take the news of you, *monsieur*. And then—then; well, I have some taste for adventures too, so I came on to France to find you.”

This avowal was not at all according to programme; but there was no help for it. That king yonder; he had eyes too sharp by far. Had he guessed? It seemed so; but he had kept his counsel. Now would this one? It would be intolerable!

But Raymond suspected nothing. He held out his hand impulsively.

“You’re a lad of spirit, though—” He caught himself. It had been on the tip of his tongue to say “though you do blush like a girl.” But he wished not to give offense. “But how came you to find me here?” he inquired.

“That was mere chance. I, too, had occasion to leave Paris in haste, and took refuge from the storm, as you did.”

“Ah! a quarrel?”

“No; another matter.”

“Perhaps a lady”—maliciously.

“Sir!” Castledown’s blush was furious. The vicomte begged his pardon.

“How shall we leave here tomorrow, *monsieur*?” questioned Castledown. “Who are those men out there, and what do they mean?”

Raymond shrugged. “I think he knows,” jerking a finger toward the sleeper; “but it is not my business to question a king. If he directs, we shall ride through them easily enough, now that we muster a dozen men. It is after that which troubles me. An’ I go riding bravely into Paris, and am

recognized, what then? *Eh bien*,” with a shrug, “that is tomorrow. You had best get some sleep, my lord; your eyes are circled, and tomorrow may be a hard day.”

“I will, *monsieur*.”

“But wait, my lord.” Raymond had turned to leave the room, when another question occurred to him. Castledown’s black eyes looked at him apprehensively.

“You were on the Portsmouth road, you say, my lord, and saw the trouble?”

“Yes.”

“There was a coach, and a lady.”

“Yes.”

“Know you who she was?” the vicomte asked, and thought: “Plague on the lad; does he flame in the face so every time one speaks to him?”

“She—she—’twas the Lady Jean Murrie, a little Scottish vixen,” Castledown replied with spite.

“Vixen?” Raymond frowned. “I thought her very beautiful; that is—well—I mean that I thought she would have been, had she taken off her mask. Why say you vixen?”

“Because I know her.” Castledown’s confidence was returning. He giggled merrily; for the blush of confusion was now on the vicomte’s face.

“You bring her strongly to my mind, my lord.”

“What!”

“It is your voice. When you first hailed me at the gate, you set me wondering where I had heard it. It is her very own—only perhaps somewhat deeper.”

“Oh! That is not so strange, *monsieur*. You see, we are own cousins through our mothers. The strange thing is that you have remembered. You saw her but an instant, and, as you say, she was masked.”

“It *is* strange. I’ve often thought of her and wondered who she might be.” Raymond heaved a sigh, which pleased Castledown in the bottom of his wicked heart.

Raymond again started for the door.

“*Monsieur!*” called Castledown softly.

“Well?”

“Have—have you a razor?”

“Certainly, my lord,” with some pride; “’tis a thing which I always carry.”

“Mine slipped my memory. Do you think you might loan me yours, *monsieur?*”

“Of course. It is somewhere in my saddle bags. I’ll get it for you in the morning.” Raymond glanced keenly at the youth and added with malice: “I cannot see that you need it greatly.”

“But it is not what you can see, *M. le Vicomte*, but what I can feel,” retorted Castledown, rubbing his chin with the back of his hand. “In daylight I am sure I would be a sight.”

“You shall have the blade. And now——”

“But where am I to sleep, *monsieur?*”

“Why, here—anywhere.” Raymond pointed to the empty divans. “Did not his majesty name you one of his lords of the bedchamber?”

Castledown eyed the slumbering monarch with evident doubt.

“I—I could wish ’twere elsewhere,” he faltered.

“Well, then, there are plenty of rooms beyond—but they are still and lonely and full of emptiness. *Mon Dieu!* you do not object to sharing a chamber with the king, do you? I knew not before that Englishmen were so particular.”

“Nay, I’ll remain; but *ah-h!* What was that?”

Clang! Whatever it was had struck the floor near the head of the king’s couch. Louis stirred and moaned in his sleep.

Castledown shrank away toward the fireplace. Raymond went boldly to the divan. The iron mask had slipped from its place of concealment under the king’s coat, and lay upon the floor. The vicomte lifted it.

“What is that thing?” asked the Englishman curiously.

“A purse,” lied the vicomte glibly. He replaced it with care whence it had fallen.

“*Ma certes*, it must be a heavy one!”

“Sweet dreams, my lord—what little time there is to sleep.” For the third time Raymond made for the door; and for the third time was halted ere he reached it.

“*Monsieur*, I pray you send Archie MacGregor to me as you go out.”

“Who?”

“My Scotch man-at-arms. The biggest of them all. You cannot miss him.”

Raymond had not far to seek to find MacGregor. The big Highlander was waiting close to the door.

“Whaur’s ma led—ma Laird Castledoon?” he asked, pulling at his bonnet.

Quietly for such a hulk of a man, Archie entered the room. After a whispered conversation of a moment with Castledown, he wrapped himself in his plaid and stretched out on the floor with his feet toward the fire. Castledown stood for a little time watching the embers, then blew out the guttering candle-ends and curled up on the divan farthest removed from the king.

Concino was not among the slumberers in the outer hall. Raymond found him standing guard on the porch, while the Huron watched in the courtyard. There had been no further sign of the men beyond the wall. Raymond sat down on the steps and balanced his rapier across his knees.

“What make you out of this tangle?” he asked, after he had recounted the words of the king. “Why should he be here, and why make such a mystery of the king?”

“He is the king—and it is the privilege of kings to be more mad than other men,” replied the Italian sagely. “Men tell that there is a strain of madness in the Bourbon blood, anyhow, which I can believe, and think that it now is uppermost in him. But he is the king; and he must be obeyed, and not questioned. *Sapristi!* I would wager my worn boots against a toadstool that the reason for his being here wears skirts and powder. He was ever a gallant; and ’tis said that his age does but increase and not cure the maggot. I’ll wager, too, that his venture has been successful. Never did I know him to be in such carefree and gracious humor.”

Raymond, remembering the encounter in Paris of which he had not told the king, thought that the lure must have been fair indeed if it had led Louis to forget the Tiger-Lily. While the lad wondered about it, he fell asleep.

He was aroused by the report of a pistol in the courtyard.

CHAPTER XVII

ON THE ROAD TO PARIS

In the early morning the storm had worn its fury out and slunk away growling before the approach of the sun. A southern wind had dispelled the chill mists and replaced them by a soft dry warmth. With a profusion of material ready to her hands, Nature had set about the composition of a perfect day.

In the old château in the forests the sleepers had slept soundly, and the watchers had watched well. Fougas had relieved the Huron in the courtyard. One of MacGregor's gillies had taken the place of Concino on the porch. It was the pistol of Fougas that had scattered the peaceful quiet of the dawning.

Not knowing what had awakened him, Raymond staggered sleepily from his seat on the steps. From beyond the wall near the gateway he heard some one yelling in pain. Then he saw Fougas straighten up from where he had crouched behind the curbing of the old well. There was a grin on the scarred face of the sergeant. He held a smoking pistol in his hand. The sound of his shot had awakened the sleepers in the château. The two rooms echoed with a clatter of hurrying feet. The gillie who had kept watch on the porch hung over the railing in a determined effort to see what was going on.

"Oh, mon, that was a varra preetty shot!" he bawled, forgetting in his enthusiasm that the Frenchman could not understand a word of his praise.

Raymond ran to the well, where Fougas was recharging his pistol.

"What has happened? At whom did you fire?" the vicomte asked.

"The *canaille* out yonder have not been idle, *monsieur*," replied the sergeant. "They have fetched a ladder from somewhere and set it against the wall. I heard the scratch of it. One of them popped his head over the wall. My little friend here said: '*Bon jour*.' He went down again. Now he is telling the others about it. I think, from the clatter of tongues, that there are more of them than we saw last night. They will surely try again. *M. le Vicomte*, if you will watch here with pistols, and M. Pazza or the Indian will cover me a bit from the gate-tower, we can serve them a trick. I will go up and get that ladder."

It would be a daring feat. The vicomte looked with admiration at the man who proposed it. He decided to go with him.

While Concino and Quidor kept watch by the well, Raymond and Fougas clambered over the débris with which the tower stairs were encumbered and reached the summit of the arch.

Heads bent and cautiously, the two crept along the parapet of the wall to the left of the gate. Twenty-odd feet from the tower was the spot where Fougas's target had made his appearance. Halfway thither they reached the embrasure of one of the antiquated culverins. Fougas thrust head and shoulders into the niche and stared down.

As the wall was thick and the space not wide, he found his field of vision limited; so he turned his shoulders sidewise and wriggled boldly into the embrasure under the nose of the gun. He peeped out once, used his eyes well and quickly, and twisted back onto the parapet.

With the exception of the open space within the confines of the moat, a patch of ground which was limited to thirty or forty feet each side of the gate, the attackers had no place to carry on operations against the château. The reason was that, beyond those limits, the water of the moat lapped at the base of the wall for its entire perimeter.

All of a score of men were gathered around the base of the ladder which they had erected; for, as Fougas had guessed, the party of the night before had received reinforcements. Near the group lay the man whom the sergeant had shot. He had received a ball through his shoulder, and in addition had broken an arm in the ensuing fall from the ladder. Two of his fellows were attending him.

These things Fougas saw in his one quick glance, and more: the ladder was too heavy to offer any hope that it could be lifted to the top of the wall. He still had hope of attempting something, however; for the ladder was barely the height of the parapet, and in order to make it serve, the attackers had been obliged to set it almost perpendicular to the ground.

Fougas told his comrade what he had seen, and they crept on until they were directly above the point where the end of the ladder rested. Hardly had the sergeant outlined what was to be done, when the friction of the wood against the stone apprised them that a scaling-party was on its way.

Warned by the fate of the first man up, these others—there were three of them—proceeded with great caution. It was some time after the topmost one's feet were level with the parapet before he ventured to lift his head.

When he did, he leaped, with the intention of throwing himself over the coping, in the hope of finding shelter along the parapet from the fire of those in the court.

As the head bobbed into view, Fougas, who had clubbed his pistol, brought the butt of it down on the climber's scone with all the strength of a seasoned arm. The stricken man groaned and fell backward, carrying his nearest comrade with him. The third one continued to cling to his perch.

At this juncture Raymond thrust head and shoulders out between two of the merlons of the battlement, whooped loudly, and discharged two pistols. The double fall and the unlooked-for attack from above threw the besiegers into momentary confusion. Dropping his weapons, Fougas swung over the coping, hung recklessly by his hands, and kicked the top of the ladder from him with both feet. The man who was crouching upon it shrieked in terror and threw his weight toward the wall; but the sergeant had kicked hard and true.

For the fraction of a minute the ladder swayed indecisively; then it whirled downward. The frightened wight upon it let go his hold, shot headfirst through the air, and went into the moat like a plummet. The men below scattered to right and left to avoid the menace descending upon them, and the ladder crashed on the sward with such violence that it was broken in half and made useless.

One or two pistols were let off at the dauntless Fougas; but the confusion caused by Raymond's appearance and the fall of the ladder served the sergeant well. Unhurt, he scrambled back to the protection of the coping.

"By the beard of St. Adjutor of Vernon, there's an end to that!" he panted. "Nor do I think that they will plant any more ladders. Unless they fetch artillery, they can come at us no other way, except they suck the moat dry—which, if it held wine of Burgundy, instead of black water and frog-slime, I would gladly aid in. We may now go down."

In the chamber of the gate-tower Fougas halted the vicomte.

"If I may, *monsieur*, I will put you a triple-jointed question," he said. "What is this coil that we are in; and how does it come that the king is in it with us; who are they out there; and—seeing that we are here and they are there—what's to be done to get out of the coil?" Here the sergeant stopped for breath.

"On all but one point my mind is as much in darkness as yours," replied Raymond. "But mark this: it is the king's stern order that no one besides our

party is to know that he is here with us, or has been here. The answer to the last joint of your query is, that we shall fight it out, and that soon. His majesty has set me the gentle task of getting him safely into Paris without cracking his *incognito*. This business just now was but the beginning of a merry day.”

When he had heard this news, Fougas, mindful of certain delicate points of the situation, whereof Raymond was ignorant, put on a serious look. It did not last long. He was a Frenchman. He shrugged his military shoulders. What the king ordered, Fougas would perform. It was a part of his creed that a king was to be obeyed with only a shade less alacrity than one would obey the devil if that personage were present to enforce his demands.

“*Dieu soit loué!* At least four of those *clampins* down there are in no condition to say no when we say yes,” he grinned.

The king had arisen. When the vicomte entered the château to report, he found the royal mind so taken up with what the royal stomach was to have for breakfast, that such matters as a siege and the pistoling of men were dismissed as trifles.

After a noble set-to, in which he demolished edibles enough to have satisfied a hard-working farm-lad for an entire day, Louis looked with concern at the remnant of the vituals.

“It is to be seen plainly that we must reach Paris before dinner-time,” he said. “Let us start.”

At this, Concino and the vicomte, proclaiming the increased strength of the enemy outside the walls and their evident determination to do mischief, argued the danger to the king’s person. The Italian ventured to suggest that he be allowed to make a dash for Paris, there to take word to Colbert or some other trustworthy man, who would send aid to the relief of the king.

Midway in his argument the king checked him with lifted hand.

“Have done, fellow!” Louis’s blue eyes gleamed with sudden sternness. “Yours to obey, and not advise me. What I said yestere’en to M. du Chêne here was not idle talk. No man in Paris, not even Colbert, must know that I have been here, until the proper time comes.”

The two men bowed and saluted.

His manner softening somewhat, the king went on: “Know you that there be times when a king must take his chance like any other man. To reach Paris today, and secretly, may mean much to me, and to France also. But

were I to die upon the road, then would it matter little to me—nor do I think that France would be greatly stirred.” He smiled rather sadly and shook his head. “Dangers! *Pah!* Is not every moment of a king’s life a danger? Tell me, did either of you ever hear that one of my line—and the line is long, gentlemen—was ever a coward?”

Therein he spoke truly. No man of all the descendants of old Hugues Capet who had sat upon the throne of France ever had been known lacking in personal bravery. They had many faults, those men of Valois and Bourbon, but cowardice was not one of them.

Raymond felt a growing admiration for this stout-swording, hard-eating man, who talked so lightly of dangers and of death. For all his stained garments and tattered shoes and the fantastic humors of him, he was every inch a king. The young vicomte’s eyes were misty as he answered:

“God willing, you shall go to Paris today, sire.”

He started for the courtyard to make preparations for the journey. In the dusk of the hall Castledown touched his arm.

“The razor, *M. le Vicomte*,” he gently reminded.

“*Oui*; I had forgotten.” Raymond sent the Indian to fetch it.

Castledown had overheard the king’s orders. At the prospect of fighting the blood left the Englishman’s face; but it came rushing back in an instant. The Murries of Isle Raasay were fighting stock, too. It was in vain that Archie MacGregor grumbled and threatened when he heard the state of affairs and what was to be done. Castledown silenced him sternly. This *incognito* also was to be preserved at all hazards. The farce was to be played through, even though it threatened to turn tragic.

MacGregor gave in finally and went to gird himself and his Scots to do battle. The prospect of “fechtin’” was dear to the big Highlander’s fierce heart; but he could have wished for the trouble to come when he was less weighted with responsibility.

“It’s ye, Airchie, that’s a lost mon if harm comes to the bairn o’ Roderick o’ Raasay,” he reflected.

Half an hour later the horses were ready. The party assembled in the courtyard before the arch of the gateway. Last out of the château came Castledown, ostentatiously rubbing a fleck of lather from his cheek, seeing which, the king, for the second time, winked at the Englishman.

There had been a difficulty, in that there was one more rider than there were horses to be ridden; but the problem had been solved by the Huron.

“Fleet are the feet of Quidor as the feet of the deer are fleet; in all New France there was none could outstrip him,” he said to Raymond. “Let Onontio ride Quidor’s horse. Quidor will run at the side of his brother.” He removed coat, hat and rapier, and gave them into the keeping of Concino. Dagger in hand, he took his place by the vicomte and laid hold of Tonnerre’s stirrup-leather.

Fougas formed the riders in order of battle, a flying wedge; and he gave to the giant MacGregor the post of honor at its tip. Behind their leader the sergeant posted the five gillies in the form of a hollow triangle, in the center of which, muffled in a clansman’s plaid, rode the king. Then came Castledown. Fougas, Concino, the vicomte, and the Indian made up the rear-guard.

The king was in high spirits, and laughed gayly as he took his place.

“*Ohé, mes enfants*, this will be a gallant charge! ’Tis true that we have not the eyes of an army upon us, nor yet the inspiration of galleries filled with fair ladies, as did the knights of the old tournaments; but yonder in the heavens the sun is looking down. The day is glorious and of good augury. Perchance history will yet make note of this, our dash for Paris.” A sudden frown crossed his smile, and he muttered into the plaid: “And for liberty, and for revenge!”

Two of the Scots bent their backs to the wheel in the gate-house. Groaning and creaking, the ponderous oak valve swung inward. Through the opening the riders could see men running across the sward, and hear their excited shouts. Alertly their gray-bearded commander began to form them to defend the bridge. Sword blades and the barrels of muskets glittered in the sunlight.

The Highlanders sprang from the platform and scrambled into their saddles.

“*En avant, messieurs!*” cried the king.

“Claymores!” thundered MacGregor, pulling his four-foot broadsword over his shoulder.

Sparks flew from the stones of the courtyard where the iron-shod hoofs struck hard. The dark passage of the arch roared with the echoes of their passing. The charge was on.

At the bridge the besiegers let go a volley of musketry, then crouched to withstand the shock of the desperate riders.

Straight into the heart of the press drove the narrow living wedge, hurling twisted figures of men before it as a ship throws up the spray. Standing in his stirrups, big Archie leaned over his horse's head and hewed downward with his terrible claymore. Wherever that blade fell there was no need to strike again. Four strokes that each sent the soul of a man into the beyond, and the Highlander had gained the bridge. In his wake the rest of the wedge hacked and tore its way through.

How he accomplished it no one saw, but one man pierced the living defense that had been set about the king. It was the grizzled leader. Quidor saw him first as he appeared magically within the triangle. Raising his shuddering war-cry, the Huron swung his dagger-arm aloft. But the other man avoided the deadly thrust, let fall his sword and leaped up at the king from behind, intending to drag him from the saddle.

Then Castledown leaned over the rump of his steed and struck a crashing blow with his pistol-barrel. The wide-flung arms went limp. The man disappeared under the trampling hoofs behind.

"You have a good heart and a strong arm," said the king; and in a lower voice, so that none but Castledown heard him, he added: "*mademoiselle*."

Scratched and bent, but still whole, the wedge writhed clear. The long blades of the rear-guard fended off the men who clung at its flanks, and with a cheer the riders galloped down the avenue which led to the Paris road.

Half of the way they had made safely, when another ragged volley of musketry was fired after them from the bridge. One of the gillies screamed and threw his sword into the air. His horse shied and veered across the grass. The man pitched headlong and lay on his back. He had been shot through the skull.

With the speed of an arrow Quidor distanced the riderless horse and vaulted into the saddle.

MacGregor looked back to where the plaided figure lay upon the grass.

"Puir Colin; me faither's brither's only laddy! Aweel, ye made a bra' passin', Colin, an' Raasay will not be shamed for ye." The chieftain drew the back of his sword-hand across his eyes as he rode on.

Ten or fifteen horses belonging to the enemy were tethered not far from the roadgate. The Huron saw them. Though pursuit was on foot behind and

bullets were flying, he took time to gather as many bridles as he could manage. The others saw his design and aided him, and the horses were all led into the highway.

When the first of the pursuers reached the Paris road, all they could see of their quarry was a swirl of dust in the distance.

Sergeant Fougas called a halt at the end of a mile's riding, and the party took stock of damage done. Three horses were limping. They had either been gashed by steel or grazed by bullets. One of the Scots had taken a sword-thrust through the thick of his bare calf, Fougas had another scar added to those which the wars had put on his cheeks, and Raymond's neck had been barely touched by a bullet.

MacGregor noticed tears standing in Castledown's eyes. The Scot reined his horse in suddenly.

"Ye are hurt—an' no telled me!" he accused.

"No, no! I'm unhurt; b-but, po-poor Colin!" The tears ran down.

Raymond saw. As he had seen also the manner in which Castledown had borne himself in the mêlée at the bridge, the vicomte was led to wonder that a man could be so strong, and yet discover such weakness. "Well, he is but a lad," he mused, the something less than a year which lay between them making all of the difference in the world.

Fougas selected three of the plundered horses to replace the wounded animals. He then slashed the girths and bridles of the others and drove them into the woods at the roadside. After a bit of bandaging and breath-taking, the party rode on.

"There seems no reason, sire, why we should not be in Paris before dinner-time," reminded Fougas triumphantly. He pointed to the sun.

"Make no doubt, rogue, that I shall eat a famous dinner," replied the king; "yet it can taste no better than the one last night. Never shall I forget that one."

Futile prophecy. Rounding a curve hardly four miles from the city walls, the party rode almost into the arms of two companies of the Black Musketeers.

Down the wide, white road they came, rank upon rank of tossing manes and nodding plumes, and the first rank scarcely a quarter of a mile away.

"Halt!"

It was the voice of the king, but with a quality in it which caused his companions to turn in their saddles and stare at him. They pulled up their horses. Already the first ranks of the oncoming musketeers were breaking from trot into gallop.

Louis reined his horse to the front. From one to the other of his party he looked. His face had gone white and wistful, and he seemed near to tears. Uncomprehendingly they returned his gaze. Then the will and pride of the man, of which he had both in plenty, laid hold of him, and he became again a commanding figure.

“M. du Chêne,” he said, “you—no, *we*—have failed. We cannot fight against fate—and yonder fate comes riding. I would have made you all great; but it was not to be; so I must say farewell, my friends of a few most pleasant hours.”

“What mean you, sire!” cried Raymond, struck by a sudden foreboding.

“Not, sire,” returned the other. “Keep that title for Louis de Bourbon. I am not he. The brief masquerade is ended—and now to resume the mask again. Farewell, liberty! Farewell, France!”

He spoke quickly and like one in great pain. Throwing off the Scottish plaid, he lifted from its place of concealment the iron mask and concealed his features.

“Save yourselves if you can,” he continued. “Haste! You may reach a seaport. I am the hunted fugitive; but they will hunt you also. I will flee no farther.”

He pulled his horse around and rode forward to meet the galloping musketeers.

At his first sight of the iron mask, Concino had leaped in his saddle as though stung. Wonderingly as had the others, the Italian had followed the words of the man whom they had thought the king. But the sight of the mask stirred in the memory of the Italian a tale that he had long forgotten.

“Mother of God!” he gasped, his eyes following the receding horseman; “*Le Masque de Fer!*”

Fougas already had turned his horse.

“We passed a forest path a half-mile back!” he shouted. “We have yet a chance!” He clapped spurs to his horse. His companions, still riding in a daze, followed his example. Shots and shouts behind them gave evidence that the hunt was on.

Quite slowly, and holding himself very straight in the saddle, the man whose features were covered by that iron and velvet mystery rode up the white road.

An officer spurred out from the ranks of the musketeers to meet him. A detachment dashed by on the trail of the other fugitives. Every man rode with his chin on his shoulder, staring at the solitary horseman. He paid them no attention. The officer, as he came up, drew his sword. Then the Mask cried in a commanding voice:

“Songez à ce que vous faites, monsieur! Respectez le sang de vos souverains!”^[1]

The officer bowed deeply, and resheathed his weapon. Without speaking, he laid a hand on the bridle and swung the horse in the opposite direction.

“Then I am not to go to Paris?”

“No, *monsieur*.”

^[1] “Think what you are doing, sir! Respect the blood of your kings!” History attributes the words quoted to the celebrated Man in the Iron Mask, who was said to have uttered them in a situation similar to that related in this tale.—AUTHOR’S NOTE.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN THE MEANTIME

Though, except the vicomte, the fugitives were possibly not so well mounted as the king's riders, there were three dispositions in favor of the pursued:

That part of France in which they were was well known to Fougas; secondly, it was a thickly forested section, and the road along which they fled was full of crooks and twists; and, lastly, which for the time served their purposes best of all, the horses which the sergeant had turned loose in the woods threw the pursuers off the scent.

Those of the musketeers who had been detailed to make the capture had one last glimpse of their quarry before it vanished around the first curve of the road.

At the junction of the highway with the forest path of which Fougas had spoken, the captain of the musketeers was about to order a division of his forces, when one of his men called his attention to a number of riderless horses a considerable distance farther on. Some of the beasts were grazing along the roadside; others could be seen among the trees.

Not unnaturally, the captain concluded that the animals had been abandoned by their riders, who were trusting to the density of the forests to make their evasion on foot. He at once dismounted his own party, left a guard to mind the horses, and devoted the better part of four hours to a thorough beating of the underbrush and hunting through the groves, a proceeding which disturbed numberless rabbits and birds, tired and dirtied the musketeers, and brought none of the looked-for results.

It was not until midafternoon that he learned of the trick of the stolen horses. Whereupon he blamed all the delay upon the man who had first pointed them out to him, sent the luckless chap back to Paris under arrest, and led his weary followers into the real trail.

After galloping for more than a mile along the path into which Fougas had led them, the members of the vicomte's party slowed to a walk to breathe their horses and to listen.

Quidor dismounted, and after applying his ear to the ground, as his woodcraft had taught him, announced that there were no horsemen behind

them. In this breathing-space Paul Fougas freed his mind.

"Par Dieu et Son Trône!" he swore. "For a night and a morning have I served a man who in speech and face and figure is the King of France! Were I to meet that man tomorrow in the streets of Paris, I would bend my knee. Were I to hear that voice in the darkest night, I should follow it and obey it. Yet, when he said that he was not Louis de Bourbon, I knew that he was speaking truth. He is not the king. In the name of the devil, who is he?"

To Concino the stout soldier looked for an answer, as did the others of the party who could understand the French language.

"It is an old tale," the Italian answered. "I heard it in my youth. I did not believe it, and forgot. Then I saw that mask of iron today, and I knew that it was true, and that I was witness to a stranger thing than ever romancer wrote down with quill and parchment."

"But the tale, the tale," interrupted Raymond, thereby gaining a grateful glance from Fougas. "Never mind the quills—who is the man?"

"It were high treason to repeat it," said Concino, shaking his head sorrowfully.

"Enfer!" grunted the disappointed and disgusted soldier. The vicomte's face fell.

"But I'll commit the treason," continued Concino, enjoying his revenge.

"Ah!" twice repeated.

"He is the twin brother to the king—born fifteen minutes later. Naturally, he was found inconvenient. And yet—royalty has not always shown itself so forbearing—he was allowed to live. All his life he has passed in prison, forced, on any occasion when he might be seen by others than his jailers, to wear an iron mask.

"From his prison, wherever it may be, he must have escaped. With what mad project in his head I know not, he was going on to Paris. He found us as tools ready to his hand, and he used us."

"But at the last he was sorry. Almost he begged our forgiveness," interposed Raymond.

"A brave mess there would have been in France had we got him to Paris!" Fougas exclaimed, with a laugh in which there was a tinge of awe. "By the thunders of God! With that voice and face and figure, and withal a bit of backing, which he might have had from certain malcontents, he might

have had his whack at being king of France, and clapped Louis de Bourbon into a prison or a grave!”

“Mad he may be; but he is a brave man,” said the vicomte.

“*Oui*,” the sergeant agreed. “M. Pazza, you have said a treason. I’ll dare to cap it with a worse. By the horse of Saint Walaric! I say that had it not been for that accident of fifteen minutes, France might today have had a better king than the one on whom the magistrates of Paris have conferred the title of ‘Le Grand’! She certainly would have had a merrier.”

It was some time later that Raymond proposed that it might be best the two parties separate. He explained that he and his two companions were hunted as accomplices of poisoners and for the slaying of a lieutenant in the royal police.

“I would not that you others should suffer for my mistakes,” he said.

Fougas, after a glance exchanged with Castledown, made bold to object.

“Anything that you may or may not have done will be a small thing in the eyes of the king, compared with the happenings of last night and today; and in those happenings we have played our part the same as you have. Nay, *M. le Vicomte*, we are all tarred with the same stick now; let us hang to the same thread.”

Decision was made to go northward, cross Champagne, if possible, to Picardy, and so come to the port of Calais, and there take ship for England.

“For,” said Fougas, “the head of none of us is safe so long as his feet rest upon French ground.”

By traveling in the nights and foraging in the forests, as the three comrades had done before, the party crossed north France with no worse fortune than was entailed by the minor hardships of life in the open. They saw no more of the musketeers, who, indeed, had lost their trail before they crossed the Marne.

Three weeks from the day on which they had left Château Villetrín, they were camped in the forests near the shore of the Channel and a few miles to the south of Calais. June had passed them on the way.

It was a little less than a month since Jean Murrie had landed in France.

In the meantime:

At Paris—Montague, the English ambassador, unable to find Jean (he was considerably relieved by the failure), dispatched a letter to his friend, the Earl of Raasay, in London. The missive was most politely and diplomatically worded; but when it was boiled down and read between the lines, it said as plainly as could be: “That minx of yours threw sand in my near-sighted eyes; if you want her home, you will have to do your own dirty work.” Squint-eyed William, long since released from the custody of the law, was the bearer of the message.

At Brussels—Olympe Mancini, Comtesse de Soissons, arriving safely in the Low Countries after escaping the perils of the *Chambre Ardente* in France, settled down to a life of quiet uneventfulness for a few years, from which she was to arouse herself once more, to go to Spain and poison a queen. History says that she did it skilfully, escaped with her usual luck, and died, a poor old hag, in Brussels.

At Paris—Hugues Banel, receiving no further visits from his young patron and Concino, undertook an investigation. In the course of it he learned a much-garbled version of the affair at the Inn of the Golden Skull—which was serious enough when told truthfully. Hugues then took to the quill also, and sent to Godalming in Surrey a message which was not calculated to reassure the Comte and Comtesse de Mortemart on either the safety or the discretion of their wandering son.

At London—Roderick of Raasay received in due time the letter from Montague, gathered its meaning clearly enough at first reading, cursed his daughter’s wit (just the same, he was proud of it); cursed Montague for a stupid ass; cursed the business of the Duke of York, which was at that time in such a delicate condition that it could not spare the constant nursing of the Earl of Raasay; cursed squint-eyed William on general principles; and ended his profane target-shooting by sending one of his bare-legged gillies hotfoot into Hampshire to bid Roger Marsden to haste him to London so soon as he should be able.

At Paris—Marie Angelica d’Escorailles de Roussille, Duchesse de Fontanges, latest favorite of the fickle king, and known to the Parisian populace as the Tiger-Lily, could not forget the fresh-faced lad with the red

hair whom she had met and accosted one day on the Quai d'Orleans. Why did he not come to see her? she wondered. Her vanity told her that whatever had delayed him must be serious indeed. Perhaps it was fear. Well, she would cure him of that. Quietly she set an inquiry on foot to discover him. As she paid well, it was not a great while before she knew fully as much about the doings of Raymond du Chêne in France as did the royal police. She, who forgot most things, in this instance did not forget.

At Paris—In the fifth hour after midnight of the night when mystery, madness, and good-fellowship were keeping company at the Château Villetrín, a rain-soaked, mud plastered rider drew the reins of a hard-ridden horse at the gates of the Palais Royal. He aroused the laughter and derision of the musketeers on guard there by a demand to see the king at once and alone.

So persistent was the fellow, and so dire his threats of what surely would happen to any one who should delay the message which he said he bore for the king, that the news of his coming percolated on from musketeer to lackey, from lackey to flunkey, from flunkey to valet, until it came to the ears of one of the gentlemen of the king's bedchamber.

It chanced that the gentleman had mixed cherry preserves with spiced milk on the night before, and the ensuing colic had put him out of touch with his pillow. He felt himself in ripe humor to administer rebukes. So he slapped the valet and kicked the flunkey, and ordered the presumptuous rider sent up to receive the third helping off the same plate.

But the messenger had a tongue which was capable of two hundred words to the minute without loss of energy, and did not look like a man who could be either slapped or kicked with safety. The colicky and choleric gentleman found himself more rebuked than rebuking. He was the first of the two compelled to stop and take breath—due probably to the colic—and so perforce he had to listen to what the other was saying.

It came out rapidly that the rider was from M. de la Reinterie, governor of the fortress of Pignerol.

Now, as De La Reinterie was high in the confidence of the king, and Pignerol was a favored repository of political prisoners of state, it was not long in occurring to the distempered eater of cherries that the matter might be of importance. Having put that which served him as a brain so far into

action, he moderated his language, put on his slippers, and went hiccupping into the sleeping quarters of the king.

Louis was in—which was by no means an unbreakable rule—and so soon as he heard whence the messenger had come, he quit yawning with surprising alacrity.

“Have him searched,” he commanded, “and send for Colbert.” He swung his shapely legs over the gunwale of his ship of dreams.

Musketeers duly pinched and prodded the messenger over every square inch of his weary body, to make sure that he had nothing for the king besides his message. In the course of another twenty minutes he was taken into the royal bedchamber, where he found Louis in a blue silk dressing-gown, and old Colbert in gray wool.

“M. de la Reinterie ordered that I say my message to you alone, sire,” the man said as he knelt. He glanced at Colbert.

“Say on,” commanded the king; “this is the controller-general.”

“Sire, *le Masque de Fer* has escaped.”

Something between a snarl and a groan escaped the king. For a moment there was silence. The old councilor broke it.

“When?” he asked.

“Ten days ago.”

Louis’s face became contorted, and he began to clench and unclench his hands, which was a bad sign.

“And what was De la Reinterie thinking, when he did not inform me at once?” he demanded, when he could control himself, and lifting his voice so high that the gentleman of the bedchamber, who was in the anteroom, began to think that he might learn something of what it was all about after all, and jammed his ear to the keyhole with redoubled vigor.

“M. de la Reinterie hoped, sire, to effect a recapture quietly, and so not give your majesty uneasiness. The prisoner has been followed closely. It is believed that he has refuged in the old Château Villetrín on the road to Vaux. M. de la Reinterie is now besieging the place, sire.”

“Besieging it! How fellow—it is defended, then?” interrupted the king.

“*Oui, sire.* A party made up of both French and English are holding it against a score of the fortress guard, which M. de la Reinterie commands in

person.”

“*Mon Dieu*—a following so soon—and so near Paris!” Louis shuddered. “What may not happen if *he* comes to Paris! *Ventre Saint Gris!* I should have had——”

“Would it not be well to send the aid at once?” interposed Colbert.

“It shall fly.”

A guardsman was summoned and instructed to notify two companies of the Black Musketeers to make ready to ride at once, and to bid Colonel du Hamel attend the king for orders.

While he waited, the king questioned the messenger further.

“How did this thing happen?” he asked.

“You know, sire, that he, the Mask, has had a passion always for the use of the sword. It has been his one amusement, and he has become a wonderful master. On the day when he escaped, he was fencing, as was his custom, with the Sieur des Alliers. They were on the balcony at the second floor of the north tower of the fortress. In the courtyard below there is a deep flower-bed.

“M. de la Reinterie was about to send a message to the Bastille in Paris. A lackey was holding the messenger’s horse near the gate. The gate was open, but guarded.

“The Mask must have rehearsed just such a scene many times in his mind, sire, M. de la Reinterie thinks.

“He suddenly disarmed Des Alliers, struck him a violent blow in the face with the hilt of his foil, and leaped from the balcony. He alighted in the soft earth of the flower-bed.

“Before the guard at the gate was aware that anything was wrong, the Mask had knocked the lackey out of the way and was riding full tilt at the gate on the messenger’s horse.

“The horse was found later on the north road, nearly fifty miles from the fortress. It was dead. It was a good horse.

“We—M. de la Reinterie and the others of the guard—traced the Mask towards Paris. We trailed him with dogs, sire; but we could not come up with him. Last night it rained, and the beasts lost the scent. That was in the forests east of the Vaux road. Then peasants told us of having seen a light in the old château. We attempted to enter there, but were resisted. ’Twas only a

small party, sire; but the place is strong, and they managed to close the old gate.”

Du Hamel came, and received instructions to proceed at once to the Château Villetrín and place himself and his men at the disposal of M. de la Reinterie. As Du Hamel was a trusted man, he was told why he was going; but, trusted as he was, he did not learn who was the prisoner of state whom he was to help recapture. Louis turned to the messenger.

“You will get a fresh horse and go with the musketeers,” he commanded. “Tell De la Reinterie to take the prisoner back to Pignerol. Those who have aided him are to be taken at all costs and hazards, all of them, and sent on to Paris, where I will deal with them. Say to De la Reinterie also that another accident such as this one will cost him something on which he places more value than does any one else—his head.”

Less than an hour later two companies of the Black Musketeers, grumbling, sleepy, and mightily wondering, rode jingling out of Paris on the road to Vaux.

At London—Roger Marsden, cured of his sword wound, but not of his anger, paid a visit to the Earl of Raasay, in the course of which they played a cursing duet that was fine to hear. The upshot of the visit was that Roger left England for France, armed with instructions and authority to capture the earl’s lost daughter and take her back to her father. It may be surmised with what relish Roger departed on that task. Squint-eyed William went with him, and so did Humphrey the groom.

At Pignerol—the man who, because of “an accident of fifteen minutes” at his birth, passed his life in prison instead of on a throne, went back to his quiet life and his fencing.

But he had had ten glorious days.

He did not regain his liberty until the year 1703—and then it was death that opened the door.

CHAPTER XIX

A RECOGNITION

From the moment when he had seen the face of Castledown in the torchlight at the gate of Château Villetrin, Raymond had been attracted to the young Englishman. In the course of the northern journey the feeling grew upon the vicomte until he was himself surprised at its strength—the more so as he was not altogether sure that it was reciprocated.

Castledown had adopted a manner of reserve, at times almost offensive, which piqued Raymond. In another it surely would have angered him. Why he bore with it in the English lad, he did not know.

Once or twice the vicomte in a hazy, casual way attempted an analysis of the feelings which he entertained for his comrade; but he was not given largely to such inward searchings, and he soon gave it up.

Castledown was Castledown. Raymond had seen him conduct bravely in the face of danger; and then again, had seen him weep and shiver at such an ordinary occurrence as the killing of a man in battle. One day in the forests, when a startled wild boar had broken cover and charged squealing among the horses, the Englishman had actually screamed and seemed on the point of falling from his saddle.

Yet withal, he was a merry comrade, and without his continual quips and jests and fantastic imaginings the way would have been much longer. It was in that quality of being able to bring all of those about him into good humor that Raymond decided the attraction must lie. So, without further thought on the matter, he continued to like him; and sometimes was a little saddened by the suspicion that the feeling might not be entirely mutual.

Calais reached, remained the problem, and not a light one, of getting safely on board an English ship. That undertaking offered risks; but they had to be taken.

As the one of the party least liable to identification, Sergeant Fougas entered the city on the morning after their arrival. He found that two English ships were due to leave port that afternoon, one for Dover, the other for Bristol.

Because the Dover trip would be the shorter, and because the captain of the Dover craft spoke French, Fougas undertook to arrange for transporting

the party.

By dint of representation that the would-be passengers were English, a few skillful hints that they had been upon a secret mission which concerned the welfare of the British government, and a third argument, most powerful of all, which came out of his pocket, the sergeant prevailed over the scruples of the sailing-master. He agreed to delay his departure until the evening, and to have a boat waiting at a designated quay to take the party to the ship.

The negotiations were made over a table in an inn near the docks. Hardly had Fougas departed before the meshes of King Louis's great net became apparent. The British sailor was on his way to his ship when he was halted by a French officer of the port, who asked him pointedly what had been the subject of the conversation in the inn. Partly because his loyalty had been aroused by the artful Fougas and partly because his palm had been crossed with gold, the Briton lied nobly, and not implausibly.

"The fellow is an out-at-heels cavalryman," he said. "He was trying to sell me his horse."

He was asked no further questions; but when it was noticed in the afternoon that his ship, though it had weighed anchor and stood out from the harbor, was lingering in no haste to depart, the port officer set a double watch along the quays.

Soon after the dusk had fallen the ten fugitives left their camp in the forest and started for the city, keeping as close as possible to the water-side. It was necessary to abandon the horses; so they were turned loose in the forest.

It was not without a moisture of the eyes that Raymond patted Tonnerre's muzzle for the last time and whispered farewell, while the big black steed whinnied and sniffed for sugar. The animal would have followed his master like a dog if he had been allowed to. The vicomte drove him back with a voice which he was at some pains to make stern.

Wherever opportunity had offered along the northern route, Concino or Fougas had visited the smaller villages and made such purchases as they could to change the appearance of the members of the little band. The Scots were cloaked to conceal their plaids and bare shanks, Concino wore the beginnings of a luxuriant beard, and Raymond's tell-tale locks were hidden by a periwig.

Without hastening, and trying their best to seem like honest travelers, they entered the city. To reach the street which led to the quay of

rendezvous, it was necessary to cross one corner of the Calais marketplace. The big square was nearly deserted. When they were within twenty yards of the street opening, a party of twelve or fifteen men escorted by torch-bearers came rapidly around the corner. It was Roger Marsden, Earl of Templeton, and his retinue, just off a ship from England, and seeking an inn.

So far as concerned the meeting with Marsden's party, all might have gone well, but for one pair of gimlet eyes. They were nearly by, with no recognitions on either side, when by the flare of a torch William espied the scarred face of Fougas. The little Englishman stopped short and quivered like a pointer dog. Then he scurried forward and clutched at Marsden's sleeve.

CHAPTER XX

THE CLOSING OF THE NET

“Oh! What sayest thou, varlet?” Marsden slued around, with William still jabbering in his ear.

William was all for attracting the attention of his patron to Fougas; but it was not the devil-may-care countenance of the sergeant that caught Roger’s eye. Instead, he saw and at once recognized the towering form of MacGregor.

“Oh, Archie, man!” he called. He hastened forward. “Zounds! This is a lucky meeting! I’ve come to France to find thee! Where is thy mistress?” As he spoke, he continued to advance. His men wheeled and followed him.

Unfortunately Raymond, who was directly behind the big Scot and almost shoulder to shoulder with Castledown, turned in the direction of the voice. Roger’s eyes, made sharp by hatred, penetrated the partial disguise of the wig.

“God’s wounds! Here be the mongrel French whelp also!”

Another thought flashed into Marsden’s brain, and jealousy added the sting of its lash to the anger which sight of his foe had aroused. What was the Frenchman doing here in company with the servants of Lady Jean Murrie?

Perished discretion. With a shout of: “Seize him, varlets! Swords and pistols!” Roger whipped out of his cloak, tore his rapier from its scabbard, and flung himself upon the vicomte.

Humphrey was close beside his master. Mindful of a broken elbow which still gave him pain, the groom leveled a pistol. Its spurt of flame cut the dusk. Raymond, springing to engage Marsden, felt the hot wind of the bullet against his cheek. Behind him, Castledown, who had been shouting something which the vicomte did not comprehend, stopped in the midst of a sentence. His voice turned to a moan. He clutched at his shoulder and crumpled to the ground.

So close together had the two stood that though the vicomte did not see the fall of Castledown, he heard the thud of the striking bullet, followed by a moan of anguish, and he guessed what had happened. He could not reach

Humphrey yet; but he had at the point of his sword the groom's master who had ordered the deed; and he swore within himself that he would avenge his friend.

For all that he was beyond the range of the vicomte's sword, Humphrey's triumph in his marksmanship was brief. As coolly as though he had stood in a practice-gallery, Fougas rested one of his own pistols across the crook of his elbow and shot the groom through the teeth.

Raymond, too, had cast all caution to the four winds. Thoughts of escape, dangers of capture, his great wish to reach his home, all were forgotten. Behind him lay the friend who had come to mean so much to him; in front was the enemy who had been the cause of all his mishaps. White fury seethed in his brain, overflowed it, and ran along his steel, lending bitterness to its thrusts. He assailed the earl with such a swirl of blows that the attack seemed more like a flight of stinging arrows than the play of a single sword.

Wounded in hip and shoulder, dazed and driven backward, Roger's bravery and his English stubbornness alone prevented him from calling for aid.

"Lights!" he shouted. "Humphrey! George! Thomas! Torches!"

He was being forced back into the shadows.

Awed by the death of the groom, which their master had not perceived, and daunted by the steady pistol-muzzles of Concino and Fougas, the retainers of Marsden hesitated, fingering at their weapons, while the earl did the fighting.

One of the torch-bearers had fled at the first crack of a pistol; but the others, four of them, were French lads of the wharves, rough and fearless. They pushed in near the swordsmen and lifted their torches high.

"Humphrey and his whip have quite your lordship's service," said Raymond in answer to Roger's shouts; "perhaps they are waiting for you whither you are going soon. Take heed of the torchlight, my lord; it is the last light you will ever see. But before you go, here is something that I promised you."

With the taunt, the vicomte's blade slipped through Marsden's guard and nicked his right ear. A wordless howl of rage answered that both words and thrust had gone home.

“Murderer of old men!” rejoined Raymond. “Coward! Dealer of foul blows!”

In Marsden’s mind a picture grew, dimly at first, then vivid: a patch of sward whereon he lay wounded, and across from him against a rock, a terrible old man with eyes of fate, who shook his thumbless hands and cursed with dying breath the man whose sword had pierced him. What was it that the accursed gaffer had shrilled? That the lad with whom Roger had dealt foully would one day send his soul to hell! Now the lad was here fighting!

Warm though the work was, Roger shuddered as he fought.

Death of God! Was it a prophet that he had slain? Was the prophecy about to be fulfilled upon his body?

New strength entered his tiring frame with the thought, and a new light shone in his glaring eyes. Gone was his pride, and his courage had followed. In their stead desperation possessed him, and he leaped recklessly upon his enemy, frothing and clashing his teeth.

That was his last furious effort. His guard went wild. The vicomte’s rapier thrust him through so deeply that its point stood two palms’ breaths out behind his back. When the steel was withdrawn, Marsden plunged on his face in the dust of the marketplace.

With that fall perchance the fierce spirit of old Anthony Hatshaw was appeased.

Humphrey’s shot still ringing in his ears, MacGregor had knelt and gathered the body of his mistress in his arms. He had no realization that the fighting had begun. For the big Highlander at that moment the entire universe was narrowed to the compass of the white face, so like that of a wearied child, that rested upon his knee. With his rude fingers he smoothed back the masses of dark hair from which the plumed hat had fallen. He looked at the long lashes that lay on the pallid cheeks and at the parted lips, their scarlet faded, and he seemed to be bewildered.

Around him the four clansmen grouped themselves, with bonnets doffed and scared faces, but none the less ready to fight like demons at a word from their chieftain. But his brain was too benumbed to accept any fact beyond the calamity that had befallen.

“Airchie, mon, is—is she *deid*?” whispered one of the gillies, the tears beginning to trickle down his red face.

Archie did not answer, did not hear.

“Ma puir bairn,” he crooned; “ma puir, bonny bairn.”

He shifted the position of Jean’s body, and the hand with which he had supported her back came away moist and reddened. The sight of it seemed to recall him to himself. He tore open her waistcoat and shirt and applied his ear to listen at her heart. His strained attention could detect no flutter there. He folded his cloak into a pillow for her head and shoulders and laid her gently upon it. Then he arose and lifted his powerful arms toward the sky. Even the wild clansmen shrank from the face they saw.

“God may forgive ye, ma laird Marsden,” he groaned. “MacGregor wullna.”

A frenzy came upon him. He drew his claymore and started forward, so blinded by tears that he stumbled as he went.

At that instant the vicomte finished his fight. The body of Roger pitched at MacGregor’s feet. Beyond it lay the corpse of Humphrey. But the Highlander heeded them not. For him the fight had just begun. The rage that swelled his heart to bursting was to be assuaged only by blood of his own shedding.

On Montague’s William descended this pillar of wrath. William had drawn a pistol from his belt, and then had lacked the courage to use it. He stood dangling it in his fingers, right in the path of the maddened chieftain.

William saw the terrible claymore lifted, and he bleated in terror and tried to flee; but because of the very intensity of his fright, his legs failed him, and he stood as though nailed to the spot.

MacGregor roared hoarsely, swung the claymore to its full sweep, and struck with all the power of his two arms. The air shrieked as the mighty weapon clove through it. The keen edge struck William below the ear, and the blade completed its arc without a pause. William’s head sprang from his shoulders and went rolling and bumping along the rough stones of the pave. For an instant the body stood rigid, with blood jetting in a fountain from the severed veins of the neck; then it collapsed across that of Humphrey.

That fell spectacle was too much for the nerves of Marsden’s men. Without further thought of fighting, they fled, yelling, across the square. Claymore aloft, and still roaring, the enraged chieftain would have followed. Concino and Fougas seized him by the arms. They were both strong men; but the Highlander shook them about like toys and dragged them with him for some distance before his blood-lust left him and he allowed them to lead

him back. The revulsion from his paroxysm of madness left him nerveless and trembling. He sat down on William's body, covered his face with his hands and burst into stormy sobbing.

Raymond turned, shuddering, from MacGregor's savagery and approached the spot where Castledown lay. His heart wrenched by sorrow, the vicomte knelt and took his friend's hand. At first the uncertain light tricked his eyes; then he saw the bosom which MacGregor had partly bared, and which the clansmen had not dared disturb.

"*Mon Dieu*—a woman!" he cried. "What is the meaning of this?"

From one to another of the Highlanders he looked for answer. They returned his glances stupidly.

Sergeant Fougas came, hat in hand, and stood beside him. The soldier's face was very solemn, and his eyes were wet.

"M. le Vicomte, that is Lady Jean Murrie, daughter of the Early of Raasay," he said. He bent and covered Jean with a corner of MacGregor's plaid.

"But what—I do not understand!" exclaimed the vicomte, his ideas spinning dizzily.

Before Fougas could reply, a commanding voice in the street behind them caused both men to start and turn.

"If you are all done killing one another," it said, "I arrest you in the name of the King of France!"

It was the voice of the port officer.

Twenty feet away a line of soldiers was drawn up with muskets ready. A similar line blocked the street which led to the wharves.

Marsden's men were prisoners also. They had been seized before they could leave the square.

King Louis's net had closed.

CHAPTER XXI

HOW POISONERS DIE

Shortly after noon on the 22nd of February in the year 1680, a number of people—more than a mere group, hardly enough to constitute a crowd—were gathered before the gates of the king's prison at Vincennes.

Though the calendar told a tale of winter, the day was almost springlike. A light snow had fallen in the night; but a warm sun had melted it away from the open spots. Only in the western shadows of walls and trees a few white, powdery streaks, and on the bronze dead grass a silvery rime of frost-dew marked the strokes of winter's brush; and now and then a gust of wind from the north shed a chill on the waiting people.

Curiosity had drawn these folk to the prison gate. A careless word from the mouth of a guard had become a rumor and spread about the neighborhood. Those who could do so had forsaken their business and responded.

At length their vigil had its reward. Bolts and chains clanked a warning. The people drew back. A feeble shout of expectation went up:

“They are coming! *Les empoisonneurs! Les empoisonneurs!*”

The gates swung open to allow the outward passage of two *carrosses*, escorted by a score of mounted soldiers.

“See, see! It is the witch!” cried one of the curious.

“How her face flames—like the reflection of hell's-fire,” suggested another, and crossed himself.

“Or of the blaze into which she is going,” amended a third.

“*A bas les empoisonneurs!*” shouted several of them at once.

In the first carriage, riding alone, was a woman—or rather all of a woman that remained after the king's justicers had done their work upon her.

She had been tall and stately and lithe of limb; but now her body was twisted awry, her head inclined to one side, and her arms and hands were warped and distorted. A year before, her heavy hair had been black as night; suffering had turned it gray as dawn's twilight.

Chill as was the edge of the wind, she was dressed in white garments, as for a festival. Above her snowy gown her neck and face were red as though the sun had burned them.

She was Catherine des Hayes, known aforetime to credulous Parisians as La Voisin, queen of soothsayers, mistress of the black arts, delver into the future, and purveyor of miraculous draughts and remedies. There was within her a spirit which defied both the cold and the heat.

Twice had she been put to the tortures of the extraordinary question, and both times had steadfastly refused to confess or to reveal the name of a single person with whom she had dealt. To the most hideous torments her only responses had been oaths and blasphemies which had appalled even the hardened executioners of the king's justice.

So she was going at last to pass through that gateway which she had opened to many others. It was the final sentence of the *Chambre Ardente* that she die by the ordeal of fire in the Place de la Grève in Paris.

Two persons rode in the carriage behind her, a man and a woman. They were La Voisin's subordinate and partner, La Vigoreaux, and her brother. They were going to die with their mistress.

They, too, had been tortured, and neither had made confession. No earlier than that morning had the dreaded question been put to La Vigoreaux. Though the torment had not broken her spirit, it had conquered her body. Senseless she rode in the carriage, her head resting on the shoulder of the pallid wretch, her brother.

"Death to the poisoners!"

The watchers by the gates pressed forward, mouthing their hateful cry.

Catherine des Hayes raised her long, intellectual face and bent on her carriage seat so that she could see them. She smiled at them, an infinitely pitying smile that ill accorded with her flaming features.

They responded with yells:

"The witch! The accursed witch! Stone her! Burn her! Death to the poisoners!"

Her gray eyes blazed with a sudden, awful fury, so intense and malignant that it silenced the onlookers. She lifted and shook her twisted arms, each separate broken finger crooked and clawing, and shrieked at them a true witch's benison—a blast of curses so frightful that they fell back cowering, and all save the boldest took to their heels.

In the rear carriage the man heard, shuddered, and made the sign of the cross, whose protection he had forfeited.

A mounted captain rode up to La Voisin's carriage-wheel.

"Another such vile outburst, witch, and you shall be silenced with a pistol-butt!"

La Voisin did not appear to hear him. Her hands had fallen in her lap. The evil fire had died in her eyes, and she was once more smiling, looking across the sunlit fields.

The cortège turned northwestward and followed the road to Paris.

In the *faubourgs* of the city the crowds were waiting, greedy of their spectacle. They surrounded and marched with the carriages, hooting and jeering.

Their clamor aroused La Voisin from the reverie into which she had fallen. Her fiery face grew redder and redder. She began to answer them, giving shriek for shriek and curse for curse. She who had shown her torturers that she had the fortitude to make a calm and passionless ending, chose instead to die like a fiend incarnate, and did so.

Vainly her captors attempted to silence her. She feared nothing, and would not be quelled.

Thrice soldiers struck her across the mouth with their pistols. With bleeding, frothing lips she raved and cursed them until they were fain to stop their ears and ride with averted faces.

In the Rue du Faubourg St. Antoine two rumbling, high-wheeled tumbrils met the carriages, and the prisoners were transferred. A black-robed priest clambered into each of the vehicles, and the procession continued on its way.

When the confessor approached her, La Voisin repulsed him and his crucifix with violence. The torrent of obscene blasphemy with which she greeted him sent him cowering to the rear of the cart.

From the crowd a tipsy soldier tossed her an unopened bottle of wine. She caught it and broke its neck against the seat of the tumbril. Laughing wildly, she raised it, and though its jagged glass gashed her lips and tongue, she drank deeply "To the health of *mon ami, le diable!*"

The cortège crossed the Pont Marne to the Ile St. Louis, and from there to the Ile de la Cité by the Pont St. Louis.

In front of the great cathedral of Notre Dame the tumbrils were halted. The Archbishop of Paris confronted them, clad in his episcopal robes and holding aloft a great cross of gold. In the name of God, the Father and of Christ, His Son, he exhorted the poisoners to make public acknowledgment of their crimes and seek the divine forgiveness before they died.

On his seat in the rear tumbril, the man, still supporting the senseless form of his sister, bent his head, and his pale lips moved. But La Voisin raised herself on her shattered legs, leaned over the side of the cart, and screeched:

“There is no God—only devils, here and hereafter! I go to join my well-served master!”

With a horrible peal of laughter, she hurled her broken bottle at the prelate’s head, and spat toward the holy towers of the cathedral.

At that, a groan went up from the populace. Had it not been for the soldiers, she had certainly been torn in pieces.

Again the procession crossed the Seine and turned into the Place de la Grève.

About the open space at the fatal *quai* was gathered a crowd so dense that a man might have walked on its shoulders for nearly an eighth of a mile without missing a step. A shout the like of which seldom had been heard in Paris went up when the tumbrils made their appearance in the square.

There, each on its separate raised platform of masonry, stood a number of stone posts, in each of which were sunk ring-bolts of iron. The sides of the posts were stained and calcined by the scorching breath of many fires. On two of those grim stages were piles of fagots and heaps of straw. At the foot of each of them a tumbril was halted. The prisoners passed from the custody of their guards to that of the masked justicers of the king, the executioner of Paris and his dread valets.

Prodded with sticks, the brother was forced to carry the body of his sister up the steps to the stake. He was chained with his back to the upright post, the fagots were piled waist-high around him, and the unconscious woman was laid across them, face upward, and also made fast with chains.

During the preparations the man made no resistance, nor did he speak. When all was completed, he raised his face toward the sky and closed his eyes.

It was otherwise with La Voisin.

When the valets of the executioner laid hold of her, she began to scream and struggle furiously. She spat and clawed like a cat gone mad, and it was necessary to drag her from the tumbril by her heels. So viciously did she use her talons, that one of the executioners lost patience, and seizing her wrists one after the other in his two hands, he broke them.

But La Voisin was long past the point where pain could subdue her. Biting, kicking and squalling, she was carried up the steps and chained to her appointed stake. The wood was heaped about her, and the straw laid on.

At a signal from the executioner, torches were applied to the straw on both platforms.

A long, shuddering breath like the sighing of the wind arose from the crowd as the first tongues of flames leaped up. Then came a silence broken only by the crackling of the fires and the horrid shrieking of the undaunted La Voisin.

Five times she pushed over the burning straw. Each time it was replaced with a long-handled fork in the hands of one of the executioners; and once he did not scruple to prod the flesh of the doomed woman with its tines—and drew upon himself a shower of imprecations which caused his face to pale behind its mask.

At last the wood blazed up.

On the neighboring platform La Vigoreaux had died, still unconscious, and the head of the man had fallen upon his breast.

Still the unshaken nerve of Catherine des Haynes sustained her blistering body. Lifting her maimed arms, she shook them over the heads of the shuddering crowd, and cursed them.

From the king on his throne to the rats in the cellars, she cursed them, waking and sleeping, eating and drinking, living and dying, and dead—Paris, France, the world, and the world's Maker—and poured forth her last breath in a hideous oath as the flames reached her, and her wicked but courageous spirit passed.

At nearly the same hour that the carriage of La Voisin set out from the prison at Vincennes, there was brought together in one of the halls of the Bastille a little group of pale-faced folk who had not seen one another's faces, or even known that one another lived, for nine long and weary months.

Not since the night when the king's soldiers had fallen upon them in the marketplace of Calais and had separated them, had there been a reunion of these pilgrims who had fared forth in quest of happy adventure and who had failed so signally in that quest. Yet in all that time only a few feet of space and walls of stone had divided them.

Imprisonment had paled their faces. On two of their number sorrow, too, had set its imprint.

Months of reflection in a narrow, speechless cell had taught to Raymond all the meaning of that mysterious attraction which had so drawn him to Jean as Castledown; and he had mourned her as a man mourns the love he has known for years before losing. MacGregor, who had cherished his mistress as he might have cherished a daughter, had well-nigh lost his wits; and only fear of his God had held him back from strangling himself in his cell.

So it was not with cheery cries and laughter that these lost men greeted one another as they met, but with glooming eyes and few words. Quidor only, whose red skin could not pale, and who was taciturn always, seemed the same as he had been.

But the sound of a footstep on the floor, a cry, the sudden turning of all eyes one way—and gloom gave way to delirious gladness.

MacGregor was the first to see. Perhaps his keen ear knew that footfall on the floor. He stared and shrank, with fright and awe in his face, then went down on his knees and lifted his manacled hands toward heaven.

“Ma leddy! Ma leddy! Gude God, MacGregor gi’es Thee thanks!”

Still in the guise of Castledown, Jean Murrie stood before them!

She, too, was pale and worn; but she was not the ghost for which Archie at first had taken her; and she was whole and well.

Delighted, they gathered around her; nor fear of jailors, or of death itself, could subdue the greeting they gave her.

Jean's story was much the same as that of all the others. The wound in her shoulder had not proved serious. She had lain for a few weeks in a hospital, she did not know where; then she had been removed to the Bastille—and did not know that it *was* the Bastille. No one had questioned her; no one had answered her questions. The jailors had been as deaf and uncommunicative as the walls.

The prisoners had a few moments only for conversation. Then a double file of guards formed around them, and they were marched through three corridors and down two long flights of stairs to the courtyard. Two and two they walked, and Jean and Raymond were last.

He did not know, did not stop to question, where they were going. His heart reeked not of time or place, but took its opportunity.

“Mademoiselle!” he whispered as they entered the twilight of the first stairway, and the guards fell back to give them room.

She turned her face toward him. Even in the dusk he could see a flush overspread its pallor; but she bravely continued to look at him. Except by the glance, she did not answer.

“Mademoiselle—I love you!”

He heard her catch her breath.

“He has said it once,” thought Jean.

Three steps——

“You do not know me. To you I was only that little fool, Lord Castledown.”

Four steps——

“All the time—from the first—my heart knew you. I loved the memory of your voice, *mademoiselle*. My heart knew you again, but kept the secret. I love you.”

That took six steps.

“Twice,” said Jean in her mind; but she kept silent.

For ten steps Raymond waited. The light at the foot of the stairs was getting nearer very fast. But there would be another stairway, though they did not know it.

“Mademoiselle does not answer.”

She did not. He ventured to reach sidewise and touch her hand. She withdrew it. They came out into the light. Twice he glanced at her as they passed along the corridor. Each time he found her face turned away. The second stairway yawned darkly before them. Again the guards drew back.

Raymond was disheartened; he loved too truly to be angered. Anyway, she had not said no, he reflected; and his heart took courage to dare again.

“*Mademoiselle!*”

“*Oui, monsieur?*”

That time the reply came on the same step; and it did not sound forbidding.

“I love you, *mademoiselle!*”

“He has said it three times!” In Jean’s brain the announcement was fairly shouted. At the same time she hated herself fiercely for having made him submit to her whim. Tears started to her eyes.

Raymond felt small, warm fingers groping for his hand.

“Why do you think I followed you to France, *monsieur?*”

In his veins the blood tingled; but he answered with courteous stupidity:

“I do not know.”

“Indeed you do!” The grasp of the fingers tightened. “I *will* say it; it’s only fair,” thought Jean.

“It was be-because I—I loved you—I love you now, *monsieur!*”

In the blessed darkness of that triply blessed staircase the vicomte stumbled clumsily. At least, that was what the guards thought—and continued to think; for he stumbled twice more before he reached the bottom. Had they known all there was to be known about those stumblings, they might not have thought him so clumsy.

The truth of the matter is that right under their guardian noses three kisses had been given, received, and returned. Raymond and Jean emerged into the sunlight of the courtyard very flushed and very happy. For the remainder of their walk and through all that followed, whenever the occasion offered, they held each other’s hands.

“But where are we going, *monsieur*—Raymond?” Jean asked as they left the courtyard and saw the beginnings of the great crowd which was packed between the Bastille and the Place de la Grève.

One of their escort, who marched at Raymond’s side, appeared to be a dull but well-meaning fellow.

“Where are you taking us?” asked the vicomte.

“To the Grève—to see them burn the arch-poisoners, La Voisin and the others,” the soldier replied. “But you are not to die today. Doubtless you

other poisoners will be hung later. I cannot say.”

Poisoners!

Raymond’s heart seemed to stop beating. There had been no trial, no hearing! Not a question had been asked of any of them! And yet it seemed that judgment had been passed! And not a word of the other adventure, which Concino had said the king would view as the greater crime! Ah; that was it! The light began to dawn on the vicomte. They were to be snuffed out, unquestioned, uncared for. The accusation that they were poisoners would cloak, and the punishment cover the other misadventure. It was monstrous! A storm of protest arose to his lips.

“François!” called back the captain of the guard, “if the prisoners talk, beat them and gag them. They are to be kept silent.”

Near the Quai des Celestins the little procession was met by a coach drawn by eight white horses. A red-haired young woman leaned from its window, studying the crowds. Her eyes ran idly over the prisoners. She started, paled, flushed, paled again, and called an order to her driver. He swung the horses to the right, scattering the crowd. At a motion of her hand, one of the soldiers of the rear-guard dropped out of his place and went to the carriage window. After a question or two, in the course of which gold passed over the window-sill, the young woman drove off furiously in the direction of the Bastille. A warning cry passed ahead of her and clove the crowds for her passage:

“Make way for the Tiger-Lily!”

At the Bastille she talked earnestly for half an hour with the governor of the fortress, and then returned to her palace.

Hedged by a double row of guards, the prisoners stood in the Place de la Grève and witnessed the execution of the poisoners. When the flames were applied, some of them, Jean and the vicomte included, turned away their faces and covered their ears. MacGregor, though he continued to look upon the fearful sight, prayed audibly. Only Quidor was unmoved.

“It seems, my brother, that in some of their customs the sons of Onontio are not different from the red Hurons—only they don’t burn women,” he remarked to Raymond; but the vicomte did not hear him.

The guards, absorbed by the spectacle, relaxed their vigilance. A few moments later the Indian pulled at Raymond’s sleeve.

"My brother," he whispered, "look at the chains of Quidor. He has worn them nearly through. With a little help from the big Yengees who wears skirts, they might be broken. Then will Quidor run so fast that no man or horse can catch him. He will swim the water yonder, and take a message to the chief, my brother's father, in the land of the Yengees across the narrow sea."

Raymond looked down. Patiently through the weeks and months, at every opportunity when he could work without attracting the attention of his guard, the Indian had fretted the steel of the gyves at his wrists against the rough stones in the walls of his cell. They were worn thin as a girl's bangles. A little fire of hope sprang up in the vicomte's breast, and then flickered out.

"It is impossible," he replied.

"Let Quidor try; he can but get killed a little sooner. It is better that he should try than to wait and see his brother burned yonder. What is the name of my brother's father, and where is his lodge?"

"Comte Denys de Mortemart—Wolf's Rest, near Godalming in Surrey."

Quidor repeated the words under his breath two or three times to fix them in his mind. Then he sidled along until he reached MacGregor. Using English, of which he knew more than he ever would admit, the Huron made the Scot comprehend what was to be done. Archie looked down at the manacles and smiled. From them his eyes traveled to the red man's face and lingered for an instant in admiration.

"Ye are a mon—a bra' mon, ma freend, for a' that ye are a copper-skinned heathen body," he whispered.

Cautiously he wrapped a corner of his plaid around Quidor's right wrist, so that the fractured steel might not pierce the flesh. Then he clasped his own shackled hands and closed their palms over the Huron's gyve. Both men looked away through the crowd, and the Highlander put forth his strength. A sound not louder than the breaking of an eggshell followed. Another, and Quidor stood free. He looked once into the vicomte's anxious eyes. Then he shot out his hands, caught two of the guards by the shoulders and leaped over them like a wildcat.

Futile pikes clashed behind him. He was gone with the speed of an arrow across the open square of the Grève; and the crowd was so dense beyond him that the soldiers dared not use their firearms.

Several of the guards started in pursuit, shouting as they went; but he outran them by three feet to one, and the wind and the clamor of the crowds

carried away their voices. Soldiers on the other side of the square did not know what had happened when the Huron reached them. He ran up to an officer as though to deliver a message, swerved, pushed his way between two musketeers, and gained the *quai*.

As he went on, he leaped and yelled like one possessed, and no one tried to stop him. Folk nearest the docks saw him spring into a boat and run to the stern. For an instant he poised there, then dived into the icy waters and sank like a stone.

CHAPTER XXII

THE WALL OF SILENCE

Never was king more faithfully served than Louis the Fourteenth of France; seldom has king deserved less of the faith of his servants.

It was in the blind obedience which he taught and exacted, more than in any inherent quality in the man himself, that lay the greatness of *Le Roi-Soleil*, or the Sun-King, as he delighted to be known.

That obedience, the lengths to which it might go, and the results which were possible to it, are no better instanced than in the chain of events and their sequels which followed the advent of Raymond du Chêne in France. Those events and results furnish also a striking commentary on the persistence and persuasiveness of the one person who set about unraveling the web which circumstance and the will of the king had woven about the destinies of the young vicomte and his friends.

Ten persons of varying stations, two of them noble, none of them friendless, had disappeared. Every attempt to find them—and in the nine months many were made by their friends—met with the same result. It received willing and courteous aid, profuse suggestions—and ended futilely against a blank, impenetrable wall of silence, ignorance, and mystery.

Beyond a certain point there was not evident a trace which the keenest eye or mind could distinguish, not a scent that the cleverest bloodhound might follow.

First in the field was the Earl of Raasay, aided by his friend Montague. They had two motives, in one of which they were powerfully backed from England: to find the Lady Jean Murrie, and to punish the slayers of Roger, Earl of Templeton, and his servants, Humphrey and William.

Black Roger's men took the body of their master home to England and told all that they knew of the grim fight in the marketplace of Calais. Their tale made quite a bit of noise in England; even the Crown became interested, and through Montague asked the aid of the King of France to discover the slayers—aid which was given freely, and apparently in abundance.

The officer was found who had made the arrests at Calais. He said that he had acted without orders, merely to preserve the peace of the port. Investigation had convinced him, he declared, that the brawl had been in the

nature of a duel, a private matter, concerning Englishmen only. As he had not wished to disturb the delicate balance of peace between the two nations, he had released the prisoners and washed his hands of the matter so soon as might be.

Marsden's men, as has been related, returned to England. Where were the others? The officer was sorry that he could not guess; they had disappeared; doubtless they feared the vengeance of the friends of the Earl of Templeton. Was there a woman among the fugitives? No; they were all men. Who was the man whom Humphrey had shot? An Englishman, one of the party, name forgotten. He had not been seriously wounded, and his companions had taken him with them. Where, then, was the Lady Jean Murrie, if not with her Scottish servants? Shrugs and smiles.

There, so far as concerned the "aid" of King Louis, the matter was at rest. Possibly half a dozen of the monarch's underlings were in possession of the full tale of the wanderings of the vicomte and his party in France. Even they did not know the entire extent of the grievance which the king held against the prisoners. What they did know was sealed by the discretion which their master had taught them.

Roderick of Raasay and his friends pursued their search elsewhere, and vainly. Austria, the Low Countries, the German states, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, were combed to no purpose.

One of the most zealous agents in the search was Lord Harry March.

Before the end of three months the story of the lost daughter of the Scottish earl was the talk of sentimentalists all over Europe. Scores of romantic youths and purseless adventurers set out to find her.

Soberer thinkers concluded that she had been robbed and slain by her wild Highlanders; or that she had been spirited away by the same man who had killed Lord Templeton at Calais. Still others did not believe the tale at all. In three months more the public had forgotten it.

Big Hugues Banel coupled what he knew from their own lips of the adventures of Raymond and Concino at Le Havre with what gossip had told of the affray at the Inn of the Golden Skull and the fight at Calais. Then Hugues, mightily worried, left his shop in the Rue des Peuplier in care of a cousin, and departed for England to put himself and his fortune at the disposal of his friend and patron, Comte Denys de Mortemart.

Not so noisy as the search conducted by Raasay and Montague, but fully as careful and earnest, was that of the Wolf for his son. In one respect both

enterprises were identical: both were flat failures.

Twice Denys crossed the Channel, once to ride throughout north France with Hugues, seeking clues in the land which the Wolf knew so well; once to go to Paris and ask aid where he had influence.

Denys did not go to the king, but to Colbert. The Controller-General promised him aid, and made an honest attempt to keep the promise. But there were some of the secrets of his royal master which even Jean Baptiste Colbert did not know. One of them was the identity and fate of the persons who had aided *Le Masque du Fer* in his mad dash for Paris. Furthermore, Colbert was aged and failing; and in consequence, like any other worn-out tool, was losing favor with the man who wielded him.

So the Wolf returned to his country home; and the only comfort which he could take to a sorrowing mother was the surmise, half-believed, that in some foreign land their son was straying, and that they would hear from him in time.

Through all those gloomy months the key to the puzzle was hidden deep within the gray stone walls of the Bastille.

There in their dim cells, cheerless by day, horrible at night, were the lost ones for whom their friends and their enemies had searched so long and so earnestly.

It was one of the greatest keepers of secrets in the word, was the Bastille—worthy of brotherhood with the Sphinx and the grave.

Time after time, until his efforts numbered into hundreds, and he gave up through sheer weariness, Raymond tried to persuade the one human being whom he ever saw, the warder who had charge of his cell, to tell him what had been the fate of his companions, what was to be his own fate, when he was to be tried, released, executed, tortured, as the case might be—any single scrap of information of any sort, on any subject. He might as well have addressed his questions to the moon.

The warder came; the warder went; sometimes, but rarely, the warder smiled; but the warder never spoke.

Recalling the advice in the letter which the Wolf had written him, the vicomte did his best to impress the warder that he was under the protection of Colbert, and that news of his imprisonment must be sent him.

If the name of the great Controller-General made the slightest impression on the wooden-faced fellow, it was not apparent.

Bribes were useless also. It was when they were promised that the warder smiled.

Not until the day of the frightful affair in the Place de la Grève, nine months after he entered the Bastille, did the vicomte hear the sound of a human voice except his own.

To relate his experience is to speak for his entire party.

What the soldier of the guard told him on the way to La Grève was true.

Louis the king controlled the *Chambre Ardente* absolutely. It was for the condemnation, more than for the trial, of poisoners. Twice these prisoners, or part of them, had opposed arrest, and they were known to have aided in the evasion of the Comtesse de Soissons. That alone was sufficient to doom them and damn them.

Louis had only to suggest that it would be a waste of the time of the tribunal to examine or try them. The *Chambre* agreed with its maker and master.

The councilors voted that the prisoners be hanged out of hand, and it was so recorded.

No one cared or inquired who they might be; it was taken for granted that they must be common folk.

CHAPTER XXIII

WHILE THE CANDLE BURNED

From the day when he learned that Jean lived and loved him, and, consequently, that there was something left worth living for, existence for Raymond became a form of madness, wherein joys like those of heaven were alternated with torments more fearful than any which King Louis's justicers could have devised for him.

"She loves you!" whispered the angels to his soul.

"Yes; she loves you," repeated the waiting demon; "she loves you; but what then? Both of you must die."

"Perhaps there is hope," suggested the brighter spirit.

"Hope!" echoed the imp of darkness, with a laugh of derision. "Did you ever hear that any one escaped from the Bastille? Think you not that in nine months all that friends can do has been done? 'Tis all of no avail. The die is cast. The stage is set. You are to die, and so is she; and there's an end on't."

"But the Indian," hope insisted; "Quidor may win through; and then the Wolf will surely come."

"*Pshaw!* Hope not," the other mocked. "The Huron's way is beset by a thousand dangers. And if he should reach the Wolf, and if the Wolf should come? Suppose you that Louis Quatorze would be coerced—that he would admit, even, that his prison holds such prisoners as you? Nay; the tale of the Indian would be dismissed as the vagary of a crazed man."

And so went on the duel of hope with hopelessness.

Raymond redoubled his appeals to his jailer. Sometimes the young man's words were so extravagant and fraught with such frenzy that the man of silence must have thought his prisoner near to madness—and indeed he was not far from that.

Late in the third night after Quidor's escape, as the vicomte sat on the stone bench that served him both for bed and seat, and stared into the pitchy blackness of his cell, a prey to the constant mental agonies that had driven sleep from his pillow, he heard a grating of locks and bars at the end of the corridor. Footsteps sounded along the passage and paused outside his door. A key rattled in the lock. He started up, his wildest fears aroused.

They were coming! He was to be led out to some unholy midnight death! He would never see her again!

Only by a strong effort did he restrain an impulse to shriek.

The door opened, and the jailer entered, carrying a length of lighted candle and a chair. He set the chair near the door; and then, wonder of wonders, the automaton spoke!

"*Monsieur* is to have a visitor," he announced in a not unkindly tone. He set the candle in a niche in the masonry, where its light would shine across the corridor. Then he spoke to some one outside.

"This way, your gr——"

"*Hush*, you fool!" interrupted a woman's voice, low, but sharp; "no titles here, fellow."

A heavily veiled and cloaked figure entered the cell and stopped in its center. It was evident that the hidden eyes were taking quick stock of the place. After a glance in Raymond's direction, the figure whirled upon the warder. An arm pointed to the door.

"Now get out!"

The man bowed and backed to the door. He paused on the threshold and pointed to the length of taper in the wall.

"For no longer than the candle burns," he said respectfully. "His excellency's orders, *mademoiselle*."

"*Chut!* Bother his excellency and his greasy candles! What care I for his excellency! Go to the end of the corridor, and see that you stay there until I call you—which will be at my good pleasure."

"But his excellency was most explicit," the fellow persisted.

"*Enfer!* Get out, I say! Here (a piece of gold fell on the threshold), go buy a smile and hang it on that sour face of yours. Begone!"

The man scooped up the gold and marched away, whistling under his breath.

Raymond had arisen and stood wondering beside his bench. His visitor approached him. The cloak fell to the floor. From behind the veil appeared the beautiful, careless face and waving auburn hair of the Tiger-Lily.

"*Eh, bien*, it's I," she said, laughing at his staring confusion. "Come; you might at least wish me *bonsoir*."

“But, *mademoiselle*—I—I—This——”

“*Tiens!* Don’t say it! I know that I’m risking my spotless reputation by coming to *tête-à-tête* with you at such an hour.” Again she laughed. “But I don’t know that your own is any better, from all that I hear of you, *monsieur*. You have been running the country with a saucy little baggage in breeches riding at your horse’s tail.”

Raymond flushed, and was about to speak; but the extraordinary creature laid a hand upon his arm and stopped him.

“There, there—blush all you like; but don’t be angry with me. Let me have my little spiteful say. It will hurt neither you nor her; and I say it to your face, anyway. Besides, I mean to be your friend in spite of you. Do you know what this visit has cost me—more gold than I can think of without a shiver, and a promise of nobility to the ambitious donkey who helped me. *Eh bien* I care not for the gold” (nevertheless, the denial had cost her a little sigh of regret), “and for the nobility not the half that I did before I asked the old dolt in the palace yonder to give me mine.

“Now, *monsieur*, don’t pick a quarrel with me, for I’m a good fighter, and let me talk—which comes easy to me—and we shall get along excellently. Fetch me that chair. *Mon Dieu!*” with a glance around and a shiver. “Such quarters! If there are any rats here, lie and say that there are not; for I detest them.”

“There are no rats, *mademoiselle*,” said Raymond obediently, bringing the chair. She saw that he was smiling.

“*Bon!* That’s better—you are not going to scold me,” she approved, seating herself. “Now sit down there, where I can see your face—so.”

She bent quickly and tapped him on the knee with her finger-tip.

“You are a pretty fellow, indeed! Why didn’t you come and see me, as I asked? There are plenty of them that would—damn them! Don’t tell me that you are bashful; for I wouldn’t believe you—not after what I know.” She paused, waiting for his answer.

He spread out his hands.

“But, *mademoiselle*, I should have had to blast my way to you with gunpowder—and I had it not.”

“*Fi donc!* You dodge. I know all about *this*. I meant before. Oh, well, I understand. I won’t plague you. I saw her the other day—saw through her in spite of her breeches. She’s not bad, and must have a very proper spirit.

Thank the good God, I'm not jealous—at least not very. *Psst!* Hold your tongue, *monsieur!* Remember; you are not to get angry. You see, I owe you a bit of teasing. Really, *monsieur*, I have thought of you many times. Remember, too, that you told me one little lie. Raymond du Chêne, you said you were, and not a noble; but it turns out that you are the Vicomte de Mervalles, and will some day be the Comte de Mortemart. Nay; don't jump; that is one thing which I know that the king does not; and I won't tell him.

“*Pardieu!* Monsieur du Chêne, I wish things might have been different—that I could have met you before I met him and you met her. *Dame!* Fate has cheated me, and then showed me the trick.”

She leaned back in her chair and looked at him, apparently lost in regretful thought. It is worthy of remark, and will presently be proved, that Marie Angelica d'Escorailles de Roussille, Duchess de Fontanges, was not nearly so scarlet as she has been painted.

“*Heigh-ho!*” she exclaimed. “What a world!”

“Your grace,” began the vicomte eagerly, “you are great and powerful, and are said to have much influence with—at court. They say that we—my comrades and I—are to hang. Can you, will you, help us? All that we ask is the opportunity, which has been denied us, to be heard, so that we can prove that we are guilty of no intentional wrongdoing.”

“*Merci* for the title,” answered the duchesse dryly; “but stick to the *mademoiselle*, *mon garçon*, if you would win me. As for helping you—that is what I came for. Still, I'm glad to hear you ask me. In the first place, do you trust me?”

Like lightning the vicomte thought. His plight could not be made much worse by anything which he might say—and she might really intend to aid him. Without any apparent hesitation he replied:

“Entirely, *mademoiselle*.”

“Then tell me the meaning of that *fracas* at La Grève the other day. It is rumored that one of your companions made his escape—though the governor of the Bastille has not dared let the news come to the king. Is it so?”

Raymond told her of the going of the Huron, keeping back nothing of the purpose of it.

She shook her head.

“ ’Twould do no good. It lays one more task on me; that of intercepting your father and keeping him from the king. This thing, *monsieur*, lies between you and me and our luck. Do you think that Louis will grant to your father what already he has refused to the King of England?

“Now, enough of idle talk. The candle is burning low. Here is what’s to be done: I will see that you get a hearing before the king. Never mind how—it *shall* be done. That, with a few good words for you, will be my part of the game. The rest is for you and for luck to accomplish.

“*Your part will be to convince the king that you believe he is the man for whom you fought at the Château Villetrín—that is your one chance.*”

“What! you know that—” gasped Raymond.

“*Oui*—and a pretty time and deal of money it has cost me to find out. But everyone out of Provence is not a fool, as the saying goes; and I’m from Provence. I know what not five persons in the kingdom know, outside of the Fortress of Pignerol and the Bastille here. Now it is for you, who know it also, to forget it, and to prove to the king that you never did know it. If he questions any of your comrades, we are lost. That is for luck to take care of—unless you can find some way to let them know. I have done all I could here—and it was not easy.”

“I will do my best, *mademoiselle*. So very much depends upon it.” His voice trembled.

“*Humh!* And who’s to pay me, I’d like to know?” remarked the duchesse, somewhat sulkily.

Raymond went down on his knees and kissed her hand.

“We will remember you as a saint from heaven, *mademoiselle*.”

“*Chut!* Get up. Quick! I think that there is a rat under that bed! I heard something!”

The “something” was the returning tread of the warder. He paused in the doorway.

“The candle, *mademoiselle*—it is going out,” he announced.

As he spoke the last stubby, charred remnant of the wick wavered in its pool of melted wax; the flame flickered, sputtered, and was gone.

“It is out, *mademoiselle!* I will light another.”

“Oui; do so, and quickly!” responded the duchesse. “There are rats in here. I hear them.”

In Raymond’s ear she hissed:

“Make a noise—quick!”

He scuffled his feet.

Marie de Roussille bent forward and kissed him; and he heard her sob as she fled in the darkness. A moment later the candlelight flamed up in the corridor, the key clashed in the lock, the light dimmed away, and he was alone.

Considerable of that night he passed trying to remember whether or not he had returned the kiss of the duchesse, and if he had, how much it would matter to Jean. Finally he arrived at the wise conclusion that unless the duchesse herself should tell Jean, which was very unlikely, Jean would never know.

He pondered his “one chance.” How simple it seemed! Yet how little would topple it. He would do his part, he was resolved. God grant that the king called only him! Could he convince him? He decided that he could; for it was true that until the time the Mask left them none of the party suspected that he was other than the king. It should not be so difficult, then, to carry on the deceit.

Could the Tiger-Lily, with all her influence, get him the audience? Why had she decided even to try?

Let the unborn man who entirely understands the reasons of women answer the last question when he comes.

As for the other: one determined woman can accomplish much—especially if she be as beautiful as was the Duchesse de Fontanges.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE WOLF AND THE TIGER-LILY

Under the icy waters of the River Seine, Quidor the Huron swam on like an otter.

Where a son of Eastern civilization would have been chilled to the bone, paralyzed and overcome in a few moments, the wilderness training of the Indian sustained him. His determination was ironlike; either he would carry out the design he had formed to aid his friends, or he would feed the fishes in the depths of the great river.

On a day when he had rambled with the vicomte on the Ile de la Cité, Quidor had noticed a rotting old dock near the angle of the Pont Notre Dame and the Quai des Fleurs. Standing on the bridge and gazing along the reach of the river, his attention had been attracted to the dock because of a dark aperture in its wooden face, which appeared to extend below the line of the water, and through which the surface ripples of the river lapped and splashed.

It was a small thing to notice, and it was months ago that he had seen it; but the brain of Quidor was a storehouse of memories and impressions where few things ever were mislaid or forgotten. He had remembered that hole in the dock.

His sudden flight across the square of La Grève toward the river was neither aimless nor without plan. From the moment when he thrust through the guards and started, he had in mind that moldering old dock, that dark doorway to a hiding-place which he was sure could be entered below the surface of the water.

At the moment when folk on the bank of the Seine saw him fling himself from the stern of a boat which was moored opposite to the Place de la Grève, another craft was passing along the river, proceeding in the direction of the Pont Notre Dame. Leaping as far as his powerful legs would hurl him, the Huron dived toward the passing boat, and swam on under the water. He thought that his lungs would burst before a shadow in the water through which he tore his way told him that he was under the bottom of the boat.

He came to the surface under the overhanging stern of the craft, clutched the edge of the keel with steely fingers, and hung grimly on. In that position

he was enabled to thrust the tip of his nose out of the water in comparative safety, and to gasp in the air for want of which his lungs were perishing.

All too short was the time he had to breathe the strength-giving force, before the time came for his second trial. Keenly watching, with one eye above the surface of the ripples, he saw the old dock come opposite him. It had not been repaired; the gap of the broken boarding was still there. Loosing his hold of the keel, and thrusting hard against the bottom of the boat with his feet, he made his second dive.

He reached the dock. There, for a moment he thought that his attempt had been a failure, and that he should have to go to the surface. The rift in the face of the planking narrowed below the water, and he could not force his body through the aperture. He bethought him then that the wood was rotten, and tore at it with his powerful hands. A strip of it came away. He shouldered his way in, and thrust his head upward with a moan of relief.

As soon as he could collect his forces, he clambered on through the wooden supporting timbers until he reached the junction of the dock with the masonry of the *quai*. He found there a narrow ledge of stone. Lifting his legs out of the chilling water, he clambered to the shelf and curled himself up there as best he could.

Again his body, toughened by the hardships of forest living, seconded his bold spirit. He fought off the chills which threatened him; and in time attained to a degree of comfort in his nest, though it was only relative comfort. The remainder of the day and the early part of the night he passed in alternate dozing on the ledge, and spells of violent rubbing and restricted gymnastics, to drive off the chills and cramps which his position brought upon him.

When he heard the city chimes tell the hour of ten, he left his lair and crept out along the deserted *quais*.

Much of Paris was unknown to him; and of France and England his ideas were of the vaguest; but he knew that if he followed the course of the river, it would lead him at last to the sea; beyond the sea was England.

For the better part of three hours he proceeded with extreme caution. Thrice, when he heard voices near him, he took to the water and swam for a distance. The rest of the way through the city, he slunk along the docks and *quais* like a fantom. Then he came to the open fields, and there the most of his apprehensions left him.

So long as the forests and the fields lay before him, he knew that he could not be caught, and that he should not starve.

Had he but known it, from the moment when he disappeared beneath the Seine in his first dive, the most of the danger of recapture was past. People who saw the deed, and saw that he did not reappear, thought his act that of a crazed man or a suicide, and so reported it to the Bastille guards who pursued him. The guards agreed with the opinion. Moreover, the man was to have died, anyway. He had saved them some trouble and a rope. To institute a search for him was, besides, to risk bringing the fact of his escape to the attention of the king, which was about the last thing the guards wished to do.

Something less than a week it took the Indian to reach Le Havre. He hunted and stole his provisions, and he never strayed far from the river, if it could be avoided.

Half a dozen gold-pieces which Raymond had given him he had managed to keep by him. With them and a bit of clever lying he contrived to reach England. He told the master of the ship that took him that he was the servant of a nobleman who lived near Southampton, and that he had been left in Paris to recover from an illness, and was now on the way to rejoin his master.

Nine days after MacGregor broke his bonds in the Place de la Grève, Quidor stood and told his tale at the hearth in the house of the Wolf, near Godalming in Surrey.

Five days after that tale was told, the Wolf reached Paris. Charli went with him. Quidor was left in England.

This time Denys was determined to go direct to the king, and demand his son in the name of their former friendship and the services performed for crown and realm by the Black Wolf of Picardy.

An agent of the Duchesse de Fontanges intercepted him. The lady's message was urgent. The Wolf went to see her. He found a friend, and he read in her face that he could trust her.

"*Ohé!* Like father, like son!" she said, when she had heard his projects, and saw the fire in his leaping gray eyes. "But you are mad, *monsieur de comte*, to think of going to the king."

"*Tonnerres de Dieu!* I will have my son out of that prison, *mademoiselle!*" cried Denys, beginning to tramp the floor.

“By the nine forked tails of the devil! But you will have yourself in, if you are not careful, *monsieur!*” retorted the duchesse with spirit.

“What, then——”

“Know, *monsieur*,” she interrupted, “that this is a matter on which Louis is as touchy as a sore-headed bear. Not all that you have done for him—and I have heard that you did much—would count with him to the weight of a fly. This is no mere matter of being suspected of a league with prisoners, but a far more serious coil, in which Monsieur Raymond is tangled. I’ll tell you the whole of it, and the plan which I have made, and which is under way—and which is the only way.”

She told him then the inwardness of an affair which Quidor had made only imperfectly clear. She told also some finer passages of the transactions of Raymond, which the Huron had missed altogether. She unfolded her plan.

“Now you will have guessed, *monsieur le comte*, why I have stirred my two hands up to the shoulders in this mess,” she said, and her face flushed. “’Tis true that I would have liked to be your daughter-in-law. But there are three reasons in the way of that: your son, the girl, and the king—and because of the king, a fourth reason,” and her bold blue eyes fell. She sighed a bit, and went on:

“But I’m no little jealous, sniveling fool, to say that if I can’t have him, no one else shall. This affair of his is one with which only a woman can meddle. At present I’m the only woman who knows enough and dares enough to do it. And, with the help of *le bon Dieu*, or *le mauvais diable*—and I care not which—I *will* do it, *monsieur le comte!*”

She confronted him with clenched hands and a blaze in her eyes that equaled that in his own. Denys bowed and kissed her hand.

“*Mademoiselle* is great-hearted,” he said. “Shall the time ever come when she has need of a sword, mine will be at her service—and two more with it, if this matter goes straightly.”

“*Merci, monsieur le comte*. You tell me that I am great-hearted. Your son tells me that I am a saint. Neither of you tells the truth—but, *pardieu*, neither am I so bad as old Dame Maintenon and coarse-voiced Montespan and their whimpering priests and simpering gossips would have folk believe!

“Now go. Leave all to me. The best that may be shall be done.”

CHAPTER XXV

THE DOUBLE TEST

Marie de Roussille made her promise good.

It took time, and all the stock of cleverness and audacity which she had, to bring it about; but she did it.

Critics of her time recorded the Tiger-Lily as a young woman of extraordinary beauty, overweening vanity, and a character at once bold, coarse, and ignorant.

As those critics were mostly women, it may be guessed perhaps, that her beauty and her influence with the king, both of which were beyond denial, may have clouded their eyes to her other qualities; and that jealousy influenced their pens against her.

Certain it seems that no empty-headed doll could have conceived and carried through the plan which she made and executed; for the matter required delicate handling.

The king was all-powerful; he was touched in a vital spot by the near success of the Masks' attempt to reach Paris; and he had resolved, so far as in him lay, to erase the very memory of it by death. Most difficult of all, the duchesse had to work upon him blindly. Only through her own interest in Raymond could she approach the matter.

She dared not hint that she knew anything of the affair at Château Villetrín, or that she had visited the prisoner in the Bastille. She had even to restrain an appearance of too great personal interest in the young man; else the royal jealousy might be aroused, with fatal result.

But—Louis le Grand could be led by the nose by a pretty woman.

Marie de Roussille both satisfied his eye and amused him. Her insolence to the other court favorites, her audacity, her deviltry, all were treated by the king with a smiling indulgence.

So it was as a whim, to be gratified like that of a spoiled child, that the king finally promised to give Raymond a hearing—and that was the way she meant it to appear. What he would find out for himself, and what he would do with it, made the gamble.

As for Louis; he had no thought, in granting the request, that he should in any way alter his judgment concerning the prisoners. It could do no harm to see the young man; it would relieve him of his promise to the favorite; then he would hang him.

While the fire-eating duchesse worked in his behalf at the Palais Royal, Raymond was hardly less busy in his cell, preparing for the ordeal. He saw early that the interview with the king would have its difficulties. A hundred times he rehearsed what he would say, and what Louis might say in reply.

The more he examined the matter, the more the vicomte came to see that the meeting would not be an ordeal for himself alone, but for the king also. It would be a double test. Failure by either the prisoner or the king would spell death for the prisoner and his companions.

Raymond foresaw that the ordeal must not be made too hard for the king, or too long sustained.

If the card which the duchesse had given him should take its trick, the vicomte was heartened by the knowledge that he carried in his sleeves a trump of his own to play.

From the night of the visit of the duchesse, though the warder was as taciturn as ever, Raymond fancied that he treated him with more consideration. He left the chair in the cell. The prisoner took to counting the days. Fifteen he made it from the night when hope had dawned for him, to the day when the warder came to his door at an unusual hour in the forenoon.

"*Monsieur* is to come with me," he said. "I will return for him in twenty minutes." He unlocked the vicomte's shackles, handed him a large packet, and went away. The packet contained an excellent outfit of clothing, and clean linen.

"God bless her!" muttered Raymond, recognizing another provision of the Tiger-Lily. He hastened to put on the clothes. To the bosom of the shirt was pinned a slip of paper, which bore the words:

"The way is prepared. Be very careful to save your neck. Adieu, monsieur!"

The note was unsigned.

"Where are we going?" the vicomte asked as the warder led him along the corridor. He hardly expected an answer, and was surprised when the man replied with a show of cordiality:

“I believe that *monsieur* is to be examined.”

Raymond’s heart beat high. Three minutes later, as they were traversing an upper hall, it turned to lead in his breast.

A few paces ahead of him, and going in the same direction, was another warder, and with him was Jean Murrie!

Of the plans of the Duchesse de Fontanges, Jean knew nothing. The difficulties of the test would be trebled, and hard enough they were already. If he could only tell her!

The corridor was long. At the far end of it was a closed door, before which two musketeers in the black livery of the king were standing guard.

If he could only catch up to her before that door was reached! One sentence could do it!

He cautiously quickened his pace.

Luck was with the lovers. Jean’s warder was a fat fellow, slow of gait. Raymond’s man was lean and nervous. Besides, he had either been softened by the Tiger-Lily’s gold, or he had become kindly disposed toward his prisoner. He made no objection to the increased speed.

Almost under the muskets of the guard, the vicomte reached Jean’s side. An old ruse, he stumbled, caught at her shoulder, and whispered:

“On your life! Pretend it *was* the king!”

Instantly the fat guard twitched her to one side, and the vicomte went first through the door to the chamber.

Had she comprehended? There was no way to know. He would give her a lead so soon as might be, and trust to her wit to understand.

The warders withdrew, and left the two standing by the door. The door closed.

Near a window at the opposite side of the room a small man with a large white periwig on his head sat in an armchair. He had flung one round and well-made leg across the other, and he tapped with a slender walking-stick at his lifted heel as he surveyed the prisoners.

Except for the periwig and the better condition of his clothes, feature for feature, even to his trim calves, Louis Quartorze was the indistinguishable counterpart of the man with whom Raymond had jested and fenced in the Château Villettrin. The vicomte dared not be surprised, dared not hesitate.

Suppose Jean had not understood him! He knelt, and heard her kneel beside him.

“Sire!” he cried. “For nine months I have tried to get a message to you, and always have failed! We were unable to obey your orders, sire; and now my companions and myself have been condemned without hearing for the very matters of which I told you, and which you forgave!”

It was a bold opening thrust, and it puzzled the king sorely.

Truth to tell, Louis had been much more interested in Lady Jean Murrie than he had in Raymond. He had wished to see the famous Scottish beauty who had ridden his kingdom in the guise of a cavalier, and who had been drawn into the conspiracy of the Mask. Perhaps—Louis sometimes was passing cruel—he thought to take some pleasure in hearing her rave and threaten him with the vengeance of England, which he did not fear at all.

Now here was this lad, hurling at him with something which it seemed he ought to know, but did not. What did it mean? *Ventre Saint Gris!* A comely lad, too! He liked the cut of him. He reminded him of some one, but he could not think who it was.

But Louis had not been schooled in world diplomacy for twenty years without learning to conceal surprise. He hesitated for a moment; but he was imperturbable.

“Nine months is a long time,” he remarked coldly; “large affairs have taken place. It is possible that I do not just recall the words of the orders which I gave *monsieur*, and which he has been unable to obey. Repeat them, and the excuse for the disobedience.”

In Raymond’s heart the blood leaped. The king was taking the bait!

“You ordered us—’twas at the moment when you left us on the road to Vaux, and rode to meet the musketeers—you ordered us to return to England at once, as it would be less embarrassing to be rid of us that way than to bring us to trial and acquittal, especially after the killing of De Sarsay. We tried our best to follow the orders, sire. We rode to Calais, and were to have taken ship to England. Then a quarrel was forced upon us in the marketplace, and we were taken.”

Raymond paused. He almost held his breath. Now was the crucial moment. If the king rose to the lure, all would be well.

“Sire,” put in the voice of Jean, “of all besides my own men at the Château Villetrin, I believe you were the only one that penetrated my

disguise. But he knows now, sire.” She glanced sidewise at the vicomte, and a blush spread across her cheeks. “We are betrothed, sire. I hope that now you have learned of our predicament, it will not be long before you can let us go.”

Jean had not only comprehended; she had seconded splendidly. The touch could not have been bettered. Still the vicomte felt the burden of suspense. He bethought himself of another aid for the king—for now or never he must be aided, must be helped to remember; and must not suspect the help.

“As your majesty remarks, nine months is a long time. And I recall that on the night when I spoke of my affairs to you, and of the strange tangle into which I had gotten myself, you did remark yourself that you were sleepy and comprehended only the half of the tale. May I make bold to review the matter, sire? Now that your zealous officers have taken and held us, you will need the facts fresh in your memory, if you take the matter up with the tribunal, as you hinted that you might.”

It is sure that the next three seconds were the longest in Raymond’s life. Had he said too much? Had he said too little? What was going on under that curling periwig? What thoughts were behind those blue eyes now bent upon him so keenly?

“Say on,” said the king. Never was voice of angel more welcome. “It seems that I recall something of the matter—the fighting at Le Havre, or some such matter. I remember that I was sleepy, having ridden far. I will hear it again.”

The bait was down, and line and sinker with it! It was time, thought Raymond, to play his own reserved card.

“First, forgive me, sire, for the holding of something back. It was a secret, kept at request of my father; but I think not that he would approve my keeping it longer. I told you, sire, that my name was Raymond du Chêne; but I said that I was not a noble. That was not true. I am also the Vicomte de Mervalles, son of Denys, Comte de Mortemart, sometime servant of your majesty under the name of the Black Wolf of Picardy.”

“Ha!”

The king bent forward eagerly. He knew now the resemblance which he had been struggling to recall. The son of his Wolf! That went a long way toward altering the face of matters.

It was the decisive stroke. From that moment Raymond's case was won. But it was by a narrow margin. Had he been thrice the son of the Black Wolf, that had not saved him ten minutes before. And there had been a fearful risk that the king already knew his identity, but Denys du Chêne had not gone to the king for aid; and Colbert had kept his counsel.

Louis XIV was no man's fool. Had he been given the time to think, he might have suspected, and after suspicion would have come knowledge that he was being duped. But surprise had struck first; and while he was still confused by it, the declaration of the vicomte had clinched the matter.

But if *Le Masque de Fer* had so successfully deceived these folk and led them to serve him as king, what would he not have done had he reached Paris, the king questioned to himself. And Louis would have given a thousand *livres* to know just what doings of the Mask at the Château Villettrín he was now shouldering; but he could not ask.

Again, as he once had done for the Mask, Raymond began with the fight on Portsmouth Hill, and related the tale of his adventures in France.

"H-m-m!" Louis cleared his throat when he had heard the lad through to the end. "H-m-m! So you came to France to serve the king? *Ventre Saint Gris!* It seems to me that you have done everything but that—that is up to a certain point; and then the king himself had his eye upon you."

He turned with a quizzical smile to Jean.

"*Mademoiselle*, I trust that you will take this fire-brand home with you so soon as possible. I want him not in my realm. He is dangerous. I shall turn him over to you for safekeeping."

"I think that he has had enough adventure, sire," replied Jean, her face a study in sunshine and showers, with a rainbow of hope across it. "If he has to have more, I will take him to Scotland."

Both of them kissed the king's hand and the interview was at an end.

One thing more Louis did for them. He instructed Montague, the ambassador, to convey the earnest solicitation of the King of France to Charles Stuart of England that the Vicomte de Mervalles be forgiven for the slaying of Lord Templeton in a duel on French soil—a favor asked partly because it seemed that Templeton had been the more blameworthy of the two, and partly to recompense the vicomte and his friends for the "mistake" whereby they had lain for nine months in the Bastille—a mistake which he, Louis, had hastened to rectify as soon as he had discovered it.

On the day after the meeting with the king, the vicomte and his entire party left Paris thankfully; nor did they feel altogether safe until they set their feet once more on English soil.

“Gin I theenk on how close we ga’ed to hangin’, it makes ma thrapple yapper like a droonin’ feesh,” was the concise retrospect of MacGregor; and his companions agreed heartily with Archie’s sentiments.

Before he quitted Paris, Denys found means to see Colbert; and the secret which might have proved dangerous was carried by the aged councilor to his grave.

In the old stone church at Godalming, the spire of which Jean Murrie had seen from her coach window on a May afternoon as she rode into Surrey, she ceased to be Jean Murrie, and became the Vicomtesse de Mervalles. The ceremony took place on the third day after the return to England, as neither of the parties to the contract were noted for going slowly in anything that they undertook.

When talk was made of inviting Roderick of Raasay down from London and delaying the wedding until his arrival, Jean lapsed into Scotch to say:

“We’ll juist get it safe ower wi’ fairst, an’ invite him afterward—then he’ll no be stoppin’ it. It’s easier to forgi’e when it canna be praveented.”

So Archie MacGregor gave the bride away.

Jean was canny. The Earl of Raasay was furious when he heard of the wedding. He did not come down at all; and he never fully forgave his daughter until the following year, when she took his first grandson, of whom she was very proud, up to London to visit him.

Concino Pazza became as interested in that grandson as if he had been its third grandfather; and it soon took precedence over even his beloved gardens.

Quidor, the Huron, never went back to New France, but elected to remain with his brother, the Fiery-Hair. Not many years elapsed before an attachment with the daughter of an English yeoman removed the red man’s last prejudice against the Yengees.

Paul Fougas returned to France, where he sought out and wedded a certain pert and pretty *demoiselle* whom he once had met in the shop of Maître Custarde in the Rue St. Honoré, Paris.

History has told of the sad ending of Marie de Rousille. Poor Tiger-Lily!

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

Inconsistency in accents has been corrected or standardised.

When nested quoting was encountered, nested double quotes were changed to single quotes.

Space between paragraphs varied greatly. The thought-breaks which have been inserted attempt to agree with the larger paragraph spacing, but it is quite possible that this was simply the methodology used by the typesetter, and that there should be no thought-breaks.

Several pages of advertising copy from the publisher at the end of the book were removed from the final eBook.

[The end of *Sword Play* by Charles Billings Stilson]