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FOR THE ADMIRAL

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TO MY WIFE

BUT FOR WHOSE ENCOURAGEMENT

THIS STORY WOULD NEVER

HAVE BEEN WRITTEN.

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CHAPTER I

A Perilous Ride

"I trust no harm has happened to my father, Jacques. The night grows late and there are strange rumours afloat. 'Tis said that the Guises are eager to break the peace."

"Better open warfare than this state of things, monsieur. The peace is no peace: the king's troops are robbing and slaying as they please. François of the mill told me a pretty tale of their doings to-day. But listen, I hear the beat of hoofs on the road below."

"There are two horses, Jacques, and they approach very slowly. My father does not usually ride like that."

"No, faith!" said Jacques, with a laugh; "if his horse went at that pace the Sieur Le Blanc would get down and walk! But the travellers are coming here, nevertheless. Shall we go to the gate, monsieur?"

"It may be as well," I answered. "One can never tell these days what mischief is brewing."

By the peasantry for miles around my home was called the Castle of Le Blanc. It stood on the brow of a hill, overlooking a wide plain, and was defended by a dry moat and massive walls. A score of resolute men inside might easily have kept two hundred at bay, and more than once, indeed, the castle had stood a regular siege.

According to Jacques it might have to do so again, for in that year, 1586, of which I write, France was in a terrible state. The nation was divided into two hostile parties—those who fiercely resisted any changes being made in the Church, and the Huguenots, those of the Religion—and the whole land was given over to brawling and disorder.

My father, who was held in high esteem by the Huguenot party, had fought through three campaigns under Gaspard de Coligny, the Admiral, as men, by virtue of his office, generally called him. Severely wounded in one of the numerous skirmishes, he had returned home to be nursed back to health by my mother. Before he recovered a peace was patched up between the two parties, and he had since remained quietly on his estate.

He it was who, rather to my surprise, now came riding at a foot pace into the courtyard. The stranger accompanying him sat his horse limply, and seemed in some danger of falling from the saddle.

"Take the bridle, Jacques," cried my father. "Edmond, let your mother know I am bringing with me a wounded man."

When we had assisted the stranger into one of the chambers I saw that he was of medium height, spare in figure, but tough and sinewy. He had a swarthy complexion, and small, black, twinkling eyes that gave the impression of good-humour. His right arm, evidently broken, was carried in a rough, hastily-made sling; his doublet was bloodstained, and his forehead had been scored by the slash of a knife.

He must have been suffering agony, yet he did not even wince when my father, who had considerable experience of wounds, set the broken limb, while I, after sponging his face with warm water, applied some salve to the gash. But he kept muttering to himself, "This is a whole night wasted; I must set out at daybreak."

"We are going to get you into bed, and dress the wound in your side," said my father cheerily. "I hope that at daybreak you will be sleeping soundly."

"The cut is a bagatelle, monsieur, and I must to the road again. A murrain on those rascally bandits!"

"At least you will be none the worse for an hour's rest," said my father, humouring his fancy. "Edmond, get off his boots, and do it gently: we must keep this wound from bleeding afresh."

Between us we removed his clothes, and in spite of his protests got him into bed, when my father bathed and bandaged his side, saying, "It looks worse than it really is. Now, a cup of hot broth, and you should sleep comfortably."

"The broth will be welcome, monsieur, but I have no time for sleep. An hour lost here may plunge thousands of good Frenchmen into mourning."

I thought at first the pain had turned his brain; but he spoke sensibly enough, and appeared deeply in earnest.

"Can we help you?" my father asked. "It will be a week yet before you are able to sit in the saddle. Do you know me?"

"Yes," said the other, and his face brightened, "you are the Sieur Le Blanc. I have seen you at Rochelle with the Admiral."

"Then you know I am to be trusted! Mind, I have no wish to pry into your business; but perhaps we can be of service. Are you travelling far?"

"A week's ride," groaned the man; then, raising himself in bed, he said, "Monsieur, I must go forward!"

"Pshaw, man, you talk nonsense! You haven't sufficient strength to carry you across the room, and the wound in your side would start bleeding before you reached the courtyard. Come, throw aside your fears; I make no secret of my friendship for Gaspard de Coligny, and it is easy to guess you have fought under his banner before now. But here is Jacques with the broth! Drink this, and afterwards we will talk."

I raised him up while he drank, and presently he said, "Monsieur, if I rested till midday I should be strong enough."



"A week at the least," my father replied, "and even then a score of miles would overtax your strength."

After lying quietly for a few minutes, he whispered, "Monsieur, make the door fast. Now, hand me my doublet. A murrain on the knaves who brought me to this! A knife, monsieur, and slit the lining. Do you feel a packet? 'Tis a small one. Ah, that is it. Look, monsieur, at the address."

"The Admiral!" said my father with a start of surprise, "and he is at Tanlay. Man, it will be a month before you can reach Tanlay; and the packet is marked 'All speed!' Do you know the purport of the message?"

"It conveys a warning, monsieur, and it will arrive too late. The Guises and the Queen-Mother have laid their plans; the Loire is guarded along its banks, and the troops are collecting for a swoop on Tanlay."

"And Condé is at Noyers!"

"The Prince is included, monsieur. 'Let us take off the heads of the two leaders,' is what the Italian woman says, 'and there will be no more Huguenots.' And the chiefs at Rochelle chose me to carry the warning. 'There is none braver or more prudent than Ambroise Devine,' they said. Monsieur, I would rather have lost my right hand!"

"Cheer up, man. I warrant you have no cause for reproach. Guise has his spies in Rochelle, and they would follow you on the chance of picking up some information. When were you attacked?"

"At the close of the afternoon, monsieur, in the wood a few miles to the west. They sprang out upon me suddenly—there were three of them—and I was taken unawares. But it was a good fight," and, in spite of his pain and distress of mind, his face lit up with a smile of satisfaction. "There is one trooper the less in Guise's ranks, and another who won't earn his pay for months to come."

"And best of all, the papers are safe," my father observed. "Now, what is to be done? That is the important point. The Admiral must have them without loss of time, and you cannot carry them to him. My duties keep me here, but I could send Jacques——"

"Jacques?" said the sick man questioningly.

"He is a trusty servant; I will vouch for his loyalty."

Devine shook his head. It was plain he did not welcome the proposal.

"Trust the papers to me," I said, on a sudden impulse, "and I will take Jacques for company."

"'Tis a long journey, Edmond, and full of danger," said my father. "I fear an older head than yours is needed."

"Jacques can supply the older head, and I will take charge of the papers."

"You are only a boy," objected Devine.

"So much the better: no one will suspect I am engaged on an errand of importance."

"There is something in that, but this is no child's game; 'tis an affair of life and death. You must travel day and night, and from the moment the papers are in your hands your life belongs to the Admiral. If you fail to reach Tanlay in time, the death of the noblest gentleman in France will lie on your shoulders."

"I will do my best."

"He is young," remarked my father, "but he can bear fatigue. He has a sure seat in the saddle, and he is more thoughtful than most boys of his age. With Jacques at his elbow the venture is not as desperate as it may seem."

Since nothing better offered, Devine at length agreed to the proposal, and having informed Jacques that we should start at dawn I went straight to bed, in the hope of getting a couple of hours' sleep before beginning the journey.

The morning had scarcely broken when Jacques wakened me; I sprang up quickly, dressed—my mother had sewn the precious papers securely inside my doublet—and made a hearty meal.

My mother, who had risen in order to bid me farewell, was full of anxiety; but, like the brave woman she was, she put aside her fears; for the Admiral's safety was at stake, and we of the Religion were well content to make any sacrifice for our beloved leader. I embraced her fondly, assuring her I would be careful, and proceeded to the chamber where Ambroise Devine lay. He had not slept, but was eagerly awaiting the time of my departure.

"You have the papers?" he asked. "Give them into the Admiral's own hands, and remember that a single hour's delay may ruin the Cause."

"He carries a full purse," said my father, "and can buy fresh horses on the road."

Wishing the sick man good-bye, and bidding him be of good courage, I descended to the courtyard, where Jacques awaited me with the horses.

"Do not be sparing of your money, Edmond; if need arises, spend freely," my father advised. "And now, may God bless you, and bring you safely through. Do not forget, Jacques, that a shrewd brain will pay better than a strong arm in this venture."

"We will be as prudent as the Admiral himself, monsieur," declared Jacques, as he vaulted into the saddle; and, with a last word of counsel from my father, we crossed the drawbridge and rode down the hill to the high road.

"'Tis a long journey before us, monsieur, and an unexpected one," observed my companion, as, turning sharply to the left, we rode through the still sleeping village. "'Tis odd what a chance encounter may bring about; but for the Sieur's meeting with the wounded man we should still be snug abed. There is some one stirring at the inn. Old Pierre will be none too pleased at having guests who rise so early; but there, 'twill be another coin or so to add to his hoard."

"Pierre is a wise man," I said.

"I think not, monsieur. There is little wisdom in saving money for others to spend. The king's troopers will ride through here some day, and Pierre will be a cunning man if they do not strip him as bare as a trussed fowl. 'Tis more satisfactory these days to spend one's money while one has the chance. And things will never be any better until they send the Italian woman out of the country."

Jacques generally spoke of the Queen-Mother as the Italian woman, and he regarded her as the chief cause of all our troubles.

"She cares for no one but herself," he continued, "not even for the boy king, and the Guises have her under their thumb. What with them and her Italian favourites there is no room in France for an honest Frenchman. Listen, some one rides behind us! 'Tis the early riser from the inn perhaps. Faith, he is a keen judge of horseflesh."

"And he has a firm seat," I remarked, glancing round. "He will overtake us in a few minutes. Shall we quicken our pace?"

"No, monsieur. If he is a friend there is no need; should he be an enemy 'twill but arouse suspicion."

"Good-day, messieurs," cried a pleasant voice, "I trust we are well met. I am a stranger in the district, and wish to discover the whereabouts of one Etienne Cordel. He is an advocate from Paris, but he owns a small estate in the neighbourhood."

"A tall man," said Jacques, "with a nose like a hawk's beak, and eyes that look in opposite directions?"

"Faith, my friend," laughed the stranger jovially, "you have his picture to a nicety. That is Etienne Cordel. Are you acquainted with him?"

"I have met him," replied Jacques carelessly. "We shall pass within a mile or two of his place, if you care to travel in our company."

"Nothing would please me more," declared the cavalier. "This is a stroke of good fortune on which I had not counted. I spent the night at the inn yonder, but the dolt of a landlord might have been one of the staves of his own barrels: he could not answer me a question!"

"Ha! my dashing friend," I thought to myself, "old Pierre must have had his reasons for making a fool of you," for in truth the landlord knew every one, and everything that happened, for miles around.

The stranger had drawn his horse abreast of mine, and was riding on my left. He was a man of perhaps thirty years, richly but quietly dressed, wearing a sword, and carrying two pistols in his holsters. His dark brown hair escaped over his forehead in short curls; his face was strong and capable; he had good features, and a rounded chin. His eyes were blue, deep, expressive, and beautiful as a woman's, and he had a most engaging air of candour and sincerity. The horse he rode was a splendid animal; my father had not its equal in his stables.

"This place of Etienne's," said he, addressing Jacques, "is it far?"

"Within a dozen miles, monsieur. You might easily have reached it last night by pushing on."

"Had I been acquainted with the road! But it was late when I arrived at the inn, and my horse had done a heavy's day work. You are a native of the district, monsieur?" turning to me.

"If you make the district wide enough," I answered, with a laugh.

"You have escaped the ravages of war in these parts; you are fortunate. One can ride here without loosening his sword."

"Yes," assented Jacques, "'tis a peaceful neighbourhood."

"A pity one cannot say the same of all France," replied the other with a deep sigh, as if saddened at the mere thought of bloodshed; "and yet it is whispered that the war is likely to break out again. Has the rumour reached you down here?"

"We hear little news of the outside world," I replied.

"Excuse me, monsieur," exclaimed Jacques suddenly, "but it will suit us to quicken the pace. We have pressing business to transact," to which our chance acquaintance replied that he was quite willing to be guided by our wishes.

Accordingly we broke into a canter, and for the next hour or so no sound was heard save the beat of our horses' hoofs on the hard road. But once, when the stranger had shot a few paces to the front—for as I have said he rode a splendid animal—Jacques made me a swift sign that I should be cautious.

CHAPTER II

Tracked, or Not?

"That is your road, monsieur. At the end of a mile a cross-road leads straight to Etienne Cordel's dwelling. You will see the house from the spot where the road branches. You will pardon us for our hasty departure, but time presses. If you put up again at the inn, we may have the pleasure of meeting you on our return."

Taking the cue from Jacques, who evidently did not intend holding a prolonged conversation, I said: "Adieu, monsieur, and a pleasant ending to your journey. You cannot mistake the way, now," and directly he had thanked us for our assistance we rode on.

"Rather an abrupt departure, Jacques," I remarked presently, feeling somewhat puzzled.

"Better that, monsieur, than wait to be asked inconvenient questions. Did you notice that slash across his doublet? He has been pretty close to a naked sword, and not long ago either! What does he want with Etienne Cordel? He looks more fitted for the camp than the law courts."

"Monsieur Cordel no doubt transacts his private business for him."

"No doubt," said Jacques, with a shrug of his shoulders. "But I did not like his appearance, and if we could spare the time I would ride back to discover what made Pierre suddenly dumb. I warrant he disliked his questioner; but if the stranger is seeking information, he can obtain all he wants from Cordel."

"You are no friend to the advocate, Jacques!"

"He is a spy, monsieur, and a maker of mischief. One of these days men will learn his true character."

"I have no liking for Cordel," I said, "but still all this has nothing to do with our errand."

"Perhaps not, monsieur; we will hope not," replied my companion, "but all the same, I wish we had started an hour earlier."

Honestly I felt rather inclined to laugh at Jacques' vague fears, for the stranger's pleasant speech and affable manner had impressed me, and I could not think of him in any other light than that of a courteous and gallant gentleman. In spite of wise saws, one is often tempted to believe that occasionally fine feathers make fine birds.

We rode on steadily, stopping for an hour or two during the hottest part of the day, and putting up late at night at a dilapidated inn in a half-deserted village. The landlord, a bent, feeble, old man, had gone to bed, but he set about preparing some supper, while, since there was no ostler, we fed and groomed the animals ourselves.

"We must start at daybreak," said Jacques, when we had finished our meal; "that will give us four hours' sleep."

"Fourteen would suit me better!" I laughed, as we followed our host to the guest-chamber, and, indeed, I was so thoroughly tired that my head scarcely touched the pillow before I was sound asleep.

It was still dark when Jacques roused me, and by dawn we were once more on the road. On this second day's journey the ravages of the late war were plainly apparent, and the sights made one's heart ache. The fields lay waste and untilled; the cattle, few in number, were mere bundles of skin and bone; the villages were half-emptied of their inhabitants, while those who remained resembled skeletons rather than human beings.

"And all this," exclaimed my companion bitterly, "is the work of the Italian woman and her friends. It is time that Frenchmen took their country into their own hands again, and out of the clutches of these foreign harpies!"

"That can be done only by another war, Jacques, and surely we have had enough of cutting one another's throats!"

"It must be either war or murder," he responded. "The Guises won't rest until they become masters. France will swim in blood one of these days. Do you know, monsieur, I am glad that Mademoiselle Jeanne is not at the castle!"

Jeanne was my sister, who, since the peace, had been living at Rochelle with an invalid aunt. She was seventeen years of age, a year older than myself, and a girl of beauty and courage.

"You are in a gloomy mood, Jacques, and fancying all kinds of dangers that are not likely to happen. Why, even the stranger we met at Le Blanc alarmed you."

"He alarms me yet," replied Jacques gravely; "he is a bird of ill omen."

"Come," I said banteringly, "let us have a canter; it will clear the cobwebs from your brain, besides helping us on our way to Saintbreuil," the little town where we intended to pass the night and to procure fresh horses. Jacques had an acquaintance at Saintbreuil—an innkeeper who secretly favoured the Cause without possessing sufficient courage to declare his opinions.

The night had grown somewhat late by the time of our arrival, but we managed to secure admittance, and Jacques had no difficulty in finding the inn—a fairly decent house in a small square.

"A quiet room, Edouard, and some supper," said my companion to the host, "and serve us yourself. There is no need that all Saintbreuil should learn of our being here. And be quick, for we are tired and hungry, and there is business to transact."

The landlord, a nervous-looking fellow, took us quickly to a chamber at the farther end of the house, and in a short time we were sitting down to a well-spread table.

"Is the town quiet?" asked Jacques presently.

"Quiet, but uneasy. The citizens are afraid of they know not what. There is a whisper that the peace will be broken."

"Humph! there is more than a whisper in some parts; but listen to me, Edouard; monsieur and I are travelling fast. We have nearly foundered our animals, and yet it is necessary to push on again directly the gates are opened. You must procure us fresh horses, the best that can be got."

"And the two in the stables?"

"Can go in exchange."

"You will have to pay heavily."

"Of course we shall, my dear Edouard, but monsieur is prepared to open his purse. Get them into the stable to-night, and call us at daybreak."

"Can you trust him to procure really good animals?" I asked, when the man had gone out.

"There are few keener judges of horseflesh than Edouard, monsieur; and now let us to bed."

Jacques had lost his gloomy fit; there seemed little likelihood of danger, and I slept soundly till awakened by our host. Dressing hastily we went straight to the stables, and were more than satisfied with our new animals. They were beautiful creatures, shaped for both speed and endurance, and I did not grudge the money the landlord had spent.

"They should carry us to our journey's end," said Jacques in a whisper; "the sight of them gives me fresh courage. I care not a rap of the fingers now for our chance acquaintance!"

"The cavalier seems to have turned your brain!" I laughed.

"Maybe 'twas only an idle fancy, but I mistrusted the fellow. Perhaps you will laugh, but I thought he might be one of those who attacked Monsieur Devine."

"Well?" I said, startled by this statement, and yet puzzled to understand how it affected us.

"If so, he must be trying to obtain possession of the papers. He would follow the wounded man, and suddenly lose him. He failed to get any information from old Pierre, and he learned little from us; but the advocate would tell him everything."

"What could Cordel tell?" I asked, still puzzled.

"That your father, monsieur, is the chief person in the district—that he is of the Religion—that the wounded messenger might have found shelter in the castle."

"Yes, the advocate would certainly mention that."

"The stranger would speak of us, too, and the lawyer, recognizing the description, would inform him who we were. That would arouse his suspicions, for you must admit that we chose a strange hour to ride."

"And you think he would follow us?"

"That is what I feared. He is splendidly mounted, and could easily overtake us; but now," and Jacques laughed, "the case is different."

"Even should he come up with us," I said, "he is but one against two, and we can both handle a sword!"

My companion shrugged his shoulders. "What chance should we have in Saintbreuil, monsieur? A

word to a king's officer, and we should either be dead, or in prison."

"Faith," I said laughing, though not with much heartiness, "you draw a lively picture! Once outside these walls, I shall not care to venture into a town again until we reach Tanlay."

"With these horses there should be no need."

The officer of the guard gazed at us suspiciously. "You travel early, monsieur!" he remarked.

"Too early for comfort!" I replied, "but I must reach Nevers before Marshal Tavannes leaves. He does not like idle excuses."

"You are right, monsieur!" replied the man, with an instant change of expression, "one does not play tricks with the marshal. But I did not know he was at Nevers."

"'Tis but a flying visit, I believe."

"Well, a pleasant journey to you. Have a care, though, if you ride late; the country is infested with brigands."

Thanking him for his advice I followed after Jacques, who had taken advantage of the conversation to ride on.

"I thought the officer might take a fancy to ask me some questions, and I am not so intimately acquainted as you with the doings of the king's general!" he said with a chuckle. "'Twas a bold stroke, monsieur, but it paid."

"Yes," I said, "it paid. And now let us push forward."

Strangely enough, now that Jacques had recovered his composure I began to feel nervous, and more than once caught myself glancing round as if half expecting to see a body of pursuers on our track. However, we proceeded all day without adventure, slept for two or three hours at a village inn, and resumed our journey in high spirits.

"We should reach the Loire by midday," remarked Jacques. "Shall we go into the town and cross by the bridge, or try for a ford? There is one a little to the north."

"The ford will suit our purpose," I said, "and I hardly care about trusting myself in the town."

There still wanted two hours to noon when, coming to a grassy and tree-shaded plateau through which ran a sparkling stream, Jacques proposed that we should rest the horses. So we dismounted, gave them a drink, fastened them to a tree, and lay down beside them.

"Monsieur might be able to sleep," suggested Jacques. "I will watch, but we cannot afford more than an hour."

"We will take turns," I said.

"Not at all, monsieur. I do not feel sleepy. I will waken you in good time."

Feeling refreshed by the short rest I was just remounting when a rough, sturdy-looking fellow came along, riding a powerful horse.

"Good-day, messieurs," he said, glancing at us, I thought, very keenly; "am I on the right track for Nevers?"

"Yes," I answered rather curtly.

"Perhaps monsieur is himself going there? I am a stranger in these parts."

"No," I replied, "we are not going to the town, but you cannot miss the way."

He hung about for some time, trying to make conversation, but presently rode on, and a bend in the road hid him from our view.

"An ugly customer to meet on a dark night, Jacques," I remarked.

"Let us push on, monsieur; that fellow meant us no good. Did you notice his speech?"

"No."

"I did; he comes from our own neighbourhood. It is possible he has seen us before."

"And what of that?"

"Nothing, except that it is curious," and Jacques quickened his pace.

At the end of a quarter of a mile a cross-road to the left led to the river, and along this track we travelled. It was very narrow, so narrow, indeed, that we were forced to ride in single file, Jacques going before. The stranger had disappeared; no one was in sight; the countryside seemed deserted.

"Do you know where the ford is situated?" I asked.

"I have a fairly good notion. Ah, what is that?" and he reined up sharply.

From our position we could just catch a glimpse of several horsemen riding swiftly along the

bank of the river. They were out of sight in a few minutes, and we proceeded in a somewhat uncomfortable frame of mind.

"They can have nothing to do with us, Jacques," I said cheerily.

"No, monsieur, nothing," he replied.

"How much farther do we go before descending?"

"About a quarter of a mile."

"Once across the river we shall be in no danger at all."

"None at all, monsieur."

"A plague on you, Jacques!" I cried, "can't you make some sensible remark?"

"I was but agreeing with monsieur."

We had gone about four hundred yards when the track began to descend in winding fashion toward the water. My companion was still in front, and I noticed he had loosened his sword. I had done the same, and in addition had seen that my pistols were in order. Somehow, a strange sense of approaching peril, for which I could not account, hung about me.

"There is the ford," said Jacques, drawing rein, and pointing straight ahead of him. "That is where we must cross."

"Yes," I said.

"But I cannot see the horsemen, and they should be visible from here. It is very absurd, of course, but still, I would advise monsieur to look to his pistols."

"I am ready, Jacques."

"Come, then, and if I say 'Gallop!' stretch your horse to his utmost."

He advanced carefully, I following, and watching him intently. Presently, without turning round, he said: "It is as I thought; the horsemen are there; we cannot get through without a fight."

"Then we must fight, Jacques; it is impossible to turn back. They will not expect a rush, and we may catch them off their guard. But it will be amusing if they turn out to be simply peaceful travellers."

"Amusing and satisfactory, monsieur. Are you ready? We will ride abreast at the bottom; it will give us greater strength."

Jacques was a splendid horseman, and he had taught me to ride almost from the first day I could sit a horse's back. From him, too, as well as from my father, I had learned how to use a sword, though my weapon had never yet been drawn in actual conflict, and even now I hoped against hope that the horsemen below were not waiting for us.

But if Jacques' view were correct, then we must fight. Because of the trust reposed in me, I could not yield; either I must win a way through, or leave my dead body there on the bank.

My companion's voice recalled me to action. "Fire your pistol directly we come within range," he said, "and then lay on with the sword."

"But we must give them warning, Jacques!"

"It is needless; they have seen us, and are preparing. *Corbleu!* it is as I thought! See, there is the man who overtook us in the village. Monsieur, there is no escape; it is a fight to the death!"

"I am ready!"

CHAPTER III

The Fight by the Way

They watched us furtively, as, with seeming carelessness, we descended the slope, slowly at first, but gradually increasing the pace as the ground became less steep. There were five of them in all, and presently I perceived that the one a little in advance of the group was the unknown cavalier whom we had directed to the house of Etienne Cordel.

"Draw level, monsieur. Now!" and the next instant we were dashing down the remaining part of the slope at terrific speed.

It was a wild ride, a ride so mad that many a night afterwards I started from sleep with the sensation of being hurled through space. The horses flew, their hoofs seeming not to touch the ground; had we wished, we should have found it impossible to check their headlong career. Nearer and nearer we approached; the horsemen wavered visibly, their leader alone remaining

unmoved.

There was a loud report; a ball whizzed past, and we heard a cry of "In the king's name!"

For answer we discharged our pistols almost at point-blank distance, and a horse rolled over heavily with its rider.

"One down!" cried Jacques in triumph, drawing his sword and aiming a desperate blow at the leader, who called out—"The boy! Capture the boy! Shoot his horse, you dolts!"

He thrust at me vigorously, but, parrying the attack more by luck than good management, I dashed on, Jacques crying, "This way, monsieur, quick!"

With a tremendous leap we sprang into the river, the poor animals struggling frantically to keep their footing.

"This way!" shouted Jacques, "we are too far to the right; the ford lies here. Forward, forward! Use your spurs; they are after us. To the front; I will hold them at bay!"

"No, no; we will stand by each other."

"Nonsense!" he cried, "remember the packet!" and, having no answer to that, I pushed forward, though with reluctance.

It was a wild scramble, now swimming, now wading, stumbling, and floundering along with the yells of the pursuers in our ears. I reached the opposite bank, and while my gallant animal clambered up, Jacques turned to face the enemy. Almost immediately there came the clash of swords, and, looking back, I saw him engaged in desperate conflict with the foremost of the pursuers.

The contest was short. With a howl of pain the fellow dropped his sword, and the water reddened with his blood.

"Spread out!" cried the cavalier angrily, "'tis the boy we want!" and at that, Jacques being powerless to prevent them from slipping past, rode after me.

"Only three to two now!" he exclaimed joyfully; "shall we stop? It will be a good fight."

"No, no, we may get away; we are the better mounted."

"I do not think so, monsieur; their horses are the fresher."

Once again Jacques proved correct. The three men, the cavalier leading, hung stubbornly on our track, and began steadily to ride us down.

"If we could reach a village," I gasped, "the people might be for us!"

"Or against us, monsieur."

On we went across the open stretch of upland, the pace becoming perceptibly slower, the pursuers approaching steadily nearer. Below us, white and dusty in the sunlight, wound a broad road, with a high bank on one side of it.

"If we could get there," remarked Jacques, "we could fight with our backs to the wall, and the odds are not so heavy."

"Let us try."

The animals responded nobly to our urging, though their nostrils were blood-red, and their quivering haunches flaked with spume. Panting and straining, they raced along, so that we gained the road a considerable distance ahead of our pursuers; but the pace could not be maintained and Jacques counselled a halt.

"The horses will get back their wind," he said, "and we shall engage at an advantage. If we go on, the creatures will be completely blown. Only three against two, monsieur; your father would laugh at such odds!"

"I am not thinking of myself, Jacques, but of the Admiral. The papers make a coward of me."

"This is the best chance of saving them. Let us wait here. Fortunately their firearms are useless, and they must trust to the sword. Just fancy you are engaged in a fencing bout in the courtyard, Monsieur Edmond, and we shall beat them easily."

We drew up on the dusty road, with our backs to the high bank, and waited—perhaps for death. The sobbing animals, trembling in every limb, were grateful for the rest, and drew in deep breaths. The sun beat down on our heads; not a ripple of air stirred the branches of the trees; for a few moments not a sound broke the eerie stillness.

"Here they come!"

They had struck the highroad some distance above us, and it gave me heart to see how blown their animals were. But the cavalier, catching sight of us, spurred his jaded beast and advanced, crying out loudly, "Surrender, Edmond Le Blanc! I arrest you in the king's name!"

"What charge have you against me?" I asked.

"I have an order for your arrest. Lay down your sword."

"Faith!" broke in Jacques, "those who want our swords must take them. We are free men."

"Then your blood be on your own heads!" exclaimed the cavalier. "Forward, my lads. Capture or kill; 'tis all one."

"Keep cool, monsieur," advised Jacques, "those two cut-throats are no sworders. They are far handier with a knife than a sword, and are unused to fighting in the sunlight."

"A truce to words!" cried their leader; "at them, my lads!" and he himself led the way.

Jacques met him boldly, while I found myself furiously engaged with his followers. They were sturdy fellows, both, and fearless of danger; but fortunately for me without trick of fence, and almost in the first blush of the fight I had pricked one in the side. The misadventure taught them caution, and they renewed the attack more warily.

Jacques was on my left, but I dared not look to see how he fared, though fearing that in the unknown cavalier he had met his equal, if not his master.

Thrust and parry—thrust and parry; now a lunge in front, now a half-turn to the right, till my arm ached, and my eyes became dazzled with watching the movements of the flashing steel. A laugh of triumph from the leader of our foes warned me that some misfortune had happened to my comrade, but whatever the mishap the gallant fellow continued to keep his adversary fully employed.

"Ride him down!" cried the leader, and once more the two ruffians attacked me furiously. One of them paid the penalty of his recklessness. With a rapid lunge I got beneath his guard, and my sword passed between his ribs. He fell forward on his horse's neck, groaning, and I cried exultingly, "Courage, Jacques! Two to two!"

But disaster followed swiftly on the heels of my triumph. A half-suppressed cry of pain came from my comrade, and I saw his horse roll over. Warding off a blow from my opponent, I turned and attacked the cavalier so hotly that he was forced back several paces, and Jacques disengaged himself from the fallen animal.

"Look to yourself, monsieur," he said, "I still count."

I had only a momentary glimpse of him as he staggered to his feet, but the sight was not encouraging. His face was covered with blood, his left arm hung limply at his side, and he had received a wound in the shoulder. But in spite of his injuries he faced his opponent boldly, using his horse's body as some sort of protection.

"Yield!" cried the cavalier, "and I will spare your lives. You are brave fellows."

"Fight on, monsieur," said Jacques stolidly.

"As you will," exclaimed the other, and once more the clash of steel broke on the air.

How would it end? The contest was going steadily against us. I could easily hold my opponent in check, but Jacques was seriously wounded; he was on foot, and must inevitably be beaten. I thought once of riding off in the hope of drawing the others after me, but they might stop to kill my comrade, and that I dared not risk.

He still fought with his accustomed skill, but he was becoming weaker every minute; he could no longer attack, and had much ado to defend himself. Our sole chance lay in disabling my opponent before Jacques was over-powered. I rode at him recklessly, but he was a wary knave, and, judging how matters were likely to go, he remained on the defensive.

We were still battling vigorously, though I was fast losing all hope, when the tramp of hoofs sounded in the distance. Who were the travellers? They could not make our situation worse; they might improve it. Our assailants seemed to be of the same opinion, and, leaving Jacques, they flung themselves at me.

Could I hold out a few minutes longer? I set my teeth hard, and braced myself for the effort. Twice the unknown cavalier missed my breast by a hair's breadth; but I was still unwounded, save for a slight scratch, when a body of mounted men turned the bend in the road. They appeared to be a nobleman's bodyguard, and wore blue favours, but this told me nothing.

Jacques, however, was better informed. "Lord St. Cyr!" he cried feebly. "For the Admiral!" and sank to the ground.

Echoing my comrade's words, I cried lustily, "For the Admiral!" at which the gentlemen set spurs to their horses, while our assailants as hastily rode off.

Before the troop came up, I dismounted, and bending over my comrade whispered, "Who is this St. Cyr?"

"A friend," he replied; "the papers are safe now; you can trust him."

A noble-looking gentleman rode in front of the troop. He was well advanced in years—at least fourscore, as I afterwards learned—but he sat erect in his saddle, and his eyes were keen and vigorous.

"What is the meaning of this, monsieur?" he asked sternly, as I went toward him.

"Am I speaking to the Lord St. Cyr?" I asked.

"I am the Count of St. Cyr."

"Then, my lord, I can speak freely. My name is Edmond Le Blanc; my father is the Sieur Le Blanc ____"

"Sufficient recommendation," he interrupted, with a genial smile.

"My servant and I were on our way to Tanlay, carrying important despatches to the Admiral. At the ford we were attacked by five ruffians. Two were wounded; the others followed us here."

"What was their object?"

"I fear, my lord, they must have learned the nature of my mission."

"And wished to obtain possession of the papers! Are they really of great importance?"

"The original bearer, my lord, was waylaid and grievously wounded near my home. He assured me solemnly that their loss would probably plunge thousands of Frenchmen into mourning. He hinted at some special peril to the Admiral."

"You have made a gallant fight," said the count, "and Providence has plainly sent us to your aid. Your servant is wounded I see. Leave him to my care, and meanwhile I will provide you with suitable escort. The ruffians will think twice before venturing to attack my gentlemen."

"One of our assailants is hurt, my lord."

"We will attend to him also; he cannot be left to die."

During this conversation, a man soberly clad and evidently a minister of the Religion—he was, in truth, though wearing a sword, the count's private chaplain—had been attending to Jacques. Now he stepped forward, and said, "The man is weak from loss of blood, but his wounds are not serious; he should speedily recover his strength."

"That is good hearing for Monsieur Le Blanc," said the count. "Pray tell your servant that he has fallen into friendly hands."

I ran joyfully to Jacques, who looked at me with a smile. "It is all right now, monsieur," said he; "the journey is as good as done."

"Still, I wish we could finish it together, but that is impossible. I must leave you with Lord St. Cyr, and push on. He has promised to furnish me with an escort."

"Do not delay, monsieur; time is precious."

I gave him a portion of my money, bade him be of good cheer, and returned to the count, who had already selected six of his gentlemen to accompany me.

"Keep free from brawls," he advised their leader, "and ride with all speed. Remember that you are engaged on a matter that may involve the life of our chief."

"We will waste no time on the road, my lord."

Amidst a cheer from the rest of the bodyguard we rode forward, and were soon out of sight. My new comrades were kindly, gallant gentlemen, in whose company I soon recovered my spirits. Jacques was in no danger, while it was certain that I should now be able to place the paper in the Admiral's hands.

Indeed, the remainder of the journey can be passed over almost without comment. We travelled fast, making few halts, and on the evening of the next day rode into Tanlay.

The Admiral, who had just finished prayers, granted me immediate audience, and my heart throbbed with excitement as I entered his room. I was about to see, for the first time, this splendid gentleman, who was to many thousands of Frenchmen the pride and glory of France.

He was of medium height, strongly made, well proportioned, and of a ruddy complexion. His eyes had a grave but kindly expression; his countenance was severe and majestic. "Here," was my first thought, "is a true leader of men!" He spoke slowly, but his voice was soft, pleasant, and musical.

"Well, my young friend," he said, "you have something of importance to communicate to me?"

I had ripped the lining of my doublet, and now handed him the packet. "My story can wait, my lord," I said, "this is the more pressing matter."

He broke the seal and read the letter, slowly, as if committing each word to heart. Then he said in his grave manner, "This is from La Rochelle, and should have reached me by the hand of Ambroise Devine. Where is he?"

"There are those who desired that you should not receive this communication, my lord, and the original messenger lies in my father's house, grievously wounded. As there was none other to bring it, the packet was even entrusted to my keeping."

"You are of the Religion?"

"The son of the Sieur Le Blanc could not well be otherwise, my lord."

"The Sieur Le Blanc has proved his devotion on more than one battlefield. So you are his son! And you have risked your life to help me! I am grateful, my young friend, and others will be grateful also; but I will speak with you again. For the present I must place you under the care of my gentlemen. There is much here," touching the packet, "to be considered, and that without delay. But you have deserved well of the Cause, boy, and the Sieur Le Blanc can be justly proud of his son."

I was thoroughly tired by my long, hazardous journey, but I lay awake for hours that night, my cheeks burning at the remembrance of the Admiral's words. He had praised me—Edmond Le Blanc—this hero whom I regarded as the highest, the bravest, the noblest gentleman in the whole world! It seemed incredible that I should have obtained such honour!

CHAPTER IV

How We Kept the Ford

Early next morning I was summoned to attend the Admiral, who received me very graciously.

"I trust you have rested well," he said, "as I am about to send you on another journey. There is, however, no danger in it," he added, smiling. "I wish you to go to the Prince of Condé at Noyers, to tell him your story, and to answer any questions he may put to you. I am setting out myself in an hour or two, but my preparations are not complete. Monsieur Bellièvre will accompany you as guide; he has received my instructions."

The Admiral could not have chosen for me a more suitable comrade than Felix Bellièvre. He was quite young, barely more than eighteen, tall, slim, and good-looking. He had large, expressive, dark eyes, thick, curling hair, and beautiful white teeth. His smile was sweet and winning, and he had an air of candour very engaging. Indeed, he so won upon me, that, after the first mile or two of our journey, we were chatting like old friends.

"You must be a person of importance," he declared merrily. "Your coming has created a tremendous commotion at Tanlay. Is it true that the Guises are bent on a fresh war?"

"I cannot tell; I am nothing more than a messenger."

"'Twas said last night you were the bearer of startling news. There was whisper of a plot to swoop down upon the Admiral and on Condé, and to whisk them off to Paris. Faith, if the Guises once got them there we should see little of them again."

"Why has the Admiral no soldiers?"

"Because he is too honourable to distrust others. He believes they will keep their word. As for me, I would as soon trust a starving wolf as a Guise, or the Queen-Mother. The Admiral is foolish, but he is too good-hearted to think about himself."

Praise of the Admiral entered largely into Bellièvre's conversation, as indeed it did into that of all his retinue. No one was so wise or strong, so full of courage and good sense, so patient and forbearing, so grand and noble as Gaspard de Coligny. It was hero worship, perhaps, but hero worship of the truest kind. Not one of his household but would have died for him.

"Do you know," I said presently, "that the Admiral is coming to Noyers?"

"And his gentlemen! It looks as if rumour for once spoke true."

"But we cannot defend ourselves at Noyers against an army!"

"No, that is impossible. Besides, our leaders must be free, or there will be no one to command the troops. Fancy an army without Condé or the Admiral at its head!" and he laughed merrily.

"Then what is likely to be done?"

"Faith, I have no notion!" he answered lightly.

"We march and countermarch and fight, just as we are bidden; it is all one to those of Coligny's household. We never ask questions."

It was a glorious day, with a fresh breeze tempering the heat of the sun, and we rode along gaily. My comrade had already learned habits of caution, but there was really no danger, and late in the afternoon we reached Noyers, where, after a short delay, I was admitted into Condé's presence.

He had received a message from Tanlay some hours previously, and he said at once: "You are Edmond Le Blanc, who brought the packet from La Rochelle."

"From the Castle of Le Blanc, my lord, where it was given me by Ambroise Devine."

"Ah, yes, he was attacked and wounded. What did he tell you?"

"That troops were being collected secretly to surround Tanlay and Noyers, that the banks of the Loire were guarded"—the Prince gave a start of surprise—and that unless you moved quickly, your escape would be cut off."

"And you rode from Le Blanc to Tanlay? Did you hear anything of this on the journey?"

"No, my lord, but there seemed to be a general feeling of uneasiness abroad, as if people thought something strange was about to happen."

"Did you notice any movement of troops?"

"No, my lord."

"Where did you cross the Loire?"

"At the ford a little to the north of Nevers."

"And it was unguarded? But there, it matters little; it will be guarded by now. How do the folks in your own neighbourhood talk?"

"That the present state of things cannot continue, and that one side or the other must begin a fresh war."

"Humph," he said, half to himself, "if we unsheath the sword again, we will not lay it down until the work is finished. Monsieur, you need rest and refreshment; my gentlemen will attend to you. The Admiral will be here by nightfall. We have to thank you for your services. It was a very gallant enterprise."

Bellièvre, who was no stranger at Noyers, introduced me to several of his acquaintances, and we spent a merry evening together. The rumour of some impending calamity had spread rapidly, and all sorts of opinions were expressed by Condé's cavaliers.

"I hope," said one, "if war does break out that the Prince will not make peace until the Guises and the Queen-Mother are swept out of the country. The king is but a cat's-paw."

"True," cried another. "His mother rules him completely."

"And the Guises rule her!"

"Not at all," said the first man, "she is ruled by her own fears. Catherine wants all the power in her own hands, and she is afraid of the Prince's influence. That is the root of the evil."

"She has too many Spaniards and Italians around her," said Bellièvre; "France is drained dry by foreigners. A plague on the leeches!"

"Bravo, Felix, that is well said; but if this rumour is really true, it is time we were doing something. A hundred swordsmen would make little impression on an army."

"Trust our chiefs! The Admiral will be here in an hour or two. I shall be surprised if we are not out of Noyers by this time to-morrow."

Bellièvre and I were in bed when the Admiral arrived, but the next morning we discovered that preparations were being made for almost instant departure. We numbered about a hundred and fifty horsemen, and by ourselves could have made a spirited fight; but we were hampered by the presence of our leaders' wives and children, and more than one man shook his head doubtfully at the thought of meeting the king's troops. I asked my comrade where we were going, and he replied that there were as many different opinions as horsemen. "But for my part," said he, "I believe our destination is La Rochelle. That has always been the rallying-place."

"'Tis a long journey, and with the women and children a dangerous one!" I remarked. "We can be ambushed at a thousand places on the road."

"Then," said he gaily, "there are a thousand chances of a fight. My dear Edmond—we seem such good friends that I cannot call you Le Blanc—do not look so gloomy. To us of the Admiral's house a brush with the enemy is as natural as breaking one's fast. They know the Coligny battle-cry by now, I assure you."

"I am not thinking of ourselves, but of the women and children."

"Ah," said he brightly, "that gives us a chance of gaining greater glory."

The sun was always shining and the sky always blue for Felix Bellièvre, and if there were any clouds, he failed to see them. He and I rode in the rear of the cavalcade, with the Sieur Andelot, Coligny's brother, and a number of cavaliers belonging to his household. The weather, fortunately, was dry, but the sun beat down fiercely, and at times we were half-choked by the dust that rose from beneath our feet.

As Felix had foretold, we struck westward, travelling at a steady pace, and seeing no sign of the king's troops till shortly before reaching the Loire, near Sancerre. Then the few cavaliers forming the extreme rear came riding hurriedly with the information that a large body of the enemy was pushing on at a tremendous pace with the object of overtaking us.

"The rear is the post of honour, gentlemen," said Andelot, with his pleasant smile—he was, I think, even more kindly than his famous brother—"but it is also the post of danger. We must keep these troops at bay until our comrades succeed in discovering a ford," and we greeted his words with a loyal cheer.

The situation was in truth an awkward one. Unless our scouts could find some way of crossing the river we must either surrender or suffer annihilation, and the word had gone forth that there must be no yielding. "Faith, Edmond," exclaimed Felix merrily, "it seems you are to have a good baptism. One could not wish a better introduction to knightly feats. Ah, here comes one of Condé's men with news."

A cavalier galloping back from the advance-guard informed Andelot that the ford was passable, and that the Prince expected us to keep off the foe until the ladies, with a small escort, had crossed to the opposite side.

"The Prince can trust in our devotion," replied Andelot briefly.

We proceeded steadily and in perfect order, Andelot last of all, when presently we heard the thunder of hoofs and a loud shout of "For the King!" as the foremost of the enemy tore pell-mell toward us. We quickened our pace in seeming alarm, and the royalists rushed on cheering as if their prey were already secured.

Suddenly Andelot gave the signal; we wheeled as one man, and with a yell of defiance dashed at them. The surprise was complete. Confident in their numbers they were riding anyhow, and before they could form we were upon them. Down they went, horses and riders, while the air was rent by shouts of "Condé!" "For the Cause!" "For the Admiral!" "Guise! Guise!" In three minutes after the shock they were flying in wild confusion back to their infantry.

"Bravo, gentlemen!" cried our leader, as we checked the pursuit and reformed our ranks, "that is worth half an hour to our friends!"

"A smart affair that," remarked Bellièvre, "but soon over. If Guise is with the troops we shan't come off so well next time; he is a fine soldier. But the women and children must have crossed the ford by now."

We proceeded steadily till the road turned, and here Andelot halted, evidently expecting another attack. Nor had we long to wait. With a sweeping rush the enemy returned, headed by a richly-dressed cavalier on a superb horse, and shouting: "Guise! Guise!"

They outnumbered us by four to one, but we were well placed, and not a man budged.

"Let them spend their strength," said our leader, "and when they waver, charge home!"

The onset was terrific, but not a horseman broke through our ranks; they crowded upon one another in the narrow pass; they had no room for the play of their weapons, and while those in the rear were striving to push forward, the foremost were thrust back upon them in a confused heap.

Then, above the din, was heard Andelot's voice, crying: "Charge, gentlemen!" and with the force of a hurricane rush we swept them before us like leaves scattered by an autumn gale. And as we returned, flushed but triumphant, a second messenger met us.

"They are across, my lord," he cried, "all but ourselves; and the Prince is preparing to defend the ford on the farther side of the river. He begs that you will come immediately; the waters are rising."

"Forward! Forward!" Laughing and cheering, we raced along, a few wounded, but none seriously, and most of us unharmed. Our comrades were marshalled on the opposite bank, and they cried to us to hasten. From what cause—unless by a direct intervention of Providence—I know not, but the river was rising rapidly, and the last of our troop were compelled to swim several yards.

But we reached the bank without mishap, and turning round perceived our stubborn pursuers advancing at full speed. The foremost horsemen reaching the river drew rein; the ford was no longer visible, and they had no means of passage. They wandered along the bank disconsolately, while we, sending them one last cheer, rode after our van.

"A point in the game to us, Edmond," said my comrade, "and oddly gained too. The Admiral's chaplain will make use of that in his next discourse. He will say that Providence is fighting on our side."

"'Tis at least a good omen! Had the enemy crossed, we must have been defeated."

"Perhaps so; perhaps not. I'll wager Guise is storming over yonder, at the escape of his prey."

"But why wasn't the ford guarded?" I asked.

"An oversight, most likely, and a fortunate one for us. However, we are out of the trap."

"There is still a long distance to go."

"Yes, but every day's journey improves our position. Condé feels secure now; he dreaded only the passage of the Loire. Guise made a huge blunder which, in the future, will cost him dear."

Encouraged by our escape, and more so by the strange manner of it, we rode on with light hearts, chatting gaily about our past adventures, and looking forward with confidence to our safe arrival at Rochelle.

"I suppose you will throw in your lot with us," said Bellière, as we lay sheltering one noon from the sun's heat; "it is a great honour to belong to the Admiral's household."

"I should like it of all things, but there are two objections to the plan. In the first place the Admiral has not offered me the privilege, and in the second I must return home. My parents will be alarmed at such a long absence."

"Yes," he said slowly, "you must visit your father and mother. As for the first objection," he added mysteriously, "it can be remedied easily."

I did not understand his meaning, but the very next day, as we were proceeding on our journey, the Admiral came to my side.

"Bellière tells me," he said, "that you wish to join my household!"

"My lord," I replied, flushing crimson—for this speech was very startling and unexpected—"I can hardly credit that such honour is within my reach."

"There is no honour to which the son of the Sieur Le Blanc cannot aspire," he said, "and you have already proved yourself a brave lad. But first you must lay the proposal before your father; if he consents, you will find me at my house in Rochelle. We pass, I believe, within a day or two's march of Le Blanc. Is your purse empty?"

"No, my lord, I thank you; I have sufficient for my needs."

"Very well; you know where to find me, but I warrant Bellière will be looking out for you!"

"I shall watch for him eagerly, my lord," interposed Felix; "he is too good a comrade to be lost."

"I owe this to your kindness, Felix," I remarked when the Admiral had ridden off.

"Not kindness, my friend, but selfishness. I was thinking not so much of you, as of Felix Bellière. I foresee many happy days in store for us, Edmond."

"Like the one at Sancerre, for instance!"

"Ah," he replied brightly, "that is a day to be marked in red. But there will be others; and, Edmond, do not waste too much time between Le Blanc and La Rochelle."

"Unless I am laid by the heels," I answered laughing, "I shall be at Rochelle shortly after you!"

CHAPTER V

A Traitor to the King

It was on the evening of the first day in August, 1568, that I rode into the village of Le Blanc. All day long a pitiless sun had been beating down on the arid earth, with not one freshening breeze to temper the intense heat, and even now not a breath of air stirred so much as a solitary leaf on the trees.

My poor beast dragged wearily along, and his fatigue was scarcely greater than my own.

"Good old fellow!" I said, stroking his neck affectionately, "a few hundred yards more and we shall be at home. Food and water, clean straw, and a shady place for you. Ha, ha, old fellow, that makes you prick up your ears!"

We trailed along the sun-baked street; the door of every house was wide open; the villagers, men, women, and children sprawled listlessly in the coolest places, hardly raising their eyes at the beat of my horse's hoofs.

But those who did glance up gazed at me curiously, and once or twice I heard a muttered, "'Tis Monsieur Edmond!" as if I were the last person they expected to see in my own home. Their strange glances, half surprise, half pity, made me uncomfortable, and set me wondering whether any accident had happened.

However, I proceeded slowly as far as the inn, outside which half a dozen men had congregated, while old Pierre himself stood in the doorway. They greeted me in wonder, and again I heard some one say, "'Tis Monsieur Edmond!"

"Well, my friends," I exclaimed, with perhaps a suggestion of annoyance in my voice, "is there any reason why it should not be Monsieur Edmond? Did you think me dead, or has the heat affected your brains? Speak up, some of you!"

"Is monsieur going to the castle?" asked Pierre.

"Of course I am!" I answered half angrily.

"Perhaps monsieur will dismount and enter the inn. Things have happened since monsieur went away."

A great fear seized me, but, keeping my features under control, I slipped from the saddle, and, bidding the ostler take charge of the animal, followed Pierre into the one private room the inn contained.

"Now, Pierre," I exclaimed, "tell me the story quickly, in as few words as possible."

"First then, monsieur," began the old man in his quavering voice, "it is useless going to the castle, as it is shut up."

"The castle shut up!" I cried in astonishment. "Well, go on with the story; it promises plenty of interest."

"Shortly after your departure, monsieur, many rumours spread abroad. Some said one thing, some another; but no one knew the truth. Then, one night, your father sent for me to the castle. He ordered me to watch for your return, and to tell you he had gone to Rochelle. Not another word, monsieur, except that you were to join him, and to keep out of the way of the king's troops."

"This is strange news!" I said.

"Your father must have gone away that night, monsieur, for next day the castle was deserted. And it was well he did not stay longer," the old man concluded, with a wise shake of the head.

"Why?" I asked anxiously.

"The next night, monsieur, we were roused from sleep by the tramping of soldiers. I ran to the window and looked out. There were more than two hundred of them marching through the village. On arriving at the castle, they found they were too late. Their leader was very angry; he raved like a madman."

"Did you go to listen to him?"

"No, monsieur, he slept here at the inn. The next day he had all the villagers drawn up outside, and made them a grand speech. Had it not been for his soldiers, I think he would not have left the village alive."

"Then he made the good folk angry?"

"Monsieur, it was terrible. He said the Sieur Le Blanc was a traitor to the king, that he had harboured one of the king's enemies, and that his life was forfeit to the law. Any man was to shoot him like a dog. He said all this, monsieur, and more, much more. Then he called in the leading men one by one, and questioned them closely, but they knew nothing."

"He should have asked you, Pierre."

"He did, monsieur, but he said I was a stupid dolt, with no more sense than one of my own casks!" and the old man broke into a hearty laugh.

"You had a guest the night I went away; he left early in the morning. Who was he?"

"I do not know, monsieur. He was a stranger who wished to learn all he could about the chief folk in the district; but he was an enemy to the Cause, and he did not carry away much information. Old Pierre was too dense to understand his questions," and the old man chuckled again.

"Well," I said after a pause, "since it is useless going to the castle, I must put up here for the night. I am tired and hungry. Get me some supper and a bed; meanwhile I must attend to my horse; the poor beast has carried me far."

Pierre's information was very disquieting, but, as my father had evidently received timely warning, I trusted he had effected his escape, and that by this time he was safely sheltered behind the strong walls of La Rochelle.

When Pierre brought in the supper I asked after Jacques, and, hearing he had not returned, told the landlord to inform him of what had happened. Whether he would endeavour to get into Rochelle or not I left to himself.

I ate my supper slowly, my mind fully occupied with this extraordinary occurrence. Why had my father thus suddenly been marked down for vengeance? He was a noted Huguenot, 'twas true, but he was not a leader such as Condé or the Admiral. He had sheltered the wounded messenger, and had allowed me to carry the warning to Tanlay.

This, of course, was sufficient to incur the Queen-Mother's displeasure; but how had the knowledge reached her? Who was there at Le Blanc able and willing to betray our secrets? Not a soul, unless—! Ah, the name leaped of itself into my mind. Who was the maker of mischief but Etienne Cordel?

I put together all that I had heard of this man whom Jacques detested so thoroughly. He was a lawyer, who, by some means, had amassed wealth and lands. Numerous stories, all evil, were related of him, and it was rumoured that he had long served as a useful tool to persons in high places. At least he had prospered exceedingly in some mysterious manner, and it was said he had

been promised a patent of nobility. I called for Pierre, and asked if he had heard anything fresh lately of this upstart lawyer.

"No, monsieur," he answered, "Cordel had gone away before the soldiers came, and he has not yet returned. He went hurriedly, after a visit from the cavalier who slept here. Monsieur does not think——"

"For the present I think nothing, Pierre. I am tired and will go to bed. Get me an early breakfast, so that I can proceed on my journey in the cool of the morning."

Of what use were my suspicions, even if I proved them to be correct? The mischief was done, and I could not undo it. My father was a fugitive from his home, to which he dared not return, and it only remained for me to join him.

I went to bed, and, in spite of my anxiety, was soon asleep, for the long journey from Noyers had been both tedious and fatiguing. Pierre called me early, and while the village still slumbered I set forth.

"Monsieur goes to Rochelle?" asked the old man, as I vaulted lightly into the saddle.

"Yes, at present I intend going to Rochelle."

"It is said here that the war has begun again."

"If it has not, it soon will, Pierre, and when it is finished, the Sieur Le Blanc will once more be master of his castle."

"Heaven grant it, monsieur," said he earnestly, as I rode off.

The state of the country west of Le Blanc was even more deplorable than what I had seen during my journey to Tanlay. The fields were bare both of corn and of cattle; the villagers were starving; the people of the towns went about in fear and trembling; the king's troops robbed as they pleased without restraint.

At Poitiers I found the citizens in a state of dangerous excitement. Armed bands, some Huguenots, some Catholics, patrolled the streets, singing and shouting, and uttering threats of vengeance. Fearful of being mixed up in these disturbances, I alighted before the door of the first decent inn, gave my horse to the ostler, and entered.

"Your streets are a trifle dangerous for a peaceful traveller," I remarked to the landlord, who showed me to a room.

"What would you, monsieur?" he asked, with a shrug of the shoulders; "the times are evil. These miserable heretics disturb the whole country with their senseless brawls. But the mischief will be stamped out before long."

"How?" I said. "Has not the king granted them the privilege of worshipping in their own way?"

"Ah, monsieur, that was meant but for a time. The Queen-Mother will make a clean sweep of their rights as soon as she has power enough. And it is said," here he lowered his voice to a confidential whisper, "that a royal army is already marching from Paris. But monsieur is hungry?"

"Hungry and thirsty both," I replied. "What is that?" for the sounds of angry voices came from the outside.

"It is nothing, monsieur; some one has drawn a knife, perhaps, and there is a little fighting, but that is all. One does not regard these things," and he hurried off to prepare my meal.

After leaving Poitiers, I avoided the towns as much as possible, though travelling in the country districts was nearly as hazardous. The peasants having no work, and being without food, had formed themselves into robber bands, and more than once I owed my safety to the fleetness of my horse.

However, on the evening of the second day, I reached Rochelle, just as the gates were being closed. The streets were filled with citizens and Huguenot soldiers, and it was apparent that the illustrious fugitives had arrived safely at their stronghold.

Being a stranger to the city I rode slowly along the street, noting the houses, and scanning the people closely, on the chance of discovering a familiar face. In all my solitary wanderings I had not felt as lonely as I did now, amidst a seething crowd of my fellow-creatures.

The first thing, of course, was to find my father, but on coming to the *Hôtel Coligny*, I resolved to dismount and to seek out Felix Bellière. Fortunately, he was within, and I received a hearty welcome, which caused me to feel once more as if I belonged to the world of human beings.

"Faith, Edmond," he cried cheerily, "the grass has not grown under your feet! I did not expect you until to-morrow, at the earliest."

"One does not care to linger around an empty nest," I replied moodily.

"Empty only for a short time, I hope. Do not look so astonished. I have seen your father. More than that, I have been presented to your sister. Already I am a friend of the family! I will conduct you to the house, if you wish. Come, I have plenty of leisure, and you will serve as an excellent

excuse for my visit."

"How did you happen to become acquainted with my father?" I asked, as we walked along.

"In the simplest way imaginable, my dear Edmond. He called to pay his respects to the Admiral; being on duty at the time, I heard his name, and made myself known as your friend. He was eager to hear news of you, and carried me off. I met your sister, and you will not be surprised that within twenty-four hours I was repeating my visit. You see there were so many things to tell her about yourself," and he laughed roguishly.

"Are they depressed by what has happened?"

"Not in the least; they regard it as a trial of their faith; but here we are at the house. I fear you will not see your estimable aunt; she is an invalid, and keeps strictly to her own rooms. Ah, here is one of the servants; let him attend to your animal, and I will announce you. Your sister will fall on your neck and embrace you. Do you think it possible for us to change parts for a few minutes?"

He was still laughing and talking in his madcap way when a door opened, and my father came towards us.

"Edmond!" he cried, on seeing me, "now this is indeed bright sunshine gleaming through the dark clouds. Monsieur Bellièvre, you are doubly welcome, for your own sake and for what you bring with you!"

The memory of the pleasant evening that followed I treasured for many years. I sat beside my mother, my hand clasped in hers, telling her the story of my adventures. Jeanne was full of high spirits, while Felix was simply overflowing with wit and good-humoured drollery.

The only drawback to our enjoyment was the absence of the trusted Jacques, but even that was slight, as he was not seriously wounded, and from the household of the noble Count St. Cyr he was certain to receive every attention.

Nothing was said that evening about the visit of the troops to Le Blanc, but the next morning I had a long talk with my father on the subject. I told him what I had learned from old Pierre, and also my suspicions concerning Etienne Cordel.

"The advocate is a scheming rogue," he said, "who bears me no goodwill because I have laughed at his pretensions to be considered our equal. He is in the pay of Monseigneur, and he has acted as a spy on those of the Religion; but, unless he heard of the affair of the letter, he could do me no harm."

"He must have heard of it from the stranger with whom we travelled," I declared. "Jacques distrusted him from the first, and believed he was one of those who attacked Devine. Did he recover?"

"Yes; he is in Rochelle, fretting and fuming at having been prevented from fulfilling his mission. But to return to our own affairs. Have you considered what this proclamation means?"

"That your life is in danger."

"A bagatelle, Edmond. It has been in danger these many years. There is something far more serious. As a traitor to the king, my estates are forfeit, and you will grow up to see another man master of the land which by right is yours. It is a heavy price for you to pay, my boy."

Now I hold it folly to pretend that this caused me no grief, but I was young and enthusiastic, and sensible enough to know that any sign of sorrow would add to my father's unhappiness. So I looked straight into his eyes and said brightly, "Others have paid a heavy price for their faith without murmuring; I am strong enough to do the same."

He held me in his arms and kissed my cheeks, saying: "Now God bless and reward you for those brave words, my son," and never before in all my life had I seen him so deeply moved.

CHAPTER VI

The Unknown Cavalier

My father had already accepted the Admiral's kind offer, so, after a few days of idleness, I began my new duties, meeting with a genial reception from my future comrades, several of whom were but a little older than myself.

Every day now some fresh note of alarm sounded. The king withdrew the privileges he had granted to those of the Religion, and from several quarters we learned that civil war in all but the name had broken out afresh. It was said, too, that the king had given command of the royal army to his brother, the Duke of Anjou, with orders to exterminate us, root and branch.

"Anjou!" laughed my comrade, "why, he is only a boy! He should be doing his lessons. Has the king provided him with a nurse?"

"Yes," I replied, "he will find Marshal Tavannes a very capable nurse."

"Oh, that is the way of it, eh? Faith, 'tis a good plan, for, see you, Edmond, if there be any glory 'twill go to Anjou, while Tavannes can take the discredit. A capital arrangement—that is, from Monseigneur's point of view!"

Meanwhile numbers of Huguenot gentlemen with their retainers were arriving at Rochelle, and our leaders were soon able to muster a respectable little army.

"Anjou must make haste if he wishes to cover himself with glory," said Felix one morning. "The Queen of Navarre will be here to-morrow, bringing four thousand Bearnese with her. They are sturdy fellows and splendid fighters."

"There is another item of news," I said. "The English queen is sending money and guns!"

"Ah," responded my comrade, "the English are stupid! Why don't they join us boldly? We are fighting for the same object, and against the same enemy. For, mark you, Edmond, our real foes are Spain and the Pope, which these English will find out one of these days! If we get beaten, it will be their turn next."

We gave the brave Queen of Navarre and her troops a right royal reception, but to me the most interesting figure in the procession was her son, Henry, on whom in the years to come the hopes of so many Frenchmen were centred. He was quite a boy, only fifteen years old, but he had a strong and capable face, full of fire and energy. His hair had a reddish tinge, his skin was brown but clear, and he had well-shaped regular features. His eyes had a sweet expression, and when he smiled his whole face lit up with animation. He sat his horse with extreme grace, and responded to the plaudits of the crowd with courtly bows.

"A gallant lad!" exclaimed Felix delightedly. "He has the makings of a soldier, and in a year or two will be a tower of strength to us."

The talk now among the younger men was of moving out from Rochelle, scattering the Royalists, marching on Paris, and dictating peace in the palace. It was astonishing how easy these things appeared to be, as we sat and gossiped idly in the Admiral's ante-chamber! Fortunately, however, our leaders, being in possession of cooler heads and clearer brains, decided otherwise, and when winter came, making a campaign impossible, we were still inside the walls.

During the autumn we were joined by a troop of English gentlemen, about a hundred strong, under the leadership of one named Henry Champernoun. They were mostly young, of good birth and family, very gallant fellows, and as eager to fight as the most headstrong of us.

With one of them—Roger Braund, a lad about the same age as Felix—we soon became very friendly. He was fair and handsome, with sparkling blue eyes and shapely features. He was tall and well made, a skilful horseman, and an astonishing master of fence. Few of us could equal him with the sword, but he was modest and unassuming, and had a genial manner, very captivating.

He was a frequent visitor at my aunt's house, where he speedily became as great a favourite as Felix. Indeed, I sometimes thought that Jeanne regarded him with even more favour. She spent much time in his company, listening to his accounts of the English Court and of his own home, which was situated in a district called Devonshire. I think Felix was not too well pleased with this intimacy, but whatever sorrow it caused him he kept locked up in his own breast.

One evening, they started together to the house, expecting me to follow as soon as I was relieved of my duty. It was, I remember, about a half after six, when I left the hotel. The streets as usual were thronged with citizens and soldiers, who in some places almost blocked the road. In front of me was a horseman, to all appearance but newly arrived. He was proceeding at a foot pace, and evidently looking for suitable accommodation.

"A fine beast!" I thought, glancing at the animal, and then—"Surely I have seen that horse before!"

The knowledge did not come to me at once, but by degrees I remembered the early morning ride through the sleeping village of Le Blanc, and the richly-dressed cavalier with whom we had travelled some distance. I quickened my steps, and scanned the rider closely. I could not see his face well, but there could be no mistaking the alert, soldierly figure, and the short, brown curls escaping over the forehead.

"Faith, my friend," I said to myself, "the tables are turned now! One word from me, and you would be torn in pieces; but you must be a brave rascal to venture alone into Rochelle! If Anjou has many spies as fearless as you, he must be well served."

I walked close behind him, wondering what was best to be done. He was certainly a spy, who had entered the city for the purpose of searching out our strength and weakness. Perhaps it would be best to call a patrol, and have him arrested on the spot. I was still considering this, when he turned up a side street and dismounted before the door of an inn. An ostler led his horse to the stables, and he entered the house.

Now the fellow was so completely in my power that I had the mind to watch him a little further. Several persons were in the room, but he had taken his place at an unoccupied table in the corner, and called for the host.

"Some food and a little wine," he said, "but serve me quickly; I have important business on hand."

"Monsieur has travelled?" said the landlord, with a glance at his boots.

"Yes," he answered, "and one feels safer inside Rochelle than beyond its walls, let me tell you!"

"What is Anjou doing now, monsieur?" asked a man at one of the other tables.

"Killing," said the stranger briefly. "Rochelle will soon be able to hold all those left of the Religion."

"I vow," exclaimed an iron-featured trooper, "it makes one wonder our leaders should keep us cooped up here."

"You had better offer your opinion to the Admiral, or to Condé," said the stranger with a laugh, and he turned his attention to the food that had been set before him.

He ate and drank quickly, taking no further part in the conversation, but apparently as much at ease as if sitting at Anjou's table.

"You will require a room, monsieur?" said the host presently.

"I will pay for one, though I may not use it."

"And your horse, monsieur?"

"Will remain in the stables."

He had nearly finished his meal now, and, acting on a sudden impulse, I crossed the room and sat down opposite him. He looked up at me in a casual way, and the next instant understood he was discovered. But the man had nerves of iron; not a muscle of his face moved; only by the sudden light in his eyes did I know that he recognized me.

"The game is to me, monsieur," I said simply.

"Yes," he agreed, "the game is yours, but do not claim the stakes until I have spoken with you."

"The game is altogether finished, monsieur, and you have lost; you cannot throw again."

"A fig for the game!" he said; "you have but to raise your voice, and these bloodhounds will bury their fangs in my heart. I know that, and do not complain. I ask only a few hours' freedom."

"Surely, monsieur, in the circumstance, that is a strange request!"

"A riddle is always strange when one does not possess the key. For instance, you believe I have entered Rochelle as a spy."

"Exactly."

"And yet you are mistaken. I suppose you will laugh at my story, but I must tell it you. You know me only as an opponent."

"A clever and a daring one."

"And yet you foiled me! But that is not to the point. My name is Renaud L'Estang. My father was a gentleman, poor and without influence; I had good blood in my veins but no money in my purse. My only chance of wealth lay in my sword. I sold it to the highest bidder. In short, monsieur, I am an adventurer, no better and no worse than thousands of others."

"And in the pay of the League!"

"At present," he corrected, with a courteous inclination of the head, "in the service of the Duke of Anjou."

"Why did you attack me at Nevers?"

"To obtain possession of the letter of whose contents we were in ignorance."

"And you denounced my father to the Duke!"

"There you wrong me. I endeavoured to capture the letter; I failed, and my part in the affair was over; but again I am wandering from the point, which is to explain my presence in Rochelle. Monsieur, has it ever occurred to you that a man who earns his livelihood by his sword may have a heart the same as more innocent persons?"

"No one is without some virtue," I said.

"There is one person in the world," he continued, in low earnest tones, almost as if communing with himself, "who has all my love and affection. For her I would willingly die, or suffer the worst tortures a fiend could invent. Monsieur, there is but one person on earth who loves me and whom I love; and she is in Rochelle, lying at the point of death."

"Your wife?" I said questioningly.

"My mother!" he replied. "In her eyes, monsieur, I possess all the virtues. It is strange, is it not?" and he laughed a trifle bitterly.

"And you risked your life to comfort her before she died?"

"Bah!" he exclaimed impatiently, "what is a trifle like that? Monsieur, I never yet begged a favour, but I beg one now. Not for myself, but for her. You are young, and have a mother of your own! I shall not plead to you vainly. I tried to kill you, but you will not take your revenge on her. And I am altogether in your power."

"Yes," I said slowly, "that is true."

"You can send for a guard, but without explaining your object. They can surround the house, while I close my mother's eyes, and afterwards I am at your service. The gallows, the block, or the wheel, as your leaders direct; you will not lose much."

"No, I shall not lose much," I repeated.

Now, strangely perhaps, I felt not the slightest doubt of the man's story. His good faith was apparent in every tone and every gesture. Whatever his vices, he loved his mother with his whole heart. And he was entirely in my power! Even if he got away from me in the streets he could not leave Rochelle! I thought of my own mother, and hesitated no longer. I could not keep these two apart.

"Monsieur," I said, "for good or ill I intend to trust you. We will go together to your home, and— and afterwards you will return with me to the *Hôtel Coligny*. If you abuse my confidence, I will leave your punishment in the hands of God, who judges Huguenot and Catholic alike. Come, let us hasten."

He made no violent protestations, but murmured brokenly: "May the blessing of a dying woman reward you!"

We passed out of the inn together, and walked briskly through the streets, until we reached a house not far from the harbour. The door was opened by a middle-aged woman who gazed at my companion in astonishment.

"Hush!" he said softly, "am I in time?"

"For the end," she answered, "only for that. Madame has already received the last rites."

The woman showed us into an empty room, where my companion laid aside his weapons.

"You do not repent of your generosity?" he asked.

"I have trusted you fully," I replied, and his face lit up with a gratified smile as he left the room, stepping noiselessly into the corridor.

The servant brought a light, and some refreshments, but they stood before me untasted. I was busy with my thoughts. The house was very still; not a sound broke the silence, not the murmur of a voice, nor the fall of a footstep. I might have been in a house of the dead.

Suddenly the door was pushed open noiselessly, and the adventurer stood before me beckoning. I rose from my seat and followed him without a word into another apartment. In the bed in the alcove a woman lay dying. She must have been beautiful in her youth, and traces of beauty still lingered on her face. She stretched out her hands and drew my head down to hers.

"Renaud tells me you have done him a great service," she said feebly. "It is through you that he was able to come to me. A dying woman blesses you, monsieur, and surely the saints will reward you. A goodly youth! A goodly youth! May God hold you in His holy keeping! Treasure him, Renaud, my son, even to the giving of your life for his!"

Her eyes closed, she sank back exhausted, and I stole from the room. How my heart ached that night! "Treasure him, Renaud!" Poor soul! How merciful that she should die ignorant of the wretched truth! "Even to the giving of your life for his!" And his life was in my hands already! Oh, the pity, the horror of it! She called on God to bless me, and I was about to lead her only son straight from her death-bed to the executioner!

For I could not disguise from myself the fact that this man would die the death of a spy. Ambroise Devine was in Rochelle, and he would show no mercy. And, terrible as it might seem, there were those in the city who would scout the idea that Renaud L'Estang had risked his life solely to visit his dying mother. "He is a spy," they would declare hotly; "let him die a spy's death!"

"It is not my fault," I said to myself angrily; "he has lost; he must pay forfeit!"

"A dying woman blesses you, and surely the saints will reward you!" The room was filled with the words; they buzzed in my ears, and beat into my brain continually; I could not rid myself of them. "A dying woman!" Ay, perhaps a dead woman by now, and her son following swiftly as the night the day! I could have cried aloud in my agony of mind.

CHAPTER VII

A Commission for the Admiral

"It is over, monsieur."

Renaud L'Estang stood before me, his face drawn and haggard, and heavy with a great grief. He had stolen in noiselessly; his sword and pistol lay within reach of his hand; he might have killed me without effort, and saved his own life. The thought flashed into my mind, but died away instantly. From the moment when he told his story I had never once mistrusted him.

"Your mother has passed away?" I questioned in a tone of sympathy.

"She died in my arms; her last moments were full of peace. Now, I am at your service."

"You are faint," I said. "Will it not be advisable to break your fast before starting out? You will need all your strength."

"I cannot eat."

"Yet it is necessary. Pardon me if I summon your servant."

He allowed himself to be treated almost as a child, eating and drinking mechanically what was set before him, hardly conscious of my presence, unable to detach his thoughts from the sombre picture in the adjoining apartment. At last he had finished, and I said gently, "Have you made arrangements for your mother's burial?"

"They are all made," he replied gravely.

"There is your sword," I remarked, pointing to the weapon lying on the table.

"Let it lie monsieur," he answered with a mournful smile; "a dead man has no use for a sword."

Now I may have done a very foolish thing, for this L'Estang was a daring soldier, crafty, able, and resolute. He was an enemy to be feared far more than many a general in the armies of the League. All this was well known to me, and yet I could not harden my heart against him. I had meant to denounce him to the Admiral, but at the last moment my courage failed. How could I condemn to death this man who had freely risked his life to comfort his mother's last moments?

"Monsieur," I said awkwardly, "listen to me. When I met you in the city, I jumped to the conclusion that you had come to Rochelle as a spy. You told me your story, and I believed it; but you have doubtless many enemies who will laugh at it. They will say——"

"Nothing, monsieur; I shall go to the block without words. Renaud L'Estang will find no mercy in Rochelle, and asks none."

There was no hint of bravado in his speech; it was but the expression of a man of intrepid courage and iron will.

"Once more listen," I said. "Had you come to Rochelle as a spy I should have handed you over to our troops without hesitation; but I am regarding you, not as the servant of Anjou but as a tender and loving son. I cannot have on my hands the blood of a man who has shown such affection for his mother. I propose to accompany you to the gate, and there to set you at liberty."

He stood like one suddenly stricken dumb. His limbs trembled, the muscles of his face twitched convulsively; he gazed at me with unseeing eyes.

"Monsieur," he said after a time, "I do not comprehend. Is it that you give me, Renaud L'Estang, my life? No, I must have mistaken your words."

"You have made no mistake. As far as I am concerned you are free. I ask but one thing, Renaud L'Estang. Some day you may be able to show mercy to one of your foes. Should such a time arrive, remember that once mercy was not withheld from you."

He did not speak, but motioned me with his hand to follow him. We entered the chamber of death, and he knelt reverently by the bedside. Then, in low, passionate tones, calling on the dead woman by name, he made a solemn vow that, should it ever be in his power, he would repay the debt he owed me, even at the sacrifice of life and all he held most dear.

"I must fight for my side," he said, "but no Huguenot shall ever seek quarter from me in vain."

He buckled on his sword, and we went out together in the dull grey morning. Few persons were abroad, and none presumed to question one of the Admiral's household. My companion fetched his horse from the inn, and I walked with him until we were well beyond the walls of the town.

Then I came to a halt, saying: "Here we part; now you must depend on yourself for safety."

He doffed his plumed hat. "Monsieur," he said, "the friends of Renaud L'Estang would laugh on being told he was at a loss for words; yet it is true. I cannot express my gratitude; I can but pray that I may have an opportunity of proving it. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" I replied, and when he had ridden some distance I returned thoughtfully to the city.

Felix, who was on duty at the hotel, looked at me curiously. "Where have you been?" he asked. "We expected you last night, and concluded you must have been detained on some special service. I have been wearing myself to a shadow on your account!"

I made some commonplace excuse and left him, saying I was tired and wished to sleep; for,

though I did not regret my action, I could hardly refrain from doubting its wisdom.

At first the incident occupied a large portion of my thoughts, but as the days passed into weeks the memory of it wore off.

Winter had set in, and we knew the campaign would not open until the spring of the next year. It was a trying time; the cold was intense—the oldest veteran had never known such a keen frost—and much sickness broke out among the troops. The good Admiral tended them with the devotion of a father, spending himself in their service, and we of his household were kept busy from morning till night.

In spite of every care, however, our losses were enormous, and the prospect became very gloomy. Every one looked forward with eagerness to the coming of spring.

"If the winter lasts much longer," said Roger Braund, one night when we had all met at my aunt's house, "there will be no army left."

"A little more patience," my father exclaimed smilingly; "once the campaign begins you will have no cause to complain of inaction!"

"Faith," laughed Felix, "if he rides with the Admiral, he will be regretting sometimes having left the comforts of Rochelle."

"I shall probably do that," said Roger, glancing at my sister, "even without the hard riding."

"Then you are a caitiff knight and no true soldier," I broke in hastily, for Jeanne was blushing furiously, and my comrade's face had lost its merriment; "but, really, things are becoming serious; more than a score of men have died to-day!"

"Poor fellows!" said my mother tenderly; "if those who force us into these cruel wars could only realize the misery they cause!"

"I fear, madame," remarked Roger, "that the suffering troubles them little, as long as they can gain their ends."

About a week after this conversation there were signs that our long inactivity was drawing to a close. The weather became far milder; the ice began to thaw, and it was possible for the soldiers to pass the nights in some degree of comfort. Orders were issued to the various leaders, carts were collected and filled with stores, bodies of troops marched out from the city, and preparations for the campaign were actively pushed forward.

"I really believe," said Felix one morning, "that we are about to move. Condé has issued instructions for all his followers to hold themselves in readiness, and a body of infantry left Rochelle an hour ago."

We were on duty in the Admiral's ante-chamber, and my comrade had just finished speaking when our leader, attended as usual by the Sieur de Guerchy, ascended the staircase. He glanced round at us with his kindly smile, and, clapping me lightly on the shoulder, exclaimed: "A word with you in my room, Monsieur Le Blanc."

Expecting some trifling commission, such as often fell to his gentlemen of the bodyguard, I followed him into the apartment, and stood waiting to hear his commands.

"A prudent youth, De Guerchy," he remarked to his companion, "and not without experience. He it was who brought the timely warning to Tanlay. His father is the Sieur Le Blanc."

"A gallant soldier!" said De Guerchy with decision.

"And I think the lad will follow in his father's footsteps. I am about to send him to Saint Jean d'Angely, and to Cognac," adding, with a laugh, "'tis a far less distance than to Tanlay."

"But the commission is almost as important," said De Guerchy.

"Much less dangerous though," and, turning to me, he added: "Can you carry a letter to the commandant at Cognac?"

"I will do my best, my lord."

"Then make your preparations; I shall be ready for you at the end of two hours."

I saluted and returned to the ante-chamber, where Felix, catching sight of my smiling face, exclaimed: "More good fortune, Edmond? I shall be jealous of you soon! Why do the Fates select you for their favours?"

"It is an affair of little importance," I said.

"Does it carry you away from Rochelle?"

"A short distance; but I must attend to my horse; our patron is in a hurry," and expecting that we should meet later I hurried away.

Having saddled my horse and put my pistols in order I paid a hasty visit home, though fully expecting to be back in the city within a few days. My father, however, thought my absence would be for a longer period.

"The truth is, Edmond," he said, "that the campaign has opened. Some of the troops have already started, and Coligny himself leaves the city before night. So, should you be charged with a message for him, you are not likely to return to Rochelle."

"And you?" I asked.

"I am waiting for orders, I may march with the troops, or remain here; it depends on our leaders."

My father's information put a greyer colour on the farewell; Jeanne and my mother embraced me very tenderly, and neither could altogether keep back the tell-tale tears. Still, they were very brave, and when at last I rode off, they stood at the window waving their handkerchiefs and smiling, though I suspect the smiles quickly faded after I disappeared from sight.

I found the hotel in a state of commotion, and Felix, who met me in the lobby, exclaimed excitedly: "It has begun, Edmond; we march almost immediately. I am just going to say good-bye to your sister. Will you be away from us long?"

"I think not. I am carrying a despatch to the commandants at Saint Jean d'Angely and Cognac. Afterwards I shall rejoin you."

"Till we meet again then," said he, hurriedly, anxious to make the most of the short time still at his disposal.

Several of our leaders besides De Guerchy were with the Admiral, and from time to time one of them came out, mounted his horse, and galloped off. Presently the door opened, and De Guerchy called me inside, where the Admiral handed me two packets.

"One for the commandant at Saint Jean d'Angely," he said, "and one for him at Cognac. From Cognac you will proceed to Angoulême, unless you meet with us on the way. I need not warn you to be prudent and vigilant, nor remind you that these despatches must not fall into the hands of an enemy. Start at once; you should reach Saint Jean d'Angely before morning."

I took the packets, placed them securely inside my doublet, and, after a last word of caution from De Guerchy, left the room. The news of the coming movement had spread throughout the town and the streets were crowded. The excitement was intense, and I witnessed many sad scenes; for every one understood that of the thousands who marched from Rochelle comparatively few would return.

Heavy carts, and big, clumsy guns—chiefly useful for making a noise—rumbled along; dashing cavaliers with flaunting favours bestrode their horses proudly; sturdy foot-soldiers carrying murderous pike or deadly arquebus tramped steadily onward, while weeping children and silent, white-faced women stood bowed with grief.

Even beyond the gates I found crowds of people who had come thus far, loth to say the last farewell to their dear ones; but after a while I left the throng behind, and set my horse into a canter. Now and again I overtook a body of troops, marching cheerfully, and singing their favourite hymns. They, too, were tired of inaction, and eager to plunge into the strife.

With the falling of darkness I slackened my pace, riding carefully, listening for any unusual sounds, and peering into the gloom. I had not forgotten my former adventure, but nothing untoward happened, and shortly after midnight I drew rein at the gate of the town.

"Your business?" exclaimed the officer of the guard.

"I am from Rochelle, with a despatch for your commandant."

"From the Prince?"

"From the Admiral—it is all one."

The gate was opened, and, having dismounted, I led my horse forward by the bridle.

"You have had a dark ride, monsieur."

"But a safe one," I answered, laughing. "Where is the commandant to be found? He will not feel well pleased at being wakened from his sleep."

"Ah, you do not know him! He is like the owl, and sleeps only in the daylight. At other times he watches; he is going the rounds now, and will be with us in a few minutes. It will need a craftier leader than Anjou to take Saint Jean d'Angely by surprise! Ah, here is the commandant!"

A veteran soldier, with white moustaches, white hair, and grizzled beard! A strongly-built man of middle height, with resolute, determined face, and an air that betokened long years of command.

"A despatch from the Admiral, monsieur," I said, saluting and handing him the packet.

Tearing off the covering, he read the letter by the light of a torch, folded the paper, and put it away carefully. By his face one could not judge whether the information he had received was good or ill.

"You are from Rochelle?" he asked sharply.

"I have just ridden from there, monsieur."

"And are you returning?"

"No, monsieur. I am proceeding to Cognac."

"You have had a brisk ride, and your horse is in need of rest. Come with me."

He conducted me to an inn, wakened the landlord, and did not leave until my horse was comfortably stabled, and preparations for a good supper were in progress. Then he said: "You will be starting early in the morning. Have a care on your journey to Cognac. Bodies of the enemy have been prowling around the district for some days."

"I thank you, monsieur. I was unaware they had ventured so far south."

"They are striking, I think, at Angoulême," he said; "I have sent a courier to Rochelle with the news. Good-night! And don't let the rascals snap you up."

The supper was an excellent one, the bed delightfully cosy and inviting, and my last thought was one of regret at having to leave it so soon. However, I turned out at the landlord's warning, made another hearty meal—these journeys were keen sharpeners of the appetite—and before the day was fairly awake had started in cheerful spirits for Cognac.

CHAPTER VIII

The Tragedy of Jarnac

What led to the dismal disaster that overtook us at the very opening of the campaign I cannot say. Some ascribe it to the rashness of the Prince, who was certainly a very impetuous leader; but it is ill work buffeting the dead, and profitless also. And if his fiery temper did, indeed, bring about the mischance, he exerted himself as a gallant gentleman to retrieve his error.

By great good fortune, as it appeared afterwards, I had carried my despatch safely to Cognac, and was now, after spending a night in the town, riding along the bank of the Charente in the direction of Angoulême. I had not encountered any of Anjou's troopers, though at Cognac it was strongly rumoured they were in the neighbourhood.

The day was cold and somewhat cloudy, the sun shining out only at intervals, and there was a suspicion of rain in the air. Partly to restore the circulation, and partly to ease my horse—for we were ascending a hill—I had dismounted, and was walking briskly along at the animal's side.

From the brow of the hill I had a clear view of the wide plain stretching before me. Huddled together in one corner was the cluster of houses forming the village of Jarnac, where I intended to break my journey. Presently, however, I caught sight of something which put all thought of food and rest out of my head. A body of cavalry had halted on the plain. Some of the men were lying down, some drinking from the brook, but scouts were stationed at a distance from the main body to give warning of any hostile approach.

"This is either Anjou or Condé," I thought, "and in any case it is necessary to discover which."

Still leading my horse, I crept down the hill, and advanced some distance across the plain, ready directly danger threatened to mount and ride. As soon, however, as I drew close enough to distinguish the scouts I saw they were friends, and went on boldly.

Where was Coligny? They did not know; they had parted company with the infantry some time previously. Leaving them, I proceeded to the main body, and in passing a group of cavaliers, heard my name called by a voice I recognized as Roger Braund's.

"Why are you wandering about here?" he asked.

"Faith," I laughed, "I might put that very same question to you! Where are Coligny and the troops? I did not expect to meet with half an army."

"Say, rather, a third; we have not a gun, nor even a man to carry a pike."

"But what does it mean?"

"Perhaps that I don't understand your mode of warfare. We have been marching and countermarching for hours, with no other result as yet than wearing out our animals; but I warrant the Prince has his reasons."

"If there is a man with brains in the enemy's council," said another Englishman, "we shall rejoin our infantry only in the next world. We are scarcely fifteen hundred strong, and I heard this morning that Anjou has at least three thousand."

"Two to one," I remarked carelessly, "the Prince has fought against even heavier odds. But——"

"Mount, mount, messieurs; Anjou is advancing!"

The scouts came galloping in with their warning; the cry was repeated on all sides; men running to their horses mounted hurriedly; officers shouted commands; in an instant all was activity.

"You showed little wisdom in stumbling on us to-day," said Roger. "You would have been better off with your own leader."

"At least I make one more!"

"Yes," he replied, "and a pity too. But come along, you will ride with us, and I promise we will not disgrace you. A fair field for a charge, Edward!" addressing one of his comrades.

"I would rather it were a pitched battle," replied the other; "with our numbers we can do no more than ride them down."

"The Prince! The Prince!" cried one, and presently Condé came riding along our ranks. He had opened his helmet; his face was full of high resolve, his eyes flashed fire.

"Gentlemen!" he exclaimed, "here is the chance for which we have waited. Let us begin the campaign with a victory, and we shall finish it the sooner."

We greeted his words with a cheer; the English shouted "Hurrah!" which sounded strangely in our ears, and every one gripped his sword firmly. For, in spite of cheers, and of brave looks, a desperate enterprise lay before us. Monseigneur's troops were at least twice as numerous as ours, and his men were seasoned soldiers.

But Condé gave us little time for reflection. "Forward! Forward!" We rose in our stirrups, and with a ringing cheer dashed at the foe. Like a wall of rock they stood, and our front rank went down before them. We withdrew a space, and once more sprang forward, but with the same result. The din was terrific; steel clashed against steel; horses neighed, men groaned in agony, or shouted in triumph.

And presently, above the tumult, we heard Condé's voice ringing high and clear, "To me, gentlemen! To me!"

He was in the thick of the press, cutting a passage for himself, while numbers of his bodyguard toiled after him.

"To the Prince!" cried Roger Braund in stentorian tones, "or he is lost!"

We tore our way like a parcel of madmen, striking right and left in blind fury, and not pausing to parry a blow. But the enemy surged round us like waves in a storm. They hammered us in front, in the rear, on both flanks; we fell apart into groups, each group fighting strenuously for dear life.

And in the midst of the fearful struggle there rose the ominous cry, "The Prince is down!"

For an instant both sides stood still, and then Roger Braund, crying, "To the rescue!" leaped straight at those in front of him. The noble band of Englishmen followed, the battle flamed up afresh; renewed cries of "Condé! Condé!" arose, but we listened in vain for the reply of our daring general.

"The Prince is down!" ran mournfully from man to man, and though some fought on with intrepid bravery, the majority were thrown into disorder by their leader's fall.

As for myself, I know not how the latter part of the battle went. Half-stunned by a heavy blow on my helmet, I clung mechanically to my horse, who carried me out of the press. As soon as my senses returned, I drew rein and gazed across the plain. It presented a melancholy sight. Here was a little band of wearied troopers spurring hard from the scene of conflict; there a man, dismounted and wounded, staggering along painfully, while some lay in the stillness of death. They had struck their first and last blow.

The battle, if battle it could be called, was over; the victors were busy securing their prisoners; nothing more could be done, and with a heavy heart I turned reluctantly away. Removing my helmet so that the fresh air might blow upon my aching temples, I rode on, picking up a companion here and there, until at last we formed a troop some fifty strong.

Hardly a word passed between us. We were angry, and ashamed; we had met with a bitter defeat; our leader was down, and no man knew even if he lived.

"Where is the Admiral?" I asked at last of the horseman at my side; "we must find the Admiral."

"I cannot say, but it is certain that when the news reaches him he will retreat"; then he relapsed into silence.

It was a dreary journey. We wandered on aimlessly and hopelessly for hours, and night had long since fallen when, by some lucky chance, we stumbled upon our infantry. We were not the first fugitives to arrive, and the camp was full of excitement.

I made my way straight to the Admiral's tent, and was instantly admitted. Several officers were already there, eagerly discussing the news, and they plied me with anxious questions. I could, however, tell them nothing fresh, and could throw no light on the fate of the Prince.

In the midst of the interview an officer brought in a wounded trooper. He was weak and faint from loss of blood, and, gallantly as he had held himself in the fray, he hung his head shamefacedly.

"You are from Jarnac?" said Coligny kindly; "can you tell us what has happened to your general?"

Every voice was hushed; the silence became painful as we listened with straining ears for the man's reply. Steadying himself, he gave his answer, and a deep groan burst from the assembled officers.

"The Prince is dead, my lord," he said slowly.

"Dead!" echoed our leader. "Killed in the battle?"

"Murdered in cold blood after the battle, my lord!"

"How?" cried Coligny, and never had I seen his face look so stern. "Think well, my man, before speaking. This is a serious statement to make."

"But a true one, my lord. I was not a yard away when the deed was done."

"Tell us all about it," said the Admiral, "for if this be true——" but here he checked himself.

"The Prince's horse fell, my lord, and he was thrown heavily. I tried to reach him, but failed."

"'Tis plain that you made a most gallant attempt!" remarked Coligny in kindly tones.

"I was knocked down, my lord, and I suppose thought to be dead! The Prince lay a yard or so away. He had taken off his helmet, and was talking to one of the enemy's officers. I heard him say, 'D'Argence, save my life and I will give you a hundred thousand crowns!'"

"And what was the answer?"

"The officer promised, my lord, but just afterwards a fresh body of soldiers came galloping to that part of the field. Then the Prince said, 'There is Monseigneur's troop; I am a dead man!'"

"And what answered D'Argence?"

"He said, 'No, my lord, cover your face, and I will yet save you.' But he had not the chance. One of Monseigneur's officers"—we learned afterwards that it was Montesquieu, the captain of the Swiss guard—"shot the Prince in the back of the head!"

"And killed him instantly?"

"He just had strength to say, 'Now I trust you are content!'" replied the trooper, "and then he fell forward dead. They wrapped his body in a sheet and carried it off the field, but I do not know where."

"There is no possible chance of your having been mistaken?"

"None, my lord."

The chaplain, stepping forward, led the trooper from the tent to give him some food, and to bind up his wounds, while every one began discussing the mournful story he had told. In the midst of the talk I slipped out, eager to assure Felix of my safety, and to learn if Roger Braund had returned.

No one in the camp thought of sleep or rest; the soldiers had gathered together in knots, asking and answering questions, while from time to time a single horseman, or half a dozen in a body, trailed wearily into the lines. I met Felix coming toward the tent, and on seeing me he ran forward hastily.

"Is it really you, Edmond?" he cried; "are you hurt? How came you to be in the fight? One of the Englishmen told me you were there. 'Tis a sorry beginning to the campaign, eh? But, after all, 'tis but one dark spot on the sun. Come to our tent and tell us what has happened. There are a thousand rumours."

"Is Roger Braund not with his comrades?" I asked.

"No; there are a good many of the English still missing, but their friends are not anxious; they have lost their way perhaps, and we shall see them in the morning."

As nothing could be done, I accompanied Felix to the tent, where a number of our comrades speedily assembled. Felix gave me food, as I had eaten nothing for hours, and then I related my story.

"On the plain of Jarnac!" exclaimed one in surprise; "what was the Prince doing there?"

"I cannot say. Remember, I came upon them by mere chance."

"'Twas stupid folly!" exclaimed the speaker. "We aren't so strong that we can afford to divide our forces. Condé's rashness will ruin everything. One would think he was a hot-headed boy!"

"If Condé was in fault, he has paid dearly for his mistake," I remarked, and was greeted by cries of "What do you mean?" "Is the Prince hurt?" "Is he a prisoner?" "Speak out, Le Blanc!"

"The Prince, gentlemen," I replied slowly, "is dead; and if my account be true, most foully murdered."

"Condé dead!" cried one, "no, no; there must be some strange mistake!"

"I fear not, monsieur!" and, while they listened in breathless silence, I repeated the story which the wounded trooper had brought from the battle-field.

"Anjou shall have cause to rue this day!" said one, speaking with deadly earnestness. "If I meet him on foot or in the saddle, in victory or in defeat, I will not leave the ground till I have plunged my sword into his heart!"

"But Anjou was not the murderer!"

"An officer of his bodyguard, you said. Do you think he acted against his master's wishes? Pshaw! I tell you, Monseigneur is as much the murderer as if his own fingers had pulled the trigger!" and the murmur of applause from all who heard showed how fully they agreed with him.

When they left the tent, to retail the circumstances of the Prince's death, I was glad to lie down. I was still anxious concerning my English comrade, but Felix, who was too excited to sleep, promised to bring me any information that he could gather. My head ached terribly, but I managed to sleep, and for an hour or two at least I forgot the dismal tragedy that had occurred.

The whole camp was astir in the early morning, and my comrade brought me very welcome news. Roger had arrived during the night, with about a dozen fellow-countrymen, tired out but unwounded.

"I half expected he was dead," I said; "he was in the very thickest of the *mêlée*."

"Humph!" said Felix, "I warrant he fought with no greater bravery than Edmond Le Blanc! He is a gallant fellow enough, but you need not worship him as a hero."

I looked at my comrade with surprise, and I think he felt rather ashamed of his ungenerous speech, as he continued: "however, he is unhurt, which is the main thing. It seems we have lost quite a number of brave fellows besides Condé at Jarnac."

"I suppose the last of the stragglers are in?"

"Yes, and we strike camp almost immediately. Anjou is very kind to give us breathing time. According to our scouts, he is actually going to lay siege to Cognac."

"He will meet with a warm reception!"

"If the citizens can hold him only for a few weeks," said Felix, "all will go well. We are to be joined by strong reinforcements. The sun will shine again, Edmond."

Making my way through the camp after breakfast I came across Roger, who had just risen from a brief sleep.

"I did not come to your tent last night," he said; "there was no need to disturb you. You are not much hurt?"

"No, but rather ashamed! We have begun badly."

"And shall therefore make a better ending," said he brightly. "Cheer up, Edmond, there is no disgrace in being beaten by twice our number. Jarnac is not the only field of battle in France."

CHAPTER IX

A Glorious Victory

The steady courage and resolute will of our great leader raised the spirits of every soldier under his command; the disaster at Jarnac became more and more a dream; the retreat to Niort was conducted without the least disorder or confusion. Every one trusted Coligny, and felt that under his rule all would go well.

And, as far as human skill and foresight could prevail, the Admiral deserved our confidence. All through the day, and far into the night, he toiled, and never grew weary; at one time inspecting his troops, at another strengthening his defences; now endeavouring to form some useful alliance, again writing cheerful letters and putting heart into the more timid of our friends.

We had another leader, too, who, though she did not lead us into battle was worth many a troop of horse to the Cause. I shall never forget the day when Joan of Albret, the great-hearted Queen of Navarre, came riding into our camp at Niort, bringing her son, Henry of Beam, and her nephew Henry, the son of the murdered Condé. True and steadfast in the hour of our defeat—more steadfast even than some of those who would ride fearlessly in the wildest charge—she came to prove her unswerving loyalty.

"I offer you my son," said this noble lady—may her name ever be held in reverence—"who burns with a bold ardour to avenge the death of the Prince we all regret. Behold also Condé's son, now become my own child. He succeeds to his father's name and glory. Heaven grant that they may both show themselves worthy of their ancestors!"

While she spoke, not another sound broke the silence in all that vast assembly; but when the echo

of the last word had died away, such a shout arose that few have ever heard its like. The whole army cheered and cheered again with one voice; hundreds of swords flashed in the air; men went wild with enthusiasm as they cried, "Long live Joan of Albret! long live the Queen of Navarre!"

When at length silence was restored there rode to the front that gallant youth, Henry of Beam, whose winning manners had already charmed us at Rochelle. I have seen him since with all the world at his feet, and crowned with victory; but after his most glorious triumph he did not look more noble than on that memorable day at Niort. He was, as I have said, a splendid horseman, and he managed his fiery charger with exquisite grace and ease. His eyes, usually so sweet, were bright and burning; the hot blood reddened his clear brown skin.

"Soldiers!" he exclaimed—and I would you could have heard the music of his voice—"your cause is mine. I swear to defend our religion, and to persevere until death or victory has restored us the liberty for which we fight."

Once again the thundering cheers pealed forth, and had Monseigneur but met us that day, I warrant he would not have carried a hundred men with him from the field.

"Your Henry of Beam is a gallant youngster, Edmond," remarked Roger Braund that evening; "I would he had been with us at Jarnac!"

"That might have prevented his being here now!"

"True! On the other hand, his presence might have saved the day. However, he will have an opportunity of showing his mettle. Do we move soon?"

"We are waiting for a body of German foot-soldiers, and for the troops from Languedoc. Directly they arrive, I believe we break camp."

"The sooner the better," said he; "we shall rust out by staying here."

Most of the troops, indeed, had begun to weary of inaction, and when, on the arrival of our reinforcements, Coligny determined to offer battle once more, the whole camp received the news with satisfaction. A great grief had befallen our leader. His brother, the kindly genial Sieur Anselot, whom all men loved, had broken down under the terrible strain, and died at Saintes. It was a terrible blow, but the Admiral sternly repressed his sorrow, counting no sacrifice too great for the success of the Cause.

We marched out from the camp at Niort, twenty-five thousand strong, all in good spirits, and all placing the most implicit trust in our gallant leader. The dead Condé's troops were especially eager for the fray, and as they mounted and rode off, the words "Remember Jarnac!" passed from man to man. It was a watchword that boded ill for their opponents.

From day to day our scouts brought in word of the royal forces. They outnumbered us by several thousands, but that did not damp our ardour; in spite of Jarnac, we felt that we were marching to victory.

We had advanced within two days' distance of the city of Limoges, when our scouts galloped in with the information that they had encountered a strong force of hostile cavalry. Our preparations for battle were all made, so Coligny continued his march, the horsemen retiring before us, and making no effort to attack.

We passed an anxious night: the sentries were doubled, the outposts strengthened, and the men slept with their weapons in their hands, ready to spring up at the first note of warning. For the Admiral's personal attendants there was no sleep whatever. We passed our time in visiting the outposts, and in seeing that everything was secure. Only after day broke were we able to snatch an hour or two's rest.

"Faith," laughed Felix, as the march was resumed, "this is fine preparation for a battle! Edmond, rub the dust from your eyes; you look sleepy enough to fall from your saddle!"

"And all our labour was wasted!" I grumbled. "Those fellows just went comfortably to sleep, laughing at us for our pains."

"Never mind!" said my comrade merrily, "it may be our turn to laugh next. And, after all, I would rather laugh last."

All that day we marched through a woody, irregular district, the horsemen watching our movements, but retiring steadily at our approach, as if wishing to lure us into some cunning trap. But Coligny was not to be tempted; he kept his troops well in hand, and in the evening we camped by the side of a small stream with a marsh in our front.

"We have caught him," cried Felix, in a tone of delight.

"Or he has caught us!" said I dubiously. "Anjou has some skilful soldier at his elbow who chose that position."

On the other side of the marsh rose a rugged hill, and at the summit the royalist general had pitched his camp. Rude breastworks, from which the muzzles of several guns peeped out, had been erected, and altogether it looked as if Monseigneur had provided us with a hard nut to crack.

Coligny rode out across the marsh to examine the enemy's position more clearly, and I fancied there was a shade of anxiety on his usually serene face. It was a heavy responsibility he had to bear, for, should his troops be defeated, the Huguenot Cause was lost. There was no other army to replace the one under his command.

"The longer you look at it the less you'll like it," said Roger Braund cheerfully—for our English comrade often came over for a chat when we had pitched camp—"Monseigneur has fenced himself in marvellously well."

"The more credit in digging him out!" laughed Felix. "Don't make Edmond more doleful; he is half afraid now of meeting with a second Jarnac. De Pilles"—the commander of our artillery—"will soon batter down those walls, and a sharp rush will carry the hill."

"'Tis a simple matter winning a battle—in our minds," laughed Roger, "but not always so easy in practice. Monseigneur's troops fought well enough at Jarnac."

"Ah," said Felix merrily, "they will fight well here, but we shall fight better!"

"Is an assault decided on?"

"No one knows," I replied; "there is to be a meeting of the Council presently. But I take it that we must attack. Monseigneur has the advantage of us. He can obtain provisions; we can't."

"And we aren't likely to retreat!" exclaimed Felix.

"In that case we must go forward; but we shall hear the decision in an hour or two."

The Council sat for a considerable time, while we of the Admiral's household discussed the situation among ourselves. There were various opinions given, the older men declaring Monseigneur was too strongly posted to be dislodged, the younger and more hot-headed making light of the danger.

At length the Council broke up, and, though nothing was actually disclosed, we soon became aware that Coligny had resolved on risking a battle.

"Bravo!" said Felix, as we went to our tent, "'twill be a pity if Roche Abeille does not make up for Jarnac!"

The bugle-call roused us at daybreak, and after a hasty breakfast we prepared for the fray. It was a glorious summer morning, with only a few fleecy clouds dotting the blue sky. The country was bathed in sunlight, and the green, leafy foliage of the numerous trees on our left made a delightful picture. The waters of the little stream in our rear danced and sparkled, and the chorus of the birds made wondrous music. Before long every feathered creature was flying hastily away in amazement and affright.

The army was drawn up in battle array, and the noble Coligny, serene and confident, rode along the lines.

"Soldiers!" he exclaimed, "the time has come. The enemy are before us. We must beat them or die. Soldiers, if we lose this battle, the sacred Cause to which we have pledged our lives is overthrown. Our religion will be destroyed, our wives and little ones slain, we ourselves shall go to the prison, the block, or the stake. Soldiers, the safety of the Cause is entrusted to your arms! I know you are worthy of the honour."

A great cheer greeted these stirring words, a cheer that, echoing far and wide, sounded like a haughty challenge of defiance to the foe.

I had little to do but to watch the opening of the battle, and my heart beat fast as De Pilles, a rough and fearless fighter, went forward with his artillery. Almost instantly the excitement became tense.

"He is into the marsh!" cried Felix. "His guns are stuck fast! He cannot get them out! Ah, see, Monseigneur is launching his horsemen at them!"

Down the hill they came in beautiful order, a troop of Italian cavalry, their helmets gleaming, their swords flashing in the sunlight.

"De Pilles is lost!" muttered a man behind me.

"No, no!" cried Felix; "he will beat them off. See, he is forming up his men. Ah, bravo! bravo! Look, there isn't a coward among them!"

With a rush, the Italians swept down on the guns. They were brave men and seasoned fighters, but they came to grief that day. Though their animals floundered in the soft soil they struggled on valiantly; they reached the guns, they wheeled and circled, they struck fierce blows with their glittering blades, but, wherever they rode, there they found a grim and sturdy opponent.

Back they went for a breathing-space, and then, with a magnificent charge, once more flung themselves on the handful of gunners. My heart stood still when, for a moment, our gallant few disappeared as if overwhelmed by the waves of a human sea.

A triumphant shout from Felix roused me. The waves had rolled back, broken and shattered, and we raised cheer after cheer as the baffled horsemen slowly climbed the hill. De Pilles had saved

his guns, and in Monseigneur's Italian troop there were more than a score of empty saddles. It was a good beginning for us.

The battle now became general. The guns, dragged from the marsh on to firm ground, opened fire against the breastworks, the infantry marched steadily forward, two troops of horse worked round to the right, seeking a favourable place for attack.

But our progress was slow. Monseigneur's troops, fighting with rare vigour and courage, forced us back again and again; their position seemed impregnable, and our men fell fast. Unless we could break through somewhere the battle was lost.

By extreme good fortune, I was close behind the Admiral when he turned his head, seeking a messenger.

"Le Blanc" he cried, courteous as ever, even in the midst of the terrible strife, "ride to De Courcy Lamont, and tell him to charge home. Tell him that unless he can make a gap for us, the day is lost. And say that the Admiral trusts him."

Bowing low, I spurred my horse sharply, and darted off. Around me rose the din of battle—the thunder of the guns, the savage cries of angry men closely locked in deadly combat. Already Monseigneur's troops were shouting "Victory!" and I had visions of an even more fearful disaster than at Jarnac.

De Courcy Lamont listened to my message with a proud smile on his face. His troopers were faint and weary; many were more or less seriously wounded; they had lost several of their comrades; but Coligny's words acted like magic.

"The Admiral trusts to us!" said their leader. "Shall we disappoint him?"

"No! no!" they cried; "we will die for the Admiral! Let us charge!"

"I thank you, gentlemen," said De Courcy simply.

It was a desperate enterprise, and would never have been attempted but for the love these gallant men bore to our great chief. For his sake they were going to throw themselves upon death.

"Charge!" Half mad with excitement, I took my place with them, behind De Courcy, who rode several lengths in advance. From a trot to a canter, from a canter to a gallop, and then with one mighty rush we swept down on the foe. A body of horse dashed across our path; we brushed them aside like a handful of chaff, and never slackened pace.

"The Admiral! The Admiral! For the Cause! Remember Jarnac!" we shouted hoarsely, as our straining animals flew over the intervening space.

Faster and faster grew the mad gallop, until, like a living whirlwind, we flung ourselves on a line of bristling pikes.

"For the Admiral!" cried our leader joyously.

"Anjou! Anjou!" came back the defiant answer, and then we were in the midst of them. We had made a gap, but at terrible expense.

Hotter and hotter waxed the strife; swords flashed, pikes ran red, shouts of triumph mingled with groans of despair; men went down and were trampled underfoot in the horrible press; we were tossed and buffeted from side to side, but we fought on with savage desperation, and the cry, "For the Admiral!" still rose in triumph. Truly it could not be said that we grudged our lives that day!

And presently an answering cry of "For the Admiral!" sounded on our ears. Our charge had not been made in vain! Back went the enemy, slowly and stubbornly at first, fighting every inch of the ground, but still retreating.

"They give way!" cried De Courcy, who was bare-headed and wounded, "they give way! Charge, my brave lads!"

The words decided the fortunes of the day. With a rush and a roar we swept forward, and Anjou's stubborn troops scattered in flight. Forward we went in hot pursuit, but suddenly everything became dark to me; the stricken field with its mob of flying men vanished from sight, and I sank forward helplessly across my horse's neck.

CHAPTER X

I Rejoin the Advance

"Do you know me, monsieur? It is I—Jacques."

"Jacques?" I repeated dreamily. "Where are we? What are we doing here? My head aches; I feel stiff all over. Where is the letter? Ah, I remember now. We won the battle, Jacques?"

"Yes, monsieur. It was a great victory. Monseigneur's troops were completely routed."

I closed my eyes and lay thinking. By degrees it all came back to me; the Admiral's message, De Courcy's wild charge, the terrible conflict, the flight of the royalists, and then—! I had a strange half-consciousness of having been raised from the ground and carried some distance, but of what had really happened I had no definite knowledge.

But how came Jacques into the picture? Surely he was not at Roche Abeille! I opened my eyes and saw him bending over me and looking eagerly into my face.

"Jacques," I said, "what are you doing here?"

"Nursing you, monsieur," he answered cheerfully. "I got to Rochelle just after you had started, and followed the army; but the battle was over when I reached Roche Abeille."

"How did you find me?"

"I went to the Admiral's gentlemen. They said you were killed, and that your friend Monsieur Bellière was distracted, and there was another gentleman, an Englishman, who looked very unhappy. But we fetched a surgeon, who patched you up, and we carried you here."

"Where, Jacques?"

"The city of Limoges, monsieur. You are lodged at a comfortable inn, and now you have talked enough."

"One more question, my good Jacques; how long have I been here?"

"Three days, monsieur. Now I will get you some nourishing food, and afterwards you must sleep."

The next morning, finding I was much stronger, Jacques was willing to answer further questions. Felix had come through the fray unscathed, and Roger Braund was only slightly wounded. Anjou, he said, had been thoroughly defeated, and there was already talk of the end of the war.

"And where are the troops now?" I asked.

"They marched in the direction of Poitiers. It is rumoured that the Admiral intends to besiege the town."

"It may be so," I observed doubtfully, "but it is hardly likely. That is the mistake Monseigneur made after Jarnac."

"Well," replied Jacques with a smile, "it cannot interest monsieur very much for the next three or four weeks."

He had quite recovered from his own wounds, and was full of praise of the Count St. Cyr, who had treated him with the greatest kindness.

"The count is a noble gentleman," he remarked, "and full of zeal for the Cause. He is bringing his retainers to aid the Admiral."

"He is an old man, too," I said musingly.

"But with all the fire of a boy, monsieur."

"Have you heard that a price has been set on my father's head?" I asked presently.

"Yes," and the worthy fellow's face clouded over with passion, "that is Etienne Cordel's handiwork."

"But we have done the man no harm!"

"He hates your father, monsieur; and, besides, Le Blanc is a fine property. Monseigneur and the Italian woman are deeply in his debt, and that would be a simple mode of payment. 'Tis easy to give away what does not belong to one. Many Huguenot estates have changed hands in that way."

I thought Jacques was exaggerating the case, but not caring to argue the matter I said no more, and turning round dropped off into a refreshing sleep.

For a fortnight longer I lay in bed, and then the surgeon, who came every day, allowed me to get up. My head was still dizzy, and my legs tottered under me, but, leaning on Jacques' arm, I walked slowly up and down the room. The next morning, still attended by my faithful servant, I went downstairs and out into the street, and from that day I fast began to recover my strength.

There was not much news of the war, beyond the fact that the Huguenots were besieging Poitiers, a piece of information that I was sorry to hear, since it seemed to me they would fritter away their strength for nothing. The Admiral, however, doubtless possessed good reasons for his actions, and in any case it was not for me to question his wisdom.

I was able now to walk without assistance, and even to sit in the saddle, though not very firmly, and I felt eager to rejoin my comrades. But to this neither Jacques nor the surgeon would consent, so I continued to while away the time in the quaint old town as patiently as possible. But, as the weeks passed and my strength returned more fully, life in Limoges became more and more insupportable, and I finally resolved to travel by easy stages to Poitiers.

The news we gathered on the journey was by no means reassuring. Coligny had failed to capture the town; he had lost several thousand good troops, and had raised the siege. Equally discomfiting was the information that Anjou was in the field again with a strong and well-equipped army.

"We seem to have gained little by our victory," I said disconsolately.

"We shall do better after our next one," said Jacques cheerily. "We learn by our mistakes, monsieur."

The rival armies had apparently vanished. From time to time we obtained news of Coligny, but it was very vague, and left us little the wiser. One day he was said to be at Moncontour, another at Loudun; on a third we were told he was retreating pell-mell to La Rochelle, with Anjou hot on his heels.

Within a few hours' ride of Loudun we put up for the night at a small inn. Jacques attended to the animals—one of us generally saw them properly fed—while I gave instructions to the landlord concerning our supper. He was an old man, almost as old as Pierre, and he had such a peculiar trick of jerking his head in answer to my remarks that I almost feared it would come right off.

"I am sorry, monsieur, I will do my best; but the larder is empty. I will kill a fowl; there is one left; but monsieur will be under the disagreeable necessity of waiting."

"We are sharp set," I said. "Is there no cold meat in the house?"

"Monsieur, the troopers have devoured everything."

"Whose troopers?" I asked sharply.

"Whose but Monseigneur's!" replied the old man; "but they did not remain long; they were busy hunting down the heretics."

After asking a few more questions, I sent him away to catch and cook our supper, and then discussed his information with Jacques. From the old man's story we gathered that the Duke of Montpensier was marching south with a division of the royal army in pursuit of our comrades.

"Between Montpensier and Anjou we are in an awkward situation," I said. "We have overshot the mark."

"That is true, monsieur; we must turn back, if we wish to join the Admiral; but our animals are tired."

"We will give them a few hours' rest, and start early in the morning."

"If the supper is cooked by then!" answered Jacques slyly.

There seemed to be some little doubt about that, but finally our host, who had been scouring the village, returned in triumph with provisions for an ample meal.

Awake soon after dawn, we fed the animals, broke our own fast, and, having settled the score, started off on the highroad to Poitiers.

It was, by the position of the sun, about nine o'clock in the morning when we perceived a horseman approaching us. He appeared in a desperate hurry, and was spurring his horse vigorously.

"Jacques!" I exclaimed, "this is a soldier of some sort. Will he be coming from Montpensier, think you?"

"Likely enough, monsieur."

"If so, he may carry important news, and his information may be of service to the Admiral. It should be easy for us to obtain it."

"True, monsieur; he will never dream of danger."

"But we must not hurt him, Jacques; mind that."

"Nothing more than a tap on the head," said Jacques, "if he should prove obstinate."

The rider came along at a swinging pace. He was a young fellow, richly dressed, and of a handsome appearance.

"Good news, monsieur!" I cried, riding toward him. "Do you carry good news?"

It was evident that he had not the slightest idea of meeting with an enemy in the rear of Montpensier's troops. He drew rein, saying, "Are you from Monseigneur? I am bearing him welcome information. Coligny is retreating, we fell on his rear just now and drove it in. Ah, ah, 'tis a rich joke! He thinks Monseigneur himself is here with the whole army."

"While 'tis only Montpensier with a division!" I said, laughing. "Where shall we find the Duke?"

"An hour's ride, not more; but I must be going. Monseigneur waits to make his plans."

The next instant Jacques had clutched his bridle rein, while the young fellow was gazing in blank

astonishment along the barrel of my pistol.

"'Tis a disagreeable necessity, monsieur," I remarked, speaking very harshly, "but you are our prisoner. Tie the horses' reins together, Jacques, and remove this gentleman's weapons. Do not stir, monsieur, it would be foolish. A cry or a movement will cost your life. We must have that despatch which you are carrying to Monseigneur."

"Who are you?" he asked.

"We belong to the Huguenot army, and have met you by a stroke of good fortune. And now the document, monsieur! Will you surrender it? Or will you compel us to search you? That is an undignified proceeding, and will not help you at all."

"No," he agreed gloomily; "I am in your power. But this is a sorry trick; I would rather you had forced the paper from me at the sword's point. It would have been more creditable to your honour."

"That may be so, but meanwhile we await the paper."

Finding himself helpless, he handed me the document with the best grace he could muster, and I immediately placed it inside my doublet.

"Now," I exclaimed cheerfully, "we are in a hurry to reach our comrades, but we have no wish to ride into the midst of the Duke's troops. In order to avoid that calamity, we will make you our guide; but pray be careful, because in the event of a mistake you will be the first victim. My servant is an old soldier, while I have had some practice with the pistol. But this is a disagreeable subject; let us dismiss it."

"With all my heart," said he, laughing. "And now what would you have me do?"

"Put us on the track of our comrades, and prevent us from falling into the Duke's hands."

"That is," said he, "to return good for evil. Well, 'tis something of a novelty for me."

"You should practise it more frequently," I laughed, and with that we rode on, our prisoner being in the middle.

I hardly thought he would venture his life by misleading us of set purpose, yet for all that I rode cautiously, keeping my eyes open for any sign of the enemy. But either by good luck or our prisoner's skilful guidance—and it matters little which—we entirely avoided the Royalist army, and came up with our own troops just as they had halted for a short rest.

Being instantly challenged, I gave my name to the officer, and asked where the Admiral was to be found.

"I will take you to him," said he, and he led us through the camp, walking by the horse's side.

Coligny was eating his frugal meal, but he glanced up at our approach, and the officer said, "Edmond Le Blanc, general, who claims to belong to your household."

"Le Blanc!" echoed the Admiral, knitting his brows—he had doubtless forgotten me—"ah, of course; you have been absent from duty a long time."

"I had the misfortune to be left behind at Roche Abeille, my lord."

"Ah, I remember. You are Bellière's comrade, and you carried my message to De Courcy. So you have recovered?"

"Yes, my lord; but I have something important to say. I have had the good luck to capture a messenger carrying a despatch from the Duke of Montpensier to Monseigneur."

"To Monseigneur!" and, turning to my prisoner, he said, "Is he not with the troops who attacked us?"

"I do not know the customs of your gentlemen, my lord," he replied, with a low bow, "but it is not our practice to betray secrets to an enemy."

"A proper answer," said the Admiral, with more slowness of speech even than usual, "and a just reproof. But this paper should tell what I wish to learn," and he broke the seal.

"Montpensier's division alone," he muttered; "this is valuable information. Le Blanc, can we be sure of this?"

"It is certain, my lord, that Monseigneur's troops are not present, though I believe they are hurrying to join with the Duke's."

"There will be just time," he said, "just time," and, leaving his meal, he instantly summoned his principal officers.

As soon as my interview with him was over a dozen of my old comrades crowded around, congratulating me on my recovery, and asking all sorts of questions. Several familiar faces were missing, and I learned that more than one of my intimate friends had been left behind in the trenches at Poitiers. Felix, happily, was unhurt, and he informed me that Roger Braund was still with the little troop of Englishmen.

"But what of your prisoner?" he asked. "Has he given his parole?"

"No, I fancy he is rather counting on the chance of escape."

"Then he must be placed under guard. I will attend to it, and return in a few minutes. Well, Jacques, has your master been very troublesome?"

"Not since we left Limoges, monsieur."

We were preparing to look for Roger when the bugles sounded, the men sprang to arms, and orders were issued for the retreat to be resumed.

"I don't like this," grumbled Felix, "it breaks the men's spirits. Our rearguard came running in to-day like a parcel of sheep. I wish the Admiral would fight; it will be too late after a while. It is not pleasant to be chased as if we were rabbits."

The royalists were in full view now, and the faster we marched the more closely they pressed the pursuit. It was very galling, and many a murmur was heard even against our noble leader, but none from those who rode with him in the rear. Twice we turned and faced the enemy, but, on each occasion, after a few minutes' conflict the order was issued for further retreat.

At length we reached the summit of a gentle slope, behind which flowed the River Dive. Here it seemed as if the Admiral intended to make a stand, but the royalists gave him little leisure for forming plans. They advanced boldly, taunting us for runaways, and bidding us muster sufficient courage to cross swords with them.

A volley from our German foot-soldiers checked their rush, and, while they were endeavouring to re-form, a body of horse crashed, as if shot from a gun, into their left flank. The noble St. Cyr, erect and soldierly, in spite of his four score and five years, led the charge, and a rousing cheer broke from us at sight of the gallant veteran.

But there was little time for cheering. "Charge, my children!" cried the Admiral, "charge, and strike home! For the Faith!"

"For the Faith!" we echoed lustily, spurring our horses, and dashing into the fray.

Hammered by St. Cyr on the left, by the Admiral in front, by the young princes on the right, the royalist horse reeled and staggered. Again and again they tried to rally; but we rode them down, broke the groups as soon as they re-formed, drove them pell-mell on to their infantry, and then with one grand rush tumbled the whole division into ruin.

"Forward! Forward!" cried the hot-bloods. "Remember Jarnac!" "Remember Condé!" "Cut them down!"

But a wild pursuit formed no part of the Admiral's plans; he wished to cross the river unmolested, so the bugles were sounded, and we came dropping back, laughing and cheering, and in high spirits at our brilliant little victory. As with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes we ranged ourselves around our brave leader some one cried out, "See, what is going on over yonder!"

In a corner of the field, some distance off, a number of royalists had rallied round a flag. Something strange was happening; the flag disappeared, came into view again, and once more sank from sight. Then in one spot the crowd gave way as if burst asunder, and out from the gap leaped a horseman. He was carrying the flag, and he rode straight toward us. A dozen men started in pursuit, but he outdistanced them easily, turning from time to time and waving the flag as if in derision.

We gazed in astonishment at the spectacle, wondering what it meant, until Felix cried out, "'Tis the Englishman! 'Tis Roger Braund. He has captured the flag!"

A great roar of cheering went up as he approached us, his helmet gone, his face bleeding, his doublet slashed, but his eyes smiling cheerfully. With an easy grace he jumped from his horse, and advancing on foot presented the trophy to the Admiral.

"A memento of the battle-field, my lord," he said, with a courteous bow.

Coligny took the flag, and with a rare smile handed it back, saying, "Monsieur, it could not remain in worthier hands! Let it be carried in the ranks of your gallant countrymen, to whom we owe so much."

Roger bowed again. "The memory of your praise my lord," said he, "will nerve us to deserve it."

As we rode back toward the river, every one tried to get near him, to shake his hand, to praise him for his deed of daring. And in truth it was a splendid action! Single-handed, he had charged into the press; single-handed he had wrested the trophy by from its custodian; and, still alone, had fought his way out. It was a brilliant feat, which we of the Religion talked of round many a camp fire. And that it was done by one who was not our countryman did not lessen our admiration.

A Desperate Conflict

WE had crossed the Dive safely, the cavalry last of all, and the soldiers, wearied by their long marches, had thrown themselves down to snatch a brief rest. The enemy were assembling on the opposite bank of the river, and it was plain that they had been heavily reinforced.

"Monseigneur must have arrived with his troops," said Felix. "I hope the Admiral will offer him battle. The victory over Montpensier has put our fellows in fine fettle; they would fight now with a good heart."

"The enemy have us at a disadvantage," said Roger. "You forget our guns are at Montcontour."

A surgeon had dressed his wounds; he had borrowed a helmet from a comrade, and had changed his doublet. His left arm troubled him somewhat, but otherwise he suffered no ill effects from his famous fight for the flag.

"They outnumber us, too," said I, "especially in their cavalry, and Anjou's gentlemen are no mean swordsmen."

"But we must fight at some time or other; we cannot wander about the country for ever!" laughed Felix. "It seems to me we have been playing at hide-and-seek with Anjou ever since leaving Poitiers. And let me whisper another thing—the Germans are beginning to grumble."

"That," said Roger, "is a serious matter. What is their grievance?"

"Money! Their pay has fallen into arrears, and I don't see how it is to be made up. The Admiral has almost ruined himself for the Cause already. 'Tis a pity we cannot capture Anjou's money chests; they would be worth having. *Corbleu!* the bugle is sounding! That means there is to be no battle."

"Monseigneur may have something to say to that," remarked Roger, as he walked off toward his own comrades.

In a short time the troops had fallen in, and the infantry at a swinging pace marched off the ground, the cavalry as before forming the rearguard. The evening was neither clear nor dull, there being just sufficient light to enable us to see our way. St. Cyr's troop, and the body of Englishmen, now, alas! sadly reduced in numbers, rode last of all, and occasionally one of the troopers would gallop up to our leader with information of the enemy's movements.

We appeared to have gained a good start, as it was not until noon of the next day that our rearguard was driven in, and we got a clear view of the hostile troops. They followed us closely, hanging like leeches on our rear, but refraining from making any determined attack. Still, in order to protect our own main body, we were forced several times to turn at bay. In these combats the fiercest fighting always centred round the troop of Englishmen carrying the captured flag.

"Roger is a gallant fellow," I remarked after one of these occasions, "but too venturesome. It would be more prudent to hide the trophy."

"Faith!" cried Felix, "you have strange ideas! I would hold it as high as I could, till my arm was numbed. I hear they have hung our banners in Notre Dame, so that the Parisians may see what fine fellows they are. If I could capture a flag, Edmond, they should cut me in little pieces before I let it go. Were I your English friend I would not change places with Coligny himself."

"Well," I said laughing, "you may have a chance to obtain your wish soon, for, whether it pleases our leaders or not, they will be compelled to fight. This retreat cannot continue much longer. And if the Germans desert us, there is likely to be a second Jarnac."

"Rubbish!" exclaimed he lightly; "we should gain the greater honour by the victory!"

Our German allies had become very sullen during the last day or two, and the evening we reached Montcontour they broke out into open threats. They declared angrily that unless their arrears of pay were immediately made up they would not fight.

The evening was almost as miserable as that after the battle of Jarnac. Monseigneur, with a strong, well-equipped army, was close on our heels, ready to swoop down upon us at any moment. Our own men were weary and disheartened, and now we had to contend with the anger of our allies.

"Let the poltroons go!" exclaimed Felix scornfully. "We will fight and win without them," and all the young hot-heads among our comrades applauded him. But the veterans were wiser, and openly showed their pleasure when it was announced that our leader had, by another splendid sacrifice, appeased his mutinous followers. But, even with the Germans ready to do their duty, our prospects seemed to me far from rosy, and I found that Roger Braund held the same view.

"Whether we fight or retreat," said he, "in my opinion the situation is equally desperate."

"The Council has decided to give battle," exclaimed Felix, who had just come from the Admiral's tent.

"Then a good many of us are spending our last evening on earth," observed Roger calmly.

"We must take our chance," said Felix; "every battle levies its toll; but I can see no more danger here than at Roche Abeille. Do you think our fellows have lost heart?"

"Not exactly; but they are dispirited, while their opponents are full of confidence."

"We beat them at Roche Abeille!"

"They have recovered from that defeat."

"We flung them off at Dive!"

"A bagatelle! Remember, only Montpensier's division was engaged. Things are different now. Monseigneur has a thoroughly good army. His cavalry especially are as brave as ours, and far more numerous. Still, I may be looking through a smoked glass. This time to-morrow you may be rallying me on my gloomy prophecy. I hope so, with all my heart!"

"I am sure of it," laughed Felix merrily. "You will not have the courage to look me in the face!"

During this conversation there was a matter on my mind of which I was resolved to speak before my English comrade returned to his own quarters.

"Is it necessary," I asked, "to carry that flag into the battle to-morrow? According to your account, the conflict will be a desperate one; is it well to expose your comrades to even greater danger? The sight of it will rouse your opponents to fury, and your troop will be singled out for vengeance."

"As Felix would say, we must take our chance," he answered smilingly. "The Admiral committed the flag to our charge, and, my comrades will guard it with their lives."

"It is needless risk."

"I think not, Edmond; it will put heart into us when the hour of trial comes. But the night grows late; I must wish you farewell, and trust that we may meet again when the battle is over."

We bade him good-night, and, having no duties to perform, lay down to rest. I slept very lightly, my brain being filled with all sorts of confused fancies, and it was a relief to hear the bugles sound the rouse.

Felix sprang up cheerfully, and in a short time we had placed ourselves in attendance on our chief, who greeted us with his usual grave but kindly smile.

"Let us commend our souls to God, gentlemen," he said reverently, "and beseech Him to strengthen our hearts in the approaching encounter."

It may have been pure fancy on my part, but as we rode along the lines I seemed to miss that air of cheerful confidence which had been so evident at Roche Abeille. The men greeted their general with cheers, and I had no doubt they would do their duty; but they lacked that eager vivacity which goes so far toward winning victory.

Across the plain the enemy were drawn up in two lines with their artillery posted on a hill, and about eight o'clock the first cannon ball came booming toward us. Instantly our guns replied, and a fierce artillery duel which lasted throughout the battle began.

"Their guns are heavier than ours, and carry a farther distance," I observed to Felix.

"It matters little," replied he; "the battle will be decided by the sword. I wonder when we are going to advance?"

"Not at all, I expect. The Admiral has chosen his ground"—though there was little choice for that matter—"and intends to stand on the defensive."

"That may suit the Germans well enough, but our own men do not like waiting to be charged. Monseigneur means to drive in our right wing! See, he is bringing his cavalry forward. How splendidly they ride! It makes one proud to know they are Frenchmen!"

"And sorry, too!"

I think Monseigneur was at their head, but the distance from our centre, where the Admiral had stationed himself, was great, and I may have been mistaken; but the leader, whoever he was, advanced very gallantly, several lengths in advance of his front line, waving his sword and cheering his followers.

The sun shone down on their steel caps, their breastplates and thigh-pieces, and made their swords glitter like silver. They formed a pretty picture, with their gay flags and fluttering pennons, and they rode with all the confidence of victors.

From a trot they broke into a gallop, and we held our breath as, gathering momentum, they swept proudly down on our right wing. A volley rang out, and here and there a trooper dropped, but the rest galloped on straight for their foe.

We craned our necks to watch the result. Not a man spoke; we hardly dared to breathe, so keen was our anxiety. Would our fellows stand firm before that human avalanche? If they gave way ever so little, our right wing must be tumbled into ruin.

Nearer and nearer, in beautiful order, horse's head to horse's head, they tore along, until, with a tremendous crash, they flung themselves upon the solid wall of infantry.

"Bravo!" cried Felix excitedly, "they are broken; they are turning back! Ah, St. Cyr is upon them! There go the Englishmen! For the Faith! For the Faith!"

We stood in our stirrups, waving our swords and cheering like madmen. Straight as a die the noble veteran with his gallant troop and the scanty band of Englishmen leaped into the midst of the baffled horsemen, and drove them back in wild disorder.

But there were brave and valiant hearts among those royalist gentlemen, and we had hardly finished our exulting cheers when they returned to the attack. They flung away their lives recklessly, but they forced a passage, and our infantry were slowly yielding to numbers when Coligny, with a "Follow me, gentlemen!" galloped to the rescue.

Cheer answered cheer as we dashed into the fray, and the shouts of "Anjou!" were drowned by the cries of "For the Faith!" "For the Admiral!"

With splendid bravery the royalists stood their ground; but Coligny's presence so inspired his followers that at last, with one irresistible rush, they swept forward, carrying everything before them.

"Stand firm, my brave lads!" said our chief, as the troops, flushed with their success, formed up anew, "stand firm, and the day is won!"

He had turned to speak to the Count of St. Cyr, when a mounted messenger dashed up, panting and breathless.

"My lord," he gasped, after a moment's pause, "we are heavily beset on the left, and are being forced back. I fear that the whole wing is in danger."

"Courage, my friend," replied Coligny, "courage. We will be with you directly. Come, gentlemen, there is still work for us to do."

The battle was now at its height, but as we dashed along from right to left, our centre paused to cheer their gallant general. They were hardly pressed, but were holding their own sturdily, and our spirits rose at sight of their intrepid defence.

On the left wing, however, the case was different. Here Anjou, or Tavannes—for I suppose it was the marshal who really directed the battle—was throwing successive bodies of troops upon the devoted Huguenots, who were sorely put to it to defend their position. But at our approach a great cry of relief went up from the panting soldiers. There was one among us worth a whole division!

Even those who had begun to retreat joined in the shout, and once more dashed into the fray. Wave after wave of royalists rolled down upon us, but time and again we flung them back, and at last, with one superb effort, hurled their front rank into ruin.

"The day goes well," cried Felix exultingly, as we galloped back to our lines. "Anjou will remember Montcontour!"

In every part of the field the fight now raged fiercely, and, wherever the stress was greatest, there, as if by magic, appeared Coligny. His escort steadily decreased in numbers; one died here, while supporting a body of infantry, another dropped during some wild charge; but our general himself, though fighting like a common trooper, appeared invulnerable.

Wherever he was, there victory followed our arms; but the odds against us were too heavy. Our men stood in their places and fought to the death; but their limbs grew tired, their arms ached with the strain; they needed rest. All our troops, however, were in the fighting-line, and the royalist attacks never ceased.

Anjou fed his lines constantly; fresh troops took the places of the fallen; we might slay and slay, but the number of our enemies never seemed to lessen. And in the midst of the terrible uproar a cry arose that our centre was wavering. For an hour or more a battle of giants had been taking place there. In front of our infantry the dead lay piled in a heap, but for every royalist who died Anjou sent another.

The strain was too great to be borne. Our men were beginning to give way, and once more we galloped with the Admiral at headlong speed toward the point of danger. We were too late; we should perhaps have been too late in any case. The royalist foot-soldiers opened out, and from behind them poured impetuously a body of horsemen.

They struck us full, rode us down, leaped at the infantry, forced a passage here and there, cut and slashed without mercy, yelling like tigers, "Death to the Huguenots!"

Coligny was wounded, his face bled; I thought he would have fallen from his saddle; but, recovering himself, he called on us to follow him and dashed at the victorious horsemen. Our numbers were few and no help could reach us. We called on our men to stand firm, to fight for the Admiral, to remember their wives and children—it was all in vain.

We were borne along in one struggling, confused mass, horse and foot, royalists and Huguenots all mingled together.

"Anjou! Anjou!" shouted the victors in wild exultation, while the cries of "For the Admiral! For the Faith!" became weaker and weaker. In that part of the field the battle was lost.

We closed around our chief, perhaps a score of us, some even of that number already desperately wounded. No one spoke, but we set our teeth hard, resolving grimly that there should be twenty corpses before Anjou's victorious troopers reached him.

"We must stop them," said Coligny, speaking in evident pain, "turn them back, beg them to fight, or the Cause is lost."

Again and again we endeavoured to make a stand; calling on the fugitives to halt, to remember they were Frenchmen, to look their foes in the face—it was useless, every little group that formed for a moment being swept away by the raging, human torrent.

"Some one must find Count Louis of Nassau," said our general, "and say I trust to him to cover the retreat. We may yet rally the runaways."

We looked at each other in doubt. It was not the fear of death that kept us tongue-tied, though death lay in our rear, but each man wished to spend his life for our beloved leader.

"Let three or four of you go," he said; "one may reach him," and as he spoke his glance seemed to light on my face.

"I will take the Count your message, my lord!" I cried, and without waiting for a reply turned my horse's head, and dashed into the whirlpool.

The battle-field was a hideous scene. Wherever the eye could reach, men were fighting and dying. There was no order even among the conquerors. I came across a little knot of Huguenot gentlemen who had turned furiously at bay.

"For the Admiral!" I cried, plunging in wild excitement into the midst of the hostile swordsmen. "For the Admiral!" Perhaps my comrades thought me mad, and in sober truth they would not have been far wrong; but they were generous souls, and with a yell of defiance they cut their way through after me.

"Count Louis," I said breathlessly to the first man, as we emerged on the other side, "where is he?"

"I do not know; he was on our right wing when the crash came."

"I must find him; I have a message from the chief"

"Let us try the right wing," he said, "they are making a stand there."

A dozen gentlemen had followed me, one of them carrying a flag, and as we galloped forward others joined us until we were fifty or sixty strong. It was like riding into the very jaws of death, but they asked no questions; the sight of the flag was sufficient. A body of infantry barred our path; we turned neither to right nor left, but crashed straight through them. A few foot-soldiers ran with us, holding by the stirrups, going cheerfully to death, rather than seek safety in shameful flight.

Suddenly a burst of cheering in a foreign tongue reached us. "Hurrah! Hurrah! For the Admiral!" and a troop of horse came tearing down. It was the band of gallant Englishmen, and I recognized Roger Braund still bearing the captured trophy. Fearing they might mistake us for royalists I rode forward hastily, crying in English, "Friends! Friends! We are Huguenots!"

CHAPTER XII

The Return to Rochelle

The conference was brief. "Have you seen Count Louis?" I asked their leader.

"No, monsieur, but we will help you to find him. Forward, brave boys; another blow for the Cause!"

They replied with a cheer—oh, how those Englishmen cheered!—and we raced on together, French and English, side by side, and death all around us. I glanced at Roger; he had been wounded again, but there was no time to speak.

The retreat in this part of the field had not become general; numbers of soldiers in tolerably good order were still battling stubbornly, and presently we reached the remnant of several troops of cavalry.

In front of them was the venerable Count of St. Cyr, his snow-white beard sweeping to his waist.

"My lord," I said, riding up, "can you tell me where to find Count Louis of Nassau?"

"Farther on the right, monsieur," he replied courteously; "but you will find it difficult to reach him. Ah, here they come!" and, glancing ahead, I perceived a cloud of horsemen preparing to

swoop down upon us.

"Pray, my lord," pleaded his chaplain, who was close by, "say something to encourage your troops. They are faint and weary with fighting, and the odds against them are terrible."

The stout-hearted warrior turned to his followers. "Brave men need no words!" he cried; "do as you see me do!" and they greeted his speech with frantic cheers.

"You will be lucky to meet Count Louis after this!" cried Roger, as I returned to my men.

The royalists swept forward, threatening to engulf us as the wild sea swallows a tiny boat, and I must admit that my heart sank at sight of them. But I was in the company of brave men, and following the flag of as brave a leader as could be found in all France.

He glanced round at us; there was a proud smile on his resolute face; his eyes glowed with fiery ardour.

"Charge, my children!" he cried, "and strike a last blow for St. Cyr!"

He pressed his horse's sides with the spurs, and waving his sword dashed forward, his battle-cry, "St. Cyr!" ringing out high and clear. It was a sight to make one weep, and yet feel proud that one's country could produce such a hero.

Forward we went, and the air was filled with cries of "St Cyr! For the Admiral! Hurrah! Hurrah!" as we plunged into the midst of the press.

"Forward, my children!" cried St Cyr, as he carved a passage for himself through the throng; "forward!"

He was a splendid rider and a skilful swordsman, but his enemies closed round him thickly. Savage blows rained upon him from every side, and at last, with a "Fight on, my children!" the gallant veteran sank bleeding to the ground. Montcontour cost France numerous brave men but none braver than the chivalrous St. Cyr.

His fall, instead of dispiriting his followers, roused them to fury! No one asked or gave quarter; it was a fight to the death, and when finally we succeeded in breaking through the royalist horse, half of our number lay lifeless on the plain. Some there were—St. Cyr's personal attendants notably—so fired with grief and anger at the death of their beloved chief that they were for turning back and renewing the combat.

This, however, was stark madness, so we galloped on, with the royalists like sleuth-hounds on our track.

Presently they slackened their pace, and then abandoned the pursuit, for we were approaching our cavalry, commanded by Count Louis of Nassau.

"You are welcome, brave hearts!" he exclaimed, "every man is needed," and his troops cheered us vigorously.

"My lord," I said, riding up and saluting, "I have come from the Admiral; he begs that you will cover the retreat, for unless you can do so all is lost."

"Where is the Admiral, monsieur?"

"My lord, when the centre broke, he was carried away by the rush. He has been wounded in the head, and I fear seriously."

"Did you leave him in safety?"

"He was surrounded by his bodyguard; at least, by all those who were left alive."

"Will the centre rally, think you?"

"There is no centre; it is a scattered mob. I fear there is no army except the troops you have here. The left, I am sure, has given way."

He was about to reply when a cavalier galloped up to us. His horse's sides were flaked with spume, and the gallant beast quivered in every limb. The rider was deathly pale; one arm hung down limply, his side was stained with blood. He rolled from side to side, having scarcely sufficient strength to keep his seat in the saddle.

He endeavoured to salute Count Louis, while I, leaning forward, placed my arm round his waist to support him.

"My lord," he said, "the Admiral—" and stopped helpless.

"'Tis one of Coligny's gentlemen," I exclaimed, "he has come on the same errand as myself. There were three or four of us."

The wounded cavalier looked into my face. "Le Blanc!" he said feebly; "it is all right," and with that his head fell forward, and he dropped dead across his horse's neck.

"A brave and gallant gentleman!" exclaimed Count Louis. "France should be proud of her sons!"

Lifting him from his horse, we laid him on the plain and turned away. On that awful day no one

had leisure for sorrow; the sorrow would come afterwards.

It was useless now attempting to return to the Admiral, so I joined my English comrade.

"You are hurt?" I said anxiously.

"A trifle; no more. Where is Bellière?"

"With the Admiral. Coligny is badly wounded. We have lost the battle."

"There is time to gain the victory yet!"

"You do not understand. The army is gone; it is a mere mob, utterly helpless; we are the only troops left. The royalists are slaying at their pleasure."

"In that case," said he gravely, "we have serious work before us. Who was the noble old man killed in the last charge?"

"The Count of St. Cyr, one of the bravest gentlemen in the Huguenot army. It will grieve the Admiral sorely to hear of his death."

"He was a splendid soldier. Ah, the bugles are sounding. Edmond, my friend, I fear the worst of the day is still to come."

My English friend was right. What had gone before was the play of children compared with what followed. We had the whole force of Anjou's army opposed to us. Hour after hour we retreated, fighting every step of the way. Of the eighteen thousand Huguenots who had marched out to battle it seemed as if we alone remained. Again and again the royalists bore down in overwhelming numbers; their heavy guns ploughed lanes through our ranks; the arquebusiers pelted us with bullets unceasingly; the horsemen charged with desperate fury.

But in spite of everything we held together; for if we once gave way the doom of our beloved general was sealed.

"Remember, brave hearts," cried Count Louis, "that we are fighting for the Admiral! We must die for Coligny!"

He himself displayed the most wonderful bravery; nothing daunted him; beset by death on every hand he remained cool and resolute, rallying us after every onset, rousing the faint-hearted by his own indomitable courage.

At last the blessed darkness came to our relief. The rain of bullets ceased; we no longer heard the thundering beat of galloping horses in our rear, were no longer called to face about in order to repel some fierce cavalry charge. The pursuit had stopped; the victors had returned to celebrate their triumph.

We marched on in the darkness of the night, gloomy and weary. Some were too tired and dispirited even to talk; others—but only a few—grumbled bitterly at their leaders, telling each other that if this or that had been done, we should have gained the victory. Many of the poor fellows were badly hurt; some sank exhausted to the ground, from which they would never rise again.

At Parthenay we overtook the Admiral and the few troops he had been able to collect. When morning came, Felix was one of the first to meet me, and I had never seen him so down-hearted. His bright smile, his happy, cheery looks had all gone; he hung his head in shame.

"It is terrible, Edmond," he said; "the Cause is ruined, and we are disgraced. I would rather we had all died on the field."

"Nonsense!" I replied, endeavouring to hearten him; "we are of far more use alive than dead. And to be beaten is not to be disgraced. Had you seen the Count of St. Cyr die you would not use that word. But what of our chief? Is he seriously wounded?"

"His jaw is broken by a pistol-shot."

"Yet I warrant he has not given way to despair!"

"No," he replied with something of his old brightness, "a Coligny does not despair."

"Nor does a Bellière!" I returned smiling. "We shall rally the runaways in a few days, and Coligny will command an army again."

The defeat was, however, a heavier one than I guessed, and only Anjou's folly saved us from utter destruction. Instead of hunting us down with his whole force he turned aside to besiege St. Jean d'Angely, and thus gave our leaders time to form fresh plans. Strong garrisons were sent to defend Niort and Angoulême, while the main part of the beaten army retired to Rochelle.

It was a dismal entry into the town. The citizens came to meet us, the men sullen and downcast, the women white-faced and weeping. Many were searching eagerly among the war-worn band for the dear ones they would never meet again on earth. On that dreadful day scores of women learned for the first time that they were already widowed, and that their helpless little ones were fatherless.

Opposite the hotel I perceived Jeanne and my mother, and on seeing me their faces lit up with

happy smiles. I could not go to them then, but the instant my duties permitted I ran again into the street. They were still in the same place, waiting.

"I thank God for this blessing, my son," said my mother. "I feared I had lost you for ever. Let us hasten home; you are weary and faint."

"But are you not hurt, Edmond?" cried my pretty sister. "Oh, how my heart ached at sight of those poor wounded men! They must have suffered torture on their long march!"

"Did Jacques not find you?" my mother asked presently.

"Yes, he was with me at the beginning of the last battle, but I have not seen him since. He may have escaped though, for all that; numbers besides ourselves got away. Bellièvre is safe, and so is Roger Braund. They have acted like heroes!"

"I saw them both," said Jeanne, blushing prettily; "Monsieur Braund has been wounded."

"Yes," I replied laughing, "he will need a skilful nurse. But where is my father? Is he not still in Rochelle?"

"No," said Jeanne with a sigh, "an order came from the Admiral three weeks ago for him to take fifty men to St. Jean d'Angely. I know it is selfish, but I wish Edmond, oh, I wish he could have stayed with us. It seems to me there is no safety outside the walls of Rochelle."

"Rochelle may be as dangerous as any other place," I remarked, not caring to let them know that Monseigneur was marching on St. Jean d'Angely. "But here we are at the house; does my aunt still keep her room?"

"Yes," replied Jeanne with a smile, "though I believe her illness is more fanciful than real. But she is very good and kind, and we humour her fancies."

It was very pleasant to be home again; to see the loving looks and to receive the tender caresses of my mother and sister. They were eager to hear what had happened, and the tears came to their eyes as I described the sufferings of my gallant comrades. They were brave, too, and instead of being crushed by our defeat looked forward to happier times.

"Perhaps the king will stop the cruel war," said my mother hopefully, "and let us worship God in peace. How can he think we wish to harm our beautiful France? We ask so little; surely he could grant us our modest request.

"I believe he would if it were not for his mother," I said, "and she is afraid of the Guises. They are hand in glove with the Pope and the Spaniards."

"Will Monseigneur try to capture Rochelle?" asked Jeanne.

"It is very likely, but he will not succeed; Rochelle can never be taken by an enemy."

I stayed very late with them that night, for there were many things to talk about, and they were so glad to see me that even at the end I was loth to depart.

The next day my comrades, who purposely stayed away on the previous evening, accompanied me home, and were made much of by my mother and Jeanne.

These occasional visits were like oases in a dreary desert. We tried to banish all thoughts of the war, and to talk as cheerfully as if there were no misery in the land. But for Felix and me these days of happy idleness speedily came to an end. There was much to be done, and Coligny needed our services. Instead of being cast down by his reverse at Montcontour, our leader was already planning a gigantic scheme which should help to repair our broken fortunes.

Meanwhile the garrison at St. Jean d'Angely was offering a splendid resistance to the enemy. Anjou was pressing the siege with vigour, King Charles himself was in the trenches—I never held, as some of my comrades did, that the king was a coward—but the handful of troops defied the royal brothers and all their force.

One morning as our chief came from his chamber, the ante-room being filled with his gentlemen and the leaders of the army, he stopped and laid his hand with a kindly touch on my shoulder.

"My young friend," he said, "we are all proud of your father. The reports from St. Jean d'Angely declare that he is the very heart of the defence."

"I thank you, my lord, for your kind words," I stammered, blushing crimson with pride, for to hear my father thus honoured was far sweeter than any praise of myself could have been.

And a day or two later Rochelle was ringing with his name. Men lauded his courage and prowess, speaking of him almost as if he were our beloved leader himself.

Heading a body of troops in the early morning, he had sallied forth, destroyed a big gun, and driven the besiegers pell-mell from the trenches. Anjou had scowled angrily, but King Charles was reported to have declared it a most brilliant feat of arms.

It was a proud day for all of us, but our joy was shortly changed to mourning. Coligny, with most of his attendants, had left Rochelle for Saintes; the rest of us, with two hundred troopers, were to depart the next day. I had spent the evening at home, and accompanied by Felix had returned to

the hotel.

"Is that you, Le Blanc?" cried one of my comrades. "What means this treasonable correspondence with the enemy?" and he handed me a sealed packet.

"For me?" I exclaimed, taking it in surprise. "Where does it come from?"

"Ah," said he, laughing merrily, "that is a nice question to ask! One of Monseigneur's rascals brought it under a flag of truce to the officer at the gate, and he sent it here. I should have put you under arrest, and forwarded the correspondence to the Admiral."

I looked at the letter curiously, and with a vague feeling of uneasiness. It bore my name, but the handwriting was unfamiliar. "One of Anjou's troopers!" I muttered.

I walked slowly away, still accompanied by Felix and carrying the packet in my hand. I had no idea of the sender, nor of the contents, yet strangely enough, when we reached our room, my fingers trembled so much that I could hardly break the seal.

"What is it?" asked Felix anxiously. "What do you fear?"

"Nothing," I replied with a forced laugh; "I am foolish; that is all."

Yes, there was my name in crabbed letters; I glanced from it to the foot of the page: the letter was signed, "Renaud L'Estang."

"L'Estang!" I muttered, "L'Estang! Why, that is the name of my adventurer. Of course he is with Anjou; but why should he write to me? Perhaps 'tis to thank me again, or to tell me something about Cordel! Ah, yes, that would be it. He must have gathered some fresh information concerning the rascally lawyer!"

I gave a deep sigh of relief, yet studiously avoided what he had written. But this was childish folly! Courage! What had I to fear? Cordel had already done his worst. We had lost our estates—it mattered little who gained them.

"Monsieur, you once did me a priceless service. I have never forgotten—shall never forget——"—"Just as I thought," I remarked aloud, "the poor fellow still feels under an obligation to me!"—"Believe me, monsieur, it is with poignant grief I write this brief note."—"Ah," I continued, "he has discovered some fresh villainy. Well, well, it is of little consequence."—"I have been with Monseigneur at St. Jean d'Angely——"

"D'Angely!" I cried; "Felix, he has been at the siege. Read it, my friend, my eyes swim, I cannot see the letters, they all run into one another."—"Your father was the bravest."—"Oh, Felix, Felix, do you understand? How can I tell them? How can I comfort them? And I must ride away in the morning and leave them to their grief! Read it to me slowly, dear friend, while I try to think."

CHAPTER XIII

A Daring Enterprise

After the lapse of many years, I close my eyes, and leaning back in my chair listen again to my comrade as with tremulous voice he reads the fatal letter.—"Monsieur, you once did me a priceless service. I have never forgotten—shall never forget. Believe me, monsieur, it is with poignant grief I write this brief note. I have been with Monseigneur at St. Jean d'Angely throughout the siege. Your father was the bravest man among our enemies. His wonderful skill and courage have gained the admiration of friend and foe alike. The king spoke of his bravery with the highest praise: Monseigneur has declared openly that the Sieur Le Blanc alone stood between him and the capture of the town. He has indeed proved himself one of the finest soldiers in France; but, alas! monsieur, the Sieur Le Blanc is no more. He fell not an hour ago at the head of his men, in a brilliant sortie. Remembering your kindness to me, my heart bleeds for you. I write this with the deepest sorrow, but it may be less painful for you to learn of your loss in this way than to be tortured by a rumour, the truth of which you cannot prove. Accept my heartfelt sympathy."

"My father is dead, Felix," I said in a dazed manner.

"He fought a good fight," replied my comrade. "His memory will live in the hearts of our people."

This might be true, but the knowledge did little to soften my grief. And I was thinking not of my father alone—after all he had died a hero's death—but of my mother and sister. How could I tell them this mournful news? How could I comfort them?

"Felix," I said, "we are going away to-morrow."

"You must stay here," he said firmly, "at least for a few days. I will inform our patron; he is not likely to leave Saintes for a week. Shall I come home with you, or do you prefer to be alone?"

"I will go alone, Felix; it will be better for them. I will join you at Saintes. Good-bye, dear friend."

"Tell your mother and sister how deeply I sympathize with them," he said. "I would come with you, but, as you say, perhaps it is better not."

"I think they will prefer to be alone," I answered, grasping his hand in farewell.

I went out into the deserted street, walking unsteadily, and hardly conscious of anything beyond my one absorbing sorrow. I reached the house at last, and in answer to my summons a servant opened the door. No, the ladies had not retired; they were still downstairs.

Perhaps my face betrayed the miserable truth; perhaps some chord of sympathy passed from me to them—I know not. They jumped up and came forward with a sudden fear in their eyes. I had already bidden them farewell, and they did not expect to see me again, until I rode from the city in the morning.

My mother gazed at me earnestly, but said nothing; Jeanne cried impulsively, "What is it, Edmond? There is bad news! Oh, Edmond, is it about our father?"

"You must be brave," I said gently, taking a hand of each, "very brave. Yes, I have received bad news from St. Jean d'Angely. There has been a fierce fight; our father headed a sortie, and has been seriously hurt. He was the bravest man there, every one says so from the king downwards. Even his enemies praise him."

"Edmond," said my mother quietly, "we are strong enough to bear the truth—is your father dead?"

Words were not needed to answer that question; the answer was plain in my face, and those two dear ones understood. Oh, it was pitiful to see their white faces, and the misery in their eyes! And yet I could feel a pride, too, in their wonderful bravery. They wept silently in each other's arms, and presently my mother said softly, "It is God's will; let us pray to Him for strength to bear our loss."

I stayed with them for four days, being I believe of some comfort in that sorrowful time, and then my mother herself suggested that I should return to my duty.

"You belong to the Cause, my son," she said, "and not to us. It is a heavy trial to let you go, but your father would have wished it. Perhaps the good God, in His mercy, may guard you through all dangers, and we may meet again. But, if not, we are in His hands. Tell Felix we thank him for his kind message."

"Roger, too, will grieve for our loss," I said. "He admired my father greatly."

The Englishmen had accompanied the Admiral, so that Roger had left Rochelle when the news arrived.

Early on the morning fixed for my departure I wished my mother and sister good-bye, and returned to the hotel. Coligny was still at Saintes, and I waited for a letter that the commandant had requested me to deliver to him. I had gone into the courtyard to see about my horse when a man, riding in, exclaimed, "Oh, I am in time, monsieur; I feared you had gone."

"Jacques!" I cried with delight, "surely you have taken a long while to travel from Montcontour to Rochelle! And yet you have a good beast!"

"As good an animal as ever carried saddle!" said Jacques, eyeing his horse complacently; "but then I have not owned it long."

"Have you been to the house?"

"Yes, monsieur," and his face became grave, "it was madame who told me where to find you. She said you were about to rejoin the army."

He did not speak of my loss, though it was plain he had heard the news, and indeed several days passed before the subject was mentioned between us. Jacques had been brought up in my father's service, and he was unwilling to talk about the death of his loved master.

"Yes, I am going to join the Admiral," I said; "but have you not had enough of adventures? Would you not rather stay at Rochelle?"

"While monsieur is wandering about the country?" he asked. "Ah," as a servant came from the building, "here is a summons for monsieur!"

The commandant had finished his letter, and having received his instructions I returned to the courtyard, mounted my horse, and, followed by Jacques, started on my journey. I was very glad of his company, since it took me out of myself, and gave me less opportunity for brooding.

"Did Monsieur Bellièvre and the Englishman escape from Montcontour?" he asked, as we reached the open country.

"Yes, we shall meet them both at Saintes; but about yourself—I was afraid you were killed."

"So was I," he laughed. "Monsieur, it was a terrible day, and a still more terrible night. Our poor fellows received little mercy. Monseigneur's troopers gave no quarter. I got a nasty cut, and hid in a hollow till all was quiet; then I crawled out, took my choice of several riderless horses, and rode into the darkness. I thought I might find the army somewhere, but there was no army to be

found."

"No," I said rather bitterly, "the army was running to all the points of the compass."

"That's just what I was doing, monsieur. What with the darkness, and the pain of my wound, and the fear of falling into the hands of Monseigneur's troops, I lost my head entirely, and wandered about in a circle. When morning came I was hardly a mile from Montcontour. Then some peasants seized me, and for once in my life I was glad to count a robber among my friends."

"How so?"

"One of the fellows was Jules Bredin, from our own village. He recognized me, and as he possessed some authority I came to no harm. Indeed, they took me to their camp in the woods, and attended to me until I had quite recovered. I owe Jules a debt of gratitude."

"On which side do these fellows fight?"

"I asked Jules that question myself, and he laughed in my face. 'My dear Jacques,' said the rascal, 'we fight for ourselves, and we get our victims from both parties. They won't let us work, so we must earn our living as best we can.' And they seemed to be flourishing, monsieur. They had no lack of wine and provisions. Jules never feasted so well in his life before. But, monsieur, what is the Admiral doing at Saintes?"

"That I do not know, Jacques, but doubtless we shall soon discover."

Our journey passed without incident, and having delivered the despatch I sought my comrades. Roger had by this time been made acquainted with my loss, and both he and Felix showed me the greatest kindness. It was pleasant to feel that one possessed such trusty friends.

"You have arrived just in time," said Felix, "for we march in the morning."

"March?" I asked in surprise, "where?"

"Somewhere to the south, I believe; but the Admiral keeps his plans close. But you may be sure he isn't going to offer Anjou battle. We scarcely number three thousand, counting the handful of infantry."

"Not a large number with which to conquer a kingdom!" laughed Roger.

"We shall get more," said Felix, who had recovered his spirits, and was as sanguine as ever. "Coligny's name alone will attract men to the standard. Why, surely that must be Jacques!" as my servant approached. "Jacques, you rascal, I thought you had deserted us at Montcontour!"

"I think it was the other way about, monsieur," replied Jacques slyly. "I stayed at Montcontour."

"Ah, a good thrust!" cried my comrade merrily, "a good thrust! But whichever way it is I am glad to see you again, Jacques. We are sadly in need of strong arms and stout hearts."

"Well, monsieur, I have been round the camp, and certainly I think the Admiral is quite equal to commanding a larger army."

"You should not regard mere numbers, Jacques; it is the quality that tells. Three thousand picked men are worth ten thousand ordinary troops. And then our chief is as good as an army in himself!"

To those who had fought at Roche Abeille, our camp presented a somewhat sorry spectacle. As Felix had said, we numbered barely three thousand men, and one missed a host of familiar faces. I thought with pity of the noble St. Cyr, and many others of our best and bravest who had already laid down their lives for the Cause.

We retired to rest early, and soon after daybreak were roused by the bugles. Tents were struck, prayers said, and about nine o'clock we moved off the ground in the direction of the Dordogne.

It would be tedious to relate in detail the incidents of that southern journey. The weather was bitterly cold and rainy, much sickness set in, and we suffered numerous hardships. Still we pushed steadily forward, through Guienne, Ronergue, and Quercy, passed the Lot below Cadence, and halted at Montauban. Here we were cheered by the arrival of Montgomery, with two thousand Bearnese, a welcome addition to our scanty force.

Smaller bodies of troops had already joined us, and after leaving Montauban we picked up several more. Felix, of course, was in excellent spirits, and talked as if we had the whole kingdom at our feet.

"But where are we going?" I asked in bewilderment, "and what are we going to do?"

"I do not know, my dear Edmond," he replied gaily. "It is enough for me that Coligny leads. I warrant he has some brilliant scheme in his head."

From Montauban we marched up the Garonne to Toulouse, and finally found ourselves at Narbonne, where we went into winter quarters. Roger was, of course, with his own troop, but Felix and I were billeted in the same house, much to our satisfaction.

After our long and painful march, the comfort which we met with at Narbonne was exceedingly welcome, and week after week glided rapidly away. Toward the end of the winter several

hundred men came in from the surrounding districts, and our army began to present quite a respectable appearance.

Many conjectures were made as to our leader's intentions, but he kept his own counsel, and even we of his household had no inkling of the gigantic scheme forming in his mind. Some said he meant to establish a separate kingdom in the south, to which those of the Religion in all parts of the country would flock; but this idea was scouted by those who knew his intense love of France. Besides, as Felix remarked, we should have to abandon La Rochelle, and such a proceeding as that was incredible.

"Into harness again, Edmond," exclaimed my comrade excitedly, one morning, coming from his attendance on the Admiral. "Boot and saddle, and the tented field once more. We leave Narbonne in a week; aren't you glad?"

"Upon my word I am not sorry. Where do we go? Is the mystery solved?"

"No," he said, laughing good-humouredly, "the chief still keeps his secret. But when it does leak out I fancy there will be a surprise for us."

The news soon spread, and the town was filled with bustle and animation. Every one was busy with his preparations, and from morning till night the streets were crowded with men and horses, and with wagons for carrying the provisions and stores. Our days of idleness were over; we had no rest now. Felix and I were ever hurrying from place to place, carrying orders and instructions to the different leaders.

At last the day came when with cheerful confidence we marched out from the town that had been our winter home. The sick had recovered their health, every one was strong and vigorous, the horses were in capital condition, and we all looked forward to a successful campaign, though without the slightest idea where it would take place.

I had thought it most probable that we should retrace our steps to Toulouse, but instead we speedily struck eastward. What did our leader intend doing? was the question asked by every one that night, and which no one could answer. A few of the troops showed some concern, but the majority shared my comrade's opinion.

"What does it matter where we go," said he, "as long as Coligny leads us? It is for him to form the plan, and for us to carry it out."

"We are going farther away from Rochelle," I remarked.

"Rochelle can look after itself, Edmond. It would help the Cause considerably if Anjou would besiege the city; but he won't. As to this march, the Admiral will explain his intentions when he thinks well."

It was at Nismes that Coligny first revealed his purpose, and it came on most of us as a thunder-clap. Instead of returning to the scenes of our former struggles, we were to cross the Rhone, march through Dauphigny, and threaten Paris from the east. The proposal was so bold and audacious that it fairly took away our breath, and we gazed at each other in astonishment. But the hot-headed ones, and Felix among them, cheered the speech with all the vigour of their lungs, more than making up for the silence of the rest.

"Soldiers," said the Admiral, "there are my plans, but I do not force you to obey me. Those whose courage fails must stop behind and return to their homes, but I will march though not more than five hundred should follow my banner. Think well before you agree. The journey is long, perilous, and full of hardship. We shall find few friends and many enemies; our provisions may fail, and Monseigneur will certainly send a strong army to bar our passage. It is an undertaking for only the bravest; the weak-kneed will but hinder."

"We will follow you to the death, my lord," cried Felix impetuously, and thousands of voices took up the bold cry.

"I will ask you to-morrow," said our chief; "for when once we have started I must have no faltering, nor turning back."

That same evening Felix and I went over to the Englishmen's camp. I had expected to find some traces of excitement, and to hear them discussing whether they should embark on the hazardous venture. Instead of that they were lounging about as carelessly as if we had Drought the war to a successful conclusion.

Roger came towards us smiling. "Well," said he, "your general has sprung a surprise on us!"

"Will your comrades go with us?" I asked. "Have they talked the matter over yet?"

"What is there to talk over? We are here to help, not to say what you shall do. Of course we shall go. One part of France is the same to us as another; but I fancy some of your own troops will elect to remain behind."

"'Tis quite possible," I replied. "The venture is a daring one."

"The majority will march," declared Felix with enthusiasm; "a few of the southerners may prefer to guard their own districts, but that is all. I knew Coligny had some gigantic scheme in his head, but never dreamed of this. It is glorious; it will be the talk of Europe."

"If it succeed," said Roger drily, "it will matter little whether Europe talks or not; but in any case Coligny is staking everything on one throw. If we get beaten, he cannot expect to raise another army."

"Do not let us think of defeat," I said, "and we shall stand a better chance of winning a victory. There is no sense in gazing at the black clouds when we can as easily look at the bright sunshine."

CHAPTER XIV

Scouting for Coligny

As Roger had prophesied, not all the Huguenot soldiers were prepared to follow their intrepid leader; but on that memorable April morning of 1570 we swung out from Nismes some five thousand strong, all horsemen, for Coligny had mounted the three thousand arquebusiers who formed the major part of our force.

The journey from Saintes to Narbonne had been tedious, and, because of the bitter winter cold, full of hardship, but we had not met with opposition. Now we were launched straight into the midst of a hostile district filled with the king's troops, and few days passed without some skirmish, in which, though petty enough, we could ill afford to engage.

It seems little to put down on paper—how we rode hour after hour, often with insufficient food; how we watched at night, sometimes springing to arms at a false alarm, and more than once having to fight desperately to beat off a surprise attack; but it was a stiff business for those who went through with it.

We were, however, in good spirits, and pushed on steadily day after day, picking up a few recruits here and there to strengthen our army. The men were sturdy, resolute fellows, full of zeal for the Cause, and ready to lay down their lives for the Admiral, to whom they were devoted.

How wholly dependent we were upon him, in spite of the presence of Prince Henry and young Condé, became plain when he was taken ill at St. Etienne. The march was stopped abruptly, and for three weeks we waited in fear and doubt, asking ourselves anxiously what would happen if he died.

Even the sanguine Felix admitted that without him the enterprise would result in failure, but fortunately the Admiral recovered, and we resumed our march.

The halt which we were forced to make at St. Etienne had done us considerable service. Horses and men alike were broken down by fatigue, loss of sleep, and scanty rations, and the long rest had restored their strength. Shortly before leaving, too, a body of cavalry, fifteen hundred strong, had ridden into camp amidst the acclamations of the assembled troops.

"Now," said Felix joyously, "Monseigneur can meet us as soon as he likes."

After leaving St. Etienne we soon discovered that the worst part of the journey was still before us. Our way lay over rugged crests, and along the edge of steep precipices overhanging gloomy chasms. Nothing save a few chestnut trees, whose fruit was not yet ripe, grew on that bare, stony ground, while the only animals were small, stunted sheep, and mountain goats.

Here and there we passed a tiny hamlet, but for the most part we marched through a wild and desolate solitude, through steep and gloomy gorges with rapid torrents thundering at the bottom. In the upper passes the snow lay deep, and more than once as we stumbled along a piercing shriek told us that some unfortunate animal, missing its footing, had hurled its wretched rider into eternity.

At length, to the loudly expressed joy of every man in the army, we left the gloomy wilderness behind, and emerged into a rich and smiling valley. The animals neighed with delight on seeing the fresh sweet grass, and we who had shivered with the bitter cold in the mountain passes rejoiced at the glorious warmth of the sun.

But now we had to proceed with far greater caution, since at any moment a royalist army might swoop down upon us. Sharp-sighted scouts rode ahead and on our flanks, while messengers frequently arrived bringing information for our general. According to these accounts Monseigneur was still in the west, but Marshal Cossé had been despatched with a strong army to oppose us.

We had halted for the night some ten miles or so from Arnay-le-Duc, and I was gossiping with Roger Braund and several of the Englishmen—their numbers by this time, alas! had thinned considerably—when Felix came up hastily, his eyes shining with keen excitement.

"Any fresh news?" asked Roger.

"Nothing certain," my comrade answered, "but Cossé is reported to be at or near Arnay-le-Duc. Edmond are you for a ride?"

"With all my heart," said I, "but where?"

"To find out what we can about Cossé. I have the Admiral's instructions. I told Jacques to saddle your horse; but you must hurry."

"Good-night, Roger; good-night, gentlemen," I said, laughing; "you can sleep soundly, knowing that we are awake."

"Take care!" laughed Roger good-humouredly, "and don't let that madcap get you into mischief. I shouldn't be surprised if he tries to get his information from Cossé himself."

"I would," declared Felix merrily, "if he gave me half a chance; but we must really go; the Admiral"—and he drew himself up with an air of assumed importance—"depends upon us."

"Good-bye," laughed Roger, "you won't be a prisoner long; we will capture the marshal and exchange him for you!"

"Monseigneur would make a poor bargain if he agreed to that!" said my comrade, as we went off light-heartedly.

"Shall we take Jacques?" I asked, as we hurried along.

"He has settled that question for himself," returned Felix in high glee; "he is saddling his own animal as well as ours."

"What does the Admiral wish to learn?"

"The enemy's numbers. The reports are conflicting and range from five thousand to thirty, but we will discover the truth for ourselves before the morning."

"At any rate we will do our best. There is Jacques; he has lost little time; the horses are ready. My pistols, Jacques!"

"They are in the holsters, monsieur, and loaded."

"Into the saddle then! Have you the password, Felix?"

"Yes; 'tis *Roche Abeille*."

"A good choice! 'Tis an omen of success. Have you any idea of the proper direction?"

"I can find the way easily to Arnay-le-Duc; I have had a long talk with one of the couriers."

Having passed our last outpost, where we stayed to chat for a moment with the officer in command, we proceeded at a brisk pace, my comrade feeling assured that we should not meet an enemy during the first six miles. After that distance we went more slowly and with greater caution, for if the marshal was really at Arnay-le-Duc, his patrols were probably scouring the neighbourhood.

About four miles from the town we entered the street of a straggling village. It was a half after ten; the lights in the cottages were out; the villagers had retired to bed.

"Shall we do any good by knocking up the landlord of the inn?" I asked.

"What say you, Jacques?"

"We shall probably learn the village gossip, and if the marshal is anywhere near Arnay-le-Duc it will be known here."

"True," said my comrade; "let us lead the animals into the yard. Edmond, hammer at the door!"

The landlord was in bed, but he came down quickly, and, having shown us into his best room, proceeded to draw the wine which Felix ordered.

"You are in bed early," I remarked on his return. "Have you no guests in the house?"

"None, monsieur."

"We expected to meet with some of the king's troops here: have they passed through already?"

"There have been no soldiers in the village, monsieur."

"But surely they are close at hand!"

"If monsieur means Marshal Cossé's army, it is ten miles off. At least Philippe said so when he came home this evening."

"Who is Philippe?"

"He lives in the village, monsieur; he could guide you to the soldiers. Shall I fetch him?"

"Yes," I replied, "and waste no time. Jacques," and I glanced at my servant meaningly, "you might go with the worthy host."

They returned in less than half an hour, bringing with them a short, thin man, spare in build, but tough and wiry. His eyes were sharp and bright, and his face was shrewd and full of intelligence.

"Are you a good Catholic, Philippe?" I asked.

His glance passed from me to Felix and back again so swiftly that he might never have taken his gaze from my face. Then he said with the most natural hesitation in the world, and as if fully expecting to suffer for his confession, "I hope monsieur will not be offended, but I belong to the Religion."

"Faith, Philippe," I said, "I guessed you were shrewd; you are the very fellow for our purpose. Since you belong to the Religion"—the rascal's lips twitched ever so slightly—"you will have no scruple in helping us. We are of the Religion, too."

"Is it possible, monsieur?" he said, with a start of well-feigned surprise.

"Now listen to me," I continued; "you know where the marshal's army is. Don't contradict; it will be useless."

"I am attending, monsieur."

"We want to see this army, but we do not wish to introduce ourselves to the soldiers. Now a sharp guide, thoroughly acquainted with the district, can easily lead us to a place from which we can learn all we want to know. Is not that a good scheme?"

"It has one serious drawback, monsieur."

"Speak on; we are listening."

"If the guide should be caught by the king's troops, he would be hanged."

"That is awkward, certainly. On the other hand, if he refuses to go he will die by the sword. You are a sensible man, Philippe, and will see the force of my remarks. Now, which is it to be? Will you earn a few crowns by taking the risk, or will you lose your life at once?"

"Truly, monsieur," said he, after a pause, "you place me in an unpleasant position; but since there is no way out of it, I will do as you wish."

"A sensible answer, and there is but one thing more to add. If you are thinking to play us false, we count three swords and six loaded pistols, and you cannot reasonably expect to escape them all."

"Monsieur's kindness in pointing out these things is truly touching!" exclaimed the rascal with a broad grin.

"My friend is noted for such kindness!" laughed Felix. "And now let us get into the saddle. Is there a spare horse in the stables, landlord?"

"Yes, monsieur," replied our host, whose limbs were shaking through fright.

"Then we shall use it for Philippe. Don't be afraid; we will pay you for the hire."

"Monsieur is very good."

"And a word in your ear, landlord. On our return, do not let us find that your tongue has been wagging!"

We rode out from the inn yard, Jacques and Philippe in front, Felix and I following.

"He is a clever rascal," remarked Felix in a low voice; "he is no Huguenot."

"If he is," I replied laughing quietly, "'twas a quick conversion. He was certainly a good Catholic until he had taken note of our dress. But the fellow will guide us aright, for his own sake. He is quick enough to calculate the chances."

Occasionally one or other of us cantered forward and rode a short distance by his side, while Jacques watched him constantly with the eyes of a hawk. But the fellow who was keen enough to understand that treachery would result in his own death, whatever else happened, led us very carefully across country and right away from the beaten tracks until about three o'clock in the morning, when he came to a halt on the top of a wooded hill.

"Very softly!" he whispered, "we are in the rear of the army, but there may be some sentries at hand. When day breaks we shall see the camp almost at our feet."

I bade Jacques lead the animals deeper into the wood, lest they should attract attention; then Felix and I lay down with the guide between us.

"So far, Philippe, you have served us well," whispered my comrade. "You will pocket those crowns yet!"

"Hush, monsieur; a single sound may cost us our lives."

This was true, so we lay silent, watching for the breaking of dawn. Little by little the night haze cleared away; the light broke through the clouds; the sun rose, lighting up first the distant hills, and presently revealing the secret of the plain beneath. The bugles sounded; men came from their tents, rubbing their eyes still burdened with sleep, and before long all the camp was astir.

"Guns!" said Felix; "how many do you make, Edmond?"

"Six," I replied, after a careful survey.

"I can count six, too," he said. "According to our spies the marshal had no guns."

I nudged our guide, saying, "What is the number of the troops down there?"

"Fifteen thousand infantry, and six thousand horsemen, monsieur," he answered promptly.

"It may be so," I said, "but we shall be better able to judge when they are ready to march."

For two hours we lay flat on the ground, with our eyes fixed on the camp, never changing our position, and speaking hardly a word. We watched the cavalry feed and groom the animals, and saw the troops sit down to breakfast. Then a body of horsemen, about fifty or sixty in number, rode out from the camp in the direction of Arnay-le-Duc.

After a while the troops fell in, and a number of richly-dressed officers rode along the lines, as if to inspect them.

"Jacques," I said softly, for all this time he had remained with the animals, "if you can leave the horses, come here."

In two or three minutes he had crept close up to us, and was looking steadily at the camp.

"How many, Jacques?" I asked, for he was an old campaigner, with far more experience than either Felix or I possessed.

"'Tis a nice little army," he said after a time, "but"—with a sidelong glance at Philippe—"no match for ours. Why, the Marshal has hardly more than four thousand horsemen, with thirteen thousand infantry at the outside."

"My own estimate!" exclaimed Felix; "what do you say, Edmond?"

"One can easily make a mistake at this work," I answered, "but I should think your guess is not far from the truth."

"Then we need stay no longer. Come," to the guide, "lead us back safely, and the crowns are yours."

Stealing very quietly and cautiously into the wood, we took our horses by the bridle, and led them—Jacques going in front and closely followed by our guide—along a narrow path, away from the camp. At the end of the wood we mounted, and, riding in twos, set out briskly on the return journey.

Thanks to Philippe, we reached the inn without mishap, paid the landlord, who was evidently surprised at seeing us again, for the loan of his horse, and handed our guide his promised reward.

"Put the crowns in your purse, my man," said Felix, "and for your own sake I should advise you not to open your lips. Marshal Cossé may not be too pleased with your night's work."

We cantered off at a sharp pace, eager to acquaint the Admiral with our success, and had covered a little more than half the distance, when, on turning a bend in the road, we perceived about a dozen horsemen galloping full tilt towards us.

"King's men!" cried Jacques quickly. "A patrol from the camp on their way back."

"We must ride through them!" exclaimed Felix. "'Tis our only chance. All three abreast, Jacques. Ready?"

There being no other way out of the business, except that of standing still to be captured, we drew our swords and, crying "For the Admiral!" dashed boldly at them. They were riding in no sort of order, but straggled along loosely, each intent, it seemed to me, on getting first. They were clearly surprised at encountering us, and, beyond a few hasty sword-strokes in passing,—and these did no damage—made no effort to oppose our passage.

Several yards behind the main body two men were stumbling along on wounded horses. They themselves were hurt also, and both promptly surrendered at our challenge.

"Faith!" cried Felix, "this is a queer proceeding. Ah, there is the reason," as a strong patrol of our own men came thundering along. The leader pointed ahead with his sword, as if asking a question, and Felix exclaimed quickly, "They are in front; their horses are getting blown."

We drew aside to give them room, as they galloped past in a cloud of dust, and then my comrade, turning to Jacques, said, "Can you manage the prisoners, Jacques? We must hurry on."

My servant produced a loaded pistol. "I am well provided, monsieur," he answered. "I think these gentlemen will not give trouble."

"Very good. Take your time; I expect our troops are on the march. Forward, Edmond," and, setting spurs to our horses, we galloped off.

All danger was over now, and before long we caught sight of the advanced-guard of our army.



"Can you tell us where to find the general?" asked Felix of an officer, as we pulled up.

"He is with the centre, monsieur. Have you seen the enemy?"

"Yes," I answered, riding on, "and there will be some stirring work soon!"

CHAPTER XV

A Glorious Triumph

Coligny was riding with a group of his principal officers when we drew up, and he greeted us with a kindly smile.

"Here are our knights-errant," said he, "let us hear what they have to say. Have you seen the enemy, Bellièvre?"

"Yes, my lord; their camp is a few miles beyond Arnay-le-Duc. They were preparing to march when we left, though they seemed to be in no particular hurry. The officers were holding some sort of inspection."

"Did you get close to them?"

"We had a clear view of the whole camp from the top of a wooded hill in the rear."

"And you have formed some idea of their numbers?"

"There were three of us, my lord, and we were all fairly well agreed. The marshal has six guns, between four and five thousand cavalry, and about thirteen thousand infantry."

"Do you agree with that statement, Le Blanc?"

"The numbers are a little over my calculation, my lord; but not much."

"In any case, you think the figures are high enough?"

"That is absolutely certain," I replied.

"Good! We owe you both our best thanks."

They were simple words, simply spoken, but they went straight to our hearts, amply repaying us for the risks attendant on our night's adventure.

Marching slowly, and halting two or three times during the day, as the general wished to husband his men's strength, we arrived early in the evening at a little stream near Arnay-le-Duc, and beheld, on the other side, two or three thousand of the royalist cavalry. There were no guns in sight, and the infantry had been drawn up at some distance in the background.

The troops took their supper—a very meagre one, too; our provisions being at a low ebb—sentries were posted, and Coligny made all arrangements for battle, in case the enemy should attack before morning.

"There is Roger coming towards us!" I exclaimed, as we lay wrapped in our cloaks on the ground.

"He has come to discover if we are still alive!" said my comrade.

"You are wrong," laughed the Englishman, dropping down beside us; "Jacques told me he had kept you from coming to grief. I congratulate you on having such a servant. But, seriously, I am glad to see you back; the errand was rather venturesome for such young persons," and he laughed again in his rich, musical voice.

"Go away," said Felix, "before I am tempted to chastise you. It would be a pity to lose your services for to-morrow!"

"It would," agreed our friend. "By the look of things, Coligny will need all the swords he can muster. Did you find out anything about the enemy's strength?"

We gave him the figures, and he remarked: "The odds are heavy enough in all conscience, seeing that we count barely six thousand men. Still, they are picked troops."

"And they have their backs against the wall," I observed. "There was a chance of escape at Montcontour, but there is none here. If we are defeated we shall be cut to pieces."

"You are entertaining, you two!" interposed Felix. "Can we not have a change? Let me arrange the programme. First, we rout Cossé—an easy matter; second, we continue our march to Paris, defeating Monseigneur on the way; third, we dictate terms of peace at the Louvre."

"And fourth," laughed Roger, "we appoint Monsieur Felix Bellièvre Marshal of France, and advance him to the highest dignity!"

"The suggestion does you credit," replied my comrade, good-humouredly; "and we will make a beginning in the morning by beating Cossé."

Knowing that we had lost our sleep the previous night, Roger did not stay long, and as soon as our attendance on the Admiral was over we went to bed, or rather lay down inside the tent, muffled in our cloaks.

The morning of June 27, 1570, opened bright and clear, and we looked forward with hope, if not exactly with confidence, to the approaching battle. The enemy were nearly three to one, but, as Roger had said, our men were all picked troops, hardy, resolute fellows, filled with intense zeal, and fighting for what they believed to be right.

They greeted Coligny with deafening cheers, when, after breakfast, and our simple morning service, he rode along the lines, accompanied by Henry of Bearn and the young Condé. These gallant youths each commanded a regiment, and their flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes told how ardently they burned to distinguish themselves.

"There are the enemy, my lads," said Coligny, in his grave, measured tones, "and we must beat them. It is our last chance. If we fail, the Cause is lost, and we shall find no mercy. If we run away, we shall be cut down, for there is no place of shelter. We must win the battle, or die on the field."

"We will!" they cried, and there was a ring in their voices that spoke of an iron determination to succeed.

"And we," said young Henry of Bearn, "will die with you. Not one of your leaders will leave the field except as a victor. It is victory or death for all of us."

At these brave words the cheering broke out afresh, and my comrade, turning to me, exclaimed, "The battle is won already! Those fellows will never retreat."

They were, indeed, in fine fettle, but it was setting them a desperate task to oppose nearly three times their number!

The marshal began the attack with a cavalry charge, but, as the horsemen galloped forward, a body of arquebusiers posted in a ditch discharged such a stinging fire that our opponents wheeled round and rode hurriedly back to shelter.

"Well done!" cried Felix; "we have drawn first blood."

They tried again with the same result, and then a strong body of infantry was pushed forward. But the arquebusiers clung firmly to their post, and presently young Condé, sweeping round unexpectedly at the head of his regiment, charged and broke the hostile infantry. It was a daring charge, and we waved our swords and cheered, as the victorious horsemen rode proudly back.

The marshal, however, was not to be denied. Again and again he launched his horsemen at us, while his foot-soldiers crept steadily nearer. All along our front the battle raged fiercely, and at every point our gallant fellows were fighting against overwhelming numbers.

"Stand firm, soldiers, stand firm!" cried our general, as he galloped over the field, bringing the magic of his presence to whatever part was in most danger.

It was in one of these wild rushes the incident occurred that laid the foundation of my fortunes, though the building took many years to complete. I tell it here, not out of pride or vainglory—though I was proud, too—but because it is necessary to the better understanding of my story.

We had just left the handful of Englishmen, who had bravely repulsed a stubborn attack of cavalry and infantry on their position, when a cry arose of "Prince Henry! Help for the prince!"

A cry of despair broke from us as we realized his peril. How it came about I never clearly learned, for in the heat of battle one rarely sees more than the things close at hand. Some said one thing, some another, but this I reckon was the most likely way of it.

His regiment was rather exposed, and on the left flank stretched some rolling ground, unsuitable for cavalry but affording good cover for foot-soldiers. Across these hollows Cossé had sent a large body of infantry, while at the same time the prince's regiment was assailed by an overwhelming force of cavalry. An order to retire was given—though none knew by whom—and in consequence, Henry, with a handful of men, was left surrounded by a sea of foes.

Coligny glanced quickly round the field; the royalists were pressing us at every point; not a man could be spared from his post.

"We must save him ourselves, gentlemen!" he exclaimed tersely, "forward!"

We counted barely two score swords, but the prince was in peril, and though the enterprise cost all our lives he must be rescued. Our comrades battling desperately at their posts cheered us as we flew by, crying, "Coligny! Coligny!" Straight as a die we rode, our chief slightly in advance, the rest of us in threes, horse's head to horse's head, the animals straining and quivering in every muscle as we urged them madly forward.

Too late! was the thought in every heart, as we beheld the prince fighting for dear life, and hemmed in by a host of enemies. "Coligny! Coligny!" we cried, and in blind fury charged the dense mass.

Now it chanced by pure accident, for I had no other thought than to follow my patron closely,

that the charge brought me close to the bridle-hand of the prince. Henry of Bearn, though a fine swordsman, was even a better horseman, and it was to his skill as a rider, much more than to his dexterity with the sword, that he owed his life.

But now he was so closely beset that he was compelled to depend upon the play of his sword, and his strength was failing. They struck fiercely at him in front and on both sides; there was a continuous circle of flashing steel; it was marvellous how death missed him. Pressed hard by a trooper on the right he turned to parry his blows more effectively, when a second trooper slashed at his bridle-arm.

There was no time for warning; no time even for thought. With a cry of "Coligny!" I dashed forward, and, throwing myself half out of the saddle, caught the descending sword. Before the trooper could recover himself I had pierced him through the side, and he fell with a groan across his horse's neck.

I did not think that Henry had noticed the incident, but without turning his head he cried pleasantly, "My thanks, monsieur; I owe my life to you."

"Have no fear for this side, my lord," I answered, and the next instant was fiercely engaged with two of the king's troopers.

But now the cry of "Coligny!" grew louder; the press was broken here and there; the Admiral himself appeared; some of his gentlemen fought their way to our side, and with one desperate effort we thrust back the hostile horsemen. "Coligny! Coligny! Bearn! Bearn!" were the shouts, as, with swords flashing and gleaming in the sunlight, we pushed a way through. At the same time the rest of the regiment drove back the infantry, and the prince was saved.

"Stand firm, soldiers, stand firm!" cried our leader as he prepared to gallop off, for Cossé's assaults were so rapid and daring that we had hardly a moment's breathing space.

But, as we were moving away, Henry of Bearn, calling me to his side, said, "Your name, monsieur?"

"Edmond Le Blanc, my lord," I answered, bowing low.

"If we live through this day," he said graciously, "I will remember the debt I owe you."

Once again I bowed, and, saluting with my sword, darted off to take my place in the Admiral's train. Whatever Henry's fortune, there appeared considerable doubt as to my surviving the battle, for my patron seemed determined to court death not only for himself but for every gentleman in his household. Wherever the Huguenots recoiled ever so slightly before the terrible onslaughts of the foe, there we were cheering and fighting till our arms were wearied by the work and our heads dazed by the maddening tumult.

And never for a moment during that long summer day did the strife cease. Cossé was inflexible; he sent his troops to death without pity, and they obeyed without a murmur. The carnage was fearful, and I longed for darkness to put an end to the hideous slaughter.

At the end of the afternoon he gathered his forces together for one supreme effort. Horse and foot, they swung along as blithely as if the battle were only beginning. I looked round on our diminished ranks, and wondered if we had strength to withstand another onset.

"'Tis their last try!" exclaimed Felix cheerfully; "if they fail now they will break, and the victory is ours. Half an hour will see the finish; one side must give way."

One side! But which?

On they came, wave after wave, like the waters of an irresistible sea. We waited in painful silence, broken suddenly by the Admiral's voice, "Stand firm, soldiers, stand firm. The end is at hand!"

On they came, bugles blowing, flags flying, horses prancing; the dying sun lighting up the bared swords and pike heads, the steel caps and breastplates. On they came, a goodly and gallant band of well-trained warriors.

"Stand firm, soldiers, stand firm!" Well in front, serene and confident, full of proud courage and high resolve, there was our glorious leader, the best and bravest man in the two armies.

With a roar of cheering and a hurricane rush the foe dashed forward. They struck us in front, they swirled tumultuously around our flanks, driving us back and cheering lustily, "For the King!" The fate of the day hung trembling in the balance, but Henry of Bearn on the one flank, and Condé on the other, rallied their troops, while in the centre the stout old Admiral plunged yet again into the fray.

"Forward! Forward!" we shouted. "On them! They are giving way!" and Felix, snatching a flag from a wounded man, charged with reckless abandon into the very midst of the foe.

"The flag!" I cried, "follow the flag!" Straight ahead of us it went, now waving triumphantly aloft, now drooping, now swaying again, and high above the din of strife sounded my comrade's voice, crying, "For the Admiral! For the Faith! Forward! Forward!"

The daring hazardous exploit sent a wave of fire through every man. We

flung off our fatigue as if it were a cloak, dealing our blows as vigorously as though the battle were but newly joined. And as we toiled on, following the flag, a great shout of victory arose on our right. Henry of Bearn had thrust back his assailants; they were running fast, and his horsemen were hanging on their heels like sleuth-hounds.

The cry was taken up and repeated all along the line, and in a few minutes the enemy, smitten by sudden fear, were flying in all directions. For some distance we pursued, sweeping numbers of prisoners to the rear; but our animals were wearied, and presently all but a few of the most fiery spirits had halted.

The victory was ours, but we had bought it at a high price. Some of our bravest officers were dead, and Coligny looked mournfully at his diminished band of attendants. We rode back to our lines, and to me the joy of our triumph was sadly dimmed by the absence of my comrade. In the wild stampede I had lost sight of the flag, and no one had seen its gallant bearer.



"Has Monsieur Bellièvre fallen?" asked Jacques, who had ridden well and boldly with the troopers.

"I do not know; I fear so. He was a long distance ahead of us in the last charge. I am going to search for him."

"There is your English friend, monsieur; he is not hurt."

Roger grasped my hand warmly. "Safe!" he exclaimed; "I hardly dared to hope it. It has been a terrible fight. Our poor fellows"—he spoke of the English remnant—"have suffered severely. Where is Felix?"

"We are on our way to look for him; I fear he has fallen."

Roger turned and went with us. "I saw him with the flag," he remarked. "'Twas a gallant deed. It helped us to win the battle. By my word, Cossé must have lost frightfully; the field just here looks carpeted with the dead."

"'Tis a fearful sight to see in cold blood," I replied.

Numbers of men were removing the wounded, but knowing that Felix had ridden some distance ahead we kept steadily on our way.

"'Twas here Cossé's troops began to break," said Jacques presently, "and 'tis hereabout we ought to find Monsieur Bellièvre's body."

The words jarred upon me horribly; they expressed the thought I was trying hard to keep out of my head.

We went quickly from one to the other, doing what we could for the wounded, and hurrying on again. It was a gruesome task, and the fear of finding what we sought so earnestly added to the horror.

Suddenly my heart gave a leap, and I ran forward quickly to where I saw the colour of the blood-stained flag. A dead horse lay near it, and by the animal's side lay my comrade. His head was bare, and his fair hair clustered in curls over his forehead. He was very white and still, and his eyes were closed.

"Poor fellow; I fear he is past help," murmured Roger.

"Let us find out," advised the practical Jacques, and, kneeling down on the other side, he assisted me to loosen the doublet.

CHAPTER XVI

A Gleam of Sunshine

"The heart beats, monsieur; faintly, but it beats."

"Are you sure, Jacques? Are you quite certain?"

"I can feel it plainly, monsieur. He has lost a great deal of blood. If we move him the bleeding may begin again; I will fetch a surgeon to dress his wounds here."

It seemed an age before Jacques returned with a surgeon, and meanwhile Felix lay perfectly still. There was not the flutter of an eyelid, not the twitching of a muscle; only by placing a hand over his heart could one tell that he still lived.

The surgeon shook his head as he bound up the wounds, evidently having little faith in my comrade's chance of recovery. We got him back to the camp, however, where Jacques and I

watched by turns all night at his side. Toward morning he moved restlessly, and presently his eyes opened.

"Felix," I said softly, with a great joy at my heart, "Felix, do you know me?"

"The flag!" he said feebly, "follow the flag! Forward, brave hearts!" and he would have risen, but I held him down gently.

"The battle is over, Felix; we have won a great victory. It is I, Edmond. You have been wounded, but are getting better. We found you on the field."

"I dropped the flag," he said, smiling at me, but not knowing me.

"It is all right. We picked it up; it is here," and I placed it near him. His hand closed lovingly round the silken folds, and his eyes were filled with deep contentment.

Leaving the room quietly, I called to Jacques, saying, "He is awake, but he does not recognize me."

"Give him time, monsieur; his brain is not yet clear, but he will come round. Sit by him a while, so that he can see you; he will remember by degrees."

Acting on this suggestion, I returned to the bedside and sat down, but without speaking. Felix lay fingering the flag, but presently his eyes sought mine, wonderingly at first, but afterwards with a gleam of recognition in them.

I had sat thus for perhaps half an hour, when he called me by name, and I bent over him with a throb of joy.

"Edmond," he said, "where are we? Is the battle over?"

"Yes, and Cossé has been badly beaten. You were hurt in the last charge."

"Yes," he said slowly, "I remember. Ah, you found the flag!"

"It was lying beside you; your horse was killed."

"A pistol-shot," he said, "and a fellow cut at me with his sword at the same time. But I am tired. Is the Admiral safe?"

"Yes, I am going to him now. Jacques will stay with you, and I will send the surgeon."

Fearing lest he should overtax his strength, I went out, and after a visit to the surgeon proceeded to Coligny's tent. My heart ached as I gazed around at my comrades, and realized more fully what the victory had cost us.

"Is Bellièvre likely to recover?" asked one.

"I hope so; he is quite sensible, but very weak."

"He did a splendid thing! The Admiral is very proud of him."

"That piece of information will go a long way toward pulling him through!" I said.

Just then Coligny himself came from his tent, and hearing our talk inquired kindly after my comrade.

"He is sensible, my lord, and I am hoping he may recover," I replied.

"I trust so; we cannot well afford to lose such a gallant lad. I must come to see him presently, and tell him how much we owe him."

"That will do him more good than all the surgeon's skill!" I said.

The excitement of the closing scenes of the battle, the uncertainty as to my comrade's fate, and the long night's watch had driven from my head all remembrance of the incident connected with Henry of Bearn, but the prince himself had not forgotten.

During the forenoon he came riding over to Coligny's quarters, debonair and gracious as ever.

"I have come," said he to the Admiral, "not exactly to pay a debt, but to acknowledge it. I owe my life to one of your gentlemen; but for his bravery and skill with the sword Henry of Bearn would be food for the worms. I trust he still lives to accept my thanks."

"Le Blanc! It is Le Blanc!" murmured my comrades.

"That is the name," said the prince with his frank smile, "and there is the gentleman."

My comrades pushed me forward, and I advanced awkwardly, hot with confusion, but—I have no false shame about admitting the truth—my breast swelling with pride.

"Monsieur," exclaimed the prince genially, "yesterday we had leisure for but little speech, and my thanks were necessarily of the scantiest. To-day I wish to acknowledge before your comrades in arms that, when I was sorely beset and had no thought except to sell my life dearly, you came in the most gallant manner to my rescue. I have not much to offer you, monsieur, beyond my friendship, but that is yours until the day of my death."

He paused here, and, unbuckling his sword, placed it in my hands, saying, "Here is the token of my promise. Should the day ever come when you ask in vain anything that I can grant, let all men call Henry of Bearn ingrate and traitor to his plighted word. I call you, my Lord Admiral, and you, gentlemen, to witness."

I tried to say something in reply, but the words were choked in my throat; not one would come. But a still higher honour was in store for me. The Admiral—the great and good leader whom we all worshipped—removing my sword, buckled on the prince's gift with his own hands.

"I rejoice," said he speaking slowly as was his wont, "that the son of the hero who died for the Cause at St. Jean d'Angely should thus add honour to his father's name."

I managed to stammer out a few words, and then my comrades crowded around, cheering me with generous enthusiasm. And, when the prince had gone, I had the further happiness of conducting the Admiral to our tent, and of hearing the words of praise he spoke to Felix, who would gladly have died a thousand deaths to have secured such honour.

I said nothing to him that day of the prince's gracious gift—he had already had as much excitement as he could bear—but Jacques, of course, had heard of it, and the trusty fellow showed as much pride as if he himself had received a patent of nobility. Roger Braund, too, came to congratulate me, and his pleasure was so genuine that it made mine the greater. Altogether I think that day after the battle of Arnay-le-Duc was the most wonderful of my life.

The defeat of Marshal Cossé was so complete that we met with no further opposition, but pushed on to Chatillon, the sleepy little town which had the honour of being the birth-place of our noble chief. Having to attend on the Admiral, I left my wounded comrade in the care of Jacques, who made him as comfortable as possible in one of the wagons, and waited upon him day and night. Whenever opportunity offered I rode back to see him, and each time found to my delight that he was progressing favourably.

At last we reached the town and rode along the main street through groups of cheering citizens to the castle, a strong and massive fortress with ample accommodation for thousands of persons. It stood in the midst of a vast enclosure, surrounded by a deep and wide fosse; and the thick walls, as Roger remarked, appeared capable of withstanding the assaults of a well-equipped army.

Inside the enclosure were large gardens and handsome terraces, while the huge tower, sixty feet high, looked down into a wide and spacious courtyard.

"This is pleasant and comfortable," said Roger that same evening, "but what does it mean? Why have we come here? I understood we were to march on Paris."

"I do not know; there is some talk of peace. Several important messengers were despatched post-haste to the king directly after the defeat of Cossé."

Roger shrugged his shoulders. "I think it a mistake," he said; "one should never come to terms with an enemy who is only half-beaten; it gives him time to recover."

"Well, this is pleasanter than marching through Dauphigny."

"So it is," he agreed laughingly; "what a magnificent old place it is! Your nobles are very powerful; almost too powerful for the king's comfort I should fancy. How is Felix?"

"Getting well rapidly, and clamouring to leave his bed. As usual, he is just a little too impatient."

"That is his chief failing," said Roger, "but he is a gallant fellow nevertheless. I wonder how your mother and sister are!"

"If we stay here, as seems likely, I shall despatch Jacques on a visit to Rochelle."

"Do not forget to say I send them my deepest respect and sympathy. Indeed, Jacques might carry a little note from me."

"To my mother?" I asked mischievously.

"Of course," he replied, with a blush that became him well; but all the same when, a few days later, Jacques started on his journey, I noticed that Roger's letter was addressed to Jeanne. Perhaps being in a hurry he had made a mistake!

We passed our time at Chatillon very pleasantly. Felix was soon able to leave his bed, and every day increased his strength. The rumours of an approaching peace became stronger, and at last it was announced that Coligny had signed a treaty, which secured to those of the Religion perfect freedom to worship as they pleased.

"As long as we keep our swords loose, and our horses saddled," said Felix, "but no longer," and Roger, rather to my surprise, agreed with him.

It was the time of evening, and we were walking on one of the terraces, when Jacques rode slowly into the courtyard. He looked tired and travel-stained, as was but natural, but his face wore a gloomy expression that could not be due to fatigue. I went down to him quickly with a sudden sinking of the heart.

"Well, Jacques, what news?" I cried, with forced cheerfulness.

"The country is quiet, monsieur, and the citizens are rejoicing in Rochelle."

"I care nothing for Rochelle just now; 'tis of my mother and sister I would hear. Are they well? Are they cheerful? Have they written to me? Speak out, man; is your tongue in a knot?"

"I would it were," said he, "if that would alter the news I bring. You must brace yourself, monsieur, to face another calamity. But here is a letter from Mademoiselle Jeanne."

"From Jeanne?" I repeated, and at that I understood the truth. My mother was dead!

I read the blotted and tear-stained paper with moist eyes. On the very day when we started from Narbonne on our memorable march, my poor mother, who had never really recovered from the shock of my father's death, breathed her last. Concerning herself, Jeanne said little except that she was living in the household of the Queen of Navarre, who was holding her court at Rochelle.

After telling Felix and Roger the sad news, I went away to brood over my sorrow alone. It was a heavy blow, and the heavier because so unexpected. The chance that my mother might die during my absence had never struck me, and I had been looking forward impatiently to meeting her again.

Fortunately, the newly-signed peace brought me many active duties. The army was disbanded, and most of our chiefs began their preparations for a visit to Rochelle. Felix and I were kept busy, and indeed until the journey began we had few idle moments.

The little band of Englishmen who had survived the war—gallant hearts, they had spent themselves so recklessly that barely a dozen remained—accompanied us, and naturally we saw a great deal of Roger.

"I suppose," said Felix to him one day, "that now you will return to England?"

"My comrades are returning at once," he replied, "but I shall stay a while longer; perhaps even pay a visit to Paris before I leave."

"If you wish to see Paris," said Felix, "it will be well to go quickly, before the clouds burst again"; but Roger observed with a smile that he intended to stay in Rochelle for a few weeks at least.

Our entry into the city was very different from that after the rout of Montcontour. Cannon boomed, church bells rang merrily, the streets were gay with flags and flowers and triumphal arches; while the citizens, dressed in their best, with happy smiling faces, cheered until they were hoarse, as the Admiral, with Henry of Bearn on his right and the youthful Condé on his left, rode through the gateway.

Jeanne, with several of the queen's ladies, was sitting in the balcony of the *Hôtel Coligny*. Catching sight of us, she stood up and waved her hand, and we bowed low in our saddles, and smiled, and waved our hands in return.

"Your sister is more beautiful than ever, Edmond," said my comrade enthusiastically.

"She looked paler, I thought," I replied, as we turned into the courtyard; "but now the war is over we shall have a chance to cheer her a little."

"Did she see Roger Braund, do you think?"

"It is likely enough," I laughed; "he is a fair size, and sits up well in the saddle," a harmless pleasantry which, to judge by his peevish exclamation, Felix did not appreciate.

That evening we all met at the reception given by the Queen of Navarre, a reception brilliant by reason of the number of brave men and beautiful women assembled. I had spent an hour alone with Jeanne during the afternoon, and she had told me of our mother's illness, and of her last loving message to myself.

I asked how she came to be in the Queen of Navarre's household, and her eyes kindled and her face flushed as she answered, "Oh, Edmond, the queen has been the kindest of friends! She sought me out in my sorrow, saying it was not right that the daughter of so brave a soldier as my father should be left to bear her grief alone. She insisted on my becoming one of her ladies-in-waiting, and ever since has done her best to make me happy."

My sister was certainly very beautiful, and I could not wonder to see the numbers of handsome and highborn cavaliers who clustered around her that evening. But Jeanne was staunch and leal, and, though courteous to all, it was in the company of her old friends Felix and Roger she found her chief pleasure.

We four were chatting together, and Felix was describing in his lively way some of our adventures, when Henry of Bearn drew near.

"Le Blanc," he exclaimed, looking at me, "surely it is Le Blanc!" and taking my arm he added jovially, "come with me, I must present you specially to my mother. She ought to know to whom she is indebted for her son's life."

Jeanne looked at me in surprise, and as we moved away I heard Felix saying, "I warrant he never told you a word of that. By my faith, one could hardly blame him had he cried it from the housetops!"

Meanwhile the prince marched up the room, his arm placed affectionately on my shoulder, and presented me to the gracious lady who was such a tower of strength to the Cause.

"Madame," he said in his hearty way, "this is the cavalier of whom I spoke. But for his courage Henry of Bearn would have been left lying on the field at Arnay-le-Duc."

She gave me her hand to kiss, and thanked me graciously, saying that while she or her son lived I should not want a true friend.

"Madame," I replied, "in taking my sister under your gracious protection you have already shown your kindness."

"Your sister!" she said in surprise; "who is your sister?"

"Jeanne Le Blanc, whom your Majesty has honoured by making one of your ladies-in-waiting."

"Then you must be the Sieur Le Blanc!"

"Edmond Le Blanc, your Majesty. My father sacrificed his title and his lands, as well as his life, for the Cause!"

"How is this?" asked her son, and when I had related the story, he declared roundly that, with the Admiral's support, he would force the king to restore my rights.

Presently I withdrew, and Jeanne, to whom Felix had related the adventure, kissed me and made much of me, to the envy of my two comrades, who, poor fellows, had no pretty sister of their own. It was a proud night for me, but the shadow of my parents' death lay on my happiness, and I would gladly have sacrificed all my honours for their presence.

"If life at Rochelle is to be as agreeable as this," remarked Roger, with a glance at my sister, "I shall be loth to return to England."

"Then you can be no true Englishman!" laughed Jeanne, as she wished us good-night before going to attend upon her royal mistress.

CHAPTER XVII

The King's Promise

Life flowed very smoothly in La Rochelle during that autumn of 1570. Amongst us at least the peace was not broken, though we heard rumours of dark threats from the Guises, and Coligny received numerous warnings not to trust himself, without an armed force, outside the city walls.

The first break came about with the departure of Roger Braund. An English ship put into the harbour one morning at the end of November, and her master brought a letter which compelled my comrade to return home.

"No," he said in reply to my question, "there is no bad news; it is simply a matter of business. I shall not wish you good-bye; I have still my promised visit to Paris to make. Perhaps we shall all be able to go there together."

What he said to Jeanne I do not know, but she did not seem so much cast down at his departure as I expected, for they two had become very close friends. Indeed, I sometimes thought their friendship was even warmer than that between Jeanne and Felix.

However, we went down to the harbour, Felix and I, and aboard his ship, an uncomfortable-looking craft, with but scanty accommodation for a passenger. But Roger did not mind this. He had sailed in a much worse vessel, he said, and a far longer distance than the passage across the Channel.

Felix shrugged his shoulders. "On land," he remarked, "danger does not alarm me, but I should not care to put to sea in such a boat as that!" in which I was at one with him.

"I will choose a better craft next time," laughed Roger, as, after bidding him farewell, we walked across the gangway to the wharf, where we stood waving our hands until he disappeared from sight.

"Does he really mean to return?" my comrade asked.

"I think so. He has evidently made up his mind to visit Paris."

"I fancy," said Felix rather bitterly, it struck me, "that he will be satisfied with Rochelle, as long as Queen Joan holds her Court there!"

My friend was not in the best of humour, but he recovered his spirits in a day or two, and before a week had passed was as lively and merry as usual. Black Care and Felix were not congenial companions.

Nothing happened after Roger's departure until the spring of 1571, when we heard of the king's

marriage with Elizabeth of Germany. None of our leaders attended the ceremony, which seemed to have been a very brilliant affair, the new queen riding into Paris in an open litter hung with cloth of silver, drawn by the very finest mules shod with the same gleaming metal.

A courier who waited upon the Admiral declared that the decorations were a triumph of art, and that the bridge of Notre Dame was like a scene taken bodily from fairy land. A triumphal arch was erected at each end of the bridge; the roadway was covered with an awning smothered in flowers and evergreens, while between every window on the first floor of the houses were figures of nymphs bearing fruits and flowers, and crowned with laurel.

But, although debarred from attending the marriage of the king, we were not without our rejoicings. Our noble leader was married to Jacqueline of Montbel, Countess of Entremont, who came to la Rochelle attended by fifty gentlemen of her kindred. Headed by Coligny, we rode out to meet her, and the cannon thundered forth a joyous salute. The citizens lined the streets, and if our decorations were not as gay as those of Paris, there was, perhaps, a more genuine heartiness in our welcome.

These public rejoicings, however, could not make me forget that my position was still very awkward. My stock of money was dwindling, and I could not expect to live in the Admiral's house for ever; while, as long as we remained at Rochelle, Henry of Beam's generous promise was not likely to bear fruit.

Jacques, who paid one or two visits to Le Blanc, reported that the castle remained closed, and that the tenants on the property had received orders to pay their rents to the crown. This was bad enough, but his second piece of information made my blood hot with anger.

I asked if he had learned anything of Etienne Cordel, and he replied angrily, "More than enough, monsieur. I shall certainly spit that insolent upstart one of these days. He is giving himself all the airs of a grand personage, and boasts openly that before long he will be the Sieur Le Blanc. He is a serpent, monsieur—a crawling, loathsome, deadly serpent; his breath pollutes the very air."

"He is no worse than his kind," I replied somewhat bitterly. "He is but trying to raise himself on the misfortunes of others."

"Worse than that, monsieur. In my opinion it was he who caused the downfall of your house, for his own wicked ends. Your father's property was to be his reward for doing Monseigneur's dirty work."

"It is likely enough," I replied, "but we can do nothing without the Admiral."

A day or two after this conversation—it was as far as I can remember about the middle of July—Felix came to me in a state of great excitement.

"Have you heard the news?" he asked. "The king has sent for our chief!"

"For what purpose?"

"He has written a most kindly letter and has promised to follow his counsel."

"Faith," said I, "it smacks to me of the invitation of the hungry fox to the plump pullet! I think Coligny will be well advised to remain within the walls of La Rochelle."

The king's letter was the subject of eager discussion, and almost every one declared that our beloved chief would run the greatest risk in accepting the invitation.

"The king may be honest enough, though I doubt it," said one, "but the Guises are murderers; while as for Monseigneur and his mother, I would as soon trust to a pack of wolves!"

Queen Joan, Henry of Bearn, young Condé, and all our leaders, though making use of less blunt speech, were of the same opinion, but the Admiral cared little for his own safety, when there was a chance of benefiting his country.

"The king is surrounded by evil counsellors," he said; "there is all the greater need for one who will tender him honest advice. I have ventured my life freely for France; you would not have me turn coward in my old age?"

"To die on the field of battle, my lord," exclaimed one of his oldest comrades in arms, "and to be stabbed in the back by a cowardly assassin are two very different things."

"You love me over-much," replied the Admiral, placing a hand affectionately on his shoulder; "you are too tender of my welfare. What is one man's life compared with the good of France?"

"Very little, my lord, except when the man is yourself, and then it becomes everything!"

"Well," replied Coligny, "at the least we can ponder his majesty's request."

"He will go," declared Felix that evening; "his mind is made up. With him France is first, second, and third; Coligny is nowhere."

"The king may really mean well," I suggested.

"If he doesn't," said Felix, "and any harm happens to our chief, the House of Valois will rue it! We will clear them out, root and branch."

My comrade foretold the Admiral's decision correctly. With his eyes wide open to the terrible risk, he elected to place himself in the king's power, in the hope of healing the wounds from which France was still bleeding.

Jeanne was so happy with her royal mistress that I felt no misgiving in leaving her, and for myself I was not sorry to exchange the confinement of Rochelle for a more active life. Besides, I could not help reflecting that it was to the Admiral's influence I looked for the recovery of my father's estates.

The evening before leaving La Rochelle I went to take farewell of my sister. "If Roger Braund should return during our absence," I said, "you can tell him we have gone to Blois and perhaps to Paris. What is it, sweetheart?" for at this, a wave of colour spread over her fair face.

"'Tis nothing, brother," said she, gazing earnestly at the ground, "only this very morning the master of an English ship brought me a note from him."

"A note for you! 'Tis strange he did not write to me!"

"He speaks of you in his letter, and hopes you are well. There is some trouble at Court" he says, "and he cannot obtain his queen's permission to leave the country."

"Then we have seen the last of him. I am sorry."

"He thinks he may be able to come in a few months," she continued, but, strangely enough, she did not show me his letter, nor did she mention the subject to Felix, who presently joined us.

The next morning, to the visible anxiety of our friends, we rode out from the city, fifty strong, with the Admiral at our head. We journeyed pleasantly and at our leisure to Blois, where the king accorded our chief a most gracious and kindly reception. If he really meditated treachery, he was a most accomplished actor.

His gentlemen entertained us with lavish hospitality, and, though there were occasionally sharp differences of opinion, we got on very well together. When the king treated our leader so affectionately, calling him "Father," and placing his arm round his neck, the members of the royal household could not afford to be churlish.

One morning I chanced to be in attendance on the Admiral when he and the king were taking a turn in the grounds. Felix and two or three of the king's gentlemen were with me, and we were all chatting pleasantly together when my patron, turning round, beckoned me to approach.

"This is the young man, sire," he said; "he comes from a good family, and I have proved him to be a trusty servant."

"My dear Admiral," cried Charles, "a word from you is sufficient recommendation. But there are forms to be observed, and you would not have me override the Parliament! Eh, my dear Admiral, you would not have me do that," and he laughed roguishly.

"I would have you do nothing unjustly, sire, but I would have you set the wrong right, and this is a foul wrong. The Sieur Le Blanc did nothing more than any other Huguenot gentleman. Why was he outlawed, and a price set on his head, and his property confiscated?"

"Upon my word," exclaimed Charles, looking very foolish, "I do not know!"

"You were pleased at St. Jean d'Angely to call him a very gallant gentleman."

"At D'Angely?" echoed the king. "Are you speaking of the man who set us so long at defiance? My brother was not well pleased with him."

"Your brother, sire, does not rule France."

"No, by St. James!" cried Charles, with sudden fury, "and while I live he never shall! I am the king, and what I wish shall be done. This Le Blanc who fought at D'Angely was as brave a soldier as ever drew sword. Had he been on our side, I would have made him a marshal. I swear it!"

"He fought against you, sire, but it was for what he thought right."

"Perhaps he was right," said Charles. "Why can't we all live at peace with each other? When we have finished cutting each other's throats, the Spaniards will step in and seize the country. I am not a fool, though my brother thinks I am!"

"While France remains true to herself, sire, Spain can do her no harm. And a generous action, your majesty, goes far toward gaining a nation's love."

"You wish me to restore this young man's estates? They shall be restored, my dear Admiral; I will look into the matter on my return to Paris. There will be papers to sign—it seems to me I am always signing papers, principally to please my mother and Monseigneur—in this I will please myself."

"I thank you, sire, not only for myself, but for Henry of Beam, whose life the youth had the good fortune to save, and who is greatly interested in him."

"If it will please Henry of Beam," said the king with an interest for which I could not account, but which became clearer afterwards, "that is a further reason why I should have justice done. Let

the young man go to his estates whenever he pleases; I will see that whatever forms are necessary are made out."

At that I thanked his majesty very respectfully, and at a sign from my patron fell back to rejoin my companions. I said nothing to Felix then concerning this conversation, but at night, when we were alone, I told him of the king's promise.

"He will keep his word," said my comrade, "unless Anjou gets hold of him. But if Anjou has promised the estates to his tool, I foresee difficulties."

"Surely the king is master of his own actions!" I remarked.

My comrade laughed. "He is a mere puppet; his mother and Anjou between them pull the strings as they please. Charles is a weakling, Edmond, and easily swayed by other people's opinions."

"He seems to be under the Admiral's influence just at present."

"Yes; it is when he returns to Paris that the trouble will begin. The other side will work hard to drive him away from our patron."

A fortnight passed before I heard anything more of the subject, and I was beginning to feel somewhat doubtful of the king's good faith when one morning the Admiral sent for me.

"His majesty is returning to Paris, Le Blanc," he said, "and I am going for a short while to Chatillon. He has promised to set things right for you, but he may forget, and I shall not be with him."

"It is very kind of you to think of my troubles, my lord."

"I must be true to those who are true to me," he replied graciously, "and I am still deeply in your debt. Now, what is to be done? Until the papers are signed, your tenants must continue to pay their rents to the crown; but it may be as well for you to take the king at his word, and go to your estates. Of course, you will need money, but, fortunately, I can supply that."

"You are indeed generous, my lord; but there is another objection," I stammered out awkwardly.

"What is that?" he asked

"My duty to yourself, my lord. It is not the part of a gentleman of France to leave his chief in danger."

"But I am not in danger, my boy! France is at peace; the king is my friend; we have blotted out the past. Still, should the time come when I have need of a trusty sword, I shall not fail to send for Edmond Le Blanc. I leave Blois in two or three days, but before then I will send my chaplain to you. Keep a stout heart; the king is anxious to stand well with Prince Henry, who will not forget to press your claims."

I took my leave of him with heart-felt gratitude, and sought my comrade, whose face clouded as he listened to my story.

"'Tis good advice, Edmond," he exclaimed dolefully, "and it is selfish in me to feel sorry; but it puts an end to our comradeship."

"Say, rather, it breaks it for a time," I suggested. "As soon as the affair is settled I shall come back."

"Will you?" he cried delightedly; "then I hope the king will sign the papers directly he reaches Paris. I shall be miserable until your return."

"The pleasures of the capital will help to keep up your spirits," I laughed. "It will be a novelty to see our friends attending the royal banquets and receptions. Monseigneur and the Guises will be charmed with your society."

"It is a big risk," he remarked thoughtfully. "I wonder how it will all end?" and I hardly liked to answer the question even to myself.

The next day the chaplain brought me a purse of money, with a kindly message from the chief, who had gone to attend the king, and I told Jacques to prepare for setting out early in the morning.

"Are we going to Paris?" he asked, and I laughed at the amazed expression of his face on hearing that we were about to return home.

"'Tis a long story," I said, "but there will be ample time to tell it on the journey."

I wished my comrades farewell, and early in the morning took my departure from Blois, Felix riding a short distance with me.

"I would we were travelling the whole journey together," he said; "but as that is out of the question I shall pray for your speedy return. Good-bye, Edmond, till we meet again."

"And may that be soon!" I exclaimed warmly.

CHAPTER XVIII

A Warning from L'Estang

The hour being late when we reached Le Blanc, Jacques proposed that we should put up at the inn. Old Pierre came bustling out with a hearty welcome; the horses were stabled, a room was prepared, and by the time we had removed the traces of our journey Pierre brought in a substantial and appetising supper.

"Why, Pierre," I exclaimed laughing, "you must have laid your larder bare!"

"All the larders in the village would be laid bare for monsieur's use," replied the old man, and I believed him.

"Come Jacques," I said, "sit down and fall-to; the ride to-day must have put an edge on your appetite!" for we had eaten nothing since the early morning.

After supper I bade Pierre seat himself and tell us the news of the neighbourhood, which he did willingly, though there was but little to relate. The castle still remained closed, and when I asked about the keys he said they had been taken away by the officer, and no one knew what had become of them.

"That need not keep us out long," said Jacques, "we can easily get fresh ones made in the morning; Urie will see to that."

"Has Etienne Cordel been in the village lately?" I asked.

"He is always here, monsieur," cried the old man with an angry outburst; "he collects the money for the crown, and acts as if he were the rightful owner. He gives himself as many airs as if he were some great lord!"

"Which he may be one of these days; he has powerful friends at Court. Doesn't he talk of what he will do in the future?"

"He tells idle tales, monsieur," replied Pierre with a frown.

"What does he say?"

"That before long the estates will be his own, and that the king has promised to make him the Sieur Le Blanc. He is going to live in the castle and grind us under his feet. But"—and the old man shook his head scornfully—"I don't think his life at the castle will be a long one! A rascally lawyer to be our master, forsooth!"

"Well, Pierre," I said, "at present I intend living there myself, and, I do not suppose Cordel will care to keep me company. Send word to Urie that I shall need his services at daylight, and now we will go to bed; Jacques is half asleep already."

"I do feel drowsy, monsieur," said Jacques, almost as if it were a crime to be tired, "but I shall be fresh by the morning."

The news of my return quickly spread, and next day all the village had assembled outside Pierre's door. Men, women and children were there, and I confess their hearty and genuine welcome touched me very closely. I had always been a favourite with them, and the death of my father, of whose prowess at D'Angely they had heard, increased their love.

"Ho, ho!" exclaimed one burly fellow, "now that our young lord has come back Monsieur Cordel can take himself off, or he will get a taste of my cudgel!"

"No, no, my friend!" I cried hastily, for his companions had begun to cheer, "you must not interfere with Monsieur Cordel, or you will get into trouble. I have returned to Le Blanc by the king's instructions, but his majesty has not yet signed the necessary papers permitting me to take possession of my property. That will come in time, but meanwhile we must be patient and give no cause of offence."

"We will do whatever you tell us, monsieur," they answered.

From the first streak of dawn Urie, the blacksmith and worker in iron, had with the assistance of Jacques been busily fashioning the new keys. It was a troublesome business, and evening was again approaching when I succeeded in entering my old home.

Rather to my surprise, I discovered that the royal troops had committed little damage, and in a few days, through the willing labours of the villagers, everything was restored to its former condition. Several of my father's old servants were eager to return, but, knowing how uncertain the future was, I decided to manage with as few as possible.

"I fear, monsieur," said Jacques one evening, about a week after our return, "that we must expect trouble."

"How so?" I asked.

"Cordel has been in the village, and has gone off in a towering passion. It seems he has only just learned of your arrival, and has let fall several threats to old Pierre."

"Pshaw!" I exclaimed, "what harm can the fellow do us?"

"I do not know, monsieur; but he is a false knave and full of cunning. He will play you a nasty trick if he can find a way!"

"We will wait till that time comes," I replied cheerfully, thinking Jacques had magnified the danger.

Cordel did not tax my patience long. The very next afternoon an officer with an escort of twenty troopers, clattering up to the drawbridge, demanded admittance in the king's name. He was accompanied by the lawyer, and, knowing it would be folly to offer resistance, I ordered the bridge to be lowered.

"Edmond Le Blanc?" said the officer brusquely.

"Permit me to put you right," I replied: "the Sieur Le Blanc!"

He looked at Cordel, who said, "No one bears that name now. His father was outlawed, and his estate confiscated. The castle belongs to the king; this fellow has no right here, and," viciously, "I doubt if he has a right to his life. In any case, as the king's representative, I order you to arrest him!"

"You will be responsible?" asked the officer, who seemed suddenly to have become somewhat timorous. "You will give me an order in writing?"

"I tell you," exclaimed Cordel furiously, taken aback by this question, "that I am carrying out the wishes of Monseigneur. If you desire to make an enemy of him, you must."

"But Monseigneur is not the king," said the perplexed officer.

"You must choose between them," I remarked, rather enjoying his dilemma. "This man appears to shelter himself under the authority of Monseigneur; I am here at the express command of his majesty, to whom, as you wear his uniform, I suppose you are responsible. However, the business is none of mine, but when the king calls you to account, remember that I gave you warning."

"A plague on you both!" cried the officer, now thoroughly exasperated. "To offend Monseigneur will be bad; to offend the king may be worse. Do I understand, monsieur, that you are here by the king's wish?"

"I am acting on his instructions. Of course, if you force me to accompany you, I must submit, but it will be at your own peril."

He drew Cordel aside, and the two conversed earnestly together for several minutes. Then, turning to me, he said, "I am going away, monsieur; when I return it will be with his majesty's order in my pocket."

"You will find me always ready to obey his majesty's commands," I answered, and at that the whole body rode off, Cordel turning round to give me a glance of bitter and vindictive hatred.

"The lawyer's first move!" observed Jacques, who had been standing by my side during the parley, "what will be the second?"

"To seek the advice of his patron. To-morrow most likely he will set out for Paris. It was bound to come to this, but I am rather sorry. Monseigneur has immense influence over the king. I fear that he and the Queen-Mother will prove more than a match for the Admiral. However, we will go on hoping until the worst happens."

The next evening Jacques returned with the information that the lawyer had departed. Having expected this move I was not surprised, but it made my prospects distinctly gloomy. Anjou possessed much influence at Court, and the king was hardly likely to quarrel with his brother over the affairs of an unknown and penniless lad.

Several weeks passed, and even after Cordel's return from Paris I remained in quiet possession of the castle. I received no papers from the king, but, on the other hand, no one made any attempt to molest me. It appeared as if the cloud had passed over without bursting. But I was yet to learn of what Etienne Cordel was capable.

I was sitting one night alone in my room, reading for the second time a letter from Jeanne. She wrote very brightly and hopefully. She continued to be a decided favourite with her royal mistress, and was very happy in her service. This was good news, as I thought it unwise for her to come to Le Blanc until my affairs were settled.

She wrote at great length, too, on a subject that was producing much excitement in Queen Joan's little court. This was a proposal that Henry of Bearn should marry the king's sister, Margaret. Charles was said to be eager for the marriage, which was also approved of by the leading Huguenot gentlemen, but thus far Queen Joan had refused her consent.

"Faith," I said to myself, "nothing could be better; it would give our party a strong friend at Court. It might help me out of my difficulty too. I wish the marriage were taking place to-morrow!"

It was a wild night outside; very cold, with a heavy downfall of rain, while now and then the wind howled round the building in furious gusts. I had put the letter away, and was sitting down again

when some one knocked at the door. Knowing it must be Jacques, I told him to enter.

"A wild night, Jacques," I remarked. "We have the best of it indoors."

"Truly, monsieur, only those who are forced will ride abroad in weather like this. But there is one person eager enough for your company to brave the storm. He has travelled far, too, by the look of his horse."

"A visitor for me! Where is he? Who is it?"

"He is in the courtyard, where, if you take my advice, you will let him stay. As to who he is, he either has no name or is too shy to tell it. He is muffled up so closely that one cannot see his face."

"And he will not give his name?"

"He says it is sufficient to tell you he is the writer of the letter from St. Jean d'Angely."

"It is all right, Jacques. Have the horse put in the stables, and bring the rider here."

"Is it wise, monsieur? One cannot be too careful in these days."

"The man is a friend, Jacques, and will do me no harm. You are getting fanciful."

"Very good, monsieur," said he stolidly, and turned away.

"The writer of the letter from St. Jean d'Angely," I said. "He must have come from Paris on purpose to see me! What does he want? Does he bring news? What a dolt Jacques is! Why is he so long? Ah, they are coming!" and in my eagerness I hurried to the door.

My visitor was heavily cloaked and closely muffled, and he made no movement toward undoing his wrappings.

"Is it L'Estang?" I asked, at which he turned as if to remind me that my servant was present.

"You can trust Jacques as you would trust myself," I said; "but come into my room, while he prepares some supper; you are wet; it is a wild night."

"A terrible night, monsieur; I was glad to see the walls of your castle."

Bidding Jacques see that a good meal was got ready, I led my visitor into my chamber, where he removed his hat and cloak, which I sent away to be dried I made him take off his boots, and gave him a change of clothing, for his own was soaked by the heavy rain.

"It is kind of you, monsieur," he said, "but I must depart before morning. I am supposed to be in Paris, and I cannot afford to be recognized here."

"Still," I said pleasantly, "you may as well be comfortable while you remain. No one will see you but Jacques, and I would trust him with my life. Join me when you are ready."

Jacques had everything arranged so that there was no need for any one to enter the room, and at a sign from me he went out, though very reluctantly, being afraid apparently lest my unexpected visitor should have some evil design on my life.

L'Estang sat down to the table and ate and drank like a man who had fasted long.

"It is a curious situation, is it not?" said he presently. "Here am I, in the service of Anjou, accepting the hospitality of one of Coligny's attendants. We ought really to be cutting each other's throats!"

"There can be no question of strife between you and me, L'Estang."

"No," he said slowly, "I am too much in your debt. I have not forgotten."

"You repaid me at D'Angely, and now I fancy I shall be in your debt. You have journeyed from Paris on purpose to see me!"

"To warn you of danger!"

"From Cordel? He is my bitter enemy, and hates me, though I scarcely know why."

"The reason is plain. You are in his way, and baulk his plans. He has been very useful to Monseigneur, and is deep in his secrets."

"But that does not concern me!"

L'Estang looked at me a moment before replying. "It concerns you very nearly, monsieur. Cordel expects to be paid for his work, and his wages were agreed upon long ago. They are the estates of Le Blanc, and a patent of nobility. Cordel flies high."

"It appears so."

"As you know, the estates were confiscated, and he was made receiver for the crown. That was the first step. Good progress had been made with the second, when Coligny appealed to the king at Blois."

"You know that?"

"I am acquainted with many things," he answered, smiling. "The king brought up the subject in Paris; Monseigneur protested, but Charles had one of his obstinate fits and declared he would do as he pleased. Monseigneur went to his mother, who talked to Charles with the result that the papers are still unsigned."

"The Admiral will use his influence," I said.

"The Admiral is a broken reed, monsieur; but if it were not so, your danger would be just as great. Cordel has been in Paris: he is furious at the check to his plans, and afraid lest they should be overthrown. He can see but one way out of the difficulty."

"And that?"

"Is obvious; you are the obstacle in his path, and he intends to remove it."

"You mean that he will try to take my life?"

"If you were dead, he would obtain the estates without trouble, and the patent would follow."

"Pshaw!" I exclaimed, "Etienne Cordel is too timorous a knave to play with naked steel, or even to fire a pistol from behind a hedge!"

"But not too timorous to employ others," said L'Estang. "There are scores of ruffians in Paris ready to earn a few crowns, and Cordel knows where to seek them. That is what brought me here to-night. Weigh well what I say, monsieur. This rascal has marked you down, and sleeping or waking your life is in danger."

I thanked the kind-hearted adventurer warmly for his service—it was strange to think that but for a trifling accident he might have been earning Cordel's pay—and promised to observe the greatest caution.

"If I learn anything more," he said, "I will send you a note by a trusty messenger, and that you may be sure it comes from me I will sign it D'Angely."

"A good suggestion, monsieur. Now, there is still time for an hour or two's sleep before starting on your journey."

"I must not be here at daylight: if Cordel recognizes me, I can do you no more good."

"The mornings are dark; I will call you in ample time, and Jacques will have your horse ready. You can be miles away from Le Blanc before the villagers are stirring."

The heavy supper and the warmth of the room after his cold, wet ride had made him drowsy, and on my promising to call him at the end of two hours he went to bed.

It was still dark when Jacques undid the fastenings of the gate, and I bade my guest farewell.

"Remember my warning!" he whispered, "and keep free from Cordel's clutches."

"A short visit, monsieur," commented Jacques, as L'Estang rode off.

"But full of interest, nevertheless. My visitor came all the way from Paris in this wretched weather and at some risk to himself to warn me against Etienne Cordel"; and thereupon I told Jacques the story, though without revealing the adventurer's identity.

"The tale rings true," said he, "but we ought to be a match for the lawyer's cut-throats. 'Tis a pity that Cordel won't give us a chance of measuring swords with him."

"He knows better how to handle the goose-quill," I laughed, leaving Jacques to fasten the gate, and returning to my room.

CHAPTER XIX

Who Killed the Courier?

L'Estang's information caused me a certain amount of anxiety, and during the next few weeks I was rarely abroad except for a ride in the broad daylight. Cordel, who was still at home, occasionally came into the village, but nothing happened that served to show he was pushing on his plot.

Indeed, as Jacques pointed out one evening when we were discussing the matter, the lawyer had a difficult game to play. He could strike at me only outside the castle walls, while the villagers were my devoted friends, and every man of them would be eager to put me on my guard.

But Cordel's threats had apparently ended in smoke. Week followed week; the old year gave place to the new, and I remained unmolested.

About the beginning of February, 1572, I received another letter from Jeanne, informing me that

her royal mistress had finally consented to journey to Blois, and that they would set out in a week or two at the latest. She also added, in a brief postscript at the end, that Roger Braund intended to pay us a visit before the summer ended.

About the same time a message reached me from Felix, who was at Blois again, in attendance on our patron. The king, he wrote, was more than ever fixed on the marriage of his sister Margaret to Henry of Beam, though the Pope and all the Guises were bitterly opposed to the match. "But the marriage is certain to take place," he concluded, "and then, if not before, I trust Charles will see that justice is done you."

"'Twas from Monsieur Bellièvre, Jacques," I said, when the messenger had departed with my reply; "he is at Blois once more. There is to be a marriage between the king's sister and our Prince Henry, and the Court is filled with excitement. Do you know, Jacques, I am getting weary of this life. If we were at Blois I should have a chance of meeting the king and pressing my claims. The longer we stay here, the more likely I am to be forgotten."

"True, monsieur; in my opinion it was a mistake to come. When one is not in sight, one is not in mind, and the Admiral has many weighty matters to think about."

"I have told Monsieur Bellièvre what I think, and asked his advice. But still, I cannot return without the Admiral's commands."

The next morning Jacques came early to my room before I had risen. "Monsieur," he said, "will you get up? A strange thing has happened."

"A strange thing?" I repeated, springing from the bed.

"A man has been slain—at least I believe the poor fellow is dead—on the highroad. Urie found him; he was not dead then, and had sufficient strength to whisper your name. Urie declares that he said quite distinctly, 'Monsieur Le Blanc!' so he had him brought here."

"Do we know him?" I asked, now thoroughly roused.

"He is a stranger to me. I have never seen him before, and he does not belong to these parts. But one thing is certain: he is no peaceable citizen."

All this time I was hastily dressing, and now, filled with curiosity, I accompanied Jacques to the room where the wounded man lay. He was a sturdy-looking fellow, in the prime of life, tough, wiry, and with muscles well developed by exercise. His dress was that of an ordinary trooper; he wore a long knife at his girdle, and Urie had placed his sword, which was broken and stained with blood, by his side. The mark of an old scar disfigured his left cheek, and his chest showed that he had been wounded more than once in his life. Jacques was certainly right in saying he was no peaceable citizen.

Urie had fetched the curé, who had bandaged his hurts, but the worthy priest shook his head at me as if to say, "There was really little use in doing it."

"Foul work!" I exclaimed; "the man must have made a desperate struggle for life. Where did you find him, Urie?"

"Just outside the little wood, monsieur. The ground all around was ploughed up by horses' hoofs, and stained with blood. I should say he was attacked by at least three horsemen. I thought he was dead, but when I bent over him he was muttering 'Monsieur Le Blanc'"

"Did he seem sensible?"

"I asked him several questions, but he did not reply, except to repeat monsieur's name, so I had him brought here."

"It is very strange," I said; "he is a perfect stranger; I have never seen him before. Why should he mention my name? Is it possible for him to recover?"

"Quite impossible, my son," exclaimed the curé; "he is dying fast; no surgeon could do anything for him. The wonder is that he has lived so long. He has been fearfully hurt."

"Did you meet no strange persons in the village?" I asked Urie.

"Not a soul, monsieur. It was very early; the villagers were not yet about, and the road was empty."

The wounded man groaned, and the curé partly raised his head, when he seemed more comfortable. His eyes were closed, and his breath came in quick gasps; the shadow of death was stealing across his face. Would he have strength to speak before he died? It was unlikely.

Who was he? What was his secret? How did it concern me? These and a dozen similar questions ran through my mind as I stood there watching him die, and quite helpless to obtain the information I needed. Once or twice he stirred uneasily; his eyes opened; his fingers strayed uncertainly over the bed as if seeking something that had gone astray, and presently he said quite distinctly, but very, very faintly, "Le Blanc! Monsieur Le Blanc!"

"He is here," said the curé softly. "This is Monsieur Le Blanc. What have you to tell him?"

I do not know if the man heard; his eyes remained open; his fingers were still fumbling among

the bedclothes; a frown clouded his forehead, and presently he whispered, but to himself, not to us, "The note! I can't find it. It has gone."

I bent over, him, placing my hand on his brow. "The note?" I said, "tell me about it. Who gave it you? Come, who gave you the note that is lost?"

My question produced an effect, but not the one I intended. The angry scowl spread over his face; the dying eyes filled with passion; the voice became quite strong again as the man cried angrily, "I did not lose it. I earned my money. It was stolen. They set on me—three of them—they were too many—I—I—"

A great hush fell across us, and we gazed at each other blankly. "It is too late," said the curé; "he has carried his secret to the grave."

"Is he dead?"

"Dead, monsieur."

"We must make inquiries," I murmured. "Urie shall show us the place where he found the body. Come, Jacques, we can do no good here."

"I will follow in a few minutes, monsieur. I wish to discover if there is anything by which we can identify the stranger."

Urie and I went out together, but the keenest search failed to help us. The dead man's horse had disappeared, and his assailants had left no trace behind them. I questioned the villagers closely, but none could throw any light on the tragedy. The victim was unknown to them, and no one had seen any strange persons in the neighbourhood. Jacques, too, was at fault, having failed to find anything in the stranger's clothing that would tend to solve the mystery.

"It is a curious thing, monsieur," he remarked that evening. "A dead body on the highroad is not an uncommon sight, but this man was coming to you on a special errand."

"It is evident he was bringing me a letter. The question is—did his murderers kill him to obtain possession of it?"

"The note has disappeared."

"True, and I am inclined to think it was the possession of the letter that cost him his life. Now, who are the persons likely to write to me? My sister—but we can dismiss her—one doesn't commit murder for a page of ordinary gossip."

"No," said Jacques, "I do not think the poor fellow was a messenger from Mademoiselle Jeanne."

"There is Monsieur Bellière! He is at Court and aware of what is going on there. Is it likely that he has heard some favourable news, and—"

"Ah, monsieur," Jacques broke in hastily, "our thoughts are the same. These cut-throats are in the pay of Etienne Cordel, and in killing this poor fellow they have struck at you. But how, I cannot understand."

"We know that Cordel has friends at Court," I continued. "Let us suppose for an instant that the king has agreed to sign the papers; the lawyer would learn the news quickly enough."

"Yes, monsieur," agreed Jacques, "that is so. But how does that help us?"

"Thus. Monsieur Bellière or the Admiral writes, giving me the information, and advising me to return. I arrive at Blois, or wherever the Court may be; the papers are signed, and Cordel's chance of the estates has vanished. He certainly might kill me afterwards, but it could be only in revenge."

"But, monsieur, the news could not have been kept from you for long. Besides, the journey to Blois would have given the lawyer the very chance he wanted. It would have suited him better for the letter to have reached you. Then his ruffians would have waited, and have waylaid you on the road."

"He might not have thought of that!"

"It would not have needed much cunning, monsieur!"

"There is just one other solution possible," I said. "You remember the man who came here on the night of the wild storm? You did not recognize him, but—"

"I am hardly likely to forget the man who tried hard to kill both of us!" interrupted Jacques.

"You have kept your knowledge very close then!" I replied.

"I had no wish to pry into your secrets, monsieur."

"It was not exactly a secret. Something happened while you were with the Count of St Cyr. I had this man's life in my hand, and spared it."

Jacques shrugged his shoulders as if to imply that he had hardly thought me capable of acting so foolishly.

"He is in Monseigneur's service, and, as you know, came to warn me against Etienne Cordel. He promised, if he could ferret out the lawyer's schemes, to write to me."

"Do you really trust this fellow, monsieur?"

"He bears no love to those of the Religion," I answered; "but for me personally I believe he would lay down his life."

"Very good," said Jacques, as if argument was utterly useless against such folly.

"I was thinking it possible that in coming to or going from Le Blanc he was recognized. If so, the lawyer would be put on his guard."

"There is certainly something in that, monsieur."

"And if he sent me a warning message, it would be to Cordel's interest to secure it."

"'Twould be easy to test the truth of the matter," said Jacques. "This fellow will be with Monseigneur; let me go to him, and put the question directly. In that way, if you are right, we shall get at the lawyer's schemes in spite of his villainy. I will not loiter on the road, and I don't see how any danger can happen to you before my return."

We talked the plan over, and at length I agreed that Jacques should start on the journey the next morning. I gave him the name of my strange friend, and he promised to get to work with the utmost caution.

"It is possible," I remarked, "you will find him at Blois, and in that case you will have an opportunity of talking with Monsieur Bellièvre. Tell him that Mademoiselle Jeanne is accompanying the Queen of Navarre."

He went to the stables, and I did not see him again until just before my time for going to bed, when he returned looking gloomy and troubled.

"I have been thinking, monsieur," he said rather shamefacedly, "and I am beginning to doubt the wisdom of my advice. If Cordel's ruffians are close at hand, my going away will make their work easier. Now that it comes to the point I do not like leaving you, and that is the truth."

"That's a poor compliment, Jacques!" I laughed; "evidently you don't think I can take care of myself."

"The poor fellow they brought here this morning was as strong as you, and had as much experience, but he is dead all the same."

"I will take care, Jacques; I will go only into the village, and if it will make you feel more easy, Urie shall sleep here at night all the time you are away."

He was somewhat relieved by this promise, and his face brightened considerably.

"Let Urie bring an iron bar," he laughed, "and a man need wear a thick steel cap to save his skull!"

I went to bed hoping to obtain a good night's rest, but the startling tragedy had weakened my nerves more than I guessed, and I lay awake a long time, wondering what the secret was that the dead man had carried with him to the grave. Was he really a messenger from L'Estang? And if so, what was the news he was bringing? I little dreamed that one of these questions was to be answered within a few hours.

We rose early; I saw that Jacques made a good breakfast, and was standing in the courtyard giving him his final instructions when we heard the clatter of hoofs, and saw a horseman coming at a gallop up the slope.

"Another visitor!" I exclaimed, "and one apparently in a desperate hurry."

Jacques dismounted, saying, "He looks as if he had been frightened half out of his wits. Stay here, monsieur, while I find out what he wants."

In a few minutes he returned with the man, who, jumping from his horse, said questioningly, "Monsieur Le Blanc?"

"Yes," I said, looking at him keenly. He might have been own brother to the poor fellow whom Urie had found by the wood. He was short but strongly built; his face was scarred; his skin red and rough through continual exposure to the weather. He carried a sword and a long knife, and a pair of pistols peeped from the holsters. Plainly he was a man accustomed to take his life in his hand.

"You have ridden fast!" I remarked, for his animal's sides were lathered with foam.

"I was paid to ride fast!" he answered surlily; "my employer feared you would have started."

"Started!" I echoed unsurprised, "whither?"

"He did not confide in me," the fellow replied, "and I didn't ask; 'twould have been no use. My orders were to ride for my life, to give you a letter, and afterwards to guide you to a certain place mentioned in the note."

"And who is your employer?"

"I had no orders to tell that; I expect he has written it down here," and the fellow handed me a sealed packet.

As he raised his arm I noticed a hole, apparently made by a bullet, through his cloak.

"What is the meaning of that?" I asked.

"It means," said he grimly, "that had I not received orders to make no delay on my journey, there would have been one rogue less in your part of the world, monsieur."

"You have been attacked on the road?" I said, with a swift glance at Jacques.

"The bullet went a trifle wide," he answered shortly, "but it came close enough for my comfort."

"Well," exclaimed Jacques, "a miss is as good as a mile. Come and have some breakfast, while monsieur reads his letter. Both you and the animal need food and rest."

Leaving my servant and the messenger together, I returned to my own room, and opened the packet. As I more than half expected, the letter was signed "D'Angely." It was very short, but it answered one of the questions I had been asking myself.

"Since sending my first messenger," it ran, "Monseigneur's business calls me immediately to Poitiers; so I must meet you there instead. Start at once; you can trust the bearer."

Directly Jacques was at liberty he joined me, and I handed him the letter without comment.

"That clears up one point of the mystery," said he. "It is plain the lawyer knows he has this L'Estang to fight against; but 'tis a pity your friend does not give a hint of what is in progress. He might, for instance, have sent a description of Cordel's tools."

"Very probably he did. You forget that this letter only supplements the first one."

"Yes," said Jacques, adding, "will you go to Poitiers, monsieur?"

"I must. L'Estang may have something of importance to tell me."

"He could have written it," said Jacques. "I don't like this journey. These assassins are on the watch. One messenger killed, and the next shot at—we can be sure they won't let you pass free."

"There are three of us," I replied lightly—"you and I and L'Estang's courier, and he seems well able to take care of himself. Let us get ready while he is resting."

CHAPTER XX

L'Estang's Courier

"The stranger rides a fine beast," remarked Jacques, as we entered the stables; "it has stood the long journey well. The grooming and feed of oats have made it as fresh as ever."

"Did he tell you his name?" I asked.

"No; he is a surly rascal. If he were to be in our company long, I should have to teach him good manners. Had I not better waken him? We shall not reach Poitiers to-night."

"Yes; tell him we are ready to start. I have no wish to pass the night at some village inn."

L'Estang's messenger was indeed a surly fellow. He came into the courtyard rubbing his eyes and grumbling at being disturbed. His patron might not reach the town before the morning, he said, and it would be better for us to make a two days' journey. His horse was tired, and likely to break down on the way.

"Little fear of that!" declared Jacques brusquely; "the beast has strength for a hundred miles yet. 'Tis as fine a creature as I have seen."

The courier looked at him with a gratified smile. "Yes," he said, brightening up, "'tis as good an animal as monsieur has in his stables."

He replaced the saddle and tightened the girths, but spent so much time over the business that Jacques was hard put to it to restrain his impatience. However, he was ready at last, and we all three rode down the slope, and along the road toward the wood.

Jacques and the courier rode together a little in the rear, and, turning round, I remarked pleasantly, "By the way, my good fellow, I suppose you have a name of your own?"

"I can't say if it's mine or not," he replied sulkily, "but men call me Casimir."

"Is this the place where you were attacked?" I asked, as we came to the wood.

The fellow returned no answer, but, suddenly seizing his pistol and spurring his horse cruelly, he

dashed to the front and disappeared. A minute or two later, we heard a loud report, and Jacques and I gazed at each other in amazement.

"Your friend sent you a pretty guide, monsieur," said Jacques; "the fellow must be crazy!"

"He fancied, perhaps, that he perceived one of his assailants."

"I saw nothing, and heard nothing; but he is coming back. Well, my friend, did you get a successful shot?"

"No," replied Casimir, who seemed angry at his own clumsiness, "I missed. But there are more days than one in a week, and my turn will come yet! Did you get a good view of the fellow, monsieur?"

I admitted that I had neither seen nor heard any one, at which he cried scornfully: "'Tis plain I shall have to be eyes and ears for the party. He was half hidden by yonder tree, but I saw the barrel of his arquebus. Had I known I was to be dragged into your quarrels, I would have stayed in Paris!"

"Tell me where to find your patron, and you can return at once," I said sternly; "I want no unwilling service!" but, muttering something under his breath he once more took his place beside Jacques.

"'Tis a rough dog, L'Estang has sent me," I thought, "but one that will bite if need be. I wonder if the fellow he fired at was one of Cordel's ruffians? Strange that neither Jacques nor I saw him."

The incident had rendered us more cautious, and we proceeded through the wood carefully, keeping a sharp lookout and listening intently; but the mysterious man had vanished so completely that I began to wonder if Casimir had not been a victim of his imagination.

From the wood we turned into the highroad, and after travelling steadily for nearly three hours halted at a wayside inn. For myself I wished to push on, and Jacques was equally impatient, but our guide complained that his horse was tired and needed a rest.

"'Twould be folly to risk foundering a valuable animal for the sake of getting to a place before one is wanted there," said he, laughing as if he had made some humorous remark. But laughter was not Casimir's strong point, and he made a sorry business of it.

However, since we were entirely in his hands, he had his way, and much precious time was wasted.

"It will take us three days at this rate to reach Poitiers," grumbled Jacques, as we resumed the journey.

"We shall be there as soon as we are expected," returned Casimir, who seemed to have a fresh fit of sullenness, which increased rather than lessened as we proceeded.

About five miles from our stopping-place, two horsemen overtook us. They were cantering briskly along, but drew rein to bid us good-day.

"Are you for Poitiers?" asked one of them pleasantly, but before I had time to reply our guide broke in roughly:

"We are going where we please. The highroad is free to all, I suppose!"

"Certainly, friend, and I doubt if many travellers would care to share it with you. A civil question is worth a civil answer."

"Our business is our own," muttered Casimir, "and we are able to look after it."

The horseman who had first spoken was on the point of making an angry reply, but his companion exclaimed with a laugh, "Let the boor alone to do his business; by the look of his face 'twill bring him pretty close to the hangman's rope!" and, taking no further notice of us, they galloped on.

"By my faith, Casimir," I exclaimed hotly, "your Parisian manners are not of the pleasantest. I could wish that your patron had employed a less boorish messenger."

"See here, monsieur," said he, "there is no need for us to quarrel, but I don't intend losing my life on your account, and it's plain there is some one who bears you no goodwill. How do I know who these travellers are? They may belong to the same gang that shot at me in the wood!"

"Well," I returned rather scornfully, "since you are so fearful of being in my company we had better push on faster. The sooner you bring me to your patron the sooner you can take yourself off."

The rebuke apparently produced some effect, and for a time we proceeded at a fairly rapid pace; but the best part of the day was over, and the late afternoon was already closing in. To reach Poitiers before nightfall was out of the question, and I began to resign myself to sleeping at some wayside inn.

"At any rate," I thought, "there can be little danger. What with Casimir's fears and Jacques' vigilance I shall receive plenty of warning."

I was never an advocate of overboldness, but our guide erred in the other extreme. He became more and more nervous and fidgety, stopping a dozen times to listen, fancying he heard the beat of horses' hoofs in our rear, and declaring we were being followed. And the more his nervousness increased, the more Jacques and I laughed at his fears.

It was fast getting dark when we entered a narrow road, where there was scarcely room for Jacques and Casimir to ride abreast. To the right was a wall of rock, to the left a steep stony slope, on which one might easily break a limb if not one's neck. I rode a little in advance; Jacques on the edge of the slope, and Casimir next to the wall. It was so dark that we could see hardly more than a few yards ahead, and I warned Jacques to be careful.

Suddenly our guide, crying, "Stop a minute, monsieur, my horse has a stone in its foot!" jumped to the ground.

What the reason was I had no suspicion at the time, though it was easy enough to guess afterwards; but the animal began plunging and rearing so violently that its owner had hard work to hold it. Jacques had no time to escape the danger, and, before I realized what had happened, his frightened horse, edging away from the kicking creature at its side, toppled over the slope.

When in after days I related the story to Felix, he laughed at my simplicity, saying I ought to have guessed the secret from the beginning; but, as a matter of fact, even when my servant disappeared I had no thought of treachery. I hugged the wall closely, and looked round.

"Get down, monsieur," cried Casimir loudly; "get down and help me. The beast has gone crazy."

Now I could dismount only in front of the plunging brute, and having no desire to be kicked to death, and the danger being pressing, I seized my pistol and shot the animal in the forehead. Being a keen lover of horses I hated to do it, but there was no alternative.

The effect of the shot produced a far more serious result than I intended. The poor beast, plunging madly, must have kicked Casimir in its last desperate struggle, for a scream of agony rang out wildly on the night air, and I could just distinguish the man's body lying motionless.

This was not all. The report from my pistol was quickly followed by two others, and a couple of bullets whizzed past my head. The next instant I heard the clatter of hoofs, and two horsemen came tearing along the road toward me. Bewildered by these sudden and startling events, I had yet sufficient presence of mind to realize that I had been trapped, and that my only chance of escape lay in flight.

Turning my animal's head, I prepared to gallop off, when I found my way barred by another horseman, who had come up during the struggle. The sudden movement saved my life; he was in the very act of firing when I struck at him fiercely, and he dropped across his saddle with a cry of pain.

The road was now open, and, keeping as far from the slope as possible, I stretched my horse to his utmost speed. It was a mad gallop, with the risk of a sudden and violent death in every foot of the road. My pursuers were not far behind, but I dared not look round. My limbs shook, the sweat poured in streams down my face; I could not think, I could only sit firm and leave my fate in the hands of Providence.

My poor horse bounded along like a crazy thing, but he kept his footing, though every moment I expected him to tumble headlong. The men behind must have ridden more warily, for the sound of hoofs, though still audible, became more faint and indistinct.

I could have cried aloud in joyful triumph as my gallant horse flew out from the narrow pass on to the broad road. My pursuers were now far in the rear, and I had a moment to think. Whoever they were, they knew I had come from Le Blanc, and would expect me to return there. My best plan was to let them pass, and then go back in search of Jacques. Even to save my own life I must not desert my trusty servant.



In a few seconds I had formed my plan, and acted upon it. Leaving the highroad, I struck into the open country, and dismounting, concealed my horse in a hollow. Several minutes passed before the two horsemen came galloping by, evidently bent on following me to Le Blanc.

As soon as they had gone out of hearing, I mounted again and returned quickly but cautiously to the spot where the startling struggle had taken place. Casimir still lay where he had fallen, by the side of his horse. The second animal had disappeared, but its rider was huddled against the wall groaning, and talking as if in delirium.

"It was not my fault, monsieur," he was saying, "Casimir bungled it; he struck too soon."

His head had evidently been dashed with great violence against the wall and I could do little for him. Besides, there was my servant to be considered. Tying my horse securely, I advanced to the edge of the slope, and cried aloud, "Jacques! Jacques!"

There was no answer, and my heart sank as I thought how likely it was that the poor fellow lay there dead, killed by the terrible fall. I found the spot where his horse had slipped, and groped my way down, still calling his name. And at last I heard a feeble "I am here, monsieur!"

"Where?" I cried, "where?" and, guided by the sound of his voice, I made my way toward him.

He was half lying, half sitting at the foot of a chestnut tree, and at my approach he struggled to his feet.

"I am coming round, monsieur," he said in a whisper, "I must have been stunned. I do not know what happened; I think I must have been thrown against a tree."

"Sit down," I commanded, "and rest while I find the horse and get your pistols; they may be useful."

The poor beast had rolled to the bottom of the slope, and was, of course, quite dead; so I removed the pistols and returned to Jacques hastily.

"We were trapped, monsieur," he whispered.

"Yes," I agreed, "but we can talk of that later. The question now is whether you can get to the top of the slope. Lean on me and take your time. There is not much danger. Casimir and a second man are dead, two others are galloping in the direction of Le Blanc. Now, are you ready?"

"I shall soon be all right. There is no bone broken; it is my head that pains!"

His steps at first were very tottery, and he had need of support, but once we reached level ground he walked steadily. We paused at Casimir's body, and Jacques said thoughtfully, "He was a cunning rogue; he deceived me to the very end. Poor fellow, I am sorry to see him like this, but he took his risks. He thought to kill me and he is dead himself."

I went over to the second of our assailants. He had fallen forward on his face; his heart had ceased beating; he lay quite motionless. He was beyond human aid, and we turned away quietly. The dead must ever give place to the claims of the living.

Jacques, who was fast recovering from the blow on his head, now seemed capable of discussing the situation with me. What was best to be done was the question in my mind. We had but the one horse, which could not carry both of us, and Jacques was too weak to walk far. It was plain that if we returned to Le Blanc he must ride, in spite of his objection.

But was it safe to return? At any moment our two assailants might abandon the pursuit, and we were not equal to continuing the fight. They were doubtless strong, sturdy ruffians, well armed, and experienced in the use of their weapons. I should be on foot, and unable to count on Jacques for much assistance.

"I think," I said, "we had better conceal ourselves until the morning; they will hardly dare to attack us in broad daylight. Besides, we can hire a horse at one of the inns."

"Why not stay here?" asked my companion. "They may come back to see if their comrades are living; then we can pounce on them."

Poor old Jacques! He was as brave as a lion, and gave no thought to his weakness.

After a while I convinced him that my plan was the best, so we unfastened the horse, and, leaving the two bodies, walked slowly along the narrow road, and so to the hollow where I had already lain.

Having secured the horse so that he would not stray, I compelled my servant, much against his wish, to lie down in a sheltered nook, and covered him with my cloak, for the night was bitterly cold.

"A good sleep will clear your brain," I remarked, "and you will need all your wits in the morning."

Walking briskly to and fro in order to keep myself warm, I listened intently for the sound of hoofs. Perhaps three hours had passed—the time seemed an age—when clambering softly from the gully and advancing to the roadside I stretched myself flat on the grass. Two horsemen were approaching slowly, and their animals were jaded and leg-weary.

They came close to me at a walking pace; I could dimly distinguish their figures as they leaned forward; they were level with me, one so close that I could have shot him dead with my eyes shut; but it was horrible to think of slaying a fellow creature in cold blood, and I let them pass. Slowly and painfully they proceeded until at length they reached the narrow road.

Returning to the hollow I wakened Jacques, and, telling him of the two ruffians' return, advised that we should proceed.

"Very good, monsieur," he said at once, "I am at your service."

CHAPTER XXI

I Save Cordel's Life

Leading the horse to the road I helped Jacques to mount, for in spite of his bold words he was

still very weak, and then walked along by his side. The night was passing, though it was not yet light, but as the road stretched straight ahead of us for several miles we could not mistake the way.

I walked at a smart pace, but rather with the idea of reaching some place of shelter than from any fear of danger. Our pursuers had abandoned the chase, and for a while, at least, were unlikely to renew it. They were too tired for a fresh pursuit, and their animals were worn out.

Jacques being still wrapped in my cloak, I was able to walk briskly, and this prevented me from feeling the cold. Mile after mile I trudged along, and as we proceeded the haze of darkness lifted, and dawn began to glimmer in the eastern sky.

Save for ourselves the road was deserted; the country around seemed dead; not a hamlet, not even a house appeared in sight. Everything was gloomy and depressing; the very rays of the sun were cold and cheerless, and the bare trees added only another dreary feature to the landscape.

Several times Jacques begged earnestly that we should change places, but, knowing this would make the pace slower, I insisted on his keeping his seat.

"We will stop at the first inn," I said, "have some food and a rest, and procure another horse."

About eight o'clock we entered the street of a village and drew up before the door of the inn. Jacques dismounted, the ostler led the animal away, and we entered the house, the landlord, who could not conceal his curiosity, showing us a room.

"A good breakfast," I said; "the best the house contains. And while you are getting it ready we will put ourselves straight. Have you any salve suitable for cuts and bruises?"

"Yes, monsieur; I will fetch some."

"Faith, Jacques," I exclaimed, when the man had bustled off, "you are a pretty object at present. There is a lump as large as a hen's egg on your head, and your face is covered with bruises, which will show more distinctly when we get the dirt off."

"Perhaps it had better be kept on," said he, smiling cheerily.

After we had brushed our soiled clothing and washed ourselves I applied some salve to Jacques' bruises, while the landlord prepared a compress for the swelling on his head. Then we sat down to breakfast, and our attack on the provisions proved that the startling adventures of the past night had not robbed us of our appetites.

I had, meanwhile, arranged with the landlord to furnish us with a second horse, and now suggested that Jacques should take a couple of hours' rest before starting. Against this he protested vigorously, declaring he had slept well during the night, and that it was I who needed rest.

At last he persuaded me to lie down, while he sat in the room facing the road, with a loaded pistol in one hand and another by his side. Nothing happened however, during the time I slept, and at the end of the second hour Jacques wakened me.

The food and rest had made new men of us, and, having settled accounts with the landlord, we mounted our horses, and set off cheerfully in the direction of Le Blanc. For the time being the danger had passed. It was broad daylight, and every yard forward brought us nearer to my friends.

But there were several things in the adventure to worry me, and that evening, after we had safely reached home, I called Jacques into my room to discuss the matter.

"I don't pretend to understand it, monsieur," he said, "but I feel sure these fellows were in the lawyer's pay. Who else would set a trap for you?"

"I cannot think. Cordel is my only enemy, and yet before concluding it was he who planned the assault there are one or two questions to answer. Casimir, for instance, was he in league with our assailants? If so, he played his part marvellously well, and blinded me effectually."

"So he did me; but he was in league with them, for all that. Remember how he shot at a man in the wood, when no man was there."

"I certainly neither saw nor heard one."

"Nor did Casimir. The shot was a signal to his comrades, and told them that his trick had succeeded. And then his fear about being dragged into your quarrel! That was a blind, monsieur, meant to throw you off your guard."

"It certainly succeeded," I was forced to admit.

"And the fuss he made about foundering his horse! It was a mere trick to delay us on the road; there was nothing the matter with the beast."

"Do you think," I asked, "he behaved so rudely to those horsemen through fear that they might upset the plot?"

"No, monsieur," replied Jacques, with a shake of the head; "I cannot see through it clearly, but in

my opinion that was all a part of the scheme. I believe they were the fellows who rode out on you while I was lying stunned."

"But why should they join us?"

"There is no telling, monsieur. It might have been to learn from Casimir if it was safe to carry out their plot. He was a crafty rogue. I had no suspicion of the truth until he began to make his horse plunge and rear. Then I knew he meant to kill me—by accident!" he concluded grimly.

"And in the confusion it would have been an easy matter to settle my account!"

"A very easy matter," agreed Jacques.

"The facts fit in well with your idea," I said, after a pause; "but if you are right, the puzzle becomes worse than ever."

"In what way, monsieur."

"It brings us face to face with this question—was Casimir in the pay of two employers—one my friend the other my enemy?"

"Pardon me, monsieur," exclaimed Jacques hesitatingly, "but are you sure this adventurer is your friend? He once tried to take your life; he belongs to the opposite camp, and he is a henchman of Monseigneur's, who certainly does not love the Huguenots. You have done this man a service, but it is easy to forget benefits."

"I am afraid that is so, Jacques, yet I cannot doubt L'Estang. Besides, he had me in his power the night he came here."

"Yes," said my servant, with a queer smile, "but he knew that had he done you any harm he would never have left the room alive."

"Still, we will assume that L'Estang is really my friend. In that case Casimir must have sold his knowledge to the lawyer. But if he was in touch with Cordel, who would shoot at him in the wood?"

"A friendly hand could shoot a hole through a cloak. Of course, it is just possible Casimir did not come from L'Estang at all. It is as easy to kill two messengers as one, and the first was killed."

"But how would he know what was in the letter? It had not been opened."

"I had not thought of that," said Jacques. "It drives me back on my first suspicion, which monsieur does not like. But, unless L'Estang helped in the plot, I cannot understand how it was carried out!"

We sat talking half the night, but without coming any nearer to solving the problem, and at last, thoroughly tired, I went to bed. Out of the whole tangle one thing only was plain—Etienne Cordel was playing a desperate game, and no scruples would prevent him from winning it.

And there was no way of getting at the rascal! He laid his plots with so much skill that I could accuse him of nothing. I had no real proofs against him, and without proofs he could laugh in my face.

The story of the attempt on my life quickly spread abroad, and the villagers came in a crowd to learn if I had been injured.

"Who are the villains, monsieur?" cried Urie. "Tell us who they are, and we will make an end of them."

"Ay," said another; "we will pull them in pieces!" and his companions shouted their approval.

"No," I exclaimed, "you must do nothing against the law, or you will be made to suffer for it. Two of the rascals are dead, and the others are not likely to trouble me again. But there is no harm in keeping watch on any strangers hanging about the neighbourhood."

"We will do that, monsieur!" they cried, and at last I succeeded in persuading them to return to their homes.

The excitement, however, did not die down, and the next evening Jacques informed me there was a fierce talk going on at old Pierre's. Some one had started the report that my enemy was Etienne Cordel, and a cry had been raised to march to his house and burn it about his ears.

"But they do not mean it?" I exclaimed.

"As far as words go, they do," replied Jacques; "but dogs that are so ready to bark rarely bite."

He treated the subject so lightly that I thought no more of it; but about ten o'clock a woman came from the village with the news that a number of the men, armed with clubs, pikes and forks, had started off in a body for the lawyer's house. In answer to my anxious questioning she said they had been gone some time, and had taken a short cut across country.

"Saddle the horses, Jacques!" I cried; "this must be stopped. Cordel has influence enough to have every one of them broken on the wheel. Look alive, man!"

Putting on my boots hastily, I followed him to the stables, when we saddled the horses and led

them out. I was in a fever of excitement lest we should not arrive at the house in time, since it was necessary for us to take the longer route by the road.

Jacques endeavoured to calm me, saying, "They will do no harm; they will only shout and threaten, and frighten the old fox half out of his wits. It won't hurt him, and it may teach him a lesson."

This was likely enough, but, fearing lest these foolish people should get themselves into trouble I galloped along, almost as fast as when my two assailants were in pursuit of me. Fortunately, we met no travellers, but, on turning into the cross-road leading to the lawyer's house, I heard a confused roar of voices. The villagers had arrived before us.

I spurred my willing beast, swept swiftly along the narrow road, shot through the open gateway, and drew up in front of the building, where a mob of men were shouting and yelling for Etienne Cordel.

"Bring your pikes!" roared one, "and break the door down!"

"Smoke the old fox out!" yelled another; and at that a dozen cried, "Yes, yes, that's the plan! Smoke the fox out, or let him die in his den."

Some had brought torches, and in their lurid glare the peasants looked quite truculent and formidable. Pushing between them and the building, I called for silence, but the sound of my voice caused the hubbub to grow louder.

"Monsieur Edmond!" they yelled, giving me the name by which I was best known to them; "Bravo, bravo, we will see justice done, monsieur!"

"Be quiet!" I cried angrily, "and listen to me. Do you know what you are doing?"

"Yes, yes. Burn the house down! He set the murderers on!"

"Who told you that?"

"Let him deny it! Where is he? Fetch him out!"

They were excited, even dangerous; I almost doubted if my influence was sufficient to keep them from doing mischief; yet in ordinary times they were as docile and obedient as a flock of sheep. They vowed they would not depart unless Cordel came out to them, and at length the lawyer appeared on the balcony which ran along the front of the house above the ground floor.

He had huddled on a dressing-gown, and looked so wretched and forlorn that I almost felt it in my heart to pity him. But the mob showed no mercy, greeting him with cries of "Assassin!" "Murderer!" and declaring loudly that he was unfit to live.

As soon as their shouts ceased, I exclaimed, "Monsieur Cordel, an attempt has been made on my life, and it is rumoured that you hired the men to kill me. Perhaps you will satisfy these good people that they are mistaken!"

He leaned over the railing and looked down, his face yellow, his eyes staring, evidently in abject fear for his life.

"My friends," he cried desperately, and it made one laugh to hear him address these peasants, whom he utterly despised, as his friends, "I know nothing; I am innocent; I have conspired against no man's life. I swear it!"

The fellow lied, and knew that I was aware of it, but for the sake of the people themselves, I was bound to protect him. An attack on the house would be followed by a visit from the king's troops, and I shuddered to think of the miseries the unfortunate villagers would suffer.

"You hear his denial," I cried loudly, "you have been deceived. We cannot punish an innocent man. Now disperse quietly to your homes. Have no fear for me; I can hold my own against any assassins who may come to Le Blanc."

They departed sullenly, still murmuring threats of vengeance, and turning round to shake their motley weapons menacingly at Cordel's house.

"Now, Monsieur Cordel," I cried, when the last of them had disappeared, "you can go to sleep without fear. I rejoice that I got here in time to prevent mischief; but, monsieur," I added drily, "had the ruffians killed me, I could not have come to your rescue!" and with that parting shot I rode off.

"'Tis a pity you had to stop them," said Jacques presently; they would have made short work of the rascal."

"And have been fearfully punished afterwards!"

"As to that, monsieur, he will do them all the mischief he can now if he gets a chance."

The next morning I sent for Urie and the leading men, lectured them on the folly of their proceedings, pointed out the risks they were running, and made them promise to keep their companions from committing any violence in the future.

"You are more or less in Monsieur Cordel's power," I said; "he has strong friends at Court, while I

have none, and am unable to protect you."

"We will be careful," replied Urie for the others, "but if anything happens to monsieur the rascally lawyer will have need of all his powerful friends."

The failure of his plot—if it was his plot—served to keep the lawyer quiet for a while. He remained at home with only his own domestics in the house, and although many men kept a strict watch no suspicious-looking stranger was seen to visit him.

Meanwhile the prospects of those of the Religion began to brighten: the king was apparently throwing off the influence of his mother and brother; it was reported that he relied more and more on the advice of Coligny, and in spite of the Pope and the Guises, he was still stubbornly bent on marrying his sister to Henry of Bearn.

The Queen of Navarre was at Blois, and Jeanne wrote me a long account of the balls and festivities Charles had arranged. I do not suppose they appealed strongly to Queen Joan, who had little taste for such worldly matters, but the music, the dance, and the joyous merriment were quite to the liking of the younger ladies in her train.

"The king has persuaded my dear mistress to consent to the marriage," Jeanne wrote, "and it is settled that we are to go from here to Paris. Felix has just left for Touraine. He is a dear, good fellow, and has been very kind. He says it is stupid for you to stay at Le Blanc. The king is so full of the marriage and of affairs of State that he will not attend to any less important business. Felix declares that if Prince Henry comes to Paris you must come too, and push your claims. It is certain that the prince's marriage will stop all further persecution of the Huguenots, and it is that which caused my mistress to give her consent. Felix told me yesterday that the Guises are very angry with the king, and have gone away. From all I hear, I really believe he would be pleased if they never came back."

I read portions of my sister's letter to Jacques, but when I remarked that our troubles were nearly at an end, he shook his head, saying, "Those who live will see, monsieur."

CHAPTER XXII

L'Estang Tells His Story

Spring had ripened into summer, and I was still at Le Blanc, not having heard from my patron, and being unwilling to depart without his orders. Cordel had gone to Paris, and, for the time at least, had abandoned his schemes.

One day, about the third week in June, I had just returned from a morning gallop when Jacques met me in the courtyard with the news that Ambroise Devine had brought me a packet from Monsieur Bellièvre.

I had almost forgotten the man, never having seen him since the morning when I started on the memorable journey to Tanlay.

"It is along while since we met," I said, greeting him. "My father told me you recovered from your wounds, and I expected to find you in Rochelle."

"Rochelle forms my headquarters, so to speak, monsieur, but I am in the hands of the chiefs. My last journey was to Flanders, whence I am now returning. Hearing that I was on my way to Rochelle, Monsieur Bellièvre entrusted me with this packet for you."

"You must stay and have a gossip with me," said I, having thanked him; "I hear little news from the outside world."

"You honour me, monsieur; but it is necessary for me to push on with all speed; I am carrying important despatches."

"But you need refreshment!"

"Jacques has seen to that, monsieur, and also to my horse."

"We may meet again," I said, as he took his leave.

"It is very likely. There will be a gathering of our gentlemen in Paris before long; but doubtless Monsieur Bellièvre has told you all the news."

When he had gone I sat down eagerly to read my comrade's letter. There was a smaller packet enclosed, but that I set aside. Felix wrote at some length, and his first item of news was very startling.

"It will cause you both grief and astonishment," he wrote, "to learn of the death of our good Queen Joan. She died on June 9, and some talk has passed of her having been poisoned. There is, however, a great deal of sickness here, and from what Jeanne tells me, I think the poor queen took fever."

"This may cause events to move more rapidly," I thought. "Now that Henry has become King of Navarre, he is a person of even greater importance. Charles will need to reckon with him."

"Our patron," Felix continued, "remains in close attendance on the king, who treats him with the utmost kindness, and even respect. The Guises are in despair, Monseigneur is furious, and even the Queen-Mother has to swallow her pride. This is strange, is it not?"

"Strange!" I exclaimed aloud, "it is a miracle! What else does this wonderful budget contain?"

"Our patron has a grand scheme in his head. He is working hard to unite the Huguenots and the Moderate Catholics into a national party, and to declare war against Spain. The king has nearly consented, and unless the Queen-Mother regains her power war may break out at any moment."

"Better to fight the Spaniards than to cut each other's throats," I muttered.

"I have kept my best news until the last," the letter continued. "Our patron believes the coming war will afford you the chance needed. He will nominate you to a commission, and present you to the king at the same time. For this purpose you must be here, and I am to instruct you to repair at once to the *Hôtel Coligny*, at Paris. Is not this glorious news?"

I had scarcely patience to finish the letter, feeling more inclined to jump up and dance around the room; and yet the ending was full of strange interest.

"A week ago, a man, closely muffled, who refused to give his name, sought me out late at night. He wished, he said, to communicate with you, but for a special reason preferred to send in an indirect way. He finished by asking me to enclose a note the first time I was sending any correspondence to Le Blanc. It sounded very mysterious, but thinking a letter could not work much mischief I consented."

"That is odd," I thought, looking at the smaller packet, which bore no address, and opening it I read in Renaud L'Estang's handwriting—

"Monsieur, I fear something has gone wrong. Did you receive my letter? My messenger has not returned, and I can hear no word of him. I am too busily engaged to leave Monseigneur, and I do not care to send to you openly. Cordel either suspects or knows that I am your friend.

D'ANGELY."

Calling Jacques, I handed the note to him, and asked his opinion.

"It does not help us a bit," he declared; "it explains nothing. If L'Estang is a false friend, as I believe, he is merely trying by this note to throw dust into your eyes. If, on the other hand, he was not a party to the plot, the mystery remains the same."

"I fear you are right, Jacques. However, let us not trouble our heads with the riddle; it will solve itself one of these days. I have other news; can you guess what it is?"

"By your face, monsieur, it should be something pleasant: the king has signed those tiresome papers!"

"Not exactly right," I answered laughing, "but I have hope of that happening in time. We are going to Paris, Jacques. There is likely to be war with Spain, and I am to receive the king's commission. It will be better than fighting against those of our own race and blood; and if we come through the campaign alive, Monsieur Cordel may even cast his eyes on some other person's estates."

"When do we start?" asked Jacques eagerly.

"I have a few arrangements to make. Let us say the day after to-morrow."

"Very good, monsieur, but it is a long time to wait."

The lawyer was still absent from his house, but in case any of his spies should carry information, Jacques let it be known the next morning that in a few days we were going to La Rochelle; nor did I give my own servants any different information.

It was a glorious summer morning when we set forth: the sun shone brightly in a blue sky thinly flaked with snowy clouds; the birds carolled joyously; the green leaves, made brilliant by the sunlight, danced in the gentle breeze; a fresh, sweet smell rose from the fragrant earth.

Many a long day had passed since my heart had felt so light, and as we cantered into the highroad I hummed a gay refrain. I felt as if this was bound to prove the most successful of our ventures.

I had real hope as a foundation on which to rear my airy castle. The war of Religion was over and done with; Huguenot and Catholic would stand shoulder to shoulder against the common foe; Monseigneur, the Guises, and all those who were striving for their own interests to embroil the country in civil strife would have to stand aside; France would at length be united, and therefore strong.

My own private fortunes also wore a rosy tint that morning. Even if the king did not restore my estates at the outset, he would certainly not refuse to do so after I had fought his battles, and

perhaps helped to gain his victories! No, I had not a single fear when I turned to take a last lingering view of the castle of Le Blanc.

As a matter of precaution we rode a few miles in the direction of La Rochelle, but neither Jacques nor I expected that any further attempt would be made upon us in that part of the country. Cordel was most probably in Paris, and could have no knowledge of our sudden departure from Le Blanc. In fact we reached Paris without any mishap, save the casting of a horse's shoe, and the loss of a few hours one night when we went astray in the darkness.

We entered Paris a little before the gate was closed for the night. It was still very light, and the streets were filled with people, very few of whom, however, took much notice of us. The capital was utterly strange to me, and I knew nothing of Coligny's residence, except that it was situated in the Rue de l'Arbre Sec. Overtaking an officer of the king's guards I asked to be directed to that street, and he very courteously undertook to conduct me part of the way.

"You are a stranger in Paris?" said he, looking critically at me and my servant.

"Yes, I have but now arrived from the south, to meet a friend who lives in the Rue de l'Arbre Sec."

"I should fancy," exclaimed the officer, with a humorous twinkle, "that your friend's residence is not far from the *Hôtel Coligny*! Have you borne arms, monsieur?"

"I fought at Arnay-le-Duc," I replied, feeling sure that my questioner had already set me down in his own mind as a Huguenot.

"I was there, too," he said, "but I'll wager we were not on the same side. However, those days are gone, and we may yet have a chance of fighting under the same flag!" to which I replied that nothing would give the members of our party more pleasure.

Having conducted me to the corner of the street and pointed out Coligny's house he took his leave, with a cheery hope that I should find my stay in town pleasant.

The Admiral was absent, but the house was occupied by several of his gentlemen, who gave me a hearty welcome. Felix was somewhere in the town on business, one said, not unconnected with my family, at which the others laughed.

He came in about an hour later, when I learned he had been spending the evening with the Countess Guichy, at whose house my sister was staying.

"The countess, my dear Edmond," said he, "is a relative of mine. She does not belong to the Religion, but she is a worthy soul, and when Queen Joan died and everything was in confusion, I persuaded your sister to go to her until she could consult you as to her future."

"That was like your kind heart, Felix; you have ever been a good friend to both of us. I had not thought how awkwardly Jeanne would be placed by the queen's death."

"There is no need to thank me," he replied, "I have done the countess a favour. Your sister has won her heart already, though to be sure there is no miracle in that. They called her the Queen of Hearts at Blois. I must take you to see her in the morning. Did Jacques come with you?"

"Yes, he is making himself at home with some of his old acquaintances; but where is the Admiral?"

"At Fontainebleau with the king. Everything is settled; Henry comes to Paris in a week or two, and there is to be a grand wedding. Our opponents are furious, but helpless. There is only one thing I dread."

"What is that?" I asked, rather taken aback by the sudden serious look on his face.

"There are ugly rumours about, Edmond. It is whispered that Guise has sworn to take our patron's life. Coligny has received a dozen warnings, but he is too fearless to notice them. He shrugs his shoulders and says 'It would be better to die a hundred times than to live in constant fear. I am tired of such alarms, and have lived long enough.' But he hasn't lived long enough, Edmond! Without him, the Cause would be ruined."

"No one will dare to do him an injury while the king stands by him," I said cheerfully. "If Charles is really his friend there is nothing to fear."

"I am not so sure of that. Unless the Admiral is at his elbow Charles is simply a tool in the hands of Monseigneur and the Queen-Mother."

"Even so it should be difficult for the assassin's knife to reach our patron while he has his body-guard around him!" at which Felix laughed, saying the Admiral frequently ventured abroad either alone, or with but one or two attendants.

The next morning we set off for the Countess Guichy's, where Jeanne received me with open arms. Since our last meeting she had become even prettier, and I scarcely wondered that the gay young courtiers had called her the "Queen of Hearts." She was very happy and cheerful, and full of praise for Felix, who had watched over her as tenderly as if she were his own sister.

The countess was a stately lady, with a kind face and twinkling eyes. It was easy to see she had become very attached to Jeanne, and she would listen to no arrangements that would remove my sister from her house.

"From all I can gather," she said, "you will be off to the wars soon, and pray what will Jeanne do then? Bury herself in that musty Rochelle? No, my dear, you shall remain with me until—ah, well, it isn't your brother who will part us!" at which poor Jeanne flushed painfully.

The countess insisted on our remaining to dinner, after which we escorted Jeanne into the city, Felix pointing out the sights and describing the buildings with the air of one who had lived in Paris all his life.

Our patron still being with the king we enjoyed a great deal of leisure, and for nearly a week spent most of our time with the countess and Jeanne, much to the satisfaction of Felix, who so contrived that I always had the honour of escorting his noble relative.

We were returning late one evening, walking quietly along the Rue de Bethisy, at the corner of which stood the Admiral's house, when a man, who had evidently been watching the approaches to the building, tapped me on the shoulder and whispered "Monsieur Le Blanc!"

He wore a large plumed hat which was drawn partly over his forehead, and he was, besides, closely muffled, but I had no difficulty in recognizing him as Renaud L'Estang. Telling Felix I would follow in a few minutes, I turned aside with the adventurer into the courtyard of a large house where we were not likely to be interrupted.

"I learned yesterday you were in Paris," he remarked, "and have been watching for you. Did your friend send you my note?"

"Yes, but it was difficult to answer. Your first messenger was killed; your second was a traitor. That is why I did not meet you at Poitiers."

"My second messenger!" he exclaimed in a tone of surprise. "Poitiers! Either you or I must be dreaming! I sent but one man, and he vanished. Why should you expect to meet me at Poitiers?"

"At your own invitation!" I replied.

"But, monsieur, this is a puzzle! I do not understand; it is beyond me."

"Perhaps," I remarked drily, "you have forgotten Casimir!"

At that he drew a long breath. "Casimir!" he exclaimed; "ah, that lets in a little light. Monsieur, will you tell me the story? We shall get at something surprising."

He listened attentively while I related what had happened, and then "Truly," he said, "this Cordel is a clever rogue, and Casimir an able tool. I have found him useful myself before now."

"He cheated you to some purpose in the end," I remarked.

"But he did not cheat me at all; I had nothing to do with him. Listen, and judge for yourself. I discovered that the lawyer had bargained with four men, one of whom was this very Casimir, to take your life. The murder was to be done in such a manner that no suspicion should attach to him, and the first thing was to get you away from Le Blanc."

"In that at least," said I laughing, "they succeeded."

"I wrote a letter warning you of this, and describing the four men, and despatched it by the hand of a trusty messenger."

"He was worthy of your trust," I said.

"The second letter asking you to meet me at Poitiers was not written by me."

"Then who was the writer?" I asked.

"It would be difficult to prove, but I should say it was Etienne Cordel. Several little matters convinced me he had heard of my flying visit to Le Blanc. That put him on his guard, and unfortunately my messenger was known to Casimir and his companions."

"Do you think they tracked him?"

"Waylaid him in the wood, abstracted the letter, and carried it to the lawyer. It was easy for him to imitate my writing, and the signature of D'Angely would disarm suspicion."

"Your explanation certainly seems reasonable," I remarked.

"And I believe it to be true. And now, take my advice and be very cautious. Men are cheap in Paris, and Cordel will stick at nothing. If I can help you against him, you may be sure I will."

I thanked him warmly, and proceeded to the hotel.

"Jacques will be glad to know that gratitude is not altogether dead in the world," I said to myself.

CHAPTER XXIII

A Royal Marriage

I should probably have worried myself considerably over the strange story related by Renaud L'Estang, but for the public events which occurred almost immediately. On the very next morning we received orders from the Admiral to be prepared to escort Henry of Navarre into the capital.

My purse, fortunately, was not yet empty, for it was necessary to don a mourning suit in order to show respect to the memory of the late queen.

"We must show ourselves as fine as those popinjays of Anjou's," said Felix. "Fine feathers make fine birds in the eyes of the populace, and we must let them see that Huguenot gentlemen are a match for those of the king."

It was early morning of July 8, 1572, when about a dozen of us, all splendidly, though sombrely attired, rode out from the courtyard of the *Hôtel Coligny*, and, passing quickly through the empty streets, proceeded to meet the princely cavalcade.

Henry's retinue formed a striking and impressive spectacle. He was attended by young Condé, the Cardinal of Bourbon, and our own beloved chief. Behind them rode eight hundred gallant gentlemen, all in mourning, the majority of whom had proved their zeal and devotion to the Cause on more than one battle-field. We saluted the chiefs, and took our places in the procession.

"I think even the Parisians will admit we do not make a very sorry show," remarked Felix as we rode along.

At the gates of St. Jacques we were met by Monseigneur at the head of fifteen hundred gorgeously attired horsemen. He greeted our leaders with elaborate ceremony, but, as far as I could judge, with little goodwill, and Catholics and Huguenots mingled together, forming one imposing body. Young Condé and his brother, the Marquis, rode between Guise and the Chevalier d'Angoulême; Henry himself was placed between the king's brothers, Anjou and Alençon.

The streets were packed with dense crowds of citizens; every balcony was filled, and fair ladies sat watching from the open windows. Here and there men shouted lustily for Monseigneur, but for Henry of Navarre there was no word of kindly welcome; we proceeded amidst a cold and chilling silence.

"This may be a royal welcome," laughed one of my neighbours, "'tis anything but a friendly one. Faith, I am beginning to think already that we shall have as much need of our swords in Paris as ever we had at Arnay-le-Duc."

"Bah!" cried Felix; "who wants the plaudits of a mob? These people are but puppets, and the strings are pulled by the priests."

"The citizens are hardly reconciled yet to the new order of things," remarked one of Monseigneur's gentlemen; "but the strangeness will soon wear off, and you will be as welcome in Paris as in Rochelle. It is not strange that at present Anjou is their favourite; you must give them time."

The speaker may have been right, but the hostile attitude with which the citizens met us became stronger, when, having escorted the princes to the palace, we broke up into small groups and rode towards our various dwellings.

The sullen silence gave place to angry murmurs, and even to open threats, especially when we passed the crosses and images at the corners of the streets without raising our hats.

"Well," I said, as, entering the courtyard of the hotel, we gave our animals to Jacques, "the king may desire the marriage, but it certainly does not meet with the approval of the citizens. In truth, now that to-day's ceremony is over, I am rather surprised to find myself alive."

"You are not the only one, Le Blanc," said De Guerchy, who was entering with us; "I expected every moment to hear a cry of 'Kill the Huguenots!' They say a bad beginning often leads to a good ending; let us hope this will be a case in proof of it. But I wish the Admiral was in the midst of us!"

"There lies the danger," I said; "a pistol-shot or the stroke of a sword, and the streets of Paris will run with blood."

"They will," declared Felix fiercely, "if any harm happens to our leader!"

When I came to think about these things in after days, it seemed strange to remember how, through all the time of rejoicing and apparent friendliness, there ran an uneasy feeling, for which even Henry's chilling reception by the Parisians was not sufficient to account.

Our first thought in the morning and our last thought at night centred upon the Admiral's safety. Absolutely fearless, and placing unbounded confidence in the king's honesty, that chivalrous nobleman behaved as if he were surrounded by loyal friends. He had consecrated his life to the welfare of France, and no thought of self could turn him aside from his duty.

His usual attendants were De Guerchy and Des Pruneaux, and with them he would set out from his residence to transact his business with the king at the Louvre. But, unknown to him, two of us always went a little ahead, while two followed closely in the rear. We carefully avoided drawing attention to ourselves, but our eyes sought every passer-by and examined every window where an assassin might lurk.

Thus the time passed between hopes and fears. There was little talk now of the war with Spain, and it began to be understood that the subject would not be pursued until after the marriage.

Being so fully occupied we saw little of Jeanne during these days, but one evening Felix and I started to pay her a visit. It was the first week in August, the day had been hot, and most of the citizens were out of doors seeking the cool air.

"One minute, monsieur!"

We were at the bottom of the steps in front of the Countess Guichy's hotel, but, recognizing the voice, I stopped and turned.

"Is it you, L'Estang?" I said.

"Hush! It would be as well to call me D'Angely. You have been followed here from the Rue de l'Arbre Sec. A strange man, now hiding on the other side of the road, has been watching you for these two days past. The populace have no love for a Huguenot gentleman."

"What is the fellow like?" I asked.

"He keeps himself well muffled; he is about your own height and build; that is all I can discover. But I believe he has been hired by Cordel. Take care not to expose yourself too freely."

"Many thanks," I said, as he disappeared.

"'Tis almost a pity," exclaimed Felix, "that you interfered with your peasants. You should have let them rid you of that rascally lawyer while they were in the mood."

"Nonsense!" I replied, "you are talking wildly. Of course there must be no word of this to Jeanne."

"I am not likely to alarm her!" he replied, and ran lightly up the steps.

The ladies were full of the approaching ceremony, and could talk of nothing but stomachers and brilliants and gold lace and such like stuff, without which they seemed to imply there could be no wedding at all. The countess, who had arranged for Jeanne to form one of the young bride's attendants, had been spending money lavishly on a wonderful dress, and she declared laughingly that when Henry saw my sister he would wish she could change places with Margaret; at which Felix remarked it would certainly show his good taste.

Jeanne laughed and blushed, calling him a flatterer, but she was very happy, and her eyes were sparkling with pleasure.

As our visit drew to a close, she contrived to whisper: "I have heard from your English friend. A messenger from La Rochelle brought me a letter yesterday. He is coming to see you shortly; he may be in France already."

"Oh," I replied, "unless he comes quickly he may have to travel as far as Flanders; that is," I added, slyly "if he really wishes to see me."

"Of course he does," she answered gaily, "and to visit Paris; he has set his heart on seeing our capital."

Although very fond of Roger Braund, I felt, somehow, rather sorry to hear Jeanne's news, and, as we left the house, my comrade rallied me on my thoughtfulness.

"Come," said he briskly, "we must hurry; the Admiral does not like our being abroad so late," at which, remembering how persistently he had refused to leave earlier, I laughed heartily.

The streets were for the most part deserted; but in spite of the late hour it was not dark.

"Listen!" exclaimed Felix suddenly, "there is some one following us; he is coming at a quick pace, as if trying to overtake us. Perhaps it is your quixotic adventurer friend, with a further warning."

"No," I replied, "L'Estang is not so heavy; he is more cat-footed. 'Tis some belated wayfarer like ourselves, in a hurry to reach his lodgings."

The man caught us up, gave a surly growl in response to our "Good-night," and passed on rapidly.

"'Tis plain that all the boors do not live in the country," remarked Felix, as the fellow disappeared. "I thought all Parisians were noted for their good breeding."

"Another mistake corrected, my friend. As we grow older—ah! After him, quick!"

A bullet had whizzed past my head, cutting, as I found later, the feather stuck jauntily in my hat—for we did not choose that Anjou's gentlemen should exhibit all the airs and graces. The shot was fired from a low entry, and before the noise of the report had died away Felix, who kept his wits wonderfully, darted inside.

In another instant I had joined him, and we raced together up the narrow court.

"There he is!" I cried; "ah, he is climbing the wall!"

Felix being the swifter runner drew ahead, but he was too late. The assassin, straddling the wall, struck him furiously with his arquebus, and my comrade fell. I bent over him in an agony of fright, but he struggled to his feet, saying, "It is all right, Edmond; he has raised a lump on my

head, nothing more; but I fear he has escaped."

"Yes, we should only lose ourselves trying to follow him there. Are you sure you are not hurt?"

"Quite sure. My head will ache for an hour or two, but I shall be all right in the morning. I suppose that bullet was meant for you!"

"There can be little doubt of it. L'Estang must have had good ground for his warning."

"You will have to put an end to this, Edmond."

"As soon as this marriage is over, the Admiral has promised to make another appeal to the king. With Henry to speak a word for me as well, I think Charles will restore my estates. At all events, there is the Spanish war in sight, and Cordel isn't likely to follow me to Flanders."

I spoke lightly, but this second attempt on my life was really a serious matter, showing as it did that my enemy had not abandoned his design. The next few days, however, were very busy ones, and the course of events gave me little leisure for brooding over my own dangerous position.

The betrothal of the royal pair took place on August 17, at the Louvre, and was followed by a supper and a ball. Then, according to custom, the bride was escorted by the king and queen, the queen-mother, monseigneur, and the leading princes and nobles to the palace of the Bishop of Paris, where she was to spend the night.

The actual ceremony was fixed for the next day, and we at the *Hôtel Coligny* were up betimes. Strangely enough, the uneasy feeling of which I have spoken had increased rather than lessened, though no one could give any reason for this growing apprehension.

Everything was going well; there was no fresh cause for alarm, and yet there was not a man amongst us—unless we except our noble leader—who did not wish the day well over. He was in the highest of spirits, looking upon the marriage as a public proof that henceforth Charles intended to rule all his subjects with equal justice. Perhaps he did!

The day was gloriously fine, and hours before the time announced for the ceremony the streets were thronged with dense crowds of citizens. On the open space in front of Notre Dame a gorgeous pavilion, in which the marriage was to be solemnized, had been erected.

Coligny was accompanied by certain of his gentlemen, but most of us were stationed outside the pavilion. The people glared at us scowlingly, and even when the grand procession passed on the way to escort Margaret from the palace they remained mute.

Yet for those who enjoy idle shows it was a pretty spectacle. Charles, Henry, and Condé, with some idea perhaps of showing their affection for each other, were all dressed alike, in pale yellow satin, embroidered with silver, and adorned with pearls and precious stones. Anjou, who was even more magnificently attired, had a set of thirty-two pearls in his toque, while the noble dames were gorgeous in rich brocades, and velvets interwoven with gold and silver.

"If the people had their way," whispered Felix, as the grand cavalcade swept by, "Henry would be going to his funeral instead of to his marriage, and there would be few of us left to mourn him."

From the Bishop's palace to the pavilion stretched a raised covered platform, and presently there was a slight craning of necks, and the citizens showed some faint interest, as the head of the bridal procession appeared in sight.

First came the archbishops and bishops in their copes of cloth of gold; then the cardinals in their scarlet robes, and the Knights of St. Michael, their breasts glittering with orders; but not a cheer was raised until young Henry of Guise appeared, when it was easy to tell who was the favourite of the Parisians.

I regarded him with much interest. He was only twenty-two years old; tall and handsome, with a lissom figure and an air of easy grace that became him well. His eyes were keen and bright; he wore a light beard, and a profusion of curly hair. Altogether, he looked a very dashing and accomplished nobleman.

"There she is!" cried Felix suddenly; "do you see her? Could any one look more lovely?"

"She is certainly magnificent."

"Bah!" he interrupted in disgust, "you are looking at Margaret. 'Tis Jeanne I am speaking of—your sister. Edmond, you are more blind than a mole!"

There really was some excuse for his extravagant praise, for even amongst that galaxy of beauty Jeanne shone with a loveliness all her own, and Felix was not the only one of my comrades to declare that she was the most beautiful of all that glittering throng.

But the centre of attraction was Margaret herself, still only a girl of twenty, with a beautifully clear complexion and bright black eyes full of fire and spirit. She was truly a royal bride, gracious, dignified, queenly. Magnificent brilliants sparkled in her glossy hair; her stomacher was set with lustrous pearls; her dress was of cloth of gold, and gold lace fringed her dainty handkerchief and gloves.

"A magnificent creature to look at!" grunted the man next to me, "but I would prefer my wife to be a trifle more womanly."

At length they had all passed into the pavilion, and when the ceremony was concluded Henry led his bride into the cathedral, afterwards joining Coligny, Condé, and a few other Huguenot gentlemen, who walked up and down the close, conversing earnestly together.

Leaving the Admiral at the Louvre with a small escort, we returned to the *Hôtel Coligny*, discussing the great event of the day. The citizens were slowly dispersing, and as we passed some of them muttered violent threats against the Huguenots; others cheered for Henry of Guise, a few raised a cheer for Monseigneur, but I did not hear a word of welcome for the king, or for Henry of Navarre, or for our own noble leader—the most chivalrous of them all.

"Charles hasn't increased his popularity by this marriage!" I remarked.

"No," said one of my comrades, "he has lost ground among the Parisians. It will frighten him; he will be more afraid of Guise than ever. How the fools roared for the duke! Perhaps they would like him for king! They would find they had their master, for all his smooth speech and courtly manners."

"The people's coldness may do good in one way," remarked Felix. "Charles may rush into a war with Spain, thinking that a brilliant victory or two would win back his popularity."

"The war with Spain will never come about," growled a grizzled veteran, who had fought with Coligny on his earliest battle-field. "Guise, the Pope, Monseigneur, and the Queen-Mother are all against it, and Charles is just a lump of clay in their hands: they can mould him as they please."

"Well," exclaimed Felix, as we entered the courtyard, "in my opinion it's either a Spanish war, or a civil war, and Charles must take his choice."



CHAPTER XXIV

A Mysterious Warning

It was the evening of August 20. The Louvre was brilliantly illuminated; the gardens and the various apartments were crowded with the beauty and nobility of France. Catholics and Huguenots mingled together on the friendliest terms; everything pointed to peace and goodwill. Henry of Navarre and his handsome queen were there, and so were Monseigneur and Henry of Guise.

One could hardly think of danger in the midst of so much mirth and gaiety, and yet, though unseen by us, the shadow of death was hovering very near!

Felix and I had gone to the palace together, but, as he basely deserted me for Jeanne, I was left to wander about alone. I was, however, by no means depressed by my isolation. The lights, the music, the beauty of the ladies, and the handsome uniforms of the men, all filled me with the liveliest pleasure, and two hours rapidly slipped by.

Now and again I exchanged greetings with some cavalier whose acquaintance I had made during my stay in the city, and amongst others I met the Catholic officer who had befriended me on the night of my arrival in Paris.

"This is far better than cutting each other's throats, monsieur," said he, with a wave of his hand. "Your Henry of Navarre has proved a real peacemaker!"

"And the king!" I responded, unwilling to be outdone in generosity. "We must not forget his part in bringing about this happy state of affairs!"

"Nor the noble Coligny's. I expect the Admiral has had more to do with it than both the others."

Now it was exceedingly pleasant to hear my patron praised in this way by one of his opponents, and I began to think that after all our prospects were less gloomy than the conversation of my comrades would lead one to suppose.

Toward midnight I was crossing the hall in order to speak with Felix and my sister, who were standing with the Countess Guichy and several ladies, when I caught sight of Renaud L'Estang. He had been in attendance upon Monseigneur, but was now at liberty. Turning aside, I went to meet him, intending to thank him for his timely warning.

"Ah, monsieur," said he pleasantly, "I have been looking for you. I have something to say, and one can talk without fear in a crowded room. But do not let people guess by your face that I am saying anything serious. That lady," and he glanced toward Jeanne, "is, I believe, your sister?"

"Yes," I replied, wondering what he could say which concerned Jeanne.

"Listen," he continued. "I have tried to keep the promise made to you that miserable night in Rochelle."

"You have more than kept your promise," I interrupted eagerly.

"I have done what I could. It is not much, but enough perhaps to show I am your friend. Now, ask me no questions; I cannot reply to them; but for the love you bear your sister answer what I ask you. Can you make an excuse to leave Paris?"

"And desert my patron?"

"No," said he thoughtfully, "it is too much to expect from a man of honour; but there is your servant! He is shrewd and capable, and will fight to the death in your sister's defence."

"Yes," I exclaimed, "you judge him rightly."

"Do not start; keep a smile on your face, but understand all the time that I am speaking of a matter of life and death. Invent what excuse you like, but to-morrow morning send Jacques to Rochelle in charge of your sister, and let him make no delay on the road. Brush aside all objections; do not be influenced by any one; follow my advice, and I pledge my word that you will not regret it."

"This is somewhat startling!" I exclaimed; "you must have some good reasons for such advice as this. Can you not trust me?"

"Monsieur," he replied a little bitterly, "I have already told you that I have my own code of honour. It sounds strange from the lips of an adventurer, does it not? But I cannot betray the man whose bread I eat. As a matter of fact, I know nothing; to-morrow I may know more—that is why I am speaking to-night. Now I must leave you, but I say again with all the earnestness I possess, send your sister to Rochelle in the morning, even if you have to force her to go!"

Raising his voice he uttered some commonplace about the brilliancy of the scene, smiled brightly, waved his hand, and disappeared, leaving me lost in wonder and perplexity.

What was the meaning of this strange warning? He was in deadly earnest; of that there could be no doubt, and yet he refused to give me the slightest clue to the mystery. But perhaps that very refusal would help to reveal the secret! I must discuss the matter with Felix, and meanwhile try to bear myself as if nothing had happened.

As a matter of precaution, however, I told Jeanne I had received news from Rochelle, and that it might be necessary for her to travel to that town.

"There is nothing at which to be alarmed," I continued, "but we will talk about it to-morrow. If it really becomes necessary for you to go, I shall want you to depart without delay."

Jeanne was a brave girl. "Do you fear danger, Edmond?" she asked. "If there is danger, I will stay and share it with you."

"What a queer fancy!" I exclaimed lightly. "It is just a little matter in which you can be of assistance to the Cause"; at which she smiled, saying, "Anything I can do for the Cause, Edmond, I will do willingly."

"Even leave Paris!" I laughed, and having driven away her fears I left her.

Felix was very bright and joyous that night, and so merry in himself that he failed to notice my thoughtfulness. I said nothing of L'Estang's communication until we were alone in our room, when I told him the story.

I had not to ask for his opinion. Almost before I had finished, he exclaimed with decision, "Whatever this does or does not mean, Jeanne must go to Rochelle. L'Estang has proved himself your friend; he can have no reason for deceiving you."

"I will answer for L'Estang's loyalty."

"Then send Jeanne away; or, rather, take her yourself."

"That is impossible! If there is anything in L'Estang's story, it points to a plot against our chief. He is evidently afraid of trouble, perhaps of fierce fighting between the two parties, and thinks my sister would be safer out of the city."

"He gave you no hint?"

"Not the slightest. He said he knew nothing, but had he known he would not have betrayed his own party. We must remember that though he has done so much for me, he belongs to the side of our opponents. It must have cost him a struggle to tell what he did."

"Yes," said Felix thoughtfully, "between loyalty to his party and friendship for you he was in a cleft stick! You will repeat the story to our patron?"

"To what end? He has received dozens of warnings! Still, I will tell him."

I obtained little sleep that night; spending the hours tossing restlessly, turning from side to side, wondering what the danger was which had induced L'Estang to give this indirect but ominous warning. As soon as the household began to stir, I rose and dressed, eager to seek an interview with Coligny.

He was already dressed and busy with Des Pruneaux, but he spoke to me graciously and with the

kindly interest that he ever showed.

"You must not keep me long, Le Blanc," he said, laying a hand on my shoulder in his fatherly manner.

"My lord," I replied, "you shall have my story in the fewest possible words. I think it is of the greatest importance, but in any case I am bound to tell you! When we were in Rochelle, I did a simple service for one of our opponents."

"A good deed ever brings forth good fruit, my boy."

"It did in this instance, my lord. The man, who is in the pay of Monseigneur, has since proved a faithful friend in connexion with my private affairs. I owe him my life. He is, I believe deep in the secrets of his party, but these he has never revealed, and I have never asked him."

"Quite right," observed the Admiral.

"Since the death of Queen Joan, my sister has lived in Paris with the Countess Guichy. Last night this strange friend of mine advised me with the utmost earnestness to have her conveyed to Rochelle. He gave me no reason, but from his manner I am sure he fears something terrible is about to happen. 'Invent what excuse you like,' said he, 'but to-morrow morning send Jacques'—that is my servant—to Rochelle in charge of your sister, and let him make no delay on the road.' There must be some grave reason for his advice, my lord."

"You have no doubt of this man's friendship?"

"Not a shadow of doubt; he has proved it to the hilt."

"Then your sister must leave Paris promptly, and she shall carry a letter from me to the commandant. That will furnish an excuse for her hurried departure. I will write it immediately."

"But, my lord," I said hesitatingly, for it ever required some courage to hint that he should take measures for his personal safety, "it is of the possible peril to yourself I am thinking."

"I do not believe there is any danger," he replied; "but I am in the hands of God, Le Blanc. If He, in His wisdom, and for His own good purpose, wills that I should die at my post, I am content. Now, Des Pruneaux shall write the letter, and after breakfast you shall take it to your sister."

I went out, and writing a note to Jeanne, bidding her get ready for an early start, sent it off by Jacques.

"I wonder," said Felix, "if your friend's warning has anything to do with the king's fresh move. Last night twelve hundred of the guards marched into Paris, and are quartered near the Louvre."

"They may be wanted to overawe Guise and Anjou," I suggested. "If so, it was a wise step to take."

"Yes, if so!" he agreed, but the tone of his voice did not imply much confidence in my suggestion.

As soon as Jacques returned, I told him to prepare for a journey to Rochelle, dwelling strongly upon the necessity for the greatest expedition.

"There is some danger threatening you," exclaimed the trusty fellow.

"No more than there was yesterday, Jacques; but I am uneasy about my sister, and would rather she were behind the walls of La Rochelle."

"I do not like leaving you, monsieur."

"You must, Jacques; there is no one else to whom I would care to entrust my sister. But not a word to her of the real reason! She must imagine she is doing us a service or she will not stir; so we are sending her with a letter from the Admiral to the commandant at Rochelle."

When Felix and I went to the house, we were received by the countess, who was not at all pleased by the news of Jeanne's approaching departure. "What new conspiracy is this," she asked, "that you need a young girl for an ally? Have you not men enough to do your work?"

"Ah," laughed Felix playfully, "you wish to discover our secrets. It is quite useless, my lady; we are proof against all your wiles; but on her return, Mademoiselle Jeanne shall tell you herself; you won't be able to do any mischief then!"

"You are a saucy boy!" exclaimed the countess, pinching his ear. "And pray, which of you is to be Jeanne's escort?"

"I am sending my servant," I answered. "He is very trustworthy, and will guard her with his own life."

"Do you intend your sister to walk to Rochelle?" she asked, the humorous twinkle coming back to her eyes.

"I am going to procure a carriage."

"You will do nothing of the kind!" she declared emphatically. "I am not supposed to be acquainted with your stupid plots, and your sister shall go to Rochelle in my carriage, drawn by my horses, and driven by my coachman. The poor beasts will probably die of the plague in that gloomy hole,

but they must take their chance. Now, do not speak! I am not to be lectured by two giddy boys. And do not kiss me, Felix! What I am doing is for Jeanne. Perhaps when they cut off my head for joining in your horrid conspiracy you will be sorry. Now, have the horses put into the carriage, while I see Jeanne."

"She is a generous soul!" exclaimed Felix, as we left the room. "She has many strange whims, but no one could be more loyal to a friend, and she has grown to love Jeanne very dearly."

"She is exceedingly kind," I said, "and the more so since we have no claims on her generosity."

By the time Jacques arrived everything was ready, and we had only to bid my sister good-bye. She bore up bravely, but the parting was a painful one, for in our hearts both Felix and I had an uneasy feeling that we were saying farewell to her for ever. Of this, fortunately, she had no suspicion, and she promised the countess to return directly the business with the commandant was finished.

"Remember," I whispered to Jacques, as the coachman gathered up the reins, "there must be no delay. Reach Rochelle as quickly as possible, and keep your mistress there until I send to you. The commandant, who will understand the real purpose of the journey, will help you."

Jacques drew up beside the carriage; Jeanne, leaning out, fluttered her dainty handkerchief; we waved our hands in response, and she was gone.

"Jeanne is a brave girl and a good girl," said the countess. "I wish she were my daughter. And now, you two villains, who have deprived an old woman of her only pleasure in life, leave me. I am going to my room, where I can cry comfortably. I am not so young that tears will spoil my eyes."

On our way back to the *Hôtel Coligny* we encountered Monseigneur, with a body of his gentlemen, riding through the city. Numerous persons were in the streets, and as he passed by, bowing and smiling graciously, they greeted him with cheers.

"Anjou has some purpose in doing that," remarked Felix; but I made no answer, being occupied in watching L'Estang, who rode in the very rear of the cavalcade. He had caught sight of me, and while still looking straight before him he raised his hand, pointing significantly to the west. I nodded my head, and with a smile of satisfaction he rode on.

"Did you notice that?" I asked.

"Yes," replied Felix, "but without understanding."

"The meaning was plain enough. He was asking if Jeanne had gone, and I answered 'Yes.'"

"He takes a great interest in your sister," said Felix a trifle discontentedly.

"Because she is my sister," I replied. "Listen, the worthy citizens are cheering for Guise now."

"I suppose he is parading the streets as well. What a pack of fools these Parisians are!"

"If they cheered for Coligny," I laughed, "you would credit them with all the wisdom under the sun. So much depends on one's point of view!"

"Edmond! Felix! Why do you look so astonished? Do you fancy I am a spirit? Feel my hand; that is substantial enough, is it not?" and Roger Braund laughed heartily as he crossed the lobby of the Admiral's house toward us.

"You in Paris!" I exclaimed, after we had exchanged greetings, "when did you arrive? How long have you been here?"

"An hour," he replied cheerfully. "Is your sister well, Edmond?"

"Quite well, thank you. She is on the way to Rochelle; but come to our room, where we can talk more privately."

He accompanied us to our room, and I told him the story as it has been set down here.

"You did right," said he thoughtfully! "Paris just now is no place for her. But this journey to Rochelle is a hazardous venture with only Jacques to protect her!"

"Jacques is a man of courage and discretion!" exclaimed Felix, with rather more heat than was necessary.

"Jacques is a brave fellow," agreed Roger, "but he is only one man. Edmond, with your leave, I will set out after the travellers, and assist Jacques in guarding your sister."

"You will have but a short stay in Paris," remarked Felix.

"I shall return quickly to offer my sword to your chief. From Edmond's story, I fancy he will have need of all his friends. I left my horse at an inn; it is a fine beast, and is thoroughly rested now. I will start immediately. No, I am not hungry; I have made a substantial meal. I shall come straight here on my return. Good-bye to you both. Directly I have placed Mademoiselle Jeanne in safety you will see me again?"

We had scarcely time to answer before he had gone, and from the window I saw him speeding

along the street as if he feared the loss of a single second would overthrow all his plans.

CHAPTER XXV

A Dastardly Deed

In the evening of that same day, the Admiral in passing to his room inquired kindly if I had executed his commission, and appeared pleased to learn that my sister had already started on her journey.

"I do not think it was necessary," he remarked, "but at least no harm can come from it, and you will feel easier in your mind. Good-night, gentlemen; our plans are progressing favourably, and I hope soon to have good news for you all."

I went to bed early that night, for Felix, unlike his usual bright self, was very gloomy and morose. I fancy he was not well pleased with the coming of Roger Braund, and still less so with his ready offer to escort Jeanne to Rochelle.

"What is the fellow doing here at all?" he asked. "Why can he not stay in his own country?"

I ventured to suggest that no one put the question at Jarnac, or at Montcontour, and that we of the Religion at least owed a great debt of gratitude to Roger and his brave comrades. Felix seemed rather to resent this remark, so I said no more, trusting that by another day he would have recovered his good humour and pleasant manners.

I remember well how that memorable day began. It was Friday, August 22, and as I wakened from a long sleep the cheery rays of the morning sun flooded the room. How little any of us in the *Hôtel Coligny* dreamed of what was to happen before that same sun sank to rest!

After breakfast, Des Pruneaux drew me on one side. "The Admiral proceeds to the Louvre this morning," he said. "De Guerchy and I attend him; you and Bellièvre will walk a little distance behind us. Be more vigilant even than usual, for there are strange rumours abroad."

Each trifling incident comes back to me now as vividly as if it happened yesterday. We went to the Louvre, waited while our chief transacted his business, and started on the journey home. Presently we met Charles, who greeted the Admiral affectionately, and the two walked together in the direction of the tennis-court. Des Pruneaux and De Guerchy joined the king's attendants; Felix and I followed a few paces in the rear.

At the court Charles and the Duke of Guise made up a match against our patron's son-in-law, Teligny, and a gentleman whose name I did not know. The Admiral stood watching the game for some time, but between ten and eleven o'clock he bade the king adieu and once more started for home. He walked between Des Pruneaux and De Guerchy, talking cheerfully about the game, and praising the skill of the king, for Charles was certainly an accomplished player, superior in my opinion even to Guise.

"Yes," exclaimed Felix, to whom I passed some such remark, and who had not altogether thrown off his bitterness of the previous day, "if he were as good a ruler as tennis-player France might have some chance of happiness."

"Well, he is making good progress even in that!" I replied cheerfully.

I have said that the *hôtel* was in the Rue de l'Arbre Sec, at the corner of the Rue de Betsisy, and we were passing along the Rue des Fossés de St. Germain, when a man approached the Admiral with what looked like a petition. We quickened our pace, but the citizen was an inoffensive person, and the Admiral, taking the paper, began to read, walking on slowly the while.

He turned the corner in front of us, and was hidden for an instant from our view, when we heard a loud report.

"Treachery!" cried my comrade, drawing his sword, and with a rush we sped round the corner. My heart leaped into my mouth as I realized what had happened. There was our noble chief, the truest, bravest, most chivalrous man in France, supported in De Guerchy's arms.

Des Pruneaux, who was stanching the blood with a handkerchief, pointed to the latticed windows of the *Hôtel de Retz* on our right, and, understanding it was from there the assassin had fired, we ran across, my comrade's cries of "For the Admiral!" bringing out a number of Huguenot gentlemen who lodged in the neighbourhood.

"This way!" I cried excitedly, "the assassin is in this house!" and the next minute, having burst open the doors, we were swarming into the building. Save for a deaf old woman and a horse-boy the place was empty, and a howl of rage rose from the searchers.

Nothing could be got from the old woman, but Felix, clutching the boy by the throat, demanded sternly "Where is the assassin? Speak, or I will kill you!"

"The man who was upstairs has got away through the cloisters, monsieur. I do not know him. I was only told to bring a swift horse from my master's stables."

"Who is your master?"

"The Duke of Guise, monsieur," and at that another howl of execration went up, several men shouting "Guise is the murderer! Kill the Duke of Guise!"

"Whose house is this?" I asked.

The boy could not answer, but a voice cried out "Canon Vallemur's! He used to be the Duke's tutor! Guise is the assassin!"

"Yes, yes! Let us kill Guise!"

"Here is the weapon," cried one of the searchers, bringing forward an arquebus which he had found in the window; "it has Monseigneur's arms stamped on it; it must belong to one of his body-guard. Guise and Anjou are the murderers!"

"Come," exclaimed Felix, "we can do nothing here; the fellow is out of the city by now!"

An excited crowd had gathered in front of the *Hôtel Coligny*, but, pushing the people roughly aside, we made our way into the courtyard.

"Is he dead?" asked Felix of one of our comrades.

"No; one bullet carried off the first finger of his right hand; the other wounded him seriously in the left arm. Paré—the king's own surgeon—is attending him. They say Charles is furious, but I do not know; all his family are accomplished actors. Were you there? Did you see it done? Tell us all about it," and they gathered round as Felix described the incident and the search in the empty house.

"Guise is the real murderer!" exclaimed one angrily.

"Or Anjou!"

"Or both!"

"If Charles doesn't punish them, we won't rest till we have made an end of him and his whole stock!"

"'Tis likely he is as guilty as the rest!"

"And Coligny trusts him implicitly!"

"The Admiral is too trustful and kind-hearted! Did you hear what he said to Des Pruneaux? 'I forgive freely and with all my heart both him that struck me and those who incited him to do it.' If I catch the fellow, I will tear him limb from limb!"

"Let us capture Guise and Anjou," cried Felix, "and if the Admiral dies hang them both."

"Bravo, Bellièvre! There's sense in that! To arms, my friends! We will have vengeance!" and a number of the most hot-headed were rushing out wildly when a cry arose of "Navarre! Navarre!" and, going to the street, we saw Henry of Navarre accompanied by five or six hundred Huguenot gentlemen.

The gallant prince was angry and excited. "What means this foul outrage?" he cried, leaping from his horse. "Have they slain our noble leader?"

"No, no, sire; he has been shot at and wounded, but he is not dead. Way there for Navarre! We want justice, sire!"

"By my faith, gentlemen," exclaimed the fiery Henry, as he mounted the stairs, "you shall have it, or Navarre shall lose its monarch."

Save for the sick-room, where our illustrious chief lay, the whole house was crowded with excited men. From time to time messengers arrived bringing reports from the city, and from their accounts it really looked as if Charles was bent on discovering and punishing the murderer. The civic guards were mustered; the sentries at the gates doubled; and no one was permitted to go armed into the streets.

"A blind!" cried some hotly. "There is no need to hunt for the murderer; Charles can find him at his own table!"

"Why do we stay here?" cried Felix; "let us march to the palace and demand justice!"

"Let us first consult Navarre," said another; "he must be our leader now," and the majority agreed with this suggestion.

About two o'clock a man came running into the courtyard crying "The king! The king!" and shortly afterwards Charles appeared, followed by his mother and Anjou. And here I must say that few of us, after looking at his gloomy face, believed that he had any share in the dastardly plot against our beloved chief. We let him pass in silence, but when Anjou came, there were many muttered threats of vengeance, and more than one loud cry of "Assassin!"

"Monseigneur comes to gloat over his victim!" exclaimed one man, and so intense was our anger that but for the king's presence I doubt if Monseigneur would have left the house alive.

When the royal party had ended their visit, Henry, Condé, and other leading members of our party held a meeting in one of the lower rooms. Felix and I remained on duty in the ante-chamber where De Guerchy came to fetch us.

"The King of Navarre wishes to learn the truth about the discoveries in Vallemur's house," he said.

The room was very crowded, and the nobles were discussing the situation with fierce excitement.

"'Tis no time for playing like children," De Pilles was saying, "I tell you we are all doomed; this is but the first stroke. Let us strike back, and strike hard."

"I would suggest," said his neighbour, "that we get Coligny safe to Rochelle, and then gather all our forces."

"We cannot move the Admiral; Paré will not answer for his life if he is moved."

"My lords," said Teligny, "I do not think it is necessary. I am convinced that the king has no hand in this vile outrage, and that if we trust him he will bring the murderer to justice."

"What!" sneered De Pilles, "execute his own brother! Or even the Duke of Guise! You have more faith in Charles than I have!"

"Where are those gentlemen who helped to search the house?" asked Henry. "Let them stand forward. Ah, my friend," catching sight of me, "I have not forgotten your face. Now let us hear the story, and why the Duke of Guise is suspected in the matter."

Thereupon I related all that had occurred, and at the conclusion Henry observed gravely, "Truly there is something here for the Duke to explain!"

"Explain, sire!" cried De Pilles scornfully, "how can he explain? Who here doubts the Duke's guilt? Let us kill him and Anjou, I say, or they will kill us. Put no trust in Charles. They will drag him into the plot."

"What would you have us do?" asked Henry; "overthrow the throne?"

"Ay," answered De Pilles stoutly, "I would clear the kingdom of the whole family."

I cannot say what further arguments were used, as De Guerchy made a sign for us to withdraw; but presently the meeting broke up, and the cavaliers, mounting their horses, rode away, singing psalms, and vowing to obtain justice.

"De Pilles was right!" exclaimed Felix, as we returned to the ante-chamber; "this means war to the knife, and the sooner our leaders give the word the better. I am thankful that your sister has left Paris."

"We owe that to L'Estang I wonder if he had any actual information of what was about to happen? I have a mind to endeavour to find him this evening; he will probably be at the Louvre."

"We will go together," said Felix, and accordingly about seven o'clock, there being nothing for us to do, we set out.

The city was in a state of intense excitement, the streets were thronged, and groups of men were discussing the attempt on the Admiral's life, and praising those who had directed the plot.

"The king is too weak," they said, "this Coligny twines him round his finger. He should listen to Monseigneur and the Duke of Guise; they would make an end of these Huguenots."

Several times I had to grasp Felix by the arms, and whisper to him to control himself, since a brawl in the streets could end only in his death and mine. A knowledge of fence is of little service against a mob of ruffians armed with clubs and pikes.

Approaching the Marais we heard a tremendous hubbub, and running forward quickly beheld a number of Huguenot gentlemen gathered outside the *Hôtel de Guise*, waving their swords defiantly and threatening to have justice done upon the Duke. De Pilles was at their head, and I expected every moment to see him give the signal for an attack on the building. Had he done so, he would have been instantly obeyed, and perhaps we should not have had cause to mourn the horrors of the impending tragedy.

Instead of doing so, however, he suddenly exclaimed, "To the palace! We will demand justice from the king; he cannot deny us!" and the Huguenots, suspicious, alarmed and rapidly losing their heads, took up the cry.

"To the palace!" they shouted; "let us see if Charles will give us justice!"

Felix, as passionate and headstrong as any of them, exclaimed, "Come along, Edmond; we shall count two more. Let us discover if there is any honour in the man."

Not believing it could effect any good, I had no wish to be drawn into the flighty venture, but as my comrade was resolute in courting danger I was forced to accompany him.

The king was at supper when, flourishing our swords and demanding justice, we burst into the palace. Charles behaved coolly enough, but Anjou, who sat next to him, changed colour and trembled, while beads of sweat stood upon his forehead.

"We demand justice, sire!" cried De Pilles, who cared no more for a monarch than for a peasant. "If the king refuses it we will take the matter into our own hands," and he looked at Anjou, who averted his head.

"You will obtain justice, gentlemen," answered Charles. "My word is pledged, and I will not break it. I have assured my friend, the noble Coligny, that the villain who shot him shall be sought out and punished. I will not spare the guilty parties whoever they are!"

At that we gave him a round of cheers, and marched out, De Pilles and his followers returning straight to the city. L'Estang was not present, but seeing one of Anjou's guards I asked if he could find my friend for me, which he did.

"The palace is not a safe place for you to-night," said L'Estang as he came to meet me.

"As safe as any part of the city," I answered. "It seems I did well in taking your advice and sending my sister away. You have heard of this morning's dastardly crime?"

"All Paris has heard of it," said he; "but pardon me if I say that to-night's folly will not make the king's task any the easier."

"Surely you do not expect us to see our leader murdered without protest!" exclaimed Felix.

"Not at all; but there is such a thing as being over hasty. It would have paid better to show, or to appear to show, some trust in the king."

"Pshaw!" cried my comrade, "for all we know Charles himself is responsible for the deed!"

"At all events," I said, "the plot must have been known beforehand in the palace!"

"If you think that, because I warned you to remove your sister from Paris, you are mistaken. Your surprise this morning was not greater than my own. I believe that scarcely any one inside the palace knew of what was going on."

"But you yourself expected trouble of some kind!"

"True; and now I am sure of it. How can it be avoided? Each side is suspicious of the other: you are angry, and justly angry, at the assault on your chief, and you threaten vengeance even on the king. I believe he wishes to be your friend, and you are driving him into the arms of your enemies. Do you fancy he will care to trust himself in your hands after to-night's mad freak? But the hour grows late, and the streets are not safe; I will walk a short distance with you."

"The citizens are still abroad!" I remarked after a time. "Listen! they are cheering for Guise!"

"And there lies the trouble," he said. "But, monsieur, I have a private word for you. Etienne Cordel is in Paris; he can read the signs as well as most men, and if there is a disturbance he will take advantage of it. You are doubly in danger—first as a Huguenot and a friend of Coligny's; next as the owner of Le Blanc. You will have to steer skilfully to avoid both dangers!"

"You speak as if a plot to murder the Huguenots were already afoot."

"I am aware of no plot at present," he said, "but after to-day's unlucky events one can be sure of nothing. Here is the corner of your street; I will bid you good-night, and once more I repeat my warning. Guard yourself, and sleep with your sword at your hand."

CHAPTER XXVI

What will the King do?

The morning of August 23 broke bright and clear, but I rose from my bed with a troubled and unquiet feeling. I had passed a restless night, dreaming that all Paris was ablaze, and that the streets of the city were running with blood, and I could not get rid of the thought that some terrible calamity was about to happen.

Directly it was light the house began to fill with Huguenot gentlemen, asking eagerly how it fared with their beloved chief. He was still extremely weak, but Paré spoke hopefully, declaring there was no cause for alarm, and that his illustrious patient required only rest and quietness.

"In a few days he will be able to leave Paris," said the famous surgeon, "and his recovery is certain. I have not the slightest anxiety about him."

This was cheering news, but as the day wore on strange and alarming rumours began to reach us from the city. Our spies reported that the streets were thronged with excited people, cheering for Guise and threatening the Huguenots with death.

"There is some one behind all this," said Felix, "some one working in secret to stir up the passions of the citizens. Unless the king interferes there will be a terrible outbreak shortly."

About noon—we had not long risen from dinner—a man arrived bearing news that, to our heated imaginations, was startling indeed. A great meeting was taking place at the *Hôtel de Guise*,

where our bitterest enemies had assembled. The spy brought a list of the names, and as he recounted them one by one our feeling of uneasiness deepened.

"'Tis a plot against us," said one, "with Guise at the head, and Anjou secretly favouring it."

"Are we to wait to be killed like sheep?" demanded Felix. "Have we not swords of our own? Shall we keep them in their scabbards? Out upon us for timid hares! We deserve to die, if we have not the courage to strike a blow in our own defence!"

"What can we do?" asked Carnaton, who had just come from the sick-room. "The Admiral is helpless, and Henry of Navarre is being closely watched. We have no leaders, and it would be folly for us to break the peace."

"Let us wait," laughed Felix mockingly, "till this dog of a Guise has murdered us all! Then, perhaps, it will be time to strike."

"The king has pledged his word to protect us," said La Bonne; "let us ask him to send a guard for our chief."

"A guard for Coligny!" cried Felix in a bitter tone; "a guard for Coligny, and a thousand Huguenot gentlemen in Paris! Let us summon our comrades and guard our chief with our own lives!"

We spoke angrily, and many sharp words passed between us, the more fiery of the speakers upholding Felix, the cooler and wiser ones supporting La Bonne, and finally it was agreed to despatch a messenger to the king.

"When the troops arrive," said Felix, "we will give them our weapons to take care of for us!"

I did not hold altogether with my hot-headed comrade, but when in the course of an hour or two the king's soldiers marched into the street I began to think we had committed a serious blunder. There were fifty of them, and at their head marched Cosseins, the Admiral's determined enemy.

"Faith!" exclaimed Felix, as the soldiers posted themselves in two houses close at hand, "I have heard that Charles loves a practical joke, but this must be one of the grimmest that even he has played!"

"He could have bettered it," said Yolet, our beloved chief's trusty esquire, "only by sending Guise himself!"

Presently a man, threading his way through the crowd in front of the courtyard, ran up to Carnaton, and whispered something in his ear.

"More bad news?" said I, noticing his look of surprise.

"I fear it is not good at any rate," he replied slowly. "Charles has sent for Guise to the Louvre."

"Guise at the Louvre!" cried Felix, "and we stay here with our arms folded! Now this is downright madness!"

"It may be," suggested La Bonne mildly, "that the king wishes to give him orders not to break the peace."

"It seems to me," said Felix, "that we might employ our time better than in inventing excuses for our enemies. This visit to the Louvre means that Charles has gone over to the side of Anjou and Guise."

"It may be so," agreed Carnaton, "but we have no proof."

"Proof!" cried my comrade with a mocking laugh, "it will be sufficient proof when one of Anjou's troopers runs a sword through your heart!"

Carnaton was about to reply when he was summoned to attend the Admiral, and we settled down to wait doggedly for the next piece of information. It was not long in coming. A messenger despatched by La Bonne returned a few minutes before three o'clock. His face was pale, and he had a frightened look which was far from reassuring.

"Well?" exclaimed La Bonne, "what news?" "Ill news, monsieur," replied the man. "Guise has left the Louvre and is in the city. The streets are crowded and the citizens are wild with excitement. He is stirring them up against us, and they are cheering him, and crying that the Huguenots ought not to live."

We gazed at each other blankly; this certainly did not appear as if Charles had given him any peaceful commands. Nor was our alarm lessened when an hour later another spy reported that Anjou and Angoulême were following Guise's example, and doing their best to rouse the passions of the people.

"They are telling the citizens," our messenger said, "that a plot to take the king's life, and to slay Monseigneur has been discovered, and the citizens are crying for vengeance on the Huguenots."

"Guise and Anjou will see to it that they get their vengeance," I remarked, for it was no longer possible to doubt that our enemies had determined on our destruction. We had put our trust in Charles; if he deserted us it was all over.

"At least," said La Bonne, "if we have to die, we will die like men."

"With our swords in our hands, and not in their scabbards!" exclaimed Felix, and a fierce growl of approval greeted his words.

As the day wore to a close it became more and more plain that, as my comrade had declared, we were like hunted animals caught in a trap. We might sell our lives dearly, but we could not hope to fight successfully against the royal troops and a city in arms.

Only one chance of escape presented itself. By banding together and making a determined rush we might force a passage through the streets, and seek safety in flight; but to do this we must abandon our illustrious chief, whose weakness prevented him from being moved. I hope it is needless to add that every Huguenot gentleman in Paris would have lost his life fifty times over rather than have agreed to such a base proceeding.

About seven o'clock in the evening many of Navarre's gentlemen left the house, and some of us accompanied them to the end of the street. La Bonne having received favourable news from the palace, our alarm, in consequence, had begun to subside, though we still remained a trifle anxious.

We were returning in a body to the *hôtel*, Felix and I being the last of the company, when a man slipped a paper into my hand and instantly disappeared.

"Another warning from your strange friend, I suppose," said Felix.

I opened the paper and read hurriedly: "Bring Monsieur Bellièvre with you shortly after midnight, and meet me at the little gate of the Louvre where I saw you before. Wrap yourselves up closely, and attract as little attention as possible. Do not fail to come, as I have important news.—D'ANGELY."

"Are you sure this is not a second invitation from the lawyer?" my comrade asked.

"It appears to be L'Estang's handwriting."

"So did the other note."

"True, but Etienne Cordel would not bait a trap for you. He bears you no grudge, and besides you would only be in his way!"

"Yes," said my comrade, "there is something in that. Will you go?"

"Why not? We may learn something that will be useful to our chief. L'Estang wishes me well, and in order to save my life he may be tempted to disclose what he knows of Guise's conspiracy; for I feel sure there is one."

"If it will serve the Admiral," said Felix hesitatingly.

"It may. I cannot tell, but it is worth running a little risk to discover."

"He has chosen an odd time and an odd place."

"He cannot meet us in broad day, and a thousand causes may prevent him from coming to this quarter. You must remember he is Anjou's servant, and he will not wish to draw suspicion upon himself."

"Very well," said my comrade, "we will go. Carnaton and La Bonne are on duty to-night."

As the evening closed in the streets began to empty; our comrades went off to their lodgings, and by nine o'clock there were few of us left in the *hôtel*. Teligny and De Guerchy were in the sick-room, and with them Paré, the surgeon, and the Admiral's chaplain, Pastor Merlin; Carnaton and La Bonne dozed in the ante-chamber, while Yolet was posting the five Switzers who formed part of Navarre's bodyguard.

"It seems as if we shall have a quiet night, Yolet," I remarked.

"The danger has blown over," he answered. "Charles was frightened into believing we intended to murder him, but the King of Navarre has opened his eyes. The real plotters will have an unwelcome surprise in a day or two. I heard De Guerchy telling the Admiral."

"Oh," said I, quite relieved by this information, "if the king keeps firm, we have nothing to fear."

"Trusting to the king," remarked my comrade, who always spoke of Charles as a puppet in the hands of his mother and brother, "is trusting to a broken reed. For my part I hope the instant our chief is strong enough to travel he will hasten to Rochelle. I have more faith in a keen blade than in a king's promise," and from Yolet's face one would have judged he was of the same opinion.

About a quarter before midnight he came with us to open the front gate, and to fasten it after our departure. We had told him something of our errand, and he advised us to go to work very warily, saying, "Do not forget that a dog isn't dead because he has ceased barking!"

We slipped into the street and he fastened the gate quietly. It was fairly dark now, and being closely muffled in our mantles there was little chance of our being recognized. Cossein's soldiers were apparently asleep; no lights gleamed anywhere; the Rue des Fossés de St. Germain was empty.

On approaching nearer the Louvre, however, we observed a body of citizens, armed, and

marching with some sort of military discipline. We had barely time to conceal ourselves in a doorway before they came by, so close to us that we could almost count their numbers.

"What does that mean?" asked my comrade when at last we ventured out again. "Where are those fellows going? Edmond, I don't like the look of that; it is suspicious."

"On the contrary, it has helped to remove my suspicion," I answered. "They are under the provost's orders, and he would not dare to muster them except by the king's instructions."

"From which you think——?"

"That Charles is taking measures in our favour on his own account."

"I hope you will prove a true prophet, though I do not feel very sanguine."

The delay caused us to be a trifle late in keeping our appointment, and when we reached the place of meeting no one was to be seen. For half an hour we walked softly to and fro, keeping in the shadow of the wall, watching keenly, and listening for the sound of a footstep.

It was strange that L'Estang should not be there, and I had a vague, uneasy feeling that it was impossible to banish. Felix, too, became fidgety, and at last said in a whisper, "Edmond, let us return; there is something wrong, I am sure of it!"

"Nonsense," I replied, more to keep up my own spirits than for any other reason; "a hundred things may have kept the man from coming. Besides, what is there to fear?"

"I don't know," he admitted, "but I am certain there is mischief afoot. It may be the darkness and the silence. Listen!" and he caught me by the arm, "do you hear that? Horses, Edmond, and horsemen! Where are they?"

Listening intently I recognized the sounds. Soldiers were gathering inside the grounds. Where could they be going at this time? Once more I slipped back to the little gate, calling softly "D'Angely!" but there was no response. The adventurer for once had failed me. I returned to my comrade, who was now trembling with excitement.

"There is some terrible business on hand!" said he. "What can it mean?"

"Let us wait here; we may discover the secret."

"Yes," he answered bitterly, "when it is too late! We have all been blind fools, Edmond, from Navarre downwards. Ah, they are coming out—horse and foot."

It was too dark for us to distinguish them closely, but we could make out a group of officers riding a little ahead, a number of troopers, and two or three score foot-soldiers. They proceeded at a walking pace, making scarcely any sound.

"Let us follow," whispered Felix, and he was in such a restless state that, although unwilling to leave without having met L'Estang, I offered no objection.

Silently, and keeping well in the shadow of the houses, we stole after them, creeping like unquiet spirits through the streets of the sleeping city. At first we imagined they were going to the *Hôtel de Guise*, and it was only on entering the Rue des Fossés de St. Germain that the dreadful truth flashed across our minds.

"They are going to murder the Admiral!" whispered my comrade with a groan. "Edmond, can we do nothing? Is there no way of warning La Bonne?"

"I fear not, we cannot get past the troops."

Even had that been possible it would have proved of but little service. The leaders quickened their pace; the whole body swept round the corner; they were in front of the building; only by the roof could any one escape; and the Admiral, alas! could not walk even across his chamber.

The blood ran cold in my veins; it seemed as if my heart had ceased to beat. Death was calling for my beloved chief, and I was powerless to keep the grisly visitor at bay. I felt Felix fumbling at his sword, and, gripping him firmly by the wrist, whispered, "Keep still! What can you do?"

"Die with him!" he answered fiercely.

"Nonsense!" I said coldly, for I had no wish to see him butchered uselessly before my eyes, "you cannot do even that! You will be slain before you have moved three yards. And I will not let you throw your life away. Live, my friend, live to avenge him!"

"Ah," he whispered, "that is well said, Edmond. Take your hand off me. I am calm enough now. Ah, they are knocking at the gate. Listen! 'In the king's name!' That is Guise's voice. Will they open, think you, Edmond?"

I had dragged him into a doorway, so that the troopers might not see us, but by this time there was little danger of detection; the noise had aroused the neighbourhood, and many citizens were already in the street.

"Yes," I said, "they will think it is a messenger from Charles. See!" for the dawn was breaking now, "there is Guise!"

"And Angoulême! And Cosseins! He has come to defend the Admiral! Let us go nearer, Edmond; they will not bother about us!"

Leaving the shelter of the doorway we mingled with the crowd, pressing close upon the heels of the troops. For several minutes we waited in breathless suspense; then the gate was opened; there was a wild rush; a cry of warning, stifled suddenly, rang out, and the troopers surged into the courtyard.

"That was La Bonne's voice," I said with a shudder, "he has learned the value of a king's promise."

Drawing our mantles up to our faces, we ran with the rest to the courtyard. Already the house was filled with soldiers, and several shrieks of agony told us that they were killing even the poor servants. We heard sterner shouts also, and hoped in our hearts that Carnaton, Yolet, and the few Switzers were making Guise's butchers pay dearly for their cruel treachery.

Guise and Angoulême had not entered the house; they were standing in the courtyard, beneath the window of the Admiral's room, awaiting the completion of the brutal work. We heard the crashing of timber, the cries of the Switzers, and then the tramp of feet up the stairway.

Suddenly the sound ceased, and Felix, turning to me, whispered, "They have broken into his room!"

An awful silence fell upon us in the courtyard as we stood there waiting for the end of the ghastly tragedy.

CHAPTER XXVII

The Day of the Massacre

I always think of this incident in my life with a certain amount of shame; yet even now I cannot see in what I failed. My comrade and I would have spent our lives freely in the Admiral's defence, but what could we do? To fight our way through that mob of soldiers was impossible; we could not have taken two steps without being killed.

And yet—and yet—perhaps it would have been the nobler part to have died with our chief! I remember the look on Roger Braund's face when he heard the story—an expression that plainly asked, "How comes it then that you are still alive?"

If we did indeed act the coward's part the blame must rest on my shoulders; but for me Felix would have flung himself at the troopers and died with the old battle-cry "For the Admiral!" on his lips. It was I who, regarding such sacrifice as sheer folly, kept him back, though my blood boiled and my heart ached at what was going forward.

Presently a man wearing a corslet and waving a sword dyed red with blood appeared at the window of the sick-room. "It is done, my lord!" cried he lustily, "it is all over."

"Where is the body?" asked Guise brutally. "Monseigneur d'Angoulême will not believe unless he sees the body."

I was beside myself with grief and passion; yet even at that awful moment I gripped Felix tightly, bidding him control himself. "We must live, and not die!" I whispered.

Behm, and Cosseins, and a trooper in the dark green and white uniform of Anjou's guard approached the window, half dragging, half carrying a lifeless body. Raising it up, they flung it, as if it were the carcass of a sheep, into the courtyard, Behm exclaiming, "There is your enemy; he can do little harm now!"

"Yes, it is he," said Guise, spurning the dead hero with his foot, "I know him well. We have made a good beginning, my men; let us finish the business. Forward, in the king's name!"

Our cry of agony was drowned by the shouting of the troopers, and the next moment we were swept with the rest of the crowd from the courtyard into the narrow street. Suddenly, as if it were a signal, the great bell of St. Germain l'Auxerrois began to toll; other bells in the neighbourhood clanged and clashed, and mingling with their sounds were the fierce cries of "Kill the Huguenots! Kill! Kill!"

Felix turned to me with a look of horror. "It is a planned massacre!" he exclaimed, "our comrades will be murdered in their beds!"

We were borne along helplessly in the midst of the crowd. In all the world, I think, no one could have ever beheld a more fearful spectacle. The men and women were mad with passion; their faces were as the faces of fiends; already some of their weapons were wet with blood. Each had a white band bound round the arm, and most of them wore a white cross in their caps.

Guise and Angoulême rode off with their troopers to carry on the terrible work elsewhere, and they bade the citizens slay and spare not. Crash went the doors of the houses where the Huguenots lived; shrieks of despair and cries of "Kill! Kill!" rose on the air; the glare of numerous

torches lit up the hideous scene.

"Drag them out!"

"Death to the Huguenots!"

"Burn the houses!"

"Long live the Duke of Guise!"

"Throw them from the windows!"

"Kill the whole brood!"

Very soon the street was dotted with dead bodies. The unhappy people, roused from sleep by the yells of the mob, could offer but little resistance; they were slain in their beds, or escaped from the murderers only to be killed in the streets.

But every one did not die tamely. At one spot we saw about a dozen of our comrades, some only half dressed, standing shoulder to shoulder, with their backs to the wall and holding the mob at bay. At this sight Felix, wrapping his mantle round his left arm and drawing his sword, ran toward them, crying defiantly, "Coligny! Coligny! For the Admiral!"

It was a daring venture, and yet no more, dangerous than remaining in the crowd, where we must shortly have been discovered.

"Coligny! Coligny!" shouted the fighters by the wall, and the very sound of the name inspired them with fresh courage. One of the ruffians pushed at Felix with his pike, but he, with a vigorous stroke, clave him from the shoulder, and our comrades cheered again as the rascal fell.

"This way, Bellière," they cried; "this way, Le Blanc! Where is the Admiral?"

"Murdered!" answered Felix bitterly, "and thrown like a dog into the courtyard of his own house."

His words sent a thrill of horror through the little band. Coligny murdered! Their noble chief done to death by a pack of human wolves! Their eyes flashed fire; they set their teeth hard, and one, a strong, sturdy fellow from Chatillon, crying "Vengeance for Coligny!" sprang at the howling mob. Three times his blade gleamed in the air, and each time it descended a man fell.

"Three for Coligny!" he cried grimly, springing back to his place.

It was a fearful conflict, chiefly because we had no hope. We could fight to the death, but there was no escape. The men with the pikes rushed at us repeatedly; we beat them off, and the heap of their slain grew steadily larger, but we had lost two of our number, and were worn with fatigue. And presently from the rear of the mob there arose a shout of "Anjou! Anjou!" as if Monseigneur himself or some of his troopers had arrived to complete our destruction.

"Let us defend the house!" exclaimed Felix, "we can kill more from the inside!" and the rest agreed.

The door of the house to which my comrade pointed had been smashed; the building itself contained no one but the dead. We worked our way along, keeping the mob at bay with our swords, until we were all in shelter; then they came with a terrific rush, but the foremost were wounded or slain, and their bodies blocked the entrance.

"Drag the furniture into the passage!" cried Felix; but we had not the time. Roused to desperation by their losses, the mob surged through the doorway, trampling upon their fallen comrades, screaming "Kill the Huguenots!" flinging themselves upon us with a fury we could not withstand.

Back we went to the foot of the stairs, where not more than two men could stand abreast; the passage was packed with a swaying, struggling mass that forced a way by its own weight. "Kill! Kill!" they screamed, and we answered with defiant shouts of "Coligny! Coligny! For the Admiral."

They gained the lowest stair, and then another; it was evident we could not hold out much longer, but the knowledge had no effect on our courage. As Felix said, we could die but once. On the landing at the top of the stairs were two rooms, but our numbers were not strong enough to garrison them both. There were only seven of us left, and not one unwounded.

"The end is close now," cried my comrade, "but we will die hard for the honour of the Admiral."

"Well said, Bellière!" and once more the familiar battle-cry "Coligny! Coligny! For the Admiral!" rang out.

"Good-bye, Edmond. I am glad Jeanne is safe." "Farewell, Felix. Ah!" Our two comrades nearest the door were down, and the angry mob, lusting for blood, burst into the room. We numbered five now, and a minute later four.

"For the Admiral!" cried Felix, running a man through the chest, but before he could withdraw his sword a violent blow from a club struck him to the ground.

We were three now, all faint, weary, and wounded. We were entirely at the mercy of our assailants. They leaped at us, brandishing their weapons, and yelling

exultingly.

"Coligny! Coligny!" I shouted in defiance. Crash! I was down, and almost immediately afterwards the noise and the shouting died away. I was dimly conscious of some one bending over me, and then knew no more.

I opened my eyes in a small room almost bare of furniture. I was lying dressed, on a bed; my head was bandaged; every muscle of my body ached with pain. Forgetting what had happened, I called for Jacques, and then for Felix, but by degrees the sickening events of the awful tragedy came back to my memory.

Getting down from the bed, I crossed the room slowly and cautiously, and tried the door; it was fastened from the outside. I went back to the little window for the purpose of looking into the street. It was crowded with people wearing white crosses in their hats and white bands round their arms.

Then, for the first time, I noticed that some one had tied a white band round my arm. I tore the accursed emblem off, and trampled it underfoot, in a fit of childish rage.

The citizens were dancing, shouting, and yelling like maniacs. They were armed with clubs and pikes and swords, and one could see the clots of blood clinging to the deadly weapons. I stood at the window horrified, yet fascinated by the dreadful sight. A soldier, evidently an officer of high rank, rode past cheering and waving a blood-stained sword. I caught sight of his face, and recognized Marshal Tavannes.

Directly afterwards, a man chased by human bloodhounds from the shelter of a neighbouring house darted into the midst of the crowd. He twisted and doubled, running now this way, now that, like a hunted hare. The assassins struck at him fiercely as he ran, holding his hands above his head to protect himself.

A blow from a club struck one arm, and it dropped to his side, broken. He turned sharply; a ruffian pricked him with his knife; he staggered forward, lurched, swayed to and fro, and finally fell. I closed my eyes in order not to see the end of the ghastly tragedy.

Presently a cart rumbled slowly along. Men and women danced round about it, shouting and jeering, and brandishing their pikes and clubs. The clumsy vehicle was packed with human beings, bound hand and foot, and tied, as far as I could see, two together. They lay in a confused heap, some of them wounded and bleeding.

I wondered in a dull sort of way where they were being taken. I learned later that they were flung one and two at a time into the Seine, while their savage enemies watched them drown.

Sick at heart, and stricken with horror, I lay down again upon the bed. My misery was so intense that I cared nothing about my own fate. Coligny was dead; I had seen Felix killed before my eyes; most of the gallant gentlemen who had been my true and loyal comrades were slain—what mattered it whether I lived or died? Strangely enough, perhaps, I did not even ask myself how I had escaped the awful butchery.

Shortly after noon, the door was opened, and some one entered the room. I expected to see a ruffian with a blood-red pike; my visitor was a pale but pretty woman, carrying a bowl of soup.

"Drink this, monsieur," she said, "it will give you strength. Renaud will return in the evening."

"Renaud!" I exclaimed, "do you mean Renaud L'Estang? Do I owe my life to him?"

"He is a brave man," she answered, "he saved your life at the risk of his own; but I must go again. Do not make any sound, monsieur. If the citizens were aware of your being here they would murder us."

She went out and fastened the door, leaving me to drink the soup at my leisure. So, it was Renaud L'Estang who had saved me. Truly that little action of mine in Rochelle had borne good fruit.

Several times during the afternoon I returned to the window overlooking the narrow street, but toward evening I lay down and slept, and when a noise at the door wakened me the room was nearly dark.

"Monsieur," a voice exclaimed, "are you awake? Do not be alarmed; it is I—L'Estang."

Hearing me move, he closed the door softly, and came across to the bed. "You are better," he said, "I am glad of that, as you must leave Paris. I have saved your life thus far, but it will be impossible to do so much longer. Cordel has discovered that you are alive, and his fellows are searching for your hiding-place. You must go to Rochelle at once; that is your only place of safety."

"It is easy to say 'Go to Rochelle,'" I answered a trifle bitterly, "but how is it to be done? The streets are filled with my enemies who will kill me without mercy, and the gates, no doubt, are strictly watched."

"Yes," he replied slowly, "the sentries have been doubled, still it is not impossible to get through,



while to stay here means death. For the sake of your sister you should endeavour to live."

"What do you propose?" I asked.

"I have a pass from Monseigneur in my pocket. The officer on duty is commanded to let myself and Louis Bourdonais leave the city without question or delay. For the time being you are Louis Bourdonais. As soon as the night becomes darker I will bring a carriage to the house, you will enter, and we will drive to the gate of St. Jacques. Unless you are recognized there is no danger."

"And if I am?"

"Then," said he, "I fear you will share the fate of your friends."

"And you?"

He shrugged his shoulders carelessly, saying, "Have no fear for me; I can easily make my peace with Monseigneur."

There seemed to me something cowardly in this running away from danger, but L'Estang mocked at my scruples.

"What can you do?" he asked. "At present there is no Huguenot party. The Admiral, Teligny, La Rochefoucault, De Guerchy, all are dead; Henry of Navarre and Condé are both prisoners, and may be put to death at any moment; your particular friend, Bellièvre, is slain—I would have saved him for your sake, but was too late. Now, if you stay in Paris, one of two things will happen. You will be discovered here, when every person in the house will be murdered; or you will venture into the street and be clubbed to death in less than five minutes."

"I do not wish to drag you into danger."

"There is no danger to me," he answered rather brusquely, "unless you are obstinate."

"Then I will go with you."

"Very good," he replied, as coolly as if we were about to embark on an enterprise of the most ordinary kind. "I will make my preparations and return in a short time."

He went out softly, and I sat on the side of the bed thinking sadly over the information he had brought. There was no Huguenot party; there were neither leaders nor followers. The assassins had not only lopped the branches but had uprooted the tree. Even Condé and Henry of Navarre were not safe from the royal vengeance! The horror pressed upon me heavily; even now I could scarcely realize the full extent of the fearful business.

I still sat brooding when L'Estang came again, this time bringing a light. He noticed the white band on the ground, and, stooping, picked it up. "It may be disagreeable," he said, "but it is necessary; it has saved your life once. Remember you are Louis Bourdonais, and he would not refuse to wear it."

"'Tis horrible!" I cried, turning from the badge with loathing.

"That may be, but it is a safeguard you cannot afford to despise. Lean on me; you are weaker than I thought."

He supported me across the room, down the stairway, and so to the door of the house, in front of which a carriage was drawn up. The coachman wore Anjou's livery—a device of L'Estang's, since the equipage did not belong to Monseigneur—and the crowd stood around cheering wildly.

L'Estang, fearful lest any of the lawyer's spies should be there, helped me into the carriage quickly, jumped in himself, and told the driver to whip up his horses. The worst of the massacre was over, but the citizens having tasted blood thirsted for more, and, though the hour was so late, they were roaming about in bands shouting for vengeance on the Huguenots.

Our carriage being compelled to proceed slowly, I had ample opportunity to note the traces of the awful tragedy. Every house where a Huguenot had lived was wrecked; in many instances the window-sills were smeared with blood, and dead bodies still lay thick in the streets. I shut my eyes tightly, while my whole body was convulsed by a shudder of horror.

"Monsieur, we are at the gate. Turn your head to the left, so that the officer may not see your face easily. If he asks questions, remember you are Louis Bourdonais of Monseigneur's household."

"Halt! Who goes there?"

My companion looked out. "We are on Monseigneur's private business," he exclaimed. "Here is his pass. Be quick, if you please, we are in a hurry."

The officer took the paper and examined it closely, "Where is Louis Bourdonais?" he asked.

"Here!" I said, bracing myself with an effort.

"I wish Monseigneur knew his own mind!" he grumbled, "my orders were to let no one through!"

"Shall we go back and ask him to write down his reasons for the change?" asked L'Estang; but the officer was already giving instructions for the opening of the gate, and in a few minutes we

were outside the walls.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Farewell France!

"The danger is over!" exclaimed my companion as we left the city behind us; "lean back on the cushions and try to sleep."

"There are several questions I wish to ask first."

"I will answer them in the morning, when you have rested, but not now," he said firmly.

He had brought a number of cushions and rugs, and he tended me as carefully as if I had been a delicate woman. And yet he was in the pay of the brutal Anjou, and perhaps his own hands were not innocent of the blood of my slain comrades!

It might have been that he guessed something of the thoughts passing through my mind, for he exclaimed suddenly, "There is one thing I would say, monsieur. This massacre is none of my seeking, and through it all my sword has never left the scabbard except in your defence. The mercy once shown to me I have shown again."

"You are a good fellow, L'Estang," I murmured, "and I thank you."

After that I fell asleep and in spite of the jolting of the carriage did not waken until the sun was high in the heavens.

"You have wakened in time for breakfast," said my companion, who appeared not to have slept at all; "in a few minutes we shall arrive at an inn where I intend to halt. I am known there, and we shall be well treated."

We stayed a couple of hours, during which time fresh horses were procured and harnessed to the carriage, while the coachman removed Monseigneur's favours from his hat, and covered his livery with a blue overall.

"Now," I said, when the journey was resumed, tell me why you asked us to meet you at the Louvre, and then failed to keep the appointment!"

"I will answer the last part of the question first; the explanation is very simple. Monseigneur needed my attendance, and when I was able to leave him it was too late."

"You intended to give us warning of this horrible conspiracy?"

"No, I could not betray my patron, but I intended to save you and Monsieur Bellièvre. I felt sure you would not leave your leader; I should have despised you if you had."

"And rightly, too."

"So," he continued, "I arranged to carry you off by force, and keep you shut up until the danger was past. Monseigneur, without intending it, disturbed my plans. Guessing you would return to Coligny's *hôtel* I followed as quickly as possible with a few rascals who would do my bidding, and ask no questions. You were not there."

"The troopers reached the *hôtel* before us," I explained.

"I guessed what had happened, and searched the streets. Finally I reached the house where you had taken refuge. I was too late for Monsieur Bellièvre; he was dead."

"As true a heart as beat in France!" I said.

"Yes," agreed L'Estang, "he was a gallant youngster. Turning from him I saw you fall, and ran across the room. The mob recognized me as Monseigneur's attendant, or it would have gone hard with you. Even as it was—but there, do the details matter? I got you away at last to the room I had prepared; then it was necessary to return to my patron."

I endeavoured to thank him, but he would hear nothing, saying, "A promise to the dead is sacred, monsieur."

"Charles may not be a strong king," I remarked some time later, "but he plays the hypocrite vastly well. One would have thought from his visit to the Admiral that he was devoured by grief."

"He was both sorry and angry at the attempt on Coligny's life; it was not his work."

"But surely he must have given orders for the massacre!"

"Afterwards, monsieur. At first I do not believe that even Guise meant to do more than kill Coligny and a few of the most powerful leaders. But they were blinded by panic; carried away by their own fears, and they swept Charles into the same stream."

"The world will say the horrible tragedy was planned from the beginning."

"The world may be right, but I hardly think so. No one, monsieur, can be more cruel than a panic-stricken man."

"Who was it," I asked, "that made the first attempt on the Admiral's life?"

"Maurevel."

"The king's assassin!"

"The same man; but he did not receive his orders from Charles; on that point I feel certain."

"Henry of Navarre still lives," I said after a time.

"Yes; he and Condé have been spared so far."

"And their gentlemen? They were lodged with their chiefs in the Louvre; surely they have not been slain?"

"Monsieur, I will tell you the story, so that you may understand how utterly helpless you are. Every one in the palace went to bed that night, restless and excited, afraid and yet not knowing of what they were afraid. As soon as day broke, Henry descended the staircase; Condé was with him, and they were followed by their gentlemen."

"They must have numbered two hundred!"

"About that number. At the foot of the staircase Henry and Condé were arrested and disarmed. Their gentlemen were called by name, and they stepped one by one into the courtyard."

"Yes," I said, as he hesitated.

"The courtyard was filled with Swiss guards. Your colleagues died bravely, monsieur, some of them defiantly, taunting the king with their last breath."

"The king!" I cried in astonishment, "where was the king?"

"Looking from an upper window."

"Yet you endeavoured to make me believe he was not responsible for the massacre!"

"I still believe that to be true; but when it began, he became blood mad."

"De Pilles was at the Louvre!"

"De Pilles is dead! Except Navarre, who cannot help even himself, you have not a single friend left. You cannot return to Le Blanc, and wherever you go you will be hunted down by Cordel's assassins. He can strike at you now without fear, and he will do so. He has the promise of your estates, and a strong hope of a patent of nobility. You cannot leave Rochelle, and even there you will not be safe."

"Your comfort is but cold," I said, forcing myself to laugh.

"I want you to see the truth in all its nakedness, so that you may not feed yourself with false hopes," he replied soberly.

"After what has happened in Paris there is little chance of my doing that; but I must have time to think; I must consult with my friends at Rochelle."

By this time the news of the fearful massacre on the day of St. Bartholomew had spread far and wide; the whole country was wild with excitement, and in the various towns through which we passed the unhappy Huguenots were being hounded mercilessly to death. Thanks, however, to L'Estang, I was never in any danger, and at length we arrived at the gates of what had become a veritable city of refuge.

Here, with many expressions of good-will on both sides, we parted, L'Estang to return to Paris, and I to enter the grief-stricken town. Numbers of fugitives thronged the streets; everywhere one saw groups of men, and weeping women, and frightened children who had abandoned their homes in terror.

I proceeded slowly and haltingly, being still extremely weak, and many a curious glance was directed toward my bandaged head. Expecting to find Jeanne at my aunt's house, I went there first, and in the courtyard saw two horses saddled and bridled as if for a journey. I stopped a moment to speak to the servant, when a voice exclaimed joyfully, "'Tis he! 'Tis Monsieur Edmond!" and Jacques came running out, his face beaming with delight.

"We were coming in search of you," he cried. "Monsieur Braund is in the house, bidding mademoiselle farewell. She is terribly alarmed on your account; she believes you to be dead. She blames herself bitterly for leaving you in Paris. Is the news true, monsieur? Is it really true that the noble Coligny has been murdered?"

"Yes," I answered sadly, "it is too true. But you shall hear all about it later; I must go to my sister."

Roger was endeavouring to comfort her, but on seeing me she broke from him and ran across the room, crying, "Edmond! Edmond!" as if she could scarcely credit the evidence of her senses.

"Did you think I was a ghost, Jeanne?" I asked laughingly. "'Tis I, Edmond, and very much alive, I assure you. Come, let me dry those tears; you will spoil your pretty eyes."

"Oh, Edmond," she gasped, "I thought you were killed! And you have been wounded! Your head is bandaged."

"I have had a very narrow escape, Jeanne; but here I am, and there is no need for any more sorrow on my account."

"And Felix?" she cried, "has he escaped too? Where have you left him? Ah, he is dead! I am sure of it! I can read it in your face!"

"Yes," I answered sadly, "there have been terrible doings in Paris, and Felix is among the slain."

"And he was so brave and good!" she sobbed. "Poor Felix! Tell me about it, Edmond."

When she had become more composed I related the story just as it had happened, but softening down the more brutal parts lest her grief should break out afresh. She was silent for a little while, but presently she said, "The Cause is ruined, Edmond!"

"Yes," I admitted, reluctantly, "with all our leaders slain, or in the hands of the king, we are powerless. And now, my dear Jeanne, you had better go to your room and rest a while."

"But you are hurt!" she exclaimed anxiously.

"The wound is not serious, and it has been skilfully dressed. However, Roger shall fetch a surgeon."

"And you need food," she said, "you are weak and faint. It is you who need rest, and I will take care of you."

"Very well," I said, thinking it would be better perhaps if she had something to occupy her mind, "you shall nurse back my strength."

Now that the excitement of the journey had passed I felt, indeed, painfully weak, and for several days kept to my bed, being waited upon by Jeanne and Roger, while Jacques slept at night in my chamber.

One morning toward the end of the week Roger came as usual to sit with me. Jeanne was in the room, but she disappeared quickly, her pretty cheeks covered with blushes.

"You have frightened Jeanne away!" I exclaimed, laughing.

"She knows that I wish to have a talk with you," he answered, and upon my word he began to blush like an overgrown boy.

"One would fancy it a matter of some importance!"

"Of the greatest importance," he replied earnestly, "since it affects all your future life. Do you realize that unless you desert your faith, and go to mass, your career is ruined? Your account of the massacre was under rather than over the mark. With the exception of Condé and Navarre there does not appear to be a single Huguenot leader left, and it is reported that Condé has recanted in order to save his life."

"The Cause is not dead because Condé has forsaken it."

"No," agreed Roger, "but it is dead nevertheless. Henry is a prisoner in Paris; the Huguenots are scattered and dispirited; they have no leaders, no arms, no money; there is not a single district in which they are not at the mercy of the king's troops. Already the Paris massacre has been repeated in several towns."

"Well," I said, wondering whither all this tended.

"You yourself cannot leave Rochelle except at the risk of your life."

"Because of Cordel?"

"Because of Cordel. He means to possess your estates; he has a powerful patron in Anjou, and you cannot obtain the ear of the king."

"'Twould do me little service if I could!"

"What will you do in Rochelle?"

"I shall not stay here long; I shall sail to our colony in America, where one can at least worship God in peace."

"Yes," he said musingly, "you can do that"; and then as if the thought had but just occurred to him, "it will be a terribly rough life for Jeanne—I mean for your sister."

"I had forgotten Jeanne. Well, that plan must be given up."

"There is one way out of the difficulty," he continued, coming finally to the point toward which he had been leading. "I am rich, and my own master. I have a good estate in England."

"Yes," I said, leaving him, rather ungenerously, to flounder through as best he could.

"I love your sister," he blurted out. "I wish to make her my wife. Do you object to having me for a brother, Edmond?"

Now, I was very fond of my English friend; he was a gallant gentleman, and the soul of honour. To be quite frank, I had once hoped that Jeanne would marry Felix, but he, poor fellow, was dead.

I gave Roger my hand, saying, "There is no one living to whom I would rather trust my sister's happiness. Besides, that gets rid of all our difficulties at once. With you to protect Jeanne, I can carry out my plans."

"Not so fast, Edmond," he interposed. "Jeanne is willing to be my wife, but she is not willing to part from you. She still blames herself for leaving you in Paris, though that, of course, is nonsense. She could not have done you any good."

"Most probably, had she stayed, both of us would have been killed. However, to return to our point; I cannot ask you to cross the ocean with us."

"It is unnecessary," said he, smiling cheerfully; "I can ask you to cross the Channel with me. No, don't speak yet. The scheme has several advantages. You will be out of Cordel's way, and yet close at hand. Things are bound to change. The king may die, or Henry of Navarre may obtain greater influence. He cannot be kept a prisoner all his life, and the time may come when he is once more at the head of an army. That will be your opportunity. A few days will take you across the water, and with Navarre as your friend—for he is not likely to go back on his pledged word—you can hope for justice."

"There is something in that," I said thoughtfully.

"There is everything, my dear fellow. Now, on the other hand, by sailing to the New World, you will cut yourself off from France for ever; and lose all chance of regaining your estates. The rascally lawyer will be left to enjoy his stolen property in peace."

This was an argument that touched me nearly, and Roger, perceiving the effect it produced, harped upon it so strongly that at last I agreed to accompany him to his English home. There was, however, still my servant to be considered, but Roger declared merrily there was plenty of room for Jacques, who should be given the charge of the stables.

"And," added the generous fellow, "I shall be the gainer by that, for he is a splendid judge of horses!" which was perfectly true.

I had a talk with Jacques the same evening and asked him to give me his opinion freely on the subject. The honest fellow did not hesitate an instant.

"Go with Monsieur Braund by all means," said he. "As long as the King of Navarre remains a prisoner you can do nothing, but directly he is free you will have a chance of settling accounts with this Cordel. To go to the New World will be to acknowledge yourself beaten."

"You are right, Jacques," I said; "we will stay in England, and bide our time."

"It will come, monsieur, be assured of that; and then let Etienne Cordel look out for himself."

We were still talking about the lawyer when Roger came in, bringing a note that had been left by a stranger at the *Hôtel Coligny*. It was addressed to me, and I recognized the handwriting immediately.

"'Tis from L'Estang," I said; "what can he have to say?"

"Open it and see," suggested Roger merrily, "that is the easiest way of finding out!"

The contents were brief, but they made me bite my lips hard. "Cordel has been granted the Le Blanc estates, and in all likelihood a patent of nobility will be made out in a few weeks. His assassins are still seeking for you."

"Well," said Roger, "as it happens, they will seek in vain, and when they do find you, they may be sorry for the discovery."

Now that my decision was made, I felt anxious to get away, hoping that new scenes and new faces might blunt the misery which L'Estang's letter had caused me. Roger was also desirous to return immediately, and, as there was a vessel timed to sail in a few days, he arranged that we should take our passage in her.

It was a beautiful September morning when we went on board, and as the ship moved slowly from the harbour I took a sad farewell of my fair but unhappy country. Stronger men might have laughed at my weakness, but my eyes were dim as, leaning over the vessel's side, I watched the receding shore. Who could foretell if I should ever behold my own land again?

"Courage, monsieur!" whispered Jacques; "we shall return."

"Yes," I replied, with a sudden glow of confidence, "we shall return; let us hold fast by that!"

My story as I set out to tell it really ends on the day when the *White Rose* left the harbour of Rochelle, but those who have followed my fortunes thus far may not take it amiss if I relate very briefly the upshot of my adventures.

Concerning Jeanne and her English husband there is little to tell. Happy, it is said, is the country that has no history, and their lives were one long happiness, passed in their beautiful home, surrounded by friends, and blessed by the presence of little children.

For four years I stayed with them, until, indeed, the joyful news of Henry's escape from Paris sent me, accompanied by the faithful Jacques, in hot haste to France, where the offer of my services was gladly accepted by the great Huguenot chief.

"The dawn is long in coming, Le Blanc," he said kindly; "but it will come at last."

It would take too long to tell you of the years of strife, of our marches and countermarches, of our defeats and victories, of how we changed from hope to despair, and from despair to hope, until on that memorable field of Ivri we smote our enemies hip and thigh, and broke the League that had brought so much misery on the country.

It was at Ivri, right at the moment of triumph, I lost Jacques, who, through good and ill, had followed my fortunes with a loyalty and devotion that no man ever exceeded, and fell just when I had the power to reward his services.

Renaud L'Estang I rarely met after my return. He served his patron faithfully and well, and on Anjou's death joined the household of the Duke of Guise, who held him in high esteem. He was, I believe, slain in one of the numerous skirmishes, but even that I learned only by hearsay.

In spite of my vaunts and boastings Etienne Cordel enjoyed his ill-gotten gains for several years, and then it was not to me, but to a higher judge he had to render his account.

But when Henry of Navarre became King of France, the estates of Le Blanc were restored to their rightful owner, and in the old castle to-day, hung in the place of honour, is the sword which Henry gave me at Arnay-le-Duc, and on which he has graciously caused to be inscribed, "From Henry of Navarre to the Sieur Le Blanc."

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