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ORRAIN

A Romance

by

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ORRAIN

CHAPTER I

THE CRY IN THE RUE DES LAVANDIERES

My father, René, Vidame d'Orrain, was twice married. By his first wife he had one son, Simon, who subsequently succeeded to his title and estates, and was through his life my bitter enemy. By his second wife, whom he married somewhat late in life, he had two sons—the elder, Anne, known as the Chevalier de St. Martin from his mother's lands, which he inherited; and the younger, Bertrand—myself.

Simon betook himself early to the Court, and we heard but little of him, and that not to his credit; St. Martin went to Italy under the banner of Brissac; and as for me, my parents yielding to the persuasion of my mother's uncle, the Bishop of Seez, decided that I should become a Churchman, and I was forthwith packed off to Paris, and entered at the College of Cambrai, being then about seventeen years of age. Being remarkably tall and strongly built, with a natural taste for all manly exercises, it might have been expected that my books saw little of me; but, on the contrary, I found in them a pleasure and a companionship that has lasted through my life. Thus it happened that I made considerable progress. So much so that the good Bishop, my great-uncle, often flattered me with the ambitious hopes of some day filling his Episcopal chair—a hope that, I need not say, was never realised.

About this time, I being nineteen years of age, things happened that entirely altered my life. My mother sickened and died. Shortly after news came of the death of my brother St. Martin, who was killed in an affair of honour at Milan. The Vidame, my father, then in his eighty-first year, and much enfeebled by old wounds, especially one he had received at Fornovo, felt that his last hours were come, and summoned my brother Simon and myself home to receive his last blessing before he died.

I hurried back as fast as possible, but when I reached Orrain I found to my astonishment the gates of the Chateau closed against me, and Simon, leaning over the battlements, bade me begone.

Overcome with this reception, I was for a space struck speechless; but at length finding voice I begged, even with tears, to be allowed to see my father. But Simon sneered back:

"You will have to take a long journey, then; either below or above—I know not which," he mocked. "Your father is dead. He has left you his curse, and the lands of St. Martin are yours. I am master here at last, thank God! And I tell you to be off! Take that pink and white face of yours back to your College of Cambrai!"

He lied, for, as I afterwards heard, my father was not dead then, but lay dying in his chamber, to which no one but Simon had access, and over which he had placed a guard of his men-at-arms, a cut-throat set of Italians whom he ever had with him.

Simon's cruel words stung me to the quick. My blood flamed with rage, and I dared him to come forth and meet me as a man; but he only laughed all the more, and, pointing to the tree of justice outside the gate, asked how I would like to swing from one of its branches. He added that, as I was his step-brother, he would give me a high one, if I chose.

I can almost see him now as I write this, with his cruel hatchet face snarling over the parapet, his red hair, his tall, thin figure and bent back—if the truth were known, Simon's affairs of gallantry must have been few.

In brief, despite all my efforts, I was unable to see my father, who died that night asking for me.

In the hamlet of Orrain itself I could find no shelter, although the villagers knew and loved me, and this was from fear of the new Vidame. I, however, found a temporary retreat in the forest, living there like a wild beast for four days, waiting with a burning heart for a chance of meeting Simon, but he never came forth.

On the fourth day my father was buried at dead of night in the Chapel of St. Hugo of Orrain, where every Vidame of Orrain, save one, lies.

Pierrebon, now my steward, and at that time my servant, and the only companion I had with me, brought me news from the village that this was to be, and I determined to be there at all hazard. This resolution I carried out, and Simon and I met beside our father's grave. The time and the occasion sealed my lips and stayed my hand. Even Simon spake never a word, but, when it was all over, rode off sullenly through the night back to the Chateau, his cursed Italians around him, and with the dawn started off for Paris.

This I did too. There was nothing else to be done, and I returned to my College.

I was, however, no longer in the position of a poor cadet, without means or resource. My mother's lands of St. Martin had come to me on Anne's death. Even my great-uncle the good Bishop agreed with me, with many sighs, that the profession of arms was more suited to my present position than the Church, but advised me to stay for a year more in College, and fortify my mind by taking the course of Philosophy.

I very willingly assented to this; but the wealthy Chevalier d'Orrain as I was called—I did not take the name of St. Martin—was a vastly different person from the poor cadet of the past year. I found myself courted and sought after. I began to find pleasures in life unknown to me before, and in the young man of fashion, who entered the world a year later it was hardly possible to recognise the once quiet and studious Bertrand d'Orrain.

I plunged into the dissipations of the capital. At the Court I found a patron in Monseigneur the Duc d'Enghien. My extravagance and my follies brought me many reproofs from the Bishop of Seez, but the good man's warnings were in vain, and might have been shouted to the stars. They were certainly at times loud enough to be heard there.

I often met Simon, now Vidame d'Orrain. He was high in favour with the Dauphin, who succeeded to the throne as Henri II., and his mistress, Diane de Poitiers, whom he made Duchess of Valentinois. By tacit consent there was an armed peace between us, though I well knew he would take any chance that might arise to my injury. As it was, we met, and passed each other without greeting, and in silence, ever with black looks, and hands on the hilts of our swords.

My acres began to diminish and the woods of St. Martin to go down. Things, in fact, were going from bad to worse, when war with the Emperor broke out afresh, and I was amongst the first of those who volunteered under Enghien for the Italian campaign. There I did my part, and shared in the day of Cerisolles as a captain in the Light Horse of Monsieur de Randan. Then, on the peace, back to Paris once more and the old life; with this difference, that now there was no restraining hand over me, for my great-uncle was dead. He left me his blessing, his copy of "Plutarch's Lives," and thirty crowns of the sun—all his fortune—for, though Bishop of Seez, he was a true shepherd of God, and laid up for himself all his treasures on high.

It was impossible that things could go on much longer without disaster, and the death—murder, rather—of that gallant prince the Duc d'Enghien deprived me of a protector upon whom I could always rely. This, followed by an unfortunate duel, the circumstances of which will be detailed later, precipitated matters. The Edict of Fontainebleau served as a weapon to my enemies, and it was put in force with the utmost rigour against me. My principal accuser was my unnatural step-brother the Vidame d'Orrain. He went so far as to charge me with aiding and harbouring the members of the New Heresy, and the discovery of a small leaflet printed at Geneva amongst my books was held to be sufficient proof against me. The affair of the duel I might have lived through, but this meant death. I took refuge in flight; it was the only course. I was condemned in my absence by the Chambre Ardente to the extreme penalty, and what remained of my property was given to Simon, who shared it with Diane, the mistress of the King.

Thus at five and twenty I found myself an exile, and penniless. One friend alone remained to me, and this was a young man of Orrain called Pierrebon, whom I have mentioned before. Through good and ill he adhered to me with ancient fidelity, and he lives still, honoured and trusted by all who know him.

Together we sought a refuge in the Low Countries, and there I learned the first great lesson of my life, and that was to live by honest work. For five years I labored, until I had amassed sufficient to give me a small estate of about fifty écus.

During those five years so many things had happened—I myself was so changed—that I began to think that I and my affairs had been consigned to oblivion, and that I might safely return to France. One day I was seized with an uncontrollable desire to see my native land once again. I determined to do so

then and there, and a fortnight later, accompanied by Pierrebon, I was in Paris.

I had every reason to confirm the opinion I had formed, that I and my doings had been forgotten. In the humble class to which I now belonged no one had ever heard of the Chevalier d'Orrain. Here in Paris I felt I was safe, and I consequently determined to fix my abode in the great city. I hired an apartment in the Rue des Lavandières, and established myself there, giving out that I was a fencing-master. No pupils came; but at any rate there was peace and contentment. I formed no acquaintances except one, a certain Camus, a glove-maker, who had an apartment above mine. For some reason or other this man forced himself upon me, and though at first I repulsed his attentions he would not be denied, and I grew to tolerate him. He was possessed of extraordinary learning, and, under the guise of his ostensible calling, plied another terrible trade—those who know the story of Jeanne of Navarre will know what I mean.

This I was unaware of at the time; but, despite myself, the man's conversation interested me, so that I occasionally yielded to his importunities, and visited him for an hour or so after supper, when we passed the time in discussion.

In this manner close upon six years elapsed, until I myself had almost forgotten in the Bourgeois Broussel—the name I assumed—the once brilliant Chevalier d'Orrain. Pierrebon alone knew my secret, and he was as silent as the grave. At times the honest fellow would speak hopefully of a good day to come; but I poured cold water on that, and, pointing to my lute and my copy of "Plutarch's Lives," was wont to say that there was enough happiness there for my life without seeking to reopen the past or delve into the future.

One night—I remember it well; it was the night of Pentecost, in the year 1555—I went up, at Camus' request, to his apartment. I had not seen the old man for some time, and our talk was longer than usual. By some chance we began to discuss poisons, and Camus opened the stores of his curious knowledge. He had studied, he said, with a strange smile, the works of the Rabbi Moses bin Maimon, and was possessed of antidotes for each of the sixteen poisons; but there was one venom, outside the sixteen, the composition of which he knew, but to which there was no antidote. On my inquiry he stated that this was the poison used by the Borgia, and it was prepared as follows:

A bear having been caught, it was made to swallow a draught of *Acqua di Borgia*. On this beginning to take effect the bear was suspended head downwards. Whilst the animal was in convulsions there poured from his mouth a foamy stream. This, collected in a silver vessel and securely bottled, was the Borgia venom, and to this there was no antidote.

I made some remark of horror, and he laughed a dry, crackling laugh, and rose from his seat.

"I will show you," he said, and was moving towards a press when we were startled by a cry from the street—a cry for help:

"*A moi*! *A moi*!"

CHAPTER II

I BECOME THE OWNER OF A RING

I started from my seat, and Camus, with a turn and a step, reached the window, where, resting his hands on the mullions, he leaned far out. I was on his heels; but the window was narrow, a mere slit, and so I could see nothing below. Late as it was the cry had, however, reached other ears than ours as well. Here and there a dim light glowed for an instant or so in an overhanging window. Here and there a shadowy figure appeared at a balcony, only to vanish like a ghost after peering for a moment in the direction of the sound. This was all the interest, all the attention it excited, and this spoke for the times.

"What is it? Can you see anything?" I asked, craning over Camus' shoulder; and, as if in answer to my question, the cry rang out again, just below the window:

"*A moi*! *Au secours*!" Then came an oath, and the rasp of steel.

"They are killing someone there," said Camus; "killing with clumsy steel. Well! 'tis an affair for the watch." And with a shrug of his lean shoulders he turned back. But I waited to hear no more. Drawing my sword I made all haste down the stairway and into the street, and there before me, where the

moonlight glistened on the mud and on the green and slimy cobble stones of the Rue des Lavandières, two men, their backs to the wall, fought for their lives against four, whilst a fifth, who seemed to direct them, stood a little apart.

The odds were heavy against the two. All the heavier because one, dressed in the bizarre attire of jester, had no sword but only a dagger for defence. Nevertheless, with his short cloak wrapped over his left arm, and the dagger in his right hand, he held his own with skill and courage.

The attack, however, was chiefly directed upon his companion, a fair-haired man, with a short moustache and beard. He had lost his hat. There was a red line of blood on his face from a wound in the forehead, and a twitching smile on his lips; but he fought silent as a wolf.

A thrust that would have found his heart was parried, but not by him. Quick as thought, the swordless man by his side hit up the bravo's rapier with his left arm, and the blade, stabbing the air, struck and bent against the stones of the wall just over shoulder-height.

"*Sus*! *sus*!" cried the leader of the night-hawks; and he ran forward.

Clearly it was time that help came. So I passed my sword through one of the bravos, and as the others, surprised and disconcerted, gave way a little, I ranged myself beside the two.

"Courage!" I said, "affairs are more equal now."

Cursing and growling, spitting like so many cats, the villains came on with a rush, their leader first. A long arm and a long sword are, however, great advantages in affairs of this kind, and I took him on the riposte. A cry and a gasp, a sword clattered on to the pavement, and the stricken man spun round and, holding his hand to his side, tried to stagger off, but after stumbling a few steps he fell in a heap in the shadow.

This settled the matter. The others, seeing their leader hit, waited for no more, but fled. There was no pursuit. For a few brief seconds we heard the patter of running feet, and then all was still.

We stood, all three staring at each other, and then the fair-haired man held out his hand, saying simply: "I thank you, monsieur!"

I met his grasp, expressing at the same time my concern for his wound.

"It is not much, I think—all due to a weak parry on my part." And he strove with a gold-laced handkerchief to staunch the blood that was flowing somewhat freely. I was about to offer what help I could when the jester cut in.

"Faith of a fool!" he said, sheathing his dagger, "my gossip here is apt to make light of these scratches; but I would give my cap and bells now for a little salve."

"If you will come into my house, messieurs—'tis but a step—we will see to the hurt."

I almost repented of my offer the moment after I made it, for I caught the jester plucking at my friend's sleeve in warning; but the other laughed, and, addressing me in a high and gracious way, said:

"Monsieur, once more thanks! I accept your offer. Of a truth!" and he ruefully looked at his handkerchief, "this is a trifle too much cupping for me."

I bowed, and led the way across the road; but the jester stayed us, calling out in his high-pitched tones:

"Just a look at this carrion! One may as well see upon whom our friend here has put his mark." So saying he stooped and turned over the man, the first of the two who had fallen. He lay half in a stagnant pool of water, and was quite dead, as we could see, for the moon fell clearly on his evil and distorted face and horny, film-covered eyes.

"As dead as imperial Caesar," said the jester; "nor can I say who or what he was. St. Siege! Stay—see this!" And throwing back the man's cloak, which half covered his breast, he pointed with his fingers at a crest embroidered on the doublet. It was a crescent in silver, with a scroll beneath it, and as we all stooped down to see, the jester's keen eyes met those of his companion.

"The scroll explains all," he said, as if in reference to the attack upon them: "it is *totum donec impleat orbem*."

"Diane?"

"Yes; Diane de Poitiers—Diane, Duchess of Valentinois—Diane, the curse of France! But I should play the Caliph Aaron no more, and keep home of nights; better still, take horse with the dawn for Navarre!"

There was a strange earnestness in the speaker's voice. There he was, one knee to ground, a finger resting on the ill-omened crest of the mistress of the King, the moon shining on his rich dress of black and gold, on the sharp, weasel-like face, and keen eyes that looked up at his friend.

"There is more in this than I thought at first," I said to myself, and scanned the features of the dead man more closely. He looked like a foreigner, and, saying that I was going to see after the other, I turned away, but with my ears skinned, as I began to dislike the affair exceedingly.

As I suspected, the jester began to warn his friend once more.

"Monseigneur, there has been enough folly for tonight, and your wound is but slight. Go not into the house! Let us thank him—reward him if you will—but let us be off!"

"Hush, Le Brusquet!" said the other in the same low tone. "There is no fear, and if there is danger I turn not from it."

I had heard enough, and seen enough too. The other man had got off somehow. He had fallen, it is true, but recovered himself sufficiently to make away. One can never be sure of the riposte in an uncertain light, and uncertain moonlight is worst of all.

"He has got off," I said as I returned; "and 'twere well to have your wound looked after, if you mean to have it done."

With this I led the way to the door of my house, and opening it bade them enter. The fair-haired man passed in at once, but I caught a gleam in Le Brusquet's hand as he followed. He had drawn his dagger once more.

My first thought had been, much as I disliked him, to ask Camus to help me in dressing the wound; but upon consideration, and chiefly, after I had heard Le Brusquet address his friend as "Monseigneur," I deemed it preferable that I should see to it myself. I had some experience in these things. A soldier should know how to stop as well as to let blood; and by way of precaution I always keep a little store of remedies at hand, for one never knows when they may be needed, as they were then. With this in my mind I led the way up into my apartment. Here, I may mention, I had established myself modestly but comfortably. It is true that the walls were bare, except for a demi-suit of mail, a couple of swords, and a banner I had taken at Cerisolles; but for the rest, what with my books—I had five in all—and my lute, I flattered myself that I had all that a man needed.

Pierrebon was asleep on a settle, and I had to call twice ere I could wake him, for he slept like the dead. But he rose quickly enough, and lit the candles. Then, bidding him fetch me materials for dressing a cut, I begged my guests to be seated. It was the first chance we had of really seeing each other. The jester Le Brusquet I did not recognize at all, though I noticed the royal cipher on his pourpoint. As for the other, there is only one house in France that bears such features, and the greatest of them all is now King, and owes his being to the man who stood before me.

As the lights fell on us I noticed a quick glance pass between the two, and Le Brusquet's hand moved beneath his cloak. It was as if suspicion were gone and he had resheathed his poniard. I smiled to myself; but Pierrebon now entered with a ewer and the things I required. He placed these on the table, and at a look from me, which he understood, vanished again.

I set myself at once to dress the wound, which was, after all, but a slight affair, though it had bled freely. I said so as I finished, adding that if it had been a trifle deeper the business would have been serious; but, as it was, a couple of days would mend matters entirely, except for a patch.

"Not Frenel himself could have tended me better," said the wounded man.
"Monsieur, I am deeply obliged to you."

And Pierrebon entering at this time with some wine I begged them to do me the honour to drink a cup.

This they willingly assented to, and filling three cups from the flagon
I raised mine on high.

"Messieurs, a toast for all good Christians! Down with the crescent!"

They understood and drank—Le Brusquet with a searching look in his eyes and a smile on his lips, and his companion with a reckless laugh.

And now they rose. "Monsieur," said the wounded man, "will you add to your kindness by telling us to whom we are indebted? You are a soldier—I can see that—and I can keep that sword of yours from rusting if you will."

So he had not recognised me! Well, ten years make a difference! And yet, if once, he had seen me a hundred times in the days when his valiant brother Enghien lived. I began to feel sure that if he did not know me I was safe indeed; but I had no mind to change my present peace for any other life, and so made answer:

"Monseigneur, it were idle for me to say that I do not know you. Rest assured that were I so minded I could follow no braver or more generous prince than Antony of Vendôme, but my sword is hung to the wall. My name is Broussel. I am bourgeois, as you see, and having a small estate of fifty écus have all that suffices for the simple needs of a citizen such as I. Monseigneur, the little service I rendered is small; let it be forgotten. Nevertheless, I thank you for the kind offer you have made."

I delivered this speech with a respectful air, but yet in a tone that carried the conviction that my resolve was unchangeable.

"As you will," said the Duke, with some coldness of manner. "A Bourbon does not offer twice. And so, farewell! I fear 'tis a long road and an ugly road we have yet to travel, thanks to my folly—eh, Le Brusquet?"

Out of the tail of my eye I had been watching Le Brusquet. All this time he had been engaged in examining the silver cup from which he had drunk his wine—a relic of my past splendour. He toyed with it this way and that, looking at the arms engraved thereon, and comparing them with those on the flagon. Then his little eyes stole a swift, searching glance at me, and a smile—just the shadow of a smile—flickered over his lips. He had not, however, lost a word of what was passing between Vendôme and myself, and on the Duke addressing him he put down the cup he held in his hand, saying quietly: "If Monsieur Broussel will add to his kindness by lending me a sword it may, perhaps, be better for us, and I promise faithfully to return it."

Without a word I took a sword from the wall and handed it to Le Brusquet, who received it with a bow, and then, turning to the Duke, I offered to accompany them to the end of the street, which was an evil place even by day. I added that a little beyond the end of the street was the Gloriette, where the guards of Monsieur the Lieutenant of the Châtelet were to be found, and that thence their way would be safe.

The Duke pulled a long face, apparently at the thought of having to disclose his identity to the guards of the Châtelet, but Le Brusquet cut in with a "Let it be so, Monseigneur. Three are better than two, except in love-making."

At this the Duke laughed, and agreed, and we all three went out into the street, which twisted and wound its crooked way towards the river face between two rows of overhanging houses, that seemed as if they were ever threatening to fall over and bury it in their ruins.

For a little we walked without a word; for Antony of Vendôme—fickle and vain, at once the hope and despair of his time—felt himself hurt and aggrieved by the refusal of his offer, and for a space preserved a sulky silence. Ere we had gone a quarter mile, however, his temper—variable as the wind—began to change and his kindly nature to reassert itself. We were passing the house of the Duplessis Richelieu when he spoke.

"*Eh bien*, Monsieur Broussel, change your mind and think better of my offer. What with one thing and another there is steel in the air at present, and a stout heart and a good sword such as you are may make an estate of fifty écus five hundred or more. Come, think of it!"

I felt my blood warm within me in spite of my fancied devotion to my contented life; but I thought of that affair of the duel, of the judgment of the Chambre Ardente, and above all, of Simon and the cards he held against me. Besides, I knew Vendôme, and so I refused once more.

"Well, well," he said, "as you will; but never say Antony of Vendôme was ungrateful."

We had by this time reached the point where the road opened out upon the river face, and halted together in the moonlight.

A little distance from us lay the Seine, shining in scales of hammered brass. The convicts were still on the Gloriette. Poor wretches! They slaved there day and night, and lights were moving to and fro amongst them as the guards watched them at their toil. They were singing a weird refrain—a chorus—ever and again interrupted by yells and curses as the lash of the task-master fell on some victim of his

hatred or sluggard at work.

"Here we part, Monseigneur!" I said. "The lieutenant of the Châtelet will give you guards to escort you farther."

I bowed to both, and would have gone—for I thought it well not to be mixed up further in this matter—but the Duke stayed me. He had taken off his glove, and was fumbling with a ring on his finger. This he drew off and thrust into my hand.

"Keep this, monsieur. Remember, if ever you want a friend you have but to send it to me. Farewell!"

"*Au revoir*!" cried Le Brusquet, who had up to now preserved silence. "Remember, Le Brusquet is also your debtor doubly—once for a life and once for a sword—and forget not my address is the sign of the Crescent."

With this mocking allusion to the Louvre and to Diane de Poitiers' influence there, he followed on the heels of Vendôme, leaving me with the ring in my hand.

I watched them until they were lost in the shivering haze. They never sought the Gloriette, but kept on the right, making directly for the Louvre.

Then I looked at the ring. It was light enough for me to see that it was a plain gold signet in the shape of a shield, with the arms of Béarn—two cows on a field *Or*—cut thereon.

"Perhaps," I said to myself, "I shall need it some day." With this I slipped it on my finger, and went back.

CHAPTER III

MY PYRAMID OF CARDS COMES DOWN

I may say at once that in this chronicle it often befalls that I have to describe the actions and deal with the motives of others. In doing this I have given no rein to idle fancy, but have strictly followed what those who played a part in my life have told me.

To show that my authorities in this respect are beyond reproach I have but to mention the names of my friends—Blaise Ste. Marie de Lorgnac, now, as all know, the Maréchal Duc de Lorgnac; and Nicholas d'Ayen, Sieur de Besme, of the Quercy, who acted so strange a part in his day under the name of Le Brusquet. Each of these is prepared on his faith, as knight and gentleman, to support my words, either on foot or on horseback, with sword or with lance, and in this respect I too am ready to cross a blade, or run a course; and so, God defend the Truth!

If further proof is needed I beg leave to refer to the confession of the Italian, Torquato Trotto, made at his expiation, which gives many and curious details, especially of what happened in Le Jaquemart, and which is registered in the archives of the Parliament of Paris, where all who list may see it. There is yet one other whom I could name, one who is ever at my side, and who for good or for ill has taken me as part of her life; but for the present the names I have cited are sufficient, and I shall say no more on the subject.

On returning to my apartment after leaving Vendôme and Le Brusquet I found old Camus at the door awaiting me. He entered with me, saying:

"I watched it all from the window. Hey! but it was well done!"

I pretended to take no notice of this remark, and pressed some refreshment upon him; but the old rascal refused, and sat with his knee between his hands, rocking himself backwards and forwards. He went on to make some roundabout inquiries as to who the persons were to whose assistance I had gone, but I told him plainly that I did not desire to discuss the subject.

Becoming nettled at this, he said: "Ho! ho! and so you do not trust me, Monsieur Broussel! Well, I tell you I know at any rate who it is that lies dead out there, for I have been to see, and it will not take long for me to find out the rest."

"Go and find out, then!" I said somewhat roughly, being annoyed in my turn.

At which he rose in a white heat. "That I will," he said; "and you will find that the hand of Madame Diane, soft as it is, can grip hard—hard, mind you, Monsieur Broussel!"

With this he flung out; and so we, who but an hour or two ago were in friendly converse, parted in anger, and with stormy words.

In a manner I was not sorry for this, for in my heart I always felt a warning against him, and there was something so ominous, so evil, in his face as he left that I felt assured he would strike a felon blow at the first opportunity.

The more I reflected on what had happened, and on Camus' threat in connection with Diane de Poitiers, the more I began to see a crop of dangers ahead of me. I began to think it well to retire to some other city. In this I was influenced by the fact that, if there were trouble about the dead man and I were involved in it, as after Camus' words I felt I should certainly be, it was hardly possible that I could escape being recognised.

The sentence against me, cruel and unjust as it was, stood still, and, once I was discovered, it would be put into force for certain.

Like a prudent general, I felt I must beat a retreat. The bulk of my money was in trustworthy hands in Antwerp, but in my oak chest were a hundred gold crowns of the sun—a great stand-by and help in the hour of trouble.

There was nothing for it but to go, and, summoning Pierrebon, I told him of my intention. We set to work to pack a valise at once. This being done, we waited for the small hours.

It was about four in the morning that I decided to move, and taking a last look at the place where I had lived so long in peace I went out into the street, followed by Pierrebon bearing the valise. I had to leave everything behind except the barest necessities and my money, and to trust the well-being of my goods to Fortune. The jade was unkind enough to forget me in this matter, which put me to heavy loss.

It was, of course, impossible to leave Paris at this hour, as the gates would be shut; but behind the Abbey of St. Germain de Pres was a little hostel called the Chapeau Rouge, where I knew I could find shelter until I could procure a couple of horses and be off.

At four in the morning night-hawks are abed, and even the convicts had ceased working on the Gloriette. The moon had gone, and it was dark now—the darkness that precedes the dawn.

We met not a soul as we stumbled along, and coming out at length to the Vallée de Misère we passed the Gloriette, and kept to our right along the river face, until almost opposite the Church of St. Germain l'Auxerrois. Here moored to the bank were a number of boats, the boatmen sleeping within them. Groping about in the darkness—such noises as we made being fortunately drowned by the continual lap, lap of the water against the sides of the boat, and their creaking and groaning as they rubbed against each other—we at length found a small empty boat tied to a large one. Favoured by darkness, we loosened the knot, and, taking to the oars, crossed the river without being perceived by a soul.

Once on the opposite bank we made the boat fast to some piles of wood near the water's edge, and leaving a piece of silver for the boatman, which I trust he found, we took the road to the Abbey of St. Germain. Near here we found a retreat in the scaffolding of a house that was being repaired. There we stayed until it was light, and about six in the morning arrived at the inn, as though we were early travellers who had entered Paris on the opening of the Porte St. Germain. In this manner, favoured by luck, and by the exercise of caution, I bade farewell to the Rue de Lavandières, and gave Camus the slip, without leaving any trace behind me.

The Chapeau Rouge was an inn mostly frequented by students, and in my younger days I knew it well, though, to be sure, more than a dozen years had passed since I last entered it. It was surrounded by a large garden, enclosed by a high wall, and I could have chosen no better place for my purpose, which was to lie close during the day, and, as soon as horses were procured, to depart at dusk, about the hour of the shutting of the gates.

As it happened, on this day there was scarce a soul at the inn, all the usual customers having been drawn away to witness the execution of a Portuguese named Gomez, who had been found guilty of sorcery, witchcraft, and other crimes, and was to suffer in expiation on the Place Maubert.

This ill wind, however, blew fair for me, as it left me undisturbed; and sending Pierrebon to purchase or hire horses I awaited his return.

It was well on in the afternoon, and the sun being hot I was resting in the shade of the garden wall,

when from within a summer-house all covered with roses, that stood near to me, I heard a lute string touched by a master-hand, and a man's voice, full and clear, began to sing "The Three Cavaliers." With a rush a hundred recollections of the past came back to me, and I felt myself once more a heedless boy, sitting on that very same seat where the singer was now, and singing the same song. I rose and went forward, and to my surprise saw it was Le Brusquet, lute in hand, and by his side there sat a small brown ape, a collar of gold round his neck.

I listened till the last of the song, and was about to turn away; but, the ape running out of the summer-house at the time, the jester put his head through the entrance, with a "Back! Pompon! back!" and caught sight of me.

In a moment he was by my side, and, willy-nilly, forced me into the summer-house.

"The very man I wanted," he said. "I came here to think of you. I always come here when in doubt or trouble—and here you are—dropped from the clouds." He poured out some wine for me, and when we had drank a health together he asked me:

"*Eh bien*, monsieur, tell me how you came here; tell me all, for I am a friend."

It was impossible not to see this, and in a few words I told him. He listened gravely the while, stroking his ape's head.

When I had done he spoke. "I too have something to tell you. There is an outcry about Madame Diane's Italian—the first time an outcry has been made about any such scum. This morning there was a scene at the *petit couvert*. I was there. The short of it is that the King, my gossip, sided with his mistress as against Vendôme. Words ran so high that the Duke was ordered to leave Paris, which he did at once."

I looked at the ring on my finger, and Le Brusquet saw the look.

"I fear," he said, "that little talisman has lost its power for the present; but, to go on, I had other business in the morning which I could not avoid. Towards eleven o'clock I hastened to the Rue des Lavandières to return your sword and to warn you. To my relief you were not there. Your hermit's paradise is gone, and an angel, in the form of one of M. Morin's guards, is at the door. Instead of a flaming sword he carries an arquebus——"

"It is quick work," I cut in; "and they have seized everything, I suppose?"

"Yes; everything. And your ostensible accuser and witness against you is one Camus, a glove-maker. He laid an information against you at sunrise. He was with Valentinois an hour later. Diane rises with the dawn, you know; and he is her glove-maker."

"So he has struck hard, and struck quickly."

"Yes; there is very little glove about his action. And more, Diane seems bent upon avenging the death of her Italian. But, monsieur, what is your next move?"

I explained my intention, and how I proposed to quit Paris; whereat he shook his head.

"It will not do," he said; "the gates are watched. So far you have beaten them, but there you will fail, and here detection is certain."

"I must risk something."

"As little as possible." And after a pause: "What do you say to the Louvre?"

"The Louvre!—the lion's den!"

"The safest place on earth. See here, Monsieur Broussel. I owe you my life; give me a chance to make some return. Can you trust me enough to put yourself in my hands? I will not fail you. It is not Le Brusquet the King's jester, but Nicholas d'Ayen, Sieur de Besme, of the Quercy, who pledges his word."

We stared each other in the face, and my good genius came to my elbow.

"Yes," I said.

In short, it was arranged that I should meet him towards sunset at the entrance to the tennis court, east of the Louvre. There was some difficulty about Pierrebon and the horses; but in this Le Brusquet again came to my aid, and it was settled that Pierrebon should find shelter in a house in the Rue Tire

Boudin, which belonged to Monsieur Blaise de Lorgnac, Seigneur of Malezieux, and lieutenant of the Queen's guard, the same being a tried and true friend of my new-found benefactor.

Pierrebon at this moment returning, I hailed him. He had been unsuccessful in his attempt to obtain horses such as we needed, but hoped to do so the next day; and shortly after Le Brusquet departed, taking Pierrebon with him, and my valise.

"Fast bind, safe find," he said as he pointed at Pierrebon; and then, calling to his ape, went off.

Towards the appointed time I found myself close to the parvis of St. Germain l'Auxerrois. For some reason or other there was a greater crowd than usual, and I was compelled to halt for a moment. Just at this moment a body of eight or ten horsemen came trotting rapidly towards the Châtelet. Their leader all but rode over a child, and would certainly have done so had I not made a long arm and pushed it aside. There was no doubt of it, the leading horseman was my brother Simon, the Vidame d'Orrain, and I thanked my good star that, owing to the dusk, the bustle, and the pace he was going at, he did not recognise me. Something, however, struck him, for twice he turned back to look. I did not wait for a third glance, and, mixing with the crowd, was lost to view.

At the gate of the tennis court I met Le Brusquet, and, passing through a wicket, we entered the precincts of the Louvre.

CHAPTER IV

THE QUEEN'S MIRACLE

Where the eastern wing of the Louvre rose high above the Rue St. Thomas lay the apartments of Le Brusquet, at the end of a labyrinth of passages and galleries. Having brought me here my friend left me, with a warning not to stir forth until his return—a piece of advice I was quite prepared to follow. Once alone I stepped out into a small, overhanging balcony, that clung like a beehive to the leprous grey of the wall, and, sitting well under cover of the battlements, looked around. Far below me was a walled courtyard, in which an archer of M. de Lorges' guard paced steadily backwards and forwards. Beyond this lay the narrow Rue St. Thomas du Louvre, its many-storeyed houses crowding one above the other, as if struggling for light and air. Here were the spires of St. Thomas du Louvre, the church raised to the martyr of Canterbury, and St. Nicaise. There lay the Quinze Vingts. To the right stood the Campanile of St. Germain l'Auxerrois, all empurpled in the afterglow of the sunset. Still farther, where the mouth of the street opened out, was a glimpse of the Seine; and with a turn of my head I could see, huge and vast, the enormous keep of the Louvre, built by Philip Augustus, and evilly known as the Philippine. But although my eyes, straining through the twilight, rested on these and more, my thoughts were far away. At a puff my pyramid of cards, the little life I had built up for myself, had come down, and all my labour and toil were in vain.

I am not of those who give way to despair; but the blue devils attack the best hearted at times, and for once I felt the hopelessness of my position, and began to think it useless to struggle further. Perhaps, after all, it would be better to accept defeat and surrender myself. Better that than being hunted like a hare, as I was. And then my thoughts were cut short. Something soft and furry sprang into my lap. It was Pompon, Le Brusquet's ape, and he looked into my face with soft, melancholy eyes.

"Poor little beast!"—and I stroked him. "You at least build no pyramids of cards."

"*Tudieu*!" said a voice, "that is true, but for pulling them down he has no equal." And Le Brusquet appeared at the window, which opened out upon the balcony.

I rose and came in. Le Brusquet stepped back and seated himself on a table, and then for the first time I noticed a third person in the room—a tall, soldierly man, with the collar of The Order at his neck. With a wave of his hand Le Brusquet presented me to the stranger, whom I found was M. de Lorgnac, the lieutenant of the Queen's guard—he in whose house Pierrebon had obtained shelter.

I thanked him for the kindness he had shown in this, to one so utterly unknown as I was to him; but he stayed me with a smile, saying that in this or any other matter I could command him, as the friend of Le Brusquet, and went on to pay me a handsome compliment in regard to the affair of the previous night.

"An affair that is like to place me on the road to Montfauçon," I said a little bitterly.

"On the contrary," replied De Lorgnac, "rather, perhaps, on the road to better things."

"Hearken not unto him!" said Le Brusquet; "he is for ever looking out for recruits for his guard. Blaise de Lorgnac is as insatiable a stirrer of the porridge of the times as I; only I use a longer ladle, as beseems a person of my wisdom. As for you, *mon ami* Blaise,—you throw your lures in vain! Know you that Monsieur Broussel is a philosopher, who has found contentment in—fifty écus a year, did you not say, monsieur?" And, reaching for his lute, he ran his fingers over the strings and began to sing:

"Mes amis, la terre est à moi.
J'ai de quoi
Vivre en roi
Si l'éclat me tente.
Les honneurs me sont devolus
J'ai cinquante écus,
J'ai cinquante écus,
J'ai cinquante écus de."

"*Mille tonnerres*! Stop! Do you want to bring half the Louvre here to listen?" And De Lorgnac placed his hand over the singer's mouth, and took the lute from him.

"Enough!" said Le Brusquet; "you have banished the inspiration. I sing no more. And as for you, Monsieur Blaise, take yourself off with that long sword of yours. It frightens the ape, and I have that to say which is for M. Broussel's ear alone."

"*Au revoir*!" said Lorgnac, but as he reached the door he turned to me.

"Your Pierrebon is safe and sound in the Rue Tire Boudin. He has received orders not to stir forth. In the matter of the horses—you must let that be my care." And without waiting for reply he went away.

"I know not how to thank M. de Lorgnac or you——" I began, but Le Brusquet cut in:

"As yet the thanks are due from me, and Lorgnac is helping me to pay my debts. And now listen, *mon ami*. One half the world consists of fools who give advice, and the other half of idiots who refuse to benefit by it; let me for once see an exception to the rule."

"I hardly follow you."

"I will explain. Between us there is this difference. In the search for happiness that every man makes I remained in the world, and you left it and turned philosopher. The result is that I am fairly satisfied with life, whereas you are sick of it in your heart. Yet, until this disaster came to you, you tried to play the happy man with your lute, your 'Plutarch's Lives,' and your hermit's cell of a house. Is it not so?"

I made no answer, and he continued:

"Last night, for some reason of your own—perhaps because you still clung to your belief in your own way of life—you refused a chance; that chance has gone; but another is left, and it remains for you to take it or not."

"What is left?"

"What is left is this. Last night you refused the sauce of a prince of the blood; to-day will you refuse the soup of a Queen?"

"Of a Queen!"

"Yes; of the Queen of France. In brief, the Queen wants a reliable person to do something for her. It must be someone unknown to the Court. Will you undertake the business or not? It will, at any rate, enable you to leave Paris in safety, in broad day if you will, though out of Paris you may have to look to your skin."

Like an old war-horse I scented the battle, and my blood flamed through me. Le Brusquet was right. With cunning knowledge he had pulled at my heart-strings, and laid bare my secret to myself. Win or lose, I now knew that I had to come back to the world; and it should be now. I rose to my feet.

"I accept," I said, "whatever is offered me."

"I thought you would," he answered; "and I may tell you that De Lorgnac knows of this. At first it was he who was to have undertaken the affair; but he is too well known, and the Queen would have none of him. He it was who suggested your name to me; and," he went on, with a smile, "it was all prearranged that he should leave us together, so that I might open the matter to you."

"But the Queen! Perhaps——"

"There is no perhaps about it. The Queen asked De Lorgnac to find her an agent, and he has named you."

"I was going to say that if the Queen finds I am bourgeois——"

"We can leave the matter of a coat-of-arms to the Queen." And he laughed as he continued: "Perhaps that may come to the plain Monsieur Broussel—and—it has just gone compline, and we, or rather you, must see the Queen."

"I am ready," I said.

"Then let us be away! Everything has gone well. The King has left for Fontainebleau to hunt the boar. He started this afternoon; Madame Diane is with him. The royal children are at St. Germain-en-Laye, and but for its guards the Louvre is deserted; there is no one here but the Queen. Come, then!"

With a whistle to the ape, which hopped along in front of us, he opened the door and passed out, I following on his heels. Outside, we found ourselves in a maze of twisting passages, along which my guide went with quick, light steps. Finally, we turned into an arched doorway, and, ascending a stair, stood on the roof of one of the galleries connecting the wings of the Louvre with the great keep.

The twilight was dead, but the moon was rising in a clear, cloudless sky. By her light we walked along the lonely battlements until we reached a flight of steps, upon which the shadow of the Philippine fell darkly. Arrived at the head of the steps we gained an embattled balcony, giving access, by means of a lancet arch, into the keep. Through this we passed, and entered a long, low corridor. So low, indeed, that by raising the baton he carried in his hand Le Brusquet, though not a tall man, could easily reach the joints of the groined roof. Here we stood for a space, where a banner of moonlight lay on the floor—the ape a dark spot in its whiteness. All was silent as the grave. Once there was a startling rush of wings as a homing-pigeon flew past the open arch and hissed off into the night. All was in semi-gloom, except where the moon lit the floor at our feet, and where, at intervals, a dim yellow halo marked the spot where a feeble lamp was burning in a niche set far back in the huge walls.

"And this leads to the Queen's apartment," whispered Le Brusquet, with a shrug of his shoulders, as he led the way along the gallery, which curved with the shape of the keep. On rounding the curve it came to an abrupt ending. Here a lamp swung by a chain from the roof, and by its light we dimly saw before us a large door, firmly closed, and seeming to bar all further progress. Near the door a man was seated in an alcove in the wall, his knees almost up to his chin, his drawn sword in his hand. He swung round on to his feet as we came up. It was De Lorgnac.

"The Queen awaits you," he said, without further greeting, and tapped twice at the door. It was opened at once, and both Le Brusquet and myself were about to step in when De Lorgnac laid his hand on the former's arm.

"M. Broussel alone," he said, drawing Le Brusquet back, and I passed through the door.

I found myself in a small ante-chamber; but there was not a soul within. I stood for a moment irresolute, when the door behind me opened once again, and I heard De Lorgnac's voice.

"Onwards! Through the curtains ahead of you."

This I did, and entered a large room, richly furnished. The light, bright though soft, of the tall candles burning in grotesque holders fell on the curtains of violet velvet, starred with the golden lilies of France, on the rare tapestry, that covered the walls, on embroidered cushions and quaint carvings. There were flowers in abundance everywhere; but their scent was killed by something that burned in a cup held by a little bronze Ganymede, the odour of which filled the room with a sweet but heavy scent. This room, like the other, was likewise empty, and after glancing round twice to make sure, I took my stand near a table, upon which there were some writing materials and a pair of richly embroidered gloves. The sight of the gloves brought old Camus back to my mind, and I was about to take one up, to look at the workmanship, when I heard a footfall; the curtains were set aside, and a woman stood before me.

It was Catherine de Medicis herself. It was years since I had seen her, then a young girl; but now, though still young, she was in the bloom of ripened womanhood. People said that, with all her accomplishments, she lacked courage, and was dull and stupid. As my glance rested on the pale features, on the somewhat sullen mouth, and on the dark, expressionless eyes before me, I began to think they were right. To-day, however, I was also to begin learning a new lesson. Others have since learned it too, and paid for the learning as lessons have never been paid for before or after. She let fall the curtain she held as I sank on one knee before her and extended me a shapely hand. As I touched it with my lips she said in her deep-toned voice:

"M. Broussel, arise!"

I did so, and, moving towards the chair near the table, she sat down, and began toying with one of the gloves, her eyes not meeting my look, but surveying me with a swift sidelong glance.

"*Eh bien*!" she said, "you are that M. Broussel who came so opportunely to the rescue of my cousin of Vendôme."

I bowed, and with another of her swift glances she asked:

"And you are to be trusted?"

"Your Majesty," I said, "I have but my word to offer for this—I have none who will add his pledge to mine."

"No one? Are you sure?"

"Your Majesty, it is as I have said."

A faint smile parted her lips, and she looked up at me suddenly and quickly, her eyes as alive with intelligence as they had appeared dull and lifeless before.

"Well, monsieur, before I trust you," and she struck the glove she held in her hand on the table, "it is necessary for me to tell you something. Listen. Many years ago—I was new to France then—a young gentleman of the best blood of Burgundy came to Paris, and entered at the College of Cambrai. Well, he did what none other of his time did, nor has any of his order done the like since. He took the three courses—took them brilliantly. You follow me?"

"I am all attention, madame." My voice was as cold and measured as hers, but in my heart I began to wonder if I would leave the room for a journey to Montfauçon, with a halt by the way at the Châtelet.

"But," she continued, "this man was not a mere bookworm nor a pedant, though Le Brun, whose voice was the voice of the Sorbonne then, prophesied a red hat for him. The red hat never came, nor did a marshal's baton, though Bevilacqua himself foretold the latter one day, as he brushed away a chalk mark just over the heart, where this young man's foil had touched him. Bevilacqua, mind you—the best sword in Europe!"

I made as if about to speak. I was about to ask her bluntly what was to be the end of this, but with a wave of her hand she stayed me.

"Permit me to continue, monsieur! This man, or boy as he was then, was true metal all through, but he was cursed with an open heart and wealth. Let us say that the course of Philosophy unsettled his mind, that the two campaigns in Italy brought but withered laurels. Let it be what you will, but back he came to Paris; and because his blood was warm, his spirits high, and his heart full of vanity and vain imaginings, the red wine was poured forth, the dice rattled, fair women smiled, and the gold crowns went. It was the old, old story; but the pity of it, monsieur, was that it was such pure good steel that was fretting thus to rust! Was it not?"

She stopped, and looked at me again with her wonderful, searching eyes, and I braced myself, as one who was about to receive a death-blow.

"At last the end came. This brave, gallant—fool—yes, that is the word—quarrelled with his best friend over a lady of the Marais—of the Marais, mind you! This friend wanted to save him from himself. The result was that those two, who had been like brothers, met each other sword in hand under the lee of the Louvre, and one—it was not the fool—fell."

The words seemed to thunder in my ears. By some effort, I knew not how, I managed to restrain myself, and her cold, passionless voice went on:

"After that came ruin—ruin utter and hopeless. And he who might have been anything died like a dog

of the streets."

Something like a gasp of relief broke from me; but the Medicis had not done yet. She rose swiftly, and for one brief second let her white hand, glittering with rings, rest on my shoulder. It was for a moment only, and then she let fall her hand, with a smile on her face.

"They say, monsieur, that the age of miracles is past. Caraffa the Legate smiles if you mention them. But I—I believe, for I know. The dead have come back before. Why not again, Bertrand d'Orrain? Would you live again, and pledge your faith for that of the Bourgeois Broussel?"

CHAPTER V

THE PORTE ST. MICHEL

Half-an-hour later, when I quitted the presence of the Queen, it was as one to whom the world was opening afresh, and in that brief interval I had felt and begun to understand the subtle intellect of Catherine, of the existence of which few as yet were aware.

In regard to the mission with which I was entrusted I am pledged to preserve silence. The people concerned in it are dead, and when I follow them the secret will go with me. Let it suffice for me to say that my task was such that a man of honour could accept, and that if I failed the preservation of my skin was my own affair, for help I would get from none. Hidden in the inner pocket of my vest was a dispatch to Montluc, the King's lieutenant in the South. In my hand I openly bore a letter, sealed with the *palle* of the Medici, and addressed in the Queen's own writing to the King. It was to be the means of my freeing the gates of Paris if difficulty arose, and how it did so I shall presently show.

I found my friends awaiting me, and Le Brusquet asked:

"Well, have you come forth a made man?"

"Monsieur, I will answer you that," I said with assumed gravity, "if you will tell me who betrayed me to the Queen."

I looked from one to the other, and they both laughed.

"Behold the traitor, then!" And Le Brusquet pointed with his finger at me.

"I?"

"Yes, you!—as if you had called it from the housetops. *Mon ami*, did ever hear of a bourgeois handling sword as you, or bearing arms *un coq d'or griffe de sable, en champ d'azur*? Those arms are on your wine-cups—if they exist still—they are on the hilt of the sword you lent me."

"*Morbleu*!"

"But that is not all. In the gay, red days, when Lorgnac here and I had all the world before us, we were of the College of Cambrai. It is true we entered as you left; but we knew you, and when all Paris was full of your name Lorgnac and I, and others whom you knew not, aped the fall of your cloak, the droop of your plume, the tilt of your sword. Those days are gone, and until last night you, I thought, were gone with them."

"Monsieur!"

"Listen! There is more yet. I but told the Queen of the arms you bore. She recognised them at once."

"That is not strange; the Vidame d'Orrain is in Paris!"

"True! But she remembered your history—every detail of it. It was long ago, and many things have happened, and the Seine there has rolled much water under its bridges since then, but she had forgotten nothing. My friend, they who say the Medicis ever forgets are fools—blind in their folly. And so, for the sake of last night, and a little for the days that have gone, we will see pretty things yet, God willing! Eh, De Lorgnac?"

"I for one look forward to the day when a brave man will come to his own," replied the other, and

their kindness touched me to the quick.

I am not one gifted with the power of speech—indeed, I hold that the greater the tongue the smaller the heart—but I found words to thank these gallant gentlemen, and De Lorgnac said:

"Monsieur, it is enough thanks to hold us in your esteem, and we will say no more about it. I have, however, some information that may be useful. Your brother the Vidame left Paris this evening for the South, it is said. Thus one danger is at any rate removed from your path."

It was something to know that Simon was gone. I thanked De Lorgnac, and added:

"Now, messieurs, for my news. I know not if I have come forth from that chamber"—and I pointed behind me—"a made man or not. This much I know, I am the bearer of a letter, the delivery of which must not be delayed, and I must leave Paris with the dawn, or before—horse or no horse."

"The horses I said were my care," De Lorgnac said. And then turning to Le Brusquet: "Await me on the steps that lead to the eastern gallery; I am relieved in less than an hour. We will then take monsieur here to my house, where there are two horses in the stables at his disposal, and the rest concerns himself."

Le Brusquet and I went back as we came, his constant companion, the ape, with us. Passing through the open arch I have already mentioned we halted on the steps that lead from the balcony to the eastern wing, and here we awaited De Lorgnac.

For a little there was a silence. Perhaps we were both impressed by the scene. In front lay the river, a band of silver, with here and there the twinkling, swaying lights of a crossing boat upon it. All around was the great city, and from the distance there came a murmuring hum of voices, like waves lapping upon a far-off shore. Around us, towering above and ringing us in with its immense strength, rose the Louvre, its vast outlines looking, if possible, larger and more gigantic in the enchanted light.

After a space Le Brusquet began to speak of the Vidame, my brother, and so we passed the time in converse until De Lorgnac came. He bade us haste if we wished to quit the Louvre ere the pontlevis were raised, and hurrying after him we made our way to the southern gate, the only one open. As we went onwards the desolation that marked the entrance to the Queen's apartments was no longer visible. Ever and again we were stopped and challenged by sentries.

"*Hein*!" exclaimed Le Brusquet, "the Scots archers keep good ward."

"Quick! Hurry!" was De Lorgnac's answer. "There goes the first signal for closing the gates!"

And as he spoke a clarion rang out shrilly. We had reached the outer court by this, and were hurrying for the bridge that led to the pontlevis when we saw a tall man, his cuirass glittering like silver in the moonlight, step out of the shadow and signal to a trumpeter, who stood at his side.

"A moment, De Lorges. Stay!" And Lorgnac ran up to him. "Faith! but your time is punctual."

Montgomery de Lorges laughed as he laid a restraining hand on his trumpeter. "I have more than half a mind to give the signal," he said. "There is a rare flagon of Arbois in my apartment, and you would have been forced to share it. Come, change your mind and stay."

"Thanks; but I cannot. We are bound to my house, where you are very welcome if you care to come."

"And leave my post? No, no!"

"Au revoir, then."

"Au revoir."

And we passed over the bridge. Almost had we freed it when the trumpet sounded again, and with a rattling of chains the huge pontlevis rose.

"Faith! 'twas a narrow thing. Had we been but a minute later the Scot would have barred all egress." And Le Brusquet looked back at the gate through which we had passed. It lay on the other side of the pontlevis—the fosse between us—and was of angular shape, surmounted by a statue of Charles V. of France, and, as De Lorgnac said, was already doomed to destruction to make way for the improvements contemplated by the King.

It was midnight now, and the streets were almost deserted, though here and there were groups of people collected together for mutual protection. As time was short we decided to take the Rue St. Thomas du Louvre despite its ill-paved and noisome condition. Passing the fountain near the Marché

des Innocents we turned up by the St. Eustache into the Tiquetonne, and thence Rue Tire Boudin was but a short step. I need not say with what joy the good Pierrebon received me, and after a light supper—in which, I fear, I did but scant justice to De Lorgnac's Joué—I determined to snatch an hour or so of rest before starting. Before doing so, however, Lorgnac took me to see the horses. They looked what he said they were—good, stout roadsters. I asked him his price, but, as I expected from one of his generous nature, he offered them to me as a gift. This I was determined not to accept, and finally, after much persuasion, he took forty crowns of the sun for the two. This was barely their worth, but nothing would induce him to accept a denier more.

The valise I had packed contained the requisites for a journey, and having changed my attire I decided to take such rest as I could get in a chair until it was time to start. I seemed to have barely closed my eyes when I was awakened again by the touch of a hand on my shoulder. It was Le Brusquet.

"*Eh bien*," he said, "but you sleep like an honest man! It has gone three. The horses are ready, and De Lorgnac and Pierrebon await you below. Come!"

So saying he led the way down. We had to go to the stables, and in the yard were the two horses ready saddled. Lorgnac was also there, and to my surprise I saw that he too was mounted.

"I will see you to the gates," he explained as he caressed his horse, a magnificent grey charger.

"And as for me," said Le Brusquet, "I will wish you good fortune here, and a safe return, and the sword you lent me is in secure keeping."

And so we rode out in the grey darkness of the morning through the solitary streets, where there was never a sign of life except an occasional dog, which—homeless and friendless—stared wistfully after us as we went past. I had decided to leave Paris by the Porte St. Michel, and this all the more as the captain of the gate—the Vicomte de Créquy—was a near relative of De Lorgnac, and the passage through might, perhaps, be made easier on this score. It was still dark as we trotted down the Rue de la Harpe under the shadow of the Sorbonne, having passed the Pont au Change and the Pont St. Michel without difficulty, although we expected some check there.

On our coming up to the Porte St. Michel the guard challenged us, threatening to fire with his arquebus if we did not halt. This we were compelled to do, and a parley ensued. The result was that the under-officer of the guard came forth, with two or three of his men, and allowed us to approach.

On our coming up, and on my explaining that I desired to have the gates opened, he swore as he surveyed us with the aid of a lantern that he swung in our faces.

"*Mordieu*!" he said, with a rough southern accent—and a grim old soldier he was—"are you madmen, or have you dropped from the clouds, not to know that the gates are shut and will not be opened till sunrise?"

"That may be, monsieur," I replied; "but I have a letter to the King—to the King, mind you—which he must get ere he starts for the hunt."

"*He*!" he said doubtfully. "A letter to the King! You will have to take it on wings, then. But from whom is this letter?" he added suspiciously.

"That, monsieur, does not concern you. The fact remains that I have this letter, and it is you who will have to answer for its late delivery, not I."

"Then let me see it."

I pulled out the letter and showed it to him, without, however, letting it pass from my hands. He cast the light of the lantern on it, and looked this way and that at the seals and at the address, muttering to himself the while.

"Devil take me! But I never could read. Here! Can any one of you read this?" And he turned to his men, but they one and all shook their heads.

"I will read it for you if you like," said De Lorgnac as he pushed his horse forwards.

"You!"

"Yes. I am Monsieur de Lorgnac, the lieutenant of the Queen's guard."

The old soldier made a mock bow. "And I," he said, "am Agrippa Pavanes, without a *De*, lieutenant of the Gate of St. Michel; and your friend there is, I suppose, Monsieur *de* Croquemort, lieutenant of Trouands. And, as we all know each other now, I tell you plainly you must hold patience by the tail as

best you may until the gates are opened. Letter or no letter, I will not let you through."

And so saying he would have turned away, but Lorgnac said quietly:

"You will be good enough, monsieur, to inform Monsieur de Créquy that I am here and desire to see him at once."

Agrippa Pavanes swung round and faced us, his hand on his sword-hilt.

"I am in charge of this gate at present, and I will act as I think best. I may not be able to read or write, but if you do not be off I will make a full stop on you with the point of my sword," he snarled.

Affairs were getting serious. Nor do I know what might have happened, but at this juncture a head appeared at a window in one of the flanking towers of the gate, and an angry and a sleepy voice asked what was the matter below.

"It is I, Créquy," began De Lorgnac, and the other exclaimed:

"You! What in the—saints' name—brings you here, De Lorgnac, at this hour of the night, or rather morning? Is it not enough that I am banished here to keep watch over this infernal gate? And now you ——"

"Come, Créquy; this is a matter of urgency. There is a letter here from the Queen which must reach the King before the *petit couvert*, and your lieutenant will not let the messenger pass through the gates."

"He is quite right! But a letter from the Queen, did you say?"

"Yes; and to the King in person. Come down, and see for yourself."

"Not I; I am in my shirt, and my health is delicate. Send up the letter. Pavanes, do me the favour to bring it up."

I handed the letter to Agrippa, who took it up, with very much the surly air of a dog walking away with a bone. A moment after he too appeared at the window with his light, and Créquy examined the letter and the seals.

"'Tis right, Pavanes," we heard him say; "'tis the Queen's own hand and seal. Let the messenger through." And leaning out of the window he repeated the same to us.

De Lorgnac thanked him, regretting, at the same time, the necessity he had of arousing him; and Créquy swore back, in mock tones of injury, that he would have a special cell built for disturbers of his rest, and, wishing us the day, retired abruptly.

Agrippa carried out his orders with an ill grace, and made no answer to my thanks; so, bidding farewell to De Lorgnac, I put spurs to my horse, and, followed by Pierrebon, rode out of Paris.

CHAPTER VI

SIMON AND I MEET AGAIN

The stars were yet shining as we skirted the heights of Charenton, but it was day when we saw Villaneuve St. Georges on its wooded hill. Here, where the Yères wound between banks covered with willows and poplars, I first drew rein, and taking the King's letter from my pocket tore it into a hundred fragments. Some I let drift down the stream, and the remainder I scattered to the winds. I may say at once that this was in accordance with the Queen's instructions. The letter was merely intended to enable me to free the gates, and after that it was to be destroyed. It had served its purpose, and now went its way. Needless to add, I had no intention to touch at Fontainebleau or disturb the *petit couvert* of the King. At Melun, therefore, where horse and man were refreshed, I crossed the bridge, and took the road to Etampes. Half way, where the little town of Alais lies on the Essonne, I turned due south, and entered the Orleannois by Malesherbes.

There was many a league yet between me and Montluc, and though I had to ride hard I had yet to husband the horses, lest they should break down, or in case of emergency.

By avoiding the main roads and large towns and keeping to by-paths I lessened the chance of danger as much as possible. At Candes, which lies at the junction of the Loire and the Vienne, I heard that the Guidon of Montpensier was hard at hand, and, knowing well the reputation of this person, I bade Pierrebon saddle up, and we started without a meal, though we had ridden far and fast. In a short time we entered the forest of Fontevrault, and my spirits rose high at the thought that in a brief space I would be in Poitiers, where Montluc lay, and my mission accomplished.

So far so good; but towards midday I began to feel the need of rest, and splashing across a ford of the Negron I called a halt on the opposite bank and looked around me; whilst Pierrebon, who was a little stiff, jumped from his hackney, and began to mop his brow and stretch his legs.

We were in the heart of the forest, and to the north, south, east, and west of us there was nothing but trees and dense underwood, with here and there a long, shimmering glade or an open space, through which a small streamlet hummed, its banks gay with flowers.

But I confess that at the moment I had no eyes for the scene—for the yellow mary-buds, the blue of the wild hyacinth, or the white stars of the wind-flowers; for leaf and shade, and all the enchantment of the woodland. In brief, I was famished, and would have given a gold Henri to have seen a signboard swinging in the air. And, besides, it was dawning upon me that somehow we had missed the track.

"Pierrebon," I said, "do you know how far it is to Marçay?"

Pierrebon shook his head dolefully, saying as he did so that he did not even know where we were.

"Then, my friend, we are lost in Fontevrault Forest."

Pierrebon made no answer to this, but mounted his hackney. And, touching my nag with the spur, we cantered along a lean glade, trusting that the track which ran along it would hap to be the right one. Now and again as we sped onwards a startled deer would break cover and rush through brake and bramble, and once an evil-tempered old boar, feeding under an older oak, glared savagely at us as we passed, grinding his tusks in senseless rage till the foam flecked his brindled sides.

We were in the deeps of the forest now, and, high noon as it was, it was grey as twilight. Here, as we eased up for a moment, a dog-wolf crossed our path, and with snarling lip and shining fangs slunk into the thorn. Oh, for a leash of hounds now! But on we went, catching a glimpse of a grim head peering after us through the thorn—a head with blazing, angry eyes, that almost seemed to speak. It was lucky it was not winter-tide, or that gentleman there would not be alone, but, with a hundred or so of his fellows, would have made rare sport with us, according to his lights.

Still we went on through the endless woods, which closed in deeper and deeper around us, until at last the track died utterly away in the tanglewood, and the horses began to give sign that they were beaten.

I saw that it was necessary to rest the beasts, and as I came to this conclusion we came upon a little natural clearing, where, around a clump of enormous elms, the turf was green as emerald and spangled with a hundred flowers. Immediately behind the trees the ground rose, forming a low hill covered with wild juniper and white thorn, and a little stream bustled by it, whilst from the leafy shades above the voices of many birds warbled sweet and low.

There was no need to tighten rein. The horses seemed to know of their own accord that they were to stop, and five minutes later they were cropping the rich forage; whilst I, stretched on the turf, my back against a tree, was resting with a sense of repose that would have been delicious except for the pangs of hunger gnawing at me in a manner that would take no denial.

"*Hein*," I grumbled to myself, "nothing to eat but grass! If I were the good King Nebuchadnezzar, now, I might do very well; but as it is——" And then I heard a chuckle, and saw Pierrebon fumbling with the valise. He cast a sly look at me, his blue eyes twinkling.

"Monsieur is hungry?"

"Famished."

"And thirsty?"

"Well, I have drank a little"—and I glanced at the streamlet—"but a cup of d'Arbois now, or even some white Rochecorbon, would be nectar. Confound my stupidity at losing the way! We should have been at Marçay hours ago; but—what the devil——"

In effect I might well have exclaimed, for Pierrebon had opened the valise and taken therefrom a

bulging wallet; and as I watched him with astonished eyes he rapidly unpacked it, pulling forth a cold chicken, some Mayence ham, a loaf of bread, and a bottle of wine, which last he put down with a little flourish, saying as he did so: "'Tis red Joué, monsieur. Not so good as d'Arbois, nor so bad as Rochecorbon."

But I had already attacked the fowl, and answered, with my mouth full:

"Pierrebon, this is the best service you have ever rendered. Open the wine, and sit down and eat. *Corbleu*! but I will dub you knight, and you shall bear arms for this—a trussed capon on a field vert."

And then there was a silence, for, with the feast before us, time spent in talking was time wasted. Finally, the capon disappeared, the last slice of ham was divided with the edge of my dagger, the last drop drained from the bottle, and restful and contented we lay back in the shade; and Pierrebon slept, whilst I slipped into a waking dream. How long this lasted I know not; but I came to myself with a start, and looked around me.

The shadow had shifted, leaving Pierrebon asleep in the sunshine, his red face looking straight up at the blue sky. The horses too were asleep in the purple loosestrife, and there was an intense peace over all things. There as I lay, listening to the splashing of the water and the song of the birds, a line of deer came out to drink, and, catching sight of us, stopped and gazed, until a sudden panic took a little speckled fawn, and it dashed away madly through the thicket, followed by its mother and a cluster of startled doe, the stag going last at a slow trot.

I rose to my feet and saw how long the shadows were. In truth, it was time to be up and moving. So, arousing Pierrebon, we were soon mounted and jogging through the woods, with our backs to the west. We made good way now, for the nags were refreshed; yet we knew not where the night would bring us, for we were wholly lost.

Farther and farther we rode into the woods, holding desperately on to a faint track that wound and twisted through the endless aisles of the forest. As the hour grew later the sky overhead changed from blue to crimson and gold, and the sunset, stabbing through the lace-work of branches overhead, cast ruddy lights on the trees, deepening the shadows, and giving a ghostly distance to objects around, so that we seemed in a fairy realm of enchantment.

As the sunset began to fade, and the red and gold overhead changed softly to purple and grey, over which the silver light of the moon would soon be cast, we decreased our speed, and now, riding side by side, peered anxiously into the wood for some sign of a human habitation; but there was none to be seen.

We rode in silence, for Pierrebon, to say truth, was uneasy at the uncanny stillness, and that awe with which Nature in her lonely grandeur inspires the dullest of mortals had begun to fill us. And so no word was spoken.

In and out the track wound, until at last it brought us to the very heart of the forest, where the shadows lay black and deep. Around us on every side the huge and aged trees, stretching in long lines of receding obscurity, stood like a phantom army of giants guarding some dreadful secret of the past. Twisted, distorted, and bent, with hairy, moss-grown trunks from which the decaying bark peeled like the mouldering cement on some old and forgotten ruin, the kings of the forest stood silent and grim, their branches stretched out in grisly menace—giant arms that threatened death to all who approached.

Deeper and yet more deep we rode into the gloom, though the sunset yet clung in a girdle of fire round the horizon, casting red blades of light between the tree trunks; and Pierrebon's cheek grew pale, for goblin and gnome and fay lived to him, and even I, who did not believe, felt if my sword played freely in my sheath. And then I tried to sing.

But so dismal were the echoes, so lowering the aspect of the mighty trees, that seemed, in the quaking shadows, to be instinct with life and motion, that "The Three Cavaliers" died away at the first verse; and then, from the woods in front of us, rang out a scream for help, so shrill and sharp in its agony that it froze the blood in our veins.

"'Tis a spirit!" gasped Pierrebon, with pale lips, and half pulled his horse round; but even as he did so the shriek rang out again—a woman's voice—and high and shrill in its octave of suffering. It was enough for me, and, sword in hand, I galloped for the sound.

A few strides of the good beast, a leap over a fallen tree trunk, and in a wide clearing I saw before me a deed of shame.

There was a man lying dead on the ground. There was a white-robed woman, screaming and struggling as two men tried to force her on to a horse; whilst another man, mounted on a white horse, with a white mask on his face, was urging them on to their work, and a long sword glittered in his hand.

I stayed not for a second, but, galloping straight on, made so sudden an assault that one of the knaves was down and twisting on the grass like a snake with a broken back, and the other had fled with a howl into the forest almost before my coming was realised.

But as the horse carried me on I felt a felon blow graze my cap, and I had but time to half turn and parry another when I found myself face to face with the masked man.

Even as the sparks flew from our swords, and I felt that I had met a master of fence, I knew it was Simon despite his mask. There lived not a man like him. Tall and thin, with long, bird-like limbs and a stooping back, with the features concealed by the white mask all but the eyes, which glittered like those of an angry asp, he seemed more spirit than man; and I felt as if I were crossing blade with some uncanny phantom of the woods rather than a thing of flesh and blood, as after a fierce bout we circled round, watching each other warily.

"So, brother, we meet at last," I said. But he made no answer, though his eyes flashed evilly as he came on again with a swift, lightning attack that chance alone enabled me to avoid. And then my life was on my wrist and eye; but I kept it, and began to slowly force him back.

God forgive me! he was my brother; but he would have slain me there like a mad dog—and life is dear. He never said a word until he was being driven back, and then an oath broke from him.

'Tis an ill thing to swear with a sword in one's hand. That oath gave me strength and cooled me to ice.

"Come!" I said, "you would not slay your heir; or are you going to make room for me, Simon?" And my sword point ripped his doublet.

The answer was a thrust that ripped my coat in turn, and then followed the rasp of our blades. It was almost dark above us now, but a lance height from the ground the horizon was still flaming red. We could barely see each other's blades, but guided ourselves by the little circles of light the sword points made as they flashed hither and thither, seeking for an opening, to slip forward like a snake's tongue.

Twice had I been touched. The first time it was a parry *en prime* that saved me; the second time Simon had hit me on my bridle arm. It was only a touch; but I felt the warm blood on my sleeve, and Simon laughed like a devil.

But he mistook his man. Collecting all my strength I made so furious an attack that I slowly drove him against the belting of trees, and then there was a lightning thrust in tierce, a quick parry, and a return over Simon's heart, but the point of my blade glanced from a steel vest he wore. In glancing, however, it slipped upwards, and catching the mask almost rent it from my brother's face, leaving it half hanging, and almost blinding him.

In my fury I followed up the thrust with another, but with the skill that was his alone he partly parried it, though my blade found his sword arm, just above the elbow joint; but as Simon's now useless hand fell to his side he saw his defeat, and, with matchless presence of mind, drove his spurs into his horse, and dashing off at full speed was lost to view in a moment.

It was useless to follow, though I rode a few yards after him, and then, restraining myself, I pulled round and came back. Then I heard a voice thank me, and Pierrebon appeared at my horse's head, as though he had dropped from the clouds, and as I dismounted he burst forth: "Now, praise to St. Hugo of Orrain! We have defeated the bandits."

CHAPTER VII

DIANE

Man of the world and of many experiences as I was; old courtier, who had seen the fairest of my land in the galleries of the Tournelles, or the salons of the Louvre, I confess that I had never seen so graceful a figure, or heard so sweet a voice as that which thanked me now. As for her, when I stepped

up, my sword still in my hand, some thought that she had only escaped the beak of the vulture to feel the talons of the hawk made her shrink back into silence.

I felt this, and, bowing, said gravely: "There is no danger now, mademoiselle. I doubt if our friends will return; but I fear it is far to any refuge to-night."

My words had effect. She was brave enough, and she answered:

"We are not far from the Mable, monsieur!"

"From the Mable! Then Marçay is behind?"

"About six miles."

"Ah! I thought we had overridden ourselves. And Richelieu is at hand?"

"'Tis but a bare league."

"Then in two hours at most we will be there. You will, of course, ride my horse, and Pierrebon and I will share the other."

"Thank you!" she said simply. And then with an effort, as she pointed before her: "Monsieur, there is a man lying there who gave up his life for me. I cannot leave him thus."

And Pierrebon answered: "There are two, lady. I have covered them with their cloaks, for they are both dead."

"A moment," I said, and I too went and looked at the twain.

There was no mistake. For these two the trees and the sky, the good and the bad of the world had ceased to be; and as I pulled their cloaks over their faces I muttered to myself, with a remembrance of the course of "The Philosophy":

"*Maximum vitae bonum mors*."

Then I came back to the lady's side. "Mademoiselle, for these two lying there, the honest man and the knave, what can be done at present has been done. Come, I pray you! It grows late."

"Oh, but I cannot!" And she too went forward to where the long dark things lay stretched out on the sward, and shrinking, she looked, and then on a sudden she sank on her knees, and prayed, and because, whatever had happened, I had never lost my faith in God, without whom we are nothing, I knelt too, and Pierrebon with me, and in our own way we each sought comfort. After a while mademoiselle rose again, and with a voice half choked with tears, said:

"Monsieur, I am ready."

We placed her on my brown horse, which Pierrebon led, I riding his, and so we took our way in silence—a silence now and again broken by a sob from the girl. I said nothing, deeming it wiser to let her be with her thoughts; but as we came to the skirts of the wood I spoke:

"Mademoiselle, I promise you that I will see to the Christian burial of your friend."

And then she wept unrestrainedly. To tell the truth, I knew not what to do, and Pierrebon kept his head well to the front, looking neither to the right nor to the left. In sheer desperation I asked her not to weep, whereat she wept the more; and then I touched her shoulder with my hand, as one would caress a child; but she shook me off, turning a face that seemed scared with terror to me, and I could only stammer out an apology, and remain silent. At last the violence of her grief abated, and I ventured to ask who the dead man was.

"He," she answered sadly, "was a trusted servant, and he was taking me home. His name was Olivet."

"Will not mademoiselle do me the honour to give me her name as well? I am called Bertrand Broussel."

She looked up as I spoke, and a nervous laugh escaped her.

"I am glad I know your name, monsieur; it is one I shall always think upon with gratitude. As for me, I —I am called Diane. I am the niece of Cujus the furrier, a citizen of Tours, who is as a father to me. I was going to rejoin him from Saumur when all this happened."

"Have you any friends near, where I can leave you?"

"Oh yes! Near Richelieu I have friends; and, once in the house of the Bailiff of Muisson, I would be safe."

"I will see you there, with your permission."

"Thank you! And I want to tell you how this happened. I was going back home from Saumur, under the charge of Olivet, and we halted at Marçay to rest. About a half-hour after leaving Marçay we were set upon and taken prisoners by the men from whom you have saved me.

"Where they were taking us I cannot tell. As evening came I heard your voice singing, and, screaming for help, I slipped from my saddle, with the intention of running towards you. Olivet made a brave effort to help me—but——" And it was only with an effort that she prevented another breakdown.

"Have you any idea who these men are?"

She remained silent, as if collecting her thoughts. And I went on:

"I ask because I recognised one—the leader."

"Ah, monsieur, I feared to mention his name. He is a great noble, and he—he—but I cannot tell you." And she stopped, with a little shiver.

"You need not, madame. He is Simon, Vidame d'Orrain."

"Yes," she said, and our talk stopped. My cheeks were burning at the thought of Simon's deed of shame, and I put this down to the long score I had against him. And so on we rode, until we passed the skirts of the forest, though still keeping to its edge, and came to a stretch of moorland, beyond which was a series of small hills. We could now hear water running like a mill-race, and from the hills there glinted the lights of a large village.

"That is Richelieu, monsieur," exclaimed mademoiselle, "and the water that we hear is the Mable."

"See there, monsieur!" Pierrebon suddenly cut in, as he arrested mademoiselle's horse, and pointed to his right, where on the edge of the forest we saw lights at the windows of a low-lying, irregular building half concealed amidst trees. "See there!" continued Pierrebon; "that is a house where at least we shall be able to sup and get a guide."

"A guide," I exclaimed, "with Richelieu before us!"

"Listen to the Mable," urged Pierrebon; "is there a bridge? If not we must ford it; and they say the river is deep and dangerous; but perhaps mademoiselle knows the ford?"

"Indeed I do not."

Considering all things, I came to the conclusion that Pierrebon was right, and that it would be wiser to seek the house. As we approached it, mademoiselle said:

"It may be the hunting-lodge of Le Jaquemart, belonging to the Sieur de Richelieu."

"Well, we will know soon," I said, and urged Pierrebon to quicken his pace. There was but a bare quarter mile of moorland, covered with yellow broom and purple thistle, to be passed, and then we came up to the house. As we did so we perceived that it was surrounded by a high stone wall, and mademoiselle exclaimed positively:

"It is Le Jaquemart; but it is strange it is occupied, for the Sieur de Richelieu is in Italy."

"*Bien*," I thought to myself, "the furrier's niece knows all about the Sieurs de Richelieu!" And then aloud: "Perhaps he has returned with Montluc, mademoiselle; or it may be that friends of his hunt the forest."

"M. de Parthenay is near Loudon."

I made no answer, for at this moment we reined up before the gate, and glanced at the massive, studded portal, and the old wall, with its soft crowning of ivy on the top, and grey-green, moss-covered sides, where the yellow wall-pepper and white serpyllum pushed between the crevices of the stonework. And as we looked we heard from within a peal of loud laughter, a woman's voice mingling with the deeper tones of that of a man. As the laughter ceased Pierrebon exclaimed:

"They are gay within, monsieur!" And then, on a sign from me, he knocked long and loudly.

"Enough, enough! You would waken the dead."

"One more, monsieur!" And Pierrebon, who already smelt his supper, brought the brass lion's head of the knocker with such force against the studded door that it might have been heard a quarter mile away.

From within came a shrill whistle, and a voice called out, with a foreign accent: "The gate, Piero! Who is it? Someone knocks."

"And will knock again soon if you do not make haste," grumbled Pierrebon; whilst I pricked up my ears, and glanced at mademoiselle, and saw her drooping in her saddle. Now we heard a heavy, lurching step on the other side of the gate, a sliding panel covering a Judas Hole was drawn back, a man's face appeared dimly, and a voice asked in halting French:

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"Supper and a guide," began Pierrebon; but dismounting I put him aside, and said:

"We are three travellers, one of whom is a lady. We have lost our way, and seek but a guide to the ford."

As I spoke the man on the other side of the gate raised a dark lantern he had hitherto held low in his hand, and flashed it through the opening, whilst he peered at us.

"Only three?" he asked.

"And one a lady," I answered; whilst Pierrebon let his tongue wag: "Oh, the mole! To want a lantern in this moonlight!" And following his words came the voice from the house, asking again in Italian:

"What is the matter, Piero?"

To which Piero answered: "I come, signor," and with a brief "Wait!" to us, swung round on his heel and went back, Pierrebon, as he looked at the retreating figure through the grille, saying, "By St. Hugo! monsieur, we might be a party of the Guidon's Free Riders, or Captain Loup and his gang!" But, paying no heed to his words, I turned to mademoiselle.

"I like not this place. We had better take our chance of finding the ford. Come!"

At this Pierrebon, with the freedom of an old servant, began to protest, and mademoiselle aided him.

"Oh, monsieur, could we not rest here for a little?"

"We may rest here for ever if we do," I said a little sharply. "Come!"

My words had, perhaps, too much of command in their tone, for she answered back coldly: "I intend to rest here, monsieur; you may go on if you like."

At this I said nothing more, and let her have her way, but gave Pierrebon a warning grip of the arm to be careful. Pierrebon nodded in comprehension. He was no fool, though many thought him so, and though if his betters drew steel he as a rule let matters lie with them, yet he could be dangerous—a thing which people found out sometimes when it was a trifle late.

We had to wait a space, then we heard the woman's voice laughing once more within. Something in its hard, clear tones jarred upon me, and I glanced at mademoiselle, but she kept her face aside. But now we heard returning footsteps, the grating of a bolt drawn back, the turning of a key, and then the gate opened; whilst Piero, a huge figure, stood before us, swinging his lantern, and beside him another man, armed with an arquebus, the fuse burning like a glow-worm.

"Enter," said Piero; "the signor will receive you."

"*Facilis est descensus Averni*," I murmured to myself, and led the way, and the gate was shut behind us. Before us lay a short drive bordered with tall poplars, and on either hand a tangle of a garden that had run to a wilderness. As we rode up a woman's figure appeared at an open window, but stepped back at once, and I asked Piero, in his own Italian:

"Has Monsieur de Richelieu returned?"

The giant answered gruffly: "I know not, signor. He who is within is the Captain Torquato Trotto."

"Torquato Trotto! I know not the name."

And Piero made no answer, for we had now come to the door of the house. Here I helped mademoiselle to alight, whilst Pierrebon took charge of the horses, and mademoiselle and I entered the house. At the same time a man came running down the stairs to meet us. As his eyes fell on us a slight exclamation of surprise broke from him; but he checked it on the instant, and advanced, saying in French:

"You are very welcome, madame and monsieur, I do assure you—very welcome."

And he bowed before us, courteously enough; but I caught the veiled mockery in his voice, and as I took the speaker in I thought he was bravo to his finger-tips.

"Monsieur," I said, "I thank you. We but crave permission to rest a while, and seek a guide to the ford of the Mable, for we have to be at Richelieu to-night."

"We will do what we can for you, monsieur. Be pleased to ascend. I will be with you in a moment. I have but a word to say to my man here. Excuse me!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE ACTS OF PIERREBON

Leaving us to find our way upstairs Torquato Trotto went out into the porch where Piero the giant stood, cast a glance at the retreating figure of Pierrebon, who was leading the horses away, looked over his shoulder like a cat, and, gripping Piero by the arm, shook with laughter.

"*Maledetto*!" exclaimed Piero, who was of an evil temper, as he freed himself from Trotto's clutches, and looked at the swaying figure before him. "Loose hold, signor! Have you been bitten by a tarantula?"

"Oh! I could sing, I could shout, I could dance. Man! that is the very girl we want; and Monsieur the Vidame, who lies within, twisting in his chair, will pay a thousand fat, gold Henris for her when he knows. Ho! it will be rare news for him!"

"Are you sure?"

"As I live. Did I not watch her for a whole week at Saumur? 'Tis well we have not Aramon and the rest with us. The fewer there are the larger the shares. Can Malsain deal with the lackey?"

Piero grinned for reply.

"Well! let him be his care, and you had better stay at hand here. Give me the key of the gate, and, remember, a hundred crowns apiece to you and Malsain for this. And now for a word in the Vidame's ear."

With this he turned back into the house, leaving Piero looking after him.

"A hun—dred crowns apiece! *Diavolo*! Captain Torquato! If I knew the money was here I would make the whole thousand mine; and then—hey for Rome again! But a hundred crowns are a hundred crowns, and fill a purse rarely. Well, I go to warn Malsain!"

And the giant went slowly off, regretting in his heart what might have been.

In the meantime we found ourselves on a landing before an open door, disclosing a room brightly lit. There was a glimpse too of a table laid for supper, and near the table stood a tall woman, with black hair that hung to her waist, with bare rounded arms and painted cheeks, and a face that was beautiful still, though she had come to be what she was.

She was holding a cup of red wine in her hand, but stopped in the act of lifting it to her lips as she caught sight of us, and setting down the wine untasted advanced, saying:

"Enter, I pray you. La Marmotte bids you welcome."

"I thank you, madame," I replied bowing, with many misgivings in my heart, and inwardly cursing the folly that had made me yield and enter this house. But who is there who does not make mistakes?—and

I for one have never set claim to be infallible. I was wrong, and I admit it—that is enough.

And so we went in, and for the first time there was light enough to see mademoiselle's face, and as I looked there came to me a sting of regret for the days that would never return. It was as if some devil had flashed before me a mirror in which the past was reflected; and, believe me, when one has lived and regretted it is not necessary to be in love for such a lightning flash of bitter memory to come to a man when he sees beside him the purity of innocence.

And so it was too with La Marmotte, who had turned to us with a light laugh, and lighter words to her lips; but laugh and words died away as she met the girl's look, and—I could read her like an open page—awakened memory took the woman back to the time when she herself was as the girl before her. And so, because there were yet undefiled wells of good in her soul, there came upon her an unwonted timidity, and it was with a respectful hesitation that she pressed upon us seats and refreshment. But even as she did so her eyes met mine with a half-imploring, half-defiant glance. She felt that I knew, though I thanked her for her courtesy as if she were a princess of the land.

Mademoiselle sank weariedly into a chair; whilst La Marmotte, with all the silent notes in her heart touched in some undefinable way, hovered over her, fearing to approach her, and yet feeling as if she must.

For me, I remained standing, softly rubbing my wounded arm, over which I had drawn my cloak, and looking around me here, there, and everywhere, for I knew we were in a trap, and trapped by my own folly. As I looked I saw something white showing beneath the cushions of a settle, and taking the cup of wine that La Marmotte handed to me I moved thereto, and, sitting down, looked more closely. It was a white mask. Softly drawing it forth, and, unobserved, slipping it into the pocket of my cloak, I saw in doing so that it was stained with fresh blood, and then I knew we were in the house of death.

At this moment Torquato Trotto appeared at the door with suave apologies, and stepping forward, rubbing his hands together, he said: "I regret to have appeared so discourteous; I trust that monsieur and madame will remain here for to-night."

"I am afraid, Signer Torquato Trotto, that is impossible."

"*Per Bacco*! You know me!" exclaimed the Italian in slight surprise.

"The name of Torquato Trotto is known in France," I said, and the brow of the man darkened.

"Perhaps I too can return the compliment, monsieur. You are——"

"Bertrand Broussel, bourgeois, of the Rue des Lavandières, Paris," I interrupted, and I caught a strange expression of disappointment in mademoiselle's eyes. "Hum!" I thought, "does the furrier's niece take me for a prince of the blood in disguise?"

La Marmotte, however, cut in at this juncture, for she saw the storm in the air, and I again said that we would go on at once, if Messire Trotto would of his kindness provide us with a guide; if not, we would go without one.

And Trotto answered blandly:

"Impossible! My lieutenant is away with my men, and I have no one here who knows the way. I am totally ignorant myself, or I would willingly help you. Besides, to go now would be madness. The road is infested by robbers—faith of a gentleman!"

"That is indeed true! I have just escaped them—thanks to the bravery of this gentleman here," exclaimed mademoiselle.

"Madame, you are lucky to have escaped; but you must tell us of your adventures as we sup," and he moved towards the table.

In the meantime Pierrebon, looking well to the right and left, led the horses towards the stables. Every shadow in the winding walk, every recess in the over-grown privet, hid a secret enemy to him. He avoided passing near the ruined summer-house for fear of the ambush that might be within, and then, finding the hedges close in upon the road, boldly took his beasts along the neglected parterres until at last he reached the stables. Here, near the open door he saw Malsain, tall and thin, but muscular and strong as whipcord, sitting down by the light of a guttering candle to a meagre repast of bread and cheese, washed down with water—for Malsain never touched wine.

"An evil-looking man," Pierrebon thought, as he glanced at Malsain sitting on a stool; and evil-looking indeed he was, with his hawk's face, thin cruel slit of a mouth, and one wicked eye that glowed with the

same sombre fire as the fuse of his arquebus, which leaned against the wall behind him. And then from the man himself Pierrebon glanced at the hermit's fare before him. "St. Siege!" he groaned, "bread and cheese and cold water—with a dagger-thrust to follow for digestion, perhaps."

But now Malsain heard him, his hand went out silently to the arquebus, and he turned a yellow, threatening face towards the visitor.

"Hola!" exclaimed Pierrebon. "It is I. I have brought monsieur's horses for a feed and a rest."

"Ho! it is you." And Malsain, putting down his arquebus, returned to his cheese again as he added: "There are two stalls vacant there, and you will find oats in that barrel." He had not, of course, it will be understood, received Trotto's message as yet.

Pierrebon entered without further ceremony. There were already three horses in the stables; but, as Malsain had said, there were still two stalls vacant, and here he put the nags. Whilst attending to them, however, he kept glancing uneasily at the supper before Malsain, which was diminishing at a frightful rate, for the thin man ate like a cormorant. At last, unable to endure this more, he stopped rubbing down the brown hackney, and, stepping up to the table, took a seat on a stool opposite Malsain. Then, drawing his dagger, he helped himself without further ceremony to some cheese and bread, and glanced somewhat ruefully into the jug of water.

"*Diable*!" grumbled Malsain, "you are eating my supper."

"Well," and Pierrebon looked at him, "am I not your guest, as my master is your master's?"

Malsain said nothing, but scowled across the table at Pierrebon; and the latter, who was as alert as a weasel when it came to the push, went on: "But, *compère*, they feed you thinly here—and no wine!"

"I eat to my taste, and drink to my taste," growled Malsain; but
Pierrebon, not heeding his ill temper, continued:

"Now, with my master there is always a bottle of Rochecorbon, and a cut from a pasty, not to mention a crown-piece here and a crown-piece there; and I wager that in the house yonder there is something more than acid cheese and dry bread for hunger, or spring water for thirst."

"Be silent, fool! Take what you can get, or leave it," said Malsain sullenly, his hand slipping down to his side; but Pierrebon laughed cheerily as he cut another slice of cheese, his two blue Burgundian eyes steadily fixed on Malsain's sallow face, and as they looked at each other there came a heavy footfall outside, and Piero called out in his deep voice:

"Malsain! Here! A word with you!"

Malsain rose slowly, and went outside, and Pierrebon, following him with his glance, saw Piero's huge figure in the moonlight, and a chill came upon him.

"By St. Hugo! 'tis the ogre himself! And they consult together!" he murmured, wishing himself a hundred miles away, and he watched the twain moving off into the shadow, straining his ears to catch a word if possible, but at first he could hear nothing. Thus a minute or so passed, whilst the evil pair outside stood in the shadow of a copper beech whispering together. If Pierrebon could but hear a word to guide him! He dared not attempt to approach them, but was forced to stay where he was. At last he caught something. Malsain laughed out like a hyena: "I would slit their throats for fifty, and throw the Vidame into that——" But Piero roughly bade him lower his voice, and the whispering continued.

Pierrebon heard no more. That there was danger in the air he knew. He had not forgotten my warning pressure on his arm as we entered the gates of Le Jaquemart, and now his worst fears were confirmed. For a moment his heart sank, but for a moment only, for as he looked around him his eyes fell on the arquebus, where it leaned against the wall. The fuse was still alight. There was no time to hesitate. Malsain was already returning; and if it were to be war Pierrebon thought he might as well begin, and strike the first blow. Quick as thought he arose, and taking up the arquebus moved off near the horses, and he was blowing on the match to hearten the fire when Malsain stepped in.

"Blood of a Jew! what are you doing with the arquebus, fool? Put it down this instant, or I slit your throat." And Malsain, his poniard in his hand, stood near the table, glaring savagely at Pierrebon.

"Pardon!" said Pierrebon. "I was but looking at it. 'Tis a noble weapon. And one well suited to a soldier's hand."

"It could kill too, I wager," said Pierrebon, laughing, as he raised the weapon, and pointed it at Malsain, who went back the step he had taken, saying, with an oath,

"It is loaded, fool! Put it down at once."

"*Hein*! it is loaded. It would kill, then, if I fired—eh?" And then, with a sudden change of voice and manner: "Ah, bandit! move a step, utter the slightest cry, and you are a dead man! Throw down your poniard!"

Malsain looked at the barrel of the arquebus. It was steady as a rock, and behind the little black muzzle the match burned bravely; whilst behind the match was a red face with two blue eyes that looked as if they meant what their owner said. Malsain let his dagger drop with a clash.

Pierrebon then advanced a couple of paces nearer, still holding the arquebus at Malsain's breast.

"Now, my friend! Take that bridle from the peg at your hand and fasten your ankles together. What!—you hesitate?"

Malsain hissed something between his teeth, and snatched the bridle from the peg.

"Go on! A running knot—lap it well round, and finish off! There!
That is right! You are no novice, I see, *mon vieux*!"

Malsain made no answer, but stood bolt upright before Pierrebon, his face grey, his one eye bloodshot, his lips livid. It is true that he had tied himself as loosely as possible, but still he was terribly crippled; and from his soul he regretted that he had not made a rush at Pierrebon, and chanced his fortune; but now this was hopeless.

Worse, however, was to come, and it came at once.

"Now," said Pierrebon, "fasten your wrist to your ankle—your left wrist."

"It is impossible," said Malsain thickly.

"Then I shall blow your brains out when I have counted three. One!"

Malsain looked about him with his red eye, and shuffled uneasily.

"Two!"

Malsain swore again, a nameless oath.

"Th——"

Malsain stooped down with the rapidity of lightning, and began fumbling with the yard or so of trailing rein.

He tried to deceive Pierrebon; but the candle gave enough light to see, and Pierrebon was sharp. There was no help for it, and at last it was done, badly done, but enough to utterly cripple Malsain. The final order now came:

"Now lie down on your face."

This was difficult; but there are circumstances under which men do all but impossible things, and Malsain performed the feat.

After this the worthy Pierrebon took a more active part in the binding of Malsain. Still holding the arquebus in one hand he unhitched another bridle from its peg. Then, placing the arquebus at *his* feet, he drew his dagger and approached Malsain, upon whom he sat, and with a gentle prick or so reminded him it was unsafe to struggle or cry. He fastened up his free arm, and finished off the work in an artistic manner. When it was over Malsain was like a trussed fowl. Pierrebon stepped back, and surveyed his work with the satisfaction of one who knows that he has done well.

"Ah, I had forgotten!" he exclaimed. Then he pulled from his pocket a 'kerchief. A touch at Malsain's throat with his poniard was hint enough. Malsain opened his mouth, and the handkerchief, rolled into a ball, was thrust inside.

Pierrebon fumbled once more in his pocket, and produced some stout twine. He gave a little grunt of satisfaction as he lashed it around Malsain's jaws, and felt at last that victory was his.

"It is complete—eh, *mon vieux*?"

And so saying he dragged Malsain with no tender hand across the pavement of the stable. There was a black, vicious-looking cob in one of the stalls. Pierrebon flung his victim on the straw near the beast.

"I should lie still," he said in warning; "the horse might kick."

Then he saddled up again, calmly selecting a third horse from the stable, from a stall where he saw some ladies' saddlery.

"This will do for mademoiselle," he muttered as he glanced around him with satisfaction; "all is ready here. And now for the ogre." Taking up the arquebus he looked at the priming, and made his way cautiously to the house.

CHAPTER IX

THE WHITE MASK

It is necessary to hark back a little now to the moment when Torquato Trotto, having given his instructions to Piero, went into the house. The stairway was empty, for both I and my charge were with La Marmotte, and the Italian ran upstairs with a footfall as light as that of a cat. On reaching the landing he stopped for a second, glanced around him, with the same feline caution that marked all his movements, and then, creeping forward on tiptoe, went along a corridor leading to a wing of the house.

At the extreme end of this gallery was a door, at which Trotto knocked softly. From within a strident voice said: "Come in!" Then followed an exclamation of pain, and a free oath.

Trotto smiled, shrugged his shoulders, as only an Italian can, pushed open the door, and entered the chamber. The spear-shaped flames of two tall candles but half lit the room, making a circle of wavering light. Beyond all was in uncertain gloom, through which one could dimly see the old tapestry and massive furniture of bygone years.

Where the light was brightest was an easy-chair, and there sat Simon of Orrain, with his bandaged right arm resting on a cushion, placed on a low table drawn close to him. As Trotto entered he looked up with a snarl.

"What is it? Did I not say I was to be left alone? Curse this arm!"

"Ah, excellency," and Trotto glanced at the throbbing arm, "you should have waited for Aramon's return, or taken us with you." But Simon broke in: "I tell you, Trotto, the plan was perfect, and if it had not been for the accident of that villain's coming our bird would have been here by this. Even when he came, if La Crotte had but stood his ground—but there! Give me some of that wine. My blood is red hot, and my throat on fire with the pain of this wound!"

Torquato Trotto filled a cup from a flagon that lay on the table near the Vidame. Simon took it from him with his left hand, drained it, and flung it from him, so that it struck the wainscoting of the wall, and fell with a crash on the floor.

"La Crotte shall hang for this," he went on savagely. "The cur! the coward!"

"You will make your wound worse, excellency. Be calm! There is time for things to mend."

"Time! When the whole affair has been bungled—and by you."

"By me, excellency?"

"Yes; if you had given me Piero and Malsain instead of those serving-wenches Billot and La Crotte."

Torquato lifted a deprecating hand. "They did well before, excellency; and Billot could not have done better, for he is dead, you say. And as for La Crotte——"

"He shall hang—hang to the first tree."

"As your excellency pleases. He has, however, to be caught first. But in the meantime I have intruded on you because I think we can yet save the game."

"Ugh!"

"Your excellency, I have a plan; and I think we win the odd trick."

"Well, what is your brilliant idea?"

Trotto coughed. "But the risk, excellency, is greatly increased now that this man is mixed up in the affair."

Simon straightened himself in his chair and looked at the captain.

"I suppose you want more money. Well, what is your plan?"

"With your excellency's permission I will keep that to myself, for a plan is a plan when one head holds it. But if I were to place your prize in your hands by tomorrow morning?"

"Impossible!"

"But I say it is possible."

"Then five hundred crowns the day you reach Paris."

Trotto shook his head. "It could be done for a thousand, excellency—for certain."

Simon's eyes seemed to sink back deeper into their hollow sockets, and his face became paler, if possible.

"A thousand devils! Impossible! It's a fortune!"

"Your excellency is playing for a fortune; and this time we win—faith of a gentleman! Make it a thousand crowns, and your bonny bird is yours with the dawn, and I will myself perform the wedding ceremony if you like."

"You?"

"Yes, excellency," and Trotto put his hand to the crown of his head. "My hair has grown, but, you will remember, I am none the less a priest for all that."

There was another silence. Simon knitted his brow, as if in thought.
Then he cursed again at his wounded arm, and spoke:

"It is an exorbitant sum; but I agree on one condition."

"And that is?"

"If you fail you get nothing; you have sucked enough from me already."

"As your excellency pleases." And then, bending for an instant over the wounded arm: "He must have been a rare swordsman to have beaten you."

Simon writhed in his chair. "Beaten me! I had the dog at my mercy, but was not quick enough in the last parry."

"Ah, excellency, 'tis always that little delay that causes accidents like this." And Trotto made a gesture towards the wounded arm; but Simon snarled at him:

"Don't touch it, fool! Ugh! how it stings! There is one consolation, however—that he must be squirming himself with pain now."

"Eh! Then you touched him?"

"Twice, Trotto, twice!"

"Ah! that accounts for his wearing his cloak so tightly over his left shoulder."

Simon started: "Wearing his cloak so tightly! Have you seen him?"

Torquato nodded, and the Vidame went on impatiently: "Are you dreaming, or am I? You have not been out of the house."

"But, excellency, benighted travellers might seek the house for rest and a guide to the ford of the Mable." At these words a red flush came over Simon's face, and he half rose from his chair.

"Here, here!" he exclaimed, his voice almost cracking with excitement—"here!—in Le Jaquemart! My sword, Trotto—quick!" And he shivered with pain as he attempted to stand; but Torquato made him sit back, and when he had succeeded told him what is already known.

"And so," he concluded, "Malsain has by this time disposed of the lackey, and La Marmotte is keeping the other birds amused until my return. When it is all settled," and Trotto laughed, "your excellency may make ready for the wedding, and La Marmotte will make a rare bridesmaid." With these words he bowed, and went to the door, but stopped at Simon's voice.

"Trotto!"

"Excellency!"

"Be sure, and fail not!"

"With a wounded man? Be happy, excellency! 'Twill be all over by midnight. I will have it done before Aramon returns, to save sharing the crowns. Good-night."

"Trotto!"

The captain put his head back through the door, and Simon said:

"Call me when 'tis over. I would see the carrion ere we put it away."

Trotto nodded, and closing the door left Simon of Orrain, full of stinging pains in his body and burning evil thoughts in his soul, and returning to us led the way to the supper-table. There, whilst we sat, mademoiselle told them of her peril, and how she was rescued, and as she concluded Trotto set down the cup of wine he was tasting, and turning to me, said:

"I congratulate you, monsieur. I trust, however, that your wounds do not hurt you?"

"Wounds!" exclaimed mademoiselle. "You are hurt, and you have said never a word! Why did you not tell me? You must have them seen to at once." And she rose from her seat. La Marmotte following her example, and Trotto added his voice to hers, and was thanked with a look.

"It is nothing. There is some mistake. I have but a scratch that will keep till the morning."

"But I insist," said mademoiselle. And Trotto put in with his soft voice: "Mademoiselle, I am something of a leech, and will see to monsieur's hurt at once." And then with a look at La Marmotte: "Perhaps mademoiselle would like to repose until my men return. I expect them every moment, and we could then arrange for your safe passage."

And just at this moment, through the open window that looked out upon the balcony, there came a scrambling noise, and the ivy outside shook and rustled, as though a heavy body were forcing its way through it. Trotto gave a quick glance over his shoulder, stepped out of the window, on to the balcony, and looked around him, whilst I took the opportunity to urge on mademoiselle to go and rest. I did so with the object of having Trotto alone for a little with me, and to test the situation. As I spoke La Marmotte looked at me with warning in her eyes, and her lips, which had paled under their paint, moved as if she were about to form some words, but could not speak. Ere matters could proceed further, however, Trotto came in, with a laugh. "There is nothing there," he said. "It must have been a cat; the wild cats here grow to enormous size." And then taking up a candlestick he continued: "I will myself see mademoiselle to her apartment." But La Marmotte spoke now.

"Mademoiselle comes to my room. There is none other ready."

The captain bowed and smiled. "I will light you there then," he said, and led the way to the door. As they went out La Marmotte, who was last, dropped her handkerchief, and stooping to recover it made a warning gesture to me; but I stared vacantly to my front.

As soon, however, as the door closed behind them, and I heard their footsteps along the gallery, I pulled out the white mask, and lifting the cover of a dish placed the mask within the dish and put back the cover. Then drawing my sword I laid it between my knees, and, resuming my seat, poured out some wine, and awaited Messire Torquato Trotto's return. It was a fortunate thing that the wild cats of Fontevrault were so large and heavy; and it was equally fortunate that Messire Trotto, ex-priest, and now bandit or freelance, was aware of the fact, else, perhaps, he might have examined the ledge that projected below the parapet, and seen there an animal which, though large and heavy, was of a different kind to the grey, striped prowlers of the forest. He would, in fact, have seen Pierrebon, who after vainly trying to get at Piero unobserved had determined to warn me, and succeeded with much difficulty in making his way thus far.

Through the screen of the ivy Pierrebon watched us in the room, and when I was alone he was about to step in at once, when he saw my actions, and guessed that I too was on the alert.

"Good!" he thought, "he knows too. I had better wait here till I am wanted. Ah! that is just the place!" Rising slowly, he climbed over the parapet, and, with his arquebus ready, leaned up against the wall, so that by moving his head slightly forward he could see into the room.

The night was warm and clear. A light breeze stirred the ivy, and shook the leaves of the old lime, by whose aid Pierrebon had made his ascent. Within I sat at the table, my cloak unclasped, now sipping my wine, now gently touching with my finger the dark patch on my sleeve near my shoulder. Without, Pierrebon stood on guard in the black shadow. Down below, Piero began to sing, as only men of his country can, and the deep bass voice, with all its liquid Italian words, pealed melodiously into the night.

I listened, murmuring to myself: "Strange! Here is one who can sing of his Alban hills and his Margarita one moment and cut a throat the next. But here they come!"

For Trotto's voice had stopped the singer, and then I heard them coming upstairs. The heavy step of Piero halted, however, in the passage, and Trotto entered alone, rubbing his hands together as usual, his white teeth shining between their setting of red lip and short black moustache and beard. Of a truth Messire Torquato was a handsome man if an evil one. He came in with a set smile on his face. "The ladies are safely at rest, and——"

"And we can while away the time with this wine, some more supper, and a little talk."

"But your wounds, monsieur! They must be attended to. I have told
Piero to bring up some salve and bandages."

"Bah!" I laughed, "let them keep. My wound, not wounds, is but a scratch, and hurts far less than the one that lost you that forefinger." And I pointed to his left hand, which wanted a forefinger.

The captain's eyes flashed, and he dropped his hand to his side, though he said, calmly enough:

"I got that at Volterra. I was there with the Caraffa."

"And I with Enghien. You see, we were comrades-in-arms without knowing it. 'Tis a pity we never met. We must fight our battles over again. Come, let us drink to the old days!"

"With all my heart," was the reply. "A moment; and I will tell Piero to wait." And he stepped to the door.

"Tell him to go to the devil," I said, and Trotto laughed, and after a word or so exchanged with Piero he closed the door and came back to his seat. "I have sent Piero off," he said, and pouring out a bumper for each of us he raised his cup, saying: "Pledge me this toast, monsieur. Long life to the bride and bridegroom!"

"Long life to the happy pair!" I clinked my cup with his, and drank, my mind working like a clock to find out what was meant, my eyes never moving from Trotto's face.

"Now," I said, "it is my turn. The wine, messire captain. And here is my toast: Confusion to the enemies of Bertrand Broussel!"

There was, perhaps, some want of heartiness in the captain's voice as he echoed the words but none in his manner of drinking, though he too began to look, as if seeking for a hidden meaning in my words, and his hand left his cup and dropped quietly to his side; but still I kept my eyes on his, as I said:

"That wine of yours is a rare cordial, captain; it makes me ravenous. Do you remember how we starved before Volterra?" And I filled my cup again.

"Yes—well."

"We were not birds of paradise exactly, and yet we had to live on air sometimes—and a thin enough diet it was. You will never guess what I had for supper once—try!"

"I am bad at guessing, monsieur."

"A mask."

"A mask!"

"Yes. It was not bad with a little olive oil and vinegar; but the very thought makes me hungry. What have you in that dish beside you?"

"Something better than a crape mask, I assure you." And Trotto put aside the cover, only to let it fall

with a little crash as he stared at the white thing, and glanced up to meet my eyes, and hear my gibe.

"A little surprise I prepared for you—a delicate attention."

Trotto knew he was discovered. He began to breathe quickly, and his hand once more went down.

"Divide it, captain," I mocked; "there is just enough for two—ah!" And I caught his wrist as he made a sudden stab at me, and pulled him half over the table, springing backwards to my feet as I did so. In his confusion he pushed the table over, and fell sideways on the floor, dragging with him the tablecloth and the supper.

He was at my mercy. It needed but a thrust, and his life was ended; but I gave him his chance.

"Get up, and take your sword!"

Trotto rose, his face white, his lips bleeding, and snatching his sword from its sheath thrust at me, with a strange smile on his face. He had lied when he said Piero was gone. All unknown to me Piero had remained, and opening the door stood at my back, his knife in his hand. I saw not the death behind me, and stiff as I was from my wound my attention was fully taken up by Trotto, who was no mean artist, and fought like a cat at bay. But Pierrebon saw, and raised his arquebus. The bravo behind me was about to strike, when there was a flash, a loud report, and he rolled over a huge, limp, and lifeless mass. At the shot Trotto had sprung back with a gasp to the corner of the room, and crouched there like a rat, staring through the smoke at us, for Pierrebon had run to my side.

"Keep the door, Pierrebon," I said, and I stepped forward; but the Italian was done.

"I yield," he said; "I have lost." And he lowered his sword; but between us there could be no parley.

"Put up your sword—put it up, or I run you through as you are!"

And because there was no help for it, save to fight, Trotto did so, but his hand shook, and his courage was gone. He made a little show of resistance; but it was nothing, and at the third or fourth pass he thrust too high. He was late in the recovery, and I ran him through the side.

"Jesus!" he screamed, "I am dead!"

Then he fell forward on his face, his fingers working convulsively.

"He is dead too!" said Pierrebon as he stooped over the body.

"Not yet," I said, and then for the first time I saw the huge figure of Piero lying stark, the knife still in his clutch, and I saw too what I owed Pierrebon, and wrung the honest fellow's hand.

"Come!" I said. "Now for mademoiselle, and we shall be off. There are others who will attend to these."

"A moment, monsieur! The arquebus is not loaded, and this, perhaps, will be more useful." So saying Pierrebon stooped and picked up Trotto's sword. As he did so he noticed the keys at the Italian's girdle.

"And this too," he added, as with a touch of the sharp sword he cut the light leather strap, and taking the keys followed me out into the gallery.

CHAPTER X

THE BITER BITTEN

When Torquato Trotto lifted the candle to guide mademoiselle and La Marmotte from the supper-room he was confident in the success of his plan, and already heard the jingle of Simon's crown-pieces in his ears. Perhaps it was the certainty that the birds were caged that made him a trifle careless, and so there was something in his air and in the glance he cast back upon his companions, whilst leading them through the gallery, that filled mademoiselle with a sudden fear, and, but for her pride, she would have run back to my side. So she nerved herself, and went on to La Marmotte's room, though it was with a quaking heart. At the door Torquato stopped, expressed a civil hope that mademoiselle would be

comfortable, and, bowing politely to her as she passed in, handed the candle to La Marmotte, and was about to return when he felt his arm seized. It was La Marmotte, and she looked into his face with eager, searching eyes as she asked: "What does this mean?—more treachery?"

There was a bitter note in her voice, and the Italian looked at her steadily. "She grows old," his thoughts ran on, "old, and exacting; I must end this." Then, because there was other business on hand, he restrained himself, and answered calmly:

"I mean no harm to her, I assure you."

With this he tried to disengage himself; but La Marmotte was not satisfied. She felt he was lying. Then, too, all the vague feelings of the past that had somehow been aroused in her that night were awake and groping in her poor heart, and, perhaps, with these emotions there was jealousy—who knows?

Time had been in the gay days in Paris when La Marmotte could have counted her lovers by the score. At last fate had thrown her across the path of the Italian, and she, although knowing him evil, loved him none the less, and followed his uncertain fortune like a faithful dog; but years were going, and beauty was fading, and her heart was fearful lest she should be cast adrift.

"Trotto," she said, and her voice was husky, "I—I do not like this.
Let them go."

Torquato Trotto cursed under his breath; but time was short, and he could not afford to waste it. He bent down and kissed the woman's hand.

"*Carissima*! have no fear. And now let me go and see to our guest's wounds." With this he freed himself, and went back.

La Marmotte stood for a pace watching the dim figure as it slipped through the gloom of the corridor, the candle in her hand casting its light on her red lips, her white neck and arms, and on the silken black hair that hung to her waist. Then with a half-stifled sigh she followed mademoiselle, and stepped into the room. It was empty. La Marmotte's heart almost stood still, and the candlestick she held all but fell from her trembling hand, as the poor wretch thought of the wrath that would overtake her if her charge escaped. But it was impossible! It could not be! And La Marmotte made another step forward, and as she looked she saw a white-robed figure kneeling at a *prie-dieu*, half concealed by the valence of the bed.

"It is her," murmured La Marmotte with a sudden relief; and then she almost spoke the words aloud, "she prays." And after a moment of hesitation, she crept up softly, step by step, and stood behind mademoiselle, a tumult of strange thoughts in her soul. La Marmotte quivered from head to foot. Near her was a small table. With a shaking hand she placed the light thereon, and made yet another step forward.

Prayer! Years had passed since she had prayed. It was years since she had learned to laugh at the soul's communion with its God; to laugh, and yet to know, in her heart of hearts, that she lied to herself. After all, life had gone gaily with her. She was as a sleep-walker in some garden of dreamland until this girl had come, and with her coming startled her into wakefulness. And, standing there, La Marmotte was for the moment innocent and pure in heart. "I will pray too," she thought. What she was going to say, what she was going to ask from her Creator, never struck her. All that she felt in her impulsive and emotional heart was an overpowering desire to pray. She half sank on her knees, and then sprang up, flushed and trembling, for at the moment mademoiselle arose, and, turning, saw her.

"Mademoiselle was praying?" stammered the woman.

"Yes, madame. I was thanking God for our escape, and for the friends
He has given us here."

La Marmotte thought of Simon lurking in his chamber. She thought of Torquato Trotto, and she shivered at the thought. Mademoiselle came up to her, and placing a hand on her shoulder, said: "I will never forget the kindness I have had here."

It was too much for La Marmotte. She shrank from the gentle touch.

"Don't," she said; "I am not worthy."

But mademoiselle simply leaned forward and kissed her forehead, and the caress broke the woman down.

Falling on her knees she sobbed out: "Forgive! forgive! Mademoiselle, there is danger here! They are going to kill here! Go back to monsieur, and leave this place whilst there is time. Better trust to the mercy of the forest wolves than the mercy of Le Jaquemart."

"Is this true?"

"True as I kneel before you." And, springing to her feet, La Marmotte went on: "But there is no time to waste; come—come at once. A—h!" For the loud report of the arquebus, and Pierrebon's angry shout, rang out; then followed the rasping of swords, and the two stood speechless, staring at each other.

But mademoiselle was brave, and she came to herself.

"Oh! they are killing him." And she flew to the door, but La Marmotte clung to her. "Not that way! There is dreadful work there! Here!—come here with me!"

So saying she strove to drag mademoiselle back; but the latter, with a strength surprising in one so slight, freed herself, and slipping past La Marmotte made for the corridor. Down this she ran, almost brushing against a figure crouching behind the arras—a figure skulking there like the evil thing it was. It was Simon, who had heard the shot too, and overcome by his fierce impatience had come forth from his chamber, poniard in hand. As the girl passed he made a half movement towards her, like the spider about to pounce upon his prey. But La Marmotte was following, and he drew back, and watched the two figures speeding down the gallery, and then they halted suddenly, for the clashing ceased, and there was the thud of a heavy body falling. Through the partly-open door of the supper-room a banner of light fell crosswise on the corridor, throwing into relief the figures of the two women standing side by side with blanched faces, and for the moment there was an awful stillness.

"Well thrust, Trotto!" shouted Simon from his lurking-place, too sure of the issue, and then he started back with a sickening chill.

He had heard my voice as I stepped out and called to mademoiselle. And she, who was but an arm's length away, sprang forward.

"Here! here! Oh! what has happened?"

"It has happened that we have come into the house of murder," I replied; and then, my eyes falling on La Marmotte, I said, as I pointed to the room within: "He needs all your care; go to him."

La Marmotte shrank back at my look and tone, and then cried out: "I am innocent—I swear it."

"Go to him!" I said; and turning to mademoiselle: "Come! we have not a moment to lose."

And so we went out, leaving La Marmotte staring after us, for she made no movement. And, standing there, a cold hand grasped her wrist, and a voice hissed in her ear:

"Fool! there is a dagger at your girdle. Could you not have driven it through his heart?"

But La Marmotte only looked at the Vidame foolishly, and from the far distance there came through the night the sound of a horn.

"It is Aramon returning," exclaimed Simon; "we have them yet." And leaving La Marmotte where she stood he followed on our footsteps, his dagger in his unwounded hand.

On he went, with uncertain, wavering footsteps, and fury in his heart. He meant to kill if he could. It was in Simon's mind to make a sudden, desperate attack. An unexpected stroke from his poniard might free him from me, and his prize might yet be his. As for the varlet—Simon gave Pierrebon not a thought. But as he went on his wounded arm began to sting and bleed afresh. A faintness came upon him, and, overcome by the pain and loss of blood, he sank down all dizzy behind the high privet, a cold sweat on his forehead. In impotent fury he struck his dagger to the hilt in the soft turf at his side, and, still holding the haft, leaned forward and peered through the hedge. Then as he crouched he heard quick voices, and then three mounted figures rode across the parterres to the gate. Again the sound of the horn rang out, and Simon heard Pierrebon's voice.

"The other wasps come back, monsieur! Hasten! Let us be off!"

"But not before I have struck a blow," answered Simon, as, heartened by the sound of the horn, he gathered himself together and made for the gate, only to see us pass through it ere he had gone ten paces.

He reached the gate somehow, and stared into the night. We were gone. We had turned to the right in the direction of the river, and were already hidden from view by the woods.

Twice Simon heard the beat of hoofs as the horses dashed over the hard ground, and after that all was still.

"If Aramon would but come!" he groaned; and then, through the moonlit haze on the left, where the moorland stretched long and brown, came the sound of hoarse voices, and a loud laugh, and upon this a line of about half-a-dozen horsemen appeared riding slowly towards the house.

"Aramon! Aramon! Here! To me!"

At his call they put spurs to their beasts, and were soon beside him—an evil-looking set of knaves, mounted on horses foam-flecked and weary with hard going. Simon gave them no time for speech, but shouted:

"After them! After them! Else they escape!"

"After whom, monseigneur?" asked he who appeared to be their leader as he went on: "We have chased the air all day; are we to ride after phantoms by night?"

"Fool! It is Mademoiselle de Paradis and her lover. He has wounded me, and killed Trotto and Piero and Malsain, and escaped with her ten minutes ago. They cannot have gone far, and the river must stop them. After them!" And, panting with excitement, he ceased.

From the height of his saddle Aramon looked down on Simon, and whistled low to himself.

"So monseigneur is wounded, which is bad for you, monseigneur; and Piero is dead, which is good; and Malsain is dead, which is bad, for he was my own man; and the captain Trotto is dead, which is good again—for me, monseigneur."

"Fool! Will you waste time? Every moment is precious."

"Softly, monseigneur! There is plenty of time for me. Trotto is dead, you say, and I sit here in my saddle captain of the wolves of Fontevrault; and," he continued with a chuckle, "with a new king comes a new policy, as you are aware, monseigneur."

"What do you mean?" asked Simon, with an uneasy note in his voice.

"I mean, monseigneur, that of late you have not played fair with us. I mean that a sword that can slay as the one you describe is not one to be meddled with by weary men; and I mean that I, Aramon, being captain of these brave fellows now, intend to be my own captain for the future. Is it not so, my wolves?"

There were gruff murmurs of assent, and Simon drew back a space. It was not, however, from fear—Simon of Orrain never suffered from the poltroon fever; he but drew back to strike hard, and to sell his life dearly. They ringed him in—his own men who had turned against him—and he stood with his back to the gate. He did not flinch, and meant to fight, hopeless as it was, for all around him were white, shining swords, that needed but a word from Aramon to be red with his blood. But the new captain did not want this.

"Bah!" he said, "throw down your dagger, monseigneur. We want not your life. For the present you will be the guest of Aramon—that is, until you have paid me, and these gentlemen here, two thousand gold Henris—fat gold Henris—for all our trouble. Come!—throw down the dagger! Put a good face on it!"

CHAPTER XI

THE ROAD TO POITIERS

We reined up on the edge of a shelving bank, and the Mable swirled before us. Beyond the alders on the opposite shore, but about a mile higher upstream, lay Richelieu. Late though it was there were many lights still burning, and now and then a fitful flare, that made the houses stand out redly for a moment, led me to think that the place was occupied by troops or marauders; and if so, the result would in either case be the same for the town, or for ourselves if we ventured thither. It must be remembered that the King's Writ was waste-paper here. All that was ill was loose in the land, and though Montpensier from the north and Montluc from the south struck with heavy hands, the

Christaudins—or Huguenots, as they called them—held all the country from the chalks of Châtellerault to Saumur, and from Fontenaye to Thouars and La Mothe St. Héraye.

Craning forward from the saddle I looked in the direction of the town, muttering to myself: "It may be out of the frying-pan into the fire." And as I did so mademoiselle exclaimed:

"Monsieur, why do we stay? That is Richelieu; and they follow us.
Cross, cross!"

I made no answer; but Pierrebon dismounted, and placed his ear to the ground.

"No one follows," he said after a little, rising to his feet; "they have had enough, these accursed bandits." And with this he mounted once more.

"But why stay? See! there is the house of the Bailiff of Muisson—that tall one where the lights are burning at the windows."

"The Bailiff keeps late hours, mademoiselle." And even as I spoke a bright flame suddenly flashed out, a ruddy light lit the walls, and the distant shouting of many voices came to our ears.

"See!" I went on, "they are cooking a late supper with the doors. They will make breakfast with the rafters."

"What is happening? Oh! what an awful night this is!"

"What is happening, mademoiselle, I cannot tell; but it seems we have only escaped a great danger to meet with another. Richelieu is full of armed men. Who they are we do not know. At any rate, for your sake if for nothing else, we will risk no more. We will cross, and make for Razines. There we will wait for daylight. Come!"

Leaning forward I took her horse by the bridle and we entered the stream.

"Courage!" said Pierrebon, who rode at her right; "courage, mademoiselle! It is not deep."

And she laughed, for she was not afraid, though the water bubbled and hissed around us, and once or twice the horses staggered and swayed, as though they would have fallen. Finally we made the passage, and reached the opposite shore. Once there I led them at a trot along the white, dusty track. We were in the angle formed by the Mable and the Veude, and here, where Poitou slopes towards the sea, the country still retains, with a roughness like unto that of Auvergne, all the freshness of La Marche. Far south was a dreary plain, but around us the land billowed into low hillocks, that stood over long stretches of stunted forest.

We rode in silence, except when now and again I spoke a word of warning in regard to the state of the road, or to regulate the pace. I began to wonder how long mademoiselle would hold out; and my doubts were soon set at rest. It was whilst crossing the almost dry bed of one of the small streams, spreading like veins over the country, that she suddenly reined up.

"I cannot go farther," she said faintly; and calling a halt I looked around me. A little distance from the track, which wound before us amongst the glistening stones, lay a dark grove of trees. I pointed at them.

"We will rest there, mademoiselle. 'Tis barely fifty paces; bear up till then!" And dismounting I walked by the side of her horse.

Short as the distance was I was in doubt if she would hold out, and as I glanced at her I saw even by the moonlight how white and drawn was her face, and then she began to sway in her seat. Calling to Pierrebon to take the reins of her horse I tried to hold her in the saddle, but, feeling her slipping, I put my unhurt arm around her and lifted her to the ground. For a little space she stood as one dazed, leaning against me with closed eyes, and then with an effort recovered herself and drew back.

"I am able to walk, monsieur—I—how far is it?"

"Only a step now." And, still supporting her, I led her onward until we reached the trees.

"We are here, mademoiselle." And taking her into the shade of a huge walnut-tree I flung my cloak on the grass, and made her sit thereon, whilst we hedged her around with saddlery. It was done as quickly as we could, and the tired girl leaned back against the saddles utterly wearied and exhausted. I stood watching her for a little, and then with a whispered word to Pierrebon about the horses stepped aside. I could do no more; but my heart was heavy within me, for I feared the result of exposure for her.

A few yards off a withered tree stood apart, an outcast from its fellows. The thought struck me as I went up to it, and tapped the decayed trunk with my fingers: "You and I, my friend—we have seen our past, and are out of the pale now." With this I sat down on one of the huge roots, that coiled like monstrous serpents at my feet, and leaning my head against the tree prepared to wait for the dawn.

My arm, where Simon's sword had touched me, now began to remind me that it needed attention. A low whistle brought Pierrebon to my side, and the injury was looked to by such light as the moon gave. Fortunately it was but a slight flesh wound, and an improvised bandage soon gave relief. So, resting it in a sling out of my scarf, I leaned back once more, and bade Pierrebon go and sleep.

For an hour or more I sat thus, watching and thinking. At last, rising slowly, I cautiously stepped up to mademoiselle and looked. She was asleep; but so still did she lie, so pale and white did she look, that I thought for a terrible moment that she was dead, and bent over her, placing my hand close to her lips to feel if she breathed. She moved uneasily as I did so, and I came back to my tree and to my thoughts. Finally, as the moon was sinking, I too slept, and as I slept I dreamed. I saw myself once more riding towards Orrain, and not alone, for mademoiselle was by my side. As we rode out of the pine-woods the Chateau stood before us. There was the square keep, with its pepper-box towers, and bartizans overhanging the moat. There were the grey ramparts tapestried in ivy, and the terraced gardens, where the peacocks sunned themselves. All around us were happy faces, and joyous voices welcoming us home—the home to which I had so long been dead; and it was mine now, and more besides—and then—I awoke with a start and looked around me. It was all so real.

"Tush!" I exclaimed, "have I slipped back into the days of enchantment and the fay Melusine?" And rising I saw it was touching dawn, for the east was red, and the morning star, Maguelonne—the shepherd's star, as we call it in our hills—was burning bright. Mademoiselle and Pierrebon were still asleep, and it was too early yet to awaken them. It would be time enough when the sun rose, and in the meanwhile I began to reflect upon the best means of bestowing mademoiselle in safety. Razines was so near to Richelieu that if the latter were occupied by marauders they would hardly have left the little hamlet alone, unless, indeed, they were Huguenots who were in Richelieu. In which event Razines, which was known to be touched with the new heresy, would probably be unharmed. This, however, did not make things any the better for us. I made up my mind that the best course would be to take mademoiselle on with me to Poitiers, and there hand her over to some responsible person until her friends could be told of her. The very thought of this, however, jarred on me somehow, and I caught myself building castles in Spain again. "Come," I said to myself, "at your age, *mon ami*, you should know better than to go off dreaming at the sight of a pretty face and the sound of a sweet voice." And then I laughed aloud at the thought that I knew but half her name—that at any rate would be remedied soon. So, rising, for it was time now, I softly awoke Pierrebon and mademoiselle, and in a short while we were once more on our way through the low hills that stretched through Lencloître.

It was necessary at all hazards that we should get some food, as well for the horses as ourselves, and when we had gone a little way we saw Razines lying to our left. Here I halted, and, moving my party into cover behind some trees, I explained the position, and begged mademoiselle to remain with Pierrebon, whilst I went forward to the village to see how matters stood, adding that, if I did not return within a short time, her best course would be to go on to Poitiers with Pierrebon, and place herself in a convent there until she could write to her friends.

"Monsieur," she answered, her colour rising, "you have risked enough for me already. I will not permit you to do this. If you go to Razines I go too."

I was delighted with her courage; but though I pressed her hard to do what I asked she was firm in her resolve. In this matter, however, I had no intention of yielding, and we might have been there half the day had we not seen coming up the road a couple of villagers with some cattle.

"We can at least inquire from them," I suggested, and she laughed.

"At the first sight of you, monsieur, they will be off. Let me go!" And suiting action to words she rode out towards the peasants. There was truth in her words, for as she rode out of the trees one of the yokels fled at once, but the other, seeing it was a woman, held his ground. A moment after they were in converse, and I saw a broad grin on the man's face. Then mademoiselle beckoned to us, and we came forth. On our appearance the peasant seemed inclined to follow his friend's example; but we somehow managed to reassure him, and gathered that, except for a small party of harmless travellers who were at the Green Man, Razines was empty.

"You are luckier than they are at Richelieu, my friend," I said.

"Then Richelieu is taken?"

"Apparently so."

"Hola! for Monsieur de Ganache!" And he flung his cap in the air. "Ha, monsieur, the Vicomte passed here but yesterday evening, with sixty lances at his back, to hang the Guidon. Has he done so?"

"I know not," I answered; and turning to mademoiselle, said: "We have had a lucky escape."

"Indeed! How, monsieur?"

"Because M. de Ganache is known to be one of the fiercest of the Huguenot leaders, and spares nothing."

"We have to thank those who made him so, monsieur; and at any rate he has spared Razines."

I looked at her in surprise. Her eyes sparkled and her cheeks were hot, and I could scarce forbear a smile at the thought that it was a little rebel I had in my charge, and turning the talk, said:

"We may go on to the Green Man in safety, I think." And, bidding Pierrebon give the yokel a coin, we pressed forwards. It was not, however, without another careful scrutiny that I led the way into the village, where we were soon within the doors of the inn. It was a poor place, but host and hostess were kindly; and did the best they could. In the public room was the party of travellers whom the peasant had mentioned. They consisted of a gentleman and his wife, whose dress and air betokened them people of rank, whilst a little apart, at the lower end of the room, were one or two others—their servants. The glitter of a sapphire ring on the stranger's hand attracted my attention, and it was as if he noticed the casual glance I cast at it, for he turned his hand so as to hide the ring. This set me observing him more narrowly, and though it was years since I had seen him I was certain it was the Cardinal of Châtillon. It was Odet de Coligny himself, not a doubt of it, and the lady was the noble woman who had sacrificed so much for his sake. He had married her—prince of the Church though he was—and had openly thrown in his lot with those of the New Faith.

They in their turn looked at us with interest as we entered, and on seeing mademoiselle the lady looked as if she knew her, and seemed as if she were about to speak, but Châtillon said something in a low voice which restrained her. On the other hand, mademoiselle seemed flurried, and kept her face averted. I could not but think they knew each other; but it was no time to ask questions, so I said nothing, but quietly set about arranging for our comforts. Mademoiselle retired to her room at once, the landlady fussing after her, and after having assisted Pierrebon to see to the horses I myself went to rest. I must have slept for a good four hours, and on awakening found it was high noon. Down I came, and entering the public room of the inn found it empty. I went on towards the stables, where Pierrebon was still asleep near the horses. There was no sign of mademoiselle, and thinking she was still resting I let Pierrebon alone, and returning into the inn sat near a window, awaiting my charge's appearance. Had I been alone I would have pressed on to Poitiers, and reached it by nightfall; but as it was it would be better to wait till well on in the afternoon, when mademoiselle, being refreshed, would no doubt be able to travel. We should halt at Miribeau for the night, and make Poitiers the next day. So I let some time go past, and then, feeling dull, called to the host, and invited him to share a bottle of wine with me. He came, as it seemed, somewhat unwillingly; but soon we were in talk, and, for something to say, I inquired about the other travellers. Here his embarrassment increased, and he stammered out that they had gone on to Richelieu about two hours ago; and then, as if taking a sudden resolution, fumbled in his pocket, and drew forth a letter, which he handed to me, saying: "For you, monsieur."

I tore open the cover, and read:

"MONSIEUR,—I owe you so much that I know not how to thank you or how to explain my leaving you as I do now. I feel sure you would like to know that I am going of my own free will, and with friends. Monsieur, we will meet again I know, and then, perhaps, I shall be in a position to show you that I can be grateful. DIANE."

I read to the end without a word, and glanced at my host. He saw and understood the question in my eyes.

"Mademoiselle gave it to me with her own hands. I—I could not prevent her leaving," he added, with fear in his voice. The poor wretch was almost overcome with terror at the thought that I might turn against him in my wrath.

"Thank you; that is enough." And crushing the letter in my hand I rose and walked out. I was hurt and indignant, but after a little I cooled down. After all, her proper place was with her friends. I had but helped her on her way, and there was an end of it. So I swallowed my ill-humour as best I could, and, to

his astonishment, making the landlord of the inn a present of the horse we had taken at Le Jaquemart, Pierrebon and I went on our way.

CHAPTER XII

A WRITER OF COMMENTARIES

I rode sullenly on, my eyes between my horse's ears. Pierrebon, who loved to wag his tongue, once or twice tried to open a talk, but finding his efforts useless dropped away back. It was not possible to go fast, as the horses were worn, and had to be saved for the stretch of nearly six leagues that lay between us and Poitiers, which, however, I had made up my mind to reach ere the gates were closed for the night. Despite all our care we were delayed by Pierrebon's nag casting a shoe, and this meant a stop for nearly an hour at a small hamlet, the name of which I forget. At length matters were righted, and we continued our journey. The day was hot and overcast. Towards sunset the clouds increased, and ever and again the rumbling of thunder gave warning of an approaching storm. We were, however, near Poitiers by this, and could see the spires of the churches and the black mass of the city. I drew rein for a moment to look, and almost felt as if my task were done, when Pierrebon exclaimed:

"*Allons*, monsieur! it has come!"

And with a vengeance, too. First a few warm drops, then a blaze of lightning, a crash of thunder, and then rain in torrents. It became dark, and it was with the greatest difficulty that we could find our way. But at length we reached the Pont Joubert, and passing the Chapel of the Holy Virgin, raised in memory of the miraculous preservation of the city during the war of the hundred years, we entered Poitiers. It is true we had reached it, but it seemed as if our difficulties had only begun. What with the darkness and the wind blowing the rain straight in our faces, so that we could barely see, it would have been hard for us to have found our way anywhere, even if we knew the city, but neither Pierrebon nor I had been in Poitiers before. In the basement of the guard-tower flanking the gate lights were burning, and a group of soldiers were sitting at a table playing at dice, whilst a few stray travellers were huddled together at the entrance, waiting, perhaps, for the storm to pass, and continually peering out into the darkness from their shelter, if such it could be called. I made my way there, and had to shout twice ere I was heard, so great was the noise of the tempest. Finally the ancient of the gate came up, and I asked him for the nearest inn. He answered, civilly enough:

"'Tis but a little way, monsieur. Go straight down the Rue du Pigeon Blanc, past Ste. Radegonde, and the Filles de Notre Dame, there in the place St. Simplicien——"

"But I know nothing of Poitiers. How am I to find my way?"

To this he shrugged his shoulders and laughed; but at this juncture a boy stepped forth out of the group at the door and offered to guide us to the inn. This offer I accepted, and with a word of thanks to the ancient we went on—the last thing we heard being hoarse orders shouted out to close the gates. Our way was lit by continuous flashes of lightning, and by one of these, lasting longer than usual, I saw on a hill which overlooked the Church of Ste. Radegonde, her right hand outstretched as if invoking a blessing on the city, the colossal Virgin of Poitiers all shining with light—light that seemed to flame back from the statue against the storm. So impressive was it that Pierrebon crossed himself, and the boy sank on his knees in the water that hummed along the street with an "Ave, ave!"

The sight was one I have never forgotten, and has often given me subject for reflection, so that I am firmly convinced that even if a God did not exist the imagination of man would conjure one up for his worship.

It was lucky that we found a guide, for, short as the distance was, I doubt if we would have found our way that night to the hostel of the Elephant, for so the inn was called. Once there I gave the boy a coin, bidding him get something to eat, for he looked as though he needed it, and told him to wait, as I would require him shortly. I determined to halt there until the storm had subsided a little, and inquired where Montluc resided. He had but lately come, I was informed, and was for the present temporarily lodged in the priory of the Capuchins. So, taking the opportunity whilst I waited for the rain to diminish, I had some refreshment, and attended to my arm, which was still painful. I then made arrangements with the landlord for another horse, as nothing would have induced me to ride my own poor beast farther that night. This being settled, I waited for half an hour or so, when the storm somewhat abated, though the wind was still high, and there was a sharp drizzle. Then mounting the hired horse, and giving the boy a

lantern I had borrowed, I bade him guide me to the priory of the Capuchins.

On we went, the wind and rain in our faces. By good luck the lantern held out, though its light was not much better than that of a glowworm. We picked our way through narrow streets swimming with water, past gutters babbling like mountain streams, and made a snail's progress through that infernal night. Now and again a broad sheet of lightning blazed athwart the darkness, showing the black and uneasy clouds overhead, and giving a momentary glimpse of tall, ghostly towers, of gabled roofs and pointed windows, and of houses that seemed to lean forward and form arcades, below which the crooked, glistening streets wound. As we were passing a large church—I found out later that it was St. Croix—the bells began to sound compline, and then from every steeple and spire in the city the chime was echoed, and borne across the night in strange sweetness by the storm. My little guide made his way bravely, and at length—it seemed an age—we reached the priory of the Capuchins. Lights were burning everywhere, and there was a huge log fire spluttering at the gate, which was still open. The arched passage beyond the gate, which led to the forecourt, was full of men, not hooded Capuchins, but men-at-arms, and it was easy to see that the priory had been turned into a camp. I explained that I bore despatches from Paris for M. de Montluc, and the words acted like magic. I was told to leave my horse to the boy, and was led along the galleries that bounded the cloisters of the forecourt. They were full of men, but all orderly and quiet, as may be imagined with Montluc at hand. At length we reached the hall, and there I was asked to wait until the General was informed of my arrival. All dripping and wet as I was, and unheeding the glances cast at me by those who were there, I sat down on a bench near the fireplace, in which, on account of the damp, a fire had been lit, and glowered into the flames, the blue smoke rising in little columns from my drenched clothes. No one spoke to me, nor did I address anyone, and I was struck by the extraordinary silence that was preserved. Men spoke in whispers, and even when a man-at-arms passed, his step was as light as that of a monk.

"Monsieur," said a voice, "will you have the goodness to follow me?"

I looked up, and saw an officer wearing the red and white sash of Randan's Light Horse, my old comrades, and the sight of the colours after so many years affected me to such a degree that at first I was unable to move, and the officer had to repeat his request. Then I arose, and followed him up what seemed an interminable stair. At last we halted before a door, and here to the knock we heard a sharp "Enter." Stepping in, I found myself before Montluc, and apologised for appearing in the drenched condition I was in. He took no notice of me, however, but kept walking up and down the cabinet like a tiger. He was in demi-mail, the collar of the Order at his neck, and as he paced the room with a halting step I observed with interest and respect the great soldier who in forty years of glorious service had but twice seen the Court. His defence of Siena was still ringing through Europe; but back upon that one saw the field of Pavia, the campaign in Naples, the defence of Marseilles, the siege of Perpignan, and the glorious campaign of Italy, which ended in the crown of Cerisolles, and where, but for him, the day was lost. I had served at Cerisolles myself; but though I had seen Montluc I had never known him. Years had, however, seemed to make no impression upon him; and, tall and lean, with long grey moustaches, and glittering, grey-green eyes, he looked like a fierce and starving cat as he restlessly limped to and fro.

At last he suddenly stopped, and, resting a hand on the hip broken at
Chieri, asked me abruptly:

"I am told you have brought despatches from Paris?"

"Monsieur!" And taking out the packet I had been entrusted with I handed it to him.

He received it in silence, and sitting down at a table littered with papers examined the seals. Then drawing his poniard he was about to cut open the packet when he arrested himself, saying:

"I see it is from the Queen."

"Monsieur, it was given to me by her Majesty herself, and when you have read it I have a message for you."

"The Queen must trust you."

"She has in this case, monsieur."

He smiled grimly, and opened the packet. As he read his face assumed so malign and fierce an aspect that I had little difficulty in persuading myself of the truth of the stories of savage cruelty that I had heard of him. When he had finished he set down the paper, and asked calmly enough:

"Your message, monsieur?"

I told him, he taking it down word for word, and placing the paper carefully in a drawer, out of which he drew a parchment roll.

"You see this, monsieur? It is my patent as lieutenant of the South. After nearly forty years of service it was given to me. I have held it a month—and now—it is waste-paper." And with that he flung it into the drawer, which he shut with a clash.

"They have need of me in Italy again, they say; and when I am gone, mark my words, these psalm-singing Huguenots, these Chrysostoms, whom I have made skip like the hills in their own hymn, will be in Poitiers in a week." And he laughed harshly as he went on: "They fear I shall turn against them, and throw in my lot with these others—I—Blaise de Montluc! Tell them I am a soldier of my King, that I am but a poor gentleman of the South, who when his time is done will hang up his sword in his Chateau of Estillac, and die there, unless God answers his prayer and lets him die on the field."

I saw before me the sudden breaking of great hopes, and, as I then thought, the ruin of a great career, and stammered out: "Monsieur, you will soon be back."

He smiled, and then, as if pushing all aside from his mind: "This will at any rate make a chapter of my commentaries. I am writing them in the style of Caesar, whom I hope to surpass in this. At present, I have carried them as far as the sieges of Parma and La Mirandole by the armies of the Holy Father and the Emperor." With this he pointed at a pile of manuscript that lay on the table, as he added, with true Gascon conceit: "It is better that they who make history should write it rather than leave it to some scoundrel clerk, as I hear Vieilleville is doing."

He seemed to have forgotten his misfortune in the contemplation of his writing, and on my applauding his sentiment, he, looking at my arm, which was still in its sling, asked how I had hurt it. I told him briefly, and he listened in silence, until I gave him information of De Ganache and the Huguenots at Richelieu. Then he stopped me.

"Are you sure they were there last night?"

"Yes, and probably till late to-day."

"Then we will have most of them here as our guests, monsieur, in a couple of days at the latest. I want De Ganache badly, and would like much to finish with him ere they finish with me."

I thought of Diane, and in my heart sent up a prayer that, on this occasion at least, the Huguenots might escape Montluc's claws; and the General went on:

"I see, monsieur, the Queen has recommended you as one to be trusted entirely—and the Queen is not easily deceived. You are, she says, a citizen of Paris, and have borne arms—where?"

"In the Milanese, monsieur. I was at Cerisolles with Monsieur d'Enghien."

"Good! And after that?"

"I did not serve, monsieur."

We looked hard at each other, and a dry but not unkindly smile sat on his lips.

"Would you care to see Italy again?"

"If the Queen has no further need for me I am ready."

"We will leave it so, then. In the meantime, you may, perhaps, have a little commission to execute for me, or rather for the Queen. That will keep you employed until you finally decide. It may need using your sword. Does your wound trouble you?"

"It will be healed in less than a week."

"Well, go now and rest. You are being lodged here, of course?"

"I have secured a lodging at the Elephant, monsieur."

"Then to-morrow you must come here. I will see to that, for I like to lay hands on a man when I want him." And with this he struck a gong, and the officer who had brought me in appeared.

"Sarlaboux," said the General, "let Monsieur Broussel be conducted safely to his inn, and see that no harm befalls him."

I was about to take my leave when Montluc stopped me.

"A word!— That little story of yours in connection with your wound, monsieur, has interested me. I will give it a place in my commentaries." And he took up his pen as I retired, followed by Sarlaboux.

I may add that, many years after, it was my good fortune to see a copy of the old Marshal's commentaries, which had been made for his brother, Monseigneur the Bishop of Valence. By some strange chance, for he rarely forgot anything, he had omitted my story, nor was there any mention of the secret communication I made to him; and, perhaps, this was due to design. He was a great soldier and a great man, whose life may be summed up in the motto of his house: *Deo duce, ferro comite*.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TOUR DE L'OISEAU

"Thirty-three Henris, of which two are bad, these I have set aside—seven sols, and nine deniers, making in all thirty-one Henris, seven sols, and nine coppers of good money—and this is all, monsieur."

It was touching the afternoon, and I was going over the present state of my affairs with Pierrebon. I looked at the small heaps of coin he had sorted out carefully on the table before me, and then rising walked to my window and gazed out. The storm of last night had passed, and Poitiers lay before me, all wet and glistening in warm sunlight. I was not, however, interested in the landscape but in the hard fact that thirty-one Henris, in round figures, would not carry me far in what I had before me. After a minute or so I came back again, and looked at the money and then at Pierrebon. It was a hopeless sum.

"It is correct, monsieur," he said; "and, of course, we have the horses."

"I know that; but what I am thinking of is that it is not enough. In short, I know not how long it will be before I can communicate with Olden Hoorn at Antwerp; and more money is needed, for there is work before us, Pierrebon."

The honest fellow's eyes lit. "How many times have I not said the good days would come back, monsieur? All the years can never be famine years, and we will have our hotel in the Rue de Bourgogne again, and twenty gentlemen at our heels when we go to the Louvre; and if money is needed now, monsieur, we have it."

"Where? I do not see it." And I laughed.

For answer Pierrebon unclasped his belt. Then taking his poniard he ripped up an inch or so of leather on the inner side and took therefrom a piece of paper carefully folded. This he handed to me, saying:

"Open it carefully, monsieur."

I did so, and found I had in my hand a diamond of some value. I looked at it in astonishment, and then at Pierrebon. He read my glance, and began hastily:

"Do not refuse, monsieur, for it came to me from you, as all that I have has come. When we left Antwerp I had a hundred and fifty livres, amassed in your service. Thirty I brought away in cash, and with a hundred and twenty I purchased this stone from Olden Hoorn himself. It is worth a hundred, I dare say, and, as money is needed now, 'tis better to use our own than to go a-borrowing."

It was impossible to refuse this faithful friend, and the diamond was transferred to me. I may mention that I had declined all offers of money made to me by the Queen and Le Brusquet, for I had a mind to work out my way without any such obligation. It was, however, a different matter with Pierrebon, and when the time came he lost nothing by his fidelity.

Matters being so far arranged we left the Elephant and betook ourselves to the priory of the Capuchins, as M. de Montluc wished. On arrival there I found that the General had set forth at dawn, with a hundred lances and the Light Horse, and that two or three days might elapse ere he returned. He had, however, left particular instructions about me, and I found myself comfortably enough lodged. My first task was to make arrangements for Masses for the soul of the dead Olivet, and for the erection of a small cross to his memory in the Church of Ste. Radegonde. Thus having fulfilled my promise to mademoiselle I spent the next day or so in resting my arm, which grew rapidly better, and in replacing sundry articles of apparel both for Pierrebon and myself. All this made so considerable a gulf in the

thirty-one Henris that I resolved to transmute the diamond into gold.

I consulted Sarlaboux, who, to his disgust, had been left behind in Poitiers. He looked at the diamond, and said he would buy it for a hundred and twenty livres; but protested, with oaths, that he had but ten crowns in the world, and would, therefore, not be able to pay me at once. This I could not agree to; and I was very nearly involved in a quarrel, as he thought that a slight was being put upon his parole. The affair, however, passed off. Finally, I decided on the advice of a new acquaintance of mine—a Capuchin named Grigolet—to seek the Jews' quarter, where at any rate I would receive gold and not promises to pay. This Capuchin, who was a jovial soul, obligingly said he would accompany me, as he himself had a little business there, in connection with the conversion of a young Jewess, whose eyes, he said in confidence, were brighter than any diamond. I accepted the holy man's aid, and we set forth, he showing me many places of interest on our way.

We left the priory by the western postern and went up the Rue des Trois Piliers. The three pillars, which give its name to the street, mark the boundary between the jurisdiction of the Chapter of St. Hilaire and the town of Poitiers. They are set in the city wall, a few yards apart, and the statue on the first pillar is that of the Emperor Gallienus. On reaching the head of the road we turned up a narrow alley, and found ourselves in the vast enclosure of the old arena—far larger than those of Nimes and Aries in that it was capable of seating fifty thousand persons, and was served for entrance or exit by a hundred and twenty-four vomitories. Through this immense and deserted ruin we passed, gaining the Rue d'Evreux by one of the entrances, in the archway of which an inn was built. Then, passing the Colleges of Ste. Marthe and Puygarreau, we took the Rue du Chat Rouge, and finally came before the ogive arch, which formed the entrance to the Rue de Penthièvre, where the Jews were compelled to live and transact their business. A similar arch and gate shut in the other end of the street, and guards were at each gate. During the day these unfortunate people were allowed to go into the city at their own risk; but by nightfall, at the sound of the *couvre feu*, every one of them had to be within his street, under heavy pains and penalties, which were rigorously exacted.

On entering we found ourselves in a small and narrow street crowded with people in yellow and grey gaberdines. All around us were dark faces, bright black eyes, and hooked noses. Children swarmed, and lay about in the filth and ordure of the pavement. My companion drew forth a small flagon of scent, with which he liberally besprinkled both himself and me, and picking our way with care we found ourselves before the shop of Nathan the Jew. Here, whilst the Capuchin went farther on to see his Jewess, I haggled with Nathan for an hour or more over the price of the diamond, but could not persuade him to give more than fifteen livres. This was absurd, and I was about to turn away in disgust when the Capuchin returned. The bargaining was now taken up by a master, and the short of it was that we made our way out of the Jews' quarter with sixty-three livres in my purse. Three of these I gave Grigole for his good offices, and on approaching the Rue d'Evreux the holy man disappeared into an auberge, doubtless with a view to meditate on further arguments for the conversion of his Miriam, whilst I returned alone to the priory.

I was now fairly well supplied with money, but took the opportunity to write to my friend at Antwerp, bidding him send two hundred crowns of the sun for me to the care of Le Brusquet. This, with many misgivings, I entrusted to the King's post. It, however, arrived in safety, and I got my money.

After supper that evening, as I was returning to my chamber, I heard a commotion in the courtyard, and at first thought that Montluc had returned. On inquiry, however, I found that this was not so, but that certain prisoners of importance had been brought to the priory. I could not find out who they were, nor, indeed, did I try much, but took myself off.

So far things were going well with me, and I felt myself justified in the hope that the famine years were coming to an end. I saw the sentence of the Chambre Ardente against me cancelled, and began to see also fine castles in dreamland, and with all these I unconsciously began to associate Diane. I laughed at my folly, tried to set it aside; but back came the thought to me, in such a manner that I felt that every step I was about to take to win back my place was not for myself but for her sake. And the fear of his own unworthiness, which comes to every man who truly loves, came upon me, and with it the ghost of that duel of days long past.

There I had sinned, and sinned deeply, and it was poor consolation to tell myself that the man does not live whose life could stand sunshine on it. For me it was enough to know that I had committed a grievous wrong; it was for me to find out how to right it, or make compensation—empty regrets were useless.

Of that affair it may be as well to speak freely here. Amongst my friends in the red days was one who was to me as David to Jonathan. Godefrey de la Mothe was of an old family of the Tarantaise, and his career at college had been of exceptional brilliancy. Some years my senior, he had at first acquired great influence over me, an influence ever exercised for my good. This lasted until my return from the

Italian campaign, when, seeing ruin staring me in the face, I had let everything go, and sought to drown my sorrows in dissipation. My friend strove to stay me; but, driven to madness, I repulsed all his kindness. One day we met near the Louvre, in such a manner that there was no avoiding him. He began to expostulate with me on my latest folly. I answered back hotly, and at last there were high words between us, and that was said by me for which there was but one remedy; and he fell, as is known. Since then I could only regret. But now there was punishment as well as regret. With the memory of this could I dare to think of Diane? There was only one answer, and with that answer I began to realise that what comes to all men had come to me, and that I loved. In his gibing way Le Brusquet had said that a man feels conscious of love in the same manner as he feels a sudden chill. The words came back to me, and I laughed sadly, for there was truth in them.

I own that the blue-devils took me to such an extent that I had thoughts of abandoning everything; but this soon passed, and I made up my mind to right things as far as man could, and leave the issue in the hands of God. I had been paying for my sins for so many years that the debt was almost quitted, and a stout heart would, perhaps, bring me to shore.

Nevertheless, I passed a white night, and rising early in the morning rode out of the city by the Porte de Rochereuil, returning about ten o'clock. On coming back I found that M. de Montluc had returned, and had desired to see me at once. I was about to dismount when Sarlaboux, who had recovered his temper, which he lost over the affair of the diamond, informed me that the General had gone on to the Tour de l'Oiseau, and I had better follow him there if I thought the matter of sufficient importance. This I did, and as soon as ever Pierrebon, whom I gave orders to accompany me, was ready we set forth, and Sarlaboux came with us. Whilst waiting for Pierrebon he told me that Montluc had utterly broken the Huguenot leader De Ganache near Richelieu, and taken him prisoner.

"Were any others taken?"

"Probably; and must be trying to hang as gracefully as walnuts now. Ménorval tells me that the old fox of Châtillon got off, though with a singed tail."

I began to breathe more freely. If the Cardinal had escaped it was more than probable that mademoiselle was safe; but I resolved to make sure.

"There were no ladies taken, were there?"

Sarlaboux cocked his eye and looked at me. "*Eh bien*! My dear monsieur, are you finding it dull here? If so, I confess so do I. This is a city of the saints. Alas, no! There were no ladies taken, as far as I know; only De Ganache."

"Then it was he who arrived last night?"

"No; he was brought in by Montluc himself this morning, and it strikes me that he will never see the sun set. He has been taken to the Tour de l'Oiseau where Montluc has just gone, and which we had better reach as soon as possible if we wish to see things."

I had to be content with this, and Pierrebon being ready we started off at a smart canter. The news I had heard had set my heart going, and it was in no enviable frame of mind that I drew up at the entrance to the Tour de l'Oiseau. The full strength of the Light Horse, their red and white pennons fluttering in the air, were trooped around the tower, and it was evident that something was about to happen, for the faces of all were grave, and all eyes kept scanning the battlements. Giving my reins to Pierrebon I passed in with Sarlaboux, and running up the stairs reached the top of the tower. There we found Montluc standing, with half a dozen or so of his officers around him, and before him a young man, his head bare, and his hands bound behind him, stood facing Montluc. It was De Ganache.

We took our places silently in the group just as Montluc spoke, in a harsh, stern voice:

"M. de Ganache, your crimes are heavy, and you are about to pay for them. I bear no malice against you. I set aside my private wrongs, the plunder of my Château of Estillac, the burning of my woods, and the wanton destruction of my papers and manuscripts collected by me with immense care."

De Ganache laughed mockingly, and the blue veins stood out on Montluc's forehead. If the issue had not been so terrible there was room, in truth, for a smile, as he went on, with a gasp of rage:

"What I hold against you is that you have been taken armed—a rebel against your King and your God. I am going to make an example of you, and shall deal out to you the same mercy you showed to Champagnac, and——"

"Enough, monsieur!" said the prisoner; "let this talking end. If I have to die, let me die. I do not want

a priest. I die in my faith, which is not yours. Let the matter end quickly, and be done with it."

A grim smile played on Montluc's lips as he leaned heavily on his sword.

"Well, be it so! I will not keep you. Supposing we say a leap."

"A leap?"

"Yes—from these battlements. If not, you will hang."

"Hang!—I!" And a flush came on the young noble's face.

"Precisely. Champagnac was hanged, if you remember, and it is the fate you reserved for me. You, however, have a choice."

For a moment there was a silence, and Montluc made a sign to the guards on either side of De Ganache to move away, and he was left free, except that his hands were fastened. With a half turn he looked over the battlements and gazed down from their dizzy height, and as he appeared at the embrasure there arose a hoarse cry from below. He drew back, and faced Montluc again.

"Is it to be like this?" he asked thickly, making a motion to indicate his tied hands.

"Yes; you will fall easier."

At this brutal answer De Ganache looked hopelessly around, as if imploring help. His fortitude seemed to give way, and he began to shiver in an uncontrollable manner. I could endure it no longer, and made a step forward; but, growling something that I did not catch, Sarlaboux seized me by the arm and drew me back. Just at this moment Montluc laughed a bitter, stinging laugh; and the wretched prisoner, swinging round, nerved himself to step again to the embrasure, and stopped there tottering. Again the shout rose from below, and Montluc rasped out:

"Come, De Ganache, two looks are enough!"

"I'll give you three to do it in, Monsieur de Montluc," I burst forth, and shaking Sarlaboux off stepped up to the General.

"You!" he snarled.

"Monsieur," I exclaimed, "this will cover you with shame! This is the act of a tiger, not a man. Forbear!—for the sake of your own fame, your own honour."

There was a low murmur behind me; even the stolid guards glanced at each other; but Montluc, after one swift, angry look at me, kept his head down, and made no answer, standing glowering at the hilt of his sword as one who did not hear.

It was De Ganache, however, who spoke. He had plucked up heart again after his weakness.

"There is at least one gentleman here! Let him alone, monsieur! Plead not! After all, death is but death." But I stayed him with uplifted hand, and went on: "Monsieur de Montluc, you will ever regret this. Will you soil your glory with this act of shame?"

Our eyes met, and the sombre fury in his look dropped before my gaze. I saw my advantage, and approaching closer to him urged him again, and to my joy he began to waver. Suddenly he turned from me, and walking to the battlements looked down himself, remaining there for a space amidst an absolute silence, broken but once by the uneasy clink of a spur.

So he stood, and we waited breathlessly, for all hung on a hair; and then as suddenly he turned to us, his face looking older and more wrinkled than ever.

"M. de Ganache," he said in a hard voice, "you are free. Guards, loose him!"

Without another word or look he stepped forward, and began to limp slowly down the winding stair.

CHAPTER XIV

As the guards cut the cords that bound De Ganache's arms those who were on the tower crowded round to congratulate him; but he seemed dazed, and unable to realise his fortune. With an effort, however, he brought himself together, and silently took my hand. He could not speak, but I understood; and now Sarlaboux urged an immediate move, saying that the sooner De Ganache was away the better, as there was no knowing what might happen next. With this he led the way down, and we followed.

On coming forth from the tower we found that the troops were already moving away, though many of the officers remained behind, and came up to us, out of curiosity to learn what had happened. At first we could not see Montluc anywhere, but a voice called out: "There is the General!" And looking, we saw a lonely figure in the distance galloping by the Marais de St. Hilaire. Then he turned the angle of the great priory. There was a flash of his red plume, a glitter of sunlight on his corselet, and he was gone.

"If you take my advice, monsieur," I said to De Ganache, "you will be off at once. Here is a horse—and there is the open gate." And with this I placed the reins of my nag, which Pierrebon had brought up, in his hand. The enthusiasm of the moment caught all. Ménorval of the Light Horse gave him a sword, someone else a hat, another a cloak. The colour came and went from De Ganache's sunburnt face as, stammering his thanks, he mounted. Then he put out his hand to me. "Monsieur," he said, "I can never forget; and De Ganache is ever your friend. *Au revoir*, gentlemen!" So, giving the reins to the horse, he galloped out of the gate, which was but a stonethrow distant. As he crossed the bridge he turned in the saddle and waved his hand in farewell, and then we lost him in the hollow ground beyond.

Mounting Pierrebon's horse I joined the others, and we rode back to the priory—Ménorval swearing that I must be a magician, as never before had he known Montluc yield as he had done this morning.

As for me, though surprised at the result, my satisfaction was increased by the thought that in aiding De Ganache I had helped one who was a friend of mademoiselle. It was not this that had prompted me to intervene on his behalf. Had it been anyone else I should have acted as I had done. De Ganache was not clean-handed. He had shown little mercy to those who fell into his hands, and when face to face with death he had shown the white feather, though at the last he seemed to recover himself. Still, guilty though he may have been, his death would have been a crime, and it was something to think I had stood between Montluc and that terrible blood madness which at times possessed him.

On arrival at the Capuchins my first thought was to see Montluc at once, and although Sarlaboux and others tried to dissuade me I persisted in my design, and found myself once more before the door of his cabinet. On my entering he received me coldly, and, without making any reference to what had just happened, inquired my business as if he had totally forgotten his summons to me. I explained that I was there in obedience to his request to see me, and after a moment of thought he said:

"You recollect I told you I would probably entrust you with a commission to the Queen? Are you ready to undertake it?"

"Perfectly."

"You will have to go back to Paris; but that is your way. When can you start?"

It was not wise to think of a return to Paris; but I had gone too far to shrink back now, and besides, I was beginning to believe again in my star. So I gulped down my fears, and put a bold front on the matter, saying:

"As soon as I can get a horse, monsieur."

"Ho!" And we looked at each other steadily. A faint smile bent his iron lips, and, muttering something in his beard, he took up a pen, scratched a few lines, and handed me the paper. I glanced at it, and saw it was an order to give me any horse I liked from his stable. I began to thank him; but he stopped me, saying:

"Show the order to Sarlaboux; and if you take my advice you will choose
Lizette, the dun mare. She will well replace the one you have—lost."

"I well know how to value such a gift, monsieur."

"Here there is a packet for the Queen; but this is not your task. I am going to entrust you with a prisoner, whom you will place in the Queen's hands."

"Monsieur," I began; but he read my thoughts ere I had spoken them.

"Oh, it is no catch-poll's business; I have others to do that. This lady is only a nominal prisoner——"

"It's a woman, then?" And my thoughts went back to mademoiselle. Could Sarlaboux have been mistaken?

"Yes; and remember that her life depends upon her reaching the Queen, though she does not believe it."

"May I ask this lady's name?"

"Mademoiselle de Paradis, the greatest heiress in Poitou, but a Huguenot to her little finger-tips."

"In that case, monsieur, the Queen's mantle of protection is likely to be a shroud."

"You do not understand," he snapped. "Mademoiselle, or rather her lands, have attracted the attention of Diane de Poitiers and her brood of swallows. The Queen would give her right hand to thwart the mistress in this, and she, and only she, can save her. Montpensier will be here in a fortnight, and I shall be gone. You know, I think, what that means. I give you my word of honour, monsieur, that this lady's life is on a hair. Why I should trouble about it I don't know; but the Queen has commanded me in this, and Jean de Paradis, her father, was my old friend, and for his sake I would save his child. But you seem to be sniffing the air over this, M. Broussel——"

"I was, monsieur! But now I accept the task."

"Very well. You will arrange, then, to start at three. I shall see that mademoiselle is ready. You will have four good swords with you; and, remember, she is your prisoner, rescue or no rescue."

I bowed, and was turning to go, when he stopped me.

"A word more! Trust not a soul, King's man or Huguenot—do not even trust her. It is said that she is the promised wife of De Ganache. If that story is true I promise you trouble, but you have yourself to thank for it." And he rose and accompanied me to his door. It was the only allusion he made to what had happened on the tower, and never again did he refer to it.

I had more than guessed who my prisoner was, though, of course, I was not sure, and the mention of De Ganache in connection with her had struck me like a blow. But it was hardly the time to think of matters like this, and putting it aside with a firm hand I hurried to my quarters, where to my annoyance I found the Capuchin Grigolet. I guessed his needs, and a brace of crowns to further the conversion of the Jewess rid me of the rascal. Then bidding Pierrebon be ready to start in a couple of hours I went in search of Sarlaboux.

I found that worthy in the archway of the main gate playing at cards with Ménorval.

"Ogier beats you." And Ménorval put down the knave of spades.

"Out upon the knave! Here is Pallas." And Sarlaboux covered the knave with the queen.

"And David, the king, takes the game," laughed Ménorval as he picked up the stakes and began to shuffle once more.

With an apology for interrupting them I showed Sarlaboux my order, whereupon, with many exclamations at my good luck, he led the way to the stable, followed by Ménorval and myself.

"*Morbleu*!" grumbled Ménorval, "if this is the pay that royal messengers get, away with my gilt spurs, and give me the wings of Mercury to my heels."

And so, laughing, we reached the stables, where Sarlaboux bid me take my choice, his face falling a little when he saw me halt before the dun mare. From her looks I saw she was likely to carry me well; and then, there was Montluc's own recommendation.

"I will take Lizette," I said.

"Then you take the best horse in all Poitou." And Ménorval then and there offered me a hundred crowns for her, which, needless to say, I refused.

At the appointed time, accompanied by Pierrebon, I rode into the courtyard of the priory, and found there the men whom Montluc had promised me. They had with them a sumpter horse, whilst a third, which was evidently intended for my prisoner, was held by a groom. I had some little time to wait, which I passed in no enviable frame of mind. Dismounting, I looked carefully at the saddlery of my party, and then paced up and down the flagged court in converse with Sarlaboux, who must have found me somewhat dull, for he rallied me, offering, if I liked not the task of taking a pretty woman all the

way to Paris, to take my place, as he had need of a wife and a dowry to rebuild his house. It was in the midst of one of his sallies that the door opened, and Montluc appeared on the steps, and by his side—Diane. There was not a doubt of it; and for a moment I became hot and cold all over, but, collecting myself, advanced to meet them. As I came forward I saw mademoiselle start slightly, make a half step towards me, and draw back, and then Montluc said:

"This gentleman, mademoiselle, will be your escort to Paris."

I bowed, saying nothing, but she held out her hand.

"Monsieur, I had hoped you would have known me."

I confess I was tongue-tied, and could only mutter something, and Montluc glanced from the one to the other of us.

"Then you are already acquainted?" he asked in surprise.

"Mademoiselle is the lady to whom, as I have mentioned to you, monsieur, I was enabled to render a slight service——"

"That is what he calls saving my life, Monsieur de Montluc. I have at any rate to thank you for giving me a friend for my jailor. There is but one more kindness I ask of you——"

"And that is——?"

"Let this gentleman escort me to Châtellerault. I do not want to go to Paris."

Montluc held up his hand. "That is the old cry, mademoiselle. It is impossible! The Queen's orders are final."

"And you call yourself my dead father's friend?"

Montluc smiled grimly. "I saved his life at Pavia. That was thirty-three years ago. But that has nothing to do with the matter. You cannot stay here. You cannot stay at Châtellerault. You must go to Paris, and it is growing late."

She flushed all over, but again returned to her point.

"You have time after time told me I am not a prisoner. Why, then——"

"Because Châtellerault no longer contains your friends, and Monsieur de Randan now commands there."

She turned as white now as she had been red before, and a bitter pang of jealousy went through me as I thought for whom all this feeling was; but she brought herself together and faced Montluc.

"Very well, monsieur. I understand your friendship and your kindness now. I tell you plainly that I will escape at the first opportunity. I shall never reach Paris."

"That is M. Broussel's affair; and, mademoiselle, the marches are long in Poitou."

She gave him no answer, but, as it were, resigning herself to the present, went up to her horse, accepting only the assistance of the groom to mount.

When all was ready Montluc called me aside, and we stood together for a moment on the wide steps.

"*Mordieu*!" he muttered as he glanced at mademoiselle, "I do not envy your task. Upon my soul, I am glad that Jean de Paradis won her mother's hand and not I!" And then in an altered manner:

"I have your word to do all that man can for her safety?"

"I have said so, monsieur."

There was a little silence, and he stretched out a lean hand.

"Monsieur, forget not: there is room for you in Italy; it would gladden me to see the golden cock of Orrain once more upon the field. And now go."

CHAPTER XV

MY PRISONER

We left Poitiers by the Porte de Rochereuil, as I had no mind to be shut within the angle between the Clain and the Vienne, whence escape would be a difficult matter if trouble arose. Whilst crossing the bridge my eyes fell on a rock on the opposite bank of the river which commanded the faubourg, and even held in check the old fortress of Jean de Berri, which guarded the junction of the Clain and Boivre on our left. I made a mental note of this, and years after I was to use this knowledge to some purpose when I stood by Coligny's side before Poitiers.

I had sent forward two of my men, with instructions to make arrangements for our accommodation for the night at Les Barres. I deemed it inadvisable to go on to Châtellerault, and Les Barres was a convenient halting-place, as there was no moon now, and there could be little travelling after sundown. Moreover, I wished to spare my charge as much as possible.

For these reasons we travelled at an easy pace, mademoiselle riding by herself a few yards ahead, for I confess that after a few civil words had passed between us I had taken the opportunity to fall back. This I did under pretence of giving instructions to Pierrebon, though I never spoke a word to him. Frankly, I was in a state that made me bad company, and I desired to be alone. The face of De Ganache seemed ever to be between me and Diane, and I morosely kept to myself, envying the lot of Adam, who was the only man who never had a rival, torturing myself, as is the custom with lovers, with a thousand suspicions, and cursing myself for a fool in having undertaken this task. Nevertheless, I am sure, such is the frailty of man, that were it to be all over again I would do in this matter all I had done before.

In fact, I was grasping the truth of what I had often laughed at—that there is none so skilled in making dragons out of beetles as the man who is in love and knows not if he is winning or losing.

We kept to the left bank of the Clain, taking a track that led over a sad and barren plain, once the garden of France. Except immediately around the city and the few hamlets we passed there was scarce a crop to be seen, and but for an abandoned vineyard, or here and there a solitary tree, brooding like a mourner over the dead, all was a dreary waste. There was little or no sign of life on this sullen and melancholy landscape. Occasionally we met a peasant making his way to some half-ruined hamlet, and driving before him a flock of geese with the aid of a long stick, to one end of which he had tied a plume of rags. At sight of us he, as a rule, left his birds to take care of themselves, and vanished like a rabbit into one of the ravines that cross and recross the plain in a network. And this was the King's peace in Poitou!

My troopers rode stolidly on, taking turns with the led horse, and now and again exchanging a word with each other. Pierrebon followed behind them, whistling the "Rappel d'Aunis." I kept to myself, as I have said, full of sombre thoughts, but watching mademoiselle as she rode about twenty paces or so in front of me. She never turned her head, but I observed that she was scanning the country on either side carefully.

Beyond Chasseneuil is a wide plain, and the track here meets the road to Thouars. I was looking at the slender spire of Miribeau, which stood out against the rising ground that stretched towards Lencloître and beyond, when I was startled by the sudden galloping of a horse. It was mademoiselle, who had turned sharply to the left, and was urging her horse at full speed towards Miribeau. We reined up amidst exclamations from the men; and the fugitive, who had got a fair distance off by this, looked back and laughed at us. It was a brave attempt at escape, and she evidently felt sure of her horse; but I had a mind to try the mettle of Montluc's gift to me, and so I told the men to go on quietly, and then, turning Lizette, followed Diane at an easy canter. As I did so, and felt the power of the long, swinging stride beneath me I smiled to myself whilst I watched the little Norman my charge rode stretching himself like a greyhound. Once more Diane looked back; and then I accepted the challenge, and gave the dun a free rein.

The country here was a wide horseshoe-shaped plain, fringed with a network of ravines, and rising gently towards Lencloître. It was for the most part barren, but at intervals there were long brown and green patches of broom, the yellow tufts swaying in the breeze. Here and there the late rain had left pools of water, flashing like mirrors in the sunlight; and away to the north-west, in dark green and grey against the sky, stretched the undulating lands of higher Poitou. Far in front of me mademoiselle rode, the white feathers in her hat fluttering like a bird, and little puffs of dust rising beneath her horse's hoofs. For a moment I thought she had made good her word to Montluc—but for a moment only. Sarlaboux was right when he said I had chosen the best horse in Poitou. She was more than that—she was one of the best horses in France, and only once was she ever beaten, but it was not on this

occasion. As she raced along the green of the broom, the flashing lights on the pools, and the white plain, all seemed to mingle in a grey haze. Soon I could make out more than a white plume and a cloud of dust before me. Yard by yard we crept up; and then mademoiselle heard the beat of following hoofs, and called to her horse, and the brave beast replied gallantly. But there was little use. He was no match for the big dun mare, and at last there was one effort more, and I was by Diane's side.

"This is not the road, mademoiselle!" I cried; but for answer she struck her beast with her whip, and then I laughed cheerfully, and our glances met. It was enough, and in a few yards she had reined up, and the little horse she rode, still full of fire, was pawing the earth, and switching his foam-flecked sides with his tail, whilst Diane was looking at me with tightened lip and a flush on her cheeks.

It was not for me to upbraid or to openly say that I had realised she had attempted to escape, and so I contented myself by remarking drily that the plain beyond was unsafe, and that there was better ground on the road to Les Barres.

"I presume, monsieur, it is for that reason we have been travelling like snails? Ah! it is fine there." And she waved her hand in the direction of Miribeau as she asked: "Why not go back to your men, Monsieur Broussel, and leave me an hour of freedom?"

"You are hard on your escort, mademoiselle," I smiled; "and besides, I took your look back as a challenge for a race. 'Tis a good little horse you ride."

"It belongs to M. de Ganache," she answered, and I bit my lip. It seemed as if I could never be free of De Ganache; but, steadying myself, I pointed to our men, filing along the white track like ants in the distance.

"It is fair going, as we know, mademoiselle, back to the road. What say you to a gallop there?"

She accepted the check she had received with a good grace, and turning her horse raced back with the recklessness of youth. On this occasion I took care that Lizette should not be first, and when we rejoined our party Diane pointed at the mare with her whip as she laughed, for she had recovered her temper.

"I see now I should not have stopped when I did. Another mile and that big, dust-coloured thing would have been yards and yards behind; would she not, Rollo?" And she bent forward and caressed the Norman's sleek neck. I did not contradict her statement, but contented myself by saying humbly that there could be no comparison between the two horses.

"I am glad you realise that, monsieur; and we will have another race—soon, I hope."

"In that case, mademoiselle, I will not stake anything, for I am certain which horse will win." And with these words I was dropping back once more to my old place when she stayed me, asking why I did not ride by her side.

"I feared to intrude, mademoiselle; it is no longer the furrier's niece
I escort."

She turned red. "Ah, monsieur, I am ashamed of my deceit; but there are things I cannot explain now that forced me to play a part."

"Let the matter rest, mademoiselle."

"I know I must have seemed ungrateful when I left you as I did; but believe me, monsieur, I can never forget the brave man who risked his life for me." And she held out her gloved hand, allowing it to rest in mine for a moment ere she withdrew it gently.

"I did what anyone else would have done. Perhaps, however, you would like to hear that I have made such arrangements as could be made for your dead servant."

"It is like you, monsieur, to remember that." And then there was a silence. After a little she asked almost timidly:

"Monsieur, amongst the prisoners taken by M. de Montluc was the Vicomte de Ganache. I have not been able to hear news of him, and I would give much to know——"

It was ever thus: De Ganache was ever first; and I answered, without letting her complete her speech:

"M. de Ganache is no longer a prisoner; he was freed by Montluc this morning."

"Freed! Are you sure?"

"Sure as I ride here. I saw him leave Poitiers in safety."

"It is almost incredible. And yet——"

"It is true, mademoiselle. M. de Ganache is known to me, and I had speech with him before he left. He is free, I assure you."

"It is, indeed, good news, monsieur." And she looked at me, her face all brightness, as she continued, with a little laugh: "M. de Montluc is, I see, more generous to men than to women."

At this juncture our speech was cut short, as from out of the ravine before us into which the road dipped there suddenly emerged one of the troopers I had sent on ahead. As the man came galloping up to us I thought at first that he bore ill tidings, but it turned out that he had ridden back to give me news of the accommodations at Les Barres.

"I have arranged, monsieur, at the sign of the Slain Leopard, where things are as good as can be expected. There is room enough, as there are no other guests but one. I have left Capus to see that everything is ready."

Thanking the man, who fell back, we pushed on at the trot, for it was now approaching sunset. Whilst passing La Tricherie I halted for a moment to show mademoiselle the ruins of Baudimont, and pointed out to her, in the distance on our right, the field of Moussaisla-Bataille, where Charles the Hammer broke the Saracen advance for ever.

We were now but a little distance from Les Barres, and could already see the roofs of the village and the square tower of the church, all alight with the sunset. As we came closer we heard the melancholy chimes of the *couvre feu*, followed by the barking of dogs, and a few minutes later we reached the hostel.

Les Barres itself was an oasis in the desert around us. It lay nestling amidst groves of walnuts, and a singular chance had spared it from the evils around. As for the hostel itself, that lay far back in a trim garden, and the quaint signboard, whereon was pictured a dead leopard on a blue field—a memory of the last days of the hundred years' war—swung triumphantly between two poles near the gate.

As we filed in my charge went into feminine raptures over the beauty of the garden, with its wealth of roses; and, indeed, it was such a spot as might have been chosen for a lovers' retreat. The interior of the inn corresponded with its old-world exterior; and the host, being forewarned, had supper in readiness, and preparations made for mademoiselle's comfort. I already had some experience of my fair charge's capacity and resource, and I was determined, for her sake, to carry out my promise to Montluc. Therefore, when mademoiselle's baggage had been carried to her chamber and she herself had retired for a space, I took the opportunity to warn my men to keep on the alert. I reminded them that their reward would be in proportion to their services; but they were old soldiers, who knew their duty, and nothing more need be said of this. Pierrebon I told off specially to keep an eye on the other guest—whom we had not seen—and then took a general survey of the house as far as it was possible. With the exception of the offices and one or two rooms, the greater portion of the lower floor consisted of one large room, half across the middle of which a stairway led to the upper floor. It seemed to me the only passage above, and whilst I was looking at it, the landlord happening to pass, I asked if this were so, and he replied: "Yes."

"You could be very easily cut off, then."

He shrugged his lean shoulders. "As easily as if we had ten ways, monsieur."

"You are lucky to have escaped so far."

"Oh, monsieur, we are poor people, and not worth pillaging, and the Vicomte has always been good to us."

"The Vicomte?"

"Yes, monsieur—the Vicomte de Ganache. He is Seigneur of Les Barres."

"I begin to understand; but I suppose you have heard that things have gone hard against M. de Ganache?"

He wrung his hands, and with a word of encouragement to him I changed the subject, and asked about the other guest. The landlord, however, professed utter ignorance of him.

"He came this morning, monsieur, and, as far as I know, goes to-morrow. He is alone, and seems poorly provided with money—and this is all I know."

There was nothing further to be done, though I had learned some things of value. As the night was warm I stepped out into the garden. It was dark, and the stars were out. High above me a light was burning faintly in a dormer window, on one side of which there was a wooden gallery overlooking the garden, and on this two figures were standing. It was too dark to see; but one was a woman, I was sure, and I was sure, too, it was mademoiselle.

For a moment I was tempted to creep beneath the balcony and—— But I put the thought aside, with a curse at myself, and turning went brooding down the garden, wondering how all this would end for me. Enough! I would do my duty—place her in the Queen's hands—and then see what Italy could do for Orrain.

A step on the gravel path, and a dark figure came face to face with me.
It was Capus, the oldest and most trusty of my troopers.

"I take the first watch, monsieur," he whispered, and passed on.

Up and down I paced for a little, and at last I heard mademoiselle's voice. She had come down, and I went back into the house.

CHAPTER XVI

THE TWELVE ROSE PETALS

Whether it were the effect of the candlelight, or whether it were due to the exertion of the day, I know not, but it seemed to me as I entered the room that mademoiselle looked pale and worn, and there was a reserve and constraint in her manner that had been absent before. I made some vapid remark about the warmth of the weather, hoping it had not added to her fatigue, to which she answered that she was tired, but that a night's rest would, doubtless, see her as well as ever by morning. The landlord at this moment announcing supper as served we went to table. At first my companion played with her food, but, yielding to my pressure, began to eat, and in a little the colour came back to her cheeks, the brightness returned to her eyes, and the coldness in her manner wore off. The landlord himself personally attended to us, and I observed that, whilst his manner towards mademoiselle was deferential and respectful in the extreme, his tone towards me was that of sulky obedience. This was so different from my first reception that, with my suspicions already aroused, it was impossible for me not to see it, and so I took the chance of a shot in the dark, saying:

"We have seen nothing of our fellow-guest, mademoiselle. It seems that, like the mole, he dislikes light. I have been thinking that, perhaps, it would be well to unearth him."

Whilst saying this I kept my eyes on an ornament on the table, but as I finished I glanced up swiftly. The landlord was at the time engaged in handing some fruit to mademoiselle, but at my remark he almost dropped the plate, and mademoiselle said, with a laugh: "You will have to arrest everyone we meet on the road, monsieur, if your suspicions are aroused so easily." Nevertheless, I was certain that a glance of understanding had passed between her and the landlord, and I felt sure that it would be well to pay a little attention to the retiring stranger.

As I expected, the landlord shortly after retired, leaving us alone. The room we were in was long and low, with a window opening into the garden. Mademoiselle was sitting facing this window, which lay open because of the warmth of the night, whilst my back was turned towards it. I said something about the landlord's manner, and mademoiselle replied:

"He is of lower Poitou, monsieur. Men there are like their country—sullen and sad." And then she stopped suddenly, her eyes fixed on the window, whilst her colour came and went. She had not the gift that cynics assert is a special attribute of the sex, and was a bad dissembler; and I here venture to say such women make the best of wives, even though life's passage with them may be at times a little stormy.

"Is there anything there?" I asked, making a movement as if to turn round; but she said hastily:

"No, nothing; I thought I saw a figure passing—that is all."

"One of my men, no doubt," I said carelessly. "We may rest secure to-night, for they will keep good watch."

To this she made no answer, but taking a rose from out of a vase near her began to pluck the petals in an absent manner and lay them beside her. When a woman's wits are pitted against those of a man it is well for him to disregard nothing, and, slight as this action was, I took note of it. I counted the petals as she plucked them. They were twelve in all. Then she cast the rose aside, and picked up the petals one after another, counting them aloud, and when she came to the twelfth she put them in a heap beside her plate.

"Twelve," I said. "Is that a magic number?"

"No, monsieur; but it is my lucky number." And rising she moved to the window and, sitting thereon, looked forth. The night was dark, and all the stars were out. From the open window, a pennon of light streamed out into the garden, heavy with the scent of roses. Mademoiselle took a deep breath, and then pointing to the twinkling lights above us, asked:

"Are you learned in the stars, Monsieur Broussel?"

I looked out too, for I was standing at the window, and laughed.

"No, mademoiselle; all I know is that the star I was born under has not done much for me. I remember, some years ago, when I was in Italy, an astrologer made a horoscope for me; but I have lost it."

"You do not believe in the stars, then?"

"Who can tell, mademoiselle! But a man's life is mostly of his own making, and a woman's too for the matter of that. There is an invariable law of Nature or of God. It is that the breaker pays, and sooner or later all learn this."

"*Ciel*! how serious you are!" And her brown eyes met mine.

"The stars should never laugh, mademoiselle."

"They cried over me when my fortune was told."

"May I ask——"

"Oh yes!—but fortune for fortune. If I tell you mine will you tell me yours?"

"Certainly."

"Well, mine was short: it was simply to beware of a church under the ground and a woman in black and white. I have never seen such a church nor ever met such a woman."

I thought of Diane of Valentinois and her favourite colours, and a sudden chill came over me. For a moment I stood silent.

"Now for yours, monsieur," she said gaily.

"Mine! Well, it was wrapped up in long names, and I never could make aught of it. As far as I remember, Aquarius, Mars, and Mercury are in the ascendant, and the face of Venus is from me. In the second house Sol is in Pisces. In the fifth Luna in Gemini, and Jupiter——"

She put her hands to her ears. "Enough, monsieur! I almost fear to look out, lest I should see a cauldron of burning sulphur, and witches dancing around it."

And as she spoke there came to us the distant echoes of hoarse laughter. I recognised the voices of the landlord and Capus, my man-at-arms.

"'Tis not Capus' business to hob-nob with the host at this hour, mademoiselle. I had better go and see that he keeps stricter watch."

With this I made a half movement to go, but she stayed me with a little gesture of command.

"Monsieur Broussel, I have a favour to ask of you; will you grant it?"

"Mademoiselle, all that is in my power I will do. What is it?"

For answer she stood up and placed a hand on my shoulder, her eyes looking straight into mine.

"Monsieur, a brave man like you should not be a gaoler of women. Let me free!"

I made no reply; but as her eyes, soft and imploring, met mine all the love in my heart rose within me. For her sake no Roman constancy would have held me to any vow; but I knew that Montluc had spoken the truth, I knew the danger she was in, and that the one chance of her safety lay in her being under the Queen's protection.

"Mademoiselle!" I stammered; but she broke in on me.

"Yes! You will let me go, will you not? Monsieur, I hate the thought of Paris and its dark intrigues; and the fate of those who belong to my faith is ever with me, like a horrible dream. I dread, I fear, each hour that brings me nearer to what I know will be my death. Monsieur, as you are a gentleman, let me free. Take me to Châtillon, and leave me there with the Cardinal. Odet de Coligny, prince of the Church though he is, is of my faith. I shall be safe there—a thousand times safer than a prisoner in Paris. Oh, say you will!"

I took her hand in mine, caressing it as that of a child, and strove to explain, but she would not listen. "Say you will; do not refuse!" she repeated; and, feeling like a hangman, I blurted out that it was impossible. And then she snatched her hand from my grasp, and stood a moment, her face half averted from me. There was an awkward silence, and collecting myself I again pointed out the danger she was in, and that in Paris alone could there be safety for her. I might have spoken to stone walls; but at my words she turned, and there were angry lights in the brown eyes, and her lips were tightly set.

"I shall not trespass further on your good nature, monsieur. I feel you have cancelled the debt I owed you, and henceforth you will understand that I look upon you as my gaoler and nothing more."

I bowed, and she continued: "And further, I do not desire to have speech with you. I travel as your prisoner; and"—with a truly feminine outburst—"I shall escape—there are friends who will see to that."

I was so full of wrath at the manner in which I had been treated that I was about to answer back hotly that, friend or no friend, she would ride into Paris by my side; but I restrained myself with an effort, and with another look of anger at me mademoiselle turned, and began to ascend the stairway. I watched her as she went up, with head erect and shining eyes, and stood where I was for some little time utterly dejected and cast down. Even if I had a shadow of a chance it was gone by this. I felt like one who was condemned to execute himself. After a little I moved towards the supper-table, and sitting down there stared aimlessly before me. My eyes fell on the little heap of plucked rose leaves that had been left on the table, and I began, at first half unconsciously, to try and read the meaning of the signal, for such it was I was sure. In the light of her last words, the sting of which still remained with me, I was certain that she had not played with the rose petals idly. I began to go back. She had told Montluc she would escape at the first chance. She had made the attempt this very day, but had apparently accepted defeat. Shortly after coming to the inn there had been a decided change in her manner. Then she had grown friendly again, and finding this fail her had broken out into open defiance. I put all this with the little incident of the window, and her open statement, made in heat, that she had friends who would help her to escape—an escape that would lead her into the jaws of the wolf, if she would but understand. Nevertheless, I could make nothing of it, and so for the present gave up guessing, determining to do all I could to protect her, and to leave the rest in the hands of Fate. The landlord coming in at this moment I requested him to send Pierrebon to me, and to show me the way to my chamber. Taking up one of the candles from the table he led me across the room, and along a narrow passage, on one side of which my room was, and then, saying he would send Pierrebon, and wishing me "good-night" with a sulky civility, the man went. Shortly after I heard steps along the passage, there was a knock at my door, and Pierrebon entered. He wore his cloak thrown over his shoulder so as to conceal his left arm and hand, and I could see from the expression of his face that he had news of some kind.

"What is it, Pierrebon?" I asked.

For answer he shut the door carefully, and placing his cloak on the floor put beneath it a small dark lantern, saying as he did so: "I have made free to borrow this, monsieur, as I think, perhaps, it may be needed."

"Then you have found out something?"

"I think so, monsieur." And he dropped his voice. "After your warning I set about trying to discover our stranger, but could find no trace of him. Capus and Poltrot, however, had seen him, and told me he had a horse; but there was no horse in the stables, and at first I thought that he might have gone."

"What about our horses?" I interrupted. "Does anyone watch them?"

"Yes, monsieur; we have old soldiers with us, and Poltrot and Bahuzet watch them, whilst Capus and the Hainaulter Cuyp watch the house—all four turn and turn about.

"Capus, however, was drinking with the landlord, and his watch seems lax."

"No, monsieur! The landlord was drinking with Capus, whom he had paid five gold Henris to cut all our saddlery to-night, especially the reins; the only saddlery to be spared is that of mademoiselle."

I whistled low, and Pierrebon, diving into his pocket, pulled out five gold pieces, saying: "Here is the money, monsieur, which Capus begs to inquire if he may keep."

"And five more besides, Pierrebon, and I beg his pardon for doubting him. But what about the stranger?"

"That too is known, monsieur, and I was about to tell you. Whilst the landlord was drinking with Capus I made my way to the kitchen, where my reception was chill, so I took myself out into the garden, and wandering down a pathway heard a whinny. 'Soh!' said I to myself, 'that is a nag there!' Sure enough there was, and I was about to step up to it when I heard a sound behind me, and heard someone coming up, and saw the light of a lantern. It is dark, as you know, monsieur, and I stepped back into the shadow, and lay there concealed. Presently the men—there were two of them—came up. One was the ostler, and the other the Vicomte de Ganache, to whom you, monsieur, lent your horse this morning."

"Are you sure?" I asked with a breath.

"Perfectly, monsieur. I saw the light on his face; and there was the brown horse——"

"Did they say anything?"

"Nothing of import, monsieur. M. le Vicomte, like a good soldier, was seeing to his beast. When they had attended to him they went back, I following slowly. There is a door leading into the kitchen, and they entered by this, the ostler, however, shutting the slide of his lantern, and leaving it in the angle of the wall. It was careless of him, monsieur, and it is here now." And Pierrebon smiled.

"Now, Pierrebon, think again: are you sure that nothing of import passed between the two?"

"Nothing, monsieur; they spoke of the horse—not a word about us. All that the Vicomte said, as they were leaving, was that he would make all arrangements at midnight; he means, perhaps, to start then. If so, he will need his lantern."

But I scarce heard Pierrebon's last words. The key of the rose petals had come to my hand. De Ganache had either arranged to meet, or to escape with, mademoiselle at twelve. This was the secret of it all, I was sure.

CHAPTER XVII

MADEMOISELLE DECIDES

So the rubber between De Ganache and myself had begun, and although I had been the means of saving his life this morning I was determined to put it to the last issue rather than see myself defeated in this matter by him.

Mademoiselle would at any rate find that if I were a gaoler I was one who looked well after his charge. So I gave instructions to Pierrebon to take my place in the room, and on no account to stir forth unless I called him. I further added that if anyone came to the door he should pretend to be sleeping heavily. With this I took my drawn sword in my hand and stepped softly into the passage. On reaching the room where we had supped I found it apparently deserted, the only light being from a lantern which burnt dimly on the dining-table. The shadow of the stairway leading above fell athwart the room, and as I looked cautiously around the clock in the hall beyond struck eleven. I waited patiently for any sign of movement or life; but there was none. Satisfied at last that I was alone I stepped forward, and made my way quickly but noiselessly to the stair. Beneath this there was room enough to stand, and hidden by the darkness, the overhanging stair, and the angle of the wall I was perfectly concealed. Here I determined to watch, through the night if need be. The discovery that this stairway was the only

passage from above strengthened my position greatly, for unless mademoiselle were possessed of wings, and it had not come to that as yet, she would have to pass this way, and then I hoped to be able to persuade her how rash and useless her attempt was.

The minutes dragged on like hours, as they always do in affairs of this nature. I chafed at the restraint of my position, and had no intention of acting the eavesdropper longer than I could help it, but for the moment I was forced to lie in ambush. All was quiet and still, so still that some mice came out, and sought for such crumbs as they could find on the floor around the dining-table. Suddenly there came the sound of footsteps along the passage. In a flash the mice had vanished, and two men entered the room. They were the landlord and De Ganache, the latter booted and spurred and wearing the hat that was lent to him, or rather given to him, this morning. He sat down on a chair at the dining-table, and placed his hat beside him, running his fingers through the red plumes.

"*Eh bien*," he said, with a laugh, "Monsieur there sleeps soundly. It will be a great awakening in the morning. I should not advise you to be here, Pechaud." And with this he turned up the lantern, so that the light fell more strongly on his clear-cut face and blue eyes. He was a handsome man, and one well formed to win a woman's heart; but with all this there were the marks of a weak and irresolute nature on his countenance, and as I looked I thought to myself that here was one who, if he fell, would fall utterly.

Pechaud the landlord, who stood respectfully near De Ganache, laughed too as he heard the Vicomte's words.

"I shall be careful, monsieur," he said. "My only fear is that they will find it so difficult to follow that they may stay here indefinitely."

"The trooper is a knave for all that, and deserves to hang; but it was well conceived—the cutting of the saddlery." And then they both laughed again. I had a mind to join in their humour, and it was hard to refrain from chuckling a little on my own account.

"'Tis a pity you could not get mademoiselle's horse."

"It was impossible, monsieur; but you will find mine carry her as well, and it is even now ready.

"Well; it does not much matter." And rising De Ganache opened the window and looked forth.

"It is a night of stars," he said, "and dark. Lord! if we but had a moon!"

"Monsieur will find the guide lead you well."

"I want no guide on my own lands, Pechaud. Night and day are one to me when I ride across them. But this guide: who is he?"

"I myself, monsieur."

"You! And yet, perhaps, 'tis as well; but I fear me, old friend, that the sky will be red behind us with the flames of this good inn; they will not forego that revenge."

"Let it be so, monsieur. My ancestors have followed yours for two centuries, and taken the good with the bad—and I am as they are; you know this."

De Ganache looked at him, and as I heard this faithful retainer's words
I began to understand the force that my opponent had on his side.
After a moment's pause Pechaud continued:

"But, monsieur, a word from an old man. How long is this to last? Why are you not at the King's side, as your forefathers ever were? Make your peace with the Court, as Monsieur d'Andelot and the Admiral have done——"

"Enough, Pechaud! Perhaps I will take your advice, and that soon; but for the present I must pull my sword-belt in by a hole, and see that my saddlery at any rate is right. As for this Monsieur Broussel, he told mademoiselle that he knew me, but I have never set eyes on him that I know. What manner of man is he?"

"Monsieur, we have just heard him as he slept."

De Ganache shrugged his shoulders and glanced up at the clock.

"It is time," he said. "Warn mademoiselle."

Pechaud turned; but even as he did so there was a light step on the stairs, and mademoiselle came down dressed for travelling, and holding her riding-whip in her hand. As she passed she glanced swiftly in my direction, and for the moment I thought I was discovered; but the shadow was impenetrable, and she went on. De Ganache rose to receive her, holding out his hand. I noticed that she barely touched it, as she asked quickly:

"Is all ready?"

"Everything, Diane." And I winced at the familiar address.

"De Ganache," she said, "I had your word for it that no harm should befall Monsieur Broussel. He risked his life for me, and I owe it to him that I stand here alive; what have you done with him?"

De Ganache smiled. "Even if he had not acted as he has, if he were my bitter foe, your word would have been law to me. Monsieur Broussel is alive and well. If we had time I would take you down the passage and show him to you—sleeping the sleep of the just."

"Forgive me! I know not what it is. I am haunted by all sorts of fears——"

"Then fear no more," he said gently, trying to take her hand, but she withdrew it from him. And then he dropped his arm, and went on: "By to-morrow evening you will be with friends, and, perhaps, you will learn by then that there are others ready and willing to die for you if need be."

"Gaston!" she said; and now it was she held out her hand, and he bent respectfully over it as he touched it with his lips.

To tell truth, I was suffering more torture than if I had been run through, for in Diane's last word I felt all my hopes vanish, I was taken off my cross, however, by the necessity for action, for Pechaud, who had discreetly retired at mademoiselle's entrance, now returned, and announced that the horses were ready.

"Come!" said De Ganache, and as he said so I stepped out and faced them. It was a bolt from the blue. Mademoiselle shrank back with a little startled cry. Pechaud stood as one petrified, his jaws agape, and his old hands trembling, whilst De Ganache put himself between me and mademoiselle, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Stand back!" he said hotly. "Back!"

And as hot an answer trembled on my tongue, but I held myself in.

"Monsieur, you do not seem to know me. Shall I remind you of this morning?"

At my words it was he who went back; his hand left his sword-hilt, and he stood staring at me.

"You!" he stammered. "I did not recognise—I—I did not know——"

"Enough, monsieur! I forgive you the ill turn you were about to play me. Perhaps, were I in your case, I would do the same——"

"If so, then my course is clear. In any other thing I would yield to you, but not in this."

"Listen. Your plan was well laid; but my men are not traitors, and I—I have not slept. Monsieur de Ganache, I have but to raise my voice, and there will be three to one against you——"

"I care not," he answered furiously, and his sword flashed in his hand, but in a moment Diane was between us.

"De Ganache! Monsieur Broussel! Put back your swords, I implore you!"

And with this she clung to De Ganache's arm. He paled to the lips as he tried to free himself.

"Diane, 'tis our only way! Keep back, Diane!"

But for answer she clung all the more to him, and it seemed as if she were covering him from my sword, as she cried out again: "No, no! It is too terrible! I will not have it! It must not be!"

I looked from one to another, a hundred emotions tearing at my heart. I had seen enough to understand how these two stood to one another, and, utterly miserable at heart, I gave way. A sudden impulse, that carried me as like a wave, seized me, and I burst out:

"Monsieur de Ganache, let it be for Mademoiselle de Paradis to decide between us. I give you my

word I will abide by her choice."

Diane let her hand fall from De Ganache's arm and turned to me in astonishment. And De Ganache stared at me with wide-open eyes, and asked slowly, dropping his words out:

"You say this?—you pledge your word?"

"I have said so. I undertook to take mademoiselle to Paris, and to see her in safety there, at the cost of my life if need be. I have since learned that which makes it impossible for me to do this unless mademoiselle comes with me of her own free will. I leave her to make her choice."

"Then, Diane, come!" And De Ganache turned towards her, a hand outstretched. I stepped aside to leave the way free, but to my surprise mademoiselle made no answer, but stood in wavering hesitation, now looking at one and then at the other of us. Once more De Ganache began to urge her, stepping quite close up and speaking in low but quick and earnest tones.

"Diane, the very stars are with us! What is there that makes you hesitate? By to-morrow evening we will be with our own people, and henceforth I will always be by your side to defend you."

She stopped him with an impatient gesture of her hand. Even where she stood in the half light I saw the red rush to her cheeks at his last words; and then she asked:

"Monsieur Broussel, I too have been learning, or rather guessing, at some things since I came down here. Is it you that Monsieur le Vicomte has to thank for his life?"

I did not answer; but De Ganache began to speak as one defending himself:

"I do thank him; but when I told you of this I did not know Monsieur
Broussel's name, Diane."

"All this does not concern the matter," I cut in. "What mademoiselle has to decide is whether she will go on to Paris or not. Which shall it be?" And I faced her.

A little silence, and her eyes refused to meet mine. Then she said faintly: "I—I do not know."

All depended on a single turn, but it was De Ganache himself who threw his cards away. Stepping up to mademoiselle he put his arm through hers, and with an air of command, almost proprietorship, he said:

"Come, Diane, we waste time here, and we have far to go. I shall give
Monsieur Broussel his thanks another day."

She looked up at him—such a look!—and withdrew her arm.

"Monsieur de Ganache," she said, "you take too much on yourself. I have decided, and I shall go to Paris."

De Ganache looked at her and laughed bitterly. Then he broke forth into weak reviling at womankind. She let him run on, and at last he asked:

"And after all I have done and risked this—this is your answer?"

"My answer—to everything, monsieur." And with this she turned from him, and passing me went up the stair, back to her apartments.

I was standing a little apart, leaning on my sword, hardly able to believe my ears, and wondering at the ways of womankind. De Ganache had taken up his hat, and was nervously tearing at the plume, his lips moving with unspoken words. All at once he turned to me, and his voice was hoarse with passion:

"Monsieur, you have won. I set this against this morning. And we are quits. Quits, you understand?"

I bowed, but made no answer. The man was beside himself, and the slightest word would have led to his drawing on me, and for mademoiselle's sake I held myself in.

"Pechaud!" he went on, "my horse."

And crushing his hat on his head he passed me without another word and went to the door. Pechaud followed him, and began to urge something, but was silenced with a rough word. Then he called for a light. Pechaud came running back for the lantern, and through the open door, as the light flickered on him, I saw De Ganache mount. Once he glanced back at me. He could see nothing, for I was in darkness, but the light which fell on his features showed him pale as ashes. The horse backed a little.

He drove his spurs in with an oath, and then I heard him hammering through the night, going—God knows whither. Beat—beat—beat—the iron-shod hoofs rushed through the village, and the dogs awoke, and barked, barked and howled, long after he had passed on his reckless course.

I waited a little, and then called to Pechaud. He came back slowly, and set his lantern with a trembling hand on the table. For the rest of the night we were in safety—that I knew.

"It grows late, Maître Pechaud," I said, "and I need rest." And so I left him.

CHAPTER XVIII

DR. JOHANNES CABALLUS

I made all arrangements betimes for an early start the next morning; and, with a remembrance of what had passed between us last night, ordered a table, with one cover only, to be set for mademoiselle near the window of the dining-room. Then I went out into the garden to while away the time there until my charge was ready for the journey.

There was a little walk outside the open window, through which I could see all that passed within the dining-room. Here I paced backwards and forwards, reflecting on the events of the past few hours. I could, of course, see that for some reason or other Diane had apparently broken with De Ganache. It was not a trick of heartless coquetry—for that I gave her credit. Yet the change had been so swift and sudden that it was difficult to assign any other reason for it. So far as I was concerned I was sure my affair was utterly hopeless; but the air of the Italian campaign would doubtless cure me, and I almost caught myself wishing that I had lost the game last night and was free to turn my horse's head where I listed.

In this disjointed thought I passed some time, and it was well after nine o'clock that Diane came forth from her room. Through the window I saw her descending the stair, and, not wishing to intrude, withdrew to the extreme end of the walk, where I began to be interested in the operations of a spider weaving his web in a rose bush. I could, however, see into the room, and observed Diane stop near the table, hesitate a little, and then sit down. Pechaud began to flutter around her, but after a little she rose, and coming to the window looked straight out at me. My spider had by this time vanished into the petals of a half-open rose, and turning I met Diane's look, and lifted my hat in formal greeting, remaining, however, where I was, as I was determined to keep the position she had assigned to me.

"Monsieur Broussel!"

"Mademoiselle!" And now I stepped up to the window.

"Will you let me know when we start?"

"As soon as ever you are rested sufficiently, mademoiselle."

My tone was coldly polite, and there was equal indifference in her voice.

"It is very good of you to say this; but now that I have decided to go to Paris the sooner it is over the better."

"The horses are ready."

"Then, perhaps, we had better start."

"I am at your service, mademoiselle." And a quarter of an hour later we were on our way once again. I did not take the direct road by Châtellerault, but turned half westward, intending to enter Touraine by way of Chinon, and then to follow the route by which I had come to Poitiers.

It was a summer day, such as can only be met with in France. Overhead billowy white clouds rolled and piled in the sapphire blue of the sky. A wind, fresh and cool, blew from the west, sweeping over the plain, hissing into the crests of the yellow broom and purple loosestrife, and bending them into lines of colour that chased each other like waves over the grey-green moorland. As we left the plain and came to the undulating lands of northern Poitou, where the country twisted down to the Bienne, the hedgerows, all glimmering in gold and green, and gay with blossoming thorn, were awake with the

song of the thrush and the black-cap. We had passed Lencloître on our left, and in that dip, dark with walnut-trees, lay the little hamlet of Razines, which had so many memories for me.

Up to now neither mademoiselle nor I had exchanged a word, as I rode well in the rear of our party, sending Capus, who knew the country, to lead us. Diane had so far kept her word, and rode behind Capus in silence. At intervals I pushed a little to one side and watched her, and now and again, as we came to a turn or a bend in the road, I saw her full and fairly, but she never so much as glanced in my direction. A little farther on we skirted some rising ground, and there, to our half-left, lay Richelieu, the smoke still rising from its burning houses, and, caught by the wind, stretching out in a long horsetail across the country. Mademoiselle reined up and watched the scene for a little, our party halting behind her. As we did so we heard a loud neigh, and a riderless horse, the saddlery still on him, came out of some stunted trees and trotted towards us. At a sign from me one of my men caught the horse and freed him of his bit and saddle, whilst I galloped up to the trees, upon which half a dozen or so of ravens were sitting. When I reached them I found what I expected there, and the hideous birds croaked down on me as if in derision, for what was lying there was past all aid of man. I came back as I went, and Diane asked:

"Is there anyone there, monsieur?"

"No, mademoiselle. And 'tis almost time for our midday halt; a little farther on and we will rest."

Diane turned her horse's head, and I was about to turn back once more to my place when she said in a low tone:

"Monsieur, I have something to say to you."

I bowed, and rode up beside her. And we let the men go onward, dropping together to the place I had left in the rear.

"Monsieur," she said after a little, "I have been trying to say what I want all the morning. I want you to forgive me for the cruel words I used to you last night. I—I never meant them." She was flushed and trembling as she spoke, and I saw the tears in her eyes. I lifted my hat at her words.

"Mademoiselle, after all you were right. I am but Bertrand Broussel, a citizen of Paris, as you know, and you——"

"Oh yes; I know all that; but, oh! I feel hot with shame when I think of my words. Monsieur, say you forgive me!"

"With all my heart, mademoiselle! Think no more of it, I pray you." And then, to change the subject, I pointed to a grove of trees in front of us. "There, mademoiselle, is where we halt for an hour or so. What say you to a race there?"

"Are you not afraid of that?"

"I will risk it," I said. And, with a laugh, she touched her Norman with the whip, and I kept Lizette pounding after her, until she pulled up, flushed and hot, near the trees, beside which the Mable purled past.

"Beaten again," she said as I came up.

"It is my fate." And, pulling up, I pointed to the river. "Do you remember this river, mademoiselle?"

"The Mable!" And she shuddered. "But surely it was not here that we crossed on that awful night?"

"No; some miles lower down." And then I helped her to dismount, and attended to the horses, whilst she borrowed my sword, and tying her 'kerchief to the point signalled to our men to come on.

There are days when all that happens is trivial, yet the memory of which is ever to be marked in white; and this was such an one to me. I let myself forget the impossible during that brief two hours' halt; nor ever had I known Diane so gracious. We spoke much of Paris. She had never seen the great city nor the Court, and I told her what I knew, though my knowledge of the Louvre was a little old. As a child she had seen the Queen once—on the day of the Lists of Amboise—and wondered whether she were altered.

"She is much the same. Time has dealt gently with her."

"Is it true that in secret she is of our—I mean my faith?"

"It is said that she favours the new religion, but I know not if this is true. It is certain, however, that

she has never joined in the persecution, and 'tis said that both D'Andelot and Marot owed their escape to her."

"And you, monsieur—are you too of the faith?"

"Mademoiselle, I think, if the truth be told, that men who, like myself, have lived much in the world do not bind themselves in their hearts to this faith or to that, whatever they profess with their lips."

"But, monsieur——"

"Listen, mademoiselle. This does not mean that we do not know how infinite is the distance between us and God nor how hard the road is to His throne."

"There is the path of faith, monsieur."

"That is the path we search for, sometimes unconsciously; and perhaps, with God's aid, I may find it ere I die."

Then there was a silence, and after that the talk drifted to other things. And I but mention this conversation because it was due to it and it alone that I was set upon the track that led to the True Road.

A little later Pierrebon, who was indulging his appetite for a good sleep, awoke from his nap, and discovered it was time to be moving. So, fording the river, we took our way north. Towards sunset we saw the walls of the priory of Ile Bouchard, around which clustered the houses of the village, like barnacles to a galley's side. On arrival here I craved the hospitality of the good monks for the night, and this was readily afforded us. Early the following morning, having bidden farewell to our kind hosts, we looked our last on the grey pile, half monastery and half fortress, and went our way through the stunted forest that straggled downward to the Vienne. Between these narrow strips of woodland, through which the path wound, rose ragged knolls clad in short, dark green juniper, and here and there were bright splashes of colour, where flowering wild weeds clustered at the bases of the brown ribs of rock that stood up starkly over all. We crossed the river by the ferry between Auche and Rivière, where the little Veude falls into the Vienne, and halted for a space on a bluff to survey the landscape. At this hour of the morning, with the air so gay, the sky so blue, and the sun so bright, the lights were still soft enough to allow the whole beauty of the scene to be strongly felt. At our feet the river went dancing along in a sweeping blue curve, its left bank clothed with rich vineland, and on its right a belt of forest —the outskirts of the forest of Chinon—which stretched, a sea of green, grey, and dim, mysterious purples, to the far-distant Loire. There, on its wooded height, the pentice roofs glistening in the sunlight, stood Chinon, with its triple castle, so full of the memories of history; and all around spread the wide Tourangeais.

"Tourangeaux, Angevins
Bons esprits et bons vins,"

sang Capus, grizzled old war-dog though he was, and, the spirit of the morning seizing us, we urged our horses down the slope, and scurried through the forest towards Chinon.

After a little we slackened pace and went on slowly, until, towards midday, when about half a league —or perhaps less—from Chinon, we came upon a roadside inn, all covered with climbing roses in bloom, whilst the air was full of the cooing of numberless pigeons that circled around and perched upon a dovecote that looked like a tower. Here mademoiselle stopped, declaring that she would travel no farther that day; and accordingly, having made arrangements for our accommodation, I walked out with Diane into a long, straggling garden that lay at the back of the house. At the extreme end of the garden was a summer-house, and on entering this we found it occupied by an old man, who sat reading therein. We were about to draw back, but he rose, leaning upon a stout stick, and very courteously invited us to be seated. His hooded black cassock, and the tonsure which was visible, as he had removed his cap, marked the priest. He was very feeble, as we could see, though his eyes, bright and piercing, contrasted strangely with the deadly pallor of his cheeks. A straggling grey moustache and beard partly concealed his mouth, which was set in a smile half mirthful and half sardonic. I put him down as the curé of a neighbouring hamlet, as he gave us the benediction, and invited us to join him, saying as he did so:

"Mademoiselle, I have long looked in dreamland for the lady who would be chosen above all others as Abbess of Thelema—and now, behold! you have come!" Plucking a rose as he spoke he bowed with old-world grace, and held it out with a shaking hand to Diane, who took it with a flush on her face, and thanks on her lips, but a puzzled look in her eyes.

"I see, Monsieur le Curé," I said, "you are an admirer of Doctor Rabelais."

"He is the most intimate friend I have, and, as you are doubtless aware, the Doctor is a townsman of Chinon."

"That, perhaps, is his book you are reading?"

"Alas, no! 'tis merely a Hebrew lexicon I was studying to decide a dispute I have with my friend Doctor Johannes Caballus of the University of Orange; but—you are learned in Hebrew, monsieur?"

"I cannot say I am," I laughed, "though we meet on common ground in admiration of Rabelais."

"In that case, monsieur, you and mademoiselle must be my guests at dinner. It is almost the hour, and we will dine here." And without waiting for a reply he seized a small handbell that lay beside him and rang it. In a little the host appeared, and the curé turned to him:

"Is dinner, as I ordered it, ready?"

"Monsieur!"

"Then serve it here, and set the table for four. Mayhap the Doctor Johannes Caballus may join us. Let me see what there is for dinner. Ah! three sucking-pigs, and a fourth to follow in quince sauce, six capons, twelve pigeons, twelve quails, four legs of mutton *en brune paté*, twelve sweetbreads, four tongues, four veal——"

But the landlord had fled, and Diane was staring with wide-open eyes, whilst I confess I thought that we had a harmless lunatic before us.

"Perhaps, monsieur, we have Gargantua dining with us?"

"That would be but a flea-bite to him. But there is the Doctor Caballus." And pushing aside the roses he pointed before him; all we could see was a sleek mule sunning itself in a patch of green.

"There is only a mule there," said Diane.

"True; but he is a Doctor of Laws of the University of Orange. I must tell you that the estimable beast is the property of Doctor Rabelais, who permits me to use him, being, as I said, a friend of friends to me. It so happened that the University of Orange conferred degrees on payment of fees without seeing or testing the candidate. My friend Rabelais, who loves a merry jest, sent them the money for a Doctor's degree for one Johannes Caballus, the same being his mule. And in due course the parchment came; and so our friend there is as much a Doctor of Laws as my lords the Bishops of Seez or Montpelier. But here comes our dinner."

I need not say that the dinner was not the feast for giants that was ordered; but, though it was plentiful, all that our old friend could eat was a little dish of peas fried in fat, which he washed down with thin wine and water. He kept all the talk to himself, delighting us with a thousand merry quibbles and jests, until, finally, he called for his mule, saying that he must depart.

"Mademoiselle," he said as he wished us farewell, "you are going on a long journey, and I on a much longer, but I know that wherever you are there will be the house of Thelema." And as I helped him to pull his domino over his shoulders he whispered in my ear: "*Beati qui in domino moriuntur*."

Then, slowly and painfully mounting his mule, and chuckling at his grim jest, he ambled away, the landlord bowing respectfully to him as he passed.

"Who is he?" asked Diane.

"That, mademoiselle," said our host, "is the Doctor Rabelais, whose name is honoured as that of the King here. He has a small estate called La Devinière hard by, and comes here at times for his health. He returns to Paris to-morrow; but he will never come back—that I know." And he shook his head sorrowfully.

* * * * * *

We never met again, for Rabelais died a month later; but in my library at Orrain, which now contains close upon a hundred volumes, I have a copy of his works bound in red velvet, and clasped with silver. Nor ever do I touch it without thinking of that rose-clad summer-house in the old garden in Touraine.

CHAPTER XIX

THE WOMAN IN BLACK AND WHITE

A few days later we saw the cliffs of Chateaudon, from whose heights the stronghold of Dunois looks down upon the town crouching beneath. On arrival we found a lodging in the little square below the castle, and here I thought it necessary to call a halt for a couple of days. Thus far our journey to Paris had been free from serious misadventure; but I was full of fears, for I knew not what folly De Ganache might commit in his madness, and the evil phantom of Simon was ever grinning over my shoulder. I, therefore, judged it prudent to write to Le Brusquet, begging him to inform the Queen how far I had come; and, as difficulties might arise in regard to my entry into Paris, I suggested that mademoiselle should be met by an escort either at Etampes or Montlhéry; and, commending myself to his friendship, begged the favour of his losing no time in aiding me in this matter. This letter I entrusted to Capus, bidding him meet me with the answer at Etampes, where he would find me at the Toison d'Or.

As soon as mademoiselle, chiefly upon whose account I had halted, was sufficiently rested to continue the journey we started once more, and quitting the vine country entered the smiling Beauce. It was towards the end of June, and our way led through the granary of France, with its long green reaches of meadow and rich cornland. Here, under the clear blue of the sky, and in an air like crystal, stretched endless fields of corn, swaying gently in the gentle breeze, and chequered with vivid patches of blue cornflower and red poppy. After the seared plains of Poitou the freshness, the peace, and the plenty around us struck us in convincing contrast, nor could I help thinking what a little it would take to make the sad Poitevin plain smile like this.

We travelled by easy stages, reaching Etampes about the sixth day, and here, on arrival at the Toison d'Or, I was disappointed to get no news of Capus. There was nothing for it but to wait, and a few days passed pleasantly enough in the curious old town. One incident that occurred is, perhaps, worthy of notice. Almost opposite our inn was a forbidding-looking house, without arms or escutcheon of any kind upon the gate. To all appearance it was uninhabited, but from the balcony of the inn mademoiselle and I observed a lady dressed in black who daily paced for an hour or so on the terrace overlooking the garden of the house. We could not distinguish her features, for she was ever closely veiled, but her attitude and mien marked the deepest dejection. To the idle all things are of interest, and our curiosity was excited; so on one occasion, as the lady paced mournfully on the terrace, mademoiselle asked the landlord who she was.

"That, mademoiselle, is the Duchess herself."

"The Duchess!"

"Yes, mademoiselle; the Duchess d'Etampes. She has lived here in the strictest seclusion ever since the late King's death. She receives no one, and yet for miles around she is blessed for her charity. 'Tis said, however," and he dropped his voice, "that she is a Christaudin; but of this I know nothing."

And so this sad, dark-robed spectre was the once brilliant and beautiful De Helly! I went back in my mind to the gay days when she reigned as queen. It was not so long ago, and I could recall all that throng of syrens. There was Canaples, star of the morning; the lovely St. Pol, star of the evening; Rieux, Tallard, Lestrange; but one only of that galaxy was left, the loveliest and the worst—Diane, whom men called the crescent moon. For her I wondered what fate was in store.

The next day, towards sunset, mademoiselle and I were once again upon the balcony of the inn, when I saw a horseman trotting past the parvis of St. Martin. I was sure it was Capus, and my doubts were soon at rest, for as he rounded the corner and came up the Rue St. Jacques I saw it was he, and signalled to him. He lifted his arm in the air in answer to my signal, and spurring his beast drew up a minute or so after at the door of the inn.

"What news, Capus?" I called out; and he waved a letter that he held in his hand. Making an excuse to mademoiselle I ran down to meet him, and soon had Le Brusquet's letter in my hands. He had done as I asked, and we were to be met at Longpont, near Montlhéry; and in a postscript he added that Olden Hoorn had sent him the two hundred crowns I had asked for from Poitiers—a piece of news not without interest to me. When I had finished Capus said:

"I came with the escort, monsieur, as far as Montlhéry. It is commanded by the Sieur de Lorgnac. There are ten lances and two court ladies and a dozen or so of sumpter horses—a brave show. They all lie at the priory at Longpont."

"Thanks, Capus. Go now and rest." And as the man went I stood for a little looking after him, and then

went back to the balcony, the letter in my hand. As I came up mademoiselle called out to me:

"See!" she cried, "there is the new moon; turn over the money in your pocket, and wish."

I laughed. "There is little enough to turn, mademoiselle; but for my wish—it is all good fortune and happiness to you."

"Now you will bring me ill-luck for having spoken your wish aloud. Oh, monsieur!"

"Heaven forbid! But have you wished, may I ask?" She turned away with a little sigh, and looked out into the violet evening, where the slender sickle of the moon shone silver bright. Down below the twilight darkled in the streets. Figures moved like shadows, and now and again a light flashed out. Tall and slight, she stood out against the darkening sky, her face half averted from me, and I knew not what it was, but an almost irresistible impulse came on me to put my fortune to the touch. But I thought of De Ganache. She was his promised wife. I thought of what I had to offer, and this and that gave me strength, and so I held back.

"Mademoiselle," I said with an effort, "this is our last evening, and my wardship ends to-morrow."

"To-morrow?"

"Yes; the Queen has sent an escort to meet you at Longpont."

"She is most kind!"

"And as I may not have the chance of speaking to you alone again——"

"Why that?" she interrupted quickly. "You will be in Paris. You will be at the Court. I counted upon having at least one friend there."

"You will have more than one friend there, mademoiselle, and more than one enemy, I fear; but I was about to say that I leave Paris the day after I reach there for Italy."

"For Italy?"

"Yes; I follow M. de Montluc there. You see, old as I am, I have to begin life over again, and there is many a fair fortune yet waiting to be sliced out of the Romagna."

She said never a word, and I continued: "It will be long ere I see France again—perhaps never; and so, mademoiselle, I once more wish you all that is good, and I offer my congratulations—I have not ventured to do so before."

She spoke now. "Monsieur, I thank you! I will not pretend not to understand your last words; but there are some good wishes that may mean misfortune, and it grows late. Good-night!"

She slid by me, and was gone almost before I realised it.

It was just past the dawn the next morning when we left Etampes. There were but five leagues or so to cover ere we reached Montlhéry, and for almost the whole way we could see before us the castle that crowned the hill. At the ford of the Orge we saw a small group of horsemen, their arms shining in the sunlight.

"'Tis the escort," said Capus, and quickening our pace we were soon with them, and I handed over my charge to De Lorgnac.

There were with him two of the Queen's ladies—Madame de Montal, and the bright-eyed Cypriote, Mademoiselle Davila, she who had escaped from the sack of Cyprus—and these two immediately appropriated mademoiselle, asking ten questions in a breath, never waiting for answer, and detailing the hardships of their own journey of four leagues or so from Paris. I had no chance of another word with her, and rode morosely by Lorgnac's side.

That night we lay at the priory of Longpont; but I saw nothing of mademoiselle, for the ladies both dined and supped by themselves, leaving De Lorgnac and myself to our own devices. After supper, as we paced the garden together, De Lorgnac gave me the news of the day, mentioning, amongst other things, that Vendôme had returned to the Court once more, and that all differences between him and the Duchess de Valentinois appeared to have been buried. I glanced at the signet that I wore on my finger, Vendôme's gift to me, saying:

"That is, perhaps, the best thing that could have happened for me; but
I little dreamed that Vendôme would ever have joined hands with Diane."

"As to that," he said, "I have long ceased to be surprised at anything. Poor Le Brusquet was in disgrace for a whole day for suggesting a new device for the Duke—a weathercock on a steeple." And he laughed as he added: "The Duke came back almost a week ago, with five hundred gentlemen in his train—amongst others the late rebel De Ganache, for whom he has obtained a pardon."

"De Ganache!"

"Yes; there has been a turn of the wheel, and for the moment the new religion is in favour. What it means I know not; but as for De Ganache, the Court gossips are already linking his name with Diane's. 'Tis certain he is ever at her heels."

"The weathercock would suit him as well as Vendôme," I said a little bitterly; "but it is good news that even for the moment the new faith is in favour. It removes one danger, and the other is——"

"Back in Paris," interrupted De Lorgnac.

"You mean my brother?"

"Yes; the Vidame came back a trifle over a fortnight ago with an arm very much hurt and one-third of his usual following of cut-throats."

"He will not have much trouble in filling his vacancies; but is he much hurt?" And I smiled grimly to myself.

"Oh! he was badly pinked; but his arm is out of its sling now. There is some devil's broth preparing, and he and Diane are the cooks. Le Brusquet, however, has sworn to put his ladle into it, and so we shall see things ere long."

"Not I," I laughed. "I shall be in Italy with Montluc."

"You may not," was the dry answer. "Recollect that the Queen has the first claim on you, and the war between her and Diane will soon be open war. Up to now it has been a kiss and a stab, but soon it will be all stab."

And so we talked until a late hour, and little did I think, as I retired to sleep, that Lorgnac's doubt about my Italian journey would come to be true.

It was well on towards the afternoon that we reached the Porte St. Michel, for we had started late, and Madame de Montal would on no account be parted from the sumpter horses, whose rate of progress was necessarily slow. M. Agrippa de Pavanes was at the gate, and as we filed in, I last of all, he looked hard at me; but I had other business on hand, and could not at the moment spare time to devote to this gentleman. It was clear, however, that he owed me a grudge over the affair of the King's letter. As it happened, we never met again; and Pavanes, if he still lives, must look upon his account with me as one of his unsettled scores.

A few yards from the gate the road narrowed, and at the corner where the little Rue Poirée strikes off between two rows of tumble-down houses to join the Rue St. Jacques there was somewhat of a block. I had fallen back behind the sumpter horses, and halted for a moment, when I felt a hand rest lightly on my stirrup. I looked down, and, as I live, it was La Marmotte.

"You!" I exclaimed. "In Paris!"

"Monsieur," she said hurriedly, her face pale and haggard, "this meeting is not chance. Ask for me tomorrow at vespers at the shop of Barou the armourer in the Rue Tire Boudin. If you do not do this you will never cease to regret it. Fail not!" And she made as if to draw away.

"A word," I said. "Trotto—does he live?"

"Oh! he lives. Thanks, monsieur, a thousand thanks!"

I had placed a piece of money in her hand, to take off any suspicion, and, rising to her part, she seized it, calling down blessings on me, and stepped back into the crowd.

Our party had gone a little ahead, and I did not overtake them until almost opposite the Cordeliers, where I joined De Lorgnac.

"That was a strange-looking beggar," he remarked.

"She was no beggar, De Lorgnac; but of her I will tell you when you, Le

Brusquet, and I are once more together."

"I shall try to wait until then; it will be in less than an hour."

We then joined the ladies, and rode by them, all outwardly in high spirits. As we rode past the tennis courts the sumpter horses were diverted to enter the Louvre by the gate near the riding-school, but we ourselves rode directly towards the main entrance. On arrival there we noticed a large crowd of sightseers at the gates, and our further progress was stopped by a carriage, surrounded by a troop of the King's guards, that came slowly out of the gate. In the carriage sat, or rather reclined, a woman robed in black and white—a woman with sullen, dark eyes and a face lovely in its pride. It was the crescent moon—Diane herself. The carriage came out slowly, as I have said, the horses walking, and from where I rode beside mademoiselle I saw her clearly. She was toying with a little dog she held under her arm and talking to a young man who sat facing her—a man whose face burned like fire, and the laugh on whose lips died away when he saw us—for it was De Ganache. The Duchess followed his glance, and turned in our direction. As her fathomless eyes fell on mademoiselle her lips parted in a smile.

"St. Siege! it must be your little heiress. Come, tell me, De
Ganache—is it not so?"

Her voice, clear as a bell, came to us distinctly. The veiled scorn and mockery in her glance was not to be mistaken, and then the horses were whipped up, and she was gone. It was all over in a moment; but I saw the riding-whip in mademoiselle's hand trembling, and she kept her face from me, looking straight between her horse's ears.

"Do you know who that was?" I asked in a low voice; but she made no answer, and I went on:

"Remember the prophecy you told me of, and—be on your guard against the woman in black and white. That was Diane of Valentinois."

CHAPTER XX

THE CROWN JEWELS

An hour later I sat with Lorgnac and Le Brusquet in a little room in the former's house in the Rue Tire Boudin. At the Louvre I had discovered that there was no chance of my being able to see the Queen until after the supper hour; and so I accepted the hospitality De Lorgnac offered me, and was back again in the very house in which I had spent my last night in Paris.

A few minutes after our arrival Le Brusquet ambled up on a Spanish mule, and soon we three were deep in discussing what had happened since the day I rode out of the Porte St. Michel. I had perforce to relate my own adventures, and when I described my meeting with La Marmotte and her strange request De Lorgnac rose from his seat, and approaching the window, said:

"You can see Maître Barou's store from here. It abuts on my stables, and you will not have far to go to keep your appointment."

"If I do keep it; but at present I have no such intention."

"You must keep it." It was Le Brusquet's incisive voice that cut in.

"Why? There is no reason why we should ever meet again."

"There is every reason—that is, if you take sufficient interest in the future of Mademoiselle de Paradis."

De Lorgnac came back to his seat. I looked inquiry, and Le Brusquet continued:

"A few things have been happening lately that make me think there is a porridge on the boil that would be the better for our help in the stirring. There have been little whispers afloat that Diane is meditating a great *coup*. Certain it is, that she and that upright judge Dom Antony de Mouchy have been much together of late. Certain it is that this coquetting with the new faith means more than Christian toleration; and, putting this and that together, I have got a clue. You do not know Carloix, do

you?"

"No."

"Well, Maître Vincent Carloix was my sister's husband whilst she lived. He is also my very good friend, and, besides that, secretary to that most noble lord François de Scépeaux, Marshal de Vieilleville. Carloix is a discreet man; but I gathered enough from him to guess that it would be safer for a Christaudin to be a prisoner with a Barbary corsair than be in Paris now, despite all the hobnobbing that goes on between the Court and Vendôme and the Admiral."

"But," said De Lorgnac, "how does all this concern Mademoiselle de Paradis? Even if it did she is the Queen's ward."

"Anne d'Audeberte was a maid-of-honour, and you both know what happened to her. My dear De Lorgnac, our friend here has told us enough for us to know that mademoiselle is a heretic to her pretty fingertips. This is bad—for her. Recollect that the Vidame d'Orrain is Diane's right-hand man; and we may be certain that his attempt on Mademoiselle de Paradis was made with the full knowledge of the Duchess. Recollect, again, that this woman La Marmotte is the wife or mistress—I care not which—of Orrain's own man——"

"And as the Chevalier here ran him through the ribs he may not unnaturally desire to repay the account," put in De Lorgnac.

"It is not that," I said; "she warned me of danger in Le Jaquemart."

"Precisely. It is of that I was thinking," said Le Brusquet. "No, Chevalier—for to us you are the Chevalier d'Orrain and not Bertrand Broussel—no, La Marmotte means you no harm, and I would stake a thousand pistoles against an obolus that you will hear something of interest concerning mademoiselle. She is not going to warn you about yourself, I fancy," and he laughed; "she knows that the Chevalier d'Orrain can look to his skin."

"But what can be the cause of Diane de Poitiers' enmity of mademoiselle?" I asked. "So far as I know, they have only but once seen each other, and that but three hours ago."

"The greatest of all causes, monsieur—money. Diane loves gold as a swallow loves a fly. When a woman is avaricious she will let nothing stand between her and her desire. Again, it is no disrespect to the Vidame, your noble brother, to say he would sell his soul for a hundred crowns, and Dom Antony de Mouchy is worse than either he or Diane. Why, man, they have shared between them the wretched estate of a journeyman tailor! The property of a street-hawker, burnt in the Place Maubert, was granted to them, and they took it."

"It is almost incredible!" I exclaimed.

"But it is true," said De Lorgnac.

"It appears to me," I said, "that my departure for Italy will be a little delayed."

"If you were as superstitious as I am," and Le Brusquet smiled as he spoke, "you would say that departure is a dream of the past."

"Why?"

"*Eh bien*, a month ago, you left Paris from this very house never to return, and here you are back again! It is my belief that your fate is against your leaving Paris, and your game will have to be played here. That slice of the Romagna you intended for your own helping will go to fill another's plate."

I laughed, and De Lorgnac rose. "There is Quinte with Cartouche at the door," he said, "and I must be off. Be at the door of the Queen's apartments a little before compline, and so, *au revoir*!"

"We have almost an hour and a half still," said Le Brusquet, "and if it were not safer for you to be indoors as much as possible I would suggest spending a half-hour at the Bourgogne."

"I think it would be better to stay here; but tell me, do you know anything definite about this design of the Duchess?"

"No. All that I know is that there is something afoot. Vieilleville was approached; but, to his honour, refused to have anything to do with it. I know, however, no details."

"Then all we can do at present is to wait and watch."

He nodded, and poured himself out some wine. Leaving him to sip his Joué I retired to change my dress, and shortly after we rode out to the Louvre. On arrival there we proceeded at once to Le Brusquet's apartments, where he received a joyous welcome from his ape.

"Here," he said, as he put the little beast down and took a sword from the wall, "here is the sword you lent me that night. You see it is clean and sharp as ever."

"Let it remain, then, in your hands, monsieur, as a trifling remembrance of Bertrand d'Orrain."

"I thank you! I shall guard it as it should be guarded. *Corbleu*! but it was a narrow affair that night; but for you Vendôme might be wearing wings now, and the house of Bêsme extinct as the Sphinga."

"It was a lucky chance. I suppose that old fox Camus still has his lair in the same place? I wonder what made him turn against me as he did——"

"Oh, Camus is like a dog that loves biting, a dog that would bite his own master in default of anyone else. Yes; he is there still. As for his turning on you, that is part of his duty; he has been for years a paid servant of Diane."

"How long is this woman to last?"

"As long as her roses. But they say those are fadeless; and Saint Gelais has had to leave the Court in fear of his life for swearing that she keeps them ever fresh by daily bathing her face in sow's milk." And he laughed as he added: "But come, now, it is time to be moving."

We were soon in the long gallery leading to the Queen's apartments; but, instead of the darkness and gloom that pervaded it on the occasion of my last visit, all was in light. Cressets burned everywhere, and at every few yards stood a flambeau-bearer, his torch alight. The vaulted roof above us was dim with the smoke that rose from the torches, and there was everywhere the subdued murmur of voices, as people passed and repassed, or stood in small knots conversing. So great was the change that I could not avoid noticing it; and Le Brusquet explained that it was always so when any of the royal children, who lived at St. Germain-en-Laye, visited the Queen. He had just said this when we rounded the abrupt curve the gallery made, and came face to face with two men walking arm-in-arm in the direction opposite to that we were taking. They were Simon and De Ganache, and recognition was mutual and instant. Monsieur de Ganache saw the surprised look on my face, which he no doubt read, as I glanced from him to my brother; and lifting his hat in a half-defiant, half-shamefaced manner, would have passed on, but Simon held him by the arm, and planting himself right in our path said, with an insolent stare:

"This gentleman must have mistaken the Louvre for the Gloriette."

Le Brusquet plucked my sleeve in warning; but I was cool enough, and had no intention of again laying myself open to the law. I gave Simon stare for stare. "Yes; it is I," I answered coldly; and then, turning to De Ganache: "Monsieur, it was from the Vidame d'Orrain that I had the good fortune to rescue Mademoiselle de Paradis. I thought you knew of this. If not, you know now with whom your arm is linked."

"By God!" Simon burst out, "if I did not remember where I was——"

"Tush!" I broke in, "there are a hundred other places where we can settle our differences. I have no time to be brawling here."

With this I pushed past, and left them looking at each other as, followed by Le Brusquet, I gained the door to the Queen's apartment. As we came up De Lorgnac himself appeared, and passed us into the anteroom. I well remembered that cheerless tomb through which I had passed a month ago; but now it was all glittering bright. The door of the Queen's cabinet was closed; but to the right folding doors—that I had not observed before—were open, giving a glimpse, through the half-drawn curtains, of a crowded salon beyond. In the ante-room itself there were about a dozen or so of ladies-in-waiting and pages, all talking and laughing; and as we followed De Lorgnac I felt a light touch at my elbow, and turning met a merry face that smiled up at me. It was little Mademoiselle Davila, the same who with Madame de Montal had met us at Longpont.

"*Eh bien*! So you have come, monsieur. I can tell you that you have been expected. Oh! we have heard about you at last—heard twice over—and we are all thinking of playing truant and running away to the forest of Vincennes or Monceaux. That last is better, for it is nearer Paris——" But here her breathless chatter was cut short by a "Hush!" from the salon, and then we heard the strings of a harp being

touched.

"'Tis *belle* Marie, the little Queen of Scotland!" And moving forward a couple of steps we were able to see into the next room. I looked round in vain for mademoiselle, and then my glance was arrested by a tall, fair-haired girl who was before a harp; and even I, who should have had no eyes but for one face, stood as if spellbound. As her fingers ran over the harp strings a low, wailing melody filled the room, and then with a voice of strange sweetness she sang a sad little song—a bergerelle of my own country. Harp and voice together died away in inexpressible sorrow at the last words, and a strange stillness filled the room, but was broken at last by a half-suppressed sob. Then in a moment all was changed. There came a bright little flourish, and she sang, joyous and blithe as a lark:

"Si le roi m'avait honné
Paris sa grand'ville,
Et qu'il m'eut fallu quitter
L'Amour de m'amie;
J'aurais dit au Roi Henri
Reprenez votre Paris,
J'aime mieux m'amie
O gai!
J'aime mieux m'amie
O gai!"

"*O gai!*" burst the chorus, almost unconsciously, from those around her, and with a flush on her face and a smile on her lips Mary of Scotland moved from the harp, and was immediately lost to view in the circle of those who crowded around her. I looked for my companions. Mademoiselle Davila had found a lanky page to flirt with; Le Brusquet seemed to have vanished; but De Lorgnac was at hand.

"Come now!" he said, and I followed him across the crowded room to where the Queen sat, amidst a group of her ladies, with the Dauphin—a small, ill-formed boy of thirteen or fourteen—at her knees. She received me graciously; and on my delivering my packet she broke the seals, glanced at the contents with apparent carelessness, and then handed it—all open as it was—to a lady who stood behind her.

"La Beauce, put this on my table." And then turning to me, said, with a laugh:

"Your ears should be tingling, monsieur, for the last hour or so there has been nothing but you talked of by my maids-of-honour. It seems that the cock of Orrain has not forgotten the use of his spurs."

My tongue had long since forgotten such courtier tricks as it had learned. In truth, it was never good at these; and whilst I was casting about for something to say, and wishing myself well away from the ring of faces that circled me in, a gay, laughing voice broke in:

"But where is the heroine, madame? Where is Diane of the Forest? She should thank her preserver before your Majesty." And Mary of Scotland, heedless and blithe of heart, made me a mock little courtesy as she moved to the Queen's side.

"Here she is," cried twenty voices; "she has been hiding here." And, before I knew how it was, I found myself face to face with mademoiselle.

"Thank him! thank him!" the reckless voices around us began to shout; and, as I stood fumbling about, mademoiselle, with a face like fire, made me a stiff bow, and was about to step back, when our chief tormentor called out:

"Oh, how poor a thanksgiving! Surely this is a fit case for a Court of Love!—how and in what way a fair lady should greet her knight after a parlous quest?"

"Madame"—and Mary of Scotland knelt before the Queen—"you will hold a
Court now, will you not?"

"*O gai*! *O gai*!" And there was a chorus of laughter and cheers.

Where all this foolery might have ended Heaven knows. The Queen herself seemed to be enjoying it, and was about to make some reply to Mary, when there was a bustle at the door, and an usher called out:

"The King! His Majesty the King!"

Holding the Dauphin by the hand the Queen rose and advanced to meet the King, who entered, followed by half a dozen of his gentlemen. Henri was tall, strongly built, and carried himself royally; but

there was a strange mixture of courage and weakness in his countenance. He was brave—no man could be found to deny that; but there was never a sparkle of intelligence in his dull eyes, though at times they shone with cunning, and his mouth was weak and sensual. That night he had supped in the apartments of Diane de Poitiers, and had evidently primed himself for this visit to the Queen, for his face was flushed and his voice thick.

"Your Majesty is unexpected, but all the more welcome for that," said the Queen as Henri touched her fingers with his lips. The King made some answer I did not hear, and led the Queen to a seat; then, patting the Dauphin's head much in the manner of one patting a spaniel's back, he looked around.

"*Birge*!" he said. "You are gay here. It was dull this evening at supper; she had the megrims."

A slight flush came into Catherine de Medicis' cheeks at this mention of the mistress, and her voice trembled a little.

"I trust madame will soon be better; but you, sire, will always find us gay here."

"It seems so. What was the particular jest? It might bring a smile to
Diane's face when I tell her of it."

I moved back, so that I did not hear the Queen's answer, but Henri laughed loudly.

"A Court of Love! *Bigre*! 'Tis a new idea, and a good one. But where is our little ward? Present her."

Mademoiselle had to come forward, and when she had kissed hands the
King said:

"I hear sad tales of you, mademoiselle; but there, never mind! You must not, however, break all our hearts. Faith!" and his feeble intellect wandered off to the one subject it could think of, "we will have a tourney in a fortnight, and the defenders shall wear your colours."

Mademoiselle blushed red, and began to stammer out something, whilst a few looks were exchanged between the courtiers that made my blood run hot. The Queen, however, interposed, and suddenly called for me.

"Monsieur d'Orrain!"

I stepped up, catching the look of astonishment in mademoiselle's eyes as she heard the name by which I was addressed.

"Permit me, your Majesty, to present to you the Chevalier d'Orrain. It is he who arranged the small matter you entrusted me with, and has, besides, shown himself a valiant gentleman. With your Majesty's permission I propose appointing him to my guards; M. de Lorgnac has a vacancy."

There was a little murmur, and as I knelt, the King extended his hand to me carelessly. As I rose to my feet, and was about to withdraw, he said, with a sudden recollection:

"Monsieur d'Orrain—the brother of the Vidame?"

I bowed, and Henri turned to the Queen, his face assuming a severe expression; but Catherine de Medicis anticipated his speech.

"It is so small a favour that I thought your Majesty would have no objection in view of M. d'Orrain's services. I do not, however, press it."

Henri hummed and hawed, and a curious, cunning expression came into his eyes.

"*Bigre*! It seems to me I have to grant favours from the moment I rise to the moment I lie down to sleep. But to tell the truth, madame, it was I who came here to ask a favour from you." And then he stopped, and his face flushed darker than ever as he went on, with a short laugh: "Come! let it be a bargain! If I grant you your request will you grant me mine?"

"Assuredly, sire!—even if you did not grant me mine."

"Oh! we will make it a bargain. Well, then, let it be as you wish with monsieur there." And turning to me: "And harkee, Chevalier! Keep your sword in your scabbard, and put your Geneva books in the fire, now that you have a new start."

"I thank you, sire!" said the Queen. "And your command——?"

She stopped, awaiting the King's answer; but Henri hesitated, and at last, bending forward,

whispered a few words in the Queen's ear. The effect was instant. She became white and red in turns, and began to nervously clasp and unclasp her hands.

"Come!" said the King, with an affectation of gaiety; "it was a bargain, madame."

There was a pause, and then, with a voice as hard as steel, Catherine de Medicis said to her favourite maid-of-honour:

"Mademoiselle La Beauce—my jewel-casket—quick, please."

La Beauce bowed, and slipped away, and we all looked on in wonder at the strange scene. Presently she returned with a small but heavy casket in her hands. Catherine opened it with a key she detached from a chain she wore at her neck, and as the lid fell back the glittering splendour of the Crown diamonds of France was disclosed to view.

"They have been worn by a line of queens, sire," said Catherine as she placed the box in Henri's hands; "they ought well to become Madame Diane de Poitiers, and cure her megrims."

With this she made a profound bow, and withdrew. When she had gone there was an absolute silence; and then the King laughed, an uneasy, foolish laugh.

"And all this because I want to borrow a few stones for the masque!" he exclaimed as he thrust the box into the hands of one of his gentleman. "Take this, Carnavalet!" And swinging round on his heel he went as he had come, his suite clattering behind him.

As he went we heard through the open doors the cries of "*Vive le Roi*!" from those in the gallery outside, and then all was still once more.

The salon, but a short time before so bright and gay, emptied like magic. I stood where I was, leaning against a pillar, wondering at the scene through which I had passed, and hardly realising that I was alone. No, not alone, for mademoiselle stood before me, her hand outstretched.

"Oh, monsieur, this is a horrible place! Why did I ever come?"

I could say nothing, for she too had seen and heard all that had passed.

"But it is not this I came to talk about. I waited so as to be able to congratulate M. Bertrand Broussel, the worthy citizen of Paris." And she laughed as she added: "I was sure of it from the first; I knew it could never be."

"May I also say that I was sure that Cujus the furrier never had a niece?"

She made a little impatient gesture with her hand. "I do not believe you will ever forget that, monsieur."

"Never."

"And you are not leaving Paris, then?" she asked after a moment's pause.

"I cannot now," I answered.

"Then," she laughed, "the furrier's niece and Monsieur Broussel will meet again. *Au revoir*, Chevalier!"

And she was gone.

CHAPTER XXI

THE HOUSE IN THE PASSAGE OF PITY

The next day, about the time appointed by La Marmotte, I presented myself at Maître Barou, the armourer's, store. There was no one there except the old proprietor himself, and it was hard to say if he were Jew or Gentile as he stood behind the counter in the midst of his wares. I had sufficient excuse for my visit, and that was to purchase a breastplate of the pattern worn by the Queen's guards, in which I had been formally enrolled early in the day.

"*Bien*!" he said when I inquired for one, "I have one that will fit you, I think. It was bespoke by M. de Montorgueil——"

"But, perhaps, monsieur may have a voice in the matter."

"Probably; but as monsieur has not paid for it, and is at present lodged in the Châtelet on account of his escapade with Mademoiselle d'Estanay, we may let that objection pass." And Maître Barou chuckled.

"In that case, let me see the corselet."

"Here it is, monsieur."

I tried it on, and finding it would suit, and that the workmanship was of rare excellency, demanded the price.

Barou hummed as he tapped the shining steel with his finger and glanced at me from under his bushy brows.

"Monsieur must have but lately joined the guards?" he asked, ignoring my question.

"A matter of a few hours."

"Ah! I thought so. I know them all, monsieur. First there is Messire
Blaise de Lorgnac, the lieutenant——"

"Maître Barou, it will take till to-morrow to go over the names. What is your price?"

"Ho! ho! messire, you grow impatient. 'Tis Aranguez plate this, as you may see—the best work of Spain, down to the buckles. Ho! ho! messire, only two good things ever came from Spain: one is good armour, and the other pretty women——"

"And I presume, Maître Barou, they are both expensive things; but the price of your corselet, for my time is short."

"Fifty pistoles, then."

"'Tis a long sum, and I am not sure of the proof."

Maître Barou looked at me reproachfully. Seizing a poniard he glanced at the blade for a moment, touched the point with the tip of his finger, and then raising the weapon brought it down with his full force on the corselet. The dagger glanced off from the mirror-like surface and buried itself deep in the hard wood of the counter.

"There, monsieur!" And Barou looked at me triumphantly. It was a shrewd enough test, and I closed the bargain, paying him his money then and there, and bidding him send the mail to De Lorgnac's house.

"And the name, monsieur?"

"The Chevalier d'Orrain."

As Barou was making an entry on a slate I heard a step behind me, and turning saw it was La Marmotte. She made no sign of recognition, however, but went straight up to Barou, to whom she handed a small package, giving him some instructions in a low tone. Taking the hint I gave a casual glance or so at the things around me, and then strolled out of the shop. I walked very slowly up the street in the direction opposite De Lorgnac's house, and I had scarce gone a hundred paces when La Marmotte caught me up, and asked me somewhat abruptly if I knew of a place called the Passage of Pity. I replied that I did, and she then told me to meet her there in an hour's time, and to be sure I was well armed. For answer I touched the hilt of my sword; and, with a nod to me, she crossed the street and disappeared up a narrow, winding alley. I kept on at the leisurely pace I was going at, wondering to myself if I were walking into a snare or not. But, although caution is a very good thing, still there are times when one should be prepared to take risks, and I held this was such an occasion. Having now reached the head of the Rue Tiquetonne I quickened my pace, and was soon in the Vallée de Misérè. I avoided the bridge, and, crossing the river by a ferry boat, was soon in the purlieus of the Sorbonne. Every inch of this locality was familiar to me, and at last I reached the cloisters of the Mathurins, a few yards from which lay the narrow by-street which the quaint wit of the Parisian *badaud* had christened the Passage of Pity. It was dark and short—so short, indeed, that an active boy, standing at one end of it, might easily have thrown a stone against the high wall of a house built athwart the other end of the road, apparently barring all progress beyond. This was not the case, however, for the narrow arch, that

was to all appearance the entrance to the house, gave access to a small flight of steps, worn with age, that led towards a gallery opening upon the Rue de la Harpe.

In the wall towards the right of this arch, about a man's height from the ground, was a small niche containing a figure of the Virgin, and beneath was that which, perhaps, had given its name to the street, for someone had traced in shaky characters upon the wall the words: "*Avez pitié*!"

Beneath these words, written in blood long since browned with age, could still be seen the impress of a hand that had been red too, as if the unfortunate writer had supported himself thus whilst tracing his miserable words.

The steps leading to the gallery beyond the archway were known as "The Little Steps of Mercy," and to get at the entrance door of the house itself, which was in part built over the passage, it was necessary to go along the gallery, in the side of which it was placed, in an almost invisible gloom, that added not a little to the mystery surrounding the place. Another curious thing about this little by-street was that every house, and there were not many, appeared deserted. Hardly a soul ever passed by day along its dim length, which was always in shadow, except at high noon, when the sunlight forced its way in a line of white light along the forbidding passage. By night no one was ever seen, and, indeed, there were few who would have ventured along the Passage of Pity when the sun went down.

Here, then, I stood at the appointed time, staring at the surly row of houses on either side of me and at the dead wall in my face. Twice I paced up and down the length of the street; but there was no sign of La Marmotte. On the second occasion, however, as I came back, the door of the house on the right-hand side nearest the arch opened slightly, and I heard her voice.

"Enter, monsieur."

For one little moment I hesitated, and then boldly slipped in. As I did so the door was immediately shut, and I found myself in almost total darkness.

"A moment." Then I heard the striking of a tinderbox. There was a small, bright glow, then the flame of some burning paper, that threw out the figure of La Marmotte as she lit a candle, and holding it out motioned me up a rickety staircase that faced us.

I had drawn my poniard as I stepped in, so evil-looking was the place, and she caught the gleam of the steel.

"It is needless," she said coldly; "we are alone."

"Perhaps, madame," I replied, taking no notice of her remark, "you had better lead the way; the place is known to you."

She did as I desired, and we soon found ourselves in a small room, in which there was some broken-down furniture. There was one window, which was closed, and being made entirely of wood all light was shut out except that which the candle gave.

"A strange place," I said, looking around me.

"When one is as I am, monsieur," was the bitter answer, "one gets friends with strange places."

I looked at her more closely than I had done before. Even by the dim light I could see how pale and sunken were her cheeks, and her raven hair was streaked with grey. Her eyes had lost the brazen fire that had shone in them once. Wretched and miserable indeed she looked. But this was not the La Marmotte of the past but another woman.

She put the candle down and turned to me.

"Monsieur, I have asked you to come here because we can be alone here and uninterrupted, and that which I have to say to you concerns the life, perhaps, of Mademoiselle de Paradis. Monsieur, you may not believe me, but from that dreadful night at Le Jaquemart I have become a changed woman. I have learned, monsieur, how to pray, and, my God! the past—the past!" And she put her hands to her face and shuddered.

"Madame, there is always a future."

"But never for a woman! Oh, Monsieur d'Orrain—for I know your name now—you know this as well as I."

I made no answer. What could I say? And she went on:

"Listen! After that night I brought him—Trotto—back to Paris as soon as he was able to move. He was badly hurt, but not so badly as we thought; and he lives for revenge. Your brother the Vidame is in a house in the Rue des Lavandières, into which he has recently moved. There I brought Trotto. Here I found Malsain and some others; and, believing me to be what I was before, they spoke freely before me. For you, monsieur, I warn you to fear the bravo's knife; they will not face you openly."

"I will try and take care of myself. But what is it that concerns mademoiselle?"

"This much I know, monsieur: the Vidame wants her for himself, or rather her wealth. The plan he has conceived is as follows:—the edict against the heretics is to be revived suddenly, and mademoiselle is to be accused. And you know what this means, with Dom Antoine de Mouchy as judge."

"But how will this gain the Vidame his wish?"

"To explain that, monsieur, is one of the reasons I have brought you here." And moving towards the window she opened it cautiously. As she did so there appeared, about three feet or more away, the grey and mottled surface of a blank wall.

"Look!" she said.

I looked out of the window. The walls of the two houses stood about three feet apart. Below me was a deep, narrow space, shut in on all sides except from the top. In the opposite wall was a window partly open, below which ran a narrow ledge. This window faced the one I was standing at, but was placed about a yard or so higher, so that anyone standing there could look into the room in which we were. All this I took in, and then turned to La Marmotte.

"Monsieur," she said, "that house is where Antoine de Mouchy lives, and where, within an hour's time, he is to meet the Vidame and some others to discuss their plan. If you would learn it you must learn it from there." And she pointed to the window above me.

I was about to speak, but she stopped me.

"Listen! I know that house from garret to cellar, for I lived there once. That window leads to an empty room. A door to the right leads into De Mouchy's study, which looks over the Rue de la Harpe, and standing at that door you can hear every word that passes within. Will you risk it?"

"The getting there is possible, but it is the retreat that I am doubtful of."

"I have provided for that." And opening a box that lay near her she pulled out a short coil of stout rope with an iron hook fixed at each end.

"Fasten one hook to the window there, and throw me the rope. I will fasten the other here, and you will have a passage back. I will wait here for you."

I glanced out of the window again. On the left was the Passage of Pity with its dreary, deserted houses, on the right, above me, was a glimpse of sky. Now and again we heard the cooing of pigeons and the flutter of their wings amongst the eaves, but except for this there was no sound, and we were perfectly unobserved.

Removing my boots and discarding my sword I climbed out of the window, resting my feet on the ledge beneath it. Cautiously rising to a standing position I found I could see clearly into the room opposite. It was unoccupied, but, so far from being empty, was filled with books and piles of documents. It looked, indeed, as if M. de Mouchy's study had overrun itself into this room. I had, however, made up my mind to take the risk of being present at this meeting whatever the cost might be, and so after another and careful look began the attempt. Between the opposite window and myself was a gap of a little over three feet, so that it was impossible to reach there. Thanks, however, to the forethought of La Marmotte I was enabled to overcome this difficulty, and after a couple of tries, during which the noise made was such as would have certainly aroused attention had anyone been at hand, I succeeded in fixing one of the iron hooks attached to the rope to the ledge of the window. Then, after a strain to test the rope, I let myself swing across the chasm, and found foothold on the opposite ledge. Once there matters were easy, and in a trice I had passed through the window.

CHAPTER XXII

A quick glance around showed me I was alone. Turning back to the window I swung the free end of the rope to La Marmotte. She caught it, drew it in, and closed the window over it as far as it would go. Through the slight opening I saw for an instant the glow of the candle. Then the rope tightened, and the light went out. I crept softly to a door on my right, and standing there listened intently. All was silence. I tried the door; it opened, and I saw before me De Mouchy's study. His table, littered with papers, was almost in the centre of the room. Near the window was a large carved chest. The walls were lined with books, and three or four bookcases, filled with dust-laden volumes, projected at right angles from them. In truth, it seemed as if Dom Antoine owned a library that might rival that of the Abbey of St. Victor.

I made up my mind to go a step farther than La Marmotte's suggestion, and as the chances of discovery were equal whether I remained in the outer room or here I decided to stay where I was. Between the wall and one of the projecting bookshelves there was space sufficient for a man to stand perfectly concealed, unless anyone chose to come round the bookcase. Here, then, I took up my position, trusting much to luck, as one has to do in a desperate enterprise, and relying on the chance that De Mouchy would never suspect that anyone would dare to act as I was doing in broad daylight, for it was not much beyond five o'clock in the afternoon.

I had not long to wait. Presently I heard a scratching at a door opposite to that by which I had entered the room. There was a murmured word or so, then the door opened, and Dom Antoine de Mouchy stepped in, bearing in his arms an immense black cat. Where the afternoon sunlight shone warmly on the carved chest he placed the beast, stroking its back once or twice, and then turned, and stood for a moment facing his table.

As he stood there, in the black robes and skull-cap of a doctor of the Sorbonne, I took careful stock of him, for it was he who, years past, had doomed me to a frightful death, and who had shared with Simon and Diane de Poitiers the remains of my property. He was past middle life, with a frame yet strong and vigorous. Cruelty and avarice had set their seals on his broad face. His cheek-bones were high as those of a Tartar, and the small and sunken eyes had a restless, savage look in them—the look of a tiger; and no tiger ever thirsted for blood more ferociously than Dom Antoine de Mouchy, Doctor of the Sorbonne, and President of the Chambre Ardente, thirsted for the blood of his fellow-creatures.

Twice he glanced around him, and then sitting at his table was soon busily employed in jotting down something on his tablets. After a while he stopped, and some thought moved him to silent laughter. Leaning back he let his glance travel round the room, and then arrested it once more on his tablets.

"Ha, ha!" he laughed out loudly this time, "this is a rare dish of fried fish! Prick up your ears, Titi!" And reaching out a long arm he stroked the fur of the huge cat that sat crouched on the coffer, an occasional shiver running through its body. It was old, very old, as I could see.

At De Mouchy's voice and the touch of his hand the creature rose slowly, turned upon Dom Antoine a pair of green eyes from which the sight had long since fled, and hissed like an angry snake. De Mouchy laughed again as he went on:

"You agree—eh? Well, listen to the names—Huguenots—Christaudins—Spawn of Geneva—whose bodies shall perish as their souls, and whose goods shall come to the righteous—that is, to me, Titi."

For a moment light seemed to come back to those sightless eyes, and with a purr, as if it understood, the great cat leaped lightly on to the table and sat before De Mouchy, whilst the latter put one finger on the tablets, and spoke again:

"*Mon vieux*! the poor fisherman has netted some fine gold-fish this time. No little sprats of tailors of the Rue St. Antoine or out-at-heel scholars—but fine, fat, golden carp. The pity of it, Titi, that the great ones of the land will take toll of this haul—tithe and fee; but there will be something left for you and for me—you understand?"

The cat snarled, as though it had followed every word, and De Mouchy went on, carrying out his terrible humour:

"Good! You cannot speak nor see but you can hear, and so listen! First—the Church first always, Titi—comes Odet de Coligny, Cardinal de Châtillon, Bishop of Beauvais—a traitor—a wolf who has stolen into the fold of Christ—with a hundred thousand livres a year of income!" He paused, and looked at the cat, with a snarl on his lips as evil as that on those of his familiar.

"Secondly, the High Nobility—Gaspard de Coligny, High Admiral of France, the tallest poppy in the garden of heresy, Titi.

"Thirdly, the Law—in the person of Maître Anne du Bourg, an unjust judge; but you and I will change his judgment seat for a felon's dock, and give him a garment of red flames for his red robes of office."

The cat mewed as De Mouchy went on: "There are many more, my friend, and one in special, against whom we dare not move as yet, for he bears the lilies of France on his shield. But let us on to the sweets, for we have dined well, and need a toothsome morsel. If you could see, *mon vieux*, and had set eyes on her, I should have my doubts of you also, for she is as the fairy light that draws the unwary into the Pit of Death. Can you guess? No! Then I will tell you. What think you of the Demoiselle de Paradis? Yes! Hiss, hiss! *Sus, sus*! On to the heretics, *mon brave*!"

And as the cat rose on its tottering limbs, arched its back, and snarled, the man leaned back snarling also, for the blood madness was on him, and he was alone, and had let himself go utterly.

At this moment this strange scene was interrupted by a sharp, imperious knock at the door, and as De Mouchy, with a start, swung round his chair and rose to his feet the door was pushed open without further ceremony, and he saw before him the beautiful but pitiless face of Diane de Poitiers, and behind her stood Simon of Orrain.

As De Mouchy stepped forward to meet his visitors with a cringing air, the cat, less of a hypocrite than its master, retreated to the far end of the table, and began to hiss like a boiling kettle.

"I did not expect you yet, madame," began De Mouchy; but Diane de
Poitiers broke in upon his speech:

"It does not matter; let us to business. But away with that hideous cat first!" And she pointed with her fan at Titi, who stood glaring at her with his sightless eyes.

"He is a good adviser, madame," grinned De Mouchy; but she stamped her foot.

"It looks like a devil. Away with it! else I shall ask Orrain to fling it through the window."

Simon smiled grimly, and stretched out a long, thin arm; but with a sullen look on his face De Mouchy lifted his pet in his arms, and, opening the door of the adjoining room, thrust it therein, shutting the door upon it. It was, indeed, a lucky change of plan I had made. Had I been behind that door discovery was certain.

The Duchess had seated herself in De Mouchy's chair, and coolly lifting up the tablets ran her eyes over them. Simon flung himself upon the coffer, his sword between his knees, and began gnawing at his long moustache, whilst De Mouchy stood between the two, his deep-set eyes shifting from one to the other.

Suddenly Diane's red lips curved into a smile.

"*Eh bien*, De Mouchy! But you are building fine castles in Spain here! See this, Orrain; he thinks to net Châtillon, the Admiral, and the First Prince of the Blood!" And she broke into merry laughter.

"And why not, madame?" scowled De Mouchy.

Diane de Poitiers checked her laugh. "For the simple reason that the house of Châtillon has become wise over D'Andelot's affair, and will not set foot in Paris. As for Vendôme, he must be dealt with differently." And her dark eyes flashed ominously.

"Put the tablets aside for the present," Simon cut in, "and let us not argue. We each form an angle of a triangle, and the triangle will be nothing at all if one of the angles is taken away. Let us discuss measures; we will take the names after. How did my proposal go at the council to-day?"

"Approved," said De Mouchy. "And the Chambre Ardente can act whenever the said court thinks fit."

"That is, when you, as president, think fit?"

"Precisely, Monsieur le Vidame."

"This, however, is not enough," Simon went on. "Another little suggestion of mine, the suspension of the edicts, made, possibly, by madame's merciful intercession with the King, has borne good fruit, and Paris is full of heretics. But I presume that it is neither their bodies nor their souls that we desire." And he looked at his two companions.

De Mouchy preserved a scowling silence, but with a flush on her face the Duchess said:

"I do not follow you, monsieur. We are good Christians, and we work for Holy Church."

Simon leaned back, his knee between his clasped hands, and laughed a bitter, mocking laugh.

"Eternal Blue! For Holy Church! Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho! Madame, those sweet lips of yours drop pearls of wisdom." And he rocked to and fro.

Deeper grew the crimson on the Duchess' cheek, and she opened and shut her fan with an angry snap. She tried to say something; but her words died away in a stammer, and her eyes drooped before Simon's cold and mocking look.

"Come," said he, the master-vampire, "let us leave this talk of Holy Church for the salons and the council. We three know what we want, and to get it we need a grant from the King, giving in equal shares all the properties and goods of condemned heretics in Paris, which by law are escheat to the Crown, to madame here, the crescent moon of France; to you, most righteous judge; and to me, Simon, Vidame d'Orrain. This done, we can begin to play."

"Excellent!" And De Mouchy rubbed his hands together. "I will light a fire on every square and on the parvis of every church in Paris, and the smell of the burning will be as incense to the holy saints."

Diane, however, remained silent, her face still flushed, and a rebellious light in her sullen eyes, which refused to meet Simon's look; and after a moment he went on:

"To obtain this, madame, we look to you. After last night I feel sure his Majesty can refuse you nothing."

His words stung her into speech. "It is absurd," she burst out, "equal shares! Monsieur, am I to be sucked dry by your exactions? Never! If I get the grant it will be for myself, and you and De Mouchy will be paid as heretofore. So much and no more; and if you like it not there are others who will do my bidding." She rose from her seat in magnificent anger, an evil, beautiful thing, and De Mouchy shrank from her look. Not so Simon. With an angry growl he reached forward and caught her wrist.

"Have you forgotten what there is between us?" he asked. She made no answer, and strove to free herself silently; but Simon's grip was firm, and there was a terrible meaning in his glance as he forced her back into her seat. "Have you forgotten?" he asked again, "or shall I call it from the house-tops to remind you? Fool! Do you not know there are a hundred as fair as you ready to supplant you? One whisper of the past, one whisper of the present—ay, the present—I have but to breathe De Ganache's name."

"Enough!" she gasped, and Simon loosed his hold, and she sat for a moment, her face buried in her hands.

"Come, Diane," and Simon changed his tone, "you have too many enemies at your gate to quarrel with old friends. We need you and you need us."

She put her hands down, her face now as white as marble, all the cruel lines of her features accentuated, and her eyes were those of a cowed tigress. Never will I forget the scene. In this wicked woman's heart there was not a regret, not a thought of the innocent blood she was planning to shed. It was defeated avarice, pride wounded to the quick, that struggled in her look, and made her, all beautiful as she was, for the moment hideous.

"Get her some wine," said Simon shortly to De Mouchy—"and get it yourself."

De Mouchy rose and left the room, and the two were alone together.

"Listen, Diane!" said Simon. "You stand on the edge of a precipice. It is said that the King has spoken of nothing this morning but the beauty of Mademoiselle de Paradis."

She gasped; and he went on:

"I see you understand. Well, unless you agree to my terms mademoiselle is secure from harm; and I think you will find Anet a dull retreat."

There was a little snapping sound, and she had broken her fan, and flung it from her on to the table. At this moment De Mouchy returned, bringing with him some wine and glasses. One he filled and handed to Diane, who drank it without a word, and then sat staring in front of her.

"I think," said Simon, "that madame now agrees to our proposal. Is it not so?'

"Yes," she said in a low voice, "I agree," but her eyes were kept down to hide their expression.

"That, then, is settled. And remember, madame, that we cannot take action until we have the King's

grant in writing. De Mouchy here will see that it is properly registered in the Chambre—and remember it must be within a week, or——" And he bent forward and whispered something in her ear.

"It shall be as you desire, Monsieur le Vidame."

"In that case," said Simon, filling himself a glass, "I drink to the health of the Great Enterprise. To the unending radiance of the crescent moon, to your new estate of Chateaux Vieux de Mouchy, and to Simon, *Duc* d'Orrain!"

With this he drank, and set the glass back on the table with a little click.

There was a silence, and then Diane rose.

"There is nothing further to discuss, I think?" she said.

"No," replied Simon; "except that Dom Antoine here would like to register a certain grant within a week."

She made no answer; but, preceded by De Mouchy and followed by Simon, moved to the door, and all three left the room together. The stars had been with me, and two minutes later I stood beside La Marmotte.

"Well?" she asked.

"There is no time to talk. If we could but get back that rope it would remove all suspicion."

She hesitated, and then: "Perhaps with your sword."

"Excellent!" And, drawing my sword, which I had slung on once more, I leaned forth from the window, and found that the point easily reached the hook. It needed but a turn of the wrist to free the rope, which, a moment after, was drawn in safely.

"And now," I said, "let us be off. If you are wise you will never set foot here again."

She laughed sadly, and we went out together into the lonely Passage of Pity. It was growing dark now, and threading our way through the labyrinth of streets we reached the river face. Here La Marmotte stopped, and abruptly wished me farewell; but I stayed her, thanking her from my heart for her good deed, and ventured, with the utmost diffidence, to say that if she were in need of a friend she could count on me. She understood.

"Nay, monsieur," she said, "for me there is but one way, and that is to follow the light that has come to me. We will never meet again; and, perhaps, what I have done to-day may be some recompense for the past. Farewell!"

Thus we parted; and from that day I never saw or heard of her again. I may mention that when things changed with me I made every effort to discover her, but without avail; and, when, some time after, Torquato Trotto paid the penalty of his crimes, he asserted, even under the rack, that he knew nothing of her, and that she had fled from him. This I believe to be truth, and can only hope that the poor, storm-tossed life found a haven of refuge at last.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MASQUERADE

That night it was my duty to take the guard outside the Queen's apartments. Circumstances had made it impossible for me to have speech with De Lorgnac, and Le Brusquet was nowhere to be seen, so that I was unable to inform them of what I knew.

Full of the discovery I had made, and with my thoughts running on the danger that threatened mademoiselle, I paced backward and forward before the door leading into the ante-room, my long shadow keeping me ghostly company. It was the night of the great masque given by the King in honour of his Diane's birthday—the masque in which she was to flaunt in the Crown diamonds—and, as may be imagined, there was not a soul to be seen in the gallery that curved before me into dim, mysterious gloom.

Now and again I thought I heard a laugh and the sound of subdued voices from within the ante-room; but, guessing that the mice were probably playing within, I paid no heed, and, being a little tired, seated myself on the coffer that lay in the shadow near the door, and stared moodily into the silence, absorbed in my own sombre reflections.

On a sudden I heard the patter of footsteps—hasty, rapid footsteps coming towards me along the gallery. I challenged, and got the password on the instant in Le Brusquet's voice, and in a half-minute the little man emerged from the gloom and stood beside me.

"I was ready to give my last pistole to see you," I began; but he put up his hand, saying in a low tone, as he pointed to the door:

"Hush! Is there anyone within?"

"Mice, I think," I answered softly.

"Perhaps a cat." And he dropped his voice to the lowest whisper. "Whoever they are I must empty that room ere we speak, for I have, I think, as much for you as you for me."

With this he knocked twice sharply at the door. After a moment it was opened, and putting the curtains aside Le Brusquet slipped into the room. In doing so, whether by accident or design, he left the door open and the curtains drawn back, so that from where I stood in the shadow outside I could see and hear all that passed within. There were only two persons there, and I smiled a little to myself at Le Brusquet's caution, for one was pretty Mademoiselle Davila, seated demurely on a tabouret, and the other was a fair-haired boy of sixteen or so, who stood with a red face and an uncomfortable air some distance away from her.

"Mice, as I thought," I chuckled to myself, whilst Le Brusquet, with a profound bow, said:

"Mademoiselle, I had thought to have found M. de Lorgnac in waiting here."

"Here! M. de Lorgnac!" replied the maid-of-honour, with a little laugh. "No; M. de Lorgnac never ventures here, unless compelled to."

"I suppose neither of you can tell me where he has gone? Can you, De Lorges?" And he turned to the page; but the boy only grew redder, and began to make a fumbling reply.

Mademoiselle Davila, however, cut in. "He has gone to the masque." And with a burst of confidence as she rose to her feet: "The Queen has gone too, monsieur."

"To the masque! The masque she said she would never attend!"

"Oh, the Queen is a woman, monsieur! And so she has gone, and gone masked, too, with Monsieur de Lorgnac in attendance—not a soul else—and I have been left here—ah!" And she stamped her little foot. "One cannot even hear the music. Oh! it is a grave, this place—a grave!"

"Faith! I know those who would think this little waiting-room a heaven."

"Who?" She was a good girl, but a coquette to her finger-tips, and the bait took.

Ere he answered Le Brusquet slipped his arm through that of the page, who seemed to be meditating flight.

"That, mademoiselle," he said slyly, "is a secret between De Lorges and myself."

Mademoiselle coloured very prettily, and half turning from her tormentor, said:

"I shall never speak to you again, monsieur—never."

"Mademoiselle, if you keep that vow I shall die in a week; but see, I will make amends. Why not slip on a hood and go to the masque? De Lorges will be proud to escort you."

She looked around her, half delighted, half frightened at the thought, and then, with a nervous laugh:

"I dare not risk it."

"Why not? Not a soul will know; and if there is any trouble say that Le Brusquet played an evil turn on you, and told you you were summoned by the Queen. I will not deny it; and it will still Madame de Montal's tongue. Come, De Lorges, persuade her."

"It would be a rare jest, mademoiselle!" And, trembling with eagerness, De Lorges made a step

forward.

She stood wavering. There was another word of encouragement from Le Brusquet, and she took the plunge.

"A moment," she said, and vanished into the inner room.

"*Eh bien*, monsieur," and Le Brusquet turned towards De Lorges, "you have a great trust to-night; guard it carefully."

"Monsieur," replied the boy, "with my life," and he touched the hilt of his little sword. He was a gallant lad this son of Montgomery de Lorges.

Le Brusquet bowed to hide the twinkle in his eyes; and now Mademoiselle Davila reappeared, disguised in a red hood and mask.

"No one will guess." And Le Brusquet surveyed her with a critical air, whilst De Lorges, who longed to be off, burst out: "Come, mademoiselle! I shall steal a mask and hood from somewhere later on."

But a new obstacle had arisen. "I forgot," she said, "the guard at the door."

"Reassure yourself, mademoiselle. It is a friend—Orrain."

"The hero!" And she clapped her hands. "Come, De Lorges." And, with a little nod to Le Brusquet, she ran to the door, followed by the page. As the two came forth she stopped.

"Monsieur d'Orrain, you will not betray us?"

"Not I, mademoiselle."

"Then as a reward I tell you there is someone you would like to see reading Marot's verses in the Queen's cabinet."

Without waiting for an answer, she tripped off down the gallery, De Lorges by her side. There was a flash of the red hood, and the two were gone.

"*Enfin*!" And Le Brusquet sat himself down on the coffer. "We are rid of that chattering feather-brain; but, before everything, tell me when you will be relieved."

"Within the hour."

"That will do excellently. Now for your news. Mine can keep for ten minutes."

I told him what I had learned, and he listened without a word until the end, listened seated on the coffer, with his chin resting on his knees, his long nose drooping over his mouth, and his keen little eyes shining like beads.

"A good day's work," he said when I had finished; "never better. Two things are in my favour; one is that they have not got that grant yet; the other, that the three seem to be dissatisfied with their angles of the triangle. Each wants what the other has, like cats over their bowls of milk; and there is an old proverb, too, about thieves falling out, which you, no doubt, remember."

"I shall put the whole matter before the Queen, and beg her to place Mademoiselle de Paradis in safety until this is ended."

"There is much water to flow under the bridges before this will end; but it will be a good move. The Admiral too will know of the triangle in three days; and, if I mistake not, that means that the Peace of Vaucelles is waste-paper. It will stop the Spanish pensions, at any rate for a time, and hit our vampires hard." And he chuckled as he slipped down from the coffer on to his feet. "*Mon ami*," he went on in his strange way, "to-night and to-morrow I shall be stirring this porridge, and by noon to-morrow you will have certain news, and then we can act. And now for your task."

"My task?"

"Yes. I knew the Queen was at the masque; she has gone there to see Diane wearing her jewels. *That* she will never forgive; and there will be a bitter vengeance some day—mark my words! The Queen requires the attendance of Mademoiselle de Paradis. She knows of this. It was arranged before, and she is merely awaiting the summons in the cabinet yonder, and you are to take her to the masque."

"But I have neither mask nor hood!"

"That is arranged also, and I have them ready for you. I will take mademoiselle out now, and you will meet us after your relief on the battlements outside the Philippine. You know the spot where the stairway leads from the gallery?"

"Perfectly."

"Then *au revoir*!" With this he slipped back into the ante-room, and five minutes after came forth, accompanied by a masked and hooded figure that would have been unrecognisable except that I knew it was Mademoiselle de Paradis.

As they came out we heard, far away in the distance, the challenge of a sentry.

"It is the relief," I said. "Quick!"

They waved their hands to me and sped like sprites along the gallery; and I waited, wondering what more the night would bring forth.

In about ten minutes the relief came up; and M. de Tolendal, who was in charge, was so eager to get back to the masquerade that he made no inquiries, and got off as soon as possible, dismissing me at the same time. I let monsieur hurry back along the gallery, following at a slow pace behind him, until I came to the steps that led down to the battlements, and passing through the archway reached the place appointed by Le Brusquet. Here I found the two awaiting me in the shadow of the donjon, and Le Brusquet said: "Here is your hood and mask. I kept them here to save trouble in carrying them. Remember that mademoiselle is the double of the Queen and you of De Lorgnac. And now away with you; I have other fish to fry." With this he ran up the stairway, and entered the Philippine.

"Mademoiselle," I asked, "can you guess what this means?"

"No, monsieur. All that I know is that it is the Queen's command, and that we are to be there by midnight."

"It will be that soon, so come."

She put her arm in mine, and we hastened along the edge of the battlements. We could hear music now; and as we went on the strains grew louder and louder, and at last we stood on the parapet overlooking the Ladies' Terrace. Beneath us stretched the gardens of the palace, and thousands of lights glowed, in many-coloured radiance, from within the foliage of the trees wherein they were set; or, raised high in the air, burned in rainbow-hued arches and fantastic loops and curves.

Beneath these lights, in and out of the shrubberies, amongst the parterres, in the shadows and in the light, was an ever-moving crowd and the continuous hum of voices, and now and again merry ripples of laughter came to us as we watched from above. A little beyond, to the right, the façade of the audience hall was ablaze with light, and on the broad flight of steps leading to the main entrance were gay groups, the rich colouring of their dresses—orange, red, gold, and purple—making them appear in the distance like masses of gorgeous flowers.

We were soon in the crowd below, making our way towards the audience hall; but our progress was not rapid, for time after time a mask or a group of hooded revellers stopped us; but with light words and merry jests we put them aside, and descending the steps entered the great hall. Here the crowd was so great that we were barely able to move; but at last we reached a pillar, on the base of which I placed my charge, and, standing beside her, we looked here, there, and everywhere for the Queen and De Lorgnac.

"I do not see them," whispered mademoiselle.

"'Tis like searching for a needle in sand; but, if I mistake not,
Madame de Poitiers will prove a magnet. Let us keep our eyes there."

With this I pointed before me towards the upper end of the hall, where a large empty space was reserved for dancing, though for the present the music had ceased, and the musicians were seated idle in the galleries above. Beyond this space was a dais, surmounted by a canopy of pale blue silk, spangled with the silver crescents of Diane de Poitiers. Behind the dais ran a huge buffet, many stages in height, rich with matchless plate, and in the centre was a sword, an enormous cross-hilted sword, said to be the Joyeuse of Charlemagne.

On each side of the dais stood the two hundred gentlemen of the King's house in violet and gold, the bright steel blades of the battle-axes they bore on their shoulders reflecting back the light in dazzling rays, and immediately in front stood the herald Montjoy with his trumpeters.

Although every soul in the crowd wore a mask and hood there were many on the dais who wore no disguise, and amongst these was the King. Henri was clad in white, with a white plume in his cap, in memory of the day years ago when, arrayed in white armour, he had ridden the lists at Fontainebleau in honour of Diane, and borne her arms to victory. Near him was Laval, the gallant Bois-Dauphin, who ran the King hard in that gentle day, and, but for the short splintering of a lance, might have been declared the victor. He too was clad in memory of the day, all in scarlet, with a phoenix for his crest—the arms of Claude de Foix. For the moment he was engaged in talk with a brilliant cavalier, the Bayard of his age, Francis, Marquis de Vieilleville.

But though here and there a great name, or a striking figure on the dais, might attract attention, almost all interest was centred on a woman, who stood with the fingers of one hand resting lightly on the King's arm. It was Diane de Poitiers herself. Tall, with black, curling hair and perfect features, with dark, melting eyes, she bore herself as a queen. The royal jewels of France sparkled on her head, at her throat, and on her arms, and glittered amidst the robes of black and white she wore. Her voice when she spoke was low and sweet, yet I had heard it as hard as steel, and I had seen those red lips curve wickedly, and those dark eyes had looked with sullen and pitiless indifference on scenes of hideous torture and death. There were two masks in front of us, arm-in-arm, watching the scene as intently as we were.

"That woman was born to be queen over men. Look at those eyes, Montaigne!"

The answer came in a dry, precise voice: "Eyes are the windows of the soul; but *Quid tibi praecipiam molles vitare fenestras*?—and you are courtier enough, De Brantôme, to appreciate Fontanus' warning."

"I am courtier enough, my philosopher, to know that the crescent moon, for instance, is out of my reach, not like that orange mask there."

"I do not know to whom you refer."

"There, at the edge of the dais. 'Tis De Ganache, who, from the day he set foot in Court, has followed Diane about like a spaniel; and though I care not to gossip——"

Mademoiselle shivered, and half turned towards me; but the talk came to an abrupt ending, for the herald Montjoy made a sign, and the trumpeters, advancing each a step, sounded a flourish. It was the signal for the galliard. As the flourish ended the music broke forth, and in a moment the empty space before us was gay with moving colours, like a wind-stirred flower bed. Those on the dais seemed to melt away, and mademoiselle, leaning forwards, whispered: "Take me out of this! Anywhere but here!"

She took my arm again, and we edged our way back to the entrance. Here, however, we found the throng so great that it was impossible to pass, and seeing a little passage to our right I turned down it. Here, amidst some foliage, was a secluded seat, and seating her there I took my stand beside her, at a narrow window that opened out upon the Ladies' Terrace. The night was warm, and throwing back her hood and removing her mask mademoiselle leaned forward and looked out upon the fairy scene in the gardens. The music came to us in fitful strains of melody, and outside was a glittering enchantment.

"Have you changed your opinion of the Court, mademoiselle?" I asked.

"No!—a hundred times no! Monsieur, I would rather be the poorest peasant girl on my lands than Diane de Paradis."

I was about to reply when we heard a laugh and the sound of low voices near us. Where we sat it was almost dark; but there was a dim light in the passage, and through the foliage we saw two figures standing side by side not three feet from us. In the orange hood of one I recognised De Ganache, and the other—yes, that laugh and voice, once heard, were never to be forgotten.

De Ganache held her hand in his. He raised it to his lips, and covering it with kisses broke into mad, foolish words—the speech of a man who has cast aside all self-respect, all honour. Ere he had spoken ten words, however, mademoiselle had sprung from her seat and stepped out into the passage, I following on her heels. At sight of her De Ganache went back as if he had been struck; but with superb insolence the Duchess stood in her way.

"So," she said in hard tones, "this is the second time to-night!" And then, with a shameless laugh, she turned to De Ganache. "You are unfortunate, Monsieur le Vicomte; you see, I have a rival even here. I congratulate mademoiselle on the quickness with which she has learned the lessons of the Court." And with a mocking bow she took De Ganache by the arm and swept down the passage.

Mademoiselle was shivering from head to foot, and even by the uncertain light I could see her eyes

were swimming with tears. For a moment all her courage, all her high spirit, seemed to have left her.

"Oh, what does this mean?" she moaned. "What does she mean by the second time? I——"

"She meant, mademoiselle, that she had met the Queen, who is masked as you are; but, Queen or no Queen," I went on grimly, "you have had enough of this, and I will take you back at once. There! Put on your mask, and draw your hood up—and come!"

I led her back towards the main entrance, which we managed to gain this time without much difficulty, and thence into the gardens. Mademoiselle spoke no word, nor did I intrude upon her thoughts. We crossed the Ladies' Terrace, the little groups of people scattered here and there being much too absorbed in their own business to take any note of us, and finally stood once more upon the battlements. Along these we hurried until we reached the stairway leading to the Philippine, and as we came up two figures stepped out of the shadow into our path. My charge shrank back with a little gasp of alarm, so sudden and unexpected was their appearance, and I half drew my poniard, but put it back again on the moment, for I recognised De Lorgnac and Le Brusquet.

"I thought we would meet you here," said the latter; "but your task ends now, Chevalier. De Lorgnac will now escort mademoiselle back."

"If I am permitted the honour," put in De Lorgnac.

"It seems that to-night I must play the marionette to your pulling, Le Brusquet," I laughed as I made way for De Lorgnac; and for once the little man made no reply, but addressing Diane said: "The Queen has already returned, and you will find the salon full, mademoiselle; but before you go give me that hood; it might tell tales. I will see it safely returned."

Diane removed the hood, and handed the soft silken folds to Le Brusquet.

"Messieurs," she said, her eyes shining brightly behind the mask she still wore, "it seems that you are hiding something from me. What is it?"

"You will know in a few minutes, mademoiselle," said De Lorgnac, "for the Queen herself will tell you."

She made no answer, but, gravely wishing us good-night, followed De Lorgnac up the stone steps, and, passing through the archway, the two were lost to our view. When they had gone I turned to Le Brusquet.

"I too am in the dark. What did De Lorgnac mean?"

"He meant that his Majesty, by some means or other, discovered that the Queen was at the masque and who remained behind in the cabinet. The result was that, an hour after you took mademoiselle away, the King, attended only by the Vidame d'Orrain—both wearing masks and hoods—visited the Queen's apartments, and——" He stopped and chuckled.

"And what?" I said.

"And found the Queen alone in her cabinet reading Ronsard."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE KING AND THE FAVOURITE

Where the gardens of the Louvre touch upon the river is a lonely and secluded walk. There upon the afternoon of the fourth day following the masquerade I found myself in the shadow of a high, ivy-covered wall, slowly pacing towards the round-tower that forms the western outwork of the palace. I had taken an opportunity the chance afforded to inform the Queen of the bargain struck between the favourite, Simon and De Mouchy, and she heard me in a downcast silence. She seemed for the time to be utterly overcome by the victorious progress of Diane. Finally she thanked me listlessly, and I withdrew, determined, however, if even at the cost of my life, to checkmate the plotters.

Whilst tossing the matter over in my mind the sudden rustling of leaves and a croaking sound arrested my attention. Glancing up I saw a small brown ape clinging to the ivy at the top of the wall and

mowing at a couple of peacocks preening themselves on the level turf beneath him. Half amused, despite my sombre thoughts, I stopped and watched, until at last, after a stare at their tormentor, the great birds stalked away like offended beauties.

"Pompon!" I called out.

In answer, the little ape turned his ribald wit upon me; but now a head appeared above the parapet, a hand seized Pompon and drew him back, and Le Brusquet's voice hailed me, bidding me come up to him. This I did with the aid of a friendly tree, and found him on the top of the wall, stretched out like a lizard in the sun. As I reached his side he rose to a sitting posture, and made room for me beside him.

"I have got the 'can't-help-its,'" he said, "and came here to let them work off. I have much to say to you."

"You have news, then?"

"Yes; and grave news. Listen! This morning, as usual, I attended the *petit couvert*, and found myself alone in the breakfast-room, where covers were laid for two. The soup was warming at a little stove, for the King takes this, the first meal of the day, without attendance. I said I was alone; but that is not exactly the case, as Pompon was, of course, with me, and the ape had one of his evil fits. He hopped in front of me, mopping and mowing, and I cannot tell why—perhaps it was because some of Créquy's red Joué—I supped with him over-night—was still ringing a chime in my head, but a sudden feeling of irritation came upon me at his antics. I seized the little beast by the scruff of his neck and dropped him out of the window on to the balcony beneath, where he remained, content enough with a plum that I took the liberty of lifting from the table and flinging after him. Then, leaning out of the window, I watched the morning, wondering to myself what new jest I could devise for the King's amusement. But I was in a morose humour, and could think of nothing. All at once I heard the hissing rustle of silken robes. I turned, and faced Madame Diane. I tell you, Orrain, never was woman born so beautiful. The rose of the morning was on her cheeks. Her eyes—they are blue-black, not black—met mine, with a laugh in them, as she said:

"'Well, Le Brusquet, have you lost your ape, or has some jest failed you?—you look so sad."

"'Neither, madame,' I answered; 'but I have lost my heart.'

"'Tell me,' she said, 'who is it? Is it La Beauce?—or, perhaps,
Madame de Montal?'

"'Neither, madame; it has strayed much higher.'

"She laughed at my speech, and was about to reply, but stopped, for at that moment the curtain lifted, and the King entered the room. He seemed in the best of spirits; nothing affects him for long.

"'*Bon jour*, Le Brusquet!' He gave me his hand to kiss. 'What news have you brought me this morning?'

"'A bagful, sire, for I supped with Créquy over-night.'

"'Then you shall open the bag whilst I breakfast, for I am famished.' And, slipping his arm through Diane's he led her to the table. I settled myself on a stool near the window, whilst Diane gave his soup to the King, contenting herself with some fruit, which she picked at like a bird. Through the heavy curtains and the closed door we could hear the hum of voices from the anterooms coming to us like the distant murmurs of the sea. For some little time the King ate in silence, whilst Diane and I exchanged a few laughing words. Finally he finished his last sippet of bread steeped in soup, pushed aside his plate, helped himself to a plum, and looked around him.

"'How!' he exclaimed. 'No roses in the room this morning!'

"'You are in error, sire,' I said. 'I have never seen finer roses than
I do now.'

"'Where?' he asked, looking around.

"But I only looked at La Valentinois, and this time she was red enough. She can blush at will, I believe. Strange that behind so fair a face lies so twisted a soul! And as the King followed my glance the blush on her cheek became deeper and deeper.

"'*Ma petite*,' and he pinched her ear, 'I find I have a rival. I shall have to send him to the Châtelet.' Whereat every one laughed, and Pompon, hearing the sounds, hopped in through the window, and

helped himself to another plum.

"'Ah, bandit!' And the King flung a sippet of toast after him as he added: 'I am hedged in with robbers.'

"'That is true, sire,' I said gravely.

"'You heard that at Créquy's last night.' And there was a sharp note in Diane's voice.

"'Oh yes; and much worse.'

"'Come, tell us!' said the King.

"'Sire, you will remember that Monsieur Joué and Monsieur d'Arbois are inveterate gossips.'

"'I will not forget. Well, what did these gentlemen say?'

"'Amongst other things, that your Majesty would totally cancel the edicts you have suspended, and freely pardon all the Christaudins.'

"I had risked my shot, and now awaited the result. It had hit its mark, I knew, for the King began to hum and haw, and Diane gave me a look from those blue-black eyes of hers. It is wonderful how their expression can change. They seemed to grow small, with a hard, pitiless look in them, and little cobwebs of wrinkles gathered near her temples.

"'It would be madness!—folly!' And her foot kept tapping the carpet.

"'Caraffa and Lorraine are right; it would be a sin.' And the King crossed himself. 'No, no! I will purge the land of its heresy. You have proved their disloyalty to me, Diane. Scarce three weeks have passed since the edicts were suspended, and see what head these Huguenots make! But I will let them see that I am King!'

"And Diane bent forward and kissed his cheek.

"As for me, I knew I was treading on dangerous ground, and so, for the present, went warily, and kept silence. And then La Valentinois knelt by the side of the King, holding his hand in hers, and looking into his eyes.

"'Sire,' she said, 'I have a boon to ask.'

"'Ask, then.' And Henri pushed aside the curls from her forehead.

"'It is that you reward the faithful whilst you punish the guilty.'

"'Let it be as you wish, *ma petite*.'

"'Then sign this, sire.' And, rising to her feet, she took a paper from her dress and held it before the King, standing beside him, with one white arm round his neck.

"Henri read, and his face fell a little. 'So,' he said, 'you want the goods of all heretics condemned in Paris granted to our most faithful subjects—Diane, Duchess de Valentinois; Simon, Vidame d'Orrain; and Antoine, Sire de Mouchy, Inquisitor of Faith! Madame, this is a matter for the council.' And, in his weak way, the King tried to put off the matter.

"Diane removed her arm from his neck. 'As you please, sire,' she said coldly; and then: 'But remember the Châtillons are making head in the north, and tomorrow they may break the peace with Spain. Remember how full Paris is of these traitors to their King and Holy Church! Never mind my request; but, sire,' and her voice sank to the tenderest note, 'think of those who love you and fear for you—and—let the council to-day be firm.'

"'Oh, it will be that. I will see to that.'

"'Thank Heaven! And now, my King, my King! for the last time!' And she knelt and kissed his hand, and there were tears—tears, Orrain!—in her eyes.

"Henri was much moved. 'What does this mean, Diane?' And he raised her gently to her feet.

"'It means, sire'—her eyes refused to meet his, and her voice shook—'that the time has come for me to go. To-morrow I leave Paris; but, wherever I go, my sorrow will be with me, and my memory of——' And once more she kissed his hand.

"'Diane!'

"She made no answer except to sob, and he put his arm round her, and tried to comfort her, but she gently withdrew herself.

"'Sire, let me go! I had forgotten that with a woman love lasts for ever, but beauty fades. I have to-day learned my lesson.' And, sitting herself down, she buried her face in her hands.

"Henri looked helplessly around, and then, rising hurriedly, paced the room. Once he came up to me, where I stood near the window, and stared at me, or rather stared across me, as though he did not see me. He was yielding, I knew, and another sob from Diane broke him.

"He took up the paper, and it rustled in his trembling hand. One more glance at the bowed figure beside him, and he called out:

"'Le Brusquet, give me a pen.'

"I made no answer, but stood as if I had not heard. I swear to you, Orrain, that I would rather have let my right hand wither than do his bidding. Twice he repeated his order; but I stood like a stone. Diane made no movement. His face flushed, and with a sudden effort he walked towards a cabinet, and the next moment the accursed paper was signed. He brought it back with him, and stood humbly beside Diane, but she did not appear to see. At last he took her hands from her face and placed the deed within them.

"'There, little one! Speak no more of broken hearts.' And he kissed her. She rose, and let her head fall on his shoulder, standing there with closed eyes, but with fingers that held the paper with a clutch like the talons of a hawk. After a little she drew back; there was a lovely smile on her lips, and the blue-black eyes were sparkling.

"'Sire,' she said, 'I thank you.' Then, with a glance behind her at the curtains that covered the door leading to the ante-rooms: 'It grows late, and messieurs there are waiting.' So saying, she bowed low to the King, and ran from the room into the inner apartments, carrying her paper with her.

"The King stood gazing after her, and I stood leaning out of the open window. After a little he came up behind me, and with studied unconcern in his voice said:

"'An obol for your thoughts, King of Folly.'

"'I was but watching those birds, sire.' And I pointed at a shoal of swallows that darted hither and thither in the sunlight snapping up the flies.

"'Ah! The swallows! What of them?'

"'They are lovely birds, sire; but, you see, they spare nothing.' And even as I spoke there was the flash of a bronze-green wing, and a wretched moth that was fluttering in the air was borne away.

"The King took my meaning, and laughed uneasily.

"'You mean I have done wrong.'

"'The Duchess is a lovely woman, sire.' And I saw him flush with shame and anger—the anger of a weak man. He controlled himself with an effort, however, and said coldly:

"'Monsieur de Besmé, have the goodness to strike that gong.'

"I did so, and in a moment the doors were flung open, showing the glittering throng without. The King kept his back turned towards me, and, taking the hint, I picked up the ape and withdrew. So, you see, my news is of the gravest, and Diane has won the rubber."

"You think so?"

"It is all over. The council to-day will revoke the suspension of the edicts, and once more the hell-fires will be lit on the parvis of every church in Paris. I am off to grow pears at Besmé. My office is for sale; but I will give it to you, with my cap and bells and baton, as a free gift if within two days you do not place a certain fair lady on a pillion behind you and ride for the Swiss cantons."

For a little there was a silence, and then I rose to my feet.

"I am going," I said. "What has to be done must be done quickly."

He nodded assent. "I shall come with you part of the way," he said, and called to his ape.

With this we descended from the wall, and walked back together to the Ladies' Terrace.

The gardens were full, for the perfect day had tempted all within the palace who could do so to come forth. Scattered here and there in the walks, or resting on the seats, were knots of people, the bright colours of their dresses all the brighter in the mellow sunshine. As we were passing the fountain called the Three Graces we were stopped by a little man with a round face and bulging eyes. He was quite young, not more than four or five and twenty, but, young as he was, Monsieur de Brantôme had already acquired the reputation of being an inveterate gossip, and was feared more than the plague. I had but a passing acquaintance, two days' old, with him, but he seized Le Brusquet.

"*Eh bien*, Le Brusquet! I hear that you were with the King and madame early this morning, and that high words passed. Is it true that you leave the Court?"

"I promise to leave it, monsieur, if you will but take my office."

"Your office!" said Brantôme in surprise.

"Yes; I have always felt myself unworthy of it since I had the honour to meet you."

"Not at all, my friend," grinned Brantôme; "you do yourself injustice. The man who quarrels with madame has unequalled claims. You have no rival. *Au revoir*!"

And, chuckling to himself, the little abbe went on, leaving Le Brusquet biting his lip. Brantôme stopped the next person he met to tell him of the passage-at-arms, and turning the walk we found ourselves in front of the Ladies' Terrace.

Somewhat apart from the gay groups that crowded together in the centre of the Terrace was a solitary figure standing near the pedestal of a bronze satyr, cast for the late King by Messer Benvenuto the Florentine. It was mademoiselle herself, and with a word to Le Brusquet I left him and walked straight up to her.

"I was wondering to myself if I should see you here," she said as she greeted me.

"And I came specially to see you, so that Fate has been kind for once."

She smiled, and was about to make some answer, when there was a burst of laughter and the sound of many voices, and turning we saw Diane de Poitiers on the stairway leading down to the Terrace, surrounded, as usual, by a heedless and ever-laughing crowd. She stood for a moment, her Court around her, whilst the people on the other parts of the Terrace broke up their talk and came towards us. Then La Valentinois, who was robed in crimson, began to descend the marble steps slowly, and as she reached the Terrace all those assembled there bowed to her as though she were the Queen. All except myself and mademoiselle, who stood plucking at the ivy leaves on the pedestal of the statue beside her, apparently unconscious of La Valentinois' presence. Whether the Duchess noticed me or not I do not know, but I saw her eyes fixed on mademoiselle, and she stopped full, about two paces from her. Mademoiselle, however, maintained her attitude of total unconcern; but after a moment she looked up and the glances of the two crossed each other. Mademoiselle stared past the favourite as though she did not see her, and Diane's face became like ivory, and her dark eyes frosted with an icy hate—a hate cold and pitiless as everlasting snow. All eyes were fixed on them now, and there was a dead silence as the two—the woman and the girl—faced each other. But it was mademoiselle who was winning. Far away as her look was there was that in it that brought the colour back to Diane's cheeks, to make it go again. Her bosom rose and fell, she played nervously with her fan, and at last she spoke, with a voice that shook in spite of her efforts to restrain it:

"I hear, mademoiselle, that you do not find the Court to your liking."
And the reply was a simple bow.

The Duchess was all red and white now. The insult was open and patent; but worse was to follow, for she made a mistake, and went on, with a sneer:

"It is a pity they do not care more for the education of girls in Poitou; but I think you are right, mademoiselle. The Court is not suited to you. You should take the veil and the black robe."

"I should prefer the black robe to a crimson one, madame. The latter reminds one too much, amongst other things, of the blood of the martyrs."

It was a crushing retort, and one to which there was no answer, for the affair of the tailor of St. Antoine's was fresh in all minds. Something like a murmur went up from those around. The Duchess gave a little gasp; but, preserving her composure with an effort, turned and walked away, her head in

the air, but wounded to the quick. The crowd followed her, but one figure remained—a man with a white, drawn face and dark circles under his eyes. Thrice he made a movement as if to step up to us and say something, but each time his courage failed him; and then, turning, he too hastily followed the others. And from my soul I pitied De Ganache.

CHAPTER XXV

THE PACKET OF LETTERS

We were left alone together, the bronze satyr leering down upon us as if in mockery. La Valentinois stood at the other end of the Terrace surrounded by her Court, and ever and again there were whisperings amongst them, and strange glances bent towards us. We might have been plague-stricken, in such manner did all shrink from us.

"Mademoiselle," I said, "you have been too rash. Look!" And I glanced at the group around Diane de Poitiers. She followed my eyes, and a little smile played upon her lips.

"I care not, nor do I fear her."

"But, mademoiselle, there are others who fear for you, and that has happened which you must hear. Not here! Come away from this, where we will be secure from prying eyes."

For a little she seemed to hesitate, and then: "Very well, monsieur; the air will, perhaps, be purer away from here."

So, side by side, we went down the steps together, and I felt, rather than heard or saw, the mutterings and the glances that followed us.

On the other side of the lawn, facing the Ladies' Terrace and leading towards the riding-school, is a walk hedged in with high shrubbery on either hand. We followed this about half way up its length, and then passing through a narrow wicket found ourselves in a part of the gardens to which few, if any, of the Court ever went. Here, amidst a bewildering maze of rose bushes running almost wild, stood an old oak. There was a little clearing at its base, around which a rough seat was placed; and here, sitting by her side, I told mademoiselle what I knew, and of the crisis that had arrived.

Invisible ourselves, we could from where we were see the Gallery of Apollo and the council hall; and as I ended a figure appeared at one of the windows and waved a 'kerchief in the direction of the Ladies' Terrace. It was the King.

"See!" and I pointed to the window, "there is the King, and you can guess to whom he signals. Whilst we talk here the council is over, and the peril is at hand."

She did not flinch nor change colour, for she was brave, but she rose and looked steadily at the council room, where we could now see other figures moving in the shadow behind the King. Then she turned to me. I had risen too, and was standing beside her.

"Do you think they will begin at once?" she asked.

"I cannot say. They will undoubtedly begin as soon as they can."

"It is horrible! Can nothing be done? Oh! why am I so helpless? Why was I not born a man?"

"Mademoiselle, the game is not lost yet. There is still safety before you. I have told the Queen, and she knows of this plot, but is powerless to stay the course of these vampires. She can and will, I know, help you to fly. Leave this place, to-night if possible, and I will see you to the Palatinate, or the Swiss cantons. They cannot touch you there. Mademoiselle, you trusted me once before, trust me again; I will not fail you."

Without a word she held out her hand, and I took it in mine. So we stood for a little, neither speaking, and then she said:

"But I know not how to leave this place; it has a thousand eyes, a thousand ears——"

"We must blind those eyes and make those ears deaf. This evening at dusk come to this spot. I will arrange that either Le Brusquet or De Lorgnac will meet you here and take you to the gate behind the riding-school. I shall be in waiting there with horses, and we will be free of the gates before even they know we are gone. We have more than four hours yet before it grows dark. Think of it! Four hours to prepare! We will beat them."

I spoke cheerily, though I well knew that all was hanging by a hair. My words had their effect, and I saw the light of hope in her eyes; but all at once she shrank from me and, covering her face with her hands, sank back upon the seat.

I confess that I knew not what to do, or which way to turn, for if mademoiselle's courage failed now it was fatal.

"Come," I said, "be brave. In a few hours you will be safe." And I placed my hand on her shoulder. At my touch she collected herself, and rose once again, her face pale, her eyes wet.

"Monsieur," she said, "I cannot take your offer. It is impossible."

"But why?" And I looked at her in blank astonishment.

"Listen!" And she spoke in low but quick accents. "Were I to avail myself of this chance I know I should be safe, for the bravest heart in France would be protecting me. But, monsieur, I should be saving myself and leaving the others—my people, those of my own faith—to die. I am a woman, and a woman may be forgiven weakness in this—for death, and such a death, is horrible—but could I forgive myself? I who knew, and fled, and left my people to die! Do you know who all are in Paris? There are scores of them. There is kind old De Mouy, there is Rochambeau, there is D'Albain, there are fifty more. Are they to die? Besides these there are the poorer brethren, rich in nothing but their faith. Are they to die? Can I leave them, without a word of warning, to the torture, to the rack, to the slow death of the estrapade?"

She stopped, her eyes all alight, her breath coming fast; but I made no answer, and stood before her in silence.

"You have nothing to say," she went on—"nothing! Orrain, were you in my place what would you do?"

"I am a man."

"And is honour less dear to a woman than to a man?"

I knew she was brave, but never before had I realised how brave and strong; and, yielding to an impulse I could not resist, I bent down and touched her hand with my lips.

"Mademoiselle," I said, "you have taught me what is right. You cannot go thus. Your friends must be warned."

"I knew you would say that," she burst in; "I knew that nothing else would come from you. Yes; they must be warned! A word here and there would be enough if there were time; but there is not, and there is only one way left."

"And that is?"

"I will tell you. Close to the Sorbonne, in a little street called the Rue des Mathurins, which leads into the Rue St. Jacques, is a house where my people meet to pray, and to-night all, if not, most of them, will be there. This much I know. But where the house is exactly I do not know, for I have never been to it. If we could get there we would be in time to warn them."

"From whom did you hear this? It is necessary for me to know."

"From Montgomery de Lorges."

"The captain of the Archer Guard?"

"Yes; he is of us, and always has been."

"Then, mademoiselle, there is light in the black sky. I will warn your friends; more we cannot do. And, since there are so many, I feel confident that the plotters will not strike for a day or so. Our warning will give those who can time to escape, and you and I will have done all that can be done. In the meantime our original plan must be carried out; but it is to a friend that I must trust you for a few hours until I have given the warning and can join you——"

She stayed me with a gesture of her hands.

"Monsieur, why should I not go with you?"

For a moment I hesitated, and then it flashed upon me that it was the best possible thing. After giving the warning there was nothing to prevent our escaping at once.

"Very well, mademoiselle. Then meet me here at dusk. And now perhaps it is time to go back."

We did not return as we came, but making for the Lime Walk, went along it slowly, talking and planning many things. In the shade, on a seat under one of the lime-trees, was a merry party of five or six people, and as we came opposite them young De Lorges the page, who was of their number, called out to us to join them; but, pointing at the Louvre, I shook my head, and as we passed on I heard Mademoiselle Davila's voice singing:

"J'aime mieux m'amie
O gai!
J'aime mieux m'aime
O gai!"

and a girlish voice, I know not whose it was, broke into a merry peal of laughter. In spite of what was in my mind I could not help glancing at my companion; but she was walking by my side as though she had not seen or heard, and, perhaps, this was the case.

At the Ladies' Terrace we parted, and I hastened at once to seek Le Brusquet. As luck would have it, I met both him and De Lorgnac face to face as I was crossing the inner courtyard, and drawing them aside explained matters to them in a few brief words. My chagrin may be imagined when I heard that Montgomery de Lorges, from whom I hoped to get further particulars of the house in the Mathurins, had left the Louvre that afternoon for Fontainebleau to help in the arrangements for a hunt there for the King. But Le Brusquet put heart into me.

"*Eh bien*," said he, "you cannot miss finding the house, as the Mathurins is not a bowshot in length; but, in any case, whilst you go and prepare for your departure I will try and find the secret of the house out, and warn some who, I know, are of the new faith. To think of a *prêche* in the very shadow of the Sorbonne!" And he laughed to himself.

"Le Brusquet is right," said De Lorgnac. "I too have some friends whom I must warn. Have no fear that Mademoiselle de Paradis will have any difficulty in keeping her tryst; I will see to that. Go now at once to the Rue Tire Boudin and make you ready; we will stand by you to the end."

I thanked these brave friends, and was about to turn away, when Le
Brusquet called out:

"Stay! I have one thing to ask you, Orrain."

"And that is?"

"You have still with you, I hope, a certain ring?"

"Vendôme's ring, or rather the ring of the King of Navarre, as we must call him now. Yes; it is beneath this glove." And I held out my left hand.

"May I see it for a moment?"

"Certainly!" And removing the glove I slipped off the ring and handed it to him. He looked at it curiously, and said:

"I think its time has come."

"Is there anything you are holding back from me?"

"No; but I have a warning in my heart that you will need it. I am superstitious enough never to neglect such a warning. Lend it to me for to-day."

"With pleasure! But is the ring of any avail? Vendôme has forgotten me. He hardly ever returns my salute when we meet——"

"The King of Navarre will at any rate pay this debt of the Duc de Vendôme—I swear it," said Le Brusquet solemnly as he slipped the ring on to his finger, and with that I left them.

On arrival at the Rue Tire Boudin I summoned Pierrebon, and informing him of the state of affairs told him to have all in readiness for our departure that night. This being over, and finding that I had still over two hours before me, I retraced my steps to the Louvre. I went to the tennis courts, where the King was playing a match against Monsieur d'Aumale, and mingling amongst the onlookers sought to pick up as much information as I could glean about the proceedings of the council held that day. M. de Tolendal, who had been on guard in the council room, said that there were only four there, and that amongst the four were De Mouchy and Caraffa the Legate.

"It is not war they talked about, I am sure," he went on, "as neither the Constable nor Vieilleville was present. I dare swear it was all about those cursed Huguenots; but we will hear soon—ha! good stroke!" And he turned from me towards the game.

Seeing that there was nothing to be picked up here I took myself off, and after a little found myself upon the Ladies' Terrace. The afternoon was hot, and the Terrace was deserted, but in the shade of the hedgerow on the opposite side of the lawn a solitary figure was seated looking over a small packet of letters. I looked, and saw it was De Ganache himself. He had changed much from the day we first met. His face was thin and sunken; there was a red spot on each cheek and a fierce light in his hollow eyes. For a moment I stood watching him, and then, having made up my mind, stepped up to him. As I approached he stared at me with his livid glance and then rose slowly to his feet. So deadly a hate shone on his face that for a second it came to me to turn away and leave him to his fate; but, fallen as he was, I could not let him go to his death without a word or a sign. So I walked straight up to him.

"Monsieur, a word with you."

He simply looked at me. I saw his forehead flush hot, and he passed his tongue over dry lips, and then, as if controlling himself with an effort, he turned from me. But I called out:

"M. de Ganache, this is life and death. I have come to warn——"

He flung round on his heel and faced me once more, his hand on the hilt of his poniard.

"Begone!" he said, "begone! else I may slay you where you stand! I——" And his voice failed him, but his eyes glared like those of a boar at bay.

"Monsieur," I said calmly, "fifty windows look down upon us, and there may be a hundred eyes watching us. If you wish it, I will cross swords with you with pleasure, but listen to what I say first. Your life, and the lives of your friends of your faith, hang on a hair. The council to-day has applied anew the edicts. As you value your life, get your fastest horse and leave Paris at once."

"In what tavern have you heard this?" he sneered.

"Monsieur," I answered gravely, "this is no jest. If you care not to take the warning yourself, give it to others. I myself will warn those of your faith who meet to-night in the Rue des Mathurins. There may be others you know of; give them at least a chance. As for yourself, you have had yours."

What answer he would have made I know not, but at this moment a sharp voice cut in upon us.

"*Eh bien*, Monsieur de Ganache! but it seems to me that Madame de Valentinois signals to you from the window yonder."

There was a little rustling in the bushes, and Le Brusquet stepped out, his ape perched upon his shoulder.

"Behold!" he said, "the crescent moon is already out." And he pointed to a window overlooking the lawn, where a group of ladies stood watching us.

"It must be to you, Monsieur le Vicomte, that madame signals," Le Brusquet went on. "Orrain here is too ugly, and as for me, she loves me no better than my ape."

With an oath De Ganache pushed past Le Brusquet and hurried across the lawn, leaving us staring after him.

"He had his warning," said Le Brusquet. "I heard every word, and thought it was time to step in ere he drew his poniard. The man is mad! But what is this?" And stepping towards the seat he picked up the small packet of letters that De Ganache was reading.

"They belong to De Ganache," I said; "he was reading them as I came up."

"In that case I will return them to monsieur with my own hands." And Le Brusquet slipped the packet into his pocket. Then turning he took me by the arm and led me off, telling me some absurd story, and

laughing loudly, until we had passed out of sight of the windows. Then he stopped.

"Do not forget this," he said: "the fifth house on the right-hand side of the Rue des Mathurins as you enter from the Rue St. Jacques."

"Thanks; I will not forget. However did you find out?"

"It is too long to tell, and I must return these papers to De Ganache."

So saying, he went off.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE CHURCH UNDER THE GROUND

The wicket gate near the riding-school was used almost exclusively by the servants of the palace, to whom it gave access to that maze of nameless streets, dingy, tumble-down houses, and squalid shops that was known as the Magasins. Here it was that the waiting-woman and the lackey stole forth to meet their lovers. Through this filtered all the backstairs' gossip of the Louvre, and more besides, for the small shopkeepers of the Magasins upheld a reputation as evil as the place in which they plied their trade.

At the mouth of one of these streets, only a few yards away from the wicket, was a small eating-house. It was here that I repaired at sunset, and calling for a basin of lentil soup sat me down at a rough table near the door, which commanded a view of the gate. It had rained that afternoon, a summer shower that passed as quickly as it came, but the eaves were still dripping, and the water was trickling in glistening lines down the walls and bubbling in the gutters. There were three other clients in the house besides myself. One contented himself, as I had, with some lentil soup, and the other two, sitting near a great spit, impatiently watched a leg of kid they had brought with them for their supper being turned thereon by a small dog, now and then exchanging a word or so with the bare-armed hostess who was supervising the process. Whilst this was going on my fellow-companion with the lentil soup kept casting envious glances at the spit, sniffing the savoury odour of the roasting meat as he slowly ate pieces of black bread sopped in the thick soup.

The wicket was open, for until compline ingress and egress was free; nevertheless, there was a sentry on duty, an arquebusier, who paced slowly up and down whistling the "Rappel d'Aunis," stopping only to exchange some barrack-room badinage with every serving-wench who, as she went out or came in, found a moment or so to spare for him. It was a lax enough watch, and it was clear that guard duty at the wicket was not so dull a matter as one might have imagined.

One of these passing affairs was rather longer and more interesting than usual, and he of the lentil soup was chuckling to himself over it, when we heard the clattering of horses at a trot coming up the road lying between us and the gate. The girl uttered a little cry and fled down the walk towards the Louvre, whilst the sentry drew himself up stiffly.

In another minute a party of about half a dozen horsemen filed up, a spare horse with them, and judge of my surprise and fear when I saw it was Simon himself who led them. As the sentry saluted the Vidame he rode close up to the man, and, bending down from the saddle, said something in a quick, low voice, but it was too far off for me to hear. The sentry saluted again, and began a steady pacing backwards and forwards; whilst Simon, dismounting three of his men, had the horses taken towards the riding-school, he remaining at the gate on foot with his three followers.

"An arrest!" exclaimed my unknown companion, and the words brought the two others from their kid, which they were just sitting down to demolish, to the door, where they were joined by the landlady and the turnspit dog.

The worst suspicions crowded upon me, and from where I sat I watched Simon anxiously, for all depended on his object in being here. He took no notice of the little group observing him, however, but, drawing his men up against the wall, leaned against a buttress, moodily pulling at his long moustache.

"We are going to see pretty things," said the hostess; "that tall crookback is the Vidame d'Orrain himself, and 'twas just the same way last year that he took poor Monsieur de Mailly."

For about ten minutes we waited impatiently, but with no result, and so the owners of the kid went back to their repast, and the man with the lentil soup called for another basin. The suspense, however, was not to be for long. Presently a man came down the walk towards the wicket, coming slowly, keeping as much as possible in the shadow of the trees, now and again stopping and looking around him as though he feared being followed. Finally, as he neared the gate, he put a bold face on the matter, and with an air of unconcern stepped towards the sentry. His hat was pulled over his eyes; but there was no mistaking De Ganache, and I watched with breathless interest. As he came up the arquebusier began to whistle his eternal "Rappel d'Aunis" once more, and the figures near the wall closed in around the buttress. In five paces De Ganache had passed the sentry and was at the gate. In another step he freed the wicket, and came face to face with the Vidame. De Ganache started, retreated a half pace, and then, recovering himself, said with affected gaiety:

"Well met, Orrain! I——" And then he stopped as he met the Vidame's sombre look and saw drawn swords on either side of him.

"Is this a jest or an outrage? What does this mean, monsieur?" And, hand to his sword, he faced Simon, who answered coldly:

"It means, monsieur, that you are my prisoner. Your sword, in the
King's name!"

"I! Arrested! It is impossible! What foolery is this?"

But the Vidame simply held out a paper. "You may read this if you doubt."

Almost mechanically De Ganache took the paper and ran his eyes over it. As he did so his fingers seemed to lose power, for the paper slipped from his hand and fluttered to the ground. The Vidame picked it up, and said again:

"Your sword, monsieur!" And then, with a bitter scorn in his voice: "A traitor's game is a losing game, Monsieur le Vicomte, and the King knows you at last."

What the words meant I was to find out later, but they took all heart from De Ganache. He put his hand to his head as one dazed, and then, dropping it again, unbuckled his sword, and handed it to the Vidame without a word. There was a sharp whistle. The horses came up. De Ganache, who seemed utterly broken, was mounted on the spare horse. The troopers surrounded him, and then came the quick order:

"The Châtelet!" And they were gone.

"*Harnibleu*!" exclaimed the hostess, "that was not how Monsieur de Mailly allowed himself to be taken. He swore like the Constable, and fought right across the road, up to this very door, and might have escaped had he not tripped up. As for that hare there—pouf!" And with an expressive shrug of her shoulders and a snap of her fingers she went back to her spit.

I sat still, wondering, but with a great relief in my heart. There was a little talk, as will be when things of this kind occur, and then matters settled down. A few more customers came in. The twilight began to fall, and then, all at once, I saw two figures at the gate. They were mademoiselle and De Lorgnac. In a moment I had joined them, and together we went on towards the river face.

At the corner of the Rue St. Thomas, De Lorgnac bade us farewell, but as he left us I took the opportunity to whisper to him the news of De Ganache's arrest.

"Then put wings to your business," he said, and pressing my hand went off, and mademoiselle and I were alone. Silently she took the arm I offered, and we hastened towards the river.

It was the fall of the evening, and the moon, almost in its full, had already arisen, dividing the sky with the last lights of sunset. We had turned to the left on reaching the river, our faces towards the Châtelet, whose square grey walls frowned over the Pont au Change. Here and there the cloud edges still flamed in gold, that slowly faded to a fleecy silver-white before the moonlight. To our left was the long row of gabled houses, some of them seven storeys or more in height, that stretched, a jagged outline of pointed roofs and overhanging turrets, to the Rue St. Denis, there to be split up in the labyrinth of streets between St. Denis, St. Martin, and the purlieus of the Marais and the Temple. Above the houses peered the square tower of St. Jacques de la Boucherie, and in the weird half light the river droned along to our right. A grey, creeping mist was slowly covering the faubourgs and the Ile de la Cité. Through this, as it quivered onwards, one saw a limitless sea of roofs; and sharp and clear, for they were still in light, stood out the lofty campaniles of Ste. Chapelle and St. Severin. But what caught the eye and arrested the glance was that which rose from the very heart of the great city; for

there, looming vast and immense, the stately pile of Nôtre Dame brooded over Paris.

Mademoiselle shivered on my arm. "Oh, monsieur, these streets, these houses, this immense city, they oppress me like a very spirit of evil!"

"Courage!" I answered. "In two hours we will have left the spirit of evil behind."

And she sighed to herself as we pressed forward. We had passed the Vallée de Misère and the Gloriette, and had now come to the fish market. It was here, amidst the raucous cries of buyers and sellers, that the crowd forced us to stop for a little. I drew my companion into the shadow of a booth, and as I did so I heard a fragment of talk between two men a little to one side of us.

"You think it will be successful?"

"Not one will escape. They are like rats in a trap."

The speaker laughed, and I would have sworn I knew the voice.

Mademoiselle had heard too, and her eyes were shining like stars.

"Do you hear that?" she whispered quickly. "Quick! Let us hasten!"

I held her back for a little, until the two had passed before us. As the light from the booth fell on them I saw that I was right—the last speaker was Camus, but the other man I knew not.

"Now, across!" I said, as the two were lost in the crowd, and with that
I hurried mademoiselle to the other side of the road.

"Monsieur," she said, "these men were talking of us, of my people, I mean—I feel sure of it—and we are too late."

"Not yet!" And I tried to reassure her, but my heart was full of misgiving. In its wonderful way her woman's instinct had warned her, and I, knowing what I did know, feared the worst despite all my assurances to her to the contrary.

It was night when we reached the Rue des Mathurins, for the way was long. Narrow and dark, the street wound before us. On one side the upper storeys of the houses were white with moonlight; but the opposite side was in shadow, and all around us was a velvet darkness, except where, here and there, a lamp, hanging to a rope slung across the street, cast a feeble and uncertain glow. Some dim figures moved before us, and occasionally we heard a footfall behind. That was all.

We had come to the fifth door on our right. It lay in the black darkness, faced by the huge blank wall of the Mathurins, and not a ray gleamed from any of the windows. All was silent as the grave.

"This is the place," I said, and we stopped.

"Are you sure?" whispered mademoiselle. "It looks deserted; perhaps they have been warned."

But, even as she spoke, we heard faint voices singing. The sound seemed to rise from beneath our feet, and muffled and far distant rose the sweet, solemn chant of the Huguenot hymn: "When Israel went forth from Egypt."

"They are there!" And mademoiselle's fingers tightened on my arm.

For answer I was about to step up to the door when hurrying feet came towards us. I pulled mademoiselle back into the deepest shadow, and as I did so two dark figures appeared, and halted before the door. Like us, all unknowing we were so near, they stopped too, listening to the hymn, and after a little one of the two began to sing.

"Hush!" said the other; but the singer answered fiercely:

"I care not, nor do I fear to give my testimony to the Lord."

But now the hymn ended, and the two went to the door. This was my chance, and so, with mademoiselle on my arm, I boldly stepped up and joined them. They turned on us as we came; but I allayed their fears.

"Messieurs, we have come as you have. See! There is a lady with me."

"Then you are well come," answered one, and with that he tapped softly at the door. A shutter opened, and a voice asked:

"Why come ye?"

"For the faith," was the reply.

"Enter, then!" With these words the door swung back, and one by one we passed in, I being the last. The door was immediately closed and barred after us, and we found ourselves in the presence of a small, pale-faced man, who peered at us with blinking eyes. The two strangers went on at once, after a word of greeting; but, throwing back her hood, mademoiselle placed her hand on the arm of the little man, saying:

"Ferrières, do you not know me?"

His dim eyes searched her through the dim light, and an exclamation broke from him.

"Mademoiselle! You! There will be many a glad face to-night. Almost all of us are here."

"Hush!" she said. "I have come to warn you. There is danger at hand.
The edicts are to be enforced again, and at once."

He looked at her, and shook his head.

"Nay, mademoiselle; we have the King's word."

"Tell him, then!" and she turned to me. "Monsieur, this is the Sieur de Ferrières, who has known me from childhood, and who refuses to believe me—tell him what I say is true!"

I did so in ten words; but the King's word was the King's word to him, and the fool was blind in his folly.

"Then take us to others who will hear," burst out mademoiselle; "in an hour it may be too late; it may be too late even now."

"Surely," he replied, "I will take you to the meeting-place, for you are of the flock, and the Lord is with us to-night; but you are mistaken, that I know."

Mademoiselle glanced at me in despair as we followed him across the hall, and down a stair that led to an underground passage. Along this we went, and, our guide gently pushing open a door, we saw before us a large room filled with people of both sexes. All were on their knees, absorbed in prayer. At the upper end of the room was a raised platform, and on this was a single figure, also kneeling, the face covered by the hands.

A whispered "Stay here!" to me, and mademoiselle stepped forward, gliding softly past the bowed figures to the right and left of her until she came to the edge of the platform; and there, unable to interrupt that silent prayer, she too knelt. So for a space, until at last the pastor rose, and stood surveying the worshippers. For a moment my glance rested curiously on the thin, ascetic face, full of lofty resolve, and then with a rush memory came back to me, and I stood as if lightning-struck. As he looked around my mind went back with a leap to the days gone by, to that hideous morning when my hot hand had struck a death-blow at my friend. It could not be he? And yet! I stared and stared. Yes; it was Godefroy de la Mothe, the friend of my youth, whom I had thought I had slain. There was never a doubt of it! And there, as I stood, the mercy of God came to me, and the weight of a great sin was lifted from my soul. For moments that seemed years all was a dream, and there was a haze before my eyes. Through this I saw mademoiselle arise and face the preacher; but I could not hear her words, though I saw that she spoke quickly and eagerly. And as she spoke there were whisperings and strange glancings amongst the people, and they pressed forward to listen too, but La Mothe lifted his hand.

"Brethren," he said in deep, sonorous accents, "we have believed the word of a prince, and the tyrant has lied to us. The edicts are renewed. But, brethren, He lives that delivered His people from Egypt. He lives that defended His Church against Caesars, kings, and profligate princes. His shield is over us, before whose footstool we kneel. Fear not, and be brave! And now, friends, we must part; but, ere we part—some of us, perhaps, never to meet again—let us pray."

He knelt once more, and the people with him, and there was a deep silence, broken at last by La Mothe's solemn voice as he began to pray aloud. And as he prayed there came to us from without the muffled tramp of feet, and the murmuring of many voices rising and falling like the swell of the sea, whilst now and again a tongue, shriller and more high-pitched than those of its fellows, would ring out a sharp, menacing bark. Still La Mothe went on unmoved, though uneasy looks were beginning to be exchanged; but at last he too stopped, for the murmurs had swelled to one long roar of savage fury, and the words of the mob reached us distinctly.

"To the fire with them! Death to the Christaudins!"

There was an instant of scared, blanched silence, and then a girl burst into hysterical sobbing, and her voice broke the tension. In a moment all was confusion and terror unspeakable, through which I forced my way to mademoiselle's side. Men shouted and raved, women screamed and prayed. Some flew to the doors, others, again, huddled together like sheep; and from outside rose higher and higher the dreadful voice of the mob, mad with blood lust, and ever above all rang out the harsh clang of the tocsin of the Mathurins.

I looked at mademoiselle; her face was white and her eyes were shining, but she held herself bravely. I drew my sword as La Mothe, the old soldier spirit awake within him, called out in a loud voice:

"The women in the centre, gentlemen! Draw swords, and make for the door, else we die here like rats."

His voice rang out clear and strong. The few who retained their heads seconded him well, and in less time that I take to tell this we had ringed in the women, and stood around them with drawn swords.

La Mothe was near the door, his spare figure erect, his look high. He alone carried no arms. I was a few feet from him, with Diane by my side.

In this formation we left the meeting-room, and reached the hall, where the huge iron-studded door was already yielding to the battering from outside.

"Throw open the door," La Mothe called out. Someone, I think it was Ferrières, stepped forward and undid the bar, springing back quickly as the door flew open; and for an instant we heard a hoarse roar, and by the light of many torches, and a huge fire lit in the street, saw a countless swarm of cruel faces. Out we rushed, striking to the right and left, splitting them before us as a plank is split by a wedge. So impetuous was the sally that the crowd gave way on all hands. But our success was only for a moment. They rallied, and surged back, savage, furious, thirsting for blood. I shall never forget that night: the tall, dark houses, the flare-lit street, and that devoted few, around whom the howling mob raged like the sea about some desolate isle.

Still we pushed them back, for they seemed to have no leaders; but now one appeared, a man mounted on a tall white horse, and we began to feel the difference.

"Down with them," he called out; "down with the devil's brood." And the light of a torch falling on his face I saw it was Simon. His words gave courage to the mob. He himself led them on, and then there was fierce, desperate work. We were fighting for our lives—and men fight hard then—and so we beat them off once more, though one or two had fallen, and there was scarcely one of us who was not wounded somewhere. But they had only gone back to breathe, and came on again in such numbers that those in front could not go back if they would, and I began to think the end was not far. This time they divided us into two, and I found myself in a little group near the wall of the Mathurins, whilst the crowd closed over the rest. Diane was still safe, but there was death all around us, and my heart sank, not for myself but for her whom I loved.

"Leave me, Orrain," she gasped. "Save yourself!"

And for answer I drew her closer to me, and fought as I had never fought before.

The place had become a shambles, though here and there were little knots of Christaudins fighting for their lives. Again and again I strove to cut a way through, but it was impossible. For a moment, however, we found a breathing space. For one little moment the mob gave way and left us, and it was then that I saw Ferrières. He had become detached from us, and was alone. Simon was near him, and with a face white with terror he seized my brother's stirrup and begged for mercy. I saw the cruel hand go up; there was a flash of steel, and Ferrières fell, his grey hairs dabbled in blood, and the white horse trampled over him as Simon turned towards us. The light of fifty torches was on us, and he knew us at once. With a cry like that of an animal he pointed at us.

"There! Those two. A hundred—nay, two hundred gold crowns to him who takes them. On! on!"

And he strove to reach us; but even he, mounted as he was, found the press too great.

But his words were heard, and they came on howling, a ring of snarling faces, of hearts more pitiless than wolves'. Twice they rushed in and twice they fell back, and my sword was red to the hilt. They wavered for a moment, and then came on a third time. One man went down, but someone sprang to my sword arm and pulled me forward. I tripped over something, and came to my knees, and as I did so the mob went over me like a wave, and I heard Diane's voice and its shrill note of agony. God knows how I

managed it, but I rose to my feet once more—the very thickness of the press perhaps saved me then—but I could see nothing of Diane.

"Diane," I called out, "I am here—here!"

And they laughed at me, and one raising a poniard made a sudden, swift thrust, that would have found my heart, but that a shining blade came between us, and the ruffian fell with a horrid cry. The next moment I heard De Lorgnac's voice. He seemed to have dropped from the clouds.

"Behind me! Your back to the wall till you get breath." And his tall figure faced the crowd; and then I saw what the best sword in France could do, and even I shuddered. They backed before him in a crescent, snarling, growling, and cursing, but never an one dared to come within reach of that long red blade.

Where was Diane? Dizzy and faint I leaned against the wall behind me, my eyes searching here, there, and everywhere. But she was gone; and I cursed my arm that had failed me in my need.

Simon was still some distance away, striving to reach me, and our eyes met. It was enough for me. I sprang at him, past De Lorgnac; and the mob gave, only to wedge me in and bear me backwards, for at this moment there rose a cry:

"The archers! The guards! Fly! Fly!"

Ay! They had come at last! When it was too late, with Martines, the lieutenant of the Châtelet, at their head. They drove the mob before them, striking them down, riding them over, and surrounded the few of us who were left.

In my confusion, as I strove to reach Simon, the hand of some fallen wretch clutched me by the ankle, and I stumbled forward. In a trice I was down, and seized; and struggling desperately, but in vain, was dragged into safety, but a prisoner.

The mob driven off, though not defeated yet, came on again, refusing to be balked of their prey; but disciplined strength was too much for them, and once more they gave way, howling around the few prisoners, whom they were only kept from tearing in pieces by the guards.

By the flare of the torches I saw Martines and Simon riding side by side talking eagerly. Suddenly the latter reined in, sprang from his horse, and lifted something in his arms. It was a woman's figure, limp and lifeless. He placed her on the saddle before him, and mounted again, whilst the mob hooted and jeered, and as the light fell on the white face I saw it was Diane.

Martines leaned forward and looked at her, with pity in his glance; but
Simon laughed out:

"*Corbleu*, monsieur! this is the worst Christaudin of them all."

The words roused me to madness, and with a mighty effort I shook myself free and sprang forward, but the butt of a lance brought me down, and once more I was seized.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE RING

Late that evening Le Brusquet sat alone in his room in the Louvre, my ring on the table before him. On leaving me that afternoon near the Ladies' Terrace his first thought had been, according to his promise, to return the letters we found to De Ganache; but he was not to be seen. Le Brusquet had sought the tennis courts, haunted the apartments of La Valentinois, and lounged about the lawns where the ladies and gallants of the Court played at *grelot* of an evening; but in vain. Finally, he mounted his mule, and ambled off to the great square house behind the Bourgogne, where Antony of Vendôme lodged with his train. Here he made certain he would find De Ganache, who followed the prince; but he was once more disappointed. So, giving up the quest for the present, he supped alone at Crabeau's, in the Rue des Fosses St. Germain. Then he returned to the Louvre, and sat down to think, as much of his own affairs as of mine. So far as he himself was concerned he felt he had fallen from the favour of the King. This had happened before; but now for the first time he seemed to have no wish to re-establish

himself, and a longing came over him to see his little pepper-box of a tower in the Quercy, and to be once more the Sieur de Besmé instead of the King of Folly.

"*Eh bien*, Pompon!" he said, addressing the ape, "the kingdom of fools is too wide a realm for one man to rule. I shall abdicate, I think. What say you? The Roman went back to his plough; Besmé will return to his pears."

The ape simply blinked at him from his seat on the table, and, carrying out his humour, Le Brusquet continued:

"You do not approve—eh? What, then, is left for me?" But as he spoke his eyes fell on the ring, and bending over it he continued:

"Yes; this is where I have failed—save for this I should be off to-morrow—but to go with failure behind me——"

He stopped, for someone knocked at his door, and to Le Brusquet's "Enter!" De Lorgnac stepped in. His face was pale and grave, his boots and clothes splashed with mud, and there were red spots on the whiteness of his ruffles.

For one moment Le Brusquet stared at his friend, and then sprang up.

"What has happened?" he cried.

"Everything—and for the worst. They are taken."

"Taken! You mean——"

"I mean Mademoiselle de Paradis and Orrain, and others besides. La Valentinois was too quick, and struck at once."

Le Brusquet swore under his breath, and Lorgnac went on:

"It happened in this way. On leaving Orrain this evening he told me that De Ganache had been arrested."

"De Ganache arrested too!"

"Yes; at sundown near the wicket gate. The full significance of the news did not strike me at first, for there were other reasons, which we know, that might have led to his arrest. On my return to the Louvre, however, I heard sufficient to tell me that La Valentinois and her party meant to act without delay."

"And never a word came to my ears, and I thought them sharp."

Lorgnac took no notice of the interruption, but continued:

"On learning this I hastened after Orrain, hoping to be in time to overtake him and save our friends; but it was not to be." And then he went on to tell him what is already known. When he had done Le Brusquet said nothing, but remained in a moody silence, staring in front of him, and De Lorgnac turned from him to the window and looked out upon the night. After a little he turned again, and putting his hand on Le Brusquet's shoulder, said:

"It looks, old friend, as if we were beaten."

Le Brusquet's eyes flashed. "Not yet! This is the last game I play, and it is not checkmate yet. Where have they taken Orrain?"

"The Châtelet."

"And mademoiselle?"

"I know not. I know not if she is alive or dead."

Le Brusquet groaned. "That is the worst tale of all. Orrain, I think, we can save."

"How so?"

For answer Le Brusquet held up my ring. "With this talisman!" And slipping it on his finger he continued: "It is not for nothing that I studied law at the College of Cambrai. As first prince of the blood, Vendôme can claim Orrain from the Châtelet. If he has any gratitude he will do so."

"I never thought of that. I saw the prisoners taken to the Châtelet. There were two, Orrain and La Mothe, who is as well known to be of the prince's household as Vendôme himself is known to be a heretic."

"Yes; a heretic too great to be touched. But he must pay his debts. I am going at once to see Vendôme. Stay here if you like. You know where to find the wine. No, Pompon, not to-night!" And pushing back the ape, who had made ready to follow him, he went off.

It was gay that night in the salon of La Valentinois. The Queen had gone to St. Germain-en-Laye, where the royal children were, and all those who could had flocked to the apartments of the favourite, to pay their court to the crescent moon. The King had retired earlier than usual, for he meant to hunt on the morrow; but his absence only made the revelry more unrestrained. The card-tables were full, and at one of them sat Diane herself, playing with Caraffa against Vendôme and the Marshal St. Andre, and surrounded by a crowd who watched the play and staked amongst themselves upon the game. Immediately behind her stood De Mouchy, in the ermine and red of his office, and ever and again a whispered word passed between the twain.

There was a pile of gold before Vendôme, who was playing recklessly but with wonderful fortune. His face was flushed and his speech thick, for the goblet on the small service-table at his elbow was ever being filled, and emptied as fast as refilled. Nevertheless, he won each time, though he seemed to fling his cards down on the table without a look or thought.

"The gods are with me," he exclaimed loudly as he pulled off a *coup*, made utterly by hazard, and drew the stakes towards him.

Diane laughed gaily, but the red fox Caraffa was a bad loser.

"Monseigneur," he said with a snarl, "there is a proverb about luck at cards."

"I know," was the swift and unexpected reply. "Mistrust thy fortune when the knave and the Church are together." And Vendôme pointed to the card the Legate had just played.

There was a titter all around; but Diane's white arm was stretched forth, and she tapped Vendôme with her fan.

"Fie, Monseigneur! Your wit is too cruel. His Eminence but referred to the old saw: lucky at cards, unlucky in love."

The prince gallantly kissed her jewelled hand. "Madame, that is true, for until I met you I never knew how unlucky I was."

La Valentinois did not note the glance in Vendôme's eye, and, vain as a peacock, blushed as she alone could blush. But a murmured word from De Mouchy caught her ear, and leaning back in her chair, her face half turned towards De Mouchy, and her fan outspread between herself and the prince, she asked in a quick whisper:

"Is it over?"

"Yes! He has come."

As De Mouchy spoke the crowd parted, and the Vidame appeared, and bowed before Diane.

"It was impossible to come sooner, madame; I had a little affair, and it was necessary to change my attire."

"A successful affair, I trust, Monsieur le Vidame."

Simon was about to answer, but a high-pitched voice broke in: "More successful than even the Vidame's great feat of arms in the forest of Fontevrault." And Le Brusquet made his way through the press, and stood behind the prince's chair.

Diane rose from her seat, and Simon glared at Le Brusquet, whilst a dozen voices called out:

"What was that, Le Brusquet? We have not heard."

"That is owing to Monsieur le Vidame's modesty; but this feat eclipses all the others of which he is the hero. This evening the Vidame broke up the heretic church in the Mathurins; nearly all the accursed brood were slain, women as well as men; but there are still enough prisoners to give us a rare bonfire by Saturday. Is it not so, monsieur?" And Le Brusquet turned to the Vidame.

"Is this true, Le Brusquet?" It was Vendôme who asked. He too had risen, and his voice was trembling with anger.

"Assuredly, Monseigneur! Ask the Vidame! It was a great stroke. Amongst others they have taken La Mothe the Christaudin——" He stopped, for the prince broke in furiously upon his speech.

"This is foul treachery! The edicts are suspended! The King's word is given!"

"And is recalled. The edicts were re-enforced to-day. It is strange, Monseigneur, that you, as the First Prince of the Blood, did not know this!"

It was impossible to mistake the insult in this speech and in Simon's manner as he made it. For a moment it was as if Vendôme's hot temper would have made him forget his rank. He raised his hand as though he would have struck the Vidame; but those around Simon hustled him aside, and it was in a scene of confusion that Monseigneur turned to Diane.

"I understand all this now," he said, pointing to the card-table, covered with the scattered cards and gold, "and I know to whom I owe this. Think not, madame, to fool me longer; but remember that all the rivers in France will not quench the fires you have lit to-day."

Then calling to De Mouy, Albain, and others of his gentlemen he bowed coldly to La Valentinois, and left the room amidst a dead silence.

When he had gone a babel of tongues broke forth, and there were loud and angry cries for Le Brusquet, whose "fool's prank," as they called it, had caused this storm. Le Brusquet, however, was not to be seen. He had stolen in, thrown his apple of discord, and stolen forth again like a ghost. None knew or understood better than he the wayward character of Vendôme, and that never was the prince capable of acting with decision unless his self-love were hurt. So he had made his plan, and acted, and now stood in the shadow of a pillar in the courtyard waiting for the prince. He had not long to wait, for Vendôme came storming out, almost on his heels, and called for his horse. There were quite a hundred or more gentlemen in his train, and as the horses were being brought up Le Brusquet stepped to the side of Vendôme and held up his signet.

"Monseigneur," he said, "here is something of yours that has come back to you."

The prince almost snatched it from him, and glanced at it by the light of the flambeaux. One look, and he turned to Le Brusquet.

"He too!"

"Monseigneur! In the Châtelet, where La Mothe is. Forget not your rights, Monseigneur!"

"I am not likely to! Here! A spare horse for Le Brusquet!" And he sprang into his saddle.

Someone brought up a nag, Le Brusquet mounted, and the word being given for the Châtelet they went out at a trot, the prince riding in front between De Mouy and Albain, his hat pulled over his eyes, and in silence.

Whilst all this was happening it fared ill enough with me. Though felled by the blow on my head I was not stunned, only so dazed that my recapture was an easy matter. This time no risks were taken, and with my hands tied behind me by means of a long scarf, the other end of which was looped round the high pommel of a trooper's saddle, I was perforce compelled to accompany my captors as best I could, bleeding and dizzy from my hurt.

At length we arrived at the Châtelet, followed to the very gates by the mob. As my blurred vision saw through the moonlight those sombre walls, citadel and prison at once, my heart sank. Hope was left behind in those fearful oubliettes, whose sinister names carried utter despair with them. There was the Grièche, the Barbary, the Chausse d'Hypocras, where the prisoners, ankle deep in water, were neither able to stand upright nor to sit; the Fosse, down which one was lowered by a rope, and the hideous Fin d'Aise in which no man retained his sanity. So it had come to this! And in sullen despair I stood amongst the guards, awaiting Martines' pleasure. At first it seemed as if I were the only prisoner; but any doubts on that point were soon set at rest, for another unfortunate was dragged up and placed beside me. I felt rather than saw it was La Mothe—but, unlike myself, he was not bound—and then I heard Martines ask:

"Are these the only two prisoners?"

"Monsieur!" answered a subordinate officer.

The lieutenant of the Châtelet was not an unkindly man, and muttering something about "hangman's work" he came up and surveyed us by the light of the torches. Then he ordered my hands to be freed, and drawing his subaltern aside gave him some commands in a low tone, and went off.

As Martines turned away this person directed us to follow him, and, surrounded by guards, we entered a vaulted passage, and after descending and ascending many stairs found ourselves before a studded door, so low that even a short man would have had to stoop his shoulders to enter therein. A gaoler fumbled with the rusty lock, which for a space resisted all his efforts; but at last it yielded, and the door was pushed open, clanging harshly as it swung back. Beyond lay a hideous dungeon, into which we were thrust, the officer following us with a couple of guards, one of whom carried a lantern. The light discovered a long and narrow prison, the ooze dripping from the walls, and the floor slippery with slime. A single slit in the wall, no wider than three fingers of a man's hand and about a foot in length, let in light and air. For the rest, a stone bench and a jug full of foul water completed the furniture of this terrible chamber. Faint and dizzy, I made towards the bench, and sat thereon in the shadow as the officer said:

"I must ask you to share this lodging for to-night. It is known as the Palace," he added, with a grin, and then pulling out his tablets he turned to La Mothe.

"Your name, monsieur."

"Godefrey de la Mothe, chaplain to Monseigneur the Duke of Bourbon Vendôme."

"And yours?"

From my seat in the shadow I answered: "Bertrand d'Orrain."

La Mothe started and half faced me, but held himself in, and the officer, having made his note, turned his back upon us and withdrew, followed by his men. We heard the door shut, a drawing of bolts, a rattling of keys, and then came silence and darkness.

No!—not utter darkness; for through the narrow slit in the wall a ray of moonlight fell, lighting the figure of La Mothe where he stood, almost in the centre of the dungeon. He was looking towards me, his eyes expectant and shining; but I could not speak, and sat like a stone.

At length he made a step in my direction.

"Orrain," he said, "have we met at last?"

With an effort I rose and took his outstretched hands, and in that moment I knew that the past was bridged over and my sin forgiven.

For long we sat together on the stone bench, and La Mothe told me of his life. How, though all thought him mortally wounded, he had rallied at last, and, in thankfulness for his escape, resolved to devote the remainder of his days to God. The spirit of the age fell on his mind, keen and ecstatic at once. In every trivial event he saw the hand of the Almighty, but he saw too the corruption around him. It was for such as he that the light of the new faith shone with an alluring radiance, and soon there was no voice that spoke more loudly for the truth than that of Godefrey de la Mothe. A fatalist above all things, even now, when everything seemed lost, he did not despair.

"Nay," he said, "the hour has not come for us to die. God has not brought us together to perish." And the words carried hope with them, even amidst the darkness and lowering prison walls. Then he knelt down and prayed; but I could not, for my heart was raging within me.

At length he rose from his knees. "The Lord will hear and answer," he said simply; but I made no reply, sitting with my head between my hands, staring in front of me. So till the moon set; and I must have slept. Suddenly I felt a hand on my shoulder, and started up. It was La Mothe.

"Hark!" he said. "Do you not hear?"

I listened. There was a distinct murmuring, the clattering of hoofs, the neigh of a horse, and then a cry, faint but distinct:

"Vendôme! Vendôme! Bourbon! Nôtre Dame!"

We sprang to our feet. "The Lord, who preserved His chosen from out of the land of bondage, hath heard my cry, and we are saved!" exclaimed La Mothe, and making our way to the door we listened. All was stillness once more, a stillness that seemed to last for hours, though it was but for a few minutes.

At last we heard the tramp of many feet, louder and louder they grew, and then there was a rattling of chains, and our prison door fell open, letting in a stream of light. In the blaze in the doorway stood Vendôme and Martines, and behind them a crowd of eager faces.

"These are the prisoners, Monseigneur!" said Martines.

"And I, Antony de Bourbon-Vendôme, First Prince of the Blood Royal of France, stand here on my right and claim them. Gentlemen," and he turned to us, "you are free; follow me!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE ARM OF GOD

Four days had passed since that dreadful night in the Rue des Mathurins—days the memory of which can never be effaced whilst I live. No tidings were obtainable of mademoiselle, save that she was amongst the prisoners who were being tried in secret by De Mouchy, and all efforts to communicate with her had been in vain. This much, however, leaked out: that owing to the whispers that had got abroad—none knew how—the prisoners, with the exception of one or two, were not of importance; but this in itself made the matter worse for mademoiselle, and gave the mock court of justice—it could be called by no other name—every opportunity of veiling its real purpose. In this De Mouchy was managing the trial with great skill. The prisoners of no account—the scrivener's clerk, the poor shopkeeper, the small mercer—got the benefit of plea and quibble! God knows, I did not grudge them that! But each acquittal, pronounced loudly in the name of the King's mercy, with high-flown words about the love of the King for his people, led step by step to the real object for which the infamous triangle worked. Already the gossips were beginning to wag their tongues at the leniency shown. It was said in the cabarets and public places that the memory of the tailor of St. Antoine haunted the King, and that he and the Queen were, in secret, heretics. At the last acquittal the cruel mob of Paris had actually dared to parade the streets, with angry cries at being deprived of the hideous spectacle of an expiation. "*Au feu, au feu*! Death to the Christaudins!" I still seem to hear their voices.

And so the time was ripe for the law to claim its prey, for the shameless three to gather in their spoil, and for an evil, vindictive woman to accomplish her revenge. The King was at Fontainebleau, whither he had gone, accompanied by La Valentinois and the Court. The Queen was at St. Germain-en-Laye, and the Louvre—except for its guards—was deserted. On the morning of the fifth day, however, the Queen returned, and although she knew what had happened she summoned me before her to hear the story from my lips. I found her in her study with three or four of her ladies. Catherine looked pale and heavy-eyed, and there were hard lines about her mouth. It was said she had never smiled since the day of the masque. I for one am certain it was from that day her secretive nature took the dark and devious course that led her to be what she became; but now it was only the beginning.

I said what I had to say briefly, and when I was done the Queen looked up at me.

"Is this all?"

I bowed in silent response, and after a pause she continued:

"I know what you would ask. I have done my best. I have written to the King to pardon Mademoiselle de Paradis, as he forgave Madame de Rentigny. I wrote at once, four days ago." And then she flushed to her temples as she added: "Up to now there has been no answer. It is useless to go myself——"

Her voice almost broke, and I looked aside, only to meet Mademoiselle
Davila's eyes. They were swimming with tears.

It was now there arose an unusual bustle in the anteroom. The doors were thrown back, and in a loud voice the ushers announced the Duchess de Valentinois. For a moment Diane stood in the doorway, a little crowd behind her, and then, tall and stately, walked slowly up to the Queen and courtesied profoundly. Catherine remained frigidly still, as though oblivious of her presence, and amidst a dead silence Diane stood before the Queen, a faint smile playing on her lips, her eyelids drooped to cover the defiant fire of her glance. One might have counted ten as the two faced each other, and then Diane spoke:

"I have come, your Majesty, from the King."

Catherine's eyebrows arched, and a swift, lightning glance of hatred passed between the two. Then Diane's lids drooped again, and her soft, flute-like voice continued:

"The King kisses your Majesty's hands, and says there is much wind and rain at Fontainebleau, but that he has slain three boars and five stags."

"He has slain three boars and five stags," repeated the Queen in an even monotone, and turning to Madame de Montal, who stood behind her chair, she said bitterly: "Why does not somebody cry, 'God save the King!'?"

"All France cries that, your Majesty," said Diane. "And further, the King once again kisses your Majesty's hands, and has received your gracious letter in regard to Mademoiselle de Paradis." And now her voice hardened to steel, and she dropped the studied courtesy of her address. "That letter has been submitted to the council, and the King has decided to let the law take its course. God will not be insulted longer in this realm."

It is impossible to conceive the insolent malice that was thrown into La Valentinois' glance and voice, and the mockery of her bow, as she made this speech. And grey-haired Madame de Montal, gazing steadily at her, said:

"Madame, you speak to the Queen!"

"No, Montal," and Catherine rose, her face white as death, "you mistake; it is the Queen who speaks to me." And without so much as a glance in the direction of the Duchess she turned and left the apartment, followed by her ladies.

The favourite looked around her, a smile of triumph on her lips; but with the exception of myself the cabinet was empty, though a murmuring crowd filled the rooms without. It was then, and only then, she realised that the victory was not all hers, and felt the sting of the Parthian arrow shot by the Queen. Her cheeks burned red, and I saw the hand that held her fan tremble like a leaf in the wind. Then with an effort she recovered herself, and with another glance at me, full of superb disdain, swept from the room. As for me, my last hope had vanished, and I stood as in a dream, staring at the pattern on the carpet before me. How long I stood thus I do not know, but at last, from within the Queen's apartments, I heard someone weeping—heard even through the closed door and drawn curtains. It all but unmanned me; and then I felt a hand on my shoulder, and looking up saw De Lorgnac.

"Orrain," he said, "come with me."

There was that in his eyes and voice which could not be mistaken.

"What has happened?" I asked hoarsely, though I well knew what he meant.

"Come," he said, "be brave! You are a man, and as a man I tell you, you need all your courage now. The Court is thrown open, and in an hour De Mouchy delivers his sentence. The harlot of France is by his side——"
And he stopped, almost breaking down.

"Lorgnac, I am going there."

"It is useless. Le Brusquet is there. Come with me!"

But I turned on him fiercely. "I am going," I repeated, and, perhaps, he read what was in my heart, for he put his arm through mine.

"Come, then. I will come with you."

True and tried friend though he was I shook him off roughly, and hurried into the streets like a madman. How I reached the Hôtel de Ville I cannot tell! I seemed to have made the passage in darkness; but at last I found myself there, pressing through the ever-increasing crowd that thronged the entrance to the trial chamber; and finally, passing the doors, I took my stand in the gallery reserved for spectators.

With burning eyes I looked upon the scene beneath me. Camus had just concluded his evidence, and was bowing to the court, a smile on his traitor's face as he listened to some words of compliment addressed to him by De Mouchy. Simon, the man I wanted, was nowhere to be seen, though my eyes, fierce with hatred, searched for him everywhere. But on a seat beside the judge was La Valentinois herself, radiantly beautiful, now fluttering her fan, now sniffing daintily at her vinaigrette, as she bent her frosty glance on the prisoners. One was old Ferrières. Like a dying man, he leaned back in a chair that had been provided for him, for his wounds left him no strength to stand. His eyes were closed. He

seemed to have fainted, and was oblivious of what was going on around him, whilst death had already set its seal upon his haggard and drawn face. Mademoiselle stood by his side, a hand resting on his chair. For one brief second our eyes met, and she smiled at me—a brave smile—and I bent my head in sorrow, for I could not look. It needed not the cry of the ushers in the court for silence. Every tongue was still. There was not a whisper, not a movement, for all felt that the supreme moment had arrived. De Mouchy bent over his papers. I heard them rustling; and then La Valentinois, leaning forward, said something to him in a low voice. There was a word to an usher, and once more the insupportable silence.

In a little we heard the steady tramp of feet. Nearer and nearer the sound came. A side door in the body of the court was opened, and a third prisoner was brought in and placed before the judge. Craning forward I looked. It was De Ganache; but how changed from the once brilliant cavalier. His figure was stooped and bent, his once dark hair was white, his face wrinkled as that of an old man, and in his shifty, unsettled glance glared the fires of madness. He did not seem to realise where he was, but began to laugh vacantly, but the laugh died away to a frozen look as his gaze fixed itself on La Valentinois.

"Diane," he cried in a terrible voice as he stretched his arms out towards her, "it was for your sake!"

But she, his destroyer, scarce glanced at him from her place on the judgment seat.

"He is quite mad!" And with a musical laugh she leaned back, and picking out a comfit from a little jewelled box began to nibble at it daintily as De Ganache's hands fell helplessly to his sides.

And now De Mouchy spoke. "Monsieur De Ganache, do you recognise the prisoners there?"

De Ganache followed his glance; a shiver went through him, and as he looked a red flush mounted to his forehead. Never had I seen a man look so before, and, thank God! never after. Unspeakable shame and hopeless despair were sealed upon his face. His lips grew livid, and twice the question was repeated ere he forced himself to answer.

"Yes."

I held my breath and listened. What did this mean? Ferrières still lay back in his semi-trance, oblivious of all things; but mademoiselle moved forward and looked at De Ganache, ineffable pity in her eyes. And now came the next question.

"They are known to you as Christaudins?"

One glance at mademoiselle and De Ganache shrank back; but her voice rang out clear and sweet, for she, with all of us, mistook the reason of De Ganache's terrible emotion.

"Deny it not, De Ganache! Be not afraid."

But with a cry De Ganache put his hands to his face and turned aside. A woman began to sob amongst the spectators, and someone dropped a sword with an angry clash on the parquet. Once more the strident voices of the ushers arose, and after a little silence was restored.

De Mouchy was about to put yet another question when La Valentinois interposed.

"It is enough," she said; "I but wanted to confront them. Let him have his reward."

De Mouchy smiled, and bending forward addressed De Ganache.

"Gaston de Ganache, Vicomte de Ganache and Les Barres, you stand convicted a heretic and traitor, and for crimes such as yours the laws of God and man have but one punishment. But bearing in mind the services you have rendered by denouncing your fellow-conspirators and discovering their secrets to the King's most trusty servants, Simon, Vidame d'Orrain, and myself, the King at the intercession of Madame the Duchess de Valentinois has in his gracious mercy spared your life on condition that you quit France within four and twenty hours. Monsieur, you are free."

As these astonishing words fell from the judge's lips—words that branded De Ganache with unutterable infamy—the miserable man looked around him like an animal at bay; and then, a madness coming upon him, he broke out into peal after peal of harsh, mirthless laughter—laughter that seemed to come from the grave and beyond; and, laughing thus, they led him away. When he was gone De Mouchy pointed to Ferrières as he said to a warder:

"Arouse him!"

They dragged the fainting man to his feet, and he stood limply between two gaolers; and then the

judge asked:

"Prisoners, is there anything you would like to say?"

And mademoiselle answered for both, in a low but distinct voice:

"Nothing. We confess we are of the true faith, and we are willing to die for it. As to our having conspired against the King—we are innocent!"

And as she spoke some strange idea must have passed through the wandering brain of Ferrières. Half in delirium, he looked about him, and with a supreme effort, standing free of the warders, he called out in a loud, fever-strung voice:

"*Vive le Roi*!"

It was one of those moments when the sympathy of a crowd can be caught by a word. Small and mean-looking as he was there was something so forlorn and hopeless in the gallant cry of the doomed man that all hearts were touched. A low, responsive murmur broke from the spectators, and then with one voice they too shouted:

"*Vive le Roi*!"

They heard it outside—the multitude who thronged the stairways, the courtyards, and the Place de Grève. And they too yelled with brazen lungs, and the roar of their voices came to us through the open windows, with the sunbeams that lit the shadows of the vast and gloomy hall. Never did subjects hail their king in a moment more sad.

Ferrières had sunk back in a crumpled heap, and mademoiselle was leaning over him in womanly sympathy; but the guards thrust her aside, and held up the dying man once more to hear, if he could, his sentence. The tumult sank away, and once more there was silence. La Valentinois sat still, watching the prisoners behind her fan; and then De Mouchy, in a speech that was dignified and impressive even to me who knew the unheard-of guilt of the man, passed the last sentence of the law. The sin of the prisoners was amply proved. It was against the King, and, he bent his head, against the Church of God. The King had already shown his mercy—all men had seen and felt it—but the wrath of God had shown itself in the disasters that had smitten the land, and France must be purged clean of the sin of heresy. As for the judge, the laws, and, in chief, the Edict of Compiègne, gave him no power to mitigate the punishment of wretches so guilty as these who stood now before him. And so Diane, Demoiselle de Paradis, and Jean, Sieur de Ferrières, were condemned to be drawn two days hence on hurdles to the Place Maubert, there to suffer the greater torture and the less, and there to have their bodies consumed by fire, as Almighty God would hereafter consume their souls.

And then, amidst an awed hush, the blasphemer who sat upon the judgment seat made a sign to the guards to remove the prisoners, and, bending down, began slowly to gather up his papers.

As the terrible words fell from De Mouchy's lips I was for the moment overcome, and the immense hall seemed to swim before me, so that I had to support myself by holding to the railings of the gallery.

La Valentinois had risen, and was leaning forward looking hard at Diane, as if expecting some cry, some appeal for mercy; but at the last words of De Mouchy mademoiselle had bent her head in silent prayer, and then her calm, pure eyes met those of the wicked woman before her, and rested on her for a moment with a grave pity in them, as she said in a clear voice:

"Madame, God has already taken one of us beyond your reach." And she pointed to Ferrières. "As for me, His mercy will come to me too, I pray; and may He forgive you as I, who am to die, forgive you now."

It was truth she spoke. A hand more powerful than aught earthly had rescued Ferrières, and he was dead. He had passed as he stood there, held by the warders, and the lifeless figure, with its glazed eyes staring into the unknown, was only kept from falling by the supporting hands around it. Even De Mouchy paled; and La Valentinois, who had striven to meet mademoiselle's look with her cruel laugh, shrank back and covered her face with her hand. And now the guards closed around their prisoners, the living and the dead, and they passed from my sight.

In a moment the tension was relaxed, and a hundred voices were raised at once, discussing the sentence, the news of which had already gone forth; and outside the multitude began to hoot and groan and cheer.

A man seized me by the cloak. "A just sentence, was it not, monsieur?" he asked. And then went on: "A pity the old fox died; but it will be a good expiation, almost as good as that of Clinet and De Luns

—*cujus regio, ejus religio*," he babbled on, airing his Latin; but I drove the fool from me with a curse, and wonder to this day if he ever knew how near he was to death.

La Valentinois had arisen, and, followed by De Mouchy and half a dozen others, was making her way to the exit, all parting before her as though she were the Queen. Now was my chance. Simon had escaped me for to-day; but De Mouchy—he at least was within my reach—and with my hand to my poniard I pressed down the steps of the gallery, but near the door was hemmed in by the crowd. Try as I would it was impossible to get through, and a barrier was put up, which made matters hopeless. There as I stood in impotent rage I saw over the heads of the crowd La Valentinois entering her coach. She was followed by De Mouchy. The guards closed around. There was a cheer, and they were gone. It was then that a cold hand touched my wrist, and a voice whispered in my ear:

"There are two days yet; do nothing rash!"

I turned swiftly, and saw Le Brusquet at my elbow, and behind him the tall figure of De Lorgnac; unknown to me he had followed me here.

"Come with us!" he said; and I made no answer, but did as I was bidden, and placing me between them we went back together to the Louvre. Once in Le Brusquet's apartments the reaction set in, and flinging myself in a chair I covered my face with my hands—for the first time in my life I had broken down utterly.

After a while I somewhat recovered myself. Lorgnac was standing with his back to me, looking out of the window, and Le Brusquet was by my side, a glass of cordial in his hand.

"Drink this," he said. "Remember there are two days yet; and God's arm is long."

Mechanically I drank, and as I held the glass in my hand Le Brusquet removed his cloak. In doing this something dropped, and stooping he picked it up. It was a packet of letters, tied with a red ribbon. With a glance of contempt at it he flung it on the table in front of De Lorgnac, who had joined us, saying as he did so:

"There are De Ganache's letters. I had almost forgotten them."

The packet had fallen on the table, almost under De Lorgnac's eyes. Half unconsciously he let his glance rest upon it, and then a strange expression came into his face, and holding up the letters, he asked Le Brusquet, with apparent unconcern:

"You have not looked at the writing, have you?"

"Not I! I dare swear 'tis some woman. Nothing else would be tied with red ribbon and scented with musk. Throw the thing away. It is too thick with memories of that traitor. My God! I did not think earth held so foul a villain."

But Lorgnac took no notice of his last words, only the hand holding the packet began to shake a little as he said slowly:

"As it happens, I know the writing well. It is a woman's hand———"

Both Le Brusquet and I turned on him, the same thought in our hearts.

"*She*!" I said, and half rising from my seat; but with an exclamation Le Brusquet snatched the packet from De Lorgnac's hand. In a moment the letters were opened, and he was reading them with feverish haste. There were four letters in all, and when he had done he looked at us, and there was the light of hope in his eyes.

"Speak, man!" And I gripped him by the arm. "I cannot bear this longer!"

"It is God's providence," he said solemnly as he grasped my hand. "Orrain, take heart! We win! Read these—and you too, Lorgnac! When you have read we must to the Queen at once."

CHAPTER XXIX

Monsieur de Créquy, his back to the light, stood in the embrasure of a window, deeply engaged in examining his features in a small hand-glass which he held daintily before him. The survey seemed to please monsieur, for he showed his teeth in a simper of satisfaction, and began to curl his black moustache between the forefinger and thumb of his disengaged hand. So engrossed was he that he never observed me coming up to him, and it was not until I was at his elbow that he suddenly realised my presence.

"*Morbleu*!" and he hastily slipped the glass in his pocket, "wherever did you spring from?"

"Not through the window, I assure you. I but came in the ordinary way. Madame, I suppose, is within?" And I pointed to a closed door in front of us.

Créquy nodded. "Yes; reposing after the fatigues of the day, and will have none but a Chevalier of the Order to guard the entrance to her bower. What a day it has been! I suppose you know it will be on Saturday?"

I could have struck the coxcomb; but held myself in, and asked to see La Valentinois, adding that my affair was of vital import. At this Créquy began to hum and haw, and I had to humour him, telling him that madame would give him but small thanks for denying me, as my business concerned what was to happen on Saturday.

"That is a different matter," he said. "I will see." And he tapped at the door. There was no answer; thereupon Créquy gently opened the door and stepped in. He came out again almost immediately.

"As I said, madame is reposing; but I have told the Syrian. Would you like to wait here?"

"Perhaps I had better get my business over as soon as possible, and save the Syrian the trouble of coming to the outer door," I said. At which Créquy shrugged his shoulders, and pointing to the door with a mock bow bade me enter.

I did as I was bidden, and found myself in a long and narrow room. The ceiling, painted to represent the sky lit up by the crescent moon, was supported by eight arabesque pillars, four on either hand. Around the bases of the pillars, and scattered here and there over the rich carpet, were seats made of huge soft cushions, covered with matchless embroidery. Near one of these luxurious seats was a low carved table upon which lay an open volume of Ronsard's poems, and close by it, thrown carelessly on the carpet, was a lute with a cluster of streaming ribbons, and a black and white satin sling attached to it. Behind this stood a carved ebony *prie-dieu*, and above the crucifix that surmounted it hung a shield surrounded by a wreath of flowers, and bearing upon it a tree springing out of a tomb, with the legend: "Left alone—I live in thee," upon a scroll beneath. This was the strange manner in which Diane de Poitiers kept the memory of her dead husband green—for she ever posed as the inconsolable widow, carrying her husband's soul about with her, packed in straw, like her Venetian crystal goblets and eastern pottery. In the centre of the room, upon a veined marble pedestal, stood, in strange incongruity, a replica of the great bronze of Goujou, that faced her chateau of Anet. In this Diane was represented nude, reclining upon a stag, a bow in her hand, and surrounded by dogs.

Owing to the heat of the day the windows were open; but the curtains of pale blue silk, with silver crescents gleaming on them, were drawn to keep out the afternoon glare; and the subdued, opal-tinted light fell softly on this bower of luxury, which was, however, likely to prove the den of a tigress to me.

The room was empty when I entered, and after looking around me I picked up the volume of Ronsard. It was open at his ode to La Valentinois:

"Seray-je seul, vivant en France de vostre age,
Sans chanter vostre nom, si criant et si puissant?
Diray-je point l'honneur de vostre beau croissant?
Feray-je point pour vous quelque immortel ouvrage?"

So far I read, and then flung the book with its fulsome verses down on the cushions. As I did this, I heard a little burst of laughter, followed by the harsh, chuckling scream of a parrot, and then a voice:

"Here! Vert-Vert! Here! To my shoulder!"

I stepped back behind a pillar, the curtains covering a door leading into an inner apartment were set aside, and La Valentinois entered, bearing on her left shoulder a large green parrot, whose plumage she caressed with her right hand. She was clad in a loose robe of some soft, clinging material that shimmered like cloth of gold. It was fastened at her throat by a jewelled star, and a golden zone clasped her waist. Her abundant hair hung loose in black, curling masses, and her little feet were thrust into

gemmed and embroidered slippers. Madame had apparently come forth in some haste I could see.

"Orrain," she said, her face half turned from me, for she was looking at her bird, "whatever brings you here? Is it anything from Sire Grosse-Tête?" And then an exclamation broke from her, and she stopped short, for she saw me.

"You!" she said. "I thought it was the Vidame d'Orrain."

"A mistake, madame, in announcing me, perhaps, which I regard as the most fortunate in my life." And I bowed before her.

So bad, so worthless was this woman, that she utterly mistook my speech.

"True! Leila said Monsieur d'Orrain—but I thought it was your brother."

I made no answer, and she glanced at me, the colour rising to her cheeks, and a smile on her lips, as she went on:

"'Tis a thousand pities, Monsieur le Chevalier, that you have taken the wrong side; and by rights I should strike that gong there and call my guards, for you are dangerous, they say; but," and she sank languorously down in the cushions, her pet now on her wrist, "'tis a warm day, and I feel bored. Do I not, Vert-Vert? Perhaps monsieur here will amuse me." And she stroked the feathers of the bird, and bending down kissed it.

"Madame," I began; but she glanced up, and stayed me with a laugh.

"What a voice! As severe as my dear De Mouchy's when he delivers a judgment; but, Chevalier, Leila, my Syrian maid, always tells me 'tis easier to sit than to stand, and there is room on these cushions—come!" And stretching out a shapely white arm she let it rest on the amber-hued silk of the cushions by her side.

As I gazed on the temptress lying at my feet the thought came to me to slay her in her sin; and perhaps she saw the sombre light in my eyes, and read my heart, for she drew her arm back swiftly, and half rose; but mastering myself I gave her her chance.

"Madame, I have come to beg your mercy——"

"You!" And she sank back again on her cushions.

"Yes, madame! I have come to ask for a life."

"Not yours, surely? It never was Orrain's way." And she smiled.

"Ay; it is my life ten times over, as well as another's; but you know whom I mean, madame! She is innocent, and a word from you will save her."

"Oh, monsieur, you overrate my power! And this is not amusing. It is too hot to talk of such things."

"Madame, be merciful! Spare her! She never harmed you."

"What!" And tossing the bird from her she rose to her feet, lithe as a pantheress. So perfectly was she formed that one did not realise how tall she was until she came near; and she was close enough to me now, her eyes flashing with a hundred evil, angry lights.

"She never harmed me? Never hurt me? She! That white-faced provincial, with her airs of virtue, who tried to shame me in public! Look you, I hate that woman! Do you hear? I hate her—hate her! If by the lifting of my little finger I could save her, do you think I would? Never! Let her die! And she shall die, as Philippine de Lune did——"

"Madame!"

"And you!" she burst in, "insolent that you are!—you! who have dared to come here! Think you that you will go free?"

"Enough, madame! I no longer appeal to your pity."

She had half turned from me, and made a step towards the gong as if to strike it, but faced back like lightning, womanlike determined to have the last word.

"*Mon Dieu*! but this surpasses all."

"Not in the least! I begged for your mercy at first; now I bring to you the Queen's commands."

She almost gasped, and then laughed out loudly. "The Queen's commands—the commands of Madame Grosse-Tête to me! Ha! ha! ha! I took you for an insolent fool; but you are mad, monsieur, mad!"

For answer I held out to her one of her letters to De Ganache.

"The Queen desires you to see this, madame. It is your own writing to a man you have killed, body and soul—and there are many others like this—so it would be useless to destroy it. Read it!"

She stared at me for an instant in blank amaze, and then snatched the paper from me, her face white, her hands trembling. One glance at it, and she burst out:

"This is a forgery! A base forgery!" And then I laughed, for there would now be no mercy shown towards this she-wolf.

"There is no forgery there! And there are other proofs. What think you that your Syrian go-between will say when put to the question? What of your glovemaker Camus, and the house in the Rue des Lavandières? Madame, you are alone here but for a half score of your archers and that fool Créquy. Think you that with such proofs in her hand the Queen would hesitate even to arrest you?"

"Arrest me!" she stammered.

"Yes! There are charges enough. What think you that the King—Monsieur Grosse-Tête as you call him—will say when he sees these letters, and hears of the triangle, and learns that all France, and all Europe, will know his shame, and of the infamous grant you cajoled him into giving you?"

She shivered and looked around her as I went on coldly:

"Call your guards if you will; but I swear to you that if you do within the hour you will fall so low that the very women of the Marais and the Temple would pity you!"

"My God!" And with a shudder she put her hands to her face, and the letter fluttered down to the carpet. Stooping, I picked it up, and continued: "The Queen, however, is more merciful than you, and even you have your uses, madame, so that her Majesty will overlook your crimes, upon a condition." And I stopped.

For a space she stood in silence, her head bowed, and her face covered.
At last she slowly put down her hands, and looked at me. Such a look!

"What is your condition?"

"It is not mine. I begged for your pity, and you denied me. This is the mercy of the Queen to you—the mercy of the woman you have wronged."

"Enough of that! What are the terms? Am I to be kept here waiting for ever?"

"Simply that Mademoiselle de Paradis is restored to the Queen unhurt, and fully pardoned, within twenty-four hours."

She bit her under lip till her white teeth left a vivid mark on it as I spoke, and then with an outbreak of wolfish fury:

"I will not! I will not!" And she stamped her foot. "She shall die—whatever happens—do you hear?"

"Perfectly! And in half an hour, I promise you, you will be arrested, and the story of your shame known to all. Do you think women like you have an empire that lasts for ever? You should take a lesson from the past, madame. Once the King's eyes are opened, and they will be in twelve hours, you will stand alone. But you have made your choice, and I will take your answer to the Queen."

With that I bowed, and made for the door. Ere I had gone half the length of the room, however, she called me back.

"Stay!"

I turned slowly, and faced her once more.

"Is it any use? You have answered me."

"No; I have not." Her voice was half strangled, and there were tears of anger and mortification in her

eyes. "No; I have not," she repeated; and then gasped out: "I will do what you wish; but I want those letters back."

"That rests with the Queen. She makes no terms with you, and in that you must throw yourself on her pity."

With a low cry she suddenly flung herself down on the cushions, biting at them in impotent fury with her strong white teeth and tearing at the embroidery with her fingers. It was the fury of despair. It was the senseless rage of an animal, and I stood and watched, feeling that a desperate game was won, and almost pitying her, murderess, and worse, though she was.

After a while she looked up at me, her face haggard, her eyes livid.

"Have you no pity?" she moaned. "Are you made of steel?"

"Come, madame! I await your answer, and time presses."

She gave me a deadly glance, and rose slowly, clasping and unclasping he hands convulsively. At last she said:

"Very well. You shall have the pardon."

"In that case, madame, I am to say that your papers will be returned to you."

"Enough!" And with another burst of anger: "And now go—begone!"

"A moment!" And stepping towards the gong I struck it lightly with the hammer. Almost on the stroke the door opened, and Créquy appeared, his eyes staring with astonishment as he glanced from the one to the other of us.

"Monsieur de Créquy," I said, "madame has received ill news, and it is necessary for her to see the King at once. Madame will start for Fontainebleau in an hour—that will suit you, madame?" And I turned to La Valentinois.

"Yes."

"You will kindly make the necessary arrangements at once, monsieur—and the Queen's guards will supply the escort. Monsieur de Lorgnac and I accompany madame."

And with that I left them, Créquy staring after me in open-mouthed amaze.

CHAPTER XXX

FONTAINEBLEAU

"Where are we? Will this road never end?"

The voice of La Valentinois cut sharply into the warm, moonlit night; and De Lorgnac, who was standing near the window of the coach, answered:

"We are at the end of the plain of La Brie, madame, and have stopped to change your horses and breathe ours."

From over his shoulder I caught a glimpse of a beautiful, sullen face, and La Valentinois sank back again amongst her cushions, where we left her to her thoughts—such thoughts they must have been!

It was the first time she had spoken since we left the Louvre, whilst all the bells of Paris were chiming vespers. She had uttered never a word of protest, even when her Syrian was prevented from accompanying her, with the meaning order: "By the Queen's command!" and through the hours, as the coach, drawn by four horses at a gallop, jolted and swung over the weary road, she lay back, still as a stone, her eyes closed as if she slept.

Now and again as I rode by her window I had glanced into the coach; but never was there any change in her position, and it was only when we halted at the post-house that her pent-up fury broke out into

an angry question, to relapse at once into an air of frozen indifference.

The escort had dismounted, and stood with their horses in two dark groups in the front and in the rear of the coach. There was hurry and stir in the post-house at the unexpected coming of the great Duchess; and De Lorgnac and I, having given our horses to a trooper to hold, paced slowly together to and fro, now and again exchanging a word.

Suddenly, almost in answer to the thoughts that moved me, he stopped, and putting a hand to my shoulder, said:

"Look you, Orrain! The game is not yet won. She has a last card."

"I feel that. It is what I think."

"If she plays on the King's madness for her she may win all, unless——" And he put down his hand, and hesitated.

"Unless what?"

"The gossip is true that the King bitterly regrets the infamous grant he made to her, and would give his right hand to escape from his word."

"Le Brusquet is certain of it. He was there when the grant was made, if you remember."

"In that case there is but one course open to her, and she will take it. She will, as if of her own accord, surrender the grant, after getting the pardon of Mademoiselle de Paradis. Thus, though balked at present, she will retain her hold on the King, and wait for another day."

"I care not what she does so long as mademoiselle is saved."

"The horses are ready, messieurs." It was Pierrebon, whom I had ordered to accompany me, who broke in upon our talk, and five minutes later we were once more upon our way, the still figure within the coach immovable and silent as ever.

All through the night we rode, and at last, when the moon sank and the darkness that precedes the dawn came, we clattered through the narrow streets of Bois-le-Roi, and entered the forest of Fontainebleau.

In a moment the clear, cloudless sky, in which a stray star or so yet lingered, as if awaiting the day, vanished from our view, and we plunged into an endless avenue of mighty trees, the overarching branches forming an arcade above us. As we swept into the shadow the lamps of the coach threw the gnarled trunks into fantastic shapes, that seemed to live and move. It was as if we raced between two rows of grisly phantoms, things of air, that vainly reached forth long, writhing arms to stay us, only to sink back and dissolve into the gloom as we sped past.

After a while we came upon more open ground, now and again passing the fires of a beater's camp, and then, on rounding a turn, we saw rising before us the vast irregular outlines of the Chateau. Ten minutes later the coach swung through the gates, and, white with foam and dust, the horses were pulled up before the Horseshoe Stair. It was not yet dawn; but lights were glittering everywhere, and the Chateau was already astir, for the King never spared himself, or others, at the chase. Indeed, that and a tourney were the only two things which ever moved his dull spirit to action. Our coming was a complete surprise; but the broad steps of the stairway were already crowded, and soon a murmuring, curious throng had gathered about the coach.

I myself opened the door, and as I offered La Valentinois my arm to assist her to alight I said in a low voice:

"We cannot give you much time, madame. It must be before the King starts."

Her eyes flashed defiantly, but she made no answer, and, declining my proffered aid, stepped out lightly. She stood for a moment on the lowest step of the stair, a tall, hooded figure, the lights of the torches playing on her, and all bowing respectfully; and then De Lorgnac called out in a loud voice:

"Madame would see his Majesty the King!"

Almost on his words a lean shadow came running down the steps towards us. By the lights of the torches flickering through the grey of the morning I saw it was Simon of Orrain himself. La Valentinois saw him too, and stood motionless until he came up to her. Simon's eyes blazed with a hundred unasked questions, but he merely said:

"His Majesty has just heard of your return, madame, and is overjoyed. It will be a great hunt to-day. Permit me!" And then he caught sight of me, and started back, his half-outstretched arm falling to his side, his lips curled back in a snarl.

"You keep madame waiting, Monsieur le Vidame," I said, "and her business is of vital import."

He was about to answer when La Valentinois placed her hand on his arm, and muttering something under his breath, Simon turned and led her up the stairway, all bowing as though she were the Queen. Whilst the two went up, they began to talk in low, hurried tones, and twice Simon looked back at me, the hate of a devil in his glance. Most of those present followed them; but there still remained many who crowded around us buzzing with questions; but we put them aside, saying we were weary, and needed rest.

As the red dawn came I found myself seated on a wooden bench near my horse's stable wondering, fearing, and hoping. The escort had been dismissed by De Lorgnac, with orders to return to Paris under M. de Tolendal, as soon as the horses were rested, and De Lorgnac himself had gone off somewhere. So two hours must have passed, and it seemed to me that the movement in the courtyards and in the Chateau grew less and less. Presently half a dozen huntsmen, leading their hounds, passed close to me, talking in loud and aggrieved tones.

"*Mille diables*!" exclaimed one. "To think it is all off!"

"Never have I known the like!" said another.

"What has happened, my friends?" I asked; and the first speaker replied:

"The hunt is put off, monsieur. Put off, after we had marked down the largest and fiercest boar in France! As high as that!" And he held his palm out almost on a level with his breast.

"Ay; and as grey as my beard," put in another, a little, shrivelled old man. "He has the devil on his side, that boar. Five times has he escaped. Three of my best hounds has he slain. For a whole week have I tracked him through the Dormoir, and now that we have him safe in his lair in the Gorges d'Apremont—the King does not hunt! He has the devil on his side, I say!"

"Way! Way for Monsieur le Vidame's horse!" called out a strident voice, and a groom came up, leading a big white horse ready saddled. The huntsmen moved aside, and the groom led the horse towards the Chateau; but ere he had gone ten steps Simon himself appeared hastening towards him.

Simon was still in his hunting suit of close-fitting dark green, a short cloak thrown over his shoulder, and long boots that reached to his thighs. His sword was slung scabbardless to his side, and he wore a baret on his head, with a single cock's feather in it, underneath which his pale face looked like that of a corpse.

As he came forward hastily towards his horse, his shoulders bent, and his wolf's eyes fixed before him, there was that in his air which was ominous of danger, and, springing to my feet, I drew my sword and stepped towards him. He saw me too, and came up like a truculent dog. We both reached the horse almost at the same time, and I fully expected him to draw on me at once; but stopping, he said:

"You seem to forget, brother, that the edict applies to Fontainebleau as well as the Louvre."

"Not in the least; but one is allowed to kill vermin in the forest."

He glanced at me in speechless, blue-lipped rage. Twice his hand sought the hilt of his sword, and twice he drew it back. But that I knew him utterly fearless I might have thought his heart had failed him as he stood before me, the veins swollen on his forehead, and his fingers twitching convulsively. At last he found voice, and, laughing harshly, said:

"Not now; give me twenty-four hours, brother, and then as you wish, or, rather, whether you wish or not."

"So be it," I answered, and he laughed again, bitter, mirthless laughter, and reached out for the reins of his horse; but ere he mounted he turned once more on me, another gust of anger shaking his frame.

"Look you! You think you have beaten me because you have beaten that black-eyed strumpet who bewitches the King. I tell you I hold her in the hollow of my hand, and she cannot buy from me what she has bought from you. As for you, you have stood in my way long enough; never again shall it be. Fool! think you I cannot read your soul? Think you I will let you win the prize I should have won? I promise you that, in these twenty-four hours, which will make you long for death—I, Simon of Orrain, swear it!"

With this he swung round, and, springing into the saddle, went off at a gallop, leaving me staring after him, wondering what devilry lay behind his words. I watched him till he rounded the elbow of the wood that lay without the gates, and then, sheathing my sword, went slowly towards the Horseshoe Stair.

Under other circumstances I should have looked with wonder and admiration on the magnificent pile that the splendour of the late King had erected on the old-time fortress of Louis VII, but, as it was, I paced up and down the Cour du Cheval Blanc, gazing at the wide stairway and the silent walls, every minute that passed seeming an hour to me in my impatience. At last I saw a figure at the head of the Horseshoe. It was De Lorgnac, and he beckoned to me. In a moment I was by his side.

"Have you heard anything?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"She has had three hours." And I pointed to the sun.

"You must give her time. It will be sufficient if we hear by noon."

Then I told him of Simon and his strange departure, and whilst we spoke together Carnavalet, one of the chamberlains, appeared, and walked leisurely up to us.

"Messieurs," he said, "you are wanted. Have the goodness to follow me."

The Galerie de Cerfs, into which Carnavalet took us, was all that remained in the modern Chateau of the old hunting-lodge and fortress of the Kings of France, and, despite the trophies of the chase and tapestries that hung to its walls, it still retained the grim and forbidding aspect of the past.

It was used as an ante-room, not only to the King's apartments but to the council chamber, and was crowded when we entered. Placing us near a pillar Carnavalet bade us wait until he returned, and threading his way through the press passed through a door at the extreme end of the gallery that led to the private apartments of the King.

Many and curious were the glances cast at us as we stood there, dust-begrimed and travel-stained; and a number of those whom we had put off in the early morning swarmed round us again with their endless questions, which we were hard pressed to parry.

Almost beside us was another door, opening into the council chamber, and interest seemed to be divided between us and what was passing there. It was clear that something of importance was in the air, for secretaries came out and went in with quick, rapid steps, and bundles of documents under their arms, and every now and again a messenger would hurry forth, and we could hear the clattering of his horse's hoofs as he galloped away.

De Lorges, the captain of the Archer Guard, joined us just as one of the express riders hurried past.

"I wager a hundred pistoles against a flask of Joué that means an end of the Spanish peace," he said, with a laugh, and rubbing his hands together. "I am sick of these rusting times. They say that Coligny has attacked Douai already. Ah! here he comes!"

He turned as he spoke towards the entrance of the gallery, and at once the subdued hum of voices stilled to silence, and the crowd of gaily clad courtiers parted, making way with low bows for someone who had just entered. For a second I thought it was the King himself; but a look showed me not the King but the stern figure of the Constable of France.

Montmorenci walked up the gallery, glancing to the right and left of him from under his bushy white brows, now and then returning a salutation. He was in complete mail, all except his helmet, which was borne by a page behind him, and his sinister appearance accorded well with his terrible fame. He was of middle height, with broad and prominent shoulders, and hair as white as snow. His face, tanned to a dark brown by constant exposure, was stern, and yet sad, with fierce, bloodshot eyes set far back in his head, and the grimness of his countenance was enhanced by the two projecting teeth which stuck out from his lower jaw like a boar's tusks.

He came forward slowly, bearing himself with princely dignity, and when he got near to us he stopped, and addressing Lorgnac, whom he knew, inquired:

"From Douai?"

"No, monseigneur; from Paris."

"I must ask the Queen to spare me her hard riders," replied Montmorenci, with a grim smile, as he

pointed at our dust-soiled apparel, and passed on into the council room.

"It is war, as sure as I stand here," exclaimed De Lorges; and at once a hubbub of voices arose, in the midst of which Carnavalet appeared, and beckoned to us. It took us a little time to reach him, but on our doing so he passed us through the door at once, entering with us, and closing it after him. Then pointing to the curtains before him, he said:

"The King awaits you there, messieurs. Enter!"

So tremendous was the issue for me that now that the crisis had come I felt for the moment almost unable to move. But De Lorgnac gripped me by the arm.

"Come," he said; "we either win or lose all in the next five minutes.
Come!"

With this he set aside the curtains, and we passed through.

There were but three persons in the room we entered. The King was standing, a hand resting on the back of the chair in which La Valentinois sat, as radiantly lovely as though all the fatigues of the night had never been. A little behind them was Bertrandi, the keeper of the seals, a lean, ascetic figure, holding a paper in his hands, and eyeing us with a vulpine curiosity. Somewhat to my surprise the King received us graciously, saying:

"*Eh bien*, messieurs, you have served madame here well, and in doing so have served me. Have they not, Diane?" And he began toying with the black curls of her hair. La Valentinois looked up at him, a world of tenderness in her glance, but made no reply, and we remained silent, struck dumb by the infinite resource of her audacity. Evil as she was it was impossible not to admire her courage; and, as De Lorgnac had rightly foreseen, she had played a great game, but even we were far from guessing the extent to which her duplicity would carry her.

"Messieurs," the King went on, "madame has joined her entreaty to that of the Queen for the life of Mademoiselle de Paradis, and very willingly and from my heart have I signed this pardon." With this he took the paper Bertrandi held and placed it in Diane's hands.

"I give this to you, *mignonne*," he said, "for from you comes the mercy of France. Give it to these gentlemen to bear to the Queen; and for the present I must leave you for an hour, for the council awaits me. Come, Bertrandi." With these bald words, delivered in a stilted fashion, his voice only warming as he bade *au revoir* to La Valentinois, the King left us, followed by Bertrandi.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE PEARS OF ORRAIN

As the curtains fell behind the King all the soft lights left La Valentinois' eyes, and they shone like blue-black steel. She glanced at us, an odd triumph in her look. So intensely an actress was she that it almost seemed, and perhaps it was so, that she was looking at us for some sign, some token of admiration at the skill with which she had played her game, but both De Lorgnac and myself remained impassive as stone.

"Here," she said at last, "here is my part of the bargain." And, handing me the paper, she continued: "I presume it is correct?" Eagerly I ran my eyes over it, De Lorgnac bending over my shoulder and reading with me. It was correct in every particular, signed by the King, and sealed by Bertrandi. As I folded the pardon up, with an inward prayer of thanks to God, La Valentinois asked again:

"It is correct, is it not?"

"Perfectly, madame."

"Now for your, or rather the Queen's share, of this business. Give me my letters!"

I looked her straight in the face. "Pardon me, madame, Mademoiselle de
Paradis is not yet free——"

"What do you mean? You quibble with words, monsieur." Her lips were trembling, and her hands

clenched; but, bowing coldly, I said:

"No, madame, I do not quibble with words. Your letters are in Paris, and will be given to you only when Mademoiselle de Paradis is placed, unharmed and free, in her Majesty's hands. That is the bargain, as you call it, and it will be kept to the letter." With this I placed the precious document in my breast pocket, and, making a sign to De Lorgnac, turned to go; but with a cry La Valentinois sprang to her feet.

"You lie!" she said shrilly; "you lie! Give me my letters, or——" And words failed her for once as she stood there, with such fear and baffled hate in her look as I have never seen in human eyes.

"No, madame," I said, "I do not lie, and threats are useless. If this pardon is recalled," and I touched my breast pocket, "the consequences rest with you—and you know what they will be."

"There is no need for alarm," put in De Lorgnac. "I pledge my word to deliver you the letters as soon as the conditions are complete."

She glanced from the one to the other of us, and set her white teeth.

"To be beaten!" she gasped rather than spoke. "To be beaten!—and by that Italian woman!"

"Look you, madame!" I said sternly, for doubts were crowding thick and fast upon me. "If you have played false—if there is any treachery or trickery here—it is ruin to you, and no power in France can save you."

She gave me a single, livid glance, and then her courage broke, and burying her face in her hands she stood shaking like an aspen.

De Lorgnac and I looked at each other, the same thought with us, and then on a sudden the wretched woman made a step forward and clutched me by the arm, her face like death, her breath coming thick and fast.

"It is not my fault," she gasped, "but he—the Vidame. Messieurs, if Mademoiselle de Paradis is to be saved, if I am to be saved, you must be in Paris ere the sun sets."

"You mean?" I said hoarsely.

"I mean that mademoiselle will die if the Vidame reaches Paris, and I shall be lost!" And with this she flung herself back in her chair, and began rocking herself backwards and forwards like a thing distraught, muttering to herself: "I shall be lost! I shall be lost!"

Her devilish cunning had overreached itself, and she sat there a pitiable object, with the ruin she had herself caused around her. I gave her one look, and turned to De Lorgnac.

"There is just time. We may just do it. Come!"

And leaving the miserable woman with her sin we hurried from the room.

I will not stop to tell, indeed I never knew, how we pushed through the crowds in the waiting-rooms and gained the outer courts; but ten minutes later De Lorgnac and I, with Pierrebon at our heels, were galloping on the Paris road, hoping almost against hope, for Simon had nearly two hours' start of us, and our horses had been ridden far and fast. Nevertheless, the stout heart of Lizette never flinched, and Cartouche, De Lorgnac's great grey, raced bravely by her side. We rode in silence, exchanging no speech, though now and again we uttered a word of encouragement to our horses. Crossing the bridge of Melun Pierrebon's nag failed him, and we lost him for the time. At the little village of Cesson we drew rein to breathe our horses, and here we had news of Simon. He had passed about an hour ago, riding easily in the direction of Lieusaint, and keeping to the high road. At last we were off once more, and leaving the plain of La Brie entered the hilly country that sloped downwards to the valley of the Yères, and on pulling up for a moment on the crest of a hill that lay to the northwest of Lieusaint we got a glimpse of Simon. It was De Lorgnac who saw him first.

"There!" he said, pointing before him into the valley. And craning forward I looked too, and saw far in the distance a white speck—a mere speck—moving rapidly on the cross road to Montgeron, and then we lost him behind a line of trees.

"He is cutting off the angle!" I exclaimed. "Quick!" And I put Lizette down the slope; but De Lorgnac called out after me: "He is lost if he does that—he will meet the marsh of Brunoy, and must come back—keep to the road!"

And, ding, dong, we galloped on the white track, white with dust ourselves, our gallant horses kept

up by their own matchless courage, and by that alone.

"He must turn back from the marsh, and we get him at Villaneuve," shouted De Lorgnac to me as we hammered along, pointing as he spoke to the wooded height that rose to our front above the willow-fringed Yères. But he little knew Simon of Orrain. I made no reply; and leaning forward in the saddle stroked the foam-wet neck that reached out before me, and felt Lizette answer to my touch, as though she knew that life and death lay in her speed.

As we raced on I watched the plain to our left, where Simon had vanished, with hot eyes that reached everywhere—eyes that missed nothing. But he was not to be seen, and hope began to spring up within me that we had beaten him. I shook up the reins, and urged Lizette on faster; but the brave heart was doing her best.

It was impossible that this could last, and as we galloped into Montgeron I felt Lizette falter under me, and an oath broke from De Lorgnac, for Cartouche had lost a shoe.

"We must get fresh horses here at any cost," I said as we pulled up at the door of a small auberge, the only inn the village possessed; but the wealth of Croesus would have been useless here, for other horses were not procurable. And so, whilst Cartouche was being shod, we off-saddled, giving the horses a drink of milk, and getting them rubbed down hastily. Whilst this was going on we stood, moody and dejected, surrounded by a group of yokels, the keeper of the auberge fussing near us. After a time, more to ease my impatience than aught else, I inquired if anyone had seen a man, mounted on a white horse, pass this way, and offered five crowns for the information. The landlord shook his head ruefully, for five crowns were five crowns; but a rough-looking fellow, apparently a fowler, stepped out of the group around us and claimed the reward.

"Ay," he said; "I have seen and spoken with him. He was dressed in hunting green, and crossed the marsh a half-hour ago."

"But there is no way!"

"So he thought too; and it cost him five crowns to find it, for I showed it to him. He is beyond Villaneuve now; but his horse is worn, and, monsieur," he went on with a grin, "I will take those five crowns from you. St. Siege! But this is the red day of my life!"

I paid him in silence, and Cartouche being reshod by this we pressed forward once more; but hope had almost gone from me, and De Lorgnac's set face was more expressive than any words. It was well on in the afternoon when we saw the houses of Charenton, and but a league and a half before us lay Paris, silhouetted in purple and grey against the sky. We were trotting round the elbow of the wood that fringed the banks of the Maren when we came suddenly on our man. He was seated on the wall of the bridge, holding the reins of his horse in his hands; and he saw us too, for we were scarce a hundred paces off. He was away like a flash, looking but once behind him as he drove his spurs home, and raced for Paris.

De Lorgnac gave a great cry, and neck and neck we followed him. If ever man knew his peril, Simon did. Against one he would have fought like a wolf; but against two the odds were hopeless, and with the rage of a wolf in his heart he fled, taking to the country away from the road in the hope of shaking us off.

As for me, I felt the hot blood throbbing in my temples, and all seemed dark around me, except there where that bowed figure on the white horse raced in front, carrying death in his hands, death for her who was to me more than life. Lizette seemed to know it too, and stretched beneath me like a greyhound; but I heard the sobbing breath that told me of a beaten horse. Foot by foot De Lorgnac drew from me, the great grey going like a stag; but still Simon held the front, and we gained not a yard on him. Already we could see the Porte St. Michel lying open before us; and now Simon looked back once more, and pointed at the gate, laughing in triumph as he did so. It was then that my gallant Lizette made a supreme effort. It seemed as if in two strides she had caught up the grey and passed him; only to falter as she did so; then there was a long stagger, and down she came.

By God's providence I was able to regain my feet almost as I fell. De Lorgnac had pulled up beside me; but pointing to Simon, who had now passed the gate, I called out: "Follow him; do not lose sight of him!"

With a nod he galloped on, and casting one look to the side of the road where all that remained of my brave Lizette lay, I hurried after the two.

The gates were not two hundred paces from me; and, sword in hand, as I ran towards them someone

came trotting up to me. I thought he was riding at me, and had all but slashed his mount across the face, when he pulled up, and I saw it was Le Brusquet on his mule.

"Hold!" he cried; "it is I. He cannot escape. De Lorgnac is on his heels, and I have set the mob after him with a hue and cry." With this he jumped from his mule and hastened on by my side, the mule trotting after us.

I made no answer, said nothing, until we reached the gates, where an excited crowd had collected, and then I asked: "Which way?"

"Do you not hear them shouting?" And Le Brusquet pointed to a crowd running up the Rue de la Harpe. "Come!" And side by side we ran on. Panting as he ran by me, Le Brusquet gasped out: "Mademoiselle is confined in De Mouchy's house. It is there the Vidame must go for safety with this mob at his heels. Hark! Hear them!"

And shrill and high we heard the cries, "Assassin! Assassin! *Tue*! *Tue*!"

Le Brusquet chuckled. "It was a happy thought to set the mob on him, and a happier thought still to pass my day at the gate." Still I made no answer, but ran on with my teeth set. The mob swung round by the Mathurins, and, forcing my way round the corner of the road, I saw they were led by a madman, shouting, yelling, and muttering fearful imprecations.

Using all my strength I headed the mob at last, only to find the madman by my side. He glared at me for an instant, and then screamed out:

"You too! You too, friend! Then we shall both see him die." And bursting into a horrid laugh he clawed at me with his hands. I thrust him back, and it was only in doing so that the light of a sudden recognition came to me. The miserable, frenzied being was none other than De Ganache. God help him!

With another look of pity and horror I ran on; but fast as I went he kept by me, and side by side we two led the crowd that howled after us in pitiless rage.

We could see nothing of either Simon or De Lorgnac; but we did not want for guides. A hundred fingers pointed out their course at every street corner, and at last a white horse, riderless, and the reins trailing loosely, came galloping out of a by-street; and a roar went up:

"He is down! he is down! In the Passage of Pity!"

With a yell the madman flashed past me, and hot foot on his heels we crowded into the narrow street; but, save for a big grey horse standing, with hanging head and heaving flanks, near the dark archway at the head of the passage, it was empty. A howl of disappointment rose behind me, and the mob halted and swayed irresolutely; but I felt that the end was come, and ran on. Followed by Le Brusquet I passed the archway, and there in the dark, vaulted passage, with his back to the door of De Mouchy's house, stood Simon of Orrain, at bay at last! De Lorgnac had been too quick for him, and had forced him to fight at the very entrance of his lair. Covered with the dust of his reckless ride, his gay hunting dress torn and soiled, bareheaded, and with the blood streaming from a wound in his face, where De Lorgnac had touched him, Simon stood, despair and hate in his look. Yet he fought fiercely for his life; but he had met his equal with the sword, and, doing his worst, could but hold on the defence and no more. He saw us as we came. He saw too the hundred faces of the mob—the mob he had once himself led to a deed of shame—glaring, shouting, and yelling at him through the open archway, though not one dared to pass the entrance. Escape was hopeless, and his pale face grew paler still, as with an oath he wiped the blood from his lips with the back of his hand, and screamed out to De Lorgnac:

"Stand aside, man! I have no quarrel with you! Stand back, or——" But the thrust he made was parried with a wrist as sure as his own, and it was only his own rare skill of fence that saved him from the riposte.

After all, he was blood of my blood, and it was not my hand that should slay him. The thought came to me sudden and insistent, as I put my blade beside that of De Lorgnac, and covering him with my point, saw the grey despair in his eyes.

"Simon," I called out, "put down your sword. I promise your life!"

He spat at me in his fury, the fury of a beast, and I was a lost man if
De Lorgnac had not stayed his hand.

"God!" he burst out, "if there were only you!"

At my look—a glance that almost cost me my life—De Lorgnac stepped back, lowering his point, and

our swords crossed. Again parrying a thrust, I once more offered Simon his life, only to meet with the same refusal. There was no help for it! A life stood on the issue, to which his was nothing to me, and setting my teeth I made at him. The fury of my attack almost lost me the game, and I heard Le Brusquet's low warning:

"Have a care. Remember!"

Suddenly Simon, who had gained a slight advantage, called out: "I accept. I have lost." And he half raised his blade. I gave back, lowering my point as I did so, and at that moment the door opened, and with a laugh Simon sprang back, and vanished from our sight.

So quick, so instant was his retreat, that for a second I hardly realised it. But someone else had. All unnoticed by us De Ganache had been crouching in the shadow of the vaulted passage watching the struggle and gibbering to himself—the only one of the mob who had dared to venture so far. Perhaps he had been waiting for his chance against the man who had destroyed his life, and had chosen the very moment of Simon's flight for his revenge. Who knows? But as Simon slipped back he sprang forward, something shining in his hand, and flung himself desperately against the door ere it could be closed. The moment's delay he caused was our chance, and rushing forward we too added our weight to that of the maniac.

In an instant the door gave way, and we dashed in, the madman first, striking to the right and left of him with a poniard. It is difficult, almost impossible, to describe what followed. All that I know is that I stumbled over someone who had fallen, and as I rose to my feet I caught a glimpse of De Mouchy flying up the stair, Le Brusquet at his heels, and realised at the same instant that Simon was on me, death in his eyes.

Nothing could have saved me then, but that a stronger hand than that of man was stretched forth to claim its own vengeance. As Simon's arm was lifted the figure over which I had fallen raised itself to its knees and, clasping the Vidame round the waist, buried a knife in his side.

With a fearful cry Simon shortened his sword and stabbed back in his turn; but De Ganache, for it was he, uttered no sound, and with a last effort, rising to his feet, struck Simon once more, this time to the heart. And they both fell sideways, the madman's hand still clenching the haft of the poniard in his death-grip.

It was over in a hand-turn, and the two who had died so terribly together had taken their quarrel with them to the last judgment seat. Simon's face I could not see; but as I bent over the two I saw in the glazing eyes of De Ganache the light of an unutterable hate—a hate that, mayhap, was carried beyond the grave.

"Orrain! Orrain!"

Twice the cry rang out—Le Brusquet's voice—and pushing my way past the mob that had already swarmed in and begun to sack and pillage I ran up the stair. At the head stood Le Brusquet, and huddled in a corner near a door was De Mouchy, with a white, fear-stricken face and chattering teeth, and De Lorgnac's sword at his heart.

Numbers had followed me, and at the sight of De Mouchy a roar went forth that was taken up by those below.

"Give us the judge! Give us De Mouchy!"

Let it be remembered, that amongst those who cried for him to be thrown to them were many who had suffered, or seen their dearest suffer, hideous torture at his hands. Revenge, and such revenge as this, was never dreamed of, never hoped for by them, and now that chance had placed it within their reach they were almost mad for it. Shouting, struggling, and raging they crowded the stair. A moment more, and De Mouchy was lost; but it was then that Le Brusquet stayed them with a jest, a grim jest that tickled their fancy, and arrested their outstretched hands for a yet sweeter vengeance.

"A moment, my children!" he called out, barring the way at the head of the stair; "one moment! We have a little business with monsieur here, and after that you can make this house another Chambre Ardente if you will."

They laughed and cheered him in their fickle mood, and as De Mouchy heard too some choking words escaped from his blue lips, and he made a forward movement, but at the sight of me he shrank back again, terror and despair on his face, and, grovelling on the floor, wept for his life.

This fiend, who had never shown mercy, now that his own time was come, pleaded abjectly, pleaded

with tears and miserable cries for the life he had forfeited ten times over, and each frenzied appeal he made was answered with mocking laughter by those who, crowded on the stair, were waiting with patience, deadly patience, for the time when he would be their very own.

I raised him to his feet, and in a few quick words asked him for mademoiselle. He could not speak, but pointed to the door at his side. It was closed, not locked, and, pushing it open, I dragged him through after me. A cry of anger rose from those on the stair, who feared their prey would escape, and, despite Le Brusquet's appeals, they were no longer to be restrained. With a rush they bore back both Le Brusquet and De Lorgnac, but keeping themselves between me and the foremost of those who followed us, with alternate threats and appeals, my brave friends enabled me to make headway. Down we went, along a narrow passage, at one end of which was a door.

"There!" gasped De Mouchy. "Quick!"

Twice I put my shoulder to it, but in vain; and De Mouchy shrieked with terror, for the mob was scarce ten feet from us, filling the passage. But still De Lorgnac and Le Brusquet held them back at the sword's point, and the way was so narrow that not more than three could stand abreast therein.

"Stand back!" I heard Le Brusquet cry; "we are freeing a prisoner!"

"Give us De Mouchy!" they howled, and then the foremost three made a dash forward. There was a smothered cry, and the leader, an evil-looking villain, lurched forward on to his face. Back they fell at this, for they were unarmed, and we got a moment's respite.

Again and again I put myself at the door, and at last it crashed open. As I rushed in I saw a kneeling figure before me. One glance, and I called out:

"Diane! It is I—Orrain!"

As she rose to her feet with a cry I put my arms around her to support her, and then the brave heart gave way, and she began to sob on my shoulder. So for a space we stood, and even the savage mob stayed their course, and halted, peering at us across the two bright swords that still held the passage.

It was now that De Mouchy made a last bid for life. In the momentary respite he had from pursuit, as the mob halted, he slunk to the farthest end of the room, and stood there, looking at us, with his back to the wainscoting, his hands resting against it, and moving nervously, as though he searched for something. Already those at the far end of the passage were getting impatient, and angry cries began once more to arise. As I put my arm round Diane to help her away we heard a click. A door concealed in the wainscoting flew open, disclosing a dark passage, into which De Mouchy dived, and vanished in a flash. But his enemies were not to be denied; and this time no effort of De Lorgnac or Le Brusquet could stay them. In his flight, whether overcome by fear, or whether it were otherwise impossible, I cannot say, but De Mouchy neglected to lock the secret door behind him. The mob, blood mad, and now utterly out of hand, filled the room, and rushed after him. For a space we ourselves were hemmed in, so that it was impossible to move, and it was whilst we stood thus that there came a frightful shriek of agony from the dark passage, and then the distant sound of struggling, and again a shriek. God, and they who were there, alone knew what happened; but as the mob swept through the room and into the dark opening that was before them the way became clear, and we passed into the street.

Cartouche was still there, standing where De Lorgnac had left him. At a word from De Lorgnac I lifted mademoiselle into the saddle—though wearied the great grey was well able to bear so light a burden—and holding her there we made our way with all the speed we could out of the Passage of Pity, Le Brusquet holding the horse.

When we reached the river face Le Brusquet turned back and pointed to the sky. There were dark clouds of smoke rolling over the Mathurins.

"*Eh bien*," he said, "there is the expiation of Dom Antoine de Mouchy!"

A half-hour later we were in the Louvre, and I had surrendered my charge to the Queen.

* * * * * *

About a month after the events I have just described I received the Queen's commands to attend her at St. Germain-en-Laye, and that very evening rode through the gates of the Vieux Chateau.

From the time that I had placed mademoiselle in safety in Catherine's hands, with the aid of the two best friends man ever had, I had not seen her. She had been ill, but was now recovered, and when I received the Queen's message, I hoped that, perhaps, Fortune would give me a chance to say farewell to Diane ere I departed for Italy to join Montluc.

The Spanish war had broken out, and De Lorgnac was in the field at Marienbourg. Le Brusquet had gone, none knew whither—perchance to see the pears of Besmé—and as for me, I felt it was time to be up and stirring. Things had changed with me, for I was now the Vidame d'Orrain, and I might hope and dream again. Moved by these thoughts I rode into the palace gates, followed by Pierrebon, and Monsieur de Tolendal, who was in waiting, at once took me to the Queen.

I found Catherine surrounded by her ladies, but though my eyes searched here, there, and everywhere I could not see the face I longed to see. The Queen engaged me for a few moments in desultory talk, and then at a sign from her we were left alone together.

"Monsieur le Vidame," she said, "is it true that you leave for Italy in a few days?"

I bowed in silence.

"And you are resolved?"

"Madame!"

"In that case, perhaps, it is needless for me to say what I intended; but, as a matter of fact, I have a government I would willingly surrender, and thought of offering it to you."

"Madame!" I began; but she cut in upon my words.

"Take a moment to consider, monsieur! Go into the next room, through that curtain there, and think over it for five minutes. Then come back and tell me. Go!"

For a second I stared at her, and then did as I was bidden. As I stepped in a figure rose from a seat near the window, and I heard Diane's voice:

"Orrain, you have come to see me at last!"

And then what followed concerns not anyone. I know not how long we were there, talking, planning, and dreaming; but suddenly the curtains lifted, and Catherine stood before us.

"Monsieur d'Orrain," she said, "I await my answer."

And then she burst out laughing.

There is but a word more to add, and my story ends. We were married the following week, for that was the Queen's wish, and then my wife and I said farewell to Paris and the Court for ever. As we rode one evening on our way to Orrain, round the elbow of the pine-clad hill of St. Hugo, and the towers of the Chateau came in sight, I told my wife of my dream, and then we were aware of a figure galloping up the leaf-strewn road towards us. It was Le Brusquet on his mule.

"*Eh bien*!" he said as he kissed my wife's hand. "And I am the first to welcome you home, after all! Orrain, *mon ami*, I have seen your pears. They are finer than mine—I swear it!"

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