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THE JUSTICE OF THE KING

by

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"The King's Scapegoat," "Room Five,"

"The Houses," "Shoes of Gold," Etc.

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THE JUSTICE OF THE KING

CHAPTER I

THE DESPATCH

All morning the King had been restless, unappeasable, captious, with little relapses unto the immobility of deep thought, and those who knew him best were probing deeply both their conscience and their conduct. Had he sat aloof, quiet in the sunshine, his dogs sleeping at his feet, his eyes half closed, his hands, waxen, almost transparent, and bird's claws for thinness, spread out to the heat, those about him would have gone their rounds with a light heart. At such times his schemes were thoughts afar off, dreams of some new, subtle stroke of policy, and none within touch had cause to fear.

But this May day he was restless, unsettled, his mind so full of an active purpose shortly to be fulfilled that he could not keep his tired body quiet for long, but every few minutes shifted his position or his place. If he sat in his great chair, padded with down to ease his weakness and the aching of his bones, his fingers were constantly plucking at his laces, or playing with the tags which fastened the fur-lined scarlet cloak he wore for a double purpose, to comfort the coldness of his meagre body, and that the death-like pallor of his face might be touched by its gay brightness to a reflected, fictitious glow of health. But to remain seated for any length of time jarred with his mood. Pushing himself to his feet he would walk the length of the gallery and back again, leaning heavily upon his stick, only to sink once more into his chair and fumble anew with shaking hands at whatever loose end or edge lay nearest.

So it had been all morning, but the restlessness had redoubled within the last half-hour. It was then that a post had reached Valmy, no man knew from whence, nor had the messenger been asked any questions. The superscription on the despatch was a warning against the vice of curiosity. It was in the King's familiar handwriting, bold and angular, and ran, "To His Majesty the King of France, At his Château of Valmy, These in great haste." A "Louis" in large letters was sprawled across the lower corner of the cover.

But though none asked questions it was noted that the horse was fresher than the man, and that whereas the one was streaming in a lather of sweat which had neither set nor dried, the other was splashed, caked, and powdered with mud and dust to the eyebrows: therefore the wise in such matters deduced that short relays had been provided, but that the rider had only halted long enough to climb from saddle to saddle. In silence he handed his letter to the Captain of the Guard, together with the King's signet, and in silence he rode away; but whereas he came at a gallop he rode away at a slow walk: therefore the wise further deduced that his task was ended.

With the King in residence not even the Captain of the Guard could move freely through Valmy, but the signet answered all challenges. Every door, every stair-head was double-sentried, but except for these silent figures the rooms and passages were alike empty. Loitering for gossip was not encouraged at Valmy, and least of all in the block which held the King's lodgings. Only in the outer gallery, where the King took the air with the pointed windows open to the south for warmth, was there any suggestion of a court. Here, at the entrance, and remote from the King alone at the further end, Saint-Pierre and Leslie were in attendance. Pausing to show the ring for the last time Lessaix unbuckled his sword, handed it in silence to Saint-Pierre, and passed on. In Valmy suspicion never slept, never opened its heart in faith to loyalty, and not even the Captain of the Guard might approach the King armed.

While he was still some yards distant Louis, gnawing his under lip as he watched him, suddenly flung out one hand, the palm outward, the fingers spread, and Lessaix halted.

"Well?" He spoke curtly, harshly, as a man speaks whose temper is worn to breaking-point.

"A despatch, sire."

"From whom?"

"There is nothing to show——"

"From whom?"

"I do not know, sire."

"Have you no tongue to ask?"

"I asked nothing, sire."

"Um; hold it up." Leaning forward Louis bridged his dim eyes with his hand, and under the shadow Lessaix saw the thin mouth open and shut convulsively; but when the hand was lowered the King's face was expressionless. "What else?"

"Your Majesty's signet."

"Let me see! Let me see! Um; that will do. Put them on the table and go. Where is the messenger?"

"He left at once."

"Um; were the roads bad from Paris?"

"He did not say, sire; he never opened his lips."

"Silent, was he? Then there is one wise man in France. Thank you, Captain Lessaix."

With a salute Lessaix retired, but as he buckled on his sword again Saint-Pierre whispered, "Whence?"

"I don't know," replied Lessaix, also under his breath, "but not from Paris!"

Left alone Louis sat back in his chair, his thin lips mumbling nervously at his nails, his eyes fixed on his own handwriting: the ring, a passport to life or death, he had at once slipped upon his finger. Every moment he knew he was watched, every action weighed, and he was a little uncertain how far a judicious self-betrayal would further his purpose. His handwriting would tell them nothing but that he knew the writer of the letter, whence it came, and that it was important. To heighten the importance but conceal the cause seemed wise. Of course presently he must take some one into his confidence, and from the depth of his soul he regretted the necessity.

That was the curse of kingship—the brain which planned, reconciling discordant elements, must rely for execution on hands it could not always control. Yes, that was the vice of government, and the reason why so many well-devised, smoothly-launched schemes utterly miscarried. If the brain could only be the hands also! If the hands could only reach out from where the brain pondered and foresaw! But they could not, and so he must trust Commines. Trust Commines! A little gust of anger at his impotence shook him and he shivered, dashing his hands upon the table; it was never safe to trust any one—never! But he was helpless, there was no escape, and in turn Commines must trust one other: trust him with execution, that is, with blind performance, not with knowledge. Beyond Commines he would trust no man with knowledge, at least not as yet, nor Commines more than he must. Later it might be policy to let it be known publicly the great danger which had threatened him, and France through him, but not till all was over!

Till all was over! Again Louis shivered a little, but not this time with anger. The phrase was a euphemism for death, and he hated the word even when wrapped up in a euphemism and applied to another. Death was death, disguise it in what phrase one might; a horror, a terror, another vice of kings worse than the first. It said in plain words, "You can sow, but you may never reap; you can begin, but you may never finish. Some one else will reap: some one else will finish." Some one else! The thought was intolerable. He hated, he loathed the some one else as he hated and loathed death. With a sweep of his arm, as if he thrust some bodily presence from him, Louis leaned forward and caught up the despatch. Let him make an end to brooding, here was work to be done.

Having closely examined the seals securing the back to make certain they were intact, he ripped apart the threads which bound it round and round passing through the seals, and drew out the enclosure. It was a single sheet of stiff paper. This he unfolded, and spreading it flat upon the table bent over it eagerly. But before he could have read three lines he sank back in his chair with a cry, and so fierce was his face that Saint-Pierre and Leslie, at the end of the gallery, instinctively drew apart, each suspicious of the other. The King's wrath was like lightning, swift to fall, and where it fell there was the danger of sudden destruction to those near.

So he sat for a full minute, his brows drawn, his thin lips narrowed to a line, his head sunk between his shoulders, then with a sigh audible to the length of the gallery he again bent above the paper, resting his weight on both arms, as if utterly weary both in body and spirit.

This time the pause was while he might have read the page slowly twice over, weighing its sense word by word, and when at length he raised his head all passion had gone from him; he was a sorrowful old man, weary and worn and grey.

"Commines!" he said harshly, "send me Commines," and sat back, the paper crumpled lengthwise in his hand.

But he did not sit for long. Rising, he paced up the gallery, his head bent, his iron-shod stick striking the flags with a clang as he leaned upon it at every second step, the crumpled paper still caught in his hand. At the door he paused, looking up sideways.

"Commines? Where is Commines? Head of God! is there no one to bring me Commines?"

"We have sent for him, sire."

"Sent for him? Why is he not here when I need him? I am the worse-served king in Christendom. No one takes thought, no one cares, no one—— Who is on guard? Leslie? Ah! Leslie cares, with Leslie I am safe: yes, yes, with Leslie I am safe," and once more he turned away, the iron ringing from the pavement as before. Suspicion breeds suspicion, and it would never do to vex Leslie's blunt loyalty with any seeming distrust. Besides, it was true, he could trust Leslie. It was not the same trust as he had in Commines; Leslie would watch over him, would guard him at all costs, but Commines would obey and ask no questions.

Three times he had walked the length of the gallery, always with growing impatience, and three times turned before he heard the sound of whispering at the door, and the ring of rapid feet followed him. But he gave no sign, and went on his way as if he had heard nothing. He recognized the footfall, but preferred that Commines should reach him as remotely from the door as possible.

"Sire!"

"Ah!" Louis turned with a start. "You have come at last! At last! There was a time I was served better. But let that pass. Philip, I have had letters."

"Yes, sire, I know: Lessaix told me."

"You know, and Lessaix told you! You watch me—spy on me, do you?"

"Sire, it is my business to know everything which touches——"

"Yes! and what more do you know? Where did the post come from, you, whose business it is to know everything?"

"Lessaix thought from Paris."

"From Paris," and Louis raised his voice so that the affirmation in it might be clearly heard at the further end of the gallery. Then he turned to the silent group at the doorway, watchful to seize upon any clue to the King's mystery which might guide their feet clear of the pitfalls besetting Valmy.

"Let all men go from me but my friend Argenton," he said, with a wave of the hand which still held the paper crumpled in the grasp. "Let the guard remain beyond the door, but let no man enter till I give leave. Paris! Let them think Paris," he went on, lowering his voice, "but from you, Philip, I have no secrets. We are old friends, too old friends to have secrets one from the other, eh, Philip, eh? Give me your arm that I may lean upon it, for I grow tired. It is the heat, not that I am ill or weaker; the heat, the heat, and I grow tired. And yet I must walk: I cannot rest; no, not for a moment; this—this horror has unstrung me."

CHAPTER II

A LESSON IN OBEDIENCE

Passing his clenched hand through the crook of Commines' arm, and leaning heavily on the stick in the other hand, Louis turned slowly up the gallery, and for a time both were silent. They made a strange contrast. The King was shrunken, bowed, and bent, a veritable walking skeleton to whom the grave already imperiously beckoned nor would take long denial. With his bony head, his listless face, his lean, long neck thrust out from the fur of his upturned collar, he resembled a giant bird of prey. The skinny hand thrust through the crook of Commines' arm, and still grasping the crumpled despatch, was the claw of a vulture. Above him, head and shoulders, towered Commines, square-set, burly, muscular,

and as full of life and vigour as his master was sapless. Just midway to the threescore years and ten, his bodily powers were at their highest, and in the ten years he had served Louis his mind had ripened so that few men were more astute, more shrewd to see and seize upon advantages, whether for himself or his master. In the King's service few scruples troubled him, the questionable act was Louis', his part was to obey.

"Then, sire, the post was not from Paris?"

"From Amboise," answered Louis, with sudden incisive vigour, his voice rasping harshly. "From Amboise, where the ungrateful son of a miserable father plots and plots and plots: and you, whose business it is to know everything, know nothing."

"The Dauphin? and plotting against you? But, sire, it is impossible. The Dauphin is barely thirteen years of age."

"The pity of it, Argenton, oh! the pity of it." As he spoke one who did not know him as Commines knew him would have sworn that tears were very near the dull, dry eyes. "No more than thirteen—no, not thirteen, and yet—ah! the pity of it."

"Oh, sire, some one has deceived you. The Dauphin is too young to plot, even if affection and common nature——"

"Too young?" broke in Louis, halting in his slow walk to strike the pavement angrily with his stick. "At what age does a serpent grow fangs? Too young? Ill weeds grow apace, and then there may be those about him who egg him on, who sow wrong ideas in his mind that they may reap some gain to themselves. All are not as faithful as thou art, Philip. I have not always been merciful—not always. At times justice has rejoiced against mercy for the general good; yes, for the general good. There was Molembrais; men blame me for Molembrais; but if the King's arm be not strong enough to strike, who shall hold the kingdom in its place? And because the King's hand pulls down and raises up as God wills—he paused, and bowed with a little gesture of his hand to his cap—"there are those who do not love me. But if they egg on, those others who should be loyal to their King and are not, if they suggest, it is my son—my son, Argenton—who is the very heart and centre; my son, who out of his little twelve years raises his hand against my threescore."

"If he has done that," began Commines, picking his words slowly (he had not as yet fathomed Louis' purpose, and feared lest he should commit himself in too great haste to the wrong policy), "if the Dauphin has truly so forgotten natural love and duty——"

"If!" With a snarl which showed his gapped and yellow teeth Louis again straightened himself, and as he raised his head beyond the reflected glow of the scarlet cloak his face was grey with passion. "If? If? Head of God, man! do you dare talk to me in 'ifs'? Philip de Commines, when you were little in your own eyes, when you were the humble fetcher and carrier to that Bully of Burgundy whom I crushed, when you were the very hound and cur of his pleasure, fawning on him for the scraps of life, I took you up, I! —I! Now you are Lord of Argenton, now you are Seneschal of Poitou, now you are Prince of Talmont, and I have made you all these, I!—I! and you answer me with an 'if'! But the hand which raised you up can drag down, you who answer me with an 'if.' The hand which drew from the mud can fling into the ditch, you who answer me with an 'if.' And, by God! I'll do it! An 'if'? We say 'ifs' to fools. Was I a fool to turn the lickshoe of Charles the Bully into the Prince of Talmont? Was I a fool to grope in the mud for a Seneschal of Poitou? Am I a fool now—I, who have held the strings of all Europe in my hand for thirty years, and loosed or ravelled them as suited the greatness of France? God be my witness, all has been for the greatness of France! France comes first, always first. And now, when I say my son plots against me, that twelve-year boy who is of an age to be king, am I a fool and liar? Does this lie? Answer me, Argenton, does this lie?" And wrenching his hand free from Commines he shook the paper passionately above his head.

So sudden and so fierce was the attack, so full of bitter venom and raw rage, so brutally naked and perilous in its threat, that Commines fairly quailed. The florid ruddiness of his fleshy face faded to a pallor more cadaverous than the unhealthy grey of Louis' sunken cheeks as he remembered Molembrais. At the door stood the guards with crossed pikes, beyond these were Leslie and Saint-Pierre, watchful and alert. He was loved little better than his master, and he knew it. Let the King speak and there would be no hesitancy, little pity. In his rapid rise he had kicked many rivals from the ladder of Court favour, and climbed yet higher by trampling them underfoot, caring little what gulf of disgrace or worse swallowed them. And the King's threat was no idle boast; the hand which had raised could drag down, not only to irremediable disaster, but to the very grave itself. A hand? A beckoning finger to those who waited at the door would be enough, and Commines trembled.

"Sire, sire," he cried, his arms raised in protest and supplication, "how have I offended you? In what

have I been ungrateful? I meant no more but that it seemed impossible a son could turn against so good, so great a father. That—that—staggered me for the moment. It beggared reason; it—it—but let me read the despatch for myself, sire. Not for belief, but for comprehension, and that we may meet the blow together, that we may turn it aside—may turn it back on—on—the hand that strikes."

"Aye!" said Louis drily, "that is more like the Commynes of old, the Commynes who served his master without an 'if.' And that is a good phrase of yours—turn back the blow on the hand that strikes! When that is done, and the time comes for reward, I will not forget that it was your phrase. And it was for that I sent for you: I knew my friend Commynes would find a way to—to—guard his master effectually."

Before Louis ended all the harshness had gone from his voice, and it became marvellously gentle, marvellously kindly, almost caressing. A master student of the subtle trifles which unconsciously influence great events, he played upon men's minds as a skilled musician on his instrument, and they obeyed the touch. Nor was Philip de Commynes, opportunist, political adventurer, philosopher, soldier of fortune, diplomatist, exempt from the influence of that skilful mastery. As he had gloomed so now he gladdened: he squared his shoulders to his fullest height, filling his lungs with a deeper inspiration, and the colour ran back to his cheeks in flood. Nor was it all in pride; there was relief, and the lifting up of a burden which for one terrible moment had threatened to crush him to the earth itself.

But the life which gave its strength to the hand which lifted and dragged down was frail almost to extinction, and remembering that one day the Dauphin must step into Louis' place Commynes ventured to temporize.

"Yes, sire, but to turn back the blow I must know who aims the blow, whence it comes, where it will strike, and when. To fight in the dark is to waste strength. Have I your leave to read the despatch from Amboise?"

"Eh?" With the gesture of a natural impulse Louis held out the paper, then drew it back. "We will wait a little. I am tired, very tired. This shock has unnerved me. Let me sit down, Philip, and rest."

Slowly, with an arm on Commynes' shoulder, he turned and, sinking into the chair, leaned forward upon the table in an attitude of utter weariness, his hand still resting upon the despatch. So there was a pause for a moment, Commynes standing to one side, silent and ill at ease. Then with a sigh, which was almost a groan, Louis roused himself. Reaching out his hand he raised to his lips a little silver image of Saint Denis, one of a group which filled a corner of the table, some standing upright, some pitched upon their faces without regard to reverence or respect. Kissing it fervently he again sighed, his eyes raised to the groined roof, and shook his head sadly. If Saint Denis did not whisper inspiration he at least spun out the time for thought. Commynes' request was reasonable, and he was at a loss how plausibly to evade it.

"Have I your leave, sire?"

"Eh?" Down came the King's hand upon the paper, Saint Denis grasped, baton-fashion, by the feet. "No, Philip, no, I think not. It is in confidence, and above all things a king must respect confidence, or how could he be trusted?" A sentence which sounded strange from the lips of a man who never kept a treaty he could break to his own advantage, or, to give him his due, to the advantage of France.

"That I can understand," answered Commynes, as gravely as if his master's tortuous road to the consolidation of the kingdom had not been strewn with ruptured contracts, unscrupulous chicanery, and solemn pledges brazenly evaded. "But how am I to act? How can I, in the dark, parry a blow from the dark?"

"Suspect every one," answered Louis, brushing aside Saint Denis as he turned sharply in his chair. The saint had served his turn. He had been invoked in a perplexity, and now that the way was clear, no doubt in answer to the invocation, he was flung aside without ceremony. "Suspect every one. To suspect all you meet is the first great rule of prudence, wisdom, success; and to suspect your own self is the second. Go to Amboise. Remember there is no if, and sift, search, find, but especially find."

"Find what, sire?"

For answer Louis clutched the paper yet tighter and shook it in the air, and if Commynes could but have guessed it, there was a double meaning in the action and the words which accompanied it.

"Find this!"

"And having found?" Commynes paused, conscious that the ground was treacherous under his feet. "Sire, remember he is the Dauphin and the son of France."

CHAPTER III

FOR A WOMAN'S SAKE

With a quick gesture, the arm thrust out, the hand open, the fingers spread, Louis shrank back, his other arm across his face. It was a movement eloquent of pathos, despair, and suffering; then, with another sigh, he straightened himself, his corpse-like face pinched with care.

"The son of France!" he repeated. "Yes! the son of France! but, Philip, my friend, my one friend, must the father perish for the son?"

"Oh, sire, sire," cried Commines, deeply moved, both by the words and the appeal in the voice. "Never that. And it is true—you are France, France itself as no King ever has been; France in its strength, France in its hope, and God knows what evil will befall—" He checked himself sharply as a spasm twisted the King's sunken mouth. Carried away by his sympathy he had forgotten that it was an almost unforgivable offence to hint that Louis was not immortal. For him the word death was wiped from the language. If the dread shadow took form to strike, those near might say "Speak little," or "Confess," but nothing more.

But for once the offence passed without rebuke; it was even seized upon to point a moral, and nerving himself to face the thought the King completed the sentence.

"God knows what evil will befall France in a boy's hands! And within a year he will be of age; of age and yet a child. A puppet king of France!" Louis paused, drawing in his breath with a shudder like a man chilled to the marrow. "A puppet, a puppet, and in the hands of a puppet what must the end be? Ah! France! France! France! It is disaster, unless it can be turned aside. Philip, you must go to Amboise. Take with you some one you can trust, if in all Valmy there is such an one!"

"There is, sire; one I can trust as my King can trust me."

"Yes, yes, but not overmuch; do not trust him overmuch. Remember what I said—suspect, suspect."

"I am not afraid, sire, Stephen La Mothe owes everything to me."

"Gratitude? Is that any reason for faithfulness? Piff!" And the King blew out his thin lips in contempt. "To bind men to you, Commines, to bind them so that you may sleep easy o' nights, you must hold them either by the fear of to-day or the hope of to-morrow. Gratitude! Thanks for eaten bread! How many are there who owe me everything, and yet have turned against me. But let that pass; may God and the Saints forgive them as I do." Louis paused, and a sardonic smile flickered for an instant across his face. If God and the Saints had no more forgiveness for his enemies than he had, then their prospects in the life to come were as miserable as Louis would have made the remnant of their days in this present world if they but fell into his power. "And this La Mothe," he went on, "there is no need to tell him all we know. To tell all you know is to lose your advantage. And why should he be faithful? Why does he owe you everything?"

"I promised his sister—it was years ago——"

"A woman? Um, I do not like women. The ways of men I can follow, but the ways of women are beyond me. Seven devils were cast out of one, but not from the rest, and so there is no understanding them. No, I do not like women."

"Sire, she is long dead."

"Yes? That makes it safer, but I do not see that it is any reason for trusting the brother. Take him with you to Amboise if you think he is safe, but remember"—and the King's lean hand was shaken suddenly upward almost in Commines' face, a threat as well as a warning—"I hold you responsible, you, you, you only. Let him be with you, but not of you; let him enter Amboise apart from you, and let him work out of sight like a mole, obeying orders without knowing why he obeys. Then if he fails, or blunders, or is fool enough to be caught spying, you can disown him, can wash your hands of him, and let him hang! Um! You don't like it? I see in your face that you don't like it. Will you never learn that a face has a tongue of its own to be used to conceal our thoughts? But yours—I know your thought. The woman! Bah! the woman is dead."

"Sire, a promise to the dead is like a vow to the Saints; none can give it back."

"Um! a vow to the Saints? But we must have the Saints on our side. Let me see—let me see. Yes! Take

him with you, openly or secretly as you will, and if he bungles I shall deal with him. That frees you from your promise. The justice of the King! Eh, Philip! will the justice of the King please you better?"

The justice of the King! Louis sat back in his chair as he spoke, his blotched gums showing in a grin between his thin lips, his dull eyes half veiled by the drooping of the leaden-hued lids. More than ever he was a mask of death, but of a death that possessed a grim humour, malevolent in its satirical cynicism. The justice of the King. Who should know that justice so well as Commynes, its minister for almost a dozen years, or who so testify to its stern implacability? None escaped the rigid iron of its wrath. Their almost royal blood saved neither the Duke of Nemours nor the Count of Armagnac. Saint-Pol, Constable of France, perished on the scaffold. Besides these a score of the greater nobles of France had fallen, nor could the scarlet of the Cardinalate shield Balue from its vengeance. If these, the great ones of the chess-board, were beyond the pale of mercy, what hope would there be for a simple pawn like Stephen La Mothe, if once he fell beneath that inflexible ban? And yet to the courtier the King's question could have but one reply.

"The justice of the King," repeated Commynes; and added, without thought of irreverence, "Let him fall into the hands of God and not of man."

"Good!" The thin lips twitched, and deep in the dead eyes a sombre fire glowed. It warmed his cold humour to read so plainly the thought hidden behind the smooth words. But to a mind as fertile as the King's that very thought was a suggestion. It would be well that this La Mothe should clearly understand all he had to fear; and not to fear only but also to hope. The justice of the King could raise up as well as cast down, could reward without measure as well as crush without mercy.

"Go to Amboise. Be myself in Amboise. If—I use your own word, Philip—if justice must strike—— Ah! poor wretched King and yet more wretched father!—be thou the King's justice, be thou the King's hand in Amboise, and let this Monsieur La Mothe be your ears, your eyes. And—um—yes, let me see this La Mothe before you leave; I am, as you know, something of a judge of men. To-morrow will do, and the next day you can go to Amboise."

"And my commission, sire? My authority to act on your behalf?"

"Commission?" The plaintive, gentle calm of the King's voice broke up in storm. Leaning forward Louis tapped his finger-tips on the table noisily. "Sift, search, find, find, there is your commission. Authority? Um—um—when Absalom rebelled against David did Joab, the king's servant, say, 'Where is my authority?' Rebellion is your authority; the safety of your King is your authority; the plot against France is your authority. For such crimes there is none above justice, Monsieur d'Argenton, none—none. But justice is like truth, and sometimes dwells in shadow. Do you understand? Justice, but no scandal. We must be circumspect. There must be no shock to public thought in France. It is the curse and fate of kings to be misjudged. Justice might well come by way of accident. And—let me see! This La Mothe! He owes you everything and you say he can be trusted?"

"Yes, sire, but I have been thinking——"

"Then, Philip, tell him something of what I have told you. The danger——" The King again shook in the air the crumpled despatch which had never been exposed, never left his grasp for an instant. "The danger to me—to France—to you, above all to you who vouch for him. He owes you everything as you owe me, perhaps he will understand as you do?"

"But, sire," said Commynes again, striving hard to keep his voice unemotional, "while you spoke I have been thinking. I fear Stephen La Mothe is too young, too inexperienced, for so grave a mission."

"And are there two in Valmy you can trust with your life? Too young? No! To be young is to be generous, to be young is to dream dreams. The generosity of his youth will repay you all he thinks he owes, and will not count the cost: the dreams will see the glory of serving France. Age brings caution, Philip; age brings too much of the weighing of consequence; and at Amboise a little incaution will be good, incaution of himself, you understand. He owes you everything; let him get it into his head that you are the gainer by his incaution—as you will be, Philip, as you will be, and he too. There! That is settled. Send him to me to-morrow. Move the brazier nearer to me, then go. Nearer yet; within reach of my hand. There! that will do."

But filled by a fear he dared not show Commynes still lingered. Across the gulf of the past years came the voice of the dear, dead woman, the voice of the lost love of his youth, lost while youth was generous, while youth dreamed dreams and loved passionate. It was the sweetest voice he had ever known; sweet in itself because of itself, caressing, gentle, sweeter still because passionate love had throbbled through it. "Watch over him, Philip, for my sake," it said, and she had died comforted by his promises, died trusting him. And now—— But while he hesitated, willing but afraid to dare, Louis

bestirred himself. Resting one arm upon the table he pushed himself half upright with the other hand, and so, half poised, pointed forward at the door. A blotch of crimson showed upon the cheek-bones and the dull eyes glowed.

"God's name, man! did you not hear me? Do you serve me or the Dauphin? Which? Go! go! go!"

This time Commynes obeyed, and obeyed in silence. The King's question was not one which called for an answer; or rather he understood that Amboise must give the answer, give it emphatically and without a quibble. Once outside the door he paused. Between Saint-Pierre, Leslie, and himself no love was lost, but the bond of a united watchfulness against a common danger bound them to mutual service.

"Where was it from?" asked Saint-Pierre. But Commynes shook his head, running his fingers inside the collar of his doublet significantly. Complacency, even when it was the complacency of self-defence, had its limits.

"I dare not," he whispered back. "He is in the mood of the devil. What is he doing now?"

As if playing the part of sentry Saint-Pierre turned and walked twice or thrice up and down before the open door, glancing cautiously within.

"Tearing the despatch, and burning it piecemeal in the brazier."

"I feared as much. If you love yourselves, gentlemen, see that you do not cross him to-day. And when I am gone from Valmy walk warily."

"Where are you going, Monsieur de Commynes?"

"To Amboise, and I would have given a thousand crowns for one look at that despatch."

But it is a question whether the look would have taught him much, though he had studied the paper for an hour. It was blank; beyond the superscription and the "Louis" sprawled across the corner there was not one single word. And yet, to one trained by ten years service in his master's ways of crooked cunning the very blank would have been eloquent of warning.

CHAPTER IV

THE JUSTICE OF THE KING

As Commynes crossed the courtyard to his lodgings his face was puckered with anxious thought. Many a time he had fished for his master in waters both foul and troubled, but always he had known the prey he angled for. Now, and he shook his head like a man who argues against his doubts, but with little hope of compelling conviction, he was not sure. Or was it that he was afraid to be sure? Was he afraid to say bluntly out, even in the secret of his own mind, the King desires the death of the Dauphin and for good cause?

That there might well be cause, that there might well be a sinister upheaval against the King with the Dauphin as its rallying centre he could easily believe, even without the evidence of the despatch. France had never yet known such a nation-builder as Louis. His quarries had lain north, south, and east. In his twenty-two years upon the throne he had added to the crown Artois, Burgundy, the northern parts of Picardy, Anjou, Franche-Comté, Provence, and Roussillon. To secure such a wholesale aggrandizement he had been unscrupulous in chicanery, sleepless in his aggression, ruthless to the extremest verge of cruelty; no treaty had been too solemn to tear up, no oath too sacred for violation, no act of blood too pitiless.

With Louis the one sole question had ever been, Does it advantage France? If it did, then his hand struck or his cunning filched, careless of right or privileges. As he had said, and said truly, France came first. It was his one justification for the unjustifiable. No! Never such a nation-builder and never a man so feared and hated for valid cause. He was the King of the greatest, the most powerful France Europe had ever known, but it was a miserable France, a France seething with wretchedness, with discontent, and each hour he went in terror for his life. Only a few, such as Commynes himself, could

foresee how great would one day be the power of these weak, antagonistic states he had so ruthlessly welded into one. For the rest, France was so full of unhappiness and dread that the Dauphin might well be the centre of a plot, a plot to murder the father in the son's name for the relief of the nation. But was the Dauphin himself concerned in the plot, or had he that knowledge which, prince though he was, laid him open to the penalty for blood-guiltiness? These were the questions which troubled Commynes.

Clearly—and as he followed his train of thought he turned aside, his hands locked behind him, his head bowed, and walked up and down in the shadow flung by the gloomy range of buildings which cut the courtyard into two halves—clearly the King had no doubt: clearly the despatch had left no room for doubt. Or else—the thought was contemptible, but it refused to be thrust aside—the King wished to have no room for doubt. The frown deepened on Commynes' face as he remembered how often the King's wishes had been master of the truth.

But could any father be cursed with such a terrible wish? Yes, when the father was that complex, unhappy man, Louis of France. Commynes knew the King as no man else knew him, and in the gloomy depths of that knowledge he found two reasons why the father would have no sorrow for the death of the son. It was characteristic of Louis to hate and dread his natural successor, nor did his distrustful fears pause to consider that if the Dauphin was swept aside Charles of Orleans would stand in his son's place. When that day came he would hate and dread Charles as his suspicious soul now hated and dreaded the Dauphin.

The other reason he had himself unveiled to Commynes, no doubt with a set purpose. Behind the King's most trivial act there was always a set purpose. In a boy's feeble hands, a puppet as he had called him, a king in legal age and yet a child in years and ignorance, this great France he had built up so laboriously would crumble into ruin. Louis was a statesman first and a father afterwards. So Commynes must go to Amboise, must sift, search, find—but especially find. Find what? His question had been answered—find and prove the boy's guilty knowledge. But having found, having proved that the King's fears were terribly justified, what then? The answer to that question touched the hopes of his ambition. Upon most men death steals unawares, but for Louis the edge of the grave crumbled in the sight of all who served him, nor, when the end came, would it linger in the coming. Supposing death struck down the King while he, Commynes, was still at Amboise, finding? What then? The opportunist in Commynes was vigilantly awake, that nice sense which discriminates the rising power and clings to its skirts. The Dauphin would be King of France. For the third time he asked himself, What then?

It was a relief to his perplexity that a cheery full-noted whistle broke across the question, a whistle which from time to time slipped into a song whose words Commynes could hear in part:

"Heigh-ho! Love's but a pain,
Love's but a bitter-sweet, lasts an hour:
Heigh-ho! Sunshine and rain!
If it's so brief whence comes love's power?
Wherefore go clearly,
Sweetly and dearly—"

and the song ran again into a whistle.

At the sound the gravity faded from Commynes' face and the coarse set mouth grew almost tender. It was Stephen La Mothe: and whatever the words might be, the lad surely knew little of love when he so lightly marred his own sentiment. A lover sighing for his mistress would have sighed less blithesomely and to the very end of his plaint. Presently the voice rose afresh:

"Heigh-ho! where dost thou hide,
Love, that I seek for thee, high and low?
Heigh-ho! world, thou art wide,
Heat of the summer and cold of the snow.
April so smiling,
June so beguiling,
Let us forget, love, that winter's storms blow."

Entering the narrow hall, lit only from the courtyard and with a much-shadowed stairway rising from the further end, Commynes pushed open a door on his right, fastening it behind him as he entered.

"Stephen, Stephen, what do you know of June and December, love's sunshine and the cold of the snow?" he said railingly.

"Nothing at all, Uncle, and just as much as I want to know," was the answer. "But a song must have a theme or there'd be no song."

"And you think love is a better theme than the text you hold on your knee."

"Yes: for a song. If it was a tale, now, or an epic, it would be a different matter. But they are beyond me, both of them. Do you think, Uncle," and La Mothe turned over the arquebuse Commines had pointed at in jest as it lay on his lap, "this will ever be better than a curious toy? I think it is quite useless. By the time you could prime it here, set your tinder burning and touch it off there, I would have my sword through you six times over."

"Charles the Rash found it no toy in the hands of the Swiss at Morat," replied Commines. "But toy or no toy, put it aside while I talk to you. Stephen, my son, I fear I have done you an ill turn to-day."

"Then it is the first of your life," answered La Mothe cheerily, as he stood the weapon upright in the angle of the wall. "It would need a good many ill turns to set the balance even between us, Uncle Philip."

"No. One thoughtless act which cannot be recalled or undone may outweigh a life. And so with this. Stephen, I have commended you to the King for service."

La Mothe leaped to his feet, laying his hands on Commines' shoulders impulsively, one upon each. And if proof were needed of the relations between these two, it would be found in the spontaneous frankness of the gesture: Philip de Commines was not a man with whom to take liberties, but there stood La Mothe almost rocking the elder man in the fullness of his satisfaction.

"At last," he cried. "I have been eating my heart out for this for a week past! And you call that an ill turn?"

"Stop! Stop! Stop!" and Commines, smiling through his gravity, followed the other's gesture so that the two stood face to face, locked the one to the other at arm's length.

How like the lad was to Suzanne: a man's strong likeness of a woman's sweet face. There were the same clear expressive eyes, ready to light with laughter or darken with sympathy; the same sensitive firm mouth and squared chin, fuller and stronger as became a man and yet Suzanne's in steadfastness to the life; the same broad forehead and arched brows; the same unconscious trick of flushing in moments of excitement. Even the colour of the hair was the same, with the curious ruddy copper tint running through the brown in certain lights.

Yes; it was Suzanne's self, Suzanne whom he had loved as he had never loved H el ene de Chambes, his wife these nine years past! Suzanne whom he still loved with that reverence which belongs alone to the gentle dead: Suzanne for whom even now his spirit cried out in these rare moments when it broke through the cynical, selfish crust which had hardened upon him since Suzanne died. So for Suzanne's sake he called Stephen his son, though there was no such difference in age, nor any drop of blood relationship.

"Do you know," he went on, gravely tender in the memory of the dead woman, "that a king's service brings with it a king's risks?"

"And did Monsieur de Perche call me coward when he wrote to you?"

"No; he said many things which it were better a boy should not know were said. Conceit is only too ready to take youth by the arm."

"And am I such a boy? Surely four-and-twenty——"

"Are you so old? It always comes as an astonishment when those we love are no longer children. It is then we realize how the years have passed."

"So old, Uncle. Four-and-twenty is no boy."

"A man in years, a boy at heart. Be a boy at heart as long as you can, Stephen, for so will you keep your conscience clean before God. And yet what use has the King for a boy's service?"

"Teach the boy to be a man in thought that he may find a use for himself, Uncle; and who can do that so well as you?"

Commines let his hands fall to his sides and turned away, pacing the room with short strides. His man's thoughts were not always such as he would care to teach Stephen La Mothe.

"To the King's service every man must bring his own thought."

"And did Monsieur de Perche call me fool when he wrote to you?"

"No: but the little things of Marbahan are poor training for the greater things of Valmy, of Blois, of Plessis, of Amboise, of Paris."

"But truth and faithfulness and courage are the same everywhere, and whether at Marbahan or Valmy a man can but serve God and the King with the best wits God has given him, and that I'll do."

"Aye!" said Commynes drily, "but what of that Heigh-ho song of yours? When love knocks on one door the service of the King may get bundled out of the other."

Stephen La Mothe laughed a hearty, wholesome laugh, pleasant to hear. There was nothing of self-consciousness in it, and no protest could have more clearly proved that the mental comment of Commynes' shrewdness had read the broken melody aright.

"That is easily settled. All His Majesty has to do is to find me a wife of seven thousand crowns a year with two or three little additions to give salt to their spending. Item, eyes which see straight; item, a mouth that's sweet for kissing; item, a temper as sweet as the mouth; item, a proper appreciation of my great merit. But, Uncle, what is the service?"

"That the King will tell you himself. And, lad, when kings talk it is a simple man's duty to listen and obey. Stephen, whatever the service may be, do it."

"Gratefully and faithfully, Uncle. Anything my honour——"

"Honour? God's name, boy, the King's honour is your honour: the King's service, no matter what it may be, is your honour. Are you, a milk-child from Marbahan, knowing nothing of the ways of men, to talk of your honour to the King?"

"Yes, but Uncle, Monsieur de Perche taught me——"

"Monsieur de Perche? Monsieur de Perche taught you many admirable truths, I don't doubt. That he might so teach you I placed you in his household seven years ago. Monsieur de Perche has taught you the use of arms, and that courtesy which next to arms goes to the making of a man. But what can a simple gentleman in the wilds of Poitou know of a king's service? and above all, of such a King? His little household with its round of petty thought was his great world, and a trial of hawks an event to be talked of for a week; but all France is the household of the King, and beyond the borders the eagles of Europe are poised to harry us. But while he lives they are afraid to swoop. While he lives, yes, while he lives."

"But after him comes the Dauphin?"

"A child! a puling, weakling, feeble child. Stephen, as king the Dauphin spells disaster."

"He will have you to guide him, Uncle, and under you——"

But Commynes silenced him with a gesture full of angry denial. Unconsciously La Mothe had put his finger on a rankling sore.

"With the Dauphin king my career ends!" he said harshly. "He and those around him hate me as they hate his father: hate me because I am faithful to the father. And yet, Stephen, I have sometimes thought—this is for you alone—it might be that if in some crisis of his life I served the Dauphin as I served his father—but no! no! no! Even then it is doubtful, worse than doubtful. If Charles of Orleans were king it would be different. He is no child and old enough to be grateful. Always remember, Stephen, that a child is never grateful; it forgets too soon."

"And I am a grown man, Uncle, and so never can forget."

"I know, my son," and Commynes' stern eyes softened. "I told the King you were faithful, and already he trusts you as I trust you," which was rather an overstatement of the case, seeing that Louis trusted no man, not even Commynes' self. "To-morrow you are to see him."

"Then I hope his service, no matter what it is, will take me out of Valmy."

"Why?"

For a moment La Mothe hesitated. The thought in his mind seemed at variance with his assertions of maturity and manhood, but he spoke it with characteristic frankness.

"Valmy frightens me."

"Why?" repeated Commines.

"Because of its silences, its coldness, its inhumanity—no, not inhumanity, its inhumanness. In Valmy no man sings; in Valmy few men laugh. When they speak they say little and their eyes are always afraid. And they are afraid; I see it, and I am growing afraid too."

"But half an hour ago you were singing?"

"But I am only nine days in Valmy. And sometimes when I sing I remember where I am and stop suddenly. It is as indecent as if one sang in the house of the dead. Soon I shall always remember and not sing at all. And I do not wonder that few men laugh."

"Why?" asked Commines for the third time. This was a new side to Stephen La Mothe and one that in the King's service—not forgetting his own—should not be ignored. Often in his career he had seen a well-laid plan miscarry because some seeming triviality was ignored. Was it not one of Louis' aphorisms that life held nothing really trivial?

"Because it is a house of the living dead."

"For God's sake, Stephen, hush. If the King heard you speak of his feebleness in such a way there would be a sudden end to both you and your service."

"The King? But I don't mean the King. I mean——" He paused as if searching for a comprehensive word or phrase, and presently he found it. "I mean the justice of the King."

"Well?" Commines' throat seemed suddenly to have gone dry, so that the word came harshly. Within the hour the King had used the same phrase, and the coincidence startled him unpleasantly.

But La Mothe made no immediate reply. To answer the little jerked-cut dry interrogatory in concise words was not easy. He knew his own meaning clearly enough, but how was he to make it equally clear to Commines, who was plainly unsympathetic? When at last he spoke it was with a hesitation which was almost an apology.

"As I passed through Thouars on my way from Poitou—you know Thouars, Uncle?"

"Yes; go on."

"Then you know its market-place with the little shops all round and the church of St. Laon to the side: a cobble-paved space where the children play? At the one end there was a ring of black and white ashes with the heat still in them, and in the middle a Thing which hung by chains from an iron stake. It had been a man that morning, but there it hung by the spine with the chains through its ribs; a man no more, only blackened bones and little crisped horrors here or there. Round it two or three score, white-faced women and children mostly, stood and gaped, or talked in whispers, pointing. Presently the little children will play there, and shout and sing and laugh, and the women gossip or buy and sell."

"A coiner," said Commines. "The King must see that the silver is full weight."

"Yes, Uncle: but I have heard that sometimes the King himself has coined——"

"Hush, boy: the King is King."

"Then at Tours, as I rode through the Rue des Trois Pucelles, there was a house with a fine bold front. One would say that a man with the soul of an artist lived in it. There were brave carvings on the stout oak door, carvings on the stone divisions of its five windows, strong iron bars of very choice smith-work, twisted and hammered, to keep the common folk from tumbling into the cellars, and in the peaked roof of fair white plaster were driven great nails from which hung fags of rope, and from one something which was no rope, but a poor wisp of humanity staring horribly aslant above a broken neck."

"Yes," said Commines, "Tristan's house. He is the King's Provost-Marshal and—and——"

"Yes, I know, Uncle. He carries out the justice of the King. But to hang a fellow-Christian over one's own hall-door is a strange taste."

"Stephen, take my advice and have naught to do with Tristan by word or deed. And no doubt the fellow deserved his hanging."

"That he may have naught to do with me is my hope," answered La Mothe, with a little laugh which

had no humour in it. "And as to deserts, he drank overmuch and beat the watch. Truly a vicious rascal! God send us all sober to bed, Uncle, and may a sudden end find nothing worse on our conscience than a dizzy brain. But that's not all. Midway between the castle and the Loire stands the Valmy gibbet, fair set in the sunshine and for all to see: and as I rode past there were two hung from it; two hang from it still, but they are not the same two."

"Thieves," said Commines. "Would you have the roads unsafe?"

"One of to-day's couple is a boy of twelve—unripe fruit for such a tree, Uncle, and a fearsome danger to the peace of France. Tristan does well to keep the roads safe from such swaggerers. Twelve years of life, twelve years of a pinched stomach, and—the justice of the King to end it all! And what of the woman who gathered nettles for the pot from the river-bank? The archers shouted to her, but she was hungry, poor starved soul, and gathered on, bent to all-fours like a beast. Then they shot her—like a beast. Down she went with an arrow through the bent back; a woman, Uncle."

"She should have hearkened and kept away," said Commines. "Neither man nor woman may come near Valmy without permission when the King is here."

"She should have hearkened," echoed La Mothe. "But the Good God had sealed her ears; she was deaf as a stone and so for the justice of the King she died. Then three days ago it was Guy de Molembrais, who came to Valmy—so 'tis said—with the King's safe-conduct."

"Molembrais lost his head as a traitor," answered Commines roughly.

"And the safe-conduct?"

"The safe-conduct was given before Molembrais' treason was fully proved."

"Then it is the King's justice to lure suspects——"

"There can be no faith with traitors. Did the safe-conduct make his treason less? Do you not see," he went on, as La Mothe made no reply, "that Molembrais got no more than his deserts?"

"Like the brawler in Tours," said the lad whimsically. "Perhaps Tristan gave him a safe-conduct too, and the fool got drunk. And if we have good, warm blood in us we all get drunk sooner or later. Yes, and please God my time will come, but may the Saints send me far from Valmy! You think I'm talking nonsense, Uncle; but Monsieur de Perche always let me talk. He said it was better to let blow at the bung than burst the cask."

"You drunk!" answered Commines jestingly. La Mothe had been on very dangerous ground and a change of subject was an unspeakable relief. "Why, except the King, no man in Valmy drinks less wine."

"Wine-drunk? Am I a beast, Uncle, that you should say such a thing? No, not wine-drunk. Love-drunk, war-drunk, fighting-drunk. To feel the nerves tingle, the blood run hot, the heart go throbbing mad! to feel a glorious exultation quiver through you like—yes, Uncle, I know I'm a fool, but it's not so long since you were young yourself."

"Nor am I so old yet, Stephen boy. When that day of your drunkenness comes there will either be a very happy woman or a sorrowful man."

"Yes, Uncle, if only the King gives me a safe-conduct——"

"The King requires the attendance of Monsieur Stephen La Mothe without delay."

With a start like the cringe of a nervous woman suddenly frightened, Commines, the man of iron nerves, turned to the door, the colour rushing in a flood to his face. Neither had heard its latch click nor seen it open, but the broad figure of a burly man was massed in the gloom against the greater light from the outer entrance. A passing torch, flaring up the hall-way from behind, showed him draped from throat to ankle in some self-coloured, russet-red, woollen stuff which caught the glare, and outlined him for the moment as with sweeping curves of blood. To La Mothe he was a stranger, but from the little he could see of the shaven face, at once harsh and fleshly sensual, he judged him to be nearly twenty years older than Commines.

"You—Tristan——" The surprise had shaken even Commines from his self-control and he spoke brokenly. "How long have you been here?"

"Since the King sent me for Monsieur La Mothe. At once, if you please, Monsieur."

"But it was to-morrow——"

"He has changed his mind. What is to be done is best done quickly. You, Monsieur d'Argenton, will understand what the King means by quickly. I know nothing but that you are to leave Valmy to-morrow morning instead of the day after, and so he must see Monsieur La Mothe to-night. As Monsieur d'Argenton's friend, Monsieur La Mothe, I would advise humble acquiescence."

"In what?" It was the first time La Mothe had spoken, and in his repugnance he could not bring himself to add the courtesy "Monsieur" to the curt question.

"Our Master's will, whatever it may be. It is a privilege, young sir, to further the justice of the King."

"The justice of the King!" replied La Mothe, carried hotly away by that repugnance. "God's name, Provost-Marshal, I am not—not—not the King's arm, like you," he added lamely. But though Tristan might neither forgive nor forget the suggestion of the broken sentence he was not the man to resent it at the moment. The King's arm must endure pin-pricks as well as deal justice. It was Commines, rather, who replied.

"Hush, Stephen, our friend is entirely right. It is you who misunderstand. The King's justice is in all his acts. Yes! and not only his justice, but his mercy and his greatness, and these three have made France what she is."

"And all these three are waiting for Monsieur La Mothe. Come, young sir, the King is very weary and it is time he was in his bed—though I would not advise you to tell him so," and leaving the door open behind him Tristan went out into the night: that he did so they were sure, for they heard the rasp of his feet on the flags of the court.

"How long was he there?" Commines spoke under his breath as his fingers closed on La Mothe's arm with a grip which left its mark. "How long was he listening? What did he hear? You fool, you fool, you may have ruined yourself—and me, and me. And why has he left us together? He has some reason for it—some end to serve: his own or the King's. Try and think what you said: no, not now, there is no time, but when you are with the King, and unsay it, unsay it. And Stephen, remember, he is the King, he is the Master of France, the maker of France, and he is dying. Promise him——"

"Monsieur La Mothe, Monsieur La Mothe, is the King to wait all night, or shall I say Monsieur d'Argenton detains you?"

"Go, boy, go. Promise everything, everything—he is the King," and as Commines pushed him through the doorway La Mothe could hear his breath coming in heavy gasps.

CHAPTER V

THE KING LAYS BARE HIS HEART

If proof were needed of the King's unique trust in his Grand Marshal it was to be found in the ease with which Tristan conveyed La Mothe past the sentries who stood guard at every door. Not Commines, not Lessaix, not Beaujeu himself, for all that he was the King's son-in-law, could have brought a stranger to the King's presence without special licence. But to none Tristan gave greeting, much less vouchsafed explanation, and by none was he challenged. Nor did La Mothe speak. Not only had the suddenness of the unexpected summons confused him, but his thoughts were too deeply busied trying to remember how far he had allowed his tongue to outrun discretion.

To say he was afraid would be too much, to say he had no fear would be too little, but his fear was less a dread than an awe. The gaiety of his laughter had clean gone from him, and his heart of song was hushed: even the crude, ironical satire of his uncomprehending youth was stayed. He had made grim jest of the justice of the King, and now the King's justice, in its sternest, most sinister incarnation, rubbed shoulders with him. It was little wonder that his mood was sobered as his mind, instinctively swayed by Commines' almost frenzied insistence, groped its way step by step from Poitou to Valmy in a troubled endeavour to recall just what had passed between them when Tristan's interruption pricked the bubble of his irony.

And he succeeded in part. First there had been the coiner of Thouars, then the brawling drunkard of Tours, the thief of Valmy, the nettle-gatherer, and lastly Molembrais who held the King's safe-conduct. Truly the meshes of the net of Justice were small when not even a twelve-year thief, a common

quarreller in his cups, or the holder of the King's safe-conduct could slip through. Perhaps it was as he spoke of this last the door had opened. It was then he had hoped he might be far from Valmy the day his passion of soul was stirred. It expressed his mood of the moment, but now he knew he had said more, much more, than he had meant, as youth so often does in its gay self-sufficiency, and the words as they stood—if Tristan had caught them—were no commendation to either favour or confidence. How could the King trust him when his foolish satire had so plainly hinted that he did not trust the King? It would be unreasonable: faith begets faith. For an instant it flashed across his mind that he might explain away the words, but in the same instant he dismissed the thought. Explanation would never win belief from such a man as Tristan, nor could he bend his repugnance to such a familiarity.

So in silence they crossed the courtyard where Leslie's Scottish archers lurked in every shadow, in silence passed the many guards grouped at the gateway to the King's lodgings, in silence traversed the great square hall, gaunt and comfortless, but brighter than daylight from its many lamps—the King was afraid of gloom—and in silence mounted the stone stairway. At its head they turned along the right-hand corridor, entering a silent ante-room with sentinels at its door; at a further door, masked by drawn curtains, the guard was doubled. Force, vigilance, suspicion, were the dominant notes of Valmy—in a sense they were Valmy itself. Midway across this ante-room Tristan paused and struck La Mothe lightly on the arm with a gesture that seemed part contempt.

"A word of advice, young man, from one who knows. Be frank, say little, answer promptly: do what the King bids you and be thankful."

"Is that a threat?" La Mothe answered the tone of half-truculent command rather than the words.

"A threat? No! The King and I do not threaten, we fulfil."

"The King and you?"

"I have said so, do you want it proved?" Drawing back the curtains very quietly Tristan stood a moment blocking the doorway before motioning to La Mothe to follow him. He knew his master, and wished to make certain that the stage picture was set before the audience was admitted.

The room was even more brilliantly lit than any they had passed through, and yet with such a skilful distribution of the light that the further end was completely shadowed. It was the effect of an artificial alcove. There, where the grey thickened, sat the King, or rather there he lay propped high upon a couch, pillows behind him and pillows at either side to support and comfort his weakness. A peaked, close-fitting cap of crimson silk, laced with gold embroidery, covered his head down to the very roots of the ears, while a long, wide-sleeved robe of the same colour, furred at the neck, and draped to give an appearance of breadth of chest, swathed him to the feet. So shadowed, and with a reflected glow flushing the thin face, it would have needed a shrewder suspicion than that of country-bred Stephen La Mothe to detect how low the flame of life burned in the frail vessel of clay.

In front of the couch a low table, hardly higher than the couch itself, was placed within reach of the King's hand: behind all—the draping, as it were, of the alcove—hung arras of blue cloth interwoven with golden fleurs-de-lis, a fitting and picturesque background to the tableau. To the left were windows, fast shuttered, to the right a closed door.

Drawing La Mothe to the front Tristan turned on his heel and re-entered the ante-room in silence, dropping the curtains behind him. There had been no formal announcement, no word spoken, but as the curtain fell the King stirred upon his pillows and La Mothe was conscious of a scrutiny which slowly swept him from head to foot. But the protection of the peaked cap was insufficient. Lifting his hand Louis shaded his eyes yet further, and leaning forward repeated the scrutiny; then he beckoned very gently and lay back upon the pillows. He was a judge of men, a crafty reader of the dumb truths told by eyes and mouth, or the faint, uncontrollable shifts of expression, and so far he was satisfied. Commynes might be right or wrong, but at least this La Mothe was no assassin. Nevertheless the door upon the right opened quietly so soon as La Mothe had passed beyond eyesight of it, opened wide enough for a cross-bow to cover him from the darkness of the passage without. Louis was not a man to run a needless risk, and the bolt which brought home the King's justice to the nettle-gatherer would not miss Stephen La Mothe at thirty feet.

"Nearer," said a soft voice as La Mothe paused, uncertain how far that beckoning hand had called him, "nearer yet; there! that will do for the present. You are Stephen La Mothe, the friend of my dear and trusted friend, therefore my friend also, and the King has need of friends. No, no, say nothing, Philip said I could trust you as himself. That is a great deal for one man to say of another."

"Prove me, sire." La Mothe spoke with an effort. The weary, caressing voice with its subtle note of pathos, the affectionate, frank admission of Commynes' worth, the half-veiled appeal with its confession

of a personal need, had touched him deeply, stirring him as music has the power to stir, so that to command words was difficult. "My uncle told me——"

"Uncle?" Louis' suspicions sprang to life newborn. Goaded by their sting he leaned forward, one arm thrust out, and for the first time La Mothe saw the deathly pallor of his face. "Uncle, do you say? Commines never called you nephew?"

"Not in blood, sire: in love—service—gratitude."

"Then it is better to have a nephew by name than a son by nature. Do you hear? If you love your uncle pray with all your soul that he may never have a son to grudge him his life." The thrust-out fingers, little more than bleached skin drawn tight over fleshless bones, were shaken in a convulsion of passion, from the sunken, dull eyes a sudden fire glared, and the thin lips shrank upon the uneven teeth. But in an instant the spasm passed and Louis sank back upon the pillows, breathing heavily and plucking at the tags of gold cord fastening his robe at the breast. "See what it is to have a son," he said, but in so low a tone that La Mothe barely caught the words, nor were they spoken as if addressed to him, then with an effort which racked his strength the King roused himself. "Love! Service and gratitude! Words! empty words! Kings hear them daily and find them lies. Because of these in his mouth Guy de Molembrais was trusted as it may be Stephen La Mothe will be trusted, and Molembrais is dead—dead in a traitor's grave. Words? It is deeds France has need of, deeds—deeds. And you, young sir, for whom my friend Philip vouched as for himself, are you more faithful than Molembrais?"

"God helping me, sire."

"Um, um; have you need of God's help to be faithful?"

"I only meant——"

"There! there! obey orders and you will have help enough. You owe much to Monsieur de Commines?"

"Everything, sire."

"Everything? Sit there," and Louis pointed to a low stool placed just beyond the transverse angle of the bench-like table which fronted the couch. "Everything! Love! Service! Gratitude! You are right! Take these from life and there is not much left. And how will you repay the everything you owe?"

"Love for love——"

"Um! A woman may have a word to say as to that! Well?"

"Service for service——"

"You are not your own. France claims you; never forget a man's first service is to his country. The nation is the mother of us all. Well, what next? Shall I tell you? Win his gratitude in return! Eh, Master Stephen, how would that please you? Prove your love, show your service, earn his gratitude, and these you will do to the uttermost by serving the King and France."

"Sire, sire," cried La Mothe, shaken out of himself by the gust of healthy emotion which seized him as the King's quiet voice grew in strength and fullness till it seemed to vibrate with as generous a passion as that which stirred the depths of the listener; "I am yours to use body and soul."

"Body and soul," repeated Louis, his eyes fixed searchingly on La Mothe's face. The lad's prompt response promised well, all that was needed was to keep this enthusiasm of devotion keyed to the pitch of action. "Body and soul! Be sure I shall not forget. But what you promise in hot blood you will forget when your mood cools. No? Well, Molembrais' mood cooled and he has been colder than his mood these three days past. But you are different, you are of stronger, finer, truer stuff, your love and service are for Commines as well as for France, and so you will not forget. You understand? Monsieur de Commines vouches for you. Monsieur de Commines." The King paused, and the nervous fretful fingers plucked at the breast of his robe afresh. He was utterly wearied and must have time to regain strength. "Monsieur de Commines stands surety for you; never forget that. Your faithfulness is his faithfulness, your failure his failure: keep that always before you. To-morrow you will——, but first tell me something of yourself." With a moan of weakness he settled back into the pillows and his eyes closed. "I must know Philip's friend as Philip knows him," said the soft voice.

And again La Mothe was touched to the heart, touched in his pride for Commines, the King's trusted friend, touched in his grateful sympathies that the King, weary and burdened by many anxieties, should find time and thought for so kind an interest in one so insignificant as himself, though that, too, was for

Commines' sake; touched above all with a generous self-reproach when he remembered his bitter satire on the King's justice. He now saw that the severities which had horrified and repelled him were exigencies of State, repugnant to the gentle, kindly nature of the man in whose name the law took its course.

And out of that grateful heart of youth he spoke frankly as Tristan had bidden him speak. Briefly, succinctly, he told of his childhood's poverty, of the change which came later under Commynes' unfailing, affectionate liberality, of his placing him as a lad in the household of Monsieur de Perche, of the life in Poitou with its training in arms and simple teaching of Keep faith, Live clean, Follow the right and trust God unafraid. It was a very simple story, but he told it well. No tale grows cold in the interest or halts for words when the heart is behind the telling.

And through it all Louis lay among his cushions like one dead. Not an eyelid flickered, not a finger moved, his breath came so softly, so quietly that the red robe scarcely stirred beneath his sunken chin. Every muscle was relaxed in that restfulness which next to sleep is the surest restorer of exhausted vitality. But the brain, the most acute and cunning brain in France, was awake. With that dual consciousness which, even more than dissimulation, is the diplomatist's prime necessity for success in the worsting of an adversary, he gathered and stored for use in his memory the salient points from La Mothe's story, while all the while, co-energetically, his mind was busy searching out how best to use this new tool for the cementing closer that fabric of France which was his pride and glory. France was at once the mother who gave his genius form and the son of his jealous love. And as he listened, planning, sufficient strength crept back to the worn body. He could play out his part to the end, and La Mothe would carry with him no sense of his master's frailty to paralyze action. In loyalty for loyalty's sake Louis had no faith.

"You need say no more," he said, nodding his head with sympathetic interest. "A debt—a debt indeed. And to-morrow you begin your repayment. To-morrow you go to Amboise with Monsieur de Commynes. Amboise," he repeated slowly, "Amboise," and paused. "Where His Highness, the Dauphin——"

"Where my son waits—and watches." The thin hand crept up to the sunk lips, lingered there an instant, crept up to the dull eyes, passed across them once or twice with a motion eloquent of weary hopelessness, and fell drearily to the lap. "God keep us in His mercy," said the King, and as his fingertips made the four points of the cross upon his breast La Mothe felt he was upon holy ground. "God keep us in His comfort. All is not well at Amboise, but my friend Philip knows—knows and feels for me. I have no orders to give. All is left to him. Only I say this, and never forget it, never—France comes first and obedience is the payment of your debt."

CHAPTER VI

HOW LOUIS LOVED HIS SON

La Mothe sat silent. His fear had passed away utterly, but in its place his awe had grown, an awe full of a deep pity. Youth is the true age of intolerance and for the simple reason that it is the age of ignorance. In its abundant strength, its sense of growth and development, its vigorous, unfailing elasticity, its blessed want of knowledge of the ills of life, its blindness to the inevitable coming of these ills, it is impatient of a caution it calls cowardice, or a frailty it neither understands in another nor anticipates for itself. But in the rare instances when it takes thought its sympathies are more generous than those of age, because the sorrows it sees are so much greater than any it has known, ever realized in itself or even conceived. So was it now with La Mothe. The pathetic, solitary figure, feeble almost to helplessness, diseased, shrunken, dying, Commynes had said, yet with a heart warm in friendliness and a thought for France alone, thrilled him to the very depths. And the dull eyes, watching him from under the heavy lids with an alert vigilance from which no shift of mood escaped, read his emotion unerringly.

Again Louis leaned forward. But it was a changed Louis. This time the light fell on a worn face fixed in a grey solemnity. The grave protesting voice, the outstretched hand driving home its indignant points, completed the spell.

"No, all is not well at Amboise. They think the King grows old. Poor humanity must needs grow old, but they are impatient and would—anticipate age. I have a son, not yet thirteen—but of age to be king. Silence—silence, he is the Dauphin. It is not for you to blame—or condemn the Dauphin. Nor does the King's justice condemn ignorantly. Plots, plots, plots! Plots against the father, God and the father can

forgive; but plots against the King—plots against France: for these there is no forgiveness and youth is no excuse."

"But, sire," began La Mothe. Then he remembered the Valmy gibbet where a boy of twelve still hung that the roads of France might be safe, and his voice choked. The King was right; youth was no excuse.

"There are no buts," said Louis, sternly emphatic, and sank back upon the pillows. "I have knowledge, I have knowledge, Commines knows—others—France, Europe—must know later; an honest lad like you will be believed."

"Three weeks ago I was in Poitou——"

"Yes, and so they will trust you; you are without prejudice, you are not of the Court."

"I meant, sire, I have no experience."

"And so the nut may be too hard for your teeth? I see no fault in your modesty: diffidence is not cowardice. But you will have help in your nut-cracking, you will have three good friends in Amboise, Greed, Fear, and Love: with these three I have made France what she is. Money—a man—a woman; what will these not do! With the first—bribe and see that you do not hold my skin too cheap; Fear—a life forfeit, if I lift a finger he hangs; Love—a woman."

"A friend, sire?"

"An enemy—but a woman. Fool her: she is young and Amboise is dull. I have a scheme for you ready made. You sing? But I know you do, Tristan has told me. Nothing escapes him, nothing: and nothing is too small for the King's service. Always remember life holds nothing trivial. Leave Valmy with Commines, but separate on the road and go to Amboise as a wandering jongleur. They are dull and will welcome any distraction. You make verses?"

"Sometimes, sire," stammered La Mothe, very ill at ease, and flushing as youth will in the shame of its pride. It was almost as disconcerting as being found out in a lie.

"Margaret of Scotland kissed Alain Chartier who made verses, and Amboise is dull. Queen or waiting-maid, women are all of one flesh under the skin, and to fool her should be easy. Remember," added Louis hastily, "I do not bid you do this or that: I only suggest, nothing more, nothing more. Monsieur de Commines—your uncle—will give you your orders, and when—when"—he paused, catching at the throat of his robe as if it choked the breath a little, swallowed with a gasp, then went on harshly—"when the end has come say nothing, but take horse and ride here for your life. Find me—me, without an instant's delay and keep silence till you have found. Here is a ring that day or night will open every door in Valmy."

"What end, sire?"

"What end? What end? Ask Commines, serve him, serve France; that end, boy, that end, and in the name of Almighty God, ride fast." The dull eyes took fire, and this time there was no need for the lying glow of the scarlet robe to make pretence of health; so fierce a passion waked the blood even in the deathly cheeks. But it also had the defect of its quality, and Louis sank back breathless in exhaustion. "No, no!" he whispered, the words whistling in his throat as he motioned imperiously to La Mothe to keep his seat. "Call no one, it will pass—it is nothing, nothing at all—and I have one thing more to say."

Fumbling amongst the cushions he drew out a little silver figure, whether of man or woman La Mothe was uncertain, so fully the tense fingers clenched it. This he held up, palsied, before his face, bowed to it thrice, his lips moving soundlessly, then the hand slipped weakly to his knees, the grasp relaxed, and the image clattered on the floor. It had served its purpose, out of the curious act of faith a renewal of strength was born and Louis was again King. But even then the words faltered.

Shading his face with one hand he reached forward to the low bench. It was littered with the contents natural to such a surrounding in such a presence, papers, parchments, an ink-horn or two, a stand of goose quills, a tray of blotting-sand, with, nearer to the King's hand, a lumped-up linen cloth with the four corners folded and twisted inwards. Amongst these the nervous hand shifted uncertainly here and there, almost like the fluttering of a bird, then came to rest upon the bunched folds of the napkin.

"The Dauphin is a child," he said, his fingers closing upon the looseness of the linen as he spoke. "A weakling—girl! And so, girl-like, he loves to play at make-believe. You know their games? There is the shell of a ruined house beyond the walls and he holds it against all-comers with a sword of lath, or carries it by assault at the head of his army of two stable-boys. Then he cries, 'I am Charlemagne! I am Roland! I am the Cid! I am——'—anything but the Dauphin of France!"

"But, sire," ventured La Mothe, as the King paused, "that is natural in a child."

"I played no such games at twelve years old," answered Louis bitterly. "At twelve I learned king's-craft and foresaw realities; at twelve I struggled to be a man in thought, never was I a girl-child in make-believe, but Charles—Charles sucks sugar and hugs his toys. But being a child we must treat him as a child, yes, yes, and so—and so—" The voice trailed into silence and the hand upon the linen shook as with a palsy. "You see," the King went on hoarsely, "what it is to be a father. The child is a child and must be treated as a child, and yet not encouraged in childish plays by the father, not outwardly—not outwardly. Else Commynes, Beaujeu, and these others would say I fostered with my hand what I condemned with my head. No, the father's hand must be hidden out of sight, and that will be your part."

With a quick jerk he flung the linen napkin on the floor, and, dropping the hand which had shaded his face, turned to La Mothe with what seemed a challenge in his eyes, almost a defiance: it was as if he said, Scoff if you dare! And yet in the little heap of interwoven, fine steel rings there was nothing to move either laughter or contempt, and if the quaint velvet mask which lay beside the coat of mail was effeminate in the tinsel of its gold embroidery, it was at least no child's toy to raise a sneer or gibe a moral.

Laughter? There was no thought of laughter. The warm heart of young blood is emotional once its crust of unthinking carelessness is pierced, and La Mothe was never nearer tears. More than that, the pathetic humanness of it all, the bitter cynical censure of the King, overborne and cast out by the abiding tenderness of the father, crushed by no logic of kingcraft, was that touch of nature which made him kin even to this stern and pitiless despot in spite of the repulsion awakened by the justice of the King. With these secret gifts of fatherhood before him he saw Louis in a new light, and the loyalty which had been a loyalty of cold duty took fire in that enthusiasm which is the devotion of the heart and counts life itself no sacrifice. Nor could he hide the new birth within him, and the dark lines of challenge were smoothed from the King's face.

"A little slender coat such as the French Maid might have worn," he said, lifting the woven links gently as if he loved them, and dropping them again in a little heap that caught the light on every separate ring and split it up into a hundred glittering points. "It may have a message for him when he plays Roland or Charlemagne, and through it the spirit of the child may grow."

"But surely all the world may know of such a gift as that? Sire, sire, let me tell the whole truth; give me leave to say this is from the father to the son, from the King who is to the King who shall be——"

"God's name, boy, who bade you fill thrones with your King who shall be! Is this Commynes' work? Does he think—does he think—that—that—Christ give me breath!" And the hooked fingers caught roughly, fiercely, at his robe, tearing it open so that the lean neck with its tense sinewy cords was laid bare to the glare. "Quick, quick, is it Commynes—Commines—Commines?" he stammered, gasping. "I took him from the gutter—from the very gutter; he was traitor to a Charles to serve Louis, and now is he a traitor to Louis to serve a Charles again?" Pushing himself up, half kneeling on the couch, half leaning on the low bench, he stretched out a shaking, threatening hand towards La Mothe. "Why don't you speak, boy, why don't you speak and tell the truth, you dumb dog?"

But the passion was beyond his strength, his jaw dropped, he shivered as if with cold, and fell back upon the cushions, one hand feebly beckoning to La Mothe to come nearer.

"Whisper," he said, patting La Mothe's arm fawningly, a wry smile twitching his lips, but leaving the watchful eyes cold. "We are alone, we two. Who put that thought into your head? Eh? Come now? Come now?"

"No one, sire, on my honour, no one."

"Honour? I know too much of the ways of men to trust men's honour. Swear, boy," he burst out again, passionately roused. "Swear on this. It is the Cross of Saint Lo, and remember, remember, whoso swears falsely dies, dies within the year—dies damned. Honour? Honour is a net with too wide a mesh to hold men's oaths. Dare you swear?"

Lifting the relic to his lips La Mothe kissed it reverently, while Louis, his lungs still fighting for breath, watched him narrowly.

"Sire, I meant nothing, nothing but——"

"But that you were a fool. Only a fool sells—the lion's skin—while the lion—is alive." His voice strengthened as if the thought stimulated him like a cordial. "And the lion is alive—alive! I must finish, I must finish," he went on more querulously. "Yes, a fool, but fools are commonly honest. You may be a

faithful servant, but you are a bad courtier, Monsieur La Mothe."

"But, sire, have you not more need of the one than of the other?"

"Of the servant than the courtier? Aye, aye, that is well said, very well said. You are less a fool than I thought. But I must finish or Coictier, my doctor—he thinks me less strong than I am—will be scolding me. Take these," and he pushed the coat of mail away from him impatiently, as if vexed that he had been betrayed into such a display of feeling. "Remember that I have never seen them, never, never. You promise me that? You swear that?"

"I swear it, sire, solemnly."

"And you will return to Valmy—to me, in silence?"

"I promise, sire."

"Swear, boy, swear."

"I swear it, solemnly."

"There!" And again he pushed the mail from him, his delicate fingers touching the mask delicately. "Give them from yourself. All things have their price, and the price of a child's confidence is to serve its pleasures. But, young sir, remember this too, remember it, I say, my son is the Dauphin of France and that which is for a prince's use, even in play, is for his use only. Let no one else have commerce with these."

"Be sure, sire, I reverence the prince too deeply——"

"Aye, aye: you can go. Words cost even less than honour. Give me proofs, Stephen La Mothe, proofs, and trust to the justice of the King," which shows how right Commynes was when he said that the justice of the King had many sides.

And so, with his deepest bow and his heart full of many emotions, La Mothe left his master's presence, and the cross-bow in the shadows beyond the door on the right was lowered for the first time in more than half an hour. For what he was to trust the justice of the King he was no more clear in the confusion of the moment than what his mission to Amboise was. But of one thing he was certain, the King was a man much maligned and little understood: harsh of word and stern of act, perhaps, but with a great, undreamed wealth of tenderness behind the apparent austerity. Of that the little coat of mail and tinselled mask bore witness. It was wonderful, he told himself, how the yearnings of the human heart found excuse for what the sterner brain condemned; surely that was where the human drew nearest to the divine! This was not alone a master to serve, but a man to love!

And Louis, a huddled, shapeless mass on his tossed cushions, sat gnawing his finger-tips and staring with dull eyes into vacancy. All passion had died from him and suddenly he had grown very old, though the indomitable spirit knew no added touch of age.

"My son," he said, shivering, "my son, my son." Then the bent shoulders straightened, the bowed head was raised, and into the tired eyes there shot a gleam of fire. "I have no son but France!" Was he a hypocrite? Who can tell? But let the man who never deceived himself to another's hurt cast the first stone at him.

When the little troop of ten or a dozen rode from Valmy the next morning on their way to Amboise he was there upon the walls, a solitary grey figure pathetic in his utter loneliness. Nor, so long as they were in sight, did his eyes wander from them.

CHAPTER VII

FOUR-AND-TWENTY, WITH THE HEART OF EIGHTEEN

Many, deep, and diverse are the springs of silence. If Commynes asked no question when La Mothe returned from his interview with Louis, and made no comment beyond "You are late, my son," it was because he knew that curiosity was almost as dangerous as opposition where the schemes or secrets of his master were concerned. La Mothe, in his ignorance, had on the other hand no such thought, no

such fear, but a charge which he held sacred had been solemnly committed to him: he shared a secret with the King and the first necessity was silence. Whatever Commynes' ultimate orders might be he understood now what his mission was, this mission to Amboise: it was to do for the father what the father might not do for himself, and as they rode slowly along the high road from Valmy he thought complacently to himself that he alone recognized the true nature of the man who watched them from the walls.

But there were obvious limits to the silence if the line of procedure laid down by the King was to be followed. A parting and a meeting were to be arranged, a plan of campaign to be decided upon; and it struck La Mothe as curious that the man who scoffed at make-believe in a boy could yet seize upon make-believe for his own purposes.

"The King does not wish me to arrive at Amboise with you," began La Mothe, and it is to his credit that he spoke with hesitation. To Commynes, as Commynes himself had said, he owed everything, and yet it seemed as if already he had come between Commynes and the King's confidence. And yet, just because he was in the King's confidence it was not easy to keep a touch of importance out of his voice. It was as if he said, "The King and I have decided so-and-so, and you are to stand aside." But the bubble of his complacency was soon pricked.

"At Château-Renaud you will stay behind after we have dined," answered Commynes, "nor will you leave the inn until three o'clock. You will then go on foot to Limeray, where you will cross the Eisse, and take the Tours road until west of Amboise. You are then to ford the Loire at Grand-Vouvray and enter Amboise from the south. Once in Amboise ask for the Chien Noir and put up there for the night."

"So you know all about it," said La Mothe, crest-fallen. Nor was it simply that Commynes knew all about it, it seemed he knew much more than La Mothe himself.

"Except that at the Chien Noir you will find some one who can open the doors of the Château to you I know nothing, and I want to know nothing. There you are to obey orders, but to have your time to yourself; and, my son, my son, pray God there may be no orders to give."

"But the King told me nothing of all this last night."

"It is enough that he told me this morning," answered Commynes drily. "You need not look downcast; it is his custom to divide his instructions."

But La Mothe had another objection, and one so obvious that he marvelled how it had escaped Commynes' notice.

"One thing the King forgets. To enter Amboise as a stranger will be impossible. Riding behind us there are twelve good reasons why I should be recognized."

"Do you take us for fools?" retorted Commynes. Turning in his saddle he pointed backwards. Valmy was still in sight, and a keen eye could have detected the meagre grey figure above the outlines of the grey walls. "What is that to the right of the castle?"

"Valmy gallows."

"And from it hang three good reasons why the twelve will keep silence. The King's grip is as sure in Amboise as it is in Valmy; it is over all France, and God have mercy on the man it closes upon in anger. Think twice, Stephen, before you say the King forgets—and then don't say it."

La Mothe rode on in silence. This sudden reminder of the justice of the King had dashed his satisfaction. Wherever he turned it confronted him, and always with a warning which was less a warning than a threat. It had been so with Tristan, it was so now with Commynes, nor could the memory of the coat of mail and embroidered toy in his saddle-bags entirely quiet the uneasiness of the threat gendered. But, seeking relief, his thought cast back to Commynes' curt instructions.

"Who is this fellow—for I suppose it is a man who is to meet me at the Chien Noir?"

"Who is he? Slime of the gutter, contemptible old age unashamed, human pitch whose very touch is a loathing, a repulsion, a defilement." It seemed as if Commynes was less afraid to speak his mind now that the walls of Valmy were out of hearing, for he went on bitterly: "The King chooses his tools well, a foul tool for a foul use, and neither you nor I can come out of it with clean hands. His name? The gallows-cheat has a dozen names and changes them as you would your coat. He is like a Paris rag-picker, and his basket of life is full of the garbage he has raked from the gutter."

"And the woman?"

"The woman! To hear you say the woman one would think there was but one in the world. The King told me of no woman."

"Then I am not likely to get drunk in Amboise, unless your rag-picker pours the wine.

'Heigh ho! Love is the sun,
Love is the moon and the stars by night.'

The scheme seems a foolish one to me. I can never play the part. But, Uncle, what do you say? Shall I make a good troubadour?"

"Sing while you may," answered Commines, with a dry gravity behind the softening of his stern mouth, "and remember that at Amboise you sing for a King's pay."

"And I would sing five songs for nothing but the pleasure of singing rather than one for a fee. What kind of a little lad is the Dauphin?"

Commines made no reply, but rode on with knit brows. The question so lightly asked was one he had often weighed in his own mind nor found a clear answer. Rumour said of him—but under her breath, for to speak at all was dangerous—that he was shamefully neglected, slow-witted, ill-taught, or, worse still, untaught, but, and here rumour whispered yet lower, that flashes of shrewdness broke the dull level of the undeveloped intellect when least expected. That he was small for his age he knew, that he was weakly, ill-formed, and awkward. These things were patent to the eye and common knowledge, but into the depths of the lad's nature he had not ventured to probe lest Louis' suspicious jealousy should be aroused. Now that he found himself between a father's twilight and a son's dawn, with "The king is dead, long live the king," an imminent proclamation, he blamed himself for his cowardice as men always do who are wise after the event. With a little more certain knowledge his star might rise with the dawn, instead of, as he feared, setting with the twilight.

"Eh?" he said, rousing himself as La Mothe repeated the question. "The Dauphin? I know little of him. He has lived at Amboise, I at Valmy or Plessis with the King: it is long since the two have met. An ailing, obstinate, dull boy, they say, with no more wit than can be put in him with a spoon. If it were not that weak natures often turn vicious that they may be thought strong I would say the King's fear of a plot was baseless."

"But surely there is no plot—a son against a father: a father who loves him," added La Mothe, remembering the contents of his saddle-bags.

"I wish the plot was as doubtful as the love; we might then have stayed comfortably in Valmy," answered Commines cynically, and La Mothe's eyes twinkled as he thought how much better he had read the King in his single hour than Commines had in all his ten years of intimacy. "The woman," he went on, "must be Ursula de Vesc, and if so you can spend your hour or two's walk from Château-Renaud to Amboise adding a verse to your love song."

"Why not a new song all for herself!" replied La Mothe, the twinkle broadening to a laugh, "or had I better wait till I see her? She would never forgive me if the adored dimple was in the right cheek instead of the left, or the sweet eyes of my song grey instead of blue. Which are they, Uncle?"

"I never knew the colour of any woman's eyes but one," answered Commines; and La Mothe knew by the softened voice that he spoke of Suzanne. "And when a woman has taught you the colour of her eyes may you see that in them which will make black or blue or grey the one colour in the world for you. As to Ursula de Vesc, she detests me much as I detest that offscouring from the dregs of brazen Paris who will meet you at the Chien Noir. But there is Château-Renaud, where you will find something better for your age and more to your liking than women's eyes."

"Dinner! and I twenty-four!"

"Eighteen, Stephen, eighteen, not a day older, and be thankful for the heart of a boy."

"Why not be thankful for the heart of a girl!" retorted La Mothe. "Pray the Saints, as the King would say, that Ursula de Vesc is as pretty as her name."

Partly that his men might be free from the restraint of his presence, and partly because he did not wish to advertise his visit to Amboise more broadly than necessary, Commines ordered their meal to be served in a private room. It was to the front, with two small windows overlooking the roadway. These were open, and as the stamping of hoofs and jingling of bridle-chains came through them Commines bade La Mothe see who were without.

"But do not show yourself. Between Valmy and Amboise every man is a friend or an enemy, with fewer friends the further Valmy is left behind."

"A priest, with three of an escort," said La Mothe, "King's men, I am sure. Some of your own have gone out to meet them. Shall I go down to make sure?"

"No; go into that inner room, rather, for I hear feet upon the stairs. If you are to be a stranger in Amboise the fewer who see you at Château-Renaud the better. We cannot give a priest the Valmy gallows as a reason for silence."

As the inner door closed the outer opened, and a Franciscan entered, his robe strewn thickly with the dust from the highway. Commines recognized him at once; he was from Valmy, one of the many clerics the King's strange religiosity gathered round him, and justly held by Louis in deep respect for the simplicity and saintliness of his life. In an age when the fires of scandal scorched the Church with such a flaming vehemence that the heat kindled round the throne of the Chief Bishop himself, Father John escaped without so much as the smell of burning on his garments. None could lay self-seeking to his charge, nor even the smallest of the many vices which in every order raised their heads, rampant and unashamed. It was characteristic of Louis that he should attach to himself men of such unselfish humility and austere pureness of life. God and the Saints would surely forgive a little chicanery to one who lived in an atmosphere of other men's holy lives.

"Father John!" and Commines caught the Franciscan by the arm almost roughly, a sudden fear setting his pulses throbbing. "Has Saint-Pierre sent you? Is the King ill—is he—is he?—you of all men know what we fear for him."

"No, my son, no; the King is as you left him, well, praise God! and strong: it is he himself who has sent me after you. He said that such a mission as yours had great need of the blessing of God upon it."

"And was that all his message?"

"That he committed France to your care. He spoke, no doubt, of the Dauphin, who is the hope of France."

"Yes," answered Commines drily, "I do not doubt he spoke of the Dauphin. Now, Father, I fear you must dine in haste, for it is time we were on the road."

"A crust in my hand to eat as we go is enough. It makes me so happy, Monsieur d'Argenton, to see the King at last taking thought for his son."

"Yes," repeated Commines, with the same dryness. "The Dauphin is indeed much in his thought. But though we are in haste there is no need you should die of starvation. France has need of you, Father John. There are plenty to play the devil's game by living, do not you play it by dying before your time."

Twenty minutes later they were again on the road, La Mothe's saddle-bags fastened on his led horse. He himself followed at the hour named by the King, but on foot, a knapsack strapped across his shoulders and on it a lute in open advertisement of his new trade. His sword was with his saddle-bags, but was no loss, so free from danger were the roads under the iron persuasion of the justice of the King. Nor were travellers numerous. Only twice was he passed, once by a courier riding post to Valmy, and once by a lad, little more than a child in age, who thundered up from behind on a great raw-boned roan horse and disappeared ahead in a cloud of dust.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BLACK DOG OF AMBOISE

Blessed four-and-twenty. From the first breath of life until the last, even though by reason of strength there be four-score years, is there a more perfect age? The restraints of the schoolboy are left behind, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil has scattered its fruit about the feet, all sweet, all fresh in their newness, all a delight, even, alas, the worst of them: that of the tree of life seems just within the reach, and the burdens of the world are as yet on other men's backs. Even if the Porter's Knot, which all must bear sooner or later, is already on the shoulder, the light heart of four-and-twenty is untroubled. It believes, in its optimism, that it will tumble the load of cares and cares into the first

ditch, and live in freedom ever after!

To Stephen La Mothe's four-and-twenty with the spirit of eighteen the world of that May day was God's good world, and what better could it be than that! If a full-leaved cherry tree, its ripening clusters rosy red and waxen yellow against the dense greenery, flung shade across the road he paused in his tramp, squared his shoulders, and drank a deep breath of the cooler air; if the blazing sun sucked up a subtle, acrid smell from the hot dust stirred by his feet he snuffed it up greedily and found it good to live. A hawk in the air, a thrush whistling from a hazel bush as only a thrush can whistle, the glorious yellow of a break of whin, all were a delight.

"Heigh ho! Love is my life!
Live I in loving, and love I to live!"

he sang, and broke into a whistle almost as blithe as the thrush itself that he might think more freely. Commynes' gibe had come back to him, and for pastime he would make a verse of his love song, let Ursula de Vesc's eyes be blue, grey, or black!

"Live I in loving, and love I to live,"

was a good line, a line Francois Villon himself could not have bettered, but how should the next line run?

"Heigho! Sweetest of strife!"

Strife! The word jarred the context, but where would he get a better?
Wife? Rife? Worse! both worse! Sweetest of strife—of strife—strife,

"Winning the dearest that life can give!"

No! that was not good, not good at all: Villon would have turned the rhyme better than that. But then Villon, wild rogue though he was, was a poet. The dearest life can give—the dearest? What was the dearest life could give? As the question, idly asked, fastened on his mind his whistle sobered into silence, and he plodded on through the dust, seeing neither the sunshine nor the shade.

France came first, the King had said, and then had made it clear that he was France. Was the King's service the dearest thing life could give? In times of peace, when the millstones and the hearts of men alike grind placidly, patriotism is a cold virtue, and even in the hot passion of war it is often the magnetism of the individual man—the personal leader—who wakens the enthusiasm of desperate courage rather than the cause in whose name men die. Roland, La Mothe told himself, might have roused such an enthusiasm, or Coeur de Lion, or Joan of Arc, but never that fierce corpse of Valmy. And if the father was France, what was the son—the twelve-year boy so dreaded and so loved? Was he not France too? Did France plot against France? "All is not well at Amboise," said the King. If that was true in the sense the father meant it, what then? Was this dull ailing boy a double parricide to his father's knowledge?

That, by the law of association of ideas, called up a new thought, and a rush of warmth, which drew none of its heat from the sunshine, flushed La Mothe. What if the boy, dull and neglected though he was, hid such a love for the father as the father hid from the boy, and what if cunning Stephen La Mothe should find it out and make this torn France one in heart? And so, because however one follows the clues through this maze of life they always lead to love at the end, La Mothe broke into his song again:

"Heigh ho! Love is my life,
Live I in loving, and love I to live.
Heigh ho! Sweetest of strife,
Winning the dearest that life can give.
Love, who denied me,
Hast thou not tried me——

And now, plague take the verse, where is my rhyme for the end?"

But a turn of the road brought him to Limeray with the stream of the Eisse flowing beyond. Another league and he would reach Amboise—Amboise, where the shuttles of fate, the man and the woman, Fear and Love as the King had called them, were waiting to weave into the warp and woof of life a pattern which would never fade; Amboise, where an end was to come—he had forgotten to ask Commynes what end—an end which in some obscure way was to serve Commynes and serve France. "If I lift a finger he hangs," said the King. That, no doubt, was the human slime of the gutter who had

roused Commynes' contempt, and yet who was his passport to the castle. A pretty passport, and one not much to his credit, thought La Mothe, and fell to wondering if Ursula de Vesc of the uncertain eyes would class them as birds of a feather—Ursula who found Amboise dull and was to kiss the poet as Margaret had kissed Alain Chartier. But Chartier had been asleep at the time, while La Mothe promised himself he would be very much awake, and then called himself slime of the gutter for the thought. This was not the chivalry and respect for all women he had learned in Poitou. Who was he that a woman, sweet and good he had no doubt, should kiss him because Amboise was dull, and if she did would she be sweet and good? He pulled a wry face and shook himself angrily, the thought was like a bad taste in the mouth.

At Grand-Vouvray he forded the Loire, with Amboise sloping up from the river in full sight, the red roofs of its houses, huddled almost underneath the Château for protection, glowing yet more ruddily in the setting sun, and entered the town by the Tours gate as Commynes had bidden him. Reared high above the town it at once awed and protected was the grey castle, towered and turreted like a fortress, and fortress it was,—fortress, palace, and prison in one. Round town and castle alike lay the river, holding them in its embrace like a guardian arm, and beyond stretched the rich fertility of the Orleanais.

The Chien Noir was easily found. It seemed as well known in Amboise as Notre Dame in Paris, and from the warmth of his reception La Mothe guessed shrewdly that his coming was expected. Innkeepers were not prone to lavish welcomes on wandering minstrels who carried all their world's gear on their back like any snail. For such light-hearted folk an open window at night was an easier method of payment than an open purse.

"A room and supper? Both, monsieur, and of the best. For the first what do you say to this?" and the landlord threw open a door with a flourish of pride. "Not in the Château itself will you find a better. Two windows, as you see: bright by day and cool by night, with all the life of the town passing up and down the road to keep you company if you are dull, and the castle gates in full view so that none can go in or out and you not know it. And for supper—I am my own cook and you may trust Jean Saxe. Give me twenty minutes, monsieur, twenty little minutes, and you'll say blessed be the Black Dog of Amboise!"

"And who are in the castle?"

"Two or three units with a dozen of noughts to their tail to give them value; Monsieur de Commynes —"

"Monsieur de Commynes? Do you dare speak of Monsieur de Commynes so insolently?" burst out La Mothe, too indignant in his loyal devotion to Commynes to remember that a wandering singer ate the bread of sufferance and had no opinions. But the innkeeper took no offence, which again suggested that he had his own private opinion of the knapsack and the lute.

"Monsieur, I meant no harm," he protested humbly. "I am Monsieur de Commynes' man—that is, the King's man—to the death."

"Well, let it pass. Who else are at the Château?"

"Mademoiselle de Vesc——"

"Does she come next in consequence? Why not the Dauphin?"

"Oh! The Dauphin!" and Jean Saxe blew out his lips in contempt. "We who live in Amboise do not think great things of little Charles. To my mind little Charles is one of the noughts. But wait till you go to the Château and then you will understand for yourself."

"And why should I go to the Château?"

"Because they love music," and the fellow grinned knowingly as he cocked a cunning eye at the exposed lute, "because there is another who loves music and can open the doors and will say—— There! do you hear him? La, lilla, la! La, la, lilla, la! He always sings over the third bottle, and the King—God bless him—pays for all."

Opening the door to its widest Saxe stood aside listening, his head on one side, his hand beckoning familiarly to La Mothe, as up the dark well of stairs there came the rise and fall of a man's voice in a brisk chant. No words could be caught, but the air ran trippingly, and if the higher notes broke in a crack which told of age or misuse, or both together, the lower ran clear and full, and the tune ran on with a rollicking, careless awing which showed that, whoever might cavil, the singer had at least one appreciative hearer—himself!

"A wonderful man, wonderful," whispered Saxe, his small eyes twinkling with appreciation, but whether at the music or because the King paid for all, La Mothe was uncertain. "A poet of poets, a drinker of drinkers, and a shrewd, bitter-tongued devil drunk or sober. Not that he grows drunk easily, not he! and always he sings at his third bottle."

"What is his name?"

"Whatever he chooses, monsieur, and so long as the King pays what does a name matter? He serves the King as I do and—with great respect—as you do also. Did I ask your name when you said, 'A room and supper'? Not I!"

"I am called Stephen La Mothe."

"As you please, monsieur, and I don't doubt you will eat as good a supper by that name as by any other. Give me twenty minutes and you will say the Black Dog of Amboise is no cur."

Nor was Jean Saxe's boast unjustified. La Mothe not only supped but ate, and with such satisfaction that in the peace of a healthy hunger crowned with as healthy a digestion—unappreciated blessings of four-and-twenty—he forgot alike King and Dauphin, Valmy and the Grey Gates of Amboise in the shadows across the road.

But neither was allowed to remain forgotten. As he sat over the remains of his supper, tapping out a verse of his love song with his finger-tips on the table, the door from the common room of the inn was opened and a man entered whom La Mothe at once guessed to be one of his three good friends in Amboise. In one hand he carried a lighted candle, in the other a great horn cup.

"Thanks, Jean," he said patronizingly, nodding towards the room he had left as he spoke. "Close the door behind me, my good fellow: both my hands are full." Then raising the candle, he turned and scrutinized La Mothe with a curiosity as great as La Mothe's own and much more frankly evident.

And he was worth studying, as a rare specimen is studied in the difficulty of classification. If there were many such men in France La Mothe had never yet met one of them. He was under middle height, the jaunty, alert youthfulness of his slim figure, supple without great strength, contradicted by the grey which shot with silver the thin hair falling almost to his narrow shoulders, and, as La Mothe searched him in the wavering, guttered candle-light, it flashed upon him that contradiction was the note of all his characteristics. The weak chin with the unkempt straggle of a beard gave the lie to a forehead magnificent in its abundant strength of mental power: the promise of the luminous, clear eyes was robbed of fulfilment by the loose mouth with the slime of the gutter and sensuality of the beast writ large upon its thick lips. From the thin peaked nose upwards it was the face of a son of the gods who knew his parentage and birthright; but downward that of a human swine who loved the foulness of the trough for the trough's sake. A Poet of poets, said the eyes: Slime of the gutter and old age unashamed of its shame, retorted the mouth; and both spoke truth. Evidently his scrutiny satisfied him, for he heaved a sigh of contentment as he drew nearer to La Mothe.

"The image of what I was at your age," he said, and again there was the note of contradiction. The voice was the sweet, full voice of a singer, but ruined at the first emotion into roughness by excess. Placing the candlestick on the table he lifted La Mothe's wine bottle and smelt it with slow carefulness, applying it first to one nostril then to the other. "Vintage '63," he said appreciatively, "and that animal Saxe fobs me off with '75."

"Then try my '63," said La Mothe, "and we shall see if Saxe has another bottle of the same."

Promptly the contents of the horn mug were flung with a splash into the open fireplace at La Mothe's back.

"Just what I was at your age! The same to a hair! A gay companion generous of heart and purse. Yes," he went on, half seating himself on the table-edge and sucking down the wine with slow appreciative gulps, "'63; I knew I could not be mistaken, though it is four years since I tasted it last. The palate, Monsieur La Mothe, is like nature and never forgets. For that reason we should never outrage either."

"Four years!" repeated La Mothe with mock admiration, then remembering that this was a poet of poets and should know his Villon, he quoted, "'And where are the snows of Yester Year?'"

The narrow shoulders broadened with a start, the bright eyes grew yet brighter, and a firmer set of the mouth gave the face that note of strength it so sorely needed. If it were not that he was already deep in his fourth bottle La Mothe would have said the wine had set his blood on fire, warming him with a fictitious energy, so sudden and so marked was the change.

"Ah ha!" he said, setting down the horn mug as he leaned towards La Mothe, and this time the voice was as full and round as a woman's. "So you know your Villon, do you? rascal that he was!"

"Was? Is Villon dead?"

"Dead! No! But his rascality is dead: dead but not forgotten! Saints! what a dear sweet life it gave him while it lived, that same rascality. 'Where are the snows of Yester Year?' That is the cry of all the years after, say, four- or five-and-twenty." He paused, his bright keen eyes watching La Mothe with a wistful humour in them, half envious, half reminiscent. "Four-and-twenty! Up to that age it is, Oh, for next year's suns! Oh, for the flowers of a new spring's plucking! and ever after, 'Where are the snows of Yester Year?' I think," he added, pursing his mouth reflectively, "that what the priests call Hell is hot just because last year's snows never come back."

"Gone!" said La Mothe, falling into his humour, "dead like Villon's rascality, but as unforgotten. But are you sure Villon is alive?"

"Monsieur," and the little man slipped from the table-edge to his feet and bowed, his eyes twinkling with an intense enjoyment, "I can vouch for him as you can for Stephen La Mothe: I have the honour to present to you Francois Villon, Master of Arts of Paris and of all the crafts of this wicked world."

CHAPTER IX

FRANCOIS VILLON, POET AND GALLOWS-CHEAT

La Mothe stared up at him incredulously. "You Francois Villon?" he began; "Francois Villon the—the ___"

The gallows-cheat, the human pitch whose very touch is defilement was what was in his mind, but with those clear luminous eyes looking down unashamed into his own he could not put the brutal thought into the naked brutality of words. But Villon read something of his meaning in his eyes and rounded off the sentence for him.

"The King's Jackal!" he said, not without a sour resentment.

"Nécessité faict gens mesprendre:
Et fain sallir le loup des boys!

You don't believe it? But you have been dandled on the knees of respectability all your little life: what do you know of necessity or hunger? I know both, and I tell you necessity and hunger are two gods before whom all who meet them bow down. Better a live jackal than a dead poet. Besides, is he not the greatest of kings? Bishop Thibault had me in gaol for a mere slip of the fingers and talked of a judicial noose—the third I've looked through—but the King fetched me out—God save the King!"

"God save the King!" echoed La Mothe, for want of something better to say. His mind was still confused by this sudden upheaval of his ideals. All that was best in Villon's poetry had stirred his enthusiasm, while all the much which was worst had left his sane wholesomeness untainted. To the half-dreamer, half-downright, practical lad in Poitou, Villon, with his jovial, bitter humour and even flow of human verse, had been something of an idol, and when our idols crash into ruin the thunder of the catastrophe bewilders judgment. But there was more than bewilderment, there was an inevitable disgust. The frankness of this disgust Villon discovered.

"Besides, again, my very young friend," he went on, "what are you in Amboise at all for, you and your lute? Is Villon the only King's Jackal here in the Chien Noir? Do we not hunt in a couple, and have you as good an excuse for your hunting as poor Francois Villon, who looked through a halter, and found the eternity beyond unpoetical to a man of imagination? What brought you to Amboise, I say?"

"The King's orders: the peace of France," began La Mothe, but though the words were fine swelling words in the mouth they somehow failed to fill the stomach of his sense. Nor did Villon let him finish.

"And I say the same. What is more, I say them openly, and do not drown the words with the twanging of a lute. Not that I blame you—not I,

'Toute beste garde sa pel,'

or, as a greater poet than Francois Villon has said, Skin for skin, all that a man hath will he give for his life. Whose hide you guard, your own or another's, I don't know and don't care. Mine was that of bare life, and there you sit and look disgust at me as if to cling fast to this good gift of God which comes to a man but once were a sin. And what are you doing in Amboise? No!" he interrupted himself hastily, emphasizing the negative with a rapid gesture of both hands, "don't tell me. If there is one thing more dangerous than knowing too little it is knowing too much. Tell me, rather, what you want me to do for you and tell me nothing more."

"Gain me a footing in the Château."

"I can open the doors, but the footing you must gain and hold for yourself. I warn you Amboise is well guarded. Oh! not with pikes, cross-bows, and such-like useless things in which our beloved King puts his faith, but by eyes that see and hearts that love, and so Amboise is a hard nut to crack. But your teeth are strong, and if the good God had made no peach stones there would be no peaches, and, my faith! peaches are worth the eating."

He drew a long breath and sat silent, the horn mug, which he had again filled and emptied, tilted against his thigh. A smile flickered his loose mouth, and the full bright eyes, turned toward the vacancy of the empty fireplace, were sparkling with reminiscences.

And who should have reminiscences if not Francois Villon? There was not such another judge of peaches in all France, no such authority upon their eating, and few who had broken more teeth over their stones. The smile broadened into a soft chuckle, laughter deepened into puckers the many wrinkles of his crow-footed temples, and he wagged his grey head in the warm appreciation of a happy memory. Dipping a finger-tip into a pool of spilt wine he wrote on the table reflectively, and as La Mothe watched his leering face he understood Commynes' outspoken contempt of this old man unashamed of his shamefulness.

"Peaches," he said, scratching his chin with a wet forefinger; "my faith! yes! I have climbed walls for them, robbed gardens of them, found them in market baskets—the gutter even. What matters where they come from so long as the cheek is warm, the bloom fresh, the skin smooth, and the sweetness full in the mouth. And where are they now? Aye! aye! 'Where are the snows of Yester Year?' My young friend, my very young friend, you have but one life, and when you drop it behind you see that only the husks of its possibilities are left: crush the grapes while you may and drink the wine."

"I thought," said La Mothe, "that the rascality of Francois Villon was dead? Leave it in its grave, if you please. It is decenter buried out of sight and does not interest me. How am I to gain entrance to Amboise?"

Villon turned to him with an elaborate appearance of carelessness, but the unctuous complacency was wiped from his face, and the narrow eyes and mouth showed how deep was his anger at La Mothe's disgusted contempt.

"How, but as my friend, pupil, and protégé," he replied, with evident enjoyment of the other's discomfiture at the unwelcome association. Then with incredible swiftness his mood changed. The raillery passed from his voice and he went on bitterly, "Do you think I love my life? Perhaps I do—at times. But not always, no, not always. You see that fly there on the table? Watch it now. It tastes the spilt wine, the ragout with its spices, the salad with its oil and its vinegar, everything within reach which tickles its palate: then it rubs its stupid head with its forelegs and trots back to the wine again. Presently"—and Villon suited the action to the word—"a great hand turns an empty tumbler over it and there it is: all the delights of the world it has lost clear within sight, but out of reach—always out of reach. That, my young friend, is what is called Hell. Do you blame the fly because it remembers the wine and spice of life? Perhaps if the great hand is merciful it draws the glass to one side, thus, and still to one side, thus and thus and thus, until, phit! there is a little red patch and no fly; yes, perhaps. Aye, aye, I have seen life. But it is better for the fly to laugh as it runs round and round under the glass than to sulk and cry its heart out for the snows of Yester Year. God save the King!"

The abrupt change of thought and the sudden end seemed to La Mothe so irrelevant that he sat in silent bewilderment, but in an instant comprehension came and a sense of compassion, almost of respect, shot through the disgust.

"Perhaps the hand will lift the glass," he said, "and let the fly back to its spilt wine and spices?"

Villon eyed La Mothe sourly. "Will that give me back my twenty years? Bah! the palate is as stale as the spilt wine, and when the good of life is gone life itself may go. There is Saxe knocking at the door. My faith! but you have indeed scared him into discretion; he never knocks for me. Perhaps he has brought that second bottle."

But Saxe was empty-handed, and by the light of the candle La Mothe could see a quizzical grin upon his face.

"Monsieur," he began, but which of the two he addressed was uncertain, "they are dull at the Château."

"And have sent for Francois Villon to make sport! I have dropped the 'de,' Monsieur La Mothe, there are so many rascals amongst the nobility nowadays that I find it more distinguished to be the simple commoner. Dull at the Château! Good Lord! don't I know it!" He paused, lifting his head with a quick, bird-like motion: a cunning smile wrinkled his face and he smote the table with his open hand. "Dull, are they? There, my hedge-minstrel from Valmy, is your welcome ready made. Bring your lute and make pretty Ursula's grey eyes dance to a love song, prude that she is."

"To-night?" said La Mothe doubtfully. "Surely not to-night: the Dauphin might resent a stranger's coming so late."

"The Dauphin? Phit! Little Charles is pretty Ursula's echo and nothing more. Come, let us go."

"Then Mademoiselle de Vesc may object."

"Mademoiselle de Vesc? So you know her name, do you? And what girl objects to a love song? I never yet knew one who did, and Francois Villon has lived his life. If they pout and turn aside don't believe them: it's just that you may not see how the heart beats. Black eyes, blue, grey, hazel, brown; Fat Meg and Lean Joan, wrinkled fifty and smooth sixteen, their eyes have all the same sparkle, the same dear light in them when the heart melts. I should know, for I have made love to every colour under the sun. Except Albino," he added reflectively and with the conscientious air of one who desires to tell the whole truth. "I wonder what it would be like to make love to an Albino. But now I shall never know, the fly must run round and round its glass until the day of the red blotch. It is a mercy I tasted the oil and vinegar in time. That disgusts you, does it? My young friend, you must learn not to say more with your face than you do with your tongue if you are to keep your secrets and the King's. Come, I talk too much and they are waiting for us."

But Stephen La Mothe left his lute behind him. He had accepted the part allotted to him half as a jest and half for the sake of the adventure it promised, but Villon had put a less pleasant gloss on this open-faced masquerade, nor had the blunt question, Why are you in Amboise? been easy of answer. Or rather, the answer was easy, but one he did not relish in its naked truth. If to be the secret almoner of the King's love for the Dauphin had been the sole reply to the question, his scruples would have been as light as his love song. But that answer was insufficient: there was a second answer, an answer which Commynes knew and these two men, Villon and Saxe, suspected, one which would leave a soiling on clean hands, yet which must be faced.

He found himself in the position of a circus-rider who, with one foot on the white horse—which was Honour—and the other on the piebald—which was duty and a King's instructions,—has lost control of their heads and feels his unhappy legs drawn wider and wider apart with every stride. And in the emergency La Mothe did exactly what the circus-rider would have done—he clung to both with every desperate sinew on the strain. To keep his piebald still under him he went with Villon to the Château, and that he might not part utterly from his white he left his lying lute behind him. But he was not happy: mental and spiritual unhappiness is the peculiar gift of compromise.

Nor did Villon make any protest at his decision. "As you will, it is between you and the King," he said, with all the indifference of the beast whose one thought is for his own skin, and then immediately proved that he was less indifferent than he seemed. "But if I knew which of the two you wish to win over, the boy or the woman, I might help you."

"The boy," answered La Mothe, remembering the gifts of a father's love which lay in the saddle-bags Commynes had brought for him to the Château. Ursula de Vesc was but a means to an end, the Dauphin was the end itself.

"The boy?" Villon paused as they crossed the road in the sweet coolness of the young night, and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "That's not so easy. Women, of course, I know like my ten fingers, but children are too subtle for me. And little lathy Charles with his long, narrow white face and obstinate chin, is no A B C of a boy. You must know something more than your horn-book before you understand him. To-day he received Monsieur de Commynes with all the gravity of the Pope: 'Where is Monsieur Tristan, Tristan of the House of Great Nails?' he asked, peering about him with those dull, tired eyes of his which see so much more than most men imagine. 'Tristan?' says Monsieur de Commynes, very sourly for so great a man, 'Tristan does not travel with me, Monseigneur.' 'He must be somewhere near,' says little Charles, 'since you come from my father, do you not? and you are both friends of his.'

It was a sharp thrust and it was not the Dauphin who looked the fool. Now, was that more or less than the impishness that's in all boys, prince or gutter rat? More, I say. No, children are too subtle for me: give me women for simplicity! But I may help you with him all the same."

Though a king dwelt in Valmy and a king's son in Amboise, never was there a greater contrast than between the watchfulness exercised for their safety. At Valmy guards had thronged at every turn, more vigilant than pickets who hold the lives of a sleeping army in their keeping, but at Amboise the doors swung open to the touch of almost the first comer, though it was not easy to be certain how much of this laxity was due to the guarantee of Villon's presence. A careless porter kept the outer gate, a single sentinel, lounging in the guard-room, let them pass into the central court unchallenged, and the servant or two they met upon the stairs gave them no more than a heedless glance. That, at least, was La Mothe's first impressions. But when he saw the same face in the lower hall, again at the stair-head, yet again in the ante-room, and recognized that the plainly dressed serving-man had kept them under observation at every turn, unobtrusively but of evident purpose, he decided that a casual stranger could not have penetrated to the heart of Amboise without first giving a good account of himself. The watcher was Hugues, the Dauphin's valet. And yet when Villon gently drew aside a curtain masking a doorway which opened upon the stair-head, there was no one in attendance to announce them. It was as if the King said, more significantly, more emphatically than in any words, "My son may be the Dauphin, but I alone am France."

"There are the boy and the woman," said Villon softly, "Charles and Ursula de Vesc. Now, had I been your age I would rather have won the woman."

CHAPTER X

LOVE, THE ENEMY

Charles was seated on a low stool at the further end of the room, a pale-faced boy with dull, peevish eyes closely set together, the long Valois nose, and a thin, obstinate mouth. His dress was severely, obstinately, contemptuously plain. Again it was as if the King said, This is not the greatness or the glory of France! But love and care had redeemed the derisive parsimony. All the lad wore was exquisitely neat and the very severity lent the little figure a dignity of its own.

Beside him, but a little behind, stood Love, the Enemy, Ursula de Vesc, a slim figure in white. One arm was flung over his shoulder, the hand holding the boy's hand as he raised it across his breast, and she seemed to draw him back to her so that he half leaned, half lay against her knee. Her other hand was caught up against her side below the rounded breast, and pressed there so tensely that the slender, bloodless fingers lay ivory-white against the hardly purer white of the bodice. The whole attitude was one of spontaneous, natural, womanly affection, but as Stephen La Mothe looked a second time he seemed to find in it both defence and defiance, or if not defiance, then that vigilant watchfulness which is almost an antagonism. The clasping arm spoke protection, but a protection which said, "Touch if you dare."

Nor did the expression of her face change his thought. The clear grey eyes were alert with something more than a girl's fresh interest, the firm mouth, even while the lips moved, was set in an unconscious strain, and across the broad forehead two lines were shadowed where no lines ought to have been. If the face of age, when the sorrows and experience of years have written anxiety for the uncertain morrow across it, moves the heart by the story it tells, how much more the face of youth lined by cares which merciful Time should still have held unrevealed? There are more valleys of shadows than that of death, and it seemed to La Mothe that the gloom of some one of them had gathered thickly round Ursula de Vesc.

Of the three or four others grouped at the further end of the room Commynes was the only familiar figure, and though all turned at the noise of the brass rings jangling on their rod as Villon drew the curtain there was no recognition in his eyes. It was the opening of the lying masquerade, and La Mothe vaguely felt the white horse stumble as it swerved from the straight course. The soiling of clean hands spoken of by Commynes on the road to Château-Renaud had begun.

"Gain the girl and win the boy," whispered Villon as, with his hand upon La Mothe's arm, they walked up the room together, then aloud, "Monseigneur and Mademoiselle——"

"Monseigneur, if you please," interrupted the girl, but though she spoke to Villon her eyes were on La

Mothe. The voice was cold, the words at once a self-effacement and a rebuke. It was as if she said, "I know my place: know—and keep—yours."

"Monseigneur," went on Villon, quite unruffled, "with the ills of life come their cure: Amboise was dull and I present to you Monsieur Stephen La Mothe."

The Dauphin made no immediate answer, but glanced up at Ursula de Vesc with a question in his eyes, and his clasp on her hand tightened, drawing her yet closer to him. It was the action of a child to its mother rather than that of a boy of twelve to a girl not twice his age, and to those who understood it was curiously instructive. Looking down upon him she smiled and nodded, nor did the gracious softening of the tender face escape La Mothe. Her eyes were grey, and surely grey eyes were the sweetest in all the world?

"Monsieur La Mothe," repeated Charles, as if the girl's look had given him courage to speak. "Monsieur La Mothe of—Valmy?"

"Monsieur La Mothe of everywhere," replied Villon hastily, before La Mothe had time to answer. "Singers and poets are of all the world. They say it took seven cities to give Homer birth."

"And Monsieur La Mothe is another Homer?" said the girl, and Stephen winced at the insolent curve of her lips. He was quite sure they were never meant for such a curve, surely a Cupid's bow would be more natural than contempt, disdain, and a few other injurious opinions all in the one expression. In this belief he hastened to reply, allowing no time for Villon to intervene.

"No, mademoiselle, I am neither a singer nor a poet, at least not such a one as Monsieur Villon."

"I hope not, for your credit's sake," answered the girl drily, nor did she seek to keep the scorn from her voice. "As both singer and poet Monsieur Francois Villon is beyond his age."

"There is no such critic as the one who fails to understand," said Villon, his wrinkled face white with anger, "and I see I was right at first, and should have said Mademoiselle and Monseigneur, not Monseigneur and Mademoiselle."

"Master Villon, you are impertinent," broke in Commynes, who loved Ursula de Vesc little, but hated Villon more.

"Monsieur de Commynes, if it were not another impertinence I would say that like breeds like," retorted Villon, entirely unabashed. He returned Commynes' dislike with energy, and so long as he served the King he had little to fear from the King's minister.

"Poets are privileged," said Mademoiselle de Vesc. "And Monsieur Villon has paid me a compliment: I neither understand his poetry nor desire to." Her tone was still contemptuous and had in it no thanks to Philip de Commynes for his reproof on her behalf. She resented it, rather, since she had no desire to owe him either gratitude or thanks.

For a moment there was a pause, a moment which seemed the prelude to a sarcastic outbreak from one or other of those she had wilfully irritated in that intolerance which so often goes hand in hand with a spirit of self-sacrifice. But Stephen La Mothe interposed.

"Mademoiselle, may I have the honour of being presented to Monseigneur?"

"You?" she said, the lines deepening across her forehead. "A roadside singer presented to the Dauphin! Surely you forget yourself—and him?"

"Even a roadside singer may be a loyal son of France," he retorted, looking her full in the face. He keenly resented the false position into which the King's ill-considered scheme had thrust him, but he had gone too far to retreat. "You know best, mademoiselle, whether the Dauphin has need of a man's honest love and devotion."

"Devotion that is here to-day, was God knows where yesterday, and will be God knows where to-morrow! Merci! the Dauphin is indeed grateful."

"Spitfire!" murmured Villon, but so cautiously that only La Mothe heard him. "Certainly I should have said Mademoiselle and Monseigneur. Or better still have left the Monseigneur out altogether. You do not go the right way. Win the girl, I tell you, and the boy will follow like a sheep."

"Let me win her my own way," answered La Mothe, which has always been the man's desire since

Adam was in Eden with the one woman in all the world. Then he went on aloud, "Pour your scorn on it as you will, mademoiselle, it is devotion that will wait patiently in Amboise until it has proved itself."

"That will wait patiently in Amboise?" she repeated. Her eyes challenged his as she spoke, and in them there was nothing of the light the sons of Adam have loved to see in a woman's eyes so that they might dwell together in Paradise.

"Why not? And if a poor gentleman desires to see France in this fashion is there any reason against it?"

"A poor gentleman, but not a poor minstrel?"

"As both I can but give my best. May I have the honour, mademoiselle?"

Her clasp upon the boy's hand must have tightened, for again he raised his face to hers as she stooped over him, speaking softly. This time it was he who nodded.

"You know best," he whispered back, and the words would have given La Mothe food for thought had he heard them. "As you say, it will be safer to have him before our eyes than behind our backs. We may be quite sure that Hugues will watch him. Yes, I agree: at least he is prettier to look at than that beast of a Villon."

From her side, where she held it pressed, her left hand slipped down across the Dauphin's shoulder until it too drew him towards her, but when she raised her head the lines were smoothed from the forehead, and if the grey eyes were still watchful, they watched through a smile.

"Monseigneur permits it," she said. "Monseigneur, I have the honour to present to you Monsieur Stephen La Mothe."

"Monsieur La Mothe of where?" asked the boy gravely.

"Of Landless, in the Duchy of Lackeverything," replied La Mothe, bowing with an equal gravity, and at the adroit parrying of a difficult question the smile crept down from Ursula de Vesc's eyes until it loosened the hard lines of the mouth, and bent them to that Cupid's bow La Mothe so much desired to see. "I have many fellow-subjects, Monseigneur."

"Another name for that duchy is Amboise," said Charles, "and so, monsieur, it is my wish that you make the castle your home for as long as it pleases you."

He spoke with such a settled seriousness that it was difficult to be sure whether he understood the jest and played up to it in that spirit of make-believe which had drawn down the King's anger or answered out of a dull uncomprehension. Nor did La Mothe care which it was. His heart leaped within him at the double promise opened up of fulfilling the King's mission at his ease and watching the unbending of the curved bow, but he answered with an equal gravity.

"Then Landless is not Houseless, Monseigneur, and to devotion gratitude is added."

"Discretion and good appetite give a man a longer life than either," said Villon.

"But remember," and Commynes spoke to La Mothe for the first time, "the King has first claim upon both."

"On discretion and good appetite?" said Villon gravely. "I fear, Monsieur d'Argenton, His Majesty in his present health has more need of the second than the first."

"Take your ribald impertinences elsewhere, but beware how you attempt them upon me elsewhere," answered Commynes, with a stern contempt. "Here Monseigneur and mademoiselle's presence protect you."

"But if I took them elsewhere, even to Paris—and, heavens! how I wish I could—Amboise would be duller than ever," protested Villon, then added, with a significance of tone which gave the careless words a weight, "let us hope that Monseigneur and mademoiselle can protect each other as well as me."

Again there was a dangerous silence, and this time it was Ursula de Vesc who turned aside the threatening storm.

"Monsieur La Mothe is to cure our dullness. Tell us a story, monsieur, if you will neither sing nor play. We love a story, do we not, Charles?"

"A story?" repeated La Mothe slowly. The chance suggestion, more than half malicious, had given him an unexpected opening, and he was turning in his mind how best to use it. "Why, yes, I think I might. Once upon a time——"

"Wait a moment," said Charles. "Here, Ursula," and he rose from his stool as he spoke, "you sit down and I will sit at your feet and lean against your knee. There! That is better. Now we are both comfortable. What is the story about, monsieur?"

"It is an eastern tale, Monseigneur."

"I like the east better than the west, don't you, Ursula?" and he looked up in the girl's face with a laugh, then at Commines in a way which lent the words point and meaning. Valmy, La Mothe remembered, lay towards the west. "Now, monsieur, we are ready."

"There was once a king of the Genie who dwelt in a certain part of Arabia. He was a very great and a very wise king, the greatest and wisest his kingdom had known for many centuries. During his reign he had added province to province——"

"At whose expense?" broke in Villon. "In love and the building of kingdoms there is always a giving and a taking."

"Silence!" cried Charles sharply. "If you interrupt again I will have you removed, even though you are who you are. Now, monsieur, go on, please."

"He added province to province," continued La Mothe, "until in all that part of Arabia there was no such kingdom for greatness or for power, and no king so feared by the kings of the surrounding countries. But though his affairs were so prosperous he had one bitter grief which was never absent from his thoughts: he was estranged from his only son, whom he loved with all a father's love."

"Yes," said Charles gravely, "I see this is really an eastern story: a kind of a fairy tale, is it not, Monsieur La Mothe? A tale one wishes were true, but knows is all make-believe."

"All fairy tales have a heart of truth," answered La Mothe, "and this is a very true one, Monseigneur, as I hope you will believe before I have ended. In all his cares of state, and with so great a kingdom his cares were very many, there was no such care, no such sorrow, as this longing, unsatisfied love of the father's heart. Day and night his one thought was how he might win for his old age the love which his boy——"

"Ursula, I am tired," and Charles rose with a yawn. "Monsieur La Follette, will you please call Hugues, and I will go to bed? If we are duller to-morrow than we are to-day we will hear the rest of the story, but I don't think I like it very much. Even fairy tales should sound probable. Good night, Monsieur d'Argenton, good night, Monsieur La Follette, good night, Monsieur La Mothe," and with a bow which contrived to omit Villon from its scope the Dauphin left the room, followed by Ursula de Vesc. But at the door she paused a moment.

"A room will be made ready for you in the Château, Monsieur La Mothe, and perhaps to-morrow you will tell me the end of your story?"

"Dull?" said Villon, stretching himself with vigorous ostentation. "My faith, yes! If you are wise, friend La Mothe, you will finish the night with me at the Chien Noir. It is not often you can rub shoulders with genius familiarly."

But Commines already had a hand on La Mothe's arm.

"Genius?" he said, sternly contemptuous. "Yes! Genius depraved and degraded: genius crapulous and drunken. Take advice, Monsieur La Mothe, and bide indoors: the foulest soiling of God's earth is a foul old age unashamed of its disgrace." Then lowering his voice to a whisper, he added, "Come to my room when all is quiet, son Stephen. Look out for the cross of shadow and take care that the de Vesc girl does not see you."

The de Vesc girl! Stephen La Mothe was almost as offended by the curtly supercilious description of Mademoiselle Ursula as Villon was at the bitter judgment so uncompromisingly passed upon him. That may have been because Cupid's bow had shot its bolt, and love's new wounds are almost as supersensitive as a poet's vanity.

CHAPTER XI

THE CROSS IN THE DARKNESS

Two or three adroit questions addressed to the servant who showed him to his sleeping-quarters gave La Mothe a sufficient clue to the whereabouts of Commynes' lodgings. That they were in the same block of buildings as his own, and on the same level, made it comparatively easy to find them. But the Château must first settle into sleep, and he had an hour or two to wait before he could safely go in search of them unobserved. In the angry mood which swayed him the delay was fortunate. For the first time in his life his temper was exasperated against the man to whom he owed everything, nor did the sight of his knapsack and lute, sent from the Chien Noir, lessen the irritation. Few things feed the flame of a man's anger as do his own faults, and in every string of the unlucky toy—for it was little more—he saw a sharp reminder of his own false pretence to flick the soreness left by Commynes.

What right had Commynes to speak of Mademoiselle de Vesc as this de Vesc girl, as if she was some lumpish wench of the kitchen instead of a sweet and gracious woman, gentle and tender as a woman should be, and yet full of a splendid courage? Yes, and La Mothe strode up and down the room to give his indignation ease by the exercise of his muscles; that was Ursula de Vesc, tender, gentle, loving: but wise in her tenderness, strong in her gentleness, and utterly without fear in her love. From which it will be seen that the Cupid's bow had sent its shaft very deep indeed, and Commynes by his contemptuous phrase had but driven it more surely home.

There be those who say love dethrones reason, but observe with what admirable logic, what cogency of deduction Stephen La Mothe could argue upon Commynes' incapacity for judgment—thus. He had misjudged Ursula de Vesc, why not also Villon? If there had been this undeserved prejudice against an innocent and helpless girl, was not his contempt for Villon equally unjustified? How, in fact, could such a man as Philip de Commynes, Commynes, the mere man of the world and of the world's affairs, understand or appreciate Villon the poet, Villon who had lifted the whole literature and poetry of France to the highest level it had yet reached? It was preposterous, ridiculous, unthinkable, the one as great a blunder as the other. So Stephen La Mothe gilded his gold, painting his lily lover-fashion time out of mind, and whitewashed into a pleasant greyness all the ugly smirchings with which Villon had so cheerfully daubed himself.

With the door drawn behind him La Mothe found the outer passage intensely dark. Its only illumination came from the narrow lancet windows through which the moonlight streamed so whitely that the rest of the gallery was yet blacker and more hidden by the contrast. Beyond, at the end, was a deeper pool of darkness which he knew was the arched entrance to the main body of the Château, his own lodgings being in a projecting wing bounded on the one side by a wide court. A few steps beyond this archway a narrow corridor cut the passageway, opening up three lanes of shadow. These were lit to a bare visibility by as many tiny lamps hung from the vaulted ceilings, mere specks of points of light too small to flicker, and such as all night long hang before the high altar of a church, symbols of changeless faith burning unquenched even in the deepest darkness of the night of the world.

Turning to the left, his hand upon the wall for guidance, La Mothe crept softly on until a further passage opened to his right. Down this he stole, breathing uneasily as men do who walk warily in the dark, intent to keep their presence secret. From the roof depended the same inadequate light, but at the farther end was a hazy blur which marked the head of the stairs, and across the floor luminous shadows drifted here and there from under doorways where the lamp still burned within the chamber. One of these chambers La Mothe knew was allotted to Commynes, and as he scanned the flagged floor of the passage, searching for the sign Commynes had given him, a shadow amongst the shadows stirred his curiosity, and he stole nearer on tiptoe: it was a mattress laid before a closed door, and stretched upon it lay a man wrapped in a blanket.

Holding his breath, La Mothe paused, listening intently. Though he had resented Commynes' brusque reference to Mademoiselle de Vesc, the wisdom of caution was obvious, and he knew the value of secrecy too well to venture an unnecessary risk. But the figure neither moved nor changed its regular deep breathing, and La Mothe slipped past noiselessly, seeking anew for the promised signal. And midway to the well of the stairs, where faint murmurings told of sleepless life even in ill-lit, ill-guarded Amboise, he found it—a nebulous dusky cross, broader than long, stretching its shadowy arms upon the flags, and at his first low tap on the panel the door was softly opened and as softly closed behind him.

"Are you sure no one saw you?"

"No one. But, Uncle, this playing at thief in the night is intolerable. It will be very much better to say quite plainly to Mademoiselle de Vesc——"

"Stephen, Stephen!" and as he spoke Commynes, who had been stooping over his signal, a tiny paper cross pinned against the foot of the door so that it blocked the flow of light from the lamp laid on the floor behind, lifted himself and laid his hand strongly on La Mothe's shoulder. "Do you know why you are in Amboise at all? Do you know it is to convict this very Ursula de Vesc of complicity in a plot to murder the King and place the Dauphin on the throne, and that the King believes the Dauphin is privy to the scheme? And do you know what part you are to play?"

Commines spoke in the anxious remonstrance of affection rather than in anger. There was no censure in the tone, no reproof, a pleading rather: but when the irritation of offence is raw it resents expostulation and rebuke alike: they are just so much salt to the wound. So was it now with La Mothe.

"It is we who conspire," he answered angrily, "we who call ourselves men and yet creep about a sleeping house to meet by stealth in the dark. And against whom? Against a weak girl, a weak, defenceless girl whose one offence is that her love is loyal to a boy as helpless as herself. A brave conspiracy truly, brave, worthy, and honourable! You saw her to-night, how she faced us for his sake, unafraid and yet very sorely afraid because she is so womanly through her courage. A girl and a half-grown boy! And we call ourselves men."

"Why do you say 'we'? Me she knows and Villon she knows, but not you."

"Some day she will, my hope is some day she will: pray God I be not ashamed to look her in the face when that day comes."

"Stephen, Stephen, what has changed you? Have you grown mad or is this that drunkenness?"

"I don't know, I only know it is something new. And if it is that drunkenness as you call it, then may I never be sober again my life long."

"Listen," and this time Commynes' voice was stern to harshness. The time for pleading, or even remonstrance, had gone by. A more vigorous schooling was needed if Stephen La Mothe was to be saved from folly. "If you must go girl-drunken as every sentimental boy does sooner or later, do not go blind-drunken or sense-drunken, but keep your eyes open and your mind clear. Mademoiselle de Vesc may be blameless or she may not: that is what we are here to prove. You call her weak, but the greatest folly of a foolish man is to despise weakness. Contempt of weakness has lost more battles than strength of arms has won. Charles the Bold despised the weakness of the Swiss, and the devotion of the weak Swiss crushed him. Weak, you say? Love is never weak. Fifty years ago a weak girl saved France because of her great love for France, and to-day another just as weak might ruin France through another great love. Never despise the power of love nor call it weak even in the weakest. If faith can remove mountains, love is greater than faith, and of mademoiselle's devotion to the Dauphin I have no doubt."

"Who has the better claim upon it?" answered La Mothe sullenly.

"Granted, but that is not the point. And what if the devotion is misdirected? It is a quality of love that it only sees the lights in the jewels and not the flaws. If love saw all the flaws in us it would hardly be love. What if Mademoiselle de Vesc, seeing the boy neglected—and I grant the neglect,—seeing him unhappy—and I grant the unhappiness,—seeing him denied his high position—and I grant the denial while I assert that the King, who is a wise king, must have wise reasons I do not understand; what if Mademoiselle de Vesc, I say, seeing all these things and understanding the reasons for them as little as I do, seeing no deeper than her devotion and knowing nothing of the King's wise reasons, were moved by this same devotion to some desperate effort which would right this wrong at any cost? Supposing that were so, what would hold her back? Fear? She is no coward, and there is no such courage on God's earth as the courage of a loving woman. Weakness? Love is strong as death and stronger, for love builds up where death can only destroy. The crime? In her eyes the crime lies in the unhappiness and neglect of Amboise, and to right the wrong by any means, however desperate, would be no offence before God or man. What would hold her back? I ask you. Nothing, nothing at all."

"Granted," said La Mothe, impressed in spite of himself and falling back upon the last resort of baffled argument. "It is all very plausible, but I do not believe it all the same."

"Because you are drunken," retorted Commynes, "and because, too, there are none so blind as those who will not see. But supposing I am right, is not the King justified, and are not we, the King's servants, justified too? And is the Dauphin such a fool as to be blind to this devotion, he who has known so little love in his life? Stephen, if the King is right and Mademoiselle de Vesc's love has overcome both fear and weakness, he is right, too, when he links Charles with her in her abominable plot."

"But why has he sent——" La Mothe broke off lamely, remembering in time that he had no right to say to Commynes, Why has he sent such a message of a father's love as lies in those saddle-bags I see in

the corner? Very naturally Commynes misunderstood the interrupted sentence.

"Why has he sent you to Amboise?"

CHAPTER XII

LA MOTHE BELIEVES, BUT IS NOT CONVINCED

But having ended the sentence Commynes broke off at the end as La Mothe had done in the middle, and with much the same embarrassment. His face, harsh and stern of feature both by nature and schooling, grew almost tender as he turned aside troubled. To speak plainly to any man of honour and generous spirit, answering his own question in direct words, would have been difficult, but how much greater the difficulty when the man was brother to that dear dead woman who had sunk to her sleep comforted by his promise of care and protection? "Watch over him, Philip, for my sake." But into the memory of the tired voice he had loved there clashed the King's harsh question so curtly asked in Valmy, and torn by the conflict of the two natures warring within him Commynes paced the room in silence. La Mothe was not the only man in Amboise who found his skill as a circus-rider tried to the utmost, and like La Mothe Commynes temporized.

"Who are we to judge the King?" He spoke harshly, even aggressively, and as if combating some undeveloped argument of La Mothe's. A burst of temper may not convince a man's own conscience, or quiet its uneasiness, but it silences its voice for a time as declamation can always silence pleading. "Who are we to question his justice or deny its right to strike? And it is as his arm of justice that you are here in Amboise."

"I?" And into La Mothe's mind, as he stood silent after the startled ejaculation, there flooded significant, misunderstood hints dropped by the King in Valmy, and by Commynes himself on the road to Château-Renaud, hints which had seemed to him meaningless in the memory of the little coat of mail which was the secret gift of a father's love. "I, the King's arm of justice? In God's name how can that be?"

"The days of Brutus have gone by," answered Commynes, never ceasing from his restless pacing of the room. The motion eased the tension of his nervous distress and made speech less formal, less difficult. "Treason is treason wherever found. You know its punishment, but the days of Brutus are gone. The justice of the King, the justice of the father, can no longer—no longer—" But even his restless pacing could not give him power to clothe the grim thought in blunt words, and Commynes was silent.

La Mothe's scornful indignation had no such reticence, nor had he yet learned how to cloak the ugliness of a naked truth in the pleasant euphemisms of diplomacy. With frank brutality he completed Commynes' broken sentence.

"The father can no longer murder the son and call it justice. But, monsieur," and it was significant that the adoptive relationship was unceremoniously swept aside, "what has the father's murder of the son to do with me?"

"Treason is treason," repeated Commynes, finding some comfort and strength in the bald platitude: it was incontrovertible and at least gave him firm ground under his feet. "Nor can treason go unpunished, or how would the throne be safe for a day? But what the father cannot do, though a king, another can and must; and must," he reiterated, steeling himself with a rising emphasis for what was to follow. "And you have been chosen as the King's arm in Amboise."

This time there was no outburst of scorn or indignation. It was not that the crisis was too deep for noisy declamation, though human nature differs from organic in that it commonly meets its most grave crises in quietness. The truth was, simply, that La Mothe did not grasp the full meaning of the words.

"The King's arm in Amboise?" he said uncomprehendingly. "The King's arm? What does that mean?" Then, by the very repetition of the phrase, enlightenment dawned in part and he shrank back, his fingers closing in upon his palms. "Not that! For God's sake, Monsieur de Commynes, say it is not that! Not that the father— Oh! it cannot be, it cannot. Is it—is it murder?"

"Justice," replied Commynes doggedly through his shut teeth. "Let us call things by their proper

names. I say justice, justice of——"

"Hell!" broke in La Mothe fiercely. "Justice is sacred, to God Almighty, and this—this—— Where is God's hand? Where is—? Oh, no, no, it is damnable, damnable!"

"Justice," repeated Commynes, quoting Louis. "Not even the son of a king is above or beyond justice."

"Vicarious murder!" retorted La Mothe. "No smooth sophism can make it less. He would have another commit an iniquity he dare not commit himself. And I am the arm of the King in Amboise? Never! God helping me. I am to obey you, Monsieur de Commynes; these were the King's orders; but not in this, never in this, never, so help me God!"

"Listen, Stephen." Commynes had fuller command of himself now and spoke more quickly, but also with more assumption of authority. "Put yourself in the King's place and consider the truth dispassionately."

"Consider dispassionately how a father can best kill his own son; yes, Uncle?"

But Commynes took no umbrage at the crude sarcasm, a sarcasm aimed at himself and the King alike. He understood it as a sign that La Mothe's mind was recovering from the shock which had swung its balance awry. Five minutes earlier he would have declared that murder could never be dispassionate. That he would listen at all was something gained.

"The King is both more and less than father," Commynes went on: "that is to say, his responsibilities are greater than those of a simple citizen, and his private rights in his son are less. He and the Dauphin do not belong to themselves. France comes first. Do you admit that France comes first?"

"God knows!" replied La Mothe moodily. The dying out of his first hot passionate protest had left him fretful and desperate. He remembered, too, something the King had said about France being the mother of them all, and at the time he had agreed; nor could he quite see where Commynes' argument might lead. "There was a time when I thought right was eternally right, but now it seems a father may wipe out his fatherhood in blood and be justified."

"France comes first," went on Commynes, emphasizing the point which he saw had weight. "The millions of lives in France come first. Could a son who plots against his father's life reign in France?"

"He is a child."

"In a year he will be old enough to reign: answer me, could such a son reign?"

"Are there not prisons?"

"You do not answer my question. I ask again, could such a son reign?"

"I am answering it in my own way, and, I repeat, there are prisons."

"And would there not be conspiracies? Would France not be torn asunder in civil war? Would the blood of France not flow like water? Be sensible, Stephen: am I not right?"

"I will never be the King's arm in Amboise, never, never. I would sooner ride back to Valmy and face the justice of the King. The justice of the King!" scoffed La Mothe, to ease his troubled soul. "And in any case I shall return to Valmy; my word is passed."

Again Commynes let the sarcasm levelled at the King's justice pass unchallenged: it is never wise to block a safety-valve when a high pressure, whether of steam or of passion, is blowing itself off.

"These things being granted," he went on, "what course is the King to follow? Is he to pardon the crime against the nation? for that is what it is; is he to pass it over in silence and leave the criminal free to weave a second and perhaps successful conspiracy? The King dare not: for the nation's sake he dare not. What then? Is he to arrest and try the prince by solemn course of law? I doubt if the Dauphin of France is not above the common law of France, but apart from that again the King dare not. France would be rent from end to end, and her enemies, England, Spain, Burgundy, would swoop upon her and lay her waste, as in the days before the coming of The Maid. I say again, the King dare not. What course is left? Nothing but the arm of justice, that justice which is Almighty God's, striking in secret, and so France is saved."

He ended, but La Mothe returned no answer. Not that he was convinced, no, not by a hairbreadth. But the sophism, and he knew it to be a sophism, was too subtle for him, and his safest refuge was silence. And yet his inability to tear the sophism to tatters was not the sole cause of the silence.

Commines' last question, What is left? though a mere flourish of rhetoric, had stirred another possible reply. Reconciliation was left, the union of father and son in love was left. Inexorable logic as voiced by Commines, if it was logic at all and not a sophism, might coerce the King to a terrible justice, but would the father's love not welcome the reconciliation of a son's penitence as a way of escape from the ultimate horror of the logic? And surely that love must be a very tender, very yearning, very forgiving love when even in the midst of just anger it could bend to such gentle thoughts as lay hidden in those gifts through the hand of a stranger. Surely, surely, surely. And so La Mothe kept silence.

"There may be no plot: there is no plot," he said at last, though in the face of Commines' assertion he had little hope he was right; then he added, "and what of Mademoiselle de Vesc?"

"The greater includes the less," replied Commines shortly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"If the King may not spare his son can he spare the girl?"

"There is no plot," repeated La Mothe, more emphatically than before, "and I shall remain in Amboise." Crossing the room he knelt beside his saddle-bags, opening and taking from them the package wrapped in a linen napkin which contained the King's gifts to the Dauphin. "I suppose I must live upon my knapsack for the present, but this I shall take with me. Is there anything more to be said?"

"Not for the present."

"Then good night."

The passage was plunged in the same quiet and as deep a gloom as when he had traversed it an hour before, and La Mothe plumed himself on regaining his room unseen. But had he paused and turned at the first angle he would have seen the shadow which lay stretched in the deeper shadows of the doorway stir itself, and Hugues' white face, a blur upon the darkness, watching him. Beyond that door slept the Dauphin, and Villon was right when he said that the guards of Amboise were not pikes or cross-bows, but eyes that saw and hearts that loved.

CHAPTER XIII

"FRIEND IS MORE THAN FAMILY"

With his overnight's irritation still unallayed, and more than ever convinced that the prejudice which could so misread Mademoiselle de Vesc must also wrong Francois Villon, La Mothe was early at the Chien Noir. Of the Amboise household he had seen nothing, which means that he had looked in vain for Ursula of the Cupid's bow, and his temper was not thereby improved. But he had the day before him, and he promised himself some recompense for his disappointment before it was many hours old. Meanwhile, he would show Villon that all who came from Valmy were not sharers in Commines' harsh judgment. He found the poet contemplative over the remains of his breakfast, but in a mood as captious as his own.

"Have you found already that the inn has a warmer welcome than the Château? I tell you this, my young friend, it will cost you less to live here than there, though in either case it is the King who pays."

"To every man his wages," answered La Mothe, but Villon shook his head. His knowledge of the paying of wages, or at least of the earning of them, gave the chance phrase a sinister meaning.

"As to that, we all look for more than our dues in this world and less in that to come. God's mercy keep us from justice! If our wages were paid in full where would we be? What is little Charles doing?"

"Sleeping, I suppose."

"And Mademoiselle de Vesc?"

"How should I know!" answered La Mothe crossly. It vexed him that Villon should speak at all of Ursula de Vesc, and still more that his answer was so lame. But recognizing the symptoms out of a wide experience, Villon only laughed softly at the brusque retort.

"Some peaches hang themselves high," he said, the laugh broadening as

La Mothe's face grew wrathful, "but they are peaches all the same. Shake the tree, my young friend, shake the tree, and see that you keep your mouth open when the fruit drops."

"Monsieur Villon, if we are to be friends——"

"So young, so very young," said Villon softly. "Friends? most certainly. If we are not friends, who should be? Are we not both jackals hunting in the one pack, and jackal does not bite jackal." Then his mood changed with a swiftness which La Mothe soon found to be characteristic, a kindness cast out the jarring banter from his face, and his luminous eyes grew wistful. "Friends? It is a good word, the very best word in the world. Friends are more than family or kinship, and not many care to call old Francois Villon friend nowadays. There was a time——" He paused, running his hand down the long trail of his beard reflectively, a slender-fingered supple hand. La Mothe noted it was, a hand that had a distinct character of its own, just as the contradictory face had, though the finger-tips were less sensitive than in the days when their itching acquisitiveness had brought their owner to the cold shadows of the gallows. "Aye! there was a time. There were four of us——"

"The ballad says six," said La Mothe.

"Four, four: a man—yet, more, a woman—may have many lovers but few friends, many to tuck an arm in his or throw it across his neck when the pockets are full. But that's not friendship, and I don't call every man friend who dips his fingers into the same till with me. Yes, there were four of us, Montigny, Tabary, Cayeux, poor snows of yester year sucked down by the cold earth. But while the blood was warm in our veins we four were as one with one purse. When it was full we laughed and sang and feasted as no king feasts, because no king has such spice of appetite nor can snap his fingers at the world and care as we could: when it was empty, and it was mostly empty, we laughed and sang the louder and shared our crusts or went gaily hungry. Brave lads every one, and brave days. Aye, aye."

"And where are they now?"

"With the snows of yester year! God knows where! and I fear me the devil knows too. Montigny was hung in '57, Tabary in '58, and Cayeux, Cayeux of the light heart and lighter fingers, went by the same path two years later: I only am left. They said I killed a man and would have hung me—me! Francois Villon! Certainly a man died or there would be no Villon now: it was either he or I, and they would have hung me." The full lips parted in a comfortable laugh and the eyes twinkled. "I appealed to Parliament in a ballad, and the humour of the notion moved the good gentlemen to mercy. 'How can we choke the breath from so sweet a singer?' said they. 'There are ten thousand hangable rogues in Paris, but only one poet amongst them!' God be praised for humour. I think it gave Francois Villon his life; but since then friendship has walked the other side of the street."

"And yet," La Mothe laid his hand on the elder man's shoulder, letting it lie there in kindness, "you who so gibe at your best self are the Francois Villon of the ballad to Mary the Mother. How is that?"

"Can I tell you?"

'Je cognois tout fors que moy mesme.'

Man is Eden in little: there is the slime of the serpent under the tree of knowledge, but the Lord God walks through the garden in the cool of the day. What are we but contradictions, shadows of Montfaucon shot through by glories from Notre Dame. Perhaps some day a clearer knowledge than ours will straighten out the tangles," and with a laugh, which had little joyousness in it, Villon plunged afresh into memories which seemed to strike the whole gamut of a soul's experience from A to G.

La Mothe allowed him to run on without interruption. The alternations of mood, tender and callous by turns, but never remorseful, never regretful, except with the regrets for a lost delight, both amused and repelled him, but at last as Villon sat silent he turned to the window and flung open the wooden sun-blinds.

"At last they are awake in the Château," he said. "Horses? hawks? Are they going hunting, do you suppose?"

"Saxe will know. Hulloo! Saxe! Saxe! What is little Charles doing to-day?"

"I was coming for you both," answered Saxe from the open door. "They are riding to Château-Renaud, and your worships are so beloved by both the Dauphin and mademoiselle that you must needs go with them. Monsieur de Commynes and Monsieur La Follette have gone hawking for the day."

"Do not go," said Villon. "They know you at Château-Renaud, and how could you explain if they

recognized you?"

"But we may not go near the inn," answered La Mothe, to whom the ride meant neither more nor less than a morning with Ursula de Vesc, therefore a delight not to be denied. "But what of horses?"

"They are being saddled this very moment," replied Jean Saxe, and then went on to paint out La Mothe's roseate dreams with the dull brush of realities. "Always," and he lowered his voice as he spoke, "whether by day or by night, you will find a horse waiting ready for your ride to Valmy. It is in the stall facing the door, monsieur. By day the stable is open and not a soul will ask questions; saddle and bridle for yourself, then ride like the devil. By night send a stone through the last window on the left and I will be with you in three seconds. Don't spare your spurs, that's my advice."

"God send the man who rides to Valmy nothing redder than a red spur." Villon had joined La Mothe at the window, and was peering out at the stir of men and horses in the open space between the inn and the castle gates.

"Saxe, what man of yours is that who is biting Grey Roland? I don't know his face."

"A stop-gap," answered Saxe indifferently. "A gipsy fellow I think he is by his colour. Old Michel is drunk in the barn—how I don't know, but the Chien Noir is none the better for it—this other is in his place for the day. I don't know his name, but he can tell a horse from a mule by more than the ears, and that's name enough for me."

"Who owns that huge, raw-boned roan?" asked La Mothe. "Surely I have seen it somewhere."

"It's as much a stranger to me as Michel's stop-gap," answered Saxe. "It's not one of the regular Château horses, that's certain. The beast has power in his legs, rough though he is. Why do you ask, monsieur?"

But La Mothe had already lost his interest. "There is the Dauphin," he said. "Come, let us go."

But his gaze was fixed on the slender figure which followed the boy, and the eyes of a much greyer age than a lover of twenty-four with the heart of eighteen might well have lit into a sparkle at the charm of the picture. He was not learned in women's stuffs, or the hundred little arts through which an accent, as it were, is put upon a charm already sufficiently gracious, or a beauty brought into yet clearer relief for the luring and undoing of the unsuspecting male, and so could not have told whether Ursula de Vesc was clad in sober grey or sunny lightness. She was Ursula de Vesc, and that was enough, Ursula de Vesc, the woman of a single hour of life, and yet the one sweet woman in the world.

"A lover's arms ought to be her riding-chair," said Villon, following La Mothe's gaze. "No, there is no offence meant," he added, as Stephen's face reddened with the beginnings of umbrage. "She may be a spitfire and not love Francois Villon, but she is a good girl, and my four eyes are not blind."

"Your four eyes?" questioned La Mothe; "most of us have but two."

"Two in my head and two in my sense, and it is by the two in his sense a man should marry. The two in the head are the greatest liars and deceivers in creation."

The Dauphin had already mounted when La Mothe and Villon crossed the roadway with their horses following, led by drunken Michel's substitute, and his greeting to both was of the curtest. The apologue of the night before was neither forgotten nor forgiven. But with Ursula de Vesc's grey eyes smiling at him La Mothe cared little for the boy's dour looks. Hugues, who had mounted his master, still waited by the horse's head, a spirited, high-bred bay, sleek and well groomed, which stood shifting its feet with impatience at the delay. The bridle of the less fiery but no less well-cared-for jennet intended for the girl was held by a stable-helper, while in a group behind the escort made ready to mount. Neither Commines nor La Follette was present; they had gone hawking, as Saxe had said, nor was Hugues booted for riding.

"Good morning, Monsieur La Mothe." Ursula de Vesc spoke gaily, frankly, as if she had not a care in the world, and the greeting in the soft clear voice stirred La Mothe's heart as the smile in the grey eyes had stirred it. "We missed you at breakfast: what early risers you poets are."

"Mademoiselle," stammered La Mothe, "my day has but now begun."

"Then you must walk in your sleep," she interrupted laughingly. "Monseigneur, do you hear? Monsieur La Mothe walks in his sleep. So do not be frightened if you hear him in the corridor o' nights. He has been up these three hours and says the day has only now begun."

"I hear," replied Charles, turning on La Mothe those dull, watchful eyes which, according to Villon,

saw so much more than men supposed. "And Hugues hears too. While Hugues sleeps at my door I shan't be frightened. Come, Ursula, mount and let us go. Bertrand is so restive I can scarcely hold him."

At that moment La Mothe felt the bridle of Grey Roland pushed into his hand with a "Hold that a moment, monsieur," and Jean Saxe's stop-gap crossed to the Dauphin's side.

"Your pardon, Monseigneur," he said, stooping, "there is a buckle loose, if your Highness would lift your leg a moment while I fasten it."

"A buckle? Where?"

"Below the saddle-flap, Monseigneur: a shift of the leg—thank you, Monseigneur, that is right," and he drew back toward the Chien Noir, nor paused until he was lost in the crowd of idlers. For a gipsy he was singularly unobtrusive.

CHAPTER XIV

FOR LIFE AND A THRONE

Slipping his foot back into the stirrup the Dauphin mechanically closed his knees, as a rider does to renew his grip after it has been relaxed. But with the tightening of the grip the bay started as if goaded by a vicious double rasp of the spurs, swerved violently, shaking his head till the chains rattled, then plunging to right and left he sprang forward at a gallop.

"Hugues, Hugues, catch the reins," cried mademoiselle, but the swerve had sent Hugues staggering, and before he had steadied himself or regained his wits Bertrand was tearing madly under the city gates, his reins hanging loose, his neck stretched like a racer's.

"The Dauphin! the Dauphin! Oh! for God's sake—Hugues—Monsieur La Mothe—is there no one to help? They will be in the Loire—drowned while you stand there staring. Oh! that I could ride like a man: why don't you move, some of you, stocks that you are?"

The gasped words were but a breath, so quickly the broken sentences followed one another, but before the frightened girl could lash them with the whip of her distress a second time La Mothe had his fingers knit in Grey Roland's mane and was climbing into the saddle, and the last he heard, as, swaying in his seat, he groped blindly for a missing stirrup, was the girl's deep breath, half sob, half cry.

Bertrand had a long start, but on Grey Roland's back was a rider who in his horsemanship had learned not only how to save his beast, so that no ounce of strength might be unduly hurried to waste, but who also knew how to compel into immediate energy all that reserve force which endures the trials of a long day's march.

Bareheaded—his hat was in his hand as he jested with Ursula de Vesc, and in the stress of the surprise he had flung it aside—La Mothe crouched low in the saddle, the reins gathered into his left hand so that he and Grey Roland alike were just conscious of the bit in the sensitive mouth. For the moment, with that tense grip of the knees, they were as one flesh; the need was they should be of one spirit. With a quiet word La Mothe soothed the excitement which might have plunged them both to sudden destruction on the rounded cobbles of the paved streets, but once the gates were passed, and the dust of the high road underfoot, he loosed the light tension and pressed his heels home into the flanks. There, ahead, a shifting vision in the rising swirl of dust, was the bay, thundering at top speed. Behind there were shouts, cries, the clatter of iron shoes upon the stones, but La Mothe heard only the muffled rhythm of galloping hoof-beats sounding through the roar of the blood swelling his temples and booming in his ears like the surf of a far-off sea. Away to the side, with a stretch of sunburnt grass between, lay the river. Let Bertrand keep to the winding road and all was well. Gallop how he might Grey Roland would wear him down, but let him swerve, let the fluttering of a bird startle him aside, and Ursula de Vesc's prophetic terrors would be justified.

As the memory of her dread flashed into his mind afresh, there swept across Stephen La Mothe one of those sudden storms of temptation which at some time or another beat into every life, even the most sheltered, and surely prove that the curse of primal sin still dwells inherent in our best humanity. "He will drown! Well, let him drown!" and in the instant of the thought, by some instinct of the brain, the loose rein was drawn in with a jerk, which forced the grey to change his stride. Let him drown and

there was an end to the tangle which made a hell in the possible heaven of Amboise, an end to the unnatural strife of father and son, an end to the threatened rending asunder of France, who was the mistress and mother of them all, whether King, Dauphin, or pawn in the terrible game of life and death, an end to the danger which hung over the head of Ursula de Vesc. Let him drown: death would pay all debts, and the crooked would be made straight.

Gritting his teeth La Mothe drew a deep breath. With the fuller realization of the thought the sudden convulsion of his heart choked him, and while his blood buzzed the louder for the possibility, fate, chance, or what you will threw the cards in the game his way. Beyond a bend of the road a waggoner's leisurely wain plodded its way to Amboise, and next instant the clearer thunder of Bertrand's hoofs came ringing back from the harder sod which lay between the river and the road. The bay had headed for the bank where, by the same bend, the river curved to a line ahead. Death would pay all debts, and the crooked would be made straight: he would pay Commines all he owed him and there would be clean hands for them both. Clean hands? "By God! No!" he cried, and shook the tightened rein loose. Clean hands? Saul, who consented to Stephen's death, was as red-handed as the man who hurled the first stone: what better was it to let the boy ride to his fate unaided? That way there was no cleansing of hands. To permit a preventable death was murder—murder.

Stooping lower La Mothe drove Grey Roland forward, urging him with voice and hand, "Faster, boy, faster, faster." That he had no spurs was a point against him, but drawing his dagger he laid the point against the wet flank. There was no need to draw blood, no need for goading. The generous heart of the beast understood the touch, and the splendid muscles coined their utmost strength, squandering it in a spendthrift, willing energy. They were gaining now, stride by stride they were gaining: Bertrand, the half Arab, had the greater endurance, but English Grey Roland the greater power and the stouter heart. Yes, they were gaining, and there was hope if only the Dauphin kept the saddle, and so far he had held his place like a crouched statue, stooping by instinct as La Mothe had stooped, and clinging to the long mane with both hands. He was no coward, boy though he was, and not once had looked back, nor did he now though the following hoofs must have been loud in his ears as stride by stride the grey gained on the bay, and the ten lengths of space between them closed to five, to three, to one, and the glint of the river rose almost at their feet. Then La Mothe spoke.

"Monseigneur, keep your nerve, it will be all right. When I say 'Now!' loose your hold and try to kick your feet free from the stirrups; leave the rest to me."

The gap narrowed foot by foot: up to the girth of the bay crept the straining muzzle of the grey, the eyeballs staring, the teeth bared, the nostrils wide, the foam flying with every jar of the hoof, up and up with a scant two yards of river-bank to spare upon the outer side, up and up till, leaning forward and aside with outstretched arm, La Mothe could feel the pressing of the Dauphin's back, and the hand closed in upon the ribs. "Now," he cried, his voice cracked and hoarse. "Now, Christ help us, now, now," and gripping the boy he reined back as tightly as he dared, reined back to feel the slender boy slip from the bay's back, hang helpless in the air an instant, then fall sprawling across the saddle. On dashed the bay, and as Grey Roland staggered in his halt the bank caved under the Arab's feet; he too staggered, rearing back too late, then plunged head foremost forward.

As, dropping the reins, La Mothe caught the Dauphin in both his arms to raise him more fully upon the saddle, he was conscious for the first time that they were followed. From behind there was a shout and the noise of hoofs, and looking across his shoulder he saw Hugues mounted on the roan riding recklessly. Beyond him the rest of the escort tailed off almost to the city gate, with Ursula de Vesc framed by the grey arch, her hand upon her breast, as it had been when La Mothe first saw her, Love the Enemy, whom he so longed to make Love the more than friend. "Win the girl and you win the boy," said Villon. But what if he had won the boy, and winning him had won Ursula de Vesc, won her to friendliness, won her to kindness, won her to trust, won her to—and Hugues thundered up breathlessly.

"Monseigneur?"

"Safe, unhurt, but I think he has fainted. Here," and lifting the lad with little effort La Mothe leaned across to Hugues and won his heart for ever by the act, "take him, you: he will be less fretted when he comes to himself. The sooner he is in mademoiselle's care the better, and I must spare Grey Roland."

"Monsieur, monsieur," stammered the valet, gathering the boy into his arms as carefully as any tender woman, "how can we thank you—how can we prove——"

"Thank Grey Roland," answered La Mothe, speaking more lightly than he felt. "I did nothing but keep my stirrups."

"Nothing?" Hugues' eyes turned to the gapped bank and followed the course of the river, void of any

trace of the bay. "Then to save a king for France is nothing. But you are right, monsieur; the sooner the Dauphin is in Amboise the better."

"Was it for this you came to Amboise?" said Villon, as La Mothe, having given Grey Roland his own time to return, halted at the inn door. The crowd had been shaken off and the two were alone. "I doubt it myself, and you should have heard Saxe curse: I give you my word it was Parisian. But, as I said last night, what you do in Amboise is between you and the King, and you won't be the first man in the world who could not see beyond a pair of grey eyes."

"Come, Villon, no Paris jests."

"This was pure nature and no jest. I stood near her there in the shadow of the gate as Roland drew in to the bay on the edge of the bank, and she forgot Francois Villon, the guard, and everybody, as a woman does when her soul speaks to her heart. Not a word had she said till then, not one, but stood breathing deep breaths; there were red spots on the cheek-bones, with those little white teeth of hers hard on her lip. But when you leant aside and gripped the boy she cried—but what matters what she cried?"

"Is not friend more than family?" said La Mothe. "Tell me, my friend."

"So you would win old Villon as well as the girl? Well, here it is then—'Thank God I was wrong, oh, thank God I was wrong: God be thanked for a good man,' and the tears were tumbling down her cheeks. My friend," and Villon's voice deepened soberly, "I who am old have been young, and I tell you this, if a man has any true salt in him at all, heaven may well open for him when a woman like Ursula de Vesc calls him good with tears on her cheeks." And La Mothe had the wisdom and humble grace to answer nothing at all. It was Villon himself who broke the silence with a whistle.

"I am forgetting, fool that I am, though I think you too would have forgotten with a pair of grey eyes weeping at your elbow. What do you call this?"

From the cloth pouch which hung from his girdle he drew a small twig and handed it to La Mothe. It was spray of wild sloe cut from a thicket and trimmed to the shape of a cross, with one stiff thorn, broad based and sharp at the point as a needle, projecting at right angles from the intersection. The marks of the knife were still fresh upon it, the bark so soft and sappy that it must have been cut from the living plant within the hour. La Mothe shook his head as he turned it over on his palm.

"This? What do you call it?"

"Many things; the shadow of death for one; revenge, I think, for another; hate, and a warning certainly, unless I am a fool as well as all the hard things Monsieur d'Argenton calls me. And perhaps I am a fool, perhaps I had better have left that lying where I found it. Almost death, that's just what it is."

"Villon, what do you mean?"

"I mean you would find just such another bit of villainous innocence under Bertrand's saddle-flap. The poor brute was driven mad by it. I picked this up where Michel's stop-gap dropped it."

"That hedge-side beggar?"

"A hedge-side beggar who carries a signet slung round his neck. His jacket opened as he stooped and the ring swung out. The hedge-side beggar boasts a crest, Monsieur La Mothe: a martlet with three mullets in chief. Now do you understand?"

"No."

"It is the crest of the Molembrais. There were two brothers, the last of their family, and Guy de Molembrais trusted our revered King—yes, I see you know the name."

Know the name? La Mothe knew it as he knew the justice of the King. Had he not given his satire a loose rein over the safe-conduct which drew this very Guy de Molembrais to Valmy, and the swift ruthlessness which brushed aside any such feeble plea as a King's good faith? If Villon was right then this little inch or two of new-cut twig might indeed be all he said, the shadow of death, revenge, hate, and a warning against further attempts of a like kind yet to be faced. But was he right?

"Are you quite sure?"

"Quite," and Villon nodded. His face was very grave: not for an instant had he slipped into his sardonic mood of ironical jest. "And, mind you, I find it hard to blame Molembrais. He must strike how and when he can."

"Does Saxe know?"

"Better not ask. I told you he swore, but that may have been at the way you pounded his horse."

La Mothe had dismounted while they talked, and now, leaving the grey where he stood, the sweat caking on his dusty flanks, he turned to the stables. But if his intention was to charge Molembrais with his cowardly attempt on the boy's life it was baulked. At the door Michel met him, his rheumy eyes still blinking from his drunken sleep.

"Where is that fellow who took your place?"

"That's what I want to know, master. Took my place, did he? I'd place him, I would, making an old man drunk to rob him of his bread."

"Who was he?"

"No good, that's all I know. Gipsy scum! rob an old man, would he? I'll gipsy him if I find hair or hoof of him. Lord, master, how liquor do make a man thirsty. You must ha' found it so yourself?"

CHAPTER XV

A QUESTION IN THEOLOGY

Never was the cynical philosophy of the proverb, Virtue is its own reward, made more clear than in the indifference with which Amboise greeted the rescue of the Dauphin. Of course, there are those who contend that virtue is in itself a sufficient reward, but there is certainly a second possible reading, and this reading La Mothe found true. No one said what a fine fellow he was, no one stared in admiration of his promptitude or in awe of his courage. Amboise was cold, chillingly cold.

Hugues, perhaps, was an exception, and if Villon was right Ursula de Vesc had also been deeply moved. But that, La Mothe told himself as he wandered disconsolately through the dull and gloomy corridors of the Château, might have been nothing more than the transitory emotion of an excited girl moved to an expression repented of when the mood cooled.

So, as lovers have done ever since this hoar world was young, he gave himself up to melancholy and found, as more than lovers have found, a satisfaction in a grievance. Then, while he fumed, three half-grown spaniel puppies, followed more sedately by a full-grown brother, came scampering around a corner, and the lover remembered he was a sportsman who loved dogs as well as little Charles himself. It was almost the sole hereditary trait in the lad, and the passion for animals was as strong in the Dauphin as it was in the King.

Round the corner, full cry, they raced, slipped upon the smooth flags, tumbled, rolled over, and with a common impulse fell upon one another as puppies will in the sheer joy of living. But the elder dog, if he still had the heart of eighteen or younger, did not forget he was twenty-four with responsibilities and a dignity to maintain. Passing gravely by the riot of paws and flapping ears he halted a yard away from La Mothe, pushed out a sensitive, twitching nose, sniffed the hand held out in greeting and as gravely licked it. Love at first sight is not confined to humanity, and thanks to the unfailing miracle of instinct the dog makes fewer mistakes than man. Inside of two minutes he had adopted La Mothe into the very select circle of his friends.

"I have heard of you," said La Mothe, pulling the soft ears gently. "You sleep in the Dauphin's room o' nights as Hugues does at the door, and now and then you lay your head on her knee, while she strokes and pets you, lucky dog that you are. Why was I not born a dog, tell me that?"

At the sound of his voice the puppies ceased their play, sat up panting a moment, and then in a tumultuous bunch rushed upon La Mothe. Charlemagne vouched for him, Charlemagne who was their oracle as grown-up brothers so often are, and they could let loose the exuberance of their puppydom without a fear that a sudden cuff would teach their youth that wild delights find an end in sorrow. Over each other they sprawled in their heedless eagerness to get near to this new playfellow, one, a little weaker than the rest, lagging a half-tail's length behind, and La Mothe was so busy trying to find a hand for each to mumble that he never knew how long Ursula de Vesc stood watching him.

Nor was she in any haste to break the silence. A puzzling factor had come into her life, and she was

impatient of the enigma. The solution was not a question of curiosity but of safety, and a safety not her own. On one side was Commynes, Louis' devoted adherent, devoted not alone in service, but in blindness, the blindness which questions neither means nor purpose; on the other side was Villon, Louis' jackal and open ears in Amboise. Between these two so profoundly distrusted stood Stephen La Mothe. Between them, but was he of them? That was the problem.

That morning, from Hugues' report of the visit in the darkened quiet of the Château, and remembering how familiarly Villon had introduced La Mothe overnight, she had had no doubt, and the cautious secrecy of the rendezvous with Commynes argued some sinister threat. But now she doubted, and as she watched La Mothe's careless play with the dogs the doubt grew. Hugues had kept his eyes open: the gapped bank and the narrow strip of grass between the bay and the river into which the grey horse had been thrust, without a hesitating thought of the inevitable result which must follow a slip or a swerve, spoke not alone of personal courage, but said plainly that La Mothe was ready to risk his life for the Dauphin. Neither Commynes nor Villon would have done that, they would have let him perish and raised no hand to save him.

Where, then, was the sinister threat? And had not the devotion which she had so contemptuously scoffed at the night before already proved itself to be no empty word? Yes, she had scoffed, and he had answered her scoff at the risk of his life. How, then, could he be one with Commynes and Villon? The thought that she had so misjudged him flushed her as with a sudden heat, the grey eyes grew tenderly troubled in her self-reproach, and unconsciously she drew a deeper breath. Slight as the sound was the dogs heard it; round they spun from their play, their mouths open, their tongues hanging, and next moment were leaping upon her skirts with little yelps of greeting.

"Mademoiselle!" and La Mothe sprang to his feet. "I did not hear you coming: how could I have been so deaf?" It was on his tongue to add, "I, who have been listening for the sound of your feet these hours past," but he wisely checked himself in time.

"Are you going to win all Amboise in a single day?" she answered, stooping so that the jubilant puppies almost scrambled into her lap. "You do not ask after the Dauphin?"

"I fear I had forgotten him," he replied, and though there was no intentional significance in his voice Ursula de Vesc was woman enough to understand the subtle compliment. "How is he?"

"If you forget, we do not. He is as well as a nervous boy can be after such an ordeal. He is looking forward to seeing you this afternoon to try to say to you what we all feel. Monsieur La Mothe, let me ___"

"Nervous he may be, but he is no coward," interrupted La Mothe hastily. He foresaw what was coming and had all a shy man's horror of being thanked. "He sat his horse like a little hero. There is no such courage as to wait quietly for death."

"And what of the courage which goes to meet death?" Pushing the dogs from her Ursula de Vesc looked up, her face very grave and tender in the shadows, as the spring of tears glistened under the lashes. Life had brought her so little to be grateful for that the happiness of gratitude was very great.

"No, you must let me speak this once, I said hard things to you last night, and my thoughts were still harder: to-day you have answered me, and I am ashamed. Devotion? Gratitude? It is we who owe you these, and we have nothing wherewith to pay. Monsieur La Mothe—"

But again La Mothe interrupted her.

"Think kindly sometimes and I am more than paid. Forgive the presumption, for why should you think of me at all? Forget the hard thoughts, mademoiselle, and let that pay in full."

"There can be no more hard thoughts. How could we think hard thoughts of our friends?"

"Friends? If that might be."

With the quick instinct which belongs to well-bred puppydom, and is not unknown even in children, the dogs had caught the graver note which changed her voice. By common consent they ceased their restless play and, seated on their haunches, their sleek heads aslant, watched her with wistful eyes; here was something their love could not quite understand.

"Friends? Amboise has more need of friends than Landless of the Duchy of Lackeverything." The girl had risen slowly to her feet as she repeated La Mothe's words, and now as she paused the shadow again broke in lines of troubled care along her forehead. "Monsieur La Mothe, what was the end of the story you began last night?"

"It has no end as yet. The end is here in Amboise, and my hope is we may find it together. I am sure we will if you will but help me. But the story is true."

"How can you say that?" she burst out passionately. "Where do you find one little, little sign of love in Amboise? I can see none, none at all. Nothing but neglect, suspicion, even hate. Oh! it is terrible that a father should so hate his son. And yet you say there is love."

"I say what I know. Trust me, and give me time to prove it."

"We do trust you, indeed we do. Love in Amboise? Is it for that you are here?"

"Yes," answered La Mothe soberly. "It is for that I am here?"

"And Monsieur d'Argenton? Is that why he is here too?"

For a moment La Mothe returned no reply, but stood passing his fingers through Charlemagne's soft hair. The lie direct or the lie inferential would parry the question and possibly serve both Commines and the King; but how could he keep his hands clean in Amboise and lie even by inference to Ursula de Vesc who had said so simply, "We trust you"? It was impossible, not to be thought of for a moment, but neither was the whole truth.

"Monsieur d'Argenton and I are not upon the same errand," he said at last. "Some day, when you know me better, and trust me for something better than a little brute courage which any man in my place would have shown, I will ask you a question. When you have answered it—and I know what the answer will be—I will tell you why Monsieur d'Argenton is in Amboise."

"Monsieur La Mothe, ask your question now."

"No, the time has not come. But I will ask this: Help me that the Dauphin may trust me, and together we will make the end of the story Love and Peace and Faith."

"Love and Peace and Faith," she repeated, her eyes filling for the second time. "They have long been strangers to Amboise. God send our France such a trinity."

And again La Mothe had to check himself lest he should reply, "To you too, mademoiselle." To bring just such a trinity into her life, Love which worketh Faith, and the Peace which is born of both, was the one supreme good which the world could offer out of all the gifts in its treasure-house. But, as he said of his question, the time had not yet come, so he changed the blunt directness to the more oblique "Not to France alone," and was rewarded by seeing the serious wistfulness shift into a gay smile, as she curtsied mockingly with a "Merci, monsieur!" very different from the same words of the previous night. Then she added, as the dogs, following her lighter mood, sprung upon her anew:

"Here I have two of them already, but certainly they give one little peace. Have they been formally introduced? This is Diane, who will be a mighty huntress in her day. This we call Lui-même because," she paused, flashing a mischievous glance at La Mothe, "well, just because his temper is not very good. He is a bully and uses his teeth on poor Charlot, who is the weakest of the three and the one we love best. But Charlot has one bad habit, he is very inquisitive, and it will get you into trouble some day, Charlot dear": whereat Charlot cocked his ears and looked wise.

Later that afternoon Charles spoke his thanks for himself, and said them with the dignity of a Dauphin of France struggling through the shy manners of a self-conscious schoolboy. But interpenetrating both dignity and self-conscious diffidence there was a frankness which told La Mothe that Ursula de Vesc's influence was already at work. The cold distaste had already disappeared, nor was there any suggestion of a compelled gratitude. Commines and La Follette had not returned from their hawking, and only Father John and the girl were with the Dauphin.

He had been conversing with the priest, but broke off abruptly when La Mothe was announced.

"Monsieur," he said, his hand stretched out as he went hastily to meet him, "there are some services hard to repay. No, I don't mean services, services is not the word. Services are for servants and I don't mean that, but perhaps you understand? And perhaps, too, some day you will teach me to ride as well as you do?"

"There is little to teach," answered La Mothe. "And as I told Hugues, it is Grey Roland who should be thanked."

"What the heir cannot do, being as yet a child," said the priest, "the grateful father can and surely

will." Then he laid his hand on the Dauphin's shoulder. "Were you greatly afraid, my son? At such a time, with death so near, fear would not shame a man, much less a boy."

"When Bertrand swerved I was afraid just for a moment, for I did not know what was going to happen, but not afterwards."

"But afterwards, in that awful moment when hope was gone and the world slipped from you, when there was nothing real but God and your own soul, what were your thoughts then?"

The boy made no reply, but shifted uneasily under the hand which still rested upon him. The heavy eyes which had brightened while he spoke to La Mothe grew dull and peevishly sullen again as, according to habit, he glanced towards Ursula de Vesc. Following the glance La Mothe saw the girl shake her head warningly, apprehensively even: but Charles had not the obstinate Valois chin for nothing.

"Perhaps you have forgotten? At such times the mind is not very clear. Or perhaps it was like a dream? Dreams, you know, are forgotten when we wake."

"I remember very well. Yes, Ursula, I shall tell him since he asks. I wondered whether a son who hated his father, or a father who hated his son, would be most certainly damned."

"My son, my son," cried the priest, horrified. "How could you allow such a terrible thought?"

"Oh!" And the boy shook off the restraining hand impatiently. "You come from Valmy and are like all the rest of them. Monsieur La Mothe, let us go and thank Grey Roland."

But as he followed the Dauphin out of the room La Mothe asked himself whether, even with Ursula de Vesc's help, the end of the story could possibly be Love, Peace, and Faith.

CHAPTER XVI

TOO SLOW AND TOO FAST

"I told you at the first you were not going the right way about it."

"And you were wrong," answered La Mothe. "I am only ten days in Amboise, ten days which seem like so many hours, and already Charles trusts me as he trusts Mademoiselle de Vesc."

Pushing out his loose-hung under lip Villon eyed his companion quizzically, but with a little pity through the banter. They were alone in the common room of the Chien Noir, and on the table by which they sat were two bottles of the famous '63 wine, one empty, the other with its tide at a low ebb, but La Mothe's horn mug was still unemptied after its first filling. With some men this would have been an offence, but not with Francois Villon. "Good-fellowship is not in wine but in words, or surer still, in silence," he would say, "and another man's drinking neither warms my heart nor cools my thirst. Besides, there is the more left for the wiser man."

"Ten days of opportunity, and you are content that a boy trusts you! Lovers were not so coldly contented in the good old days of the Paris pavements. Soul of the world! but there is no talk like Paris talk. La Mothe, you will never be a man till you hear it. Cling-clang go the feet, and cling-clang sing the flags under them, cling-clang, cling-clang, and I'll never hear it again—never. Content, d'you say? I'll not believe it. I'll not think so little of you. The Good God never meant man to be content. How would the world move?"

"I'm winning what I came to Amboise to win."

"A snap of the finger," and Villon filliped his own noisily, "for what you came to Amboise to win. The garden grows more flowers than fleurs-de-lis, and better worth the plucking. Eh, my young friend? I think there is a certain tall, slim Madonna lily——"

"No Paris jests, Villon."

"Trust Francois Villon! Jest?" His eyes twinkled humorously over the edge of his tilted horn cup as he finished the second bottle. "In all divine creation there is nothing so solemn as the heart of youth in its first love. It is the first, is it not, La Mothe? Gods of Olympus! was I ever as young as you? I think Paris

aged me before I was breeched. But to go back to my garden. Do you dislike the simile—a Madonna lily?"

"The subject is distasteful."

"Mademoiselle de Vesc distasteful? Monsieur La Mothe, I apologize. In all my Paris days I was never such a hypocrite as to make love to a woman who was distasteful. But then, is any woman distasteful if a man be only in the right mood?"

"Villon, that is untrue——"

"My friend, I know my past better than you do. Distasteful? Pah! it is an ugly word."

"What you say of me is untrue. I honour Mademoiselle de Vesc——"

"Much she cares for that! 'No, thank you!' said the cat, when they gave her frozen milk. Honouring is cold love-making. And now you have proved that you don't go the right way about it. 'Mademoiselle,'" and Villon minced a melancholy falsetto, "'I respect you deeply; mademoiselle, I honour you humbly from a distance; you are the highest star in the heavens, and I a worm of the earth! Permit me to kiss your venerated finger-tips.' Honour! Bah! get nearer to them, man; nearer to them; the closer the better; honour is too far off. Listen, now, while I teach you a better way."

"Thank you for nothing," said La Mothe drily, but unoffended. In these ten days he had learned which of Villon's jests were innocent of intention to hurt, and which carried a poisoned barb. "Love may be bought in Paris, but not in Amboise."

"But it costs more," retorted Villon. "In Amboise it costs a man's whole life, whereas in Paris," he paused, shrugged his shoulders, turned the drinking mug upside down and shook it whimsically, "emptiness ended all: emptiness of pocket, emptiness of—but there are seven separate emptinesses and any one was enough. Now listen and do not interrupt again. There be many ways of gathering peaches, but your way of kneeling at the foot of the tree with your hands folded like a saint in stained glass is the worst of all. It is only in theory that women, even lily Madonnas, love men to be saints; when it comes to practice——"

He broke off, chuckling the soft complacent chuckle La Mothe so greatly disliked, and putting the empty mug to his nose drew in the perfume of the wine with a deep breath. The lids drooped slowly over his shining eyes, and in the backward groping along the crooked byways which had led from Paris pavements to the mercy of Louis by way of an escaped gallows he forgot both La Mothe and Amboise. The voice of Paris the beloved, Paris the ever mourned for, was in his ears; the jargon of the Rue Maubert, the tinkle of the glasses through the doubtful but merry songs of the Pet du Deable, whispers of gay voices which had long passed beyond these voices, and the leering face, part satyr and part poet, grew wholly poet in its remembrance. It is the blessing of nature, and one of its most divine gifts, that memory brings back the best from the past and leaves the worst covered. Even our snows of yester year are roseate with the glow of imagination.

"The Madonna lily! Blessed is the man who gathers one and finds warm blood in its pure veins. The gift of a good woman who loves and is loved. Aye, aye, God send us all heaven while we're young. The Madonna lily! Once there was such a one in the garden of life, pure, sweet, and beloved. But the perfume was not for Francois Villon, and the swine in him turned to the husks of the trough. Catherine de Vaucelles; Catherine, dead these many years, dead but never forgotten, a saint with the saints of God, and the rest—damned." He spoke to himself rather than to La Mothe, but after a little spell of silence he looked up, gravely in earnest. "You go too slowly. Any day the King may crook his finger. What if he calls you to Valmy, then sends you God knows where, God knows for how long, and you return to Amboise to find some one else has gathered your lily while you lagged? That would be a chilly winter in the garden of life where you left young spring."

La Mothe sat silent. What reply was possible? That the advice was well meant he knew, but he had never before realized that a peremptory recall might come any moment from Valmy. And it was not impossible. Louis, aged and ailing, spurred, too, by the desire for the comfort of his son's love while life was still good to the taste, would be impatient of delay. These ten days which had passed with the swiftness of a summer's morning would be long as a wintry month to the lonely father. But to the devout lover, in him haste savoured of presumption. Ursula de Vesc was his good friend and comrade; could he hope for more than that in so short a time? In making haste might he not lose all he had gained? Besides, in the service and worship of the one dear woman in the world, a man is his own High Priest, and none save himself may enter into the Holy of Holies. And what could this peach-picker of Paris pavements know of such a Holy of Holies? Nothing, absolutely nothing. So he sat silent, doubly tongue-tied by doubt and reverence.

But for these, Villon, who read his face with disconcerting ease, had no great respect.

"Eh!" he said briskly, "is the advice good?"

"Is good advice easy to follow?"

"Yes, when it is palatable, which is not often: commonly it has a bitter taste in the swallowing. Or do you think it will be all the same fifty years hence? By all the Muses, there's an idea! I must write the 'Ballad of Fifty Years to Come.' Let me see—let me see—'m yes, the first verse might run like this:

"Where is La Mothe, that lover gay,
Or Francois Villon, poet splendid!
Madonna of the eyes of grey,
Or Charles whom Bertrand nearly ended?
D'Argenton, are his manners mended?
Or wisest Louis, swift to pardon
Though so grievously offended?
Ask of the Scents of Amboise garden!

"There!" and he drummed the empty mug on the flat of the table in mock applause which was not all unreal, "what do you think of that for the first draft? It does justice to me and to you, chronicles little Charles' escape, kicks your Monsieur d'Argenton in passing, and takes off its hat to the King all in a breath."

"Tear it up," answered La Mothe. "Will the King thank you for hinting he will be dead and forgotten fifty years hence? When you speak of Louis, you should always say, 'O King, live for ever!'"

The drumming ceased, the gay laugh died out of Villon's eyes, and he sat ruefully silent. To hint at death to Louis, even remotely, was an unpardonable sin.

"You are right," he said at last, and said it with a sigh. "All the same, the idea is a good one, and ideas are scarcer than poetry and always will be. I have heard your verses, my young friend. Here is Saxe. Saxe, have you brought that third bottle? To drink less than his average is a crime against a man's thirst."

But Saxe was empty-handed.

"Monsieur de Commynes desires speech with Monsieur La Mothe in the Château garden."

"Monsieur de Commynes? Bah! Go and be birched," said Villon peevishly. The failure of his ballad had vexed him, and he was ready to vent his spleen on what lay nearest. "You deserve it for your milk-and-water love-me-a-little-to-morrow. Had it been the old Paris days the Madonna lily would have said 'Come!' to Francois Villon in less than a week."

"Paris flowers do not grow in Amboise garden," answered La Mothe, and added "Thank God!" in his heart.

Commines was standing at the entrance to an arch of roses which, pergola fashion, covered a sunny walk. On three sides rose the Château, grey and sullen, on the fourth was an enclosing wall. In shaded corners a few belated gillyflowers, straggling and overgrown, filled the air with perfume, but La Mothe's gaze was caught by a group of Madonna lilies, slim and graceful, rising from a bed of purple fleurs-de-lis, their ivory buds new opened, and the recollection of Villon's comparison thrilled his imagination with its aptness. Grace for grace, beauty for beauty, in fulfilment and promise, they were Ursula de Vesc herself.

But almost with his first sentence Commynes proved that Villon had shrewd forethought as well as a poet's eye for a fitting simile.

"If it is not Mademoiselle de Vesc it is Francois Villon; if it is not philandering it is wine-bibbing," he said harshly. "Stephen, the King thinks you are wasting your time in Amboise and I think so too. What have you discovered in your ten days?"

"All that there is to learn, Uncle."

"I see. That Ursula de Vesc has a pretty face? Stephen, Stephen, you are not in Amboise to play the fool."

La Mothe flushed and was about to answer angrily, but remembering that Commynes spoke for the

King rather than for himself he restrained his impatience.

"Uncle, is that just?"

"Well, what have you discovered?"

"That there is no such vile scheme as the King imagines."

"Can you prove that?"

"To me there is proof. Ten days ago, when the boy thanked me for pulling him off Bertrand's back, he as much as said he had nothing to pay me with. Now if this lie of a plot against the King were the truth, would not a self-willed boy like the Dauphin, boastful as boys are, proud and galled by the debt he thought he owed me, have hinted that the day would come when he could pay in full, and sooner than some expected? He surely would. His pride would have run away with his discretion. Besides, Uncle, what have you discovered in your ten days?"

But Commynes returned no answer, and to La Mothe his gloomy face was inscrutable. He knew his master; knew, without being told in so many words, that it was the King's purpose to set Charles aside; knew that the King believed justification for such a course was to be found at Amboise; knew above all, knew with the knowledge of other men's bitter experience, that there were no thanks for the man who failed, even though that failure proved a son innocent of crime against a father. It was not innocence the King desired but guilt.

And yet, now that La Mothe had brought him face to face with the question, what had he discovered? Little or nothing. Using all the arts and artifices which ten years' service under such a master of subtle craftiness as the eleventh Louis had taught him, he had cajoled and bribed, probed and sifted, even covertly threatened at times. But all to no purpose. An indignant sarcasm from Ursula de Vesc, a politic—and wise—regret for the estrangement from La Follette, a petulant outburst from Charles, childish and pathetically cynical by turns, the vague whispers inseparable from such a household as was gathered together in Amboise were all his reward. But the King demanded proof; the King demanded articles of conviction which would, if necessary, satisfy an incredulous world that the terrible tragedy which followed proof was the justice of the highest law.

"Disaffection is everywhere," he said at last; "disloyalty which only lacks the spur of opportunity to drive desire into action. If these things are on the surface, worse lies hidden. You know the proverb of Smoke and Fire? I see the fire laid, I smell the smoke: it was for you to find the spark, you who have had a free hand in Amboise. But you play nonsense games with Charles, hanging upon the skirts of the unscrupulous woman who tutors him to revolt, or drink in taverns with a scurrilous thief turned spy to save his neck from a deserved hanging. Do you think you serve the King by philandering in a rose garden, or playing at French and English in the Burnt Mill? Francois Villon! Ursula de Vesc! Stephen, you make yourself too much one with them—an unhung footpad who prostitutes the powers of mind God gave him to the devil's use, and a woman——"

"Uncle, if even your father had spoken evil of Suzanne would you have listened to him?"

"Suzanne? What has Suzanne in common with Ursula de Vesc?"

"Only that I love her as you loved Suzanne," answered La Mothe.

"Ursula de Vesc? Stephen, at the least she is the King's enemy."

"Yes, he told me so himself."

"And at the worst——"

"There is no worst," said La Mothe doggedly. "There is no plot against the King, no plot at all."

"And your proof is that when a clever woman bade a boy control his tongue he obeyed her! Will that convince Louis? Would it convince yourself but for this calf-love of yours? Stephen, Stephen, you do not know the gulf on which you stand. What answer am I to return to the King?"

"Uncle, is it my fault that I am living a lie in Amboise?"

"Grey Roland changed all that for you ten days ago. There was the game in your hands, and you threw it away! A touch of the heel, a single twitch of the bridle—there, there, say nothing: perhaps at your age I would have had the same scruples. But what answer am I to return to the King?"

"That I will do all he bade me; do it with all my heart to the very letter," answered La Mothe. And with that Commynes had to be content.

"You go too slow," said Villon. "You go too fast," said Commines. Between such cross fires what was a poor lover to do? There was once, La Mothe remembered, a man who had an only son and an ass. But the problem is older than the imagination of any fabulist, and as new as the newest day in the world. "Thou shalt die," said the Lord God. "Thou shalt not surely die," said the devil.

"I will take my own way," he said. "It is my life I have to live, not theirs." And that afternoon came his opportunity to prove that a man knows best how his own life should be shaped.

CHAPTER XVII

STEPHEN LA MOTHE ASKS THE WRONG QUESTION

Only the very foolish or the very weak man seeks to hide from his own soul the full, naked, unpalatable truth about himself. The fool follows the principle which governs the libel upon the intelligence of the ostrich, and vainly tries to persuade himself that what he does not see does not exist, while the weak man dares not open the doors of the cupboard hidden in every life for shivering terror of the secrets he knows are there. Wiser wickedness deliberately airs his skeleton now and then, and thereby the grisly presence grows less grisly, and the hollow rattle of the bones less threatening. The articulation remains the same, but the tone, so to speak, is more subdued.

And Stephen La Mothe, being neither a fool nor altogether weak, was not afraid to admit to himself that Commines' angry contempt had described the day-by-day life at Amboise with sufficient accuracy, at least so far as the Dauphin and Ursula de Vesc were concerned. The bitter fling at his friendship for Villon did not trouble him. It was simply the high light added to the picture to bring out its general truth.

Yes, he had played games of make-believe with the boy, such as Louis had spoken of half in tolerance and half with the vexation of a clever father who resents that his only son is not as clever as himself. He had—no, he had not philandered in the rose garden. The associations of the word stirred him to revolt. Dairy-maids might philander, kitchen wenches and such-like common flesh might philander, but never Ursula of the grey eyes, Ursula of the tender, firm mouth. Ursula philander? Never! never! The thought was desecration. What was it Louis had said? All women are the same under the skin. It was a cynic's lie, and Louis had never known Ursula de Vesc.

Lifting a lute he touched the strings lightly. He was in one of the smaller rooms of the Château, one the girl used more, almost, than any other, and little suggestions of her were scattered about it. On a bench was a piece of woman's work with the threaded needle pushed through the stuff as when she laid it aside, flowers she had gathered were on the table, the portière masking the door was her embroidery. Perhaps all these forced an association of ideas. Picking the strings out one by one half unconsciously, the air of the love song followed the shift of the hand, and equally unconsciously his voice took up the rhythm, first in an undertone, then louder and louder:

"Heigh-ho! Love is my sun,
Love is my moon and the stars by night.
Heigh-ho! hour there is none,
Love of my heart, but thou art my light;
Never forsaking,
Noon or day-breaking,
Midnights of sorrow thy comforts make bright.
Heigh-ho! Love is my life,
Live I in loving and love I to live:
Heigh-ho!—"

"Monsieur La Mothe, Monsieur La Mothe, have you deceived us all these days?"

Down went the lute with a clang which jarred its every string into discord, and La Mothe sprang to his feet.

"Deceived you, mademoiselle! How?"

"That first night—I do not like to remember it even now, but Monsieur Villon told us you were both

poet and singer, but you denied it. And now I hear you singing——"

"Not singing, mademoiselle."

"Singing," she persisted, with a pretty emphasis which La Mothe found very pleasant. "We shall have a new play to-night. A Court of High Justice, and Monsieur La Mothe arraigned for defrauding Amboise of a pleasure these ten days. I shall prosecute, Charles must be judge, and your sentence will be to sing every song you know."

"Then I shall escape lightly; I know so few."

"There! You have confessed, and your punishment must begin at once. Villon was right: Amboise is dull; sing for me, Monsieur La Mothe."

"But," protested La Mothe, "Villon was wrong as well as right in what he told you that night."

"What? A minstrel who wanders France with his knapsack and his lute and yet cannot sing?" If the raillery yet remained in the gay voice, it was a raillery which shifted its significance from pleasant badinage to something deeper, and the tender mouth which La Mothe was so sure could never lend itself to philandering lost its tenderness. More than once he had caught just such expression when the perilous ground of the relationships between father and son had been trodden upon in an attempt to justify the King. Then it had been impersonal, now he was reminded of his first night in Amboise, when her cold suspicion had been frankly unveiled. But the hardening of the face was only for a moment. "Truly, now," she went on, "have you never made verses?"

"Very bad ones, mademoiselle."

"A poet tells the truth! The skies will fall! But perhaps it is not the truth; perhaps you are as unjust to your verses as you are to your singing." Seating herself in a low chair, she looked up at him with a dangerous but unconscious kindness in her eyes. "Now sit there in that window-seat and let me judge. With the sun behind you you will look like Apollo with his lyre. No, not Apollo. Apollo was the sun itself. Why are men so much more difficult to duplicate in simile than women?"

"Not all women. I know one for whom there is no duplicate."

"A poet's divine imagination!"

"A man's reverent thankfulness."

The grey eyes kindled, and as the unconscious kindness grew yet more kindly La Mothe told himself he had surely advanced a siege trench towards the defences. As to Ursula, she could not have told why these last days had been the pleasantest of her life, and would have indignantly denied that Stephen La Mothe was in any way the cause. Women do not admit such truths as openly as men, not even to themselves. But Amboise was no longer dull, the rose garden no longer a mere relief from the greyness of the hours spent behind the grim walls which circled it. The sunshine was the same, the budding flowers were the same, the glorious shift from winter to summer, but they were the same with a difference, a difference she never paused to analyze. Spring—the spring of her life—had come upon her unawares.

But a more acknowledged element in the pleasant comfort of these days had been a sense of support. One of the most corroding sorrows of life is to be lonely, alienated from sympathy and guidance, and in Amboise Ursula de Vesc had been very solitary. La Follette was politic, cautiously non-committal; Hugues of a class apart; Commines an avowed opponent; Charles too young for companionship; Villon a contempt, and at times a loathing. Into this solitariness had come Stephen La Mothe, and the very reaction from acute suspicion had drawn her towards him. Repentance for an unmerited blame is much nearer akin to love than any depths of pity. Then to repentance was added gratitude, to gratitude admiration, and to all three propinquity. Blessed be propinquity! If Hymen ever raises an altar to his most devoted hand-maid it will be to the dear goddess Propinquity! Yes! these days had been very pleasant days.

But an unfailing charm in a charming woman is that one can never tell what she will do next. Though the grey eyes kindled and the kindness in them grew yet more kindly, though the soft embroideries in the delicate lawn were ruffled by a quicker breath, the natural perversity of her sex must needs answer perversely, and Ursula de Vesc blew up his siege trench with a bombshell.

"Monsieur La Mothe, were you ever at Valmy?"

"Yes, mademoiselle." There was no shadow of hesitation in the reply, though the abrupt change of subject was as startling as the question itself.

"Of course. Music opens all doors. Monsieur La Mothe, I congratulate you."

"That having been in Valmy I am now in Amboise?"

"Upon better than that. Some day I may tell you."

"But this is the best possible, and I congratulate myself. No! Good as this is, there is a better than the best! Mademoiselle——"

"But you sing as well as make verses, do you not—you, whose music opened the gates even of Valmy? Indeed, I heard you just now. You are another Orpheus, and Valmy a very similar interior. You don't like me to say so? Very well, my lute is in your hand, and I am waiting. Did they teach you in Poitou to keep ladies waiting?"

"Poitou?" repeated La Mothe; "but I never said I had been in Poitou."

"Oh! but as a minstrel you wander everywhere, or—what was it?—as a poor gentleman seeing France, and so to Poitou. Anjou, Guienne, anywhere would do as well—except Flanders, where Monsieur de Commines comes from, and where I wish Monsieur de Commines had remained," she added.

"You dislike Monsieur de Commines? Mademoiselle, if you knew him better; how I wish you did. There was once a friendless boy—"

"Is this another fairy tale?" Though she interrupted him with so little ceremony, there was no asperity in the voice. It was as if she said, "Even good women have their limitations. I may forgive Philip de Commines, but you cannot expect me to praise him."

"As true a story as the other."

"And you believe in that other?"

"With all my heart."

"Then why does the father not show himself fatherly?"

"Is it not the part of the son to say, 'Father, I have sinned'?"

"I see," she said, some of the old bitterness creeping into her tone, "the prodigal of twelve years old who is rioting in Amboise—you see how he riots—should ask forgiveness," and as she spoke Stephen La Mothe, with a sudden sense of chill, remembered that other prodigal of twelve years old who was hung on the Valmy gallows that the roads of France might be safe. If Commines was right, the parallel was complete—horribly complete. But she gave him no time to dwell upon the coincidence. "You put a heavy charge upon me," she went on, the furrows deepening on her forehead. "Would to God I could see what is best, what is right. I must think. I must think. Play to me, Monsieur La Mothe, but not too loudly, and do not call me rude if I do not listen. I know that must sound strange, but at times music helps me to think. Is it not so with you?"

The question was apologetic, and as such La Mothe understood it. He understood, too, the straits in which she found herself. So powerful was her influence over Charles, the boy would certainly act on her advice. Her knowledge of Stephen La Mothe was greater than he supposed. If he was right, and she held her peace, this breach between father and son would not only remain unhealed but would be widened by Louis' natural resentment at the rejection of his covert overtures; but if La Mothe was mistaken she knew the old King well enough to be certain that he would use the boy's unwelcome advances against him in some cunning fashion. Which way lay wisdom? Or, as she had put it—raising the question to a higher plane—which was the right?

"If you please," she said imperiously. "Yes, I mean it. Play David to the evil spirit of my doubt," and with a laugh to cover his sense of embarrassment La Mothe obeyed, touching the instrument very softly.

But she could not have told whether he played a drinking-song or a Miserere. With her, as with many, the quiet rhythm of the music stimulated thought, and gradually the perplexity cleared from her mind. Stephen La Mothe was not a fool, that counted for much. He was honest, that counted for much more. The King was notoriously ailing and, being superstitious, might well repent; no high motive, but a probable one. Philip de Commines' visit to Amboise was not by chance, and nothing less than his master's orders would have kept him so long from Valmy. If Stephen La Mothe was right, then these orders must surely have a connection with the King's changed disposition towards the Dauphin. She would watch Commines, doing nothing hastily, and by his actions would shape her course.

With the relaxation from concentrated thought the swing of the music's rise and fall caught her ear. It was a ballad air, and new to her. Shifting her chair, she looked up at La Mothe as he bent over his instrument. Streaming through the windows behind him the cunning sunshine lit the brown of his hair to a red-gold. She had never seen just such a colour in a man, and the Apollo simile was not so unapt.

"Sing," she said suddenly, and again La Mothe obeyed, catching up the air almost unconsciously.

"Lilies White and Roses Red,
Gracious sweetness past compare,
Beauty's self to thee hath fled,
Lilies White and Roses Red:
Lover's service bows its head,
Awed by witchery so fair,
Lilies White and Roses Red,
Gracious sweetness past compare."

"Are they your own verses?"

"No, I wish they were. I only think them."

Their eyes met for a moment, then she looked aside and there was silence. Her thoughts, or that brief glance—Apollo was a god, good to look upon—had so warmed her cheeks that the refrain of the Triolet was almost justified. The lines of anxious care were smoothed from the forehead, and the half-smile of the new-drawn Cupid's bow was a little tremulous. A sudden determination moved La Mothe. Never had he seen her so gracious, so womanly, so completely the one sweet woman in all the world. Pushing the lute aside, he leaned forward.

"Mademoiselle," he began earnestly, "do you remember ten days ago I said there was a question I would dare to ask you when you knew me better?"

"I remember," she said, turning a little from him that the light might not fall upon her face to betray her. She said she remembered, but the truth was that in the tumult of her thoughts the recollection was vague. "Yes, I think I know you better."

"It is a very bold question, and one which might well offend. And yet you know I would not willingly offend you?"

"Yes, I am sure of that." The rustling of the lawn and laces on her breast was a little more tempestuous, but the voice was very level, very quiet. As to Stephen La Mothe, he felt that earth and sun and stars had disappeared and they two alone were left out of all the world.

"So bold, so presumptuous," he went on, "that it is hard to find words at all. But you forgive me in advance?"

At that she smiled a little. She did not think there would be much need for pardon. Was there any question Apollo—Stephen La Mothe, that is—might not ask? She knew now why these ten days had been the happiest of her life.

"Yes, Monsieur La Mothe, you are forgiven beforehand."

"Then—is there any plot in Amboise against the King? From you a simple 'no' is enough. I ask no proof, a simple word, nothing more."

Unconsciously he had forced a pleading into his voice, an urging, as if it was not so much the truth he sought as a denial at all costs; but as she turned in her chair, rising as she turned so that she looked down upon him, he broke off. It would have taken a much bolder man than Stephen La Mothe to have maintained his covert accusation—and what else was it?—in the face of the angry surprise which needed no expression in words.

"Was that your question? You have spied upon us all these days—suspected us—accused us in your thoughts? You have pretended friendship, devotion—God knows what monstrous lie—and all the while you spied—spied. But you shall have your answer in your single word. No, Monsieur La Mothe; such women as I am do not plot against their King, nor teach sons to revolt against their fathers."

"Mademoiselle——" he began.

But not even the scornful indignation vouchsafed him a second glance as she swept past him without a word. At the door she paused and, half turning, looked back across her shoulder, a spot of scarlet on

either cheek.

"I had forgotten my message. I had already told Jean Saxe, in case I failed to find you. The Dauphin bids you join him at the Burnt Mill at three o'clock; but if it were not that the Dauphin's word is a command, even to you I would say be otherwise engaged, Monsieur La Mothe, since I must be of the party."

"But, Mademoiselle——"

He spoke to an empty room, and if Ursula de Vesc closed the door between them with a greater vigour than the politeness strict deportment demanded she may surely be excused. It may be that even the angels lose their tempers at times over the follies of a blind humanity.

As to Stephen La Mothe, he stood staring at the closed door as if he were not only alone in the room but in the very world itself; or, rather, as if the world had suddenly dropped from under his feet and the shock bewildered him. She had been so gracious, so very sweet and gracious. He had been forgiven in advance; why such bitter offence? A single word was all he had asked—one little word. Then he flushed all over with a peculiar pricking sensation down the spine. Could it be that she expected a very different question; one whose answer might have been a Yes? If that were so—but it was absurd, and he called himself many hard names for having such an idea a single moment. To have thought such a thought of Ursula de Vesc was as preposterous as saying she would philander in a rose garden.

CHAPTER XVIII

FRENCH AND ENGLISH

Before the coming of the Maid, that is to say more than fifty years before Stephen La Mothe gave himself the heartache over his misreadings of the most read chapter in the book of nature, there stood upon the banks of the Loire, about a mile from Amboise, the flour mill of one Jean Calvet. For six generations it had passed from a Calvet to a Calvet, son succeeding father as Amurath an Amurath, and the Moulin Flèche d'Or was as well known to the countryside as Amboise itself. The kirkyard or the grinding stones; humanity must needs find its way to both.

When harvests were fat, and corn plentiful, its stones hummed from daylight to dark to the blent music of the creaking wheel and the splash-splash of the water which drove it. In lean years, when war or famine was abroad, and thanks to England these years were not few, the sluice was lifted, and in place of the hoarse murmur and complaint of the grinding stones and lumbering wheel there was the soft purr of the millrace, and the Calvet of his generation lived, like a turtle, on his own fat, waiting for better days. And sooner or later these always came, and with their coming grew the prosperity of the Golden Arrow. Corn and the human heart must needs be ground while the world lasts, and perhaps it is as much out of the grinding of the latter as the former that life is strengthened. Then came a day which brought an end to more than the prosperity of Jean Calvet the sixth.

Some clocks wear out, running down with little spurts of life and longer intervals of dumbness; others end with a sudden crashing of the pendulum while in its full swing, and a wild, convulsive whirr of the jarred wheels. One moment the sober tick tells that all is well, the next—silence. So was it with Calvet's mill.

In the fortune, or misfortune, of war an Englishman, one Sir John Stone, riding that way with his band of marauders, little better than licensed brigands, found Amboise too tough a nut for his teeth, and harried the Calvets in pure wantonness. Over the tree-tops the garrison of Amboise could see the smoke of the burning, but they were too weak to venture succour.

Calvet must fend for himself lest Calvet and Amboise both end in the one ruin. There was little defence, but that little was grimly in earnest and yet more grim the revenge of the attack. For that generation both pity and mercy had fled France. Jean Calvet the younger, he who should have been the seventh of his line, was coursed in the open like a hare, but turned at the last and died at bay as a wolf dies. Behind the barred door were Jean the sixth, his two younger sons, and the dead man's wife. The woman, grey-faced but tearless, fought as the men fought, using her Jean's cross-bow from the narrow upper windows. All that rage, desperation, and hate could do was done, and when the door fell in with a crash Jean the younger had been avenged four times over. John Stone took as little by his wantonness as he deserved.

Then came the end. There was a rush up the stone stairway, a brief struggle to gain the upper level, a minute's surging back and forth, a briefer, fiercer fury of strife among the cranks and meal-bags, a few rough oaths, a woman's scream, and then silence, or what by contrast passed for silence, since the sudden quiet was only broken by deep breathing and the sucking of air into dry throats. England had gained an ignoble victory.

Fire followed as naturally as the spark follows the jar of flint and steel, and with a hundred and fifty years to dry its beams, its cobwebbed walls hung with mouldy dust from the grinding of as many harvests, its complex wooden troughs and grain-shoots parched to tinder, the old mill was a ready prey. All that could burn burnt like a pile of dry shavings. But the walls, the stairway, and the upper floor were of stone, and stood; and but for one thing the peace which followed the coming of the Maid might have set the waterwheel creaking afresh. That one thing, typical of the times, forbade the thought. When the men of Amboise cleared away the rubbish they found the bones of Jean Calvet the sixth piled in a grim derision upon his own millstones, and so these stones never turned again. Who could eat bread of their making?

But the blackened shell was one of the Dauphin's favourite haunts, nor could a better stage for one of those plays of make-believe which had called down the old King's bitter irony have been well devised. So far as possible the mill had been restored to its old condition. The rubbish had been cleared from the ancient watercourse; the tough old wheel, freed from the weeds and soil which bound it, was set running as in the past, and a palisade of stout pickets erected to fence out the curious. The side furthest from the roadway, with its clumps of hazels, alder thicket, and chestnut wood in the distance was left open. Here, amid surroundings which lent a sombre realism to the pretence, Charlemagne could carve out a kingdom, Roland sound the horn of Roncesvalles, or the Maid herself win back to France the crown the boy's forefather had lost.

But, dearer even than these, he best loved to reproduce in little the tragedy which had laid the mill desolate, and it was La Mothe's participation in that mock combat which had aroused Commynes' contempt. What boy of imagination has not revelled in such sport, living a glorious hour beyond his age? And not a few of every nation have, in their turn, made the glory real at the call of the country that the blood of new generations may take fire. And Stephen La Mothe saw no shame in such a play; saw, rather, a stimulus and an uplifting whose effects might not altogether pass away when the play ended. So he was France or England as the Dauphin bade him, and by turns died valiantly or fought victoriously.

But chiefly, and to La Mothe it had its significance, the Dauphin played the part of Jean Calvet. All children, and not children only, love to be upon the winning side, and it told something of the trend of the boy's deeper nature that he would rather die for France than live for England. So would it have been the afternoon of the day La Mothe had followed his own course to his own disaster had not Charles once more proved the truth of Villon's observation. The dull eyes saw more than men supposed.

"You and Ursula have quarrelled," he said, with all a boy's blunt power of making the truth a terror. "All the way from Amboise you have not spoken a word to each other; and you will quarrel still more if I shut you up in the mill together. Do you be Stone, with Blaise and Marcel, while I and Monsieur La Follette and Hugues will keep the stairs." Then a gleam of unaccustomed humour flickered across his face; a sense of humour was rarely a Valois characteristic. "No, I am wrong. Do you be Calvet; I want a real battle to-day, and you will fight all the better with Ursula looking on." As for Ursula de Vesc, she drew her skirts together and ran up the unprotected flight of stairs humming an air—not Stephen La Mothe's triolet, you may be sure—as if she had not a care in the world.

So the forces arrayed themselves, Charles and the two lads from the stables behind the clump of bushes which always served as an ambush, and La Mothe at the doorless entrance to the mill, where he was to give the alarm and then retreat to the upper floor where La Follette and Hugues were posted. La Follette, who had been a lover in his day, would have kept watch below and taken Hugues with him, but Ursula de Vesc, in the upper room, told them tartly that the Dauphin would be displeased if the usual plan were departed from, and so, in no very playful humour any of them, they waited the attack.

Presently it came. Out from his ambush, a hundred yards away, raced the Dauphin, Marcel and Blaise at his heels, their stout wooden swords bared for the grim work of slaughter. "The English! the English!" shouted La Mothe. "Frenchmen, the enemy are upon us!" But as he turned to gain the upper floor there came a cry which was not part of the play, a cry of fear and despairing rage, "The Dauphin! the Dauphin! Monsieur La Mothe, save the Dauphin," and midway on the stairs Hugues dashed past him.

"Hugues, what is it?"

"An ambush. The Dauphin; they will murder the Dauphin——" and Hugues was through the doorway

with La Mothe and La Follette following, and Ursula de Vesc, white and trembling, at the stair-head, more in surprise than any realization of danger. But only for an instant, then she ran to the narrow window where Hugues had waited, watching.

Midway from their hiding-place, confused by the sudden outcry, stood the Dauphin and the two lads, and towards them ran Hugues with all his speed, La Mothe not far behind. La Follette waited at the door, uncertain and bewildered. But from a further covert, the thicket of more distant alder, a troop of ten or a dozen horsemen had burst, galloping at the charge, nor could there be any doubt of their sinister purpose. It was a race for the boy, with the greater distance to neutralize the greater speed, but they rode desperately, recklessly, as men who ride for their lives.

"Run, Monseigneur, run," cried Hugues, panting. "See, behind—behind," and almost as he shouted the words he and La Mothe, younger and more active, reached the group. "Out of the way, fools," he gasped, shouldering the stable lads aside; then to La Mothe, "Take the other arm," and again there was a race of desperation, but this time with the mill as the goal. Nearer and nearer thundered the hoofs, out from his scattered following forged their leader, his spurs red to the heel, his teeth set hard in the shadow of the mask which hid his face. "Faster, for God's sake faster," groaned Hugues, "Faster, faster," shouted La Follette from the doorway, and Ursula de Vesc, at her point of vantage, hardly dared to breathe as she knit her hands so closely the one into the other that the fingers cramped. Then the chase passed out of sight, and she ran to the stair-head, waiting for she knew not what. It was just there that Calvet the younger had died, and now there was a little mockery in the tragedy. Beyond the doorway she heard a "Thank God!" from La Follette, then shadows darkened it, and the Dauphin was thrust in, staggering. On the instant La Follette followed, paused, glancing backward as if in hesitation. But one duty was imperative. Catching the boy in his arms, he half carried, half forced him up the stairway, while in the open space below La Mothe and Hugues, letting Blaise and Marcel slip between them, turned side by side to face whatever was without. What that was she knew, and as she watched him in the gap an instant, before hastening to the Dauphin's aid, the girl's heart went out to Stephen La Mothe in the agony of a bitter repentance. If death pays all debts surely the darkening of the shadows brings forgiveness for all offences?

CHAPTER XIX

GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN

But meanwhile there was a pause. Below, in the defenceless doorway, Hugues and La Mothe stood shoulder to shoulder for one of those fiery instants which try a man's nerve rather than his courage. For the moment the Dauphin was saved. But they had no illusions. It was only for the moment, and both knew that in the moment to follow the danger would not be for the Dauphin alone. But only one, Stephen La Mothe, gave that a thought, and it was not for himself. Ursula de Vesc? The masked scoundrel who, panting with the rage of disappointment, faced them three yards away, one hand still gripping the reins of the horse by whose head he stood, the other a naked sword, had his half-score of cut-throats behind him, and could afford to leave no witness to his outrage. There would be no pity for Ursula de Vesc.

"Damnation," cried La Mothe almost in a sob, and, forgetting that he, too, wore a sword, he would have sprung upon him barehanded in his despair had not Hugues forced him to keep his place.

"Not yet," he whispered. "Wait; perhaps—later——" and the moment of possibility had passed. The troop was upon them.

But their leader held them back.

"Wait," he said in his turn. "We may save time. Be wise, and give us the Dauphin. We are a dozen, you only three or four. We are sure to have him in the end."

"On what terms?" It was Hugues who answered.

"Terms?" cried La Mothe. "Hugues, there can be no terms."

"Your pardon, Monsieur La Mothe," said Hugues. "You are a gentleman, but I am only a servant," and in his excitement La Mothe never paused to ask himself why Hugues should so classify a hedge minstrel of the Duchy of Lackeverything. "It is a fine thing, no doubt, to die for your honour, but what

have I to do with honour? Life is life. The boy, on what terms?"

"Your lives. And you gain nothing by refusing. The boy is ours in any case."

"Never," said La Mothe, struggling to shake off the restraining hand that pinned him, helpless, half behind the doorpost. "Never while I live."

"Just so," answered Hugues, tightening his grasp; "not while you live. But afterwards? and what better are we then, or the Dauphin either? Give me three minutes, monsieur, to persuade him, just three minutes," and in La Mothe's ear he whispered, "For God's sake be quiet or you will ruin us all."

"Three minutes? Play me no tricks, my man."

"But, monsieur," and Hugues' voice was a whine as he spoke. "What trick is possible? You are a dozen, we three or four. And are we not caught like rats in a pit?"

"Like rats! You have said the word! Take your three minutes, rat, and don't forget that like rats we'll kill you."

Urging his point vehemently, pleadingly, and with every plausible argument at his command, but never slackening his grip, Hugues drew La Mothe a yard or two into the blackened ruin. There he held him with a wary eye to a possible surprise. Blaise and Marcel were on the upper floor and only La Follette was in sight, standing guard at the stair-head.

"Listen," he said. "Monseigneur is dearer to me than to you. Do you think I would give up one hair of him while I live, I, who sleep at his door of nights? Never, not one hair! But between us we may save him yet. Shake your head, curse me for a coward, for a scoundrel, try to throw me off, strike me if you like. Yes, yes," he insisted, raising his voice, "it is our lives; why lose our lives for nothing?" Then, in a whisper, "They will give the alarm from the fields; it is only a mile to Amboise——"

"But it is a mile—a mile to go, a mile to come back——"

"It is the one chance," answered Hugues loudly, fawning on La Mothe with a hand which aped persuasion. The words had a double meaning and held La Follette quiet, La Follette who might have ruined all through incomprehension. "You know the bench where Mademoiselle sits to watch the play? When I cry Now! rush up and fling it across the gap of the stair-head. It will hold them back for a time. Then, for God's sake, Monsieur La Mothe, fight, fight, fight. Fight to the last. It is for life, it is for France, it is for Mademoiselle."

"And you?"

"I will hold the door."

"But that is death."

"It will give you a minute, or two, or three."

"Then it is my place; I have a sword."

"I love him best," answered Hugues. To him was the one unanswerable argument; he loved him best, and love had the right to die for love's sake. "You understand? When I cry Now! run—run."

"Hugues, Hugues, let me——"

"Do you think a valet cannot love?"

"It is time," said a voice from without. "Are you ready, rats?"

"Yes, monsieur, yes, yes. I have him persuaded Just one little moment. Monsieur La Mothe, NOW! Now!"

"No, Hugues, no, let me——"

"Damn you, man, would you murder the Dauphin for a scruple? Now! I say, Now!"

"I have a sword——"

But Hugues had caught up the slender cudgel dropped by Marcel in his flight for the stairs and was already in the doorway.

"If you want the Dauphin, come and take him. God save the Dauphin! France! France!" and drawing a

deep breath he stood on guard, one wooden sword against a dozen of steel.

"Bravo, Hugues," cried La Follette from above. "Hold the scoundrels while you can, and God be with you. Come, La Mothe, come, come."

And what could La Mothe do but obey? For a moment he glanced this way and that, uncertain, drawn to the one man who stood alone against such odds, yet knowing that to aid him was the surest way to make Hugues' sacrifice unavailing. Then he jumped for the stairs; but not before the doorway was darkened; not before he heard the dull clash of steel upon wood; not before Hugues had stifled a cry which told that the offering up of the sacrifice had begun.

And as it began so it ended. But how desperately the breach was held, how desperately Hugues fought with his mockery of a sword, with his bare hands, with his very breast, they could only guess when he was found later with the staff in splinters, his palms and arms hacked and gashed, his bosom agape with dumb mouths which told their tale of love and splendid courage lavished to the utmost. He died with all his wounds in front; he died for loyalty, for love's sake, giving his life without a grudge. Could a Roland or a Charlemagne have done more?

Reaching forward La Follette seized La Mothe, dragging him up the last three stairs, "Draw, man, draw, we will fight them here." But La Mothe shook him off.

"This first," he said, and catching up the broad, unbacked bench which day by day had served Ursula de Vesc as a resting-place he flung it, flat downwards, across the railless stair-head. "It's done, Hugues, and never fear but we'll fight," he cried, offering the only comfort he could to the man who, down below, gave his life for them all. "Now, Follette, I am ready."

But Hugues still held the door, and for the first time La Mothe had leisure to look round him. In the background were Blaise and Marcel—barehanded, silent, helpless. The younger, Marcel, was crying openly but dumbly, the tears running unheeded and unwiped down his cheeks; the other, dogged and dour, with teeth and fists clenched, was of braver stuff, a fighter, but without a weapon. Midway, still exhausted from his flight, Charles lay on his elbow, propped against Ursula de Vesc, who stooped above him with one arm round his shoulders as support. The boy's long narrow face was paler beyond his natural pallor, but his mouth was firm-set, his eyes bright and dry. The girl's features were hidden, and Stephen La Mothe was not sure whether he was glad or sorry. To have read coldness or reproach in her eyes at such a time would have been bitter indeed.

It was but a glance, then La Follette touched his arm. Down below there was no longer the rasp of steel on wood. Hugues was fighting now barehanded, but he had been better than his word—the three minutes had been prolonged to four. Then came a cry, "Ah, God!" and La Mothe heard Ursula de Vesc sob. For a moment she looked up and their glances met, but there was little time to read her message, little time to see anything but the pain in the grey eyes. A rush of feet on the stairs called him, and side by side with La Follette he bent across the well. The bench half covered the opening, but there were slits of a foot or more wide at either edge, opening the way for attack.

But the rush ceased almost as soon as it began. This new obstacle was unlooked for, and between the slits those above could see the savagely passionate faces of the besiegers staring up at them. Then one, bolder or more enterprising than the rest, crept up cautiously step by step, measuring his distance as he advanced.

"Cover me," he said to the next lower. "Strike at whatever shows itself," and thrust blindly upwards. It was their first sight of bare steel, and Ursula de Vesc drew in her breath with a shiver as she saw the red smear upon its flat. "Oh! Hugues, Hugues," she moaned, and the Dauphin, catching at her hand with both his, shrank closer.

"Damnation!" cried La Mothe, striking fiercely at the blade as it darted from side to side or sawed back and forth. But when he would have struck a second time La Follette curtly forbade him.

"You may break your sword, and he can do no harm from where he is."

So they discovered for themselves, and the foremost crept yet a step higher. But when he struck afresh La Follette, lunging aslant and downwards, caught him below the wrist. With a curse he let the blade fall clattering, and there was a pause. But if he were bolder, those behind had not been idle. A voice from the background cried out to clear the steps, and before those above understood the altered tactics a picket, drawn from the palisade, was thrust between the bench and the wall. It was La Follette who first grasped the danger.

"Blaise—Marcel!" he cried. "Here on the bench both of you and hold it down."

But only one answered the call. Marcel was on his knees in the corner praying for the miracle which should be his own handiwork, not the first man nor the last who has called on God to bear the burden his own shoulder refuses. Blaise was of better stuff. "Here I am, monsieur," he cried, but before he could bring his weight to bear a second picket, sharpened at the point, was rammed up and forward with two men's strength, driving the bench aslant till its end dipped and it fell with a crash, scattering those below, but with little hurt. The way was open, but Hugues' foresight had added five minutes to the four.

"For the Lord's sake," cried Blaise, staring into the welter below, "give me something in my bare hand. Rats, he called us, rats, and I won't die like a rat, I won't, I won't." It was the cry of primitive nature and the Dauphin answered it.

"Here," said he, rising on his knees as he unbuckled his own small sword. "You are stronger than I am. Be a man, Blaise."

"You'll see, Monseigneur, you'll see. Come up, you curs, come up. Rats, you said? Come up and meet a man."

"Three men," said Mademoiselle. "Monsieur La Mothe, is there nothing I can do?"

"Nothing, mademoiselle," he answered, and turning met her eyes with a smile. He knew he was forgiven, and thanked Hugues in his heart that he had lived so long. But for Hugues he would have died at the door, died in ignorance. The comfort was the dead man's gift to him, and now, in the paradox of nature, because of that comfort it would not be so hard to follow him.

But if to die comforted would be less hard, there was something much more than comfort to live for, and to La Mothe the odds did not seem utterly hopeless. Three resolute men could surely hold the well hole till succour came. Resolute? Much more than resolute—desperate. Again he glanced aside at Ursula de Vesc. Had he not the best cause the world holds to be resolute to desperation? Hugues had died for love's sake, please God he would live for it.

CHAPTER XX

THE LAST STAND

Below the attack halted, but up the stairway came the noise of rough laughter and rougher words, words which made Stephen La Mothe's blood grow hot and his nerves tingle as, gritting his teeth, he stamped his feet so that the girl might not hear them also. Resolute? Desperate? Yes, much more than resolute, much more than desperate, and with much more than a man's life to be lost. And all were of one mind. Follette he was sure of, and at his right Blaise, the stable-lad, panted in short breaths, swinging his unaccustomed weapon softly. "Damn them!" La Mothe heard him say. "Will they never come?" and when the nine minutes had crawled to twelve they came.

But not with a rush, not as those above had reckoned. The siege had grown cautious. This time there was a system. Up, on the very edge of the steps, broad, wide, and shallow for the easier carrying of heavy loads upon the back, came the two with the palisades, up, until the pickets were a full yard through the well-hole, but with those who held them out of reach, and with a shout, the wood rasping the ancient flagging, each swept a quarter circle. It was the work of an instant. As the pickets crashed against the wall the voice from behind cried, "Now lads!" and the rush came. There was the clang of iron-shod feet on the stones, a glimmer in the half obscurity, and behind the pickets the stairway bristled with steel.

"Praises be!" cried Blaise, and crouched on his heels. Down he leaned, down, forward, and lunged clumsily. That, too, was the work of an instant, an act concurrent with his cry, but when he straightened himself a picket had dropped into the gloom, and he who held it lay upon it, coughing and choking. "Rats!" said Blaise, slashing viciously at the blade nearest him. "Dieu! but the rat bit the cur dog that time! Come on, you curs."

And the rats had need to bite. The well-hole was double-lined; those in front fought upward, while those behind protected them and stole a step higher if the defence slackened. Nice play of fence there was none. In such a packed confusion the brute strength of Blaise the stableman counted for more than the finest skill of fence in the world. And with the brute's strength he seemed to have the brute's

indifference to pain. Twice, stooping low, he parried with his arm, taking the slash with a gasp but thrusting as he took it, and each thrust struck home. But those behind filled the gaps, those below pressed upward stair by stair, and La Mothe, breathless, but without a scratch, knew what it was to be blood-drunken as the din of steel filled his ears and he saw the flushed and staring faces opposite rise minute by minute more level with his own. The three were doing all men could dare or do, but the end was nearer and nearer with every breath. The end! God in heaven! No! not that—not that; and in his drunkenness he dashed a thrust aside as Blaise had done, stabbed as Blaise had stabbed, and laughed drunkenly that he had sent a soul to its Maker with all the passions of lust and murder hot upon it; but happier than Blaise he took no hurt.

"Mademoiselle," said La Follette without turning his head, and speaking softly to save his breath, "go you and Monseigneur to the corner behind me," and La Mothe knew that he too saw the coming of the end. There in the corner, with Love and France behind them, they would make their last stand.

"I have Monseigneur's dagger," she answered. Again La Mothe understood the inference left unspoken, understood that she as well as he had heard the brutal jests which had set his blood boiling. That she had the dagger was a comfort; but what a splendid courage was hers. Marcel had even ceased to pray.

For very life's sake La Mothe dared abate the vigilance of neither eye nor hand, and yet by instinct—there was no sound—he knew they had risen to obey. By instinct, too, he knew that Ursula de Vesc had drawn nearer, and it was no surprise to hear her voice behind him. But it was not to him she spoke.

"Now, Blaise, thrust, thrust!"

There was a rip of torn cloth, a flutter in the air—the flutter as of a bird on the wing—an upturned point was caught in a tangle of white linen, and through the tangle Blaise rammed his sword-blade almost to the hilt and laughed, panting.

"Rats!" he cried, tugging his arm backwards with a horrible jerk. "Go to your hole, cur!" and more blood-drunken even than La Mothe he broke into a village song.

"'Rosalie was soft and sweet;
Sweet to kiss, sweet to kiss:
Hair and month and cheek and feet,
Sweet to kiss, sweet to kiss.'

"Mademoiselle, fling in that praying lout from the corner and make some use of him; it's all he's fit for."

But the gap was filled; there were two on the top-most step, and La Follette, not only wounded in the thigh but slashed across the ribs, was giving ground.

"Be ready, La Mothe," he said. His teeth were clenched and his chest laboured heavily. "Be ready, Blaise."

"Ready," answered La Mothe, saving his breath. His heart was very bitter. The twelve minutes were seventeen, succour could not be far off, but the end had come. "Do you hear, Blaise?"

But Blaise was past hearing. While he fought with his right his maimed left hand, cut to the bones, had torn his smock open from the throat, and the hairy chest, smeared with his blood, glistened in broad drops from the sweat of his labours. In such a hilt-to-hilt struggle his ignorance was almost an advantage. He had nothing to unlearn, no rules of fence to disregard, and his peasant's strength of arm whirled aside an attack with a paralyzing power impossible to any skill. Right, left, downward swept the blade, his knees and hips half bent as he leaned forward, crouching, his left arm swinging as he swayed. Right, left, downward, his blood-drunkenness growing in savage abandonment with every minute. Yes, he was ready—ready in his own way—but past hearing.

"Damn the English," was his answer to La Mothe, his mind back in the fifty-year-old tragedy. The play was no make-believe, and he was Michel Calvet, son to Jean the sixth, the Michel whose elder brother had been coursed like a hare and killed in the open. Then his song rose afresh, but gaspingly, raucously, as if the notes tore his chest.

"'Rosalie, I love you true;
Kiss me, sweet, kiss me, sweet.
Lov'st thou me as I love you?
Kiss me, sweet, kiss me, sweet.'

"Rats," said he! "Come up, y' cur dogs, come up."

"La Mothe," breathed La Follette, "when I say Now!"

Yes, the end had come.

"Damn the English," cried Blaise hoarsely. With a mighty stroke he swept aside the opposing points, drew a choking breath, crouched lower, and, with the Dauphin's sword at the charge, he flung himself into the gap breast-forward, missed his thrust, splintered the blade against the wall, and with a wild clutch drew all within reach into his grip. For an instant they hung upon a stair-edge, then, in a writhing, floundering mass, breast to breast, breathless, half dead or dying, they rolled to the floor. From behind La Mothe heard Ursula de Vesc cry, "Oh God! pity him!" in a sob. But he dared not turn, his own blood-drunkenness fired him to the finger-tips and he lunged furiously, getting home a stroke above a point lowered in the surprise. Again there was a rush of iron-shod feet upon the stones, but a rush downward, a moment's pause below, a crossing babel of passionate, clamouring voices, insistence, denial, and yet more denial, then a silence—or what seemed a silence—a few hoarse whispers and a cry or two of pain. Yes, the end had come. In the corner stood the Dauphin and, half in front, Ursula de Vesc, her arm stretched out across his breast in the old attitude of protection. Marcel lay beside them in a faint.

"Hugues?" There was a question and a cry in the boy's one word.

"Charles, Charles, have you nothing to say to the brave men who almost died for you?"

"Hugues loved me," he answered, and at the bitter pathos of the reply La Mothe forgot the ingratitude. There were so few who loved him. But the girl could not forget.

"Monsieur La Follette, Monsieur La Mothe," she began, but broke off with a cry. "Oh, Monsieur La Follette, you are wounded? What can I do? Words can come afterwards, and all my life I will remember, all my life. Are you dreadfully hurt? Can I not do something?" But though she spoke to La Follette her eyes, after the first glance, were busy searching Stephen La Mothe for just such an ominous stain as showed in brown patches upon La Follette. But there was none. Breathless, dishevelled, his clothing slashed, he was without a scratch, and the strained anxiety faded from her face.

"I can wait," answered La Follette, "we must get the Dauphin to the Château. La Mothe, see if they are gone," and he glanced significantly down the stairway. La Follette knew something of war, and there must be sights below it were better Ursula de Vesc should not see lest they haunt her all her life, sleeping or waking.

But the Dauphin, his nerves strained and raw, had grown petulant.

"It is safe enough. I heard them ride off. I want Hugues. I want Hugues."

"And Blaise?"

"Oh! Blaise!" He broke into a discordant laugh. "I told him to be a man and, my faith! he was one. Do you think, Ursula, that Father John will ask my thoughts a second time?"

CHAPTER XXI

DENOUNCED

"It was an epic," said Villon, "a veritable epic, and if you were truly the Homer I called you half the towns in France would claim you for a citizen. As it is you have only been born twice, once in—where was it? No matter, it is of very little importance; it is the second that really counts, and that second birthplace is—Amboise. A man's soul is born of a woman just as his body is. And a man's soul is love. Until love comes he is a lumpish mass of so much flesh without even a spark of the divine."

"Then you," said La Mothe gravely, "have seen many incarnations?"

"Many!"—and Villon's eyes twinkled—"but with each one the pangs of birth grew less violent. You will find it so yourself. But our epic. Though I cannot write it I will sketch it in outline for you. Book the

First: Hugues!" He broke off, shaking his head soberly, every trace of his humorous mood gone. "Poor devil of a Hugues! Francois Villon, who made verses, will be remembered, and Hugues, who made history, forgotten. Why cannot I write epics that we might both be remembered together? But no! a tinkle of rhyme leavened with human nature and salted by much bitter experience—that is Francois Villon! I know my limitations. A man can give out nothing better than is put into him. Well, so long as we give our best I don't believe the good God will be hard upon us. Now, then. Book the Second: Martlets and Mullets—there's alliteration for you."

"Martlets and Mullets? Villon, what do you mean?"

"Have you forgotten our friend of the spiked thorn?"

"But the Dauphin swears these were Tristan's men."

"Tristan? Impossible! Tristan is too sure, too careful an artist to spoil his work. Heaven knows I do not love Tristan, but I will give him this credit: when he sets out on a piece of scoundrelly work he carries it through. No, no, I'll wager my Grand Testament to the epic—which will never be written—that it was Molembrais' second cast of the net, and when he drags Amboise a third time there will be fish caught. What's more, La Mothe, there is a traitor in Amboise—a traitor to the boy. First there was Bertrand, then the Burnt Mill: these don't come by accident. But Tristan? Tristan botches no jobs. But to come back to our epic. Book the Third: Blaise! How many dead were there?"

"Four."

"And Blaise, the stableman, has two at the least, if not three, to his credit. When Charles is king—pray heaven Louis does not hear me at Valmy—he should make Blaise, the stableman, a Marshal of France, or perhaps Master of the Horse would suit him better," and Villon chuckled gleefully. He had always a huge appreciation of his own wit, however slender. "There's a lucky dog for you, to grip death round the neck, hugging him to the breast with both arms, and yet get nothing worse than a scratched wrist, a slashed palm, and a dent in a thick skull. Book the Fourth: but here is Monsieur d'Argenton and I had better— No! I'll stand my ground. The rose garden of Amboise is free to all king's jackals."

"Villon, Villon, why are you so bitter-tongued?"

"Listen to Monsieur de Commines for five minutes and you will know why. And it is not I who am bitter, but the truth. Jackals both, I say."

They were, as Villon had said, in the rose garden. Dusk, the dusk of the day on which Hugues had made history to be forgotten, was thickening fast, but the air was still warm with all the sultriness of noon. To that confined space, with the grey walls towering on three sides, coolness came slowly. The solid masonry held the heat like the living rock itself, and no current of the night wind blowing overhead eddied downward in refreshment.

But solid as was the masonry, and mighty the walls in their frowning strength, there is but little of them left, and of the rose garden not a trace. Time, the great iconoclast, has touched them with his finger and they have passed away like the humble maker of history, while Francois Villon's tinkle of rhyme, leavened with human nature, still leaves its imprint on a whole nation. Perhaps the reason is that the makers of history could have been done without. In these generations the world would be little the worse, little changed had they never been born, and have lost nothing of the joy or brightness of life. In his own generation the patriot is more necessary than the poet, but let four centuries pass and the poet will wield a larger influence than the patriot.

But thick as was the dusk, a dusk thicker than the actual degree of night because of the prevailing shadow, La Mothe saw that Commines was disturbed by an unwonted excitement. Not from his face. It was deeply lined and sternly set, the eyes veiled by gathered brows, the mouth harsh. But he breathed heavily, as a man breathes who has outrun his lung power, and his uneasy fingers clenched and unclenched incessantly. Those who knew Philip de Commines understood the signs and grew watchful. But it was upon Villon that the storm fell.

"For an hour I have been searching for you—in the Château, in the Chien Noir, in every tavern in Amboise——"

"And you find me amongst the roses! How little you know my nature, Monsieur d'Argenton!"

"I know it better than I like it," answered Commines grimly. "You lodge at the Chien Noir?"

"It has that honour. The cooking is passable, and I can commend to you its wine of '63. Monsieur La

Mothe drinks nothing else."

"As with a fool so with a drunkard, one may make many. But I am not here to talk of Monsieur La Mothe's drinking bouts, though they explain much. You are in the King's service?"

"As we all are; you and I and Monsieur La Mothe. Yes."

"No quibble; you are paid to be faithful?"

"As we all are; you and I and Monsieur La Mothe. Yes."

"Villon, curb your impertinences. I'll not endure them."

"Monsieur d'Argenton, there is a proverb which says, 'Physician, cure thyself.' What did I tell you, Monsieur La Mothe? The five minutes are not up yet." But Stephen La Mothe discreetly answered nothing. One of the first lessons a man learns in the ways of the world is to keep his fingers from between other men's millstones.

"You lodge at the Chien Noir," went on Commines, ignoring the retort; "you are in the King's service and have been paid with your life. Why are you not faithful? Under your very eyes a devilish scheme is hatched and you see nothing. Are you a fool, or have you grown besotted in your age? And you, Stephen, you who were given a free hand in Amboise for this very thing, you who have spent your days in child's play—Stephen, son"—with a sudden gesture Commines put his hand across La Mothe's shoulder, drawing him almost into the hollow of his arm, and the cold severity passed from the hard voice—"don't mistake me, don't think I scoff at to-day's danger, to-day's courage. No. I thank God you are safe, I thank God he has given me back my son Stephen; but what am I to say to the King?"

"Ho! ho!" said Villon; "so it is son Stephen nowadays? Then the play is almost played out?"

"Most of all I blame you," and Commines, his arm still round La Mothe's shoulders, turned upon Villon in a swift access of passion. "How is it you are blind, you who are hand and glove with Jean Saxe? Be sure the King shall hear the truth."

But Villon was unabashed. "What is the truth, Monsieur d'Argenton? Even your friend Tristan would not hang a man without first telling him what for. What is this truth of yours?"

"There is a plot against the King's life."

"In Amboise?"

"In Amboise. The Dauphin, that woman Ursula de Vesc, Hugues——"

"It's a lie," cried La Mothe, shaking himself free from Commines' arm. "A lie, a lie. I have Mademoiselle de Vesc's own word for it that it is a lie."

"And I have proof that it is true."

"Proof? Whose proof?"

Commines hesitated to reply. Already he had overstepped his purpose. Before making his disclosure to La Mothe he had searched for Villon in the hope of drawing some confirmation from him, or what, to a mind willing to be convinced, might pass for confirmation; but in his vexed anger he had spoken prematurely. Weakly he tried to cover his error, first by an appeal, then by domineering. But the lover in Stephen La Mothe was neither to be cajoled nor threatened.

"Stephen, cannot you trust me after all these years? What interest have I but the King's service?"

"Uncle, you said proofs—whose proofs?"

"What is that to you? Do you forget that you are to obey my orders?"

"Proofs, Monsieur d'Argenton, whose proofs?"

"All do not blind themselves as you do." Round he swung upon Villon, shaking a stretched-out finger at him viciously. "Drinking himself drunk like a sot, or hoodwinked by a cunning, unscrupulous woman for her own vile ends. Silence, sir!" he thundered as La Mothe sprang forward in protest. "You ask for proofs, and when I come to proofs you would cry me down with some mewling folly. For her own purposes she has philandered with you, dallied with you, listened to your love songs till the crude boy in you thinks she is a saint."

"A saint," answered La Mothe hoarsely, "a saint. I say so—I say so. A saint as good, as sweet, as pure

—" He paused, looking round him in the darkness, and his eyes caught the faintness of a far-off patch of grey suspended in mid-air against the gloom. "As pure and good as these lilies, and the Mother of God they are called, for that, Monsieur d'Argenton, is Ursula de Vesc."

"Good boy," said Villon, rubbing his hands softly; "he has not sat at the feet of Francois Villon these ten days for nothing. I could not have said it better myself."

But Commynes was unmoved by the outburst. It was to combat this very unreason of devotion that he had hoped for further confirmation. Villon would surely let slip a phrase which would serve his purpose, a word or two would do, a suggestive hint, and then a little colouring, a little sophistry, would make the little much and the hint a damning reality. To an adept in the art of twisting phrases such an amplification of evidence was easy. Meanwhile an open quarrel would serve no good purpose.

"Words, Stephen," he said more gently, "mere words, and what are rhetoric and declamation against proofs?"

"Whose proofs?" repeated La Mothe doggedly.

Once more, as on the night of his coming to Amboise, he felt the ground slipping from under his feet and was afraid of he knew not what. "So far it is you who have answered with rhetoric and declamation."

"Word-of-mouth proofs."

"Here in the Château?"

"No," answered Commynes reluctantly, "not just in the Château but at its very door. I tell you, Stephen, there can be no mistake. Weeks ago Hugues approached him, first with hints, then more openly. It was the very cunning of Satan, the line of argument was so plausible. The King is old and ailing, life a very weariness, death a relief. In his sick suspicion he grows harsh to cruelty, striking first and judging afterwards. France was afraid, bitterly afraid. Men died daily for no cause, died innocent and as good as murdered, gave names and instances, and because of these France was afraid. None knew who would follow next. For the general good, for the safety of the nation, some one must act. So the Dauphin had sent him, the Dauphin and Mademoiselle de Vesc. That was weeks ago, and you," again Commynes turned upon Villon in denunciation, "you must have known."

"Lies, all damnable lies," said La Mothe, choking. "Who is the liar? You won't tell me? But I must know; I must and shall. Not in the Château, but at its very door? At its door? Jean Saxe! Is it Jean Saxe, Uncle, is it Jean Saxe? It is! it is! Jean Saxe the—the— Villon, you said there was a traitor to the Dauphin in Amboise, was that Jean Saxe? A traitor to the Dauphin, a liar to the King; who else could it be but Saxe? It was Jean Saxe who gave Molembrais his chance ten days ago, Jean Saxe who knew of the play in the Burnt Mill to-day, Mademoiselle told him——"

"More proof," said Commynes. "She and Jean Saxe are in collusion."

"Collusion to kidnap the Dauphin? Mademoiselle de Vesc and Jean Saxe in league against the boy? Uncle, you are mad and your proof proves too much. If all the world were one Jean Saxe I would believe Ursula de Vesc's No! against him."

"Good boy," repeated Villon, speaking, as it were, to the world at large. "The very first time I saw him I said he was the image of myself. Monsieur d'Argenton, what is Jean Saxe's story?"

"That by Mademoiselle de Vesc's directions Hugues sounded him on behalf of the Dauphin, but vaguely at first. There was great discontent, said Hugues, and greater fear. The death of de Molembrais, guaranteed though he was by a safe-conduct, had set France asking who was secure if once the King had determined on his destruction. Even loyalty was no safeguard. In the King's sick suspicion his most faithful servants might be the first to suffer. Not a day passed but there was a hanging, and de Molembrais was a warning to both high and low. For a man to keep his own life at all cost was no murder."

"True," said Villon. "*Toute beste garde sa pel!* Yes, monsieur?"

"That was the gist of it; vague as you see, but significant. Then, two days ago, Hugues spoke a second time, urging Saxe to a decision. If the Dauphin were king, all France would breathe freely, all France would say, Thank God! The generous nature of the boy was well known. There would be rewards. Mademoiselle de Vesc had authorized him to promise——"

But La Mothe could control himself no longer. Through Commynes' indictment, coldly, almost phlegmatically delivered, he stood motionless and silent, his hands clenched, every muscle tense with

restraint. It was the fighting attitude, the attitude of a man who waits in the dark for a blow he knows not whence, but a blow which will surely come. Now the restraint snapped.

"Villon, for God's sake, do you believe this lie?"

It was an exceeding bitter cry, and the pain of it pierced through even Commines' armour of calmness. But Villon, though he shivered a little, only shook his head. His face, dimly seen, was full of a grave concern.

"Some one has spoken to Saxe," he said. "Hugues or another. I know Saxe well, he has not brains enough to imagine so great a truth."

"A truth!" cried Commines, catching at the phrase he waited for. "Stephen, Stephen, all along I warned you she was dangerous."

"Very dangerous," said Villon, "I have felt it myself. No man is safe. In '57—or was it '58?—there was just such another. Her mother kept the little wine shop at the corner of—"

"Take care, sot, it is the King you trifle with, not me. You said Saxe had told the truth."

"That the King and France are both sick; yes, Monsieur d'Argenton."

"No, no, but that Saxe had been approached."

"By Hugues or another; yes, I believe that."

"You hear, Stephen? Does that satisfy you?"

"But I also believe that Saxe, being a fool, has added a little on his own account," went on Villon as if Commines had never spoken.

"Then what is the truth?"

"You ask that of a poet? As well ask it of a courtier—or a king's minister," he added, and turned to La Mothe. "Were I you I would set them face to face this very night."

"But she has already denied it."

"All the more reason. A truth will wait till morning, but a lie should be killed overnight. Lies breed fast and die hard."

"But she may refuse."

"If I know women," said Villon, "Mademoiselle de Vesc will refuse you nothing."

CHAPTER XXII

"WE MUST SAVE HER TOGETHER"

But while Stephen La Mothe still hesitated Commines took action. He recognized that sooner or later there must be a confronting. Ursula de Vesc, however deeply implicated, was no patient Griselda to accept judgment without a protest. Tacit admission would condemn the Dauphin equally with herself, and she might be trusted to fight for the Dauphin with every wile and subterfuge open to a desperate woman. In her natural attitude of indignation she would certainly force a crisis. The sooner the crisis came the better, and amongst those for whom that was better Philip de Commines was not the least. With all his heart he loathed the part he was compelled to play, even while determined to play it to its ghastly end. But to some men, Commines amongst them, the irrevocable brings a drugging of the sensibilities. When that which must be done could not be undone he would be at peace.

The sooner the crisis came the better, too, for Stephen La Mothe, and Commines' sympathies went out to him with an unwonted tenderness. The lad's nerves were flayed raw, and for him also there could be no peace until the inevitable end had come. But just what that end would be, and how it was to be reached, Commines feared to discuss even with himself.

But the first necessity was that Ursula de Vesc's complicity should be brought home to her. Let that

be done, and La Mothe's despair might clear aside all difficulties, though, without doubt, the poor boy would suffer. There is no such pain as when love dies in the full glory of its strength. But then would come the ministrations of Time, the healer. Mother Nature of the rough hand and tender heart would scar the hurt, and little by little its agony would numb into a passive submission.

It was a truth he had proved. Suzanne's death had been as the plucking out of the very roots of life. In that first tremendous realization of loss there had been no place left for even God Himself. But that had passed. The All-Merciful has placed bounds on the tide of human suffering: Thus far shalt thou go, and no further. The maimed roots of life had budded afresh, and if no flower of love had shed its fragrance to bless the days, there had been peace. So would it be with Stephen La Mothe. But the Valley of Tribulation must first be crossed, and it would be the mercy of kindness to shorten the passage, even though the plunge into its shadows was the more swift. For that there must be conviction, and for the conviction a confronting. Villon was right, Ursula de Vesc and Jean Saxe should be set face to face within the hour.

"Monsieur Villon," he said with unaccustomed courtesy, "I agree with you. Hugues is dead, the Dauphin too high above us, but Mademoiselle de Vesc has the right to know the peril she stands in. Will you do us all a kindness and bring Jean Saxe to the Château? Monsieur La Mothe and I will—" he paused, searching for a word which would be conclusive and yet without offence, "will summon Mademoiselle de Vesc."

"It is an outrage," said La Mothe stubbornly, "and I protest against it, protest utterly."

"Stephen, try and understand," and Commynes laid his hand upon the younger man's shoulder with something more than the persuasive appeal of the father who, to his sorrow, is at variance with the son of his love. It was the gesture of the friend, the equal, the elder in authority who might command but elects to reason. "Consider my position a moment. By the King's command I stand in his place in Amboise. If he were here——"

"God forbid!" said Villon. "The King is like heaven—dearly loved afar off."

"But his justice is here——"

"And his mercy?"

"And his mercy," repeated Commynes coldly, "the mercy that gave you life when justice would have hung you as a rogue and a thief. Of all men you are the last who should sneer at the King's mercy. And now will you call Jean Saxe, or must I go myself?"

"As my friend La Mothe decides," answered Villon. "I advise it myself. Give a lie a night's start and you will never catch it up."

"Stephen, son, be wise."

With a gesture of despair La Mothe would have turned away, but Commynes held him fast. His faith was unshaken, but the natural reaction from the day's tense emotion had sapped its buoyancy, leaving it negative and inert rather than positive and aggressive. The half-hour's slackless concentration of nerve and muscle in the defence of the stairway had drained him of strength and energy like the crisis of a fever. For him Ursula de Vesc's curt No! stood against the world; but Philip de Commynes was the King's justice in Amboise, and against Jean Saxe's accusation her denial would carry no weight—no weight at all. But, though the gesture was one of helplessness, Villon chose to construe it into consent.

"Good!" he said cordially, "it is best, much the best. In half an hour I will bring Saxe to—let me see, the Hercules room, I think, Monsieur d'Argenton? It is small, but large enough for the purpose, and as it has only one door it can be easily guarded."

"No guards," said Commynes harshly. "There must be no publicity."

Villon laughed unpleasantly. His shifting mood had, almost for the first time in his life, felt kindly disposed towards Commynes as he saw his evident solicitude for La Mothe, but that was forgotten in the contemptuous recall of a past he held should no longer rise against him. What the King forgave the King's minister should forget. The thrust had wounded his vanity, and now, as he saw his opening, he promptly thrust back in return.

"You are the King's justice in Amboise and would have no man know it! That is true modesty, Monsieur d'Argenton! No, don't fear, there will be no publicity. Monsieur La Mothe, he calls you son; but friend is more than kin, more than family, remember that Francois Villon says so."

Commines' answer was an upward shake of the head, a lifting of the shoulders hardly perceptible in

the darkness.

"It is the nature of curs to snarl," he said. "But his impertinence grows insufferable and must be muzzled." Linking his arm into La Mothe's he drew him slowly along the garden path. Both were preoccupied by the same desire, to win the other to his own way of thinking, but it was the more cautious elder who spoke first. He would appeal to the very affection Villon had gibed at.

"Stephen, dear lad, with all my heart I grieve for you. Would to God it were anything but this. Mademoiselle de Vesc has always opposed me, but that is nothing; has always striven to thwart me, but for your sake that could be forgotten; has always flouted and belittled me, but for your sake that could be forgiven. You are as the son of my love, and what is there that love will not forgive—will not forget? These weigh nothing, nothing at all. In the face of this—this—tremendous crime against the King, against all France, I count them nothing, less than nothing. Dear lad, you must be brave. This worthless woman——"

"No, Uncle, no, not that, never that!" La Mothe's voice was as level and quiet as Commines' own, and the elder knew thereby that his difficulty was the greater. Quietness is always strong, always assured of itself. "I do not believe Saxe speaks the truth."

"Saxe is the spark, and I told you I smelt smoke. Even Villon admits, much against his will, that some one has approached Saxe."

"But not Hugues, and if that is untrue then all is untrue."

"No: there is no logic in that. Hugues or another, it matters little who it was. It is the fact that damns, and Saxe is explicit. And how can Villon be sure it was not Hugues?"

"Uncle, Uncle, you can't believe it, in your heart you can't believe it. All these days you have seen her, so gracious, so gentle, so womanly. It can't be true, it can't. There is some horrible mistake."

"Saxe is explicit, and Villon agrees with him," repeated Commines, driving home the inexorable point. "Nor can I help myself; the King has left me no alternative."

"Mademoiselle de Vesc has denied it to me, and I believe her."

"You believe her because you love her."

"No," answered La Mothe simply, "I believe her because I have faith in her, but even though she were all Saxe says, and more, I would stand by her because I love her."

Commines paused in his slow walk, slipped his hand from La Mothe's arm, and they stood silent side by side. Then in his perplexity he moved a few paces away, halted, turned again and faced La Mothe.

"Poor lad, and I have no alternative. The King and my duty alike allow me none. Stephen, in self-defence I must be frank with you. It is my firm belief that the King has evidence he cannot show openly ___"

"And so a pretext will be enough? God in heaven! is that justice?"

"No, there must be something more than a pretext, something more than a lie; but Saxe will be enough."

"It will be enough if Saxe's lies cannot be disproved?"

"If Saxe cannot be disproved," corrected Commines. "I cannot admit that Saxe lies."

"And what then?"

Again Commines turned away. Humanity's Iron Age was as stern, as selfish, as callous, as cruel as in the days of Attila the Hun. Christianity, after its almost fifteen centuries, had no more than, as it were, warmed it through with its gentle fires. There was as yet no softening. It was true that some increasing flowers of civilization obscured the brutality, some decorations of art glorified it, but underneath the beauty and the art the native ruthlessness remained unchanged. Might founded a throne upon the ruin of weaker nations, cemented its strength with the blood of innocence, set the crown upon its own head, and reigned in arrogant defiance of right or justice.

From the barbarous Muscovite in the north to the polished Spaniard in the south the conditions scarcely varied. Everywhere there was the same spirit. A Louis pushed wide the borders of France by theft and the law of the stronger arm, a Ferdinand offered up his holocaust to the greater glory of God, a Philip yet to come would steep the Netherlands in blood to the very dikes that the same God might be

worshipped in violation of the worshipper's conscience, in England a Crookback Richard had neither pity nor scruple when a crown was the reward of ruthlessness and murder.

Nor in the high places of religion was there a nobler law. A Sixtus, at that very moment, was letting loose the horrors of an unjust war upon Florence and Ferrara in the name of the Prince of Peace, while the sinister figure of Alexander Borgia sat upon the steps of the Papal throne biding its time. If the meek inherited the earth, it was commonly a territory six feet long and two in breadth. Everywhere the ancient rule was still the modern plan: those took who had the power, and those kept who could. There were exceptions, but exceptions were rare. Even at the Round Table there was only one Galahad.

Commines did not differ greatly from his age, or he would have been no fit minister for Louis. A tool is no longer a tool if it is not obedient to the hand which guides it. Let it fail in the work set it to do and it is cast aside into forgottenness or broken up as waste. He had no liking, he had even a loathing, for the part allotted to him, and he played it unwillingly; left to himself, he would not have played it at all. Ursula de Vesc might have lived out her life in peace so far as he was concerned; but Ursula de Vesc stood in his master's path, and however distasteful it might be she must be swept aside, now that Saxe made it possible so to do, and yet hold a semblance of justice. Only through her could the Dauphin be reached, therefore Commines steeled his nerves.

But to Stephen, partly for his own sake, and yet more for the memory of the dear dead woman, his heart went out in a greater tenderness than that of cold sympathy. Human love in the individual has been the salt which has kept the body politic from utter rottenness. How to soften the blow to Stephen was his thought as he paced slowly through the cool darkness of the night: how to do more than that, how to link Stephen to his own fortunes, which would surely rise after the successful execution of this commission of tragedy. Slowly he paced into the darkness, turned, and paced as slowly back again, to find Stephen standing motionless where he had left him, his hands linked behind his back, his shoulders squared, his face very sternly set.

"And if Jean Saxe's lies cannot be disproved? What follows then?"

"Stephen, we must save her together." He paused, but La Mothe made no reply. What could he answer? To continue protesting her innocence with nothing but his own word and hers to back the assertion was but beating the air; to ask, How shall we save her? would, he thought, tacitly admit her guilt. So there was silence until Commines went on slowly and with an evident difficulty; he would need all his diplomacy, he realized, all his powers of sophistry and persuasion if he was to carry Stephen La Mothe with him along the path he proposed to follow.

"Let us face facts," he began, almost roughly. "Saxe will leave me no alternative. No! say nothing, I know it all beforehand, and with all my soul I wish this had not fallen to my lot. And yet, Stephen, it is better I should be here than Tristan; Tristan has a rough way with women. Poor lad, that hurts you, does it? Yes, I am better than Tristan, even though Saxe leaves me no alternative. But we shall save her together," and this time Stephen La Mothe, out of the horror of the thought of Ursula de Vesc given over to the mercies of such a man as Tristan, found it in his heart to ask, "How?" The answer came promptly, but with grave deliberation.

"By the King's mercy."

"What mercy had the King on Molembrais? Will he be more merciful to a woman?"

"Then by his gratitude. Stephen, for her sake we must win the King's gratitude together."

"I do not understand."

"Behind the girl, but joined with her, stands——"

"The Dauphin? My God, Uncle, not that way."

La Mothe's voice was strange even to his own ears, so harsh and dry was it, the voice of age rather than of youth, and, indeed, he felt as if in this last hour he had suddenly grown so old that the world was a weariness.

"There were three in this plot," answered Commines, unmoved from his slow gravity, "Hugues, the Dauphin, and Mademoiselle de Vesc. Hugues is dead, but two still remain."

"His own son, his own, his one son? No, no, it cannot be, it cannot."

"I grant that it is incredible, but Saxe leaves no loophole for doubt."

"I do not mean that. I meant it could not be that the King—I cannot say it; his one son."

"He has no son but France. Do you remember what I told you that night in my room? Better the one should suffer than the many. And now there is a double reason, a double incentive to us both. Mademoiselle de Vesc's life hangs upon it. Follow the chain of reasoning, and, for God's sake, Stephen, follow closely. There is more than the life of a girl in all this. Jean Saxe cannot be suppressed even if we dared attempt it; Francois Villon, the King's jackal, who holds his life by a thread, knows everything. Of all men he dares not keep silence, of all men he would not keep silence if he dared, scum that he is. Within two days the King will know all Saxe's accusations, and if we do not act for ourselves another—Tristan or another—will come in our place. We will have destroyed ourselves for nothing, and there will be no hope for the girl, none. Can you not guess Tristan's methods with women? But, Stephen, if we act, if we return to Valmy and say, 'Sire, we have done our duty to the nation, with heavy hearts and in bitter sorrow we have done it: even though we have laid love itself on the altar of sacrifice, we have done it, give us this one life in return'—can the King refuse? Remember, if it is not we it will be another, and if we have no claim to ask, there will be no life given. Nor can we have any claim but obedience. I see no other way, no other hope."

The touch upon his arm was half appeal, half admonition, wholly friendly, but La Mothe winced as he shrank from it. There are times when human sympathy is the very salvation of the reason and the one comfort possible to the bruised spirit, but now the solitary instinct of the sick animal was upon him and he longed to be alone. Some sorrows are so personal they cannot be shared. Nor was it all sorrow. There was the passion of a fierce resentment, the bitter protest of helpless nature against a wanton and callous outrage.

As plainly as if Commines had said it in so many words he understood that, sinless or sinning, Ursula de Vesc was to be sacrificed to some state advantage; he understood, too, that neither Commines nor the King cared greatly whether she was innocent or guilty, and that but for his sake Commines would have given her hardly a second thought. Saxe lies! What matter? The state must progress. Saxe lies! What matter? Better one suffer than the many. Saxe lies! What matter? We will save her together by the one way possible.

Did he remember that first night in Amboise? Had he ever forgotten? Even in his plays of make-believe had he ever forgotten? The mind has a way of laying aside the unpalatable in some pigeon-hole of memory; it is out of sight, not forgotten. Yes, he remembered. Then it had been obedience to the King, service to the man to whom he owed everything and a duty to France. Now, more tremendous than all, Ursula de Vesc's life was thrown suddenly into the scale. That was Commines' plain statement. Nor was he conscious of any resentment against Commines. If Jean Saxe held to his story Commines could have no alternative, and if not Commines, it would be another, another less kindly.

No? His rebellion, the bitter upheaval of spirit, was against the conspiracy of iron circumstances which hedged him round on every side, a rebellion such as a man might feel who finds himself in silent darkness bound hand and foot with grave-clothes, while his brain is still quick and every nerve quivering with the passionate desire for life. "I see no hope," said Commines, "no hope but the one way," and Stephen La Mothe knew that one way was murder. Abruptly he turned upon his heel.

"The half-hour must be almost up," he said; "let us go to her."

CHAPTER XXIII

JEAN SAXE IS EXPLICIT

"Say to Mademoiselle de Vesc that Monsieur d'Argenton requires to speak with her in the Hercules room." It was the Judge who spoke. Already Commines stood in Louis' place to search, sift, find, and his tone was as cold and curt as the words were brusque. Then, as an afterthought, he added, "You can say, too, that Monsieur La Mothe is with him."

"No," said La Mothe; "omit that part of it."

For a moment Commines hesitated, annoyed by a tone curter and colder than his own, but after a glance at La Mothe's set face he motioned to the servant to go. That was not the moment to precipitate a conflict.

"Stephen, why not? It is the truth."

"Great heavens! do we want the truth?" answered La Mothe.

"But we are not friendly, she and I, and she may not come; you said so yourself. Remember, we must have no scandal, no publicity."

"Yes, what you have to do will be best done in the dark."

"Stephen, be just. You know I mean that Saxe's story is not one to be blazed abroad. Besides, nothing will be done to-night."

"But to-morrow, or next day?"

"It was not for the Dauphin's sake you risked your life this afternoon."

"That is quite true. It was for Mademoiselle de Vesc, and it may be risked again."

"Stephen, what do you mean?" But La Mothe, striding ahead as if impatient to face the issue and have done with uncertainties, returned no answer. There could be no answer until he saw how events fell out.

The Hercules chamber was named after the tapestry which hid the dull grey plaster of its walls. From the one door—and that there should be but one was unusual in an age when to provide for the strategy of retreat was common prudence—where the infant Hero strangled with chubby hands the twin serpents sent for his destruction, the story of his labours told itself with all the direct simplicity of medieval art.

No chronology was followed, the embroiderer having chosen her scenes at pleasure or as the exigencies of space demanded. Here, Samson-like, he tore the Numean lion jaw from jaw, his knee sunk in the shaggy chest, his shoulders ripped to the bone as the hooked claws gripped the muscles, his mighty torso a dripping crimson in the scheme of colour. There he cleansed the Augean stable in a faithfulness of detail more admirable in its approach to nature than its appeal to the sensibilities, the artist having left nothing to the imagination; beyond was the more human note, and Omphale bound him to her by a single thread stronger than all the chains ever riveted in Vulcan's forge. Next, with perhaps a significance of symbolism, the shirt of Nessus tortured him to madness with its scorching fires till the huge limbs writhed and the broad, kindly face was all a-sweat with agony, but—and now it was the door again—the benediction of peace crowned the end. The labours, the sorrows, the fiery trials were behind the back for ever, the faults and failures were forgiven or atoned for; after the stress of toil, the weariness of struggle, came the blessedness of rest; after humanity, divinity and the imperishable glory of high Olympus. Crude in its art, angular in its execution, there still was something of the soul of the worker stitched with the canvas. To Stephen La Mothe, touched at times by a poet's comprehension, it seemed not altogether a myth,—a type, perhaps; only, being very human, he hungered with a bitter hunger for the crowning of the peace and the divinity of love while life was life. It requires a robust faith to believe that Olympus can bring anything better than the best of earth.

A carved oak bench, black with age, stood beneath the centre of the three narrow windows piercing the outer wall; a four-branched copper lamp gave light from the polished table in the middle of the room; here and there, flanking the oaken bench, at the ends of the room, and at either side of the wide fireplace, were chairs and stools. A few wolfskin rugs dotted the floor. Villon and Saxe had not yet arrived.

"Mademoiselle begs that she may be excused to-night; she is very tired."

"But she cannot be excused," began Commines, when La Mothe intervened.

"Say that Monsieur La Mothe very greatly regrets she should be disturbed when so weary, but as it is of importance to Monseigneur he trusts she will excuse Monsieur d'Argenton's importunity."

"I told you how it would be," said Commines as the servant left the room, "you might as well have given your name first as last."

But La Mothe shook his head. "There is a difference, and she will understand." Then the restraint he had put upon himself with so much difficulty snapped for a moment: "Uncle, for God's sake, be gentle with her."

"I will be all I dare, but I trust neither Saxe nor Villon," and as he spoke the two entered the room.

In spite of a strong effort at self-control the inn-keeper was visibly ill at ease, while Villon, on his part, was complacently, almost offensively, cheerful. In a characteristic Puckish humour he had played alternately on Saxe's hopes and fears, but refusing all definite information beyond the bare statement

that Monsieur d'Argenton had sent for him peremptorily. Why? How could Francois Villon say why? He was no confidant of the Lord High Jackal of all the King's jackals. Saxe, who was so friendly with couriers from Valmy, should know why. Perhaps, humble though he, Jean Saxe, was, he had rendered the King some service of late? and at the hint Saxe glowed, with expectation. Who was so generous a paymaster as Louis! Perhaps, on the other hand,—and the wrinkles of Villon's many wrinkled face deepened into puckers,—Jean Saxe knew too much. That was dangerous. Amboise was like Valmy, more entered than came out. Louis had many ways of paying debts. There was Guy de Molembrais, for instance—, but Saxe was frankly sweating and Villon broke off. The second hint was clearer even than the first, and Saxe felt that both were true.

But when he would have spoken Commines impatiently motioned him to be quiet, flinging a "Wait!" at him as one might a command to a restless dog, and at the evil augury the drops gathered anew round the edge of his close-cropped hair; gathered and swelled until they trickled down the cunning, stupid face. Villon, he noticed, and found another evil significance in the act, drew away from him, leaving him solitary just when the warm nearness of human kind would have been a comfort.

They had not long to wait. Hearing a movement in the passage Villon threw open the door, closing it again behind Ursula de Vesc. Then he leaned against it like one interested but indifferent in his interest. The girl was pitifully pale. Double lines of care creased the smoothness of the forehead; the weariness she had plead had been no pretence, but was written plainly in the languid gait, the drooped lids, and the dark patches beneath the eyes. By her side walked Charlemagne, and half a yard behind the three puppies trotted sleepily, Charlot lagging last; even in his anxious preoccupation La Mothe noticed it was Charlot, the best beloved of the three because it was the weakest.

Her first glance was for La Mothe, her second, and this time she bowed slightly, was towards Commines, then it fell upon Saxe, and the brows were raised in a mute interrogation, but there was neither apprehension nor dismay. Stepping forward La Mothe placed a chair beside the table, and, crossing the room, she sat down with a murmur of thanks, then she turned to Commines. Drawing back a step La Mothe, half behind her, rested, his hand on the chair-back, and the stage was set.

"Mademoiselle," began Commines, "Saxe, whom you know, told me a strange story to-day, and it seemed to us it was your right to hear it as soon as possible."

"Us? Who are us, Monsieur d'Argenton?"

"Monsieur La Mothe and myself."

"I agree with Monsieur d'Argenton that it is your right to hear it," said La Mothe, "but in everything else I disagree. For me your one word to-day was enough."

"So that is why Monsieur d'Argenton is in Amboise?"

"The story is this," went on Commines, studiously ignoring the cold contempt in her voice. But she interrupted him.

"Let Saxe tell his own story; why else is he here? It is always safer to get such things first-hand. Now, Saxe?"

Turning her shoulder on Commines she confronted Saxe. She knew she was, somehow, on her defence, but not the offence alleged against her. All day La Mothe's unexpected question had troubled her, and vaguely she had connected it with the attempt upon the Dauphin at the Burnt Mill, though how she, the Dauphin's almost one friend in Amboise, could have knowledge of the attempt she could not understand. With the failure of the attack she had thought the incident closed, but now Jean Saxe had a story to tell, a story in some way linked to Stephen La Mothe's question, a question which flushed the pallor of even her weariness when she remembered how widely it had differed from what her thought had been.

But Jean Saxe was in no haste with his tale. Jean Saxe shuffled his feet, licked his dry lips, and caught at his breath. His throat was drier than Villon's had ever been, and Villon's was the driest throat in Amboise. A modest man, though an innkeeper, Jean Saxe did not know which way to look now that he was, for the moment, the centre of the world. Either the grey eyes, their lids no longer drooping, searched him out, or Commines' stern gaze stared him down, or, worst of all, he met the sardonic light with which Villon beamed his satisfaction at a scene quite to his humour, and so Jean Saxe was dumb, remembering that Louis had many ways of paying his debts, and more went into Amboise than came out again. For the trusted servant of so generous a King Jean Saxe was not happy.

"Come, Saxe, come. Tell me what you told me this afternoon, neither more nor less. There is nothing in it to your discredit."

"Yes, monseigneur, certainly. I have nothing to hide. I have always been the King's most humble, faithful, devoted——"

"Leave that aside. Come to your tale and tell the whole truth."

"Of course, monseigneur. Hugues came to me——"

"When did Hugues go to you?" It was Ursula de Vesc who spoke. From his place behind her La Mothe could see the upward defiant tilt of the head as she asked the question.

"Let him tell his story his own way," said Commines, "or you will confuse him."

"As you will, but Hugues is dead and cannot defend himself," and the defiance passed as, with a sigh, the girl sank wearily into her chair, felt La Mothe's hand where it rested upon the back, and leaned hastily forward, then settled slowly into her place again. As for Stephen La Mothe, the beating of his heart quickened, but he stood unmoved. The touch comforted them both.

"Hugues came two days ago——"

"That was the second time. When did he come first?"

"Three weeks ago, monseigneur."

"Are you sure?"

"It was a week before your lordship came to Amboise. I remember it perfectly because——"

"Never mind why; that you remember and are sure of the day is enough. I want you to be exact. It was a week before Monsieur La Mothe and I arrived?"

"Yes, monseigneur." Saxe had thrown off his nervousness. He no longer shuffled his feet but stood breast square to the world. Commines' questions had loosened the thread of his story, and he was ready to run it off the reel without a tangle. "He said the King was very sick in Valmy, so sick and full of suffering that every hour of life was an hour of misery. It would be pure happiness, said he, pure charity and a blessing if such a life were ended. He was sure the King himself had no wish to live."

"That," said Ursula de Vesc, her eyes fixed on vacancy, "is so very like what we all know of His Majesty."

"Yes, mademoiselle. Then he went on to say that those who helped the poor suffering King to relief would be his best friends, and it ought to be no surprise if there were such friends."

"Were there names mentioned?"

"No, monseigneur, not then."

"But this afternoon you told me——"

"I thought Saxe was to tell his story his own way?" broke in Ursula de Vesc, tartly.

"Mademoiselle de Vesc, you cannot know the peril you stand in."

"Peril from what, Monsieur d'Argenton?"

"from the justice of the King."

"If it be only from his justice then I stand in no peril. But I, and all who love the Dauphin, know well how the King's justice deals with Amboise. Saxe, go on with your story your own way. No names were mentioned that day? What then?"

"Hugues said the King's sickness made him peevish and suspicious, so that he doubted even his own friends. No one was safe, neither high nor low, and no one could tell who would follow the same road as Monsieur de Molembrais, whose safe-conduct couldn't save him. 'Even you, Saxe,' he said, 'faithful as you have been and true servant to the King, not even you are safe, and you know a man's first duty is to himself.'"

Francois Villon could not forgo the favourite tag of philosophy whereby he had shaped his own career, "*Toute beste garde sa pe!*" and that was the first time, Saxe?"

"The first time," repeated Saxe. "I think that was all he said then, monseigneur, or the gist of it, for he

repeated it over and over again."

"Then come to the second. When was it?"

"Two days ago, monseigneur."

"Tell it your own way; or, stay a moment. Mademoiselle de Vesc," and Commines turned to the girl, his face both grave and troubled, "help us to be your friends, help us to save you from yourself before it is too late. Much can be forgiven to a generous devotion however misplaced. The King, I am sure, will see it in that light. I beg, I pray you, pray you to speak before Saxe speaks. If not for your own sake, then for the Dauphin's, for—" he paused, and, lifting his eyes, glanced at Stephen La Mothe bolt upright within touch of her, "for the happiness of a life help us to help you."

CHAPTER XXIV

A PROPHET WITHOUT HONOUR

At the appeal La Mothe's grip upon the chair grew more tense, and his hand so shook that the whole chair was shaken as he felt the girl stiffen against his knuckles. What his hopes were he did not dare admit, though the foundations of his faith were never shaken. Better even than the girl he understood how great was the issue Commines played for in his effort to move her from her silence. Was it an honest appeal or was it a trap? Would the love of a father accept a hinted repentance, a veiled regret as sufficient? or did Commines, astute and unscrupulous in his master's service, invite a contrition that he might triumphantly declare, Here is proof? A single word spoken in reversal of her afternoon's denial would justify— But swiftly as thought grew from thought Ursula de Vesc was yet swifter in her reply.

"I think you mean to be kind, Monsieur d'Argenton, and for that I am grateful. Saxe, we are waiting."

"Two days ago Hugues came to me again. I was in the stables——"

"Where Hugues flung you into the horse-trough last month for speaking disrespectfully of the Dauphin?"

"Mademoiselle, you must not interrupt; later you can question Saxe if you wish."

"I wished to show you what good friends they were, these two. Hugues cannot speak for himself."

"He had need of me," said Saxe sullenly, "and that was the reason he came to me as I say. I was grooming Grey Roland. 'He saved a King for France,' said Hugues, with his hand on his neck, 'and what a King he will make, so grateful, so generous. Not a man who helps him will be forgotten. And it won't be long now. Saxe,' he said, 'you should join us while there is time.' 'Who are us?' said I. But he wouldn't answer that. 'You could hang us all if you knew,' he said. So I told him that unless I had at least one name I wouldn't listen to him. What was he but a servant? So he stood rubbing his chin awhile, then he said, 'We need you, Saxe, for you have the horses we want and you know Valmy, so I'll tell you who is the brain of it all and the keenest next to the Dauphin himself—Mademoiselle de Vesc.'"

"A lie," said La Mothe, "the damnedest lie that ever came out of hell. Finish your lies, Saxe."

Sternly Commines turned upon him. "You are here only on sufferance; either leave the room or be silent."

"Monsieur d'Argenton, it is every man's right——" began La Mothe; but Ursula de Vesc, turning in her chair, laid a hand upon his arm.

"Wait," she said, smiling up at him bravely; "but I am grateful to you all the same. So I am the brain of it all, Saxe?"

"I only know what Hugues told me," answered Saxe, looking straight before him. Of the two he was the more disturbed. His scalp tingled, and again the little points of perspiration were glistening on his forehead. Her quietness frightened him. To have shouted down a passion of protest, a passion of terrified, angry denial, would have been more natural. "He said you sent him on both days, you and Monseigneur. You were both afraid the King would suspect the truth——"

"The truth!" repeated the girl, and for the first time her voice shook; "but it is all a lie, as Monsieur La Mothe says, a clumsy lie, and yet I see that it may serve its purpose. It is not the truth the King requires. Monsieur d'Argenton, I tell you formally that what Saxe has said is absolutely untrue."

"Saxe is explicit, you can question him when he has finished," answered Commines coldly. For him the King stood behind Jean Saxe, and no mere denial would content Louis or set his fears at rest. "Go on, Saxe. The King would suspect the truth?"

"So he said, monseigneur, and so there was need for haste," said Saxe.

"Then why wait two days before telling Monsieur d'Argenton? Why wait two days before warning the King? Why wait until Hugues was dead?"

"There was a courier from Valmy to-day," said Villon, speaking for the first time, and, as it seemed, irrelevantly.

Commines turned upon him sharply. "What has that to do with it? He brought letters from the King addressed to me. Monsieur La Mothe knows their contents."

"And for Jean Saxe," retorted Villon; "letters from the King for Jean Saxe and Monsieur d'Argenton!"

"Ah!" said mademoiselle the second time, "so that is why Monsieur d'Argenton is in Amboise."

"That is why," answered Commines, his hand stretched out in denunciation. "At Valmy we more than guessed your treason. But it was hard to believe that a woman could so corrupt a boy, that a son could so conspire against a father, and I came to Amboise probing the truth. And every day proof has piled upon proof, presumptive proof I grant, but proof damning and conclusive nevertheless. Every day the King has been held up to loathing and contempt. Every day the woman—you, Mademoiselle de Vesc, you—egged on the boy to worse than disaffection. Every day the son reviled the father, even to telling God's own priest that his one thought was hate—everlasting hate. The spirit to hurt and the accursed will were there, more shameless every day, more shameless and more insolent; but until to-day, until Jean Saxe spoke, there was no proof that the courage to act, the courage to carry out the evident ill desire was callously plotting to set France shuddering with horror. But Saxe has spoken. That he should have spoken earlier is beside the point. He has spoken at last and the truth is stripped bare."

"No truth," said mademoiselle, "no truth; before God, no truth." She was rigidly upright in her chair, her eyes blazing like cold stars, her face very pale. Every limb, every muscle, was trembling, her hand pressed under her breast as when La Mothe had seen her for the first time. "No truth except that the Dauphin has said unwise things at times and I also. To that I confess."

"You confess because you cannot deny," answered Commines, "and had Hugues not tampered with Saxe the truth might never have been known until all France stood aghast at the tragedy. That Hugues is dead matters nothing. His death does not affect the issue. He would have denied it had he lived. But now we know without a doubt that you and he, and that unhappy boy, the Dauphin—Villon, who is that fumbling at the latch? Let no one in, and bid whoever knocks begone whence he came."

But instead of obeying Villon flung the door wide. The Dauphin was on the threshold, half dressed, his shoes unbuckled, his laces awry, his face cadaverous in its pallor. He had been crying, and the traces of the unwiped tears lined his cheeks. Underneath the dull eyes, duller than common, were livid hollows, and he shook from head to foot in a nervous terror.

"Hugues," he said, his voice a-quaver. "How am I to do without Hugues? He always slept at my door, and now I have no one—no one at all. Ursula, what has happened? What are they saying to you?"

Mechanically obedient to the dominant power of custom rather than to any conscious will, Ursula de Vesc had risen at the boy's entrance. But the strain of an enforced calmness is greater than that of any passionate outburst, and only the support of the table kept her on her feet. Against this she leaned, her open hand flat upon it.

"Monseigneur—Charles—oh! why did you come just now?" Her voice broke as it had not broken when confronting Saxe or braving the bitter denunciation Commines had poured upon her. But the boy's presence fretted her realization to the quick. It was not she alone before whose feet the gulf had opened so suddenly. "Go back to your room. Some one will take Hugues' place,—good, brave, loyal Hugues."

"Sleep in peace, Monseigneur," said La Mothe, "I will take Hugues' place to-night."

But Commines thought he saw his way to end a scene which had grown embarrassing, and at the same time take the first step along a path which could have but one end.

"There is no need for that. One of my men will guard the Dauphin."

"Your man? A man from Valmy sleep at my door? Thank you, Monseigneur d'Argenton, but I do not wish to sleep so soundly as that."

"And yet you wished your father to sleep sound?"

"My quarrel with my father is between the King and the Dauphin," answered the boy with one of those sudden accessions of dignity which were as characteristic as they were disconcerting. "Do you, sir, know your place and keep it. Ursula, what is Saxe doing here at this time of night?"

Though he addressed Mademoiselle de Vesc by name, Charles looked round him as he spoke. The question was for the room at large. But no one answered him. It was no part of Commines' plan to make a public charge against the Dauphin. There was no need to make such a charge, it could only provoke a scene of violence, of denial, of protest, of recrimination, and raise a storm whose echoes might pass beyond the walls of Amboise. Not that way would he earn the King's thanks, so he held his peace. But the Dauphin was not to be cowed by silence.

"Ursula, what have they been saying to you? All these men against one woman is cowardly. If I were a man like Monsieur La Mothe——"

"Hush, Charles; Monsieur La Mothe is our friend."

"I know. He saved us both to-day, me for the second time. Monsieur La Mothe, when I am king, I won't forget. But why is Saxe here? Villon, you are his friend, why is Saxe here?"

Villon had closed the door behind the Dauphin, resting his back against it as before. His shrewd clear eyes had watched every phase of the scene from its beginning. Twice he had spoken, twice or thrice he had laughed his soft unctuous chuckle as if his thoughts pleased him. Now, directly addressed, he came forward a step, and his bearing was that of the actor who hears his cue.

"No friend, Monseigneur; the honour would be too great. Who am I to call myself the friend of a prophet? Or perhaps it was Hugues who was the prophet; Hugues who is dead and cannot speak for himself."

"Speak no evil of Hugues," said Charles, "he—he——" and the boy's lips quivered, the tears starting afresh under his swollen lids as the memory of his loss came home to him, "he loved me, he died for me, and oh, Ursula! will they take you from me too?"

"No, Charles; surely not. But I think Monsieur Villon has something more to say. Why do you call Hugues a prophet?"

"Because he foretold Guy de Molembrais' death three days before it occurred—or was it four? You should know, Saxe?"

"I only know what he told me," answered Saxe doggedly, but the fresh ruddiness of his face had faded, and he sucked at his lips as if they had grown suddenly dry. He knew Villon and Villon's ways of old, knew his bitter tongue, knew his shrewdness, and feared both.

"Just so," said Villon cheerfully, "and a week before Monsieur d'Argenton came to Amboise he told you no one was safe from the King's sick suspicions, not even if he carried a safe-conduct, and instanced——"

"Villon is right!" cried La Mothe. "Monsieur d'Argenton—Uncle—thank God, Villon is right. Guy de Molembrais was alive a week before we left Valmy. Saxe has lied, lied, lied. Do you see it, Uncle? I knew he lied. Oh, you hound! you hound! And you had a letter from Valmy this afternoon? That accounts——"

"Hush, Monsieur La Mothe, hush." Rising from her chair Ursula de Vesc almost put her hand over La Mothe's mouth in her efforts to silence him. "You have said enough; do not say too much—too much for yourself. Charles, Charles, let us thank God together," and, turning from La Mothe, she caught the boy in her arms, drawing him to her breast in a passion of relief. It was not difficult to see what her chief anxiety had been. "Monsieur d'Argenton, surely you are satisfied now?"

Was he satisfied? By no means. But Commines was spared the embarrassment of an immediate reply.

The door, which Villon had just quitted, was thrown hastily open and a servant entered, a sealed envelope in his hand. Ignoring the Dauphin utterly—and it was indicative of the estimate in which the boy was held—he turned to Commines.

"From Valmy, for Monsieur d'Argenton, in great haste. The messenger has left a horse foundered on the road."

"From Valmy? But this is not the King's—there! you can go. See that the messenger is well cared for."

With his thumb under the silk thread which, passing through the seal, secured the envelope, Commines paused and, in spite of all his trained self-control, his face changed. Of all the emotions, fear is, perhaps, the most difficult to conceal because of its widely varied shades of expression. With some it is a tightening of the nostrils, with others a compression of the lips, a change of colour, or a line between the brows. It may even be the laugh of an assumed carelessness, a pretence at jest, but upon one and all it leaves some sign. The seal was not the King's seal, and the handwriting was strange to him.

"Saxe, if you have lied, it will go hard with you, understand that. No, I can hear nothing now; tomorrow, perhaps, or next day. Monsieur Villon, place him in safety for to-night, he must not be allowed to leave the Château."

"But, monsieur—monseigneur, I mean—it was the King—"

"Hold your tongue, you fool," said Villon, hustling him through the doorway; "would you make bad worse, or do you want to hang twice over?"

But even when the door was shut behind them Commines stood irresolute. There are times when to be alone is the instinct of nature, and this was one of them. He felt intuitively that some blow threatened, some reverse, a disaster even. Louis' last letter, received that very day, had been harsh in tone, curt to severity, its few words full of a personal complaint which his pride had concealed from Stephen La Mothe. It had been more than a rebuke, it had been a warning, almost a threat. Now upon its heels came this, and he knew that of the three who watched him curiously two were his open enemies. If it was his dismissal, his downfall, there would be no pity. But to be alone was impossible. The situation had to be faced there and then. "With your permission. Monseigneur?" he said, and tore the envelope open.

It was a short letter, as many fateful letters are, and Commines read it in a glance, then a second time. "My God!" they heard him say twice over, drawing in his breath as if an old wound had hurt him suddenly. Half unconsciously his hands crumpled up the paper, then as unconsciously smoothed it out again. The instinct to be alone had possessed him like a prayer, and at times our prayers have a trick of finding an answer in a way we do not expect. The solitariness he desired had come upon him. He forgot he was not alone, and the truest solitude is the isolation of the spirit when the material world slips from us, and in the presence of the eternal a man is set face to face with his own soul. So he stood, the paper shaking in his shaking hands, his lips moving soundlessly. Then he shifted his eyes, and as they fell upon the Dauphin, caught in Ursula de Vesc's arms, the skirt of the white robe half wrapped round him, his head almost upon her breast, he straightened himself with an effort.

"Monseigneur," he began, "the King—" but the words choked in his throat. His coarse, healthy face had gone wan and grey, now it flushed and a rush of tears filled his eyes. But with an impatient jerk of the head he shook them from his cheeks and La Mothe saw him struggling for self-control. "The King is dead," he said hoarsely. "God have mercy on us all; the King is dead—dead."

From the boy his eyes had travelled upwards, following the protecting arm which lay across the slender shoulders, and it was Ursula de Vesc who answered. Charles had caught her hand in both his and held it pressed against his breast. It was clear that he did not understand, but the full meaning of the tragedy of death is not comprehensible in a single moment, nor was the girl's answer much more than an exclamation.

"Monsieur d'Argenton! The King? The King dead?"

"Dead," he said dully, "the greatest King that France has ever known, the greatest mind that was alive in France. In France? In Europe! There was none like him—none. A great King, great in his foresight, great in his wisdom, great in his love for France; a great King, and he is dead. But yesterday, this very day even, he held the peace of nations in the hollow of his hand, now— Why, how poor a thing is man. Dead! dead! But his monument is a great nation, a new France; and who shall hold France in her pride of place amongst the nations where his dead hand raised her? Dead; the Great King and my friend."

CHAPTER XXV

"IT IS A TRAP"

This time no one broke the silence, and for a little space the quiet was like the reverent stillness of a death-chamber. The awe inseparable from sudden death possessed them. And yet, after the first shock of natural horror, La Mothe was conscious of a great relief. Not till then did he realize how tense the strain had been, how acute the fear. But at the slow dropping of Commynes' bitter-hearted words there came a revulsion of feeling, and he was ashamed to find a gladness in such a cause of grief. For the loss to France he cared little. To him Louis had been but a name, the figurehead of state. If not Louis, then another, and France would still be France. But as Commynes turned away and, following that other instinct of nature which, in the dumb animal, hides its wounds, covered his face with his arms as he leaned against the wall, the lad's heart went out in sympathy to the man who had lost his friend. And surely over and above his greatness of mind there must have been some deep heart of goodness in the dead man when he moved affection to such a grief. But at last the silence came to an end, and again it was Ursula de Vesc who spoke.

"Monsieur d'Argenton, you will, of course, go to Valmy at once?"

"To Valmy?" Commynes brushed his hand across his forehead with a characteristic gesture and paused, hesitating. "Why—I—Monseigneur, have you nothing to say?"

"What is there to say?" answered the boy. "Do you think he loves me any better than he did? Why are you in Amboise at all?"

It was only a bow at a venture, the ill-tempered fling of a petulant boy, but the shaft struck home. Why was he in Amboise? His hope was that the full purpose of his lengthened stay at the castle would never be known, the truth would ruin him with the new King, ruin him utterly. Hastily he searched his memory how far he had committed himself. Not too deeply, he thought, so far as Charles was concerned. Ursula de Vesc was of less consequence, and Saxe could always be made a scapegoat. Saxe had lied, Saxe had deceived him, and, except Stephen La Mothe, no one knew how ready he had been to be deceived. Perhaps Saxe had also deceived the father? Yes, he would take that line, if necessary; Saxe was the evil genius of them all, but the first essential was to placate the boy with a generality. Liars and successful diplomatists are rapid thinkers, and no too obvious a silence followed Charles' blunt question.

"Monseigneur, for ten years I have been your father's trusted and faithful servant——"

"Ursula, I am tired and shall go to bed. Thank you, Monsieur La Mothe, but I do not think you need sleep at my door. To-night I shall be safe. All the same, I would be Dauphin again if it could bring Hugues back. I don't understand what it means to be King; perhaps in time I shall see the difference. Good night, Ursula. I do not know what they were saying to you, but they had better leave you in peace. Good night, Monsieur La Mothe."

"The King is dead; long live the King! and service to the dead is soon forgotten," said Commynes bitterly as the door closed. The significant ignoring of his presence had stung him to the quick. It might be said it was only the rudeness of an ill-taught boy, but the boy was King of France, and the suggestive omission was an evil augury to the hopes of his unsatisfied ambition.

"Can you blame him? He is a very loyal boy, and was quite honest when he said he would be the Dauphin again if that would bring Hugues back, and as Dauphin he has been miserably unhappy."

"He is very fortunate in your love, mademoiselle." Commynes had never heard Villon's opinion, but it was his own, and he acted upon it promptly. Win the girl and the boy will follow.

"I loved him for himself and for his unhappiness," she answered simply. "But will you not return to Valmy at once? Surely death does not end all service!"

"My duty and service are to the living," replied Commynes shortly. "I shall remain in Amboise. The dead take no offence."

"You will forgive me if I speak too plainly, Monsieur d'Argenton, but the King was so jealous and, may I add, so generous, it would vex his ghost to think he was so soon forgotten."

"Mademoiselle, I serve France, and to-night France is in Amboise."

"Is the letter from Coictier, his doctor, Uncle?" Hitherto La Mothe had kept silence. He agreed with

Mademoiselle de Vesc, but found himself in a difficulty. In spite of his gratitude and reverence for Commynes, in spite even of his profound belief in his shrewder, sounder judgment, he revolted from this callous opportunism which abandoned a dead master for a new service without the apparent compunction of a moment. Surely the grave should first shut out all that was mortal of the old obedience? And yet, because of that unfailing gratitude and profound faith, he could not join with the girl in her open condemnation. But crumpling the letter anew, Commynes shook his head as if the question was distasteful.

"No."

"From the King's son-in-law, Monsieur de Beaujeu, then? He would, of course, send you word immediately. Or Leslie? or Saint-Pierre?"

But after each name Commynes made a gesture of dissent, pushing the paper into his pocket at the last to end the questioning.

"Not from any of these?" said mademoiselle. "Who, then, has written? Surely the Dauphin has a right to know?"

"Tristan," answered Commynes, and, turning, he looked her full in the face.

"Tristan?" she said icily, drawing herself back with a movement which La Mothe recognized by an unhappy experience. "You choose your friends strangely."

"But he is no friend," protested La Mothe, full of scorn and indignation for Commynes' sake at the shame of the suggestion. "It would be impossible with such a man. And Monsieur de Commynes has told me more than once that Tristan is jealous of his influence with the King, and is his bitterest enemy."

"And yet out of all Valmy it is Tristan—and Tristan only—who is friend enough to send the terrible news to Monsieur d'Argenton? Is that not strange? Monsieur d'Argenton, you are a learned man; is there not some proverb about distrusting the Greeks when they bring presents?"

"Tristan would never dare to spread such a report never, never."

"But Tristan's master might. You don't think so? Forgive me if I am suspicious, but can you wonder, you of all men? In Amboise we have learned to doubt everything, even the friends who are ready to die for us," and, with a sudden impulse, as natural and gracious as it was touching, she held out her hand to La Mothe, a wistful, kindly tenderness, deeper than the emotion of gratitude, moistening her eyes. Very gravely he stooped and kissed it with a "Thank God, mademoiselle!" To say more was unnecessary, for in the three words he said everything. It was the formal wiping out of the day's misunderstanding, the knitting together of life-threads torn apart, and where there is such a knitting the union is firmer, closer, stronger, more indissoluble than before the rent. "Monsieur d'Argenton," she went on, the voice a little tremulous and yet with a clearer ring, "once before, when the King doubted the loyalty of Paris, did he not spread abroad such a rumour that he might test the spirit of the people?"

"Yes, but there was a deep policy in that."

"And is there no deep policy now! Is it for a shallow reason you have spent two weeks in Amboise, or that Jean Saxe has coined his lies with such carefulness of detail? May we hear Tristan's letter?"

For a moment Commynes hesitated. He had regained his full self-control, and it was with a growing surprise that La Mothe heard him debate the situation with Ursula de Vesc as with an equal. But not only was he impressed in spite of his prejudice against her, but he was too shrewd a politician to put aside any suggestion which commended itself to his reason just because he despised its source. And the girl was right. If there had been a deep policy in setting afloat the Paris rumour, there was a yet deeper policy now, a policy more subtle, darker, and pregnant with tragedy. Belief in the King's death might well loosen the tongues of those who had plotted against him, and their unguarded triumph furnish the very confirmation which had been vainly sought in Amboise these ten days. While he hesitated Ursula de Vesc urged her point afresh.

"Monsieur d'Argenton, in the Dauphin's name I might claim to see the letter, I might even demand and compel it as a right; but there will be no need for that?"

"No need at all," he answered. "This is the letter. As you see, it is very short:

"MONSIEUR,—A great misfortune has overtaken us, the greatest possible. The King is dead. It is being kept secret, but I send you the warning that you may make yourself secure in Amboise. Note

carefully how the Dauphin takes it. I commend you to the keeping of God.—TRISTAN.'

You see it is explicit."

"And Saxe was explicit, but he lied." She was too much of a woman to spare him the thrust, but it was the only revenge she took, and having taken it, she sat silent, her brows knit, her fingers playing unconsciously with Charlemagne's soft ears. The dog's head was on her lap, motionless, the gentle brown eyes fixed upon her face. Charlot lay asleep at her feet, breathing little heavy breaths of contentment, as if enough of his brain was awake to enjoy the sleep of the remainder.

"Yes," she said slowly, "I agree that the King's Provost-Marshal is explicit, but I do not read his letter as you do. Perhaps it is because Amboise has made me so suspicious. It is a sorrowful thing to say, but we have been taught that safety lies in distrust of Valmy. It is horrible, but it is not our fault, and I distrust now. Tristan is your enemy and ours. The King, the great King, is not above setting a trap. I think I see a double snare; a snare to catch the Dauphin, to catch all who are his friends in Amboise, and a snare to catch the great King's minister himself. Perhaps it is foolish, I know it is presumptuous, but let me read the letter my own way; you can show me afterwards where I am wrong. It is clever, but it is the cleverness of the man who thinks only of his own interests, who makes no allowance for love, loyalty, or single-hearted duty, and judges others by himself. Is that your great King, Monsieur d'Argenton?" and Commines, answering nothing, recognized the life-likeness of the portrait.

"But no!" she went on, "your great King is dead, the letter says so, and this is your friend Tristan who sends you the warning that you may make yourself secure in Amboise! What does that mean? You know that better than I, but I suppose it means that, first in the field, you may win the Dauphin's confidence and govern France through the boy. That is a great gift from an enemy, Monsieur d'Argenton, and what would the King say if he were alive? But the King is dead! Then why are you to note carefully how the Dauphin takes the news? For whose benefit are you to note it? For your own? But you are to make yourself secure in Amboise! For Tristan's? But how does it touch Tristan? For the King, who is dead? That is absurd. For the King, who is alive? for the King, who dictates the letter that he may lay hold of some chance word and torture it into God knows what vile use against the boy? Bear witness, gentlemen, both of you, there was no such word. And what is the ending of the letter? He commends you to the keeping of God! Tristan, the hangman, commends Monsieur d'Argenton to the keeping of God. There will be much need for His keeping if you make yourself secure in Amboise while the King lives. Do you not smell the King's unctuous, perverted religiosity in that sentence, Monsieur d'Argenton? It is a snare, a snare for us all, and if I were you I would ride to Valmy this very hour, though I foundered a dozen horses on the road. Monsieur La Mothe, am I not right?"

"Entirely right," said La Mothe heartily. He might have gone further and, following the precedent set by Adam in Eden, have said, "Eternally right!" for what lover ever thought his mistress in the wrong? But this time there was more than a lover's agreement. "Uncle, surely you see that Mademoiselle de Vesc is right, right every way? If that scoundrel has lied, then there is a trap set, but if it is the truth, surely your place is at Valmy?"

"Why?" asked Commines, but as he spoke he read the letter afresh, weighing each sentence separately. "Why not at Amboise?"

CHAPTER XXVI

COMMINES TAKES ADVICE

Respect kept La Mothe silent. How could he say bluntly, 'You owe everything you possess in the world to the man who is dead—position, title, office, wealth. Are these forgotten?' In his embarrassment he glanced at Ursula de Vesc. Owing Commines neither respect nor gratitude, she had no such scruple.

"Death is always terrible," she said softly, "or we make it terrible by our own terrors, but there will be a new terror added if love and the loyalty of gratitude die with the life. Is eaten bread so soon forgotten, Monsieur d'Argenton?"

Almost abstractedly Commines looked up from the paper in his hand. If he heard her, he gave no sign of having heard; certainly he showed no resentment at the implied censure. His mind was busy balancing prospects and possibilities. If Charles were king, Ursula de Vesc would be a power behind

the throne. If, as she said, Louis—and not for the first time—played one of his grim jests full of a sinister possibility, to remain at Amboise would be fatal both to himself and to the boy. The King might say the Dauphin grasped at the crown while the father lived, and Philip de Commines abetted him. After all, Valmy was safest. Not many days before, Louis had told him with brutal frankness that the hand which pulled him from the gutter could fling him back again. Yes, Valmy was safest. But what account was he to give of his mission? The letter, whether false in its news or true, was a sufficient reason for his return. It was most natural, human, and loving that the faithful servant should stand by the bier of his dead master. It would even be a point in his favour if the King lived. No doubt Tristan had said, 'Test him and he will go over to the Dauphin.' Well, he would give Tristan the lie and prove that Louis came first, living or dead. Yes, Valmy was safest.

But his mission? For the time it had failed. Saxe, as Stephen had said, had proved too much. He must make Saxe the scapegoat. The obvious lie damned him. It was crass stupidity to put into Hugues' mouth a lie which carried its own disproof with it. To force an accusation based upon the remainder of the story would be unpolitic. His best course would be to relieve the King of all his fears at Amboise. There was no plot, the Dauphin was loyal and obedient: not affectionate, that would be proving too much like the fool Saxe, and Louis would never believe it. Then there was the King's letter to Saxe. It must not be forgotten. That shrewd rascal, Villon, was right when he said some one had sounded Saxe, only the some one was not Hugues the valet. The letter must be ignored, or, better still, it might even help to make his—Commines'—position more secure than ever. It was Louis' habit to disavow his failures. He would, of course, repudiate Saxe and disavow the mission to Amboise, and because of the disavowal he would, openly at least, welcome the Dauphin's loyalty. That was Louis' way. Yes, Valmy was safest.

"I must leave Amboise at once," he said at last, and speaking as if the intention had always been in his mind. "If this misfortune has overtaken us all, which God forbid, we must meet it with courage and resignation. May He who alone is able comfort the bereaved son of so good and so great a father. My hope and prayer, mademoiselle, is that you are right and the King is making trial of our love and loyalty. In either case my place is at Valmy. La Mothe, order a horse to be saddled without delay."

"There is one ready in Saxe's stable," answered La Mothe. Then, lest he should be asked the unpleasant question how he came by that knowledge and for what purpose the horse was in readiness, he added hastily, "What shall we do with Saxe?"

"Keep Saxe safe until you hear from Valmy; let no one but Villon or yourself have speech with him. Such a liar would calumniate the King himself. Now, Stephen, the horses in ten minutes."

"Horses?" said La Mothe blankly. Was he also to leave Amboise now that a new dawn was breaking?

"Yes, tell two of my men to be ready. I do not trust Tristan, and will take no risks. An accident might happen to a lonely man on an all-night's ride."

"And yet," said the girl as La Mothe left the room, "you were ready to trust Tristan ten minutes ago?"

"But you have opened my eyes. Why? That is the one thing I cannot understand. We have always been opposed, always at enmity, and never more bitterly than to-night. Mademoiselle de Vesc, why did you not take your revenge and let me ruin myself?"

"I might give you a woman's reason and say, Because!" she answered, speaking more lightly than she had yet spoken; then as she paused a moment the pale face flushed, and the beginnings of a smile played about the mouth, only to die away in a tender gravity. "And yet, to tell the truth, it was a woman's reason: it was because there was once a friendless, helpless boy, and Philip de Commines—you were neither Argenton nor Talmont then, monsieur—opened his heart to him."

"But, mademoiselle, to be honest, that was for a woman's sake."

"And," she answered, the flush deepening and the gentle tenderness of mouth and eyes growing yet more tender, "to be honest, this is for a man's sake."

Again there was silence, and in the quiet the two who had been enemies, and might be again for the same cause, drew into a closer, better comprehension upon a common ground. At heart they were akin—the politic unscrupulous opportunist vowed to the compulsion of his ambitions, and the girl who through all her threat of danger had given no thought to herself. For the sake of the man; for the sake of the woman: they are the twin cogwheels, working the one into the other, which keep this great machine of life, this sordid material world, upon a sure, if slow, ascent from the baser to the nobler, from the kingdoms of this world to the glory of the Kingdom which is to come.

"A good lad," said Commines at last, speaking as a man speaks who is moved in his depths. "Simple in his faith, simple in his reverence for the best as he understands it, simple in his simpleness of heart: a

lad so loyal that he can see no disloyalty in others. God bless him for a good lad. He came here a boy, but Amboise has made a man of him—Amboise and you together." It was Francois Villon's second birth over again, but in different words. "Mademoiselle, it will be my charge to commend him to the King."

"For God's sake, no!" she burst out. "Leave him the man he is, Monsieur d'Argenton, leave him his simplicity of faith. Commend him to the King? I would rather he ploughed the fields for bread than served your King. Here he is. Good-bye, Monsieur d'Argenton, may you find all well at Valmy; good night, Monsieur La Mothe, we shall meet again in the morning, or is it already the new day?" and with a smiling curtsy to each she was gone. To Stephen La Mothe it seemed a cold good night after all that had come and gone between them that day, the misunderstood question in her work-room, the shadow of death in the Burnt Mill, and, above all, their nearness as he had stood behind her chair. But she had her purpose. She might spare Philip de Commines, she might even forgive him, but she would not touch his hand in friendship.

In silence Commines returned to his room, La Mothe following; in silence made himself ready for the road; in silence they both went together to the great gate and passed without. Perhaps it was that each felt the need of quiet to adjust his thoughts. But once the heavy door, bolted and studded with iron, had clanged behind them, and the stars were clear overhead, Commines linked his arm with La Mothe's, drawing him close with the affectionate equality and confidence of the old days when they were father and son, brother and brother, friend and friend in one. Let their union in blood be what it may, it is the most perfect relationship man and man can know, and differs from the sweeter, more tender relationship of man and woman in that nothing is sought, nothing granted.

"Stephen, lad, we have been at odds, you and I, and it has hurt us both, but that's over. I think we were both to blame. Perhaps I have grown old, and so forgot that youth must have its day; perhaps you could not understand my duty to the King, or how, when a man is ridden by a dominant purpose, he must go straight forward and make or break a way to the end. And yet you were doing something of the same yourself. With you it was love in duty; with me, duty in love. For, Stephen, make no mistake. Notwithstanding what it shames me to remember, I love and reverence the King as the truest friend France has. May God spare him to France until the boy has grown to be a man. Woe to thee, O land, when thy King is a child. Henceforward I think the Dauphin has nothing to fear; all that man can do to draw father to son and son to father I will do. Stephen, your mission here is ended."

But in the darkness La Mothe shook his head; this was the real Philip de Commines, the Commines he had known and loved. The crust of selfishness which overlies the heart of every man given overmuch to one purpose, even the most honourable, had broken up, and the generous warmth of the kindly nature within asserted itself. To such an one La Mothe could speak as he could not speak to the shrewd politician, or the leader of men.

"Not ended yet, Uncle. With you I pray the King still lives, and that is more than I could honestly have said in the Hercules room yonder with Saxe spinning his lies. Tell him that within twelve hours I shall have fulfilled to the very letter the orders he gave me. Watch him as you tell him, you who are so shrewd a judge of men, and I think you will say that to draw the father to the son will not be difficult."

"You believe that, Stephen?"

"I know it, Uncle; but here are the horses." With no more words La Mothe assisted Commines to mount, standing by his knee as he settled himself in the saddle. Then Commines stooped and the two men clasped hands.

"God keep you, Stephen."

"And you, too, and may all be well at Valmy," answered La Mothe earnestly, and added impulsively, "Uncle, have you nothing to say to me?"

"Only this, Stephen, thank God for a good woman," and with a last pressure of the hand Commines rode on into the darkness, his two guards a length behind him.

CHAPTER XXVII

For once in his career Phillip de Commines, ambassador and diplomatist, was well pleased to have failed, or rather, paradoxically, he told himself that failure was his true success. The King—he had come to the conclusion that Louis had played one of those grim jests which were not all a jest and at times had tragic consequences—the King, no doubt, had been deceived, possibly by Saxe, and to have Saxe proved a liar beyond question could not but be a relief. So all was well; the King's fears could be set at rest, and he himself was freed from an odious duty. Against his expectation he had quitted Amboise with clean hands.

Nor even as regards the Dauphin, and the future the Dauphin represented, was there much to regret. There was even, he believed, much to hope. Ursula de Vesc controlled the boy, Stephen La Mothe would influence the girl, and Stephen owed him everything. These were all so many links in a chain, and the chain bound him not only to safety but to continuance in his present offices, perhaps even to advancement. Even though the King had died there was no need to remain in Amboise to secure himself; La Mothe would do that for him. But the King was living, the King would welcome his failure, would be touched by his prompt return to Valmy, and the world was a very good world for those who knew how to use its hazards and chances rightly.

The stern justice of the King had swept the highways clear of violence. According to a grim jest of Villon's, thieves and thievery were alike in suspense from Burgundy to the sea. Except the ruts of the road, deep in places as the axles of a cart, or the turbid waters of the Loire, treacherous in the darkness and swollen by heavy rains in the upper reaches, travelling was as safe by night as by day, and Commines met with no delays but those at all times inseparable from such a journey. Tristan's forethought, as it proved, had provided no accident. This time there was no halt at the Château-Renaud. Through the little straggling village they rode at a hand-gallop, and except to bait or breathe the horses on a hill-crest, no rein was drawn until the dawn had slipped from grey to glory and a new day lay broad upon the fields. When that hour broke, they had made such progress that they had reached the place whence Commines had shown La Mothe the three good reasons why his men would keep their counsel.

"Dismount and ease the saddles," he said, slipping a foot from the stirrup as he spoke, "the gates will not be opened for two or three hours at least. Lead the horses on slowly, I will follow you."

But he was in no haste. In the small hours of the morning the currents of enthusiasm, like those of life, run slow. It is then that the spirit of a man is at its weakest. Or perhaps it was the sight of Valmy that cooled his optimism. There it lay, grey and forbidding even with the yellow sunlight of dawn full upon it, and there, stark and clear, an offence against the sweetness of the new day, were the three royal gibbets. Their sinister hint was emphatic. The justice of the King was without mercy, and sombrely he asked himself, Was he so sure that in his failure he had no need of forgiveness? Was it not rather true that with Louis failure had always need of forgiveness and was never forgiven? He was not so certain, now that his blood was sluggish in the vapoury chill of dawn, but that he had been hasty in quitting Amboise at all; and yet, what if Tristan, playing on the jealous suspicions of the King, had set a trap? And even as he speculated with dull eyes whether there was a trap or no, whether the King lived at all, and what course was the most politic to follow, a stir of life woke at Valmy: a small troop passed out from the grey arch facing the river and took the Tours road. The distance was too great to distinguish who comprised it. But Valmy was awake, and with Valmy awake the sooner he faced his doubts the better—doubts grow by nursing, and given time enough their weight will kill.

Walking briskly forward he mounted and urged his tired horse to its best speed. That it should reach Valmy in its last extremity, foam-flecked and caked with sweat, would appeal to the King's sick suspicions. It was a petty trick, mean and contemptible, but had the King not played a still more mean and contemptible trick on him? Commines knew with whom he had to deal; it was the vulgar cunning his master had taught him, and any apparent absence of anxious haste would be a point lost in the game: so their spurs were red, and their beasts utterly blown, utterly weary from their last climb up the river's bank when they drew rein before the outer guard-house. The Tours troop was already out of sight.

Lessaix himself was on duty, and as he came forward with outstretched hand Commines required no second glance to tell himself that Ursula de Vesc had construed Tristan's letter aright. Not so frankly would he have been greeted if Valmy's master lay dead in Valmy.

"The King expects you," he said, "and by your horses' looks you have lost no time on the road." As he spoke he ran his finger-tips up the hot neck, leaving tracks of roughened, sweaty hair behind the pressure.

"When did you leave Amboise?"

"The King expects me? How can that be?"

Then as Lessaix, scenting a mystery, looked up curiously Commines made haste to cover his slip, "Or rather, how did you know I was coming?"

"Tristan told me as he rode out half an hour ago. He said you were on the way and might arrive any moment. You are to go to the King at once."

"So Tristan left half an hour ago?"

Try as he would Commines could not quite control his voice. He owed more to Mademoiselle de Vesc than he had supposed. The trap had, as it were, snapped before his face and he had escaped by a hair-breadth. Tristan's cunning was as deep as simplicity. His forethought must have run somewhat thus. Lessaix knows that Monsieur de Commines is expected any moment and is to go at once to the King, who waits for him; Monsieur de Commines does not appear, but remains paying his court to the Dauphin at Amboise. The inference would be clear to all men, and Monsieur de Commines would be ruined outright and utterly discredited. Yes, Ursula de Vesc had saved him from downfall, or worse.

Lessaix, watchful as every man was who called Louis master, caught the change of tone and again looked up, but this time with something more than curiosity—an anxious wariness, a fear lest some current of events he failed to discover might catch him in its flood and drag him down with its undertow unawares.

"Monsieur de Commines," he said earnestly, laying a hand on Commines' bridle-rein as they passed at a foot's pace under the archway, "we have always been friends, always good comrades, is there—" he hesitated, uncertain how far he dared commit himself with his good friend and comrade, "is there anything wrong—astray—here, or at Amboise?"

"The Dauphin is well, and it is you who should have the news of Valmy. I know nothing but that the King sent for me in haste. Some question of new taxation, perhaps; or it may be that England threatens to break the peace. What did Tristan say?"

"Nothing but what I tell you, but he laughed as he said it. If I were you, I would not delay, but would go to the King booted and spurred and dusty as you are."

Commines nodded. The advice was welcome, not only because it was meant kindly but for what it inferred. If disgrace threatened, Lessaix at least had no knowledge of it.

"The messenger who left two days ago, has he returned?"

"Not yet; there was another yesterday."

"I know. Who is on guard?"

"Beaufoy, and the password is Amboise."

Again Commines nodded. Beaufoy? That, too, was all in his favour. Beaufoy was one of the younger men and not at all in the King's confidence. If Louis had any sinister coup in his mind, Leslie, or Saint-Pierre, or Lessaix himself would have been on duty.

With an alert, quick step, that had in it none of the stiffness or fatigue of a long night's ride, Commines mounted the stairs, answering friendly salutes at every turn. As at all times with the King in residence, the halls, corridors, and ante-rooms were like those of a barrack rather than of a royal chateau. Here and there he was challenged and his way barred by a lowered halbert, but it was more or less perfunctory, and at the password the way was cleared. That Beaufoy was unfeignedly glad to see him was another satisfaction. Ever since he had come in sight of Valmy an uncomfortable sense of friendlessness had haunted him with the unreasoning horror of a nightmare, and Beaufoy's welcoming smile was like the wakening into sunshine.

"*Dieu merci!* but I am thankful you have come," he said, but speaking softly so that no sounds passed through the curtained door at his back. "Four times within the hour the King has sent asking for you. It is like the cry of one of his own parrots, 'Commines! Where is Commines?'"

"Who have seen him this morning?"

"His two janitors of the eternal, if it be no sin to say so—the priest and Tristan. Fortune keep their last ministrations far from me!"

"Then the King is awake?" said Commines, unbuckling his sword-belt and handing it to Beaufoy.

"Awake, but in bed as a good Christian ought to be at this time of day. Faith! Monsieur d'Argenton,

you are in fortune's pocket; four times within the hour he has asked for you—four times, as I'm a starving sinner without a hope of breakfast."

"The better appetite later!" Letting the curtains fall behind him Commines pushed the door open softly, closed it softly at his back, and advanced a step. But in spite of the caution of his quiet Louis heard him.

"What's that? Who's there? Beaufoy—Beaufoy——"

"Sire, it is I—Commines."

"Commines!" he repeated, the sharpness of his frightened voice dwindling breathlessly. "Commines, Philip, what—what news from Amboise?"

"The very best, Sire."

"The very best! Ah, God, my son! my son! The very best? Oh, France! France! Philip, tell me—tell me your news. But is the door shut—shut fast?"

Through a prolonged life Commines never forgot that scene and never answered, never dared to answer, even in the secret of his own mind, the question, What news from Amboise was the very best?

A single shutter had been drawn half aside, and in the semi-obscurity the chalk-grey face of the King showed ghost-like against the vaulted darkness of the curtained bed. The fret of spirit through these ten or twelve days had sapped him, worn him like so many days of consuming fever. With one hand, the elbow propped upon the coverlid, he pushed the draperies aside, the other was fumbling with its fingertips at his convulsed mouth. In impatience, or that he might breathe the freer, the ribbons which knotted his woollen nightrobe at the throat had been unfastened, leaving the lean, parchment-coloured chest and throat, corded with starting sinews, nakedly open. As he leant aslant, the curtains arching overhead, his eyes roundly open in the shadows of their sockets, he was like a corpse new risen from its tomb and full of horror from the dreams which had dogged its sleep.

"The very best! Tell me everything, Philip. Or, no!" The shaking hand ceased plucking at the lip, and the shrunken arm, bare to the elbow where the gown had slipped, was thrust out, beating the air as if to push aside some terror. "Tell me the one—the essential—God's name, man! can you not understand?"

"The best news possible, Sire." Commines' eyes were growing accustomed to the gloom and no detail escaped him. "The Dauphin is innocent, is loving—loyal."

The King shrank as if he had been struck and the cadaverous face grew yet more ghastly. Shifting uneasily on his elbow he pushed the curtains wide apart, rasping the rings sharply on the rod, and drawing back his hand fumbled anew at his mouth.

"Loving, loyal—living." There was a perceptible pause, and the third word was harsher, drier than the others, and spoken with a jerk as if forced from the throat under compulsion. "You received my letter written two days ago?"

"Yes, Sire, and a second last night. Thank God, with all my heart, it——"

"Let it wait. The messenger of two days ago, has he come back?"

"Not yet. I asked Lessaix."

"Why?"

"Idle curiosity, Sire."

"Only fools are curious for nothing, and you are no fool, or were not when you left to go to Amboise." He paused, and in the silence Commines searched his wit for some plausible reason for the question he had put to Lessaix. But Louis probed no further. To hear the truth would have suited his purpose no better than it would have suited Commines to tell it.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Commines broke the silence with a bold stroke. "He carried more letters than yours, Sire. A man named Saxe——"

"Saxe?" said Louis, drawling the word. "Who is Saxe?"

"An innkeeper in Amboise. Yesterday, an hour or two after I had received Your Majesty's letter, he came to me with a lying tale."

"What sort of reputation has this Saxe?"

"He is an innkeeper."

"An innkeeper? Innkeepers are decent folk. Travellers trust them nightly with their property, with their lives even. There is no discredit in innkeeping. You know, Monsieur d'Argenton, I do not hold that honesty and honour are the prerogatives of the nobility. This Saxe, now, what was his tale?"

"One, Sire, that if true would have plunged all France into sorrow, and you into the deepest grief of all. He accused the Dauphin, a girl named Ursula de Vesc, and one Hugues, the Dauphin's valet, of plotting against Your Majesty."

"Philip, Philip, did I not say so? I thought you understood when you left Valmy. Did I not tell you to sift, and search, and find? Now comes this Saxe, a decent, reputable man——"

"Sire, Saxe lied."

"Lied?" Loosing the curtain Louis slipped back upon his pillows, huddled in a shapeless heap, his hands clenched upon his breast, his chin sunk upon their clasp so that the mouth was hidden. Only the eyes, dull but with a sombre glow in the dullness, seemed alive. "Who says Saxe lies?"

"All who heard him, Sire."

"What? There were witnesses?"

"There was need of witnesses for the sake of the publicity afterwards."

"Um! I do not say you were wrong, but it has turned out badly. Well?"

"Saxe proved too much. He swore the Dauphin quoted Molembrais' death as a reason why all France was——" Commines paused, fearing to offend by an unpalatable truth, but Louis ended the sentence for him.

"Why France was afraid. Well, that was probable. I see no lie in that."

"No, Sire; but Saxe fixed the day definitely, and Molembrais was alive at the time."

The King's hands slipped to his lap and he sank yet further into the pillows. He was breathing heavily, and from old experience Commines knew that he controlled his fury of anger only by an effort and because Coictier, his physician, had warned him that any outbreak of violent emotion might be fatal.

"Oh, the fool! the—the—the—I must be calm. May all the devils—no, I must be calm, I must control myself; my miserable, wretched heart—but to be cursed with such a fool, such a fool!"

"A scoundrel, Sire, rather than a fool; a villainous, lying scoundrel, who would traduce the Dauphin himself. Let us thank God he overreached himself and his lie is found out. Let us rejoice that the Prince your son is innocent of all blame, is loving and loyal. Let us publicly, promptly stamp Saxe for the liar he has proved himself to be, lest he malign the King himself. Sire, if I may speak freely, it is now the one course possible."

"Eh, Philip? What was that? Accuse the King himself? Accuse me—me? Of what, Philip, of what? Where is this Saxe? In whose keeping? Monsieur d'Argenton, have you been imprudent—careless? By God! you shall answer for it if this liar of a Saxe spits his poison at me—at me. No, Philip, I do not mean just that. Yes, we rejoice that he has lied, rejoice that the Dauphin is the loving and loyal son of his loving father. We owe you much, France owes you much for this news. Yes, we rejoice—we rejoice—God knows how we rejoice! Philip, the cordial—there, on the table—that crystal flask. This joyful emotion is killing me."

Half filling a cup from the flask Louis had pointed at with a hand which faltered and fluttered in the air a moment, then fell lifeless on the bedclothing, Commines stooped over the King, holding it to his

mouth. At first the lips sucked a few drops slowly, then more rapidly. As the strength of the liquor reached the heart the labouring of the chest quieted, the leaden dullness of the cheeks took on some semblance of life, and the eyes brightened. The spasm had passed, but for a moment it had seemed to Commynes that Tristan's letter had, at worst, been prophetic. Motioning that he had drunk sufficient, Louis closed his eyes, laying his head back upon the pillows that he might rest the easier. But there was no rest for the busy brain. His eyes still closed he beckoned to Commynes to stoop lower.

"Saxe—where is Saxe?"

"In safe keeping, Sire."

"Safe? He cannot talk?"

"Quite safe. Only La Mothe and Villon visit him."

"La Mothe? Faugh! another fool. There is no end to the breed. I think God made them as He made flies, to be the fret and plague of life. You vouched for the fool, Philip, remember that."

"And I still vouch for La Mothe," answered Commynes. He felt that he was now safe, so safe that he might even venture to plead for Stephen. "Consider, Sire, you who are so just, is it the boy's fault that we failed to discover what does not exist? Remember, Saxe lied, lied throughout, and has always lied." He paused, but if he expected to draw some further comment from the King, he failed. Louis lay silent, his face void of expression, and Commynes went on: "That cruel jest the Provost-Marshal played upon us all cut me to the heart. Sire, Sire, how could you permit it? All night long I have ridden from Amboise in despair and bitter grief, despair for France hopelessly bereaved of so good and true a friend, so great a King. The awful shock——"

"There, there, no more of that," said Louis harshly. The reminder of the grim, inevitable certainty which had lately been so significantly near was more than he could bear. With an effort he struggled on his elbow, pushing himself upright. "See! it was all a jest. I am strong—stronger than for years. Coictier says so; but he says, too, that I should rest, so I will lie back again. Yes, yes, a jest—and yet not all a jest." From under his drooped lids he looked up at Commynes, watching him narrowly in the grey light. "Charles, what did Charles say? Charles, who is so loving and loyal. Laughed and thanked God—eh, Philip?"

"No, Sire, no. For the moment he seemed struck dumb, as we all were. True grief is silent. When sorrow is at its sorest, words do not come easily, and never have I seen so bitter a sorrow as the Dauphin's last night." Which was true, for Hugues, who had loved him, lay dead. And Hugues' death gave Commynes another inspiration, which, because of the end in view, he seized upon without a scruple. "But when at last words came they were worthy of him, worthy of his loyalty both as son and subject. 'I would be Dauphin again,' said he, 'if I could but bring him back.'"

Twisting himself round upon his pillows Louis caught Commynes by the arm with a greater strength than had seemed possible in one so frail, caught him and held him, and if the hand shook, it was not from weakness.

"He said that? Charles said that? Who prompted him?"

"No one, Sire. He spoke his own thought frankly, and every word he said came from his heart."

"Philip, as God lives, is that true?"

"As God lives," said Commynes deliberately, "these were the Dauphin's very words, and he spoke them from his heart. No one prompted him, no one led him; they were his own thoughts, his only."

With a deep breath which might have been a sigh or a moan Louis lay back. His eyes were closed, but his whole air had changed: the lips were firm-pressed in a thin line, the fingers no longer plucked at this or that in a nervous attempt to hide their nervousness by a pretence at animation, and from long experience Commynes knew that he had forced himself to some unusual effort at concentrated thought. But the outcome of the thought surprised and disappointed the watcher.

"La Mothe?"

"Sire, I vouch for La Mothe."

"God's name, Philip, has the fool nothing to say for himself?"

"I had forgotten. To-day's blessed relief drove it from my head. Can you blame me, Sire, if I forgot everything but my joy? Last night, as I left Amboise, he said, 'Pray Heaven the King still lives. Tell him

that within twelve hours I shall have fulfilled the order he gave me."

"Twelve hours? Twelve hours? Philip, by your salvation, have you told me the truth to-day? Charles? My son? That he said those things? More hangs on it than you can guess. As you love me, Philip, and as I have made you what you are, do not deceive me."

"Most true, Sire; I would plead for the Dauphin——"

"Plead? What need have you to plead, you or any man? Plead? Your officiousness goes too far. Is he not my son? Who is on duty?"

"Beaufoy, Sire."

"Pray God there is time. Send Beaufoy to me—now, this very instant. Go, man, go! Why do you stand staring there like a wax image? Oh! pray God there is time. Send Beaufoy—do you not hear? Send Beaufoy, send Beaufoy this instant! Beaufoy! Beaufoy! And, Philip, have the fastest horse in Valmy saddled and ready. Go, Philip, go! Make haste, for the love of Heaven, make haste! Beaufoy! Beaufoy!"

Uncomprehending, but terror-shaken at the sudden outburst which filled Louis' frail body with passion, Commines hastened to the door. He thought he had sounded all his master's shifting moods, but this agony of a fear not for himself, this pathos of horror, was new to him. Dimly he understood that the antagonism to the Dauphin had broken down finally and for ever. La Mothe was right, it had not been so hard to draw the father to the son. But why call for Beaufoy? Why such anxiety of haste? Why that scream of fear in the voice? Beyond the door stood Beaufoy, perplexed and startled.

"The King—go to him."

"Ill? Dying?"

"No, he needs you. Go at once—at once," answered Commines, with a jerk of his head, and was gone.

"You called me, Sire?"

"Pen—ink—paper. There, on the table. Quicker, dolt, quicker!"

But with the quill between his fingers and the paper flattened on a pad against his knee, Louis was in no haste to write. Gnawing with unconscious savagery at his under-lip he stared into vacancy, searching, searching, searching for the precise words to express his thought. But they eluded him. It was not so simple to be precise, so clear that even a fool like Beaufoy could not make a mistake, and yet be so cautious that the true purpose, the inner meaning of the order, would not betray him. Commines' voice was clanging in his ears like the clapper of a bell, and would not let him think coherently. Twelve hours! Twelve hours! Even now—no, not yet, but soon, very soon, it might be too late. "Perdition!" he cried, striking his hand upon the woollen coverlid—he was chilly even in May—"will they never come?"

And at last they came, not what satisfied him, but what perforce must suffice, and with a hand marvellously steady under the compulsion of the iron will he dashed off two or three sentences at white heat, added his signature in the bold, angular characters which had so often vouched a lie as the truth, and flung the paper across to Beaufoy.

"There! obey that, neither more nor less. Your horse is waiting you in the courtyard. Read your orders as you go, but let no man see them, not even Argenton. The moment they are executed return to Valmy."

"Go where, Sire?"

"To Amboise—Amboise, and ride as if all hell clattered at your back. Go, man! Go, go!"

Until Beaufoy had dropped the curtain behind him Louis sat rigidly upright; then, as if the very springs of life were sapped to their utmost limit, he sank back in collapse upon the pillows. From the half-opened shutter a shaft of light, falling athwart the table, flashed a spark from the rounded smooth of a silver Christ upon the cross, propped amongst the litter, and drew his eyes.

"Twelve hours," he whispered, staring at it, fascinated. "Thy power, Thy power and infinite love, O Lord! God have mercy upon us! God have mercy upon me! My son! My son!"

And riding down the slope to the river Beaufoy read:

"Go to Amboise. Arrest Monsieur Stephen La Mothe and bring him to Valmy without delay. Tell him his orders are cancelled, and on your life let him hold no communication with the Dauphin.—LOUIS."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE PRICE OF A LATE BREAKFAST

For men there is no such ladder to place and fame as their fellow-men. Over their crushed and trampled backs, or with a hand in their pocket, ambition or greed can climb to heights which would be hopelessly unattainable but for the unwilling foothold of another's disadvantage. La Mothe? Who the deuce was La Mothe? Beaufoy neither knew nor cared. He had his first commission in his pocket, a good horse between his knees, the warm sunshine of the May morning lapping him round with all the subtle sweetness of the sweetest season of the year, and Valmy, which hipped him horribly with its gloom, was behind his back. He was almost as fully in fortune's pocket as Monsieur d'Argenton!

Nor was that all. There was even the hope that this poor devil of a La Mothe might say, "No, thank you!" to the order for arrest, and so give Paul Beaufoy opportunity to prove to the world at large, and the King in particular, that Paul Beaufoy was not to be trifled with, that Paul Beaufoy was as ready with his sword as clever with his head, and fit for something much better than arresting poor devils accused of God knows what. But that would be too great good fortune, and meanwhile the world was all one warm, sensuous, golden, best of worlds, with just one small fret to mar its perfection—he had had no breakfast! That must be remedied, and the half hour's delay could be made good by harder riding afterwards.

So, midway to Château-Renaud, at the junction of the St. Amand road, he gave a little auberge his custom, comforting nature with an omelet while a fowl was being put on the spit. But because custom such as Paul Beaufoy's came that way but seldom the fowl was slow to come by, yet slower to cook, and more time went to its eating than would have been to Paul Beaufoy's advantage had the King known the excellence of his appetite. But the King knew nothing and would know nothing, so no one was hurt by the picking of the bones. The poor devil of a La Mothe would naturally not object to the delay, and in any case a prick of the spur would drag back some of the lost minutes.

Gaily he put his theory into practice, his heart as light as a bird on the wing or the paper which was to consign this unknown poor devil of a La Mothe to he neither knew nor cared what misfortune, and gallantly the generous beast between his knees answered the call. But—surely disjunctive conjunctions are the tragedies of the language! They tumble our castles in Spain about our ears with neither ruth nor warning. Man would be in Paradise to this day—but Eve ate the apple; Napoleon would have conquered Europe—but England stood in the way. So was it with Paul Beaufoy. His lost hour would have been regained—but but the pace killed, and with Amboise a weary distance away he found himself stranded and disconsolate beside a foundered horse. And linked to the tragedy of the disjunctive was this other tragedy. It is the generous-hearted who pay for the follies of others. Had the broken-down beast been a cowardly scum it would never have lain a castaway by the roadside.

And now, indeed, in the King's vigorous phrase, hell was at his back; only, as is so often the way with blinded humanity, he never guessed the truth, but thought it salvation, from behind, down a side-road, clattered a small troop at a quick trot, and taking the middle of the highway Beaufoy called a halt.

"In the King's name!" he cried, holding up the hand of authority. The intoxication of a first commission is almost as self-deceiving as that of a first love. In his place Philip de Commines, recognizing that he was outnumbered ten to one, would have been diplomatic. When there is no power to strike, it is always unwise to clench the fist, especially when a hat in the hand may gain the point. But the authority sufficed, and at a motion from their leader the troop halted.

"More energy than discretion," said he, with a glance at the disabled horse. "What can I do for you, and why in the King's name?"

"My energy and discretion are my affair," answered Beaufoy, more nettled by his inability to dispute the truth than by the truth itself. "I am from Valmy upon the King's business, and must have a horse without delay."

"Let Valmy buy its own horses, I am no dealer," was the brusque answer. But the hands which had caught up the loosened reins promptly tightened them afresh. "How long from Valmy?"

"That can matter nothing to you; what does matter is that I am on the King's business and must have a horse."

"Having, like a fool, killed your own! But that, as you say, is no affair of mine. When did you leave Valmy?"

"I see no reason——" began Beaufoy, but with a backward gesture the other silenced him.

"Reasons enough," he said. "Count them for yourself. For the third time, when did you leave Valmy?"

"This morning, and I warn you that the King will call you to account for every minute's delay."

"You, not me; I did not founder your horse." The half banter passed from his voice, and the bronzed face hardened. "And we have accounts enough as it is, the King and I."

"Pray God he pays his debts and mine, and that I be there to see," retorted Beaufoy, exasperated out of all prudence. "Again, in the King's name I demand your help. I must have a horse. Two of your men can ride double."

"Must this! Demand that! Tut, tut! you forget the reasons behind me." But though he spoke with a return of the banter which goaded the unfortunate Beaufoy almost to madness, his eyes were keenly alert and there was no smile in the mockery. Had Beaufoy been a Philip de Commines he would have known that jest with no laughter at its back is more dangerous than a threat. "Where are you going?"

"That is my affair and the King's."

Lurching forward in the saddle the elder man—he was eight or ten years the senior—shook his clenched gauntlet in Beaufoy's face, his own crimson from the gust of passion which suddenly swept across it. "The King! The King! The King!" he cried furiously. "Curse you and your King! What devil's plot is that lying old tiger-fox scheming now that you ride to death an honest brute than either of you? Whose murder comes next? Or are you from Valmy at all? Give some account of yourself."

"If you are a gentleman, if you are not a coward as well as a bully," answered Beaufoy, his face as white as the other's was flushed, "come down from your horse and meet me man to man. You'll not ask me to give an account of myself a second time."

"That is Valmy all over! Give up my advantage that you may gain! And who are you with your musts and demands?"

"My name is Beaufoy——"

"Then you are not from Valmy," broke in the other, running on Beaufoy's name, "for no faith, beau, bonne, or belle, ever came out of Valmy."

With a shrug of his shoulders Beaufoy turned on his heel. "Coward as well as bully," he began, but at a sign from their leader the troop gathered round, hemming him in in a circle.

"Now that my reasons are plainer to you, will you answer my question—where are you going? No reply? And yet no one understands the logic of numbers better than your coward of a master. But I'll have my answer. Are you going to Blois? No! To Tours? No! Amboise? Ah! your eyes have a tongue of their own. You cannot have lived very long in Valmy, my ingenuous friend. Why to Amboise? You won't tell? But, by God, you shall! Do you think I'll be balked for a scruple?" His hand crept to his hilt as he spoke; now, with a swift wrench the blade was out and its point at Beaufoy's throat. "Come, your message?"

But Beaufoy only shook his head. The age had the quality of its defects. The law that might was right had bred a contempt for life, one's own or another's, it mattered little which. In the great game of national aggression the single life is a very small thing, and the man who slew without pity could die without fear. If any second incentive were needed, Beaufoy found it in the gibe at his name. Beaufoy would hold good faith let it cost Beaufoy what it might. Stiffening himself rigidly he answered nothing.

"Come, the message! I'll have it, though I rip it out of you. You won't answer? Then there is no help for it. Once!"—and the point touched—"twice!"—and the point pricked—"three times! Monsieur, you are a brave fool, but on your life do not stir. Grip him by the elbows, Jan. Now you, Michault, go through his pockets. What first? An empty purse! And yet you must have a horse, must you? Was I to collect its price at Valmy, my good sir? When I go to Valmy it will be for more than the life of a horse. Next, a woman's ribbon! No wonder the purse was empty. A paper! Give it me—a love-letter! I congratulate you, Monsieur Beaufoy, and return it without reading the signature. No doubt the empty purse is justified. May she show as firm a faith as you have done; her cause is the better of the two. Now that. This time we have it. Monsieur Beaufoy, you have done everything a brave and honourable gentleman could do. Give me your parole to hurt neither yourself nor us and Jan will release your arms."

Panting, every nerve tense with impotent resentment, Paul Beaufoy looked up into the not unkindly eyes turned down to his. A physiognomist would have said it was a reckless face rather than an evil one. The blade had been lowered, but Jan's muscular hands still held his elbows behind his back in an

iron grip; beyond him was Michault. No prisoner in shackles was more helpless.

"For this time," he said between his teeth; "but God granting me life——"

"Let go your hold, Jan. Monsieur Beaufoy, I trust you as I would never trust that brute without a soul you call King. Trust the King? God help the man who trusts King Louis! One very dear to me trusted him, trusted his pledged word with his life, and I humbly pray God's mercy has him in its keeping, for he found none in Valmy." Sheathing his sword he sat back in the saddle and smoothed the looted paper carefully. "Go to Amboise. Arrest Monsieur Stephen La Mothe and bring him to Valmy without delay. Tell him his orders are cancelled, and on your life let him hold no communication with the Dauphin.—LOUIS."

Having read the order through from beginning to end, he read it over a second time, sentence by sentence, pausing to consider each separately.

"'Go to Amboise.' Monsieur Beaufoy, I do not wish to ask you anything a man of honour such as you are cannot answer. Do they know you in Amboise?"

"No," answered Beaufoy, after a moment's consideration; "and if I thought it mattered one way or the other, you would get no answer from me. I am from the north, and a stranger both in Valmy and Amboise."

"'Arrest Monsieur Stephen La Mothe and bring him to Valmy without delay.' It follows that you do not know this Stephen La Mothe nor he you?"

"No," repeated Beaufoy.

"Nor his offence?"

"Not even that."

"God knows there need be no offence at all. 'Tell him his orders are cancelled.' Monsieur Beaufoy, I do not ask you what these orders are."

"And if I knew, I would not tell you."

"Then you do not know?"

"No."

"'On your life let him hold no communication with the Dauphin.' Is it fair to ask why?"

"Again, if I knew, I would not tell you, but I do not."

"Then it comes to this: you, a stranger in Amboise, are to arrest a stranger to yourself for an offence of which you are ignorant?"

"With my orders clear and explicit I have no need of knowledge."

"Is this order public property at Valmy?"

"No one knows of it except myself and the King," replied Beaufoy, clinging desperately to the remnants of his authority.

The other nodded abstractedly, his thoughts busy elsewhere. He quite recognized the type of man with whom he had to do—light-hearted, careless, frivolous even up to a certain point, but beyond that immovable. To question further would be useless, and almost in violation of the strange code of honour which permitted unscrupulous violence but respected the right of reticence in an equal—in an equal, he it observed; an inferior had no rights, none whatever.

"'Bring him to Valmy.'" Turning in his saddle he beckoned to one of his followers, a man older than the rest, shrewd-faced and grizzled. "What do you think, Perrault; can we do it?"

"Enter Amboise?"

"Enter Valmy."

But Beaufoy could control himself no longer. "Monsieur, whoever you are, I demand back the King's order. These instructions are for me alone and I must——"

"What? More musts? No, no, you have done all a man of honour can do—except hold your tongue and

acknowledge the inevitable. Jan and Michault, take Monsieur Beaufoy into the field yonder, but quietly, courteously."

"Courteously!" foamed Beaufoy, struggling vainly as he was hustled across the road out of earshot. "Curse your courtesy, footpad! Some day you shall answer me for this."

"If the King permits," was the ironic reply. "Be a little more gentle, Jan. Now, Perrault?"

"Monsieur Marc, they will never let us into Valmy."

"Not all of us, not you—I alone."

"Alone? Monsieur Marc, you would never venture——"

"Never venture? As God lives, Perrault, I would venture to the gates of hell for just five minutes with Louis of France, and you know it."

"But it is impossible."

"Desperate, not impossible. This," and he shook the paper in his closed hand, "gives me Stephen La Mothe; La Mothe has the King's signet, he told Villon and Villon told Saxe; the signet gives me Valmy if I have any luck. La Mothe and the King at one cast—La Mothe, through whom I have twice missed the Dauphin! Perrault, I'll do it; by all the saints, I'll do it."

"Yes," said Perrault, and there was a wistful tenderness in his rough voice, "you may get into Valmy, but, Master Marc, you'll never win out again."

"Old friend, would you have me turn coward with such a chance flung in my way? And would Guy have done less for me?"

But Perrault returned no answer.

CHAPTER XXX

"LOVE IS MY LIFE"

"Blessed be the man who first invented sleep," said the wise Spaniard. And yet there are times when even a sleepless night can leave a light heart behind it. For the first time since coming to Amboise Stephen La Mothe felt at peace with himself and with all the world, though the latter is a secondary consideration. As between the two disturbers of his comfort a man's most triumphant foe is his conscience. And he had good cause for comfort. When at their very worst, things had gone well with him, and as he reckoned up his mercies the morning Paul Beaufoy rode post from Valmy, he found his pouch of life full to the rim with white stones.

First: Ursula! There was a little tremulous contraction of the heart, a little sudden sense of warm sunlight as he said the name over. Ursula—Ursula! What a kindly cunning mother is Fate: she always gives the one sweet woman in the world the sweetest of names. For where was there a sweeter name than Ursula? So soft, so—so—well, just Ursula. Ursula was safe and had forgiven him. Which of these two mercies was the greater he hardly knew; the second, perhaps, since it was undeserved. He was a very humble lover, as all true lovers should be who realize, with a wondering incomprehension, that in creating woman last of all the Lord God had concentrated all the wisdom of His six days' experience, and even then only consummated the perfection after a seventh day of thoughtful rest. He did not know that the miracle of a loving woman's forgiveness is as common and natural as the sunshine, and, let it be said sorrowfully, as necessary to life.

And Ursula was safe. For that they had to thank Villon. It was he who had grasped the flaw of Saxe's over-proof, and so tumbled the whole fabric of lies into a ruin never to be built up again. For both these mercies he humbly thanked God. It is to be noted by the student of the ways of men that he never gave the Dauphin's safety a thought. He had risked his life for the boy, and would risk it again if necessary, risk it cheerfully, but as an abstract proposition he cared little whether the Dauphin lived or died. Next after Ursula came Commines. There had been a bitter moment when Commines had tottered on his pedestal, but Ursula's hand had steadied him just when the touch was needed. Ursula again! It was

marvellous how the whole of Amboise had its orbit round Ursula. In the end Commynes had justified himself, and in that belief the loyal heart of Stephen La Mothe found the early May sunshine yet more pleasant and the air sweeter.

Nor was there now any fear but that he would leave Amboise with clean hands. The white horse and the piebald were ambling side by side under his feet, and all danger of a sprawling tumble between them in the mud was at an end. And because he would leave Amboise with clean hands he could without shame say to Ursula de Vesc such things as are the sacred treasures of the heart's Holy of Holies. At least it would not be an unworthy love he had to offer, unworthy of her acceptance, since no man's love could be fully worthy of Ursula de Vesc, but not unworthy in itself. But first he had the King's commission to fulfil, and if Louis really lay dead at Valmy surely he might violate the letter of his orders and say, "These are the message of a father's love." Or, rather, Ursula came first, always first, even before the King's commission, and with the thought came Ursula de Vesc herself.

"Good morning, Monsieur La Mothe."

"Mademoiselle! you so early?"

"I do not think many slept in Amboise last night. Did you hear that Tristan's letter was one of your King's merry jests?"

"But are you certain?"

"Absolutely. He was seen on the walls just before the closing of the gates last night. You know at Valmy they do not wait for the sun to set. Shall I let you into a secret I would not have told you a fortnight ago?" The white night, its long hours haunted by anxious thoughts, had left a wan reflection on her face, but now the pallor warmed; into the tired eyes a little light of laughter flickered, part humorous, part tender, and the Cupid's bow trembled on its string. "In Amboise we are not so forlorn as you think. The innkeeper at Château-Renaud is our very good friend, or how could we have known that a certain Monsieur Stephen La Mothe, a wandering minstrel with lute and knapsack on his back, was coming our way?"

"You knew that?"

"From the first," she answered, still smiling, but with so kindly a raillery that not even a lover could take offence. "Did you think you played the part so well that you deceived us? Or that the Dauphin had sunk so low as to make a friend of the first hedge-singer who came his way? We were warned from Château-Renaud that you who arrived with Monsieur d'Argenton on horseback departed alone on foot."

"That raw-boned roan which passed me on the road?"

"Yes. And can you wonder if we were suspicious and just a little frightened? You were from Valmy and Valmy is our Galilee: nothing good comes out of it."

"I wonder at nothing but your goodness in bearing with me."

"You owe us nothing for that. That," the colour mounted to her forehead; she, too, had grown ashamed of the first night, ashamed and astonished that she had not understood Stephen La Mothe's transparent good faith from the very first, "that was precaution. In the Château we could watch the watcher. Then you began that fairy tale and your face told me you believed it every word. That puzzled me. How could anything good come out of Valmy? Yet next day you saved the Dauphin's life and again yesterday. But I am forgetting the King and how we know the letter was a lie. Cartier, the innkeeper at Château-Renaud, has a son in Valmy and had been to visit him: the King was on the walls when he left before sunset last night. The hangman's letter was a trap to catch us all, and the Great King consented to it. What a worthy King! Oh! I am very human and my bitterness must speak out when I remember last night. Saxe, Tristan, the King, Monsieur d'Argenton, and against them one weak coward of a girl. They would have lied my life away last night; and not mine only, the Dauphin's."

"Mademoiselle, am I forgiven for my folly of yesterday?" He knew he was, but for a cunning reason of his own he wished to hear her say so.

"Can I blame you?" she answered, making no pretence at misunderstanding him. "You, too, are from Valmy. No, no. I do not mean that. That was a cruel thing to say; it is you who must forgive me, for you are not of Valmy, you who stood by me and believed in me even when I seemed the vile thing they called me."

"The sweetest and truest woman on God's earth," he said. "I believed in you even before I loved you—no, that is not true, for I think now I loved you that very first night when you had nothing for me but the

contempt I deserved. Every day since then you have grown sweeter, dearer, more revered: so strong for others, so full of courage for others, so full of thought for others and without a thought for yourself: never one thought for yourself, never one and never a fear. And every day I have hungered for you; I don't know any other word for it but just hungered, hungered, hungered that a little of the dear womanly graciousness might be mine. Though that would not be enough, not that only: love must have love or go starved."

Except for a shake of the head in depreciation or denial she had heard him without interruption. Why should she interrupt what was so sweet to hear? But though it was the very comfort her heart longed for, there was no smile on her face, a fresher glow on the cheeks, perhaps, a fuller light in the eyes, but beyond these a pathetic wistful gravity rather, as if in the presence of a solemn sacrament. And surely the revelation of that which is nearest in us to the divine is a true sacrament of the spirit. But when he ended she put out a hand and touched him gently, her fingers lingering on his arm in a caress.

"And I? Oh, my dear, my more than dear, have I not hungered? I think a woman starves for love as a man never can." From his arm the hand stole up and caught him round the neck, the other joining it, and his face was drawn down to her own. "Am I shameless, beloved? No! for there is no shame in love, and Stephen, my heart, my hero, my man of men, I love you, I love you, I love you."

But presently, as she lay in his arms, her head drawn into the hollow of that which held her near, the grey eyes smiled up at him in a return to the tender mockery he knew and loved so well, nor was it less sweet for the moisture behind the lashes.

"Yesterday——"

"Hush, beloved, do not talk of yesterday," nor, for the moment, could she. But she was wilful, and being a woman, had her way.

"Yesterday you sang; will you ever sing again?"

"Yes, listen!

'Heigh-ho, love is my life,
Live I in loving, and love I to live.'

Until to-day I never knew how true that is. Ursula, my sweet, you must teach me the ending, for I have never yet found one to please me."

"You talk of endings when life has just begun. Tell me, was Homer blind?"

"So they say," he answered, marvelling much what new shift of thought was coming next.

"I thought so," and the smile deepened until the grey eyes shone through their thin veil of unshed tears. "And Homer was blind yesterday or he would have seen I expected a very different question."

"Yes, laugh at my foolishness; I love to see you laugh, you who have laughed so little all these days. But I think the time of laughter has come for us both."

"Until you go back to Valmy."

"And that must be soon."

On the instant she belied his optimism, for the laughter faded from her eyes leaving her once more the woman of many sorrows, and with a sigh she released herself from his clasp.

"I hate Valmy; I have a horror of it and of your terrible King. He always seems to me like some dry-hearted, cold-hearted beast rather than a man. Is there nothing human in him?"

"He is more human than you think. Ursula, I know it, so you need not shake that dear, wise head of yours."

"You say so because you are so human yourself. Dear, I love you for your charity."

"Love me for what you will so long as you do love me," answered he.
"And do not be afraid. I am quite sure I am not making any mistake.
The King trusts me as he never trusted Monsieur de Commynes."

"And how well he trusts him we saw last night," she said, with a little bitter irony which surely might be pardoned. "But how can I help being afraid? Are you not all I have in the world?"

"Charles?"

"Do you think Charles counts for anything now? And yet he is a dear boy who has the good taste to approve warmly of Monsieur Stephen La Mothe. Did I not tell you, that day you were playing with the dogs, that you would win all our hearts?"

"And Monsieur Stephen La Mothe," said Stephen jestingly, "approves so warmly of the dear boy's approval, that if it would not be presumptuous he would ask his leave to beg his acceptance of a little remembrance of these last days."

"Ask his leave! Poor boy, he would be delighted. Dauphin of France though he is, he gets so few presents. What is it? Let me guess. Your lute! and you would sing——"

"No, not my lute, wicked that you are. And if I sang at all it would be Blaise's song adapted to this most blessed of blessed days.

Ursula is sweet to kiss,
Sweet to kiss, sweet to kiss."

I told Monsieur de Commines that was one thing I must have in a wife, and praise God, I have got it!"

"Hush, Stephen! Do you want all Amboise to hear your foolishness?"

"If that is foolishness, may I never be wise again. To me it is the one wisdom of the world. I think I am drunk this morning and it is only seven o'clock. Is not that scandalous? Love-drunk at seven in the morning and never to be sober again! Mademoiselle de Vesc, do you know you are the most beautiful woman in all France?"

"I know I am the happiest," she answered soberly. "But, Stephen, what have you got for the boy? I would not be a true woman if I was not curious."

"And you are the very truest woman——"

"Stephen, I will not have any more foolishness. Tell me at once what have you got for Charles?"

"Two small gifts: a coat-of-mail so fine in the links that you could hold it in your two hands—no! not in your two hands, they are only large enough to hold my heart. Then there is an embroidered mask, a tinselled toy of a thing but pretty enough. They will help him to dress his plays. Ask him, Ursula, if he will accept them from me even though I came by way of Valmy."

"Would you spoil his pleasure? No, I shall say nothing at all about Valmy, just that a wandering minstrel be so rich that he can make presents to a Dauphin of France! Sing me a song, Master Homer the blind, and I will give you—let me see: no, not what you think—a silver livre!" But she did not wait for his music. Dropping him a little demure, mocking curtsy she turned and ran down the box-edged path, singing as she went, and the air she sang was Stephen La Mothe's "Heigh-ho! love is my life; Live I in loving and love I to live!" and the lilt of the music set Master Homer's heart throbbing.

CHAPTER XXXI

SAXE RISES IN VILLON'S ESTIMATION

"There was a time," said Villon, "when I, too, could forget that rose arches are open at the ends. The world is always gaping at our elbow. If we taste a peach in an orchard, the wall is low; if we smell a rose in a garden, there are, Heaven be thanked, more flowers than leaves when life's at May; and either way the world is with us."

"And you were the gaping world!" answered La Mothe, vexed for Ursula's sake that Villon of the bitter tongue should have discovered their secret. "Was that friendly of you?"

"Not gaping, no! But is a man to close his eyes when heaven opens? I beg you to believe," he went on with great dignity, "that just so soon as I made certain you had nothing to learn from me I left you to your rose-gathering. Observe I have not said one word about the thorns. That is the stale gibe of the cynic whose heart of youth has dried before its time. And what if there are thorns? A single rose with the dew of love upon it is worth more than a pair of scratched hands. Gape? Could you believe it of me

—of me, Francois Villon? No, son of my teaching, I doffed my hat and went on tiptoe to see Saxe."

"Saxe!" cried La Mothe. "Never once have I thought of Saxe, never once all day, and now it is almost night."

"Don't distress yourself on that account. Saxe has wanted for nothing, thanks to his two best friends. That reminds me." Pausing, Villon rapped loudly on the table with his clenched knuckles, rapped until a servant familiar with his ways answered the summons. "My friend, fetch me a bottle of wine, one single bottle from the furthest-in bin on the right-hand side of the cellar. It is the '63 vintage," he explained to La Mothe, "and I have the best of reasons for knowing Saxe will not object."

"But why one bottle only?"

"I have been invited to a certain presentation," he answered, the crow's feet round his twinkling eyes deepening as he laughed. "Thanks, my friend," he went on as the drawer returned with the wine; "place it on the table and retire to your kitchen to meditate on the mutability of human fortune in the person of the greatest poet of his age, from the Guest of the Three-legged Maid of Montfaucon to 'Francois Villon, my friend' of the Dauphin of France! At last they are beginning to appreciate me at the Château."

"But what of Saxe?"

"Ah, Saxe?" Filling his horn mug he emptied it with such slow satisfaction that the flavour of no single drop of the wine missed his palate. "Saxe's best friend had been before me this morning."

"But Monsieur de Commines' orders were strict, only you and I were to see him."

"Not even your Monsieur de Commines can shut out a man from himself, and who is a better friend or a worse enemy? Saxe, the wise man, has hanged himself."

"Hanged himself? Saxe?"

"An intelligent anticipation," said Villon, nodding thoughtfully. "I did not think he had so much good sense or good feeling. He always struck me as a man of a coarse, material mind; but one can never tell."

"Villon, it is horrible! How can you talk so callously? But you know you do not mean what you say."

"Every word of it. Hanged he would have been in any case, that was inevitable. I warned him last night that he knew too much, and that more went into Amboise than came out again. And was it not better he should go to his end quietly, decently, just God and himself alone together—the Good God who understands us so much better than we do ourselves and so makes allowances? You don't agree with me?"

"I can only say again, it is horrible."

"Then what of the justice of the King which makes a man a spectacle in the market-place, with all the world agape at the terror of it, the world that licks its lips over lovers in rose arches or the gibbeting of wretches no worse than itself? Think of the terror of it! Think of the shame of it! The men he had drunk with, the women he had laughed with, the children he had played with, all ringed round him to see him die. And there he would hang till his bones dropped, a shame and a blot on the clean face of the earth, blackened by the heat, drenched white by the rain, twirled and swung by every breath of wind, while the pies and the crows made thimble-pits of his face, a waste rag of humanity. Come now, which is the decenter?"

"Poor Saxe!"

"If Saxe had had his way, there would have been no dew on the roses this morning. He would have lied Mademoiselle de Vesc to death without a scruple."

"She wished him no harm, of that I am certain."

"It is of the quality of roses to be sweet. But, La Mothe, say nothing to her; it would spoil her happiness, and we seldom get pure gold to spend through a whole day of life," a cynical truth La Mothe was to remember before a new morning dawned.

"Villon, how can you sit there drinking his wine?"

"My friend, would Saxe be the less hanged if I went thirsty? And, to be serious, if to go thirsty would unhang him, I would drink a second bottle of wine to make certain. If he had lived to fight for his life

like a mad dog, as he would have done, Heaven knows how many he would have bitten. As it is, peace to him, and God be thanked there is no infection in a ten-foot rope. And yet I don't know! When I think of it, La Mothe, there is such an uncomfoting resemblance between us three that I wonder which will go next."

"I admit no resemblance, at least to Saxe."

"Do you not? A fortnight ago he palmed off his bad wine upon me, I palmed you upon the Dauphin, and you palmed your bad verses off upon mademoiselle. Now Saxe is hung, and—bah! your presentation will save us two."

"You use too big a word, it is nothing but a trifling remembrance."

"It is a poet's privilege to use what words he chooses, and I choose presentation. Or," he pushed out his loose lips as he leered up at La Mothe with a shrewd twinkle in his eyes, "shall I call it another intelligent anticipation? No, your own word will do better—a remembrance. The King—God bless him!—will presently die in earnest; the Dauphin, being King, will presently forget Monsieur Stephen La Mothe, forget the race for life on Grey Roland's back, forget the stairs of the Burnt Mill. Short memories are common diseases in princes. When, lo!—a wise youth you are, La Mothe—a remembrance jogs his recollection, and the King who had forgotten rewards Monsieur Stephen La Mothe for having saved the Dauphin's life twice over. Monsieur La Mothe's fortune is made all through his intelligent anticipation in bringing a presentation to Amboise by way of remembrance. Faith! La Mothe, it was almost prophetic, and prophets fare badly in Amboise. Look at Hugues! Look at Saxe! That ten-foot rope may be infectious after all."

"Villon, you are quite wrong."

"Pray God!" answered Villon soberly. "It's an ill of the flesh few recover from. But let us go to the Château." Pushing the unemptied bottle from him he rose with a sigh. His puckish, ironic humour had changed; gaiety was utterly gone, and the wrinkles upon his face were those of age, not laughter.

CHAPTER XXXII

LA MOTHE FULFILS HIS COMMISSION

Partly to divert the boy from his grief at Hugues' death, but partly also as an outlet for her new-found lightness of heart, Ursula de Vesc would have turned what Villon insisted on calling a presentation into a playful ceremonial. Gorgeously attired, the Grand Turk, seated on a divan of shawls and cushions, would receive the envoy of the Sultan of Africa bringing presents from his master. It would be just such a play of make-believe as the boy loved. But when La Mothe proposed to present the offering in the name of the King of the Genie her zest waned, and a little alloy seemed mixed with the pure gold of the day. That would remind him of Valmy and spoil all his pleasure, she declared. There must be nothing of Valmy in the night's amusement.

So only she, Father John, and the dogs were present in the Dauphin's private apartment, study and playroom in one, when La Mothe and Villon entered. As is almost always the case, the room reflected many of the characteristics of its owner, and in its ordered disorder, its hints of studies, its litter of wooden swords and broken dog-whips, might be seen the boy who was almost man in gravity and yet still a child in a child's love of toys. Rising as the two were announced, his effort at dignity was sorely marred by the eager curiosity with which he eyed the linen bundle carried by La Mothe.

"So you are leaving Amboise, Monsieur La Mothe, and we will have no more games together."

"When I return, Monseigneur."

"And I hope that will be soon, though I don't know why you are going. But, then, I never quite knew why you came at all."

"Nor I until to-day, but the reason is the very best in the world," answered La Mothe, and the boy, following his glance, caught the significance of the colour warming Ursula de Vesc's cheeks.

"So you have made up your quarrel, you two?"

"Never to quarrel again, Monseigneur."

"I hope so, but I don't believe it. Two people can't live together without quarrelling. Even I quarrel with Ursula at times. Monsieur La Mothe, will you please call me Charles, as she does? it is my wish."

"Monseigneur, you are very good."

"Not Monseigneur any more, then, and don't forget. It's all I have to give. Father John, who never saved my life or did anything for me, calls me Charles, so why not you who saved my life twice? Down, Charlot, down! leave Monsieur La Mothe's parcel alone. You are always pushing your nose where it is not wanted. What have you in that napkin, Monsieur La Mothe?"

"For your acceptance, Monseigneur——"

"Charles, not Monseigneur," said Ursula softly. "You will be calling me mademoiselle next!"

"Hush, Ursula! I cannot hear what Monsieur La Mothe says if you keep chattering. For my acceptance, Monsieur La Mothe? Not many give me presents; but then, I don't think there is much love in the world."

"There is more love in the world than you think," said La Mothe, "and some day you will very reverently thank God for it, as I do. Some day, too, you will know that these are from the very heart of love itself."

"Yes, yes," said the boy, shifting impatiently in his chair as La Mothe, laying the package on the table, busied himself untying the knotted corners, "I know very well all you have done for me; but what have you there?"

"Wait, my son, wait; you will know all in good time." But when the Franciscan would have laid a restraining hand on the Dauphin's shoulder, Villon twitched him by the sleeve of his robe.

"Hush, man, hush! Had you never young blood in you? Why, I am like Charlot the puppy, just itching to know what is inside."

"But it is not good for youth——"

"It is good for youth to be young," said Villon testily. "Ah, Monseigneur, I like that better than a frock with a cord that goes all round, and no offence to you, Father John."

Catching the coat-of-mail by the shoulder points, La Mothe shook it out and held it hanging with such a careful carelessness that the lamplight, picking out each separate link, fired its length and breadth into a dazzling glimmer of living silver flame shot through by the colder blue of hammered steel. With every cunning, unseen movement of the fingers a ripple from the throat rolled downward and out at the edges in a white fire of fairy jewel-work. Then with a jerk he caught it in his open hands, shaking them till it settled so compactly down that it lay entirely hidden in their cup.

"Monsieur La Mothe! Oh, Monsieur La Mothe!"

To La Mothe the flushed face, the sparkling eyes, and, above all, the exclamation, were so pathetically eloquent of a stinted, starved, neglected childhood that a rush of passionate resentment swept across him in arraignment of the father who robbed his son of those common joys which are childhood's natural food and rightful heritage. To be a man in responsibilities, a man bearing the burden and sorrows of his years, without having first been a boy at heart is more than an irreparable loss, it is an irreparable wrong, a tragedy which has killed the purest sweetener of the sours of life. Rob the twig of its sunshine and you rob the tree of its strength. But even while the flame of his anger scorched him, he remembered from whose hand had come the gifts which brightened the boy's eyes, and was ashamed. Had he not said there was a wealth of unimagined love in the world?

"For me, Monsieur La Mothe?"

"If you will accept them."

"See, Ursula! See, Father John! Now I can really be a knight like Roland, or fight as Joan of Arc fought. Oh, thank you, Monsieur La Mothe, thank you. And what is this?"

"An embroidered mask for your plays, only none but you must wear it. See, this is the way it fastens behind, and this fringe hides the mouth."

"I don't think I like that so well. Yes, I do! For now I can be the man who attacked the Burnt Mill

yesterday—he wore a mask, you remember. Poor Hugues! Oh, Ursula, I wish Hugues was here that I might show him my armour. But I will show it to Blaise instead. You know Blaise is to sleep at my door now? Come, Father John, while I show it to Blaise. I will put on the mask afterwards."

"And meanwhile, Monseigneur," said Villon, "I will try how it fits."

But La Mothe, remembering the King's instructions, intervened. "No, no, Villon, that is for the Dauphin alone—that and the coat-of-mail—no one else must use them."

For a moment it seemed as if Villon, vexed at what he took to be a rebuke for presumption, would have pushed aside La Mothe's protesting hand, but with a shrug of his shoulders he gave way.

"Perhaps you are right," he said, turning the edge of the awkwardness with a gibe. "Princes have need of masks lest the world should see they are nothing but common flesh and blood like the rest of us."

Slipping her hand into La Mothe's arm Ursula de Vesc drew him to the door, followed by Villon, and the three stood watching the Dauphin half dragging Father John down the passage in his eagerness to show Blaise his treasure. He had caught the Franciscan familiarly by the sleeve, his cold suspicion of all that came from Valmy banished for once, and was hugging the mail to his breast with the other arm.

"More and more you are my dear," she whispered, her lips so near his ear that his blood tingled at the stirring of the warm breath. "It was a beautiful thought and I love you for it, but it was just like you. Oh, Stephen, how I wish Villon was not here!"

Now why did she wish that? And why did the white rose flame suddenly red?

Left to promptings of his own desires, Charlot the inquisitive debated whether the door or the table offered the better field for amusement and improving observation. The door, with its group of three crowded into the narrow space, and all intent upon the passage-way, promised well, but the table was nearer and forbidden, which promised better. Besides, some play he did not share was in progress, and he owed it to the dignity of his puppydom to know what it was. Once already, when he tried to push his nose into that linen package, he had been balked. Rearing himself on his hind legs, his forepaws on the edge of the Dauphin's chair, he stretched his neck inquisitively. But the chair was blank, and with an effort he scrambled upon the seat, his ears cocked, his head aslant.

So far all was well, and from his vantage he looked about him with an enquiring mind. There was something new on the table, something strange, part of the play he had been shut out from, and his curiosity was piqued. Very cautiously he stretched out his sensitive, twitching nose and sniffed. Yes, it certainly was new, certainly was strange, so new and strange that he must enquire further. Again, very cautiously, for he knew he had no business there at all, he caught the mask in his teeth and dropped with it softly on the floor. A little dazed by his success he looked about him. The humans were at the door talking quietly, Charlemagne beside them; Diane and Lui-même were biting one another's ears in a corner; he had the floor to himself, and could investigate quietly. The fringe caught his attention. Nosing the mask face downward he sniffed again, drawing a long breath, and as he sniffed a thrill shivered through him, his legs braced under him rigidly as if they were not his legs at all, then he gave a little soft, growling yelp, sighed, and grew suddenly tired. His legs relaxed, doubling under his body, and he lay quiet, his muzzle buried in the hollow of the mask.

"In the steel coat he will look like the Maid of France herself!" said Villon as they turned back from the doorway.

"And perhaps his plays may waken something of the Maid's great soul in him." Then, before La Mothe could tell her that she herself had shown much of Joan's strong courage, singleness of heart, and unselfish spirit, she added, "It was a sorrowful year when France lost so great a soul."

"But France is never long bereaved," replied Villon, and from his tone they could not say if he spoke in jest or earnest. "If a great soul went, a great soul came—I was born that year! La Mothe, Charlot is no respecter of the rights of princes."

"Charlot! You mischievous dog!" Stooping to rescue the mask, Ursula de Vesc caught the puppy with both hands to drag him towards her; but at the first touch she let him slip from her hold and drew back, startled, looking up into La Mothe's face as he bent over her. The plump little body relaxed heavily, sluggishly on its side. "Stephen, Charlot is dead!"

"Dead? Not possible, Ursula!" Stooping in turn he lifted the dog; but the limbs sagged loosely downward and the head rolled over on the shoulders. The eyes were fixed and glazed, the chaps twitched back from the gums, leaving the teeth bared. There could be no doubt—Charlot's days of

curiosity were ended.

"Stephen, what does it mean? What can have hurt poor Charlot?" But when reaching downward again she would have picked up the mask Villon anticipated her, setting his foot upon it.

"Don't touch it, for God's sake, don't touch it!"

"Monsieur Villon, that is the Dauphin's."

"It killed Charlot!"

"Killed Charlot? How?"

"Ask La Mothe, he gave it to the Dauphin and should know."

Perplexed, bewildered, vexed, too, at the destruction of the Dauphin's toy and the tone of Villon's reply, she caught at the table-edge, pulling herself upright.

"Stephen, what does it all mean?"

But La Mothe only shook his head. Comprehension had been staggered but had recovered, and was growing to conviction as small significances, luminous and imperative in spite of their triviality, pieced themselves together in his memory. But how could he answer the question? How put in words the fear which was taking shape in his mind? It was Villon who gave her the key.

"Poison."

"Poison?" she repeated, shrinking in a natural repulsion. "Poison on a mask you gave the Dauphin? Stephen, how could that be? But you must answer, you must tell us," she insisted as he shook his head for the second time, "you must, you must!"

"I cannot." He spoke curtly, harshly, but the determination was unmistakable. Twice he repeated it. "I cannot, I cannot."

"But, Stephen——"

"Ursula, you don't doubt me? You don't think—you can't think I knew? You can't think I planned this—this——" He faltered as his eyes turned upon the limp body he still carried in his hands. He had passed his word to the King to be silent, and even if he spoke, the truth would only add horror to horrors. "Ursula—beloved!" Laying Charlot on the table he held out his hands in appeal, to have them caught in both hers, and he himself drawn into her arms.

"Doubt you? No, Stephen, no, no; I trust you utterly—utterly. And cannot you trust me? We have the boy to think of—the Dauphin—he must be protected. But for Charlot he—he—oh! I cannot say it. Stephen, don't you see? don't you understand? How can we guard him in the dark? The mask, Stephen: whose was it? where did it come from? Tell me for the boy's sake."

"I cannot, Ursula. Dearest heart, I cannot."

Lifting from the table the napkin in which the mask had been wrapped, Villon shook it out, holding it up much as La Mothe had held the coat-of-mail. Then he threw it on the table, spreading it flat.

"Fleur-de-lys," he said, his finger on the woven pattern.

"Fleur-de-lys and—Stephen, you came from Valmy? Oh! My God! My God! I understand it all. So that is why you are in Amboise?"

Villon nodded gravely. Temperamentally he was the most emotional of the three, and the tragedy in little, which so nearly had been a tragedy in great, had so shaken his nerve that he controlled his tongue with difficulty.

"Yes," he said slowly, "that is why he is in Amboise, and he never knew it. There were two arrows on the string, Saxe and this. And it might have been me." He turned to La Mothe. "You saved me; but for you it would have been me."

But La Mothe gave him no answer. For the moment it seemed as if he had forgotten Villon's existence altogether. His arms were round the girl, one hand mechanically stroking her shoulder to quiet her fears, lover fashion, and comfort her with his nearness. But his thoughts were in Valmy, a thin, tired voice whispering in his ears, a white face whose eyes smouldered fire looking into his. With a shiver he roused himself.

"Yes, I came from Valmy, and I must go back to Valmy; I must go this very night. Saxe used to keep a horse always ready," he ended, with the bitterness of shame in his voice.

"Stephen, was it for this?"

"I suppose so. But I must go to Valmy to-night. As to the Dauphin, when I return——"

"When you return!" echoed Villon drearily. "Did Molembrais return? Saxe knew too much, and Saxe is dead. You will be the next, for you know more than Saxe ever guessed at."

"Saxe dead?" said Ursula, turning to Villon in her distress. "Monsieur Villon, how did Saxe die?"

"Do not ask me, but persuade La Mothe to keep away from Valmy; let him go anywhere—anywhere, but not to Valmy. Remember Molembrais, and Monsieur La Mothe has not even a safe-conduct."

"Stephen, Stephen, for my sake! Oh, that terrible King!"

"Beloved, I must go to Valmy, my word is pledged. Help me to be strong to go; you who are so loyal and so brave, be brave now for me. Surely to be brave for another is love itself! But, Villon, the Dauphin must know nothing of what has happened. Let him be happy while he can. Take away poor Charlot and that horrible thing, and leave me to make up a tale. Ursula, go and play with the dogs—anything that he may not see the pain on your dear face. He is coming back—listen how he laughs, poor lad! Go, Villon; go, man, go, go!"

"Blaise broke his knife-blade and never dented a link!" cried the boy, rushing in as Villon disappeared. Never had Ursula de Vesc seen him so full of a child's joyous life, a child's flood-tide of the gladness of living, and so little like the dull, unhappy, suspicion-haunted dauphin of France. "Father John says I look like a Crusader, but I would rather be Roland. Now I must wear my mask."

"Monseigneur, will you ever forgive my carelessness? but Charlot has torn it."

"Charlot? Where is Charlot?"

"Sent away in disgrace. As a punishment he is banished for a week."

"But my mask, I want my mask!"

"It is spoiled, and I must get you a new one—a better one."

"But I don't want a new one or a better one; I want this one, and I want it now! It was very careless, Monsieur La Mothe, and I am very angry with you."

"Charles! Charles!" broke in the Franciscan, "Roland would never have said that; and I am sure it was not Monsieur La Mothe's fault."

For a moment the boy turned upon the priest in a child's gust of passion at the interruption, his face a struggle between petulance and tears. Then he tilted his chin, squaring his meagre shoulders under the coat-of-mail as he supposed Roland might have done.

"You are right, Father, though you do come from Valmy. Monsieur La Mothe, I am sorry for what I said, and do not forget you are to call me Charles. Ursula, you have been crying; is that because Charlot spoilt my mask?"

"No, Charles; but because Monsieur La Mothe must go to Valmy."

"Oh! Valmy?" he said dully. "I am never happy but somehow it is Valmy, Valmy, Valmy! I think hell must be like Valmy."

"My son, you must not say such things."

"But what if I think them? Am I not to say what I think? And in hell they hate, do they not? Monsieur Villon," he went on as the poet re-entered the room, "they were talking of Valmy as I passed the stair-head. Will you go and see if my father is dead a second time? No! stay where you are, I hear some one coming."

Hastily crossing the room, Charles cowered close to Ursula de Vesc, furtively catching at her skirts as if half ashamed of his fears and yet drawn to the comfort of a strength greater than his own. All his pride of possession and joyousness of childhood were gone, and instead of wholesome laughter the

terrors of a crushed spirit looked out of his dull eyes. He was no longer Roland, but the son of Louis of France. Laying her arm about him in the old attitude of protection which had so stirred La Mothe's heart, she held him close to her, the anxiety of her watchfulness no less evident than his own. The darkness of her dread had deepened tenfold. Valmy could bring no good to Amboise, no good to Stephen La Mothe.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE ARREST

There was no long delay. Passing Villon with a single, keen, scrutinizing glance, a man, a stranger to them all, entered, pausing a yard or two within the room. Four or five troopers showed behind him in the doorway, but made no attempt to cross the threshold. All were dusty, travel-stained, and with every sign of having ridden both far and fast. Their leader alone was bareheaded, his sheathed sword caught up in a gauntleted hand.

"In the King's name, Monseigneur," he said, turning to the Dauphin with a salute which halted evenly between respect and contempt. But the Dauphin only shrank closer to Ursula de Vesc and it was La Mothe who answered.

"You are from Valmy?"

"By order of the King."

"With despatches?"

"With instructions, and," he paused, motioning to the open doorway behind him, then added, "means to carry them out."

"What are your instructions?"

"To arrest Monsieur Stephen La Mothe——"

"Arrest Monsieur La Mothe? Why? On what ground—on what charge?" Sweeping the Dauphin aside Ursula de Vesc moved forward as she spoke. The instinct of protection had given way to something very like the instinct of attack: her love for the boy was satisfied with a passivity which could never content her love for the man.

"If I could tell you, I would," he replied courteously, "but I fear Monsieur La Mothe must ask the King that question himself. I know nothing beyond my instructions."

"Are your orders in writing?" It was Villon who spoke.

"Yes, but I do not recognize your right to see them."

"My right, then," said La Mothe, "since it is against me they are directed."

"Certainly; no doubt you can identify the writing."

"I can," answered Ursula, stretching out her hand for the paper which would have been Beaufoy's passport to promotion but for his unlucky appetite. But it was withheld in obvious hesitation.

"Remember, mademoiselle, that if it is destroyed, I still have the means behind me——"

"Oh, monsieur," she interrupted, striking at him with her tongue and finding a relief in the contempt, "it is easy to see you come from Valmy."

A sour smile crossed his face as the colour rose at the gibe, but he only shrugged his shoulders with a little outward gesture of the hands.

"Yes, we grow suspicious in Valmy. There are my instructions, mademoiselle; you will see they leave me no alternative."

"Yes, the writing is the King's throughout. 'Go to Amboise,'" she read, "'Arrest Monsieur Stephen La Mothe, and bring him to Valmy without delay. Tell him his orders are cancelled, and on your life let him

hold no communication with the Dauphin.—LOUIS." With every sentence her voice hardened; spots of colour flecked the pallor of her cheeks, grew and deepened. "It is vile, infamous, contemptible," she said, "but it is like your King. Yes! You come from Valmy, there can be no doubt you come from Valmy. Stephen, I shall speak. Useless? Perhaps; but I shall speak all the same. Your King has hid spies in Amboise, we know that, spies who can lie or tell the truth as it suits their master. Through them the King knows that Monsieur La Mothe has twice saved the Dauphin at the risk of his own life, and now—now!" She paused, beating the paper with the back of her hand with a force that lent her words power and meaning, "now he is to hold no communication with the Dauphin! Monsieur La Mothe may set his own life on the hazard to save the Dauphin but he may not speak with him! That is Valmy gratitude and the King's miserable, jaundiced mind. And his commission is cancelled! What that commission is I do not know, but, thank God! Monsieur La Mothe, you are freed from it, whatever it is, since it came out of Valmy."

"I thank God too," said La Mothe, his eyes meeting hers a moment and travelling behind to where the Dauphin stood hugging the wall with Diane and Lui-même at his feet. The significance of the glance was unmistakable, and the girl paused, breathless, in the revelation. The gifts were his commission, the mask which killed Charlot was his commission, and the commission was cancelled. The King had repented, had he not repented there would be no cancellation. "Yes," repeated La Mothe, "very humbly I thank God, nor do I think the King can have heard as yet of the Dauphin's second danger. Monsieur, I am at your service; I was about to leave for Valmy to-night in any case."

"So much the better; but I regret you must go as my prisoner. You can understand that I have no option."

"I quite understand, and here is my sword. Monseigneur—no, since you permit it, Charles, my friend, I leave you in good keeping. You will have Mademoiselle de Vesc, Father John, and Villon here, to watch over you. Villon, beware of that third cast of the net. I think that is now the one great danger."

"La Mothe, La Mothe, must you go? Is there no other way? Remember Molembrais."

"What other way is possible? The King has my word, and if that were not enough there are what Monsieur de Commines would call five good reasons behind the door. Monsieur, you have my parole. Something stronger than your five reasons holds me. Good-bye, Charles, my friend—"

But somewhere in the boy's blood a dash of the Crusader's spirit he had sneered at stirred. Brushing past Ursula de Vesc he ranged himself by La Mothe's side, his coat-of-mail an undulating pool of light as when the moon shines on a falling wave pitted by the wind.

"Monsieur from Valmy, Mademoiselle de Vesc is right. You may tell my father that Monsieur La Mothe has twice saved my life and that all Amboise knows it. That he saved me may not count for much in Valmy—it may even be against him—but what all Amboise knows all France will know. I think my father will understand. Monsieur La Mothe, good-bye, and when you come back we shall play our games together again. I don't think I care about the mask, but I shall not forget to be Roland. Come, Father John, let us go and pray that Monsieur La Mothe will soon come back to us."

"Monseigneur—Charles!" cried La Mothe, taking the stretched-out hand in both his, "you are a gallant little gentleman. No; I do not think you will forget to be Roland. God save the Dauphin!"

"Thank you, Monsieur La Mothe. Monsieur from Valmy, you have my leave to go. Come, Father John." With a stiff little bow he hooked his arm into the brown sleeve of the Franciscan, and the two left the room.

"I think, monsieur," said Ursula de Vesc, "the Dauphin speaks the sentiments of us all. You have Monsieur La Mothe's parole: he will follow you in five minutes."

But how spirit drew to spirit as lip to lip in these five minutes needs not to be told. Whoso has seen love go out of life, uncertain of return, will understand. But if that morning there had been a passing behind the veil into the holy of holies where immortal love dwelleth, then in these five minutes there was the very throbbing of the heart which beats eternal even in these earthly walls of time.

Nor was Villon drier of eye as he waited under the stars.

"He knows too much," he said; "and when a man knows too much, not even a ballad can save him."

CHAPTER XXXIV

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

But for two happenings by the way Stephen La Mothe's ride over the route taken twenty-four hours earlier by Commines was without event. Of these happenings one was bitter and one was sweet, and in mercy the bitter came first, leaving the sweet to comfort the end of the journey.

Once fully clear of Amboise the leader of the troop halted, and by a prearranged plan his followers gathered round them, hemming them into a circle as they had hemmed Beaufoy earlier in the day.

"Monsieur La Mothe," he said civilly, but speaking with the air of a man who had a fixed purpose, "there is a certain signet which I must demand. We who come from Valmy always say must and demand," he added, with a touch of grim humour, which was lost on La Mothe, but which Paul Beaufoy would have appreciated.

"Your instructions said nothing about a signet."

"I must have it, nevertheless. You can see for yourself that the order was written in haste, and how should I know the ring exists if the King had not told me? To be frank with you, these men do not go with us all the way to Valmy, and where would I be if, when we arrived, you played your signet against my scrap of paper?"

"But you have my parole."

"Valmy's parole!" he said scornfully. "I mean no offence, but I can afford no risks. Come, Monsieur La Mothe, do not put me and yourself to the indignity of a search."

At the contempt in the scornful voice La Mothe started, flushing hotly in the darkness. But the memory of the deadly deceit practised on his own faith was too recent, and he controlled himself. How could he blame a stranger for judging the servant by the master?

"The ring came from the King and should go back to the King. On your honour, is this part of your duty?"

"My most solemn duty, as God is above us; without the signet I cannot fulfil all that has been laid upon me"—which was true in a sense. The order stolen from Beaufoy might gain him entrance to Valmy, but without the signet he could not count on forcing a way to Louis himself.

"On compulsion, then," said La Mothe, giving up the signet, and thenceforward they rode in silence, not pressing their horses unduly; but it vexed him to think that Louis would not trust him to return the ring.

If Stephen La Mothe was sick at heart, who could blame him or charge it to the discredit of his courage? The rough lesson had been roughly taught that it is better to tramp the road of life afoot and one's own master than to ride a-horseback under compulsion. He had learned, too, that on the tree of knowledge of the ways of men are many fruits which pucker the mouth, as well as those which gladden the spirit. As to the ways of women, that is an altogether different book—a serial, let us say, but in how many numbers?

Of these ways La Mothe learned one before the sun of a new day had risen. Somewhere in the neighbourhood of the auberge where Paul Beaufoy had purchased breakfast at a cost greater than an empty purse, the troopers were dismissed after a brief conference, from which La Mothe was excluded, and the two rode on alone. Each was preoccupied and neither spoke. Knowing the relationship which existed between Valmy and Amboise there seemed to La Mothe nothing strange in the procedure followed both at the Château and afterwards. If the King suspected he had joined the camp of the Dauphin, then arrest might have been resisted; but once upon the road, and his parole passed, there was no further need for force. The King who kept no faith was shrewd to know when he could trust the faith of others, and the troopers doubtless were required elsewhere. The truth was they followed at a distance, in order to cover and aid Molembrais' flight in the desperate possibility of his escape from Valmy.

Unconsciously following the precedent set by Commines, they drew rein while it was yet dark. Daylight, both knew, would show Valmy in the distance. But as they crawled at a foot's pace in the yet darker shadow of a dense pine-wood edging the highway, the east a sullen grey ribbed by a narrow cloud poised upon the horizon like an inverted giant monolith, there sounded behind them the remote pad, pad of rapid hoofs muffled by dust. It was the very dead hour of night, when even nature is

steeped in the quiet of a child's sleep, and the rhythmic beat broke the stillness like the throbbing of a heart.

"This way and be silent."

La Mothe felt rather than saw his bridle caught, wrenching his horse backward into a gloom so heavy that those behind them would have passed them by but that Grey Roland, chafing at the pressure on the bit, tossed his head and set the cheek-chains jangling. Instantly the foremost rider checked, and a voice called out of the darkness, "Who is there? Stephen! Stephen!" It was Ursula de Vesc. With a touch of the spur La Mothe drove Grey Roland forward, dragging the rein from the hand which held it.

"Ursula! You! Why are you here? Who is with you?"

"Where else should I be?" she answered between laughter and a sob. "Did you think I could wait, breaking my heart alone in Amboise? Besides, there is no danger. Father John is with me, and now we shall be together to the end."

"But the Dauphin?"

"Your orders are cancelled, don't you remember? There is no longer any fear for the Dauphin. And if there was," she added half defiantly, "I would be here all the same."

From the shadow of the pines La Mothe's captor rode slowly forward. "For what purpose, mademoiselle?"

"To tell the King what I know Monsieur La Mothe will never tell him—that he has twice saved the Dauphin's life against that would-be murderer, Molembrais. And when all France hears the story, as all France shall, not even the King will dare to lay a finger on the most loyal gentleman from Artois to Navarre. My one fear was I might be too late, and all night have ridden in terror lest you should reach Valmy before me."

"But there is no entering Valmy in the dark."

"Monsieur La Mothe's signet—"

"La Mothe, you never told me that."

"Why should I?" replied La Mothe. "I owed you no information. You took your instructions from the King. But, Ursula, you cannot, must not, dare not, go to Valmy. Remember Saxe. The risk would be madness, the danger—"

"Where you go I go," she answered steadily. "Dear, do not try to dissuade me, it would be no use. Let us not fret ourselves in the little time we have. And is the danger less for you than for me?"

"Do you mean," demanded Molembrais, "that the signet will give admission to the King at any hour, day or night?"

"At any hour, yes."

"And we are ready to go," said the girl, ranging her horse by the side of Grey Roland, so that La Mothe was within touch of her hand.

"Neither you nor the priest—La Mothe and La Mothe only," he answered, his voice roughening into passion for the first time. "Come, sir, I hold your parole."

"But this does not touch Monsieur La Mothe's parole."

"Mademoiselle, you read my instructions; they have nothing to do with you."

"Monsieur, I never thought myself a person of any importance, but I believe the King will thank you."

"Flatly, I decline to take you."

"Flatly, I shall go whether you decline or not."

"Father!" and in his angry perplexity Molembrais turned, appealing to the priest.

"She is right," answered the Franciscan, speaking for the first time, "and when one is right there is no turning back, no matter what the end may be. Yes," he went on, replying now to a sudden gesture dimly seen in the gloom, "I know you are armed and we are not, but, short of killing me, you can no more turn

me back from the right than you can turn back the finger of God from lifting the sun yonder."

He faced the east as he spoke, and at the sweep of his arm all faced with him. Dawn trembled in birth below the hard rim of the world. The leaden sullenness was colder, clearer, the upper sky a threat of storm, but the impending shaft of cloud had caught the first of the coming glory and blazed a splendid crimson. It was as if indeed the Divine had clothed itself in visibility, that the troubled in spirit might take comfort, and faith go forward strengthened in the right, unafraid.

Crossing his breast mechanically with his finger-tips the monk sat in silence, like one tranced. "Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and the King of Glory shall come in," he murmured. Then he roused, straightening himself in the saddle. "Let us ride on. Have no fear, mademoiselle. By the Christ of Love whom I serve you shall taste no harm."

"They will never let you pass the outer guard."

"A way will open; ride on."

"Well ride, then!" And ride they did, furiously. The fewer sleepless eyes in Valmy the better for his purpose; the surer, too, his chance of escape in the confusion which must follow the King's death. Once only Molembrais looked round.

"Remember your parole. Keep near me, La Mothe!" Then, crouching low, he drove his spurs home and dashed forward at a reckless gallop.

But if he thought to shake off Ursula de Vesc and the Franciscan, he was mistaken. Thanks to the good offices of Cartier, the innkeeper, they had changed horses at Château-Renaud, and now their freshness more than balanced any lesser skill in horsemanship. Even Father John, the weakest rider of the four, never flinched or fell behind, but, stiff with pain and every joint a living fire from the unaccustomed fatigue, kept his place, second in the troop. Stephen and Ursula came last, side by side. Crossing the Loire the pace slackened, and for the first time speech was possible.

"Stephen, you are not vexed? I could not wait in Amboise eating my heart out, knowing nothing."

"How could love vex me?" he answered as they clasped hands across the current. "But, beloved, I am in terror for you. The King——"

"Hush! do not talk of the King. Father John is right, God's over all, and I have no fear." The clasp tightened in a message neither could speak. But it was only for a moment; already their horses were scrambling up the further bank, forcing them apart.

"God guard you, Ursula."

"Stephen, beloved, is it good-bye?" For answer he shook his head, but not in denial; none knew for certain how suddenly good-byes might be said in Valmy.

Once across the river Molembrais beckoned to La Mothe to close up with him.

"We must keep together now. If I have done my part courteously, help me in return by silence. Remember, no one in Valmy knows of the arrest. Mademoiselle de Vesc and the monk must fend for themselves."

La Mothe nodded agreement. The request was natural. For his part he had no desire to be a target for curious questions. He had no explanation to give, nor was he even certain whether, as Villon said, he knew too much, or was accused of disloyalty in joining the Dauphin's party. As to Ursula, it seemed safer for her to be disassociated from him in either case; safer, too, that the King should see him first and alone; the heat of his wrath might exhaust itself. So the two rode on ahead, Ursula and Father John following more leisurely. The dawn was as yet little more than a haze of yellow mist.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE DAWN BROADENS

While they were still a bow-shot from the walls a hoarse voice shouted a command to halt, but Molembrais, holding the signet above his head, called back "In the King's name," and rode on. Every

moment of gloom was precious, and a bold assertion of privilege was his surest hope. If he appeared to doubt his own credentials, who would believe? There is always a certain willingness to take a man at his own valuation, especially if the valuation be a low one. Waiting for no challenge, and faithful to his policy, he flung himself from his horse at the outer gate with every appearance of haste.

"In the King's name," he cried, scarcely giving himself time to light upon his feet and holding fast by Paul Beaufof's formula. "To His Majesty, Monsieur La Mothe and I—quickly now."

As he more than half expected, the very importunity staggered opposition.

"His Majesty is asleep; you cannot pass——"

"His orders are imperative—sleeping or waking—any hour by day or by night. Who is on guard?"

"Monsieur de Saint-Pierre."

"Send for him, then. Stir yourself, my man, and don't stand there gaping like a fish."

But Saint-Pierre had already heard the altercation, and at the rasp of his spurs on the flags Molembrais turned sharply. Quick to note the richer dress he drew his own conclusion. Waiting for neither question nor explanation he again held out the signet.

"Monsieur de Saint-Pierre, we must see the King at once—at once, you understand. Here is my authority."

"But I do not know you? No stranger can——"

"But you know this!" Molembrais cut him short. "Do you think I have risked my neck galloping these accursed roads all night to be delayed now just because you do not know me? Is it the King's signet or is it not?"

"Pass, then," said Saint-Pierre reluctantly. "Does Monsieur La Mothe go with you?"

For an instant Molembrais hesitated. Dared he say no? He would have given much to have shaken off La Mothe now that the gates were passed, and have forced his way to the King alone; but the attempt might waken that suspicion which slept so lightly in Valmy. While he paused, La Mothe answered, deciding the question.

"Unfortunately, yes, Monsieur de Saint-Pierre. Will you please tell Monsieur de Commines that I have arrived?"

"Is it arrest? My dear lad——" he began as La Mothe nodded, but Molembrais again interrupted him.

"We have no time now. Where is the King?"

"In his usual lodgings."

"Mort-dieu! monsieur, how should I know his usual lodgings? Am I of Valmy?"

"Monsieur, a little civility would do you no harm."

"Monsieur, once I have seen the King I will be as civil or as uncivil as you please."

Turning on his heel Saint-Pierre beckoned to an under officer. "Pass these gentlemen to Captain Leslie: he is on duty in the King's ante-room. Don't fear, La Mothe, I will send word to Monsieur de Commines without delay. He is anxious about you, for he has been enquiring at the gates once this morning already."

"Monsieur de Saint-Pierre, there is a lady behind us; she has ridden all night——"

"A lady?" Saint-Pierre's hand fell on his shoulder in a kindly touch. "Not old enough to be your mother, I'll wager! Don't fret, mon gars, I have been young myself," and with that La Mothe had to be content.

Motioning to La Mothe to precede him, Molembrais took up his position last of the three. Now that he was within its walls the indefinable terror of Valmy possessed him in spite of his recklessness. It was not that he repented, not that his purpose was less bitterly determined, not that he had grown coward or would have turned back had return been possible, but the chill of the shadows through which the path lay crept deeper and deeper. In part it was a dread of failure, in part the inexpressible revolt of

nature against an inevitable sacrifice, in part the sinister suggestions inseparable from Valmy itself.

And how could he escape from that suggestiveness? There, where the denser gloom sloped from the roof across a paved courtyard, Guy's scaffold might have stood; through that doorway, dimly outlined against the greyness, Guy might have looked upon the light for the last time; these obscure, uncertain windows, blind eyes in the slowly waning night, might have seen the axe fall; down these cellar stairs might have been carried—but they had swung to the left into a narrow court, and before them were the King's lodgings. No! it was not that he repented, not that he had turned coward, but would fate and circumstances trick him of his revenge at the last?

There are some men whom the dread of failure chills to the heart when the crisis calls them, and Marc de Molembrais was one of them. He had no definite plan of either attack or escape. How could he have, when every angle of the stairs, every corridor, every room through which they passed was strange to him? But if he had no plan, he had a purpose firmly set in his determination, which neither gloom nor chill could check; from that purpose, that stern, stubborn justice of revenge, he never shrank, beyond it he never looked. Somehow he would get Louis of France into his grip, and somehow he would break to liberty. At the door of the King's ante-room Leslie met them, and their guide stepped aside: his work was done.

In silence Molembrais held up the signet. Instinctively he felt that neither bluster nor importunity would serve him now. Then he glanced aside at La Mothe. "We must see the King and at once," he almost whispered. His heart was beating to suffocation, and in his dread of failure he feared the excitement in his voice would betray him at the last.

"Where from?"

"Amboise."

Leslie nodded comprehendingly. That Paul Beaufooy should go and a stranger return was quite in keeping with the King's devious methods. "Give me your sword and then I will waken him. I think he expects you."

"My sword?" The request staggered him. He had relied upon his sword for the one thrust necessary, then to aid him in his escape, or at least that he might die fighting.

"Don't you know that no one approaches the King armed? not even I, not even Lessaix. There is nothing personal in it."

"No, I never heard that." He stood a minute, gnawing his lip, then wrenched the buckle open. What matter, he had his dagger hidden!

Laying the weapon aside, Leslie softly lifted the portière, holding it looped with one hand while with the other he opened the door very gently.

"Sire!"

"Is that Leslie? I am awake."

"There are messengers from Amboise. Your Majesty's signet——"

"Thank God! Oh, thank God! Lord God! Mother of God! Christ of God! grant he was in time." The voice was thin and tremulous, the end almost a sob. "Turn up the lamp, Leslie, and leave them with me alone. Mercy of God! strengthen me for what is to come."

Dropping the portière behind him, Leslie crossed the room with a quietness rare in one so roughly natured and so strongly built. But Louis had the power of winning men's affections when it so pleased him, and it was politic to win the man who held his life in care. Loosening the wick in its socket with the silver pin hanging from the lamp for that purpose, Leslie returned to the door.

"Are you ready, Sire?"

An affirmative wave of the hand was the answer, as, high upon his pillows and pushed to the very outer edge of the bed, the King leaned forward. Was he ready? He dared not say so. Words do not come easily when life or death waits uncertain behind the door.

"Have you slept, Sire?"

"No." The voice was firmer as the hard will regained the upper hand, but it was harsh, dry, curt. "Perhaps I'll sleep—later. Please God I'll sleep later. Send them in."

But in the ante-room Leslie paused a moment.

"Take off those riding gloves," he said sharply. "You must know little of kings' courts. Leave them on the table. You can pick them up as you go out."

"I know my duty," answered Molembrais, "and that is enough for me." To speak sharply steadied his nerve. But at the door he stood aside and motioned to La Mothe. "Do you go in first." Again it was not that his courage failed him, but La Mothe would be so much covert, La Mothe would draw the King's attention. It would ruin everything if, while he was on the very threshold, the King should cry out, Where is Beaufoy?

But Louis never gave him a glance. As the light fell upon La Mothe's face he drew a shivering sigh and clenched his teeth with a snap. Life or death had passed the door—which was it?

"Come nearer," he said, beckoning. "Nearer yet. You, Beaufoy, stay there by the door. The Dauphin?—Charles?"

"Well, Sire."

"Well!" The beckoning hand dropped, then he leaned forward, covering his face. "Oh, God—God—God—God be thanked!" he sobbed, his shoulders shaking in convulsions as he fought for breath. "God be thanked!" La Mothe heard him whisper a second time, and in the silence Molembrais crept forward and aside, edging by the wall where the shadows were thickest. The lamp was his danger. He must quench the lamp and strike in the dark. Forward and aside he stole towards the table.

Suddenly Louis reared himself upright, again shaking a hand before him, but this time in a threat.

"I cancelled my orders: where—where——"

"The mask is destroyed, Sire."

"Destroyed? Safely?"

"Safely, Sire."

"And the Dauphin—Charles—does he know——"

Again he paused, and again La Mothe filled the blank, reading into the completed words the uncompleted question.

"The Dauphin knows nothing but that the gifts were mine."

"Yours! Yes, yours, yours only, and you dared—who is that at the table?" His voice rose shrilly into a cry. "That is not Paul Beaufoy."

The shift of eyes, the change of voice, rather than the words themselves warned La Mothe. Round he spun, irresolute in surprise. Nor was it the figure stooping at the table-edge with a hand reached for the light that caught his gaze, it was the gleam of that light clear upon a signet ring, and Villon's phrase rang in his ears—"A martlet with three mullets in chief." Then the lamp flickered out.

"Molembrais!" he cried, and sprang on Molembrais; and from behind, as they twisted in each other's arms, he heard the King whisper in an indrawn, frightened breath, "Molembrais! Molembrais!" as if the dead had risen.

Molembrais! It was the third cast of the net. Straining his grip yet tighter, La Mothe fought for his life. Molembrais was the stronger, Molembrais was the more desperate, and desperation is a strength in itself. Twisting, their limbs interlocked, they spun, tripped and fell; and with the blood drumming in his ears La Mothe heard nothing, knew nothing, felt nothing but Molembrais' hot breath in his face, Molembrais' tense muscles closing, stiffening, crushing as they rolled upon the floor, wrestling as they rolled. Then of a sudden the room was ablaze, a racking violence wrenched. Molembrais from his clasp, and he was pressed back downward on the floor, a sword at his throat. It was Commynes; Leslie and a guard held Molembrais; beyond, at the doorway, stood Ursula de Vesc; by the bedside Father John stooped above the King, his arm thrown round him.

"Stephen, Stephen, what madness is this?"

Propped on his arm La Mothe pointed to Molembrais.

"Molembrais!" he panted. "Twice—the Dauphin—now the King. Thank God I knew him at the last."

By the bedside the Franciscan stooped lower, whispering in the King's ear—whispering urgently, insistently, pleadingly. What he said none heard, but the hard face slowly softened.

"Philip, let him rise; you did well to vouch for Monsieur La Mothe. And you, young sir, who have learned when to speak and when to keep silence, was I not right? Amboise was dull, and queen and waiting-maid are all of the one flesh? Mademoiselle, take him back to Amboise with you and watch together over my son, the Dauphin, and the God of Mercy be gracious to you both as He has been to me this day."

He paused a moment. Shifting on his elbow he laid an arm round the Franciscan's neck, drawing him closer, and as he whispered to the priest a laugh wrinkled his worn face. Father John nodded, smiling. The King's arm slipped from him and he straightened himself.

"You are right, Sire, it is their due. Mademoiselle, come nearer. Who giveth this woman to this man?"

"I do," answered Louis.

Seven years after the boy Charles succeeded to the throne a certain Stephen de Vesc, chamberlain to the King, was appointed, first, Seneschal of Beaucaire, then Governor of Gaeta, and finally Constable of France. Could it be that Stephen La Mothe adopted his wife's name to please the Dauphin? Such changes are not unknown in our day, and for less cause.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE JUSTICE OF THE KING ***

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