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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE DUKE'S MOTTO: A MELODRAMA ***

THE DUKE'S MOTTO

A MELODRAMA

BY

JUSTIN HUNTLY McCARTHY

AUTHOR OF

"SERAPHICA" "IF I WERE KING" "THE PROUD PRINCE"
ETC. ETC.



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MCMVIII

NOVELS BY
JUSTIN HUNTLY McCARTHY

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DÉDICACE

A VICTORIEN SARDOU

MAÎTRE,

Voilà un mélodrame que j'ai fait, le dernier de plusieurs mélodrames anglais qui ont Lagardère pour héros. Des mots remplacent l'action, des mots remplacent le décor, les costumes, et les accessoires; mais enfin ce pastiche n'est qu'une pièce et non un roman. Je l'ai fait pour Lewis Waller, acteur romantique s'il en fut, et grandement doué des qualités qui appartiennent par tradition à Lagardère. J'ai su, il y a longtemps, grâce à M. Jules Claretie, que vous étiez le vrai createur de ce paladin, Lagardère, pair de d'Artagnan, pair de Cyrano, pair presque de Roland et d'Olivier. Et si je ne l'avais pas su, j'aurais pu l'apprendre dernièrement en lisant ce livre aussi plein de charme que d'érudition, "Les Anciens Théâtres de Paris" de M. Georges Cain. Mais je crois que cette vérité est connue de peu de monde dans les pays où se parle la langue anglaise, que quand on loue "Le Bossu" de Féval on doit aussi louer "Le Bossu" de Sardou.

XIV-I.-MCMVIII.

CONTENTS

I.	THE SEVEN DEVILS	1
II.	THE THRUST OF NEVERS	13
III.	A BUYER OF BLADES	32
IV.	THE LITTLE PARISIAN	48
V.	THE PARRY TO THE THRUST OF NEVERS	62
VI.	THE MOAT OF CAYLUS	73
VII.	BROTHERS-IN-ARMS	82
VIII.	THE FIGHT IN THE MOAT	91
IX.	THE SCYTHE OF TIME	100
X.	A VILLAGE FAIR	108
XI.	ÆSOP REDUX	114
XII.	FLORA	124
XIII.	CONFIDENCES	132
XIV.	"I AM HERE!"	139
XV.	THE KING'S WORD	152
XVI.	SHADOWS	159
XVII.	IN THE GARDEN	172
XVIII.	THE FACTION OF GONZAGUE	185
XIX.	THE HALL OF THE THREE LOUIS	198
XX.	A CONFIDENTIAL AGENT	209
XXI.	THE PRINCESS DE GONZAGUE	219
XXII.	THE FAMILY COUNCIL	225
XXIII.	THE KING'S BALL	237
XXIV.	THE ROSE-COLORED DOMINO	247
XXV.	THE GLOVE OF COCARDASSE	257
XXVI.	THE REWARD OF ÆSOP	266
XXVII.	ÆSOP IN LOVE	278
XXVIII.	THE SIGNATURE OF ÆSOP	290
XXIX.	THE DEAD SPEAKS	298

I

THE SEVEN DEVILS

It was very warm in the inn room, but it was so much warmer outside, in the waning flames of the late September evening, that the dark room seemed veritably cool to those who escaped into its shelter from the fading sunlight outside. A window was open to let in what little air was stirring, and from that window a spectator with a good head might look down a sheer drop of more than thirty feet into the moat of the Castle of Caylus. The Inn of the Seven Devils was perched on the lip of one rock, and Caylus Castle on the lip of another. Between the two lay the gorge, which had been partially utilized to form the moat of the castle, and which continued its way towards the Spanish mountains. Beyond the castle a bridge spanned the ravine, carrying on the road towards the frontier. The moat itself was dry now, for war and Caylus had long been disassociated, and France was, for the moment, at peace with her neighbor, if at peace with few other powers. A young thirteenth Louis, a son of the great fourth Henri, now sat upon the throne of France, and seemingly believed himself to be the ruler of his kingdom, though a newly made Cardinal de Richelieu held a different opinion, and acted according to his conviction with great pertinacity and skill.

Inside the Inn of the Seven Devils, on this heavy day of early autumn, seven men were sitting. It was an odd chance, and the men had joked about it heavily—there was one man for each devil of the Inn's name. Six of these men were grouped about a table furnished with flagons and beakers, and were doing their best to alleviate the external heat by copious draughts of the rough but not unkindly native wine which Martine, the plain-faced maid of the Inn, dispensed generously enough from a ruddy earthenware pitcher. A stranger entering the room would, at the first glance, have taken the six men seated around the table for soldiers, for all were stalwart fellows, with broad bodies and long limbs, bronzed faces and swaggering carriage, and behind them where they sat six great rapiers dangled from nails in the wall, rapiers which the revellers had removed from their sides for their greater ease and comfort. But if the suppositious stranger were led to study the men a little more closely, he would be tempted to correct his first impression. The swaggering carriage of the men lacked something of the stiffness inevitably to be associated with military training in the days when the levies of the Sun-King were held, or at least held themselves to be, the finest troops in Europe, a cheerful opinion which no amount of military misfortune could dissipate.

Each of the drinkers of the inn had his own individuality of swagger, his truculent independence of mien, which suggested a man by no means habitually used either to receive commands or to render unquestioning obedience. Each of the men resembled his fellows in a certain flamboyant air of ferocity, but no one of them resembled the others by wearing that air of harmonious training with other men which links together a company of seasoned soldiers. With their long cloaks and their large hats and their high boots, with their somewhat shabby garments stained with age and sweat and wine, in many places patched and in many places tattered, with their tangled locks and ragged mustachios, the revellers had on closer study more the appearance of brigands, or at least of guerillas, than of regular troops. As a matter of fact, they were neither soldiers nor brigands, though their way of life endowed them with some of the virtues of the soldier and most of the vices of the brigand.

There was not a man in that room who lacked courage of the fiercest kind; there was but one man in the room with intelligence enough to appreciate the possibility of an existence uncoupled with the possession of courage of the fiercest kind. There was not a man in the room who had the slightest fear of death, save in so far as death meant the cessation of those privileges of eating grossly, drinking grossly, and loving grossly, which every man of the jack-rascals prized not a little. There was not a man in the room that was not prepared to serve the person, whoever he might be, who had bought his sword to strike and his body to be stricken, so long as the buyer and the bought had agreed upon the price, and so long as the man who carried the sword felt confident that the man who dandled the purse meant to meet his bargain.

These were the soldierly virtues. But, further, there was not a man in the room who would have felt the smallest compunction in cutting any man's throat if he had full pockets, or shaming any woman's honor if she had good looks. These were their brigand's vices. Fearless in their conduct, filthy in their lives, the assembled rogues were as ugly a bunch of brutalities as ever sprawled in a brothel, brawled in a tavern, or crawled from some dark corner to cut down their unsuspecting prey.

The six fellows that sat around the wine-stained, knife-notched table of the Inn of the Seven Devils had little in them to interest a serious student of humanity, if such a one had chanced, for his misfortune, to find his way to that wicked wine-house on that wicked evening. There were differences of nationality among the half-dozen; that was plain enough from their features and from their speech, for though they all talked, or thought they talked, in French, each man did his speaking with an accent that betrayed his nativity. As the babbling voices rose and fell in alternations of argument that was almost quarrel, narrative that was sometimes diverting, and ribaldry that was never wit, it would seem as if the ruffianism of half Europe had called a conference in that squalid, horrible little inn. Guttural German notes mixed whimsically with

sibilant Spanish and flowing Portuguese. Cracked Biscayan—which no Spaniard will allow to be Spanish—jarred upon the suavity of Italian accents, and through the din the heavy steadiness of a Breton voice could be heard asserting itself. Though every man spoke in French, for the purposes of the common parliament, each man swore in his own tongue; and they all swore briskly and crisply, with a seemingly inexhaustible vocabulary of blasphemy and obscenity, so that the foul air of that inn parlor was rendered fouler still by the volley of oaths—German, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Biscayan, and Breton—that were fired into its steaming, stinking atmosphere. So much for the six men that sat at the table.

The seventh man in the room, although he was of the same fellowship, was curiously unlike his fellows. While the others were burly, well-set-up fellows, who held their heads high enough and thrust out their chests valiantly and sprawled their strong limbs at ease, the seventh man was a hunchback, short of stature and slender of figure, with a countenance whose quiet malignity contrasted decisively with the patent brutality of his comrades. The difference between the one and the others was accentuated even in dress, for, while the swashbucklers at the table loved to bedizen themselves with an amount of ferocious finery, and showed in their sordid garments a quantity of color that likened them to a bunch of faded wild flowers, the hunchback was clad soberly in black that was well-worn, indeed, and grizzled at the seams, but neatly attended. He sat in the window, reading intently in a little volume, and, again unlike his associates, while he read he nursed between his knees a long and formidable rapier. Those at the table paid him no heed; most of them knew his ways, and he, on his side, seemed to be quite undisturbed in his studies by the noise and clamor of the drinking-party, and to be entirely absorbed in the delights of literature.

But if the hunchback student was quite content to let his companions be, and to find his pleasures in scholarship of a kind, it came about that one of his companions, in a misguided moment, found himself less content to leave the hunchback student undisturbed. It was the one of the company that knew least about him—Pinto the Biscayan, newest recruit in that huddle of ruffians, and therefore the less inclined than his fellows to let a sleeping dog lie. He had been drinking deeply, for your Biscayans are potent toppers, and in the course of his cups he discovered that it irritated him to see that quiet, silent figure perched there in the window with its wry body as still as if it had been snipped out of cardboard, with its comical long nose poked over a book, with its colorless puckered lips moving, as if the reader muttered to himself the meaning of what he read, and tasted an unclean pleasure in so doing. So Pinto pulled himself to his feet, steadied himself with the aid of the table edge, and then, with a noiseless dexterity that showed the practised assassin, whose talent it is to pad in shadows, he crossed the room and came up behind the hunchback before the hunchback was, or seemed to be, aware of his neighborhood.

"What are you reading?" he hiccoughed. "Let us have a peep at it." And before the hunchback could make an answer Pinto had picked the book quickly from the hunchback's fingers and held it to his own face to see what it told about.

Now it would have profited Biscayan Pinto very little if he had been given time to study the volume, at least so far as its text was concerned, for the little book was a manuscript copy of the *Luxurious Sonnets* of that Pietro Aretino whom men, or rather some men, once called "The Divine." The book was illustrated as well, not unskilfully, with sketches that professed to be illuminative of the text in the manner of Giulio Romano. These might have pleased the Biscayan, for if he had no Italian, and could, therefore, make nothing of the voluptuousness of the Scourge of Princes, he could, at least, see as well as another savage the meaning of a lewd image. But the privilege was denied him. Scarcely had he got the book in his fingers when it was plucked from them again, and thereafter, while with his left hand the hunchback slipped the booklet into the breast of his doublet, with his right hand he dealt Pinto such a buffet on the side of his head as sent him reeling across the floor, to bring up with a dull thud at the table against the backs of his nearest companions.

Instantly all was tumult. Pinto, black with anger, screamed Biscayan maledictions and struggled to get at his sword where it hung against the wall, while his comrades, clinging to him and impeding him, were trying in every variety of bad French to dissuade him from a purpose which they were well enough aware must needs end disastrously for him. For they all knew, what the raw Biscayan did not know, how strong was the arm and how terrible the sword of the hunchback whose studies Pinto had so rudely and so foolishly interrupted. As for the hunchback himself, he stood quietly by his chair, with his hands resting on the pommel of his rapier, and a disagreeable smile twisting new hints of malignity into features that were malign enough in repose. Now it may be that the sight of that frightful smile had its effect in cooling the hot blood of the Biscayan, for, indeed, the hunchback, as he stood there, so quietly alert, so demoniacally watchful, seemed the most terrible antagonist he had ever challenged. At least, in a little while the Biscayan, drinking in swiftly the warnings of his companions, consented to be pacified, consented even to be apologetic on a whispered hint, that was also a whispered threat, from his leader, that there should be no brawling among friends.

"It was only a joke, comrade," he said, sullenly, and flung himself heavily into his empty seat. The hunchback nodded grimly.

"I like a joke as well as any man," he said, "and can make one myself if occasion serve."

Therewith he seated himself anew, and, pulling the book from his bosom, resumed his reading and his silent mouthing, while something of a gloom brooded over his fellows at the table. It was to dissipate this gloom that presently the man who sat at the head of the table, a bald and red-

faced fellow who looked a German, and who seemed to exercise some kind of headship over the others, pushed back his chair a little from the board and glanced half anxiously and half angrily towards the inn door. Then he thumped his red fist upon the wood till the flagons clattered and rattled.

"Why don't the late dogs come to heel?" he grumbled, speaking with a strong Teutonic accent. "It is long past the hour, and I like punctuality."

A Spaniard at his right hand, swarthy, not ill-looking, whom his friends called Pepe el Matador, grinned into the German's face.

"Will not this string of swords serve the turn?" he said, and pointed with a dirty, well-shaped hand to the six long rapiers that hung against the wall behind them.

The Italian, Faenza, began to laugh a little, quiet, teasing laugh; the sullen Biscayan, Pinto, patted el Matador on the back; Joel de Jurgan the Breton, stared stolidly; and Saldagno the Portuguese, refreshed himself with a drink. Encouraged by what he conceived to be the sympathy of his comrades, Pepe renewed the attack. "Come, Staupitz, come," he questioned, "are not those swords long enough and sharp enough to scare the devil?"

Staupitz struck the table again. "No, no, my children," he said, "not for this job. Monsieur Peyrolles told me to bring nine of my babies, and nine we must be, and nine we should be at this moment if our truants were at hand."

At this moment Saldagno set down his beaker. "I hear footsteps," he said. In the momentary silence which followed this remark, all present could hear distinctly enough the tramp of feet outside, and in another instant the door was flung open and the two men whom Staupitz had been expecting so impatiently made their appearance.

If the contrast had been marked between the six men who sat at the table and the seventh man who sat apart, the contrast that existed between the two new-comers was still more striking. The first to enter was a big, jovial, red-faced, black-haired man with a huge mustache and a manner that suggested an ebullient admiration of himself and an ebullient appreciation of all possible pleasures. He was habited much like his predecessors, in that he was booted, cloaked, hatted, and sworded as they were booted, cloaked, hatted, and sworded, but everything with him, owing, it may be, to his flagrant Gascon nationality, tended to an extravagance of exaggeration that made him seem almost like a caricature of the others. His hat was bigger, his cloak more voluminous, his boots more assertive, his sword longer, his taste for colors at once more pronounced and more gaudy. If the others might be likened in their coloring to faded wild flowers, this man seemed to blaze like some monstrous exotic. He was a swashbuckler whom Callot would have loved to paint.

While he entered the room with his air of splendid assurance that suggested that the Inn belonged to him, and greeted those that awaited him with such a nod as a monarch might accord to his vassals, he was followed by one that showed in almost every particular his opposite. This one, that represented an extreme of Norman character as his ally represented an extreme of Gascon character, this one that seemed to shelter timidly behind the effulgence of his companion, was a lean, lanky, pallid fellow, clad wholly in black of a rustier and shabbier kind than that worn by the reader in the window. From beneath his dingy black felt hat thin wisps of flaxen hair flowed ridiculously enough about his scraggy neck. While his Gascon comrade entered the room with the manner of one who carries all before him, the Norman seemed to creep, or rather to slink, in with lack-lustre eyes peering apologetically about him through lowered pink eyelids, while his twitching fingers appeared to protest apologetically for his intrusion into a society so far above his deserts. But if in almost every particular he was the opposite to his friend, in one particular, however, he resembled him, for a long rapier hung from his side and slapped against his lean calves.

In a further regard, moreover, the two new-comers, however different they might seem in build of body and in habit of apparel, resembled each other more closely than they resembled any of the earlier occupants of the Inn room. There are castes in rascality as in all other trades, classes, professions, and mysteries, honorable or dishonorable, and this latest pair of knaves belonged patently to the more amiable caste of ruffianism—a higher or a lower caste, as you may be pleased to look at it. In the bold eyes of the gaudily clad Gascon, as in the uneasy eyes of the sable-coated Norman, there was a quality of candor which might be sought for in vain among the rogues that greeted them. Certainly neither the Gascon nor the Norman would have seemed reassuring figures to a timid traveller on a lonely road, and yet there was, as it were, a kind of gentility in their composition which would have been obvious to a reader of men, and would have approved them as, in their way and of their race, trustworthy. Here, the reader of men would say, are a brace of assassins who hold a sort of honor in their hearts, who would never skulk in a corner to stab an enemy in the back, nor wrong a wretched woman who plainly was unwilling to be wronged—a brace of heroes. And the reader of men would for once in a way, have been in the right.

THE THRUST OF NEVERS

At the sight of the two men, the ruffians at the table set up a roar of welcome and bumped their mugs lustily upon the board to a chorus of greeting, in which the names of Cocardasse and Passepoil were repeated in a variety of accents from German to Italian, from Portuguese to Biscayan, from Spanish to Breton, but in all cases with the same degree of enthusiasm and admiration. The big, gaudy fellow, patently pleased by the tribute, struck a magnificent attitude and extended a benedictory hand towards the drinkers. "Courage, chanticleers!" he shouted—"comrades all," and, advancing towards the table, gave Staupitz a lusty slap on the back, while Passepoil, following nervously behind him, whispered beneath his breath and behind his lifted hand a timid "Greeting, gentlemen," which was hardly audible in the buzz of voices. But while Cocardasse was busy engaging clasps of the hand with the men of many nationalities who had been waiting for him, the attention of Passepoil was entirely diverted by the appearance of the Inn maid, Martine, who at that moment appeared upon the scene with a fresh pitcher of wine in honor of the fresh arrivals. The lean and pale man blushed and sighed as he saw her. Those in the room that knew the Norman were well aware that love of woman was his weakness, and they paid no heed to his attempted philandering, taking it, so far as they thought of it at all, as a matter of course and honest Passepoil's way.

Though Martine was as little comely as need be, she was still a woman, and a woman Passepoil had never seen before, and, sidling towards her, he endeavored to enter into amicable conversation, which was received but indifferently well. By this time Cocardasse had finished his greetings, and, drawing back a step or two, surveyed the company with a look of satisfaction not unmingled with astonishment.

"Why, Papa Staupitz," he said, "here we have many friends and all fine blades. This is indeed a pleasure party." His eyes travelled from the table to the window, where the man in black still sat and read quite unconcernedly. Something like surprise puckered Cocardasse's rubicund face. "You here, Æsop?" he questioned.

The man whom he called Æsop looked up for a moment from his book and shrugged his shoulders. "Devil knows why!" he said. "If they want me, they don't want the others. If they want the others, they don't want me."

His remarks were interrupted by a slight scuffle between Passepoil and Martine. Passepoil had so far conquered his natural timidity as to go to the length of soliciting a kiss from the Inn maid. She had successfully repulsed him with a slap on each of his cheeks, and had slipped from the room. While Passepoil was rubbing his face ruefully, Æsop went on, sardonically:

"What do you think of it, friend Cocardasse? Here we are, nine of us, nine picked swordsmen, and we are going to fight one man."

Cocardasse had returned to the table and filled himself a monstrous measure of wine. He was thirsty, an habitual state with him, and he eyed the rough wine lovingly.

"Who is the giant who is going to fight nine of us?" he asked as he lifted his cup from the board.

Passepoil, who, enjoying like his comrade an abiding drought, had followed his example, hoping to find consolation in wine for the disappointments of love, also expressed his surprise.

"Every man of us can fight three men at a time," he whispered, timidly, and he, too, lifted his glass.

"Who is the man, anyhow?" said Cocardasse, cheerfully, making the wine swing in the vessel; and Staupitz answered him, slowly:

"Louis, Duke of Nevers."

The effect of this simple speech upon the new-comers was exceedingly remarkable. Cocardasse seemed suddenly to forget his thirst, for he set down his untasted mug upon the table. Passepoil did the like. "Oh!" said Cocardasse, solemnly. "Ah!" said Passepoil, gloomily.

For a few appreciable seconds of strained excitement to those that watched them the pair remained rigid, staring at their rejected wine-cups, as if the liquor they contained had some monstrous Medusa-like property of stiffening into stone all those that presumed to drink of it. Then the Gascon, slowly turning his head, gazed steadfastly at the Norman; and the Norman, slowly turning his head, gazed steadfastly at the Gascon, and then the pair, so gazing, both wagged their polls very solemnly indeed, and puckered their eyebrows and betrayed many other very visible signs of dissatisfaction, not to say of discomfort. Then Cocardasse muttered to his comrade the words "Louis de Nevers," as if they were not at all to his liking, and Passepoil, in his turn, repeated the words, as if they were not at all to his liking, and then they both sighed and grunted and were silent.

The look of stupefaction, not to say consternation, on the faces of the new arrivals was patent to every man in the room—most patent and most unpalatable to the leader of the gang. Staupitz thrust his red, Teutonic face forward with a mocking look and a mocking voice as he grunted: "Seems to me you don't relish the job."

Cocardasse nodded at him with perfect affability, and patted his shoulder with a massive, red hand. "Papa Staupitz," he said, good-humoredly, "you read me like a book."

"In the largest print," added Passepoil, who generally supplemented any remark of his comrade

with some approving comment of his own.

Staupitz swung round in his chair, upsetting a tankard in his angry movement, as he glared, all rage, at the strangely assorted pair. "Are you afraid?" he asked, with guttural contempt.

Cocardasse grinned and showed his large, dog-like teeth. "I am not afraid of you, Papa Staupitz," he said, quite cheerfully, "nor of any man in this room, nor of all the men in this room."

Passepoil added, stammering in his speech, blinking his pink eyelids rapidly: "If any gentleman doubts the point, there is a pleasant bit of kitchen garden outside where we can adjourn and argue the matter pleasantly together, as gentlemen should."

Nobody present seemed inclined to pick a quarrel either with the ebullient Gascon or the hesitating Norman. The six bullies at the table knew well enough, and savage, masterful Æsop at the window knew well enough, that the swaggering Gascon was the first fencing-master in Paris, and that his colleague, the Norman, for all his air of ineffable timidity, was only second to him in skill with the weapon and readiness to use it. There was a moment's silence, and then Cocardasse observed: "I'm afraid of just two men in the world."

"The same with me," added Passepoil, humbly.

Cocardasse resumed his interrupted speech: "And one of them is Louis de Nevers."

Staupitz's puzzled, angry face travelled round the room, ranging over the Gascon, the Norman, the Spaniard, the Portuguese, the Biscayan, the Breton, and the hunchback. "Thunder and weather!" he cried; "is not nine to one good enough odds for you?"

The others, with the exception of Æsop, who still seemed to read as peacefully in his book as if he were alone in the room, appeared inclined to applaud the question of their chief, but Cocardasse was not in the least impressed by the retort. He replied to Staupitz's query with another—"Have you never heard of the secret thrust of Nevers?"

A new silence seemed to fall upon the company, and for the second time since the Gascon and the Norman had entered the room the hunchback took a part in the conversation, closing his book as he did so, but carefully keeping a finger between the pages to mark the place. "I don't believe in secret thrusts," he said, decisively.

The Gascon moved a little away from Staupitz and a little nearer to Æsop, whom he looked at fixedly. The hunchback sustained his gaze with his habitual air of cold indifference. Cocardasse spoke: "You will, if you ever face Louis de Nevers. Now, Passepoil, here, and I, we are, I believe, held in general repute as pretty good swordsmen—"

Passepoil interrupted, stuttering furiously in his excitement: "But he touched us with that secret thrust in our own school in Paris—"

Cocardasse completed his friend's statement: "Three times, here on the forehead, just between the eyes."

Passepoil labored his point: "Devil take us if we could find a parry for it."

Cocardasse summed up his argument, gloomily: "They say it has never been parried, never will be parried."

Again an awkward silence reigned. With a shrug of his shoulders, Æsop resumed his studies, finding Aretino more diverting than such nonsense. Breton stared at Teuton; Italian interrogated Spaniard; Portuguese questioned Biscayan. The affairs of the party seemed to be at a dead-lock. The fact was that Staupitz and his little band of babies, as he was pleased to call them, were not really of the same social standing in the world of cutthroats as Gascon Cocardasse and Norman Passepoil. Cocardasse and his companion were recognized fencing-masters in Paris, well esteemed, if not of the highest note, whereas Staupitz was no better than an ordinary bully-broker, and his so-styled children no more than provincial rascallions. It was not for them, and they knew it, to display such knowledge of the great world as might be aired by Cocardasse and Passepoil, and when Cocardasse spoke with so much significance about the thrust of Nevers, and questioned them with so much insistence about the thrust of Nevers, it was plain that he spoke from the brimmings of a wisdom richer than their own. Staupitz, who was in some sense a son of Paris, if only an adopted son, and that, indeed, by process of self-adoption, knew enough of Olympian matters to be aware that there was an illustrious gentleman that was Duke of Nevers, whom he was equally willing to aid with his sword or slay with his sword, if occasion served. Now occasion seemed to demand that Staupitz should follow the latter course. He was employed to kill somebody, and Æsop had assured him that this somebody was Louis, Duke de Nevers. Staupitz had not cared who it was; it was all one to him, but honestly he was troubled now by the patent trouble of Cocardasse and his ominous mutterings about the thrust of Nevers.

Passepoil broke the silence, surveying the puzzled faces around him. "No wonder there's such a crowd of us." And for the first time there was something like the sound of audacity in his voice and a glance of audacity on his visage.

"Faith," said Cocardasse, emphatically, "I'd rather face an army than face Louis de Nevers."

Again there was a silence. The gentlemen of the sword seemed to be at a loss for conversation. Again Passepoil broke the silence, this time with a question: "Why are we after Louis de Nevers?"

Nobody seemed to be able to answer him. Even Staupitz, who was responsible to the others for

this gathering of the company, was baffled. He had been told to supply nine swords, and he had supplied them. He had been told by his employer the purpose for which the nine swords were wanted—he had been told by Æsop against whom those nine swords were to be drawn—and that was the extent of his knowledge. This time the hunchback, in his favorite character of know-all, took the lead. He put his book in his pocket, as if he perceived that further study was to be denied him that afternoon, with so much noise and bustle of curiosity about him, and rose from his chair. Holding his long rapier behind his back with both his hands, he advanced into the middle of the room, where he proceeded to harangue his fellow-guardsmen.

"I can tell you," he said, harshly, "if you would care to hear the story."

Now bravos, swashbucklers, spadassins, and such soldiers of fortune are like children in this regard—as indeed in many another—that they love a good yarn well spun. If something in the dominating, masterful manner of Æsop compelled their attention, something also in the malicious smile that twitched his lips seemed to promise plenitude of entertainment. A grave quiet settled upon the ragamuffins, their sunburned faces were turned eagerly towards the hunchback, their wild eyes studied his mocking face; they waited in patience upon his pleasure. Pleased with the humility of his audience, Æsop began his narrative.

"There are," he said, "now living three noble gentlemen in the first flush of youth, in the first flight of greatness, young, handsome, brilliant, more like brothers than friends. They are known in the noble world of the court as the three Louis, because by a curious chance each of these splendid gentlemen carries Louis for a Christian name. Humorists have been known to speak of them as the three Louis d'or. The first is none other than our good king's person, Louis of Bourbon, thirteenth monarch of his name; the second is Louis, Duke of Nevers; the third is his cousin, Louis of Mantua, Prince of Gonzague."

He paused for a moment, looking with the satisfaction of a tale-teller at the expectant faces before him, and as he paused an approving murmur from his audience urged him to continue. Æsop resumed his narration.

"You will ask how the Italianate Mantuan comes to be a cousin of our French Nevers, and I will tell you. Nevers's father, Louis de Nevers, the twelfth duke, had a very beautiful sister, who was foolish enough, or wise enough, as you may choose to take it, to fall in love with a needy Italian nobleman that came adventuring to Paris in the hope of making a rich marriage. He made a rich marriage, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he thought he made a rich marriage. He married Mademoiselle de Nevers."

Again Æsop halted, employing one of the familiar devices of rhetoricians, who lure their hearers to keener interest by such judicious pauses in the course of their exposition. The listening ruffians were as attentive as babes at a day-school, and Æsop, with a hideous distortion of his features, which he intended for a pleased smile, went on with his story:

"Mademoiselle de Nevers had some fortune of her own, of course, but it was not large; it was not the feast for which the amative Mantuan had hungered. The Nevers's fortune was in the duke's hands, and remained in the duke's hands, for the duke married at much the same time as his sister; and the duke's wife and Gonzague's wife were brought to bed much about the same time, and each bore a son, and each son was named Louis after the twelfth duke, out of the affection his wife bore him, out of the affection his sister bore him, and out of the affection that sister's Mantuan husband pretended, in his sly Italian manner, to bear him."

A belated patriotism stirring vaguely in Faenza's muddled mind tempted him to resent the hunch-back's slights upon the land which had been unlucky enough to mother him.

"All men of Italy are not knaves," he growled, huskily, and, half rising from his seat with crimsoned visage, he was busying himself to say more, when Staupitz, who was as interested as the others in Master Æsop's scandalous chronicle, clapped one bear's paw on Faenza's shoulder and another bear's paw across Faenza's mouth, and thus forced him at once, by sheer effort of brute strength, to a sitting posture and to silence. This action on the part of the man whom for the time being he had consented to accept as his general, combined with the cold glance of cruelty and scorn which Æsop gave him, served to cool Faenza's hot blood. He heard Æsop say, dryly, "Some men of Italy are fools," and might perchance have flamed again, to his misluck, but that Staupitz, breathing thickly in his ear, whispered: "Idiot, he mocks a Mantuan. Are not you Naples born and bred?" Faenza, recovering his composure, resolved himself swiftly from an Italian in general to a Neapolitan in particular, with a clannish antagonism to alien states. He spat upon the floor. "Damn all Mantuans!" he muttered, and did no more to interrupt the flow of Æsop's discourse.

"As I was saying, this princeling of Gonzague affected a great show of friendship for his ducal brother of Nevers, and this same friendship he left—it was, indeed, wellnigh all he had to leave—to his only son and only child, the present prince of Gonzague."

He made a momentary halt, as if he were observing curiously the effect of his words upon his hearers, then resumed:

"The young Louis de Gonzague and the young Louis de Nevers were almost of an age. Each was an only child, each was an only son, each was clever, each was courageous, each was comely, each was the chosen heart's friend of a namesake king, each was much a lover of ladies, each was much loved by ladies."

Æsop grinned hideously as he said these words, and his left hand fumbled lovingly at the little volume that lay hid in the breast of his doublet, but he did not delay the flow of his words.

"The chief difference between the two young men who were bound so closely by ties of blood and yet more closely by ties of personal affection was that while Louis de Nevers was the heir to all the treasures of his house, Louis of Gonzague was heir to little more than a rotting palace and a hollow title. And yet, by the irony of nature that seemed to deny long life to any of the stock of Nevers, Louis de Gonzague was the next of kin to his cousin, and the heir to all his wealth if by any ill chance the dear young duke should die unmarried."

Here Æsop deliberately shut his mouth for several seconds, while the listening bandits, persuaded that some thrilling news was toward, nudged each other with their elbows and riddled the watchful hunchback with imploring glances that entreated him to proceed. Thus mutely importuned, Æsop opened his mouth again:

"But the difference in the youths' fortunes never made any difference in their friendship. The purse of the rich Nevers was always open to the fingers of the poor Gonzague, and the poor Gonzague had always too true an appreciation of the meaning of friendship to deny his heart's brother the privilege of ministering to his needs. And as the young Nevers did not hint at the slightest inclination to marry and settle down, but always declared himself and approved himself the most vagrant of lovers and the most frivolous of libertines, there seemed no reason for the good Gonzague to be uneasy as to his possible heritage. Moreover, the young Duke of Nevers was something delicate of constitution, as it would seem, for all his skill as a soldier and swordsman and his fame as a lady's man. Once when he was the guest of his cousin of Gonzague in Mantua he fell ill of a strange fever that came near to ending his days, and was only saved by his French physician, who tended him day and night and took him back to France in the first dawn of his convalescence."

Æsop stopped and blinked at his hearers viciously, looking like some school-master that wonders how much or how little of what he has been saying his pupils have understood. Cocardasse was the first to show intelligence and to give it tongue.

"I'll wager," he cried, and swore a great Gascon oath, "that I can hazard a pretty guess as to the name of our employer in to-night's work."

Æsop leered at him with a pitying benignity.

"You were always a great brain for deduction, friend Cocardasse," he said. "And who should you say was the honest gentleman who wanted our swords for this present business?"

"Why," answered Cocardasse, shaking his head gloomily, "though I hate to think it, and hate to say it, it seems to me that the man who has most to gain from this little meeting and its inevitable result is none other than the third Louis, your Italian of Gonzague."

Æsop nodded, and a ferocious smile illuminated his evil face.

"You have come to a very creditable conclusion, friend Cocardasse. It looks very much as if Jonathan wanted to kill David, as if Patroclus yearned to slaughter Achilles, as if Pythias wanted to extinguish Damon."

Master Æsop prided himself upon his scholarship and his felicity in classical allusion—a felicity wholly wasted upon his present audience.

Cocardasse was still curious. "Why does Louis de Gonzague want to kill his friend, Louis of Nevers, just at this particular moment, and why here in this heaven-forgotten hole of a place, in this heaven-forgotten corner of the world?"

Æsop explained: "Because Louis de Gonzague, having tried once, with good reason, and failed, tries again with better reason and means to succeed this time, believing much steel to do better than a little poison. Because, in a few words, Louis de Gonzague wants to marry the beautiful Gabrielle, daughter of old Caylus of the castle there, who is wealthy, too."

Passepoil, who was always interested in affairs of the heart, put in his word. "Why doesn't he marry her?"

Æsop was ready to explain that matter also: "Because Gabrielle de Caylus is already secretly married to Louis de Nevers. They were married one year ago in the chapel of Caylus, and the only witnesses were Louis de Gonzague and his factotum, Monsieur Peyrolles, who has summoned us to this tryst."

"Why were they secretly married?" asked the amorous Passepoil.

Æsop answered him: "An old family feud between the houses of Nevers and Caylus. The marquis would rather kill his daughter than let her marry Louis de Nevers. So they were wedded secretly, without his knowledge, and Louis de Gonzague, that could deny his dear friend and cousin, Louis de Nevers, nothing, helped him to his wife."

"That was generous, at least," Passepoil sighed.

Æsop sneered. "He hoped, as he believed with reason, that there would be no issue of the marriage, and that by-and-by he would come to what he called his own. But three months ago a daughter was born to the nuptials of Nevers, and that is why we are here to-night. Monsieur Peyrolles would pretend that it is the old marquis who is using us, the old marquis who is suspicious of an amour between his daughter and Nevers. But I know better."

"How do you know all this?" Cocardasse inquired.

Æsop shrugged his shoulders. "My good fellow," he said, "it is my business to know everything that is worth knowing in my trade. There are very few noble houses in France that can hope to

hold any secrets from me. You may take my word for it—that is how matters stand."

Staupitz and his five swordsmen sat silent and puzzled, leaving the ball of conversation to be tossed between Cocardasse, Passepoil, and Æsop.

Cocardasse spoke next: "An ugly job. There's only one man alive to match Louis de Nevers."

Something almost approaching a human smile distorted the wrinkled face of Æsop and made it appear more than usually repulsive. "You mean me," he said, and the smirk deepened, only to dissipate quickly as Cocardasse replied:

"Devil a bit. I mean the little Parisian, Henri de Lagardere."

"The best swordsman in Paris!" Passepoil cried, enthusiastically.

"The best swordsman in France!" Cocardasse shouted.

Passepoil commented again: "The best swordsman in Europe."

Cocardasse, not to be outdone, put the final touch to the picture: "The best swordsman in the world."

The name of Lagardere seemed to make a marked impression upon the company. Every man seemed to have his contribution to make to the history of the little Parisian.

Faenza was the first to speak.

"I met your Lagardere once," he said, "at a fencing-school in Milan, where half a dozen French gentlemen met half a dozen gentlemen of my nationality in a match to test the merits of the French and Italian methods of fence. This Lagardere of yours was the only one whom I had any difficulty in overcoming."

Cocardasse gave an ironic snort. It was evident that he did not in the least believe the latter part of Faenza's narrative. Joel de Jurgan took up the thread of reminiscence.

"If your Lagardere be the same as the man I am thinking of," he said, "I came across him a couple of years ago at the fair of Neuilly. We had a passage of arms, and I think I gave him a cut on the head, but it took me some time, I promise you."

Cocardasse glared at the speaker, but said nothing, though the word "liar" was plainly expressed in his scornful glance. Joel, impressed by his angry face, hastened to add, with the air of one that praises an adversary in the handsomest manner, "I swear he was the best fellow, second to myself, that I ever met with the rapier."

"I have met him," grunted Staupitz. "He touched me once in a bout of twelve points. That was a triumph for him, to my thinking."

Pepe added: "He fought with me once in Madrid, and got off without a scratch. That says a good deal for his skill, I'm thinking."

Saldagno and Pinto were silent. They looked curiously at Pepe, but they nodded their heads approvingly.

Thus each of the bravos had his eager tale to tell, and would have told more but that Cocardasse waved them into silence with his large hand. "There is only one Lagardere," he said, and looked as if the subject were ended.

Æsop yawned. "I should like to meet your Lagardere."

Cocardasse eyed him ironically. "Sword in hand?" he questioned. "When that day comes, pray for your soul."

Æsop shrugged his shoulders, and with an air of indifference produced a watch and consulted its dial. "Friends," he said, "this is the hour fixed for the arrival of Monsieur Peyrolles, and I think I hear footsteps in the passage."

Instantly the Gascon seemed animated by a hurried purpose. He sprang to Staupitz's side, and, catching him by the shoulder, shook him vehemently. "We must be well paid to face the thrust of Nevers. Let me bargain for you. Back me up, and those that are alive to-night will have money in pocket to-morrow."

III

A BUYER OF BLADES

Staupitz and his companions seemed to place implicit confidence in the superior diplomatic powers of their Gascon comrade, and to have been seriously impressed by the gravity of his statement concerning the thrust of Nevers, so death-dealing, so unwardable, so almost magically fatal, for they readily agreed to his proposition. Places were rapidly found for Cocardasse and Passepoil at the table. Æsop returned to his seat and his little sinful book. It

was deepening dusk by now, but the hunchback knew his Aretino by heart, and the open page was a pretence. So he mused by the window, and sat nursing his knee moodily. Those at the table seemed busy drinking, and heedless of all things save drink, when the side-door of the room, that led through the kitchen to the yard, opened, and the man they were expecting entered. It was characteristic of the man to make his appearance so slyly, surreptitiously, sidling, and roundabout, where another would have stepped in direct. At the heels of the new-comer tiptoed Martine, swinging, for precaution against the thickening dusk, a dingy lantern whose provision of fish-oil emitted a pitiful light that scarcely bettered the growing blackness. This lantern the girl set upon the head of an empty barrel that stood in a corner, and its fitful, shivering rays, faintly illuminating the murkiness around, was at least strong enough to allow any philosopher among the bravos—and Æsop was in his way a philosopher—to observe and moralize upon the contrast between the appearance of this Monsieur Peyrolles who employed bravos and the bravos that this Monsieur Peyrolles employed.

Monsieur Peyrolles was a tall, thin, middle-aged man of pale complexion. Like Æsop and like Passepoil, he was dressed in black, as became the confidential servant of a master with many confidences; but, unlike the amorous Æsop and unlike the amorous Passepoil—though the two men were amorous after a very different fashion—his garments were of fine quality and fine cut, with much costly lace at his yellow neck, and much costly lace about the wrists of yellow hands that to a casual glance might, in their affected ease, have passed for patrician. Like Passepoil, he carried a sword, and, like Passepoil, he knew how to use it, although, unlike Passepoil, he was really of a timid disposition, and never engaged in any encounter in which he was not certain that his skill was far superior to that of his opponent.

He affected the manners of a fine gentleman, and modelled himself as much as he dared upon the carriage of his master, when his master was not by, and, like the most of such copying apes, he overdid the part. His face was curiously unpleasant, long and yellowish white and inexpressive, with drooping eyelids masking pale, shifty eyes, with a drooping, ungainly nose, and a mouth that seemed like a mistake of nature.

When Martine had placed her lantern to her satisfaction upon its Bacchic pedestal, she slipped from the room as quietly as she had entered it, answering as she went, with a glance of disdain, the passion of admiration that glowed in the eyes and twitched in the fingers of Norman Passepoil. The people that kept that evil Inn, the people that served that evil Inn, always left their sinister customers to themselves to kiss or kill, as best pleased them.

On the entrance of Monsieur Peyrolles the bravos rose and saluted him ceremoniously. If there was any hidden mockery, any latent contempt, any unconscious hate felt by the brave scoundrels for the cowardly scoundrel in their reverence, it was not evident to the new-comer, who took the greetings with offensive condescension, eying the bandits over the lace edges of his kerchief.

Staupitz advanced some few feet to greet him. "Welcome, Monsieur Peyrolles," he said. Then, pointing with an air of introduction to the fantastic, many-colored, huge-hatted, big-booted gang of ruffians ranged about the table, he added, "My children."

In the dim light Peyrolles peered derisively at the different members of the party. "They seem a choice set of ruffians," he observed, with the labored impertinence that seemed to him a copy of his master's nonchalance.

Staupitz laughed thickly. "No better blades between here and world's end." He pointed first at his comrades, as if to imply that he spoke allegorically; then he pointed to the row of rapiers dangling against the wall, to prove that he also spoke practically and by the card.

"After all," said Peyrolles, "that is the important matter. I come to tell you how to earn your pay."

By this time Staupitz and the others had resumed their seats and were staring fixedly at Peyrolles, something to that worthy personage's embarrassment. Staupitz having said his say, dropped into silence, and Cocardasse leaned forward, asserting himself. "We are all attention," he declared; and Passepoil, faithful echo by his side, murmured, "We are all attention," and allowed himself to wonder what had become of Martine, and to regret that business did not permit him to go to look for her.

Peyrolles began to explain. "Wait in the moat to-night at ten o'clock."

Staupitz interrupted him. "Ten o'clock?" he cried. "The devil! it will be pretty dark by ten."

"I think there should be a moon about ten," Æsop observed, quietly, with his exasperating air of all knowledge.

"Yes, yes," Peyrolles went on, sharply, irritated at being stayed in his instructions, "there will be a moon, no doubt, but we do not want too much light for this business. Well, then, wait in the moat at ten. I do not think you will have to wait long. Then, or thenabouts, a cavalier coming by the mountain road will tie his horse to a tree beyond the bridge that spans the ravine. He will cross the bridge and walk to yonder window hard by the postern."

Peyrolles paused as if he had nothing more to say, and took it for granted that his hearers understood his drift. But one of them seemed to desire more explicit information.

"Then," said Cocardasse—"then we are to accost him."

Peyrolles nodded. "Very politely—and earn your money." He turned upon his heel now, for he relished the Inn room little, and its company less, being a fastidious lackey, and made to go, as

if the affair were settled.

But Cocardasse arrested him. "Who is the gentleman we accost politely?" he asked, very blandly, but behind this blandness of Cocardasse's there was something menacing to those that knew him well.

Peyrolles eyed the huge Gascon disdainfully. "That does not concern you," he said, sharply.

But the Gascon was not in the least abashed, and, while he grinned at the would-be great man with an air of veiled insolence that was excessively exasperating to Monsieur Peyrolles, he questioned again: "Who is our employer?"

Again Peyrolles retorted: "That does not concern you."

And again Cocardasse persisted: "It might concern us very much if we chanced to believe that our quarry is Louis de Nevers, and if we got it somehow or other into our heads that our employer is Louis de Gonzague."

As Cocardasse spoke these words, Peyrolles, now thoroughly alarmed and irritated, gave Cocardasse a glance that ought to have withered him, but Cocardasse was not withered, and smiled banteringly at his employer.

"Fellow," Peyrolles said, "you are inquisitive." As he spoke he flapped his kerchief reprovingly at the bravo, whose dilated nostrils greedily drank the delicate odors it discharged, and he again made as if to depart, and again Cocardasse delayed him, still with the same exasperating show of exuberant politeness.

"When it is a matter of our skins," he said, "I think we have a right to be inquisitive, and I think we had better have a little chat, Monsieur Peyrolles."

As he spoke he made a noble flourish of his right arm that was distinctly an invitation to Peyrolles to seat himself in their company, and Passepoil, rising with an air of great urbanity, placed a stool before Peyrolles.

"Pray be seated," he urged, suavely, blinking his pink eyelids and manifesting a deferential fear of the great man that he was very far indeed from feeling.

Peyrolles looked about him half angrily, half frightened. He would have been glad to make his escape from that accursed chamber, but he had astuteness enough to see that there was no escape for him. Cocardasse had somehow or other managed to get between him and the door, and the other ruffians seemed to be entirely in sympathy with the Gascon's conduct, and to have no regard whatever for Peyrolles's dignity or feelings.

With a smile that he intended to be amiable, Peyrolles sat down.

"Well," he said, with an air of one that swallows sour wine, "what have you to say to me?"

"Come," said the Gascon, "that is good. Now we can chat at our ease, and it will not take us many seconds to understand each other, I promise you." He turned to Staupitz. "What was the sum offered for our services?" He knew very well, for Staupitz had told him as they huddled together before, while the hand of Peyrolles was upon the latch, but he thought that it made the situation more impressive if he affected ignorance.

Staupitz answered: "Three hundred pistoles."

Now this was a fair market price enough as the tariff went for ambushes and assassinations of the kind. It meant twenty-five pistoles each to the eight subordinates of the band, and a comfortable hundred pistoles for old Papa Staupitz to pocket as the patron of the enterprise. But Cocardasse held up his hands in well-affected horror and amazement. "Three hundred pistoles!" he echoed; "for ruddling the blades and risking the lives of nine of the finest swordsmen in Europe? Preposterous!—there must be some mistake! We won't haggle. We must have three thousand pistoles or—good-bye."

At this audacious proposal to raise their blood-wages exactly ten times, the eyes of the bravos glittered avariciously, and they drummed approval on the table with their fists. Cocardasse deprecated this display of interest with a gentle wave of the hand, and, leaning back in his chair, eyed Peyrolles coolly, sure that he plied him with a vise. And Cocardasse was right.

Peyrolles hesitated, but also Peyrolles reflected. It had been his wish to buy his bandits as cheaply as he could, but it was evident that they were better informed about the night's business than he intended them to be. It was essential that the work must be done that night, and it was also evident that the gentlemen of the sword were quite prepared to take their leaves if their terms were not agreed to. He sighed and said, "You shall have the money."

Cocardasse nodded approvingly. He was enjoying himself immensely in this baiting of the valet of Gonzague, but he allowed no sign of entertainment to ripple over his crimson countenance.

"Good," he said, quietly, "but I take it that you have not got such a sum as three thousand pistoles about you."

Peyrolles shook his head. "I have brought with me the three hundred pistoles that were agreed upon," he said, sourly, with an emphasis upon the closing words of his speech. Cocardasse caught him up promptly.

"Agreed upon in ignorance of the services demanded," he corrected. "Well, good Monsieur Peyrolles, let us have that three hundred pistoles as earnest money for the larger sum."

Somewhat reluctantly Monsieur Peyrolles produced from his doublet a small canvas bag and

threw it into the hollow of Cocardasse's extended palm. It chinked pleasantly as it fell, and Cocardasse weighed it tenderly.

"I will not affront your worthiness," he said, "by affecting to doubt the contents of this little bag, and putting it to the scrutiny of a count. I will take your word for the tale."

As he spoke he tossed the bag over to Staupitz, who caught it dexterously and put it in his pocket. On this Peyrolles made to rise, and again found that the hand of Passepoil, obedient to a glance from Cocardasse, descended upon his shoulder and nailed him to his place.

"Wait," said Cocardasse, amiably, "we must have some surety for the love of the money."

"Is not my word enough?" Peyrolles asked, with an ineffective air of dignity. Cocardasse smiled very sweetly.

"The best of us may have a bad memory," he said, and sighed over the frailties of humanity. He turned to his nominal leader. "Papa Staupitz," he said, "will you not see if a pen and ink be available?"

Staupitz rose while Peyrolles glowered, and going to the door that led to the kitchen, summoned Martine. Martine, heedless of the adoring homage renewed in Passepoil's eyes, went to a cupboard in the wall and extracted from its depths a dingy ink-horn and a stubby quill, together with a page of fairly clean paper torn from the back of an old account-book. Setting these on the table, she departed as quietly as she came, wholly indifferent to the languishing glances of the Norman. Cocardasse waved a space for Peyrolles at the table.

"Be so good," he said, with a quiet insistence, "as to write a formal promise to pay Papa Staupitz two thousand seven hundred pistoles to-morrow. Date it carefully, and sign it with your excellent and honorable name, my dear Monsieur Peyrolles."

Peyrolles frowned, but there was no help for it; so he rose to his feet, untroubled this time by the restraining fingers of Passepoil, and, going to the table, wrote the demanded document, with every appearance of repugnance at the task and its conditions, for the pen was vile, the ink viler, and the paper vilest. When he had finished, Cocardasse took it from him and scanned it carefully.

"That is all right," he said, and placed the still wet writing on the table in front of Staupitz. Peyrolles made as if to move towards the door, but again Passepoil, who was watching intently the face of Cocardasse, read a meaning there, and, pouncing upon Peyrolles, persuaded him firmly back into the seat he had quitted.

"That is not all," said Cocardasse to the astonished and angry valet. "This night's work is a big night's work, and not to be paid for over the counter and done with. We want the money first, but afterwards we want the protection and favor of Louis de Gonzague."

Peyrolles frowned and made a vehement effort to assert his authority.

"You talk very freely and loosely of great names," he said, with as much sharpness as he could muster in the presence of that ring of rascality. "You should know very well, if you know anything at all about the scandals of grandees, that Monseigneur the Marquis of Caylus has every reason to dislike Monseigneur the Duke of Nevers, and to wish him out of the way."

Cocardasse laid a whimsical finger to the side of his jolly, tropical nose and grinned impishly.

"We know what we know, Monsieur Peyrolles," he said, urbanely. "If it were merely necessary to kill the Duke of Nevers to gratify the hate of any private enemy, one place would do as well as another, and we might take him any time on his way here, instead of waiting till the precise moment when he enters the moat of Caylus. But you wish us to wait for that precise moment because you, and your master, wish it to seem patent to all the world that the deed was done by the Marquis of Caylus on his own ground, to defend his own honor. Once again, we demand hereafter the favor and protection of his highness the Prince of Gonzague."

This time Peyrolles needed no pause for reflection. So much was wise to promise to men who could draw conclusions so dexterously. "You shall have it," he said, and rose from his seat, this time unrestrained by the Norman's pressure. "There is my hand on it," he added.

Cocardasse appeared not to perceive the extended hand as he slapped the hilt of his sword. "Here is my rapier, which answers for me."

Peyrolles smiled sourly. "You had better place a sentinel in the moat," he said, addressing Staupitz. "He can give the signal when the mouse walks into the trap. Till then let the others keep in the background so as to cut off our gentleman's retreat."

Staupitz nodded sulkily. He had always held Monsieur Peyrolles in considerable respect, a respect that had been greatly shaken by Cocardasse's audacious and insolent treatment of the satellite of Gonzague. Now the bravo seemed ready to resent receiving an order from his employer's go-between. Peyrolles prudently took no notice of his sullenness. "Good-evening, gentlemen," he said, and walked towards the door. As he reached it, he turned again and spoke significantly: "Remember—if you fail, no pay."

Cocardasse grinned impudently at him. "Sleep in peace, Monsieur Peyrolles." Peyrolles made a wry face and went out.

As soon as he had gone the bravos gathered about Cocardasse and patted him enthusiastically on the back. Only Æsop remained in his corner, apparently indifferent to the whole proceedings.

"Well done, comrade," cried Passepoil, wringing the hand of his brother-in-arms; and the others,

whose pay had been so notably increased by the diplomacy of Cocardasse, were equally as effusive in their expressions of gratitude.

Cocardasse met their applause with an impressive monosyllable. "Wine," he said to Martine, who had peeped in to see if her services were needed, and in a twinkling the pannikins were filled again and lifted to eight thirsty mouths, and set down again empty of their contents. The first business was to share the contents of Monsieur Peyrolles's bag, which Staupitz duly divided according to the original understanding, giving each man twenty-five pistoles, and keeping the remainder for himself. By this time the ink on the promissory note was dry, and Staupitz folded it up carefully and put it in his pocket.

After this for another half-hour the talk was all about the young Duke de Nevers and his secret thrust, and the woman he loved, and the Prince de Gonzague, his friend, who meant to kill him. Here, as before, Æsop dominated the party by his superior knowledge of all the individuals in the little tragedy in which they were invited to play subordinate parts. He told them of the life feud between the family of Caylus and the family of Nevers, a feud as bitter as that of the Capulets and Montagues of old time. He told them of Gonzague's passions, Gonzague's poverty. He told them all about Monsieur Peyrolles, Gonzague's discreet and infamous factotum. He told them, also, being as it seemed a very gold-mine of court scandals, much of the third Louis, the august friend of Louis of Nevers and Louis of Gonzague, the third Louis who was the king of France.

The bravos hung upon his words. In many ways they were simple folk, and, like all simple folk, they loved to be told stories, and Æsop prided himself upon being something of a man of letters, a philosopher, and an historian. It was, therefore, no small annoyance to narrator and audience when the narrative was interrupted, as it was nearing its conclusion, by the opening of the Inn door. Every face expressed astonishment as it was pushed sufficiently apart to admit the entry of a slender and graceful boy in the rich habit of a page. The boy came a little way into the room, looking cautiously about him. He acted as if at first he took the room in its dimness to be unoccupied, and he seemed to be somewhat disconcerted at discovering that it contained so many occupants. He stood still while his bright eyes ran rapidly, and indeed fearfully, over the somewhat alarming features of the guests. Failing, apparently, to find among them the person, whoever it was, whom he had come there to seek, he turned to leave as quietly as he had entered, but his egress was barred by Æsop, who had slipped between him and the door, and who now questioned him, with a grin of malignant intelligence on his face.

"Whom are you looking for, pygmy?"

The page put a bold face on it and answered with a bold voice: "I have a letter for a gentleman."

Æsop pointed to the group at the table. "We are all gentlemen. Let's have a look at your letter." Then he added to his companions: "It may be useful. The imp wears the livery of Nevers."

Instantly the others approved by signs and grunts of Æsop's action, and the page, now really alarmed, made a desperate effort to escape. "Let me pass!" he cried, and tried to rush under Æsop's arm. But Æsop caught the boy in an iron grip, and, though the courageous page drew a dagger and tried to stab his assailant, he was disarmed in a second and seized by the others, who sprang from the table and clustered about him, fierce birds of prey about a helpless quarry. The lad cried for help, hopelessly enough. Strong, dirty fingers were tearing open his jerkin and fumbling for the concealed letter, when suddenly it seemed to the astonished swordsmen that an earthquake and a whirlwind had combined for their undoing. Æsop rolled to one end of the room, Staupitz to another; Cocardasse and Passepoil, Saldagno, Pepe, Pinto, Faenza, and Joel were scattered like sparrows, and the little page found himself liberated and crouching at the feet of a man who was standing with folded arms surveying the discomfited bravos mockingly.

IV

THE LITTLE PARISIAN

The new-comer was a young man of little over one-and-twenty, of medium height, but with a well-built, well-knit figure that gave a promise of extraordinary strength and power of endurance, coupled at the same time with a scarcely less extraordinary suppleness. He had a face that was certainly handsome, though many handsomer faces were familiar in Paris at that day, but none more gallant, and, indeed, its chief charm was its almost audacious air of self-reliance, of unflinching courage, of changeless composure, and unconquerable humor. The eyes were bright and laughing. Even now, although the man was undoubtedly angry, his eyes still smiled in unison with his lips. His dark hair fell gracefully about his shoulders. He wore a somewhat faded white coat, girdled with a crimson sash—the white coat of a captain in the king's Light-Horse—and, though he carried himself with an easy dignity, the general condition of his dress showed he was one who was neither afraid of nor unfamiliar with poverty. Now he looked around him with a bright defiance, seemingly diverted by the havoc his single pair of

arms and legs—for he had used both limbs in the brawl—had wrought among nine swashbucklers, and apparently prepared at any moment to repeat the performance, if occasion called for action.

It was curious to observe that, though the new-comer had worked such confusion among the bravos whom he had taken so roughly unawares, he did not show any sign of having passed through a scuffle with a number of men or having accomplished anything especially arduous in bringing them so swiftly to discomfiture. His breathing was not quickened, his comely young face was unflushed. As he stood there lightly poised in an easy attitude that might at any moment be resolved into an attitude of defence, he seemed, to such of his spectators as had sufficiently recovered their senses to look at him coolly, rather to resemble one that had come in on the heels of a tuss and was watching its result with unconcerned eyes than one that with no more assistance than his own agile limbs had been the cause of humiliation to so many powerful adversaries. Staupitz, blinking fiercely as he rubbed his aching head, which had rattled sharply against the table that arrested his flight across the room, was too bewildered to swear out the oaths that were frothing within him when he realized that the earthquake, the whirlwind, the cataclysm that had tumbled him and his companions about like so many nine-pins was no other and no more than the slim and pleasant young gentleman who stood there so composedly. While the bewildered ruffians were picking themselves up, and with some little difficulty recovering their breath, the young gentleman addressed them mockingly: "Are there quite enough of you to manage this adversary?" And as he spoke he pointed to the little page who was huddled at his feet.

Æsop was the first of the bravos to recover his troubled senses and to seek to retaliate upon his assailant. He whipped his long rapier from its sheath, and was making for the intruder when Cocardasse flung his strong arms around the hunchback and restrained him. "Be easy," he cried; "it is the little Parisian!" And at the same moment Passepoil, with the gesture of one who salutes in a fencing-school, exclaimed the name "Lagardere."

As for the other ruffians, they gathered together sulkily enough about the table, staring at the stranger. His face was familiar to all of them, and there was not one among them bold enough to follow the example of Æsop. Lagardere, who had taken no notice of the threatened attack of the hunchback, surveyed the group, and, glancing from them, addressed himself to Cocardasse and Passepoil.

"Why, my old masters," he asked, drolling them, "what are you doing in this desperate adventure? You ought to be careful. The boy might have hurt you." His eyes turned from the Gascon and the Norman back again to the fellows at the table. "Some of these scarecrows seem familiar." His glance rested on Staupitz, and he questioned him: "Where have we met?"

Staupitz saluted Lagardere very respectfully as he answered: "At Lyons."

Lagardere seemed to search his memory and to find what he sought. "True. You touched me once."

Staupitz made an apologetic gesture. "Only once in twelve times."

Lagardere turned to Saldagno, Pepe, and Pinto. "Ah, my bandits of Madrid, who tried me, three to one."

Saldagno was more apologetic than Staupitz, with a Latin profusion of gesture, as he explained: "That was for a wager, captain."

Lagardere shrugged his shoulders. "Which you did not win." He turned to Joel de Jurgan. "Does your head still carry my cut?"

The Breton lifted a large hand to his bullet head and fumbled through the thick hair for a familiar spot. "There is a scar," he admitted.

Lagardere turned to the Italian. "Do you still," he asked, "hold the Italian school to be superior to the French?"

Faenza shook his head. "Not when you practise the French method," he answered, politely.

There was a little pause, and then Æsop, who had by this time been released from the embrace of Cocardasse, and had sheathed his sword, came forward and faced Lagardere. "I desire acquaintanceship, Captain Lagardere. Men call me Æsop."

Lagardere gazed at the hunchback, and a look of displeasure banished the mirth from his eyes. "I have heard of you," he said, curtly. "A good sword and a bad heart. I don't like the blend. You may go to the devil."

He turned away from Æsop and bent over the lad, who still crouched at his feet. "Now, lad, you must promise not to hurt these gentlemen, for some of them are friends of mine."

While the bravos tried not to appear annoyed by Lagardere's banter, which, indeed, in its simplicity vexed their simple natures greatly, the page rose to his feet and whispered softly to his rescuer, "I have a letter for you from the Duke de Nevers."

Lagardere extended his hand. "Give it," he said.

The page produced the letter, of which Æsop had been so anxious to gain possession, and handed it to Lagardere, whispering as he did so, "Save me from these ogres. I carry another letter to a lady."

Lagardere smiled. "To Gabrielle de Caylus, I'll swear," he murmured in a low voice which was

calculated only to reach the page's ears. Then he turned again to the swordsmen. "Sirs, this lad, more fastidious than I, dislikes your society. Pray respect his prejudices." He pushed the page gently towards the main door. "Hop, skip, jump!"

In a moment the page had glided out of the room. Æsop made a movement as if he were inclined to follow, but any such intention was frustrated by Lagardere, who shut the door after the boy and stood with his back towards it. "Stay where you are, gentlemen," he said, and there was something so persuasive in the way in which he said it that the gentlemen stayed where they were. Then Lagardere, as if he had almost forgotten their presence, slowly walking down the room till he paused in the middle, opened the letter and began to read it. As he seemed absorbed by its contents, Staupitz on the one side and Æsop on the other came cautiously towards him with the intention of reading the letter over his shoulder, but Lagardere's seeming forgetfulness of their presence instantly changed. He looked up sharply, glancing right and left, and Æsop and Staupitz fell back in confusion, while Lagardere spoke to them, mocking them: "You will dub me eccentric; you will nickname me whimsical; you will damn me for a finicking stickler, and all because I am such an old-fashioned rascal as to wish to keep my correspondence to myself. There, there, don't be crestfallen. This letter makes me so merry that you shall share its treasure. But, first, fill and drink with me, a noble toast."

To suggest drinking was to forge a link between the bravos and the man who down-faced them so masterfully. The big jug seemed to jump from hand to hand, every mug was full in a twinkling, and every face was fixed steadfastly on Lagardere, waiting for his words. Lagardere lifted his brimming beaker with a voice of joyous mockery that carried at once defiance and respect to a distant man. "The health of Louis of Nevers!" he said, and drained his green wine as cheerfully as if it had been the elixir of the gods.

At his words blank astonishment spread over the faces of the Gascon and the Norman. "He said 'Nevers,'" Cocardasse whispered to Passepoil, and Passepoil whispered back, "He did." As for the other bravos, they had been as much surprised as Cocardasse and Passepoil by Lagardere's request, but they managed to conceal their surprise by lifting their mugs, and now as they nodded and winked to one another, they tilted their vessels and drank, shouting, "The health of Louis de Nevers!"

Cocardasse came nearer to Lagardere, and said in a voice that was almost a whisper, "Why do you drink the health of Louis de Nevers?"

Lagardere looked for a moment annoyed at the presumption of Cocardasse in questioning him, then the annoyance gave place to his familiar air of tolerant amusement. "I don't love questions, but you have a kind of right to query." He turned to the others. "You must know, sirs, that this pair of rapiers were my fairy godfathers in the noble art of fence."

The Norman looked at Lagardere with a very loving expression. "You were a sad little rag of humanity when first you came to our fencing-academy."

"You are right there," said Lagardere. "I was the poorest, hungriest scrap of mankind in all Paris. I had neither kin nor friends nor pence, nothing but a stout heart and a sense of humor. That is why I came to your academy, old rogues."

Cocardasse was reminiscent. "Faith, you looked droll enough, with your pale face and your shabby clothes. 'I want to be a soldier,' says you; 'I want to use the sword.'"

Lagardere nodded. "That was my stubborn law. The world laughed at me, but I laughed at the world, and I won my wish."

"Just think of it!" said Cocardasse. "Henri de Lagardere, a gentleman born, without a decent relative, without a decent friend, without a penny, making his livelihood as a strolling player in the booth of a mountebank."

While Cocardasse was speaking, Lagardere seemed to listen like a man in a dream. He forgot for the moment the reeking Inn room where he stood, the beastly visages that surrounded him, the whimsy that had drifted him thither. All these things were forgotten, and the man that was little more than a boy in years was in fancy altogether a boy again, a shivering, quivering slip of a boy that stood on the gusty high-road and knuckled his eyelids to keep his eyes from crying. How long ago it seemed, that time twelve years ago when a mutinous urchin fled from a truculent uncle to seek his fortune as Heaven might please to guide! Heaven guided an itinerant mime and mountebank that tramped France with his doxy to a wet hedge-side where a famished, foot-sore scrap of a lad lay like a tired dog, trying not to sob. The mountebank was curious, the mountebank's doxy was kind; both applauded lustily the boy's resolve to march to Paris, cost what it might cost, and make his fortune there. The end of the curiosity and the kindness and the applause was that the little Lagardere found himself at once the apprentice and the adopted son of the mountebank, with his fortune as far off as the stars. But he learned many things, the little Lagardere, under the care of that same mountebank; all that the mountebank could teach him he learned, and he invented for himself tricks that were beyond the mountebank's skill. How long ago it seemed! Would ever space of time seem so long again? So the young man mused swiftly, while Cocardasse told his tale; but ere Cocardasse had finished, Lagardere was back in the tavern again, and, when Cocardasse had finished, Lagardere caught him up: "Why not? Some actors are as honest as bandits. I was no bad mummer, sirs. I could counterfeit any one of you now so that your mother wouldn't know the cheat. And my master made me an athlete, too; taught me every trick of wrestling and tumbling and juggling with the muscles. That is why I was able to tumble you about so pleasantly just now. I should have been a mountebank to this day but for an accident."

Passepoil was curious. "What accident?" he asked.

Lagardere answered him: "A brawl over a wench with a bully. I challenged him, though I was more at home with a toasting-fork than a sword. I caught up an unfamiliar weapon, but he nicked the steel from my hand at a pass and banged me with the flat of his blade. The girl laughed. The bully grinned. I swore to learn swordcraft."

"And you did," said Passepoil. "In six months you were our best pupil."

Cocardasse continued: "In twelve you were our master."

Passepoil questioned again: "What became of your bully?"

Lagardere was laconic: "We had a chat afterwards. I attended his funeral."

Cocardasse clapped his hands. "Well begun, little Parisian."

Passepoil pointed admiringly at Lagardere. "Look at you now, a captain in the king's guard."

Lagardere laughed cheerfully. "Look if you like, but I am no such thing. I am cashiered, exiled from Paris."

"Why?" asked Cocardasse, and Lagardere replied with a question: "Do you remember the Baron de Brissac?"

Cocardasse nodded. "One of the best swords in Paris."

Lagardere resumed: "Well, the late baron—"

Passepoil interrupted: "The late baron?"

Lagardere explained: "Brissac had a lewd tongue and smirched a woman. So I pulled his ears."

Cocardasse grinned. "The devil you did!"

"Yes," said Lagardere, "they were very long and tempting. We resumed the argument elsewhere. It was brief. Good-bye, Brissac! But as the good king, thanks to the good cardinal, now frowns upon duelling, I am exiled when I ought to be rewarded."

Cocardasse sighed. "There is no encouragement for virtue nowadays."

Lagardere's voice was as cheerful as if there were no such thing in the world as exile. "Well, there I was at my wit's end, and my nimble wits found work for me. 'If I must leave France,' I said, 'I will go to Spain, where the spirit of chivalry still reigns.' So I raised a regiment of adventurers like myself—broken gentlemen, ruined spendthrifts, poor devils out at elbow, gallant soldiers of fortune one and all. They wait for me a mile from here. We shall find work to do in Spain or elsewhere. The world is wide, and it has always work for good swords to do."

Cocardasse looked at him admiringly. "Your sword will never rust for want of use," he said, with approval.

Lagardere answered him, briskly: "Why should it? 'Tis the best friend in the world. What woman's eye ever shone as brightly as its blade, what woman's tongue ever discoursed such sweet music?"

Cocardasse took off his hat and swung it. "Hurrah for the sword!" he shouted.

Lagardere's glance applauded his enthusiasm. "Iron was God's best gift to man, and he God's good servant who hammered it into shape and gave it point and edge. I shall never be happy until I am master of it."

Æsop joined the conversation mockingly. "I thought you were master of it," he said, with an obvious sneer.

Cocardasse and Passepoil looked horrified at the hunchback's impertinence, but Lagardere did not seem to be vexed, and answered, quite amiably: "So did I till lately." Then he said, addressing himself generally to the company: "Have any of you ever heard of the thrust of Nevers?"

A tremor of excitement ran through his audience. Cocardasse took up the talk: "We spoke of it but now."

"Well," said Lagardere, "what do you think of it?"

Æsop, the irrepressible, thrust in his opinion. "Never was secret thrust invented that cannot be parried."

Lagardere looked at him somewhat contemptuously. "So I thought till I crossed swords with Nevers. Now I think differently."

Cocardasse whistled. "The devil you do," he commented.

"I will tell you all about it," said Lagardere. "It happened three months ago. That secret thrust piqued me. Then people talked too much about Nevers; that irritated me. Wherever I went, from court to camp, from tavern to palace, the name of Nevers was dinned in my ears. The barber dressed your hair à la Nevers. The tailor cut your coat à la Nevers. Fops carried canes à la Nevers; ladies scented themselves à la Nevers. One day at the inn they served me cutlets à la Nevers. I flung the damned dish out of the window. On the doorstep I met my boot-maker, who offered to sell me a pair of boots à la Nevers. I cuffed the rascal and flung him ten louis as a salve. But the knave only said to me: 'Monsieur de Nevers beat me once, but he gave me a hundred pistoles.'"

Passepoil sighed for the sorrows of his young pupil: "Poor little Parisian!"

Lagardere went on with his tale: "Now I am vainglorious enough to hold that cutlets would taste good if they were cooked à la Lagardere; that coats à la Lagardere would make good wearing, and boots à la Lagardere good walking. I came to the conclusion that Paris was not big enough for the pair of us, and that Nevers was the man to quit the field. Like Æsop yonder, I laughed at the secret thrust."

He paused, and Cocardasse questioned: "But you don't laugh now?"

Lagardere answered him, gravely: "Not a laugh. I waited for Nevers one evening outside the Louvre and saluted him. 'Sir,' I said, in my grandest manner, 'I rely upon your courtesy to give me a moonlight lesson in your secret thrust.' Lord, how he started. 'Who the devil are you?' says he. I made him a magnificent bow. 'I am Henri de Lagardere, of the king's Light-Horse. I am always in trouble, always in debt, always in love. These are misfortunes a man can endure. But I am always hearing of your merits, which is fretting, and of your irresistible secret thrust, and that is unbearable.'"

Lagardere paused to give dramatic effect to the point in his narrative.

"What did he say to that?" asked Passepoil.

Lagardere went on: "'Ah,' said the duke, 'you are the fellow they call handsome Lagardere'" (Lagardere interrupted the flow of his story with a pathetic parenthesis—"I can't help it, they do call me so"); "'people talk too much about you, and that wearies me'; which shows that he had a touch of my complaint. Well, he was civility itself. We went down by the church of St.-Germain, and had scarcely crossed swords when the point of his rapier pricked me here, just between the eyes. I was touched—I, Lagardere—and if I had not leaped backward I should have been a dead man. 'That is my secret thrust,' says the duke with a smile, and wished me good-evening."

V

THE PARRY TO THE THRUST OF NEVERS

There was a heavy stillness in the room when Lagardere came to the end of his tale. "This sounds serious," Cocardasse said, gloomily, and those about him were gloomily silent.

Lagardere resumed his story: "I pondered that thrust for a month. At last I mastered it. I tried it on the Baron de Brissac with perfect success."

A general laugh at this remark relieved the tension of the bravos' nerves. Æsop took advantage of the more cheerful atmosphere again to address Lagardere. "Matchless cavalier," he asked, with a wry assumption of politeness, "would you show me that thrust you esteem so highly?"

Lagardere looked at the speaker with a whimsical smile. "With pleasure," he said, and drew his sword. Æsop did likewise, and while the bravos drew back towards the wall to allow a free space for the lesson the two swordsmen came on guard. Lagardere explained while he fenced, naming each feint and lunge and circle of the complicated attack as he made it. With the last word of his steel-illuminated lecture his sword, that had illustrated the words of the fencer, seemed suddenly to leap forward, a glittering streak of light.

Æsop leaped back with a yell, and clapped his left hand to his forehead. "Damnation!" he cried.

Cocardasse, who had been following the proceedings with the keenest attention, hurried out of the circle of spectators. "Splendid!" he cried. "What is the parry?"

"It is as clear as day," Lagardere answered. "This is how the trick is done," and again, as he spoke, his blade explained his text, gleaming and twisting in the cunning evolutions of the riposte.

Cocardasse, who had drawn his own sword, repeated Lagardere's words and parodied Lagardere's gestures faithfully. "I see," he said, and turned to the others, who had lost nothing of the lesson. "Have you caught it, boys? It might serve—"

Lagardere interrupted him, indifferent to the evil appreciation on the faces of the spectators. "It will serve at once. I am going to try it on its master."

"On Nevers?" queried Staupitz, hoarsely.

Lagardere nodded. "On no less a man. I should have told you that I plagued him until he promised me my revenge. When I was exiled I wrote to remind him." Lagardere drew a letter from his breast and held it up for a moment before returning it to its lodging. "In this letter he accepts my challenge, names the time, the place—"

Cocardasse interrupted: "What time?"

"To-night at ten," Lagardere replied.

"The place?" asked Passepoil.

"The moat of Caylus," Lagardere answered. He pointed to the window at which Æsop had been sitting so long. "You can see it from that window."

There was a general look of astonishment on the faces of all the bravos. Passepoil, quick with his Norman caution, glanced at Staupitz and the group about him, and put his finger cautiously to his lips.

Cocardasse was still inquisitive. "Why there?" he questioned.

Lagardere explained, amiably: "Because such is the good duke's pleasure. When I sent him my cartel I made it plain that I had little time on my hands, as I was anxious, on account of the king's fire-new zeal against duelling, to cross the frontier as speedily as might be. I knew the duke was staying on his estates near by, and I suggested, with a fine show of gravity, that possibly his highness was acquainted with some quiet place in the neighborhood of the Castle of Caylus where we might settle our little difference. Oh, the words were solemnly couched, but I swear to you that I laughed heartily when I wrote them."

Lagardere laughed again in memory of that former mirth as he made an end of speaking. Cocardasse scratched an ear and glanced at Passepoil. Passepoil scratched an ear and glanced at Cocardasse. The rest of the bravos stared with a sullen curiosity at Lagardere, who paid no heed to their gaze.

"Why did you laugh?" Cocardasse asked, after a short pause.

Lagardere answered him affably: "Because I knew that my allusion to Caylus would fret my excellent enemy. There is, it seems, a beauty hidden in that gloomy castle, Gabrielle de Caylus, whom my duke adores in spite of the ancient feud between the two houses of Caylus and Nevers. It should please him to fight under the eyes of his lady love, whom I can console if I win."

The idea seemed to please Lagardere, for he again began to laugh softly to himself after he had finished speaking. But Cocardasse did not seem to think it was a laughing matter, for his voice was almost solemn as he asked: "Did you speak of the lady in your letter to Nevers?"

Lagardere interrupted his mirth to reply: "Of course. The situation is so humorous. I suggested playfully that there was a lovely princess imprisoned in the castle of a wicked old ogre named Caylus, and I hinted that if things turned out as I hoped, I might be fortunate enough to carry solace and freedom to the captive damsel." He paused for a moment and then asked in wonder: "Why do you pull such long faces?"

For, indeed, the faces of the swashbucklers were almost funereal in their solemnity. Passepoil, relying upon his Norman cunning, took it upon himself to explain a ticklish situation. "It is lucky we are here to help you," he said, knowingly.

Lagardere's laughter became more pronounced. "To help me?" he cried, and he shook with amusement at the absurdity of the words.

Passepoil insisted: "It's no laughing matter. Nevers is the lady's husband."

He spoke with a portentous solemnity against which Lagardere protested, laughing louder than before. "On the contrary, it is more laughable than ever. A secret marriage. A romance. Perhaps I shall have to soothe a widow when I hoped to woo a maid."

"Better have a sword or two to back you," Cocardasse suggested, cunningly.

Lagardere frowned. "No, thank you. I do my own fighting."

Passepoil whispered, insinuatingly: "Could I help to carry off the lady?"

Lagardere's frown deepened. "No, thank you. I do my own love-making. Clear out and leave me alone. That is all I want of you, my friends."

Cocardasse sighed. "I'd do anything in the world to oblige you, but—" He paused and looked helplessly at his former pupil, whom his faltering speech, his hesitating manner began to anger.

"But what?" said Lagardere, sharply.

Cocardasse made an apologetic gesture. "Every man to his trade. We also are waiting for some one."

Lagardere raised his eyebrows. "Indeed, and that some one?"

The bravos looked at one another uneasily, trying to seem devil-may-care and failing wofully. Nobody appeared to want to speak. At last Passepoil spoke. "That some one is Louis de Nevers," he said, and wished heartily that he did not have to say it.

Lagardere at first appeared to be puzzled by the answer. Then the full meaning of it seemed to fall upon him like a blow, and his face blazed at the insult. "Nevers! You! Ah, this is an ambushade, and I have sat at drink with assassins!"

Cocardasse protested: "Come, captain, come."

Lagardere's only answer was to spring back clear of the nearest swordsmen and to draw his sword again. The bravos gathered together angrily about Staupitz, buzzing like irritated bees.

Lagardere flung his comely head back, and his bright eyes flamed with a royal rage. His words came quick and clear in his anger: "It was for this you sought to learn Nevers's thrust, and I— Oh, it would make the gods laugh to think that I taught it to you! You have the best of the joke

so far, excellent assassins, but if any one of you touches a hair of Nevers's head he will find that the joke is two-edged, like my sword. If Nevers must die, it shall be in honorable battle and by my hands, but not by yours, while Lagardere lives."

Æsop commented, sneeringly: "Lagardere is not immortal."

Staupitz grunted, angrily: "Shall one man dictate to nine?" and made an appealing gesture to his comrades, inciting them against their censor.

Lagardere faced their menaces with the contemptuous indifference with which a mastiff might have faced as many rats. He commanded, imperiously: "Pack off, the whole gang of you, and leave Nevers to me!"

The bravos still buzzed and grumbled: Cocardasse rubbed his chin thoughtfully; Passepoil pinched his long nose. The situation was becoming critical. Lagardere was Lagardere, but he was only one man, after all, in a narrow room, against great odds. Truly, the odds would be diminished if the quarrel came to actual blows, for Cocardasse was resolved, and he knew that Passepoil was resolved also, to side with Lagardere in such an emergency. But even with the situation thus altered the result could only be unnecessary bloodshed, which would be bad, for, if Lagardere was their dear Little Parisian, the others were also their comrades. Further, it would mean the postponing, probably the abandonment, of their enterprise against Nevers, which would be much worse. Cocardasse plucked the Norman to him with a strong finger and thumb, and whispered in his ear: "Get the boys away and shift the keys."

Passepoil nodded, and glided discreetly among the bravos huddled together at the table, whispering the words of Cocardasse in the ears of each.

Lagardere frowned at this mystery. "What are you whispering?" he asked, angrily.

Cocardasse explained, plausibly. "Only that if you wanted to keep Nevers to yourself—"

Passepoil interrupted, concluding: "It mattered little who did the job."

By this time the bravos, who at the beginning of the quarrel had unhooked their rapiers from the wall, were now pulling their cloaks about them and making for the main door. The Italian, the Breton, the Spaniard, the Biscayan, and the Portuguese filed out into the passage, followed by Æsop, who turned to pay Lagardere a mocking salutation and to say, tauntingly: "So good-night, gallant captain."

Staupitz, with an air of surly carelessness, sauntered down to the only other door in the room, the door that led to the domestic offices of the Inn. While he did so, Cocardasse held out his hand to Lagardere in sign of amity, but Lagardere refused it. "I am no precisian," he said. "I have kept vile company. I would not deny my hand to a hang-man. But the most tolerant philosopher has his dislikes, and mine are assassins."

Cocardasse sighed, and made for the main door, followed by Passepoil, who said, wistfully, "Adieu, Little Parisian," a greeting of which Lagardere took no notice.

Now, while Æsop had been saying his taunting farewell to Lagardere he had been standing with his back to the door, and with his left hand had dexterously abstracted the key. Also, while Cocardasse had been endeavoring to gain a clasp of the hand from Lagardere, Staupitz had quietly locked the door leading to the kitchen and put that key in his pocket. Now Staupitz, Cocardasse, and Passepoil went in their turn through the main door and drew it behind them.

Lagardere seated himself at the table with a sigh of relief as he heard the heavy feet trampling down the passage, but his relief did not last long. His quick ears caught a sound that was undoubtedly the click of a key in a lock, followed by the shuffle of cautiously retiring feet. He instantly sprang to his feet, and, rushing to the main door, caught at the handle and found the door firmly locked.

"Damn them!" he cried; "they have locked the door." Then he began to shout, furiously, calling first upon Cocardasse, and then upon Passepoil by name to open the door immediately, knowing these two to be his friends among the gang of rascals. But no answer came to his cries, and, vigorous though he was, his efforts had no effect upon the solid strength of the door. Turning, he hurried to the door which led to the kitchen and tried that, only to find that it, too, was locked against him, and that it, too, was impregnable. He looked about him hurriedly. He knew it was no use calling for the people of the Inn, who would be sure to side with their truculent customers, and he knew also that, if he did not succeed in making his escape from the trap into which he had blundered, Nevers would be murdered.

He rushed to the window and looked out. The sight was not pleasing. The rugged rock on which the Inn was perched dropped beneath him thirty feet to the moat below, and, though his eyes eagerly scanned the face of the cliff, he could see no possibility, even for one so nimble as himself, of climbing down it successfully. To jump such a height would be to end as a jelly and be of no service to Nevers. For a few wild moments he cursed his folly in having been deluded by the bravos, and then his native high spirits and his native humor came to his assistance, reminding him that he always made it his business to look upon the diverting side of life, and that it was now clearly his duty to seek for the entertaining elements of the present predicament. Undoubtedly, these were hard to find. The jest was decidedly a bitter one, and could only be turned to his taste if he succeeded in getting out. But how was he to succeed? He tried the door again, despairingly and unsuccessfully as before. He reflected that perhaps there might be a rope in the room, and anxiously he looked in every corner. No rope was to be found.

Clapping his hands to his sides in his vexation at being thus baffled, he touched the soft

substance of his silken sash, and instantly an idea kindled at the touch. "Perhaps this will do," he thought, and hurriedly proceeded to unwind it. It was a long sash, for it went from his shoulder to his waist and then three times round his middle, where it was tied in a large bow with long ends. It was at least fifteen feet long, and as tough as any hemp that was ever twisted. He fastened one end of it quickly round a bar in the window, and let the long crimson streamer drop down the side of the cliff. Using this as a means of descent, it would bring him half-way down the rock. Hanging by his arms, he would cover much of the remaining distance, and the drop thence to the ground would be easy. In another moment he was outside the window, and, grasping the silk firmly in his strong fingers, began his perilous descent.

VI

THE MOAT OF CAYLUS

The descent into the moat of Caylus was rather a ticklish business, even with the aid of an improvised rope, for the face of the cliff was, for the most part, smooth, and afforded little in the way of foothold, but Lagardere was a trained athlete and a man of great physical strength, one that could use his feet with skill for purchase against the face of the rock, and he made his way dexterously to the end of his tether. Even when he had got thus far, and was swinging by his hands from the end of his taut sash, he was a considerable distance from the ground. But Lagardere let go with as light a heart as if he were a new Curtius leaping into a new gulf; and, indeed, if he had been of a mind to make the parallel, he would have counted his stake as great as the safety of Rome. Dropping like a plummet, he alighted on his hands and knees on the ground. Quickly he picked himself up, dusted the earth from his palms, and, after carefully feeling himself all over to make sure that he was none the worse, save for the jar of his tumble, he looked about him cautiously. It was late evening now, and the hot day knew no cooler dusk.

As he looked up from the strange vault in which he stood, the vault that was formed by the moat of Caylus between the rock on which the castle rose and the rock on which the Inn of the Seven Devils was perched, he saw above him the late evening sky painted with the strangest pageant. To the right of the spot where the sun had declined the purple melancholy of the heavens was broken by a blaze of gold, such as might have flashed from the armor of some celestial host marshalled and marching against the Powers of Darkness. To the left, under lowered eyelids of sable clouds, there ran a band of red fire that seemed as if it must belt the earth with its fury, a red fire that might have flamed from the mouth of the very pit. Lagardere was not over-imaginative, but the strangeness of the contrast, the fierce splendor of the warring colors, touched the player's heart beneath the soldier's hide. "The gold of heaven," he murmured, and saluted the sky to the right. "The rod of hell," he thought, and pointed towards the left, where distant trees stared, black, angry outlines against those waves of livid fire. Was not this contest in the clouds a kind of allegory of the quarrel in which he was now engaged, and was not his cause very surely, in its righteousness, its justice, its honor, gilded and invigorated by those noble rays to strive against and overthrow the legionaries of evil?

Even as he thought such unfamiliar thoughts, the pageant of opposing forces dimmed and dwindled. The darkness was gathering swiftly, investing the world with its legion of gloom; and in the shadow of the great Castle of Caylus, rising like a rock itself out of the solid rock behind Lagardere, the moat was soon very dark indeed. There was little light in the moonless sky; there came none from the castle, which in its dim outline of towers and battlements might have been the enchanted palace of some fairy tale, so soundless, so lightless, so unpeopled did it seem. There was a faint gleam discernible in the windows of the Inn on the other side of the gorge from which he had just succeeded in escaping.

Lagardere looked up at the Inn and laughed; Lagardere looked up at the castle and smiled. What was she like, he wondered, that beautiful Gabrielle de Caylus, whom it had been his impudent ambition to woo, and whom he now knew to be married to Nevers, his appointed antagonist? He had come all that way with the pleasant intention of killing Nevers, but he felt more friendly towards his enemy since he had learned of the plot against his life, and he wondered who was the instigator of that plot, who was the paymaster of the, as he believed, baffled assassins. For in a sense he believed them to be baffled, and this for two reasons. The first was that he heard no sound of stealthy footsteps creeping across the bridge. The second was that when he glanced up at the Inn window he saw that the dim glow in the distant window was suddenly occulted, and then as suddenly became visible again. It was plain to Lagardere that some one had entered the room and had looked out of the window for an instant. Therefore some one had already discovered his absence, probably the maid of the Inn. No doubt she would send word to the bravos, and it might very well chance that the bravos would not think the odds in their favor sufficiently good when they knew that they had to deal with Henri de Lagardere as well as with Louis de Nevers.

Lagardere whistled cheerfully the lilt of a drinking-song as he reflected thus, for he considered himself quite equal to handling the whole batch of rascallions if only he had a wall of some kind

to back him. He was fondling the possibility that they had given up the whole business in disgust at his interruption of their purpose, when it suddenly stabbed his fancy that they might ambush Nevers on his way. But he dismissed that fear instantly. He hoped and believed that if they knew he was free they would give him the first chance to kill Nevers for them. In any case, all that he could do was to wait patiently where he was and see what the creeping minutes brought.

The moat of Caylus did not appear to him to be, under the existing conditions, by any means the ideal field for a duel. In the darkness it seemed to him to be more happily adapted for a game of blindman's-buff. There was a half-filled hay-cart in the moat, and bundles of hay were scattered hither and thither on the ground and littered the place confusingly. Lagardere began to busy himself in clearing some of this hay out of the way, so as to afford an untroubled space for the coming combat. While he was thus engaged he heard for the first time a faint sound come from the direction of the castle. It was the sound of a door being turned cautiously upon its hinges. Crouching in the shadow of the rock down which he had lately descended, Lagardere looked round and saw dimly two forms emerge like shadows from the very side of the castle. The newcomers had come forth from a little postern that gave onto the moat, to which they descended by some narrow steps cut in the rock, and they now walked a little way slowly into the darkness. Lagardere, all watchfulness, could hear one of the shadows say to the other, "This way, monseigneur," and the word "monseigneur" made him wonder. Was he going to be brought face to face with the Marquis of Caylus, the old ogre whose grim tyranny had been talked of even in Paris?

The shadow addressed as monseigneur answered, "I see no one," and the voices of both the shadows were unfamiliar to the listener. But the voice of the shadow that was saluted as monseigneur sounded like the voice of a young man.

The leading shadow seemed to be peering into the darkness in front of him. "I told them to place a sentinel," he said to his companion; and as he spoke he caught sight of Lagardere, who must have looked as shadowy to him as he looked to Lagardere, and he pointed as he added: "Yes, there is some one there, monseigneur."

"Who is it?" the second shadow questioned, and again the voice sounded youthful to Lagardere's ears.

"It looks like Saldagno," said the first shadow; and, coming a little farther forward, he called dubiously into the gloom: "Is that you, Saldagno?"

Now, as Saldagno was the name of one of the swordsmen who had met at the Inn in menace of Nevers, Lagardere came to the swift conclusion that the two shadows now haunting him had something to do with that conspiracy, and that, if it were possible, it would be as well to learn their purposes. He was, therefore, quite prepared to be Saldagno for the occasion, and it was with a well-affected Lusitanian accent that he promptly answered, "Present," and came a little nearer to the strangers.

The first shadow spoke again, craning a long neck into the darkness. "It is I, Monsieur Peyrolles. Come here."

Lagardere advanced obediently, and the second shadow, coming to the side of his companion, questioned him. "Would you like to earn fifty pistoles?"

Although both the voices were strange to Lagardere, the voice of this second shadow seemed to denote a person of better breeding than his companion, a person accustomed to command when the other was accustomed to cajole. Also, it was decidedly the voice of a young man. Whoever the speaker might be, he certainly was not the crabbed old Marquis de Caylus. Lagardere endeavored eagerly but unsuccessfully to see the face of the speaker. Night had by this time fallen completely. The moat was as black as a wolf's mouth, and the shadow that was muffled in a cloak held a corner of it so raised that it would have concealed his visage if the gorge had been flooded with moonlight.

"Who would not?" Lagardere answered, with a swagger which seemed to him appropriate to a light-hearted assassin.

The shadow gave him commands. "When ten o'clock strikes, tap at this window with your sword." He pointed as he spoke to the wall of the castle, and in that wall Lagardere, peering through the obscurity, could faintly discern a window about a man's height from the moat. The speaker went on: "A woman will open. Whisper very low, 'I am here.'"

Involuntarily Lagardere echoed the last words, "I am here," and added, "The motto of Nevers."

There was annoyance in the well-bred voice as it questioned, sharply: "What do you know of Nevers?"

Peyrolles respectfully answered for the sham Saldagno: "Monseigneur, they all know whom they are to meet. How they know I cannot tell, but they do know. But they are to be trusted."

The shadow shrugged his shoulders and resumed his instructions: "The woman will hand you a child, a baby a few months old. Take it at once to the Inn." He paused for a moment and then said, slowly: "I trust you are not tender-hearted."

Lagardere protested with voice and gesture. "You pain me," he declared.

Apparently satisfied, the shadow went on: "If the girl should die in your arms, no one will blame you, and your fifty pistoles will be a hundred. 'Tis but a quick nip of finger and thumb on an

infant's neck. Do you understand?"

"What I do not understand," retorted Lagardere, "is why you do not do the job yourself and save your money."

It was now Peyrolles's turn to be annoyed. "Rascal!" he exclaimed, angrily. But the man he called monseigneur restrained him.

"Calm, Peyrolles, calm! For the very good reason, inquisitive gentleman, that the lady in question would know my voice or the voice of my friend here, and as I do not wish her to think that I have anything to do with to-night's work—"

Lagardere interrupted, bluffly: "Say no more. I'm your man."

Even as he spoke the plaintive sound of a horn was heard far away in the distance. Peyrolles spoke: "The first signal. The shepherds have been told to watch and warn at the wood-ends and the by-path and the causeway to the bridge. Nevers has entered the forest."

The noble shadow gave a little laugh. "He is riding to his death, the fool amorist. Come."

Then the two shadows flitted away in the darkness as nebulously as they had come, and the castle swallowed them up, and Lagardere was alone again in the moat among the bundles of hay.

"May the devil fly away with you for a pair of knaves!" he said beneath his breath, apostrophizing the vanished shadows. "But I'll save the child and Nevers in spite of you." For in those moments of horrid colloquy all his purpose had been transmuted. These unknown plotters of murder had confirmed him in his alliance to the man he had come to slay. So long as Nevers was in peril from these strange enemies, so long Lagardere would be his friend, free, of course, to rekindle his promise later. But now even Nevers's life was not of the first importance. There was a child threatened, a child to be saved. Who were these devils, these Herods, that sought to slay a baby?

Even as he asked himself this question he could hear through the clear air the striking of a clock in the distant village. He counted the strokes from one to ten. This was the time that had been fixed by the master shadow. Lagardere made his way carefully across the moat till he stood beneath the designated window. He drew his sword and tapped with the blade thrice against the pane. Then he sheathed his sword and waited upon events.

VII

BROTHERS-IN-ARMS

He had not long to wait. In a few moments the window above him turned softly on its hinges, and a head appeared in the open space. The chamber from which the window opened was unilluminated, and the light in the moat was so dim that Lagardere could only perceive the vague outline of a woman's head and shoulders leaning forward into the darkness. Even in that moment of tension he felt himself stirred by a sharp regret that he should not be able to judge for himself as to the beauty of the lady whom the world called Gabrielle de Caylus, but whom he knew to be the Duchess de Nevers. A very low, sweet voice called to him through the darkness, speaking the Christian name of Nevers.

"Louis!" the woman said, and Lagardere immediately answered, "I am here." He spoke very low, that his voice might not be recognized, and because he had the mimic's trick he made his voice as like as he could to the voice of Nevers.

Evidently his voice was not recognized, evidently the lady took him for her lord, for she immediately went on speaking very low and clear, her words falling rapidly from above on the ears of the waiting Lagardere.

"Do not speak, Louis," she said; "do not linger. I am watched; I fear danger. Take our dear Gabrielle."

As she spoke she leaned her body a little farther forward into the night and extended her arms towards her hearer.

Lagardere tingled with a sudden thrill as he realized that this beautiful woman was nearer to him, that she was seeking him, that she believed him to be her lover. And he realized with a pang that he, impudent in his libertinism, had entertained with a light heart the light hope in some audacious way to take by storm the love of this unknown woman. It had seemed, in Paris, an insolently boyishly possible, plausible adventure; but now, in his new knowledge and in this distant, lonely place, his enterprise, that, after all, was little more than an impish vision, seemed no other than a tragi-comical impertinence. All that he had known of Gabrielle de Caylus was that she was reported fair, and that she was loved by his enemy. All that he knew of her now was that she was his enemy's wife, that she had a gracious voice, and that she loved his enemy

very dearly; yet this was enough for Lagardere, this, and to know that the woman was all unconsciously trusting to his honor, to his courage, to his truth. And it was with an unfamiliar exaltation of the spirit that Lagardere swore to himself that the unwitting confidence of Gabrielle de Caylus should not be misplaced, and that all his hand, his heart, his sword could do for her service should cheerfully and faithfully be done.

Lagardere could see that she was holding something in the nature of a bundle in her outstretched arms. This was the child, no doubt, of whom the masked shadow had spoken. Lagardere took the bundle cautiously in his hands and lowered it to a secure resting-place in his left arm. Then the Duchess de Nevers spoke again, and he saw that she was holding another and smaller object in her hand.

"This packet," she said, "contains the papers recording our marriage, torn from the register of the chapel. I feared they would be destroyed if I did not save them."

As she spoke she put the packet into Lagardere's extended right hand, and as his fingers closed upon it the horn that he had heard before was wound again in the distance, but this time it seemed to his keen ears that the sound was nearer than before.

The woman in the window gave a shiver. "There is much to say," she sighed, "but no time to say it now. That may be a signal. Go, go, Louis. I love you."

In another moment her head was drawn back into the darkness of the apartment, the window closed, and the old castle was as silent and obscure as before. If it were not for the bundle in his left arm and the packet in his right hand, Lagardere might well have been tempted to believe that the whole episode was no more than the fancy of a dream. He thrust the packet into his breast, and then moved slowly towards the centre of the moat, tenderly cradling his precious charge. Peering closely down at the bundle, he could dimly discern what seemed to be a baby face among the encircling folds of silk which wrapped the child. It was sleeping soundly; the transition from its mother's arms to the arms of the soldier of fortune had not wakened it, and now, as Lagardere gently rocked it in his arms, it continued to sleep.

The whimsicality of the adventure began to tickle Lagardere's fancy. He seemed to be destined to play many parts that night. A few minutes back he had masqueraded as a bravo to deceive the mysterious shadows. Then he had pretended to be a husband to deceive the Duchess de Nevers. Now he imitated a nurse in order that Nevers's child might sleep soundly. He looked again at the quiet morsel of humanity, and his heart was stirred with strange desires and melancholy imaginings. Raising his hand to his hat, he uncovered solemnly and made the baby a sweeping salute.

"Mademoiselle de Nevers," he whispered, "your loyal servant salutes you! Sleep in peace, pretty sweetheart."

Then he began to sing softly beneath his breath the burden of an old French lullaby which he remembered from his childhood days, with its burden of "Do, do, l'enfant do, l'enfant dormira tantôt," and as he sang the horn again sounded the same dreary, prolonged note as before, but now more clearly, and therefore plainly nearer.

"That must be the last signal," Lagardere thought, and on the moment he heard the sound of footsteps on the bridge, and out of the darkness beyond a man slowly descended into the darkness of the moat. In another instant Lagardere heard the well-known voice of Nevers calling out: "Halloo! Is any one here?"

Lagardere advanced to meet his appointed enemy. "This way, duke!" he cried. Then he added, reprovingly: "You would have been wiser to carry a lantern."

Nevers moved swiftly towards him along the kind of path that Lagardere had made in the bundle of hay, and as he came he spoke, and his tone was menacing and imperious. "Let me feel your blade. I can kill in the dark."

Lagardere answered him, ironically: "Gifted gentleman! But I want a talk first."

He had scarcely finished when a flash like lightning stabbed the darkness and came very near to stabbing him. It was the sword of Nevers, who was thrusting wildly before him into the gloom, while he cried: "Not a word! You have insulted a woman!"

Lagardere beat a rapid retreat for a few paces, and called to him: "I apologize humbly, abjectly. I kneel for forgiveness."

Nevers's only answer was to follow up and thrust rapidly at Lagardere's retreating figure, while he cried, fiercely: "Too late."

There was nothing for Lagardere to do but to defend himself in order to gain time with this passionate madman. Therefore, Lagardere drew his sword and parried the attack which Nevers was now making at close quarters. It was so dark in the moat that the two antagonists could scarcely see each other, and even the brightness of the blades was with difficulty distinguished. In a voice that was at once anxious and mocking, Lagardere cried to the duke: "Unnatural parent, do you wish to kill your child?"

The last word stopped Nevers like a blow. He lowered his sword and spoke wonderingly: "My child! What do you mean?"

Lagardere answered him, gravely: "At this moment Mademoiselle de Nevers is nestled in my arms."

Nevers echoed him, astonished: "My daughter, in your arms?"

Lagardere came quite close to the duke and showed him the bundle cradled in his elbow. "See for yourself; but step gently, for the young lady's sleep must be respected."

Nevers gave a gasp of surprise. "What has happened?"

Lagardere answered him, slowly: "Madame de Nevers gave this little lady to me just now from yonder window, taking me for you. There is a plot to kill the child, to kill you."

Nevers gave a groan. "This is the hate of the Marquis de Caylus."

"I don't know who is doing the job," Lagardere answered, "but what I do know is that the night is alive with assassins. I think I have got rid of some of them, but there may be others, wherefore prudence advises us to be off."

He could see Nevers stiffen himself in the darkness as he answered, proudly: "A Nevers fly?"

Lagardere shrugged his shoulders. "Even I have no passion for flight, but with a sweet young lady to defend—"

Nevers seemed to accept his correction. "You are right. Forgive me. Let us go."

The two men turned to leave the moat, but as they did so they were stopped by the sound of fresh footsteps on the bridge, and in another instant Nevers's page had descended the steps and ran to join them.

"My lord!" he cried to the duke as soon as he reached the pair—"my lord, my lord, you are surrounded!"

Nevers gave an angry cry: "Too late!"

Lagardere answered him with a laugh. "Nonsense! There are but nine rascals."

But the laugh died away upon his lips when the page hurriedly interrupted: "Twenty at least."

Lagardere was staggered but emphatic. "Nine, duke, nine. I saw them, counted them, know them."

The page was equally emphatic. "They have got help since you came. There are smugglers hereabouts, and they have recruited their ranks from them."

Lagardere grunted. "Ungentlemanly," he protested, and then addressed Nevers: "Well, duke, we can manage ten apiece easily." He turned to the boy and gave him some quick instructions. "Creep through the wood behind the castle to the highway. Run like the devil to the cross-roads, where my men wait. Tell them Lagardere is in danger. They may be here in a quarter of an hour."

The boy answered him, decisively: "They shall be."

Lagardere patted him on the back. "Good lad," he said, and the boy darted from his side and disappeared into the darkness.

Lagardere turned to the duke. "There is no chance of escaping now without a scuffle," he said; "we must fight it out as well as we can. You and I, duke, ought not to think it a great matter to handle ten rascals apiece in this fighting-place, if only we intrench ourselves properly."

As he spoke he laid his precious bundle reverently in the hay-cart, where it seemed to sleep as peacefully as if it were in its native cradle, and began piling up the great masses of the bundles of hay in front of him to form a kind of rampart.

Nevers looked at him in astonishment. "Do you stand by me?"

Lagardere answered him cheerfully. "I came here to fight with you. I stay here to fight for you. I must fight somebody. I lose by the change, for it is a greater honor to fight Monsieur de Nevers than a battalion of bravos, but there is no help for it."

There was a little silence, and then Nevers said, slowly: "You are a splendid gentleman."

"There is nothing to make a fuss about," Lagardere said, lightly. "I am this little lady's soldier. I came here in a cutthroat humor enough, but since I dandled her daintiness in my arms I've taken a fine liking for her father."

Nevers reached out his hand to Lagardere. "Henceforward we are comrades—brothers."

Lagardere clasped the extended hand. "Heart and hand, for life and death, brother."

VIII

THE FIGHT IN THE MOAT

As they stood there, hand clasped in hand, exchanging the dateless pledge of brotherhood, they heard the sound of many feet coming cautiously along the road to the bridge. The practised assassins walked catfoot, but there were others that shuffled in their care to go warily.

Nevers said, quietly: "Here come the swords."

Lagardere gave a jolly laugh. "Now for a glorious scrimmage!" he said, and made his sword sing in the air.

As he spoke the words, shade after shade began to descend the steps from the bridge and to advance cautiously into the moat. Lagardere counted them as they came: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty. Even in the darkness he thought he could recognize certain figures: the twisted form of the hunchback, the burly body of Cocardasse, the gaunt figure of the Norman, the barrel bulk of Staupitz. This barrel bulk came to the front of the shadows huddled together at the base of the hill, and spoke with the thick, Teutonic voice that Lagardere had heard so short a time before. "There they are," Staupitz said, and Lagardere could see a gleam in the night as the German pointed to where the two newly bound comrades stood together.

An instant answer came with the defiant cry of Nevers, "I am here!" which was immediately echoed by Lagardere. "I am here!" he shouted; and then added for himself: "Lagardere! Lagardere!"

Among the bravos a momentary note of comedy intruded upon the intended tragedy, as is often the way when humanity foregathers on sinister business. Cocardasse plucked Passepoil by the sleeve and drew him a little away from their fellow-ruffians. "We cannot fight against the Little Parisian," he whispered into the Norman's ear. "We will look on, comrade." Passepoil nodded approval, but spoke no word. For the rest of that red adventure into the placid blackness of the night those two stood apart in the shadow, with their arms folded and their swords in their sheaths, sombrely watching the seven men that were their friends assailing the one man they loved. Such honor as they had forbade them to change sides and fight for the Little Parisian. They had been paid to range with the assailants of Nevers. But no payment could possibly prevail on them to attack Lagardere. So, according to their consciences, they split the difference and held aloof. Their abstention was not noticed by their fellows in the excitement of the time.

Numerous as they were, the bravos and their new recruits seemed unwilling to advance against two such famous swordsmen. Lagardere taunted their apathy:

"Come, you crows, the eagles wait for you." He felt that the words had a fine theatrical ring, and he enjoyed them as he flung them forth.

Nevers cried his cry, "I am here!" and Lagardere repeated it, "I am here!" He was longing to come to blows with the bandits, and to show them what two men could do against their multitude. His sword quivered like a snake in its eagerness to feel blades against its blade.

The barrel bulk of Staupitz spoke again addressing his little army. "Do you fear two men?" he asked. "Forward!"

On the word the eighteen men charged, the original seven leading; the eleven recruits, less whole-hearted in the business, came less alertly in the rear. The charge of the assassins was abruptly arrested by Lagardere's bulwark, and over that bulwark the swords of the two defenders flashed and leaped, and before every thrust a man went down. It seemed an age of battle, it seemed an instant of battle. Then the baffled assassins recoiled, leaving two of the smugglers for dead, while Saldagno and Faenza were both badly wounded, and cursing hideously in Portuguese and Italian.

Behind the intrenchments, Lagardere chuckled as he heard. He turned to Nevers. "Are you wounded?" he asked, anxiously.

And Nevers answered, quietly: "A scratch on the forehead."

As he saw Nevers lift his hand for a moment to the space between his eyes, Lagardere groaned to himself, "My damned fencing-lesson," and mentally promised to make his enemies pay for their readiness to learn. He had not long to wait for an opportunity.

The discomfited bravos were rapidly gathering together for a fresh attack. This time their leading spirit was no longer Staupitz, disagreeably conscious of the difficulties of the enterprise, but the hunchback Æsop, who seemed to burn with a passion for slaughter. Lagardere likened him in his mind to some ungainly, obscene bird of prey, as he loomed out of the mirk waving his gaunt arms and shrieking in his rage and hate. "Kill them! kill them!" he screamed, as he rushed across the intervening space, and the bravos, heartened by his frenzy of fight, streamed after him, flinging themselves desperately against the piled-up hay, only to meet again the irresistible weapons of the friends, and again to recoil before them. Nevers held his own on one side; Lagardere held his own on the other. Nevers delivered his thrust at Æsop, and for the second time that day the hunchback felt the prick of steel between his eyes and saved himself by springing backward, his blood's fire suddenly turned to ice. Lagardere's sword was like a living fire. "Look out, Staupitz! Take that, Pepe!" he cried, and wounded both men. Then, while the German and the Spaniard fell back swearing, he turned joyously to Nevers, for his quick ear caught the sound of galloping on the distant highway.

"Good cheer, brother! I hear horses. My men are coming. Lagardere! Lagardere!"

Nevers responded joyously, "I am here! Victory!"

By this time the ground was strewn with the dead and wounded of their assailants, and, save for the slight scratch on Nevers's forehead, the defenders were unhurt. The galloping of horses was now distinctly heard, and the sound was as displeasing to the bravos as it was delightful to Lagardere.

Delightful, indeed, for the sake of his companion, whom he was so hot to save. Otherwise, Lagardere, so far as he had clearness enough to think coherently at all, thought that he had never lived, had never hoped to live, through moments so delightful. To be in the thick of such a brawl, to be fighting side by side with the best swordsman in all France against what might well be considered overwhelming odds, and to be working havoc and disaster among his antagonists, stirred Lagardere's blood more blithely than ripe wine. He had fought good fights before now, but never such a fight as this, in the black and dark night, with the dim air thick with hostile swords, and the night wind singing songs of battle in his ears. To live like this was to be very much alive; this had a zest denied to any calmly planned duello; this had a poetry fiercer and finer than the shock of action in the daylight lanes of war.

He called merrily to the bravos to renew their assault, but the bravos hung back discouraged; even the murder-zeal of Æsop had flagged. Then, in an instant, the attacked became the attackers, on the impulse of Nevers. Shouting anew the motto of his house, "I am here!" he leaped lightly over the rampart of hay, soliciting the swords of his foemen. Lagardere followed his example in an instant, and the pair now carried the war into the enemies' country, charging the staggered assassins, who scattered before them. Lagardere drove some half a dozen of the rogues, including Staupitz and the discomfited Æsop, towards the bridge. Nevers, nearer to the castle, struck down in quick succession two of the ruffians that were rash enough to stand their ground, and stood for the moment alone and unassailed, the master of his part of the field.

Noiselessly behind him the little postern of Caylus opened. Noiselessly two shadows emerged, both masked and both holding drawn swords. Though it was still all blackness under the walls of the castle, there was now a little light in the sky, where a pale moon swam like a golden ship through wave after wave of engulfing cloud. The pair paused for a moment, as if to make sure that indeed their auxiliaries were being routed. Then the foremost shadow glided quietly close to Nevers, where he stood flushed with victory.

"I am here!" Nevers cried, exulting, as he waved his conquering sword and looked in vain for an antagonist.

"I am here!" repeated the shadow behind him, mockingly, and thrust his weapon deep into the victor's side. Nevers reeled before the suddenness and sureness of the stroke, and fell on his knees to the ground with a great cry that startled Lagardere and stayed him in his triumph. Nevers, striving to rise, turned his face against his treacherous enemy, and seemed to recognize the shadow in spite of its masked visage.

"You!" he gasped—"you, for whom I would have given my life!"

"Well, I take it," the shadow whispered, grimly, and stabbed him again. Nevers fell in a huddle to the earth, but he raised his dying breath in a cry.

"Help, Lagardere! help! Save the child! Avenge me!"

Then he died. Though the assassin stabbed again, he only stabbed a corpse. Lagardere, who was brooming his foes before him as a gardener brooms autumnal leaves from grass, had been arrested in his course by the first cry of the wounded Nevers. While he paused, his antagonists, rallying a little and heartened by their numbers, made ready for a fresh attack. Then, swiftly, came Nevers's last wild call for help, and Lagardere, with a great fear and a great fury in his heart, turned from the steps leading to the bridge and made to join his comrade. But the clustering swordsmen heard that cry, too, and found new courage in the sound. It meant that one of the demi-gods with whom, as it seemed, they were warring, was now no more than common clay, and that there was good hope of ending the other. They came together; they came upon Lagardere; they strove to stay him in his way. They might as well have tried to stay a hurricane. Lagardere beat them back, cut them down, and swept through their reeling line to the spot where Nevers was lying.

"I am here!" he shouted, and faced the masked shadow. "Murderer, you hide your face, but you shall bear my mark, that I may know you when we meet again."

The slayer of Nevers had stood on guard by the side of his victim when Lagardere came towards him. By his side the masked companion extended a cautious blade. In one wild second Lagardere beat down the slayer's sword and wounded the unknown man deeply on the wrist. The assassin's sword fell from his hand, and the assassin, with a cry of rage, retreated into the darkness. Lagardere had only time to brand the traitor; he had not the time to kill him. Looking swiftly about him, he saw that his vengeance must be patient if he were to save his skin from that shambles. The sword of the satellite defended the master; other swords began to gleam anew. From all the quarters of that field of fight the bravos were gathering again, all there were left of them, and Lagardere was now alone. With the activity of the skilled acrobat he leaped backward to the cart, and, while he still faced his enemies and while his terrible sword glittered in ceaseless movement, he snatched the child from the sheltering hay with his left hand, and, turning, began to run at his full speed towards the bridge. There were bravos in his path that thought to stay him, but they gave way before the headlong fury of his rush as if they believed him to be irresistible, and he reached the steps in safety.

Once there he turned again and raised his sword in triumph, while he cried, fiercely: "Nevers is dead! Long live Nevers!"

By now the galloping of horses sounded loud as immediate thunder, and even as Lagardere spoke a number of shadowy horsemen had occupied the bridge behind him, and those in the moat could see above them the glint of levelled muskets. The servant shadow held the postern open with a trembling hand to harbor the survivors of the strife. But the man that had killed

Nevers, the man that Lagardere had branded, had still a hate to satisfy.

"A thousand crowns," he cried, "to the man who gets the child!"

Not a man of all the baffled assassins answered to that challenge. Standing upon the steps of the bridge, Lagardere caught it up.

"Seek her behind my sword, assassin! You wear my mark, and I will find you out! You shall all suffer! After the lackeys, the master! Sooner or later Lagardere will come to you!"

IX

THE SCYTHE OF TIME

The years came and the years went, as had been their way since the fall of Troy and earlier. To the philosophic eye, surveying existence with the supreme wisdom of the initiate into mysteries, things changed but little through eons on the surface of the world, where men loved and hated, bred and slew, triumphed and failed, lorded and cringed as had been the way since the beginning, when the cave man that handled the heavier knuckle-bone ruled the roost. But to the unphilosophic eye of the majority of mankind things seemed to change greatly in a very little while; and it seemed, therefore, to the superficial, that many things had happened in France and in Paris during the seventeen years that had elapsed since the fight in the moat of Caylus.

To begin with, the great cardinal, the Red Man, the master of France, had dipped from his dusk to his setting, and was inurned, with much pomp and solemnity, as a great prince of the church should be, and the planet wheeled on its indifferent way, though Armand du Plessis, Cardinal de Richelieu, was no more. His Gracious Majesty Louis the Thirteenth, self-named Louis the Just, found himself, for the first time in his futile career, his own master, and did not know quite what to make of the privilege. He mourned the deceased statesman with one eye, as it were, while he ogled his belated goddess of freedom with the other. It might well be that she had paid too tardy a visit, but at least he would essay to trifle with her charms.

Many things had happened to the kingdom over which, for the first time, his Majesty the King held undivided authority since the night of Caylus fight. For one thing, by the cardinal's order, all the fortified castles in France had been dismantled, and many of them reduced to ruins, owl-haunted, lizard-haunted, ivy-curtained. This decree did not especially affect Caylus, which had long ceased to be a possible menace to the state, and, after the death of the grim old marquis, was rapidly falling into decay on its own account without aid from the ministers of Richelieu's will. For another thing, two very well-esteemed gentlemen of his Majesty's Musketeers, having been provoked by two other very well-esteemed gentlemen of his Eminence's Musketeers, had responded to the challenge with the habitual alacrity of that distinguished body, and had vindicated its superiority in swordcraft by despatching their antagonists. After this victory the gentlemen of the Musketeers, remembering the rigor of the cardinal's antipathy to duelling, made a vain effort to put some distance between them and the king's justice. They were arrested in their flight, brought back to Paris, and perished miserably on the scaffold by the pointless sword of the executioner. Each of these events proved in its degree that Monsieur de Richelieu had very little respect for tradition, and that if he disliked an institution, no matter how time-hallowed and admired by gentlemen, he did away with it in the most uncompromising and arbitrary manner. There were many other doings during the days of the cardinal's glory that are of no account in this chronicle, though they were vastly of importance to the people of France. But many things had happened that are of moment to this chronicle, and these, therefore, shall be set down as briefly as may be.

News did not travel, when the seventeenth century was still young, from one end of the kingdom to the other with any desperate rapidity. Even when the posts rode at a hand gallop, the long leagues took their long time to cover, and, after all, of most of the news that came to the capital from abroad and afar it was generally safe to disbelieve a full half, to discredit the third quarter, and to be justifiably sceptical as to the remaining portion. But, credible or incredible, all news is blown to Paris, as all roads lead to Rome, and in the fulness of time it got to be known in Paris that the Duke Louis de Nevers, the young, the beautiful, the brilliant, had come to his death in an extraordinary and horrible manner hard by the Spanish frontier, having been, as it seemed, deliberately butchered by a party of assassins employed, so it was said, by his father-in-law, the old Count of Caylus.

It was not difficult for the well-informed in Paris to credit the ignoble rumor. The old feud between the house of Caylus, on the one hand, and the house of Nevers on the other, was familiar to those who made it their business to be familiar with the movements of high persons in high places; and when on the top of this inherited feud you had the secret marriage between the son of the house of Nevers and the daughter of the house of Caylus, there was every reason, at least, to believe in a bloody end to the business. There was, however, no jot of definite proof against the marquis. Nevers's dead body was found, indeed, in the neighborhood of the castle,

with three sword wounds on it, one inflicted from the back and two from the front, but who inflicted or caused to be inflicted those wounds it was impossible to assert with knowledge, though it was easy enough to hazard a conjecture.

Anyway, Louis de Nevers was dead. It was amazing news enough for Paris, but there was more amazing news to follow. To begin with, Louis de Nevers's young wife was now formally recognized even by the old marquis as Louis de Nevers's young widow. It was true that there was no documentary evidence of the marriage, but Prince Louis de Gonzague, who happened to be a guest of the Marquis de Caylus at the time of the murder, and who seemed little less than inconsolable for the death of his friend, came forward in the handsomest, gallantest fashion to give his evidence. He told how he and his faithful henchman Peyrolles had been the witnesses of the secret wedding. He succeeded in placating the wrath of the Marquis of Caylus. He succeeded in obtaining the sanction of the king, and, which was more important, the sanction of the cardinal, to the recognition of the marriage of Mademoiselle de Caylus with the late Duke Louis de Nevers. All this was thrilling news enough, but news more thrilling was to follow. The newly recognized Duchess of Nevers soon, to the astonishment and, at first, the blank incredulity of all hearers, took to herself a third name, and became Madame la Princesse de Gonzague. There was soon no doubt about it. She had consented to marry, and had married, Prince Louis de Gonzague, who, as all the world knew, had been the closest friend of the dead Louis of Nevers with one exception, and that was Louis of Bourbon, that was King of France. People who talked of such things said, and in this they were generally inspired in some way, directly or indirectly, by friends of Prince Louis de Gonzague, that the Duke de Nevers had been murdered by an exiled captain of Light-Horse, who was little else than a professional bully, and who for some purpose or purposes of his own had, at the same time, succeeded in stealing the duke's infant daughter. What the reasons might be for this mysterious act of kidnapping they either were not able or did not choose always to explain. It was an undoubted fact that the late duke's daughter had disappeared, for the grief of the whilom Duchess de Nevers and present Princess de Gonzague was excessive for the loss of her child, and the efforts she made and the money she spent in the hope of finding some trace of her daughter were as useless as they were unavailing. It was also certain that on or about the time of the late duke's death a certain captain of Light-Horse, whose name some believed to be Henri de Lagardere, had fled in hot haste from Paris to save his audacious head from the outraged justice of the king for fighting a duel with a certain truculent Baron de Brissac and incontinently killing his man.

What connection there might be between these two events those that busied themselves in the matter left to the imagination and intelligence of their hearers, but after awhile few continued to busy themselves in the matter at all. Nevers was dead and forgotten. The fact that Nevers's daughter had been stolen was soon forgotten likewise by all save the man and the woman whom it most immediately concerned. Few troubled themselves to remember that the Princess de Gonzague had been for a brief season the Duchess de Nevers, and if Louis de Gonzague, whenever the tragic episode was spoken of, expressed the deepest regret for his lost heart's brother and the fiercest desire for vengeance upon his murderer or murderers, the occasions on which the tragic episode was referred to grew less year by year. Louis de Gonzague flourished; Louis de Gonzague lived in Paris in great state; Louis de Gonzague was the intimate, almost the bosom friend, of the king; for Louis of Bourbon, having lost one of the two Louis whom he loved, seemed to have a double portion of affection to bestow upon the survivor. If Louis de Gonzague did not himself forget any of the events connected with a certain night in the moat of Caylus; if he kept emissaries employed in researches in Spain, emissaries whose numbers dwindled dismally and mysteriously enough in the course of those researches, he spoke of his recollections to no one, save perhaps occasionally to that distinguished individual, Monsieur Peyrolles, who shared his master's confidences as he shared his master's rise in fortunes. For Monsieur Peyrolles knew as well as his master all about that night at Caylus seventeen years before, and could, if he chose—but he never did choose—have told exactly how the Duke de Nevers came to his death, and how the child of Nevers disappeared, and how it was that the battered survivors of a little army of bravos had been overawed by the muskets of a company of Free Companions. He could have told how seven gentlemen that were named Staupitz, Faenza, Saldagno, Pepe, Pinto, Joel, and Æsop had been sent to dwell and travel in Spain at the free charges of Prince Louis de Gonzague, with the sole purpose of finding a man and a child who so far had not been found, though it was now seventeen years since the hounds had been sent a-hunting.

But though a year may seem long in running, it runs to its end, and seventeen years, as any school-boy will prove to you, take only seventeen times the length of one year to wheel into chaos. So these seventeen years had been and had ceased to be, and it was again summer-time, when many people travelled from many parts of the world for the pleasure of visiting Paris, and some of those travellers happened to come from Spain.

X

A VILLAGE FAIR

It was a custom of old standing in the little village of Neuilly to hold a fair every year in the full flush of the spring. The custom of this fair went back for ages; antiquarians declared that they could find traces of it so far off as the reign of the good King Dagobert of the yellow hair, who had, as immortal song has consecrated, a trifling difficulty with his smallclothes; at least, it was certain that it dated from a very long time, and that year by year it had grown in importance with the people who go to fairs for the purposes of business, and in popularity with the people who go to fairs for the purposes of pleasure. Hither came half the tumblers, rope-walkers, contortionists, balancers, bear-leaders, puppet-players, wrestlers, strong men, fat women, bearded ladies, living skeletons, horrible deformities, lion-tamers, quack doctors, mountebanks, and jugglers who patrolled Europe in those days, and earned a precarious living and enjoyed the sweets of a vagabond freedom in the plying of their varied trades.

At one time the fair of Neuilly had attracted only the humbler folk from Paris to taste of its wares, but as it had gradually grown in importance, so, accordingly, it had increased the number of its clients. First, the humbler burgesses came with their wives to gape and stare at the marvels it displayed; then their example was followed by the wealthier of their kind, and fur and velvet moved freely among the rabble of the fair. Now, in the year with which we deal, it had been for some little time the fashion for gentleness to drift in merry parties to Neuilly and enjoy the fun of the fair as frankly as any sober burgess or loose-tongued clerk. This year, however, a greater honor still was in store for the fair and its fellowships of vagrant playmakers. It was known to a few, who were privileged to share the secret, and also privileged to share the enjoyment with which that secret was concerned, that his Sovereign Majesty Louis of Bourbon, thirteenth of his name of the kings of France, intended to visit incognito the fair at Neuilly. He was to go thither accompanied by a few of the choicest spirits of his court, the most excellent of the rakes and libertines who had been received into the intimacy of the king's newly found liberty, and those same rakes and libertines felt highly flattered at being chosen by his highness for his companions in an enterprise which at least was something out of the beaten track of the rather humdrum amusements of the Louvre. Why the king particularly wanted to visit the fair of Neuilly on that particular day of that particular spring-time, none of those that were in the secret of the adventure professed to know or even were curious to inquire. It was enough for them that the king, in spite of his ill-health, looked now with a favorable eye upon frivolity, and that a sport was toward with which their palates for pleasure were not already jaded, and they were as gleeful as children at the prospect of the coming fun.

Neuilly knew nothing of the honor that was awaiting it. Neuilly was busy with its booths and its trestles and its platforms and its roped-in, canvas-walled circuses, and its gathering of wanderers from every corner of Europe, speaking every European tongue. Neuilly was as busy as it well might be about its yearly business, and could scarcely have made more fuss and noise and pother if it had known that not only the King of France, but every crowned head in Christendom, proposed to pay it a visit.

A little way from Neuilly, to the Paris side of the fair, there stood a small wayside inn, which was perched comfortably enough on a bank of the river. It was called, no one knew why, the Inn of the Three Graces, and had, like many another wayside inn in France, its pleasant benches before the doors for open-air drinkers, and its not unpleasant darkened rooms inside for wassail in stormy weather; also it had quite a large orchard and garden behind it running down to the river's edge, where the people of the Inn raised good fruit and good vegetables, which added materially to the excellence of their homely table. The high-road that skirted the Inn encountered, a little way above it, a bridge that spanned the river and continued its way to Neuilly and the fair and the world beyond. At one side of the Inn was a little space of common land, on which, at this time of fair-making, a company of gypsies were encamped, with their caravans and their ragged tents and their camp-fires. On the other side of the Inn were some agreeably arranged arbors, in whose shadow tables and chairs were disposed for the benefit of those who desired to taste the air with their wine and viands. Taking it in an amiable spirit, the Inn of the Three Graces seemed a very commendable place.

All day long on the day of which we speak, and all day long for many days preceding it, there had been a steady flow of folk from the direction of Paris making in the direction of Neuilly, and not a few of these, taken by the appearance of the little wayside Inn, found it agreeable to refresh themselves by slaking their thirst and staying their stomachs inside or outside of its hospitable walls. The most of those that so passed were sight-seers, and these the Inn saw again as they passed homeward in the dusk or sometimes even in the darkness with the aid of flambeaux and lanterns. But a certain number were, as might be said, professional pedestrians, peddlers with their packs upon their shoulders, anxious to dispose of ribbons and trinkets to gaping rustics, easily bubbled burgesses, and to the more wary histrions and mountebanks, for whom a different scale of charges ranged.

A little after noon on the day in question the wayside Inn of the Three Graces was quiet enough. The last chance visitor had emptied his can and crossed the bridge to Neuilly and its delights; the last peddler had slung his pack and tramped in the same direction; the gypsies, who since early morning had sprawled upon the common land, had shaken themselves free from their idleness into an assumption of activity, and had marched off almost in a body to take their share in the profits of the occasion by a little judicious horse-coping and fortune-telling. One of their number, indeed, they left behind in the great, gaudy, green-and-red caravan that stood in front of all the other caravans in the middle of the grassy space—one of their number who would much have preferred the merriment and the sunlight of the fair to the confinement of the

caravan, but who remained in the caravan, nevertheless, because she had to do what she was told.

The neighborhood of the Inn, therefore, seemed strangely deserted when a man appeared upon the bridge in the direction contrary to that of the general stream of passers-by, for this man was coming from the direction of Neuilly and was going in the direction of Paris. He was a twisted man with a hunched back, who was clad in black and carried a long sword, and he came slowly down the slope of the bridge and along the road to the Inn, looking about him quickly and cautiously the while as he did so. He had the air of one resolved to be alert against possible surprises even where surprises were improbable if not impossible; but his sinister face wore a malign smile of self-confidence which proclaimed that its wearer felt himself to be proof against all dangers.

XI

ÆSOP REDUX

Seeing that the neighborhood was vacant of all occupants, the hunchback advanced to the Inn, and, seating himself at a table under one of the little arbors, drummed lustily with his clinched fist upon the board. In answer to this summons the landlord appeared hurriedly at the door—such a man as had evidently been destined by heaven to play the part of landlord of a wayside inn.

He advanced and questioned his guest obsequiously: "Your honor wants—"

The hunchback answered him, roughly: "Wine, good wine. If you bring me sour runnings I'll break your head."

The landlord bowed with a dipping upward projection of apologetic hands. "Your honor shall have my best."

The landlord went back into the Inn, and the hunchback sprawled at his ease, tilting back his chair and resting his lean, black legs on the table. He sat thus wise for some little time, blinking under the shadow of his large, black hat at the pleasant sunlight and the pleasant grasses about him with something of the sour air of one to whom such pleasant things meant little. But presently his careless eyes, that might almost have seemed to be asleep, so much were the lids lowered, suddenly grew alert again. A man appeared on the bridge—a lank, lean, yellow-skinned man, with a face that seemed carved out of old ivory, with furtive eyes and a fawning mouth. The new-comer was gorgeously, over-gorgeously, dressed, and his every movement affected the manners of a grand seigneur. He carried a tall cane with a jewelled knob, on which his left hand rested affectionately, as if it pleased him, even in this form, to handle and control costly things. Precious laces extravagantly lapped his unattractive hands. A sword with a jewelled hilt hung from his side. The moment the new-comer saw the hunchback he hastened towards him, but the hunchback, for his part, for all his plain habit, showed no deference to the splendidly dressed gentleman who saluted him. He remained in his easy, sprawling attitude, his chair still tilted back, his thin legs still lolling on the table. The magnificent gentleman addressed him with a certain air of condescension in his voice:

"Good-morning, Æsop. You are punctual. A merit."

Æsop, without rising or showing any deference in his manner, answered with a scarcely veiled note of insolence in his voice: "Good-morning, Monsieur Peyrolles. You are not punctual. A defect. Sit down."

Peyrolles, apparently somewhat dashed by the coolness of his reception, obeyed the injunction of the hunchback and seated himself, but he still forced the show of condescension into his manner and strove to maintain it in his voice as he continued the conversation. "Though it's—let me see—why, it's seventeen years since we met—I knew you at once."

Æsop grunted: "Well, I knew you at once, if it comes to that, though the time was no shorter."

Peyrolles smiled awkwardly. "You haven't changed," he observed.

Æsop's eyes travelled with a careful and contemptuous scrutiny over the person of his old employer. "You have. You didn't wear quite such fine clothes when I saw you last, my friend. What luck it is to have a master who makes a rich marriage!"

As he said these words the landlord emerged from the Inn with a tray in his hands that bore a bottle and glasses. As he approached, Æsop swung his legs off the table and resumed the ordinary attitude of a feaster. The landlord placed the tray on the table, thankfully accepted Æsop's money, and with many salutations returned to the shelter of the Inn. Æsop filled two glasses with a shining white wine and pushed one to Peyrolles. "Drink!" he said, gruffly.

Peyrolles waved his yellow fingers in polite refusal. "I thank you. No."

In a second Æsop had sprung to his feet angrily, and, leaning over the table, thrust his own twisted visage close to the yellow mask in front of him. "Damn you!" he screamed—"damn you! are you too proud to drink with a man who has travelled all the way from Madrid on your dirty business? Let me tell you—"

The man's attitude of menace, the man's violent words, clearly alarmed Monsieur Peyrolles, who interrupted him nervously with a voice quavering with protestation: "No, no, you need not. Of course, not too proud. Delighted."

Æsop dropped into his seat again. "That's better. Your health." He lifted the glass to his lips as he spoke and slowly drained it. There was no sound of solicitation for his companion's welfare in his words, there was no expression of pleasure on his face as he did so. He took the good wine as he took all bright and kindly things, sourly.

Peyrolles hastened to follow the example of his pledge. "Your health," he said, and sipped diffidently at the wine, and then, finding it agreeable, finished it.

There was a little pause, and then Æsop spoke again.

"Seventeen years," he murmured, with a chuckle—"seventeen years since we last met, on the morning, as I remember, after the little mishap in the moat of Caylus."

Peyrolles shivered, and seemed uneasy. Æsop paid no heed to his evident discomfort.

"What a wild-goose chase you sent us all on, I and Staupitz and the others—flying into Spain to find Lagardere and the child. The others hunted for him, as I suppose you know, with the results which, also, I suppose you know."

Peyrolles nodded feebly. His yellow face was several tinges yellower, his teeth seemed to threaten to chatter, and he looked very unhappy. His voice was grave as he spoke: "Those who did find him were not fortunate." Æsop laughed.

"They were fools," he asserted. "Well, for my part, I said to myself that the wise course for me to follow was not to waste my strength, my energy, and my breath in chasing Lagardere all over a peninsula, but to wait quietly for Lagardere to come to me. Madrid, I reasoned, is the centre of Spain; everyone in Spain comes to Madrid sooner or later; *ergo*, sooner or later Lagardere will come to Madrid."

"Well, did he?" Peyrolles asked, forcing himself to give tongue, and eying the hunchback dubiously. He found Æsop too humorous for his fancy. Æsop grinned like a monkey whose nuts have been filched.

"No," he said—"no, not as yet, to my knowledge, or he would be dead. But I have a conviction that our paths will cross one day, and when that day comes you may be sorry for Lagardere if your heart is inclined to be pitiful."

The unpleasant expression on Monsieur Peyrolles's face whenever the name of Lagardere was mentioned now deepened sufficiently to make it quite plain that he cherished no such inclination. Æsop went on:

"He proved himself a pretty good swordsman on the night of the—shall we say altercation?—and he certainly succeeded in persuading me that there was something to be said for those secret thrusts that I treated too lightly. When I first met Lagardere I knew all that Italy and all that France could teach me of sword-play. Now I know all that Spain can teach. I tell you, friend Peyrolles, I think I am the best swordsman alive."

Peyrolles did not at all like to be hailed as friend in this familiar manner by the hunchback, but he had his reasons for mastering his feelings, and he showed no signs of distaste. Perhaps he had begun to realize that Æsop would not mind in the least if he did manifest displeasure.

"Now, finding myself in Madrid," Æsop resumed, "and not being inclined to follow the foolish example of my companions, which led each of them in turn to you know what, I cast about to make myself comfortable in Madrid. I soon found a way. I set up an excellent bagnio; I lured rich youths to the altars and alcoves of play and pleasure. I made a great deal of money, and enjoyed myself very much incidentally. It is always a pleasure to me to see straight, smooth, suave men killing themselves with sweet sins."

The expression of his face was so hideous, as he spoke in his demoniacal air of triumph over those that were less afflicted than himself, that Peyrolles, who was not at all squeamish, shuddered uncomfortably. Æsop seemed for a while to be absorbed in soothing memories, but presently he made an end of rubbing his hands together silently, and resumed his speech:

"It was all in the way of my ancient and honorable trade to have no small traffic with pretty women and the friends of pretty women and the parents of pretty women. And it was this part of my trade which put the idea into my head which prompted me to write to you, friend Peyrolles, and which persuaded me to uproot myself from my comfortable house and my responsive doxies, and jog all the way from Madrid to Paris."

The sense of what he had sacrificed in making the journey seemed suddenly to gall him, for he glared ferociously at Peyrolles, and said, sharply: "Here have I been talking myself dry while you sit mumchance. Tell me some tale for a change. Why in the name of the ancient devil did Nevers's widow marry Gonzague?"

Peyrolles laughed feebly. "Love, I suppose."

Æsop waved the suggestion away. "Don't talk like a fool. I expect old Caylus made her. He was a

grim old chip, after my own heart, and our widow had no friends. Oh yes; I expect daddy Caylus made her marry Gonzague. What a joke!—what an exquisite joke!"

Peyrolles replied, with attempted dignity: "You didn't travel all the way from Madrid to talk about my master's marriage, I suppose."

In a moment Æsop's manner became ferocious again. Again he thrust forward his seamed, malicious face, and again the yellow mask drew back from it. "You are right, I did not. I came because I am tired of Spain, because I lust for Paris, because I desire to enter the service of his Highness Prince Louis de Gonzague, to whom I am about to render a very great service."

Peyrolles looked at him thoughtfully, the yellow mask wrinkled with dubiety. "Are you serious about this service?" he asked. "Can you really perform what your letter seemed to promise?"

"I should not have travelled all this way if I did not know what I was about," Æsop growled. "I think it matters little if I have lost Lagardere if I have found the daughter of Nevers."

Peyrolles was thoroughly interested, and leaned eagerly across the table. "Then you think you have found her?"

Æsop grinned at him maliciously. "As good as found her. I have found a girl who may be—come, let's put a bold face on it and say must be—Nevers's daughter. I told you so much in my letter."

Peyrolles now drew back again with a cautious look on his face as he answered, cautiously: "My master, Prince Gonzague, must be satisfied. Where is this girl?"

Æsop continued: "Here. I found her in Madrid, the dancing-girl of a band of gypsies. She is the right age. The girl is clever, she is comely, her hair is of the Nevers shade, her color of the Nevers tint. She is, by good-fortune, still chaste, for when I first began to think of this scheme the minx was little more than a child, and the gypsies, who were willing to do my bidding, kept her clean for my need. Oh, she has been well prepared, I promise you! She has been taught to believe that she was stolen from her parents in her babyhood, and will meet any fable half-way. She will make a most presentable heiress to the gentleman we killed at Caylus—"

Peyrolles agitated his yellow hands deprecatingly. He did not like the revival of unpleasant memories. "My good friend!" he protested.

Æsop eyed him with disdain. "Well, we did kill him, didn't we? You don't want to pretend that he's alive now, after that jab in the back your master gave him fifteen years ago?"

Peyrolles wriggled on his chair in an agony of discomfort. "Hush, for Heaven's sake! Don't talk like that!"

Æsop slapped the table till the glasses rang. "I'll talk as I please."

Peyrolles saw it was useless to argue with the hunchback, and submitted. "Yes, yes; but let bygones be bygones. About this girl?"

Æsop resumed his narrative. "I sent her and her tribe Franceward from Madrid. I didn't accompany them, for I'm not fond of companionship; but I told them to wait me here, and here they are. What place could be more excellent? All sorts of vagabonds come hither from all parts of the world at fair-time. How natural that your admirable master should amuse his leisure by visiting the fair, and in so diverting himself be struck by a beautiful gypsy girl's resemblance to the features of his dear dead friend! It is all a romance, friend Peyrolles, and a very good romance. And I, Æsop, made it."

The hunchback struck an attitude as he spoke, and strove to twist his evil countenance into a look of inspiration.

Peyrolles was all eagerness now. "Let me see the girl," he pleaded.

Æsop shook his head. "By-and-by. It is understood that if Gonzague accepts the girl as Nevers's child he takes me into his service in Paris. Eh?"

Peyrolles nodded. "That is understood."

Æsop yawned on the conclusion of the bargain. "Curse me if I see why he wants the child when he has got the mother."

Peyrolles again neared, and spoke with a lowered voice: "I can be frank with you, master Æsop?"

"It's the best plan," Æsop growled.

XII

FLORA

Peyrolles prepared to be frank. He put up his hand, and whispered behind it cautiously: "The married life of the Prince de Gonzague and the widow of Nevers has not been ideally happy."

Æsop grinned at him in derision. "You surprise me!" he commented, ironically.

Peyrolles went on: "The marriage is only a marriage in name. What arguments succeeded in persuading so young a widow to marry again so soon I do not, of course, know." He paused for a moment and frowned a little, for Æsop, though saying nothing, was lolling out his tongue at him mockingly. Then he went on, with a somewhat ruffled manner: "At all events, whatever the arguments were, they succeeded, and the Duchess de Nevers became the Princess de Gonzague. After the ceremony the Princess de Gonzague told her husband that she lived only in the hope of recovering her child, and that she would kill herself if she were not left in peace."

He paused for a moment. Æsop spurred him on: "Well, go on, go on."

Peyrolles cleared his throat. Being frank was neither habitual nor pleasant. "As the princess had absolute control of the wealth of her dead husband, the Duke de Nevers, and as she promised to allow my master the use of her fortune as long as he—"

Again he paused, and Æsop interpolated: "Left her in peace."

Peyrolles accepted the suggestion. "Exactly—my master, who is a perfect gentleman, accepted the situation. Since that day they seldom meet, seldom speak. The princess always wears mourning—"

Æsop shivered. "Cheerful spouse."

Peyrolles went on: "While the Prince de Gonzague lives a bright life, and sets the mode in wit, dress, vice—in every way the perfect gentleman, and now the favorite companion and friend of his melancholy majesty, whose natural sadness at the loss of the great cardinal he does his best to alleviate."

Æsop laughed mockingly as Peyrolles mouthed his approvals. "Lucky groom. But if he can spend the money, why does he want the girl?"

Peyrolles answered, promptly: "To please the princess, and prove himself the devoted husband."

Æsop was persistent: "What is the real reason?"

Peyrolles, with a grimace, again consented to be frank: "As Mademoiselle de Nevers is not proved to be dead, the law assumes her to be alive, and it is as the guardian of this impalpable young person that my dear master handles the revenues of Nevers. If she were certainly dead, my master would inherit."

Æsop still required information. "Then why the devil does he want to prove that she lives?"

There was again a touch of condescension in Peyrolles's manner: "You are not so keen as you think, good Æsop. Mademoiselle de Nevers, recovered, restored to her mother's arms, the recognized heiress of so much wealth, might seem to be a very lucky young woman. But even lucky young women are not immortal."

Æsop chuckled. "Oh, oh, oh! If the lost-and-found young lady were to die soon after her recovery the good Louis de Gonzague would inherit without further question. I fear my little gypsy is not promised a long life."

Peyrolles smiled sourly. "Let me see your little gypsy."

Æsop hesitated for a moment. It evidently went against his grain to oblige Peyrolles—or, for that matter, any man, in anything; but in this instance to oblige served his own turn. He rose, and, passing the door of the Inn, crossed the space of common land to where the caravan stood, a deserted monument of green and red.

The hunchback tapped at the door and whispered through the lock: "Are you there, Flora?"

A woman's voice answered from within—a young voice, a sweet voice, a slightly impatient voice. "Yes," it said.

"Come out," Æsop commanded, curtly.

Then the gaudy door of the caravan yielded, and a pretty gypsy girl appeared in the opening. She was dark-haired, she was bright-eyed, she was warmly colored. She seemed to be about eighteen years of age, but her figure already had a rich Spanish fulness and her carriage was swaying and voluptuous. Most men would have been glad enough to stand for a while in adoration of so pleasing a picture, but Æsop was not as most men. His attitude to women when they concerned him personally was not of adoration. In this case the girl did not concern him personally, and he had no interest in her youth or her charms save in so far as they might serve the business he had in hand.

The girl looked at him with a little frown, and spoke with a little note of fretfulness in her voice: "So you have come at last. I have been so tired of waiting for you, mewed up in there."

Æsop answered her, roughly: "That's my business. Here is a gentleman who wants to speak with you."

As he spoke he beckoned to Peyrolles, who rose from his seat and moved with what he considered to be dignity towards the pair, making great play of cane, great play of handkerchief, great play of jewelled-hilted sword flapping against neatly stockinged leg.

He saluted the gypsy in what he conceived to be the grand manner. "Can you tell fortunes, pretty one?"

The gypsy laughed, and showed good teeth as she did so. "Surely, on the palm or with the cards

—all ways."

"Can you tell your own fortune?" Peyrolles questioned, with a faint tinge of malice in the words.

Flora laughed again, and answered, unhesitatingly: "To dance my way through the world, to enjoy myself as much as I can in the sunshine, to please pretty gentlemen, to have money to spend, to wear fine clothes and do nice things and enjoy myself, to laugh often and cry little. That is my fortune, I hope."

Peyrolles shook his head and looked very wise. "Perhaps I can tell you a better fortune."

Flora was impressed by the manner of the grand gentleman, for to her he seemed a grand gentleman. "Tell me, quick!" she entreated.

Peyrolles condescended to explain: "Seventeen years ago a girl of noble birth, one year old, was stolen from her mother and given to gypsies."

Flora, listening, counted on her fingers: "Seventeen, one, eighteen—why, just my age."

Peyrolles approved. "You are hearing the voice of Nature—excellent."

Æsop put in his word: "That mother has been looking for her child ever since."

Peyrolles summed up the situation with a malign smile: "We believe we have found her."

Flora began to catch the drift of the conversation, and was eager for more knowledge. "Go on—go on! I always dreamed of being a great lady."

Peyrolles raised a chastening finger. "Patience, child, patience. The prince, my master, honors the fair to-day in company with a most exalted personage. I will bring him here to see you dance. If he recognizes you, your fortune is made."

Flora questioned, cunningly: "How can he recognize a child of one?"

Peyrolles lifted to his eyes the elaborately laced kerchief he had been carrying in his right hand, and appeared to be a prey to violent emotions. "Your father was his dearest friend," he murmured, in a tearful voice. "He would see his features in you."

Flora clapped her hands. "I hope he will."

Æsop, looking cynically from the girl to the man and from the man to the girl, commented, dryly: "I think he will."

Peyrolles considered the interview had lasted long enough. He signed to the girl to retire with the air of a grandee dismissing some vassal. "Enough. Retire to your van till I come for you."

Flora pouted and pleaded: "Don't be long. I'm tired of being in there."

Æsop snapped at her, sharply: "Do as you are told. You are not a princess yet."

The girl frowned, the girl's eyes flashed, but her acquaintance with Æsop had given her the thoroughly justifiable impression that he was a man whom it was better to obey, and she retired into the caravan and shut the green-and-red door with a bang behind her.

Æsop turned with a questioning grin to Peyrolles. "Well?" he said.

Peyrolles looked approval. "I think she'll do. I'll go and find the prince at once."

"I will go a little way with you," Æsop said, more perhaps because he thought his company might exasperate the sham grand man than for any other reason. He knew Peyrolles would think it unbecoming his dignity to be seen in close companionship with the shabbily habited hunchback, hence his display of friendship. As he linked his black arm in the yellow-satin arm of Peyrolles, he added: "I have taken every care to make our tale seem plausible. The gypsies will swear that they stole her seventeen years ago."

Peyrolles nodded, looking askance at him, and wishing that destiny had not compelled him to make use of such an over-familiar agent, and the precious pair went over the bridge together and disappeared from the neighborhood of the little Inn, and the spirit of solitude seemed again to brood over the locality. But it was not suffered to brood for very long. As soon as the voices and the footsteps of Peyrolles and Æsop were no longer audible; the green-and-red door of the caravan was again cautiously opened, and cautiously the head of the pretty gypsy girl was thrust out into the air. When she saw that the pair had disappeared, she ran lightly down the steps of the caravan, and, crossing the common, paused under the windows of the Inn, where she began to sing in a sweet, rich voice a verse of a Spanish gypsy song:

"Come to the window, dear;
Listen and lean while I say
A Romany word in your ear,
And whistle your heart away."

CONFIDENCES

Before she had finished the last line of the verse the curtains of a window in the second story of the Inn parted and another young girl showed herself through the lattice. This girl was dark-haired like the gypsy, and bright-eyed like the gypsy, and, like the gypsy, she seemed to be some eighteen years of age, but beyond these obvious features resemblance ceased. The girl who looked down from the window of the Inn was of a slenderer shape than the gypsy, of a more delicate complexion, of a grace and bearing that suggested different breeding and another race than that of the more exuberant Gitana. The girl at the window spoke in a clear, sweet voice to the singer: "I thought it must be you, Flora."

Flora called back to her: "Come down to me, Gabrielle."

The girl Gabrielle shook her head. "Henri does not wish me to go abroad while he is absent."

Flora made a little face. "Our friends do keep us prisoners. There is not a soul about."

Gabrielle smiled and consented. "I will come for a moment."

She withdrew from the window, and in a few minutes she appeared at the Inn door and joined her impatient friend. Flora kissed her affectionately, and asked, between kisses: "Are you not angry with Henri for keeping you thus caged?"

Gabrielle smiled an amused denial. "How could I be angry with Henri? He has good reasons for his deeds. We are in great danger. We have enemies."

Flora stared at her wild-eyed. "Who are your enemies?"

Gabrielle looked about her, as if to be assured that no one was within hearing, and then whispered into Flora's ear: "Henri will never tell me, but they hunt us down. Ever since I was a child we have fled from place to place, hiding. I have often been roused at night by clash of swords and Henri's voice, crying: 'I am here!' But his sword is always the strongest, and we have always escaped."

"Surely you will be safe in Paris," Flora said.

Gabrielle sighed. "Why, it seems we dare not enter Paris yet. When we left Madrid in your company Henri told me we were journeying to Paris, but now we linger here outside the walls until Henri has seen some one—I know not who; and while we linger here I must keep in-doors."

Flora looked mischievous. "Perhaps Henri is jealous, and tells this tale to keep you to himself."

Gabrielle sighed again: "Henri only thinks of me as a child."

Flora still was mischievous. "But you know you are not his child, and I am sure you do not think of him as a father."

Gabrielle turned upon her friend with an air of dainty imperiousness. "Flora, Flora, you may be a witch, but there are some thoughts of mine you must not presume to read."

Flora laughed. "You command like a great lady. 'Must not,' indeed, and 'presume'! Let me tell you, pretty Gabrielle, that I am the great lady here."

Gabrielle was instantly winning and tender again. "You are my sweet friend, and I did not mean to command you."

Flora laughed good-humoredly. "You should have seen your air of greatness. But I am speaking seriously. I believe I am the long-lost daughter of a great lord."

Gabrielle stared, amazed. "Really, Flora, really? Are you in earnest? Tell me all about it."

Flora looked like a gypsy sphinx. "Oh, but I may not. I should not have spoken of it at all, but I am so mad and merry at the good news that out it slipped."

Gabrielle softly patted her cheek. "I am glad of anything that makes you happy."

Flora tried to look magnificent. "Do not you envy me? Would not you like to be a great lady, too? I am afraid you look more like it than I do."

Gabrielle spoke again in a whisper: "I will tell you my secret in return for yours. So long as I can be by Henri's side I envy no one—ask nothing better of fortune."

Flora smiled knowingly. "Do you call that a secret? I have known that ever since I first saw you look at him."

Gabrielle looked pained. "Am I so immodest a minion?"

Flora protested: "No, no. But your eyes are traitors and tell me tales."

"I must be wary," Gabrielle said, "that they tell no tales to—to others."

Flora shrugged her pretty shoulders. "Lovers are droll. A maid may love a man, and a man may love a maid, and neither know that the other is sick of the same pip, poor fowls."

"What do you mean, witch?" Gabrielle questioned.

Flora twirled a pirouette before she replied: "Nothing—less than nothing. I dance here by-and-by to please a grandee. Will you peep through your lattice?"

"Perhaps," Gabrielle answered, cautiously. Then she gave a little start. "Some one is coming,"

she said, and, indeed, some one was coming. A man had just mounted the bridge from the Neuilly road and stood there for an instant surveying the two girls. He was a modish young gentleman, very splendidly attired, who carried himself with a dainty insolence, and he now came slowly towards the girls with an amiable salutation.

"Exquisite ladies," he said, "I give you good-day."

At the sound of his voice and the sight of his figure Gabrielle had disappeared into the Inn as quickly as ever a rabbit disappeared into its hole. Flora had no less nimbly run down to the caravan; but when she reached it she paused on the first step, attracted by the appearance of the handsomely dressed young gentleman, who appealed to her earnestly: "Why do you scatter so rashly? I should be delighted to talk with you."

Flora mocked him: "Perhaps we do not want to talk to you."

The new-comer would not admit the possibility. "Impossible," he protested. "Let me present myself. I am the Marquis de Chavernay. I am very diverting. I can make love to more ladies at the same time than any gentleman of my age at court."

Flora laughed. "Amiable accomplishment," she said, mockingly; but while she mocked her quick eyes were carefully noting every particular of the stranger's appearance, from the exquisite laces at his throat and wrists to the jewels on his fingers, and finding all very much to her taste, and the appropriate adornments for a young gentleman of so gallant a carriage and so pleasantly impertinent a face. She had never cast her eyes upon any youth in Madrid that had captivated her fancy so mightily, and she thought to herself that when the time came for her to have a lover here was the very lover she would choose. And then she remembered, with a fluttering heart, that she was likely to become a great lady and the peer of this fascinating dandiprat. As for him, he returned her gaze with a bold stare of approval.

The Marquis de Chavernay agitated his dainty hands in delicate assurance. "Agreeable, believe me," he asserted; and then asked: "Why has your sister nymph retreated from the field? I could entertain the pair of you."

As Flora's only answer to this assurance was a further, though perhaps not very earnest, effort to enter the caravan, he restrained her with appealing voice and gesture: "Please do not go."

Flora looked at him quizzically. "Why should I stay, pretty gentleman?"

The little marquis made her a bow. "Because you can do me a service, pretty lady. Is there an inn hereabouts at the sign of the Three Graces?"

Flora was curious. "Why do you want to know?"

The little marquis wore a mysterious look, as if all the political secrets of the period were shut in his heart or head, and he lowered his voice as he answered: "Because I am commissioned to ascertain its whereabouts for a friend."

Flora laughed, and pointed to the Inn into which Gabrielle had retreated. "You have not far to seek to oblige your friend," she said. "There it stands behind you."

Chavernay swung round on his heels, and surveyed the modest little hostelry with amusement. "The shelter of the fugitive nymph. Oh, now I understand my friend's anxiety! Pretty child, my duty forces me to leave you when my inclination would fling me into your arms. If I may wait upon you later—"

This time Flora had evidently made up her mind that it would be indiscreet of her further to prolong the colloquy. She dipped him a courtesy, half mocking and half respectful, wished him good-day, and, diving into the caravan, slammed the door in his face. The little marquis seemed at first astonished at the austerity of the gypsy girl.

"Dido retires to her cave," he thought to himself. "Shall Æneas pursue?" He made for a moment as if to advance and force his company upon the seeming reluctant damsel. Then his volatile thoughts flickered back to the girl who had entered the Inn. "Methinks," he reflected, "I would as soon play Paris to yonder Helen. But I must not keep his Majesty waiting. No wonder he seeks the Inn of the Three Graces." For it was plain to the little gentleman that he had now discovered the reason why his august master and sovereign had done him the honor to select him as scout to find out the whereabouts of the unknown tavern.

XIV

"I AM HERE!"

Pleased at the success of his mission, although disappointed at not having made further progress in the graces of the two girls whom he was pleased to regard as shepherdesses, he cast his eye first to the shut door of the caravan and then to the silent face of the tavern, and was about to rejoin his illustrious master with all speed when his attention was arrested by a

singular figure advancing towards him from the Paris road. This person was tall and thin and bony, with a weakly amiable face fringed with flaxen hair, and timid eyes that blinked under pink eyelids. He was dressed in black clothes of an extreme shabbiness, and the only distinguishing feature of his appearance was a particularly long and formidable sword that flapped against his calves. The fellow was at once so fantastic and so ridiculous that Chavernay, whose sense of humor was always lively, regarded him with much curiosity and at the same time with affected dismay.

"Is this ogre," he wondered to himself, "one of the protecting giants who guard the fair nymphs of this place, or is he rather some cruel guardian appointed by the enchanter, who denies them intercourse with agreeable mankind?" Thus Chavernay mused, affecting the fancies of some fashionable romance; and then, finding that his attentions appeared strangely to embarrass the angular individual in black, he turned on his heels to make for the bridge, and again came to a halt, for on the bridge appeared another figure as grotesque as the first-comer, but grotesque in a wholly different manner.

This second stranger was as burly as the first was lean, and as gaudy in his apparel as the first was simple. The petals of the iris, the plumes of the peacock seemed to have been pillaged by him for the colors that made up his variegated wardrobe. A purple pourpoint, crimson breeches, an amber-colored cloak, and a huge hat with a blue feather set off a figure of extravagantly martial presence. Where the face of the first-comer was pale, insignificant, and timid, that of the second-comer was ruddy, assertive, and bold. The only point in common with his predecessor was that he, too, swung at his side a monstrous rapier. The sight of this whimsical stranger was too much for Chavernay's self-restraint, and he burst into a hearty fit of laughter, which he made no effort to control.

"What a scarecrow!" he muttered, looking back at the individual in black. "What a gorgon!" he continued, as his eyes travelled to the man in motley. "Gog and Magog, by Heavens!" he commented, as he surveyed the astonishing pair.

Then, still laughing, he ran across the bridge and left the two objects of his mirth glaring after him in indignation. Indeed, so indignant were they, and so steadily did they keep their angry eyes fixed upon the retreating figure of the marquis, while each continued his original course of progression, that the two men, heedless of each other, ran into each other with an awkward thump that recalled to each of them the fact that there were other persons in the world as well as an impertinent gentleman with nimble heels. The man in black and the man in many colors each clapped a hand to a sword-hilt, only to withdraw it instantly and extend it in sign of amicable greeting.

"Passepoil!" cried the man in many colors.

"Cocardasse!" cried the man in black.

"To my arms, brother, to my arms!" cried Cocardasse, and in a moment the amazing pair were clasped in each other's embrace.

"Is it really you?" said Cocardasse, when he thought the embrace had lasted long enough, holding Passepoil firmly by the shoulders and gazing fixedly into his pale, pathetic face.

Passepoil nodded. "Truly. What red star guides you to Paris?"

Cocardasse dropped his voice to a whisper. "I had a letter."

Passepoil whispered in reply: "So had I."

Cocardasse amplified: "My letter told me to be outside the Inn of the Three Graces, near Neuilly, on a certain day—this day—to serve the Prince of Gonzague."

Passepoil nodded again. "So did mine."

Cocardasse continued: "Mine enclosed a draft on the Bank of Marseilles to pay expenses."

Passepoil noted a point of difference: "Mine was on the Bank of Calais."

"I suppose Gonzague wants all that are left of us," Cocardasse said, thoughtfully.

Passepoil sighed significantly. "There aren't many."

Cocardasse looked as gloomy as was possible for one of his rubicund countenance and jolly bearing. "Lagardere has kept his word."

"Staupitz was killed at Seville," Passepoil murmured, as one who begins a catalogue of disasters.

Cocardasse continued: "Faenza was killed at Burgos."

Passepoil went on: "Saldagno at Toledo."

Cocardasse took up the tale: "Pinto at Valladolid."

Passepoil concluded the catalogue: "Joel at Grenada, Pepe at Cordova."

"All with the same wound," Cocardasse commented, with a curious solemnity in his habitually jovial voice.

Passepoil added, lugubriously: "The thrust between the eyes."

Cocardasse summed up, significantly: "The thrust of Nevers."

The pair were silent for an instant, looking at each other with something like dismay upon their

faces, and their minds were evidently busy with old days and old dangers.

Passepoil broke the silence. "They didn't make much by their blood-money."

"Yes," said Cocardasse; "but we, who refused to hunt Lagardere, we are alive."

Passepoil cast a melancholy glance over his own dingy habiliments and then over the garments of Cocardasse, garments which, although glowing enough in color, were over-darned and over-patched to suggest opulence. "In a manner," he said, dryly.

Cocardasse drew himself up proudly and slapped his chest. "Poor but honest."

Passepoil allowed a faint smile, expressive of satisfaction, to steal over his melancholy countenance. "Thank Heaven, in Paris we can't meet Lagardere."

Cocardasse appeared plainly to share the pleasure of his old friend. "An exile dare not return," he said, emphatically, with the air of a man who feels sure of himself and of his words. But it is the way of destiny very often, even when a man is surest of himself and surest of his words, to interpose some disturbing factor in his confident calculations, to make some unexpected move upon the chess-board of existence, which altogether baffles his plans and ruins his hopes. So many people had crossed the bridge that morning that it really seemed little less than probable that the appearance of a fresh pedestrian upon its arch could have any serious effect upon the satisfactory reflections of the two bravos. Yet at that moment a man did appear upon the bridge, who paused and surveyed Cocardasse and Passepoil, whose backs were towards him, with a significant smile.

The new-comer was humbly clad, very much in the fashion of one of those gypsies who had pitched their camp so close to the wayside tavern; but if the man's clothes were something of the gypsy habit, he carried a sword under his ragged mantle, and it was plain from the man's face that he was not a gypsy. His handsome, daring, humorous face, bronzed by many suns and lined a little by many experiences—a face that in its working mobility and calm inscrutability might possibly have been the countenance of a strolling player—was the face of a man still in the prime of life, and carrying his years as lightly as if he were still little more than a lad. He moved noiselessly from the bridge to the high-road, and came cautiously upon the swashbucklers at the very moment when Passepoil was saying, with a shiver: "I'm always afraid to hear Lagardere's voice cry out Nevers's motto."

Even on the instant the man in the gypsy habit pushed his way between the two bandits, laying a hand on each of their shoulders and saying three words: "I am here!"

Cocardasse and Passepoil fell apart, each with the same cry in the same amazed voice.

"Lagardere!" said Cocardasse, and his ruddy face paled.

"Lagardere!" said Passepoil, and his pale face flushed.

As for Lagardere, he laughed heartily at their confusion. "You are like scared children whose nurse hears bogey in the chimney."

Cocardasse strove to seem amused. "Children!" he said, with a forced laugh, and it was with a forced laugh that Passepoil repeated the word "Bogey."

For a moment the good-humor faded from the face of Lagardere, and he spoke grimly enough: "There were nine assassins in the moat at Caylus. How many are left now?"

"Only three," Cocardasse answered.

Passepoil was more precise. "Cocardasse and myself and Æsop."

Lagardere looked at them mockingly. "Doesn't it strike you that Æsop will soon be alone?"

Cocardasse shuddered. "It's no laughing matter."

Lagardere still continued to smile. "Vengeance sometimes wears a sprightly face and smiles while she strikes."

Passepoil was now a sickly green. "A very painful humor," he stammered.

There was an awkward pause, and then Cocardasse suddenly spoke in a decisive tone. "Captain, you have no right to kill us," he growled, and Passepoil, nodding his long head, repeated his companion's phrase with Norman emphasis.

Lagardere looked from one to the other of the pair, and there was a twinkle in his eyes that reassured them. "Are you scared, old knaves? No explanations; let me speak. That night in Caylus, seventeen years ago, when the darkness quivered with swords, I did not meet your blades."

Cocardasse explained. "When you backed Nevers we took no part in the scuffle."

"Nor did we join in hunting you later," Passepoil added, hurriedly.

Lagardere's face wore a look of satisfaction. "In all the tumult of that tragic night I thought I saw two figures standing apart—thought they might be, must be, my old friends. That is why I have sent for you."

"Sent for us?" Cocardasse echoed in astonishment.

"Was it you who—" Passepoil questioned, equally surprised.

"Why, of course it was," Lagardere answered. "Sit down and listen."

He led the way to the very table at which, such a short time before, Æsop had sat with Peyrolles. Now he and Cocardasse and Passepoil seated themselves, the two bravos side by side and still seemingly not a little perturbed, Lagardere opposite to them and studying them closely, resting his chin upon his hands.

"Ever since that night I have lived in Spain, hunted for a while by Gonzague's gang, until, gradually, Gonzague's gang ceased to exist."

"The thrust of Nevers," Cocardasse commented, quietly.

Lagardere smiled sadly. "Exactly. I had only one purpose in life—to avenge Nevers and to protect Nevers's child. I abandoned my captaincy of irregulars when the late cardinal quarrelled with Spain. I did not like the late cardinal, but he was a Frenchman, and so was I. Since then I have lived as best I could, from hand to mouth, but always the child was safe, always the child was cared for, always the child was in some obscure hands that were kind and mild. Well, the child grew up, the beautiful child dawned into a beautiful girl, and still I kept her to myself, for I knew it was not safe to let Gonzague know that she lived. But the girl is a woman now; she is the age to inherit the territories of Nevers. The law will shield her from the treason of Gonzague. The king will protect the daughter of his friend."

The Norman shook his head, and the expression of his face was very dubious. "Gonzague is a powerful personage."

Cocardasse did not appear to be so much impressed by the power of Gonzague, but then it must be remembered that he came from Marseilles, while Passepoil arrived from Calais, which is more impressed by Paris. What the Gascon wanted to know was how his old friend and one-time enemy had contrived to appear so opportunely.

"How did you get here?" he asked.

Lagardere explained. "There was a gypsy lass in Madrid of whom by chance Gabrielle had made a friend. Poor girl, she could not have many friends. One day this girl told us that she and her tribe were going to Paris on some secret business of their own. Here was an opportunity for the exiles to return, unseen, to France. As gypsies, we travelled with the gypsies. I have been a strolling player, and as a strolling player I helped to pay my way. Before we left Madrid I wrote you those letters. As a result of all this delicate diplomacy, here I am, and here you are."

Cocardasse still was puzzled. "But our letters spoke of the service of Gonzague?"

Lagardere laughed as he answered the riddle. "Because, dear dullards, I want you to enter the service of Gonzague. If I return to France to right a wrong, I know the risk I run and the blessing of you two devils to help me."

Each of the two bravos extended his right hand. "Any help we can give," protested Cocardasse—"is yours," added Passepoil.

Lagardere clasped the extended hands confidently. "I take you at your words. Gonzague is at the fair yonder in attendance upon the king. You may get a chance to approach him. He can hardly refuse you his favor."

"Hardly," said Cocardasse, grimly, and—"hardly," echoed Passepoil, with a wry smile.

Lagardere rose to his feet. "Go now. I shall find means to let you know of my whereabouts and my purposes later. Till then—"

"Devotion!" cried Cocardasse.

"Discretion!" cried Passepoil, and each of the men saluted Lagardere with a military salute. Then the two bravos, linking arms, crossed the bridge together and made for the fair, conversing as they went of the wonderful chance that had brought Lagardere back to Paris and their own good-fortune in having been able to prove themselves innocent of complicity in the murder of Nevers.

When they were gone, Lagardere walked slowly up and down beneath the trees, reflecting deeply. He had gained one point in the desperate game he had set himself to play. He had found two adherents upon whose hands, whose hearts, and whose swords he could count with confidence, and he felt that he had succeeded, in a measure, in planting adherents of his own in the enemy's camp. But he had another point in his desperate game to win that morning. He had written a letter, he had requested a favor, he had made an appointment. Immediately on arriving in the neighborhood of Paris he had caused a letter to be despatched to the king's majesty—not to the king direct, indeed, but to the king's private secretary, whom Lagardere knew by repute to be an honorable and loyal gentleman, who could be, as he believed, relied upon, if he credited the letter, to keep it as a secret between himself and his royal master. It was a bold hazard, although the letter was weighted with the talisman of a name that must needs recall an ancient friendship. Would that letter be answered? Would that favor be granted? Would that appointment be kept?

For some time Lagardere paced the grass thoughtfully; for some time—perhaps for a quarter of an hour—his solitude was undisturbed. At the end of that time he emerged from the shadow of the trees, and, standing at the foot of the bridge, surveyed the road that led to Neuilly. What he saw upon the road seemed to give him the greatest satisfaction. Three gentlemen were walking together in the direction of the Inn. One was a very dandy-like young gentleman, very foppishly habited, who seemed to skip through existence upon twinkling heels. Another was a stiff, soldierly looking man of more than middle age, whom Lagardere knew to be Captain Bonnivet,

of the Royal Guards. The third, who was the first of the group, was a man who, though still in the early prime of life, looked as if he were fretted with the cares of many more years than were his lot. He was a slender personage, with a long, pale face. He was clad entirely in black, in emphasis of a mourning mind, and as he walked he coughed from time to time, and shivered and looked about him wistfully. But at the same time he seemed to affect a gay manner with his companions, as one that aired a determination to be entertained. It was seventeen years since Lagardere had seen the king, and he was saddened at the change that the years had made in him. He could only pray that those changing years had wrought no alteration in the affection of Louis of France for Louis of Nevers.

XV

THE KING'S WORD

In a moment Lagardere enveloped himself in his gypsy's cloak and flung himself on one of the benches of the Inn, where he lay as if wrapped in the heavy sleep which is the privilege of those that live in the open air and follow the stars with their feet. When the king, accompanied by Chavernay and followed by Bonnivet, crossed the bridge and paused before the Inn, nothing was to be noticed save the huddle of gray cloth which represented some tired wayfarer.

Louis of France looked about him curiously. "Is this the Inn of the Three Graces?" he asked.

He even allowed himself to laugh a small laugh.

The Marquis of Chavernay smiled a faint smile. "Yes, your majesty, and since I have been privileged to behold two of its three attendant graces in the flesh, and found them most commendable girls and goddesses, I think, without indiscretion, I could hazard a guess as to your reason for this visit."

The king looked at his impudent companion with the complaisant good-humor which, since his much-talked-of bereavement, he was prepared to extend to those most fortunate among his courtiers who could succeed in diverting his melancholy. He was familiar with Chavernay's impertinences, for Chavernay had soon discovered that the witticisms which would have gained the frown of the cardinal earned the smiles of the king. "Truly," he said—"truly, I do come for an assignation, but it is with no woman. You boys think of nothing in the world but women."

Chavernay made the king a most sweeping reverence. "Your majesty would, if your majesty deigned to condescend so far, prove the most fatal rival of your most amorous subject."

Since the death of the cardinal, Louis liked it to be hinted that he was still the man of gallantry, irresistible when he pleased. So he smiled as he caught Chavernay's ear and pinched it. "Imp, do you think you lads are the only gallants, and that we old soldiers must give way to you?"

Chavernay saluted him again. "You are our general, your majesty—we win our battles in your name."

Louis laughed and then looked grave, smiled again and then sighed. "My dear Chavernay, when you are my age you will think that one pretty woman is very like another pretty woman. But there is no pretty woman in this case."

Chavernay made a still more ironical bow. "Your majesty!" he said, with an air that implied: "Of course I must appear to believe you, but in reality I do not believe you at all." Chavernay was thinking to himself of the adorable creatures whom he had seen disappear within the walls of the Inn and the walls of the caravan, and he drew his conclusions accordingly, and drew them wrong. When the king answered him, he answered, gravely, as one who objects to have his word questioned even by a frivolous spirit like Chavernay.

"I come here," he said, "in reply to a letter I received two days ago—a letter which appeals to me by a name which compels me to consider the appeal. That is why I come here to-day. My correspondent makes it a condition that I come alone. Take Bonnivet with you. Keep within call, but out of sight."

Chavernay bowed very respectfully this time. The newest friends of Louis of France knew that they best pleased him by appearing to presume on his good-nature, but even the lightest and liveliest of them felt that there was a point beyond which he must not venture to presume. Chavernay felt instinctively that he had reached that point now, and his manner was a pattern to presentable courtiers.

"Yes, your majesty," he said, and turned to Bonnivet, and Bonnivet and he went over the bridge and out of sight among a little clump of trees on the roadside. From here they could see the king plainly enough, and hear him if he chose to raise his voice loud enough to call them, but here they were out of ear-shot of any private conversation. That their presence in the neighborhood was scarcely necessary they were both well aware, for there were few conspiracies against the king's authority and no plots against the king's life, and if Louis of France had chosen to go

unattended his pompous, melancholy person would have been in no danger.

Louis walked slowly to the little table in the arbor, and, seating himself, took out a letter from his pocket and read it thoughtfully over. Then he drew a watch looped in diamonds from his pocket and looked at the hour. As he did so the huddled, seeming sleeping figure on the bench stiffened itself, sat up erect, and cast off its cloak.

Lagardere rose and advanced towards the king. "I am here," he said, in a firm, respectful voice.

Louis turned round and looked with curiosity but without apprehension at the man who addressed him, the man who was dressed like a gypsy, but who clearly was no gypsy. "Are you the writer of this letter?" he asked.

Lagardere saluted him with a graceful reverence. "Yes, your Majesty. I know that you are the King of France."

Louis slightly inclined his head. "I could not refuse a summons that promised to tell me of Louis de Nevers. Are you Lagardere?"

Lagardere made a gesture as of protest. "I am his ambassador. Have I the privilege of an ambassador?"

The king frowned slightly. "What privilege?"

"Immunity if my mission displeases you," Lagardere answered.

The king looked steadily at the seeming gypsy, who returned his glance as steadily. "You are bold, sir," he said.

Lagardere answered him, with composure. "I am bold because I address Louis of France, who never broke his word—Louis of France, who still holds dear the memory of Louis of Nevers."

The king signed to him to continue. "Speak freely. What do you know of Louis of Nevers?"

Lagardere went on: "Lagardere knows much. He knows who killed Nevers. He knows where Nevers's child is. He can produce the child. He can denounce the murderer."

"When?" asked the king, eagerly.

"To-morrow," Lagardere answered. Then he hastened to add: "But he makes his conditions."

Louis frowned as Lagardere mentioned the word "conditions," and asked: "What reward does he want?"

Lagardere smiled at the question. "You do not know Lagardere. He asks for a safe-conduct for himself."

The king agreed. "He shall have it."

But Lagardere had more to ask. "He also wants four invitations for the ball your majesty gives at the Palais Royal to-morrow night."

Perhaps Lagardere showed himself something of a courtier in this speech. The great Richelieu had bequeathed to the little Louis his splendid dwelling-house, and Louis was indeed giving a stately entertainment there, avowedly in order to do honor to the memory of him who had made so munificent a gift, but in reality to prove to himself that he was master where he had been slave, and that he could, if he pleased, amuse himself to his heart's content in the house that had been the dwelling of his tyrant. What Louis, always dissimulative, feigned to be an act of gracious homage to dead generosity was in truth an act of defiant and safe self-assertion. Perhaps Lagardere guessed as much. Certainly he played agreeably upon the king's susceptibilities when he gave to Richelieu's bequest the name of Palais Royal, which was still quite unfamiliar, instead of the name of Palais Cardinal, which it had worn so long and by which name almost every one still called it. Certainly the king's pale cheeks reddened with satisfaction at the phrase; it assured him soothingly of what he was pleased to consider his triumph. But he allowed a slight expression of surprise to mingle with his air of complacency, and Lagardere hastened to give the reason for what was on the face of it a sufficiently strange request.

"There, before the flower of the nobility of France, Lagardere will denounce Nevers's assassin and produce Nevers's child."

The king agreed again. "He shall have his wish. Where shall the invitations be sent?"

Lagardere bowed low in acknowledgment of the promise. "Sire," he said, "an emissary from Lagardere will wait upon your secretary to-morrow morning. He will say that he has come for four invitations promised by your majesty for to-morrow night, and he will back his demand with the password 'Nevers.'"

The king bowed his head. "It shall be done as you wish," he answered. "Is there anything more?" he asked, and Lagardere replied: "This much more: that your majesty speak nothing of this to any one till midnight to-morrow."

The king agreed a third time. "Lagardere has my word."

"Then," said Lagardere, "Lagardere will keep his word."

Louis rose to his feet, and signed that the interview was ended. "If he does, I am his friend for life. But if he fail, let him never enter France again, for on my word as a gentleman I will have his head."

He saluted Lagardere slightly, and turned and crossed the bridge. A few paces beyond it he was

joined by Chavernay and Bonnavet. The three stood together for a few moments; then the king and Bonnavet continued their journey towards Neuilly, leaving Chavernay behind them, lingering in the shade of the trees.

XVI

SHADOWS

Lagardere looked thoughtfully after the departing monarch. "God save your majesty for a gallant man," he murmured to himself. "Now we may enter Paris in safety. Why, who is this?" He was about to enter the Inn, when he suddenly stopped and looked back sharply over the Neuilly road. To his surprise he saw that the light-heeled fop who had accompanied the king was retracing his steps in the direction of the bridge.

Lagardere asked himself what this could mean. Did the king suspect him? Was he sending this delicate courtier to question him, to spy upon him? He moved a little way across the stretch of common land, and stood at the side of the caravan so that he was concealed from any one crossing the bridge from Neuilly. As a matter of fact, Chavernay's return had nothing whatever to do with the business which had brought the king to the Inn of the Three Graces. He had asked and gained permission to be free to pursue a pastime of his own, and that pastime was to try and learn something of the pretty lady whom he had frightened into the seclusion of the Inn, a pastime that he felt the freer to pursue now that the king's assurance that he had visited the Three Graces for the sake of no woman.

So, dreaming of amorous possibilities, Chavernay came daintily across the bridge, very young, very self-confident, very impudent, very much enjoying himself. As he neared the Inn he looked about him nonchalantly, and, seeing that no one was in sight, he stooped and caught up a pebble from the roadway and flung it dexterously enough against the window above the Inn porch. Then he slipped, smiling mischievously, under the doorway of the Inn, and waited upon events. In a moment the window was opened, and Gabrielle looked out. "Is that you, Henri?" she asked, softly.

Instantly Chavernay emerged from his hiding-place, and stood bareheaded and bending almost double before the beautiful girl. "It was I," he said, with a manner of airy deference.

Gabrielle drew back a little. "You? Who are you?" she asked, astonished.

Chavernay again made her a reverence. "Your slave," he asserted.

Gabrielle remembered him now, and looked annoyed. "Sir!" she said, angrily.

Chavernay saw her anger, but was not dismayed. He was familiar with the feigned rages of pretty country girls when it pleased great lords to make love to them. "Listen to me," he pleaded. "Ever since I first saw you I have adored you."

He meant to say more, but he was not given the time in which to say it, for Lagardere came forth from his shelter beside the caravan and interrupted him. At the sight of Lagardere, Gabrielle gave a little cry and closed the window. Lagardere advanced to Chavernay, who stared in astonishment at the presumption of the gypsy fellow—a gypsy fellow that carried a sword under his mantle.

"That young girl is under my care, little gentleman," Lagardere said, mockingly.

But Chavernay was not easily to be dashed from his habitual manner of genial insolence, and he answered, as mockingly as Lagardere: "Then I tell you what I told her: that I adore her."

Lagardere eyed him whimsically, grimly. He felt disagreeably conscious of the contrast between himself in his shabby habit and the gilded frippery of this brilliant young insolence. He speculated with melancholy as to the effect of this contrast on the young girl that witnessed it. "You imp, you deserve to be whipped!" he said, sharply.

Chavernay stared at him with eyes wide with astonishment, and explained himself, haughtily: "I am the Marquis de Chavernay, cousin of the Prince de Gonzague."

Lagardere changed his phrase: "Then you come of a bad house, and deserve to be hanged!"

In a second the little marquis dropped his daffing manner. "If you were a gentleman, sir," he cried, "and had a right to the sword you presume to carry, I would make you back your words!"

Lagardere smiled ironically. "If it eases your mind in any way," he said, quietly, "I can assure you that I am a gentleman, although a poor one, and have as good right to trail a sword as any kinsman of the Prince de Gonzague." He paused, and then added, not unpitifully: "I would rather beat you than kill you."

Chavernay was scarcely to be appeased in this fashion. Something in Lagardere's carriage, something in his voice, convinced the little marquis that his enemy was speaking the truth, and that he was, indeed, a gentleman. "Braggart!" he cried, and, drawing his sword, he struck

Lagardere across the breast with the flat of his blade.

Lagardere was quite unmoved by the affront. Leisurely he drew his sword and leisurely fell into position, saying, "Very well, then."

The swords engaged for a moment—only for a moment. Then, to the surprise and rage of Chavernay, his hand and his sword parted company, and the sword, a glittering line of steel, leaped into the air and fell to earth many feet away from him. Even as this happened, Gabrielle, who had been watching with horror the quarrel from behind her curtains, came running down the Inn stairs and darted through the door into the open.

She turned to Lagardere, appealing: "Do not hurt him, Henri; he is but a child."

The little marquis frowned. He disliked to be regarded as a pitiable juvenile. "If the gentleman will return me my sword," he said, "I will not lose it again so lightly."

Lagardere looked at him with kind-hearted compassion. "If I returned you your sword twenty times," he said, "its fate would be twenty times the same. Take your sword and use it hereafter to defend women, not to insult them."

While he was speaking he had stepped to where Chavernay's blade lay on the sward, and had picked it up, and now, as he made an end of speaking, he handed Chavernay the rapier. Chavernay took it, and sent it home in its sheath half defiantly. "Fair lady, I ask your pardon," he said, bowing very reverentially to Gabrielle. "Let me call myself ever your servant." He turned and gave Lagardere a salutation that was more hostile than amiable, and then recrossed the bridge in his airiest manner as one that is a lord of fortune. Lagardere stood silent, almost gloomy, looking at the ground. Gabrielle regarded him for a moment timidly, and then, advancing, softly placed a hand upon his shoulder.

"You are not angry with me?" she whispered.

Lagardere turned to her and forced himself to smile cheerfully. "Angry—with you? How could that be possible?" He was silent for a moment, then he asked: "Do you know that gentleman?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "I saw him for the first time to-day, not very long ago, when I was speaking to Flora. I had come out for a moment when she called to me, and he came over the bridge and took us unawares."

Lagardere looked at her thoughtfully. "Could you love such a man as he?" he asked, gravely. "He is young, he is brave, he is witty; he might well win a girl's heart."

Gabrielle returned Lagardere's earnest look with a look of surprise. "He is a noble. I am a poor girl."

Lagardere smiled wistfully. "How if you were no longer to be a poor girl, Gabrielle? How if this visit to Paris were to change our fortunes?"

Gabrielle looked at him curiously. "Why have we come to Paris, Henri? I thought there was danger in Paris?"

"There was danger in Paris," Lagardere said, slowly—"grave danger. But I have seen a great man, and the danger has vanished, and you and I are coming to the end of our pilgrimage."

"The end of our pilgrimage?" echoed Gabrielle. "What is going to happen to us?"

"Wonderful things," Lagardere said, lightly—"beautiful things. You shall know all about them soon enough." To himself he whispered: "Too soon for me." Then he addressed the girl again, blithely: "When I took you to Madrid you saw the color of the court, you heard the music of festivals. Did you not feel that you were made for such a life?"

Gabrielle answered instantly: "Yes, for that life—or any life—with you."

Lagardere protested: "Ah, but without me."

Gabrielle's graceful being seemed to stiffen a little, and her words gave an absolute decision: "Nothing without you, Henri."

Lagardere seemed to tempt the girl with his next speech: "Those women you saw had palaces, had noble kinsfolk, had mothers—"

Gabrielle was not to be tempted from her faith. "A mother is the only treasure I envy them," she said, firmly.

Lagardere looked at her strangely, and again questioned her. "But suppose you had a mother, and suppose you had to choose between that mother and me?"

For a moment Gabrielle paused. The question seemed to have a distressing effect upon her. She echoed his last words: "Between my mother and you." Then she paused, and her lips trembled, but she spoke very steadily: "Henri, you are the first in the world for me."

Lagardere sighed. "You have never known a mother, but there are graver rivals to a friendship such as ours than a mother's love."

"What rivals can there be to our friendship?" Gabrielle asked.

Lagardere answered her sadly enough, though he seemed to smile: "A girl's love for a boy, a maid's love for a man. That pretty gentleman who was here but now, and swore he adored you—if you were noble, could you love such a man as he?"

Gabrielle began to laugh, as if all the agitations of the past instants had been dissipated into

nothingness by the jest of such a question. "I swear to you, Henri," she said, softly, "that the man I could love would not be at all like Monsieur de Chavernay."

In spite of himself, Lagardere gave a sigh of relief. It was something, at least, to know whom Gabrielle de Nevers could not love. He essayed to laugh, too.

"What would he be like," he asked—"the wonder whom you would consent to love?"

He spoke very merrily, but it racked his heart to speak thus lightly of the love of Gabrielle. He wished that he were a little boy again, that he might hide behind some tree and cry out his grief in bitter tears. But being, as he reminded himself, a weather-beaten soldier of fortune, it was his duty to screen his misery with a grin and to salute his doom with amusement. As for Gabrielle, she came a little nearer to Lagardere, and her eyes were shining very brightly, and her lips trembled a little, and she seemed a little pale in the clear air.

"I will try to paint you a picture," she said, hesitatingly, "of the man I"—she paused for a second, and then continued, hurriedly—"of the man I could love. He would be about your height, as I should think, to the very littlest of an inch; and he would be built as you are built, Henri; and his hair would be of your color, and his eyes would have your fire; and his voice would have the sound of your voice, the sweetest sound in the world; and the sweetest sound of that most sweet voice would be when it whispered to me that it loved me."

Lagardere looked at her with haggard, happy eyes. He could not misunderstand, and he was happy; he dared not understand, and he was sad.

"Gabrielle," he said, softly, "when you were a little maid I used to tell you tales to entertain you. Will you let me spin you a fable now?"

The girl said nothing; only she nodded, and she looked at him very fixedly. Lagardere went on:

"There was once a man, a soldier of fortune, an adventurous rogue, into whose hands a jesting destiny confided a great trust. That trust was the life of a child, of a girl, of a woman, whom it was his glory to defend for a while with his sword against many enemies."

"I think he defended her very well," Gabrielle interrupted, gently. Lagardere held up a warning finger.

"Hush," he said. "What I am speaking of took place ages ago, when the world was ever so much younger, in the days of Charlemagne and Cæsar and Achilles and other great princes long since withered, so you can know nothing at all about it. But this rogue of my story had a sacred duty to fulfil. He had to restore to this charge, this ward of his, the name, the greatness, that had been stolen from her. It was his mission to give her back the gifts which had been filched from her by treason. For seventeen years he had lived for this purpose, and only for this purpose, crushing all other thoughts, all other hopes, all other dreams. What would you say of such a man, so sternly dedicated to so great a faith, if he were to prove false to his trust, and to allow his own mad passion to blind him to the light of loyalty, to deafen him to the call of honor?"

He was looking away from her as he spoke, but the girl came close to him and caught his hands, and made him turn his face to her, and each saw that the other's eyes were wet. Gabrielle spoke steadily, eagerly:

"You say that what you speak of happened very long ago. But we are to-day as those were yesterday, and if I were the maid of your tale I would say to the man that love is the best thing a true man can give to a true woman, and that a woman who wore my body could lose no wealth, no kingdom, to compare with the rich treasure of her lover's heart."

There was no mistaking the meaning of the girl, the meaning ringing in her words, shining in her eyes, appealing in her out-stretched arms. To Lagardere it seemed as if the kingdom of the world were offered to him. He had but to keep silence, and his heart's desire was his. But he remembered the night in the moat of Caylus, he remembered the purpose of long years, he remembered his duty, he remembered his honor, and he grappled with the dragon of passion, with the dragon of desire. Very calmly he touched for a moment, with caressing hand, the hair of Gabrielle. Very quietly he spoke.

"We are taking my fairy tale too gravely," he said. "It all happened long ago, and has nothing to do with us. Our story is very different, and our story is coming to a wonderful conclusion. This day is your last day of doubt and ignorance, of solitude and poverty." He turned a little away from her and murmured to himself: "It is also my last day of youth and joy and hope."

Gabrielle pressed her hands against her breasts for a moment, like one in great dismay. The tears welled into her eyes. Then she gave a little moan of wonder and protest, and sprang towards him with out-stretched hands. "Do you not understand?" she cried. "Henri, Henri, I love you."

Lagardere grasped the out-stretched hands, and in another moment would have caught the girl in his arms, but a dry, crackling laugh arrested him. Gently restraining Gabrielle's advance, he turned his head and saw standing upon the bridge surveying him and Gabrielle a sinister figure. It was Æsop, returning from his stroll with Monsieur Peyrolles, who had paused on the bridge in cynical amusement of what he conceived to be a lovers' meeting between countryman and countrymaid, but whose face now flushed with a sudden interest as he recognized the face of the man in the gypsy habit.

Lagardere turned again to Gabrielle, and his face was calm and smiling. "Go in-doors," he said, pleasantly, "I will join you by-and-by."

Gabrielle, in her turn, had glanced at the sinister figure on the bridge, and, seeing the malevolence of its attitude, of its expression, had drawn back with a faint cry. "Henri," she said—"Henri, who is that watching us? He looks so evil."

Lagardere had recognized Æsop as instantly as Æsop had recognized Lagardere. Æsop now came slowly towards them, addressing them mockingly: "Do not let me disturb you. Life is brief, but love is briefer."

Lagardere again commanded Gabrielle: "Go in, child, at once."

"Are you in danger?" Gabrielle asked, fearfully.

Lagardere shook his head and repeated his command: "No. Go in at once. Wait in your room until I come for you."

Æsop looked at him with raised eyebrows and a wicked grin. "Why banish the lady? She might find my tale entertaining."

At an imperative signal from Lagardere, Gabrielle entered the Inn. Lagardere then advanced towards Æsop, who watched him with folded arms and his familiar malevolent smile. When they were quite close, Æsop greeted Lagardere:

"So the rat has come to the trap at last. Lagardere in Paris—ha, ha!"

Lagardere looked at him ponderingly. "The thought amuses you."

Æsop's grin deepened. "Very much. Before nightfall you will be in prison."

Lagardere seemed to deny him. "I think not. You carry a sword and can use it. You shall fight for your life, like your fellow-assassins."

Æsop looked about him. "I have but to raise my voice. There must be people within call even in this sleepy neighborhood."

Lagardere still smiled, and the smile was still provocative. "But if you raise your voice I shall be reluctantly compelled to stab you where you stand. Ah, coward, can you only fight in the dark when you are nine to one?"

Æsop gave his hilt a hitch. "You will serve my master's turn as well dead as alive. I wear the best sword in the world, and it longs for your life."

Lagardere pointed to the tranquil little Inn. "Behind yonder Inn there is a garden. To-day, when all the world is at the fair, that garden is as lonely as a cemetery. At the foot of the garden runs the river, a ready grave for the one who falls. There we can fight in quiet to our heart's content."

Æsop glared at Lagardere with a look of triumphant hatred. "I mean to kill you, Lagardere!" he said, and the tone of his voice was surety of his intention and his belief in his power to carry it out.

Lagardere only laughed as lightly as before. "I mean to kill you, Master Æsop. I have waited a long time for the pleasure of seeing you again."

Then the pair passed into the quiet Inn and out of the quiet Inn into the quiet Inn's quiet garden, and down the quiet garden to a quiet space hard by the quiet river.

XVII

IN THE GARDEN

Beyond the Inn there ran, or rather rambled, a long garden, the more neglected part of which was grown with flowers, while the better-attended portion was devoted to the cultivation of vegetables. Where the garden ceased a little orchard of apple-trees, pear-trees, and plum-trees began, and this orchard was followed by a small open space of grassed land which joined the river. Here a diminutive landing-stage had been built, which was now crazy enough with age and dilapidation, and attached to this stage were a couple of ancient rowing-boats, against whose gaunt ribs the ripples lapped. Sometimes this garden and orchard had their visitors: the landlord and his friends would often smoke their pipes and drink their wine under the shade of the trees, and even passing clients would occasionally indulge themselves with the privilege of a stroll in the untidy garden. But to-day the place was quite deserted—as desolate as a garden in a dream. Every one who could go had gone to the fair, and those travellers who paused to drink in passing took their liquor quickly and hurried on to share in the fair's festivity. The landlord was kept busy enough attending to those passers-by in the early part of the day, and, now that the stream had ceased and custom slackened, he was glad enough to take his ease in-doors and leave his garden to its loneliness.

When, therefore, Lagardere and Æsop entered the garden they found it as quiet and as uninhabited as any pair of swordsmen could desire. They walked in silence along the path

between the flowers and the vegetables, Lagardere only pausing for a moment to pluck a wild rose which he proposed in the serenity of his confidence to present to Gabrielle, and while he paused Æsop eyed him maliciously and amused himself by kicking with his heel at a turnip and hacking it into fragments. Lagardere put his flower into the lapel of his coat, and the pair resumed their silent progress through the orchard till they came to a halt upon the river-bank.

Lagardere looked about him and seemed pleased with what he saw. There was no one in sight, either hard by or upon the opposite bank of the river, and he felt that it might be taken for granted that there was no one within hearing. He turned to Æsop and addressed him, very pleasantly: "This, I think, will serve our purpose as well as any place in the world."

Æsop grinned malignly. "It would suit my purpose," he said, "to get you out of the way in any place in the world."

Lagardere laughed softly and shook his head. "One or other of us has to be got out of the way," he said, quietly, "but I think, Master Æsop, that I am not the man. I have been waiting a long time for this chance; but I always felt sure that the time would bring the chance, and I mean to make an end of you."

Æsop scowled. "You talk very big, Little Parisian," he said, "but you will find that in me you deal with a fellow of another temper to those poor hirelings you have been lucky enough to kill. They were common rogues enough, that handled their swords like broom-handles. I was always a master, and my skill has grown more perfect since we last met at Caylus. I think you will regret this meeting, Captain Lagardere."

Now, Lagardere had been listening very patiently while Æsop spoke, and while he listened a thought came into his mind which at first seemed too fantastic for consideration, but which grew more tempting and more entertainable with every second. To thrust Æsop from his path was one thing, and a thing that must be done if Lagardere's life-purposes were to be accomplished. But to get rid of Æsop and yet to use him—at once to obliterate him and yet to recreate him, so that he should prove the most deadly enemy of the base cause that he was paid to serve—here was a scheme, a dream, that if it could be made a reality would be fruitful of good uses. It was therefore with a strange smile that he listened while Æsop menaced him with regret for the meeting, and it was with a strange smile that he spoke:

"I do not think so," he answered, maturing his plan even while he talked, and finding it the more feasible and the more pleasing. "You are a haggard rascal, Master Æsop, and the world should have no use for you. I believe that by what I am about to do I shall render the world and France and myself a service. You are nothing more than a rabid wild beast, and it is well to be quit of you." As he spoke he drew his sword and came on guard.

Something in the composed manner and the mocking speech of Lagardere seemed to bid Æsop pause. He let his weapon remain in its sheath and began to parley.

"Come, come, Captain Lagardere," he began, "is it necessary, after all, that we should quarrel? You have got Nevers's girl—there is no denying that—but we do not want her. We have a girl of our own. Now I know well enough, for I have not studied love books and read love books for nothing," and he grinned hideously as he spoke, "that you are in love with the girl you carry about with you. Well and good. How if we call a truce, make a peace? You shall keep your girl, and do as you please with her; we will produce our girl, and do as we please with her. You shall have as much money as you want, I can promise that for the Prince of Gonzague, and you can live in Madrid or where you please with your pretty minion. Make a bargain, man, and shake hands on it."

Lagardere eyed the hunchback with something of the compassion and curiosity of a surgeon about to deal with an ugly case. He saw now his enemy's hand and the strength of his enemy's cards and the cleverness of his enemy's plan, and was not in the least abashed by its audacity or his own isolation.

"Master Æsop," he said, briefly, "if it ever came to pass that I should find myself making terms or shaking hands with such as you, or the knave that uses you for his base purpose, I should very swiftly go and hang myself, I should be so ashamed of my own bad company. We have talked long enough; it is time for action." He saluted quickly as he spoke, according to the code of the fencing-schools.

And Æsop, in answer to the challenge, drew his own sword and answered the salutation. "Gallant captain," he sneered, "I have been in training for this chance these many years, and I think I will teach you to weep for your heroics." As he spoke he came on guard, and the blades met.

The place that had been chosen for the combat was suitable enough, quite apart from its solitude. The morning air was clear and even; the sun's height caused no diverting rays to disturb either adversary; the grass was smooth and supple to the feet; there was ample ground to break in all directions.

The moment that Lagardere's steel touched that of Æsop's, he knew that Æsop's boast had not been made in vain. Though it was a long time now since that afternoon in the frontier Inn when he and Æsop had joined blades before, he remembered the time well enough to appreciate the difference between the sword he then encountered and the sword he encountered now. Clearly Æsop had spoken the truth when he had talked of his daily practice and his steady advance towards perfection. But, and Lagardere smiled as he remembered this, Æsop had forgotten or overlooked the possibility that Lagardere's own sword-play would improve with time—that

Lagardere's own sword-play was little likely to rust for lack of usage.

The few minutes that followed upon the encounter of the hostile steels were minutes of sheer enjoyment to Lagardere. Æsop was a worthy antagonist, that he frankly admitted from the first, and he wished, as he fought, that he could divide his personality and admire, as a spectator, the passage at arms between two such champions. Of the result, from the first, Lagardere had not the slightest doubt. He was honestly convinced, by his simple logic of steel, that it was his mission to avenge Nevers and to expiate his murder. He was, as it were, a kind of seventeenth century crusader, with a sealed and sacred mission to follow; and while, as a stout-hearted and honest soldier of fortune, he had no more hesitation about killing a venomous thing like Æsop than he would have had about killing a snake, he was in this special instance exulted by the belief that in killing one of the men of the moat of Caylus his sword was the sword of justice, his sword was the sword of God.

If, therefore, it was soon plain to him that the boast of the hunchback was true enough, and that his skill with his weapon had greatly bettered in the years that had elapsed since their previous encounter, Lagardere was rejoiced to find it so, as it gave a greater difficulty and a greater honor to his achievement. It was clear, too, from the expression on Æsop's face, after the first few instants of the engagement, that he was made aware that his skill was not as the skill of Lagardere. He fought desperately, and yet warily, knowing that he was fighting for his life, and trying without success every cunning trick that he had learned in the fencing-schools of Spain. The thrust of Nevers he did not attempt, for of that he knew Lagardere commanded the parry, but there were other thrusts on which he relied to gain the victory, and each of these he tried in succession, only to be baffled by Lagardere's instinctive steel.

Lagardere, watching him while they fought, hated his adversary for his own sake apart from his complicity in the crime of Caylus. Æsop was the incarnation of everything that was detestable in the eyes of a man like Lagardere. A splendid swordsman, his sword was always lightly sold to evil causes. He prostituted the noble weapon that Lagardere idolized to the service of the assassin, the advantage of the bully, and the revenge of the coward. He would have felt no scruple about slaying him, even if Æsop had not been, as now he was, a dangerous and unexpected enemy in his path.

Æsop, unable to make Lagardere break ground, and unable to get within Lagardere's guard, now began to taunt his antagonist savagely, calling him a child-stealer and a woman-wronger, with other foul terms of abuse that rolled glibly from his lips in the ugliness of his rage and fear.

Lagardere listened with his quiet smile, and when the hunchback made a pause he answered him with scornful good-humor. "You waste your breath, Master Æsop," he said, "and you should be saving it for your prayers, if you know any, or for your fighting wind, if there is nothing of salvation in you. You are a very base knave. I do not think you ever did an honest, a kindly, or a generous deed in your life. I know that you have done many vile things, and would do more if time were given to you; but the time is denied, Master Æsop, and yet you may serve a good cause in your death."

Even as he spoke Lagardere's tranquillity of defence suddenly changed into rapidity of attack. His blade leaped forward, made sudden swift movements which the bravo strove in vain to parry, and then Æsop dropped his sword and fell heavily upon the grass. He was dead, dead of the thrust in the face, exactly between the eyes, the thrust of Nevers.

Lagardere leaned over his dead enemy and smiled. His account against the assassins of Caylus was being slowly paid; but never had any item of that account been annulled with less regret. The others—Staupitz, Saldagno, Pinto, and the rest—had been ruffianly creatures enough, but there was a kind of honesty, a measure of courage in their ruffianism. They were, at least some of them, good-hearted in their way, true to their comrades and their leaders; but of the ignoble wretch that now lay a huddle of black at his feet, Lagardere knew nothing that was not loathsome, and he knew much of Master Æsop.

Lagardere stooped and gathered a handful of grass, wiped his sword and sheathed it.

"Yes," he said, apostrophizing the dead body, "you shall serve a good cause now, Master Æsop, if you have never served a good cause yet."

He looked anxiously about him as he spoke to make sure that the solitude was still undisturbed. There was not a human being within sight on either bank of the river. This quiet, this isolation, were very welcome to his temper just then, for the purpose that had come into Lagardere's mind at the commencement of the combat had matured, had ripened during its course into a feasible plan. It had its risks, but what did that matter in an enterprise that was all risk; and if it succeeded, as, thanks to its very daring, it might succeed, it promised a magnificent reward. That it involved the despoiling of a dead body in no way harassed Lagardere. He was never one to let himself be squeamish over trifles where a great cause was at stake, and, though much that was inevitable to the success of his scheme was repellent to him, he choked down his disgust and faced his duty with a smile. Quickly he dragged the body of his dead enemy into the shelter and seclusion of the orchard-trees. There, rolling Æsop on his face, he proceeded nimbly and dexterously to strip his clothes from his body. Soon the black coat, black vest, black breeches, black stockings, black boots, and black hat lay in a pile of sable raiment on the orchard grass. As he garnered his spoil, a little book dropped from the pocket of the black coat and lay upon the grass. Lagardere picked it up and opened it with a look of curiosity that speedily changed to one of aversion, for the book was a copy in Italian of the *Luxurious Sonnets* of Messer Pietro Arentino, which Lagardere, who knew Italian, found at a glance to be in no way

to his taste, and the little book had pictures in it which pleased him still less. With a grunt of disgust at this strange proof of the dead man's taste in literature, Lagardere stepped to the edge of the orchard, and, holding the volume in his finger and thumb, pitched it over the open space into the river, where it sank. Having thus easily got rid of the book, Lagardere began to cast about him for some way to dispose of the body.

The boats that lay alongside of the little landing-stage caught his eye. Lifting Master Æsop's corpse from the ground, he trailed it to the crazy structure, and placed it in the oldest and most ramshackle of the two weather-worn vessels. After untying the rope that fastened the boat to its wharf, Lagardere caught up a boat-hook that lay hard by, and, raising it as if it were a spear, he drove it with all his strength against the bottom of the boat and knocked a ragged hole in his rotting timbers. Then, with a vigorous push, he sent the boat out upon the smooth, swift river.

The vigor of its impetus carried the boat nearly out to the middle of the stream before the river could take advantage of the leak. Then, in a few minutes, Lagardere saw the strangely burdened craft slowly sink and finally settle beneath the surface of the stream.

When the boat and its burden were out of sight, and the water ran as smoothly as if it were troubled with no such secret, Lagardere turned, and, gathering up the garments of his antagonist as a Homeric hero would have collected his fallen enemy's armor, rolled them into as small a bundle as possible, and, putting them under his arm, made his way cautiously back to the Inn.

He gained its shelter unperceived. Unperceived and noiselessly he ascended the stairs which led to his room, and, opening the door, flung his bundle upon the ground. He then closed the door again, and, going a little farther down the corridor, knocked at an adjoining door, which immediately opened, and Gabrielle stood before him looking pale and anxious. Lagardere smiled cheerfully at her, and, taking from his coat the white rose which he had plucked in the garden, offered it to her.

The girl caught it and pressed it to her lips, and then asked, eagerly: "The man—where is the man? What has become of him?"

Lagardere affected an air of surprise, and then, with the manner of one who thought the matter of no importance, answered her: "You mean my friend in black who spoke to me just now?"

The girl nodded. "Yes," she said, "he seemed evil, he seemed dangerous."

Lagardere smiled reassuringly. "Evil he may be," he said, "but not dangerous—no, not dangerous. Indeed, I am inclined to think he will be more useful to us than otherwise."

"But he seemed to threaten you," the girl protested.

Lagardere admitted the fact. "He was a little threatening at first," he agreed, "but I have managed to pacify him, and he will not trouble us any more."

He took the girl's cold hand and kissed it reverentially. "Gabrielle," he said, "we go to Paris to-day, but till I come for you and tell you it is time for us to depart I want you to remain in this chamber. You will do this for me, will you not?"

"I will always do whatever you wish," the girl answered, and her eyes filled with tears.

Lagardere was filled with the longing to clasp her in his arms, but he restrained himself, again kissed her hand with the same air of tender devotion, and motioned to her to enter her room. When she had closed the door he returned to his own room, and there, with amazing swiftness, divested himself of his outer garments and substituted for them those of the dead Æsop.

Producing a small box from a battered portmanteau that stood in a corner, he produced certain pigments from it, and, facing a cracked fragment of unframed looking-glass that served for a mirror, proceeded with the skill of an experienced actor to make certain changes in his appearance.

His curiously mobile face he distorted at once into an admirable likeness to the hunchback, and then, this initial likeness thus acquired, he heightened and intensified it by few but skilful strokes of coloring matter. Then he dexterously rearranged his hair to resemble the hunchback's dishevelled locks, compelling its curls to fall about his transformed face and shade it. Finally he surmounted all with the hunchback's hat, placed well forward on his forehead. He gave a smile of satisfaction at the result of his handiwork, and the smile was the malign smile of Æsop.

"That is good enough," he murmured, "to deceive a short-sighted fellow like Peyrolles, and as for his Highness of Gonzague, he has not seen me for so many years that there will be no difficulty with him."

He glanced at his new raiment with an expression of distaste. "When I get to Paris," he mused, "I will shift these habiliments. It is all very well to play the bird of prey, but it is somewhat unpleasant to wear the bird's own feathers."

THE FACTION OF GONZAGUE

A little later in the day a company of joyous gentlemen made their way from the fair of Neuilly and came to a halt opposite the tavern whose green arbors seemed inviting enough after the heat of the dusty road. All of the company were richly dressed, most of the company were young—the joyous satellites of the central figure of the party. This was a tall, graceful Italianate man, who carried his fifty years with the grace and ease of thirty. He had a handsome face; those that admired him, and they were many, said there was no handsomer man at the court of the king than the king's familiar friend Louis de Gonzague. A man of the hour and a man of the world, Gonzague delighted to shine almost unrivalled and quite unsurpassed in the splendid court which the cardinal had permitted the king to gather about him. Something of a statesman and much of a scholar, Gonzague delighted to be the patron of the arts, and to lend, indirectly, indeed, but no less efficaciously, his counsels to the service of the cardinal during the cardinal's lifetime, and to the king now that the cardinal was gone. A man of pleasure, Gonzague was careful to enjoy all the delights that a society which found its chief occupation in the pursuit of amusement afforded. Even the youngest cavalier in Paris or Versailles would have regretted to find himself in rivalry with Gonzague for the favors of the fair. But in his pleasures, as in his policy, Gonzague was always discreet, reserved, even slightly mysterious, and though rumor had linked his name time and time again with the names of such gracious ladies as the cardinal had permitted to illuminate the court of the king, Gonzague had always been far too cautious, or too indifferent, to drift into anything that could in the least resemble an enduring entanglement. Indeed, there was an element of the Oriental in his tastes, which led him rather to find his entertainment in such light love as came and went by the back ways of palaces or could be sequestered in cheerful little country villas remote from curious eyes. This, however, was a matter of gossip, rumor, speculation. What was certainly known about Louis de Gonzague was that he delighted always to be surrounded by young gentlemen of blood and spirit, with whom his exquisite affability seemed at once to put him on a footing of equal age, and whose devotion to himself, his person, and his purposes he was always careful to acquire by a lavish generosity and that powerful patronage which his former friendship with the cardinal and his present influence over the king allowed him to extend.

Perhaps the most remarkable proof of Gonzague's astuteness, of Gonzague's suppleness, was afforded by the manner in which he had succeeded in holding the favor of the great cardinal through all the long years of Richelieu's triumph, and yet at the same time in retaining so completely the friendship of the king. When the cardinal died, and many gentlemen that served the Red Robe found themselves no longer in esteem, Gonzague passed at once into the circle of the king's most intimate friends. Gonzague, as the comrade of a ruling potentate, proved himself a master of all arts that might amuse a melancholic sovereign newly redeemed from an age-long tutelage, and eager to sate those many long-restrained pleasures that he was at last free to command. Gonzague's ambition appeared to be to play the Petronius part, to be the Arbiter of Elegancies to a newly liberated king and a newly quickened court.

Very wisely Gonzague had never made himself a politician. He had always allowed himself to appear as one that was gracefully detached, by his Italianate condition, from pledge to any party issues, and so in his suave, affable fashion he went his way, liked by all men who knew him slightly, counted on by the few men who believed they knew him well, and hugely admired by that vast congregation of starers and gapers who passionately display their approval of an urbane, almost an austere, profligacy.

In the long years in which Gonzague had contrived to establish for himself the enviable reputation of the ideal of high gentlehood, he had very quietly and cautiously formed, as it were, a kind of court within a court—a court that was carefully formed for the faithful service of his interests. He managed, by dexterously conferring obligations of one kind or another, to bind his adherents to him by ties as strong as the ties of kinship, by ties stronger than the ties of allegiance to an unsettled state and a shadowy idea of justice. There was a Gonzague party among the aristocracy of the hour, and a very strong party it promised to be, and very ably guided to further his own ends by the courteous, so seeming amiable gentleman who was its head.

About him at this moment were grouped some of the joyous members of that jovial sodality. There was Navailles, the brisk, the dissolute, the witty, always ready to risk everything, including honor, for a cast of the dice, for a kiss, for a pleasure or a revenge. There was Nocé, pleasure-loving, pleasure-giving, always good-tempered, always good-humored, always serenely confident that the world as it existed was made chiefly for his amusement and the amusement of his friends. There was Taranne, a darker spirit, as ready as the rest of the fellowship to take the wine of life from the cup of joy in the hands of the dancing-girl, but a less genial drinker, a less cheerful and perhaps more greedy lover and feaster, as one who dimly and imperfectly appreciates that the conditions of things about him might not be destined to endure forever, and was, therefore, resolved to get as much of his share of the spoil of the sport while it lasted as any bandit of them all. There, too, was Oriol, the fat country gentleman, at once the richest and most foolish of the company. There, too, was Albret, who loved women more than wine; and Gironne, who loved wine more than women; and Choisy, who never knew which to love the best, but with whom both disagreed.

At the present moment the party was extremely hilarious. Its members had ransacked the toy-shops of the fair, and every man was carrying some plaything and making the most of it, and

extolling its greater virtues than the playthings of his fellows. Taranne carried a pea-shooter, and peppered his companion's legs persistently, grinning with delight if any of his victims showed irritation. Oriol had got a large trumpet, and was blowing it lustily. Nocé had bought a cup-and-ball, and was trying, not very successfully, to induce the sphere to abide in the hollow prepared for it. Navailles had got a large Pulcinello doll that squeaked, and was pretending to treat it as an oracle, and to interpret its mechanical utterances as profound comments on his companions and prophecies as to their fortunes. Albret was tripping over a skipping-rope; Gironne puffed at a spinning windmill; Choisy played on a bagpipes, and Montaubert on a flute. In the background Monsieur Peyrolles watched all this mirthfulness with indifference and his master's face with attention.

Gonzague looked round upon his friends with the indulgent smile of a still youthful school-master surrounded by his promising pupils. "Well, gentlemen, does the fair amuse you?" he asked, urbanely.

Navailles turned to his doll for inspiration, made it give its metallic squeak, and then, as if repeating what Pulcinello had whispered to him, replied: "Enormously."

Oriol trumpeted his approval loudly, and the expressions of the others bore ample testimony to their enjoyment.

"Well, gentlemen," said Gonzague, "I hope and think that I reserved the best for the end." He made a sign to Peyrolles, who approached him. "Where is the girl?" he questioned, in a low voice.

Peyrolles pointed to the caravan. "Shall I bring her?" he asked.

Gonzague nodded. Peyrolles crossed the grass, his course followed curiously by the eyes of Gonzague's friends, till he halted at the caravan and knocked at the door. Flora put out her head, and, recognizing Peyrolles, greeted him with an eager smile.

"The time has come," said Peyrolles, in a low voice, "for you to dance to this gentleman."

Flora touched him eagerly on the arm. "Which is my prince?" she asked.

Peyrolles gave a jerk of his head in the direction of Gonzague, and answered: "He in black with the star."

In a moment Flora had retired within the caravan, and emerged again with a pair of castanets in her hands. She advanced to Gonzague and made him a reverence. "Shall I dance for you, pretty gentleman?" she asked.

Gonzague watched her curiously, seeing in one swift, incisive glance that she might very well serve for his purpose. "With all my heart," he answered, courteously.

He seated himself at a table under the trees, with his little court grouped about him, and Flora began to dance. It was such a dance as only a Spaniard trained in the gypsy school could dance—a dance whose traditions go back to days when the Roman Empire was old, to days when the Roman Empire was young. Now active, now languid, by turns passionate, daring, defiant, alluring, a wonderful medley of exquisite contradictions, the girl leaped hither and thither, clicking her castanets and sending her bright glances like arrows towards the admiring spectators. She moved like a flame fluttered by the wind, like a butterfly, like a leaf, like any swift, volatile, shifting, shimmering thing. She seemed as agile as a cat, as tireless as a monkey, as free as a bird. Suddenly the dance that was all contradiction ended in a final contradiction. At the moment when her exuberance seemed keenest, her vitality fiercest, her action most animated, when her eyes were shining their brightest, her lips smiling their sweetest, and her castanets clicking their loudest, she suddenly became rigid, with arms extended, like one struck motionless by a catalepsy, her face robbed of all expression, her limbs stiff, her arms extended. She stood so for a few seconds, then a smile rippled over her face, her arms dropped to her sides, and she seemed to swoon towards the ground in a surrendering courtesy. The dance was at an end.

The delighted gentlemen applauded enthusiastically. All would have been eager to seek closer acquaintance with the gypsy, but all refrained because Gonzague himself rose from his seat and advanced towards the girl, who watched him, respectful and excited, with lowered lids.

Gonzague laid his hand on her shoulder with a caress that was almost paternal while he spoke: "I know more about you than you know yourself, child. Go back now. I have long been looking for you."

Flora could scarcely find breath to stammer: "For me?" She ventured to look up into the face of this grave and courtly gentleman, and she found something very attractive in the dark eyes that were fixed upon her with a look of so much benevolence. Gonzague pointed to Peyrolles, who was standing a little apart from the group of gentlemen.

"Peyrolles will come for you presently," he said. "Peyrolles will tell you what to do. Obey him implicitly."

Flora made him another courtesy. "Yes, monseigneur," she faltered, and, turning, ran swiftly to the caravan and disappeared within its depths. Each of the young gentlemen gladly would have followed her, but, as before, they were restrained by the action of Gonzague, who seemed to have taken the girl under his protection, and no one of them was foolhardy enough to dream of crossing Gonzague in a pleasure or a caprice.

But during the progress of the dance there had been an addition to the little group of

gentlemen. Chavernay had come over the bridge, with, curiously enough, Cocardasse and Passepoil at his heels. When he saw that a dance was toward, he made a sign to his followers to remain upon the bridge, while he himself mingled with his habitual companions. When the dance was over and Flora had disappeared, Chavernay advanced to Gonzague. He, at least, was foolhardy enough for anything. "I give you my word, cousin," he said, "that I have already lost the half of my heart to your dancer. Are we rivals with the gypsy lass, cousin?"

Gonzague looked urbanely and yet gravely at his impudent kinsman. "You must look for love elsewhere," he said, decisively. "I have reasons, though not such reasons as yours; but you will oblige me."

Chavernay laughed contentedly. "My faith! there are plenty of pretty women in the world, and plenty of ugly men, as it would seem. I have brought you some friends of yours."

He made a signal as he spoke, and Cocardasse and Passepoil, descending from their post upon the bridge, advanced towards the brilliant group, bowing grotesquely as they did so, with their big hats in their hands and their long rapiers tilting up their ragged cloaks. All the party gazed in amazement at the whimsical apparitions, to the great indignation of Cocardasse, who whispered angrily to his companion: "Why the devil do they stare at us so?" While to him his companion replied, soothingly: "Gently, gently."

The gentlemen were screaming with laughter. Taranne fired a volley of peas, which rattled harmlessly against the long boots of Passepoil. Navailles consulted his oracle, and declared that he liked the big one best. Oriol, with a flourish of his trumpet, announced that he preferred the smug fellow. Peyrolles, with a look of horror on his face, rushed forward and attempted to intercept the new-comers, but he was too late. Cocardasse was already in front of Gonzague, and had made him a tremendous obeisance. "We have the honor to salute your highness," he said, sonorously.

Gonzague observed him with well-restrained astonishment, and questioned Chavernay: "Who are these—gentlemen?"

Chavernay was eager to explain that he had come across them in the fair, and had taken a great fancy to them. After some conversation he found that they were seeking the Prince de Gonzague, and thereupon he had consented to be their guide and to present them. At this point Peyrolles interposed. Coming close to Gonzague, he whispered something to him which caused for a moment a slight expression of dislike, almost of dread, to disturb the familiar imperturbability of his countenance. Then he looked at the bravos. "Gentlemen," he said, "I believe it is your wish to serve me. A man can never have too many friends. Gentlemen, I accept your services." He turned to his familiar, and ordered: "Peyrolles, get them some new clothes."

Peyrolles hurriedly beckoned Cocardasse and Passepoil apart, and could be seen at a little distance transferring money from his pocket to their palms, giving them instructions, and finally dismissing them.

Chavernay looked at Gonzague. "I congratulate you on your new friends."

Gonzague shook his head. "Judge no man by his habit. Hearts of gold may beat beneath those tatters."

Chavernay smiled. "I dare say they are no worse than most of your friends."

Taranne, Nocé, Navailles, Oriol, Albret, Choisy, Gironne, and Montaubert caught him up angrily. They seemed offended at the suggestion. Gonzague placated them with a phrase: "Our dear Chavernay includes himself, no doubt."

Chavernay accepted the suggestion. "Oh yes; there is devilishly little to choose between any of us."

The impertinence of the answer and the impertinence of the speaker's carriage were not calculated to smooth the ruffled feelings of the gentlemen, but Chavernay was never one to bridle his speech in deference to the susceptibility of his cousin's satellites. He now eyed them mockingly, even provokingly, full of amusement, while they fumed and fretted, and hands crept to hilts. Cheerfully courageous, Chavernay was prepared at any moment to back his words with his sword. Gonzague, studying the lowering faces of his adherents, and smiling compassionately at the boyish insolence of Chavernay, interposed and stifled the threatened brawl. "Come, gentlemen," he said, graciously, "let there be no bickering. Chavernay has a sharp tongue, and spares no one, not even me, yet I am always ready to forgive him his impudence."

A word of Gonzague was a command—a wish, a law—to his faithful followers, and their countenances cleared as he spoke. Gonzague went on: "His Gracious Majesty the King will be leaving the fair soon, though I am glad to think that it seems to have diverted his majesty greatly. Let us attend upon him, gentlemen." Gonzague emphasized his words by leading the way across the bridge, and Chavernay and the others followed at his heels, a laughing, chattering, many-colored company of pleasure-seekers. Only Peyrolles remained behind.

When the last of them had crossed the bridge and was far away upon the road to Neuilly, a man came to the door of the Inn and looked thoughtfully after them.

The man was clad in black from head to foot, and his body was heavily bowed. As he moved slowly across the grass, Peyrolles hastened towards him, seeming to recognize him. "I was looking for you, Master Æsop," he cried; "I have good news for you."

The hunchback answered, quietly: "Good news is always welcome." And to the ears of Peyrolles

the voice was the voice of Æsop, and to the eyes of Peyrolles the form and the face of the speaker were the form and the face of Æsop.

Peyrolles went on: "His highness the Prince de Gonzague is delighted with the girl you have found; she will pass admirably for the girl of Nevers."

The seeming Æsop nodded his head and said, quietly: "I am glad to hear it."

"The Prince wishes to see you," Peyrolles continued. "The Prince wishes you to enter his service. Master Æsop, Master Æsop, your fortune is made, thanks to me."

"Thanks to me, I think," the hunchback commented, dryly.

Peyrolles shrugged his shoulders. "As you please," he said. "Come to the Hôtel de Gonzague tomorrow, and ask for me."

"I will come," the hunchback promised. Then Peyrolles hastened over the bridge, and made all speed to rejoin his master.

When he was well on his way the hunchback drew himself into a chair, laughing heartily. "Oh, Æsop, Æsop," Lagardere murmured to himself, "how vexed you would be if you knew how useful you prove to me!"

XIX

THE HALL OF THE THREE LOUIS

One of the handsomest rooms in the Palace of Gonzague, as the Palace of Nevers was now called, was known as the Hall of the Three Louis. It was so called on account of the three life-sized portraits which it contained. The first was the portrait of the late duke, Louis de Nevers, in all the pride of that youth and joyousness which was so tragically extinguished in the moat of Caylus. His fair hair fell about his delicate, eager face; his left hand rested upon the hilt of the sword he knew how to use so well; his right hand, perhaps in the pathos, perhaps in the irony of the painter's intention, was pressed against his heart, for Louis de Nevers had been a famous lover in his little day, but never so true a lover as when he wooed and won the daughter of the hostile house of Caylus. A heavy curtain by the side of the picture masked an alcove sacred to the memory of Nevers.

Facing the portrait of the dead duke was the portrait of his successor, of the present master of the house. Louis de Gonzague, in all other things a contrast to Louis de Nevers, contrasted with him most flagrantly in appearance. Against the fair, boyish face of Nevers you had to set the saturnine Italianate countenance of Gonzague. The brilliancy of Louis de Nevers was all external, bright as summer is bright, gay as summer is gay, cheerful as summer is cheerful. The brilliancy of Louis de Gonzague showed more sombrely, as melting gold flows in a crucible. No one who saw the picture could fail to deny its physical beauty, but many would deny it the instant, the appealing charm which caught at the heart of the spectator with the first glance he gave to the canvas that portrayed Louis de Nevers. In contrast, too, were the very garments of the two men, for the dead duke affected light, airy, radiant colors—clear blues, and clear pale-yellows, and delicate reds with subtle emphasis of gold and silver; but the splendor of Gonzague's apparel was sombre, like his beauty, with black for its dominant note, and only deep wine-colored crimsons or fierce ambers to lighten its solemnity.

The third picture, which was placed between Louis de Nevers and Louis de Gonzague, was the portrait of Louis, not as he now looked, being King of France in reality, but as he looked some seventeen years earlier, when the cardinal was beginning his career, and when the peevishness of youth had not soured into the yellow melancholy of the monarch of middle age.

It was in this room, consecrated to the memory of his dead friend, to the honor of his living friend, and to the glory of his own existence, that Louis de Gonzague loved to work. It was a proof of his well-balanced philosophy that he found nothing to trouble him in the juxtaposition of the three pictures. The great double doors at one end of the room served to shut off a hall devoted for the most part to the private suppers which it was Louis de Gonzague's delight to give to chosen friends of both sexes, and when, as often happened, supper ended, and a choice company of half-drunken women and wholly drunken men reeled through the open doors into the room where the three Louis reigned, Gonzague, who himself kept always sober, was no more than cynically amused by the contrast between the noisy and careless crew who had invaded the chamber and the sinister gravity with which the portraits of the three Louis regarded one another.

The king himself, who sometimes since his freedom surreptitiously made one at these merry gatherings, where a princely fortune and a more than princely taste directed all that appealed to all appetites—the king himself, coming flushed from one of these famous suppers into the sudden coolness and quiet of the great room, would appear to be more impressed than his host at the sudden sight of the three canvases. Then, in a voice perhaps slightly unsteady, but still

carrying in its flood the utterance of a steady purpose, Louis of France would catch Louis de Gonzague by the wrist, and, pointing to the bright, smiling image of Louis de Nevers, would repeat for the twentieth, the fiftieth, the hundredth time his oath of vengeance against the assassin of his friend if ever that assassin should come into his power. And hearing this oath for the twentieth, the fiftieth, the hundredth time, Louis de Gonzague would always smile his astute smile and incline his head gravely in sign of sympathy with the king's feelings, and allow his fine eyes to be dimmed for an instant with a suggestion of tears.

The room was an interesting room to any one curious as to the concerns of the Prince de Gonzague for other reasons than the presence of the three pictures, for to any one who knew anything about the arrangements of the palace this room represented, as it were, a kind of debatable land between the kingdom of Gonzague on the one side and the kingdom of Nevers on the other. A door on the left communicated with the private apartments of Louis de Gonzague. Cross the great room to the right, and you came to a door communicating with the private apartments of Madame the Princess de Gonzague. The Prince de Gonzague never passed the threshold of the door that led to the princess's apartments. The Princess de Gonzague never passed the threshold of the door that led to the prince's apartments. Ever since their strange marriage the man and the woman had lived thus apart; the man, on his part, always courteous, always deferential, always tender, always ready to be respectfully affectionate, and the woman, on her part, icily reserved, wrapped around in the blackness of her widowhood, inexorably deaf to all wooing, immovably resolute to be alone.

What rumor said was, for once, quite true. The young Duchess de Nevers, on the night of her marriage to Prince Louis de Gonzague, had warned him that if he attempted to approach her with the solicitations of a husband she would take her life, and Louis de Gonzague, who, being an Italian, was ardent, but who, being an Italian, was also very intelligent, saw that the young wife-widow meant what she said and would keep her word, and desisted discreetly from any attempt to play the husband. After all, he had his consolations: he controlled the vast estates of his dead friend and kinsman, and though he felt for the lady he had married a certain animal attraction, which easily cooled as the years went on, his passion for the wealth of Nevers was more pronounced than his passion for the wife of Nevers, and he contented himself easily enough with the part assigned to him by his wife in the tragi-comedy. Every day he requested, very courteously, through Monsieur Peyrolles, permission to wait upon the princess, and every day the princess, also through a servant, expressed her regret that the state of her health would not allow her the pleasure of receiving his highness. So it had been through the years since Louis de Nevers was done to death in the moat of Caylus.

On the day after the fair at Neuilly, Louis de Gonzague was seated in the room of the Three Louis busily writing at a table. By his side stood Peyrolles, his gorgeous attire somewhat unpleasantly accentuating the patent obsequiousness with which he waited upon his master's will. For a while Gonzague's busy pen formed flowing Italian characters upon the page before him. Presently he came to an end, reread his letter, shook over the final writings some silver sand, then folded it and sealed it leisurely. When he had done he spoke to Peyrolles:

"This letter is to go to his majesty. Send Doña Flora here. Stay! Who is in the antechamber?"

Peyrolles answered with a bow: "The Chevalier Cocardasse and the Chevalier Passepoil, monseigneur."

Gonzague made a faint grimace. "Let them wait there."

Peyrolles inclined profoundly. "Yes, monseigneur," he said, and waited. The long knowledge of his master's manner, the long study of the expression on his master's face, told him he had not done with him, and he was right, for in a moment Gonzague spoke to him again:

"This gypsy girl will serve the turn to perfection. She is dark, as Gabrielle de Caylus was dark. She is beautiful, not so beautiful as Gabrielle de Caylus indeed, but, bah! filia pulchra, matre pulchrior. Before the king to-day I will produce her. The princess cannot but accept her. If afterwards a charming young girl should die of a decline—many die so—the fortune of Louis de Nevers becomes the fortune of Louis de Gonzague, who will know very well what to do with it, having the inestimable advantage of being alive."

Peyrolles indulged in the privilege of a faint little laugh at this witticism of his master, but apparently the applause did not please Gonzague, who gave him a gesture of dismissal. "Send the girl to me at once," he said; and with a still more humble salute Peyrolles quitted the apartment. When Gonzague was alone he sat for a few minutes staring before him like one who dreams waking. Then he turned and glanced at the picture of Louis de Nevers, and an ironical smile wrinkled, more than time had ever done, his handsome face. Evidently the contemplation of the picture seemed to afford him a great deal of satisfaction, for he was still looking at it, and still wearing the same amused smile, when the door behind him opened and Flora came timidly into the room. She was not in appearance the same Flora who had dwelt in the caravan and danced for strangers on the previous day. She was now richly and beautifully dressed as a great lady should be, but she seemed more awkward in her splendid garments than she had ever seemed in the short skirts of the gypsy. Gonzague, whose every sense was acute, heard her come in, though she stepped very softly, and abandoned his contemplation of the picture of Louis de Nevers. He turned round and rose to his feet, and made her one of his exquisite salutations. The girl drew back with a little gasp and pressed her hands to her bosom.

Gonzague smiled paternally. "Are you afraid of me?"

The girl shook her head dubiously, and there was suspicion in her dark eyes as she asked: "What

do you want of me?"

Gonzague smiled more paternally than before. "I want you to love me," he said; and then, seeing that the gypsy lifted her brows, he continued, leisurely: "Do not misunderstand me. Women still are sometimes pleased to smile on me. I do not want such smiles from you, child. There is another fate for you. Are you content with your new life?"

Flora answered him with a weary tone in her voice and a weary look on her pretty face. "You have given me fine clothes and fine jewels. I ought to be content. But I miss my comrades and my wandering life."

Gonzague was still paternal as he explained: "You must forget your wandering life. Henceforward you are a great lady. Your father was a duke."

Flora gave a little gasp, and questioned: "Is my father dead?"

Gonzague allowed his chin to fall upon his breast and an expression of deep gloom to overshadow his face. "Yes," he said, and his voice was as a requiem to buried friendship.

Flora's heart was touched by this display of friendship. "And my mother?" she asked.

Gonzague's face lightened. "Your mother lives."

Flora questioned again, this time very timorously: "Will she love me?"

Gonzague seemed to look at the girl sympathetically, but really looked at her critically. He found her so pleasing to his eye that he almost regretted that she had been chosen for the part she had to play, but also he found her on the whole so suited to that part that he felt bound to stifle his regret. "Surely," he said, and smiled kindly upon her.

Flora gave a little sigh of satisfaction. "I have always dreamed that I should be a great lady. And dreams come true, you know—the dreams that gypsies dream."

Gonzague raised his hand to check her speech. "Forget the gypsies. Forget that the gypsies called you Flora. Your name is Gabrielle."

Flora gave a start of surprise. "Gabrielle!" she said. "How strange! That is the name of my dearest friend."

It was Gonzague's turn to be surprised, but he never was known to betray an emotion. It was with an air of complete indifference that he asked: "Who is she?"

And Flora answered, simply: "A girl I knew and loved when we were living in Spain."

Gonzague knew that he was agitated; and that he had every reason to be agitated, but he knew also that no one beholding him would know of his agitation. "What became of her?" he asked, still with the same apparent indifference.

And Flora answered as readily as before: "We travelled to France together."

"Travelled to France together!" echoed Gonzague.

Perhaps, in spite of himself, some hint of keenness was betrayed in the voice he was so studious to keep indifferent, for this time Flora gave question for question, suspiciously: "Why does all this interest you?"

Gonzague's voice was perfectly indifferent when he replied: "Everything that concerns you interests me. Tell me; was this other Gabrielle a Spaniard like you?"

Flora shook her head. "Oh no. She was French."

"Was she, too, an orphan?" Gonzague asked.

"Yes," said Flora; "but she had a guardian who loved her like a father."

The gypsy girl could not guess what raging passions were masked by the changeless serenity of Gonzague's face. "Who was that?" he asked, as he might have asked the name of some dog or some cat.

And he got the answer he expected from the girl: "A young French soldier."

Perhaps, again, Gonzague's voice was keener with his next question: "Whose name was—"

In this case Flora, suddenly recalling her conversation with Gabrielle on the previous day, became as suddenly cautious. "I have forgotten his name," she said, and looked as if nothing could rekindle her memory.

Gonzague affected to be busy with some of the papers that lay before him, and then, at a venture, and as if with no particular purpose in his thoughts, he said: "I wish I could get this Gabrielle to be your companion, child."

Flora clapped her hands, and forgot her caution in her joy at the prospect. "Well, that might be done. I will tell you a secret. Gabrielle and her guardian are in Paris."

Underneath the table, and hidden from the girl's sight, Gonzague's hands clinched tightly, as if they were clinching upon the throat of an enemy; but his face was still quite tranquil as he said, carelessly: "Where are they?"

Flora's voice was full of regret. "Ah! I do not know; but they were at the fair where we were playing, and I know that they are coming to Paris."

Gonzague rose to his feet and took both the girl's hands affectionately in his. His eyes looked affectionately into hers, and his voice was full of kindness. "If your friend can be found, be sure

that I will find her for you. And now go. I will send for you when the time comes for the meeting with your mother."

Flora clasped her hands nervously. "My mother! Oh, what shall I say to her?" she cried.

Gonzague's smile soothed her fears. "Hide nothing from her, for I am sure you have nothing to hide. Speak the loving words that a mother would like to hear."

With a grateful look at her newly found protector, Flora darted from the room, and Gonzague was left alone.

XX

A CONFIDENTIAL AGENT

Gonzague was left alone, indeed, only in a sense, for on a sudden the great hall with its famous pictures had become the theatre of fierce emotions and menacing presences. Just at the moment when Gonzague believed his schemes to be at their best and his fortunes to be nearing their top, he was suddenly threatened with the renewal of the old terror that had been kept at bay through all the years that had passed since the night of Caylus. Through all these years Lagardere had been kept from Paris, at the cost, indeed, as he believed, of many lives, but that was a price Louis de Gonzague was always prepared to pay when the protection of his own life was in question. Now it would seem as if Lagardere had broken his exile, had forced his way through the thicket of swords, and was again in Paris. Nor was this the worst. Just when Gonzague, after all his failures to trace the missing child of his victim, just when he had so ingeniously found a substitute for that missing child, it would really seem as if the child herself, now a woman, had come to Paris to defy him and to destroy his plans. He sat huddled with black thoughts for a time which seemed to him an age, but was in reality not more than a few moments; then, extending his hand, he struck a bell and a servant entered.

"Tell Peyrolles I want him," the prince commanded, and was again alone with his dreads and his dangers until Peyrolles appeared. Gonzague turned to his factotum. "I have reason to suspect that Lagardere is in Paris. If it be true, he will come too late. The princess will have accepted the gypsy as her child, the mother's voice will have spoken. If Lagardere is in Paris, he and the girl must be found, and once found—"

The ivory-like face of Peyrolles was quickened with a cunning look. "I have a man who will find him if any one can."

Gonzague turned upon him sharply. "Who is it?"

"Monseigneur," said Peyrolles, "I have at my disposal, and at the disposal of your highness, a very remarkable man, the hunchback Æsop. He was in the moat of Caylus that night. He, with those two you saw yesterday, are the only ones left, except—"

Peyrolles paused for a moment, and his pale face worked uncomfortably. Gonzague interpreted his thought. "Except you and me, you were going to say."

Peyrolles nodded gloomily. "As Æsop," he said, "has been in Spain all these years hunting Lagardere—"

"Yes," Gonzague interrupted, "and never finding him."

Peyrolles bowed. "True, your highness, but at least up to now he has kept Lagardere on the Spanish side of the frontier, kept Lagardere in peril of his life. Æsop hates Lagardere, always has hated him. When the last of our men met with"—he paused for a moment as if to find a fitting phrase, and then continued—"the usual misfortune, I thought it useless to leave Æsop in Spain, and sent for him. He came to me to-day. May I present him to your highness?"

Gonzague nodded thoughtfully. Any ally was welcome in such a crisis. "Yes," he said.

Peyrolles went to the door that communicated with the prince's private apartments, and, opening it, beckoned into the corridor. Then he drew back into the room, and a moment later was followed by a hunchbacked man in black, who wore a large sword. The man bowed profoundly to the Prince de Gonzague.

Peyrolles introduced him. "This is the man, monseigneur."

Gonzague looked fixedly at the man. He could see little of his face, for the head was thrust forward from the stooping, misshapen shoulders, and his long, dark hair hung about his cheeks and shaded his countenance. The face seemed pale and intelligent. It was naturally quite unfamiliar to Gonzague, who knew nothing of Æsop except as one of the men who had played a sinister part in the murder at Caylus.

Gonzague addressed him. "You know much, they tell me?"

The man bowed again, and spoke, slowly: "I know that Lagardere is in Paris, and with the child

of Nevers."

"Do you know where he is?" Gonzague questioned.

The man answered, with laconic confidence: "I will find out."

"How?" asked Gonzague.

The hunchback laughed dryly. "That is my secret. Paris cannot hold any mystery from me."

Gonzague questioned again: "Is it to your interest that Lagardere should die?"

"Indeed, yes," the hunchback answered. "Has he not sworn to kill every man who attacked Nevers that night? Has he not kept his word well? I am the last that is left—I and Monsieur Peyrolles, for, of course, I except your Excellence. I promise you I will find him, but I shall need help."

"Help?" Gonzague echoed.

The hunchback nodded. "He is a dangerous fellow, this Lagardere, as six of us have found to our cost. Are there not two of our number newly in your highness's service?"

"Cocardasse and Passepoil," Peyrolles explained.

The hunchback rubbed his hands. "The very men. Will your highness place them under my orders?"

"By all means," Gonzague answered, and, turning to Peyrolles, he said: "They are in the antechamber; bring them in."

Peyrolles turned to obey, when the hunchback delayed him with a gesture. "Your pardon, highness," he said; "but I think there is another service I can render you to-day."

"Another service?" Gonzague repeated, looking at the hunchback with some surprise.

The hunchback explained: "Your highness, as I understand, has summoned for this afternoon a small family council, ostensibly for the purpose of considering the position of affairs between madame the princess and yourself."

The hunchback paused. Gonzague nodded, but said nothing, and the hunchback resumed: "Your real purpose, however, as I understand, is to present to that council the young lady, the daughter of Nevers, whom I have been fortunate enough to discover in Spain. You wish this discovery to come as a surprise to madame the princess."

Still Gonzague nodded, still Gonzague kept silence.

"I believe that you have requested madame the princess to attend this family council, and that up to the present you have not succeeded in obtaining her assent."

"That is so," said Gonzague.

"I was about to suggest," the hunchback went on, "if your highness will permit me, that you should employ me as your ambassador to madame the princess. I believe I could persuade her to be present at the family gathering."

Gonzague looked at the man in astonishment. "What persuasions could you employ," he asked, "which would be likely to succeed where mine have failed?"

Again Æsop made an apologetic gesture as he pleaded his former excuse. "That is my secret," he repeated; "but, prince, if you employ me you must let me attain my ends by my own means, so long as you find that those ends give you satisfaction and are of service to your purposes. Though I am by no means"—here he laughed a little, bitter laugh—"an attractive person, I believe I have a keen wit, and I think I have a clever tongue, thanks to which I have often succeeded in difficult enterprises where others have failed ignominiously—at least, it will be no harm to try."

"Certainly," Gonzague agreed, "it will be no harm to try. If the princess persists, I could, of course, in the end compel her by a direct order from the king himself, who is good enough to honor us with his presence to-day."

"But," the hunchback interrupted, "it would be far more agreeable to you if the princess could be induced to come of her own accord?"

"Certainly," Gonzague agreed.

"Then," said the hunchback, "have I permission to approach madame the princess and endeavor to persuade her to act in conformity to your wishes?"

"You have," said Gonzague, decisively. Something in the hunchback's manner attracted him. The suggestion of mysterious influences appealed to his Italian spirit, and the confidence of the hunchback inspired him with confidence. He pointed to the curtained alcove.

"Madame the princess," he said, gravely, "comes every day at this hour to spend some moments in contemplation and in prayer beside the picture of her former husband. That alcove shrines his sword. By virtue of a mutual understanding, this room is always left empty daily at this same time, that madame the princess may fulfil her pious duty untroubled by the sight of any who might be displeasing to her."

Here Gonzague sighed profoundly and summoned to his face the expression of a much-wronged, grievously misappreciated man. After an interval, which the hunchback silently respected, Gonzague resumed:

"If she were to find you here the princess might be, would be, pained; but if, indeed, you think you have any arguments that would serve to influence her mind, you could explain your presence as owing to ignorance due to the newness of your service here."

Æsop nodded sagaciously. "I understand," he said. "Leave it to me. And now if your highness will place those two fellows at my disposal, I will give them their instructions."

The prince rose and turned to Peyrolles. "Send the men to Master Æsop," he commanded.

Peyrolles went to the door of the antechamber, and returned in an instant with Cocardasse and Passepoil, now both gorgeously dressed in an extravagantly modish manner, which became them, if possible, less than their previous rags and tatters. Both men saluted Gonzague profoundly, and both started at seeing the hunchback standing apart from them with averted face.

Gonzague pointed to the hunchback. "Obey Master Æsop, gentlemen, as you would obey me." The two bravos bowed respectfully. Gonzague turned to the hunchback and spoke in a lower tone: "Find this Lagardere for me, and we will soon break his invincible sword."

"How?" the hunchback questioned, with a faint note of irony in his voice.

Gonzague continued: "By the hands of the hang-man, Master Æsop. Do your best. Those who serve me well serve themselves."

The hunchback answered, slowly: "Whenever you want me, I am here."

Gonzague, in spite of himself, started at the hunchback's last words, but the demeanor of Æsop was so simple and his bearing so respectful that Gonzague was convinced that their use was purely accident. He looked at his watch. "I must prepare for the ceremony," he said. "Come with me, Peyrolles," and the prince and his henchman quitted the apartment.

The hunchback muttered to himself: "The sword of Lagardere has yet a duty to perform before it be broken." Then he turned to Cocardasse and Passepoil where they stood apart: "Well, friends, do you remember me?"

Cocardasse answered him, thoughtfully: "'Tis a long time since we met, Æsop."

Passepoil, as usual, commented on his comrade's remark: "It might have been longer with advantage."

Indifferent to the bravos' obvious distaste for his society, the hunchback continued: "I have news for you. Lagardere and I met yesterday."

Cocardasse whistled. "The devil you did!"

The hunchback coolly continued: "We fought, and I killed him."

Cocardasse's air of distaste was suddenly transmuted into a raging, blazing air of hatred. He swore a great oath and sprang forward. "Then, by the powers, I will kill you!"

"So will I!" cried Passepoil, no less furious than his friend, and advanced with him. But when the pair were close upon the hunchback he suddenly drew himself up, flung back the hair from his face, and faced them, crying, "I am here!"

Cocardasse and Passepoil paused, gasping. Both had one name on their lips, and the name was the name of Lagardere. In another moment Lagardere was stooping again, the long hair was falling about his face, and the two men could scarcely believe that Æsop was not standing before them. "Hush! To you both, as to all the world, I am Æsop, Gonzague's attendant devil. Now I have work for you. Go to-night at eleven to No. 7, Rue de Chantre." As he spoke he drew a letter from his coat and gave it to Cocardasse. "Give this letter to the young lady who lives there. I have warned her of your coming. I have told her what she is to do. She will accompany you unquestioningly. I have to trust to you in this, friends, for I have my own part to play, and, by my faith, it is the hardest part I have ever played in my life." He laughed as he spoke; then he drew from his breast another packet and handed it to Passepoil. "Here," he said, "are three invitations for the king's ball to-night—one for the girl you will escort, one for each of you. When you go to the house you will wait till the girl is ready, and then you will escort her to the king's ball in the Palais Royal at midnight, and bring her into the presence of the king by the royal tent near the round pond of Diana."

"I will do that same," said Cocardasse, cheerfully.

"Never let her out of your sight at the ball," Lagardere insisted.

"Devil a minute," Passepoil affirmed.

"Let no one speak to her," Lagardere continued.

"Devil a word," said Cocardasse.

As the hunchback seemed to have no further instructions for them, the pair made to depart, but Lagardere restrained them, saying: "Ah, wait a moment. We are all the toys of fate. If any unlucky chance should arise, come to me in the presence of the king and fling down your glove."

"I understand," said Cocardasse.

Lagardere dismissed them. "Then, farewell, old friends, till to-night."

THE PRINCESS DE GONZAGUE

When Lagardere was left alone he placed himself at the table where Gonzague had been sitting so short a time before, and, taking pen and paper, wrote rapidly a short letter. When he had folded and sealed this, he rose, and, crossing the room, went to the door which opened on the antechamber to the princess's apartments. Here he found a servant waiting, wearing the mourning livery of Nevers, to whom he gave the letter, telling him that it was urgent, and that it should be delivered to the princess at once. When he had done this he returned to the great room and walked slowly up and down it, surveying in turn each of the three pictures of the three friends who had been called the Three Louis. He paused for a moment before the picture of Louis de Nevers. "Louis de Nevers," he said, softly, "you shall be avenged to-night."

He moved a little away, and paused again before the portrait of the king. "Louis of France," he said, "you shall be convinced to-night."

A third time he resumed his walk, and a third time he paused, this time before the portrait of the Prince de Gonzague. Here he stood a little while longer in silence, studying curiously the striking lineaments of his enemy, that enemy who, through all the change of years, had retained the grace and beauty represented on the canvas. "Louis de Gonzague," he murmured, "you shall be judged to-night."

Then he resumed his steady pacing up and down the room, with his hands clasped lightly behind his humped shoulders, busy in thought. For, indeed, he had much to think of, much to plan, much to execute, and but little time in which to do what he had to do. Fortune had greatly favored him so far. The friends he had summoned had come at his call. One more of his enemies had been swept from his path, and by the destruction of that enemy he had been able, thanks to his old training as a play-actor, to enter unsuspected into the household and the councils of the man who most hated him, of the man whom he most hated. But, though much was done, there was yet much to do, and it needed all his fortitude, all his courage, and all his humor to face without hesitation or alarm the problems that faced him.

His reflections were interrupted by the opening of a door, and, turning rapidly, he found himself in the presence of a woman clad entirely in black, whom he knew at once, in spite of the ravages that time and an unchanging grief had wrought upon her beauty, to be the Princess de Gonzague, the widow of Nevers. The princess was accompanied by a lady-in-waiting, a woman older than herself, and, like herself, clad wholly in black, on whose arm she leaned for support. Lagardere bowed respectfully to the woman he had last seen so many years before in the short and terrible interview in the moat at Caylus.

"You requested to see me," the princess said, gravely and sternly.

"I requested permission to wait upon you," Lagardere answered, deferentially.

"You are," the princess continued, "I presume, in the service of the Prince de Gonzague?"

Lagardere bowed in silence.

"It is not my custom," the princess said, "to receive messengers from his highness, but it is my custom daily to visit these rooms for a few moments at this time to look at one of the pictures they contain, and at this time his highness leaves the room at my disposal. From the earnestness of your letter, I have, therefore, consented to see you here in the course of this, my daily pilgrimage. What have you got to say to me?"

"Your highness," said Lagardere, "I am, as you imagine, in the service of his highness the Prince de Gonzague, but I have been out of France for many years, and know little or nothing of the events which have taken place in my absence. I understand, however, that there is to be a family council held in the palace to-day, and that it is my master's earnest wish that you should be present at that council."

The princess drew herself up and surveyed the hunchback coldly. "There is no need," she said, "for any such council nor any need for my presence. I have told your master so already, and do not see why I should be importuned to repeat my words."

Lagardere bowed again, and made as if to retire. Then, as if suddenly recollecting something, he drew from his breast a small, sealed package. "As I was coming to the Hôtel de Gonzague this morning," he said, "a man whom I do not know stopped me in the street and gave me this package, with the request that I should deliver it to your highness. I explained to the man that I was in the service of his highness the Prince de Gonzague, and had not the honor of being included among your highness's servants. But the man still pressed me to take charge of this packet, asking me to deliver it to the care of one of your highness's women, and I should have done so but that I thought upon reflection it might be better, if possible, to deliver it into your own hands."

As he spoke he extended the package, which the princess received in silence and scrutinized carefully. It was addressed to her in a handwriting that was wholly unfamiliar, and carefully

sealed with seals in black wax, that bore the impression of the word "Adsum." The princess looked keenly at the hunchback, who stood quietly before her with bent head in an attitude of respectful attention.

"Do you know anything further respecting this package?" the princess asked.

Lagardere shook his head. "I have told your highness," he said, "all I know of the matter. I never saw the man who gave it to me. I do not think I should know him again."

The princess again examined the packet closely, and then, advancing to the table, seated herself for a moment and broke the seals. The contents of the packet seemed to startle her, for she suddenly turned to her waiting-woman and beckoned her to her side. Then, with a gesture, she motioned to Lagardere to stand farther apart. Lagardere withdrew to the remotest corner of the apartment, and seemed lost in contemplation of the portrait of Louis de Gonzague.

The princess spoke to her companion in low, hurried tones. "Brigitte," she said, "here is something strange." And she showed her a little book which she had taken from the packet. "This is the prayer-book which I gave to my husband at Caylus seventeen years ago, and see what is written in it." And she pointed to some words which were written on the blank page inside the cover in the same handwriting as that in which the packet was addressed. These words the princess read over to her companion:

"God will have pity if you have faith. Your child lives and shall be restored to you to-day. Distrust Gonzague more than ever. Remember the motto of Louis de Nevers. During the council sit near his picture, and at the right time, for you and for you alone, the dead shall speak." These words were signed, "Henri de Lagardere."

The princess turned and beckoned to the hunch-back, who immediately approached her. "You are my husband's servant," she said. "Are you much in his confidence?"

"Madame," Lagardere replied, "I am too new to Paris to consider myself in any sense the confidential servant of his highness, but I can assure you that I hope to serve him as he deserves to be served."

The princess seemed thoughtful, then she asked again: "Did you ever hear of a man named Henri de Lagardere?"

The hunchback appeared agitated. "Madame," he replied, "Henri de Lagardere is the enemy of my master, and he is my enemy. I have been seeking him unsuccessfully for many years, both in my master's interests and in my own."

The princess rose. "Enough, sir," she said. "I will consider his highness's wishes. Come, Brigitte."

Holding the packet in her hand and leaning on her companion's arm, she went towards the picture of Louis de Nevers and knelt for a moment in prayer. Then she rose and silently quitted the room, still leaning on Brigitte's arm.

XXII

THE FAMILY COUNCIL

Lagardere remained alone for a while in the room, pensively contemplating the portraits of the Three Louis. Then the sound of footsteps came to his ears, footsteps advancing from many directions, footsteps all making towards the great hall. He smiled as a man smiles who is prepared to encounter cheerfully great odds, and then, as if there were observing eyes upon him, though indeed no eyes beheld him save those that were painted in the canvases of the three friends, he slouched across the room, more markedly the hunchback than ever, till he came to the curtained door by the side of the picture of Louis de Nevers. He lifted the curtain, glanced round him for a moment at the empty room, and then dipped behind the curtain.

The curtain fell, the room was empty, save for the painted presences of the Three Louis. But the room was not empty long. A few moments later Gonzague entered the room respectfully escorting his illustrious master and friend, Louis of France. At their heels followed a little crowd of notabilities, eminent lawyers, eminent ecclesiastics, all of whom had claim, by virtue of their kinship or by virtue of their authority on delicate, contested family matters, to a seat and a voice in the council that Louis of Gonzague had been pleased to summon. After these again came Gonzague's own little tail of partisans, Navailles and Nocé, Taranne and Oriol, Choisy and Gironne, Albret and Montaubert, with Chavernay fluttering about them like an impudent butterfly, laughing at them, laughing at his august cousin, laughing at the king, laughing at himself—laughing at everything. To him such a family gathering as this which he attended was almost the most ridiculous thing imaginable on the face of the whole world, and therefore deserving of consideration, if not of serious consideration.

The king took his place upon the kind of little throne which had been set apart for him. The rest

of the company arranged themselves with instinctive sense of precedence upon the chairs that were ranged behind it. To Chavernay the whole thing looked like a pompous parody of a trial where there was nobody to be tried, and he made unceasing jokes to his neighbors, which compelled them to laugh. This earned for him a disapproving glance from the dark eyes of Gonzague, which had no effect whatever in depressing his spirits.

When all the guests were duly seated, Gonzague gravely rose, and, turning towards the king, saluted him respectfully. "I thank your majesty," he said, "for honoring us on this occasion, when matters of great moment to me and to the lady whom I am proud to call my wife, and to the great family with which I am associated at once by ties of blood and alliance, are in question. Your majesty will readily understand that nothing but the gravest sense of duty could have urged me to bring together so learned, so just, so brilliant an assembly of men to deal with delicate matters which have perhaps been too long left undealt with. Such differences of opinion as may perhaps be admitted to exist between madame the Princess de Gonzague and myself, however trivial in the beginning, have in a sense grown with the passing of time into an importance which calls imperatively for some manner or form of adjustment."

He paused in his speech, as if to control his emotions and to collect his thoughts. The king leaned forward and addressed him. "Does any one," he asked, "appear here for madame the Princess de Gonzague?"

Gonzague looked about him with a melancholy glance. "I had hoped, sire," he said, "that madame the princess would have chosen some one to represent her." But even as he spoke he paused, for the door that led to the princess's apartment was thrown open, and the Princess de Gonzague appeared, clad in black as usual, and as usual leaning upon the arm of her faithful Brigitte.

As the princess entered the room, every one rose, and all eyes were fixed upon the stately figure and melancholy features of the still beautiful, if prematurely aged, widow of Nevers. The princess made a deep inclination to the king, and then spoke: "Your majesty, I need no one to represent me. I am here."

Gonzague allowed his features to betray the satisfaction he felt at the presence of his consort. He hastened to advance to her as she seated herself close to the curtained alcove, saying as he did so: "Madame, you are indeed welcome." And there was a sincerity in his tone not always characteristic of his utterances.

The king bowed in his courtliest manner to the unhappy lady, and addressed her: "Princess, you know why we are assembled here?"

Slowly the princess inclined her head. "I do," she said, and said no more, but sat looking fixedly before her, the image of a patience that shielded a strong purpose and a resignation that was now kindled by a new hope.

The king turned to his friend and host: "Prince de Gonzague, we await your pleasure."

Louis de Gonzague rose to his feet and surveyed his assembled guests with a grave countenance that seemed to suggest boldness without effrontery and a grief nobly borne. All present admired his beauty, his dignity, the proud humility of his carriage towards the great lady who was in name his wife. Many sympathized with him in what they knew to be his strange position, and felt that the princess was indeed to blame in refusing friendship and sympathy to such a man.

Gonzague bowed respectfully to the king, and his eyes travelled over the whole range of his audience as he spoke. "Sire," he said, "I have to speak to-day of the sorrow that has haunted me, as it has haunted your majesty, for seventeen years. Louis de Lorraine, Duke de Nevers, was my cousin by blood, my brother by affection. His memory lives here, eternal as is the grief of his widow, who has not disdained to wear my name after wearing his."

He paused for a moment, and in that pause the princess spoke in a voice that was shaken with emotion, in spite of her determination to be firm: "Do not speak of that. I have passed those seventeen years in solitude and in tears."

Gonzague paid to her and her sorrow the homage of a bow; then he resumed: "When madame the princess did me the honor to accept my name, she made public her secret but legitimate marriage with the late Duke de Nevers and the birth of a daughter of that union. This child disappeared on the night of Nevers's death. The registration of its birth is torn out of the chapel register and lost. For seventeen years the princess has patiently sought for her lost child, and has sought in vain."

The princess sighed: "Alas!" Gonzague paused for a moment as if to allow the princess to say more, and then, seeing she kept silent, he continued: "Calumniators have hinted that it was my wish that the child should not be found. Have they not, madame?"

"Such things have been said," the princess replied, gravely.

Again Gonzague spoke: "There were even those who hinted that my hand might strike at a child's life. Is not that so?"

Again the princess repeated her former phrase: "Such things have been said."

Now Gonzague questioned her directly: "And you believed the accusation?"

The princess inclined her head: "I believed it."

At this reply a murmur not to be repressed ran through the assembly. Those that sympathized with Gonzague before now sympathized more deeply on hearing such an answer come so coldly

from his wife's lips. Gonzague allowed himself the luxury of a little, patient sigh, the privileged protest of the good and just under an intolerable suspicion.

"I am not surprised. The princess does not know me. For seventeen years the princess and I have been strangers. Now, for the first time, I can show myself to my wife as I am." He addressed himself directly to the princess: "Through all these seventeen years I, too, have been seeking what you sought; but, more fortunate than you, I have succeeded where you have failed."

He turned to Peyrolles, who was standing close to his master's side, and commanded: "Bring in Mademoiselle Gabrielle de Nevers."

In a moment Peyrolles had vanished from the room, leaving every man in the assembly impressed and startled by Gonzague's statement. The king looked from Gonzague, whose face he had been studying while he spoke with admiration and approval, and fixed his keen gaze upon the princess. She alone, of all those in the room, seemed unmoved by the momentous tidings that her husband had communicated. The younger men whispered among themselves, the elders kept silence, but it was plain that their curiosity was very great.

In a few moments Peyrolles returned to the room escorting Flora, now very beautifully attired in a dress of simple richness.

Chavernay could not restrain his surprise as she entered. "The little dancing-girl," he whispered to his right-hand neighbor, Choisy, but he said no more. Even his airy nature was impressed by the stillness of the company and the gravity of the situation.

Gonzague took the hand of Flora and conducted her across the room to the princess. "Madame," he said, "I restore your child."

The princess looked fixedly at the girl, her thin hands clasping the arms of her chair convulsively, and it could be seen that she was trembling from head to foot. She was waiting for a voice, she was wondering if she would hear a voice, and as she waited and wondered she heard a voice from behind the curtain near where she sat apart, a voice which reached her ears, a voice with a mysterious message—"I am here."

The princess clasped her hand to her heart. "Ah!" she murmured, "will the dead speak? Is this my child?" And again the voice spoke and answered: "No."

By this time Gonzague and the girl had reached the princess, who now rose to her feet and confronted the pair as she spoke. "My child should have with her a packet containing the page torn away from the register of the chapel of Caylus, torn away with my own hands." She turned to Flora and questioned her: "Have you that packet?"

Flora dropped on her knees and stretched out her hands with a pretty, pathetic air of supplication. "Madame, I have nothing. Ah, madame, the poor little gypsy girl asks of you neither wealth nor station; she only entreats you to love her as she loves you."

The princess prayed silently: "Oh, Heaven help me! Heaven inspire me!"

Gonzague was startled by this sudden hostility to his scheme, but spoke with respectful earnestness: "Madame," he said, slowly, "we have depositions, sworn to and duly attested in Madrid, that this girl, then a year-old child, was given to a band of gypsies by a man whose description coincides exactly with that of one of the men believed to have been concerned in the attack upon Louis de Nevers in the moat of Caylus. We have their statements that in their hearing the man called the child Gabrielle, that he said to the head gypsy that she was of noble birth, and that he gave her up to them because he wished the child to suffer for the hate he bore her father. All this and more than this we can prove. For my part, I say that in this girl's lineaments I seem to see again the features of my dear dead friend. Madame, to reject the child whom we believe to be the daughter of Nevers, you must have reasons grave indeed—the strongest proofs. Have you such reasons, such proofs?"

From behind the curtain a voice travelled to the princess's ears, murmuring, "Yes," and the princess repeated, "Yes," confidently.

Gonzague drew himself up with a look of pain and sorrow. "I understand, madame. Some impostor, speculating upon your sorrow, has told you that he has found your child."

Chavernay whispered behind his hand to Navailles: "Our cousin is losing his temper."

As the princess kept silent, Gonzague pressed his question: "Is that not so, madame? Speak! Is this not so? Some one has told you that she is alive?"

The princess heard the voice behind the curtain whisper: "She lives." Looking steadily at Gonzague, she said: "She lives, in spite of you, by the grace of God."

The agitation of the audience was very great. The king directly addressed the princess: "Can you produce her?"

Again the voice whispered to the Princess, "Yes," and again the Princess repeated, "Yes," as confidently as before.

"When?" asked the king, to whom Gonzague had at once yielded the privilege of question.

The voice whispered, "To-night," and the princess repeated the words.

The voice whispered again, "At the ball in the Palais Royal," and again the Princess echoed it, "At the ball in the Palais Royal."

The king had no more to say; he was silent. Gonzague groaned aloud as he turned to Flora. "My poor child, only God can give you back the heart of your mother."

The girl, with the quick impulsiveness of her race, again flung herself on her knees before the princess, while she cried: "Madame, whether you are my mother or not, I respect you, I love you!"

The princess laid her hand gently on the girl's dark hair. "My child, my child, I believe you are no accomplice of this crime. I wish you well."

Flora was now sobbing bitterly, and seemed unable to rise. Peyrolles hastened to her side, hastened to lift her to her feet, and hurriedly conducted the weeping girl from the room. The princess, holding her head high, turned and addressed the king: "Your majesty, my mourning ends to-day. I have recovered my daughter. I shall be your guest to-night, sire."

The king bowed profoundly. "Believe that we shall be most proud to welcome you."

The princess made him a reverence and turned to leave the room. The king quitted his chair, hastened to her side, and gave her his arm to the door. When she had departed, Louis of France hastened to Gonzague where he stood alone, the centre of wondering eyes. "What is the meaning of this double discovery?" he asked.

Gonzague shook his head with the air of one who is faced by a shameful conspiracy, but who is not afraid to face it. "I have found Nevers's child. Who the impostor is I do not know, but I shall know—and then—"

He paused, but his menacing silence was more impressive than any speech. The king wrung his friend's hand warmly. "I hope you may. Till to-night, gentlemen."

All were standing now. The king embraced the company in a general salutation and went out, followed by his friends. The lawyers, the ecclesiastics took their leave. Only the friends of Gonzague remained in the room, and they stood apart, eying their master dubiously, uncertain whether he would wish them to go or to stay. Chavernay took it upon himself, with his usual lightness of heart, to play their spokesman. He advanced to Gonzague and addressed him.

"Can we condole with you on this game of cross-purposes?"

Gonzague turned to Chavernay, and his countenance was calm, bold, almost smiling. "No. I shall win the game. We shall meet to-night. Perhaps I shall need your swords."

"Now, as ever, at your service," Navailles protested, and the rest murmured their agreement with the speaker. Then Gonzague's partisans slowly filed out of the room, Chavernay, as usual, smiling, the others unusually grave. Gonzague turned to Peyrolles, who had returned from his task of conveying Flora to her apartments. "Who has done all this?" he asked.

He thought he was alone with his henchman, but he was mistaken. Æsop had quietly entered the room, and was standing at his side. Æsop answered the question addressed to Peyrolles. "I can tell you. The man you can neither find nor bind."

Gonzague started. "Lagardere?"

Æsop nodded. "Lagardere, whom I will give into your hands if you wish."

Gonzague caught at his promise eagerly. "When?" he asked.

"To-night, at the king's ball," Æsop answered.

XXIII

THE KING'S BALL

The gardens of the Palais Royal made a delightful place for such an entertainment as the king's ball. In its contrasts of light and shadow, in its sombre alleys starred with colored lights, in its blend of courtly pomp and sylvan simplicity, it seemed the fairy-like creation of some splendid dream. Against the vivid greenness of the trees, intensified by the brightness of the blazing lamps, the whiteness of the statues asserted itself with fantastic emphasis. Everywhere innumerable flowers of every hue and every odor sweetened the air and pleased the eye, and through the blooming spaces, seemingly as innumerable as the blossoms and seemingly as brilliant, moved the gay, many-colored crowd of the king's guests. The gardens were large, the gardens were spacious, but the king's guests were many, and seemed to leave no foot of room unoccupied. Hither and thither they drifted, swayed, eddied, laughing, chattering, intriguing, whispering, admiring, wondering, playing all the tricks, repeating all the antics that are the time-honored attributes and privileges of a masquerade. Here trained dancers executed some elaborate measure for the entertainment of those that cared to pause in their wandering and behold them; there mysterious individuals, in flowing draperies, professed to read the stars and tell the fortunes of those that chose to spare some moments from frivolity for such mystic consultations.

In the handsomest part of the garden, hard by the Pond and Fountain of Diana, a magnificent tent had been pitched, which was reserved for the accommodation of the king himself and for such special friends as he might choose to invite to share his privacy. Around this tent a stream of mirth-makers flowed at a respectful distance, envying—for envy is present even at a masquerade—those most highly favored where all were highly favored in being admitted into the sovereign's intimacy.

At the door of this tent, Monsieur Breant, who had been one of the cardinal's principal servants, and who still remained the head custodian of the palace, was standing surveying the scene with a curiosity dulled by long familiarity. He was unaware that a sombrely clad hunchback, quite an incongruous figure in the merry crowd, was making for him, until the hunchback, coming along beside him, touched him on the arm and called him by name: "Monsieur Breant!"

Breant turned and gazed at the hunchback with some surprise. "Who are you?" he asked.

The hunchback laughed as he answered: "Don't you know me? Why, man, I am Æsop the Second. My illustrious ancestor laughed at all the world, and so do I. He loved the Greek girl Rhodopis, who built herself a pyramid. I am wiser than he, for I love only myself."

Breant shrugged his shoulders and made to turn upon his heel. "I have no time for fooling."

Æsop detained him. "Don't leave me; I am good company."

Breant did not seem to be tempted by the offer. "That may be, but I must attend on his majesty."

Æsop still restrained him. "You can do me a favor."

Breant eyed the impertinent hunchback with disfavor. "Why should I do you a favor, Æsop the Second?"

The hunchback explained, gayly: "In the first place, because I am the guest of his Majesty the King. In the second place, because I am the confidential devil of his Highness the Prince de Gonzague. But my third reason is perhaps better."

As he spoke he took a well-filled purse from his pocket and tossed it lightly from one hand to the other, looking at Breant with a sneering smile. Breant would have been no true servant of the time if he had not liked money for the sake of the pleasure that money could give; Breant would have been no true servant of the time if he had not been always in want of money. He eyed the purse approvingly, and his manner was more amiable.

"What do you want?" he asked.

Æsop made his wishes clear. "There is a little lodge yonder in the darkness at the end of that alley, hard by the small gate that is seldom used. You know the gate, for you sometimes used to wait in that little lodge when a late exalted personage chose to walk abroad incognito."

Breant frowned at him. "You know much, Master Æsop."

Æsop shrugged his shoulders. "I am a wizard. But it needs no wizard to guess that, as the exalted personage is no longer with us, he will not walk abroad to-night, and you will not have to yawn and doze in the lodge till he return."

"What then?" asked Breant.

Æsop lowered his voice to a whisper. "Let me have the key of the little lodge for to-night."

Breant lifted his hands in protest. "Impossible!" he said.

Æsop shook his head. "I hate that word, Monsieur Breant. 'Tis a vile word. Come now, twenty louis and the key of the lodge for an hour after midnight."

Breant looked at the purse and looked at the hunchback. "Why do you want it?" he asked.

Æsop laughed mockingly. "Vanity. I wish to walk this ball like a gentleman. I have fine clothes; they lie now in a bundle on the lodge step. If I had the key I could slip inside and change and change again and enjoy myself, and no one the worse or the wiser."

The purse seemed to grow larger to Breant's eyes, and his objections to dwindle proportionately. "A queer whim, crookback," he said.

Æsop amended the phrase: "A harmless whim, and twenty louis would please the pocket."

Breant slipped his hand into a side-pocket, and, producing a little key, he handed it to Æsop. "There's the key, but I must have it back before morning."

Æsop took the key, and the purse changed owners. "You shall," he promised. "Good. Now I shall make myself beautiful."

Breant looked at him good-humoredly. "Good sport, Æsop the Second." He turned and disappeared into the tent.

Æsop, looking at the key with satisfaction, murmured to himself: "The best."

As he moved slowly away from the king's tent a little crowd of Gonzague's friends—Chavernay, Oriol, Navailles, Nocé, Gironne, Choisy, Albret, and Montaubert—all laughing and talking loudly, crossed his path and perceived the hunchback, who seemed to them, naturally enough, a somewhat singular figure in such a scene. "Good Heavens! What is this?" cried Navailles.

Nocé chuckled: "A hunchback brings luck. May I slap you on the back, little lord?"

Æsop answered him, coolly: "Yes, Monsieur de Nocé, if I may slap you in the face."

Nocé took offence instantly. "Now, by Heaven, crookback!" he cried, and made a threatening gesture against Æsop, who eyed him insolently with a mocking smile.

Chavernay interposed. "Nonsense!" he cried. "Nonsense, Nocé, you began the jest." Then he added, in a lower voice: "You can't pick a quarrel with the poor devil."

The hunchback paid him an extravagant salutation. "Monsieur de Chavernay, you are always chivalrous. You really ought to die young, for it will take so much trouble to turn you into a rogue."

Fat Oriol, staring in amazement at the controversy, questioned: "What does the fellow mean?"

Chavernay burst into a fit of laughing, and patted Oriol on the back. "I'm afraid he means that you are a rogue, Oriol."

While the angry gentlemen stood together, with the hunchback apart eying them derisively, and Chavernay standing between the belligerents as peace-maker, Taranne hurriedly joined the group. He was evidently choking with news and eager to distribute it.

"Friends, friends," he cried, "there is something extraordinary going on here to-night!"

"What is it?" asked Chavernay.

Taranne answered him, with a voice as grave as an oracle: "All the sentinels are doubled, and there are two companies of soldiers in the great court."

Navailles protested: "You are joking!"

Taranne was not to be put down. "Never more serious. Every one who enters is scrutinized most carefully."

"That is easy to explain," said Chavernay; "it is just to make sure that they really are invited."

Taranne declined to admit this interpretation of his mystery: "Not so, for nobody is allowed on any pretext to leave the gardens."

Oriol flushed with a sudden wave of intelligence: "Perhaps some plot against his majesty."

"Heaven knows," Navailles commented.

Æsop interrupted the discussion with a dry laugh, dimly suggestive of the cackle of a jackdaw. "I know, gentlemen."

Oriol stared at him. "You know?"

Nocé gave vent to an angry laugh. "The hunchback knows."

While this conversation was going on a group of middle-aged gentlemen had been moving down the avenue that led to the Pond of Diana. These were the Baron de la Hunaudaye, Monsieur de Marillac, Monsieur de Barbanchois, Monsieur de la Ferte, and Monsieur de Vauguyon. They had been taking a peaceful interest in the spectacle afforded them, had been comparing it with similar festivities that they recalled in the days of their youth, and had been enjoying themselves tranquilly enough. Perceiving a group of young men apparently engaged in animated discussion, the elders quickened their pace a little to join the party and learn the cause of its animation.

When they arrived Æsop was speaking. "Something extraordinary is going on here to-night, Monsieur de Navailles. The king is preoccupied. The guard is doubled, but no one knows why, not even these gentlemen. But I know, Æsop the Wise."

"What do you know?" asked Navailles.

Æsop looked at him mockingly. "You would never guess it if you guessed for a thousand years. It has nothing to do with plots or politics, with foreign intrigues or domestic difficulties—"

Oriol thirsted for information. "What is it for, then?"

Æsop answered, gravely, with an amazing question: "Gentlemen, do you believe in ghosts?" And the gravity of his voice and the strangeness of his question forced his hearers, surprised and uneasy, in spite of themselves, to laugh disdainfully.

Æsop accepted their laughter composedly. "Of course not. No one believes in ghosts at noonday, on the crowded street, though perhaps some do at midnight when the world is over-still. But here, to-night, in all this glitter and crowd and noise and color, the king is perturbed and the guards are doubled because of a ghost—the ghost of a man who has been dead these seventeen years."

The Baron de la Hunaudaye, bluff old soldier of the brave days of the dawning reign, was interested in the hunchback's words. "Of whom do you speak?" he asked.

Æsop turned to the new-comers, and addressed them more respectfully than he had been addressing the partisans of Gonzague: "I speak of a gallant gentleman—young, brave, beautiful, well-beloved. I speak to men who knew him. To you, Monsieur de la Hunaudaye, who would now be lying under Flemish earth if his sword had not slain your assailant; to you, Monsieur de Marillac, whose daughter took the veil for love of him; to you, Monsieur de Barbanchois, who fortified against him the dwelling of your lady love; to you, Monsieur de la Ferte, who lost to him one evening your Castle of Senneterre; to you, Monsieur de Vauguyon, whose shoulder should still remember the stroke of his sword."

As Æsop spoke, he addressed in turn each of the elder men, and as he spoke recognition of his meaning showed itself in the face of each man whom he addressed.

Hunaudaye nodded. "Louis de Nevers," he said, solemnly.

Instantly Æsop uncovered. "Yes, Louis de Nevers, who was assassinated under the walls of the Castle of Caylus twenty years ago."

Chavernay came over to Æsop. "My father was a friend of Louis de Nevers."

Æsop looked from the group of old men to the group of young men. "It is the ghost of Nevers that troubles us to-night. There were three Louis in those days, brothers in arms. Louis of France did all he could to find the assassin of Nevers. In vain. Louis de Gonzague did all he could to find the assassin of Nevers. In vain. Well, gentlemen, would you believe it, to-night Louis of France and Louis de Gonzague will be told the name of the assassin of Nevers?"

"And the name?" asked Chavernay.

Choisy plucked him impatiently by the sleeve. "Don't you see that the humpbacked fool is making game of us?"

Æsop shrugged his shoulders. "As you please, sirs, as you please; but that is why the guards are doubled."

He turned on his heel, and walked leisurely away from the two groups of gentlemen. The elders, having little in common with Gonzague's friends, followed his example, and drifted off together, talking to one another in a low voice of the gallant gentleman whose name had suddenly been recalled to their memories at that moment. Gonzague's gang stared at one another, feeling vaguely discomfited.

"The man is mad," said Gironne.

"There seems a method in his madness," said Chavernay, dryly.

Albret interrupted them. "Here comes his majesty."

"And, as I live, with the Princess de Gonzague!" Montaubert cried, amazed.

Oriol elevated his fat palms. "Wonders will never cease!"

XXIV

THE ROSE-COLORED DOMINO

All the party bowed respectfully as the king came slowly down the great walk, giving his arm to the Princess de Gonzague. Then, anxious to avoid any appearance of intruding upon the privacy of the monarch, they drifted off in search of fresh amusement.

Louis addressed the princess, indicating the gayety around him with a wave of his arm. "After so long an absence from the world, all this folly must worry you a little."

The princess looked at him sadly. "The world and I have little more to say to each other. I come here to-night to meet one who has promised to tell me of my husband, of my child."

"Lagardere?" said the king, gravely.

And as gravely the princess answered: "Lagardere."

"At midnight?" asked the king.

"Yes," said the princess.

The king looked at his watch. It was half-past eleven. "Will you rest in my pavilion, princess, until the time comes?"

Louis conducted the princess into the tent, where he was followed by his escort. As they did so, Gonzague, coming slowly down the avenue, watched them thoughtfully. It was strange, indeed, to see his wife in such a place and in such company. It was strange to feel that her passive hostility through all these years was now turned suddenly into action.

"Bah!" he said to himself; "it is my word against that of an adventurer who has hidden for twenty years."

Peyrolles, pushing his way through the crowd and peering to right and left, caught sight of his master and hurriedly joined him. "Well," said Gonzague, "have you found the girl?"

Peyrolles made a gesture of despair. "We have searched Paris without success. Not a sign of her, nor of him."

Gonzague frowned. "She must be here. If she be the real child, the princess may recognize her."

"And all is lost," said Peyrolles, with a groan.

Gonzague almost smiled. "No. We will charge Lagardere with having assassinated the father and stolen the child for his own ends. He shall be hanged out of hand. Doña Flora will seem the

commendable error of my over-zealous heart, and as for the new princess—well, even princesses are mortal."

Peyrolles had always admired his master, but never perhaps so much as now. "Your Excellency is a man of genius," he said, enthusiastically.

Gonzague smiled. "Forethought, my good Peyrolles—only forethought. But it would save trouble if the girl were out of the way."

Peyrolles bowed. "I will do my best, monseigneur."

"Good," said Gonzague. "I must wait upon his majesty. And upon the princess," he added.

Gonzague, whose intimacy with the king always made him the first to be bidden to any special festivity, entered the tent unchallenged, and was warmly welcomed by Louis. Peyrolles remained outside, walking up and down, immersed in distasteful reflections. He had failed to find the girl; he had failed to get on the traces of Lagardere; he had seen nothing of Æsop. The ball, so pleasant to everybody else, seemed to him full of menace, and he eyed with some disapproval the jolly, noisy folk that thronged the alleys and shook the night with laughter. Swollen with sour humors, he leaned against a tree, cursing in his heart the folly of those swordsmen who had failed to get rid of a cursed enemy. Enveloped, as it were, in bitterness, he failed to notice a not unnoticeable group that detached itself from the crowd beyond and came slowly down the alley towards the Fountain of Diana. The group was composed of a woman in a rose-colored domino and mask, accompanied by two tall, masculine figures muffled from head to heels in black dominos, and their features completely hidden by bearded black masks. The pink domino and the twin black dominos seemed to be seeking their way.

"This," said the bigger of the black dominos, and his voice was the voice of Cocardasse—"this must be the Fountain of Diana."

The second of the black dominos pointed to the statue shining in the many-tinted water, and spoke with the voice of Passepoil: "There's some such poor heathen body."

The woman in the rose-pink domino turned to Cocardasse and asked: "Is Henri here?" And her voice was the voice of Gabrielle.

"I don't see him yet, mademoiselle," Cocardasse answered.

Gabrielle sighed. "I wish he were come. All this noise and glitter bewilder me." And the trio proceeded slowly to make the tour of the fountain.

But if Peyrolles, propped against his tree, was too preoccupied to notice the not unnoticeable group, light-hearted Chavernay was more alert. Drifting, as every one drifted that night, again and again, towards the Fountain of Diana as the centre of festivity, he turned to Navailles and pointed to Gabrielle. "Who is that mask in the rose-colored domino? She seems to seek some one."

Navailles laughed. "She goes about with two giants like some princess in a fairy tale."

Nocé was prepared with an explanation. "It is Mademoiselle de Clermont, who is looking for me."

Taranne pooh-poohed him. "Nonsense. It is Madame de Tessy, who is looking for me."

"It might be Mademoiselle Nivelles, looking for me," Oriol suggested, fatuously.

Choisy, Gironne, Albret, Montaubert—each in turn offered a possible name for the unknown.

Chavernay would have none of their suggestions. "No, no. That is not any one we know. She is neither court lady nor a play actress; she is some goddess in disguise, and I am going to reveal divinity."

Then he tripped daintily forward and intercepted Gabrielle and her companions as they accomplished their first tour of the pond. "Fair lady," said Chavernay, with a graceful bow, "are you looking for some one?"

The large arm of Cocardasse was interposed between Chavernay and Gabrielle, and the large voice of Cocardasse counselled Chavernay: "Stand aside, little man."

Quite indifferent to the counsels of the mighty mask, Chavernay persisted: "Fair lady, dismiss this monster and accept my arm."

This time it was Passepoil's turn to intervene. "Out of the way!" he commanded, and gave Chavernay a little push.

Instantly Chavernay's hot blood was in a flame, and he clapped his hand to his sword. "How dare you, fellow—" he began.

But now Gabrielle, greatly alarmed at the prospect of a brawl in such a place, and perfectly recognizing the marquis, removed her mask from her face for a moment while she spoke: "Monsieur de Chavernay, you will let me pass."

It was only for a moment, but it was long enough to give Chavernay time to recognize her, and he fell back with a respectful salutation. It was long enough, also, for Peyrolles, leaning against his tree and at last roused from saddened thoughts to contemplation of the outer world, to get a glimpse of the girl's face and to recognize its extraordinary resemblance to the dead duke. He gave a start of surprise. Was fortune playing into his hands, after all?

Chavernay bowed. "Your pardon, lady; your path is free," he said, and stood aside while

Gabrielle moved slowly forward with her escort on a second tour of the fountain. Navailles and the others had seen, indeed, the lady unmask, but were not near enough to descry her features.

"Well," said Navailles, eagerly, to Chavernay—"well, who was the lady?"

Chavernay answered, coolly: "I do not know."

At this moment the lean form and yellow face of Monsieur de Peyrolles intruded itself into the group of Gonzague's friends.

"Monsieur de Chavernay," he said, "my illustrious master is looking for you. He is with his majesty."

"I will join him," Chavernay answered, readily. He was, like his kinsman, a privileged person with the sovereign, and he, too, was permitted to enter the tent unchallenged. He entered it with a graver demeanor than he had worn that evening, for he was strangely perplexed by the presence at the king's ball this night of the girl whom he had seen at the country Inn. As soon as Chavernay had disappeared, Peyrolles, hurriedly beckoning, gathered about him Navailles, Nocé, and the others, and addressed them in an eager whisper:

"Gentlemen, you are all devoted to the interests of the Prince de Gonzague?"

Nocé spoke for himself and his comrades: "We are."

Peyrolles went on: "Then, as you value his friendship, secure the person of that girl whom Monsieur de Chavernay spoke to just now."

"Why?" Navailles questioned.

Peyrolles answered him, sharply: "Don't ask; act. To please our master it should be done at once."

"How is it to be done?" asked Taranne.

Peyrolles looked about him. "Is there no other woman here who wears a rose-colored domino?"

Navailles pointed to a group in an adjacent arbor. "Cidalise, yonder, is wearing a rose-colored domino. She will do anything for me."

"Bring her," Peyrolles said, in a tone of command which he sometimes assumed when he was on his master's business, and which no one of his master's friends ever took it upon himself to resent. Navailles went towards the arbor and came back with Cidalise upon his arm. Cidalise was a pretty, young actress, wearing just such a pink domino as that worn by Gabrielle.

Navailles formally presented her to Peyrolles. "Monsieur Peyrolles, this is the divine Cidalise. What do you want of her?"

Peyrolles unceremoniously took the actress by the wrist, and pointed to where Gabrielle and her escort were wandering.

"You see that girl in rose-color, escorted by two giants? Your friends will gather about them and begin to hustle the giants. In the confusion you will slip between the pair, who will then be left to march off, believing that you are their charge, who will, however, be in the care of these gentlemen. Do you understand?"

Cidalise nodded. "Perfectly. And if I do this?"

"You may rely upon the generosity of the Prince of Gonzague," Peyrolles answered. If he said little, he looked much, and Cidalise understood him as she accepted.

"It will be rare sport. Come, gentlemen."

By this time Gabrielle and her companions, having completed their second circumnavigation of the pond, were going slowly across the open space again. The crowd was very great about them, the noise and laughter made everything confused. Gonzague's friends took advantage of the crowd and the confusion. They huddled around Gabrielle and her escort, laughing and chattering volubly. They hustled Cocardasse, they hustled Passepoil, treading on their toes and tweaking their elbows, much to the indignation of the Gascon and the Norman, each of whom tried angrily and unavailingly to get hold of one of his nimble tormentors. In the jostling and confusion, Cidalise slipped neatly between the two bravos, suddenly abandoned by their plaguers; while Gabrielle, surrounded by the dexterous gentlemen, was, against her will but very steadily, edged towards a side alley. Cocardasse and Passepoil, drawing deep breaths such as lo may have drawn when freed from her gadfly, looked down and saw, as they believed, Gabrielle standing between them. The seeming Gabrielle moved on, on a third journey round the Pond of Diana, and her escort accompanied her, confident that all was well.

In the mean time, Gabrielle was appealing to the gentlemen who surrounded her. "Gentlemen, stand aside!" she said, in a tone partly of entreaty, partly of command.

At that moment Peyrolles came to her side and saluted her respectfully. "Do not be alarmed. We come from him."

Gabrielle stared in amazement at the unfamiliar face.

Peyrolles bent to her ear and whispered: "From Lagardere."

Gabrielle gave a cry. "Ah! Where is he?"

Peyrolles pointed to the far end of the alley in which they were standing. It was a dimmer alley than the others, for, in obedience to a suggestion of Peyrolles, Oriol had been busily engaged in

putting out the lights. "At the end of this alley. He is waiting for you."

He offered her his arm as he spoke, and Gabrielle, believing indeed that Lagardere had sent for her, accepted his guidance down the alley, and so she disappeared from the noise and mirth and light and color of the royal ball.

As the domino in pink and the dominos in black completed their third turn round the Fountain of Diana, the domino in pink plucked off her mask, and, looking up at her accompanying giants, showed to them, amazed, the pretty, impudent, unfamiliar face of Cidalise. "May I ask, gentlemen, why you follow me?" she said, merrily.

At the sight of her face, at the sound of her voice, at her question, Cocardasse and Passepoil reeled as if they had been struck. Cidalise went on: "I have many friends here, and no need for your company." Then she laughed and ran away out of sight in a moment in the shifting crowd, leaving Cocardasse and Passepoil staring at each other in staggered amazement.

"The devil!" said Cocardasse.

"That's what I'm thinking," said Passepoil.

Cocardasse groaned. "What will Lagardere say?"

"Well, we did our best," Passepoil sighed.

Cocardasse groaned again. "What's the good, if we didn't do what he wanted?"

"Where shall we find him?" asked Passepoil.

Cocardasse consulted the watch which he owed to the bounty of the Prince de Gonzague. "He will be here at midnight. It is nearly that now. Come, man, come." And the baffled, bewildered, angry pair plunged despairingly into the thickness of the crowd about them, hoping against hope to find their lost charge for the moment when Lagardere was to make his appearance.

XXV

THE GLOVE OF COCARDASSE

For a little longer the noise and revelry continued, until the moment came when the king's hospitality, offering supper to his wearied guests, emptied the gardens of many of their frequenters. Inside his tent the sovereign was supping with his friends. By his side sat the Princess de Gonzague, who neither ate nor drank, but waited with an aching heart for midnight. At a quarter to twelve Bonnivet entered the tent and advanced towards the king.

"Sire," he said, "there is a gentleman here who insists on immediate speech with you. He says you have appointed this time and place to meet him."

Louis turned to the Princess de Gonzague, whose pale face had suddenly flushed. "It is he," he said; and then turned to Bonnivet. "Introduce the gentleman."

Bonnivet went to the entrance of the tent, and a moment later Lagardere entered. He was wearing his old white coat of the Royal Light-Horse, and he advanced composedly, with head erect, towards the king.

"I am here," he said, as he saluted the duke, and all present gazed on him with curiosity. Only three knew who he was or why he was there.

Gonzague muttered to himself: "Now for the death-struggle."

The king looked at his visitor. "Who are you?" he asked.

And Lagardere answered: "I am Henri de Lagardere."

At that moment Peyrolles, privileged as his master's henchman, entered the tent and made his way to Gonzague's side. "All is well," he whispered. "We have got the girl, and the papers are upon her."

The king was addressing Lagardere. "You are here at our pleasure—free to come, free to go, free to speak."

Lagardere answered, firmly: "I mean to speak."

The princess turned to him. "Will you give me back my daughter?"

Lagardere made her a bow. "In a few moments she will be in your arms."

At this moment Gonzague rose and interrupted. "Sire," he said, "I can tell you something of this man."

Lagardere glanced scornfully at Gonzague. "Sire," he said, "I can tell you something of this man." He advanced towards Gonzague and addressed him in a low tone: "On that September night I told you that if you did not come to Lagardere, Lagardere would come to you. You did

not come. I am here." Then he turned to the princess. "Madame, here, as in the moat of Caylus Castle; here, as by the picture in your palace, I am wholly in your service."

Gonzague turned to the king with an appealing gesture. "I implore your majesty to let no one leave this place. If Monsieur de Lagardere is desirous of darkness and mystery, I ask only for light and truth."

The king spoke, decisively: "If the attack has been secret, the justification shall be public."

Gonzague addressed Lagardere: "Where is the woman who calls herself the daughter of Louis de Nevers?"

The king also questioned: "Why is she not with you?"

Lagardere answered, composedly: "Mademoiselle de Nevers will be here at midnight, and will herself present to your Royal Highness the papers that prove her birth."

"What papers?" asked the king.

And Lagardere answered: "The pages torn from the parish register by her mother, and confided to me in the moat of Caylus Castle."

The princess leaned forward. "What do you say?" she asked, eagerly, and the king echoed her question.

Lagardere replied: "The princess gave those papers to me when she placed her child in my arms, believing that I was her husband, Louis de Nevers."

Gonzague questioned, with a sneer: "Why should she think you were her husband?"

Lagardere looked him full in the face. "Because, thanks to you, I gave the signal agreed upon—her husband's motto, 'I am here.'"

The princess clasped her hands. "My God, sire, it is true."

"And these papers are in your hands?" the king asked.

Lagardere answered, quietly: "They are in the hands of Mademoiselle de Nevers."

Gonzague looked triumphantly from Lagardere to the king. "Then why is this pretended Mademoiselle de Nevers not here?"

Lagardere replied, composedly: "She is to be here at midnight."

Gonzague looked at his watch. "It is midnight now—she is not here. Your majesty sees the worth of this man's word."

Louis gazed curiously at Lagardere, whose bearing, in spite of the king's prejudices as a friend of Gonzague, impressed him as that of an honest man. "Had you not better send for this lady?" he questioned.

On Lagardere's face now some anxiety was depicted, and he answered, anxiously: "She will be here; she must be here. Ah!"

In the excitement consequent upon the extraordinary scene that was passing in the king's presence, the attention of all the guests was riveted upon their host and upon the amazing altercation between Louis of Gonzague and the unknown adventurer, and the entrance of the tent was left unheeded and unguarded. At this moment the curtains were parted, and the figure of Cocardasse appeared for a moment in the opening. As Lagardere saw him, Cocardasse lifted his glove in the air and let it fall to the ground. Then, in a moment, he had vanished before any one had noticed the episode.

Lagardere gave a sharp cry of pain as he turned to the princess. "Madame, your child is not here; your child must be in danger!" he cried.

The princess clasped her hands as she cried: "My child! My child!"

Gonzague pointed mockingly at Lagardere. "The impostor is already exposed!" he cried, exultingly.

Lagardere turned towards him, fiercely. "Liar! assassin!" he cried, and advanced towards Gonzague, but was stopped by Bonnivet.

The king looked at him sternly. "Sir, you have made charges you could not prove, promises you could not keep. You shall answer for this before your judges."

Bonnivet made as if to arrest Lagardere, but Lagardere held up his hand. "Stop!" he cried; "let no man dare to touch me. I have here your majesty's safe-conduct, signed and sealed—'free to come, free to go'—that was your promise, sire."

Gonzague protested. "A promise won by a trick does not count."

The king shook his head. "I have given my word. The man has forty-eight hours to cross the frontier."

Lagardere bowed to the king. "I thank you, sire. You are a true and honorable gentleman. But, sire, I give you back your word." As he spoke he tore the safe-conduct in two and flung it at his feet. "I ask but four-and-twenty hours to unmask the villain who now triumphs over truth and justice, and to give back a daughter to her mother. Nevers shall be avenged! Make way for me!"

As he spoke he turned upon his heel and passed rapidly from the king's presence, the amazed and bewildered guests giving ground before him as he passed. Instantly Gonzague turned and

whispered to Peyrolles: "He must not leave this place alive."

And Peyrolles answered, confidently: "He shall not. Every gate is guarded by my spies."

The king rose gravely and addressed the assembly. "Let us disperse, friends. What we have seen and heard leaves us in little mood for merrymaking." Then he gave his hand to the now weeping princess, and, followed by his immediate escort, quitted the tent. It was soon deserted; it was soon empty. The king departed in the direction of his palace. News that the ball was ended spread rapidly, and in a short while the gardens that had been so thronged and brilliant became deserted and desolate. The departing guests found that every exit was guarded by soldiers, and that their faces were carefully scanned before they were suffered to leave the precincts of the Palais Royal.

Gonzague remained alone in the solitude by the Fountain of Diana, waiting for Peyrolles, who presently joined him.

"Well?" Gonzague asked, anxiously.

Peyrolles looked disappointed. "He has not left by any of the gates. He must be hiding in the gardens."

Gonzague commanded, sharply: "Bid your men seek till they find, and kill when they find."

Peyrolles bowed. "Yes, your excellency," he said, and disappeared down one of the silent alleys. As he departed, the hunchback emerged from the shadow of a tree and approached Gonzague noiselessly. Gonzague started a little as he suddenly became aware of the hunchback's presence.

The hunchback bowed. "Is your highness content with the night's work?"

"So far, yes," Gonzague replied. "We have got the girl and got the papers safe in my palace."

"Ah! And Lagardere?" the hunchback asked.

Gonzague answered: "Peyrolles is looking for him, with six of the best swords in Paris."

Æsop spoke, contemptuously: "Peyrolles is a bungler. Leave it to me. I will find Lagardere for you and deal with him as he deserves before an hour has passed."

Gonzague caught at his words eagerly. "You promise?"

Æsop answered, proudly: "On the word of a hunchback. Before two o'clock I will bring you the news you wish for."

Gonzague gave a cry of triumph. "Then ask and have your own reward." Then he turned and hurriedly left the gardens, his breast swelled with exultation. When he was out of sight, the hunchback whistled softly, and Cocardasse and Passepoil came out of the shadow of the trees. The lights were now rapidly dying out, and the gardens lay in darkness checkered by the moonlight.

Lagardere turned to his friends. "She is in Gonzague's palace. We must rescue her at once."

Passepoil appealed to him, pathetically: "Can you ever forgive us?"

"Yes," Lagardere answered—"yes, on one condition. There is a snake in this garden. Kill him for me."

Cocardasse gave a grin of appreciation. "Peyrolles it is."

Even as he spoke there was a tramp of feet and a flare of light in a side alley, and Peyrolles came towards them followed by half a dozen men, each of whom carried a torch in his left hand and a naked sword in his right. Peyrolles came towards the hunchback.

"Well, Æsop, we cannot find him anywhere."

"That," the hunchback answered, coldly, "is because you don't know where to look."

Peyrolles turned to his followers. "Seek in all directions," he said, and the men with the swords and torches dispersed in twos down the adjacent alleys.

The hunchback laid his hand on Peyrolles's shoulder. "I know where to find him."

Peyrolles turned in astonishment. "You do?"

"I am here!" the hunchback said, sternly. He drew himself up erect and menacing, and flung back the long hair from his face. Peyrolles gave a gasp of horror as he recognized the man whom he had seen such a short while before in the presence of the king.

"Lagardere!" he cried, and was about to scream for help when Cocardasse grasped him by the throat. There was a short struggle, and then Cocardasse flung the dead body of Peyrolles at the feet of Lagardere.

Lagardere bent over him and spoke his epitaph: "The last of the lackeys. Now for the master."

THE REWARD OF ÆSOP

Paris lay quiet enough between the midnight and the dawn. All the noise and brilliance and turbulence, all the gayety and folly and fancy of the royal ball had died away and left the Palais Royal and the capital to peace. Little waves of frivolity had drifted this way and that from the ebbing sea to the haven of this great house and that great house, where certain of those that had made merry in the king's gardens now made merrier still at a supper as of the gods. The Palace of Gonzague was one of those great houses. The hall where the Three Louis gazed at one another—one so brave, one so comely, one so royal—was indeed a brilliant solitude where the lights of many candles illuminated only the painted canvases throned over emptiness. But from behind the great gilded doors came the sound of many voices, men's voices and women's voices, full of mirth and the clatter of glasses. His Highness Prince Louis de Gonzague was entertaining at supper a chosen company of friends—flowers from the king's garland carefully culled. There were the brilliant, insolent youths, who formed the party of Gonzague; there were the light, bright, desirable women whom the party of Gonzague especially favored among the many of their kind in Paris. Nocé was there, and Oriol and Taranne and Navailles and the others, and the dainty, daring, impudent Cidalise and her sisters of the opera, and Oriol's flame, who made game of him—all very pretty, all very greedy, as greedy of food and wine as they were greedy of gold and kisses, and all very merry. One face was wanting from the habitual familiars of Gonzague. The little, impertinent Marquis de Chavernay was not present. Gonzague had not thought fit to include him in the chosen of that night. Chavernay was getting to be too critical of his kinsman's conduct. Chavernay was not as sympathetic with his kinsman's ambitions and wishes as his kinsman would have had him be.

At the head of the table sat the illustrious host, beaming with an air of joyousness that astonished even his friends. It was as though the sun that had shone for so long upon all their lives, and in whose light and heat they had prospered, had suddenly taken upon himself a braver radiance, a fiercer effulgence, in the glow of which they all, men and women alike, seemed to feel their personal fortunes patently flourishing. No one knew why Louis de Gonzague was so gladsome that night; no one, of course, ventured to ask the reason of his gayety. It was enough for those, his satellites, who prospered by his favor and who battered on his bounty that the prince, who was their leader, chose on this occasion to show a spirit of careless mirth that made the thought of serving him, and of gaining by that service, more than ever attractive.

Outside, in the deserted hall, the Three Louis stared at one another, heedless of the laughter behind the gilded doors, indifferent to the hilarity, regardless of the license characteristic of a supper-party in such a house at such an hour. For long enough the Three Louis kept one another company, while the great wax candles dwindled slowly, and the noise and laughter beyond seemed interminable. Then the door of the antechamber opened, and the hunchback entered the hall and paused for a moment, glancing at each of the Three Louis, with a look of love for one, a look of hate for the other, and a look of homage for the third. At the hunchback's heels came Cocardasse and Passepoil, waiting on events. The hunchback stood for a moment listening to the noise and jollity beyond the doors. Then he turned to his followers:

"My enemy makes merry to-night. I think I shall take the edge off his merriment by-and-by. But the trick has its risks, and we hazard our lives. Would you like to leave the game? I can play it alone."

Cocardasse answered with his favorite salute: "I am with you in this if it ends in the gallows."

Passepoil commented: "That's my mind."

Lagardere looked at them as one looks at friends who act in accordance with one's expectation of them.

"Thanks, friends," he said. Then he sat at Gonzague's table, dipped pen in ink, and wrote two hurried letters. One he handed to Cocardasse. "This letter to the king, instantly." The other he handed to Passepoil. "This to Gonzague's notary, instantly. Come back and wait in the anteroom. When you hear me cry out, 'Lagardere, I am here,' into the room and out with your swords for the last chance and the last fight."

Cocardasse laid his hand on the sham hump of the sham Æsop. "Courage, comrade, the devil is dead."

Lagardere laughed at him, something wistfully. "Not yet."

Passepoil suggested, timidly: "We live in hopes."

Then Cocardasse and Passepoil went out through the antechamber, and Lagardere remained alone with the Three Louis. He rose again and looked at them each in turn, and his mind was hived with memories as he gazed. Before Louis de Nevers he thought of those old days in Paris when the name of the fair and daring duke was on the lips of all men and of all women, and when he met him for the first time and got his lesson in the famous thrust, and when he met him for the second and last time in the moat at Caylus and gave him the pledge of brotherhood. Looking now on the beautiful, smiling face, Lagardere extended his hand to the painted cloth, as if he almost hoped that the painted hand could emerge from it and clasp his again in fellowship, and so looking he renewed the pledge of brotherhood and silently promised the murdered man a crown of revenge.

He turned to the picture of Louis de Gonzague, and he thought of his speech in the moat of

Caylus with the masked shadow, and of the sudden murder of Nevers, and of his own assault upon the murderer, and how he set his mark upon his wrist. The expression on Lagardere's face was cold and grave and fatal as he studied this picture. If Gonzague could have seen his face just then he would not have made so merry beyond the folded doors.

Lagardere turned to the third Louis, the then solemn, the then pale, Louis of France, and gave him a military salute. "Monseigneur," he murmured, "you are an honest man and a fine gentleman, and I trust you cheerfully for my judge to-night." Turning, he advanced to the doors that shut him off from the noisy folk at supper, and listened for a moment, with his head against the woodwork, to the revelry beyond, an ironical smile on his face. Then, as one who recalls himself abruptly to work that has to be done, he who had been standing straight when he contemplated the images now stooped again into the crippled form of the hunchback and shook his hair about his face. Raising his hand, he tapped thrice on a panel of the doors, then moved slowly down to the centre of the hall. A moment later the doors parted a little, and Gonzague entered the room, closing the doors behind him.

He advanced at once to where the hunchback awaited him. "Your news?" he cried.

The hunchback made a gesture of reassurance. "Sleep in peace. I have settled Lagardere's business."

Gonzague gave a great sigh of satisfaction. "He is dead?" he questioned.

The hunchback spoke, warmly. "As dead as my hate could wish him."

"And his body?" Gonzague questioned.

The hunchback answered: "I have concealed his body very effectively."

Gonzague brought his palms together silently in silent applause. "Excellent Æsop! Where is Peyrolles?" he asked.

The hunchback paused for a moment before replying. "He sends his excuses. The events of the night have upset him. But I think he will be with you soon."

The indisposition of Peyrolles did not seem to affect his master very profoundly. What, indeed, did it matter at such a moment to a man who knew that his great enemy was harmless at last and that his own plans and ambitions were safe? Gonzague came nearer to the hunchback.

"Æsop, there is no doubt that Lagardere's girl is Nevers's daughter. She has his features, his eyes, his hair. Her mother would recognize her in a moment if she saw her, but—"

He paused, and the hunchback repeated his last word interrogatively: "But—?"

Gonzague smiled, not enigmatically. "She never will see her. Nevers's daughter is not destined to live long."

Well at ease now, and more than ever in the mood for joyous company, Gonzague turned to re-enter the supper-room, but the hunchback clawed at him and brought him to a halt. Gonzague stared at his follower in a bewilderment which the hunchback proceeded partially to enlighten. "You have forgotten something."

"What?" asked Gonzague, in amazement.

The hunchback made a little, appealing gesture. "Little Æsop wants his reward."

Gonzague thought he understood now. "True. What is your price?"

The hunchback, more bowed than ever, with his hair more than ever huddled about his face, swayed his crippled body whimsically, and when he spoke he spoke, apologetically: "I am a man of strange fancies, highness."

Gonzague was annoyed at these preliminaries to a demand, this beating about the bush for payment. "Don't plague me with your fancies. Your price?"

The hunchback spoke, slowly, like a man who measures his words and enjoys the process of measurement: "If I killed Lagardere, it was not solely to please you. It was partly to please myself. I was jealous."

Gonzague smiled slightly. "Of his swordsmanship?"

The hunchback protested, vehemently. "No, I was his equal there. I was jealous of his luck in love."

Gonzague laughed. "Æsop in love!"

The hunchback seemed to take the laugh in good part. "Æsop is in love, and you can give him his heart's desire. She was in Lagardere's keeping. She is now in yours. Give her to me."

Gonzague almost reeled under the amazing impudence of the suggestion. "Gabrielle de Nevers! Madman!"

He laughed as he spoke, but the hunchback interrupted his laugh. "Wait. You have to walk over two dead women to touch the wealth of Nevers. I offer to take one woman out of your way. Do not kill Gabrielle; give her to me."

Gonzague stared for a while at the hunchback in silence. "I believe the rogue is serious," he said, more as a reflection addressed to himself than as a remark addressed to the hunchback.

But the hunchback answered it: "Yes, for I love her. Give her to me, and I will take her far away from Paris, and you shall never hear of her again. She will no longer be the daughter of Nevers;

she will be the wife of Æsop the hunchback."

The proposition was not unpleasing to Louis of Gonzague. It certainly seemed to offer a way of getting rid of the girl without the necessity of killing her, and Gonzague was too fastidious to desire to commit murder where murder was wholly unnecessary, but the thing seemed impossible. "She would never consent," he protested.

The hunchback laughed softly, a low laugh of self-confidence. "Look at me, monseigneur," he said, "Æsop the hunchback, but do not laugh while you look and damn me for an impossible gallant. Crooked and withered as I am, I have power to make women love me. Let me try. If I fail to win the girl, do what you please with her, and I will ask no more."

Gonzague looked keenly at the bowed, supplicating figure. "Are you thinking of playing me false?" he murmured. "Do you dream of taking the girl to give her to her mother?"

The hunchback laughed—a dry, strident laugh. "Would Æsop be a welcome son-in-law to the Princess de Gonzague?"

Gonzague seemed to feel the force of the hunchback's reasoning. To marry the girl to this malformed assassin was to destroy her more utterly, she still living, than to destroy her by taking her life. "Well," he said—"well, you shall try your luck. If she marries you, she is out of my way. If she refuses you, you shall be avenged for her disdain. We can always revert to my first intention."

A slight shudder seemed to pass over the distorted form of the hunchback, but he responded with familiar confidence: "She will not disdain me."

Gonzague laughed. "Confident wooer. When do you mean to woo?"

The hunchback came a little nearer to him and spoke, eagerly: "No time like the present, highness. I thought that on this night of triumph for you I could provide for you and your friends such an entertainment as no other man in all Paris could command. I have ventured to summon your notary. Let your supper be my wedding-feast, your guests my witnesses. Bring the girl and I will win her. I am sure of it—sure."

Gonzague was too well-bred, too scholarly a man not to have a well-bred, scholarly sense of humor. His nimble Italian fancy saw at once the contrasts between his noisy company of light men and loose women and the withered hunchback who was a murderer and the beautiful girl whom he had robbed of her birthright and was now ready to rob of her honor. "It will be a good jest," he murmured.

The hunchback indorsed his words: "The best jest in the world. You will laugh and laugh and laugh to watch the hunchback's courtship."

Gonzague turned again towards the doors. "I must rejoin my guests," he said; "but you look something glum and dull for a suitor. You should have fine clothes, fellow; they will stimulate your tongue when you come to the wooing. Go to my steward for a wedding-garment. Your bride will be here when you return."

The hunchback's bowed head came nearer still to earth in his profound inclination. "You overwhelm me with kindness."

Gonzague paused, with his hand on the door, to look at him again. "You kill Lagardere; you marry Gabrielle. Do I owe you most as bravo or bridegroom?"

Again the hunchback abased himself. "Your highness shall decide by-and-by." Then he turned and went out through the antechamber and left Gonzague alone.

Gonzague rubbed his hands. "Æsop is my good genius." Then he touched a bell and a servant entered, to whom he gave instructions. "Tell Madame Berthe to come with the girl who was placed in her charge to-night."

The servant bowed and disappeared. Gonzague went to the golden doors and threw them open. Standing in the aperture, he summoned his friends to join him. Instantly there was a great noise of rising revellers, of chairs set back, of glasses set down, of fans caught up, of fluttered skirts and lifted rapiers. Men and women, the guests of Gonzague, flooded from the supper-room into the great hall, and under the gaze of the Three Louis, Oriol with his fancy, Navailles with Cidalise, Taranne, Nocé, and the others, each with his raddled Egeria of the opera-house and the ballet. As they fluttered and flirted and laughed and chattered into the great hall, Gonzague held up his hand for a moment, as one that calls for silence, and in a moment the revellers were silent.

Gonzague spoke: "Friends, I have good news. Lagardere is dead."

A wild burst of applause greeted these words. The pretty women clapped their hands as they would have clapped them in the theatre for some dance or song that took their fancy. The men were not less enthusiastic. The difference between the men and the women was that the men applauded because they knew why their master was pleased; the women applauded because their master was pleased without asking the reason why. The name of Lagardere meant little or nothing to them.

Nocé spoke a short funeral oration: "The scamp has cheated the gallows."

When the applause had died down, Gonzague spoke again: "Also I have good sport for you. To-night you shall witness a wedding."

XXVII

ÆSOP IN LOVE

Again the applause broke forth. Oriol, his round eyes growing rounder, echoed the last words as a question: "A wedding?"

Gonzague nodded. "A wonderful wedding. The bride is a beauty, and the bridegroom is Æsop."

Navailles looked round over his companions and sighed for the absence of a choice spirit. "How Chavernay would have laughed!" he said. "I wish he were here."

"I did not invite Chavernay," Gonzague replied, coldly.

And even as he spoke the door of the antechamber opened and Chavernay made his appearance unannounced, as briskly impudent, as cheerfully self-confident as ever. He shook a finger in playful reproof at Gonzague as he advanced, wholly unimpressed by the slight frown which knitted the brows of his unexpected host. "It was most unkind of you; but another makes good your neglect, whose invitation I really had not the strength of purpose to refuse."

Gonzague's irritation was not altogether dissipated by the coolness of his kinsman, but he judged that any show of anger was unbecoming so felicitous an occasion, so he smiled slightly as he asked: "Who invites you?"

Chavernay looked all around him, scanning the faces of the men in the brilliant group of Gonzague's guests, as if seeking there a countenance he failed to find. Then he answered, in a tone of voice that was unusually grave for the light-hearted marquis: "Henri de Lagardere."

At the sound of that name a thrill ran through the guests, and all echoed with astonishment the name of Lagardere.

Gonzague looked at Chavernay with a pitying smile. "You come too late," he said, "if you come at the summons of such a host. Lagardere is dead."

Chavernay gave a little start of surprise, while the others, to whom the news had been good news some little while ago, but was no news at all now, laughed boisterously at his expected discomfiture. But Chavernay did not seem to be discomfited, and seemed inclined to doubt the tidings. "Dead?" he said. "Why, he wrote to me to meet him here at two o'clock."

As he spoke he drew from his breast a folded piece of paper and extended it to Gonzague, who took it with a reluctance, even with a repugnance, which he controlled because it was so clearly unreasonable. The paper contained a few words written in a bold, soldierly hand. They ran thus:

"Meet me to-night at two o'clock at the palace of the
Prince de Gonzague. HENRI DE LAGARDERE."

Gonzague returned the paper to Chavernay with an ironical smile. "Somebody has been hoaxing you," he said. "You will not meet Lagardere here."

Taranne consulted his watch. "It is now two o'clock," he said, and showed the dial to Chavernay, who looked puzzled, but also unconvinced.

"No one will come," said Navailles, mockingly.

At that moment Chavernay's quick ear caught the sound of footsteps in the private passage outside, and called attention to the sound. "Some one is coming. Is it Lagardere?"

As he spoke all eyes were fixed upon the door. So firmly had the fear of Lagardere emanated from the consciousness of Gonzague to impress the hearts of his party that even then, when all present had the assurance from their leader that Lagardere was dead and done with, their conviction not unsettled, indeed, but somewhat disturbed by Chavernay's words and Chavernay's strange message, waited with uneasy expectation for what might happen. Then the door opened fully, and the hunchback came into the room, dressed now with a splendor of attire which seemed to contrast more grotesquely than his wonted sable with his twisted, withered figure. All present, including Gonzague, had for the moment forgotten the existence of the hunchback. All present, with the exception of Chavernay, burst into the loud laughter of relieved nerves as they beheld him.

"This is not Lagardere," said Oriol, holding his fat sides.

The hunchback laughed a mocking laugh in answer to the amusement of the company and the amazement of Chavernay. "Who speaks of Lagardere? Who remembers Lagardere? Æsop is the hero of this feast; Æsop is a gentleman to-night, with a silk coat on his back and a lace kerchief in his fingers. He woos a beauty, and the chivalry of France shall witness his triumph. Lagardere is dead! Long live Æsop, who killed him!"

The little marquis advanced towards the jesting hunchback with clinched hands and angry eyes. "Assassin!" he cried, and seemed as if he would take the hunchback by the throat, but Gonzague came between his kinsman and his servant, saying, coldly: "Whoever insults Æsop, insults me."

Æsop marries the girl whom Lagardere called Gabrielle de Nevers."

Chavernay folded his arms and looked fiercely around him. "Now I know why Lagardere sent for me—to defend a helpless woman."

The hunchback drolled at him: "She will not need your championship. She will accept with joy the hunchback's hand."

Chavernay shook his head scornfully. "That will never happen."

The hunchback answered him, coolly: "That will happen, Monsieur de Chavernay."

At that moment the door opposite to the antechamber opened, and the figure of a fair girl appeared.

"Your bride approaches," said Gonzague, and moved towards the new-comer, suddenly pausing with an angry frown as he perceived that she was not alone, for Gabrielle, very pale, but with courage in her eyes and determination on her lips, entered the room accompanied by the gypsy girl Flora. To Flora Gonzague spoke, angrily: "Why are you here? This is no place for you."

The gypsy looked at him defiantly. "This is my place," she said, "for I have found my friend, and I think she needs my friendship."

Gonzague spoke, imperiously: "Retire, Mademoiselle de Nevers!"

The gypsy girl gave him no answer, but held her ground mutinously. Gabrielle moved a little away from her friend's side. She asserted her right firmly. "I am Gabrielle de Nevers."

Again Gonzague addressed Flora: "Mademoiselle de Nevers," he said, "have you not undeceived this unfortunate, this misguided girl?"

Flora answered him, steadily: "No, highness, for I believe her."

Gonzague began to lose his patience. He was bound, in the presence of his friends, to keep up the assumption of belief in the gentility of Flora, in her heirship to Nevers. He addressed her, harshly: "Mademoiselle de Nevers, if you are mad enough to wish to abandon your rights to an impostor, I am here to protect you, and I order you at once to retire."

Flora gave no sign of obedience, and Gabrielle spoke again: "I am Gabrielle de Nevers. Why have I been brought here?"

Gonzague turned to her, and his manner was that of a judge coolly courteous to one whom he professed to believe possibly innocent of complicity in sin: "You have been brought here because I did not wish to deliver you to the stern justice of the law. Your offence is grave, but the fault lies with your accomplice, and his alone the penalty."

Gabrielle looked all about her, sustaining bravely the bold stares of the dancing-women and the evil admiration of the men. "Where is Henri de Lagardere?" she asked; and then, as only silence followed upon her question, she cried: "Ah, he must be dead, since he is not here to defend me."

Gonzague confirmed her fears: "He is dead."

Chavernay, who had kept resolutely apart from the rest of the guests, now advanced to the beautiful girl who stood there alone and friendless, save for Flora, and made her a respectful bow. "I will defend you in his name," he said, simply.

Flora clapped her hands. "Bravo, little man!" she cried.

Gonzague, with a stern gesture, motioned to Chavernay to stand back. "You presume," he said. "I offer this deluded girl protection. It is for me to see that she is properly provided for."

Gabrielle gave him a glance that pierced through his specious protestations. "You wish the daughter of Nevers to die. If you have killed Lagardere, I have no wish to live."

Gonzague answered her, urbanely: "You take the matter too seriously. You have shared an imposture. I propose to shield you from punishment. You shall tramp the highways no longer. Here is an honest gentleman ready to marry you, to forgive and to forget. Advance, Æsop."

At that command the hunchback, who had been leaning against a chair an apparently amused spectator of the not untragic scene, shambled slowly forward more ungainly than ever in his finery, his long sword swinging grotesquely against his legs.

Flora gave a cry of indignation. "Are you mad? That monster!"

The hunchback's answer to her words was a comic bow, which made Gonzague's friends laugh. Gabrielle looked at the laughing gentlemen, and there was something so brave, so stately in her gaze that the laughter died away.

"Gentlemen," she said, "you bear honorable names, you wear honorable swords. Gentlemen, the daughter of Nevers appeals to you to protect her from insult."

Even Gonzague's band, hardened by the influence of long association with their master, could not hear that appeal unmoved, though no man among them made any motion of responding to it.

Chavernay, however, rested his hand lightly upon his sword-hilt. "Rely on me," he said, boldly.

Gonzague looked at him contemptuously. "No heroics, sir. The lady is free to choose between the husband I offer and the law that chastises impostors." He turned to the hunchback, who stood near him. "I fear your love affair goes ill, Æsop."

The hunchback did not seem at all disheartened. "It will go better when I take it in hand myself. Let me speak to the lady alone."

Flora fiercely protested: "No, no, no!"

But Gonzague turned to her with a look so menacing that even her courage quailed before it. "For your friend's sake, be quiet, Mademoiselle de Nevers," he said. Taking Flora by the hand, he drew her, partly by main force and partly by strength of his dominating influence, away from Gabrielle. Then he turned to his friends. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "our good Æsop desires to speak to the lady of his love in private. We are all, I am sure, too sympathetic with his amorous ambition to interfere with his wishes. Let him ply his wooing untroubled. Stand apart, please, and give Æsop a fair field."

Wondering, laughing, whispering, Gonzague's guests drew back and ranged themselves against the golden doors, and Gabrielle was left standing alone in the middle of the room. The hunchback caught up a chair and carried it to where she stood, making a gesture which requested her to be seated.

Gabrielle looked at him scornfully. "I have nothing to say to you. I trust to the justice of France."

The hunchback spoke to her in a low voice, so evenly calculated that every syllable of what he said was clear to the girl's ears, though no syllable reached the others: "Do not start; do not show surprise."

Gabrielle had the strength of spirit to control the wonder, the joy, the hope at the sound of the loved voice thus brought her so suddenly; but she trembled, and her strength seemed to fail her. She sank into the chair which the hunchback had offered her. "My God!" she murmured, and then said no more, but sat with clasped hands and rigid face.

The hunchback spoke again, in the same low, measured tones: "Seem to listen against your will. A sign may betray us both."

"Henri!" Gabrielle murmured.

The hunchback went on: "Seem as if you were enchanted at my words, by my gestures. They are watching us."

Now the hunchback walked slowly in a circle round the chair on which Gabrielle was seated, making as he did so fantastic gestures with his hands over her head—gestures which suggested to the amazed spectators some wizard busy with his horrid incantations.

Taranne nudged Oriol. "She listens."

"She seems pleased," Oriol answered.

Chavernay muttered, angrily: "This must be witch-craft."

Nocé, leaning forward a little, called to the hunchback: "How speeds your suit?"

The hunchback paused for a moment in his round to make a motion for silence. "Famously, gentlemen, famously. But you must not disturb my incantations."

Navailles touched Nocé on the shoulder. "Let the dog have his day."

The hunchback was again at the side of Gabrielle, still indulging in extravagant antics of gesticulation, speaking softly the while. "Gabrielle, they think me dead, but I live and hope to save you. But we face danger, dear, but we face death, and must be wary. Will you do whatever I tell you to do?"

"Yes," Gabrielle answered.

The hunchback went on: "God knows how this night will end. I have told them that I can make you love me."

Almost Gabrielle smiled. "You have told them the truth."

The hunchback continued: "I have told them that I can persuade you to marry me."

Gabrielle said again: "You have told them the truth."

The hunchback sighed. He was still cutting his strange capers, waving his extended fingers over the girl's head and making grotesque genuflections, but he spoke, and his voice was full of passion and his voice was full of pain as he whispered: "Gabrielle, Gabrielle, I have always loved you, shall always love you. But you must not love me, that would never do. Nevers's daughter cannot, may not, love the soldier of fortune."

"Yet you ask me to marry you?" Gabrielle said.

The hunchback answered: "To save you from Gonzague. You would have died to-night but for this mad plan of mine. Once you are safe, you can easily be set free from me."

There was that in Gabrielle's eyes which the hunchback could not see. There was that in Gabrielle's heart which the hunchback could not read. Gabrielle appreciated the nobility of the man who was trying to save her, but Gabrielle also understood the strength of her own love and her own determination, but she showed nothing of this in her words. All she said was: "Well, I am not safe yet. What do you want me to do?"

The hunchback instructed her. "Just say yes to the questions I shall ask you now aloud. Speak as if you were in a dream."

He drew back now a little from the girl, and turned triumphantly to the others, with the air of

one who has accomplished a very difficult task. Then he approached Gabrielle again.

"Do you love me?" he asked, in a clear voice which carried to all parts of the room.

And the girl, looking straight before her like one that spoke in a trance, answered, clearly: "I love you with all my heart, for ever and ever and ever."

Gonzague, who had been watching the proceedings with cynical curiosity, was the most amazed of the amazed spectators. "Here is a miracle."

"I'll not believe it," Chavernay protested.

The hunchback made an angry gesture to command silence. "Hush!" he said, and then again addressed the girl: "Will you be my wife?"

Gabrielle answered as clearly as before: "I will be your wife gladly. In joy and in sorrow, I will be your wife so long as I live."

The hunchback turned triumphantly to the company. "Gentlemen, gentlemen, you see that my suit prospers. The poor hunchback was no boaster."

Flora, seated near to Gonzague, and conquered by his domination and by the horror of the scene, covered her face with her hands and shuddered. "It's too horrible," she moaned.

The hunchback nodded to her ironically. "You are severe," he said, dryly. Then he turned to Gonzague. "There is a friend of mine at the door," he said. "May I introduce him?"

Gonzague nodded, and the hunchback advanced to the door of the antechamber.

Chavernay looked after him with haggard eyes. "What spell has the devil got?" he muttered.

Gonzague shrugged his shoulders. "I am amazed; but the knave has my faith, and, if the lady's taste limps, shall we say her nay?"

XXVIII

THE SIGNATURE OF ÆSOP

By this time the hunchback had opened the door and introduced to the company a dapper, affable gentleman who was habited, as became his calling, for the most part in black; but he lent an air of smartness to his notarial garb by reason that the black of his coat and breeches was of silk, and that he wore a quantity of costly lace. This was Master Griveau, one of the principal notaries of Paris, and a man that had been employed not a little by the Prince de Gonzague. For this reason his face was familiar to most of those present, and the faces of most of those present were familiar to Master Griveau, and Master Griveau nodded and bowed and smirked and smiled, and showed in a hundred little ways with a hundred little airs and graces that he was quite the man of the world and quite at home in fashionable circles. He was accompanied by two of his clerks, who seemed as anxious to efface themselves as their master was to assert his personality.

The hunchback patted the notary on the back with a pat that made him give at the knees and look somewhat ruefully about him as if an earthquake had occurred, and introduced him to the company: "Here, sirs, is my Cupid—nay, better than Cupid, for Cupid had no pockets, whereas Maître Griveau has, and my marriage contract in one of them."

Master Griveau, with the air of one who could take a joke as well as any man if the joke were proffered in august company, produced a large, folded paper bound about with green ribbon. He bowed profoundly to Gonzague. "In accordance," he said, "with monseigneur's instructions, as conveyed to me by monseigneur's"—he halted for a moment, and then continued—"Monseigneur's friend, the deed is prepared and ready for signature. Have I monseigneur's permission to make a few preparations for the interesting ceremony?"

Gonzague nodded, and the brisk little man, with the aid of his two clerks, pushed a table into place, arranged writing materials, and, seating himself with a great air of formality, investigated a quill pen, spread out his contract, and surveyed the company with the air of one who should say: "I have done, and done well, all that it becometh me to do; it is now for you to play your part in this ceremony."

Gonzague addressed the notary: "Have you entered the names of groom and bride?"

Master Griveau gave a little, protesting cough. "I do not know them, your highness. I have left blank spaces for the names."

Gonzague pointed to Gabrielle, where she sat apart. "The lady is Mademoiselle de Lagardere." Then he turned to the hunchback. "And you, what is your lawful name, Æsop?"

The hunchback made an appeal to Gonzague. "Highness, humor my jest to the end. I have kept my real name a secret long enough; let me keep it secret a little longer. Will you and your

friends honor me by signing as witnesses? Then I will fill in the blanks and set down my own name—a name that will make you laugh."

Oriol gave a grin. "Æsop is comic enough."

Lagardere nodded to him. "Æsop is a nickname. My true name will divert you more. Sign, sirs, sign."

Master Griveau, with due solemnity, unfolded the contract and spread it before him. Then he dipped a pen in the ink, and stood waiting for the illustrious company to sign the contract.

"Give me the pen," said Gonzague. He was beginning to tire a little of the comedy, in spite of its element of marvel, and to wish the girl well out of his sight with her hunchback husband. He signed his name and held up the pen. It was eagerly sought for. Taranne gained the privilege of taking it from the fingers of his master. Taranne signed, Nocé signed, Oriol signed, Gironne signed, Choisy signed, Albret signed, Montaubert signed. When the pen was offered to Chavernay, Chavernay put his hands behind his back and shook his head. It came to Navailles to sign last.

"Now for the happy pair," Navailles said. As he spoke he turned to where the hunchback and Gabrielle stood together silent, a strangely contrasted bride and bridegroom—youth and age, so it seemed, beauty and ugliness, sin and purity. Truly, it appeared to be what Chavernay thought it and called it—a damnable alliance.

While the signing had been toward the hunchback had spoken softly one sentence to his bride. "Gabrielle," he said, "if I die here, I die as I have lived—your lover."

And Gabrielle had answered him in the heart of her heart: "I love you, my lover."

Now, when Navailles addressed him, the hunchback moved forward, and waved away the little, glittering crowd of gentlemen that gathered about Master Griveau at the table, ordering them to move. "Make space, sirs, for my wife and me. I need elbow-room for my signature."

He advanced to the table, holding Gabrielle by the hand, and still, though the humor of the situation had endured so long, even the wine-flushed men and the wine-flushed women seemed almost as conscious as Chavernay of the tragedy that underlay the humor of the play. All fell back and left a free table for the hunchback and his bride. Master Griveau settled himself comfortably in his seat and took up his pen. Turning to the hunchback, he began: "Give me your names, your surnames, your birthplaces—"

The hunchback interrupted him: "Have you signed?"

"Certainly," Master Griveau answered, something astonished at being thus carelessly treated.

"Then, by your leave," said the hunchback, and dexterously edged the indignant notary out of the chair. "Leave the rest to me. Back, friends, till I finish." Pushing the chair aside, he restrained with a sweep of his arm the advancing crowd of gentlemen eager to see the name that Æsop would acknowledge.

While Master Griveau, with a very much offended air, edged himself into the circle of Gonzague's friends as one that had earned the right to move freely in such company, the hunchback began rapidly to fill in the blank spaces on the parchment before him.

Master Griveau felt it his duty to say a few words of protest on behalf of the slightly offended majesty of the law. "A very extraordinary ceremony, highness."

Gonzague smiled ironically, but cared nothing for the offended majesty of the law, so long as his own purposes were being served. "Æsop is an extraordinary man," he said.

The hunchback, who had overheard this conversation, pointed with the feather of the pen he had just been using to Gonzague. "You are right, prince," he said. Then he gave the pen to Gabrielle and whispered to her, so low that no one heard him: "Sign Gabrielle de Nevers."

The girl took the pen from his hand and signed boldly, though she signed that signature for the first time in her young life.

The hunchback took the pen from her fingers. "Now my turn." Deliberately and swiftly he signed his name and flung down the pen. Then he moved back a little way from the table and drew Gabrielle behind him. He turned to the expectant company. "Come and see, sirs. You will stare, I promise you."

All were eager to press forward and read the signature, but all restrained their desire until the curiosity of the master of the house was satisfied. Gonzague advanced leisurely to the table, relieved to think the comedy had come to an end, and that he had satisfactorily rid himself of an incubus. He bent carelessly over the parchment, and then sprang back with face as pale and eyes as wild and lips as trembling as if on the pitiful piece of sheepskin he had seen some terror as dread as the face of Medusa. His twitching mouth whispered one word, but that word was "Lagardere!" and that word was repeated on the lips of every man and woman that watched him.

Before the eyes of all present a new miracle happened, more marvellous than its predecessor, for the hunchback suddenly stiffened himself and became erect and soldierly; the hunchback swept back the grizzled locks that had so long served to conceal his features; the hunchback stood before them a strong and stalwart man, with drawn sword in his hand. Stretching out his arm, he extended the sword between Gonzague and the parchment and touched with its point the signature that was still wet upon its surface.

In a terrible voice he cried: "Lagardere, who always keeps his tryst! I am here!"

For a moment that seemed sempiternal a kind of horrible silence reigned over the room. It was hard to understand what had happened. The startled guests stared at one another, terrified by the terror on Gonzague's face, amazed at the metamorphosis of the hunchback, shuddering at the name of Lagardere. The first to recover courage, composure, and resolution was Gonzague himself. He sprang from the table to where his friends stood together and drew his sword.

Pointing to where Lagardere stood, with Gabrielle clinging to his arm, he cried: "He must not escape! Your swords, friends! It is but one man!"

But even as he spoke, and while Lagardere was waiting with lifted sword for the inevitable attack, Chavernay crossed the room and stood at Lagardere's side. "We shall be two!" he cried, and drew his sword.

At the same moment the doors of the antechamber opened, and Cocardasse and Passepoil, with their naked swords in their hands, entered and ranged themselves on the side of Lagardere.

"We shall be three!" said Cocardasse.

"We shall be four!" said Passepoil.

The situation was changed, but the situation was still perilous. On the one side of the splendid room stood Lagardere, with Chavernay, Cocardasse, and Passepoil, their gleaming weapons ready for attack. On the other side, with a great gap of space between the two parties, stood Gonzague and his cluster of light friends, every man of whom had bared his rapier and was ready to obey the summons of his chief. Behind these the women huddled together, some screaming, but the most part too frightened to scream. Flora, overstrained, had fainted.

Lagardere taunted Gonzague. "Come, monseigneur," he said, "are you afraid? The odds are not so favorable as they were at Caylus."

With a writhing face Gonzague screamed to his friends: "Charge!"

And Lagardere answered with a ringing cry: "I am here!"

In another moment the two parties would have met and blended in battle; but before Gonzague's followers could obey his command and follow his lead, they were stiffened into immobility by a sudden knocking at the golden doors. At that unexpected sound every sword was lowered, and then from beyond a stern voice came, commanding: "Open, in the king's name!"

XXIX

THE DEAD SPEAKS

Immediately the golden doors were flung open, and Bonnavet entered from the supper-room, followed by a company of soldiers.

Gonzague turned to Bonnavet, indignant and bewildered. "What does this mean?" he gasped.

Bonnavet's answer was to salute with his sword, as he announced: "His majesty the king!" And through the double line of soldiers Louis of France entered the room with the Princess de Gonzague on his arm.

The king looked with astonishment at the strange scene before him—the fainting women, the two camps of armed men, the scattered furniture. The Princess de Gonzague looked only at the girl, who now hung so lovingly upon the arm of Lagardere.

"Why have I been sent for?" the king asked.

And instantly Lagardere answered him: "To witness my restoration of Mademoiselle Gabrielle de Nevers to her mother." As he spoke he moved towards the princess, and gave Gabrielle to her out-stretched arms.

The Princess gave a cry of joy. "She has the face of Louis! She is my child!"

Gonzague tried to speak, and failed; tried to speak again, and succeeded: "Your highness, I again declare that I gave the true Gabrielle de Nevers to her mother. I have the page torn from the register of the chapel of Caylus in this sealed packet." As he spoke he held out a small sealed packet, which he had drawn from his breast.

The king turned to Lagardere. "What do you say to this?"

Lagardere answered: "That I have kept my word. I have given back her daughter to the princess. I will now unmask the murderer."

Again the king questioned him: "Where are your witnesses?"

Lagardere turned and pointed with his drawn sword to Gonzague: "You are the first."

Gonzague, trying hard to recover his composure, raged at him: "Madman!"

Lagardere turned to the king and spoke more solemnly: "The second is in the grave."

Gonzague laughed. "The dead cannot speak."

Lagardere still looked menacingly at Gonzague. "To-night the dead will speak. The proofs of your guilt are in that sealed packet, stolen from me by assassins in your pay."

Gonzague turned to the king, protesting: "Sire!"

Lagardere interrupted him: "Monseigneur, he is going to say that that packet contains only the birth-lines of Mademoiselle de Nevers—but there is more than that."

Louis of Orleans turned his steady gaze on Louis of Gonzague, and read little to comfort him in the twitching face of his life-long friend. "Break the seals, Louis," he commanded.

Lagardere spoke, exultingly: "Yes, break the seals and read your doom, assassin. The packet contains only the birth-lines of Mademoiselle de Nevers, but still it contains the proof I ask. As Nevers lay dying in my arms, he dipped his finger in his blood and traced on the parchment the name of his murderer. Open the packet and see what name is there."

Now, while he was speaking, Gonzague began to tremble like a man that has the trembling sickness; but as Lagardere continued he seemed by a desperate effort to stiffen himself, and, moving slowly, unobserved by those present, who were for the most part busy with looking upon Lagardere, he neared a candelabrum. As Lagardere uttered his last command, Gonzague thrust the packet that he held into the flame of the candle, and in a moment the flame ran along the paper, lapping it and consuming it. The king and Lagardere both saw the despairing deed.

The king was the first to speak. "Louis!" he cried, and could say no more.

Gonzague dropped the burning paper from his fingers, and it fell in ashes upon the floor.

Lagardere lifted his sword in triumph. "The dead speaks! There was nothing written on that paper. His name was not there, but his own deed has set it there."

The eyes of all were fixed upon the face of Gonzague, and the face of Gonzague was an ugly sight to see. Hatred and despair struggled there for mastery—hatred and despair, and the hideous sense of hopeless, ignominious, public failure after a lifetime of triumphant crime.

"Louis!" cried the king again. "Louis! Assassin!"

In a moment Gonzague's sword was unsheathed, and he leaped across the space that divided him from Lagardere, striking furiously for Lagardere's heart. But Lagardere was ready for him, and, with a familiar trick of the fencing-schools, wrenched Gonzague's weapon from his fingers and flung it to the floor. A dozen hands seized Gonzague—the hands of those that once had been proud to call themselves his friends.

Lagardere turned to the king, appealingly: "Monseigneur, I cry a favor. Let me support this quarrel with my sword, and God defend the right."

The king was silent for a few seconds, trying to set himself right with a world that had suddenly changed for him. Surely, it would be better to let it end so, whatever came of it. He turned to Lagardere, and bowed his head in silent approval: "As you will."

Suddenly, then, the Princess de Gonzague, clinging to the child in her arms, cried out, calling to Chavernay: "Monsieur de Chavernay, in yonder alcove lies the sword of my dead husband. Fetch it, and give it to Monsieur de Lagardere."

In a frightful silence Chavernay crossed the room, entered the alcove, and came forth holding the sword of Louis de Nevers in his hand—the sword that Louis de Nevers had used so valiantly on the night of Caylus. Silently he offered it to Lagardere, and silently Lagardere, giving the weapon he held to Cocardasse, took the sword of Nevers from the hands of Chavernay. Thereafter Lagardere stooped and picked up the fallen sword of Gonzague. Then, advancing towards his enemy, he made a sign to those that held him to release their captive—a sign that was immediately obeyed. He held out the weapon by its blade to Gonzague, who caught it. In another moment the two men were engaged in combat.

On the walls the impassive portraits of the Three Louis looked on while one of the Three Louis fought for his shameful life, while another of the Three Louis sat in heart-broken judgment upon him, and while the widow of another of the Three Louis sat clasping in her arms the child she had surrendered in the moat of Caylus so many years ago.

Gonzague was a fine swordsman, and Gonzague fought for his life, but he did not fight long. Suddenly Lagardere's arm and Lagardere's sword seemed to extend, the blade gleamed in the flare of the flambeaux, and Gonzague reeled and dropped.

"Nine," said Cocardasse, thoughtfully.

Passepoil placed his forefinger between his brows. "The thrust of Nevers," he murmured.

Lagardere lifted his blood-dyed sword and saluted the picture of Louis of Nevers. "After the lackeys the master. Nevers, I have kept my word."

Then he let fall his weapon, for the soft arms of Gabrielle were about his neck.

THE END

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