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THE FROWN OF MAJESTY



The Crown of Majesty

*A ROMANCE OF THE DAYS OF
LOUIS THE FOURTEENTH*

BY

ALBERT LEE

Author of "The Key of the Holy House," "The
Gentleman Pensioner," "King Stork
of the Netherlands," &c.



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THE FROWN OF MAJESTY

CHAPTER I

THE CURÉ OF TOUR

FATHER CALVISSON, village priest and confessor, was intolerable. I endeavoured to honour him because of the sacred office which he filled, but the effort was too severe to be sustained for any length of time. A man must have had a genius for friendship to have entered the Curé on his list of friends. Even in the estimation of the most ill-conditioned of the district—and this is a great deal to say, for they were bad to the bone—the Curé brought infinite discredit to his priestly office. None could say that he displayed the beauty of a clean, self-respecting, upright life. The most inveterate gossips felt that he surpassed themselves, for they had proved him slanderous, exacting, selfish, fonder of the table and his flagon than of his breviary, indifferent to the welfare of his holiness the Pope and the prosperity of Mother Church—saying so, indeed, in his drunken moments, when, like the majority who indulge freely in wine, he spoke what he really thought. Yet when sober, the pharisaism of the man was displayed. He was, to outward

seeming, as full of zeal and as zealous for the Church's good name as anyone throughout the length and breadth of France.

There was another motive for the general lack of love for this priest, and it fell in most convincingly with my own experience.

Father Calvisson made confession a trading matter, and when I confessed, hinted at bigger fees than I deemed my delinquency warranted. The trivial sin was magnified by his insinuations. If I fought a duel, the Curé either contrived to be on the ground at the critical moment—an indifferent *Telemachus*—or walked uninvited into my library, there to say that he supposed I knew that there was a law in the land against duelling. I knew it well enough, but shrugged my shoulders with a show of disgust when the priest went on to say that he should be in the confession-box at four o'clock that afternoon. I understood, from the look on his face, that the information given as to his whereabouts at that particular hour must needs be taken in the light of an imperative command to me to be in attendance. If the look had not been sufficient, the peremptory tone removed all doubt in the matter. What could I do but take the hint?

France was so priest-ridden that I was powerless in the Churchman's hands, although I was the *Vicomte de la Tour*. The fact that I was counted among the most powerful of the nobility of France, and exceptionally wealthy, went for little. By virtue of the Church's domination—which did not exempt the *Grand Monarque*, Louis the Fourteenth—I was at the beck and call of this lean-bodied, red-faced,



pimple-nosed, wine-bibbing, snappy old priest, who had it in his power to throw out hints, lying or otherwise—he did not care which—that might make Madame de Maintenon turn her back on me. Such a thing as that was tantamount to social ruin. It was worse, in a sense, since it would bring some of his Majesty's Guardsmen to my gate, to know how long I had been a Huguenot.

In the estimation of the majority of the people in Tour, the Curé was a trying man to deal with, so that it was neither my fancy nor my prejudice. Confession time was no season of consolation, but something to be dreaded; for while one confessed with average honesty—only keeping back what was too disagreeable to put into speech, or knowledge which was best not known to the father confessor—he would scold and comment to an extent which would have aroused open resentment had it not been a tonsured one who spoke.

A priest's person, of course, has been, from time immemorial, traditionally sacred, and not to be maltreated with fist or steel. A dog could bark at him, snap at his lean legs, and feel no concern for the confusion and fright of the clerical mind. The canine parishioner, having no sense of spiritual responsibility or of priestly jurisdiction, was careless as to having disturbed the priest's dignity, and indifferent to the vituperations which came from an irate ecclesiastic's lips. He only troubled himself concerning the stone which even a priest might throw at him.

It was different with the men and women of Tour. They were not caninely ungodly. Having so much

at stake, they cowered before the Curé's baleful eyes, and shrank from his anathemas, for they felt the smart of the penance and exactions that followed.

There came times when it was as much as I could do to keep my hands off my father confessor, and one day especially there was a passage between us which hurt me as much as if I had been wounded in an affair of arms. It is important that I should name it because it marks the beginning of a series of events which make up the stirring story I have to tell.

Father Calvisson was hearing me at confession, and spoke with a studied insolence. He had put some questions to which—being an obedient Catholic—I returned straightforward answers. In commenting on my confession, he told me that I had a stubborn will, and a masterful pride that must be broken. I had heard this so frequently that it did not affect me; but something followed which moved me greatly. I do not remember how he contrived to twist the conversation, but he was presently reflecting on my mother's memory, calling her a heretic, and intruding on her womanly honour.

I could not tolerate this, however expedient it was to be on friendly terms with the Curé in such perilous times.

Rising to my feet in hot passion, I cried :

"Father, you say too much! Leave my mother alone with God! How dare you speak such things to me, her son? If you were not my confessor, I would strike you off your seat, and beat you like a dog!"

It was madness on my part, some will say, but the memory of my mother was very dear to me. She

was the sweetest, truest, purest woman on God's earth when living here. Rather than be silent under such an insult to the memory of one I loved so much, I would forfeit my whole estate, and toil in the sweltering fields like the serfs whom I could see through the open window of the church.

Calvisson's face turned blue-red with anger. There was nothing about him at that moment which savoured of the meekness of the Gospel he professed to teach. His appearance was that of unrestrained passion. The veins knotted in his forehead, his lips had an ominous curl on them, and his eyes shot out malignity. My sudden burst of temper was checked on the instant, for this priest had the advantage every way. It was polite to be conciliatory.

"Father, pardon me! My anger carried me away."

I could have said more, but I would not say that I was sorry for having spoken for my mother's good name, and so, by imputation, besmirch her honour by reason of my own cowardice. Self-preservation may lead an honourable man to do much, but never so much as that.

The Curé noticed the omission, but while he frowned ominously, I think he felt it well just then to be somewhat lenient.

I had found on other occasions that with this priest money covered many sins. He did not shrink from Simony, since he often trafficked in holy things. I drew a purse from my doublet, and laid it on the little desk at which he sat. He did what I had never seen him do before; he opened the purse, and putting in the forefinger of his right hand, moved the coins

one by one, and counted them. They were all of gold, and he nodded his approval.

"Go in peace, my son," said he gravely; "and in future be more careful of your speech."

The rebuke made one feel somewhat like a whipped cur.

As I was moving towards the aisle to come away, he called to me. Looking round quickly, I saw a sinister smile on his face.

"You spoke, father?"

"I did. I want to say that such outbursts are unseemly, my son, and expensive in more ways than one."

I quite comprehended that. A priest's resentment was more to be thought of than a purse of gold, although that which lay on the desk contained little short of a hundred pistoles. At that moment someone entered the church, and the father confessor, for the sake of appearances, instantly dissembled. The evil look in his face died away, and he smiled pleasantly when I turned and walked down the aisle slowly, wondering how he had not followed up his reproof by insisting on aves and credos in such number as to be vexatious and inconvenient. Possibly he had a heavier penance in store.

I was not at my ease when I reached the château. Instead of going to the library, as was my wont, I paced the terrace restlessly, until the great mastiff was weary of walking up and down, and flung himself on the stones at the doorway.

The heavy thud of the animal brought me back to my surroundings.

"Ha, Bernouin, you have no father confessor, no Father Calvisson! Happy dog!"

Bernouin, whose head had rested between his fore-legs, lifted it, and gazed into my face inquiringly. When he found that I had nothing further to say, he dropped into his old position, looked up at me from underneath his eyebrows, and blinked contentedly.

A serving-man chanced just then to come out of the shady dining-hall, and striding over the mastiff, asked if there was aught that I wished him to do.

“Yes, Rousard.”

In my ceaseless walk I had come to the conclusion—although I chafed at such helplessness—that it was best to do something to appease the priest. Ill-tempered ones always get extra consideration, and having a presentiment that the purse had not proved full enough, I had wondered what more I could do to restore the Curé to good-humour.

“Go to Father Calvisson, and say that I desire his company at supper to-night.”

The man was off instantly, but I thought I heard him mutter something to the effect that even his lord must needs hold a candle to the devil. When the broad-shouldered fellow hurried to the wicket, to pass down the avenue of lime trees, there was little need to wonder what his thoughts of the priest might be. He had undoubtedly seen his worst side, as I had done so frequently of late.

While Rousard was on his errand, I loitered on the terrace. Overhead was an almost cloudless sky, which had lost the soft blue of the early morning, and was become with the ageing day a metallic grey by reason of the heat and haze. About me were all the sounds of country life when summer is at its full—the whirr of wings as a wild fowl careered through

The Frown of Majesty

the air, the lazy cooing of the pigeons in cote and wood, the half-defiant, half-startled bark of an awakened fox in the distant copse, the occasional stamp of a sleepy horse in the courtyard, the snapping teeth of irritated dogs at the worrying flies, the impatient lowing of the kine that longed for milking time, the faint rustle in the cornfields as the fitful breeze dropped on them, and the drove of burdened bees that went by one's face on the way to flowers they had not visited.

Scores of times I had listened with pleasure to such sounds, but to-day they were unconsidered trifles. I was ruffled and anxious, for a problem had come before me for solution, and I could not put it aside for future consideration. It must be dealt with now.

Thinking over the Curé's scandalous life, I began to question the reasonableness of his domination over me and my conscience. Was he to interfere with my most sacred feelings, while his own heart was so sin-stained? Was a man of rank and reputation to put his conscience into such keeping? I had been severe when criticising the Huguenots, but I was beginning to admit the justice of their contention that no unholy one had the right to come between a man and his God. How could such a one as Father Calvisson make peace for me? I could not believe it possible, after having had such an experience, and after having heard Bourdaloue preach a sermon in Notre Dame, when I was last in Paris, from the text: "Be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord." Unconsciously I was beginning to rebel against these

pretensions of the Churchmen. Mine was a labouring heart and a perplexed mind.

Rousard was not long gone. He came back and found me leaning idly on one elbow against the carved stonework of the terrace, with Bernouin trying to open the closed fingers of the hand which hung at my side with his great wet muzzle.

“What said the Curé?”

The man halted before me, hot and perspiring with his hurried walk in the sun. He had come so quickly that the wicket did not slam until he answered.

“He will come, Vicomte.”

“Was he pleasant in his speech?”

I hoped by the question to discover the mood of the father confessor.

“He smiled, monsieur! His pimpled face was glum enough when I walked down the aisle, for he thought I was coming to confession, which he did not wish to hear, seeing that he was already on his feet to quit the church. But when I gave your message, his steely eyes flashed with pleasure, and I vow he licked his lips in anticipation of the good things he will have at my master’s table.”

It was impossible not to smile. Rousard took the rough liberty of an old and trusted servant—such liberty as might be expected of one who had taught me in my boyhood how to swim, to ride, to fence, to shoot, and do a score of things which my pale-faced tutor had neither the wit nor the physical strength to teach. When I was a lad I had given the man much of my confidence, and was the gainer considerably. Manhood had not broken off the habit, and now I

told the retainer of what had chanced between myself and Father Calvisson.

He looked grave.

"Vicomte, I have long supposed that he disliked you. I can only trust that he will do you no harm."

I winced involuntarily at the suggestion of injury. Here was the confirmation of my fears, yet I pretended not to believe in the possibility.

"What harm can he do to me?"


"What harm may not a priest do, Vicomte, if he has the will?"

"Heaven only knows," said I bitterly.

There was silence for a while. Presently Rousard, with a whimsical look on his face, observed:

"I would like to see that lean priest dead. I should know that my master was safe. Until then—"

He shrugged his shoulders, and did not complete the sentence.



CHAPTER II

THE SUPPER

FATHER CALVISSON flung open the wicket as the great clock in the courtyard struck six—so punctually that Broglie, my page, declared in a whisper to Rousard, but loudly enough for me to hear, that the priest had been hiding among the lime trees, so as to slip in at the precise moment.

10 "I hope supper will be late, for I would love to have old Pimple-face go hungry," observed the boy mischievously, looking round at the Curé while he was speaking, to be assured that he was not near enough to hear.

"Don't talk nonsense, my lad," said Rousard, trying to look as well as speak sternly; but Broglie saw a tremor of the speaker's lips, and laughed gaily.

"Ha, Rousard! You blow hot and cold! You talk to me of nonsense, and see—you smile!"

The retainer burst into loud laughter when he saw the page pointing at him with his forefinger.

To hide all suspicion of complicity in this by-play, in case the priest should overhear, I busied myself in readjusting my doublet, which was somewhat awry. Then I turned and bade my visitor welcome, hating myself for the compulsory hypocrisy.

There was such a suavity about the priest's manner when he entered that a stranger would never have believed that he had been so bitter and spiteful in the confession-box ; but he was a consummate actor, provided he had not been too long at the wine. He could hide his feelings and display a kindness of spirit which deceived the most acute of onlookers. I believe he would have cheated the King. On this occasion he was all smiles and geniality when I led the way to the table.

Lean though he was, Calvisson was second to none as a trencherman. When the Curé was passing into the dining-hall, Broglie whispered to one of the kitchen wenches who was standing at the sideboard, and I was so near that I heard the words expressive of the lad's belief that he had discovered the secret of the priest's laziness.

"Susanne, look at him ! He is skin and bones because he works so hard while eating so much. Keep your eye on him whenever you come in during the meal."

Susanne threw back her head and laughed so loudly that I was obliged to look round sternly, and express my disapproval. It would be sorry work if the father confessor imagined that my servants laughed at him ; for his moods were as changeable as the weather in April.

During the supper-time he was all sunshine, and if one could have forgotten past experiences—the ill repute and baseness of the Churchman's character—he would have said it was a pity that such geniality had so unpossessing a mask.

There are some tempers in this world which change

without any apparent cause, or with a very small one. An unfortunate accident that summer's evening wrought havoc with the Curé's artificial equanimity, when the dishes were removed, and the wine came on the table.

Rousard had been standing behind my guest's chair to anticipate his wants, and seeing that the priest's glass was nearly empty, went to the side-board to fetch a flagon to refill it. He chanced to pour in some claret instead of Rhenish, not having noticed that Broglie, out of pure mischief, had shifted the flagons, knowing the retainer's mechanical methods. Calvisson, unconscious of the error, tossed off the contents—then exploded with anger. The back of his good-humour was broken, and there were no more smiles, and no more pleasantries. Henceforth it was all sour criticism and complaint, although I had the Madeira served.

One would have thought that such a plentiful supply of wine, and of such a quality, too, would have induced a genial spirit and a generous softness, even in this Curé. On the contrary, each glass belied the Scriptural idea concerning wine, "Which maketh glad the heart." It was so much venom added to the ecclesiastic's temper.

"He is seeking a quarrel, and I must beware," said I, beneath my breath. I could feel my colour mounting, but I resolved to let the Curé have his say, and exhaust his ill-will.

"Come, father, you do not praise my wine," I cried, pretending to be in no sense daunted by his lack of friendliness. "I think his Majesty, were he here, would pronounce it good," I added, forcing a smile ;

but smiles were so foreign to my feelings just then that I should have been delighted to kick the priest into the courtyard.

He did not so much as deign an answer. Instead of speaking, he held up his glass to the evening sunlight with the air of a practised drinker. Leaning against the table, with one arm asprawl, and the other playing with the glass, he looked across at me with drunken fierceness. Had any other person spoken, I should have been disposed to smile when, without anything to lead up to it, he broke the silence by saying that I was a playgoer, who should be a religious man. What if I had been? Did not all the nobles of France patronise the players—even his Majesty? It was just as absurd when he went on to say that I knew more of Molière's plays than my breviary, and that instead of going to hear my own father confessor preach, I went to listen to Bourdaloue and Massilon.

The charges were trivial. But when the priest began to say that he smelt heresy in the château, and said so without regard to the presence of Rousard or Broglie, I was exasperated.

"Father," I cried, "you forget that your talk is not fit for a boy's ears!"

"What?" snapped the Curé, bringing his glass to the table with such force that it shivered into pieces, the red wine splashing over his bony hand.

"You forget that your talk is not fit for a boy's ears," I repeated sharply, pointing to Broglie, who was standing by the sideboard with a startled look on his face. The priest's drunken fierceness had frightened all the mischief out of him.

"Then let him get out of the room," he snarled. "Go out of the room at once," he cried, turning to the page, who was only too glad to be relieved of duty, and get away from the father confessor. He looked at me first, however, to see whether he ought to obey, and at my nod went, pulling the door after him with some alacrity.

Father Calvisson reached forward for another glass, which he filled, after having wiped his hand on his gown.

He was about to continue his talk on the unwelcome subject of heresy, but I interposed.

"Father, you speak before my servants without regard to my dignity."

"Ha! My lord of Tour does not care for his serving-man to hear of his weaknesses," he responded, staring round at Rousard.

"I do not care that any servant of mine should be made to think me a libertine, a heretic, and a scoundrel generally, when I am an honourable nobleman, and as loyal a son of the Church as yourself," I retorted hotly, no longer careful as to consequences; for patience may be carried to such extremes that a man loses his self-respect—a thing I was not prepared to part with.

Calvisson laughed drunkenly. Taking up his glass, which he had overturned in his boisterous mirth, he said something which made Rousard mutter an oath under his breath, while my own hand went unconsciously to my dagger-hilt. The serving-man's fist closed up with anger, the action showing that it would have boded ill for the speaker had he been anything but a priest. A nod from me, and he

would have tossed the Curé into the river or the horse-trough—whichever would have pleased me most.

But that would have been madness. Father Calvisson had but to whisper abroad that Fulcran de Belliot, Vicomte de la Tour, was a Huguenot, to achieve my ruin, whether the assertion were true or false. The ruin in its degree would be as complete for Rousard, if he followed the impulse to lay violent hands on the truculent ecclesiastic.

“Shall I leave you, monsieur?” said the retainer in my ear.

“No,” came my reply, after a moment’s pause.

Seeing that it was dangerous to retort, we allowed the priest to have his say, waiting with what content we could, while there was so much to exasperate us. In time the wine began to overpower him. Seasoned drinker though he was, he could not hold out interminably against the potent drink which he took, in spite of my suggestion that he had had sufficient. The glass, which was half-way to his lips, slipped from his fingers and shivered on the stones, his chin fell on his chest, his hands hung helplessly at either side, his body reclined against the high-backed chair, and in a few minutes the reverend father slept a drunkard’s heavy sleep.

Rousard looked on in scorn. Like me, he felt it shameful that this priest should be what he was in a world where men cheat, deceive, lie, contest, rob, and murder. God knows, the times were such that no priest could be too holy and eager to interfere for the bettering of men. There were other Churchmen in France who bent beneath the burden of their work,

who watched over their people with solicitude, trembling when they saw the destroyer, hawk-like, hovering over them. It was never so with Calvisson, who brought shame to his order, and made men scoff at religion. It was the common talk among the people throughout my vast estate, and beyond its borders, as to the devilries he had perpetrated. I never heard one word about any charity he had displayed, either in the dispensing of simple gifts, or in the exercise of a loving-kindness which exhibits the tenderness of spirit and care for another's weal, that might well come from one who professed to follow Christ. Not a word! The man was face to face with doubtful, hard, and vexing issues; yet none of them moved him in the least degree.

"What shall we do with him, Rousard?"

"Throw him into the horse-pond, monsieur," said the other, giving the sleeper a kick, by way of revenge for the many penances prescribed in bygone days, when the retainer had no option but obedience.

"It would never do."

Yet I felt that the drunken Curé deserved it.

"No, I am afraid it would not," said Rousard dubiously. "I had better carry him home, and when he wakes he may think he has been dreaming."

When I nodded approval, the strong fellow stooped, then lifting the lean priest in his arms, bore him out of the château, careless as to whether the confessor's head banged against the door-posts when he passed out of the room, and down the passage, into the outer air. I followed to the terrace and saw Rousard go down the steps, across the courtyard, then out at the iron gates, following the beaten path through the

meadow, which led towards the Curé's home. It was nearer through the wicket, and down the lime tree avenue; but he went that way, I think, hoping that some of the peasants might see him with his burden.

While Rousard was absent, I walked to and fro in the moonlight, thinking of the change, not in the priest's habits—for there was none—but in his attitude towards myself. He had once been comparatively friendly; of late he had lost no opportunity of being disagreeable. Under ordinary circumstances, one in my station would have resented such insolence as had been displayed at confession and the supper-table. But these were no ordinary times. I had seen the necessity of being circumspect, and consequently had stayed at home a great deal, so as to escape the perils of the Court, to avoid having anything to do with the tangled skein of intrigue, to abstain from taking sides with one or other of the parties which kept the nation in unrest. It seemed to me, while I paced the terrace, that all my caution had gone for naught, and that I had deprived myself to no purpose of the delights and excitements which were to be found in the Court of the *Grand Monarque*. I had even run the risk of my absence being misconstrued.

When Rousard came back, slamming the gate behind him, I was no nearer an answer to the puzzling question as to why the Curé had changed so much of late?

CHAPTER III

THE LETTER IN THE BUREAU

ISABEL—the woman who looked after the priest's home—came to the château on the following morning from the father confessor. There was a scared look on her face, and she spoke with considerable hesitation. She did not like being the bearer of the imperative message she brought, bidding me, the Vicomte de la Tour, go at once to the Curé.

"I do but repeat what Father Calvisson bade me say, M. le Vicomte, and he threatened me with extra penance if I did not give his message exactly as he worded it," said she, accompanying her words with a gesture which betokened her helplessness.

This was a reversal of established usage, that the lord of the château should turn lackey to his chaplain, and go to him on demand. It was for the priest—dependent on my bounty—to wait on me; and realising the reversal, and angrily disapproving, I sent back a curt refusal.

The woman looked at me with a sort of mute entreaty, as if she felt that the reply she had to carry might bring harm to someone. Before she turned to go away, she threw out her hands deprecatingly, and delivered herself of what was on her mind.

"I do not know what has come over the priest. He is either going mad, or is growing very wicked."

It went against the grain to chide her, but I felt compelled to speak reprovingly.

"You should never criticise your priest."

She looked at me with a puzzled expression on her face, as if she wondered in her own mind as to what I had done—whether I had been guilty of some heinous sin which made her master unusually angry, and was being sent for to make amends, and do penance. She must have seen on my face signs of anger, annoyance, vexation, but no trace of guilt; and curtseying low, she turned and walked away.

Before many minutes had passed, she came back, white-faced and trembling. She spoke falteringly, stammering out the sentences of her message, where, usually, she was so free of speech. She hesitated so much, that she only said what the priest's words were, after I had given her encouragement.

"Father Calvisson is angry, monsieur. He insists on your coming. Forgive me, but I only say what he told me to say—not one word more. He bade me tell you that if you did not come, it would be worse for you."

Rousard was standing by, his face flushing with anger, and an oath escaped his lips. It was well that the Curé did not hear him. Like the noblest in the land, I was under the bondage of fear, but my answer was emphatic.

"Let the priest come here to me. Go and tell your master so."

"It will mean trouble, monsieur," Isabel expostulated; not that she cared for her master's wishes

being frustrated. It was easy to read her honest face, and see that all her fear was for me.

“But why should I go?”

“I cannot say, monsieur. I only know that I did not like the look on the Curé’s face. It was a very cruel one.”

I felt the need of a friend at such a juncture. To ask counsel of one’s retainer would seem a lowering of dignity; yet when crises come, formalities and the usages observed among men may well go for once. Rousard, looking first to Isabel, then to me, and back again to the woman, decided the matter, waiting for no approach on my part, and running all risk of causing offence by apparent forwardness. It was the privilege of long service, and I could not, and did not want to resent such a thing.

“I would go, monsieur.”

“But who ever heard of one in my station waiting on his Curé whenever he might choose to send his orders?”

“True, Vicomte, but I verily believe the devil has got into the priest, and mischief may come if you refuse.”

The woman—who crossed herself at the suggestion of Satanic possession—stood aside, pale and frightened, loath to carry back anything like a refusal from me, while Rousard and I, in face of a presentiment of danger, talked the matter over. It ended in a message that I would shortly wait upon Calvisson.

I found the Curé in his chair, dishevelled and unwashed after his night’s debauch; for it could not well be styled less. It needed no telling that Rousard was to blame for the blood-stained cloth which was

wrapped about the Churchman's head. The serving-man had carried the unconscious ecclesiastic without regard to obstacles in the way, having the pleasure of revenge in doing so, while the memory of unreasonable penances and innumerable aves and credos, was busy in his mind.

"It is not usual, father, for the priest to make a lackey of one in my station," said I sternly, standing before Calvisson.

"Certainly not usual," the answer came, with a snap; "but there are exceptions to every rule, and this is one."

"I do not see why there should be an exception in my case," was my hot retort; for the walk from the château had in no sense lessened my choler.

"Perhaps you do not." And this with all the exasperating insolence of the preceding night. His sleep had in no sense improved the father confessor's temper.

"Then explain, I pray you," said I, making a great effort to restrain my anger.

"Precisely; I will explain," the other responded meaningly, alike in tone of voice and expression of face.

The priest had some regard for propriety, however, that morning, for he turned to the woman who was in the room.

"Isabel, go into the garden, and remain there until I call you. Stay under the beech tree, where I can see you; for then I shall know that you are not listening."

The woman's comely face flushed crimson, but she went out meekly. Presently I saw her sitting on the

rustic seat, with the shadows of the slowly-moving branches playing on her. Not far behind her were the bushes which bordered what was known in all the country-side as the Haunted Copse, so that it was a piece of cruelty on the Curé's part to send her there, although it was broad daylight.

"Now for the answer to your question, Vicomte," began Calvisson, turning round in his chair and facing me, so soon as he saw where Isabel had placed herself. There was an expression in his eyes which I did not like, and it was the more galling because I remembered that it was my money which kept this man in luxury. Even the house in which he lived was mine. Surely the times were bad when one of the highest nobles in the land should be at the beck and call of a disreputable parish Curé! I did not want him to cringe, but it was not too much to look for courtesy. Other priests were deferential—this one was insolent, and I could not think why.

"Say on," said I curtly, for Calvisson was slow to speak, spending his time in a prolonged stare into my face. He sat silent in his chair, turning his lean thumbs one over the other with provoking slowness, and did not proceed until I had spoken once more.

"You sent for me. For what purpose?"

"Vicomte, did you ever hear of the Revocation?"

"Certainly!"

It was a very ridiculous question for any Frenchman to put to one of his countrymen; for who had not heard of the signing of that document by the King, whereby the Protestant population in France lost all their liberties, and every privilege?

"Precisely," the priest observed, looking at me

from beneath his eyebrows. "One thing I do not think."

He was exasperating to a degree. He held me on tenter-hooks of uncertainty while he turned his thumbs again, and gave a sardonic smile time to play over his lean and pimpled face. It spread slowly.

"What thing do you not think?" I asked impatiently, tired of this slow measure of speech.

"Well, to speak plainly—stand aside, Vicomte, for I want to see where that woman is. I have something to say which is best said in your ears only, and Isabel's are long, and her tongue wags too freely when she is among the peasants."

He bent forward, and looked through the window into the garden. He was satisfied with what he saw, for his housekeeper was still sitting within the shifting shadows of the beech.

"To speak plainly," he resumed, sitting back once more, "I did not think that Fulcran de Belliot, trusted at Court, and posing before France as a good Catholic, would be among those who set the decree of King Louis aside."

He not only gazed at me to see how I received his words, but he rubbed his hands together, as if he enjoyed my confusion.

My answer came sharply:

"I have never set the decree aside."

"Softly," the other interposed, pointing his lean forefinger at me. "Softly."

"I speak the truth, Father Calvisson," was my emphatic assertion, for here was a slur on my veracity.

"The whole truth?"

I was being examined much as if I were a criminal, and was naturally restive under the examination, and by such a judge.

"Yes."

Surely there could be no doubt as to the sincerity of my reply; yet the priest pretended not to think so, for he said:

"Think again."

"You are insolent, father. You throw a doubt on my honour. There needs no thought in the matter. I have never set the decree aside. No other man should question my truthfulness as you are doing!"

"I chance to be a priest," the confessor chuckled.

He knew that few men would venture to lay hands on an ecclesiastic.

"Explain your words," I demanded. "I am in no humour to be played with. In times like these I am not prepared to have such an accusation as that thrust at me. You have said much to me of late, father, and have frequently spoken words which in others would be treated as insolence."

Father Calvisson's response was deliberate.

"An accusation *must* be thrust at you, if you are guilty."

I looked keenly at the Curé, whose face still had that provoking smile upon it.

"What reason have you for saying this? I am tired of innuendos."

"Oh, but this is no innuendo, my son. I have come to a plain assertion of fact."

The Curé got up from his chair and walked across the floor unsteadily. It was plain that he had not yet

recovered from his indulgence at the château, or if he had, had been drinking more wine since he awoke. He went to the bureau, where such treasures as he possessed were kept, and papers which he did not wish Isabel to see. He was in no hurry. Taking a key from his bosom slowly, he opened one of the drawers. A small bundle of papers lay therein, tied round with a blue riband, which he undid deliberately. He was evidently pursuing a policy of suspense.

"I have a paper here, my son, which may interest you, if you will read it. But stay, I will read it to you," he said, selecting one out of the bundle.

He gazed at the opened letter for a time, now holding it at arm's length, then bringing it nearer to his eyes.

"You had better read it yourself, for my eyes do not serve me well this morning, and I have mislaid my spectacles. I bless the clever Italian who invented such things, but I wish he had made them so that they should never get lost."

I was consumed with impatience, and eagerly took the paper from the priest's trembling fingers. My own hand, usually so steady, shook as much as my companion's when I perused what was written. While I read I turned first hot, then cold, then faint. The lines seemed to swim before me, and the room, with the blurred image of the smiling Curé, was whirling round. It was only by a supreme effort of will that I recovered myself, and was able to look at Father Calvisson, who observed me curiously, as though he watched a criminal who should convict himself by his bearing. Indeed, the priest—to read my face the

better—bent forward so closely that his breath, which smelt of wine, mingled with my own.

“Is it true, Vicomte?”

The Curé was slowly rubbing his hands together, while his eyes were screwed up, as if he would see my face more plainly.

“It is abominably false!”

“Nonsense! My informant knew what he was about. He charges you with being a Huguenot, and also with having employed a Huguenot in your household, contrary to the King’s decree.”

“I say it is abominably false! Who is this Huguenot whom I have harboured?”

“That is best known to yourself,” he answered in oily tones, which were worse to hear than if he had been violent in his speech. “And doubtless you know, as well as I do, that none are permitted to hire or harbour Huguenots, under the heaviest penalties. The penalty which concerns you in this case is the galleys.”

“The galleys? God forbid! The whole letter is a lie,” said I, but now more quietly, for I saw that it would be well to conciliate the Curé, rather than cross him. “God knows I am no Huguenot, but an honest Catholic.”

“We will take that for granted for the nonce, Vicomte,” the priest observed. “What about the Huguenot servant?”

“So far as I am aware, I have not a Huguenot on my estate, much less in my household. I have regard for my liberty and my good name, and would not barter them so insanely.”

Father Calvisson smiled, as though he had often

heard such repudiations. He made no comment on my words, but simply said, after a short pause :

“The paper goes to the King to-night.”

“But it is full of falsehood—shamefully so!” I reiterated.

We stood in silence for a while, mentally measuring each other. Our faces must have indicated the different conclusions at which we had arrived, as to the issue of a contest, if it came to one. I knew myself helpless ; the priest was confident of victory. This was no physical trial of strength, otherwise the Churchman would have been hopelessly beaten ; for in point of stature I towered over him a full head, at least. But there was a moral force behind the ecclesiastic which rendered strength of body, and even a patent of nobility and favour at Court, of no avail.

My position was a startling one ; for the feeling against the Huguenots and those who befriended them was so intense that there was always the fear of an outburst such as that which made the fatal Eve of St. Bartholomew so infamous. The one-sided strife of creeds gave the stronger party the power of life and death over any whom they hated ; and to achieve the ruin of a rival, or force him to part with some of his wealth as the price of silence, was an easy task. The King himself had the utmost hatred for the Huguenots. He had no great men about him, and the second-rate advisers flattered him into the belief that the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes was not only a testimony to his religious zeal, but a splendid example of his sagacity. The bigoted Madame de Maintenon, who was practically the monarch of

France, being omnipotent over Louis, told him plainly that the Revocation would cover him with glory before God and man.

I knew, therefore, that Calvisson had but to speak, in order to achieve my ruin. Not to go so far as the Court, at his behest any of the men and women within my own domain—unless they had nobler natures than most—would rise against their master, simply to save themselves. I had no reason to suppose that these dependents of mine would slay the human nature in them for my sake. The fact that I had fed and sheltered them in famine and cold would go for naught when the testing time came, for the spirit of self-preservation was strong in days when life was full of perils, and the way beset with difficulties.

I was not blind to the possibilities which almost resolved themselves into certainties. Suppose that the letter went to the King—a word from His Majesty would bring me to beggary, and I should spend my days at the galleys, chained to the worst of criminals. Or I might awake some night and find that the peasants were overrunning the château, ready to plunge their knives into my heart, or set the mansion in flames, and shut me in to their mercy. Such things had been done a score of times since the Edict of Nantes had been revoked. It fell in with the wishes of the rabble, who hailed the opportunity of sacking the houses of the Huguenots. The murderously disposed not only got their booty, but received medals from the authorities, in recognition of their zeal in rooting out heresy.

Then for the priest himself, looking at the man, thin-lipped, crafty, with shifty eyes, it was easy to

believe him one who would bring me to such a fate without compunction. I thought of him while he stood there, as scheming for my downfall, eager to hurl me from a position envied by my fellows down to the most despised; but what his motive was, I could not divine. Nor could I think of anything I had ever done to him to make him wishful to effect my ruin.

I turned to the window, overcome by the extremity of my perplexity and danger. This had come to me like a thunderbolt from heaven.

The priest stood by without a word. His cold-blooded cruelty in contemplating all this peril with such a smiling face bewildered me. I no longer wondered at the fiendish tortures practised by the Inquisitors, if those of the Holy Office were such men as Father Calvisson; and doubtless they were.

Isabel was in the garden, sitting there with her hands in her lap, and her eyes upon the park and the beautiful château of which I was so proud. She did not stir, but gazed before her as if the priest had looked at her with the eyes of Medusa, and had turned her into stone. She would not move lest her master should accuse her of listening, although it would have been impossible for her to hear anything while she was so far away.

The Curé's housekeeper, however, had little place in my thoughts, for the nearer and all-absorbing concerns—matters that affected my own destiny—possessed me, and took up all my attention. She was but an unconsidered object that I saw, and yet did not see.

This was the question which held me with an insistence that was painful to the point of agony: Would the Curé send that letter on to the King? It was false from end to end, but if it bore the signature of a priest, even of such a priest, the King, bitter beyond words against Huguenots, would accept the charges contained in it; and then—the galleys, or a living death in one of the dungeons of Paris.

I knew something of the character of Calvisson. There was his love of money—an inordinate love—and the thought came that he might be bribed into silence. Avarice holds principle with a slack grip. So sordid a passion would override loyalty to the Throne, or to the Church. Nothing is so mean that the cloak of greed may not cover it. Surely, then, with so much at my disposal, I might buy him over to silence; whereas an appeal to tenderness or sympathy would altogether fail. In the case of any one who has a lust for wealth, loyalty goes down before the onslaught of gold like a stricken man in the battle-field.

But what if the priest would not take the gold I offered? Suggestions came in now for consideration. A resolve to see the King was put aside because it did not seem practicable; a determination to brave the matter out and abide by my chances followed; but although I am no coward, I shrank from that, for I feared that the prolonged anxiety would break my spirit.

My reverie was broken in upon by Father Calvisson, who spoke with an irritative arrogance.

“You had better go home, Vicomte. I have work

to do, and your presence prevents my doing it. Isabel!"

The woman rose to her feet instantly, and crossed the browned grass.

This did not please me.

"I would say a word, father. Tell the woman to stay where she is a moment or two longer."

"I want her," was the sharp rejoinder, as if he resented my words. "Go, for I would be at my work!"

There was no escape from such peremptory words.

"And this letter?" said I, putting on a bold front, although conscious of an inward and unspeakable dread, when I pointed to that damnable paper as it lay on the table. An ominous band of black lay across the scrawling lines—the shadow of one of the iron bars in the window. It reminded me of the dark lines which might fall across the floor of a prison cell.

"It will go to the King to-night," was the priest's answer. "Isabel, get me my dinner; I am hungry."

The woman was at the door, glad to be called away from the garden, and waiting to know why she had been summoned. When she heard the Curé's words she went to the kitchen, and once more the priest and I were alone.

"Will not money serve to bring about the destruction of yonder letter?" said I, pointing to the document with my forefinger. I was growing desperate, and made this dangerous bid for deliverance. It was dangerous because, if the fact



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leaked out that I had offered the priest money, my action might be construed into an admission of guilt.

“No!”

The answer was too emphatic to be mistaken.

CHAPTER IV

"I SHALL TELL THE KING"

THE remainder of the morning was spent in restless wandering. To settle down to any definite occupation was impossible. I went to my library, and sought for calmness among my books; but whereas at other times they had such charm for me, I now read page after page without comprehending a single thought. I tried Auguste de Thou's "History of his Time," but the facts of one page were fugitive before I had turned over the leaf. Francis Malherbe had always interested me, but now I found him—what others, who had little love for true poetry and fine language, had called him—"A tyrant of words and syllables." Either he was no poet, or I was lacking in discrimination. The cultured of my time were enthusiastic over the songs of that prince of poets, Pierre de Rousard; but while his verses had hitherto tripped to the music of my soul, now they were lifeless and uninspiring; for on every page I saw a picture of the priest holding that lying letter in his hand, and looking at me with the irritating smile on his face. I flung the book of this once poet-laureate across the room, breaking the costly covers away as the volume overturned the iron dogs of the fireplace, then hurried out of the apartment. Up and down

the corridors, through other chambers, into the kitchens, startling the cook and his helpers by this unusual visit; away to the terrace, to the stable, to the village—I went anywhere to get away from my thoughts!

The news of the orgy of the Curé had got abroad. Probably Broglie and Susanne—hand-and-glove in any mischief that was going—had passed it on assiduously, glad to have something out of the common run to report. Whoever was responsible, it effectually disturbed the usual serenity of the domestic life of the village. When I walked down the street I found the women in little groups, hands on hips, while they gossiped over the evil doings of the ecclesiastic who dared to serve as a priest of God, and yet led such a scandalous life.

Now and again I heard scraps of the chatter. The women were refreshing each other's memory with the doings of this one and that among the tonsured priests—telling how one was a profligate, another a liar, someone else an adulterer, others dice-players, while a few had not hesitated at murder.

It was chiefly said in low tones, only a word here and there escaping the lips of a louder speaker, and with many a glance around, and a certain fearsomeness, lest Father Calvisson himself might overhear them, or someone be traitorous enough to play the listener, and carry word to the Curé.

It was one of those days which the most sensitive look back upon with pain, not so much because of any physical suffering or unusual vexations, but by reason of memories which made so great a break-in upon our moral courage. To me the aspect of every-

thing appeared to have undergone a change. Things that were usually so full of charm had lost their attractiveness.

I came to a hillock, and gazed around with a lack of appreciation one might have expected from a blind man. I was thinking of other things, and not of the scene before me; yet it was a brilliant summer day, and the glory of the sunshine filled the landscape. I was out of harmony with it all, and the stillness of the country life did not serve to hush down the clamour in my own soul.

After that I walked till I was hot and weary, getting home too tired to eat, although Rousard pressed me to try this thing and that on which the men in the kitchen had bestowed such care.

"I have something else to think of," said I, somewhat impatiently, brushing aside the servant, who saw that I needed food.

"Then take this glass of wine, monsieur," he insisted, bringing to me some choice Madeira.

I took the wine, and felt the better for it. Another glass brought back my appetite, and while I sat I relieved my mind by telling Rousard what had happened at the priest's house. The serving-man stood with folded arms, and a grave look which presently altered into one approaching consternation.

"Can you not bribe the Curé?" he asked eagerly.

"I said to Father Calvisson, 'Will not money bring about the destruction of the letter?' and he answered me sharply enough in the negative."

"Try him again, monsieur. It would go hard with the priest if he should be called upon to say 'No' to an offer of a few hundred pistoles."

"I would offer him a thousand to get the thing done with. Not that I am guilty of heresy," I added hastily. "God knows that I am no Huguenot, and have no sympathy with their practices, while I commiserate their sufferings."

Rousard looked at me sharply, after he had glanced round the room.

"That was scarcely a wise thing for my master to say, for sympathy of any sort with the Huguenots is not palatable to those who are in authority."

"I am talking to you, Rousard—"

"I know, Vicomte," the man interrupted, "and what you say is safe in my hearing. But suppose others had been here?"

"Then I should not have said such words."

"Pardon me, master, but walls, they say, have ears."

He had scarcely spoken when the door swung open, and Father Calvisson walked in with all the assurance of one who could afford to throw ceremony aside. Broglie was in the doorway, a little behind my unexpected visitor, looking behind him at me with a scared look on his face, as though he feared my anger at his having shown in the priest without first inquiring whether it was my will to see him. The history of that entrance, so far as I could read it, was this: that the Curé came into the great hall, and bade the boy show him into the library instantly. Broglie dared not refuse, whatever risk he ran of rebuke from me.

"You can leave the room, Rousard," said Calvisson, who seemed to imagine that he had the right to order my servants at his pleasure. "I would speak with M. le Vicomte alone."

I nodded obedience to my retainer, who looked at me to know my will.

"Well, father?" said I, with such ease as I could command.

To still the tremor which shook me somewhat, I sat well back in my chair, and grasped its carved arms with a certain nonchalance.

His answer astounded me.

"I want the loan of a horse to ride to Paris."

"To Paris? What takes you to Paris, father?"

"Need you ask?"

I put on a bold look, determined that he should not think that he had frightened me.

"You mean to carry to His Majesty the letter we were reading this morning?"

"Precisely."

"The course is a remarkable one, father. You come to me to borrow the rope with which I am to be hung."

"If you choose to think so."

"Do you positively mean to take the letter to the King?"

"Positively."

His calmness angered me, but I strove to appear cool. And meanwhile I swiftly reasoned. If the letter must needs go, and my fate was so assured, why should I oblige this priest? Whoever heard of a man making a noose with which his enemy might comfortably hang him?

"You shall not have my horse, Father Calvisson. If you are resolved to carry a lying letter to Paris, you shall find your own means of getting there. Rousard!"

The man came in at my call.

"Saddle two horses—one for me and one for yourself, and be in readiness to start for Paris in an hour."

When the retainer had gone, the Churchman looked at me with some amazement in his face.

"You would run into death's jaws, M. le Vicomte, if you rode into Paris."

"Perhaps so," I answered coolly. "I should wait for death if I remained here—or the galleys, I think you said this morning. It were better, I think, to be on the move, and meet my undeserved punishment in the midst of activity, than stay here for the arrival of His Majesty's messengers."

There was a look on his face which puzzled me. Was he relenting? Had he merely assumed the insolence of the previous night, and made the threats in the morning, in order to frighten me? He did not reply to my words, but stood with his back to the empty fire-place, watching me as I moved about the room, gathering up such things as my sword, a dagger, a brace of pistols, and a bag of money from a handsome coffer, ornamented with gilded reliefs and paintings. I thought, when I turned round hastily, that there was a look of greed on the ecclesiastic's face, and a certain hesitancy. Perhaps it was fancy, but it was not improbable.

"You mean to go, my son?"

"I do. I intend to tell the King of the letter you have received concerning me, so that he may be prepared."

"It is madness—self-murder!"

"Better be murdered by my own act than by

yours, father," I answered sharply, looking up boldly.

The spirit of resistance had come upon me in this way, and surprised me, as it certainly must have astonished the father confessor. He did not reply.

"It is no more madness," I went on, "than to wait here. And to tell the honest truth, father, since I am to die, I would rather have the distractions of a journey than think of facing death here, amid the monotony of country life."

I had come back to the table, and turned out such money as was in the bag, ostensibly to see if I had sufficient to take me to Paris. It glanced and glittered in the sunlight which fell across the table—a goodly show of golden coins, enough to make some esteem themselves rich, but barely so for the needs of one who was going to see the King.

The Churchman came forward a step or two involuntarily. Gold was always a magnet to him. When I glanced up he was bending forward slightly, one hand playing with his silver crucifix, the other met the chin, the bent forefinger being pressed against the two or three front teeth that yet remained.

I began to think that this display had saved me ; but he disappointed me. He did not say a word.

While I gathered the coins together, and dropped them into the purse, a few at a time, so that the chink of gold came musically, I spoke.

"Father Calvisson, I asked you this morning whether money would serve to destroy that lying letter, and you said 'No.' I would have given you as much as you have now seen, not in so doing

making any avowal of guilt—for I am innocent, as God can bear me witness, and as you must feel and know—but to avoid the scandal which would make men scoff at religion, since one of its chief upholders was a Huguenot in disguise, and to prevent the trouble which would necessarily come while I sought to clear myself of an infamous charge. I must needs spend this money in going to Court."

Having gazed at me, then at the bag as I placed it in my bosom, the Curé passed by my words as though I had not spoken, and said what was in his own mind.

"My son, you must remain here, and not go to Paris."

I looked up in simulated surprise.

"Why?"

"Because I bid you stay."

"That is no good reason, father."

"It is. I am your spiritual adviser, and in that sense you must needs obey me."

"And stay here to wait for death?"

"Why not?"

This was insolently spoken—callously, as if I were nothing but a chessman in the player's hand, someone without a heart, without anything at stake. It roused me to strenuous opposition. If I had experienced any hesitation before he spoke, the impulse came upon me strongly to revolt against the dictatorial attitude of one who so abused his sacred office.


"I will not stay here," I exclaimed resolutely. "I am going to obey a stronger voice than yours, father—the voice that urges me to self-preservation. I

shall tell the King of your own methods of discharging duty—of your drunkenness, of your general unworthiness to fill the office you hold, and of the endeavour you have made to achieve my ruin on a charge which is absolutely false. What your motive is I cannot fathom. I am going now, so I will trouble you to quit the château.”

I was convinced that his resolution to ruin me was a fixed one, and therefore it mattered not if I displeased him more. I was resolved to die fighting. What could extra hate, more or less, harm me now? This Churchman should no longer be the jailor and turnkey of my mind and conscience. I would think for myself.

Father Calvisson passed me with an angry look and a muttered imprecation. He halted and turned round, however, when I followed him into the corridor and pulled the door after me. I thought he would speak, but after a baleful look from those bloodshot eyes of his, he turned his back upon me, and walked away without a word.

When he descended the winding staircase, I returned to the room, and crossing to the window, looked into the courtyard. Presently he appeared below, went slowly and with bent head towards the iron gates, waited while the porter opened one of them for him to pass through, and then disappeared.



CHAPTER V

THE STABLE AT GUECHE

THE afternoon was growing somewhat old before we lost sight of the château, but Rousard and I rode on rapidly, intending to halt at an inn which stood on the edge of the high road leading to the capital. There we could rest for the night, and ride forward in the cool of the morning, since the sweltering heat of mid-day was exhausting, alike to horse and rider.

We rode hard, for I was anxious to have speech with His Majesty before anyone on the priest's behalf could tamper with him, and arouse his prejudice. Otherwise I was condemned already, for Louis' detestation of Protestantism in any of its forms made him forgetful of service rendered either to himself or to the State, and indifferent as to the rank and prestige of the person suspected of being tainted with heresy. A Huguenot—active and virulent, or obscure and harmless—was regarded at Court as a traitor, someone to be treated with unrelenting severity, as being desirous of shattering the political fabric, and scoffing at the pretension implied in the King's historic declaration, "I am the State!"

The air, it is true, was full of pretensions to just treatment, but it was equally full of murder. When some of us were talking one day of the state of affairs



since the signing of the Revocation, M. Anquetil said, in little more than a whisper, that the quiet assassination of Calvinists went steadily on all over the kingdom ; the dagger, the prison, and the slow execution of the secret cell destroyed them.

Those words recurred to me. I realised my danger now that Father Calvisson had so distinctly displayed his hatred. The thought was a spur to me, and again and again I urged my horse forward, telling Rousard that every moment was golden. I think he realised the fact, for he responded without fail to my call.

The night stars were appearing in the heavens, and the distant horizon, which had been aglow with colour, was deepening into blackness when we drew near to the hostelry of Gueche. The lights that shone from the windows were somewhat blurred by the wraith-like mist which hovered over the river and the meadows ; but we knew the country well, and rode up to the door at such speed as the tired horses could carry us.

When the landlord saw us, he bade us welcome in one breath, and expressed his regret at seeing me in the next.

“ I am sorry to see you to-night, M. le Vicomte.”

I had lived at such tension during the last few days that the landlord's greeting came as a shock to me, and I began to fear lest the Curé had tampered with the bloodhounds, if the leash had not already been slipped.

My question came sharply : “ Why, Tonnay ? ”

I was infinitely relieved when I heard the answer, for the regret was simply that of an obsequious

landlord, unable to oblige a customer whose money was worth having.

“I am sorry to see you, M. le Vicomte, because the hostelry is full.” I drew a deep breath, which did not escape Rousard’s attention, for he looked at me intently while Tonnay proceeded. “I have not a room at liberty unless anyone of those already here is content to sleep in the stable, and give up his bed to you.”

The civil-tongued fellow knew well enough that the bare suggestion of such a thing was absurd, and shrugged his shoulders accordingly. Rousard chuckled quietly, and not without reason, for what man would make room for a nobleman?

“There is nothing for it but the stable-loft,” said I, determined to sleep there, rather than take my tired horses two or three leagues farther on that night.

“Nay, the stable is not for such as you, M. le Vicomte. Let me consider.”

We halted a while to give the landlord time to think of some way out of the difficulty. Tonnay knew me as a good paymaster, and was doubly anxious to please me. There were one or two inside whom he would gladly turn out, because they were doubtful characters—gallows-birds, he said—but there was the chance of disturbance. Some of his customers would intervene if he made such an arrangement in favour of one of the hated class of nobles, and there would probably be considerable damage to property as the result. He mentioned the possible course, and the almost certain consequences, but expected me to disapprove—which I did.

"Is there any house in the village?" I asked.

Tonnay walked away, and spoke to a wench who was coming down the stone-paved passage with an empty wine-jug. She said something in answer, and laying down the vessel, skipped past us, and along the village street, soon being lost in the fast-gathering darkness. She came back before long, breathless with her run, to say that Jehan Sault, the tanner, had some rooms in which M. le Vicomte and his retainer might lodge for the night, but no stabling for the horses.

"Then of what avail is that?" I cried impatiently. "Can I leave the horses in the street, or suffer them to crop the grass at the roadside?"

"Nay," interposed Tonnay. "The horses may be stabled here."

I was in a sufficiently ill temper barely to thank the landlord, and turned away from the door after dismounting.

"Let this girl show us where the tanner lives."

Mine was Hobson's choice, as I have heard the English say, so that it was Jehan Sault's house that night, or no lodgings at all.

Rousard had made a face when the tavern girl said that Sault could take us in for the night. His first question was bluntly spoken:

"Is the place clean enough for M. le Vicomte?" and although the girl curtsied, and said that everything was as clean as a new pin, we had some doubt on the matter, and held ourselves in readiness to ride on to the next village if the accommodation offered did not suit us. The girl's expression of satisfaction was not necessarily conclusive, for she had been

brought up among the people, whose houses were filthy and malodorous.

The apartment, however, into which Jehan Sault showed us was so clean that Rousard and I declared ourselves content, whereupon the girl who had conducted us to the house could not help saying somewhat tartly to my retainer:

“What did I tell you?”

“All right, my pretty chuck, I crave your pardon,” answered the burly fellow, giving the girl a kiss behind my back, and sending her to the inn quite satisfied.

The room stood off the landing of the first flight of stairs, and was low-ceilinged, wainscoted, and somewhat small, but clean. Such cleanliness was a rarity, for dirt and dilapidation were too general, alike in village and city, throughout France.

“We should be glad to have supper,” said I, after I had flung myself into the chair by the open window with considerable pleasure. Being somewhat of a bookworm, to sit in quietness and read at my leisure from the Essays of Michel de Montaigne, which I had brought with me in case an idle hour fell to my lot, was infinitely better than being shut in the public room of a hostelry with people of all sorts—mountebanks, soldiers, sharpers, men who only found pleasure in the clicking of the dice, or in bellowing some drunken song which the average man would blush at, even if there were no women in the place. The poor fare which the tanner could offer us was amply compensated for, since to a man studiously inclined, a quiet read is better with the plainest eating than tempt-



ing food served amid an uproar of oaths and quarrels.

Rousard, hankering for company of a more jovial character than a book-loving master afforded, begged permission to go to *La Machine*—as the inn was called—where he might find some kindred spirits, and nodding assent, I sat cross-kneed, glad to be alone. One could not have enjoyed Montaigne while a fidgeting, loud-yawning serving-man was sitting on his stool, rolling his head against the wall, creaking his shoes, or kicking his legs about with the energy of Chrysippus.

From the window at which I sat I could, without any trouble, see the street which passed the hostelry, as well as the white winding road which ran on to Tour; but I was so absorbed with what I read that I did not note the wayfarers. It is true that soon after Rousard had gone, I looked up at the sound of a horse's feet on the stones, and saw what looked like a priest riding by; but having no care for a stray traveller, I turned once more to my book.

I had read a great many pages, and my eyes were somewhat smarting by reason of the badness of the light from the smoky lamp, when the door opened noisily, and Rousard bundled in without so much as asking for leave to enter.

"How now!" I exclaimed testily, for I was not particularly pleased at being brought so roughly out of Montaigne's world of pleasant gossip and incoherent fancies back to this one where there were so many unwelcome realities.

A sight of Rousard's face ended my annoyance, for it was agape with news. There was no need to

question him ; for as soon as he had come in, and closed the door behind him, he began.

He had gone to the hostelry, and after winning a score or two of livres from a strolling player there, and, in company with the loser, consuming a respectable quantity of wine which he paid for out of his gains, he went to have a last look at the horses, to see that they were comfortably stalled for the night. When he had first gone to the stable, one of the stalls was empty ; on this second visit it was filled. Taking the lanthorn from the peg to have a look at the animal that was munching his corn, he exclaimed in astonishment. It was a roan, with a peçuliar white dagger-shaped spot on each of the fore fetlocks. He rubbed his eyes to be certain that he was not dreaming.

“Marot!” he cried, using the name of a horse that had been left in the stable at Tour.

The beautiful creature, bearing signs of having been ridden hard, left his oats at once, turned round sharply on hearing the well-known voice, rubbing his nose affectionately on the man’s shoulder in the way he was wont to do.

Rousard, without staying to ask any questions of the stableman, came off to me at a run, much to the astonishment of the foot-passengers who chanced to be making their way homewards. Then hurrying up the stairs, three steps at a time, he came into the room, bursting with the news.

“You must have been drinking, and so got to dreaming,” said I, not being able to credit his story ; but he swore by the Mother of God that he was as sober as anybody in Gueche, doing so with an

emphasis that went far to convince me that he had reason for his belief.

"We will go and see this queer creature," said I, reluctant to leave my book; but Montaigne's disquisitions could wait, whereas a valuable horse might readily disappear, and we should not get to the bottom of what was likely to prove a mystery.

Going down the stairs, and walking along the passage, we heard a voice in the room on our right. The door was sufficiently ajar to show the sandy-bearded face of the tanner, who was speaking to a person standing back out of sight.

"Perhaps I can manage for you, father," Jehan Sault was saying, but with a certain amount of hesitation.

"A priest wanting the tanner to do something queer, I'll warrant," muttered my man, as we stepped into the street, where the moon, high in the heavens, cast short shadows. While there was no taint of heresy in Rousard, he had small reverence for the spiritual advisers of the day. Like the Huguenot, who fought against a cunning Jesuitism, he, in his degree, sought to tear off and rend the false fig-leaves of ecclesiastical pretension, and nothing but a dread of the consequences of omission would have taken him to a confessor. His knowledge of Father Calvisson was a disquieting one, and having no great acquaintance with others who were priests, he classed them all within the same category. The time occupied by our walk to the hostelry was filled in by him with comments on the iniquity of wolves who dared to don sheep's clothing, and he muttered, as he swung along behind me, that if he had his way, every

Churchman in the land should wear a cravat of hemp, the Cardinal included. He would hang them all with pleasure.

It was nothing new to hear him talk thus, so that I did not enter into any dispute. I merely cautioned him that it was well, while there was such widespread ill-will for the Huguenots, to keep a still tongue in his head, lest he might be classed among the heretics. He was a sensible fellow, and took the quiet rebuke in good part, owning that there was something in what I said. A few minutes of silence followed, the only sound being that of our stumbling boots on the uneven cobble-stones. Then he drew level with me to express his surmise concerning the presence of the roan in the stable of *La Machine*.

It was nothing less than this—that Calvisson, knowing of our departure for Paris, had waited a while, and when we had a good start, went to the château stables, and bade the hostlers saddle the best horse there. He would possibly say that he had important news for M. le Vicomte, and none would demur.

There was no time to talk over this disturbing suggestion, for we were at the stable door. A hostler was inside, having a look round before locking up for the night. When he saw us enter he scowled. Evidently he thought we wanted our horses saddled, and he was in a hurry to get to bed. He soon threw aside ill-temper for curiosity when I took the lanthorn from his hand, and walked into the stall where the roan was lying on his bed of straw.

“Marot,” said I, in a tone my horses knew so well.

The splendid creature was on his feet immediately ;

so also were the others that had brought us hither, and a three-fold whinny set the stable in commotion. As for Marot, there was no need to examine him for tokens of his identity. It was my roan without question.

“Hostler, who rode this horse into Gueche?”

“A priest,” was the prompt reply.

“What was he like?”

“Sharp-featured, lean of figure, pimple-faced, and ugly-tempered,” the stableman answered, without hesitation.

“Father Calvisson,” said Rousard quietly, and for my ear only.

“It must be so,” I muttered. Turning to the stableman, I bade him under no condition to suffer the horse to leave the stall, since it was mine, and had been used without my permission. A couple of livres, and the promise of more in the morning, brought the assurance that my instructions should be followed out, priest or no priest, and when I had tossed an extra handful of corn into each of the three feeding troughs, we came away, waiting outside to see the door securely locked.

The lights were being turned out in the inn when I walked down the passage, and opened the kitchen door.

“Tonny,” said I to the landlord, who was playing cards with a couple of soldiers. The man came forward instantly, and waited to know my business.

“Have you a priest here?”

“A priest, M. le Vicomte? God forbid!” he exclaimed indiscreetly.

The soldiers roared with laughter, and rattled their

empty mugs on the table by way of approval. Tonnay, affecting not to hear them—although he coloured up at the thought of his indiscretion before one such as myself—went on :

“ I have seen no priest since yesterday, and that was Father Beauce, who was going to give absolution to the old fellow who lives in the house opposite. But why do you ask ? ”

“ There is a horse in the stable which belongs to me. ”

“ Two, ” the landlord interrupted.

“ Yes, I know that. But I mean a third horse—a roan ; one with white dagger-shaped spots on the fore fetlocks. You have seen him before. ”

There was no doubt as to the man’s genuine surprise.

“ Tell your master what kind of individual brought the horse, ” said I, turning to the hostler, who had followed us into the inn.

Tonnay listened, but declared that no one answering to the description given was in the place. In spite of this, I insisted on seeing for myself. We went from the kitchen to the other rooms, looking into each to see whether the priest was among the few who yet sat at the tables, or slept in their chairs, too drunken to get into the street, or up to their beds, without assistance. Not one of any who were sober enough to answer had seen him for whom we were searching.

“ Will he be in one of the sleeping rooms ? ”

“ How could he be ? ” asked the landlord querulously. “ Did I not refuse you, M. le Vicomte, because I had not room ? Do you suppose I would have refused you if I had had a bed at liberty ? ”

“ Well, see to it that no one takes any of my three



horses in the morning without my permission. I will hold you accountable for them."

The landlord bowed low, and waited at the door-step while Rousard followed me down the street to the house of the tanner.

CHAPTER VI

A COSTLY LETTER

MOUNTING the stairs, with Rousard close at my heels, I reached the landing, where I halted, and my retainer, being unable to see because of the darkness, bundled on, nearly overturning me.

When I had ascended with Jehan Sault as my guide, I had not noticed another door next to that by which I entered the room placed at my disposal. Judging so from the fact that side by side were two lines of light close to the floor, and two rays proceeding from as many keyholes, I concluded now that there were two doorways, and was puzzled as to which I should choose.

“Which is my room, Rousard?” I asked, speaking low, not to disturb the tanner’s lodgers, if there were such besides ourselves.

“I do not know, monsieur.”

“What did you do when you came up to tell me of Marot? There were two rooms then, I suppose?”

“I only saw light beneath one door, Vicomte.”

We stood silent for a full minute. The tanner had evidently gone to bed, for the door of his living-room downstairs, when we passed it, was wide open, and we could see the moon looking in at the window. I had no wish to trouble anyone, to wake a sleeper

from his first sleep, or disturb someone at his devotions before retiring for the night. People, however amiable ordinarily, have no superabundant supply of courtesy when so intruded upon.

"Which room shall we try?" I asked.

"The one to the right is more likely to be yours, monsieur," Rousard replied, somewhat impatiently, I thought; for he had no such qualms as I in the matter of disturbing a stranger whom he might never see again. If anyone proved rough in speech, he was always ready to answer back in the same spirit, and loved a shindy. It made the blood run more quickly through his veins, and did his soul good.

"If we are wrong we can but back out and try the next door. But I am certain 'tis the one to the right," he added confidently.

Advancing, I felt for the handle, and opened the door carelessly; but when it swung against the wall noisily, I stepped back in some amazement, treading heavily on the toes of my servant, who had followed at my heels.

I saw at a glance that the room was not mine, for the walls were unpanelled, and whitewashed. It was, moreover, scantily provided with comforts, a round table in the centre, a rude bedstead, and a couple of broken chairs being all that the chamber contained in the matter of furniture.

The mere mistake as to the room did not account for my astonishment. It was a sight of the occupant which took me aback, and made Rousard, who saw over my shoulder, cross himself religiously, and exclaim, in a low voice, "Holy Mother of God!"

A smoking lamp threw its light on the face of one

who sat with his left arm on the table. Before him was a flagon, and his right hand grasped a wine-cup. He was in the act of raising the cup to his lips, and as the door opened, the man's eyes met mine. We knew each other on the instant, and the Curé—for it was my own confessor—sprang to his feet with what sounded like an oath. His surprise caused him to drop the cup, and the red wine—like blood in the dismal lamp-light—ran across the table in a stream, and dripped on the floor.

“What are you doing here, Father Calvisson?” I cried, stepping into the room. Rousard halted at the door, not wishing to intrude, but curious to know how the priest would answer.

The confessor's unwholesome face was a deep crimson, but that might have been due to the wine he had drunk, or to the glowing sun while riding. Quite probably it had its cause in this sudden confrontation. His lean countenance seemed to grow leaner, and the hairless jaw-bones moved restlessly, as though he would speak, yet knew not what to say, now that he was taken unawares.

But this was only for a few moments. His *sang-froid* returned, and he was the wily one again, prepared to answer my questions if he chose to do so, or meet them with the studied insolence which made it so difficult for a man of spirit to keep his hands off him. It was just possible that he would try to bully me into submission, now that we were face to face.

“Send that man away!” he cried, pointing past me to my retainer, who was filling up the doorway, and staring at the Curé in a manner that must have

incensed him, and was disconcerting to the most self-possessed.

Rousard went away unwillingly enough, as if not caring to leave me alone with Father Calvisson. He shut the door of my room noisily, an assurance on his part to me that he was not at the keyhole.

At intervals he bawled out a song which the Catholics were wont to sing, to show their contempt for the Huguenots; another intimation from him that he was not playing the part of eavesdropper, so that I need have no fear of speaking my whole mind to the priest.

"Father Calvisson," said I, when the door slammed, "I would like to know why you are here, instead of looking after your parish?"

"I have come hither with good cause, you may be sure," he answered, but with a quietness which took me aback considerably.

I had expected angry words, such as he had spoken when he confronted me in his own room at Tour. His voice was gentle, almost tremulous. Was he regretting his exposure of himself through having drunk so heavily? And did he wish now to make amends? On the other hand, was he playing a part, with intent to overreach me? There was no telling, for I knew him of old as a famous actor, kind or violent as his schemes required.

He paused a while to mark the surprise on my face; then went on:

"You thought I should come in anger, M. le Vicomte. On the contrary, I have come eager to hinder you from bringing about your own destruction."

It was incredible! I rubbed my eyes that I might see the priest more plainly. Fortune was surely playing the fool with me. The Curé had avowed his intention of compassing my ruin, yet here, in the tanner's house at Gueche, he was assuring me of his anxiety to save me from what he chose to consider my ruin.

"I cannot comprehend!" I exclaimed bluntly. "When at Tour, you charged me with being a Huguenot—"

"I charge you with being such now," he interposed calmly, but very decisively.

"Then I am still less able to comprehend," I retorted sharply, being certain that he had no care for my safety, but was playing for his own hand. "If you charge me with being a Huguenot, how are you going to save me? You declared only this morning that you purposed sending that lying letter—and probably a forged one—to the King."

He winced at that suggestion of forgery, I thought. I went on, watching him keenly, hoping to fathom his motive, and discover whether he were acting falsely.

"I told you of my intention to see the King, father—of forestalling you, or any other false witness."

I was not sparing him, and he again displayed some restlessness. He did not wait for me to say more, but spoke at once.

"Let me explain, my son. When you had gone, I considered matters well. I thought of the danger you were riding into; of the certainty—if you got to Court—of the King discarding you, forgetful of all the service rendered by your family in the past for the safety of the Throne. You do not seem to know

the hatred His Majesty has for all who are suspected of heresy. It is common talk that he would send his own son to the scaffold, were he proved to be a Huguenot. The middle course he once pursued—as Catherine de Medici did, before she started her grim scheme of murder—is forsaken. Louis the Fourteenth is now an extremist, moved to it by Madame de Maintenon, who is anxious, by a studied devotion to the Catholic cause, to win over the priests. The policy of conciliation is come to an end, and noble after noble, to say nothing of the common people, goes to the Bastille, or is flung from the hangman's ladder."

I knew all this. It was patent to everyone ; but what of it? While I listened, it began to dawn on me that the priest had a motive in hindering me from going to Paris. It was absurd to suppose that he wished to keep me out of danger for my own sake. Did he want to delay me while another carried the letter on to the Louvre, or to Versailles, or wherever else the King might be? Or had he a fear that the letter which he now held, and purposed to show to His Majesty, would not prove sufficiently convincing to bring about my downfall? In such an event, he would fain have me return to my château, while he thought out some other scheme.

I knew not what to say. If the Curé expected me to reply, I must needs keep him waiting until an answer was forthcoming. Fortunately for me, a respite came. Rousard, anxious, no doubt, to assure me that he was not listening, was shouting out a song much in vogue in the *auberges* of Paris and the country inns, and so loudly did he bawl that Jehan Sault came out

of his bed and protested against anyone singing at an hour when honest men ought to be able to sleep.

"Alright, Jehan. I am trying to keep myself awake while M. le Vicomte is gossiping with your lodger in the next room. They are old friends," I heard Rousard say ; but I fancy he must have winked at the tanner when he spoke those last words. There was a sentence more by way of protest, and Sault's feet were heard presently on the stairs, and some audible grumbles at tired men not being allowed to rest after a hard day's work.

During this pause I had found my answer to what the Curé had said ; but he forestalled me as soon as we heard the tanner slam his door. His words, however, came haltingly, as if even he, a person of no great sensitiveness, were half ashamed to speak.

"My son, we parted in anger, and naturally so when you showed me the way out of the library." He paused, then went on again : "God knows, I do not want any harm to come to you. If the letter goes to the King, you die, or will be sent to the galleys, and I know not which is worse. But there is no need for it to go."

There came another pause, during which he fingered his crucifix nervously, and partly turned away from me. There was something to say, but he could not bring himself to say it, and it was not for me to help him, and therefore I stood in silence. Presently he went on quickly, as a horse might do when it has had the cut of a whip after scuffling along the road sleepily.

"There can be an accommodation. I am in sore need of money—never mind for what purpose. The

fact of my want must suffice. 'Tis in the interest of another who is in trouble ; indirectly, it is to serve the Church. Give me a thousand pistoles, and you shall burn the letter here on the hearth, and go your way —back to your château, or where you will."

¶ A mental nausea came upon me. All my previous contempt for this Churchman was of small dimensions compared to the feeling of indignant disgust at one who was willing to forego what was clearly his duty as a Catholic, if he possessed what he considered convincing and honest proof of my heresy. Never did I see a man so extreme a worldling, who, by his vows, was set apart for the discharge of solemn and sacred duties. He was drunken and venal, and therefore an unworthy priest. Yet was he worse than many others? I had but to call to mind the grasping nature of a higher Churchman than Calvisson—Cardinal Mazarin. The Cardinal, in a manner which was more than questionable, had amassed such wealth that when he died he left behind him no less a fortune than fifty million livres. Calvisson was but following the example of his famous superior.

This display of sordid greed, regardless of the high claims of his holy office, made me think of him as one of the *Politiques*, who preferred civil and temporal interests to their religious orthodoxy. There was a difference in Calvisson's case, however. With the *Politiques* it was part of the play of policy resorted to without creating much public scandal ; but this priest was looking after his temporal gains, under the plea that he was anxious to serve another, and, as he suggested, indirectly serve the Church.

I did not like this purchase of safety. But when

the bitterness of religious faction was so extreme that trial was a lottery, and condemnation was almost certain, since a layman's word was met by the assertion of a priest ; and since, also, life is precious, more especially when we are young, I was not ready to resist the temptation, much as I loathed my weakness. I gave the Curé what he desired, paying him some money in actual coin, and drawing an order on M. Mornay, a banker at Nevers, for the remainder.

"Before you take this, father," said I, while I looked at the paper on which the ink was wet, "you must give me the letter, and we will burn it here."

"Do you not trust me?" he asked, somewhat querulously, for he must have seen distrust in my face.

"'Tis not a matter of trust, but a business transaction. Here is a note for value received, if you choose to put it so, and if I do not get the value, I shall not part with the money."

That was my answer, and when I saw that the Curé demurred, I drew back the paper, and prepared to tear it to pieces.

"Take it," said the priest, laying the letter on the table with a reluctance which showed that my precaution was not altogether unnecessary. I instantly threw the note for the banker across to him, and his fingers clutched it greedily. This was the Churchman who, in the eyes of the world, was naturally arrayed against wealth, and preached an ascetic morality—the man who was supposed to open the gates of Heaven to the poor!

"And here is the gold, father," said I scornfully, as I pushed the heap of coins midway. He scooped

them towards him, counted the pieces one by one, and placed them in the lining at the breast of his gown.

"Father, such words as are on this paper ought never to have been written," said I sternly, when he patted his breast to flatten the little hoard and remove the traces of its presence. "God knows, I am as true a Catholic as yourself. You know it. I think, too, that His Majesty knows it; if he does not, he shall know it some day. As for this paper"—and I held up the letter between my thumb and forefinger, as though it were something an honest man did not care to touch—" 'tis best to destroy it."

I rose to my feet, turning over the rickety chair on which I had sat while writing out the banker's order. Going to the lamp, I held the accusing epistle over the flame, then laid it on the hearthstone. The heat contorted the paper, the writing showing up in white marks as the letter twisted about; but before long it lay still, black, and crisp, until I put my heavy boot on it and crushed it to powder.

The priest looked at me, then at the pulverised blot upon the hearth, from that to the paper in his hands. Seeing that the ink was dry, he folded it slowly, and placed it between the pages of his breviary.

"Does my son go back to the château to-morrow?" he asked, in better humour than I had observed for many a day gone by.

"That is my business," I answered curtly. "Go your way, and I will go mine."

How could a man be civil to such a priest? I had



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no capacity for civility just then, and turning on my heel, I left the room.

Rousard shrugged his shoulders when I told him what had transpired, and he gave expression to my own thoughts. The letter was destroyed, the priest was subsidised—but was I safe?

CHAPTER VII

THE QUEEN'S TAILOR

AWAY in the far-off sky was a sea of burnished gold and silver, whose glittering waters washed the shores and cliffs of islands innumerable. Castles, mansions, and homesteads were on the distant mainland, hemmed in by mighty forests of emerald green and ruby—a brilliant stretch of landscape into which no sorrow intruded, and where none of the sordid passions that make earth so sad had any place. Château, river, meadows, and trees which were about us, all were bathed in the glowing light of the fiery sunset.

There could be no such holiness and peace in the capital towards which Rousard and I were riding, and which lay between us and that sapphire sea. Licentious corruption and abandoned profligacy were to be found within the shadows of the magnificent Church of Notre Dame, and coarseness underlay all the politeness one met with. It was impossible to forget that in a city which looked so beautiful from without were intrigues and resolutions which led to shameful breaches of solemn promises, to tyranny and schism. These had already culminated in horror and bloodshed that have rendered the capital of France so infamous.

I had suffered Father Calvisson to have the use of

one of my horses—I would not trust him with Marot—so that he might ride first to Nevers, and then to Tour, after he had obtained the gold for which he had such a hankering. With unbounded assurance, he had almost commanded me to return with him, but I bade him sharply not to interfere with my concerns, but go his way, and leave me to please myself as to my own movements.

Why I rode to Paris I hardly knew. The restless night which followed my interview with the Curé had been passed in framing and discarding one scheme after another. The thought possessed me that the château just now would be intolerable. The quietness of the country did not promise well for my disturbed spirit. If I moved from Gueche in any direction, it must needs be towards Paris, where a life of action would suit my present mood.

Hence it came about that when the many-coloured roofs and the churches of the capital were bathed in sunset glory, we approached the city by way of Vincennes, entering by the gate of St. Antoine. One and another of my acquaintances stopped my progress to welcome me to the gay life of Paris, so that it was growing late when we had passed through the narrow, winding, filthy streets, and pulled up at the house where I had been wont to lodge, near the Tour de Nesle.

“What is your will, monsieur?” asked a bare-armed woman who came to the door, and filled up the open space with a sharp assertiveness, as if resenting Rousard’s noisy summons.

“I want René Bandelet,” I explained.

“He is gone. Went three months since to the

Rue de Richelieu," came the quick answer, and as if angered at being brought from her work for naught, she shut the door on us.

We did not care so long as we knew where to find the tailor to the Queen—for René Bandelet had been such when Her Majesty was alive, and still held the title, if one may call it such. Moving forward with much noisy clatter, we rode to the house we wanted.

The fat little proprietor hurried out to see who had banged so heavily on his street door after work hours, but when he saw me and his quondam crony, he gave us hearty greeting, and asked what our will might be.

"Need you ask, since I never think of staying with anyone else when I come up to Paris?" I cried. "Am I not welcome?"

The tailor waved his hands deprecatingly, and shrugged his shoulders, wagging his head to right and left, as if he would emphasise his disclaimer of anything like lack of hospitality.

"How could M. le Vicomte doubt? Welcome? There is no one in all France whom I would rather have as my guest, but—"

He paused and washed his hands more vigorously, thrusting forward his bullet head, bedaubed with pomade, shaking it until Rousard exclaimed:

"By the Blessed Virgin, the man will wag his head off! Speak up, René. What of your 'buts'?"

"I have no rooms fit for monsieur. There is only the dingy apartment here on the ground floor, which commands a view of the street." He paused again, twisted his head a bit, and showed the palms and open fingers of his hands, as if to say that the

thoroughfare had no attractions. "But the bedroom is better, and looks out on the garden."

"Why must I take the dingy room, René?" I asked, satisfied, however, now that I knew I had no need to go farther; for Bandelet was the best of hosts.

"Someone has taken the other apartments, M. le Vicomte; a courtier, I am given to understand. I call him a human hog, bedecked with jewels, and dressed in silk and satin. There is such coming and going, such shouting and scraps of plays from actors and dancers who come here, and laughter, and oaths, and songs—such a medley, that one is inside the gates of perdition, and monsieur may not sleep o' nights, and so have to listen against his will."

The Queen's tailor was almost breathless when he had done, and waited for my answer.

"One might get used to that, René. But who is this courtier?"

The little man looked up to me while I towered above him in my saddle, screwing up his eyes, and making a face so wry that it was impossible not to laugh aloud. He took it in good part, save to glance at Rousard reproachfully, as if to protest that he—whatever M. le Vicomte might do—should not laugh at an old comrade.

"Don't look at me like that!" cried Rousard. "Thou wert always full of mystery, and thy face so melancholy at a trifle, that one cannot but have his laugh out to see it."

René made no answer to his crony, but replied to my own question.

"'Tis M. de l'Eperon, monsieur. That is all I

know, and he rents the best floor. What is more," he rattled on, working away with his needle-pricked hands as quickly as ever, now and again throwing them back, palms outward, while his lips splashed out the words, "he has taken them for three years, and only signed the contract the day before yesterday."

"Never mind that. Our fellow-lodgers need not frighten us away. So long as I can be under your roof, and there is a garret for Rousard—"

"There is," was the eager interruption. "If there were not, I would make him a bed in the cellar for old friendship's sake," he added, giving a roguish look at my retainer, who laughed again, and made a cut at the tailor with his riding-whip. The other avoided it deftly, and stood a little distance off, waiting to hear what else I had to say.

"And does Madame Bandedet cook as well as ever?"

"Who would question her skill? Madame de Maintenon would fain have her at her château, but I could not spare her."

"Thou art a model husband, René," exclaimed Rousard. "Is it the wife or the cook thou lovest?"

"Both! both!" responded the little tailor, with much good-humour and twinkling eyes. "But is M. le Vicomte content to stay?"

"Ay, René. Can we have some supper?"

"In a few minutes, monsieur. Rousard, Daguin, in the Rue des Maçons, will stable the horses. Will monsieur step in and see his rooms?"

I had barely dismounted when there emerged from the dusk a man of medium height, and dressed in black of the richest quality. He came down the

street with heavy step, and somewhat slowly, but when he drew near he glanced at us, as if he would have us stand aside, so that he might enter the house before which we halted. The very gesture displayed the courtier, but I did not know him. I had been so long absent from the Court, only going up rarely, and for such brief stays, that there were many about the King whose faces were unknown to me.

"'Tis M. de l'Eperon," whispered René.

He was a handsome man, yet I took an instant dislike to him. The dark face, with its large nose and wide mouth, displeased me. The black and heavy eyebrows shaded eyes that were shifty, and instead of confronting me with a full glance, the look came from beneath the brows.

"He will know me again," thought I, as we bowed distantly, and M. de l'Eperon passed down the passage. His right hand was bandaged, and suspended by a scarf about his neck.

"Has he been fighting?" asked Rousard.

"Yes," answered the tailor. "He runs all manner of risks, cares naught for regulations, and fights duels in spite of the King's prohibition. I believe he got worsted in a fight yesterday morning, for he came back badly injured."



CHAPTER VIII

“MAINTENON AND NOAILLES”

WHAT René Bandelet had said as to the company which his lodger kept was amply verified before the night was very far advanced. One after another tramped along the passage, and stamped up the narrow staircase, whistling or singing some scrap from Molière, or the latest thing which Racine had written. Some, with oaths that were the exclusive property of the Court, so far as I could judge—for I never heard them elsewhere—crossed the threshold, and loitered in the passage just outside my door, to finish a bit of scandal before they mounted the stairs to join the company there.

Some of the voices were familiar. They belonged to men of rank whom I knew well, and who would have come into my room to give me a pleasant greeting if they had known that I was in Paris again. Once or twice I heard scraps of women's chatter—possibly they were actresses who had come in to sing or dance for the special pleasure of M. de l'Eperon's visitors.

Rousard entered my room after an hour or two had gone, to see whether I had need of him. He shrugged his shoulders when he had entered and closed the door behind him.

“Poor René!” said he. “It is as he declares. He feels as if his house had become a portion of perdition, and that was why he was so loath to take my master in, especially since you must needs hear all this tramping, and singing, and dicing, and I know not what, right overhead.”

He paused for a few minutes, looking at my disgusted face. I had been trying to enjoy a few pages of Molière, only to fail, and become exceedingly annoyed.

I was on the point of speaking, when Rousard started again.

“Listen, monsieur! I have heard it said that one dares not sing *Maintenon and Noailles* without fear of the Bastille, but that is sung boldly enough. No doubt the singer is Du Fort, who went upstairs an hour ago. She is the opera dancer, monsieur, who, men say, is mistress to the Duc de Valentinois. ’Twould be bad for René if any of the watch passed by and heard it!”

We had come into queer company, and ran some risk in consequence. Presently little Bandelet came in, washing his dry hands as was his wont whenever he was perturbed.

“M. le Vicomte, I deplored your coming, as you know. I deplore it more. Had I known that M. de l’Eperon would do as he is doing to-night, I would have shut the door in your face, asking your pardon the while, since I should have done it out of regard for your comfort and your safety.”

“Have no care for me, my good René! I am content to stay with you, for M. de l’Eperon’s visitors will not go on much longer.”

I said this, hoping to soothe the little man, who was in a state bordering on frantic excitement.

"But I *must* care for you! They were singing that song—did you not hear it?—*Maintenon and Noailles*. Only last week Comte de Peront was taken to the Bastille for humming it as he walked along the streets. Suppose the watch passed by this house and heard it! And to think of it! I have signed a bond with M. de l'Eperon, so that he keeps my rooms for three years. Three whole years, and this may go on every night!"

The tailor was in tears, but Rousard good-naturedly patted him on the back, by way of comfort.

"They are not singing it now, René."

"But they were singing it a little while since," he cried; "and they may sing it again. There! they are at it now! *Maintenon and Noailles!*" screamed René. "Suppose the watch went by!"

To advise him to go upstairs and protest was to place him in the way of possible mischief. I had no certain knowledge as to the character of the people overhead. Some had come and gone, several of them men to whom I was known intimately. Still, it were shame to sit and suffer the tailor not only to lose his custom at Court, but risk his being hurried off to a noisome dungeon in the Bastille. But what could I do?

"Go up, René, and protest," said I, not knowing what else to advise.

"I dare not, monsieur. Some of them have drunk so deeply that they have no reason left. They would run their swords through me, and how should I be the gainer then?"

The thought of his dangers wrought him into such a frenzy that he was past all action which must needs be accompanied with judgment. Yet at any moment the watch might pass by; then would come a raid, and while those who were overhead would well deserve what they got, since they joined in the scurrilous refrain, it was cruel to sit there, book in hand, and suffer the poor fellow to be ruined.

The song ceased, which was well for all concerned. Rousard had gone to the street door, and came back hastily, bidding me look through the window. Three or four of the King's *gens d'armes* were walking slowly by, but they halted when they came opposite the door of René's house, and looked up and down the street. It was probably with no other purpose than to be certain that all was quiet; but what if they had come a minute or two sooner? or what if Du Fort should start the song again in her shrill treble?

René almost screamed with fear when he saw the soldiers standing in a group. He gasped with relief when the men walked on, after a quick glance up to the window of the chamber where the roysterers were.

“They will come back again,” was the tailor's sobbing remark. “Listen, monsieur. There goes that devilish song again!”

The *gens d'armes* had barely got round the street corner when Bandelet thus cried out, with too much reason, for Du Fort was singing the song afresh, and louder than before, as if she had been dared not to do so.

“I will go up to them myself, René,” said I, walking to the door.

"You must not, monsieur. They will turn on you," objected the tailor, throwing his arms wide open to prevent me.

"What matter? Stand aside. I am going," I insisted.

"And so am I," said Rousard resolutely, taking René by the collar, and pulling him aside unceremoniously. "Sit there in the chair, and leave things to us."

The faithful fellow was at my heels as I walked up the stairs, and when we stood outside the door he wanted me to stand back, so that he might be the first to enter.

"Certainly not," I rejoined, putting out a hand to hinder him.

"Someone will dig at you with his dagger for interfering," Rousard expostulated.

"If they do, so much the worse for the 'someone,'" said I, lifting the latch, and walking into the room.

The song ended abruptly. It was being sung by Du Fort, as Rousard had surmised. She had been so plied with wine that she could scarcely stand. She was between two men who held her on her feet, while, with her beautiful voice, she sang the forbidden words which cast such a slur on the King's mistress, Madame de Maintenon.

Three other women—courtesans, beyond all doubt—and ten or a dozen men were in the place. Some were of moderate rank, without influence; others actors; one or two were officers in the King's household. I looked for men of high degree, for I had heard the voices of such in the passage, or at the street door.

I had almost expected to see the Duc de Valentinois, the Grand Prieur, and the Duc d'Estrades, but they were not in the room when I glanced around, scanning the different faces. Seated at the various tables were men and women, drinking, the cards which were lying before them being splashed with wine that had been spilt freely. Some had been playing at *basset*, but when I entered with such scant ceremony, they gathered up their cards eagerly, and thrust them out of sight, looking at me with a studied indifference. They knew that the game they played was illegal, and that the King had decreed that all persons discovered at it should be fined a thousand livres.

“Who are you, monsieur?” exclaimed M. de l'Eperon, with a suavity quite unexpected. “And what may your business be?”

I ignored the first question. As for the second, I spoke briefly, for none could tell how soon the *gens d'armes* might return.

“I am here, gentlemen, to remind you that you run the risk of a lodging in the Bastille by singing the song which His Majesty has prohibited.”

De l'Eperon did not speak, but one of the courtesans, watching the angry look on his face—one which betokened resentment at my intrusion—cried out boldly :

“What song?”

I took no notice of the strumpet's question, although she repeated it, adding some saucy words which ill became a woman's lips, and drew derisive laughter from the other women, and approving glances from three or four of the men.

"Monsieur," said one whose left arm was about the waist of the woman who had questioned me.

I did not know him, but he had the appearance of a player. His right hand toyed with a wine-glass, and his voice was already thick with hard drinking.

"Monsieur," he said again, after a short pause, as if, for the moment, he had lost the control of his voice, and must needs make some effort to compel his lips to frame the words aright, "this lady asked you a civil question, and I would have you give her a civil answer."

I looked at him with surprise, that one of his grade should speak with such measured insolence to me, and on behalf of an abandoned creature whom he was fondling drunkenly. One may quarrel with his equals, but deem a quarrel with his inferiors an impossibility. Consequently, while my fingers itched to deal with him summarily, I passed his words without a reply. It was M. de l'Eperon with whom I had to deal.

The men and women were growing restless at seeing me—a stranger—standing in the open doorway, with Rousard filling up the space behind me. They could not understand my silence; neither could they tell whether I was an officer in His Majesty's service, with other men waiting for a word before they entered to effect arrests. They needed not to be told that they had been saying and doing things which were hanging matters in the present temper of the King and his powerful mistress. The singing that night of airs from the play, *La Fausse Prude*, which Louis had forbidden because Madame de Maintenon recognised herself in the character as-

sailed therein, might lead to the halter, to a ruinous fine, or prolonged incarceration in the dismal cells of the Conciergerie or the Bastille.

I read the suspicion in their faces, but it was none of my business to undeceive them. I was only concerned with the fact that they had compromised the Queen's tailor and all in his house by this defiance of royal decrees.

It was time for someone to speak. Everyone looked from me to De l'Eperon, who had not spoken since I had answered him, and he thought it best to say something.

“What business may our doings be to you, monsieur? Are you acting on the King's behalf?”

“I am acting within my rights when you compromise those who are in this house by permitting a scurrilous song to be sung here against the King's express decree, and when I see some of your company playing at *basset*.”

This was unwise, and it did not mend matters when I pointed across the room to the men who had slipped the forbidden cards into their pockets.

De l'Eperon had become red with anger at my intrusion. Now his colour deepened, and an oath escaped his lips. I did not heed this, however. I had come to put a stop to the orgy—at all events, to that portion which imperilled René Bandelet, and I said what I had to say.

“I have but to call in the city watch, M. De l'Eperon; and for the rest,” said I, with a shrug of the shoulders, which goes so far with Frenchmen, “you must judge for yourself.”

There was an outburst of anger and mockery.

Language came from the lips of the courtesans which one might have expected in a camp. A wine-glass sped past me, and shivered when it crashed against the doorpost, leaving a gleaming trail of red wine as it travelled through the air. The woman who had first spoken struggled out of the arms of the man who held her, then picked up a pewter flagon, and with her whole force hurled it at my head; but it missed me, and Rousard, who saw it coming, caught it in his hand. The wine splashed over his face and scarf and doublet, but did him no other harm, and with a nonchalance which was habitual when matters grew serious, he tossed the vessel down the stairs. I could hear it clatter on the steps and along the stone passage, and then a cry from the tailor who was at the street door, anxiously looking up and down in the hope that none of the *gens d'armes* were near enough to hear the clamour.

"Let the watch go to the devil, and go you with them!" cried M. De l'Eperon, turning round to the wall, where his rapier was hanging on a nail.

"'Twould be well to come away, monsieur," said Rousard, stepping between me and the angry roysterers. He took hold of the latch and drew the door together quickly. After that, pushing me before him, against my will, although in full accord with my judgment, he began to descend the stairs. "You have entered your protest, and there will be mischief if you press the matter farther," said he firmly, but with all respect.

What else he said I did not hear, for there came a roar of laughter, then a defiant chorus, which might have been heard at the distant corner of the Rue de

Richelieu. An instinct of liberty took us both to the front door, where we found Bandelet and his spouse wringing their hands, and bewailing their helplessness. At an open window, here and there, a night-capped head was thrust out, and more than one questioned us as to the cause of the uproar, and why we did not call in the watch.

The chorus, however, came to an end, silence followed abruptly; there were sounds as of chairs being thrust back, or overturned, then heavy steps on the stairs. One by one, with a certain stealth, the guests of De l'Eperon passed into the street, looked up and down, as if to see whether the watch were near, and finding the way clear, walked off quickly, not paying any attention to our little group of four.

CHAPTER IX

M. DE L'EPERON'S VISITOR

THE neighbours saw clearly that René Bandelet was no party to the treasonable and scurrilous doings of the night ; but they would certainly hold him responsible if there was anything like a repetition. Those who were within earshot expressed their sympathy, or advised René to give information, so as to clear himself ; then, one by one, the heads were drawn in, the windows closed, and the Rue de Richelieu became quiet enough for tired ones to fall asleep.

René looked relieved when he saw the last of De l'Eperon's company disappear round the street corner ; but when we had crossed the threshold once more, he entered my room with me, and asked for advice as to the course he should pursue.

"Go upstairs and give M. de l'Eperon notice to quit forthwith," I answered.

"By the Mother of God, I would do so gladly!" he exclaimed earnestly ; "but of what avail? He would laugh in my face, for he has taken the rooms for three whole years, and signed the paper but a day or two since. I wish he had got pricked in his right hand before that day, so that he could not have held the quill, for then he should have gone neck and crop. Fortune is against me!" the little man

grumbled bitterly. "He used that hand freely to draw up the paper and sign his name, then got wounded within twelve hours. What can I do now?"

"Tell him to quit, notwithstanding," said I. "Tell him that if he does not cancel the bond, and get out of the house to-morrow, you will lodge information with M. de Biron, the Chief of Police, concerning what we have heard, and what Rousard and I have seen. We saw—I did, at all events—three or four engaged at *basset*, which is a forbidden game."

"I saw it," interposed my retainer, eager to corroborate my words; "and I'll stick to that, come what will."

"Then go and tell him so, René. He will scarcely face out the double charge."

"I dare not! He would laugh in my face. I know these men. They brazen it out, say they have powerful friends at Court, and I know not what, and one walks away like a cur with his tail between his legs."

Bandelet's case was so serious that matters could not be suffered to take their course. The law was severe towards those who did not possess the ear of the influential, and the tailor knew that. He was ignorant as to the influence his lodger upstairs possessed. There were courtiers who were nonentities, mere hangers-on; men who went to Court and looked about, but said nothing, or if they spoke, were not listened to. Others could mould events, and win the King's attention. To which of these did M. de l'Eperon belong? It was certain that he had visitors of eminence—men like those I have already mentioned, some coming in disguise who might be princes

of the blood, for all that one could tell. To cross him, therefore, was to risk incalculable possibilities for mischief.

Bandelet's prosperous condition was the reverse of an assurance of safety. Some of the nobles were rich beyond the dreams of avarice, and vied with the old Romans in their extravagant display; but many were impecunious, and in order to obtain money, resorted to tyranny and extortion at the expense of the *bourgeoisie*, whose business tact and energy had made them affluent. René Bandelet was credited with having great wealth. Aware of the fact that he possessed this reputation, he knew that if he went to those who administered justice, he would only obtain it on costly terms. Just as probably he would not get what he paid for. M. de l'Eperon might have friends at Court who would take the tailor's money, and make many promises, but set others to work to render his life so intolerable for making complaint that he would only purchase immunity from ruin by parting with a heavy sum from his hidden store.

The little man knew this, and lacked the moral courage to face one who might set such dangerous machinery in motion. It was this sense of helplessness that made him somewhat of a craven, who, under other circumstances, might have been a man of fine spirit. The accident of one's surroundings is responsible for many of the undesirable traits of character which are displayed. A man of courage, conscious of an indiscriminating tyranny which never admits of remedy, accepts the inevitable, bowing to the tyrannical in the hope of retaining the fruits of his industry. At the bottom of all the submission one meets with

among the oppressed lies the hope of avoiding a further descent in wretchedness. France, with Louis the Fourteenth as King, was dominated by an oligarchy of extravagance, and Bandelet, like others of his class, having gathered in money by continuous toil, believed in the policy of allowing sleeping dogs to lie. He was willing to bear his present disabilities, rather than attract an attention which meant impoverishment.

There was every reason why the tailor should not arouse the wrath of the man who rented his rooms, and whose influence was an unknown quantity. He was not likely to gain a single louis; he had everything to lose by an impulsive protest. In my case, however, I could interfere to some purpose. My rank was my guarantee. If De l'Eperon had friends at Court, whom he might prejudice against me, I surely had as great, so that at most I had but to face possible discomfort which might come of intrigue and jealousy.

"I will go up and see him," said I, when I marked Bandelet's natural hesitation.

"It will bring you trouble, M. le Vicomte," the little man objected half-heartedly, yet considerably relieved on hearing the suggestion.

I was about to leave the room and march upstairs, when some footsteps were heard in the passage.

"I thought they had all gone," Rousard observed.

Under the impression that someone had come down from the apartment overhead, and passed into the street—the more convinced that such was the case on hearing a man stumbling at the doorstep—I went out a minute or two later to find M. de l'Eperon, and

say what I had to say before he went to bed for as much of the night as yet remained.

René stood in the passage with a lamp held high to light the way, and show me the turning in the staircase. When he saw that I had taken the twist safely, he went into his room and shut the door, leaving me in darkness. I could see a streak of light on the floor from left to right, showing the entrance plainly, and a bright spot half-way up the door, giving me guidance to the latch.

A knock for admission was not answered at first. A second summons was followed by an impatient call to enter. Opening the door without hesitation, I entered, apologising for having once more intruded, and at so late an hour.

"But my business is important, monsieur," I was saying, after I had pushed the door behind me.

A smothered exclamation made me look round to my right, where the window was. Before me sat the man I had come to see, and expected to find alone. The lamplight, however, showed up the robed form of the Curé. On his face was a look of extreme annoyance, and before I had time to speak, he cried:

"I thought you were at Tour, M. le Vicomte!"

"I thought the same concerning yourself, Father Calvisson," said I, in response to his querulous remark. "Duty should have taken you there," I added, "to say nothing of your solemn assurance that it was your purpose to return thither."

He had recovered from his surprise by this time, and thought to browbeat me as he had done at Tour so short a while before. That was a tyranny to which

I would not submit, and I asked the priest pointedly why he had deceived me.

"Two may ask that question, M. de Belliot."

"You are insolent," I retorted; and indeed he was. His attitude towards me roused all my spirit of resistance, and I resolved to show this Churchman that I was not to be ruled by him. He was my spiritual adviser, but he was not my master. Was rank to count for nothing? Did he not live on my bounty, and a liberal one? There were scores of curés who knew and envied Father Calvisson, and would gladly accept his post at half the money he received, and with one-half the privileges he enjoyed. It was evident that he was growing too great for the space he occupied, or there was still in his mind that false charge of heresy. Yet I was near the King, and although, to my chagrin, the father confessor was now in Paris, I could have audience with His Majesty at an early hour to-morrow.

Those words of mine—"You are insolent"—rankled, and robbed him of his self-possession.

"And if I am insolent, Vicomte, what are you?"

M. de l'Eperon looked at each in turn, bending over the table, and shading his eyes with his unmaimed hand, in order to see our faces more readily.

"Pardon me, monsieur," said he, turning to me, and speaking before I made answer to Calvisson. "May I ask two questions?"

I nodded by way of assent.

"First, I have not the pleasure of knowing your name."

"I am the Vicomte de la Tour."

"Ha! known to some as Fulcran de Belliot?"

"You appear to know so much," said I, somewhat stiffly. The suspicion crossed my mind that I was not a stranger to him, and I did not care to be catechised by one who was my inferior in rank.

"I have heard the name," he answered suavely; but the softness—with such a thought in my mind—irritated me.

"Your other question, monsieur?" I asked abruptly, and not disposed to discuss the matter of my name with him.

He drew himself up, realising that I should consider any further question on that point an intrusion.

"Well, M. le Vicomte, I should like to know your business. Is it with me, or with my visitor?"

"With you. It may be for your comfort that I should speak of it to you in private. Father Calvisson, I must ask you to leave the room awhile."

"No!" said De l'Eperon decisively. "Father Calvisson may hear all that you have to say. There is naught that you would speak of which he may not hear. I have more than once gone to him as my father confessor."

"The question of his presence, of course, is one for you to judge upon. If it is naught to you that the Curé here should listen, I am not concerned as to the consequences to you. I ought to say, however, that it is a matter of grave import. It may affect your liberty."

I paused. The priest and De l'Eperon exchanged looks. There was no gesture, but the glances between them were significant.

"May I proceed?"

De l'Eperon merely nodded.

"You have taken these rooms for three years," I began.

"What is that to you?" said the other angrily. "Have you come here to pry into my private concerns?"

"I have not come to pry into any man's private concerns, but I *have* come to speak of things that concern the King."

"Ha!"

"You have taken these rooms for three years," I repeated, regardless of the impatient movement of the man who sat at the table. "I am come to ask you to cancel the arrangement, and take lodgings elsewhere."

He stared at me in blank amazement, then laughed in my face.

"Why?" he asked, when he had had his laugh out. If he had been more sober, he would have seen that something underlay my purpose which was no laughing matter. "You want these rooms for yourself?"

"If you are not prepared to hear me, monsieur," said I, when he went on jeeringly, "I will say no more to you, but at once lodge information with the City Aldermen as to the company you have had to-night, and the songs they have been singing."

This sobered him.

"What do you mean?" he cried; and there was anxiety in the tone, in spite of his assumed indifference.

"As for your company, the King may say little. But if, when I see him, I tell him that among your visitors to-night were the Duc de Valentinois, the

Grand Prieur, and the Duc d'Estrades, and that during your drinking you were all singing a song concerning which the King has spoken with such disapproval, you not only compromise your visitors, but run the risk of a lodging in the Bastille or the Conciergerie."

His face had been red with drinking, but now it was livid. It was easy to see that he was greatly disturbed, and that his assumed indifference had deserted him.

"And there was some play going on, M. de l'Eperon, which will end in a heavy money penalty, if it be known—a thousand livres, I believe, is the limit," I continued, with quiet persistency; for I was ill-pleased at having been treated so insolently.

"But what has this to do with my quitting these rooms?" he asked quietly.

"René Bandelet had no thought of the company you would keep when he entered into an arrangement with you. Naturally, he is not disposed to have you imperil him, if you choose to put your own self in jeopardy. I am come on his behalf to say that if you remain here I shall speak to the King, with whom I have audience to-morrow, and tell him of what I heard and saw here. I think, monsieur, that the retention of these rooms is not worth such a penalty; but since Bandelet has no wish to be ruined by you, there is your alternative. If you go quietly, having handed me the paper on which the terms are set forth, nothing more will be said."

"And if I refuse?"

"Everything will be said."

The Curé had so far been silent, but now he interfered.

"M. de l'Eperon, your going may not be pleasant to you; but if you stay, it may compromise the noblemen who were here. I should advise you to go."

The other rose to his feet without a word. There was a bureau in the recess by the fire-place, and going thither, he took out a piece of parchment, which he gave to me unwillingly. Then crossing to the door, he opened it, and bowed me out.

Returning the bow, but not deigning any look for Calvisson, I passed down the stairs to the room where René Bandelet was impatiently awaiting my coming.

I had achieved my purpose. But I had unconsciously let loose some evil forces which brought me infinite peril, and a course of suffering which one may well deem incredible, when the story is told.



CHAPTER X

THE PALACE CORRIDOR

IT was a common saying among those who frequented the Court that Madame de Maintenon, hunting, and excursions to Marly, were the only amusements which the King took pleasure in. He was often erratic in his movements in consequence. He was in Paris to-day, and gone to-morrow, glad to escape from the intrigues and jealousies which became so burdensome, to enjoy the freshness of woodland paths or quiet water-parties in the company of the brilliant woman who exercised such boundless influence over him.

When I went to the palace to see the King on the following morning, I found that he had risen early, and had gone with Madame de Maintenon to Marly, accompanied by a few of the courtiers who were most in favour at the time.

To intrude upon His Majesty in his retirement was impossible. None who valued his good-will would have dared such a thing—not even the princes of the blood. Madame de Montespan—the King's discarded mistress—had ventured one day to go there uninvited ; but powerful as her influence over His Majesty was at the time, she never repeated her indiscretion, and never regained what she had lost by

her folly. Everyone took the hint. The open glades, henceforth, were as secure from intrusion as if closed in by high walls and bolted doors, so that the King was able to enjoy the company of the woman who controlled the destinies of the nation without espial or interruption.

There was no alternative for me but to wait in patience for His Majesty's return, and since none other could have audience while he was at Marly, I had no immediate reason to be troubled at the presence of Father Calvisson in Paris. Yet it was impossible to set aside the sense of uneasiness which the Curé's appearance produced in my mind and Rousard's.

"He is here for mischief," my man had said when I told him, while undressing for the night, of M. de l'Eperon's visitor. "He means to get at the King with that trumped-up story of your heresy, or intends to blackmail you. I would rise early, monsieur, and be among the first to see His Majesty."

The King often received in the morning before he went to prayers; as soon, in fact, as his barber and others in attendance had completed his toilet. But on this particular morning, when I paced the corridors, and came to the door of the royal sleeping chamber, I found that His Majesty had gone unexpectedly. In unusually good-humour with himself, he had risen, and was dressed before the nobles who should have been present to assist had arrived. He delighted in the thought of their confusion when, coming at the usual hour to perform their morning duties, they should find that their august master had

stolen out of the city. Such escapades relieved the monotony of palace life.

The uneasiness which affected me was increased when, on turning from the captain of the guard to retrace my steps, I saw, far down the richly decorated corridor, the long dark robe of a priest. Yet I had seen a dozen priests already since I passed through the palace gates, and was not disturbed. The King's favourite instruments were the Jesuits, who ruled over his conscience, so that they were naturally in evidence within the palace, and I had gone by them without notice ; but here was one who bore himself in a way I knew too well. Going forward quickly, to draw level with him, I looked into the Churchman's face. It was Father Calvisson. He must have seen me before, for he displayed no token of surprise when he found me at his side.

"Why are you here, father?" I asked quietly, for men were coming and going on business, and there was no reason why I should attract their attention.

"May I not do as I please?" he replied, in a tone as quiet as mine.

"Not if, as I imagine, it means harm to myself."

"How can my presence here mean harm to you?" came the question evasively.

"Need you ask after what occurred at Gueche?" I returned. "You received a thousand pistoles, and left me with the understanding that no more should be said relative to the trumped-up charge of heresy. It was understood that you should go back to Tour ; but you have not been there, and are where you first declared it your intention to come—to His Majesty. Why?"

"On business," was the curt answer.

"My business, Father Calvisson?"

"Perhaps—perhaps not!" This was said sharply enough for me to look round quickly to see whether any were sufficiently near to hear the insolent tone of the priest's reply.

"One would have supposed that you had some honour, father," I observed, sick at the thought of what might happen to me if by any means the King were interviewed by the Curé before I had the opportunity of speech with His Majesty. Who was there in France who did not know that Louis, encouraged by his sagacious mistress, was resolute to crush out the religious faction for which he had such deadly and unreasoning hatred? I believe he would have banished the Dauphin had he any suspicion of his being tainted with Huguenotism.

I have an idea that the thought flashed through the Curé's mind that he might evade me by duplicity. He saw that his savage outburst while supping with me at Tour had been unwise. His Jesuitical proclivities now came to his aid, and he spoke suavely, dropping the sharpness quickly.

"I promised you, my son, but I had a private reason for going from the promise. Do not let us quarrel. You persist in your desire to know why I am here. The reason is that I want a favour. The Abbé de Brune is dead, and I wish to succeed him. You surely have no objection?" he added, looking at me with a sneer; for he knew that I should be glad to welcome his successor at Tour.

"None, if that is all," I remarked.

"It is all," he answered, and turned away to look out on the palace yard, where the waters of the gorgeous fountain scintillated in the sunshine.

But he had not deceived me. I saw by the look on his face that I had paid down my thousand pistoles to no purpose, and that this story of succeeding the dead Abbé was apocryphal. Calvisson was in Paris—and I could have sworn it—to follow up his charge of heresy; so that it would be a race between us as to which of the two should first gain the ear of the King.

On the other hand, the natural question was: Why should he wish to do this? What had he to gain? I could not see that by the ordinary process of giving information he would obtain a single louis, and I had no knowledge of any priest having received promotion by betraying a Huguenot. One would consider it in his interest to be my friend, for he was growing rich in my service, since I was always sending him the best from the château larder, and paying him liberally whenever I went to confession. I had, moreover, added to the Curé's stipend, so that it was double that which any parish priest received in the province in which Tour lay.

The suspicion dawned on me, as we stood in the recess, that he had something in view besides his pretended zeal for the Church—something by which he would gain in breaking with me. If so, was he working for another? But what interest had another in my downfall?

I could not imagine.

Just then I turned, purely by accident, and saw Comte de Boissergent coming jauntily along the

corridor. He was one of the most dissolute nobles in France, yet in great favour with the Churchmen, because he had hunted down three or four Huguenot noblemen who had posed as Catholics. The Comte's history, which was common property, flashed through my mind, and set moving there a train of thought which lent a possible explanation of the remarkable attitude of Father Calvisson. De Boissergent had had no inheritance; was actually dependent on gratuities which he received from distant relatives, and on his winnings at the gaming tables. He suddenly became a great landed proprietor, having received from the King the estates of Vicomte d'Urban, a Huguenot, who was now at the galleys. The whisper went the round of the courtiers, and notably among the ladies who had attended the Queen, that De Boissergent had employed a Curé to disclose the admissions of the Vicomte at the confessional.

I watched the priest's face, and thought that it flushed somewhat when he saw the Comte pass by. The altered expression was an apparent confirmation of my suspicion. I touched the Curé's arm to make him look at me, but he could not meet my eyes with his.

"I must go," said he hastily, moving away; but I detained him.

"Stay, father!" I exclaimed, clutching at his robe. "I want to know something before you go."

"What?" he asked querulously, trying with his fingers to disengage himself.

"Why have you so changed? Why have you

deceived me? Why have you persisted in this fable of heresy?"

He did not answer. For a second time his effrontery failed him, and he would not look me in the face.

"Is it money you want? You know you had but to ask for it in reason, and I would give it to you. Then you would not have perjured your soul by laying so foul a charge against me."

He was still silent, and his fingers were busier than before, while his breath came and went quickly. I had never seen him so disturbed. He started when I deliberately put the test question, to take him by surprise, and his unwholesome face grew mottled.

"Father Calvisson, that was the Comte de Boissergent who passed just now, and doubtless you know how he became rich after having been so poor?"

"Mother of God!" he cried, and although my hand held him firmly, he wrenched himself away, and hurried down the corridor.

I did not follow, for several ladies came round the corner, laughing gaily, and I was anxious not to create a scene. I drew within the curtains not to be observed, and, alone, thought out the matter carefully. This much I was certain of, that I was in danger, that a scheme for my undoing was being concocted, and that someone was following on the lines which had been pursued so successfully by the Comte de Boissergent.

What could be worse for me than this unfortunate visit of the King to Marly?



CHAPTER XI

THE WATER-PARTY

IT was reported that the King would not return to Paris until the week was out, so that I had some respite. If I remained excluded from the royal presence, neither could any other have audience. I had but to be alert, and take my opportunity when it came.

My inclination was to remain in the seclusion of my room in the Rue de Richelieu, among the books I bought or borrowed of my friends ; or go to a *cabaret* in the Rue du Vieux-Colombier, where I should meet Boileau, Racine, La Fontaine, or others of the famous literati of the capital. It was a relief whenever one had had a spell at Court to join such men, and be able for a time to shut out the frivolity and heartlessness, the brilliance and immorality, which jarred on one who was accustomed to the quietness of country life. These men—highly educated, philosophical, some of them speculative—had their fun and nonsense, their jests and epigrams, their raillery and irony, and the room in which they met sometimes rang with laughter. But they were in such contrast to those men and women who fluttered like moths about the great central light within the palace, reckless and heedless of the graver matters of life.

But one is never master of himself, and is compelled to pay the tribute levied by Society. Not caring, therefore, to carry my heart on my sleeve, I went here and there in the city, dining with my friends, attending card-parties and musical masses, going to the opera and comedy theatre, to dances, wherever fancy took me, or my presence was demanded.

Such things were the penalties of station. There was a certain compulsion to play one's part in the maze of beauty and brilliancy, and amid the infinities of compliments, affectations, and civilities. Had it not been for the tyranny of Society, I should have preferred the pleasures of the *cabaret* I have named, and to be away from circles where modesty was rare, and where, as one of my friends declared, without any stretch of truth—I think it was Nicolas Boileau—“Every standard of right and wrong is overthrown by the brilliant, and witty, and well-dressed vices crowding in.”

One morning I called to see my cousin, the beautiful Comtesse du Roure.

“Ha, M. le Vicomte, my messenger is on his way to the Rue de Richelieu with a *billet-doux* for you!” she exclaimed laughingly, as I crossed the richly carpeted floor to kiss her hand.

“Indeed, madame? I had no idea that you cared for me sufficiently to write me a love-letter,” I responded mischievously, for she and I were always at cross-purposes—wilfully so.

“Fie on you, Monsieur de Belliot; what conceit!” she answered, slapping my fingers with her jewelled fan.

"But you said it was a *billet-doux*, Comtesse," I persisted. "And is not that a love-letter?"

"No, monsieur; just a dear little note, and richly perfumed to lower your spirits and render you less refractory. 'Twas to ask you to join my water-party this afternoon."

"All depends, madame, on the company," I said teasingly. "Will it be suitable for such as I?"

"Now, Fulcran, do not be so tormenting," said she, pouting her ruby lips, which needed no art on her dresser's part to lend them any charm. "I do not think you shall go with us. You have come to the capital a dull countryman in everything, save in your capacity for being disagreeable to the best friend you have in all the world. What do you say to that?" she asked, pointing her fan at me with mock severity.

"What can a poor countryman say, cousin, whose only mentor is his curé, and that curé Father Calvisson?"

She lifted her hands with a gesture of impatience—not with me, but with the Churchman.

"That Calvisson! The shameful man! Compare him with my affectionate little Abbé, as good a man as ever walked the earth. If I were the Archbishop, I would unfrock your parish priest. He is lewd, drunken, lying, scandalous in every way. Why do you keep him in your parish? Why does not that big fellow Rousard duck him in the horse-pond?"

"He would do so if I would allow it."

"I will tell him not to heed you, Fulcran, the next time I see him. What is Father Calvisson doing in Paris? Has he no duties at Tour? I

saw him loitering about the palace this morning when I came away from Madame's apartments."

She meant Madame de Maintenon.

"Did he see the King, Catherine?" I asked, dropping all banter, and talking freely to the woman with whom I had played and squabbled in our childhood.

"The King is still at Marly, and Madame is with him. Besides, you amaze me with your question. What should such as he want with His Majesty?" she asked sharply, displaying the prejudice of her rank, and expressing her disapproval thereby of the liberty of access which the King allowed his subjects.

We had often exchanged confidences, being as brother and sister to each other; and now, longing for someone in whom to confide, I told her what had brought me up to the capital.

"Shall I tell Madame de Maintenon?" she asked presently, while I sat beside her on the gilded couch. "You know how she saved De Girardon by her interference."

"Wait a while, cousin. I am here to have the first word with the King, unless he should return unexpectedly."

"Very well. I will send you word if I get to know of the time of his coming. I think it will not be yet, for Madame loves to have him to herself at Marly. There she can work her sweet will with him, and forward her own pet schemes. By the way, why do you not approach her yourself? She is not half as bitter against the Huguenots as the King is, so that if you are tainted with the heresy—"

"I am not, cousin!" I interrupted emphatically.

She had been looking anxious, but spoke immediately with great relief:

"So much the better, then. She would make it right with the King, even should Calvisson get the first audience with His Majesty. She is omnipotent over Louis," she added. "'Tis true she is a bigot, but she always recommends milder measures. I know for a fact that she has several Huguenot servants whom she shields—her own dresser, for example. Get Madame on your side."

"I have never spoken with her in private, cousin," said I, somewhat dolefully.

"Leave it to me, Fulcran. A fine, handsome fellow like you should win her heart, where the lean-faced, sour-looking priest would rouse all her resentment. But let it pass. There is plenty of time. Now about this water-party—will you come? I have the loveliest maiden coming. I shall tell you nothing about her," she added, when I asked the Comtesse to describe her. "You will see her if you care to join us."

"Oh, but I will!" I cried, easier at heart now that I had confided in one whose influence was great at Court.

"Then please leave me now, for I want to complete my arrangements. We start at two, and it is now eleven! Inconsiderate man, to hinder me so, when I have such weighty matters in hand!" she cried, with mock severity, turning to the table, on which a silver bell was standing.

I left the Comtesse with a light heart, knowing that she was in favour with the King, and possessed

of great influence with that remarkable woman who ruled him, and was said to be privately married to His Majesty. Neither one of them was accessible as yet, but I felt freer than at any moment since I rode through the gateway of my château at Tour. I could trust the Comtesse to do her utmost now that I had told her all; and feeling thus, I entered into the full pleasure of the day.

There was never a more glowing afternoon than that when the bargemen cast off from the marble steps at the end of the Comtesse's garden, and suffered the many-coloured and gilded craft to float down the stream. The purple sail filled out before the breeze, and carried us onward, past the flowered meadows, against whose banks we sometimes brushed slowly when the wind had dropped. Then one snatched at the yellow iris, or pulled up some water-scorpion grass, which he laid in the lap of the woman who had planned this excursion.

The ladies fell into the mood of that summer-time upon the river. One dropped her bejewelled hand over the barge's side, and about it the waters played and splashed, and in the sunshine the liquid drops vied with the precious stones for glancing beauty. Another sang a song in vogue at Court with all the *abandon* of one inured to the license of the palace. Presently one of the gentlemen drew out a copy of the *Mercur Galant*, a Society paper, from which, with the Comtesse's permission, he read bits of gossip and tales of gallantry, which made eyes fall in turn on this one or that, and brought a flush to the face, or sallies of laughter.

When the tittle-tattle had been exhausted, and the

paper was tossed out on the waters amid the protests of some of the ladies, the Comtesse looked round for someone else who might amuse the company. Jean de la Fontaine was there, and Jean Racine, too—the one, that day, heavy and dull, unmoved by the companionship of so many gaily dressed and laughing beauties, because of his lapse into dreamland in search of another fable with which to charm the world; the other—I mean Racine—inconstant with his biting raillery, which set the idle men upon their mettle, and made the women yet more vivacious, and praise him boldly for his championship of their sex. It was pungency among so much that was insipid, strength amid so many puerilities, to hear a man speak without regard to the prejudices that swayed the frequenters of a Court where lies and intrigues were as daily bread.

Racine responded to my cousin's look. What he said was taken in good part, and one and all sat spell-bound in the barge, hanging on the player's words. Some of the ladies, listening, went from sympathetic tears to sudden laughter. Even the bargemen, with knowing looks, thrust their thumbs into their neighbours' ribs, and bade them mark well what was being said, and take it all to heart for future amendment.

We were resting at the time at a bit of wooded waterside, and Racine read some portions of his greatest play. It was *Phèdre*, and the listeners had already seen the play upon the stage at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. That afternoon he rehearsed it with the passion that had won him fame. The men's eyes were fixed on the player's face, and their cheeks

paled when he lashed at Vice. The women, who sat with folded hands and parted lips while he was doing so, relapsed into smiles when he rewarded Virtue, and flung contempt on Evil and her seductions. From time to time they clapped their hands, turning their laughing, mocking faces to the gallants, whose consciences the scathing lines hit mercilessly. When Racine passed from this graver theme, they shrieked with an ecstasy of delight.

I had eyes and ears for one woman only while this was going on. The Comtesse had brought with her the acknowledged beauties of Paris, but none could compare with Louise de St. André. When my cousin presented me, I was amazed at her loveliness. I cannot describe it. The fact that she was somewhat *embonpoint* was an addition to her charms. It accorded more with my own ideal of beauty. Her gaze was frank and open, and her blue eyes gave one no thought of the wantonness that lurked behind the demure looks of the other ladies who greeted me.

"Fulcran, you are smitten," whispered my cousin, when the talk began after Racine had folded his manuscript, and flung himself back in his seat to chat with one of the ladies.

"Smitten? I am bewildered. I had no idea that there was such an one in Paris."

"There was not until a month ago. She has been shut up by her jealous sister in the château at Broneau, and this is her first look out on the world. Beware how you treat her, Fulcran. I do not want her spoilt."

"Spoilt? How could I dare? She is too good, too beautiful!"

"Do not venture. I fear the Dauphin. He has already seen her, and is pestering me to help his suit, which, of course, I shall not do. Louise is a thousand times too good to be his mistress. The other men will try, but I shall guard her well in this abominable city, where we have so much wanton flattery, such high living, and low thinking. Listen, Fulcran," went on the Comtesse, tapping my shoulder with her fan to attract my attention, for my eyes were wandering to the girl, whose dainty hand hung over the barge and caught the waters.

"I am listening, cousin."

"The women there who are caressing her so fondly—look at Madame Croisat, for example—will awaken to her charms, and be madly jealous. For how will the men resist such beauty? I almost wish I had not brought her to the capital."

"Then I should not have seen her."

"Suppose the King should see her? What confusion if Madame de Maintenon should realise that he had lost his heart to her!"

"God forbid!" I exclaimed jealously, although I had not yet touched mademoiselle's hand, and scarcely knew the sound of her voice. "But look!" said I abruptly, pointing to the meadow on the other side of the river, forgetting Louise de St. André and all the others in my sudden excitement.

Two men and a woman were standing in the middle of a group of elms, some little distance from the bank. One was M. de l'Eperon—his bandaged arm was the guarantee of his identity—the other man was the Curé of Tour. The woman I did not know.

The Frown of Majesty

"Who are they? and what of them?" asked the Comtesse, when she turned at my touch upon her hand. Like me, she saw the three in busy converse, and so absorbed that they did not observe us. "Ha! the woman's face is familiar, but I cannot recall her in any way. One of the *canaille*—a grisette, perhaps. You can tell that it is so by the manner of the creature as she stands, by the style of her dress, by the gesture, by her whole bearing. I am ashamed of De l'Eperon, a gentleman born, and of a priest, to come so far afield with such as she."

The woman turned while the Comtesse whispered to someone, and then I saw the face. There was an evil look upon it, and a strange twist of the mouth as the sun and shadow played on it through the leaves which shifted in the breeze. The woman's whole expression was fixed in my memory with that one glance; fixed because a suspicion was aroused with seeing her in such company. I wondered whether that conference concerned me.

Before my cousin was free to speak with me again, the three who made up that incongruous group among the trees began to move away, and presently disappeared behind the hedgerow.

I turned to my immediate surroundings, and when, not long afterwards, we stepped upon the bank, and scattered about the meadow while the servants were spreading the meal upon the grass beneath the willows, the Comtesse took Louise and me apart, and walked with us a little time. Presently she went away to see that the repast was arranged to suit her fastidious taste, so that Louise and I were left alone together.

Walking along the edge of the stream, we came to some flowers—the fleur de luce—and my companion, stooping, picked two or three of the purple blossoms, and held them up for me to smell, smiling while she did so. But a look of dismay came into her face.

“I have lost my ring!” she cried, looking at her white hand.

I went down on my knees at once, and after long seeking found the treasure. It was an Oriental ruby of inestimable value and wonderful beauty, embedded in a massive ring of gold, so shaped that the ruby itself was held between a thumb and two finger-tips of the precious metal. The ruby light in the heavens, as the sun sank westwards, was rich and vivid, but not more so than that which flashed from the jewel I held.

Louise clapped her hands with pleasure when she saw that I had found it, and taking it from me eagerly, returned it to her finger.

“’Tis a trifle too large for me, as you see, but I love to wear it, because it was my mother’s, and I loved her dearly,” she added simply, and with a tremor in her voice. “I thank you, M. le Vicomte, with all my heart.”

I saw, by her sparkling eyes and her grateful tone, that she laid great store by the ring, and that she considered I had rendered her a service. After that all strangeness between us was gone, and we walked on and on until the signal came for our return to the barge.

What we talked of I do not know; but when we

parted that evening, I was not the same as he who, a few days before, had left the château at Tour. For I had learned to love ; and to do that is to change one's whole nature. It is regeneration.

CHAPTER XII

TWO LETTERS

THE King remained at Marly.

The talk among the judges, courtiers, military men, and ministers was that the State—so much to Louis—had become, for the time being, a secondary thing with His Majesty, and that the hold which Madame de Maintenon had upon him was more pronounced than it had ever been since the King had first succumbed to the then widow Scarron. Monseigneur¹ and the Dauphin were content at the King's absence, for whenever Louis was in Paris he was to them a sort of watch-dog, hampering their movements, and perpetually frustrating them in their scandalous intrigues with the ladies of the Court.

"When the cat's away, the mice will play," said my cousin the Comtesse laughingly, a few mornings after the water-party. Someone had been retailing what she called some refreshing Court gossip, in which these royalties were inculcated, and she told it to me. "But what matter? Is Louis the Fourteenth himself immaculate?"

"That is treason, cousin," I remonstrated, looking round quickly to see whether any were in the room

¹ Francois Louis de Bourbon, Prince de Conti.

besides ourselves, to carry words to the King's ears which might have brought her trouble.

"'Tis all right, Fulcran. There's not a soul within hearing," she declared, with pretended contrition. "And the *Grand Monarque* will never know unless you turn traitor, and tell him. Cousin," she said, after a momentary pause, "Louise is gone to the Château de Neure."

"Near Marly?" I asked eagerly, and flushing at the unexpected mention of the name of the woman who had so completely conquered me, supplanting everyone and everything that had hitherto interested me. "Then she will not join us at the dance to-night?" I added, with a feeling of intense disappointment; for I had been looking forward to the entertainment, for which the Comtesse was making such elaborate preparations. "What made her go while the dance was so near?"

"She would not have gone but for a letter which came, bidding her join Marie, Marquise de Lauzun, at once, because she was taken suddenly ill, and wished to see her. Here is the letter. Louise read it to me, and tossed it on the table petulantly, saying that her cousin was always doing something at inopportune times. You can read it for yourself, Fulcran."

I was not interested in the epistle,—only concerned at the absence of the woman with whom I had hoped to dance; but since the Comtesse held it out to me, and it would have been rude to decline, I took it and glanced it through—one of the most ordinary of notes, but for its somewhat peremptory wording. Something in the handwriting, however, attracted

my attention. I had seen it elsewhere—yes, and, as I thought, very recently. I looked at it so intently, and for so long a time, that the Comtesse grew impatient.

“You must have read it through and through, and got it off by heart, Fulcran. Have you fallen in love with the writer? I warn you she is no beauty, and her husband would not object to be rid of her, I think.”

I took no notice of the bantering words, but put the question which was running in my own mind.

“Who is the writer? Not the Marquise?”

“Oh, dear, no! She writes a scrawly letter, a dozen words to the page, and undecipherable, with all the lines running uphill.”

“The writing here is small, distinct, and straight. I wonder why she employed an amanuensis? That, perhaps, is explained by her illness. It looks familiar, cousin. Do you object to my keeping the letter for a day or two? I am studying handwriting just now. Racine and I were talking of resemblances in writing only yesterday, and this is strikingly like some which I read last night. May I take it?”

“By all means,” the Comtesse answered indifferently, and dismissing the matter by talking of the coming dance, and some of the ladies with whom she desired me to be pleasant.

Half an hour later I was striding along the streets, brushing by all whom I met, gentlemen, cobblers, and rag-patchers—any who chanced to be in the way of one who had no eyes for what was going on, because of being buried deep in thought. I suppose that some of them turned round and stared after me;

The Frown of Majesty

possibly they indulged in comments anything but flattering—the rich at my rudeness, or for cutting my acquaintance, which was a social crime I would not have been guilty of willingly; the poor at my brutality in treating them as *canaille*, and regardless of their being heavy-laden. One lady, who was passing in a sedan-chair, waved her fan at me by way of greeting. I bowed mechanically, and went on, although she thrust her head out of the window, and called after me.

When I reached the house in the Rue de Richelieu, I nearly overturned René Bandelet, who was doing his best to fill up the wide doorway; then tramping by him without a word, and down the passage, I turned into my room, and went straight to the bureau. Unlocking one of the drawers, I took out a letter I had received the night before from Father Calvisson, wherein he humbly asked for five hundred pistoles, since he had incurred some heavy liabilities for one to whom he wished to be of service. He added that if I could oblige him, he should be able to return to Tour at once.

It looked like safety for me, and as if the threatened charge of Huguenotism would come to nothing.

“By all means,” I had said, with a deep breath of relief. “Anything to get the Curé out of Paris.”

The pistoles went at once to the Rue Galande by the hand of Rousard, who wanted no telling to be quick about his business, when I told him its nature.

The idea that I was to be freed from this threatening personal peril was not the reason for my eager perusal of Calvisson’s letter. There was another motive. I took it to the window-sill, and spread it open beside

the epistle which had been received by Louise de St. André. The first glance, by way of comparison, caused me to clench my fists, and I turned sick with dread. Then I traced the lines of both letters slowly.

“What can it mean?” said I, aloud again and again, leaving the two letters side by side, while I walked up and down the narrow room, only to return from time to time to re-examine the epistles.

Rousard stood in the open doorway of the apartment, and watched me for a while as I tramped about without taking any notice of him, presently halting to stare through the window into the street. He only spoke when he saw the sweat-drops on my forehead—the consequences of a terrible suggestion that had swept through my mind.

“Anything wrong, monsieur?” he asked anxiously, more loyal than curious, and stepping into the room.

“Shut the door and come here.”

The man obeyed, and was at my side promptly.

“Look at these two letters, and tell me what you think about them. You need not read them,” I added, and he glanced at me strangely, naturally wondering why he should be asked for an opinion on two epistles, if he could not peruse them. He turned them over and over in his hands, shook his head, and spoke candidly.

“If I must not read them, I do not see the use of looking at them, monsieur.”

“It is not the contents I am concerned with. Look at the two letters, and tell me what strikes your mind concerning them.”

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"Nothing more than this, that they are both written by Father Calvisson," he answered bluntly, somewhat testily, too.

"But why by the Curé? Why not by two different persons?"

"Well, that is easily answered, monsieur. The handwriting is the same in each. There is the letter you showed me yesterday, and here is another written by the same hand."

"That was what I wanted to know, Rousard. Now you can read them both, and tell me your own ideas about them."

The man was a slow reader, but his wit was certain and quick. When he had laid the two epistles on the window-sill again, his opinion coincided with mine—with that suggestion which filled me with a fear so terrible that it caused the sweat-drops to stand out on my forehead.

"The names in the two letters are different, monsieur, but the same hand wrote them. It looks to me as if the Curé sent to you for money without any intention of going back to Tour, and that this letter to Mademoiselle de St. André is a decoy."

"*Mon Dieu!* I thought the same, Rousard!" I cried, nearly beside myself with dread for the safety of Louise.

A fearful suspicion came, based on some private knowledge which the Comtesse had imparted to me. Louise was at heart a Huguenot, although she passed as a good Catholic. She was rich, too, enormously rich, holding lands which would be sufficient dowry had she wedded one of the princes of the blood. She was surpassingly beautiful and accomplished; a rich

man would have taken her gladly had she been as poor as any of the peasant girls, and would have thought himself fortunate in possessing her. One of these facts would influence the Curé. Calvisson may have discovered her heresy, but that was doubtful, since, as my cousin assured me, Louise had kept the knowledge to herself—had been, as it were, judiciously worshipping in the House of Rimmon, by reason of her danger if she were suspected of Huguenotism.

It was common knowledge that a man convicted of being a Huguenot would be sent to the galleys; that a heretic woman, whatever her rank, her wealth, or her beauty, would be condemned to lifelong imprisonment in the Tower of Constance or the Castle of Sommieres, each as infamous for the tortures inflicted as any of the prison chambers of the Inquisition, since the Edict had been revoked.

The horror in either place was assured, and seemed to set my hair on end; for I knew that over the gate of the Tower of Constance was an inscription similar to that which the Florentine dreamer saw written over the doorway of Hell: "All hope abandon, ye who enter here!" The bare possibility of the incarceration of such a woman in such a place nearly drove me mad. The fact of her having so much wealth would the more readily seal her doom, for the estates, on her conviction, would be confiscated to the Crown; and it was well known that the King's need of money was at the time a desperate one; or if the fancy took His Majesty, they would go to whomsoever he was disposed to reward.

While tramping up and down the room, followed

by the eyes of my faithful retainer, who did not know what to say, there came the memory of that pleasure trip upon the Seine, and of that group of three among the elms—the Curé, M. de l'Eperon, and the evil-looking woman with the twisted mouth.

Had the interview of those three anything to do with this decoy letter? for I was certain it was such. Was De l'Eperon wishful to marry Louise, to get her money, having the Curé as his accomplice, and purposing to make this woman her jailer—this creature who was surely a stranger to tenderness and pity?

The thoughts poured in upon one another, and became so intolerable that I sat down at the table, where I buried my face in my hands, savage at my helplessness.

"Some wine, Rousard!" I cried, fearing lest I should yield to the faintness that crept upon me.

The man went to the sideboard and brought a cup of Madeira, which put new vigour into me when I drank it off.

"One for yourself, Rousard; then we will talk the matter over."

"What say you?" said I, while my companion drank.

He laid the empty cup on the table, and answered briefly:

"Ride as fast as horse can carry you to the Château de Neure, monsieur. And let me ride with you," he added.

"Tis a good suggestion. Look to the horses, while I see to our being fitly armed. There may be some rough work to be done. But stay," I cried, when



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Rousard was turning to the door, "would it be well to take someone with us?"

"The fewer the better, to start with, monsieur," was the reply ; and seeing me nod approval, the other walked away.

CHAPTER XIII

MISSING

IN less than an hour we were riding westward along the road which led to Marly, but it was not until we rode past the château that had belonged to Cardinal Richelieu, that I grew sufficiently calm to think matters over. I had come from the capital, actuated by some wild impulse, without having considered my right to institute a search for Louise de St. André. Had the ladies and gentlemen in Paris been acquainted with the actual relationship between us, and had they heard of my self-imposed task, I suppose they would have pronounced my enterprise Quixotic. And one could scarcely blame them. I was engaged on an errand of rescue before I knew that Mademoiselle de St. André was in any peril. If she were really missing, I was bent on finding one to whom I had never spoken a word of love—of whom, indeed, I was scarcely a friend, barely more than a mere acquaintance. She might have passed out of my life as quickly and unexpectedly as she had entered it.

But all such thoughts I set aside impatiently. While I might be nothing to her, she was everything to me. She had my love; she was possibly in danger. There must be some conspiracy to do her

harm, and that was sufficient motive for my self-imposed mission.

Jealousy, too, played some part in the matter. The recurring memory of that incongruous group in the meadow associated itself with this disappearance.

"M. de l'Eperon," thought I, "is in league with Calvisson to cajole her into marriage—he to get her wealth, the money-loving priest to perform the ceremony, and receive a large sum in payment for his share in the abduction." The part of the woman with the twisted mouth I could not conceive, but possibly the abducted girl was to be placed in her keeping.

Imagination turning me into this new direction, led me to suppose the Curé intruding on Louise, with the woman as her jailer, telling the poor girl that she was in direst danger because of her heresy, working thus upon her fears. Then I seemed to hear him assuring her that she could escape the penalty by marrying M. de l'Eperon, who was in love with her. How easy for the courtier to pay the priest a large sum of money after she had been frightened into consent. Ten thousand, or even twenty thousand pistoles would scarcely be missed as the price of such service when once De l'Eperon was master of Louise de St. André's fortune.

Whatever scheme my fancy suggested, it was maddening. It all meant unhappiness for Louise—most probably extreme danger—and certainly the frustration of my own hopes of making her my wife, if once she got to know me intimately.

I spurred my horse vigorously, and rode along the street of Reuil at a furious gallop, which brought the people to their doors, and drew Rousard after me in

a state of wonderment as to what had caused me to make such a sudden dash.

"Have you seen anything, monsieur?" he asked eagerly, when my horse slowed down after a long run, and he was enabled to draw level with me.

"Nothing," I answered, riding on without vouchsafing any explanation.

At the bend of the Seine the road to the Château de Neure broke off from that which led to Marly, and ran towards Noisy. It was necessary, in order to reach the house of the Marquise de Lauzun by the shortest route, to leave that town to the left, and traverse the forest of Marly for a couple of miles along a path barely wide enough for a coach to pass, and so deserted that few cared to travel it alone. Someone had erected a rude crucifix at the entrance, and to a tree close by was affixed, upon a rough bracket, an image of the Virgin. A peasant was kneeling at the cross, but when he saw us turning our horses to take the winding road, he rose to his feet quickly, and threw his arms wide open, as if to hinder us. On being challenged for an explanation, he declared that the path was haunted, and that none ever passed that way. I scorned his suggestion that we should ride along the forest edge, and so avoid the ghostly perils he enumerated, and we both rode past him. It was an unusual act of grace on the peasant's part towards one of my class, seeing that the nobles were so soundly hated by the people.

There were no houses on the way after we left the open country behind us, save one which stood back a hundred yards or thereabouts to our left. It displayed no great pretensions when seen from the

distance, but had evidently once been the abode of a man of wealth. The walls were covered with ivy, which hung in such heavy festoons over the windows that Rousard remarked that the rooms must have been as dark as if they had been shuttered. The chimneys were smokeless, the outhouses in a deplorable state of dilapidation, the doors tightly closed and ivy-covered, and nothing living was at hand to suggest that the place was occupied. But there was no need for us to take the trouble to find out whether the house had any occupants. We were bent on assuring ourselves that Louise de St. André was with the Marquise de Lauzun.

As we rode along this woodland path I had to think of the explanation I should give for my visit to the château. If I found her with the Marquise, what should I say? Could I tell her that I had established myself as her knight-errant when I possessed no claim to anything more than friendship, and that only of a few days' standing? That would be absurd, and might be readily construed into an intrusion. I had no alternative but to resort to a bit of pardonable duplicity, explaining my presence at the château by saying that, having heard of the illness of the Marquise, I had turned out of my way to make inquiries. That would seem reasonable, since I knew her intimately.

After a time we rode along the avenue which wound its way through the magnificent park for nearly a mile. It ended abruptly at a stream which ran briskly by to join the Seine. From the opposite bank stretched the greensward, bounded by some rising ground, on the slope of which stood an ancient

house, its grey, weather-beaten walls and embattled towers looking formidable in their simple severity, as the sunshine of the summer afternoon fell on them. The drawbridge had been lowered, and we could look into the spacious courtyard.

Before crossing the bridge which spanned the stream, we halted, and at that moment saw a little company ride forth, preceded by a lady on horseback. Some dogs were leaping about her, noisily expressing their delight at the prospect of a run across the undulating, tree-dotted country.

The rider who led the way did not follow the winding road, but came across the grass in a straight line, her horse's feet occasionally kicking up the gravel and dust where the path swept round to intercept her. She was riding to the bridge, on the other side of which we had halted, and the dogs, taking notice of our presence, bounded forward with loud clamour.

Seeing us, the lady rode towards us at a hand-gallop, and pulled up for a moment at the other end of the bridge.

"I give you greeting, M. le Vicomte," she cried merrily. "Welcome to De Neure! Have you come to stay?"

She approached when she had spoken, meeting me midway on the bridge, with her gloved hand extended.

My answer took her by surprise.

"I heard that you were seriously ill, madame."

I tried to speak cheerfully, but it was not possible. Here was proof that the letter which induced Louise to leave my cousin, the Comtesse, and ride to the

Château de Neure was what I had suspected—a decoy.

The Marquise laughed gaily at the bare suggestion of illness, and as she sat in her saddle, with her hounds loitering about her, and her restless horse keeping her hand in constant motion as he tossed his head, or shifted from side to side, she looked like a woman who did not know what sickness meant. The glow of health was in her cheeks, and the fresh country air played on a face that had no need of cosmetics.

“I have not had a day’s sickness, M. le Vicomte, for ten years or more; and so far from being ill, I hope to ride to St. Germain and back before we sup. I would ask you to join us, but perhaps your horses are tired?” She did not give me time to speak. “If you would care to come, your horse may be stalled, and you shall ride one of mine. Now come, I pray you, monsieur,” she added. “I am longing to hear what is doing in Paris. Is it true that the King is still with Madame de Maintenon at Marly? And is it true that my lovely cousin, Louise de St. André, is with the Comtesse du Roure?”

She spoke so volubly, and her animal spirits carried her on so fluently, that I could not say anything; but when she mentioned Louise by name, I broke in upon her words, heedless as to whether she thought me lacking in courtesy or otherwise.

“Madame, ’tis because of Mademoiselle de St. André that I am here to-day.”

“Fie on you, M. le Vicomte!” she cried, laughing again. “I thought you had come to see *me*! Have you, then, lost your heart to her, as I hear other

gallants have done? I have been told that the decree against duelling is likely to become a dead letter in Paris on her account, and 'tis even whispered that the Dauphin is smitten. M. le Vicomte, I have half a mind to ride on and bid you good-day," she added, with mock severity.

"Seriously, madame," I interposed; but she went on again before I could say another word. It was a text for her, and she took it up flippantly.

"Who would say 'Seriously, madame' on such a glorious day? Come, monsieur, your horse does not look so tired after all; so join me, and let us ride on."

"One moment, I pray you," said I, moving my horse close to her side. "I have something serious to say."

The laughing face became grave, and the vivacity passed. She sat her horse silently, and waited.

"A letter reached Louise this morning—pardon the apparent liberty I take in speaking of her thus!" I exclaimed, breaking off when I saw that she looked at me in some surprise because of the familiarity I had inadvertently displayed in my anxiety. Then I went on quickly, for this was no time for explanations: "A letter came to her this morning from yourself, bidding her come to you without delay, since you were very ill, and likely to die."

The eyes of the Marquise opened wide, and a look of wonder swept across her face. She doubtless thought me demented.

"Monsieur, I have not written to my cousin for six months or more!" she cried.

"Then you did not write this?" I asked, drawing

the suspected letter from my breast, where I had held it in safe keeping.

She took it from my hand, glanced at it quickly, then held it out at arm's length in scorn.

"If Louise thought that I wrote this letter, she must be gone mad. 'Tis no more of my writing than it is that of my mastiff yonder. 'Tis written with a man's hand, as anyone may see."

"So I thought, and so I feared, madame," I answered. "But since you did not write that letter, matters must be serious for mademoiselle, and there must be some devilry afoot. Is she not here?"

"Here? I have not seen her for two months. Then she was at St. Germain, driving the gentlemen mad with love and jealousy," she replied, with forced gaiety; but it was easy to see that she was anxious.

"I waited on my cousin, the Comtesse du Roure, this morning, and she gave me this letter to read. Mademoiselle Louise had started some hours before because of it; she was so anxious when she heard that you were ill."

"Foolish girl, to suppose that I should write such a man's hand as that!" said the Marquise, displaying considerable annoyance in look and tone.

"She may have concluded that, being ill, you employed some one to serve as your amanuensis, madame. 'Tis a growing custom with ladies of rank."

"Of course; naturally," she admitted.

We were silent for a while, each engaged in anxious thought. Her horse fretted at the enforced halt, and the ladies in attendance, and grooms behind, gazed at us curiously, wondering what had reduced

the Marquise from vivacity to perplexity, and to such obvious anxiety.

"Come to the château, M. le Vicomte," said the lady, breaking the awkward silence.

"Excuse me, madame. If mademoiselle is not here, I must seek her instantly. This letter has been sent, as I feared, to serve as a decoy for some villain's purpose. Farewell, madame!"

I was gathering up the reins, when she asked me simply:

"Is my cousin anything to you, that you take this so much to heart?"

"She is the world to me, madame. To her I am probably nothing—perhaps less than nothing; but because she is so much to me, I am going to find her. Farewell!"

"God speed you, monsieur! I, too, will send everywhere to seek for her. Heaven grant that she may have come to no harm!"

She waved her hand in grave adieu, and we swung our horses round, to ride away in opposite directions.

CHAPTER XIV

THE HOUSE IN THE FOREST

I HAD told the Marquise de Lauzun that it was my intention to find Louise; but when I turned my horse's head to face the road which led to Paris, I had no idea as to what course was the best to pursue.

We had not gone far along the winding avenue before I halted and held conference with Rousard, who, having heard all that had passed between me and the Marquise, required no explanation. My own brain was fertile with imagination as to the peril of Louise, but sluggish in suggestions concerning the course to be followed in order to find her. The detective instinct was not strong with me; my mind was not like that of many—prolific in expedients. My book-lore—even such close acquaintance with the satires of Rabelais—had not taught me much as to the wiles of those who were bent on crime. Rousard, for the nonce, was equally bewildered, although I had hitherto found him quick-witted and capable.

As a matter of fact, we had not compassed the possibilities while riding to the château. The mind is not capable of projecting itself beyond a certain point. One grasps eventualities, but centres his mind on these only for a while. He does not display

any extraordinary capacity for remedies so long as the uncertainty exists. It is when the average man is face to face with new demands, when hopes have proved chimerical, and only cruel facts are before him, that he grapples with the difficulties, and forces his mind to act under the new conditions.

As yet, while we consulted together in the avenue, our minds were in a state of chaos. But gradually it dawned upon us that it was altogether unlikely, if Louise had been decoyed, that her abductors would bring her anywhere near to the spot named in the letter. If they met her on the way they would contrive to lead her as far from the Château de Neure as possible, lest, if any suspicion arose, they might be quickly overtaken.

“We had better return to Paris, Rousard, and start afresh. We might learn something when we are in the city, or on the road.”

“Yes, monsieur. We must also do what we ought to have done, and what we did not do, while coming hither—inquire at inns and houses whether any such company as that we are seeking had passed.”

The retainer hinted thus at our flagrant stupidity; for while travelling to inquire of the Marquise, we had asked no questions of the wayfarers we had met, and none of the innkeepers, as to their having seen any persons going in the direction of the Château de Neure, who would answer to the Curé, Louise, or De l'Eperon. We had ridden hastily, only bent on reaching the home of the Marquise de Lauzun. I had not even made any inquiry as to the nature of Louise's escort when she left the house of the Comtesse.

We resolved on retracing our steps towards Paris,

and be guided by such information as we might pick up while on the road. Thereupon we spurred our horses along the avenue, and into the winding forest path.

I had forgotten the lonely house until we saw it once more. It was as desolate as before ; a place which a peasant would have passed quickly if alone, crossing himself by way of warding off any possible evil, supernatural or otherwise. Its stillness in such a solitude gave the great building a threatening aspect, so that I did not now wonder at the warning we had received when we essayed the journey through the forest.

“No use turning aside to make inquiries there,” observed Rousard, as we drew the horses into walking pace, the better to see whether there were now any signs of life.

It seemed so improbable, after our scrutiny, that anyone could be dwelling in a place so dilapidated, that we did not halt ; but when we had ridden past, the creaking sound of rusty hinges moving caused me to turn quickly, my hand resting on the horse’s flank. Instantly curiosity was changed to wonder, and an exclamation of astonishment coming from my lips, Rousard, who had apparently not heeded the sound, even if he had heard it, pulled up his horse, saw in what direction I was gazing, and looked back eagerly.

The shutter of one of the lower windows was open, brushing back the heavy festoons of ivy, and a woman was peering at us. There were her bare arms, one hand resting on the sill, the other holding the bolt. Her bodice was open at the neck, and as

the light of the low-lying sun fell on her face, I saw it plainly. Fancy may have been sporting with me, but I thought I saw that evil-looking creature with the twisted mouth. This was the picture of a moment only—a quick flash, as it were, in the slanting sunshine; for the woman's face changed swiftly from impudent satisfaction to alarm. Then the shutter closed with a prolonged scream, and the house assumed once more its appearance of solitariness.

It was no dream on my part, some imaginary vision of one about whom I had been thinking during the forest ride, but a reality; for Rousard cried:

“I saw a woman's face!”

“You did. It belonged to her whom I saw in the meadow the other day, talking with Father Calvisson and M. de l'Eperon. What shall we do?”

“Go to the house, and see what she may have to tell us, monsieur.”

We turned our horses, and rode across the soft, root-strewn moss and grass, reaching the door, which, however, was fastened when I stooped from the saddle and tried the latch. Not only were there the marks of hoofs on the soil, but signs of a recent entrance having been effected. Grass, ivy, climbing plants, moss, and fungi had asserted themselves here, hiding the stone doorstep, but had been roughly broken in upon by the opening of a door which had not been used, perhaps, for years. Although it was now closed tightly, some of the tendrils had fallen inwards after the retreating door, and were caught and crushed as in a vice which would not release them again.

Dismounting, we knocked loudly for admission, but no response came. There was that sound which induces the sense of emptiness when a house is uninhabited; something so different to what is heard when it is occupied. The blows fell heavily and swiftly, but vainly, for we obtained no answer.

After a time Rousard looked to the windows, while I remained at the door, to listen for any signs of someone stirring within the house. They were too firmly fastened to be opened by anyone outside, and none could enter by them because they were securely barred. When my servant returned and told me he saw no possibility of entrance, I left him in charge of the horses, and bade him continue knocking, while I took my turn in seeking some mode of ingress. He did as I desired, and his blows were loud enough to wake any but the dead.

Stretching away to right and left of the house, and in a line with it, was a wall, whether of stone or timber I could not tell, it was so bunched and overgrown with masses of evergreen. Passing along the front face to the left, I came to some dense brushwood, which, filling up the spaces among the thickly-growing trees, completely hid the other portion of the green boundary from the sight of any who travelled on the forest path. It went off at right angles for a great distance, and I followed it until I came to a spot where the ivy had formed a natural ladder. Pulling myself up among the tangled growth, I was able to see what lay inside.

At one time there must have been an ordered dignity within the enclosure, but Ruin had stalked through the garden. Vines, olives, chestnuts, walnut,

apple, almond, and citron trees massed together. Nature had her revenge on man for having robbed her of a portion of her domain, for on regaining possession, she effaced every token of his care. Amid all this rank growth three or four cedars were standing. Wild vines had wound their clinging tendrils about the trunks and branches, strangling the life out of them, so that the once-green, over-hanging boughs coloured and shrivelled, and drooped in the helplessness of death.

Looking towards the house, I saw something moving—a woman. She was pushing her way among the tall grass and weeds and thorns, but halted a moment for a backward look at the house from whence she seemed to be coming. When she turned again I saw her plainly. Her bosom was bared to the sun, and her hair was dishevelled. Her mouth was awry and cruel; her face was one to make a timid woman shudder with dread—a face full of evil passions, and scarred with blows she had received in drunken fights. She was of the same stamp with those who had screamed out the death-cry on the Eve of St. Bartholomew, and revelled in the bloodshed. One could have imagined her among the murderous Jacquerie who, three hundred years before, marched through the land, athirst for the blood of the nobles.

Was it possible that Louise, so gentle and refined, was in the keeping of such a creature, who was swearing as she passed, and in such terms as to make one marvel at the language human lips could frame? If so, Father Calvisson was infamous beyond conception. Even against a proved heretic such conduct was inexcusable.

I called aloud to her to stop, but when she heard my voice she looked round quickly, then fled with what speed she could, and with a frightened cry, to a dense mass of shrub into which she plunged. One could trace her course by the moving vegetation, and by the crackle of the snapping twigs. It was impossible to enter at that spot because of the dense bush of thorns beneath, and having lost sight of her, I climbed down and passed along outside the wall as quickly as the tangled growth would allow.

At one place the ivy's ravages had broken down the wall, and here I forced my way into the garden, where the weeds and nettles were almost shoulder high. Above the singing of the birds I could hear at intervals Rousard's stentorian voice, and then a volley of blows upon the door, but deadened by the distance. It was clear that he had not succeeded in getting anyone to answer his demand.

When I stood in the garden and looked around, there was no sign of life, save that of the birds and squirrels that had free access to the place. The fruit bushes, gone wild, grew in great bunches here and there, thickly enough to enable anyone to watch my movements without being seen. Possibly the woman was doing that now. If De l'Eperon had been within the enclosure, he could have picked me off with a musket readily, and none would have told his whereabouts but for the blue curl of smoke above the bush.

At the bottom, where I supposed the virago to be lurking, I could see between the trees the same stretch of undergrowth that marked the boundary, and beyond it the mighty trees of the forest. To my

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right was the house. It looked like the dwelling of a well-to-do *bourgeois*, who had chosen to live there in ease after a busy life in some Paris quarter. The portion which faced the forest path was so overrun with greenery that one could not tell whether it was plain or ornamented; but now I saw a terraced dwelling, with three or four moss-grown steps which led upwards to a doorway, overarched with rotten, carved woodwork, about which ivy had grown, and climbing plants had draped their heavy festoons.

The iron-barred windows had shutters also, some of which were unclosed. Here one was fastened back to the stuccoed wall, while another stood out at an angle, just as the last wind had left it. It was easy to suppose that in bygone days the dwellers in this place had looked out on an extensive garden, bright and beautiful with its flower-beds and well-cut lawn, and that many light-hearted groups had loitered in the gravelled paths, or walked through shrubberies, and beneath the trees which now towered over rank grass and weeds, and tangled growth. In the centre of the lawn stood a sun-dial, a horologist that had lost the count of years, and now could barely mark the time of day because rank weeds and ivy had twined about the gnomon, and hid the mildewed plate.

I crossed to the terrace, loosening my rapier as I went, to guard against any possible danger; for how could one say what he might expect? Mounting the marble steps, I placed my hand on the massive door. I had thought to find it fastened, but it opened slowly when I pressed against it. Before me was a long passage, which widened midway into a large square hall, in semi-darkness, although it was daylight outside.

Overhead was an oak ceiling, beautifully embellished with the carver's art, but black with age. At the further end was the door on which Rousard was still beating vigorously. It was bolted, twice barred, and chained; and wasting no time, I went thither, opened it, and stood face to face with my retainer, who was red in the face with so much shouting.

He stared at me open-mouthed, for he had not expected to see me.

"Where's that woman, monsieur? She must be stone deaf, for I have yelled till I am hoarse, and have banged upon this door loudly enough to rouse the Seven Sleepers."

Had I not heard him, the door furnished abundant evidence of his endeavours, for it was deeply dented with the heavy blows he had beaten on it with the pommel of his sword.

Standing in the open doorway, I told him what I had seen, and how I had got into the house. There was no need to tell him of the spacious, tangled garden, for looking along the passage, we could see it plainly, and the forest at the further end.

"We ought to go through the house and garden," said I.

"True, monsieur, but we dare not leave the horses. While we were away someone might mount them, and be off. Let me look round for stable room."

"That would be safer," I observed. "Such tumble-down places, as those outhouses are, could be entered easily."

Rousard reflected for a few moments, then walked to the door nearest to him in the passage. He flung it wide open, and peered in.

The Frown of Majesty

"Could not be better!" he cried, beckoning to me.

We looked into a large chamber, evidently used by the late owner as a lumber room, but now empty, with the exception of two or three boxes. The place was in semi-darkness, but my companion, crossing the stone floor, opened the shutter and the small window, letting in the air and sunlight.

"I can stable the horses here, monsieur. They can do with a rest and a meal, seeing that they have had so long a journey."

In a few minutes the tired creatures were brought in, the boxes served as tables on which the nose-bags rested, and we left them munching their oats contentedly while we prosecuted our search. To avoid unnecessary risk, Rousard fastened them in, taking charge of the key.



CHAPTER XV

A REMINDER OF ST. BARTHOLOMEW

GOING down the passage, we opened the doors one by one, and peered into every room. The second apartment detained us a little while because of its contents. There was in it a rough oaken table, on which were some baskets that contained food and wine, fresh and appetising to hungry men. A long time had passed since we tasted food or drink, and consequently we did not hesitate to help ourselves freely, eating until we were satisfied.

After that we began our examination of the house.

The rooms were all—save one—in semi-darkness, for the windows were either shuttered, or the ever-greens had grown over them, matting together so closely as to obscure what light might otherwise have found its way through. From each apartment came the musty smell that tells of doors long closed, and the exclusion of air as well as light. In none of them was there any sign of life, except when a rat was disturbed by the sudden opening of the doors. Our entrance was followed by the scramble of the creature's feet upon the floor as he fled to some corner where he knew of safety.

The floors in some of the rooms were bare ; on others were carpets, rat- and moth-eaten, but with

sufficient of them remaining to show that the owner had been a man of considerable means. They broke into fragments when we set foot upon them, or crumbled into dust. Pictures richly framed hung on the walls, or had fallen to the floor, but the canvas was blotched and mildewed, so that only a black and indistinguishable mass was visible. In some rooms were silver lamps—blackened for want of an attentive hand—hung on the walls, or suspended from the ceiling. The cornices had once been richly gilded, but now they were black with age, while the silken coverings of the walls and the tapestries were torn and streaked, some portions hanging in colourless shreds. Most of the apartments were handsomely furnished, but in the style in vogue a century and more before, while there were everywhere the spoils of different lands, showing that the owner of this mansion had travelled far, and relished rarities.

One chamber was exceptionally rich in its appointments, bearing out my notion that this had been the dwelling of a rich trader, who had quitted his business house in the Marais, or some other quarter of the capital, and had come hither to enjoy the fortune he had amassed. Many of the *bourgeoisie* of Paris were more wealthy than those who squandered their time in dangling about the Court, ogling the women, and joining in some dangerous or disreputable intrigue. Not only were they more wealthy, but their homes were, in many cases, even more luxurious.

The curtains of flowered silk in this apartment were transparent, but the sun, which had once displayed the gorgeous colours, now shone through darkened patterns, and the handsome scarlet damask



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covers on the chairs were faded. The gilded framework and oaken panels of the bureaux had turned black in the course of years, or from lack of attention. Here, as in the other rooms, there was dust everywhere ; on the floor, on the seats, on the ornaments of silver and china, thick on the shattered remnants of a malachite vase which had been overturned from its pedestal of black marble, on the hearth, and on the brass dogs in the fire-place. The air that entered when the door was opened stirred the fine particles, so that they not only irritated one's nostrils and throat, but drifted about like mist.

Close by the window stood a table, on which lay an open book with heavy clasps, and massive silver rims along the edges of the covers. I did not cross the floor to look at it, for something else attracted our attention, and caused our lips to open with awe—an awe which robbed us of speech. At the table sat a strange figure, once richly clothed ; but now the dust-covered garments hung in tatters. It was all that remained of a man of wealth—a dead man, whose flesh had gone, and of whose body nothing was left but the grim skeleton. He was bending over the table, the bony hands clasped together as if in prayer, and the skull rested, face downwards, on the open page. The handle of a butcher's knife stood out of the dark-coloured doublet, and told the story as well as words could do. Someone had entered stealthily, and plunged the weapon into the reader's back, straight to the heart, and then had fled, leaving the instrument of death to tell what the end had been.

It was too terrible a place to linger in. The sweat-drops came upon my forehead when I thought that

Louise might be in such another place as this. If she had been shown into this room in passing, with the wanton cruelty which such a woman I had seen was capable of, it must surely have driven her mad with terror to know that she was imprisoned in a house containing such a fearful thing.

"Come away, monsieur," said Rousard, gazing into my face, and doubtless interpreting the look he saw upon it.

There were ten rooms in all on the ground floor, but that was the only one which had any token of death or life—whatever one may choose to term it.

From the great hall, the walls of which were covered with armour, a handsomely-carved winding staircase, panelled with oak, led to the rooms above. Up this we stepped cautiously, wondering what we might see. There had been no trace of Louise in the apartments below. When my foot touched the bottom step, an ejaculatory prayer went silently from my heart, that I might find her, and carry her away.

Nothing unusual could be seen when we looked up before we began our ascent, save some blackened spots like splashes here and there on steps and walls, and dark streaks which ran from one step to the next below. But when we had taken the final turn, which gave us a full view of the wide corridor straight before us, we could not suppress a cry of horror. It was terrible enough to see what was there in each other's company; I cannot think what we might have felt had we come upon the sight alone.

Across the top step, with the head overhanging, lay

a woman, her knees drawn up. A dagger was clutched in her bony fingers, while the other hand was lying on the breast. As with the man in the room below, there was nothing but a skeleton. Such, too, were the bodies lying on the floor of the passage, men to the front, women behind; some close by, with weapons in their hands, or within reach, others lying across the thresholds of rooms that lined the corridor, some of them small children. One was a tiny babe, clasped in the arms of a kneeling woman, who might have been its mother. That seemed the most pitiful thing of all.

The story told itself. It was an awful remnant, lingering in France, not far away from the city from whose church towers had rung out the wild alarum which gave the signal for massacre on the Eve of St. Bartholomew, nearly a hundred and twenty years before. The murderous work had first been done in the capital; then the people, thirsting for blood, had come—a turbulent mob—to this lonely spot in the forest, knowing that a Huguenot and his family dwelt there, and suspecting that many had escaped from Paris to hide in his home during the sanguinary horrors of that fearful night.

It may have been that the master of the mansion was deaf, and so read on and prayed in spite of the outcries of the mob, and the awful confusion in the corridors. The assassin had stolen in and caught him unawares, while he sat at his open Bible. Meanwhile, there was the fierce fight on the part of the sons and men of the household at the top of the stairs, ending, as all those terrible doings of that never-to-be-forgotten week had done, in death for

the heretics. One of the frenzied crowd had died—a woman as forbidding and dreadful, perhaps, as she whom I had seen in the garden. Others had been wounded, likewise, without a doubt, for the swords in the hands of the dead defenders, whose faces were to the stairs, had stains upon them, while the pistols in the hands of some of the women were empty.

One would have been glad to turn away and see no more, but that was impossible while we were unaware of the whereabouts of the woman we were seeking. Those who had decoyed her might be callous enough to bring her upstairs, to prevail upon her the more readily to yield to their demands, whatever they might prove to be. What would not one of her high-strung nature do to get away from the horrible place, and breathe God's pure, fresh air, and look around on the beautiful world outside? Now that Calvisson had displayed his true nature, taking to himself—as I firmly believed—such an accomplice as the evil-faced creature who had hurried into hiding in the garden, I could conceive the possibility of so base an act of intimidation as that.

"This is fearful," said I, half beside myself. "It may be that mademoiselle is in one of those rooms."

"Surely not!" cried Rousard emphatically. "None would do so horrible a thing, monsieur, as bring a lady here."

But when I told him what I thought as to the probable motives of her abductors, he acquiesced, and even stepped beyond me to be the first to peer in at the doors.

We did not miss a single room, but Louise was not in any one of them. In two of the chambers we found the remains of some dead Huguenots ; in one of them a sombrely-dressed merchant, sitting on the ground, one arm on the seat of the high-backed chair, and just below the helpless hand a dagger, which had fallen from his grasp. On the costly coverlet of the curtained bedstead lay a woman, the blood-stains showing how her death had come. In the other room was a boy who had stood before a girl—his sister, perhaps—to shield her from the fatal blow.

But nowhere was there any trace of Louise, although we tore down curtains in our search, and opened cupboards, and even tested the walls by tapping on them, in the hope of finding some secret hiding-place. There was no sign of her presence, nor did any voice respond to our repeated calls.

We looked out of one of the windows into the garden to see whether any trace of the woman who had passed me had been left. If we could lay hands upon her, gold would probably shake her loyalty to her colleagues, when threats might prove unavailing. I judged that she was of the sort that could be bought, and, to release Louise and carry her to the Château de Neure, I would gladly part with thousands of pistoles, if needs be—anything save honour.

While we were gazing into the tangled wilderness, I thought I saw a face among the brushwood behind one of the cedars. I pointed at it, in the hope that Rousard might see it also ; but if it had really been there, it disappeared. Imagination often peoples the world with that which we wish to see, and Rousard,

who had not seen the face, thought that fancy had been sporting with me.

We lingered there awhile, but seeing nothing living save the birds, and hearing nothing but their song and our own heavy breathing, or an occasional snort, or the stamp of the horses' feet on the floor of their improvised stable, we went into the passage, stepped carefully over those grim objects lying in our way, and hurried down the stairs into the garden, to breathe the fresh country air.

CHAPTER XVI

THE ORIENTAL RUBY

THERE had been no indication of the presence of any cellars to this lonely mansion, but eager to make our search complete, we began afresh, starting from the door by which Rousard had entered. We passed from room to room, throwing open the shutters, some of the hinges of which broke off, after having been eaten away with the rust of six-score years. This second search served to show that Louise was nowhere in the house. It also enforced the fact that this had been the abode of one whose wealth had been considerable.

Whether the owner had been a man of family, one would not care to say, and it mattered little now since he and his were dead and gone; but, as in the houses of men of rank, he had hung upon the walls the relics of fighting days—either the arms of his ancestors, or such as he had purchased in the capital, with which to make a show. The walls of the broad passages were covered with corselets, iron helmets, gauntlets, leg-pieces, pikes, halberds, petronels, calivers, muskets, and many an obsolete weapon that had done its work in the warlike days.

In the rooms on either hand were curios; china which now had a fabulous value by reason of its

rareness, flagons and cups of solid silver, lamps of the same precious metal, with small round mirrors behind them, vessels of antique bronze, gone green with age and neglect, tables and cabinets, vases and Bohemian glass. All these, and the carpets, the tapestries, the pictures, and the superb furniture, bore witness to the taste and opulence of the now dead owner.

But there was nowhere any trace of Louise de St. André; none in the out-houses and dilapidated stables, none in the bedrooms upstairs which we visited; not so much as a foot-mark upon any of the dusty floors. Incredible as it may appear, the mob had come hither on that fatal day, but had not stayed to plunder; for the house stood undisturbed, its gold and silver ornaments standing in their places, just as they had done while there was no thought of perfidy on the part of Charles the Ninth. Even the money-chests we opened in one of the bed-chambers had remained untouched. When we raised the lids we saw the dull golden coins, and the parcels which doubtless contained jewels of great price.

It may well be supposed that the people had more lust for blood than thoughts of spoils; more hate for heretics in their bigoted frenzy; and having slain all whom they found in the place, had hurried on elsewhere to add to the death-roll, thinking to return for plunder later. When the murderous feeling had passed, they feared to return to a house which they had turned into a shambles. Being superstitious, they had a dread lest the protesting spirits of the slain should meet them at the threshold. The mansion speedily gathered to itself a ghostly re-

putation, and none came near. Even the road through the forest was deserted, travellers preferring a longer journey by a roundabout way, rather than approach this charnel-house.

By the time our search indoors had ended, evening was approaching. We walked slowly down the marble steps from the terrace, and stood on what had once been a gravel path. The garden had not been explored, and it was possible that some hut or out-house might be there in which Louise was concealed. Yet before we could prosecute our search it would be dark.

What could we do?

We waited idly, looking around aimlessly, hoping for some haphazard inspiration, since information as to the missing one's whereabouts was not forthcoming. Rousard, who had stood at the bottom of the steps while I paced to and fro in uneasy cogitation, aroused my curiosity by a loud exclamation; then added to it by bending low and taking something from among the grass which grew up between the cracks of the steps. He looked so eagerly at what he had found that I hurried to his side. A blood-red flash was followed by another, and yet more. As by some intuition, I seemed to know what it was, and almost snatched the treasure from his hand in my eagerness.

It was a costly ring—a golden thumb and two finger-tips holding an Oriental ruby, the facets of which caught the light at every turn. It was none other than the ring I had found for Louise in the meadow on the day I first met her. If I had any doubts as to its ownership, the legend within the

circlet of gold would have dispelled them. Cut into the precious metal was the word "LOUISE," followed by the Latin motto, "*Ne cede malis.*"¹ What could be more appropriate than this in her present circumstances?

"'Tis mademoiselle's!" I cried. "There is her name, the same as her mother's, and the family motto. She has been down these steps, and the ring, fitting so loosely, has fallen from her hand." To assure him that it was no play of fancy, I told Rousard how I had found it a few days before among the rushes, while on the water-trip.

After some deliberation we separated, Rousard taking the left side of the garden, with drawn sword, and I the right, rapier in hand. Forcing our way through the tangled growth, we pressed forward, using our eyes in the fast-deepening twilight, to discover, if possible, anything like an out-house into which she might have been hurried. As we went we shouted aloud, disturbing the birds and rabbits, and waiting at intervals for an answer, in case the lost one heard our cries.

"Mademoiselle, where are you?"

"Mademoiselle Louise!"

"Mademoiselle de St. André!"

We varied our call so that if Louise heard us, she would know that we sought her.

On and on we went, tripping at times over hidden roots, catching our feet in creepers, stung with nettles, torn on hands and faces with thorn branches which stood in our way. We touched the bottom boundary at last, ragged and bleeding, breathless with our calls

¹ "Do not yield to misfortune."

and struggles in that enclosed wilderness, without having heard any response. No cry, no sob, no wail of distress, no shrill scream had come to tell us of the whereabouts of her whom we were seeking.

We exchanged positions and turned our faces to the house, fighting with the tangled growth, and heedless of the pain as the thorn branches swished back against the skin, or penetrated our garments and held us fast. When we reached the terrace steps once more, it was almost dark. We could see the building as it marked off its roof against the sky, but behind us the garden was in blackness. No sound came to our ears that was human, save our own hard breathing after that fight with the dense growth of bush and tree.

"Did you hear aught?" I asked of Rousard.

"Not a whisper, monsieur," the other answered savagely, cursing the Curé, the woman, and all others who had had a hand in this abduction. It did me some sort of good to hear him, for he spoke my own mind in the matter. I only regretted that curses had such little efficacy that they broke no bones, and brought no deserved suffering on the evil-doers.

When he had relieved himself to my complete satisfaction and his own, my companion suggested that we should rest the night through, and begin our search afresh in the garden at day-dawn.

To sleep in a house which had such ghostly occupants was not pleasant, but the night air was beginning to be chill. We turned into the room next to the horses, when Rousard had found them some water, and while he slept I kept watch. He

was to sleep for three hours, and then allow me to rest.

I judged the hours as well as I could, and after the long vigil, began to think it time to awake my companion. I was about to do so when I heard some stealthy movements in the passage. Walking quietly to the door, I listened, but everything was so quiet that I concluded I had been mistaken. The sounds, however, came again. A chain dropped so quietly that there was only the faint scrape of metal as the links rubbed on each other. My hand went to the latch, but I did not lift it, thinking I would first go to Rousard and awake him. It was a safeguard in one sense, for who could tell what danger might be outside? The delay, however, proved to be a mistake, for a sudden opening of the door would not only have awakened my companion, it would have taken the person outside by surprise.

Bending over the sleeper, I awoke him. He sat up instantly, rubbing his eyes.

“Time to change, monsieur?”

“Silence,” I answered, in a whisper. “Listen. There is someone outside.”

He stretched out his hand for his sword, which lay close by, but before he could rise to his feet there was the loud metallic clang of a falling iron bar upon the stones of the passage, then a smothered exclamation of fear, the rush of footsteps, and the slamming of a door on that side of the house where the garden lay.

It was dark, so that I lost some time in getting to the door, and when I drew it open and entered the

passage, the silence was as it had been while Rousard slept.

"Someone was trying to get out by the door yonder," he suggested, when we stood on the terrace. "I'll go down the passage and see."

He was absent a short time, and in the interval I looked around. The moon, a little above the horizon, was shining among the trees and bushes, and casting long dark shadows. Some of the leaves, which trembled in the breeze, sent back silver glintings as the pale light fell upon them. One could hear the croaking of the frogs, the loud, monotonous hoot of the brown owl, and the churning note of the night-jar as it swept among the trees. But nothing living could be seen.

"'Twas as I said, monsieur," Rousard called back. "The chains are down, and one of the bars removed. If you will go in and sleep, I will keep watch here. When daylight comes I will wake you, and we may begin our search afresh."

Nothing would please him, before I turned into the room for my rest, but to open the door and look out on the forest through which we had ridden the day before. The bit of open ground was so lighted by the moon that if a rabbit had scuttled by we should have seen it. The trees stood weirdly in the silver light, but behind them was an impenetrable blackness. The sounds of Nature could be heard, and the low rustle of the trees in the slight breeze that moved among them; but nothing to tell of men or women stirring. Not satisfied with the quietness, Rousard left the threshold while I stood in the open doorway, and crept along under the shadow of the house and

wall to the right, to see if anyone was in hiding, and waiting for the door to be opened. Coming back, he went past me in the other direction, returned after a short absence, and re-entering, silently fastened the door, and stood on guard.



CHAPTER XVII

THE COMTESSE ANGRY

THE search was renewed when morning came, but it was altogether useless. Nothing in the mansion, and nothing in the garden, gave token of any hiding-place. Passing through a doorway in the wall which ran along the bottom of the garden, we traversed the forest, going in all directions until we were famished and weary, but all in vain. There was neither trace of Louise nor of the woman who was probably her jailer. Nothing transpired to give any token of the presence of Father Calvisson, or his supposed colleague in this abduction, M. de l'Eperon.

Had it not been for the finding of the ruby ring, I should have concluded that the woman's presence in the garden was nothing more than a coincidence. It was the discovery of the jewel which convinced me that she had played some part in the disappearance of Louise, for if the maiden for whom we sought had not been on the steps, how did the ring get there?

The whole matter was an impenetrable mystery.

We returned to the house for food, and then renewed our search, prosecuting it until nearly nightfall.

The want of success compelled us reluctantly to give up all hope of finding Louise, and ride to the Château de Neure, to learn whether the Marquise de

Lauzun had been more fortunate. My first glance at her face, when I met her in the hall, convinced me that she knew nothing.

There was no alternative but to return to Paris on the following morning, to make inquiries there. It was just possible that Louise had suspected mischief, and turned back before she could be waylaid; so that when I neared the capital, my hope grew stronger that I might find her in my cousin's home.

Nothing came of our inquiries at the *auberges* and *hôtelleries* on the way. There was no trace of Louise having passed, none of the woman whom we suspected, none of the Curé, none of M. de l'Eperon. Had Louise disappeared during the night, one could have understood the passing of a party in the darkness; but she started in the broad daylight, when the road had scores of packmen on it, and when it was difficult to go past the *auberges* which were frequented by the common wayfarers without being seen. A woman was crossing the road at a lonely spot, going to a well, and we questioned her.

"Such a lady did not go by, monsieur. I sat at the door the whole of the morning, plying my spinning-wheel, and saw all who went by—messengers to and from Marly, packmen and pedlars, but none such as you describe; at all events, Mademoiselle de St. André was not this way, for I know the beautiful lady well."

When I entered the house of my cousin, the Comtesse, things were going on very much as usual. A dandy stood upon the steps which led into the street, chucking the chin of a wench who was returning from some errand, while another was inside,

bandying words with the old serving-man who refused to admit him into his mistress's boudoir, since she had given the word that she was not to be disturbed. The Abbé de Mornay, who was the Comtesse's father confessor, had come to see her, and was contentedly awaiting her pleasure, sitting, meanwhile, on a velvet-covered stool, and busy with his breviary, oblivious to the wrangle between the two men close by. Some sedan-chairmen were in the street, waiting my cousin's coming, ready to return if they were not wanted, and laughing with the maid who had taken out a message to them.

Too anxious to take much notice of these everyday matters, I walked across the marbled floor, and passing behind the stairs, tapped on the door of my cousin's boudoir. She called out "Enter!" thinking, I suppose, that it was one of the household. I was about to go in when Burgot came after me, unceremoniously leaving the man with whom he had been wrangling, and hastening after me to say that the Comtesse must not be disturbed.

"'Tis too late, Burgot. My cousin has called to me to enter;" and with that I walked into the Comtesse's private room, the man standing in perplexity, and debating with himself whether he should tell his mistress that he had sought to preserve her privacy.

She was seated at an open bureau, busied with some papers she was turning over hurriedly, as they lay in confusion in one of the drawers. This occupation so absorbed her that she did not turn to see who entered, but she looked round quickly when I spoke.

I had expected a smile, but she gazed at me crossly.

"I thought to receive courtesy from you, Fulcran,

and not rudeness!" she exclaimed, taking me aback by this unlooked-for greeting. She went on with characteristic impetuosity :

"You promised to come to my dance, and were ill-mannered enough not merely to stay away, but not so much as to send me a word expressive either of your inability or your unwillingness to come. What if Louise could not be there? You need not have been wanting in good manners. A lackey, even, would have sent to say that he could not come, if one of his friends had invited him out. But you are so absorbed in your calf-love for this *débutante* that your best friends are no longer worthy of consideration. I am ashamed of you, Fulcran!"

She was so incensed that she turned her back upon me, and began to move the hands of the handsome timepiece on a bracket above the bureau.

Until then I had no chance of saying a word, but crossing the floor quickly, and standing at her side, I spoke the words that came first :

"Do you not know of Louise?"

"I know nothing of her! How could I, since she is gone to the Château de Neure?" she answered indignantly, turning her back on me afresh, and showing how deeply I had offended her.

"Then I have bad news for you, cousin," I cried ; "Louise has disappeared!"

That brought her face to face with me on the instant.

"What do you mean, Fulcran?"

The anger was gone, and the face grew pale. A startled look came into her eyes, while she took my hand in hers impulsively. Her lips parted with

horror when I spoke of what I had seen while searching the forest mansion. Her thought coincided with my own when I showed her the ruby ring, and told her where I had found it. Louise must have been carried there, and the ring was dropped while she was taken down the terrace steps to some hiding-place in the garden.

“Concerning the woman with the twisted mouth, Fulcran, tell me what she was like.”

As soon as I had described the creature who had passed me while I looked over the garden wall, the Comtesse said :

“I know her ! She is Margot Cartier, an abandoned woman who lives in a hovel by the Tower of Jeansans-Peur. But the thing seems incredible, cousin,” she went on. “De l’Eperon is a profligate, but he would surely have naught to do with such a woman ; and as for the Curé, ’tis impossible that he would associate with a courtesan of her type. Think of it ! It would be an outrage on decency, an unpardonable degradation of the sacred office.”

“Nevertheless, Catherine, you saw him with her in the meadow when we were on the barge. I remember your criticism of these same two men, the courtier and the priest. And mark what happened within so short a time. The priest wrote the letter which drew Louise away from you—you will have no doubt of that when I place the two letters side by side for your perusal. More than that, I saw the woman, Margot Cartier, in the garden, and this ring, too, was there. Does it not look like a conspiracy in which these three have played their parts ? ”

There was no gainsaying this, and we stood face

to face, anxious, but unable to devise any scheme whereby we might regain possession of Louise, and spoil the intrigue against her. The King was unapproachable; Madame de Maintenon equally so. Marly was as inaccessible as if it had been surrounded by massive walls, with drawbridge, portcullis, and moat. One dared not venture even to send a message into the groves where His Majesty was keeping holiday. As for the Dauphin, he was equally impossible. He cared only to hear mass at the Oratory, and to see the grisettes and fishwives curtseying to him when he rode along the streets. He would have listened if I had appealed to him, would have made all sorts of promises; and there, so far as he was concerned, the matter would have ended.

Our interview was broken in upon by the untimely arrival of Monseigneur, and since the Archbishop could not be denied admission, I turned away reluctantly, having first promised to come to the Comtesse at nightfall, when there were to be some private theatricals in her salon.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN THE "CUL DE SAC"

THE day was spent in fruitless search for some information concerning the whereabouts of Louise, or any of those whom I suspected of having had some share in her abduction. Leaving Rousard at my lodgings, I went to the Tower of Jean-sans-Peur, to make it the starting-place of my inquiries for Margot Cartier. I asked a fishwife if she knew the woman, and her retort was a ready one :

"Ask me if I know the devil!" Looking me up and down, she added : "What does one of your rank want with such a creature; monsieur?"

The expression upon her face was one of some surprise. She evidently considered that none who were respectable could have dealings with the abandoned creature for whom I was inquiring.

"I do not know her, mistress ; but it is important that I should find her, since she can give me valuable information."

"Then take the first turning on the right ; 'tis a *cul de sac* close by a butcher's shop, and she dwells there when she is at home."

The woman's contempt for Cartier was so supreme that she spat on the ground, as if the very talk about her was nauseating.

The Frown of Majesty

The butcher was none the less surprised when I made my inquiry of him. He had been bawling out the merits and prices of meat while slicing a piece of mutton when I accosted him; and tossing the knife on the block, he stood, hands on hips, to hear what I had to say.

"She is not often asked for by such as you, monsieur," was the answer to my question.

"Perhaps not, my good fellow, but it is necessary that I should see her."

It was no business of his, and he said so; but he stared at me curiously, as if by his looks he would worm out my motive for finding her. Then pointing to the house with his greasy forefinger, he nodded me farewell, picked up his knife, and went on with the task I had interrupted.

The street in which I made these inquiries was long and narrow, but crowded with citizens in their work-day clothes, who jostled the richly-dressed gallants that were making their morning calls. Some of these latter, who knew me, wondered to see me talking with such a man as the butcher, and did not forbear a joke at my expense when they saw me *tête-à-tête* with the fishwife. I turned their banter aside with a forced laugh, and walked down the Allée de Couvée.

It was crowded with children, some of whom were crawling about amid the offal and filth, naked as when they were born, screaming and squalling, cursing and kicking, in imitation of their elders, who were drinking at the *auberge*, half-way down the narrow *cul de sac*. It was all a revelation to me, for I had never witnessed such squalor and foulness. It had been talked

of by the ladies and gallants, some of whom freely sprinkled their kerchiefs with rose-water, and held it to their faces, as if they felt that the recounting of what they had seen or heard of contaminated the air of the room in which they chanced to be. In the salons of the wealthy, the realities of life, as they affected the people, were unknown—apocryphal. In such resorts were to be found none but brilliant, prosperous, and dazzling ones, "well fed, well dressed, and well amused," as I once heard Madame de Sévigné say. Under such conditions life was a delightful and enjoyable thing.

But here, in the *cul de sac*! It was a hot-bed of vice. Beggars, courtesans, grisettes, creatures of both sexes who had no appetite for anything but cruelty, and pedlars who replenished their baskets by robbery, were there. So were people who had seen better days, but had been brought down, in spite of honest effort, to indigence, and to such an environment. They knew nothing of country air and sun, green meadows and pleasant odours, now that they had come hither. Fate showed in their case how viciously she can deal with those whom her heartless sister Misfortune has flouted, as if they had not already received the full measure of stripes, and more besides.

The alley was infamous in every way. The stench from the open gutter down the centre, the garbage which lay about in one's path, ready to slip the feet from beneath the unwary, the foul air that came out of the houses, the doors of which, on either side, one could almost touch by stretching the arms wide open, made the whole place a plague centre, from whence

might spread a contagion that would invade mansion and palace, regardless of persons.

My intrusion into this alley, sacred, one might say, to the poor and lawless, created some commotion. Two men who were fighting with knives stopped to look at me. Children who were scooping up the mud they had made with dust and water held up handfuls, and seemed to wait for the word to bespatter my rich dress, while some of the loungers cast greedy looks at the gold buttons on my coat. The women, dirty and dragged, came to the doors, and stood on the steps with their bare arms akimbo, commenting on my face and figure. Some of the beggars who had been drinking and laughing drew near, and made whining pleas for help.

The position was not a pleasant one. The two who had been in murderous conflict forewent their quarrel, and with a word to their supporters, who were quite as brutalised, they drew somewhat nearer. One of them, a big fellow, a head taller than myself, became the spokesman of the alley, and demanded my business. There was no reason why I should resent the inquiry, and I answered coolly :

“I want Margot Cartier.”

“You?”

The man spoke as if it were a miracle that anyone of my rank could wish to say aught to one of their community. But I responded with a grave question :

“Why not?”

“We do not want such as you down here,” said he, and the knife, wet with the blood he had drawn from his antagonist’s arm, seemed to move menacingly.

"But I have business with her," I said, with as little haughtiness as possible, turning my back on the man to speak with a woman close by.

"Can you tell me where Margot Cartier dwells?"

"If I choose to do so," came the answer, with an insolent gesture, assumed, without a doubt, and evidently designed to cover a certain timidity in the presence of her semi-savage neighbours.

"Do not tell him, Coulon!" cried the man with the knife.

"Why not, Mongorge?" asked the woman, putting on some effrontery.

"Because I dare you! That's why!" said the fellow.

The look on his face cowed her, for she drew back, and walked down the alley to get out of harm's way.

I looked round hastily, feeling that it was better to return to the street along which the people passed without so much as a glance down the *cul de sac*, or, if any chanced to loiter, only to indulge in the wonder why a gallant could be so mad as to venture into such a death-trap. The glance convinced me that it was well to waste no time. The others were closing in about me; the children held up their mud in readiness to throw it; some of the women were encouraging the men to spoil the face of the dandy; others did as Coulon had done, and disappeared, to avoid being mixed up in the fray that was certainly coming. I saw all this, and wished myself safely in the street again.

But what affected me most was the glimpse of a face in the window of the house opposite. Judging from the dress, it was that of a priest, standing well

back in the room, the features barely visible, but the body somewhat bent, as if the Churchman peered at me. Was it Father Calvisson? Had it not been for my immediate danger, I should have put my face against the grimy glass to satisfy myself as to the man's identity, but a snatch at my jewelled garter made me turn quickly, and face the people who were blocking up the passage. I kicked the fellow who had gone on his knees to get at my buckle, and he rolled over with a howl, holding his face with his filthy hands.

It was the signal for an outburst. Mongorge made a dash at my throat, his knife flashing as he held it back to strike; but he tripped and fell across the man who had already tumbled.

By this time my rapier was out, and it had such an ugly look that the others who had been crowding round, meaning to clutch at my jewels, dropped back out of reach of the long, straight, thin, and narrow blade of Solingen steel. They formed a semi-circle before me, leaving me with my back to the wall, while they considered how they could punish me for my temerity in intruding on their domain, or get such booty as my ornaments and purse would provide. In such a case, where it would be "first come, first served," the men waited their opportunity to push past their fellows, and make the first snatch. The children, mixed up with their elders, threw the mud they had been making. Some of it found lodgment on my velvet coat, but mostly it splashed on the wall and window near which I stood.

The priest made no effort to allay the tumult, but some of the women called on the men from the door-

steps to let me alone, and suffer me to go my way. Three or four went so far as to cuff the children, or their husbands, who possibly held them in wholesome fear, for one or two of the men slunk away from the *mêlée*, to get out of reach of the tongues and blows of these viragoes. One woman, seeing the second fighter about to creep up at my side and strike at me, came behind him, and wrenched the murderous-looking weapon from his hand. He turned upon her and battered at her face so savagely that my blood boiled. I could not refrain from running my rapier through his arm as he brought it back to strike the woman more freely. He swung round with an oath, and I expected him to leap upon me; but he had no wish to spit himself upon that long blade which was in readiness.

Gradually I worked my way up the alley, those to my right drawing back as I moved towards them, since I made a rapier thrust from time to time. I had passed three or four doors in this fashion when Mongorge, having picked himself up and kicked three or four mud-throwing children out of his way, came at me on my left with a rush. A woman in the open doorway before which I chanced to be standing at the moment, gave me a word of warning. It was Coulon. None saw her speak, for with her arms folded, she leaned against the doorpost, apparently without any concern as to the issue of the contest.

"Look to your left, monsieur. Kill him, the devil!" she said, in an undertone.

The fellow came on. Stepping back quickly, so that I stood in the doorway beside the woman, I thrust out my foot. Mongorge fell over it heavily,

and his head striking against the sharp corner of the doorpost, he rolled over on the stones, and lay still and unconscious.

"Run your rapier into him, monsieur!" exclaimed Coulon, in the same low tone. "He is the devil himself—a murderer!" she added, as passionately as she dared without attracting attention.

A woman against whose feet he fell kicked the ruffian surreptitiously, and more than one smile of satisfaction flitted across the faces of some of those who looked at him.

I made no reply to her who stood at my side, but seeing that all eyes were on the fallen rogue, I cleared a path for myself, such as blocked my way falling back before my threatening weapon, which had already drawn blood.

When I reached the street I saw the butcher. He had been watching the affray, and nodded approvingly as I emerged from the *cul de sac*.

"'Tis mad work for such as you to go there, monsieur," he ventured to say, while I stood for a moment or two to return my rapier to its sheath, and wipe off the filth with which the children had bespattered me. Seeing this, he asked me to go into his shop and put myself tidy. His wife, who had been looking down the alley at her husband's side, took me into the room behind, and cleansed my clothes as far as it was possible.

"I do not know what business you had with Margot Cartier," said she, for her husband had told her of my inquiry for the virago. "She is best kept at a distance, monsieur. She has a dreadful tongue, is lewd, cruel, quarrelsome—everything that is bad."

"I do not know her," I remarked, for the woman seemed concerned, wondering what one of my rank could want with her. "But it is necessary that I should see her, since she can save a lady from trouble if she will."

"She will not," was the emphatic rejoinder. "She would rather see one suffer than do aught to spare her, especially if she be a lady of rank. But you could not have found her down there. She went away two or three days ago, and one of the women who came here for some meat was wondering what had become of her."

"Why did you not tell me, Adele?" cried the butcher, somewhat reproachfully. "I might have told monsieur, and spared him a fruitless and risky errand."

"I gave it no thought, Pierre."

"Did a priest go down at any time?" I asked, curious to know whether I had really seen Calvisson in the alley.

"I saw one turn the corner an hour ago," the butcher replied. "Who it was I do not know, for the cowl was drawn over his face; and more than that, I was busy serving a customer."

CHAPTER XIX

THE CHEVALIER'S BALCONY

THE King's reign had seen the advent of much that was covering his reign with glory—much that gave warrant to the title of *Grand Monarque*. He stimulated many industries, and encouraged the progress of science, letters, and art, and many another monument testified to his public spirit. But he never succeeded in providing an efficient police, any more than he knew how to render the capital wholesome and clean. Consequently, Rousard followed me unbidden when I started at nightfall to visit the Chevalier de Goudrin. It was common knowledge that the streets were never safe after the sunset angelus, and he knew that alone I should run considerable risk, whereas, with his companionship, few would venture to molest me.

When we reached the house in which the Chevalier lodged, the concierge told me that he was not in, but would return shortly.

Mounting the dimly-lighted stairs to reach the apartments where I would await his return, I entered a richly-furnished room. I have heard it said that Louis the Fourteenth's reign was a triumph of gilded wood; and here was ample evidence of it. Two high-backed arm-chairs, richly carved, a couch covered

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with blue velvet, like everything else in the suite, a gorgeous cabinet, a closed bureau, a bookcase and monumental armoires with pilasters and arched headings, with other pieces of costly furniture, all of gilded wood, were in the spacious chamber, and, seen by the light of hanging lamps, were as dazzling as anything to be met with in the King's palace.

But I had been here many times, so that it was not new to me, and while Rousard waited on the landing outside, I stepped on to the balcony at the open window to breathe some of the cool air from the river, which swept along the end of the garden. There were sun-curtains about this projecting gallery, so that I could not be seen if any were on the balconies of other houses to right and left unless I drew back the hangings.

It was growing dark. Here and there a light could be seen on the river, and at intervals came the call of boatmen. Once there was a scream, as of someone in pain—no unusual night-sound on that part of the Seine, which was within the city boundaries. On the river, as in the streets, a man found safety in his own caution or the promptness of his blows.

There were other sounds in the summer evening air. The houses in this quarter were occupied by men and women of high degree who followed the Court, and from one open window and another came sounds of laughter, a song, the strains of music which accompanied the minuet, the Giga, or any other dance which fell in with the fancy of the company. But after a while I forgot them all in listening to something which absorbed my whole attention.

To my right, and outside the window of the house next to the Chevalier's, was a handsome balcony, bathed in light that poured through the open window to which it was attached. It was empty for some time after I had stepped into the open air, but presently I heard a voice, and looking in that direction through the slightly parted curtains, I saw a cavalier appear. The light fell on his face, and I knew him—M. de l'Eperon. He took his stand at the corner, and leaned indolently against the ornamental ironwork which railed the gallery. A few moments later he was joined by one whose voice I had not yet heard; but as the new-comer stepped into the open air, he spoke, and I knew at once that he was Father Calvisson. He was objecting to carrying on his conversation out of doors.

"'Tis too hot, father," said De l'Eperon, "and we can talk as privately here."

He went on without a pause to make an assertion which not only roused my curiosity, but set my heart beating.

"I fear that Margot Cartier has fooled us."

"I do not fear it; I know it," replied the Curé angrily. "She was to carry Mademoiselle de St. André to a house in Chatillon, but when I went there this morning, neither mademoiselle nor Cartier had been near the place."

De l'Eperon broke in sharply on the grumbling words of the priest.

"Chatillon was never mentioned between us, father. The woman was to see that the lady was waylaid, and taken to a lonely mansion in the forest of Marly—"

"I know that," the Curé interrupted; "but when I thought matters over, I feared that she would be too near to her cousin, and our plans be in some way frustrated."

Careless as to whether he gave offence or not, De l'Eperon retorted savagely :

"You had no right to change our plans without consulting me. I told you plainly that if we got her to the haunted mansion, the horrors there would frighten her into a promise to marry me. Then I should have paid you down the ten thousand pistoles I promised you. Now, curse you—"

His passion rendered him regardless of the fact that priests could not well be cursed with impunity. He was going on to say more, but he stopped on the instant, when the Curé swung round and faced him. There was a ring of resentment in Calvisson's words :

"My son, you forget !"

De l'Eperon realised his folly. Men who wanted to curry favour with the King had not yet learned defiance to the priests, for they knew full well that His Majesty was little better than the tool of the Jesuits. It was common knowledge that Louis called himself lord of the persons and wills of his people; but every man and woman at Court knew that his favourite instruments—the Jesuits—ruled over his conscience, and more or less directly had their own way in everything. Calvisson had but to go to Père la Chaise, the King's confessor, and De l'Eperon from that hour would be a social outcast without appeal; and if the Curé pressed his advantage and revenge, a victim at the galleys,

"Forgive me, father," said the courtier, cooling down on the instant. "My passion got the better of me, but you should know best."

"Had some been so spoken to, my son, it would have gone hard with you," the Curé observed.

"I know it, father. I am thankful I have to deal with you, and not with others. You must remember my passionate nature."

"I do. Some day it will be your undoing."

It was marvellous how men with the spirit of De l'Eperon could bend to such priests as this Calvisson, and I thought so during that altercation. But while listening, I remembered my own jeopardy. My lease of liberty was a short one. I had withstood the Curé, and he only waited to have his way with the woman I loved, and for the return of the King from Marly. What was my life worth after that? In my eagerness to find Louise I had partially forgotten my own peril, but the knowledge of De l'Eperon's yielding brought it all back with overwhelming force, and set me thinking as to whether I should abide in Paris to see the King, or go in search of Louise, and run all risks.

I decided on the latter course, for who could tell what experiences the missing one was undergoing while in the keeping of Margot Cartier?

The two men now discussed the matter afresh.

"Why has not Cartier taken mademoiselle to Chatillon, father?"

"I cannot think, unless she has been taking our money, and is working for another who pays her better."

An oath escaped De l'Eperon's lips, and he

brought down his hand heavily on the ironwork, so that it shook, and gave forth a low, metallic ring.

"If it be so, father, there is no money for you."

"And none for you," the other interrupted, giving the retort in an angry tone.

"*Mon Dieu!* I know it! And if I lose I am ruined!"

I do not suppose that many among all the gallants of the capital would have expended much regret on learning of De l'Eperon's ruin, for he was no favourite. Some fraternised with him, and many of such were men and women of the highest rank; but their fraternity only lasted so long as he could serve them. They would ignore him the moment their purposes had been achieved. One talks of honour among thieves, but the honour is non-existent; the real thing is expediency, nothing more. And De l'Eperon knew that.

"The greater reason why you should strain every nerve to find her," said the Curé, when his companion expressed his fear.

"But how can we start? Where are we likely to find her?" came the sharp interrogations.

"I cannot say. As I have told you, mademoiselle is not at Chatillon. I know for a certainty that she is not at the Château de Neure, and has not been there, for one of the servants has sent me word that she has not arrived; indeed, he added that the Vicomte de la Tour had been to see the Marquise de Lauzun, and that she is scouring the country to find her. It is even said that she talks of running the risk of censure, and of intruding on the privacy of Marly,

appealing either to the King or to Madame de Maintenon."

"And what of the Vicomte?" asked De l'Eperon.

"I know nothing of his whereabouts. He must be searching for her, having found out something of this attempt at abduction."

For some reason he kept back the knowledge of my adventure in the *cul de sac*, and waited to hear what the other had to say.

"Cannot you get him out of the way? We agreed to accuse him of Huguenotism, so that I might have his estate conferred on me, seeing that the King owes me some acknowledgment for service rendered."

"I cannot proceed until the King returns."

"And what of Cartier?"

"I have been to the Allée de Couvée, and she disappeared a day or two ago," was the priest's reply.

There was a prolonged silence, and De l'Eperon was the first to break it.

"We must make sure of mademoiselle, and leave M. le Vicomte alone until then. There is no hurry so far as he is concerned, and we can easily deal with him when we have settled this matter satisfactorily."

The Curé grumbled somewhat at the proposed delay, but acquiesced. What more they said I did not hear, for they went indoors in accordance with De l'Eperon's suggestion that they should take some wine before his expected company arrived.

I reflected as I leaned over the balcony railings, and looked out on the dark night. I had discovered this conspiracy against myself. It was to be a repetition of the scheme of which I had been re-



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minded when talking to Father Calvisson in the palace corridor, whereby Comte de Boissergent had obtained the estates of Vicomte d'Urban, who, for aught one knew, was at the galleys. It was something to know that ; and something, also, to know that I was to go free so long as Louise was unheard of. But after that ? What matter, so long as I found her ? The first free moment after such a fortunate event, I would wait upon the King.

CHAPTER XX

MANSART, THE BUTCHER

HE who knows what absolute bewilderment is will imagine my position when I left the house of the Chevalier de Goudrin. My bewilderment begot the sense of helplessness, and from that I passed to despair. By the time I reached my own rooms I had given up all hope of ever finding Louise, for I had not one shred of information as to her whereabouts, and nothing save the ring which would serve as a clue. As I have shown, I had endeavoured to work on that, but nothing came of it. The only suggestion that I could set any store by, which came after long thought, was to find Margot Cartier, and bribe her to divulge what she knew.

But she was as unapproachable as Louise. Calvisson, on his own confession, had been to the Allée de Couvée, and found no trace of the virago. His priest's cloak had been some sort of safeguard for him, so that he was able to venture among the vagabonds of the *cul de sac* without risk, whereas to me it would be tantamount to suicide to go thither, especially after my recent experience.

I thought at one time of going to the Governor of the city, and telling him what had transpired, ask him to send some men to search the houses in the

alley for Margot Cartier, or to obtain some definite information as to where she was hiding. The thought of difficulties which I will not here recount changed my purpose.

I was under promise to go to the house of my cousin, the Comtesse, and not caring to offend her a second time, I dressed and went thither, covering my rich clothing with a long, dark-coloured cloak. Rousard bore me company as usual, and when I entered the salon, joined the lackeys, who, like him, had escorted their masters or ladies. The hostess greeted me on my arrival, and, drawing me aside, asked eagerly for news. I had none to give her, beyond what I have already written here.

"Be careful, Fulcran," said she anxiously, on hearing of the risk I had run while in the Allée de Couvée.

"Don't worry, cousin! The real trouble is—how am I to get some clue as to Louise's whereabouts?"

"*Mon Dieu!*" she exclaimed, her bright eyes glistening with tears; "if I could only throw out a suggestion, but I cannot."

The theatricals went on their brilliant way, as if none present that night had any care. The salon was full of men and women who spent their lives at receptions, entertainments, and pageants, and were brimful of high spirits, careful only for amusements and self-indulgence. The frivolous, shallow-brained women among whom I sat irritated me, and one and another added to my irritation by offering me money for my thoughts, or made me an object of banter because of my moodiness. Now and again I roused myself to attention, then they playfully patted me

with their fans, talking to me when I devoutly wished they would listen to Du Fort, who was singing on the stage at the end of the decorated chamber.

They added to my torment by asking how *Maiselle de St. André* was? whether the talk in the salons was correct that she and I were to be married, and if so, whether we should withdraw from Court, and vegetate at the *Château de Tour*, or reside permanently in Paris?

Another mischievously asked if there was any truth in the report that I was captivated by the charms of a certain fishwife, whose stall was near to the Tower of *Jean-sans-Peur*? I had been seen talking to the jade on very friendly terms, the beauty declared, with a toss of the head, as if she wondered how I could have dealings with the *canaille*.

I wished these brainless chatterers farther, with their coquetry and caprice, wounding me as they were doing—unwittingly, of course—by making Louise the butt of their pleasantries. Had they known of her disappearance they would have changed their tone, and pestered me with inquiries; but the *Comtesse* had contented herself with telling the *grandes dames* of the letter which called her away to the *Château de Neure*, and had said nothing concerning the fraud which had been practised. She thought it best to be silent a while, and I agreed.

I sat there for one long hour, wishing for Gyges' ring, so that I might have become invisible; then my neighbours would have turned their wit on each other, leaving me to my own thoughts. When an opportunity offered I left the salon, and putting on my cloak, went into the street. What object I had

in view I cannot say. I do not think I had any other than to get away from the chatter of the women who sat near me.

Where I wandered I do not remember ; but after a while I turned of set purpose to the Tower of Jean-sans-Peur, resolved to run all risks, and once more seek for information concerning the whereabouts of Margot Cartier. As fortune would have it, Pierre Mansart, the butcher, whose acquaintance I had made that same day, was standing at his shop door talking to someone, but when he saw me he bade the other a curt good-night, and came forward to greet me.

"Pardon my presumption, monsieur," he exclaimed, "but I fear you are going to run the risk again, and enter the alley!"

He had not misjudged my intention, for a moment later I should have turned the corner. I answered him readily :

"'Tis true, my good fellow, for the finding of that woman Cartier is a matter of life and death."

"But she is not there, monsieur. Coulon, one of the women who live down there, was here just before I shut the shop door, and we got to talking about you. I chanced to mention your desire to see Cartier, and she shook her head, wondering that one of your station should have dealings with such a creature."

"Coulon? That was the woman to whom I was speaking. Perhaps she will know something of her whereabouts?"

"I doubt it," said Mansart, shaking his head. "Cartier lodges in her house, but keeps her counsel as to her movements. Moreover, how would you get

at Coulon? The Allée de Couvée is a den of wickedness at any time, and doubly so after nightfall. Murder is no uncommon thing there. You went away this afternoon, and Mongorge, the fellow who tried to get at you with his knife, when he came back to consciousness and saw that you had escaped, vowed that he would draw blood from someone. He caught sight of his antagonist in the fight you interrupted, and rushing at him unawares, drove his knife into him three or four times before anyone could interfere. Coulon tells me that Beaté is not likely to see daybreak."

"My friend," said I, when he had finished, "the life of a lady of rank is in jeopardy. I would like to see Coulon, if it were possible!"

The butcher stood silent, with folded arms, holding his chin with one of his hands, as if thinking deeply. He did not even return the greeting of a belated citizen who passed by, nor did he answer his wife's call from within.

"I might get you in at her window, which overlooks my garden," said he presently.

I jumped at the proposal, for, without any real reason, I had a conviction that the woman could tell me something. At all events, I was not disposed to return to my lodgings without a strenuous attempt to interview her.

I turned to follow Mansart into the shop, and saw a burly fellow a pace or two from my elbow. The man's face was in the shade, but the figure was too familiar to be mistaken.

"Is it Rousard?" I asked.

"Yes, monsieur."

"Why are you here?"

He was not disturbed at the testiness in my tone, but answered frankly:

"I came to see that none molested my master."

"Then stay here until I return."

His answer came instantly:

"Nay, monsieur. Pardon me, but I overheard what you said to this man, and since it is your purpose to have dealings with people in the *cul de sac*, I intend to be near you, to see that you come to no hurt."

There was no disrespect, yet I could not but observe the resolution in his tone, which showed that he would be difficult to shake off. In a sense I was annoyed; on the other hand, I could not fail to appreciate the fellow's fidelity. My safety was his first care; his own jeopardy was not considered.

"'Tis kind, Rousard," I answered; and without waiting for any invitation, he followed closely, almost brushing against me when I stepped over the threshold, as if he expected that Mansart might shut the door upon him. The butcher, however, thought it wise that my man should accompany me; for he went so far as to advise Rousard not to let me out of sight.

CHAPTER XXI

THE OPEN WINDOW

MANSART'S garden was in darkness when we passed into it in his company. To the left were other gardens, all void of any sign of life, save in one, to which some *convives* had come, quitting the house to breathe the cooler air. A flaming lamp showed us a magnificent cedar tree, the great branches of which, like outstretched arms, formed a black canopy over the group of men and women who sat about a table and talked together. The dwellers of neighbouring houses had gone to bed, for window after window was without light.

On the right, the backs of the houses of one side of the Allée de Couvée formed a wall to Mansart's garden. The people dwelling there were night birds, for late as it was, nearly every room had a light in it. Some of the windows were open because the night was warm, and the air of those fever dens stifling, so that much of what was said came to our ears.

Bad as it all was in the daytime, the night aspect of the *cul de sac* was infinitely more distasteful. The hum of city life had died away, and most of the citizens were sleeping off their weariness; but here wickedness was running riot. It was shame to know that men and women could talk so foully, or sing

such songs as fell upon our ears at that midnight hour. Precious as land was in Paris, I was surprised to find that Mansart's garden was so long. There was no wall between it and the houses of the Allée de Couvée, so that while we passed slowly among the fruit trees and bushes, we could look into some of the lower rooms. In one some were gambling, and squabbling over their paltry gains and losses. In another, three women drank, slowly and quietly, as if they had come together for that purpose. A fourth sat with her head buried in her bare arms upon the table. Yet farther down the garden we looked into a dimly-lighted chamber where lay a woman, all alone, nearly naked, clutching wildly at times at the wood-work of the bedstead. Suddenly she leapt upon the floor with a wild cry, flung up her hands with a gesture of despair, then fell across the bed, and lay still. One could not but shudder alike at the sight and the cry. We waited a while, but none heeded her scream, nor entered the room.

At another spot we saw an open window, and halting among the bushes, could see without being seen. Mongorge was seated at a table, and facing the garden. His only companion was a woman, about whose waist he had thrown an arm. In the hand that was free he held a string of diamonds, which scintillated as they moved, and caught the light from a lamp hanging on the filthy wall. I saw the woman's face when she looked up to watch the dice-box in her hands. It was Coulon's.

She was beautifully dressed, in striking contrast to the rags she wore when I saw her in the afternoon. Seen from where we stood, she seemed to be in rose-

coloured silk, adorned with French point lace. The short sleeves and full petticoats gave her the appearance of a lady of fashion, such as one might expect to see at Court, or in the houses of the noble. Her shoulders—the colour of old ivory, from want of cleansing—were bare, and on her breast was a golden pendant with a device wrought in precious stones which flashed with every breath she drew.

Mansart exclaimed in wonder :

“’Tis Coulon! To think of that drab in such attire! What fool has squandered his wealth on her?”

In her love for gaming—or for some other purpose—she had set aside her aversion for Mongorge. She had bid me kill him; but women in her station quarrelled and made friends again in a short space of time.

She gazed at the squares of ivory, collected them, and threw again. Pointing at the dice with her forefinger, and with an eagerness that was startling, she sprang to her feet, clapped her hands, and cried :

“Mine! Give them to me, Mongorge!”

Without a doubt the fellow had thought to win the jewels for himself, for his look of triumph changed, and he held the diamonds out of Coulon’s reach.

“Nay, ’twas not a fair throw,” he answered.

“It was! They are mine!” the woman screamed.

“Throw again, you drunken jade,” shouted Mongorge savagely. “You cheated.”

“I did not!” retorted Coulon, snatching at the precious stones. “They are mine! I won them! Give them to me!”

Mongorge still held them out of the woman's reach, but she made an unexpected spring upon his knees, then tore the diamonds from his hands, breaking the silken cord on which they were strung, so that some of them fell to the floor, sparkling like coloured lightning as they dropped.

The man gazed at the remnants for a moment or two, then rose to his feet, the woman, who had remained on his knees, falling heavily to the floor. She rose at once, however, and danced before him, clutching the gems, and shrieking :

"I have some of them! Give me the others, Mongorge! They are mine! I won them! They are mine!"

Mongorge muttered something between his teeth, but held her at arm's length, when Coulon went forward to snatch at his hand. Again and again she sought to get at her prize, heedless of her dress, which was torn in the struggle, and finally she struck at the man's face in anger. He returned the blow, and followed with another. The second blow seemed to rouse his savage nature, and like a wild beast that has tasted blood, he struck again and again, until the woman fell back from him, seeking to guard her face with her uplifted hands. At last she picked up one of the pewter cups from the table, and was about to throw it at his head ; but seeing her do this, Mongorge, hastily laying his precious handful on the table, rushed at her, snatched the cup from Coulon's hand, and beat her on her body with it till she cried for mercy. But he did not desist until she fell back against the open window.

We did not dare to interfere. I wanted to go for-

ward and climb into the room to put an end to the struggle, but Mansart and Rousard held me back, declaring that it was tantamount to suicide to venture.

"They are used to it, monsieur," said the butcher. "To-morrow Coulon will repay every blow with interest."

Mongorge, when he saw the woman at the open window, laughed loudly, as if a thought had come. Tossing the cup across the room, he lifted her in his arms, and without caring for her further cries for mercy, threw her into the garden below. The distance was not great, but she fell on the grass with a heavy thud. She did not move after she had flung out an arm in the helplessness of swift-coming insensibility, but lay there, to all appearance dead.

The ruffian looked out of the window, then leaning on the sill, he laughed.

"Coulon," said he presently, in a mocking tone; but there was no answer. "My sweet, is your bed a soft one?"

While he was there we did not dare to venture from our obscurity to see if the woman lived, lest the fellow should rouse the people of the *cul de sac*, and invade the garden. We had Mansart to think of; for if their anger was stirred they might burn his house about his ears. The *Grand Monarque*, with all his splendour, could not crush out the human vermin, as he called such who dwelt in the alleys of the capital, and the butcher would have found it useless to call for his King's protection.

Mongorge did not wait for more than a minute or two. Going from the window, he went to the table,

picked up the sparkling stones, took the lamp from the wall, searched the floor for such as had fallen in his struggle with the woman, and then chuckling, came and looked into the garden once more.

"Still asleep, my beauty? 'Tis not healthy to lie on the grass o' nights. But there, you know best. Have your own way."

After a wish that Coulon might have pleasant dreams, and bidding her a mocking farewell, he turned from the window, crossed the floor, and passed out at the door, which he slammed behind him.

We went to see if the woman was dead. Kneeling at her side, I put my ear to her face, and found that she was breathing. She moved her arm while I was on my knees, then turned on her side. Seeing us, she raised herself on her elbow.

"Who are you? What did Mongorge do to me? Ah, I remember! Curse him! He tossed me out of the window! But never mind! I shall have my turn! Mansart, hold me. I feel faint. I believe the scoundrel has broken my back."

She fell to the grass again, and moaned, then lay still.

"I will carry her to the house, lest she should die, and that were a pity, for she is the best of the whole nestful of rogues," said Mansart, lifting her in his strong arms. When he did so, Rousard stooped and picked up a slipper with a silver buckle set with precious stones, wrought in a monogram, which, in the darkness, could not be deciphered.


The mystery was this: How did such a woman, poor as the poorest, starving more frequently than

satisfied, so one would think, foul, also, from life in such a filthy place—how did such as she come to be richly clothed and so bejewelled? The less wealthy among the fashionable ladies of France contented themselves with jet ornaments, since they could not afford diamonds. Only the rich wore real gems; but here was a creature from the gutter wearing a dress and jewels such as would content the proudest of the women I had left in the salon of my cousin, the Comtesse.

“Adele!” cried the butcher, when he stumbled up the steps with his heavy load, and entered the room in which his wife was sitting.

Madame Mansart swung round, wondering at her husband’s breathless call. “Great Heaven! what have you there? A lady of rank?” She came forward, and gazed at the woman whom the butcher had laid upon the floor, since her dead weight had tried his strength. “Why, ’tis Coulon! And in such a dress! She, a harlot, a beggar, in silk and gems!”

“Bring her to her senses,” said Mansart, who breathed heavily after bearing his unwonted burden, and gazed at the beaten, bleeding face of the unconscious one. “I will tell you all about it presently.”



CHAPTER XXII

WHAT COULON SAW

TWO or three hours passed before the battered face showed any signs of returning consciousness, and it was broad daylight when Coulon spoke. Even then her words were incoherent, and when left alone for a little while she fell into a deep sleep, from which we did not attempt to rouse her.

The golden pendant about the woman's neck had meanwhile attracted my attention, and after having examined it intently, I became filled with a feverish anxiety. It bore a monogram made up of diamonds, sapphires, and rubies, forming the letters "L. S. A.," These could very well have denoted Louise de St. André, and if so, Coulon was able to throw some light on the whereabouts of the maiden for whom I had been seeking.

Taking the pendant with me, Rousard and I returned to my rooms, where I vainly attempted to sleep for a few hours, proposing later to carry the jewel to the Comtesse, and ask her if she could identify it. She knew it instantly, and expressed her willingness to go with me to Mansart's house to see the dress Coulon wore.

The chairmen who carried her thither looked at each other when my cousin got out of her sedan-chair,

and went with me into the butcher's shop. On entering the room where Coulon had been lying, we found her still asleep, as if making up for the loss of rest during many a night. At the first glance the Comtesse exclaimed:

"'Tis the dress Louise wore when she left me to go to the Château de Neure. It was a new one which she put on to show to me, and when the letter came she did not stay to change, but threw a travelling cloak over it, and went away. To think of that drab putting it upon her filthy body!" she cried in disgust, looking at the sleeper with all the scorn which Court ladies were wont to display for women of Coulon's class. "You must not lose sight of her, Fulcran. She ought to be carried to the Conciergerie, and be made to tell what she knows."

"Nay, 'twere better to keep this matter to ourselves," I answered. "Some money will loosen her tongue, and if I give her sufficient, she may render me valuable assistance in finding Louise."

Catherine swung round impatiently, turning her back on the sleeper.

"A twist of the thumb-screw would suit such a strumpet," said she, anger and scorn in her voice and face. "She will take your money, and lead you a chase, then leave you no wiser than before."

"I think not, cousin. If she knows anything, a few gold pieces will set her tongue going. I will take care to make it worth her while."

"As you will, Fulcran," she answered, after she had turned and gazed at the woman in silence. "It may be so, but I have grave doubts of her telling you anything. Take me home, please."

I walked by the chair and talked to the Comtesse on her way homewards, and parting with her at her door, returned to Mansart, in the hope that Coulon had ended her sleep. She was sitting up when I entered the room, and expressing her wonder at finding herself in the house of the butcher. She had only opened her eyes a few moments before, and was asking what had happened to bring her there.

"I remember," was her response, when she had heard Mansart's explanation; but seeing me enter, she looked surprised, and pointing her finger at me, exclaimed: "'Tis the gallant who was fool enough to enter the alley!"

"True, Coulon. I have to thank you for serving me during the fight," said I.

She lapsed into good-nature at once.

"Mongorge nearly did for you then, monsieur. But what made you come into the Allée de Couvée?"

Mansart and his wife went to the shop, and left me with the woman to do my business how I would.

"Shall I go, monsieur?" asked Rousard; and when I nodded in the affirmative, he sauntered into the street to await my summons.

"Coulon," said I, when we were alone, and wasting no time, "where did you get this?" I held the pendant before her. "And the clothes you wear?"

She looked down at the costly dress with some amusement, then smoothed her dirty hands over her lap to feel the silk. She laughed when she saw me looking at her.

"That's telling, monsieur," she answered, with easy good-nature, which made me think that if I treated her skilfully, I should get at her secret.

"But it is telling that might be worth your while. Suppose I gave you this to tell me?"

I held up a golden pistole, and her eyes gleamed.

"I will tell you if you will give it to me."

"Take it. But I want the truth."

"'Tis the truth I am going to tell you," she cried, adding an oath with a facility which made me stare at her. "I got them from that she-devil, Margot Cartier."

"But she is far away from here," said I.

"She was. She is now."

I looked at her keenly, my heart beating. The thought had come, that if Cartier was in the Allée de Couvée it might be worth while to get some of the city guard into the *cul de sac*, and take her by force—then compel her to divulge what she knew. But the words "She is now" disappointed me. She was far away, doubtless where Louise was hidden. I shuddered when I thought of her being with such a woman, stripped of her rich dress, and robbed of her valuables, perhaps treated with hideous brutality; for how could Cartier do anything that savoured of gentleness?

A sly look came into Coulon's face when she saw my anxiety. She gazed at the piece of gold in her hand, and shook her head.

"Monsieur, I can tell you something, but I won't do it for this paltry coin."

It was to be a matter of bargain, and since I was resolute to find Louise at all costs, I was indifferent on the point of money.

"How much do you want, Coulon?"

She looked me up and down, as if to judge, not of

my resources, but of the probabilities of obtaining a big price. Her fingers fidgeted with the point lace on her bosom, and presently she named the sum.

"A hundred pistoles, monsieur."

"That is a large amount."

"But I know you are anxious to hear what I can tell you," she answered candidly.

I was anxious; sick with dread, in fact, and I dallied no longer.

"Very well. You shall have a hundred pistoles, provided you tell me the story from beginning to end."

Her eyes glistened at the promise of so much wealth.

"When shall I have it?" she asked eagerly.

"When I have proved the truth of your story."

"But I want the money now."

"You shall have ten pistoles when you have told me everything, and a hundred when I have proved that you have kept nothing back," I responded.

"Then listen!" she exclaimed, folding her hands, and suffering them to lie in her lap on the rose-coloured silk. She paused for a few moments, thinking how she could best tell her story.

"Margot Cartier lives in my house—I suppose you know that? Pierre Mansart will have told you?"

I nodded.

"Father Calvisson came to her one night, while she and I were drinking together. He said he wanted to see Margot alone, so I went out of the room; but I listened outside. I heard him say that he wanted her to waylay Mademoiselle de St. André, a beautiful

lady who was visiting the Comtesse du Roure, and carry her away to a place he would tell her of later. He gave her some money, I know, because I heard the chink of gold, and when they had made their plans, he went away.

"Margot would not tell me what the priest wanted with her ; but she did not know that I had heard it all," Coulon added, with a laugh, rubbing her dirty forefinger across her lip, then folding her hands again.

"She was so nasty-tempered that I made up my mind to spoil the game for her. Why should she have so much money, and I none? Who is Margot Cartier? A she-cat, a liar, a drunken drab, the devil's spouse—if ever he married!"

Coulon spoke savagely when she thought of Cartier, just as she had spoken of Mongorge in the alley, when he and the others gathered about me.

"Never mind that, Coulon. I want to hear about mademoiselle."

"Am I not telling you?" she replied sharply. "Do not interrupt me, or I shall give you the story wrongly." She rubbed her lips again, and said: "I want some wine. I am thirsty."

She went on once more, when she had had a draught:

"I followed up Margot Cartier. Wherever she went, I went, taking care she should not see me. I saw her talking to a man one night near a doorway of Notre Dame. I could not see the gallant's face, but I heard what passed between them." She laughed aloud at the thought, but went on again: "Margot told the man that someone—she did not

name Father Calvisson—had arranged with her to carry mademoiselle away, and he offered to double the amount the priest had promised.

“I went after Margot into the haunted forest. She had half-a-dozen men there—Mongorge among them—and when mademoiselle rode along the winding path, they suddenly rushed out, killed the two varlets, and carried away the lady and her maid to a great house among the trees.

“I remember seeing Margot dance when she entered the mansion, as if she had successfully accomplished her purpose. They all went in, Mongorge brushing past the woman, and leading the way down the passage. He entered one of the rooms, but came out trembling, white in the face, and looking scared, as if he had seen a ghost. The door of the house was left wide open, and I followed stealthily, so that I saw all this. The others peeped into the chamber, then drew away in horror, crossing themselves. Mademoiselle, whom they carried, saw what they saw—what I, too, saw when I followed. She screamed dreadfully, and then became silent, as if she had died. Her hand hung helplessly, swinging to and fro, while the carriers and Margot hurried into the open air.

“They passed down some steps into a garden which was in ruin. Walking towards the lower wall, they bore the lady and her unconscious maid among the bushes, and passed out of my sight; but I followed swiftly, heedless of the thorns which scratched me, and the undergrowth which caught my feet, and threw me down. Is that what you want to hear, monsieur?” she asked abruptly.

"Go on," I answered eagerly. "Tell me everything, and do not pause."

She nodded.

"I lost sight of the others when I fell, but presently heard the men cursing at the thorns. By stealthy following I marked their course until they arrived at a hut in the forest, all covered with creepers, and into it they carried the two women.

"I dared not stay any longer lest they should see me. I thought I would return to the hut, if needs be, to discover what came of the scheme which Margot had in hand. Hurrying to the house, I ran down the passage, my heart beating as if it would burst because of that horrible thing I had seen, then out at the door, and into the forest path. I did not halt until I got into the road where a cross was standing. Some packmen were passing, and since they were going my way to Paris, they gave me a lift, and so I got home. I had intended to go back, but could not muster courage. That house was too dreadful a place to enter alone.

"Last night Margot Cartier came home with a bundle, which she placed in her room. After locking the door, she went away again. What was in the bundle? She had never locked the door before; hence, thought I, it must contain something precious. I followed her to the city gate, and seeing her mount a pack-horse and ride away, I returned to the alley.

"My curiosity would not suffer me to lose sight of the closed door, and when Mongorge came in he asked me what I was doing. His eyes glistened when I whispered in his ear. No one was near, so he put his shoulder to Margot's door, and burst it in.

We found the bundle in the chimney, and carrying it into my room, opened it on the table. It contained this dress, and these slippers, the golden pendant, and a string of diamonds. I wanted the jewels, and so did Mongorge ; hence we agreed to play for them, so soon as I had put on the dress. I won the pendant, and then we played for the string of diamonds—”

“I know the rest,” said I, when Coulon put out her hand for the wine-cup.



CHAPTER XXIII

COULON TURNS GUIDE

THE woman's story so far corresponded with what I already knew that I unhesitatingly believed all that she told me. Before an hour had gone I was busy arranging for another journey to the mansion in the forest of Marly, while Madame Mansart gathered such clothing from her wardrobe as would enable Coulon to travel with me without attracting the scandal of wayfarers.

She was willing enough to go when I had concluded a bargain to her satisfaction, and on her own initiative proposed that I should pick her up on the road outside the city. She had no wish to run the risk of seeing Mongorge or any of the people who lived in the Allée de Couvée, for if they saw her on horseback they might ridicule her, and she was sensitive to criticism from those of her own class. Her reasonable suggestion that if Mongorge saw her riding with me towards the forest he might become suspicious, and hasten to give Margot notice of our approach, induced me to suffer her to go out of my sight for a while. Her anxiety to obtain the money I had promised, however, was sufficient guarantee

that she would not fail to be at the appointed place.

We met but few on the road whom we knew, and none took notice of Coulon, who rode ahead and alone, as if she did not belong to us. Dressed in the respectable garments which the butcher's wife had given her, and veiled to hide the bruises on her face, none of her cronies of the *cul de sac* would have known her had they passed; nor would any foot-pads say aught, or molest her, while two well-armed horsemen were a few yards behind.

After a time a company approached us, riding from Versailles. With noisy laughter they drew their horses across the road to bar the way, and demand my business so far from the capital. Racine was among them. There was always that strange incongruity in the matter of companionships in Parisian society. Men like La Fontaine, Corneille, and Racine associated with shallow-brained people about the Court, who idolised them, not because they appreciated worth of intellect, but because these literary geniuses had obtained the patronage of royalty. They knew nothing of the beauty of poetry, nor of the subtlety of thought which such pen-workers had put into words; but these literati were the fashion until the whim of His Majesty or Madame de Maintenon changed. Once that should be, the things they had applauded would be esteemed worthless; the men on whom the courtiers had showered their attentions would become social outcasts; they would be howled down and scorned. It was the way of the world—the brilliant world that made up the Court in Paris, or at Marly. I call to mind what

Madame de Sévigné once said to me, that there was a certain social god in the midst of a parterre of young and lovely women, with ribbons, plumes, bright colours, suave voices, smiles and perfumes, while abbés, courtiers, and poets stood round in attendance, an apparently appreciative and enthusiastic audience.

It was Racine's day just then. He was the being whom the world delighted to honour, and these gay women and gallants—the pensioned lackeys of the Court—were always with him.

Rousard rode forward to keep an eye on Coulon's safety, and to induce her to wait somewhere out of sight until I should be at liberty, which did not promise to be for some time to come. These idlers had nothing on hand just now, and were willing to pass an hour in gossip, regardless of my own wish to ride on, since time was precious, and my whole soul seethed with impatience. Every woman had her question to ask, and every man his banter to dispose of. When I thought I had told all I knew as to the doings in the capital during the last four-and-twenty hours, one fair and frivolous creature insisted on my listening while Racine recited his latest tirade. A hundred inquiries followed as to my business out of Paris, for beneath all the flattering courtesies there was among the men and women of quality a curiosity as keen and rude as any that was bluntly expressed by men and women who were branded as *canaille*.

I was on the point of gathering up my reins when two horsemen came along the road from Paris. One was M. de l'Eperon, the other Father Calvisson, riding my own horse which I had lent him when

at Gueche, so that he might return to his duties at Tour. Those who were about me were so full of laughter because of a bit of gossip which I retailed for the sake of putting myself into good odour with them, that none essayed to hinder the priest or his companion. They contented themselves with a respectful salute for the Churchman, and a curt nod for the other, who was in no sense popular among those that paid court to the King or his mistress.

When I got away from the noisy group, Calvisson and his companion were hidden in the distance by a cloud of dust. Coulon was no rider, and had we gone on quickly she could not have followed us. I had thought to overtake the priest, and keep in his company—whether welcome or otherwise—and so frustrate him if he had any idea of going to the forest mansion, the supposition being that Mongorge had sold his secret as to the whereabouts of Louise. For a time I kept them well in sight, having left Rousard behind to come on with the woman as swiftly as she could travel. I gave up the pursuit when they turned away from the forest path, and took the road which led towards Marly.

Waiting for Rousard and Coulon at the spot where the cross was standing, I found myself wondering whether the priest and his companion really meant to run the risk and intrude upon His Majesty's privacy. If so, they were surely purposing to bring about my downfall, and put into effect that scheme of theirs which I had overheard on the Chevalier's balcony—to obtain my estates, and get me sent to the galleys. My ears burned at the thought of my peril, and my face flushed and smarted, although the

day was balmy, and the air without a sting. But what matter? I would procure the release of Louise, and after that take my chance of righting myself with the King. There should be no change of purpose. It had animated me from the moment when I discovered my dilemma, and I pursued my plan, practically ignoring my own safety while I sought to achieve the liberty of the woman who, unknown to herself, had won my heart. An inward monitor whispered the word "Danger!" again and again, until I found myself spurring Marot down the forest path, then pulling him up suddenly, and wheeling round, to return to the cross where I had promised to await the arrival of Coulon and her escort.

After long waiting they came, and we entered the forest, coming at last to the house into which Louise had been carried.

The door was closed, but not fastened. When we tramped in there was the hollow echo which tells of the absence of everything like human life. Coulon stood outside shuddering, glancing down the passage fearfully, afraid to enter because of that terrible presence in one of the rooms. What would she have done had she known of the death-group at the top of the staircase?

We took the horses into the room we had already used as a stable, and were then free to commence our search. The woman hesitated when I told her to follow.

"I am afraid."

"Nonsense! The dead can never hurt the living," said Rousard, laying a hand on Coulon's arm. "Come along, and do not be stupid."

She yielded reluctantly, but insisted on walking between us, gripping our arms tightly when we drew near to the door of the room in which the dead master sat. I felt her hand shaking, and looking round, saw the bruised face white with fear, and heard her chattering teeth.

“Mother of God, protect me!” she cried, snatching her hand from my arm for a moment, while she crossed herself. “That horrible thing! Oh, why did I come here again? Let me go back.”

She turned quickly as if she would run out to the forest, but Rousard caught her by the arm, and held her with a grip from which she could not release herself, in spite of her frantic struggles.

“Let me go! I pray you be kind! I shall die if I see that horrible thing!”

“Nonsense, Coulon,” said I; “’twill never touch you.”

Rousard, to reassure the frightened creature, flung his arm about her waist, and almost lifting her from her feet, hurried past the door, only halting when he got to the terrace in the garden.

“Now you are safe enough, so pluck up courage,” said the retainer, with rough good-nature, for he saw that the woman was genuinely alarmed. She could have faced the fists of men in a quarrel in the Allée de Couvée, and was accustomed to the flash of steel in that hot-bed of violence and murder; but here was Death in his most appalling aspect, and not without good reason her spirit failed her absolutely. When Rousard took his arm away from her she sank to the stones, and buried her face in her hands, weeping hysterically. We began to wish we had come

The frown of Majesty

without her, but her presence was indispensable. She knew where the hut lay, and diligently as we had searched the forest, we had found no trace of it. For some time she struggled with her terror, and only overcame it when Rousard shut the house door, and led her down the terrace steps. A draught of wine from his flask revived her courage, and she stood ready to show the way.

The path through the tangled garden was no easier to traverse than before, but we went forward, covering our hands with gloves, in order to deal with the thorns that barred the way. At last we came to the wall which formed the bottom boundary.

By this time Coulon was herself again, cool and alert. She stood a while in the open doorway, and gazed about her; then pointing to the left, led us among the trees and bushes. Here and there the soil was soft, and looking down we saw signs of others having passed that way—the footprints of men. My heart leaped with hope, and I felt kindly disposed towards this strumpet, as the Comtesse had called her, since she had not deceived me. But a fear followed on the heels of such a hope. Was Louise still in the hut we were seeking? Or had Margot Cartier taken her away? One token after another presented itself to our guide, assuring her that she was going in the right direction; here some leaves scooped out of the carpeted level with the feet of passers-by, there a soft patch of soil where the imprint of heavy boots told their tale.

After a while Coulon, who had been leading, halted, and pointed to a heap of evergreens among the trees, a hundred yards ahead.

“They took her there!” she cried.

I did not wait to hear what next she would have said, but hurrying past her, went forward at a run, my eyes fixed on the ivy-covered hut. Suddenly I stopped, and my lips parted with an exclamation of wonder.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE HUT IN THE FOREST

A WOMAN was crossing the bit of greensward in front of the hut with uncertain steps. Her hands hung helplessly at her sides, blood came from her forehead in a thin red line which marked her face, and the dishevelled hair fell over her shoulders. Once she looked up, and the sun lighting her features, I saw that it was Margot Cartier. That same moment her feet caught in a tree root, and she fell, striking her head against the point of a broken, low-jutting branch. She screamed with the pain, then lay full length upon the moss which spread out like a rich green carpet.

While I looked across the open space at the fallen woman, all was silent, but for the broken songs of birds, and the strange murmur as the breeze of the summer's day played among the leaves.

After that brief halt I hurried to the woman's side. She lay as one in a swoon, motionless and quiet, but for her quick breathing. When I called to Rousard to hasten, he came to my side, followed by Coulon.

"Keep watch over her!" I cried. "Do not let her

get away from you! 'Twere best, perhaps, to tie her hands and feet."

Without waiting to say more, I went on and looked for the entrance to the hut, but it was so covered with ivy and creeping plants that I only found it by tracing the footprints.

When I entered the dilapidated place, I saw nothing but a basket containing food and wine. The walls were covered with cobwebs, and streaked with water-marks, while long streamers of green ivy hung through the broken roof, fitfully admitting the sunshine in places. The window opposite the door was massed up with matted vegetation, so that one could barely see the outside forest. Balmy as it was without, the air within this dismal ruin was mouldy and chill.

On finding it unoccupied, I could not repress a cry of bitter disappointment. My fears were realised, I thought, and that she-devil whom I had seen had hidden Louise elsewhere. Walking from corner to corner to find some possible trace of her whom I was seeking, my foot kicked against something which jumped noisily across the floor. I looked at it, but turned away impatiently, for it was nothing but a heavy padlock. Going to the centre of the room, I gazed about, swearing that I would put Margot Cartier to torture, rather than suffer her to keep her knowledge to herself. I think I was mad for a few moments. I clenched my hands tightly, and breathed heavily while I thought how I would press the woman to the extremity of pain, if she did not give me my answer instantly. Searching again around and overhead for some sign of the loved one's presence, I called aloud:

"Louise, where have they hidden you?"

I had no thought of receiving an answer. It was despair that brought the cry from my lips, and again and again it came. I could see between the ivy strands that hung over the doorway what was going on outside. Rousard and Coulon were kneeling by the fallen virago, not doing what I had bid them, but watching the woman's face. Then Coulon clasped her hands, bent low for a closer look, and sprang to her feet with a cry. The retainer laid his hand on Margot's bosom, as if to feel for the beating of her heart; then shaking his head, he, too, arose and stood at his companion's side, looking at the prostrate one.

Wondering what had chanced, and eager to lose no time, I went out of the hut.

"Rousard!"

"Yes, monsieur," the man answered, casting a backward look at Cartier as he came towards me. "The woman's dead," he added, before I had time to speak.

"Dead?"

It made me angry to think that she had escaped me, and was not available for imparting information as to the missing one's whereabouts. The dead woman's presence was evidence that Louise could not be far away, but how could one find her in this tangled forest?

"Have you found mademoiselle?" asked Rousard, but in a doubtful tone, since he could see my face.

"The place is empty," I replied, striding past him to look at the virago, who might have been of so much use to me at this juncture.

She lay bosom downwards, but her face was so turned that we could see it. It had that death-like hue which tells that life has gone. A wound from which the blood trickled slowly was on the temple, another on the forehead. When I stooped, I saw that the arms were broken. A discoloured mark showed that, to all appearances, she had received a blow from a heavy weapon across one of the wrists. She had evidently been engaged in deadly conflict with someone, and her latest fight had ended in her undoing.

Coulon, who stood at my side, could not repress an exclamation of relief. She thought, perhaps, of quarrels she had had with this dead woman when they lived together in the *cul de sac*, this unsexed creature whose nature was brutal, and never softened by any tenderness. She spat on her, then kicked her viciously, in part repayment of the wrongs she had endured.

"She killed my child!" she gasped; "the only thing I ever loved."

Once more she spurned the dead one with her foot. As if that did not satisfy her hate, and prove sufficient in the way of revenge, she went upon her knees and slapped the pale, disfigured, wicked face again and again, with all her force. Rising to her feet, she walked to and fro, and sobbed.

"She killed my child! the only thing I ever loved," said she repeatedly, while her feet brushed through the forest leaves. But from this she passed to another frenzy, expressive of her joy, and danced upon the leafy soil. The dried leaves scattered with the wind she raised by the swing of her skirts, and

she gave up only when she was weary. Too breathless to speak, and desiring to shut out the sight of the dead woman who had wronged her so, she walked to the hut; but stumbling on the threshold, fell heavily. She lay there for a few moments, while Rousard and I stood by Cartier's side, wondering what we should do, since her secret had died with her. We were startled by an eager call from Coulon, and looking her way, saw that she had partly raised herself, and was holding up a hand to beckon us to her side.

"What is it?" I cried, advancing swiftly.

"Listen!"

She lowered her head till her ear touched the floor. Listening intently, I heard nothing, and said so.

"But listen!" she exclaimed impatiently. "Do you not hear?"

Her face filled with wonder when I, thinking she had gone mad, shook my head.

"But *I* do," she persisted. "Kneel, monsieur. Put your ear close to the board."

I was on my knees in an instant, listening intently, and then I heard what set my heart beating fiercely. A voice which seemed familiar was saying:

"Help, for God's sake!"

I looked on the wooden floor, and cursed myself for a fool. Now I understood the presence of the padlock which my foot had spurned. I had come into the place to gaze right and left, and upwards to the broken roof, never giving a thought to the floor I trod. By close scrutiny in the half twilight of the darkened room, I saw a square-cornered trap

door which opened into a cellar, and Coulon was lying across it. Pulling the woman away with scant ceremony, I found a ring of iron, sunken in the wood, and taking it in my hand, raised the door, tossed it back noisily, and looked down into the space beneath. A lanthorn threw a dismal light about an earth-walled cellar, the floor of which was reached by some wooden steps. Close to the wall, and lying on her back, was a woman, whose bare white arms were outspread on the dark soil. Near to the steps another crouched, who looked as though she had purposed to climb them, but had not strength to make the attempt. Her face was uplifted to catch a glimpse of him who was peering down at her; but none could have seen it, since the candle-light behind her was too dim to do more than just dispel the darkness.

"Are you Mademoiselle de St. André?" I asked, lying flat upon the floor, endeavouring to discover for myself who this woman was.

There was no answer to my question, but she who crouched asked faintly:

"Who are you?"

"I am the Vicomte de la Tour," I responded, and in a moment or two I had my feet on the wooden steps in the act of descending into the cellar.

"Ha! thank God!" came the words, but before I had reached the bottom step the woman flung up her hands, and fell back insensible.

Going down at a run, I bent over the prostrate one, but could not see her face because of the darkness. Her bare arms and shoulders were cold,

and her breath scarcely perceptible. Had I not marked the low breathing when I put my ear to her lips, I should have thought her dead, she lay so still. But for the cloak which had partly fallen from her, she was scantily clad. If it were Louise, the explanation of her lack of clothing was simple enough. Margot Cartier had not only robbed her of her jewels, but had stripped from her the rich dress I had seen Coulon wearing.

Stepping over the other body, I crossed the floor to get the lanthorn, so that I might see which of these two was the woman I had been so eagerly searching for. While doing so, I trod on something hard, and looking down, saw a sword at my feet. Kicking it aside, I returned with the light. First I bent over her who lay with outstretched arms. It was Marguerite, the maid. She, too, had been robbed of her dress, and such valuables as she possessed, and now lay dead. Over her left breast was a wound such as a sword-thrust might inflict, and a red stream had flowed from it. When I placed my hand upon her, she was already cold, and the face was set in death.

Striding over her, I knelt beside the other. She was now breathing audibly, the breath coming in little gasps, while her hands opened and closed restlessly.

It was Louise, looking ghastly white in the dim light of the solitary smoke-grimed lanthorn. She opened her eyes while I waited for Coulon to come down the steps and do something for her, since a woman's hands are of more avail in such a case.

"Where am I?" she asked, looking about her, as

if for Marguerite ; but seeing her lying still not far away, she turned to Coulon, then to Rousard and myself. The light evidently fell on my face, for she spoke as if she fully recognised me. "Vicomte, did you come hither to effect my rescue?"

"I did, mademoiselle," I answered, taking her hand in mine, and kissing it reverently.

"Then I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

She said no more. The light seemed to be too much for her eyes, and she closed them ; then her head fell wearily on Coulon's shoulder, and she lay there, half-unconscious, and silent. She knew not the character of the creature on whose bosom she was lying—that she was a denizen of the *cul de sac* which had such an evil reputation. In that moment of dependence, distinctions were levelled, and the two were women together. Coulon knelt there, doing what she could for the lady of rank, pouring a cordial between her lips, or chafing her hands to give them warmth ; but a sense of her unworthiness came over her while she looked upon the other's pure face, which nestled against her. Her own flushed crimson, and when she turned round to me for a moment, her eyes were full of tears. One rolled down her cheeks, then another, but she brushed them both away with the corner of her camlet.

"Take her into your own arms, monsieur!" she exclaimed. "'Tis not meet that such as I should touch her."

"Nay!" I cried, moved by the look of pain in the woman's face, and the husky voice, which gave token that goodness had not altogether died out of her soul. "'Tis better that she should be in a woman's arms,

Coulon. Think naught of that, but do what you can to restore her."

Kneeling about the unconscious one, unable to bring her back to any knowledge of her surroundings, we talked of the best plan to pursue. Before long it was arranged, and Rousard, mounting the cellar steps, strode through the wood towards the mansion, to get his horse and ride with all speed to the château of the Marquise de Lauzun.



CHAPTER XXV

THE KING'S FROWN

DURING the next four days I stayed at the Château de Neure, whither we had brought Louise from the forest hut.

She had not recovered consciousness, in spite of the efforts of the leech who came from St. Germain, but lay in a fever on the bed to which she had been carried, tossing her arms on the silken coverlet, talking wildly and weeping in turn, knowing no one when she looked at us, who stood anxiously at her bedside.

By listening to what she said in her fever dreams, one might have told the greater part of her story, from the moment she left Paris until I found her in the cellar, with dead Marguerite for her only company. Sometimes she plaintively besought Margot Cartier to set her free, offering large sums of money if she would but do so, or if she would tell her friends of her whereabouts. Anon she would expostulate against her detention, and threaten the woman who had abducted her, only, however, to break off suddenly with a wail of disappointment.

"Oh, you are cruel to place me at the mercy of a libertine! You say he wants to marry me? Not he! He wants my money. He is not infatuated with my beauty. He has others as beautiful as myself. He can have others as rich. He, who goes with wantons—how can he dare to sully me?"

She would be silent again, lying for a time with her eyes closed, and her lips moving, as if she communed with herself. When she opened them to gaze at us, she did not know me, neither did she recognise her cousin, the Marquise, nor take any notice of Coulon, who had begged to be allowed to help in nursing the sick one.

Sometimes she clutched at the bed-clothes with her soft white hands, and sitting up, looked past us, speaking indignantly.

"How dare you speak to me like that, monsieur—to me, a woman who is pure in thought as well as life? Would you deal with me as though I were some strumpet who cares for money more than for virtue? Am I naught but a grisette? Do you dare to play with me, and raise a scandal in the Court? I will die first. If you keep me here in this dreadful place, where vermin crawl and render the darkness intolerable, I can but die; but you shall never have your way with me. Shame on you—a gentleman! One so near the throne, to serve a woman so!"

The words were spoken with a spirit that made poor Coulon look at her in amazement; but the passion of the sick one passed to white heat which brought tears to the eyes of the woman of the *cul de sac* and made her cower. So did my own heart tremble to see one so gentle telling, unconsciously,

the story of those days when Rousard and I had sought for her ceaselessly.

At another time she would lift her hand and gaze at it with dismay.

"M. le Vicomte, I have lost my ring. It dropped among the rushes. 'Twas my mother's, and I wore it because I loved her so dearly. Ha! you have found it? I thank you, with all my heart!"

She kissed her hand before offering it to me to kiss, as was the courtly custom of the times. But while I thought that she had come to herself again, and this was the indication of returning consciousness, she held her plump fingers to Coulon, or to the Marquise. Then I knew it was a vain hope.

The third time she did this, I drew the ruby ring from my own finger and placed it on hers. She seemed to know what I had done, for gazing at it, she kissed it, and then my own hand, murmuring gratefully :

"M. le Vicomte, I thank you with all my heart. You do not know how much I loved my mother." The tears sprang to her eyes, and rolled down her cheeks when she spoke.

I thought I should go mad while I stood in the room throughout the days and nights, and watched the leech when he entered and drew near to the sick one. I was hungering for a look or a word that would tell of improvement; but he shook his head, and looked more grave, it seemed to me, each time he went away.

One morning I mounted Marot for a scamper across the park, and then travelled along the road which led to Marly. The thought had come that I might

hear whether the King had returned to Paris. Each day I had been told that he was yet in seclusion with Madame de Maintenon, as if the cares of State did not affect him, and his only thought in life was of that fascinating woman who held him, body and soul, in the closest bonds. If it transpired that His Majesty had gone to the capital, it was my determination to follow him, and forestall De l'Eperon and Calvisson.

We had ridden through the gateway, and were cantering down the dusty road, when De l'Eperon and the Curé of Tour passed us, as if they were coming from Marly. They did not halt on seeing us, but the look on their faces was such that I felt my heart beat more quickly with apprehension. The courtier frowned, and struck the spur into his horse's flank, so that the startled creature plunged, then tore madly down the road. Father Calvisson did not alter his pace. There was that same look on his ill-favoured countenance which I had seen before—a prolonged and insolent stare such as he had given me after Isabel had brought his message, demanding my presence at his house. He even turned to gaze after me, as if he desired to see me plainly, and fix my appearance in his memory.

Rousard, who was my companion, scowled. He looked as if he would like to follow the priest and horsewhip him, but he rode on at my side, merely remarking, soon after I had turned my back on the Curé :

“ I expect he has been to Marly, to see whether the King intends to stay there much longer.”

I made no answer, but flicked at the leaves of the

overhanging branches with my whip. Presently an exclamation from Rousard ended my reverie.

“The King!”

I gazed down the long straight road and saw two horsemen who, as they drew nearer, proved to be of the King's bodyguard. Half a score of paces behind these came two more, and the four swept by, without a look to right or left, without so much as a salute, which was customary when one of my rank was on the way.

Then came such another company of ladies and gallants as I had met when on my second search for Louise. Not one among them all could excuse his or her averted face on the plea that I was a stranger. The Vicomte de la Tour was known to all who were about the King's body, and every lady in Madame de Maintenon's following knew me. Yet nearly all, on seeing our horses drawn up at the roadside to suffer them to pass, instead of looking about them at the beauties of the countryside, began to be otherwise occupied, and gathered up the reins, or turned to a companion — anything to excuse themselves from greeting me. Only one looked at me, and that was the Comtesse. Her eyes, which usually sparkled with laughter, were now brimming with tears, and there was a little gesture of dismay and loving solicitude as her horse trotted past me. She was on the other side of the road, but seeing me, crossed, so that she might come close to me. I caught her words when she rode by.

“Dear cousin, my sympathy!”

There was no time for more.

What did she mean? Was she referring to Louise,

lying at death's door in the château? Had I not seen the faces of the others I might have thought so, but not now. She was thinking of something else. But what?

While I sat in my saddle, waiting for the passing of the King, Louis himself drew near. On his left hand was a lady—that mildly imperious woman whose nickname in the Court was *La Dévote*. Her horse was gorgeously caparisoned, and she, with her splendid figure and high-bred carriage, dressed as a queen might be. Usually, when I came to Court, Madame de Maintenon's lovely eyes were turned upon me with pleasant greeting, and her deep coral-coloured lips parted into a smile; but when she saw me waiting there, saluting, the sunshine on her face while she talked with the *Grand Monarque* passed, and a frown of disapproval was her only response to my courtesy. She did not even bow to me.

The King was more severe. His large dark brown eyes flashed angrily, and what the courtiers called the "Hapsburg under-lip" curled with a scorn that dumbfounded me. He went so far as to make the sign of the cross, as if he feared that I might cast a spell upon him, then slashing his golden-mounted riding-whip upon the shoulders of the grey Arab charger which he rode, he plunged by without a word of greeting.

What need to go farther after such an episode, which might well damn one in the eyes of the Court and all the world? It wanted no one to tell me what had chanced. I could read into it well, and spell the one word that was there, to the exclusion of all else—**RUIN**. The King's frown could mean nothing less.

Calvisson and De l'Eperon had intruded on the monarch at Marly, contrary to all precedent, daring such a thing because of the story they had to tell. They knew His Majesty's feeling towards everything that savoured of heresy. Apart from the hold which Madame de Maintenon had upon him, the King hated Huguenotism intensely. The dislike was so complete that he suffered everything to go, rather than pardon those who were tainted with it, and pressed his religious zeal so extremely that he drove the best and most loyal of his subjects from the land.

It was strange that a monarch who lived so questionable a life should be so jealous for the Church's honour. Père la Chaise, his indulgent and astute confessor, Bourdaloue, and others, politic to a degree, condoned his immoralities, and encouraged him in his dislike to Huguenotism. They compromised in this matter. His life was scarcely less impure than that of the disreputable second Charles of England, but he was a more cultured man; so that what was denounced as glaring sin in the one was glossed over, and mildly termed an indiscretion, in the other.

It was maddening to think that I should be robbed of wealth in the name of religion, and deprived of rank, for it must needs come to that, and be sent to the galleys by one of such moral obliquity; that one like him should dare to condemn me in a matter of conscience without hearing me in self-defence, and without affording me any opportunity of asserting my innocence.

I am not saying this in dispraise of the *Grand Monarque* because of his treatment of me, nor am I writing such words concerning the woman who ruled

him, simply for the reason that she turned her back upon me. It is common knowledge. There were few in France who did not know that Louis was selfish and indifferent to the welfare of others, just as all are aware that the Jesuits, accepting the power his favour gave them, overlooked his worst crimes against virtue and generosity of feeling.

Going back to that day when the King frowned upon me, I remember how the lackeys who followed him had their turn of insolence, just as the ass of fable was bold enough to kick the dying lion. More than one cried, when the horses dashed by, "*A bas les Huguenots !*"—the cry which, so tradition said, had gone like wildfire through the streets of Paris on the dreadful Eve of St. Bartholomew.

I looked up when they had all passed, and saw Rousard in his saddle, with his mouth agape, gazing after the last of the attendants who were fast disappearing round the corner of the road. Then a curse escaped him, and the loyal fellow ventured to express in words what was in his mind.

"That devil, the priest, has got at the King, monsieur !"

"I fear so," I answered quietly.

My mind was in such bewilderment that I could not think of anything else to say.

"When I see him — curse him ! — whether he crosses my path in Paris, or at Tour, he shall know what I think. If I find him near a horse-trough anywhere, summer or winter, he shall stay in it until he volunteers me absolution, and I warrant he shall neither know how to sit, nor lie, nor stand for a long week after. The devil !"



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The man's teeth went together with a snap when he had exhausted his vocabulary in framing oaths and curses.

It was sympathy, and it did me so much good that I was not disposed to check or warn him.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE "LETTRE DE CACHET"

THE King did not fail to follow up his frown.

Amid all the splendours of the Court, the high spirits of the lords and ladies there, the fascinations of La Dévote, and a thousand distractions, such as receptions and pageants, the *Grand Monarque* was not allowed to forget the nobleman whom others desired to be rid of from sinister motives of their own. If De l'Eperon wanted me out of the way, he knew some who were in high places who would further his schemes, in the hope of securing his co-operation later on for their own purposes. Possibly the King had forgotten all about me before he reached Versailles in the absorbing conversation of his companion; but I could well believe that Madame de Maintenon—who, as St. Simon once said of her, believed herself to be universal Abbess in spiritual matters, and fancied herself a mother of the Church—would say to the King, when he bade her farewell:

"Sire, do not forget that the Vicomte de la Tour is a Huguenot."

"I will not," would be the response, as La Dévote swept into her own apartment.

Before sunset, while I was walking to and fro on the terrace, questioning the leech as to the prospects of Louise's recovery, I saw half-a-dozen horsemen riding along the winding road across the park. It was no unusual sight, for gallants with their attendants came and went continually, at all seasons, and especially when it became known that Mademoiselle de St. André was lying ill at the château, and likely to die. There was a flutter at my heart, however—a premonition of trouble for myself. The doctor was surprised, no doubt, when I turned away from his prosy explanation of the complicated nature of the sick one's malady. But I could not listen, for I felt certain that the cavalier who was riding alone a yard or two ahead of the others was not come to ask after Louise, but had business with me.

Long before he dismounted in the courtyard, I saw that he was M. de Biron, Chief of Police in Paris. He mounted the steps with a nonchalance which was cruel, seeing that he was on an errand which meant untold misery for the man he was seeking; then seeing me, he made a low bow.

"May I speak with you alone, monsieur?" said he, approaching.

"I am alone," I answered stiffly.

"True," the other said; "but I have that to give you which should be placed in your hands unseen by others."

"What does it matter who sees it?" I asked; for I knew from repute that when the officer bore a

lettre de cachet, he was instructed to deliver it secretly. He would often wait till night had fallen, or meet one in a lonely road, away from the eyes of the curious, so that he who received the fatal epistle would disappear, his whereabouts being unknown to his friends.

It was no part of my duty to make the task of the King's officer easy, so that I did not hesitate to put that question : " What does it matter who sees it ? "

De Biron rejoined at once :

" 'Tis customary for me to do this in privacy."

" All the same, monsieur, I will receive it here, whatever it may be that you have to give me."

I had no desire to disappear without anyone knowing the cause, or the method of my disappearance, simply to oblige this man and his masters. Just then Rousard came to the terrace, seeking me.

M. de Biron looked annoyed, but that was no concern of mine. If he wished to arrest me, let him do so in the broad light of day, and not allow the world to suppose that I was riding off for my own pleasure, without regard to the courtesy due to the lady of the château.

" I might speak with you in one of the chambers within the house, monsieur," he insisted ; but I, as persistent as he, replied :

" Speak here, M. de Biron. I have no wish at present to go indoors. Let me know your will, and here, if you please."

The Chief of Police looked sulky, and putting his hand into his bosom, drew forth a letter which bore the King's seal.

" 'Tis unusual, monsieur," he grumbled.

"'Tis unusual, monsieur, to arrest an innocent man," I answered sharply. "The whole thing is contrary to the law of France," I added, whereupon he shrugged his shoulders, but said not a word.

I took the letter from his hand, but scarcely needed to open it in order to discover its contents. The King's frown had led me to expect such a thing as this; nevertheless, I broke the seal and read, my face growing rigid while I perused the lines which bade me consider myself under arrest for a crime unnamed. This *lettre de cachet*—an unconstitutional violation of the right of personal liberty—told me in formal terms that I was to accompany De Biron wheresoever he was instructed to take me, and without delay, under danger of further penalties.

"You will come at once, M. le Vicomte?" It was a question, but none could avoid taking it as a command.

"When I have said good-bye to my friends," I answered.

"Pardon me; I cannot allow that. You must come at once."

"Without a word of farewell to those who are within?" I cried.

"Certainly!"

"But I must needs tell them why I am going away."

"I cannot allow it, monsieur. It is my business to take you away with all secrecy."

I stood before the Chief, stern and angry. The injustice of the thing seemed to lessen the thought of my hopeless case, and the extremity of my peril. I found myself thinking of a day that would surely

come—a day when the throne would be overturned by the outburst of the nation's wrath, if such high-handed proceedings as these were persisted in. But the short reverie on illegalities and tyranny ended. My anger gave place to the sense of my absolute helplessness, and lack of hope, for I was in the King's hand, and had no alternative but to obey. It was as useless to protest against such an unconstitutional act as the issue of that *lettre de cachet* as for a fly to attempt to escape from a web after the spider had begun to weave his further toils about the hapless one, to hold him in.

If secrecy were desired by M. de Biron, I was resolved not to oblige him. I called out to Rousard.

“Rousard, I am under arrest by reason of a *lettre de cachet* which this gentleman has brought me. Tell the Marquise de Lauzun that I am not permitted to say adieu.”

“Monsieur,” cried the officer angrily, “you violate all custom—”

“What care I for custom that is contrary to the law?” I retorted savagely. “Does not His Majesty violate my liberty by issuing such a thing as this?” I held out the letter, and saw how my hand was trembling with wrath.

“It is unwise to create a scene,” the Chief expostulated.

“It is a crime, monsieur, to break in upon a man's liberty, without specifying the reason for his arrest!” I cried, and so loudly, that a lady, whose dress I could see at the door of the château, heard my words, and stepped on to the terrace to know who spoke in such angry tones.

It was the Marquise.

Seeing the Chief of Police, and noting my anger, she hurried to me, and looking at the officer, asked the meaning of his presence on her terrace.

"M. le Vicomte, I pray you to think of what I have said," the other exclaimed, ignoring the lady's question in his anxiety to preserve secrecy—so strong was this habit become of doing everything after the manner of the Inquisitors.

"Nay, M. de Biron, I shall speak what pleases me. Madame, this is the Chief of Police, and here is a *lettre de cachet*. I asked monsieur to allow me to say farewell, but he wished me to go away silently, leaving you all to surmise as to my whereabouts."

Tears sprang to her eyes. She thought of the sick one in the château, and of my longing to have one word from her before she died, and her words expressed her thought.

"M. de Biron, you will allow monsieur to say good-bye to someone who is dying—a dear friend of his?"

The Chief shook his head.

"It is contrary to my instructions, madame. M. de Belliot ought to have come with me instantly, but he has broken in upon all established usages."

The Marquise dared not speak, lest such a letter might be sent to her in return. She took my hand in hers, and kissing it, said :

"I will say good-bye to her for you, dear friend. Now, God be with you, and send you deliverance!"

Regardless of the King's officer, I stooped and whispered :

“ Tell her, if she recovers consciousness, that I love her. God only knows how much ! ”

After kissing her hand, I turned away.

“ I will tell her that, monsieur, and more,” the Marquise answered, walking slowly down the terrace.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE RED JACKET

MONTAIGNE quotes the following words in one of his chapters: "It is in our own power to bury, as it were, in a perpetual oblivion, all adverse accidents, and to retain a pleasant and delightful memory of our successes." He rightly prefaces the quotation by declaring his belief that it is not true. From what I know of life, it is as false as anything can be. If it were true I should have no story to tell. My memory would but permit me to traverse again the sunny lanes of life, and all the mud and mire would be forgotten. The care and sorrow, the pain and torture, the sleepless nights, the days of weariness and bitter experience, the shame that follows degradation, would be no more than the dream of a night—less than that; something beyond recall.

But it was a dreadful reality. Montaigne's counter quotation is true enough: "I do also remember what I would not; but I cannot forget what I would."

Hence, while I sit here, writing my story by the open window, oblivious to the low murmur of the river and the sounds of country life, I am compelled against my will to see again the things that went to

make my misery ; to feel afresh the horror of the environment ; to wince while one hears again—only in fancy in this after-time, thank God !—the hissing of the burning iron that branded me as a galley slave ; to realise what agony comes to a loyal man who is writhing under a lying charge of treason and heresy.

When we entered Paris it was dark, so that none of the passers-by, curious though they were, could see the face of the rider at the side of the Chief of Police. The streets, moreover, were not so full as usual, and few of the gallants were out, since, owing to the return of the King, they were at the Louvre.

After turning into the Rue St. Antoine, we pulled up at the doorway of the Palais des Tournelles, where, centuries before, the Earl of Bedford had lived, while acting as Regent for the young and incapable English king, Henry the Sixth. The glory of the place had departed. It was malodorous and dilapidated now, and instead of being the abode of kings, was a prison-house for such period as the *Grand Monarque* should choose to persecute the Huguenots.

Dismounting, I ascended the steps into the hall, and awaited the pleasure of the officer who had escorted me. He was courteous, although he must have known of the degradation that was in store for me ; but he left me standing there, as if to give me an opportunity to think over the probabilities as to my future.

The Palais des Tournelles was known throughout the kingdom as the halting-place of the prisoners who were travelling south to begin the life of toil at the galleys. The halt at its entrance indicated the

nature of my own punishment. The fate I had feared when I sought to forestall Calvisson with the King had come, and I had no need to cherish any hope of returning to my home again as master of Tour. Not even money would avail me. A man of the middle classes might purchase his liberty by recantation, and the payment of a thousand pistoles; a merchant might buy his freedom with a great price, thus sending money into the empty exchequer; but what would secure the freedom of the lord of Tour? The *lettre de cachet* meant more than imprisonment, and more than the toil of the galleys, for in actual practice it ensured the forfeiture of one's possessions, either to His Majesty, or to whomsoever the King should name.

That morning I had been a man of wealth. At nightfall I was no better off than the peasant I passed on the road—poorer, for I was penniless, since the gold I had about me would be taken away, and even the clothes I wore were no longer my own.

I could see it all in my mind's eye. De l'Eperon was to be master of Tour, and Calvisson, for aiding and abetting him, was to receive his promised pistoles.

I was ushered into a room at the back of the palace. It was dark, so that on entering I could not see whether I was alone; but when the door closed behind me, and the key screamed in the lock, someone spoke.

"Who are you?"

It was a woman's voice, and it came from one at my feet.

"Ay, who are you?" followed another question,

this time from my right. The speaker was a man, for the strong tones declared the fact.

What need to hide my identity? Yet I did not answer the question, but simply asked how many were in the chamber.

"There were ten of us," the man replied. "Ten when the sun went down, but there cannot be more than nine now, for the woman at my side is still and cold. She must be dead, for although I have bent my ear to her lips, I cannot hear her breathing, and her heart no longer beats."

"Why are you here?" said I, not wondering at an occasional sigh and sob, which told of some who were quietly weeping.

"We are Huguenots. The women—five of them now, if it be true that my companion is dead—will go to the Tour de Constance, so one of the guards told me, but the men are for the galleys."

"God forbid!" I exclaimed, shuddering at the thought of the journey which lay before the poor creatures with whom I was now to herd.

"Ay, God forbid!" cried the woman who had first spoken. "But of what avail to say it? There is the terrible tramp for hundreds of miles, and already we are footsore. My own feet are shoeless and blistered, and I could scarcely crawl that last mile to-day. I am praying for death. It will mean release from sorrow and from sighing, and I shall escape the agony of my loneliness, with my dear ones left behind in the old home."

She was weeping, and the pent-up grief seemed to burst from the lips, and the tears to find their way between the fingers of the hands which I could faintly

see covering her face ; for I was getting used to the darkness.

What need to hold back my own name, if these partners of mine were prisoners for conscience' sake ? When I told them briefly who I was, one from the farther corner cried aloud :

“The Vicomte? God help us, but you were no Huguenot!”

“I know the voice,” said I, “but who may you be?” I was trembling at the thought that the sleuth-hounds had been on my own estate. I suddenly remembered whose voice it was. “Are you René Bandelet, the tailor?”

“Yes,” sobbed the little man. “Someone lodged information against me that I was in the habit of harbouring Huguenots, and was one myself. 'Tis true I have been one secretly for many a year, but I did not think it was known.”

He burst into a loud wail of sorrow, which I endeavoured to soothe when I crossed to his side of the room. We were brothers in misfortune now, and putting all thought of difference of birth aside—for we were brought to the same level here—I went on my knees, and throwing my arms about the broken-hearted man, spoke what helping words I could command. There was a reciprocity about the attempt. It served to make me forget my own pains and penalties for the time, so that when he had quieted down, and presently lay on the floor to sleep, I, too, wearied, and wanting rest after the vigils of the last few days and nights, lost myself in heavy slumber.

The noisy tramping of men awoke me, and before

I fully realised where I was, a soldier crossed the floor, and roused me with his heavy boot.

"Wake up!" he exclaimed.

I sat up instantly, but scarcely understood as yet why I was lying in a room with men and women I had never seen before.

"Take this," said the soldier roughly, handing me a huge piece of bread, in the scooped-out portion of which was plugged a lump of beef. In the other hand he held a jug of wine. Two other men were serving out the same sort of fare to my comrades in misery, while a fourth was bending over the still body of a woman lying not far from the door.

"Laporte," said this man, turning round to speak to the soldier, who was growing impatient at my slowness to take the food from his dirty hands.

"What's the matter?"

"This woman's dead. Cold. She must have been dead for hours."

The Huguenot who had been lying near volunteered no information, but was eating ravenously. He seemed to know that the day's march would tax his strength, and that he would need all the sustenance he could get. The women sat and ate with a weary compulsion, as if, though life had no hope for them, and no more promise of brightness, they must swallow the food given to them, or add on to the misery of their day's experience. Some could not eat the whole of their share, and thrust the remainder into their bosoms. It would be welcome on the road, or be acceptable to the other hungry ones, if they were unable to eat it themselves.

When the dead woman had been carried away,

and we had all been branded, the little company of prisoners were left alone. The sunshine poured in through the window, as if to cheer us, but the good office failed. The brightness was a mockery, since it seemed to laugh at our miseries, and present a startling contrast to our gloom of heart. We settled down to talk. René had already told his story to the others when he entered the room at sunset. It was my story they wanted to hear, and I told them what I deemed fitting, keeping back what bore on my love for Louise. That was too sacred to be imparted to others.

"'Twas that priest and M. de l'Eperon!" cried René, when I had finished. "Father Calvisson tried to bribe me to say something against you, but when I refused, he vowed it would be worse for two instead of one."

There was no time to say more, for the door opened again, and in tramped the same soldiers, bringing with them some heavy chains.

"Here are your ornaments, monsieur," said one of them, coming to me; "the badge of nobility, Vicomte," he added, laughing loudly.

His insolence angered me, but it was madness to say or do anything to express resentment. It would but add to my disabilities, and that would accentuate my misery. All that I could do was to accept my fate as stoically as possible, keeping an open eye for any chance of escape. On that escape I was resolved, even if it meant a life of poverty and exile.

Strong as the soldier was, he bent beneath the load of iron he carried. Throwing it on the floor, he bade me strip.

"Not before these women!" I remonstrated.

The fellow laughed coarsely, then cried:

"Women, close your eyes, or turn your backs. The Vicomte objects to perform his toilet in your presence."

Instantly the women prisoners hid their faces in their hands, or turned their backs upon us, while René and I stripped to the skin, and clothed ourselves in the garments which had been brought to us. Last of all, we donned scarlet-coloured jackets, such as the other men were wearing—the badge of heresy.

"You look respectable," said the soldier, picking up my doublet, and searching it for my purse, which he appropriated, together with the ring which he told me to take off my hand. "You shall have a bracelet instead," he observed, chuckling.

"Now for the finery," he added, stooping to lift the heavy chains. Straining at the task, he flung them over my shoulders, while, with a dexterity born of practice, he brought the iron collar round my neck, and closed the spring with a snap.

The weight nearly bent my back, and my knees inclined to give beneath me, but with an effort I maintained my footing, and stood waiting for the next development in this cruel experience.

An hour later the men stood in the street, a long string of prisoners, joined together by chains, the weight of which was such, that it was difficult to move without sinking beneath the load. As for René Bandelet, his burden was altogether beyond his strength. The moment the soldier had flung the chains on his shoulders, he fell in a bruised heap upon

the floor, and when they raised him to his feet and left him unsupported, his knees bent, and he staggered into the arms of the man who had intended to adjust the collar. It was clear that to him, so burdened, travelling was impossible, and with much swearing the soldier bore the chain away, either to get a lighter one, or to have some portion of it removed.

While we stood there in the sunshine, which gave promise of a hot day, the women came down the steps with weary gait, and hopeless faces. An iron collar was about their necks, but far less heavy, with chains too strong for them to break, but light enough to enable them to walk. Some sort of mercy had been meted out to them, although it was but scant.

They were of all ages, like the men. Some were grey-haired, others in the flush of youth. Not a few, as was the case with many of the men, were criminals, women such as one would find in the Allée de Couvée; but there were women of rank—one could see that it was so by the grace of their movements, and by the unmistakable look of refinement on their faces. There were women of all classes, a hundred of them, who came out of the Palais des Tournelles, their faces wet with tears. Even the hardened among them, the women of the *cul de sac*, and the like, had lost their bravado, and were softened by their weariness and lack of hope.

It took a long time to attach these women to the line of men, with whom they were placed side by side, and joined by a chain to our iron collars; but the task was ended, and we began to move slowly, almost at snail-like pace, so heavy were the chains.

It was late in the morning before we passed the

palace of the King, and there my sense of shame asserted itself beyond all my former feeling. His Majesty was about to sally forth for a walk in the street, and now stood at the gate with Madame de Maintenon. About them were lords and ladies whom I knew—ladies with whom I had gossiped and danced, who had known me ever since my first appearance at the Court. Some of the men, I know, disliked me because I would not connive at every mad wickedness, but others had come to me for money when they were in difficulties, and had been great friends with me.

Not one of them looked at me with anything like sympathy. They could not but see and know me, for Madame de Maintenon exclaimed aloud, forgetting her usual reserve :

“See! the Vicomte de la Tour!”

All eyes were turned in my direction, but not a sign of recognition, nothing expressive of regret. There were sardonic smiles on the faces of some who imagined that they had had reason in the past to be jealous of me.

As for Madame de Maintenon, she frowned upon me, and turned away. So did the King.



CHAPTER XXVIII

THE CHAIN

THE journey was painful and prolonged. The heavy chains were a burden in themselves, and in the blazing sun of that exceptionally hot summer, men fainted and fell on the road. Still worse was it for the women, whose shoulders were galled by the iron collars, and their whole frame bent under the inhumanely heavy load of metal which had been put upon them.

There was no difference made in the treatment of those who were part of that sad, long line of prisoners. The women who were wont to toil in the sun, and be on their feet in the fields from sunrise to sunset, felt the fret and strain, so that they were exhausted before they had gone five miles. To those whose lives had been spent in affluence, whose hands were white and soft, and who had been nursed in the lap of luxury, the journey was a prolonged torture ; and one and another hung heavily on the arm of the man with whom she was walking, adding unwillingly but compulsorily to the burden of the chain.

The lot of those women who had to carry babes in their arms was intolerable, and there were three such

among the prisoners. My own companion was a young wife of eight-and-twenty, and she bore a lusty boy who had been born six months before. Full of hope that she would be released ere long, she insisted on bringing her treasure with her. I will not tell her story more than this: that she was no Huguenot, but her heart was tender, and with womanly pity she had sheltered one of the preachers who was hunted by the King's men. A spiteful neighbour betrayed her, and she was sent down the country to be lodged in the Tour de Constance.

The horrors of the women's prison so far away had not been talked of in her village, so that she spoke hopefully. If she lived the journey out, she felt sure that her husband would prove her a loyal daughter of the Church. That was why she would not part with her child. Mother-like, she said that none would look after him so well as she. What other woman's breast would feed her boy? Even in case a foster-mother could be found, the neighbours would be sure to neglect him. Did I not think so? she asked me wistfully.

The glaring sun taxed her strength, and I took the babe from her, carrying it in one arm, while she, when faint, hung on my other. That struggle to keep my own footing under the added weight, served to lessen my mental anguish. It was when we halted for the night that my mind went back to the Château de Neure, dwelling on the loved one whose feet, I could but think, were already laved by the waters of the River of Death. If I could have told her how I loved her! Had she been able to look into my face conscientiously for a moment or two, and, if incapable of

speech, strong enough to press my hand in token that my love was not a vain one, it would have been an inspiration while treading what, to me and these other unfortunates, was the Dolorous Way.

Our journey lay through Gueche, but our progress was so slow that a week had passed before we reached it. Jehan Sault, the tanner with whom I had lodged the last time I rode that way, was standing at his door, and as the procession went slowly by, he peered into the face of every man. Another was at his side, whose looks were even more eager—my own servant, Rousard. There was no soldier near as I passed close by him. The head of the child whom I carried almost brushed his doublet, and in a low voice he said :

“Have courage, monsieur.”

“Mademoiselle Louise?” I asked quickly.

He understood, and the answer was instant :
“Better.”

“Thank God!” was all I could say, and then passed out of hearing. But I noticed that Rousard followed idly, walking down the street as though he wanted to see the prisoners entering their lodging.

We stayed that night at the village hostelry, the women lying in an out-house, still chained to each other, and some of the men in the stable. I lay in the same stall in which my man had found Marot, worn out with my iron burden, which was never removed, and the extra effort demanded of me while supporting Heloise Rion and her baby. But the whispered news which Rousard had brought—God bless the honest fellow!—was like wine to me. It gave me something to live for. If I lived long

enough to be chained to the galley seat, I would yet escape and find her. She should hear from my own lips that the galley slave loved her as he loved his life. Of course, she could never marry one who had the galley brand upon him, and in that thought lay so much of the bitterness. How could I ask a woman to be my wife—I, who was penniless, a felon, an outcast who never dared to show his face in Paris, and whose only hope of maintaining liberty was to go into exile? Still, if I could but tell her how I loved her! If, when I told her, she should answer that she loved me in return, although an exile, I should have some share of joy—the joy that comes when one knows that love is not resented, but requited.

I saw no more of Rousard for seven whole days and nights, and meanwhile poor Heloise broke down completely. The sun had gone, and the rains set in, making the roads doubly trying for those to whom a single ounce of extra burden might bring the struggle to an end. The mud clogged our shoes, so that there was weight at the shoulders, heaviness at the heart, and hindrance at the feet. But the chain moved on, and we had to go its pace. Heloise at last lost one of her shoes; before the day ended the other went, and she travelled barefoot, for the stockings were already full of holes.

Our journey on the sixth day after leaving Gueche lay along the side of a river. The path was hardly broad enough for the chain to traverse and allow the soldiers to pass us when they would. Suddenly, a little ahead of me, there was a splash in the water, and those who, like myself, looked down to the river

which ran between the deep banks, saw a man beating the water with his hands, frantically. I knew the drowning one; it was René Bandelet. He had contrived to slip the collar over his head unseen, and had made the bold but fatal bid for liberty. Whether he could swim I do not know; I think he could not. A soldier who had been swearing at one of the women not far behind, came forward, saw the man floating by, levelled his musket and fired. A cry of pain followed, poor Bandelet threw up his hands, then sank, and we saw no more of him. It was better a hundred times to die, than tramp on to the galleys, and endure the torture there.

It was nearing sunset when Heloise spoke faintly.

"I am ill, monsieur."

"Cling to my arm," I answered. "I will call to the guard."

She did not speak, but shook her head, then staggered on, now stumbling, so that I had to draw her close to me, and fling my arm about her waist. I looked into her face while she mechanically put her feet forward in their turn, and it was white and death-like.

"Let me kiss my child."

I contrived still to hold her up, and bring the babe's lips to hers. She whispered some loving words to the little one, who fondled his mother's face with his chubby hands, and crowed with pleasure. But the woman's head drooped, and with a sob she hung on my arm like one that was dead. I thought her so, and cried to the guard who was near. The fellow came up, wondering why I wanted him, then called a halt.

When we stood still, I lowered Heloise to the ground gently, kneeling beside her to see what could be done; but Death had been merciful, and had set her free. She belonged to the chain no more.

Three or four of the guards came and looked at her, then the officer in charge, drawing forth a key, gave it to one of the men, who bent down and unlocked the collar. Without a word, the body was lifted and tossed out into the middle of the stream, where it sank like a stone.

The captain of the chain was about to turn away when he caught sight of the child in my arms.

"Was that her baby?" he asked roughly.

"Yes."

"Then give it to me."

Thinking that he might pass it on to one of the women, who might care for the little fellow that crowed aloud, indifferent to his mother's fate, I handed the babe to the soldier, who took it from me so roughly that it screamed with terror. He swore at it, then tossed it into the river. It struck the waters near to the spot where Heloise had disappeared, and sank out of sight.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE FILE

THE night which followed after the next day was spent in a hamlet some twenty miles farther south than my own château at Tour. In passing along the street I again saw Rousard, this time standing at the inn door talking with the landlord. He did not look at me lest he might draw attention to himself, but he knew full well that I was aware of his presence.

It was already growing dusk, and we were nearly at the end of the day's weary tramp. The woman who walked at my side, now that Heloise was gone, had talked incessantly on the way. She was an abandoned creature, who had lived in the Allée de Couvée, knew Mongorge, Margot Cartier, and Coulon, but was now on the way to the Tour de Constance because of having murdered her husband, or the man who passed as such. Apart from that, her company was obnoxious for many reasons. She was vicious and hard-hearted, turbulent and untamable, one who spoke words which, if she had been a man, I would have resented with a blow. She had never known poor Heloise Rion, yet she sought to blacken her character by making audacious charges.

But she rendered me an unintentional service. That day's journey broke in upon her strength. The sun had been exceptionally trying, and already ten poor women had been released from the chain, some of them falling dead, others not likely to see the day out. She had been quiet for an hour or two, and before we reached the door of the hostelry, began to sway. Suddenly she clutched my arm, and with a loud cry fell to the ground, foaming at the lips, and beating with her fists frantically.

The guards were scattered about the chain, none chancing to be near me at the time. At my call the procession halted, and the landlord, seeing the woman biting and struggling, hurried forward to be of some assistance. It was Rousard's opportunity, and following the keeper of the hostelry, he knelt with me at the woman's side.

"Take this, monsieur," he whispered, looking up to be sure that none could see him, and bending forward to cover our hands with his body.

My hand went to his instinctively, and took from him something hard, and a few inches in length, wrapped in a cloth. What was it? A dagger? There was no time to think of that. This I was certain of, that it was something which would be of service, and I received it gratefully.

"Hide it, monsieur!"

I thrust it into my bosom, and had barely done so when the guards began to gather. Anxious to get to the barns which were to afford us shelter, the captain of the chain produced his key for the eleventh time that day, and set the violent one free from the collar. Then calling to the women who had come

from the cottages, he bade them attend to her, and see that she did not get away when she recovered.

Rousard found opportunity in the confusion to whisper to me :

“ I shall keep near, monsieur. Try and get away to-night. If you can do so, make for the forest, and when there, hoot like an owl. That will tell me where you are.”

I rose to my feet at the officer's command, and the chain was on the move to the barns. Rousard followed curiously, as did many of the villagers, for such a sight relieved the monotony of country life.

When it had grown nearly dark, the weary prisoners had all fallen asleep. Being a hot and stifling night, the sentinel who was stationed outside mercifully left the door wide open, so that from where I lay I could look out on the village, and to the forest which lay eastward of it. The soldier, who had travelled with us all the day, was too tired to tramp to and fro, and sat in the doorway, just across the threshold, so that he could see into the place where his charge was sleeping. He passed the time as well as his ingenuity would serve, sometimes whistling a tune, singing a well-known song in a voice that scarcely travelled to my ears, or looking to his musket and dagger, which he polished carefully with a piece of leather. It would be so much less to do in the morning.

Meanwhile, lying prone on the straw, I stealthily opened the little parcel which Rousard had contrived to pass into my hands. Notwithstanding all my care, there was a faint chink of metal, which did not, however, attract the attention of the sentry. The first

thing that touched my fingers was a small dagger, which I slipped into my bosom contentedly, having felt its keen point. The other article was even more to my purpose just then, and I thanked God for Rousard's sensible assistance.

It was a file.

I did not waste a moment, but began to use it on the collar at my neck. As the rough edge began to bite into the iron, it seemed impossible that the noise the file made, being so close to my ear, and the rustling of the straw when my hand moved to and fro, should not be heard. But I rubbed on, keeping my eyes fixed on the sentry, so that if he turned his head I could cease instantly, and hide the implement which was to help me to liberty. He took no notice, however. It was evident that the sound which was so alarmingly loud in my ears was not perceived elsewhere.

Once the captain of the chain came to the sentry, who, hearing his approach, rose to his feet, and bore every appearance of having been actively alert from the first. The man who accompanied the newcomer carried a lanthorn in his hand, and threw the light into the place to see that all were asleep, but then moved on a yard or two, silhouetting, as it were, the two soldiers who blocked up the doorway. Since they were talking somewhat loudly, and could not possibly discern the movement of my arm, I wrought hard at my task, becoming more cautious as the officer passed on, and the sentry dropped into silence, leaning idly against the doorpost.

Two hours went before I finished my task, for there were many interruptions, sometimes from within,

when one of the sleepers stirred, or sighed in his dreams, and again, when the sentry, to keep himself awake, walked into the barn and moved up and down, peering at the prisoners by the aid of a lanthorn which had been hanging outside the door. It was an awkward, arm-aching task, for I had to file crossways, to avoid cutting into the neck, so that the work was that much extended in point of time ; but at last the tool had gone clean through, and the collar, which worked on a hinge, was open.

My heart leapt when I felt the hinge move to my touch. If I took the collar off, I was free, since the chain which had kept me in the long line of prisoners was fastened to it, and not to my hands. There are moments in one's life which may be deemed supreme, when everything hangs upon the opportunity it affords ; when, if it be used successfully, a new life may find its expression ; if lost, the future is discomfiture, and worse than that—little short of death, if one can count its disabilities. Here was my supreme moment. If I failed, I must needs tread every inch of the way to the galleys, and spend my days at the oars, writhing beneath the whip of hopelessness and the heavy blows of the *comite* !¹

My eyes felt as though they were starting from their sockets, when I watched the sentry, hoping that he would fall asleep. But no ! While I was holding the collar together, to prevent it from falling noisily to the ground, now that it was loose, he yawned, then stood upright, dropping the butt of his musket on the stones, and waiting expectantly.

Listening, I began to be hopeless, for there was an

¹ The galley slave-driver.

increasing sound of the steady tramp of soldiers. Why were they coming? To rouse us, and begin our journey afresh, hours before daydawn? Surely not. To relieve the guard?

Four men halted at the doorway. There was a short, quick order, the sentry joined his comrades, another took his place, and a few moments later all was silent again. My heart became as lead when I saw what had happened. How could I hope to get away now that a soldier had come fresh to his task? I was face to face with a problem, from the solution of which I shrank. If the soldier did not sleep, I should have to kill him, unless I would be content to await the morning, and take the consequences of my night's labour. At the calling out of the prisoners for a fresh day's tramp, a glance would show that I had been working at my chain, and after that, I should not be lost sight of, night nor day.

I have prayed for many strange things in my time, but that night I prayed to be saved from the task of murder, and for sleep to overtake the sentry. Meanwhile, waiting for my answer, I watched. The man walked up and down for a time, and as he paced to and fro, I noticed that he moved unsteadily. His footsteps were uncertain. Sometimes he stumbled, and once, when he tried to place his back against the doorpost, he lurched and swore. The thick-voiced words confirmed my suspicions, and raised my hopes. The fellow had been drinking heavily, and the potent liquor was working its way with him. I had only to wait.

But it was weary waiting to one so eager to get

away. The moments went slowly, as if they were loath to pass. It seemed to me that two long hours had gone before the soldier slid down clumsily upon the threshold ; as a matter of fact, it was not more than a quarter of that time. He sat with the musket across his knees, his head drooped on his chest, and in a few minutes heavy snores told that he was asleep.

Cautiously lowering the chains to the straw, I rose to my feet, and looked about me. All were asleep, poor fellows! Even for the criminals I had a sort of pity, for an experience was before them which made men know what hell was like. They had no need to die before they would endure some of its horrors. There was no assistance possible from me for any one of them. I could not have extended a helping hand even to my own brother, if I had had one there.

Crossing to the door, I waited to assure myself that the sentry was asleep. He gave no token of wakefulness, but his head sank lower, and his snores grew louder. The man's drunkenness served me well that night.

Stepping over the sleeper, I stood a moment in the open air. The lanthorn at the doorway burned so dimly that it would not betray my presence to anyone a dozen yards away. To the east, and half a mile distant, was the forest, becoming visible because the belated moon was just arising. One could see the uneven tree-tops like a black shadow against the silvery light, and to the south the open country, into which the forest had sent some solitary sentinels.

I dared not linger. A hundred yards away was a giant elm, offering shelter while I decided on my course. I hastened to it, tolerably secure from observation, because the light of the moon was scarcely strong enough to show a moving object, and the grass deadened any sound while my feet fell on it quickly.

When I got within the shadows, where none could see me, there was a movement to my right; scared by the sound, I drew the dagger from my bosom.

A whisper followed:

"Monsieur?"

The voice belonged to my faithful retainer, and I whispered in reply:

"It is Rousard?"

"Aye, monsieur. Come quickly."

No other word was spoken, and Rousard leading, I followed at a run, so that we were breathless when we halted in the forest. Our stay was of short duration, sufficient only to regain our breath after the wild dash across the grass. That done, we went forward, winding in and out among the trees until we must have travelled a mile.

"Are you hungry, monsieur?" asked Rousard, standing at the foot of a tree, from whence we looked down an open moonlit glade.

"Yes, my good fellow, but more thankful to you for the service you have done me," was my answer; and reaching forth my hand, I clasped his, and shook it gratefully.

"Now eat, monsieur, for we have a long journey," said my companion, whose voice shook somewhat, as if my greeting moved him.

Taking the food from his hand, I bade him go forward; I would rather eat as we moved, than halt. I wanted to feel that no moment passed without placing extra space between me and my possible pursuers. True, they might not miss me until the morning, when the weary, brow-beaten prisoners were brought out to complete the chain once more; but every yard made their task the harder, and my own liberty more certain.

After a while the moon was high enough to send her light through the overhanging branches, showing up the ground we traversed, so that we made better progress. When, after covering several miles, we got into more open country, where the forest seemed to straggle and thin out, and one could see a sweeping valley on the left, Rousard halted, and looked about him.

"It should be here," he said to himself. Then to me:

"I know this ground well, monsieur, for I was born here. Yonder, where the trees thicken, is my father's hut. He is a woodman, and being a Huguenot, will welcome you the more. Stay here. I will go and awake him."

I waited under the shadows of a beech-tree, backing into the hollow trunk which afforded space for a bigger man than myself to hide in. Some minutes passed before Rousard returned, but when he stood once more in front of me, he told of his father's willingness to find me shelter,

CHAPTER XXX

THE HOLLOW BEECH

MY hiding-place was in a line with the palisading which formed the boundary to the ground which surrounded the house belonging to my retainer's father. It was the hollow trunk of a huge beech-tree, one side of which presented a bold front to the forest, that was not more than fifty yards distant. Rousard knew this hollow in his boyhood, and in it he had kept his treasures, the possession of such being within his exclusive knowledge. It was entered by climbing to the fork on the house side, and dropping through a hole large enough for a man's body to pass. The opening was hidden with a thick and ragged mantle of wild vine, so that none, even had they climbed the tree, would have suspected any entrance to the space beneath. This mass of leaves needed to be lifted on entering, but it dropped back readily, and gave no token of any place of concealment.

Leading me thither, Rousard bade me climb up after him, and when I had done so, left me standing in the fork while he went for a lanthorn. He came back with one in his hand, but unlighted; then

dropping into the hollow, he used his tinder-box, and lit the candle.

The space which the light displayed was sufficiently commodious for one to lean against the side, and stretch his legs to their full extent, while some leaves, which Rousard threw in plentifully before he left me, made a comfortable bed, which took off the hardness of the well-trodden floor. Naturally enough, it boasted of no furniture ; but my man, in his boydays, had brought hither a heavy log, and it served as stool or table, just as one might fancy. From the entrance it was a sheer drop of eight or ten feet, and the sides afforded no foot or hand hold, whereby one could clamber out again. A short ladder was there, however, so that the exit and ingress were easy enough.

Having done what he could to make me comfortable, the kind-hearted fellow turned to put his foot on the ladder. There was a queer smile on his face when he looked at me.

“ My father will not see you, monsieur, because he wants to answer truthfully should any stop to ask some awkward questions. He can say he has not set eyes on you, without doing damage to his own feelings. 'Tis a way he has when he wants to serve other people, and some might take exception to it ; but I have no doubt the old man will make his case good when he stands before his Maker to explain matters.”

On being left alone, my weariness overcame me, and I fell into a dreamless sleep. On awaking, I saw that the leafy covering was thrown back from the entrance overhead, and Rousard peering in, as if

to assure himself that I was safe. His ordinary dress was exchanged for a peasant's garb—a necessary precaution, in case any of the soldiers who marched with the chain should remember having seen him in the neighbourhood just before my escape. The disguise was so complete that I was alarmed to see a stranger looking down; but the moment he greeted me, I knew him.

Finding that I was aroused, he left me, but returned a few minutes later with a basket. This he brought down the ladder, and, having asked how I had slept, spread the contents on the log. While I ate he disappeared, but came presently with some clothing, such as he wore himself.

“This, monsieur, will be a good exchange for the tell-tale red jacket, which is only worn by galley slaves. Should the opportunity come when we may get away, it would never do to be dressed so conspicuously,” and he nodded his head sagaciously.

There is no necessity to recount my feelings during the days I spent in hiding. They were monotonous; yet the need for care served to lessen the wearisomeness. Rousard would sometimes come to tell me what he knew, but not so often as he would have done, since there was one working for his father who was excited at the news which had percolated the forest, and had spread over the countryside beyond, as to the escape of a notable prisoner from the chain. He was so important a personage that the chain was detained at the village while the district was scoured, and a reward of a hundred pistoles had been offered for information which would lead to his capture.

"We must beware of Pierre Basselin, monsieur," observed Rousard. "I heard him say this morning that he would dearly like to earn the hundred pistoles, since he wanted to marry the miller's wench at Fleury; and I verily believe he would stick at nothing to get the money, he is so infatuated with the girl."

"Could we not buy him with a bigger sum?" I asked; for the prospect of being shut in the hollow tree day and night for weeks to come was not exhilarating.

Rousard scratched his head and reflected for a while.

"Yes, monsieur," he said dubiously, "we could buy him, no doubt, if you have the pistoles."

It was the first time in all my life that I had known the want of money, and now I experienced the disabilities of poverty. I had not a coin of any sort about me, nor a jewel which could be exchanged for gold. I was as poor as the beggar who whined at the street corners, or contemplated murder in order to get bread. I had been stripped to the skin in the Palais des Tournelles, and all the wealth I once possessed was swept away from me by the King, or those of his creatures who had secured my downfall.

That was the moment when I realised the absoluteness of my descent and loss of place. If ever an arrow rankled in my heart it was then, and Rousard, leaning against the wooden wall, looked on with quiet sympathy. He remembered the high estate from which I had fallen, and cursed his clumsiness in putting the truth before me. But how was he to know? He asked for pardon, and I took his hand in token of my belief that he could have said no less;

that sooner or later I should be compelled to measure up my resources, and acknowledge my poverty.

The bitterness of it! to know that a man is revered in proportion to the fatness or leanness of his purse, and that if the purse be lean, he is despised, go where he will. There were men and women at Court who had envied me, and paid me much attention. They were glad to know me, were gratified if I gave them a friendly nod, took it as a compliment if I invited them to my table, were proud to be seen with me in the street; but that was when I was rich.

I looked down on my shabby peasant's garb, greasy and jagged with the thorns which the previous wearer had brushed against when he was hedging. Apart from the fact that I was a reputed Huguenot, would the men who watched the palace gates admit me? They would kick me away as they would a dog. Suppose I succeeded in slipping into the corridors or chambers where my lords and ladies gossiped—how many would speak to me? What lady would lay her soft white hand on my arm and laugh with me as of old? They would slink away, and the noisy corridor would become silent and empty, save for the presence and the execration of the one poor man who had flaunted his poverty before the world.

There was nothing for it but to beware of Pierre Basselin, the woodman.

Rousard and I had many a talk together, but always at the time of sunset or at night, lest the prying eyes of Basselin should mark his visits to the beech tree. After the day's work was done, the woodman went to the village in the valley to see his

Dulcinea, and frequently my man watched him go that way, coming to me when the other disappeared, bringing the food that was to serve me for the next four-and-twenty hours. Once he came with a book which he took from his father's room, hoping thus to find me something that would serve to pass the time, which went so slowly. It was Froissart's "Chronicles," and on the first reading it was full of interest. But one gets to the end of a book before long, and looks round for fresh methods of whiling away the dreary hours. Froissart served his turn, and then I wanted no more of him, but sighed instead for my missing copy of Montaigne.

Rousard came to me one afternoon, his face flushed, and betraying signs of excitement. Dropping down into my hiding-place, he delivered himself of some startling news. A dozen of the King's body-guard, who knew me personally, and could detect me among a score of men, had been scouring the forest. They halted at his father's house, and asked the old man if he had seen the Vicomte de la Tour.

"I never set eyes on him!" exclaimed the forester doggedly, standing in his doorway, and not turning a hair. He had kept to the letter of the truth without volunteering any information, and felt that, under the circumstances, his course was one of justifiable duplicity.

"Where are the soldiers now?" was my eager inquiry, especially when my companion asserted that the leader was none other than M. de Biron, who had arrested me at the Château de Neure.

"Gone in the direction of Fleury, and Basselin after them as hard as he can run, in the hope of

picking up some news, and earning the hundred pistoles."

"Then if he be gone, may I not get out of this for a while, and have a breath of the free air?"

"I'll go outside, monsieur, and look around," was the answer.

The serving-man clambered up the ladder, and standing in the fork of the tree, peered among the leafy branches to be assured that none lurked either in the garden or the forest.

"Come, monsieur," said he at last, and with alacrity I climbed into the open air, which I had done many a time in the darkness, but had not ventured to do in the broad daylight.

Rousard was alert while I sat and enjoyed the scene before me. Between the branches I could see on one side the dense forest through which we had come when seeking this shelter. Behind was a garden gay with flowers, and at the other end the unpretentious house in which my companion was born. A white-haired man stood in the doorway, tossing bread to the birds that came from the trees around, chattering alike to him and to each other, while they waited for another handful of crumbs.

"My father," observed Rousard, who had followed my gaze, and marked the unspoken inquiry on my face. "Do not let him see you, for he wants to be truthful if he can, should M. de Biron come here again."

The old man turned indoors, and then I turned to look towards the open country. Far away, and on the border of a splendid landscape, was a noble building. My heart beat more quickly when I heard

that it was the Château de St. André, the home of Louise. Miles away to the right was another which had a familiar look about it, and I could not forbear an exclamation when Rousard said that it was my own home at Tour.

Near to hand was the fertile valley of Fleury, with a winding river skirting the corn-fields, and circling half-way round the village whose roofs were glittering in the sun. A white and dusty road led thither, and on it moved a dozen horsemen. They were searching for me, and I found it difficult to repress a cry of exultation at the thought that they had missed me. Far behind was a solitary figure—a man whose hands were held up at his sides, and who ran at his top-most speed.

I pointed at him, but did not speak, and Rousard answered my look :

“Pierre Basselin on the look-out for his hundred pistoles.”

We waited in silence until the horsemen disappeared behind the little church.

“I wish I could get rid of Basselin,” said Rousard regretfully, and as if to himself. “Now that he is fairly on the hunt, he will follow up the search, for he is mad on that wench. I know him well, and I do not see how we are to get away. We cannot be off in daylight, and last night I caught him prowling about in the garden. God help us if by any means he should guess that this tree is hollow.”

“If I had some money!” I exclaimed vainly. A hundred and fifty pistoles were as impossible to me as to the veriest beggar.

My companion said nothing, and an hour later we

saw a man come from behind the church at Fleury, and walk quickly along the road towards us. We watched his progress, and kept him in view until he took the bend at the hill. He would have to pass very near to the tree if he proved to be Basselin; consequently I dropped into the hollow trunk. Rousard replaced the mat of wild vines, and left me to myself.

I saw no more of him that evening, and when it was quite dark I began to think that I would climb the ladder, and spend an hour or two in the open air. It was company to hear the owl and the night-jar, or listen to the passing of a wild boar. I had, however, a page or two of Froissart to read, and I did so deliberately; for time was cheap to me then, and anything that would pass an hour was welcome, after weeks of seclusion.

I closed the book when I had ended the chapter, and stood on my feet. Then an exclamation of wonder made me look up. The lanthorn was burning dimly, but I saw everything plainly. The light fell on something which sent a feeling of faintness over me for the moment—the face of a man with parted lips, and eyes showing their white rims, so widely had they opened with astonishment.

The fellow was a fool in one sense, for instead of slipping away and giving the alarm on making such a discovery, he had cried out and attracted my attention. Now he was spell-bound, and could do nothing but stare. Whether his good fortune had paralysed him I cannot say. I had never seen him before, but I was convinced that he was none other

than Pierre Basselin, who, in some way, chanced upon this place in which I was hiding.

He was too high up for me to grapple with him, and prevent his getting away, and I was altogether at a loss to know how to deal with this real danger. A parley with him was not likely to be of much avail ; to offer him a bribe was to enter on a bargain which a poor man could never complete.

“ Who are you ? ” he asked presently, still staring at me.

Not knowing what to answer, but trying to puzzle out a scheme equivalent to the difficulty, I began with evasion. The stare relaxed while we talked, and presently the fellow brought matters to a climax.

“ Now tell the truth. Are you not the man who escaped from the chain—the Vicomte de la Tour ? ”

“ I ? ” was my questioning reply, putting as much surprise into the tone as possible.

“ Yes, you.”

Suddenly his face, which had become radiant with the thought of his discovery, changed, the mouth screwed up, and an explosive exclamation of pain escaped his lips. The next moment he tumbled into the hollow, and after him came the big body of Rousard.

CHAPTER XXXI

DESPERATE MEASURES

BASELIN was so thoroughly taken by surprise that he was slow to rise to his feet, and when he did so, found himself confronted by his master's son, who was ready for such action as circumstances might demand.

"What were you doing up there?" asked Rousard, with a nonchalance which thoroughly covered his consternation at finding that our secret had been surprised.

Basselin, who had been brushing himself out after the rough handling, regained some of his presence of mind, and put a couple of questions himself:

"What are you doing down here, Rousard? And this other man—who is he?" pointing at me.

He dropped his bravado, however, when he caught sight of the retainer's face, and his mouth slowly opened, indicative of fear as to his own safety. It occurred to him that he would stand small chance of getting off with a whole skin if he were disposed to be rough with him, and that there was little probability of any help being forthcoming, since none knew of his having gone prowling round the garden,

and certainly were not aware of this hiding-place in the hollow beech. Rousard did not deign an answer, and the woodman did not venture to repeat his question.

"Basselin," said my man deliberately, putting a hand to his belt, and producing a dagger, which looked ugly in the lanthorn light, "I asked you what you were doing up there?"

He pointed to the entrance with the weapon, and the gesture, as much as the question, convinced the woodman that it would be wise to answer.

"I was on the look-out for the Vicomte, who escaped from the chain three or four weeks since."

"I suppose you wanted the reward?" Rousard observed blandly.

"Yes," was the sulky reply.

Not a word was said for a minute or two, and Basselin looked about him, overhead, and on the floor, as if to find a possible way of escape, for the weapon with which my man trifled was not reassuring.

Rousard stepped back against the side of the chamber, and spoke again.

"You wanted the money to enable you to marry the miller's wench at Fleury, so I suspect. The girl's very pretty, and should make you a good wife. I think it would be a pity if we spoiled her hopes of wedding a fine fellow like you, which, of course, we could do," he added, holding out his hand, so that the dagger looked more uninviting than before. "But what do you want the money for, Pierre? Won't she marry a poor man?"

The woodman answered sullenly, compelled to reply, it would seem, against his will.

"Old Mignard says he won't consent till I can show a hundred pistoles, and all my own."

"So you thought you would play at spy to get the pistoles?"

"I didn't say so."

"Now, don't talk nonsense, Pierre! You want money. Suppose we gave you a hundred and fifty pistoles—fifty more than M. de Biron offers—would that keep your mouth shut as to what you have seen here?"

I turned quickly, and looked at Rousard to see if he had gone mad. How could I find a hundred and fifty pistoles? But Basselin took him seriously enough, and answered quickly:

"Try me."

"I should want to do more than try you. You would have to swear one of the most solemn oaths a man can swear never to whisper or give any hint whatever as to this," and he waved his left hand, as if to indicate all that was contained in the hollow beech.

The woodman plucked up courage somewhat.

"What's the use of talking about such a thing? What are you going to do with me?"

"I am going to show you a hundred and fifty pistoles, and promise to pay them to you if you take the oath I have spoken about."

I was astounded when my servitor drew a bag from his bosom. Bidding me keep my eye on the countryman, he knelt upon the floor, poured out the contents on the wooden block, and slowly counted

the coins, one by one, placing them in little piles of ten. I do not think the woodman had ever seen so much money in a heap before, for he looked at the pistoles greedily, and breathed quickly. His hands began to fidget, and he found it difficult to stand still.

"A hundred and fifty," said Rousard decisively, placing the last pile of ten alongside the other fourteen, and throwing back his two wide-open hands. "They are all yours if you care to have them."

"I do!" cried Basselin eagerly. "Give them to me, and let me go!"

"Nay, Pierre, not quite so fast as that," said my man. "There are necessarily some conditions. You must stay here while this gentleman and I talk the matter over for a few minutes up there."

"Then you will make off, and not return," responded Pierre craftily.

"Nothing of the sort. Besides, I will leave the money on the block, and if we do not come back it is yours. I will put it in the bag, and tie it well round; and mark you, I shall look down to see that you don't take any out while we are talking."

There was no help for it. Basselin wanted to be gone, but had to stay.

Leaving him below, Rousard and I climbed out and seated ourselves in the tree while we talked together. Then I got to know of the retainer's loyalty, the knowledge of it touching me to the heart. He had spoken to his father, and the old man had gone to his store, which, when he had counted it, amounted to a hundred and fifty pistoles. It was his all, but he insisted on his son taking it, so that if Basselin should

prove troublesome, the greater sum might make the reward seem insignificant, and buy his silence, if not his co-operation. I wanted to see the old man, and thank him, but Rousard would not hear of it. His father prided himself on his truthfulness, and would feel that a lie had been forced upon him, since nothing would lead him to betray me.

Then came the thought that now it was imperative that we should be gone, unless we kept Basselin a prisoner, which scarcely appeared possible. We might detain him in the hollow beech for four-and-twenty hours, and go the next night if the way proved tolerably clear, and that we finally decided upon. Next came the question of ways and means. We should be compelled to quit the country, but how were we to live when in another land? and how should we keep body and soul together while travelling to the border or the sea, without money?

Rousard was dubious. He knew that his father had not another coin in his possession more than sufficient to keep his house going for the next week, and pay Pierre his wages. Out of nothing nothing could come, he observed sententiously, after an awkward pause, and some disconcerting reflections.

The decision to which we came was a desperate one, and to carry it out was tantamount to running into the lion's jaws, or dangerously near to them. I knew of a secret entrance into my own château at Tour—for I considered it my own, in spite of the forfeiture of my estates—and I thought it possible to enter, and get to the strong box which held my money, or obtain possession of some valuables which

were negotiable. There were many other things we could do if we timed our arrival at night.

“And what about Basselin?” asked Rousard, falling in with the suggestions somewhat unwillingly, and only because there seemed no help for it.

“Take him with us, and tell him he shall have the pistoles, and more, if we can get any, so soon as we are safely away from the château. He must go with us so far.”

When the details were arranged we re-entered the hollow, and told the woodman what we had decided upon. He looked somewhat glum at the prospect of an imprisonment of four-and-twenty hours, but the expectation of money sufficient to make him comparatively rich, reconciled him to the necessity for patience. He took the discomfort philosophically, knew that he could satisfactorily explain his enforced absence to the girl for whom he was venturing so much, and consequently threw himself on the ground to sleep.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE HAUNTED COPSE

TAKING him at his own estimate, Basselin was by no means the commonplace countryman one might reasonably have judged him to be, but one of very considerable parts, and well versed in the ways of the world—that is to say, of the rustic's world. In the course of his incessant chatter he displayed himself as the incarnation of boastfulness and self-satisfaction. Before he had talked an hour, I knew him as the most daring fellow of the countryside, standing higher in the esteem of the maidens—especially the acknowledged beauties—than any of those who, he was honest enough to own, were more handsome than himself. He had but to hold up an inviting forefinger, and half-a-dozen of the wenches were waiting upon him.

Then he began to tell of the great things he intended to do with this hundred and fifty pistoles, and his plans were so astounding that it was a relief to climb the ladder, and breathe the air which satisfied everyday mortals.

I did this at considerable risk, for there was the possibility, and not an extreme one, that M. de

Biron had left some soldiers in the neighbourhood to watch the forest and the house close by. Rousard was so impressed with this that he did not come near to the beech tree until after sundown, but spent the day in labouring as a common woodman; a task which afforded him a reasonable opportunity for keeping a constant look-out on the forest, to be assured that there were no strangers loitering round.

Once or twice the time hung heavily on Basselin's hands, and he asked to go into the open for a walk round. We were at close quarters in the hollow, which was only comfortably large enough for one, so that he had some excuse when he desired to stretch himself, and fill his lungs with fresh air. I explained to him the desirability of keeping out of sight, and when he did not appreciate my plea for privacy, I had to say plainly that a hundred and fifty pistoles were far more to marry on than the paltry hundred which the Chief of Police was offering.

Just before sundown he had talked himself empty, and had not another word to say. His imagination was unequal to any further invention, and consequently he sat back with folded arms, and communed with himself. Once or twice, while he indulged in his own thoughts, closing his eyes the while, I saw his shoulders shaking with silent laughter. I concluded that he was thinking his part over, previous to recounting his adventures to the miller's daughter, and that he was immensely satisfied with the mental rehearsal. Judged by what happened later, my conclusion was scarcely a correct one.

It was quite dark when Rousard dropped down into the hollow, and said that the way was clear. I

rose to my feet instantly, glad to be on the move again, even should the risk be ever so great. Nor was Basselin less eager, for he shook himself, and declared that the sooner we got away the better. He had already taken the oath, a very solemn one, but the serving-man, who knew him, made him go down on his knees and say it over again, by way of reminder. I thought the woodman looked somewhat pale when Rousard rehearsed the oath, and bade him follow, but he pulled himself together, and declared that he was too anxious to have the money to bother about anything like treachery. We both believed him.

We had four leagues to travel before we could reach the château which had once been mine, and as the night was moonless, and the rain began to fall in torrents, we made such poor progress that signs of dawn displayed themselves while we had yet a mile to go.

To approach in broad daylight was out of the question, so that we were compelled to look around for a place of concealment. It was too wet to remain in the open if any house proved available, and now being in a neighbourhood we knew well, Rousard and I drew apart, and talked the matter over. There was considerable uncertainty as to what might be the attitude of the rustics, who doubtless knew of my having been sent to the galleys for heresy. Rousard might enter their homes, for no charge had been made against him, and he might eat and sleep to his heart's content. Basselin also might accompany him without any demur on their parts. The difficulties centred about myself. The people on the estate

would perhaps shut the door in my face, either because they hated heresy, or because of the penalties which attached to those who harboured Huguenots. There was the risk, moreover, that they might betray me for the sake of the money. My old retainers were not likely to turn their backs upon me because they loved the new master more; but so many things had to be considered, and the people at Tour were human, and the quality of self-preservation would not probably be held more in abeyance by them than by others.

Had it been a fine day we should have found shelter among the brushwood, but the rain poured down mercilessly, and we were wet to the skin, as well as hungry. Rousard spoke after due deliberation.

“The only place I can think of is the hut yonder, where old Margot Ducrot lives; but one has to think of the consequences to her, should it get abroad that she sheltered you.”

“She will never suspect that I am the Vicomte when she sees me in such a garb as this,” I suggested, but doubtfully, looking at the drenched peasant’s clothing, and the boots clogged with mud and filled with water, after the night’s journey.

“Perhaps not, monsieur; she is not too keen of eyesight. But she may know your voice, and what then?”

“She would betray me,” I observed, and with good reason; for the old woman had always been hard-spoken when Huguenots were the topic of conversation. But Rousard had quite another opinion about her, for he retorted quickly:

“I do not think so, but she might politely ask you

to seek shelter elsewhere. As for betraying you, I know her too well to suppose such a thing."

We were about to venture across the meadow to reach the door, when we saw a woman emerge from the place. She carried a basket in her hand, and a serge chapeau in some degree protected her head and shoulders from the storm. She walked towards us quickly, but her head was so bent down that I did not see her face until she was within speaking distance. She looked up, somewhat startled at finding men near to her, and we knew her instantly.

"Isabel!"

The name escaped our lips involuntarily, and the sound of our voices fell upon her ear, for she halted, as if inquiringly. Ignorant as to her possible attitude, especially since she dwelt with the Curé, I drew somewhat behind the others; but her quick eyes penetrated my disguise.

"Who is that, Rousard?" she asked, pointing at me with a hand which was quickly wet with the pelting rain.

"A friend," was the evasive reply.

"Nonsense!" said the woman. "I know who it is, and it is not well that he should be here. For God's sake, take M. le Vicomte away. Whoever heard of such madness? Rousard, you deserve to be whipped for bringing him here."

"Softly, Isabel," was the soothing rejoinder, for the woman was genuinely alarmed for my safety. "I will tell you what we want, if you can keep silent for a couple of minutes."

"Say on," she snapped, as if pretending to be

severe in order to hide her real feeling. "But hark! Monsieur, go and hide among the trees, for they may be soldiers."

I needed no second bidding, for one could hear plainly the thud of horses' feet upon the road which ran within a few yards of the spot where we were standing. I hurried into the brushwood, from whence I could see without being seen, and had not long to wait before I saw who the horsemen were. They pulled up when they saw a woman and two men talking together; then the leader rode to the little group and asked a question which made me thankful for having gone into hiding. It was M. de Biron who spoke. I knew his face, although his hat, from which the water poured, was drawn well over his head. Had I not seen it, I had reason to know his voice, and the sound of it made my heart beat the quicker.

"Have you seen a red-jacketed Huguenot go by?" he cried, half-savagely, for this hunt in the rain was not to his taste. "I am looking for M. le Vicomte, who may have donned some other garb," he added.

"No, monsieur," came the answer from the woman, who ignored the latter words; "we have seen no Huguenot."

God bless her for her loyalty. She said more in answer to his questions, and so also did Rousard, but I could not hear the words. Whatever they were, they served to convince the Chief of Police that no Vicomte had passed that way, and he must seek elsewhere. He turned round his horse, whose feet kicked up the mire, splashing the little group.

"A hundred pistoles have been offered, but the

King will give two hundred now to the man who will tell us where the Vicomte is," cried De Biron.

"Or to a woman, monsieur?" asked Isabel innocently.

"To a woman? Of course!" was the somewhat snappy reply, and the rider rode off at a canter, followed by the soldiers who awaited him in the road.

The three watched the horsemen until they were out of sight, oblivious to the rain which dripped from every corner of their clothing. Each was deep in thought, and not one spoke until Isabel's face turned in my direction. Then she strode across the slippery moss, stepping over such roots as were in her way.

"Monsieur, I can hide you for a while—say for a few hours, if you will trust me," said she, standing before me with deference.

In spite of my shabby garb, and the mud with which I was bespattered, her old regard for rank returned. I was to her the Vicomte to whom she was wont to curtsy, and her kind-looking face bore tokens of her deep concern for my adversity. If others were ready to turn their backs upon me, she was not. Her face was already splashed with the rain, but the eyes were swimming with tears of sympathy which before long fell down the cheeks.

"Trust you, Isabel?" said I, taking her hand in mine. "God bless you for your loyalty, and offer of help. But where will you take me?" I added; for time was not to be trifled away in talk, since danger was abroad.

"Follow me, monsieur, and you shall see," she answered, hurrying forward, not now in the open, but among the bushes.

Asking no further questions, and confident that she would not betray us, we suffered her to lead us along many a pathway we knew so well, always, and somewhat to our alarm, drawing nearer to the château. My consternation became so great in time that I halted and protested that Isabel was leading us where discovery was certain.

“I do not wonder at your objection, monsieur; but will you not trust me?” the woman asked, with a wistful look on her comely face. “There are few of the peasants about on such a day, and it is too early for any of the retainers of the new lord to be abroad. But let us not delay, for the moments are precious. Half an hour hence may be too late.”

She went on again, now leading us into the midst of bushes which no eye could penetrate, and so tall that our heads could rarely be seen when we stood upright. Such a possibility we avoided by stooping low when we came to places where the growth did not reach so high. Whether Rousard knew the place, I could not tell, but this part of the copse was strange to me. Here and there we came across a brook which twisted and turned, and now, after the heavy rain of the night, was hurrying on in flood and noise, eager to discharge its abnormal measure of water into the distant river. Although the day was an hour or two past the sunrise, it was deep twilight here, and had the sun been blazing in the sky, there would yet have been a sombre shadow over the place.

Isabel halted. When she turned to us we saw that her face was deathly pale.

“What place is this?” I asked, wondering that I

could have dwelt the greater portion of my life in the neighbourhood, and did not know of such a spot. I glanced at Rousard, and a scared look was on his face.

"It beats me quite," he observed. "I've been in this neighbourhood for years, but I don't remember this."

"Don't you?" was Isabel's response. "Come here, and see."

Going forward through the high bush, she drew some dripping branches aside.

An exclamation almost of fear escaped my lips, and a low whistle of consternation from the retainer. As for Basselin, he had followed sullenly, and took no interest in anything that was going on. He kept close up to us, lest he should lose us, for here we were in a maze from which there was no apparent outlet to any but those who knew it well.

Before us was the Curé's house. Not a dozen yards away was the tree under which Isabel had sat while I perused the letter which the priest had taken from the bureau. To the left was the same impenetrable bush into which none had trespassed. No one would venture by reason of a legend which pointed to the place as haunted. One could understand—when memory began to work—that Rousard, as man or boy, had never plunged into the dark recesses of the haunted copse. The old story ran from lip to lip among the people of the countryside that long ago in this lonely place a priest had kept one of his brothers who was mad, and could never die. Night after night the maniac walked to and fro in nakedness, so far as the chains would suffer him, and cries,

and sobs, and screams of pain, and bursts of maniacal laughter would be often heard, or the low and piteous wailing of one whose life would never end, and whose tale of misery was never complete. Some had said that when they wandered by the place they could hear the clanking of the chains, or at times a prayer for a death that would not come. One curé after another had gone to the edge of the bush, to exorcise the spirit that possessed the copse, but there was only a temporary hush, and the terror began again.

I remembered it all, and turned to look at Rousard. His eyes had a frightened look in them, and his natural manliness seemed to have deserted him. But for the love he bore me he would have dashed away into the open, risking discovery and its consequences.

Isabel was pale and trembling. I thought she would fall to the ground with terror, but she controlled herself, making the sign of the cross continually.

"I was constrained to bring you here. None other would venture hither, monsieur, so that I knew you would be safe," she said apologetically, her words coming with a certain breathlessness, and her hands, which she placed on her bosom, moving restlessly.

She was going on to say more, but her mouth was dry, and her lips had a tremor about them which served to show that she was struggling against an inclination to scream aloud.

She had dared so much in coming here, and for my sake. I had never known another pass through the copse.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE MADMAN'S ROOM

THERE were two courses open to us now, and Isabel told us what they were. One was to go to a dilapidated hut close by, the existence of which we had never heard, since none now living had seen it, buried as it was under the rank growth of the copse, the other was to enter the Curé's house, and hide in a spot where, so the woman assured us, we should be secure against discovery. Either alternative was undesirable, but since the horrors of the haunted copse would be beyond endurance when night closed in, we preferred to incur the risk of entering the priest's dwelling, and lying there in warmth, with only human foes to think of.

There is a certain sense of shame within me while I write down the fact that I dreaded my stay in that man-forsaken spot where a mad spirit was reputed to dwell. While one may pride himself on being tolerably free from superstition, there is a remnant of it in all who are human; and when one is taken unawares, it hurries out of the dark corner of one's soul, and declares itself. I thought myself as free of

it as most, but I could well have run from the haunted spot, if my pride had not controlled me.

There was no one stirring in the house, so far as we could judge, and none outside, where the rain was now pouring down in a perfect deluge. Nevertheless, we did not venture across the lawn, but proceeded cautiously among the trees and bushes which formed the boundary to the Curé's garden. We were about to enter Calvisson's home when Isabel opened the woodhouse door, and hurried us in, closing and locking it after us. Wondering what this might mean, we peered through the cobwebbed opening which served as a window, and saw Broglie, the young fellow who had been my page. He was coming down the apple walk, but presently halted at the open door, where the woman awaited him.

"Why, Isabel, you seem wet!" said he facetiously, looking her up and down leisurely, while the water poured from his own cloak, and formed a pool on the doorstep.

"I might well be wet when I have walked all the way from Margot Ducrot's home," was the good-natured reply.

"So far as that, and so early? Hadst gone to see Margot's handsome nephew? Fie on you! But why do your courting so early in the morning, and on such a morning, too? Why not keep to courting at night? Ha! that's the time, when the young fellow could have walked at your side, with his arm about that graceful waist!"

The page laughed loudly, and Isabel, who was good-nature itself, joined in, but stopped abruptly.

"Hist, Broglie! I forgot. We shall wake the priest."

"Holy Mary defend us!" said the page, lowering his voice, and crossing himself. "He would double yesterday's penance, which he set for me because he saw me kissing Susanne, and heard me tell her to let the priest hang, when she declared that he was coming. I did not know of his approach, but he both saw me and heard me, and I've been at my prayers ever since. But to business, Isabel. M. de l'Eperon—confound the interloper!—sent me to say that he will come hither some time after noon with one or two friends who want to talk business with the Curé. Now wilt give the message, and let me have the answer, sweet Isabel?"

"I dare not wake his reverence. Listen to him now, snoring as though—"

"As though he would fright the devil from visiting him," interposed Broglie, in a loud whisper. "But what must I say to my master?"

"Tell him that I will give the message to Father Calvisson as soon as he wakes."

Broglie nodded, and turned away; but he loitered as if he had somewhat more to say.

"M. de Biron has been at the château again, Isabel. He came this morning like a drowned rat, and as mad as could be. He nearly killed me when I asked his business, for he caught me a clout on my cheek, and sent me spinning, bidding me not to stop up the doorway when a gentleman wished to enter. He has been telling the varlets that he will give two hundred pistoles to any of them, and to the wenches too, if they will help him to capture the runaway

galley-slave. God save him! I mean the master," the young fellow added, lifting his cap reverently, showing that he put his heart into the prayer.

"Suppose they met with the Vicomte, would they tell of him?" asked the woman.

Brogie pushed out his lips, as if considering the matter, then answered emphatically:

"If they did, I would stick my knife into their ribs, the beasts!"

There was no mistake as to his sincerity, judging from the look upon his face.

"The master was a heretic," suggested Isabel.

"Not he! It was a lie on the Curé's part, but why he lied, I can't imagine; and so say all the varlets at the château when the priest is out of hearing, and M. de l'Eperon is not at hand."

"But tell me, Brogie, would the men and women be likely to earn the pistoles if they had the chance?"

"No. They were talking about it in the kitchen, and some of them vowed that they would kill the fellow who acted traitor to the master—for such we call the Vicomte, even now. God bless him, and save him, too! But I must go."

"Who are the visitors?"

"Don't know," answered the page, hurrying away, and slamming the wicket after him.

Ten minutes later, we were in a room which lay next to the priest's private chamber, where he received those who wanted to see him quietly. A fire soon roared on the hearth, and when Isabel had tossed in some rough towels, and three old robes which the Curé had cast aside, she closed the door upon us, and left us to strip and dry ourselves. A

large cage, some six feet square, with thick wooden bars strapped with iron, and a door large enough for a man to enter by, stood near the fireplace, and on it we hung our sodden garments so that they might dry.

Yet we were in considerable trepidation ; for while we were safe enough so long as we could hear the priest snoring in his room, what was there to hinder him, on awaking, from wandering through the house, and into the place where Isabel had lodged us? We began to think that we had chosen badly, and that in the outhouse in the haunted copse we should have been more secure from discovery. Basselin had no great desire to be caught in our company, lest his presence might have been construed into complicity with an escaping prisoner, so that he, too, had his reasons for hoping that Father Calvisson would not intrude upon us—at all events, not until he had received his money, and was gone.

We told Isabel our fears when she came to us with some food, but she smiled. She went to the door to assure herself that her master was asleep, then returned, and standing at the fireside, explained that the Curé never passed the door without crossing himself, and that nothing would induce him to enter. She had never known him so much as peep into the place ; he always hurried by, as if fearing lest some awful hand might be stretched out to draw him in.

“But why?” I asked, puzzled to know the reason for such fear on the part of the priest.

“’Tis the room where the poor madman lodged before he was taken into the copse. Yonder is the cage in which he was confined. It is said that he

gnawed at the wood just as a rat might have done. See it for yourselves. It wanted but little more time, and the bars would have snapped. The priest who was brother to the maniac feared lest he should break out some night and murder him. It was of no avail to clothe the poor creature, for he tore his garments into strips, laughing horribly while he did so. He even crunched between his teeth the plates and basins in which his food was placed, so that at last those who waited on him in the copse had to keep at chain-length, and thrust the food at him with a long-handled shovel. Sometimes he would catch this in his hands, and snapping it in two, make of it a club, with which he lashed about him furiously, beating down the saplings, and breaking off tree branches.

“The Curé has a horror of madness,” she went on presently, “and has declared many a time that he would spend a night out of doors, no matter how cold or stormy, rather than enter here. I do not like the thought of the room myself, and never come to it; but when I knew that you were in danger, M. le Vicomte, I thought of it as the safest place I knew of. You have no need to fear my master, so long as you are quiet.”

Her words seemed reasonable enough, for there was nothing in the room to tempt the Curé to enter, since it was absolutely empty on our coming in, save for that madman's cage. The room was next to that in which I had had many an interview with the priest. The walls were in a filthy condition, mildewed, and stained with the water which had found its way in during the rains of the last hundred years, while the

window was cobwebbed and grimy with so many years' accumulation of dust and damp, and darkened the room as effectually as though it had been shuttered. The wall which separated the chamber from Calvisson's had on it a patch of wood some six inches square. Examining it closely, I saw that it was hinged to some woodwork, but the hinges were so rusted that the iron was broken, while the wood itself was worm-eaten. When I prised it open with my dagger, the little door tumbled to the floor with a noisy clatter. A light sleeper might have been awakened anywhere in the house, but the priest slept on.

"Noises do not often awake him," said Isabel complacently, but going to the door, nevertheless, to listen. "Especially when he has supper at the château," she added, with a meaning smile.

Rousard and I fully understood the allusion.

Turning my attention to this hole in the wall, I saw that it was curtained on the other side, as if the priest had no wish to be reminded of the maniac's chamber. Putting my hand through, I held the hanging aside, and saw the room which I had cause to remember so well. There was little in the place which I could not see, and now, with the wall door removed, there would be little said which we should not overhear.



CHAPTER XXXIV

“FOR THE FALL OF FRANCE”

THE long night of tramping through forest and field, and on soddened roads, when we were beaten with the wind and drenched with the rain, followed by the welcome warmth of a roaring fire, good food, and dry clothing, caused a drowsiness which ended in deep slumber.

When I awoke the day was declining, and rising idly on my elbow, and indifferent to my companions, who were sleeping soundly, I gazed into the fire moodily. The blaze had died away, and there was now the dull red glow which lightened the room, into which the shadows of the departing day had crept while we were oblivious to all that was doing in the outside world. Now and again one of the sleepers moved restlessly. It was a sure indication that the heaviness of their sleep was passing, and they might soon be awake ; but that did not concern me. I was gazing at the pictures which formed themselves among the red and quivering heat of the logs—pictures which told of the past, and, for aught that I knew, had something prophetic about them. I shuddered more than once, for if scenes amid the

embers were faithful indicators of coming experience, there was capture before me, and—God forbid!—the galleys after all!

The representation of coming disaster was so real that I put my hand into my bosom, and drew forth the dagger which Rousard had given to me. If it came to capture, and the galleys were to be my lot, then I would end all by that sharp, short blade of steel, and forget Louise, the Curé, my reverses, and my pains.

I was roused from the unpleasant reverie by the slamming of a door. Listening intently, half-fearing for the moment to trust to that dread which Father Calvisson had for the maniac's room, I started to my feet and looked about me. There were some voices, but I could not locate them. I had forgotten the little opening in the wall, which would have served to reassure me, just as the message which Broglie had brought in the morning had slipped from my knowledge. But standing there, my whole soul alert, memory brought back one thing after another, and caused me to go on tiptoe to the opening, where I could see what was transpiring in the Curé's room.

The voices were now so distinct that I could hear words, and I knew some of the speakers because of the familiar tones. There was Father Calvisson, as a matter of course, and in a deferential tone he was requesting his visitors to be seated. The other voice was De l'Eperon's. But who were the strangers? I gently drew back the curtain to satisfy my curiosity.

There were four men in the room. The Curé was

standing with his back to the fire, all smiles and suavity, causing those whom he sought to please to forget his pimpled face and drunkard's nose. One who did not know him might have almost pitied so genial a man for having such an unprepossessing appearance, wondering at the incongruities which Nature sometimes permitted. He was rubbing his hands together, and waiting for his visitors to be seated.

De l'Eperon was not looking much the happier, although he was richer by my whole estate since I had last seen him. He had played his daring game, and won, but there was the possibility that his partner had been troublesome in the settlement. I could quite believe it, and somewhat viciously hoped that it had proved so. An avaricious man like Calvisson was not likely to let his partner off with slack payment. He must have made demands which rendered the coffers less full than they had been in my own day.

The other two men I did not know. Judging from their garb, they were Churchmen, but that might mean little, since disguises were frequent. Of course, it was possible that the Curé was suave because they were ecclesiastics of high rank; but plausible as the explanation was to my mind, I had the impression that he honoured them from some ulterior motive. Before many minutes had gone, I knew them to be genuine Churchmen, but not of France. The first word which one of them uttered betrayed him an Italian; the response of the second to a question from Calvisson was German in its accent.

One long hour they talked, debating a topic which meant the ruin of France. I could hear sufficiently well with the curtain dropped, and with less risk of discovery ; so that having satisfied myself as to the persons who were in conclave, I was content to listen without seeing the speakers. My only excuse for eavesdropping was the natural wonder as to whether I was in any danger because of their presence in the house. Otherwise, such an act would have been abhorrent. Hearing some movement behind me, I looked round and saw Rousard. He had noticed that I was standing against the wall, and wondering whether any mischief was stirring, came to my elbow to listen. The conversation absorbed him as it did me, so that we became oblivious to everything save what was transpiring in the Curé's room. We stood there, face to face, almost taking each other's breath, which came quickly, while we followed the topic that engaged their attention.

Gradually the knowledge came as to the object which the strangers had in coming to Tour. One was an emissary direct from the Vatican ; the other represented the princes of the German Empire. They, as Churchmen, had been chosen, as being less liable to arouse suspicion than if two noblemen had undertaken the mission. They were Jesuits, without doubt, and naturally more subtle in their ways of dealing with those whom they had been deputed to visit. It had been recognised in the courts of Europe that Louis the Fourteenth, a monarch of a restless, grasping nature, had already become the arbiter of Europe's destinies. His

preparations for war on a colossal scale alarmed the statesmen outside of France, and since they could never get anything from him but suave assurances of friendship, they had more than once formed strong coalitions against him. One of these was the famous League of Augsburg, the design of its promoters being to bring moral force to bear upon Louis, so that by realising his isolation, he might forego his plans.

Coalitions, however, which lacked a show of force had proved ineffectual; but now, as we heard, while listening, the armies of the Great Powers of Europe, equipped with secrecy, were shortly to be set in motion, simultaneously invading France at her most vulnerable points.

What this had to do with De l'Eperon and Calvisson I soon discovered. The former had been appointed to the command of a strong frontier fortress which barred the progress of the Italian army. The emissary from Rome promised him papal favour, and emoluments which seemed to me almost beyond the dreams of avarice, if he would betray the stronghold when the army approached. The hatred for France, or fear of her, must have been great to call forth such a payment.

Calvisson had no such opportunity, but he possessed a persuasive power, which was known at Rome to be irresistible, over a noble whose superstitious regard for the Church was common knowledge. This noble guarded the approaches from the Rhine, and three fortresses which formed a line of defence were within his jurisdiction. He was to

be amply rewarded, while Calvisson, who was ambitious alike for position and wealth, was promised gold, and a vacant see.

I drew the curtain back while the German was telling the Curé this, for I wanted to look at the priest's face. He had been sitting in his chair with folded hands, as if ready to pretend certain objections; but the promise robbed him of his self-possession, and he rose to his feet hastily.

"You mock me, monseigneur!" he exclaimed.

"This is no time for mockery, father. His Holiness himself has so decreed it, as this letter testifies. The Pope promises the see and the Emperor the money." Thereupon the ecclesiastic handed Calvisson an open letter, which he read eagerly, his hands trembling with excitement, and his face flushed with greed.

"I will do all that you desire," said he, moving restlessly; "and I would to God I might start on my errand at once."

"We must needs restrain you for a week," was the response of the German, on whose face was a look of satisfaction. "We have to approach the Governor of Rochelle—"

"Who is in Paris," interrupted De l'Eperon.

"That is well, if it be true," the other observed doubtfully. "But we were told that he had returned to Rochelle."

"I saw him in Paris less than a week since, and he told me that he did not intend to leave the capital for another fortnight."

The German nodded approval at De l'Eperon's words. It would shorten their task considerably, he observed.

Having secured the co-operation of these two men who were so ready to betray France, the emissaries set forth the details. There was no need for haste. The Italian army was ready to advance at twenty-four hours' notice, but England was not yet prepared for a descent upon Rochelle, nor were the Germans sufficiently near to make such an early dash across the border. There was to be simultaneous action four weeks from that day, and meanwhile the utmost secrecy was to be observed, since so much depended on taking Louis unawares.

When everything had been arranged to the satisfaction of all who were plotting for the fall of France, Father Calvisson summoned Isabel, and ordered wine. She brought it, and the four, while drinking, went again into such details as might prevent anything like misunderstanding. So anxious was the priest to make himself secure, that the emissaries, at his desire, wrote and duly signed a paper, setting forth the reward he was to obtain for his services.

Not a word escaped us, and we were so anxious to see what transpired that we held back the curtain, and peered into the Curé's room with eyes that scarcely blinked. We paid no attention to Basselin; indeed, he never so much as took our thought for a moment, for here were matters engaging us of transcendent importance. A nation's fate was hanging in the balance. Five or six weeks hence, France, famous and feared, would lie bleeding at the feet of the conquerors, her farms and crops and vineyards destroyed, and, judging from what the Italian declared, the beautiful country would be converted into

a smouldering wilderness. It roused one to a pitch of madness to think that beloved France should be plunged into such direful misery.

"I will wring the Curé's neck the first time I meet him," said Rousard between his teeth, when the priest carried the paper to the bureau, and placed it in one of the drawers. I knew that it was no mere threat on my companion's part. He meant it.

As for De l'Eperon, my own unspoken resolution was that if I met him in the château, sleeping or waking, I would kill him; for that would be so much work done for the salvation of France. If any man owed loyalty to Louis, it was he who had been enriched by his King. I set aside the fact that he had been so enriched at my expense, for my thoughts were concentrated on his treachery, and the black ingratitude he displayed.

Presently the Italian lifted a full glass, and looking first at Calvisson, and then at De l'Eperon, he said, smiling the while:

"Success to the Holy League, and confusion to the *Grand Monarque*."

Not a word was spoken by the others, but each one raised his wine and drank. Then De l'Eperon, with a sullen look upon his face, dashed his glass to the ground. It splintered into a hundred pieces. His companions looked at him in wonder, while he of Rome smiled again, but said nothing.

"You are in earnest, my son?" said the German.

"I am," was the almost fierce response.

Saying this, De l'Eperon rose to his feet, and going to the door, opened it, and led the way in silence.

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The others, standing, followed, the Curé going last of all.

"I will wring the Curé's neck the first time I meet him," repeated Rousard, when the door slammed behind Calvisson.

CHAPTER XXXV

A DIFFICULT PROBLEM

SAVAGE at the thought of our helplessness, but wondering whether it was possible to spoil this base conspiracy, we turned away from the wall. We did not pursue our thoughts, however, for Rousard cried aloud :

“Where’s Basselin ?”

I looked at the speaker, and then around the room in amazement. There was no third man in the place, for the woodman was gone. Going to the cage on which his own garments were hanging, my companion felt among them hastily, and an oath escaped his lips.

“What is it ?” I asked, but for a while I got no answer, Rousard taking up one thing after another, and searching them vigorously.

“The beast has gone off with the hundred and fifty pistoles,” he said at last, almost dancing with anger. All sorts of declarations came tumbling over each other as to what he would do if by any chance he could lay hands on the fellow who had duped us.

The story needed no telling. While Rousard and I were occupied in listening to the men in the Curé’s

room, Basselin, who had apparently been sleeping, had used his opportunity. Quietly slipping off the priestly garb, he clothed himself in his own garments, sure that if we had seen him so doing we could say nothing. Still, not wishing to draw attention to himself, he went to his work as silently as possible. When this was done, he secreted the bag of pistoles about him, and carrying his heavy boots in his hand, had slunk away. A feeling of intense mortification at having been tricked by a countryman possessed us, when we sat before the fire once more. How he must have laughed in his sleeve at having escaped the two men who had drawn him so far away from home, and especially the ex-lord of Tour. I could fancy his chuckle at the thought of having outwitted us when we had considered ourselves masters of his movements.

There appeared to be no help for it, so that we sat before the glowing fire to wait until it should be sufficiently dark to venture into the château. Strange to say, I had no sense of fear as to the outcome of Basselin's escape. I pictured him hastening to the forest to get into hiding, in case we should follow in pursuit. But in a few minutes I had put him out of my thoughts, and busied myself with a problem of greater moment.

A mental conflict began which seemed to shake my very soul, now that I knew of the jeopardy of France. Unless the King should be apprised of the intentions of the League, and De l'Eperon's scandalous betrayal of his trust, the country could scarcely escape the terrible experiences that were to follow this cleverly planned crusade. The crown of the haughty *Grand Monarque* was likely to be trampled in the dust, at a

time when the nations had apparently acquiesced in Louis' supremacy, and granted all, or nearly all, his claims. He was, however, living in a fool's paradise, dallying with his mistresses while they strung diamonds which his people had starved to pay for. With the help of his second-rate statesmen, he was maturing plans which he expected to end in making him master of Europe. Instead of that the sluice-gates of war were to be loosened. It wanted but the signal, when they would be forced open, so that the terrible flood would pour irresistibly upon city and village, beating finally against the walls of the capital.

The problem perplexed me sorely, and took shape in the question: Should I think of my own liberty, or of my country's weal? I could not forget that I was a fugitive, who had broken from the chain, and was painfully striving to reach a safe refuge. The horrors of the galleys were a nightmare to me. It was common knowledge that those who once took their seats on the galley bench would never quit it till they were ready for the grave. The waist of the galley has been called by one a hell of foul and disgusting utterance. My bid for liberty meant escape from this hell, if possible. I almost cursed the unhappy chance that had brought to me the fact of the nation's peril, because, as a son of France, I must needs pause in my flight, and solve the problem of duty. Ignorance would have been happiness, for I should have toiled along the roads by night, hiding by day, but always pressing on to the sea to find safety, although it meant exile and poverty.

I tried with all my soul to argue my right to go on to liberty; but there was always that thought of ruin

for France. If the King knew, he could hurry his armies forward to the threatened points, and meet the invaders; if he remained ignorant, there would be the smoke of burning cities and ruined villages settling over the land like a funereal pall.

It was not Louis of whom I thought—not the King, but France. Nor could I say that it was the class to which I belonged; for the nobles were vicious and self-seeking, careless of the woes which racked the bosoms of the people. Who could suppose that I would stay my flight for the sake of such a king as Louis the Fourteenth? Knowing him as I did, I could say of him what I once saw written concerning the first Francis—that by harshness, by contempt of law, by violation of justice, by aggravated taxation, he became the true despot of France, a Richelieu without his breadth of vision and singleness of aim.

“No,” thought I, as I lay upon the floor, and gazed into the fire which Rousard had fed with fresh logs, “Louis is not a man to inspire anything like self-denial, for he is the personification of selfishness.” I was not prepared to say what some of those who fawned and cringed would say at times: “Sire, you command our service and our lives.” Not I!

I remember hearing Racine say, when Corneille and I were spending an evening with him: “The King cares for no one, and thinks of no one but himself.” It was a caustic thing to say, but it was none the less true. Racine had been greatly annoyed that day because of a dispute he had had with His Majesty over a sentence which Louis wished the playwright to expunge from a play he had been rehearsing

The actor demurred, but the King persisted, and in the course of their talk His Majesty said :

“Self-aggrandisement, my dear Racine, is the noblest as well as the most pleasant occupation of kings.”

“He thinks naught of the starving poor,” cried Corneille bitterly ; “naught of the misery that can be met with in the lower quarters of the city, but will lavish fortunes on his mistresses, while a million are longing for a meal !”

I thought of all this, and shook my head.

“Not for the King.”

But the problem still awaited solution. If not ready to stay my flight for the King's sake, what was I prepared to venture for my country? I loved France with all the love which true patriotism can inspire. I could not hold out against that subtle influence which induces a man to endure so much for his native land. I do not attempt to explain, for I do not think it explainable. Liberty and personal safety seemed so sweet—sweeter now than at any moment when I was journeying with the chain in the sweltering sun ; yet they were slackening their grip upon me while I thought of the perils which threatened France. Some spirit was working within as if to withdraw me from the thought of my own dangers, making me realise that I was a portion of the nation's personality—if I may put it so. I had laughed once when Masillon said, in one of his glowing perorations, that if patriotism thrills a man, drudgery becomes beautiful, and suffering noble, and death sweet in the country's service. I had laughed then, when there was no suggestion of

suffering for me, as did the others in the motley, chattering crowd that hurried out of the church. But now was the gravest moment of my life, when, without any desire to be a martyr, I had to choose between self and duty, between liberty and the galleys, between my own ease and the comfort of the nation.

I do not understand the logic of the thing, but I was compelled against interest, and I know not what besides, to risk everything to save France.

“I am going to see the King, Rousard.”

I had supposed that my companion was in the room with me, for being so absorbed with my thoughts, I had not noticed his absence. He stood in the doorway, however, while I spoke, with a paper in his fingers, and my words so startled him that it fell to the ground. Picking it up, he came in quickly, and shutting the door behind him, exclaimed incredulously :

“To see the King, monsieur?”

He looked at me as if to assure himself that I had not gone clean mad, and said again :

“To see the King?”

“Yes,” I responded presently. “He ought to know of the errand of those two Churchmen, and of the agreement they have made with Calvisson and De l’Eperon for the betrayal of France.”

“True, monsieur ; but if you go to see the King, he will send you to the galleys, and take precautions against a second escape.”

“He may,” said I dubiously ; but in my own heart I knew full well that Rousard spoke to the fact, and not to mere supposition. The King would

hear what I had to say, but to him I was a mere pawn on the great chessboard of the State, to be played so long as I was of any value, but removed when no longer needed. It was the natural course a monarch would pursue who cared for no one, and thought of no one but himself, and was all in all to himself. Favourites were thrown aside without a thought, so that one who had brought upon himself the frown of Majesty had little expectation of generous treatment, even while he rendered incalculable service.

"He may," said I, knowing this; and already I could feel the cold circlet of iron about my wrist, and had before me the hideous picture of the galley, every victim in which was toiling as they must toil in hell. But France had the right to demand her salvation at my own cost, and if I shrank from the payment, I was an unworthy son.

I put this before Rousard, and to it all he responded simply :

"It sounds right, monsieur; but it is all wrong. I see no reason why you should serve a King who has sent you to the galleys unheard, and at the instigation of a couple of rogues like the priest and De l'Eperon. Let us get away into the Low Countries, or to England—anywhere for safety, and let France take her chance."

"Have you no patriotism, Rousard?" I asked reproachfully.

"No one has more, monsieur; but I do not see why you should run your head into the lion's jaws," the man answered doggedly. "Get out of France, and let me go to the King."

I shook my head. I knew that none in his station could approach the monarch. A noble was not always sure of admission into the Presence Chamber, so much depending on the royal whim on that particular day ; and as for such an one as Rousard, it was unlikely that the keeper of the door would suffer him to enter without knowing his business, or that he would have sufficient wit to influence those who could carry his news to the royal ear if they chose—Père la Chaise, for example.

It was very trying to one's resolution to hear what the honest fellow had to say in order to dissuade me. To sit quietly and hear the King's character analysed, so far as one like him was capable of doing so ; to listen to the galley horrors which he recounted with an embellishment wrought out with unusual skill because he had an absorbing care for my safety ; to hear him say what a good thing it was to live, even in exile, so long as one had liberty—it was a difficult matter to hold to the determination that the King must know of France's peril, and that I must be content to take the risks.

Rousard gave up argument at last, and ceased to protest, standing at the fireside, and turning the paper in his hands idly.

"What have you there?" I asked, after a spell of silence.

"'Tis the written promise which one of the Churchmen gave to Father Calvisson," he answered, almost sulkily, handing it to me. "I went into the Curé's room, and took it from the bureau, thinking you might like to see it."

Here was damning evidence against the would-be

betrayers. I saw at once that however incensed the King might be against me personally, and indisposed to believe my story as free from prejudice, he would credit the written testimony. He would know that the plot was absolutely existent, and not a freak of the imagination. Seeing for himself what Calvisson had engaged to do, he would realise the danger threatening on the Italian border, and believe in De l'Eperon's perfidy. Any hesitation I may have had as to my course was removed instantly.

"This settles the matter, Rousard. I shall see the King, and ask him to read it."

"So be it," was the response, and the faithful fellow proceeded at once to clothe himself in his own garments, rolling up the priest's old robe, and tossing it contemptuously into the corner behind the cage.

CHAPTER XXXVI

BETRAYED

IT was now quite dark, and consequently we prepared to quit the Curé's house, to make the venture into the château, and seek for the much-needed money. There was not a sound anywhere save in the kitchen, the door of which was open. There was, however, that inexplicable consciousness of some unseen presence—the feeling that someone was near, although he could not be heard. That might be attributed to the vagaries of fancy, or exaggerated fear, now that we were bent on a dangerous errand. The sound in the kitchen served as an attraction, and walking along the passage, we heard what seemed like a woman's sobs. Wondering what trouble had come to Isabel, we looked into the place.

"What ails you?" I exclaimed, entering incautiously, and walking to the table, on which the woman had flung her arms in the abandonment of grief.

Before she had time to raise her head, Rousard cried out in alarm. Looking round quickly, I saw him hurled headlong into the kitchen by two men

who now stood in the doorway. Before he could rise to his feet, these men rushed in, followed by half-a-dozen others, one of whom was M. de Biron. We were so taken unawares that there was no struggle, for while Rousard was knelt upon, I was thrown to the floor, and like my man, bound hand and foot. We were then dragged to the wall, and our backs set against it.

Sitting thus, we could see what was transpiring. Isabel, usually so gentle, wiped her eyes; then observing someone standing in the open doorway, and rubbing his hands in glee, she snatched at a wine-jug, and hurled it at the man. He saw it coming, and ducked his head, but the vessel struck the doorpost against which he had been leaning, and was shattered, the contents scattering over him. The red wine covered the man's head and face, dripping to the floor, while one of the broken pieces tore a long wound across the forehead.

It was Basselin, who, on escaping, and finding that M. de Biron was at the château, had gone to him with information as to our whereabouts. He had counted on getting the two hundred pistoles which were offered for aiding in my capture.

"You cruel beast!" the woman cried passionately, looking round for another missile.

At that moment the Curé entered the house, and gazed upon the scene in astonishment.

"Who are those men?" he asked, pointing to us who were sitting on the floor, unable to move because of our bonds.

"The Vicomte de la Tour," cried Basselin savagely,

mopping his forehead, which was bleeding freely. "The other is his man, Rousard."

An evil smile stole across the priest's face. He had doubtless been told that I had escaped from the chain, and he was so pleased to find that I had been captured that his delight surprised the soldiers. His language, expressive of his gratification, and interspersed with words unworthy of clerical lips, apparently disgusted De Biron, who, when Calvisson asked how we got into his house, refused to answer, and forbade his men to make the Curé any wiser.

As for Basselin, he took him into the priest's room, and wrote out an order for the pistoles. The woodman, eager to finger the gold, and having nothing further to wait for, hurried away. I saw him pass the door, and heard the garden gate slam after him.

My fear was that poor Isabel would have to pay a heavy penalty for harbouring an escaped Huguenot, but De Biron, content to have found me, whispered a word or two of caution to her as to her further dealings with heretics. Natural as was my dislike for him, I conceded in my mind that there was a certain generosity about the Chief of Police ; unless, as I thought later, he had other things on hand, and did not wish to be hampered with prisoners. He looked at Rousard somewhat irresolutely, as if considering what he ought to do with him.

"Why are you in M. le Vicomte's company?" he asked sharply.

"I sought to get him away," the man answered doggedly. He concluded that escape was impossible, and blurted out the truth, knowing that the punish-

ment would be the same, whether he spoke or remained silent.

"That means the galleys," observed De Biron.

"'Twas my master," was the fearless response.

"Well, I only want M. le Vicomte, so you can go. If I find you loitering around, I will have you flogged, and sent off to the nearest prison."

Rousard did not speak, but when the cords were cut, and he was free, he bent over me, almost with a woman's tenderness, and kissed my forehead.

"God help you, monsieur, for I cannot," he said huskily.

I could not answer. The man's loyalty touched me to the quick, and brought tears to my eyes, so that I only saw his blurred figure when he turned away, and walked out of the room.

"Come with me, monsieur," said M. de Biron presently, and when I rose to my feet, with my hands still bound, and walked at his side, he spoke; but not until we had passed into the lime-tree avenue which led to the château.

"I am sorry for your fate, M. le Vicomte," said he, and the harshness had gone out of his voice; "but I have to do my duty."

I did not reply.

"I cannot think how you can be a heretic, monsieur, after pretending such loyalty to the Catholic faith," he observed, as we went through the wicket gate, and paced the terrace I knew so well.

"I am no heretic, M. de Biron. I am as true a Catholic as yourself. 'Tis that lying Curé who betrayed me, so that he might share in the spoils,

after M. de l'Eperon had secured my estate. There has been a base conspiracy against me."

I answered him emphatically, causing him to turn and look me in the face sharply.

"You astound me, monsieur."

"I speak the truth. I repeat, I am no heretic, but the victim of a conspiracy."

De Biron said no more, but led me to my old room, loosening my bonds with his own fingers.

"You will give me your word, M. le Vicomte, not to attempt any escape?"

"God knows I am an innocent man," I answered; "and since I have had no trial, I consider liberty my right. I therefore tell you, M. de Biron, that I shall do my best to get away."

"That is plain speaking, monsieur."

"It expresses my intention."

"Then I must double the guard. You will find four men on the terrace below, if you look from the window. I shall put some men outside this room, and they will receive orders to shoot you down if you venture into the passage. 'Tis my necessity, monsieur, and not my choice, since I have to account for your body to the King."

I turned away and walked to the window, where I saw the men already pacing to and fro. While I gazed at them in the spirit of hopelessness, I heard the door close, and looking round, found that I was alone.

My thoughts that night were too many to be put aside, and for hours I could not sleep. To be a prisoner in my own home was the cruel extreme of irony. It was exasperating to think of our careless-

ness in allowing Basselin to slip through our fingers as we had done, and I called myself a fool a dozen times over for not seeing that since he was intent on getting money, he would seek to betray me and secure the larger reward. I was a fool—one beyond all expression, deserving my fate for being so blind—for supposing that the woodman would allow the Chief of Police to cross his path, and not claim the money he had the disposal of. Why had we not thought of the possibility so soon as we discovered his escape? Then we might have got away.

After a time the remembrance of the jeopardy to France returned, and I could not put it aside, even if I would. There was De l'Eperon under this very roof, possibly planning how best to trail the glory of his country in the dust.

And Calvission also!

I thought I should go mad. How I wished I had whispered to Rousard to go to the King, to Racine, to Père la Chaise, to my cousin, the Comtesse du Roure, to Louise—to anyone who would get at the monarch's ear and tell him all. In the bewilderment which followed my capture I had forgotten it, and I cursed myself for my self-absorption and forgetfulness, when I might well have mentioned it to M. de Biron.

The moon rose, and when I gazed out of the window, I could see the men below. Their armour gleamed in the silver light, and their tread was steady and monotonous—such an unwonted sound at Tour. While gazing thus, the thought came that I would tell M. de Biron at once. I went to the door that I might ask one of the soldiers to fetch him, but it

was locked. No one answered my call, although I beat upon the barrier with my fists and boots.

Failing there, I crossed again to the window, and was relieved to find that it opened when I twisted the hasp. Thrusting out my head, I challenged one of the sentries, who asked surlily what my business was.

“Tell M. de Biron that I must see him instantly.”

“He is asleep, monsieur.”

“My business is sufficiently important to warrant your disturbing him.”

“He would be angry,” said the man impatiently, as if he had no desire to exchange words with me.

“Nevertheless, 'tis a pressing matter,” I insisted; “a matter of life and death.”

The man hesitated. It was easy to see that he was debating with himself as to whether he should pursue his monotonous tramp, and ignore me and my words, or send for M. de Biron. After a brief interval he went along the terrace for a few yards, then halted, and with his eyes fixed on the window, as if fearing that I was trying to be rid of him so that I might drop out and effect my escape, he called to one of the soldiers near, spoke some words to him, and returned to his old station, handling his musket somewhat ostentatiously, to assure me that he was alert against any attempt on my part to get away.

A quarter of an hour later the door of the chamber opened, and M. de Biron entered, buttoning his doublet while advancing.

“Why have you disturbed me in the middle of the night, monsieur?”

"Because I have news of importance to impart."

"Why did you not impart it when I was with you in the evening?" came the question, in a tone which showed that while the Chief of Police could be very suave at times, he could be as surly as a bear if anything displeased him. After the conciliatory attitude he had assumed during our walk to the château, his anger surprised me. He was clearly a man of moods, and it was unfortunate that this was an ill-tempered season with him.

"You gave me small opportunity," I responded, resenting his sharpness. "And more than that, I was too bewildered at my unexpected capture to think of the matter. But let that pass. France is in danger, monsieur, and it is necessary that I should see the King without delay."

"You to see the King?" he cried, in a tone which made my blood boil.

He was speaking as if I had been one of Mongorge's set, and that I was only fit to bandy words and exchange opinions with such as belonged to the Allée de Couvée. Had I not been a prisoner, no one should have spoken so to me without a challenge, or the direct blow in the face. But here I was helpless, and must needs take insult quietly, lest a worse thing should come upon me.

"It is necessary that I should see His Majesty, although I am a prisoner, and not in Court garb," was my answer. All my ire was aroused, but since I did not wish to spoil my chances of easing myself of this burden of knowledge, I did my utmost to control my anger and be calm. "France is in peril, and His Majesty should know."



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M. de Biron had hitherto proved himself a gentleman, but now he swung round on his heel, with the laughter of incredulity, and turning his back upon me, stalked towards the door. When I hurried to his side to entreat him to listen, he flung out his arm and hurled me from him; then hastened away, leaving me more desperate than before.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE CORN ROOM

I HAD fallen asleep upon my bed after long and discouraging hours of fruitless thought, and when I awoke it wanted no clock to assure me that the day was far advanced. Apart from the position of the sun, which cast the shortest shadows of an autumnal day, the view from the window bore testimony to the fact that the morning was growing old.

Before me were the familiar sights and sounds, such as I had seen and heard from my infancy. The women were standing as usual in the village street, in little groups, chattering and gesticulating as excitedly as ever, displaying as much feeling over a trivial household misadventure as when a real catastrophe had occurred. Such a thing as proportion was never likely to trouble them, for to people who had no great cares, and whose lot was tolerably even, the present episode was always the most absorbing. The stablemen nearer at hand were whistling, or exchanging coarse compliments or criticisms, as of old; the husbandmen were in the sunny fields, making the most of the day after such heavy rain;

and close by were the humdrum details, just as they had chanced when I was master of Tour.

I could not keep back the feeling of bitterness when I thought how happily the world was able to go on without me. It touches one's pride to think that after all a man is of such little consequence, that in spite of what he may have been, he is not indispensable. He may be missed, but the world is not wrecked because of his absence. One is apt to overrate himself until misfortune comes, and then a new and humiliating estimate is formed.

But there was something near which made me forget such things, and quickened my impatience. Four men were pacing the terrace, speaking in tones so low that the soldiers on guard could not overhear them. They were the four who had conferred together in the Curé's house. Not one of them looked up to my window except Calvisson, and that but once. The sun, however, was in his eyes, and he neither saw me nor the look upon my face. Had he seen me, he might not have been so self-satisfied as he appeared to be.

They wandered away at last, and I saw no more of them. Food was brought to me by one who refused to speak in answer to my questions. The man's stony stare was discouraging, so I turned my attention instead to what he brought. It was meagre in quality and quantity, as if to indicate that I was to be brought into training in readiness for the coarse and insufficient fare of the galleys. Being hungry, I ate with eagerness, then turned away to gaze out of the window again. One thing surprised me, and that was to find myself where I was, instead of having been

roused in the early morning to take my ride to Paris, or to some prison on the road, to await the coming of the next chain that was making its slow journey to the sea. Although it was nearly noon, there were no signs of departure.

An hour passed—perhaps more. The women went to their homes, and the men came down the street for the midday meal, or sat on tree trunks close by their work, to eat their food. The leisure gave me the unwelcome opportunity of turning my thoughts upon myself and my future. Inevitably the chain claimed my attention, and I pictured it going from stage to stage, and fancied myself more frequently whipped than in the first weary march. I rehearsed some of the pathetic stories I had heard, and might hear again—of people who at one period of their lives had been fêted and caressed, now envying the very beggars their liberty, and willing to exchange their lot with theirs, if it were but possible. Who could doubt it, when they knew that if the galley-slave left his bench at any time during the day, it was to be tied to the post, and whipped until he who wielded the weapon of torture tired? It was not an hour of thought which one would care to have; but the day was coming when the thought would be exchanged for experience. The anticipation served to thrill me with horror.

Could I possibly buy my escape? Some of those men below, who paced the terrace for hours together, looked as if a few pistoles would be acceptable. A man may do much with money—another will do much for it. One may escape from thralldom should he possess it in sufficient quantity; another may

risk much and point out a possible way if gold is offered.

It was only by money that I could purchase freedom. The sense of torture was, in my case, the more acute, because money was the only key to escape, and I had none. Had I been a Huguenot, there was the bare possibility that I should have but to renounce my heresy, and get some of my friends to advance me a great sum, the chains would be broken, perhaps, and I should be a free man again, restricted, it is true, and poor, and under the surveillance of the priests and M. de Biron. But for me such liberty was not possible. I had no heresy to renounce. Ostensibly, I was sent to the galleys for being a Huguenot, but some deeper motive had been assigned for obtaining the *lettre de cachet* from the King.

Money was the only thing that would serve me, but how should I get it? This was the room in which I kept one of my treasure chests. Three thousand pistoles ought to be in it—a sufficient sum to buy every man in De Biron's company, and De Biron himself, perhaps, whom I now saw riding across a distant meadow with half a dozen of his guards.

I went to the chest, wondering how I should open it; but when I knelt on the floor before it, and placed my hand on the padlock, the heavy thing tumbled to the floor; the hasp was loose, and it was easy to raise the lid. That was the end of my hope, for the chest was as empty as when it had been in the hands of its maker—empty, but for a solitary golden coin which had escaped the eyes of the searcher before me, and

now lay on its edge in the corner. I took that for myself. It was my own in spite of the fact that the King had been generous with another man's wealth. It might serve to buy me a meal, or if it should ever be my fate to be flogged, the man who wielded the whip might strike less heavily if I could slip the piece of gold into his hand unseen.

I must have been absorbed in thought for a long time, for I was on my knees, gazing hopelessly into the box, when the door opened, and the Chief of Police entered. Perhaps the look of despair on my face surprised him, for he stared at me strangely, and his only greeting was :

"We start in half an hour, monsieur."

He seemed in no hurry to be gone, but strode across the floor to the window, where he looked out on as glorious a bit of country as he would see anywhere in France. The resolution came that I would now compel him to hear what I had to say as to my obligation to see the King. I rose to my feet, and slammed the door together. He had left it open—perhaps purposely—and I could see three or four of his men outside. But at this unexpected noise he swung round, doubtless thinking that I had made a rush for liberty. Seeing me, he said with some sarcasm :

"Your movements might be quieter, monsieur."

"I have something to say, M. de Biron, which is for your ear alone," I retorted.

"That you must see the King?" he asked sharply, anticipating me.

"I must needs see him, because I have news for his ear which will startle His Majesty. France is in

deadly peril, and the King should know it," I added earnestly.

He was watching me keenly, half suspiciously. The look seemed to carry its interpretation with it, and had it not, his words followed quickly, and I was not long in doubt as to his thoughts.

"You have lost your reason, I fear, M. le Vicomte!" he exclaimed, and an expression swept across his face, half of pity, half of worry, at the prospect of having to play the part of keeper to one whom trouble had driven mad.

"I am as sane as you, M. de Biron. I wonder that you, spoken of throughout Paris as so loyal to His Majesty, should be slow to believe me when I tell you that France may any day be brought to ruin!"

I put out my hand to touch his arm, as if to emphasise the words I was resolute to speak, but he thrust me aside impatiently, saying something about having matters of more importance to see to than to listen to one whom anticipation of the galleys had bereft of reason; and with that he left me once more.

It was a full hour later when I was told to mount a led horse which was set in the midst of a number of troopers. There were none of the varlets about who were wont, in the more fortunate days, to serve me; but M. de l'Eperon stood on the terrace to watch me ride away, and the Curé was with him. I did not look in their direction after I had once seen them, but I had in my mind's eye the sinister expression on each face—the exultation of the courtier at having wrested my possessions from me, the malignity of the priest who had sworn away my character, and disgraced me alike in the eyes of my dependents, of those who

frequented the Court, and in the estimation of His Majesty.

The Curé, however, was not content to part with me quietly. He came forward, and forced me to look on his unwholesome face, for he held my horse's bridle, and gazed at me insolently, as he had in my own house, and when I withstood him in the tanner's home at Gueche. On those occasions I held him in wholesome fear, for he might do me harm; now the injury was done, and things could not be worse, whether I pleased him or not. He was about to speak, but my anger hindered him. Bending forward in the saddle suddenly, I hurled my fist into his face with a force which might have killed him. He fell without a groan upon the stones, and so incensed was I at the moment, that I should have pressed my horse forward to trample on him, had not the trooper who gripped the rein turned the creature aside.

I glanced at M. de Biron, who was near, and thought I saw a look of concern sweep across his face. Far from being angry, and ordering me some punishment, he bade the men close in about me and proceed.

"The poor gentleman has lost his reason. God pity him!" I heard him say to the troopers, who gazed at him, surprised at his leniency; for M. de Biron had not the character for being over-gentle with the prisoners in his charge.

Again and again I sought to have speech with him while on the journey, but he would neither hear me nor turn his eyes in my direction. He had formed his opinion concerning me, and was resolved not to waste his breath by talking.

It was nearly dusk when we drew near to a château, and the picturesque building, which stood on the summit of a hill, was only reached by traversing a beautiful avenue of elms, which ended in a fine old gateway. We could not enter until one of the retainers came out of the porter's lodge to know our business. What De Biron said I did not hear, but the man, with no great alacrity, swung open the massive iron gate, and stood back somewhat sullenly while our party entered the outer courtyard. There we halted, the Chief of Police riding into the inner quadrangle to have audience with the owner, and doubtless to demand quarters for the night in the King's name.

He was away several minutes, but came back apparently well pleased. Bidding me dismount, he led the way into the inner court, three soldiers accompanying us; from thence we proceeded to the great hall, whose immense window was facing the quadrangle. When we had gone up the flight of semi-circular steps and passed beneath a square-headed arch, we turned into the hall itself.

I had no eyes for the noble, flat-ceilinged apartment which stretched for more than sixty feet before us, nor for its panelling and massive furniture, which was all of polished oak. My attention was taken instantly by a little group of women, two of whom, to judge by their dark velvet and embroidered costumes, were of the highest rank. They stood somewhat in the shade, the huge copper lampholder throwing its light, so that one saw their figures, and not their faces.

Bidding us halt, M. de Biron advanced to the spot

where the ladies were standing, and asked in what place he might lodge the prisoner for the night. One of them responded in a sweet voice that brought back strange memories, and the troopers standing round gazed at me inquiringly because of the exclamation which escaped my lips. The words I heard, without regard to the voice itself, were sufficient to set my heart beating more quickly.

"Coulon, show the way to the Corn Room. Monsieur de Biron, I have no thought as yet as to where your prisoner may stay, but that chamber will serve for a little while, and we can change it presently."

"Whatever place it is, mademoiselle, it will do. My only desire is that this man should be safely lodged, for I do not wish him to escape me."

"Then I will inquire of my varlets as to the best place for him," was the response.

I knew the voice, although I could not see the face, and I was overcome with a sense of shame at the thought that this sweet-spoken lady should see me in such a garb—in mud-stained, ragged, greasy garments which even a peasant would think well worn. But that was only a passing thought, for I was curious to look upon the face of the mistress of the château.

"Bring the prisoner forward!" cried De Biron, and not loath to advance, I almost led the way in my eagerness. I should have preceded my keepers by some paces had not one of the men laid a hand on my shoulder, and said sternly :

"Steady, monsieur ! Be in no hurry."

It was difficult not to shake him off impa-

tiently, but I restrained myself, and walked more slowly.

When I saw the faces of the women, I gasped. Coulon I knew on the instant—the woman of the *cul de sac*, no longer the disreputable and unwholesome creature who had rendered me such service, but clean, well-dressed, and well-behaved. She stood a little behind the ladies, one of whom was none other than Marie, Marquise de Lauzun, whom I had last seen when De Biron arrested me at the Château de Neure.

It was the other, the sight of whom so agitated me, that the great hall swam before my eyes, and my knees almost failed me. Her name escaped my lips involuntarily, although I was anxious that she should not recognise me in my pitiful estate. When she knew me at Court, I was the wealthy and much-envied master of Tour. Now—God help me!—I was worse than a beggar, an uncouthly-dressed peasant, bound for a place which was likely to be hell to me.

“LOUISE!”

The fourth woman looked on indifferently. She was a stranger, and took no interest in the mud-bespattered man whose arm was held with a tight grip by a stalwart trooper; but the other three wondered, as if they had heard a familiar voice. They looked at me keenly, but could not penetrate my disguise, and suffered me to pass on without a word.

Coulon left the group, and lifting a lamp from its nail upon the wall, led the way along the richly-decorated corridors, until we reached a chamber which was in darkness. Throwing the door open,

she entered first, and bade me follow. Two of the three troopers remained outside, but the other, whose hand still held my arm, advanced with me. When I walked into the apartment, he left me standing at the woman's side, and taking the lamp from her hand, passed round the walls, which were decorated with purple silk, on which were embroidered the golden ears of corn that gave the room its name; smoothing the walls with his hand, tapping here and there to be assured that there were no hollow places, and no hidden door; then looking to the floor and to the window fastenings, even going so far as to stand upon the brass dogs in the fire-place to gaze up the chimney for a possible means of escape. He expressed his approval.

"You will do here, monsieur. Come, my dear, and leave the prisoner to enjoy a bit of solitude. He is no good company for anyone, for I do not think he has spoken a dozen words since he left Tour."

She turned with him and left me; but not before, unseen of the trooper, she had brushed past me and whispered:

"I will tell mademoiselle."

While the man had been satisfying himself that I should find no way of escape, Coulon had drawn closer to me when she heard me whisper her name.

"Coulon, do you not know me?"

"The voice is familiar," she replied, in as low a tone, keeping her eyes on the soldier.

"I am the Vicomte de la Tour on the way to the galleys."

"*Mon Dieu!*" said the woman, laying a hand on her bosom to control herself. "No wonder I knew

your voice. M. De Biron told mademoiselle that his prisoner was a gentleman, although in peasant's garb, and that is why you are lodged so well. He did not mention your name, and we heard that you had escaped."

"I got away, but was betrayed. Tell me, Coulon, does Mademoiselle Louise care?"

"Care? She wept day and night when she heard of your arrest, and called you noble, and prayed for your escape. Ah, monsieur, I cannot tell you all! How she clapped her hands when news came that you had broken the chain, and could not be found!"

"Will you tell her who I am, and that I pray God to bless her for lodging me so well?"

"Hist!" came the answer, for the soldier's search was ended, and he was coming towards us. She whispered those words to me before she went: "I will tell mademoiselle;" and in a few moments I was alone in the Corn Room.

CHAPTER XXXVII

LOVE'S ACHIEVEMENT

I THINK that the knowledge of my nearness to Louise was a pain rather than a pleasure, notwithstanding that I had so longed to see her face again, if only for a passing glance. That opportunity had come, bringing me a certain relief, since I knew for myself that she had recovered from her sickness, although she looked very frail, and did not give great promise of fighting against the winter's cold, which was approaching. To know that she was so near, and in a sense my jailer, brought to me some of the agony of Tantalus. It was almost as much of torment as when the Eastern king, with the hunger of famine and a quenchless thirst upon him, lay in the midst of plenty, and with unstinted wine in sight, which he could neither taste nor drink.

Yet there was something of gladness, because Coulon had whispered that Louise had wept when she knew of my arrest, and prayed for my escape. If I had only known that I had something more than mere sympathy, if I but knew she loved me, I felt that I could bear the galley torment better. It would be something to dream over during the monotonous

reach and pull at the oars for days, and weeks, and months ; something to carry with me into my sleep when the toil was over for a brief season, and I should be free for a few hours from the lash of the *comite*, who loved to see the prisoners wince, and hear them scream.

An hour had gone when the door opened, and food was brought in by a trooper who, on entering, had no word for me, neither pleasant nor uncivil. He carried a lamp, with which he made a more searching examination of the room, since it was supposed that I should have to stay there the whole night through. I ate while he was thus engaged, because, if I had the opportunity, I was resolved to effect my escape, and tell the King ; and in order to do that I should need strength. The food, moreover, was appetising. One could well have thought that it had come from the mistress's table at her desire, since there were dainties one could not expect from the kitchen, for a ragged peasant prisoner.

The man loitered, as if he waited to carry back the fragments of the meal, but I bade him be gone if he had naught to say ; for it was better to eat alone, and in the dark, than have a surly fellow watching every mouthful, and scuffling his feet impatiently on the carpet.

"Do you want the light to see the good things you are eating, monsieur ?" he asked, and I answered in the affirmative, civilly, thinking him willing to leave it. I was mistaken, for he laughed at his clumsy joke, and turning on his heel, stalked out of the room, shutting me up in darkness again. What



he said to the men outside I do not know, but there was loud laughter ; without a doubt, at my expense.

The window looked into the inner courtyard, and the lanthorns hanging on the walls showed that M. de Biron had set a watch, for armed men were loitering there. Turning to look at other things, one could see by the dim lights behind the curtained windows of various chambers round the court, that they were occupied, and I wondered in which of these Louise might be. When some hours had passed, the lights went out one by one, and but for the assistance of a couple of lanthorns in the quadrangle, there was nothing to be seen. The occupants of the château were evidently asleep.

Throughout that weary time I had walked up and down unceasingly, tramping on the thick carpet and the uncovered polished floor indiscriminately, careless as to whether others were disturbed by the noise ; to and fro, now to the window, back to the door, then round the room, only halting to turn when I reached the canopied bedstead, round the room again, to get to the other side. There was always this purpose in my mind—to get to the King's ear, if it were possible. A hope began to form itself that His Majesty was human, and would feel some sort of gratitude—that he would be prepared to compromise, if not to pardon ; to banish me, perhaps, and not to send me to the galleys. But that was uncertain. Still, France was to be saved. If M. de Biron should enter the room at all, I would thrust the bolt into the door to prevent the men outside from entering at his summons, and then I would talk and talk until, against his will, he had

heard the story. More than that, he should be made to believe in my sanity, for he should read the paper Rousard had found in the bureau—that damning evidence against the priest.

Then my mind swung round to other thoughts. Was De Biron in the conspiracy, and was that the reason why he would not hear me? Was it the secret of his pretended belief in my insanity? If so, he would tear up the paper in order to screen the Curé, and the King would laugh at me, even should I escape and see him. If De Biron thought me mad, might not His Majesty come to the same conclusion, unless I had written proof? The King was so erratic that I could not form any opinion.

The element of uncertainty wrought me to a pitch of impatience. An impulse came to open the window, grip the gargoyle, pull myself up to the roof, and so escape; but on the opposite side of the courtyard, standing beneath a lanthorn, with his back against the wall, was a soldier, whose musket was in readiness, in case I thought of making such a rash attempt.

Tossing off my boots because my feet were tired, I flung myself upon the bed. I thought that sleep would be a respite from hopelessness, would bring me some forgetfulness of the fate in store, and blot out from my mind the hideous pictures of the galleys. Even to think of Louise was misery, for how could she help me, and how could I hope to have a word with her? I went over all my past experience with her—from that hour when she came into my life, and fascinated me with her beauty of face and spirit. Those words which

Coulon had spoken about her were my only solace:

"She wept day and night when she heard of your arrest, and called you noble, and prayed for your escape."

Yes, and she had clapped her hands when the news came that I had broken the chain. God bless her for it! But how I prayed that I might see her, if only for a moment, just to kiss her hand!

I lay in silence after that vain wish. In the courtyard could be heard the tramp of a soldier, who sometimes called across to him who kept watch beneath the lanthorn. Outside the door of the chamber was the sound of the steady breathing of a sleeping guard. I had heard that sound before, and thought it possible that I might open the door softly, step over the sleeper, and get away; but when I had tried the handle, I found that the door was fastened.

After a time my thoughts were broken in upon by a slight noise, which appeared to come from the great fire-place. Silence followed for a few moments, and I attributed the sound to my fancy. Notwithstanding that, however, I was in a half-raised posture, my elbow supporting me while I stared into the shadows.

There was still the heavy breathing of the guard outside, and still the smothered laughter and talk of men in the courtyard. Then that sound once more. With my whole mind on the strain, my eyes wide open until they ached with the intensity of my gaze into darkness, my lips parted, and even the pulsating sounds in my ears making themselves

heard, I listened. Presently came a long, upright line of light, broadening swiftly, and where I had been peering into blackness, I looked through an open space into the lower portions of a handsome chamber, with costly furniture in view.

That was not all. Furniture and chamber only attracted notice for a moment or two. A woman's figure blocked the way. She was bending low, one hand held out before her, as if to feel for obstacles, the other on the door, or panel, or whatever else it was, which she had opened. As she moved towards me she drew the door after her, and the broad light narrowed down to nothing, and I was in darkness again.

I was too surprised for speech, too full of wonder to make a sound; but my thought was active, and my mind all inquiry. Was it Coulon come to bring me a message? Or was she come to show me a way of escape?

In the darkness which followed, denser, if possible, than before, because the sudden light had somewhat blinded me, there was a slight rustle of a woman's dress, the faintest scream of metal at the hearth, as if her skirt had caught one of the brass dogs and shifted it, and after that a nearer rustle of silk, which showed that the woman was approaching the bedside.

I did not speak. The whole thing appeared to me so strange and ghostly that I was somewhat startled and bewildered; but a soft hand fell on my face, and a warm breath followed on my cheek. And after that a whisper which almost made my heart stop its beating, for the joy of hearing it.

"Monsieur de Belliot, do not speak. It is I, Louise de St. André. Follow me in silence."

I did not say a word. I simply took the hand that had been placed upon my face while it felt for me, and putting it to my lips, kissed it passionately.

"Come, monsieur," she whispered again, evidently standing to listen to the breathing of the soldier at the door.

I slid softly to the floor, and stood at her side. She held me by the hand, and led the way to the fire-place. On reaching it she drew her hand away, and I could hear the rustle of her garments, as if she drew them up to avoid touching the metal dogs that were in the way; after that she moved noiselessly, and slowly the line of light reappeared. While it was growing broader with each moment, I could see her bent form as she stepped before me through the open space. In a moment or two she had passed, and stood upright in the lighted chamber, dropping her dress into its place with a deft shake, the secret of which is only in a woman's knowledge. I was at her side in an instant.

"Thank God, you are safe, monsieur!" she exclaimed, when she thrust a wall of brick that worked upon a pivot into place, and then a great mirror which served as a second barrier against intrusion from what had been my prison.

I looked at her, and she was trembling. Her beautiful face was flushed with the excitement of her danger, and her eyes gleamed while, in a certain ecstasy of relief, she put her hands together, and clasped them nervously. I gazed into her face, not able to speak—for what could I say? But my soul

was alert, and I had discovered her secret. What need for words? When M. de Biron had delivered his *lettre de cachet*, the Marquise had promised to tell Louise how much I loved her, and she had not failed me; so that the woman before me knew what I felt; and now her own story was written on her face, whether she would hide it or not. The look of gladness was not one which a friend, however intimate, would have for another friend drawn out of jeopardy. It was more than that, and seeing it, forgetful of my beggary and my garb, I put my arms about her, kissing her lips with a passion I had no wish to restrain.

There was no doubt in my heart as to whether I had read her story aright, for, sobbing after her brave venture—being unnerved by the strain—forgetting my mean attire, and only thinking of my love and hers, she flung her arms about my neck, and gave me kiss for kiss.

“Thank God! thank God!” she murmured again and again, while we stood together thus. What need to search for words with which to confess our love, when our hearts had spoken for us?

I know not how long we had stood there, but presently a tapping on the chamber door brought us back to the realities of life, and out of the land of love.

“Come here, beloved,” whispered Louise; and taking my hand, she drew me to the curtains which hung about her bedstead. Hiding me among them, she hastened to the door, on which the tapping came again.

I watched her as she crossed the floor and stood in

the open doorway fearlessly, as if secure against intrusion on the part of any who might betray me. It was a charming picture—Louise standing there, with one soft hand upon her bosom, the other holding the handle of the door, her face aglow with gladness, yet having a content I had never seen upon it until now. As one might well be, in such rank as hers, she was richly dressed in orange-coloured silk, the bodice of which was trimmed with French point lace, and about her waist was a belt of pearls. There were orange ribbons in her hair, and pearls among her curls, and about her white neck a chain which held a diamond pendant.

“Ah, Marie,” said she joyously, “have you been waiting long?”

There was no answer, but a laughing woman entered and closed the door after her, thrusting in the bolt to keep out intruders.

“No need, Louise, to ask how you have fared. Where is the ragged prince?”

And the Marquise de Lauzun gazed round the spacious chamber, her face all smiles.

“Find him!” cried Louise, standing apart, and wiping her cheeks, which were wet with tears.

She laughed gaily as her cousin moved from place to place, and exclaimed:

“Oh, cold, madame! cold, madame! Ah, colder still! There, now, you grow warmer; ay, warmer! nearly in a blaze! You will burn your dainty fingers, Marie!”

The curtain was swept aside, and I stood revealed. The Marquise took my hands in hers, and kissed them laughingly, looked into my face, and mis-

chievously asked whether I had forgotten my lady-love, and found another in my wanderings—bade me speak out before Louise, and name the woman who had the warmest place in all my heart, and kissed my hand again.

Did ever one get such a welcome?

“I suppose he was not glad to see you?” said Marie, turning to Louise.

“Was he not?” cried the other. “Look at my crumpled silk! See where the clumsy peasant tore my lace, and disarranged my hair. Was he not glad to see me?”

There was a loving defiance in her words, as if she dared anyone to say that her love had been squandered. Regardless of her cousin's presence, she flung her arms about my neck, not ashamed to avow her love before another woman, and kissed me again and again. I do not need to wait for death to know what bliss is, since Louise served me so.

“But, cousin, think!” said Marie, pretending severity at the other's forwardness. “Fie on Louise de St. André for kissing a mud-bespattered peasant, and a prisoner, too!”

“A mud-bespattered peasant, Marie, and a prisoner?” retorted Louise, half taking her in earnest. “Nay, I kiss the Vicomte, the man who did so much for me when I was in danger, and whom I loved throughout it all; the man who sent his love to me through you, when I never thought to see God's fair world again! Oh, cousin, the man I love from my very soul! Whom I love the more because he has been in deadly trouble. Fulcran, if I could but have saved you!”

**The Frown of Majesty**

She looked into my face, her own becoming wet with tears, which sprang to her eyes and down her cheeks at the thought of my sorrows, which she had been helpless to lessen.

Those tears, and the love that prompted them, healed my heart-wounds.



CHAPTER XXXIX

THE CELLAR IN THE FOREST

LOVE may laugh at much, but it dare not laugh too long at danger. There was the half hour of bliss to which Marie left us, and when she returned, the thought intruded, and asserted itself beyond repulse—the thought that there was peril even now.

We sat a while and talked—these beautiful women with their velvets, and silks, and precious stones, which they had worn to do honour to M. de Biron, and I, the ragged peasant; ill-assorted company others would have thought, had they peeped in upon us. But there were things concerning which we had to speak, that rendered Louise and Marie oblivious to everything except the pressing necessity of finding for me an exit from the château without the knowledge of the Chief of Police.

At first the difficulties did not appeal to either of my companions, and they chatted away, indulging in self-congratulations because they had contrived to rob the captors of their prisoner. They were delighted when they anticipated the dismay and anger of De Biron on discovering that the Corn Room was empty.

"Two hundred pistoles gone for naught," said the Marquise, clapping her hands.

"And a stern reprimand for M. de Biron from His Majesty," added Louise, her face all smiles.

Our talk turned upon what had chanced since the day when the *lettre de cachet* had been placed in my hands, and naturally, I made inquiries as to how Louise had been decoyed. When she had quitted Paris in haste on receiving the forged letter, she had no fear of the haunted forest, and never having passed through it, did not know she was approaching it. She rode on with her attendants until they neared the house which I have already described, when some scoundrels of the Mongorge set rushed upon her, killing her lackeys. She and her maid were carried through the mansion and the deserted garden to the cellar of the forester's hut.

It was all as Coulon had told me. With such a dreadful woman as Margot Cartier to act as warden, the two prisoners expected the worst. The virago would do nothing for them, but appropriated their jewels, and money, and dresses, then left them in darkness, locked in the cellar, trembling and clinging to each other for comfort. They would have fought with her when she took their clothes and valuables, but the woman had both pistol and sword, and swore horribly as to the way in which she would use the weapons, if they did not instantly strip themselves of such things as she named, and lay them on the floor.

Cartier was absent for some four-and-twenty hours, leaving them to the abominations, the darkness, and the chill of that underground prison, and without food. When she came back, bringing with her a

lanthorn, she flung them each a shabby cloak, then gave them bread and wine, while she herself sat on the lowest step and talked. She spoke the language in vogue in the *cul de sac*—words so obscene and violent that the prisoners shuddered. Out of her ample vocabulary she drew the most terrible expressions it contained, for the purpose of witnessing the looks of disgust, and the distress of those who were in her power.

Louise tried to bribe her, but she laughed derisively.

“Buy me? Where would you get the money?”

“I am rich,” was the answer. “A hundred pistoles shall be yours.”

Cartier had a wine-cup in her hand, and was raising it to her lips; but the sum which Louise offered aroused her contempt—so much, indeed, that she became angry, and tossed cup and wine at Louise’s head. Cartier failed to do her any mischief, however, for she avoided the missile, which, whirling past her, dashed against the wall, and fell to the floor.

“That for having offered me such a paltry sum!” the *virago* cried; and Louise understood that she must bid high if she would be free.

“A thousand pistoles,” she said, although it was, in her judgment, an unreasonable bid for liberty.

“Nay, nor ten thousand,” was the answer. “Have you the thousand pistoles here?”

“How could you think it possible when you know that you have robbed me and my maid of everything?” was the indignant answer.

“And how do you suppose I should get the thousand pistoles, *mademoiselle*? As soon as you got to Paris, you would have me arrested and sent to

the Conciergerie. Ha, I know the tricks of Court ladies!" the woman added, striding past Louise to pick up the pewter wine-cup.

After a time the virago left them in darkness, not returning for many hours. When she descended the stairs again she had someone with her; to judge by his dress and bearing, a man of rank, but not recognisable, since he hid his face in his scarf.

"Take that girl away," said he roughly, pointing to Marguerite.

"If I take her up the steps, monsieur, she may elude me," the woman asserted, "and then there will be the devil to pay."

"You have some string," the stranger answered impatiently. "Tie her hands, and get her out of this. If she attempts to run, shoot her down, or run that rusty sword into her ribs—do anything, so that you take her away."

Poor Marguerite held out her hands to be bound, for it would have been madness to struggle, especially with such a woman as she who had the twisted mouth—a creature in whom there was nothing of gentleness, and a superabundance of cruelty. She stooped to kiss her mistress, fearing that this was but a ruse to separate them, then went up the steps slowly, goaded on the way with words and blows by the woman of the Allée de Couvée.

The trap-door fell with a noisy bang when she reached the top, and Louise found herself alone with the stranger. She could not decide on his identity. There was something familiar in the voice, but his face was so covered, and the light so dim, that she could barely see.

He looked around for a seat, and finding none, chose the bottom step, as Margot Cartier had done before him. For a little while he appeared to be undecided whether to state his business boldly, and declare his personality, but Louise would not help in the matter of conversation. She peered at him without reserve, as if she would discover who this stranger was.

"I will have nothing to say to you, monsieur, until I know your name and see your face!" she exclaimed decisively, when he had vainly tried to get her to talk.

"You have seen me often, mademoiselle," was the suave retort, "and we have been good friends."

Louise remained silent, and question after question put by him went unanswered. She contented herself with words like those she had already spoken :

"I have told you, monsieur, that I will have nothing to say to you unless I know your name and see your face. If your visit here boded good for me you would speak. Since you are silent, and remain unknown, I can think that you purpose things which do not count for my own honour."

The man responded evasively. Seeing the resolute woman before him, her pure face and clear eyes, which seemed to look through him, his courage for speech evaporated. Conscience, apparently, made a coward of him, and robbed him of the words best suited to his mission.

"I told you I would have nothing to say to you," said Louise, when for a long time she had persistently remained silent ; "but it were well, perhaps, that I should ask one question. It may serve to show you

what I owe to you. Did you, monsieur, employ that woman who is keeping watch over my maid to bring me here?"

He sat in silence for a few moments, an elbow on his knee, and his chin resting on his fist. He was revolving in his mind whether he should reply or not. He had set himself a task, easy, perhaps, with some women, who were as pretty as paint and furbelows, and lace and pearls, could make them, and were prepared to let themselves go at a good price. But he saw that the woman before him was not one of their kind. With the other women there was a wild recklessness, Bohemian in its nature; but Louise was of a different stamp, and he knew it—knew it before the abduction, but hoped to rise to the occasion. Here, however, face to face with her, he felt himself unable to do other than sink immeasurably below it.

"Come, monsieur!" she cried courageously, "I want my answer!" She was going to make a bold fight for herself. "Am I here because *you* had me brought hither?"

"Yes, mademoiselle," said the other, moving uncomfortably.

"And who are you?" asked Louise sharply. "No gentleman, I am assured, since you employed that strumpet to do your work for you."

Her whole spirit was aroused. She saw that she was as safe with bold measures as with timidity, and rising to her feet, she went to where the lanthorn stood upon the floor. Taking it into her left hand, she walked to the foot of the steps and held the light close to the stranger's face. She bent low to look at him, her breath coming quickly, half with fear and

half with anger, and for a time was puzzled. There was so little of the face showing, and the other would not allow her to look into his eyes. Libertine he might be, who had had his way before, since he had chosen women of his own stamp, but he realised that he had now set himself a task beyond his powers. The brazen impudence with which he had pressed himself upon other women failed him absolutely.

"I have come to make you an honourable offer," he said, not looking at her.

"Then tell me your name, monsieur, unless, as I believe, you are a coward!"

Suddenly she took him by surprise. She put out her right hand swiftly, and striking his feathered hat from his head, tore away the scarf, so that his identity was revealed. She dropped the lanthorn to the floor, and clasped her hands upon her bosom, while a little scream of dismay escaped her lips:

"THE DAUPHIN!"

"Yes, mademoiselle," cried the man, regaining his courage now that the truth was known, and rising to his feet. While she stood, startled and trembling, he flung his arms about her, and drew her to himself, and before she could hold him back, he was covering her lips and face with kisses.

"Ah, monseigneur, I pray you desist!" she panted. "Oh, do not dishonour me! 'Tis cruel and wicked!"

She held back his face, and would not have any more of his kisses, until, with a laugh, he brushed her delicate hands aside.

"I have loved you so long, mademoiselle, that you must be mine. You *shall* be mine!"

"Nay, monseigneur, I will not," answered Louise

resolutely, struggling vainly to get away from his embrace. "Monseigneur, how dare you serve me so?"

"Nay, my beautiful one, 'tis you who should answer such a question," replied this heir-apparent to the throne of France. "I asked you once, nay, twice, to love me, and you refused. I do not forget your scorn. And since I could not have you by persuasion, I must needs make you mine by force."

"I will never be yours, monseigneur!" cried Louise.

"Never?" said the Prince, drawing back somewhat to look at her, his face betraying his astonishment when he realised her unwillingness to yield to him—nay, her positive anger, which caused her to stand there with clenched hands and heaving bosom.

The beauties of Paris, high and low, were generally eager to get a smile from the Dauphin, and ready to sell their virtue to him. When he chose one of them as his mistress, there was jealousy at once. But here was one who would not welcome his advances, who repelled them indignantly; and he could not understand it. Possibly the curt refusals he had had from her before were spoken so that she should not be deemed too cheaply bought; and he put down those rejections to a natural pride on the part of one whom even the King might be pleased to win. But he was undeceived, for she answered his inquiry instantly:

"Never, monseigneur! Never! How could I be yours while your royal wife lives?"

He was so amazed that he dropped his hands, and watched her keenly. He fancied that he saw the

spots of colour on her cheeks, marked the curl of the lips which she wiped as though she would not allow his kisses to remain there. She had wilfully taken him so differently to what he had intended, for he had no thought of marriage. Her conduct was a rebuke which brought the blood to his own face, and the old inability to speak returned. He could only stand and look at her.

“Leave me, monseigneur,” exclaimed Louise presently, when she had stepped back, so as to keep him at arm’s length, if he should again approach her.

“Nay, mademoiselle,” the Dauphin answered, recovering somewhat, and not caring to be beaten. “I had you brought here—”

“It was a cowardly resort,” interrupted she, anticipating his words. “A cowardly resort to lure me here, so that you might have advantage of my helplessness.”

“But I loved you, Louise, passionately; and since you would not listen to me in Paris, I brought you here, where I might have you to myself, and so plead my cause.”

Louise feared for herself, for she was growing somewhat hysterical with the strain of this encounter, and found herself laughing derisively. It was only by a strong effort that she controlled herself. Had she fainted, or in any way succumbed, she knew that the man before her would have the advantage.

“You loved me?” she cried. “Me? Mademoiselle de St. André? What honour is there in such love as yours? I do not forget, monseigneur, how you have loved the fishwives of the market; how

you preferred their company and their manners to that of the pure-minded women who are sometimes found at Court. You insult me, monseigneur, to offer me the same honours which you confer on grisettes and strumpets, and I pray you leave me."

The Dauphin's face turned livid with anger. Knowing her high spirit, he had been prepared for difficulty, but not for anything like this. Louise thought for a moment that he would strike her for daring to speak so to one of royal blood, and she held up her hands as if to ward off the anticipated blow; but he controlled himself, and declaring savagely that he would starve her into surrender, he mounted the steps and disappeared. She heard him bid Cartier send Marguerite into the cellar while he spoke to the woman, and the maid, eager to know how her mistress had fared, hurried down to her.

When Cartier descended half an hour later, she began taunts and insults which lasted on into the night. Throughout that time she drank copiously of the wine which had been brought for herself and the prisoners. She sat on the step, as before, and asked Louise how the Dauphin loved. Was he gentle? Were his kisses sweet? Were they the same as those which the grisettes received? Did he promise to kill the Princess in order to take the chaste mademoiselle to his palace?

The night was all like this. The virago neither slept herself, nor would she suffer her prisoners to rest. If they dropped into a slumber, she reeled across the floor and kicked them till they woke, or pinched their arms or necks. When hunger began to tell on them, she opened the basket ostentatiously,

and ate the dainties deliberately, although she declared that food was not like wine. Still, there was the food, and it had to be eaten by someone; consequently, she would eat it rather than it should be wasted. Coarse laughter and abominable words followed, which added to the torment of the night.

At last Cartier, overcome by wine, fell asleep. The two prisoners watched her, crouching together, as if nearness to each other might lend them courage. The woman's sword was clutched firmly in her hand. Gradually the idea of escape framed itself. The virago had tumbled off the bottom step, and lay on the floor, leaving the ladder free. Why not mount it stealthily, and get away into the forest? It took them a long time to decide their course, and, as it proved, the delay was fatal. It wanted courage to make the attempt, and while Louise was willing, and more than once placed her foot on the step, Marguerite shuddered and shook her head, declaring in a frightened whisper her terror lest the woman should awake as she was passing.

Louise persuaded her at last, and they faced the ladder. Looking upwards, they could see through the chink in the floor that it was broad daylight, and they realised then how much precious time they had lost. But they mounted, opened the trap-door, hurried across the floor, and out of the hut. Going blindly through the forest, they found themselves at a doorway, and thrusting it open, hoping they might meet with someone who would succour them, entered a tangled garden. They did not know it to be that through which they had been carried some time



before, but it offered hiding for them, and they gladly availed themselves of it.

Before the door slammed together, however, they looked at each other in dismay. They heard the virago screaming to them to stop, and ere they could decide upon their course, Cartier had kicked the door wide open with her foot, and stood before them with her sword held threateningly.

“Now, my pretty, walk back, if you please, the way you came, and quickly too, or I will drive this into your bosom.”

It was useless to resist, madness to refuse, for the woman was inflamed with wine and passion. The foam was on her lips, and it appeared to Louise that it was only the thought of the money she would lose which kept her from killing them both. Cartier placed herself between the defenceless women, and having thrust her sword into the belt at her waist, she gripped an arm of each, and regardless of the pain her tight grasp caused, she compelled them to return. More than once her stumbling threw them all to the ground, bruising their bodies on the tree roots and stumps; but notwithstanding that she was full of wine, Cartier was quickly on her feet, to stay them in their flight, if they attempted it.

When they reached the hut, the woman ordered Louise to descend, and with a hopeless sob she went down into the darkness. It had been so bright up there, where the sun was shining, and where the birds sang such glorious songs because they revelled in their liberty. To go into that lanthorn-lit cellar was like entering the doleful shades, where hope and mercy would never come. But there was no alterna-

tive. The woman had her sword drawn, and the look upon her face precluded resistance. When the feet of Louise touched the floor she turned in wonder, for Marguerite had uttered a long, shrill cry, a call for help, in the hope that someone might be near and hear her.

“You she-devil!” shouted Cartier; then, to Louise’s horror, the woman plunged her sword into the maid’s bosom, and the poor creature, falling backward, tumbled into the blackness, and lay still, without so much as a moan.

She was dead.

The virago looked down and laughed cruelly when she saw Louise take the lanthorn, and gaze at the face of her companion.

“The pretty dear!” she cried mockingly. “She’ll want no nursing.”

Louise could only think of the girl whose fate was so terrible. How long she knelt beside her, trying to arouse her, hoping that the stillness did not mean death, she could not tell. It might have been minutes; it might have been hours. But always there came the drunken scream of the woman above, taunting her, and cursing the dead one.

Louise at last drew back, and sitting on the floor, away from Marguerite, she sobbed, compelled the while to hear what the woman cried down to her.

“So, my pretty, she is dead? Now I have you alone to care for. You alone to keep for the Dauphin. Fool! A thousand as good as you, as beautiful, almost as rich, would have thrown their arms wide open to welcome the Prince who will some day be King. Even La D evote would have taken the

Dauphin, if she could not have had His Majesty! Madame de Maintenon is no fool, not she! But you are a thousand times a fool to spurn the Dauphin."

The woman, in drunken merriment, began to wave her sword, and dance about the opening at the top of the steps. How it chanced Louise could not tell, although she was watching the gyrations of the jailer. The virago stumbled in her whirling, and with a scream of fear, came down headlong into the cellar, falling with a crash which was sickening, at the feet of the shuddering prisoner. The sword fell from her hand, and for a few moments she lay helpless. Louise thought she would never move, and was thinking of flight; but Cartier rose slowly to her feet, bleeding and bruised. Her arms hung helpless at her sides, she limped, and groaned, and reeled, but was now completely sobered. Turning to Louise with an oath, she spat at her, then climbed the steps painfully, moaning as she went. When she got to the top she threw the trap-door into its place with her foot, and shut Louise in the darkness with the dead.

I knew the other portion of the story, since I had seen Margot Cartier fall and die in the forest.



CHAPTER XL

LOVE'S BOLDNESS

WHEN I told my own story, and of my fixed determination to see the King, Louise was filled with consternation. She took my hand in hers, and looked into my face, as if she wished to say words which were likely to be deemed unworthy, because they would work against my loyalty.

"Fulcran," she almost whispered, and so falteringly that the word was little more than a sob.

"My darling, what is it?"

"It will be fatal to go to the King. I know him so well. He will be angry and unreasonable. Do you not know him?—a man of petty soul beneath an imposing exterior. He will be so provoked to think that you have escaped after he had ordered your deportation to the galleys. Beloved, suppose he promised that you should not suffer, do we not know that he rarely scruples to falsify his word? Do not trust him. Let me contrive your escape to the coast, and suffer Louis to look after himself."

She was fondling my hand while she spoke, and drew so closely to me that her soft cheek rested against my mud-stained garb. Her eyes gazed into

mine with loving entreaty, as if she were prepared to barter loyalty, and run the risk of loss of worldly goods, which was more than possible if France were overrun; and all for my sake. Her longing was to see me safe, away from the tyranny of this monarch, away from the almost certain journey to the galleys.

"Fulcran, think of yourself."

"I do," said I, bending down to kiss her lips, while my arm encircled her, as if to hold her tightly for the short time that might remain. While I held her, and saw that dear face pleading lovingly, more by its plaintive beauty than by all the words she said, I began to waver in my resolution. Thought after thought came to me, bearing upon the King's uncertain temper. It was a common saying at Court—but behind the hand, and never openly—that the King's policy was not governed by the maxims of Christianity, and I felt that the monarch would spurn me from his path without compunction, or any thought of gratitude for the service I had rendered. He would take the information and act upon it; but, still believing in my heresy, send me to the galleys without a word of thanks, and without making any allowance.

"Do not go," whispered Louise. "Go to England, where heretics are safe with the Protestant William. I will come to you, dearest, whether as a wealthy woman or impoverished. Yes, Fulcran, I will come to you, for weal or woe."

"But I must go—*I must!* 'Tis not for Louis that I care," said I, glancing round as if to be sure that none could hear this treason but herself and Marie, who was with us in the chamber. "'Tis not for

Louis. 'Tis for France. The King may see fit to measure my service against his prejudice."

"He will not, Fulcran. I have little faith in our Most Christian King. Marie, persuade this obstinate man to consider himself first."

The Marquise had been sitting with folded hands and pale face, watching us in this strife betwixt love and loyalty. It was easy to see that her soul was like ours, tempest-tossed. She measured love's claims, and loyalty's demands. She spoke falteringly, for the issue was a great one.

"I do not know what to say, Louise. God knows, I should like the Vicomte to escape; but what if France should be prostrate? Think of it, my child. M. le Vicomte, my heart says, 'Go to England, and leave Louis to his fate.' But since it is not the King only who must suffer, but France and all her children, my head dictates the acceptance of the risk. Like Louise, I do not trust the King, but who knows? May we not work upon his counsellors, who will represent your service as meriting reward?"

Louise was lying heavily on my breast, weeping silently, and one by one the tears fell down her cheeks.

"Darling, would you love a traitor?" I whispered, when Marie had spoken.

"I? Nay, I should despise such a man. But get away, Fulcran, and when you are safely landed in England, write to the King and tell him all."

"Time is too precious. It may take weeks to get to the coast, and in a month from now De l'Eperon is to throw open the fortress gate, and Calvisson will have done his work. I must go, Louise! Yes, I

must go! God help me, but it is terrible to run the risk of losing you for ever!"

The thought of such a possibility was more than I could bear, and drawing my arm away from the woman at my side, I buried my face in my hands. There were no tears, no sobs, no outward signs of weeping; but it was with me as though my heart wept out every hope, and left me lonely and despairing. I thought of her who was now upon her feet, with her arms about me, trying to console me. Was not her own heart breaking? I should have the physical pain, and the lashes of the *comite* at the galleys; but hers was as hard a lot as mine. The sadness would be as great, the agony of mind as poignant. Great God! why was it that one should have to run such risk, and have such a fight to wage 'twixt love and duty?

A long time passed, and not a word was spoken. Now and again the soft lips were on my forehead, as if to give me token of her nearness. Louise was the first to break the silence.

"Fulcran, I am sorry to have intruded on your resolution. I think it a very noble one, but it seems terribly hard that it should be followed up. If the King is cruel, and sends you to the galleys, be brave. I will move heaven and earth to secure your liberty. You shall know what obstacles love can remove. We will see what can be done among those who are close to the throne. There is Madame de Maintenon. She is friendly to me, and Marie may induce her to use her influence. I have heard it said that the King is so brought under the girdle of his mistress—or his wife, as some declare—that he can deny her nothing

in the world. But suppose she will not trouble herself? Oh, Fulcran, it is so hard!" She put her arms about me once more, her jewelled bosom against the peasant's garb! "You will know how I loved you, Fulcran!" she cried.

Marie, whose face was wet with tears, came and stood by me also.

"Fulcran de Belliot, it shall go hard if the King—should he prove obdurate—stands against the endeavours of two women. Let us all be brave, and as for you, go like a true man and do your duty."

I spent the remainder of the night in the inner chamber, while Louise and Marie vainly sought to sleep in the apartment where we had talked together for so many hours. Their presence there was that of wardens. None would dream of my being hidden where I was. M. de Biron would not dare to think evil of Mademoiselle de St. André, whose character was stainless, and acknowledged such by those who frequented the corrupt Court of France. I was as safe in that little room as if a cordon of soldiers had surrounded me for protection. So far as security went, I was content.

When morning came, there was an outcry in the château. My escape had been discovered, and M. de Biron was moving hither and thither like one who had lost all self-control. Hiding among the hangings at the window, I saw him pacing the terrace, questioning this one and that among the guards, then hurrying back into the château. His rage was such that those to whom he spoke cowered, and one who answered slowly, staggered because of a blow from the fist of his impatient master. I opened the door



slightly, which shut me away from Louise, and presently heard her speaking.

“We must search closely, monsieur. He may have crawled out of the window on to the roof. It would be easy for him to reach the ground in such a case, and make for the forest.”

“I have searched, mademoiselle. Not one room has been passed, save your own and that of the Marquise. I suppose he will not be here?”

“Monsieur!” cried Louise, with well-pretended indignation, as if protesting against the insinuation that she would venture to harbour a gentleman in her own sleeping chamber.

She told me afterwards that M. de Biron peered into her face, as if to discover for himself whether her apparent innocence of my whereabouts was assumed or not. One thing was in my favour—her name and mine had never been associated in any of the petty gossip and scandal of the Court, so that the Chief of Police would not think of her as likely to display unusual interest in me, or run the risks of an attempt to cover my escape.

“Pardon me, mademoiselle,” said De Biron, after a pause. “You would not, perhaps, object to my searching the room, simply for my satisfaction? I should like to be able to tell the King that there was not a corner unexamined.”

“Monsieur!” cried Louise, and this time angrily. “I tell you this is my bed-chamber.”

It was sufficient, and M. de Biron went away. Louise, however, came to me, and bidding me follow her, led me to the mirror, and hid me in the space at the back of the fire-place of the Corn Room.

"If I refuse him the opportunity to search my rooms he will be suspicious, Fulcran," she said, and shutting me into the darkness, she hurried away.

I could hear her voice very faintly a few minutes later.

"M. de Biron, if I do not allow you to search my chamber, you may begin to suspect me," she said, somewhat sharply. "Come in and satisfy yourself."

"I thank you, mademoiselle," said the Chief, when he had made a thorough search. "M. le Vicomte has evidently got away, but how, I cannot imagine."

An hour after that I was in the inner chamber once more, and looking out of the window, saw De Biron ride off with some of his men, the others remaining behind to watch for me, and examine the outbuildings afresh, on the chance that although I had vanished from the Corn Room so mysteriously, I might not have succeeded in getting away into the country.

After M. de Biron had gone, Louise tapped at my door, and when I opened it, I saw her with Coulon, whose face was all smiles. The woman carried food on a tray, and setting it on the table, went on an errand. Marie was in the outer chamber, acting as sentinel, to spare us from surprise. Before the meal was over, Coulon returned, bringing with her a bundle which, when she opened it on the carpet, proved to be a change of clothing more in keeping with my station.

"Call to me when you have discarded that disreputable peasant garb," said Louise, quitting the room, and leaving me to myself.

When next she entered, in answer to my summons, her face beamed.

"Ha! 'tis my handsome cavalier, clean and wholesome, and in a dress that befits him. Oh, 'tis a thousand pities that such a man should go to the galleys!" she added piteously, and her blue eyes filled with tears. "Must you really go to the King?"

"I must, Louise," I answered quietly, but emphatically.

She left me after a time, and an hour later, while looking through the window of my hiding-place, I saw her in the courtyard. Half-a-dozen horsemen were there, and the Marquise, in travelling costume, stood beside a beautiful bay. The women kissed each other fondly, then Marie was lifted into the saddle, and rode away. Louise followed the horses to the gateway, and standing there, watched the riders until they were nearly out of sight. She waved her lace-bordered handkerchief, and so did Marie, who had turned to have a last look. Then the travellers disappeared among the trees, and I saw them no more.

I thought it strange that the Marquise should leave the château while Louise required companionship.

I heard voices in the outer chamber when noon was approaching, but I dared not peep out to see who was there. One, I knew, was Louise. Who could mistake her tones? She was talking seriously, and the answers given were not a woman's; they were full-voiced and manly. Who was the man? De Biron? No; that I was certain of. I had a hope that it might be Rousard, who, perhaps, had contrived to

pass into the château, unknown to those who kept guard.

After a time the man crossed the floor and quitted the outer chamber, and the door closed after him. Then Louise came to me.

"Where is the Marquise gone?" I asked immediately.

"Did you see her go away?" replied she, trying to look gay, but betraying the fact that she had something on her mind which was opposed to laughter.

"Yes."

"She has urgent business, and must be away for a day or two. She says you will be safe enough without her, Fulcran."

Louise was restless. More than once she went to the window, then returned as if she would speak, but did not know how to begin.

"Has anything gone wrong?" I asked anxiously, for now her hands clasped, then loosened. She laid them on her bosom, or wiped her face with her dainty kerchief, her breath caught with half a sob, and partly a sigh.

"No, Fulcran, nothing has gone wrong that you do not know of. You will have to stay here a while, for Rousard, your retainer—"

"Is he here?" I cried.

"Yes. He came just now, having crept in sliily, while De Biron's men were searching the outhouses afresh, hoping to find you."

"And what about him? Can I see him?"

"It would not be safe at present; but he says that De Biron is scouring the country, and has offered



another two hundred pistoles to any peasant who may find you. They are to bring word to the château, so that this is evidently to be his headquarters for a few days. That means, Fulcran," said she, drawing nearer, and laying her plump white arm about my neck lovingly—"that means that you must stay here until we can think of a safe exit for you."

"I should not mind, darling, if it were only to get away to England," I said falteringly; for that loving face wrought tremendously against my resolution. To have her in an alien land, willing to share my exile—it would be bliss indeed, for wealth is not the only good of life. A loving heart like hers would make the roughest path pleasant. There was a certain joy even now in her presence, although one knew not what might be before us, since so much depended on the whim of an erratic, selfish, and bigoted monarch.

"If I could only go to the galleys with you!" she exclaimed passionately. "Oh, I would comfort you day and night, and share your sorrows! What would I not do?"

Was the old struggle coming again? I thought it best to end it by taking her hands in mine, and, holding her away a little, suffer her to see my face.

"Louise, the thing is settled. We must not alter it. I must tell the King—*I must!* And I must take the consequences; and you, alas, poor little darling!"

She looked at me. She had something to say which she half-feared to give utterance to, but after a further hesitation she spoke.

"Then, Fulcran, the King, I fear, will be unkind, and will send you to the galleys; and because of that,



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there is something I want to ask. Do not think it bold of me, or unmaidenly. My heart will break if you say 'No' to it."

"What is it?" I asked, drawing her to myself, so that she could nestle against me.

"I want you to be my husband now, so that when you go, I may know that you are mine; so that you may know that your wife is here, in this château, thinking of you, loving you, praying for her husband night and day, doing what a wife only may do to effect your deliverance, if possible. I have brought Father Barnard here, and told him all. He will marry us now, if you do not think your Louise too bold."

God bless her ten thousand times! Her love was great to take me, an outlaw, with all the pains and penalties, and only God knew what besides.



CHAPTER XLI

THE KING'S WARRANT

THREE days passed—days of bliss and pain combined, bliss in having the love of Louise, and that tenderness which made me wonder, for I did not know till then how deep a woman's love can go. If the fate that promised came, she was resolved that I should have such memories of my wife that it should be a consolation to me while I plied at the oar in sunshine, storm, heat, cold, stripes, and brutality. I should have the thought of a woman's love, a wife's unspeakable devotion.

If the hardest task in life were to be set for me, it would be to write the story of those three days, and let the world know of the love of Louise. I have tried to do it, and chapter after chapter has been written—poor, worthless things, declaring on every page my impotence, my inability to tell of her who became my wife for weal or woe.

Father Barnard had blessed us tenderly when he made us husband and wife. There were tears in the old man's eyes when he saw Louise draw down my face to her lips, and heard her say :

“ My husband ! ”

"The Lord bless you both and keep you, and send you happiness, and soften the heart of the King!" said he, before he left us. One could not but feel that such a benediction would be availing.

At noon on the third day, Louise and I, looking out on the country, saw two bodies of horsemen approaching the château. One company came leisurely, led by De Biron, who was riding in to rest his animals, before he set out afresh for another search.

The other company came along furiously. One horse fell, and the rider was hurled into the stream near by, but none waited to see how he fared. They were bent on reaching their journey's end without delay, their errand being urgent. When the strangers drew up in the courtyard, the tired creatures they rode were covered with foam, while the men themselves were worn out with their journey.

"I must go and see what their business may be, Fulcran," said my wife. "They must be from the King, for yonder is De Beure, His Majesty's messenger."

A few minutes passed before she returned.

"The King wants you, darling. De Beure has brought a warrant for your instant attendance upon him, and the message is so urgent that I have to find horses for the journey."

"But how did he know I was here?" I asked, astonished.

"That was my secret, Fulcran," she faltered. "When I saw that you were resolved to go to His Majesty, we thought it best to prepare the

way, and mollify the King, if it were possible. Marie went to Paris to tell the story to His Majesty. She bribed De Beure to bring me this," and she drew a letter from her bosom.

It was short, but it served to fill us with hope:

"COUSIN,—The King frowned when I told him of the Vicomte's escape; but when I went on to tell him of De Belliot's determination to come to him, so soon as he felt that he could elude M. de Biron—who would not believe that he had stirring news for His Majesty, but thought him mad—he said that the fugitive was a brave man, and should be treated fairly, if the story proved true. M. de Beure has a warrant to bring De Belliot to Paris, that the King may question him.

"His Majesty is angry; but Madame de Maintenon, who was present when I told the King the nature of the news De Belliot has for his ear, has told me she will use her influence for the Vicomte's weal, provided his news is genuine. I assured her that it was.

"Do you come, also, if you think you can bear the fatigue of the journey.

"My love to you. Bid the brave Vicomte take courage.

"MARIE."

I was speechless when I thought of the bold scheme those two women had framed; but Louise lovingly rallied me, and bade me go with her to meet the King's messenger.

I have never seen a man so astonished as M. de

Biron, when he saw me step into the courtyard. He had ridden in, and found De Beure talking with Rousard. He came forward, however, instantly, and laying his hand upon my shoulder, cried:

"I arrest you, M. le Vicomte, in the King's name!"

"Nay, monsieur," interposed De Beure, with provoking easiness. "The Vicomte is in my hands, and I have to take him to His Majesty at once."

"How came he here?" exclaimed De Biron angrily. "I have searched for him high and low. Mademoiselle, I understood from you that he was not here."

"I did not tell you so, monsieur," said Louise quietly. "But that does not concern us now. 'Tis enough to know that M. le Vicomte has been found, and has to appear before the King at once. You will find refreshment awaiting you in the banqueting chamber. And you also, M. de Beure. When will you start?"

"An hour from now, mademoiselle. My men are hungry, and the horses unfit for travel. As I have told you, I shall trouble you to find me fresh animals for the return journey."

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I need not stay to tell of all that chanced on the journey to the capital, of Rousard's gladness in finding me, of the alternating hopes and fears as to the outcome of my summons before the King. We

got into the road along which I had travelled so painfully when in the chain. There was the stream into which poor Heloise and her babe had been tossed by the callous soldiers; then Gueche, and later we were clattering along the streets of Paris, towards the Louvre, where the King was staying.

We had ridden hard, but Louise kept up bravely. Love had lent her strength, and while she was full of hope, she had her fears; for who could rely upon the moods of His Majesty? If he were angry, then it was farewell for ever. She would never see me unless she journeyed to the sea, and from afar watched me toiling at the oar. That could be no consolation, and she dreaded its possibility.

The King was apprised of our coming. De Beure had sent forward one of his men when we were three or four miles away from the capital to tell of our approach, so that I entered the presence without delay.

Madame de Maintenon was with His Majesty. She was seated in the window, busy with her embroidery, her favourite occupation, but she did not greet me with any words. She rose and bowed, then sat down and went on with her work, only glancing occasionally at the King, and then at me.

Louis was standing before a table on which lay the golden-knobbed stick which he usually carried—a gift from the woman who was present with him. His face was proud and stern when I approached, but it was evident that he—usually so calm and indifferent to tidings, bad or good—was now disturbed and anxious.

He began angrily:

"M. de Belliot, why did you escape from the chain?"

"I was condemned unheard, sire, and was innocent."

My bold answer took him by surprise, and I saw Madame look up quickly. Her work fell into her lap, and she folded her hands, her gaze no longer one of indifference, but of keen attention.

"But you were a Huguenot, monsieur, and that was sufficient!" exclaimed the King, his assumed nonchalance somewhat shaken by my unexpected boldness.

"I am as loyal to your Majesty, and as true a Catholic, sire, as any in your realm. None know that better than those who dared to accuse me."

Was I doing myself harm by speaking thus? Usually men cringed in the presence of Louis, and sought the King's favour by bartering their manliness. I was too much in earnest just then to cringe. Surely the monarch could discern between honest declaration and servility? He was annoyed, however, for he spoke petulantly.

"I have reason to think otherwise, monsieur. But let that pass," he added, with an imperative wave of the hand, which was habitual. "What is this that I have heard as to the intended betrayal of France? Is it true or false?"

"It is too true, sire."

I told what I knew. As my story went on, Madame quitted her seat in the window, and drew near to the table about which the King and I were standing.

"But where is your proof, M. le Vicomte?" cried Louis, his face white with anger at the perfidy of those who owed allegiance to him and to the State.

"It is here, sire," I answered, drawing forth the paper which Rousard had taken out of Calvisson's bureau.

"Read that, madame," said the King, handing the paper, when he had carefully perused it, to the lady at his elbow. "Tell me what course I ought to pursue."

She read it eagerly.

"'Tis all too true, sire, and you must act upon the knowledge M. de Belliot has imparted. 'Tis not too late to save France."

"I will act to-day, madame," said Louis significantly.

Then turning to me, he asked a question :

"On your honour as a gentleman, M. le Vicomte, are you a heretic?"

"I am not, your Majesty. It was a plot on the part of M. de l'Eperon and the Curé of Tour—the former to obtain my estate, the priest to get his share of the spoils."

"And as for your loyalty?"

"I am ready for anything the King may ask—I am ready to serve France. I came hither to tell of the country's danger, sire, when I might have secured my own safety."

The King looked at me keenly, then picking up his gold stick, and taking Madame de Maintenon's arm, he turned away, and walked up and down the chamber in eager conversation with her.

They came to me presently, the King extending his hand for me to kiss.

"I crave your pardon for dealing with you unjustly, M. le Vicomte," said he frankly. "I have been duped, and I regret that I treated one lightly who was ready to risk so much on behalf of France. The Marquise de Lauzun told me of your resolution in spite of the danger you incurred, and I honour you for it."

The thought of all that this meant for me—yes, and for Louise, who had braved everything by marrying me when I was an outlaw, seemed to overwhelm me. I was robbed of speech, and all that I could do was to bow low, and keep silence. His Majesty understood it, and left me to myself a little space.

Next day Louise and I were riding to Tour, and Rousard bore us company. When we reached my home, we found that the King's messengers, already there, had missed De l'Eperon and the Curé. The news of the King's anger had travelled fast; so also had the news of my restoration to favour. Whither the would-be betrayers of France had gone, none knew. Their whereabouts were never known.

France was spared the horrors of invasion; for the King, whose armies were fully equipped, carried the war into the lands of his enemies. When the war was over, there was a service of thanksgiving in the Church of Notre Dame. The great cathedral was crowded to the doors, but near to the royal pew were they whom His Majesty delighted to honour. Of those who were within the chosen circle, none was more happy than my wife, who throughout the service sat in sweet content, listening to Bourdaloue, who preached



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the sermon, but holding my hand in a loving clasp unseen of those who were about us.

It was pleasant to me, and God knows how welcome the knowledge was to her, to have exchanged the frown of Majesty for the royal smile.

THE END

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