



THE
DISTANT LAMP

HAROLD BEGBIE

Wishing Mr. Archibald
a very merry Xmas and
a happy New Year.

Charlie, Wylie, + Ross.

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THE DISTANT LAMP

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BY

HAROLD BEGBIE

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TO
MY FRIEND
ARTHUR MEE
CREATOR AND EDITOR OF
'THE CHILDREN'S MAGAZINE'

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CHAPTER I

A PANIC IN THE STREETS

AS you may chance to espy, in following the solemn curves of a great river, some bright, exquisite, and delicious little rustling stream hidden nun-like from the glare of the sun by a convent of green trees ; and as you may feel in this whispering and timorous charity of the lofty hills a charm more intimate than the big river has yet given you, and find yourself overcome by a desire to penetrate those dim and verdurous shadows, to rest for a little while in sound of that unfailing music ; so in certain minor events tributary to the immense river of history, even the severe scholar may discover a tenderness, a beauty, and a charm more beguiling than comes to him from the main channel, and gladly turn aside to rest his attention and refresh his emotions, though it be but for a languorous hour, with these beautiful and childlike beatings of the human heart.

Such an event happened in France at the beginning of the thirteenth century—at the time a great event, indeed, as strange and marvellous a thing as

ever happened in the world, a thing absolutely single and unique, but now forgotten or unknown, almost as if it had never been. The flood has not dwindled to a rivulet, but has vanished from the fields of time; the whirlwind has not sunk to a whisper, but has died into the silence of the grave. The wonder, the rapture, the terror, the bitter anguish and accompanying crime of this unique occurrence, have become like the pavement inscription of a cathedral tomb which the oblivious feet of those gazing upwards at the roof have trodden out of knowledge. Nevertheless, the marvellous thing happened; it was real; it is true. Let us, then, if you are curious in such matters, endeavour to read that almost obliterated record of the past which the historian has ignored, and build again from the few broken and disfigured letters which seven hundred years have spared to us, the story of that great event, the spirit of that distant time.

In the year 1212 there lived in the little town of Châteauneuf, which is now a part of Tours, a prosperous merchant and money-changer named Nicholas Rigny. Sharp and masterful in his business, a man without mercy where money was concerned, he surrendered everything to do with the family life into the hands of his wife.

He would say of himself, "I am something like a cat: in my shop I catch mice; at my hearth, I

sleep," and he would boast, blinking his eyes, rubbing his soft hands, and moistening his pale lips, that Dame Elisabeth managed the household *almost* as well as he managed his trade.

There were three children in this family—Gaspard, the eldest, a strong, scornful and rather silent lad of eighteen; Falaise, an excitable pretty girl, nearly sixteen; and Hildebert, the darling of the house, a charming but delicate boy, twelve years of age.

It was by the advocacy of their mother that neither of the boys was forced to follow the father's trade. Gaspard worked with a physician and spent much of his leisure with one of those barbers who first founded the great science of surgery. He was a boy curious about life and bent to discover some of its mysteries. He had no liking for his father's business, and was without desire for wealth. Vexed and angered as the money-changer was by what he considered this low and superstitious taste of his eldest son, he allowed the good mother to have her way and left the boy to grow up in the shape of his own inclinations.

As for Hildebert, he lived at a table with brushes, earths, and vellums, illuminating sacred books, dreaming of angels, and longing for miracles. Falaise, at her needlework, would look up and watch his smiling and enraptured face with wonder, sometimes calling him by name four and five times before he would hear her. 'Will you be a priest?' she

once asked him. 'No,' he answered, still working with his brush. 'A monk?' 'I do not think so.' 'What, then?' He glanced at her quickly with his grey eyes and said, 'I should like to be a saint and do miracles.'

Falaise would sometimes catch this rapture from the little boy, and would go to the shrine of St. Martin and pray for long minutes on her bended knees, her pretty face hidden by her hot hands, her heart fluttering with excited thoughts of God. But the very next day she would be laughing with Gaspard at the priests, and mocking the pilgrims who poured from all quarters of the world into Châteauneuf. Or she would be found in secret with a girl friend, painting her face in the fashion of those days, or dressing herself in glittering clothes which would have angered her mother—no more thought of heaven in her heart than Gaspard could have found with his razor in the brain of a pigeon.

The house in which this family lived may be seen to this day, standing back from the market-place in a dark and tortuous street called Rue Briçonnet, after the first mayor of Tours. The dwelling has suffered a thousand insults and degradations, but in the narrow windows of the first floor, still ornamented with five pointed arches which spring from brief and slender columns, we may catch a glimpse of its former splendour and imagine something of the vanished life within. Often did Falaise look

from one of those windows at the tide of pilgrims pouring up from the river Loire to the famous shrine of St. Martin ; and while that pretty blushing face framed in white stone attracted a hundred eyes to look upwards, the chink of coins below, where Nicholas under the groined vaulting of his shop was busy at his trade, invited as many feet to step into that dark interior and change poor foreign money into solid French. Something else may be said of those windows on the first floor, which now look down on a cobbled street as clean as a ship's deck. Often during the day, for she was a good housewife, Dame Elisabeth would come there hastily, pail in hand, and with a mechanical cry to those below, 'Ware water !' would shoot the contents into the road below, and then turn quickly back to her work.

There were no drains in those days. The trodden mud of the road, where pigs and dogs hunted for food, was indescribably horrible. The atmosphere of a city reeked with evil odours ; Paris itself could be smelt miles before it was reached. People who washed once a week thought themselves extraordinarily clean. The corridors, staircases and even the rooms of castles and palaces were like stables. Decency did not exist. The fork was not invented ; everyone, from king to beggar, ate with their hands on a bare table, and sucked their fingers afterwards. The poor starved ; the rich stuffed themselves into apoplexy. Conversation was coarse and boastful.

Priest, monk, and nun, for the most part, were given over to wickedness. Everywhere it was the same. Some of the men who had been to the Crusades declared that the Moslem was a better man and a cleaner animal than the Christian.

But in spite of all these horrors, Châteauneuf was a proud and arrogant city. The noble towers of its many churches, the pointed gables of its clustering houses, the beauty of its white walls and carven stone, gave it a rich, solid, and splendid appearance. Then, too, there were its countless inns, numerous monasteries for men and women, endless shops of goldsmith, leather seller, potter, weaver, and worker in ivory—a packed mass of buildings curving fantastically, the little streets twisting here and there, diving into shadows, plunging into darkness, emerging into flooding light, and all leading eventually to the great cathedral of St. Martin then a-building from its former ruins.

The people of Tours, looking across a narrow space planted with vines and gardens, saw this prosperity of their haughty neighbours with uneasy eyes. They, too, were building a great cathedral—a cathedral to St. Maurice—but they had to acknowledge that St. Martin was the better man of business. Slowly, very slowly, rose that superb cathedral of Tours, so that it became a phrase to say of any long and wearisome proceeding, 'It is interminable; it is the work of St. Maurice.' And

this phrase continued even when the name of the cathedral was changed, for the sake of money, and when as St. Gatien it had become one of the loveliest accomplishments of human art, a wonder of the world, a delight to all the generations.

Certainly St. Martin was the better man of business. He had performed I know not how many miracles, so that people not only came to his shrine from Germany, England, Italy, and Spain, but from the far and distant East. Money of all the world poured into that little city, and with the pilgrims came the traders, till Châteauneuf, built over the bones of St. Martin, was like a fair, and seemed as if it might become the mart of all mankind.

A chronicler of that period has painted the picture of this prosperity in a few words. 'The people of Châteauneuf,' said he, 'are rich and ostentatious, and array themselves in the most costly stuffs and furs. Their battlemented houses are ornamented with tall towers. Always feasting, they drink from goblets of gold and silver. They play with cats and dice, and go bird hunting. They build churches of stone with sculptured arcades, and throw across the Loire, the Cher, and other neighbouring rivers, bridges also of stone. The beauty of the women is amazing. They rouge their faces and wear magnificent garments. . . .'

Such was Châteauneuf at the beginning of our story, when Gaspard was dreaming of surgery,

Hildebert dreaming of miracles, Falaise dreaming of love, while Nicholas was counting his gold under the groined vaulting of his handsome shop, and Elisabeth above was at work with the housewifery.

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On a certain summer evening in July, when the dark and twisting streets were so full with loitering people that merchants riding on white mules, peasants in rough carts, and bearers of fashionable ladies reclining on sumptuous litters, were obliged to move at a snail's pace through the thronging multitudes, a cry was suddenly raised which sped like fire from street to street and instantly threw the whole town into a state of excited consternation.

The cry was, *Look to your children!*

For a long time no one could say where the cry originated. Of its meaning there were instantly a hundred interpretations in every street. One thing only was sure, one thing only was plain—the children of the town were threatened. Men could be seen running to their houses; merchants came to their doors; women appeared at windows; work-people and apprentices, their tools in their hands, appeared hurriedly in the streets asking what it meant. The swarming mass of people, almost stationary a moment ago, moved with the swiftness of a winter tide and disappeared in all directions, scattering the panic. Men seized up their little

children and ran with them—terror, anger, and excitement in their eyes—to the safety of their houses. The taverns emptied themselves. Monks stood in clusters at the doors of their monasteries. Priests came from the churches. A woman ran shrieking from St. Martin's shrine, her hands outspread, her eyes starting from her head. 'What is it?—what does it mean?'—everyone was asking; and always the cry came back, *Look to your children!*

The very alm and repose of the tranquil atmosphere were suddenly scattered. The west became blood-red, and the air quivered in this scarlet radiance with the menace of death.

A drunken man stood in the centre of a little square, and shouted in a loud voice, 'Friends, what have I told you? It is the Jews, the hated Jews. Curse them for the enemies of God!'

This cry was taken up and passed as quickly as the other. 'Look to your children,' people shouted; 'the Jews are after them.' Everywhere one heard that baleful cry, 'It is the Jews.'

Suddenly a Jew appeared at the corner of a street, running. His face was like linen, his black hair streamed behind him, his large eyes protruded from their sockets, horrible with fear. He was pursued by a crowd of men, yelling like hounds. The gaspings of his breath were drowned by the furious cries which now resounded from one end of the town to

the other : 'Kill the Jews! To death with the Jews!' Someone flung a stone. The Jew yelped, stumbled, and sped on. It was terrible to see how his eyes appealed to right and left for succour. If he could but reach the sanctuary of St. Martin! If some friendly door would but open to receive him while there was yet time! But the cries grew louder. A man rushed from a dark court and struck the Jew with a hammer. The unhappy creature, uttering a piercing shriek, reeled, flung up his arms, and fell. In a moment a shower of stones pelted him like rain. A crimson streak trickled from his black hair and dyed his livid cheeks where a great violet bruise was just showing. He rolled over, lay quivering for a few moments, and then was still.

'To death with the Jews!' cried the infuriated people. Hastily they picked up the stones and ran off in search of other prey, shouting hoarsely their cry of death.

The Jew had fallen at a few paces from the shop of that barber-surgeon with whom Gaspard was wont to foregather and discuss questions of science. An operation on a peasant's poisoned finger had kept the surgeon and his young friend busy at the first outbreak of the panic; but the murderous crowd had hardly gathered up their stones and dispersed when Gaspard sprang through the doorway of this shop and ran to the body of the Jew.

He was still bending over the poor battered corpse, fingering, listening, and watching for a sign of life, when Peter the Barber came to his side.

‘Dead?’ asked the barber.

Gaspard glanced up. ‘Yes,’ he answered; ‘dead as yesterday.’

A crowd was gathering. The barber looked about him, kneeled suddenly at Gaspard’s side, and whispered in his ear, ‘No; not dead. Don’t you see why? Come! help me to carry him inside.’

They had begun to lift their burden, when a man in the crowd cried angrily, ‘Let the swine lie. Do you hear, Master Barber? let him lie and die in the street, like a vile dog.’ The rest of the men growled their approval; some of the women seized Peter and Gaspard by the shoulders, shaking them, and screaming: ‘They would murder our innocent children, these Jews; let the infidel lie, let him die in the road.’

Peter grinned and said softly, ‘My friends, do you think I lift him for his good? I am not a fool. What do you think? Keep quiet, I tell you, and let me get the dog away before the militia come to save him.’

But Gaspard, still supporting the dead man, said in a loud voice, ‘Why do you shriek against the Jews? What harm do they do you? Infidels you call them? But this man worshipped the same God as Christ did!’ His dark eyes flashed; there was

scorn on his lips. He stood holding the body, and surveying the people with contemptuous disdain.

‘Are you a Jew, then?’ one demanded.

‘They would murder our children!’ cried some.

‘They deny Christ,’ said the others.

‘And you!’ answered Gaspard, with a ring in his voice, ‘do you not deny Christ when you murder a man?’

Peter the Barber whispered to the man nearest to him, ‘Only let me get him quietly into my cellar! He shall not revive, that I promise you. Bless my soul, does any man call me a fool?’

But the suspicions of the people were aroused. Some of the men at the back of the crowd had been whispering together. ‘He wants to cut up the body!’ cried one. ‘Ah, he’s in search of a skeleton!’ said a second. In an instant the crowd was enraged. They seized the poor dead Jew, dragged him from the barber’s arms, thrust Gaspard aside, and violently flung the body to the ground. ‘Let the dogs finish it!’ they said fiercely.

The barber laughed, tossing his head. Then he looked at the body. ‘What waste!’ he exclaimed.

A moment afterwards a company of urban militia, a forced body only lately called into existence, doubled on to the scene with long spears at the shoulder which jumped and swayed with their movement. Gaspard and the barber escaped from the crowd, and made their way back to the shop.

The boy's eyes were still flashing. His hands and lips trembled. His breath came in quick gasps.

'After dark!' said the barber, stroking his chin, and glancing back over his shoulder. 'Yes, indeed, after dark. H'm, we were a trifle too hasty. But, after dark! If the excitement keeps up, it may be easy. Yes, bodies may be cheap! Science, you see, turns the violence of fools to the service of the wise. We must learn, my child, to suffer fools gladly.'

CHAPTER II

MISSING

AT the back of the money-changer's shop, in a little dark corner of the court, close by the outside staircase which rose to the floor above, was the family kitchen—a small circular, Gothic building, resembling a pepper-pot, with arched windows and two or three slender chimneys shaped like pointed pencils.

In this building Dame Elisabeth was busy at the fire. A solitary oil-lamp gave a grudging light to the dark interior, which was foggy with smoke and steam, and heavy with the pungent smells of cooking. Rushes strewed the floor. A low table, spotlessly clean but of dark and damaged wood, occupied the centre of the room. At one end of the table was a silver goblet ; in the centre a large loaf of black bread. Benches without backs stood against the walls. Round the large and open fireplace, whose chimney was black with soot, a few iron pots hung from hooks in the stone wall. Near a credence of carved wood was a cask on rough trestles.

The dame was anxious, and not about her cooking. Her grim but noble face, on which the firelight played, was marked by deep care. Gaspard, she felt, could take care of himself, but Hildebert was at Marmoutier across the river; Falaise was somewhere in the excited town; and although the wild panic by this time had apparently subsided, and although instead of the Jews merely the Old Man of the Mountains was suspected of malice towards the children, still the dame, whose heart beat only for God and her children, was anxious and uneasy.

Three or four times she had been to Nicholas in the shop, a most unusual proceeding on her part, and each time, proud that she came to him, he had told her with a laughing assurance that the thing was a mere fairy-story, a matter of which no reasonable man could give account—some idle story seized upon by the hot-heads of the mob and turned by them into this momentary hubbub. He had pushed her from his shop, laughing at her for a foolish woman.

A neighbour had come to see her a few minutes ago, a staid, safe woman. 'It is a troubadour's tale from Tours,' this good body had said. 'The wicked fellow told the people, to amuse them, that Aladdin had started to seize the children of Vendôme and carry them into the mountains; one of the ignorant peasants who live in the caves at St. Symphorien,

heard a part of this story, thought it was truth, and straightway rushed to the bridge crying, *Look to your children.* A good family man, yes; but stupid! From that spread this foolish fear. And they say a score of Jews have been killed.'

Still Elisabeth was anxious.

Perhaps she dismissed from her heart every thought of a massacre, every thought of robbers; certainly she had no faith in Aladdin. The panic in the city did not trouble her any longer. Peace was restored; the streets were now quiet. But that sudden and wild terror for the safety of the city's children had set her thinking—thinking with all the wonderful solicitude of her mother's heart, which was deep with infinite, unfathomable love. She thought of Falaise, who was beautiful but unstable, who was growing up excitable and capricious, who loved fine clothes, would spend hours before a mirror, had eyes for every man who admired her pretty face, and showed no sign at present of a housewife's virtue.

She thought of Hildebert, who was so thin, delicate and pale, whose cheeks flamed so suddenly, whose great eyes burned at times like immense lamps. Would he ever grow to manhood?—would he soon decide for the Church or live like a dreamer and a visionary till manhood came with its shocks, brutality, and disenchantments? Where was he now? No doubt he had been playing at Crusades

with his friends at Marmoutier, playing that rough game of Christians and Saracens with all the passion and realism which were so characteristic of his intense nature. Suppose he should be struck by a stone, or stumble and break a limb !

She thought of Gaspard. Surely he had changed of late. His tenderness had gone. He was cold, severe, silent. Why was he so hard and selfish ? Why did he mock at the priests ? Why did he never go to church ? Why did he speak impatiently of things which all the world believed, and laugh at those things in which everyone was interested ?

These thoughts occupied her heart the while she stirred the pot over the fire mechanically.

She had brought up her family with one central guidance in her soul. She believed in God. To God she prayed for her children, and whatsoever happened to them she had always said, 'It is the Will of God.' They had adored her, and this charming love had confirmed her faith. She had but to speak and they obeyed. Did she suffer ?—they came about her to comfort and console. Ah, the dear confidences at bedtime, after the night's prayers, over each of those three little cots ! Yes ! surely God had answered all her prayers. She looked back over the years ; they had been full of sweetness.

But to-night she wondered.

Had she been wise in being so kind ? Was God refusing to do what she herself should have done ?

Perhaps it had been better if Gaspard had been forced to church, forced to follow his father's trade, forced to speak respectfully of priest and monk. Perhaps it had been better if Falaise had been forced to household work, forced to cook and clean, forced to mend and sew, forced to go to market.

Was it not dangerous to love and indulge and gently guide? Was it not better to rule, to order, and to force?

At this point of her reflections, Falaise came smiling and blushing into the kitchen, a little out of breath and a little guilty, but strangely beautiful, flushed by the evening air.

'Where have you been?' demanded Elisabeth, stirring the pot and turning round her head in its white cap to survey her daughter.

'By the river,' said Falaise, whose voice was like music.

'It is late. Come, cut the bread; your father and brothers will soon be here.'

Falaise went to the credence, picked up the great knife, and going to the table began to cut rounds of black bread from the huge loaf. She was surprised by her mother's stern voice and hard look. She could not think what had happened. And she was so happy, so excited! Oh, how she hated cutting the big loaf, which hurt her hands and tired her arms.

'What excitement there has been in the city!'

she exclaimed presently, unable to keep silent any longer.

‘A wonder you were not in it,’ replied the mother gruffly.

‘I?’

‘You.’

‘Why?’

For a moment there was no sound but the scraping of the ladle in the pot. Then Elisabeth said gruffly, ‘It is what you like—excitement. When shall I see you at work in the house, helping me, and doing your woman’s duty in the world?’

Falaise grew serious. ‘Oh, mother,’ she exclaimed, ‘I am very young to be out of the sunshine all day. It is so dark in here. And outside——’

Elisabeth nodded her head. ‘Ah, outside! It isn’t the sun you go for! No; it’s the pretty faces, the fine clothes, the painted cheeks, and the eyes of the men who gape at you.’

Falaise came to the fire; the steam settled on her face and moistened her eyes. She put an arm round her mother’s waist and nestled against her side. ‘I will try to help you, my mother; you are always kind; do not be cross with me.’

Elisabeth gave her a quick kiss. ‘Here comes your father. Move. Let me get the pot to the table. Tut, how hot it is, this handle!’

Falaise went to her father, her hands extended, her eyes bright.

Nicholas had entered but a minute, rubbing his white hands and snuffing the savoury smells, before Gaspard arrived, stern, white, and silent. The dim lamp cast a murky light on the four faces, so different and so interesting each in its own way. Everybody asked for Hildebert as they drew the benches to the table. 'I fear some mischief will happen to him,' said Elisabeth. Falaise was talking to Gaspard who answered her only in monosyllables. Nicholas fished a great piece of meat from the pot, placed it on the round of black bread in front of him, and mumbled a brief grace in Latin. 'Go to the street and see if he is coming,' he said to Falaise. Then he began to eat, briskly.

Elisabeth filled the single goblet with wine from the cask and brought it to Nicholas. 'He is never so late as this,' she said anxiously, and moved to the lamp which required feeding.

'It is all this hubbub,' said Nicholas. 'The boy is sure to be mixed up in such a hurly.' He turned to Gaspard. 'Did you hear anything?' he asked.

'I saw a Jew killed,' answered Gaspard.

Nicholas laughed. 'Well, a Jew the less in the world will hurt no one!' He drained the goblet and pushed it over to Gaspard. Elisabeth took it and went again to the cask.

Falaise returned. 'He is not in sight. I went to the corner, and I asked two or three if they had seen

him.' She stood at the end of the table, her large eyes shining, her cheeks slightly flushed, her neck as white as wool. Elisabeth, regarding her with frightened eyes, saw how beautiful she was.

'Bah! he will be here directly,' said Nicholas. 'Sit down, wife, and eat. Your fidgets will not bring the lamb back any quicker. Look you, I taste in the pot to-night more maternity than goes with good cooking. This stir in the streets has mis-stirred your smoky pot. You cannot worry and cook at the same time. Pish! your children are safe. Sit down, I say.' He drank another goblet of wine, and, standing up, drew a piece of fish and the leg of a duck from the dish on the table. 'Drink some wine,' he said; 'it will put heart into you.'

Elisabeth took no notice. She stood behind the table for a moment, and then went to Gaspard. 'Finish your supper quickly,' she said in a low voice. 'I can eat nothing till your brother is here.'

Gaspard replied, 'I will go now,' and rose from the table. She watched his strong figure disappear through the arched doorway into the shadows of the court.

When he was gone, Nicholas turned to Falaise and asked her what she had seen by the river that afternoon. 'Drink some wine, girl,' he said; 'and tell me your gossip.'

The girl's eyes flashed. 'What do you think?

I saw the Count ! He was riding a white horse ; his clothes were of crimson and gold ; his gloves were sewn with pearls ; and in his hand he carried a hawk. As he rode, his harness, which was splendid and fine, made a rich music.'

'Oh, tush ! tush !' said the mother angrily. There were dark shadows in the hollows of her cheeks and black lines under her eyes.

'Go on, my pretty,' laughed Nicholas, who was striving to hide his own anxiety for the safety of Hildebert. 'Did you make a curtsy to the Seigneur, eh ? And did he see my little lily ? Tell us how he looked then ; I love the pictures that you make with our French language ; well——?'

Falaise glanced at her mother's white face, and then turned quickly to her father. She had been longing all the while to tell her great story. She had longed to burst into the house with it. Her mother's harsh welcome had stemmed her words, and even now that grim and ghostly figure standing motionless between the table and the door checked the flow of her words. But she turned her gaze from Elisabeth, tried to forget her, and exclaimed, 'What do you think, father ? The Count saw me ! Yes, and he lifted his hand and made to threaten me with the hawk. Really he did. "By my faith," said he, "here's quarry worth a day's hunting."' Catherine heard him, and so did Anne. And then he laughed, and said to a nobleman at his

side, "We grow in Touraine the prettiest girls in Christendom." I heard him say it. We all heard it. Oh, but——'

Elisabeth stamped her foot on the rushes. 'For shame!' cried she. Her voice trembled; her hands were clenched. 'To hear you speak such words, and your brother perhaps dead! Fie upon you, Falaise. That I should live to hear such giddy words from child of mine!' She went to the door, looking back with anger at Falaise.

Nicholas shook his head, mumbled, and glanced over the edge of the goblet. Falaise sat hot and shamefaced, twisting her hands in her lap, her eyes cast down. For a full five minutes there was silence in the room.

Gaspard returned. 'There is some excitement in Tours,' he said. 'They say a preacher has come from Vendôme. Mayhap Hildebert is there. I will go across and see. By the river and on the bridge there is no sign of him.'

He spoke quietly, without emotion. His handsome, masterful face betrayed nothing. He had a message to deliver, and delivered it. That was all.

Elisabeth caught him by the arm. 'I will come with you. I can wait here no longer. Is there fighting over there? Have any more been killed in the streets?' Her eyes searched his face.

'All's quiet,' said Gaspard.

'I will come with you. Oh, my heart, if harm

should befall him ! And we sitting here ! Does no one care for my boy ? Am I the only one ? Ah, God forbid ! Falaise, put the pot to the fire and cleanse the table. Nicholas, keep watch for our youngest.'

'Stop !' cried Nicholas, who was going to the cask, goblet in hand.

She turned at the door. The dusky orange-coloured light of the lamp showed her face rigid in austerity.

'What good can you do in the street, wife ?' demanded Nicholas weakly, frightened by her look. 'Bide here, and keep the young lad's supper hot for him—that is mothers' work. And while you, do you see, attend to that, I and Gaspard will go, and not the same road ; he one way, and I one way. That has sense in it. Now, I pray you——'

'I cannot rest here,' said Elisabeth. One of her hands was pressed against her heart. 'See how late it is. He has never before kept us like this. And there has been fighting in the streets. Jews have been killed. And besides, something tells me. Yes, my boy needs me. Disaster has come to him. He is calling me.'

Nicholas turned white and moistened his lips uneasily. The goblet twisted in his hands and the lamp sparkled on its rim. He watched his wife, cunningly.

'Jews have been killed !' exclaimed Falaise from

the table. She had heard nothing. She was frightened.

‘Aye, blood has been shed, and people have gone mad,’ said Elisabeth, frowning at her.

‘All that,’ said Gaspard, ‘is long over.’

‘Our right noble militia will see to that!’ laughed Nicholas, making a move of affected composure to the cask.

‘Still, he may have been killed!’

‘Dame!’ said Nicholas, drawing up. ‘You are beside yourself to-night. Look you, I have heard from your lips a thousand times since children came to us, *It is the Will of God*. Well! Is there no God all of a sudden? All of a sudden has He ceased to hear your prayers? Come, restore yourself. No harm has befallen your son. I am a religious man. God has prospered me. I say, no harm has come to our youngest.’

‘Nevertheless, I will go and seek for him,’ Elisabeth rejoined. ‘What! would you have me sit here——?’ She put her hand to Gaspard’s arm. ‘Let us to Tours. Oh, heart of my body, look how dark it is! To think of my little lad——’ She stopped suddenly on the threshold. ‘Listen!’ she cried; ‘what is that sound? Oh, dear God——!’

At that moment the lamp began to fail.

A dreadful silence filled the darkening kitchen. Falaise stood white and frightened at the table. Nicholas, with dropped underjaw and staring eyes,

remained half-way to the door, like a man transfixed. And at the door itself Elisabeth was clutching Gaspard's arm, listening with white face, one finger raised in the air, her body taut with new alarm which strengthened all her fears.

There was a roar of voices in the street, a sound of men running, and once more the cry resounded on every side—

'Look to your children !'

CHAPTER III

THE CALL

NO one in the kitchen seemed able to move. If a stranger had entered the court at that moment and through the arched doorway had suddenly seen those four people standing in the dim interior as if transfixed, the wavering flame of the failing lamp throwing wild and fantastic shadows across their blanched faces and their motionless bodies, well might he have fled in consternation from a scene so ghostly, so haunting, and so silent. For the kitchen was like a tomb, and its inmates like the dead.

The hubbub in the streets grew louder. Shrill voices of panic-stricken women rose above the deeper and more reverberating clamour of men. The feeling of a whole city in violent motion, the sense of a multitude suddenly aroused and moving furiously, entered the still, silent, and darkening kitchen like the rumble of an army.

All in a minute this terrible tension was relaxed. It was like the snapping of a stretched cord.

Somebody outside in the streets had laughed.

The incongruous sound of this rich laughter entered the darkening kitchen and dispelled panic, just as it seemed instantly to silence the roar in the streets. Gaspard endeavoured to free himself from his mother's clutch. Elisabeth slowly lowered her finger, which had seemed to be listening. Nicholas cleared his throat and took a step to the door. Falaise began once more to collect the trenchers of black bread. 'It is nothing,' said Nicholas, moistening his lips.

'Let me go and see,' Gaspard said quietly to his mother.

'Listen!' she cried suddenly, joy and happiness in her voice, her worn face instantly transfigured.

The others heard nothing but the laughter, which was now loud and general; only Elisabeth had heard the sound of Hildebert's voice. They looked at her, wondering.

Before they could move, the little lad had dashed through the house and now came running towards them, breathless with excitement, his scapular hanging behind him, his hose dragging, his arms extended. He seemed to throw himself into his mother's arms.

'It is true!' he cried eagerly, pressing himself to her bosom, his head lifted, his wonderful great grey eyes with their thick lashes directed to her stooping face. The laughter in the streets continued. Before any of them could speak the little boy went on, gasping with his tremendous excitement, the

slim body in its dress of deep blue still quivering with the overwhelming force of his emotion : ‘ It is all quite true about Stephen of Cloyes. You know what I told you ? It is true ! God *has* appeared to him. He has seen angels. The sheep in the field have bowed down before him. He touches people and they are cured. And what do you think ? Something we have never heard before ! Oh, mother ! he has been to the King at St. Denys, and now—oh, mother, listen ! listen !—*he is marching to the Holy Land with the children of France !* It is true, true, true ! Isn’t it glorious ? God has chosen the children. God has told Stephen that the children of France shall drive the Saracens from Holy Land and take possession of our Saviour’s tomb.’

The laughter in the streets continued.

‘ All the armies of the Christians,’ Hildebert cried breathlessly, ‘ have been vanquished because the men were wicked. God will not give the Holy Land to wicked men. The Saracens have been permitted to kill them and torture them, and drive them back, because they are sinful. But children are pure ! Children are innocent ! Children do not love sin and offend God. And so He has chosen them. He told Stephen He has ordained it. Stephen of Cloyes is a poor boy ; he is a shepherd, like David. He has prayed ; he has longed to see God. And God has appeared to him in the fields ; he has seen **Him** on

the hills ; and God has chosen him out of all the people in the world to lead the great army of children into Holy Land. Children, only children ! The King believes in him. He went to St. Denys. He showed a letter. The bishops would not believe at first. Now they all believe. Everybody believes. And the children are pouring out to join this beautiful Stephen. Their fathers and mothers try to stop them ; some of the angry fathers put fetters on the children and chain them up ; but God breaks the chains and loosens the fetters. Over a thousand children have gone from Vendôme alone. Nothing can stop them. It is the Will of God !—the Will of God ! And, mother—— !’

The boy stood tiptoe, stretched his face upward, and pressed his hands tightly round his mother’s neck. The laughter in the streets continued.

‘ I must go, too ! ’ he broke out, trembling. ‘ Directly I heard about it, I felt my heart grow hot in my body. Make me a red cross, dear mother, and let me go soon. I long to see Stephen. I want to touch his dress. I want to hear his voice. Oh, think, mother ! with that voice he has spoken to God ! Isn’t it wonderful ? isn’t it grand ? And they say that our Lord came to him once dressed like a poor man ! He will tell me all about that. I shall walk at his side to Jerusalem, and he will tell me how our Lord looked and what He said to him on the hillside. And I will come back from Holy Land and tell you.

All the wickedness is to cease. Bad men are to be destroyed. No one will be able to live who does not love God. And I shall see the Lake of Galilee. I shall worship on the Mount of Olives. I shall weep in Gethsemane. I shall adore on Calvary. And I shall see the tomb in the garden where He was laid, and where His Mother came and St. Peter ran and looked in, and where the angel was sitting !’

Loudly, brutally, sounded the laughter in the streets.

‘ My child !’ cried the mother, holding him fast, straining her eyes to see his face in the fading light ; ‘ you cannot go to Holy Land.’ She kissed his brow. ‘ It is some tale they have told you. It is not true, my angel. Listen, how the people are laughing !’

‘ Wicked people are laughing !’ burst out Hildebert with passionate indignation. ‘ Yes, but God will destroy them.’ He seemed as if he would free himself from his mother ; but she still held him, bending over him, tenderly. ‘ They tried to take the Holy Land from the Saracens ; but they couldn’t ! Let them laugh ! They call themselves Christians, but they do not love God. Devils laugh like that ! Mother, mother, you must believe ! It is all true. It really is true. And I *will* go with Stephen to the Holy Land. You cannot stop me, dear mother. Father cannot stop me. No one can stop me. It is the Will of God.’

The eyes of Falaise were bright and excited. The

enthusiasm, the intense emotion of Hildebert had communicated their fire to her soul. She drew nearer to the doorway with her bright eyes fixed in fascination on her brother's face.

Nicholas, too, was profoundly moved by the boy's hot and passionate assurance. His face was paler than usual, the blue lips were firmer set; there was a gleam of fire in his light-coloured eyes. He moved thoughtfully to the dwindling lamp, rescued the wick from extinction, and then approached the doorway, his eyes bent upon Hildebert's excited face.

'You cannot go,' said Elisabeth, as Nicholas came to her side.

'You are mad to think of it, my son,' added Nicholas hoarsely. He cleared his throat, moistened his lips, and laid a hand on the child's shoulder. 'Come, sit down to your supper, and let us talk this matter over.'

'No one believes!' cried Hildebert, fiercely and with challenge. The laughter in the streets became an agony to his soul. He looked about him. Gaspard's cold, impassive face seemed to enrage the boy. No one understood him. All were against him. 'You cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven,' he cried, 'unless you become as a little child. It's the Will of God. We have not chosen Him, but He has chosen us. Don't *you* believe, Falaise? Oh, mother, surely you believe! You taught me to

pray. You go to mass. You give to the poor. Falaise, I told you about Stephen of Cloyes, and you said it was beautiful. Now it is *more* beautiful. Think, he has seen our Lord. Think, God has bidden him lead the children of France to Holy Land. Don't you believe now? Don't you want to believe?'

'Little son,' said Nicholas, taking the boy's arm in a firm grasp, 'there are many leagues from here to Holy Land; you need be in no hurry to start; and it is necessary for pilgrims to eat. Now, come to the table. We will sit about you while you make a little supper, and you shall answer our questions.'

As he drew the boy into the kitchen, he made a motion with his head to Falaise, signifying that she should make up the fire and get her brother's supper.

Hildebert turned his eyes to his mother. 'You will make me a red cross, won't you?' he pleaded.

Elisabeth was weeping at the door.

CHAPTER IV

A MAN COMES RUNNING

THE fire was kindled, the pot began to steam, and a show of cheerfulness appeared on the faces of Nicholas and Elisabeth. They got Hildebert to the table, called him by endearing names, rallied him for his disordered clothes, bustled Falaise here and there, and eloquently expressed their anxiety to hear the full story of Stephen and this wonderful pilgrimage.

Hildebert sat on the bench, his shoulders rounded, his head bent, his hands hanging idle between his knees. He looked at no one. He heard nothing that was said.

There was a pathetic beauty in the little boy with his long dark hair, his pale face, his grey eyes with the dark lashes, his small mouth of which the lips were swollen and parted with emotion. His doublet of deep blue, with its wide and loose collar, its short sleeves, and its low-waisted belt, admirably became his charming face. The rich but solemn colour of this dress added to the tragedy of his appearance, and made him look like a scolded angel.

He felt that it was useless to speak ; he was conscious of an immense and crushing disappointment ; he had come too suddenly out of rose-coloured clouds and the dazzling ecstasy of transfiguration into this hard, stupid, and unseeing world. His thoughts were of heaven ; and they had placed him at a table. He longed for God ; and they spoke of supper. Worse, he came to them with blessing, with glory, with light for their darkness, with joy for their sorrow ; and they treated him as one distraught, one who must be soothed and indulged, got quietly to bed with sweetmeats and kisses !

Gaspard, still standing by the door, a little in shadow, surveyed his brother with contempt.

‘Quick, Falaise !’ called Nicholas cheerfully, rubbing his hands. ‘Make the pot boil, child ; stir it about ; keep the good things a-moving. My faith, Hildebert, but it smells savoury !’

‘You must tell us all about this Stephen while you eat,’ said Elisabeth, placing a trencher of bread before the little boy, and resting one of her hands upon his stooping shoulders.

‘Let him drink first,’ quoth Nicholas. ‘Pilgrims are thirsty souls !’

‘I doubt you’ve drunk nothing, my angel,’ said Elisabeth, ‘since you left us at noon.’

She took the goblet to the cask.

As the wine began to flow, the disillusion and rebellion which were breaking the child’s heart rose

in a great sob to his throat. He suddenly flung his arms on the table, let his head fall there, and burst into tears.

Elisabeth turned off the tap of the cask, and ran to him. Falaise at the fire began to weep and called to Hildebert, going towards him, that *she* believed his story, and that she, too, would like to go to Holy Land. Nicholas, puckering his brows and pursing his lips, took a turn here and there, his eyes on the rushes. A moment ago he had felt proud of taking command in a purely household affair, something which had nothing to do with the shop; he had almost welcomed this unexpected crisis, had secretly rejoiced at his wife's weakness and tears, had flattered himself for a clever and skilful head of a family; but now——

Walking here and there in the kitchen, he caught sight of Gaspard at the door. A sudden thought struck him. He looked cunningly over his shoulder. Elisabeth was on one side of Hildebert, Falaise on the other; the boy was completely hidden in their embraces. Softly he approached Gaspard and whispered in his ear, 'Go quickly into the streets, and get the truth of this tale. Not a word!' He put his finger to his lips, nodded knowingly, and, once more pleased with his generalship, turned back again to the table. 'Why, what is this?' he exclaimed cheerfully; 'tears!—tears in a pilgrim! Come, Hildebert my son, you must grow a heart

worthy of the red cross.' He rubbed his hands and laughed. 'What will you do between this and Jerusalem?—there are many stones on the road, and some broken water, too, if what crusaders tell us is true. Ah, a stormy course, believe me! You'll need courage. Courage is a fine thing. Hardihood, eh? Endurance, what? Oho, lad! You must show us the warrior before we let you crack Saracen skulls to the glory of God.'

'There, there,' whispered Elisabeth soothingly, sitting on the bench and gradually working Hildebert first into her arms and then on to her lap. 'Tears do no harm, and it isn't the first time your mother has dried them for you on her bosom, is it, my angel?' She began to rock him backwards and forwards, her lips in his hair. 'You've tired yourself at Marmoutier. The noise in these streets has been too much for you. Eat a little supper and I'll put you to bed and sit by your side till sleep comes. (Falaise, bring me the goblet.) A little wine, love, will do you good; my angel is hot; he's overdone and worn out. There, there! snuggle against my heart, and let the tears fall.' She pressed him to her, and crooned to him.

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Gaspard passed through the house and made his way into the streets, which were still unusually full of people, but from which all panic had now com-

pletely disappeared. He heard men laughing indulgently, and caught the name of Stephen, mockingly, from the lips of women standing at dark entries or leaning from the sills of upper windows.

The crowds were greatest by the inns. Pilgrims who patronised these establishments, and those who slept in the streets outside, were gathered together in shadowy groups, talking together, or eagerly listening to one who had definite news. A crescent moon shone upon the white walls and pointed gables of the houses. Merchants passed, hand in hand, across these open places, talking softly and laughing quietly. A couple of drunken priests were helping a third, worse drunk than themselves, to keep upon his feet. Evil women stood watching from darkened doorways. Robbers followed swaying and uncertain figures through narrow lanes. Dogs foraged in the litter. From most of the inns came the sound of loud voices quarrelling or singing discordantly.

Gaspard was about to join a group of pilgrims listening to one who seemed to be speaking quietly and with intelligence, when he felt his doublet lightly touched and heard a voice which quickened all the pulses in his body.

‘So you have not yet gone to Jerusalem!’ said this voice, which was wonderfully soft, wonderfully sweet, and, above all things else, charged with the mystery of an original soul.

He turned quickly, his dark cheeks flushed, his eyes shining.

‘Isabel!’ he exclaimed, and laughed with a deep joy.

The girl was tall and thin, with pale, colourless hair like faded straw, narrow eyes which were darkened by shadows, a fine nose most delicately chiselled at the nostrils, and lips that were long, full, and, in repose, full of power and determination.

She was almost as tall as Gaspard, and carried herself loosely, with an easy grace and the appearance of carelessness.

‘So you have not started yet?’

‘If I wanted to,’ he answered, ‘I could not leave you.’

‘But girls are going, they say, as well as boys.’

‘You mean you would come with me?’

‘But you are not going!’

‘What is the truth of this tale?’ he asked her. ‘Hildebert has come home with a fine story. He wants a red cross and would be off at once to join someone he calls Stephen of Cloyes.’

She laughed. ‘Some have gone already, not waiting for the red cross. They say a hundred and more children are missing.’

‘But is it true that this Stephen is really marching to Holy Land?’

‘Oh, that is how you choose to believe!’

‘It is late for you to be out,’ he said, regarding

her tenderly. The moon made little stars in her dark eyes and turned her long neck to a pillar of gold.

‘I am waiting for my father.’

‘Ah!’

‘He loses his purse if one of us is not by to guide him home.’ She laughed bitterly.

Gaspard’s lips hardened. ‘What with the madness of religion,’ he said, ‘and the madness of wine, this town is more a place of devils than men.’

‘They are no better at Tours; no better at St. Cyr; no better anywhere in France. Life is so. What would you?’

‘What would I!’ he exclaimed. ‘I have oft told you. I would have for a ruler of men neither soldier nor priest, neither noble nor commercial *prud’homme*; no! I would have those who understand the body of men made masters of life.’

‘Ambitious youth!’ she laughed. ‘You would set a barber on the throne and beat all our swords into razors!’

They moved slowly across the square, and as they went he told her once again his dream for the world. Instead of money emptied at the feet of priests to increase their arrogance, or bestowed upon soldiers to lay waste cities and vineyards, he would spend all on human knowledge in the cause of human welfare. He would have the streets of cities cleansed, the world searched for healing herbs,

scholars endowed to discover and invent, life made intelligent, mankind ennobled, the secrets of nature laid bare.

It was his dream, and only with Isabel did his soul share it.

One other of his dreams he shared with her, the one nearest to his heart as the other was closest to his brain. He dreamed to be famous and great, a man known throughout France for his genius in the healing art, a friend of kings and princes, a master of knowledge. Then, in a fair house with a sweet green garden of shady trees and fragrant herbs, of burning flowers and cooling fountains, he would dwell with Isabel for his wife, and they would be happy the livelong day, and he would let her tease him as she would, loving to be teased by her, and he would tell her in a thousand ways how exquisite she was to his soul, how ravishing to his brain, how dear, how delicious, how precious to his heart.

As he told her again of this dream, she lifted her head and looked upwards, smiling at the crescent moon. 'You are like Hildebert,' she said softly; 'you dream!'

'Nay,' he answered scornfully; 'we are poles asunder. That poor child dreams of heaven; I of truth. He runs after the shadows of another world; I pursue the knowledge of this.'

'Nevertheless,' she answered, 'what is real is equally different from what you both dream.'

‘Isabel!’ he exclaimed, coming to a stop and turning round to confront her, ‘what I dream is the hidden truth of that which really exists. Trust me, and you shall see. Believe me, even as I adore you. Have faith in me. I shall discover things. I shall be famous. We shall be rich and happy, you and I.’

She rested her strange eyes upon him. ‘How shall these things be?’ she said half mockingly, half wistfully.

At that moment a man came running into the square, and, as if in answer to the question of Isabel, called Gaspard’s name in a loud voice.

The lovers started and turned about.

‘I am here,’ cried Gaspard.

The man came to him. ‘Quick with me, friend,’ said he; ‘the Count sends for you. If your wits are as good as some say, fortune awaits you.’ He pulled at Gaspard’s arm. ‘I’ve a horse ready for you at the Sign of the Green Cross. Hasten, for the Count raves.’

‘The Count is ill?’ asked Gaspard, going forward. His voice trembled a little with excitement. Isabel, to whom he had said no word of farewell, watched him go.

His strong head, with its short-cropped hair, rose from heavy shoulders on a neck which had the force and steadfastness of a column. At the waist and hips he sloped away like a greyhound. The legs were

straight and handsomely shaped. There was neither stiffness nor laxity in his carriage, but rather an immense energy held firmly in the leash of a watchful will, ready to rouse up and exert itself in a moment. He walked like a man sure of himself and ever on the alert for action ; not as one in haste or excited by a purpose.

He disappeared round the jutting corner of a dark house, but suddenly came back out of those dark shadows and stood in the moonlight.

‘ Till to-morrow ! ’ he called to Isabel, and waved his hand.

She saw that his eyes were bright, and smiled to him with a little nod of her head. ‘ Good fortune ! ’ she called softly. Again he waved his hand, and then, turning about, plunged into the shadows of the darkened street.

Isabel stood in the moonlight, waiting for her father to quit the tavern.

Gaspard told the Count’s messenger to await him at the Green Cross, and ran swiftly forward to his father’s house. He found the family watching for him. The messenger had called there, and had told them of the Count’s desire to have Gaspard’s attendance on his son, mortally wounded by a rolling horse. Nicholas was pleased and greeted Gaspard warmly. ‘ Hurry, my son,’ said he ; ‘ for this is a matter carrying great consequence.’ Hildebert was abed and asleep, his pale face

flushed, his long eyelashes wet with tears, his lips parted.

Gaspard went lightly up the stairs and passed into his room, striking a light. The room seemed to him smaller than usual. When he had kindled a flame, he went to a chest and took from it a bag which contained surgical instruments given to him by an Italian student. Then he went to a cupboard and selected certain bottles which he wrapped carefully and disposed about his person.

In this little room were several old books, three rough drawings of the human skeleton, a yellowing chart of the blood vessels, cases containing the bones of animals and birds, bottles filled with various mixtures, bunches of dry herbs, trays of moths, butterflies, and beetles. Here the boy had worked, and here he had dreamed. It was at once the cell of a scholar, the playroom of a boy, and the altar of a genius. To-night it seemed to him strangely small, seemed as if it belonged to a past from which he had parted.

As he turned to go, Falaise glided into the room, glowing and self-conscious. She congratulated Gaspard on his good fortune, and then in the same breath said swiftly, nervously, laughing over her words as if they were unserious. 'Tell the Count, Gaspard, that it was your sister he threatened with his hawk this afternoon. 'Twill amuse him, perhaps.'

Gaspard regarded her. In his soul he compared her with Isabel.

There was such judgment in his eyes that Falaise grew pale ; but at the next moment was bold and mocking. She laughed, looked him in the face, and said scornfully, ' How many jokes do you see in a year ? '

' I thought,' said Gaspard, putting out the light, ' that you were going with Hildebert to Holy Land.'

He passed from the house, came to the Green Cross, and mounted the horse that was standing ready for him at the door. The Count's messenger bade him sit firmly and keep a sharp eye on the horse's head.

They pushed their way through a dark street, and coming to the road beside the Loire gave the rein to their horses. The moonlight shone upon the broken cart-track, upon the broad river, upon the tall trees bordering its gentle banks, and filled the wooded island floating in the centre of the stream with a mist of tremulous silver.

CHAPTER V

GASPARD'S RETURN

THEY rode in silence. Gaspard was busy with the work in front of him ; he knew what there was to know ; questions, he realised, would produce nothing but gossip, for which he had no mind, which would interrupt his thoughts.

It appeared that the Count had already sent for his master the physician and for Peter the Barber, and that these two men, after causing the injured boy an infinite agony and being passionately cursed and threatened by the now furious Count, had conjointly suggested Gaspard's appearance on the scene—perhaps as a scapegoat.

Gaspard reckoned all the difficulties, reflected on a certain drug in his doublet, and went over in his mind all he knew about the bones in the human body. He was conducting a hundred operations as he rode along the soft road beside the moon-silvered Loire.

The messenger presently called to Gaspard to follow him, and turning from the river crossed a few fields, and came to the Cher. He led the way into

the water, telling Gaspard the ford was a good one. On the other side of the river he put spurs to his horse, and they galloped through a glade in the forest, till the park was reached in which the Count was resting at a famous castle.

This lovely undulating park, where great sheets of water curved into the gloom of their own islands, was flooded with moonlight and dusky with filmy shadows of tall, solitary trees that were motionless under the grinding starshine. It gave Gaspard the feeling of vast space and an almost intolerable power.

If he should fail——!

The castle came into view, far-spreading, solid as mountain and yet so radiant in the whiteness of its stone that it seemed the creation of a dream. Philippe Auguste had lodged in this lovely place, Henry II of England had signed within its mighty walls a treaty of peace. Gaspard gazed up at its broad and balustraded terraces, its many windows, its battlemented towers, and felt himself grow suddenly small and impotent. If he should fail——! Nay, was it possible that he could succeed?

He was conducted through a vaulted hall, crowded with people, to the kitchen, where the Count was at supper—not having eaten a morsel since the accident to his son. Kings in those days would take their meals by the fire at which they were prepared, and the Count had a love for the

smells of cooking flesh and the warmth and traffic of the fire. Save on occasions of state he dined always in the kitchen, even in the castles of his friends, eating at a bare table with hands that he seldom washed.

At sight of Gaspard he started up, pulling a morsel of meat from his mouth. 'Why, 'tis a boy!' he exclaimed, and stood for a moment, gaping. Then he added, quickly, the fire flinging a red light on his perspiring face, 'Lad, your master is a fool, and your friend the barber is a coward. By St. Damien and St. Côme, they deserve a bleeding themselves! I packed them off lest I should break their necks for them. Do you better than they, and I will reward you well. You are but a boy; but the world is now at your feet. Men say you have a talent for these things. Now is a time to show it. Follow!'

He led the way to a stair, and along a corridor strewn with rushes to a large tapestried chamber where the injured youth lay gasping and groaning on a mattress, his mother bathing his forehead, a sister moistening his lips, a crowd of others standing by in loud conference.

Gaspard asked for warm water in an ewer, for grease, and a towel. Then he said to the Count, 'Seigneur, let all these people go from the room.'

The Count was struck by his manner.

When the room was empty, Gaspard took the

bottles from his doublet, unwrapped them from their coverings, carefully examined them by the lamp, and then selecting one, poured the contents into a phial and went to the groaning youth on the mattress. The Count, watching him narrowly, like a man fascinated, noticed that he turned pale.

'What have you there?' he demanded, catching Gaspard's arm.

'A drug, Seigneur.'

'How works it?'

'That you shall see.'

He looked the Count in the eyes, went forward, and knelt at the mattress. Kneeling down at the sick lad's side, 'Drink, sir,' he said quietly; 'it will give you ease from your pain.'

The youth drank, spilling a little of the drug, and choking.

'Tell me where your hurt is greatest,' Gaspard asked, and gently placed his hands here and there.

The Count watched him with admiration.

Suddenly the wounded man groaned deeply.

'Have no fear,' said Gaspard; 'I shall not cause you pain.'

'That's good!' cried the Count warmly; 'no pain, that's good; and you speak with assurance.'

The youth became suddenly very pale, and the jaw locked.

'Look!' whispered the Count, catching Gaspard's arm.

‘It is nothing, Seigneur.’

‘He dies!—he dies!’ cried the Count, pushing Gaspard aside, and bending over his boy who was now livid as death. He was so full of horror that he did not observe Gaspard’s pallor, nor notice how his voice shook.

Gaspard himself, for a moment, was afraid. His heart beat fast. He could feel his throat drying like dust. ‘Seigneur,’ he said at last, speaking firmly, ‘if ill befalls him, yours will be the fault. I pray you, lay not a hand upon him.’

The Count lifted himself up.

Gaspard went to the ewer, cleansed his hands with the grease and water, and rubbed them for a long time with a towel, watching the boy on the floor with a steady scrutiny. This calm action seemed to reassure the Count.

‘Lad,’ said he grimly, ‘I know not what you are about, but if you work by poison, and if you seek to medicine pain by death, I shall pay your reckoning not with gold but with steel. Why is my son like this? Hearken, you are not here to cleanse your hands, but to heal my son of his hurt. Why looks he glassy, like death? Why breathes he like a man strangling? The physician talked Latin and consulted the stars; the barber laid not a hand to the boy without making him scream; but they left the colour in his cheeks and the soul in his eyes.’

‘Seigneur, your son will presently awake healed

of his injury,' said Gaspard. He took off his doublet, rolled up his sleeves, and knelt down at the mattress. 'Touch me not with a finger, hinder me not with a word,' he said to the Count, not looking up, and straightway set about his work. . . .

It was dawn when he left the castle, and the sun seemed to rise to celebrate his glory. 'As my soul lives,' the Count had exclaimed a dozen times at least, 'the King shall hear of this; aye, all the world shall know it!' Gaspard had heard him tell the ladies and the gentlemen of the castle how the thing had been done. 'He put the boy into a drowse that was like death; he pierced him with a lean razor, took from him splintered bones as fine as hair, sewed him up like a bag, and then he grasped the bones in his hands, so, and forced them into place with a noise that you could hear.' At the door he had given Gaspard a purse of gold, had told him he would send presents after him, and had said, 'Henceforth, boy, you shall be man of mine. You shall lodge with me, eat with me, and have what you ask. Sell yourself to no one; nay, not to the King. Call yourself evermore the Count's Surgeon.'

Happy was the heart of Gaspard as he rode through the park, and followed the river with its tapering poplars and its silver willows to the roofs and towers of Châteauneuf. The sun shone in his eye, and warmed his flesh. He was conscious of

success ; he was sure of fortune and of fame. But most strong of all his emotions at that time was a liberating sense of relief. He had made a dangerous experiment ; his courage was justified.

From an old woman bent double with rheumatism, who lived in one of the caves at Marmoutier, and who was regarded by all the neighbouring world as a witch in league with the devil—this poor old soul two years afterwards on the Place Foire le Roi at Tours was flung into boiling water and afterwards hanged, drawn, and quartered—Gaspard had learned of a drug which caused so deep a sleep and produced such a deadness of soul, that, during the trance it thus induced, the body could endure the frightfullest pain of an hour's length without knowledge.

In secret he had tried this drug on animals, going into the woods for that purpose, afraid lest the clergy should hear of him and the town be raised to murder him. The Church condemned shedding of blood. It was almost impossible to get hold of a human skeleton. The same powers that allowed a blasphemer or a coiner of false money to be flayed alive or burned at the stake would not allow a surgeon to dissect the body of the greatest criminal that had been put to death.

Gaspard, with the courage of genius, had tried this drug on the Count's son. It had succeeded. His surgery, learned from the Italian student more

than from Peter the Barber—Italy was ahead of all other countries in this respect—had succeeded as brilliantly. Yes! but it had all hung upon a hair.

As he rode through the morning air, his thoughts flew to Isabel. He must go to her and tell the great news. His dream had come true! They would soon be married. She should wear fine linen like a princess and live in one of the parks owned by the Count.

Then he considered with himself whether he should go first to his mother or to Isabel. He imagined how they would be waiting for him anxiously at home, his father at the shop door, his mother at one of the windows above. But Isabel would be waiting, too.

He felt like a boy suddenly set free from school and made master of his own life. The day was his. No longer need he work for the physician. Henceforth he was to call himself the Count's Surgeon.

It was a noble horse, and finely caparisoned, that he rode beside the Loire. He said to himself, 'I will not go at once to the inn. I will give Isabel a sight of me on this great horse, and my mother, too!'

The roofs and towers and beautiful white walls of Châteauneuf shone warm in the morning light.

As he entered the town many stared at him, and some questioned. He rode stiffly, with his head

high, self-conscious and proud. But inwardly his heart was like a child's, trembling with excitement.

'He would go first to Isabel,' he said, and turned the horse up a narrow lane.

She was within doors, but came to him in a moment. 'I succeeded,' he said, endeavouring to speak in a natural voice.

'You were more fortunate than I,' she answered, looking at him with some uncertainty.

'What do you mean?'

'My father lost his purse!'

'That need not trouble you. I have a bigger, filled, too, with the Count's gold money.'

'So you are famous, then?'

'Our marriage shall come swiftly.'

'You are too fine for me on that big horse.'

'You shall ride a bigger and a better.'

'Have you been home yet?'

'No.'

She studied him. 'I am glad you have succeeded,' she said quietly. 'I was wrong, but I wanted you to be right. Come this evening, and we will walk by the river.'

He bent from the saddle. 'Will you have this purse?' he whispered. 'It is of no use to me.'

She shook her head and drew back from him. 'I love you for the thought,' she said softly; 'but I will touch no gold of yours till there's somewhat on my finger.'

‘Heavens, how I love you!’ he exclaimed.

‘It’s a mad world!’ she laughed. ‘Go home, Master Surgeon, for I think they will be glad to see you.’

His eyes followed her into the shadows of the house, where her father, a painter of pictures, with certain skill in miniatures, was sleeping off the effects of his drunkenness, and where a woman was weeping, and the children were hungry.

Gaspard turned his horse’s head and rode back, his heart emptied of pride to make room for the love that consumed him.

No one was waiting for him at his home; no one watched from the windows.

He drew rein, stooped low, and looked into the shop with its groined vaulting and its black shadows. His father was not there.

He listened for voices above. Not a sound came to him. Disappointment and annoyance darkened his countenance. ‘If it had been Hildebert!’ he reflected bitterly.

He dismounted, fastened the reins to a staple in the wall, and went round to the court at the back.

No one was in the kitchen.

‘A strange welcome!’ he said, and went up the stairs, troubled and oppressed.

He found nobody.

He went to his room to get rid of his instruments and bottles, before making enquiries of the neigh-

bours. As he entered the room, consecrated by so many hours of study and hard toil, and now done with for ever, a piece of parchment on the table caught his eye. He strode across the room and picked it up hastily. 'What in Heaven's name is this?' he exclaimed, reading angrily. On this parchment was written in the beautiful hand of Hildebert—

'Falaise says you do not understand her. She would have you know that she has gone with me to Holy Land.'

Under this writing was a little red cross.

CHAPTER VI

A PRIEST EXPLAINS

AS Gaspard was descending the outside stairs, holding the piece of parchment in his hand and wondering what had happened, his mother came noiselessly round the corner of the house and passed without seeing him into the kitchen.

She was dressed in black from head to foot, save for the white linen that framed her face. In her hands she held a piece of parchment which had been twisted and twisted again in her fingers. There was such anguish in her drawn face, such tragedy in her bent head, that Gaspard, brought to a sudden stand on the stairs, felt at his heart, as he watched her cross the silent court, so great a spasm of pain that it almost brought tears to his eyes.

Quickly recovering himself, he descended the stairs, and entered the kitchen.

Elisabeth was kneeling by the table, her arms flung out before her, her face laid sideways on the dark wood. She was weeping and speaking. Tears came through the closed lids of her eyes, and words

that were like those tears came through her swollen lips.

‘O God, sweet God, dear God in heaven!’ she was saying; and these words were repeated again and again.

Not to startle her, Gaspard spoke softly from the doorway. ‘Mother, tell me what harm has befallen you.’

She did not raise her head; she did not even open her eyes. ‘All’s lost, dear son,’ she made answer; ‘all’s lost to us. O God, hear my prayer, let my cry come unto Thee!’

Gaspard advanced into the room. ‘I am but now home,’ he said; ‘I know not what has happened.’

‘Only God can help us!’ cried the mother. ‘Pray to Him, my son; call upon His name. We are lost without Him. Our house desolate, my grey hairs in sorrow to the grave!’

‘You speak, dear mother, of Hildebert and Falaise?’

‘They have gone from us; in the night they have gone from us! Read what is written. My little son’s farewell to the mother who would die for him! They have bewitched him. He has listened to a tale. O God, was there no angel in all your glorious heaven to guard my little son? And now wicked men have killed him, or he is destroyed by wild beasts, or he is wandering lost in the forest,

calling on my name !' She burst anew into an agony of tears and called to God for His mercy and His aid.

She had pushed towards Gaspard the piece of twisted parchment, and he took it from the table and opened it. The first thing he saw was a little red cross beneath the writing.

This is what he read—

' Sweet mother, I love thee more than tongue can tell, much more than pen can write. But it is God's Will I be parted from thee, I and Falaise. He has called us in the night. We both have heard His voice. We go to Holy Land. Pray for us, sweet mother, and watch for our return. We shall surely come back to thee singing the Lord's song and bringing flowers from Bethlehem. I love thee, mother, next to God I love thee more than all.—Thy little son and His crusader, Hildebert.'

Gaspard folded the paper. ' If they went in the night, and afoot, they cannot now be far,' he said, thoughtfully. ' I have a horse outside ; it is a little spent, but I will ride after them. Certain it is that they have listened to a foolish story. There is no Holy Land for them ! I do not see Falaise fighting the Saracens ! Look for their return right soon, mother—footsore and very hungry ! They will walk themselves out of this dream.'

As he ceased speaking there came a sound of footsteps in the court and the light in the kitchen

was suddenly darkened by the figure of a man in the doorway.

Gaspard faced round. It was a priest, one of the Canons of St. Martin's.

'Dame!' said this venerable man, entering the room, 'I have heard of your trouble and have come to comfort you, perhaps to show you God's Will.' His voice was kindly and gentle. Only for a moment did his sad eyes rest on Gaspard's sullen face. He looked towards Elisabeth, who had lifted her tear-drenched eyes to him, and went quickly towards her, making a tender sound with his lips, stooping towards her, laying hands of exceeding gentleness upon her shoulders.

'Oh, Father,' she cried to him, 'there is no comfort for me, save the return of my little ones.'

'You are in the first agony of grief,' he replied tenderly. 'Our Saviour suffered even as you suffer. Weep, my child, for God will comfort you. But have faith.'

'They have taken my children!'

'Nay; no one has taken them.'

'They have gone from me, my little son is gone from me!'

'How know you, my child, that God has not called him?'

Gaspard frowned.

'How should that be? Would the good God call my little son into the forest to be killed by wild beasts?'

‘Nay, but to the Holy City to recover His Glory from the infidel!’

Gaspard uttered an exclamation.

‘Is it not a dream, a fairy story?’ cried Elisabeth, eyes wide, her whole body suddenly strong with energy.

‘How can children,’ asked Gaspard scornfully, ‘walk to the Holy Land?’

‘How did our Blessed Lord rise from the dead?’ asked the priest quietly.

‘It is true, then?’ cried Elisabeth, white as death.

‘Yes; it is true. A miracle has happened. Give glory to God, O my sister, that son of yours has been called by His mercy to this mighty work.’

‘But, Father,’ cried the pale woman, ‘how shall my little son go up against the Saracen?’

‘How shall a troop of children cross the sea?’ demanded Gaspard.

‘Is it for us to ask questions of God?’ said the priest quietly. ‘Listen, and I will tell you how this thing of wondrous grace has come to pass, a thing so sweet and exquisite that only God could have conceived it.’

And sitting there on the bench, Elisabeth kneeling beside him, Gaspard scornful with crossed arms near the door, the old man told his story.

He said that whenever in times past the world was like to perish from excess of iniquity, as at the

time of our Lord's coming, God wrought a mighty work, revealed Himself in some strange and potent way, so that mankind was rescued from destruction. Thus had it happened many times in past ages, and so was it now. How evil were the days! How dead were the souls of men! They built great churches, but those who ministered there were reprobate. They went to the Crusades, but drunken and sinful, like an army of thieves. Men were careless of religion, he continued. It was only women who came to church, and they, for the most part painted and bejewelled, to confess abominable sins. Money was the god of the world. To eat, drink, to live in fine houses and lay by much wealth—this was the way in which men lived. Never, save at the time of our Lord's coming, had mankind been heartier given to iniquity, more perilously near the brink of universal annihilation.

But now, behold how fair and beautiful a thing had come to pass. To save the world God had called a child! There was no man living, neither archbishop in his palace nor monk in his grotto, worthy of this great work. It needed a child. Perfect innocence, unsullied purity, implicit faith! A little child should lead them. A young lad, watching his father's flocks on the hills of Cloyes, had been called by God to save the world. And now, thousands of children in France—some said in Germany as well—felt themselves irresistibly *impelled* to follow Stephen of

Cloyes. They were going out from their homes in a great army; a mighty host of blameless little ones were marching through the land, their faces set towards the Holy Places of Jerusalem.

‘And much more,’ concluded the old man, whose pale face was tinted with pink by his enthusiasm, and whose fading eyes shone with glints and gleamings of strange fire, ‘much more shall be accomplished by these sacred babes even than the taking of the Holy Land. For they shall *convert the whole world*. Yes! God is about a great and glorious work. These little ones will do a miracle. All Christendom, seeing their work, shall bow itself at the Manger of Bethlehem; all Christendom shall rise up from wickedness and evil; all Christendom shall turn itself again to God; and the heathen shall be given to us for our inheritance.’

He laid his hands, which trembled slightly, upon the woman’s shoulders, and bending forward, peered into her eyes, closely and searchingly.

‘Would you have any of your children at home,’ he asked slowly, lovingly, ‘when God is calling all those that are innocent, all those that are pure, *all those that love Him*, to do His work in Holy Land, to save the whole world, and to hasten the Kingdom of His Son—His only Son, our Lord?’

The mother answered: ‘Great, I fear, is my sin, Father; for I had rather all the world were lost than that my little son was gone from me. See you,

Father, he is the little one who came last, he is sickly and dreamful, he has no strength in his limbs for hard tasks, and no cunning in his brain to outwit wicked and evil men.'

'It is such children as God calls, daughter! It is just such holy little ones!'

'Nevertheless, I would have him home with me, safe in my keeping.'

'Is not God's keeping safer than thine?'

'I cannot answer that, but I know I would have him home.'

The priest lifted his arm, raised his head, and exclaimed, pointing a finger to the roof, 'Think, in the world to come, in the life everlasting, think if you should see, close to the Throne of God, the host of little ones who saved the world, and should hear an angel weeping at your side, saying, "*Mother, but for thee I should have been one of those happy saints of God!*"'

Elisabeth, kneeling, fixed her eyes on the priest's face.

'I see them there!' he cried ecstatically; 'the blameless little ones of God, the purest saints, the nearest angels to the throne of glory—a host, a shining host! Oh, to be one of those! My Saviour, my Saviour, make me as a little child, that I, even I——'

She lifted herself upon one knee, caught his arm, drew the withered hand to her lips, and cried passion-

ately, 'He shall be there, Father, my little one shall be among that glorious host. It is the Will of God, the Will of God!—and I shall see him there, and hear him sing, and sometimes he will look upon me and smile with his eyes that have such dark lashes!'

Suddenly she ceased, and burst into tears.

The priest stooped to comfort her.

'Nay, Father,' she cried, 'I have bowed to Heaven's will. I am content that he should be gone from me. I do not wish him home. But he asked me to make him his red cross! Ah me! would I had done my angel's last request. For now in heaven he will wear a little red cross on his shining robe, a cross that his mother's fingers did not stitch, that her tears did not bless. And I shall see it, and remember, and it will make me sad.'

CHAPTER VII

FAREWELL

THAT night Gaspard and Isabel stood alone together under the dark trees by the cold-flowing river. Though they were quite alone there, they spoke, after the manner of lovers, in low voices, the words almost obscure. Gaspard was sad and heavy. He was bidding Isabel farewell.

One arm was about her waist, holding her to him ; the hand of the other arm lay against her neck, pressing her face to his. His lips, close to her ear, whispered of all the pain that was hurting his strong soul.

To-morrow they would be far parted. While she was sleeping he would be riding eastwards and southwards from beautiful Touraine. Every breath she drew in her gentle slumber would mark an added distance between them.

It had come about in this fashion.

Elisabeth, subdued by the priest, and bowed to the Will of God, had gone to the shrine of St. Martin. While she was there, praying for the safety of Hildebert and asking Heaven to give her strength

to bear her cross, a voice—so she said—had sounded in her ear, saying, ‘*His brother shall be to him like a shield, and in him shall the young one find a strong protector.*’

Straightway she had risen from her knees, and came running home, her face joyous with belief. She found Nicholas talking with Gaspard, and telling how all his efforts to find the two children had been fruitless. She burst in upon them with her tidings. ‘A miracle!—a miracle!’ she cried. ‘Blessed St. Martin himself has spoken to me. . . .’

When Gaspard heard what had happened at the shrine, he said, ‘Last night I was made the Count’s Surgeon.’

Nicholas started, and questioned his son proudly. But Elisabeth fell on her knees and wept to him. ‘Go to your brother,’ she cried; ‘go to him, my son; for it is the will of Heaven, and your mother’s prayer.’

He stooped, lifted her up, and very pale, said, ‘I will go, mother; but you must not kneel to me.’

She flung her arms about his neck, kissed him, placed her hands upon his head and blessed him with a mother’s blessing. ‘Now is my heart at peace,’ she had said; ‘for the Lord has surely chosen thee to be thy brother’s defence against the Saracens.’

Nicholas had winked at him behind his wife’s back; and at that moment, even in his bitter dis-

appointment, Gaspard had felt that he hated his father.

Later, Nicholas drew him aside. 'This crusade,' said he, 'is nothing more nor less than a summer madness. The poor babes will march some hungry leagues or so, and then sit down by the way and bleat for their dams. That they should ever reach Marseilles is a thought not to be reckoned with—much less Jerusalem! And should they find mules to go with, and get so far as Marseilles, the sea will stop them. I am a religious man, my son, as you know. God has prospered me. I do not use my knees so often as your mother, having more need of my brains; but I believe, and I support the Church, good or ill. Nevertheless I say that miracles are rarer than some think.' He winked, rubbed his hands, and laughed softly in his loose cheeks. 'And I also say, lad, that God is not the God I take Him to be if He send unarmed babes to fight the dirty infidels. But, mark! Women must be soothed. A wise man will avoid argument with these after-thoughts of the Creator. He will say, "Yes, love," when he means, "No, hang it!" and, with a round emphasis, "No, sweet, of course not!" when he stoutly means, "You see if I don't." Therefore, my handsome fellow, soothe your mother; let her think the Blessed St. Martin came down from heaven to give her this idea; let her think that Hildebert is sure to touch Holy Land; let her think that

you will be there to skewer a dozen black-faced Saracens before they so much as ruffle the fluff on her darling's doublet; but you, lad'—here he touched Gaspard's ribs with a curved thumb—'you spur after them as quick as can be, sling them up, willy-nilly, behind your saddle, and bring them back here to eat salmagundi in the kitchen. I doubt not they will be grateful for rescue!'

All this, but in his own way, Gaspard had told to Isabel; and Isabel, when she had thought for some moments, asked him quietly:

'Do you believe that this strange thing is from God?'

'No!' he said vigorously.

'Why not?'

'Because it is contrary to reason.'

'Yet there is some spirit in it,' she had said, half-sighing, and turning her face away from him, 'which makes as it were a sweet music in my heart. I expect you are right. I suppose it is all a delusion. But I could wish it to be true, Gaspard. Do you know what I mean? I could wish God acted so.'

'He has given us reason that we may act for ourselves.'

'But hearts——'

'The heart He has fashioned for love and a fire-side; a sweet human gift it is, sweeter I discover every fresh moment that you are near me. But reason He has given us to use for dominion and

glory ; it is by reason that we subdue the earth, it is by reason that we understand the soul of things, and it is by reason we shall find Him in the end. Think you all this power about us, all the hard travail of the years, is for naught but the making of fools ? I say Reason is the end of life.'

He began to break out in rage against the priests who roofed the wretched bones of saints in shrines of gold and precious jewels, and would not let surgeon or physician have for holy science the corpse of one they had murdered by their wicked powers.

But Isabel had covered his mouth with her hand. 'Waste not my time with thy hobby !' she had said ; 'for now at this moment I would have thee and thee alone.'

And so they stood under the dark trees, very sadly, very tenderly ; with the noise of the dark-flowing river sounding through their whispers, their eyes near, but their lips nearer.

'When will it be thus again ?' she sighed.

'They will never reach Marseilles,' he said ; 'soon I shall come back to you, and soon we will be man and wife ; my heart is on fire for it.'

'I feel,' she whispered sorrowfully, 'that it will be long ere you come back.'

'That cannot be, save that a week from you is like an age from another.'

'I am afraid.'

'It is sadness.'

‘The other was too good ; it came too suddenly. When I saw you this morning on that great horse, when I saw your look of pride and victory—do you know what happened ? ’

‘Tell me.’

‘My heart stopped beating ; and I became cold like stone. I said, *The fall is not far.*’

He smiled at her superstition. ‘Sweet heart,’ said he, kissing her hair, ‘I am still the Count’s Surgeon. The fall is not yet, and never shall be while my brain is whole. I send word to him of this chance to-morrow ; in a few weeks I shall be back ; and the first thing I shall ask of him will be this. Seigneur, I shall say, let me marry the girl who believes in my art and alone can hold me to my path.’

His voice was so strong and sure that she looked up at him, smiling. ‘If men have ever been loved more than you are loved by me, I think they must have been as gods. Not only do I love thee, my strong and straight-limbed man, but I worship and adore thee.’

☞ Sweet, inexpressibly sweet, nay head-turning and intoxicating words were these in Gaspard’s ears ; for not only did he greatly love the soul that breathed them, but he had been ever one of those who go to the wall of this world’s affections and are as little understood even by those nearest to them as they are loved by the crowd.

When he came home he found that a messenger from the Count had lately been there with sundry gifts of game, saying also that he was to keep the horse on which he had ridden from the castle, a horse on which the King himself had ridden, and was to come next morning as soon as might be after dawn.

His mother watched him anxiously while Nicholas gave this news.

‘You will not be false?’ Elisabeth said, seeing that his face flushed with pride.

‘Nay, mother, I will do your bidding.’

‘God’s bidding,’ she said solemnly.

‘Oh yes, dame, he will go to Holy Land,’ said Nicholas. ‘Have no fear of that. Let the Count look for another barber-surgeon. My son is St. Martin’s man now. Saracens, I warn ye! your days are numbered!’

Gaspard was to go before dawn. His father came secretly to his room that night, a finger to his lips, his eyes blinking, gave him a roll of gold, saying solemnly and in a slow impressive whisper, ‘Use it wisely; bring as much back as possible; but bring not a single piece home with you, if it be necessary for a quick return.’ He squared his shoulders and spoke a tone louder. ‘Remember, not only do I want the little boy back, aye, and the girl, too, bless her pretty face; *but the Count wants you.* Waste not an hour. Opportunities come from

Heaven ; if not taken they have a knack of going to the other place, quick as lightning. My boy, the Lord bless you.'

At the break of day Gaspard was dressing in his room, carefully placing certain drugs and his surgical instruments ready to go with him—for he hoped to call that very night on the Count—when his mother entered the room carrying two little parcels.

'Give this to your sister, and this to your brother,' said she, in a voice that was full of tears. It was easy to see she had not closed her eyes. 'And tell Hildebert, dear son, that his mother sent it to him and that it has touched the shrine of St. Martin.'

Gaspard did not know how it happened, but not troubling to conceal his drugs from her, and as if some invisible hand impelled him, he turned to the table by the window, took up the Count's purse of gold, and placing it in his mother's hand, said to her :

'Ill may befall me, that, or I may not see home again as soon as I could wish ; whatever chance, as I shall surely give your gift to Hildebert, so give you this purse to Isabel ; and say to her, mother, that it is my husband's provision for her till I come back again, and that I send it to her with my true love ; and be ever kind to her, mother, as if she were your own daughter, for my sake.'

Elisabeth said to him : 'I never knew ! But,

have faith, my son. God will reward you for this sacrifice.' And she took his face in her hands, and kissed his brow.

'Swear to me,' she said suddenly in an eager voice, still holding his head, her grave eyes close to his, 'that you will never leave your brother's side till his soul is with God. Swear it to me, my son, on the love I have given you.'

'Mother,' he answered, 'I swear it.'

Then Gaspard went down the stairs, and passed out into the street, and came to the inn where his horse was stabled.

CHAPTER VIII

A LAST GIFT

STILL shaken by this parting with his mother, which haunted him strangely, Gaspard opened the door of the stable and was about to grope forward in the darkness, when a sow that had been sleeping with her litter in one of the stalls, lifted her head with a sharp growl, uttered a more joyous grunt, and then, with a sudden scuttering, made for daylight and the open air.

Quick as he was in springing back to shut the door, Gaspard could only succeed in making the huge sow a prisoner between door and lintel. At this such a pandemonium arose as seemed like to wake the whole city. First, the wriggling, kicking, plunging, but prisoned sow herself uttered the most piercing screams and reverberating yelps: second, the entire litter of twelve active piglets began to squeak and squeal in a discordant chorus of hysterical perturbation: third, innumerable fowls roosting in the rafters and along the mangers started to cluck-cluck-cluck and cackle as if the end of the world were upon them: fourth, a cow with her calf at the

end of the stable rose hurriedly to her feet and bellowed ferociously with an absurd exaggeration of maternal solicitude : and last, every hungry dog for a mile or more around began to bark and howl, the one against the other, till you might have thought the city was besieged.

As it happened, the din was providential.

‘Go, then, you ugly brute!’ growled Gaspard, who was blushing at the noise he had occasioned. He opened the door, and bestowed a vengeful kick on the departing sow. ‘No, you don’t!’ he added quickly, as the litter of piglets suddenly charged like cavalry to join their victorious mother.

As he brushed them back with his feet, and made fast the door, a voice from the far end of the stable exclaimed sleepily and angrily, ‘What’s to do, then?—what’s to do? Heaven bless little mice, has the world come to an end?’

Gaspard stopped, craned his neck, and listened. ‘Who’s about?’ he asked sharply.

‘Who’s about!—who isn’t about?’ demanded the sleepy voice. There followed the sound of a human yawn, the shuffling of straw, and Gaspard could fancy the stretching of limbs and the blinking of half-awakened eyes.

He groped forward to find his horse. As he was busy in the stall, saddling and biting the Count’s handsome present, there was a sudden jump at the end of the stable, and a voice he recognised with a

start exclaimed, 'By St. Martin's cloak, I believe it's Gaspard !'

At the next moment Isabel's father came stumbling out of the darkness. 'Gaspard, lad,' said he ; 'I've slept in straw this night for your sake. I've mixed my holy dreams with the breath of cows, the snores of pigs, the yawns of horses, and the sniffings of muffled fowls. Rats have tickled my legs and mice have taken my nostrils for their burrows. I have suffered the tortures of a martyr. And why ? For your sake, lad. If there's another man in all France who'd do the like for you, name him, and I'll dub him King of Fools.'

Gaspard smiled. 'What brings you here, then ?'

'Sentiment, my boy ; the sentiment of a father and an artist who can beat all the monks in Christendom at their own work. For last night I learned from Isabel what lies between you two, and how the Count has made you his body's surgeon, and how you must first ride after these mad children who have got Saracens on the brain. Said I, "He shall have something to keep my tall girl in his mind." I went to your house ; but you were all a-bed. I thought to myself : If I sleep at home he will be gone before I am up. "Isabel," said I—for she stood at my side—"show me where his horse is bedded and I will couch there till he comes at dawn." And so I did, lad, so I did ! With rats and bats, fowls and

owls, and sows and cows! May I never pass such another night. The saints protect me from the troubled dreams of a horse, and the midnight family affairs of cow and sow! But it's over. Never was I more glad to open eyes and sniff the dawn. And here's what put me to it. Take it to the door and let your eyes feast upon it. My boy, 'tis a master's work, and a masterpiece!

It was a miniature of Isabel, painted two years since, but a veritable likeness, and done at a time when her father's genius, at its highest, had not abandoned itself to the corruption of drunkenness. Gaspard stood at the door, his eyes shining, his lips smiling, a colour in his cheeks.

'I do not ask a penny for it,' said the proud artist. 'Great as is my need for money at this particular moment in my life of everlasting misfortune, I say to you: Take it as a gift. Any man else I would charge a gold piece for that gem of my art, for it is a masterpiece, and I shall never achieve greater.'

Gaspard felt in his belt. 'It is not for the picture,' he said, pressing a gold coin into the apparently unwilling but nevertheless tenacious hand of Isabel's father; 'the picture is a present, and I will hold it so, always. But I pay for your night's lodging.'

He bade the now happy artist tell Isabel that he would soon be back, a week at the most, perhaps

the very next dawn, and charged him to say that he went forth happier for the picture which was now lying next his heart.

‘And mark this,’ said the future father-in-law ; ‘ ’tis a pleasanter thing by far to be the Count’s Surgeon and have a tall girl for wife, than to ride after mad children. If your brother and sister will not come back with you, let them go on alone ; but you, do not you risk gold, honour, comfort, and love by a foolish delay. They to their road, and you to yours. Each man for himself. Aye, and remember the Count is a heady man ; disobey him, and you lose not only wealth and love ; no, but may be your clever head and all its contents will roll after those other good things.’

Gaspard rode out of the inn-yard with an uncomfortable feeling at his heart. Until now he had not realised the risk he ran in offending this new master. Suppose the Count should be angered. Suppose he did not overtake the children that day, and came back a week hence to find the Count’s door shut against him ! That would be a door shut between him and fame, between his heart and Isabel.

He debated whether he should not first ride to the castle, look to his patient, explain to the Count, and then go forward to keep faith with his mother. Conscience would not approve. He had promised his mother. Moreover, if he told his mission, the

Count might refuse to let him go. That meant an oath broken, and an oath to his mother.

It was better to ride forward after the children as hard as his good horse could go, and after he had turned them home, to ride—he hoped that very sunset—to the castle. He placed his hands to feel for his instruments and drugs. Yes, he would reach the castle ere set of sun.

So fresh, so calm, so happy and rejoicing was the dawn, that Gaspard gradually lost the oppressive sense of the great risk he ran. Like a true youth, mounted on a fine horse, and riding at dawn through a fair country, he saw but the rosy side of life. He drew Isabel's picture from his doublet, regarded it in the cup of his hand, smiled upon it, murmured to it, called her his 'Pretty' and his 'Sweet,' and even sang two lines of a love ballad—

So let life run as run it will,
If I have thee I'm happy still.

Then, out of desire to be back with her soon, he thrust the picture into his bosom, gathered up his reins, settled himself in the saddle, and set off at a light canter.

'What shall I call you, old true-heart?' he said to the horse. 'You were yesterday a Count's, you have been ridden by a King, and now you have ascended to be a Surgeon's Pegasus. Are you not proud, my beauty? How your brown coat shines

in the sun ; how black and crisp your mane ; how tempestuous your great neck ; how mountainous your shoulder ; how musical your hoofs upon the earth ! What shall I call you ? Carry me swiftly, and I will call you Mercury. Carry me safely, and I will call you Michael. Nay, what shall I call you ? Something it must be that runs with Isabel and sounds with Fame and breathes of Love.'

He laughed in the joy of the exercise, and felt himself grow warm with happiness and joy.

The country through which he rode has in it nothing of the savage or impressive. It is like a water-colour, a landscape of light tints and gentle lines. The sky is lofty and azure, with white clouds that have the brilliance of snow. The hills do not spring from the ground nor aspire to the heavens ; they undulate like fruitful furrows that belong to man and the earth. The rivers flow without energy, describing languorous curves through their jocund valleys, making themselves the mirror of the clouds and the glass of verdurous islands floating in the midst of their green waters. On every side are vineyards and stretches of pasture, with forest spreading away into the tremulous mist of horizons soft as sleep.

'So should smell the cities of men,' thought Gaspard, snuffing the cold sweet air. And at that he fell to dreaming of the future—the future of the human race, as he saw it in the glow of his en-

lightened genius. He saw cities of noble streets, planted with trees and spread with gardens; he saw men walking there who had risen above the baseness of common sin and the dishonourable servitude of superstition; he saw tall and beautiful women in that city with happy children at their side; and nowhere was there tyranny of priest or soldier or seigneur; neither ugliness of human countenance nor deformity of human body—but a race like angels, strong, vigorous, and alive to wonder, beauty, and the heaven of knowledge. . . .

All day he rode, baiting his horse here and there, and at night came to an inn without having heard one single intelligent word of the children's pilgrimage. He went to bed ill at ease, and could not sleep for some hours, worrying his brain as to what Isabel would be thinking and the Count saying of him.

On the following morning he was riding somewhat dejected over a smooth country when he came to a green bank of hills which rose gently and easily upwards from the vineyards at their feet. To shake off the mood that weighed down his spirits, he clapped heels to his horse, which had so far only walked from the inn, and made up the hillside at a smart canter.

The hoofs of his horse scattered sweet dew in a drifting smoke; the air came cold and crisp to his face and neck, rustling past his ears; the sun dazzled his eyes; the birds sang joyously from

thicket and sky ; he took pleasure from the smell of his horse's heating coat.

He drew rein on the top of the hill, and let Pegasus, Mercury, and Michael go slowly forward, snuffing with satisfaction and stretching his thick neck till the muzzle, soft as velvet, almost brushed the dew.

'To the right or to the left?' Gaspard asked himself. 'To the right I may be ahead of them, and have to wait : to the left I may be behind, and have to spur after them.'

He was thus thinking, when the horse brought him to the further side of the hill, where it descended with a sharper precipitance to the other valley. For a few moments his eyes rested themselves on the infinite distance of the horizon, which quivered, throbbed, and glowed with the riot of the dawn ; then bringing them nearer and downward to choose his way, he suddenly started in his saddle, uttered a sharp cry, and stood up in his stirrups, gazing downwards like a man spelled out of his senses.

CHAPTER IX

GASPARD PERFORMS A MIRACLE, AND PROPHEESIES

THE spectacle which took Gaspard's breath away was one of the most amazing sights which human eyes have ever seen.

An army of children, stirring a dust of gold from the road, was marching through the land of France.

Standing in his stirrups on the hill-top, the morning sun in his face, he looked down upon this immense army of children winding southwards and interminably between the green and quiet fields below. As far each way as gaze could reach moved this wonderful column of boys and girls, this amazing army of young life, stretching and winding in vast sinuous curves like some tremendous river or some gorgeous ribbon fallen out of heaven. He could scarce believe his eyes. Save for the dust rising from under their feet it might have been a dream. But it was a true sight. For the first time it came home to him that this crusade was a real and living thing. He looked to his right, children were disappearing into the gloom of distant trees; he looked to his

left, children were emerging from the shoulder of the hills. And between those two distant points stretched the unbroken river of childhood, the great glittering ribbon of infancy, with the dust drifting like smoke from beneath their feet. Leagues and leagues of children! He leaned forward, and studied, as well as he could from that height, the scene before him.

With the thousands of children were some hundreds of men, a few mounted on mules and horses, but most of them walking; priests and monks, merchants and peasants, thieves and vagabonds—a strange medley of humanity. As for the children, some were as old apparently as himself, tall, strong, thick-set young men, who marched freely and with a high courage; the majority he judged to be of Hildebert's age, children of twelve or thirteen years. But in that vast army there were thousands of children who were little more than babes, tiny boys dragging weary feet and yet turning to encourage still smaller girls with whom they walked hand in hand. And the colours and the texture of their garments told of a universal instinct—for some of the children were richly, even splendidly dressed; others were in the sober, lasting hues of the peasantry; and others yet again in the sacking and rags of utmost beggary. Above their heads here and there floated banners; pennons fluttered at the end of spears; many wore a red

cross on the breast or arm ; the little ones had crowned themselves with garlands gathered on the way.

As Gaspard stood in his stirrups, the sound of voices rose to him from the valley ; and as he watched he saw those thousands of faces lifted upward to the sky, and was conscious of a radiance in them, like the light of the sun.

He could not hear what words they were singing, but the music spoke to him of religion, and religion as never before he had understood that passion of the human soul. It was the faith of a little child rising up in ecstasy to heavens visible with blessing.

Gaspard muttered inarticulate impatience, and, sitting down in his saddle, walked his horse slowly and obliquely down the side of the hill.

He said to himself : ‘ This means Marseilles, or I am a fool. Curses on him who first set this madness afloat. Only the sea will stop it.’

He began to think of Isabel, and then of the Count. His surgical instruments jingled in their case as the horse went slowly and jerkily down the hill. He ground his teeth in angry rage. Yesterday the world was at his feet, like a ball. Fate had kicked it away from him. There was nothing before him now but the Count’s enmity and perhaps ruin, disgrace, even death.

☆ Fool, fool ! Why had he let his heart be touched by a kneeling mother ? Did not his reason warn

him at the time that sentiment plays havoc with a man's affairs? He should have said 'No!' to his mother. He should have seen her tears unmoved. He should have held firmly to his course. 'I have my own life to think of!' Yes, he should have said that, and stuck to it; even if she had cursed him.

Weeks must surely elapse before he could get back. Hildebert, he told himself, would keep on till the bitter end. Falaise might turn homewards, perhaps even now was stumbling footsore towards the roofs and towers of Châteauneuf; but Hildebert would limp onwards till the sea stopped him.

And Gaspard had sworn to his mother . . .

As he drew near the children he heard the words of their battle-song:

Jesus Christ, repair our loss,
Unto us restore Thy Cross!

He set his teeth and frowned upon them, looking hither and thither for sight of Hildebert or Falaise. He felt himself ill at ease and out of countenance, like a sane man joining a host of the mad.

As he drew rein and sat watching the children file past him—many were pale and already limped sorely—a lusty fellow some forty years of age, black-bearded and olive-skinned, with a nose broken across his face, gold rings in his ears, and as evil a smile on his mouth as ever life of iniquity bestowed on

human face, came to Gaspard's side, laid his hand on the horse's neck, and demanded rather than asked whether he meant to join them for Jerusalem.

'I look to go as far as any, said Gaspard, meeting his gaze.

'Come on, then,' said the man, laughing goodheartedly. 'A brave word! You're the soul of my blood. Look you, you and I will be companions, brothers in arms, David and Jonathan! We'll share board and bite, prayers and vigils, feasts and fastings. And like true Christians, young master—for I like the cut and colour of your face—we'll share this great fat lazy horse of yours. Ah, that we will. A bargain is a bargain. When you're tired of riding, I'll be tired of walking; and you shall wear out your shoes while I am wearing out my hose on your saddle. A fine saddle, too; fit for a lord, or I'm no judge of leather and never set toe to stirrup. On my word, we'll call you the Prince of this affair. Stephen shall be saint; but you shall be prince. On, then! I walk at your stirrup.'

Gaspard said to him: 'Tell me, my friend, what profit do you look to get out of this madness?'

The other laughed. 'A few sins shriven, perhaps a hundred or more days' indulgence, much spiritual edification, and, in the end, a halo, a harp, and a golden throne!'

Gaspard said grimly, 'I see there are more of your kidney following these babes.'

‘Not too many for the pickings, I hope,’ laughed the other, looking about him.

‘How far do you think they’ll get?’

‘Lyons, perhaps, or thereabouts. A good many have dropped already.’

‘Do they carry much money?’

The man glanced shrewdly up at Gaspard. ‘Brother,’ said he, ‘I’ll answer that question when you’re walking and I’m riding!’ He lifted his hand to his beard, pulled it forward through his fingers, and gave it a twist upward. ‘You’re an enquirer, then?’ he asked. ‘A student, eh?’ With a laugh he took a full-length inventory of Gaspard, and went forward smiling.

‘What’s to be made out of these babes?’ demanded Gaspard.

‘Change places, comrade, and I’ll tell you.’

‘The King’s horse is not for the likes of you,’ said Gaspard.

The other looked quickly up. ‘The King’s horse? The likes of me? What’s your meaning, comrade?’

‘That you’ll learn later,’ said Gaspard darkly. He shook the reins, touched the horse with the heel nearest to the robber, and went forward at a sharp trot.

He rode up the line of singing children, scanning all the faces, some of them so piteous, wan, and pale that his heart ached for them. At about three hundred yards from the head of this great host,

he came upon Hildebert hand in hand with Falaise. Hildebert was singing.

‘ Well, ’ he said, ‘ are you tired yet ? ’

Falaise turned pale, affected to look scornful, and afterwards averted her face.

Hildebert ceased singing. After his first look of alarm, he cast envious eyes on Gaspard’s horse.

‘ Isn’t it time you rode home with me ? ’ Gaspard asked.

‘ Home ! ’ cried Hildebert, his face falling. ‘ We are going to Jerusalem. ’

‘ And footsore already ? ’

‘ We do not mind. ’

‘ What will you do when you come to the sea ? ’

Hildebert’s cheeks flushed with joy. ‘ Have you not heard, Gaspard ? God has spoken to Stephen. Yes ! When we get to the sea the waters will roll away to the right hand and the left, and we shall pass over on dry land, like the Israelites pursued by Pharaoh’s chariots. ’

‘ Do you believe it ? ’ asked Gaspard, frowning.

‘ Believe it ! God has said so ! Why ! do you think God cannot make the sea obey Him ? Do you think He is only a man ? You do not know what has been happening. Stephen has performed miracles. Ask Falaise. Sick people come out in villages and towns to touch his dress, and they are healed at once. We have seen hundreds, haven’t we, Falaise ? They give us food, and we sleep in their

houses, and we pray for them, and some of their children join us. God has told Stephen that the sea will divide for us, so it must be true.'

Gaspard said: 'Among Stephen's miracles, does he cure feet that are weary and legs that are like lead?'

'We are not tired!' said Hildebert.

'See me do a miracle,' said Gaspard, and dismounted. 'Now, Hildebert, up you go, and you too, Falaise.'

Hildebert, after making Gaspard promise solemnly that he would not leave the procession, allowed himself to be lifted on the saddle; but Falaise continued to avert her head and would not speak to Gaspard.

'And now hear me prophesy,' said Gaspard. 'Unless you turn back before Marseilles is reached your heart will be broken.'

Hildebert, seated on the great horse, took no notice of these words. Lifting his face, he burst into the battle-song, with a new glory in his eyes:

Jesus Christ, repair our loss,
Unto us restore Thy Cross!

CHAPTER X

LAST APPEALS

PITY for his brother's pale face and exhausted strength had moved Gaspard to set Hildebert on his horse. And now, as he walked beside him, something akin to tenderness stirred in his heart and mingled with this strong compassion. He remembered how amusing Hildebert had been as a baby, how charming as an infant, how delightful, beautiful, and affectionate as a little boy.

Who could have foreseen this frightful catastrophe in a childhood so overflowing with sweetness and pleasant charm? Alas, but for this madness, how good had been the life at home! He pictured to himself that domestic life as he could have wished it to be, and as it might have been but for this extraordinary folly. He saw himself the great and famous Surgeon of the Count. His prosperous father proud of him; his careful mother rejoicing in him; Falaise the bosom friend of Isabel; and Hildebert, helped and encouraged by his famous brother, rising in the world to be a great artist—the painter of exquisite pictures, the writer of wise and beautiful books.

How bright and comfortable seemed to him in retrospect the little circular kitchen, with the blazing fire, the smells of cooking food, the rushes strewed on the floor, the table set out with its trenchers of bread, and the family gathered there after the day's work in the light of the cheerful lamp.

'Hildebert,' he said, rather mournfully, 'your mother's heart is sad for you, and I think there is no man in France so wistful now as your father. Is it well that you go on? Is it well that you turn your back on all their love, and care, and tender thoughtfulness? Remember, few children in this world are loved as you. From the opening of your eyes it has been for you nothing but smiles and pretty words and everything you asked. Such things are not to be misprized without great sin against our human nature. Have you thought about these precious things? Have you made certain in your soul that to slight them and reject them is God's Will with you?'

Hildebert had ceased singing while his brother spoke. But he listened with impatience, shifting in the saddle that was so big for him, as if he would have the horse go faster, a light in his eye and a colour in his face which showed that he felt it impossible for Gaspard to understand what was in his soul.

'God called me, and I must go on!' he said, looking ahead of him. 'Mother will understand,

because I have asked God to tell her how it is when she is praying. And besides, I shall come back. Falaise and I will come back, carrying our sheaves ! ’

‘ How came you to steal away at night ? ’

‘ Falaise called me. ’

‘ Falaise ! ’

‘ She came to me and said—you can ask her—that God wished her to go to Holy Land ; and that I was to rise and go with her. She said God had called us both to go. ’

Gaspard was thinking hard.

Presently he went to the other side of the horse, where he was next to his sister. She paled at seeing him, and turned away her face.

‘ Falaise, ’ he said to her, ‘ I want to ask you a question. But first let me tell you that happiness has died out of the home, that nothing is there now except the dust and ashes of all that was before ; and thus it must be till you and Hildebert return. Now, I will ask you my question. Did God call you to this mad and foolish business, or did anger with me drive you to it ? ’

She would not answer.

He placed a hand on her arm, but she drew away from him. ‘ If I offended you, ’ he said quietly, ‘ I am sorry ; I beg your pardon. But in the name of Heaven do not sacrifice father and mother, the home life, your future happiness, everything, for—

what? A little black mark in your mind against poor me!’

She tried to laugh. ‘You are quite wrong!’ she said.

‘I think I am right.’

‘Then,’ she cried triumphantly, ‘you suppose that all these thousands and thousands of children are here marching to Holy Land simply because they are angry with you!’ She turned away and tried to join in the singing, but her voice broke.

Gaspard felt himself beaten. It was useless to argue with Hildebert in his exalted state; hopeless to turn the heart of Falaise, who had taken a dangerous step, knew it, but had not will enough to retrace it. There was nothing for it but to wait for the sea.

He felt his arm touched from behind. ‘Please, sir,’ pleaded a child’s voice—a voice weak and gasping with exhaustion—‘please, sir, is that Jerusalem?’

A little child, eight years of age, with hollow cheeks and eyes from which all lustre had faded, a dusty, pale, shrivelled, hungry, limping, and almost breathless child, was pointing forward to a few houses prominent in the distance against the midday sky.

‘Nay, my son,’ said Gaspard, ‘yonder is not Jerusalem; but take a better look at it, and you shall see for yourself.’ He stooped down, lifted the

boy in his arms, and set him in front of Hildebert. Then he turned to Falaise. 'Is it God's will, think you, that this little one should suffer thus? How many have fallen? How many will die before the sea is reached? The sea! And then, *the march back!* Have you thought of that? The march back! Over all these miles. The march back—back from a sea that has not parted for you, back from a God in whom you have ceased to believe, back to a world that will laugh at you and mock you for your pains!'

It was useless to speak. Onward pressed that host of hungry and footsore children, the dust rising about them, the treble of their weary voices breaking every now and then into song and hymn, the miles passing slowly, grudgingly, mockingly, under their sore and dragging feet.

'Hildebert!' he said suddenly, 'but for my horse you would be like that child in front of you. Look at him well. Is that God's Will with you?'

'God sent me your horse,' answered Hildebert.

'If your mother could see you, broken, footsore, spent, dying like a dog on the road!'

'You cannot frighten me, Gaspard. God is so close to us.'

'Turn back in pity's name!'

'If you need your horse, take him. I will walk. Nay, I would rather walk,' and he slipped off the horse and joined the ranks, singing the battle-song.

Gaspard said bitterly: 'That I should live to see you tread underfoot the heart of your mother!'

'Did she send you to taunt me?' demanded Hildebert. 'I do not believe it! No; my mother believes in God. I have prayed to Him, and He has told her how it must be. She is contented. It is my father only who wants me home. My mother has not sent you. I am sure she has not sent you.'

His words reminded Gaspard of the two packets in his doublet.

He drew them forth. 'Yes and no,' he said. 'Mother did send me after you, but not to taunt you, not even to bring you back unless you wish to come. And she sent these things to you. This for you, Falaise, and this for you—bidding me say, Hildebert, that she carried it to the shrine of St. Martin and laid it there for a blessing.'

His hand, searching for these gifts, had touched the miniature; he drew it from his doublet, looked at it a moment, and then showed it to the boy on the horse. 'That's a pretty picture, isn't it?' he asked. The boy's eyes opened wide.

'Oh, it's the prettiest picture I ever saw!' he exclaimed. 'It's like an angel, isn't it?'

Gaspard smiled. 'It is an angel, my son.' Then he took the miniature from the boy's hand. 'I'd give it to you,' he said, 'only it happens to be the thing I love best of all my possessions. I'd rather lose a hand than that little picture, my son!'

He was interrupted.

‘It is her own rosary,’ said Falaise, but without enthusiasm. She held up the old brown rosary which had been familiar to the children from infancy.

‘Look!’ cried Hildebert, a shout in his voice.

Gaspard turned, and there in the boy’s hand, shaken by his excitement, was a little cross of red silk. ‘Now I know,’ cried Hildebert, his face wonderful, ‘that God has told my mother. On, on! I am happy now. Falaise, will you stitch it for me on my doublet?—not on my sleeve, over my heart!’

A weak voice appealed to Gaspard on the other side. ‘Yes?’ he said, turning to the little boy on the horse.

‘Please, sir, what do you call your horse?’

‘I call him——’ said Gaspard, and stopped.

On the other side of the horse was the man with the black beard, glancing at him with evident malice. For a moment Gaspard felt uneasy.

‘Will you permit me a word with you?’ asked Blackbeard. He laughed, took his pointed beard in his hand, and gave it an upward turn.

‘What is it?’ asked Gaspard.

‘You said, I think, that you rode the King’s horse?’

‘Well?’

Blackbeard’s eyebrows began to twitch. ‘Have you the animal’s pedigree?’

‘What is that to you?’

‘Or His Majesty’s warrant?’

‘The same answer, sir!’

Blackbeard laughed, showing broken teeth. ‘I’ve met fools on my travels before,’ said he, playing with the point of his beard, ‘but never yet have I seen a man so run and so ask for the scaffold.’ He dropped behind, and Gaspard heard him say in a loud voice, ‘The King’s horse! There’s one here has His Sacred Majesty’s horse!’

For some time Gaspard walked in silence, thinking what this man meant. Then the little boy asked him again, ‘Please, sir, what is your horse’s name?’

‘His name? Oh, I call him Crusader,’ answered Gaspard.

‘Oh,’ exclaimed the child, ‘what a lovely name!’ He stooped forward and laid his cheek on the horse’s mane. ‘Crusader,’ he said, ‘I do love you so.’

CHAPTER XI

THE MINIATURE

THEY stopped at the town which Gaspard's little boy had mistaken for Jerusalem. The people stood at their doors, lined the sides of the houses, and filled the windows. All the bells seemed to be ringing. In the distance Gaspard caught glimpses of priestly robes and above the heads of the people saw a lifted gold cross which flashed with jewels.

He enquired for a stable, and being taken for one of the Crusaders, found a dozen people willing to show him the way. When he had fed his horse and rubbed him down with straw, he took the little boy's hand and led him into the inn, calling for food.

'I have told you my horse's name,' said he ; 'it is time that you told me yours.'

'I am Felix,' said the boy.

Gaspard smiled. 'Sit down, my Lord Felix, and eat what they set before you. In a few minutes I will return. You are not afraid?'

The boy drew himself up and pointed to his red

cross. 'I am hungry,' he answered; 'but I am not afraid.'

Gaspard patted his head. 'Spoken like a true knight. Well, wait for me here,' he said, and went into the streets again, to search for Hildebert and Falaise.

As he turned a corner of one of these crooked lanes he came into the central square and saw a great church on the opposite side of the way. The whole place was thronged with excited people, and at the doors of the church stood a row of priests, a bishop in their centre, while a boy, standing in a cart with his back to the church, was addressing the multitude.

'That must be Stephen of Cloyes,' thought Gaspard; he was conscious of a sudden interest to see and hear the child who had so bewitched the infancy of France.

It was not easy to see him clearly, for the distance was great and many of the people held children on their shoulders. It was still less easy to hear him, for though he spoke passionately, there was such a shuffling of feet, such a straining to hear, such a murmur of conversation on every side, that the actual words were drowned.

But Gaspard was impressed by the spectacle. The row of old and reverend men in priestly garments, and the splendid fretted stone of the cathedral rising lofty and severe behind them, made a back-

ground which seemed to force, to project the child forward into some supernatural and most striking prominence. And there before him, before this mere child in a dusty cart, were thousands of men and women standing in a dense mass, the eyes lifted, the ears turned, their souls centred on the shepherd boy from Cloyes. Gaspard looked at the gorgeous arches, the austere pillars, the vast rose-window filling the great west front of the church, and upward still to the calm and tranquil belfry towers solitary against the blue of heaven; and then he let his eyes pass slowly over that sea of humanity, dense as forest leaves, that great frozen sea which filled the whole place from side to side as far as eye could reach; and last of all, he brought his gaze back to the child in the cart—the Shepherd of Cloyes, the Prophet of God!

What could be made of it? So far as he could judge, this Stephen of Cloyes appeared to be a lad of twelve, perhaps fourteen years of age. A brown-faced, dark-haired, strong-featured boy; a boy clearly of the fields and the open air. The voice was passionate and hoarse; the gestures were uncouth; the bearing was wild and undisciplined; nothing of a mystic, nothing of a saint, but—as clearly—nothing of a rogue.

Gaspard could make nothing of it.

He turned about, elbowed his way through the people, and set off to join his little friend at the inn.

To search for Hildebert and Falaise in that crowd was a hopeless task; wisdom told him to go and eat his dinner with Felix and look that his horse was safe.

As luck would have it, passing through one of the dark streets on his way to the inn, he caught sight of Blackbeard. The rogue was standing at a door, a bowl in his hand, which he jingled as he addressed the people inside. Some loafers on the other side of the way watched him dubiously. A few women leaned from upper windows. Gaspard paused and listened.

‘For the children I beg, the poor children who go to take Holy Land from the Saracens,’ said Blackbeard; his earrings moved as he jerked the bowl. ‘Give to them, and your stay in purgatory will be brief. Give to them, generous friends, and the saints will bless you.’ He looked up at the windows, shaking his bowl. ‘Think how far they have to go! Think how tired and hungry they must be ere Jerusalem is reached. Give, good friends, give! It is the Will of God.’

Gaspard could bear it no longer. Then, as now, men saw wrong done, disapproved, experienced anger, but passed on. Then, as now, many a righteous man refrained from reproaching that which his soul condemned. But Gaspard’s fiery blood was linked up with his moral sense and throbbed through all the chambers of his soul. He strode across the street, approached the man and

demanded who it was that commissioned him to beg for the pilgrims.

Blackbeard swung round with a smothered oath, showing his broken teeth.

In a minute there was a crowd about them.

‘Ah!’ cried one, ‘I took him for a rogue from the first!’

‘Empty his bowl for him,’ cried another.

‘To the river with the robber,’ said a third.

Blackbeard turned from Gaspard, and addressed the people. His dark face was flushed with indignation. ‘Who stops me in my blessed work?’ he demanded. ‘Who is it? Shall I tell you? It’s a thief, a horse thief! Follow him to his inn. See for yourself. See the horse he rides and the saddle he sits on. Friends, he seeks to injure me because I know his crime. He is afraid of me. I’ll tell you all what he has done. Listen! *He has stolen the King’s horse!*’

Gaspard had stood trembling, his jaws locked, his clenched fists trembling at his hips, while Blackbeard spouted forth his calumny. But now he sprang upon the man and seized him by the throat. ‘Robber, you lie!—you lie, like the fiend that you are!’ he cried fiercely. The two bodies, clipped together, writhed and swayed. The money in the bowl jerked itself across the street, struck the opposite walls, and rolled into the gutters. The instruments in Gaspard’s doublet clashed like knives.

The crowd burst into delighted laughter. 'Let them fight it out,' they cried. 'Let the two rogues settle it between them!' 'Go it, horse-thief!' 'Look out for his knife, lad!' 'There they go; both of them down!'

Gaspard seized the villain's knife hand; at the same time, placing a foot behind his leg, he pressed him suddenly backward with a wrench to the left which brought him down. They fell heavily and rolled in the road, the feet of the crowd hastily withdrawing from their vicinity. A woman at an upper window burst into a comfortable laugh.

'Drop your knife!' cried Gaspard. He was on top.

Blackbeard, amazed at the boy's strength, lay quiet, waiting for his breath. The glare in his dark eyes had the horror of murder.

'Drop it!' commanded Gaspard, twisting back the wrist.

At that moment there was one of those accidents which in an instant turn tragedy into sorriest comedy. A woman at one of the upper windows, unmindful of the crowd below, threw the contents of a housewife's slop-pail into the street.

The crowd parted with a roar of dismay. Gaspard remained where he was. 'Drop your knife,' he kept saying.

'To the river with them!' cried the crowd, the man worse drenched among them leading the

way, angrily. 'To the river with the thieves!' Violent hands were laid upon Gaspard. The knife was trodden by furious feet out of Blackbeard's hand. At the next moment they were separated, each in the hands of the mob. People came out of their houses and swelled the crowd.

'To the river with them, to the river with the thieves!' Some were laughing; those who had been drenched were cursing. Every moment the crowd swelled.

Gaspard felt himself shot forward, hands at his shoulders, hands at his waist, hands round his wrists. His feet were borne off the ground.

Breathless and helpless, a hundred thoughts flashed through his mind as he went ignominiously forward. He thought of the drugs and instruments in his doublet; of the Count; of the operation he had performed; of Isabel; of her miniature; of the sow that he had jammed in the stable door; of the cathedral front with Stephen of Cloyes addressing the crowd; of the gold cross he had seen with the flashing jewels; of Blackbeard's knife; of Falaise with her face averted from him; of Hildebert's little red cross; of his father's wink behind his mother's back—and, last of all, but with a most poignant sense of wretchedness and guilt, of the poor little boy awaiting him at the inn.

'From the bridge or the quay?' asked one of the running voices behind him. Another voice

replied, between panting breaths, 'Ours from the bridge.' At this Gaspard felt himself whirled away to the left and caught a glimpse of Blackbeard being rushed past him on the right.

The lane in which he found himself was dark with ancient houses, and ascended slightly with a sharp curve at the end. The lower parts of these houses consisted of shops; the quarter was evidently a centre of some importance in trade. Few people were about, but those who stood in the streets or sat in the shops made no offer to interfere in Gaspard's behalf. They had wares to watch, affairs of their own which touched gold and silver.

Where the lane curved, however, Gaspard's progress was brought to a sudden stop. A long, clumsy, painted carriage, drawn tandem by two heavy grey horses richly harnessed, blocked the entire road.

Brought to a walk, Gaspard appealed to his captors. They refused to hear him. He was pushed roughly forward, his persecutors talking among themselves and laughing with a grim humour. 'It's the duchess!' said one. 'Aye, in her new coach,' said another.

Gaspard's heart beat with hope. A duchess! A great lady! She would set him free if he could but get to her. As they endeavoured to thrust him past the standing coach, which was somewhat like a modern gipsy van, a lady dressed in the very height

of fashion started from the padded and rose-coloured interior, came to the central window, and leaned out. A reek of perfume issued with her into the street.

She was so painted and patched that she resembled a china doll. It seemed every moment that with any violent movement her porcelain face must crack, her carmine lips run, her pencilled eyebrows chip into powder. The nose was snubbed and insolent, the eyes narrow and mischievous, the mouth petulant and sensual. She leaned out of the window, smiling like a mask, and asked the cause of Gaspard's captivity. The left corner of her mouth had a little sore, and she held her fingers at the lips, fretting it as she spoke.

Two or three of the men speaking together said that Gaspard had come to the town with the pilgrims and that he had stolen the King's horse.

'But how nice!' exclaimed the lady, smiling. She drawled and her accent was horrible to Gaspard's ears, used to the pure French of Touraine.

However, he hid his feelings, looked at her with entreaty, and implored her to hear the truth. 'I stopped a rogue from robbing these people,' said he; 'to cover his guilt the rascal accused me of a crime; and then these fools set about me. But I am no horse thief, madam. I am a surgeon, a surgeon to the Count of Touraine; there are those in the town can prove it.'

‘But how amusing!’ smiled the lady, fingering her sore lip.

‘He’s a thief, duchess, depend on’t, he’s a thief,’ cried his captors. ‘The two of them were fighting like cat and dog in the gutters.’

‘Duchess,’ cried the desperate Gaspard, a sudden inspiration in his heart, ‘you are as beautiful as Paradise and know how loveliness is worshipped. Let these fellows unhand me that I may show you the face of her whom I adore; by that face, by the heart of her whom I love, I will appeal to you for your protection. Queen of love, hear me. The Count, my master, will thank you. He honours me. Of your bounty, most beautiful and most gracious——’

‘Let me see the face,’ said the duchess, extending one of her hands. ‘But how romantic!’

Gaspard fished in his doublet and produced the miniature. ‘Let her lesser beauty,’ said the rogue softly, ‘appeal to your grace’s incomparable loveliness.’

The duchess smirked upon him, examined the miniature, and pursed her lips. ‘A plain face, a stupid plain face,’ she drawled contemptuously, ‘but the picture is cleverly done; it has some skill in the colouring.’ She tossed the precious miniature on to the seat of the coach, and looking up again, demanded, ‘And where did you steal it?’

Gaspard turned white as death.

‘ My picture ! ’ he cried. ‘ Give me my picture ! ’

‘ I will keep it for you, ’ she said in her lazy drawl, ‘ till you get back from Jerusalem ! ’

‘ Or the water ! ’ said one of the men.

The crowd laughed and the duchess beamed upon them.

‘ You will leave me in the hands of these men ? ’ gasped Gaspard. Then his rage broke out. He cared not what became of him. He cursed the town, charged the duchess with a thousand crimes, swore to have justice, mentioned the King’s name with a wild freedom, and ended up by demanding once more his picture.

‘ Do you swim, pilgrim ? ’ asked the duchess, fingering her tiresome sore.

‘ Swim ! ’ echoed Gaspard.

‘ Oh, I am sure you do ! ’ She called to her coachman to proceed, and as she sat back in the carriage she said wearily, ‘ To the river with this frothing dog.’

Gaspard was tighter seized and shot forward up the hill.

CHAPTER XII

FELIX DISAPPEARS

FEELINGS of rage and mortification did not burn so furiously in Gaspard's breast as to smother his bitterness of self-reproach. He blamed himself unsparingly as the blood danced in his eyes and ears. Fool to have interfered between Black-beard the rogue and these clowns who did not know an honest man when they saw one! Yes, fool, a hundred times fool; but ah!—*monster* and *villain* and *unpardonable sinner* to have brandished his love for Isabel in the face of that painted minx in her gaudy coach! That was where the shoe pinched sharpest.

Why did he yield to these absurd spasms of the brain? Why did his reason allow his life to be carried away on these waves of emotion?

Impulse, he told himself bitterly, had set him on this folly of crusading with mad children; impulse had made him attack a cunning rogue in the street; impulse had made him appeal to one who, any fool might have seen, was as false as she was empty, as vile as she was vain.

And now his chance in the world was gone, his life was to suffer a frightful hazard, and Isabel's miniature had vanished for ever !

Bitterly, on his violent way to the bridge, did Gaspard, surgeon to the Count of Touraine and man of passionless science, upbraid himself.

But his progress and his reflections were both suddenly interrupted. A main road crossed the lane through which he was being thus brutally projected, and, by a merciful providence, just before his captors reached this four-cross-ways, the people and the pilgrims, returning from the square and Stephen's oratory, passed like a great flood across the road and made an impassable barricade between Gaspard and the bridge.

Many noticed him ; he was raked by hundreds of half-curious eyes ; but no one questioned, no one interfered. He stood there like a guilty felon, held on either side by the collar, gripped by the arms, hands at his girdle, fists in his back, and one man in front (he who had been worse drenched by the pail) watching him like a bloodhound.

An idea flashed into his mind.

'If you will not listen to reason——' he began.

'Hold your peace !' growled the man in front.

'Will money buy you ?' Gaspard asked. 'I'll give a gold piece to be rid of you.'

'Silence, I say !' threatened the Bloodhound.

The men at his back were whispering. Gaspard caught the words, 'But we'll look in his belt, nevertheless, before he goes over.' 'Aye,' said another; 'we're entitled to thieves' takings!'

He set his teeth and waited. The crowd passed slowly, thickly, indifferently.

Then his fiery blood got the better of him. What! to stand ignominiously in the public streets without one single protest of innocence! No; he would show them the manner of man they had dared to lay their dirty hands upon!

In a second the splendid youth was like a madman. He let fly with his right foot, plunged violently to the left, hurled his whole body forward, and at the next minute was pressing backward, almost free, with his body couched, his head curled under him, his arm forcing to left and right, every muscle in his youthful frame strained to the utmost.

It was a great effort, but the tussle ended and Gaspard was still a prisoner.

The angry and gasping men got a firmer grip of him; Bloodhound came closer and hit him a stinging blow in the mouth. The multitude crossing the road had scarcely turned their heads to regard the hopeless struggle.

Alas, but a few hours ago the words were said to Gaspard, 'The world is at your feet'—yes, and said to him by as powerful a man, next to the King, as

any in France. And now! Now he stood the prisoner of loathsome men, bleeding, disordered, passionate, helpless, ruined!

He looked about him for a wild moment, haggard, agonised, and despairing.

The crowd went by, hardly regarding him.

To hide the tears scalding in his eyes, to fight the sobs in his throat, to shut his eyes from the ignominy and burning shame of his position, Gaspard bowed his head and longed that the end might come. To get to the bridge, to be free of these hands gripping him so cruelly, to have the water all about him and a shore within reach of him—this was his only longing.

The crowd went by speaking of Stephen. Was it true? Had these miracles really occurred? Was it possible that children could overcome the Saracens? The lad had spoken well. He was like a veritable prophet. God had certainly called him. But who would care to set his child on this crusade? After all . . .

Gaspard heard the floating words as he fought with the hot tears of his shame.

Of a sudden his name was called. He lifted his head, the blood running down his chin, and looked wildly, hopefully about him. Falaise was thrusting through the crowd to come to him—fear, agony, indignation, love in her eyes—and with her was a heavy-shouldered, fat-faced priest, a giant of a man,

who held her hand and kept close to her in a way that was not pleasant to see.

Even in that moment of hope Gaspard's brows darkened on the priest, and he looked reproachfully at his sister.

'Gaspard!' she cried, 'what has befallen you?'

The priest did not ask questions. 'Unhand him, you dirty churls!' cried this giant of the black robe. 'Unhand an honest youth or I'll set a thousand of our pilgrims on you.' And with the words he laid immense and hairy hands on the shoulders of one of the rogues, twitched him off, and slung him against the opposite wall.

The others raised angry voices. 'Hold, Father; the duchess has condemned him; the duchess has bid us throw the thief in the river.'

'Duchess!' bawled the huge priest. 'Duchess!' And as he slung another of Gaspard's captives across the road, he said with indignation and with scorn, 'Who dares say duchess when Holy Church commands?'

'He is no thief!' cried Falaise, facing Bloodhound with anger in her eyes. 'How dare you call my brother a thief!' She looked as if she would scratch his eyes out, and Bloodhound turned on a sulking heel, and joined his mates now slinking away on the other side.

In a minute Gaspard stood free, saved by Falaise.

He was in the midst of telling his story when he

stopped himself suddenly. 'Great Heaven,' he exclaimed, 'the child at the inn!'

'Where mean you? What child?' cried the priest, catching hold of his arm as he turned to go.

Gaspard told them of Felix left at the inn.

'Well, the boy has had time to stuff himself,' laughed the priest. 'What, are you so late from boyhood and think he will complain of that! Hold a minute. If we let you go those rogues will attack you again. It is necessary that we go with you.'

So they went together, and all the way Gaspard was troubled by the big priest's familiarity with Falaise, and hated him in his heart for a hypocrite and a rogue.

At the inn they found the landlord standing at his door.

'Ah! so you've come at last,' said this worthy, scowling on Gaspard and glancing suspiciously at the priest. 'Well, that boy of yours has eaten like a soldier and gone off without paying his bill, like a true pilgrim.'

'Gone!' said Gaspard.

'Aye, gone without paying.'

The priest laughed. 'We shall find him with the pilgrims,' he said. 'For us, it is wise to eat before we start. Let us to the table. The oratory of this Stephen has fed my soul and starved my body.'

Gaspard went anxiously to the stable. Crusader, to his great relief, was still there. He went to the

corner of the street. There was no sign of Felix. He waited for a few moments and then returned to the inn.

‘Come!’ cried the priest, who held a goblet in one hand and a flagon in the other. He laughed, smacking his fat lips, and blinking his small eyes. The great round of his face shone with heat and was beaded with perspiration. He had not shaved that day and the whole great jowl was blue and prickly with the stubble of his beard.

During the meal he said to Gaspard: ‘So you are not a believer, my friend. You follow the Crusade rather than go with it. This I learn from the white lily at my side, your exquisite sister. Well, I do not judge you. For myself, I neither believe nor disbelieve. I wait for God to settle that little matter. If the sea divides for us, I shall make Heaven a present of my faith; if not, well, I shall go back to my town and say mass like the others. For the present, I reckon that this Stephen of Cloyes has the balance in his favour. Look you, he has healed the sick; he has the gift of tongues; and children follow him. Such things are not natural. Either God is with him or Satan is making use of him. We must suspend judgment. Time will decide.’

‘I should like to talk to him,’ said Gaspard quietly.

‘That you will find difficult,’ quoth the priest, laughing. ‘At the start he was humble, and walked

like the rest of us, a true shepherd. But now, my friend, he rides in a cart ; he wears a robe of honour ; he has a guard all about him. It is like approaching a king to get near him.'

Gaspard asked Falaise if she or Hildebert had spoken to Stephen. She shook her head quickly. 'Oh no !' she said ; 'Hildebert tried the first day, but he could not reach him.'

The priest, who was eating voraciously, told Gaspard to postpone any questions he had framed for Stephen's answering till they got to Jerusalem.

When they had finished their meal, Gaspard paid the bill and went to the stable for his horse. He found three or four men standing there, regarding Crusader with admiration. These men turned at his approach and stared at him curiously, presently whispering among themselves.

He saddled and bridled Crusader, led him from the stable, and mounted in the yard. One of the men approached him.

'That's a fine horse,' he said quietly.

'You speak truth,' answered Gaspard shortly.

'I expect there's a history attaching to that horse,' continued the man.

'There is,' said Gaspard, riding away. Over his shoulder, he added, 'He was born on such a day, broken in such a year, and now he carries his master out of this scurvy town into fresh air and honest country.'

The man came to the yard entry and shouted, 'When he's dead let me know and I'll send you his epitaph.'

Gaspard rode on, and overtook the priest and Falaise.

'That's a fine horse,' exclaimed the priest, genuinely amazed.

Gaspard laughed. 'Never,' said he, 'did a beast's praise make his master more uneasy.' He thought of Isabel's saying, *The fall is not far off*. 'It seems to me,' he went on, 'that this horse is more likely to carry me into mischief than bring me safely home.'

'It's a fine horse,' said the priest thoughtfully.

They turned a corner, and Gaspard saw a hatless man hurrying away into the distance whose clothes were damp, stained, and disarranged.

It was Blackbeard.

CHAPTER XIII

STEPHEN'S FAVOURITE DISCIPLE

HILDEBERT came running to greet them as they joined the procession.

‘What do you think?’ he cried eagerly. ‘I have spoken to Stephen! He was surrounded by people, but he saw me looking at him, and he called me to his side, and walked away with me. I was alone with him! He says I am to travel with him sometimes in the cart. He says he likes me and will have me for his favourite disciple!’

Falaise glanced doubtfully up at Gaspard on the horse. Gaspard’s face was like a rock.

The priest laughed and rubbed his great hands. ‘Come, then, you shall tell us what he said. A good gossip will help pass the time. How did he speak? Said he anything about the sea dividing? Tell us your story, little angel.’

Hildebert was so excited that his words tumbled out of his mouth in an almost breathless enthusiasm. ‘He did not talk about himself at all; he never said a word about what he has seen or what he can do;

he made me tell him all about myself, and asked me whether I believed in him, and if I *really* thought God would give us Holy Land.'

'And you answered?' said the priest.

'Oh, I told him I believed with all my heart!' cried Hildebert. 'I told him that I would follow to the end; and I said that I had always longed for something wonderful and glorious like this to happen so that wicked men might *know* the Will of God.'

'And that pleased him, eh?'

'He put his hand on my shoulder, and said, *I love you, little brother; and you shall be my favourite disciple.* So I snatched his hand off my shoulder, and lifted it to my lips, and kissed it, and said I would die for him. And he smiled so sweetly on me, and he said very sadly, *Little brother, only children can understand the things of God.*'

'Ha!' cried the priest, whose face was grave and earnest; 'said he that to you, did he? Well, there is a warrant for it. *Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.* Yes. Yes. Well, we must wait. 'Tis a great business. We shall see. A long road, but there's an end to it. Only children, said he? Yes, that's the Scripture. I think this boy must have the Spirit of God upon him.'

Gaspard, who was looking here and there for Felix, slipped off his horse and persuaded Falaise to ride. The priest lifted her into the saddle, all the

gravity disappearing from his face as he set her there. He laughed into her eyes, squeezed her hand, and called her the lily of the march.

Then he turned to Gaspard. 'What think you of your brother's tale?' he asked in a lower voice, as though he would discuss the matter secretly.

'It is plain enough,' replied Gaspard.

'Is it?' exclaimed the priest. 'Well, perhaps you are right. The Scriptures say that a man must be born again. St. Paul has it that the natural man *cannot* understand the things of God. Our Blessed Lord, as all good Christians know, took a little child and set him in the midst of His disciples——'

'I mean something else,' said Gaspard.

'Ha! I forgot. Yes. You don't believe. Well, what do you think of this talk with Stephen? How is it *plain enough*, as you say?'

Gaspard frowned. 'It seems to me,' he said, rather impatiently, 'that this shepherd boy from Cloyes has begun to be doubtful of himself and his mission.'

'What!' cried the priest, almost stopping.

Gaspard continued, without altering his pace. 'As I see it, the matter is in this fashion. Surrounded by flatterers and absurdity, the Mystic, who has just begun to doubt, sees my little brother gaping at him with honest love and unaffected worship. He calls

him aside. He asks what Hildebert thinks about him. When he gets the full and unquestioning faith of a little child he is relieved and feels happier. He says that Hildebert is to be his favourite disciple. Don't you see why? He needs innocence and simplicity to buttress his faith. I think he is afraid of the ball he has set rolling. He did not anticipate either so great a ball or so far a journey.'

The priest was exceedingly grave. 'Perhaps; yes, perhaps,' he said slowly, speaking in a low voice. He kept his eyes on the ground and walked with his head bent. 'What you say has the sound of truth in it. Suppose he has been deluded! And all these children, thirty thousand of them, following in vain! What calamity! And yet we have Scripture warrant for his words. Only little children can understand the things of God. It is necessary to have the heart of a little child. Yes. The Scripture says so. *Become as little children.* You are nearly a man, and I am in the midst of my age; you and I are full of doubts, with hearts hardened by the world and eyes blinded by our own conceits. Suppose we are wrong! Suppose Hildebert is right! My friend, look at his face! Is it not the countenance of an angel?'

Gaspard was conscious of despair. This mad pilgrimage, he felt sure, would crawl slowly forward all the way to the sea; and at the sea Hildebert

would be the very last among that wailing host of broken-hearted and disillusioned children to turn back. Alas! he had brought certain ruin on himself. It was hopeless to expect that the Count would forgive him. Here he was, in the midst of fanatics and thieves, marching away from fortune and love, his face towards ruin.

An idea occurred to him.

‘Hildebert!’ he exclaimed suddenly, going to the boy’s side; ‘will you take me with you to the head of the procession and get me a word with Stephen?’

Hildebert glanced up at him quickly and reproachfully. ‘But, Gaspard,’ he said sadly, ‘you don’t believe!’

‘I would ask Stephen a question.’

‘But he said to me that the questions of people harden his heart. He does not like people who ask this and that. He wants people to believe in God.’

‘Nevertheless, take me to his side.’

‘I cannot.’

‘Come, it is a small matter.’

‘No, it is a great matter, Gaspard! Don’t you see, Stephen wants to be alone with God. He told me the people press about him and talk to him all day, so that he can never be quiet with his own thoughts. At Cloyes he could think about God from sunrise to sunset, and he says it

was beautiful and easy then to feel God close to him.'

'Well, he can spare me five minutes.'

'I will not ask him for them.'

'I have given up much for you!'

'That is nothing, Gaspard. You must give up *all* for God. Oh, I wish you believed! Stephen says that only those of us who have become as little children will conquer the Saracens. The others will die. It is so beautiful to give your whole heart to God; to forget all about yourself; to think always about heaven and its bright angels; to long and long and long for the Presence of God.'

The child stole a glance at his brother's face and he quickly turned his head, edging a little away from Gaspard. 'Come!' he cried to those on the other side, 'let us sing *It is God's Will*.' And the next moment the afternoon air was filled with the voices of children.

Darkness descended on the heart of Gaspard. He walked away from Hildebert, left the priest in charge of Falaise and the horse, glanced behind him for a possible sight of the missing Felix, and then strode on ahead to get a nearer view of Stephen.

'If I can force him into a corner,' he said bitterly; 'if I can bring him face to face with his own doubt; ah, then I will *drive him* to turn my brother back. There is still a hope. If I could get home in

two days, in three days, perhaps even in four days, the Count might forgive me. And then, Isabel !'

He thought of the lost miniature and became sad.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PURPLE ROBE

IT was a matter of many minutes to reach the head of the procession.

As he went along Gaspard took notice of the people he passed and the expression of their various faces. The men seemed to him thoughtful and anxious ; the children, for the most part, feverish and wretchedly fatigued. Among the youths of his own age there were many noble faces stern with the energy of religious fervour. He was struck by the strength and power of these young men, the look of concentrated purpose in their eyes, the appearance of unyielding resolution in their lips and chins.

It was a dust-stained pageant. Happiness was nowhere discernible. Like an army at the end of a long march, the host moved slowly, wearily, and rather silently forward. A few of the children were still singing behind him, but their voices weakened, and grew gradually faint. Some of the older men were talking together, but not with animation. The horses and mules sweated in the burning

sun. The dust rose like a thick smoke. A cloud of flies buzzed above the heads of the moving multitude.

There was a bodyguard of priests and monks surrounding the cart in which Stephen travelled. These men were more talkative than the rest. They argued among themselves in loud voices, using many gestures and constantly changing places as they went forward. A few of them had their hands on the side of Stephen's cart and walked more or less silently, only speaking to those at their elbow, and that briefly, as though answering questions with "Yes" or "No." The rest made the air loud with their incessant loquacity.

Gaspard saw all this in a brief moment. His gaze went quickly to the cloaked figure lying across the floor of the cart, with the back resting against one of the sides.

It was not easy to see the face of Stephen because of the crowds surrounding the cart ; but by peering here and there, standing tiptoe now, and now stooping the knees to glance between a row of bodies, Gaspard at last obtained a definite impression of the hero.

He was a boy of fourteen, swarthy and dark-haired, with swollen bags under the dark eyes, and a brooding petulance in the full lips. The forehead was low but broad, with thick eyebrows depressed to the very lids of the eyes. The ears

were small ; the nose coarse and abrupt ; the chin firm ; the neck full, strong, and powerful.

Gaspard took notice of the purple cloak worn by this new saint of the Church, and observed a massive ring on one of his brown fingers.

He was still peering for a closer study of Stephen when a monk touched his arm.

‘What do you seek ?’ asked this monk.

‘A talk with the shepherd boy from Cloyes,’ replied Gaspard.

‘That is impossible, my brother.’

‘Is he so mighty, then ?’

‘Who is mightier than the Chosen of God ?’

‘Yet our Lord talked with publicans and sinners !’

‘True, but they came to Him with broken hearts.’

‘Not all, I think.’

‘Or thirsting for salvation.’

‘Well, I come thirsting.’

‘Do you ?’

‘Yes.’

‘For what ?’

‘For Truth.’

The monk was young and his countenance was beautiful, with the grace of refinement. His eyes, although full of gentleness and the most quiet serenity, pierced to the very soul of Gaspard. ‘Truth,’ said he, ‘is to be had of God. He has already declared it. Christ Jesus, my brother, is

the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Ask God, and He will make it clear to you.'

Gaspard's brows darkened. 'But I would hear from the lips of Stephen himself the truth of this crusade—this crusade of little children to Holy Land!'

'Did you hear him preach at the last town?'

'No.'

'Wait, then, till the next; I will lead you where you shall hear him plainly.'

'Then he is too fine to answer a question I would put to him?'

'No, my brother; but you are too presumptuous in seeking to ask it.'

'How so?'

'When God has answered your prayer for Truth you will understand.'

Gaspard reflected for a moment. Then he said: 'I have come hither to look after a brother of mine, a little brother who is weak and delicate, who is like to die on the road before ever we come to the sea. His mother loves him, and has sent me to take care of the young child. Now, brother, I would ask this Stephen of Cloyes whether he is very sure that the sea will divide for him, whether he is very sure that it is God's Will children should desert father and mother and die on the road. That is my question. And I think if I came face to face with him, if I forced his eyes to look straight into the

eyes of honest doubt, I could persuade him to let my brother go. And that, I think, would be as good a work as he has yet done or is like to do, for my mother is one who serves God and loves this little son with all her heart.'

The monk took Gaspard aside. 'Do you doubt the Hand of God?' he asked quietly. 'Why, brother, see how visibly it moves across this land of France! Look backward on this host of innocence and faith. It is the Hand of God! Think you a shepherd boy could do this thing? Think you a child could set so vast a thing afoot? Consider what it means, and what it promises. Here through the land of this our country moves a great army of little children, children who love games and play, to whom it is natural that life should seem a merry pastime; and they are marching footsore, weary, hungry, thirsty, to face the armies of the Moslem! How came this miracle, except from Heaven? And see further what it promises. Sinful is the world, the whole of Christendom diseased with evil and iniquity, the very Church of God rotten with unrighteousness. What can save mankind? Are we not like the Israelites, given to false gods and abandoned to uncleanness? Aye, we are worse than them. For unto us has shone the Perfect Light, and in our very midst has been lifted up the Cross of Christ. What, then, can save us? A miracle! Yes, and only a miracle. Brother, behold the

miracle! These children will advance to Holy Land between the parted waves of ocean; at sight of them the Saracens will fall down and worship God; the Holy Father will march from Rome to Jerusalem; from thence the Church of Christ will rule the whole world; and then, all the nations of the earth—confronted by this miracle of the children—will acknowledge God to be the Lord. Brother, this is the Will of God.'

Gaspard said: 'And if the sea does not divide?'

'I will answer that question when God denies Himself.'

'I tell you,' said Gaspard angrily, 'that the sea will *not* divide. I tell you that everyone here is deceived. You dream. You are deluded. At the sea you will sit down and curse God, and God will judge you for the murderers of little children. What say the Scriptures about the millstone? I advise you, look out for that millstone of God! It will grind you to powder. I had rather commit all the sins that Moses banned than lead one little child to disenchantment and despair.'

The monk laid a kindly hand on his arm. 'So spoke the Israelites in the wilderness, my brother; but the Promised Land was reached.'

'I see it is in vain!' cried Gaspard. 'You are like men in sleep. You are in the midst of a dream, and what is real you cannot understand. I see how it is. Only the sea will awake you.'

‘You are hot and fierce,’ replied the monk gently. ‘In such a mood it is not possible to comprehend the Will of God. Try and humble yourself, my brother; bow your spirit to the dust and ask the Everlasting God to let the light of His truth penetrate and disperse the darkness of your soul.’

Gaspard uttered an exclamation of impatient disgust. ‘You dream! you dream!’ he cried angrily. ‘Such a God is fit only for the heathen whom you despise. He has given us reason. We are men. He means us to think, to act, to work.’ He looked towards Stephen in the cart. ‘That boy!’ said he. ‘Do you know what he is? The Chosen of God, say you? No. I will tell you. The truth is simple. He is a madman.’

‘And you,’ said the monk, ‘are blind!’

With a gesture half of resignation and half of contempt, Gaspard stopped on the road, and let the monk go on beside the cart.

That night they reached no town, and bivouacked under the stars on the edge of a dark forest. Gaspard gave the fat priest a notion of his suspicions concerning Blackbeard, and it was agreed between them to share a watch over Crusader.

Falaise and Hildebert slept side by side under the branches of an oak, their heads resting on a pillow of moss. Not far from them, Crusader was hobbled to a long rope, one end of which first Gaspard and then the fat priest held by the hand. On every side of

them children lay stretched upon the ground, little weary children whose deep breathing made a strange music through the forest. Their white or flushed faces seen by starlight, the curls clustering at the side, the lashes resting on the cheeks, the lips slightly parted, made a deep impression on the soul of Gaspard. He thought of Stephen's purple robe, and set his teeth.

'God's millstone!' he said to himself. 'Would it might fall to-night!'

And as he watched the air was peaceful with the breathing of the children and fearful with the howling of wolves.

CHAPTER XV

THE CITY OF DESTRUCTION

THE dawn broke grey and cold, the whole east banked with sullen clouds, a wind from that quarter ominously sounding a shrill trumpet of menace and dislike.

‘Now there is a chance for this Stephen to prove his power!’ said Gaspard grimly.

‘What mean you?’ asked the priest, who was laughing with Falaise.

Hildebert was on his knees, his hands clasped in front of the cross on his breast, his eyes raised to heaven.

‘Rain is not far; let him disperse it,’ said Gaspard.

‘Rain!’ cried the priest, turning about to scan the sky. ‘What a tragedy! Yes. On my soul, it looks like it. Rain! That will be frightful.’

‘And let him feed these hungry children!’ said Gaspard bitterly. ‘The sparrows of the air have their breakfast; shall not the lambs of God be fed also?’

The priest eyed him narrowly. 'You do not believe? You think it will come to nothing?'

'I am waiting,' said Gaspard, 'not for the miracle, but for the millstone.'

They set out. A messenger came to fetch Hildebert, and he ran joyfully forward to be with Stephen.

Before they were in sight of a village the first spots of rain fell here and there, thrown forward by the wind out of a sky as black as ink. Gaspard looked round, and then turned to Falaise, who was riding Crusader.

'You have no cloak?' he asked.

She shook her head. 'No. And I feel cold. I think I would rather walk.'

The priest came to her side. 'Jump, little lily. You shall walk beside me, and I will shield you from the rain.'

There were several children scarce able to drag one foot after another. Gaspard chose three of them and set them one behind the other on Crusader's saddle. He thought, with the keenest remorse, of little Felix left behind in the town, perhaps stolen by evil people.

The raindrops increased in number and in size. Children could be seen pulling their scapulars or hoods over their heads. Men riding mules and horses drew their cloaks round them. Those who had blankets unpacked them from the straps and

wore them over the shoulders. Falaise allowed the priest to lay his great arm about her and hold her close to his side. It grew darker and colder every moment.

‘How far is it to Jerusalem?’ children were asking.

‘Is it just over this hill?’

‘Shall we get there before the rain falls?’

And then, as if heaven had opened all her water-gates at once, down came the black and piercing rain, down at a pursuing slant, sloping in a flood from the cruel east, with a hiss, a roar, and a smoke of steam, driving at the backs of the children, stabbing at them, whipping them forward with all the lashes of the howling wind.

In a moment the garments of that mighty host were soaked and drenched. The gay colours became dark; the pretty looseness shrank to the skin of the shivering wearers. Water ran from the brims of hats, the rims of scapulars, the faces and the hands of all the multitude. Horses and mules sent up a steam of mist. The air smelt like a cauldron. The road became a morass. As far as eye could see the country lay flat, melancholy, and damp with gloom.

Gaspard set his teeth. ‘If Stephen doubted yesterday,’ he reflected, ‘still more shall he doubt to-day. This drench of the heavens should wash

the mystic out of his soul. Could I but come at him now ! ’

He looked for Hildebert. The boy was not to be seen. ‘ Oh, he is with the great Master, the Chosen of God ! ’ he told himself angrily. ‘ Yes, I forgot. Stephen has need of him. Much would I give to see those two sons of faith soaking in a cart ! ’

The rain continued all the morning.

Soon after midday a rumour came from the head of the procession that a town was in sight. ‘ Oh, I am so glad ! ’ cried a child, whom Gaspard had lifted on to his shoulder.

‘ You are hungry, little man ? ’

‘ Yes ; but I think it may be Jerusalem. ’

‘ No ; Jerusalem lies across the sea. ’

‘ But I think this rain is the sea, ’ answered the child.

‘ No ; it is only a foretaste ! ’ said Gaspard grimly. But the sight of human habitations warmed his heart. He was very hungry and his shoulders had long been aching with their load.

The town proved to be sceptic, almost to a man. The clergy laughed at the half-drowned crusaders as they entered the city, and the few people who had their doors open refused food till money was produced.

Such a sight, perhaps, was never seen before. The ugly little narrow streets of this town were packed

with a drenched and hungry mob of children, packed from end to end and from side to side. Doors were shut and locked. Only from the shining roofs and dripping windows did the people look down upon the soaked crusaders. Voices were raised on every hand, men in the street calling for food, the people in the houses shouting their derision. To add to the horror of it, hundreds of the little ones sank upon the wet mud of the roadways famished and exhausted. The rain continued to fall, but was less violent; it descended in a drizzle which looked to be interminable. To crown all, thousands of these children burst into loud weeping and filled the air with their wailing.

Gaspard left the priest in charge both of Crusader and the boy he had carried on his shoulder. He forced his way to an inn. By a great effort he gained an entrance and bought food for Falaise and Hildebert and the children on the horse. But scarcely had he made his appearance in the street than the food was torn out of his hands, and children on the verge of madness began to gnaw at the loaves. He went back to the inn, and by paying a large sum of money obtained the three last loaves and a piece of cooked meat. These things he placed in a small basket, and carrying it in his arms, forced his way through the crowd and reached Crusader in safety.

But no sooner did he open the basket than a

hundred hands were stretched forward and the whole air rang with beseeching cries for food. He managed to tear a piece out of one of the loaves and hand it quickly to Falaise ; at the next moment his basket was empty.

Angry cries began to sound on every side. The thieves and rogues who had followed the Crusade clamoured for action. 'These people,' they said, 'are the enemies of God ; let us sack their wicked city and spoil them to the glory of our Lord !'

Certain of the priests also joined in this cry. A monk sprang upon a wall and denounced the town, calling down upon it the judgment of God. Someone on a roof opposite threw a stone which struck him on the head and brought him to the ground bleeding and stunned. The cries of anger on both sides became louder and fiercer.

Suddenly a shout of panic came from the rear. In an instant furious pressure drove the whole host violently forward. Horses reared upon their hind legs. Mules lashed out with their heels. Children fell and were trampled underfoot. On every side rose screams of terror and alarm, shrieks of agony and fear. Then came the cry, 'Soldiers ! The soldiers are going to kill us !'

Gaspard got upon Crusader's back, stood on the hindquarters, and, steadying himself with a hand laid upon the shoulder of one of the children, looked back-

ward. At the far end of the town he saw a body of soldiers armed with swords and spears ; they were mercilessly driving the children before them like a flock of sheep.

It flashed through Gaspard's mind that perhaps this was the millstone of God. Here perhaps was mercy disguised as chastisement. Outside the town, surely Stephen and the priests about him would come to their senses. At any rate, thousands of children would refuse to go forward. How could they go on ? They were drenched to the skin ; they were ravenous for food ; and the road was like a quagmire. Yes, by a good hap, this disaster might yet prove his salvation.

He was borne forward in the press. It was like some awful nightmare. Children fell and disappeared with a shriek of terror. Nothing could resist the pressure from behind. In a packed density the army of children surged forward between the houses, many with their feet off the ground, some with broken limbs, numbers of them dying and actually dead. Brutal women threw water at them from the windows. Shouts of laughter marked the progress of this murderous stampede. Dogs were in the midst of the children barking and snapping at their legs.

The huge priest kept Falaise in front of him, and with spread arms protected her from being crushed to death. But a dead child, with broken

ribs, was pinned against his back by the pressure from behind. He was like a stone wall. Gaspard was able to keep his hand on Crusader's bridle, but the good horse was frightened, and plunged now to this side and now to that, crushing children against the houses and treading others under his hoofs. The three children on his back were screaming with terror. It was dreadful to hear the treble cry of 'Mother!' in the midst of the clamour.

'This is certainly not Jerusalem,' said Gaspard to himself; 'it is the City of Destruction.'

At last the open country was reached.

Picture to yourself the hideous spectacle. Through the narrow gateway of the city spouted a veritable *squash* of children, bursting between the dark walls and pouring itself in a sluggish flood across the muddy fields. Hundreds emerged from that dreadful sewer only to fall upon the ground, thousands ran screaming forward in a panic of delirium, thousands more spread out to left and right and stood in breathless groups beside the walls of the city. At one moment a mule came plunging and kicking out of the gates, at the next a horse rearing on its hind legs, with fiery rolling eyes and nostrils rimmed with blood. And in the midst of this confusion one heard the shouts of men, the screams of children, the barking of dogs, and everywhere the hard and furious breathing of an angry multitude.

Gaspard drew Crusader aside, and stood looking at the awful sight.

The rain ceased, and a watery sun, labouring its way to the west through sullen skies and banks of thunder-coloured clouds, threw a thin radiance on the scattered host and soaking landscape. The whole scene was one of desolation and despair, mocked by a sun that sought the other side of the world.

When he had discovered the priest and Falaise, Gaspard gave up his charge of Crusader, and set off to save, if it were possible, some of the dying children strewn upon the ground. He was working in this way till sunset.

Night had just begun to fall when he bent his steps towards a little crumpled figure stretched upon the damp earth close to the city walls. A couple of famished dogs were beginning to attack the legs of this child as he came up. He drove off the snarling brutes and knelt hastily down at the child's side.

A cry of joy and agony broke from his lips.

'Felix!' he called. 'Little Felix, is it you, is it really you?'

The child opened his eyes and stared at Gaspard with a dazed and glassy wonder.

Quick as lightning Gaspard drew a phial from his doublet, and, supporting the little boy's head, poured part of the contents through his lips. He

spoke to him consolingly, drew him close to his bosom, and stooping down, kissed the pale forehead that was cold as death.

After some minutes Felix revived sufficiently to move his arms. He put his hand to his doublet and tried to take something from his breast. It was more than he could do, and his dying eyes made a tragic appeal to Gaspard.

‘What do you need, little brother?’ asked Gaspard tenderly, and he placed his hand gently in the boy’s doublet, and drew out something thin and square that lay there, warm with his body’s heat.

It was dark, but Gaspard saw at once, and with an unutterable rush of joy and wonder at his heart, what the precious thing was that he held in his hand.

It was the lost miniature of Isabel.

‘Felix!’ he cried. ‘Felix! My own dear little Felix! How did you come by it? What miracle gave it to you——’

The child’s head fell back towards his arms. Gaspard peered down at the tiny face. The cheeks became like snow, the lips darkened swiftly till they were like dead lilac, the eyes that met the straining gaze of Gaspard, the poor little eyes that had longed so earnestly to behold Jerusalem, were fixed and soulless and dead.

A spasm of furious anger swept through Gaspard’s

body. 'Now, by the living God,' he exclaimed, 'I will call this Stephen to account!'

He lifted the dead child in his arms and ran forward through the twilight.

His eyes were full of tears.

CHAPTER XVI

FACE TO FACE

GASPARD was never to know how Felix came by the miniature. But it happened in this wise.

The poor little child was turned out of the inn by the landlord, who hoped Gaspard might never return, so that he could keep the horse for payment of the food he had served to Felix. Cast into the street, Felix stood crying miserably against the wall of the inn, determined to wait there till Gaspard returned. A crowd collected about him. While they questioned the child, the duchess came by in her painted coach, fresh from the scene with Gaspard. She saw the crowd, and inquired what was passing. When she heard the tale she laughed heartily, and bade them lift the little crusader into her coach. 'If he will not pay for his dinner,' she said, 'he shall beguile me with the tale of this Crusade.'

Unwillingly, the tears still in his eyes, Felix travelled for a league or two in the coach of the duchess. To amuse him, to cure him of his weeping that he might the more intelligently reply to her

questions, she had shown him the miniature, just as Gaspard had shown it to him, as "a pretty picture." At sight of it Felix started, forgot his tears, and asked how she came by it. The duchess laughed and told him the story. 'I must go!' cried Felix; 'you are a wicked woman; let me go!' But she would not permit him to depart. 'Tell me about this Crusade,' she said, 'and you shall keep the picture.' So Felix told her, and what is more, preached her such a lovely sermon of innocence and faith that the vain woman could never afterwards rid herself of its memory; at the end of her life, they say, she came to pray God for His mercy and forgiveness, haunted by that sermon of the child.

When she had done with the boy she let him get down from the coach, and he ran all the way back to the city. He arrived to find that the pilgrims had departed. He went to the inn, found that Crusader was gone, and set out to follow. He did not overtake the pilgrims at nightfall, and pushed on through the darkness solitary and alone, till he sank exhausted on the ground. Next morning he continued the pursuit. The rain drenched him to the bone; he was starving with hunger and consumed by thirst; but still he ran after the pilgrims. He came up with them before the city of destruction was reached. His strength was exhausted. He could not get to Gaspard. Staggering

and reeling in the mud, he begged some of the men to carry him ; they refused. He found himself caught into the moving tide and borne forward. Then came the panic, the stampede, and the final outburst on the further side of the city.

He staggered forward a few paces, spun round, spread his little arms in the gathering darkness, and fell prone against the city walls.

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Gaspard ran through the night with the dead boy in his arms. The pilgrims were sitting or lying on the ground, many of them weeping. The darkness seemed to be thick with multitudinous groups and clumps of stationary humanity. No one was moving save Gaspard, but the sound of voices filled the air. In the distance a dim lantern was burning at a height of three or four feet from the ground. He made his way in that direction.

Stephen sat in the cart, moody and silent. Hildebert was lying at his feet. The bodyguard of priests and monks bivouacked on the ground, talking excitedly. The yellow light of the lantern revealed the mud upon the wheels and sides of the heavy vehicle ; but it threw the brightest of its rays on the cloaked figure of Stephen with the favourite disciple at his feet.

It did not now enter the calculations of Gaspard to seek Hildebert's release from this wild crusade.

He did not think of his home, of his ambition, of Isabel, of himself. With one thing only was his soul concerned, and that was the dead child in his arms.

Before any of the priests could prevent him, he had reached the side of the cart and laid the body of Felix close to the hand of Stephen which bore the massive ring. Stephen started violently and withdrew his hand. Hildebert got upon his knees and faced towards Gaspard. Several of the priests rose from the ground and came pressing to the cart.

‘Look at this child, Stephen of Cloyes!’ cried Gaspard in a voice that rang with indignation and was deep with woe. ‘Yesterday he had health and strength; he saw with his eyes, he heard with his ears; where he would go his feet could take him; what he would take, his hands could reach. Look at him now! He lived, as you are living at this hour. The heart beat in his breast. The blood ran through his veins. There was light in his eyes, sound on his lips, bloom on his cheeks. He was a living, breathing, moving creature. Look at him now! Why does he lie so quiet? Why are the eyes so fixed, the lips so silent, the little hands so still? *He is dead.* The life has vanished from him. He is like a stone on the road, like the floor of this cart on which you both lie, the living and the dead. And why is he dead, he who yesterday had life like you? Shall I speak? Dare you hear? Shepherd,

the child is dead, the little life is crushed and broken and killed, because of you ! Look at him, Stephen of Cloyes !—look at your victim ! Look in those eyes that see nothing, and answer me. Was it God's Will that thus this little life should end ? Was it God's Will that he should hunger and thirst, should stumble and fall, should cry in vain to his mother, should die in the rain and the night ? Who stole him from his mother's arms ? You. Who dragged him on a fruitless march ? You. Who left him breadless when he hungered and waterless when he thirsted ? You. Who brought him through a driving rain to a city that denied him food and rest ? You. Who left him friendless and deserted in the hour of death ? Look on his face. He was like an angel. Look in his eyes. They thought each village was Jerusalem. You called him, and he followed. He stumbled, and you did not hold him. He fell, and you did not lift him up. He died, and your back was turned upon him.'

Stephen did not utter a word or attempt an interruption. He maintained his position and met the challenge of Gaspard's gaze with a sullen composure. Nevertheless the swarthy cheeks were dark with uneasiness and in the frowning eyes was a look deeper than vexation.

The priests crowded about Gaspard. One of them sharply bade him take the dead child away, others stretched their arms over the cart to lift out the

little corpse. Hildebert, who had listened with a terrible fascination to his brother's invective, started to his feet.

'It is glorious,' he cried, with face transfigured, his hand clutched at the little red cross on his breast, 'to die for God! Yes, that is the glorious end of life—to die for God! Here or in the Holy City, what matters it? You are sad, Gaspard, because he is dead. But think, think! *He is not sad.* No! he stands in heaven among the shining host, his eyes lifted to Christ, his face glad with the kisses of the angels. And from heaven he will see us march through the sea, and watch us go up against the Saracens, and behold the gates of Jerusalem open to receive us. It is only his body that lies cold and still. His soul is with God. He is happy, he is happy, I know he is happy!'

The priests pressed between Gaspard and the cart.

'One word from you, Stephen of Cloyes!' he cried in a loud voice.

The shepherd boy regarded him.

'Are you sure, are you quite sure,' cried Gaspard, 'that God is with you still?'

The priests forced him back.

'Dare you answer that question?' cried Gaspard.

The priests drove him back.

'Your answer!' cried Gaspard.

By the light of the lantern he saw that Stephen's brows grew dark.

‘The millstone!—remember the millstone!’ called Gaspard.

And then he thrust the priests aside, turned on his heel, and went back through the night to his sister and his horse.

CHAPTER XVII

FALAISE REALLY BELIEVES

THE death of Felix made a profound effect upon Gaspard. He seemed to see in it the will of an evil destiny. No longer did he think of home or anticipate an immediate end to this madness of a children's crusade. For two days he spoke to no one, leaving the priest to look after Crusader, avoiding Hildebert and Falaise, walking always by himself at some little distance from the procession, his head bent, his eyes fixed upon the ground.

It was a sandy country through which the pilgrimage was now passing, and from a sky vacant of clouds and vibrating with heat the sun poured its blinding rays upon the unsheltered road that was like an oven door. Many children fell by the wayside and died in all the agonies of thirst. Several merchants, who had ridden thus far in the hope of seeing miracles, turned the heads of their mules and horses, and rode back with different notions of religion. A few of the robbers struck across country to towns and cities on the further side of a forest.

One day, as Gaspard was walking solitarily and

sad, the fat priest came to his side and said to him, 'I am becoming like you, my son; my faith is dwindling.'

Gaspard answered: 'But the thing will go on.'

The children were singing loudly and excitedly in spite of the great heat. Some of the priests were shouting words of Scripture and calling on God to do great miracles. There was a feeling of madness in the air.

'A few days ago my faith was strong enough to keep your sister on the road,' said the priest; 'but now she has sought comfort and strength in another quarter.'

Gaspard looked up.

'I did not think she was so earnest,' continued the priest; 'I thought she was more of my mind—waiting to see what would happen.'

'Where is she?' asked Gaspard.

The priest pointed ahead. 'Yonder with a crazy disciple, but one younger than me and more to a girl's liking!'

Gaspard's eyes darkened at the sight they saw. Falaise was almost dancing as she walked along, and one of her hands was clasped by a youth who walked at her side, his head raised, his eyes shining, his lips parted as he shouted the battle-song of the Crusade.

While Gaspard looked, the youth turned towards Falaise, and she sprang into his arms, laughing, singing, and waving one of her hands in the air.

The young man kissed her and danced with her in his arms.

The youth was one of those who had early attracted Gaspard's admiration. Apparently he was some eighteen years of age, tall, well grown, and of a noble countenance. The dignity and strength of the young face, however, were at this moment distorted by the wild and ungoverned passion of his fanaticism. Gaspard's blood ran cold at the sight of him.

'What think you of that?' asked the priest, with a laugh. 'I think *my* faith had been stronger if she had fed it on such kisses.'

'Oh, peace!' cried Gaspard. 'You make me sick!' He ground his teeth, and exclaimed bitterly, 'What! is life nothing but a madness and a folly? Was it for such an end as this that earth came forth in power and beauty and the whole vast firmament of God grew bright with majesty? Are we like the beasts of the field, we men with our reasons and our souls?' He turned suddenly on the priest. 'Go back to your flock, and teach them the law of God. Why do you play the vagabond and gipsy here, envious of a girl's kisses and thinking only of your next dinner? Have you no purpose in the world? Are you not charged with a duty? Read the words of Isaiah. Get the great Paul by heart. Man alive, there is work to do in this world. The wheel of life turns. Mankind is in the making.'

It is heaven or hell for you, for me, for all the human race.'

'You are eloquent!' quoth the priest.

'And a fool!' said Gaspard, relapsing into sullen silence.

The priest said: 'Once on a time my heart was like a flaming fire which God Himself had kindled. I used to shout to the skies, *I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord, but——*' He sighed deeply.

'Ah, my son, life is a long road and Time a cripple that lags thereon. For us priests, time wears the shell of tortoise or snail; at first we mount up with wings like eagles, then we run and are not weary, presently we walk and do not faint; but finally we sit down, we stretch the limbs, we close the eyes, and to the buzzing of flies and the humming of bees, we fall asleep. The heart grows tired. The mass loses its mystery. One yawns at the altar. I tell you what God should do. He should perform a miracle once a year to keep up the enthusiasm of the clergy. Then all would be well. But the same things happen, day after day, year after year; and they are dull things. It is not easy.'

'The miracle is always happening,' said Gaspard.

'Where?'

‘Life is a miracle.’

‘A dull miracle!’

‘Only to the blind.’

‘Look at my life, what does it offer me? I marry the youth; I baptise the baby; I bury the dead. So it goes on, from year’s end to year’s end.’

‘But what could you make of that life? Think! If you teach the children of your village to understand the glory of the world, men to wonder at its power, and give to all the true knowledge of life, you bring heaven itself to that corner of the earth. God does not want miracles; He wants work. When you teach a man to be clean, to be honest, to be true, you prepare the way for the Kingdom of Heaven. You yawn at the altar! Well, turn to the reason of man, serve God at that altar, make men worthy to be called the children of God, and your yawns will be fewer.’

‘The reason! Why, that is Satan’s stronghold. My son, you talk with the folly of your years. It is the heart that must be saved, it is the heart that must be given to God.’

‘Do you read with your heart, think with your heart, choose with your heart?’ asked Gaspard. ‘All that is a trick of the tongue, a jest of language. It is the heart that has borne these thousands of poor children from their homes to their undoing. No; we are different from the animals because God has given us a reason. We think. We balance. We

decide. If we do not use our reasons, if we trust blindly to our instincts, we are no better than the beasts. I tell you all the Church's talk of the heart will pass away and become a folly in the world. Men will advance. They will heal disease, they will build great cities, they will invent tools and implements, they will search earth for her secrets and heaven for her mystery. They will grow ! they will be like angels ! they will become gods and the sons of God ! And the Church will fall. Mark my words, Father, the Church will fall.'

Later that same day Gaspard went to Falaise and drew her away from the young man to whom she had so passionately attached herself. The girl's eyes were bright with excitement, her cheeks flamed with feverishness, constantly she laughed and broke into wild singing. It was several minutes before Gaspard could calm her.

'It is unseemly,' he said presently, 'to behave as you have behaved this day.'

'You don't understand, Gaspard.'

'I know what is pure and right and good,' he replied firmly.

'I love him.'

'You are beside yourself and would love fifty others if you had the chance.'

'No ; I love only this one. Listen, I will tell you. When I first came with Hildebert I did not really believe. I only hoped it might be true. Then Father

Henry talked to me, and I became like him ; I only thought of the Crusade as an adventure ; I just wanted to see what would happen. At last I grew tired. I wanted to go home. I was frightened. I was wretched. But when Edmund came to me with food, and sat with me in the twilight, and talked to me of God and miracles and the glory of the Holy Land, oh, then my heart became like a fire, and I believed ! I believed ! I really believed ! It is glorious to believe. Oh, Gaspard, I wish you could believe too ! When one *really* believes it seems all at once that nothing matters, *nothing* ! I am no longer hungry and thirsty, or tired and miserable, or dull and frightened. I no longer want to go home. I no longer doubt what will be the end. No ! I am so, so happy ! I love Edmund with all my heart and soul ; and when we get to Holy Land I am going to be his wife, and we are going to give ourselves to God, and death may come to us but it will not make us sad or sorrowful. We are so happy, Gaspard. We have plighted our troth. We shall love each other for ever and ever.'

A man drew alongside of Falaise. Gaspard looked at him, expecting to see the fanatic Edmund. But it was not Edmund. It was Blackbeard.

'So you are still here !' said the rogue, smiling.

Falaise cowered to Gaspard's side, shrinking from the horrible man with his broken teeth and his shining ear-rings.

‘Got a girl to talk to, as well as a King’s horse to ride, have you?’ laughed Blackbeard. ‘Well, you’re luckier than I am. Never mind, comrade. I promise you one thing. I’ll wager you money on it, too. ’Tis this. Before ever we get to Marseilles I shall be the bigger man of the two. What say you? Will you take the wager?’

‘Did the river teach you nothing, then?’ asked Gaspard scornfully.

Blackbeard’s face grew suddenly fierce. ‘The river? What river?’ he demanded. Then he pretended to recollect. ‘Ah, yes, to be sure. But, comrade, that’s ancient history.’ He laughed uneasily. ‘The river? Well, it washed some of the dirt off my clothes and gave me a cool feeling after the sun. Yes. And you? How liked you the taste of running water? They baptised us in the same flood, didn’t they? A jolly town. Fine fellows in that town. Ah, but there are different towns ahead of us. Wait, comrade. Have patience. The river’s one thing. Cold stone is another. Four walls and a grating; what? Ah, you wait a little.’

He dropped behind, and Gaspard did not turn round to look at him.

‘Who is that man?’ cried Falaise. ‘He frightened me. Gaspard, he is going to do you an injury. Who is he? How have you offended him?’

Gaspard said quietly. ‘He is nothing. Dismiss

him from your mind.' And then, passing his arm through hers, he bent his head, and as they walked together through the twilight, he spoke to her of true love which is calm and deep and quiet, of virtue which is strong and honourable, of chastity which is like the stars of God, and of her father, her mother, her home, of Isabel and the long days ahead.

'I know now,' he concluded, 'that this crusade will go on till we reach the waves. I know that it is hopeless for me to think of getting you and Hildebert to come back before the flood is reached. But, Falaise, on the road thither, walk as your mother's daughter. Be proud, be calm, be steadfast in your soul. As you love God, let there be dignity mixed with your virtue. Suspect yourself. Be watchful of your moods. Question your faith and hold your emotions in a hand of iron.'

She could not understand him. 'Yes, I will, Gaspard; I really will,' she cried, nervously and eagerly. 'But you don't know what it is to believe, really to believe, with the whole heart. You think the sea will not divide; you are sure we shall never get to Holy Land. So you see you can't possibly understand what it is really to believe. I wish you had faith, like Hildebert's and mine. How lovely that would be! But, Gaspard, do be careful of that horrid man with the black beard and the ear-rings. I am sure he means harm to you. And now I must go. Edmund is calling me. Hildebert is still with

Stephen. Good-bye, dear Gaspard, for the present. You understand me now, don't you? I really do believe. I love God. I am so happy.'

She smiled into his eyes, ran to Edmund, and was soon singing the battle-song of the Crusade beside her latest lover.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DARK HOUSE

THEY were approaching a large town.

Nearly three weeks had gone by since Gaspard left his home, and for the greater part of that time he had walked, like the rest of the host. Crusader was still in the ranks, loaded with the most tired and exhausted of the children. Hildebert travelled with Stephen. The fat priest had dropped behind with a company of merry men. Blackbeard had ridden away on a mule. Falaise walked with her lover, only occasionally taking her place on Crusader's back. Gaspard very often carried a child on his shoulders, but he was silent and morose.

Just as the head of the procession was reaching the city, a company of soldiers emerged from the central gateway and took up a position on both sides of the two towers. At first the crusaders expected antagonism, but Stephen's cart was allowed to pass unchallenged, and the head of the procession surged after it, singing the hymns which had cheered them for nearly three hundred miles of their long journey.

Falaise was close to the gateway when she saw

Blackbeard among the soldiers. At once she was aware of danger for Gaspard. She clutched her lover's hand, drew him into the thick of the host, and told him her fears. 'We must warn him,' said Edmund; 'but I fear it is too late.' Quietly they turned round, and made their way as quickly and as secretly as possible backward through the advancing host. Before they came upon Gaspard they encountered the fat priest eagerly shouldering his way through the crowd, his face shining in anticipation of food. Falaise caught his arm, and told him.

'Ah!' cried the fat priest. 'I know what it is. I heard the black-bearded rogue talking with his fellow villains. He stole a mule the other night and rode forward. They are after your brother's horse. Wait a minute. Follow me.' He turned round, forced his way through the crowd, and, after some minutes of this battling, came upon Crusader.

'Off with you, my chickens!' he exclaimed, lifting the children down in a bunch. 'Now,' he cried to Falaise, 'warn your brother; tell him not to claim the horse; tell him to look out for me on the further side of the city two days hence.' He slipped Crusader's bridle off, stowed it under his habit, and then mounted, carefully covering the saddle and stirrup-irons with the ample folds of his robe. 'One of you fellows lead the horse by his forelock,' he cried. 'They won't recognise him without his handsome harness. Here, you on a mule, ride at my

side. Close up the ranks. Laugh and sing. Be merry, I say, be merry! Falaise!' he called after the girl; 'tell your brother to keep well behind, and in the middle of the ranks.'

So they went forward.

As the priest approached the gateway, Blackbeard came forward and peered through the crowd at his horse. He caught but a glimpse of a drooping, shabby head, and quickly changed the direction of his eyes to scrutinise the animals behind. 'There'll be children in the saddle,' he said, 'and the harness is fit for a King; there's no mistaking it.'

The priest laughed with joy as he entered the town.

'Now,' said he to himself, 'for the best inn and the best dinner! After, back I ride to my flock on this solid horseflesh. 'Tis mine by the ruling of Providence and all the dictates of human reason!'

Gaspard had been warned by Falaise. He lowered the child who was on his shoulder, snatched the cap from his head, got on the other side of a heavy man mounted upon a tall mule, and stooping down a little, walked steadily forward to the gateway.

Blackbeard missed him.

With feelings of anger as well as of relief, Gaspard entered the city, and made his way through the dense multitude in the streets. The clergy had come out in force to welcome Stephen of Cloyes. Monas-

teries had thrown open their doors to receive the pilgrims. Merchants and shopkeepers were offering a royal hospitality. The whole town was humming with pleasure, excitement, kindness, and good-humour.

Gaspard could not find Falaise. He strode away by the first side-turning that offered itself, and enquired of a decent citizen the nearest way to an inn. It took him nearly half an hour, so great was the press, to find this hostelry, and when he reached it, the place was so packed with customers that it was impossible to enter.

A strange-looking woman approached Gaspard and spoke to him. 'Are you one of the crusaders, then?' she asked, rather sadly. Her face was extraordinarily sorrowful; her clothes were ragged; she had eyes that were dark with tragedy, and her voice sounded like a ghost's.

'I go with them—yes,' answered Gaspard.

'Where is your cross?'

'I do not wear one.'

'How is that, if you go to Holy Land?'

Gaspard shrugged his shoulders. 'Not all of us wear the red cross,' he replied.

'But you are going to Holy Land?'

'I go as far as the others.'

'And you are hungry? You want food?'

'Yes.'

'Come with me; I will provide for you.'

Gaspard said : ' You are kind, good dame ; but I have money and can afford to pay for my provender. Better if you seek out some of the little children who are near famished and carry neither purse nor wallet.'

She said quietly, ' Come with me,' looked at him for a moment with her large sorrowful eyes, and led the way across the street and up a narrow turning to a house that was shuttered from the ground to the roof.

Gaspard's heart sank at sight of this melancholy dwelling. The woodwork was blistered and rotten. The stone was crumbling to ruin. On the window sills was a thick dust, and in the doorway a litter like a dustbin. He gazed up at the dead house, studied the dark entry, that was like a tomb, and for a moment hesitated to enter. He was conscious of fear.

The woman passed in before him and opened a door at the back which admitted them to a dismal yard. Gaspard looked about him with increasing suspicion. A flight of stairs led from this yard to the upper floor. The woman went to those stairs without looking round, and Gaspard followed. She went up before him, opened a door, passed through a gloomy chamber, and came to another door which was fastened. Here she paused for a moment, fumbling at the lock, then she opened the door and went in. The room was in pitchy darkness.

‘Wait,’ she said in a low voice, ‘while I kindle a lamp.’

‘Why not open the shutters?’ asked Gaspard, peering about him in the thick darkness.

‘Wait,’ she said.

He heard her moving here and there in the gloom. His heart began to beat uneasily. There was something weird in this house. The very air breathed mystery. He became definitely suspicious and alarmed. His eyes strained to see, his ears strained to listen. He stood with his fists clenched, ready to repel attack.

At last she struck fire.

The sound came from the left, a little behind him. He turned quickly and saw the flame with relief. In the midst of the darkness the figure of the woman could be seen stooping over a lamp, the flame gradually revealing her sorrowful face and ragged dress.

Something black and covered was lying on the floor at her feet. It was like a human body.

CHAPTER XIX

WOUNDED

THE woman came to Gaspard, carrying the lamp, and led the way to the further side of the room. A table stood near the wall. On this table were the remains of a meal—black bread, fruit, a dish of meat, and some bottles of wine. The woman invited Gaspard to sit and eat.

‘ Dame,’ said he, ‘ why do you keep the shutters closed, and waste oil in the midst of sunlight ? ’

‘ No harm will come to you,’ she answered ; ‘ eat and drink, pilgrim ; the time is short.’

He sat down at the table with his back to the wall, and began to eat.

‘ When you get to Holy Land,’ said the woman, seating herself on a bench opposite to him, ‘ will you think of this meal in my dark house and mention my name in your prayers ? ’

‘ What is your name ? ’

‘ Isabeau.’

Gaspard started. ‘ I know one who is called Isabel ; her name is often in my prayers and oftener in my thoughts.’

The woman leaned her elbows on the table, studied Gaspard's face for a long time, and seemed to pierce his very soul with her eyes of woe.

'I would have you go to Gethsemane,' she said slowly, 'and kneel there on the ground and say these words: "*Jesus, Thou Man of Sorrows, take pity on Isabeau of the dark house.*" And I would have you go to Calvary and kneel there on the ground, and say: "*Jesus, Thou Lamb of God, take pity on Isabeau of the dark house.*" And at the tomb where He was laid: "*Jesus, Thou Christ of the Living God, take pity on Isabeau of the dark house.*" Those three prayers, at those three places. Will you do that, in memory of this meal?'

Gaspard, who could not remove his eyes from her gaze, said quietly, 'Tell me, dame, what ails thee?'

'Will you do what I ask?'

'If I get to Holy Land—yes.'

'You will not forget?'

'No.'

She rose from the bench. 'It is time you were going. To wait longer is not safe.' She took his hand. 'Pilgrim, if your heart is pure, God will answer your prayers,' she said solemnly. 'Keep your heart very pure. And remember me in Holy Land.'

They were walking across the room to the door. The black and covered thing that was like a human

body caught Gaspard's eyes. He stopped and pointed to it. 'What is that there that lies so still?' he demanded.

The woman said, 'It is one of them,' and continued on her way.

'What do you mean?' asked Gaspard, still standing.

She turned and looked at him. 'Forget,' she said, 'all that you have seen here, and ask me no questions. Remember only the three prayers in Holy Land. Come, pilgrim; for you the sun shines and the day is beautiful. For me it is always the dark house. Come, it is unwise to tarry.'

As she turned to go forward something impelled Gaspard to seek an answer to his question. He strode quickly across the room, reached the covered thing on the floor, and was just about to pluck the dark cloth from it, when steps were heard hurrying across the next room.

The woman sprang towards him as he stood upright over the mystery. At the same moment the door opened.

Blackbeard entered the room.

An oath, half of rage and half of joy, broke from the scoundrel's lips. He looked from Gaspard to the woman, from the woman to Gaspard, and then hastily and fearfully scanned the covered thing at their feet. This in a moment. Then, closing the door swiftly behind him, he plucked out his dagger.

‘At last!’ he said, between his broken teeth.

In the darkened room, with its dim light, he looked horrible, repulsive, terrible, standing there at the closed door with his drawn dagger.

‘How you come here only the Fiend knows!’ said Blackbeard. He laughed. ‘My coy-duck never served me better. I meant you for a prison. Now you shall die.’

The woman cried in a low, whimpering voice, ‘Have mercy! He is but a poor pilgrim. He has eaten a little bread. He goes to Holy Land. Do him no harm.’ She placed herself in front of Gaspard, and spread out her arms. ‘Let him go,’ she cried. ‘He knows nothing. I have told him naught. He has eaten a little food, and he has promised to pray for me.’

Blackbeard did not take his eyes from Gaspard’s face. ‘Pray for you! The prayers of a horse-thief! Stand on one side, whimperer; stand on one side,’ he said savagely to the woman.

She seemed to grow suddenly bold. ‘No! No! I will not!’ she cried in a louder voice.

Blackbeard was amazed by her courage. ‘What!’ cried he ferociously, taking his eyes from Gaspard. ‘Will you withstand me? Will you disobey? Get out of the way.’

‘Yes, I *will* disobey you!’ answered the woman. ‘Yes, even if you kill me.’

Gaspard, unseen by Blackbeard, had taken a

surgeon's knife from his doublet. He stood in the dark corner, watching his enemy with eyes that did not flinch.

'Do you know who this boy is?' demanded Blackbeard, blazing at her with rage.

'I have borne enough!' almost shouted the woman. 'Too long I have been afraid. I will hold my peace no longer.'

'He is my enemy!' cried Blackbeard. 'He is the man I went to seek to-day. He escaped me; he fooled me with the soldiers. That is one score. And I owe him another. Get out of my path, woman. This man is my enemy. I tell you his hour has come.'

'You leave me to starve,' said the woman, 'you desert me, you cast me off for weeks, for months——'

'Get out of my way!' cried Blackbeard, approaching.

'And then you return, you come back to me—why? To make me a partner in your crimes!'

'Out of my way.'

'I am scarlet with the blood you have shed; my soul is dragged to hell by your crimes. No! I will not keep silence. Kill me! Kill me! I will bear no more.'

She moved towards Blackbeard, her arms still spread. Although he did not take his gaze from Blackbeard's eyes, Gaspard was aware of the tall,

dark woman moving from the darkness into the yellow light of the lamp, with her arms spread. 'Strike!' she cried. 'Strike! Add my body to his on the floor. And then kill the youth. That will be three—three in one day! Kill us, murderer, kill us. God will avenge!'

Blackbeard hurled her ferociously across the room. He was about to spring on Gaspard when, before he could properly recover his balance, Gaspard leaped at him like a tiger. The boy's spring was so sudden and swift that Blackbeard reeled, toppled, and fell heavily to the ground. But on the ground he recovered his senses, and grasping his dagger in a firm hand, he struck at Gaspard's breast.

The point pierced the flesh but stopped at the ribs.

Gaspard got a knee across the scoundrel's arm, and held it prisoner. Then, with his right hand, he lifted his surgeon's knife and, in his rage, would surely have killed the villain then and there, but for the woman. She rushed upon him, caught his wrist in her two hands, and held it firm.

'Keep your soul pure!' she cried in a breathless voice of agony and fear.

'Pull him off me!' called Blackbeard, with an oath, writhing on the ground.

'You have promised me. The three prayers. Keep your soul pure.'

Gaspard was almost overthrown between them.

‘Do not shed blood,’ cried the woman in Gaspard’s ear. ‘Wait! Hold him there. I will come to you quickly.’

‘Open the shutters! Cry murder from the windows!’ said Gaspard, in gasps.

‘No! Wait!’ said the woman.

She went from the room.

Blackbeard lay still, pinioned by Gaspard.

The two men gazed at each other, both breathing hard, the teeth clenched, the eyes flashing with excitement. The lamp on the distant table threw but a dim light on their strained faces and their heaving bodies.

The woman returned quickly with a rope. She spoke not a word, but kneeling at Blackbeard’s side, began to pass the rope under his neck and round his body, binding him with a cunning skill that amazed Gaspard. At first he struggled furiously, but presently lay still. When the man’s arms and hands were safely pinioned, Gaspard got up and held his feet while the woman continued her silent work. Blackbeard made no effort to escape.

‘You taught me the trick of this,’ said the woman at last, looking into Blackbeard’s eyes. ‘Move, and you strangle yourself! Struggle, and you go to God’s judgment! Ah, do you not fear? How many souls have you hurled into the other

world? How many men, women, and little children have you murdered? And their blood is on my soul. I am as guilty as you. Last night I saw you kill poor yonder man, and to-day I should have helped you destroy the body. But God shook my soul in the night. I looked into the abyss of hell. I saw murderers in the flames. Oh, you have made me like them. Once I was pure, once I was innocent. It was you who lured me away, it was you who ruined me, it was you who made me a partner in your crimes. And you have beaten me, stabbed me, starved me, deserted me. I have lived in this dark house for years, till my soul is as dark and guilty as its walls. But now it is over. I will not lie here any more, waiting for you in fear and trembling, starving and deserted till you come to feed me and beat me and make me help you in your crimes. It is over at last. The long hell of my life. God has warned me.'

She rose up and caught Gaspard's hand. 'Come,' she said, dragging him to the door.

'Wait a moment,' he said.

He bent over Blackbeard, lifted him carefully, and dragged him to the wall. There he propped him up, and moved to the covered body on the floor. Reverently he removed the dark cloth, and looked at the dead man's face. It was the face of a young and handsome man, whose youth and beauty had just begun to be marred by depravity and sin.

Evidently Blackbeard had lured him, drunk, to this dark house, and made him an easy victim of his dagger.

Gaspard lifted the dead body and placed it beside Blackbeard.

‘Look on this face, till the soldiers come for you,’ he said. ‘Look on it, and consider what you will say to God in a day or two’s time.’

He went to the table and drew it to the centre of the room, so that the lamp shone full upon Blackbeard and the murdered man.

‘Now, villain, till the lamp dies, look at your victim. And when darkness comes, *think of death* and judgment.’

He became suddenly faint and dizzy. Something warm moved at his side. He clapped his hand there, looked at it, and saw blood. Then he moved to the door, like a man in a dream.

As he joined the woman, and as they were passing through the doorway, Blackbeard burst into a roar of laughter.

Gaspard stopped, but the woman dragged him forward. ‘Come,’ she said; ‘we have work to do.’

They were at the bottom of the stairs, when they heard Blackbeard’s voice shouting at its loudest from the room above :

‘Murder ! Murder ! Stop them ! Stop the murderers !’

Gaspard lurched against the wall, and spread his hands. At that moment his legs gave way under him. 'I am fainting,' he murmured, and fell backward into the woman's arms.

CHAPTER XX

THE SEA

WHEN Gaspard opened his eyes he found himself alone. His brain was perfectly clear. He remembered everything. Quite rationally he looked about the place to see where he was, and even examined his side with a calm and professional curiosity. Then he rose to his feet.

He was in the yard of the dark house, close to the stairs. His wound had been bathed and a roll of clean linen was bound about his body. He felt for his miniature and instruments ; they were safe in his doublet. He listened to hear any sounds from above, and then moved towards the passage which led to the street.

The door opened as he entered this passage, and the strange woman, Isabeau of the dark house, made her appearance. She seemed both surprised and glad to behold him so well.

‘There is nothing to fear,’ she assured him. ‘I went back to the room and gagged my husband ; then I came and dressed your wound—it is not a serious one ; and afterwards I went into the street

to bring some of your friends. They are going to stay the night in the town, so that you have plenty of time. The monks will receive you at their monastery. A party of crusaders are now in the street waiting for you.'

Gaspard said: 'And what becomes of you?'

'That is nothing,' she answered.

She did not tell him the determination at which she had arrived. For a few minutes she had dreamed of going to Holy Land herself, but when Blackbeard called 'Murder,' and when Gaspard fainted, she saw her duty in another light. Blackbeard, she knew well, would lie away her life and Gaspard's too; he would swear that they had murdered the man upstairs and that when he interfered to save the youth, Isabeau and Gaspard had made him a prisoner. This threatened Gaspard. She alone could save him. And so she had made up her mind to act at once, to get Gaspard safely away, and then go to the authorities and give herself up as the accomplice of Blackbeard. Only thus could she save him. She was tired of her life. Now that Gaspard had promised to pray for her in Holy Land she was content to die.

So she helped Gaspard from the house, gave him into the hands of some crusaders outside, and then went quietly to her doom. If Gaspard had known that she was going to the rack, the thumbscrew, and the faggot, he would not have walked so

cheerfully away from the horror of the dark house.

On the following day he was out early in quest of Crusader. He wanted to find either Falaise or the fat priest. He walked hither and thither, making enquiries of those he knew, but without result. When the procession set out for the town Gaspard was still without knowledge of his horse or his sister.

A gale was blowing, and into the teeth of this gale moved the great pilgrimage. Many new children had joined it. A considerable number of merchants and priests swelled the ranks. Marseilles was not far off, and the chance of seeing a great miracle performed had drawn thousands of people from the town and countryside. Stephen in his cart was no longer depressed. The incense of flattery had ascended to his brain. Bishops had kneeled to him. The populace had pressed about him to touch his robe. Women had filled his cart with flowers. Hildebert was no longer necessary. A priest had suggested that the great Stephen should be alone in his glory and honour.

So Hildebert came back to his place in the ranks.

The little boy's face was wonderfully beautiful. He had lived at Stephen's side for many days. He had heard the great story of the call. The enthusiasm of his own soul had become heightened by the marvels of this tale.

He saw Gaspard and came to his side eagerly, taking his hand.

‘Where is Falaise?’ asked Gaspard.

‘I do not know; but, Gaspard, I want to tell you——’

‘Have you seen my horse?’

‘No; but, dear Gaspard, I have so much to tell you. What do you think? Stephen has told me everything!’

The wind blew in their faces. There was a noise all about them of rustling cloaks. Clouds of fine sand were driven at them by the great wind; the bellow of the gale in their ears and the sting of the dust in their eyes made talking difficult. But as they stumbled on, with heads bent and eyes half closed, Hildebert told Gaspard the story of Stephen, breathlessly and in gasps, lifting up his voice almost to a shout because of the wind that drove every sound but its own roar over their shoulders, with the sand that blinded them.

Gaspard felt the little hot hand of his brother squeezing and moving in his hand as the shouted words whipped past his ears.

He was not interested by the story. The poor man who had come to Stephen on the hill at Cloyes, and who had charged him with this mission of a Children’s Crusade, was not for Gaspard, as he was for Stephen and Hildebert, an apparition of the Lord Himself. And so everything that followed

from that mysterious appearance had no meaning, no reality, no consecration for the rational mind of Gaspard. He said to himself, 'This Stephen is a madman; he has brooded on religion; he has dreamed of crusades; and the man who came to him was a phantom of his own brain.' While Hildebert poured out his wonderful story Gaspard was busy with his own reflections. And the wind seemed to make nonsense of miracles and dreams and crusades to Holy Land.

The day passed, and night came. They slept in the open, and in their sleep were drenched by a vigorous rain. Gaspard woke to find Hildebert nestling into his side, and not nearly so wet as himself.

The sun was shining from a cloudy sky; the wide landscape twinkled and pulsed with innumerable moisture; there was a pleasant freshness in the wind which was still blowing hard, but now with cheerfulness rather than malignity.

Gaspard disengaged himself from the embrace of Hildebert, and stretching his stiff limbs, got upon his feet, and started off to explore the procession. He found no trace of the fat priest or Crusader. Towards the end of his enquiries, however, he came upon Falaise and went to her side. She was sharing some food with Edmund.

Before the procession started the family was united once again, Hildebert walking between

Gaspard and Falaise, with the faithful Edmund singing at the side of the rejoicing girl. And thus they continued till the end of the great march was reached, and the roofs and towers of Marseilles, with the new church of Notre Dame just a-building on the hill-top, came into view. But Crusader had disappeared.

It was not with the wild enthusiasm of the priests and children that Gaspard hailed this sight of Marseilles, but his heart was nevertheless stirred by a profound feeling of thankfulness. For them it was the beginning of the miracle ; for him the end of a folly. They shouted at the prospect of divided waves and a clear road of God to Jerusalem ; he thought of the road home, and Isabel, and his work as a man of science.

He was troubled by the disappearance of Crusader, and considered whether he had money enough to buy three horses, so that he and Hildebert and Falaise might push home as soon as possible. It was not his intention to walk home if he could possibly help it ; every day was precious, precious beyond the power of words to express ; it was not only that he feared the Count's displeasure, not only that he dreaded what that august master would be saying of him, but that he himself longed with a deep and earnest desire to be back at his sensible work.

Marseilles was too big a town to excite itself

unduly over the arrival of these pilgrims. Numbers of people turned out in the streets with genuine enthusiasm, numbers regarded the children with an amused curiosity, but still greater numbers went on with their daily traffic, neither turning the head nor asking a question.

The enthusiasm was among the children themselves. Nothing can describe the wonder and the rapture of those transports as the host of thirty thousand entered the gates of Marseilles and passed through the narrow streets shouting their hymns, lifting their swords and spears, waving their banners, and almost running in their desire to behold the miracle of the sea.

The pressure of those behind became almost like a panic. The order of the ranks was completely broken. Priests, monks, merchants, and roguish camp-followers pushed their way through the pressing children, or doubled down side streets in their haste to be first at the seashore.

God was to do a mighty work.

‘Now shall the earth behold the glory of the Lord!’ shouted a thin old priest, and he forced his elbows into the faces of children and hurled himself through the crowd, cursing those who obstructed his way.

Hildebert was silent with awe. His large eyes appeared to grow bigger, his cheeks were pale, he walked very peacefully. Falaise and Edmund were

singing, but he was silent. They were pressing forward, but he was content to hold Gaspard's hand and to go at his pace. Gaspard looked down at him and was conscious of pity, pity that was like a stab at his heart.

'Almost I could wish, Hildebert,' he said tenderly, 'that the sea would part, if only for you.'

'God's Will be done,' said Hildebert, without looking at him. 'I believe in God. I am not afraid.'

In a dense mass the procession moved with a wild disorder through the tortuous dark streets. Stephen's cart, surrounded by priests, was out of sight; as far as Gaspard's eyes could see there was a thick crowd of people ahead of him, some riding, some waving spears and banners, all of them struggling to improve their places and get quickly to the sea. He glanced backward, and the same sight met his gaze.

Presently, as if a voice had spoken simultaneously at every ear in that host of surging people, the procession checked—checked visibly and distinctly and became silent. The hymns died on the air. The banners were lowered. The pressure ceased.

'The sea has not divided!' was murmured from the head of the procession to the last units straggling far behind.

None could explain how it happened. Quietly, mournfully, whisperingly, the host of children went

forward through the dark streets *knowing* that the miracle had not occurred.

It is impossible to describe the effect of this knowledge. It was not only the sudden cessation of song and eagerness that made it so terrible ; it was the change in the faces of the children. As if a sponge had passed over all those happy and excited little faces, the host presented, in an instant, the aspect of disillusion and despair—children's disillusion ; children's despair. It was a heart-breaking sight.

Falaise gripped Edmund's hand, and looked with terror into his eyes. ' Shall we have to go back ? ' she whispered. He said, ' It may not be true.' She came closer to him, ' We shall have to go back ! All the way back ! I am afraid.' Hildebert heard the last words. He turned to her and said, ' Do you doubt the power of God ? Have faith. He will not desert us. Are we not His little children ? '

They emerged at last from the narrow street, and came into view of the sea.

It was one of those perfectly beautiful days when the earth, the sky, and the ocean appear to be rejoicing together at the departure of storm. The immense dome of blue sky was piled and spread with continents of languid moving clouds as white, as radiant, and as pure as mountain snow. The deeper blue of the great heaving sea was broken and spaced with foam—white shimmering foam which ran

along the tops of shining waves and tossed a smoke of silver spindrift to the wind. The orange-coloured cliffs shone like walls of brass in the morning sun. There was a gladness in the green of the grass, a splendour of rejoicing in the autumn banners of the trees. And the wind was vigorous, but warm and kind; the sea was stormy, but happy and proud-hearted; the heavens were in commotion, but without menace or depression.

The children spread out in a mighty confusion on the seashore. By far the greater number of them saw the ocean for the first time, and the sight seemed to assuage the bitterness of their disenchantment. Some of them actually ran laughing and clapping their hands down to the edge of the waves. A few knelt on the shore and prayed aloud, lifting their faces, which were transfigured with enthusiasm, to the smiling sky. A few took up their battle-hymn and shouted its music to the clangour of the sea.

Hildebert was carried off his feet with joy and passionate faith. He began to dance, striking his hands together, and gazing towards the mist of the horizon.

‘Oh, it will happen! The miracle will happen!’ he cried excitedly. It seemed to him that God was greater than he had ever imagined. Stephen would pray, and presently these huge toppling waves would drive asunder, would pile themselves up in

mighty banks on either side, and then the children, God's children, would pass over to Holy Land, singing their hymn.

What was the effect made upon Gaspard by this tumultuous and indifferent sea, which filled the air with a music he had never heard before and spread before his gaze an idea of strength which he had never yet imagined? He stood in the midst of the children, conscious of elation and loneliness, conscious of joy in the sea, of answering exultation to the rapture of the main, but aware of solitude, an appalling solitude in his soul. Yes, the sea was magnificent and glorious; no words could sound the true praises of its majesty and power; but how small a thing was man, how insignificant and weak, how separate and solitary in the midst of this enormous universe!

'Hildebert!' he said, stooping to his brother; 'as sure as there is a Living God, the creator and maker of all this mighty world, as sure as there is such a One, *this sea will never part*. Make up your mind. Prepare your soul for the shock. As sure as God lives, this sea will flow for ever.'

'Oh no, oh no!' cried Hildebert. 'You do not know how great He is. You have forgotten what He did for Israel. Stephen will pray, and the waves will divide asunder. We must have faith. God will perform a miracle. I *know* it, I *know* it, I *know* it!'

Gaspard waited a moment and then said to him, 'Suppose the miracle does *not* occur?'

'But it will!'

'Suppose, however, that it does not?'

'I cannot!'

'Well, listen to me; it is possible that the sea will not divide. If it does not divide, we shall have to go back. To walk would be terrible. You would die on the road. Now, listen. I have money. I can buy horses. But if I delay till everybody here is seeking to buy, my money will not procure us even a single mule. It is well therefore that I go now; at once. Will you come with me? or will you promise me to remain in this spot with Falaise till I return?'

'The sea *will* divide. You do not really believe in God or you would know that it *must* divide. Why, our Lord has promised Stephen! How *can* you doubt? Stephen told me. Our Lord said to him: *The sea will divide, and you will go over to Holy Land like the Israelites of old.* Do you think that He will promise and not perform?'

Gaspard laid a hand on his shoulder. 'Look at this sea!' he said angrily, impatiently. 'Look at it! Do you think it will stand still when Stephen bids it?' He laughed scornfully. 'You must be mad. Heavens, child, look at it, look at it! Don't you *feel* it is eternal? I tell you the sea will not divide. It will flow like this for ever and ever, till the end

of the world. You talk about God's Will! Here it is—visible to your eyes—this great flowing sea, which obeys His word and for ever will obey it. Not Stephen's will, but God's!

Hildebert answered less confidently, 'Stephen told me what our Lord said to him. I am sure there will be a miracle.'

'Well, will you promise me not to move from here till I return?'

'Yes.'

'You and Falaise?'

'Yes.'

He went to Falaise, spoke to her, and then turned away from the sea.

As he struggled through the crowd towards the streets of the city, he caught sight of Stephen's purple robe in the midst of a bevy of priests and monks. The shepherd boy was standing on a rock at some little distance from the actual waves, his arms folded slackly over his breast, one hand raised to his mouth, his eyes frowning at the sea.

Gaspard stopped for a moment and regarded him. Then he laughed bitterly, and went forward again, well pleased and satisfied.

'Beaten!' he said to himself; 'beaten! very handsomely beaten! And thank God for it!'

CHAPTER XXI

SHIPS OF GOD

MARSEILLES gradually woke up to the fact of this extraordinary crusade. A host of thirty thousand hungry people, most of them helpless and penniless children, proved an inconvenient addition to the city's population. Tradesmen became apprehensive ; merchants visited the town authorities ; soldiers were moved here and there to prevent riots.

The city was divided in its views. Many of the clergy who still cherished in their hearts the ideals of the Christian religion rejoiced in the presence of these consecrated children and came in the most stately procession to the seashore, confident of a miracle. Others, monks and clergy alike, who regarded their religion merely as a superstition, and lived as wicked and violent lives as the worst rascals in the country, made open mock of the Crusade.

As for the lay population, some looked upon this venture with reverence and hope, while others

frankly and openly sided with the unbelieving clergy in laughing its pretensions to scorn. There was one point of view only on which they were all agreed, to wit, that if the crusaders demanded food it was reasonable for them first to produce the purchasing money. One or two of the monasteries opened their doors and offered hospitality; here and there a baker bestowed loaves and cakes in charity; but, for the most part, the city shook its head, and stood guard over its merchandise.

The shore was soon thronged by a tremendous crowd of people. Sailors of all nations, singers and actors, cut-throats, pickpockets, kidnappers, and highwaymen, swelled the ranks of this enormous multitude. The air was filled with the most diverse sounds—oaths, blasphemies, and atrocious merriment clashing with the pure hymns of the children, the prayers of the priests, and the songs of the troubadours. Ghoulish women enticed the fairest of the children to their evil homes; villainous men picked out the best dressed of the children and led them away with promises of food. Confusion reigned from one end of the shore to the other.

When Gaspard returned from his business in the town, it took him a full hour to reach the side of Hildebert. He found the boy resisting the appeal of a man to go with him into the town for food, and was just in time to drive off an old woman

who was on the very point of carrying off Falaise to her den of infamy.

‘I have bought three horses,’ he said to his brother and sister. ‘They are strong and in good condition. It is well that we start at once. My money is disappearing. I possess just enough, and only just enough, to procure food for ourselves on the way home. Let us extricate ourselves from this mob, and make a start before sunset.’

Falaise was half-willing to go, but wished first of all to see Edmund. Hildebert, however, refused to depart.

‘You can go,’ he said; ‘you and Falaise; but I shall remain. God is trying our faith. He only wants those who believe. When the faithless have departed, when only the true remain, He will divide the waters.’

Gaspard was vexed and angered by this reply.

‘If you wait a thousand years,’ he said fiercely, ‘the waves will still be a-breaking on this shore. What is the use? God has not deceived you: it is you who have deceived yourself. You believe in a God that does not exist. The God who does exist pities you, and tells you to use your reason. He has given you that reason to use. Look at this great sea! Employ your reason and look at it with the eyes of understanding—you know it will never disobey God’s law!’

But Hildebert stood firm.

For three days they waited in Marseilles, these unhappy and almost disenchanted children. Some cursed God aloud in the streets, and either started to go home or, in a frightful collapse of despair, willingly surrendered themselves to the villainy of the dark slums and secret alleys. Others remained on their knees for hours and hours on the seashore, praying for the miracle. Edmund had disappeared, and Falaise was losing faith. The crowd gradually thinned. A few priests, a few scoundrels, continued to move among the children; but most of the citizens returned from this unprofitable and now rather tedious excitement to the business of their daily lives. The despairing crusaders were almost left alone.

Gaspard said to himself: 'I must wait a little longer. A week at the most will make an end of it. If their eyes are not opened by that time, hunger at any rate will drive them home. It cannot be more than a week.'

He was troubled about money. Every day he had to pay for the keep and stabling of his three horses and every day he had to provide food for the family—food which had swiftly risen, with this advent of thirty thousand human beings, to almost famine prices.

One day as he came to the shore from looking after his horses, he was amazed to find all the

children shouting with joy and filling heaven with their hymns of victory. Instinctively he looked at the sea as if he expected the miracle, but at the same moment he laughed mockingly at himself for this foolish thought. The sea was turbulent, inclined to anger, and a great wind from the land was in wrathful conflict with the advancing waves.

He hurried to Hildebert.

The little boy almost flung himself into Gaspard's arms. 'The miracle! The miracle!' he cried ecstatically.

'The miracle!'

'Yes, the miracle! God has answered our prayers. It is settled, Gaspard, it is settled! I knew it would be. We only had to wait. God was trying our faith. I told you it was so.'

'What miracle? Look at the sea! Are you mad?'

'God has made another way for us,' answered Hildebert. 'We are not to march to Holy Land. *We are to sail!* Think! He knows how tired we are. He has seen how we suffered on the march hither. He has had compassion on us. Angels have appeared to Stephen. God has provided ships for us. We sail to-morrow. To-morrow, to-morrow, to-morrow! Oh, Gaspard, I told you God would hear our prayers. To-morrow we shall start—for *Holy Land!*'

‘Where are these ships?’ asked Gaspard with a sinking heart.

Hildebert pointed excitedly to the harbour. ‘There are seven of them. Great tall ships with spreading sails! There will be room for all of us—all of those who are faithful. We shall *sail* to Holy Land—blown by the winds of Heaven!’

‘Where comes the money to pay for these ships?’

‘Money! They are ships of God!’

‘Nonsense! Who pays for these ships?’

‘You won’t believe! I tell you they are sent to us by God Himself. Ask Falaise, ask Stephen, ask anyone. They really are, Gaspard. No money will be paid. No money is wanted. Only faith—faith in the great God!’

Gaspard caught the arm of a priest who was passing at that moment. ‘Father,’ he said respectfully, ‘will you tell me the truth of this new tale, this tale of the ships?’

‘It is quite simple,’ answered the priest, studying his face with interest. ‘Our Blessed Lord has moved the hearts of certain pious traders in this town, and they have placed at the disposal of Stephen seven goodly and well-formed ships that ply to Holy Land. In such ways does God, our heavenly Father, delight to do His miracles.’

Hildebert seized the priest’s hand, and held it, as he exclaimed, ‘God knew—didn’t He, Father?—

that we should be tired if we marched at the bottom of the sea all the way to Holy Land. That is why He sent the ships. Isn't it? He knew we should be so tired.'

The priest stooped and kissed the little boy's forehead. Then he turned to Gaspard. 'My son,' he said gently, regarding the troubled face of Gaspard with compassion, 'listen, I entreat you, to the words of this child, who is so like an angel; for—*of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.*'

The sky seemed to crash about Gaspard's head and the ground to go from under him. He closed his eyes for a moment, breathing hard, and then turned aside to cover his emotion.

'I am lost,' he said to himself. 'This is the end of my life. All my hopes, all my dreams, the whole of my love. Yes, this is the end. I shall never see France again.'

A sudden tempest of anger swept through his soul. He swung round, bent flashing eyes on the priest, caught Hildebert's arm with his hand, and called God to witness that they were cheating themselves and would surely break their hearts.

At the same moment he was conscious of an almost irresistible impulse to abandon his brother. Isabel called him, science called him, ambition, common sense, and all the joys and hopes of his burning youth, called him to return. What! to fling away his life?—to go to the butchery of Moslem spears

on the trading ships of these foolish pious merchants?—to leave home for ever, hope for ever, love for ever, life for ever?—to go to absolute and certain death with a pack of crazy children?—just because he had given his word to his mother!

Thus far he had come, bitterly and unwillingly enough, certain that the sea would turn his brother back. But now the madness was to embark afresh. There was to be no end now, save only death. Everything was gone now. The last hope, the last hope! It was as if hell had got him into its hold, and had fastened all its flaming doors.

The priest said to him, 'If you do not believe, why do you go?'

Gaspard pointed to Hildebert. 'He is my brother. And I—I am his fool.'

'I don't want you to come,' cried Hildebert, 'if you don't believe.'

The priest regarded Gaspard with genuine sympathy. 'I understand,' he said quietly. Then he took hold of Gaspard's arm and, close to his face, said in a low voice, 'But remember the sacred words, *Greater love than this hath no man that he lay down his life for his friends.* There are also those strange words, my brother, *Ye have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you!*'

He made the sign of the cross in parting benediction, and moved hurriedly away.

The three children stood together in silence.

Then Falaise came close to Gaspard, slipped a hand timidly through his arm, nestled closer to his side, and said to him in a low voice, 'Will you help me to find Edmund? I want him to be in our ship.'

CHAPTER XXII

THE STORM

ON the following morning a procession of clergy came down to the harbour and, dividing itself, went on board the seven ships. Prayers were then offered, hymns sung, and the blessing pronounced on each of the vessels. The owners, the captains, and the sailors knelt with the children to receive this valediction of the priests.

Then the clergy and the owners went ashore; cheers were raised by a great crowd on the quay, and with a vast rattling of chains, shouting of orders, blowing of whistles, and a hurricane of fresh cheers from crusaders and spectators, the anchors came up, the sails unfolded themselves, and the great ships moved towards the open sea.

Gaspard watched the receding shore with a clouding grief in his eyes. He was haunted by those words of the priest: *Ye have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you.* He felt that perhaps it was the Will of God that he should be like an iron shield to his brother, that when the hour of massacre arrived he should be there standing before Hildebert and protecting him to the very last from the swords and

spears of murderous Islam ; nevertheless, he could not keep from his heart a feeling of the most exquisite agony and remorse as he saw the land of France withdrawing itself from his gaze.

‘If indeed,’ he reflected, ‘God has chosen me He has chosen one who is unwilling, one whose sacrifice is grudgingly, rebelliously made. I would be home in France. I would be at my work. Ah, would that I were now in Châteauneuf, working and studying, dreaming and achieving, with Isabel for my bride.’

Falaise, too, was unhappy. Edmund had gone, and no one could tell her on which ship, if on any at all, he was making this great journey to Holy Land. Hildebert was for a moment depressed, because he had been separated from Stephen. He leaned against the rail of the ship, and gazed at the nearest vessel, where Stephen could be seen in his purple robe surrounded by young men and children. He was not unhappy, but he wished himself with the Chosen of God.

For three days the vessels sailed within hailing distance of each other, favourable winds filling their sails and a sea not over rough bearing them beneath the smiling heaven. Happy, glad, and confident were the children. On every ship the hymn rang out in treble voices :

Jesus Christ, repair our loss,
Unto us restore Thy cross.

The sailors learned to sing this hymn, and at their work would shout the words to the fresh breeze and to the gracious sky, almost drowning the pretty voices of the children.

On the fourth day the heavens darkened, the wind increased, the sea became passionate and fierce. All that day, with their sails furled, their naked masts and trembling rigging black against the sky, the seven top-heavy, broad-bowed vessels drifted and plunged and rolled in the trough of the waves.

At night the wind had become a tempest. The wretched children, huddled below in utter darkness and almost suffocated by the decks above their heads, could hear the splash of the waters, the roar of the wind, and feel the staggering progress of the ships. But they could not see the blackness of the night, the immense heave of the waves, the reel and trembling of the masts—the wide agony and desolation of the world.

When morning came only five of the ships were visible.

The children learned that two of the finest vessels had struck upon the island known as the Rock of the Recluse, off Sardinia. 'The ships are nothing but splinters,' said one of the sailors to Gaspard; 'and those who sailed in them are nothing but corpses—all the lot, every man jack of them and every girl jilt of them, the whole jolly

lot—corpses!’ He seemed to delight in the disaster.

Hildebert enquired the names of these two ships, eagerly scanning the others that were near enough to be seen. When the sailor told him, he cried out, ‘No; you are wrong! You must be wrong! Stephen’s ship *cannot* be wrecked. He is the Chosen of God.’

The sailor studied him curiously. Then he stooped down to the level of Hildebert’s face and said to him very slowly and meaningly, ‘My son, my pretty pink-faced son, Stephen is a corpse. I don’t care whether he was Chosen or Unchosen. I don’t care whether he had all the angels or all the devils looking after him. If Stephen was aboard either of those two ships, Stephen is a corpse. Now you take that from me. Bite your teeth on it. Chew it. Turn it over on your tongue. And then swallow it, once and for all. *Stephen—is—a—corpse!*’

Hildebert turned away from the man with loathing, and caught hold of Gaspard. ‘He can’t be dead, can he? It’s a mistake, isn’t it?’

The sailor laughed and went off a pace or two. Then he stopped and turned round. ‘Stephen’s a corpse,’ he said cheerfully. ‘I don’t know who Stephen is, but I know *what* he is; I never so much as saw Stephen, but I know where he is to be found by those who want him. Yes. I know that for

certain. Stephen's a corpse. Let everybody know the fact. As sure as fish swim and winds blow and cocks crow, Stephen's a corpse.'

Gaspard looked down on Hildebert's upturned face. 'I am afraid it is true,' he said quietly. 'That man knows what ships have gone down. There's no reason why he should tell us a lie.'

'But, Gaspard, Stephen is Chosen by God! He is to lead us to Holy Land!'

It was too late now to ask Hildebert if he still felt sure of the Divine Will. Gaspard's heart was too full of utter misery for reproach or argument. The die was cast. Nothing could now alter his destiny.

'We cannot tell what will happen to us,' he said, 'but, whatever may be the fate of Stephen, we ourselves are certainly bound for Holy Land.'

Hildebert left him and went in search of Falaise. He wanted someone to tell him with certainty that Stephen was not drowned.

He returned to Gaspard in an hour's time. 'I cannot find Falaise anywhere,' he said desolately, and with a real note of weariness in his voice.

'What is the matter with you?' asked Gaspard.

The little boy turned away his face. He lifted and rested his arms on the rail of the ship, and looked across the vast circle of the sea, his eyes only just a few inches higher than the rail.

Gaspard put an arm round him. 'What is it?'

he asked, bending down to the wind-blown curls of his brother.

‘Everybody——’ began Hildebert.

‘Yes?’

‘——thinks that Stephen is drowned,’ cried the poor little boy. ‘But it *can’t* be true. It simply *can’t* be true, Gaspard.’

Late that afternoon Gaspard searched the ship for Falaise. She was not to be found. He encountered the same sailor who had told him of Stephen’s fate, and asked him if he had seen anywhere a young girl—describing Falaise in a few words, as if unwillingly.

‘There’s such a slip as her with the captain,’ replied the sailor. ‘Fast friends, they are, I tell you! Kissing and cuddling in the cabin all the morning. Why, he must be fond of her, seeing that he gives her the best of his food.’ He noticed Gaspard’s darkening brow. ‘What! is she a flame of yours?’ he enquired, laughing. ‘Well, take advice from me; don’t you interfere with the captain. He’s young. He’s peppery—red peppery. And he fears neither God nor devil!’

Gaspard left him and went to the other end of the ship.

Towards evening Falaise came to the place where he was sitting with Hildebert. Her face was flushed, she smiled self-consciously, her eyes could not encounter the steady gaze of Gaspard. Before she

reached them, she began to say excitedly that she had been in the captain's cabin, and that he had shown her this and that, and was so kind and so interesting and so brave.

When she had finished Hildebert said to her, 'Did he tell you anything about Stephen?'

'About Stephen? No. Why? What do you mean?'

'They say he was drowned in the night.'

'Two ships were wrecked,' said Falaise.

'What were their names?'

'I forget now.'

Gaspard looked up. 'You were too busy to heed the names of two broken ships!' he said bitterly. Then he added through his teeth, 'Edmund is soon forgotten!'

CHAPTER XXIII

BETRAYED

THE truth, the awful and terrible truth, came slowly home to them.

For several days they sailed through calm seas with no other gloom upon their souls than the now certain knowledge of Stephen's death. Hildebert declared that God would raise up another leader, and spoke of Moses and Joshua. But the other children were frightened and alarmed. It was only the beauty of the sea, the kindness of the sky, and the cheerful blessing of the sun that kept them from despair.

One day Gaspard said to Falaise, 'Take me to this new friend of yours.'

'To the captain?'

'Yes.'

She was too frightened to disobey.

'Will you let me speak to you?' asked Gaspard at the cabin door.

The captain, a young, handsome, but turbulent-looking fellow, measured Gaspard from head to foot. Then he turned to Falaise. 'A brother, you say? All right. Come in. What do you want?'

Gaspard said to Falaise, 'Leave us together,' and shut the door as she departed. Then he approached the captain. 'The leader of this expedition, Stephen of Cloyes, is dead, drowned off Sardinia with about a thousand other children,' he said slowly. 'They are now leaderless. I don't suppose there is one of the remnant who would aspire to take his place. While he was living, the crusade was hopeless. Now that he is dead, it is absurd. I suggest to you that we should turn and go back to France.'

'Are you one of the crusaders?' asked the captain.

'I am here to look after my brother and sister.'

'You're big enough to take the leader's place.'

'No doubt, but I haven't sufficient faith.'

'Perhaps not. However, you've got cheek enough for a dozen. What! Do you give me orders?' The captain got up and swaggered towards Gaspard in the rolling and threatening manner of a brutal seaman. 'Look here, my son, if you don't want to find yourself in irons, and chucked into three foot of bilge, and fed on bread and water for the rest of this trip, you keep your mouth shut in my presence; aye, and keep it shut among the other children, if you're sick for mummy and can pipe no other tune than the homeward tack. Understand? Understand?' he cried in a louder voice, noticing the terrible

anger in Gaspard's ashen face. He laughed in a bullying way, and shot his face close to Gaspard's. 'I punish mutiny on board my ship,' he said brutally, 'in three ways—the irons, the lash, and the plank. Now, go! And if you don't want one of those three, go with your tail between your legs.'

For a minute Gaspard was tempted to spring upon the man, but wisdom saved him just in time. He turned and went out of the cabin, dazed, sick, despairing.

He found the children in a state of excitement. They were looking towards the other ships, which had sailed far away from them and were now fast approaching the just visible coastline of Africa on their starboard bow. Even in the desolation of his manhood, the utter misery of his helpless cowardice before the captain's truculence and insults, Gaspard was struck by the course on which these vessels sailed. He swallowed the lump in his throat, dashed the tears of mortification from his eyes, and pushed his way through the children to the rail of the ship.

'Why, they are leaving us!' he exclaimed, craning his neck over the rail and shading his eyes.

'What does it mean? Are we deserted?' sounded on every side.

Gaspard turned away and walked to the other end of the ship. He met a sailor and asked

him why the other vessels had left them. The man said, 'Ask no questions, young sir; it's *wiser!*' He returned to the group of children, and stood with them, watching and thinking.

It was certain to him now that treachery had got them in its hold. The insolence of the captain meant contempt for the Crusade, and the disappearance of the four ships proclaimed that Holy Land was not the goal.

A cry of fear rose from the children.

Falaise came to Gaspard, white as death, her eyes starting from her head. 'What is going to happen to us?' she asked.

He shook his head.

Hildebert approached. 'Gaspard, they say we are betrayed!'

They both knelt at his knees and caught his hands. 'What shall we do?' they cried. 'We are betrayed! We are lost! What shall we do?'

The cry of the other children became a wail.

At this moment the captain made his appearance. He regarded the crying children with amazement. 'Here's a fine army to kill the Turks!' he exclaimed, throwing back his head. 'Why, what are you crying for? Want your mothers? Want to go home, do you? Well, listen to me.' He raised his voice. 'You'll go home when you've killed the Saracens, and not an hour before; and till that time comes you'll dry your eyes and keep your

mouths shut, or I'll tie you to the rigging and drag you through the sea on hooks. Now, understand. Those are my orders. No more caterwauling on this ship or I'll flay the lot of you alive.'

He turned on his heel and walked off.

The sun had set. A greyness in sea and sky filled the air with gloom. Seen in this light, the clustering and huddled children, with their pale faces and eyes of terror, were like ghosts. It was not the captain who had so stricken them. It was their own sudden loss of God. They were dumb and motionless—children not only betrayed, not only threatened with slavery, but friendless in earth and heaven.

Then a beautiful thing happened.

Hildebert rose from his knees beside the seated Gaspard, and approached the children. His face was white, but in his eyes there was a look of exaltation. It was as if a light burned behind his skin, as if angels were looking from his eyes. He spread his arms out to the children and said, 'It is wrong to weep. It is wicked not to have faith. God has promised. We must trust Him. Come, let us show the great Father in heaven that His children, who have faith in His infinite goodness, are unafraid!' And he lifted up his voice and sang—

Jesus Christ, repair our loss,
Unto us restore Thy cross.

Most of the children were touched by his magic enthusiasm—were 'full of God'; but one, the nearest to him, felt nothing but despair.

While the voices of the children rose to heaven in the gloom of twilight, Falaise, kneeling at Gaspard's feet, clutched his hands, pressed herself to him, and, raising her white face close to his, exclaimed in a panic of terror, 'I don't believe in God. But you save me, you, Gaspard! Save me. I am afraid.'

And Gaspard looked in her eyes, placed one of his hands tenderly upon the lovely head, and said in a voice of agony, 'I promise. I will save you. But pray to God, pray to God.'

At that moment a sailor came to them. 'Get up, lassie,' he shouted above the voices of the singing children. 'The captain wants you.'

CHAPTER XXIV

A RUSE

QUICK as lightning Gaspard saw his course. Falaise was clinging to him, her face close to his. He slightly bent his head. The singing of the children was sufficient to drown a whisper from the sailor. 'Say you will come in a moment,' he murmured into his sister's ear.

She looked up, did as she was told, and the sailor went off.

'Gaspard,' she cried to him in breathless terror, 'the captain wants me to be his wife. He says he will marry me and give me riches. But I do not like him. I pretended I liked him because I was afraid. He makes me frightened. What shall I do? If I refuse to marry him he will flog me. He is violent and fierce. Oh, Gaspard, tell me what to do. I dare not, I dare not become his wife.'

'Would you rather die?' he asked quietly.

'Yes, yes! I have been foolish, but rather than marry him I would die. Oh, Gaspard, think better of me. I will try to be splendid—like you. Forgive

me. I have been vain and foolish. I repent now. I am so sorry.'

'There is not a moment to lose. Listen to me, little sister. If I faced the captain and tried to protect you, I should be overpowered and nothing would come of my resistance. *But you perhaps can save us all.* Now listen to me. Go to him; hide your feelings; pretend still that you like him. While he is merry ask for drink. Say you are thirsty. When the wine is brought to you, point to something at his back and ask its meaning. As he turns round to look at this object, quickly and secretly empty into the wine'—he paused and drew a phial from his doublet—'the contents of this little bottle. Then pretend to taste the wine. Say it is not good. Tell him it is bitter, challenge him to drink it. If he does drink it, very soon he will fall as if he was dead. Hide the goblet, and come running from the cabin crying that the captain is in a swoon. Now, little one, go, and go bravely. All our lives, perhaps, hang upon your acting well this part.'

When she was gone Gaspard went to Hildebert and drew him aside.

'I have something to ask you,' he said. 'We are betrayed. We are helpless in the hands of wicked and merciless men. Never shall we see Holy Land, and never again shall we behold our homes. This is to be our fate—*we shall be sold as slaves.* Now, is not death better than slavery? Would it not be

better for us to die now than to live for long years in cruel and most shameful slavery? I ask you that question.'

'Yes,' said Hildebert, 'it would be sweeter to die.'

'Now there remains another question,' said Gaspard. 'Shall we think only of ourselves, we three, or shall we help to deliver all the other children from their frightful doom? I can procure our deaths without pain, but to free the others we must needs set fire to the ship.'

Hildebert started away from him. 'What do you mean, Gaspard?' he asked in a tone of horror.

'It is better to die than to live as a slave. You have said so yourself.'

'Yes!' cried Hildebert; 'if God sends the death.'

Gaspard regarded him sternly. 'God acts through men, men who have reason and can think sanely.'

'But it is wicked to take life! It is mutiny against God!'

'Then you would be a slave.'

'If God wills it.'

'Have you thought of Falaise?'

'What do you mean?'

'Slavery for a young girl is worse than hell.'

Hildebert thought hard.

'She must die,' said Gaspard. 'I have made

up my mind. She herself is willing. I shall kill her to-night. Even if she were unwilling, I should kill her ! ’

‘ You dare not ! ’ cried Hildebert.

‘ Yes I dare. And if you are wise, you will go with her into the next world ; and after you, I will follow.’

‘ Do you think I am afraid to be a slave ? ’ cried Hildebert.

‘ Do you know what slavery means ? ’

Hildebert’s eyes flashed. ‘ I care not what it means. I believe in God. I will pray to Him in chains ; yes, and under the whips of the taskmaster I will preach the true religion of Christ. I am not a coward. Would you creep away to heaven, like a deserter ? Are we not here to fight and suffer for our Saviour ? What does it matter whether we are free or bond so long as we believe, so long as we teach the love of God to those who are in darkness ? Oh, Gaspard, do not be a traitor ! You make me shudder. To think that you would kill Falaise ! How dreadful, how awful ! It is murder. God will never forgive you.’

‘ Falaise would rather die than live a life of iniquity.’

‘ Yes, so would I,’ cried Hildebert, ‘ *if the iniquity was my own !* But we are not guilty of sins done against us. She must suffer whatever comes to her. Even if her life is made like a devil’s she can keep it

pure as an angel's. It is her soul that counts. She can plead with those who sin against her. She can make them better, she can help to spread the truth of God. Oh, Gaspard ! do not talk any more of killing us. We must be brave. We must endure. I will preach to all the children and tell them. They will not be afraid of slavery. No one who believes in God, no one who loves Christ, will be afraid of chains. Don't you see it is *glorious* to suffer for Christ's sake ?'

Gaspard was moved by the deep faith of his brother, though he judged it, though he could not understand it.

'Say nothing at present,' he said quietly. 'I have a scheme to save us. If it should fail, we can talk again of this other matter. But it may succeed. And if so, we shall get home again to France.'

'God's Will be done,' replied Hildebert. 'All that we can do is to keep the faith and endure to the end, whatever happens to us, whether it be sweet or bitter.' He took his brother's hand. 'Don't you want to say, Gaspard, at the end of your life, *I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course ; I have kept the faith ?* That is splendid ! Oh, it would be miserable and vile to run away. Think what the martyrs and saints have suffered for us ! I don't think anyone who really believes is afraid of pain and suffering.'

A sudden cry rang through the ship.

The children turned from looking across the sea, and ran forward; Gaspard and Hildebert followed them; at the next moment Falaise appeared, running from the captain's cabin.

She flung herself against Gaspard and whispered in a great terror, 'He is dead. I have killed him with your poison.'

'No,' said Gaspard; 'he is not dead. Summon your courage, and take me with you to the cabin.'

'They will kill us.'

'No, have courage.'

He led her forward through the crowd of children.

The cabin was full of sailors, talking in loud voices. Gaspard forced his way in. 'Friends,' he said quietly, 'I know something of medicine. Let me look at the sick captain and see what I can do.'

'Sick!' cried a sailor. 'He's dead, dead as a stone!'

Gaspard bent over the prostrate body of the brutal seaman. For a moment he thought they were right. The man was like a corpse.

'I think he is not dead, but in a trance,' said Gaspard. He got up and looked at the sailors. 'Who commands the ship?' he asked quietly.

'I do,' said one of the men.

'Get the others out of the cabin and the children from the door,' said Gaspard.

The sailors murmured. 'Seems as if he commands

the ship,' they grumbled angrily. 'Who are you to give orders?' demanded one. But the man to whom Gaspard had spoken obeyed the order given, and cleared the cabin.

Gaspard bent over the captain, loosening his clothes. He remained in this posture for a considerable time, producing surgical instruments from his doublet and carefully arranging them on the floor. All this time he was thinking hard.

Presently he got up, and looked the seaman in the face. The two pairs of eyes were reading each other through and through.

'Well?' demanded the officer.

'I can save him,' said Gaspard.

The other did not reply.

Then Gaspard said with meaning, 'I can make him well in a few hours, or after many days.'

Still the other did not answer.

'Left to himself,' said Gaspard, 'he will recover soon.'

The officer looked away.

'You are in command of the ship,' said Gaspard.

'I am now the master,' said the officer, meeting his eyes. He shifted on his feet and grinned uneasily.

'You will sail the ship, you will land us at an Eastern port, and you will sell us into slavery.'

'You know all about it, then?' laughed the seaman.

‘How much are we worth to you?’

‘What you will fetch!’

‘The price of heathen slavery may be less than the price of Christian ransom.’

‘Ransom?’

‘Three at least of these children have rich parents.’

The officer studied him suspiciously. Then he broke out in a confident tone of voice, exclaiming, ‘There’s no ransom in this case. What are you proposing to me? You’re but a lad. You say you’re a man of medicine. How do I know it? Besides, I’m the master of this ship. I take no orders. The best place for you, it seems to me, would be the dark hole.’

He adopted a threatening attitude.

Gaspard did not flinch. ‘Without my care, the captain will be up and about to-morrow morning.’

‘You say so.’

‘I know it.’

The officer considered. ‘And you could keep him like that for three days?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

The officer said, ‘Well, a bargain’s a bargain. Keep him like that.’

‘And you’ll take us back to France?’

‘Not I!’

‘Where is the bargain, then?’

‘ Oh, we’ll talk about that at Cairo.’

‘ No ; now !’

‘ Humph ! A bargain’s a bargain. Yes, that’s right enough. Well, see here, I’ll take you on as one of the crew.’

‘ My brother and sister must return with me to France.’

The other opened his eyes. ‘ Oh, it’s a family party, is it ? Well, all right. I’ll take you three back with us.’

Gaspard distrusted his man. ‘ Hear what I have to say,’ quoth he very seriously. ‘ My father is a rich man, a banker of Châteauneuf ; bring his children safely home to him, and on my word of honour he will load you with gold.’

The officer pretended to ridicule this idea.

‘ I mean it,’ said Gaspard. ‘ And as sure as there is a living God, you will rejoice one day that you have done this act of mercy, even if it be for the sake of money.’

‘ We’ll think about it,’ said the officer. ‘ In the meantime, keep him as he is till we get to Cairo, or at any rate to Alexandria.’

And he went out of the cabin whistling.

That night Gaspard said to Falaise, in secret from Hildebert, ‘ It may be—there is just a chance—that we get back to France, we three. But if the scheme falls through, you will be sold as a slave in Alexandria. A Turk or an Arab will buy you.

Your life will be dreadful. Little sister, nothing can make such a life worthy the living. Death would be better. Well'—he took her hand and fondled it—'will you surrender your soul to God? Instead of such a frightful and hideous life, will you die? I can send you into a sleep from which you will pass peacefully into the next world, and God will forgive us both, you and me, because we preferred death to degradation.'

He was amazed by her answer. 'I have thought it all out,' she said quietly, nestling to him like a frightened child. 'I would rather die than fall into sin. I was going to ask you when you came to me just now to take my life away. I have said my prayers. I am quite ready to die. And, Gaspard, I am so sorry because I have sinned against you. It was I who brought Hildebert upon this pilgrimage. Your words in your bedroom stung me. Do you remember them? I deserved them; but they stung and hurt me. I determined that I *would* go on this crusade. I wanted to show you that I was not light and foolish and vain. I knew I was, but I wanted you to think I was not. And but for me you would not now be here. I have brought all this ruin upon us upon you, Hildebert, and myself.'

'Hush, little sister,' he whispered tenderly; 'the fault was mine. Those cruel words were a sin on my part, for a brother should protect and love

his sister. But think no more of what is done. Perhaps, after all, I may get you safely home ; and if not, sleep is sweet, and death can be without pain of any kind. Have no fear. I will save you from slavery.'

CHAPTER XXV

SLAVERY OR DEATH?

EVERY day of the voyage now deepened the sense of impending calamity.

The sailors no longer made any disguise of their mission. They would come among the children laughing and ask them how they liked the prospect of slavery. A few, but only a few, of the doomed children would weep, would go down on their knees, would pray the brutal sailors to have pity. The great majority, however, maintained an attitude of sublimest confidence. Hildebert had preached to them, had preached, perhaps, the most passionate sermons ever addressed to the human heart since the days of St. Paul, perhaps the most beautiful sermons ever preached since the days of the Master.

The child looked slavery full in the face, and with the eyes of an absolute faith. It did not daunt him. It did not strike at his heart a single terror or awake one least regret. God willed it so, and thus it was a most beautiful thing. Nay, it was clear to that lovely heart, as clear as stars shining on the bosom of a winter night, that in this manner God had

provided their way of discipleship. They were to be the leaven of Christ in the meal of Islam. Chained and fettered, harnessed to bitter toil, starved by their tyrants, and flogged by their taskmasters, thus they would preach the Word—never uttering reproach, never making an appeal for mercy, never ceasing to sing their hymns of love.

‘We thought to conquer the Saracens with our spears and with our swords,’ cried Hildebert. ‘Behold how God has humbled our foolish pride and rebuked our cruel hearts! We are not to destroy, but to create. We are not to kill, but to bring to life. Our Father in heaven has made us not lions of Christ but His doves. In our cages we will praise Him, and by our meekness and our courage we will conquer Islam for the Kingdom of God.’

Falaise had come under Hildebert’s spell. She no longer thought of death, she no longer feared the horrors of an Eastern tyranny. Chief and foremost of all those children singing their hymns on that evil ship, Falaise might be seen, tall and beautiful, her eyes shining, her face white with spiritual exaltation.

One of the sailors said to her, ‘There’ll be no hard work in the burning sun for you, my pretty flower; they’ll make you a queen, if you toss your head enough and roll your eyes with a proper skill.’

She looked at the man and said, 'You cannot make me blush or weep! If they lift me to a throne or tread me in the dust, I shall still praise the great God, and pray to Him for them and for you.'

Gaspard spent most of his time watching the captain's trance and studying the character of the second officer, whom he suspected of treachery.

Towards the hour of sunset the ship arrived at Alexandria. Before the anchor was lowered innumerable boats swarmed about the French vessel, filled with Arabs and Egyptians. Among these boats was a noble barge, under whose awning sat a huge and hideous Egyptian splendidly dressed and attended by slaves. This was Maschemuth, the Governor, who came to bargain for some hundreds of the Christian children.

The second officer told Gaspard to remain in the captain's cabin, and thither Gaspard succeeded in persuading Falaise to follow him, lest she should arouse the Governor's cupidity. Hildebert refused to leave the other children.

Fortunately, the Governor did not purchase Hildebert. Amidst the shouts and laughter of the black-faced people thronging the ships in their boats, the Governor selected his purchases, bargained with the officers, and, after paying the money, returned to his barge. The children were then

transferred to the boats, and went over the ship's side singing their hymns to God. Only a few of them shed a tear.

Hildebert leaned over the rail and called to the departing children never to forget God, and to be faithful to the end. It was one of the strangest sights ever seen in the East, and brought reverence to the hearts of the Arabs.

The sun had set. The mosques and palaces, with their slender minarets and gleaming towers, faded into the scarlet grandeur of a sunless sky and lost the sharpness of their outline. The water and the shipping were irradiated by a glory of quiet beauty which made everything tremulous and indistinct. And in the hush and coolness of the dying day, the boats rowing to the shore with their cargoes of little children became choirs of Christianity, so that the solemn evening air was filled with treble voices singing hymns to God. And from the dark travel-stained ship anchored in the stream rose answering music, the same words, the same harmony, the same faith. Those condemned, on their way to suffering and torture, sang the same hymn and in the same spirit as those waiting to be condemned and tarrying a little longer for the chain. And as the children's music ascended to heaven—that wonderful music of the white races, of Europe, of Christianity—the scarlet died from the west, a light, like molten emeralds, spread over

the roofs of the city, splashes of gliding violet appeared in the darkening water, lamps shone from the walls and in the windows of the shadowy houses, and a crescent moon rose golden and strangely massive above the sombre branches of the silent palms.

The music did not cease on board the ship till the boats were out of sight and hearing. Then Hildebert kneeled on the deck, and the hundreds of children still left kneeled at his side, and with one voice, under the glory of those Eastern skies, they prayed: 'Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name . . .'

Gaspard in the captain's cabin had been preparing Falaise for the worst of all their fears. He said to her at last, 'I suspect treachery. We shall be sold into slavery at Cairo. Nothing, I am sure, can save us.' He paused, took her hand, regarded her earnestly, and said, 'Be faithful to your vows *to-night*.'

She shuddered.

'Gaspard, I dare not. I am not afraid of slavery; but I fear to die. Don't ask me. Let me be like Hildebert; let me——'

'You are a girl,' he interrupted.

'It may be God's Will with me——'

'That is blasphemy. No. Never think such thoughts of God. Drive them from your soul while it is yet innocent. We know little of God, but at

least we know that He does not send what is worse than death. Falaise, save yourself. Escape from Satan and hell. It will cause you not a moment's pain. Look at this man; you will fall asleep; you will become like him; and then quietly your soul will pass into a better world.'

'But it is wicked to take one's life,' she said weakly, wretchedly.

Perhaps she felt that this was true; perhaps, also, she had reflected on what the sailor said to her in jest, and had already dreamed romantic dreams of slavery. She was very young, very beautiful, and earnestness with her was not the character itself but just a mood of the hour.

'I implore you,' said Gaspard, 'to choose death before the horror of such slavery as will surely be your lot.'

His eyes were fixed upon her in judgment rather than appeal.

'I prefer death,' she said hurriedly, 'but I dare not take my life.'

'Do you mean that?'

He rose to his feet and looked at her very searchingly.

'Hildebert says that if God meant me to die He would send the death.'

'Perhaps He does.'

'If not, Hildebert says, I must bear whatever happens to me.'

Something in Gaspard's eyes terrified her. She started back, her face blanched, her hands extended, her eyes staring in horror. 'Gaspard! Gaspard! What are you going to do to me?' she cried.

He seized her in his hands. 'I will be God's agent!' he cried, between his teeth. She cried wildly for help. His hands fastened round her neck. She uttered one piercing shriek of terror. Then she was silent. He drove her backward, pressing at her throat.

The door burst open, and the sailor who was now captain rushed in. He sprang upon Gaspard and tore him away from Falaise, who fell to the ground and lay motionless. Another sailor followed, and another.

'Get this boy into ropes,' cried the new captain. 'I've had enough of him. Murder was what we found him at. Look at the girl yonder. Our richest prize.' He swore a frightful oath. 'If he's killed her I'll flay him alive!'

He went to Falaise and leaned over her. 'The young fiend,' he said fiercely, 'has put a black necklace round her pretty throat with his fingers. He shall smart for it!'

'Is she dead?' asked one of the others.

'No; she's living still.'

The sailors held Gaspard, and looked towards Falaise.

The man acting as captain fetched water and dashed it into the face of the poor girl. She began to revive. Presently she looked about her, and, seeing Gaspard, uttered a faint cry of fear. The new captain bade her be easy in her mind, and went outside the cabin. He returned quickly with three sailors, carrying ropes. Gaspard was bound hand and foot.

They flung him down and dragged him out of the cabin and along the deck. The children were now below. The deck was deserted. The sky was bright with stars. Alexandria looked like a city of dreams in the glamour of the moonlight. Gaspard was roughly lifted to his feet, raised a few inches above the level of the deck, and bound to the mast so tightly that the ropes cut his arms and legs and wounded his neck.

The sailors left him and went away.

In an hour's time the new captain came down the deck, leading and supporting Falaise. He stopped in front of Gaspard and said, 'Look, he can do you no more harm! Don't be afraid of him any longer. We'll keep him like that till we get to Cairo. And to-morrow we'll flog him to revenge the bruise on your throat.'

Falaise regarded Gaspard with horror in her eyes. She said no word to him, and turned her head aside, and went forward, away from him. The seaman led her to the hold where the huddled children were

waiting for sleep, and then, leaving her, returned to Gaspard.

‘So you murdered the captain as well,’ he said, smiling. ‘Anyway, he’s dead. We are going to sew him up and drop him overboard, to-night, into the Nile. Your services, Master Doctor, will not be required any longer!’ He laughed mockingly, and slouched away.

Gaspard’s strength held out till midnight. Then his senses began to swim; he was conscious of intolerable agony; he could not prevent himself from groaning.

He was on the point of swooning when a figure appeared on deck, creeping towards him in the shadows. He watched its advance without interest, without fear, without hope.

The form came close to him. It was Falaise.

‘Gaspard, what can I do for you?’

He opened his closing eyes, and looked at her, groaning. The bruise about her throat was visible in the moonlight.

‘Gaspard, can I save you?’ She tried to unfasten the ropes. Her face was like death; her hands were trembling; as she struggled with the great knots she moaned and shivered.

He made an effort. ‘Falaise,’ he murmured, ‘save yourself! Listen. Place your hand in my breast . . . take out what I carry there. Give the picture to Hildebert; tell him to keep it for me,

and the instruments ; but don't tell him about me. Show me the phials—close to my face ; I can't see. There ! that one !—let me look again—yes, that one. Be careful of it. Give the rest to Hildebert. But that one, for you. Drink—quickly—it is your one hope.'

'But you, Gaspard ! They will flog you !'

'I must live. I promised our mother. While Hildebert is alive I must live.' He groaned in his agony, and the cold sweat ran down his forehead.

She said to him, 'Wait, I will return.'

He closed his eyes.

When she came back she had to touch him with her hands to rouse him from his stupor. 'I have given the things to Hildebert,' she whispered, 'but I have not told him. Gaspard, I am going to die to-night. You are right. God never sends such torture. It is His Will that I should die. But oh, Gaspard, if I could save you first ! I have brought all this suffering upon you. Gaspard, forgive me ; say you forgive me !'

The agony in his eyes was dulled by tears.

'I never loved you so much as now,' he murmured. 'Little Falaise ! Dear little Falaise !'

She raised herself up and kissed him, and burst into tears on his breast.

When she raised herself she saw that he had fainted. For a moment she hesitated. Then she ran

along the decks, and rushed towards the captain's cabin. As she reached it the door opened and three sailors staggered out bearing between them something long and heavy sewn into a sail. She knew it to be a corpse, and uttered a cry and reeled away from them. The new captain, following behind the seamen with their burden, sprang forward and caught her before she fell.

'What are you doing here?' he demanded.

'My brother!' she gasped. 'He is dying! Save him! Save him!'

His eyes were fastened upon the burden.

'Wait!' he commanded, and strode towards the other men. They whispered together for a moment and then baring their heads, kneeled down on the deck, and uttered a prayer. The moonlight shone upon their bowed heads and upon the body in its shroud. They had themselves murdered the captain, but before dropping his corpse into the river they felt that they must pray for the repose of his soul.

The body was lifted, swung to and fro, and then hurled overboard. While the splash was sounding the men laughed among themselves and made coarse jokes concerning him for whose soul they had prayed but a moment ago. Then they returned to the cabin for drink, laughing and well pleased.

The chief murderer came to Falaise, the man who

was now full captain of the ship, and whose plans were laid to take all the profits of the slave-dealing.

‘Come along, my pretty bird,’ he said cheerfully. ‘We’ll have a look at this precious brother of yours.’

Falaise clung to the man. She was trembling like a leaf. ‘Promise me, promise me!’ she cried.

‘What?’ He looked at her tenderly.

‘Not to flog him. I love him. He is my brother. He only tried to kill me because he did not want me to be a slave. Oh, do promise me!’

‘What will you give me?’

‘Anything.’

‘Anything!’ He laughed. ‘Well, you’re just the little lass to make a sailor’s wife. I’ll take you back to France, and marry you in the church of Our Lady, and you shall live on the hill, where you can watch for my ship. What do you say?’

‘Oh, do promise me!’

‘Well, give me a kiss to begin with!’

She flung herself upon him, and kissed his face and lifted his hands and kissed them, weeping half with joy and half with fear.

‘That’s a promise, then,’ he said. ‘We’ve plighted troth. You are going back to France to be my wife.’

‘Oh, save us all!’ she cried. ‘Save me, save my brothers, save the rest! Take us home again.’

For God's sake. Save your soul. Do an act of mercy. Don't sell us into slavery !'

'Hush ! my pretty bird !' He looked back anxiously over his shoulder, towards the cabin where the sailors were drinking. 'We'll talk about this in secret, you and I, when the others are asleep. In the meantime, let us have a look at your brother.' He walked down the deck with his arm round her waist, holding her to him, tightly, sometimes stooping to kiss her hair. 'You are just the little wife for a sailor,' he said. 'I am well content. Things have shaped finely for me this voyage. I have got a ship and a wife. We will be rich and happy.'

They found Gaspard still in a swoon.

The captain pulled a baulk of timber towards the mast, and placed it under Gaspard's feet. 'There ! that will make it easier for him. It will take the weight off him.'

Falaise pleaded for the ropes to be unfastened.

'We'll do that to-morrow,' said the captain.

'But he will die !'

'No ; he'll come round in a minute.'

'You promise me !'

'Now, little wife, begin by obeying your husband !'

She seized him and held him. 'Let him go ! Let my brother go ! Save him !'

'To-morrow.'

‘Now!’

‘No; he’s not safe; I can’t trust him.’

She looked wildly about her. ‘You won’t flog him?’

‘It depends. I don’t think so.’

‘But you promised!’

‘You must trust your husband.’

‘I say, you must set him free; you *shall* set him free. He is my brother, and I love him.’

Her insistence angered the man. He caught her wrist. ‘Don’t forget,’ he said, ‘that I am your master as well as your future husband. Why, I can sell you for a slave to-morrow, or I can this very night flog you like a dog, or I can string you up to the mast, or I can give you wine and good food and kiss you as my little wife that is to be. I am a man who is kind or cruel according as people treat me. Take care, then, for I stand no nonsense.’

For a moment her terrified soul looked into the dreadful eyes of the man who held her. She saw by the light of the stars that he was cunning, brutal, soulless. It became clear in a moment that she could not trust him. He was capable of all treachery and deceit, all cruelty and baseness. Nothing to him was either sacred or holy.

With a cry of horror and a sudden energy of spirit she freed herself from the man’s hold, pushed him backwards, and sped away.

He recovered himself, muttered an oath, and gave

chase. There was no love in his heart for this girl ; he had never intended to keep his word ; but she was valuable stuff, she would sell for a great price, and he did not intend to lose her. Falaise, frightened like a deer, was fleeing from a man who sought her for the money she would fetch in the slave market.

The moonlight revealed these two figures, the hunter and the hunted, running down the deserted decks. One was a pure child, the other a murderer. As she sped here and there, gasping in her terror and yet clear in the vision of her soul, the sound of Arabs singing in the bazaars of the city came across the rustling waters. She heard them singing, she heard the voices of the drunken sailors in the cabin, and she heard the breathing of her pursuer, hot behind her. She was conscious of everything—of the moon, the stars, the flowing river, the domes and towers of the city, the voices, and the murmur of the wind. She was conscious of all this. She was also conscious of God.

One thought suddenly flashed across her determined mind, which was perhaps the last movement of that egoism and vanity in her character which were the only real faults of her nature. In the very height of her exalted purpose, the distracted girl thought to herself, ‘If Gaspard could but see and know what I am now about to do !’

She wanted a spectator, she wanted an audience,

she wanted applause, even in her passage to eternity.

This was the thought, the only thought in her mind, as the poor girl sprang at the rail of the ship, flung herself over, and was borne by the great river swiftly towards the quiet sea.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE MARKET

EARLY on the following day, just before the tide turned, and the sailors prepared for the last stage of their voyage, Gaspard was taken down from the mast, and his clothes stripped off his body. Then he was slung up spread-eagle to the rigging, and most brutally flogged with the rope's end. When they unfastened the ropes he fell like a garment to the deck, but he did not utter a cry and he had not swooned under the torture.

Salt was rubbed into his frightful wounds, and he was thrown naked into the 'black hole' of the ship, without food and without water. All this took place while the children were sleeping, and ere the sun had appeared above the horizon.

When the ship was approaching Cairo, he was brought up from this dungeon and his clothes restored to him. The captain bade him dress quickly and stand firmly, or he would be flogged again. 'If you don't fetch a good price,' said this monster, with a bitter laugh, 'I'll keep you aboard, and flog you all the way to France.'

Hildebert, who could not understand the absence of Gaspard and Falaise, caught sight of his wretched brother as he stood naked on the deck, and ran towards him with tears in his eyes.

‘ Oh, Gaspard, what has happened to you ? What have they done to you ? ’ he cried, clasping his hands in horror.

Some of the other children saw the naked Gaspard, saw the ghastly wounds on his flesh, and came forward, timidly, crowding at Hildebert’s side.

Gaspard looked at Hildebert. ‘ There is no God ! ’ he said bitterly, but in a weak voice.

‘ Gaspard ! Do not say such an awful thing ! ’ cried Hildebert in an agony of horror. ‘ But what have they done to you ? Why did they torture you ? Oh, I am so sorry, Gaspard ! I would have gladly borne it in your stead. Poor Gaspard ! Poor Gaspard ! ’

Gaspard looked at him again. ‘ There is no God ! ’ he said in a stronger voice.

The other children began to weep and to wail.

Hildebert came close to his brother. ‘ The saints suffered for God ! ’ he cried earnestly. ‘ Be brave, dear Gaspard. It is only for a little time. And after this life we shall be with the saints, and we shall understand, and God will restore all things a hundredfold.’

Gaspard stooped to pick up his clothes, but staggered, and would have fallen if Hildebert had

not caught him. The agony of this movement was so great that the sweat poured out of his skin, and he gnashed his teeth together, groaning and cursing.

Hildebert burst into tears.

‘Falaise gave you my phials?’ asked Gaspard, panting in his pain and in his weakness.

‘Yes.’

‘Let me see them.’

He selected one, drank, and after a moment seemed to recover his strength. Hildebert lifted his clothes and helped him to dress.

‘Where is Falaise?’ asked Gaspard.

‘I do not know.’

Gaspard thought. Then he remembered. ‘Is she living or dead?’

‘Dead?’ cried Hildebert. He looked about him wildly. ‘Why should she be dead? What makes you ask?’

‘Is she not on the ship?’

‘I have looked for her, but I cannot find her.’

‘Go and ask the sailors.’

Hildebert came running back. ‘Gaspard! Gaspard!’ His eyes were full of tears.

‘Ah!’ cried Gaspard, with something of a smile. ‘Then it is good news!’

Hildebert was wringing his hands. ‘She jumped overboard in the night! She is dead! She was afraid to be a slave! Poor Falaise, sweet Falaise, she is dead! We shall never see her again. Oh,

Gaspard, I loved her so, and she is dead ! Poor Falaise, sweet Falaise, our darling Falaise ! ’

‘ Thank God ! ’ cried Gaspard. ‘ Now do I love her with all my soul, and now does my faith come back to me a little. Perhaps, *perhaps*, Hildebert, there is a God. Not your God ; not the God who sells children into slavery, not a God who desires pain and agony, not a God who ordains that innocence should suffer and faith be broken on a wheel of blood ; not that God. No ! But a Power that acts at the last moment when we have abused our reason and blundered to the verge of ruin. Perhaps there is such a God. ’

A party of sailors appeared.

One of them said, ‘ Now, then, young skulker, hurry your dressing, d’you hear ?—or you’ll get the rope’s end for breakfast. You others, form up on the starboard quarter. Be off with you, quick. ’ He drove them away, like lambs.

One of the other sailors helped Gaspard to dress. The ship had reached Cairo.

In less than an hour’s time the children were transferred to the shore, amidst the mockery and execration of an immense multitude. They were marched in a body to the slave market, and like animals were there inspected with excitement and glee by a crowding and quarrelling multitude of dealers. Hildebert was too shaken by the death of Falaise to sing. The courage of the other children

had evaporated. Huddled together, these unhappy Christians stood in silence and terror, the sun blazing upon them, awaiting their doom.

Gaspard managed to keep near Hildebert. He foresaw that the great difficulty of his enterprise had now arisen. If his oath to his mother were to be kept, it was essential that he and Hildebert should be sold to the same master.

A slave-dealer appeared upon the scene, before whom the others gave way. He was keen-eyed, and hook-nosed, with a long and cruel mouth. This man was the agent of the Sultan. He passed over Hildebert, who was slight and delicate, but examined Gaspard carefully. The keen eyes and the munching lips of this man sickened Gaspard and filled Hildebert with terror. The little fellow clung to his brother and whispered, 'Don't let him take you! He is cruel. I am frightened of him.' But for the flogging and the long agony of his exposure Gaspard would surely have been purchased by this frightful person. As it was, the pressure of Hildebert had caused him so exquisite an agony that, wincing and paling visibly before the eyes of the dealer, he looked even more broken and deathly than before. He was passed over.

When the Sultan's agent had finished his inspection and made his choice, the other dealers moved quickly and eagerly among the children, selecting groups of them, and dividing them into separate

companies. All this was done hurriedly, brutally, and with a rough carelessness. Hildebert was dragged away from Gaspard, but directly his purchaser had let go of him he stooped down, slid away, and joined Gaspard in another group. This movement was undetected.

The air was now filled with a deafening clamour. It arose over the price of these Christian children. Money was about to pass, and money is a serious thing. These hucksters of human life were like dogs fighting for a bone. At every moment it seemed as if they must come to blows. The chewing and spitting populace, thronging them in a confused multitude, took vigorous sides in their disputes. The air rang with yells, screeches, and screams. Arms were lifted, and fists shaken. The black faces were contorted with passion and ferocity.

Hildebert clung to Gaspard.

When the prices were settled, the children were driven off in droves. Gaspard and Hildebert were together, and they clasped hands and exchanged looks of gratitude. By a miracle they had not been parted. By a miracle they were still together. But they were of a company destined for fresh bargaining.

They were marched to a courtyard, and there, after an hour's wait, they were more leisurely inspected, more carefully sorted.

A venerable old man with handsome turban and

flowing beard examined the children with the benignity of a tender-hearted patriarch. He spoke French, and addressed questions to the children. He desired to know whether they could read and write, whether they were painters, jewellers, or craftsmen of any kind. All these questions he asked soothingly, often smiling, and sometimes laying his hand upon the little heads, as if in blessing.

Gaspard and Hildebert were placed together with some more of the children, and the others were marched away.

Presently fresh batches of children were driven into the courtyard, until the company numbered forty. All these children could read and write, or else were craftsmen and artists. Gaspard had the satisfaction of knowing that he was still able to keep his word to his mother. But for how long would he and Hildebert be together ?

They were given a little food, and then, roped together, they were marched into the streets.

Someone called to their guards, ' Whither ? '

The answer was, ' Bagdad.'

CHAPTER XXVII

HOLY LAND

AS the party of forty Christian children passed from the city of Cairo and, crossing the Nile, entered the great desert of Sinai on the further side, Gaspard was so sunk in thought, so concentrated on a single reflection, that he neither heard the derisive shouts of the populace nor felt the pain of his wounds. It even escaped him to ask Hildebert for the miniature of Isabel.

The single occupation of his mind was the thought of Falaise. He recalled to his remembrance a hundred incidents in her childhood. He brought to his memory innumerable instances of her brightness, her gaiety, her sweet tenderness, and her impulsive affection. And all through these memories there sounded in his soul, like the tolling of a great bell, the single and awful thought that this bright and beautiful young girl was dead.

Never more would she laugh; never more would she sing; never more would her eyes flash happiness; never more would her lips flow with merriment; never more would she lift her hands to her

pretty hair and smile upon the living world out of eyes that were self-conscious of their beauty.

In the night which had just passed, all the mystery that made Falaise Falaise had ceased to be. A silence had fallen upon her. Stillness had frozen her to stone. On that eager and vivacious young life the curtain of death had suddenly descended. Her beauty and her joy were blotted out for ever.

He did not regret the suggestion he had made to her ; he did not think it would be better for her if she still lived ; but the thought that she had utterly ceased to be hung upon his soul like a heavy chain.

Night came, and as he fell asleep on the desert, Falaise came from the shadows to haunt his dreams.

At daybreak he woke in great pain. The guards were already up. Some were rousing the other children, and some were kneeling in the sand, saying their prayers.

Hildebert said to him, ' We, too, must pray,' and fell upon his knees.

They were given a little food, and soon afterwards the march began.

As they moved across the desert, Hildebert said to Gaspard, ' When these Arabs pray, do they love God and long to behold His Presence ? '

Gaspard answered, ' Allah is to them what God is to us ; and they understand the Eternal as much and as little as we do.'

‘But if they love God why do they sell us into slavery?’

‘And if we love God,’ replied Gaspard, ‘why do we kill the Mussulmans and massacre the Jews? It is the way with all religious people. Men love their religions more than humanity.’

Hildebert was about to defend Christians eagerly, when he stopped at the first words of his defence. Instead, very slowly and thoughtfully, he replied, ‘Christ’s religion was the love of humanity.’

‘Yes,’ said Gaspard.

‘We ought to love these men,’ said Hildebert.

‘Yes.’

‘It was wrong of us to take swords and spears, and to long to fight the Saracen in Holy Land. Stephen was called, but he did not understand the call. God is now gently leading us in the right way. I think I begin to see the truth, and it is more beautiful than the dream.’

The guards were not unkind to them. They halted whenever the children were badly tired, and showed them kindness when the sun was overpowering in its heat. Among the guards was a handsome young Arab who could speak French. He asked the children various questions and translated the answers for the benefit of his fellows. They were curious about the Crusade, and amused by the children’s seriousness.

One day Hildebert said to this Arab, ‘We were

wrong to wish to kill you, and so God has suffered us to become slaves. He did not mean that we should go up against you with swords and spears. He meant us to come as preachers of His word. Jesus did not summon legions of angels to fight for Him. He loved His enemies. And we were sinful when we forgot our Saviour's example, and followed the example of wicked men. All the crusades have failed because the crusaders did not follow the example of Jesus. God is not mocked. But Christendom is rebuked.'

This astonishing speech of the beautiful child was translated to the other Arabs, and caused immense excitement. It was the hour of the evening bivouac. The five camels that accompanied the expedition were lying in the sand; the tents were erected; the sun had departed; stars shone with a pale lustre in the darkening sky; as far as eye could see the fawn-coloured desert stretched away in undulating gentleness.

The Arab turned at last to Hildebert and said, 'You Christians do not obey Him whose Name must never be uttered except with reverence. Our prophet acknowledged Him as One from God. But you make Him One from Satan, even when you call Him God Himself. Look, how you fill your churches with idols; look, how you make God Three, not One; look, how your priests wring money from the poor and array themselves in splendour; look, too,

how you fight with each other and make cruel war upon the nations of the earth. Your prophet was holy and pure ; but you Christians are like dogs—you bark in His Name, but you bite in the devil's.'

Hildebert considered these words for a long time, and the Arab watched him curiously. The other Arabs, sitting at a little distance, also watched the beautiful boy, who was so like an angel even in their eyes.

At last Hildebert said, ' We may be wicked, and we may make mistakes, but we acknowledge Christ as the Son of God. He died for our sins. By His precious Blood we are cleansed from unrighteousness. But you deny Christ. You say He was not the Son of God. You will not let Him save you from your sins.'

The Arab's eyes flashed. He leaned forward and put a hand on Hildebert's arm. ' You do not live as He told you to live,' he said sternly ; ' how, then, should you understand what He taught ? Listen, He said there was One God ; you say there are Three. Listen, He commanded you to pray to the One True God ; you pray to angels, to saints, and to a woman. Listen, He taught what our father Moses taught, that it is sinful to make graven images ; but you fill your churches with these idols and bow down to them and pray to them. Little son, if you so disobey the law, how can you understand the Law-Giver ? '

He laughed, and, not waiting for Hildebert's reply,

turned eagerly to the other Arabs and told them with triumph what he had said. They listened gravely, nodded their heads approvingly, and regarded Hildebert with sorrowful eyes in which there was neither malice nor scorn.

Thus marching and resting, the guards and their prisoners crossed the desert and entered Palestine. When the children suddenly realised that they were really and truly in Holy Land—for they had no idea that their journey led through Palestine—they were filled with wonder and an almost paralysing reverence. The dull despair which had weighed upon their minds fell away, the torpor depressing their souls lifted, a flood of joy swept through their veins.

Hildebert cried to the friendly guard asking that they might halt a moment for prayer, and this request was granted with a dignified courtesy. The children fell upon their knees, even Gaspard following their example, and, with hands folded and faces lifted to the blue heaven, they prayed, each one in the silence of his soul, to the God of Christendom.

While Gaspard prayed, he saw with the mind's eye a dark house with a woman standing in the doorway who regarded him anxiously. He remembered Isabeau, and prayed for the peace of her soul. As the petition framed itself, the woman's face faded and grew mistlike, and became presently like a distant lamp hung in the midst of darkness. A sigh broke from Gaspard's lips. 'I am looking,'

he told himself, 'at Eternity,—for Eternity is a big word for a little distant lamp that shines in the night of our ignorance.'

When they rose Hildebert was the first to speak. 'God,' he cried, with shining face and rapturous eyes, 'has heard our cry! Slaves we are, and roped together like cattle, but our feet are in Holy Land; we breathe the very air of the exquisite dear Jesus, and our eyes behold the sacred land where our most loving Saviour was born in a manger. Let us not despair. Let us not be sad. Let us not murmur against God, like the Israelites of old. No; let us be like Him who laid down his life for us here in Palestine. Let us be meek and lowly. Let us be kind to those who hate us, and gentle to those who would do us injury. Thus shall we conquer. Thus shall we take up the cross of Jesus. Thus shall we show Him how greatly, oh, how greatly we love Him! Think! We are in Holy Land, in Holy Land! All the lovely words of Jesus were said, all His beautiful deeds were done, all His sacred and awful griefs, pains, agonies endured, here, *here* where we stand! Let us be true to Him. We must give thanks to God, and love Him with all our souls, and seek to do His Will. He has brought us to Holy Land. By His mercy we are here. And we are here because we can serve Him. Let us rejoice, let us give thanks, and let us seek by our lives and by our speech to hasten the triumph of His Kingdom!'

These words, passionately delivered, and magic with the whole force of Hildebert's genius, quickened the already lively emotion of the captives into a veritable enthusiasm. They lifted their faces to heaven, and broke into ecstatic song. All save Gaspard, whose eyes were full of tears. Sweetly sounded those treble voices in the morning air—

Jesus Christ, repair our loss,
Unto us restore Thy cross—

so sweetly that the Arabs did not rebuke them, did not mock even among themselves.

But there were others in Palestine who did not share this reverence of the guards, and as the children marched through Holy Land they were followed by hordes of loathsome creatures who laughed at them, railed against them, threw dust and stones at them, and would have torn them to pieces but for the protection of the guards.

Thus the poor little prisoners passed through Jerusalem and through Nazareth, and the beauty of those places was marred for them by the mockery of the multitude, and all their natural emotion at beholding those sacred scenes was clashed and put to discord by the yellings of the mob and the brutalities of the inhabitants. It was difficult even for Hildebert to think that love could win against such hateful malice and such furious antagonism. It was difficult for all, even for Gaspard, not to long

for the sword of the crusader. Wretched, footsore, feverish, and frightened, the forty children of Christ passed through the land of His most lovely life, and came at last, broken and despairing, to the city of Damascus.

CHAPTER XXVIII

PARTED

ALL courage and all hope died out of the hearts of the children as they left Damascus behind them and marched across the terrible desert which stretches from Syria to Mesopotamia. The sun maddened them; the sand blinded them. They did not murmur against God, but they could not sing to Him. They did not lose faith, but they could not pray.

Wretchedly, most wretchedly, did they drag their feet across that burning waste of Syria, and when the Euphrates was reached there was scarcely one of them who could have gone a league further without falling dead on the sand.

They were placed in boats, and the long journey down the great river refreshed them sufficiently for the rest of their pilgrimage. They crossed the plain, and arrived in Bagdad with their courage somewhat restored and their hope almost quickened once again into earnest faith.

The great and splendid city of the Caliph filled

them with amazement. The rivers and orchards surrounding it were like fairyland, and the palaces and pavilions, with their many domes and glittering balconies, rose from this kindly earth with dreamlike beauty to a sky so pure and tranquil that it was ravishment to behold it, ravishment to breathe that perfect air of heaven. Mosques, caravanserais, kiosks, colleges, and royal palaces bewildered the eyes with their beauty. The scented gardens rang with the singing of birds. The broad streets and handsome squares were thronged by a vast multitude dressed in gorgeous stuffs and many-coloured raiment. Students from every eastern country swelled the crowds in the city; merchants from every climate jostled each other in the streets; soldiers in superb dresses rode by on Arab horses; elephants, camels, zebras, and mules moved among the crowds; and from the balconies of houses and from the windows of the bazaars floated, with the heavy perfume of the East, the music of harp and lute and the singing of women.

It chanced at this time that there was a convocation of all the Saracen princes at Bagdad, summoned thither to discuss with the great Caliph the affairs of the Mohammedan world. The Children's Crusade had been mentioned with contempt and amusement by these mighty princes. When they heard that forty of these very children were actually in Bagdad they suggested that the Caliph should summon them

into his presence, if only for the sake of a moment's merriment. The idea was acted upon.

Into the presence of the Caliph and the princes the forty pilgrims were ushered by a retinue of soldiers. Interpreters stood ready to obey the Caliph's commands. Instruments of torture were brought into the room. The soldiers stood guard over the captives.

They were first questioned about the origin of the crusade, the voyage across the sea, and their journey to Bagdad. Then they were asked whether they would abjure their faith. This question was put first to Gaspard.

He replied, 'I cannot define my faith ; how, then, can I abjure it ? '

'What do you believe ? ' he was asked.

'I believe in a great Power, the Creator and Spirit of all things ; but what He is, or how He acts, I have no knowledge.'

This answer produced perplexity among the princes.

He was asked after a moment whether he would accept the faith of the Prophet and worship Allah.

'I worship God,' he answered, 'and Allah is but a name for God. As for your prophet, I know nothing about him.'

He was passed over.

Hildebert was asked whether he would abjure his faith.

‘I would rather die the death!’ he replied, with enthusiasm. ‘I worship the great God, and I adore the Holy Christ by whose death I am saved and in whose resurrection I look for eternal life. Sirs, there are many wicked Christians, but Christ is the Son of God, and only by faith in Him can men be saved.’

He was ordered to be tortured then and there. The soldiers seized him, and he began to pray quietly and sweetly to God, asking for courage and beseeching forgiveness for those who ill-used him.

While he was racked, while his thumbs were screwed, and while heated irons were applied to the soles of his feet, the other children were examined, and all of them refused to abjure their faith. In the midst of this scene Gaspard broke out in a rage against the Caliph.

‘Look at that child!’ he exclaimed passionately, pointing to Hildebert. ‘Is Allah pleased by his pain? Does the sight of his agony give joy to the angels in Paradise? Why do you torture a little child? What for? What is your reason? Kill him, if you fear him, slay him, if you think Allah will bless you for the gift of his soul. But, by your manhood, do not let him be tortured like the devils in hell.’

A couple of soldiers seized Gaspard, and he was forced to the rack, from which Hildebert had just been lifted.

The scene that followed is too dreadful to describe. Of the forty children, eighteen died of the excruciating tortures to which they were all alike subjected, and the remaining twenty-two were driven back to their owners, the slave dealers, more dead than alive. Hildebert, the most delicate of all those children, was the least injured by the torture he had endured.

For three days the angry and indignant slave-dealers tended them and used them with the greatest consideration, anxious to get as much money as possible for this remnant of their original speculation. At the end of the three days they were visited by various merchants and asked many questions concerning their knowledge. Gaspard was the first to find a master. He asked his purchaser, through an interpreter, to buy Hildebert as well, since they were brothers and could work better together than alone. But while the purchaser was listening to the translation of this question, an old man in spectacles—peering, dusty, and shabby—had been asking Hildebert questions about his skill as an artist. Before Gaspard's buyer could speak this old man had purchased Hildebert.

The brothers parted from each other with an agony of grief. Not until that terrible moment, perhaps, had either realised the depth of their brotherly affection. Hildebert clung to Gaspard, and looked up into his face with tears pouring from his eyes.

Gaspard did not weep ; but his face was ashen, his lips trembled, he dared not trust himself to speak.

‘It is God’s Will, Gaspard!’ cried Hildebert. ‘We cannot understand it. It seems hard and terrible. My heart feels as if it must break. Oh, Gaspard, I could so much easier bear all things if you were with me ! But we will trust God, won’t we ? We will pray to Him. We *know* it must have a meaning.’

Gaspard laid his hands on his brother’s shoulders and looked at him long and tenderly.

‘Yes, it has a meaning,’ he said heavily.

‘I shall pray for you ; pray for me, Gaspard.’

Gaspard’s eyes began to grow moist with tears. ‘Is this the end,’ he said sadly, ‘the end of our life, that began so sweetly beside the Loire?’ He stopped. The tears overflowed. His whole body was shaken by a convulsive sob. ‘Ah, God ! ah, God !’ he exclaimed, and was silent.

A hand touched Hildebert’s shoulder.

The old dusty man, peering through his spectacles and smiling under his beard, nodded his head to signify that his slave must come away.

The brothers embraced, and parted.

Hildebert carried with him into slavery the miniature of Isabel for which Gaspard had forgotten to ask him.

CHAPTER XXIX

LIKE GASPARD

FIVE years after the parting of the two brothers Gaspard had earned his freedom. His experiences as a slave somewhat resembled the immortal story of Joseph in Egypt. One may say that his dream of fame which he had so often discussed with Isabel beside the Loire had come to some reality.

His first master was an alchemist and astrologer—a superstitious man, and yet a genuine seeker of knowledge. Among his disciples were three European students, beside Gaspard the slave—a Spaniard, a Savoyard, and a Fleming. He possessed a library of rare manuscripts and was acquainted with the most advanced sciences of East and West. From the first day of his slavery Gaspard was treated with consideration by this master, but the disciples despised him as a slave, and the Spaniard marked him down for an enemy. Six months had not gone by when a false charge of stealing was brought against him by this Spaniard; he was flogged and put in prison. During his imprisonment he performed a small operation on one of his gaolers. The success

of this operation reached the ears of the Governor, whose favourite wife had lain for three months at the door of death. He sent for Gaspard and conducted him to the bedside of his wife. Gaspard found that the beautiful young creature was suffering from an internal abscess. He performed a dangerous operation, and the woman recovered.

The Governor, more delighted by the health of his wife than amazed by the miracle of the operation, released Gaspard and made him his own slave. For nearly four years he served this master faithfully and well, instructing his children, and, as a surgeon, earning so much fame in the city that on two occasions he was summoned to the palace of the Caliph. At the end of his five years' slavery, on condition that he would never leave the city of Bagdad, he was presented with his freedom and became a professor in one of the colleges established by the Caliph.

Gaspard would have been happy in this life—for he was free, occupied as he would be occupied, and famous—but for two griefs which incessantly preyed upon his heart. One was the lack of Isabel, the other ignorance of Hildebert's fate.

Ever since his release from prison he had spared neither time nor patience to discover the whereabouts of his brother. The Governor of the prison had helped him, the great Caliph himself had given orders for enquiries to be made; but all in vain.

Hildebert and three other children of the eighteen had entirely disappeared.

The mystery of Hildebert preyed upon his whole health. He was flattered by princes, honoured by sages, worshipped by students from all parts of the East; soon his freedom would surely be restored to him in fullness and some day he would be rich beyond the dreams of avarice; but he could not rest for thinking of Hildebert—the little brother whom he had seen tortured and whom he loved with the depth and strength and silence of his noble nature. He grew sad, morose, and melancholy.

One day he was passing through the most crowded of the city squares when he saw an old man whose face at once struck him as strangely and in some way terribly familiar. He could not at first think where he had seen that old and withered face, with its flowing beard, its thick spectacles, its innumerable wrinkles; but all at once it sprang to his mind that this was the dealer who had purchased Hildebert for his slave five years ago.

He approached him eagerly, and asked for information of his brother. The old man laughed and chuckled at the question; hundreds, hundreds of slaves, he said proudly, passed through his hands; he had dealings in Cairo, Damascus, Bagdad, Teheran, Bokhara, Benares, Peshawur—all over the world; how, then, should he remember one little French boy—and "five" years ago, too!

But the fact that Hildebert had been one of the Children's Crusade helped him at last to dive with some definite clue into the labyrinth of his memory. He carried Gaspard to the caravanserai where he was resting, and over a cup of coffee gradually pieced together this and that, until he had arrived at a conclusion. All the time that he was fumbling with the past, this old man was secretly studying Gaspard through those thick spectacles of his, and considering what he could make out of him.

Every now and then he asked Gaspard a question about himself, his position, his means, his ambitions for the future.

At last he said, smoothing his dusty beard, 'I think I know where your brother is ; but it would cost much money, very much money, to buy his freedom. He is far from here, far, very far. No one could reach him save I myself ; no, no one in the world. And it would cost, oh, a fortune to buy him. Yes, a fortune. You see, he is clever. Yes, a very clever craftsman. In fact, I should say that there is no one in the whole East who is his equal. Now, you are a great man here, a most honourable man, but you possess little money. How, then, can you hope to buy this great and precious craftsman ? '

And so on, and so on.

He told Gaspard to come and see him on the following day, and refused to say where Hildebert was working, till he had thought things over.

Next day, having discovered that Gaspard was forbidden to leave the city, the old man told him the truth. Hildebert was a slave in Benares. Pressed to say at what trade Hildebert worked, the Arab replied, 'He is an artist in stone.'

From this point he sought to find out what Gaspard would pay for the release of his brother. Gaspard answered in his turn that he must think it over.

His mind was made up. Unable to trust the old man, and too poor to find money for Hildebert's purchase, he determined to escape from the city and make his own way to Benares. In a week's time his plans were completed. Able to speak Arabic perfectly, and thoroughly acquainted with the customs of the Mussulmans, he disguised himself as an Arab, and, accompanied by a brave and faithful servant whose life he had saved, set out early one morning for the long journey across Persia to the unknown land of India.

The risk was great. The old and wily slave-dealer, missing him in Bagdad, would be sure to inform the authorities whither he had journeyed. Soldiers, mounted on swift horses, would soon lay him by the heels—for he and his servant were mounted on camels—and thus he would be ignominiously brought back to the city and either thrown into prison or executed by the Caliph's order.

But Gaspard was strongly influenced by the promise he had made to his mother. He could not rest in his freedom while Hildebert was a slave. Again and again as he urged his camel forward it flashed through his mind that he might now escape to Cairo and take ship for France, where Isabel was waiting for him. But he put the tremendous temptation from his soul. He was strangely convinced that his life was consecrated to his brother. His mother had said that he should be his brother's shield. While Hildebert was a slave he knew that he could never rest.

So Gaspard, the free man, rode forward at the peril of his life to succour the little brother from whose fanaticism had flowed his own misfortunes and the total wreck of all his happiness.

After many weeks and innumerable adventures which it would take us too long to relate he and his faithful servant arrived in the sacred city of Benares. He discovered within two days of his advent the whereabouts of Hildebert.

Hildebert, as the slave-dealer had said, was an artist in stone. He was employed with hundreds of other slaves by a famous worker in marble. For over five years he had drawn the most elaborate designs of flowers and birds, had chiselled these designs in white marble, and had then filled the sculpture with coloured marbles and precious stones. But when Gaspard arrived in Benares the day of

Hildebert's glory as a craftsman was on the wane. The close and incessant work, the minuteness of which is at once its beauty and its wonder, had brought him to the verge of blindness. He had lately ruined several pieces of splendid marble. To rest his eyes, and to save if possible so useful an artist, his master had sent him from the workshop to the yard. When Gaspard first saw his brother the poor youth was staggering under a block of stone, cursed by the other slaves assisting him and flipped with a cane by the Mussulman in charge of the operation.

It was only by a tremendous effort that Gaspard could keep back his tears. He stood in his Arab's dress, the master of the works at his side, watching his brother with so great a compassion and so infinite a love, that his soul at that moment seemed as if it would wrench itself clear of his body.

There was the little brother of his childhood, the Hildebert of a thousand memories, the darling of his mother, the adored idol of his father—there, staggering and stumbling under a great load, his Eastern garments smothered in dust, his flesh worn to the bone, his eyes dull with blindness, and all his degradation and misery and ruin written in the invisible letters of fate which proclaimed him a slave. Looking upon his brother in the mason's yard, Gaspard felt himself smitten with a very swoon and nausea of grief.

He had pretended to be an agent of the Caliph, making enquiries as to a great and splendid mosque just about to be erected in a suburb of Bagdad. The marble worker was polite and obsequious.

‘That white boy,’ said Gaspard the Arab, ‘is too slight for such work; you are wasting good material; and look, his eyes are damaged.’

The marble worker told him Hildebert’s history.

‘I am something of a physician,’ said Gaspard; ‘let me look at his eyes.’

He trembled as Hildebert was brought to him.

The little brother was now a stripling, but wasted to a shadow. His complexion had become dull, the eyes had lost their lustre, the dark lashes were full of powdered dust. He came shuffling towards Gaspard in his shabby linen clothes, stumbling in his paces, his hands feeling their way. And yet, in spite of all the misery and waste of his condition, in spite of all the tragedy and ruin of his youth, there was that same pure look of a radiant spirit in the young face which had made his childhood so adorable.

Gaspard said to him in Arabic, speaking harshly, ‘Your eyes are dim, my brother.’

‘God is good,’ answered Hildebert in the same language; ‘I am well content.’

‘Allah is certainly good,’ said Gaspard; ‘but we must take care of our bodies.’

Hildebert smiled. ‘What matters the body?’ he asked gently. ‘Whether I be blind or see, whether

I be deaf or hear, whether I be dumb or speak—always God is near, and always I see the face of Christ and hear His voice. The body profits nothing. The dwelling-place of love is the soul.'

Gaspard's body was shaken by profound emotion. The voice of his brother was so beautiful and searching to his soul in its infinite pathos; the tones had not lost their sweetness, and time had given to that gentle music of his spirit a calm, a depth, a steadfast confidence which before had been lacking. Gaspard was moved in every fibre of his being. He rested his hands on Hildebert's shoulders, bowed his head, pretending to examine his eyes, and for a moment was silent, utterly unable to speak. 'Believest thou, my brother,' he asked presently, 'in the prophet of the Christians—you, who are a slave, you, who work for the true believers, you, whom your Christ has deserted?'

Hildebert answered, 'I am not alone. All faith in God is good. But faith in Christ is the most beautiful, and therefore the most true. He does not leave those who dearly love Him. Though I am a slave He is with me always. Yea, my brother, it is His Will that I am a slave, and thus I serve Him and thus I wait for my freedom in Him alone.'

The marble worker laughed softly, 'This little swine,' he said, 'is as gentle as a dove; we let him speak freely, for he says nothing harsh; of the true religion he speaks ever with respect, though he

continues an infidel; but for that, and the fact that he is a good worker, I should have twisted the tongue from his mouth years ago.'

Gaspard turned away.

'Back to your work, infidel!' commanded the master, and sidled after Gaspard. 'Are his eyes curable, think you?' he asked eagerly.

Gaspard said to him, 'I have taken a fancy to that child. The Caliph, my master, would rejoice to have such a slave about him. He is nearly blind. Soon he will be useless to you. Nothing, I think, can restore his sight. Give him to me, I pray you, that I may take him back with me to Bagdad.'

The master said, 'When the Caliph buys my work, I will send him the boy—for a price. But he cost me much money. He is a clever worker.'

'He will be blind in a year,' said Gaspard.

'Still, he cost me much money.'

'Let me take him now.'

The master laughed softly, 'When the Caliph buys my marbles, he shall have the boy—for a price.'

Gaspard went away.

On the following day he returned, and after talking of marbles with the master, made once more his request for Hildebert. But the man was more adamant than the marbles.

Then Gaspard, who had made his plans and saw his road clear before his eyes, said to the man, 'Will

you exchange him for another slave, one who is tall and strong, to whom the lifting of those stones would be a little thing, and one, moreover, who is cunning in my own trade of physician ? ’

The master was well pleased with the offer. He himself knew that the eyes fail at this work never to regain their sight. A blind weakling in the yard was of no service to him. They discussed details. Gaspard promised to send him the slave that very night.

‘ Do you speak the little boy’s language ? ’ he asked.

The master shook his head.

‘ Of what nation is he ? ’

‘ He is French.’

Gaspard talked a little longer, and then said he would speak to the boy once more.

In Arabic he said to Hildebert, ‘ I speak your language, albeit indifferently. Is it your will that I give you instruction in that tongue ? ’

‘ I love my language,’ answered Hildebert, ‘ and it is many years since I heard it. Yes, I pray you, speak to me in my language. But no instruction, my brother, can draw me from the love of God.’

Then Gaspard said in French, slowly and as if with difficulty, ‘ Lay restraint upon yourself and be calm ; show no excitement at what I shall say to you. I bring a message. Are you master of your feelings ? Can you control yourself ? ’

‘Do you come from my brother?’ asked Hildebert, his voice trembling.

‘Yes.’

‘Is he well?’

‘Yes.’

‘I need not have asked!’ said Hildebert. ‘Nevertheless, good is it, very good, to know that our prayers have truly been in accordance with God’s holy Will.’

‘So you have prayed for this brother?’

‘Always.’

‘You are dear to him. He thinks of you often. He knows too that you are dear to your mother and would send you back to her. I am here for that purpose. I am here to obtain your freedom.’

Hildebert’s face shone. ‘For that, too, I have prayed—to see my mother once again, before I am blind.’

Then Gaspard told him that a slave would be exchanged for him, that with this slave who came to take his place would come a faithful Arab, one in whom he could wholly trust. This Arab would go with him to the coast, would find him a ship for France, and would provide money for his journey.

‘All that you must do in return,’ said Gaspard, ‘is to send him by your father a present of money.’

‘But my brother?’

‘He is happy.’

‘I would see him!’

‘Nay, he is far from here.’

‘But will he not come home?’

‘He is happy. He works for a great potentate. His life is easy. Nothing is hard or bitter. He does not grieve that he must remain with the lord, his master. One thing only he lacks, and with one message he bade me charge you to those of your house. He says that you possess a miniature which is dear to him, and which he would fain have restored to him.’

‘I carry it with me,’ cried Hildebert eagerly. ‘Three things only I possess. The little red cross which my mother made for me, the rosary which she sent to my sister—God rest her soul—and the picture which my brother desires.’ He placed his hand in his cloth, drew out the miniature, and gave it to the Arab.

Gaspard regarded it with a most moving composure. Not a muscle trembled in his whole body. His eyelids did not blink. He looked at the picture—and that was all. But his soul was in agony.

Hildebert said to him, ‘Did he send me a message?’

‘He bade me charge you,’ said Gaspard, looking up from the picture, ‘to give this same message to his mother, to his father, and to the lady of this picture, “I am happy: I am well: I am content; in heaven that which was denied on earth may perhaps be fulfilled; and always I shall love you.”’

See, he wrote it down on this paper ! It is written for the lady of the picture. Further he bade me say that no one should grieve for him, since he lives in honour and prospers at his work.'

'You will see him soon ?' asked Hildebert.

'Yes.'

'Tell him,' said the almost blind but still beautiful boy, 'that I cannot love him more, nor pray for him more earnestly, than I have ever done since we parted many years ago ; but report to him that I said this to you, *It is like Gaspard to think of others.* Tell him these words, sir, when you give him the picture.'

So the brothers parted for a second time, but now without embraces, and without tears.

That night, brought by his faithful Arab servant, Gaspard presented himself, as a European, before the master of the marble works.

He never saw Hildebert again, but many times in the years ahead of him, bearing blocks of marble on his shoulder, taunted by the other slaves, and urged by the taskmaster with his cane, he saw the vision of a distant lamp burning dimly in the midst of a great blackness, and felt that it had light for his soul.

CHAPTER XXX

MUSTARD SEED

NOW there happened to Hildebert on his voyage homeward a very happy and surprising encounter. He made friends with many of the people on board ship, and, of course, the fact that he was one of those who had set out with Stephen of Cloyes for Holy Land rendered him a principal centre of conversation. Merchants, students, and sailors would congregate about him on deck, and he would tell them stories of the Crusade, and answer questions that they put to him concerning the heathen with whom he had lived.

There was a young student travelling to Europe who delighted in argument, and very often he would amuse himself by seeking to destroy Hildebert's faith. He would say that the religions of the world were all equally false, and that it was absurd for anyone to suppose that the particular religion to which he was born had the special blessing of Heaven.

One day he said to Hildebert, 'How can you

believe any longer in your God, seeing that He allowed so many innocent children who trusted Him with their whole hearts to be sold into slavery? Do you tell us that such is the action of a good God? You say "He is our Father." Now, answer me; is such a thing the action of a loving Father?'

The merchants and sailors surrounding Hildebert looked at him anxiously for his answer. They disliked the student. They felt that his scepticism was wicked and dangerous. They even feared that a man who thought so freely about religion might bring their vessel to shipwreck. At the same time, in the secrecy of their hearts, they acknowledged the difficulty of his question.

Hildebert looked at the student, struggling to see with his dim eyes the face of a man who did not believe in God, and answered as follows: 'In the first days of my slavery, brother, I thought as you think now. It seemed to me impossible that a good God would so mock children who trusted in Him. I could not pray to Him. To think about Him almost drove me mad. I felt myself alone in the world, alone in a cruel world where the devil was stronger than God. For more than a week I suffered agonies which were like the dying of the soul. But gradually, brother, the truth came to me. And the truth is this: *God will have nothing to do with the sword.* Violence of any

kind is hateful to God; and conquest, because it is a transitory thing, and a thing full of pride and self-aggression, is not the method He chooses for the establishment of His Kingdom. Jesus our Lord was tempted to use force, but He withstood the temptation. Instead of legions of angels, He planted the grain of mustard seed. Instead of the sword, he took a morsel of leaven. But we children, moved by the Spirit of God to spread His truth, were tempted and fell. We thought of conquering the infidel. To us the infidel appeared, not a brother, not a child of God, but an enemy. What could God do when we rejected His way and chose for ourselves? If you thrust your hand into fire, is it God's doing that you are burned? If you drink poison, is it God's action that you die? Surely it is your own doing. But God did not desert us. Nay, even in our humiliation, in our bitter wretchedness, in our chains and prisons, He manifested His rightful way. For we learned to be modest and gentle to the infidel, we saw that he, too, is in search of God, and above everything else by our resignation, our prayers, and our kindness to those who ill-treated us, we sowed the true seeds of the Christian faith.'

He paused for a moment, and then, leaning quietly forward, he laid a hand upon the arm of the young student and added these words: 'Wherever a little child sold into slavery was faithful to God,

brother, there the Spirit of Christ moved among the heathen. Who shall measure the growth of the mustard seed, the working of the leaven, in the years to come? I think it is nearer God's way just to touch the hearts of the heathen with the Spirit of Christ's religion, even if the touch come from the hand of a little child, than to destroy those heathen by the sword or to force them into Christianity. I look for no conquest of the world in the name of Christ but for a gradual brotherhood of love among all nations through the example of those who are true children of His Kingdom.'

A certain merchant who heard this answer was greatly impressed by Hildebert's faith, and he sought to do him many services and was often in his company, speaking to him of faith. This merchant not only revered Hildebert, but he grew every day more fond of the youth, until at last he came to love him almost as a son.

It struck this good man to the heart, watching the dim eyes of the beautiful youth, that he should soon be blind, and he implored Hildebert not to wait for a remedy until he arrived in France, but to visit a hospital in Cairo where many people were cured of grievous afflictions.

Hildebert for some time declared that he was content to go blind, and assured the merchant that God would grant him strength to bear the great darkness. But the merchant argued eloquently

that God intended us to use all means for our health, and he so reminded Hildebert of Gaspard by his insistence on the divinity of reason that at last the boy yielded to his importunities.

When the ship lay off Cairo, Hildebert and this merchant went ashore and made their way through the crowded streets, filled with a dreadful rabble, to the hospital of whose fame the merchant had heard.

They were admitted by a porter, and conducted to a clean white room overlooking a beautiful garden, from the terrace of which a view could be seen of the Nile. In the centre of the garden was the statue of a woman in the garments of a Sister of Mercy; she was kneeling, and with her hands clasped as if in prayer, her head slightly raised to heaven, she was gazing towards the river. The sun, breaking through the branches of dark trees, made a glory round this kneeling figure.

The door opened, and a woman entered.

She was young and beautiful, dressed in a long robe of dove-colour, with white linen over her breast, a nun's hood of dove-colour over her head, a bandeau of white linen on her brow.

She looked at the merchant, who advanced to meet her, and asked in French what she could do for him. While he was speaking she looked towards Hildebert.

A strange fixed light came suddenly into her

eyes. She raised her hands to her heart. For a moment she swayed. Then she went swiftly forward, and stood close to Hildebert, looking into his eyes.

Hildebert was only aware of the presence of a woman, a white woman dressed in religious garb. He wrinkled his eyes to see her face, and with all courtesy offered her the salutation of a Christian.

But at the next minute he found himself in the embrace of this woman, felt himself half lifted from his feet and strained to her bosom, felt her kisses on his cheeks, and heard his name from her lips—his name, tenderly and passionately uttered with all the yearning of a mother's love.

Then he knew that Falaise lived. Raising his head, a smile of glory shining in his face, he cried her name three times, holding her to him, kissing her, the tears starting from his eyes.

The merchant was amazed and could not understand what had happened. But when he was about to withdraw in order that brother and sister might be alone together, Falaise stopped him, and Hildebert begged him to remain.

She conducted them to the garden, and in a cool place they seated themselves, and there Falaise told her wonderful story.

From the moment when Falaise threw herself over the side of the ship she was conscious of some

mysterious support, as though invisible arms held her, guided her, and, as it were, embraced her tenderly. Yet she was conscious that these invisible arms had difficulty in saving her, that they had to contend against the laws of Nature, that they were even sore put to it again and again to prevent her from drowning. But she was nevertheless certain that all would be well with her. She did not struggle. She did not cry out. Once, when the water passed over her face, she saw, in a sudden and instantaneous illumination, all the incidents of her life, from the very dawn of infancy up to that moment when she sprang from the ship. A feeling visited her heart, sad and regretful, that she had not been of more service to her mother, that she had not been kinder to the poor and sorrowful, that she had not loved the great Father of Heaven with a greater devotion. Then a voice said in her ear, quite distinctly—

‘There is time yet ; be not anxious ; God is very merciful.’

And from that moment, after a most beautiful sensation of calm and tranquillity, she remembered nothing till she found herself safe from the river.

She came to consciousness in the hut of a fisherman, far from the city of Cairo. The man, his wife, and three little children were surrounding her when she wakened.

Some days later she was placed in a boat and

taken to Cairo. The man carried her to the house of a rich Egyptian lady, and there left her. Falaise, without knowing it, was a slave. The fisherman had sold her for a very few coins.

But the Egyptian lady was a good woman who worshipped one God and practised all the kindness commanded by Mohammed. The fisherman might have sold her to wicked men, but he feared God, and would sell her only to one who was good. Thus by the power of religion was Falaise saved from calamity. The rich Egyptian was very gentle to her and taught her the language of Egypt and instructed her in the art of embroidery.

When Falaise could speak Egyptian, she told the lady her story and asked that she might work for the poor and sorrowful. The story made a great impression on the lady's heart. 'Your God and my God,' she said, 'though we call Him by a different name, is the One true Father of the human race. When I pray to Allah, and when you pray to God, it is the same Eternal who hears, the same Father who answers.'

After a little time the two women decided together that it would be an act pleasing to God to build a hospital where the sick and afflicted of Cairo might be nursed to health, comforted by religious kindness, and where all that science could accomplish should be done for those who are poor. And soon the hospital was built, and so great was the effect upon

the Egyptian lady's heart of this noble place inspired by love of Christ, that just before the end of her life she became a Christian. Then, on her deathbed, she caused a statue of Falaise to be set up in the garden, a statue of the white angel whom God had sent to Egypt, an angel praying to God, with her eyes towards the river and the sea. At her death Falaise became the chief of the hospital and was alone responsible for its maintenance.

Such, in brief, was the story of Falaise. Both Hildebert and the merchant were marvellously moved by its narration. Again and again brother and sister embraced with joy. The merchant smiled upon them and blessed God for His mercy.

Then Hildebert asked Falaise if she would return with him to France.

She shook her head. 'I feel that it is here I am intended to work,' she replied, 'and my mother, who worships God, will understand and will not ask me to return.'

Hildebert drew from his bosom the old rosary which five years ago his mother had sent by Gaspard to Falaise.

She handled it tenderly for a moment, kissing some of the beads, and then returned it to Hildebert. 'It is sacred, because my mother has used it in her prayers,' she said; 'but I can pray best to God with empty hands. Take it back to our mother, and let it be a sign to her of my love. We shall meet

in heaven, where there shall be no more tears, no more partings.'

Then Hildebert told her what he knew of Gaspard.

'Whether he return to France or stay with the great king in India,' Falaise said at the end, 'he will serve God. I think God has greater need of him in India than in France. Tell our parents that they must not grieve either for Gaspard or for me. It may be sad for them not to see us again on this earth, but life is only for a little, and afterwards, in a beautiful heaven, we shall meet and be happy with God. Surely it shall sweeten their sorrow now, that I in Egypt and Gaspard in India are at least touching the religions of the heathen with the kindness of Christ. And they will have you to bless and rejoice them. God has not left them comfortless.'

She said more than this when Hildebert implored her to return if only for a little time, and she spoke so passionately, like one inspired, that Hildebert was carried away by her eloquence.

'I, too,' he exclaimed, 'will remain. I, too, will not go back. The Crusade was not in vain. It shall yet conquer the world by love.'

But Falaise gathered him into her arms, and said to him, 'It is the Will of God that you return, not only to comfort our parents, but to teach France that the sword is not the weapon of Christ. If none return, none will know. Go back to France, and

tell the gospel of the Children's Crusade, for it is a good tidings.'

Then she took Hildebert into the hospital, and his eyes were treated by a doctor, and after a few hours he returned with the merchant to the ship.

CHAPTER XXXI

BRINGING HIS SHEAVES

ON a summer's evening, Hildebert arrived in Châteauneuf. The money with which Gaspard had provided him enabled the poor boy to buy a mule in Marseilles, and he had ridden as far as Limoges. Here he was robbed of all he possessed, save the little red cross and the rosary, by a man whom he had met on the road and with whom he had talked freely and trustingly, as was his nature.

The rest of the road, therefore, he tramped and begged his way, befriended by the poor, mocked by the rich, and distrusted by priests and monks. He arrived footsore, dusty, and hungry at the hour of sunset.

Nicholas had just come from the shop to the kitchen. Elisabeth was bringing the pot from the fire to the table. Isabel was greeting Nicholas, as she set the three trenchers of black bread in their place.

Isabel had come to stay with Elisabeth soon after the departure of the Children's Crusade. When the

news arrived from Marseilles of the betrayal by the pious merchants and the shipwreck of some of the vessels, Isabel remained to comfort and sustain the poor desolate and broken-hearted mother. The two women became devoted. They were not like mother and daughter, but like sisters crushed and broken by a single blow. They clung to each other in the ruin of their loves ; and Nicholas looked on, and rubbed his hands, and moistened his lips, and said, 'It is God's Will. He has prospered me. And now He will not leave me lonely to the lamentations of an old woman with a broken heart. God is good. One must believe to be prospered.'

Hildebert entered by the familiar door of the house. He called, but got no answer. Then he groped his way through the shadows to the yard. As he came towards the kitchen, Isabel, whose eyes were lifted to greet Nicholas, saw him, but did not recognise him. Long ago—more than five years ago—the children had been given up for dead.

'Someone wants you,' she said quietly to Nicholas.

He saw where her eyes were directed, and wheeled briskly round.

'Who is it?' he demanded. 'What do you want?'

At that moment there was a frightful clatter in the kitchen. Both he and Isabel turned swiftly

round. Elisabeth had let the pot fall from her hands upon the rushes of the floor. They saw her standing, white as death, her arms half lifted and stretched out towards the doorway.

In an instant Isabel divined the truth, but she ran to her second-mother, embraced her, and held her from falling, without once casting a look at the son who had come back.

Nicholas did not immediately realise what had happened. His brain only knew that a stranger stood at the doorway, and that his wife had spilled the supper.

‘What’s to do? What’s to do?’ he exclaimed petulantly.

‘Mother!’ said the stranger at the door, and groped his way in, holding in his outstretched hand, as if in warrant of his identity, a little red cross and a rosary.

Then Nicholas sprang forward, seized his son in his arms, examined his face, uttered a frightful cry of joy and agony, and hugged him to his bosom.

Elisabeth advanced, weak and tottering, supported by Isabel. Her eyes, with their black rings, seemed to stand clear of the sockets; her cheeks were like the linen that covered the head and framed her face like the dress of a nun; her lips were parted; with her hands she seemed to be swimming through the air.

Nicholas, his eyes streaming, and still embracing Hildebert, turned his head, and sobbed out rather than cried, 'Wife! Wife! The little one. Our little one!'

She took Hildebert into her arms, held him against her breast, bowed her head, and wept upon him.

She only had seen, even in the shock of her joy, that her son was all but blind.

.

When they were calm, Hildebert told the story of the Crusade, related the encounter with Falaise, gave the message she had sent back with the rosary, and told how he had parted from Gaspard more than five years ago, how he had been a slave in Benares, and how, finally, Gaspard had sent an Arab to obtain his freedom.

'Ah!' cried Elisabeth, 'the blessed St. Martin spoke truly to me! Your brother was sent by God to be your shield and protector.'

'And comes he not home himself?' asked Isabel in a quiet voice.

It was the first question she had asked. Elisabeth caught up her hand, and held it, and looked at her with love and tenderness.

Then Hildebert remembered the letter, and drew it from his ragged clothes, and gave it to Isabel.

'He keeps your picture, which he loves beyond

all his possessions,' he said ; ' and he bade me say that none here is to grieve for him, that he is happy and content, that his master is a great king, that he is promoted to honour, and that he loves you all, and trusts in God that what is denied here may be fulfilled in heaven.'

No one spoke for a moment, and then Nicholas laughed, rubbed his soft hands, and said :

' Our Gaspard was always a lad for ambition. He has got fame and power. He sits at the elbows of kings, and that they be black ones, and infamous heretics and infidels to boot, matters not to him ! Skeletons are all of one hue ! Well, let him live as he will. We are not all made alike. But God bless him, God bless my boy Gaspard, for sending home to us our little Hildebert of the red cross.'

So Hildebert lived at home, and became gradually blind, and was beloved by all for the sweetness of his disposition and the glory of his faith, which was like an atmosphere about him and like a fragrance in his speech. He it was who taught Europe that the sword is not the weapon of Christ, that the heathen are also in search of God, and that we must first use them as brothers before we can bring them to the Cross of Christ. Hildebert spoke to many who came to his father's house as to a shrine. He addressed bishops and clergy, and he laboured among the poor of Touraine, teaching them above

everything else the Law of God. There was never a teacher of the True Way like Hildebert in that region of France.

And Isabel became mother both to him and to Elisabeth in her old age, and she was the good angel of that house, and to no one, lest it should mar their bliss, did she ever tell what her heart knew by instinct, to wit, that Gaspard had laid down his life for his brother.

‘What is denied here,’ she would say cheerfully, whenever any trouble came to perplex or worry them, ‘will be fulfilled in heaven.’

So she believed; and in this faith she lived her gentle life of unselfish ministration, and passed to the mystery of death sure of its truth.

Gaspard was already on the other side to greet her and fulfil.

.

So ends a story that was once the wonder of the world, soon but its laughter, and afterwards but one of many things forgotten. We who understand it better will neither wonder nor laugh; rather, while its memory yet lingers in our minds, will we hope that it had some blessing for the East, some warning for the West, some purpose in the mystery of God. For surely as we look more closely back upon the road of history, the more clearly do we see, through all the wanderings and

blunderings of Man, the moving, the guiding, and the patient shaping of a Spirit Hand.

What seem to us but sad funeral tapers,
May be heaven's distant lamps.

Never can the world content itself either with the grossness of sensuality or with the cramping dullness of materialism. Always in periods of great spiritual darkness there will be such wild, violent, and passionate reactions as this Children's Crusade, witnessing even in the height of their folly and the depth of their tragedy to the longing of the soul at whatever cost for contact with the central verity of existence. 'Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee.'

THE END.

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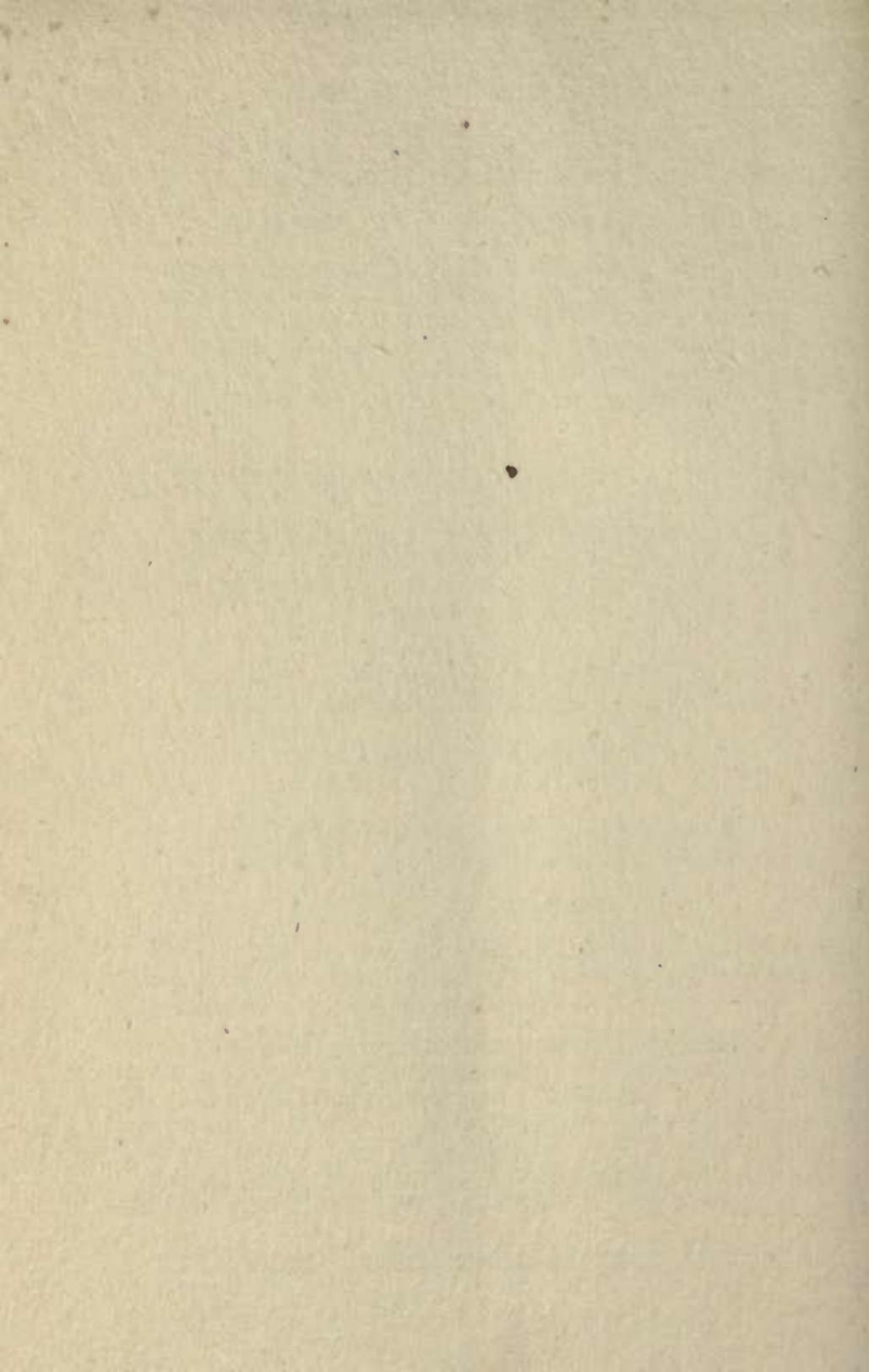
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