

choked him; he clasped his hands and threw them up toward Heaven, as if he called on his creator to witness his innocence, and immediately expired.

The two friends rose and looked at Thoms.

Whiter in his grave he would never be. The veins stood out on his damp forehead like whipcord, but he returned their fierce gaze with a dogged firmness.

"What do you say to this charge?" demanded St. Udo.

"I say nothing," mumbled Thoms, showing his long, cruel teeth. "If you're ready to believe a rebel against your own servant, I needn't expect much fair play. What else would he say to revenge his death, I'd like to know? Of course, if you're a-going to shoot me, nothing that I can say will stop you—you're master here, as well as everywhere else."

He ground the last words out through his teeth with a venom, a fury which belonged more to a madman than to a man supposed to be in possession of his ordinary sanity, and he addressed them to St. Udo exclusively.

"You deserve to die," said St. Udo, "if you have attempted our lives."

"By gar! we will court-martial the rogue!" cried Calembours. "He shall be shot, the traitor!"

"If you shoot me, you shoot an innocent man," protested the old man. "Surely Colonel Brand will give me fair play? I swear I never attempted your lives!"

St. Udo scrutinized the eager face doubtfully, and frowned.

"You say that the Confederate, not you, fired that pistol-shot?" he demanded.

"I do say so," answered Thoms, firmly.

"Then we give you the benefit of the doubt this time," said St. Udo, "but warn you that you shall be well watched in future. Be off, now, and beware of treachery, for you shall not escape a second time."

The haggard face lit up with evil exultation; but Thoms cringed before the haughty colonel, and muttered his gratitude in abject terms.

"No more need be said," cried St. Udo, with a cold sneer, "except this—if either Colonel Calembours or I meet death treacherously, you will be a suspected man, and will not escape, I promise you. Now, go."

Away slunk Thoms, with his head down on his breast, and the friends' eyes met significantly.

"There goes von rascal unhung," said the chevalier.

"He's mad, Calembours—mad as Malvolio," said St. Udo. "Don't annoy yourself over his vagaries. Ugh! how I detest his presence near me."

Reed, the soldier, filled the camp with whisperings against Thoms; over and over the black story was repeated by a thousand camp-fires, and wherever the wretched man slunk, he was met by suspicious looks and loathing hatred.

He saw that everybody believed in his guilt, notwithstanding Colonel Brand's clemency, and he quailed before the terrible position, and shrank into himself in dumb patience.

Some hours later the command was once more on the march, and at the dawn of day it came upon a plantation with a magnificent mansion set in the midst.

A murmur of satisfaction ran through the weary men as a halt was ordered, and ere long the verdant plain was white with tents, and the lambent air was rife with the rattle of the breakfast preparations, and fragrant with the odor of coffee and frying steaks.

Colonels Brand and Calembours looked anxiously at the pretty mansion which peeped from foliage of the jasmine, oleander, and magnolia, and in its spacious rooms they mentally saw their brave boys properly cared for and nursed by the negroes of the plantation.

"We can ask for room for our wounded here until we get a chance to send them to Washington," said St. Udo, "and leave a guard with them. Come, Calembours, let's reconnoiter."

"With all my heart," quoth the chevalier. "I like the outside of the *maison* better than the inside of my tent, and, by gar! comrade, what then will the inside of the *maison* be? Come, then."

And with this brief prologue the quaintest performance was ushered in which Colonel Brand had yet witnessed in his acquaintance with the sprightly Chevalier de Calembours.

The two colonels approached through beds of sweetest flowers, and tinkling fountains, and garden houses—the loveliest residence imaginable, swathed in roses and creamy jasmine cups, girdled with balconies in highest tracery, embellished with a row of pillars in front upholding a gilded piazza roof, and entered through an imposing portal of richest design.

There was no sign of life, however, apparent, although the upper windows were opened to their widest extent, and the snowy curtains waved out on the wall among the climbing roses; and St. Udo's peremptory rap upon the door only received an answer from its echo in the sounding hall.

"*Encore!*" cried the cavalier, "they sleep soundly! Again, *mon ami*, don't despair."