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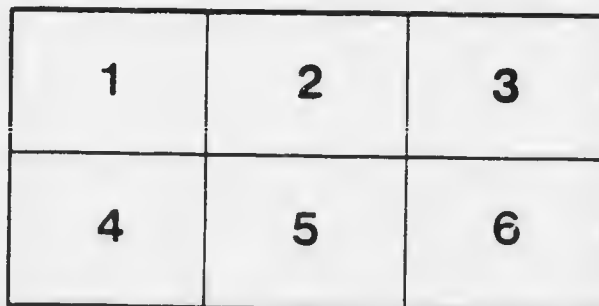
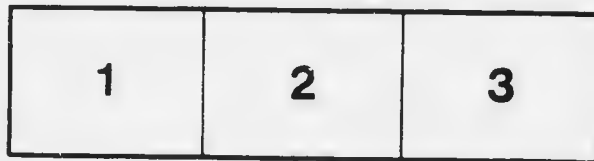
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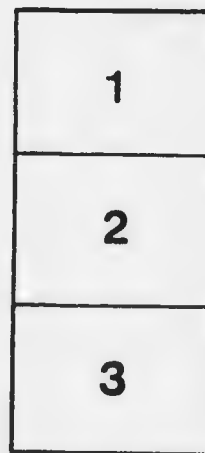
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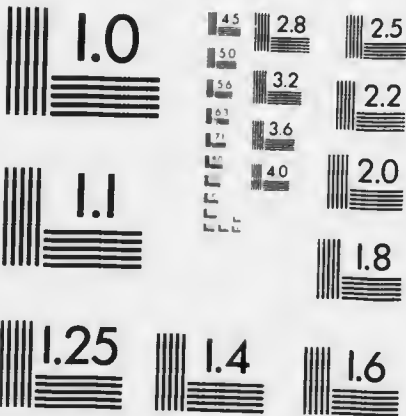
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A WILDERNESS WOOING



A WILDERNESS WOOING

BY
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A WILDERNESS WOOING

CHAPTER I

A REBEL'S WEDDING

THERE is no stream with gentler charm than the little Rundle River in the month of May. That winding silvery ribbon, with the round-bosomed hills at its back and the shimmering green Channel to southward, and all around it the cool woods and the scented meadows open to the sun, makes such a picture as a man might carry in his mind through many lands and seas.

Arnold Firle, who sat in his boat and rowed up-stream with the tide, had been far enough away, and had seen wild enough work in the four years that had passed. There had been bloody, cruel business among the ruthless Frenchmen and the dogged Dutch in the Low Countries. Only three nights ago he had sailed out of the Scheldt, lit by a burning village, whose flames made dancing shadows upon the great brown sails that bore him seaward.

It seemed to him almost unreal that he was home again, that he sat here lazily pulling his oars amid the sweet peace of the south country, with the Rundle rippling under the little boat that bore him towards Westringfold. A bend of the stream hid the last view of the town at the river mouth, and of the fat Dutch fishing-craft that had brought him home. The tide was near the flood, carrying

the boat easily forward. Arnold Firle let the oars dangle in the full river, and sat looking about him, weaving pleasant fancies.

It is only four miles up, from the sea to Westringfold. Upon its high wooded slope, close above the stream, rose already full in view the stately mass of Westringfold Castle, the outlines of its grey walls and towers softened by a light haze. A banner floated over the keep, so Arnold knew that the Earl of Vane, his cousin, was at home.

His thoughts, however, concerned themselves little enough with the Earl his cousin, and his eyes rested only so long upon the ancient turrets of his dwelling as might suffice to pick up the bearings of another. That other, which from the river at this point you could not see, lay near the foot of the rise, a square snug house, sentinelled by mighty elms, and sweetened (as he well remembered) by the fragrance of a flower garden that sloped down to the stream. It was a house full of magical memories of a boy's fanciful passion and a girl's wayward teasing.

All that was four years ago, and the boy was a man, for the wars had made him one, and if he had lost some of his fancies he had treasured his memories the more. Now that the hour was come for seeing her again, he sat in a growing fever of anticipation. Four years is a long time! True, she had promised to remember him, and just at that moment the tears had been in her eyes. But she must have had many suitors, for she had been very lovely in those bright days when she was seventeen and he was twenty-one, and her care-for-nought old grandfather, whose heiress she was, had made much plunder on the Spanish Main. Arnold preserved a humiliating recollection of the old freebooter's scorn when he had once faced him boldly and asked for his promise of Marjorie.

"Go, Master Arnold, and get fledged," he had said.

"Do you think I price you higher than other lads, because you stand heir to my Lord of Vane? The Earl is a wild bird, but one day he will take a mate to his nest, and then who is Master Arnold Firle?"

"Sir Andrew Ruthven, I never mentioned my cousin!" the young man had cried indignantly.

"But you thought of him, I'll warrant!" the old man had laughed. "Here's a secret, Arnold—I think more of you because of those smuggled cargoes you and your scoundrels have brought into Westringfold than if you were cousin to a dozen dukes. But smuggling is a poor game for a gentleman to play. Go you and cut the purse-strings of the King of Spain, as I did, or of the French King, or of any foreign Majesty who has a purse to lighten, and when you can buy this house over my head with your spoils of war you shall have Marjorie to share it with you. And till then you may go to the devil!"

The lad had taken old Sir Andrew at his word, and had gone to the devil, or to the wars, which is much the same thing. He had not won much wealth, to be sure, but he had gained some honour. He had fought a king's ship (her other officers being slain) against the Dutch sea-dogs, and had sunk his man, and if the pestilential ague of the Low Countries had not caught him at the last he would have sailed to Westringfold long since in his own tall ship, and not in yonder Dutch tub, with her crew of bribed fishers.

As he sat there remembering in his boat, within a mile of her who had been the beacon of his hopes those four years, Arnold Firle was seized with a sudden great impatience to be at her side. He bent like a galley-slave to the oars, and the Rundle churned as the light craft flew up-stream.

Now he was in the little ancient town, sweeping under the low stone arch of the bridge. He pulled out of the current, and tied up the boat by the bridge stairs.

The bridge, from which the road winds up to the castle gate, was all revelling with banners, and green branches, and flowers and evergreen were swung in festoons from poles that had been set along the roadway. The church bells were pealing from the top of the town, and the streets were full of merry-makers. Outside the inn that faced the old Bridge Stairs a group of fellows were dancing absurdly in the roadway, and others, seated drinking by the door, cheered them on. The landlord, a good client of Arnold's for certain of those smuggled cargoes of which Sir Andrew Ruthven had spoken, stood grinning in his porch.

Having a mind to make himself presentable for company before going further, Arnold crossed the road and touched the landlord on the shoulder.

"Old friend," said he, "I'm glad to see you thriving. Show me a quiet room, and a tankard of English ale."

"A tankard of ale you shall have, but for your quiet room, master, you must go further afield, for I think you will find none in Westringfold to-day. And as for old friendship, I do not know you from Adam." Which only shows how four years of hard adventure, and a fisherman's suit, may transform a man.

A twinkle came into Arnold's grey-blue eyes. "Where do you store your liquor nowadays?" he whispered, leaning to the landlord's ear. "Do the mourners still bury it at midnight in the old iron grave? And who is now chief mourner, Stephen?"

The landlord stared and stood back. "By the Mass!" cried he, "it is young Master Firle!"

"Captain Firle now, if you please, of His Majesty's Navy," said the young man, assuming an air of great gravity. "I hope you have no smuggling in these parts, such as I have heard prevailed here formerly. Tell me, Stephen, what is the meaning of all this gaiety?"

"My lord your cousin has found a bride, Master Firle.

What forlorn place come you from that you do not know that? "

" I am this minute landed from Holland," said Arnold, " where I very narrowly escaped being eaten up by the angry Dutchmen. If you will give me the loan of some Christian clothes, Stephen, I will pray for you very willingly."

" Come inside," said the landlord, pulling him in. " I am heartily glad to see you, lad. I thought you dead."

" And you were not so far astray," answered Arnold. " I have been near enough to it. So the Earl has found a wife! Pray where did he come on that discovery? "

" He had not far to seek," said Stephen. " And, faith, had he sought farther he would likely have fared worse, for I verily believe he has the most lovely lady that ever tempted the eyes. If my lord your noble cousin would be advised by old Stephen he would keep her away from London, for if the eyes of Majesty should light upon her ladyship—" Here the landlord winked his eye, and put his tongue in his cheek. " Ladies of smaller origins than Mistress Marjorie have comforted the Throne," he added.

If Arnold Firle had been struck between the eyes he could not have been more dazed. He caught hold of a chair.

" What ails you? " said Stephen, turning round.

The young man stammered something about his recent illness, and stood staring blankly.

" Sit you down," said the landlord, pushing him into the chair. " Here, girl, some ale! " He looked down upon his guest with as much anxiety as his round red countenance would hold.

" I am better," Arnold made shift to say, and then collected his self-control. " You were saying," he went on " that the Earl of Vane has married Mistress Marjorie, grand-daughter to old Sir Andrew Ruthven of River Grange? "

"No other," answered Stephen. "They say at first it was hard hunting, for the maid was coy, but you know your noble cousin. He has the Spanish blood by his mother's side, and the more she doubled, the more hotly he pursued. He is bold and masterful, with the passion of the South in his veins, and the keen wits of the North in his head, and he has withal a notable way with the women. Such a lover is not easy to withstand. A hot and handsome lord, the Earl of Vane!"

A serving-girl brought Arnold's liquor and set it on the table before him.

"Drink," said Master Stephen, "to the happiness of our lord and lady! I will go and find you some clothes. You are about my son's build, I think."

"Wait!" cried Arnold, still heavy-witted from the blow to his hopes. "I have changed my mind about the clothes. For to-day I will keep those I have, and to-morrow I will see the tailor."

Stephen looked curiously at his young friend and shrugged his broad shoulders. "As you will," said he, "though to my mind, Master Firle, you have more the air of a pirate than a Christian man, and I am sure my boy's jacket will fit you very well. In any case, you will stay with us this night?"

"Ay, that I will do gladly," the young man answered, little knowing what the night was to bring forth, and being much too dumbfounded by his news to care. So Stephen the host went off to attend to his affairs, for he had a full house, and the room was noisy with boisterous revellers.

The bronzed young Captain, in his rough attire, sat at the table with his head on his hand in a bitter reverie, heedless of the scene about him. So absorbed was he with his own thoughts that when presently a neighbour laid a hand on his arm he started violently. The man beside him had a sour smile. His dress was dusty and

travel-stained, and in front of him lay his pedlar's pack. He had the air of awaiting an answer to some remark which Arnold had not heard.

"Did you speak to me?" asked Arnold.

"I said, sir, you do not drink to this happy bridal," said the man.

"Nor you, sir, I observe."

"Why should I drink," asked the man, "to that which cannot be?"

"How do you mean? 'That which cannot be'?"

"Well, sir," said the pedlar, sourly enough, but with the air of one rejoicing in a secret, "it is no particular business of mine, but I am open to wager you that by this time to-morrow there will be more tears than kisses in the Castle of Vane." This he said in a low and cautious voice.

"You speak in riddles," answered Arnold, affecting an indifference that was very far from him.

The pedlar leaned to his ear. "If you love gossip," he whispered, "here is a piece for your enjoyment. To-morrow morning his lordship of Vane will be on his way to the Tower, and when he leaves that lodging I think he will get no further than the Tower Hill."

Here indeed, if it were true, was a mighty piece of news! Arnold looked at the fellow's pack upon the table, and thence at his sneering, indifferent face.

"If your goods are genuine in this line," said he, "you should obtain a good price for them at Westringfold Castle."

"Ah!" muttered the pedlar. "Do you think that has not occurred to me? But when the lions and tigers are fighting among themselves, it is a wise dog that keeps his head out of the dish. There is a troop of three hundred of the King's guards riding to-night on Westringfold, for the Earl's arrest."

"Why?" asked Captain Firle.

The pedlar shrugged his shoulders, and spat on the floor. "I do not understand politics," said he. "But I have ears and eyes. The troop that I have told you of was thirty miles from here at this morning's dawn, for I was turned out of my quarters last night for their leader's accommodation. The roads are very bad with the late rains, and I came over the hills in the night by moonlight. But if the soldiers are not in Westringfold by dusk I will give you my pack and all that is in it."

It was now a little short of noon. Arnold's head was in a whirl with the pedlar's news, but he dare not let his interest be seen. He took a slow draught of his ale, and then looked wisely into the tankard. "To be an Earl is a dangerous trade," he moralized.

Just then mine host, passing the table where the two sat muttering together, stopped to ask the young man how he did.

"Better," said Arnold, "thanks to this comfortable can. When I have had some sleep I shall be a man again. Pray show me where I may lie."

"I will show you where you may lie," said Stephen, "but if you can sleep in this racket I shall be surprised." He pushed off through his crowding customers, beckoning the young man to follow, which Arnold did with such deliberation as he could muster.

As he went he nodded to the pedlar. "There will be more racket, and more surprise by to-night," said he, confidentially, "if your news come true."

But when the landlord had brought him to the private part of the house, Arnold took him by the shoulder. "Stephen, you can trust me?" he asked.

"Why, I suppose so," answered the other. "We have been in some tight places together, Master Firle."

"If you will do me a service, and ask no questions, I will do you a greater, both now and in time to come."

"Well?" said the landlord.

"Lend me the key of the Iron Grave," said Arnold.
"And whatever liquor of value you have in your cellars, see it in safe hiding before five o'clock."

Stephen stood and gaped.

"Keep a quiet tongue," said Arnold, "and if all happens as I think it may, you will reap a good harvest from the event. Have I ever tricked you?"

"No, no, Master Firle."

"Nor ever will. Hasten, get me the key."

The landlord gave his companion one more look, and then without a word went to a cupboard in the wall, and took out a thick iron key as long as a man's hand. This Arnold hid under his seaman's worsted vest.

The inn was a great rambling place, with a courtyard on the side away from the river. Arnold Firle walked out through the courtyard, skirted the old wall of the churchyard that was on the opposite side of the road, and presently came to the great gate of Westringfold Castle.

CHAPTER II

WHAT PASSED AT WESTRINGFOLD CASTLE

THE gate in the barbican was open, and Arnold walked through unhindered into the inner court. At the further end of this the doors of the hall were set wide open; on either side of them was a smooth turfed lawn, bordered with spring flowers. There was a very gay company within, if one were to judge from the sounds of song and laughter which came through the open windows, and the flash of colours that passed and repassed in the hall. Before the door a great hound lay and dozed in the sun. The whole place had an air of solid wealth and comfortable security, in the face of which Captain Firle could not but consider very unfavourably both his appearance and his business. Of the political transactions of the past four years in England he knew very little, and while it did not surprise him that His Majesty should think fit to descend upon an enemy like a thief in the night, yet he could not understand how a nobleman who had put his head in jeopardy should keep his house so easy of access as appeared to be the case with the Earl of Vane.

The pedlar had been most positive in his news. But how if he were wrong? In that case, Arnold reflected, he was about to make himself out a great fool. But if the pedlar were right, then the happiness of his boyhood's love, of her on whom till to-day his hopes and dreams had centred, was given into his hands to make or to mar.

The dozing hound looked up and growled threateningly as Arnold stopped before the entry. Small blame

WHAT PASSED AT WESTRINGFOLD CASTLE 11

to the brute, thought the young sailor; but when a fleshy-fisted serving-man came and put two large fingers on his shoulder and ordered him to be gone, the blood danced up into his head.

"I am come here," said he, "at some inconvenience to myself, with a piece of news for your master which he must know. Let me see the Earl of Vane."

At this the fat rascal grinned. "My lord has something more pleasing to his sight at this moment than a greasy fisherman. Get out, Herring-bones!" he jeered, holding his nose with his fingers, and waving a napkin in front of him for the amusement of a couple of maids who had come from the door behind him.

"You scum!" cried Arnold. "If my message miscarry through you, you are likely to make acquaintance with pricklier things than herring-bones. As you value your rat's life, bring me to your master, or your master to me."

The fellow flushed up fierce and red like a turkey-cock, and grabbed the young Captain by the arm. "Here—at him, Bruin!" cried he to the great hound, and in another moment the creature would have leaped upon the stranger, but just then one passed across the doorway within at sight of whom Arnold called out loudly, "Marjorie—Lady Vane!"

She came running to the entry. "Who called me?" she cried.

The frightened menial grabbed the collar of the brindling hound in the nick of time.

Arnold lifted his cap. "I think you know me, Marjorie," said he.

"Why, it is Arnold Firle!" she cried. Her breath came quick, her face was suddenly aflame, and then as suddenly paled. "Why do you come—now and thus?" said she.

He stood before her for a moment tongue-tied. His lover's dreams had never conjured a picture of her more

beautiful than this reality. He had never seen her so richly dressed as she showed in her wedding robes, but it was not her dress that abashed him. It was the revelation which seemed to come to him at that caught breathing, that face so suddenly pale, those remembered eyes of his sweetheart, deep brown, nearly black, which searched his now for an answer. Ah, yes, she knew him well enough. If he had but come yesterday! The thing was too cruel! A storm of passionate emotions swept over the young man. Wild, treacherous promptings rose in him, and as he stood there dumbly before the girl whom he had loved and lost, he trembled with inward conflict. Supposing, even now, he left undone the business he had come to do? To-night the King's men would come! And behind the King's men, if the pedlar was right, loomed the dark shadow of the Tower and the black shape of the headsman. He was the heir, he, Arnold Firle, and he had only to wait till to-night to secure the earldom of Vane—and the Countess of Vane!

"Are you ill, Arnold?" The sound of her voice, clear and low, called back his manhood.

"I must speak with the Earl. At once! At once!" he burst out.

The young Countess's fair face clouded with quick suspicion. She looked questioningly at her lover, then motioned impatiently to the staring servants to be gone.

"You were always brave and honourable, Arnold," said she very gently.

"I have always tried to be so," he answered bitterly. "I have kept my plighted word. But honour, Marjorie, is a plant with a sour fruit. Pray bring me to my cousin quickly."

Her cheeks flushed again at the sting of his words. "Why do you seek him?" she asked, schooling her voice to calm.

Arnold Firle read in her eyes her fear of a jealous

quarrel between her husband and her lover, and her suspicion of him added fuel to the rising fire of his wrath.

"Oh!" cried he, "there is no dishonour in my business with the Earl. But it cannot bear delay, Lady Vane. My minutes may be better than gold mines, though I come so beggarly." He glanced from his rough fisher's dress to the young Countess's rich robes.

"Look at me, Arnold," she commanded, and he looked very steadily into those dark eyes that had so teased his boyhood. Her colour deepened, but her gaze did not falter. "Come," she said at length, and without another word she led the way indoors.

They passed down a great hall, which was hung, between the escutcheoned windows, with sheets of ancient arras, and down the side opposite the windows were portraits of the House of Vane. Here and there a startled wedding guest drew back, or a servant stood and gaped. The Countess opened a door, and led the way into a little darkish room, lit only from a larger adjoining chamber, from which came sounds of merry-making.

"Shut the door," said she, and Arnold did so. Then she came and put her hands on his shoulders. They were small, pretty hands, for though she was almost his own height she was dainty alike in form and feature. When she would, she could bear herself very proudly and remotely, but there was no pride in her now. "Arnold, my dear friend, tell me that you mean no harm to my husband," said she.

"God help me!" he cried, his bitterness melting suddenly under the appeal of her eyes, and his voice breaking a little, "I have come to save him, if I can, for your sake, Marjorie."

"To save him!"

In a few words he told her what had passed at the inn.

"Wait!" said Marjorie. She went away into the larger room, and presently returned with her husband.

Arnold had had little dealings in the past with his cousin the Earl, who, as he well knew, had regarded him haughtily as a poor relation, and had borne him no goodwill as his possible heir. He had not even seen his cousin often, for the Earl had been used to spend most of his time in the gaieties of the Court at Whitehall. But he remembered his lordship very well—a fine, tall man of thirty or thereabouts, with a dark imperious face, yet with a manner, when he so chose, singularly winning and gracious. In his wedding suit of slashed velvet, his lace ruffs and his jewelled purpoints, he looked a very great nobleman indeed. He was a man, thought Arnold, with a jealous pang, to take captive a woman's fancy, though folk said he was not to be trusted far. The Earl seemed pale now, but he bore himself very sedately.

"Good cousin," said he, loftily, "but for my lady here I vow I should not have known you."

Arnold went hot with unreasoning fury. "Every bird, my lord," said he, "cannot be judged by its feathers."

"Very true, cousin," answered the Earl, smiling ironically. "Considered as a bird, your plumage is strange."

"Captain Firle," said the Countess, looking anxiously, with heightened colour, from one to the other, "will you tell my lord what you have told me?"

Putting a strong curb on his wrath, Arnold repeated his news in a low voice.

Then for some moments there was silence in the little room. The young Countess eagerly watched her husband, who stood with folded arms, frowning, his look bent on the ground.

"Why have you brought this news to me?" he said at length, looking up with a glance of sombre suspicion. He lowered his voice almost to a whisper as he proceeded: "If the Earl of Vane's head is unsteady on his shoulders, how is Arnold Firle concerned to keep it there?" he asked.

WHAT PASSED AT WESTRINGFOLD CASTLE 15

"Very little, my lord, by the code of His Majesty's Court!" blurted out the younger man, hotly. "But by the code of friendship, with which the Countess of Vane has honoured him in years past, very much concerned."

The Earl was silent again for a while. Sounds of music came faintly from the revellers within the castle. The Earl looked piercingly at his cousin, then at his wife, and then at his cousin again. At last he turned to his newly-wed wife with a strained pale face.

"My dear, I think we have met too late," said he. "I think I have not long to live."

There was a deadly conviction in his tone. The young Countess swayed before him, and he took her by the arm.

"Be brave," said he. "I should have told you. I have played for a high stake, and it seems that I have suddenly lost."

She clung to his arm, very white, with fear in her eyes.

"Edmund, you must escape!" she whispered.

He smiled bitterly. "How escape?" said he. "The ports are the King's, and the roads are well-nigh impassable. I am betrayed, and I do not know my betrayer!"

"Oh, escape!" she urged again. "It cannot be that escape is impossible."

"You do not know the King," he answered. "I am trapped. This very hour, it may be, my gaolers are entering the town." His calmness in despair gave him dignity.

From his bitter resignation his young wife turned to her old lover with a gesture of piteous appeal.

"Cousin," said Arnold, "if you will listen to me I think a way of escape may be devised."

"I am listening," he replied, holding up his wife in his arms.

"I know little of high politics, my lord," said Arnold. "But I know your town of Westringfold better than you,

and well for me that I do, for there have been times when such birds of rough plumage as I have been hard put to it for a hiding-place. Cousin, a few hours since I left the mouth of the river, whither some Dutch fishers, whom I had paid well for the service, brought me in their vessel. She lies there yet, and will lie till the afternoon tide tomorrow. If I can bring you and my lady to that craft, I have no doubt that the same gilded reasoning which prevailed with the Lowlanders to bring me to England will suffice to take you hence."

"And my wife?" said the Earl, suspicion flashing again in his glance.

"And your wife," answered his cousin, coldly.

"There is not a man from here to the sea who does not know me," said the Earl. "And there are many who hate me, Arnold Firle."

"Doubtless," said Arnold. "Nevertheless, you may escape if you will trust me. Remember, cousin, that in serving you I put my own head under the axe."

"The more fool you, cousin," retorted the Earl. "Nevertheless, since it is your fancy to serve me for the sake of my wife, let us have your plan." As though touched with a sudden jealous pang he stood away from his Countess.

"You shall give out within the hour," said Arnold, "that your fancy is to go riding with my lady in the sun. Half a mile beyond the town lies the Triangle Copse. You and she must ride to the entry of the wood, and there dismounting, order your lackey to lead the horses round by the road to the wood's further end, and await you while you saunter through the trees. But when the man is gone you must not enter the wood. A little on the hither side of the copse, a hundred yards from the road on the left hand, there was formerly a deepish dell, and in its midst a dried-up well, not more than six or eight feet down from the ground."

WHAT PASSED AT WESTRINGFOLD CASTLE 17

"It is still there!" exclaimed the Countess. "It has a wooden covering, that a man can move, and the place is very solitary."

"Yes," said Arnold, meeting his cousin's searching glance. "You must get into the well, and when it is dark I will come to you and lead you to the fishing-boat by a path which I think will be new to your lordship."

The Earl frowned doubtfully. "And if you bring the King's men—" he began to say.

But his wife put up her hand. "Trust him, Edmund!" she murmured. "He will save you if he can."

The Earl of Vane smiled bitterly. "I trust no man in England, sweet wife," said he. "But if my cousin Arnold performs what he promises, he will find I can remember a service. Cousin, we shall await your pleasure—at the bottom of the well!"

He gave his would-be rescuer a careless nod, and with a hard, proud face led his wife into the larger room. Presently came a servant who conducted Arnold to the door of the great hall.

CHAPTER III
THE IRON GRAVE

THE young sailor went back to the inn immediately and sought out his acquaintance the landlord.

"There is profitable work afoot for you," said he. "Have you made safe your wines?"

"That I have," answered Stephen, "and I hope you are not fooling me. You were always fond of a joke, Master Arnold."

"Wait and see," said Arnold. "Keep a shut mouth, and for your life let no one remove my boat from the Bridge Stairs. Now lend me some clothes to wear, and get me, by hook or crook, a nun's cloak and hood."

"Bless the man! Do you think I keep a convent?" cried Stephen. "I should like to know what devil's trick you are after."

Arnold put his hand in his pocket and laid a dozen gold pieces on a table near. "There's an earnest of my good intentions," said he. It was all he had at the moment in the world, but something was needful to bind the man's help. Stephen's eyes sparkled at the sight. "In the old days," said the young man, "I have known your good wife receive many a kind gift of clothing from the Sisters of St Joseph," he said.

"Well, well," muttered the landlord, doubt and greed struggling in his face, "I must see what can be done."

"I must have it within two hours," Arnold persisted.

It was now five in the afternoon, and the little town was still enjoying its revelry undisturbed.

Three hours later, having changed his sea-clothes, Captain Firle sat at a private window of the inn, that gave upon the river, and watched the gathering dusk. A goodly parcel of clothing lay beside him on the ground.

Misgivings had begun to assail him. What if the pedlar had been mistaken!

When it was nearly dark a lad came suddenly running across the bridge to the door of the inn, where there were still many roisterers collected.

"Hi, sirs, there be a mighty troop of horse a-comin' in " cried the boy, excitedly.

Arnold waited for no more but went downstairs with his baggage. The landlord was at the stair foot.

"I will take a walk," said the sailor. "Remember strictly what I have told you, and you may die a rich man."

With that he went out through the back yard of the inn, and hastily following the road past the castle gates was soon outside the town. Not a soul did he meet on his way to the Triangle Copse, and before long he had come to the old well. At first he thought it empty, for the night was dark, with no moon, and the wooden cover was partly over the well's mouth. But when he put his head down and called in a low voice an answer came out of the ground. So he made haste to remove the covering, which was light enough, and in a few moments he had helped up the couple who hid within.

He unrolled his parcel. "My lord," said he, "if you will put on these old sea-clothes of mine, and if the Countess will cover her finery with this nun's dress, we will quickly have you secure. The King's men are now crossing the bridge to Westringfold."

"They will go first to the castle," said the Earl.

"We must avoid that road. Well, Arnold, we are ready."

In the darkness the rough disguises served their purpose. No unwarned man would have sought a Peer of England under this greasy cap and jerkin, or guessed fine lace and silk beneath that black nun's robe. But Captain Firlie was glad he had not forgotten one thing.

"You must cut your beard and your love-locks," said he curtly to his cousin. "No fisherman ever went with a face so daintily trimmed."

He handed a pair of scissors to the Earl, at which the nobleman gave a shrug, but nevertheless clipped off his curled hair and hacked at his well-kept beard, till he might have passed for the veriest pirate.

Then they set forth towards Westringfold, avoiding the roadway, and keeping along the hedges that divided the fields.

They had come as far as the outer wall of the churchyard, and already Arnold was congratulating himself that they would reach unchallenged the place for which he was making, when in the dark shadow of the wall they plumped suddenly into a stranger.

"Halt there!" cried the man, and there was a jingle of metal when he moved.

"Have at him—quick!" cried Arnold. Without waiting to see what the Earl would do he flung himself on the soldier with such force that they rolled on the ground together. Arnold had gripped his man by the throat to prevent him shouting, but the soldier, being the bigger of the two, struggled desperately, and would quickly have thrown off his assailant. But as they fought together suddenly he made a convulsive twist, a hoarse gurgling sound escaped him, and the next minute he lay passive in the young man's hold.

"We must bind and gag him!" gasped Arnold, without relaxing his grip.

"There is no need," answered the Earl of Vane. Looking round his cousin saw him in the half dark very coolly wiping a dagger on the soldier's clothing.

"Over the wall!" whispered the young man, choking down a kind of horror at that sight. "There will be more of them here directly. Do you mount on my shoulders and draw up the Countess. Quick!"

The Earl obeyed at once, and while he was still hanging down his wife upon the other side, footsteps sounded coming up the street. Taking a run Arnold Firle sprang at the wall like a cat, and by good luck drew himself over.

But as his feet touched ground there came a shout from the other side, and he knew they were discovered. "Now!" cried he in a low, tense voice, "for all our lives, good cousins!"

Taking a hand of each he dragged them, stumbling in the obscurity over the grassy mounds and the old stone slabs in that consecrated place, to a corner of the churchyard nearest the town, where they all stopped panting under a thick clump of cypress. They could hear the shouting voices at the other end of the ground, and the scraping noise of men climbing the wall.

Arnold drew out the key that Stephen the landlord had given him and bent down, fumbling in the darkest of the cypress shade for a flat slab which he remembered well, and quaking at the noise of the climbing. Ah! Here it was—the hole in the slab which he sought! He thrust in the key, which was not so much a key as a thin bar which reached a lever and set in motion a spring.

Slowly—all too slowly, for the pursuers had dropped from the wall and the fugitives could see a lantern flashing in the graveyard—the great slab of iron swung on a pivot, opening a black pit.

"Mother of God! What have we here?" The Earl started back with a hoarse whisper.

"The pathway to safety," whispered back his cousin. "Cousin Edmund, our lives hang on moments. Let the Countess take my hand and do you follow quickly. There are steps below us. See—the search scatters. The graveyard is not large!"

Without more ado he seized the young Countess's hand and stepped down into that black grave. A moment later the Earl joined them; then Arnold, feeling upwards with his hand, reversed the spring that moved the slab. There was a gasp beside him as they heard it resume its place, and he felt the fingers still clasped in his own tighten for an instant with fear. They stood all together in the utter dark, breathing a close, dank air.

"Give me also your hand, my lord," said he, and led them both to the foot of the steps very cautiously, for it was years since he had trod this secret way. When they reached the last—there were not many—he drew them forward a little way and then stopped.

"Where have you brought us, in God's name?" said the Earl's strained voice.

"Have patience," answered the younger man, "and I will make a light." He had brought with him flint and steel and a candle, which he soon had burning.

The feeble flame was dazzling by comparison with the black gloom to which their eyes had by now become accustomed. It lit up a narrow stone cavern. The slabs which made the sides of the cavern were bulging inwards with damp and the pressure of earth. There was a litter of broken rubbish on the ground, and in one place a skull with some bones. At the end of the vault opposite to the stairway was a pile of old mouldered coffins that reached from the ground to the roof.

"Are we to stay in this charnel-house?" asked the Earl.

"No indeed," answered Arnold, "if you will help me

to open the back door, and Lady Vane will hold the candle."

The young Countess, who had not spoken since they had climbed the wall, held out her hand and took the candle, and though her lovely face was pale as ivory under the nun's black hood the light did not shake in her grasp.

"Now," said Arnold, "we will move these coffins, cousin."

Each standing at one end of the pile they edged the coffins away from the wall of the vault, keeping them heaped one above the other as they were. When they had thus been edged far enough from the wall for a man to pass behind them Arnold beckoned the Countess to bring the light nearer. In the portion of wall thus revealed was a small iron door. This he opened and bade her pass through with the light. As she did so he picked up a piece of rope that lay coiled on the ground near the coffins.

The Earl's face lightened a little when he saw the second door. "But how can we replace these dead?" he asked.

"Help me lift up the pile," said Arnold.

The rope he had picked up was knotted at both ends. He slipped one end of it under each end of the ghastly pile, so that when they two had passed through the doorway after Lady Vane, and the body of the rope was pulled from the side of the iron door, the knots were gripped by the weight of the coffins on the floor, and thus the whole pile was dragged up close again behind them to the wall.

This done they turned with head and shoulders bent to follow a low dark passage burrowed through the earth. It was close and stifling, and the sweat came out on their faces.

"This is a fearful hole!" said the Earl, stumbling over the uneven ground, and cursing as he stumbled.

"There are worse in the Tower of London," answered Arnold.

They came at last to another iron door, similar to that leading from the vault. The Earl tried it and found it locked.

"How now? Are we trapped?" said he angrily to his relative.

"My lord and good cousin," said Arnold, "before we go further I will inform you that the facility for this escape is provided by a humble servant of your lordship—the worthy man whom you will shortly see. I make bold to ask you not to forget him when you come to happier times. As for this secret way, it has been used in time of need these many years by a few hardy traders who, if you will believe me, make but small profits, and suffer grievous risks. I trust your lordship's memory will not retain too minute an impress of what you have seen or may yet see to-night."

"My memory will be the good servant of my friends," answered the Earl.

There was a small wire handle in the wall of the passage near the door. This Arnold pulled, and they waited.

After a few minutes the door was opened and the red, round face of Stephen the landlord met them, peering curiously at each in turn.

"Save us!" cried he, "it is the Earl of Vane himself you have with you, Master Firl! I shall be hanged for this secret!"

"That you certainly will, if we are discovered," Arnold assured him. "But failing that, your fortune is made. Is the boat safe?"

"The boat is safe and the tide is floating her."

"And the King's men—where are they?"

Stephen's mouth opened. "Then you knew about the King's men!" he gasped, and looked slowly and fearfully at the Earl.

Arnold made an impatient movement. "Where are they?" said he.

"Everywhere," answered Stephen. "They are searching the town."

"Are there any in the road before the inn?"

"I think not."

"Go and see," said Arnold, "and if there are any there, get them elsewhere by hook or crook. My lord and my lady will wait in your cellar while I watch at the outer door. When the road is clear we go to the Bridge Stairs."

With a scared face the landlord led the way through the door which he had opened into a little stone cellar, flanked with casks and barrels. "I thank you for your advice about the wines, Master Firle," said he, sheepishly.

Now that they had emerged from that rabbit burrow the Earl of Vane was himself again. "Man!" he whispered to the frightened landlord, "put on a better look or all is lost. Here—take courage from this!" He felt about under the old sea-jerkin that covered his own clothes and put a fine gold chain in the landlord's hand.

Stephen stammered his thanks. "I will take a draught of wine, my lord Earl," said he. "You shall not complain of me."

He went up out of the cellar, followed by Arnold Firle, who bade the fugitives wait until he called. The cellar led into the house, which when they had entered, Arnold took his companion firmly by the shoulder.

"A straight game, Stephen!" he said warningly.

The landlord nodded gravely. "My folk have served your folk too long for any other," said he, breathing hard. "Trust me."

From a window of the inn Arnold watched him go into the street. Several dark figures, whom he took to be soldiers, stood near about, one of them stiffly by the bridge head. Suddenly he heard Stephen's voice cry out some words he could not catch, and saw him set off

running towards the castle. The other figures instantly followed him, and seeing that, Arnold ran back to the cellar without delay and put his head inside.

"Come!" he cried.

The three of them ran out of the inn together and across the street to the Bridge Stairs.

CHAPTER IV

THE ESCAPE

THE boat was just as Arnold had left her, and two minutes after that perilous run they were out in mid-stream, sweeping under the bridge on the first of the ebb. The night was dark and once they had left the neighbourhood of the bridge there was little immediate risk of their being discovered.

Arnold bent to the oars with a will, for if the Earl and the Countess were to get free of the English shore that night it must be before the next turn of the tide. With the strong southerly breeze that was blowing no ship could leave the Rundle against the flood. For some minutes they drifted down the dark current in silence, glad of a breathing space after the risks they had come through.

"Good cousin and preserver," the Earl said at last, "I very much hope you are right about these Dutchmen of yours. May it not occur to these honest fellows that a better price is to be made by handing us over than by taking us hence?"

"In that case we must fight them for it," answered Firlie.

After that the fugitive noble said no more to his cousin for some time, but sat still with the Countess in the stern of the boat, one arm about her. From time to time they murmured to each other too low for their rescuer to hear. The sight of them thus was a bitter medicine for the dreamer who had floated here in the sunshine of hope only twelve short hours ago. Meanwhile

the boat went swiftly down the stream, and now they were nearing the river mouth.

By-and-by, in a widening of the river just inside the piers, Arnold made out the dark mast of the Dutch vessel against the sky.

He looked at her with some anxiety, for the Earl's doubts of the Dutchmen found answering doubts in his own mind. The men had driven a hard bargain with him when he had left the Scheldt, they had treated him scurvily enough on board. They would be greatly surprised, and could not be other than suspicious, to find him returning so soon with a second and third fugitive. But there was no other way. Arnold leaned forward and spoke in low tones to his companions.

"I will make fast alongside and go first aboard," said he. "Sit still, both of you, in the boat until I call."

"Not so," replied the Earl. "I will come with you. Then if these rascals prove difficult we will surprise them with a swift and sudden attack."

Arnold had been unwilling to leave the young lady alone in the boat. But there was weight in the Earl's counsel.

"As you will," said he, after a pause. "But do nothing till I give the word."

When they got close to the vessel he hailed her in the Dutch. There was no reply, nor were they challenged when they drew alongside. A short rope ladder hung over the smack's fat side, and up this Arnold scrambled, the Earl following close. Not a sign of life met them.

"The Dutchmen have gone ashore," said Arnold. "Quick—get the Countess aboard and come and give me a hand."

While his cousin went to the ladder he whipped out a knife and cut the gaskets, one after another, of the smack's great mainsail, which the Hollanders had methodically stowed. He freed the halyards ready for

hoisting sail, and after a minute's search found a hatchet and laid it handy beside the cable winch.

The smack was a heavy, unwieldy craft, with a fore-deck and an after-deck, and a wide, deep well amidships where the fish were stored. To this low body of the vessel he brought Lady Vane when her husband had helped her aboard. "For there may be bullets flying soon," he whispered to his cousin.

"Hark!" exclaimed the Earl with a start. "What's that?"

They listened. There came across the water the splash of oars.

"Come now!" said Arnold, and sprang to the main halyards. "Haul away, Cousin Edmund, for your life, as I give the word!"

They pulled on the ropes and slowly the great sail rose, flapping in the wind, black against the night sky. With the sound of the creaking blocks a hoarse outcry reached them from shorewards. Looking over his shoulder as they hauled Arnold saw the dark shape of a boat advancing. The sail went up and up. Now it was halfway, crackling and roaring in the strong wind. The Earl of Vane was breathing hard: he was not used to this kind of labour.

"Firle," he gasped, "this is beyond me!"

"Remember—we have no weapons!" said Arnold. "Haul, my lord, for your life!"

But the Countess, seeing her husband's extremity, ran to help, and putting her woman's strength to the others, they dragged on the rope together.

The sail was up at last, but by now the shouting Dutchmen were close at hand. Arnold sprang to the winch and seized the hatchet, and as the toiling Dutchmen began to draw alongside struck with all his force at the cable. It parted at the blow, and the sparks flew from the winch where the axe-blade encountered the iron.

Arnold leaped back to the tiller. The swiftly-ebbing tide slewed the smack round away from the on-coming boat, and presently, her great sail bulging full, she began to gather way through the water.

But the Dutchmen, rowing desperately, seemed resolved to make race of it, and cursing loudly came on close astern, and suddenly a shot from a pistol struck splinters from the tiller under Arnold's hand.

"Cut away our little boat!" cried Arnold. The Earl did so, and thus freed the smack made better speed. But the wind blew strongly in at the river mouth, and they had to make several tacks to get out. The furious crew in their boat rowed hard to intercept their runaway ship, and each time they drew near enough, as the smack went about, they saluted her with pistol fire.

But the meeting of wind and tide in the river mouth was the salvation of the fugitives. The water ran so high that the oarsmen could make no headway against it, and presently they shipped a heavy sea and turned away shorewards.

"They will raise the coast after us," said the Earl of Vane.

Arnold Firle laughed a little recklessly. He was on the element now that he had known and loved from boyhood. Moreover, the angry temper of the night suited not amiss with his present mood.

"If they do," he answered, "the sea is wide and the night is dark and wild, and France is not so very far away."

The young Countess, who had come up beside them on the after-deck, overheard his words. "Heaven send we may reach France!" she exclaimed. "Captain Firle, this is a fearful night!"

Indeed, to shore-keeping folk it was wild enough. Even running free as they were up Channel, with the wind on their quarter, the ebb tide struggling with the

fresh breeze threw up great crested billows, through which their unwieldy vessel pitched and lurched with a prodigious splashing. It began to rain, too, and the weather promised to get worse before it got better. Nevertheless, their ship, if clumsy, was stout. Arnold turned to the Countess.

"The weather is well enough, my lady," said he. "A little blustery and wet, but our ship can laugh at that, as you will see. Cousin Edmund, do you understand the handling of a tiller?"

"No," said the Earl, gloomily watching the already distant lights ashore. "I do not."

"I will be your tutor," said Arnold. "But let us first put the lady in a dry place, for I think this rain will last. You will find under this deck a very passable den, where Mynheer, the skipper of this tub, takes his repose, and in a cupboard of that same you will find the best provender that our ship's larder yields."

The young Countess vehemently protested that she would rather die of cold on the open deck than go below. But the Earl overruled her, and after a few minutes they went down together, clinging to each other and to the ship's gear in the helpless way of landsfolk when the decks are heaving under them.

By-and-by the Earl came back alone.

"This boat of yours is a foul, dirty kennel, cousin," said he.

"Ay," said Arnold. "But the dogs that live in the kennel barked in the King of England's ears."

"How do you mean?"

"Ten years ago," said Arnold, "when the captain of this tub was a young man, he fought his gun in the fleet that his countrymen sent up the Thames, and they roared defiance in King Charles's face. Men who do such deeds are not bred in palaces."

The Earl stood silent, holding fast to the side of the

vessel, and watching the big seas rush up through the darkness under her counter. When he spoke next it was on a different matter.

"How did you come to be a friend of my wife, Cousin Arnold?" said he.

"I loved her," answered Arnold, simply.

"That is what I have thought," said the Earl. "Then you are the man against whose memory I have had to contend for two years."

"I am the man," said his cousin, with sudden bitterness, "whom Marjorie Ruthven vowed to remember. I am glad to know she kept so kind a vow so long."

"And you are still her lover!" cried the Earl.

"I still love the memory of Marjorie Ruthven," answered his cousin in a hard voice. "Why otherwise should I put my neck in jeopardy to save her husband?"

The Earl came nearer, till he stood close to the man at the tiller, grasping at the woodwork of the vessel to steady himself.

"I knew there must be someone!" cried he. "I had vowed your death, not yet knowing your name. But you have saved my life to-night, therefore I will make you rich, and your life is safe from me, Cousin Arnold, on one condition."

The young helmsman laughed angrily without replying, and brushed the salt spray from his eyes.

"Your humour is more sensitive than mine," said the Earl. "Why do you laugh?"

"To hear the man offer me terms for my life whose own life hangs on a thrust of my arm upon this tiller."

"Laugh if you will," fiercely exclaimed the Earl, "but remember this: if when we come to France you bring yourself once under my wife's eyes, I will have you stabbed!"

"We may never come to France," said Arnold. "If

we do I will very certainly bring myself under the eyes of Lady Vane."

"You dare not!" cried the Earl in a blaze of sudden fury. "For what purpose?"

"To please myself," said his cousin, hotly, "and because you threaten me!"

"You are a fool!"

"Why, so I am," said Arnold, a bitter humour getting the better of his wrath. "And good for you I am!"

"You mean—?"

"I came home to claim a bride," said Arnold, pulling viciously at the tiller as the strong seas dragged it round. "I found her newly wed to another, and that other with one foot upon the scaffold steps. For the sake of the love I bear my lady I snatched that other from the headsman, in gratitude for which he offers to have me stabbed while his life is still in my hands. Verily I think we are well matched in folly."

"As for gratitude," said the Earl, "your fortune is made if you will. As for the Countess, you were happy in losing her. For even if you had won her, cousin, I would have had her just the same, and she would have forgotten you, as she forgot you till to-day."

"Braggart and coward!" cried the young sailor. "If she whom I love had withstood a day longer you would more easily have carried the King from London than Marjorie my wife from my side!"

"She whom you love?" repeated the Earl in a voice like a snarl. "Will you tell me, you dog, that you presume so to speak of the Countess of Vane?"

"Ay, I'll tell you that!" cried Arnold, furiously.

"Tempt me no further!"

At that the Earl seemed to draw suddenly back, and how the next thing befell Arnold never rightly knew. He saw his cousin put his hand to his side as though to draw a weapon. The smack gave a heavy lurch and the next

moment the Earl was upon him, half rushing, half reeling. To save themselves from being swept overboard they clung fast to the tiller together. Up came the boat's head into the wind, and while the cousins still struggled to recover themselves, with a crash the great mainsail swung over, and the smack plunged forward into a smother of spray, heeling down upon the opposite tack till the seas came overside. Down the streaming deck the two young men rolled. Arnold, grasping out at random, by good luck seized the slack of a sheet and held fast by it while the boat recovered herself.

Then he stood up, and rubbing the sea-water from his eyes looked round for the Earl. The deck was empty.

He shouted into the darkness, but there was no answering cry, only the swish of the great waves rearing past, and the splashing of their white crests under the lash of the gale.

CHAPTER V

AN ACCUSATION

IN a cold dismay, Arnold Firle ran with a seaman's instinct to take the helm. The smack had shipped a lot of water, and had been near swamping.

There was no possibility of saving the Earl. There was no boat, and none to launch it had there been one. The wind and sea were rising steadily, and it was clear enough that the task of saving the vessel would be hard.

If they were not to be washed under they must by some means get the great mainsail reefed, for to carry on as they were was to court disaster.

And before all, there was the Countess to be told of what had happened!

Yet it was long before Arnold Firle could brace himself to face that necessity. Coward-like he stood in the steerage, heading the smack to the seas that rushed down, postponing from minute to minute the terrible business of breaking that news. Perhaps she would come out on deck again! The noise, and the rolling of the vessel, he told himself, had been enough to terrify any woman, though Marjorie had always been fearless from a girl. Arnold found his thoughts turn to the memory of many a sail they two had had together out of the Rundle River in the old days.

But though he waited thus she did not come.

At last, when for the sake of both their lives he dared wait no longer, he went down to her, and found her sleeping like a child in the Dutch captain's bed—a sail-cloth

hammock slung athwart the cabin. The light from a little swinging lamp touched her face and her dark loosened hair. How weary she must have been, he thought, to fall asleep so at such a time and in such a place! The sight of her sleeping there in the uneasy lap of the sea seemed to him infinitely pathetic, yet it nerved him wonderfully.

She must have felt his presence in her sleep, for while he stood beside her she half turned over, and opening her eyes sat up in her swing-bed.

"You!" she cried, and in the lantern light she blushed like a rose. Then she went suddenly grave. "Where is my husband?" she asked.

"Marjorie, you must be very brave," said Arnold, holding on to the hammock. "The sea has washed him overboard, and we are in instant peril of our lives."

She stared at him with fear and wonder in her eyes. "Edmund drowned!" she cried. "Oh, heaven!" She seemed to shrink with horror from his touch.

"You shall hear all," said he, "though it is little there is to tell. But for the present I must save you if I can. Come."

But she only shook her head. The terror of what she had heard seemed to have robbed her of speech. The young man saw a dreadful suspicion dawn in the wide dark eyes—saw the lovely face grow suddenly white and hard.

"I read your thought!" he cried. "It is not true—by all that is most holy!"

She shuddered, and looked as if she would faint. But still she stared at him with those horror-filled eyes.

"Come!" he commanded, his voice harsh with pain. "You must come! You shall come! It is death to stay!"

This time, with dull resignation, she obeyed.

She got out of the hammock, and when her feet touched

the rearing floor of the cabin would have fallen, but he clutched her arm in time.

Arnold found an oilskin coat and put it round her, and they crept out again into the angry night, and across the heaving afterdeck to the tiller. The cold spray flew over them in drenching clouds; the smack laboured and thumped in the seas as though she would burst her planking in.

"Courage!" cried Arnold to his companion. "Will you take her and hold her in the wind while I reef?"

The girl nodded her head, and took the tiller in a firm grasp. Arnold went forward and fought a breathless combat with the flapping, roaring sail, till he had it reefed down close. It took a long time, and more than once they were beaten almost flat to the sea, so that he thought the end was come. Once a great black flood swept the smack from stem to stern, and he held on for life to the halliards. When it passed, he looked back, expecting to see the afterdeck bare. But the young Countess clung fast by the helm, and next minute the sturdy Dutch craft began to right herself, and the water to pour out again from her scuppers.

At last the sail was reefed, and Arnold went back. Lady Vane gave up the tiller without a word.

"She rides more easily now," the young man said. "Will you go below again, or will you stay on deck?"

"I will stay here."

She crouched down on the deck near by, holding fast by a rope as the vessel plunged and swayed. They were running free again now, with the wind on the quarter, and were making, for so clumsy a boat, great speed before the gale.

"Where shall I steer for, Marjorie?" asked Arnold, after there had been no speech between them for a long while.

"Why do you call me Marjorie?" she said. "How did my husband fall overboard?"

It was the question which Arnold had known must come. He felt his voice shake like a guilty creature's as he answered:

"We were talking together, and there came a great sea that heaved up the boat, and the Earl losing his hold rolled down upon me. We slid down the deck together, and when I stood up he was gone."

For awhile she was silent, and then:

"Of what were you talking with my husband?" she asked.

"Of yourself."

Her white face was turned towards him in the gloom. "And what did you say of me?" she asked.

"I answered my cousin's questions," he said.

"What questions should the Earl of Vane ask about his wife?"

"He asked how I became your friend."

"And you answered?"

"That I had been your lover."

"Ah!" she cried. "You loved me so well, that for three years you sent me no word that you lived."

"You wrong me," said Arnold. "I sent letters by one and another, as the chances of war gave me opportunity. There was not a day I did not think of you, Marjorie."

"In the first year of your absence two letters came," said she, "and after that no more."

"I sent them," he insisted.

"They did not come," she said. "But the Earl of Vane came, two years since, and from the first I knew that he would have me. I think no woman ever resisted him. And my grandfather swore me to the marriage on his death-bed. What else did the Earl your cousin say to you?"

"That he would make my fortune, unless I spoke to you again."

"And in that case?"

"I should be stabbed."

"So," she said after a pause, "it is as I thought. You quarrelled."

"There were high words between us."

"You quarrelled," she repeated. "And my husband—fell!"

"Marjorie!" cried Arnold Firle, "as God is my witness I never raised a hand against my cousin! I think he was in the act to strike me when he slipped, but I cannot tell. We rolled down together, and my hands are as clean of his death as your own."

"Oh!" she cried, "if I might believe that! Heaven, if I might believe it, Arnold!" Her voice was bitter and wild.

"It's the truth!" he cried, his soul recoiling with terror from the suspicion she fastened on him. "Should I save him from the scaffold to murder him upon the sea?" he asked her. And the next moment he knew he had done wrong to justify his simple denial.

"He had not reached the scaffold," she answered slowly. "He might never have reached it. And you had been my lover! Oh, pitiful heaven!"

"I was, and shall be always your lover," he said.

"My husband floats between us in the sea," she told him.

"I do not see him," he answered, "nor shall, if you acquit me, Marjorie. The Earl was hot and headstrong. I am guiltless of his death."

She sprang up, clinging to the side of the boat. "The Earl was my husband!" she cried. "How shall his Countess acquit you? He is dead on his wedding night, and whether he were good or evil, whom has he but his

Countess to see him righted if he has been wronged? By heaven, he shall have justice done!"

"I did not mean to slight him," said Arnold. "He was my cousin, and the head of our house."

"Whither are you steering?" she asked.

"Where you will, Marjorie."

"Do not call me Marjorie," said the girl. "You must steer us back to Westringfold."

"We cannot face this weather," answered Arnold. "We must run before it, or sink."

"Then steer for Dover," said Lady Vane.

"I will try," he said. "Have you friends in Dover?"

"Friends?" cried she, wildly. "The King's justice must be my only friend. The law of England must judge between my husband and my lover, and God helping me I will abide the verdict."

"And God helping me, you shall," said the young sailor. "And I think they will hang an innocent man."

He squared away yet a little more, and by dead reckoning shaped a course for Dover.

CHAPTER VI

THE "GRACE DE DIEU"

THERE was no more talk between them after that, and soon Lady Vane went to her cabin, leaving Arnold at the helm, turning over in his mind the strange chances of the hours that were passed, and the ugly promise of the hours that were to come.

Cool reason whispered in his ear to bear away southwards and make for France again. But Arnold Firle scarcely heard the whisper. Under the black cloud of suspicion that had fallen on him he could not think clearly. In desperation he steered on his new course, feeling vaguely that if that was how she esteemed him he did not greatly care whether his evil fate was to drown or hang.

If they came to Dover he would certainly be hanged. He had balked the King of his prey, and the gross machinery of the law, fed with the bare facts of the night, would need but little oiling to bring him in a murderer. In his highly-wrought, emotional state he even took a kind of bitter satisfaction at the thought of what would be Marjorie's remorse when they took him out to hang him.

The smack plunged and staggered along over the wild sea. They were far out in the Channel, and it would be hours before they could raise the land lights. The storm was worse than ever, the wind screaming in the bare rigging, and the drag of the helm with the following seas enough to pull a man's arms from their sockets.

From the north-east, whither they were sailing, the faintest tinge of grey began to herald the dawn.

All of a sudden, with a violent crash that made all her timbers quiver, the smack seemed to stand still, and in the same instant Arnold Firle was flung to the deck. The stern of the vessel was lifted up, and with a crackling noise like a volley of musketry, the heavy mast broke short and fell overside, carrying with it the sail. A sea broke hissing on their quarter and drenched the decks, and with the stoppage of the boat's way the force of the wind appeared redoubled.

Too dazed for the moment by the shock to call out or even move, Arnold lay where he had been shot by the impact, expecting the ship to sink. But she floated still, and after a few seconds he got on his feet and made for the cabin door.

The smack lay far over on her side, and the lamp in the cabin having been extinguished, the place was in black darkness. Arnold shouted, and as he groped blindly forward he touched the young Countess's hand.

"We are going down—are we not?" she gasped.

"God knows," said he. "We have struck something—wreckage, I think—and we are dismayed."

"Get me out of this! I would not drown in a hole like a rat," she cried.

He got her to the deck. "I must find an axe," he said, and went back into the black gloom of the cabin, feeling round the wall for the hooks whereon, as he knew, the careful Dutch skipper had such tools always hanging ready. It was like an eternity, those minutes of frantic groping in the dark, with the shattered mast alongside banging and thumping at the hull, and the ship, for all he knew, making her last heaves on the sea. At last his hand encountered the blade of a hatchet, and in another minute Arnold was out of that den of blackness, hewing and hacking with desperate energy to free the tangled gear.

The great spar bumped unmercifully upon the wooden side of the smack, but though the seas swept her decks she still rode high in the water. The men knew their trade who put those timbers together. If only he could free the mast in time!

It might have been half an hour later that the mast ceased to belabour them, and the smack drove out clear of the wreckage, a battered hulk at the mercy of the storm. The woodwork at one side where the mast and the heavy boom had fallen was broken, and the tiller had been smashed by the to-and-fro rolling of the gaff ere Arnold could cut this free. The gale showed no disposition to abate with the coming of daylight.

The Countess of Vane was in the fore part of the smack, where Arnold had lashed her to the stump of the mast as a safeguard against the seas which from time to time broke over them.

Finding it still possible to reach the cabin, Arnold fetched his companion, as soon as he could, some food and a bottle of wine. Wretched and dangerous as their plight was, as they clung there and ate their food, and drank from the same bottle, scarcely a word passed between the castaways. The young Countess's eyes ranged over the empty sea, and sometimes she looked close down overside, as though half expecting the dead man to appear.

When they had eaten and drunk Arnold made shift with such tools as he could find to construct a sort of rough raft, on which they might hope to keep afloat for awhile if the smack should sink. This occupied some hours, during all which time the gale blew hard, and Lady Vane, chilled and pale, maintained her constant watch over the sea.

Arnold had just made fast to the raft a box with some provisions, when his companion called out suddenly, and pointed across the water.

It was a dull day of driving rain-clouds, but following the direction of her arm, the young man saw at intervals, far off in the south-east, the top-masts of a ship. Slowly, very slowly, she grew plainer to their sight, and they stood together and watched her.

Who, that has not been shipwrecked, can know what it means to watch and wait thus, helpless in the lap of the wild waters, with death holding out expectant hands around? There, a mile or two away, are safety and human company—men who may never see you, or who seeing may abandon you, or who, seeking to succour you, may be foiled by the cruel strength of the sea.

For half an hour or more these two underwent a horrible alternation of hope and fear. The ship was now in full view—a Frenchman as Arnold judged by the build of her, a tall good ship reeling close-hauled under nearly bare poles.

“God grant they see us!” cried the Countess Marjorie.

“Amen to that!” said Arnold. “They are beating towards us.” Yet he knew well that dismasted as the smack was, and lying low in the water, it was odds that the Frenchman had not seen her yet. Seeing them so close-hauled on the wind, and the smack drifting fast before it, he judged they would pass to windward unless they sighted the derelict. Watching a chance therefore to reach the cabin again, Arnold ran and charged a musket, and succeeded in bringing it back dry.

Already the ship seemed a trifle to windward when he got back beside the Countess, and not daring to lose the help of the wind in carrying the sound, he fired his piece. Then, climbing the swaying stump of the mast, he waved his coat.

“They see us!” he cried. “Look, Marjorie!”

In fact, the ship was squaring away a little towards them. Arnold descended, and began to unfasten the

lashings with which his companion was secured. "There will be no time to lose," he said.

"How will they save us?" she asked, fetching her breath quickly, and watching the on-coming ship.

"It may yet be they will not try," said he. "The sea is a hard master, and trains hard servants. They cannot launch a boat if they would, and if they heave to and try to cast us a line, they risk our fouling them."

While speaking he made a rope fast under the girl's arms, and leaving a little interval, secured it about his own middle. She saw what was done, but said nothing, and Arnold Firlie thrilled at the knowledge that, despite herself, her trust in him was greater than her suspicions.

Down swooped the French ship, a noble sight as she rode the storm, her great masts swaying in slow arcs against the cloudy sky, her high carved prow now smothered in white spray as her beakheads shattered the seas, now rushing bravely through the parting waves. Her name, the *Grace de Dieu*, blazoned in the fore, was like a promise from heaven to them in their extremity.

Nevertheless there were few men on her decks, and it was clear she was not going to heave to. She swept down close on the weather side of the smack, and only at the last moment, just ere she drew abreast, a man sprang into the forechains with a coil of line. Straight as an arrow's flight it came and struck Arnold on the chest. Crying to the Countess to hold him fast, he whipped the line round both of them, and gripped it with both hands as it pulled taut.

In a second they were dragged overside into the raging sea. Then followed a fierce and dreadful fight for breath amid the suffocating rush of waters. Arnold was conscious of a cruel oppression of all his faculties, a swift vivid remembrance, a black despair. At last came a blow that extinguished consciousness.

The next the young Englishman knew was that he lay on his back, while a swarthy man with a black beard held something to his lips. Arnold became aware of a confused murmur of talk, and by-and-by recognized the sounds of the French tongue. He raised his head, and saw that he lay in a ship's fo'c'sle.

"Well, comrade, how do you find yourself?" asked the black-browed man.

"Where is the lady who was with me?" said Arnold.

"On deck," said the man, "and has been this hour or more, as live as a lark. Is she your wife?"

Arnold shook his head.

"Tant mieux!" laughed the Frenchman. "I hope you are not her lover, comrade."

"Why do you hope that?" Arnold asked.

"Well, well," said he, "there is likely to be a great competition for the lady in the land whither we are bound. This is a queer ship, comrade. You talk like an Englishman."

"I am one."

"In that case you deserved the crack on the pate with which our *Grace de Dieu* welcomed you," said the Frenchman. "But you speak the King's French, and that is to your credit, and in any case it is of little moment what you have been, considering what you will have to be henceforth. Still, if I had known in time that you were one of those plaguy English, hang me if I would not have thrown the line wide!"

"It was you, then, who threw the line?"

"Who else should it be?" said the man. "I bet there is not another on this ship than Jean Picaud that could have saved you from the fishes."

Arnold Firle, who began to recover, told the Frenchman that he was grateful for his deed, though grieved that the doing of it should afford him such small satisfaction, and he added a compliment about the man's handiness,

which seemed to please him. "And now if you please, and my legs will carry me," said he, "you shall take me to your captain."

"A good idea," said Jean Picaud. "The captain gave orders you were to be brought to him as soon as you came to yourself." He turned and gave a light kick in the ribs to a lad who sat near eating a piece of bread and meat. "Boy!" he cried, "will you gorge yourself with flesh on a Friday! Go and tell the captain that the Englishman we pulled out of the sea has had French spirit poured down his foggy throat enough to float a canoe. Say that he speaks our tongue, and that we have dressed him in French clothes, so that being now to all intent a Frenchman and a Christian, he would give thanks to his worship for deliverance."

The lad departed grinning, and presently returned with orders to bring Arnold to the captain.

CHAPTER VII

THE SHIP OF WOMEN

JEAN PICAUD had said that Lady Vane was on deck, but Arnold saw nothing of her as they made their way to the poop.

The *Grace de Dieu* was a fine ship, and though the gale still blew strongly, she rode the waves like a great sea-bird. What with the spirit they had given him, and the blow he had had against the ship, it was as much as Arnold could do to keep his feet by the time they came to the great cabin.

The French captain was a little spare gentleman of about sixty, with a keen nut-brown face. Two men sat with him in the cabin, as great a contrast one with the other as well could be. One was a young officer, gallantly dressed, with bold, passionate eyes, but with a look of bored discontent on his handsome face. The other was dressed soberly in black. He was pale and bloodless, and had pale blue, sunken eyes, and lips strangely bright for a man. From the first moment that Arnold Firle encountered the stare of those pale eyes he conceived an instinctive antipathy for their owner.

The young Englishman saluted, and made shift to thank the captain for the lives of his companion and himself.

The captain acknowledged these expressions with a stiffish bow. "What is your name?" he asked.

"Arnold Firle, monsieur."

"And what are you?"

"I have the honour to be a captain in the Navy of His Majesty of England, monsieur."

The Frenchman looked up sharply. "You will pardon my remarking that you do not look the part, monsieur," said he. "Pray be seated. What is the name of your ship?"

"My ship was the *Lion*, monsieur."

"Ha!" cried the little captain with a snort. "I know that ship by repute. She was with us in Holland."

"She saw some fighting there, monsieur. She was badly battered, and she was sent home—what was left of her."

"It was never a youngster like you," cried the French captain, standing up, "who, when his skipper was shot, fought the *Zwarte Gans* and sank her off the Hook, after a five hours' battle!"

"It was my good fortune, monsieur," answered Arnold.

The Frenchman sprang forward, and held out his hand with the greatest cordiality in the world. "Ventre Dieu! I am glad to have met you, Monsieur Firle!" he exclaimed, while his two companions also rose to their feet. "One is always honoured to meet a brave man. I am Etienne D'Aubert, at your service. This"—he indicated the young officer—"is Lieutenant Lafitte, my second in command, and this gentleman here is Monsieur André Michel."

The two men rose and bowed. A light smile flickered on the thin, bright-red lips of Michel, and again Arnold had that feeling of instinctive aversion.

"The lady who was saved with you—is she your wife?" asked Captain D'Aubert.

"She is the Countess of Vane, widow of the Earl of Vane," said Arnold. "The Earl her husband was washed overboard last night, and she is left in my charge."

The keen eyes of the little Frenchman watched Arnold questioningly, but the young Englishman vouchsafed no

further explanation of the curious circumstances in which he and his companion had been picked up.

"Well, well," said D'Aubert, shrugging his shoulders, "the lady seems in good hands, Monsieur Firle. As for yourself, it is true that my master is at peace of a sort with yours, yet I fear you will not be a very welcome guest in the place whither we are bound."

"And where may that be?" asked Arnold.

"To Canada, across the Western Ocean." It was the man in black who spoke.

"But can you not land us, Monsieur D'Aubert, at some port in England or France?"

D'Aubert shook his head. "I am late already," said he, "and with these head winds I shall be later yet. And mine is a cargo that will spoil with keeping—eh, Monsieur Michel?"

"You should ask Lieutenant Lafitte, captain," said Michel, meeting the skipper's roguish look with his flickering smile.

"Me?" laughed the young lieutenant. "Parbleu, Monsieur le Capitaine, I have no objection to keep such a cargo as long as may be necessary."

"Eh bien, messieurs," said D'Aubert, "if I am any judge of appearances, Monsieur Firle here is still too sick and dizzy to care two pins what we carry, so long as we find him a corner to lie down in. There is the berth of the quartermaster who fell overboard the day we left port. Picaud, you rascal, take monsieur thither, and see that he is made comfortable."

With a courteous inclination he dismissed his guest. Arnold, indeed, was in no state to sustain polite conversation, and having assured himself that the Countess was well cared for, lay down gratefully enough in the place to which Picaud brought him, and slept for many hours.

But the next day, the gale having gone down and the sun coming out pleasantly, Arnold made a discovery.

The *Grace de Dieu* was full of women! For two hours in the best part of the morning they thronged the waist of the ship, from which the seamen and the sail-trimmers were cleared, and there they walked about among the small boats and the ship's gear, taking their ease in the sun, to the number of a hundred or more. Lady Vane was among them, and once she looked up and caught his eye as he stood beside the captain on the quarter-deck. But afterwards she would not look towards him again. All the women were young, and many of them good-looking, though in Arnold's view there was none to compare with Marjorie. A couple of nuns moved about among them.

"What think you of our hen-coop, Monsieur Firle?" said Captain D'Aubert.

"One would say you ship a harem for the Sultan of the Turks," the Englishman answered lightly, though his curiosity was keenly aroused.

"One would say wrong," answered D'Aubert. "Our master, King Louis, is a prince with a fertile brain. Out there, beyond the Western Ocean, we are building for the future, Monsieur Firle. We are planting a new France in the wilderness. We have got a nation in the nurse's lap, and hope to make it grow. But to make a nation you must have men, and to get men it is necessary to have women. Monsieur Michel here, who has travelled a great deal in these new lands of ours, can tell you all about it. He has helped to select our cargo."

Arnold glanced at Monsieur Michel and noticed, with a sudden angry resentment, that those pale blue eyes were fixed with a peculiar intentness on the girlish figure of the widowed young Countess, as she rested a white hand upon a gun and gazed pensively seaward.

Hearing his own name Michel turned. "You see before you the mothers of New France," said he, stretching out an arm towards the women. His voice was hard

and thin, and Arnold could not tell whether he spoke in approval or derision.

"You have some adventurous ladies in France," he said.

Captain D'Aubert shrugged his shoulders. "As for ladies, you may call them so if you will," said he. "'Mixed goods' is what our holy Mother Marie du Plessis calls them at Quebec, where the King runs his marriage market. It is true that each of the pretty dears carries a certificate with her that she is the real thing, and some of them are of good enough families, yet I should call them a consignment very much at purchaser's risk, Monsieur Firlé. I could tell you some stories—eh, but some stories!"

"Where do they come from?" asked Arnold.

"Bah!" exclaimed Michel. "Where do they not come from! Dieppe, Paris, Rochelle, Rouen, wherever there are girls who are in want of a husband and a dowry. We find them both in plenty, *là-bas* in Quebec, at His Majesty's expenses. You will see some things, when we come to port, that will surprise you."

"All the same," put in D'Aubert, as though on the defensive, "you will not find the equals of the men we are breeding for France over yonder, not if you search Europe from Brest to the Bosphorus."

Save for the glimpse he had of her from the quarter-deck Arnold saw nothing that day of Lady Vane. The next day the weather worsened again and nothing was to be seen of the "cargo," for the women were berthed in the main or gun deck of the ship, where spaces were screened off for them between the guns to give them privacy.

For upwards of a week the *Grace de Dieu* beat down Channel against head winds from the west and south-west, until, one wild morning, her anxious company looked forth and saw upon their lee the surf leaping high about

the grim black fangs that Ushant shows the ocean. She cleared those perilous rocks with none too wide a margin, and began to breast in good earnest the great green rollers of the Western Ocean.

The length of the journey down Channel had bred some discontent among the men, but the day after they lost sight of the last rocks of France the weather cleared; a favouring light breeze from the south-east sprang up, and the ship sped westward under a bellying cloud of sail.

That evening Captain D'Aubert gave a supper party in the great cabin, to which his officers and some ladies of the "cargo" were bidden, the latter with the hardly-wrung consent of the stern-faced nuns who played duennas to the passengers.

Among the Captain's guests came the young Countess of Vane. It was the first time she and Arnold had met since their rescue. The strong sea air had made her a picture of health, enriching her great beauty, and the warm sunshine had brought a riper glow into her cheeks.

She greeted her countryman with a quiet reserve, and he quickly perceived, with chagrin, that it was her intention to avoid opportunities for speech with him. With the rest of the company, notwithstanding she spoke little French, the young Countess was quickly at ease, receiving coolly, like a queen among her courtiers, the homage of these sailors' undisguised admiration.

More than once Arnold surprised the intent, yet furtive gaze of André Michel fixed upon Lady Vane. There was a cold look of calculation, and at the same time a purposeful force in those light eyes which constantly renewed in the young Englishman a vague disquiet. For no reason he could give to himself he began to realize that he detested Monsieur Michel.

Yet if the Countess had attracted the attention of Michel there was another of that ship's company, the young Lieutenant Lafitte, over whom a spell was cast

that evening so apparent that it was a matter of general comment.

"Ma foi, Monsieur Firle," laughed Captain D'Aubert in his ear, "when this charming Madame de Vane has cast off the shadow of her loss I think she will have no difficulty in replacing Monsieur le Comte."

Again Arnold Firle tasted the bitterness of the jealousy which knows itself hopeless. When she whom he loved smiled on the infatuated young lieutenant, as she smiled impartially on them all, he ached with the thought that though she had held his memory for four years, never again, even in the courtesy of social usage, would Marjorie so smile upon him, because of the dreadful suspicion she laid at his door.

A few nights later, when there was another such gathering in the cabin, it was clear that the ardour of Lieutenant Lafitte occasioned the Countess some embarrassment.

That night, as Arnold was vainly trying to sleep, Lafitte came to his quarters. His eyes were shining, his dark face alight with his emotion.

"Monsieur Firle," said he, "I wish you to tell me the truth about Madame de Vane."

"What truth, monsieur?" asked Arnold.

"Let me tell you," said the young officer, pouring out his words in a torrent of excitement, "that I love Madame to such a degree that I lose all power over myself. I am devoured, Monsieur Firle! I have asked her to marry me when we come to Quebec. But she says she cannot marry, and when I ask her why she answers that she has a task to fulfil before she may listen to the voice of a lover. I plead with her: she will say nothing but that she is the servant of her task, and that you will confirm her words."

"Well?" said Arnold.

"Well, in God's name, what task is this?" cried Lafitte.

"Madame has told you I will confirm her words," said the Englishman. "Very well, I confirm them."

"But the task—what is it?"

"Since Madame has not told you I cannot tell you either, Monsicur Lafitte," said Arnold. "Yet you may rest assured that Madame will hear no lover till it be accomplished."

"You say so!" cried the young man, his eyes blazing into Arnold's. "What fishes' souls you English have!" He seized Arnold's wrist with a hot hand and leaned to the Englishman's ear. "If she were the King's," he said in a hissing whisper, "I would have her!" The next moment he was gone.

Arnold got up and went out to breathe the cool night air. Almost at the door of his cabin he came upon André Michel.

"What have you been doing to our lovesick Lafitte?" asked Michel. "The poor youth roars so loud in his pangs that one cannot but overhear him."

"You overheard him, monsieur?"

"But certainly, since I have not the misfortune to be deaf."

"Lieutenant Lafitte will do well to be careful," said Arnold. He was angry with Lafitte, and at that moment he was even more angry with this stealthy, eavesdropping fellow who eyed his lady so covertly, yet persistently.

"Yes," murmured Michel. "Lafitte is a fool. He will cause trouble. He must be looked after." He stood and looked at the Englishman in the half darkness.

"What do you mean?" said Arnold.

Michel laughed unpleasantly. "It is not wise to say all one means—like Lieutenant Lafitte," he observed. "Qui vivra verra, Monsieur Firlé. I am going to bed."

In the next few days the weather changed again. Instead of gliding smoothly towards the sunset under a white cloud of sail, the *Grace de Dieu* climbed the watery

hills again with gaunt, bare masts, and the wind, which had been friendly, got round ahead of her. She was not yet half-way to the New World, and already rations were being shortened. The discontent of the crew increased from day to day, and to Arnold Firlé, watching things with a sailor's eye, it seemed that the officers began to wear a look of anxiety. Had they been an ordinary ship's company their situation would have given no occasion for uneasiness, but with so many mouths to feed the case was different.

As the days wore on Arnold perceived a subtle change in the spirit of the men, which did not seem to be observed by the captain and his officers. There was a growing sense of tension, a repressed expectancy. More than once Arnold was surprised to see Lieutenant Lafitte in earnest conversation with Michel, more than once he observed Lafitte talking familiarly with men whom he knew to be malcontents, in a way that seemed strange on the part of an officer. The latter sight, suspicious though he deemed it, gave him less uneasiness than the former, which completely mystified him. What could the hot-headed lieutenant have in common with the cool and crafty Michel?

Yet nothing happened and the ship continued to struggle westwards.

One evening an incident occurred which might have given the young Englishman food for thought had it left him in a frame of mind for thinking.

Captain D'Aubert had held another gathering in the great cabin, and Arnold had withdrawn himself early, unable to endure the sight of others enjoying that friendly converse with his sweetheart from which he was so miserably debarred. He betook himself to the stern-walk round the poop and stood there in the darkness, leaning on a small gun mounted to fire astern, and gazing gloomily down upon the great waves.

Suddenly he became aware of voices near by. One was a woman's voice—Marjorie's. "No, no! I will not hear you!" he heard her say.

And then another voice, low but determined: "You shall hear me, madame!" The tone was hard, yet had a ring of passion. "I love you, but I am no cringing lover. I have the wit to gain you and the force to hold you. You shall be mine, because I am resolved."

Arnold, with something between fury and repulsion, recognized that voice. He looked up and saw them dimly against the poop, but he himself was hidden from them by the gun. He heard a movement as though she sought to escape, and then the man had her in a close embrace and spoke again in his hard, determined tones. But in the midst of his utterance came the Countess's half-stifled cry—"Help, ah, help!"

Without a word Arnold sprang out from his concealment. The man was slighter than he, and in the Englishman's fierce wrath was as helpless in his arms as a child. Arnold took him by the throat and shook him like a rat, then held him speechless against the stern-chase gun. They three still had the stern-walk to themselves. Against the blackness of the gun the pale face of Michel showed in the faint light from the sea. Arnold drew back his arm for a blow, but Lady Vane laid her hand on his elbow.

"You will kill him!" she said breathlessly in English. "Stop!"

"He deserves no better!" cried Arnold. "Why should I spare him?"

"Because I spare him," she answered with a quiet pride. "Let him give his word that this goes no further than us three, and release him."

"I do not trust the villain," Arnold said.

"Whom can one trust?" said the girl with a little sigh.

"If you would trust me, Marjorie!" he exclaimed.

"Let him go!" she insisted.

Arnold turned to his prisoner, dropping again into French. "Monsieur Michel," said he, "Madame whom you have insulted will not have you killed. Give me your word as a gentleman that this shall not go beyond us three and I liberate you." Michel made a gesture of assent and Arnold relaxed his grip.

Monsieur Michel staggered as he was released. He had been very nearly choked by the relentless clutch of the Englishman and he found his voice with difficulty.

"It shall not go beyond us three," he said hoarsely. "We three shall remember it—ah, very well!" Then without another word he turned away.

"He hates you," said Marjorie.

"What is his love or his hate to me!" cried Arnold.

"Guard yourself from him!" she said.

"To what end?" he asked bitterly. "That they may hang me in England for a murderer? Indeed, my lady, between the dagger of hate and the rope of dishonour my fancy is for the dagger."

She came and stood close beside him, and he saw her dark eyes shining in the faint light. "You have saved my life from the sea, Arnold Firle," she said, "and now you have saved my honour. Yet dare I thank you? O God, if I dared!"

She caught her breath hard, and then turning swiftly away left her lover standing alone under the stars.

CHAPTER VIII

MUTINY

IT was about a week after that night, on a bright clear morning, that Arnold Firle was on the fo'c'sle head of the *Grace de Dieu*, lazily watching the porpoises playing under her prow.

Jean Picaud the boatswain came up, and clambered out like a monkey along the great bowsprit, to examine, as it seemed, the state of the gear.

Many times Arnold had talked with this man and found him very good company. He was a time-serving rascal, with a keen eye to his proper interests, but a most capable seaman, and since it was he who had been the means of bringing Arnold and the Countess on board, he had taken into his head to regard them as in some sort his peculiar property. On this morning, as Picaud busied himself about his work in the rigging under the bowsprit, Arnold observed that he more than once looked up towards him with a quizzical expression. There was no one near him just then on the fo'c'sle.

"Monsieur Firle," called Picaud suddenly in a low voice, "if you will trouble yourself to come down here where I am, you will have a better view of the dolphins." At the same time he put his fingers on his lips.

It occurred to Arnold that from where the man hung below the figure-head he was invisible to those on the ship's decks, but it was with little thought of what was to come that he scrambled down to him.

"Monsieur Firle," said Picaud, "if I tell you something which it greatly imports you to know, will you swear

to keep silence in the present, and to remember in the future the poor boatswain? "

" Why, Jean, I do not like an oath that is sworn in the dark," Arnold told him. " But I am a man of honour."

" I saved your life once, yours and Madame's, and I may do so again," said he.

" Well, I swear. What is this mighty secret? "

" Simply that you are to be murdered, Monsieur."

" You are very obliging," said Arnold. " By whom? "

" That is as may be," said Picaud. " But it will need great care if you are not to be in heaven by this time tomorrow."

The young Englishman sat for a few moments very thoughtfully in the rigging.

" Well," said he at last, as quietly as he could, " when I am dead, what will Monsieur André Michel proceed to do? "

Picaud grinned. " You bid me look into a deep well, Monsieur Firle," said he. " If you are killed—which I hope you will avoid, monsieur—you will not be the only one. Perhaps the *Grace de Dieu* will change her course. Perhaps those who are left will sail south to join the buccaneers on the Spanish Main. How do I know? "

" And what of the women? "

Picaud grinned again. " The women are in no danger," said he. " The sun shines warm in the Carib Sea, Monsieur Firle. The blood runs quicker, and love is kinder than in the wintry lands of the North."

" Monsieur Picaud," said Arnold, " all this interests me very much, but I think it would interest Monsieur D'Aubert still more."

" Doubtless," said the boatswain.

" It is your duty to warn him."

Jean Picaud looked up with an odd smile. " I am not attached to the captain," said he. " And I have not been commissioned to murder him—as I have you, Monsieur Firle."

At this Arnold started. But Jean Picaud looked down quietly at the shooting porpoises. "Captain D'Aubert enjoys a fight," he mused. "Whereas I do not. It is unwise to take things too much for granted."

Suddenly he stopped with an exclamation. Eight bells were sounding from the deck.

"Quick!" hissed Picaud. "If you would save yourself, climb down and hide behind the spritsail! Lieutenant Lafitte is coming at eight bells to see if my task is done. Quick!"

A man can do many things with death at his heels that in cool blood he would not attempt. In a few seconds Arnold was clinging by hands and feet above the sea along the under side of the great spritsail yard where it crossed the bowsprit and the sail lay folded upon it. Less than a minute passed ere he heard the voice of Lafitte from the fo'c'sle head hailing Picaud, who still remained in the rigging.

"Is all in order, boatswain?"

"All is well, my lieutenant," was the answer.

"Then come up quickly!" cried Lafitte. "Aux armes! Aux armes!"

An indescribable clamour instantly arose from the decks of the ship, cries and pistol-shots, and orders shouted in haste. Then the screams of the women in the gun-deck were mingled with the din.

Arnold scrambled back beside Picaud. "In Heaven's name, what is this?" he demanded.

"Mutiny, Monsieur Firlé," answered the man, coolly. "Your murder was to be the signal. Now the fat is in the fire."

Arnold began to climb up to regain the fo'c'sle, wondering what devilish scheme of Michel's could have joined him in collusion with the headstrong, passionate Lafitte.

"Are you mad?" called Picaud below him. "The fo'c'sle is in our hands, and its guns command the whole

ship's waist. The captain and those with him may be dead men within five minutes. Come back!"

For a moment Arnold paused. It was clear that the captain and officers were making a stiff fight in the after part of the ship.

"Follow me!" he shouted to Picaud, and without waiting to see whether he did or no, the Englishman gained the deck and rushed to the gunner's quarters in the after bulkhead.

At the same moment Lieutenant Lafitte, sword in hand, hatless and with torn coat, came running from the poop, and a few sailors with him, some of them bleeding. Captain D'Aubert, at the head of another group, came running in pursuit.

"Fire!" cried Lafitte furiously to the gunners waiting on their guns, which swept the middle of the ship. Then suddenly he stopped at the sight of Arnold Firlé. Without a word Arnold rushed upon him, and having no weapon struck him with all his force between the eyes. Down went the young Frenchman like a felled ox, and his sword rattled loose on the deck. Arnold caught it up and rushed upon the gunners to save the bloodshed he saw coming.

"Halt!" he shouted.

Too late! The whole fo'c'sle battery burst into a roar, sending a tornado of destruction down the ship's middle. Like a madman Arnold rushed upon the gunners, thrusting and hacking with Lafitte's sword. They hesitated a moment and gave back, thinking themselves taken in the rear. Then, seeing the Englishman unsupported, they came at him with a shout, and he backed into a corner, fighting furiously in desperation. Then behind the mutinous gunners Arnold saw the old captain, streaming blood, and followed by a score of stragglers, with bared cutlasses, hurrying across the deck.

"Surrender and save yourselves!" cried Arnold to the

mutineers. One or two looked behind them and wavered, which was their undoing. Next moment D'Aubert and his men were upon them. The captain cut down one, and a second was pistolled as he raised his arm to strike. Then the rest with one accord flung down their weapons.

Old D'Aubert, white with loss of blood, and his left arm shattered at his side, glared at them for a minute in dumb fury, then ordered them to file out on the deck. They stood there cowed and fearful, fifteen of them in line.

"Who is your leader in this villainy?" cried the captain. "Answer me the truth and some of you shall be spared."

With one voice they accused Lieutenant Lafitte.

"Bien! I will deal with him. As for you, dogs and assassins, get you up and sit on the rail, and you shall have your medicine."

In wonder and fear they obeyed.

"Sit close!" cried D'Aubert, and they edged nearer to one another.

Then the old man called for muskets, which were brought, and more men came up too, so that when he gave the word, thirty muzzles were pointed at the hapless wretches on the rail.

"Now, my children," cried the old sea-dog, all white-faced and trembling, "when I give the word you shall fire in sections of seven, and pick me off every third man of yonder traitors, and the section that misses its man, by all the saints in heaven I will physic them likewise! Fire!"

The line of pointing muskets flamed and roared. Like dead birds from a branch five men of that close-seated line dropped overside into the sea, while from the survivors, as they clung to the bulwarks, rose cries of horror and cries of pain—for the firing had been across the whole

width of the deck, and not all the bullets had flown straight. Then with blanched faces the survivors with one accord fell on their knees on the bloody deck and stretched out hands of supplication.

"You that are whole," cried D'Aubert, "clean up the mess you have made. Make haste, for by Our Lady I waste my own blood while I stand here chattering. Then get you to your quarters!"

The grim little man passed his unwounded hand across his brow, then staggered up to Arnold Firle, who stood watching this horrible business. "Monsieur Firle," he said unsteadily, "the King owes you much, and I more. My officers are dead, and you must help me." With a final effort he turned to his men. "Monsieur Firle will act as my lieutenant, in place of those who have been murdered," he said. He leaned hard on Arnold with his uninjured hand. "For God's sake get me below!" he muttered. "I have bled too long!"

Glancing round him, Arnold encountered the scared gaze of Jean Picaud. "See to the men," said he, "and I will see to the captain."

He got D'Aubert to his cabin, and with such rough skill as his experience had taught him dressed and set the broken arm. Monsieur D'Aubert had fainted with the loss of blood, and lay in his bunk like a dead man. The Englishman procured some cognac, and at the first sign in the captain of returning life, he went on deck and found Picaud.

"Go and tend the captain," he ordered, "and when he is able bring me word of the course that we must lay."

Under the fo'c'sle bulkhead he came upon André Michel kneeling beside Lieutenant Lafitte, who was still insensible from the stunning blow Arnold had delivered him. Michel looked up with an inscrutable expression on his thin and crafty face.

"This is a very bad business, Monsieur Firle," said he.

"It might have been worse for some of us," answered the Englishman, bluntly.

"We have lost twenty men of the ship's company," said Michel. "Of the officers, only the captain and Lieutenant Lafitte remain alive, unless you count myself."

"We cannot afford to count you, monsieur," said Arnold. "I must request you to consider yourself under arrest, and to keep your quarters until the captain's pleasure is known."

Monsieur Michel rose to his feet, two red spots glowing on his thin cheeks. "By what authority do you offer me this insult?" he demanded.

Arnold eyed him with a rising wrath, which he strove to keep in leash. "Captain D'Aubert has committed to me the charge of this ship," said he. "And I mean that she shall come to port, Monsieur Michel. That is my authority for taking precautions."

"I acknowledge no authority of Captain D'Aubert," said Michel. "I am on this ship as agent to the King's Minister, Monsieur de Colbert. Take warning, young man!"

"And take warning, you," answered Arnold, with an ominous quiet, "that if in five minutes you are not in your cabin I will have you put in irons, were you Monsieur de Colbert himself." He beckoned a couple of seamen, who to his relief instantly obeyed his summons. "Choose quickly, Monsieur Michel."

Michel looked at the sailors, calculating his chances. They were two of the firing party. There was no encouragement in their appearance for resistance to the captain's deputy.

"I go," said Michel. "These honest men are witnesses that you, an Englishman, have dared to place under arrest, on a French ship, a servant of the French King. His Majesty has a long arm, Monsieur Firle!"

His pale eyes flashed a look of impotent malice as he walked away.

Arnold paid no further heed to him at the moment, but pointed to Lieutenant Lafitte, who had sat up and was staring about him with a dazed expression.

“You will put Monsieur Lafitte in irons,” he told the sailors, “and you two will be responsible for him, your lives for his, until Monsieur le Capitaine shall give you other orders. You understand?”

“Parfaitement, Monsieur le Lieutenant.”

Arnold waited to see his orders executed, then straightway set about his task of navigating the ship. In this task he had his hands full, though the crew, who had had their fill of excitement, proved amenable to discipline and obeyed orders readily enough.

It was the better part of a week after these happenings that Captain D'Aubert was able to come again on deck. When he heard what had been done to Michel he looked glum.

“That fellow must be given his liberty, Monsieur Firle,” said he. “He will give trouble. He is an artful rogue. On the one hand he is an agent of the Government, and on the other he plays, I believe, a deep game in Canada yonder, in the interests of the Jesuits. Why did you cross him?”

“I did not trust him, monsieur, and you had done me the honour to commit the ship to my charge.”

“I can prove nothing against him,” said D'Aubert. “He took no part in the fighting, that I know of, and Lieutenant Lafitte admits that it was he who led that business, in the hope of carrying off your handsome countrywoman and turning pirate—the hare-brained fool!”

“When I came on deck, after you were taken to your cabin, I found this Michel bending over Lafitte,” said Arnold, reflecting that save for what had passed that night

on the ship's stern-walk, he was altogether without evidence even of evil motive against Monsieur Michel. And on that matter his lips were sealed.

"An act of charity to the wounded, let us suppose," said D'Aubert, with a sneer. "No, no, Monsieur Michel must be freed. It is not so much to risk, for to-morrow, if this wind holds, we should enter the great river of Canada."

So Monsieur Michel was set at liberty, and went about the ship with a sour face and those bright red lips of his tightly set. Several times he was to be seen consulting with the two nuns on the women's deck.

More than once in the past week the *Grace de Dieu* had come in sight of land, and in the afternoon of the day following Michel's release the look-out at the masthead hailed, and by-and-by the outline of a distant coast rose like a mist on the horizon.

"It is the river of Canada," said the old captain. "I think you will not have seen the like before, Monsieur Firle."

And indeed they sailed on for five days more with a fair wind, and slowly the distant, mist-like coasts showed themselves out of the water, and began gradually to close in towards each other as the *Grace de Dieu* made her way up the vastest river Arnold had ever seen in his sailing, bordered with great dark forests, and here and there a stretch of grass-land of so bright a green that it hardly seemed grass at all. Then one evening they cast anchor in a spacious roads, and saw before them a huge cliff, towering high above the ship's topmasts, and on the cliff's brink a citadel from which floated the fleur-de-lis. Beyond the flag showed a cross, that stood on a cathedral tower, and on the strand at the cliff's foot a cluster of merchants' houses crouched in the shelter of the rock.

Arnold Firle had seen many splendid cities, but never, he thought, a place so built by nature to command as this

vast regal cliff, from whose brow the guns looked out over the forests and the farmsteads, and over the ships at anchor below in the noble sparkling river that poured the waters of half a continent eastwards to the ocean.

Boats came out towards them from the shore. The women on board, long pent in the narrow limits of the ship, crowded the deck and gazed out with eager interest upon the land where their future lay. They besieged the two nuns with questions, and from time to time turned to glance at the quarter-deck, where Monsieur Michel stood leaning on the rail, watching them with a cynical smile.

Captain D'Aubert, his injured arm still in a sling, passed by, in high spirits at the end of a difficult voyage.

"Eh, monsieur, your goods are in prime condition for the market, is it not so?" he asked.

"Well enough, Monsieur le Capitaine," answered Michel, coldly. He had not forgotten his treatment.

Captain D'Aubert crossed the deck to Arnold, and jerked his thumb back in the direction of the women. "Their hearts are all a-flutter already," said he. "Tomorrow, Monsieur Firle, you will see something to amuse you in the King's city of Quebec."

CHAPTER IX

A WOMAN'S WHIM

EARLY next morning Arnold was summoned to the captain's room. He found the commander sitting with a very blank face.

"Lafitte has gone," announced D'Aubert, briefly.

"Gone! Do you mean escaped, monsieur?"

"That is precisely my meaning," answered the captain, tartly. "If I had had your English phlegm, my dear Monsieur Firle, and had kept that rascal Michel under guard, I should not now look such a fool."

"But Lieutenant Lafitte was in irons. How could Michel release him?"

"He is no longer in irons, and he is no longer here. And as before, I can prove nothing against Monsieur Michel."

"And where is Michel?"

"He is still aboard, and purrs as sleekly as a cat that has stolen the cream."

"And the men?"

"Will say nothing. Michel has funds at his disposal."

Arnold shrugged his shoulders. "Monsieur André Michel is too deep for me," he said. But in his own mind he was convinced that an alliance between those two could not last, and the motive that might lie behind it gave him a deeper concern than he cared to show.

Captain D'Aubert broke in upon his speculations. "That was not why I sent for you, Monsieur Firle. Your countrywoman, Madame de Vane, desires speech with you before we land our pretty cargo."

“And I too, captain, as you may suppose, am anxious to see Madame, and discuss arrangements for our return to England,” said Arnold, who had scarcely exchanged two words with the young Countess since the mutiny.

It was D'Aubert's turn to shrug. “From what the nuns tell me,” he remarked, “you will not find Madame very amenable to discussion. She insists, it appears, that her name and estate shall not be made known ashore, and declares her intention to land with the holy sisters and their charges. I think you will find her in a strange mood, Monsieur Firle. But of that you shall judge for yourself. Come.”

Full of sudden misgivings, the young Englishman followed the captain to the gun-deck, where the women were making their preparations to land. He was conducted to a small cabin, where he found Lady Vane in company with one of the nuns whom they had brought from France, and there the captain left him.

The nun, with a slight inclination of her head, withdrew a step, and sat down, leaving Marjorie face to face with her lover. The girl's colour came and went by turns.

“Arnold,” said she, “you have told me that King Charles's justice would hang you.”

“I did not say it would be justice,” he answered.

“You have said you will give yourself up,” she continued, “but I release you from that promise.”

“Why do you release me, Marjorie?” he asked with sudden hope.

“Oh!” she cried, “because I am full of doubt; because my heart bids me acquit you of my husband's death; because Heaven itself, as though to shame my mistrust, has snatched us from the operation of our English laws.”

Her bosom rose and sank with the agitation she strove

to suppress. Like all her fellow-passengers, she was dressed for the landing in a virginal white. Her soft brown eyes were full of disquiet as they met her lover's gaze. As for Arnold Firle, it swept over him like a flood that life was worthless to him unless it brought a full and free acquittal from those sweet lips. When he spoke again his voice was unsteady.

"No," he said. "We will not be guided by chance. The King's judges shall deal with me as soon as I can cross the water again. Ah, Marjorie, I am too deep in love with you to keep my life and leave my love unwooded!"

"You shall not speak so to me!" she cried, and her voice was almost harsh. "I have sent for you to say that I wish us never to meet again, and that from to-day I put myself in charge of these good sisters." She indicated with a turn of her head the seated nun, who had remained throughout like a figure carved in wood.

"You will not take the veil!"

"The widow's veil is mine already," said she, with sudden hysterical wildness. "If I change it for the nun's or the bride's, who shall deny me?"

"The bride's?" he echoed.

"Ay, sir, the bride's," she answered recklessly. "Is not one road to oblivion as good as another? I thought to go to Dover, and Heaven has brought me here. Who am I that I should reject the guidance of Heaven?"

"Heaven has not guided you to the altar," said Arnold, aghast at her wildness. He glanced with suspicion at the pale cold face of the nun, who looked up for a moment without expression at the Englishwoman, and then resumed her statuesque pose.

"Has it not!" laughed the Countess. "We women, I am told, when we land here, are to be displayed in three several halls, according to our degree. The bridegrooms are awaiting us in a frenzy of eagerness, for if they marry not now within a fortnight, they will be heavily fined by

the King's decree. They will come and pick us out, as a butcher chooses his sheep from the flock. We offer good choice, do we not?"

"The captain has told me something of this," said Arnold. "Are you mad, Marjorie? You shall not do it!"

"Oh, but we shall!" she persisted in her wild perversity. "We have here the tall and the short, the blonde and the brown, the plump and the lean. Every man may find a shoe to fit him. 'Tis said among the girls, Arnold, that the plumpest will be taken first, as being the more likely to resist the cold weather. Oh—and I had forgotten, the Governor-General will give each couple for dowry an ox and a cow, a pair of swine, a pair of fowls, two barrels of salted meat, and eleven crowns of good French money. I think that's all. What more would you have?"

As if exhausted by her outburst, she sat down on the little cabin bed beside the nun, while her breath came fast, and her sun-kissed cheeks flamed with a high colour. The nun put out a white hand and took one of Marjorie's.

Heedless of the nun's presence, Arnold fell on his knees beside the girl.

"Marjorie, Marjorie!" he exclaimed. "Remember you are Lady Vane, a peeress of England, and spare yourself this madness!"

She paled suddenly. "It was only for a little while that I was what you say, but I doubt if I can forget it," she said. "Farewell, Arnold Firl!"

She rose again, and the nun with her, and they made to leave the cabin. The young man also got up, and faced the Countess of Vane, for a moment barring progress to the door.

"I will not leave you so!" he declared. "Marjorie, it is not you who speak. This morning you are not yourself. I have known you too long, and loved you too long

to think it. When you are calm, and alone, you will revolt at the thought of what you have proposed. Does this lady"—he indicated the nun—"know of your name and rank?"

"She knows all," answered the girl. "She speaks no English."

Arnold turned to the nun. "Madame, it is your profession to be charitable. In my countrywoman's great distress of mind, I entreat you to see that she does herself no wrong."

The nun answered by a mere inclination of her head.

"The Governor-General," Arnold continued, "will of necessity be informed of the circumstances—"

"No!" cried the young Countess. "Will you persecute me, sir?"

"I will protect you, if I can," he answered.

"Do what you will," she said wearily. "From to-day our ways must lie apart."

Again she made to go, and this time Arnold did not prevent her. But for an instant as she went out with the nun the Countess allowed her eyes to linger upon her lover. Her lips trembled, and though she held her head high, for that moment he felt that he had read into her heart. It filled him with a new resolve that in the face of everything that fate might do he would win that sweet verdict of absolute acquittal.

When they had gone Arnold betook himself to Captain D'Aubert, whom he found already waiting to go ashore, a packet of despatches in his hand.

"Well, and how did you find your countrywoman?" asked the old sailor.

"Much as you warned me, Monsieur D'Aubert. I shall throw myself upon your kindness to let me have speech as soon as may be with the Governor-General."

"With all my heart," said the captain. "I go direct to the Count of Frontenac, and you shall come with me."

You may be sure I shall inform His Excellency of the great services you have done to His Majesty in saving his ship for him."

Glad enough to know that fate had given him this handle with the authorities, Arnold stepped down into the boat with the captain, who as they were rowed ashore pointed out this and that feature of the city. They came to land at the foot of the cliff, where were a number of stores and traders' dwellings. Here it was, said Monsieur D'Aubert, that the skins of the beaver and other creatures were brought by the natives for shipment to France, from hundreds of miles of forest and river to the westward, and to the value every year of many thousands of livres. By a steep winding road, very trying to legs long cramped on shipboard, they climbed to where the city was perched aloft, passing on the way what seemed to Arnold for the size of the place an extraordinary number of large religious houses, strongly built of stone. Indeed, up here on the cliff the population appeared to consist in the main of soldiers, nuns and priests. As for the Château Saint Louis, which D'Aubert showed him presently as the place where the Governor dwelt, it was an indifferent old wooden structure, though maintained in high state, and fully guarded by soldiery. It seemed to the young Englishman that the firing of a bundle of straw would set the whole place in a blaze.

They were left for some time waiting in a large hall, whose windows looked far out over the river and the hills. A number of persons of various sorts were there, bent on the same business of seeing the Governor. There were townsmen and soldiers, a pair of Jesuit priests who murmured to each other like black spectres, and in one place there squatted on the floor a half-naked savage, still as an image of beaten copper, his knees as high as his ears, having beside him many curious belts of white and purple beads. He had limbs like a Greek god where they showed

free from his fur robe, and a thin, cruel, hairless face, with glittering black eyes. Arnold thought to himself that if an evil spirit could clothe itself with flesh it might well appear in such a guise. The man fascinated him. That face, inscrutable as the face of the dead, looked neither to right nor left. But for the glitter of the black eyes he might have been a statue.

"What is that apparition?" whispered Arnold to D'Aubert.

"An Indian of the Iroquois," was the low answer. "A nation of devils, Monsieur Firlé."

Hereafter Arnold was to learn much more of that nation. But just then a door opened at the further end of the hall, and two men came in from another room, at whose entrance all present turned their heads. They advanced talking earnestly. One was a tall old man, grey-haired, but dressed in the height of elegance, resplendent in gold and silver lace, peruke and ribbons, and erect and supple as a youth. His keen imperious face was full of fire and command, and his every movement had a restless energy. As he talked he gesticulated freely, but his bearing, notwithstanding his dandified attire, had an almost kingly dignity. His companion was in many respects his opposite. Tall like the first, he had a look of unconquerable hardihood, and he seemed the embodiment of calm reserve. His deep eyes, grey and thoughtful, looked out from under thick dark brows. He was much the younger of the two, and his face was tanned as brown as a Moor's.

"Yonder stand the two greatest men in New France," murmured Captain D'Aubert. "The one is Monsieur the Count of Frontenac, Governor for the King, and the other is Monsieur Robert Cavalier de la Salle, who is a sealed book to us all. See how the Jesuit fathers watch them. Ha-ha! There's no love lost between the Griffin and the Crows."

"The Griffin?"

"It is the coat-of-arms of His Excellency."

From where he stood talking the eagle glance of the Governor-General suddenly singled out D'Aubert. Instantly he crossed the hall to the captain, beckoning his companion to follow.

"Welcome back, Captain D'Aubert!" cried he, extending his hand with soldierly frankness. "I hunger for a sight of your dispatches, to learn what my friends and my enemies are doing for me in France. Who is this with you?"

Captain D'Aubert briefly explained the young Englishman's presence, and lowering his voice told the story of the anxious voyage of the *Grace de Dieu*. The Governor-General looked grave.

"Monsieur Firle," said he, very graciously, "I thank you on behalf of His Majesty, and while you stay in Quebec I hope you will consider yourself my guest. Your countrymen, God knows, give me trouble enough to the southward, and I fear there will be some severe blood-letting between us before I die. But I honour a brave man at any time, and if you will give me your parole as a gentleman, I will place no restriction on your movements. I hope you are a good Christian, Monsieur Firle."

"I was brought up in the Reformed faith, Monsieur le Comte," said Arnold.

"So much the worse for your soul," said he. "But we hope to convert you. We are all missionaries here, are we not, La Salle?"

"Too many missionaries, too few musketeers, Excellency," the tall bronzed man replied.

"Ah—ça!" exclaimed Frontenac. "If you and I could have our way, La Salle!" He turned with a smile to Arnold. "Monsieur Firle, if the King of France could be brought to understand what few understand, the greatness of this land and the promise of it, this gentleman here and myself would plant the white lilies over a realm

more vast than Europe itself. If you love high adventure I commend you to the Sieur de la Salle. Monsieur D'Aubert, I must talk with you. Be good enough to bring hither your despatches. Gentlemen, excuse me."

He carried off the captain to the room from which he had come, leaving Arnold standing with La Salle.

The Frenchman regarded his companion gravely for a few moments in silence.

"You are anxious, naturally, to return to England, Monsieur Firle?" His statement had the tone of a question.

From the first moment of seeing him, Arnold had felt strangely drawn to Monsieur de la Salle. Even to outward view there was something in common between the two men. The Frenchman's hair had the raven blackness of the South, his handsome, sombre face was more finely chiselled than the frank open countenance of the young sailor, and he was the taller and more sinewy. But both were men of the open air, hardy and straight-limbed, and if the Englishman's blue-grey eyes were the brighter with youth they were not more direct in their gaze than those which were bent upon him.

"I am anxious before all things, monsieur," Arnold answered, "to secure the safety and well-being of the lady with whom I was rescued by the *Grace de Dieu*."

"Where is she?"

"She has entrusted herself to the sisters who crossed in the ship."

"Then she is not a heretic?"

"She is of the old religion, monsieur."

"I mean no offence, Monsieur Firle," said La Salle.

"Are you her lover?"

It was impossible to be angry at this man's calm forthrightness. "My one wish is to serve her," answered Arnold.

La Salle smiled, and the smile transformed him. "I

see that she is wayward," he said. "You have my sympathy, Monsieur Firle, for I also have a mistress wayward and exacting. Her name is Danger." He stood for some moments looking out of the window, and then turned abruptly. "They will take your lady to the place we call the Marriage Mart," he said. "Most likely they are there already, for your ship is long overdue, and our young men have been waiting here a fortnight. If you like I will take you thither."

"I fear she will not see me," said Arnold, feeling the blood rush to his face under the other's steadfast gaze. "Yet I would gladly learn how she is lodged."

"Then come," replied La Salle.

CHAPTER X

THE MARRIAGE MARKET

THEY left the Château of Saint Louis together, and in a few minutes came to a large stone building, enclosed in a walled courtyard, with an iron gate. It was scarcely two hours since Captain D'Aubert had brought Arnold ashore, yet already, it appeared, the "cargo" of the *Grace de Dieu* had been landed.

At the gate of the courtyard sentries stood posted, and outside a crowd of men were waiting, rugged soldiers and simple young peasant farmers for the most part, with here and there a trader of the city. The sentries saluted Monsieur de la Salle, and made way for him to pass with his companion.

They crossed the courtyard, and entered the house, which seemed to be a kind of religious establishment. They came into a large room, decorated with flowers, where a number of young women and girls were standing, or sitting about on benches. A score of men, looking very awkward and sheepish, were moving about among them, ogling, and here and there addressing themselves to the women. Several religious of both sexes were in the room, seemingly for the purpose of introducing the shyer suitors and smoothing over the preliminaries. The Countess of Vane was not there.

"They will have put your lady in the third hall, with the demoiselles," said Monsieur de la Salle. "They should have known better than to bring her here at all. Follow me."

They passed a second hall, similarly filled with young

women and their suitors, and came into a third, somewhat better furnished and adorned than the others. Here were assembled what were clearly the pick of the girls the ship had carried. Scarcely had they got within the doorway than Arnold beheld the Countess of Vane in her white dress, sitting alone at the far end, looking out of a window, flushed and scornful.

The same sort of traffic was going forward here as in the other halls, save that the suitors were of a better class.

While La Salle and his companion yet stood in the entrance, a man in black who had his back to them turned round. Arnold started to see André Michel.

Monsieur Michel smiled sardonically.

"The Sieur de la Salle comes a-marrying?" said he.

"Not so, good André," returned La Salle, coldly. "Like yourself, I come but to rejoice vicariously in the happiness of others. You had, I am told, a troubled voyage."

Michel shot a glance of keen suspicion at Arnold. "Alas, yes, monsieur," he replied. "Yet there were compensations."

"You are fortunate, good André, in that your labours usually bring you compensation."

The irony of his companion's tone was not then understood by the Englishman, but he saw a flush come into the sharp, thin, guileful face of the agent, and an angry glint of the unnaturally blue eyes. This time Michel made no answer. He turned away, and Arnold saw that he watched Lady Vane, and then looked towards another part of the hall.

With a violent start Arnold saw advancing from that direction towards the Countess of Vane a young man dressed like a farmer, but whom he instantly recognized for none other than Lieutenant Lafitte, who until the previous night had been fast in irons in the hold of the *Grace de Dieu*.

For a moment a cry of denunciation rose to the young Englishman's lips. But it remained unuttered. The sheer daring of the lieutenant held Arnold dumb, and then a sentiment of pity moved him for the desperate passion which had braved the certainty of death if he were discovered for the sake of approaching and pleading his cause with the object of his infatuation. Then Arnold wondered, not for the first time, at the strange understanding which seemed to exist between Lafitte and Monsieur Michel.

The lieutenant seemed to have eyes for only one person in that hall. Making his way steadily through the assembly, he went straight to the Countess of Vane and stood before her, his back to the rest of the room. At first she did not see him, her gaze being still out of the window. But presently, impelled perhaps by the fixity of his regard, she turned her head, and when she saw him she started and stood up.

What passed between them Arnold could only guess. He saw how the young man spoke rapidly, earnestly; he saw that Marjorie listened at first flushed and embarrassed, then, seemingly, with some sort of consideration, that her eyes rested for a moment kindly on Lafitte, that she sat down, and dropped her head in the palms of her hands. For a little while she remained so, while the lieutenant looked down on her ardently, hungrily. At length he spoke again, and then she shook her head without looking up. He put his hand on her shoulder, and at that she sprang to her feet, said a few sentences in what seemed a mood of angry reproach, and forthwith turned away. Next minute Lafitte was in retreat, pushing straight for the entrance through the crowd, his face flaming with mortification and wrath. As he came on he perceived Michel, and then his eyes met Arnold's. He stopped suddenly, then without speaking gave a short hard laugh, and came on, with the air of one bracing him-

self for a struggle. For the fraction of a second Arnold Firlé glanced at his companion. It was clear that Monsieur de la Salle did not know Lafitte. For the life of him Arnold could not bring himself to say the word that would lead to the recapture and death of that mad young mutineer. None opposed Lafitte as he strode recklessly out of the hall.

André Michel gave a laugh as he disappeared. "There goes one whose suit has not prospered," he observed, and immediately moved forward into the hall.

"Do you see her whom you seek?" asked Monsieur de la Salle.

"I see her," Arnold answered, "and by your leave I will speak to her, monsieur."

"Do so. I will await you."

As Arnold crossed the room, for the first time Lady Vane observed his presence, and she crimsoned at his approach.

"Have you come," she hotly asked, "to gloat over my humiliation?"

"I have come to serve you if I may," he told her. "You do not sit here of your own free-will?"

She smiled bitterly. "Of my own free-will I entrusted myself to the sisters," she said. "They are bent on finding me a husband before the day ends." Suddenly her tone changed. "Oh!" she exclaimed in a lowered voice, "I am afraid! I am afraid!"

"Of what?"

"Of everything," she murmured, shuddering. "Most of all of that pale and hateful man who was with us on the ship!"

"Of that villain Michel?"

"He has been here this hour," she said. "He has spoken to me—as never he dared to speak even on that night you know of. He is like a bird of prey. He terrifies me with his unnatural blue eyes and his sharp, cruel face,

and his red lips that he licked as he spoke. I shall see him in my dreams!"

"You must not stay here," said Arnold.

"And where then can I stay?" she cried. "Am I not alone among strangers, whose very language I speak with difficulty?"

Near them, as they talked, Arnold overheard a hard-faced girl of Rochelle haggling with a suitor over the number of his cattle. Marjorie heard too, and caught her breath quickly.

"Doubtless," Arnold said, "the Governor-General will give you hospitality until we can be sent to England. There is with me one who is high in the Governor's friendship. Give us leave to speak for you."

"Only get me away from here—before to-night, Arnold!" said the girl.

"Trust me!" he answered. "And first of all you shall be taken this very hour from these hateful rooms, to where you may be at peace."

Leaving her, he crossed again through the throng of marriage-mongers, and came back to Monsieur de la Salle.

The tall Frenchman smiled. "At least you would seem to have fared better than your rival, Monsieur Firle."

"All this sickens her," Arnold said. "She is frightened, and begs to be removed. If the Governor would give her shelter in his Château—"

"That should be easily granted, the more especially after your services, monsieur."

"Meanwhile," said Arnold, "she cannot remain here, amid all this." He saw a nun approaching, and started forward to address her, but La Salle caught his arm.

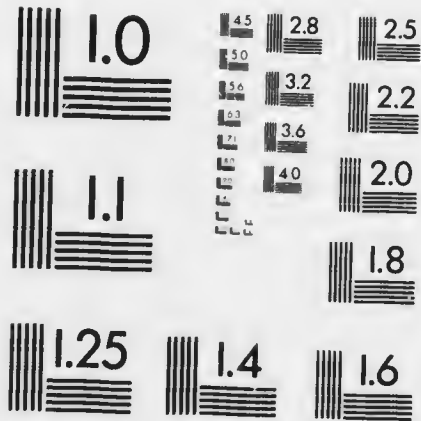
"With your permission, Monsieur Firle, I think I can serve you better."

He crossed to the nun, and after a few words came back to his companion. "All is well, Monsieur Firle. They



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will take the lady immediately to a private part of the Seminary, until word comes from Monsieur de Frontenac. But the Governor is faced with an arduous day's business. It will be night, and it may well be to-morrow, ere Madame can be brought to the Château. Meantime she will stay here safely. If that satisfies you, shall we go?"

"I will but give her the news," said Arnold, "and set her mind at rest."

He crossed again to the Countess of Vane, to tell her what was promised, and neither he nor Monsieur de la Salle remarked that at that point André Michel, who had been standing close behind, went quietly out of the hall.

When the young Englishman and his new acquaintance returned to the Château of Saint Louis, they found, as La Salle had foretold, that the Governor was still deeply immersed in affairs. It was now well past midday, and Captain D'Aubert had gone back to his ship.

They took a meal together, the Frenchman saying little, but watching his companion with thoughtful eyes.

"Have you ever, in your sailing, visited Canada before?" he asked.

"It is the first time I have crossed the Western Ocean," answered Arnold.

"We are fellow-guests of the Governor. If you will give me your company I will show you something of this New France of ours."

Arnold gladly embraced the opportunity. Already he had come to regard Monsieur de la Salle as a friend, notwithstanding the Frenchman's quiet and almost haughty reserve.

In the afternoon they left the city, and walked out along the heights above the great river, whose broad sparkling highway lit the landscape far to east and west. They spoke little as they walked. When they had come a long way Monsieur de la Salle stopped, and lay down on the grass at a great height above the river and the woods.

He tossed his plumed hat on the ground beside him, and resting his head on one hand, reclined, watching the distance, while the hot sun beat on his face, and the upland breeze played with his long black hair. He seemed to have forgotten that he was not alone. The stern lines of his face relaxed, and by-and-by—not a little to the young Englishman's surprise—he began to sing to himself in a low voice, a plaintive, simple melody that clung to the ear. Often in after days Arnold Firle heard that melody, sung to the plash of paddles in the stream, and to the muffled tramp of feet in mossy woods and on the white carpet of the snow, till every note of it brought back a memory. Even at this first hearing the song, sung mellowly though so low, seemed in some strange manner to discompose him, for after awhile, when La Salle had stopped singing, the young man broke in upon a silence and began to tell to this stranger the story of his life and his love.

Monsieur de la Salle heard him without comment, still looking towards the far horizon, but when Arnold ceased speaking he turned suddenly with his rare smile.

"Comrade," said he, "if you would come with me I would show you a life which would cure you of all such troubles."

"And what life is that?" asked Arnold.

"The life of the forest and the river, the life of freedom under an open heaven; the life of such as spy out new lands, with danger for a zest and honour for an end. A week from to-day I shall be upon yonder river, Monsieur Firle." He stood up and stretched out his long arms with a gesture as though he threw from him the trappings of courts and cities, and he took a deep breath of the hill-side wind.

"Whither do you go, monsieur?"

"First to my seigneurie of Fort Frontenac, a hundred leagues to the west. After that—who knows? I have

my plans. You heard what His Excellency the Governor said awhile since at the Chateau? "

"That you and he could give the King of France a greater realm than Europe itself."

"It is less than the truth, Monsieur Firle. Some day they will learn it in Europe, and then the face of the world will change." He checked himself abruptly, as though he shrank from opening his heart to a stranger. "Well, comrade, will you take my physic of the life adventurous?" said he. "I need men of nerve and resource, and such you appear to be. Above all, just now, I need men who understand the working of a ship."

"You tempt me hard," said Arnold. "But there are three things that stand in my way."

"I am sorry to know it," replied La Salle. "What things? "

"First, I cannot leave my lady among strangers."

"The Count of Frontenac is a gallant gentleman. He will send her honourably to England. Remember that she has dismissed you."

"I can only remember that I love her, and must serve her!" cried Arnold, at which Monsieur de la Salle shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

"In the second place," said Arnold, after a pause, "I still bear the commission of the King of England."

"There is peace between our countries, is there not?" asked Monsieur de la Salle. "Some day we may come to death-grips over these new lands, but not yet, Monsieur Firle. Not yet for many years. And what in the third place? "

"In the third place, I am resolved to go back and stand my trial on the charge of my cousin's murder," said Arnold.

"To what purpose, save to be hanged? "

"Most likely," was the dogged answer. "Yet there is the bare chance that they may believe the truth, and,

if they do, I have won all. Do you not see, monsieur, that she will be convinced in no other way? ”

“ I see very clearly,” answered Monsieur de la Salle, looking gravely down at the young man, “ that if you have been to each other what you say, you will lose your own life and spoil your lady’s for a piece of foolish sentiment.”

“ What then is the alternative? ” cried Arnold, almost angrily. He had risen, and with a dull red flush on his face gazed at his companion with eyes bright with his emotions.

Monsieur de la Salle did not at once meet that eager glance, but stood with an odd smile looking towards the misty woodlands beyond the river.

“ I am not a lover,” said he at last, “ but if I were, and my case were yours, I know what I should do. Every good woman, comrade, believes in the justice of Heaven. I would go to her, and swear my innocence before the altar. Then I would tell her how I was bound upon an enterprise full of dangers, and ask her to appeal with me to Heaven’s justice, that if I were guilty and forsworn I might die in it and never see her more, but that if I were her true and honourable lover it would please Heaven to preserve me unharmed, and restore me to her service. What think you, Monsieur Firlé? ”

The Frenchman made this remarkable proposition as though it were the most natural thing in the world. Arnold found himself greatly moved. The suggestion lit a new hope in him. With the sanguine buoyancy of youth he saw himself already brought scathless through the ordeal, returning to claim the reward of his lady’s faith and love.

“ Heaven helping me, I will do as you say,” he answered at last.

The sun was setting when they got back into Quebec. The gates of the Marriage Market were closed, and the sentries were gone. In the Château of Saint Louis the Governor had at length finished with State affairs, and was

taking the air on a terrace overlooking the river. Arnold lost no time in preferring his request, and as Monsieur de la Salle had foretold it was granted at once by the courtly old gentleman.

"We have not so many ladies to lighten our exile that we should not greedily welcome the company of Madame de Vane," said he, and calling for a pen, he there and then wrote out an authority for Arnold to present the next morning at the Seminary.

In the morning, accordingly, as soon as the gates of the Seminary were reopened for the resumption of the marriage-making, the Englishman presented himself, armed with this paper, and was taken into the presence of the Mother Superior, a stern and reverend lady.

She looked from the paper to its bearer, and her grave face became graver.

"I fear, monsieur, that there is some mistake," she said.

"How, madame—a mistake! I do not understand."

"This lady was sent last night to the Château of Saint Louis, by order of Monsieur de Frontenac."

CHAPTER XI

THE CONFESSIONAL BOX

AT that staggering piece of news Arnold stood for a moment and stared at the nun in blank amazement. He felt suddenly cold with dread.

"At what hour would this be, madame?" he asked, commanding himself with an effort.

"Soon after nine o'clock. Madame had already gone to her room. The messengers waited while she prepared herself."

"And the messengers—who were they?" the young man persisted.

"The requisition was handed to me by Monsieur André Michel, who came in the ship from France. He did not wait himself, having, as he said, pressing matters to attend to, but there came with him two religious, who escorted Madame back to the Château."

"The requisition was forged!" exclaimed Arnold, bitterly, as the trick was laid bare.

The stern-faced woman started as if she had been struck. "I have it here," she said, controlling herself, and she drew a paper from the folds of her black robe.

"It is forged, I tell you!" cried Arnold again.

The nun opened the paper, and looked closely at it, comparing it with the order Arnold had himself delivered.

"Yes, it is a forgery," she agreed in her cold voice. "But it is a good forgery. And Monsieur Michel is the trusted agent of the King."

"Monsieur Michel will hang for this, if there is justice

in New France," said Arnold, grimly. "Be so good as to give me those papers, madame."

She gave them to him without demur, and with a curt word of thanks he left her standing there and ran back to the Château.

The Count of Frontenac, when he heard the story, fell into a great rage. His face went scarlet under his white hairs.

"This dog Michel has over-reached himself!" he cried. "By Our Lady, he shall feel the Griffin's claws in his neck at last!" He strode fiercely up and down. "I have suffered him too long, Monsieur Firle," he broke out again. "He is a spy, a cursed spy, for his true masters the Jesuits, who seek to thwart my every scheme. He has the ear of the Minister in Paris, and poisons it with lies against my rule. But by the Saints, I have him now. Believe me, you shall be richly avenged!" Monsieur de Frontenac stood still by the table on which Arnold had laid the two papers side by side. He looked down upon them, frowning. "The vile, impudent dog!" he exclaimed, "to kidnap my own guest under pretence of my own name. He shall see my name again to some purpose, with proclamation made and reward offered for his capture."

He strode to the door of his room, and summoned an officer, then sat down and wrote rapidly while the officer waited.

"Let this be published at once about the city," he commanded. "And remember, I want the man alive!"

The officer saluted and withdrew.

"This matter touches my honour and the King's, Monsieur Firle," said the Count, drumming restlessly with his fingers on the scabbard of his sword, which lay upon the table. "There will be no stone left unturned. Notice will be given at each house of religion, and within another hour every householder in Quebec, and every ship in the river, will have been warned. Messengers will be dis-

patched east and west to the river settlements, threatening forfeiture of lands and goods to whosoever knowingly harbours these contemners of God's sanctuary and the King's majesty. I think there is no more that we can do."

"Indeed, your Excellency has flung a wide net. I thank you from my heart," said Arnold.

"Tush, man! It is my own honour that I guard," said the Count. "Never fear, we'll land our fish. But why should he steal your countrywoman?"

For the first time Arnold told what had happened in the stern-walk of the *Grace de Dieu*.

"Pray Heaven your fair countrywoman pays not too dearly for her clemency!" said the Count. "There are other tales, still more unwholesome, told of this treacherous villain. I would you had throttled him and dropped him overside!"

"With your permission, Monsieur le Comte," said Arnold, "I will go out again into the town and hear what is doing, for this suspense is hard to bear."

"Do so," replied His Excellency. "Stay—if any challenge you, here is your safe-conduct." He wrote a few lines and signed his name at the foot.

So prompt had been the measures taken, that already when Arnold got outside the Château, the news of the abduction had spread like wildfire through the little town, and many were the curious glances turned upon the Englishman as he wandered up and down the steep streets. But in many restless, anxious hours he heard no news, either in the streets or in the Château, to which he frequently returned.

At last, weary in body and sick at heart, Arnold turned in for a moment from the warmth of the afternoon sun at the open doors of a large church, and sitting down buried his head in his hands. On entering he had received the impression that the church was empty, but by-and-by

he became conscious of a curious sound. The interior of the church was dark by contrast with the glare of the sunshine without, and when Arnold looked up he could not at first make out whence the sound proceeded. It seemed a sound of mingled sobbing and supplication, very pitiful to hear. After awhile Arnold discovered that it came from a small side chapel, half obscured from where he sat by the bulk of a dark confessional box. On the altar of the chapel a few tapers were dimly burning. Still he saw no one, till, rising to his feet, he perceived a woman's figure huddled at the foot of the altar steps.

At that moment the sobbing broke out more piteously than ever. To avoid intrusion upon another's grief, Arnold began quietly to leave his place, and moved towards the door. Then all at once the paroxysm ceased, and there was so deep a silence in the church that he stood still where he was in the midst of the aisle, lest his presence should disturb the sufferer.

But while he stood hesitating, a few yards from the confessional box, the woman emerged swiftly from behind it, and advanced down the aisle towards the church door. Seeing that an encounter was unavoidable, the young man stepped quietly aside to let her pass.

But as she came close to him she gave a violent start, and stopped, staring at him with a look of such unmistakable horror and terror that Arnold was amazed.

"Mon dieu! It is the Englishman!" she muttered with pale lips.

"Is an Englishman then so fearful a spectre, *made-moiselle*?" he asked, smiling to reassure her.

But her fear seemed if anything greater.

"You have followed me!" she accused him in a faint voice.

Arnold stood and considered her without replying, his first astonishment succeeded by a vague suspicion. She was young and slight, comely notwithstanding her eyes

were red with crying. Why should she, whom to his knowledge he had never seen before, be suddenly terror-struck at his appearance? Was it possible that this girl could be connected with the one problem which filled his thoughts?

His silence seemed to goad her.

"Why have you followed me?" she asked with a more defiant note.

The hostility in her tone deepened his suspicion of her. He resolved that he would not undecieve her.

"If I have followed you, mademoiselle," he said gravely, "I think you know very well whether or no I have reason."

"They may kill me!" she cried with heaving bosom, "but I will tell them nothing."

Here was the threshold of a discovery! Arnold's heart beat fast. But he had himself in hand.

"Why should they wish to kill you?" he asked quietly.

"Do not taunt me, Englishman!" she answered. "You know very well whose life it is they seek. But they will never take him! I have prayed the Virgin to protect him. My André, they shall take my life for yours!"

Her face was filled with a rapt devotion. Arnold felt a quick pity for her. He recalled what Monsieur de Frontenac had said about unwholesome tales. But the certainty that he was on the track of Michel kept him hard.

"If one whom you love is in danger you have my sympathy, mademoiselle," said he. "For your case is mine."

She gave him a swift, penetrating glance. "You love the Englishwoman?" she asked.

"I have no thoughts but of her," answered Arnold, simply.

"Nor I save for Monsieur Michel," said the girl.

"I think they will hang him," Arnold told her.

She went very white, but fixed him with a steady gaze. "Not if you save him, monsieur," said she.

"How—I?" cried Arnold, surprised beyond expression. "I save him, mademoiselle?"

In proportion as his self-restraint broke down the girl before him seemed to regain hers.

"His friend upon the ship was mad with love for the English lady," said she. "Monsieur Michel saved his friend, whose life was forfeit through his madness. And because he helped his friend to carry off the woman whom he loved, my lover's enemies seek his life. It was foolish of him. It was wrong—do I not know! Did I not tell him so when he came to me for help. But he would not hear me. He set his friend before himself. Ciel! If they had but shot his friend in the fighting on the ship!"

Wrath blazed in the young Englishman's blue-grey eyes as he looked upon this poor confiding fool, and began to take in the full villainy of the man who had stolen Marjorie.

"You proposed that I should save this lover of yours, mademoiselle?" said he. "To what end?"

The bitterness of his words escaped her. She read only hope in his apparent calm.

"Will you make terms with me, Englishman?" she asked.

"What terms?"

"If I betray my lover's friend will you save my lover's life?"

"I do not understand," said Arnold.

"If I tell you where to seek the English lady," she said, trembling with eagerness as she almost whispered in his ear, "will you swear to grant me the price I ask?"

"Mademoiselle," said Arnold, "you have not told me your price, "but to save my countrywoman is my whole desire."

She took hold of his coat, and drew him back into the chapel from which she had come, where there was a gilded statue of the Madonna.

"Kneel," said she, and he knelt.

"Swear," said the girl, "that you will not raise your hand against André Michel. Swear, and you shall find her whom you seek."

For just a moment Arnold hesitated. But the bait was too powerful. His vengeance must stand aside for his love.

"It is a great thing you ask," he said. "But I will keep faith with you."

"And that you will not suffer him to be harmed," insisted the girl, "and that you will go privately to the place, without seeking out the Governor or his soldiery, and that when you are come there you will honourably warn my lover that the country is raised against him. All this you swear before Our Lady?"

"All this I swear, upon condition that I find the one I seek," answered Arnold, steadily.

The girl caught her breath in a sob and stretched out her arms to the gilded statue. "Ave Maria!" she murmured. "Ave Maria, gratia plena!"

"And now, mademoiselle," said the Englishman, "since every minute is precious, tell me the truth quickly."

She seemed to wrestle for a moment with her doubts, then raised her eyes to the statue and turned to her companion.

"Five leagues down the river," said she, "there is a thick wood on the southern shore, and on the further side of the wood lies a farm called Grande Hermine. It is there that Monsieur Michel has taken his friend to hide him."

Arnold sprang to his feet. "Remember!" cried the girl, fixing on him her large dark eyes. She made a step towards him but tottered, and fell on the floor in a faint.

CHAPTER XII

THE FARM CALLED GRANDE HERMINE

WITHOUT giving her more than a look, Arnold ran out of the church into the afternoon sunshine. Outside, he stood for a moment in thought, and then his mind was made up. He would go to Captain D'Aubert, who had good reason to be his friend. So Arnold made his way down to the river shore, and looked about for a boat to take him out to the *Grace de Dieu*.

At a little distance from him a number of men, Frenchmen and half-naked natives, were busied about a group of large canoes that lay upon the strand. Among these people Arnold beheld the tall, commanding figure of Monsieur de la Salle.

At that sight his plan changed. Here, after all, was the man who knew his secret, the strong man to be trusted!

Arnold walked along to the canoes. When he came up Monsieur de la Salle was testing a paddle on his knee. It snapped, and he flung it aside. "We have no room for toys," said he to one near by.

When he saw the Englishman he nodded and came forward.

"Is there any news?" he asked. "I have seen the proclamation, Monsieur Firlé."

"I have found out where Madame de Vane is kept prisoner," answered Arnold.

La Salle stepped aside immediately, and listened attentively while the Englishman related all that had passed in the church.

"This Michel is a deep-dyed scoundrel," he com-

mented. "It is hard for you to be the instrument of his escape. If he escapes now the Count of Frontenac will be furious. What will you do?"

"I shall perform my promise, monsieur."

La Salle nodded and became thoughtful. "Yet you will need help," he said. "You cannot go alone."

"I am a stranger in a strange country. Will you advise me?" Arnold asked.

La Salle stood still considering. "Be at this spot at sunset," he said at last. "You will find me waiting with a canoe. André Michel and I are old acquaintances, Monsieur Firle. He and his masters, I fear, will cross my path again ere long."

"Monsieur de la Salle," said Arnold, "I beg you will remember that I have passed my word in this matter, not only that I will not harm this villainous abductor, but that I will not suffer him to be harmed."

La Salle made a gesture of impatience. "You are not the only honourable man in Canada, Monsieur Firle," he answered. "Go alone, if you will, but I think you may find me useful. It is two hours to this farm of Grande Hermine."

"Monsieur, you do me an injustice!" protested the young man. "Heaven is my witness how gladly I confide in you in this matter. Yesterday you did me the honour to ask me to take service with you. Ah, Monsieur de la Salle! If to-night we save my lady from this defiling villain, I will be your sworn man from to-morrow!"

The Frenchman smiled. "Comrade, you are a man after my heart, but make no rash vows. We will see what the night brings forth. Be punctual at the meeting-place."

He gave the young man his hand, and Arnold returned with a lighter heart into Quebec to await the hour of sunset.

There was no news in the town, and to the anxious

lover it seemed an eternity ere he descended again to the river bank, to find La Salle already there, and with him another, a priest in a grey cassock. They stood together beside a canoe that lay close to the water's edge.

"This is Père Hennepin, of the Order of the Récollets," said La Salle. "I have privately acquainted him with our purpose, and you may rely upon his discretion."

The priest was a squarely-built, sun-browned man, with black, dare-devil eyes. He pushed the canoe into the water, and wading in, held it steady. "Get in, my son," said he. "Remember that in the midst of life we are in death: therefore, if you have not voyaged in such a craft before, sit steadily amidships."

The young Englishman got into the frail shell, and the others followed, Père Hennepin in the prow, and La Salle astern—if such terms can be used of a craft which is the same one way as another. Next minute they were shooting down the swift current of the river at a surprising pace, driven forward by the strong paddle-strokes of the two Frenchmen.

The night came down quickly, as it does in those latitudes, and very soon they were gliding through the darkness, under a sky spangled with stars like points of silver on a mantle of black velvet. From time to time they raced through an eddy, and the swirling water gurgled to their very gunwale, but the two Canadians paddled on as unconcernedly as though they were aboard a ship of the line. The shore on either side was lost to view in the dark distance, save where at long intervals the faint glimmer of a settler's light shone yellow across the water.

"Do you ever write poetry, Monsieur Firlé?" the priest suddenly asked, when they had paddled awhile in silence.

"I have done so," Arnold admitted, in some surprise.

"To a lady, no doubt," said the other.

"To a lady it was," answered Arnold, wondering what this had to do with Père Hennepin.

"Ah!" the priest rejoined. "You refer then to the poetry of passion, Monsieur Firle. Such poems must be supremely good to be pardonable."

"I never inflicted them save upon one reader, reverend sir," quoth the young sailor, beginning to be nettled.

"Eh bien," said Hennepin, "it is a weakness from which the wisest have not been free. 'Behold thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast dove's eyes.'" With a singular expressiveness the priest sang into the night these words from King Solomon's Song, and then laughed softly. "Aha! There was one who could make words burn!" exclaimed he. "But I meant the poetry of action, the poetry of romance and of the day-dream. Have you tried that sort, Monsieur Firle?"

"I have not," said Arnold, shortly, considering that here was a strange topic for men situated as they were to be talking of in the darkness of the night, on the rushing current of the river, with deadly weapons lying to their hands and the prospect of blood-letting before the dawn.

The burly priest's conversation in no wise interfered with the strength of his paddle-strokes, and he ran on without turning his head.

"That is because you are a man of action yourself," said he, sententiously. "As for me, I have made yards and yards of poetry—poetry of high adventure, poetry about battles and sieges, and voyages and discoveries, and strange peoples, and shipwreck; poems about all that brave men have done and may do in this big wonderful world which the bon Dieu spins between heaven and hell. I could sit and tell you stories till you would fall asleep, good sir. When I was a slip of a boy, away in Rochelle, I would hide under the boats upon the beach, and stretch my ears to hear the mariners talking to each other of the places they had seen, and the wild deeds they

had done. When I was a little older I would penetrate into their houses, into their drinking-shops, wherever men gathered who had had adventures I would be there, hearing truth and lies, and the more I heard, the more I longed to hear, till at last I could bear it no more, and off I went to see the world for myself. But whereas these men, when they came home from their wanderings, desired but to stay, and only went forth again under the sharp spur of need, with me it was the case that the more I drank of adventure the more my thirst increased. And so it is, that every time I go upon a new enterprise—as to-night upon this affair of yours—the fountain of romance wells up in me afresh.”

To all this rigmarole the young Englishman answered nothing, and for a time the canoe sped on in silence.

By-and-by Père Hennepin began to sing in a low tone a slow sad melody to which the strokes of his paddle steadily kept the time.

“Un Canayen errant,
Banni de ses foyers,
Parcourait en pleurant
Des pays étrangers. . . .”

Up till now there had not been a word from Monsieur de la Salle, who sat in the stern of the canoe like a figure of fate, paddling untiringly. But at the first slow, haunting notes of the priest's song he joined in and the two men's voices went on and on, in a soothing monotony of sound, to the accompaniment of the wash of the river alongside and the ceaseless plash of the paddles.

At length they ceased with one accord.

“We are nearing Grande Hermine,” said La Salle.

They went on for perhaps a quarter of an hour after that, closing in gradually towards the southern bank. They passed the dark outline of a wood, then turning landwards shot into a little cove sheltered from the current of the main river by a projecting spit of rock. Cautiously

THE FARM CALLED GRANDE HERMINE 101

they disembarked, and after hiding the canoe in some bushes near the water, took each in his hand a musket that had lain in the bottom of the canoe.

La Salle led the way, as in utter silence the three moved upward over a grassy strip beside the river. They rounded a corner of the wood, and saw before them in the night a dim wide space of fields, and the black outline of a house, from one window of which streamed a ray of yellow light. Round the house, as they approached, could be distinguished a palisade of stakes driven into the ground.

La Salle raised his arm, and the three came to a stand. A gate in the palisade stood open, but beside the gate, within, was something which La Salle whispered was a dog's kennel.

"Leave the dog to me," whispered the priest. "Wait here, messieurs, till I come again."

They stood fast accordingly, while Père Hennepin, stripping off his cassock, wound it round one arm, and moved forward, silent as a wraith, towards the gateway. It was a still night, but not the faintest rustle stirred the grass as the burly shadow of the priest drew away from them. From the direction of the house came the sound of men talking.

Suddenly there was a short, coughing growl, a light scuffle on the ground, and the dim figure of Hennepin no longer showed against the palisade. Arnold and La Salle waited for several minutes longer. The voices still came from the house, and presently the priest was back beside the watchers, gliding snake-like through the grass.

"Come," said he.

They all went forward noiselessly, and entered the stockade, past the body of the hapless dog where it lay in front of its kennel. The voices were clearer now, raised in disputation. The three men approached beneath the window, the horn frame of which was open to the night, and cautiously peered inside.

The house, or cabin—for it was little more—was built of logs, and seemed to consist of two principal apartments. That into which they looked was the living-room. On a bench, beside a table on which stood a smoking lamp, two men sat and eyed each other wrathfully—André Michel and Lieutenant Lafitte.

“Choose now, Lafitte,” the pale-eyed agent was saying. “I will give you peace or war.”

“Peace!” cried the young officer, his voice shaking with scorn. “Peace—and you rob me of the woman I have risked my life to gain, the woman you yourself helped me to take! War—and you denounce me to the Governor-General!”

Michel nodded. “You have stated the alternatives precisely,” he said.

“Traitor!” cried Lafitte. “Why did you release me from the ship?”

“That my purpose might be the better served,” Michel answered callously.

White with fury, yet bewildered, the young lieutenant glared at his companion. “It was you who planned to abduct her,” he said with lowered voice.

“But it was you who carried out the plan,” said Michel with a wicked smile. “It was you, and another friend of mine, who brought her through the streets. If she had suspected too soon it would have been you who would have been taken. My risk was over when I had paved your way by forging the Governor’s signature.”

Lafitte rose to his feet unsteadily. “If I killed you—” he began.

But Michel was watching him as a cat watches a mouse. “Sit down, you fool!” he ordered sharply. “Did you think I put my neck in the noose for you? You are young. A girl from the next ship will serve your turn as well. I am forty, Lafitte, and never did I think to madden thus

for a woman. But the English girl has set me on fire. I have sworn to have her."

"Then you are forsworn!" cried Lafitte. He gave a wild laugh, and breaking off in the midst of it, rushed so suddenly upon his companion that Michel, taken unawares, rolled over the bench, and together the two men fell struggling on the ground. The lamp, which Lafitte in his onrush had overturned, rolled off the table, and in a moment the spilled oil burst into a sheet of flame. The startled combatants sprang to their feet again, and Lafitte clumsily sought to put out the swiftly-spreading fire.

But André Michel, white-faced and furious, drew a short knife from his girdle, and hurling himself from behind upon Lafitte, drove in the blade between his shoulders.

The wretched youth shrieked and fell forward into the fire. Michel, leaving him to die where he lay, sprang through the rapidly-mounting flames and beat wildly with his fists upon a heavy wooden door at the inner end of the living-room.

"Come out! Come out!" cried he. "The house burns!"

Round to the door of the cabin rushed the three watchers from the window, but found it barred within. They threw themselves against it, but it held fast. They could hear the frantic agent calling to his victim to open, and the crackling of the woodwork in the burning room. While La Salle set his loaded musket against the fastening of the door, Arnold and the priest hurried back to the window. It was too narrow to get in or out, and the window of the second room, which was similar, was fast shuttered on the inside.

In desperation Arnold took Père Hennepin by the shoulder. "Hold me up," said he, and climbing on the priest's broad back he pointed his gun through the window.

At the same moment came the report of La Salle's musket from outside the door.

Michel locked round at the crash, but the door still held.

"Madman!" shouted Arnold, "unbar the door or I blow out your brains!"

There was terror on the agent's face, but not of the deadly weapon levelled at him. "Get her out!" cried he in a frenzy.

"Unbar the door!" Arnold shouted back again.

This time Michel understood, and came running through the smoke and fire to obey.

By the light of the dancing flames Arnold had seen, as he clung at the window, an axe hanging on the wall, and the moment the door opened he ran to seize it. La Salle at the same moment caught up one end of the half-burned bench and called to Hennepin to get water to throw on the flames.

Already the heat and smoke in the room were almost more than a man could bear, and the fire roared terribly. Gasping for air as they worked, the two men rained blows upon that inner door till they burst an opening. Arnold put his head through, but could make out nothing.

"Marjorie! Marjorie! It is I—Arnold Firle—who calls!" he shouted. But there was no answer. At it they went again, till they had smashed the opening large enough to let them stagger in.

There was a white patch on the floor beside the bed. It was the young Countess, who had swooned with the heat and the horror of her position.

By the light of the flames they lifted her up, and lest the fire should touch her face or her hair, Arnold took off his coat and covered her head with it, for the cabin was now a crackling furnace between them and the safety of the door. A moment they stood to steady themselves before making that rush, for their strength was nearly

gone, and they were reeling like drunken men in the hot and stifling smoke.

"Now!" cried La Salle. Supporting their unconscious burden between them, they ran stumbling through the fire, blinded, suffocating, desperate. Their hair and clothes were burning as they reached the outer air, but the next moment they were half-drowned with the contents of a bucket of water which the stalwart priest had procured. They made their way to the river, and having laid their burden in the canoe looked about for André Michel. But he was nowhere to be seen.

CHAPTER XIII

THE VOW OF ADVENTURE

THE dawn was breaking as they beached the canoe on the north shore of the river opposite Grande Hermine.

In the keen fresh morning air the young Countess had revived. Her brown eyes wonderingly searched the faces of her rescuers as they lifted her from the canoe and laid her on the grass at the foot of a great tree.

Then fear came into her face, and as Arnold knelt beside her to ask how she did, she seized his hand.

"Don't leave me!" she cried brokenly. "Don't leave me, Arnold! Where am I? Ah, how cold I am!"

Père Hennepin, understanding English as it seemed, brought out a flask of spirit, of which she drank a few sips and sat up.

"Where am I?" she repeated.

"Safe enough, Marjorie," said Arnold, caressing the hand that clung to his. "Quite safe with these brave gentlemen, my dear."

The girl shuddered. "That man, Monsieur Michel, and that other!" she exclaimed. "Where are they, Arnold?"

"One is dead," he answered, "and for the other, I think you will not see him again, Marjorie." Which showed that he did not yet know André Michel.

A few yards away La Salle's tall figure stood, watching the English couple. "If Madame could walk a little way—?" he questioned.

"I will try, but I think I cannot go far, monsieur," she said in her broken French.

"There is a farm," he said, "at half a league from here, where they will treat us hospitably, and give us horses to take us to Quebec."

They rested, however, a little longer by the river before they set out. Presently they struck a sylvan pathway that wound along under the shadow of great pines. La Salle led the way with the Récollet brother, conversing quietly between themselves, and merely throwing back a glance from time to time to see that all was well with Lady Vane, who followed a little behind, leaning somewhat heavily upon her countryman. The red light of the morning filtered among the pine trunks and illumined in bright patches the mossy path they trod.

As Arnold Firlie went forward with his precious burden on his arm his blood thrilled with a delicious intoxication. With a new-found hope he looked down at the dark, curling brown hair that lay all tumbled upon her face and neck. He saw how the returning colour slowly tinged the cheek which was half hid from him as she walked. When they had gone some distance she looked up into his face. The rosy colour suddenly flooded her own, but not since the fatal night when the Earl his cousin had been cast away had he read such gentleness in her eyes.

"Arnold," she said in a low voice that stirred him to the soul, "I know neither where we are nor how I have come here. But I understand that once again you have stood between me and—and—"

She broke down, and he could feel her shudder as she leaned upon him. "Oh," she murmured, "do not think me unthankful!"

"I think of you, Marjorie, as I always must," he answered. "Yet indeed it is those two good friends with us whom you should thank. But for them you might be still in the hands of that foul wretch Michel."

The young Countess's cheeks paled again at the mere name of her abductor. "He haunts me! He haunts me!" she exclaimed. "Do not speak of him!"

"You must forget him," said her lover, moved with pity and rage at the thought of what she must have endured.

"If I could!" she murmured; then, looking towards the Frenchmen in front, she asked who they were.

Arnold told her, and described their night journey upon the St Lawrence and what passed at Grande Hermine. At that her cheeks flushed again, and for a time she walked on silently. Then, in a low tremulous voice, she told him the story of her abduction; how, when the two seeming nuns had led her almost to the river, one of them—the only one who had opened her lips to speak—went away and a third met them. Then the remaining two hurried her in silence to a canoe, and despite her protests made her enter. Marjorie told of her blank terror when, by the strength of their paddling, it was borne in on her that the nuns were not nuns, but men, how, after two hours of suspense, they landed and carried her to the farmhouse, and thrusting her into the inner room left her to her terrors. The next day she learned with horror who were her captors, when they made her come out, and she found them stripped of their women's gear, and knew herself a helpless prisoner. Disjointedly, flushing with womanly shame, leaving much unsaid that was easily to be divined, Marjorie gave Arnold to understand something of that day of terrors, through all of which her captors seemed at cross-purposes, glowering suspiciously at her and at each other. But when they all supped together at night they gave her, as she positively declared, wine so strongly drugged that though she merely sipped it, when they bade her again to the inner room she scarce had the time to secure the fastenings of the stout wooden door when she

felt her senses going, and staggering to the bed she sank down and knew no more.

At the recital of this dastardly plot a fierce desire to have Monsieur Michel by the throat took possession of the young Englishman, and he chafed at the memory of the promise extorted from him in the great church at Quebec.

In front of them the wood abruptly opened out, and they saw some fields, and the stockade and blockhouse of an outlying fortified farm, before which La Salle and the priest stood awaiting them.

"I am ashamed," said Marjorie, "that I have not thanked these gentlemen! How can I ever repay their gallant service!"

"Indeed, you cannot," her lover answered, smiling. "And as for the reverend father, I believe the adventure has been to him its own ample reward. And as for Monsieur de la Salle, I hope to repay him a little, though I can never repay him all."

The Countess of Vane looked questioningly at her companion. "What do you mean by that?" asked she. "How can you repay a debt which is mine alone?"

"I will tell you," Arnold answered, "when we come to Quebec."

At the farm they were hospitably entertained, with such welcome as men give in wild and dangerous lands where guests are few. The master of the house, it appeared, was an old soldier of a famous regiment, that of Carignan-Salières, and had Monsieur de la Salle been the Governor himself he could not have been received with a greater deference. A room was made ready for Lady Vane to rest, and while she did so the veteran conducted his visitors over his little property.

What there was upon that farm Arnold Firlie could never have said. That walk through the woodland from the river bank had changed for him the aspect of the world. He lingered greedily on the memory of its every moment,

recalling each look and tone of her whom he worshipped. At last, he told himself, she believed in him again, and the cloud of cruel suspicion which had hung over him was breaking. This very day, while her heart was open to appeal, he would follow the counsel of his new-found friend and commit his cause and his hopes to the justice of Heaven. So resolving, in his ardour of youth and love, it seemed to him that already his fight against fate was won, that success and happiness lay ready to his grasp. Let the dangers of the ordeal be what they might, they could but add to the zest of victory!

When in the afternoon the horses were brought and the little party set out for Quebec, it seemed to Arnold's impatience that never horses moved so slowly. But they came at last to the city, and he rode close up alongside Monsieur de la Salle.

"Monsieur," said Arnold, "two days ago you gave me some advice, which with your kind leave I desire to carry out before we meet His Excellency."

La Salle looked gravely at the young man, then his eyes rested on the graceful figure of the girl riding near, and he nodded. A minute later, as they approached the church, he reined up. "I will await you with Père Hennepin," said he.

Arnold crossed to the Countess and laid a hand on her bridle. "Marjorie," he begged, "will you come into the church with me?"

"Why?" she asked with a start.

"To bear witness to a vow."

"Will not another serve as well?" she asked.

"No other will serve at all," said he.

He dismounted as he spoke, without waiting for her answer, and she, seeing him wait to assist her, got down likewise, and Arnold gave the reins to his companions.

They entered the church, and he led her towards the altar. The church was empty save for their two selves.

"Why have you brought me here? What vow is this?" she whispered, looking at him in a bewildered way.

"A simple vow enough," said Arnold, going on his knees. "Monsieur de la Salle has asked me to be his man on a quest beset with many dangers. Marjorie, I have come here to pledge myself to serve him for two years from to-day. And this is my prayer to the justice of Heaven: that if I am guilty of my cousin Edmund's death I may die miserably in this venture; but that if I am innocent I may be preserved. And if I am preserved, I shall come to you wheresoever you may be, and say, 'Will you have me for your husband?'"

"Oh!" cried the girl. She stood back, staring with a white frightened face at the great carved crucifix over the altar.

"Will you say 'Amen' to that prayer?" the young man asked her.

She covered her face with her hands, as if to shut out his earnest gaze. At last she let her hands fall and came close to him.

"You must not go," she said.

"I must go, Marjorie," he answered. "Countess of Vane, you know that I must go. Kneel, and say 'Amen.'"

"What can it prove?" she faltered. "What can it disprove?" And then, with a rush of red into her face, "In all the world," she cried piteously, "I have only you—only you to trust, Arnold! Do not go!"

Arnold felt himself trembling. Her soft brown eyes were wet with tears. It was some moments ere he dared trust himself to speak.

"That is why I must go," he said.

She clasped her hands on her bosom, looking down eagerly, searchingly, into his face. She was so close to him as he knelt that one small foot touched his knee. On an impulse Arnold bent down and kissed it.

"In all the world I have only you to love, and I mean that you shall trust me truly," he told her earnestly. "Marjorie, say 'Amen!'"

Their eyes looked into each other's, and at last she sank on her knees beside him, and he felt her cold hand take his.

"Amen!" she murmured.

CHAPTER XIV

ANDRÉ MICHEL'S TURN

ON the evening before Monsieur de la Salle's expedition was to set forth, Arnold Firle sat in the room which had been allotted to him at the Château of Saint Louis, watching the sun go down across the great river. The hour was one for reverie, and his thoughts wandered far and near. One moment he wondered vaguely what things might have happened across the ocean, in that earldom of Vane which now was his. Then he musingly reviewed the strange chances that had placed him where he was; and then again he speculated upon what might lie before him in the distant places for which he soon was bound.

There was a knock at the door, and Monsieur de la Salle came in. Arnold had not seen him since the early part of that afternoon, when, after making a very thorough final inspection of his canoes and his men, the leader of the expedition had gone for a farewell interview with the Governor.

The Sieur de la Salle sat down on the table, laid his hat beside him, and folding his arms, regarded the Englishman with an embarrassment strange to him.

"I have a piece of news for you, Monsieur Firle," he announced.

"Good or bad, mon capitaine?"

"You shall judge. André Michel has been seen in Quebec."

At that the young man started up. "Michel!" he cried. "And he was not arrested?"

"Unfortunately, no. The person who saw him was Madame de Vane. No one else appears to have seen him, but Madame is positive."

"When was this?"

"Not two hours since. Madame de Vane, it seems, was returning from a walk in the town with the woman His Excellency has set to attend her, when she saw Michel watching her from a window near the west gate. He was dressed, she says, like a ranger of the forests. Men have been sent to the house, but if he was there he is there no longer."

"Did Madame tell you this herself?"

"There is the point of my news. She came to me and begged me with tears to let her accompany our expedition."

"But, a woman—how is that possible?"

The leader of adventurers, notwithstanding his calm exterior, seemed to hesitate strangely. "Possible or no, Madame la Comtesse refuses to remain in Quebec. She is terrified of that man, comrade."

"And what did you say to her, Monsieur de la Salle?" asked Arnold.

"I said ours was men's work. I showed her the safety of the Château, promised her passage to France on the next ship that sails; I painted the dangers of our enterprise, the horrors of Indian war. All this was to no purpose. The more I spoke of perils, the more she besought to come, vowing she would sooner die a hundred deaths than be left in Quebec to risk another encounter with Mic^ll."

Greatly affected by this news, Arnold paced up and down the room.

"Do you wish to withdraw?" asked La Salle with a note of harshness.

The young Englishman stiffened. "Monsieur!"

"Your pardon!" said the other. "I remembered that you are her lover." He sat watching Arnold with an

enigmatic smile. "Then you hold to your purpose?" he presently asked.

"Assuredly."

During a long pause the Frenchman's deep eyes gravely followed the restless movements of his companion. "Monsieur Firle," said he at last, "I will make you, as the honourable lover of this lady, an offer which goes against my discretion. More than a hundred leagues from here towards the west, upon the hither coast of a great inland sea called Ontario, I have a fort and seigneurie. It is a wild place, and the way to it is wilder. It is from there that we make our real start. As far as that place, if you and she desire, I will convey Madame de Vane, and leave her there with an honest family of our French people." He hesitated, and went on: "But I would have you bear in mind three things: the lady is lovely beyond the ordinary even as we count loveliness in Europe; that in this new land the men who hold the distant forts live hard and seldom see a woman; and that both you and I, and all who go with us into the unknown places, may never return again. Choose then for yourself and for Madame."

Notwithstanding his habitual self-control, the look which the French leader bent on his companion was one of intense and eager inquiry.

"Have you told her what you have told me?" asked Arnold.

"All this, and more," answered La Salle, with a note of satisfaction in his tone which he could not hide, "and still she desires to come."

Arnold Firle paused long ere he replied. "We are in God's hands, Monsieur de la Salle," said he at last. "If she will come, I beg you let her."

La Salle rose and went to the door. "I will tell her to be ready with the dawn," he said.

The Englishman suppressed an impulse to go with

him, and resuming his seat by the window, reflected, frankly and simply, that since this request had been made by Marjorie without reference to him, he would do better to leave things in his leader's hands. His estimate of that leader had grown from day to day, and it seemed to him natural enough that the young Countess, in her isolation, should confide in that man of strong and self-reliant nature, who seemed, in body and mind, to tower above his fellows. Stray words that La Salle had dropped from time to time had given the young sailor an inkling of how far-reaching was the range of his plans. He thought of the recent exploits of Hernando Cortés, who in the south had given an empire to Spain, and it appeared to him that this grave, inscrutable wanderer of the wilderness was also of the stuff of nation-makers. Arnold had heard him called hard, unsociable, a schemer, and worse names. But La Salle, in his dealings with himself, had discovered a vein of almost knightly chivalry. The men who had journeyed with him before declared that neither peril nor hardship stirred him from his purposes, that he treated himself more harshly than any under him, that he knew not fear, and was never so fertile in resource as when the plottings of his enemies and the cruelty of circumstances seemed combined against him.

Darkness had come on while Arnold sat thus, and it was with a thrill of pleasure that he remembered that for several days yet he would not lose sight of her for whose dear sake he was committed to Monsieur de la Salle and his adventures. It was an enchanting summer night, with a silvery moon making a pathway of light upon the river. By-and-by Arnold got up and went out from the citadel into the streets of the town. Then, turning his back upon the houses, he walked out above the water, along those grassy heights where he had first confided to his leader the story of his life.

He had come some distance from Quebec, and his brain,

perhaps, was too busy with the past and future to be paying proper attention to the present. For suddenly his foot slipped in descending a slope in the uncertain light, and he came heavily to the ground.

How long he lay dazed he had no idea, but when he staggered to his feet there was a cruel pain in his head, and on putting up his hand he found himself smothered in blood. He made a few steps and sank down, woefully sick and dizzy, on the ground. He felt a cut on the back of his head and the blood running warm on his neck. With a handkerchief he sought to stop the flow, but the effort nearly cost him the loss of his senses a second time, and he realized that if he were to return to Quebec that night he must find help.

A few hundred yards from where he sat Arnold beheld a glimmering light and the dark outline of a solitary house. Towards this, after a few minutes, he began painfully to drag himself.

Short though the distance was, it seemed an eternity ere he drew near the place, while the fierce barking of a watch-dog warned him that if the brute were loose he might expect a rough reception. Arnold felt for a pistol, then remembered with dismay that he was unarmed. There was nothing for it but to go on, and summoning his remaining strength, he reached a heavily-timbered doorway in a high palisade that surrounded the house. The door was fast. Behind it the dog was making an infernal din. Arnold shouted at the top of his voice, and then, utterly spent, sank down outside the door, leaning against the great stakes of the palisade.

Presently a man's voice was heard, angrily cursing the dog, and then a voice called to know who was without.

"One who needs help, and will gladly pay for it," cried Arnold.

He heard the door being unfastened. The next moment a lantern flashed in his face, and for an instant

ere he lost consciousness he saw the pale blue eyes of André Michel peering into his own.

When next he became conscious of his surroundings he was lying upon a bed of skins. Near by him André Michel sat at a table whereon there was a lamp. He was dressed, as Monsieur de la Salle had said, in the garb of a trapper of the woods. When he saw Arnold watching him his thin red lips drew back in a smile.

"I hope you are feeling better, Monsieur Firle," said he.

Arnold sat up, and discovered that his head was bandaged, and Michel, rising, passed him a jug that he took from beside the lamp.

"Drink a good draught," said he. "We have an account to clear. You need not fear: the wine is not poisoned."

Feeling badly the need of some refreshment, Arnold drank, and was revived thereby. Michel sat watching him, drumming with his thin fingers upon the table. A cruel look came into his face.

"Ever since that night upon the *Grace de Dieu* I have waited for an opportunity to kill you," he said.

"It seems that you have found it," answered the young Englishman. He was very pale with the loss of blood he had suffered, but his mouth was grimly set, and his blue-grey eyes watched every movement of his enemy. He was wondering, as he sat there on the bed, what his chance might be in a sudden rush upon Michel. His glance dropped a moment to a pistol in the latter's belt.

Michel saw the glance, drew out the pistol, and tapped on the table with the butt.

"Yes, I have found it," said he. "But I do not know that I shall use it. Perhaps we will clear our account in another way."

The door opened in answer to his tapping on the table,

and a young woman entered. Arnold recognized at once the pale fair face, the troubled dark eyes full of dread. It was the girl he had seen in the church.

"Elise," said Michel, "bring me a pen and paper, and send a couple of men."

The girl looked from Michel to his prisoner, and then to him again. She gave him a glance of entreaty.

"André, you will not harm this gentleman?" she pleaded.

"Have you fallen in love with him?" he sneered. "That would be droll, mon dieu! I could work it into my plans."

The red flamed in the girl's face, and tears started to her eyes. "Do not taunt me, André," she said, and with a catch of her breath she went out. Presently she returned with writing materials, which she set before him, and as she left the room again two native Indians came in, greasy, muscular men, horribly ugly, with cruel faces, and stony, expressionless black eyes. Michel spoke to them in their own tongue, and they took their stand on either side of Arnold, each with a hunting-knife naked in his hand.

"We can talk more freely now," observed Michel, ironically. "These gentlemen are unacquainted with the French language. You need feel no embarrassment in their presence, Monsieur Firlé."

To this pleasantry Arnold had no answer.

"I wish you to write a letter," said Michel.

"To whom?"

"To the Governor-General, Monsieur le Comte de Frontenac."

"And what should I write to Monsieur de Frontenac?"

"This: 'I am in the hands of André Michel, who values my life at three thousand crowns, to be paid three days hence at noon, at Two Tree Point, to the messenger whom he shall send.'"

Arnold smiled scornfully. "The servant of King Louis is then also a brigand," he said.

"The King's servant has been outlawed by the King's Governor," Michel coolly answered. "One must protect oneself. Write, and do not argue." And he held out the pen.

For some moments the Englishman sat with the pen in his hand. He reflected that it would at least be well for his friends to know what had befallen him, though his hopes of rescue were small. He carefully wrote the message as dictated.

With a sardonic smile Michel read the writing. "Money is scarce in New France," said he. "I fear the Governor will not price your life so high. But no matter! It is a fair round signature, not hard to copy."

Realizing instantly that he had been duped, Arnold sprang forward to destroy the paper, but at his first movement his savage warders gripped him as in a vice, and forced him back upon the couch.

André Michel regarded him with a look of diabolical subtlety, and laughed low.

"I may be wasting my skill," he said. "But he who succeeds once, may do so again. And at least the experiment will be interesting. It is lucky that I have some knowledge of your barbarous English tongue." He said something to the Indians, who redoubled their hold upon their prisoner, and then Michel set himself to write, carefully and with frequent pauses for thought. At last he turned round in his chair, and held up a sheet of manuscript.

"I will read," said he, "and you must excuse my faults of pronunciation if I have caught the idiom aright. Listen carefully. I am dying. I have killed André Michel, but am wounded mortally. I write this by the charity of one who knows our tongue. As you hope for

mercy, I entreat you to come secretly with her who brings you this from your lover, Arnold Firle.' ”

Michel looked up from his reading, and a smile of cruel triumph was on his face at sight of the white cheeks and blazing eyes of his helpless captive.

“ Bien! You are her lover! I thought it was so,” said he. “ I have thought the lady showed you little favour, but if she has any kindness, and I have any fortune, this should bring her.” He folded and sealed the paper, and tapped his pistol-butt again upon the table. “ You and I, Monsieur Firle, have the honour to desire the same woman,” said he. “ If she comes, you shall live, that I may the better enjoy my revenge on you. But if she does not come, you shall die—and your death will not be comfortable! ”

He looked up as Elise re-entered the room. “ Ma chérie,” said Michel, “ I wish you to go with this letter to Quebec. You must deliver it yourself, secretly, into the hands of the Englishwoman who is at the Château—”

With a wild cry Arnold interrupted him, and with the fury of desperation fought to escape from his swarthy guardians. But the Indians overbore him, weakened as he was, with ease, and at a word from Michel thrust a gag into his mouth. Elise stood by in fear and wonder.

“ Whatever the Englishwoman asks you, you will answer nothing, save that Monsieur Firle lies at the point of death and asks for her. If she will come, secretly and alone to-night, bring her hither, but if not, escape as you can, lest they put you to the question. You understand, you are to tell nothing! Nothing, Elise! ”

“ I understand,” faltered the girl.

“ And hark ye, my dear,” said Michel, with a disagreeable smile, “ since you seem to have a regard for this gentleman, remember that if Madame comes he lives, but if she comes not, he dies. Take it now, and go quickly! ”

With a hand that trembled a little Elise took the sealed paper, and turned towards the door.

Ere she reached it, he called after her, his voice, that had been harsh, suddenly modulated to a caressing note.

“Elise!”

The girl stopped and turned quickly, her dark eyes lighting up.

“If the Governor finds me, I am lost, Elise,” said Michel.

“The Governor will never find you through me, André,” she answered. Then she went out.

When she had gone Michel stood up. His pale, red-rimmed eyes glittered with malice as he turned to his prisoner. “I think we are in a fair way to balance our account,” said he. “It grows late, and doubtless you will be glad to sleep. We have not such quarters here as they boast at the citadel, but if your lodging is rude, at least it is secure.”

He spoke to the Indians in their own tongue, and they lifted Arnold like a child between them, and carried him from the room after Michel. They descended some steps, and presently Arnold found himself thrust into a dark underground cellar, closed by a heavy wooden door. Soon a plate of food was brought to him, and his gag was removed, and by the light of a candle which his dusky gaoler carried, he was shown a heap of rushes in a corner. Then the door was fastened on him, and he was left to his thoughts.

CHAPTER XV

AN EVENING'S ENTERTAINMENT

IN the hours which followed, the young Englishman passed through all the agonies of doubt and apprehension. Lying in the blank darkness, at first he lost the sense of his physical pain in the torments of speculation, and in the impotent fury which raged in him against his persecutor.

Would the woman he loved be deceived by this foul trap and lured to her destruction? It was long since she had seen his handwriting. Would she suspect the forgery? The likelihood of her believing in it seemed far to outweigh the chances of her suspicions being aroused. And even if she suspected, might she not generously take the risk? Once let Elise bring her alone to this distant solitary house and her fate was as good as sealed. Not a second time would the crafty traitor let her slip through his hands. The more Arnold revolved the position, the more his fears increased, and the lower sank his hopes for the young Countess's safety. If indeed he still clung to hope it was centred in Elise. Yet then he reflected that even Elise, if she desired to serve him because of his service to her, knew nothing of the contents of the letter, but knew, on the other hand, that her failure meant his death. The one chance lay in the letter being shown to her by Marjorie.

In his fever of anxiety Arnold lost all notion of time. Hours might have passed, or it might be only minutes, while he had tossed in his dark captivity. The claims of his physical nature made themselves felt at last through the turmoil of his anguished emotions. The pain in his

head, and in the foot which he had twisted in falling, forced itself upon his consciousness. And with the realization of his hurts there came to him the reflection that even though death at the hands of his cruel captor were imminent, it were best to sustain his strength as well as he might while life was left to him. He dragged himself across the earth floor of his dungeon to the place where the food had been left for him, and ate. Then again he fell to weighing the chances of the night, listening with eager intentness for the slightest sound from without, tossing from side to side of his uneasy couch in a nightmare of alternate hope and despair. At last sheer exhaustion had its way, and he fell into a troubled sleep.

How long his sleep lasted Arnold had no means of judging, but a rough shake awoke him, and he sat up unrefreshed and with a memory all confused, to see the pale daylight coming in at the door of his prison, and a scowling Indian face, like a copper mask, peering into his.

"Come with me," said the native, speaking in French with a barbarous pronunciation.

Arnold tried to rise, but his stiff limbs refused their office. Seeing the prisoner's condition, the Indian made no more ado, but bending down, lifted him like a child in his muscular arms, and carried him out of the door and up into the house, then out into the open air to the doorway in the palisade where Arnold had heard the dog baying overnight. The beast was there now, a great dark bloodhound with heavy sagging cheeks, which growled surlily as the Indian approached with his burden. André Michel stood holding it on a leash. Elise was with him, red-eyed as if she had been weeping, and dressed as for a journey. A dozen natives surrounded them, each laden with a bundle on his back, carrying canoe paddles and guns.

The Indian who had brought the prisoner set him on

the ground with a grunt. Arnold sought to rise, but though he succeeded in standing, such was the state of his injured foot that he could only sink down again. Michel uttered an exclamation of impatience and gave an order. Putting down their burdens, half-a-dozen of the men set to work to make a rough litter by fastening their paddles together crosswise. On this the Englishman was lifted, and two natives took it up. Then at a word from Michel the whole party set forward.

The sun was barely up, and there was a filmy haze over everything. Dew sparkled on the grass, and the air was sweet and pure with the vigour of morning. Though not a living soul was visible besides themselves, Arnold noticed that the party made use of every possible cover, and never moved in the open when they might pass under trees. From time to time Michel, who strode silently beside the litter in his woodranger's dress, gave an anxious glance on all sides of him.

They had proceeded thus as nearly as Arnold could judge about half-an-hour, when they made a turn towards the left, where he guessed the river lay, and coming to a sudden steep slope made their way down it to the water's edge. Here was a little beach of white sand, on which the oblique rays of the sun shone dazzlingly, and behind it, in a clump of bushes under the low cliffs, two large birch-bark canoes lay half concealed. These the Indians lifted out and carried to the water, and carefully placing in them their guns and other baggage made ready to embark. Five minutes later the whole party were in mid-stream, paddling as fast as strong arms could urge the canoes against the swift current of the vast Saint Lawrence.

Now, for the first time since they had left the house, André Michel seemed to breathe freely. From time to time he still glanced back at the wide expanse of the river glittering under the sunrise, but there was little appre-

hension in his look. And save for themselves, the watery plain around them sparkled empty as mid-ocean.

Hope sprang in Arnold's mind, and strengthened to conviction, that the hideous plot of overnight had failed. Was it even possible that the pursuers were on this villainous schemer's track? One thing alone was certain—Lady Vane was not at present in the persecutor's clutches. That certitude brought some degree of serenity to her hapless lover's mind.

His content perhaps betrayed itself too readily. André Michel, who squatted beside him with a paddle in the stern of the canoe, by-and-by gave him a sour look.

"Your life is forfeit, Englishman," said he. "Madame refused her lover the last interview for which he prayed. Your women have hard hearts."

Arnold had been watching Elise, who crouched near him. There was the mark of a cruel bruise upon her tear-stained cheek. Stung beyond endurance, the young man shot his bolt at a venture. "Better a hard heart than a cowardly one," said he. "If our women are hard, at least we do not seek to soften them with blows."

A furious blow in the face from Michel's paddle-blade was his retort. "Be silent, dog!" he shouted, pale with rage. "Speak again, and I will have your tongue torn out! You should die now," he hissed in the ear of his half-senseless victim, "but that I would not disappoint my men of their evening's entertainment."

Stunned and sick with the blow, Arnold lay helpless as a log in the bottom of the canoe. The morning advanced, and the summer sun mounted higher and higher in the fleckless blue. Even out upon the broad bosom of the river the scorching rays were hard to bear. Yet still the tireless red men plied their paddles, slowly, steadily forcing a way against the current, mile after mile, bend after bend, up the great highway of Canada.

At last, when the heat was becoming well-nigh intoler-

able, Michel, working with the rest at his paddle, gave a curt order, and the canoes swung landwards. In a few minutes the voyagers disembarked upon a grassy shore, and leaving their canoes by the water, made their way a few yards into the vast pine forests which everywhere hedged the river. Sitting down here in the fragrant shade they took a hasty meal, and stretched themselves on the ground for an hour's sleep.

That is to say, the barbarians slept. Oblivious to everything, just as they had lain down, their strong limbs flung out in relaxation, they lay like dogs that have had a long run. With the three Europeans it was different. Each had thoughts which banished sleep. While Michel lay with his head raised upon his hand, and watched the river with ferret eyes, his hapless captive sat with throbbing head leaning against a great tree, wondering brokenly if news of his fate would ever reach the woman he loved and the man he had undertaken to serve, and how long the time would be ere the *Sieur de la Salle* with his flotilla would pass up this same watery highway. How would the Countess of *Vane* fare when he was dead, in this land of strangers and peril? And then his thoughts turned to his own impending doom. What kind of death was he to die at the hands of this villainous gang? Arnold hoped vaguely that he would meet his end as a man should, and yet he shrank from the prospect with a sick dread. He had heard such things—terrible, fiendish tales—of what the natives of these lands inflicted upon their wretched prisoners.

A movement at his side recalled him from these uneasy reflections. The girl *Elise*, who had been wandering under the trees, stood beside him with a great handful of leaves. Michel also noticed her, and turned.

“What are you doing, *ma mie*?”

“I have found some dressing for *Monsieur Firle's* injured foot,” she faltered.

The other chuckled unpleasantly. "By all means," he sneered. "Monsieur will stand with the greater comfort at his stake to-night." And he turned callously to resume his watch upon the river.

With careful fingers Elise removed the boot from the injured foot. Skilfully as she did it, the pain caused was exquisite, so swelled by this time was the limb. She fetched water from the river, dipped the leaves in it, and bound them, damp and cool, about the foot and the ankle, with strips torn from her clothing.

Arnold took an opportunity to put his lips to her ear. "The letter—did you deliver it?" he asked.

She nodded, and went on with her work. But though he asked her other questions, he got neither word nor sign, except that once, when in his anxiety he raised his voice by a little, she laid her fingers for a moment on his lips, and looked frowning at him. From time to time Michel threw a glance round at her, but said no word. When her self-imposed task was done, Elise rose and left the prisoner, and seated herself quietly at the feet of André Michel.

The hour of rest passed quickly, and they embarked again upon their way. All that afternoon, in the glaring heat of midsummer, the paddles flashed tirelessly in the stream, till at last the air cooled a little, and the red glow of sunset filled all the west towards which they travelled, and the great shining expanse of the river in front of them became a broad pathway of crimson and gold. Not until the sky had paled, and the swiftly-falling dusk was already over the Saint Lawrence, did they turn their prows again towards the shore.

They landed at the point of a little promontory, and carefully hiding their canoes in the brushwood near the bank, made their way for some distance into the gloom of the forest. Soon they found an open space, over which the moon, which was nearing the full, shed a silvery

radiance. The two Indians who carried the prisoner set him down roughly on the ground, and André Michel himself brought up the great bloodhound, and made him lie down on guard at Arnold's side.

"It is a good sentinel, Monsieur Firle," said he. "I think we may leave you in his charge while we seek what we require."

In a few minutes the whole party had dispersed in the woods, leaving Arnold to his reflections. Escape was out of the question. Not only was he crippled and unarmed, but at his slightest movement a savage growl from the brute beside him warned him what fate awaited him if he did not remain passive. Soon an Indian returned with an armful of brushwood, and laid it down in the clearing. Another and another came similarly laden, till a huge pile was standing there.

Suddenly the stillness of the night was broken by a horrifying yell that rang from the forest depths. The hound at Arnold's side sprang up, bristling, and growling fiercely. The prisoner listened, but several minutes passed and the sound was not repeated. Then voices were heard among the trees, calls and savage laughter.

An Indian came leaping into the open space of moonlight, capering like a madman, brandishing in one hand a naked knife, in the other something dark and soft, which had the appearance of a wet mop. He was followed at a short interval by a knot of others, uttering taunting cries, and dragging a prisoner securely bound. Last of all came André Michel, and the girl clinging to his arm. Michel stood a moment unconcernedly in the moonlight and coolly watched his men. Elise still held to him without speaking, as she crouched fearfully at his side.

"Little fool," Arnold heard him say to her, "you had done better to stay with your mother. The forest life is not for such as you. Come now, these rascals of mine will need fire-water to celebrate this achievement. They

will want cords too, which we will also bring." He moved in the direction of the canoes.

But Elise glanced back apprehensively.

"The Englishman, André—what of him?"

Michel turned to follow her glance, and laughed harshly. "They will take the other first," said he. "It is not every day, my girl, that these Huron scoundrels catch an Iroquois brave. Meanwhile, we must see that the Englishman gets a good view." He laughed again, then moved away and disappeared with Elise towards the river.

With a shudder of apprehension Arnold watched the savages with their prisoner. They had dragged him to a stout sapling that grew at the edge of the clearing, and fastened him to it, taunting and jeering at him all the time. The man who held the mop-like object in his hand advanced and struck the captive lightly with it in the face, and dark marks appeared on the prisoner's skin. The mop, Arnold suddenly understood, was the hair of a man's head, still wet with its owner's blood.

In a few minutes the Hurons began to drag fuel from the heap, and build a fire in the vicinity of the sapling. They never ceased to taunt the helpless warrior, who to all their mockery presented a front of stolid and contemptuous calm.

By-and-by one set a light to the fire that they had built, and while the dry wood blazed up furiously more and more fuel was heaped upon it. The Indians seated themselves near the fire, and began to eat their evening meal. While they were thus engaged, Michel returned with Elise, bringing a small keg of spirit, which he broached and set in his followers' midst. A shout of welcome greeted its appearance, and while a cup of the fiery liquid was passed from hand to hand the Frenchman and the girl seated themselves a little apart and ate.

After they had supped, Michel called one of his men,

and Arnold Firle, watching the two as they talked, and the white face of Elise, knew that his fate was being decided. At last the Indian, pointing to a tree which stood not far from the sapling to which the other prisoner was bound, smiled all over his cruel, bony face, and turned back to his companions. They too, when he spoke to them, smiled and nodded in approval.

Arnold was watching them as they rose from the fire and looked fixedly at him, when he heard the hated voice of the agent beside him, and beheld food placed for him on the ground.

"Monsieur Firle," said Michel, with an evil face, "it seems you must accept my hospitality for one night more, for these followers of mine have decided to occupy themselves for to-night only with the gentleman you see opposite. I beg you will make what haste you can with your supper, for they have arranged to place you where you will enjoy a good view of their entertainment. It is, I assure you, a custom of the country which cannot fail to interest a traveller like yourself."

Summoning all his courage and force of will, the young Englishman took without speaking the food thus offered, while his captor stood quietly beside him. While he was still eating, Arnold saw one of the Hurons take a burning fir branch from the fire, and with the glowing red end slowly trace a line down the bare breast of the bound victim and then another transversely. With a thrill of horror he ceased eating, and sat staring with a terrible fascination at the dark figures round the sapling. Not a moan, however, came from the captive. The Indian flung his branch back into the fire with a derisive shout.

"The sacrilegious dog!" said Michel, coolly. "He says that the Iroquois are all heathen, but that this one is now saved from purgatory by the emblem of our holy religion, Monsieur Firle."

"Are you a Frenchman, to permit these things?"

cried Arnold. "What has yonder wretch done against you?"

"Nothing, indeed," answered Michel with a shrug of the shoulders. "These scoundrels of mine came upon him and another by the merest accident, and finding that they outnumbered them six to one, they attacked. You must know, monsieur, that between the Iroquois, of whom this warrior is one, and the Huron nation to which my fellows here belong, there is deadly enmity. There is no quarter given in this country, and the man who does not exhaust his ingenuity in torture upon a captured foe need look for no respect from his friends. Nevertheless, the game is not all one-sided. I will undertake, if you like, to send you back to Quebec to-morrow, if in the first half-hour these rascals of mine get so much as a groan out of yonder brave. And now, if you have finished your supper, we will place you where you can see to better advantage."

Michel called to his men, and several of them, already more like demons than human beings from the spirit they had drunk and from the lust of cruelty in their slanting eyes, came running from the group about the fire. Scowling exultantly, jabbering words which he did not understand, and grinning with savage back-drawn lips and shining cruel teeth, they caught up Arnold and carried him to the tree already noted, where they bound him fast in a standing position, facing the fire and the suffering Iroquois. The Frenchman turned to Elise, who had crept up white-faced with horror for his protection amid the orgy that began to develop.

"Go back to the canoes," he told her. "In a few minutes you will not be safe here, girl. Go, and I will join you in half an hour." He led her away under the trees and then returned.

Meanwhile the martyrdom of the wretched captive proceeded, and Arnold Firlé went sick and cold with the

horror of what he saw, and with the fear which, despite his utmost efforts, crept over him when he remembered that what he witnessed to-night he was himself to suffer to-morrow.

He saw the tormentors place hot embers between the toes of the bound man; they drew out one by one the finger-nails from his quivering hands; they cut his flesh with knives, and tore off strips from his skin. Still the Iroquois flung them back taunt for taunt as they danced like fiends about him, and not in the fiercest of his agony did he satisfy his torturers by a single groan or cry. It seemed impossible that flesh and blood could endure such things as this man endured. The great fire roared and crackled in the summer night, sending up red flames and rolling smoke into the pale moonlight, and making the shadows leap in the glade as wildly as these savages leaped about their captive. To Arnold Firle the whole scene was like a frightful vision. He felt his senses going from him, and closed his eyes.

André Michel, who had stood calmly watching the horrible spectacle, and turning from time to time a look of satisfied malice upon the Englishman, stepped up to him at last and said in his ear: "The half-hour is up, Monsieur Firle. I should have won my bet."

Arnold looked round. Already Michel was walking away.

"Don't leave me!" cried the young man in a sudden panic of horror so awful that even the presence of his deadly foe seemed something to be desired. But Michel shook his head. "I have no taste for these sights, monsieur. I have seen them, alas! too often," said he with pitiless mockery. "The Iroquois is a long way from being dead yet, if I am any judge. The vitality of these savages is amazing. I have seen a man last eight hours under such treatment as this, and yet abuse his captors till they tore out his tongue in a rage. But to-night it

would not surprise me if these rascals were too drunk to finish their work. Some of them seem already half asleep, and there is plenty of spirit left yet. Au revoir, Monsieur Firle!"

The next moment he was gone after Elise.

Left to themselves, the Indians grew yet wilder in their orgy. They were already intoxicated with the strong spirit their master had provided, yet not a minute passed but one or another came to help himself from the keg. In proportion as their drunkenness increased, the mangled Iroquois had temporary respite. Soon several of the Hurons lay on the ground, incapably drunk. Others, however, wearying of the monotony of torturing the unresponsive warrior, began to turn their attention to the Englishman. A knot of them collected about the tree where he stood bound with the great mastiff on guard beside him, and began unsteadily to execute a dance, making pretence the while to slash him with their knives.

Nearer and nearer came the keen, pointed blades, and the devilish, savage countenances, jeering at him, as they had at the Iroquois, in words of which he understood not one syllable, but of which the dreadful import was clear. At last the point of a knife entered the flesh of his left arm. Instinctively Arnold winced at the prick of the steel, and a shout of delight went up from his tormentors.

And now the ghastly conviction came to him that Michel had deliberately withdrawn himself in order that these infuriated wretches might work their will on him to-night. Vainly he longed for the incredible fortitude of the Iroquois opposite, who from his place of suffering faced him with beadlike, watchful black eyes and motionless, blood-stained features. Arnold's spirit went faint at the thought of what was to come.

Another knife-point penetrated his clothing. This time he set his teeth, and no sound escaped him, though the steel bit hard. Presently a powerful, muscular Indian,

staggering in his intoxication, made his way to the fire, and drew from it two blazing faggots. These he picked up by their unburned ends, and shouting something to his comrades, came slowly back towards Arnold, leering horridly, and keeping the red ends of the wood pointed at the prisoner at the level of his head. With a thrill of horror Arnold realized that the man intended to put out his eyes. Perhaps his face betrayed his dread. The Hurons round him burst into a yell of derision, and nearer and nearer drew the glowing faggots that were to blind the victim.

Suddenly the extremity of one of the faggots, burnt too much to hold together, dropped to the ground. It touched a paw of the bloodhound, which had lain solemn and silent at his post amid all the uproar hitherto. Madened with the pain of the burn, the beast leaped up, and mingling his hoarse baying with the infernal din of the exulting savages, sprang wildly at one and another, snapping his great jaws, and burying his angry, gleaming teeth in more than one brown leg. Screaming with pain and fury, the Hurons ran back, and the dog, content with his defence, withdrew snarling to his post again.

Once more the savages gathered about the spirit-keg, and fortified their shaken nerves with fiery drink, while those who had felt the white teeth fingered their torn limbs, and turned apprehensive glances at the red, wrathful eyes of the hound.

After that Arnold Firlé for a long time saw nothing. He was not a coward, but he was not hardened for the endurance of these horrors. Moreover, the Indian's knife had bled him freely. His white face sank upon his breast, and he hung limp and senseless at the tree where he was bound.

When at last he opened his eyes again to his surroundings, the moon had travelled far across the sky, and the glade was in shadow, save where the fire, diminished but

still glowing, cast a red gleam around. The dark shapes of the Hurons lay here and there in the attitudes of sleep. Opposite him, he was conscious that the Iroquois still lived, for he felt, rather than saw, the black eyes of the tortured prisoner watching him with a curious intentness. And then he realized that there was someone moving beside him in the half dark, and peered round.

It was Elise. Her hand was on the collar of the dog, her lips came to his ear.

"Monsieur Firle, are you sensible?" she whispered.

Arnold nodded.

"You kept your promise to me," said the girl. "You did not kill him when he was in your power. I will save you now—though he cast me from him. Listen—I am cutting your cords. He sleeps now—all the camp sleeps but you and I. You must escape."

Arnold turned his head towards her. "May Heaven reward you!" he murmured. "Yet escape I cannot. There is my foot, that will not bear me, and there is the dog. But cut me free, and give me the knife, that at least I may die a man's death, and bless you from my heart!"

"There are the canoes," she said, "if you could drag one out alone. But he sleeps not far from them." She had cut his bonds as she spoke, and stood holding the dog by the collar, her great eyes shining in the gloom. "The dog will be quiet with me," she said. "Hasten! Here is the knife."

He took it, and made a step from the tree, but nearly fell with the stiffness of his limbs. Yet he kept his feet, and turned a moment to face her.

"I was a coward," he whispered earnestly, "and you have given me a man's heart again. Heaven help you, mademoiselle. Farewell!"

He was limping away, but stood still again, irresolute. The black eyes of the Iroquois followed his every movement. Was it possible, Arnold asked himself that that

poor creature still could stand alone? The eyes of the two men met. Elise, reading the Englishman's thought, called to him in a low voice to be gone. But Arnold shook his head. With a sudden impulse he limped to the sapling, severed the cords which held the prisoner, and gave the knife into his mangled hand in order that the poor wretch, if so minded, might forthwith end his agony.

To his intense surprise, however, the Iroquois, though his feet were charred and his body and limbs were streaked with wounds and blood-clots, stepped forward from the sapling. Taking the knife in his bleeding fingers, he beckoned to Arnold to follow, and treading as though insensible to pain, moved cautiously round the group of sleeping enemies in the direction of the river. As he passed the second recumbent figure the Huron raised his head and sat up, staring. Without a word the Iroquois dropped upon him, rolling him to one side, and fixing the man's face in the crook of his left elbow before he could open his mouth. Then with his red right hand the escaping prisoner drove the knife deep into his enemy's breast again and again, while the Huron's life-blood gushed out in streams, and with a quiver all over and a strange stifled sigh he went limp in the encircling arm and died without another sound.

The Iroquois stood up again, a figure of blood and horror in the pale light. He turned to Arnold, and it almost seemed that he smiled. He beckoned with his hand, which still held the dripping knife, and with cautious yet unfaltering footsteps led the way towards the Saint Lawrence. To Arnold's dismay, he took the direction of the thicket where the canoes were hidden, and near which, as the Englishman knew, André Michel lay sleeping. It was in vain that Arnold gesticulated, in vain that he whispered warnings in the French. The man merely shook his head, and moved on with his steady, stealthy tread.

In a few minutes the pine trunks thinned around them, and they had a sight of the river, gleaming calm and silvery under the moon. At the foot of a great tree that stood solitary like a sentinel of the forest towards the stream, they saw Michel lying stretched, asleep in his blanket. Beside him on the ground sat Elise. She saw them at the same moment, and with a soothing movement put her hand over the mouth of the bloodhound, whose collar she still held. With the other hand she pointed towards a thicket between the sleeper and the water's edge.

The Iroquois, signing to Arnold to step carefully, entered the thicket, and immediately the fugitives beheld the canoes lying upside down where they had been laid on landing, their contents piled beside them on the ground. With infinite precaution the two men lifted one of the long, yet light and fragile birch-bark shells, and carried it to the river. As they laid it half in the water, the canoe grated lightly on the strand, and at the same moment there came a threatening growl from beyond the intervening thicket.

Instinctively Arnold stooped to thrust the canoe into the river and embark, but the Indian laid his mangled hand upon his arm and grunted, with a shake of the head. "Venez," he said, and making nothing of his crippled feet, ran back knife in hand to the thicket.

It seemed the act of madness. Even as he followed, Arnold heard the dog's deep bay approaching. They reached the other canoe, and while the Indian stood a moment in tense expectancy, Arnold snatched up a paddle as the only weapon handy. The next moment there was a crashing of the bushes as the hound rushed through, a ferocious roar as it sprang, and then--Arnold stood amazed and breathless. The Iroquois, with a snarl like that of another beast, stooped with incredible swiftness as the dog shot from the ground: there was a lightning

flash of the knife-blade, and the same moment it ripped into the dog's throat below the death-trap of the gaping jaws, and the powerful brute lay snapping in convulsions at their feet.

Twisting himself clear of the clicking white fangs, the Indian leaped with his whole weight upon the inverted canoe, smashing the frail shell hopelessly, then, staggering to his feet, again cried "Venez!" and snatching up a second paddle, ran back for the river as a wild shouting came from the forest. They shoved the waiting canoe into the water, and Arnold needed not the imperative gesture to get in. Nevertheless, his companion ere he followed drew himself erect on the shore, and with the whole force of his lungs gave forth a penetrating yell of defiance. Then hurrying into the canoe he thrust his paddle desperately into the water, and the light craft leaped forward down the current.

Arnold looked back. Dark figures ran out from among the trees. The night grew hideous with the furious yelling of the Hurons. There was a flash and a roar of a musket, and the paddle which the Englishman held splintered in his hand. Then gradually the rage of shouting died away behind, giving place to the calm of the summer night, and borne on the deep bosom of the Saint Lawrence, the canoe glided silently towards Quebec.

Presently the toiling Indian drew a long sigh. The paddle, all blood-stained where his tortured fingers had held it, fell into the bottom of the canoe, and the Iroquois, stooping forward in a helpless sort of way, finally collapsed at the feet of his rescuer, and Arnold found himself alone in the waste of hurrying waters.

CHAPTER XVI

ORDEAL BY WATER

“IF I knew for certain that he was dead—” said the Countess of Vane. She hesitated. Her voice was shaken.

In the flickering light of his camp fire Robert Cavalier de la Salle watched her gravely with his thoughtful eyes.

“Et puis alors, madame?”

“I would have accepted the offer of Monsieur de Frontenac, and would have gone back in the next ship for France,” she said. “Oh, Monsieur de la Salle, he cannot be dead! Tell me what you think in your heart!”

The French leader turned his face away, and looked into the fire. Perhaps it would not have been easy for him to have told this English lady quite all that he had thought in his heart since he and she had become acquainted.

“I fear the worst, madame,” he answered after a little while. “And yet I do not trust that letter altogether.”

“Faith, and neither do I!” exclaimed a dark-eyed priest—the same who had gone to Grande Hermine with Arnold Firle in the night. “A letter in a strange hand, which its bearer is afraid to deliver honestly to the sentry, but lays under a stone in the roadway, and forthwith runs away!”

“It is Monsieur Firle’s signature,” said Marjorie, taking out the letter, whose contents she knew by heart, and holding it open in the firelight.

Monsieur de la Salle took it from her hand. “It seems to be,” said he.

"Ah! if we were at Montreal!" cried Lady Vane.

La Salle watched her pityingly. "You must not build your hope too much on Montreal, madame. From first to last this letter is strange, but one of the strangest things about it is that same word, scrawled across it in coloured chalk, in a hand which is neither that of the letter nor that of the signature?"

"The timid messenger's, perhaps?" suggested Père Hennepin, who was wreathing himself in clouds of Indian tobacco smoke.

Marjorie started at that. Arnold had told her of the girl in the church, who had been at the bottom of her rescue from Grande Hermine. Some swift intuition convinced her that the priest was right. But if so, who had written the letter itself, and why had the messenger been afraid? She turned to La Salle.

"It is all very dark, monsieur," said she. "Yet I must hope. My hope is fixed on Montreal, to know the best, or worst. Shall we be long upon the way?"

"Not a day longer than we must, madame," he answered. "But the distance is great—more than half-way to our destination. Ah, you are brave, Madame de Vane! You and Monsieur Firle have a great courage—a great faith."

"We have need of it," answered the girl, bowing her head in her hands, to hide her tears that would not be denied.

That night, in the rude hut of boughs which the voyagers had built for her and the attendant the Governor had sent with her, the Countess of Vane knelt long, and prayed without form of words for the lover in whose honour she could not but believe, and whose fate was so darkly shadowed. She slept little, in that first of many bivouacs amid the deep silence of the woods, with the pale moonlight glinting through the fragile roofing upon the face of her slumbering companion. From time to time

she would go to the tent door and peer out at the dark figures round the red camp fire, the long black shapes of the canoes upon the river's edge, and the great glittering expanse of the Saint Lawrence itself. More than once, while thus looking out, she saw the tall, gaunt figure of the leader stealing like a shadow from one part of the camp to another, now crossing the firelit circle, now moving vaguely among the trees where the invisible sentries were posted—tireless and watchful ever, like a man well used to carry his life in his hand through the midst of dangers. And indeed, though they had made but a short day's journey from Quebec—having delayed their start with a vain search for Arnold Firlé—it behoved all travellers in Canada to be wary in these times. For it was not yet twenty years since the great river along all its length had been red with fire and blood, and the lilies of France had almost been torn from their feeble roots in the New World by the savage warriors of the Five Nations. Once, as Marjorie peered out thus, herself unseen, Monsieur de la Salle had come with that cat-like Indian tread of his to within a score of paces of her woodland bed-chamber, and had stood there with folded arms, backed by the glow of the fire, gazing at it long and steadily. Then, with a sigh, he had moved away.

The early summer dawn had broken, though the camp was still asleep, when La Salle, rising from a light slumber, made his way to the river bank, and with his blanket still about him, stood contemplating the ruddy eastern sky. This man, in whose keen brain schemes of empire were long since mapped out upon a scale which might have taken the breath of most of his contemporaries, this man whose strenuous nature revelled in the perils of realizing his own ambitious dreams, found in the great spaces of the wilderness a saving calm which upheld him through danger and intrigue, through achievement and disaster alike.

He wove plans of large dominion because in these his soaring imagination found its play, as kings dream of conquest and poor men of wealth; but dominion itself held no charms for him. He was of the great race of the pathfinders, to whom the struggle to do is more than the thing done. In the crowded highways of the world he was a stranger, but in the great untrodden wastes, pitting his manhood against the chances of the unknown, his restless spirit found its true content. The red sun setting over undiscovered lands, the lonely, perilous trail through places where no other of his race had trod, the voice of the hurricane roaring in forest solitudes, the stern exhilaration as his frail canoe shot down some rioting rapid to its unknown goal—these things were more to him than the praise of princes or the hatred of his enemies.

As he stood at the river's edge, and watched the morning unfold, the lines of his strong face relaxed. He looked long down the water on his right, where it flushed over all its width with the reflection of the dawn. Then he glanced leftwards, where the solemn forests fringing the stream were still grey and cool. What was that black speck—far off in mid-river to the west?

In a moment his mood of contemplation passed, and he was transformed into the keen-eyed rover of the woods. He stepped back into cover, and watched. Moving down the current towards him, the distant mark took shape—a canoe. It came nearer, and he saw that it drifted uncontrolled on the water. It lay very low, as if half waterlogged. For a moment La Salle hesitated; then he lifted one of his canoes into the water, laid in her a musket and his naked sword, and paddled out alone to meet the derelict. She seemed lower than ever in the water as he drew near to her, half a mile away from the shore. Then suddenly she was alongside, and he saw the reason why she floated as she did.

Two men lay dead or senseless in the craft, which was

partly full of water and splashed with blood. The water itself that had got through her leaky bark was tinted red. An Indian and a white man lay there, and with a start La Salle recognized in the latter the Englishman, Arnold Firlé. To his experienced eye it was clear that the derelict would remain but little longer afloat. To get the men, or even one of them, into his own canoe was an impossibility, even for an expert canoeist like himself. To enter their craft was still more out of the question.

And if they sank in the deep Saint Lawrence!

For one measureless moment the French leader rested his paddle and looked back at the shore which he had left, where in her forest bedroom lay the woman whose life was so strangely bound up with that of the unconscious Englishman before him. He recalled every incident of the previous day's journey, every moment of that evening round the camp-fire. If the canoe sank in the Saint Lawrence!

The next moment his browned hand was on the gunwale of the derelict, and the two canoes were side by side. He dared not call to the senseless men lying there—so near was their craft to sinking that the mere movement of their revival—if they were yet alive—might finish the matter. The only hope was to get both canoes to the bank immediately. And he had neither rope nor cord to lash them to each other.

Necessity, however, is an urgent master, and La Salle had an inspiration. First stripping off his coat, he laid it beside him. Then he took his sword, and thrust the keen point through the bark of his own canoe near the after end, and continuing the thrust, pierced likewise the gunwale of the helpless craft where he held it alongside him, till the sword was buried in the bark of his own canoe to the hilt. Then taking his coat, he made a sailor's twist with one sleeve about the naked blade in the sinking canoe, and wound the other about the sword's hilt in his

own. Thus, sink or swim, the two shells were fast bound to each other by that link of shining steel. La Salle took up his paddle, and with slow, powerful strokes urged the double burden shorewards.

Apart from the instant danger of sinking, it was no light work, for both canoes were large, and the second one dragged heavily with its weight of water. There was, moreover, the risk that the slender bond which held them together would snap under the strain, or that the sword-blade would cut clean through the birch bark. La Salle dare not discharge his musket to summon help, for if the men lived the sudden alarm might startle them into a fatal activity. He paddled doggedly, the sweat coming out on him and his muscles straining at the unequal task. The torn sides of the canoes creaked and slowly split with the jerking of the steel bond. The current was bearing them swiftly down stream, for he dared not try to stem it for fear of the added strain.

They had long passed the camp, and now a few minutes would settle the fate of the unconscious men. The shore was near, and the sword had torn a long gash in the side of both canoes. A bare inch of bark now held the derelict in tow; every moment it strained and cracked, and the water had leaked in to such an extent that the canoe seemed to float by mere miracle. In this last extremity, with the paralysis of exhaustion creeping over his muscles, the Frenchman thought again of that green hut among the trees. For himself, he knew that he could swim ashore with ease. He had done what a man could do. The powers of good and evil seemed suddenly to be tearing at his soul. Nearer came the land, nearer, nearer yet. Surely it was all over, and they were sinking! With a desperate shout he thrust his paddle into the river like a man possessed, churning the shoaling water. It no longer seemed himself who fought for these men's lives, but some fury that in his extremity had entered into him.

The forest blurred before his eyes, but still his dripping paddle flashed in the sun. Suddenly his straining canoe ran her nose upon the beach, and La Salle leaped out. Even as he did so, and seized the prow of the other craft, the water flowed over her gunwale. La Salle hauled out the two men and laid them side by side upon the shore.

His furious energy had left him. He crossed himself devoutly, and fell on his knees.

Thus he remained for a few moments, his breast still heaving with the strain he had come through, and the sweat running down his deeply-tanned face. Then he rose and went to the two upon the strand, bending over them with practised hand and eye. Both, he saw, were living. La Salle went quickly towards the camp.

He found it just astir, and the Countess of Vane at her tent door in the early sunbeams. La Salle made her a grave bow. "I hope you have slept well, madame," said he.

"I have slept a little, and prayed much, Monsieur de a Salle," she answered.

At that he smiled, and with the smile all the sternness left his face. "I think I have brought you an answer to your prayers," he said, and saw her colour like a rose.

CHAPTER XVII

BAD MEDICINE

THE bells were ringing in Montreal.

The row of small houses that made the street of Saint Paul, stretching parallel to the river, was hung with cloth of blue and white and silver—the colours of Our Lady. For it was the fête of the Assumption. Here and there the fleur-de-lis hung from a window in the sunshine. From the fortified gates of the Seminary buildings, between the street and the river, came a procession, singing, and bearing banners and emblems. Nuns, priests, children in white frocks, choristers, and acolytes, and a few dusky Indian converts, joined in the chanting of an Ave, and along the route of the procession were gathered the population of the settlement—trappers in moccasins and buckskin, traders with their wives and families, soldiers from the bastioned fort down there by the river, an Indian or two, officials and ecclesiastics.

Beside a solidly-timbered merchant's house, half fort, half residence, Arnold Firle stood by the Countess of Vane, watching with the rest. Arnold was strong again, with face and hands tanned deeply with the sun and wind, and all his sinews braced by labour and endurance. His companion, glancing at him a moment as the procession filed by, and noting the quick interest he gave to all that passed, was struck by his almost boyish zest. It recalled to her the days when they were boy and girl together, before he sailed away to the Low Countries.

“How do you like this land of Canada, Arnold?” said she.

He gave her a questioning look. "I like it very well," he answered quietly. And then, with a changed tone, "Ah, Marjorie!" he cried, "I could travel on thus to the end of the world!"

The Countess smiled. "I think we have nearly reached the end of the world, as men know it. And there is a long way yet before us."

"Ay," said Arnold. "A long journey, before I can claim faith from you and you can give faith to me."

Her colour heightened, and Arnold stood still, watching the receding procession. But his thoughts were elsewhere. He was still under the glamour of those days that had just passed. His mind was crowded with memories of the river and the forests, of the hot and splendid summer days through which they had toiled at the paddles, of the deep calm summer nights when, the camp-fire lit, and the women's sleeping-hut built of bark and boughs, and the rough meal heartily eaten, they had stretched themselves to sleep beneath the stars. Travelling thus, the time had passed so pleasantly, that the uncertain future had thrown scarcely a fleeting shadow over the enjoyment of the present hours.

While Arnold stood half lost in a day-dream, he felt a touch on his arm, and turned quickly.

"Ah, Jacques!" said he, lightly. A tall Indian stood beside him. It was the same who had escaped with him from the torture-stakes of Michel and his band. He had been brought along with the expedition, and ever since his recovery, which had been extraordinarily rapid in view of the terrible mauling he had undergone, he had attached himself to the Englishman like a dog to his master. The soldiers had given him a French name, his own being unpronounceable, and Jacques had added a little to his scanty stock of French talk. Something like a smile showed now on his scarred features, as with a hand that was hopelessly maimed yet still had strength, he

pointed across the roadway. Arnold saw a young woman with a basket of fruit and vegetables on her arm, making her way through the people.

"Her, cut you free," said Jacques the Iroquois in his broken French. The next moment Arnold caught a glimpse of the walker's face under her hood, and saw that it was Elise. He turned to Lady Vane.

"Yonder goes she who saved us, Jacques and me," said he. "She who brought Michel's letter and laid it where you told me."

"Then Michel is in Montreal!" exclaimed Marjorie, with a shrinking movement. "And it was she who wrote that name upon the letter, to bring me hither."

"If you will go into the house I will cross and speak to her," said Arnold.

The merchant's house by which they stood was that in which Monsieur de la Salle had found temporary quarters for the Countess and her woman. Arnold saw her safely within, and calling Jacques to follow him, hurried after Elise.

She started violently when he came up with her, and it seemed to Arnold that her glance was furtive and her air distressed. She hurriedly cut short his expressions of thanks for her rescue. She would not meet his eyes, and fumbled as she stood there with the contents of her basket. "I thought you dead, monsieur," said she.

"I should be, but for you, mademoiselle. But I reached the camp of Monsieur de la Salle."

"Ah! I know that Monsieur de la Salle is here at the fort."

"What then, mademoiselle?" said Arnold.

"This is a town of his enemies," said Elise with a furtive look.

"He is not afraid of his enemies, mademoiselle."

"The more fool he!" she answered bitterly. Then

with sudden earnestness she faced Arnold. "The English lady is here," she said, "because of what I wrote upon the letter. I have seen her."

"Then it was you who wrote 'Montreal.'"

"Ay," she answered, with the bitterness in her voice again. "I was a fool. I did it in charity, to her and you. I did not then know—"

"What did you not know, mademoiselle?"

"I did not know that André loved the Englishwoman," she replied, and her cheeks were crimson.

"Where is André Michel?" asked Arnold, suddenly stern.

The girl's manner changed. "He is not here!" she cried. "Monsieur Firle, I tell you the truth. And you have sworn to me you will not harm him!"

"What I have sworn, I will keep," said Arnold, "though how hard that promise is you well enough know. Why are you left here, mademoiselle?"

This time Arnold was certain that she was afraid of his question. She stared at him for a moment with a terrified glance, but she did not answer. Instead, she hugged her basket closer with one arm, and with the other hand drew her light cloak about her. Arnold saw with surprise that she was trembling as she stood before him.

"Go back to Quebec!" she exclaimed suddenly. "Go back, and take the English lady!"

"You talk strangely, mademoiselle," said he. "I am of Monsieur de la Salle's expedition, and we go with him to his fort at Cataracqui."

"Monsieur de la Salle has many enemies in Montreal," she said in a tone of warning.

"As elsewhere," answered Arnold.

"The expedition"—Elise looked round her quickly—"the expedition is doomed! Go back, or you will bitterly repent!"

And leaving him standing there, she hurried on without another word.

Arnold and the Indian stood and watched her retreating figure. Her behaviour was mysterious enough, but at the moment the Englishman's thoughts were not so much of her as of André Michel. Where was he? And why was Elise in Montreal if he were away?

She did not look back. Arnold saw her cross the street towards the river, and disappear round the corner of a building.

"Bad medicine!" grunted Jacques the Iroquois in his impassive way.

"What do you mean?" asked Arnold.

The native crooked his left arm in imitation of the action of one holding a basket, made as if to put his right hand to the basket, and thence to his lips, spat, and nodded solemnly.

Arnold did not understand. But he strode in the direction taken by Elise. He would go and warn Monsieur de la Salle of what she had so vaguely hinted. La Salle, he knew, was busy at the fort, where he was the guest of the commandant.

Before he reached the fort he saw Elise again. To his surprise, she went straight to the gate with her basket, and entered, and he saw the two sentries nod and joke as she passed within. Then Arnold went up and desired to have speech with his leader.

One of the men went in with the message, and meanwhile Arnold, having sent away the Iroquois, stood conversing with the other sentry. "Who is that woman who went in just now?" he inquired.

The soldier winked cheerfully. "One who is much too good-looking to be in the kitchen, but not lucky enough to be in the parlour, monsieur," said he.

The first soldier returned, and Arnold was bidden inside the fort.

Monsieur de la Salle was seated before a table, in a little room that looked out across the river and the forests which lay beyond. The table was littered with papers and charts. The French leader rose courteously, yet with a weary air.

"Well, Monsieur Firlé," said he, "you at least, I think, have not sought me either to lend money or to claim it."

Arnold hesitated. Now that he was here, his warning seemed too vague to dwell upon in the presence of this stern and self-reliant captain. "I interrupt you—" he murmured.

"Not without cause, I doubt not," said La Salle. "And not unwelcomely, monsieur, seeing that you withdraw me from contemplating the disagreeable." He pointed at the littered table. "Debts and bills, mortgages and bonds," said he in a tired voice. "I hear of little else, as soon as I show my face outside the wilderness. In this settlement of Montreal half the merchants are my creditors. And I, who could carve for the King an Empire beyond his dreams, must quake at every slight reverse, at every lying rumour set afoot by my enemies, because the purse-strings of my enterprises are held by such men as these!" La Salle smiled bitterly.

Arnold felt that he had come upon an unthankful errand. "Courage, mon capitaine!" said he. "One day the King of France will be proud of you and your work."

"I wonder!" muttered La Salle, grimly. He turned away, and looked out of the little window. He remained silent for some moments, then turned to face the Englishman again. "Yet it is no small thing I have set before myself," he continued, and stepping to the table, he opened a large map, and put his finger on one point. "Here is this island fort of Montreal," said he, "planted at the confluence of two great streams, securing to us

French the trade of a vast region to north and west. Here, south-westerly, lies the route of our journey along the great river of Canada, to where it flows out from a mighty inland sea. Not far from that point, Monsieur Firle, I have my fort and seignury of Fort Frontenac on the northern coasts of that sea. You follow?"

Arnold nodded.

"And now observe the battle-ground of the Griffin and the Crows!" cried La Salle, warming as he spoke. "The Jesuits, who from being missionaries and martyrs of our Faith have become in these days an association of priestly merchants, have procured from the King's Majesty an ordinance, whereby none other may go to trade in the Indian country. Therefore, at my fort at Cataraqui, the Count of Frontenac and I have induced many of the Indians to settle, thus bringing the trade of those regions to my doors without breaking the King's ordinance. But the Griffin and the Crows, Monsieur Firle, fly higher and see farther than the King and his Minister. See here again."

He passed his finger along the map. "Fifty leagues and more this Sea of Ontario extends towards the west, and at its western end there enters it from the south a stream that flows from another still larger sea, lying south and west amid countries almost unknown. Take yourself to the extreme limits of this second Sea of Erie, and then again strike southward through the forests. In a week's journey you come to the Miami River, which runs southward, leading into streams larger and larger, till at last your canoes come out upon the brown waters of a river the greatest in all the world. The natives of those countries call it the Father of Waters, and so indeed it is. Far down that vast flood I have journeyed, Monsieur Firle, and whither it leads in the end God alone knows. But I believe—and on this I am ready to stake my life—that it flows not westwards as men say into the unknown,

but southward and eastward ever, till it pours its vast waters into the warm seas on the Spanish Main. It is there, comrade, that the eyes of the Griffin and the Crows look out. It is in that great valley, as great as half a continent, that I would build an empire for France and King Louis. And it is there the Jesuits would rear an empire for their Order, to pour the wealth of that huge region into their churches and colleges, and make the disciples of Loyola the dictators of half the world. Ah! we understand each other—they and I! But I will make the Griffin of Count Frontenac fly higher than the Crows! Let them keep to the northern forests, and where their martyrs have bravely sown blood and tears let them traffic basely for furs and gold! Let your Englishmen stay east of the mountains, where they have established themselves along the shores of the ocean. And let Spain rule in her golden lands of the south. I will plant the lilies of France along the highways of these great rivers which I have explored alone. In the years to come French men and women shall dwell in peace and plenty in those warm lands of summer where now a few savages hunt and fight!”

Arnold had never seen his leader so moved, never heard him speak so fervently of his high designs. La Salle's deep eyes shone with enthusiasm; his strong face was alight with colour. He folded up the chart, and strode up and down, absorbed in contemplation of his visions.

“I thought to bring you a warning, Monsieur de la Salle,” said the Englishman at last.

La Salle stopped abruptly. “What warning?” he asked.

Thereupon Arnold related his meeting with Elise, and her dark saying. If he had added what Jacques the Iroquois had said he might have been glad of it afterwards. But he had not understood any meaning in the Indian's comments. When he had told his story, La Salle laughed harshly.

"I also can give you some news, comrade," said he. "This villain Michel is departed, in the interests of the Jesuits his masters, to stir up hostility against my coming among the Indian peoples of the south. As for your fair preserver, Mademoiselle Elise, doubtless it was thought she would be safer and more useful serving in the kitchen of the fort. Eh bien, as my expedition is doomed, they say, will you go back to Quebec?"

"I am your man, monsieur," said Arnold. "And in this expedition I have even more at stake than you."

"True," answered La Salle, with a swift softening of his mood. "Love, honour and happiness are your stakes, comrade. There can be no greater. If you knew how I envy you!"

But Arnold did not know, then, nor for long afterwards.

"I have thought," said La Salle, almost diffidently, "that in these past days your affairs have seemed to prosper better, Monsieur Firle. I will release you, if you wish, of your undertaking with me."

The young sailor shook his head. "Why should I go back if you go on?" said he.

At that the French leader held out his hand. "I thank you," he said. "I am going on to-morrow, Monsieur Firle."

But on the morrow they did not go on, nor on the next day, nor the next. For that evening, while Arnold walked with Hennepin the Récollet beside the river, a soldier rode up hurriedly and saluted.

"Holy father, will you mount my horse and ride to the fort with all speed!" he cried. "Monsieur de la Salle lies dying, and would make his confession to you." He sprang to the ground.

The priest gave one exclamation of dismay, then leaped to the empty saddle with the agility of a boy, struck the horse with his sandalled heels, and galloped away.

“What is it—in Heaven’s name?” asked Arnold of the soldier.

The man made a wry face. “It is nothing in Heaven’s name, I think, monsieur. They say ’tis hemlock and verdigris, mixed cunningly into a salad.”

Too late Arnold remembered what the Iroquois Jacques had said and done, and in a flash he understood.

Bad medicine, indeed!

CHAPTER XVIII

A NIGHT ALARM

ALL that night Père Hennepin remained at the fort. At midnight a message came out that the Sieur de la Salle still lived, and first thing in the morning Arnold Firlé presented himself at the gate, and met the priest coming out.

"Eh bien, God knows if he will live," said Hennepin, wearily, his jovial face frowsy with a sleepless night. "We have done all we could. Hélas! if you knew what he and I have done and seen together, my son!"

"They say it was poison?" said Arnold, questioningly.

"They say everything," answered the priest. "But what else could it be? I would I had the poisoner between my hands. Bon dieu, but I would teach him his trade!"

"Then he is not discovered?" Arnold's conscience smote him as he spoke for the use of the masculine pronoun. Yet he owed the girl his life!

Hennepin shook his head gloomily. "The Sieur de la Salle's enemies are bitter and unscrupulous," said he, and went his way to his lodging.

Arnold roamed about for a time in dire perplexity. If he denounced Elise, and proved what he could prove, undoubtedly the girl would die; and she had not only saved him from a fearful death, but through her the Countess of Vane had been delivered from Michel. On the other hand, if he did not denounce her, his leader who trusted him lay in instant jeopardy of his life.

Wrestling with this problem, Arnold left the settle-

ment behind him, and wandered in the woods upon the island. The morning was well advanced ere he had made up his mind. At all costs he must save the man who trusted him. He turned his steps again in the direction of the town.

As he walked, suddenly the sound of sobbing caught his ear, and presently he came upon a woman—the woman herself—moaning on her knees at the foot of a tree. He stood and looked down at her, for she did not rise, and at sight of him her face went ashy pale.

“I think, mademoiselle, they have not succeeded in tracing the poisoner,” said he.

She stared at him, wide-eyed with fear, but made no answer.

“I made a promise,” said the young man, stolidly, “to forego a righteous vengeance. But I did not promise to shield a murderer.”

“André did not murder Monsieur de la Salle!” she gasped.

“When a man is stabbed, one does not blame the knife, but the hand that held it,” he replied. “Monsieur de la Salle still lives, therefore he is not yet murdered. But if he dies, I take back my promise, mademoiselle.”

Elise sprang wildly to her feet. “Ah!” she cried, “God knows I protested! I resisted, I pleaded, but I think I am bewitched; for in the end I consented. Blessed Virgin, I am a murderess!”

Sternly as he had started for the fort, Arnold was moved by the girl's obvious agony of spirit.

“Mademoiselle Elise,” said he, “I cannot forget what you have done for me. Yet Monsieur de la Salle trusts me, and how can I leave the fort unwarned? The Indian who escaped with me saw what your basket held.”

The wretched girl fell on her knees, trembling and crying. “Spare me!” she cried. “Have mercy! If

Monsieur dies, then denounce me, for I shall already have paid the price when they come for me. But if he lives, spare me for what I have done for you! ”

Arnold wavered before her piteous entreaties. “ We are in God’s hands. Be it so,” he answered at last. He turned away, and heard her sobs break out afresh as he left her.

For three days Robert Cavelier de la Salle lay between life and death. But not this time were the enemies of the great path-finder to triumph. The iron constitution which had withstood the extremes of heat and cold, which had defied the feverish swamp, hunger and thirst and fatigue, rallied at length from the effects of the poison. The recovery was the wonder of the garrison. Two days after leaving his bed La Salle, still haggard with illness, took leave of the commandant, and re-embarked his expedition.

The canoes took their way again up the great river. Scarcely had they made a few miles, when the foaming white rapids of Lachine forced them to land, and they carried their craft by rude tracks through the forest, with the roar of the angry waters in their ears, till the stream became navigable again, and widened into a long lake. Here they embarked again, and steering ever towards the sunset, glided on between the dim dark forests that bounded the lake. Thence again on to the broad current of the river, broken often with furious rapids, day by day they forced their way into the lonely lands, until one evening, as they sat about the camp fire, Arnold learned that the next night they would reach the fort at Cataraqui.

All that past day they had paddled their canoes through a country of enchantment, filing one after another through watery mazes that led them among scores of lovely islets. Great rocks had towered above them, crowned with a crest of pines; they had slid along

crystal ways and seen, in the tiny bays among the rocks, great water lilies gazing upward at the sky from their cool and leafy beds. Mosses and lichens painted the rocks soft and green where the clear water bathed them, parched and brown where the sun glared on the higher crags. Their camp that night was pitched on one of these islands, in a cool grassy hollow where the boughs murmured above their heads in the summer breeze.

Midnight came, and the camp was wrapped in sleep, all but the watchful sentries posted on its outskirts. The fires had burnt low, and it was very dark under the trees.

Suddenly, without challenge or warning cry, the loud report of a sentinel's musket startled the sleepers to wakefulness and knowledge of urgent peril. There was silence for a moment after the shot, then La Salle's voice rang out in quick command. From round the fires where they lay, the men sprang for cover, their weapons ready in their hands. Arnold Firlé found himself with his leader beside the women's hut of boughs. They strained their ears, but could hear nothing. Not a sound broke the calm of the night. For several minutes the whole camp waited in a fierce suspense. Arnold heard a rustle from within the hut as one of the inmates came to peer out into the darkness, and he was about to go to her to reassure her, when he felt La Salle's hand upon his arm.

"Wait!" whispered the Frenchman.

Almost ere the word was out, suddenly and swiftly like the spring of wild beasts, dark shapes seemed to leap from the very ground. There was a shriek from the tent, and in the dull red glow from the embers of a fire a dark hurrying figure was for a moment revealed, and for a moment the flutter of a woman's dress was visible.

The Englishman levelled his weapon, but at the thought of that fluttering dress, and of what the bullet might strike, his nerve for an instant failed.

But from close beside him came a flash and a roar. "Come!" shouted La Salle, and together they leaped forth in pursuit.

They had not far to go. A score of paces beyond the dying fire they saw a light patch against the dark bole of a tree, and found Lady Vane upon the grass. They carried her back to the tent.

"Are you hurt, Marjorie?" said Arnold.

"No, no, I am not hurt," she answered. But she trembled all over.

"Have no fear!" La Salle urged her in a voice which thrilled. "We shall surround your quarters till the morning. Tell your woman in there to keep silence, madame, as she values her life." He placed her within, and putting his hands to his mouth, made a low sound like a night-bird's call.

"Lie here, Monsieur Firle," said he, pointing to a patch of deep shadow on one side the hut. "I shall be on the other side. If you hear the brushwood rustle beside you, do not stir, but if you see any man move in front of the hut, fire, and do not miss!"

Arnold stooped obediently into the shadow. All the camp fell strangely silent again. Where a few minutes ago the smouldering fires had been surrounded by sleeping men, there was now not a sign of life. It was as if the expedition had suddenly vanished. Only from within the women's arbour there came now and again a smothered moaning from the Countess's terrified attendant.

The slow minutes passed by. Arnold lay with his musket at his shoulder, his finger ready on the trigger, and peered intently into the gloom. But there was nothing to be seen, and not a creature stirred.

A gentle pressure on his arm made him start so violently that he nearly discharged his weapon.

"Sh!" came a low whisper in his ear. "It is I, Hennepin. All the camp is lying round the women's

hut, Monsieur Firle." And with a sudden thrill of loyalty to his leader, Arnold understood that the Sieur de la Salle made no vain boast when he said that his followers were the best woodsmen in Canada.

Thus they all lay, every man with ears and eyes astrain, in a profound silence, till the short summer night slipped past, and the pale light began to filter among the trees. Stiff with his long vigil, Arnold Firle looked about him. Among the trees, to right and left and rear, the men lay hand on gun in the deepest cover.

At last the leader's voice was heard, and with one accord they rose.

"Are we all here?" he asked. And then, "Where is Etienne Lagrange?"

Etienne Lagrange had been on sentry duty that night.

"Find him, mes enfants," said La Salle, "and then half of you to search the island."

The sentinel was soon discovered. He lay where he had been posted among the woodland, with a knife through his throat. Not far off another body lay, a dark-skinned Indian shot through the body. He had not died at once, for there was a trail of blood from the Frenchman to where he lay.

La Salle turned the Indian on his back. "A Huron!" he muttered.

Before they started on that last day's journey to the fort, Lady Vane showed a small drilled hole in the sleeve of one of her garments.

"There is a marksman in the camp from whom I have escaped narrowly," said she, pale but smiling.

La Salle bowed gravely. "Madame, it would have been better for you to have been shot through the heart than to have lived to be the prisoner of an Indian."

Her smile fled. "Yes," she said. "But it was a Frenchman, Monsieur. It was Monsieur Michel." She shuddered.

"Are you sure?" La Salle asked abruptly.

"He spoke to me."

"What did he say?"

"He said, as he set me down, 'I cannot carry you with a broken arm; but we shall meet again!'"

CHAPTER XIX

THE INDIAN LODGE

THE dazzling white carpet of the snow flung back blindingly the winter sunshine. A keen wind was blowing inland from the vast fresh-water sea of Ontario, and along the desolate shore there was a grinding and breaking of ice as the short and angry waves hurled themselves incessantly upon the frozen coast.

Warmly wrapped in clothes of beaver fur, Lady Vane and Arnold Firle walked briskly along by the lake shore, following a foot-path on the snow beaten hard by the passage of many feet. Above them, long rows of high stout palisades, coated with frost and hung with icicles in long festoons, protected the water-front of Fort Frontenac. High above the stockade the fleur-de-lis streamed out from a flag-staff, fluttering loudly in the bitter breeze. A sentinel in leathern cap and jerkin was stamping up and down along the rampart.

"Oh, when will the snows melt!" cried the young Countess. "Do you not long, Arnold, for a sight of green grass?"

"Indeed, it will be welcome," he answered. "Yet it seems you thrive, Marjorie, on this winter air."

The girl's fair cheeks, in fact, had the glow of perfect health, and her eyes shone under their dark brows.

"How long is it," she asked, "since Monsieur de la Salle and the rest sailed away yonder?" She pointed down the great lake, where beyond the broken shore ice the sunshine lay on the dark water in a streak of glowing silver.

"Three months and eight days," he answered.

At that the young Countess smiled. "You find the time hang heavily that you count the time so closely."

"Not heavily," said he. "How could that be, when you are here? But anxiously, Marjorie."

The quietness of his tone struck her, and she gave him a swift, inquiring glance. They pursued their walk, till the fort was left a little way behind, and they were passing on their snow-path through a small village, in whose thickly-thatched houses, loopholed for gun-fire, and knee-deep now in the universal snow, dwelt sturdy French farmers, feudal tenants of the Sieur de la Salle.

"Who was it," Arnold asked suddenly, "who suggested this expedition to see the Indian village?"

"It was Madame Bariot. All the time we have been at the Fort I have never once seen the inside of an Indian lodge. I jumped at the idea."

Arnold nodded.

"What do you mean?" the girl exclaimed. It seemed to her that her lover was grave beyond his wont, and had a look of weariness and strain.

"I do not trust the Bariots," he said abruptly.

Marjorie gave a merry laugh. "I believe you suspect everyone in the Fort of designs either against me or Monsieur de la Salle," she said. "There is Monsieur Bariot at his door, waiting to conduct us."

"Marjorie," said Arnold, earnestly, "even in this Fort there are traitors to its commander. When Monsieur de la Salle went away he bade me be his eyes and ears, and give him timely warning of anything taking shape to his prejudice. I have worked hard and learned much. I have even learned a little of the Indian speech."

"You will be the better interpreter to-day," she said gaily.

But her companion did not respond to her mood.

"On the south coast of the lake, opposite the Fort, there is a mission of the Jesuits," he said.

"And what then?"

"André Michel is with them," said Arnold, and at that she started. "The Jesuits are our leader's bitterest enemies, for they and he, by paths however different, seek the same great prize—the empire of the west. They have formed a league against Monsieur, and have made the Iroquois believe that he has strengthened his defences here in order to make war on them."

"But the Iroquois here are friendly," the girl objected. "I have been told they helped to make these very walls." She pointed towards the ramparts and bastions of the Fort, where small cannon grinned from the new fortifications of hewn stone to landward.

"True," said Arnold. "But they are faithless, changeful as the wind, and cruel beyond imagination. A little spark would fire their hatred. And it is Michel's business to supply that spark."

Marjorie's brown eyes grew wide with apprehension. They had both stopped short in their walk.

"If Fort Frontenac fell," said Arnold, "Heaven help us, Marjorie!"

"But there is the garrison!" she objected.

"It is honeycombed with the intrigues of Michel and the enemies of La Salle," he answered. "And at best, what are we? A couple of officers and a dozen soldiers. A couple of score of workmen, and a few farmers and friars. Why, in time of truce, are the forests round us full of enemies?"

"I did not know it," she said.

"The garrison have known it for days," said Arnold.

"Monsieur de la Salle should know it too," said the girl.

"And so I hope he does. You remember the merchant

who came from Montreal at Christmas, and seized his store of furs for debt? On the day they left I sent word by Jacques, but here we are at the end of February and Monsieur does not come."

The English girl looked round her in a bewildered way. She saw that Bariot had left his doorway, and was coming towards them over the snow.

"All that you have told me is very serious, Arnold," said she, "but I do not see that it touches Monsieur Bariot. He and his wife, since I have lived in their house, have been very good to me."

Arnold regarded the approaching Frenchman with a frown. "The woods around are full of warriors," said he, "yet Batiste Bariot passes freely to and fro. And André Michel, who said he would meet with you again, lurks yonder across the lake."

"It was Monsieur de la Salle himself who put me in these people's charge," said the young Countess in great distress. "Oh, Arnold, you distrust too much!"

"Do not go!" urged Arnold.

"Monsieur Bariot is honest. I cannot insult him so," she answered. "And am I not safe with you?" She smiled to disarm his suspicion.

The Frenchman, so thickly clad in furs that he looked like some strange animal, came up and doffed his great fur busby. He was a large, heavily-made man, with a bushy moustache and a black beard. He had his gun in his hand, and seeing that Arnold also was armed, nodded approvingly.

"It is unnecessary, but it produces a good effect, chez ces animaux là-bas," he grunted, jerking his head half-contemptuously towards the Indian village. "Madame is curious to see their kennels. Ma foi! it will be something, back there in Europe, to say you have walked through an Iroquois lodge. Not many of our countrywomen can say the like, madame. But I warn you, it is

dirty. The bon Dieu has made nothing so foul as these creatures."

Monsieur Bariot talked fast, which encouraged Arnold's suspicion of him.

"I have been seeking to dissuade Madame from going into so disagreeable a place," he remarked.

Bariot shot a keen glance at the Englishwoman from under his bushy brows.

"There is nothing to be afraid of," he said brusquely. "Shall we go, madame, or shall we stay?"

For a moment Marjorie turned a hesitating look upon her lover. But Arnold said nothing, and it was with a little air of pride that she answered for both, holding herself very erect, though the colour retreated a little from her cheeks. "Since we have arranged to go, let us go, Monsieur Bariot."

They went on accordingly towards the Indian settlement, but Arnold Firle walked close to Lady Vane and watched Bariot with unceasing vigilance. He noticed, as they approached, groups of young warriors who came around them, staring in unabashed curiosity at the spectacle of a white woman in their village. By the time they reached the first hut, quite a score of Iroquois were following between them and the French farms.

"It seems we have been well heralded among these fellows, Monsieur Bariot," said Arnold, fingering his weapon.

Bariot shrugged his shoulders. "What would you have! It is an event. Doubtless the chief's lodge will be well filled."

The groups behind and about them grew in numbers as they advanced, and Arnold saw that many of the Iroquois carried weapons.

"Monsieur Bariot, I do not like the look of these men," he said bluntly as they approached an erection larger than the rest in the village.

Bariot laughed unpleasantly. "They are ugly, mon dieu, and no mistake! But if you are afraid it is easy to return. But it will offend the Iroquois."

They were walking on either side of Lady Vane. The Englishman's eyes flashed ominously. He spoke quietly in that Indian tongue which he had been studying so carefully.

"I am not afraid," he slowly said, "but if there is any trouble in the lodge Batiste Bariot will not come out alive."

"Pardon, I do not understand English," said Bariot. But Arnold had seen his surprised start, and his suspicions were increased tenfold. He looked at the dark scowling faces which now ringed them in, and cursed himself for his folly in yielding to persuasion. For now indeed it was too late to return without a direct insult to these haughty savages.

From the door of the dwelling which they had approached the chief stalked solemnly out—a tall old man with a hawk-like face, wrapped from head to foot in robes of beaver fur over a tunic and leggings of painted skins. His hair bristled in a ridge across the crown, giving him a peculiarly ferocious aspect, but at sight of his visitors he bowed gravely, and with a sign invited them to enter.

"We must not draw back," murmured Marjorie to her countryman. Very pale, but without other sign of fear, she stepped forward into the strange dwelling, Arnold and the Frenchman keeping close on either side of her.

The lodge was a long building of bark, made on a framework of light saplings, which were bent inwards and bound together to make the arched roof. Through long openings in this the smoke went up from a number of fires ranged down the midst of the hall, and about the fires, or on a kind of low scaffolding that ran down either side of the dwelling, were the dusky inmates. The whole place reeked with smoke, and was full of a close, animal smell like an ill-ventilated stable.

The tall chief led the way to the first fire, and pointed courteously to some mats laid on the ground. Arnold saw that the horde of followers had entered the lodge at the rear of the party. He heard the chief ask Bariot in the native tongue, "Where is the present?"

In reply, the Frenchman opened his great fur coat, and laid on the ground something wrapped in wampum, or belts of coloured beads. It was the currency of the Indian trade, and Arnold felt that this was the price of their betrayal.

He looked about him at the crowd of Indians closing up in a dense mass across the passage-way. The black eyes flashed in the dark faces. They glanced towards their chief—it seemed they waited for a sign.

"Is it enough?" asked Bariot.

"It is enough," the chief replied.

The Englishman's fingers stiffened on his gun, for he felt that the supreme moment had arrived. There was a dead silence in the lodge, as the eyes of all the natives rested on him and his companion.

Suddenly through that momentary stillness the report of a gun-shot rang loud and near. The tall Iroquois gave a harsh exclamation, and Batiste Bariot, cursing under his breath, turned in surprise towards the door. The whole lodgeful of savages stood listening intently.

Quivering through the frosty air came the sound of a faint halloo, and there was a stir among the Iroquois. The hail came again—two high-pitched, staccato notes such as men use to carry long distances in the wilds. Then there was a second loud report, and then a third.

The Indians hesitated no longer. There was a rush for the door of the lodge. Arnold dragged the Countess with him through the press.

"Run for the Fort!" he told her, the moment they crossed the threshold. They fled from the lodge together, but there was no pursuit. When Arnold looked back, the

Iroquois were standing grouped near the door of their lodge, staring towards the neighbouring forest. Nevertheless, he took Lady Vane by the hand, and ran with her to within five hundred yards of the Fort. Only when they had come near enough to see the sentinel over the gate gazing out anxiously across the snow did he pause in their flight.

"Go on to the Fort. You are safe now," said he.

"And you?" she panted.

While he stood irresolute a shout for help came clearly from the woods.

"Au secours! Au secours!"

"I am going back," said Arnold. "Go quickly to the Fort." And he turned back and ran towards the trees. Now that Marjorie was safe he had no fears for himself.

He passed the Iroquois at the lodge gate, and as he neared the woods he overtook Nicholas Bariot walking leisurely with his gun ready.

The black-bearded Frenchman gave him an odd smile. "I should not be in such a hurry to enter the forest, if I were you," said he.

"You heard—it was a Frenchman who called," said Arnold.

"Doubtless. Yet for timid folk the woods are not very safe just now—not so safe, *par exemple*, as an Iroquois lodge."

Arnold flushed at the taunt. But at that moment a man rushed out from the trees into the full sunlight. A tall man, dishevelled and hollow-cheeked, with great eyes that burned like fires in his wasted face. His wild black hair escaped out under his fur cap, and the clothing hung loosely on his gaunt frame. He staggered and reeled as he ran, and when Arnold rushed to him he clutched hold of the young man to save himself from falling.

"Treachery, Monsieur Firlé!" the man cried in a hollow voice. "Help me to the gates!" He leaned hard,

and panted. "Quick!" he gasped. "There are two more—out there!"

Arnold peered into the man's face as he helped him along, and was shocked at the change he saw. For it was Monsieur de la Salle.

CHAPTER XX

BARIOT'S BARGAIN

THEY reached the gate of the Fort, and the French leader sank down exhausted. The garrison came round him, but he motioned them aside, and with a shake of the head refused a glass of spirit.

"Take food, four of you," said he, "and bring in my companions—Jacques the Indian, and the soldier Leclerc. They are starving. Take your guns, and go warily. Now give me food."

Some broth was brought, and he sipped it eagerly, yet cautiously. "For two days we have had nothing," he said. "And I am nearly blind with the snow, mes enfants." He turned his eyes, rawly red and frightfully inflamed, upon the soldiers. Yet he was not so blind but he saw Lady Vane standing with the rest, and smiled.

"Ah, madame, it is better in the Château at Quebec!"

He drank some more of the broth, and ate a few mouthfuls of bread. Then he leaned to Arnold Firle, and whispered eagerly, "Get me to bed. I must recover my strength, for there is much to do."

Half an hour later he was asleep in his room, his chilled limbs warmed by a great fire of pine-logs, while the daylight was shut away from his eyes by hangings across the window.

By-and-by, as Arnold sat by the fire watching his leader, a message was brought that Monsieur Bariot desired to speak with him. He went out into the enclosure of the Fort.

There he learned that the soldiers who had gone out

for La Salle's companions had been met half-way by Bariot and a band of Iroquois from the native village who had already found Jacques and the Frenchman. They had been brought in unconscious, but had revived, and Jacques, with his iron constitution, had been the first to find his tongue.

"Ma foi!" said Bariot, when he and Arnold were alone, "they have had a time—those fellows! You should have heard that Indian of yours in his broken talk! I thought he was with you at the Fort here, Monsieur Firle."

"I sent him away," said Arnold. His distrust of this big, black-bearded fellow was stronger than ever, and the events of the morning had converted it to an active dislike. That treachery had been intended towards Lady Vane he was certain; yet he could prove nothing. He felt, nevertheless, that the dislike was mutual, and wondered what the man might want of him.

"Ah!" muttered Bariot, with one of his odd smiles. "The Sieur de la Salle has had trouble, it seems, in his camp yonder, above the great cataract on the Niagara River, where they are building the new ship which is to conquer Lake Erie for the Governor. You remember the little vessel in which Monsieur sailed away from here? Well, it is wrecked—smashed—off the mouth of the river there, and all the gear is lost. What does Monsieur do? He resolves, if you please, to return hither on foot—on foot, bon Dieu! in this country, in the midst of winter, two hundred miles over the snow—in order to hasten the sending of fresh materials for the carpenters. Ah, the rigours of such a journey, Monsieur Firle! The cold, the snowstorms, the forests full of wild beasts and wild men! The provisions running lower and lower on the sleigh which they pull with them! And at last, the starvation. For two days, in this climate, they have eaten nothing!"

Arnold looked inquiringly at the Frenchman. It

struck him there was something unnatural in this rattle of talk.

"Did you send for me to tell me this, monsieur?" he asked.

Batiste Bariot grinned, and his big white teeth gleamed under his black moustache. "Diable, no!" he exclaimed. "But it is interesting, is it not?" He opened his fur coat, for it was warm in the room. "Well, they had got near the Fort at last, more dead than alive, when pouf! some lurking Indians fired at them. We heard the shooting, if you remember. Well, they drove off the Indians, but these poor comrades were at the end of their tether. They collapsed, all save the Sieur de la Salle, who ran on as you know. As for the others, it was I who had the pleasure of rescuing them."

With arms akimbo, Bariot took a turn or two up and down the room, staring at the Englishman with a boastful confidence, and with the air of a man who has developed a neat argument.

"Well?" said Arnold Firle.

"Well," repeated Bariot, tapping his chest, "it was I, Monsieur Firle, who had the pleasure of rescuing those unfortunate men."

"And what then?" said the Englishman.

Monsieur Bariot muttered an exclamation of annoyance, and sitting down, began to explain. His naturally rough voice took on a peculiarly wheedling tone.

"Between you and me, Monsieur Firle, there has arisen—shall I call it an unfortunate misunderstanding?"

"You may call it so if you like," said Arnold, bluntly.

"Peste!" cried Bariot, and his black eyes flashed with sudden wrath. "You take too much upon yourself, Englishman. You have as good as accused me to-day of treachery towards Madame de Vane—me, in whose care Madame was placed by the Sieur de la Salle himself. You have threatened me like a dog. Men like me, monsieur,

do not take kindly to such treatment." He seemed to curb his anger with a strong effort.

Arnold was in a quandary. His suspicions of this black-browed fellow were strong as ever, yet he knew he had no proofs.

"What I have done," he said stubbornly, "I am ready to uphold, at a proper time and place."

"Bah!" said Bariot, with an assumption of bluff cordiality. "If we must quarrel, mon cher, doubtless we can find a time and a place. But why should we quarrel? Are we not in the same service? And moreover, we are to be shipmates."

"Shipmates?"

Bariot nodded, with a grin for the note of surprise in the other's tone. "The Sieur de la Salle knows upon whom he may rely," said he, stroking his black beard. "The young birds must not have all the corn, Monsieur Firle. Before he went away he promised to make Batiste Bariot pilot of this new ship which he is building—this *Griffin* that is to hold the sea of Erie. I have hunted beaver along those coasts, you see. It is a responsible post, a post that may be profitable—a post, in short, for a man who is to be trusted."

Why did the man so insist upon his fidelity? Arnold felt that good wine needs no bush.

"Monsieur Bariot," said he, "will you tell me why you have sent for me?"

"I am coming to that," said Bariot. "Well, it would not do for Monsieur's officers to appear at enmity between themselves, hein? It would increase his anxieties, would it not?"

"Well?" said Arnold.

"Well," continued Bariot, schooling his rough voice to a tone of conciliation, "you are a young fellow in love. Oh, là-là, you need not deny it!"

"Why should I deny it?"

"Why indeed! It is a happy state—the happiest

state in the world. But also the most suspicious, Monsieur Firle. Therefore, though you have insulted me, I make allowance for you. You have as good as accused me of designs against your mistress. Since you choose to think so ill of me, I have come to tell you that Madame's continued presence in my house is inconvenient to my family arrangements. I shall request the Sieur de la Salle to remove her. She will perhaps be safer lodged within the enclosure of the Fort. That is my side of the bargain," concluded Bariot, with an air of injured innocence.

Arnold felt himself placed in a ridiculous position. For the life of him he could not bring himself to trust the honesty of this man, yet in every aspect the groundlessness of his suspicions seemed manifest. With some embarrassment he asked, "And what is mine, Monsieur?"

"It is easy enough," answered Bariot. "Simply that you should bury your dislike to poor Batiste Bariot who has done you no harm, and let us have no more sour looks, mon cher."

There was a frank openness about the Frenchman's words which accorded ill with the furtive look in his black eyes and the wheedling persuasiveness of his tone. But Arnold's discomfiture was complete.

"I bear you no ill-will, Monsieur Bariot," said he, colouring awkwardly. "Since we are to be shipmates, I hope we shall learn to understand one another better."

"Why, so do I," rejoined the big Frenchman, baring his white teeth in a smile that was not quite reassuring. "Then the Sieur de la Salle need not be troubled with dissensions among those who serve him. Au revoir, Monsieur Firle."

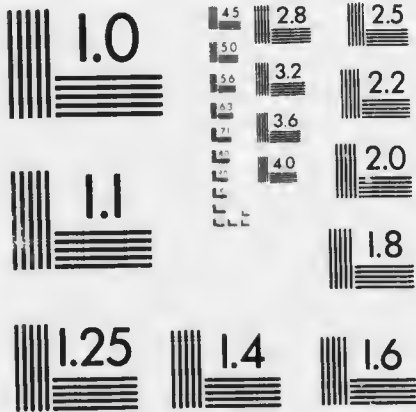
He replaced his busby on his head, and buttoning up his furs went out.

But Arnold Firle could not rid himself of the impression that he had a good deal to learn yet ere he would understand Batiste Bariot much better.



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CHAPTER XXI

THREE FAREWELLS

FOUR months had passed, and the fragrant calm of a summer night was over the little settlement at Cataraqui, and the broad bosom of Ontario lay like a sheet of silver outspread beneath the moon.

Marjorie, Countess of Vane, sat musing alone on the stump of a great tree which had lately stood near where the rough track ran between the French farms and the Fort. Beside her crouched a great dog, the faithful sentinel of the farmer with whose family she now lived, scarcely three hundred yards from the Fort itself, whose dark frowning mass stood outlined in the moonlight. All around, in the acres reclaimed from the wilderness by the industrious colonists, lay silent fields of corn, young orchards and vineyards, witnessing to the richness of this western land.

Nature slept and dreamed to-night, but man, it seemed, was wakeful and busy. From beyond the Fort, where the mast of a little vessel could be discerned rising from the Cataraqui stream, came through the still air sounds of preparation, noises of heavy masses being moved, commands, laughter, or fault-finding. Lights flashed among the shadows at the Fort. The notes of the ship's bell, ringing the watch, came clearly to where the young Countess sat, a slim white figure in the moonbeams, her fair face resting on her palm as she gazed at the line of that tapering mast. For with to-morrow's sunrise the canvas would spread upon it, and the little vessel which lay there loading would sail away into regions unknown, bearing

with it all her hopes and fears. And Marjorie would be left alone, among strangers of another race, to await the verdict of Heaven which she and her lover had invoked.

She gave a little shiver. Her thoughts roved back over the year that had passed. It was a year ago, almost to the night, that she and Arnold Firle had landed in this vast new country, with the grim shadow between them of that dead husband who had won her so masterfully, and had lost her, and all the world, in the very hour of winning. In the eventful weeks and months during which Arnold and she had been together that dread shadow had faded almost into nothingness. For Marjorie was honest with herself, and knew that the past year had restored her faith in her first love. Yet now the faint shadow of the Earl brooded over the future, filling her with dim foreboding.

For herself she had no fear. Monsieur de la Salle, who during the past four months had been to Quebec and back on his affairs, had failed to persuade her to seek the greater security and comfort of the citadel there. She had felt that here on the banks of the little Catarqui she would the sooner learn what fate had in store, whether happiness or woe. Even the terror of André Michel—who, indeed, was said to have left the Jesuit settlement across the water—could not turn her from her decision, and when her lover himself had added his persuasions to his leader's, she had told him that that was her share of the perils which had to be run. But in her room in the loopholed farmhouse yonder she had a little dagger, without which, after to-morrow, she meant never to stir abroad.

The clear note of the ship's bell sounded again from the river. Marjorie looked up. She had sat there for more than half an hour. Surely it was time for Arnold to come! Doubtless he would be busy to-night, but he had said he would come for a parting word.

Just then the sound of singing came through the still

air, and the girl started, and her face glowed. But then she knew it was not he who sang. It was a deep bass voice, trolling a song of the western Frenchmen. And the dog growled; he would not growl for Arnold. The song trolled nearer.

“V'là l'bon vent, v'là l'joli vent,
V'là l'bon vent—ma mie m'appelle!
V'là l'bon vent, v'là l'joli vent,
V'là l'bon vent, ma mie m'attend!
Derrier' chez nous ya-t-un étang,
Trois beaux canards s'en vont baignant.”

She recognized the voice—it was big Batiste Bariot. The moonlight made him gay. He was a notable trapper, she knew, a fearless sailor, and the “brave wind” of which he sang was near his heart. To-morrow he would be answering the call of that old love of his. Almost at the moment she recognized his voice he came in sight, and when he saw her he walked up to her.

“Bon soir, madame. Will you wish me good luck in my undertakings?” said he with a little swagger.

Marjorie did not like Monsieur Bariot, but she had never quite shared Arnold Firle's distrust of him.

“With a good heart, in all honourable enterprise, monsieur,” she answered readily.

“A good enterprise, and good company,” he laughed. “I am to be pilot of the *Griffin*, madame, and Monsieur Firle her first mate. I am told he is a great navigator.” There was a rough sneer in his tone.

“Monsieur de la Salle has confidence in him,” she answered quietly.

“Marvellous confidence,” he said, and laughed again. “Marvellous, madame, considering how well the interest of each would be served by the death of the other.”

The young Countess rose to her feet. “What do you mean, Monsieur Bariot?”

“V'là l'bon vent,” he hummed. “V'là l'joli vent.”

What should I mean, save that there is more than one at Fort Frontenac who dreams of a beautiful lady."

She felt her cheeks go hot at the careless insolence of his tone. "I hope the *Griffin* will have prosperous voyages, Monsieur Bariot," she said haughtily, and resumed her seat as though dismissing him.

"Why, we all hope so," said he. "Yet if the *Griffin* sank, when her master was ashore, I think she would not carry *all* her master's hopes to the bottom. They say that when poor Captain Uriah was shot, the Hebrew king lost a good officer, but bore it with philosophy. And I dare swear the man who loosed the arrow, if ever he was caught, was not too harshly used. V'là l'joli vent, ma mie m'appelle!"

It was clear that Batiste Bariot was not quite sober. But the Countess of Vane sprang up with flaming cheeks. "Go!" she exclaimed. "Go, Monsieur Bariot, before I summon those who will punish your insults!"

"Oh, là-là!" he chuckled, too pleased with himself, in his half-tipsy state, to be disturbed by her wrath. "I did not mean to insult you, dear madame. Let me tell you, it is no disgrace to have turned the head of such an one as Robert Cavalier de la Salle."

"Go—you are mad!" she said coldly, but her heart quailed at what he had said.

"Not mad," grinned Bariot. "Only merry, dear madame, for to-morrow I set out to make my fortune. The bon Dieu has given us eyes to see with, and I will wager the profits of my voyage against that bracelet on your arm that you will speed two lovers ere the morning. May he who finds most favour return the first to claim it!" And with a mocking bow he went singing on his way to the Fort.

Marjorie sank down again upon her seat, her face burning, her hands upon her bosom. What had Bariot said? That Monsieur de la Salle, the bold, austere com-

mander of a great adventure— She fought against the suggestion, even while she remembered how always he had shown her a strangely gentle deference, had manifested the most eager care for her safety and comfort. She recalled incidents, stray words, and looks, which in the light of what Bariot had said might be made to bear a new significance. And then, with a pang of terror, her mind flew back to Bariot's reference to the new vessel whereon Arnold and he were to be shipmates—the new ship that was to be built down there at the Niagara River. The more she thought of that, the greater grew her fear. "If the *Griffin* sank," Bariot had said with his jeering smile, she would not drown all her master's hopes!

A quick, light footstep sounded near her. Marjorie started up, and the next moment Arnold Firle was at her side. She sat down again, her heart beating fast, and he knelt on the grass and took her hand in his.

"I have come to say good-bye, dear love," said he.

"Arnold!" she whispered, "I am frightened."

"No, no," the young man said. "We have laid our cause before the Supreme Court. We need not be afraid. When next we meet, I shall claim you, Marjorie!"

She had no words just then, but her fingers clung to his.

He began to tell her, as he had often told her, of the plans for the expedition; how they were first to make their way with the fresh supplies and material to the Niagara River at the other end of the great lake, where the *Griffin* lay awaiting them. Thence for hundreds of leagues they would sail the unknown waters of Erie and Huron to the Jesuit mission and trading station at Machilimackinac, on the wild northern coasts of the lake of the Hurons. As they went they were to trade with the natives, and the priests were to preach the faith, and when great stores of furs had been collected the Sieur de la Salle was to return with that wealth to Montreal and Quebec to satisfy the

insistence of his creditors. Meantime Monsieur de Tonty, his lieutenant, was to push southward and eastward, to establish a camp among the great Indian nation of the Illinois, and there await his leader's return; after which the expedition was to seek the passage which the Sieur de la Salle maintained was to be found down that great river of which he had spoken, and so press on to plant the fleur-de-lis in the summery lands about the Mexican Gulf, and reach the islands of the West Indies. And how many thousands of leagues of unknown lands and seas they would travel over, no man knew nor could guess. "I have asked Jacques the Iroquois about these lands," said Arnold, "but he only shakes his head. Marjorie, he wanted to come with us, but I am leaving him here to play the watch-dog over you."

The young Countess gave but a half-hearted attention to these details, and presently broke in abruptly:

"Arnold, Monsieur Bariot has been here."

"Ah!" said Arnold, quickly. "And what of him?"

"Will he command the *Griffin*?" asked the girl. "I mean, Arnold, when Monsieur de la Salle is not himself on board?"

"He will be pilot," answered Arnold. "He will be responsible for the navigation. But why do you ask, Marjorie? The Sieur de la Salle will be on board till at Machilinackinac our expedition divides and he brings back the furs to Montreal."

"And you will remain with the ship?"

"Doubtless, to take back Monsieur de la Salle to the country of the Illinois."

"Arnold"—the Countess took him by the hand and looked earnestly in his eyes—"do you trust Monsieur de la Salle entirely?"

"Trust the Sieur de la Salle? My Marjorie, he is a knight of old, dressed in our trappings of to-day. Why, I would trust him with your own sweet self."

"Would you?" said she in a curious voice. She could not bring herself to repeat what Bariot had said. "I wish that Bariot were not your pilot," she continued inconsequently. "He does not like you, Arnold."

"Nor I him, sweetheart," answered her lover. "But we are so polite as to conceal it from each other. Batiste Bariot and I understand each other, Marjorie." Which was stretching the truth a great deal for his Countess's comfort.

For a little longer the lovers sat hand in hand, whispering their hopes and fears and trust. Then the bell tinkled again from the ship in the river. "I must go, dear heart," said Arnold. "The trial by ordeal has begun."

She bore herself bravely at the parting, but when he caught her in his arms and held her fast, she trembled all over.

"My lovely Marjorie!" he murmured. "I am not afraid of the justice of Heaven."

"Ah, no!" cried she in a quick breath. Yet when he was gone, and she had watched his strong young figure disappear in the shadows about the Fort, she hastened within doors, and flinging herself on her bed, burst into a storm of tears.

She had lain thus for some time, just as she came in from the night, when there was a knock at her door, and she heard her hostess's voice. The room was in darkness save for the faint radiance of the moonbeams from without, and Marjorie went to the door.

"My Jean has just returned from the ship," said the good woman, "and with him Monsieur de la Salle, who entreats you to give him a few minutes if you are not yet abed, madame."

"The Sieur de la Salle!" repeated the girl slowly, paling with the swift resurrection of her fears. "But at this hour!"

" True, madame, it nears midnight," said the farmer's wife. " Yet I think there are few abed to-night."

" I will come," said Marjorie. Hastily washing away the traces of her emotion, and setting her thick brown hair in order, she descended to the living-room, where La Salle in a suit of rich dark silk, and wearing a silver-hilted sword, awaited her alone.

He bowed low as she entered, and handed her one of the farmer's rough chairs with a courtier's grace, and though he looked weary, the smile that was so rare on his bronzed and serious face partly disarmed her fears.

" I must entreat your forgiveness, madame," said he, " for disturbing you at so late an hour to make my farewells. But indeed, my desires have been the prisoners of necessity. You know that we sail at dawn? "

" I have heard so, monsieur."

" It is a venture in which I stake my all. Will you wish me well in it, Madame de Vane? "

" With all my heart," said Marjorie, red and pale by turns with expectation. " God keep you safe, Monsieur de la Salle, and all who go with you! "

" Ah! that is kind of you! " he exclaimed. " I see little of ladies, madame, but the good wishes of such as you are like flowers on a stony path." He bowed again.

Marjorie smiled a little nervously. " I have heard that the stony path is of your own choosing, monsieur."

His deep grey eyes seemed to look right through her, as he stood before her chair. He was still a young man, though his fine and virile face was sharply lined.

" It is true," he said. " And why it is true I declare I know not. The life I lead, madame, has no attraction for me other than honour, and the more danger and difficulty there is in my undertakings, by so much the more do they seem to me worthy and honourable. Yet perhaps it is not the best life for a man."

He spoke with perfect quietness of tone, as though to

himself rather than to another. Then, to the girl's relief, he looked away. He seemed to have fallen for a moment into a kind of abstraction.

"I have always heard," ventured Marjorie, "that the Sieur de la Salle was one who ever followed honour."

"Ah — thank you again for that, madame!" He turned with a flash of pleasure in his sad dark eyes. "Indeed, it is the simple truth. My enemies call me harsh, reserved, ambitious. I declare to you that if to my men I am stern, to myself I am pitiless; if I am reserved, it is because I have always been lonely, and because trusting myself a little, I have learned in a bitter school to trust few others, save only the bon Dieu; and if I am ambitious, it is honour alone that beckons me. But I did not come here to prate about myself. What you have deigned to tell me, madame, opens the way for what I came to say."

The young Countess's breath came quickly. What had he come to tell her at this midnight hour?

"Let me hide nothing from you," said La Salle. He took a step nearer, and she felt his compelling eyes on her again. She stood up.

"Long ago, in Quebec," he went on, in a restrained and steady voice, "Monsieur Firle, my friend and comrade, did me the honour to confide in me. He told me, madame, of his devotion to yourself, and of unhappy circumstances which beclouded his hopes. I know the motives with which he gives me his aid in this my great adventure. Dear madame, it has pleased Heaven to bring me through many perils, but it may be that I go to-morrow on a journey from which I shall not return. Therefore at this last moment I wish to do a friend's service to a friend. I wish to say to you, as one that has some knowledge of his fellows, that I believe from my heart that Arnold Firle, Earl of Vane, is faithful and true, and clean from any kind of treachery or dishonour." He paused, and the girl before him quivered under the intensity of his

gaze. He seemed about to say more, and then his face hardened swiftly, as though with a strong effort of self-repression. "I think that is all, madame," said he.

So that was all! The burning colour overspread the girl's cheeks, and the eyes she turned to him were drowned in grateful tears. Batiste Bariot was wrong, and her lover was right! She could have nothing but trust for that face so kind yet so stern.

"Ah—Monsieur de la Salle!" With an instinct of gratitude she stretched out both hands to him.

La Salle did not misinterpret the gesture. His face was pale, and his dark eyes shone like stars. Stooping on one knee, he took a hand of hers and set his lips upon it, as though she had been a queen.

"Your prayers must follow us, madame," said he, and rising swiftly he went out.

A few hours later Marjorie, Countess of Vane, kneeled at her chamber window in the ruddy morning light. There was a roar of cannon from the Fort, and an answering thunder from the little vessel which gathered way before the light breeze. Past the palisades of the Fort she slid, with her company of adventurers, soldiers and priests, her white wake gleaming rosy in the sunrise; past the great wooden cross that the friars had reared near the shore, past the scattered farmsteads of the French and the bark-roofed dwellings of the native village, till she diminished slowly on the shining waters of the vast lake.

Would they ever come back?

Marjorie sank her head upon her hands. Now the ordeal had begun indeed!

CHAPTER XXII

THE ISLE OF THE DEAD

IN the swooning heat of an August afternoon a strangely-assorted company lounged about the decks of a ship which drifted slowly, under a cloud of sail, over the glassy, smoothly-heaving waters. Sailors and artisans, trappers in the free dress of the wood-ranger, a couple of Indian hunters, friars in hoods and cloaks, and one or two men of superior order with ruffles at neck and sword in belt. Over one and all seemed to brood a spirit of anxious expectancy, as though on this afternoon of peace and sunshine some great event portended.

Five small cannon looked out from the vessel's portholes, and at her prow a great painted griffin yawned open-mouthed as she dipped and rose to the swell.

The low tones in which the lounging men conversed ceased altogether as there emerged from the cabin companion-way the figure of a grey-clothed priest, with the cord of Saint Francis about his waist, and a rosary and crucifix hanging at his side. His sandalled feet made scarcely a sound as he crossed the deck to the men grouped in the down-draught from the big mainsail. The priest was Hennepin the Récollet.

"Eh bien?" queried a gruff voice. It was Batiste Bariot, standing sunburned and swarthy beside the lazy wheel.

"Eh bien, he still lives," replied the priest.

The pilot nodded. A well-dressed, wiry man, with but one arm, upon whose quick southern face was stamped a look of great resolution, turned to Hennepin.

"Do you think he will recover, father?"

The friar crossed himself piously. "We are as children led by the hand in the dark, Monsieur de Tonty," said he, sententiously. "Heaven in its wisdom has brought the Sieur de la Salle through so much that I cannot think he will perish thus of a strange sickness on his own ship."

"A strange sickness indeed," said Tonty, darkly. "As strange as that which Monsieur suffered in Montreal last year." He turned a keen and searching glance from face to face around him. "Who is with him now?"

"The Englishman—Firle."

Tonty nodded. "A stout sailor, that! But for him, I think we should not now be riding the Lake or the Hurons. Eh, Bariot?"

"What?" said Bariot. "The Englishman? Ay, he knows his trade. But all the English—cursed race!—are happy in vile weather. It makes them feel at home, pardieu!"

"Well, the Englishman has courage," observed the priest.

"Courage!" cried Bariot, spitting on the deck. "Which of us has not courage that sail in the *Griffin*, messieurs? But what is the use of courage if you know not how to use it? The Sieur de la Salle has courage enough, yet did not even he, in the tempest that roared about us lately, call on all to commend their souls to heaven? A fine time for the exercises of religion! If I had not stood to the wheel and cursed you all to quarters, and if the Englishman had not gone aloft to shorten sail when the rest of you were vowing chapels to Saint Anthony, where do you think we should be now?"

"Faith, I do not know," smiled Hennepin. "Nor do I know where we are now, honest Batiste. Nor do I believe that you do yourself."

An angry gleam came into the pilot's black eyes at the laugh which greeted this sally.

"I know well enough, father," he answered. "And to-night it may be *your* trade which may come in useful. For we shall sleep to-night, messieurs, in the bay that washes the Isle of the Dead. Yonder it looms already on the sky-line, that isle."

There was a general crossing of themselves on the part of the company, an example which was followed by the surly pilot himself. Men crowded to the side of the ship, and stared ahead into the haze of heat. Dark wooded islands faded slowly past them on either hand. Vast black wastes, dim as clouds, marked where the pine forests covered the mainland of the lake, far on their starboard side. Gazing ahead, where the placid water shimmered into incalculable distances, the adventurers could see that the horizon in that direction was closed by a faint dark line.

"The Isle of the Dead?" repeated Monsieur de Tonty. "I have heard the Indians speak of it with fear. What is it, pilot?"

"It is a rocky islet of pine trees, in the midst of a deep bay where there is good anchorage." Batiste Bariot, well content to find himself the centre of interest, made a long pause to whet his hearers' appetites. "There is a village of the Iroquois on the shores of the bay, but not a native will set foot on the isle, for they say it is the abode of spirits, messieurs, and that if a man lands there by day he will return to his tribe a madman, and if by night, the demons of the place will devour him and he will be seen no more."

Superstitious fear was plain to see on the faces of the men. In these wild solitudes there was food and to spare for imaginative dread.

"Why anchor there?" asked Hennepin.

"There are furs to be bought from the Indians," said the pilot.

"Tell us more of it, good Batiste," commanded Tonty,

and the rude assembly crowded round, timorous, but eager for the tale.

"I have heard the Iroquois say," proceeded Bariot after a while, "that two great painted rocks in that isle are a father and his son. Ages ago, they say, a chief's son died, and the chief, who loved him well, followed his son's soul for many days and nights till he came to the ghost country. He was very weary when he found his son, for the old man's mortal body had been a grievous burden on his journey. Yet when the youth, who was fresh and strong, urged him to join in a hunt with the spirits, he put forth his last strength in the effort. But he was weary to fainting, and soon he sat down under a great tree and called his son. 'My son,' says he, 'I have followed you a long journey to the ghost country, and am tired. I pray you therefore leave the hunt, and return with me.' So the young man came and sat beside him. The other souls, who moved with the fleetness of the wind, cried out to him, 'Come on! Come on!' But his father murmured feebly, 'Stay, my son!' And in the end the young man stayed, and the spirit hunt swept by. Then they began to circle round the pair, screeching and wailing, and by-and-by all the track wherein they circled turned to shining water, and the chasing souls swept away shrieking through the air, and the old man and his son were left alone on an island in the midst of a shoreless sea. There they dwelt for a long time, until one day the Father of Life came upon them as he was building lands about that sea. 'What is this?' says he. 'The living and the dead dwelling together!' And he turned them both into rocks that same hour, and made the island accursed to mankind. And so it has remained ever since. And once and again in a long while, the Indians say, the twin rocks give out doleful voices in the night, bewailing their doom."

The adventurers crossed themselves again when the tale was ended, and even the swarthy face of the narrator

was pale in the sunshine as he gazed ahead under the jibboom. So engrossed had they all been, that none had noticed Arnold Firle come quietly from the cabin to join them as the tale was beginning. Père Hennepin saw him first, and questioned him with a look.

"Monsieur sleeps easily," said Arnold. "He is better." Then he raised his voice boldly: "If he who would have poisoned him hears me, let him be ashamed, for when Monsieur thought he lay dying, he expressly forgave that cowardly deed, and all who with their plots have sought to ruin him."

So faintly the breeze blew, and so slowly the ship sailed, that sunset had long gone, and half the night had passed, ere at length the *Griffin* came to harbour in the bay of which the pilot had spoken. The waning moon was sinking behind the Isle of the Dead—a rugged, rocky mass from which a pine-clad hillock rose darkly against the velvet sky of night, casting a long shade across the ship. On the other side of them the black forests of the mainland stretched illimitable.

For the rest of that night the ship lay solitary at her anchorage, but soon after the break of day the Frenchmen fired their cannon. Dark figures came running to the water's edge from a group of bark huts clustered in a clearing; yells of surprise answered the roar of the guns; slim canoes shot out, filled with painted savages who gazed in consternation upon the monster of the deep. No ship, since the world began, had sailed those waters before.

After breakfasting, the greater part of the French rowed ashore in the ship's boats, the priests to preach as their custom was at each place of call, and the leaders to trade with the natives for furs, or to shoot game for their sustenance on board.

By the orders of pilot Bariot, Arnold Firle remained with a few men in charge of the ship.

In the afternoon the main body returned, and though

they brought a few beaver skins, they reported ill success. The Indians, it seemed, were surly, and unwilling to trade.

"Their minds have been turned against us," said Monsieur de Tonty, angrily. "The Father of Life, they say, has revealed to them in dreams that we are evil men."

Père Hennepin laughed. "I suspect the Father of Life appeared to them in the guise of a black crow," said he. "Does not this place lie on the route to Canada from the Jesuit mission of Saint Ignace of Machilimackinac? Do not the fathers and their men call here, good Bariot?"

"Likely enough," answered Bariot, with a shrug. "It lies on the way." Arnold saw that he shot a glance of suspicion at the friar.

"We will do their duty for them," said Hennepin. "Pilot, that was an evil tale you told us yesterday. Here we are, messieurs, witnesses of our holy religion to these barbarous, ignorant savages. I have told them it is my purpose to land upon this their isle of demons and say Mass thereon, whereby with the blessing of Heaven the spell of evil shall be removed. See—the Indians wait in their canoes about the ship. Which of you will come with me?"

Bariot started back, gazing on the priest with renewed suspicion and fear. "That will not I, father," said he.

The men, rude unlettered fellows for the most part, looked at one another in hesitancy, and then at the dismayed face of the big pilot. They stared at the haunted islet, where the tree-tops shimmered in the heat of afternoon.

"I will follow you, father," said Monsieur de Tonty.

"And I—and I," said others, taking courage.

"And I," said Arnold Firle.

They manned a boat again, taking with them the portable altar of the Récollet, and their weapons. In their wake glided the bark canoes of the savages, light and swift as dragon-flies upon the water.

First they made the circuit of the islet, resting from time to time upon their oars, while the priests sang Latin hymns, and Hennepin uttered formulas of exorcism. There was nothing notable about the Isle, save its air of solitude in the bright daylight, and the bold hillock upon which the pine trees stood ranged against the sky. But at one point, on the side opposite the anchored *Griffin*, there was a beach of clear white sand, and in the midst of it rose two tall rocks, strangely coloured with red, and blue, and yellow.

"The chief and his son!" said Monsieur de Tonty. "Let us land here, father."

The boat was rowed ashore, but the following canoes hung back, and the dusky occupants clapped their hands to their mouths in token of amazement and fear.

Between the painted rocks Père Hennepin set up his altar, and before it knelt Monsieur de Tonty in a mantle of bright scarlet, and the little company of soldiers, priests and wood-rangers.

When the service was finished they wandered over the isle, which was but a few acres in extent, empty of any sign of human life, and strangely peaceful in its solitude. On the banks of a little stream, which came from a spring in the hillock and ran purling into the lake, they saw a few beavers at work, but the little creatures, usually so timorous, looked at them fearlessly as they passed. A brown bear that crossed their path scarcely hastened his pace to avoid them. The tameness of the animals was more impressive than the absence of man, and almost unconsciously the explorers drew closer together as they walked among the trees.

"One sees," said Tonty, in a low voice, "that the living do not visit the Isle of the Dead."

By-and-by they came out again by the coloured rocks, to find the Indians still floating in their canoes off the enchanted shore, awaiting them with anxious faces.

They got into their boat, from which Hennepin, as they returned to the ship, exhorted the savages with much complacency on the foolishness of heathen superstition and the benefits of true religion.

That evening, as Arnold Firle sat in the bows of the ship, smoking a pipe of the Indian tobacco, and considering the sunset, Batiste Bariot came up to him.

"I do not trust these natives," said he. "You and I will share the watch to-night, Monsieur Firle."

The Englishman nodded. "And which watch will you take?" he asked.

"The second watch," said Bariot. "I will relieve you at midnight."

"Bien," said Arnold in matter-of-fact tone. But it struck him that this was the first time Monsieur Bariot had taken a night watch while the *Griffin* lay in port.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MIDNIGHT MESSAGE

PUNCTUAL to the minute, as the ship's bell smote out the hour, the big form of Bariot emerged from the companion-way on deck at midnight.

"Eh bien?" said he in his curt way.

"All well, captain," answered the Englishman.

"Then good-night," said Bariot, surlily, and Arnold went below to the officers' quarters in the waist of the ship.

It was a perfect night, hot and calm, and with better company he would have preferred to remain on deck beneath the stars. From his side of the ship he could see the haunted isle from end to end. The nearest point of it was but a few hundred yards away. The bright curve of the moon hung in silvery radiance just above the flank of the hillock, whose shadow was already projected some way across the clear water in the direction of the *Griffin*. Very soon the light would have sunk behind the clustered pines, and the ship herself would become engulfed in the deepening shade. Beyond the intercepting island, at one end, Arnold could see the further shore of the bay curving out towards the open lake. The scene was utterly tranquil, and in the thin moonlight almost ethereal. Many such nights, calm and clear and pure, had he known in these wide lands and waters of the west, and as he leaned at the ship's side ere turning in, his thoughts roved back over an eventful year.

For nearly an hour he stayed thus, lost in his memories and dreams.

Suddenly he started. Away yonder, on the flank of the hillock, where the sinking moon gleamed among tall straggling pine stems, he had seen a moving human form! Arnold looked again, straining his sight, but this time he saw nothing save the silent trees. Yet he was certain there had been no hallucination. He remembered the harmless brown bear they had encountered in their walk upon the island, and for a moment sought to persuade himself that it was a wild creature of the woods which he had seen. But the vision had been too clear.

He leaned at the vessel's side, staring intently. The silvery moon slid down behind the hill, and the shadow covered the *Griffin*, but he saw no more movement.

Arnold's pulses beat with an unwonted excitement. He shivered slightly, though the night air was warm about him. The mystery of that swiftly-vanishing form cast a spell upon him.

He glanced around. The ship lay silent, dark save for the faint light which shone from the sick commander's quarters astern.

Suddenly the young sailor made up his mind, and quickly and quietly he began to remove his clothes. When he had stripped, he peered overside into the clear dark water, and then towards the silent upper deck, and he laughed lightly to himself. He would see how keen a watch the *Griffin's* pilot kept!

He took the slack of a rope and knotted it in half a dozen places before lowering it gently to the water. At the last moment he remembered the brown bear again, and stooping over his clothes, took his belt and fastened it about his middle, with his sheathed hunting-knife tucked securely in its place. Then with catlike caution he crept over the bulwarks of the lower deck, and let himself slowly down into the lake.

Swimming silently, and favoured by the deep shadow cast by the hillock, he drew away from the ship, and look-

ing back when he had gone about a hundred yards, knew himself undetected. Not a sound or a movement came from the sleeping vessel. The water was cold, as is the water of all the great lakes of Canada even in the heat of summer, but the distance was not long. Swimming with greater confidence now, Arnold soon felt the rocky bottom beneath his feet, and waded cautiously ashore.

He gained the black shadow of the first trees, and paused to take breath after his swim. For a few moments the darkness and the silence, and an unreasoning dread, almost broke down his resolution, and the impulse seized him to plunge back into the lake and leave the mysteries of that isle unsolved. With a strong effort, however, he controlled his fears, and drawing his knife, advanced into the gloom, striking a bee-line, as nearly as he could judge, towards the slope of the hillock at the point where he had seen the vision.

Arnold was shivering now, but more with apprehension than with cold, for the air was quite warm about him. As he glided from tree to tree he darted keen glances on all sides of him. Now and again he started violently as some small wild creature hurried away unseen from his path, but as he progressed his hardihood returned, and before long he came out on the rise of the hill, and saw the pale moonlight again in front of him. The moon was now near her setting, hovering far out in the lake near the horizon, and a long narrow path of silver light shimmered on the calm waters.

On the further side of the hill the ground was more open, and for a time Arnold crouched in the shadows, for this was the spot where the form had vanished. Near here, too, the little stream ran down to enter the lake by the painted rocks, and when he had waited some while, and neither seen nor heard anything to disturb the deep peacefulness of the place, the young man took his courage in both hands, and boldly stepped out of his hiding to

follow the course of the brook. He proceeded without adventure until he reached a point where the stream, rippling down a slight declivity on his left, emptied itself in the lake. Straight before him the ground ran up to a rocky point, a cliff in miniature, which overhung, as he knew, the beach by the painted rocks. Slightly to the right of this rise the park-like turf sloped gradually down through a sylvan glade to the water. Arnold began to descend slowly through the scattered trees of the glade.

He came within view of the twin rocks, standing up gaunt and ghostly from their patch of white strand. Suddenly, with a wildly beating heart, he stood stock still in his tracks, and the next moment dropped flat to the ground, where he lay with suspended breath.

From behind one of the weirdly-coloured masses a figure had emerged, not fifty yards away from him—a figure of a man, stark naked, running slowly and silently upon the sand. The figure advanced towards the spot where Arnold lay quaking in a clump of tall grass, his right hand trembling on the haft of his knife. Full between him and the dying moon it loomed, inhumanly tall, spectral, terrifying. It approached him perhaps a score of paces, then, suddenly turning about, retraced its steps towards the rocks. The instant it vanished behind the nearer rock, Arnold leaped up, and ran like a deer for the cover of the nearest tree trunk, behind which he flung himself down panting. Truly the Isle of the Dead was a different place in the still night watches from that pleasant dreamland of the afternoon!

But in a few minutes the young man's natural courage rallied, and he shook off a little the unreasoning panic that had assailed him. Peering round the bole of the tree he descried that form of dread standing by the edge of the lake, a black silhouette against the setting moon. Arnold slowly wormed himself among the trees behind him, until he succeeded in getting the mass of one of the rocks be-

tween him and the shape. Then with what haste he dared, he retreated till he felt secure from observation, and fetching a circuit, advanced again towards that rising ground which dominated the two rocks. On the summit of that little bluff there was a dark fringe of brushwood that would yield good cover.

In a few minutes he had gained the bluff, and with extreme caution dragged himself to the edge at a point where, peering through the sheltering fringe of scrub, he could look almost directly down upon the patch of white sand. The light was feebler now, and already the red heel of the moon was sipping into the lake. But Arnold could discern the figure running slowly to and fro between the haunted rocks and the water's edge. Presently it stopped again, and stood motionless beside the lake, and then Arnold caught the sound of a light plash. He looked round, and was startled to see the black shape of a canoe nearing the strand. A solitary man squatted in the canoe, and sprang out as it touched the shore.

A hoarse exclamation broke from the waiting figure. "Mon dieu! Why did you not come sooner?"

"I could not," said the other, calmly.

The young sailor craned forward. Both those voices he knew. The first was the voice, frightened and angry, of Bariot the pilot; the second—in all the world he would never mistake that hard and heartless tone. Little as he had thought to hear it in these distant wilds, he knew it in a moment for the voice of his bitter enemy, André Michel, the Jesuits' man. And in a flash he guessed why Bariot had taken the watch alone.

"Lend me a coat," said Bariot. "I am chilled to the bone. More than half an hour I have waited for you in this place of demons. At any moment they may discover my absence. Eh—what a place to talk!" The man seemed to shudder as he spoke.

"You are too easily wrought upon, my good Batiste,"

said Michel. He took off his coat and handed it to the naked man beside him. "But your zeal will not be forgotten. Now for your news. If you have waited an hour for me, remember I have waited three weeks for you in the kennels of the Indians yonder. Your company knows nothing of my presence?"

"I only know, from your messenger this morning."

"La Salle—tell me of him."

"He is very sick," said Bariot, curtly.

"What—you have not succeeded?" There was a note of disappointment in the cruel voice of the agent.

"No, I have not succeeded," growled Bariot. "I received my orders from the persons you know of, Monsieur Michel, and I administered that which I was instructed to administer. But the Sieur de la Salle has a constitution like a rock. The dose, perhaps, was under-estimated. And I will tell you this: I am glad of it, for that is work, pardieu, that I do not take to kindly, and work that I will not do again. Pah! I am not particular, but poisoning is not in my line, monsieur. No, he will live."

"It is a pity," said Michel, coolly. "For in that case the labours will be increased of those who work for the true advantage of Holy Church in these lands. For the man is a dangerous schemer, and pertinacious. With him removed, the rest would lack the courage and obstinacy to carry out his plans. However, let us not lose our tempers, good Batiste, but tell me what he has so far done, and what you have discovered of his intentions."

"As for that," said Bariot, "you know the Sieur de la Salle is not a man to shout his plans from the housetops. We have picked up, as we sailed, great stores of furs, collected ready for us by Monsieur de Tonty and some dozen men, whom Monsieur de la Salle sent in advance of the ship from Niagara for that very purpose. In the river of Saint Claire we overtook Monsieur de Tonty, who has come on with us. It is believed that some of our

advance party have made their way as far as the mission at Saint Ignace, or even beyond. If you ask me what I think, it is that Monsieur will continue the voyage till he has picked up every available fur, and then sail back with them, for I believe his affairs are desperate, and that without the wherewithal to satisfy his creditors he will be ruined. It is thought that Monsieur de Tonty will be dispatched to the south, to the nation of the Illinois, to prepare the way for an advance into those regions."

"Why, mon cher, you are quite a statesman," said Michel, with a little jeering laugh. "Monsieur de Tonty will find that we have anticipated his embassy."

"How so?"

"We of the Order," said Michel, boastfully, "by way of paring the griffin's claws, have arranged a little war between the nations of the Iroquois and the Illinois, and I have seen to it that the Illinois warriors suppose us French leagued with the Iroquois against them. When Monsieur de Tonty arrives among the Illinois he will find himself in a thorny thicket. As for the Sieur de la Salle, it is to you, Batiste, that the Order looks so to steer your ship that her cargo never reaches the Niagara. It would be better if La Salle, also, should never return, but since you are timorous we must not press you too far. Let him get back to his fort, if he must. Without his furs he cannot save his credit. The Order relies on you—do not fail!"

"I will not fail," said Bariot, harshly yet fearfully.

"You know the reward of success and the punishment of betrayal," said the other, coldly.

"I will not fail," repeated the pilot. "I must go back to the ship, Monsieur Michel." He began to take off his borrowed coat.

Arnold saw the dark outline of the Jesuit agent move towards his canoe. Then Michel paused and turned back. "There is another matter, Bariot," said he. "You served

me badly in the business of the English lady. You bungled it."

"I did not!" came the pilot's hot denial. "It was the accursed Englishman, Firle, who spoiled my plans."

"One day I will reckon with him," said Michel, acidly.

"But your plan was badly laid, Batiste."

"The fellow plays the watch-dog to La Salle," cried Bariot, angrily. "He suspects me, yet I have to speak him fair. He is a thorn in my side. Let him beware! I will pluck him out yet, and make an end of him!"

"Do so, by all means," Michel cheerfully rejoined. "It will save me trouble, my friend. But do not bungle again, for your thorn has a sharp sting. As for the lady, I look forward to repairing your blunder very soon. Bon soir, Batiste!"

He stepped to his canoe, pushed off, and in a few minutes was lost in the darkness on the lake.

CHAPTER XXIV

HOW BARIOT WAS BEWITCHED

ARNOLD FIRLE was shivering now as he lay on the edge of the bluff, yet not with cold alone. The vile treachery to which he had listened filled him with righteous fury. He had a momentary wild impulse to rush from his place of concealment and plunge his knife into that traitor's heart, but as he lay trembling with wrath, he saw the dark form of Bariot disappear along the beach.

Guessing that Bariot, shirking the pitch-black gloom of the trees, would choose the longer way back around the shore, Arnold sprang up, and throwing caution aside, ran in among the woodland to intercept him. He emerged soon upon the beach a little further on, where a great tree stood almost in the water. There the Englishman waited. He had no clear intention, but a rage possessed him to denounce this black-browed villain to his face.

Presently Bariot appeared, stepping delicately to avoid cutting his feet on the rocky shore. He was passing the tree, without seeing Arnold in the dense shadow.

"Halt!" came hoarsely from the watcher. He sprang forward, and with his left hand, cold from his long vigil, clutched Bariot's hairy neck from behind, swinging him round, while his right arm raised the knife.

At the sound of a voice in the blackness, the pilot started violently. At the fierce clutch of that cold hand in the haunted gloom panic seized him. With a scream of terror he wrenched himself free, and fled back the way he had come. Arnold heard him crying to Heaven and the saints to save him as he ran, and his fury suddenly evaporated. With a grim laugh he set himself to run along the

shore in the opposite direction, towards the spot where he had swum to land. He reached it without further adventure, and immediately took to the water and swam back to the ship.

Not a soul stirred as he climbed aboard by his knotted rope, and while he quickly got into his clothes, he turned over in his mind what he had seen and heard. It occurred to him that there might be a more prudent course than to denounce the traitor as soon as he should set foot on the ship. To trouble his leader with such matters in his present state was not to be thought of, and for the others Arnold knew there were some at least among them who held him in jealous suspicion as an Englishman. The danger of a repetition of the poisoning scarcely threatened now, both because those about La Salle were on the alert, and because of what Bariot had himself said to Michel. And as for other dangers to the expedition at which that midnight conversation hinted, in a few days his leader might be about again, and he would lay the whole matter before him. For Arnold, the sharpest fear of all lay in the veiled threat of Michel's parting words—that he looked forward to repairing very soon Bariot's "blunder" regarding Lady Vane. And here was he, Marjorie's countryman and lover, bound to remain for untold weeks and months hundreds of miles away from her in these trackless wilds of lake and forest. His hands were tied, and only at the price of dishonour might he recede from the pledge he had given.

Scarcely had he dressed himself, and begun to feel his blood warm again in his veins, when his eyes, watching the strip of dark water between the ship and the island, discerned a movement upon it, and his ears, strained to catch the least noise, heard a light splash. Bariot was returning!

Arnold's course had to be swiftly decided. As he stood hesitating, an idea flashed into his mind, and he

smiled grimly to himself. Could he make the traitor denounce himself?

With bare silent feet he hastened to the upper deck, taking care not to let his profile show against the sky. Somewhere there must be hanging the rope by which the pilot had lowered himself to the water. If only he could be in time!

Reaching the side of the ship away from the swimmer, Arnold crept quickly along the bulwarks. There was no rope visible. He came to the fo'c'slehead, where the great bowsprit heaved a line of blacker darkness over the dark water, and underneath it the carved griffin of Count Frontenac brandished its timber claws and gaped. There, all unexpectedly, he nearly stumbled over the end of a rope ladder, which hung down across the monster's shoulders to the lake.

Arnold peered cautiously over the bulwarks on the island side. The swimmer's head was still some distance off, yet it might be that he could see the dangling rope. Crouching low, the Englishman drew it in very slowly for a few feet, till he felt sure that though it might still be visible to the swimmer it would be beyond the reach of a raised arm. Then, as swiftly and cautiously as he had come, he hastened back, and getting into his hammock, lay awaiting events.

He heard, or fancied he heard, the gentle splash of swimming cease. Then came several louder sounds of water in disturbance, and the noise of hard breathing. Arnold told himself that Bariot was trying to spring from the water high enough to lay hands upon the rope which hung just above his reach. The splashing and breathing grew louder, till the listener marvelled that none awoke on the ship. Then suddenly came a frightened shout:

“Au secours!”

With limbs a-twitch to be moving, Arnold lay still in his hammock. There was no danger that a man like

Bariot would drown. Fear, not danger, inspired that shout. It came again, insistently:

“Au secours! Au secours!”

And in a moment the ship was in commotion. Men sprang half-dressed from their sleeping-places, snatched what arms they could and ran on deck. Arnold ran with the rest, carrying, for appearance sake, his sword naked in his hand.

The crew, finding neither friend to save nor foe to slay, stared a few moments at each other, and then again the cry came:

“Au secours! It is I, Bariot! Help me out of the water!”

His words came hoarsely, as though half choked.

“A rope! A rope! Man overboard!” was the shout. But he answered them from the lake:

“There is a rope—here at the prow. Lower it quick, in Heaven’s name!”

Then they found the rope ladder, and let it down, and Batiste Bariot came up it, while one ran and fetched a lamp.

When the pilot stood by them on the deck, stark naked, his teeth chattering and his eyes glaring with fear in the light of the lamp, they gathered round him in amazement.

“What ails you, my son?” asked Hennepin the Récollet. “You look like a man bewitched.”

At that word Bariot clutched at the shrouds. “Bewitched!” cried he. And then, as if commanding himself with a great effort, “Where are my clothes?” said he.

“Faith, I do not know,” answered the friar.

But Bariot turned from him, and going to the pawlpost found his clothes and began to dress himself, while they all stood and watched him.

Presently up came Monsieur de Tonty. “What is all this?” he angrily demanded.

"It seems," said Hennepin, "that Captain Bariot has been enjoying a swim, monsieur."

The company waited while the Italian fixed the shivering man with his little keen eyes.

"Explain!" he ordered.

Batiste Bariot looked suddenly sheepish.

"The father is right, Monsieur de Tonty," said he, sullenly enough, though to Arnold it seemed that the half-satirical words of the priest had put heart into him. "I was taking the second watch, as you know. Well, the night was as hot as a furnace, and it came in my mind to cool myself with a swim. And I had misjudged the rope and could not get back. And I thought I was drowning. Voilà tout, monsieur."

"Voilà tout!" repeated Tonty in wrathful derision.

And a fine freak to play in the middle of the night! And will you condescend to explain, my dear Bariot, what would have happened to us all if a hundred or so of Iroquois warriors had had a fancy to visit us while you were cooling your carcase in the lake?"

"There was neither sight nor sound of an Indian," replied Bariot, sulkily. "I am not a fool, Monsieur de Tonty."

"Are you not?" said Tonty, shortly. "Then you are the greater knave. Be sure that Monsieur de la Salle shall hear, when he is fit, how well you keep your watch."

Bariot gave him a vengeful glance, but answered nothing, being indeed too shaken by the night's adventure, and too relieved at escaping detection, as he thought, to indulge his mutinous spirit at that moment.

Still greater was his relief when, some days afterwards, he received a stern reprimand from the Sieur de la Salle himself, now on the road to recovery from his sickness. For, while bitterly blaming him, La Salle left him his command of the crew, and the opportunity of fulfilling that which was in his treacherous heart to do.

"You may deem me harsh, Monsieur Bariot," said La Salle, "but I speak to one who is no stranger among these savages. You do not need me to tell you that a few moments of relaxed watchfulness on the part of any man may cost us all our lives. And I tell you plainly, I will not have my designs imperilled. Look to yourself!"

The *Griffin* that day, with all sail spread before a favouring breeze, was rounding a wooded cape. La Salle shaded his eyes from the sun and watched the shore.

"In a few minutes we shall open up that Crows' nest of Saint Ignace," said he. "Keep her head more off the point, pilot."

"There is good water close in shore," growled Bariot.

"Head her off!" cried his commander, with such sudden imperiousness that Bariot pulled the wheel round without a word, and his tanned face lost a little colour.

For at that moment it had come into his mind to cast the ship away upon that jutting promontory, and at one stroke avenge himself for the brow-beatings he had had, and earn his promised reward. Well he knew that little help would come from the Jesuit fathers of the mission behind the point, or from the lawless traders in contraband furs who dwelt about this last outlying station of their Order.

The *Griffin* sailed round the point, and let go her anchor in a quiet haven. Her cannon roared salute, and by-and-by, across the glass-clear water, her boats were rowed ashore, filled with armed men going to hear worship in the chapel of that Order which desired nothing so much as their destruction.

And before they returned to the ship that night Batiste Bariot found his path made clear.

CHAPTER XXV

THE WOODS OF SAINT IGNACE

HE was in no mood to take advantage of the liberty which had been granted till sunset to the boats' crews. A full hour before that time Bariot made his way down the beach, and stretching himself beside the boats, lit a pipe against the mosquitoes, and gave himself to meditation.

His thoughts, however, yielded the pilot small satisfaction. With sulky wrath he reflected upon the frustration only that day of his design against the *Griffin*, and the loss of an opportunity particularly favourable. But another matter occupied him still more, and to it for days past his mind had constantly recurred; the alarming experience, namely, which he had undergone in the Isle of the Dead.

Batiste Bariot had not yet recovered from the terrors of that place. He had striven—for he was no coward—to explain the apparition that had come out of the darkness and laid its cold and clammy hand upon him. Even yet he shuddered at the recollection of that moment's panic. He had all the superstitions of his age, and his seaman's brain was stored with the ghostly legends of his trade. He was firmly convinced that what he had encountered on the isle was neither the creation of an overwrought mind nor any mortal presence. In other circumstances he would have confided in a priest, but how should he account to Père Hennepin, the fast ally of La Salle, for his presence that night upon the haunted isle?

As he lay thinking, the idea occurred to Bariot that he

might make confession of the whole incident to one of the fathers at this very station of Saint Ignace. They, at least, would give him sympathetic hearing, and doubtless a Jesuit knew as much of the ways of demons as his brother priest of the rival Order of Récollets.

Mightily pleased with his intention, big Bariot was getting to his feet, when he saw that which for the moment drove all hobgoblin speculations from his mind. At a little distance from him two men were walking away together towards the woods, and though their backs were towards him he recognized his leader and Firle the Englishman.

What talk was that they held together? Bariot's first dislike of Arnold Firle had fed and thriven on the bitter jealousy with which he had observed how the young man was trusted by his commander. He well knew that his first officer was far deeper in the counsels of La Salle than he might hope to be. And though he had commenced the voyage with the firm belief that Arnold's death would be gratifying to La Salle on account of Lady Vane, Bariot had seen sufficient of the relation of the two men to abundantly disprove his theory. How this should be it was not in the pilot's plotting nature to understand, for he was still fully persuaded that his leader was a lover of the English girl.

What were they saying to one another? Bariot resolved to learn, if the discovery lay in his power. He had the repute of a crafty hunter, in a land where men hunted for their livelihood. Well, he would use his skill to some purpose now! He set off.

As at Fort Frontenac, and as in every place in these vast wildernesses where the white man's axe and gun had made him a temporary foothold, the settlement of Saint Ignace was ringed at a little distance with the all-encompassing forests. The retreating figures had nearly reached the outskirts of the woods. Walking with a casual air, yet

keeping an eye constantly upon the men he stalked, Bariot struck off to reach the fringe of the woods at another point. Gaining the cover of the trees unperceived, he turned and made with all speed for the point where they had entered. His moccasined feet made no sound, and so swiftly did he advance that he went near betraying himself by his haste, for as he climbed out of a depression in the woodland, he saw, through a network of brushwood, his quarry approaching. Bariot dropped into the hollow again, and crawled into a dense thicket. He lay there motionless as the dead, reflecting that it was fortunate his men had had the glare of the lowering sun full in their faces.

Close to his thicket, almost crushing its outer edge, a great pine had fallen. From his hiding-place the pilot could see a portion of its long straight stem, splashed with crimson light where the sunset glow came through an opening of the trees.

Presently, hearing voices close at hand, he peered through his bush, and saw his men walking towards the fallen stem.

"I will rest a moment," said La Salle. "I am not very strong yet, Arnold. This last attempt on me came very near to success. If I knew the rascal's name! But I cannot countermine the intrigues of my ill-wishers." He sighed wearily as he sat down on the fallen tree and rested his head on his hand.

The Englishman did not sit, but stood looking down at his leader.

"I can tell you his name, Monsieur de la Salle," said he, quietly.

La Salle looked up quickly.

"His name is Batiste Bariot," said Arnold.

"Not Bariot! No, no, not Bariot!"

"Bariot is a villain," said Arnold.

"Bariot and I have travelled far together," said La

Salle. "This needs proof, Monsieur Firle." The pioneer's dark eyes were fixed keenly on the young sailor. Bariot in his shelter trembled.

Thereupon Arnold told the whole story of his night adventure upon the isle, La Salle hearing him to the end without a word. When it was finished he stood up. His lips were compressed, and his face was set in a hard self-control, though his eyes flashed at the treachery thus revealed. He took a few steps to and fro, and then stopped with a queer smile.

"All this is very good for you, comrade," said he.

"Why so?" asked Arnold.

"Because you must go back, and at once, to guard Madame de Vane from whatever plots yonder scoundrel Michel may be hatching."

"My duty, monsieur—" began the young man, but La Salle interposed.

"True. You have sworn to serve me, and it is in my service you will return, first to Niagara with the ship, and afterwards to my seigneurie of Frontenac with her lading, which I shall formally entrust to your hands under my seal." The strained look came back into the French leader's face. He flung out his arms dramatically. "I am in a desperate situation, comrade," said he. "I will be candid with you. You know well how I am embarrassed with my creditors, yet you know not how deeply. You know I went to Quebec. I tell you that the whole of my property in the settled parts of Canada has been seized, through the panic engendered by the false rumours of my foes. If I do not take back great store of furs, I and my enterprise are ruined. I had thought to return from hence with the ship myself, leaving Monsieur de Tonty to await me in winter quarters in the country of the Illinois. But this fresh treachery unsettles me. With how many other of my men has there been tampering?"

"There was no talk of others," said Arnold.

"Maybe, but who can tell? Tonty is tried and true, yet could even Tonty, in a hostile country, hold together a band of disaffected adventurers? No, no, be the outcome what it may, I myself must lead them on to the countries of the south. If the Crows will array the Iroquois against the Illinois, as this Michel says, then the Griffin shall bare his claws in the cause of the Illinois, for their country is the key to the great river which we would make a highway for France. I must stay, and you must go—and when you see your lady-love, good comrade, entreat her kind prayers for us all!"

"And what of Captain Bariot?" asked the Englishman.

La Salle gave an exclamation of impatience. Batiste Bariot, crouching in his bush, held his breath for the answer.

"Bariot must go with you," said La Salle after a pause.

"In what capacity?"

La Salle stood and considered gravely.

"If the villain had his deserts he should go in irons," he said at length, "and be hanged at the journey's end for an example to traitors. But if he went in irons, who would navigate the ship? I could trust in you, and know her safe, if you were but a Frenchman. But you are English, and I dare not. The men are unruly fellows, jealous of you already, I am told, and there would be a mutiny. The safety of the ship touches me too closely to take a risk which may be avoided."

"Bariot will cast her away," said Arnold, firmly.

"God forbid!" exclaimed the leader. "It shall be your task to prevent that, Arnold. You have saved me once; save me again!"

"You set me a hard part, Monsieur de la Salle."

"Do I not know it!" cried the Frenchman. "Yet I will not leave you resourceless. I will give you a written

authority, under my seal, to take over the absolute command at any moment you may deem it needful in my interest. That shall be your warrant. And if he play false, shoot him out of hand!"

"Let Bariot remain behind!" pleaded Arnold. "Give me the ship, monsieur, and I will bring her to port!"

For a moment La Salle wavered. Then he shook his head.

"I dare not," he answered. "My friend, you do not know these men of mine—adventurers, wood-rangers, half of them outlaws. They know Bariot, and fear him. He is an expert in their own crafts, but you are an outsider. No, no, Bariot must go with you. But I deem him a coward at heart. If you have cause to put it to the touch, I think he will shrink from open defiance of my warrant, for I stand for the Count of Frontenac, who stands for the King of France."

"Mon capitaine, I am in your hands," said Arnold. "Since you order me, I accept your commission. Heaven helping me, I will save your ship from treachery, and my lady from worse."

La Salle held out his hand. "I rely on you," he said simply. "Let us go back to the boats."

When they had passed out of sight Batiste Bariot crawled from his thicket and stood up. His white teeth gleamed as he shook his fist after the departed men. "'Heaven helping you,'" he repeated in a mutter. "Pig of an Englishman, Heaven will not help you!"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE HAUNTED ISLE AGAIN

THERE had been a week of heavy weather on the lake of the Hurons. Such weather as only the bleak Upper Lakes are capable of in the fall of the year. A week of bitter gales, with driving rain and snow, and short, savage seas that strained the carpentry of a ship from stem to stern.

The *Griffin* had survived it bravely, but she had been sorely tried. Her great figure-head was smashed; her mizzen-mast was partly crippled, and more than one of her sails had been blown out of its bolt-ropes. Up and down, to and fro she had thrashed on the great fresh-water sea, never daring to approach the desolate coast. Her crew—the soul of the ship—were worn with work and watching, and were sullen and angry. But at last the sky was clearing, and the east wind, against which they had beaten so long, was losing its force. They had got a little more sail on the ship again, and she was flying north-eastwards on the starboard tack, pounding noisily through the short, quick seas, smothering her decks with the bitter spray. Far ahead could be faintly discerned a dark line of land, and the sunset promised well for the morrow.

Big Bariot was at the wheel, and Arnold Firlie beside him.

“Do you know where we shall make the landfall?” asked Bariot.

“How should I?” answered the Englishman, wearily. “The north shore is a wide place. Why should we make a landfall at all?”

“And why should we not?” growled the pilot.

"Because the wind is dropping. It is a good breeze for a long stretch to the southward, in my opinion."

"I did not ask for your opinion."

"You asked where we were."

"Did I?" Bariot laughed grimly. "I know very well. We shall make the Isle of the Dead on this course, in time to lie up for night in the bay. A good place for a night's rest, hein?"

"Good enough," Arnold assented. What did the man mean, he wondered.

"You had better turn in," said Bariot. "I shall take her into the bay. We need a quiet night, hein?"

"We shall all be the better for one," Arnold admitted. He went below as ordered. He was dog-tired with the strain of the week that was gone, yet for a moment, as he stood beside his hammock, he thought uneasily of the pilot, whose iron strength had scarcely seemed to suffer through all they had endured. But there is a point of exhaustion beyond which a man's will cannot force his body, and Arnold Firle had reached it. He would snatch an hour's rest, he thought, before they neared the land. He stayed only to remove his outer waterproof, then got into his swinging hammock, drew his damp blanket about him, and fell instantly asleep.

He awoke suddenly, after what seemed but a few minutes, with the sound of firing loud in his ears, and found himself unable to rise. He was lashed fast in his hammock! It was daylight, but he judged the dawn had not long come.

As he lay and tried to free himself there was more firing from the deck. Then came shouting and the tramping of hurried feet above him, cries of terror and rage, a clatter of falling weapons—all the frantic noises of a sudden strife. Arnold heard the deep voice of Bariot amid the din.

The uproar was as brief as it was violent. There en-

sued a long silence. By the motion of the ship Arnold knew she was hove-to. By-and-by there was a sound as of something being dragged across the deck above him, and then a loud splash in the water, followed by others—five in all. Again the Englishman struggled desperately to release himself, and again failed, and lay back exhausted.

After a further interval he heard the ship's bell strike—two bells of the morning watch. A heavy step sounded near, a hand was on the door of the cabin, and Bariot came in and stood beside him. The pilot's head was bound with a handkerchief, his swarthy face was pale beneath its tan, and there were marks of blood on his clothes and on his bare, muscular arms. He looked down grimly at his first officer.

"Eh bien, Englishman," said he. "Do you want to get up?"

"What is the matter?" Arnold's heart sank as he put the question.

Batiste Bariot grinned. "There has been a little difference of opinion. My arguments have prevailed. Voilà tout," said he.

"Who bound me?" demanded Arnold.

"Never mind. I unbind you." And Bariot took a long knife from its sheath in his belt, and cut the cords which held the young man a prisoner. "Get up, and do your duty," said he.

"And what is my duty, Monsieur Bariot?" said Arnold, giving him a straight look.

"Diable! You ask too many questions. You are here to work the ship, are you not?"

"I am here to serve Monsieur de la Salle," answered the Englishman, steadily.

At that the pilot's face reddened with wrath. "You are here to do my bidding!" he roared. "Go, get sail on her, with those that can help you. And ask no more questions, cursed spy!"

Without replying, Arnold went on deck. He would have liked to arm himself, but Bariot, still holding the naked knife which had cut him free, was close upon his heels.

Five men of the crew were on deck—four of them in a group by the mainmast, and the fifth, with his arm in a sling, sitting on a coil of rope. Of the rest of the crew there was no sign. The deck was bloodstained in great crimson patches, and long thin streaks which ran towards the bilges, and the five men looked at the first officer curiously as he came up.

Commanding his voice as well as he could, Arnold gave the necessary orders, and set about the work of making sail. The four sound men obeyed with a sullen air; the wounded man sat quietly nursing his arm, and watching the rest.

“Where are the others?” Arnold asked, as he helped a seaman on the braces.

The man jerked his thumb overside. “Là-bas,” said he, curtly.

“Why?”

The man shrugged his shoulders and said no more.

The *Griffin* had after all passed the night at sea. Some six or seven miles to the windward Arnold recognized the outlines of the coast near the Isle of the Dead. The day-break breeze was very light, scarcely ruffling the surface of the lake. The day promised to be warm for the time of year, and calm.

Bariot had taken the wheel. It seemed to be his intent to work to windward for the island by the island, whereas the ship's right course lay clean the other way, down the length of the great lake.

Presently, when the *Griffin* was gliding slowly through the water under all the sail that could be spread, Bariot called to one of the men, and bade him bring food on deck for all. This was done, and they breakfasted where they were. Then Bariot turned to his second in command.

"Go aloft, and keep good watch, Englishman," said he. "Do not come down till I call you, or—" He left his sentence unfinished, but slowly and significantly drew his hand across his throat, and nodded.

The insult, in the presence of the others, brought the blood flaming into the young man's face. Unarmed as he was, a fierce impulse seized him to plant a blow with his fist between those wicked black eyes of the pilot's. But six to one was too long odds. He realized the hopelessness of present resistance, and there came to him the thought of Marjorie exposed to the plottings of Michel. At that thought his anger was frozen. For if he failed in endurance now, and these villains took his life, what might not be her fate? Arnold turned soberly away and began to mount the rat-lines.

With that calm sea and fainting breeze there was nothing to do aloft, and well enough Arnold knew that vigilance was not the reason for sending him there. It was clear enough that the men below had no present use for him, and he wondered much why he had been suffered to live while others less prominent in the service of La Salle had paid for their fidelity with their lives. He no longer could doubt that Bariot had seized the ship.

The sun climbed higher in the fleckless sky, and the *Griffin* scarcely moved through the water. Glancing below, Arnold saw the crew stretched on the deck asleep. Only Bariot, unwearied as ever, lolled at the wheel. Thus two hours passed. The ship was now quite near the land, yet she would have to make another tack in the light airs before she could fetch the haven. Bariot called the men and they put her about. Then he summoned the man with the injured arm, and yielded him the wheel. Two of the sailors, musket in hand, were set on guard at the foot of the mast, and the remainder went with the pilot below.

In a few minutes they returned, carrying on deck a

bale of furs. They descended again, to return with more, and so continued for the better part of an hour, till the deck was littered with the more valuable part of the ship's cargo. The *Griffin* was by now close to the entrance to the bay, and Bariot called out to the Englishman to come down.

Arnold, whose indignation had been steadily rising during his long spell aloft, had determined to make one public protest in his leader's name. He walked up now to Batiste Bariot as he stood with the others about him.

"Monsieur Bariot," said he, firmly, "I have sworn service to the Sieur de la Salle, and whether all this is his service or no each man here can judge. Monsieur distrusted you, and gave me this, lest you should play the traitor." Arnold slipped out La Salle's warrant as he spoke. "In the name of Monsieur I claim command of his ship, and here is my authority!"

"And here is mine," answered Bariot, coolly. "Do you see this, Englishman?" Bariot snatched a pistol from his belt, and pointed it at the young man's face.

With sudden desperation Arnold struck up the barrel and rushed upon the traitor. They fell to the deck, locked in a fierce grip. But at Bariot's shout as he fell the others flung themselves on his assailant, and in a few minutes Arnold lay panting on the deck, bound fast hand and foot. Bariot delivered him a savage kick as he lay helpless.

"English pig!" cried he, shaking his fist at the fallen man, "I will teach you manners, but not yet!"

He went to the wheel again, and brought the ship into the little bay. They anchored her, and lowered a boat. Bariot, after coming to test his prisoner's cords, left the wounded man and another to guard him, and taking the rest with him, left the ship.

They were away a long time. Arnold's guards grew hungry, and one went to fetch food. The prisoner, as a

forlorn hope, turned to the other, the man with the broken arm.

"My lad," said he, "if you will set me free, and cut the cable, I will take the ship to Niagara, and you and your comrade will earn a high reward. Monsieur the Count of Frontenac, who is behind the Sieur de la Salle, has an open hand for those who serve him well. And behind the Count of Frontenac there is the King."

The fellow started, and peered at his prisoner with foxy eyes.

"It must be done quickly," said Arnold, following up his stroke. "A moment of resolution, comrade, and you will earn honour and wealth instead of the gallows. Let the ship swing free and the thing is done."

"There is no wind," said the man.

"Wind enough for a ship that runs free," answered the prisoner.

"Monsieur Bariot is a terrible man," said the other.

"Are we not three men on deck," said Arnold, "and they three in a little boat? A shot would sink them."

"One of them is my friend," argued the fellow.

"Let him look to his neck, and you to yours," urged Arnold, feeling that he was losing his cause. "Save the ship and I will save your necks, and you will get great rewards."

"My comrade comes," replied the man after a pause. "We will talk of it while we eat, monsieur."

They did so, and shared their meal with Arnold. But the man with the hurt arm had lost too much blood to be ripe for sudden daring. He shook his head as he munched.

"The idea has its merits, monsieur," said he, coolly. "But you know it is the season for storms. It is a long and dangerous voyage, and even if we could work the ship there is not one of us knows the country save Monsieur Bariot. He will lead us overland to Montreal, where we

shall find good markets for what we bring. Bariot for me! ”

“ And me,” nodded the other.

“ Eh bien,” said Arnold; “ when you mount the gallows, comrades, remember that I gave you good advice.” And in bitterness of heart he resigned himself to his fate.

Soon afterwards there was the plash of oars alongside, and Bariot returned aboard with the other two sailors. He seemed in high spirits, and smote his hands together as he stepped on deck.

“ I have brought three fine canoes, mes enfants,” said he. “ Make haste and load them. But first, put me this gentleman in the ship’s boat. Monsieur Firle and I must have a little conversation quite by ourselves, and I know of a quiet spot. Put a bottle or so of wine in the boat, and a brace of wild-fowl. It may be we shall sup together.” He laughed unpleasantly.

In a few minutes Arnold found himself lowered over the side of the *Griffin*, all bound as he was, into the boat which lay there. Beside the boat he saw three large canoes. Bariot climbed down after him into the boat, and taking the oars, pulled away from the ship. His black eyes, as he rowed, watched his prisoner with an evil light of triumph.

“ Not so cold as swimming, Englishman, hein? ” said he, presently. “ We can talk freely on the island. A pleasant spot, Monsieur Firle—the Isle of the Dead? ”

“ You did not always think so, I believe,” said Arnold.

“ Ha! You have me there, pardieu! ” laughed the pilot, grimly. “ But since you were so good as to explain to the Sieur de la Salle in my hearing certain curiosities of the isle, I have got over all that. I revisit the isle with pleasurable anticipations.”

“ I do not share them with you,” Arnold forced himself to say. At least he would not whine before his enemy.

Batiste Bariot leaned back his head and laughed aloud, showing his great throat with its growth of black beard.

"Mais!" cried he. "One sees you are a humorist, monsieur. I foresee a merry hour. Believe me, I have thought out a very passable diversion."

"You will murder me, I suppose, as you did the others," said the Englishman, bluntly.

"Murder? What words you use, Monsieur Firle! A murder—*bon dieu!* No, no. You played a joke on me—an excellent one. Now I play one on you."

The boat's nose grated on the beach, and Bariot sat for a moment and considered his prisoner.

"Here we are," said he, "and if I am not to carry you I must give you the use of your feet." He stooped and unfastened the knotted cord which bound the young man's legs. Making a slip-knot with it, he put the noose about Arnold's neck and drew it close, but not to strangulation point. Then he helped his prisoner ashore, and taking the slack of the cord in his left hand, and a pistol from his belt in his right, he led the way inland. "It would be unwise to try to run away," he remarked, with a playful tug on the cord.

But indeed his victim was in no state to run. His legs were stiff with lying bound so long, and he walked with difficulty.

There was not far to go. When they had penetrated a little way into the woodland, Bariot stopped beneath a tree, which had a branch projecting almost horizontally from the stem, some ten feet from the ground. Placing his prisoner under the branch, a couple of yards from its parting with the trunk, he tossed the free end of the cord over the branch, caught it again the other side, and repeated this process till he had made three turns about the branch. Then he made it fast. As Arnold stood, the cord ran up straight from his neck to the tree, not tight, but without an inch to spare for movement on his part.

He could neither sit down upon the ground nor reach the tree to lean.

With a cold shudder he began to realize the fiendish plan of his enemy. But Bariot had not yet done.

He stood and gazed about him a moment, then turned to the Englishman, and this time his hate was unveiled. "You face westwards, Monsieur Firle—the direction of the sunset," he said with a grin. "I think there will be a fine sunset. The wood is not thick here, and as you see, one catches a glimpse of the lake. You will enjoy the spectacle. Stay though—I was nearly forgetting! You may grow hungry, and hunger, pardieu! spoils the best show of man or nature."

He went away, and brought back the provisions which he had had placed in the boat. Tying these to a string, he tossed the end of the string over the branch as he had done the cord, and suspended them a couple of yards in front of Arnold. Then, standing with legs apart and arms akimbo, he grimly surveyed his work.

"There is my little joke, all complete," said he. "What do you think of it?"

"Traitor and bully!" cried Arnold. "Kill me and have done!"

"What! Murder an unarmed man! What must you think of me! No, indeed. But since you abuse my hospitality, and call me hard names, I must leave you. You will have a quiet night with the Chief and his son. The Indians will not disturb your slumbers. Bonne nuit, Monsieur Spy!"

With a grimace and a bow Batiste Bariot turned away. But with these mockeries his hate could not be satisfied. When he had made a few steps he ran back. "Bah!" he cried fiercely, "did you think to beat Batiste Bariot, you English pig!" And he spat viciously in his victim's face. Then he strode off through the woodland, and in a few minutes Arnold heard the boat pushed off from the beach, and knew himself abandoned to his fate.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE BROWN BEAR

THE afternoon was already far advanced, and the autumn sun was dipping towards the lake. A dozen times, in his exhaustion and despair, Arnold Firlé was minded to end his sufferings, and allow the deadly cord that caressed his throat to do its fatal work. Sooner or later he knew that death must come. Weariness must overcome him, his limbs give way beneath him, and his life expire in the agony of strangulation. Why delay the inevitable end?

Yet again and again he fought down his despair. Well he knew there was no hope of any human being coming within call. The Indians shunned this place as bewitched, and the only white men within many leagues were those who had decreed his death. As he stood with aching knees and reeling brain, he thought of Marjorie, Lady Vane, exposed to the evil cunning of Michel; he thought of La Salle, his chivalrous leader, looking in vain for the succour that could never reach him now. But the bitterest reflection of all was that the ordeal upon which he had entered had gone against him, seeming to becloud the very justice of Heaven. What could Marjorie now think of him, when by the test that he himself had challenged he stood condemned as the murderer of his cousin?

Greedily the young man watched the red sun sinking lower, with the conviction that this sunset was his last. It vanished below the water, and the brief twilight faded into night. Just such a night it was as when he had swum the strait to learn the treachery of the man who had set him here to die. The moon was a little higher now in the

sky, and her pale light, filtering through the scattered woods, showed him the tree boles in ghostly outline around him. Silence reigned in the isle.

The workings of the prisoner's brain became disordered. From time to time he lost the knowledge of his surroundings, and then by fits and starts the pain in his aching legs recalled him with a thrill of horror to a sense of his position.

Ah! What was that? A vast dark shape moved swaying before his failing eyes. A hot breath was on his face. Instinctively he sought to move back, and instantly the cord about his neck tightened painfully. Was this the end? He resumed his former position, but the pressure of the cord upon his throat was cruel. Suddenly he recognized the shape which moved before him. It was a large brown bear. The pale light glinted in its little eyes as it stood up on its hind legs fronting him, with its fore-paws extended. The creature, he realized, was about to hug him, as he had heard of such animals doing. Well, it would only a little accelerate the end, for he felt that he was at the limit of his powers.

But the bear, having straddled up to him, dropped again upon all fours and turned its back. He saw it lock up to where the wild-fowl were tied upon the branch. In vain it strove to reach the dainties, and growled with angry disappointment. It squatted on its haunches for some moments with an almost human air of consideration, and finally, as though it had reached a solution of the problem, it came forward again. But not this time to the stationary man. Passing behind him, it clambered with heavy agility into the tree, and began to make its way along the extended branch. With an ease surprising in so big a creature, it arrived at the point where the string was fastened about the branch, and crouching on the latter reached down a paw after the dangling dainties. Again and again they eluded its claws, till at length, losing patience, the beast made a swift lunge at the dead birds as

they swung at the string's end. There was a sudden violent crackling, and next moment bear and branch crashed to the ground together, striking down in their fall the man who stood beneath.

Scared by such an unlooked-for development of the situation, the bear made off, and for some minutes Arnold lay dazed by the blow which had saved him.

When at length he understood how he had been reprieved, a great hope leaped up in his heart. Bound as he was, weary almost to death, helpless in a place to which no help could come, and with none but enemies within many leagues, it yet seemed to him that some beneficent power had snatched him from the very brink of doom. He burned with a new courage.

He tried to move his hands, and though the pain of his bonds was great, his fingers were not yet numb. To stand erect was beyond his power. Moreover, the strangling cord was so tight about his neck that a little more pressure would be fatal. But he could move a few feet without the cord pulling. He writhed towards the broken wine-bottles, and lying on his back got a piece of broken glass in the fingers of his right hand. Then persistently, though with great difficulty, he set himself to work it to and fro upon the cords which bit his flesh.

So slight was the movement he was able to make with his fingers, that by the time the first strands gave way Arnold was in a perspiration of pain and exhaustion. He lay awhile and rested, then went at his task again, till at last his perseverance was rewarded and his hands were free. He took the noose from his neck and stood up.

He felt very faint and dizzy, but he was filled with a renewed faith in his destiny. In the body of one of the broken bottles a little wine remained unspilled, and Arnold drank it eagerly, and ate a few mouthfuls of bread, which put fresh life into him. Taking up the rest of the provisions, he crept away some distance from that terrible

spot, and in a little open glade stretched himself on the ground to rest.

The night was very bright and still. Soon Arnold began to wonder at the clearness of everything about him, for the moon was young yet, and there seemed a strange quality in the brightness of the sky.

At length Arnold rose and walked across the isle to the beach at the point opposite which the *Griffin* had anchored. Before he emerged from the trees the explanation of the night's brightness was already plain.

A ruddy and yellow glare shone in his face from the water, and a sound of crackling and a low roaring was audible. Keeping to the cover, Arnold made his way to the top of the beach. Right in front of him the *Griffin* lay, a blaze of fire from stem to stern. The leaping flames had seized upon her rigging; they sprang from spar to spar. The hempen shrouds had gone. Clouds of smoke rolled about the ship, and showers of whirling sparks flashed out from the smoke. Her tall masts were brightly outlined in glowing fire—a beautiful and terrible sight. Even as Arnold watched her mainmast swayed, a long needle of light against the dark smoke, and with a loud hiss fell into the water. Wild shouts greeted its fall, and then he perceived, at some distance from the burning vessel, the dark shapes of canoes upon the water, filled with wondering savages. In vain he peered from canoe to canoe, searching for the shipmates who had doomed him to death. There was no white man in that flotilla.

Suddenly, as with a sorrowful heart the young sailor watched the gallant little ship in her death throes, there came a blinding flash and a stunning explosion. Blazing masses were hurled far in all directions, and a shriek of fear went up from the canoes. The burning vessel had vanished. The flaming vision had resolved itself into a few glowing timbers scattered upon the lake, and a great

white-brown cloud of smoke and steam which slowly dispersed in the pale moonlight.

Arnold Firle experienced at that moment a feeling of utter loneliness. Though he had guessed the *Griffin* was to be abandoned, unconsciously he had been looking to the derelict ship as his ally. That ruthless explosion had shattered the last hopes he might have had from her.

For a long while he lay watching the now empty strait. The floating timbers had burned themselves out, and the canoes with their occupants had returned to the native village, when at last Arnold bestirred himself. Leaving the beach again, he found a clump of bushes on a dry slope, and crawled in among them. His would-be murderers had not troubled to remove his belt when they bound him, and his knife was still in it. He took it out and laid it beside him, then stretched himself on the ground and slept the sleep of exhaustion.

When he awoke it was broad day. The keen morning air made him shiver, but he breakfasted heartily from his small store, and with the strengthening sunshine his spirits revived. All that day he spent upon the isle, not daring to show himself, but when night fell again he set about his preparations to escape. Going down to the beach, he undressed and made a bundle of his provisions, his clothes and his knife. This he placed upon a miniature raft which he had cut out of boughs, and he attached to the raft a short length of the cord which had bound him, and fastened the other end about his body. Then he entered the water and struck out for the mainland.

It was a long swim and a cold one, for the temperature of the water had lowered with the advance of the season, and the drag of the little raft made progress slow and difficult. Midway of the strait Arnold came upon a great charred beam from the ship, and grasping this, rested a few moments. But the cold was beginning to numb him and he dared not wait. He swam on, more and more

slowly as he advanced. He felt the cramp creeping over his limbs, his breath came gaspingly, and still the shore seemed perilously far. The panic that will attack the strongest swimmer when he feels his strength giving out began to invade him. Time after time he fought it down. Just as he felt the last struggle at hand his foot touched bottom, and nerved by that contact, he struggled forward over a long submerged bank of sand and reached the shore.

Arnold dressed himself and struck boldly southward along the coast. His plan was a desperate one—no less than to follow the coasts of the vast inland seas through which the *Griffin* had sailed, till he should reach the *Sieur de la Salle's* fort on the Niagara River. That must be, he knew, a journey of many hundreds of leagues, a journey beset with peril from wild beasts and wilder men, with peril of torrent and swamp, with the cruel winter daily drawing nearer. Yet he knew no other way to serve his leader, and to save the woman whom he loved.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE CHRISTMAS CAMP

IT was Christmas Day, and a bitter gale was blowing off the lake of the Hurons. The long-shore ice, crunching and grinding under the onrush of the breakers, sent up a dismal roar which could be heard far inland. The air was filled with a fine dry snow-dust, which was not falling from above, but was caught up from the ground by the wind and whirled like flying sand before the gusts.

At a little distance from the lake a solitary figure stumbled slowly southwards. The man, who was Arnold Firle, bore but little semblance of humanity. Gaunt and red-eyed, with sunken cheeks and matted hair and beard, none would have recognized him for the stalwart young sailor who had been left more than two months since to his fate on the Isle of the Dead. He seemed, indeed, more animal than man, for over his torn clothing he wore the skin of a bear, and his face was almost wolfish with hunger. Two months, and still the life was in him, though ebbing fast, and still he fought his way towards the south.

The light of the short day was fading. A red fox crossed his path, peering round wonderingly at the stumbling figure. At sight of the little creature the wanderer sprang forward with a bound like a beast of prey, his knife raised to strike. But the fox vanished like a streak, and the man, exhausted by the effort, fell forward on the snow with a groan. Raising himself at last, he staggered to a fir tree, and leaned against its stem.

Was this to be the end? Had he suffered so much, and fought against all the powers of the wilderness for so long, to perish thus at last? He shivered, and drew the

bearskin more closely round his emaciated body. But for that skin he would long ago have frozen. He had come upon the bear asleep, and with the courage of desperation had flung himself on the beast and plunged his knife straight to its heart. That incident passed through his memory now, with many another scene of his wanderings—the fish snared from the lake and eaten raw, the wild berries of the woods, the little creatures that he had captured and devoured, the holes scooped at night in the snow for shelter. But now he felt he would never survive another of those nights in the freezing woods.

From near at hand the long howl of a wolf sounded through the gale. Instinctively Arnold's hand went to his knife, but this time the weapon remained in its sheath. He had killed a wolf ere now in single fight—he had even eaten its flesh in his ravening hunger. But this time the brute, if it came, must have its way. Arnold sank on his knees in the snow at the fir tree's foot.

The howl of the wolf sounded again, this time quite close, and from further off another answered it from the woods. The kneeling man did not even look up. His lips moved as if he prayed.

From the twilight depths of the forest two dark shapes emerged, moving swiftly over the white carpet of the snow. With easy, regular swing they glided on their snowshoes—tall, powerful forms of men, each with a musket in his hand and a burden on his back. They uttered the wolf-cry as they ran, but suddenly it broke in the middle as they caught sight of the kneeling figure. They stopped by the fir tree, and stood a moment impassive beside Arnold. Their faces were frightfully painted, and their heads bristled with long feathers.

One stooped and touched the shoulder of the Englishman, who looked up like a man in a dream. In the roar of the gale he had not heard their approach. But his sunken eyes kindled instantly at the sight of what they

carried on their backs, and he rose to his feet. He pointed wildly to the game, and then to his open mouth. That they were Iroquois warriors on the war-trail was nothing to him now.

Without a word said, one of the savages cut a piece of flesh from the mass and handed it, all raw and bleeding, to the famished man. The other produced a handful of crushed boiled corn, which he gave to Arnold. They stood like graven images and watched him while he ate. Then one pointed with his hand, and they set off again, more slowly, that he might follow.

By-and-by a light shone in front, and descending a bank they came to a sheltered place where half a dozen great fires blazed. Beside the fires stacks of wood lay piled in cleared spaces, and about them moved a nightmare assemblage of perhaps two hundred warriors, ghastly with war-paint. Arnold was made to sit down in the glow of one of the fires, where more food was given him, and a dirty blanket was flung over his shoulders. When he had eaten, and drunk a draught of fiery spirit, there came to him one who, for all his grotesque hideousness, had the commanding air of a chief. This personage squatted on the ground beside him, and peered into his face with little beady eyes.

"You French man?" he inquired in that language.

Arnold nodded, reflecting that as a Frenchman his chances of life would be greatest among these savages.

"You brave?" inquired the chief.

Arnold nodded again, modesty in such surroundings being an ineffective virtue. "I am a friend to Onontio," said he in the Iroquois, using the name by which the Count of Frontenac was known to the natives.

Without betraying the least surprise that a white man should speak his tongue, the Iroquois proceeded with his catechism.

"Why does a friend of Onontio perish in the forest alone?"

"My canoe was wrecked," said Arnold. "For seventy days I have wandered in the woods."

The savage clapped his hand to his mouth. "The Father of Life must be your friend, Frenchman," said he. "Can you shoot with a gun?"

"Give me one and see."

The chief called one of his men, and a musket was placed in Arnold's hands. Then the man who had been summoned went away to a little distance, and stooping to the snow, commenced to drag something which lay there towards the nearest of the forest trees. He stood it up against the tree and retired, and Arnold saw that the object was a man.

"Shoot," ordered the chief in his emotionless voice.

"Why should I shoot a man with whom I have no quarrel?" asked the Englishman.

"He is no longer a man," said the Iroquois. "He died to-day of a pestilence, and the wind has frozen him. Shoot, and fear nothing."

Arnold looked, and though in his weakness he scarce dared trust his sight, he saw that the figure was nude, and leaned motionless where it had been placed. He raised the musket and fired. The chief caught up a flaming brand from the fire, and ran to the tree. Then returning, he patted the young man's arm. "It is good," he grunted. "The bullet pierced his forehead, and smashed the bones of his head. Frenchman, you shall come with us, for the spirits have sent you. We go to harry those dogs, the Illinois. Last night I had a vision in my sleep. I dreamed that one of us lay dead in our midst, yet when I counted the living, behold, their number was the same! It is a good omen. See, I have given you the dead man's bed." He pointed to the dirty blanket. "Now sleep, for though you are weak with fasting, to-morrow we go forward."

And Arnold Firle obeyed. Wrapped in his warm bearskin, and in the blanket of the warrior who had died of the pestilence, he slept that night beside the roaring Indian campfires as he had not slept for many awful weeks, without fear for the present or anxiety for the future. The Heaven to which he had appealed had stretched out a hand to save him again in his utmost need. He slept, and in his dreams he was back again beside the Rundle River, leaning over the parapet of the bridge with Marjorie at his side. And as they watched, he thought his cousin the Earl passed beneath with Michel the Jesuits' man, and after them a fleet of birch-bark craft filled with the red men. One and all looked up as they passed with stony, expressionless eyes, but they made no sound, and when he went to the other side of the bridge to see the canoes emerge, there was nothing but the summer sunlight glinting on the stream.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE BATTLE IN THE NIGHT

DAY after day the hunters of blood moved southwards through the wilderness. A stranger to the country, coming suddenly among them, might have thought himself among a company of fiends. Their fierce and cruel faces, like birds of prey, were daubed and painted in violent colours. Their matted black hair above was stuck with feathers, and beaks of birds, the quills of the porcupine, or the teeth and horns of beasts. Their gaunt bodies were clothed with tunics and leggings of skins, with here and there a robe of beaver fur or the skin of a bear. A few had firearms, but mostly their bony brown fingers clutched a bow. Hatchets and knives, quivers of arrows, and shields of raw bison hide made up their armament. All day long, while the short winter daylight held, they pressed forward tirelessly over the dazzling snowy wastes and through the black colonnade of the fir forests. Sometimes they killed a few rabbits, beaver or porcupine, or shot a caribou or moose, and then they feasted gluttonously from the kettles slung over their fires, but for the most part they travelled half famishing on a diet of parched corn meal and maple sugar. Their wide snowshoes, like webbed feet, kept them above the snow. At night, sitting crouched like apes or lying rolled in their blankets beside their roaring fire, puffing the tobacco smoke from their carved stone pipes, they could hear the loud cracklings of the frost in the forest trees, like sudden pistol firing.

At first it had seemed to Arnold Firle that he must give out with the strain of these forced marches. But he

had served a hard apprenticeship in his weeks of loneliness, and day after day he endured.

One night, as they sat by the fire, the chief, who had taken him under his protection, drew his hatchet from his girdle and began to improve its edge with a great stone. He stroked the sharpened edge with his claw-like fingers. "To-morrow, my little one, you shall drink well!" said he.

Then he turned to Arnold, and touched the barrel of his musket. "He will speak good words to-morrow, brother," said he.

"To-morrow?" repeated Arnold, starting, for he had no quarrel in which to fight.

The chief nodded. "Shoot straight, brother. We are in the country of those dogs, the Illinois."

"Have no fear, brother," answered the Englishman. But in his heart he dreaded that day of savage battle.

Next day, at noon, they came upon a native fishing in a hole in the ice of a river. He fled, but was brought back.

"Lead us to your town, brother, and you shall go back to your fish," said the chief to him. But he would not speak, and when they tortured him he gave back taunt for taunt until they cut out his tongue. At the scene which followed Arnold Firlé went sick. In vain he besought mercy for the captive wretch. In vain he levelled at him his own musket, to put an end to his sufferings. The Iroquois angrily struck down the weapon and closed about him with menacing looks. Only the intervention of the chief availed to save him from the vengeance of the warriors.

The hapless Illinois proved well his mettle, dumbly refusing again and again their offer of mercy if he would show the way to his town. When death came at last to his release his savage tormentors hacked out his heart, roasted it, and the principal among them, dividing it in minute pieces, devoured it to increase their valour.

At sunset that day they camped without a fire, lest it should betray them to their prey. Huddled in holes dug

in a great drift, they ate their meal under the sparkle of the stars, and lay down beside their weapons to await the dawn.

But while the night was still young, the quick ear of a savage sentry caught a faint sound through the darkness, and he roused the sleeping camp. The chief stood still and listened hard, then nodded gravely. "It is the war-song of the Illinois," said he. "We have not been secret enough, my brothers. Come now!"

Away they sped through the starry darkness, like a pack of wolves upon the scent. What had been a mere murmur of a sound, almost inaudible to the ears of the Englishman, grew rapidly in strength and volume—a noise of discordant shouting, hoarse singing, and the banging of weapons and war-drums. A red glare began to show through the trees, and brightened as they advanced, till the reflection of it was on their faces.

The chief, swinging along beside Arnold, touched his arm.

"Those dogs," said he, "think to frighten us and show that they are watchful. But already their voices grow weary, brother. Soon they will sleep, and they will not awaken!" He bared his teeth as he spoke.

At length the Iroquois raiders, keeping to the cover of the forest edge, approached the Illinois village. The dark lines of its enclosing palisades showed sharply against the brightness of blazing fires within. Here and there the line of the stockade was broken by a high watch-tower.

Already the chief's prophecy was partly fulfilled. The din within the enclosure was dying down as the morning approached. The Iroquois stationed his destroying bands at different points about the circuit of the palisades, whence, at the sound of his war-shout, they might rush at once to the attack from half a dozen places. He kept Arnold Firlé in his own band of some fifty warriors.

Silence was settling now upon the doomed encampment. "They are weary. It will be a good slaughter,"

whispered the chief, his eyes glittering in the firelight. "Come hither, brother."

Crouching in the soft snow, he made Arnold do the like, and brought him into the cover of a fallen tree which lay within easy range of the palisades. "Lie here, and when you see an Illinois god above the stockade, shoot straight!" he muttered. "Now you shall see, Frenchman, how a chief of my people leads his warriors to fight."

He beckoned to one of his men to follow, and together, silent as cats, they crept from cover, and approached the palisades. Not a warrior stirred in the village now.

Arnold, crouching in the snow, musket at elbow, finger on trigger, asked himself what he would do when an Illinois appeared. Would he shoot, or by holding his fire at a critical moment would he expose himself to the vengeance of those savages waiting in the wood behind?

He had no need to find an answer. Even as he pondered the problem, the two Iroquois reached the black shadow below a watch-tower. With a silent agility which he could not but admire the chief climbed up the rough-hewn timber. Arnold saw him drop to the platform behind the palisade. While the second man was following him, Arnold saw the chief raise a fur-clad body in his powerful arms, hold it a moment a black patch against the firelight, then thrust it over the pointed stakes upon the snow outside. Next moment the blood-curdling screech of the murderer proclaimed the first victim's death, and while the lurking Iroquois rushed to the onslaught howling like leopards unleashed, the wretched Illinois awoke to face their doom with what courage they might. The night was filled with the din of mutual fury, yell and counter-yell of struggling savage foes, the crash of axes on wood, and the report of firearms. Dark figures of men leaped into visibility on the platforms behind the nearer palisades. Here and there flames burst out, where the invaders, swarming over the defences, had set fire to the lodges of the enemy.

Arnold lay and watched the hideous fray like one in a nightmare. Near him, almost where the chief had entered, the stockade and the watch-tower were in flames, and the heat of the conflagration reached him where he lay. The fire had eaten deep into the lower part of the fabric ere the flames burst out above, making the tower like a gigantic torch. Suddenly the lower part of the tower, unable to support longer the weight of the blazing superstructure, gave way, and with a crash and a cloud of sparks the tower collapsed, smashing in its fall a part of the stockade, and leaving open to Arnold's view a narrow space through which he could see right into the village.

It was like gazing into an inferno. Bodies, half-consumed, lay amid the fires. The hatchet and club of the conquerors descended alike on man, woman and child. The Illinois were making fierce resistance, and yell still answered yell in the full rage of battle.

Suddenly, in the broken gap in the stockade, across which tongues of flame from the burning tower were licking, there came leaping a black figure, whose long, close habit impeded him as he ran. It was a Jesuit priest, with looped black hat crammed down upon his eyes, the rosary at his waist lifting and falling as he leaped and stumbled on. Clutched fast in his arms he held a child. A second figure, smeared with blood and war-paint, and yelling in exultation, sprang out after the fugitive, hatchet in hand. The priest ran towards the forest. He stumbled, and fell upon his knees, covering the child with his body, and the Iroquois running behind swung up his weapon for the blow.

That instant Arnold's musket spoke. The yell of the savage died in his throat. He gave a convulsive bound and fell dead upon the snow. The priest rose to his feet as Arnold ran to meet him. He had a lean and bony face, but the light of a great devotion shone in his eyes. His cassock was blood-stained. When he saw it was a white

man who stood beside him, he held up one hand with a commanding gesture, then fell on his knees, and laid the little body he had carried on the snow. Arnold saw an Indian boy of perhaps ten years, wounded to the death. The child's eyes sought those of the priest with a piteous, trustful look. His small life was ebbing fast. The Jesuit's lips moved. His hand made the sign of the cross upon the dying little one. Arnold understood that this was a young convert for whom the Jesuit was performing the last rites of his church, and stepping quickly between the priest and the blazing village, he set himself to reload, resolved that if straight shooting could secure it, those prayers should go uninterrupted.

But no more warriors issued from the inferno behind the burning wall. Close to Arnold lay the dead Indian whom he had shot. With a momentary qualm he recognized the Iroquois chief himself. Well, there would be short shrift for him now, into whosoever hands he might fall.

A touch upon his shoulder made him turn. The Jesuit stood beside him, calm, though the tears streamed silently from his eyes.

"It is over, and God's lamb is in His fold," said he. "Who are you, my son?"

"I was a prisoner with the Iroquois, father."

"I am Hilaire, a missionary to these heathen here," said the priest. "In a whole year of labour only this boy has been brought to the faith, and they have slain him."

"Come, let us be gone," said Arnold, "before they seek their leader, whom I have shot. Hasten, father!" He seized the Jesuit by the arm and hurried him under the trees and into the forest depths. Gradually the sounds of conflict died behind, but not till they had put some miles between themselves and that scene of carnage did they dare to rest. They stood together on the banks of a frozen river. Silence surrounded them, and beyond the farther shore the sky was turning pink with the dawn.

CHAPTER XXX

HOW JACQUES KEPT FAITH

IT was a week after the midnight battle, and a raw February day was closing. On the banks of the frozen river whose course they had followed stood Arnold and Hilaire, and an Indian hunter whom they had met in the woods. Not far away the light of several fires shone through the gloaming.

"Yonder is your goal, Monsieur Firlé," said the Jesuit. "There is the great town of the Illinois, where, it is said, Monsieur de la Salle and his men have made their winter quarters. You have reached your journey's end."

"Say rather it's beginning, father," answered the Englishman. "Would that the end lay so clearly before me!"

Under the guidance of Hilaire, to whom he had confided so much of his adventures as he deemed prudent in the interests of La Salle, Arnold had unexpectedly picked up the tracks of the expedition. And in the company of this courageous priest he had learned to understand something of that spirit in which, as La Salle had described to him, the martyrs of the Order had formerly sown the seed of their faith among the ferocious dwellers in this western wilderness.

"Let us go down into the town, father," said he.

The Jesuit hesitated. "I have heard that Monsieur de la Salle has little love for my Order," said he.

"La Salle is a brave man, who loves all brave men," answered Arnold. "Come!"

But when they had gone a little further the priest stopped.

"Hark!" he muttered. "I think they have a prisoner. Ah! pitiful Virgin!"

"Come, father," the Englishman persisted.

"They will be mad with the lust of cruelty!" exclaimed the Jesuit. "To enter the town is to put your life in jeopardy."

Arnold gave a short laugh. "It has been in jeopardy these many months, good father," said he, "and no power of mine has saved it. I have that to tell Monsieur de la Salle which has waited too long already. I am going on."

Hilaire hesitated, and a shudder passed over him at the sounds he heard. Then suddenly he grasped his companion's hand. "You shame me, Englishman!" he cried, and set out briskly towards the glare of the fires.

When they came to the protecting palisades of the town they found the gate open, and passed in unchallenged. Immediately they were in the thick of an excited multitude of Illinois, most of whom carried torches in their hands. No courage could save them now, if once the caprice of the savages should turn against them. They passed a platform, on which a stake was raised, with slow fires burning round it. But there was no victim bound there. The native hunter, who kept beside them, accosted one of his countrymen, then turned to Hilaire and said some words with a smile of cruel triumph.

Arnold saw that the face of his companion underwent a swift change. His thin cheeks paled in the torchlight, but into his eyes came a look of immovable resolve.

"What does he say?" asked the young man.

The Jesuit's voice was unsteady as he answered. "It is an Iroquois prisoner they have taken—one who has travelled from a great distance. He has been tortured already, but they have reserved him to run the gauntlet."

"What is that?" Arnold felt a shiver of dread.

"Do not ask! Ah, heaven—and he is a Christian, for this man says he wears a crucifix about his neck." For a

moment the priest stood still amid the thronging, staring savages, his head bowed, his hands crossed upon his breast. Then he looked up. "Come," said he in a voice of authority. "It is to be in the great lodge of their chief."

In the momentary expectation of being attacked, Arnold walked quickly beside his companion. Curious glances were turned on them. Wild faces peered suddenly into theirs, but none molested them. It seemed there was more pressing business in hand. They came with the crowd into a vast lodge, similar in shape and construction to that into which Arnold and Lady Vane had adventured at Fort Frontenac.

Down the midst of the huge hall six fires blazed fiercely, at intervals of about a score of yards. On either side the fires, in long grim lines, stood ranged the warriors of the Illinois, their fierce countenances lit by the dancing flames, their right hands grasping thick torches of pine. At a little space behind the lines of the fighting-men, and running on each side of the lodge down its entire length, were the low platforms whereon at ordinary times the inhabitants of the great building dwelt. Now they were filled with eager watchers. The straining faces, expectant and pitiless, peered towards the further extremity of the hall, whence came savage laughter and jeers. The smoke from the crackling fires and the torches filled the high body of the lodge, and made its escape through openings in the roof. It was a weird and wild scene, but as yet its horror was hidden.

Hilaire the Jesuit, followed by Arnold Firle, sprang to a place on the nearest platform. Half a dozen hooked faces were turned in amazement to the two white strangers, and a babel of voices began around them. But suddenly all were stilled by a cry from the further end.

Amid a roar of derisive shouts an agonized figure was seen running down the midst, leaping in frenzy through the red heart of the fires. As he came on the yelling

warriors belaboured his naked body with their torches, goading him to fresh feats of desperate agility. He came nearly to the end of the line, and then Arnold perceived that the wretch's arms were bound behind him.

As he neared the place where the two white men crouched in horror, the Iroquois, whose body was covered with wounds, made a desperate rush to break through the ranks of his tormentors. With fierce shouts and pitiless laughter they thrust him back, so that he fell on the edge of a fire. He bounded up. In his agony he had freed his hands, and away he fled again to the further end of the hall.

Arnold wildly clutched the priest at his side. "I know him! I know him! Oh—merciful Heaven!" The words came from him almost in a scream. He knew that tortured face. He knew the little crucifix that still dangled from the victim's neck. He had seen it last on the neck of Lady Vane at the fort.

The Jesuit, with set face but awful eyes, held his companion's arms with hands that shook violently. "Pray for him, my son!" he commanded. But Arnold was past the power to pray.

The din of screeching approached again. Yonder came the tortured figure, helter-skelter through the smoke and flame. Right to the hither end of the lodge he ran, and with eyes of madness turned to glare around. For a brief moment the shouting paused.

Arnold sprang to his feet. "Jacques!" he cried in a voice that rang across the lodge. "To me, Jacques! To me!"

The staggering Iroquois straightened himself. His staring eyes lighted on the tall figure of the young Englishman erect among his foes.

Every eye in that savage crowd turned suddenly on Arnold, and a silence of sheer surprise fell on all. In the face of the Iroquois the fortitude of the hardened warrior

for a moment resumed its sway. In the midst of his agony he smiled.

"Oh, my white brother, I have served you truly!" he cried, "though she whom you set me to guard is in your enemy's hand. A month hence she sent me to seek you, and gave me this for a charm." He touched the crucifix at his throat. "'Tell him to hasten,' she said. Now throw me a knife quickly, O my brother, that I may die a man's death before these dogs!"

Without a moment's reflection, in a passion of revolt against the whole horrible scene, Arnold snatched his knife from his side and flung it over the heads of the fighting-men. Jacques the Iroquois caught it deftly with a red, dripping hand. Shouting the war-cry of his nation, he hurled himself like a wild animal upon the nearest of his foes, struck him to the heart, and then, swiftly withdrawing the weapon, plunged it in his own breast and fell back.

Hilaire the Jesuit gasped, and a scream of balked fury burst from the savage concourse. But heedless of their rage Hilaire sprang down. He pushed his way through the line of shouting warriors as though they had been schoolboys, and in sheer amazement at his temerity the Illinois stood still. In the pause that followed Arnold saw the priest on his knees beside the expiring Iroquois. Then the murderous howl of the Indians broke out afresh, and the next minute the two white men, each held fast by two gaunt and muscular savages, and surrounded by a yelling crowd, were being dragged through the Illinois town to the spot where the torture-stake stood on its grim platform.

CHAPTER XXXI

LA SALLE

FIRST the Illinois stripped off their victims' clothes; then, setting them back to back against the post, they bound them fast.

"Shiver not, brothers!" they cried in derision. "If you are cold, you shall soon be warm!" And they pointed tauntingly to the fires still burning in large clay vessels near the stake, while some hideous hags set themselves to fan the embers back to life.

Every minute the crowd about the platform increased in numbers and in frenzy. There had been many spectators in the great lodge of the chief, but here in the open there was room for all. It seemed that the entire population of the town had now come together for the spectacle.

Arnold, sick with apprehension, heard the Jesuit's voice behind him, steady in prayer.

A tall old warrior stepped forward on the platform, and held up his hands for silence to the crowd. Then with a cruel leer he turned to the captives. The fires were brightening again.

"First we will wash you, brothers," cried the old man in a loud voice, "for we see you have travelled far to receive our caresses."

He gave a signal, and a number of men approached bearing vessels of half-melted snow-water. The freezing mixture was hurled in gallons over the heads of the naked victims.

"Ah—how that refreshes you!" jeered the leading tormentor, and the crowd shouted with delight as the helpless men gasped and shivered under the ordeal. "Can it be that you are so soon cold!" cried the old savage. "My brothers, we must warm you!" He went to the

nearest of the fires, and drew out a long iron rod that had been heating there. With this he approached the Jesuit and slowly drew the glowing end downwards and transversely across his bare chest. The damp flesh hissed under the touch of the metal, but not a sound escaped the lion-hearted priest. The Illinois screamed and danced with enjoyment. The torturer thrust the iron again into the fire, and Arnold Firlé summoned all his fortitude to emulate as best he might his brave companion. His despairing gaze travelled over the demoniac horde below the platform, and away beyond them to the fires that lit the savage scene, and the darkness of the night which ringed them in.

Suddenly, from his elevated position, he beheld that which the crowd, staring with cruel lust at the torture-stake, had not perceived—that which he had never hoped to see again. Out of the ring of darkness into the glare of the fires moved a little triangle of men in helmets and leather, and halted as they came into the light.

The exulting Indians paused expectantly as the old warrior again drew forth the glowing rod, and came smiling towards the Englishman.

Then, with all the force of his lungs, Arnold shouted wildly into the night:

“Au secours! Au secours! A moi, La Salle!”

Instantly, as though in answer to that cry of despair, a volley of musketry roared out behind the crowd. The red-hot rod dropped from the hands of the astonished chief, and all heads were turned.

The Frenchmen advanced again a little way, and halted. While some stood with barrels levelled at the crowd, others busily reloaded. It was clear that the first challenging volley had been fired into the air, for though they were close on the skirts of the mob, not an Illinois was harmed. The little group stood like an island of discipline in a sea of disorder. A single figure advanced

from among them, weaponless, and a deep voice cried aloud. It was the *Sieur de la Salle*. Arnold understood no word of what he spoke, but he saw that the savages, though drunk with the lust of blood, stood irresolute and listened. But *Hilaire*, who knew the Illinois tongue, raised his face to heaven which had heard his prayers.

"How, brothers!" cried *La Salle* in stern reproof. "Have we sworn friendship and exchanged gifts, and do you burn my countrymen without my knowledge?"

A murmur arose in the crowd, and a few wild figures of men and women ran threateningly towards the tall, solitary figure.

"Back, dogs and she-wolves!" cried he, waving them aside with a contemptuous gesture. "The Father of Life has whispered in my ear of your deceit. Away!"

Without so much as glancing to right or left, he came on, while the Illinois, over-awed, undecided, shrank before his stern, fearless eyes and made a lane to the foot of the staging. *La Salle* mounted it gravely, in a dead silence, and stood in front of the stake. His brow was sombre as he looked at the bound form of the Englishman, but Arnold saw that he was recognized. *La Salle* turned and fronted the mob.

"Know ye, O warriors of the Illinois," cried he, "this man here is my friend. And the other"—he pointed to the Jesuit—"is the friend of my friend." He caught up a birch twig which lay near the fires. "See," cried he. "This bough is the friendship which I and the greatness of *Onontio* have sworn with your nation. Let these men perish, and thus our truce is broken." He snapped the twig asunder. "And thus," he added, flinging the fragments in the fire, "shall the greatness of *Onontio* in his wrath throw this nation to utter destruction!"

There was a silence of hesitation in the crowd, a silence broken at last by a growing murmur of disapproval.

"Who is *Onontio*? His house is far away," cried the shrill voice of a hag in the mob below. "We will eat up

you and your friends, and give our children your bones to play with." A fierce shout endorsed the savage threat.

La Salle stepped slowly to the very edge of the platform, and without a sign of fear gazed down on the sea of distorted faces. The shouts died down. The Indians, ever responsive to the power of a bold orator, waited for the Frenchman's reply.

"Old woman, whose tongue wags with folly," said La Salle, "I will ask you also a question. Who is the Manitou who steers the storms through the regions of the air? Is his house near? Does he dwell in your village?"

"You are few, and the warriors of the Illinois are many and strong," screamed the hag in fury, and again came the dangerous shout of approbation.

La Salle smiled in calm derision. He raised one hand and pointed to the stars.

"The arrows of the thunder are few, and the trees of the forest are many and strong," said he. "But when the Manitou shoots the arrows of his thunder, the strong forests are consumed for many days' journey. If I am weak, why do I stand here alone among your warriors? See now—I cut free my friends, and if any here will give this nation of the Illinois to destruction, let him now lay his hands upon me, that all may know by whom they are destroyed."

With an imperturbable calm he stepped up to the old chief who had begun the torture, and took a hatchet from his belt. With a couple of blows he sundered the cords which bound the prisoners, whom he took, each by a hand, and led them forward. Not a man moved among the Illinois. They stood dumb before the sheer daring of the act.

"Now," cried La Salle again, "let him who would be dear to me and to Onontio give a covering to these my friends against the cold."

He had them under a spell. For the moment, at least, the prisoners were safe. Here and there a lean brown arm was extended, offering a blanket or a robe. The shivering

pair were clothed, and La Salle led them to the edge of the staging, where some rough steps led down to the ground.

"O men of the Illinois," cried he ere he departed, "it is right that brothers should meet together and be merry. In two days I give a feast outside my fort. Let all come, that we may bury this night in forgetfulness."

A shout of approval welcomed his words. He led down Arnold and the priest, extending his strong hand to support the latter's tottering steps, and the three came through that savage crowd to the little knot of Frenchmen who still stood with levelled weapons. The cold was bitter, but by now La Salle's face streamed with sweat. He put himself at the head of his company, and guided by the flare of a couple of pine torches, they passed out through the palisades, and marched for nearly half a league through the darkness till they came to a low hill at the top of which lights shone out. They descended a hollow that ran along the base of the hill like a natural ditch, and climbed the slippery snow of the other side, to find themselves faced by an embankment crowned by a high pointed stockade. A hoarse voice challenged from above, and then a heavy timber gate swung back to give them entrance.

"Let the guard be doubled to-night, and let the rest sleep on their arms," said La Salle. "Let Père Hennepin be summoned to tend this suffering priest. As for you, Arnold"—he laid a heavy hand on the young Englishman's arm—"you and I must talk together at once. Well it was for you both that one of these fellows, with whom the father would seem to have made friends, came hot-foot to tell me of your plight. Come."

He led the way to his quarters, where a great fire of logs was burning. La Salle flung down a heap of clothes before the fire. "Dress," said he, "and I will bring you food. While you eat you shall talk, for what you have to tell me cannot wait."

CHAPTER XXXII

RIVAL OR ALLY?

NOT before he had set food before his guest did La Salle throw himself into a seat, and fixing his deep eyes on Arnold, ask him for his news. "The worst first, if you please," said he.

"For you, monsieur," said the Englishman, "the worst is that the *Griffin* is lost, and all that she carried." And briefly he recounted all that had befallen him since sailing from Saint Ignace.

La Salle sat and listened with a hard face, staring into the fire, saying nothing at all either in question or comment. When Arnold had recounted his adventures up to the time of reaching the Illinois town, he paused. The French leader turned to him, a bitter smile on his swarthy face.

"Can a man be stronger than his fate?" he said. "I doubt not they suppose me ruined utterly."

"That was what Michel said upon the Island of the Dead."

"Maybe he is right," said La Salle, gloomily. "You have been a loyal friend to me. I thank you for it."

"Monsieur de la Salle," said Arnold, "I think no man is ruined while faith is in his heart."

The Frenchman looked up swiftly. "By Saint Denis!" he exclaimed, "you shame me. Yes, that is true. He who is constant can never be ruined. Michel and I will yet have a reckoning." He paused, gazing into the fire. "Well, Monsieur Firle," he resumed, "you have told me the worst for me. What other worst remains?"

Arnold pushed back his chair and stood up. "The worst for me, monsieur, is that Michel has carried away the Countess of Vane from Fort Frontenac."

Like a man electrified, La Salle sprang to his feet, and Arnold stood amazed at the swift change of his expression.

"Where had you that news?" he cried vehemently.

"From the dying lips of Jacques the Iroquois, whom they murdered to-night in the chief's lodge. I left him with her for a guard."

"How came he here?" cried La Salle.

"God knows," answered the young man. "I told him so much of your route as I knew, that he might act as a messenger in case of need. When we arrived they were tormenting him, but in the midst of his pains he gave me his message, and I flung him my knife, that he might die as he said like a man."

"Where is she?" said La Salle. For the moment he seemed to have forgotten all else, save that this English girl was prisoner in the hands of Michel.

"More than I have told you I know not," answered Arnold in a dull voice. "To-morrow, with your leave, monsieur, I set out to find her."

"We will go together," said La Salle.

Arnold Firlé stared at him blankly, a strange suspicion beginning to spring in his mind. "You?" he exclaimed almost accusingly.

The French commander confronted him with burning eyes. "You cannot go alone," he said.

"Jacques the Iroquois came alone," said Arnold.

"He was a native. Where he lived you would die."

"I do not die easily," said Arnold.

"Nor do I—thanks, perhaps, to her prayers," said La Salle, gravely.

"Her prayers?" repeated Arnold in growing astonishment.

"On the night before we left Fort Frontenac," said La Salle, almost like one talking to himself, "I went to see Lady Vane, and she promised her prayers for my success in my undertaking."

" You went to see her—you? "

" I have said so."

Arnold laughed, a little brutally. For the moment his whole-hearted admiration, his almost passionate devotion to the dauntless leader who only a few hours since had saved his life, wavered in the grip of a half-savage jealousy. " Are you, too, her lover? " he blurted out.

A dull, deep colour flushed the weather-tanned face of the Frenchman. " I could be, easily," he answered with a quiet pride, " had love and I time for each other's company. She is a very noble lady, and I have never met her like. Shall we quarrel over that, Arnold Firlé? "

The younger man's glance fell before his leader's steadfast, searching eyes. " No, I will not quarrel with you, Monsieur de la Salle," said he.

" In four days we will set out," said La Salle, " you to save your mistress, I to save my expedition." He spoke like one who thinks aloud. " Say nothing of the *Griffin's* fate. If that were known with certainty, which we have long suspected, the courage of my men would ebb away. But since she is lost we must have new anchors, ropes and gear for the ship which we are building here to descend the great river when the summer comes—the ship which shall yet take us to the Indies and add half a continent to the realm of France."

" I must start to-morrow," said Arnold, doggedly.

" No," said La Salle with authority. " Consider: by Heaven's great mercy you have come to the end of such a journey as few could have survived. You have escaped to-night by a hair's-breadth from a frightful death, and those who would have sacrificed you may already have repented their weakness. It was not easy to persuade them."

" Ah—and I am grateful! "

La Salle dismissed that aspect of the matter with a wave of his hand. " These savages are treacherous," said he. " They must be strengthened in the truce I have

made, and the way to their hearts is through their stomachs. The day after to-morrow I shall feast them. The next day, while the warriors are heavy with gluttony, I shall send forth Père Hennepin with others to explore this river of the Illinois until it enters the greater river of my dreams. And the day after that, you and I, with a few more, will start for Cataraqui on foot."

"The thaws have begun," said Arnold, significantly.

"Do I not know!" cried the Frenchman. "And the distance is five hundred leagues as the wild geese fly, and there are marshes and rivers to cross, and the lands of four savage tribes, and there are great forests to penetrate, and hunger to bear, and many other perils which each day will bring. Yet it is the only way for me to save my expedition, and for you, if Heaven permits, to save your love."

"Or avenge her," said Arnold, hoarsely.

"Or avenge her!" La Salle repeated solemnly, and extended his hand, which his young follower gripped without a word.

They set out upon the first day of March. On the river-bank near the fort the half-built vessel lay waiting for the things that must be brought from so far away. Below, on the dark surface of the stream, blocks of ice still floated. Four Frenchmen and a native hunter were to tempt the perils of the wilderness with Arnold and their leader.

"Expect me in the summer, Tonty," said La Salle to his lieutenant.

"You will find me here, monsieur, with the flesh on my bones, or without it."

Those two brave men who understood each other clasped hands, and the journey began.

Soon the ice blocked them on the stream, and they made sledges and for days toiled over the wet snow, dragging their canoes. Then the canoes were abandoned, and they set out to tramp across the wilds. Day after day, week after week, they held on their uncharted track

through the half-thawed wilderness, warmed by the noonday sun, chilled to the bone by the raw night cold. The rain and sleet lashed them, the thorny thickets tore their flesh, the swamps sucked them waist deep in icy slime, yet they forced their way on, till under the cruel strain even the iron constitutions of La Salle's adventurers began to break down.

One day, when for upwards of a month they had fought the wilderness, two of the Frenchmen gave way. They were dead beat. A subtle fear began to invade the others—a terror of sheer desolation.

Careless of consequences, they lit a great fire, and sat round it all that day, and devoured a wild turkey which they had shot.

The raw darkness descended around them, and they huddled closer about their fire. Monsieur de la Salle ordered all to take their rest. "I will watch to-night," said he.

Arnold Firle lay down with the others, but it seemed to him that he had scarcely closed his eyes when a light touch awakened him.

His leader, crouching beside him, laid a finger on his lips, and pointed to the sleepers round the fire. He beckoned, and began slowly to creep away on hands and knees, silent as a cat.

Wide awake in a moment, Arnold followed. The camp was set in a thin woodland, near a small stream, towards which, in the inky darkness, La Salle was crawling. He moved with a surprising swiftness and stealth, pausing now and again for his less expert companion. At last he lay quite still in a clump of thick rank grass.

"Listen!" he whispered low.

The Englishman lay straining for a sound, but for some time heard nothing. Suddenly, with a kind of shock, he realized that stealthy footsteps were all about them in the gloom.

La Salle whispered in his ear: "When I strike, lie still. But if I am attacked, be ready. Strike them to kill."

A minute passed in breathless silence. Then Arnold caught the quiet swish of grass beside him. He felt, rather than saw, a swift strong movement from La Salle. A wild cry of pain and panic rent the silence, then followed cries of terror in a strange tongue, and a rush of many feet in the dark. Then silence fell again.

"Quick!" murmured La Salle. "Back to the camp!"

In the same way as they had come, though with less caution, they hastened back to the fire. The party, startled from sleep, had already taken cover. La Salle laughed roughly.

"Sleep again, mes enfants," said he. "You had a bad dream, is it not so? Eh bien, you will dream no more to-night. Monsieur Firle, will you keep the watch with me?"

Together they returned into the darkness, and for a full hour lay motionless as the dead, listening with all their power. But there came no more swishings through the grass, and at last they returned nearer to the fire. La Salle selected a tree-bole a little bigger than the rest, and with his hunting-knife began to cut marks upon the bark.

"What are you doing, mon capitaine?" asked Arnold.

"Writing a little story for our friends down there"—he jerked his head backwards towards the wood—"to con to-morrow. They are not brave, these savages of hereabouts. I know their ways. I can read the thoughts of such animals. Because we boldly burn our fire at night, and do not travel secretly, they take us for a great party. Because we attacked them first, stealthily, at a distance from the camp, they think we are well sentinelled. Doubtless they take us for a war-party of Iroquois. Eh bien, here are the signs for our number of warriors—a hundred and fifty. And here are the scalps we have taken. And here the prisoners we take to burn at home!" He laughed while Arnold stood amazed alike at the daring and the knowledge of the savages which dictated such a device. He remembered that the war-party which had rescued

himself had carved the trees in such a way behind them.

It was in this way the little band pressed on, as though in the teeth of fate. Day succeeded day, each with its call for uttermost endurance, uttermost resource. Two men, broken with the ordeal of the journey, were left behind, to make the best of their way to the nearest mission station. But with every fresh obstacle flung in his path, the iron-willed leader seemed to renew his determination. Pitiless to himself, unsparing of his followers, he battled on. Sickness attacked them, but they struggled forward. Did he intend, thought Arnold, with dark suspicion, to wear them all out and reach his seigneurie alone? Would love and La Salle find time for each other then?

But on a bitter April afternoon Arnold and La Salle, the only sound men of the party, staggered out of a pine wood in a driving gale of sleet, and saw before them white seas foaming upon a desolate coast. They had reached the shores of Erie. A week later, bringing their sick companions in a canoe of their own building, they landed in the dusk at the little fort on the Niagara whence, nearly a year before, they had sailed in the hapless *Griffin*.

The commander, a gaunt wild figure, stalked up first to the stockade, leaving Arnold by the canoe. In a few minutes he returned with half a dozen glum-looking men bearing torches. His face was grey in the glare as he laid a heavy hand on the young Englishman's arm.

"News enough," said he, "but not for you. News of more losses for me, more triumphs of my enemies."

"And—Lady Vane?" Arnold's throat was dry.

"No news." Arnold put his hand to his eyes in a dazed way. He felt his leader's grip tighten fiercely on his arm.

"Courage—always courage!" said a hard voice in his ear.

Arnold fought down his dizziness. "And we start for Fort Frontenac—?"

"To-morrow!" said Monsieur de la Salle.

CHAPTER XXXIII

ANDRÉ MICHEL'S RAID

IT had been late in the fall when Michel had talked at midnight with Bariot the pilot on the Isle of the Dead. Travelling quickly with a few native companions, the wily apostle of discord reached the shores of Ontario safely ere the winter closed in. Already, before his confederate had given the *Griffin* to destruction, the agent had reported to his employers the result of his journey, and when the new year opened he had been some weeks established with a few half-castes and some native followers in the forests near Fort Frontenac. There, like a hungry wolf, he lurked in hiding for his prey, the fair English girl whose beauty had so long lured his evil heart.

Monsieur Michel did not think he would have long to wait. His recent labours had been liberally rewarded, and he found it easy to maintain a close intercourse with the treacherous dwellers in the Iroquois village on the outskirts of La Salle's seigneurie.

For upwards of half a year now Marjorie, Countess of Vane, had lived the frontier life in the home of her farmer-host under the frowning mass of the Fort. More than a year had passed since first she saw Fort Frontenac, and the girl had come to look upon this rough outpost of France against the wilderness as a kind of home. The brilliant sunshine of the western summer, the fresh breezes from the vast lake, the keen tonic frosts of the western winter, had wonderfully ripened her. She found a zest in the new life she was living, in the new and unaccustomed things it taught her. Fully trusting now in her lover's honour, she bravely sought to sustain an equal faith in his destiny.

Yet there were times when the loneliness of her position overwhelmed the girl, when she would gaze out over the lake with tear-filled eyes, and a passionate longing for some word of the lover who had sailed away over those smiling treacherous waters into the great unknown. At such times she would take a kind of satisfaction in seeking out Jacques, the gaunt, disfigured Iroquois whom Arnold had left to guard her.

"Where do you think they are now, Jacques?" she would ask. "What do you think they are doing?" And the Indian would solemnly shake his hawk-like head, and according to the hour of the day would hazard a guess in stumbling French out of the measureless store of his woodman's knowledge.

On a wild January night Marjorie fell asleep with the booming of the shore ice in her ears as it ground upon the beach before a southerly gale. She awoke with a start at a sudden noise of rending quite close.

The cold night air was blowing in at the casement, and the head of a man, wearing a thick fur cap, was outlined in deeper blackness against the night.

"Madame," cried a voice, "the house burns! Put on quickly your warmest clothes and come to the window. There is no other way."

She sat up in bed in sudden fear.

"Hasten!" said the man. "Madame, listen to that! You have not ten minutes."

Marjorie coughed. The room was half full of acrid smoke. She could hear the roar of flames, and now that she looked she noticed under her door a ruddy glow.

"We will save you from the window. Bring your snowshoes," said the man, and suddenly the head was withdrawn.

In feverish haste Marjorie began to dress. Ah, why had the farmer and his wife not warned her before! For an instant she opened her door, but such a rush of fierce

heat and stifling smoke met her that she flung it to again in terror, and rushing to the window, put out her head.

It was a strange scene in the bitter midnight. A red glow from the burning farmhouse lay upon the snow, where nearly a score of fur-robed figures were standing motionless, their faces turned towards the conflagration. Right underneath her window, which was some twenty feet from the ground, several men were grouped about a sleigh which they had leaned on end against the wall. It was too dark to make out anything but their shapes.

Suddenly a gust of heat invaded the room behind her, and an ominous crackling warned her that the door was burning.

"Messieurs, messieurs, I am ready!" cried the girl.

Instantly two of the waiting figures sprang upon the tilted sleigh. One climbed upon the shoulders of his comrade, thus bringing himself high enough to reach the window.

"Lower yourself," said he.

She did so, and as though she had been a child, he took her in his arms and let her down till, with the help of the second man, she stood upon the sleigh. From there to the snow was an easy leap.

The moment her feet touched the ground the rest of the group surrounded her.

"The others—you have saved them?" she cried, a little scared by the strange silence of the men.

"They are dead!" one answered her briefly, and pointed to the threshold. Two figures—a man's and a woman's—lay there on the snow.

"Oh!" cried Marjorie in a horrified gasp. "Take me to the Fort, if you please." Vaguely she wondered where was Jacques, her guardian. If she had known, he also lay on the snow behind the house, stunned and bleeding from a wound on the head.

"Yes, to the Fort," answered the man who had spoken,

and whose face, half hidden in thick furs, she did not recognize in the dark. "Hola—the sleigh for Madame!"

"But I can walk—it is quite near!" cried Marjorie in fear and surprise. But already two of the men had the sleigh down from the wall, and from somewhere in the gloom another led forward a frightened horse.

At that moment half a dozen soldiers from the Fort ran forward into the enclosure about the farmhouse lit by the leaping flames. At the sight of the sombre, silent, fur-clad watchers they halted. Then one advanced to the first of the standing figures, and Marjorie, trembling at she knew not what, heard his surprised question:

"Qu'y a-t-il donc?"

The next moment the silent man in furs had turned swiftly. His right arm rose and fell, and with one cry the soldier lay stretched on the snow.

The man beside Marjorie shouted a command, and straightway the other waiting figures rushed with one accord upon the soldiery.

"Trahison! Aux armes! Aux armes!"

The terrified shout of the men-at-arms as they bolted for the Fort sent a shudder through the helpless girl. What frightful nightmare was this?

She felt herself lifted by powerful arms, and next moment she was in the sleigh. Three men sprang up beside her, and the unknown who had shouted the order to the rest shook the reins upon the horse's back. The scared beast sprang forward, and the keen air blew in their faces as the runners glided smoothly over the hard snow. It was not towards the Fort they sped, but away through the sleeping settlement, away past the Iroquois village, away through the blackness of the winter night towards the forest.

The young Countess turned faint with terror as they sped on. Not a word was spoken by any in the sleigh. It began to bump and lurch with the increasing uneven-

ness of the ground. The horse laboured more and more painfully, but the driver tossed his reins, and with the slack thrashed the animal with a ruthless persistence.

At last, with the desperation of fear, the English girl rose in her seat, clutching the driver with both hands. "Stop—I command you!" she cried. "Who are you, and where will you take me?"

If the silence had alarmed her, the driver's answer chilled her with horror. His voice was strong with triumph. It was fierce, yet caressing. She remembered it now too well.

"My beautiful one, it is your lover. It is I, André Michel, who adores you!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE CAMP IN THE FOREST

THE helpless girl sank back into her seat. Desperately she fought down the panic that assailed her.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked presently, in a voice that sounded strange to her own ears.

Michel bent over her. "A long journey, sweetheart, but with a happy ending!" he answered. "Ah—we shall live at ease, over there in France!"

She sat still, shuddering, shrinking from him as he leaned to her.

They reached the forest, and the sleigh could go no further. Michel lifted her to the ground, and called to one of his companions to take out the horse. A bearskin from the sleigh was fastened on the animal's back, and Marjorie, half-fainting, was placed thereon.

The grey winter dawn was breaking as they entered the forest, one man going in front with his gun in his hand, another bringing up the rear, while Michel held the rein and tramped at his fair captive's side.

The daylight strengthened quickly. For a full hour they pressed on, urging the tired horse to his best pace, while the men, on their netted snowshoes, maintained the unwearying stride, even and easy, of the hardened ranger of the woods. At length they were overtaken by about a dozen others, Indians and half-breeds, all well armed, coming from the direction of the Fort. A halt was called and food taken. Then they pressed forward again, and about mid-day they came to the banks of a small ice-bound stream, where, on the bare snow, three Indian huts of skins and bark were grouped about a larger central structure of freshly-hewn logs.

None too soon they reached this dreary shelter, for the wind had risen again, and the snow was whirling thickly. The camp was surrounded by a high wall of beaten snow, with a lower embankment of the same within, upon which the inmates might take stand for defence.

Upon this rude rampart there was standing a fur-clad figure, at sight of whom Marjorie felt her heart stand still. She reeled, and would have fallen, but Michel with swift understanding put up a hand to support her.

He lifted her to the ground. "You must not be frightened at Batiste Bariot," said he. "He brings good news, m'amie." He flung open the door of the wooden cabin. "Enter," said he. "It is a poor house, but your lover shall give you a better in Paris. Ah, but I have amassed riches, and the days and nights have been long that I have waited for you! On the *Grace de Dieu*, so long ago, I swore you should be mine. Ciel! how I adore you, my beautiful one!"

To all this the young Countess had no answer. The vision of that great form of Bariot the pilot had driven out all thoughts but one. She turned a piteous white face upon Michel as she leaned in his arms. "If you have any pity, let me speak to Monsieur Bariot," she pleaded.

"You shall!" he answered. "You shall speak to whom you will. But first you must eat and rest. It is not so bad in here. We foresters live well. I will make a fire, and you shall see."

The cabin, which was lined and floored with skins, had at one end an opening in the roof, beneath which was a rude stone hearth. In a few minutes Michel had a wood fire blazing, and though the smoke penetrated to every part of the building before making its escape, the warmth gave comfort to chilled limbs. Seated on a heap of furs near the blaze, Marjorie, Countess of Vane, strove to regain the self-control of which terror and fatigue had well-nigh deprived her.

From time to time, as he busied himself about the cabin for her comfort, her captor turned on her his gaze ardent with triumph and desire. But his captive never once lifted her dark soft eyes to his. Hidden by their long lashes those eyes of hers were bent fearfully upon the dancing flames.

At last, when with ready ingenuity he had given to the rudeshelter some look of comfort, and when he had set warm food before her, Michel came and laid his hand familiarly upon her shoulder. The girl drew back at the touch, and at the look of abhorrence she gave him Michel also recoiled.

Then he laughed a little brutally. "This will not do, m'amie," said he. "You and I must be better friends. Why should you shiver at a touch of my hand?"

She schooled her glance to be expressionless. "I must speak with Monsieur Bariot," she repeated in a dull, mechanical way.

"Have I not promised you shall?" he answered. "But you must rest first. At noon I will bring him to you." His bold, admiring glance rested again for a moment on the dark delicate beauty of his captive; then he bowed himself away.

Left to herself, Marjorie sat long on her couch of furs, a lovely pale figure of despair. She realized that this raid had been carefully planned, and how small was her hope of rescue from the Fort. She had no idea how far they might be from the Fort, but thought it could not be less than twenty miles. And it was snowing fast. Very soon their tracks would be obliterated. What was it Michel had said of Bariot? That he brought good news! How could he have brought good news and she be here a prisoner?

She was soon to learn, though the time of waiting seemed an eternity, and though her body rested, the tension of her mind increased with each lagging minute. When at last a knock sounded at the door of her cabin she sprang to her feet in uncontrollable anxiety.

Michel came in, eyeing her curiously. "It is Monsieur

Bariot," said he, and motioned to the man behind him to enter.

The black-browed pilot knocked the snow from his feet at the threshold, and advanced a little sheepishly under the eager gaze of those melting brown eyes.

"Where is Monsieur Firle?" she asked him.

"Monsieur Firle?" he repeated. "Monsieur Firle?" Something in his hard heart failed him, and he looked for encouragement to his chief.

"You can answer, can you not?" said Michel.

"True—I can answer," he stammered.

"Then answer!" cried Marjorie, suddenly imperious, yet trembling as she faced them.

"Monsieur Firle perished when the *Griffin* was wrecked," he said.

The girl caught her breath in a quick gasp. She went white to the lips, but she stood her ground, staring at the pilot. Batiste Bariot quailed before her. The memory of his victim abandoned on the Isle of the Dead assailed him. How mad and wild she looked!

At last she spoke in a strangled whisper. "It is a lie!"

"It is true," he muttered.

"Swear it on the crucifix!" she cried hoarsely.

He stared at her as if petrified.

"Answer her, Bariot," commanded Michel. "What ails you?"

"The crucifix!" cried he between wrath and fear. "What have I to do with the crucifix! By the black sins of my soul, madame, I swear to you that Monsieur Firle is dead."

There was no doubting him. With a low moan she turned away, and threw herself face downward on the bed of skins.

André Michel, frowning, motioned Bariot to leave the cabin. Then he came and stood beside the shaking figure of the girl. Long he stood there, silent and forbidding.

She looked up at last, when the first of her anguish had spent itself, but seeing him stand there, turned away her head again with a shudder. Michel pressed his bright red lips together.

"This grief will pass," said he coldly, after a pause. "Consider, your countryman has been dead these three months. Your lover that was is no more. Henceforth I am your lover."

She sat up then, her eyes burning in her drawn white face. "And this was your good news!" she said.

"It is good news to me," he answered. "He was my enemy."

"Whom you would have murdered, if you could!"

Michel shrugged his shoulders. "From the first day I saw you I knew I should make you mine." A touch of passion came into his voice.

"That you will never do," she said, rising and standing before him. "Ah—if you knew how I hate you!"

His red lips smiled. "I do," said he. "But I am a man, and not a headstrong boy. I can wait till you give yourself to me, madame."

"I would give myself sooner to Death," she told him.

"No," he said calmly. "You are distraught, but you are not mad."

The cold certainty of his tone was horrible. Marjorie felt that she feared him even more than she detested him. And something of what she felt Michel read in her glance.

"I will go," he said. "You are afraid, not because you are in my hands, but because my mind is the master of yours. Yet I adore you, Marjorie. And sooner or later you will not say 'Go,' but 'Come.'" He bent towards her, and for a moment the mask that hid the workings of that ruthless soul was broken. His eyes blazed, and his face, flushed with passion, was transformed. "In hate or love I am not a man to be balked!" he whispered, and turning swiftly, went away.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE PESTILENCE

DAY followed day in that lonely camp without other event than the bringing in of game by the hunters, or an occasional thaw which set the forest dripping about the huts, or a blizzard that tested the security of their rude dwellings.

The young Countess found, to her surprise, that she was free to come and go in the cabin which had been given up to her. But if she left the camp by day she was never alone, and she knew she was securely sentinelled at night.

Michel, who shared with Bariot and two other Frenchmen one of the bark lodges, came daily to visit her. He showed himself a considerate jailer, and rarely offered advances, yet the cool certainty of the man was not without effect upon the mind of the girl. That something must happen soon she knew, and at that thought she trembled.

The thaws became more frequent, and the snowembankment about the camp dwindled daily. One morning, after his usual call, Michel said to her, "We shall leave here soon."

"When?" asked Marjorie.

"When the lake is clear of the shore ice we start for Montreal. Then to Three Rivers, where you and I will be married. In May, when the first ships come to Quebec, we will sail for France."

To that she made no answer.

"To-morrow," continued Michel, "I send men to the lake, to build canoes for us, and to bring back word. If all is well we will start in a week."

But all was not well before that week was out. One morning Michel presented himself at the cabin with a strange scared look on that face which seldom showed emotion.

“Do not leave the cabin to-day!” said he. “Promise!”

“Am I not your prisoner?” answered the girl, coldly.

He made an impatient gesture. “There is smallpox in the camp!” said he.

At that dreadful word she looked up quickly, startled for a moment out of her despondency.

“Three of the Indians are stricken,” said Michel. “To-morrow we will start.”

“And leave them?” she inquired.

He laughed. “They have left us,” said he, with a sneer, “all but the sick men, who lie awaiting death in their manner. Only the Frenchmen remain.”

The English girl shuddered.

“It shall not touch you!” Michel cried. “I have set men to watch that hut and shoot if any come forth. I do not fear death, madame, but death by that horrible corruption—ah, it is too shocking!”

When he was gone she looked out. Over towards the lodge where the Iroquois had camped, two fur-clad figures paced slowly to and fro, musket on shoulder. Marjorie drew back into her prison-house. A horror of that deadly plague began to oppress her.

The evening came, and Michel, as his custom was, brought his fair captive’s supper. His hard and cruel face was haggard with fear which he made no attempt to hide.

“Are you ill?” she asked him coldly.

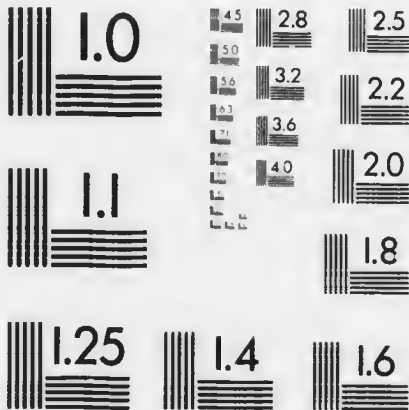
He started as if struck. “No! It is Bariot. He has fever. Mon dieu, I suspect him! If he grows worse—!” His lips quivered as he spoke. It seemed impossible that terror could so transform a man, whose nerves had seemed of steel. Such fear was infectious. Marjorie felt it creep upon her as she watched him.

He went out, and she fell on her knees in the cabin, which was lit only by the glow of the fire. Striving with all her will to subdue the fear that assailed her, she grew gradually calmer. She went to the door and peeped out.



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There was no sentry at her door to-night. Overhead the stars shone brightly. She could see the black outline of the bark lodges near, with a little yellow gleam coming from the one in which the four Frenchmen lived. The starry serenity of the night encouraged her, and closing the door again, she returned into the cabin and ate her meal. Then she built up the fire, and loosing the masses of her dark hair lay down in her bed of furs.

But she could not sleep. The thought of that silent black hut with the dying savages within obsessed her mind. She imagined them huddled together, sick to death with the nauseous disease, unfed, unwarmed, untended, not daring to crawl from their den of misery for fear of the ruthless bullets that waited for them without.

Suddenly the Countess of Vane sat up on her couch. Surely the light was stronger in the cabin! Yet her fire burned no more brightly! She looked up at the tiny open windows made, clerestory fashion, in the roof of the cabin. Yes, the yellow light which began to illumine the cabin was from outside. She heard men's voices in the night—then a sudden shriek.

Throwing a heavy bearskin about her shoulders, she went to the door and opened it a little way. What a sight was there!

The two huts which had been occupied by the Indians and the half-breeds were in flames. A dozen yards from the door of that in which the three Iroquois were imprisoned, Michel and the Frenchmen stood with levelled muskets. Almost as Marjorie opened her door an Indian staggered from the burning hovel. One of the muskets flashed and roared, and the dusky figure collapsed upon the ground. A second Iroquois appeared framed in the doorway.

"Tirez, Bariot!" cried the voice of Michel.

Bariot fired, but either the charge went wide, or its wound was less than mortal, for with a despairing yell the stricken wretch came on, tottering with extended arms,

till he was within two paces of Michel's barrel. Then Michel let drive at him, and sprang back to avoid the falling body.

No one else came out of the hut. Perhaps, thought Marjorie, the third Indian was already dead. She stood with her door ajar, fascinated with the horror of the scene.

"Allons, Bariot," cried Michel, sharply—"throw this carrion back into the fire!"

The big sailor turned round. Marjorie could see that he was unsteady on his feet. Perhaps that was why he had missed his aim. The glare of the blazing huts showed the terror on his face.

"Do you hear!" shouted Michel. "Throw it back, before he corrupts us all!"

"But," stammered Bariot, "the infection, monsieur!"

"The infection, imbecile? You have it already!" cried his leader, brutally. He snatched the gun from the man who had not fired, and pointed it at Bariot. "This is a quicker infection!" he said grimly.

"Holy Virgin! Would you murder me!" The words came thickly from the sickening man. "Stay—I will do it, but it will be my death, comrades." He stooped and painfully dragged the dead Indian towards the hut.

"In with him!" cried Michel, as Bariot hesitated at the heat.

With a desperate effort the big Frenchman pushed the corpse inside, and then that of the man who had fallen at the door. Meanwhile Marjorie saw that Michel spoke rapidly and insistently to the others.

The pilot, his horrible task accomplished, came back towards his companions.

"Halt!" cried Michel. "Come no further!" he shouted, his voice rising almost to a scream.

Bariot stood still, staring from one to another of his countrymen with heavy bewilderment.

"If thou knowest a prayer, comrade, say it quickly, but come no nearer," one of the men called to him. "It is

easier to die thus—than thus.” He pointed first to the levelled gun-barrel, and then to the charnel-house behind.

A dreadful comprehension dawned on the face of the sailor. “Misérables!” he cried, and came forward drawing out his hunting-knife.

Then Michel fired, and with a groan Batiste Bariot fell forward on his face.

“Allons, mes enfants, we had better go to bed,” said the murderer. “It will not be safe to touch him. Tomorrow we will leave this accursed place.” And without looking behind them the guilty men went towards the remaining shelter.

Marjorie, sick and faint at that hideous butchery, had closed her door. For a few moments she leaned against the wall, trembling violently; then, flinging herself down on her couch, she pulled up the furs over her face and eyes, trying like any panic-stricken child to shut from sight and hearing the horrors of the night.

She had lain so for perhaps an hour, and her shaking limbs had grown still. She had closed her eyes, but sleep was far from her. Suddenly she became conscious of a strange sound, like the scraping of an animal, at the door of the cabin. A famished wolf, perhaps, scenting a meal from his forest lair? Yet no wolf, surely, would come so near the glow of a fire! Then the sound changed. It was distinctly now a knocking that she heard. Her fear renewed its force, and the girl crouched the closer in her wraps. But the scraping and the knocking continued.

At last the sounds so worked upon her nerves, that the lonely girl could endure it no longer. Feeling for her little dagger, she took it in her hand, and going to the door, opened it a few inches. By the dull red glow of the burned huts she perceived a dark shape upon the ground outside. The shape raised a white face—Bariot’s!

With a horrified gasp the girl shrank back. “You!” she exclaimed.

Rising on his elbow, Bariot lifted his white face a little higher. "Mercy, madame!" came in a weak whisper from him who had been so strong. "They seek to murder me!" he gasped. "I am shot! Have pity!"

And Batiste Bariot had the smallpox! For a full minute, without answering a word, Marjorie stood in the doorway looking down upon the helpless, supplicating man. With a tremendous effort she was fighting down the repulsion she felt—the physical shrinking of health from the contamination of a horrible disease. In the end she set the door wide open.

"I am dying, madame," murmured Bariot.

"You must not die there," she answered. "Come—I will do for you what I can."

Aided by her strong young arms, the sick and wounded wretch crawled within the hut, and she shut the door. When she turned to him again she found that he had fainted.

Kneeling beside him, the young Countess found his clothing saturated with blood. She searched for the wound, wondering as she did so whether this were not already his end. But she found the place where Michel's bullet had entered his breast, and with such skill as most women of her day possessed, she made shift to stanch the bleeding with pieces torn from her own clothes. This done, she took some of the skins which made her couch, and arranged a bed for the patient, covering him over when she had dragged him to it. She poured a little water between his lips, and there being nothing more that she could do, she sat down beside her fire.

By-and-by a step sounded without. This time there was no knock upon the door, which was pushed open abruptly, and in the dim light André Michel stood upon the threshold, a wild and reckless look upon his face.

The English girl rose up, keeping her eyes on his.

"Why have you come here?" she asked.

He laughed. "I should have come before!" he cried.

"Mistress, you must give me hospitality to-night." He advanced towards the fire.

For the first time since she had been in this man's power Marjorie felt no fear of him. Yet she was trembling as she answered.

"Go back!"

"Not I!" said he. "This time I come to stay. Am I not in my own house?" He laughed again, never taking his glittering eyes from her face.

"Go back!" she cried again insistently, "before it is too late."

"That is why I came!" said he, roughly, "before it should be too late. Who knows? Who knows if those others have not incurred the infection? I could not endure to be with them another night, m'amie. So I have come to be with you instead!"

"You will not dare!" she told him, with flashing eyes.

He came closer, till he was almost touching her. "I have left you too long alone," said he. "But you shall be alone no longer!"

"I am not alone," she told him, in so strange a voice that he started back, drawing a pistol from his belt.

"Where is your company, mistress, that I may deal with him?" he said in a sobered tone.

"He will not fear your pistol," said the girl. "His name is Death, Monsieur Michel." She pointed to that still form beneath the bearskin in the gloom.

Michel took a couple of steps towards the bed, then gave a loud cry of horror, and his face, which had been flushing, blanched.

"You have touched him—you!" he faltered, shrinking back.

"I have touched him—and he has the pestilence," she answered. "I told you I was not alone. Now go!"

And with a look like a frightened hound Michel slunk out into the night.

CHAPTER XXXVI

BARIOT'S REPENTANCE

THUS it came about that the forest camp remained. For Batiste Bariot did not die, and Marjorie Lady Vane nursed all unsuspectingly the murderer of her lover with such a devotion as she might have lavished on that lover himself. Thrice each day the door of the cabin was thrust a little open, and food and drink was placed within by a hand that immediately withdrew. Each time the voice of Michel asked, "Are you well?" and each time she answered, "I am well."

Meanwhile the days lengthened, the snows vanished from the woods, and the spring came slowly on. Sometimes, while the patient slept, his nurse walked abroad in the strengthening sunshine. None came with her at such times, though on occasion Michel dogged her footsteps at a little distance, watching her with a strange wonder.

Whether it was that the great letting of blood from his wound relieved him, or that his strength stood him in good stead, Bariot took the smallpox only lightly. Yet his fever ran high, and often he rambled for hours in delirium.

Those were times of frightful ordeal for his nurse. For they opened her eyes to knowledge of what this man had done. Not all at once, but by slow uncertain degrees, by a phrase here and there he laid bare the main outlines of the truth, and at the end of a fortnight Lady Vane was aware that the man who had pitilessly given her lover to a dreadful end lay utterly in her hands for life or death.

It was night when for the first time that truth sank

into her brain. Just as she was, she rose up and walked out of the cabin into the darkness of the forest. In the early morning one of Michel's Frenchmen, starting on a hunt, came upon her where she had sunk down at the foot of a pine, and at the look in her eyes he crossed himself and ran back to the camp.

Michel went out to see her. "He is dead?" said he, thinking of Bariot.

"You helped to kill him," came from her blue lips, and her eyes accused him with a dreadful stare.

"The man was dangerous, m'amie," said he. "Put him outside before you take the infection."

"The infection—ah!" And suddenly understanding of whom he spoke, she broke into hysterical laughter. "No, no," she cried. "I will keep him. I have not finished with him yet!" And she rose and walked unsteadily back to the camp.

She found the patient lying asleep—an ugly picture, his face, red and swollen with the crowded vesicles of the pestilence, framed in the tangled mass of his black hair and beard. A fierce hate of the powerless wretch surged up in the girl's tortured soul. It would be so easy to let him die of his disease—so easy and so just! Ah, but she could avenge her lover so completely! She could nurse back this disfigured traitor to life, to consciousness, and then she could denounce him to his face, and leave him to perish in his weakness, drinking to the dregs his bitter draught of punishment, without a priest to absolve his guilty soul.

It had seemed to her mind, distraught with horror as she gazed down that morning on Bariot, that her instincts of humanity were poisoned at their source. And as the days dragged on the grim temptation clung to her.

One night, when Bariot had scarcely spoken a sensible word for a week, Marjorie sat and glowered upon him while he slept. Suddenly he opened his eyes and fixed

them upon hers, and an expression of terror spread over his face.

"Mercy, madame!" he exclaimed.

"Why?" asked the girl, coldly.

He sat up on his couch, supporting himself by both hands. "What have I said while I have lain sick?" he said.

"Too much, Batiste Bariot," she answered. She saw that the fever had left him. Her time was come!

His eyes were searching her face in the dim light. "You have not been sick?" he asked.

Marjorie shook her head. With surprise she saw the terror fade from his eyes. He lay back again.

"Listen," he said. "What I may have said I do not know, but what I must say I know well." In slow deliberate sentences he told her what he had done with her lover. When he had finished a sweat of exhaustion broke out upon his forehead. "The bon Dieu has preserved you that I might make confession," said he.

The Countess made no answer. Why had the infection, so deadly and pitiless, spared her who had dared it daily? The question began to besiege her thoughts. She said no more to Bariot, but rose up and went out into the woods, where the moon was shining. When she returned, long afterwards, Bariot was sleeping peacefully.

The next day he watched her with a strange expression, but she tended him as usual.

"Why do you keep me alive?" he asked her suddenly.

"I do not know," she replied.

"Has Monsieur Michel been here?"

"No."

"Because of me?"

"Because of the infection."

"Ah!" The information appeared to content him, but at the time he said no more. Another day he returned to the subject abruptly. She had continued to nurse him,

performing her task mechanically, taking no note of his progress.

"The infection will last for several weeks," said he, "perhaps more—I do not know. But I feel that I am getting better. When I am strong enough, if it pleases you to let me live, I will kill Michel for you and take you wherever you would be."

Marjorie turned a white face to him. "Are your hands not red enough—murderer?" cried she.

"Yes, indeed," he answered simply. The big voice was growing gruff again with his returning strength. "All the same, I will kill him."

"I desire nothing at your hands," she told him.

"Ay, madame. Yet while I am here, or while they think I am here, you are safe." He looked at her with a beseeching earnestness, and repeated: "Do not forget that, madame — while they think I am here you are safe."

She turned away without reply, thinking, with a bitter contempt, that the man was pleading for his life. Yet afterwards she recalled his look of entreaty.

Three mornings later, when Marjorie awoke at the dawn, she found herself alone in the cabin.

A few miles away, staggering along in the heart of the woods, Batiste Bariot was at that moment fighting against exhaustion. His mind was fixed stubbornly on one resolve. One thing lay before him to be achieved, and that done he cared for nothing else. But would his strength avail him? His woodsman's craft had brought him thus far, even in the night, but his legs tottered under him, and without some assistance he knew himself unequal to his undertaking. Long forest miles still lay between him and Fort Frontenac.

He had brought a little food with him from the cabin, and he sat down and ate it while the sun rose. It revived him a little, yet he still felt too weak to go on. To a

strong man, such as Bariot had been, such a feeling is very terrible. He fought against it. It could not be that he was to die thus, on his way to make the only reparation in his power to her whose life he had wrecked, and who had nevertheless put her life in jeopardy to save him! Somehow or other he *must* go on to the Fort. All the force of his will urged that unyielding "must" upon his enfeebled body. He knew that if a man in his condition was to cover those intervening miles he should rest often and rest long. So for a full hour he sat where he was and nursed his resolution. Then he rose, and crawled on for perhaps a couple of miles, ere his cramped limbs gave out again.

This time he lay and rested till nearly noon. Hitherto he had carried a gun with him, which he had brought from the cabin, where there was no lack of arms. But it was grievously heavy for one in his state, and Bariot resolved to leave it behind when he made his next advance. His head throbbed painfully, and he was tortured, despite his determination, by the fear of failure. He left his gun, and took a few steps more.

Suddenly Bariot stopped. His quick woodsman's ear had caught a sound that did not belong to the creatures of the forest—the sound of a horse's hoofs. Next moment he had concealed himself.

The sound came again, and almost immediately the horseman appeared in sight, riding carefully as the place required. With a start Bariot recognized one of Michel's half-breeds, who had fled with the others when the small-pox broke out.

"Holà, Pierre Duchelin!" he hailed, coming out of hiding.

The rider reined up, with a startled glance. "Who are you? Keep off!" he cried, fingering a pistol as he spoke.

"It is I—Batiste Bariot."

"You—Bariot!" cried the half-breed, a look of horror

on his face. "Keep away! You have the spotted death!" He pulled his horse aside as Bariot stepped towards him.

"I am cured," said Bariot. "Stop and listen, fool!"

"No abuse, captain!" snarled the man. "Tell me, does Monsieur Michel live?"

"Ay, he lives—no thanks to you!"

"But it will be thanks to me, monsieur, if he continues to live!" grinned the half-breed. "I have red-hot news that will burn his ears, I believe, and I look for good pay for saving him, I assure you."

"What is your news?"

"Just this—that last night who should come up to the Fort through a pouring rain but Monsieur de la Salle and his friend the Englishman!"

Batiste Bariot stared a moment dumbly at the speaker. He put out his hands as though for support, and reeled as he stood. The ghastly pallor of his face startled the half-breed.

"You are mistaken, good Pierre," he stammered, controlling himself with a great effort. "The Englishman died when the ship was wrecked."

"Mistaken!" The half-breed laughed insolently. "Then the ghost of the Englishman is much more like the Englishman than the ghost of Bariot is like Bariot," he chuckled. He was for riding on.

"Halt!" cried the pilot, a sudden light in his sunken eyes. "You have not far to go, Pierre, to the camp. If you will give me your horse I will make you a rich man. I have much laid to my credit at Montreal, and I think I have not long to live."

The half-breed eyed him a moment, then laughed again callously. "Pardieu, I believe you are right," said he. "But look you, Monsieur Bariot, if I claimed this treasure of yours I might be told I was mistaken again."

Bariot, desperate in his weakness, leaned for support

against a rock. His eyes blazed. "You impudent rascal! I will write the pledge here and now."

"A la bonne heure!" cried Duchelin. "I should be afraid to take it, captain, for fear of the infection. You do not look nice. I should not like to look like that. Stand away, or I shoot you!" He brandished his pistol with an ugly look.

"Shoot, you cursed mongrel!" cried Bariot, and with the fury of despair he flung himself towards the horse. The animal shied violently as the pistol exploded, but Bariot felt himself unhurt, and with murder in his heart hastened back towards the spot where he had laid his discarded gun behind a rock.

The half-breed, controlling his startled horse, urged him after Bariot, who stumbled with weakness as he ran. Duchelin took a second pistol from his belt. "Name of a name! There will be no mistake this time!" he shouted.

The hunted man dipped behind his rock, and the half-breed spurred round its end. His swarthy, angular face, distorted with rage, changed suddenly as he found himself confronted with the muzzle of a gun. He reined up and raised his pistol, and the two reports roared as one. But for that one moment Batiste Bariot's disciplined nerve and eye responded to the call. The rock chipped above his head where the pistol bullet glanced from it, but the half-breed flung up his arms and fell an inert lump upon the ground. Bariot saw him fall. Then the forest swam before his eyes in a thickening mist, and he fainted.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE MAN AT THE GATE

IN the dead small hours of the night Robert Cavalier de la Salle sat writing in his room at Fort Frontenac. A single lantern threw its yellow ray upon the page, and upon the thin swarthy face of the writer, worn with hardships, weary with disappointments, anxious with doubtful thoughts. It was a letter to Colbert the Minister of the King which he was writing, a letter in which he sought to set forth what he had done, and what he had been prevented from doing. It was a hard letter to write, for King's Ministers do not take kindly to records of failure, even though the failure be of the heroic sort. The writing of it had taken many hours, but it approached completion. At last La Salle signed his name and laid down his pen. He sipped a little wine from a cup at his elbow, and leaning back, pressed his hands for a moment on his tired eyes.

At length he rose, and his tall gaunt figure crossed the room to the corner where his bed stood against the wall. He was about to fling himself down for a few hours of sleep, when a knock sounded at the door. Frowning, the weary commander straightened himself, and striding to the door threw it open. A sentinel saluted respectfully.

"Eh bien?" questioned La Salle.

"Monsieur, a dead man lies at the gate of the Fort."

"What have I to do with dead men? Have I not enough trouble with the living, friend?"

"Monsieur, it is a Frenchman, by the dress," the sentry persisted. "Last evening he was not there."

With an impatient gesture La Salle motioned the man to lead on, and followed him to the ramparts of the Fort.

In the north-east the faint greyness of the dawn was apparent. The dark expanse of Lake Ontario to the south was already visible. The sentry led the way to the part of the defences which commanded the gate, and pointed to a figure that lay prostrate, its arms extended towards the gate. There was something mutely appealing in the attitude of the body.

"Unbar," said La Salle, "and bring him in." He stood on the rampart and watched while a couple of the soldiers, new men lately sent up from Quebec, carried out the order, and then the sentry came to him again.

"Monsieur," he said, "it seems the man is not dead, but I think he has not long to wait."

At that La Salle went down to see this waif from the night. Holding a lantern to the face, he recognized with a dull surprise Bariot the pilot, changed almost beyond belief, senseless, yet certainly Bariot.

"Take him to my room," he ordered brusquely, and the men with a look of wonder obeyed, laying Bariot on the floor. La Salle bent over the unconscious man and noted the recent ravages of disease. As the lantern light shone clearly on the face the soldiers drew back.

"Have a care, monsieur!" cried one. "He is dying of the smallpox!"

"No. He is not dying of that. But he has had it. Go, bring vinegar, and send a priest quickly."

Glad to escape from that company, the men departed. La Salle took the wine-cup from the table and forced some liquor between the dry lips of the man on the floor. In a few moments Batiste Bariot feebly opened his black eyes, and stared vacantly at the leader he had betrayed. La Salle made him drink some more wine, though he perceived that death was at hand.

Yet for a moment intelligence flickered in the dark face. Bariot clutched at La Salle's sleeve. He gasped out words in a thick whisper, and La Salle bent down to

catch their sense. One word only he caught—the name of Michel.

“Again!” he cried urgently, and raised the dying man’s head. He laid his ear close to the panting lips.

“Michel”—he heard again—“five leagues—north-east from here with the English girl—Mère de Dieu—miséricorde!”

The effort was too great. The dark head fell back on the supporting arm; the jaw dropped helplessly; the life that had flickered back for a moment had gone out. La Salle took the dead man’s listless hairy hand, and with it made the sign of the cross upon his breast.

A priest, blinking at the lamplight in the room, entered, stifling a yawn.

“You are a minute too late, reverend Father,” said La Salle, grimly. “He will have to make shift for himself with the Authorities. Have the goodness to send back the men and we will remove him, for he has had the small-pox and will be better outside.”

The priest uttered a pious ejaculation, but came no nearer than was needful to sprinkle holy water on the dead man’s face.

“Who is it, monsieur?” he asked.

“He did not tell me his name,” answered La Salle.

Before the sun was up Batiste Bariot had left Fort Frontenac for the last time. Every place which he had touched in his dying was drenched by the scared soldiery with vinegar, to exorcise the evil of La Variole.

Only Cavalier de la Salle, lying wakeful on his bed in the room where Bariot had died, took no thought of La Variole and her terrors. He pictured the English girl as she had stood to bid him God-speed on that moonlight night before he had sailed away into the West. Often had he dwelt lingeringly upon her image in his camps amid the wilds, thinking that for such a wife a man might be content to forego ambition, to break from that subtle

spell of the life of forest and river. He had tried to stifle those thoughts in vain, and he could not stifle them now. Her remembered face for the moment blotted out all other things. Even his letter to the Minister was forgotten. On that drenching night, when he and Arnold had struggled the last mile to the Fort's gate, the absence of any clue to her whereabouts had been a bitter blow. All yesterday they had searched for a clue, and now his brain, stirred by that dying message, was already planning her rescue. He thought of Arnold Firle, asleep while this great news had come. If his friend had died—! But his friend had stood by him through all, and lived, and loved, and thought that he had lost. He would have to be told quickly!

The French leader rose, and in a restless fever paced his room. Slowly the daylight was strengthening. There was no time to lose. La Salle sank upon his knees, and stretching his arms on the table leaned his head upon them. When he stood up again his face was calm and inscrutable. He summoned a soldier, and sent for his second in command.

"Gaston," said he, when the sleepy officer appeared, "pick me out the six best men of the garrison; arm them well; provision them, and let them be ready to start with me in two hours for Quebec."

"Monsieur! Such haste?"

La Salle nodded. "We go first into the woods," said he. "Let two canoes be sent four leagues to the eastward, to await us on the shore, and send one with them who knows by sight that villain André Michel. If they see him they are to fire on him. You will command till I return."

La Salle went then straight to the bedside of his English follower, and at his touch Arnold started up.

"I have news for you," said La Salle, quietly.

The young man gazed into his leader's face, and suddenly hope sprang to his eyes.

"Of her?" cried he.

"In two hours we start to save her—if she can be saved." In a level voice La Salle told all he knew, while with trembling eagerness the Englishman dressed and armed.

"Must we wait two hours?" he asked impatiently.

"She has been for two months in Michel's power," said the Frenchman, harshly.

The young sailor's face flamed. "You need not tell me that!" he cried passionately. "Do you think I shall forget when I meet *him*?"

"No, I think not."

"I tell you I must hope! I will hope! Why am I here? why has this message come to-day from dying lips, if I am not to hope?"

"Yes—hope!" agreed La Salle. He got up and went out. He left the Fort by the gate where Bariot had lain dying, and peered with straining eyes along the ground in the early morning light. What had the man said—"north-eastwards from here"? La Salle made a wide cast from the Fort. Soon he came to grass, on which the dew lay heavy. Casting hither and thither, like a hound for scent, at last he stopped. His woodranger's eye detected some bent green blades. He stepped forward slowly, then walked on with confidence. Ah! Here was a slightly-crushed patch, where a heavy body had lain at length. A few score yards and he came to another such patch. Bariot's journey had not been easy. Pressing eagerly forward, he reached at last the forest's edge, and now he knew, as surely as if he had seen it written on paper, that at this point the dying traitor had dragged himself from the trees. La Salle walked back to Fort Frontenac and found his men ready, though it wanted yet half an hour of the time he had allowed.

They set forth at once, and so fresh were the tracks through the spring woods that in the afternoon of that same day they came to Michel's camp.

But the camp was empty.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE VOICE OF "DESTINY"

"ARE you well?"

It was the evening of the day on which Batiste Bariot had left the camp in the forest.

It was the same question, in the same voice that had asked it these many days, as Marjorie's food and drink were brought to her cabin door. Then Bariot had not killed Michel, as he had said he would.

"I am well," answered the girl, as she had answered a score of times before.

All that day she had kept silence, wrestling with her conscience in the cabin. For she believed that Bariot would carry out his threat. But now she rose and went to the door, and opened it wide. André Michel still stood there.

"Batiste Bariot has vowed to kill you," she said quietly.

"Batiste Bariot?" He stared at her.

"He went away this morning."

"You have cured him?" There was a kind of awe in Michel's tone.

"He says he will kill you," Marjorie repeated, and with that cold warning returned within her doorway.

André Michel stood still and considered. That Bariot should wish to kill him was natural enough. Where was Bariot? Hiding, doubtless, in the woods till night, when he would come out and avenge himself under cover of the dark!

Michel hastened to summon the two Frenchmen who remained with him. But though they searched long in the failing light they did not find their man.

"Perhaps he has fled to the Fort," said one.

Michel thoughtfully considered the suggestion, for the same idea had occurred to him. Treachery is a weapon double-edged and slippery. His thin lips smiled.

"In the morning we will start for Montreal," said he. "When we get there you shall draw your pay, mes enfants, and your pay, you will find, will be worth drawing, for you have served me well. You shall have Bariot's share too."

He left them then, and went and knocked on the cabin door. There was no answer, and he pushed it open. It was already dark within, but he heard a slight movement and knew that Marjorie was there.

"Madame," said he, quietly, "to-morrow we set out for Montreal. There is a church at Montreal."

"A church?" repeated the Countess of Vane.

"The mission church of Notre Dame, where we shall be married."

"Heaven forbid!" cried Marjorie.

"Heaven will not forbid," he answered in a low voice.

"Nor, I think, will you. For you are in my hands, and I have loved you since the day you came on board the *Grace de Dieu*, two years ago. Since then, what has happened? Your English lover is dead. Bariot killed him. Did Heaven forbid that? Monsieur de la Salle and his expedition are dead. Did Heaven forbid that? Destiny gives you to me, and from Destiny there is no escape."

"Ah! but is there not!" The girl's voice rang wildly in the dark.

"There is not," he answered, still in that low, tense voice. "What Destiny gives, why should I not take at once? But because I love you, Marjorie, I shall wait and take my gift at Montreal."

"Neither there, nor anywhere!" she cried. "Oh, God, have mercy!"

Michel took a swift step towards the spot from whence

that anguished cry came, then he controlled himself. "I do not fear your prayers, sweet love!" cried he. "They have been answered already. Did you not pray for your dead lover? Well, he is dead. Pray again, if you will, against me who love you now. The way is long to Montreal from the forests of Cataraqui. Pray, and we will make a compact together! Is it not so?"

"How—a compact? I do not understand, Monsieur Michel." The girl's voice was faint.

André Michel drew close to where she crouched in the darkness. "If Destiny, which you call Heaven, would have you otherwise than mine," he whispered, "Destiny shall answer your prayer between here and Montreal. But if we come safely to Montreal you shall give me your hand at the altar of Notre Dame."

"I had rather die!" she murmured.

"But you will live, and I will make you love me—even me, Michel, whom you hate."

"No! No!" she cried. "You cannot!"

"We shall see," he answered. "Do you accept the compact?"

Long Michel awaited her reply. He heard her weeping in the darkness, and then an inarticulate moan. The poor young Countess, her brave spirit broken by suffering and fear, her strength worn out in nursing back to life the man she believed to be her lover's murderer, gave way at last to her despair.

"Do you accept?" repeated Michel more gently.

"If Heaven abandons me I will abandon myself! Go!" she cried piteously.

"I go," said he, and went out again into the lesser darkness of the night.

In the morning they set out. They reached the lake, and found the canoes which had been built and hidden by the men sent by Michel several weeks before; and in the afternoon, by the time Monsieur de la Salle and Arnold

with their party had found the deserted camp, they had already been afloat for several hours.

The young Countess cowered in the body of a canoe, and gazed overside at the wind-flecked river with listless eyes, like a woman in a trance. Not once did she look up at the man opposite, who, plying his paddle with the regularity of a machine, watched her hungrily yet exultingly.

Exultingly, because at last he had conquered! She had promised to marry him when they came to Notre Dame!

Notwithstanding all she had endured, his bride-to-be was beautiful still. In the confinement of the camp she had grown pale and thin, but already a day of open sky, the keen air, the sunshine of advancing spring, had wrought some change. He told himself she would be lovely as ever before long, when he had betaken himself with his wife and the fortune which he had made to France. France was the home for a man who had made his money! And as he watched her, the agent of the Crows built castles in the air, while he reflected that every stroke of his paddle brought them nearer to Montreal.

Near them on the river a second canoe skimmed along, driven by the strong strokes of his two French companions. They still feared the pestilence, and though they held to him they would not travel with the woman who, they declared, might yet bring it upon them.

The vast spreading waters of Ontario had long been left behind. On glided the canoes down the swift clear stream of the Saint Lawrence.

Some way ahead of them a long wooded island lay in mid-river, its nearer tree-tops lit by the pale gold of the approaching sunset.

Michel noted, as they drew near, the easy shelving beaches it offered to the stream, the pleasant shelter of its bright green dells, protected from harsh winds by fir-crowned rocks. Rousing himself from his visions of the future he called to his companions.

"Keep close to the shore, till we find a camping-ground."

The men slackened their stroke, keeping only steering way on the canoes, which slid past the island banks upon the current. Just ahead of them a tiny promontory ran out into the stream: there should be good landing behind it. Michel motioned with his paddle, and the canoes began to turn towards the point.

Suddenly there was a loud shout from the island:

"Halte-là!"

Two armed men ran down upon the strand.

"Ohé! Halte-là!" they shouted again.

Michel, half turning his canoe to face them, paused with paddle in air.

"In whose name, comrades?" cried he.

"In the name of La Salle!"

With a fierce exclamation Michel struck his paddle in the water and headed for mid-stream, and at almost the same moment the men on the island fired.

The range was short—not fifty yards. Michel's paddle splintered in his hand, and a second bullet, whistling over the head of his companion, struck one of the men in the second canoe. With a loud cry the man lurched forward, clutching at the side of the frail craft, which instantly capsized and sank, leaving the survivor struggling in the bitter current.

There was no spare paddle in Michel's canoe—the canoes had been too hastily made for that. In a few moments the current would drift them on to the island, where the men-at-arms were busily reloading. But in the nick of time a paddle from the sunken canoe swept alongside, and Michel, snatching it from the water, with swift strong strokes made away from that fatal shore. Looking back as he worked, he saw the two men run along to reach the end of the promontory for a surer aim.

"Lower your head!" he cried to Marjorie.

But the English girl, all her listlessness gone, sat upright in the canoe, her brown eyes fixed in eager intentness on the pointing muskets.

Again the reports rang out, but though a bullet ripped through the side of the canoe above the waterline, no other harm was done, and ere the marksman could reload a second time, Michel was far out of range.

There seemed no pursuit, but he plied his paddle hard till darkness came, shooting a foaming rapid in the perilous uncertainty of the short twilight, and landing at last, miles from the place of the attack, on a small islet thickly covered with trees.

Although the night had fallen there was a bright moon sparkling in silvery radiance over the broad river.

On the extremity of the island where they had landed, looking down stream, Michel carefully hid the canoe amid some low bushes and took out some food which was stored in her.

The Countess of Vane, a slim, ethereal figure in the moonbeams, stood watching him with a rising dread in her heart. On that little islet in mid-river they two were utterly alone.

"Come," said Michel, presently, turning to her with an odd smile on his thin lips, "give me your hand, my betrothed, lest you stumble in the shadows."

For a moment his hand, hot and damp from his long paddle, closed on hers. But the girl drew quickly back, trembling, and felt herself flush hot and cold by turns. His tone, rather than his words, appalled her. Never, since he had had her in his power, had he addressed her with such insolent pride of possession.

"Whither am I to come?" she asked him, in a voice she struggled to keep steady.

"To the western point of the island," he answered, "that I may watch the river above us as we sup together."

West or east, it was all one. "I will follow you," she said.

He led her through the patch of dark woodland to the other end of the isle, and in the shadow of a high rock they sat down by the shore.

Marjorie tried to eat, for notwithstanding her desperate situation a wild hope had sprung in her heart since that sudden challenge—" In the name of La Salle! " If her woman's strength could help her she would strive to keep her strength.

Michel at first said nothing, but as he glowered eagerly upon her he seemed to read her thoughts. The smile still lurked on his red lips, and his voice was low and persuasive when he spoke at last.

" You must conquer your shyness with me, sweet Marjorie," he murmured, " since you are so soon to give yourself to me."

" I shall never give myself to you," she answered unsteadily.

" You would break your compact? No, no! You will not do that! "

" I have fulfilled it! " she cried with sudden wildness. " If Destiny should answer my prayer—those were your own words, Monsieur Michel. And Destiny has answered my prayer this day! "

He gave a low satisfied laugh. " You dream of rescue. Dismiss the dream, ma chère amie. I am not a fool. We are pursued—I knew that, though you did not."

She looked up swiftly, her pulses beating high.

" Before we entered the rapid I looked back," said Michel. " There was a canoe far off in the sunset afterglow. That was why I shot the rapid in the twilight—a thing not many men would dare to do, madame. *They* did not dare, and therefore I have won. For after midnight the moon will set, and in the darkness I shall give them the slip. No, no, André Michel is not a fool, sweetheart. In a week you will give yourself to me in Notre Dame."

" I will not! " cried the girl, springing to her feet.

"You annul our contract?" he asked. A wicked gleam came into his eyes.

"Not I, but Heaven annuls it."

"We shall see. If you will not give yourself to me, eh bien, I need not wait. I will take you for myself!"

She answered nothing. What could she answer! Her eyes turned desperately towards the gleaming river. Thank God, there was always the river!

Once more it seemed as if he read her thoughts.

"If you have supped," said he, suavely, "we will go to the top of this rock together and look out. By now our pursuers may have made the portage past the rapid. In that case we may see them pass. That would be interesting for us both. Will you come?"

"Yes, I will come."

She went with a wildly beating heart. The ascent was easy to the top of the bluff, which was clothed with ferns and moss. As they mounted Michel suddenly gripped her hand. "Understand," he whispered tensely, "if you cry out you will never see the morning! Nothing shall rob me of you now!"

"I understand," she faltered.

They reached the top, and lay prone amid its crest of fern. At this end of the isle the rocky shore was partly undermined by the eternal friction of the current, so that in places the harder rocks actually overhung the stream. It was so with the projection of the bluff. Some twenty feet immediately below them the water swirled deep against the island shore.

For some minutes they lay side by side in silence.

"There is nothing," said Michel. He raised himself to his knees and prepared to descend. "Come then," said he.

He was within a foot of the edge.

With a sudden flash of inspiration the desperate girl remembered the canoe concealed at the other end of the

island. With a swift and vigorous movement she thrust at her companion with all her might. For a moment he hung on the curving edge of the bluff, clinging grimly to a root of fern; then it gave way in his grasp and he splashed heavily into the water.

Without looking after him, the Countess of Vane scrambled down the landward side of the bluff, and ran breathless and stumbling through the gloomy woodland to the bushes where the canoe was hidden. Well enough she knew that in a few minutes at most her persecutor would have swum ashore and be in furious pursuit. But if once she could launch the canoe, then with ten seconds' start she would be free!

Twice in her mad flight she fell to the ground, but she reached the canoe. Frail craft as it was, it was heavy work dragging it for a girl's unaided arms, and there were things in it which she dared not stay to remove. Frantically Marjorie dragged at the birch-bark shell. She got it clear of the bushes, she pushed it down the strand to the very water's edge. Already she heard the crackling of brushwood in the gloom, and the hard breathing of Michel as he ran.

Panic took possession of the girl. She thrust the canoe into the water, and as he ran towards her from the trees she stepped in.

Alas! In her reckless haste the thin bark had struck some obstacle, some jagged branch or sharp-edged stone. The water was pouring through its side, and already the canoe was partly filled.

Even so she would have trusted herself to it sooner than retreat, but ere she could clear the beach Michel rushed down. Splashing knee-deep into the water beside her, he seized her in his arms without a word, and she felt his breath hot in her face as he turned again to breast the slope of the island shore.

He carried her up through some brushwood, and set

her down in a clear space where the moonlight fell. Then he sat down on the grass facing her, to recover his breath after his swim and his pursuit. He was soaking wet from head to foot, and but for the dangerous light of passion and wrath in his eyes, he would have been a rather ridiculous figure. But the girl's fear of him drove out all other emotions. She remembered with a pang of regret the little dagger she had left in the forest cabin.

Michel recovered himself quickly. He smiled, and in his smile Marjorie seemed to read her fate.

"Destiny has spoken again, sweetheart," said he. "You tried to kill me, but Destiny kept me alive. You tried to leave me, but Destiny gave you back to me."

"I did not seek to harm you, but only to escape," said the girl. She rose to her feet and Michel did the same.

"What does it matter!" he exclaimed impatiently. "All is fair in love." He took a step towards her. Like a helpless victim, spell-bound before the destroyer, she stood and stared at him with wide brown eyes.

"The canoe is sunk," said Michel, still smiling. "For to-night, at least, Destiny gives us to each other! In the morning—who knows? But to-night you are mine!"

Behind the smile she read the madness in his eyes, and knew herself the prey of a ruthless savage. Wildly she sprang back through the brushwood towards the river.

As she crossed a patch of deep, soft moss, something moved beneath her flying feet. But she gave it no heed. In her terror she did not hear the weird rattling noise that filled the bushes behind her. She did not hear André Michel stumble and fall as he followed in her track, but just as she reached the river's very edge an awful cry behind her made her pause. It was such a cry as she had never heard before. It struck a chill of horror to her heart.

Crouching fearfully at the brink of the current, she looked back over her shoulder. There was no one in sight.

Again that awful cry rang out into the night, nearer than before. And then Marjorie saw Michel again. He staggered from the brushwood on to the moonlit shore, but not towards her. He did not seem to see her. He was swaying hither and thither, struggling furiously with something which coiled and waved about him in the uncertain light like a living rope. The moonbeams flashed for a moment on a knife-blade in one of his hands. One end of the quivering thing that enveloped him darted at his throat again and again, and the wretched man screamed in frenzy, stabbing and cutting blindly with his knife.

How long that ghastly strife endured Marjorie could never have told, but at last she saw the man, with a supreme effort, fling to the ground a wriggling shape which instantly uncoiled and vanished in the grass.

Michel dropped his weapon, and stood still for a moment, clutching with his hands at his head and throat. Then, reeling like a drunken man, he made a few steps along the shore, and suddenly collapsed upon the ground. Motionless with horror, the girl stood watching him. For the space of perhaps a minute her persecutor lay writhing and groaning where he had fallen; then a series of terrible convulsions set in, and a few sharp cries of mortal agony broke from the struggling wretch. At last he lay quite still.

For a long while the girl remained chained by fear where she stood. Then, subduing with a mighty effort the panic which beset her, she approached the still form.

The eyes which had so lately blazed with passion into her own were wide open, staring horribly in the fixity of death at the starry sky. The face was discoloured, and here and there a little trickle of blood showed on the cheek and neck. And that was all.

André Michel was dead. "Destiny" had spoken again.

Shuddering, the Countess of Vane turned from that shocking sight and sank upon her knees.

Across the shining current of the Saint Lawrence a dark shape came gliding, straight towards the spot where the half-sunken canoe of Michel projected from the water. It grated gently on the island shore, but Marjorie did not hear. Two stalwart men-at-arms stepped out, and a third remained with the canoe that had brought them. Stealthily, like trained foresters, they moved towards the kneeling girl, all unconscious of their presence.

Thirty yards from her they came suddenly upon the dead body in the grass, and stopped and stared at each other.

"By the Virgin! She has killed him!" whispered the younger of the two

But the elder, who had served with his leader in the lands to the south, stooped over the corpse and looked closely at the dead face.

A slight sound came from the bushes near. The elder backwoodsman sprang up and dragged his comrade back.

"Listen!" he hissed. "That is what has killed him!"

The younger man listened hard.

"Dieu merci!" he muttered. "A rattlesnake!" And his face showed the fear that gripped him at the queer noise in the grass.

And now Marjorie heard them and looked round. She showed no surprise, for she was wellnigh past sensation.

"Are you hurt, madame?" the old soldier asked her gently.

"No, I am not hurt. Who are you, monsieur?"

"We are from Monsieur de la Salle. By your leave, madame, we will take you to him."

She stood up, but as she went towards him she swayed, and he caught her fainting in his arms.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE BELLS OF WESTRINGFOLD

AFTER all, it was in the mission church of Notre Dame at Montreal that Marjorie, Countess of Vane, was married.

Three weeks later she saw once more the rambling fortress of Saint Louis on the cliff's brow at Quebec, and looked out from her window through the ruddy sunset haze at a ship which lay dwarfed below her in the river.

Even at this distance she knew the *Grace de Dieu*.

She was not the only one that evening who watched the tall French ship. In a corner of the battlements the Sieur de la Salle and Arnold Firlé walked slowly up and down.

"Consider well, Arnold," said the French commander. "There is the ship, and here is the shore. Make your choice."

"It is made," answered the Englishman.

"You hold to your decision? Remember, it may cost you your head."

"Dear friend and captain," said Arnold earnestly, "by the *Grace de Dieu* I came hither, and trusting in the grace of God I will go hence. Am I not right to go?"

La Salle smiled wistfully as he gazed across the river.

"Indeed, I think so," he answered. "We need such men here as you are; but you are a peer of England, and it is to England that you owe your service."

"Believe me," urged Arnold, "I seek not so much my earldom as my honour—my honour and hers."

"They say King Charles is needy," said La Salle. "If your earldom is forfeit by your cousin's treason, what kind of welcome waits for you—and her?"

The young man smiled. "In that case you and Monsieur de Frontenac must find a use for King Charles's castaway."

"As for that, my friend, Canada owes you something, and I—I owe you more."

"You!" cried the young man, fervently. "Ah, monsieur! And what do I not owe you! And what does she not owe you! Who but you showed me first the way to win back her faith? Who but you, when she had given me back her love, restored us to each other when every hope seemed gone? Hear me confess, monsieur—once I thought you wished to take her from me."

"Yes, you told me so," La Salle said quietly.

"If you knew how I was afraid!" cried Arnold. "For there are few men in the world such as you, mon capitaine!"

La Salle laughed harshly. "The world would be a sadder place, my friend, if there were more. I was not born under a happy star."

"Do you know what *she* says of you?" asked the young man, eagerly.

"And what does *she* say?" asked the Frenchman. His tone was bantering, but his face was pale and set as he leaned upon a gun.

Arnold pointed to the fleur-de-lis that floated above the Château of Saint Louis. "She says that the white lilies of France can never fade while there are Frenchmen like Monsieur de la Salle."

La Salle had turned away from his companion. He made no reply. He was as motionless as the brown gun on which he leaned.

A sullen, heavy detonation boomed suddenly from the river below, and a small white cloud of smoke rose from the side of the *Grace de Dieu*.

La Salle stood erect. "It is Captain D'Aubert, who recalls his men," said he. "He sails on the morning's tide. You have no time to lose."

Two hours later, having made their farewells to the old Governor, Arnold and his wife stood on the deck of the great ship which was to take them home to Europe. The Sieur de la Salle stood by the rope ladder down which he was about to depart.

"God keep you both, comrade," said he, and he embraced the young Earl with an impetuous warmth which was strange in him, and when Marjorie gave him her hands he stooped and touched his lips upon them.

"Oh, Monsieur de la Salle!" cried Marjorie, "there are no words to thank you, who have given us life and happiness."

He smiled bravely as he looked for the last time into the eyes that had haunted him.

"The bon Dieu gives us life, madame, while it seems good to Him; and as for happiness, it comes where there is love and faith." He bowed slowly with a courtier's grace, and the next minute he was gone down into his boat.

The *Grace de Dieu* sailed away at sunrise. For a whole month the prospering breezes followed her, and on a day in mid-July, when the green English Channel was dreaming in a thick summer haze, a fisherman, who was setting his nets off the mouth of the Rundle River, looked up with a scared face at a great shape which loomed swaying out of the mist above him.

When he had pulled clear the fisherman stared up, in two minds whether or not to warn the skipper of his whereabouts—for the wreck of such a vessel would be a godsend to the folk along the beach! Seeing that she was a foreigner, and would probably not understand him anyhow, the honest fellow gave his conscience vent.

"Ship ahoy!" he cried. "Ye'll be on the Rundle bar in half an hour!" He saw the leadsman in the chains carefully heaving the lead, but from one who stood above the leadsman there came a cheery laugh.

"Not we!" cried a clear English voice. "Catch hold, my hearty!"

At the same moment a well-flung line came smack upon the boat's thwart.

Ten minutes later the fisherman was sitting in his boat, staring, as he slowly pulled his oars, at a most seamanlike young gentleman and a young lady of such loveliness as he had never dreamed of, who waved their hands and cried farewells in a foreign tongue to the ship which was fading spectre-like into the mist to seaward. But the fisherman rested a moment on his oars, and clapped his hand to his pocket, and knew that if this was a dream it was a right good dream. So he left his nets to take care of themselves for that tide, and rowed for the Bridge Stairs at Westringfold.

Arnold and Marjorie sat together in the stern, and as the boat entered between the weed-grown harbour piers the young man looked about him. The sea-fog lay behind them, and river and shore were warm in the sunshine.

"Love," he whispered, "it was a day like this—just two years ago!"

"Don't!" she exclaimed. "Listen, Arnold, what noise is that?"

As the boat glided onward, faintly down the river came the sound of pealing bells.

Arnold smiled. "Dear, it is a good omen!" said he. "Boatman, why do they ring the bells of Westringfold?"

"For the King's Majesty, your worship," answered the man.

"The King!" cried Arnold, starting forward. "What brings the King to Westringfold?"

The boatman grinned. "Why, sir, if all that's said is true, just the same thing that takes me thither now, and that's the hope of a fat fee."

Arnold quickened with keen excitement. There flashed into his mind the memory of a royal right, so

ancient as to be traditional in the little town, yet so rarely demanded as to have become almost mythical. But did the boatman know?

"The Earl makes a great party, no doubt," he said, controlling his voice.

The boatman grinned again. "There beant any Earl—that's the rub!" said he. "Your worship touches it on the raw. He that was Earl is proscribed a traitor, and he that should be Earl has not been heard of this long time. And the King's lawymen has found out about the charter of Vane, and His Majesty is coming to fill his empty pockets."

"Give me an oar, man, and pull your best!" cried Arnold, sharply. "One does not see the King every day!"

Willingly enough the boatman surrendered one oar, and the boat moved faster up the stream.

"Who will welcome His Majesty?" asked Arnold.

"Indeed, there is none but the Mayor," answered the man, "and Master Franklin, the Castle steward, who waits with all the Castle folk on the bridge."

"Pull, man, pull!" urged Arnold.

So well he knew that old tradition! And to think the King might even now be putting in force his ancient right! It was a right which dated from the days when the first Earl of Vane had received his fief from the grim Conqueror himself. If at any time the Sovereign came to Westringfold, the Earl of Vane, on pain of forfeiture of lands and title, must await the King at the bridge. There he must offer his sword into the King's hand, holding it by the naked steel blade, and he must repeat his oath of fealty. As Arnold rowed he threw a glance behind him. There was the old stone bridge, with the tide swirling through its worn and massive arches as it had done for half a dozen centuries.

"What time does the King come?" he asked.

" 'Tis said at noon. Us'll be seein' him directly minute," answered the fisherman in his southern talk.

" Pull hard!" cried Arnold, impatiently, while his young wife watched him with wondering brown eyes. Over the old walls of the bridge he had seen the green liveries of Vane and a line of glittering pikes. They were close to the little town now, and the bells were ringing wildly, and the air vibrated with their clamorous welcome. And then suddenly above the pealing bells came a high flourish of trumpets and a hoarse uproar of cheering.

Arnold strained fiercely at his oar. The heavy fishing-boat shot swiftly under the arches, and swung round to the old bridge stairs.

" Come, Marjorie!" cried the young sailor. He flung a handful of silver to the astonished fisherman, and ran with his bride up the worn and slippery steps. Without a pause he mounted to the bridge, and though there a couple of stalwart fellows opposed his further progress, he caught a glimpse behind them of the steward, a gorgeous figure resplendent in velvet and lace.

" Franklin!" he shouted. " Ho, there! Franklin!"

The steward turned in a pompous surprise, and as he turned Arnold saw that he wore a sword of old and heavy make.

" You know me, Franklin!" he cried. " I am Arnold Firle. I am the Earl of Vane. Quick, man, your sword! And see to the Countess while I render the King his due."

The stout and gorgeous Franklin stared at the tanned and weather-hardened face of him who called so urgently. The cheering came ever nearer. Above the hedgerow where the road wound towards the bridge the horsemen of the guard came into view.

" Oh, fool!" cried Arnold to the gaping steward. " Will you lose me my earldom and yourself your place for lack of a yard of iron?" He pushed aside the pikemen

and snatching the steward's sword from its scabbard advanced to the end of the bridge at the very moment that the first horseman rode up.

"Halt! Who cometh?" cried Arnold in the ancient form.

The captain of the King's guard stared, but made answer, "Charles, by the grace of God of this realm of England King. Who are you, that challenge the King?"

"I am Arnold, Earl of Vane, by the King's gift and my fathers' sword," answered the young man.

The captain glanced at the naked blade, and again took up the old formulas, though in evident surprise. "And where is your fathers' sword?" he demanded.

"At the King's right hand, now and always," answered Arnold, holding the sword by the end of the blade as custom ordained.

The captain hesitated at this unexpected encounter. But Charles, whose coach had halted at the entrance of the bridge, had caught the challenge. He raised his head, and his dark, indolent eyes perceived the naked sword.

"Whom have we here?" he asked, and motioned to the riders about him to move aside. "Let this gentleman approach."

Arnold stepped forward between the opening ranks of soldiers and courtiers, and sinking on one knee, offered the hilt of his sword to the King. "Sire," said he, "I give your Majesty welcome to my castle of Vane, which your Majesty's fathers gave to mine. I am Arnold Firle, my cousin Edmund's heir."

"And where, fair sir, is your traitorous cousin Edmund?" asked the King.

"Sire, he is drowned."

"Why, that is good news," said Charles, coolly, "though it defrauds the headsman. Pray how came your cousin to so convenient an end?"

"Sire," said Arnold, "I throw myself on your Majesty's compassion. Two years ago I returned from the Low Countries, after long absence in your Majesty's service. I came back to seek the lady whom I loved, and found the bells of Westringfold ringing, even as they are ringing now. Sire, the lady was newly wedded to my cousin, and I learned that my cousin, all ignorant of his danger, was that very night to be arrested."

A look of faint amusement came into the King's lazy eyes. "'Tis an ill wind, fair sir, that blows no man any good," he observed. "Fortune favours you, it is clear."

"Ah, Sire!" said Arnold. "If I dared to hope it! I had no cause to love my cousin for taking my sweetheart, yet if she truly loved him I had much cause to save his life."

"Your logic overpowers me, sir," said the King, satirically. "To what are you coming?"

"Your Majesty, I tried to save his life," said Arnold. "I got him away to sea on the Dutch craft which brought me hither, but the night fell stormy, and my cousin was washed overboard and drowned."

"You mean you pushed the rascal over," said the King.

"Sire, I mean no more than I have said," answered the young man, respectfully. "His wife was with us on the vessel."

"Oho!" laughed Charles, sitting upright. "His wife was there, was she! Fair sir, you are ingenious. And now, I take it, the lady is your wife, instead of your naughty cousin's?"

Arnold bowed. "Your Majesty is correct." But his blood boiled within him at the royal insinuation.

"This is a very droll tale," declared the King. "A vastly amusing tale, begad! And where is your heroine, sir?"

"Sire, the Countess of Vane awaits your Majesty

yonder on the bridge, and when your Majesty sees and speaks with her you will know that she is not one to wed a murderer."

"Come, look not so straight at me, man!" said the King. "Though if all be as you say, your head is forfeit for coming between a traitor and the law."

"I throw myself upon your Majesty's clemency," said Arnold. "My wife and I have landed only ten minutes since from a French ship that brought us over the ocean from the New World. Hearing your Majesty was to honour my house, I have come straight to your Majesty's side to fulfil our ancient duty."

Charles, whose indolent eyes, under their heavily-drooping lids, had been keenly watching the frank face of the man before him, suddenly dropped his bantering tone. "Tell me," said he, "was it you, my lord, who fought our little *Lion* against the *Zwarte Gans* and sank her?"

"My captain was killed, Sire; there was nothing else for me to do."

"Well, well," said Charles, "at least you are a man, which is more than some of us are nowadays, hey, my lords? But who knows if your story is true?" he added, turning back from his courtiers to Arnold.

"Sire," said the latter, "the boatman who brought us in from seaward sits at this moment in his boat at the bridge stairs, and there should be one still in Westringfold who can bear out what I say of my cousin's escape. Let your Majesty ask for the landlord of the inn by the bridge."

"Let him be fetched," ordered the King, and the word passed along to the crowd which stood waiting beyond the bridge, and in another minute the stout figure of Stephen the landlord was seen advancing, his usually florid countenance blank and pale at the sudden summons to converse with Majesty.

"Friend," said Charles to him, "who is this gentleman here?"

Stephen looked with amazement at the man confronting him. "May it please your Majesty," he stammered, "it is Master Arnold Firle, cousin of my lord the Earl of Vane."

"And where is the Earl of Vane?"

"Indeed, may it please your Majesty, I do not know," said Stephen. "It is said he fled the country, taking with him the Countess." The honest fellow's legs were shaking under him.

"Tell the King's Grace all, Stephen," said Arnold. "The blame was mine who tricked you, and His Majesty will lay it on my shoulders."

"The whole truth is," said Stephen, "that I helped Master Arnold to save the Earl and the Countess, but I swear, may it please your Majesty's worshipful Grace, by all holy things, that I knew not who it was I saved until it was too late not to save them."

Charles shrugged his shoulders and dismissed the frightened innkeeper with a wave of his hand. "And now present me to your Countess, my lord, and with your leave let us be getting to dinner," said he to Arnold's glad astonishment. "Gad, the air of your southern hills gives an emptiness we would gladly buy with gold at Whitehall."

Arnold turned and beckoned to Franklin the steward, and in another moment the guards and gentlemen made a passage through which the young Countess approached the royal carriage. As she came past the staring men the colour heightened in her cheeks, but her step was firm and free, and her shining brown eyes watched her husband and the King.

Charles gazed with a quickening interest, and as she curtsied low at the carriage step he smiled graciously and bowed. Here was a beauty unlike the beauties of his Court.

"Madam," said he, "this fortunate gentleman is your husband, I am told."

"Your Majesty is correctly informed," answered Marjorie, demurely.

"He says his cousin, your late husband, was accidentally drowned in attempting to escape from my officers. What do you say to that?"

"Sire, I believe my husband utterly," answered Marjorie. She gazed frankly in the King's heavy face, and then dropped her eyes before his long glance that was compounded of cynical good-humour and admiration.

Charles glanced at Arnold's great sword, which he still held by the hilt. "Madam and fair hostess," said he, "when eyes like yours inform me they believe, my doubts are conquered. My lord Earl, here is your sword." He handed back the ancient weapon, and Arnold, surprised and joyful, knew himself by that same token forgiven. "Be pleased, both of you," said the King, "to enter my carriage, and conduct me to your door. At dinner you shall tell us of your adventures." Rising, the King gave his hand to the young Countess and made her sit beside him in the coach. "My lord Earl," said he, "in very truth you have deserved the block. Your dead cousin's treason has cost your estates dear, and verily it would mightily convenience my treasury to send you to the Tower. In that case you would cease to be Vane. You take me?"

"I am in your Majesty's hands," answered Arnold, gravely.

Charles smiled slowly to himself. "And yet observe my quandary," said he. "It is impossible that the husband of this lady should ever cease to be vain. Therefore, since even kings cannot accomplish that which is impossible, it follows, does it not, that you are Vane, and must continue so?"

"I bow gratefully to your Majesty's gracious logic," answered Arnold, smiling.

Charles signed to his attendants, and the trumpets

rang out again as the great carriage rolled heavily across the bridge. Up through the narrow climbing street of Westringfold it mounted, while the bells clashed wildly in welcome, and as at last it passed beneath the Castle gate, Arnold stole a glance at his young wife's face. Their eyes met a moment, then Marjorie turned to the King.

"Sire," said she, "be welcome to our home, and may happiness and content await you in this our Castle of Vane!"

She bent her head to the King, but Arnold saw the swift blush and the sparkle of her eyes, and knew that the message was for her husband.

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