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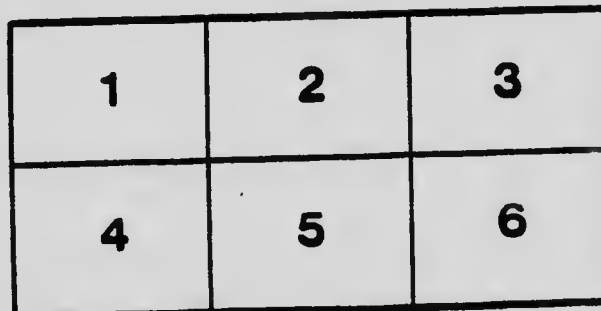
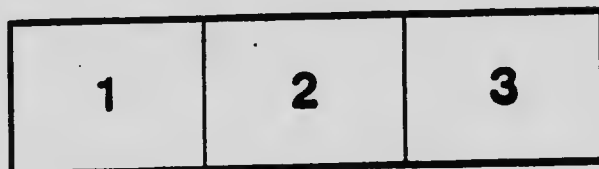
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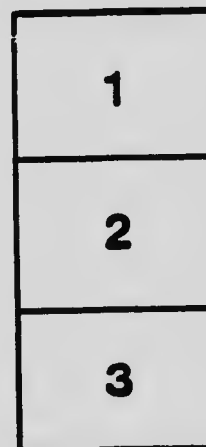
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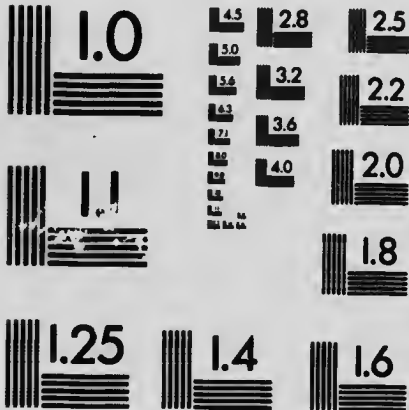
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SIR GALAHAD OF THE ARMY

# SIR GALAHAD OF THE ARMY

BY

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"THE THREE ENVELOPES," "THE JUSTICE OF THE KING,"  
"SHOES OF GOLD," "WINDS OF GOD,"  
ETC., ETC.

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# SIR GALAHAD OF THE ARMY

## CHAPTER I

### THE CAMP AT SALEGNA

THAT Monsieur de Commynes should have contrived even a three days' truce was a triumph of diplomatic insinuation. Being an honourable gentleman and the representative of The Most Christian King, he would not lie even to secure the boon of such a heaven-sent breathing space. In diplomacy the lie direct is, at best, a crude weapon with a dangerous recoil. Because of that recoil, and for the reasons already given, Monsieur de Commynes never used it except when the choice was narrowed down to a lie or the truth, and the truth was the more dangerous. Few men of his day were more discreet, more persuasive, or better versed in that nice art of negotiation which sweetens bitters and makes the worse appear the better.

No lie, then, was necessary. The truth, well larded, as it were, with possibilities and insinuations was sufficient. On behalf of the confederate Italian states the Marquis of Mantua swallowed it comfortably. Commynes' argument lay somewhat on these lines—the King desired nothing better than to return to France in peace, therein lay the truth; the King was young and those about him hard to convince, therein lay the suggestion; France was not bound forever to her present allies, therein lay the insinuation; and all three, truth, suggestion and insinuation, were pressed home with that persuasive address in whose use Monsieur de Commynes was a past master.

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That there was dissention amongst the confederates—Venice suspecting Milan, Milan fearing Venice and Florence heartily hating both—may have aided him somewhat to secure his object, but that in no way lessens the merit of the achievement.

That day the King lay at Salegna, a wretched cluster of huts with but two virtues: the walls and roofs were strong to withstand the terrific winds which at times swept down from the mountains, and a crescent of roughly-flat ground surrounded it, so that the few tents which still remained after the march from Naples and the passage of the Apennines could be pitched in tolerable comfort. Mercifully the month was July, and to eat or sleep in the open was no hardship, but food being scarcer than enemies, there had, of late, been more rest for the teeth than either brain or muscles.

Not so in Salegna. Thanks to the truce, even those hornet-wasps, the Greek mercenaries in the pay of Venice, ceased their harassments, and the village, poor though it was, furnished bread and meat of a kind. For once the King ate a sufficiency in peace: if the villagers thenceforward starved till the trampled residue of their scant harvest could be reaped it was the fortune of war. When great stones clash together the lesser which come between may look to be ground to powder, and if the mills of God grind exceeding small what shall be said of the mills of the devil?

The day was Friday, but Monsieur de Brissonet, the cardinal, had very wisely granted a dispensation. This was both politic and christianlike, two forces which do not always run in double harness even when driven by a churchman. If the proverb is right and a starved stomach has no ears neither has it a tender conscience; dispensation or no dispensation, fast day or no fast day, hunger would have eaten meat.

Partly because the housing was miserable, but chiefly because of the withering heat, the King dined under the shade of a great chestnut tree. Seated with him were the cardinal, Monsieur de Commynes

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and Monsieur de Guise, and the food furnished to their table was no better than that served at the score or more of others surrounding it. Though slow of speech at times, and dull to the unobservant, the King knew how to bind men to him by those ties of personal affection which grapple closer and hold faster than any devotion of loyalty to a cause. In the camp he was a soldier, bearing the fatigues of a soldier equally with those who served under him and with less complaint. Now he ate sparingly and spoke little, nor could those who watched him curiously have told whether he favoured the churchman, the politician or the soldier.

But if the King ate his bread in silence those about him at the lower tables, or stretched upon the grass, rejected his example without a scruple. There was not much laughter. In spite of popular belief to the contrary the French are not a laughter-loving people. Movement, the nervous excitement of a crowd, the bustle of life, and above all, the sound of their own voices they love, but to give themselves frankly to laughter is rare except in those of the south.

So was it under the trees at Salegna. From every side there rose a babel. None heard greatly what was said nor resented that he himself received no answer; then, as the chattering of sparrows in an ivied wall ceases suddenly, so, none knowing why, their talk ceased and each man looked at his neighbour, momentarily afraid of he knew not what. That was the first instinct, the second was to turn to the King's table. Above it, bare-headed, stooped Lasalle, who was in charge of the outposts, whispering earnestly.

But though he spoke to Commynes it was Charles who answered.

"Envoys? Messengers? What does the name matter, Lasalle, that you stammer over it? For the present, thanks to Monsieur de Commynes, we are at peace with these gentlemen; why should they not enter the camp?"

"The name matters if we call them spies, sire,"

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replied Commynes. "What is their business, Lasalle?"

"They say they come on the part of religion and charity."

"Spies?" the King drawled, mouthing the word. It was partly because of that slowness of speech that men thought Charles dull of intellect, but partly, too, because his face was unemotional. That he was so reckoned Charles knew and at times used both slowness and self-control to hide his purposes; yet at times his words could scorch like fire. "You are always too much of the politician, Monsieur de Commynes."

"Sire, your revered father taught me that my first duty was to suspect—"

"Even his son! Monsieur de Commynes, you forget. The King is dead, long live the King! Thank God, I can trust. How many did you say there were, Lasalle? Two? Then bring the gentlemen here."

"But, sire," intervened Brissonet, "it seems to me that Monsieur de Commynes is right. Surely, not knowing their purpose, it is dangerous—"

"Fie, Cardinal! It is the duty of the Church to have faith, even for those who have none for themselves. For whom did they ask, Lasalle?"

"For you, sire."

Crushed and neglected in boyhood, his every hour clouded by the fear lest the suspicions Commynes had spoken of should take form and strike, Charles was even less given to laughter than the nation he ruled; but now a gleam of humour lit up his heavy eyes an instant.

"Then there must be more religion and charity in the State than in the Church, eh, Cardinal? Bring them here, Lasalle, with every courtesy."

The silence at the surrounding tables remained unbroken. Beyond the King's first words little had been heard, and nothing perfectly understood, but Lasalle's presence was itself a portent. Not for any trivial cause would the officer of the guard have left

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his post, truce or no truce. Envoy, the King had said. But an envoy to what end? Was the truce already denounced? Had the confederates already repented of this breathing-space they had granted France? Was the tension of unsleeping, anxious watchfulness which had tightened every hour of every day since Naples had been quitted six weeks before to be strained afresh? Surely Commynes, always so tolerant of himself and so intolerant of others, had done his work badly. Some loophole of plausible excuse had been left unstopped. An hour before his supple cleverness had been their admiration. Who so astute as Commynes! Who so shrewd and full of foresight! He was worth a dozen generals to France in her hour of exhausted weakness. But now they gloomed upon him in sullen disquietude as, obedient to a gesture, he left the place where he sat fronting the King and ranged himself alongside the tree trunk at Charles' back and the silence deepened. Even the soldiers caught the infection. The noisy hum of the camp quieted, only in the direction where Lasalle had disappeared was there a buzz of angry voices.

At the sinister suggestion of their threat Charles rose.

"Remember they are our guests," he said, raising a hand in warning, and added significantly, "while the truce lasts." It was then that Lasalle broke through the distant ring of soldiers—mingled French, Swiss, and Italian allies, a ring which crept momentarily nearer, closing in upon all sides. The King kept his feet. Short bodied, long limbed, he knew that his insignificance of stature was less insignificant when he stood.

The Italians had left their horses at the outposts, and as the little line of three abreast, Lasalle being in the middle, came in sight, a murmur broke the silence. Envoys? In matters so vitally important they had looked for grave men, Senators of Venice, Pisani or Trivisano, perhaps Mantua himself. But these were mere youths, these were callow boys.

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Their very presence upon such an errand was an insult crowning broken faith with contempt. And where were the heralds? Where were the common trappings of form and courtesy between nation and nation? As the stillness of expectation had grown profound so now the murmur hoarsened. But for the second time the King raised his hand, then looking round on all sides touched himself upon the breast with his finger-tips. No words could have spoken plainer: "I am France, be sure France will guard the honour of France," and again there was silence.

Yet not even the scowlers through whose ranks the Italians passed, nor Commines himself, fluttered and suspicious, could pick a fault in their bearing. Without doubt they knew nothing of the Apostolic injunction, Let no man despise your youth, but they fulfilled its spirit to the letter. Clean limbed, clear eyed, the supple strength and grace of their years unconsciously avowed in every firm-set, swinging stride, they were types of young manhood very good to look upon. Once the awkward, self-suspecting age is passed no tutored experience, however schooled to perfection, can rival the beauty of wholesome youth refined by that subtle influence of descent and training which breeds both reliance and repose. Despised? No, there was no despisal. Poor ungainly Charles, robbed in his childhood of one half that influence, envied them in his heart, but, with the grace of kingliness which had already compelled his people's affection, was the more resolved to shield them from discourtesy let their mission be what it might. Spies they were not, that he was sure. The thought was bred of Commines' jaundiced suspicion. Spies pry and probe, spies are furtively alert; these men looked neither to the right nor the left.

"Well, gentlemen?"

At a sign Lasalle had halted, and the last two or three paces the lads advanced alone. Now they paused, embarrassed by the curt greeting as much as

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by a sudden realization that what had seemed so simple and easy of accomplishment at a distance had suddenly grown in difficulty. Guise, upon their right, completed their discomfiture. Removing the velvet cap, which by the King's direction he had continued to wear, he looked up quizzically. The hinted censure struck home. With prompt haste they uncovered, reddening to the scalp.

"Sire, we did not know—it is the first time—"

"No fault of yours, I can bear witness to that," said Charles laughing. "Your visits have not always been as welcome as to-day; but then," he added, "you have not always come in the name of charity and religion. Here is the Cardinal of St. Maïo, is your errand not to him instead of to me?"

Through the drawled speech, purposely prolonged beyond the King's custom, the confidence of youth, never long to be suppressed, had again asserted itself.

"Oh, sire, as to that, our welcome was always warmer than we wished for and our visits shorter."

But Commynes could not contain himself. All his life he had held that the smoother the words the more sinister the purpose they covered. Now he broke in.

"There is a truce," he said harshly. "Why, then, are you here at all?"

Allowing no time for a retort Charles interposed. "The truce is Monsieur de Commynes' child and he is jealous for its life and reputation."

"But, sire, it is because of the truce we are here. Avellino, do you explain."

"An Avellino of Calva? If so, I knew your father."

"Yes, sire. He died at Monte Fortino."

"And left the world the poorer! God grant him peace. There lived no braver gentleman, no more honourable, more generous enemy." Raising his flat cap the King stood for a moment bare-headed, while the lad beyond the table flushed a second time.

"And you, signor?"

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"Federigo Mirandola of Mantua, sire."

"We in France have cause to know the name. Always honoured, your uncle the Marquis has made it famous. Now, gentlemen, what is this charity and religion?"

## CHAPTER II

### THE HELPERS OF GOD

FOR a moment the two stood in silence. In the life they lived, the life the times compelled them to live, to act first and explain afterwards had been the rule, with the result that explanations had rarely been demanded. Now the reversal of the rule found them unprepared. Then,

"Speak thou, Federigo, the idea was thine," and thus goaded, but kicking bitterly in spirit against the goad, Mirandola began :

"It is not all religion, sire, and not all charity—"

"Something of youth," said Guise, "and the more youth the less charity. Leave the charity out and give us the youth, Messire Federigo. We shall get to the point the quicker. We thought you had come to denounce the truce."

"We, monsieur? What have we to do with politics?"

"As much as with charity I think," retorted Guise laughing. "Leave both out and come to this idea of yours."

"Back in the mountains behind us there is a convent—"

This time it was Charles who interrupted. "No ribaldry," he said sternly. "Camp jests which shame a man's age are the curse and disgrace of youth."

"I meant none, sire. Marco, do thou speak. I am a fool with my tongue."

"Back in the mountains behind us there is a nest of brigands, masterless men—"

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"Good," said Guise. "Now we are growing warm, as the children say, I am beginning to understand the zeal of this charity of youth."

"And the religion; do not forget the convent, monsieur."

"Leave off parables," said Commynes curtly. "What have we to do with your convents or your un-hung rogues?"

"Yes, tell us that. I foresee the parable is the parable of the fox and the henroost; but what is that to us, or to you either?"

With a wisdom which did him credit Mirandola, who answered, ignored scoffer and critic alike. It is characteristic of both that the pearls of argument or proof are wasted on them; they have neither the will to be convinced nor the frankness to admit conviction.

"All the world," he said, addressing the King, "knows that the order of Santa Clara is as vowed to poverty as the Franciscans themselves. But though the sisters, possessing nothing of their own, are poorer than the beggars on the streets, the sisterhood at times is rich. The convent of Our Lady of Truth—"

Again Charles interrupted. "I have heard of it before. It guards the relics of Saint Apollonia."

"Yes, sire, and through these holy relics the convent is famous. In times of peace, which heaven knows are rare enough, there are pilgrimages from Parma, Modena, Bologna, even from Florence, and by the gifts of the pious the convent has grown rich. As perhaps you know it is isolated, buried in a fold of the hills to the south-west. In the days of its foundation, faith and the reverence of the people were its protection. Exposed though it was none was so debased, so lost to God, as to raise hand against it; but now—" he paused, spreading out his open palms in an eloquence which beggared speech.

Nor was there need for words; King, cardinal and politician alike knew that partly through the lawlessness which spreads from armed camps as infection from a plague centre, partly through the Church's

## THE HELPERS OF GOD

own forgetfulness of its lofty mission, faith lay sick to death and reverence had fled to the ignorance of the humble. But Commynes, true to his antipathy and suspicion, broke in afresh.

"The point : have done with your preachment and come to the point."

At the peremptory sharpness of the tone, naked and undisguised in its hostility, Mirandola looked up, his eyes darkened by the first resentment he had shown since entering the camp. The sullen temper of the soldiers he had passed by as the menace of an ill-conditioned half-cowed beast, willing to offend yet held in check by the leash of its own fears. Guise's rebuke, sharp though it had been, was merited, but here was a challenge which stirred those angry quills youth finds so hard to control.

"Sacrifice is the point, theft is the point, spoliation, murder—perhaps worse, and you gentlemen of France have made it possible. But for you, but for France, these cursed brigands who neither fear men nor acknowledge God could have been held in check. France let all hell loose on Italy ; France—"

"Come, come," said Guise ; "you were tearing one another's throats before our day."

"Yes, monsieur, but even then the foe of God was the foe of all. Now Italy has her very life to fight for."

"And so forgets God ?"

"No, sire, and that is why I am here to-day. Hidden somewhere in the hills—no man knows where, for there has been no leisure to search out and crush the evil brood—there is a nest of brigands, and word has reached the camp that to-night the convent will be stormed. They are helpless, these women, defenceless, a little family of the Lord God's servants, and some of us—"

"Yes," said Charles encouragingly as Mirandola paused, "some of you ?"

"Sire," he broke out, "can we leave these gentle ladies, these brides of the Lord Christ, to the mercy

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of such unholy wretches? You who have seen war, you who have seen sack, you know what our unhappy women suffer when the soldiery are let loose."

"Never with my will," said Charles between his shut teeth, his face set and stern; "God knows, never with my will."

"We are sure of that, sire; but if hell breaks loose even against the will of a king what damnation will not rage when the will of the devil drives unhindered? The very thought of it chokes me."

"Good lad," said Guise, "good lad! If there are many like you in the camp yonder I do not wonder that we have our face to France. How far away is this dovecot of yours?"

"Perhaps two or three hours' ride, monsieur. I cannot say for certain."

"And you have leave to go? The Marquis of Mantua is your uncle, is he not?"

"On my mother's side; yes, monsieur."

"And he has given you leave for your knight-errantry?"

"No, monsieur, not exactly," answered Mirandola, his eyes twinkling while his fellow herald broke into open laughter as at some excellent jest privately enjoyed. "To tell the truth we have not asked him yet."

"And will not, I'll wager! Frankly, now, does he know you are here at all?"

"Frankly, monsieur, he does not."

"God send me patience!" cried Commynes. "Has a boy's thoughtless folly set the whole camp by the ears?"

"At least not thoughtless," said Charles, "and if it has, so much the worse for the camp. In a word, now, what is your purpose with us?"

"For the moment we are foes to each other, sire, but we serve the same God and love the Church. We offer France half the honour of saving this house of holy women whose defence is the duty of all Christendom. It is nothing but a night's ride—"

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"Not a man shall go!" It was Commynes who spoke. With the flat of his hand upon the table he leaned forward between King and Cardinal, his coarse, blunt face crimsoned with anger. "Not a man, not one. Let Italy rake her own chestnuts from the fire, we'll burn no fingers."

"Stand back, Monsieur de Commynes. You forget yourself—and me. Would you have spoken thus in my father's presence?"

"No, sire, for there would have been no need. His late Majesty would have sprung the trap himself. Monsieur de Guise, you agree with me?"

"I agree that we need every man we have."

"And you, Cardinal?"

"Surely God will care for His own."

"Now, sire, are you satisfied?"

Motioning Commynes to give place—an order at last grudgingly obeyed—Charles looked round him in perplexity before replying. Even while he recognised Commynes' great services he bitterly resented his tutelage, always suggested, often offensively expressed. Once again, before the whole camp, he was made to feel that he was but the shadow of that father whose sick suspicions had robbed his childhood of a boy's prerogative of freedom and frank-hearted gaiety, and whose willing tool Commynes had been. And yet how could he protest? How could he assert himself in opposition to such a trinity as Church, Army and State, represented by Brissonet, Guise and Commynes? Like most indolent natures he took refuge in compromise.

"Every man is servant to his own conscience," he said, raising his voice so that he might be understood as distinctly as Mirandola and Commynes had been. "You have heard what Monsieur de Commynes has said. On such an errand of danger, but not for France, I lay commands upon no man."

A silence followed, then from behind the King there broke a ripple of laughter and a voice cried out, "Galahad! Let Gala"

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But as the laughter spread, interspersed with little buzzings of eager talk, widening its circle as the ripples widen from a stone flung in a pond till the verge is reached, Commynes swung round.

"Let no man go! Have you not heard what His Eminence and Monsieur de Guise have said? Let no man go. Is this a time for players' folly?"

Again a silence followed. In all the army there was no man so feared as Philip de Commynes; not even Marshal de Gié himself, though De Gié never scrupled to hang where discipline demanded a hanging, nor was too scrupulous as to who hung so long as the lesson was driven home. De Gié, blunt and a soldier like themselves, they could measure and understand, just as they could measure a lance's length and judge the weight of the arm behind it, but this subtle weaver of webs for the tangling of men's feet, smiling, smooth, pliable, or rigidly inflexible, boisterously passionate, as suited his cunning purpose, was beyond their comprehension. It was safer to offend the King than the King's minister: the one forgave easily and forgot utterly, the other neither forgave nor forgot; and so for a time no man answered. Then the edge of the ring was broken and the laughter rose afresh as a man stepped forward a pace.

"For shame's sake, silence!" cried Charles, the drawl lost in the heat of the rebuke: "Gentlemen, gentlemen, have you neither grace nor decency? Yes, Monsieur Le Brocq?"

"I will go, sire," said Le Brocq.

Though older than the King he appeared younger, so fresh and smooth, almost boyish, was the face framed in the straight fair hair which, falling to the shoulders, suggested the Teuton rather than the Frank. His coarse, cloth doublet, patched, worn and weather-stained, set off admirably his broad shoulders and long, muscular limbs. The laughter which had roused the King's anger fretted him not at all, nor was there any touch of challenge or assertion in his voice. So Orlando might have borne himself, or David when

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he kept his father's sheep in the pastures of Bethlehem. At a beckon of the King's hand he joined the group at the table, bareheaded. The two Italian lads were tall but Roger Le Brocq topped them by half a head.

For a moment Charles glanced aside at Commynes, then back to the gray eyes which looked so steadily into his own and his heavy face softened.

"Monsieur Le Brocq, Monsieur Le Brocq, how can you dare to say yes when all these gentlemen say no?"

"But, sire," said Guise, "it was Guise the general who said no, not Guise the man; and I take it Monsieur Le Brocq speaks as a man and not as a soldier."

"And," added Brissonet, not to be outdone in a courtier-like walking upon both sides of the road at once, "it was the lover of France who said no, not the churchman."

"Ah!" retorted Charles, "you blow cold, you blow hot; all except Monsieur de Commynes who is always cold. Well, Le Brocq?"

"Sire, if I speak frankly I may not please Monsieur de Commynes."

"Nevertheless, speak frankly. I answer for Monsieur de Commynes."

Turning, Le Brocq looked the Italians up and down, then glanced round the camp, with its many signs of the havoc wrought by the hardships of the prolonged march.

"Gloss the truth how we may, sire, we are in dire straits. If even one of us sees France again it will only be by the mercy of God. What hope have we of His help if we go not to His help when He needs our help? I have no gift of words, sire, but how can God fight for us if we fight not for Him in His need?"

"You speak like a fool," said Brissonet harshly. "How can man fight for his Maker and when had God need for the help of man?"

It was Charles who replied. "Once I heard that fiery-tongued monk of Saint Mark, Fra Girolamo,

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preach in Florence from the text, 'Cursed be Meroz, saith the angel of the Lord, Bitterly accursed be the people thereof, because they came not to the help of the Lord.' You, Lord Cardinal, were not in the city at the time, but your question is answered. Monsieur Le Brocq, you have my leave to go, and my thanks," he added, raising his voice. "Where is your rendezvous, gentlemen, and at what hour?"

"At the camp, I suppose?" said Commynes.

"And have my uncle, who is quite of your way of thinking, lay us by the heels? No, monsieur, not at the camp. But midway between us, on the Pontremoli road, there is an inn. We are to gather there one by one an hour after sunset."

"Good. Monsieur Le Brocq, you will report to me instantly on your return, let the hour be what it may. Blaise will admit you. At Naples I had hoped that France and Italy might have stood before the world together in the name of justice and religion, as you will this night. But that dream is past. Gentlemen, good fortune go with you. To-night, if I were not Charles, I would be—Galahad!" Stooping he filled his silver cup with the thin wine of Salegna. "To the helpers of God!" he cried, and set down the cup empty.

## CHAPTER III

### TWO STRONG MEN

THERE is a wide-spread belief, fostered perhaps by the examples of Hercules and Samson, that great depth of chest and an unusual development of muscle are accompanied by an equanimity of temper not easily disturbed save under exceptional circumstances. Whether this quality of composure is due to that good digestion which waits on healthy appetite—and what is so calming to the temper as a good digestion?—or is a direct gift of careful Mother Nature for the preservation of the weaker but offending brethren may be an open question. The belief, certainly, is often justified by experience.

Roger Le Brocq was no more a Hercules than a Samson, just as neither of these ancient heroes was a Galahad, but it was well for the peace of the camp that his nature partook of their docile qualities. Hercules, it will be remembered, performed his tasks without a murmur, and Samson long endured the baiting of the Philistines before the Berserk point was reached, and he and they went down in one common ruin. To the rough jests showered upon him when the diners broke up to idleness on the departure of the Italians, jests coarse at times and always personal, camp-fashion in every age, he retorted with unruffled good humour.

"Behold the one great noble soul in all the camp!"

"You know your own soul best, Brunet," he retorted. "God ha' mercy on its nobility!"

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"The teacher of the Church! Where did you learn theology, Galahad?"

"I teach as I was taught."

"What an eye he has to the ewe lambs of the flock."

"At least, they'll be safer with me than with you."

"The camp is dull, fetch a couple of pretty faces back on a pillion behind you."

"Cleanse your foul tongue, Renault, and we will forgive your face, unwashed though it is; but perhaps that is all the better, we see less of it."

But as the interchange warmed, those who knew Le Brocq best, and noted how his full-lipped mouth hardened, were relieved when an interruption broke off the passage of words which so soon might have become a passage of arms. Commynes' liveries on the messenger gave Renault material for a final shot.

"Go and be birched for your folly! Poor devil! its odds he won't be able to sit a horse by the time the truce-maker has done with him!" Nor, for once, had Le Brocq a retort ready. He had his own rueful idea of what awaited him.

And yet Commynes' reception was gentleness itself.

"The King owes you a debt, Monsieur Le Brocq, and I shall see to it that it is paid in full before long." Then, as Le Brocq, astonished at this falsifying of his expectations, remained silent, the smooth, full voice went on. "And not the King only, France herself is your debtor; you did well, very well indeed, and I am very pleased with you."

"Thank you, monsieur," stammered Le Brocq. "I feared you were offended."

"At first; yes, I admit it. But you saw clearer and further than I in the heat of the moment. Now between us we must turn our opportunity to the best purpose. You speak and understand Italian well?"

"Yes, monsieur, after one year in Italy."

"Good. And have a quick ear? A good memory?"

"Yes, monsieur, both I think."

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"Better and better. But of course if you had not these advantages you might as well have kept silent. Sit down. No doubt you have your own plan of procedure, but in matters of this kind my grey head is the better guide."

Breaking off, Commynes, his brows knit, his mouth pursed, sat staring with narrowed eyes through the one window of the miserable hut which formed his quarters in Salegna. The space beyond was full of the characteristic bustle of a crowded camp, but he saw none of it; the air rang with snatches of song, rough laughter and hoarse cries mingled with the clank of hoofs and the stroke of the armourer's hammer, but he heard none of them. Unscrupulous in his methods, an opportunist in his own interests, harshly critical of those from whom he disagreed, Philip de Commynes was a faithful servant to France, ready and eager to use adroitly the first tool which came to his hand. If the tool broke in the using so much the worse for the tool. To say that he judged other men by his own standard is no more than to say that he measured the age by its spirit. Rousing at last, as if his problem had solved itself, he leaned forward, laying a hand on Le Brocq's arm and gripping it firmly to force his attention.

"Listen. They are at odds amongst themselves, these Italians. They are like dogs bound together by a loose chain. You have seen them? One strains this way, the other that, but the chain holds them together and they go the one road. So is it with Italy. The chain is the fear of France: they do not love each other and but for the chain they would not hunt in couples. The first point for you is, are they so much at odds that in spite of the chain they are ready to fly at each other's throats? Or if the chain were loosed would they so fly? Watch these young fools to-night. The hotheads of Venice, Milan and Florence will be there, watch them well. They will be off guard. It may be they will drink that wretched inn's bad wine. Being young and fools that would

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be natural. Bad wine is a great begetter and bringer to light of hidden truth, therefore watch well. That is the first point. The second is, are there reinforcements on the way, if so, what is their number, whence do they come, by what road and when expected? If not, it may be well to prolong the truce. It is in times of peace, of inaction, that such coalitions crumble. The dogs grow full-fed and having none other to fight, fight among themselves. But if there are levies near at hand, within four days' march or five—you understand me?—it may be well to break the truce at once."

"But, monsieur, it was solemnly sworn—"

"Tst! tst! There are always pretexts, call them reasons, causes, if you will. With that you have nothing to do. The third point is less important. Our own common spies can always inform us of their present strength and the disposition of the troops in their camp."

Little by little, as comprehension dawned upon Le Brocq, his face had clouded though Commynes, absorbed in his instructions, failed to see the change. Now he drew back abruptly.

"I am no common spy, Monsieur de Commynes."

"No, no; did I not tell you the King would be grateful? All you have to do is to keep your ears open. At times drop a word or two which might set Milan against Florence, a hint or question of comparative merits, and see what follows. If there is a group, ride near that group and catch their talk without seeming to listen. It is ten to one that their jealousies will crop out, or they'll speak of this or that which they think will follow when the truce is ended. Store your memory, let nothing escape you as too trivial, and leave me to draw the inferences. Be the good fellow, though if you think a quarrel will draw out a boasting hint of the future, then grow captious, sneer a little and fire their temper. Your part is mere child's play."

"Yet I cannot play it." Le Brocq's voice, always

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full as became his depth of chest, deepened a tone. "Surely you forget that for this one night we are brethren and comrades upon God's service? How could I degrade that service by playing spy or traitor?"

For a moment a sudden rush of anger to Commynes' eyes threatened an outburst, but he controlled himself.

"Your scruples do you honour," he said, and contrived to say it without a sneer. "But may it not be that God has sent you in the way of this very thing?"

"The danger which threatens these holy women—"

"Heaven send me patience! Do you really believe, Monsieur Le Brocq, that it is for the succouring of a pack of women, who may or may not be threatened, that these gay youths are losing their sleep, risking Mantua's anger and their own skins? Not for an instant! It's not grace in their hearts but hot blood in their veins that drives them. It's a boy's prank, a boy's appetite for a quarrel and nothing more. Fling your scruples to the winds, man, and seize the chance your restless spirit gives you."

"It may be as you say." Le Brocq's face was troubled as he answered, but his voice, for all its careful courtesy, left no question of his fixed determination. "I do not judge them. But for me this is God's service—His only—and I dare not do what you ask."

"I do not ask," retorted Commynes sternly. "In the name of France and your King I bid you; do you understand? bid you!"

Le Brocq's mouth hardened as it had hardened when the baiting of Renault and his fellows had grown almost beyond bearing, but there was no break in his tone.

"In the name of a greater, monsieur, I must refuse."

"You used the word traitor just now, used it unjustifiably. Am I to fling it in your face, Monsieur Le Brocq and with justification? The man who fails to aid his country in her need betrays her just as

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surely as if he raised his hand against her. Are you that traitor?"

"You heard the King, monsieur: every man is servant to his own conscience. I cannot do this thing."

"A visionary service."

"I know no higher; it is God within me."

Through the prolonged instant of silence which followed, these two strong men confronted each other steadily. Round the eyes of the elder, and across his forehead, the little wrinkles scored by time and thought deepened to furrows as an angry and stern contempt struggled with his self-control. Of the many narrow-minded perverse fools he had met this, surely, was the most obstinate and the least comprehensible. But the younger man never flinched. If the flush upon his ruddy face darkened it was the only sign he gave that he understood. Then Commynes spoke.

"Galahad they called you? Monsieur Le Brocq, I pity you for a romantic fool who does not know that in our generation there is no place for Galahads. You can go."

And without further protest Le Brocq went. Protest? What room was there for protest? The two men were poles apart and neither understood the other. But Commynes was wrong. His cynical contempt and angry disappointment blinded him. The age which can find no place for Galahads, over-punctilious though they may be at times, stands judged and condemned by the omission. Certainly the age which a Bayard made illustrious could not be so reproached.

## CHAPTER IV

### AT THE ALBERGO DEL SOLE

IN the folds of the hills night falls rapidly, and the darkness was intense as Le Brocq rode out of camp alone. With the slackening of the tension following the proclamation of the truce vigilance had been relaxed and he passed the lines unchallenged, the clank of his horse's footfalls drowned by the uproar which buzzed unchecked round a score of camp fires behind him. Even in July the mountain air struck chilly, and however inured to cold the soldier is an animal who loves heat.

Once upon the road, rutted into dusty pitfalls by the baggage waggons, he gave his horse its head, letting it pick its own way through the gloom. Where the path is dangerous or obscure instinct is often a better guide than reason. It was almost Le Brocq's first moment of detachment since, stung by what he conceived to be undeserved censure, he had quitted Commynes' quarters. There had been trivial camp duties to perform, his horse to groom and feed, while his intervals of idleness had been besieged by jesting advice, part ribald and part curious. In the dulness of comparative inaction, with no sudden attack to fear, Le Brocq and the purpose of his midnight expedition had been fair game. Now he had leisure to, as it were, set himself before himself and ask if these censures were deserved.

But first of all, was it true, as Commynes had said, that Avellino and the rest had no other thought than excitement and distraction? He could not believe it.

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Mirandola's passionate appeal rang true: it was the truth ringing through the passion that had compelled his own action. His heart had burned within him as he listened. The terrible details of the suggested picture were so easily filled in. Nor was there need to conjure up imagination. He had seen pillage, fire and sack and he knew their horrors.

Mirandola was right: damnation would rage if once these human brutes who neither feared God nor regarded men were let loose. He had been taught that to defend the defenceless wherever found was at all times a true man's service, but surely it became something greater than man's service, the service of Almighty God Himself, when these defenceless were the gentle, helpless Brides of Christ? Surely it did, surely, surely; and how could he degrade such a service by twisting it to his own ends, prying and peeping upon the men who shared its honour with him? "Oh, but," said Commynes, "they have no such thought, they seek no such honour." Did that matter? Did that render the sacred duty less sacred? Righteousness was eternally righteous however men might scoff or jibe; the wafer was no less the body of Christ because the pyx which held it was contemptible. They called him Galahad. The grail which comes to every man at times is no less a grail because others fail to see it. No! he could not believe that the censure had been justified.

That his love for France, his loyalty, should be questioned—that was bitter hard to bear. Ever since he could bear arms he had held his life in pawn for France; it was hers for the taking. If a man, having all the powers and passions of a man throbbing through his veins, could love a mother with a child's love, a love untainted, undivided—that was his love for France. And now to have his loyalty doubted, his devotion sneered at! A whinny from his horse broke into his half angry, half unconscious protest, and with the instinct of the soldier who by turns has been hunter and hunted Le Brocq drew rein sharply. A

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near-by whinny answered; through the darkness came the stamp of hoofs, the jingle of bridle-chains impatiently shaken, and peering ahead he caught sight of a dull light blurring the gloom. It was the Albergo del Sole. With a slackened reign Le Brocq rode forward slowly.

The inn, a squat two-storied building, part stone, part wood, stood a few yards back from the highway, thrust, as it were, into a recess of the hillside. Beyond it, covered by the pine growth which had made dark the road, the slope rose abruptly, but the flat on either side lay clear. Here, tied up to hitching-posts upon the right and left, were two groups of horses, their numbers hidden by the dusk. His comrades of a night were already at the rendezvous. Dismounting, Le Brocq added his horse to the rest, looked carefully to girth and stirrup-leathers, then turned to the inn.

The door was closed, but through one small, four-square window a dull light streamed like a misty breath upon the darkness. From within came a chorus of careless voices, exclamations, laughter, the rasp of feet upon a sanded floor pointed by hollow echoes. It would not have required the foresight of a Commines to suggest that the inn's wine, be it good or bad, would not pass untasted.

But as Le Brocq paused, his hand upon the latch, there came that silence which falls at times upon a cawing rookery and a strong, clear voice struck up a song whose air and words Le Brocq knew well:

'Tis truth to say that song's divine,  
For whoso singeth drinketh wine,  
And whoso drinketh finds his thought  
In rose-flesh mesh of love is caught.  
And what can earth show heaven above  
Half so divine as woman's love?

Then came the chorus, roared with an abandon more vigorous than musical. Under cover of the roystering repetition Le Brocq pulled the latch, opening the door an inch or two:

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And what can earth show heaven above  
Half so divine as woman's love?

Promptly the second verse followed, sung by a rough, uncultivated voice, yet with the nation's natural gift for musical expression :

They err who praise the power of song,  
For whoso singeth drinketh long,  
And whoso drinketh fills his brain  
With foolish dreams to breed him pain.  
For who that loveth hath not proved  
Himself a fool for having loved?

Again the last two lines were shouted lustily, a stamping of feet and rasping of horn mugs half drowning the final words.

In the third verse both singers joined :

Then listen all to whom we sing  
While we expound this curious thing,  
That bad is good, and right is wrong  
In love and wine and power of song.  
However good a thing may be  
Too much is bad for you and me :  
And song, wine, love, or such like stuff,  
Is good but till you've had enough.

"Therein, my friends, lies the whole philosophy of life." As the din quieted Le Brocq recognized the voice of the second singer. "The philosophy of life, I say, from first to last—landlord, fill up—however choice the vintage may be—not this, landlord, not this—however it warms the blood and sets visions dancing in the brain, the moment it stales the palate, the moment it palls, fling it aside, and try another."

Pushing open the door Le Brocq entered, closing it quietly behind him. The speaker sat facing him, his legs astride a bench, a drinking-vessel flourishing above his head to point the rhetoric, and their eyes met. Promptly, the fingers spread, the palm outwards and open, up went the other hand motioning for silence.

## AT THE ALBERGO DEL SOLE

"By the bones of Saint Denis, it is Galahad, knight-errant in ordinary—no! extraordinary—to the armies of France! Welcome, Sir Galahad!"

"My name is Le Brocq," said Le Brocq, advancing to the middle of the room.

"The name! a fig for the name! 'Tis the nature we love and admire, as men mostly do a virtue they have not got!"

Rising from a corner Mirandola took Le Brocq by the arm, standing with him shoulder to shoulder.

"Gentlemen, this is our French comrade."

"Aye, aye, I said so," retorted the singer, "the one knight-errant of the armies of France. You take good care of yourselves below there, Monsieur le Galahad."

"Perhaps after three days—the truce is for three days, is it not?—we shall take even better care of me than ourselves."

"Wait," said the mule, 'till the grass grows;' but as the horse waited he died of hunger."

"Then if death is so near make the best of the time left you."

Shifting back upon the bench the singer, sobering suddenly, flung out one hand in the gesture to avert the evil eye, then laughed forcedly.

"Are you always as cheerful a comrade, you and your death warnings? Come, drink! Landlord, fill up a cup for Sir Galahad."

"Not to-night; to-morrow or next day, while the truce lasts, but not to-night."

"Why not to-night? You French are no watery Venetians like Loredano there; why not to-night? Thank God for his mercies! I come from Tuscany where the wine is red."

"And the blood, too," retorted Loredano, "as Venice has shown Florence many times and will again."

"Better red blood than canal puddle in the veins, my frog of Venice! Saints and angels! think of canal puddle in the veins!"

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"Damn your lying insolence," cried Loredano shouldering his way roughly through the three or four who stood between them. "By Saint Mark! I'll teach you—"

But Mirandola interposed. "Be quiet the two of you. Why cannot you be civil, Soderini?"

"Why cannot your Galahad drink like a man? Here, landlord, thou thievish vendor of vile vinegar—there's alliteration for you!—fill up, fill up. I hate a man who drinks milk like a girl, and yet I've heard say there is wine in Burgundy. When Italy goes riding to France, as she will some of these days, I'll see for myself. Landlord, fill up again. Why won't the man drink? Oh! faith, I see now. Galahads don't drink. Now, I—"

"Come, Soderini," said Mirandola, "let us be going. You have drunk enough."

"Enough? A man never drinks enough. I'll prove it by logic like a scholar of Pavia. Until a man is full drunk he can always hold more, and while he can hold more he has never enough—if the wine be good."

"Yes, but if he be drunk?"

"Ah! there I have you. What a man does not know he cannot allege; a drunk man knows nothing, not even that he is drunk, how then can he allege that he has had enough? Proven to the hilt! Landlord, fill up."

From a corner a youth of Avellino or Mirandola's age rose up. There were about ten or a dozen in all, Le Brocq noticed, mostly lads of hardly a man's full growth. Soderini was the eldest of the band.

"Let us go; he can stay where he belongs."

"I'll wager that is little Capelare," said Soderini without stirring. "When he grows older he will know it is safer for Milan to have Florence at her back."

"Yes," retorted the lad, with a bitter emphasis which twisted the meaning of the words, "always at her back."

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"Because Milan does not dare meet Florence face to face," gibed Soderini, and laughed.

Now, just as there is no such wholesome healer as laughter, so is there no such weapon of offence. Laughter is the very apothecary of life; it cures, it soothes, it comforts; it is a balm for the closing up of wounds, a cordial for the weary spirit, an anodyne to pain, a gentle balm for the sick or sore of heart; by it the noxious humours of the distraught mind are purged, and though its power the dark, corrupt corrodings of the soul take on the hue of health; or, like some poison-drug, it maddens sense, firing the veins with venom; as acid bites and burns so laughter bites, leaving upon the seared memory a scar never to be effaced; its bitter kills the sweet of friendship and its sharpened point at times strikes home to the letting out of blood.

So it was now, or almost so. With a leap the Milanese flung himself bodily on the Florentine as he sat half turned upon the bench, his mouth still open in its gibing sneer, and clinching his arms about him, gripped him tensely to his breast. Soderini was the heavier of the two, but, aided by surprise, Capelare with an effort slung him sprawling on the floor; then snatching out his dagger he fumbled with the other hand at his enemy's throat. But swiftly as the weapon was flung up to strike Loredano and Mirandola were swifter still. Closing in from either side one caught the strained wrist, the other lapped an arm about the crouched body and together they tore the two apart. Breathing heavily, his teeth clenched, his eyes glaring, all laughter wiped from his face, Soderini lay where he had fallen.

"You cur, you coward," he panted, "you sneaking Milanese rat! Stab me in the back, would you? By the Lord who made me you'll get no second chance."

Gathering his legs under him he rose slowly, shaking himself as a dog does on quitting the water, and pushed aside the fallen bench with his foot.

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Like a dog, too, his lips were drawn aside, leaving the teeth bared. In the silence, as the two faced each other, the dagger twitching in the hand whose wrist Loredano still held fast, a horse whinnied. Soderini, his eyes always on Capelare, moved back a step.

"Leave him go," he said, easing round his sword-belt as he spoke. "We'll finish here and now. On guard, cur, though it's more than your due."

But Mirandola kept his grip, nor, struggle how he might, could Capelare fling off the clasp.

"Not to-night," he said authoritatively. "To-morrow in the camp you can do as you choose, but there will be no fighting to-night. We need every man we have. Be quiet, Capelare, you played a fool's game, and you know it, but the first blame was yours, Soderini. Why could you not keep your bitter tongue quiet? As well foul a man's name as his nation. But there'll be no fighting to-night."

Before answering Soderini looked slowly round the room, but found no encouragement in the eyes which met his. Commynes had guessed shrewdly, or rather he had applied the experience drawn from a life-long study of men. The one bond which bound this bundle of naked swords together was the common fear and hate of France. Let that fear be relaxed, let that hate be turned, not to love indeed but into that political gain which in nations takes the place of love, and they would turn their points willingly one upon the other. With the snarl still lifting his lips Soderini pushed back the steel he had half drawn from its sheath.

"For to-night, then; only, see to it some of you that Capelare does not ride at my back; I cannot have eyes everywhere. Chalk up the score, landlord."

But the innkeeper, a peasant prematurely aged by labour whose toil, urged early and late, barely wrung a living from the stubborn soil, broke into a whining wail of protest.

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"Signors, signors, you may never pass this way again. I do not even know your lordships' noble names, how then can I charge the score? You have drunk my best, 'tis all we have to live upon, we three—"

Soderini cut him short. "Three? What three?"

"My wife, signor, my daughter—"

"What's the wench's age?"

"Seventeen, signor."

"Have her down. Many a sweet fig grows on a crooked tree."

But again Mirandola intervened. "There's no time for foolery. We should have been on the road half-an-hour ago. To-morrow—"

"To-morrow! to-morrow! With you it is always to-morrow! Don't you know that a thing is only worth the having the day you want it? Well, let it be to-morrow. Chalk up your score, groundling, to-morrow I'll come and—add to it!" Laughing, he drew open the door and swaggered out. Softly he whistled to his horse, a nicher answered, and Le Brocq felt that, quarrelsome bully and ruffler though he was, he could not be all bad since a dumb brute trusted him.

As the rest filed out, following Soderini, Mirandola turned to the cowed peasant.

"Take the shot from that," he said, laying two silver pieces on the table; "and watch well till the camp shifts or you may lose more than your wine." Then he laid a hand on Le Brocq's arm. "With all my heart I am sorry you have been so baited. We heard the name in camp to-day and repeated it without a thought. I should have known Soderini better and kept my tongue quiet, ill-conditioned beast that he is."

But Le Brocq laughed. "Do not let that trouble you. You know the proverb, 'If evil tongues burned like fire the poor would have charcoal at Christmas!' And what can you expect from a nettle but stings? Listen!"

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Above the stamping of the hoofs as the two stood in the open doorway, the lamps from behind dividing the obscurity with a yellow light, above the ring of cheek-chains and the clash of steel on steel as the little troop mounted, rose Soderini's voice full of its old domineering banter.

"What! there are two of them, are there? Sir Galahad the Second, as I live! Saints send he's a less dull dog than the first."

"My name is Charleroi, monsieur," was the reply, and as Le Brocq heard the drawled voice he hastily pulled to the door behind him, cutting off the light.

"Devil take the name, though it is better than the other. Hulloo! you two by the door, it's boot and saddle. Who knows the road?"

"I do," answered a voice from the darkness.

"Good, my son. We will ride on ahead and not keep the pretty dears waiting. Never keep a woman waiting, my child; it is one of the unforgiveable sins, though you may bite your nails for an hour and be humble if it pleases her whim to dawdle.

"For who that loveth hath not proved  
Himself a fool for having loved!"

Stooping, he patted his horse's neck to soothe its fretting. "So boy! So! you will be as tame as that same fool before the night is over."

In the confusion of the departure Le Brocq edged his horse next that of his fellow Frenchman.

"Sire, sire," he whispered, "what brought you here?"

"You brought me," answered Charles, laughing, "you, with your 'What hope have we of God's helping if we go not to His help in His need?' So hold your peace, Monsieur Le Brocq; and did I not tell them all to their face that a man is servant to his conscience?"

"But, sire, think of the danger. You are our head—our heart; you are all France. You must return to the camp at once."

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"And has not all France need of help?" replied the King, sobering. "I am a Christian soldier first and a King afterwards. Say no more, Le Brocq. Indeed, what can you say? If that loud-tongued fellow ahead knew who rode behind him I think there would be a sudden end to the truce."

## CHAPTER V

"LORD HAVE MERCY UPON US"

THE House of Our Lady of Truth stood, as its ruins bear witness to this day, in a sheltered valley round whose fertile bed the towering ridges raised a bulwark alike against the storms of winter and the summer's scorching heat. In its first foundation it was an outpost of worship, almost of civilization, remote and lonely. The centres of busy life, the centres of strength, lay far off; the wilderness was its nursing mother.

There is surely something beautifully suggestive in the very isolation of those houses of peace and devotion. Their founders saw the vision and followed it. And in the following there was a translation of the spiritual into the physical, a taking of the things which are eternal and applying them in daily practice to the things which pass, in the faith that the power which noted the fall of sparrows would not forget the care of that committed to it.

And the trust was justified. As little by little the fame of the small community drew settlers to the neighbouring valleys, simple, laborious, poor-living folk, rude and untaught, there grew up a devotion which held the passing generations of the growing sisterhood in an inviolable security immeasurably stronger than their own grey walls. Were there any sick, the sisters soothed and tended them; were there any sorrowing, the sisters brought such comfort as gentle womanhood alone can; at the quick pangs of the entering into life, or the final laying down of the

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garment of toil which was that life's chief inheritance, their ministrations never failed and, vowed to the poverty of their foundation, they gave freely, ungrudgingly, but took neither fee nor reward.

And yet wealth flowed in, such wealth as added a lesser glory to a greater. As Mirandola had said, the fame of the relics of Saint Apollonia, confided to their care, drew devout throngs from the populous duchies of Modena and Parma. Impersonal wealth, be it understood: votive offerings to the shrine of the saint, jewels and ornaments of gold for the Carpenter's mother, or such plate as might have served for the high altar of a cathedral. As was said of the days of Solomon, silver was naught accounted of, and yet the salt of faith within kept the sisters' humble ways of life unchanged, and the power of faith without held them safe.

But of late a change had come. As pestilence taints the blood, poisoning the very fount of life, so the foul fever of internecine strife infects the body-politic, destroying the wholesale vigour of the nation. Forgetting their common brotherhood state had clashed with state, seeking some petty aggrandizement, or avenging some no less petty affront. The scattering of the dragon's teeth broadcast produced its natural crop of armed men and violence became the rule of life. Fighting for its very existence, its eyes ever turned outwards, government had no leisure to repress internal disorder. Whoso had the power took, and weakness raised its protest in vain.

Yet even then religion might have gone on her sacred way unassailed had not the hoofs of a Priapus, if not of a Satyr, peeped from under the pontifical robes of a Borgia. At the sinister portent reverence sickened, and unfaith, nourished upon rapine, raised its front unashamed. The scum of opposing camps, recruited from outlawry and the disgorge of gaols, infested the highways, finding untroubled refuge in the mountain fastnesses. Of such a band Mirandola had spoken and, warned of

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the threatened pillage, the sisters had sent to the camp pleading for protection.

But, uncertain of the response, uncertain even whether the messenger would reach the camp, the day had been devoted to precaution. First, the reliquary, a coffer of chased bronze inlaid and damascened with gold, was removed from its barred niche ; then the high altar, where the aged Franciscan brother, sole representative of the Order, confessor and counsellor in one, offered daily mass, was stripped, ancient brass replacing the gold of later and more wealthy years.

Next, Our Lady of Truth gave up her jewels, Our Lady who might have been Our Lady of the Stars for shining splendour ; the coronal a Duke of Parma who knew no truth had laid at her feet in grateful commemoration of a successful lie ; the rubies of a Massa-Carrara, every blood-red stone in gratitude for the life of an enemy, and they were many ; the emerald signet with which, at his death, a turbulent Caldora had sought to purchase that peace he had never desired all his life ; these and half a hundred more, sacred and clean in themselves whatever the givers may have been. Even the lace scarf which draped the head, falling across the outstretched arms, and the robe of silver tissue disappeared.

Finally, the lesser treasures of the sacristy were hidden and with the fall of dusk the marble chapel stood as bare as any whitewashed country parish church. With the fall of dusk, too, the candles being lit, the sisterhood gathered to their places and kept vigil before the changed altar, while, on his knees, his head bowed upon his breast, Fra Giovanni offered prayer for those in peril. For that night none might sleep.

It was a very solemn and, outwardly at least, a very peaceful vigil. The quiet worshippers, each in her robe of silver grey, the hood drawn forward upon the bent head, each kneeling upon her prie-dieu, were in an orderly group before the altar rails leaving the rear

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of the chapel void. In the forefront, in the centre, knelt Mother Euzebia, behind whose gentle strength of spirit there still lurked the fiery pride of the Colonnas, curbed to abnegation by discipline. From time to time, still bowed, she would stretch out a hand as if in comfort or encouragement, and softly caress the grey figure upon the stool beside her, but there was no other movement; nor was there any sound except the murmured voice of the celebrant. If, in any, the spirit cried in its fear of the unknown it cried dumbly.

So the hours slipped past; always the same tranquil quiet, always the same murmured worship in supplication; if the petitions varied, the thought remained unchanged. *Lord have mercy upon us; Lord, whose loving care is over all thy creatures, watch, we pray thee, over us. Into thy strong hands we commit that which is beyond our weakness. Protect thy servants who wait upon thee if it be thy will—if it be thy will.* Then, without warning, the silence broke up in the patter of running feet, the crash of iron upon iron and a hoarse outburst of rough voices.

Across the worshippers a shudder swept, a gasped sigh, almost a groan. But the Mother's command had been clear and sternly strict, "Let none speak, come what may, even the worst, let none speak," and but for the sibilant, indrawn breath of terrible expectation there was silence. The voice of prayer faltered, ceased and recommenced. Rising in her place the Mother turned and faced the door: the curtain covering it was thrown noisily aside and a lay sister, one of the two who kept the gate, rushed in.

"They have come! they have come! Oh Mother of God! what shall we do! what shall we do!"

Again the sibilant groan swept across the congregation and again the voice of prayer faltered, but there was no tremor in that which answered. If the thin, ascetic face was pale under the shadow of the grey hood the mouth was firmly set.

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"Bid Sister Agatha come here, then come thou and kneel with us. Be tranquil, my child'ren, and remember the command—at the worst let no one speak. Father, pray on."

Dominated by the one strong will, moved in part by the habit of long obedience, calmed in part by the contagious power of self-reliance and calm courage, silence again fell. But above the voice of prayer, more importunate now in the more importunate need, there broke the sinister crash of iron upon iron and the yet more sinister clamour from the forces at the gate. Motioning to the two frightened portresses to take their places with the sisterhood Mother Euzebia bent above the grey figure beside her.

"Be brave, child, but keep thyself hidden behind the rest. Cover these white hands of yours and see that the hood never shifts from your face. There are times when to be old and ill-favoured is the mercy of God;" then kneeling she bowed her head upon her folded arms. Fra Giovanni's voice rose steadily, pleadingly.

*"Thou who knowest the end from the beginning, have mercy upon us: Thou whose power is as infinite as thy love, have mercy upon us. Thou who art the peace of the world, have mercy upon us. Into thy hands, O God, we commend—"* With a crash that echoed through the stone corridors like the shock of arms the gate fell and the voice broke.

But, nerved by the imminence of the crisis, none moved. Through the dead quiet there came nearer and louder the intermittent, unhasting tread of heavy feet, the muffled but clearer rumble of coarse voices, once a laugh, yet none moved; a steel scabbard clashed against the outer stone of the chapel wall, yet none moved. Only the girl shifted uneasily upon her prie-dieu, her shoulders twitching, her breathing short and heavy as though the rapid beating of her heart stifled her. Again the Mother laid a hand upon the arm. The pressure was only for an instant but it sufficed. Warned by the touch the girl forced a self-

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control. Louder, clearer, nearer; now they could almost count the feet. How many were there?

"Father, pray on!"

*"Lord have mercy upon us! Christ have mercy upon us! Lord have mercy upon us!"*

Louder, clearer, nearer; then there was a silence, a silence that was an agony.

## CHAPTER VI

### SACRILEGE

IN a prismatic life whose primitive, coarse colours would certainly never have blent into the purity of a white light, Pietro Margotti, miscalled The Saint, partly from his name in baptism but chiefly through a derisive inversion of qualities, had of necessity found himself in many disturbing situations. Of these some had demanded a politic pliability, some had called for instant action, some had threatened life itself, but none had so shaken his nerve as that disclosed when he drew the curtains Agatha, the portress, let fall behind her.

The shrill outcry of protesting terror at the gateway had been according to custom; the forcing of the barrier, with all its clash and healthy vigour of activity, had followed the common rule: they were the natural homage feebleness paid to strength. But the solemn suggestion of the absolute stillness had first puzzled, then soberly disquieted him. To have forced his purpose in the face of the weeping, hysterical protests he had expected would have been easy, congenial even, but this silence made him qualmish. Superstition is seldom far from the ear of the blatant scoffer, now it whispered to him and his conscious soul shivered. A chill gripped him, soaking to his marrow, and his skin prickled under the scalp. Every step clanged and rang like the funeral march of death, the hollow echo the echo of a vault. Then he lifted the curtain and an awe fell upon him. But for shame's sake and the sake of those who were with him,

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mingled a little with the fear of the chief whose lieutenant he was, he would have tiptoed back to where Matteo kept watch over the horses, and ridden away as empty-handed as he had come.

That was his natural impulse. But pride and the fear of men's laughter, two forces which so often masquerade as honest courage, made him pause. And yet it was not all pride and a false shame. Somewhere in the coarse grain of his careless, callous bully-nature a finer fibre quivered responsive; but while he lingered in doubt those behind thrust him forward.

At the clumsy clatter of the stumbling feet the Mother rose, facing him, and as their eyes met Pietro The Saint, recovered grip of himself. Action always braced him and here was battle.

"Well?" the single curt word, sharply flung, was a challenge.

Fra Giovanni had also risen. His grey old face was touched with colour on the cheek-bones but he held his peace. Even before such unbidden guests Julia Colonna was mistress in her own house; had she not been how could she have controlled her flock of women? Grey frocks cover hot passions at times, as grey ashes hide live coals, and suppressed nature will out if nature be not hard held. Half turning as he advanced Margotti motioned backwards with his hand, then paused until all his followers had crossed the threshold. On the face of one he detected just such a look as might have been read upon his own three minutes earlier. He knew its meaning and its danger. Crooking a finger he beckoned him.

"Come to the front, Battista, my son; we know, and down at Payullo they know, that thou lovest the dear women."

At the laugh which followed the barbed gibe the boy's face reddened; all knew that a dagger stroke and a dead light o' love had driven him to the hills. But the thrust served its purpose: the awe which had for a moment possessed him at the solemn

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rebuke of the altar of his fathers broke up in braggadoccio.

"You'll find me as near the front as yourself. Get doing, Margotti."

"What wickedness of your father the devil brings you here, outcasts?"

"Outcasts?" Margotti caught at the word mockingly. "How can you call us that, and we here at mass?"

But she let the scoff pass by unheeded. "Name your business, your purpose, call it what you will, and begone."

"Presently, presently," he answered, keeping to his bantering vein. "You forget we have but just come. Too short a visit would not be manners. Nor, after all our trouble, can we go without some remembrance to take with us. What shall it be?"

Flinging back her hood with a quick movement of the head Mother Euzebia advanced a step, one arm stretched out as if to thrust back the sacrilege. Under the white forehead-band of her nun's coif her eyes blazed indignantly.

"Would a man rob God?"

Margotti returned no direct reply, but his ironic suavity dropped from him.

"Two of you guard the sacristy there; let no one pass in or out."

"We are all here, none will pass."

"Do as you are bid. It's well known that who says priest or nun says liar," he retorted obliquely, amplifying a libellous proverb of the day.

"Oh, you shameless coward, you—"

"A woman still, I see, robe or no robe! Battista, my son, stand within the rails by his holiness, and if he gives you cause deal with him as if you had loved him—once! You have too quick a hand to be trusted with the women. Vanelli, and thou, Jacopo, stand by this door, but with an eye to the passage."

"Vanelli?" repeated Mother Euzebia. "There was a Vanelli in the Val d'Orno. Day and night

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through three weeks we nursed his child sick with a typhus, and, by the grace of God, saved him alive though a sister died that he might live. That was two years ago. Art thou that Vanelli?" Pausing, she pointed with outstretched hand at one of the group of four or five still hanging round the doorway. Instinctively he shrank back into the shadow to hide himself, but she had seen his face. "Yes! Thou art the very man. And to-day you would rob God. Oh, the very brutes have more gratitude. Vanelli," her voice rose sharply, imperiously, "by that living child and by that dead woman who gave her life for him I charge thee—"

But Margotti broke in roughly, even fiercely.

"Be silent, or, by heaven—"

"Swear by hell; what knowest thou of heaven? Vanelli, to him who sins and repents there still remains—"

Again Margotti interrupted, stamping his spurred foot till the flags rang and the groined roof rumbled in metallic echoes to the very limits of the choir.

"Begone, Vanelli; keep thou the horses and send Matteo here in thy place, and by hell—is that as you'd have it?" he jerked across his shoulder—"if all's not ready for us when we're done with this spitfire there will be no living child in Val d'Orno to-morrow. Begone, I'll not trust you here; but remember and bid Matteo hasten."

For an instant the shadowed figure beyond the doorway hesitated; but Margotti sprang at him with so fierce a gesture of passion, snarling, "Think of the child, you dog," that he threw up his bare hands a moment as if in defence, then shrank back into the obscurity. Next moment they heard the rapid tramp of his feet upon the stone floor. Then Margotti turned to the altar again and there was silence.

The sisters were no longer upon their knees, or very few of them. The rest, dumb as sheep, had drawn into little crouched groups at either side of the narrow central aisle, three here, four there. Only the

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girl had risen upright. She stood behind the Mother, her back to the strong light of the many candles upon the altar, her hood drawn closely over her face. Both were tall women, and not even the coarse, ungainly frock of the Order could altogether hide the graceful, shapely lines which differentiated the younger from the elder. Her hands were obediently hidden in the loose sleeves. Behind them, still within the altar rails, stood Fra Giovanni; his open palms lay crossed upon his breast, but there was a backward tilt of the grey head and a light in the eyes which belied the humility of the attitude. Presently Matteo came.

"Keep the door, you and Jacopo. Not here, out in the passage way, and watch for a surprise. There may be a trick in all this mummery. Come with me, the rest of you." His eyes fell on Battista, standing in awkward uncertainty midway along the floor. "Devil's Name! what are you slouching there for? A shirker, are you? Do as you are bid, my lad, or go back to Payullo to be hanged. Are you only brave when there's a woman to be knifed? Psha! What's a priest but a woman with a beard!"

Stung by the jeering sneers the boy again moved on. Although he had overcome his first scruples after the fashion common to human nature, by throttling conscience and plugging the ears against its promptings, he was still at the parting of the ways. The solemn calm of the altar frightened him as the dark frightens children with the sense of an unseen, watching presence. At the opening of the narrow aisle he halted. Midway, blocking it completely, stood the Mother, her head erect, her hands folded in her grey robe. How should he pass her? Almost it would be easier to go back to Payullo. Margotti, his vigilant eyes upon him, saw and understood. Striding forward he seized the two nearest stools one in either hand and sent them rolling, spinning, clattering, along the floor with such violence that they struck the wall and rebounded in wreck with a crash.

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"Like that, man, like that," he cried, and before the words were well spoken the boy was pushing and kicking the light seats to right and left. The bluster of the noisy uproar had decided him. Julia Colonna stirred not an inch as he brushed past, but the girl shrank aside, drawing her robe closer about her to avoid his touch.

On the upper of the two marble steps in the open space between the altar rails, Fra Giovanni confronted him.

"Stand back."

"Go forward," ordered Margotti, "but no violence."

Both commands were obeyed. Gripping the priest lightly Battista pushed him aside without hurt, then, mounting, he stood beside him, a hand still upon the collar of his robe.

"Reverend Mother," began Margotti, conciliation in his voice for the first time. Instantly she interrupted him.

"No mother to a son of perdition."

But he kept his temper. "Blunt that woman's sword of yours. So far, who has been hurt?"

"You have broken down our gates, you have profaned God's house," she answered, pointing to the wreckage by the wall as she spoke.

"A smith and a carpenter can patch these, but you have that here which neither one nor other— No, I make no threats." He paused, biting his lips as if uncertain how to proceed. The job he had in hand was not to his taste. If there was no danger neither was there any profit; it was like stealing milk from a cat, there would be more scratches than solid value: and to give Pietro Margotti his due he grudged no risk where the gains were commensurate. Here there was no gain. Then a thought struck him, just such a full-flavoured jest as his palate loved, and he laughed out in self-appreciation. "No, I make no threats," he replied, "but, Reverend Mother, bid your fair ladies fling back their hoods."

"I shall not."

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"Be persuaded," said Margotti. "I have many reasons on my side, reasons I would be loth to use in argument. Look; there are two by the door, two more at the sacristy, Battista there behind you, and three here. I say again, be persuaded."

"For what purpose?"

"I will tell you that later."

"Then I refuse."

Margotti held up his hand. "I warn you; my fellows are rough. Will it be seemly to have them mishandle these grey sheep of yours? It is for you to judge. I warn you, too, that if once violence stirs their blood I can answer for nothing. Think again. I give you while I count ten. One—two—three—"

But the slow tightening of the tension was more than could be borne after the long strain of the day. Suddenly her fortitude collapsed. Down sank her face into her open hands and she burst into a passion of tears.

"Oh, my people, my people," she sobbed, "the children whom God has given to my trust; what shall I do! what shall I do!"

"Uncover." It was the priest who spoke, his voice thin and harsh. "The sin is his not yours."

Margotti nodded approvingly. "Let them say what they like, it takes a man to understand men. Do as his holiness bids and face this way, all of you."

## CHAPTER VII

### MARGOTTI, THE SAINT, JUSTIFIES HIS NAME

RIGID observance of rule, and the rope which goes all round, may discipline the flesh to a dead level of unprotesting submission, but the individuality of the spirit remains unchange<sup>d</sup>. Loosen the bond or cord of custom and it asserts itself. So was it now. Some of the sisterhood obeyed the order at once, almost mechanically, some with reluctance, yet others required a second command, more sharply given, before their rebellion consented to obedience, Margotti standing silent the while, a twinkle of laughter in his eyes.

And with the uncovering the emphasis of the spirit became yet more marked. They were of all ages of womanhood, but if few were young few showed open evidence of the passage of years. In their placid life they had grown old gently, untouched by those deeper passions which write the tumult of their story in line and wrinkle.

Yet it was not always these elder who took this rough schooling meekly. If some sat almost listless, staring into vacancy, others flamed indignant at the contumely thrust upon them and only the remembrance of the injunction, "Let no one speak!" held them silent. Some, both younger and elder, wept without restraint, others sobbed dry-eyed; a few sat telling their beads, their shaking lips moving mechanically in the prayer which, for the moment, had no meaning. Last of all the girl uncovered, shaking back her hood brusquely.

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"The devil of a temper," said Margotti to himself as their eyes met. But instantly she dropped her chin upon her breast and the strong light behind her shadowed the face beyond analysis.

With the laughter still in his eyes, and a grim humour twisting his mouth, Margotti slowly scanned the twin groups before him, passing from face to face in insolent appraisal. He was enjoying himself hugely. Then, with levelled finger he picked out one.

"You, stand up."

But the brutal curtness of the order paralyzed her and she sat staring at him, whimpering open-mouthed like a frightened child. But though the tears were still upon her cheeks Mother Euzebia had in part recovered her control.

"For what purpose? You may torture, you may kill, but before God I warn you—"

"You will see later; stand up, wench. Must I count again? One—two—three—"

"Obey." Again it was Fra Giovanni who intervened. "For the present," he added, his voice deepening significantly.

With an effort, her mouth twitching in the agony of her terror, she struggled to her feet. She was of the younger of the sisters, black-eyed, full-lipped, full-cheeked, comely even under the shapelessness of her grey frock. But now horror of what her dazed brain but half understood had wiped both colour and youth from her face, leaving it old, grey and distorted. For a moment she stood, swaying, her shaking hands groping for the chair-back in front of her, then her joints loosened under her and she collapsed.

"Try once more," said Pietro, miscalled The Saint, encouragingly. His voice was insinuating, almost bland. "Battista, my son, lend thou—" But the sinister hint was enough; this time she kept her feet and again Margotti sent his gaze roving critically over the broken groups before him. The three who stood at his shoulder drew together, whispering and

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laughing. Margotti was a great man and the sport entirely to their taste. Twice, with slow deliberation, he completed the survey, always with the twinkle of laughter in his eyes, then,

"You, and you, and you; stand up." This time he was obeyed, though one, covering her face with her hands, sobbed as if her heart was already broken.

"Oh, my children, my children, God help us, God have mercy upon us; what shall we do?"

"Be easy, Mother," answered one, "it will not be hard to die," and as she spoke she looked Margotti in the face unafraid.

"Good," said he, as if answering the challenge, "here is one who is wasted in such a life." Suddenly he pointed to the girl. "You are already on your feet; that makes five," but this time there was neither insolence nor banter in his tone. Turning, Julia Colonna caught the girl to her breast.

"Child, child, was it for this you were given to my care!"

The girl made no answer but when she raised her head her eyes were very bright and the mouth strongly set above the firm chin. If Margotti had put his thought into words it would have been that here was one whose courage might find it easy to die and yet one who loved life. But he kept his thoughts to himself.

"Five," he repeated, his voice gravely sober. "Reverend Mother, you have done all that a woman could do, or a man either. Who warned you of our coming I do not know, but you have used your time well. For gold you have put brass, for jewels tinsel, and your treasures are hidden. If we searched we might find. but we have no time to search; and yet for all your forethought you are beaten. Here are these five; what will you give me for these five?"

Releasing the girl Julia Colonna faced him. Her mouth was thin and hard, her voice as level as his own when she replied:

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"We have nothing to give."

Margotti's answer was a significant gesture towards the stripped altar and a shrug of the shoulders. Though he kept silent she understood.

"Would a man rob God?"

"Rob? That's a hard word. Who said rob? I said give."

But she shook her head. "We have nothing. That," she half turned as she spoke, "that is not ours."

"Think!" Margotti's voice grated harshly. Little by little he had moved forward down the narrow aisle; now he paused and his eyes shifted slowly from one to another of those who stood about him.

"Five, what will you give for these five?"

This time she gave him no answer, only looked him squarely in the face, but she who had been first bidden stand up whimpered out, "Oh, Mother, Mother, Mother," and a shiver like a flaw of wind ran through them all at the agony of the appeal. A spasm twisted the elder woman's face a moment but she kept silence.

"Damnation! do you take us for milk-babes? An answer, woman, an answer. What will you give?"

Under the grey frock her hands were gripping one into the other in such a convulsed pressure that the nails bit. "They are a trust," she said, "a trust for Almighty God—"

"And are flesh and blood no trust?" Margotti's passion flamed out fiercely. "These five, are they no trust? Which does that God of yours love best? There are thirty of us there in the camp."

"But you dare not." She was breathing thickly between clenched teeth half bared, and the words came almost in a whisper, but her eyes never flinched from his. "You may threaten but you know you dare not. All Italy, all Christ's world, would rise and tear you from limb to limb."

"Dare not? By God, I'll show you what I dare!" Out shot his left hand; gripping her by the shoulder

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he shook her savagely, then in a flash his sword was at her breast. "Now will you speak?"

"Never! It is a trust," she answered, but her voice was fuller and a light had leaped to her eyes. The threat of personal danger was but a spur to her courage.

"We'll see." Drawing back his point he jabbed it forward an inch or two sharply. At the touch she winced and a scream split the silence. It was the girl behind who cried out, but as she started forward Margotti shifted his eyes to her a moment. "If you move another step I thrust," he said curtly, and she controlled herself, whimpering for the first time.

But Fra Giovanni could contain himself no longer. With an effort he wrenched himself free from Battista's relaxed grasp, only to be recaptured the next moment.

"You coward! You sacrilegious coward! Have you no fear of the curse and wrath—"

"Smite him on the mouth if he will not hush," cried Margotti.

"God smite thee, thou wolf."

"Smite him, I say. What is a priest but a man? Smite him," and Battista smote.

Staggering back against the altar Fra Giovanni looked up. "God requite thee, poor boy, and He will in His own time. Surely you know not what you do."

"Good," said Margotti, "I see that we shall be friends, you and I. Now, reverend fool, must I use the spur a second time."

But the priest was uncowed. "You men behind, you by the door, must the curse of one light upon all? In the name of God, whose servant I am, I curse thee from His altar, thou wolf of Satan, living and dying I curse thee—"

"What is a priest but a man," jeered Margotti again.

"If thou diest the common death of men then has God not spoken by me."

## SIR GALAHAD OF THE ARMY

"Few of my trade die in their beds," answered Margotti. "Now, woman," and he shook the sword-point in her face.

But Fra Giovanni's appeal had struck home. Matteo came forward a step or two.

"Make an end, Margotti, no good will come of this. You can buy gold too dear."

"No fear but I'll make an end. But I'll not go empty-handed and have it said that Pietro The Saint, was afraid of a priest and a woman. For the last time," and again he shook her savagely. "If you don't speak, another will—when I'm done with you."

"Do you hear him?" From right to left she turned. "I charge you, keep silent all of you."

"Then do you speak, I'll stand no more."

"Margotti! Margotti!" this time it was Jacopo who cried out.

"Aye, Margotti! Margotti!" mocked Margotti. "But you'll be ready enough to claim your share all of you when I've wrung it out of this obstinate fool, as wring it I will. From behind, on the right, a grey sister sprang at his arm in the courage of despair. But he saw the movement. Shooting back his elbow with all his force he sent her staggering, next instant his point was again levelled. "Another like that and I thrust. Once, will you speak? Twice—"

"Never! I was a Colonna before I was a nun."

"A Colonna? Damn the Colonnas!" he cried and thrust.

There was a moment's pause, a moment's silence, then, as she drew breath in a choking gasp, swayed, staggered, fell, a scream broke out, a scream that was half a groan and from the girl loudest of all. "Oh! you devil," she cried, "you cruel, pitiless devil!" and dropped upon her knees, drawing the Mother's head to her lap. But while the wail still echoed from the roof a shout answered it, and through the shout a cry muffled by distance. Matteo darted to the door, paused for a moment, listening half without and darted back.

## MARGOTTI, THE SAINT

"Margotti, Margotti! a rescue, a rescue."

"What's that?"

"Horses; I don't know how many. That was Vanelli who cried; I doubt they have killed him."

For a moment Margotti paused, looking round the church in doubt. Then he stooped over the kneeling girl and touched her on the shoulder as she bent, loosening the grey frock at the throat.

"Here's one: we'll have this one with us." At the touch she looked up and a wave of ungovernable passion swept like a breath the grey pinch of distressed grief from her face, flushing on the cheek bones in patches of angry red.

"I am a Caldora; do not dare to lay hand on me."

Drawing his arm back Margotti still stooped irresolute. So divided was his mind, so distracted his attention that it was doubtful if he comprehended even if he heard the words. Again Matteo called him.

"Don't play the fool. How do we know how many there are? It will be hard enough to win through by ourselves. Come, man, come, I hear them in the passage already."

Yet Margotti still lingered. "It can be done," he half muttered, his eyes upon the upturned face. He had held his sword arm angled from him rigidly, now, unconsciously, he let it fall to his side. Behind her the altar lights, reflected from the upper half of the steel, glinted in a spark. As the glitter drew her gaze for an instant, leading it to the smeared dulness lower down, she sucked in her breath like one in pain.

"Pray God they kill you," she said fiercely.

"Come, Margotti, come," urged Matteo again, and this time Margotti heeded him.

"Out with you," he said briefly. "Come, you others," and while the chapel still echoed from the clang of their running feet Fra Giovanni was on his knees praying God for a passing soul.

She spoke once, and once only.

"You were right, Sister, it is not hard to die."

## CHAPTER VIII

### "CHARITY AND RELIGION"

IF its optimism is one of youth's most enviable and cheerful assets it is, at times, a pitfall for the feet of its inexperience. At the inn it had been pure nature to say, I know the road, and by the assertion climb into an unaccustomed leadership. But the boasted acquaintance, founded upon a single daylight ride, had failed to stand the test under the changed conditions. Night, that grudging alchemist of the black hood, had transmuted the highway gold of noon to a leaden obscurity which played hobgoblin tricks with memory. So long as the Pontremoli road was followed there was no difficulty, but neither was there need for guidance: the rutted tracks were assurance enough. But once the path, a highway no longer, struck more directly into the secret heart of the mountains certainty vanished till, with a frankly caustic condemnation of fools in general and one in particular, youth was deposed and Soderini took the lead.

Here and there a charcoal burner or woodcutter helped them on their way, but the huts were few and hard to come by in the dark, nor were the occupants very willing to answer. Poor souls, the backwash of the great wave of war which swept Italy had surged even into their hunger-smitten lives, and in the dead silence of the night the importunate thunder on the door was as the summons of despair itself. Twice it was necessary to force an entrance, and so slow was the progress that they might have turned back had not Soderini found the baiting of the unfortunates

## "CHARITY AND RELIGION"

much to his taste. In the end a reluctant peasant was hailed, protesting, from his bed to serve as guide, and thereafter the rapidity of the advance was the pace of a pair of legs whose owner's choice lay between a thong of leather or sparing their weariness.

Charles and Le Brocq rode side by side but spoke rarely. By nature the King was taciturn, and Le Brocq was mistakenly troubled in thought, blaming himself without cause. When a man has done his best as he understands it, has followed the gleam as he sees it, and results fall awry, he should refuse to shoulder the burden of responsibility. It is no part of a man's duty to tie on his back the Porter's Knot of providence.

Once Mirandola spurred alongside.

"Charleroi?" he said interrogatively. "Charleroi is a town in France, is it not?"

"In Auvergne," said Le Brocq, as Charles hesitated.

"Yes, Auvergne," repeated the King, "but I am from the Orleanais."

"It is strange," said Mirandola, "how much alike you Frenchmen's voices are: not that yours resembles Monsieur Le Brocq's, but in your camp to-day—"

But Le Brocq interposed hastily. "These scoundrels above here, how strong are they?"

"Half a dozen—a score, I cannot tell you for certain. All I know is that a peasant came to camp this morning crying for succour. The sisterhood had sent him in desperate haste. Sure word had come that the convent would be broken into to-night and the good ladies were beside themselves with terror. The Marquis answered grimly enough that if the holy Saint could not guard her own, sinful men would be of little use, and in any case he had no lives to spare. The new levies are still five days' distant. And so, weeping and howling, the fellow was thrust out of camp. For my part, I only half believe the story. We have reckless dare-devils enough loose in Italy, God knows, but not many who will lay hands on the church."

## SIR GALAHAD OF THE ARMY

"Then," said Charles slowly, "all your fine talk of fire, sack, and worse than either was—"

Mirandola broke in with a laugh. "What would you have? Exaggeration is a necessity of art. No woman was ever so sweet and good as the Madonna of a Perugino. If I had said, some foolish women are afraid of a shadow, would we have been on the road to-night?"

"And why are we on the road to-night?"

Mirandola laughed. "It is good to be young while you're young. Honestly, now, is not this better than six feet of hard earth and a saddle under your head? And who knows? it may be true. As I warmed up to-day I began to believe myself. As I say, who knows! After all, God may be good to us and reward our charity. Does not the church teach that the virtue lies in the intention?"

"After the Marquis had refused, what then?"

"Some of us followed the poor wretch and heard his story. He was ready enough to tell it. To listen to him you would think hell was loose, and indeed some of the tales he told would make your scalp tingle. So in the end we promised him we would lose a night's sleep for our own sport and the glory of God. Then we thought of you. There was a truce, why should not you have your share. You know the rest. Here's another of these beetling valleys. To me they all look alike. I'll ride on and see how much further we have to go."

"So Monsieur de Commynes was right," said Le Brocq, not without a secret relief to temper a natural vexation. There would be no risk to the head and heart of France. "It is a boy's frolic and nothing more."

"Mirandola was right, too," answered Charles. "The intention counts. Are our honest failures to weigh nothing in the scales on the last day of reckoning?" Then, after a pause, he added, "Truly, Le Brocq, is there a Charleroi in Auvergne?"

"Not that I know of, sire."

## "CHARITY AND RELIGION"

For the first time that night the King laughed out in frank heartiness. Reaching across in the darkness he touched Le Brocq on the sleeve.

"That's good! Thank heaven, you are human. That name they call you made me afraid."

"Oh, sire, very human."

"Galahad? Why do they call you Galahad?"

"For no reason at all," answered Le Brocq shortly.

"Nonsense; good or bad there is a reason." Then with a touch of cynicism born out of his own boyhood's grim experience he added, "They might speak ill of you for no reason, but men never hint good without a cause. Why Galahad, then?"

But before Le Brocq could answer Mirandola had galloped back.

"To the front," he called out. "This is the Val d'Orno. Santa Apollonia is not half a mile away," and passed on to hasten those in the rear. Presently there came the quickening of hoofs from behind and in a bunch they joined Soderini who had halted.

They found the peasant guide protesting piteously. "But, signors, this is the Val d'Orno, truly it is. I swear it. Do I not know it as the palm of my hand? The house of the holy ladies is not a bowshot away—two at most. For the love of God, signors, do not force me to go there. If they should see me, if they should know I brought you here, Pietro The Saint would serve me as he served Bruno six months ago."

"How was that?" asked Le Brocq.

At the gentler note in the voice the peasant turned and gripped Le Brocq by the knee. His hands were shaking, his muscular, horny fingers closing and unclosing in a nervous convulsion.

"There were five of them, signor, just as there are five of us—Bruno, his wife and three little ones. He had offended, how I do not know. But they fired his hut, and when they rushed out they flung them back until—until— Oh my God, do not force me on.

## SIR GALAHAD OF THE ARMY

For the children's sake—for the mother's—signors—excellencies—noble gentlemen—" He broke off, weeping.

"This Pietro the Devil, is he their leader?"

"No, signor. For two months, or three, more perhaps, there has been another. They say he is a great gentleman like yourselves, but how should I know, and Margotti is still Margotti."

"And this is truly the Val d'Orno? You swear it?"

"By Saint Apollonia herself, signor. A bow-shot, two at most. And the road—see, it is like this, all flat like this," and in his eagerness he stooped, patting the highway. "You are great lords, you come and you go, but I—I am a maggotty nut for Pietro's cracking. Excellencies—noble gentlemen—"

"Let him go," said Charles, speaking with the authority he had left behind him in camp. Then, recollecting himself, he lowered his tone, adding, "We can find him again if he lies."

"No lie, signor, no lie; as God lives, no lie. One bow-shot—two at most—"

"Silence!" Le Brocq raised a hand as he spoke. To right and left the black bulk of the ridges rose in a broken, dim silhouette against the scarcely relieved obscurity of the night. Behind, round a fold in the hills whose overlapping spur was lost in the darkness, lay the road they had travelled; before, stretched a gloom yet more intense, and out of it, thin and clear, through the hush came the scream of a woman and the stamping of horse-hoofs on the hard road.

"Damnation!" cried Soderini, wheeling his horse. "It was true, then, and they are there already," and with a shout he galloped headlong into the dark. For an instant Le Brocq paused, his hand on the King's arm in a tense grip.

"Sire, sire, remember France."

"Monsieur Le Brocq, would you have France a coward?" With a wrench Charles freed himself and side by side, not seeing one yard of the road before

## "CHARITY AND RELIGION"

them, they followed Soderini at the charge. The peasant had instantly disappeared.

Out of the darkness, seen dimly, rose the grey-white bulk of Saint Apollonia. Its sheltering outer walls fronted the roadway and at right angles faded into obscurity. Above these, ghostly in the half-distance, stood the cloisters, within whose quiet guardianship lay the dormitories: midway along their length rose the pointed facade of the chapel. A faint glare through its narrow windows of many-coloured glass filtered mistily into the night, like breath on frosty air, but except the light with its suggestion of worship there was neither hint nor sign of life. To all appearance Apollonia slept her nightly sleep of peace. The great gates lay further, where a second block of buildings, the kitchen and refectory, broke the sky-line.

From the front came the sound of plunging hoofs and next instant Soderini had ridden back, his hand raised to call a halt.

"There are about a dozen," he said in a rapid whisper as the troop gathered up. "Some one must care the horses or they'll stampede, we can't delay to halter. Here, Rudini, you see to them, the rest follow me." While he spoke he swung himself to the road, flinging his reins loose. "Chut, man! we have no time to argue," he went on as Rudini protested. "And what have you to complain of? If these fellows break past us—and some of them must—you will have your bellyful of fighting and something over. Are you ready? Now, then! By the Lord! there is one of them."

Out of the darkness broke a shadow, peering forward in uncertainty, and a voice said, "Is it you, lads?" It was Vanelli. Who could these be, at such a time, but reinforcements sent by the padrone? Soderini's shout undeceived him and he ran for shelter. It was then that Margotti struck home in the exasperation of his blind rage and at the scream of the women an answering roar went up. Vanelli,

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running for life in the darkness, stumbled, found his feet again and raced on, only to be caught where the broken gate yawned into the court beyond.

Wrenching out his sword he turned as a cornered rat turns, to die fighting, but turned too late. Soderini was upon him. As the slash ripped his neck and shoulder he, too, screamed, cursing, and went down with a blade through his lungs and a second in his throat. The delay was brief, but there was delay, then over him they raced, pell-mell, trailing one after the other like schoolboys to their play, their feet echoing upon the paved passage as they swept round to the left towards the yellow square of light which midway stained its length. Then out through the open chapel door poured the meeting stream and in the open space between the cloisters and the refectory the two met.

In such a *melée* there could be no order of battle, nor was skill of fence of any avail. On the one side it was a fight for life—there could be no quarter, the wounded would not even be spared for a hanging; to kill and break through, or be killed, was the sole choice, and neither love nor hate can nerve the arm or steel the strength like despair. On the other there was the spur of exasperation, of horror at they knew not what, added to that Berserk spirit which fights for pure joy of fighting and reckons no consequences.

To Margotti Soderini was opposed, but for the most part each struck where he saw an opening and held himself ready to parry both upon the right and left. Le Brocq kept to the side of Charles, always a foot or two in advance, covering him unobtrusively; twice he found time to turn a blow, once he caught a thrust upon his arm, escaping with a ripped sleeve, but the King was neither laggard nor slow, and in the desperate, incessant clash, Le Brocq's intervention passed unnoticed.

But the struggle was too fierce to last. Brute strength, if not numbers, fought for the evil; the light from the open door, too, was a useful ally. It shone

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full upon their opponents' faces, full, too, upon their play of swords while their own was shadowed. Jacopo alone was down, half hamstrung and coughing blood on the pavement; Avellino had a slashed arm, Capelare a thrust through the shoulder. With a shout Matteo and another leaped at the weakened line, were halted an instant, but pressing on bore down the attack and were through, followed by all save Margotti, and in upon him Loredano and the rest clustered like hounds on a bayed wolf. But in their hot blooded eagerness each hampered each and none would give way. So for thirty seconds he held them off, his wrist a wrist of steel, his hard-knit muscles tense with the strained effort, his sword a play of white flame obedient to that instinct of defence which foresees attack. With knee bent and breathing hard through his clenched teeth, bared to the gums, he held his ground. His sleeve was frayed and slashed, his tough jerkin ripped across the ribs, but no point had touched, his life was whole in him; and the thirty seconds stretched slowly to sixty.

Then came a double diversion. Up, almost under their shifting feet, rose Jacopo, his face flecked and smeared with blood, his jerkin soaked to the breast bone. Inch by inch, stretched his full length, he had clawed his way across the pavement, praying to all the gods he knew for a little, just a little more of life, that he might not go out into the dark alone. Rearing himself up from the waist he clutched at his nearest foe to steady himself and shortened his sword to strike. But at the touch Mirandola turned, and turning tripped, and together they rolled upon the flagging, wrestling and tearing like maddened dogs one at the other. At the same instant there came a shout from the broken gateway, a shout and the hurried scuffle of feet, and to meet they knew not what desperate attack Loredano and the King swung round, Le Brocq following. But there was no attack, only Battista in the shadows, shouting and stamping on the stones. Through the opening sprang Margotti, too

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intent on flight to strike, and before the ruse was recognised the two were lost in the darkness. Miranda was on his knees, panting; beside him Jacopo lay dead. Avellino was stoically binding up his slashed arm; Capelare, the Milanese, had untrussed his doublet and was examining his wound as best he could in the uncertain light. Then came the gallop of hoofs. Rudini had escaped observation in the gloom.

## CHAPTER IX

### MY LIFE FOR HERS

SODERINI laid his hand on Charles' shoulder patronisingly.

"You did well, little man, you and Galahad both of you. Rome and Gaul, Italy and France, together could face the world, eh?" But Charles made no reply, and Le Brocq, sheathing his sword, turned towards the yellow light streaming through the open door.

"Let us tell the poor souls they have nothing more to fear, and then give God thanks for his mercy," he said.

But on the threshold he paused, motioning to those behind for silence, uncovered in a double reverence and entered softly. Mirandola followed, also uncovering, the rest halted in a group about the door. Charles, moved by an unwonted caution, remained in the shadows behind.

In a circle divided by the narrow aisle, the sisters were gathered, each upon her knees. In the centre crouched Antonina Caldora, the Mother's head pillowed on her lap, the placid face staring with open, unseeing eyes at the rescue which came too late. By her side knelt Fra Giovanni, and mingled with the sobs of the sisterhood rose the lower murmur of his voice in prayer. Twice, misled by some flicker of light upon the face, he paused, stooping his ear to the upturned mouth, and twice renewed that bitter cry of spirit to spirit which was little more than a breath for sound; but when he had stooped the third time he

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lifted the fallen hands and laid them crossed upon the breast. He could doubt no longer. Then he rose, the tears streaming down his withered cheeks, and as he rose the sobbing burst into a wail.

"The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord ; and blessed be the martyr of the Lord," he said, his voice gathering volume as he spoke. "You, gentleman, have come too late."

Soderini swaggered forward. With the rest he had been subdued and awed by the picture before him, but now the touch of reproach in the priest's voice roused that spirit of ready antagonism and self-assertion which was the man's very life. There is no such thorny porcupine as the mind of the egoist joined to the muscles of the bully.

"Too late," he repeated, "those who lie dead outside would not say so if they could speak. And what's more, your Apollonia will thrive upon to-night's work. What's that text of yours? The blood of the martyrs is the growth of the church? Too late! We risk our lives and that is all the thanks we get."

"Ten minutes sooner and you would have saved a life."

"Ten minutes later," he retorted, looking round him at the grey circle of kneeling figures significantly, "and there would have been more cause for whimpering."

"We lost our way in the dark," said Le Brocq. He had joined Soderini and the two stood side by side. They were both tall men, but though Le Brocq was the taller and broader of the two the contrast between them did not lie in their inches. "From my heart I grieve, bitterly grieve, that we are too late, but, Father, I do not think we are to blame."

"You are not of Tuscany?"

"No, Father."

"Nor of our nation?"

"No, Father, I am French ; there is another with me," and he half turned with a gesture towards the

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door where Charles still lingered in the background. "Is not the Church the Mother of us all? But if we were too late to save we are not too late to succour. Command us, Father."

"You take too much upon you, Monsieur Galahad," broke in Soderini angrily. "Who are you to say, 'Command us, Father?'"

"Hush, son, let there be no quarrelling in God's house and in such a presence as this."

"Oh, that! If you had looked death in the face as often as I have you would not think much of that; and besides, she could never have been a mother of men."

The priest returned no answer. "Lift her, two of you, and lay her within the altar rails," he said, and stood aside while the grey-frocked sisters obeyed him. Then he followed them and placed the crucifix which hung from her waist between the crossed hands. The girl had risen and had drawn the hood forward over her eyes as at the first. Turning, she leant upon the shoulder of the nun who had not found it hard to die, hid her face in the grey frock and broke into such a flood of tears as nature in her mercy sometimes loosens lest over-strained reason should topple to collapse. Suddenly she straightened herself, raising her arms piteously.

"Take me away, oh take me from this horrible place." But sharp as was the cry not all its agony could disguise the fresh youthfulness of the voice, and Soderini replied,

"If you lowered your hood—" he began. But Le Brocq interrupted him.

"We will find safe conduct for as many as wish to leave," he said, drowning Soderini's voice without ceremony.

"Safe conduct for all these!" retorted Soderini with a contemptuous sweep of his hand. "You bite off more than you can chew, my big friend. No, no; we could squire two or three, but not a couple of score of grey meal-bags. Who goes with us to the camp? You, sister, for one?"

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"My counsel is, stay here," said Fra Giovanni. "News of this sacrilege will spread like the wind of God. No place will be so safe or so sacred, and what was said in a wicked gibe will again prove its truth: the blood of the martyr will be the power of the church. Bide here, daughter, bide here."

"I could not, no, I could not. With what—" Antonina Caldora paused, glancing round her as if with a fearful expectation. "With what has been already I could not."

"Good," said Soderini, "I said there was one for certain. You will find life more cheerful down below there," and he jerked his head backwards.

"God has her in His peace," said the priest, answering what he conceived to be the girl's thought softly. "Surely you are not afraid of the holy dead?"

"The living, of the living," she answered, shivering. "What has been might be again. I must go—at once, to-night, without delay I must go."

"I cannot forbid you." Gentle though he was, tender of heart and compassionate to the erring and the penitent as became his Master's service, Fra Giovanni could show himself stern to harshness when the occasion called for sternness. "No, I cannot forbid, but I can warn. Think well how, and with whom, you go out into the world. Think well of the dangers and the snares. She who lies dead within these altar-rails gave her life to-night for you—for all: think well, lest in your wilfulness you make that gift waste. These gentlemen—we owe them much. God forbid that we should not be grateful. But," he paused, dwelling on his words impressively, "beyond their courage we know nothing of them. That you should trust yourself, trust yourself alone—"

"I cannot stay here." She spoke decisively. "So long as there is any escape I cannot stay here."

With the same quick motion as before she shook back her hood, and at the strong beauty of her face Soderini clicked his tongue much as Margotti might have done. Colour had crept back into the smooth

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cheeks, a tinge only, a promise rather than a fulfilment, yet it lit the shadowed olive with that glow of life which tells of warm blood and a passion to set it throbbing: but her eyes were very troubled and under them the stress of hardly-spent emotion showed its imprint. Her hands, Soderini remarked with approval, were long-fingered, well and strongly formed: he did not like too small hands in a woman.

"Nor need you stay," he said. "The good Father's homiletics are out of date." He looked round him with an effrontery almost the equal of Margotti's. "The door is open. Are there others? Well, then, signorina—Sister, I should say, if you are ready?"

"Not with you." Her eyes met Soderini's boldly, then shifted to Le Brocq. "Signor—monsieur—"

"Galahad has all the good-fortune," sneered Soderini with bitter irony as she hesitated. "See what it is to belong to the all-conquering French! Did some one say Naples? But in Naples there were men not women."

"Where you will," said Le Brocq, answering the unspoken appeal. Then he remembered Charles and added hastily, "But not to-night." The King came first, France came first. If dawn found the King missing from camp the truce might break up in riot. Charles could not accompany them to the sister's place of refuge, nor dared he trust him alone to the companionship of such as Soderini.

"But not to-night," repeated Soderini mockingly. "The boot is on the other leg now: the knight dare not trust himself alone in the dark with the lady: he might lose his reputation! See what it is to be a Galahad!"

Le Brocq let the mockery pass unheeded. "Trust me, Sister; in six hours I can return, sooner perhaps, and I shall answer for you with my life."

"In six hours it will be broad day! Oh wise and careful Galahad! If I know anything of faces that is not the kind of compliment you heard whispered once on a time, signorina—Sister."

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"But I cannot wait six hours," she answered in a burst of impetuous passion, her voice rising with every broken phrase, "I cannot—I dare not: if you had seen—if you knew—they may come back again. Father, tell him that I cannot wait six hours, I cannot—cannot—cannot."

Leaving the shelter of the shadows Charles came forward. He, too, recognised Le Brocq's dilemma. He had secured his opportunity of joining the expedition by pleading fatigue, and giving orders that on no pretext was he to be disturbed. But the new day would bring its obligations. The army must move on, always downward towards the Emilian plain, always northward to France and safety. If one single golden hour of this truce was squandered to waste through him, he would be a traitor to his army and his people. That was one danger. The other was no less threatening. If the opposition of Blaise, his valet, were forced aside, the hut discovered empty and no hue and cry could find the King, there could be no limits placed upon the disaster which might follow, nor, though no coward, dared he trust himself alone with these Italians.

"To the camp first," he said, "afterwards where the sister wishes. Le Brocq, we have no time to lose."

The drawled voice drew the attention of all, but it was Soderini who spoke.

"There's a little man with some sense in his head. It's the one camp or the other. Come, my grey bird, make your choice."

"Father, what shall I do? Bide here I cannot—I cannot."

"Why not, daughter?"

"If they came back," she breathed. "I could not bear it. Already one has died—for me, you said. If they come back it would be waste. Father, I must go."

Again and again Fra Giovanni plead with her, strove, argued, insisted, but she was immovable in her

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purpose. A terror of Margotti's return possessed her and neither argument nor authority could cast it out. At last and with profound reluctance the priest gave way.

"Surely the curse of Eve is a perverse obstinacy," he said testily as he beckoned to Le Brocq. "Come here, my son. I ask no oath of you—the man who would wrong a helpless woman committed to his care would give little heed to an oath—but God so requite you in life and in death as you deal with your charge."

And Le Brocq answered, "Living and dying, my life for hers, my honour for hers, God so requite me. Come, sister."

"Daughter, are you content?"

"Yes, father. But I must first say farewell to one who for my sake has fared so ill."

"Not so," and now the Franciscan's voice was very gentle. "To say that she has fared ill is to doubt the goodness and love of the God who has taken her to Himself. And, daughter," the gentle voice deepened solemnly, "live thou that it be not a farewell but only until we meet again."

After a deep reverence to the altar the girl mounted the steps, passed the rails and knelt on one knee above the recumbent grey figure stretched in the open space between. Stooping, she lifted the crucifix from the breast, kissed it, laid it against her own breast, pressing it there with both hands, her white-coifed head bent low, kissed it a second time and returned it to its quiet resting-place. For a moment or two so she knelt, still stooping, her lips moving soundlessly, and throughout the church there was a great silence; then, leaning on one hand, she laid her lips gently on the placid forehead, touched the grey hair reverently and rose.

"Monsieur, I am ready."

"Son, remember," said the priest.

"God so requite me," answered Le Brocq. "Come, sister."

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For a moment it seemed as if even then Soderini would have intervened, but Fra Giovanni had already mounted the steps and turned with both arms extended in benediction.

"He who hath made all nations of the one flesh bless and reward you," he said. "Daughter, I commit you to the keeping of your brothers; brothers, I charge you, watch over your sister, and may the peace of God go with you."

Out from the little group round the doorway Mirandola stepped forward.

"Father, have no fear."

"Son, I have none." He turned to Agatha, the porters. "Go thou and see to the saddling of a horse, the rest bide here," and as the sound of departing feet died away in the distance he fell upon his knees, giving thanks for the martyrs who had already entered into rest.

## CHAPTER X

### A NIGHT'S RIDE

A KEEN north wind had sprung up, sweeping the sky of cloud. The moon, not long past the full, rode almost overhead, dulling the white brilliance of the summer stars with her whiter light. To one and all the sharp, sweet freshness of the night was a grateful tonic, but to none more than to Antonina Caldora. Where the width of the highway permitted the girl rode between Charles and Le Brocq, where it narrowed, as it frequently did, to little better than a mountain track, one or other reined back, but the King took no precedence. In front was Soderini with one or two others, behind came Miranda, Avellino and the rest; all spoke louder than common, laughed more than common, and found food for jests in trifles. Success, or the release from a curbing strain, has an effect as intoxicant as wine and that night they had experienced both.

The Frenchmen spoke little and at first Antonina Caldora, too, was content to be silent. Yet their success had been no less and their relief was greater, especially Le Brocq's. Perhaps in part the reason was that for them the spirit of the enterprise had been different, and in part a sense that the end had not yet come.

But with the crisp coolness of the wind whipping her young, healthy blood riotously along her veins the girl soon wearied of the silence, wearied, too, of an unaccustomed negligence which touched the unconscious arrogance that, in greater or less degree,

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is a defect of the quality of beauty, especially in a woman. Speak she must and speak she did, beginning with gratitude in words prettily chosen, a subtle flattery of admiration giving flavour to the thanks. Le Brocq, to whom she spoke more directly, replied briefly that they had done no more than their duty.

"Ah, but, signor—monsieur—which am I to call you?—that is your French chivalry. It is always ready to succour poor women in distress. It was splendid—magnificent—"

"But too late," he interrupted. The words were smooth, the voice rich and full, but behind words and voice there seemed to Le Brocq an unreality which left both poor. There was no unreality in the waspish vigour of her retort.

"Too late? How can you say you were too late when you trapped these wretches and gave two of them their deserts? Would to God it had been the whole ten, or better still, that you had saved them for their hanging. Too late? No! but on the very tick of time."

"Too late to prevent murder, Sister," answered Le Brocq, with just an inflexion of emphasis on the last word.

"Ah yes, the poor mother. But why was she so obstinate? I forget, you do not know how it happened. It was all to save a handful of gems and a gold cup or two." For a moment she was silent, then, in one of the impulsive outbursts which seemed characteristic, she went on, "Do the dead know everything? Can they understand what they never fully understood while living? If they do I think she is not sorry. She was a good woman."

"No," answered Le Brocq, "I don't suppose that she is sorry. She was faithful, and whatever its present hurt may be faithfulness leaves no after sorrow."

"But I was not thinking of that," said the girl and rode on in silence. Just there the road was rough

## A NIGHT'S RIDE

and heavily overshadowed by trees, but Le Brocq saw that the hands Soderini had so greatly approved both helped and controlled her horse with perfect assurance. Once clear of the shadows and with a smoother path she spoke again: "How far have we to ride, Monsieur Galahad."

"My name is Le Brocq."

"Oh!" Both pause and interjection might have been surprise or mockery, perhaps there was something of each. "Of course there was the Galahad of the old romance, but I wondered. The name did not seem French—nor the nature," she added a little tartly, remembering Le Brocq's implied rebuke.

"It was the nature that came to your help," said Charles, speaking for the first time.

"Ah?" She turned on the saddle with a freedom which spoke of custom. "So you have a tongue? Yes, I recollect now, you spoke once or twice—there." The raillery died out of her voice as she ended, but only for an instant. "Galahad's all, then! Even that sweet gentleman whose voice I hear so loud there in front! Truly his delicacy, his good taste, and his estimate of women all proclaimed it!"

"Thank God," said Charles, "he is of your nation, not mine."

"Thank you, monsieur, that was very prettily said. If that is the way you use your tongue I think it is almost a pity you ever found your voice. Do you always pay such compliments to the ladies you squire? And am I to blame? You said Monsieur Galahad—I like that name best—was Monsieur Galahad because he came to our aid; but the gentleman with the loud voice and the pleasant estimate of womanhood also came to our aid, is not he, too, a Monsieur Galahad? I have vexed you now, have I?" she went on as Charles rode in silence. "Monsieur, forgive me, but ever since I could speak my tongue has run away with me. The gift of silence is a great gift."

"It is," answered Charles curtly, and with a shrug she turned back to Le Brocq.

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"Galahad was one of the old knights, was he not?"

"So I have heard, Sister."

"Let me see. My nurse told me the story. He was very brave, very chivalrous, very modest, and there was something else, was there not? Is that why they call you Galahad, monsieur?"

"Yes," said Charles, remembering his own interrupted question and leaning forward to catch Le Brocq's eye as he spoke. A touch of malicious humour moved him. Would Le Brocq parry the question or would he face the girl's banter? "I never knew why they call you Galahad. Tell us the reason, it will pass the time."

"For no reason," answered Le Brocq. "Who expects a reason for camp jests?"

"Even a lie cannot live without some foundation of truth," said Charles, his tone unconsciously taking on its accustomed authority. "Tell us, Le Brocq."

"And this, I am sure, is no lie." Antonina Caldora's voice was almost caressing in its gentle, pleading persuasiveness. "Tell us, please, Monsieur Le Brocq."

"It was nothing. There was a woman—"

"A woman and nothing!" she interrupted. "Fie! You are almost as complimentary to women as Monsieur I-do-not-know-his-name is to my nation. What is the name, monsieur?"

"Charleroi."

"Well, as Monsieur Charleroi. Yes, monsieur, now you may go on, but is that the way you begin a story?"

"There is no story. It was near Caserta, on the march to Naples." Le Brocq paused, then went on gravely, "Sister, in war there are many things hard to speak of, not to be spoken of to any woman, but least of all to such as you. Your life of peace, of isolation from the world, of ignorance of the world's sins and follies—"

"No, no," she interrupted, "you are quite wrong. Is it not the very life of the sisters to know suffering and sorrow—of others, if not their own? Besides,"

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she added, an ironical protest livening her voice, "you might not guess it, but I am not so very long from the world."

"Be easy," said Charles, still with his hint of malice. "He is only preparing his canvas for the picture. Go on, Le Brocq."

"But I have already told you it was nothing."

"Women love to hear nothings, especially about women. Go on please, Monsieur Le Brocq."

"Well, then, at Capua, our second day there, passing down a by-street I came upon an open space, a little waste angle between old houses, and in the angle was a woman surrounded by four or five of our men. She was dressed in gay colours, like so many women of the South. A scarf, or veil, was flung over her head, hiding her face, and she cowered into the angle with her head behind her hands like a frightened child."

"Yes?" said the girl, as Le Brocq paused.

"I am no story-teller, Sister, nor is there any story. I pushed between and bade them begone and leave her in peace for shame's sake, but they only jeered the more. Then I drew and swore that before they laid finger on her they must deal with me. At that they laughed and told me to look behind, and when I turned there was a painted hag of sixty grinning derision at me. 'A Ga'ahad!' said one, 'a true Galahad,' and the name stuck."

"More smoke than fire," said Charles. "That was small cause for such a name to stick and to be remembered all these months."

"Now tell us of Caserta," said the girl, "Caserta, on the march to Naples."

"Faith, yes! I had forgotten Caserta. Le Brocq, Le Brocq, you are playing with us."

"Better not press me, messire." Just in time Le Brocq saved his tongue from tripping.

"We are waiting," said the girl, "and every minute makes us imagine greater things."

"That is true. Better speak, Le Brocq."

## CHAPTER XI

### THE MAN OF FOLIGIANO

FOR a moment Le Brocq rode on in silence, his face gravely set ; then,

"It was near Caserta, not at it. I was on the very fringe of the outer wing of the army where discipline was weak ; mostly men did what seemed good to them, were they not Frenchmen in Italy ? And what is war but a thorn-tree with all manner of fruits, chiefly evil ? Risk the pricks and gather what you will : eat and be filled, even though the juice which flows at the crushing be blood. The King had given strict orders ; life and—" Le Brocq paused an instant, then went on, "Womanhood were to be sacred. But what are orders ! Given the opportunity, in war nothing is sacred.

"On the outskirts of a village, a furlong or so back from the road we followed, was a farmhouse. Discipline was weak : as we passed six or eight broke ranks and ran across the field. From the rear I saw them and but for a scream would have passed with the rest. I had a small command. The King's orders were strict ; the scream drew me and I followed.

"Like to-night I was too late. The father lay dead on the threshold, the mother was tied to the great square bed which filled one corner of the room, and the scoundrels—our countrymen, messire—not Soderini's—were already playing micare—the guessing game—for the girl. We learned it from the Italians. You know it, messire ? How many fingers do I

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show? And as he shows the other cries a number, and the girl stood by the overturned cooking-pot, shivering as she listened, with her dead father on the floor at her feet half in the sunshine." He spoke tersely, baldly even. As he had said, he was no story-teller; yet both, the King who knew war and the girl who knew the quietness of peace, caught and understood the picture equally.

"She was a pretty, slender-limbed creature, hardly more than a child and harmless as one of her own pigeons, but the rippled edge of the flood of war, a war she could not understand, had caught her. The coarse, homespun bodice was ripped—but let that be.

"When they saw me they broke off their game and told me to be gone for my own sake, there were more than enough already; and one who knew the Capua story called me by the nickname, and, thinking I had come on the same errand as himself, added a coarse comment. The others took it up in chorus, laughing and jeering. 'Galahad be it,' I answered. 'God helping me, as Galahad would have done in a like case so will I,' and, as at Capua, I drew upon them, while from the bed the mother called to Our Lady to give me strength for the weak's sake. And I do not doubt she did."

"Yes," said Antonina Caldora, as Le Brocq paused. "What came next?"

"It grieved me, then and after, God be my witness, for they were my very countrymen. Three were slain and the rest, knowing they were on the devil's side, gave up the fight. But somehow the story leaked out at Foligiano, the village I spoke of at first, and the foolish name stuck as a camp jest."

"Foligiano?" repeated Charles. "So you are the man of Foligiano? Narbonne told me the story but did not know the name. Monsieur Le Brocq, in the name of—" France, was on his tongue-tip, but Charles changed the word in time; who was he to speak in the name of France? "In the name of humanity, I thank you. Such villainies were never

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with—" again he stumbled but again recovered himself, " the King's consent."

But the girl held out her hand frankly. " Galahad ! The name in jest was earnest. How can you call it foolish ? And was I not right ? Very brave, very chivalrous, very modest and—the something else as well. How proud the woman you love will be of that story."

" I love no woman, Sister."

" Ah, no, I forgot." The generous emotion which had shaken her voice an instant hardened into the old half-malicious banter. " Galahad was a maiden knight and loved nothing but his sword and the Holy Grail. God wot ! that was a strange mixture. Are you like that, Monsieur Galahad—Le Brocq, I mean ?"

" To follow each in its place, as each calls to the right, I know nothing better," answered Le Brocq.

" And which was it to-night ?"

" Something of both perhaps."

The brief reply, soberly given, nettled her. " That must have been a curious sight, Signor Galahad hunting the Holy Grail in the dark with his sword drawn ! And were all the other Signor Galahads—"

Turning in his saddle suddenly Le Brocq faced her. " Shame, Sister ! Are you so accustomed to violence and sudden death—such a death and for such a cause—that they are forgotten in an hour ?"

" Oh, you men, you men," she returned, a note of pain vibrating through her voice, " so wise in your own affairs and yet so dull. Forgotten ? Do you not see that I cannot forget ? Always, always I think this horrible night will come between me and the good of life, and yet because I do not harp upon it, because I do not weep and moan and wring my hands you think I have forgotten. Think it then, if you will, Monsieur Le Brocq, but if you do, you do not know much of women and still less of Antonina Caldora. We forgive, but we never forget, and we do not always find it easy to forgive."

" I was a fool," said Le Brocq. " How could you

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have forgotten? But who is there to forgive? These cowardly wretches?"

"Myself," she answered shortly, and the three rode on in silence.

Where the road divided, one branch leading to the French camp, the other to the Albergo del Sole, Soderini and those with him had halted. The forking of the roads left a wide space well-lit by the westering moon. Waiting for no greeting Soderini singled out Le Brocq.

"At least twice to-night you have thrust yourself where you were not desired. Down amongst those French cowards you can, perhaps, do that at your pleasure but not with me, Monsieur Galahad, the woman-hunter. Galahad! a curse on such hypocrisy." But before he had fully ended Charles had spurred forward.

"Cowards?" he cried, losing his drawl in his excitement, "I give you the lie direct. It is you who are the cowards, you who let your foul tongue loose behind the safe odds of ten or eleven to two."

"Tut, tut, little man, I have no quarrel with you," answered Soderini. "Keep your fingers off other men's hot chestnuts lest you burn them. And it is just because only two out of all the camp joined us to-night that I use the word. You heard me use it, Monsieur Galahad the hypocrite? You can hector those down below there but you cannot hector me."

"You forget, Signor Soderini, the truce has still two days to run," and Le Brocq, as he spoke, pointed to the grey suggestions of the coming dawn spreading coldly in the east.

"Curse the truce, what is the truce between you and me? I have called you coward, Monsieur Le Brocq, twice over I have called you coward. Must I also strike you in the face?"

"And you lied, knowing it was a lie," replied Le Brocq tranquilly, "and a lie, told as a lie, has no sting; it is the truth that hurts."

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"You give me the lie, you French hound? You dare—" But before he could spur forward Mirandola and Loredano, the Venetian, had thrust themselves between.

"Be quiet, Giro; you brought it on yourself with your bullying. We'll have no quarrelling to-night. Be quiet, you fool; we won't allow it I tell you. We are all against you, everyone of us. You know as well as I do that—" he paused, hesitating a moment, then went on, "that Monsieur Charleroi and Le Brocq bore their share with the rest of us."

"Mirandola, you shall answer for this."

"Nonsense, man; when you have had a sleep you will thank me for it. Don't spoil our sport at the last. Good-night, Sister; good-night, gentlemen. My sorrow is that when we next meet it must be face to face, and not side by side for religion or charity; but, Monsieur Charleroi, I was right in your camp yesterday, was I not?"

As the little group of three went upon its way at a slow trot, Antonina Caldora turned to Le Brocq.

"And you could endure these insults?"

"There is a sworn truce, Sister."

The grey-froked shoulders were lifted in a shrug.

"That is not our way when our honour is touched."

"It is my way," answered Le Brocq. "When an oath has been sworn for me I keep it. While the truce lasts I will fight upon two quarrels only, my God's and my King's."

Just before the parting troops were separated by a turn of the road Mirandola said, "Now both together, Avellino," halted, and faced round.

"God save the King!" they cried, and repeated it yet more loudly, "God save the King!"

"What new French worship is this?" demanded Soderini, who had drawn rein with the rest. Mirandola laughed.

"The smaller one, he whom you patronized so condescendingly and called little man, is the King of France. At the inn I thought I knew his voice, but

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until we saw his face in the church we were not certain."

"And you are sure?"

"Not a doubt of it. There's knight-errantry for you! and you kept shouting coward, in his ears!"

"The King of France! Then, by God, we'll have him. Come, lads."

"For shame," and with a wrench of the bit Mirandola and Avellino angled their horses in a barrier across the road. "He trusted us. No, Soderini, you must not, you shall not; close in, Avellino. I tell you, Soderini—"

But ramming his spurs rowel deep Soderini broke through, and, still rasping his horse's flanks, tore down the road at a canter. Here was his chance to snatch reputation, and pay off old scores at the one swoop. Such a gift comes but once in a lifetime, and he bent low in his saddle as he rode.

At the cry Charles had halted, a little dry smile lifting the possessed sadness of his face. The inferred acclamation both pleased and touched him. So they knew! He had not been mistaken in his estimate of these two whom Commynes had called spies. Commynes was too suspicious, always too suspicious. But at the muttering of the angry altercation through the clear calm of the night, and the first clattering of hoofs, Le Brocq reined round.

"Ride forward, sire," he said curtly, forgetting for the moment the masquerade of identities, "ride for the camp, ride hard."

"And leave you alone? Never."

"But there's no choice." Le Brocq spoke rapidly, with authority. "There is the nun to protect; if not for yourself then for her. Ride, for God's sake, ride. The Cardinal of St. Malo will take her in charge. It is for France, you do not belong to yourself; ride, sire, ride."

For an instant Charles hesitated. Through the Valois obstinacy was blent in a large measure that chivalrous courage which was the heritage of so

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many Kings of France until the coming of the later Bourbons. To leave Le Brocq alone, offering him up, perhaps, as a sacrifice to secure his own safety, was abhorrent to both sides of his nature. But even his obstinacy and his courage recognized that Le Brocq was right: he did not belong to himself. France had suffered too much from captive kings, or if he persisted in this highway brawl what misfortunes might not befall the army in the confusion which must follow? Mantua would break the truce, would fall upon the camp, the disaster would be irreparable. "You are right," he said briefly. "God keep you, Le Brocq; come, Sister," and rode on, the girl following, more through her horse's instinct than by any act of her own.

Instantly Le Brocq spurred forward. His horse, trained alike to tourney and battle charges, met the onset without a flinch, almost unseating Soderini with the shock. Already there was the rattle of advancing hoofs. Recovering himself and unsheathing Le Brocq reined back where the road was narrowest, took the centre, and waited. There he would make his stand. Soderini was hardly less quick to regain control. "Damnation!" he cried furiously, spurred on afresh and in his eagerness the two met almost hilt to hilt. But their play of fence was only for a moment. In from behind Soderini dashed Mirandola and without a pause pushed between.

"Friends, Le Brocq, friends!" he cried. "Move back, Soderini, what a devil of a fellow you are; would you fight the lot of us? Be sensible, the King is in camp by this time. Capelare, push in at that side. There! Be quiet, Giro; you see you can do nothing."

"Nothing do you say? I'll show you that!" Rising in his stirrups Soderini, mad with rage, made a furious sweep at Mirandola's unprotected head; but Le Brocq, who had never lowered his point, turned it aside, and the blade, slanting down, rattled on the check-chains of Capelare's bridle.

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"What a rough dog you are," said Mirandola.  
"Thanks, Monsieur Le Brocq, there was a touch of Galahad about that. I shall not forget it."

"Nor I," broke in Soderini, still furious.  
"Meddling fools you are, all of you."

"After two days there will be no truce," said Le Brocq. He turned to Mirandola. "If I do not thank you, signor, it is because an Italian gentleman could have done no less. Good-night, gentlemen all. God sending me life you shall find me in two days' time, Signor Soderini."

Saluting with his sword he sheathed it and reining round his horse trotted slowly down the road towards the camp. Sheathing in turn Soderini spurred sullenly homeward, his comrades following at a walk. All were silent. The night's work had not been wholly barren, but religion and charity might alike ask if their name had not been taken in vain. Certainly there was little of either in their thoughts.



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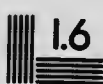
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## CHAPTER XII

### HIS EMINENCE IS HUMAN

AT the outskirts of the camp Le Brocq found the King and Antonina Caldora awaiting him. Charles rode forward slowly.

"Well?" The curt word had many significances.

"It was Soderini; but Mirandola and the others persuaded him differently."

"I understand the persuasion! And you?"

"They left me nothing to do, sire."

"Um. I can guess the nothing as I can guess the persuasion. You must leave the sister in the care of His Eminence. Remember I am supposed to be in my lodgings. But for Blaise I could not have quitted them at all. It was he who saddled the horse and left it hidden; he is waiting for me and it now. He would have given his ears to come with us, but that was impossible."

Without explanation Le Brocq understood. Blaise had been the King's personal attendant since the days when Charles, a lad of twelve, was shut up in the Chateau of Amboise, half prisoner, whole suspect Dauphin though he was, or rather because he was the Dauphin. Louis the Eleventh's jaundiced mind, judging others by himself and remembering his own cabals against his father, went in hourly fear of his successor. If Louis had tried to shake a Charles prematurely from the throne, why not a Charles a Louis? That he was little more than a child counted for nothing; he was the heir, and to Louis the heir must always be a conspirator.

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Night by night through that time of danger Blaise had slept at the boy's door; now he watched over the man with the anxious care of a jealous dog. Le Brocq knew his nature well, knew what he must have suffered through the inactive hours of the King's absence, but knew, too, how impossible it was that Charles should have brought him with him. Not only would his devotion have betrayed his master, but his rough tongue and unpolished ways—in origin he was a stable boy—would have been food for jesting. Through him all France would have been held up to ridicule. Soderini would have sneered that the flower of knighthood had taken root in the gutter, and belaboured Blaise into reprisals by the bludgeon of his wit.

The cause of Le Brocq's absence was known to all, and under his convoy they entered the camp without difficulty. Day was breaking, but few were astir except those who kept the outposts, and after the first challenge no man questioned them, nor, in the dim light, was the King recognised. Midway to his quarters Blaise met them, running at top speed. Not so much as a glance did he give to Le Brocq or the girl, who kept in the background, but, as the King drew rein, went down on his knees; catching his master's outstretched hand in both his he mumbled it greedily as a dog might.

"Thank God! Oh, thank God! thank God!" Le Brocq heard him whisper, almost in a sob.

"All's well, old friend," said Charles. "Come, get on your feet now, and give me your shoulder. 'There!' Leaning on him with unnecessary heaviness—he knew Blaise loved the pressure—he dismounted and turned to Le Brocq. "To the Cardinal at once, and come to me in an hour."

"But, sire, you have been in the saddle all night; surely you will sleep first?" Lest he should attract attention Le Brocq's voice was little more than a whisper.

"Sleep must wait," Charles answered briefly.

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"After I have seen you ! shall have much to say to both Guise and Commynes. Later the camp must shift." Raising his voice he turned to the girl, "Do you, Sister, take what rest is possible. Come, Blaise," and with his arm still across his servant's shoulder, Blaise leading the horse with his free hand, he walked slowly towards his quarters. As Dauphin he had known but little love and now that he was King he was wise enough to remember that little.

To say that His Eminence resented the premature disturbance of his rest is, perhaps, no more than to admit that even a Cardinal is human. The cause of the disturbance ruffled him still further.

"Monsieur Le Brocq and a nun? What have I to do with either at this hour of the morning?" he demanded querulously.

Surely he did well to be angry? Vexed by the stubborn refusal of Blaise to admit him to his master's presence late the night before it had been long before he could sleep, questioning whether or not he had fallen into some disgrace; and now to be awakened before cockcrow was an outrage. Not that there were cocks to crow in Salegna, they had vanished every one into the pot together with every relative to the remotest generation, and hardly so much as a bone was left whereof one might say, this was chanticleer!

"Bring them in, bring them in," he went on, his irritation growing by the sense of wrong it fed upon. Then he remembered that it was difficult, Prince of the Church though he was, to look dignified wrapped in a horse-blanket and lying on a pallet-bed in the sordid setting of a peasant's room not ten feet square, and sharply bade his servant shutter the window, so that when Le Brocq and Antonina Caldora entered all that could be seen of His Eminence's greatness was a dim, huddled figure with its knees drawn up and the coverings pulled to the chin to hide the four days' stubble of beard. As has been said, even a Cardinal is human, and Brissonet had his vanities.

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"Well, monsieur, well; what does this unseemly disturbance mean? Could you not have waited an hour or two? Who is this with you?"

"It is most urgent, Your Eminence. This is Sister—?" He paused, looking round at the girl.

"Antonina," she said.

"Sister Antonina, whose life was threatened at Saint Apollonia last night. To leave her behind us was impossible—"

"And so you brought her to the camp!"

"No, Your Eminence, but to you, whose very name is a protection."

"But where the plague—um, I mean where am I to bestow her?" It was difficult for the Cardinal of Saint Malo to forget that not so long before he had been Guillaume de Brissonet, Superintendent of Finances, and in every age, nor forgetting the present, finance and financiers have been fruitful parents to malediction. "There are but two rooms in the wretched hovel—"

"But there are two rooms."

"Yes, yes, yes, but—why could she not have stayed where she was? She was not alone, I suppose. There were others besides her, were there not?"

"One, the Mother-Superioress, is dead."

"What? Murdered?" Shaken out of himself Brissonet dropped the covering and turned his startled face upward, careless that the light between the chinks of the ill-fitting shutters was growing stronger momentarily. "Monsieur Le Brocq, they would never dare—"

"But they dared."

"Then you were too late?"

"In part too late; but we killed two of them."

"That was good. Brood of the devil that they are, pitiless wretches, surely the curse of God is on them and on all who consort with them. Murdered! God have mercy on us! Is there no respect for religion? Tell me how it happened, Sister."

And Antonina Caldora told, using very few words

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When she described how she and the others had been set aside Brissonet nodded his head gravely and turned to Le Brocq.

"You did quite right to bring her with you. Forget my peevishness, Monsieur Le Brocq," which again shows how, happily, a Prince of the Church can be very human. In spite of the horse-blanket, and the unshorn growth upon the chin, Le Brocq had never seen the Cardinal of St. Malo more truly dignified. "Go on, Sister." Then, when she had ended, he said solemnly, "May the Lord have mercy, and have no mercy," nor were the two who listened confused by the apparent contradiction. Again he turned to Le Brocq. "Have you seen the King?"

"I must go to him immediately."

"To follow the camp will be unseemly—impossible; but he will decide what is to be done. Meanwhile, Sister, wait in the other room. You must be very weary. In five minutes you shall have this bed to rest upon."

"But, Your Eminence—"

"There is no but. Le Brocq, again I say you did quite right. I shall say so to the King if need be. Go, now, both of you."

Though the sun had risen it was still low behind the hills, and the light was no more than a warm grey as they stood for a moment at the open door of the hut.

"You need have no fear," said Le Brocq. "You are safe now, entirely safe."

"After you came I had no fear; and oh! I am so thankful that you came. I have no words to say how thankful."

"You must be very weary." Le Brocq had no wish to be thanked, and yet, when he considered it afterwards, he remembered that there had been more of relief than gratitude in her voice.

"Not so very tired: I am much stronger than you think. There is the Cardinal calling me. A Cardinal! I never saw one before and have lost an illusion! He

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looked more like a cross-tempered old monkey than a Cardinal as he sat there with his knees to his chin, but I think he means to be kind. Good-bye till we meet again, Monsieur—Galahad!" With a little fluttering gesture of the hand she re-entered the hut, but as she turned she looked back and Le Brocq caught a glimmer of laughter from the recesses of the grey hood.

At the door of Charles' quarters began the comedy of ignorance for the benefit of all who might be within hearing or eyeshot. Have speech with the King? No, that was impossible. The King had given orders that he was to be disturbed upon no pretext, said Blaise.

"But I have his express orders," protested Le Brocq.

"You, monsieur? Ah!" a light broke upon Blaise. "Then you must be Monsieur Le Brocq? That is different. I am to bring you to His Majesty at once. Wait one moment, monsieur, if you please, while I waken him," and, the target of a growing curiosity as the camp woke to life, Le Brocq waited.

Many envied him as he stood by the door of the hut which was, for the time being, the palace of a King of France. Yesterday, in the face of Commynes' white passion, silence had seemed discretion, now there were some few who questioned whether cowardice would not have been the truer word. But the greater number asked themselves if, after all, the King's good-will might not have drawn them up more rungs of the ladder of court favour than Commynes' resentment could have thrust them down? Galahad had had the true instinct, Galahad, whom they had derided, as the world so often derides what is above its comprehension and believes that thereby it shows its superior wisdom.

Charles was dressed in the riding-suit he had worn through the night, but with all dust of the road carefully removed. With none but Blaise within earshot there was no need to continue the comedy of pretence.

"Well?"

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"Thank God for the good in all men, sire. At times I have done the Cardinal a wrong in my mind."

"Break the crust and find the pigeon," said Charles, quoting a homely proverb, then went on abruptly, "You heard what these Italians said last night?"

"Yes, sire; but last night I dared not resent the impertinence."

"That? Do you think that vexed me? It only proved how well I played my part. No; I meant what they said one to the other of the troops from Venice?"

"Sire, there is a truce, and last night we were all comrades."

"Come, come, Le Brocq, they spoke loudly enough and you're not deaf; you must have heard?" There was an imperious note in the appeal but Le Brocq, watching the King with troubled eyes, kept his peace. "Of what are you afraid?" demanded Charles, "for I think you are afraid of something even though you are the man of Folignano."

"Love is always afraid of wounding what it loves, sire."

The dull eyes brightened. "Yes, I think you love France."

"To me you are France, sire, and the only love I know."

"Le Brocq, Le Brocq, wait till some woman comes between! And listen, love should always trust love to understand; there should be no fear in love, so speak out. You heard them last night?"

"Do you order me to speak, sire?"

"St. Denis! No, man, no," broke in Charles, with a vexed laugh. "Nurse your scruples if that pleases you. I think I heard enough without your confirmation. Tell me, Galahad that you are, if you were King of France would you forget what you heard? Would you say in your heart, 'I know nothing of new troops from Venice?'"

"I said yesterday that if I spoke frankly I might

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offend Monsieur de Commynes, and I think I did offend him. Now I fear—"

"There is no fear in love," repeated Charles. "Tell me, Galahad."

"Can the King of France play the spy, sire?"

"Spy?" The Valois pride broke out in passion at the hinted affront. "Monsieur Le Brocq, do you dare fling spy in my face? Have a care, monsieur, have a care, or by the God who made me—" With an effort he controlled himself. "Love must try to understand," he said, his voice still rough with emotion. Turning to the open door he beckoned Le Brocq and with a sweep of the arm took in the circuit of the camp, now humming with activity. "For every life there I am responsible. Am I to send them as sheep to the butcher for a scruple? Would not the God who is the Father of the camp-follower as well as of the King demand their blood at my hand? 'Where are those whom I committed to your care?' I dare not fence the question with a quibble. Call the Cardinal, Monsieur de Narbonne, Guise and Commynes to come here: come thou also, and be not righteous over-much, Galahad my friend," which seems a hard saying in a world with such rare need of the injunction.

## CHAPTER XIII

### SPURS OF GOLD

"THEREFORE," concluded Charles, "not only must there be no renewal of the truce, but if we are to strike our blow at all we must strike it within three days."

The King sat at the head of a small table in the hut set apart for his lodgings; at either side, on rough benches, were the four leaders he had summoned to his Council of War. They had listened with deep attention, fully aware of the gravity of their circumstances. In the background, near the door as if to keep it and facing the King, stood Le Brocq. It was Guise who broke the silence.

"You have no doubt, sire, of the accuracy of the information?"

"No doubt at all; it is trustworthy and precise."

"Yes, of that I am sure. But," he hesitated a moment, "might there not be a conspiracy to mislead and so prevent a renewal of the truce?"

"How many were there, Monsieur Le Brocq?"

"About a dozen, sire."

"And of what ages?"

"Chiefly the ages of Mirandola and Avellino, sire; some were younger."

"You hear, gentlemen? Would a dozen reckless lads conspire to mislead? Consider; they had not even permission to leave the camp, who, then, could prompt such a plot? Would they hatch it themselves? Youth is not so cunning."

"With respect, sire," said Commynes harshly,

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"youth is damnably cunning at times and I'll prove it." None had listened more attentively to the King's statement than Commynes, and with every sentence, as its purport became clearer and the information definite, his strong, coarse face had darkened with suppressed passion. Now, losing all governance, he swung round upon Le Brocq. "So, monsieur, you can pose as a saint on a pedestal, you can hide yourself under a whited name, you can proclaim yourself the champion of religion, you can dub yourself the helper of God and you can steal with all the silent cunning of a thief in the night?" Back he turned to the table, his broad, stooped shoulders shaking with the violence of the wrath which possessed him. His voice rasped, his words came in a torrent. "Listen, gentlemen, listen. Sire, give me leave to speak. After this honourable gentleman, this Galahad of the Army, had sought to bring a slur and a disgrace upon his comrades, for what else was it than a slur and a disgrace to say, I alone, of all the soldiers of the Most Christian King, I alone have the devout courage and the emprise to adventure myself in defence of the helpless? I sent for him to my quarters. Here was his opportunity to play the patriot and gain for the information which would save the army while men thought him nothing but a self-conceited and bombastic fool! But he would not—one moment, with your leave, sire—no! he would not! He was too saintly, too pure-souled, of too noble and clean a spirit! He was Galahad! How could Galahad stoop—give me leave to speak, sire, I beg—how could he stoop to save France by repeating what the enemies of France plotted and planned before his very face? It would degrade his high mission! it would smirch and sully the immaculate whiteness of his—his— Oh! the unnatural cunning of youth! For now," round he swung again, shaking an open, outstretched hand towards Le Brocq in the vehemence of his contempt, "now you would steal my thought for France and climb across

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my back to confidence and favour. The King, my master, God rest him, always bade me beware of sanctimoniousness; and yet he never knew a Galahad!"

"Monsieur de Commynes, Monsieur de Commynes," cried Charles, beating the flat of the table with his palm sharply, "three times I have tried to set you right but you would not listen. Monsieur Le Brocq has told me nothing, not one single syllable."

"Who then, sire? No one but this Le Brocq thrust himself forward in advertisement yesterday."

"Later there was a second who loved the honour of France more than he feared Monsieur de Commynes' displeasure."

"And his name, sire?"

"What does that matter? The information is precise, but be sure he will never supplant Philip de Commynes in his master's confidence and trust."

"Then it was not Le Brocq?"

The King shook his head. "No, not Le Brocq."

Rising, Commynes crossed the room and held out his hand.

"Monsieur Le Brocq, I made a mistake and ask your pardon."

"The man who makes no mistakes makes nothing, and all the world knows what Monsieur de Commynes has done for France."

"When you have finished your compliments," said Guise sarcastically, "perhaps you will give attention to our business, which is the saving of the army."

"With the expiry of the truce we fight," said Charles briefly.

"But they are three, perhaps, to our one?"

"Will the disparity be the less when the new levies join them? No, we fight within three days."

"But where, sire?"

"It is to decide that you are here. Come, gentlemen, let us take counsel."

So for two hours they talked, earnestly, quietly and without heat as men do who feel the burden of a

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heavy issue press upon them. Suggestion after suggestion was made, considered, and rejected because of some inherent weakness in the proposal. Finally it was decided to break camp as soon as the troops had dined and press forward to join Marshal de Gié, who lay near Fornovo with the advanced guard, then to seize or force a favourable opening. That done, Charles turned to the Cardinal.

"Your ward of the night, what of her?"

"I left her sleeping, sire."

"Then send and waken her. She cannot go with us. But first of all I have an act of justice to perform before the camp. Come with me, all of you; you, too, Le Brocq."

Fronting the King's lodgings was an open space where, according to custom, the royal standard had been set up. This, again according to custom, had been kept clear from camp encroachments so that the little group, as it halted below the standard, was in full view of all and, as was natural, drew the curiosity of the idlers. It is to Charles' credit that his presence never staled, nor was this due so much to the divinity which hedges kings as to the human personality of the man. Lifting his cap he acknowledged the greetings which rose upon all sides, then turned to those about him.

"Monsieur de Narbonne, do you remember Foligiano?"

"Foligiano? No, sire, I fear I have forgotten."

"Foligiano, where seven Frenchmen forgot their honour, their country's honour, and fell below the level of the very beasts. Foligiano—"

"Yes, sire; near Caserta? I remember now. There was the sack of a wayside farm—"

"Call it murder," said Charles harshly, "murder, with worse to follow. You heard young Mirandola yesterday pour his scorn on the shame of the armies of France; this was such a shame, or would have been but that on the seven there came an eighth."

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"I remember it all, sire. De Faye, Ahier and Vibert were killed."

"Red-handed in their murder; yes, but by whom?"

Narbonne hesitated a moment. "That, sire, I have forgotten."

With a sweep of his arms Charles turned to the others who stood round about.

"You see, gentlemen? The memory of the evil dead lives, but the good of the living is forgotten as if it had never been. The eighth, the man who stood in that hour for the honour of France and the justice of the King—nay, who was the justice of the King, is forgotten. Monsieur Le Brocq, come forward and kneel. It does not accord with the honour of France that she should owe the vindication of her honour to a simple squire."

It was only as the King ended that Le Brocq fully understood his purpose and the courage which had never failed him before forsook him utterly. Under the tan of his year's campaign his fair skin flushed ruddily, then, as his knees shook under him, the colour ebbed as suddenly as it had flowed.

"In the name of God, kneel, Monsieur Le Brocq."

"Sire," he stammered, "I am not worthy—I have done nothing—"

"I am the judge of that. And it is not only for Folignano. Last night, to your own risk, you stood three times between your fellow-countryman and danger; it may be that you even saved his life. Am I to forget these things? If so, what should a King remember? Kneel, Monsieur Le Brocq."

And Le Brocq knelt, scarcely conscious that he knelt. His heart was beating to suffocation; the camp had suddenly gone dim and remote, even the King's voice had grown remote; and he scarcely felt the touch of the sword-blade on his shoulder.

"In the name of God and our Lord Saint Denis I make thee knight. Be brave, chivalrous, loyal. Keep faith and justice even to thine own hurt.

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Defend the right, defend the weak ; keep truth and thy country's honour precious as thine own soul, and in the guarding of them count death itself as but a little thing. Only so shalt thou be worthy. Rise, Sir Roger Le Brocq."

Still dimly, confusedly, more by intuition than clear consciousness, Le Brocq saw the King turn and beckon, saw Blaise approach carrying a sword across whose hilt two gilt spurs were hung, saw Charles receive them, heard him say to Guise, as he handed him a spur, "In the name of God and Saint Denis," saw Guise kneel on one knee, felt him lift his right foot, felt him fasten the gilt spur upon the heel and sign his knee with the cross, heard the same words spoken to Narbonne and felt the left foot spurred in like manner, felt his sword unbuckled and the new blade fastened in its place. Then from all the camp, from the Swiss mercenaries who, men themselves, loved a man who was a man, from the Pisan allies who remembered that the woman of Folignano was one of their own breed and nation, from his countrymen north and south, gentle and simple, a hoarse roar went up, "God save the King! Galahad! Galahad! Galahad!" and at the roar the blood rushed racing to Le Brocq's face. Down he went on his knees a second time and catching at the King's hand pressed it to his lips.

"My King, my King," he stammered, "always I would have died for my King and for France, but now more than ever, more than ever."

Then Charles remembered a taunt used by Commynes in the fury of his contemptuous passion. Raising the other hand he motioned for silence.

"Health to Sir Galahad of the Army!" he cried, and at the words the roar broke out afresh.

However critical or jealous men may be in the individual, in the bulk they are always easily swayed to some warmer emotion, rising at times to a blind fierceness of unreasoning excitement hard to control. Here there was the generous recognition that one of

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themselves, one who had fought in their ranks and borne the privations of the campaign even as they had, was given the reward due to him. It was at once a lesson and an incentive. But to this was added a second satisfaction: Commynes was feared and disliked, yesterday he had opposed Le Brocq, opposed him bitterly and contemptuously. Surely this was a triumph, a crowning triumph for the fighting wing of the army! and through the hoarse roar there rang a note which lent a sinister suggestion to the acclamation.

Perhaps Charles so understood it. Turning promptly he linked an arm through that of Commynes, drawing him aside, and as he did so the Cardinal's messenger returned bringing the grey sister with him. Her hood was drawn forward, her hands hidden in the long, loose sleeves of her frock. For a moment she stood with lowered head at the edge of the little group, then picking out Commynes she curtsied but recovered herself sharply, turning the movement into a low reverence.

"You sent for me, sire?"

"No, no," answered Commynes hastily. "Here is His Majesty."

"Oh, sire, forgive my ignorance, but—" she hesitated, then went on in a low voice which shook a little, though through what emotion it would be hard to judge, "without their crowns kings are so very like other men."

"Just," said Charles drily, "as in the dark all cats are grey. Sir Roger Le Brocq has told us last night's sorrowful story. The relief was too late?"

"In part, sire."

"But the murderers were punished?"

"In part, sire." Her voice lost its demure smoothness as she repeated her answer. "Two! What are two out of thirty?"

"Thirty?" echoed Charles, startled, "were there thirty last night?"

"Between the cowards who struck and the greater

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coward who sent them to strike, yes, sire. God send them all the one end."

"You are bitter?"

"There are some offences no woman can forgive. With your leave, sire, we will not speak of it."

"The devil of a temper," said Guise in Brissonet's ear, and the Cardinal whispered back,

"A minx! I had not been five minutes alone with her before she told me that at last she understood why it was rumoured that the next Pope would be a Frenchman!"

"The rest of the sisterhood remained; why, out of them all, were you afraid?"

"A woman's reason, sire; and because," she went on looking round as she spoke, "Monsieur Le Brocq—Oh! a Chevalier of France and I never knew it! But so many mistakes are possible in the dark."

"A minx," repeated Brissonet. "Frock or no frock, the sooner she is packed out of camp the better. If she stays she will set us all by the ears with that wasp's tongue of hers."

Low as the words were spoken Charles caught the aside.

"Sister," he cried sharply, then paused. "By what name are we to call you?"

"In the world," she said slowly, "I was known as Antonina Caldora."

"Caldora? There is a Count of Fonzano whose family name is Caldora?"

"He is my father."

"Ah, I have heard of the Count of Fonzano."

"Many people have," she answered tartly.

"A very brave gentleman."

"He is my father." The tone was still tart, but through the acid repetition a pride of race asserted itself. It was as if she said, I am my father's daughter, and yet she had shown herself a very coward the night before. Charles caught the assertion.

"Like father, like child. How many brothers have you?"

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"None, sire."

"Sisters, then?"

"None, sire."

"An only child? The last of his own line? And yet he could choose the convent for you?"

"He could send me there, sire," and again there was no mistaking the acid of the reply.

"For shame. Is that the way you speak of your vocation?"

"No, sire; of the Count of Fonzano."

"And is it any less shame to so speak of your father?" In his character of churchman Brissonet intervened.

"Ah!" she said coldly, "it is easy to see that Your Eminence is not one of the many who know the Count of Fonzano."

"We break camp in an hour," said Charles, making no effort to conceal his vexed displeasure. "What is your wish?"

"My wish has little to do with it, sire. Having escaped the fire I see nothing left but the frying-pan—needs must that I go back to Fonzano."

"How far is Fonzano from here?"

"Half a day's ride, perhaps less."

"Le Brocq—"

But, as Charles turned, Le Brocq caught the King's intention before ever the words were spoken and, forgetting all etiquette, broke out in protest.

"Sire, sire, do not send me from the army on the very edge of the truce. Yesterday Monsieur de Commines said that France would have need of every man—"

"And yesterday you ignored Monsieur de Commines." With a sharp gesture Charles silenced him. "And did I not hear something of an oath sworn last night before the altar and in the presence of the dead? Or must I throw your new-made knighthood in your face before your spurs are dulled? Obedience without question is the law of your order, Sir Roger Le Brocq."

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"I have not seen her face," whispered Guise to Brissonet, "but I have known half a day's ride through the hills more dangerous than a battle."

"A minx!" returned the Cardinal, clinging steadily to his phrase. He knew of none more descriptive. "I have seen her face and Le Brocq is a wise man to cry off."

Perhaps that was true, but if the Cardinal was right then the philosophers who declare that wisdom is the mother of true happiness are grievously wrong. Le Brocq was the picture of misery and discontent; vexation and resentment were written openly on his frank face. At the moment, in the bitterness of his disappointment, he would have given back his gilded spurs for a week's freedom from their obligation.

But more than his knighthood bound him. There was, as the King had said, his oath, and at the recollection he turned mechanically towards the innocent cause of his chagrin, his grey eyes clouded with rebellion. Promptly, as if answering the challenge of his annoyance, the girl disengaged a hand from the loose sleeve which hid it, pushed back her hood deliberately and looked him in the face. The few hours of sleep had smoothed away the lines of weariness, the natural colour of healthful youth had crept delicately back to the cheeks, the full, warm lips were curved suggestively and under the white band across the forehead the dark eyes looked defiance alike at Le Brocq and the sun. It was as if she said, pick your flaw, either of you, if you can!

Turning, Guise laid a hand on Brissonet's arm.

"Some women who wear no frock are nuns at heart, while others— I tell you frankly, Cardinal, but for the frock I would ride in Le Brocq's place myself;" and Brissonet nodded comprehendingly.

"A minx," he said for the fourth time. "It is well for the frock there is a Galahad, and for the Galahad that there is a frock. All the same, I would choose the camp."

All the by-play passed in half a minute's silence

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to be broken by Le Brocq. Falling on his knees before Charles he put both his hands between the King's after the ancient custom. He had one more arrow in his quiver: the first had missed badly, but the second might hit the gold.

"Sire, you know, and God, He knows, that I am your man in life or in death. I was wrong. And yet, though I was wrong— Sire, there is one, an Italian, and last night I pledged my honour that when the truce ended—"

"Le Brocq, sire, is a good soldier but a bad chronologist," said Guise. "To-day is Saturday, the truce runs till Monday, Fonzano is only half a day's ride away. Let him sleep there to-night, no doubt the Count will make him welcome; then to-morrow he can join the army at his leisure and next day slaughter as many of the enemy as he pleases."

Charles nodded thoughtfully. Though he had censured Le Brocq he sympathized with, and understood as no other present could, the cause of his unwillingness to obey. Soderini had slandered all France.

"All that is possible, Sister?"

"Oh, sire," she retorted, "if you have such a thing as a civil horse-boy in your camp I beg you will send him with me and not this most noble, courteous, chivalrous—ill-mannered, doltish booby of a Chevalier of France."

Those who knew Charles best looked for a stinging rejoinder, a rebuke whose pointed barb would rankle, as sharp words will, long after the speaker had forgotten its launching. But though the King first went white, then red, at the insult, he controlled himself.

"Are you a little of a woman," he said slowly, sternly, almost sorrowfully, "and with so little of a true woman's gentle nature, that you have already forgotten last night? If in your youth you are what you are, God pity you in your sour old age."

No rebuke? That is wrong; it was the one rebuke which could have touched her at the moment. Steadily

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she looked into Charles' eyes until he had ended, then she hid her face in her hands and the long breath she drew was broken midway by a burst of sobbing.

"No," she wept, "no, no; I am not so vile as to forget." But even in the midst of her confession her vexed temper gained the upper hand. "You called me a grey cat a while ago, and what can a cat do but scratch—though it is less grey than you think it."

## CHAPTER XIV

### A MINX

"Is your worshipful knighthood a reader of old romances?" said a small, meek voice.

Le Brocq came to himself with a start. His mind had leaped forward in a dream, the three days of truce were ended, France was at the throat of Italy fighting for bare leave to live and he was not there. Where he was, or why he was absent, he did not know; it is so in nightmares. It had been easy for Guise to say, "Half a day here, half a day there." It is always the man who is not dogged by misfortune who bears the troubles of others lightly. Then the girl spoke, and of a sudden he found himself on the highway in the very heart of a sultry July afternoon, with the truce still two days to run and the camp ten miles behind him.

"I beg your pardon, signorina—Sister, I mean?"

In the depths of her hood she grimaced, shaking her head vexedly.

"I asked you, do you love romances?"

"I know very little about them."

"No, you only make them. Now I, who cannot make them, love them. My old nurse used to tell me stories of them. There was Arthur and Amadis and Roland and—and—" she glanced at him sidelong, "Galahad and the Knight of the Rueful Countenance. Until to-day I always thought he was a Knight of the Round Table—the English, we know, never laugh—but now I think he was French; was he French, Sir Roger?" She paused a moment, not

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long enough for a reply but sufficiently to set an accent on the next words. "It is a pretty name enough, but I think I like the other better."

"What other name?"

"Sir Galahad of the Army."

Le Brocq flushed hotly. "How did you hear that?"

"They were all shouting it. Are you not very proud of the name, Sir—Galahad?"

"If it were deserved, yes."

"Deserved?" she echoed. "Oh if we got no more credit than our deserts even I would have a beggared reputation. I liked the name: it seemed to fit. But one thing puzzles me. Is it part of the Galahad nature, monsieur—I know that is wrong, but what can you expect of a Poor Clare?—is it part of the nature to speak little and laugh less?"

"I am as God made me," answered Le Brocq briefly.

"And He does all things well, does He not? It were heretic to doubt it and I—" again she hesitated, "I am no heretic; my frock proves that. But why do you laugh so little? We have only to-day to laugh and to-morrow comes so soon."

"And yesterday to remember."

"Now you are hateful," she broke out with something deeper than petulance in the protest. "Why will you not let me forget, you and your sad-faced King? It is always, remember, remember, when with all my heart I want to forget lest I grow mad with memory. There! forgive me. It was wicked of me to scold but my frock has its privileges. God knows it needs them to balance the limitations."

"Limitations?" repeated Le Brocq pointedly. "I have seen no limitations."

"That is better, much better," she said encouragingly. "And since we may not laugh let us talk."

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"Of what?"

"Of what you will."

"Of your father, then. Tell me something of the Count of Fonzano."

For a moment she rode on in silence, giving the reins a little shake as if vexed, then:

"I think in some things my father is very like my father's daughter."

"And I," said Le Brocq, laughing in spite of himself, "think that your father's daughter must be very like her father."

"That is still better though I hope it is not true! We shall not be so dull after all. Tell me some of your romances; French romances are always so interesting to—to women."

"I know none, Sister."

"None? But you must be twenty-two years old at least?"

"I am twenty-eight," answered Le Brocq stiffly, unwilling that even a minx should despise his youth.

"Twenty-eight? And no romances? Why, in Italy—" she broke off, biting her lip and turned the subject with a swiftness which bewildered Le Brocq, unaccustomed to women's ways. "That girl at—what was the place? Folignano? was she so very pretty?"

"I don't know," answered Le Brocq, still stiffly. "I never looked at her."

"Saints! Do you never look at women? I remember now, you did not look at me this morning—Oh! I forgot! You are Galahad of the Army. It is strange, for sometimes men like to look at us. And they were playing *micare*?"

"Yes."

"You do not tell romances well," she said plaintively. "I think it would be very romantic to have *micare* played—for me. Why did they play *micare*, Monsieur Le Brocq?"

But Le Brocq made no reply, and the girl, smiling

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serenely behind the safe cover of her hood, was content to ride on in silence. She had goaded him sufficiently for the moment, and in part had paid the debt she felt was due by her sex. She did not disguise from herself that an exceedingly undesirable experience lay before her at Fonzano, it behoved her, therefore, to use the very few hours left still to the best advantage.

With the serene smile still curving her lips she turned to survey her victim and a light kindled in the depths of the dark eyes. Feeling the prick of the goad, and unaccustomed to be driven, Le Brocq had straightened himself in his saddle like a man who prepares to face an onset. His mouth was harder set than he knew, hard-set as it would have been had the assault been bred of that fiercer warfare whose dangers and tricks of fence he knew better than this galling prick of speech, and its firmness became him well. It gave him that touch of masterfulness most women love in their hearts however they may rail against it with their tongues. The broad shoulders, squared unconsciously back, together with the tense, strong muscles of the arms swelling the leathern jacket which fitted like a skin above the patched doublet, gave the suggestion reality. Such pride of strength must be made to feel its weakness, and Antonina Caldora promptly set herself to its abasement.

"Monsieur Le Brocq—there! I always forget! I should have said Sir—"

"Call me Monsieur Le Brocq; it sounds more natural."

"How good you are, though I am not quite so sure that you are natural. Monsieur Le Brocq, is not that running water I hear?"

Relieved by the lifting of the goad Le Brocq made haste to check his horse that he might listen the better. A sparse growth of pines bordered the road at either side, the brown trunks hidden for the first six feet by a riotous interwoven tangle of woodland

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life. Through this, upon the left, came the purr and murmur of a stream breaking across its shallows.

"I am parched with thirst, will you please bring me a drink."

"But how? I have no cup."

"When you were campaigning, and a wounded comrade was thirsty, what did you do? We are comrades, are we not?"

Le Brocq discreetly ignored the second question while answering the first, the beginnings of a smile in his eyes belying the gravity of his tone.

"I brought it in the crown of my hat."

"Oh!" This time it was a grimace which the hood concealed as her face wrinkled in disgust at the suggestive stainings upon the travel-worn cap Le Brocq held out towards her. "I think I am not so thirsty as that. Supposing you were going to drink, what would you do?"

"Scoop the water up in my hands."

"I like that much better, I don't think I ever drank from a man's hands. Please bring me a drink, Monsieur Le Brocq, I am more thirsty than I thought I was."

Dismounting, Le Brocq looped his reins over a branch of the thicket and plunged through the undergrowth. Instinctively he knew that of her two thirsts that for amusement at his expense was probably the greater, yet what could he do but obey? She had him in a cleft stick. Had he refused, or made excuse, she would have sharpened the edge of her irony yet the more. But he never thought of refusing. Though it pleased her to make a fool of him she was not the less a woman, and therefore to be treated with the respect he would have paid the mother whose memory he revered. He had had little experience, and so did not know that the young of the breed have no desire to be respected as mothers before their time.

Stooping over the brook he bared his arms, sluicing himself lavishly with the cool water, then, choosing a

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deeper pool he plunged his head neck-deep below the surface to the great comforting of his goaded spirit and rose puffing satisfaction. Squeezing the water from his dripping hair as best he could he pushed it back from his face, filled his hollowed palms and, balancing them carefully, picked his way carefully back to the road.

"Beauty is strength, strength beauty," and great is their power. The laugh ready to rise to the girl's lips never curved them, they rather grew firmer. For the first time that day a touch of contrition troubled her; this was like compelling a big-limbed mastiff to the petty tricks of the lap-dog. But the mastiff would have been miserable in his self-consciousness, here there was no self-consciousness, no sign of vexation, only a serene indifference and a watchful carefulness, the one for her, the other that he might not spill the water borne in the hollow of his hands. The knowledge galled her. Her plot to humble—no, humiliate him, had failed. Failed? Not quite. As the cat in the fable has only one trick, but finds it sufficient, so a woman, who has many, usually relies upon one of nature's teaching in the end. It goes by many names, it takes many forms; with one it is beauty, with another grace, with another graciousness, and with not a few simple audacity, but when all is said all may be summed up in the lure of the flower to the bee.

"A little higher please, Monsieur Le Brocq, a little higher still." As she spoke she leaned forward and downward towards Le Brocq's outstretched hands. "How well you carry it and how strong your hands are. No! I cannot reach it. It must be this stupid hood; wait, I will push it back. There! that is better is it not? And yet I cannot reach it. See!" she pursed her full red lips, pushing them out as she spoke. "Does it tire you very much reaching up like that?"

"No, but the water will spill."

"And your trouble be lost?      That would never

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do. Perhaps," she paused, hesitatingly, "perhaps if I leaned my hand on your shoulder I could reach it better? Do you think you could bear my weight?"

"Oh yes," said Le Brocq cheerfully, "do not be afraid. I have often carried a sheep on my shoulder."

Half involuntarily she straightened herself; a gleam of anger lit up her dark eyes and with a jerk she sat back in the saddle.

"Even then I could not reach it, so you have wasted your labour after all." She said it regretfully, sweetly almost, but there was a subtle acid through the sweetness.

"Not wasted," answered Le Brocq, still cheerfully. "See!" Turning, he pushed his hollowed palms under the soft muzzle of her horse, washing the hot nostrils gently. "We must take care of her, she belongs to the army, you know."

"Your army? It is always your army. I think I hate you and your army," and this time there was no sweetness through the acid.

Mounting, Le Brocq rode on in silence, but it pleased him to see that she did not vent her undisguised vexation on the dumb beast. It was a touch of revelation which argued a reasonableness and restraint her wayward temper had not led him to expect. The recognition moved his sympathy. These caprices of misplaced levity which had so offended the innate reverence of his nature, were they not, after all, only the natural rebellion of passionate exuberant youth arbitrarily cramped to a distasteful and unwelcome vocation? Rumour spoke of the Caldoreschi as a high-metalled intractable race always in revolt against dominance and running easily to extremes whether bad or good, with, as most passionate natures have, the capacity to be saints and the willingness to be sinners. They endured restraint hardly, coercion not at all; yet here was a Caldora whose restraint was implacable and coercion without remedy. There was nothing strange in that. It is a recurring folly in fathers that

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they forget their own youth with its tragic sorrows its needless limitations, and force their children to live the tragedy anew, cramping their lives to those narrow limits whose lessons of tolerance and sympathy age ignores while it resents their memory.

Moved by this sympathy Le Brocq glanced at the girl, to find her watching him with a new expression in her eyes; had he but known it he had won his spurs that day for the second time. Being a woman she was the readier to speak.

"You are very courteous gentlemen, you French! Your King bids me hold my tongue, your Cardinal calls me ugly names—I have quick ears—and you, you compare me to a sheep! Was it a live sheep or a dead sheep, Sir Galahad of the Army?"

"Sister, I am sorry, truly I am. I was—"

"Oh, make no excuses. I will admit you had your provocation. There! that is handsome of me, is it not? And it might have been worse, you might have said a goat. Are we friends again?"

"Sister, I have always been—"

"My friend?" again she interrupted his protest. "Yes, I am sure of that, for it is always our friends who hurt us and tell us truths we don't like. There! you are forgiven if I am forgiven and there is peace once more between France and Italy. It is always we women who make peace. And I am a woman," she went on with a rapid insistence, "though you may think me nothing but a dumb sheep in a grey fleece."

"Not dumb," he said gently.

"Thank God! not yet!" she retorted and laughed as she said it. "To-morrow I shall be dumb enough."

"Why?"

"It is not well to speak above your breath at Fonzano."

"Why?" repeated Le Brocq. But she made no reply and all laughter was gone from her eyes.

"How well you know these roads," he went on, partly to relieve the silence but also in part because his curiosity had been stirred. Throughout the after-

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noon, almost since they had quitted Salegna, she had been guide, nor had she once shown doubt or hesitation.

"I have ridden them often enough, though not of late," she answered. "My mother was dead, my father rarely at Fonzano. Child though I was, I was my own mistress and the name of Caldora of Fonzano was a greater protection than even you, worshipful knight though you are. In the hills fear is stronger than force, Monsieur Le Brocq. Then my father came back." Light and shadow had played upon her as she spoke, now a gleam of tenderness, now a flash of railleury, but she ended in gloom.

"That must have been pleasant in your loneliness."

She laughed again, but not as she had laughed at his irony.

"As I said to His Eminence, you are not one of the many who know the Count of Fonzano. Since my father has ceased to be a man—"

"Sister, you must not speak of your father like that."

"—he has been a devil," she went on steadily, ignoring the rebuke. "I think it must have been at Fonzano that Dante found the gates of hell."

"Sister," began Le Brocq, more shocked by the hard bitterness of the tone than by the actual words, but reining her horse sharply to a stand she interrupted him.

"Sister! sister! sister!" she cried petulantly, "I am sick of the miserable masquerade. See!" Dropping her reins she fumbled for a moment among the white folds which bound her head, wrenched off the linen and flung it impatiently on the road. Drawing a deep breath she stretched out her arms as if in the abandonment of a new freedom. "Praise God! I'm no Sister and never shall be. Does that horrify you, Sir Galahad? But I am no postulant and never will be. At the convent I only wore the dress as a convenience. A nun? I would work for rye bread in the fields first."

While loosening the linen bands she had broken

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the fastening which bound her hair, now, as she turned half defiantly upon Le Brocq, it slipped from its restraining fillet and tumbled in waved masses to her saddle. But she seemed entirely oblivious, and the little rapid gestures pushing back the floating trails from forehead and temples were without a trace of coquetry or self-consciousness.

"I am glad," said Le Brocq, and said it heartily. But she made no pretence of misunderstanding him, as so many women might have in her place and with less reason.

"That it is not a Sister of Saint Francis who is so light of mood? No! Were I a nun I would be one to my heart's core, soul and spirit; but being only a woman—" She broke off, her hand straying again to her loosened hair. For a moment she looked embarrassed, perplexed rather, then her gaze fell upon the linen bands lying on the roadway where she had flung them. "Monsieur Le Brocq, will you give me my nun's weeds back again. I am not the first who has had to beg back humbly that which has been thrown away in a rage."

But if he thought she meant to twist the linen back to some semblance of its old form and use he was mistaken. With a wrench of her strong hands—Le Brocq noted their strength just as Soderini had approved their shapeliness—she ripped off a band an inch or so broad, flung the remainder back where it had lain, and with an utter absence of self-consciousness as great as if she was before her own mirror, alone in her tiring-room at Fonzano, bound up her hair with the ragged wisp, coiling it upon her head in three sweeps of the arm whose rapidity and effect bewildered Le Brocq. Then she looked him in the eyes, always with a calm serenity which disarmed suggestion. Apparently what she read there contented her, for she picked up her reins and rode on. It must not be forgotten that Le Brocq had told the King no less than the truth when he said that he was very human.

## CHAPTER XV

### MARGOTTI INTERVENES

OF the windings through the hills Le Brocq had taken careful note, remembering that he must trust to his own guidance for the return journey. That he should lose his way utterly was impossible. Woodcutters, and charcoal-burners' huts were rare, farms yet rarer, wayfarers the event of an hour, villages almost non-existent, but the sprinkling of life would be sufficient to enable him to check his memory from time to time. And he would need such aids. Not always had they ascended; there had been levels and dips, twists and turns, bendings to right and left, the sun now on the face, now on the back, but always through the solitude of the mountains, always with the world remote.

Everywhere they had met with a cowed respect, an obsequience whose cringing servility grated on Le Brocq. He knew its meaning only too well. It was not that these peasants—the men taller than their southern brethren, lean-faced, long-limbed, sinewy, the women bent by toil in the fields and withered before their flower—were either docile or abject by nature—the ferocity of their revenges when passion broke the bounds of fear cried aloud to the contrary—but never since they were born had they, whether men or women, possessed themselves in soul or body. The one the Church claimed, the other was the chattel of some over-lord. For his pleasure they lived and endured, for his profit they toiled, for the glory of his greatness they died at times. That his

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profit, his pleasure and his greatness might increase they married and brought forth children, hiding away their growing girls lest worse than joyless toil or death should overtake them. Now and then some turbulent or more desperate spirit took to the free life of the mountains as Vanelli had done. But these were rare. Mostly they lived as their fathers lived; it is to be doubted whether the cords of custom do not bind faster than those of even love or hate.

But though Antonina Caldora had never hesitated in her choice of roads, she had checked her knowledge from time to time, rather, Le Brocq believed, to confirm a memory than to resolve a doubt. Each enquiry had been answered with an abject, cringing submission, but as the day grew older and they drew near to Fonzano it seemed to Le Brocq, trained to observation in a hostile country, that the furtive upward glances which accompanied the reply belied the fawning servility of the words.

If the girl was recognised no sign was given except once, and then it was an inference. Three goats, tethered together, grazed the coarse grass of the wayside, a woman watching from the shade of a bush. At the girl's beckon and command, sharply spoken, she rose slowly, a sullen curiosity on her face, but she gave no reply until she stood at Antonina Caldora's knee. Then a sudden energy flushed her, her dull eyes lit up, and she laid an impulsive hand on the grey frock.

"Have you turned to this? Mother . . . God! is there some hope that at last a Caldora will have pity on the poor?" But as she read her answer in the girl's vexed face her hand slipped listlessly to her side, and she motioned forward with a jerk of the head: "Yes, God help us, that is the road to Fonzano," and Le Brocq noted as curious in one so passionate that Antonina Caldora rode on without even a retort; and yet the very bitterness of the tone had been an insolence.

Because of these turnings and twistings it was a

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relief when at last she looked up, saying curtly, "Another hour at the most," but instantly she dropped her chin upon her breast again and he left her to her thoughts. Already the influence of Caldora, where it was not well to speak above the breath, was upon her, and Le Brocq marvelled what manner of man it could be whose nearness silenced a tongue which had flouted both King and Cardinal unabashed.

But almost immediately the silence was broken and Le Brocq, half a length in advance, drew rein, holding up a hand for quiet. Thin, yet dull, muffled either by distance or a fold in the hills, came a confusion of sound which he knew to be the footfall of horses. With a single rider, or two at the most, the clink of the hoof is distinct, sharp and rhythmic like the tick of the death-watch, with a company the reverberation is as continuous as the rumble of a baggage-train; here it was between the two, therefore a troop, but a small troop, eight or ten at the most. Whether advancing towards them or crossing their path Le Brocq was uncertain, then, suddenly, the dullness sharpened.

"Pull your hood over your face," he ordered briefly, "they are coming this way. What do you think?" he went on after a pause, "are they from Fonzano?"

She shook her head doubtfully. "I would say not."

"Perhaps men for your army?"

"Not that certainly. Fonzano needs all its men to guard Fonzano. Do you not see how we are beloved? But what does it matter who they are?"

"Not much, but I expect Commynes' truce does not run in the hills."

"Oh!" she cried, a note of genuine concern casting out the flippant bitterness, "and you are French? Selfish that I am! I never thought of that."

But he caught her bridle as she turned her horse's head.

"No, to ride forward is safest. Besides, it is too late; see, there they are!"

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Le Brocq had been right in his guess at their number. Round a bend, at a walk, came a straggling group of seven or eight horsemen, and as they cleared the shadow the girl would have forced her rein loose but that he was right—it was already too late to escape.

"Margotti!" she cried.

"Margotti? Who is Margotti?"

"Last night—the convent—Mother Euzebia—oh! the coward, the coward."

Before the words were fully spoken Le Brocq understood, but even in the pinch of his dilemma it filled him with an unreasoning exultation that the note ringing through the broken words had nothing of selfish fear in it, only contempt and loathing. With the instinct of the soldier he glanced round him for defence if defence were possible, if not, then to gain time. Upon one side a thicket stood, its sturdy branches close and interlaced; upon the other, a yard or two back from the road, was a flat-faced boulder. Could they hope to pass the troop unmolested? But even as the question took form in his brain, last night's experience cried "no" to it. To Margotti nothing was sacred; the nun's garb might even be an incentive. What then? The girl would be recognised. And then? He waited for no reply to the question; none was needed. Guided by last night's knowledge, and remembering the girl's story told in the camp, the problem had but one solution—to Margotti nothing was sacred.

"Back flat against the rock, flat as you can scrape it."

"But—"

"Do as I tell you," he said sharply, and Antonina Caldora obeyed with a sudden submission, as she had never obeyed before.

"But there are so many—too many."

Too many? He knew it even better than she as, by a touch of the knee, he edged his horse sidelong till, with the girl behind him, he faced angle-wise up

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the road. So far he had compromised nothing and it might be they would pass them by. If not— But Margotti settled the doubt while still thirty paces away; Le Brocq had forgotten how, last night, the light from the church door had shone upon his face. Turning in his saddle The Saint shot a question over his shoulder; Battista answered from behind and both laughed.

"A pleasant night for a promenade, signor," said Margotti, halting, "a promenade of two, I mean. He is a lonely man who has no companion but his own thoughts. You have my congratulations, and I think," he laughed again, the easy merriment of frank enjoyment, "I may fairly have yours. It is not often that friends suddenly parted meet so soon."

Most men have their foibles, their amiable weaknesses which show them human; one of Margotti's was that he loved the sound of his own voice and prided himself upon his nice choice of words. His other weaknesses were less easily forgiven, though even more admired by his companions.

"Yes," said Le Brocq civilly, "we met last night I think."

The Saint caught the foreign accent. "Not a countryman? Then what must follow will be an added pleasure."

"Perhaps we shall share the pleasure together," answered Le Brocq, still civilly. "That we may not do so I will make a bargain with you."

"No," said Margotti with emphasis, "no bargain; bargains are between equals, you are one and we are eight, here there is no room for bargaining. Who is that with you?"

"I differ." Ignoring the question Le Brocq stretched himself. "I am, as you see, not a small man. In what you think must follow, you, I am sure, would not hold back. I am still more sure that those behind I would not let you, and I have some skill of fence."

"I little last night."

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"Last night I had the King of France to guard."

"The King of France?"

"Yes, he fought on my right: a little man but a great one."

"Damnation! and we never knew it," cried Margotti, striking his clenched right fist with the palm of the left. "The King of France? That meant a clean slate to us all and money to spend all our lives! Yet he slipped through our fingers. But who could have thought he was the King."

"You do not know the French," retorted Le Brocq, "and that brings me to my bargain." Pausing, he searched the faces before him with a keen scrutiny.

## CHAPTER XVI

### LE BROcq STRIKES A BARGAIN

THAT he had been allowed to parley counted for much, that he had impressed Margotti for more, and he had impressed him. The hit that Margotti dared not hold back, even if he would, but must lead the risk had told; that he, Le Brocq, had, as they supposed, been chosen to guard the King in a wild and dangerous adventure told yet further. He was a man to be reckoned with and the parley had set them in the mood to reckon the reckoning. Ignorance of danger is a prime aid to courage. Through the pause came a whisper from behind, soft though insistent, "Foligiano, remember Foligiano," but Le Brocq ignored it.

"No, you do not know Frenchmen," he repeated. "Here is my bargain. I make no pretence at illusions. You can kill me, I know, but before you kill me I shall have killed three of you; is it worth your while?"

"You rank yourself high," said Margotti grimly, but, noting Le Brocq's great strength and length of arm, and remembering how he had been chosen to guard the King overnight, he did not dispute the assertion.

"I have nothing to hope and a desperate man goes far," answered Le Brocq. "The three might even be four."

"Come to your bargain."

"Let the Sister—" he paused on the word. It was characteristic that even in the pinch of this cleft stick

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he hated the lie inferential. "Let my charge go free. Give her five minutes' law, and at the end of the five minutes I shall throw away my sword."

Again the whisper came from behind, louder this time, "Oh, Galahad, Galahad, no, no, not that," but again Le Brocq ignored it.

"Well?"

"A bargain is no bargain where both don't gain," said Margotti slowly. "You say we gain three lives, perhaps four; what do you gain?"

"I pledged my word," said Le Brocq. "I gain a kept pledge."

"And lose your life?"

"Can I save it in any case?" and the curt logic appealed to Margotti as no protest of knightly honour could have done. This was a thing he could understand and The Saint was eminently a practical man.

So far those behind Margotti had kept silence except for busy whisper. Amongst themselves, now one spoke up.

"Why not put the boot on the other leg? Throw away your sword now and five minutes after we'll let the wench go."

"Because," said Le Brocq very deliberately, "you can trust me, and you know it, but I cannot trust you, and you know it. That is why. Is it a bargain, Margotti?"

"That we can trust you is true enough and that woodenhead behind there is a fool. But you are wrong, Frenchman. If Margotti, The Saint, passed his word not the eleven thousand virgins of Cologne would induce him to break it. And we had enough of grey frocks last night. Yes, it's a bargain."

"But I say, no!" cried the girl, pushing back the grey hood in the excitement of her protest. "I am Antonina Caldora; touch so much as a hair of us, if you dare. My father—" A confusion of plunging horses interrupted her and through the confusion the cause spurred forward, careless whom he drove from his path, or how.

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"No bargain, Margotti, no bargain," he shouted. Bending almost to his horse's ears in his excitement, he beckoned horribly with the seared stump of a maimed arm as he spoke. "'Tis the she-whelp of the old wolf himself and I'll have no bargain. There's this to pay for and I'll have no bargain." Again he waved the stump in the air and at sight of it Le Brocq's gorge rose as it had never risen at the morrow of a battlefield.

At the sudden scattering behind him, and the angry exclamations it provoked, Margotti had turned in his saddle, but when the fellow would have dashed past him he put out an arm and thrust him back.

"Steady, steady; we know it was old Fonzano's doing, but Fonzano is an ill thistle to grip."

"Grip? I'll grip him! Ten weeks I've served and taken neither share nor wages. Give me the girl for wages, Margotti, and by God! I'll grip him. Listen, now." His face was twitching, his mouth jerked in short spasms, under eyes blazing with the threat of insanity the nerves fluttered and always he sawed the air with the seared stump. Behind him Le Brocq heard Antonina Caldora draw in her breath almost in a whimper.

"There were four of us, four, and another coming. It was the end of winter and there was no food, not a crust, nothing, nothing at all, no food for the little children, none for the mother, none, none." He paused, wetting his lips as he looked round him in appeal. Words came hardly, his very passion choked him. And he had the instinct of the gamester; he played for a stake, for his vengeance. "Would you let them die, you others, or would you do as I did—kill a deer, a wild creature that fed itself? But he said it was his, God blast him, and hacked my hand off for a thief, and the one that was coming came dead and the mother died. And he laughed as his brute hacked me, laughed when I screamed and prayed, laughed, laughed! Grip? I'll grip him! Give me the girl for wages, Margotti."

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And as Le Brocq read the fury which surged up to the eyes of those behind Margotti he eased his sword-hilt softly from the neck of the sheath. His purpose was to kill the girl and then die fighting. There were, as she had said, too many.

Margotti also caught the fury and it troubled him. The tale, common though it was, had moved him, but not as it had moved the others. He was ready enough to give hate its free hand and earn an easy popularity he might turn to account later, but not at the cost of his own skin. Le Brocq must be reckoned with. But could he hold their fury in check? In his perplexity he turned, and for the first time looked at the girl. For a moment he stared dumbly at the flushed face, imperious in its passion, then he laughed, laughed freely and without restraint. But the open merriment goaded the peasant to a wilder fury. Rising in his stirrups he slashed savagely at Margotti with his maimed wrist; possibly he forgot, in his rage, that there was no clenched fist at the end of it.

"Laugh at me, would you? Laugh as the butcher, Fonzano, laughed? Margotti, I'll—I'll—"

"Be quiet, fool, and keep that fag end of a man to yourself or I'll shear it higher." The blow had missed, but only by a hair's-breadth; that it had been struck at all roused The Saint's temper. He turned to Le Brocq, "Signor, the bargain is off."

From behind his shoulder the maimed peasant drew a long breath as his hard, fierce eyes devoured the girl in a terrible anticipation.

"I'll die for you, Margotti, by God, I'll die for you. Grip? I'll grip him! Pay me my wages, Margotti."

"I warn you—" began Le Brocq. But Margotti held up his hand.

"Give no heed to this frothing fool," he said, with a backward jerk of his head. "Faith of The Saint the signorina is safe enough, and to prove it I will not even ask your sword from you. And you, dolt,"

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he went on as the peasant broke into his clamour afresh, "get back to the rear where you belong and stay there. Now! now!" he raised his hand afresh, this time in deprecation of the outspoken murmurs behind, "when did you ever know Margotti spoil sport or loss a profit? But what kind of nutcrackers would we be pinched in between old Fonzano and the *padrone*? That old Fonzano is a cruel, bitter devil I grant, but by Saint Peter my patron, I would rather cross six Fonzanos than the chief." Back he turned to Le Brocq. "Is it a bargain, signor? You keep your sword and the girl, and the chief decides? Thousand saints, man," he added testily as Le Brocq hesitated, "what are you boggling at? What can you do? Kill two or three of us? Granted! But is the girl the better? Kill me amongst them and let loose this mouthing brute? Is the girl not the worse? Let her go I shall not: that is final."

"The signorina must decide," answered Le Brocq briefly. It was useless, he recognized, to waste time on argument. For some reason, obscure to him, Margotti had shifted his ground and the man who felt himself strong enough to defy his whole following was not one to be moved by persuasive words. And what else had Le Brocq to offer? Absolutely nothing. Nor could he deny the force of Margotti's logic. Bad as Antonina Caldora's plight was The Saint's death would make it still worse. In Mirandola's terse words, 'Damnation would be loose.' "Signorina, you have heard everything. I cannot advise you, but," he touched his sword hilt as he paused, but not covertly, frankness was wisdom, "it is either this or agree."

"I agree," she replied, speaking as briefly and as quietly as he himself had spoken. "I am ready to go. Only, you must ride beside me and keep your sword, as that man there has promised."

"Faith of Margotti," said Margotti, and Le Brocq nodded comprehendingly. He was a judge of men. Ruffian though he was Margotti would keep his word.

## LE BROCC STRIKES A BARGAIN

But there must be no undue optimism, no undue assurance on the girl's part.

"Remember last night. You understand the risks? that I may be helpless, that you—"

"I am ready to go," she repeated. Apart from the words the set of her lips affirmed her decision. "And I shall never forget last night, don't think it, but," the hardness softened from the mouth a moment, "with you I shall not be afraid."

"Good!" said Margotti briskly. "It could not have fallen better if I had planned it all myself. Ride ahead two of you, now wheel in behind them, signor and signorina; I shall follow. Battista, keep thou last with Falco; let him play no tricks, my son. Forward, trot."

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE HERMITAGE OF SAINT CYPRIAN

DURING that ride, or afterwards of it, Le Brocq spoke little. His thoughts were too vigilant for much speech. Upon him lay the responsibility of action. With their two tired horses escape was hardly possible, but Margotti had exacted no parole and no chance which offered the girl a hope of freedom could well be too desperate. He had warned her of her risks, but doubted whether she understood her danger. More than once she had spoken of romances ; perhaps she imagined that here was one which would be a tale to tell her children's children, rousing little thrills of delicious terror by a winter's fireside, with the happy ending to send them comforted to bed.

Remembering the temper of the troop, and that one-handed hate incarnate riding behind, Le Brocq saw no happy ending. Whence could it come? Ransom? What ransom ever satisfied revenge or paid the debt of hate? Her father, the grim lord of Fonzano, had not smoothed a way to the happy ending. Not for the first nor the last time the father's sour grapes would set the children's teeth on edge. No, Le Brocq could see no happy ending.

Yet, even if she understood, could she have chosen differently? What option had she? That he should fight? But she herself had said there were too many. What then? That she should fall into the hands of God rather than man? But youth clings to life even in despair. And yet had she not some such thought, some such terrible expectation,

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when she said he must keep his sword? He glanced up at her and found her watching him as once before.

"Were there fewer at Folignano?"

"The risks were fewer."

"How so?"

"I only risked myself; here there were two."

"But you could have escaped."

"And at Folignano I could have passed by."

"But you did not!"

"Would you, being a man?"

At that she flushed a little. The inference of equal courage pleased her. Since the days of her later girlhood the few men of her station whom she had met had never failed to pay the smooth courtesies—warmer than courtesies at times—which are a woman's tribute all the world over and in every age. This man only had been stockish. Never once had he seemed to know that she was a woman and beautiful. And now it gratified her the more that the quality he picked out for praise was a man's quality rather than a woman's; he spoke of what he understood. Naturally and instantly she answered him woman-fashion.

"No—yes—I do not know, not being a man. Do you not wish I was a man?"

"Yes," he assented soberly, almost brusquely; "then we might have cut our way through this accursed scum and reached the army before the truce ends. Now I doubt if I shall see the army again."

"*Merci, monsieur!*" she retorted in her Italian accent, and at the tartness of the tone *Le Brocq's* blunder came home to him.

"Do you think I regret that? No, not for a second. I have one regret and one only, that I have failed in my charge."

"What more could you have done?" She paused a moment, then went on, hardly above a whisper but with little broken catches in the voice. "But there is one thing more perhaps, a thing hard to speak of, but

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I think a Sir Galahad will understand without many words. I am not ignorant of—what may threaten ; a man can but die, but a woman—there is that poor wretch behind us, and these others—if I had a dagger I would not be afraid. Monsieur Le Brocq, do you understand? You have your sword—if—if—oh, my God, how can I say it? But if you—go, I must go, too. I must not be left alone, Monsieur Le Brocq—”

“I understand,” said Le Brocq and stretched his hand across the space between them. She caught it for an instant with a grip as tense as a man’s then dropped it and sank back in her saddle. Next moment she met his eyes, smiling so bravely that Le Brocq marvelled. Where was the woman of last night, the woman whose unreasoning terrors deafened her to the pleadings of Fra Giovanni? But then, Le Brocq knew little of women.

Margotti, riding a length behind and noting the by-play laughed quietly. Certain private grudges which had galled him since his failure of the night before seemed in a fair way to be repaid. Truly his luck had turned. Just in the nick of time he stayed himself from vowing a votive candle to his patron saint: he had forgotten that he no longer believed in saints, but old habit is slow to die. Then, on second thoughts, he decided in favour of the candle. One never can tell. Supposing after all, there truly were saints to help or hinder? A candle, after all, cost little and it was as well to be on the safe side. A candle? He would vow two to make sure.

The humbler rogues spoke little, but from that little Le Brocq gleaned that the raid upon Saint Apollonia was strongly deprecated if not openly resented. Like Margotti they had cast off religion as the lies of priests, and the saints as fables, and yet—and yet—Saint Apollonia? Not to have meddled would have been safer; so they shook their heads and grumbled softly. No matter to what extremes we push our religion or irreligion to the thoughtful man, and in

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times of stress, there is almost always an "and yet" to beggar the logical deduction.

The road they followed was in part a return towards Salegna, but soon they branched aside and a few minutes later plunged straight into the heart of the forest; another hundred yards and the outer world was lost, shut away from them utterly by the surrounding monotony of the straight brown tree trunks. Twilight, too, had fallen, or a brown dimness which might pass for twilight; no sun's rays could penetrate the density interwoven overhead. The going was firm to hardness but there was no sound; from that carpeting of pine-needles, packed through many generations, no click of iron shoe could rise. Remote and sorrowful the wind sighed through the upper boughs, but except for the rare rattle of a cheek-chain they were as ghosts in a grey world of silence.

To Le Brocq every direction appeared alike, but the two who led, guided by experience or some significance hidden from him, neither paused nor faltered. None spoke. An awe was upon him and with the awe there fell a sense of peace: he who has felt the solemn quiet of a great church wrap the spirit as with a garment of calm will understand.

Ten minutes later they were hailed; down a narrow aisle of tree-trunks a man showed himself a hundred yards away and Margotti spurred alongside Le Brocq.

"We are almost there. See!"

But at first Le Brocq, following the direction of the outstretched arm, saw nothing but the old bewilderment of overlapping forest life, then, as at sea a vague suggestion breaks the distance in a cloudy blur and one who knows cries, "Land!" a shadow greyer than the twilight thickened the obscurity.

It was a mass of almost naked rock, smooth and sheer for fifty feet, then rising in fissured ridges to a crest of jutting peaks. Patches of moss, now brown, now green as moisture died or lingered, hugged the seams of tilted strata or overhung the ledges, rescuing

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the huge mass from the stern bleakness of absolute sterility. From almost the edge of this upheaval the plateau across which they had ridden fell steeply away, the upper reaches of the descent sparsely sprinkled with pines whose stunted growth spoke a starved roothold; beyond these an abrupt fall of broken shingle, compacted to stability by the intermingled silt, ended in an arid waste of rocks, sunbaked to barrenness.

Between the rocky perpendicular and the sharp descent lay a grass ledge a few feet broad. Along this, the rock upon his left, the gulf—as yet half masked by trees—sinking almost sheer upon his right, Margotti turned with the indifference bred of an old custom. Antonina Caldora followed, hugging the wall nervously. But the narrowness was only for a stride or two. Rapidly the ledge widened as the rock curved back, and in another stride they had passed beyond the stunted outposts of the forest.

With the sudden change came a revulsion, the tense reins were for an instant drawn yet tenser, then with a cry of surprise the girl's hands fell to her lap. From the very lip of the ledge the stony cascade fell swiftly away—how many hundred feet Le Brocq never knew—its grey, fretted surface grooved here and there by the wash of winter water-courses. Far down, the wooded valley rose to meet the descent in that eternal struggle for survival which is the indomitable characteristic of nature under all her infinite forms. The world which shall be was in grips with the world which was, and little by little the dead negation was being worsted, as negations always must be when pitted against the powers of progress, little by little beauty and strength crept upward, every starved pioneer the centre of a renewed advance. Did they perish, as those who go forth to make new worlds their own must often perish: out of their death there rose a yet stronger life and that which seemed defeat made victory certain. And beyond this silent, unremitting warfare a glorious peace abounded.

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It was a very little world they looked out upon, a world where, to all seeming, no man came or had come since its making. Neither village nor hamlet broke the smooth undulations of the pine-covered hills; not so much as one thin trail of smoke told where a solitary charcoal-burner plied his craft. Up either side, and in the distance, these undulations rolled the sombre loveliness of their unravaged greenery in gigantic, ever-mounting crestless billows till they overflowed the ridges and imagination pictured the fixed torrent of their descent to the Great Beyond. There the sun still burned, but in the valley pools of shadow spread and deepened, pools which, like the silent, stealthy in-flow of a tide, would creep together, coalesce, and rise in flood until its depth out-darkened the blackness of the night.

"The hermitage of Saint Cyprian of Pelusium!" It was an exclamation rather than a question which broke from the girl as she looked, wide-eyed, across the abyss. But Margotti nodded assent.

"Then you know the place?"

"I have heard of it. But I never dreamed—" She checked herself, reddening, and Margotti caught up the broken sentence, ending it in his own fashion.

"That saints and sinners had tastes alike! Oh, yes, signorina, they both love nature's beauty, though it is not always the same nature! Come: the *padrone* will be expecting you."

"Expecting us? How can that be?"

"They will have told him there are—shall I say strangers? and not many grey frocks come to the Hermitage."

"Last night there would have been five. It was infamous—"

"Five!" he interrupted. "That was my jest, but the obstinate fool spoiled it."

"As God lives you shall pay for it yet," she answered, looking him full in the face. But The Saint only shrugged his shoulders. There was so much to be paid for that one item more or less on

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the list mattered little. Then a memory stirred his gall.

"Let that sleep I advise you. She brought it on herself. What did she think we were there for? If it comes to that, I would ask no better end. But let it sleep, signorina. Take my advice and let it sleep if you want peace at the Hermitage."

"As God lives," she repeated unflinchingly. "Now lead on to your *padrone*."

## CHAPTER XVIII

### LUIGI ADORNO, GENTLEMAN

A FEW yards further and the curve of the rock again drew to the lip of the ledge offering, as Le Brocq's soldier-eye noted, a second line of almost impregnable defence should the first fail. Beyond it was the camp.

But not at that moment could he gather its varied and incongruous details: that there was a second inward curve he saw, longer and vastly deeper than the first, its smooth surface a carpet of dry, wind-clipped grass where, perhaps, a score of men with four or five women intermingling, stood in a straggling, broken group watching their approach. Then from the group a man ran forward and at sight of him Antonina Caldora called to Le Brocq to help her to her feet lest he should touch her. Nor was he an instant too soon, though she, in her impetuous haste, almost threw herself into his arms. In the conditions dignity was difficult, yet she attained it, or that angry aggression which is its counterfeit.

"Well, signor?"

"Antonina—"

"Antonina Caldora, yes; but not the Antonina of six months ago."

"Six months ago, no, but of yesterday."

"Nor of yesterday."

"Why, what has changed—"

"Murder has changed me. Sacrilege and outrage have changed me. The girl who dreamed has awakened to the woman who knows. The lying

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masquerade is at an end. Signor Adorno, you were once a gentleman—"

"Mother of Heaven! What pretence is this?"

"Pretence? There is no pretence; pretence was six months ago—yesterday, though I did not know it—now it is reality. Do you understand? It is all changed; nothing is as it was. Nothing," she insisted.

Some instinct drew her as she paused a moment, that compelling sense of eyes that watch, and she looked up to meet Margotti's ironic appreciation. His grudge, born of the black ten minutes which had followed his empty-handed return the night before, was being repaid sooner than he could have hoped.

"Is that cowardly jackal so much your bosom confidant that he sits there to listen to your shame? Well, let him listen, he will hear some truths which will shame himself as well as his master, if there is still a shred of decent manhood left between you. A robber of churches! a swaggering foul-mouthed bully! a striker of priests! a slayer of women!" Never had Le Brocq heard such biting scorn, such acid contempt. "Were I a man and such a pitiful wretch I would fling myself headlong down the fall there lest decent men should read the truth in my face! A slayer of women, I say, a spoiler of altars, a common thief," she paused as her wrathful glance shifted to Adorno, "and your friend! No, thank God! to-day is not as six months ago nor as yesterday."

With a sudden passionate gesture Adorno turned on Margotti. No words were needed. In a haste which hinted trepidation the reins were gathered up, at a touch of the knee the horse roused himself and the group of three was left alone, the centre of increasing curiosity. All pretence at employment had been abandoned. As Margotti reached the watchers they gathered round him, questioning in whispers, but he only shook his head and rode on; in the midst Le Brocq could see the maimed peasant

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gesticulating and pointing with the seared end of his dreadful stump, but all passed in a few seconds. Then Adorno turned to the girl.

"And this gentleman, is he your bosom confidant?"

"It shames me that he should be compelled to listen to so contemptible a story. But he has a right to know the truth. Monsieur Le Brocq, six months ago—" But Le Brocq allowed her to go no further.

"Signorina, do not pain yourself with six months ago. With that I have nothing to do and never can have. I am only concerned with to-day and with this gentleman. Your men," his tone was studiously civil; not Communes himself, conscious of a pinch of circumstances where no force could aid him, could have been more smoothly courteous, "your men have blundered in their zeal. I cannot think," he hesitated a second, "your warfare is with the passerby. No doubt you will repair that blunder and at once, so that this lady may reach her father's roof to-night?"

For a moment Adorno stood in silence, his handsome face dark with a frown. Le Brocq judged him to be about thirty years old, and even in the throes of a resentment no less bitter for being rigidly curbed to civility, he acknowledged that rarely had he met a handsomer or more virile man. Less tall by an inch or two than Le Brocq he was more slenderly built, and carried his fine natural proportions with an unconscious grace of ease which spoke not alone of well-knit muscular strength, but justified the claim to breeding Le Brocq had frankly granted. When he spoke he caught at Le Brocq's chance phrase, but his reply was to the girl.

"Passers-by? Surely, Nina *mia*, it can never be just that, never just passers-by? I'll not believe it, never, never. Think—"

"For a night and a day I have done little else but think, though at times I have talked like a fool to keep thought down."

"But you must hear me."

"Yes," she answered slowly, "I suppose my

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foolishness has given you that right. But I tell you beforehand, Luigi, it can make no difference."

Instantly his face lightened. In his experience, and it was great and varied, it had been sufficient to gain a hearing. Even when his passion had been a passion of the tongue only he had never known its pleading to fail utterly. How then, could it fail now when he was aflame, heart and soul?

"Wait till you have heard me, *carissima mia*. All shall yet be as of old."

"No," she replied, "nothing can ever be as of old; always there will be the face of a dead woman between us."

Again Adorno gloomed, but this time with a hardening of the full-lipped mouth that flung a sinister shadow across his face. He seemed to Le Brocq a man of moods, easily cast down and just as easily buoyed up again, but with a sterner undernature dangerous to rouse. It was, he judged, by virtue of that sterner nature that he held in check the troop of vicious scoundrels who stood at gaze ten yards away. But whether the sudden darkening of the face was impatience at the implied rebuke, or a gust of anger against Margotti for his undesired and misbegotten zeal, Le Brocq could not determine.

"It is of that we have to speak—that and other things." Pausing he glanced backward at the group behind him, silent now but intently watchful, then at Le Brocq. "But not here. These cursed rascals have the ears of wolves."

"And you are one of them!"

"If I am you know why," he burst out passionately. But instantly, through the power of that stronger, subtle undernature, he controlled himself. "That, too, is a thing we have to speak of—how a man may buy with his soul and take no pay. Messire—I do not know your name but by your speech you are French, I think?"

"Yes, I am French."

"And I am of Pisa, so, but for—" he paused, as if

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searching for a word, then went on, a gleam of sardonic laughter in his eyes, "but for a woman, the dearest, sweetest woman the world holds or has held since its making, we would be friends and allies. Because," again he paused and this time his choice of words varied, "because of that sale of souls I cannot say friend and ally, but in spite of that sale Luigi Adorno is a man to be trusted. I was, as the signorina with the chivalrousness of her sex has reminded me, once a gentleman. Thank God! when I pledge my word I am one still. This lady is in your care; that she may be in your care Margotti has left you your sword, which shows that even Margotti has some salt of grace left in him. For reasons which you may have gleaned in part I must have private speech with your charge. In the old Hermitage near by we can find privacy. Give us ten or fifteen minutes: surely that is not too long for the settling the good or evil of a life?"

"It will soon be night and I do not know how far we are from Fonzano."

"An hour's fast ride. But you prejudge our fifteen minutes. There may be no going on to Fonzano."

And Le Brocq answered as he had answered Margotti. "The signorina must decide."

"Yes," she said, "it is his due; though, Luigi, it can make no difference, nothing can."

"Wait!" he retorted, with a return to the old light confidence. "We shall yet be back to yesterday or six months ago. Six months ago! No! Our to-day will be sweeter and more precious, infinitely sweeter and dearer than six months ago. There will be no going back; it will be a going forward. Then, messire, we have our fifteen minutes?"

"It is not my decision." The self-confidence of the man affected Le Brocq and he began to be afraid of he knew not what.

"You are not afraid to be left alone with my scum?"

"I am not afraid."

"There spoke the Frenchman, perhaps the Gascon, but I quite believe it. Nor is there any cause for fear.

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The rascals know me too well by this time. Come, Nina *mia*."

For a moment the girl hesitated ; then,

" Yes, it is best to make an end at once. Will you wash out the horses' mouths, monsieur, while you wait ? I do not think it would be well to let them drink."

Wash out the horses' mouths ! More and more Le Brocq was perplexed as he stood watching the two as they walked from him, side by side. What manner of woman was this who could give thought to her horse's comfort with the crisis of her life clamorous upon her ?

The clustered group broke up at their approach. As they neared it he could see the tired shoulders straighten under the grey robe, and by the backward tilt of the head he knew that Antonina Caldora was looking hatred in the face calmly and unafraid. Yet it was to avoid this very crisis that she had brushed aside Fra Giovanni's arguments and fled the convent. Surely here was a contradiction in nature hard to explain.

By this time he had come to know the subtle changes of her many expressions and could guess the look her face would wear—a serene indifference with just sufficient pride and contempt to warm the negation and provoke antagonism. He had found that look in her eyes more than once as they had met his own. Arrogance ? No, it was too cold for arrogance, too selfless. It had not pleased him then though now the knowledge of it was a relief ; it proved how fully she was mistress of herself. A suggestion of detachment pleased him yet more. This time it was towards Adorno ; though she walked by his side her unconcern was absolute, he might as well not have existed. Without knowing why, or even knowing that it gave him pleasure, this attitude pleased Le Brocq.

Midway through the group Adorno paused, singled out the man whom, the night before, Margotti had called Matteo.

" Watch over him," he said curtly, with a backward gesture towards Le Brocq, " see that he is not molested : for the moment he is our friend and may remain so."

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The fellow nodded, sullenly, as if with a grudge, Le Brocq thought, but made no reply. None had spoken ; but once, soon after Adorno and Antonina Caldora had turned away, he heard the maimed man say in a gasping whisper, "The she-whelp of the old wolf, the damned butcher who gave me that !" and the seared stump had been pushed into a neighbour's face. Yes, he thought, she had great need to be mistress of herself. A few steps further and the two passed through a stone doorway on the left.

With leisure to observe Le Brocq discovered that the Hermitage was not, as he had supposed, a mere name, a retreat where some holy man of old had found isolation from a world whose license offended his austerity. The guardian rock not alone curved backwards from the lip of the descent, but was hollowed deeply inward until its pent brows overhung a broad stretch of the smooth ledge. This space, aided by the angels, said tradition, the Saint had enclosed, following the line of the upper cliff so cunningly that save for a greyer tone, half hidden in the gloom to the casual eye, the perpendicular seemed unbroken ; nor had Time, that inexorable foe to all builders, even the angels, forced a breach. Here and there, at varying levels, were openings for light and air, easily mistaken at a first glance for natural fissures in the rock.

Later Le Brock found that certain caves had come to the aid of the builders, extending the Hermitage to no mean proportions. In front, partly bedded in the slow accretions of the soil, were curiously rounded boulders of different sizes ; these, he judged, had been discarded in the building because of their inconvenient shape. Nor even an angel architect can comfortably fit a round stone into a square hole ; the experiment in nature, whether human or otherwise, has always been unfortunate in its results.

From the dead rock Le Brocq turned to the life which gave it significance. They were a mixed and sinister crew, these comrades of Margotti, and drawn from many sources. There were bare-legged cattle-

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herders from the valleys ; mountaineers in raw sheepskins ; men of the cities who, even in their wild life, aped the city's ways in the scrupulous adjustment of their patched clothes : a mixed incongruous troop, whose very elements seemed to make for antagonism.

Three huge cooking-pots hung over as many fires from iron tripods. Round these separate groups were gathered, part men part women, with here and there a child at its play or staring into the flaming wood in the fascination a fire compels.

But though a mixed troop the opposites kept apart. City clung to city, strolling side by side in the growing gloom as if the pavement so dear to the heart rang under the tread of the spurred heels ; in little groups the men of the mountains talked together in that slow undertone which is born of solitude and much thinking upon nothing. The valley peasants and the women were busied with the evening meal, shredding vegetables, cutting gobbets of meat, or breaking up crusts of dry, dark bread, all for the great pots where the mixed oil and water already bubbled ; and over all the light from the triple fires danced through the increasing darkness, lending to the scene that touch of beauty and romance beloved of Antonina Caldora.

Presently resin torches were thrust into sockets fastened against the walls, and under the power of the yellow-tawny glare beauty and romance deepened. Out of the further obscurity Margotti swaggered, and from group to group the stealer of deers flitted like a spirit of vengeance, always declaiming, always cursing, always shaking his horrible maimed stump in the light of the fires. Presently, too, a frank-faced lad, not much more than a man in years, came forward, a pail of water in either hand, though whether he had heard the girl, or in natural courtesy, Le Brocq did not know.

So the night fell and the fifteen minutes of Adorno grew into an hour ; yet, fret though he might, what could Le Brocq do but wait.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE END OF A ROMANCE

OF the two upon whom the obscurity descended when Adorno drew the door close behind them the man was the less composed. Nor was this strange. The girl knew the limit of her risk, at least so far as it was imminent, but for him the cards of fate were still face down on the table. And—again so far as the risk was imminent—he stood to lose more. His parable of selling for no pay had not been a mere figure. He had sold, not grudging the cost nor counting it; the love of Antonina Caldora would be payment in full. Now—

But that was the issue; what would follow now? In the warm twilight and before the Frenchman, whose part in the drama he did not understand, he had had no doubt; but in the grey obscurity, alone with a reserve new to him and foreign in her, he was not so sure. Like Margotti the night before, he would have preferred clamour and denunciation, a renewal of the hot scorn of her reception, to this indifference, this cold disapproval which shrank from him and yet had no touch of fear in the shrinking. Cold indifference, that seemed the keynote of her bearing; she even looked about her in curiosity, real or admirably assumed.

They were in a living-room, the refectory of the old Hermitage days, scantily supplied with even the rudest furnishings—a rough trestle table, a bench which ran its length, a wooden stool or two were all. The four walls were of untrimmed stone, the roof of the living

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rock sloping gently upwards and outwards. In each wall there was a doorway, above that which faced the entrance a narrow opening reaching almost to the roof admitted borrowed light and air to some apartment beyond. A hollowed niche in the eastern corner, fronted by a stone table, told of some shrine or altar long disused; the niche was empty. The floor was the hardened earth of the ledge, clean-swept, smooth, hollowed in places by the tramp of feet. Upon a wall adjoining a side doorway, a sword and dagger hung from a wooden peg. In the outer wall were three lancet openings, one extending to the rock itself; the air smelt pure and wholesome.

"Well?" The monosyllable was curtly, but not offensively, not even impatiently said.

"Nina *mia*, what has changed you?"

"I do not think I am changed," she answered slowly, "I think it is just that I understand better than I did."

"Understand what?"

"Myself—and you."

"And now?"

"It is different."

"Different?" he burst out passionately. "That is always your cry, it is different, different, different. What is different? Is my love for you less? Oh, little Ninetta—" But when, out of pure natural instinct and with no clear purpose in his mind except to ease the hunger which gnawed him, he would have laid his hand upon her arm she shrank back in a repugnance that was almost horror.

"Mother of heaven! do not touch me; I could not endure it, I could not."

By an effort of that stronger undernature which Le Brocq had divined he controlled his hurt resentment, schooling himself to quietness, though not without a cost which wrote itself in lines upon his comely face.

"Antonina beloved, what has changed you? A little time ago—long every hour of it has seemed to

## THE END OF A ROMANCE

me who have starved for you—you were content to be in my arms—”

“Don’t speak of it,” she cried, “I am shamed to my very soul when I remember.”

“Yes, but you do remember,” he answered, a note of confidence, almost triumph, rounding his voice. “You loved me then and what has been will be again when this madness passes.”

“Never.”

“But you did love me,” he persisted. “Nothing less than love would have allowed Antonina Caldora—”

“Not you,” she interrupted, “not you, never you. I know that now. It is your due that I should tell you the truth though the telling shames me. I was a woman who had lived the life of a child and grown to womanhood without knowing the change. Here in the hills, from my few books in Fonzano and from my nurse’s stories, I fed on romance and the imaginations of a child. The loneliness, the quiet, the savagery all round me in the wild hills and valleys fostered the dreaming. The child lived in a world of pretence where the impossible was the commonplace of every day, and the child grew to be a woman unknowing. Then my father came back to Fonzano. You know him and I will speak no more of him, but the free life of the child-woman ended. But not the dreams and the imagination; they were my very life and the world in which I lived. Few men came to Fonzano, of the few most spoke smooth things to me as men will to women whom God has made good to look upon, as I knew I was though I think without vanity. But none touched me, none was of the world in which I lived, my world of dreams and imagination, though I tried to think them so, and so none touched me. Then you came.”

“Yes,” he said softly, the triumph a little fuller in his voice, “then I came and, God be thanked, I touched you.”

But she shook her head. In the almost-dusk he could scarcely see her face, but it was very grave, very

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troubled, yet, he thought, very sweet through the troubled gravity.

"No," she said soberly. "I thought so, but I was wrong. I believed so, had I not believed I loved you," her voice roughened in her effort to keep its steady level unbroken, "I would never, child though the woman in me was, have given you leave to touch so much as my hand. But I was wrong. It was romance I loved, not you; it was my imagination of you, never you. But I did not know it. In part it was my father's doing. A man of the great world, he saw what the child-woman missed and bade you come no more to Fonzano. That—I understand myself better now—moved me in two ways: I, too, was a Caldora and had my pride like all the Caldoreschi. His curt contempt drove my pride to rebellion, and then, too, the romance grew in glamour. I was the persecuted maiden of some old chronicle, you the devout lover and noble knight—"

"True lover, God knows," he interjected. But though she let the interruption pass as if it had been unheard she winced a little in the darkness. This time there had been no triumph, only a suppressed passion of protest.

"I loved the mystery of it all," she went on, "loved the romance of the stolen meetings, loved the adroit evasion of the watch set upon me, loved best of all the defiance of the father whose contempt had stung my pride, and dreamed, in my ignorance of myself, that all these loves were you."

"But you did love me," he repeated. "Do you think I am so blind a fool that I do not know that?"

"That you most likely have much experience I admit—"

"There was never one like you, beloved," he interrupted, "never one, never. And you loved me, I know you did, and what has been will be again."

"No, what has been will never be again—all's ended."

"But only four days ago you sent me word—"

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"Four days ago and even this time yesterday I was blind, I was ignorant: now I see, now I know. Romance! You fed me on romance and I took your windy tales for the breath of God! You had seen the great world even as my father had seen it, but through different eyes, and with what a different tongue you spoke of it! What a golden light was in your pictures, what a rush of life and colour; what movement of noble ladies, chivalrous, honourable gentlemen, yourself one of them! What great deeds you had seen and done, deeds to live in history, deeds such as the splendid Paladins of old had wrought, and in the end it is all—this! a horde of thievish scum! It is your own word, your own word," she cried, drowning his protest for the moment, "and it is all true, every word of it; deny it if you can."

"A woman's truth," he answered roughly, "just so much as suits her to tell and no more. For who drove me to this? You, you, you! Who held me to this? You again! If you want truth, by God I'll give you truth. When that bitter-tongued, gibing devil, your father—Nina, beloved, the one love Luigi Adorno has ever called queen of his life, forgive me, but you drive me to madness when you throw the scorn and contempt of outcast in my face, you who know so well for whose sake I am what I am."

"Do you think I acquit myself? No! and may God have mercy upon me! But you played upon me, deceived me, lied to me." Tensely erect she faced him fearlessly. "Do these chivalrous, honourable gentlemen, your friends of the great world, cheat at dice?"

"That is a lie; Nina, I swear to you, that is a lie."

"Perhaps," she answered, her tone as level as before. "My father told me something of the story and I said as you: that is a lie. He is not an easy man to call liar, my father, but I did it for your sake. Of course it was a lie! Were you not the very flower of courtly knighthood and romance! What

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lie could be blacker? Then in the French camp—"she broke off an instant, then continued, as if in explanation, "they are not all French; there are Pisans amongst them. You are of Pisa, I think? As I passed on foot through the camp to the place where the King waited for me I heard our Italian tongue and I listened, for I had caught a name—Adorno. 'Luigi Adorno?' said one of them, 'I hear he is somewhere in the hills, afraid to show his face since his friends, the dice, played him false!' Afraid to shew his face! my paladin!"

"They played me false," said Adorno. "Yes, I lost and could not pay."

"Wait. 'How false?' asked the other. 'He won so often that Soderini seized them, broke one and found it loaded. It was a pity, for he was a spirited devil!' Perhaps it is not true," she went on, "perhaps there is another Luigi Adorno. God knows, I hope so. And yet, true or false, I think it would have made no difference if I had loved you."

"And you did and you do. I know you better than you do yourself. You are not the woman to love lightly, to give one day and take back the next; what you have been you will be."

"Yes," she answered, "that is true, though how far it makes for happiness I do not know. If one were shallow one might suffer less. But you are wrong. I never loved you as a woman loves; I loved, as I have told you, the romance you glamourised me with. And last night romance died. With a coarse hint in his mouth and a laugh that was in itself an offence, your friend and jackal bade five of us stand up before them all—"

"That was Margotti's jest; it would have gone no further. He thought to frighten ransom from them. You he was to know because you stood upright beside the Mother."

"Was it a jest for me to be pilloried bare-headed before your scum? To-day I might have been your wife—thank God, that's past, but it might have been,

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and you call the degradation jest! Was it in jest that he profaned God's house—"

"I never knew a Caldora hold it sacred when to profane it suited his purpose."

"Oh!" she retorted bitterly, "I see you, too, can jest like your friend and jackal. You, too, would have bidden the lesser rogue strike God's priest on the mouth within the very altar rails, and call it jest; you too, would have stabbed to death the woman who dared be faithful to her trust. These things are jests and any courteous gentleman and noble knight may take his pleasures in them. But I call them sacrilege and murder."

"Would you lay Margotti's sins at my door?"

"You have enough, I grant, without them."

"A woman's answer! I ask again, do you lay Margotti's sins at my door?"

She paused a moment. In the heat of her accusation her voice had both risen and quickened, but when she replied it had fallen to its old cold level of forced control.

"I have heard said that he who partakes with a thief is himself no better than a thief. Is Margotti discredited? Have you cast him out from your scum as unclean? These things happened yesterday—to-day almost, and to-day I find Margotti riding your errands as if God had not been mocked and no dead woman lay in her cell in Saint Apollonia. The thief partakes with the thief. So it is no woman's answer. God knows you have enough sins of your own without adding Margotti's."

"And for whose sake? For yours!"

"Oh, yes," she retorted, a faint mocking contempt breaking the calm of her voice, "when you dined in Pisa with Soderini it was for my sake, and yet you had never seen me."

"Let that pass; I have told you it is a lie. And true or false you forgave it."

"No, I said love could forgive. True or false it matters nothing to me now, only it was not for my sake."

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"But ever since." His voice softened, grew richer, musical, full of that tender insinuation he had never known to fail. It was too dark to see his face but it, too, had softened as colour warmed it again. "Ever since that day I met you in the woods and for a moment thought some goddess of the old dead faith had awakened from her wintry sleep, and found instead—"

"A credulous fool!" she interrupted.

"So sweet and dear a woman," he went on, "that all the man in me went down in worship. My goddess of the woods! And love came. Yes! Doubt it, deny it as you may, love came. The goddess stooped to be a woman. *Nina mia*, were we not happy? For me the wintry days in the dark woods of Fonzano were warm with spring—love came."

"No love," she said. "You swept me from my feet, but there was no love, never."

"Love," he repeated insistently, "unless love is a lie and you say your God is love. No love? For what, then, did I sell my soul, for what did I become an outcast and my life forfeit? Does a man lose himself here and hereafter for a pretence? It was love—love—love, and all through the months here, alone with the scum you jeer at, I have never counted or grudged the cost. It was for you—you, my beloved, my goddess."

"Pisa," she interjected.

This time, though neither noted its absence, he made no pretence of denial.

"That could be lived down. With France in retreat Pisa has need of every sword. In Pisa's struggle for life the ruined gamester—not as Adorno perhaps, but let the good old name go—might carve his way back to honour and reputation. But now that can never be. Even in her need Pisa would hang me. Your father, that most noble Count of Fonzano, would see to that. For your sake, for love's sake, I shut the door on hope. Hope? You were my hope,

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name and honour were flung in the mud, well lost for your sake. And now, because Margotti is a brute—"

"Your friend and jackal."

"Child, child, how can you in your ignorance of life judge what weapons a man must use whether they soil his hands or not."

"Could even Margotti soil them? I don't believe it!"

"How bitter you are, you who were so sweet."

"Bitter? Why should I not be bitter? Have you not flung me in the same mud where you flung your honour? For your sake I was sent like a whipped child to Saint Apollonia—"

"No, Nina; for love's sake."

"Have done with your talk of love. How many women have you lied to, cajoled, deceived, as you lied to me?"

"I never lied. As God is my witness—"

"God!" she scoffed, "would you play your clogged dice on me as you did on Soderini? For your sake I was banished to the convent and now, like another prodigal, having eaten husks here with swine I must creep humbly back to such a welcome as you know will wait me—your doing, Signor Adorno, you who fooled my ignorance and robbed me of the freshness of my girlhood. I grow curst with shame when I think of it. And now there is but one act of decency and honour left to you; set me and Monsieur Le Brocq upon our way with no delay. Thank God, I have met one true and simple-hearted gentleman, heavy and cloddish perhaps, but at least a man who can call God to witness unafraid of a lie."

## CHAPTER XX

### "I CANNOT LET YOU GO"

FOR the moment Adorno made no reply. Dusk had fallen utterly. Through the narrow, unglazed crevice windows a flickering light filtered from the resin torches, warm and dusky like a thunderous sunset. The glow fell upon his face and the girl, watching, saw it change. The pulsing of the shadows, she thought. Then he laughed, and for the first time since the door had closed upon them the girl was afraid.

"Now I understand why all is ended between us and why poor Luigi Adorno, who damned himself for your sake without a regret, is cheat and thief and murderer; why the past is wiped out, and the poor wretches, who last night risked their lives for you and at your call, to-day are contemptible scum! Here is a new romance, you have tired of the old and one nail drives out another. Luigi Adorno was a winter's pastime but here is a summer toy; something more perhaps, a make-peace with that smooth-tongued devil, your father. And I am to show myself the chivalrous gentleman you have proved I am not and set you both on your way so that the ruffled reputation of a Caldora may be smoothed by another credulous fool. I'll not do it; as God lives I'll not do it. Sooner than another man shall touch even your hand in love I'll—I'll— Oh, Nina, little Ninetta, love of my heart, I have starved for you all these weeks, lived in a heaven of hope all these weeks, and it drives me mad to think that any man would dare even to look into your dear eyes in love. You are mine, mine only; yes, mine."

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"Mad, truly! Twenty hours ago I had never seen his face and now— Oh! you shame me with your wild folly. Look into my eyes in love? Fra Giovanni gave me to his care, beyond that he has not a single thought, that, and to return to the camp."

"So you have tried him?"

"Oh, Luigi, Luigi—"

"Nina *mia*, blood of my heart! is it once more Luigi! Luigi! All this cloud between us will pass, the sunshine and the gladness of the dear old days will be ours again, never to be darkened. Set you on your way? No, sweet, no; last night will be forgotten, what is there love cannot forgive for love's sake? Your French clod may go, but not you; you do not dream how I have starved for your dear face or you would not ask it."

"Oh," she wailed, "will you never understand? Have I not spoken plainly enough? Luigi, I never loved you, never, never."

"Wait, sweet, wait; give me two or three weeks—"

"Weeks? Surely you will never prison me here against my will for weeks?"

"Wait," he repeated, "it will not be long against your will."

"What do you gain?"

"You."

"Never."

"I am not afraid. Was it for nothing that Margotti met you on the road and brought us together again when all seemed lost?"

"But I refuse to stay."

"And I refuse to let you go. Which is the stronger?"

"And you use your brute strength like a coward. A coward!" she taunted. "Luigi Adorno, the Pisan cheater at dice, is a coward! But what else would a thief and a slayer of women be but a coward! A coward! A coward!" Then as his face whitened even under the glow of the smoking torches her voice changed. "Luigi, Luigi, for Christ's sake let us go"

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"Us? That damned Frenchman? No! Neither you nor him."

"Luigi!"

"No, no, no; with or without your will—"

"Do you dare to threaten?" Turning swiftly she snatched the dagger from its place on the wall behind her and faced him again. "Threaten then! which is the stronger now, you or I?"

"Nina, you mistake, mistake utterly. Threaten you? I may be all you have said, but threaten you? No! nor even thought it. I only meant that though you fought against it love must win in the end."

"Love? What do you know of love, you who threaten? Is love a gaoler?"

"Yes, sweet, in my heart I will prison you—"

"Oh! was there ever such perverse blindness! Luigi, as you are a man and strong, and I a woman and helpless, I pray you, I beseech you, I beg you, let me go. Think how they will point at me—Antonina Caldora who herded for weeks with outcasts. They hate my father. For his sake they will strike at me without pity—an outcast, an outcast. Luigi, if ever you loved me, if you still love me as you say, I beseech you, I pray you, be generous and let me go. Be the chivalrous gentleman I dreamed you were, be the true lover who loves himself last, let your nobler, truer nature have its way; be generous, be yourself, be the Luigi Adorno of old and let us go."

"And so I would, little Ninetta, but that I have faith. Love will come as it came before and then let point who may. I cannot let you go."

"Luigi—"

"Dear, why fret yourself? I cannot."

"And your love condemns me to that!"

With a part indignant, part appealing gesture towards the outer wall she motioned for silence. What had been a murmur of talk at the beginning of supper, incoherent and uncertain, had risen to a raucous clamour as tongues had loosened under the stimulus of food and wine. Through the uproar,

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swelling and falling by turns but always discordant, broke gusts of rough laughter, oaths, unholy phrases, the sharp accent of quarrelling, snatches of coarse song, and as he listened to his scum justifying its name Adorno's face darkened. The girl caught the change.

"Surely not, Luigi? It would haunt me till I die."

But he was unmoved. "They are no worse than they were four days ago. Their tongues are as their lives, as other men's are. I cannot let you go."

"God pity us both," she answered wearily. "But I keep my dagger."

"Sweet, there is no fear, none. Brigitta will be your maid—"

"Who is Brigitta?"

"A child of twelve. We have women here."

"I hear them," she said curtly.

"Wives and mothers," he went on, answering the significance in her voice. "Women who have never lived women's lives and yet are not unwomanly. What are the peasants, God pity them, but beasts of the field with human souls."

As he spoke Antonina Caldora's mind went back to the goat-herd by the wayside, with her bitter cry, "Is there at last some pity for the poor?" If these women had lived unwomanly lives, labouring as brute beasts, whose fault was it? That of the Caldoras and their like. That the brute workers were still womanly was to their credit.

"Little Brigitta, then, if it must be so," she said, more gently than she had spoken since the door closed. Adorno took no notice of the implied appeal. To say little was his wisdom. He had forced his point at the end through a less violent opposition, less bitter upbraidings than he had feared. To answer the appeal might open the closed flood-gates afresh and every biting word widened the chasm.

"She is a good child. In two days she will love you, in three die for you if need be." He paused, looking round him. "You and she can sleep there,"

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he went on, pointing to one of the side doors, "and she can serve you here. It was the refectory of the old Hermitage days."

"Yes, but whose room is that opposite?"

"Mine."

"Then I refuse."

"But you will have Brigitta."

"Yes, but I refuse. Give it to Monsieur Le Brocq and I consent."

"To that Frenchman?"

"Why not? They call him Galahad of the Army. Besides, I shall have Brigitta. And you think I will trust myself to your scum with only Brigitta between us? It is either that or—I have my own way of escape and you have never found me coward. I learned a lesson last night. That much thanks I owe your jackal. Said one, threatened by Margotti, 'It will not be hard to die.' Said another, murdered by Margotti, 'It is not hard to die.' And of what are you afraid? Of Monsieur Le Brocq? Monsieur Le Brocq is the best defence against Monsieur Le Brocq. God knows, you have given me little reason to trust men, but I will trust Monsieur Le Brocq. Well, what shall it be?"

"I agree; but I warn you, Nina—"

"Oh," she cried impatiently, "do not warn; act, when you have cause. Tell Monsieur Le Brocq."

"Nina—Nina *mia*—"

"Go, go," she interrupted, shrinking back from the hands he stretched out towards her. "Can you not see that I can bear no more? What a fool I have been, what a fool!" and without another word Adorno went.

As the door closed she threw up her arms in the abandonment of despondency and half fell, half sank upon the bench by the table, then leaning aside she laid her head upon her clasped hands and wept. Blessed be the wisdom of nature! even in their bitterness tears are wholesome medicine. God pity the poor soul who fails to find them in its need.

## CHAPTER XXI

### NO RANSOM

BEYOND the door Adorno paused in an evil mood. For a full day he had been the prey and fool of circumstance. With an expectation so assured that in imagination he foretasted its crowning he had seen Margotti and his troop ride upon a mission he could not in prudence head. A show of force, not mere numbers but compulsion, had been thought necessary as a blind ; what shadow of reality would there have been in the semblance if Antonina Caldora had followed Luigi Adorno ? Clearly none. Therefore, knowing nothing but that there was an unnamed woman to be brought back, a woman who would reveal herself, Margotti had led, Margotti, whose incurable vices of greed and temper had ruined everything. From the highest heaven of his hopes Adorno would have fallen to the very pit of despair but for his rage against Margotti. It is to be presumed that in hell there is room for no other passion but resentment against one's self. That is where the poets err. The recognition of eternal justice will hold every other rebellious accusation in check.

And how he had raged. It was then that Margotti's grudge was born, the child (as most grudges are) of a caustic tongue. His incompetency was thrust raw and naked into his face, and his courage held up to a withering contempt as the man who had fled empty from a ruck of women. In the end it was Matteo who had stayed the blazing flood of wrath.

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"Have done," he broke in roughly. "We rode out ten and we came back eight. We could do no more." And those about him, some goaded by their stiffening wounds, growled approval. But the grudge was born, nor had the confidence of a further commission that afternoon killed it.

So much for Margotti. Then there was this Frenchman to add to his ill-humour. Here was a cursed chance! Not that Adorno believed what he had so shamelessly insinuated. Ragged nerves are like a frightened cat, they scratch without intention. Antonina Caldora was no light o' love, but that was no reason why he should welcome the man she had contrasted with himself to his own great damage. Le Brocq, she called him: curse Le Brocq, and all Frenchmen.

And Antonina herself? Truly he did well to be angry. But Antonina would not bear thinking o', or, rather, in thinking of her he remembered himself, his hopes and his loss, his weeks, months almost, of waiting and, worse than all, the promise of the end; somewhere in that roaring, blackguard crew there was a priest as yet unfrocked for drunkenness and worse—a priest! Adorno almost laughed at the irony of it all.

But even in his exasperation with all the world he remembered the girl's needs.

"Brigitta!" he shouted. At the cry there was a partial silence, a lull in the blent inharmonies, and through the lull Adorno called a second time more loudly, "Brigitta!"

"Here, signor!"

From the furthest of the three groups surrounding the fires a small figure detached itself and ran towards Adorno, her bare feet and legs twinkling in and out of the glow in her hot haste. Yet for all her speed Brigitta did not arrive breathless. Thin limbed, thin faced, with lean ribs hooping a meagre body, Brigitta neither tired nor lost breath easily. Le Brocq, watching from a distance, was moved to a sense of

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relief, mingled with a vexation he did not understand, to see the man tilt the pointed chin and then run his fingers twice or thrice through the tangled hair. The relief was on account of Antonina Caldora, no man who could treat a child so tenderly was wholly bad ; that made for her safety. And the vexation—Le Brocq was not given to self-analysis but it annoyed him in a quite unreasonable way that this good-looking scoundrel, well-knit, strong, graceful in his easy activity, could show such tenderness. To be all he was, yet gentle in his ways and not wholly bad, was surely a combination dangerous to a mind steeped in romance ?

"Yes, signor."

"Brigitta, my child," Adorno's hand was on the thin shoulder now and the pressure of his fingers lent his words an emphasis, "you are to be the little maid to the lady in the room behind me."

"The Signorina Caldora ? We do not love her, we others."

"Wait," he said. "You will love her very soon. And what do they know of her, these others ? Her father ? That is different. But forget the father ; remember only that here is a lady who is very tired and has need of you. Be a clever little woman and help her."

It was characteristic of Adorno's gentle upper-nature that he spoke to the child as to an equal, moving her sympathy to willing help rather than commanding her. On her part Brigitta's frank remonstrance proved that fear was not the spur which drove her to answer his call in such haste.

"Fetch some bread and fruit," he went on, "some wine and—yes, a bowl of the soup. Then prepare a bed in whichever room she chooses. You are to share it with her to-night and every night. Sleep at her door so that she need have no fear. Forget that they do not love her, these others ; remember only that she has need of you. Now go, child, and make haste."

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For a moment she stood twisting her lean body in its loose dress, a bare sole rubbing a bare ankle doubtfully ; then, "I'll do it because you bid me, signor," she said, and ran back whence she had come, but with less alacrity.

Le Brocq stood much where they had left him, a tired horse at either side, his arms flung across their withers. The long delay, pregnant with uncertainty, had so racked his temper that his greeting, as Adorno approached, was rougher than he had yet spoken ; but like a wise man, knowing his utter helplessness he threatened nothing.

"Where is Signorina Caldora? You said ten minutes and it is an hour or more. This delay is not to be borne."

"Nevertheless you will have to bear it," retorted Adorno, scarcely less roughly. He was willing enough to quarrel but doubted the policy. To have a quarrel forced upon him would serve his ends equally well and keep his record clean, therefore he strove to be insulting rather than aggressive.

But when Roger Le Brocq promised Fra Giovanni, "My honour for hers," he had meant what he said. A hot word, natural in the circumstances, righteous even, might leave his charge without a protector. Of course, they could kill him, he always recognized that ; but death cancels most debts of honour and the very violence would be absolution from his promise. Therefore, answering in his turn, he strove to answer smoothly.

"Must is a king among words, signor, and all bow to it. When do we bid the two saints good-bye?"

"The two saints?" To his vexation Adorno found himself led where he had no desire to follow.

"Saint Cyprian of Pelusium and Saint Peter of—the world at large, I suppose."

"Take care how you make Margotti a jest."

"He was certainly no jest last night."

"Last night? Were you one of them?"

"To my honour, signor."

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"A Frenchman?"

"The Church is universal and her defence every man's right and duty," answered Le Brocq. "Now as regards the signorina?"

"She remains here." Adorno spoke crisply, drily, with a return to the old antagonism inviting retaliation.

"I can see her, of course?"

The question was smoothly, even casually put, and yet upon the answer hung the issue Adorno so desired to force. If he refused, curtly, drily, Le Brocq without doubt would insist, would hold to his insistence and a quarrel must follow, a quarrel not hard to force to a violent end. And yet, earnestly as his latent jealousy urged him to refuse he assented with scarcely a moment's hesitation. Antonina Caldora held his promise.

"Certainly. Come now, I will leave you together."

"The horses?"

Adorno turned. "Marco! ho! Marco!" he called.

"Yes, signor," a voice replied, and the lad who had helped Le Brocq to water the horses came forward.

"Feed and rub these down, then halter them with the rest."

"Are they required again to-night, signor?"

"What is that to you? Do as you're bid. Come, monsieur."

Side by side they followed Marco and the horses, side by side as the man and the woman had walked an hour before, but apart as they had been. Through the gloom twin wavering stars approached them, winding and shifting from side to side in short, irregular courses, halted, flared brightly and disappeared. It was Brigitta, a two-wicked brass Etruscan lamp swinging from one hand, a platter of food in the other. At the closed door Adorno halted.

"Your charge is within," he said curtly. "You will find me here when you are ready."

But short as the interval had been it had given Le

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Brocq time for thought. Something of what must have passed between Antonina Caldora and the man at his elbow he guessed, guided in part by the eager expectancy of Adorno's greeting and in part by his shifts of mood. Something of the girl's present attitude he also guessed from the gloom on his companion's face. Apply the one guess to the other and what would be the thought uppermost in the mind of a man like Adorno? Prompted by instinct Le Brocq put the logical answer into action.

"You, too. It is better you should know what passes," and Adorno justified his instinct by following without hesitation.

The girl still sat by the trestle but, confronted by her peasant handmaiden, pride had come to the aid of physical weakness and the reaction of something very near akin to despair. More than most women—in part the gift of race perhaps—she possessed the power of compelling a calm even in the very heart of a tempest whose strength shook nature to its core. Tears there had been, but they were dried and the beautiful face was yet more beautiful through the sorrow which spiritualized it.

Brigitta had been diligent in her service. Beside the two-wicked lamp lay a plate of fruit, the crust of a large loaf, a flask of wine with its drinking cup and a bowl of smoking broth. Having finished her ministrations the child stood aside, uncertain what to do. One thing perplexed her: in her experience of life weakness was not a thing to be either feared or hated since it could either be crushed or ignored. Why then, did these others hate so bitterly this sorrowful woman whose tears of helplessness were hardly dry on her cheek? The *padrone* had spoken of the father, but that the sins of the father should be visited on the children was beyond the grasp of Brigitta's philosophy.

With a gesture not unkindly Adorno motioned her to go. But the girl intervened.

"Bide here," she said, then added, "Come to me,"

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and, when the child obeyed reluctantly, she laid an arm about her, drawing her in close against the breast of the grey frock. The nearness comforted and strengthened her. As to the child, her wiry muscles were strained, ready for flight, defence, or even attack; some evil must threaten, or why was the hate of these others so mixed with fear? But the arm about her shoulders, the arm whose white hand lay above the beating of her heart—she had never seen so white a hand—only drew her gently closer. At the suggestion of a tenderness new in her experience Brigitta looked up into the girl's face, loved it for its beauty as children will, pitied it for the sorrows she could not understand, as children will, and, all unconsciously, the tense strain slackened. Without a thought of the hate or the fear she nestled closer to the folds of the grey sleeve and was comforted in turn.

"Monsieur Le Brocq, I am so sorry, so distressed. This is on my account."

"We will cry out when we are hurt," he answered cheerily, but instantly grew grave. "Tell me frankly, signorina, do you remain here of your own will?"

"No."

At the curt monosyllable, sharply spoken, Brigitta lifted her head, looked at the weary face a moment, then at Adorno, back again at the girl and nestled into the fold of the arm as before. But Adorno anticipated Le Brocq's remonstrance.

"If not to-day, to-morrow; if not to-morrow, next day. Willingness will come, and more than willingness."

"Neither to-morrow nor while life lasts."

"But I am certain and I am content to wait," he said, but his face was not the face of a man who is at ease in his thoughts. He turned to Le Brocq. "One of these rooms is for the signorina and Brigitta here, the other is yours: you may keep your sword."

"For the signorina? Saints in heaven! are you such a dastard as to hold the signorina here against

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her will, hold her in the midst of such an unholy crew as is herding out there? And for what purpose? For ransom? Name your blood-money and I pledge my word as a gentleman and a knight of France it will be paid you."

"Ransom? No ransom. Antonina—"

"No," she interrupted, "no ransom; the price is too high. It shall never be paid by me. But surely for Monsieur Le Brocq?"

"Nor for Monsieur Le Brocq. You know well I hold neither for blood-money, as he calls it. For tonight there's no more to be said. Supper will be sent him here. Brigitta, my child, watch well over your mistress. Rest well, Nina *mia*; sleep and a new day will bring a change."

But the girl, though she looked him unflinchingly in the face, answered him nothing.

## CHAPTER XXII

### HEART'S DESIRE IS EASILY PERSUADED

NOT until the youth, Marco, having brought food and wine, had departed and Brigitta been despatched to prepare the room for her mistress did either Antonina Caldora or Le Brocq speak ; then,

"Monsieur Le Brocq, this is terrible for you."

"But I meant what I said every word of it : let us not cry out before we are hurt."

"I think you always mean what you say, which is a new thing in my knowledge of men. And you are hurt already. You know your heart is with the army and to be absent from it hurts you. Besides, the truce ends in two days."

For a moment Le Brocq made no answer, then he surprised her by proving that what she had said in part petulance was wholly the truth.

"Yes. If I denied it, would you believe me ? But that is no reason why we should not make the best of the present. Signorina, I am an old campaigner, so, first—"

"Old, I am older than you are."

"I am, I told you, twer-y-eight."

"And I am fifty I think, or a hundred and fifty—no, not that, for then I would be dead and that would be best of all."

"Now you are spoiling everything. For I was going to say that you were making the best of the present by not railing against what we cannot prevent. Next, take food."

"I cannot eat."

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"But you must. Suppose we had the chance to escape—"

"Escape!" Instantly she flung off her lassitude. "Oh, is it possible?"

"No, I don't think so for a moment. I want you to trust me in everything, so I tell you the blunt truth. But one can never tell. So, eat, that we may be ready for the best or the worst."

And, in time, she ate. Whoever invented the proverb, proved false by so many, that appetite comes with eating, must have had the recuperative powers possessed under almost any circumstances by healthy youth in his mind. And as she ate, drinking sparingly of the rough wine mixed with water, vigour returned, vigour nervous and mental as well as physical. Yet even with the renewed strength setting her pulses throbbing she broke out into neither railing nor bitterness. Perhaps she remembered Le Brocq's praise.

"Monsieur Le Brocq, you must think of yourself now; you have sacrificed enough for me."

"No sacrifice," he answered briskly, "never think it."

"Loss, then, for whatever is waste is loss, and you are lost to the army."

"The army is not everything."

"To you I think it is."

"As God lives, no! My word and my faith are more."

"Oh yes," she said, "I had forgotten you are Galahad, and the more shame to me. But you have kept both."

"Badly: we should have been at Fonzano."

"Oh!" she cried, "do not say that. I cannot bear it to-night. Not that I want to be at Fonzano, but it reminds me of where I am. Yes, you have kept both word and faith. Monsieur Le Brocq, you must return to the army."

For a moment he stared at her, perplexed. But her eyes, troubled and dark with the threat of tears,

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met his frankly. That she, too, meant what she said was beyond doubt. Because of the threat of tears, because, too, of the sharpness of the pain in the voice, Le Brocq answered in the lighter vein.

"There are a score or two of good reasons against that! Listen to them outside."

"They count for nothing, it is—" she paused, biting her lip, then spoke steadily on, "it is Signor Adorno who counts and perhaps that vile wretch, Margotti."

"Two reasons, then, instead of forty, but two that are more than enough."

"I think not." A flush of colour warmed the blanched face and again she paused. "I think Signor Adorno would not be sorry."

"And you?"

"I think it would be best."

"For me?"

"For both." The flush deepened. She found the explanation she felt compelled to hint more difficult than she had expected. "I think I would be freer, less—suspected."

"I understand," and having said so much Le Brocq, remembering the instinct which had bidden Adorno follow him, sat silent, plunged in deep thought.

His first impulse had been to scout the suggestion as impossible, alike a breach of faith and a blot on manhood. His honour, so lately gilded, would be smirched. But instantly, perhaps awakened by his mind's use of the word, came the remembrance of his oath which was no oath—my honour for hers, and for the second time that day he put self aside. What was best for her must be his sole rule. The God who had permitted him to be where he was and as he was would be the final judge of his honour. Wisely she left him to sift his thoughts without interruption, and when he spoke it was characteristic that it was without protest. He understood and he trusted her to understand.

"And you? What of you? Be plain and honest with me."

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"Vile as he has shown himself"—She broke off, seeking some milder form of words. Not so long ago he had been her hero. "He is less wicked than you think. I would be safe."

"For how long?"

"For always I think," she said hesitatingly.

"Do not think, be sure."

"Yes, I am sure; always."

"But there could be no always."

"No, but when he—" again she hesitated, but from a different cause, "when he believes the truth he will let me go."

"Do such men believe?"

"I shall compel belief."

Le Brocq nodded slowly and again lapsed into silence. The girl had more than confirmed his instinct nor did he doubt her reading of Adorno's character: he was not the man to sink to the committal of the baser villainies. But, passionately human, a mistaken jealousy might drive him to extremes: it would be wiser, then, to disabuse him utterly of such a ridiculous suspicion as he had already hinted. And how could that be done better than by quitting the camp? In all her conclusions the girl was right, she would be freer, less—to use her own word—suspected, and—yes! his heart was with the army. Where else could it be? In two days the truce would end, and with its end, France, as the King had said, must strike her blow or be crushed by numbers: where else should his heart be but with the army?

But before his heart's desire came his pledged word: his life for hers. What was her risk? Not from Adorno. He accepted her estimate of Adorno, but could Adorno hold his villainous crew in check? Then he remembered his own belief in the man's strong under-nature, an under-nature with two sides to it, a side which compelled service by force of character and a side which won it by winning affection. The two united were a tremendous power. Le Brocq was accustomed to handle men and the quality of the youth Marco's

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obedience had struck him. It was willingness rooted in desire to please, not in fear. He had found the same quality in Brigitta's eyes at the interchange between the girl and Adorno. Had the child hated or feared him there would have been a child's puckish glee at his repulse. But there had been nothing of the kind, a resentment, rather, until she had looked the second time into Antonina Caldora's face, then the resentment had become perplexity. Adorno, Le Brocq judged, had somehow won a sovereign place in her affections. Such a man, a man who both won and compelled obedience, could be trusted to hold even this godless crew in check—for a time. And that was all Le Brocq would ask of him.

"Yes," he said, answering his thoughts rather than her words. "I think that is right. I had better see him at once."

"You mean you will go?"

"That lies with Adorno."

"Yes," she said slowly, "that lies with Adorno now. You had better see him at once."

She had gained her point, but having gained it was by no means contented. For beyond her point lay the desire of all humanity which never can be won, the desire without a doubt, of her great ancestress, Eve, in the gardens of paradise, to eat of the fruit—which, being interpreted; means having her own way—without paying the cost. It is the way of nature to present no bill of costs till the fruit is eaten or, at least, to lay a veiling finger on the sum total. While it was still in doubt whether or not Le Brocq should go, while it was still arguable, it had seemed wise, easy even, to say "leave me alone." But now that she had won her point, now that her fruit was eaten, nature had lifted that veiling finger and the sum total of the appalling loneliness frightened her.

Beyond the door Le Brocq paused, searching for Adorno. Supper was ended, but groups, both men and women, still lingered round the dulling glow of the wood ashes, some upon benches, some upon the

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smooth hard-packed earth with its covering of dead grass, or lounging in the background.

Le Brocq had met with just such a scene many times in the after-twilight of a village street—women who gossiped, their hands and bare arms twinkling in the torchlight with an argumentative emphasis almost as expressive of their meaning as their tongues; women who stitched upon patched garments; one who rocked a tired child to sleep in her arms, silent herself but following the ceaseless talk with alert enjoyment. That there were so many women and children, more than he had at first supposed, confirmed Le Brocq in his purpose. The men were mostly silent—it was the woman's hour—throwing in a word now and again, though two or three, leaning forward, joined in the babble with a zest the equal of the women's own.

Drunkenness there was none. Later Le Brocq learned the reason: all were free to drink as they chose but it was Adorno's fixed rule that whoso drank himself drunk was thrust out of the camp. He knew the nature of his blackguards: they might quarrel in cold blood, but drunken they would use their knives, therefore the rule had been inflexible. Nor was he afraid of treachery in revenge for the punishment. The camp was no secret hiding-place. The huge ledge it occupied was as open as the stage of a theatre whose vast auditorium stretched to the confines of the confronting hills. To force its narrow entrance against their desperation would be impossible. But Adorno had no fear even of an attempt. Florence, Parma, Pisa, were in handgrips for existence, and in the fierceness of the elemental struggle for bare life there was no leisure to enforce the refinements of law and order.

But Adorno was not in any one of the groups by the dying fires, and as Le Brocq speculated which of the ruffians he should accost with enquiries Marco joined him.

"The horses are fed and housed, signor."

"Housed? You have stables, then?"

"Caves, signor."

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"Good. I shall need mine to-morrow."

"But not the signorina's?"

"Not the signorina's," answered Le Brocq in the same tone and without an apparent pause. The question had posed him, but it seemed better, safer for the girl, to foster the assumption that she remained of her own choice.

"Naturally. Last night the *padrone*—" began Marco; but Le Brocq had no wish to discuss the past night's histories.

"The *padrone*? Yes. I must see the *padrone* at once. Where is he?"

"In the cell of Saint Cyprian himself. Come with me and I'll show you."

The Hermitage folk were early folk. Already the groups by the dulling fires were breaking up and, as Le Brocq followed Marco, he was again struck by the likeness to a village street. There was the same gathering of cronies into little coteries, the same pausing at a doorway for a last gossip, the same undisguised interest in the stranger, but without impertinence or insult. The women, he noticed, were housed together: Adorno was a wise man in his generation. If he could only have excluded gambling he would have scotched the three most potent causes of deadly quarrel the world knows of—scotched, not destroyed; that will never be while wine is drunk, women loved, or wealth sought unearned.

The hermit's cell was almost the last of a series of doors which pierced the rough-built wall enclosing the hollowed rock. At the threshold Marco, whose free, swinging walk and upright carriage spelt city breeding and a knowledge of arms, saluted deferentially. At first the gilt spurs had fired his imagination, he knew their meaning on a Frenchman's heels well enough; later it was the wearer's bearing—he was in a wasp's nest yet seemed neither to fear their stings nor hear the threat of their buzzing.

"Until to-morrow, signor," he said respectfully.

Adorno sat hunched forward over a small table in

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he centre of the little grey-walled room which legend called the cell of Saint Cyprian. A broken shrine in the eastern corner—there were still touches of blues and reds showing where a fresco had once adorned the smooth of the weather-stained niche—was possibly the origin of the tradition. A plate of the savoury soup, strong smelling, strong flavoured, thick with shredded meat and vegetables cooked to a pulp, had been pushed aside untasted. By his elbow stood a flask of wine and a horn cup, but the one was only half empty and the other full. However severe the rebuff Adorno had made no attempt to drown his chagrin. That in itself made for the girl's safety. The man who obeys his own laws under provocation to disobey them is a man whose laws are obeyed.

At the groaning of the door he turned, not recognising Le Brocq at first in the dim light, then rose.

"Well?"

"I have an appeal to make."

"Then don't make it. Already you have thrust yourself too far into affairs which do not concern you. I'll hear no more."

"No thrusting on my part." Partly by nature, but partly also for policy's sake, Le Brocq was carefully conciliatory.

"I hold to the word. What have you, a Frenchman, to do with our Italian affairs? I do not mean thrones and crowns, Charles and France, but here—here—here."

"Do you speak of last night?" said Le Brocq, his slow coldness in sharp contrast to Adorno's heat.

"Of to-day, of all this accursed meddling in what does not belong to you."

"To-day is the sequel of last night; but for last night to-day would not be as it is. Do you speak of last night?"

"And if I do?"

But Le Brocq checked the biting retort which rose to his lips. It would be easy to say, last night was

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sacrilege, last night was murder, last night was the basest infamy of contemptible cowardice ; and you—you who let loose these brutal forces upon helpless women, you who profaned God's altar with the blood of His martyr, you who were the brain though not the hand, you who plotted but dared not perform, you who stole, killed, ravished by proxy, you are the most guilty of them all and the most cowardly. And to grip such ruffianism by the throat and choke it into impotence you call meddling and fling my nation in my teeth ?

To do justice and defend the honour of God and womanhood are not the prerogative of any one nation. They are the duty and the right of universal man, let him call himself by whatever name he may. But to you it is meddling ! Meddling ? Will you call it meddling when your fellows hiss your shame into your face ? Will you call it meddling when the law slips the rope of justice round your neck ? Meddling ? Is it meddling to hold up profanation and sacrilege and the cowardly slaying of women to the execration and scorn of honest men ? Yes, to have retorted would have been easy but Le Brocq controlled himself : Antonina Caldora's helplessness coerced him.

"Let last night sleep," he said, and just because he repressed his impulse to retort he spoke harsher than he knew, offensively almost, flinging out his last words like a challenge, "Will you hear my appeal ?"

"No," replied Adorno, answering the challenge rather than the words. "I will hear no more to-night, nothing, not a word."

"But—"

"But nothing ! You have my answer. I bid you good-night, Monsieur Le Brocq."

"Be it so," said Le Brocq, "to-morrow will be time enough, and to-morrow you shall hear me," and left the cell.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### "MY GRAIL IS THE ARMY"

ANTONINA CALDORA was still seated where Le Brocq had left her. The child, Brigitta, having finished her work of preparation, had joined her mistress and stood in the shadows watching the troubled face with that frank scrutiny of childhood which sees so much more than it understands and is perplexed thereby, just as its elders scrutinize nature and supernature, guessing without full comprehension at what is beyond experience.

"Well? Do you leave to-night?"

"No, he refuses—"

"To let you go?" Quite unconsciously a light leaped to the tired eyes as she stiffened back on the bench. Next to eating its cake and having it, nature loves the rejection of a grudged sacrifice. She knew now that this was what she had desired yet never dared to hope for. Then, in the selfishness of her satisfaction forgetting that Le Brocq's heart was with the army, she went on, "But now that he understands it does not matter so much."

"But he understands nothing," answered Le Brocq. "We came to loggerheads—it was my fault, I see it all now—but he would not even listen to what I had to say. But to-morrow will not be too late."

The touch of colour died from her face.

"No, to-morrow will not be too late," she repeated. For a moment she sat in thought, striving to look into that to-morrow, caught her breath in a sigh as if the vision brought neither hope nor comfort,

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then rose. "Come, Brigitta, let us rest if we cannot sleep. Have you a floating wick ready for us within? Yes! Why, what a clever little maid you are! Good-night, Monsieur Le Brocq, I am sorry—no, there is no use attempting what is beyond words, but do not suppose I think lightly of all that has come and gone." She hesitated, as if about to hold out her hand, but checked herself, dropping a stiff little curtsy instead. "Good-night, Monsieur—Galahad!"

And Le Brocq found nothing better to say than a banal, "Good-night, signorina," but he nodded and smiled to Brigitta who nodded gravely back, adding a dip of her brief skirts in quaint imitation of her mistress. Then a bolt was shot.

Left to himself Le Brocq proceeded to justify his claim to be an old campaigner. As regards Adorno he was tranquil, as regards Adorno's power to hold his ruffians in check he was also tranquil. But the one stable element in human nature is its instability, and that man is a fool who, being in danger, trusts to faith and fear when he can add wood and iron to his defence. His first duty was to guard his charge, even against the guaranteed impossible.

So the outer door was barred and locked, the narrow windows inspected and, by the aid of the trestle table noiselessly shifted and the bench piled on its flat, proven too narrow to permit of a head and shoulders to pass. Then, lamp in hand, he made the circuit of the room ending with the cave which faced the entrance, a place of dust and ancient lumber, its roof sloping downward by slow degrees till, thirty feet away, rock and ledge met.

From the formation Le Brocq judged a similar hollow backing ran behind the whole length of the Hermitage. The contents had their significant histories—some broken planking, the limbs and shattered trunk of a Madonna, a matted pile of moth-eaten cloth, vestments perhaps, but with no suggestion of their sacred use remaining, an antique marble chest, the coffin it might be of the founder of the Hermitage, but empty

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now and splintered at the edges with the wrenching off of the lid. There was neither lock nor bolt to the door, but as there was no outer communication the omission mattered little.

The apartment allotted to his own use was in all respects similar to the refectory but less wide. Its whole furnishings were a bench and a narrow bed covered with a coarse blanket. Was his charge no better housed, he wondered; then remembered that she had been expected the night before: no doubt some preparation had been made for her reception.

Having made certain that no surprise from the outside was possible he lay down, leaving the door of communication open. He would keep vigil and by the sounds of the night judge the nights to come when he would not be there to watch. Should the girl call he would hear on the instant and be ready.

But there were no sounds: the night was absolutely still. In the woods below the screes night-birds might call one to another or wolves howl, but behind these walls no echo of their cry penetrated and these other night-birds, these other fiercer wolves who inhabited the caves and ledges of the rock, they, too, were silent. There was not so much as a muffled whisper at the door.

Not for many months had Le Brocq known such a soundless quiet. Always there had been the camp—The Camp? Instantly the word turned his thoughts to a new direction. By this time the camp was a day's march downward and northward, a day's march nearer France. But between lay the end of the truce between lay that final struggle—Le Brocq raised himself on his elbow, listening. Through the intense stillness came the sound of snuffing, of scratching; it was like the rasp of a dog's claws on a door, not his own door, that of the refectory. A dog, that was it. Le Brocq had seen a score of times the eager nostrils thrust against the knife-edge slit, scenting some prey within, then the claws scraping at the angle of wood and earth in a vain eagerness. Commonly

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there was a whine of impatience; here there was no whine, but the door shook gently. Then the snuffling ceased and Le Brocq lay back upon the pillow: not a flaw of sound broke the stillness.

The girl was right, if one could not sleep one could at least rest. Stretching his tired limbs, and for all their strength they were very tired, Le Brocq settled himself to comfort. What was it Mirandola had said? Better a night's ride than six feet of hard earth and a saddle under the head! But this was better than either. Sluggishly Le Brocq's mind trailed backwards. When had he last lain on a bed? Not since he had quitted Naples! It was Adorno's bed, he supposed, and again his mind followed the new trail. A strange compound, Adorno: not all bad, no, not all bad, just—just human, as the King said, human. That was a foolish thing to say, everyone was human, everyone was all bad—no, that was wrong, not all bad. What was he thinking of? Adorno? To-morrow Adorno would be more reasonable; to-morrow he must—must ride to the camp. But Brunet and the others would laugh at him in a grey frock, and the hood would not keep on his head, though someone behind him tied it on with a band from a linen coif which kept blowing along a road where the sunshine was always a lance-length ahead with a snake wriggling in the dust, a snake that was no snake but a maimed arm that reared up its seared stump upon the elbow, shaking; and then, of a sudden, the light was all about him, the light and the buzz of the camp with voices calling—calling—

"Signor! signor! will you wake up and come to breakfast. The signorina is waiting." It was Brigitta, and as Le Brocq stared at her uncomprehendingly he saw Antonina Caldora herself smiling from the open door.

"Signorina, I am ashamed—"

"Of being human? But I am glad, very glad; you had much need of sleep."

"But I meant to watch."

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"I know. It was like you. But there was no need."

"You were not disturbed?"

"By nothing."

"And you slept?"

"Ten hours I think."

Le Brocq could easily believe it as, later, they ate their morning meal together in the refectory, he at the end of the table, she across its angle at his side. Where is there such a palimpsestist as nature, writing the story of the present over the outworn but indelible lines of the past? The potent medicine of wholesome youth had worked in her veins as she slept; lustre and light and the vigour of life were new-born in the eyes, self-reliance and courage rang in the voice.

And not only sleep, the leech, but sleep, the artist, had been at work with his dual powers, smoothing the forehead, rounding the cheek, and adding the deft touches of colour which are to beauty as the painting of the lily. Nor was there need to bid her take food for wisdom's sake; the dark bread, the goats'-milk cheese, the common fruits, were all eaten with a healthy appetite. She had achieved something of a toilet, too. The dark, abundant hair was newly coiled and a broad, gay ribbon—Brigitta's contribution—superseded the strip of linen.

"Sleep? As the dead sleep, I think," she said; then, hastily, with thumb and fingers made the gesture to avert the evil omen. But instantly she laughed. "If I say I slept as you slept will that content you? I never saw a man asleep before. You looked like—like—"

"Like what?" asked Le Brocq as she paused.

"Like Adam, I think. You know the Lord God cast him into a deep sleep and so I think it was with you last night. You slept because He sent you sleep, blessed be Him and it. Monsieur Le Brocq, I think—what a lot of thinks there are this morning—you are like Adam at the first."

"Why at the first?" This lighter mood was an

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intense relief to Le Brocq. Clearly he might rejoin the army without the smallest pang of compunction.

"There was no Eve, you know."

"But after the deep sleep?"

"Oh, then you are Galahad and hunted the Holy Grail, which no man ever yet found on earth."

"To every man his Grail," answered Le Brocq. "Nor is it always the same quest. To-day my Grail is the army."

"The army?" she repeated blankly, "but—but I had forgotten the army."

"But last night we decided that it was best—"

"Yes, I know," she interrupted, silencing him with a little fluttering motion of her hand, but the lightness and laughter had left her eyes when she raised her head and looked him squarely in the face. "Do you know, I sometimes think you men dream your Grails as we women our romances, and wake to find the quest the following of a false god. Brigitta, child, where will Monsieur Le Brocq find the *padrone*?"

"Shall I go and look for him, signorina?"

"Oh, if it be a question of looking for him Monsieur Le Brocq can search for himself. Bide thou with me, little friend."

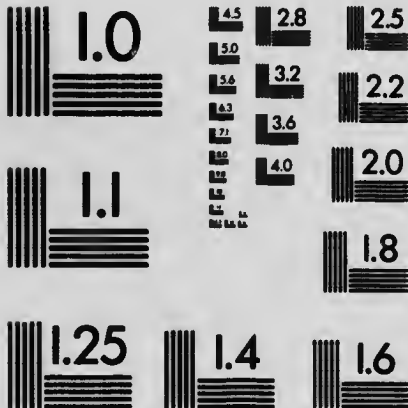
As she spoke she held out her hand, beckoning, but Brigitta caught it in both hers and pressed it to her mouth with something of that fierceness which so often fires the loves and hates of the women of the South. And not the women only. Was it not for just such a fierceness translated into action that Battista had taken to the hills? Brigitta kissed, but had hate moved her, not love, had the pendulum of her passion swung to the reverse, she would as readily have bitten.

He had chosen well, had this old Eastern saint of the early centuries. Where, questioned Le Brocq within himself, could a man school his spirit better to learn the power and peace of God than upon the ledge of this mountain fastness, with the tranquil beauty of the curved hills sloping to the hazy distance, the



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## SIR GALAHAD OF THE ARMY

sun-smitten blue vault above, and the huge sheer rock behind, hedging him to safety with as secure a strength as if Michael himself had laid his archangel arm about the Hermitage? Heaven stooped to earth and earth reached up to heaven without blot or blur of man's making to mar the communion.

But now? Reversing the vision of the Apocalypse, The Kingdoms of the Lord had become the kingdoms of this world—or worse. The holy places were polluted, the altars profaned, the sacred images destroyed. In place of placid peace there was riot, in place of prayers cursing, in place of solemn chants lewd songs, and where Cyprian's white-robed monks had drawn near to God in meditation Adorno's ruffians, for the most part steeped to the throat in blood, made ready for some new violence: and Antonina Caldora must bide amongst them. Well, God was still over all and the heavens, praised be their Maker! still stooped to earth in communion with whoso had ears to hear.

But Le Brocq had no need to obey the girl's half splenetic outburst—surely it may be forgiven her?—and go in search of the *padrone*. Adorno himself found him. If the guests had slept, the host, apparently, had not; the overnight ruddy olive of the cheeks were sallow, the handsome face drawn and haggard.

"Signorina Caldora?"

"Is well." At the evident concern in the voice Le Brocq was moved to expostulation. "Listen!" he went on, with a wide gesture of the arm which caught, as in a net, the many reeking offences of the camp. "Are these fitting for her ears?"

"It is no worse than when she desired to come of her own will."

"You are determined?"

"Immovably."

"Then let me go."

"You?" Adorno's incredulity was profound.  
"You?" he repeated.

## "MY GRAIL IS THE ARMY"

"For three days on parole."

"That you may bring a rescue back with you!"

"Take an oath of me if you wish, though none is needed. France, fighting for her life, can spare no men for a rescue: no, nor Italy either. And if I brought rescue you could defy it; at the worst you have a hostage. No, no rescue, but a three days' truce ends to-morrow, a battle follows instantly; that much I know for certain. You are of Pisa, Signor Adorno. France, as I say, is fighting for her life. If France is worsted and Florence falls on Pisa there is an end to her liberties. For the moment France stands between Pisa and destruction. Take an oath of me if you will, but let me go down."

"One man! You hold yourself in high esteem!"

"God knows, not so. But I love France and would do a man's work."

"And be killed!"

"As God wills, but what worse are you? And—"

Le Brocq hesitated a moment. Was it wise to remind him of the wasted tragedy of Saint Apollonia and the cause of the failure? But the reference held an argument which might move a man like Adorno when an appeal to patriotism failed, perhaps not unnaturally—was he not now a man without a country? "It is not all for France," he went on, "there is something for myself also. On Friday night there was a Florentine, Soderini—"

"Giro Soderini? a big-boned, loud-voiced, swaggering—"

"Bully," said Le Brocq. "Yes, that is the man."

"We have a quarrel too, he and I," said Adorno with a sudden grim sternness. "So Giro Soderini was there! Had I known I would have taken Margotti's place at all costs. What is your feud with Soderini?"

"He gave his tongue license—"

"You need say no more. A foul-mouthed brute, and yet the Soderini are gentlemen! But where could you hope to find Soderini?"

## SIR GALAHAD OF THE ARMY

"In the camp, if there is no battle."

"How could you venture there alone?"

"I ventured here without need."

"Yes, but that was for—"

"My ward's sake; this would be for myself. Give me three days."

"Is your word to Signorina Caldora less binding to-day than yesterday?"

"As man to man, is the Signorina Caldora in any danger?"

"As God lives, in none."

"Then give me three days."

"But since she is in no danger why return at all?"

"Because," answered Le Brocq slowly, "if she is not in danger to-day she will be—later on."

"From me, monsieur?"

"No, in spite of you," and again Le Brocq drew the circuit of the camp into his meaning.

For a full minute Adorno was silent. The anger which had flashed to his eyes with the interjected question passed as quickly as it had risen. For the moment Le Brocq had gained one half his object. No lover, Adorno argued, could so leave his mistress, no mistress would consent thus to be left. Nor was the suggested parole preposterous in an age when chivalry, though dying, was still a religion, almost the only religion invariably obeyed by a powerful class; Le Brocq could be trusted to hold his word inviolate at any cost. But Adorno's jealousy was restless; he, equally with Brigitta, was of the south and passion bit deep.

"Does Signorina Caldora know of this—this scheme of yours?"

"Yes."

"And that you return in three days?"

"No."

"Promise me you will not tell her."

"I promise."

"Well, I will think of it. To-night will be time enough to decide," and he turned away.

## **"MY GRAIL IS THE ARMY"**

Le Brocq found the table cleared and Antonina Caldora alone, sitting by it listlessly.

"He cannot decide," he said.

But her only answer was a gesture of indifference.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### PAROLE

BUT if Adorno thought to trick Antonina Caldora into an unwelcome self-revelation which might confirm his jealous suspicions he reckoned without a woman's power of innocent dissimulation.

The day had dragged wearily, as all days must which are heavy with indecision. There is nothing like suspense to lengthen the dark hours of the spirit, let the sundial mark them as it may. The girl kept almost rigidly to her own apartment; if she visited the refectory Brigitta was at her elbow, at the mid-day meal Brigitta served. Never once did she cross the threshold to the outer life of the camp.

As to Le Brocq, surely there are few more disjointed existences than that of an active, resourceful man plunged suddenly into the centre of a busy life but denied all share in its activities? Add to that an unrest which refused him even the sojourn and pastime of observation. Antonina Caldora was right, his heart was in the camp. Obsessed by his uncertainty his day was mostly spent striding from door to door till the girl, beyond the wall, was fain to put her fingers in her ears to drown the rattle of his spurs and the fall of his foot on the hard-packed earth; Le Brocq was a big man and walked heavily.

Then, about four o'clock, Adorno came. Ignoring Le Brocq, who was still striding his sentry tramp, he knocked at Antonina Caldora's door.

"Antonina!"

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For a moment there was no reply. It was as if she debated whether she would answer Adorno's summons, so given. But commonsense prevailed.

"Yes?"

"It is I—Luigi."

"Well?"

Adorno's face shadowed at the curt coldness of the monosyllable. The tone was at once offended and an offence.

"We could talk easier without a stone wall between us."

Again Le Brocq, halted by the table, noted the pause of an instant's debate, but again commonsense prevailed. At the shooting of the bolt—it was significant that even in the day-time the bolt was shot—Adorno slipped back a pace or two. His back was towards the strong afternoon light which fell full upon the girl as she faced him. Brigitta had been left in the sleeping-room.

"Well?"

"You look better, Nina; you slept?"

"Yes."

At the studied, continuous monosyllable a rush of anger lit Adorno's eyes, but he controlled his resentment.

"I have decided, monsieur." His gaze shifted to Le Brocq for an instant as he paused with careful purpose that he might be understood clearly, then it returned to the girl's face. "You can leave to-night."

"Thank you." Le Brocq, too, turned to the girl who stood midway between them. But she was impassive. By not so much as a flicker of the eyes did she give sign that she heard and understood.

"You expect a battle?"

"As I told you."

"A battle that must be decisive?"

"Yes. It is life or death."

"And the French are—"

"Outnumbered three or four to one."

## SIR GALAHAD OF THE ARMY

"And if there is no battle you will seek out Soderini in your own quarrel?"

"As I told you," repeated Le Brocq tranquilly. He perfectly comprehended the purpose of the questioning, but Signorina Caldora's impassivity never flinched. Why should it flinch? What was all Italy but one shifting battlefield? and was not his going her own desire? As he had come into her life so he would go out of it; why should she flinch?

"In an hour, then," said Adorno. His test failed, and yet he could find no peace in assurance. Perhaps she would betray herself in the crisis of the parting. "You will be here to wish him God-speed?"

"Always shall I wish him that." She answered steadily. "Yes, I shall be here. One comfort I have. Whatever punishment my sin and folly may bring on me a brave and loyal-hearted gentleman will not be forced to share it. God prosper you as you deserve, Monsieur Le Brocq. Not many men, I think, dare pray that honestly for themselves."

"Certainly I dare not, signorina, I who failed in my trust."

"And do you call that success?" she demanded, with a sweep of her arm in scorn toward Adorno. "Then God grant me failure. Have you anything further to say, signor?"

"I can wait," answered Adorno, with a phlegm which surprised Le Brocq. "You cannot cast the past out of your life just by saying, I shall!"

"No," she retorted, "but I can trample it under foot."

"Love will rise, trample it how—"

"This does not concern Monsieur Le Brocq," she interrupted sharply. "I ask again, have you anything further to say?"

"And I answer again, I can wait. In an hour your horse will be ready, monsieur;" but for all his self-control it was a relief to his sleepless suspicions to hear her door close before he even laid his hand on the outer latch.

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But if she did not reappear through the hour of waiting she must have either watched or set Brigitta to watch. The coming of Marco, mounted, leading Le Brocq's horse, was as a signal. Her face was very pale, with unnatural patches of colour high up upon the cheeks, the brows down-drawn, the mouth a straight, thin line when at rest. But her voice was firm nor did her hands tremble. Le Brocq was waiting, standing by the table and nearest the door, but until Adorno entered neither spoke.

"Your horse is ready," he said curtly. "There is nothing left but to say good-bye."

"And I say it ; God be with you, signorina."

"And with you," she answered solemnly. He held out his hand as he spoke, but for a moment she kept hers folded in the sleeves of the grey robe, then, abruptly, both shot out catching his and holding it in a strong clasp. "Failure, you said a while ago? Never think that, Monsieur le Brocq, never, not for one instant. God gives us just such failures that we may find the power which never fails. If that be not true what comfort or hope have I who have failed so miserably? And have no fear for me. See!" Still clasping him with her right hand she drew aside her frock with her left. Thrust into the cord wound doubly round her waist was the dagger she had snatched the night before from the wall. "I always have a way open, God is merciful and will understand. You and another have taught me not to be afraid."

"If I believed there was cause to fear—" began Le Brocq.

"There is none," interrupted Adorno harshly. "Have you more to say, Nina?"

"Only that I shall never forget, never. God be with you, Galahad of the Army!" and the firm voice broke. But the loss of control was only for an instant. Withdrawing her hand she hid both once more in the folds of her frock and turned to her own apartment. Le Brocq had answered nothing.

## SIR GALAHAD OF THE ARMY

In silence he followed Adorno from the room, in silence mounted and with Adorno by his side rode at a footspace towards the entrance of the camp. Marco had fallen behind.

"I give you two days," said Adorno. "A night to go, a day and a night with your army, a day to return. I ask no oath."

Le Brocq nodded silently. It did not strike him as at all strange that two such widely different men as Fra Giovanni and Luigi Adorno should voluntarily forego a security commonly demanded from kings and prelates. Certain of his own integrity of purpose, why should any man doubt him?

But the clipping of the three days to two troubled him. Not that the two were insufficient. If the King was right there would be an immediate end to the vexing, inconclusive skirmishes of the past weeks; the truce must break up in battle. No; forty-eight hours were enough, but Adorno must be less tranquil in his mind than he let the girl suppose or he would not have clipped away a day. Why? But Adorno gave him no clue. He was following his own thoughts as he walked at Le Brocq's knee, one arm flung carelessly, almost familiarly, over the horse's withers in an easy, natural association.

"Did she speak of me?"

She! Their last talk had been of a man's honour, of his riding to battle where his nation might suffer a defeat which would leave it poorer by more than an empty throne: such things, at least, had been the inference, and now—she! To the lover there is but one woman in all the world, and in the midst of all his faults Adorno remained the devout lover. To say, she, was as explicit as words could make identity. Naturally Le Brocq understood.

"No."

"Not at all?"

"Not at all."

Some men might have found food for their caustic humour in this eager, almost piteous, seeking for

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remembrance, bitter-tongued though it was. But not Le Brocq. It was too sorrowful. Dimly he understood that to be forgotten, to be thrust out of mind, is the very grave of love. Anger, contempt, scorn, are better than forgottenness; while there is remembrance there is hope. This man might be a scoundrel, might be all his association with Margotti suggested, but in this one thing he was honest and—it was too sorrowful.

"If you knew the whole truth you would blame me less," Adorno went on. "I am not as bad as—Friday night would make out. That was Margotti."

"Which is master?" said Le Brocq drily, but it was an inference rather than a question. As such Adorno understood it for he made no reply, but his arm slipped to his side and he drew further apart. Where the ledge narrowed with the drawing-in of the rock he halted.

"I am still an Adorno of Pisa," he said, and it may be that it was his answer to the inference. It may be too, that it was his final assurance to Le Brocq. "Marco will guide you to the road, when you return ker south-west through the pines. I will look for you before sunset on Tuesday."

"If I live and can sit a horse," answered Le Brocq.

"That damned brute, Soderini. Le Brocq, I would give—but that can never be now." He half lifted his hand in farewell then withdrew it. But Le Brocq, leaning aside, extended his.

"Till Tuesday, God willing."

"Till Tuesday," repeated Adorno, crushing Le Brocq's fingers with his close grip. Stepping back he nodded, "Now Marcc," and the two rode on.

It was Marco who broke the silence.

"A bad business that on Friday, signor."

"You were not there?"

"No, thank God! Nor would I have gone, though they called me coward. No good will come of it. That was Margotti all over. He must needs thieve,

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and such thievery. He cannot be content like the rest of us."

"If you do not thief why are you here at all?" said Le Brocq bluntly.

"Oh, signor, I am no thief." Marco's tone was part offence, part expostulation. "A thief? My old mother down in Parma—God keep her in health—would cast me off for ever. Never a thief, signor, never."

"Then why are you here at all?" repeated Le Brocq.

"For leave to live, like the rest of them, and we're content with that; all but Margotti and two or three more, though I think their number is growing. It was no fault of mine. I think the good God left the grace of quietness out of our Italian blood. There was a brawl, the Whites against the Blacks, nothing more than happens every day in the week but I killed a man. What would you have? It was his life or mine, but I was a White and the Blacks got the upper-hand, so for me it was hey to the woods or hang! Presently the Whites will win, then I can go down again—but a thief! no, signor, never."

"I see," said Le Brocq slowly. "Are you all like that?"

"Not all. With some it is one thing, with some another—women, the dice going wrong, the good red wine too strong, but with all it is the hills or hang. With a few more than I like," he added reluctantly, "it's not quite so clean a story as an honest quarrel and let the better man win. But we must take our world as we find it; there are crooked trees in every wood as well as straight."

"But how do you live, all of you, if you don't thief? Do the heavens rain manna on Saint Cyprian?"

Marco laughed. "What kind of wild-fowl manna may be I don't know, but I understand you very well. You mean the meat and the drink, though there is little enough of the drink, thanks to the

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*padrone's* wisdom. But, signor, men must live, and to take a beast out of the fields to keep soul and body together is not thieving."

"I think," said Le Brocq dry'y, "I saw a one-handed fellow who found it thiev'g."

Marco sobered on the instant. "Evil will come of that just as it will of Friday's folly. To maim God's image for the sake of a wild thing—that's devilry."

"Nevertheless," said Le Brocq sternly, "see to it, thou who art an honest man, that the punishment of evil does not fall upon the innocent in a worse devilry. Do you understand? I see you do. Is that my road?"

"Yes, signor; to the left until you reach the highway, then still to the left."

## CHAPTER XXV

### IN THE TRACK OF WAR

LE BROcq rode slowly. He had a long journey before him. By this time the camp would have removed two days' marches northwards, perhaps even have reached the plain itself, and he dared not press his horse lest he founder him. But also his thoughts oppressed him and in that first hour he fought out the racking battle which besets the man who doubts if, after all, he has done right—not for himself but for another.

There, on the ledge, confronted by Adorno's unfounded suspicions, it had been easy to see wisdom in an absence which gave him his heart's desire. It is very comforting when duty and inclination run in double harness; all roughnesses disappear from the track and what music they make together on the smooth road. The very hills, which at other times curb to a weary spirit-breaking plodding, vanish utterly and no day's march is a tick of time too long. Hills? On the path of Heart's Desire there are no hills, there never were hills, there never could be hills, there is nothing but that gentle downward sweep which invites the easy stride and bids fatigue defiance. So had it been at the ledge; but now duty hung back, tugging heavily on the bit of inclination and the joyous ease of the pace was broken. Was there not a greater danger than the danger of Adorno's groundless suspicions?

Then—Le Brocq was very human—he began to search his mind backwards for excuses or a scapegoat

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and naturally he found one. The girl had said his going would make it easier for her. But, being honest as well as human, and an honest conscience is either a great blessing or a great burden, Le Brocq told himself that it had been his province to judge, not hers. And why, if her ease would be so much the greater, had her almost childlike gaiety of spirit frozen so suddenly that morning? And why, if her ease was so secure, did she keep that dagger girdled ready to her hand? Le Brocq groaned as he rode. Would Galahad have done this? The name had been so dinned into him of late that he had come to think himself, not as a Galahad indeed, but as a man before whom a clear ideal has been set, and when that is so woe to him who falls short. The honest conscience which carries the spirit so lightly with it whither both would go, grows to a crushing burden when the spirit shoulders it to its back to carry it whither it would not.

But eight-and-twenty with clean blood in its veins, a good horse between its knees and the thin mountain air blowing crisply in its ears does not brood over its mistakes for long. As his horse warmed to its work Le Brocq pressed him gently, and with the quicker motion his spirits rose. What, after all, was to be feared? They were not all scum. That had been too sweeping a condemnation. Marco was a good lad and could be trusted to second Adorno if need arose. To kill a man without malice in a street brawl was no shame, and this had been something above the level of a drunken scuffle. Between the Whites and the Blacks it was almost civil war and half Italy was involved. Yes, Marco could be trusted even though lifting a beast from the fields was not thieving. And was it thieving? If so, then he and France had stolen many a time in the year past and stealing was mortal sin. And, drawn by an invisible chain which held Antonina Caldora at one end of it and Eternal Damnation at the other, Le Brocq broke into song :

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Our Lord He loves the souls of men,  
For them He came to die ;  
Then to Himself He took again  
His life, that such as I  
In life and death might hope be given  
By grace to dwell with Him in heaven.

Our Lady laid her wimple blue  
In folds her head around.  
Her pitying eyes like stars shone through  
Wherever men were found.  
That pity drew their thoughts above ;  
By grace they found a Father's love.

Our Lord laid down His pride of birth,  
In flesh His glory veiled ;  
As man He dwelt with men on earth,  
Sin to His Cross He nailed ;  
That mankind seeing man in God  
By grace might follow where He trod.

Our Lady's heart is torn in twain  
For sorrows not her own.  
She sees the grief, the sin, the pain,  
She hears and heeds the moan.  
Sweet Mother ! join with ours your prayer,  
By grace the Judge will hear and spare.

Dear God ! how good it was just to be alive ! Forgetful of the long journey before him, forgetful of the risks of a foundered horse and conscious of nothing but the luxurious sense of a healthy well-being and a freedom from anxious thought Le Brocq stood upright in his stirrups, waving an arm in the air for pure light-heartedness and gave out his chorus to the silent trees on either hand with deep-chested satisfaction. As has been said, Le Brocq was very human. His depression had vanished and for the moment he was a schoolboy set free from thralldom of rod and hornbook.

Sweet Mother ! join with ours your prayer,  
By grace the Judge will hear and spare.

But nature can be a cynic. As Le Brocq lifted his face to heaven in pure gladness of living a splash on the forehead sobered him. Edging his horse under

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the shelter of the trees by the roadside he looked about him. One of the summer storms common to mountainous districts had blown up. The sky was densely overcast and already thunder was sullen in the distance. To the cost of a wet skin he never gave a second thought, but his horse had need of every spark of spirit it possessed and few things cow a brute more than a drenching downpour. To wait till the force of the storm had broken was his wisdom.

Dismounting, Le Brocq eased the girths, slipped the bit from the mouth, soothed with voice and touch the fret of the nerves jangled by the advancing thunder and betook himself to patience. And he had much need of the virtue. After the first fierce burst of passion through the tree-tops the wind died, leaving the thunder crackling overhead, and with the passing of the wind rain descended in yet more sweeping torrents. From the cavernous protection of the thick pine boughs Le Brocq could hear it hissing on the streaming mud of the roadway, could judge the weight of the fall from the steam-like spray drifted cold upon his face, but neither rain nor road was visible in the intense gloom of the night. What had at first been wisdom was now compulsion.

Little by little, at first slowly, then with increasing power as the dry channels of the watercourses filled new sounds sprang to life till, as the storm passed, the brawl and tumult of foaming mountain streams roared from every valley-bed. With the cessation of the downpour a fresh start was possible but thenceforward, until morning broke, Le Brocq's progress was slow from necessity, not discretion, and the dawn which brought with it the ending of the truce found him still upon the road above Salegna.

Half-an-hour later he entered the deserted village. Nowhere was there sound or motion of life. The Gorgon of war had passed that way and at the terror of its glance Salegna had stiffened into stone. Beyond lay the camping-ground, the heaped ashes of its watch-fires beaten flat by rain : still further and the river,

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a sparse trickle two days before, brimmed brown and seething to the limit of its rocky banks.

To follow the track of the army was at once easy and difficult. There is rarely any doubt which way violence has passed, even violence in subjection; but the weight of the heavy guns, the heaviest the world had knowledge of and Charles' peculiar pride, had furrowed the descent down to the ancient rock which had once formed the river's bed. Upon this loosened mass the rain had poured, churning it in places to half liquid mud which gripped and held the hoofs with stubborn tenacity, in others laying bare the shelving rock, water-worn to a glacial smoothness: in either condition haste was dangerous.

Presently the camp of Saturday night was left behind and then, suddenly, with the sun high above the southern shoulders of the hills and all the vault glorious with the blue of nature's compensation there broke, as it were, a stupendous echo of the night's thunder. But Le Brocq had heard the hoarse, rumbling note too often in the past year to be deceived. Reining in his horse with a jerk he listened intently a moment, then crying an oath which made neither sense in his brain nor sound in his ears he urged on the tired beast reckless of all danger.

Danger? What danger could be counted for an instant or give him pause? The truce was ended and Mother France in grips with Italy for her life. The truce was ended and he was again too late. Fiercely he reviled himself for his wasted hours. Too late! Surely the eternal curse of man will be to have too late! dinning in his unstopped ears while all his spirit quivers with the knowledge that once there was time.

And yet, because a broken neck would be the poorest service he could offer Mother France in her need, Le Brocq was not wholly reckless. If the gilt spurs, never yet blooded, urged the pace, a firm hand, nursing the bit, chose the safest path, while with touch and voice he soothed the excited nerves into that confidence which is a rider's surest ally in times

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of stress or danger. It is then that horse and horseman seem as one. At a touch of the bridle they swerved to right or left, avoiding quag or shelving rock without breaking pace, and taking bush or boulder in a leap if only the further ground were firm. All doubt, all compunction, followed afar, limping behind as abstract duty always limps when matched with the stark necessity of the hour.

And with the cannon booming louder and louder as every minute passed the need was clamorous. And yet, what could one man do? His duty and no more; follow the gleam as he knew it; search out his Grail as the Vision drew him. For surely there be many Grails, from that which holds the Holy Blood to that where a man's unselfish service is poured out without stint and without regret? Too late? Galahad would not have been too late. But he—no Galahad, no, no Galahad. But there were many Grails, the lesser for lesser men, many—"Carefully, boy, carefully." Le Brocq steadied his horse as it stumbled. France? Yes, France; whatsoever is sacred, whatsoever is worshipful, whatsoever calls for sacrifice, whatsoever is akin to the divine: loyalty to Mother France, a life for France! Yes, many Grails! Many! A life for France? That surely was no false god?

The hills had flattened, the valley widened, underfoot the ground was firmer but heavily strewn with loose stones and boulders—a bad country for cavalry or artillery. On the right the Taro roared. Doubling a rounded spur Le Brocq drew rein, all his soldier instincts alert and speculative.

Here was life at last, life feverishly active and almost as confused in its activity as a rifled anthill. Down the slope from a broad cluster of close-packed houses whose pent roofs almost touched, so huddled were they the one upon the other in a desperate effort not to be outermost and so first open to attack, raced a mixed medley of men, knights in armour, crossbowmen, men-at-arms, each jostling each in the blind effort of their haste. Those on foot caught wildly at the

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bridles of those who galloped past, while those who rode spurred on and gave no heed or else struck fiercely back. If a rein was gripped rider and footman fought as wolves fought, to kill, making no effort at defence, and as they fought the flight gathered in upon them from right and left, swarming upon the plunging horse in a desperate struggle for possession. If a runner, deaf and blind in the terror of his panic, blocked the way the rider rode him down ruthlessly; life lay beyond. God pity the fool who intervened. Holding his breath Le Brocq leaned forward, straining his eyes. This was defeat. Defeat? It was worse—it was rout, it was disgrace. Then a hoarse cry broke from his parched throat.

"Thank God! Oh, thank God! Not France! Not France!"

But as the rout poured on, scattering as it advanced and swollen by a second stream which swept into sight upon the sloping space between the town and the river, Le Brocq grew sensible of his danger. He would be one amongst scores. In that mad ride for life it might well be that none would pause to take toll of a stranger. But what of the men on foot? That he possessed a horse was enough to mark him out as prey. If, frantic with panic, they spared not even their fellows of the camp-fire, their comrades of bite and sup, what fate might not he expect once his speech betrayed him? Turning to the left, almost at right angles, Le Brocq compelled his tired beast to a gallop, first across a ruined cornfield, then towards a vineyard marvellously spared. There, amongst the vines there was shelter.

But not unseen. From the very edge of the tide of disaster three fugitives diverged, swooping up the slope as if by common consent to cut him off. They were allies till the saddle was empty, thereafter let the strongest hold the spoil as best he could. With a practised eye Le Brocq measured his chances, but nearness favoured the attack and drawing his sword he reined round to meet it. There was no time to charge.

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Le Brocq never knew the story of the next three minutes. That he dropped the reins to free his hand he recollected, but every other memory was lost in the stress of the fierce struggle which drove the blood buzzing to his head like the roar of the Taro. He was not even conscious of the prick which galled his forearm as, instinctively, i.e. parried with flesh what he could not turn aside with steel. But when the three minutes had passed he was labouring for breath, panting like a spent runner whose lungs ache with the fierceness of the strain. One of the three lay tossing on the battered corn, a second had fled and above the third, disarmed and beaten to his knees, Le Brocq stooped aslant, his sword drawn back to thrust. A trickle of blood was wet on his left fingertips.

"Mercy, for the love of God!"

But Le Brocq was still blood-drunken. Back twitched his sword-arm for the freer stroke, lower he bent to lend weight to the fury of the blow, and at sight of the implacable face with its teeth bared and hard eyes passionately vengeful, the despairing wretch collapsed as if death itself had loosed his joints. For a moment Le Brocq hung above him in indecision, gulping for breath, then pulled himself straight in the saddle. The lust for blood had passed.

The rout still struggled down the slope. From the heart of the town came the clash of steel, the hoarse roar of voices, the pounding of hoofs upon the cobble pavement. Rousing his horse Le Brocq entered the vineyard and at a trot turned down an alley between the vines skirting the town upon his right. The prick below his elbow smarted like a galled scratch but the blood had ceased to trickle. Beyond the vineyard stretched a wheatfield, flattened by the night's rain, beyond that a pasture and beyond the pasture— Le Brocq stiffened his loosened muscles and spurred on at a gallop.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### FORNOVO

BEYOND the pasture the approach to the northern gate of the town, Fornovo, was a-swarm with battling life. Versed in the ways of camps Le Brocq, as he rode forward, made a shrewd guess at what had been the sequence of events. The King had couched at Fornovo, in the town itself. Here, on the northern slope, the general camp had been pitched, with open country before it for the new days march. On the right flank, beyond the Taro, not half a league away, lay the confederate enemy, their tents still visible among the trees on the hill they occupied down to the very bank of the river. That morning the King had marched out in the triple formation common to his custom, the van, the main body, the rear guard. That morning, too, the truce had ended and the French, swerving to the right, had halted to pour their artillery fire across the river, and the Italians, weaker in gun power, had forded the river higher up to fall upon the rear.

Then the almost inevitable had happened. The Greek mercenaries, alien in race and creed, inspired by no sense of patriotism, serving alone for pay and plunder and finding the former chiefly in the latter, fell upon the French baggage-train and the rear guard, facing round, had charged, driving the unsupported men-at-arms to rout; they, meeting their own reinforcements had drawn them into the irresistible current of their panic. Then had followed a pursuit with such fierce and ill-considered ardour

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that Milanese infantry, Venetian men-at-arms, Greek mercenaries, the French attack and the whole horde of camp followers, grooms, valets, sutlers, hangers-on, had been gulfed in the one vortex of confusion.

But the confusion was clearing. Those who could escape had fled, some through the town, some beneath its walls by the river's bank, followed hard by the French horse, and war in its grimmest, most inglorious image held the field. War? It was rank murder. Scattered about the wide space were scores of struggling groups where the hemmed-in remnant of the attack fought desperately in that second, wolfish law of nature which abandons self-preservation as hopeless, and strives at any cost to drag a foe to a common destruction.

Quarter? None was asked, and none would have been granted by these scullions of the camp armed with butcher-knives, meat-axes, wood-choppers, and aflame with the lust for blood. Even to loosen the head-piece of a fallen enemy was too slow for their hot impatience. With one blow of a wood-axe they cracked the casque as one cracks a walnut with the heel and the next stroke clove the skull to a pulp. Quarter? As well talk to jackals of quarter when a stag is down and their teeth in its throat. The insane thirst for blood which has so often parched France was upon them and nothing less than satiation could quench it.

The turmoil split the ears with its tumult. From every side there were cries and shouts, foul cursing and still fouler laughter, the clang of metal on metal, the sharp snap of breaking steel and a last horrible scream, part protest, part defiance, whole despair. War? Who is there does not hold its fierce and cruel arbitrament in detestation, crying denunciation upon the horrors whose naked miseries exhaust language and beggar imagination? Of all the false gods who claimed an open worship in the name of the divine was there one more foul? Desolated and dishonoured homes were his altars, the reek of burn-

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ing cities his incense, wailing and lamentation his hymns of praise, the lives of men, the innocence of women, the happiness and prosperity of nations his offerings of propitiation. And yet at times a Bayard, a Sidney, a Havelock and, God be thanked, a thousand more lent even war a Christian greatness and a tender dignity; or a splendid, generous courage, a devotion of self-sacrifice, shed a relieving light of glory upon the lurid terror of the picture.

But here there was neither courage nor devotion, here there was not one generous instinct, nothing but the lust to kill for killing's sake and to set the blood aflame with the sight of blood. They even turned, red-handed, on Le Brocq when, tingling with blent shame and rage, he charged down upon the nearest struggling group. But the down-thrust furious face, the stern command in their own tongue and, above all, the naked sword, already reddened and held poised to enforce the order to stand aside from their prey, made for discretion and they drew back, snarling curses.

"Galahad!" said one who had seen the knighting, "damn Galahad!" But the fellow, a camp-butcher by trade, who knelt above the fallen man, his poll-axe already swung up to strike, held his hand.

"Vive Galahad of the Army!" said he. "Get upon your feet, swine, and fight for your life. Stand back there, you others." Rising, he motioned to his fellow jackals to give them room. "For once in my life I'll be a gentleman! Get upon your feet, I say, and fight."

For a moment the Milanese lay still, dazed by the blow which had cracked his head-piece, then rolling on his elbow he pushed himself to his knees and looked about him. Part of the casque had fallen aside leaving his head half bare. A trickle of blood ran from a jagged bruise at the temple. Mechanically he smeared it dry with the flat of his hand and stumbled to his feet. In the other hand he still held the sword he had drawn after flinging away the

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lance which should have driven the French into the Taro.

"Smell that!" Suddenly the butcher pushed forward the head of his poll-axe. "It will smell your brains in a minute. Are you ready? hey?"

At the menace the Italian stepped back, pushing aside the axe with his reddened palm and again looked about him dazedly.

"He does not understand," said Le Brocq. "He speaks no French, nor is he fit to fight."

"With respect, messire," said the butcher, "a poll-axe has a tongue of its own all the world over. As to not fighting, it's either fight or go down like a bullock and I don't care a maravedi which. It'll be the same in the end, and with this sport all round us we have no time to waste on tourney rules. Art ready, swine?" and this time the poll-axe held a threat not to be mistaken.

Stepping back, the Italian tugged at his gorget, loosened and flung aside the remains of the splintered casque, brushed his smeared hand twice or thrice across his face to clear the sight and put himself on guard. But Le Brocq, watching keenly, saw it was not the guard he would have used had sword met sword.

"Vive Galahad of the Shambles!" cried the groom who had cursed Le Brocq. "Make haste, Guiton, I'll knight thee with the poll-axe afterwards."

"Like a gentleman for once," said the butcher. Montjoie! Saint Denis! Set on, France, set on!" and rushed on, laughing, to finish the mockery of a struggle at a stroke.

But the Milanese leaped back, parried the vicious thrust of the axe-head which should have staggered him, swept round the blade in a circle, shore the axe-handle clean across below the iron head and in a continued movement caught his enemy with a lunge between the left upper arm. He jerked free the blade and sprang back a pace, laughing. For an instant the butcher swayed, then, his mouth still open for laughter,

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lurched forward on his face, beat the earth feebly with his hands and lay still.

"Run!" cried Le Brocq in Italian and pushed his horse forward, "run for your life."

And there was need for the advice. While Guiton, as they had called him, still clawed feebly at the world he had loved so well his fellows were in full cry for revenge. Over his body they went at a stride, none pausing so much as to turn him on his back. But the Italian, his wits sharpened by necessity, had been yet prompter and held a five-yard lead. Le Brocq, forcing a detour with his horse, made the five eight: in the alleys of Fornovo there was safety. Townward he raced at top speed, his long black hair lifted from his neck by the wind. The heat of the brief combat and the fear of death had cleared his brain from the shock of Guiton's pole-axe. Burdened by neither greaves nor cuisses he ran freely, his teeth set, his breath held pent. Foot by foot he gained on the straining, silent pack behind him. Fornovo! Fornovo and hope! Fornovo and life!—then he slipped and on the instant they were upon him in a heap.

Almost sickened Le Brocq turned away. As he had said to Antonina Caldora, there are many things in war not to be spoken of and here was one of them. The battling groups were fewer now because of scores of such silent reasons as Guiton and the Milanese. That pillage should follow murder was natural. From the slaughtered bowmen and men-at-arms the camp scum turned to the baggage waggons, overturned by the Greeks in their greed for spoil. These, part rifled, were speedily whole sacked; that it was their own army they robbed counted for nothing. But as Le Brocq hesitated, weighing the value of intervention, he was called by name.

"Le Brocq! Le Brocq! Help! Help!"

"Who calls?" cried Le Brocq, rising in his stirrups as he looked round him.

"P--e—Soderini—help! Ah, my God—"

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If bitter need had sharpened the first cry poignant despair rang through the second. But it was the shout of triumph, half drowning the cry, which drew Le Brocq—the shout, and the sudden toppling of a mailed figure from the saddle to be fastened on with a fierce savagery which spoke the beast rather than the man.

"Le Brocq!" The cry was muffled by the hands fumbling at the visor to unfasten the gorget and lay bare the throat. Once that was done—"Le Brocq! Le Brocq!"

But Le Brocq was already stooping over the straining, panting heap who wrenched at the unaccustomed fastenings. Never had there been such need for his great strength and never had he so exerted it. Gripping a jerkin collar with each hand he slung two of the assailants sprawling on their backs; striking right and left with clenched fists he drove off two more and clutching a fifth in both hands flung him aside with such a will that he rolled five yards away; then, bestriding Soderini, he menaced them as they rose. His sword was sheathed, nor did he draw it.

"Damn you for cowardly curs! Murder him, would you? Stand back, or by God there'll be murder done on you, not him." An instant's pause followed as, bewildered and uncertain at this sudden reversal of the wheel, they looked at one another. "You know me—Sir Roger Le Brocq." It was the first time he had spoken his new honour and even in the emotion of his excitement a thrill ran through him. "What I say I'll do. God forbid," he touched the sword at his thigh, "God forbid I should slay a Frenchman, but stand back or by the same God I'll do it."

Again there was a pause. The sixth, who still knelt at Soderini's side, drew slowly back on his heels, his eyes fixed fearfully on Le Brocq's flushed face. Then he rose and Soderini pushed himself to his elbow behind Le Brocq.

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"He is our meat; by all the laws he's our meat."

"Then come and take your meat," answered Le Brocq grimly.

But they dared not. All their lives they had served authority and now its assertion cowed them. More than that; they were units, lacking that mutual confidence of support which soldier gives to soldier. And, above all, they knew the man they had to deal with. If Guise had forgotten the man of Folignano the grooms and scullions of the baggage train remembered. He had slain Frenchmen before and would again if driven. What chance had their cudgels and butcher's knives against such a man, and as they hesitated Soderini rose beside Le Brocq.

"Their meat, am I!" His smattering of French had caught the repetition and the phrase galled him. "I'll show them whose meat I am."

But Le Brocq pushed him back. "Begone, all of you," he said sternly. "And you, Soderini, get back to your own lines if you can."

"Not before I— Malediction! they're gone. They caught me unawares, I swear they did. My accursed horse took fright and before I had him controlled they were round me like hornets. Then when they nuzzled at my throat—Le Brocq, I—" He stopped short, snatching off a gauntlet impulsively. But Le Brocq drew back from the outstretched hand.

"Not for a King's ransom. Do you think a mouthful of thanks wipes out a night's insults? Get to your lines lest French cowards take you unawares the second time."

For a moment Soderini stood motionless, but as Le Brocq turned away he thrust his hand into its gauntlet again and laughed.

"To our next meeting, Sir Roger le Galahad! Nor will my hand be empty."

Le Brocq made no answer. During the truce the story of his knighting must have leaked to the Italian camp. The wonder was that Antonina Caldora's name

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had not been flung at him in a ribald jest. But reinforcements from the main body were driving back the rioters and at the threat of their dispersal Soderini had ridden for his life. Le Brocq was not the man to push his personal feud at such a time.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### HOW THE LESSER MAY BE THE GREATER

CATCHING one of the many horses wandering loose about the slope Le Brocq adjusted its length of stirrup-leather and mounted. Pillage had already ceased, and order in part restored by a rough justice which laid not a few of the rioters on the same red field with Guiton and his antagonist. It was swift, stern and sudden, but it was almost more merciful than the slow hanging which must have followed a more formal trial. Hailing a Swiss, Le Brocq asked the King's whereabouts.

"Back beyond," was the answer, given with a jerk of the head.

"How far?"

"A bow-shot—two—no distance," and skirting the block of baggage waggons Le Brocq rode on.

Here the main attack had been repulsed and how desperate the sharp, brief shock had been was terribly clear. That was the first thought suggested by the red harvest; the second was that even from the very beginning the struggle had been less a repulse than a rout. There had been no ordered battle; the dead lay in tossed heaps, three and four deep, as if, in blind flight, one had stumbled upon the other to be butchered, helpless, where they fell. The French were very few. Now, across the field, small search-parties passed from heap to heap, but there were no wounded, or almost none. Le Brocq did not pause to ask himself why. The scene on the slope between the baggage-train and Fornove was too fresh in his memory.

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Nor did he exult in the victory. That the poor rags of humanity were not French—yes, he thanked God for that ; that the passage to the Alps would now be clear and unchallenged, though not for him—again yes. But however stout men's hearts may be in the shock of fight, however pride, emulation and the thirst for glory may spur them to desperate courage, however lust to kill, feeding on its own creation, may drive them to fury and excess, there can be, even to the victor, little more than shame, little more than regret, when he looks down upon and across his field of dead. They are no longer enemies. They are men, his fellows, men who loved their country as he loves his, men who died for her as he would die : but for the mercy of God he would have been one of them—where is there room for exultation ? Le Brocq saw none. Lifting his cap he rode on, bareheaded.

Beyond the battlefield were heavy bodies of troops, some still in the confusion natural to a repulsed attack, others compact and steady, the reserves never called upon for action ; still further and the van, under Monsieur de Guise, held its position. From all sides came the ring of hoofs on the stony ground, the rattle of armour, orders shouted, the call of bugles, a feverish activity grimly in contrast to the quiet of those who had been feverishly active so short a time before.

Stragglers were already returning from the pursuit. Brunet, one of these, hailed Le Brocq. From him he learned the history of the morning. It had been much as he had surmised : the battle had not lasted half an hour, the pursuit not much longer, but the attack had cost the Italians almost as many thousands as the French had lost hundreds. Side by side the two men rode at a walk, Brunet talking with all the full-mouthed satisfaction of the man who has seen and done to the man who was too late.

"Little Charles was splendid ! He gave not the least thought to himself but charged again and again and always in advance of the line. No one would

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have known him for the slow dawdler he is." He paused a moment, looking down at Le Brocq's spurred heel. "You were wiser than all the rest of us three days ago. There he is now and I'll wager if he calls either of us it will not be the man who has just fought his battle and helped him win it."

And pessimism was justified of its child. Charles, riding past, the centre of a gay group where the courtier and the soldier were curiously blent, caught sight of these two as, in common with all, they drew rein, and drew rein in turn.

"Le Brocq! Hey! Come here," he cried, beckoning.

"I said so," grumbled Brunet under his breath, "and all because of a pack of grey women who look sour at the world because the world has looked sour at them."

"I was too late, sire," said Le Brocq, pausing a little distance short of the halted group. The Cardinal, he noted, was not one of them, nor Commynes. Charles laughed.

"Too late? It was Mantua who was too early for his own comfort; hey, gentlemen?"

"Yes, sire," answered one, "he had better have overslept himself this morning."

"Well, they sleep soundly enough now," said another, throwing out a hand towards the field of the dead as he spoke. "Not even the guns waken them."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, that is no cause for jest," answered Charles. "God, He knows, it grieves me—" He broke off suddenly as a horseman galloped up. "Yes, Monsieur de Chousy, what are the figures?"

"On our side, sire, not a hundred."

"God be thanked for His mercies." Baring his head the King crossed himself, nor was there anything perfunctory in his devotion. Charles meant what he said, meant it from his heart. "And the enemy?"

"The counting is not nearly completed, sire, but so far there are more than six hundred—"

"Six hundred? Monsieur de Mantua has much to

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answer for. All we sought was a free passage to France. But he denied it and—six hundred! And the count not yet nearly finished! Lay these wasted lives at his door, oh Lord, not at mine. God knows I desire no man's death."

"They brought it on themselves, sire."

"They? Poor sheep! Mantua, not they. And if it were so would it make them more alive? Gentlemen, we will ride no further." His eyes fell upon Le Brocq. "God be praised, it is not all death and loss. Here is one who brings news of a life preserved. Your charge is safe, Sir Roger Le Brocq?"

"Yes, sire, I believe—that is, I hope so." Le Brocq stammered as he spoke. It was strange how suddenly, how completely, the foundations of his assurance crumbled under him at the sudden question. Was he sure that Antonina Caldora was absolutely safe?

"Hope? Believe? What do you mean by hope and believe? Why, man, surely you know for certain?"

"It is a long story, sire."

"Tell it briefly."

The gay chatter had ceased and the group of soldier-courtiers surrounding the King was keenly attentive. Sudden advancement such as Le Brocq's, is rarely popular with the individual, especially when it is for a virtue he does not himself possess. The King's reference to Foligiano had been repeated. Foligiano! If there had been as many Le Brocqs as there had been Foligianos Charles would have led north an army appreciably weaker. Two days before they had cheered, but that had been part policy and part the nature which is easily warmed to emotion by a touch of pageantry. Now policy had shifted with the King's displeasure, emotion had cooled and some, at least, were not sorry that Le Brocq, who had climbed the ladder of favour so quickly should tumble yet more quickly. In every community there are those who imagine that the fall of another sets their own scale soaring.

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"Well, sir, well?" burst out Charles, as Le Brocq remained dumb in his embarrassment.

"I hardly know where to begin, sire."

"At the end. Where is the nun I gave into your charge?"

"She is not a nun, sire; she has taken no vows."

"Signorina Caldora then, where is she? Do you fence words and terms with me?"

"God forbid, sire. While we were still half an hour from Fonzano we were set upon by these same masterless men—"

"And you?"

"Surrendered, sire." From the group beyond the King someone laughed, but though Le Brocq reddened he went on steadily, "To have fought and died, leaving the girl helpless, would have been more cowardly."

"Then she is not left helpless?"

"She is safe I believe, sire."

But Narbonne, who rode at the King's left, broke in impatiently,

"Sire, we have no time to waste. There is the safety of the army to be seen to. If Sir Roger Le Brocq would come to the point. Where is the lady?"

"At the Hermitage of Saint Cyprian."

"And where the devil is that? Your pardon, sire, but—to use your own word—this fencing would vex a saint. Where is this Hermitage?"

"In the mountains. It is the camp of—of—these men," ended Le Brocq lamely.

A profound and most ominous silence followed, but when Narbonne would again have spoken Charles motioned him sharply aside.

"Whose camp, Sir Roger Le Brocq? Margotti's?"

"Yes, sire, and—"

"Now God give me patience! Here is an unhappy woman, helpless, alone, a child almost, and—" But Narbonne leaning forward interposed.

"Look, sire, Commines and His Eminence. This must wait."

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Charles, his long, pale face flushed with a quite unaccustomed passion, turned furiously at the interruption, but almost instantly controlled himself.

"You are right, Narbonne, quite right. The safety of the army comes first though this galls me to the very soul." Pausing, he looked round him searching, then beckoned impatiently. "Mourant, see to it that Sir Roger Le Brocq does not leave the camp on any pretext whatever, you understand?—not on any pretext whatever, and bring him to me in three hours."

"Sire, take my parole."

"Your parole? And what of the promise you gave the priest before the altar at Apollonia?—my life for hers, my honour for hers; and now her life and honour are left to that devil Margotti, and you are here with your skin whole. No, Sir Roger Le Brocq, I shall take no parole. See to it, Mourant." And, followed by his staff, Charles rode off to meet Commynes and the Cardinal.

Only one of the group held back, a slender, clear-eyed, frank-faced lad not yet twenty who, that very morning, had been knighted on the field by the King. Riding across to Le Brocq he held out his hand.

"It will all come right, Le Brocq. We know you too well to doubt that. There is an explanation I am sure."

"Thank you, Bayard," answered Le Brocq soberly. "Yes; the explanation is that a man's clenched fist is bigger than the sun, and yet there is always light to walk by."

These were three grey hours for Le Brocq, with Mourant always at his shoulder to remind him that his honour was suspect. The crowded life of the camp was busy upon every side, a life full of an eager, almost passionate energy but which held no place for him. He was as alien from it as the few prisoners who shared his inactivity—more alien, for surely the man who would and may not, is more an outcast than he who would not even if he could.

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Nor was this enforced idleness while others toiled in the old familiar round, this rejected service where labour was insufficient for the clamorous needs of the hour, the hurt which galled Le Brocq the deepest. Without word said or charge made he was already accepted as guilty and disgraced. It bit him to the very soul that comrades of a year's campaign gave him no greeting, that even Brunet passed him by with head averted—Brunet, who barely an hour before had grudged him his good fortune. Side by side he had fought in the same cause with them, day by day he had starved with them, night by night he had watched with them. Through these strenuous, terrible weeks, with death for ever at their elbow, surely they should have come to know him and trust him for the man he was? But no; uncondemned, untried, at a breath of a King's disfavour he was to them worse than plague-stricken—an outcast, whom to recognize was to risk advancement. Yes, that bit and rankled.

Dully, his interest blunted almost to incomprehension, he watched the manifold labours denied his love for France; the pitching the tents, the setting the guards, the building and lighting the camp-fires, the unpacking and bestowal of the baggage-train, the hasty sepulture of the dead. This was by turns a difficult and an easy task as pick and shovel lit upon boulder-rock or cut their way through gravel, but whether deep or shallow the pit, and without word spoken, the ground was holy, divinely consecrated by the blood poured out in defence of throne and nation. What other consecration of their last resting-place did they need, these dead? Surely next to "Blessed be the dead who die in the Lord," must come, Blessed be the dead who die that their land may live.

Through these grey hours Le Brocq neither spoke to Mourant nor Mourant to him, and it was a relief when he was touched on the shoulder.

"Come, monsieur, it is time."

Charles had dined. The space before the hut

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where he was lodged—a hovel even more miserable than that at Salegna—was the very heart and centre of the camp. Every minute brought its shift of animation as horsemen came and went with reports or orders, or the leaders of the army brought congratulations, sought instructions or pushed some claim for recognition. Small detached groups of the King's staff and chief officials stood here and there, informally discussing what a council must decide later on. From one of these the King advanced to meet Maurant and Le Brocq.

"Wait here," he said curtly to the former, and "Follow me," as curtly to the latter. His face was grave to severity, his full underlip pushed out above the obstinate, long chin. At the door of the cottage he paused. "In ten minutes, gentlemen," he called out in a loud voice, then turned into the one bare room the hut afforded. A rough-hewn table, a bench and a massive wooden stool were its furnishings; a truss of straw covered by a riding-cloak was scattered in a corner.

"You heard me, so be brief. Why are you in the camp, Sir Roger Le Brocq?"

"God knows, sire, I thought it my duty."

"Leave His name out. Men take it too lightly into their mouths to cover their faults and follies. Why are you in the camp I ask you again?"

Briefly, baldly, spurred to compression by the King's temper and the shortness of the time, Le Brocq told the story of the past two days, explaining nothing, extenuating nothing except by inference. And without shift of expression Charles listened. Once, only, he interrupted. It was when Le Brocq referred to Adorno as an honourable man.

"Honourable? A thief and a leader of thieves? A cheat? Guilty of sacrilege and an imputed murderer? Yet you call him honourable?"

"I hold myself honourable, sire, yet I am here. A man may fail in nine points of the law and keep the tenth. Had I not believed Adorno honourable

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in this thing, I would not be here. It is his power, not his honour, I doubt."

"Go on," said Charles, and heard him in silence to the end. Then, his hands locked behind his back, his head sunk forward, he paced slowly back and forth along the narrow length of the cramped space while Le Brocq, erect, waited his sentence. Halting midway the King held out his left hand.

"Give me your sword."

So that was the end! Le Brocq's heart stumbled as if it dropped a beat, but his hands were steady as, silently, he unloosed the fastening at the belt and placed the sheath in the outstretched hand. His face had lost its ruddy comeliness. Stiffening his shoulders rigidly back he waited while Charles, the sheath caught in his left hand behind his back, his right gripping the left wrist, resumed his walk, his head bowed as before. Through the small window, unglazed and unshuttered, the many voices of the camp spoke a message which had never before seemed so full of meaning, or so good to listen to. Antonina Caldora was right, his heart was with the army. A second time the King halted.

"I believe you believed yourself justified," he said harshly, nor was there the accustomed hesitancy in his words. "If I did not so believe I would break you as the armourer would break this sword." He paused, partly to set his thoughts in order, partly because much speaking was not his habit, but there was no dulness in the eyes which looked up to Le Brocq's greater height with a dignity which made light of inches. "Your fault is this. This service seemed too small to you. When it was laid upon you your cry was, The army! The army! or, My feud with Soderini! You forgot you were vowed, first a knight of Almighty God, then of France, and that in the service of God Almighty there is nothing small." Again he paused; but Le Brocq made no appeal, no protest, attempted no exculpation. He knew the King, he was diffident of his own

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judgment, but being decided he was immovable. "The small things of God Almighty are the greatness of life. Once, says the scripture, there was a man who had one talent committed to him: a little thing, he thought, but it was as big as the gate of heaven and he missed it. A man's nearest duty is the greatest thing upon earth, Sir Roger Le Brocq, and its seeming smallness does not lessen its greatness." This time his pause was brief and it seemed to Le Brocq that the severity softened from the face. "One command I lay on you. Should you meet that braggart, Soderini, I forbid you to fight with him; you are not your own while your vow at Apollonia binds you. Follow me."

As Charles crossed the threshold the buzz of talk in the immediate neighbourhood died away and the scattered groups turned expectantly. Not much longer than the allotted ten minutes had passed. That argued ill for Le Brocq, but the sword in the King's hand argued yet worse. Stepping aside Charles motioned Le Brocq to halt.

"Sir Roger Le Brocq's fault was one of proportion, he mistook the lesser duty for the greater. But the man who makes no mistakes makes nothing." A gleam of humour crossed his face as, his eyes upon Commines, he quoted Le Brocq's excusal of Commines' outburst. He turned to Le Brocq. "Before all the camp I ordered you into arrest; before all the camp I give you back your sword. You know your duty, go and do it."

A silence followed. The King's decision was unpopular. Some were jealous for their Order which, they thought, Le Brocq had disgraced; others were merely jealous of Le Brocq himself; yet others were impatient at what seemed to them a waste of time; what did it matter that an obscure squire of yesterday had stumbled in some fanciful duty, or broken some obsolete law of a dying chivalry?

With the same strange sense of remoteness which had beset him two days before Le Brocq knelt, but

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before he took the sword held out to him he touched with his lips the hand which held it. No words were spoken, but the dumb salute was a consecration to obedience and service more binding than any vehemence of protest. Rising, he buckled the sword in its accustomed place and stepped back.

"God be with you, Sir Roger Le Brocq," said Charles. "You have our permission to go."

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### THE GREY CAT SCRATCHES

ACCORDING to every law, but that of probabilities Le Brocq should have met Soderini in his ride hillward and southward, should have been goaded to fight by insult of word and hand, should have been tongue-whipped with bitter scorn and contempt for his refusal because of the King's command and, pursued by contumely, should have gone upon his way drawing what cold comfort he might from the knowledge that virtue is its own reward.

But where Soderini was Soderini and His Maker alone knew. Misjudging the strength of the current after the night's rains the Taro had caught him, swirled, eddied, buffeted him, spun him and his beast round in a veritable dance of death, then toppled him sidelong into the frothing waters. The weight of his armour did the rest. Soderini was dead, slain by the very defence he trusted in. When the fury of the spate had passed it would have been hard to tell where God's handiwork began and man's ended, so battered was he; certainly none could say, This was Soderini.

And because of the spate Le Brocq, who quitted the camp after no better dinner than half a loaf and a drink of muddy water, gained nothing by his prompt obedience. Every summer trickle was swollen to a torrent, every shallow stream brimmed brown and frothing, every valley ford roared defiance. Twice, at a risk to his life greater than Soderini would have been, he forced a passage where two days before he

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and Antonina Caldora had crossed dry shod. But the third said "No" to his "Yes" with such a thunderous voice that common prudence halted him. To drown needlessly in a ditch is a poor advancement of the greater glory of God. There was nothing for it but to wait, which is at once the simplest and the hardest task of life.

Because of these delays, because, too, the mountain road was gapped and seamed to danger-point at many places, setting a drag on progress, it was hard upon the hour fixed by Adorno when Le Brocq quitted the highway and turned to the left under the trees. That he did not add actual starvation to fatigue was because it is the poor who are good to the poor. Thrice, out of their need, peasants had given him of the best their poverty provided, but for two nights he had known no sleep. His eyes were sunken, his whole face haggard, and Antonina Caldora would no longer have made a jest of his youth.

Matteo, who had gained a life through Vanelli's scruples, was on guard. Le Brocq guessed Adorno had warned him of his coming for he neither challenged nor expressed surprise.

"The *padrone*?"

"Within." The laconic answer was sourly given as if the defeat at Saint Apollonia still rankled.

"And," Le Brocq hesitated, "all well?"

Matteo grinned, but still sourly. Like Margotti he had seen a certain hand-clasp, like Margotti, too, he had drawn an inference strengthened by Le Brocq's return; why else, if not for this Caldora woman, would he thrust his head into the wasps' nest needlessly?

"How should I know! She keeps indoors."

Conscious of a blunder, Le Brocq rode on. All through he had blundered. He should never have left the Hermitage. And why had he left it? Lest Adorno should say this or think that! That was a fool's reason, since no man, sure of himself, need care what is said or thought; and if ever a man was sure of himself it was Le Brocq.

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At the Hermitage itself his coming attracted little attention. A stranger to him, a hill peasant by his dress, came forward and took his horse. If there was no courtesy neither was there deliberate insolence, only the boorishness natural to his upbringing. For an instant Le Brocq hesitated—should he ask a second time for Adorno? But he decided no! It would be better first to hear Antonina Caldora's story of the two days. Lifting the latch of the refectory door he entered quietly.

Afterwards Le Brocq was inclined to believe that she heard the click and rasp as the door opened and shut, but she gave no sign of having heard. Only one person in all the camp claimed or dared use the right of entrance, and to him she was contemptuously indifferent. If he forced his privilege unduly she had a way of escape to the inner room, should he abuse his right by following her, her way of escape lay ready to her hand; and Antonina Caldora, driven to extremities, would have hesitated as little over one escape as over the other. But whether she heard or not she remained motionless where she sat, facing the door from the further end of the trestle table, her elbows on its edge, her head bowed in her hands, the fingers lost in the loose folds of the hair. Le Brocq moved forward a step.

"Signorina."

With a choked catch in her breath she straightened herself and rose slowly, her finger-tips resting on the flat of the trestle. To Le Brocq she seemed taller, more slender than before, frailer, almost wasted, at once more childlike and more womanly; certainly the eyes were hollowed, the cheeks sunken, the face paler, gentler, sweet with that gentle sweetness which comes of resignation and sorrowful thought. Later he knew that the change was in part due to a change of dress; the grey frock was still there, but it was no longer the shapeless robe of the sisterhood. By some cunning of adaptation it had been secularized, and with the change beauty had been reborn in form and

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grace. But for the moment he recognized no detail, saw nothing save the slim straight figure and the pale beauty of her troubled face; then a light woke in the tired eyes and the pallor died.

"You!" The very gladness in the voice was a reproach greater than the upbraiding of words and it stirred Le Brocq as the appeal of her gentler beauty had stirred him. "You have come back! Oh! thank God you have come back, thank God! thank God! I was so very lonely, so—so afraid."

"Afraid? Adorno? Has he dared—"

"No, no, no; not that, not that, but—" Sinking down on the settle she leaned forward on the table, her arms folded under her, and broke out sobbing. "I was so lonely. There was no one and—and I am not as brave as I thought I was." For a moment there was silence as, shaken with sobs, she drew her breath deeply, then she sat up, wiping the tears from her cheeks with the flat of her hand. "But why did you come back to this horrible place? That was the one comfort I had—that you were safe with—with the army you love; and now, you have come back! That is because you are Galahad! No one but you would have come back—no one."

"I should never have gone," replied Le Brocq, then went on hesitatingly like one who feared bad news. "Signorina, these two days, have they been—?"

"Hush, we must not speak of them except to say, Thank God, they are past! I am not afraid any longer."

But he persisted. "You said you were afraid. What frightened you?"

"Everything—I frightened myself I think. Then, the noise outside, the knowing who they were and—and what they were. Always I could hear them singing, talking, whispering. Even when it was quiet I could hear them whispering, or thought I did. And once, it was in my room there, at night, I could not sleep and had a wick burning and through the window there came a terrible bare arm. It had

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no hand, but it groped this way and that as if it had, groped and groped until I could feel the fingers fumbling at me, and there were no fingers, only the red scar of the wrist, and I lay watching, waiting—"

"Damnation," said Le Brocq between his teeth. "Where was Adorno? Have you told Adorno? There must be an end to this devilment."

But already she had stiffened. "I can ask nothing of Signor Adorno, nor must you for me. He would not understand and that would be worse. Besides," the sudden hardness of the face grew pathetic as she hesitated, "how can I blame him? Not Adorno, I don't mean Adorno, that other poor wretch. In his place would you hate us any less?"

"Still," began Le Brocq, "you should have told—" But the door behind him opened quietly and Adorno entered.

He, too, had changed for the worse in the two days. His dress was carefully neat, there was even some prompt at fashion and refinement, but the lines of his handsome face had deepened; small wrinkles cobwebbed the temples and the mouth was harshly set. A student of men would have said that he had lived too much with his own thoughts and found them evil companions.

To the girl his bow was almost exaggerated in its deference, but to Le Brocq he offered no greeting bad or good and his tone was an insult.

"So, monsieur, this is the way you report yourself?"

"There was no need to report. All your camp knew of my return."

"That may be French manners but with us a parole should surrender himself. A man of honour would have come direct to me."

The girl forestalled Le Brocq's reply.

"Parole? Were you under bond to return?"

"To Fra Giovanni, yes."

She turned on Adorno, her eyes blazing. "Is it not enough to cheat with dice that you must cog men's honour to your advantage? And you," she

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confronted Le Brocq, nor did her voice soften, "you could leave me here alone to eat my heart out in terror without a hope? And they call you Galahad! Galahad? God ha' mercy, but a good name is easily won in France. Galahad? Would you have left a trollop of your camp among such soulless wretches without one word of comfort or hope? Not you! She's part and parcel of the my you worship, while I—I am nothing—"

"Shame, Nina, shame!" It was Adorno who broke the storm, his voice as hard as her own. "You women have short memories."

"Would they were shorter," she retorted hotly, "for already I remember too much." But Adorno went on without a pause,

"Monsieur Le Brocq was under a double parole—silence and to return."

"Why silence?"

"Because I ordered silence and I am master."

"That may be a cause but is no reason; why silence?" she repeated, the spot of angry red spreading on her cheeks.

"Because," said Adorno slowly, "I had a mind to see whether Le Brocq stands where I stood six months ago. Months? No! Days! Six days ago!"

The flush spread swiftly to forehead and neck but she faced him without a tremor.

"A trap for a helpless woman! What a gallant gentleman it is! He murders, he thieves, he lies, he deceives, and then he marvels that knowledge pours a contempt upon him which only ignorance held back. And you, Monsieur Le Brocq, lent yourself to this most honourable scheme! Do you make a third with Margotti?"

"Le Brocq had no option."

"Option!" she echoed contemptuously, "as much option as you had with the cogged dice still unthrown; you could have held your hand and this other honourable gentleman could have thrust a 'no!' down your throat. As I have done," she added,

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"and as I always shall do. I give you good-night, gentlemen." Without even the mockery of a salute she turned to the inner room, pushing the door behind her, and they heard the bolt shot.

For a moment Adorno faced Le Brocq, expecting the outburst of censure and recrimination he would have welcomed. But none came and he shrugged his shoulders tolerantly.

"Was there ever such a termagant? She's untameable."

"Then why pen her up? Surely after such plain speech—"

"That will change. Passion will take on a different complexion. I can wait. Was there a battle?"

"Yes, but I was too late."

"And—"

"Our victory."

"Ours?" repeated Adorno gloomily, "ours? I suppose so. But what country have I? And all for nothing! No! by God, it shall not be for nothing. A termagant to-day, to-morrow—well, moods change and I can wait. Soderini?"

"I—" Le Brocq hesitated, "I do not know where he is."

"Could you not find him?"

"Yes, but—"

Adorno laughed. Behind the door Antonina Caldora lifted her hot face from the pillow and listened; it was not a pleasant laugh. Perhaps it was without intention that he raised his voice.

"You surrender to Margotti as tamely as a sheep, you are too late for the battle, you meet Soderini but know nothing of him; and yet you wear steel! Perhaps you can use steel for your supper, Sir Roger Le Brocq! I will send Brigitta to set it for you."

And Le Brocq answered him never a word. Of what use was a protest which must end in words only? The King's voice was in his ears, "You are not your own while your vow at Apollonia binds you."

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Still laughing Adorno closed the door behind him noisily, leaving Le Brocq bitterly resentful behind his mask of calm. Almost suddenly he was conscious that he was very tired. For two nights he had not slept, five times within four days he had made the mountain journey up or down, for two days he had eaten little and badly. Yet he knew it was not these which had sapped his powers. Muscularly his great frame was unexhausted; fatigued, yes, healthily fatigued, but not exhausted. Upon necessity he could have duplicated the four days, the labour of the four days that is, and still held some reserve of strength. And yet he was very tired. It was as if his very spirit ached. His failure lay heavy upon him and what burden is so crushing? And it was failure without redemption, failure utter and unrelieved. He had vowed at Apollonia and failed; he had pledged to Soderini and failed; France had fought for her life, had need of him and he had failed, and now he had failed his charge a second time.

Profoundly weary Le Brocq seated himself at the table, leaning his head on his hands as the girl had done, and as he did so the bolt was shot softly back. Opening the door Antonina Caldora stood for a moment, a grey shadow of silence in its framework.

"Monsieur." It was such a meek voice that Le Brocq, deaf in his bitter self-arraignment, heard nothing. "Monsieur!" This time she was more insistent and he looked miserably up. "I was a beast just now and your King was right. But what can a cat do but scratch? Though I did not mean to scratch, at least not you. But when cats lose their tempers—I was a cat, I know I was—they scratch even their friends. Monsieur, is the cat forgiven? Oh, do not look at me with such piteous eyes; they hurt me, and I shall never forgive myself. Where have you been, what have you done these two days, that you look so tired, so worn and old and ill? And I, in my little foolish passion, saw nothing. Why is it? What has done it?"

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"It is nothing, signorina."

"Do not call me signorina. No one called me that except—" She broke off, her face flushing. "We may be pent here for—all my life or his. I do not like signorina, it is too—too far off. You must be the big wise brother and I the foolish little sister—when I am not a cat. But I don't think the cat will scratch again. Now tell me why you are so worn and grey? You will not? Then I must find out for myself. Where did you sleep last night?"

"Nowhere."

"And the night before?"

"Nowhere."

"And there was a battle?"

"Yes, but I was too late."

"Late? Did you not fight at all? Did you kill no one?"

"I think there was one."

"And you call that too late?" Le Brocq had risen and she paused, her eyes searching him keenly.

"What is that on your sleeve?"

"Nothing, nothing at all."

"Show me. Yes," she insisted, "I must see for myself, so you may as well show me first as last." With drawn brows and teeth closed in upon the lower lip she watched while Le Brocq, very reluctantly, drew up his sleeve, but with the baring of the arm her face cleared. The scratch was rather broad than deep and was already glazing. "No, not much," she said, "but you were not too late. A night's rest will help; Brigitta and I must see that you get it." Then, to Le Brocq's great embarrassment, her eyes filled with tears and the mouth fell to trembling.

"Signorina," he protested, pulling his sleeve down hastily, "already I have told you it is nothing, nothing at all. I had forgotten it was there."

"I know," she answered, "but I think the cat's claws bit deeper, and oh, I am so sorry she scratched."

## CHAPTER XXIX

### MARGOTTI AND BATTISTA HAVE IDEAS

FROM where he stood, knee-deep in the hollowed rock, the fall of water splashing in a thick rain from his bent shoulders, Le Brocq looked up side-long.

"They sent you after me I suppose?"

Marco seated on an upper ledge, nodded cheerfully.

"Yes, signor."

"Why?" Shifting his position so that the stream fell on his broad chest Le Brocq, his head thrown back, his eyes and mouth perforce closed while the cool spray splashed him gratefully, drew deep, luxurious breaths through his nostrils, then with a dexterous twist he caught the fall on the nape of his neck. "To get into the Hermitage with permission is easier than to go without it. Am I a bird that I should fly! Why, then?"

"I do not know; I had my orders."

"And obeyed them without question as the true soldier should. In your place I would have done the same." And Marco, remembering the gilt spurs and all they stood for, glowed with a satisfaction more comforting than any warmth of a July sun. But Le Brocq, crouching low in the pool, had again caught the stream on his bent shoulders, an attitude singularly ill adapted to conversation. After a minute or two he rose, clambered out of the pool and shook himself as a dog might. "All the same I could go if I wished to—down there," and he nodded towards the crumbling fall of gravel

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and silt which descended at a perilous angle some hundreds of feet to the upper boulders of the valley wall.

"I think not," said Marco respectfully. "There was a man once—I saw him try it, he—he—did not go far, not on his feet, that is. He is still somewhere among the stones below."

"Still, I could do it," answered Le Brocq thoughtfully, turning, as he spoke, another side of his body to dry in the sun. Marco's few suggestive words had drawn the picture plainly enough—the dash from the ledge, the first few desperate strides, the impetus of the rush driving the shoulders faster than the clogged feet, the stumble, the pitching headlong, the rolling down and down and down with every second a more sickening whirl, now head, now feet, now arms, the final crash against an upheaved boulder, a little cloud of dust, a little trickle of loose stones and silence. Le Brocq drew a long breath. "But it is no place to risk a woman except in a last necessity and I give you my word, Marco my friend, that when I go I will not go alone."

"That's all one to me, signor," answered Marco, still cheerfully. "Any day these cursed Blacks may be driven to the wall and then it's hey! for me to the valley."

Le Brocq shifted another quarter turn, stretching himself to the heat. "And are all as contented as you are?"

The White's face clouded. "No, signor, for most of them have no such hope as I have. For them it is the Hermitage all their days or a gallows. And then—" He hesitated and broke off.

"Yes," said Le Brocq indifferently, "and what?"

"They are out of humour with the *padrone*."

"Why?" Stooping, Le Brocq chafed his limbs briskly. The strong heat, sucking out the stiffness born of cramp and fatigue, was completing the ministrations begun by the cold water. He was almost his own man again.

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"Because of Saint Apollonia, the signorina, and—" again Marco hesitated, "and you," he ended.

"Ah!" Pausing in his rubbing Le Brocq looked up enquiringly. "Saint Apollonia I can understand—all the world knows that sacrilege is death and damnation—but why the signorina and why me? Let us take them one at a time." Turning, he began dressing unconcernedly, talking on as if for talking's sake. "Why the signorina?"

"There is a father," said Marco. "We spoke of him before. Some want ransom, some want revenge, but the *padrone* says no to both. I am from the valley and know little—nothing, but if half be true, hill or valley, if I were one of them—which God forbid—I would want revenge."

"On a woman?"

"God forbid again, signor; but these swine, what can they do but nuzzle at what's nearest?"

"I see." Le Brocq's face was turned away and his voice held its level. Blessed be cold water! Half an hour earlier his nerves would have broken bounds and betrayed his wrath. "So some want one thing and some another? Margotti, now, he wants revenge?" It was a shot at a venture and whether it hit or missed mattered little. It missed.

"No, signor, ransom. Margotti says she is worth money, but Battista says she is worth more than money."

"But this Battista is not of the hills any more than you are?"

"That's true, signor." This time Marco's hesitation was more prolonged. It was to his credit that he found it difficult to suggest Battista's ideas. He approached the subject obliquely. "Battista killed a woman down below."

"What has that to do with it?"

"He pretends that because of the signorina he has forgotten the dead woman. The signorina is very beautiful," added Marco in a seeming inconsequence.

"But that is not revenge."

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"To the others, yes, if you can understand Battista's ideas. There is a one-handed devil, mad I think—"

"I see," repeated Le Brocq, tightening the grip of his self-control, though his chest was heaving with the hard suppression of his indignant rage. "Is there a barber by any chance amongst these pleasant gentlemen?"

"A barber?" Marco had looked for an outburst of alarmed or angry protests, and incredulity as much as surprise at the calm digression held him silent for a full minute. "But, signor, you would never risk yourself?"

"Why not? I never yet knew a wretch so low as to kill in cold blood the man who trusted him and whose death was no profit."

"But there is a profit."

"How so?"

"You have your sword and the signorina is behind it—it is always the signorina."

"I see," said Le Brocq for the third time. "But," and he rubbed his stubbled chin discontentedly, "this must be got rid of somehow."

"Will you trust me?"

"You? But when you let blood I thought it was Black, not red!"

Marco laughed at the jest. "In the hills a man learns many trades. Will you trust me?"

"Trust you? Yes! Fetch your tools and have no fear for your prisoner. When I quit the Hermitage, as I told you, it will not be alone."

Left to himself, Le Brocq sat looking out over the valley, but seeing neither the trails of blue mist in its depths nor the sun-scorched pines which crowned its heights. He had slept a campaigner's sleep, restful and profound, awakening soon after dawn. That he should sleep was necessary for the safety of all after his two nights' abstinence; that he might sleep Antonina Caldora and Brigitta had divided the night between them, or had promised to do so. Waking,

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he remembered the waste of the cascade which fed the Hermitage, which made the Hermitage possible as a refuge. Out of a fissure in the upper cliff, near the further end from the entrance, a spring flowed, its volume unchanged through summer or winter. Dripping from ledge to ledge below the camp it plunged finally into an abyss, the drifting plaything of every stormy wind. In one of these ledges a pool had been hollowed by the falling water, and there Le Brocq determined to wash out from joint and muscle the dregs of weariness left by the past day's strain.

The camp had been fully astir as he passed through it, but beyond an open curiosity none took notice of him until Marco, detaching himself from a noisy group, followed at a distance and without intrusion. When, finally, he seated himself within view of the bathing pool, but again without impertinence, Le Brocq spoke.

Marco's story by no means surprised him, Adorno himself had inferred a discontent which was, or ultimately would be, a danger. But villainous as Marco's hints had been they hardly accounted for the storm of fury which had set his listener's nerves tingling, filling his veins with fire. The crimes of war had been written so largely on his past year's knowledge that iteration should have blunted sensibility. But not when the sinister suggestion struck at Antonina Caldora. That, no doubt, was because she was his special charge, his peculiar care and therefore sacred, or so he told himself. She was behind his sword, Marco had said. But neither he nor Adorno could protect her once his damned scum rose in revolt. No doubt some would stand by them, Marco for one, but—Le Brocq shook his head doubtfully—Caldora of Fonzano was a name too well hated; had not the girl herself said in bitter sarcasm, "See how they love us!"

What then? Warn Adorno? But on what ground? Marco he could not quote. Marco, he did not doubt, had risked his own life by the warning

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more certainly than he, Le Brocq, would by baring his throat to the razor of Margotti or the boy Battista. Battista? Le Brocq cursed him heartily under his breath as a fresh gust of rage shook him. He knew his vile type—weak, erotic, shameless, a slave to his debauched imagination. Battista was almost more dangerous than Margotti. With an effort Le Brocq compelled his thoughts back to their channel. He could give no warning.

What then? Appeal to Adorno? But Le Brocq put the idea from him without examination. No general appeal would move Adorno. His remark the night before showed him still besotted; the very passion of the girl's contempt he had construed as a point in his favour. Appeal would fail. What remained? Flight?

Rising, Le Brocq looked about him with a more analytic attention than he had yet given. Behind was the wall of rock, its one end sentinelled night and day, its other guarded yet more surely by the abyss where the water at his feet vanished into misty air as it fell; that way an eternal no! faced him. In front—the current of Le Brocq's thoughts checked. In front it was not impossible. Yes, that was the only way to put it—not impossible; that is, not impossible for himself. But for a woman, or rather a man and a woman? Slowly, coldly, as many a time in war hotly and rapidly, spurred by the need for instant action, Le Brocq reckoned the chances, then shook his head. For a woman, or a man and a woman, it was so full of danger as to be hopeless. One or other must stumble, or those upon the ledge would roll down those curious round stones and set the whole surface flowing. A strong man who kept his head might win through, but a woman—never. A worse necessity must arise before they faced the screens: to wait and watch was all that remained.

It was then Marco returned, a cloth over one arm, a basin containing a little olive oil in his hand. It is proverbial that amateurs are more professional than

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the professional. Marco considered it a point of honour to talk while he worked.

"Do you know the story of the Hermitage?" he began, as he rubbed in the oil to soften the skin. "They say it is a thousand years old and that the angels built it." A twinkle of laughter danced in his eyes. "Do you think, signor, they guessed who the tenants would be who would come after them?" But Le Brocq, for a very valid reason, made no reply and Marco went on with his tale. "The holy man came from the East. I think there must have been Whites and Blacks in the church in those days and he, like me, was a White and in the right, though I have never heard that he killed his man. But he fled over-seas for his life and the Blacks followed him." Pausing again Marco tested the edge of the razor on his thumb and found it to his liking. "Each called the other by some hard name I have forgotten, but it meant hell and damnation, though which was the heretic I don't know. No! That is not right! The saint was a White and so the others were the heretics, but they hated each other as only Christians and two of a trade can. You wear your beard as you do your muscles, signor, strong and hard to lay on its back." He was silent a moment, intent upon his work, and with the razor-edge cold on his strained throat Le Brocq realized as never before the inward meaning of Marco's question—would he risk himself? "At first they tried the entrance, but there even a saint—I don't mean Margotti, signor—could hold his own against a legion of devils. That does not sound orthodox. Of course a saint can hold the devil at arm's length no matter where he may be, but perhaps you understand what I mean? A simple guard was his safety then as it's ours now. Then they tried the gravel fall and Saint Cyprian of Pelusium might have been Saint Cyprian the Martyr but that the angels fought for him. You have seen these round stones, signor? These are what were left after the battle, and if any infidel doubts you just ask him this—How

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did stones like these come to be where they are? Men who know the bones of the earth better than I do those of a pullet say they are not of this country at all, but come out of some burning mountain, which, it is well known, is a by-way to the pit, and so the angels fought hell with hell and killed the serpent with his own poison. Light they are, these stones, light for their size, but, by Saint Mark of the lion! they made an end of the Blacks and here is the Hermitage to prove it. There, signor, you have a chin like a babe and not so much as a nick to show that a razor touched you!"

## CHAPTER XXX

### SIX MONTHS AGO

"BUT you cannot mew yourself up," said Le Brocq. "When did you last see the sun? Saturday? And this is Wednesday. Signorina, that will never do."

"And you really slept? Really and truly?"

"Shamelessly, while you watched."

"As shamelessly as you slept," she said, laughing. "Brigitta was to watch till she tired then waken me. But she slept and I slept and the first we knew was you were astir."

"To-night I answer for the safety of the garrison, so sleep in peace."

"I think I slept because I was at peace," she answered, sobering.

"Keep your outer door always locked and come and go by the refectory. Is there a room beyond?"

"There is no door."

"That is what I mean. Have you a cave behind?"

"Yes." Her gesture of repulsion was not all pretence. "It is empty but somehow horrible. Brigitta and I searched it together. I dared not venture alone. I have grown such a coward that I am ashamed—ashamed—ashamed. It used never to be like this with me."

"That is Margotti's doing. You must not blame yourself."

"Oh, you do not know," she answered, her voice sharpening. "Blame myself? I ask myself is there, can there ever be, any forgiveness. And yet I sleep. Does Margotti sleep, do you think?"

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"Signorina, signorina, you must forget Margotti."

"It is not Margotti, it is myself I should forget, and I cannot. I have been so foolish, so wickedly foolish."

"I do not believe it," said Le Brocq sturdily.

But she only shook her head. "I rail at Margotti, I call him a slayer of women, and so he is, but the fault was mine. If I pushed a stone over the ledge outside there, and it crushed out a life at the bottom, would the fault not be mine?"

"Signorina, you have lived too long in this half light; come out into the sunshine."

"Afterwards, perhaps; but I can tell you better here. And I want to tell you. If you knew all you would never have come back from your army—but I am glad you did not know. See what it is to be a woman and in two minds at once. Six months ago—"

"Once before I told you I have nothing to do with six months ago, only with to-day."

"But to-day is the result of six months ago and I must tell you. Six months ago—no, it began earlier than that. I must think."

They were in the refectory. Brigitta had removed the remains of the early meal, what now would be called breakfast—bread and fruit and some wine mixed with water; dinner would follow an hour or more before noon. All the morning she had been gay and preoccupied by turns, but the gaiety had been forced, the preoccupation real. Now she sat looking across the table at Le Brocq with troubled, unobservant eyes, the upper teeth catching nervously at the lower lip.

"I think the beginning was that I grew up with neither mother, father nor friend, no control but my own will, no playfellow but my own thoughts and the romances—not book romances, at least not many, a few, but chiefly stories my nurse knew. She had been my mother's nurse and had lived with her in the great world I have never seen; the court of the

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Sforzas at Milan, the Medici of Florence and all the life of Rome. She should have controlled me, but she did not; for my dead mother's sake I could do no wrong. My father? That I was a girl was an offence from my birth and he did not come to Fonzano, at least not at that time. It was a foolish life but a happy one. Can you not see the lonely girl with all her host of ghost-friends, brave men and noble ladies every one? Am I excusing myself? Perhaps, but I would like to excuse myself to you.

"Where my nurse heard the old tales I do not know; from the wandering Jouglers, I suppose, as they passed from castle to castle, singing or telling stories for their bread. But she knew them all by heart: Roland, Valentine, Orlando, Arthur, Galahad. Yes, you were there, monsieur, but I never thought to see you in the flesh! But I lived them all and I was them all and loved them all. Many a time, eager and half fearful, I have sat in a window-seat at Fonzano and watched the stars for the Grail to come; many a time I have ridden alone through the narrow hills and shouted, then listened for the horn of Roncesvalles. For it was all real. It was they who were alive, doing splendid deeds of chivalry, and I the ghost watching them wistfully. It was a happy life for all its loneliness, but not a wholesome one for an undirected girl growing to womanhood with the passionate blood of the Caldoras in her veins. Then my father came home and there was an end to my riding alone but not to my dreams; I think I dreamed the more that I might forget the reality. But we will not speak of that time, if you please; we will come to six months ago, but perhaps you can understand?"

If Le Brocq made no reply none was needed; the comprehending sympathy in his eyes was enough. But, as he had once asked himself what manner of woman this was, now, all unconsciously, he asked in a hot indignation what manner of father this could

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be who could so starve his daughter from the love which was her right.

"Of course I had grown up, but I think that was rather in body than in mind. Can you imagine a woman's powers, senses, instincts, interwoven through a girl's visions of romance? Not that I was altogether ignorant of the usages of the great world whose actual life I knew nothing of. In part my nurse had schooled me and in part my father; add to that that my life had given me frank speech, too frank your King found it at times? But I lived two lives and when strangers came to Fonzano—they were very few—I tried to make the two one, fitting the spirit of my heroes of romance to the living flesh and blood, to the gross outraging of my poor ghosts, until— I think at last we have reached six months ago."

She had spoken steadily, slowly, her eyes fixed on the trestle between them. Once or twice a shift of mood had changed her voice, contempt, anger, even a faint ironical humour, but for the most part it was level and expressionless. Now a touch of colour flushed her face and she looked up, an appeal in her eyes. Le Brocq answered it in part, but only in part; the crave for sympathetic comprehension left him tongue-tied. It was holy ground his inexperience dared not enter upon. For the third time he fell back upon his protest, varying the words.

"Signorina, there is no need to tell me these things."

"Great need, that you may know what I am and the mischief I have done."

"What you are I know well enough," he answered sturdily, but though the colour deepened on her cheeks there was no lightening of the trouble in the eyes.

"Wait till I have finished and let me speak to the end. Six months ago Signor Adorno came." Her eyes were turned once more to the flat of the trestle, but it was only by an effort that the voice held its

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level quietness. Le Brocq, seeing the effort, and misunderstanding it, cursed Adorno under his breath. "Our first meeting was by chance in the woods which surround Fonzano. My lonely rides had been forbidden as unseemly in a woman but I might go where I would afoot. To my father's pride the name of Caldora of Fonzano was a safeguard within the limits of Fonzano. I know now it was unsafe; I might have met such an one as that maimed peasant, but I met Luigi Adorno instead. Next day Luigi Adorno came to Fonzano."

Again she paused, but Le Brocq held his peace as she had bidden him. Had he spoken at all it would have been to give voice to his underbreath. It was a new thing to him to hate a man. In the past year he had fought with many, their lives or his, but he had hated none; even in his hottest anger he had never hated Soderini.

"You know the custom, the stranger's right to hospitality unquestioned? But soon there was more than that. Signor Adorno was a Pisan, the Count of Fonzano favoured France, so they had much in common. To the Count of Fonzano he talked of battles and sieges, of the dangerous power of the Pope, of the policy of Venice, Milan and Florence, of how Italy could best profit by the coming of the French, while to the Count's daughter and sole heiress—" She checked herself. "No, I do not think that is quite just, but for me there were endless tales of adventure in the field, of the magnificencies of Lorenzo the Magnificent, of Ludovic the Moor's gorgeous court of Milan, of all the splendid life in the great cities, every one a shifting picture full of warmth and light and colour to stir the blood in the grey gloom of Fonzano; and through them all, through the clash of steel, the noble chivalry, the gay courtly splendour, moved Luigi Adorno, their centre and their pivot. Can you wonder that romance was born anew? This time it was no pallid ghost of the imagination but chivalry

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incarnate; the paladins of old had come to life in Luigi Adorno—Ogier, Amadis, Arthur, all the brave knights who lived for glory or died for God and country, but not Galahad, never Galahad." For a moment she flashed up a look from the trestle-flat, but only for a moment, and the pallid smile had nothing of coquetry in it.

"A paladin and the friend of princes!" The level voice hardened. "Truly it was the golden age of romance with life at its spring even in the stark days of winter until there came a morning when the sun staggered in the heavens. Signor Adorno was missing from Fonzano and when I asked why, my father cursed according to his custom and said the man was a thief and worse. 'That,' replied I, 'is a lie.' But instead of flaming out at me he only stared. It was the first time in his life, I think, he had heard the word so spoken. 'Pish!' said he at last, 'what does a girl know of men's affairs! The fellow cheated with cogged dice down in Rimini. It is proved to the hilt. A son of old Paolo Soderini caught him. I suspected him from the first; the wine was too sweet to be wholesome. A gentleman and, by God! a common cheat!' And what better could I do but cry again that it was a lie, and be bidden get to my nursery for a fool."

"To hold fast by our friends, even through evil repute, is not folly."

Again the eyes flashed up, this time with a softened light in them.

"Thank you, monsieur, I was sure you would understand. It makes it so much easier for me. Galahad of the Army! You are not called by your name for nothing. But the Count of Fonzano is a hard man and has a bitter tongue. Perhaps that is natural in men who are not as God made them. I was asked no promise and I gave none, but I do not now think that excused me. Either my father trusted me without a promise or gave no thought to me, which I do not know, but either way I knew I defied

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him. That, I think—see how wicked I am—lent a zest to it all; the girl sent to her nursery for a fool could outwit the man of the world, and that very day I met Signor Adorno in the woods where we had met first. Do you see the romance of it all?—the brave knight slandered by evil tongues for jealousy of his exceeding greatness, the unhappy maiden forced to a secret tryst by a cruel father, the gallant, splendid lover—”

“Signorina, spare us both.”

“You understand,” she said, the bitter scorn passing from her voice; “that is enough. Only, as God lives, it was the mystery of it all, the romance of it all, that I loved, that and nothing more, nothing; but at the time I did not think so. Then—women see what men miss—my nurse suspected and watched me, traced me and told my father. I will say nothing of what passed, but the Count of Fonzano has a bitter tongue. He might have spared his contempt; I have some gift for faithfulness, and at that time not ten fathers would have moved me. The Rimini lie was no less a lie; why should I be moved? Only, now I won over my nurse to my side and romance deepened. More than ever I was the captive princess, he the chivalrous knight sworn to my release. To that end, he told me, he had gathered together a troop, and my imagination pictured—I do not know what, but not a band of thievish scum, the off-scourings of city gaols for whom a halter dangled—Margotti, Battista, and their like. Certainly I did not picture the truth, but then I knew nothing of the truth in those days, not even my own self.”

“I have seen them,” said Le Brocq. Then, with Marco in his mind, he added, “I do not think they are all bad.”

“By accident then, not by choice,” she retorted. “But the troop was there, as gallant and splendid as himself—and so they were. With his band he proposed to force Fonzano—Fonzano that had stood

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five sieges!—and for my sake to end what he called the tyranny of my father. But he failed, as every other attempt on Fonzano has failed, and two of our poor fellows were killed. For that he was outlawed. Yet it was I who killed them. At the time I could not see it, at the time I could see nothing but the glory of being fought for, the old romantic tales had come to life again; but now I know these two died because of me as others have died since."

"I think the blame lay elsewhere," said Le Brocq, but though he said it harshly he said no more. He could not trust himself to say all he thought of Adorno.

"Perhaps, but they died and a price was set on Adorno's head. Then, last month, because another attack was threatened, the Count of Fonzano sent me to Saint Apollonia secretly. All that was known was that I had left the castle. But there were always peasants coming and going and I contrived to send word to the Hermitage. Then came the raid, thievish greed, sacrilege, every vileness, cold murder." Suddenly the tension snapped and she leaned forward upon the table, her head bowed upon her arms, sobbing in an utter abandonment of self-control. "My doing, my doing!" she wailed. "And yet, God knows—oh yes, God knows I never thought, never dreamed such things were possible in man. It was only then I understood. But my foolishness did it all and I could not rest until I had told you—that you might know how wicked, how vile I am. Go away; leave me here alone, I am only fit to be left. Go back to your army and leave me to these thieves and scum, for I am no better than one of them. Oh, dear God! I think my heart will break."

"Signorina—"

At the sternness of Le Brocq's voice she looked up, the tears wet on her cheeks, her mouth quivering, her eyes dark with misery.

"You poor child! For what were you more than a child! You blame yourself too much. You call

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folly crime and ignorance sin. How could you foresee the ruin men's passions work? You brood too much, you have lived too much in this greyness; come out into the sunshine and forget."

"But Mother Euzebia?"

"Let her God and ours judge. For myself, I have no fear of His judgment. He is all knowledge and His mercy understands. I am no priest, but were I one I would say, 'Go in peace.'"

"Ah," her eyes lightened wistfully, "that is because you are Galahad and think no evil."

For a moment Le Brocq looked at her in silence; then,

"God forgive me," he said solemnly, "but at this moment I have murder in my heart," and indeed it seemed to him that Adorno had sinned that sin against faith and ignorance which knows no forgiveness.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### FALCO TRIES HIS GRIP

THENCEFORWARD Le Brocq saw to it that he had his way—they lived more in the sunshine. He knew nothing of morbid psychology but experience had taught him the healing ministration of sunlight and the freshness of the winds, that coming into close touch with nature which surely gave the legend of Antæus birth; for who is such a giver of strength to the weak as Mother Earth, with her children the winds and her faithful servant the sun?

Whether within doors or without the child, Brigitta, was almost always with them. Adorno's prophecy had early come true. By processes as untraceable as the birth of the scarlet wind-flower, from the dry root hate had passed into love and worship. Why these others still hated Brigitta could not understand. They cursed the dead race and the living father, and found in both reason enough; but a child's mind neither loves nor hates vicariously.

In her own secret thought Brigitta believed the Madonna was very like Antonina Caldora. Was she not our Lady of Sorrows? was she not gentle and gracious and tender? had she not the most beautiful face in all the world? and were not all these true of her mistress? Not that Brigitta recognised tenderness and grace as such, she only felt them in her starved soul and gave adoration in return. She rarely spoke, but from where she sat a little apart at Antonina Caldora's feet she would put out a hand

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from time to time, fondling and stroking the grey robe as if every touch was a happiness, as no doubt it was. Once Le Brocq saw her kiss it secretly, then glance furtively up as if frightened at her daring.

And because of her nearness the girl and Le Brocq's talk was mostly of his past year in Italy: of Rome, of Naples, of the blue waters of the sea she had never seen, of Montecarlo where Avellino's father had lost his life, of the Holy Father whom Le Brocq had once seen in Rome at Fra Giovanni, the Florentine preacher who had foretold the King's safe return to France, but of himself little except what she dragged from him by close questioning. Her own reticence concerning Fonzano, but especially its master, he noticed, was even greater.

Mostly they sat upon the round stones Marco had spoken of, and Le Brocq, fingering the surface as he talked, recalled the legend. It was deeply pitted, the hollows sharp-edged but brittle in the divisions. It was easy to believe that for their bulk they weighed little. Near Naples there was abundance of just such stone.

But often they sat silent. That, quite unknown to either, marked a change in their relationship: where there is complete accord and sympathy there is less need for words. And once, Brigitta having gone to prepare the mid-day meal, the girl's eyes filled suddenly and something like a sob shook her as she hid her face for a moment, but only for a moment, then she looked up and smiled but neither spoke.

From the first Adorno made a practice of coming to the refectory at least once a day. Le Brocq always left the two alone and what passed between them he never knew. But as time went on the visits grew shorter and shorter and day by day Adorno's comely face hardened. An appeal for the girl's release was silenced with bare courtesy and after that, except when driven by necessity, the two men never spoke together.

Either suspicion had died away or vigilance relaxed. Le Brocq soon found himself free to move where he

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would within the limit of the camp. Using this freedom for closer observance he early came to Marco's conclusion—the main gain to Adorno's mixed crew of scoundrels was leave to live. But it was a gain ample enough to account for their presence at the Hermitage. For every man of them justice had a gallows ready. Singly they would have been a prey to the first peasant hungry for reward ; united no peasant dared attempt betrayal. The fate of Bruno at Margotti's hands was a warning never to be forgotten : what Margotti had done Margotti would do again. The presence of the women and children was easily accounted for. The mercies of justice were cruel. Force, mis-calling itself law, would have little pity on the wife and children of a proscribed peasant. To take to the hills was safer, and so again the Hermitage granted leave to live.

Of open violence or theft, beyond such theft as Marco had justified, Le Brocq saw little evidence. To all intents and purposes it was a village community and if they thrived, reaping where they had not sowed, had they not high precedent? Every overlord in Italy from the Alps to the Ionian sea did the same. But it was a community of suspicions, its discordant, even antagonistic elements held together by one great need—life itself. Over these discordant elements Adorno's power was twofold or, rather, double-branched : the peasant outlaws obeyed him because he was of that dominant class to whom obedience without love was natural, the city scum accepted him because he was a man of the city and Adorno of Pisa a name to follow.

But ease and immunity breed discontent and forgetfulness. To Le Brocq, always observant to force events to his own advantage, there were, as time went on, growing signs of a break up of discipline. Obedience was more sullen, Adorno's orders were disputed behind his back, Margotti grew in insolence, covert yet none the less insolence : once he drank himself furiously drunk, but though Adorno stormed he dared

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not thrust him out of the camp. It was the spreading of the leaven Marco had spoken of. Bickerings would soon grow to quarrels, open ruptures would follow, authority would be thrown off, and then—yes, what then?

The question fastened on Le Brocq's mind with a grim insistency as he idled through an afternoon watching the camp's play of life. The midday meal was over, the women were busied with women's after-work while the men lay in groups upon the brown grass, drinking from a huge earthen jug which they passed from hand to hand. It was a new custom and a dangerous one, but Adorno had made no attempt to curb it. He was out of camp that day, and Le Brocq noted as significant that he always took Margotti with him when he left the Hermitage.

With the rest of the idlers, gesticulating and muttering to himself as he sat a little apart, was Falco, the maimed peasant. From the left came the wine-jug and mechanically he stretched out his handless arm to take it. It was a jest that never failed, its touch of brutality lent it a mordant humour, and at once there was a roar of laughter, a roar which deepened as Falco looked about him in bewildered rage. They were baiting him he knew; but why? Then his glance fell upon the seared stump and the jug where his hand had been and he sat dumb, his mouth frothing, whereat they laughed the more.

"Take it, man, take it, but don't spill the wine!" cried one.

"Grip it tight," jeered another. "See how his fingers itch for it! Ask old Fonzano for the loan of them."

"Grip?" said a third, "why, poor devil, he couldn't even grip old Fonzano's smooth throat if he had the chance, and Margotti would soon give it him to squeeze if he had his way."

For a moment Falco stared, twisting the stump from the axis of the elbow, then he struck at the dangling jug as he had once struck at Margotti, send-

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ing it flying, its spilt contents red as blood in the sunlight.

"Grip? I'll grip him," he snarled, his lip caught up from his bared teeth. "I know how and I'll do it. Wait till to-morrow and see. Damn Fonzano, damn! damn! damn!" And they laughed the more as he shook a clenched fist and a maimed stump side by side over his head. It was not often that the humour of the stale jest was so full flavoured. Then he caught Le Brocq's eyes upon him and controlled himself. Folding the wrist into the hollow of the right arm and laying it against his breast he sat rocking to and fro, mouthing and biting his lips, but from time to time he glanced up at Le Brocq furtively.

"Right," said Battista, "Margotti would give us sport and something to show for it at the end of the day; Margotti would not mew himself up in a cell like a monk; Margotti's the saint for me."

Yes, authority was being thrown off, would soon cease to be authority, and what then?

But that night, when Brigitta's sharp cry of "Signor! Signor!" woke him from a deep sleep, Le Brocq had yet more instant cause to ask himself the question. From the first, following his instructions, the girl had kept her outer door fastened and each night Le Brocq saw to that of the refectory and his own, locking and barring both. But, also according to custom, that he might the easier hear an alarm, his communicating door was left open, Brigitta sleeping just within and across that of her mistress. Though a deep sleeper Le Brocq awoke easily, his senses swiftly and fully alert; that much his military life had taught him.

"Signor!"

At the third cry he was on his feet, but silently; that, too, he had learned in the camp. To warn an enemy of your coming was to lose a point in the game where every man's stake was his life. Even in so short a time the cry had changed. It was more frightened, shriller, thinner, though the sound of a

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scuffle slurred it. Almost instantly Brigitta called a fourth time.

"Oh! signor!" Again there was a change as the slur thickened to a gasped hoarseness which could not quite disguise the despair. But Le Brocq was already in the refectory.

For the moment he caught nothing in detail, but afterwards memory came back in fragments and patches as a dream comes back. The gloom was intense but not utterly dark. Through the lancet windows a faint greyness filtered but the solid realities were unreal and ghostly. In the yet blacker hollow of the opposite doorway a confused blur shifted, faintly clearer and utterly lost by turns; but Le Brocq, seeing nothing distinctly, understood absolutely. The paler gloom winking in and out of sight so near the floor was the grey smock of little Brigitta; little Brigitta who was whimpering and sobbing, too breathless to cry again as she struggled desperately against the huger, almost invisible bulk which overtowered her; little Brigitta whose breath ceased suddenly in a gurgle as Le Brocq caught the trestle with both hands and flung it aside with such ungoverned strength that it split in halves against the wall behind him. His bare feet had been soundless but at the crash the grey bulk straightened, Brigitta was spun sideways along the floor and Le Brocq felt, rather than heard, the little lean body collapse against the door on his right.

His sight was clearing now, and the grey bulk took form and outline beyond doubt as the maimed peasant turned to grapple with him. Not ten seconds had passed since the first cry, not five since he had crossed his threshold, and what followed was as the glimmer of summer lightning. Down went the shorn wrist to the hip in the old mechanical groping for the knife which had been shifted to the right, a snarled curse and the hand shot down, but as the bared steel flashed grayly up Le Brocq closed and the same instant saw the dim face of Antonina Caldora in the darkness of

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the room beyond. With his left hand he clutched at Falco's right wrist as the peasant struck savagely down, missed it but gripped him below the elbow; his right caught and for a moment held the left, a bony mass whipped round with corded sinew and shrunk muscle, then it was tugged back, the seared stump trailing through his fingers, to be slashed fiercely in his face the next instant. Again Le Brocq caught and held it, this time with a yet tenser grip impossible to fling off and the men swayed, wrestling.

Both fought for life. Le Brocq was the stronger by far, but the power of a mad hate nerved the other with a force which levelled the contest. His grasp on the right arm was faulty, but he dared not loosen it for an instant to mend his hand. In that instant the freed knife might make an end. A tumbled bench at his knee hampered him, yet he feared to shift his feet lest he should stumble in the darkness; time, he knew, was on his side.

But the other also knew it. With a groaning sob he caught, gasping, at a long breath and made his effort. Le Brocq felt the shrunk muscles tighten under his fingers, tighten horribly in the strained endeavour to drag the stump through his hold, felt the powerful, labour-hardened right arm bending slowly down to force the knife-point into the upper muscles of the arm whose hand prisoned it, and roused his every power to wear down the effort. All struggle, all wrestling ceased, and all sound but of breath half freed and caught again, then the peasant suddenly relaxed.

But if it was a feint to catch his enemy unawares it failed. With a sudden swing Le Brocq spun him round, or half round, and forced his right arm under the hairy throat. So for a moment almost back to breast they stood, panting. But only for a moment. Up Le Brocq strained his arm, forcing back the chin, his thrust-out shoulder point catching the naked neck at the nape; up line by line, swaying and struggling; up and up till the breath choked, whistling in the

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throat with the lungs' effort for air; up and up until even the whistling ceased; up till with a savage side-long wrench the spine snapped at the skull base and in the last useless straining after life they tottered and fell upon Brigitta's tossed bed, Le Brocq uppermost. There for a moment he lay panting through clenched teeth, every nerve and muscle still tense. But there was no need for precaution; the head rolled round helplessly and the joints under him relaxed. Filling his lungs greedily Le Brocq raised himself on his knees, listening. Antonina Caldora had already slipped past and was in the room behind him calling for Brigitta. A thin hoarse voice answered the cry.

"Signorina, I—I—did the best I could."

Through the darkness Le Brocq heard the girl sob.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### I SHALL NOT BE AFRAID

THE little maid was sorely bruised and twisted. Her throat ached from the grip that crushed it with such savage strength, an arm and shoulder had suffered from the force of the fall but, so far as Le Brocq could judge in the dark, no bones were broken. His first care had been for the child, then, leaving her in the girl's arms to be kissed, pitied, praised and crooned over, he had carried the dead man to his own room, closing the door upon him, and dragged Brigitta's bed of beaten straw into the refectory. It was better that they should keep vigil together, nor could daylight be far off. But almost instantly Antonina Caldora in turn handed the child to his keeping with a murmured, "One minute, monsieur, please." Nor was she much longer absent and Le Brocq, as he laid Brigitta in her arms again, was conscious of the touch of the grey frock; before that it had been—he did not know what it had been.

"You poor, brave child! Does it hurt very much?"

"No, signorina, not much at all."

"Can you speak without great pain?"

"Yes, signorina, of course I can."

Both answers were untrue, but Brigitta came of a stock too inured to hardship to make complaint easily; nor, in the endurance of suffering, is there any such patience as a child's patience. Besides, to whimper would grieve the signorina and rather than that Brigitta would have lied ten times over. But Le Brocq, feeling very big and helpless as he stood by

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the bedside, guessed the truth ; he had heard the grit of her teeth and felt her wince under his touch.

"Then tell us what happened."

"I thought I heard a rat in the cave and listened, then I heard his breathing and knew it was no rat, so I stood up and called the signor. Then he caught me, but I bit his hand and called the signor twice more and he flung me against the door. But the signor had come and I knew it was all right, so nothing mattered."

"No! nothing mattered then. But what should we do without the signor, we two?" And, much to his embarrassment, Le Brocq found his hand caught, pressed and held fast, not by one hand alone but by two. Never had he felt such a touch before, at once so soft, so warm and smooth and yet so firm. It thrilled him in a way that was strange and unaccountable. But what should he do? Withdraw it? That would not be easy, it was held too fast, too closely. "What should we do, we two, Monsieur Le Brocq?" The girl was sobbing as she had sobbed when she heard Brigitta's voice in the darkness. "We owe you our lives and for me not for the first time—"

"To Brigitta, not to me," he interrupted. In his embarrassment he spoke harsher than he knew and his curt refusal of her gratitude chilled her. It was a return to the old days of formality. "It was Brigitta who held the breach. What a brave little soldier it was! For me, I helped at the last, that was all." Then to put an end to her thanks he tried to change the current of her thoughts and blundered, as shy men often do with women, "Are you still in love with romance, signorina?"

Instantly the soft pressure which held him eased and the hands slipped away from his.

"I had hoped my foolishness was forgotten. And yet it was not all foolishness, not the foolishness you suppose and blame me for. My world was in ruins that night we rode together and I dared not think,

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dared neither look back nor forward. To hide myself from myself I railed and gibed. But how could you know that, you who never followed a false star but always your Grail of duty."

"God knows, not always. And I was wrong just now, nor did I truly mean it. I thought that night—" he hesitated, seeing yet deeper offence before him, then went on abruptly, "I know better now, I know how brave and steadfast you can be; how patient, how uncomplaining, how full of a—"

But it was her turn to be embarrassed. Outside the dawn was grey, but she was thankful that the gloom was still dense enough to hide the burning of her cheeks.

"Hush, hush, you shame me. Brigitta, child, are you not thirsty?"

"Oh, signorina, if I might have a drink."

With an exclamation of dismayed self-reproach the girl rose from her knees.

"How patient you have been, and I—I never thought. It is only the signor who thinks." At the door she paused as if the horror of the darkness within, reaching outward, seized upon her as she faced it. But Le Brocq saw the head tilted, and clenching her hands she forced herself to go forward. Then she disappeared and they heard her groping for the earthen water-bottle.

But as he listened Le Brocq himself received a shock which drove the blood in a rush to the skin. A hand touched his feet, stroking them, and Brigitta said thinly, "I knew the signor would come!" He had forgotten that they were naked and stole softly to his room, as shamed as any maid could have been.

Thereafter they kept vigil mostly in silence, except that Brigitta moaned from time to time when pain, growing intolerable, cast out her stoical self-repression. Then Antonina would kneel by her, pushing back the hair from the hot face, soothing, comforting, quieting, easing the fret as only a woman can till the moaning ceased. But when the grey paled, whitened, warmed,

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growing mellow with the broadened dawn, Le Brocq spoke his mind.

"Signorina, one way or another there must be an end to this."

"Must? Who are we to say must?"

"We must make a must for ourselves."

"Brigitta!"

"Brigitta will never betray us. I am not afraid of Brigitta."

"Thank you, signor," said the thin, hoarse voice.

"Do you think I meant that? No! not for a moment." Stooping she kissed the child on the forehead. "Never that, Brigitta *mia!* no, never that. But," she went on, looking up, "Brigitta might suffer from these others, as she calls them."

"I am not afraid, signorina."

"No, I know you are not. Who could think it after to-night? It is we who are afraid for you."

"But the must remains," said Le Brocq.

"Why does it press to-day more than last week or a month ago?"

"Last week it was more dangerous to attempt to go than to stay. What has happened to-night changes that."

"Oh, Monsieur Le Brocq, that poor, unhappy man!" It was the first time she had spoken of him and her voice shook.

"You pity him?"

"Who should pity him like a Caldora of Fonzano?"

"Signorina, we must speak of ourselves. What has been to-night may be again. The fear of it would be intolerable. If Brigitta had not awakened—surely you see it would be intolerable? We must lock and bar the doors now even by day."

"Yes," she assented helplessly, "but from the first you said there was no hope. Oh, if you had not come back! if you had only never come back!"

"Nor do I call it hope," said Le Brocq, keeping doggedly to his point though the sorrow in her voice

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almost moved him to try to comfort her. "There are two possibilities," he went on hesitatingly. "Your father, if he knew, would he not attempt—"

"Be sure he knows," she interrupted curtly. "What is the second?"

"Down the screes—"

"Oh, signor, signor, not that way!" Forgetting her pains in her eagerness Brigitta pushed herself up upon her elbow. "Once I saw—"

"Hush, I know, but we will not speak of it."

"But I, too, have a right to know, and so we must speak of it," said the girl. "What did you see, Brigitta, dear?"

"It was a man and the stones caught him, and—oh, signor, nor that way, not that way."

"Did he die, Brigitta?"

"Signorina, it was horrible."

"I understand." She sat thinking silently. Her face was very pale, but that may have been from the weariness and strain of the night. "Monsieur Le Brocq, is there no other way?"

"None. Many times I have edged, as if carelessly, towards the entrance and always have been followed closely, also as if carelessly."

"Would we go at night?"

"At night I think."

"Would we go together?"

"Yes; hand in hand would be safest. Each will need to help each."

"Then I am not afraid. Shall it be to-night?" Her cheeks flushed as she looked up and Le Brocq marvelled at the courage in her eyes.

"Perhaps; but I will make another appeal to Adorno. Surely, surely, if he has—" he paused, loathing the thought, then went on hastily, "if he has ever loved you to-night's danger will move him."

"Try," she answered, the flush deepening, "but I have very little hope."

"I will do it now." Stooping, he caught up

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Brigitta's pallet in his arms. "Lie still, little soldier, I shall not hurt you."

"I know that, signor."

"Brave little soldier!" Bending, Le Brocq kissed her gently on the forehead and Antonina Caldora, following, felt her eyes grow moist; this was the man she had called a clod and stockish! "There!" he went on, laying the bed along the wall of the inner room, "the signorina will watch over you. Keep the door closed but call me if need be."

Lifting Falco's body he laid it on the floor of the refectory, but beyond eyeshot from without, then opened the door. The sun had risen and all the camp was astir. Hailing one of the men Le Brocq curtly bade him go and tell the *padrone* that Monsieur Le Brocq must have speech with him at once.

"Give my message word for word," he added, fearing lest a garbling might weaken its urgency.

The fellow hesitated as if about to answer insolently, but the habit of docility got the better of his churlishness and he nodded.

"I'll tell him, signor," he said curtly.

But Adorno showed no haste to respond. His bitterness against Le Brocq had grown daily. He had convinced himself that but for Le Brocq Antonina Caldora would have relaxed her hostility. The past would have been forgiven—Rimini, the deception at Fonzano, even the grim tragedy of Saint Apollonia—but for the presence and influence of this damned Frenchman. Openly and secretly Adorno cursed him. Because of him the daily interview had grown curter and more bitter, more biting, until at last the acid of her contempt had eaten his control to such a thinness that he feared to trust himself.

Because of Le Brocq, too, his grip over his scum had slackened. Adorno was not ignorant of the discontent, was not ignorant that those who were no longer satisfied with leave to live saw in Le Brocq and Antonina Caldora the earning of wages, was not ignorant that for his own ends Margotti fostered the

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discontent. For all these things, through a perverted reasoning, he blamed Le Brocq. And now came a curt, peremptory message which made little of his authority. Must, and at once? Must and at once might wait. And for half an hour each man nursed his wrath in his own way.

When at last he came, flinging the door open noisily in the violence of his mood, he found Le Brocq confronting him.

"Shut it behind you," he said briefly.

"Monsieur Le Brocq, this is the second time to-day—" But Le Brocq broke in with an impatient gesture.

"Think less of your dignity and more of your honour," he retorted. "You see I grant more than most, I grant you have some honour left. How long will you foster murder within your own walls, Signor Adorno?"

"Murder?"

"Murder! Look there."

"Falco dead! How did he—"

"Ask Signorina Caldora, ask little Brigitta. But for the child the woman you say you love would be as he is—dead; his doing but your blame. Signor Adorno, as you are a man, as you still have that shred of honour left, end this cruel folly. Folly? That is no name for it; it is shameful, shameless wickedness, it is the vile, cowardly torturing of a woman body and soul, the woman you say you love, and there must be an end to it."

"Well, then, make an end of it. Go."

"That would make no end for her, and you know I cannot leave her here to your Falcos."

"Then let her go."

"You consent?"

"Yes, if she goes alone; but she will not. Twice she has refused. But for you she could have been in Fonzano long ago. You are a very fortunate man, Monsieur Le Brocq!"

Le Brocq let the sneer pass in silence. His

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passion had died away, but more than ever the weight of his responsibility oppressed him; if evil befell now it would befall because of him. And yet it never entered his mind that Antonina Caldora might be persuaded; hopeless though it seemed Adorno would be the easier to move. But while he paused, biting his lips, Adorno spoke again.

"Falco, how did he come here?"

"I suppose he hid himself in the cave. The child Brigitta heard him and awoke."

"Yes, but how did he die?"

"I think I broke his neck."

Adorno laughed as he had laughed on the night of Le Brocq's return.

"I remember now; he had only one hand, poor wretch!"

"Signor Adorno, you forget yourself."

"No, no; I remember you were always too late! I have two hands and am not afraid! As to Falco, I owe you some thanks there. It makes one fewer to deal with. I will have him sent for." But as he turned to go Le Brocq laid a hand on his arm.

"Adorno, that day I left the camp we touched hands together man to man. Under all these follies, under all these faults and worse than faults there was the spirit that felt it was fit for better things. For God's sake give that better spirit its way; let this unhappy, troubled, suffering woman go in peace. Be generous, be the man you were, be the man you still are when your truer nature speaks, be the son of your fathers, the Adornos whose name and memory Pisa holds in reverence and honour. As man to man I plead with you, give Signorina Caldora leave to go."

Adorno stood as rigidly as a statue until Le Brocq ended, his face as set as a statue's, then he turned and looked the Frenchman in the face. It was unfortunate for Le Brocq's hope of success that his very earnestness and intensity of feeling had lent him a dignity and refinement of expression un-

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common in a man. Adorno caught its power and felt its subtle superiority. With the recognition his jealous hate rushed back in flood.

"Turn priest and preach!" he sneered, shaking off the touch from his shoulder with a roughness that was itself an insolence. "Let her go if she will—alone. But she is in no danger. Now that Falco is dead there is not a soul in camp would hurt her."

As the door before him closed Le Brocq heard that behind him open.

"I told you you would fail," said Antonina. "It must be to-night and I shall not be afraid."

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### *MICARE*

THE sound of voices disturbed Le Brocq and he roused himself. That he might throw away no chance in the coming venture, however slender—and how slender they were, these chances, he disguised neither from himself nor Antonina Caldora—he had returned to his old place of observation among the rocks where the overflow from the spring fell into space. Thence he had view of the entire descent, from the crumbling pebbles under the lip of the ledge to the half-submerged boulders which disputed the upward encroachments of the stunted pines, and every angle, every contour, was scrutinized with the slow appraisement of the man who adventures life upon the hazard of his choice.

Le Brocq was under no illusions. Already he had told himself that for a woman the safe passage of the scree was impossible. But everything in this world is relative. When face to face with a worse certainty even the impossible is gilded with a doubt, he dared not say with a hope. And he was persuaded of the certainty. Falco's death would be avenged. They might jeer at his impotent rages, they might make a butt of his misfortune, but he was one of themselves and without a doubt his death would be revenged on the man who had taken his life. The tide which sucked Le Brocq under would sweep the girl also to destruction; to face the scree was safer.

Slowly, coldly even, he chose his route, marking the peculiar dangers in his mind. Here there was

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the fretted edge of a water-course to be avoided, there a sharp dip in the decline, yet lower a projecting boulder. But above all he must hold a grip of himself, running neither too fast nor too slow and keeping the signorina on her feet; of her courage and self-control he had no doubt.

She had bolted the door behind him and lain down to rest, to sleep if possible. Le Brocq would not disturb her by returning, so, like a wise man, he set himself to repair the waste of the broken night and soon slept. But, as has been said, he woke easily and silently, nor, being awake, did he scruple to listen. It was Margotti's voice, and The Saint was not the man to invite a nice punctilio.

"Ever since that night you smote old grey-frock across the jowl I knew we would hunt in couples, you and I. In couples, you understand: neither before nor behind the other, eh? That was the night you proved yourself for the man you are, my son."

"Down in Payullo they knew me for a man long before then, Margotti." It was Battista who answered, a boastful swagger in his voice. He had travelled far since the ways had parted that night in Saint Apollonia and he had chosen the downward track. If Margotti held the blood-mark degree in the Brotherhood of Villainy so did he, and he was determined none should forget it. But Margotti was not impressed.

"Pish! What was that! a woman! For me, I value a woman more or less as nothing. But a priest, and before his own altar, too! Now, I call that the true spirit of a man. For, do you see, my son, a dead woman cannot strike back except through the law, and after Fornovo what have we to fear from the law up here? Nothing at all. But a priest—"

"Margotti, you don't believe—"

"Not I!" interrupted Margotti, who had scrupulously payed his vow of two candles and honestly believed that the fall of events just as he would have had them fall was his due and natural reward; else

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why waste candles? "Did I not say at the time, 'What is a priest but a man?' But, Battista, my son, this is no matter of striking a priest on the mouth. The *padrone*, curse him, can strike back, and for us it's either win through or go the way of Saint Cyprian."

"What do you mean by that, Margotti?"

"Nothing that matters. Though there's but one way into life there are many out of it, and if needs must that we travel it matters little whether we go by a red road or a white. But win through we shall. Now, who must we put out of the way? Adorno must go for one, that gay lad Marco for another, Gianotti, Matteo—"

"No, Margotti, not Matteo. Matteo is one of us."

"That Matteo is as tired of curded milk as we are I agree, and yet Matteo must go."

"No, Margotti," persisted the boy—he was little more—with an obstinacy which surprised Le Brocq, "he caught my horse three days ago when it bolted, I don't know but that he saved my life; not Matteo."

"Now listen, my son, listen." Margotti's voice grew very persuasive. "You say he saved your neck? You would have done the same for him, would you not?"

"Yes."

"Well, the Church tells us that it is intention that counts, and so, d'you see, you have paid him back and squared the account. Matteo must go. Listen again. A leech lets blood for two purposes—to cure, and to keep in health. Adorno and Marco must go, that's letting blood for cure; Matteo, that's to keep in health. Matteo is too near ourselves. I know his breed. Within a month he'd be saying, Margotti must go, Battista must go, and go we would. Now, d'you see? But we'll make use of him first. He'll do his share and then at the end—why, leave that to me. Are you satisfied, my son? Trust Margotti, trust The Saint; The Saint knows."

"If you think so, Margotti."

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"Think so? I know it! I knew, too, you were too shrewd, too long-headed, too much the man of Payullo not to understand. That is settled then; Matteo must go."

"When do you act—I mean we?" Battista corrected himself hastily. "Soon, I hope?"

"That's the true spirit," cried Margotti softly. "There's nothing like eating when you are hungry. And you're hungry, eh? What a man you must have been at Payullo! Though you've grown since then, faith, yes! Hungry for what, my son?"

"We'll talk about that presently. How soon? To-day?"

"No. Most of our fellows are out of camp, Matteo amongst them. That dear Matteo? We must give him his share of the sport; faith of Margotti! but the end will surprise him."

"When then? To-night?"

"Perhaps," replied Margotti, and having echoed Le Brocq he proceeded to echo Adorno. "We owe the Frenchman thanks for having got rid of that gibbering fool, Falco. Men of one idea are always dangerous. Falco might have spoiled your plan, my son, and mine too, for that matter. The worst use you can put a white throat to is to cut it. Now you, devil of a fellow from Payullo that you are, you would rather—there! there! I don't blame you, I was once young myself."

"Margotti, down at Payullo I thought I was in love, but—"

"But you were only a boy then and now you are a man! Chut, chut, say no more. Do you think I was called The Saint for nothing? We are both a-hunt for the same game but for different reasons, and there must be no quarrelling over the spoil afterwards. Be quiet and let me think."

Part crouched, part lying behind the rocks, stiff with cramp, every nerve raw with rage, Le Brocq bit his lip to bleeding in his effort to force control. Some words had been slurred in the splash and

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murmur of the falling water, but only at the first. As his ear quickened, growing accustomed to the rhythm of the sound, he lost nothing, nor, guided by Marco's hint, had the sense ever been doubtful. His first impulse, as the meaning of that sense came home to him, setting his blood aflame, had been to fall upon them there and then. Of the result he had no doubt. With the advantage of surprise and a yard or two in the height of the rocks they could not hope to escape him. Yet he dared not, for Antonina Caldora's sake he dared not. In their desperation they might drag him down with them; if not, the scuffle would be heard and he would have the whole camp on his back. The end would be the same and he dared not leave her alone and helpless.

Curbing his passion he listened. Could he have had detachment enough to have observed himself the violence of his rage would have frightened him. His teeth were clenched, his temples full to bursting, his muscles rigid, his breath short and spasmodic, his eyes hot, staring as if the intervening rock was thin air and he looking unblinded on the elder and the younger ruffian as they planned what he dared not formulate in thought, lest the wild fury of his wrath should burst all bounds and precipitate what he knew he must avoid. Then came the silence, broken only by the splash and music of the fall.

So prolonged was the quiet that Battista, whose nerve was the weaker, lost patience.

"Margotti, take the man for your share and leave me the—the other. I'll make it up to you, I swear I will."

"While the grass grew the ass died! Talk sense, my son, talk sense. The signorina is worth twice—twice do I say?—ten times the man. Everyone knows Fonzano and everyone can find it. The Count is a wicked devil and ill to handle I grant, but the girl is all the human flesh he has in the world. Now, the Frenchman's a pear off another tree. Gilt spurs and empty pockets have gone together before

## MICARE

now and France is a far cry. Besides, I have another idea in my mind."

"By God, Margotti, I would kill her sooner than—"

"Be quiet, fool." Margotti's bantering voice grew hard. "This is not Payullo! Now, now, now, take your hand from that dagger—there! that is better. Now we can talk. But what a child you are, flying into a rage like that. Why should I not do what I will with my own—once it is my own? There you go, mouthing again! But I'll ease your fret lest you put a sword through my back in the dark to-night. I like you best when I can see the whites of your eyes, my son. Here's my plan. I am tired of the hills; that devil, Fonzano, has influence as well as money, to have the girl might load the dice for me—by Saint Peter, there's the way out! I'll play you for her."

"No dice, Margotti! at least, not yours," he added as Margotti groped in the pocket of his doublet.

But The Saint took no offence at the implication. He had, it may have been observed, his own code of honour and it bound him rigidly. Had Battista raised no objection he would have diced—and won. But he was no blusterer and the code aforesaid forbade insistence. The distinction may seem small even to non-existence, but to Margotti it was real and vital. Take an advantage? Yes! Force an advantage? No! His sense of honour jibbed.

"As you will. But I'll win, dice or no dice. My luck is at the flood ever since the day we caught the signorina. So much for old grey-frock and his curses. If not dice, what then? I have it! *Micare*! Who wins the first three has choice, and that we know is the signorina; come now, you guess first."

*Micare*! The grim irony stung Le Brocq's memory. It would be very romantic to have *micare* played for me, she had said to vex him in the perversity of her mood, and her romance was reality. They were silent now, these two, except for the curt call of the numbers till Le Brocq heard Margotti growl, "Show

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your fingers better, my son," then the numbers began anew—two—seven—four—four—eight—in short, spat-out words. In his mind Le Brocq could see them, the hands flung sharply up, so many fingers spread, so many clenched and hidden, just as he heard the short rasp of the guess—six—nine—five—one—three—

But at last Battista shouted, "One to me, Margotti, one to me!" his voice shaking in his triumph and excitement.

"One to you, my son," answered Margotti, "but you'll see I'll win in the end!" and the game began again—four—one—nine—three— "Oh ho, my son, what did I not tell you? One to me!" And the next point fell to Margotti and the next and the game was over; The Saint had won. Le Brocq drew a long breath. Until then he had not known how he had kindled with excitement. Well, better The Saint than Battista, and better the scree than either. If there had been any doubt of the urgency of the need there was none now. There was a moment's silence, then,

"Damnation, Margotti, you did not play fair. Twice I saw you shoot out a finger and cheat me. I'll not be robbed."

But Margotti was already on his feet.

"We are not at Payullo," he sneered. "Why can't you take your beating like a man? Play me no tricks and don't come behind me in the dark to-night. I choose the signorina; you can do what you like with the Frenchman. Come, my son, don't bear spite; we hunt in couples, you know. Besides, if I'm put out of the way you take both. Come, are we friends? Ah! that's as it should be."

There was no reply in words but Le Brocq judged the response had been grudgingly given.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### TRAPPED !

FOR an hour Le Brocq kept his place among the rocks. He had early come to two decisions—that Adorno should be warned and that the attempt must be made that night without question. As to Adorno, his soldier instinct partly moved him; treason is a serpent every heel must trample and to keep silence was to approve murder. But he had another and more selfish purpose. Adorno might act promptly or, prepared to crush it, might await Margotti's attack. Each course had its advantages, but either way there must be a relaxing of vigilance and a confusion which Le Brocq hoped to turn to his own use.

Once upon the ledge he idled back to the camp, pausing to look in at the caves, where the horses were housed, as was his custom, or to pass a word of light talk with one or other of the more civil men, as also was his custom; then, as if struck by a sudden remembrance, he turned and walked briskly back to the cell of Saint Cyprian. It was one of Adorno's offences, and a dangerous error, that he shut himself up too much from his scum. Before such a rabble authority should keep its power in evidence. Without the ceremony of a knock Le Brocq opened the door and closed it behind him.

Adorno was striding up and down the length of the cell, his hands caught one into the other at his back, his chin sunk upon his breast. At the click of the door closing he swung round sharply, his hand

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catching at his sword-hilt with significant anticipation, but Le Brocq allowed him no time to speak.

"I have a warning for you."

"A threat I suppose! Take my warning first. My patience is exhausted, I'll endure no—" But Le Brocq broke in curtly.

"Margotti, Matteo, and Battista, the woman-killer from Payullo, mean murder to-night; there's my warning. How many are at their back I do not know."

"Murder? To-night? Monsieur Le Brocq—" Surprise startled Adorno into courtesy for the moment, but only for the moment. "So you wish to breed suspicion and set us by the ears, do you?"

A falter in the sneer robbed it of its sting, nor had Adorno's change of countenance been lost on Le Brocq. Though there was surprise there was no astonishment. Without doubt Adorno knew that treachery brooded but, again without doubt, he was perplexed and angry that Le Brocq should know it also. Le Brocq let the insult pass. It was enough that Adorno recognised that danger existed.

"Believe that if you choose, but an hour ago Margotti and Battista gambled which of them should possess Signorina Caldora when you are dead. Margotti won."

"Signorina Caldora?" The blood rushed to Adorno's face in a flood of passion. "Why--what—" He broke off, stammering in his rage.

"Why? Because to Margotti she is worth whatever her father will pay, even, perhaps, a pardon; to Battista—there was a woman down in Payullo—"

"Damnation!" It was the roar of a beast rather than the cry of a man, or if a man then a man wounded to the quick not in body but in soul. Le Brocq forgave him much for the wholesome vigour of that curse. But almost instantly he controlled himself. "Tell me from the beginning," he said curtly.

And, with as few words as possible, Le Brocq told.

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Nor did Adorno interrupt the telling though his face, grown lean and haggard these last days, showed plainly how fierce was the inward conflict. Not even the story of the gamblers and their stake moved him beyond a sudden twitching of the mouth ; then,

"Ser Margotti has given me an idea," he said grimly. "He is right. Most of his fellows, as he calls them, are out of camp to-day. But not by accident. For days past I have kept the head and tail apart. Either Margotti and that vile whelp Battista have been absent, or the meaner scum, and at night I have taken my precautions. But that cannot go on. An accident might give them their opportunity any day." He paused a moment, biting his lip as he glanced aside into vacancy, but almost immediately met Le Brocq's eyes again. "Why did you warn me? For the sake of your help Margotti would have sent Battista by the same road as Matteo: the Signorina would have been held to ransom, both would be free. Every way it was to your advantage to be silent, why, then, did you warn me?"

"Nothing else was possible," answered Le Brocq simply. "Would you have me join hands with murder! In my place you would have done the same."

A light flickered in the Pisan's eyes and the harsh lines smoothed from the gaunt face at the implication.

"Sir Galahad of the Army!" he said, but there was neither offence nor mockery in the words. "Sir Roger Le Brocq, you have much to forgive which I shall never forgive myself. Go now to the refectory and remain indoors; say nothing to Signorina Caldora, but keep her indoors also, and have no fear of to-night."

Left alone, Adorno remained standing motionless plunged in deep thought. Of the truth of Le Brocq's story he had not the smallest doubt. His own observation, coupled with the reports of Marco and others, had warned him of the growing discontent. But he was unprepared to find that the plot had

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ripened. That those who were equally threatened with himself would join in a terrible vengeance he was assured, but his problem now was how to force conviction. Margotti was popular. Heavy-handed, but without malice, he had a jest for even the meanest sheep-stealer of them all. Where was there such a pleasant scoundrel, or such a scoundrel? The wickedness lower men scarcely dared to dream of was his familiar custom. Even those who opposed him recognised his greatness. To push such a man from his pedestal would need something more than an accusing finger. There must be a demonstration of his treason.

As to Battista.—Adorno's face grew crimson as rage stormed through him afresh and his fingers itched for Battista's throat. Take the man for your share and give me the other! Le Brocq had quoted the words with significant emphasis, adding no comment of his own. Nor was comment needed. Of the two Margotti was the more wholesome. If The Saint was the greater sinner Battista was the viler scoundrel. Self-sufficient, too, like most weak scoundrels, his ideas of his own importance swollen to bursting, Battista would take his defeat badly. Already he had accused Margotti of cheating, already he had threatened him. And that was before Margotti had won what alone moved Battista to his treason. In his disappointment and desperation would not Battista, weak and without even a shred of thieves' honour—had he not given up Matteo without a scruple?—would not Battista be ready to betray Margotti in turn? Yes, but on terms, and with his fingers still itching for Battista's throat Adorno would rather have seen Margotti go scot-free than give Battista terms. And yet—and yet—yes, perhaps, perhaps; at last Adorno thought he saw his way.

Finding Marco in the camp he gave him his instructions, but with a careful avoidance of all emphasis. From time to time he broke off to speak to one or another of the children with the friendliness

## TRAPPED

which had won Brigitta's affection, then resumed his apparently casual talk.

"Take your time," he ended. "Matteo will not return till sunset. See that Battista is alone; let him not come to me for half-an-hour after that, and watch if he speaks to Margotti meanwhile. Ten minutes after he comes be you in talk with Margotti near the cell so that Margotti sees who comes and goes. After I call you to the cell drop some phrase to warn me if Battista has spoken with Margotti during that half-hour; leave the rest to me but play up promptly to my lead. Do you understand clearly?"

"Clearly, signor."

"Good!"

With a careless wave of his hand Adorno turned away, sauntered as far as the entrance to the camp then back to the cell. Unbuckling his sword he laid it aside upon the table and set himself to wait. An indifferent confidence was the keynote of his comedy.

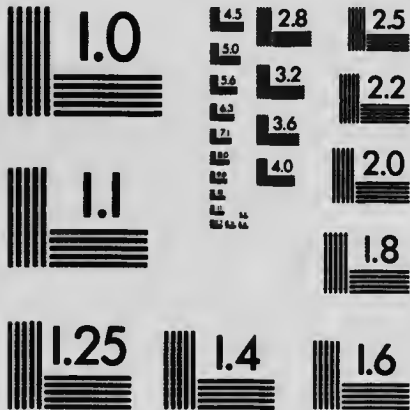
Nearly an hour had passed before there was a loud, aggressive knock at the door, and, in response to Adorno's call, Battista entered. That his swagger was more pronounced than usual was due in part to the drowning his resentful disappointment in the rough wine which served the camp, and in part to a natural contempt for the man who was so blind a fool that he could not see the mine being sprung under his very feet. Suspicion he had none and Adorno's reception roused none. The touch of indifferent coldness, almost of tolerant condescension, which had always galled his self-esteem, driving him at last into covert antagonism, was there as of old and as irritating as it was unvaried.

The interview was very brief. Adorno's orders were concerned with the trivialities of the camp, the commonest routine of its daily life, and gave Battista's will to be insolent no opening to relieve his vexation by an impertinence. A caustic phrase or two at the



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end stung his self-esteem and he quitted the cell scowling and muttering to himself. Five minutes later Adorno followed, but halted at the threshold, Margotti and Marco were talking together ten yards away.

"Hulloa! Marco!" hailed Adorno, "bring your sword here a minute, do you come too, Margotti," then, leisurely looking round the camp he re-entered the cell. His sword, as has been said, was lying on the table. Slipping out the steel he laid it down, pushing the sheath aside. "Mine is a Rimini blade," he went on, stooping over the table, "and I want to compare it with a Ferrara. Show me yours."

"But mine is a Rimini too, signor," answered Marco. "Ferraras cost money."

"I know they do, but I wished to see if I could find out wherein lies the difference and the value."

"Mine is a Ferrara," said Margotti. "They cost! yes! But what's a crown or two where a man's life is concerned?" Drawing the blade he laid it on the table beside the other. "There it is, signor. Now, see—"

"One moment." Adorno motioned him aside. "Let the light come in." But as Margotti stepped back Adorno brushed the Ferrara to the floor, set his foot on it and caught up his own, all between two breaths. He stood between Margotti and the door.

"Since when have you taken to playing *micare* for my prisoners?"

"*Micare*? I—" Margotti drew back, but he stood between two points; Marco had played up to his chief's lead and there was no breaking through.

"No lies, now. *Micare*—you and that frothy scur, Battista. He is a bad loser. I thought you knew men better. You were a fool to trust him. He's not ten minutes gone. It was a bold scheme, Margotti. Signorina Caldora was to set The Saint free from the hills, a bold scheme and worthy of you. But you've lost, Margotti, you've lost and, by God! who loses pays."

## TRAPPED

For a moment Margotti glared from one to the other, his lips moving soundlessly, then burst out :

"The cur, the damned cowardly cur! But you dare not touch me, Adorno, you dare not lay a finger on me. Mat—"

"Matteo, who must go? Matteo? You are a fool for once. Wait till Matteo hears Battista's story. Battista would have saved him but you refused. Matteo might do his share and then—" Adorno hunched a shoulder. "Besides, who is going to wait for Matteo?"

"Adorno, give me one thing—give me that Payullo rat here, we two alone, barehanded and the doors shut! After that you may do as you will with me, I won't whine."

"So it was the truth?"

"Why deny it?" he snapped back. "Even if it was a lie you would believe it to be rid of me."

"Never! No man can say Luigi Adorno was not loyal to those who were loyal to him. As to Battista, you may leave him to me."

## CHAPTER XXXV

### SAINT CYPRIAN'S WAY

MUCH more passed, but there is no need to set it down, nor the scale by which Battista sunk from denial to frantic petition and the collapse of terror when Marco and six others laid hands upon him. There was no need for six but Adorno's wisdom was to do nothing in a corner. He counted too, and rightly, upon Battista's self-revelation to give proof to all the camp, so that what must follow would be justified. So there were six, and amongst the six some of Margotti's weaker henchmen. Fear for their own skins, and lest they should be accused, would sharpen their zeal. Sharpened it was; nowhere could the boy find belief or pity. Who could believe when Margotti had confessed? Who could pity? Not those who must have died in their sleep that night, nor those who trembled to be found in a like condemnation. So they jeered his howls for mercy, and when he cursed him bade him take to prayers while he had the time.

And time was short. Adorno struck as swiftly as sharply. There was a priest there, as yet not unfrocked for drunkenness, and brought to the Hermitage for so different a purpose that every sight of him stirred Adorno's bitter sense of loss to the depths. Would they have a priest? Margotti curtly refused. He could vow candles to he knew not what, but at the bottom there was something great in the scoundrel and on the threshold of the unknown abyss he would whine confession into no priest's ears; had he not said,

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what is a priest but a man? The abyss would be no less the abyss. If there was no God, why whine at all? If there was a God, as priests said with their mouths and denied with their lives—Margotti shrugged his shoulders—how could any priest avail The Saint who would be the same Saint to-morrow if he had life?

With Battista it was different. So long did his clammy hands cling to the few sands of life left him as he knelt beside the white frock of the Carmelite, soiled with much muddied contact with the foulness of the world but still cleansable if one set heart and mind to it, and so a type of the wearer, that at last Adorno had to tell him to make an end, he had but three minutes more; whereat the penitent lifted his twitching white face from the knee where it was bowed and cursed so vilely that the priest, as yet not unfrocked for drunkenness, shook him off in something like horror. And then, the boy struggling, biting at the hands that bound him, screaming, cursing, the secret bestial nature flinging out the human, they made ready for the end.

It was a few minutes later that Marco knocked at Le Brocq's door. His face was parchment-coloured under its bronze; his dilated nostrils twitched curiously.

"The *padrone* sent me. Come, signor, and for the Lord's sake let none look out."

"For what purpose—" began Le Brocq, but Marco beckoned him impatiently to silence.

"Come, signor, come; let the poor devils get it over."

Then Le Brocq understood. Marco's "Let the poor devils get it over," was the same as Margotti's "Matteo must go." But there was no need to make sure that none looked out; Antonina Caldora was in her own apartment with Brigitta. Pulling the door after him Le Brocq followed Marco, already on his way towards the entrance.

The camp was empty and strangely silent; never,

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except in the dead of night, had Le Brocq known such a silence. To the front, and for the whole sweep towards the water-course, the ledge was bare of life; never, since its abandonment as a Hermitage, had it been more bare. But to the other end, out of sight and beyond where for the second time the rock curved to the lip of the ledge, there was noise and movement—a wailing, dry-throated cry, shrill in its high pitch and yet rather moan than cry, an inarticulate screaming sob that set Le Brocq's nerves on edge. Marco, hastening onwards, wiped his damp forehead with his hand and shuddered.

Beyond the curved point of the rock stood the men of the camp in a half circle; enclosed, upon the verge of the ledge, were Adorno, Margotti and the Carmelite. Then the line parted and as Le Brocq saw what lay at their feet he checked himself with a cry. Face downward, upon one of the rounded stones rolled to the very edge of the fall, lay Battista, cords passing from ankle to wrist straining him immovably. Only his shoulders heaved in the gasped spasms of his choking screams and his head shifted from time to time uneasily. Above him stooped the monk, but at every urgent word he only screamed the louder, dragging the breath into his dry lungs horribly.

With a cry, "Adorno! for God's sake!" Le Brocq sprang forward. But Adorno thrust him aside, staggering.

"Stand back," he said roughly. "Hold him, two of you. The traitor goes Saint Cyprian's way—that is the law." He paused, looking round the circle as if in challenge, then repeated, "That is the law and you know it, all of you. Marzano, and you, Breto, heave now. No? What are you boggling at? Were you in the plot? Would you have cut our throats to-night as he would? No? Then heave, I tell you. Stand back, priest, stand back, your part is done. Now men, now—together; heave."

There was a breathless silence, even the dry-throated, indrawn moaning ceased, then one shriek,

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the bitter agony of mortal terror in dissolution, and Le Brocq closed both ears and eyes that he might neither hear nor see the consummation of the horror. "God! God!" he cried in his heart, a dumb, inarticulate pleading for mercy, if mercy there still might be, and when he looked again there was nothing but a cloud of dust blowing across the screes and the sharp faint clang, far down, of stone trickling upon stone. Margotti, his teeth clenched, his face ghastly, swayed on his bound feet as he gasped for breath.

"Adorno!" To speak at all choked him, nor had he spoken since he had flung Battista's treachery in his teeth to have it flung back with such a curse as told him he had been tricked. "Not that way—for God's sake, not that way. Kill me like a man, not like a brute."

For a moment Adorno hesitated, looking round the circle. He, too, was ghastly white. They could endure no more; cailous scoundrels every one, blood upon their hands every one, but they could endure no more.

"No, not that way," he said. "Roll up another stone."

There was a doubtful pause, a looking one at the other in hesitation; then,

"*Padrone*—" began one, but Margotti cut him short.

"Adorno, is it a chance for life?"

"Yes."

"You mean it? A chance?"

"Yes."

"Then do as you're ordered, scum," Margotti said truculently, with a jerk of his head towards the cliff where the stones lay bedded. There was even the twitch of a grim smile on his mouth as they obeyed him with a kind of frightened alacrity.

With the huge stone poised on the very edge Adorno drew his sword and cut Margotti's hands and feet loose, but Le Brocq, who had shaken himself

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free from the double grip which held him, noticed that it was not sheathed again, it was carried at the charge, rather ; The Saint was a desperate man.

Freed from the cords Margotti stretched himself, uncramping his muscles, his eyes fixed shrewdly on the descent. Already, with a visible effort, he had regained his self-control. Adorno's purpose needed no telling. Yes, there was a chance of life. But he, as well as Brigitta and Marco, had seen a man go by Saint Cyprian's way and to grip that chance the first necessity was self-control. So, quieting his lungs with deep breaths, he scanned the descent, picking a path as Le Brocq had done earlier in the day. The priest laid a shaking hand upon his shoulder.

"Let be," he said impatiently, his eyes still on the fall. "If you must pray, pray for a clear head and sure feet." He broke off, turning sharply. "What was it grey-frock said? If I die the common death of men—Bah! what is a priest but a man!"

"Make ready," said Adorno.

With a jerk Margotti faced round again.

"How much law?"

"How much would you have given us in our sleep to-night? Get your shoulder to the stone, Marco, and you, Gianotti," nor, this time, was there any hanging back.

"No, but Adorno, how much law?"

"None, fool. Why did you not jump when you had the chance?"

Margotti's lips parted but no sound came. Perhaps he judged that even a curse might be too dearly bought by his loss of breath. Silently he faced the fall, filling his lungs slowly ; his hands were clenched, his feet gritted the lip of the rock groping for balance ; that, and the moan of the wind overhead, seemed to Le Brocq the sole sounds in the silence.

Twice he fainted. But Adorno, one hand on Marco's shoulder, his sword always at the poise to lunge if need be, his eyes fastened on Margotti's face, gave no sign and the silence deepened. Those behind

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held their breath, waiting. Suddenly The Saint swung his hands above his head, bent knees and hips in the one movement and dropped lightly the five feet to the upper drift of the screes, recovered balance, braced back his shoulders and with long swinging strides raced obliquely downwards, plunging almost calf-deep through the crusted rubble at every step. With the first stride Adorno's grip tightened on Marco's shoulder.

"Heave, men, heave!" he cried, lending his weight to the thrust.

For an instant the boulder hung upon the edge, then toppled, hung again in the loose gravel, broke free, ploughed sluggishly down and rolled, gathering speed with every second, till at length it sprang into the air with furious, mighty leaps, dashing a cloud of stony spray before it with every impact and dragging after it an increasing avalanche. Hearing the thunderous roar of the fall Margotti looked back fearfully across his shoulder, swerved, stumbled, recovered his footing doggedly, strove to turn aside, stumbled again and fell. The sure feet had failed him, but even then he kept the clear head. Digging his bleeding fingers into the crumbling slope he flattened his body, clutching desperately at life. While they held there was hope—hope. But the packed rubbish—the stones were larger now—tore loose from his grip and he rolled down, rolled into the path of the avalanche. The boulder whistled past but the roaring, grinding torrent gulfed him; there was a choked cry, a scream, gone was the need to hold the breath, nay, the breath, was driven groaning from the choked lungs.

Again there was the metallic trickle of pebble on pebble, again there was the cloud of drifted dust and silence, but Margotti had tumbled into the abyss by Saint Cyprian's way, battered shapeless before ever the stone had crashed into the pines.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### FREEDOM

THERE was a deep breath, like a heavy long-drawn sigh. Adorno, who stood erect and tense at the falls' brink, staring wide-eyed downward, his sword still mechanically carried at the charge, pushed the blade into its sheath and turned.

"To your duty, all of you," he said briefly. "Monsieur Le Brocq, wait, I beg. Marco, I have an order for you."

Grasping Marco by the arm he drew him aside, whispering in his ear as the rest dispersed. The strong undernature Le Brocq had divined that first evening was dominant. None cavilled, and but that every man, as he passed the neck of the league which led to the further camp, looked downwards one would have said that The Saint was already forgotten.

"You understand? In twenty minutes, then."

"Good, signor; in twenty minutes," answered Marco.

"A good lad," said Adorno, looking after him. "Some day he at least may take his place with honest men and do a man's work in the world." But though the suggestive bitterness of the tone invited comment Le Brocq made no reply. The tragedy of Margotti and the still grimmer tragedy of Battista were too raw in his mind to talk platitudes to the man who had caused them.

Though the August sunshine was hot upon them Le Brocq was irresistibly reminded of that first grey dusk when they had so walked, side by side. Their

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relationships were curiously similar. In the month which had passed there had been development, but little real change. The former veiled antagonism was now naked and open; aggressive instead of passive. In Adorno it was a sullen, unresting suspicion, in Le Brocq a resentment whose hidden springs of bitterness he never paused to analyze; surely the enforced detention of Antonina Caldora and his own separation from the army were cause enough? And yet, had he analyzed, he might have asked himself why his wrath always burned so hotly when he remembered the history of six months before. An honourable man's condemnation of an ignorant girl's deception? Well — perhaps.

As before, Adorno halted at the door of the refectory, but there the parallel ended.

"Enter," he said, pushing it open. "I will follow." Though coldly spoken it was a request rather than a command and Le Brocq, ready to take offence, found none. Adorno pushed the door shut. The refectory was empty. "Though it was not for my sake you did what you did," he went on, "I admit I owe you a life."

"I would have done it for you alone," answered Le Brocq. "To save murder," he added, deliberately robbing the assertion of all personal application.

"Perhaps." Though a touch of humour rose to Adorno's gloomy eyes he let Le Brocq's qualification pass unnoticed. If it pleased this Frenchman to be so honest, let him be honest. "Sir Roger Le Brocq, how much more would you do for the same sake?"

"For you?"

"For Signorina Caldora?"

"The signorina is my ward."

"And nothing more?" The scene he had passed through so lately must, Le Brocq supposed, have tattered Adorno's nerves for he flung the question with an unnecessarily loud insistence.

"Certainly nothing more," answered Le Brocq quietly.

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"Nor will be?"

But this time the insistence irritated Le Brocq. More than ever before he regretted he was not a free agent. Yet, just because he was not a free agent he curbed his irritation.

"Signor Adorno, how would you answer such a question so put? That answer is mine."

"Then my answer to your answer is a warning. As God lives, no man shall rob me and live. Nor shall you, though I owe you a life. I would find you—I warn you deliberately—I would find you and strike you in time if you were behind the walls of Fonzano itself."

"Yet I think you skinned your knuckles on Fonzano once already," said Le Brocq drily.

Adorno flushed, but the thrust quieted rather than excited him.

"Nevertheless I would not fail a second time. Your life or mine: you are warned. What I say I will do."

"Nevertheless we are at the Hermitage and not in Fonzano, so your warning is wind."

"Marco is saddling the horses; you will be in Fonzano to-night. That is why I warn you."

"To-night? The Signorina Caldora?"

"Both. Falco was a madman and mattered nothing; that he broke in last night was an accident. A repetition could be prevented. But Margotti and that other were dangerous. Besides, there is still Matteo to reckon with." He paused a moment, then, looking at Brocq squarely in the eyes, went on steadily, "Signorina Caldora is too dear to me, too revered, too much God's saint: there must be no second Battista. In ten minutes or less you leave the Hermitage."

"Adorno!" Impulsively Le Brocq stretched out his hand, but Adorno drew back.

"No, I think not. That I have fallen how I know, but not so low as to touch hands with the man I warn."

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With a shrug Le Brocq turned away. "Signorina!" he called, knocking gently at her door.

"Monsieur!" The reply was at once so clear and prompt as almost to startle Le Brocq, but before he could speak again the door was opened. "Brigitta is easier," said the girl. There was a splash of colour high up upon the cheek-bones and her eyes were very bright; towards Adorno she did not so much as glance.

"Signor Adorno has at last given way. We leave the Hermitage at once."

If either man looked for surprise, relief, or even the passion of tears in an excess of joy, he was mistaken. There was not even a lifting of the eyebrows.

"A month ago I would have been grateful, but now—" she broke off with a gesture of indifference, then added, with apparent inconsequence, "at times I have not been unhappy here. Monsieur Le Brocq, we must take Brigitta with us."

"Brigitta?"

"Yes. How could I leave the child who saved my life to the mercies of this scum?"

"But her mother?"

"I answer for her mother," said Adorno coldly. At the stern contempt in the girl's last word he had winced as a man winces at the touching of an old wound where the nerve is raw.

"But what does Brigitta say?"

And Brigitta, bare-legged, her grey smock cleaner than when she had raced to answer Adorno's call a month before, appeared at the door to reply for herself. The small, thin face was white and pinched, but the eyes were shining with excitement.

"I am ready, signor. See! I will be able to walk quite well."

"A good child," said Adorno gently. "The signorina makes every one love her."

"Walk!" repeated Le Brocq, "why, you poor, brave child, you could never—"

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"No," interrupted the girl, "I shall carry her."

"The signor will carry her," said Adorno. "Marco, as one of the scum, cannot go the whole distance. You will like the signor to carry you, Brigitta?"

"Yes, signor," she answered soberly, "only, I shall be very heavy."

"Everyone loves the signor!" Adorno repeated himself sarcastically, with a variation. "But we have already spoken of that, Monsieur Le Brocq."

"You have, not I," answered Le Brocq, but the brown of his tan deepened as Antonina Caldora stooped over the child. When she straightened herself her face, too, was flushed, no doubt with the stooping. The situation had grown difficult and Marco's arrival with the horses was, on the whole, opportune.

"Hand me a coverlet from the child's bed," said Adorno curtly. Taking it, he wrapped her round carefully, leaving the arms free. "Mount and make ready while I go and explain to her mother," he went on, lifting her. "Brave little woman! Last night you did what a man would have given his life to have done!" Then, the child half whimpering in her excitement, he went out.

"Come," said Le Brocq. But as he paused at the door for her to pass before him she turned, looking back at the barren vault of the refectory with its doors open to right and left and, to his astonishment, there were tears in her eyes.

"There is so much to say farewell to, more than I had thought possible," she said, and moved onwards.

In silence Le Brocq mounted her on her horse, in silence climbed into his saddle, in silence took Brigitta, now frankly crying, into the hollow of his right arm and in silence they rode forward at a foot's-pace, Marco leading, Le Brocq in the rear. Saint Cyprian, too, was silent, or almost silent: there was a murmur behind them, an increasing murmur Le Brocq thought, but whether relief, protest or resentment he could not guess. Adorno, walking at his knee a yard away, gave

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no sign. He carried his head high and his face was set like a flint.

Just beyond the first contraction of the cliff towards the ledge Marco halted, whether by instinct or under orders was uncertain. To the right were the hollows whence the stones had been torn an hour before, to the left the screes, ploughed and scarred with the dumb record of a terrible vengeance. For a significance and a threat the spot was well chosen. Adorno moved forward abreast of the girl's girths.

"God keep you, little Ninetta. What I said at the first I say still—I can wait. Some day you will understand what a man's love is." With the strong light upon it his face showed very white and haggard and his voice shook. But there was no tremor in it when he turned to Le Brocq. "You are warned. Only weak men threaten and to-day has shown you what I am. By the life of God, no man shall rob me of my very own. Ride on, Marco."

But at the entrance to the camp there was a second halt. This time it was the girl who drew rein. Turning in her saddle she looked back beyond Le Brocq. Her face was very gentle, wistful, almost tender, her eyes soft and luminous with the beginnings of tears.

"Never can I hope to be so happy again—never."

"But you are going home," said Le Brocq. "At Fonzano—"

"You are one of those who do not know the Count of Fonzano," she answered, as she had answered Brissonet, and rode on.

Progress was slow. As the strength of a chain is the strength of its weakest link so progress must always be the pace of the slowest mover. Le Brocq, with little Brigitta in his arms, rarely dared to break the walk. It was not that the child complained, but at the jar of a trot the pinched face whitened and the thin muscles grew tense above the hooped ribs in the effort to control the pain. Twice Marco, riding ahead, called impatiently to make haste, till at last

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Le Brocq bluntly told him he could return to the camp if the pace did not suit him.

"No, signor, I dare not do that. I have my orders."

"And I dare not ride faster because of the child. She saved our lives last night."

"Falco? I know, signor, and yet—" he paused, measuring the distance between them and where Antonina Caldora had ridden onward, "a child's aches will mend, but if there is murder done—"

"Murder?"

"Matteo. But perhaps I am a fool to be afraid."

Half an hour later Marco again halted.

"I think all is safe now," he said, his eyes on the girl. "Fonzano is just beyond the bend."

"I have no fear and never had any," she replied, then added, "no fear of the road, I mean."

"Then, signor—"

"Yes, go, Marco." Dropping the reins Le Brocq held out his hand. "Whites up! Blacks down! and a safe return to Parma," he said cheerily. "If you need a friend and I am within reach come to me."

Marco's frank face flushed with satisfaction as he gripped Le Brocq's hand. He never forgot the gilt spurs on the heels, and the clasp of their wearer's hand warmed his veins like wine. He was no thief, not he, and never would be. His old mother in Parma and this grip of the hand would forever hold him back from that.

"God be with you, signor and signorina. It has been a bitter hard time this month past but not with the good will of us all. And after bitter comes sweet. Some day we'll meet, signor," and with a flourish of his faded cap, gay with a broken plume, he rode off at a gallop.

"After bitter, sweet?" repeated the girl. "There goes another who does not know Fonzano."

## CHAPTER XXXVII

### THE JUSTICE HALL OF FONZANO

"AT least you will sleep safe at Fonzano."

"I was never afraid," she answered, almost defiantly. "That is, never after the third night."

"It was then the signor came back," said Brigitta, with all a child's directness of application. But the girl was undisturbed.

"Yes, it was then the signor came back," she repeated tranquilly. "Monsieur Le Brocq, I have never thanked you—no, let me finish, and if I do not thank you now it is because I feel that something more than thanks will have to be said at Fonzano. What that may be makes me anxious. I know my father and you do not."

It was on Le Brocq's tongue to ask two questions: what could there be to say, and what manner of man was the Count of Fonzano. But with Brigitta wide-armed in his arms he left them unspoken. He remembered, too, that she had always frozen into silence whenever he had touched upon her father and the old life at Fonzano.

"No thanks, signorina. We have been too good comrades for thanks. And being such good comrades, what is there we cannot say one to the other, or leave unsaid."

"Yes, good comrades," she agreed quickly. "That is the very word. More loyal comrade there could not be. Monsieur Le Brocq, there is Fonzano, and I am not afraid for myself! Surely I cannot be just the half-child I was a month ago."

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Fonzano! In his quickened interest Le Brocq forgot to comment upon the bitterness of her humour. As they talked they had rounded a sharp bend of the hills. To the left a broad causeway, something short of a furlong in length and excellently paved, followed the minor hollows of the rise to an isolated outcrop of grey rock divided on every side from higher land by such broad sweeps of undulating ground that domination was impossible. On this stood Fonzano. Twenty feet above the base of the rock a smooth circular wall, high and massive, formed the first line of defence, its only break a double guard-house divided by a huge portcullis where the causeway ended. Above the wall—Le Brocq paused for a word which would be at once adequate and descriptive—peered? brooded? towered? frowned? threatened? All of them would fit, yet no one of them wholly described the fortress-castle whose sombre strength of central donjon, flanking and angle towers, turrets, machicolations and echauguettes imposed against the rising greenery of the wooded hills, was as sullenly defiant and seemingly immovable as its foundation of living rock.

But midway up the paved road Le Brocq found other food for thought than the lichened greyness of Fonzano's strength. Out from the guard-house on either side men poured, blocking the gateway with the gesticulating, questioning uncertainty of excited astonishment. Every man was armed and as they shifted, shouldering one another in their eagerness, Le Brocq grew bewildered by their numbers.

"How many are there, signorina?"

"About fifty, I think. Of course there are also the scullions, sewers, lackeys, grooms—perhaps as many more. And there," she went on as one pushed to the front with authority, "is Corloni, my father's—no, not squire, something less than squire and more than soldier. See! he has sent the news to my father. I shall ride ahead, Monsieur Le Brocq."

But only at a more rapid walk; when she reached

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the portcullis Le Brocq was not more than a length or two behind. As she drew near the men stood to arms in a line at either side, Corloni in the middle, but when she would have passed on with a bend of the head as if she had returned from no more than an hour's ride he raised his hand to stop the horse. Promptly the Caldora temper flashed out.

"Take your hand from my bridle this instant."

"But, signorina, my master—"

"Am I forbidden my father's house?"

"No, signorina, no; but—"

"Then lower your hand and stand aside lest you find to your cost that I am my father's daughter."

But while Corloni wavered, his hand shifting back and forth like a fluttering pigeon seeking perch yet afraid to alight, she drove her horse past him, her chin in the air, her eyes blazing. As to Le Brocq, she never once looked behind, but he felt instinctively that it would have gone ill with the man who denied him passage. But there was no denial. Curious eyes searched the bundle in his arms, with Brigitta's snock head above his elbow, but after a glance at the spurred heel Corloni saluted respectfully and Le Brocq followed without challenge.

Thenceforward he had little leisure for details. That the huge, two-leaved door set in an arch of massive stone, before whose hollow the girl drew rein, was bolted, barred and studded with iron, strong with a repellent, sinister hint of sleepless fear, he gathered by instinct rather than observation. The girl, unassisted, was already on her feet and holding up her arms for Brigitta. Her face was very pale, her eyes brilliant with a harder shining than at the Hermitage, but her mouth was set in a firmness of purpose Le Brocq had come to know and respect.

"Leave the horses to the grooms and come with me."

"But Brigitta will tire you?"

She shook her head impatiently. "Tire me? If that were all!" But hardly had she gone two steps

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when she turned. "Be patient ; it will not be easy, but whatever happens be patient." And again she went forward rapidly.

They were in a vaulted passage, stone-flagged, stone-arched, with doors and corridors opening to right and left, also a stone staircase. Further on was a square, unroofed court surrounded by a covered gallery exposed at the side. Twice men-servants showed themselves, stared a moment, then hastily disappeared ; from the gallery came a flutter of skirts, the glimmer of a peering white face above the stone handrail, a muffled exclamation, and a door was closed.

Just within the court the girl paused as if uncertain, and while she paused an upper servant came noiselessly from an open door to meet them : Fonzano's personal attendant, Le Brocq judged.

"Signorina, you are to wait my lord in the Justice Hall."

"The Justice Hall ?" Le Brocq could not see her face but the indignant tone coupled with the valet's gesture of deprecation were suggestive.

"Signorina, what can I do but bring the order !"

She returned neither answer nor comment, unless a squaring of the shoulders under the grey robe and an added lift to the head as, slowly, she crossed the courtyard obliquely could be construed as comment. Before an open doorway, set in the angle, she turned.

"Sir Roger Le Brocq, I regret the discourtesy of Fonzano as much as my father will when he understands how much we owe you," she said in a clear voice. But as she crossed the threshold her nerve faltered. Suddenly she lowered her head. "Kiss me, Brigitta mia," she whispered between passion and tears.

The response was instant. Up went the bare, lean arms in a close embrace and with a "God be thanked, there is still love in the world," the girl moved on. As to Le Brocq, a thrill shot through him ; anger at this unfatherly father, he thought. But perhaps it

## JUSTICE HALL OF FONZANO

was not all anger ; the complexities of emotion are at times difficult to disentangle.

The Justice Hall of Fonzano was worthy of Fonzano's justice. Stone-walled, stone-paved, stone-roofed, stone-mullioned, its sole light the half-quenched filtration from a high-pitched clerestory, even in the heat of August it struck a chill. The enormous carved mantels framing the gigantic hollows of the twin fireplaces were of stone, the lintels and the door-posts were of stone, the very benches were stone. A shallow, unrailed dais rose at one end, the sole wooden structure in the hall.

It needed no fervid imagination to conjure up the stony-hearted justice meted from it through the ages. Here Falco had been judged, here he had been condemned, perhaps even here—Le Brocq's gorge rose at the monstrous thought. Almost he could hear the peasant's passionate pleading. "There were four of us and another coming ; there was no food, not a crust, nothing, nothing at all, no food for the little children, none for the mother, none, none." Almost he could hear the rip of the blade and the echo of Falco's shriek rolling back from the stone roof where the Justice of Fonzano brooded untouched by pity. "And he laughed as his brutè hacked me—laughed !"

And now they were bidden wait in the same Justice Hall ; wait, as perhaps Falco had waited. Why ? Involuntarily Le Brocq turned to Antonina Caldora. She had sunk down into the angle of a stone bench and sat huddled forward in the relaxed tension of utter weariness. And yet Brigitta was held close to her breast, perhaps for comfort. With the patience of her hard training the child kept silence, but from time to time she touched the girl's cheek softly, also perhaps for comfort.

"Signorina, she is too heavy, let me take her."

"No, it is not worth while now, and—yes, here is my father. Oh, Monsieur Le Brocq, be patient, be very patient."

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

FEDERIGO CALDORA, JUDGE

TO the right and left of the dais doors opened. From behind one of these came the sound of heavy feet, not men in armour it seemed to Le Brocq, and unduly loud for Fonzano where none spoke above his breath except such as Falco in the hour of his agony. It was a slow tramp, slow and careful, and as it paused outside the door Le Brocq unconsciously braced himself. Why, he could not have told ; he had never so braced himself to face the anger of Communes.

The pause was for an instant only ; then two servants entered backwards, stooping, their shoulders rounded. Cautiously, slowly, exercising an infinite care, they inched inward, turned slowly and Le Brocq saw they carried the one side of a huge chair. Next moment the Count of Fonzano was in his Justice Hall, borne of four, a gross heavy man—gross-armed, gross-shouldered, with a gross, smooth-shaven face above a gross breadth of chest, not a sensual grossness but the grossness of an unwholesome animal growth. The eyes were large, full and bright under a broad brow, the mouth—but the shape of the mouth was lost in the gross fat of the cheeks and the chin was formless. He was sombrely, richly dressed ; from the waist down a coverlet of dark crimson silk falling to the chair-foot was folded in at either side. Behind his shoulder, in curious contradiction, followed a monk in the white robe of the Carmelites, small-boned, lean-faced, meagre as Brigitta was meagre, his robe spotless.

## FEDERIGO CALDORA, JUDGE

"Nearer the edge, nearer yet; there, that will do. Set down and go till I call you."

The voice was strong and clear, yet singularly gentle, so gentle that even the imperative was robbed of its imperiousness. Till the door closed there was silence. From the girl, erect now upon the stone bench and soothing Brigitta with her hand as one soothes a troubled child, Fonzano's gaze shifted to Le Brocq, looked him squarely, searchingly in the eyes with the penetrating appraisal of a man accustomed to judge men, then swept him down from head to heel. A smile puckered the broad face.

"You improve as you go on, my girl. If a third cast of the net were possible—but it is not—you might land me a noble. But perhaps you have. Your name, signor, I beg?"

"Roger Le Brocq. A month ago—"

"A Frenchman?" The soft voice held its level and Le Brocq, a growing irritation fretting his temper uselessly, remembered that someone—Falco was it? or Adorno?—had called the Count of Fonzano a smooth-tongued devil. The smoothness was justified, the second half of the description not impossible. Impossible? Falco's maimed wrist was its proof. "A Frenchman," he repeated. "It might be much worse. I am of the French faction and in any case I prefer a knight of France to a Pisan cogger of dice as a son-in-law."

"Son-in-law?" It was the girl who answered, starting to her feet with the cry. A wave of colour, reddening her to the throat, had driven out the pallor. "Father, how can you so shame me?"

"If you do not shame yourself, my girl, I cannot shame you," he answered drily. "Son-in-law, I repeat. Sir Roger understands me if you do not. A month ago! Your own words, Sir Roger. How else am I to account for that month?"

"You know the proverb of the bird and its nest," answered Le Brocq contemptuously. "The proverb is a true one, but the foulness is a lie."

## SIR GALAHAD OF THE ARMY

"High words, Sir Roger Le Brocq! Is it wise to give Fonzano the lie in his own Justice Hall? Remember, France is far off."

"I am my own France."

"And an honourable French gentleman." Suddenly the bantering smoothness dried out of the soft voice and he turned sharply to the girl, his broad face fiery with suppressed passion. "What is that in your arms?"

"A child—"

"Am I a fool or blind? What child, dolt?"

"A peasant's child."

"Then sling her outside the gate. I'll have no peasant brat in Fonzano."

"I shall not. She saved my life last night when Falco, whom you maimed in this hall, would have murdered me in revenge. Where she goes I go."

Her voice was as intolerant as his own and as hard. For a moment he stiffened in his chair, the broad hands shaking on its clenched arms. But with a deep breath he controlled himself, nodding his huge head ponderously.

"So you too can be a Caldora! By my name, I am glad of it; but I fear, Sir Roger, that Dame Le Brocq will be a termagant of a wife. Where is this Falco?"

"Dead."

"How?" He turned to Le Brocq.

"I broke his neck, I think. There was no other way. He was armed but I had no weapon."

Fonzano laughed. "Then Dame Le Brocq will be kept in order if her tongue grows curst!"

"Father, I refuse, refuse utterly—"

"My girl, you should have refused a month ago. Your French gallant—I prefer him to your Pisan—shall not give me the lie the second time so I say no more. But you do not seem to understand the cleft stick you've slipped into. You leave Saint Apollonia with this gentleman, you disappear for a month—no, no, no, I want no explanations; where

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the month was passed is nothing to me. You disappeared, I say, for a month and reappear again with this gentleman. If, after that, there is any refusal it might be by Sir Roger Le Brocq. But I think not; no, I think not. Fonzano would have a word to say and I still maintain that France is far off."

"But I too refuse." Le Brocq spoke curtly, sharply.

"I expected no less." The smooth voice was in courteous distinction from Le Brocq's rough reply, but through the smoothness there was the acid of a galling mockery. "A gentleman of your polite nation would naturally echo the lady. Your chivalry compels refusal. But if the lady should change her mind, as ladies do at times, what then? Leave the cause of change aside, what then? Would not the same chivalry compel assent? Do you feel the cleft stick?"

"But it is an outrage, a damnable outrage."

"I think not, and unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, I am, as you see, the judge. My dear daughter is my ward. Some months ago there were episodes—"

"She was lied to by a scoundrel, deceived, hoodwinked, cozened. You, a man of the world, should have protected her from his plots. It is to the honour of her ignorance and innocence that she was misled. The blame, if there is blame, was yours not hers."

"Thank you, monsieur," whispered the girl softly.

"Good!" said Fonzano. "Not many men would have dared to speak as you have spoken, standing where you stand. Almost you are a Caldora—almost, not quite; that will come later. But in your zeal you forget. I did protect, Fonzano can take care of its own as you will see. I sent her to Saint Apollonia; you took her thence, took her to the French camp. That was a month ago. I suggest nothing, but you are a man of the world as I—have been." The pause, almost imperceptible, ended in

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an acrid bitterness, and Le Brocq, his eyes on Antonina Caldora's face, saw her bite her lip and wince as at a galling hurt; but instantly Fonzano went on. "You have seen war, you know its aftermath and what some men hold to be fair prey. I ask no questions, I desire no knowledge; but consider, it is a month since you left Saint Apollonia. You know the world; is it, after all, such an outrage? Of course, there can be no compulsion." He jerked his head slightly backward. "Fra Luca would never consent to compulsion."

"Then for the third time I refuse."

"Then, my girl, to my great regret Sir Roger Le Brocq must hang!"

There was a moment's silence, tense and absolute, then the girl broke out passionately.

"Father, you dare not. For a whole month he has stood between me and death; you dare not, you dare not."

"What Fonzano dares not do in Fonzano is beyond my comprehension," answered the smooth voice. "That Sir Roger Le Brocq did his duty as a man of honour I do not in the least doubt. He can still do it. The name of Caldora must stand clear before the world, but there is no compulsion."

"And no hanging," retorted Le Brocq fiercely, "not while a man has a sword at his side."

"Good! I expected no less. Hanging, I grant, was a figure of speech. It was the high light of the picture, something beyond probability which fixes attention on the purpose of the artist. You have been in Florence and have seen Fra Angelico's Angels? And it has fixed it. There are but the two alternatives. Antonina, you have the night to think it over. Go now to your old quarters and take your brat with you. My son-in-law, as I trust, will remain; but there can be no compulsion."

"Fra Luca—"

"The church will do its duty," Fonzano's voice roughened, "the church will do no more. I also will

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do mine. My girl, I do not say, sleep sound! I say, think well!"

In silence the girl looked at him fixedly, tearless, yet breathing like one who sobs; in silence she turned away. Both arms clasped Brigitta, now she eased the child to one shoulder and held out a hand to Le Brocq. Firmly his steady hand clasped it, held it, covered it with his left, and so they stood, Fonzano watching both keenly with his shrewd eyes.

"Why do you not curse me? All that a man can give or venture you have given or ventured for me and it has brought you to this. A month ago you ventured your life—my doing and my folly. A month ago you pledged your honour for me; God knows you have kept the pledge sacred before God and man. Not a day in that month but your life was in pawn for my sake, not a day but you might have saved it at no cost and you would not, for my sake you would not. For my sake? No! I do not think so highly of myself as that. For something greater, nobler, finer, than just a woman's sake. For your oath's sake, for your honour's sake, and to defend the defenceless. God bless you for your simple faithfulness, Sir Roger Le Brocq, and God be thanked for Galahad of the Army." In the end her voice broke and tears were streaming down her cheeks as, clasping in turn, she stooped and kissed Le Brocq's hand.

"Signorina—no—I—it was my happiness—"

But she had loosened her clasp and was already turning towards a familiar door. Brigitta, held fast against her breast, was sobbing bitterly.

## CHAPTER XXXIX

### TWO UNHAPPY SOULS

"Now," said Le Brocq, "at last we are free to speak."

But as he paused at the foot of the shallow dais, his great height towering above the gross figure in the chair, a bell rang out, slowly, solemnly, sonorously, and Fonzano held up a hand.

"The Angelus! Fra Luca, pray for the souls of two unhappy men, Federigo Caldora de Fonzano and Pietro Spina."

It was the shift of voice, the lapse into earnestness, rather than the words or the uplifted hand which arrested Le Brocq. Was the vice of hypocrisy to be added to cruelty, lying and ill-faith? Clearly the Carmelite did not think so. It was rather as if he recognized and approved a duty. Falling on his knees at Fonzano's side, his head bent, his hands crossed upon his breast, he broke into petition. Of its intimate tenor, why the name should be thus coupled or why either should be unhappy, Le Brocq gathered nothing from the Latin; but from time to time Fredericus Caldora and Petrus Spina jostled one another in the same breath.

Shortly the prayer ended, but when Fra Luca would have risen from his knees Fonzano laid a hand heavily on his shoulder.

"Now pray for the happiness of Roger Le Brocq and Antonina Caldora, soon, as we hope, to be joined in wedlock. But be brief; Spina is waiting."

This time there was a short pause, but before Le Brocq could decide whether or not to protest and

## TWO UNHAPPY SOULS

cry "sacrilege," the murmured petition had begun. The words came slowly. Possibly at Fonzano the souls of unhappy men had the more frequent need for prayer. Again there was the ignorance of the direct meaning of the sonorous periods, again there was a linking together of names for a common purpose—Rogerus Le Brocq; Antonina Caldora—and Le Brocq's heart in spite of his resentment thrilled within him at the suggestiveness of the solemn association.

Rising to his feet Fra Luca stood back, but before Le Brocq could unburden his indignation Fonzano again spoke across his shoulder.

"Fra Luca, bid them bring Pietro Spina. Of the two, Sir Roger Le Brocq is the less urgent."

"Signor," began Le Brocq, "if you think to play with me—"

"Wait. No man yet has called the Justice of Fonzano play. Father, bid them bring the rogue, Spina. You need not grudge him his three minutes, Sir Roger Le Brocq, and for these three minutes I beg you to give place a little."

There was no time to reply. The priest was already on his way to the door when the repeated command reached him. Almost immediately a group of five entered upon the lower level and Le Brocq stood aside; he had no intention of feeding the curiosity of Fonzano's men-at-arms.

In such a place and such a presence it was a group most eloquent in its significance. In the midst of three guards, one at either side locking an arm, one behind grasping a frayed collar, shambled a peasant, his loosened knees doubling under his weight at every unwilling step. His feet were naked, his miserable body miserably covered; his sunken cadaverous face, a sickly grey, glistened with the sweat of terror; his slack mouth hung open and from time to time he sucked at his lips for breath.

Behind the four, a yard or two in the rear, walked a man in black and red whom Fonzano might have

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called the high light of the picture. Muscular, long-limbed, broad-shouldered, his sinewy arms naked to the elbow, he carried a short, heavy sword bare in his right hand; round his waist was a leather girdle thrust through with the implements of his terrible trade whose hinted use made Le Brocq shudder and set his blood racing.

Collapsed, his joints hanging, the slaver dropping from his slack mouth, Spina looked piteously up at the broad, ensanguined face of his lord of life and death, read no sign of mercy in the clear eyes and fell whimpering.

"Pietro Spina, sheep-stealer."

"No—no," he stammered, gulping. "No, my lord—no, Excellency, I found it dead on the hillside—dead—dead. Three days—three days dead!"

"Was it less mine—dead?"

"Excellency, we were hungry—"

"Was it less mine?"

"Dead—dead—we were hungry—dead—dead. Mercy, my lord! Mercy! Never again! we will starve; we will—will eat grass, if we may. Mercy! mercy!" Hanging from the hands of his guards, rather than standing upon his feet, he broke off, sobbing.

"Sheep stealer!" Grasping a chair-arm Fonzano pushed his heavy body laboriously forward and shook a stretched-out finger in denunciation. "Dead? Perhaps. But whether a dead sheep or a living lamb," he glanced aside at Le Brocq an instant, then back to the terror-stricken wretch below him, "whoso touches Fonzano's flock pays. We hang them."

"No, signor, no; for the love of God, mercy. They were starving—"

"Yes, for their sakes there will be mercy. Keep your life lest they starve outright." Throwing himself back in his chair he paused, then beckoned to the man in black and red. "Mark him, Annibale; the left hand above the wrist."

## TWO UNHAPPY SOULS

"Signor! No! not that! Never again, I swear it—I swear it. We will starve—Ah! Good God! Good God!—signor—Excellency—damned devils of hell—"

Many a time had Le Brocq seen men die of a sudden mortal hurt, many a time heard them cry as lance-head splintered bone or sword-thrust found the vitals, but never with such a scream as split the air as, fighting hard, the ragged sleeve was ripped to the elbow, the lean, muscular arm drawn tense between a grip that crushed the straining fingers and a guard's weight flung upon the shoulder, while the man in black and red stepped forward, measuring his distance. Falco ha' said the brute laughed. Le Brocq did not believe it. There was no laughter in Fonzano's eyes, only a terrible intentness; but if there was no laughter neither was there mercy. To hold his peace was to be partaker in the iniquity and as the man in black and red swung up his arm Le Brocq sprang forward.

"Count Fonzano, I protest—"

Instantly Fonzano raised a hand. "Annibale, hold. You protest, Sir Roger?"

But Le Brocq had recovered his self-control. A protest which must end in words was futile; to denounce Fonzano's justice in Fonzano's Justice Hall a waste of breath; how futile and how great a waste the silence of Fra Luca proved. The monk had turned away, his face buried in his hands: what agony of prayer for miserable souls was in his heart God and he alone knew. But his attitude gave Le Brocq a suggestion.

"There were two unhappy men; Signor, I beseech you, make one happy."

"I could not refuse my son's first request. As I said to Antonina I say to you: think well. Do you ask this of me, Sir Roger Le Brocq?"

Spina's strained sobbing had ceased. Here was hope.

"Signor," he breathed, his blood-shot eyes fixed

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on Le Brocq's face, "there are four to feed—four; have mercy—ah, God in Heaven, we must all starve."

"I can refuse my son nothing to-day. Do you ask this thing of me, Sir Roger Le Brocq?" Fonzano's voice was level and smooth, but there was no mockery in it. From the intent, earnest face, the gross chin on the gross chest, Le Brocq looked into the haggard eyes of Pietro Spina; the lips moved, but no sound came, the agony of petition was too great.

"I ask this of you," said Le Brocq slowly.

Fonzano nodded his huge head. "A Knight of France," he said soberly. "Take him away; give him bread and meat for his family and henceforth a daily dole; it is my son's gift."

Silently the group of five moved to the door, nor were Spina's feet of more use to him than when he entered; as the door closed they heard him sobbing bitterly. Suddenly Le Brocq bethought himself.

"There must be no compulsion on the Signorina."

"There will be none."

But the gust of passion had not died out of Le Brocq. Now it broke afresh.

"And has there been no compulsion? You carry things with too high a hand. By the power that made me, Count Fonzano, why should I not force an end between us here and now?"

"Because you dare not; because a Chevalier of France dare not even threaten such a miserable half-man as Federigo Caldora." With a sweep of his hand Fonzano flung back the crimson coverlet inpetuously, almost fiercely, from the chair-front. Strapped into the chair was the gross torso, but below the torso—nothing. "My horse rolled on me. They say I would have died. God knows, it would have been easier to have died than live like this. But while I lay senseless they hacked me as I am—me, Federigo Caldora! and left me a byword and a jest to every coward and scullion. Misfortune has no friends. Said one 'Some men die by inches but poor Fonzano

## TWO UNHAPPY SOULS

by feet and legs.' Said another, 'Pray heaven his Maker will know him for his own mother would not?' Curse them all for cowards! While my life was whole in me they would not have dared so much as walk between me and the sun; but when, maimed though I am, I would have fixed a quarrel on a jester, he sneered—was I in such haste to follow my legs to the grave? and bade me thank God I had a mouth to eat and drink as well as curse with—me! Federigo Caldora!" Slowly, his fierce eyes blazing on Le Brocq in challenge, he drew back the silk, hiding his mutilations. "Do you ask now why I said, 'Pray for the soul of that unhappy man, Federigo Caldora!' God knows the body is past petitions! Think of it, Sir Roger Le Brocq, think of it; all my life strong in me, all my powers of life seething full in me and—this! a jest, a byword, a contempt; a thing of gibe and laughter to my own child."

"Never that, never; no, not once." In face of that fierce rebellion of spirit Le Brocq dared attempt no commiseration, no conventional comfort; it would have been an insult.

"Never?"

"Never. That you and she are not in accord, yes; but there were causes on the surface. She spoke little of Fonzano, of your—misfortune never."

Fonzano sat silent, his eyes intently searching Le Brocq's face, his broad hands white in their hard grip of the chair at either side. The fury of his passion had died away, but his breathing was still forced, his gross chin firm set, then:

"My little Nina! We do not understand each other. After all she, too, is a Caldora in her own way."

"I have never known a sweeter woman."

"Aye, when her tongue is not curst."

"Nor a braver."

"I said she was a Caldora. Well, God send us all at the last. To-night, Sir Roger, you must know the custom of Caldora and keep vigil."

## SIR GALAHAD OF THE ARMY

"Vigil?"

Fonzano smiled grimly. "Before the altar, fasting; is the custom. Fonzano's bridegrooms have great need at times to make their peace. One regret I owe you—you are robbed of your wooing."

"You have me in a cleft stick," answered Le Brocq, flushing, he could not have told why, but it was not with anger. "You say there is no compulsion, yet by one road or another you have led me where I stand to-night. One thing I swear to you, there shall be no compulsion on Signorina Caldora."

"There will be none."

"She must assure me so herself."

"I agree."

"And this I tell you beforehand; when your priest has said his Yea and Nay I shall hold myself free to go where I will, even from the door of your chapel."

"Where you will and when you will. To Fonzano's son Fonzano's door opens out or in as he chooses."

"Your oath to all these. I mean no offence, but I fight for a liberty not my own."

"My life for hers, my honour for hers," quoted Fonzano. "What? am I such a child to the world, or so careless of my daughter that I do not know the story of Saint Apollonia and of more than Saint Apollonia? There is no offence. Lend me the crucifix from your breast, Fra Luca. As I pray God to have more mercy on my soul in death than He has on my body in life I swear there shall be no compulsion, and the Yea and Nay being said you, Sir Roger Le Brocq, may go freely where you will—where you will," he repeated, and laughed, but there was nothing of the sardonic in the merriment. "Are you satisfied? Then your hand upon it," and Le Brocq to his astonishment, found himself leaning across the dais to grip the hand stretched out towards him. "Fra Luca, bring my son—who-will-be to the chapel; then at eight to-morrow—you understand?"

"If Holy Church will it permit," said the priest. "Where there is force there can be no sacrament."

## TWO UNHAPPY SOULS

"You have my oath. I shall not so much as see Antonina again to-night."

But Le Brocq lingered a moment.

"There are two things, Signor," he began hesitatingly. "When I am gone, be good to the little maid ; there is a great, loyal soul in that small body."

"Be satisfied. I do nothing by halves ; you saw Spina just now. She shall be well cared for—when you go."

"Next, where is the army, that I may join it when I leave Fonzano ?"

"A week after the battle it was at Nizza della Paglia, thence it marched to Turin. Your King is safe. You will find him there and the road to France open—when you leave Fonzano." Then he added with a deepened significance. "Italy has need of such men as you."

## CHAPTER XL

### VIGIL—AND AFTER.

WITH Fra Luca's "God's peace be with you, my son," and the soft dropping of the curtain behind him quietness closed in on Le Brocq. Not silence. However subdued the voices, however heedfully men passed to and forth upon their business, the life of Fonzano was too full, too sleepless, for utter quiet. Even in the dead of night the faint avowals of watchful care could be heard, with, far off, the thin sentinel tread of an iron heel upon the flagging.

At the falling of the curtain Le Brocq welcomed the quietness with profound satisfaction. To be alone, with leisure to think, was a blessed relief. Every hour since Brigitta had called, Signor! Signor! had been packed with an entanglement of disturbing emotions. To disentangle these, with a due apprehension of their meaning and value, was a prime necessity if he was to see his way clearly before him, and yet, even with the quietness about him as a mantle, Le Brocq was unable to follow his thoughts forward.

The very stillness was an enemy to thought. The clamour of the day's many voices grew insistent through it. And they were voices with a claim to be heard. Voices which said, It is we who have shaped the end, it is we who have made it possible, we, not you, only went forward in the path we opened for you. Men think they shape their own destiny, but for most it is shaped for them; the best they can do is to use what is laid ready to their hand.

## VIGIL—AND AFTER

So the voices were many. There was Falco, who was dead ; there was little Brigitta who had almost died ; there were Margotti and Battista who were dead ; there was Adorno, there was Fonzano, there Pietro Spina, there was—Antonina Caldora ! Had even one of these voices failed there would be no end in sight, or at least not the same end. Falco had driven them to despair, Brigitta had stood in the path of murder, because of Margotti and Battista Adorno had sent them on their way, Fonzano and Spina together had coerced his honour, Antonina Caldora—that gave great food for thought. What part had Antonina Caldora played ?

Kneeling on the prie-dieu which fronted the altar rails, Le Brocq leaned forward, resting on his folded arms. The voices were dying down. Each had been heard in turn, each acknowledged and all had gone out of his life except Fonzano and Antonino Caldora ; Adorno's threat he reckoned as nothing or next to nothing. And of the two who remained Fonzano's influence over his life had ended. If he had the vices and his time and class he had also the virtues—his pledged word would be rigidly kept. The new day would find the door open either for Fonzano's son or for the man whom Antonina Caldora had refused to call husband, even in name, that the malice of the world might be silenced. Well, there would be the army left.

Strange how men hide themselves from themselves, and passing strange how simply nature draws aside the disguise. The unsought phrase drifting through Le Brocq's mind brought revelation—there would still be the army left. Was the army, then, no longer first ? A month before the army had stood for his heart's desire, and had drawn him with a compelling power which it was a joy to obey ; Antonina Caldora had said the truth—it was his Grail. As he had ridden downward and northward he had stood upright in his stirrups, singing for pure gladness of heart because the army and the camp lay before him.

## SIR GALAHAD OF THE ARMY

Now—the blood rushed to Le Brocq's temples and his pulses throbbed as he began to understand why he had hated the lad Battista with such a bitter hatred, and why the story of Adorno's six months ago had cut him to the quick. No, the army no longer came first, and of the two who were left in his life one would never go out of it again, never. Very soberly Le Brocq bowed his head upon his arms and prayed that when the morning came he might be man enough to play his part to its bitterest end. God grant her peace, God grant her her heart's desire, God grant that when he rode downward and northward for the last time he would carry with him no memory of a shadow in the eyes of the woman he loved, at least no shadow of his making.

The woman he loved. Le Brocq shivered a little even in the warmth of the night. Never before had a woman come into his life as Antonina Caldora had come. For him love had hitherto been the gracious tender reverence of a mother's memory, or the loyal devotion paid so ungrudgingly to that other mother—France. This strange newness awed Le Brocq a little as recognition grew clearer. When had it begun? There was nothing of it at Saint Apollonia, nothing in that first stay at the Hermitage; had there been would he have shouted and sang as he rode to the army! And yet her welcome—he formed no name in his thoughts, none was needed—her frank gladness on his return had moved him strangely. But the gladness had, of course, meant nothing; a man's protection was a relief in her loneliness, that was all. And how womanly she had been, how careful that he should make no mistake; he was big brother and she little sister. God bless her for a good woman, said Le Brocq in his heart, as every man should say of the woman he loves.

And not only good but strong and tender. Good women seem, at times, to have little blood in their veins, little warmth in their love, to belong already to that world where there is neither marrying nor giving

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in marriage. That was not Antonina Caldora. A love which could go out to the child Brigitta with such a passionate strong tenderness that it cast out all fear of Fonzano, and defied him in even in his wrath, would surely some day waken in a yet more passionate strength for the one man worthy of it. That, said Le Brocq, sorrowfully, I am not. Galahad? There were no Galahads, only weak faulty men who, more or less blindly, more or less stumblingly, saw and followed their Grail whatsoever it was. If it had love in it, such love as tramples self and baseness under foot, then it was holy; not the highest perhaps, not the greatest quest of life, but at least one which a man can follow in the world of men.

And he had followed though he might not find. Three times in the past night—it was drawing on to morning now; one by one Le Brocq had heard through the quietness the muffled boom of the hours as they passed—three times she had cried her refusal with an insistence there was no mistaking; not even the lash of Fonzano's smooth tongue could drive her to a reluctant obedience. God bless her for a good woman, said Le Brocq a second time, with apparent inconsequence. And yet not so. It stirred his reverence that she should reverence her womanhood too highly to degrade it even in name without love. Without love! Le Brocq winced—well, there was always the army. Bowing his head once more on his folded arms he prayed dumbly. There were no words even in his thought, only the sense of a great need, and an unfaltering belief in the power of a solemn presence. And, such are men, presently he slept.

At a touch upon his shoulder Le Brocq awoke, cramped and stiff but fully alert on the instant. It was broad day, but no direct light lit up the multi-coloured glories of the southern window, therefore the sun still hung in the east. By his side stood Fra Luca, a smile on his mild face.

"You are a good sleeper, my son; doubly good.

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Never saw I a man sleep so sound or so quickly roused."

"A poor vigil, father."

"No: the best. Only a clean life could sleep so tranquilly in such a presence. For Antonina's sake I thank God from my heart."

Le Brocq flushed. "Her memory will help me to keep it clean. How late have I slept, father?"

"It is close on six, when I say matins. At seven there will be a special mass, then at eight—" he paused, a hand on Le Brocq's arm and his eyes filled. "In the child of a month ago a woman's soul has been born with sore travail. Signor—monsieur—yours is a great nation of brave men, but where women are concerned—"

"I love her with all my heart and soul," said Le Brocq simply. "If my name will shield her from lying tongues it is hers, but she need have no fear from me. Only," he added, his voice deepening, "I must be satisfied that she is not coerced."

Fra Luca's light grip on Le Brocq's arm tightened. "Be easy, my son, you shall be satisfied. By now she is in the Ladies' Garden waiting you, just you two alone. Come."

With a reverence to the altar Fra Luca turned towards the door followed by Le Brocq. His thoughts were in a whirl, his heart throbbing as it had throbbed in the first consciousness of self-revelation, every nerve tingled, his very joints seemed loosened and out of control. What corridors, what galleries they passed through, what stairs they descended, he could not have told, it was only vaguely that he recognized the open court they had crossed the night before. If Fra Luca spoke, the words passed him by meaningless until his ear caught Adorno's name.

"Adorno?"

Fra Luca halted. "Yes, your—" he paused, searching for a word without offence, "your host of the Hermitage, as I was telling you, he is dead."

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"Dead? Adorno dead?"

"Yes. A frank-faced, frank-tongued lad brought word. He is in the guardroom now and wept at the telling. No man could be all bad who was so wept over."

"No," said Le Brocq soberly, "Adorno was not all bad. It was Marco, I suppose, who brought word. I must see him presently. Perhaps he will come with me to the army. How did Adorno die?"

"There was a quarrel the last night. He said you would understand, and would say no more. But Adorno and four more are dead; he and others broke camp and the Hermitage is abandoned."

"No, not all bad," repeated Le Brocq. "In the end he died for the Signorina and for me, for the woman he loved and the man he hated." He paused in thought, his mind far away. He had no doubt how Adorno died. Either Matteo had feared for his own share in Margotti's plot, or had resented the freeing of the prisoners. Suddenly he bethought himself. "Does the Signorina know?"

"No, why distress her?"

"I see no reason. She has had distresses enough and still has. Little Brigitta?"

"Better, well almost. The children of the poor are like kittens, unless you kill them outright they thrive. My son, the bell will ring for matins, it is almost six, you have until seven."

"It is five times too long. Lead on, Father, I am ready."

The Ladies' Garden of Fonzano was a second but larger open court planted with cool greenery. Whoso has seen the gardens loved of the Augustines can picture its pleasant intricacy of winding paths bordered by spreading shrubs clipped at times to quaint devices. Through the spaces between the greenery were glimpses of a robe whiter than the Carrara of the fountains.

"There is the Signorina. God have you both in His keeping. Be gentle with her, Signor."

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Le Brocq smiled a little grimly to himself as he went forward alone. Surely never was such an injunction less needed, his one question was how to hold his grip upon himself that self-revelation might not flash out in voice and word, and at the first sight of her face the grip almost loosened, so wan was it and so full of misery. She too, had kept vigil, but without relief. In her white frock, white to the throat and untouched by any colour, she seemed taller, more slender, more a child, but the steadfast eyes were full of a woman's knowledge and a woman's sorrow.

At the sound of his footfall she turned, grew tense a moment, looked him in the eyes then aside. Nor for a breath or two did either speak. Then,

"Signorina, at last I have fulfilled the trust of Saint Apollonia."

"Yes," she answered. "At last you are free to return to the army."

Le Brocq winced at the unconscious irony, but he dared attempt no protest. He choose safer ground.

"Your father has promised to care for Brigitta."

"Galahad to the last!" Her eyes smiled, but there was little light in them. "You think of everyone but yourself. The child will never forget her Signor. But," her voice fell a little, "which of us could ever forget."

"She is a loyal, brave child."

"Oh!" she flashed out with a return of her old spirit. "More t'han children can be loyal even though they are cowards."

"I know no braver woman. Last night proved that, for the child's sake. And not last night alone. Through all that terrible month you never once complained; there is no such courage as the courage which patiently endures under an hourly threat of the unknown. It is easy to be brave in the heat and stir of action, the very need compels courage. But to be patient and silent day after day, never knowing

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what an hour may bring—Signorina, I never saw its like in a man."

"I was not afraid," she said, a spot of red on either cheek. "Not after you came back," she added, nor did she look aside as she said it.

"I should never have gone."

"It was your right, there was the army; where you will go again."

"Signorina," Le Brocq hesitated, unwilling to court discomfiture. Yet it was to say this very thing they were met together. "Last night your father—"

"I refuse," she interrupted hastily, the spot upon the cheeks spreading, "refuse utterly, refuse now as I did then. Not even my father can compel such an outrage."

"No, there is no compulsion."

"Then let the world say what it will; we know ourselves, that is enough. The evil tongues cannot hurt you so far away, and I—I will have Brigitta. After all you have endured, all your dangers for my sake, it would be a poor requital to turn Adorno—"

"Adorno? What has he to do with us?"

"He threatened, he warned. He could not prevent I know; but sooner or later—" she broke off, her clenched hands pressed hard against her breast. "So many have died because of me, but you—the man who—who saved me, sheltered me; no, no, not that; I, too, would die I think."

"Was that the reason you refused last night?"

"In part," she assented, flushing.

"As if Adorno mattered!" said Le Brocq scornfully, then he remembered Fra Luca's news and added very soberly, "Nor will he ever matter again; signorina, I grieve honestly, but Adorno is dead."

"Adorno? Dead?"

"Last night, I know no more. Marco brought word."

The clenched hands fell slowly to her sides but were not relaxed, then the left slipped up again and was laid against her heart as if to quiet its throbbing.

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"Dead?" she repeated and paused, her eyes fastened on Le Brocq's face. "But I still refuse. It makes no difference."

"No," assented Le Brocq, "it makes no difference. Nothing could make a difference but the love of the woman I love, and with that not fifty Adornos would matter."

"You love?" she repeated. The right hand crept up to its fellow and lay there. "But yesterday I was your ward, nothing more. I heard you say it—your ward, nothing more. And so last night I refused: because of Adorno and—and because of that. Now you say, the woman you love. Ah, dear God! I cannot understand."

"Nor did I understand, not till last night. But even when I understood, even when I knew you for what you are, the one dear heart's desire, the Grail of life to be followed with all the worship of a man's one love, you had nothing to fear from me; sacred and revered I would have left you at the church door. Nor is it that love only came last night: it was then I understood, but I know now I have loved you since the day I came back from the army."

"And I from the day you left me. But," light leaped to her eyes as a rush of colour flushed her like a tide, "what if I do not wish to be left at the church door?"

Le Brocq has always said that he found the hour till seven struck five times too short.

THE END

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