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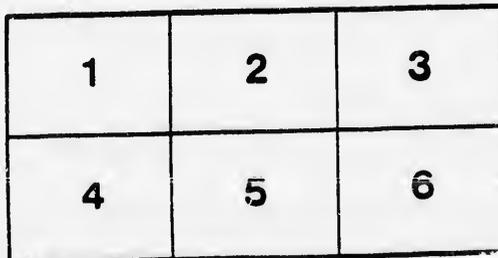
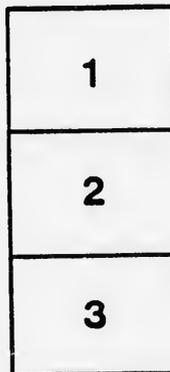
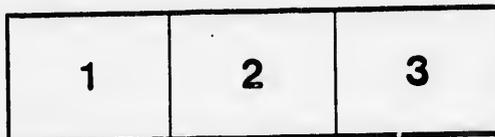
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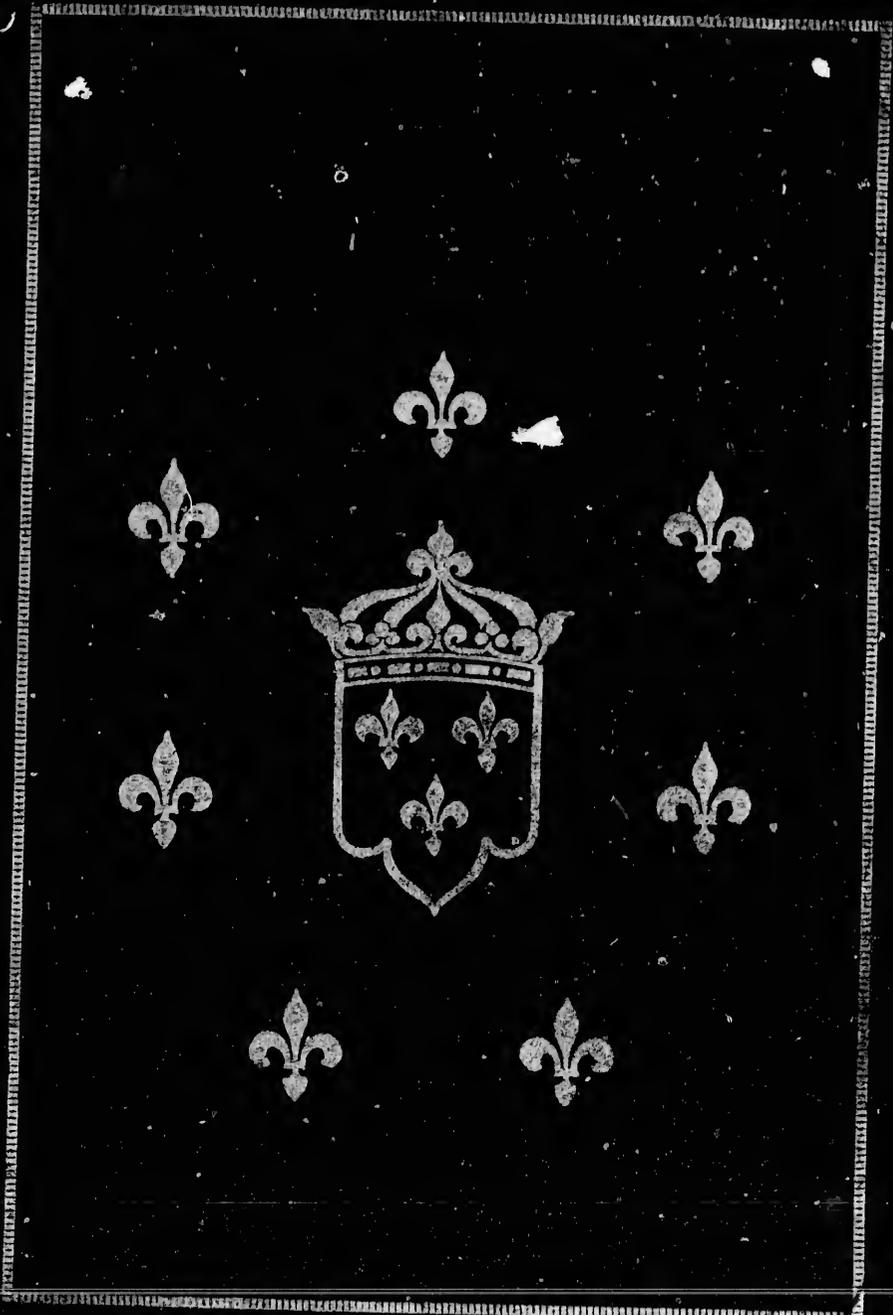
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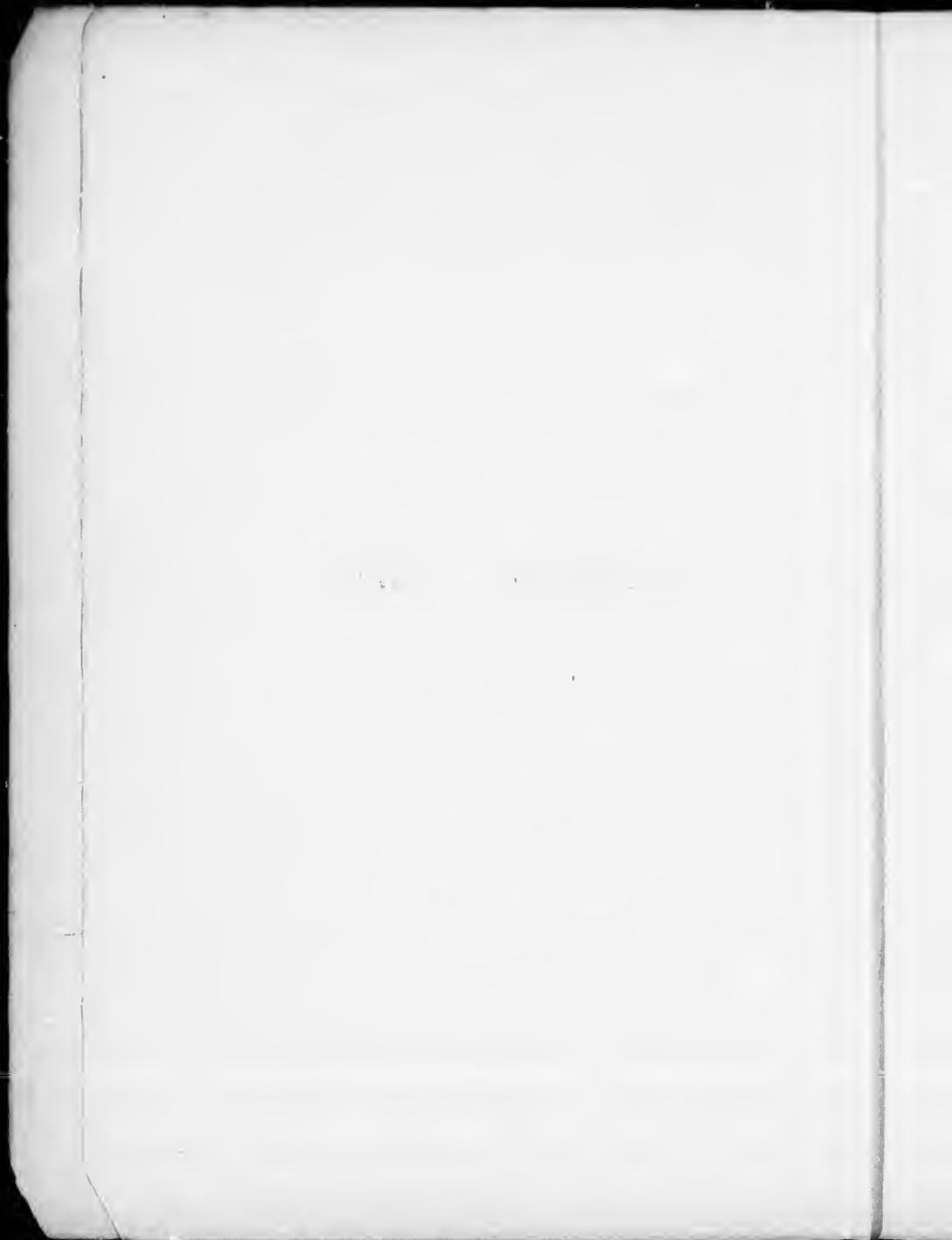
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A KING'S PAWN



A KING'S PAWN

BY

HAMILTON DRUMMOND

AUTHOR OF 'A MAN OF HIS AGE,' 'FOR THE RELIGION,' ETC.

TORONTO

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A KING'S PAWN.



CHAPTER I.

THE KING CROOKS HIS FINGER.

WHEN, out of His divine imaginings, God gave man the world and all the things of charm and worth that are therein—things seen, things dreamed of, and things known by instinct—He gave nothing sweeter or more beautiful than the love of a good woman. That much is so clear that whosoever has tasted its truth will cry out upon it for a platitude. He who has not tasted it is, as it were, as yet outside the pale of blessing. What is less certain is whether in the wife and mother the love to the husband or the child is the greater. Many a time it has seemed to me to be the one and many a time the other, so that I have concluded this: whichever calls for the greater sacrifice, draws for the time the greater love.

Take a case—one of but little moment, I grant, but it illustrates the point.

Jeanne, my wife, had no love for that dusty ride to Orthez in the blinding July heat. To bide with me in the cool quiet and comparative greenery of Bernauld would have been more to her taste. But Gaspard, our boy, had slipped his collar-bone in some school horse-play, and so needs must that his mother go and nurse him back to health, and a stronger muscle for the next fool's bout. Have me with her she would not, lest mothers of a double handful of bustling boys laugh at her for making much ado of a small matter. Bide at home she would not, "For," said she, with such a shiver in her voice that I could but kiss her and answer nought, "I have but him and you in the whole world."

Later I told her that for love of the son she had gone near to lose the life of the father, since but for being alone at Bernauld I would have sent some politic answer to the King's letter and kept my place and peace at home; or else have brought her with me to Vic, where her woman's wit would have kept me clear of the folly I presently fell into with my eyes open. Yet this was scarcely true, for when a king wags a crooked finger and says "Come," there are few but will follow the beck; nor could she, or any other—unless it had been Nostradamus himself—have foreseen what afterwards befell.

This was how it came about.

Two days had passed since my lady had ridden

out for Orthez, where Gaspard kept his terms in the school of Beza's founding, and I, being utterly moped for want of her, had betaken myself to my study. Not to books. To my great loss, that solace has never been mine. Time and again I have seen Coligny, crushed by defeat, and burdened with the sorrows of the whole Huguenot family in France, drop care at the side of an arm-chair, and find rest and refreshment in what to me was mere weariness of words. Queen Jeanne, too, the mother of our Henry, could forget the bloody griefs of her beloved Navarre in a crabbed manuscript of monkish Latin, and draw from study the strength which others gain in sleep. These being the two I most reverence in the world, it is not likely I would have the folly to despise what gave them comfort, but the thing itself was beyond me.

My study, then, in place of shelves and cases, had nails and hooks and racks. Nevertheless, that which hung upon the walls had tongues as long as sheep-skin, since they told tales of life and of death; of victory and defeat; of courage, of cunning, and of cowardice; of shame, glory, and self-sacrifice; the growth and decay of nations; the progress and development of craftsmanship; the passions, the follies, and the failures of men; the awful nearness of God, and the sharp swiftness of His judgments. All these they told. Could books do more? I trow not.

Here was a trophy of lances and pikes; there of bows, crossbows, and arbalists, tough ash and tougher

yew; or of musketoons and the newer-fangled arms that were so surely pressing the old out of use. Between these were suits of armour, browned, hammered, and damascened; from the heavy plate wherein a man sat his horse like a pillar of iron and could not budge ten feet a-foot to save his life, to the delicate coats of chain-mail that fitted the body with the ease and comfort of a shirt, and yet were as safe as a wall of sand. But my books had other than metal leaves, for in one corner was a stand of tattered flags that had flown in more winds than those of Europe, while above the great mantel was set a star of sword-blades, some with handles and some without, but mostly notched and grim with use. With four such walls about him a man could pass his day and never be alone. But to every man his lure, and even as the Admiral had his favourite reading so had I mine, and my best beloved books were those glittering strips of steel above the mantel that even in the dark glowed like polished silver.

Here it was that Marcel found me in the dusk of the second day after Jeanne's departure. I had lifted down a sword from the great star, and the old squire needed no second glance to recognise it.

"The Florida blade!" he cried as he saw me test afresh its swing and balance; "my faith, Master Blaise, now that it's down you may keep it down. When the King sends post to Bernauld it's not to chop gossip, I'm thinking!"

"Ay," answered I bitterly enough, for what with

Mornay and De Rosny, the King had forgotten me of late. "When the King sends! But man and steel will have rusted beyond use before that day comes."

"And perhaps better so," cried Marcel. "Better for the young master, better for madame, better for Bernauld. We are too old, Master Blaise, to hold our own with the lads in the front line, and struggle on in the rear we will not."

"Too old?" and I rose and stretched myself: "let him who thinks he says truth in jest beware lest he find he has lied in earnest. Too old? Why four-and-forty is a man's age and no more. As for thee——"

"Oh," said he sourly, "let me and my age be. Only, if you could cut my years in half I would be twice the man I am."

Which was true enough, though I would have bitten my tongue across sooner than have said so. Kings may fling aside an old servant like a tattered glove and forget the wounds he has saved them, but so could not Blaise de Bernauld.

"Chut," said I, doubling on my tracks; "better the old dog's cunning than the puppy's conceit. But what has all this to do with the Florida blade?"

"Did I not say so?" and he smote a palm with a clenched fist. "I'm out-worn, brain and bone. There's a fellow without who swears he comes on the King's business, and yet he slipped my memory as if kings' messengers were as common as acorns."

"And his message?"

"Ay, I asked him that, and for answer he cocked his bonnet at me and said was I, by chance, Messire Blaise de Bernauld, and when I told him 'No,' he said I was old enough to know that a king's message was not blabbed to the first country fool that asked it! Fool and old, he called me," went on Mareel in high wrath, and entirely forgetful of his own self-depreciation. "He had best mend his manners, or for all his Court training I may show him that I am less of one and other than he thinks."

"No, no; remember a king's messenger is sacred," cried I laughing, and with no thought that within forty-eight hours I was to forget my own saying. "Take me to the fellow, that I may keep the peace between you."

Henry of Bourbon, Henry of Navarre, Henry of France—whichsoever you will, for he was all three by turn—being no laggard himself, whether in affairs of head or heart, had but scant toleranee for lagging in others. Jacques Gobineau, therefore, who rode to Bernauld that July day, had made a discreet haste, wisely counting dust and a summer sun as but light things when weighed against the king's wrath. A lean-chopped, leather-skinned man-at-arms he was, and with all the shrewd impudence that is own child to a strong arm and an empty pocket.

As I cut asunder the silken string that bound his packet he stood wiping the crust of dust from his thrice-sweated face with one hand, and swinging

his bonnet with the other with as easy an air as if not alone Bernauld, but the whole county of Bigorre, was his for a possession. If he was hot without—and the red in his cheeks vouched that past doubt—he seemed no less afire within, for he turned his face to the door and drew in slow draughts of air between his lips as a man does who, having nothing better wherewith to cool his thirst, cools it with wind.

“From Pau?”

“From Pau to-day, monsieur: yesterday from Vic, and plague take the roads, whether yesterday or to-day,” and he shook the fine dust from him in a cloud as a spaniel might water.

“The King?” and I turned over the letter with its broad seal, and the looped chains of the Albrets impressed on the splash of wax,—“the King is at Vic?”

“The King?” Turning towards me the fellow laughed, not insolently but in good companionship as one might with an equal. “The King, by your leave, is a dog straining hard on a leash, and restlessly nosing this way and that for pure love of energy and delight of life. He *was* at Vic, monsieur, but where he is now the Lord knows. Some of these days the leash will break and then we shall see, and France shall see; and there will be some slaving at the jaws, with blood in the slaver. An honest man may then come to his pay, perchance, by good loot if not by honest crowns. ‘The King, where is he?’ quoth he. A question easy to ask

but hard to answer." And again the fellow laughed as a man does who has a quaint jest in his memory.

"It is like this," he went on, slipping his bonnet over the left arm by the chin-strap and checking his points with the outstretched forefinger of his right hand. "You see me, monsieur, more rags and threadbare patches from hose to collar than bits of whole cloth. That's Navarre, and what Navarre is the King is, and when a man is out at elbows he cares little what company he keeps, and so fares here or there as his humour takes him. No offence, monsieur, if our Henry has bid you to Vie; I talk only as the Court talks. He, being King, we wink our eyes; but were it one of us——! But that's talk, though where the King is the Lord knows; for since Monsieur de Rosny went bridegrooming to Mantes the leash is slackened, or the tether longer, which you will."

"And is this the way," said I sternly, being nettled as much by his easy assumption of commandership as by his cool impudence—"Is this the way that hireling troopers and camp scum talk of the King? Better beware, friend, lest a shut door come of an open mouth, and a shackled leg of a loose tongue, as have come to many a better man than thou before this."

"Faith," said he, looking me straight in the face, "the truth is as open as the mouth, and if it's as loose as the tongue, whose fault is it? That it's truth there's no gainsaying. And when it comes

to shackled legs, Vic is twenty leagues away, and that's a far cry. As for trooper and camp scum, I grant there is more hireling than paid man about me, seeing that the King owes me seven months' upkeep, for which I may whistle. 'Tis a hard thing if a man, lacking better pay, may not fill himself with windy words. There seems nought else on the hills," he added caustically, again drawing in a thirsty breath.

Upon the hint I remembered hospitality and bade a lackey see to the fellow's comfort. Small wonder that his tongue was on edge. The dust and wayside heat would have soured a sweeter temper than that of a battered man-at-arms with his pay in hopeless arrears. Truly it was a fool's work to have bandied words with such a fellow, parched and fasting, and argued that I was growing dull witted in my handling of the affairs of men.

"This comes," thought I, turning up the great hall with the King's letter still unopened in my hand, "of being buried in stagnation beyond the whirl of the times. Fineness of touch, whether for man or steel, lies in action. Or else Marcel was right, and at four-and-forty a man grows numb of instinct and should stand aside that some quicker brain may push its way to the front."

The thought shook me like a blast of mountain wind on a March day—shook me spirit and body. To a man who for a score of years has handled the affairs of a nation, even though the nation be but

a cock-pit to a Roman circus, as was Navarre to France or Spain, the being out-worn by time, and flung into a corner as past use, is a stroke as bitter as death, and indeed a man of action had as lief be dead as have his uses blunted. With that I opened the King's letter, and in it found the shaming of my mood, though with the consolation there came, as often happens to the discomfiting of a man's ease, a new cause for disquietude.

What the King wrote was this:—

“ To Monsieur Blaise de Bernauld.

“ MY FRIEND,—As you have forgotten that the road to Vic is by way of Ossun, I send a messenger to remind you. The Queen is at Nérac, Mornay at St Germain, Rosny at Mantes; and with only La Rochefoucauld and Roquelaure I am weary of my life and their state-craft. Crave Madame Jeanne to lend you to me, De Bernauld. I kiss her hand and would it were her cheek. Come to me, I beg, and if you have a tried friend bring him.

“ From Vic, this 17th day of July,

“ Your very good and assured friend, HENRI.

“ Be speedy, for I have an admirable thought in my mind.”

Curt, but being in his own hand throughout it meant more than if another had written a folio. Henry had no love for the pen. Curt, ay, but

courteous; wherein he differed from his Valois cousin and namesake in Paris, to whom every man, not a king or a minion, was a lackey. He would have begun with an imperative "Bernauld," like a curse flung at a dog.

Twice I read it to myself while Marcel stood by tugging at his beard and eyeing me wistfully. Then I read it a third time, aloud. Why not? Wit strikes fire from wit, and besides the sound of a thing opens up its sense. When the meaning of a thing is obscure better talk to your bedposts than not talk at all. Besides, again, Marcel was more than squire, he was lover and friend and truer than my own heart, therefore, I say, why not?

As I read it, slowly, and sentence by sentence, he punctuated it with grave nods. Then he said: "Make us equal, Master Blaise. Read it out a second time and then we'll get at the marrow."

So I began, "'My friend.'"

"Ay," broke in Marcel, "he has need of you, that's clear. But for what, Master Blaise, for what? That's the bone we must crack."

"'As you have forgotten that the road to Vic is by way of Ossun, I send a messenger to remind you.'"

"There's a cunning stroke! 'Tis you that have forgotten, not he; oh Lord, no, not he! And yet, for all that you have forgotten, he puts his king's dignity aside and reminds you that you have forgotten. It's not in nature. My faith, but he must need you sorely."

“The Queen is at Nérac, Mornay at St Germain, Rosny at Mantes; and with only La Rochefoucauld and Roquelaure I am weary of my life and their state-craft.”

“The pick of the kingdom, d’you mark, and yet he sends to Bernauld! ’Tis something hare-brained that he dare not moot to the Council. God grant it be honourable, for the King is not at all times too nice in his purposes.”

“Crave Madame Jeanne to lend you to me, De Bernauld. I kiss her hand and would it were her cheek.”

“I’ll warrant him! The King had ever an open eye for a fair face. And see how her name comes pat to his pen to cozen her with a royal memory. How could my lady say nay to so soft a request?”

“Come to me, I beg, and if you have a tried friend bring him.”

“Ay, ay, short of death or sickness there is no getting out of that. The rest you might cry off, but who can say ‘No’ to a king’s ‘I beg’? As to the friend, why, here we are, two that love Bernauld and know one another as a hand knows a glove. That is settled.”

“Be speedy, for I have an admirable thought in my mind.”

“Plague take his thoughts! How many lives will that thought cost d’you suppose, Master Blaise? Not many, perhaps, for the thing is plainly secret, but at least yours and mine are on the venture. Plague take his thoughts, say I.”

"Why secret?"

"Because," and Marcel laid out two long, lean fingers on his palm, "do you mark? A friend, says he, not a dozen, nor twenty, when he knows Blaise de Bernauld can have twice these for the asking, but a friend, one friend, therefore the thing is secret; a tried friend, therefore it is dangerous."

"But," I objected, "why dangerous? Why not a mission to France?"

"What?" and there was a world of contempt in Marcel's voice, "a mission to France with Monsieur de Rosny at Mantes and these others at the King's elbow? My faith, no! The sharpness he needs is keen steel and not cool wit, therefore he remembers Bernauld. Not that the men with him are cowards, but they are in the eye of the world and their every move watched."

Which was true enough, and shows that Marcel well understood, and could use at times, the privileges of a candid friend. But to say "Ay" to his plain inferences was hard. To echo the old squire's "Plague take the admirable thoughts of the King of Navarre" was easier. More than once I had burnt my fingers over them. Nay, more than once they had set The Little Kingdom smouldering so hotly that, had Mornay and Roquelaure not stamped out the embers, all France and Spain would have been ablaze and Navarre lost in the ashes.

Why dance to his piping? you will say. Is it not a true proverb that he who calls the tune

should pay for the music? Yet here it was the King who called and we who paid, and out of your prudence you will add some caustic criticism on the folly of the man who, of calm deliberation, thrusts his fist into a wasps' nest at another's instance. In your ignorance you are justified, but all the same had you known the fascination of Henry of Navarre you would have played the fool as readily as I did, and without a second thought as to your wisdom. Plague take him, said I, and in the same breath bade Marcel make ready, as needs must that we ride from Bernauld by cock-crow.

CHAPTER II.

HOW BLAISE DE BERNAULD FOLLOWED THE
KING'S BECK.

IN spite of his threescore and I know not how many years—four or five at the least—Marcel was next day himself seeing to the saddling gear while the morning was yet grey.

Inch by inch, as was his wont when we rode on the King's service, he fingered over every strap and chain, as a girl might her string of pearls, and with the greater need since the one touched no more than the pride of a woman, while on the other hung, perchance, a man's life. Not a buckle but he tested, twisting and straining it lest in idleness a flaw of rust had eaten through. Not a link of steel, not a loop, or flap of leather, but was scrutinised with the delicate caution of an old soldier who has been taught by grim misfortune and at the cost of his own blood that in playing the game of war there is no scope for the giving of chances.

By sun-up we were in the saddle. Having neither wife nor child to leave behind, my farewells were of

the briefest, and it was with a kind of sorrowful satisfaction I gave God thanks that my lady was spared a sore heart. As for old Marie, Marcel's dame, she took the parting philosophically, as became one who not ten nor a dozen times had seen the back of the father of her children with the full knowledge that she might never see his face in life. Tears she had none; they had been too often shed, and for sore cause, to come readily to the eyes. Nor was there any lamentation. Repression in grief is a lesson soon learned of stern old mother necessity. Needs must that men do their duty, hap what may, and where was the sense of sending a man away to the Lord knew what risks with a larger sorrow in his heart than need be? But—as had ever been her custom since the day Marcel and I rode out from Bernauld to join Coligny two and twenty years before—she bade him beware of Spanish men and overmuch wine, and see to it that rain or shine Master Blaise was cared for.

Whereat Marcel twisted his mouth into a queer smile under his white moustache, and muttered as he pulled a strap tighter—

“A sweet pair of babes we are, to nurse one another and be bottle-fed—though not with strong drink. I think you can care for your skin by this time, Master Blaise, though if it comes to a pinch I am not the man to fail you.”

Later on, as he rode by my side, he went back to Marie's warnings with a chuckle. We were too old

friends for the nice punctilio of master and servant, and I never held with keeping a trusted comrade trotting at one's heels like a trained spaniel. When we rode in company it was another thing. Marcel would then as soon have broken the unwritten treaty of bread and salt as have come within three lengths of me except upon orders or some stern necessity.

Curious how that bread and salt binds the Basque peasant. Some Moslem leavening in their blood, doubtless, spread northwards from the days of the Moorish dominion. Your peasant of France would eat at your board until his stomach cried "Enough!" or give you the pickings of his poverty, and then for a silver testoon cut your throat in your sleep the same night; but the Basque would give himself, or the son of his hope, to death sooner than that harm should touch you through him.

"These women, these women, with their fears and fancies," laughed he. "'Beware of Spain's men,' says the dame, and we with our backs to the Dons, and our noses to France. When she comes to a question of liquor there is more sense in it, for, on my word, 'tis one of the sorrows of threescore that a man's head grows hot, and his hand shaking, sooner than is reasonable. You would think, to hear these good souls talk, that they held their men to be fit for nought but herding sheep, and yet, I'll warrant she would be the first to cry 'Coward!' if I so much as took thought for a whole skin when Bernauld had

need of me. For, d'ye mark, Master Blaise, that if her first thought was for me her last was for you, and my word on it, that's the thought that sticks fastest in her mind."

Which, however true a saying, had as close an application to himself, and so I told him.

"A pretty fellow you are to gibe," and I struck him lightly on the shoulder with my riding-whip. "The Bernaulds might go wreck, root and branch, might they not, and you would not risk so much as a finger-nail for their saving?"

"Oh, but that," said he, very seriously, "is quite another thing. I am Bernauld straight through, both born and bred, and by reason of the blood and service of half-a-dozen generations; while she is no more than a kind of married chattel of the house, with some thirty years' sufferance. But," he added, "she was always reasonable, and, thank the Lord, I brought her up well."

Jacques Gobineau we had left behind. Marcel saw to his rousing betimes, but the rascal came to the courtyard yawning, and with his dress flung on him awry like a man who, having slept two nights in doublet and breeches, found waking with the sun a sore cross to the flesh.

"You must hasten, fellow," cried I. "The King is impatient, and, if our beasts hold out, we shall see Vic before midnight."

"'Tis a man's bounden duty to do the King's bidding," said he, gravely. "Nay, more, 'tis a man's

wisdom, too, when the King is Henry of Navarre, and so I would say let the beasts chance it, though I love a horse as well as most men who hold that to the fighting man a sound horse means a wholesome life. But as to riding with you, by your leave, monsieur, what was written on the letter I carried yesterday?"

"Nothing," answered I, "but my name and 'these in haste.'"

"Ay, so I thought, but there was nought of wild hurry and an evil pace on the home journey, and so I'll e'en ride back my own man. Not," he went on, "that I would not ride hot-headed for the King if need be, for all that I draw no pay. To tell the truth, I would not shift my barren service for the best in Europe, for I have a kind of dog's instinct which tells me that sooner or later he who holds by this penniless King of ours will be full fed and out of the best."

Though the fellow spoke with a certain spice of freedom, there was, now that I came to know him better, nothing of insolence in his tone. Rather, he was one who had fought the world so long, at such rough odds and for such wealthy pay of hard blows and little else, that he had won a kind of equality with every man, be he lord or lout.

So Jacques Gobineau remained behind at Bernauld, and as I bade him a careless farewell I little thought his lean and leathern face would ever be as welcome a sight as a lover to a maid, and in so

short a time. As for the full feeding, that hound's instinct of his was right in the main, though the gorge of the banquet came neither his way nor mine.

The times were peaceable as times went then in Navarre, or had gone since I was breeched. A simmering of war there was, or more rightly, a bubbling of discontent that at a puff to the passions might boil over into a fury of heat; but the enemy within the gates was, for the moment, more to be accounted of than the enemy beyond the border. By this I mean that there were dregs of humanity in the shape of masterless men lurking in the woods and mountains, and that Henry had enough ado to keep himself straight with France and Spain to have leisure to so much as dream of compelling obedience to law or order beyond arm's length. We therefore rode well armed, Marcel being battle-harnessed more like a brigand than an honest squire. That he should have a sword buckled tight to his belt was a thing of course, but the pair of dags he wore thrust against the slenderness of his lean paunch, and no more than ten inches from his hilt, so that he looked like an armoury a-horseback, savoured of redundancy. As for me, I contented myself with a pistol thrust through a thong of leather on my saddle-flap, just above the left thigh. This and a sword were weapons enough, and I am free to confess that if Marcel's dags were beyond common custom so was my Florida blade.

Of an antique pattern, and over long for the style then in vogue, it had earned its wearer a smile before then—a thing which troubled me not at all. Fashions in fripperies may be well in their way, though I am old enough to hold them in but little respect, and look rather to the wearer than the stuff, but when it comes to a man's life a proved blade is more to the purpose than all the fashions in Christendom; and it is better to be laughed at for a long sword than wept over for a shortened life.

Ossun, though the shorter road, we gave the go-bye because of the many hills. The longer way round was like to be the shorter way there. Of the ride to Pau, and thence to Vic, there is no need to say much. The prologue of a play grows tedious if over spun. But it was early apparent, from the heat overhead and the choking dust below, that to force the journey through in one day was to ruin two good horses; and in such things, as in too many others, Navarre was poor enough already. Nor was I long in excusing Jacques Gobineau's ill temper and carping tongue. Thirst and a redhot sun are no respecter of persons, and parch throats, gentle and simple, with entire impartiality. Therefore, although the day was by no means spent, it was a welcome twist of the valley that brought us within sight of Pau, and with a kind of groan of satisfaction we turned across the small plain on the left bank of the river to the bridge that lies below the south-west angle of the city.

There were many who knew us at the chateau,

and doubtless there was not only a lodging, but a welcome, to be had for the seeking; but silent tongues best suit a king's business, and to parry questions would have been no easy matter. Besides, I had no mind to admit that I rode on I knew not what errand.

Even frank ignorance would have gone for nought. Nay, the very vagueness of the thing, and our admission of ignorance, would have sharpened curiosity, and thenceforward we had been marked men. We therefore passed the chateau by, and, crossing the deep cleft or valley that lies to its east rear, contented ourselves with the comforts of an inn for the night.

Though the road from Pau to Vic is short in leagues it is long in miles, by reason of the many valleys and ridges to be crossed. It is as if one laid both hands flat upon the table and drew a line across the knuckles, so full of ups and downs is it; and being but an unfrequented road the riding was of the worst.

What the travel of the long winter had cut into ruts the summer sun and a few broad waggon wheels had pounded into dust. So that, saving on the very crests of the ridges, there was not a single furlong of a road with a hard, sound bottom. Presently this brought a greater trouble than comes of choking thirst, and more heat than lies even in a summer sun.

There was but little stir in the air—no more, indeed, than served to keep afloat the cloud of dust our beasts kicked up, and drift it slowly along with us in the current we ourselves created, so that our progress

showed not so much a group of withering humanity and horseflesh as a rolling puff of smoke some five yards high. This, at rare and grateful intervals, a gust would blow aside, only that it might close in upon us anew as the wind died.

Travellers were few, but one such interval showed us a cloud like unto our own rolling up the horse-track from Lembeye, and perhaps a furlong off. Less dense than that which plagued our comfort, it was longer drawn, as if some half-a-dozen rode in single file, and presently in the thinning of the dust we caught their loom like grey shadows thrown upon a vapour.

"A prick of the spur would do no harm," said Marcel, as the cloud closed in on us. "Better have them behind than before lest they be going our way. Our own pother sticks in the throat overmuch to add another man's, and, hark at that, Master Blaise, we are not the only ones who think so!"

From the left came the quickening hammer of hoofs, muffled indeed by the powdered softness of the road, but sounding clearly enough to give point to Marcel's words, and as we passed where the paths met we could not have held fifty yards of an advantage.

"Let the fools gallop," answered I, spurring on. "We hold the road, and hold it we will unless it be against the King himself. If it comes to a trial of speed they will ride fast indeed if they match Bernauld."

This, those behind presently found for themselves they could not do, and so tried a parley.

"Holloa, in front," cried a voice. "We ride on the King's business. Halt, and stand aside, lest we teach your discourtesy a lesson it has much need to learn."

Before the threat was well spoken I saw Marcel's bridle hand fly up with a jerk.

"The French of Paris," said he, slowing down and turning in his saddle. "How comes such a mincing of words in the depths of Navarre? This should be seen to, Master Blaise."

"They are five and we are two," answered I. "We can see to it later. Ride thou on. We have quarrels enough in Navarre without falling foul of a man for clipping his speech."

Then the fellow behind spoke a second time.

"If you fear to show face," said he, "at least show your backs, that we may dust them with our whips when we meet where there is no running away."

At that it was my turn to draw rein sharply and Marcel's to thrust in his word.

"Ride on, Master Blaise; we have quarrels enough in Navarre without falling foul of a man for a rough sneer with a kind of varnish of truth to it."

Answering nothing I halted my beast, turning him nose down the road to Pau, and stood waiting. It was a place made for my purpose. A high bank to the left, and a scrub-lined stretch of timber on the right, as matted as a wattle fence, narrowed the space

to a twenty-foot path, and in such a spot no one man was likely to pass without consent, unless he first flung me aside.

Hearing us halt those behind also halted, and as the smother of dust blew aside I saw them moving on towards us at a foot-pace. Five there were, and five as miserably begrimed mortals as ever craved a torrent to sluice their soiling, but through the coating of dirt there showed touches of fashion, and suggestions of finery which were not of the ways and poverty of Navarre. Especially was this true of him who rode at their head. From the dust-grey plumes in his bounet to the foolish rosettes in his shoes there were a dozen signs which, apart from his French of Paris, would have told that he was not one of us. A shimmer of silk, a wisp of lace, a florid beribboning all grievously draggled and travel-stained, but still clear to the practised eye.

"Being myself on the King's service," said I as he halted six paces away, and cutting in before he could speak, "I have but little leisure for words. You asked to see my back, monsieur, but that is what I have never yet shown an angry man."

"Oh, your pardon," said he, with such an accession of courtesy into his voice as might come to a man who had taken the lord for the lackey and found his error; "I did not know that there were others besides myself in these wilds of Navarre who served the King. I took you for one of Monsieur Vendôme's gentlemen."

"In Navarre," answered I, drily, "we know no better than to call Monsieur Vendôme King, and it is my pride that I am his poor gentleman. Here, at least, my King takes precedence, and pass you shall not, bluster or no bluster." As I spoke I drew my beast at right angles across the road, and went on, "If you force a quarrel, force it quickly; you are five to two, and that between France and Navarre is common odds, though to bring lackeys into the quarrels of gentlemen is not our custom."

"Ah," said my fine gallant, sitting back in his saddle, and eyeing us with that fool's light of laughter in his look which is so sore an irritation. "So we have lighted on an aboriginal! Between France and Navarre. By St Denis these are big words! France and Navarre? Why not France and Gascony?"

"Because, monsieur," answered I, "Navarre is not froth and empty boasting, whatever Gascony may be. How soon will it please you to be ready?"

"But this is rank folly," he cried. "I am the Marquis de Chaussy, and am the representative of the Duc d'Epéron, ambassador of the King of France to"—and he hesitated, then added—"him you call the King of Navarre. You, with all respect, monsieur, are I know not who."

"Who talks Gascony now?" cried I, angrily. "All that should have been thought of before you coupled whips and the dusting a gentleman's back in the one sentence. Harken to me now, Monsieur, the representative of the representative of the King of France.

We of Navarre are not to be lightly flouted by French words or French ways, and were you the Duc d'Epemon himself, instead of his Jaekal, one of three things would happen to you. You would either ask pardon in few words, taste the whip you were so glib about ten minutes since, or——” and I touched the blade at my side.

On that one of his fellows from behind pushed to the front, a big-framed bully of a man, with a steel bonnet and cuirass for all the swelter of the sun.

“Oh ho,” said I, as he thrust himself in between de Chaussy and myself, “does the King of France’s ambassador do his fighting by deputy as he doth his embassy? A convenient fashion, by my faith, but one that, like other French manners I wot of, we are not eager to copy,” which so stung the fellow’s leader that he was off his horse, and with his blade naked, before I had time to fling Marcel the reins.

“Come, Monsieur l’Inconnu,” he cried; “rustic folly must bear its punishment, and by God’s grace I shall soon show you how we of the King’s service do our fighting. As for you fellows, back there a hundred paces, and let no man so much as wag a finger lest these clods find food for lies. Come, sir.”

For a moment the fellows hung in the wind, and as I climbed out of the saddle with a greater stiffness than was comforting I saw, out of the tail of my eye, Marcel steal his hand to the flap that since our leaving Pau had buckled his two dags from the dust. But my Lord Marquis rounded on his troop in savage

earnest, and rated them as one might a kennel of hounds, until with little of courtesy in their looks they drew back as he commanded.

"Bid your fellow keep his fingers on his reins," said the Frenchman. "In face of the odds I have no blame for his ready groping after powder and ball, but let him once show his weapons and there will be no holding these dogs back. Come, sir, let us make an end of this, lest it spread farther than is fitting."

At a word Marcel turned the beasts, and rode slowly up the Vic road, and before he had rounded to face us again I had the Florida blade out, and was ready for the play. "Peste!" I heard de Chaussy mutter as the sun glinted down the long length of the steel. "'Tis like the skewer in my father's kitchen in Picardy, and fit to spit a stalled ox."

"You have doubtless heard," answered I, "of a proverb that links long spoons to supping with the devil. Turn the spoon to a sword blade, and the devil to France, and the proverb holds, though the latter half hit the truth nearest. As for spitting an ox, I think a Picardy sheep will serve my turn for to-day."

Never was there a fight with less of heat or passion. Wrath had flown off in words, and by the time we were foot to foot the controversy as to precedence to Navarre dust was wellnigh forgotten. To this I ascribe the bloodless outcome of the struggle, for he must be the veriest swashbuckler who hungers for a man's life when the cause of battle is cut of mind; only his contempt had left some little sting behind it,

and I had it in my thought that he should learn the value of a quiet tongue. With the third pass I knew his skill of fence to the last trick as well as if we had played daily for a month, and that he felt himself a beaten man I read in his eyes and in the sudden wariness with which he stood on his defence. Thenceforward it was torture to him, torture as keen as a gash on naked flesh, for not an instant but that he tasted death by anticipation. So with a lunge and a twisting recovery of the blade I made an end, wrenching his hilt from his grasp and flinging the steel ten feet away in the dust.

He who hides is first to find. In three strides I had my foot on the blade, and while still covering myself with my own point, I stopped, and, gripping the handle, plucked it up sharply, snapping the steel across.

"The Lord grant," said I, "that one day Navarre may so do to France, fling her in the dust and set foot upon her. You will do well, Monsieur l'Ambassadeur, to keep the peace while in The Little Kingdom, lest you find those who love blood better than does Blaise de Bernauld."

Mounting my beast, which Marcel had brought up at a trot, we were on the road to Vie before my Lord Marquis was well assured he had escaped without steel in his ribs. At that time we saw no more of him or his, and the whole tale of our meeting might have been left untold but for the warped use the King afterwards made of it.

CHAPTER III.

THE FINE IDEA OF THE KING OF NAVARRE.

WHEN your King is so out-at-elbows that his revenues are no more than six thousand crowns a-year, indifferently paid, there is but little patriotism, and less comfort, in claiming the honour of his hospitality. Therefore as at Pau, so at Vic, we passed the chateau by and hunted out lodgings for ourselves at the sign of the Three Stars, and thereby gave de Chaussy the ear of the King.

For my part he was welcome to the first telling of the tale, for I knew our Henry over-well to fear that a man's simple upholding of his own right, and correcting another's discourtesy, be that other whom he might, could at that time cool his love. Later, when Paris and Paris ways, together with overmuch adulation, had spoilt him, it was different, but so long as my King was but King of Navarre his faith and justice could be trusted. We therefore rid ourselves leisurely of the stains of travel, and they were many, and let my Lord Marquis talk and bluster as he would.

That he had been beforehand with us I would have

known even though we had not met him at the stairwayhead as I mounted to my audience, for Roquelaure and La Rochefoucauld, who were with the King and saw all things through the eyes of policy, looked askance at me as I passed the doorway; and, having ears wellnigh as quick as eye and hand, I caught a half-murmured grumble that had little of welcome in it for Blaise de Bernauld.

It was Roquelaure who spoke, and his voice was deeper than he thought.

"One fool's folly may do that which ten men's wisdom cannot undo. At his age this brawler should have learned——"

"If all men were as careful for the honour of Navarre," broke in the King, "there would be a wholesome mending in French courtesy, and a welcome abatement in French pretension," and from where the three stood by the window at the farther end of the room he turned to greet me.

"Welcome to Vic, Monsieur de Bernauld," he cried, holding out both hands as frankly as if I had been an elder brother. "We have heard of your coming, and it is not given to every man to have an ambassador of France as his herald."

"Nor, thank the Lord," added Roquelaure, "is it given to every man to sow the seeds of strife between France and Navarre."

"Nor," added I, on my own part, having greeted the King with all respect, and looking across his shoulder at the two in the window-corner, "is it

common, thank the Lord, to hear Navarre reviled, and take the gibe with a grateful heart. If I have offended against Navarre in defending Navarre I am ready to answer to the King; if against Monsieur de Chaussy or—or—his friends, here or in France, I am ready to answer——”

“Tut,” said Henry, linking an arm in mine. “Have you come all the way from Bernauld to fall foul of Roquelaure, and over a fool who knew not so much even as the rule of precedence by road? Let us leave all that. If what I have back of my mind be true D’Epernon will have other things to talk of, and, after all, it is with the Duke we have to deal and not with the Marquis. Let us leave all that, I say; and tell me, rather, how is Madame Jeanne? and that old war-horse of a Squire of yours? I never see him but I smell battle and—and you have him with you, I trust?”

With that the other two took their leave, seeing plainly enough that the King had somewhat to say to me, and to me alone.

Once they were clear of the hall Henry took me by both hands and turned me to the window, holding me at arm’s length, and looking up at me keenly from his six inches of lower height. He was then something less than thirty years of age, and with his face as yet free from that alertness of suspicion and brand of sensuality which marred it later. The black, close-clipped hair that clung to his skull like a garment, showed darker than nature by contrast with the

whiteness of the temples. His eyes were frank and bright, as those of a man of unflinching courage and quick wit should be, but with a depth in them that neither Roquelaure then, nor Sully afterwards, ever entirely fathomed. Bartholomew had taught him much, not the least lesson being an admirable reticence when reserve was policy, and until the day of the dismal tragedy in the Rue de la Ferronnerie there was never a schemer of them all, native or foreign, who measured the breadth and depth of the King's thoughts. In the midst of his sorest wrath he could play complacency, or seem the fool when his wit was most in labour. As yet the thin hooked nose and the pointed chin were distant neighbours, and the curled moustache overhung a mouth still unsoured. A frank face, a shrewd face, a strong face, ay, and as some found to their cost, a winsome, captivating face too, from the line of crisped and waved hair to the point of the clipped beard.

"You will do," said he, "you will do. I feared a twelvemonth of Bernauld had fattened you into doubtful usefulness, and a man must needs be hard knit and as strongly supple in mind as body to suit this scheme I have in hand. As for De Chaussy, never heed him: though I had rather you had left the man's blade unbroken. That, by your leave, my friend, savoured of the rustic and bully. Oh, never flush. I am a downright man with those I trust, and so speak my mind openly and we will be no worse friends thereafter; but this D'Epernon comes on a

weighty matter, and I would that he had had no petty cause of cavilling. The bout with De Chaussy is nothing; or, rather, I am glad of it, since it may teach this mushroom duke a civil tongue; but to break a man's sword, and so pour your contempt upon him, and before his servants, too, why, a thrust in the ribs had been easier borne."

"But——" I began.

"But," said he, "it is done with, and not all the 'buts' in Navarre will undo it, and you heard how these two took it? With them all things are measured by policy. You can sometimes forget that I am a king, but these others—never, and now it will be worse. The Duc d'Anjou is dead:" and he stepped back, touching me on the breast with his finger-tips and nodding his head at me as if he would say, there's food for thought.

"Then," said I, "the world is rid of a weak rogue whose capacity for wickedness was only limited by his folly, and of the whole false tribe there is but one Valois left to plague France."

"Two," cried Henry, twisting his moustache to a still closer curl, "two. You forget Madame Marguerite, my wife."

"By your leave, Sire," answered I; "I remember very well, and stand to what I say. There is but one left to plague France."

"Ah! I take you;" and he laughed. "She is now of Navarre you would say, but she may plague France yet. I pray the Lord she may."

"Since you wish it, Sire, I pray so also," answered I like a good courtier; "but what have we to do with the Duc d'Anjou?"

"You are rusty, you are really rusty," cried the King impatiently. "Tell me, friend De Bernauld, what children has my good cousin, Henry the Third?"

"Not one, Sire."

"What brothers? What nephews in the direct line?"

"Not one, Sire," said I again.

"Not one!" he echoed, and set his face like a mask. "Bourbon is as much a son of Saint Louis as Valois, and yet you ask me what have we to do with the Duc d'Anjou! Confess that your wit halts. The Valois are done with, and who knows but Madame Marguerite may one day—— But we will talk of that when D'Epernon has come and gone."

The deduction was no hard one, and I suppose the blood ran to my face with a flush, for he put his hand on my arm:

"Let the Duke's message wait," he said; "only, Anjou's death set me thinking."

"Then," I cried, "it was not to-day that you heard——"

"Tut, man," he broke in, "am I a fool or a cypher that the heir of France should die and I not know it? Oh, believe me, I am better served than you think."

Taking me again by the arm he walked me up and down the length of the hall, talking busily the while.

"Anjou died at seven in the morning, and by noon he who rode south to Navarre had put eighteen leagues between him and Château Thierry."

"But," said I, stupidly, "there is no Court mourning."

"Why should there be?" answered he testily, "Do *I* know the prince is dead? Who am I to know a thing the King of France has not yet been pleased to tell me? Let D'Epemon tell his tale and we shall weep like any man who has fallen heir to his cousin's slippers, and thereby stands on the steps of the greatest throne in Europe. But Anjou being gone set me thinking. If you were King of France, Monsieur de Bernauld, whom would you fear?"

"The Lord God Almighty," answered I, "and no one else, be he king, pope, or emperor."

"That is well enough for the common ear," said the King, impatiently, "but we are man to man, and there are other fears than those of the craven. The fear, for instance, that is no terror and has caution for mother and wisdom for sire. Come, a plain answer."

"Spain."

"Spain," and he nodded his head gravely. "My thought too, and especially if the King of France were Huguenot. Now, if Navarre could win back the provinces Spain filched from her, the King of France, owning both ends of the passes, would have less to fear? What? Is that right also?"

"If, if," said I, laughing. "Have I ridden all the way from Bernauld, Sire, to talk of ifs, and buts, and

ands? If Christmas falls at midsummer. If the sun rise west and set east. If Philip of Spain turn Huguenot. If the devil repent. If Catherine de Medici——”

“You talk folly,” said he, coldly, “and were I indeed to play the King with you, as my cousin Valois would, four bare walls would pay you for your ifs. What? Have I fallen so low that a petty gentleman whom I honour with my confidence dare gibe me? Have a care, Monsieur de Bernauld, have a care, I say,” and he turned on me in such a tempest of wrath as I had never yet seen shake him. His face lost its sunshine, and hardened to a set grimness that aged him by a score of years: and then—as was the nature of the man until suspicion and betrayal soured him—in the midst of his anger his mood changed from winter to summer in a flash. Only, when he next spoke there was a sterner ring in his voice, and I had learned once again the truth that it is not wise to take the familiarity of kings over frankly.

“You have not answered my question, Monsieur de Bernauld. If Navarre wins back its lost provinces, what then?”

“That it will be a great gift to France, Sire, and, when the time comes, may well win the giver a throne.”

“And that France will lift no finger to prevent it? Such jealousies are at an end; eh, Monsieur de Bernauld? Well, then, if Spanish Navarre revolts to French Navarre, who will say No? Philip?”

Philip has his eye on England, and has no mind to bring a French war about his ears. Henry the Third? France reaps without sowing, and will support the heir-presumptive, or why else is D'Epemon so far from Paris? All that is on an if, but a bird whispers that Spanish Navarre is restless, and seethes with discontent. The question is, is that true, and will Spanish Navarre move? France would never pardon failure, and there is nothing less than a royal crown upon the cast. Do you know Spain, Monsieur de Bernauld?"

"Which Spain, Sire?" asked I, bluntly. "The one of the devil's making or that after God Almighty's pattern? The Spain of an accursed people, or the Spain of honest hills and valleys? The first I know through its men and methods, and loathe, as all Europe knows and loathes. Of the latter I know nought, and for reasons as big as a man's life."

"Then, my friend, you shall learn something new, and that shortly, for needs must that a man with a cool head and a stout arm ride south and sift the truth from the lies, and Blaise de Bernauld is the man for the work."

"By your leave, Sire," said I, sharply, "Blaise de Bernauld is not the man. Have you forgotten how eighteen years ago I, with two hundred at my back, men of my own raising, raided Florida and avenged on Spain that massacre of Frenchmen France dared not avenge for herself? Have you forgotten how we wiped Spain's accursed settlement off God's

earth as a man wipes a foulness from his palm. How we swept the seas even as English Drake and Hawkins swept them, bringing home such booty as Rochelle never saw before or since? How that Alva's bloodhounds hunted Blaise de Bernauld for the price Spain put upon his head, and struck at his life not once, nor twice, nor thrice. How that the women of that Diego Saumarez whom I slew in the west set bravos to lie in wait at Bernauld, and how I bear, and will bear to the grave, their sign-manual carved upon me,—have you forgotten all this, Sire, that you say ride south to Spain as easily as one might say why not go a-heroning for pastime?"

"Ay," said the King; "but who is there now in Spanish Navarre that cares a fig for you and your Florida raid? Besides, the story is eighteen years old, and all forgotten, as forgotten as——"

"As Saint Bartholomew," said I, bitterly, as he hesitated for a word.

"Good," said he, "have it so. There are times when kings should have short memories. I take your words, Monsieur de Bernauld. As forgotten as Saint Bartholomew. And what is it, after all? To ride across the hills with as many as you will at your back, and pass a day here and a day there with those who, if the whisperings tell truth, love Albret as much as they hate Hapsburg, and that is heart and soul. Why, man, 'tis but a week's pleasuring, but, as you see, no fool would serve our turn.

It must be a cool head and a keen brain to sift talk from truth, since out of this thing may come the making of history."

"Sire, Sire, I dare not go."

"Dare not, Monsieur de Bernauld? You dare flout France, as you did yesterday, and risk a bloody war all for a handful of dust, but dare not face a shadow to build up peace? I say you must, you and no other. Since through you has come the peril of the kingdom, through you must come its safety."

"But, Sire, a moment since you jested at this De Chaussy?"

"Ay, ay, 'tis the same mouth that laughs and cries, but France has already such a hunger for Navarre that who knows how a mouthful of dust may whet her appetite. Go you must, De Bernauld, but have as many with you as you will."

"No troop, Sire, I will take no troop," I cried. "What? have every officious busybody set agog to know who is this that rides into Spain with an army at his heels? Three or four, no more, but, by your leave, since I am the stake in the game, the three or four must be of my choosing."

"Said I not that you were the man!" and the King's open hand fell on my shoulder as I have seen it fall a score of times when there was a point to be won by bluff frankness. "Three or four it shall be, but, by your leave, of my choosing, since I am the stake and have more to lose than

thou hast, and know my men better. Marcel, for one. That is why I bade thee bring a tried friend. I know Master Marcel, ay, faith, I know him well. He has much of the bulldog in him for all his thin jaws. Stubborn, faithful, tenacious, and what he grips he holds. As to the other two, I have them in my mind, De Bernauld. Never fear for them. They love Navarre as well as thou dost, are neither squeamish nor fools, can fight if needs be, and run if needs must, can lie upon occasion and never ruffle the brow, and can tell the truth where truth best serves their purpose, and, beyond all that, they have a dozen generations of good blood to vouch for them. Why; Saints, man—forgive the oath, De Bernauld, 'tis a trick of Paris, and mayhap it will come in fashion again—the thing is as good as done. 'Tis you, and such as you, are the true makers of history. The name is the name of Henry, or of Rosny, or the like, but the hand is Bernauld's. As for plans, we will settle all that when this popinjay duke has come and gone. He is twenty-four hours behind, says De Chaussy; give him a second twenty-four to say his say, and a third to get back to Guienne. Be ready four days hence, and meanwhile let your tongue be as silent as the grave where lies Diego Saumarez. If a bird of the air carried the matter it might fare ill with the King's friends. You understand?"

Again he clapped me on the shoulder, and five minutes later I found myself tramping down the

stairway, with my heart fluttering as if the King had given me a dukedom instead of setting me to play knucklebones with the devil of Spain, and, for all his denial, my own life the stake.

Later, as I thought it over in cold blood, I said as I had said at Bernauld, plague take the ideas of Henry of Navarre, and the second thought was the truer. I might have added, plague take myself, since my bout with De Chaussy had, in a measure, set me under the King's thumb. But it is a great comfort to a man's nature to have some other to curse besides himself.

CHAPTER IV.

HOW THE KING REFUSED THE THRONE OF FRANCE.

WHETHER D'Épernon lagged upon the road I know not, but he was certainly a day later than the King had reckoned. It was not upon the first but on the second day after our reaching Vic that Marcel came to me about an hour and a half past noon with news of the arrival of the embassy. I had dined, and dined well and placidly as became a man whose meat was to his liking, and whose appetite, digestion, and conscience were alike good; and was lingering over the last half of the one flask of wine that was my dining allowance. Some men hold it a kind of virtue that they can drink their three or four, or even their five bottles and yet not be utterly drunken, but I have seldom found a man whose judgment in delicate affairs was as sound after the end of the second bottle as before the beginning of the first; and that a man should put himself to the test of a hog'shead with an air of pride seems to me a folly.

Not that I despise the hard head that can withstand assaults, whether from within or without. It

has its uses, for a man never knows the twists of the path of life, and I was presently to see just such a stoutness of brain save four men from destruction; but for all its uses it is a poor thing to boast of. My one flask of Gascony wine was, therefore, my limit, and it was at its last glass when Marcel came to me.

"Truly we have a tight grip on the skirts of luck," said the Squire with a hard grin. This dangling about the Court at Vic was not to his liking, and in face of the King's orders I dared not give him an inkling of the scheme in prospect. "The King will have you to the castle, and with no delay. 'Tis Bernauld here and Bernauld there, but what Bernauld reaps out of it all the Lord only knows. Nought, I expect, but hard knocks, scant thanks, and a starved purse. But there's the King's own message given me by Monsieur de Rohan."

"Given you how long since?" said I, setting down the glass and rising from my stool.

"Well," and for an instant Marcel looked shame-faced; "maybe an hour back, for I mind me dinner was no more than served."

"What, fool?" cried I in consternation; "thou hast made the King wait whilst I——"

"Not a whit, not a whit," he said hastily; "there has been no waiting. He has these fine French gentlemen to fill the time, and to my mind it was a safer thing that you went up full than fasting. When a man goes among such cattle he never knows——"

But I left him babbling, and so never heard the end of his excuses. That Henry of France had not sent D'Epemon all the way from Paris to say bluntly "Anjou is dead," I knew full well. No, no; something that touched both France and Navarre lay behind such an embassy, and here had this fool lost me, perhaps, the hearing of it.

With a dozen fancies fighting in my head I made my way to the castle, only to find that the public audience was ended, and the King and D'Epemon, with certain of their suites, retired into Henry's cabinet. Thither I went, and though D'Arros would have turned me back I would take no denial. The King had called me and to the King I would go, and in the end I won my point as a man commonly does who is but insistent enough, and so was present at a notable scene.

The King's cabinet filled the angle of the castle, and was a long, narrow room with one window at the end and two at the right hand side. From it one door opened on the corridor and a second into the reception hall, where he had met me two days before. It was, therefore, private, and out of the way of casual interruption. Down the lower half of the middle of the room ran a narrow table, beyond it being a great arm-chair, with half a dozen lesser chairs, straight backed and leather seated, grouped round it. There, in the centre, sat the King, one knee flung across the other while he leaned not on the chair arm but on the sword hilt propping up his

left elbow. Behind were La Rochefoucauld, Roquelaure, Le Sœuf, and Marmet the Calvinist preacher; and at sight of Marmet I guessed in a flash D'Epernon's mission, and that Henry would speak soft words.

No bitter controversialist was Marmet, no glowing firebrand in a black cassock, no narrow bigot ready to burn, or be burned, for the love of God and demonstration of pure religion, but a man of peace and toleration; as mild as he was sincere, and one who, out of the simple goodness of his heart, would have found it hard to curse even the devil, in spite of his hatred of him and all his works. For him the millennium was always just beyond the door, and he confidently looked to see the Catholic lion lie down with the Huguenot lamb, though how they were to reconcile their differences of creed and forget the trails of blood that lay across both must have sorely puzzled his faith. Marmet's presence, therefore, made for peace.

Before the King, and standing three paces back, were D'Epernon, De Chaussy, the Chancellor Du Ferrier, and a Franciscan monk whom I presently came to know as Brother Mark, a man with the face of a Raphael or a Saint John, and so, in his way, a fitting match to Marmet. It was plain that the diplomacy to be used was that of black cassocks and grey frocks, and so I grew afraid, since there is no man who so closely leads himself by his own nose as your religious enthusiast.

In front of Henry was, as I have said, D'Épernon, and a fine figure of a man he made. Thirty years old, and therefore only in the beginning of the prime of life, Jean Louis de Nogaret deserved his description as the handsomest man at the Court of his master; and to good looks he added that easy assurance, touched with arrogance, which comes of unchecked success and the security of a king's favour. Governor of the Three Bishoprics and the Boulonnais and prime favourite of Henry of Valois, than whom no king was ever more devoted to those who won his love, he could afford to look the world insolently in the face. That he had so looked, and in his pride had ruffled our Bourbon, I knew from the King's first words.

"Let us have done with compliments," he was saying as I entered. "Leave aside the sugar and come to the bitter, Monsieur le Duc. Or have men in Paris taken to calling dukes of my cousin Valois' creation 'Monseigneur' yet? No? Well, it will come, but for the present 'Monsieur le Duc' must content us. I am sure the King has not deprived himself of the great happiness of your company for so many days simply to bid me good morning gracefully. Come to the point, I say."

"What my master bade me say, Sire, he bade me say to your private ear."

"Then," answered Henry, "what does the Chancellor here, and our friend in the grey frock?"

"To urge the King's reasons, Sire, and so bring conviction——"

"Your pardon," said Henry, breaking in briskly; "does it touch Navarre? Ay, so I thought. Well, monsieur, these gentlemen you see with me—welcome to their number, Monsieur de Bernauld—are Navarre, and therefore you may speak frankly."

For a moment D'Epernon hesitated, gnawing his lip and glancing doubtfully at us from one to the other; then, making up his mind to the unavoidable, he began, speaking slowly and manifestly picking his words with care.

"The King, Sire, having the sorrowful uncertainty of life brought very near to him in the death of his beloved brother, out of the great love he bears to you, and out of his burning zeal for our Holy Mother Church, desires to urge upon you the terrible danger that lies in deferring that reconciliation and return to her bosom which alone can bring you peace in this world and salvation in that which is to come. In matters so sacred and of such dignity, Sire, I am wholly unworthy to open my lips, but by me my master affectionately prays you to give good heed to the message which he doubts not the Spirit of God will vouchsafe through the mouth of this holy priest, whose worth and honour are not those of man's making but are the very gift and inspiration of Almighty God."

"Ay," said the King, who through all this speech had never shifted his eyes from the other's face, but watched him as a wary fencer watches his adversary; "to pick the husk of words from the kernel of mean-

ing and be blunt, he would have me turn Catholic a second time. To what end, monsieur? Once I heard Mass for a jewelled bonnet and a bare chance of life, but now—to what end, I say again?”

“Sire, as I have said, under the shadow of his brother’s death the King, my master, is keenly sensible of the spiritual danger——”

“La, la, la,” broke in Henry. “When the King your master has fewer mistresses, and keeps treaties with better faith, it will be time enough to preach religion to a Huguenot. Remember this is Navarre’s private ear, so to the point, monsieur, to the point.”

“There is always this, Sire, and I say it with all respect—Paris is the very prude of orthodoxy, and can never hold out her arms to the new religion.”

“Ah! but, monsieur,” retorted the King drily, “I have no love for prudes.”

“Then view it this way, Sire. Paris is the pivot of Europe; Paris is a tree that shadows all France.”

“I admit and regret the shadow,” answered Henry; “but your tree has its roots in the provinces, and so draws strength even from far-off Bearn, and I make a shrewd guess that a growth from the ancient root of Saint Louis may one day flourish in Navarre, and no thanks to the goodwill of Paris. To be blunt again, monsieur, since it is my nature to be downright, there is no longer a Valois to succeed a Valois, and the King your master says to Henry of Bourbon, ‘Be Catholic, and you may be King hereafter.’ Am I right?”

"I have no mission, Sire——"

"What? You would catch Navarre without even a bait to the hook? Is this your mission, Master Chancellor, and yours, too, priest?"

"Let the barrier be removed, Sire," answered Du Ferrier, "and what need is there for promises? Do you not stand on the steps of the throne?"

"Ay, by the Lord! do I," cried Henry, flinging himself back in his chair and staring the Chancellor proudly in the face; "and let him who seeks to thrust me down beware of himself, lest he slip and fall headlong. Now, sir priest, it is your turn."

Down upon his knees went Brother Mark.

"Sire," he said, "my King is the King eternal, and therefore I can humble myself to man without shame. Here, as His ambassador, and kneeling at your feet, I pray you in His name to give France peace. From Artois to Navarre the land is sick of blood, and cries out against the miseries of war. Listen, Sire, listen! Can you not hear France weeping for her children, and not comforted because they are not? And is Navarre dumb? Has she no tears? Is there a home within its borders, be it that of prince or peasant, that does not mourn its dead? These two, Sire, France and Navarre—these two cry to you this day to dry their tears and bid them stay their sobbing. That one God of peace, He whom we alike serve, though from different altars, waits upon your answer. In His name, Sire, and for the salvation of France and your own beloved birthright, give us peace." His words I can

tell you, or something like them, but the man's passion-broken tones, as his voice pled and wailed, are beyond me. But this I know, he sent a shiver through me that, rising at the heart, rippled down to the very finger-tips, and I thanked God I was not King of Navarre.

While he spoke Henry sat eyeing him with his hawk's look, never stirring nor shifting his gaze, and the silence that followed was breathless with the fate of a nation. It was a conscious relief to all when at length the King answered him, and to me a double relief that his clear, hard, cool sense brushed aside the snare that would have trapped me.

"These, monk, are things of policy, and no words will make them more. Can a man juggle with his soul's health for policy? Tell me that."

Whereupon Brother Mark broke afresh into a torrent of words, of which I gathered no more than this: There was Marmet and here was Brother Mark. Let the King appoint judges to hear, weigh, and consider; and then act as the Holy Spirit inspired them. Which, at the first blush, seemed a more reasonable and tolerant thing than might have been looked for from a hunter of Huguenots. But the King would none of it.

"In this case," cried he, "I alone am the judge, since who can come between a man and his conscience? and whose 'yea' shall suffice in the Great Judgment hereafter if God now saith 'nay'? Or if there be another judge joined with me, which I doubt, it is the

faith of free Navarre. As to the inspiration, the Spirit hath spoken already, monk, both in my time and in our mother's, and under His teaching we have thrust away priestly aggression further than we are like to reach a hand to drag it back again."

"Ah, Sire," said the Franciscan sorrowfully, as he rose to his feet, "I fear before God you have no wish to be converted."

Whereupon the King rounded on him with his eyes ablaze.

"Understand; it is you who come to seek me, and not I you; and I hold it to be God's truth that France has greater need of me than I of France, and that the need will grow."

On that Du Ferrier, the Chancellor, had a word to say. A calm and politic man, Du Ferrier. Hitherto, saving for once, he had held his peace, watching the changes of the tide with alert eyes, and listening to the play of words. Now he broke in.

"We bring you, Sire, as the Lord of old brought Moses to the top of Pisgah, that you may see the promised land. But there is a division between, Sire, and it is for you to say whether you will cross and enter in."

"Rather," interrupted La Rochefoucauld, and speaking with naked bluntness, "you show the King the kingdoms of this world and the glories of them, and say, 'All these do we give you if you will fall down and worship the devil.' There are mountains and mountains, Sir Chancellor; and as to your figure of

Moses, if the King followed your beck he might be lost in as unknown a grave as that in the Vale of Moab."

"I speak to the King, and from him I take my answer," said Du Ferrier between his teeth.

"You speak to Navarre," retorted La Rochefoucauld. "To Navarre that remembers that there is a Huguenot Condé as well as a Huguenot Vendôme. It is by Navarre, monsieur, that the last word will be said."

"Peace, François, let that rest," said the King; "and remember, my Lord Chancery is representative of my good cousin, and to compare the King of France to the devil as in your heat you did a moment back, is a kind of *disrespect*. Now, monk, if you have ought to say, say on."

Had Brother Mark ought to say? Verily he had, else Brother Mark had not been there at all. For a moment he stood silent, looking down upon the floor, and his hands clenched hard. Then he faced the King, and it may be that I read him wrong, but there seemed to be a subordinating of will and conviction to instruction.

"As you, Sire," and he looked across the King's shoulder at Marmet, who stood behind, "have been already so well instructed in the Holy Faith, I will leave aside all niceties of theology."

"Ay," said Henry, and from where I stood at the side I could see his face harden, "I remember well the instructing. It was some three days before Bar-

tholomew, and the final arguments were well demonstrated: at least few stood against them. Thou art right, monk: leave niceties aside."

For a moment the monk was staggered at the thrust; then, with a deep breath, he gave himself to his task.

Now, when a man whose trade it is to talk, whether from a pulpit, a rostrum, or an upturned barrel-head fronting a quack's booth—when such a one, I say, lets his tongue loose, the common man who sits below with mouth and ears open understands no more than it is meant he should. Is there a weak spot in the argument?—it is slid across as lightly as a boy skims on day-old ice. Is there a point that tells?—it is hammered and twisted and laboured and fashioned as a smith shapes a lancehead out of a clumsy ploughshare, and in the end, amidst the froth of words and the jangle of phrases, he holds little more in his memory than that black's white, or maybe blue, or yellow, or green, as the speaker chooses.

Of Brother Mark's argument, therefore, I remember little in detail, but to my poor judgment it seemed that he had more discretion than a right appreciation of the King's mind, for he left aside the weighty differences and dwelt rather on the points of approximation. But these, too, he soon turned his back upon, and what I remember best savoured more of the wily politician than the earnest theologian. It came back to what had already been said, and may be summed up in this: The Lord has set before you

this day life and death, blessing and cursing : the life not of yourself, the blessing not of yourself, but of the people whose lord and yet whose servant you are. After all, if that arrow failed to go home he might keep the rest in his quiver, for it was the straightest and surest of them all.

When he ended we looked to Marmet to break the silence that followed, but Henry stopped the preacher with a gesture and answered for himself.

“ You are weak, monk, you are weak, for you seek to dazzle the flesh rather than convince the spirit. With policies I will have nought to do ; but as for the little leaven of theology that touched your discourse, here is my reply : I say not that you are altogether wrong and we altogether right. It is, rather, that the light of God comes to this mist-girt earth in a line direct from Himself, and here breaks in this direction or in that, no one having the entire of light and no one the utter darkness. But to be honest with you, it seems to me that into your light there have drifted more and greater motes than into ours, and it behoves a man to see to it that his soul lives as much as may be in the undimmed shining of Almighty God. I like not your Church’s ways. Liberty is the very soul of faith, and were I to become heretic to my conscience, whether through compulsion of fear from without or greed from within, I would be bondslave to unbelief— an evil case, since he who flings away faith, flings hope and charity after it.”

My own thought is that Henry, having guessed

their mission, had prepared his set reply ; for neither his matter nor his fashion of speaking was after his common manner. Be that as it may, with his last words he rose, so putting an end to the audience.

“ La Rochefoucauld, Roquelaure, Marmet, attend these gentlemen. Monsieur le Duc, I will prepare fitting letters for your master’s private eye. Assure him of our deep and Christian sympathy in the heavy grief which has fallen upon his house. For the present, gentlemen, farewell : affairs of state press upon me, in which, De Bernauld, do you attend my orders.”

At the door there was some little confusion, and above the murmur of whispering voices I heard La Rochefoucauld say, as if in reply to some comment by D’Epernon,—

“ If you come to comparisons, monsieur, I only wish some one would offer you the crown of France in one hand and a few psalms in the other ! I know well which you would choose ! ”

CHAPTER V.

THE CONDESCENSION OF THE DUC D'EPERNON.

As the door closed the King stood silent a moment, his head upon his breast, half listening to the echoes from the corridor and half in thought. He had shut all France and the glory of a great throne outside the door, and for the moment Navarre must have shrunk very small in his eyes. Then he roused himself and, drawing his hand across his forehead with a quick gesture, as a man does who brushes aside a thought, turned to me.

"Which was it, De Bernauld—honestly meant or a snare?"

"A snare, Sire," replied I promptly; "when did a Valois follow a straight path or seek any end but his own?"

But he shook his head. "You are wrong, you are wrong; I am persuaded it was an honest hint, but ill judged. Did you hear La Rochefoucauld? 'There is a Condé,' said he bluntly, 'if a Vendôme fails'; nor can I blame him when I remember that his father perished in Bartholomew. What? Could I dream

that the sons of Coligny, Montamar, La Force, Piles, Teligny, and a hundred others would knit their fortunes with those of a man who trampled their fathers' blood under-foot that he might mount a throne which rests upon their graves? Never. They would have flown to Condé first, and there would be two Kings in Navarre instead of one, and a bloodier, bitterer, deadlier war than has ever yet cursed us, for it would have been a war of brother and brother. No, no, it was well meant but ill judged."

"But, Sire," cried I, "this is policy, and you would none of their policies."

"If a man have two good reasons, De Bernauld, need he give them both when one will suffice? Was it for me to put the suggestion in D'Epernon's head that he might play off a Condé against a Vendôme, and so let France eat the oyster, leaving the shells to us whoever won? By the Lord, no. But mark this; there is more need than ever for your ride to Spain. Paris will now be cold to us, and needs must that Navarre loom large in the eyes of France. If the Spanish pretext fails us, then, my friend, there will be nothing left but war. Come what will, France must not forget who claims the crown. I am frank because I trust you, De Bernauld, and so tell you this, and lest you still have scruples about this woman Saumarez who, I doubt not, is dust these dozen years."

And yet, for all his frankness, he, as was his custom with us all, told me no more than suited his plans, and that was about half his thought.

"To-morrow D'Epéron comes for his congé. After Paris the court of Navarre is not to his taste. Did you hear him sneer at our poverty? No? Ah, it was at the public audience so as to give sharper point to his courtesies. 'Twas rare,' said he with a courtly bow, and contempt in his face, 'to see a king's followers so free from the bonds of fashion!' upon which I told him that for the present the court livery of Navarre was a mailed jacket, and that I prayed God I and mine might never have cause to return the ceremony of a state visit! The fool! to risk his master's business for the sake of a vulgar gibe. Well, he takes leave to-morrow, and rides north the next morning. Let him be once gone, and the sooner you are south thereafter the better."

"To-morrow, then, Sire. Marcel is already grumbling at the delay."

"Is he so? Ay, ay, trust the old war-horse to smell action! Yet, let him understand, and you also, De Bernauld, that the errand is one of peace and quietness. There must be no ruffling, no hectoring, no quarrelling over nice points. He who can pocket an insult and bide in patience until the time comes to pay the debt is the truest lover of Navarre."

"But the language, Sire."

"Chut! a Basque understands Basque whether it be of France or Spain."

Taking a map from a drawer, he spread it out upon the table.

"Here is Vic; be at Pau two days hence, and if

curious tongues ask questions let it be thought you ride home to Bernauld. From Pau take the road to Oloron, there turn south, and wait where a stream from the west joins the Gave d'Aspe. The rendezvous is there, four days from this. Is it clear?"

"But, Sire, why not all ride in company?"

"To save gossip, my friend. That you and your squire should return to Pau is nothing, for it is all on your journey; but let two of my court go with you—the two, mark you, I have in my mind—and there would be no end to the chatter. No, no, from the Gave d'Aspe onwards the command is yours, and I can promise you that the men I will pick have learned obedience; but here it is my business. Now, farewell, De Bernauld; keep an open eye, a quick ear, a cool head, and a quiet tongue, and I will warrant that ten days hence you will give a good account of yourself."

With that he fairly pushed me from the cabinet, and so stifled the dozen questions I had yet to ask, a favourite method with Henry of Navarre when he had said his say and had no mind to listen to objections.

Marcel I found waiting me at our lodgings, and from the packed saddle-bags it was evident that he had his mind made up for a speedy move.

"Well, Master Blaise," he cried, "have we got the route?"

"Ay," answered I, "to Pau to-morrow."

"To Pau?" and his face lengthened. "In the Lord's name, why to Pau?"

"Because the King wills it, my friend; but wait, wait; from Pau we go—elsewhere."

"Oh, ay," he grumbled. "I said from the first there was danger, and now I must run into it blindfold like a fool."

"You run nowhere that I don't lead," answered I, "and what has served your turn for twenty years may well serve it now. If it were my affair I would tell you the truth plump, but it is the King's business, and so there's an end of it."

Which, though it did not content him, at least shut his mouth. Yet, it was barely the truth, for I am frank to confess that the Spanish woman was much in my mind; and even if I had had the King's leave I might have told him nought, for I dreaded lest a whisper of our ride south should blow ahead of us across the mountains.

Not that I had an uneasy conscience as regards Diego Saumarez, her son. By the Lord who made me, no; a hundred times, no! He, through treachery and in the blunt callousness of cold blood, had slaughtered our expedition to a man, even after hospitality given and received, so that I alone escaped. The vengeance that I afterwards took upon him and his was no more than his due, and if I go to my God with no greater guilt on my soul than the slaying of Diego Saumarez there in Florida, I will have little to repent of. But thrice the woman had tried hard to strike me, and I had no mind of set deliberation to put myself within arm's length of her.

That she was dead was the King's whim, and indeed might well be true seeing how far gone she would be in age if living. Diego Saumarez had been some five-and-thirty years old; it was sixteen years since I had slain him; add some twenty-three or four to that, and the witch, if still on the face of the earth, could be little short of seventy-five. That the devil the mother had gone to join the devil the son I trusted, but remembering these three attempts at cool murder, I held caution to be no shame.

But not even when I had closed Marcel's grumbles had the tide of talk ceased flowing for the day. At "The Three Stars" we supped early, as became sober people, and the dusk was still warm in the west when the host came fussing to my room in a fine pucker of importance.

"One of the French gentlemen is without, monsieur," said he, bowing as he had never bowed to Blaise de Bernauld, the King's guest. "Will ye mill ye, he must see you. By Our Lady he is a fine figure of a man, and we poor inn-keepers of Navarre would be happy had we——"

"Eh, eh?" I broke in shortly, for it vexed me to see how easily the man's servile mood was bought. "What's that? What has Our Lady to do here in Vic?"

"What, monsieur? Did I say so? Truly these French fashions get a hold of a man."

"French crowns, rather!" said I. "But show him in, man, lest he give you ten francs more, and you turn Catholic outright."

"One of the French gentlemen!" said Pierre Coué. On my faith it was D'Épernon himself, and had I been the brother of his love he could not have embraced me with a greater show of affection: show, I say, for the pretence was as hollow as a rotten filbert.

If kings were wise there are some men they would never send on embassies, and D'Épernon was one of them; unless, indeed, to his Holiness Pope Gregory, Philip of Spain, or the royal vixen of England. With these he had been civil all through, lest their greatness put a slight upon him; but there in Navarre the courtesy was but a courtesy on top, a thin veneer that barely covered the arrogant contempt which possessed the man for so petty a place as The Little Kingdom. When a man's greatness fills his own eyes his master's cause is likely to suffer. So was it now. The man played a part, and his heart was so little in his mission that he played it badly.

"We ride hence to-morrow or the next day, Master de Bernauld," said he, flinging on the table the huge cloak wherewith he had disguised his magnificence, "and before leaving, it behoves me first to pay my debts, or rather my master's."

"Debts!" answered I, "debts? To my thinking Navarre owes France more than France Navarre, and has small chance of paying a full reckoning."

"Nay, nay, nay, let that rest," and he waved his hand airily, as if with a gesture he had once and for all put an end to a people's wrongs. "The debt is an apology, Master de Bernauld, an apology on

the part of that ill-mannered De Chanssy. You did right to treat him to such a lesson, and I tell him it is thanks to your forbearance that our embassy is not a member short."

"'Tis no thanks to himself," answered I drily, "for whether with his tongue or his sword he bungled like the veriest tyro."

"Well, well, well," and he shrugged his shoulders impatiently, "he played the fool and suffered for it, and I have said that he got his deserts, and so there's an end."

Then he turned from me and walked up and down the little room in five hasty strides, combing his beard with his fingers the while. Suddenly he stopped and faced me.

"This is a doomsday for Navarre, Master de Bernauld; a doomsday, I say. What? You were there?"

"A doomsday?" answered I, watching him, and with less thought of what he said than of what was to come next. "As to that, Monsieur le Duc, every day is a doomsday."

"Tush, tush, you are no fool if your King is. We have heard of you, and you know very well what I mean. Your King had fortune in his lap to-day, and flung it out again like a handful of parched peas. The Bailiff of Rouen is dead, Master de Bernauld, and my King bade me tell you so. The revenues are 2000 crowns a-year."

"Ha, the King of Navarre could hardly sink so low as that," answered I gravely.

Whereupon he fell into a chair and laughed as I had not seen a man laugh for a twelvemonth. "Oh, you provincials, you provincials," he gasped between his guffaws, "you will be the end of me. The first prince of the blood Bailiff of Rouen at 2000 crowns a-year! Saints! how Henry will laugh when I tell him this! 'Tis for yourself, man, for yourself."

"Oh, for myself," said I, still gravely. "Crowns are crowns, and scarce enough in Navarre. With my King's permission, monsieur, I accept." This sobered my lord Duke, as it was meant to do, for his laughter was too personal to be to my liking, and gathering his sprawling limbs together he sat up.

"There is, naturally, a trifle of condition," said he, staring at me curiously, "but nothing, believe me, that a gentleman need boggle at. Merely this. Your nomination dates from the hour you self-willed fool thinks better of to-day's obstinacy, and carries you with him. France could hardly place Rouen in the hands of a Huguenot. You understand?"

"Two thousand crowns, did you say, monseigneur?"

"Two thousand, ay, and in such a place there are always pickings, the taking of which will be winked at. It's a bargain, eh?"

"Commend me to his Majesty, Monsieur le Duc," answered I, very humbly. "Truly I think he ranks poor Blaise de Bernauld over legally."

"Not a whit, not a whit;" and rising to his feet, D'Epéron reached for his cloak: "there is no need for thanks."

"Yes, over highly," I persisted, "seeing that Judas sold his Master for thirty pieces of silver, paid once and for all, and I am valued at 2000 crowns a-year. The market for traitors has gone up. What is your price, Monsieur le Duc?" With one hand upon my hip and the other twirling my moustache, I set myself before him. "Come, talking privately and between rascals, what, I say, is your price?"

"My price, fellow, do you dare——"

"Ta, ta, ta," I broke in; "fellow me no fellows lest I make a boast that there were Bernaulds of Bigorre before Nogarets of Epernon were so much as dreamed of. As to what I dare, I dare be a loyal gentleman—loyal to my God, to my conscience, and to my King. What, monsieur?—under cover of your office you would seduce the King's servants? If I am the first you have approached, let me be the last, lest the thing come to my Master's ears. His temper is short at times, Monsieur le Duc."

Turning to the door, I flung it open and called down the stairs at the strongest pitch of my voice: "Below, there, Pierre Coué; lights for Monseigneur le Duc d'Epernon," and so bowed him out. I had no mind to have it bruited abroad that Blaise de Bernauld was in secret conference with the enemies of Navarre. The poorer a man is, the more need he has to keep his honour from the breath of scandal. Fifty thousand crowns a-year are ample witness to the excellence of a man's reputation.

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CHAPTER VI.

HOW MARCEL'S HUNGER LOST ITS EDGE.

WHAT a blessing it was to be free of the cramped and pent-up narrow ways of Vic none can tell but those who love God's country better than man's town. Even the smother of hot dust could not choke our satisfaction as, the day following, we took the back track to Pau. With the whole day on our hands, and the beasts' strength to save because of the journey which lay beyond, there was no sense in haste. So, through the hottest of the day we lay in shade on the crisp grass and drowsed, or tramped in talk our many marches over again, and thus rode up to the inn in the cool of the dusk.

Supper was nearly ended, and a motley crowd had gathered on the benches before the door. Grave citizens greedy for the last news, travelling chapmen of the better sort, soldiers of fortune and misfortune, with a sprinkling of court gallants,—each class herding by itself, with a busy flitting of serving-men from group to group. In the fall of a July night it is pleasant after drinking one's wine outdoors rather than

huddled up in the stewing odours of the common room, where the reek of many meats spoils the flavour of the liquor.

In such a laughing, chattering, gossiping throng, intent upon their own pleasures, our coming would have passed unnoticed—a thing I greatly wished, since I had no mind to talk openly of either past or future, nor yet seem to hide a secret—but for what I deemed a piece of officious buffoonery.

Having given up our beasts to the care of the inns-folk, we were shouldering our way to the door, intent upon supper, when I felt my elbow plucked with small ceremony, and a shrill voice cried out—

“Here is a sober fortune, master, or rather a pair of them, so have done with your jests. To look at the two, you would say they carried all Navarre on their backs, and, by my faith, they have their share!” and a hand smote me briskly between the shoulders, driving up into the air a cloud as heavy as a puff of smoke.

“Who gave you leave, friend, to annex so large a part of The Little Kingdom?”

Turning sharply, I found myself face to face with a tall slip of a girl, whose brown fingers still held me fast by the arm. Behind her, one lean hand gripping her shoulder, the other leaning on a stout stick, was the frailest and most wrinkled mortal that could totter on two legs and a crutch. Withered and thin, he seemed shrunken into bone and parchment, and but for the palsied chin and restless, shifting eyes,

he might have passed for a specimen of the embalmer's skill. As I stood staring, halting between impatience and compassion, Marcel from behind me put my thoughts into words.

"Jests, and with him! The Lord be good to us, but I would as soon jest with death himself!"

"No, no, not him, but my other master," answered the girl, looking back across her shoulder. "See where he comes yonder."

Hopping, skipping, and playing antic; now upon his heels, now on his toes, now rolling like a cart-wheel, came a lad dressed as a jester—bells, bauble, cockscomb, and all.

"Two masters?" he cried. "Ay, ay, and so have we all. Now one is lord, now the other: wisdom or folly, youth or age, death or life. Two for all, only some have three, like Messire Daillon in the corner yonder."

"Life and death are enough for most men. How is the third called?" said the girl.

"Wife by her husband, shrew by the neighbours, and madame by the priest. Eh, messire?" and the lad shook his bells in the air with a crash. Then he leaned forward, and thrusting his cockscomb under the flap of a broad-brimmed hat, tilted it over its owner's eyes.

"Which do you serve," he cried, "youth or age?"

"Youth," answered the lad, a fresh-faced boy with a laugh in his brown eyes, "and will for ten years."

"Then you serve me, and since I am folly you serve folly. Like master, like man."

"If that be so, then I serve age."

"Tell that to your sweetheart, and see how she'll take the compliment. I'll warrant your tingling ears will prove you folly's servant still. Thou art mine, man, thou art mine, and for ten years."

Even a small jest pleases a full stomach, but amid the laughter that greeted the mountebank's retort I wrenched my arm free from the girl's grasp.

"Our soberest fortune is to be supperless, but it is one soon mended. Keep thy quips for some other time, girl," said I, and was moving on to the inn door when the old man's high-pitched, quavering voice stopped me.

"I smell it, I smell it," said he, his trembling gaze fluttering from Marcel to me and back again to Marcel.

"What was it you man said?" and lifting his heavy staff, he pointed it tremulously at the squire. "Let him have his jest ready, for I say again, I smell it."

Again the girl plucked me by the sleeve, but this time all the laughter and mockery had dried out of her face, and the brown of her cheeks had whitened.

"For the Lord's sake, monsieur," she whispered, "go on, you and your friend. The fit has seized him, and why should he put a curse upon you?"

But for all his withered anatomy the ancient had caught her words, for he turned upon her angrily.

"Who says that death is a curse?" he cried shrilly. "A curse to him who fears what lies beyond, but to

no one else. Nor is it of my bringing. If I smell it, I smell it because it is there; and if it is there, not all the terror in the world will thrust it back an hour." A second time he lifted his stick and pointed it first at me and then at Marcel. "It is you or you," he said, "for it was not in the air until ye came, but which of the two it is I know not. Give me your hand, master, that I may see."

But Marcel, to whom he spoke, drew back.

"Not I, by the Lord. The whole thing's a mumming lie for money, and I will have nought to do with it."

Leaning heavily on the girl's shoulder, the old necromancer shut his eyes and stood a moment silent, and swaying on his tottery feet. Then suddenly he looked up, blinking, and thrusting his stick forward, struck Marcel on the breast. "I saw it, and it was there," he said, "but whether it was thee or the other was hidden. A lie?" and he broke out into a high cackle of a laugh. "Ay, ay, so they all say because it frights them to believe the truth, and if the vision be two weeks old and untrue it is indeed a lie, but not till then, my master, not till then. Come, girl."

"True or false, jest or earnest," said I, "it was well played. Let the gaffer warm his old bones with a mouthful of good wine to-night," and I dropped a coin into her hand.

"Ay, ay, take it, girl; we must live, we must live," he mumbled out of his toothless jaws, but with no word of thanks. "Come, let us get home, the cold of

the night chills me. A lie! quotha; let two weeks tell, two weeks, no more. Come, girl, come."

Back into the crowd they turned, the clown tripping and jiggling at their heels, and the last I saw of them was the sheen of the bauble bells as the lad shook them above his head.

"Come," cried I to Marcel, who stood open-mouthed and staring. "More than he will be the better of a five-year-old flask of Gascony grape-juice, and besides, my belt is too loose by three holes at the least."

By this time half Pau was gaping round us, and all hope of concealment at an end. But if the quack, or whatsoever he was, had done us an ill turn in thus giving our shy modesty an undesired prominence, his strange ravings had set something to the other side of the account in turning the edge of inquisitive inquiry. What mattered the gossip of Vic, court scandal and all, compared to the choice tit-bit that a prophet had foretold Blaise de Bernauld was to die that month, or that week, or that day, or, as some would have it, that very hour?

Nothing whets a morbid interest, an unassuagable curiosity, like the sight of a man who, with the life as yet whole in him and bubbling with an exuberant vitality, must needs die within a known time. Take the meanest rogue from the kennel, a depraved, evil-living and evil-smelling, contemptible wretch, drink-sodden and the easy prey of all the foulest lower vices, a thing that honest folk and common rascals will alike shun, and let it be given out that he is to

hang within the hour, and your world of honest folk, ay, even delicate and dainty women, will throng and jostle each other for the bare joy of gaping at the villain. It is, as I think, that he is already an adopted citizen of that great unknown, to which we pay more heed for others than for ourselves, and the glamour of his nearness to the eternal is upon us: for, look you, it is an awesome thing to be within an arm's-length of the eternal.

Be that as it may, round they came about us like bees round a honey-pot, and with as infinite a buzzing. A dozen questions were plied in the one instant, while those behind, tiptoeing and straining in their eagerness, sprawled and fought upon one another's shoulders to hear the answer.

"Did we know the carl?" No, nor so much as ever before clapped eyes on him. "Was he mad?" Best ask himself. "Where had he come from?" How did we know? "Where was he going to?" Again, how did we know? "Was it to-night I should die, or to-morrow, or next week?" By God's grace, neither to-night, nor to-morrow, nor next week, unless I died of plain hunger, since it was nine hours since we broke fast. "Why had he cursed me?" He had not cursed me, and I knew not why. "But it was true he had foretold death?"

Then I lost my temper and answered that something of the sort was said, and I would prove the truth of the forecast on some of them there and then if they did not stand aside and refrain from thronging

us. A few more curt words quenched the meddling prying of the nearest; and seeing that I had no mind to die in their midst for their private delectation and so pleasantly round off the spectacle, the crowd thinned and we forced our way to our lodgings.

At the inn-door was our host, as full of curiosity as a ripe peach of juice, and ready to overflow at a hint. If he could but get the rights of the story it would mean much custom to "The Black Horse," and therefore many hard crowns to his pocket, since gossiping is dry work; but I promptly put a period to his talk.

"Thy business, friend, is not our business but to feed us. We pay thee for meat and drink, not for words. Covers for two, then, and supper. Quickly now."

"Lay one here by the window," struck in Marcel, "and one yonder in the corner."

"Not so," said I, "but both here by the window. What, man? We both ride on the King's business, and so are equal in all things, save that I lead and you follow."

"Not now, Master Blaise," he protested. "Wait till we leave Pau. It is not seemly, and folks will talk."

"Tut, they talk already. Lay here, host, and be speedy."

The fellow must have thought that the way to our tongues lay, as with most men, through our stomachs, for in shorter time than I had thought it possible he laid us a meal fit for a king. Not a

King of Navarre, be it noted, for Henry, though a brave trencherman, was a plain eater; a Philip of Spain rather, whose wealth of the Indies bought him all that heart could desire save quiet at home and a satisfied ambition abroad. Yet, so far as the table was concerned, what was he the better for all his riches? He could do no more than eat and be filled, and hope to give God thanks for a good digestion, and the poorest kind may do that. Six courses there were, and had I let him our host would have danced attendance through them all. Hints he gave no heed to. "Art thou married, friend?" asked I as he hung at my shoulder with his ears a-cock.

"Ay, your worship, these five years."

"Then I have no doubt the good-wife has need of a man's help with so many coming and going."

"Trust her to manage; my place is here with your worships' honours."

"Then best empty the place," answered I shortly, "for our worships' honours have things private to discuss. Begone, friend, till we call."

Which put an end to his prying for that time. Yet for all its toothsome-ness, Marcel but played with that which was set before him. Neither the broiled trout, fresh from the Gave waters, nor the larded reed-birds from the Dax swamps could tempt him, and when he left the third service hashed about upon his platter but almost untasted, I broke out upon him,—

"What are you so backward about, man? Have

we not messed together a score of times, ay, and pigged it with our bare fingers, too, and you never once played bashful?"

"Oh, by your leave," said he with a kind of a groan, "it is not you, Master Blaise, who have come between me and my meat. Not even the King would do that—no, not though we ate off the one spit. For, you see, to do a man's work a man must fill himself like a man, no matter who sits at his elbow. But that eldritch carl has put a blight upon me, and though through being as empty as a beggar's purse I could soon drink myself drunk, I could never drink myself merry."

"What!" I cried, and in my astonishment I thrust the bench a foot back on the sanded floor, and sat staring. "You? You with your half-dozen pitched fights and score of skirmishes, to grow peakish like a maid over a cut finger, and all for the mumb-ling of a parchment-jawed dotard! Lord, man, how often have you thrust yourself into risks that were none of yours for pure love of the thing, a man's risks and deadly?—and now you shiver for a shadow."

"Ay, but that was a thing I saw, while this is God knows what of underhand mischief, and there's the difference. If it were a lie the fellow told it would be nought; if it were truth and I knew it for truth, well, a man's a man: but not to know if it be lie or truth is what sits so cold on my stomach! Why, it is like a ghost, neither flesh nor devil that a man can meet and handle, and so a man quakes."

"Come, come," said I, dragging back my bench to the table. "Listen, man; if it be lie, as of course it is, what then?"

"Why, nought as I say—all's well."

"Good; but if it be truth, what then?"

For a moment Marcel hung in the wind, his fingers at their old trick of beard-combing, then he answered slowly,—

"If it be for Bernauld, all's well still. Don't think I grudge it, Master Blaise."

Leaning forward, I stretched my hand across the table and caught him by the wrist.

"Who am I, old friend, that you should love me so? With you it has ever been Bernauld first and Bernauld last to the forgetting of self. But touching this thing, you said a moment since that if it were a thing certain it would be nought, but now God knows what might. come, and so you quaked. So be it; take your own phrase, 'God knows.' Leave it there, I say, leave it there."

"Amen, Master Blaise," he answered, and his great lean hand closed over mine and held it as in a vice.

But let no man gibe at Marcel's qualms. When it comes to facing the unknown and undefined, the best of us are like children shivering at the dark.

CHAPTER VII.

WE RIDE TO THE TRYST.

I WOULD not give a fig for the man who is so sluggish in his blood that he has no moods. He is as flat and flavourless as unsalted bread, and though he may be sound-hearted and wholesome, and men may, so to speak, live by him, yet he gives neither zest nor pleasure to life nor ever tickles the palate of being. As well dwell under the tedious sameness of a grey sky as with such a one. Give me, rather, the storm and the sunshine, the dash of rain and the flecking of white clouds across the blue, nay, even the rare out-bursting of a tempest, if the air be but clear and sweet thereafter. A man of such variations was Marcel, full by turns of honest anger, a woman's compassion, sturdy hate or unselfish tenderness, as the need of the hour demanded.

Whatever his over-night's gloom may have been, his spirits the next day, as in the early morning we turned our backs on Pau and rode down the winding slope to the river, were those of mischievous sixteen rather than sedate four-and-sixty.

"Lord, Lord," he chuckled, as we rode across the bridge which lies to the south-west of the city, and turned to the right, instead of to the left that would have led to Bernauld. "What would my lady say to see us giving the home and the go-by, and riding knights-errant where chance may drift us, like these dons of Spain they tell of in the old romances, and we, both of us, grizzled as badgers? Though there," he added, passing his hand through his stiff bristle of beard, "I am free to confess I have the wrong advantage."

Then in his light-headedness he set himself to trolling out such a carol as might come from a crow with a quinsy. But I soon put a stay upon his music.

"Since when have I been fool enough to ride I knew not whither? Now that Pau is at our back, and with it is gone all chance of chopping gossip, I may tell you our whitherwards. We are bound for Spain, friend Marcel."

You should have seen his jaw drop. His carol died in a hoarse quaver as if one had suddenly clipped him by the throat, and the light went from his eyes like the snuffing of a candle. Nay, he fairly gasped as a man does at a rough blow below the ribs.

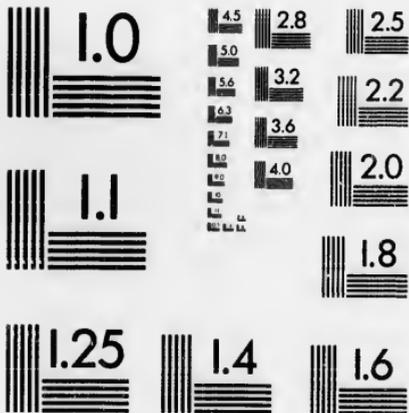
"Spain?" he said in a high drawl, "Spain? Good Lord, good Lord, it is pure midsummer madness."

"It is the King's business," answered I, "or rather it is Navarre's business, and, if you knew the ins and



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outs of it, sane enough for any one but us. But when the King says yea, who or what is to say nay?"

"Common-sense," said he gruffly. "If the King said, 'Thrust your hand in the fire,' would you do it?"

"Ay, if I could pull Navarre out of the coals, and so would you."

"But," he cried wrathfully, "there are fires and fires; and Navarre is scorched on more sides than one. Why plunge into Spain's brazier?"

"Because it is the King's business, man, and there's an end of it."

"An end of it," I heard him mutter; "ay, and of us. Now I know why yon necromancer smote me so straight on the breast last night." And, as was his wont when vexed or ill at ease, he checked his horse a half-dozen lengths behind and followed in silence.

The path led first through those Jurançon vineyards whence came that famous wine which old Henry of Albret gave our Henry to drink the very day of his birth, and which tradition says the babe swallowed with such satisfaction as to prove him *un vrai Béarnnais*. A rough and sturdy growth it is, and the man was soon to prove that what had been the babe's liking had not abated with the years. Having threaded these, we swung to the left between rolling hillocks, and headed straight for the snow-cap of the Pic d'Ossau, and so for a league followed the rising ground in the centre of the valley. It is a country of slopes and hollows, and with no stream

to serve as guide. Once south of Lasseube, we crossed the short spur on the right, and so rode into Oloron in easy time for dinner without having once broken our beasts' pace.

This time Marcel had no mind to lose his meat. The issue was set fair and square before him, and I have ever found that to look a risk in the face is to rob it of more than one-half its terrors.

"'Tis the place of a good Christian to make the devil's work as hard in the doing as may be," said he, as he cleared his plate for the third time. "Therefore it behoves a man who is on the right side to keep his muscles hard. If it comes to banging the accursed dons, or being banged by them, I'll give away no points in the game."

Thenceforward, too, he was cheerful in a sober, grumbling fashion, and if there were occasional relapses into a sour pessimism it was only when his almost twenty years of prejudice got the upper hand.

Not that it was all pure prejudice. Marcel had his own good and enduring reasons for hating the witch-mother of Diego Saumarez, even as I had, since in striking viciously at me she had wounded him on one occasion, and so deeply that a scar was left which not all the sixteen years which had passed since then had fully healed. It had come about in this way.

In her mad hate and wild thirst for vengeance she had hired a worthy rogue—La Hake by name—to do that work which was beyond the reach of

her own hand. That his instructions were to make a swift end of Blaise de Bernauld he admitted, but I being on the Queen's business at the time, my lady and our year-old boy fell into the snare he had spread for me. My whereabouts she refused to reveal, and the callous-hearted scoundrel slew the little lad before his mother's eyes that he might compel a revelation. That was crime number one, and it failed in its purpose.

Then came a day when the King—who was then no more than the Prince of Bearn—in an ill-considered boyish freak, appeared at Bernauld with no more than two or three attendants, and at his heels came La Hake and a score or two of rascals as evil-minded as himself. See now the villain's quandary. If he burnt Bernauld, master and all, as he lusted to do, and so earned his wages from the Spanish woman, he missed the royal game that had fallen into his net. Henry of Navarre, alive, was worth a barony at the least from either France or Spain; dead, nothing, except perhaps a long rope.

In the end he agreed that Blaise de Bernauld should go scot free for that time if the Prince of Bearn were given into his hands, and upon that bargain I, as some afterwards said, sold my King that was to be, to save my own skin.

But they who said so lied. What we really did was to substitute Marcel's fifteen-year-old son for Henry, and in the dark the fraud passed muster, but only for a time; and when the bloody villain found he had been cheated, the wolf within him drave

him, and he slew the lad with as little compunction as he had slain my boy. That was crime number two, and it profited its author no more than did the former murder; for Marcel, the father, lighting upon him with a father's agony of loss still raw, struck him down in cold blood.

There, in few words, is the cause why Marcel held the mother of Diego Saumarez—or was it the wife? La Hake seemed uncertain, and spake sometimes of one and sometimes of the other—in a dread that was only equalled by his hate. There, too, is the strange bond of ungrudging sacrifice which bound the King of Navarre to Marcel, the Squire of Bernauld.

From Oloron to the place of rendezvous is no more than an hour's trot, and you may be sure the sun was drawing near the crest of the hills before we turned up the road that runs by the left bank of the Gave d'Aspe, and made our way to the throat of the rising valley.

"It's a happy thing, and a great comfort to a man," said Marcel with a groan as the gorge narrowed, "to have nought to live for in the broad world; to be, so to speak, the butt-end of a tag that has trussed points in its time, ay, and trussed them busily and well, but has now not so much as a rag of silken cord left to create a use or even a reason for existence. Well, well, let the tag wear out with the rest, or go to the mire, and be forgotten."

"Nought to live for?" said I. "What of Marie and that great son of yours?"

"Tut," answered he, "a man like me who is faring here and there on who knows what risky errands, dies so many times in the imagination of those he leaves that there must be at least a dozen ghosts of me at Bernauld by this time. As to the lad, he's a good lad, but at eight-and-twenty the blood in his own veins counts for more than the blood out of another's, even though he call that other 'father.' No, 'tis a great comfort."

"Well," said I, to humour him, "and what of Bernauld? Since when have I shrunk to so poor a thing that compared with me the nearest ditch has the greater welcome? Do I and Bernauld count for nothing, old friend?"

"Nought to live for at four- or five-and-sixty," answered he with a shake of his head; "when the old dog has lost his teeth and can no longer hold his grip or use his nails he is better dead. You would not make a turnspit out of a wolf-hound, Master Blaise? Why, it would break the beast's heart. And d'ye think that because a man has outlived his day he is lower than a brute? But, thank the Lord, the old dog can die, and so, I say again, 'tis a comfort there is nought to live for."

"But," I cried, "why all this croaking? a week ago and you had it in you to trounce Jacques Gobineau for no more than a cross look, ay, and you could have done it, too, for all your whining at the dulness of tooth and claw!"

"Ay, but," said he, "a man is as old as he feels,

and there are times when a man ages twenty years in as many minutes. Tell me, Master Blaise, you who have hot blood in you for all your cool head, only you know, as a man should, how to keep a grip on your passion; tell me what was your thought that sorrowful hour it came home to you that the flush and power of youth had gone from you, and though you knew it not, you were half-way to old age? Nay, you have no need to tell me, for the truth has bitten me twice and left its mark each time. It is as if a man slipped from spring to autumn in a snap, and I have slipped from autumn into winter. That it had been autumn I knew. The warmth and glow of life had failed from the summer heat, the days were drawing in, and the light of the eye had dimmed; growth was stayed; the vigour of life was checked, and the sappy limbs were stiffer and more rigid. Ay, it was autumn, but no more than autumn, until yon earl touched me with his stick and you cried Spain in my ears to give the touch points and pressure. Then the glow went grey, the dimness darkened, the limbs stiffened into stark dead uselessness, and the chill of winter had me in both heart and brain, and I was old—old—old."

While he spoke we had unconsciously dropped into a walk, leaving the beasts to wander as they would; nor, when he ended, had I ought to say, so moved was I by the note of hopeless sadness that shook his voice. The silence that belongs to the presence of the dead was upon me, and answer him

I could not, any more than I could comfort him that black day we bore home to Bernauld his brave lad, done to death by La Hake. It may be taere are those who will jeer and cry out upon Marcel for a morbid old fool, but so could not I. The first conscious loss of a man's vital power is, after its fashion, as sorrowful a thing as, and at times even more so than, the laying away of the body in the grave. If the zest of life be gone, the flesh is, truly, little better than a grievous burden.

Therefore I kept silence for a time, but at last, stretching out my hand to grasp his, "Thank the Lord, old friend," I said. "No frost of winter can kill the love of brother and brother," and said no more, for, after all, words are the poorest coin in all the world wherewith one heart can pay another.

Whatever virtue of vital force had gone from him the power of his grasp was unabated, for his grip crushed my hand until the bones cracked as he answered.

"The winter must draw to an eternal spring before that day comes, Master Blaise, though it is borne in upon me that the winter is far through."

"Chut, man!" cried I, "think shame to yourself! All this brooding because of an old fool's maunderings? Why, 'tis nonsense, arrant nonsense; besides, it hit me as closely as you."

"No, no, not so; for it was me he touched. But if I may only die as I have lived, for the house that has sheltered me and the man who has loved me,

I can say no less than 'thank God.' What plagues me is that one of these filthy dons may slap a knife into me and no one be a whit the better."

Then we shook up our beasts and rode on towards the growing gloom of the gorge in silence for, maybe, a long half-league. Then Marcel, pointing ahead and to the right, cried,—

"Yonder's the place, Master Blaise, for there is the brook coming in from the west that the King spoke of."

CHAPTER VIII.

JEAN MINET OF GUIENNE.

ALMOST unnoted the valley had closed in upon us, and so sternly that twilight was anticipated by a full hour. To the left the Gave roared through its time-worn bed, a streak of foaming white, with rare slants of black and silent water rolling across the levels in uneasy stress from the outfall of the upper slope. Beyond it the bank rose rough and impassable, a sloping desert of loose stone and cliff, possibly the feeding-ground of the goat or mountain sheep, but affording no track for man or horse. Then, still higher, came an abrupt rise strewn by boulders and seamed with rock slides, into which crept the advance-guard of stunted pine, larch, and scrub oak, whose better-nourished battalions swarmed upon the highest reaches and filled the sheltered ravines. On the hither side the road clung to the stream with such abrupt zigzags as the rocky nature of the ground compelled, but, saving at one point, there was the same wild savagery, the same upper growth of timber, the same huge stretch of tongueless silence and melancholy suggestion of desolation.

The exception was where the wall of the valley was split by that stream from the west which the King had appointed as the meeting-place. Here the gorge widened, and the detritus from the river had slowly built up a small plateau which, for all the hot and breathless drought of summer, was a miracle of greenness and fresh luxuriance.

"Thank the Lord," cried Marcel, "we can at least breathe here and not risk the sucking in of the rocks atop of us. I would as lief sleep in a prison as in the cleft that lies farther ahead. And see, Master Blaise, yonder is a house, and with life in it, too. We shall rest snugger to-night than I had thought."

Sure enough he was right. Sheltered by a group of trees on the tongue of land between the two streams was the grey loom of a cottage from the chimney of which a thin trail of blue smoke drifted down the valley. No light showed, but that went for nothing, since a thrifty peasant can eat his scant supper on his door-step, and then go to bed in the dark to save oil.

"Life, indeed," answered I dubiously, "but perhaps more life than welcome. A man who dwells two leagues from anywhere may have his own reasons for being surly and slamming the door in the face of strangers. I'll warrant few angels come to the valley of the Aspe."

"Chink two crowns at him and then put them back in your pocket, and you will see him grin though he had his father's bones hid under the hearthstone,"

answered Marcel. "But pay him nought save on good behaviour and as a farewell blessing. Or if 'beg, dog, and you will get bone' won't fetch him, we will play the seigneur and bid him sleep in a hole outside while we share his bed with the fleas. Not but what the stars are coverlid enough for me, as in scores of nights past, and fresh air sweeter than stale smells, but I would have these court jackanapes who are to join us presently see that Blaise de Bernauld is master wheresoever he goes. They might gibe at your bidding else, and at a time when there was no room for two words. Come, a twist of the bridle and we're there."

Down through the knee-deep grass we turned towards the splash upon the shadows which was the hut, and which was growing visibly greyer with every minute.

It was a small, one-storeyed cottage, with walls built after the fashion of the country—that is to say, pitted thickly with smooth river pebbles, as if twenty feet of a cobble pavement had been cut from a city roadway and set on edge, only that the stones were somewhat smaller. In the centre of the line of wall was the door, and at either end a narrow window deeply set in the masonry. Both of these latter were boarded from within, a small circular hole being cut in the wood to admit light. The door was fast shut.

"Where there is fire there is life though the dogs are sullen," said Marcel with all a soldier's contempt for the peasant not of his own seigneurie; and

leaning from his saddle he hammered loudly, "Hulloa, within there! Ay! I said there was life. Do you hear the fellow mumble? Open, friend, open, and for your own sake. A churl's welcome brings a churl's payment," and again he struck the door smartly.

For all result he might as well have struck the rocks that were so sheer and black above us, for no one answered, though the babble and murmur of a voice could be heard within. Then Marcel grew wrathful. In his own country Blaise de Bernauld was no small power, and because of it Bernauld's squire held a reflected authority which few cared to question twice. That we were beyond our own borders was true, but use and wont are hard things to shake off, therefore Mareel waxed angry.

"Look you, friend," and he shook the door gently as he spoke, "you are in a fair way to earn yourself a broken pate. Open for your health's sake, if not for civility."

He had dismounted and now stood with his bridle in one hand, and his other fist leaning heavily on the door upon which he punctuated his speech. But as there was no sound of motion from within, and the mumbling still went on, he turned away in hot anger and threw me the reins.

"Hold these, Master Blaise," he cried; "if they will not hearken to soft words maybe hard stones will serve the turn;" and down he went groping his way to the river, whence he presently returned with a great boulder, as big as a steel bonnet, in his fists.

Standing two paces back he poised the huge stone on his right palm, with the back of the hand pressed against the shoulder, and with all his strength—and Marcel's muscles were firm as wires for all his age—he flung it crashing against the door near where he judged the inside bolt to be shot. To me it seemed that the whole house shook under the blow, but the stout door withstood the shock, and from within the babble rose into a grumbling roar.

"Plague take it," growled he; "it's a stiffer business than I reckoned. Turn round your beast, Master Blaise, and tickle him under the belly. Maybe a pair of hoofs will do what fair words can't. Hulloo, within there; open, I say again, lest we ding the whole house down."

"Let me try the stone," said I, for the chatter we heard vexed me, and, whereas I had at first no great wish to billet myself in what could not but be poor quarters, I was now determined to compel an entrance, *bon gré mal gré*. There would be a swift end to quiet and all decency of order in Bearn if every Jack-peasant could keep a closed door at his own pleasure. "Hold thou the beasts and stand back."

Stooping, I lifted and poised the stone as Marcel had done, and was balanced back on my right leg in act to throw with all my strength when he stopped me.

"Tst, tst, tst," said he between his teeth; "listen, Master Blaise, listen!"

From above came the swish, swish of legs pushing their way through the long grass, and a moving shadow showed against the shadows at rest.

"There is but one, Master Blaise. Shall we treat him as friend or foe?"

"As friend, man, as friend," answered I; "thank the Lord, we are not in Spain as yet."

"As friend be it," returned Marcel, "though, for that matter, there are some even in Navarre I would as lief keep at arm's-length." Then he raised his voice in such a shout as must have scared the wits of the new-comer, for he checked himself with a start and made as if to bolt for the mountains. "Come, man, come; and if you have any love for this door here come quickly, for our patience is outworn and the panels are like to follow the patience. Nay, fool, we wish you no ill. Speak to him, Master Blaise, lest he take to his heels."

"Have no fear, friend," cried I. "We are travelers who seek a night's lodging and can pay our way. A roof overhead is all we need, food we have of our own. Have no fear, I say."

But Marcel's hoarse roar had shaken him, and though he approached slowly like a timorsome cat, he was still crossing himself as he came into clear eyeshot.

"Saints! gentles," stammered he, peering at us in the gloom, "I had no thought there was a living soul within a league of me saving the poor devil inside there, and your nobility's voice sent my heart into my throat."

"Then swallow it down again, friend," replied Marcel sharply, "and dup the door, for we have seen the outside of it long enough."

That was Marcel all over. For hard on twenty years he had schooled and domineered, teaching me, amongst others, that the first necessity of command is to know how to obey; and now at times, when we were alone or dealing with one or two of the peasantry, the old habit was too strong for him, and he still played the master. This, knowing the true honest heart and love of the man, never chafed me, but lest our friend of the solitudes should fall into a misapprehension I struck in: "Where was that tongue of yours bred, my man? Not here in Navarre?"

"No, seigneur. I am Guienne born and a man of the plains."

"So? Mongrel French, with maybe a dash of blood from the English occupation. But what a man of the plains is doing up here in the hills can wait for the telling. See thou to the tethering of the horses, Marcel."

By this time the door was open, but the interior was as black as a midnight cavern, or rather a blot of shadows, as now and then a smouldering ember from the hearth broke into a rare flicker and died to grey ash. But our host of the night, blowing the grey aside, lit a rush-lamp with a wisp of straw thrust into the red heat of the fire and sent the shadows scurrying to the corners. Farther than that the feeble flame could not drive them.

"Enter, seigneur, enter," said he, coming forward with his lamp held high above his head; "it is a poor place at the best, and to-night there is that within it——"

"Which will serve my turn well enough," I broke in. "Let there be no excuses, friend."

"Ay," answered he with a sudden shake in his voice, "you have hit the nail on the head, though by misadventure. What is here will serve the turn of king or serf alike, since it is death and no less, if I read the signs aright. See yonder."

Following his gesture, I turned to a corner of the hut where there was spread a thick layer of dried bracken and beaten straw, over which a tattered covering had been cast. On this lay a man fully dressed in serviceable homespun, and who, though he took no note of us at all, never ceased his uneasy tossings. From side to side he flung himself unrestingly, nor ever ceased moaning, mumbling, or calling out in his delirium.

"'Tis the third day, seigneur, and pray God it's the last, if for nought else but that a man who toils by day may sleep o' nights."

"Who is he? Your father? brother?" for in the dim light his age was uncertain.

"A black stranger, seigneur, one would say a wastrel of the highways, if it were not that his clothes are good, and there was that in his pockets which will pay his keep. I found him on the road three days back, his horse gone the Lord knows where, and since

then he has spoken no word of a Christian tongue, but shouts and groans and mutters so that not even twelve hours' labour can win a man sleep. But," and he leaned forward, peering at the sick man as he had peered at us in the dusk, "all's wanted is patience. I'm thinking he's far through."

"And what says the surgeon?"

"Surgeon!" cried the fellow, staring at me as I stooped beside him and laughing in derision; "where should such as I find a surgeon? 'Surgeon,' quoth he. 'Where's his fee?' quoth I."

"His fee, man? You have cleaned the poor wretch's pockets and yet grudge a fee for his life?"

"By your leave, seigneur, if the fee went to the surgeon where would I come in? No, no; we poor folk live or die as we can, and there's an end of us."

"Stand aside and let me see to him."

But before I could go down upon my knees Marcel was between me and the head of the bed.

"Not so, Master Blaise, let me see to him rather, for that is more fitting. Besides, it may be a catching fever."

"Blaise!" quoth the sick man, rolling up his dim unseeing eyes at us. "Blaise! Ay, Blaise de Bernauld," and then he fell again into an incoherent mouthing.

As my name came patly from so unexpected a place, Marcel snatched the light from the peasant's

hand and thrust it down to within three inches of the other's face, and we both stood staring.

"No man that I know," muttered Marcel, stooping his lowest to see the better. "Nor, by the looks of him, one that I want to know, for that matter. As evil-featured a rogue as a man would meet from here to Toledo."

Marcel was right as to his looks at the moment. A five or six days' growth of black bristle covered him from nostrils to chin-point and crept in a stiff thicket up to his ears. Great bushy brows hung pent over lack-lustre eyes. The lips had gone thin and livid, and the once dark skin was like a patch of unwholesome yellow parchment in its setting of black hair. The mouth was stretched and gaping, and a swollen tongue shot quivering out between an ugly set of yellow fangs. An evil-featured rogue, and yet, as he lay there tossing and panting in his thirst, a very pitiable and miserable wretch.

"Leave him to me," said Marcel again. "The moon is up, and you had best sup outside. Hark to his ravings! Get outside, Master Blaise, I say. The more air he has the better."

"Blaise! Ay, ay, Blaise de Bernauld," muttered the fellow a second time. And again, in his perplexity, Marcel pushed the lamp under his nose and stared his hardest.

"If he talks sense call me," said I, for I saw the squire had reason on his side. "This prattle of Blaise de Bernauld has something behind it. Have you a

more serviceable lamp, friend? This one is as frail in life as your guest yonder. A puff would blow either into the dark."

Out from a corner the peasant fetched a horn lantern, and with it set between us we seated ourselves beneath the trees and fell to our supper, and to judge by the gleam in his eyes, and the brisk play he made with his teeth, it was not often that a meal of cold capon and wheaten bread came his way.

"And now, friend," said I, as, our hunger blunted, we picked the bones with some show of daintiness, "how comes a man of Guienne so far from his birth-place? Such love for Navarre is a thing uncommon in a Frenchman."

As I spoke his eyes lit up for a moment fiercely, then the flash died out and left his face stolid as a turnip, but while they were still ablaze he snapped out,—

"Cannot a man hate as well as love?"

"Hate?" said I—"hate France?"

"Bah! seigneur, what is France to a serf? A fair cause for foul robbery, a name, no more. See," and again his face lit up, and his very finger-tips became instinct with description as he crooked them before my face, "here is a grindstone: the lower; that is France. Here is another: the upper; that is the overlord—no offence, seigneur, I speak of Guienne. The one below lies passive, the one above whirls thus and thus and thus, and between the two the handful of wholesome grain that lies between goes to dust and

is gobbled up, though the bulk goes not to France. Hate France, seigneur? No; a man who hates well has no room in his heart for more than one hate. Take away France and who remains? The overlord. *Voilà!*"

"But," said I, "all that is too much hate for a fistful of taxes, or even two of them. Besides, if all your kind pay alike, how is it that you have shifted while the rest remain?"

This time the glare in his eyes was the red hunger of the wolf, and as he drew back his lips in a snarl he had more in him of the brute than the man. For a moment he sat silent, eyeing me, his grimy toilworn fingers stroking his mouth and chin in the pangs of indecision. Then he said slowly—

"The seigneur, perchance, loves Guienne?"

"The seigneur," answered I, sharply, "is Bearnois, and hates Guienne."

"Then it may be that Rigault de l'Annaise, the Lord of Gravaine, is a friend of the seigneur's?"

"Neither Rigault de l'Annaise, nor any other Frenchman," returned I; "and as for the man himself, I never so much as heard of him."

"Then—then, it may be that the seigneur is a great lord, and I have ever found that wolf stood by wolf for all that they were not of the one breed."

"As to that," said I, "I hold that master and servant are as one before God, and that the serf can have as sorrowful a heart as the lord."

"Ay?" and he drew a long breath,— "that was not

Rigault de l'Annaise's creed. Thank the saints, he has learned to know better.

"Then if the man has amended——"

"Amended? Who said amended? I said he had learned better, and the two differ."

"But what has this to do with fleeing Guienne? Surely the fat plains, for all the grind of the taxes, are better than the hungry hills?"

"When life is the last thing a man has left, seigneur, and even that has grown bitter, he is, perhaps, a fool to cleave to it, but he does. Better starve in Navarre than hang in Guienne."

"Hang?" I cried; "then you have blood on your hands?"

"No more than a man should have," he answered sullenly. "Though as for hanging, there are a score of things for which a man may hang in Guienne, and yet have white hands. If you smuggle salt, you hang; if you steal a noble's deer, you hang; if you curse a priest, you hang—when the abbot catches you. Oh, it is simplicity itself, seigneur, and gives justice a free hand. Were I lord, and Rigault de l'Annaise serf, I could wish no better law. As to the blood on my hands, since you have some conscience for the poor, listen and judge. Yet, whether you blame or no, matters little; I would do the same again."

It was a mean, ignoble face that stared at me across the dim light. A foxy, shifty face, with narrow, cunning eyes that shot a furtive glance, and

then looked down in a lying forced humility. I had seen the same thing in a hound whose spirit cruelty had broken, and that crouched and wagged its tail when, but for the whip, it would have bitten. The forehead and round the eyes were seamed and puckered by the premature age which comes of grinding poverty and incessant labour. The mouth was big and vicious under its ragged mat of hair, and from chin point to scalp were the deeply-scored lines of vice and debauchery. Yet, as he spoke, his look steadied, the brute within him went under, the man came to the top, and a kind of greatness that compelled a grudging admiration dawned across the face.

“There were three of us, seigneur,—Marie the wife, Marie the child, and I, Jean Minet; and, in our poor way, we were happy—as happy, that is, as a man can be who has a knife everlastingly at his throat, and feels the prick of it. The plains are less fat than you think and full crop, or lean crop, or no crop at all, the priest’s tithes and dues, the lord’s taxes and exactions, the King’s this, that, and the other, must be paid. So we who worked went hungry, that those who never stirred finger, but yet cursed us for our laziness, might go full fed. Yet, in our way, we were happy, for the old lord Raimond de l’Annaise had a man’s heart in him, and held us at least to have equal rights with his hounds.

“But old Raimond died, and all that ended; for Rigault, the new lord, had court debts to pay, and a court schooling to teach him how to do it. Thencefor-

ward we lived worse than the dogs, for they had a right to a clean kennel, an armful of straw, and enough coarse food to keep the life in them. A hard man and a vicious was Rigault de l'Annaise, and night and day I pray God, with all my heart, he reaps what he sowed. If we saw him a league off, we scurried to cover like scared rabbits lest, in the light gaiety of his heart, he laid his wolf hounds on us for sport. Peasants were plentiful—the Lord knows they were over-plentiful—and sport a lord must have. So, when a bitter winter followed a blighted harvest, and Marie the wife died of sheer slow hunger, spun out through starving weeks,—and, O God! do Thou eternally forget Thy mercy to the jeering wretches who harried us bare as a licked trencher for all our cries! Do Thou remember this thing to them, I pray—we had no tears left to weep. That she should die was good.

“ Marie the child was a thing of wires, while I, as you see, am tough as an oak stave, and so we won through, feeding on roots and haws and offal of the dogs' leaving until the grass came. Young folks are like mountain streams, and soon run full. In another year the girl was Marie the woman, and then an evil thing befell her. At the edge of the wood Rigault and his huntsmen came full tilt upon her, and she, being still little more than child for all her inches, stopped to peep at the brave sight, when she should have fled as from worse than the plague. ‘Hulloa!’ cried he, reining back, and staring at her. ‘Whose doe is this? What is thy name, child?’ and she, shaking and red-

dening under his free look, told him she was Marie, daughter of Jean Minet, one of his lordship's villeins. 'So,' said he, riding up to her, and thrusting his hand under her chin that he might see her better; 'and where has Jean Minet hidden thee all this time? By St Denis! he deserves to hang for defrauding his lord, but for sake of thy pretty face, child, I spare him. Bid him send thee to the castle to-night, ma belle; or, stay, to-night I sup abroad. To-morrow will do, but without fail. The seigneur hath his rights, thou knowest—eh? and mayhap the strong box hath a dowry somewhere within it. Lest the message be garbled, Hugues, do thou look out this Minet, and give it him thyself. After the dogs, fellows.' And so rode on.

"That night Hugues came to me, coarse and careless, and the lesser scoundrel of the two. 'As well do it with a good grace, and first as last,' said he, as he saw my fists clench; and I doubt not that he spoke in kindness. 'He has a rough way with him when he is crossed, has our Rigault; and a seigneur's rights are his rights. I speak as a friend;' and, with a nod, he went off. But I could not do it, seigneur; the girl was a good girl; and, no, by all the saints, I could not do it.

"By right we should have fled that night. God knows, it was not our weight of baggage that kept us; but I went down with an ague, and for two days could move neither hand nor foot, but to shake. At the end of that time back came Hugues, with three others at

his heels. 'The seigneur bids me tell thee,' said he, 'that it is well he is a merciful man, else it would go hard with thee. Furthermore, I am to say, that in these things he has no mind to exercise compulsion, but relies rather on a due recognition of the justice of his claim. But, friend, because he is just, he cannot let thy contumacy pass.' Whereupon, seigneur, the ruffians seized me, and maimed me—so, while Marie stood by shrieking."

Forward, almost into my face, Jean Minet thrust a trembling right hand from which the little finger had been hacked hard by the palm. "'Send the wench to-morrow,' said Hugues, and left us.

"The next day it was the same thing, seigneur, only the left hand suffered. 'A finger a day,' said Hugues, 'then the hands, and so upwards. Our Rigault is a patient man, but he holds his grip, and will come to the limbs in time. Better first than last, friend Minet, and he bids me say the place is watched.'"

He sat silent, stroking and pulling at his beard with the tips of his three fingers. Then suddenly he looked up, his face whiter than that of the death's head who lay within doors, and his teeth chattering.

"She was a good girl," he stammered, "a good girl, and I killed her that night as she slept. Thank the Lord, my hand was sure, for she only moaned once, 'Jesus,' and was still. Oh! never start; would you have done less? and have we peasants not hearts as well as you lords? To die was nothing; but the other—oh, Lord God! not the other, not the other. Later, I

killed him, too—killed him, as I would a rat. That is why, seigneur, I am no longer a man of Gasconne."

The flush that had risen at the last to his face died out, and again there came back the furtive, uneasy, shifting look; but thenceforward, so long as I live, I shall hold no man ignoble until I have so proved him. What a play of passions was his! What a letting loose of hell! Sorrow, wrath, dread, hatred, vengeance, murder fled in and out of his eyes like the figures of a masque. At the last, his tale ended so quickly and in such a sombre concentration of despair, that, seasoned as I was to the desperate griefs and bitter losses of life, I could but sit and gape.

"Killed her?" I gasped at last,—“killed her? Your own child?"

"Ay, seigneur, why not?" he answered dully, for his passions had fallen into grey ashes. "Better the body than the soul. You did not know Rigault de l'Annaise!" Then he turned upon me fiercely. "Maybe you would pity him too, the brute beast! Maybe you would say that rights are rights, and the powers that be are ordained of the Lord?"

"God forbid!" said I—"God forbid! of the devil rather. For him I have no pity, and as he sowed so let him reap."

What more would have passed I know not, but at that moment Marcel joined us, and, with not so much as a glance at me, fell-to on his supper in silence.

CHAPTER IX.

THE HAND OF TERESA SAUMAREZ.

"WELL?" asked I, with some show of a reasonable vexation, as Marcel went on munching stolidly without a word. "What of the patient?"

"Dead," answered he curtly, "and therefore there is one rogue less in the world."

"Dead?" echoed I, awed as most men are in such a presence, though it be but for a moment—"dead, and so swiftly?"

"Did I kill him?" retorted Marcel with gruff sharpness. "You yourself heard monsieur of the three fingers say he was far through."

"What ailed him that he went so quietly at the last?"

"The sun ailed him to begin with, and a horse hoof or a God-be-praised Navarre road ailed him to end with, but which I know not. The skull is cracked under the scalp."

"Dead! Ay, ay, dead! God rest him, poor wretch, and comfort the hearts that will be sore for this night's loss wherever they may be!"

Whereupon Mareel broke into a hoarse laugh, and catching up his can of wine, cried—

“Here’s a toast. May more of his kind go the same way, and speedily!” and again he laughed, but with so bitter a jollity that I forbore to chide him for his unseemliness.

“And what of his wild talk of Blaise de Bernauld?” asked I curiously; “did he speak out?”

“Ay, he spoke,” answered Marcel briefly; “but, by your leave, you know the proverb of the full man and the fasting, and it is a plaguy long time since I dined.”

Yet, for all his show of appetite, it was clear there was more ostentation and pretence about his eating than honest hunger. He mangled his meat and left the bones unpicked; and as for the hunch of bread he ripped from the loaf, it went for the most part in crumbs, and down the outside of his jerkin rather than his throat.

Jean Minet had dropped his elbows on his knees and his chin on his palms, and, as we spoke, sat staring at the dull gleam of the light. To my mind he neither heard nor saw us, but was back once more in Guienne and living afresh the sorrows, the losses, and the hatred of his past. But presently Mareel roused him. His pretence at supper had come to an end, and he could no longer fritter away the minutes playing a part.

“Hulloa! Waken up, friend,” he said sharply, and pushing the other with his foot as he spoke.

"Best see to your guest within there. Though, if you take my advice, you will have him promptly out by the heels and so sleep the sounder. An honest man's house is better without such cattle, dead or alive. As for us, God's roof-tree will do for my master and me to-night."

Like a man accustomed to obey, Jean Minet started at the authoritative voice and looked about him in a dazed fashion. Then he rose clumsily to his feet, and muttering, "Ay, ay, seigneur, your pardon, seigneur, your pardon," like a man half asleep, and made for the open door. Midway in he paused and turned,—

"There was no priest," he said, looking vacantly at Mareel. "But there; to die or to live, whether it be priest or surgeon, we poor must do without."

"Priest!" said Mareel between his teeth. "Not all the priests from here to Rome could have asoiled him. Besides, he was witless, and only told truth in maunderings."

"Plague take your mysteries," cried I; "cannot you speak out, man."

"How do I know," answered he cautiously, and speaking under his breath, "but the fellow, Minet you call him, is in league with that dead rogue?"

"Chut! Minet is from Guienne, and has his own reasons for being solitary. I vouch for Minet."

"Guienne?" he cried, rising and coming over to where I sat. "That explains it!"

"Mysteries again! Explains what, man?"

"Why the poor wretch's wanderings were so much gibberish to his three-fingered host."

"Ay? and why?"

"Because it's not in reason that a man of Guienne would understand Spanish Basque."

"So he was from the south, was he? Now we know where he got his yellow skin. But what of his chatter of Blaise de Bernauld."

"Listen, Master Blaise," and Marcel sat himself down beside me under the shadow of the great trees. "When you two were gone out I went down on my knees and scanned him as a mother might her babe, for what right had a stranger to prattle of Blaise de Bernauld in that fashion? but never a hair of him did I know. Then I set the light on a stove that was handy and began to feel him. His ribs and limbs were sound, but the first touch of the head was enough. Back of the ear, just where the hair thickened, was a pulp I might have thrust in with my thumb, though for all the break in the bone the skin was whole, and but for the uncanny softness of it his life was little the worse. Then I pushed up his lids, and the twist of his eyes told me the sun had hit him hard, and that between the stroke from above and the smash from below his time was so many hours and no more. My own thought is that a splinter of the bone turned inwards, and saving that a surgeon scooped out the pulp and fixed a silver plate across the hole, his wits would never have been sound

again. After that I gave him a drink, and laying his head back on the riding-coat that propped him up, sat and watched him awhile. But his breath came in heavy slow puffs, and the thought that the end was nearer than I at first supposed spurred me on.

“‘Blaise de Bernauld!’ said I. On the moment he stopped rooting and fidgiting in the straw, and screwed his blind eyes up at me.

“‘Blaise de Bernauld,’ said he, like an echo, and swore in Spanish Basque.

“That gave me a thought. Dropping you, Master Blaise, I groped for the other end of the coil and caught it first time.

“‘Madame Saumarez!’

“You should have seen him jump. The word was like a half-inch dagger prick. ‘Ay, ay,’ he cried, ‘Senora Saumarez, the devil of a woman, the devil of a woman,’ and then he fell to moaning and combing at the straw with his fingers.

“That bolt had gone home, so I notched another. ‘Five hundred crowns—eh? Five hundred crowns?’ Round he heaved himself in the bed and flung his arms up aimlessly. ‘No, no, no,’ he mumbled, rolling his head from side to side; ‘not five hundred, three hundred only, no more than three. ’Tis too little for a man’s life.’

“Now I had both ends of the coil and knew two things—that Diego Saumarez’s accursed witch of a mother was alive, and that her hate was alive too.

But the rogue was weaker, and was plucking with his finger-tips at the rumbled covering flung across the straw in a way a man understands, though he may have seen it no more than once. There was little time to lose if I would assure assurance.

“‘Madame Saumarez gave you three hundred crowns to murder Blaise de Bernauld?’ said I, very slowly and with my lips at his ear; and again he rounded on me even with the rattle in his throat.

“‘No, no,’ he panted, ‘half only, and half when it was done.’ Then he burst out with broken curses, mixed with disjointed recollections, that would have blackened a dozen souls, and moaning prayers; and God, the devil, and the saints, were invoked in turn till his breath failed, and for ten minutes he lay gasping, with growing intervals between the gasps. Then of a sudden he stretched himself with a sigh, and the end came.”

“Thank the Lord he died,” went on Marcel, “for had the life taken fresh root in him I would have stamped it out again, witless and all as he was. It was either him or you, Master Blaise.”

I will not deny that Marcel’s tale troubled me, but as his hand gripped my knee in the darkness, and I felt his fingers tremble, I cast forebodings from me with an effort. When a man has a fit of the quakes there is no better medicine than to have to hearten-up one who is in a still more evil case.

“Bah!” cried I, with a sounding slap on his shaking hand; “Spain is as broad as France, and we will but

touch its fringe. What though the witch be alive and venomous? It is a thousand to one if we so much as go within ten leagues of her. Thou and I have faced worse odds many a time than such a chance as that. And, after all, what is the pother about? A woman!"

"It is not the woman I fear," answered he moodily, "but fatality that works through her. The predestination of it!"

"But, man," said I sharply—for fatalism either makes or breaks a man, and here it was like to be the latter—"Calvin never preached the doctrine to make us shiver, but to give us comfort, since by it we are in God's hands."

"Ay," replied Marcel, "there you have it, and that's a thing men are prone to talk of but have no wish to hasten. I never saw the priest yet, whether he followed Rome or Luther, who so longed to meet God Almighty that he hunted death hot-foot. As to the thousand-to-one chance, Master Blaise, what do you make of yon fellow meeting us plump on the road? Answer me that!"

"I make this," said I; "the pass which gapes so black and narrow behind us there is a short cut, and therefore a wise one for him and for us. Why, it's a straight line, though he came from Seville itself. Your mind is full of shadows."

"Have it so, but it's a crooked path for so straight a road," he answered dourly; "and take this with it, that there's no shadow without a substance, and

where you find the shadow the substance is not far behind."

It was on the tip of my tongue to bid him ride home to Bernauld with the first of the light, since in a party of four there was no room for one to be a poltroon, when the reappearance of Jean Minet in the hut doorway checked me.

"The bed is vacant now, seigneur," said he, holding out the rushlight in front of him, and speaking as coolly as if he were the serving wench of "The Three Stars" at Vic. "If I was long in making ready, it is because the three days' rooting had worn it out of shape."

"What?" I cried. "Could you not let the poor soul lie till the morning?"

"By your leave, seigneur, he will rest as quietly under the settle as in the bed. Why waste good straw on bones that can't feel when there are bones that can which want it?"

"Then lay your own bones there, friend," answered I. "The earth for bed and our saddles for pillows will serve our turn for to-night."

"Every man to his taste," said he with a grin; "but I find him better company than he was any time these three days past. Best think twice, seigneur, and try the straw. There's nought catching in a broken head. Though, for that matter, I have known one make many before now! No? Well, the saints give you good rest, seigneurs both. If you need aught call me, but call loud, for there are

three nights' sleep owing to me, and by the grit in my eyes I am going to have my dues."

If nature paid Jean Minet his debt it was not at our expense. In spite of the hard ground, Spain, and Marcel's dolefulness, I never slept sweeter under a brocaded canopy than I did that night beneath the shadow of the great trees. Nor do I think it any shame that the sun was in my eyes between a cleft in the hills on the farther side of the gorge before I awoke. Where needs must I can waken with any man, and I thank God that at sleeping I can also hold my own with any man. Indeed, when a man is in camp or on the march, and has his fourteen, or maybe more, hours of duty packed into the twenty-four, I hold that the faculty of sound sleep is as needful and as worthy as that of wakefulness.

One advantage there is in such a bed as was mine. Once awake, there is small pleasure in playing lazy-bones. Mother earth's knees are kindly enough to him who, out of honest weariness, seeks sleep, but they are over-hard for dandling. In three blinks I was broad awake and staring about me.

Both Marcel and Jean Minet were already afoot and at their tasks, the one for the living, the other for the dead—for the squire was busy warming a measure of wine as a corrective of the night dews, while the Guionese was hard at work with mattock and shovel, and was already sunk to his knees in the soft earth. An easy labour was his, and by the time the wine had caught the proper degree of heat—that

is to say, warm enough to bring the tears to the eyes without scalding the throat—he was climbing out of the pit.

With the glare of the sun in his shifty face and the smudges of black clay on hands and ragged clothing, I looked in vain for the finer instinct and power of passion that had been so mightily stirred as we sat on either side of the horn lantern. They were gone, until the depths within him of suspicion and self-effacement were again broken up, and in their place was a furtive and sordid servility.

“All’s ready, seigneur,” said he, rubbing the mould slowly from his hands as he spoke; “and if the other seigneur would give me a hand, we can tuck him out of sight at once and have done with him.”

“With a good will, though with a better will still had there been six of his kind instead of one,” answered Marcel; “but as I was blowing the fire, Master Blaise, the thought came to me that there might have been news of her we wot of in the fellow’s pockets. I’ll warrant they are empty enough now!”

“Right,” cried I. “Hark you, friend, what spoils were there? Disgorge.”

“There was nought, seigneur, there wa nought,” answered Jean Minet hastily and clapping a tell-tale hand to his side. “At least, nought but a beggary raffle of odds and ends not worth your lordship’s turning over.”

“What?” said Marcel, laying a hard lean hand

on the other's shoulder. "Nought? Neither weapons nor papers? Jostle up thy memory, man, and see thou assert not overmuch. Too large a lie is as dangerous at times as too much truth."

Jean Minet looked at us cunningly, but in silence, as if reckoning up the chances.

"There was a crown, or maybe two, but no more than my due for the three days' nursing and the loss of sleep o' nights. Gentles like you would not rob the poor," he whined at last.

"Faith of Bernauld! are we thieves?" cried Mareel, shaking him wrathfully. "Empty thy pockets as thou emptied his. You may keep your crowns, and if there be money's worth in what we find we will buy it."

But the Guennese still hung in the wind. "You would not cozen me?" said he, fawning on Mareel.

"Cozen you?" cried he back contemptuously. "Why, man, we are two and you are one. That, and the limb of the tree yonder, would be cozenage enough if we had a mind to it. Must we search?"

"No, no," he replied in haste. "I will trust your honour, seigneurs."

"Ay," said Mareel grimly. "Just as much trust as Navarre shows France, and no more. The trust of what can't be cured. We understand. Down on your knees, friend, and spread out the loot."

If he had carried all his worldly possessions upon him—as I made no doubt he did—then truly the battered rogue who lay dead behind the jamb of the

door had found the profession of thief and cut-throat a poor paying one. Out of his poverty an honest artisan had laid by as much in a year as he had earned in fifteen. The inventory is soon told.

"Item," said Marcel as Jean Minet emptied his pockets with very little haste but a great show of alacrity, and laid out his treasures in order, "nine crowns, two francs, and four deniers. Now, Master Blaise, where is the rest of the blood-money gone? Dice, liquor, and *bona robas*, I suppose! Truly what the devil gives with the right hand he filches with the left, and perhaps a little more with it. Item, one leaden saint indifferently battered. James of Campostello for a wager, and much good he did to him! Item, one roll of stout cord. 'Twas to keep him humble, I take it, and remind him of the death he ought to die if he but got his dues. Item, one square of dog-cared paper. Set that aside, Master Blaise—we will see to it presently. Do you note that, for all its dirt of grease and thumb-marks, it is not frayed at the edges, therefore it has not been many days in its mixed company. Item, three silver buttons which might serve as bullets at a pinch, and item, to go with the same, one short dag with a mouth as wide as a priest's bell, and one leather bag of black powder,—a proper combination, on my faith, to bring down that wizard of Bernauld we two wot of. Silver will kill where lead fails. Well, an honest Navarre highway has put an end to that caper.

Item, one bone charm against the evil eye. There is some sense in that, and, by your leave, we will set it aside also. The Lord only knows what we shall meet beyond the mountains. Item, two cogged dice. Ay, ay, a rogue all through! He would neither fight fair nor play fair, but he's ta'en his wages, so we may let that pass. Item, one knife. Now! look at the blade! Seven inches long if a hair's-breadth, and keen as a barber's bleeding-tool. A back, too, stout enough to carry it through a rib as easily as I would slice a carrot. Mark, also, that it is new. A true and nice courtesy in the worthy gentleman who lies yonder, and accounts for one or two of the vanished crowns: you don't buy such a knife as that for nought! And last; item, a brass token of high and peculiar sanctity, for the legend saith it has been blessed by no less a person than the Cardinal Bishop of Toledo himself, and is granted as a special favour to Bernardino—now plague take me if I can decipher the rest, 'tis scabbled. A nice man Bernardino! He took as few risks as may be for this world or the next, and yet, mark how he miscarried!"

"Then, seigneur," said Jean Minet timidly, "your lordship has no need of aught save the paper and the bone charm? The rest——"

"Pouch the coin, the buttons, the cord, the dice, the saint, and the brass token, friend," said Marcel. "Let the rest be, and do thou come and put this Bernardino to bed. If we keep the dag and the knife we will pay thee for them. Take the paper,

Master Blaise—this small inconsiderate piece of bone will serve me as remembrance.”

“We will take the weapons at two crowns each,” said I shortly; “the bag of powder to go with the dag. Saving his sword, which I made no doubt you had hidden away, is this all?”

“All, seigneur, all,” he cried, letting the question of the sword slip by him. “See, I swear it on the holy apostle.”

“I will take thy word for it, friend. Now to your task, Marcel.”

While they buried him I unfolded the grimy paper. If not, as Marcel had said, frayed at the edges, it was at least worn so thin at the folds that the light showed through in thin lines, and the writing, being of the faintest, was hard to read. It was in the hand of a woman, tremulous, but yet roundly formed, and ran to this effect:—

“I, Teresa Saumarez, hereby ratify and reaffirm my promise that I will pay you, Bernardino Zarresco, or the bearer of the Toledo token, 150 Spanish crowns or 50 ducats of Milan at your choice, in addition to a like sum already received by you, provided always that proof to my satisfaction be forthcoming that the thing you and I wot of is fully accomplished. To this I pledge my oath in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. TERESA SAUMAREZ.”

Then came a ragged edge whence a strip had been

torn so that, to my great chagrin, both date and place of signing were missing. A sore loss they were to prove presently.

To him who held the key the enigma was clear: the paper was neither more nor less than a contract in solemn form, and for my own destruction!

CHAPTER X.

TWO MEN OF DISCRETION.

I PRAY with all my heart," said Marcel, three hours later, "that the King will send us the men of his choice speedily. This Minet of yours, Master Blaise, has too deft a way with dead men to please me. I would rather he handled them with larger respect, and have an idea that the night air of the valley might be unhealthy for us."

"If they slept at Oloron last night, as I reckon they did," answered I, "you may look to see them top the rise any minute. As for this Minet of mine, as you call him, I warrant him honest."

"Honest? Oh, ay, I know the kind of honesty! It is rife after every battle, for what theft is there in robbing a corpse of what it has no further use for? To my mind a three league space between us would be a mighty aid to Master Minet's honesty."

"Then saddle up," said I, "and go as far as the stream to see if the two be coming. If they have half the virtues the King endowed them with, there

is little chance that they will lag while on his business."

"Virtues in the King's presence, and virtues out of it, are two different things," quoth Marcel sententiously. "Trust a court lord no further than you see him, say I."

"Then the more reason to go and meet them," replied I, "since, be they who they may, we must needs trust them up to the hilt for two weeks to come."

"Would to the Lord they were at an end," answered he, as he climbed into the saddle. "Two weeks said the old death's-head at Pau, and here we have to trust God knows who for these same two weeks, and if they fail us——"

Out shot his palms before him, and up went his shoulders to his ears; and the pantomime was as expressive as if he had held forth for an hour.

Minet had gone about his business. What it was, or where it lay, I never knew, nor did I at that time set eyes on him again. He being gone, Marcel and I had the plateau to ourselves, nor was there ought for me to do but watch the squire pricking slowly up the slope through the grass. He was in no haste, and the distance was a few hundred paces at most, so that, but for a horseman's dislike to going a-foot when he can ride, he might have tramped it.

As listlessly as I gazed so listlessly he rode, the great four-foot weeds lording it above the grass, docks, teasels, and cow-parsnips, slapping and picking at his

jackboots. Then, as he neared the top of the rise he straightened himself, and roused his beast into life with a dig of the heel. In three bounds they were on the crest of the hill, and reining his horse in with a jerk Marcel rose bolt upright in the stirrups, steadying himself with a grip of the knees. For a moment he stood straining at gaze, his hand hollowed above his eyes, then grasping the reins with both fists he swung round and galloped downhill with a fine contempt for his neck's safety.

"Mount, mount, mount," he roared as soon as he came within clear earshot. "'Tis the King himself, Master Blaise,—the King of Navarre, and no other."

"The King, man?" answered I, rising leisurely on my elbow. "What gnat in the brain has bitten you this time? The King is at Vic."

"Am I a fool not to know Henry of Navarre," replied he, drawing up beside me with such a tug at the reins that his beast fairly slipped uphill on its crouched haunches. "The King it is, and if he is to fare to Spain with us the fat's in the fire with a vengeance."

"The King, the King?" repeated I, stumbling to my feet and fumbling at the horse-gear with fingers that had neither feeling nor instinct in them, so dumbfounded was I. "The King here? It is madness in you or in him—pure madness."

Back to me came Jacques Gobineau's caustic grumblings. "The King's a dog straining on the

leash," said he, "and with Rosny and Morny out of Navarre the tether is longer or the leash weaker!" God grant it were not snapped altogether. Once already a mad freak of Henry of Navarre's had run us into a trap. Was the man renewing the boy's folly, and must a life pay for the whim as it paid then? Back, too, came Marcel's groan, "Plague take the fine thoughts of the King of Navarre!" and as I pressed home the bit in my beast's mouth I stamped in fair vexation.

"Madness?" echoed Marcel. "Ay, madness, in very truth, but not in me; and can you stop it, Master Blaise?"

"I can try," answered I, between my teeth. "To squire Henry across the border is to play traitor to the Kingdom, and that I shall never do, though he kill me for the disobedience. But are you sure, man, are you sure that it is the King?"

"Am I sure that you are Blaise de Bernauld?" said Marcel curtly. "There are two of them, as he promised. One is a stranger, but the other is the King of Navarre."

"Will you hold to your word, Master Blaise?" he went on, as we breasted the slope in a lumping gallop; "if so, the King has my thanks, for he has unwittingly done us a good turn, and we may both see Bernauld yet."

"What word, man?" asked I testily, for my mind was full of trouble. "For the Lord's sake, bate chattering for once."

"That you will turn back to Navarre, and so scotch this great idea of his. Burn his plans with his own heat, Master Blaise—that's my advice. Lord, Lord! it's a new life to us both, a new life, and Madam Spider must spin a fresh web."

"Not a foot will I budge," said I, "not a foot."

"Not a foot!" chuckled Marcel, slapping his thigh in his glee. Then he sobered, "But he's a kittle man to cross is the King, and a hard man to say Nay to. I'm thinking we'd best not holloa yet awhile."

By this time we had reached the road, and there, sure enough, were two horsemen jogging slowly towards us. Sure enough, too, one was Henry of Navarre. Not even the three furlongs of distance which lay between could make that doubtful to one who knew his every trick of gesture as I did. The upward tilt of the chin, the aggressive squarings of the not over-wide shoulders, the sudden flinging out of a hand level with the breast and swift swoop of the fingers for the curled moustache, together with half-a-dozen mannerisms peculiar to the most pronounced individuality of his age, proclaimed the man without cavil or question.

His companion, who rode his beast more soberly and with none of the volatile movements so characteristic of the King, was René de Montamar, a man some three or four years his junior, and a cadet of that great house which had given Queen Jeanne one of her seven famous viscounts. Shrewd, cool

beyond his years, as full of cautious courage as of reckless devotion, I could have wished no better comrade on such a thorny business as this was like to prove than René de Montamar. In him, too, I might look to find an ally when the pinch with the King came.

All that ran through my mind with the first sweep of the eyes, and on its heels came the memory of Marcel's last words. Truly the King was a kittle man to cross, and lest my courage fail it behoved me to act while my blood was still warm and my purpose unshaken.

"Bide thou here," cried I, and set off at a gallop.

The King's first words were not comforting.

"Turn about, turn about," he shouted as I came within earshot. "Ventre St Gris! you ride the wrong way, man! 'Tis a brave tryst, Monsieur de Bernauld, and do I not keep my word to the letter? The stream from the west and two men of courage and discretion willing to obey orders."

Then he drew rein so that his horse fell to a walk, and sitting back in his saddle he roared with laughter at my dolorous face—roared till he almost rolled himself flat on the grass.

"See to him, De Montamar," he gasped; "saw one ever such a scandalised solemnity!"

"Sire, Sire," I cried, leaping to the ground and kneeling at his stirrup, "what midsummer madness is this?"

"Neither madness nor folly," replied he, straighten-

ing himself and his face grown grave on the instant, "but sound sense, as I shall show you. Nay, man, hand-kissings are done with; an honest grasp, as between comrades, if you will. What? did you think I would bid you harry a wasp's nest, and not myself take my risk of the stings? You shame me, De Bernauld, that after fifteen years you know me so little. Up, man, up! we are all on a level here."

"But, Sire," said I, rising as he bade me, "we are not, and never can be on a level, and what is a fit and common risk for Bernauld or Montamar is no fit risk for Navarre. Ah! I see, Sire—you came to test me. You could not trust poor Blaise de Bernauld, so, under cover of a jest, you put me to the trial. Be it so, though the Lord knows it was not needed. Now that you have proved me, ride back to your train, Sire, and we three will ride south."

"No, no, by my faith, that is not so," he cried earnestly. "I am no Valois to be suspicious of my tried gentlemen. In sober truth, I have come to see for myself how things stand across the border. As for a train, I have none nearer than Vic, where I doubt not Roquelaure has half-a-dozen companies scouring the country searching for me, though it is a question if that can be called a train which has nought in charge and will have nought!"

"Then in sober truth, Sire," answered I, "I would be no friend to Navarre if I did not say this must stop here and now. Who gave you leave, Sire, to risk your head? We three will ride alone or we

will not ride at all. What do you say, Monsieur de Montamar ?”

“Ta, ta, ta,” cried the King. “It will be a new thing for me to ask leave of any man to risk my head or whatever it may please me to risk. As to Monsieur de Montamar, what has Monsieur de Montamar to do with the will of his king ? Why, nought, save to obey it without question. Nor have you. Besides, I hold your promise.”

“A promise given in ignorance is no promise, Sire. Had you been as frank with me as I with you, we had never left Vic.”

“Plague take your jesuitries,” replied he. “A promise is a promise, and so will say any man of honour. Eh, Monsieur de Montamar ?”

“Ta, ta, ta,” cried I in my turn, and with an angry rasp in my voice. “As to Monsieur de Montamar, what has Monsieur de Montamar to do with the honour of Bernauld save leave it to its master’s keeping ? This thing is folly, I say, folly ; and I will have no part in it.”

“Monsieur de Bernauld,” said the King sharply, so sharply that I winced as if a hornet had stung me, “understand me at once, that I may not have to say it twice. For the present I am Henry of Navarre, and so to be obeyed without flinch or question. What, Monsieur, would you dare bandy pros and cons with me ? It is my part to command and yours to fulfil, and let there be neither pause nor hesitation. Later, when I am Monsieur d’Albret, it will be another

matter. If needs must, as, indeed, needs will, Henry the King can sink himself in Henry the man. But not yet—no, by my faith, not yet. Do you understand?"

I understood well enough, but, for all that, had no mind to give up the point.

"It is like this, Sire," and the fingers that twisted and plucked his horse's mane were as unsteady as on the day when I first laid my heart bare to Jeanne, my wife. "It is yours to command because you are Navarre, therefore it is to Navarre that I owe a first obedience. Now if this thing is for the ruin of Navarre——"

"Oh, a pest on your casuistry. Listen now to me. Though you turn back, though Master Marcel there turns back, as I don't doubt he would at a crook of your finger, for Bernauld is Navarre and all the world to him; ay, and if this dumb fish of a Montamar turns back, yet will not I, but will ride on alone. If I am Navarre as you say, what will Navarre say to you then, Monsieur de Bernauld? Tush, man, it is the part of a wise man to know when he is beaten, and, *Ventre St Gris!* you are routed beyond rally. Mount, mount, and let us push on."

Without waiting for an answer he put his horse at a trot, and left me biting my fingers and in two minds what to do. De Montamar ended the doubt.

"Go we must, though it is on a fool's errand," said he. "He has been like a mad schoolboy these four-and-twenty hours, and is ripe for any mischief. The only hope is that we may sober him."

"Sober him!" I groaned, but mounting as I spoke. "There are but two things that will ever fully sober Henry of Navarre, old age and death, and of the former of these I have a doubt. Plague take it, man, why did you sit there mute? Had you but spoken your mind we might have moved him between the two."

"Not a jot, not a jot, no, nor would the whole council. He was pledged to himself in this thing, and whosoever he may disappoint it will not be Henry of Navarre."

The King, as I have said, had ridden on, and now we found him flinging jests at Marcel in true rough camp fashion, much to the squire's embarrassment. What turn affairs had taken he knew not, so held his peace lest he made bad worse, and therefore stood shifting himself from leg to leg like an awkward school-boy with his eye upon the ferrule.

"Thou hast my pity, my friend. Truly my heart is sore for thee," Henry was saying as we rode up. "That master of thine has the temper of a bear. If he be-rates thee as he has just be-rated me, thy life must be a dog's life. And all for what? For a little difference as to north and south, no more. Ay, here he comes. Mount, man, mount, and let us ride on, lest he let his tongue loose a second time."

"Presently, Sire, presently," I cried; "I have a message first."

"A message, De Bernauld?" and the King swung round on me sharply. "What message can you have

in these wilds? Is this some fresh folly? Do not try my patience over-much, monsieur."

"It is to pay a debt, Sire, and no more. Last night the peasant who lives yonder showed us kindness, and I would pay him something more than thanks for his hospitality."

"That, and no more?"

"Nothing more, Sire."

"No sending post to Vic or Pau or Oloron?"

"No, Sire, no."

"Faith of a gentleman, Monsieur de Bernauld?"

"Faith of a gentleman, Sire."

"Then come, De Montamar. I must have you in leading-strings, my child, and see that you wander not alone in these wilds. What art thou but a babe, and I must play father and mother in one lest you go astray."

And presently I heard his voice trolling out the old Béarnnoise chanson wherewith his mother had sung him into life—

"Notre Dame, du bout du pont,
Aidez-moi à cette heure!"

Truly the King of Navarre was as variable in his moods as any ten women.

CHAPTER XI.

THROUGH THE RIBS OF NAVARRE.

“WHAT did I tell you?” said Marcel, laughing softly. “‘The King is an ill man to cross,’ said I. ‘Not a foot will I budge,’ said you. ‘He is a hard man to say Nay to,’ said I. ‘’Twould be the ruin of Navarre,’ said you. And——”

“Have done, man, have done. Is it not enough to be compelled to do a folly that is still a folly in spite of all the compulsion in the world, but thou must sharpen thy tongue on a gibe at it? Or hearken, if the King’s business is not to thy liking, turn back and go home again. Either come with a good grace or stay away—is that plain?”

“I did but jest, Master Blaise,” he cried hastily, putting out an appealing hand; “and how is a plain man to know what to do? One moment it is, we are comrades all, and equals all; the next, ‘Get to your kennel, hound.’ I who would not anger you for a king’s ransom.”

“My fault, old friend,” said I, conscious of my ill-temper and pricked to the heart at the sorrow in his

voice. "The King was right. I am as surly as a bear. But can you marvel? If aught goes wrong, who bears the blame? Why, Blaise de Bernauld, who out of his riper years should have known better than to give the King his head. If all goes well, who gains the credit? Why, the King and no other, since it is the way of the world to praise the great and blame the humble. But let that be. Leave these five crowns on Jean Minet's settle. He gave us of his best, and neither peer nor peasant could do more. God forbid that we should play the churl to him. Then its 'Ho! for Spain.'"

"Ho! for Spain," he echoed dismally, like a Jew saying his pater noster on Holy-Cross day. "For the Lord's sake, wait for me, Master Blaise, while I do your bidding, lest the cur in me turn tail."

It was where the road, having made a sharp ascent, curves abruptly across the naked ribs of an angular spur that we at length made up upon the King and de Montamar. They had drawn rein on the stony flat of the crest, at the point which still held in full view the winding cleft we had traversed and yet opened up the wild ravine which lay before us. Above was sheer rock, with a line of pines like a far-off pent eyebrow; below was sheer rock, the Gave no more than a roaring thread of silver, jostling and tearing at the stern bounds which held it back. Beyond the stream the sinuous bends of the barren cliffs fell away on either side until lost behind grey crags as sombre and as barren as themselves. Life

everywhere was at its lowest ebb. In its despairing clutches for existence it had gained a feeble foothold on the southern precipices, but on the north the sun had driven it to utter rout; there was neither shrub, nor grass, nor weed, nor greenery of any kind,—nought but a ponderous and many-ribbed skeleton of death.

Yet it pleased the King's fancy.

"See," said he, with a sweep of his arm that gathered into its scope the whole bend of the valley—"See what a barrier of heights and depths the mercy of God Almighty has set between us and the threatenings of Spain. With our outposts entrenched beyond these fastnesses, the King of France may sit on his throne in peace from all fear of Spanish meddling. Tell me, De Bernauld, is it not our part to see we hold the passes through and through and both north and south?"

"The wisdom is clear enough, Sire, but——"

"Ha!" he broke in. "That is a point which had slipped from me. Let there be no more talk of Sires. Henceforward we leave the crown and its trappings of lip courtesy behind, and until we sight Pau again I am plain Henri d'Albret, a simple gentleman in the train of Monsieur Blaise de Bernauld."

"No, no," cried I, hastily. "By your leave, Sire, Blaise de Bernauld is at home breeding sheep in the good county of Bigorre, where I would to the Lord I were with him. Henceforward, for reasons which you know, and until the King picks up the crown

again, I am Monsieur Blaise de Zéro, and from my heart I pray you not to forget it."

"What! Have you still that maggot in the brain?"

"Ay, Sire, and with cause, for the old blowfly has laid a fresh erop."

There and then I told them of our meeting with Master Bernardino Zarreseo, and of his bloody commission to Bernauld.

"Chut," said Henry, as I ended. "It's a long league to Toledo. Let us not cry out till we're hurt. That the fellow meant you a mischief, I grant, but," he went on, Beza's theology coming to the surface, "that no mischief was to befall you is shown by the grave in Jean Minet's pasture, and if not a mischief from him who sleeps there, why from another?" Which was very comforting to the man who was not threatened—though, for that matter, there is nothing easier to be endured in the whole world than another's dangers, unless it be another's losses.

Later my anxiety on the King's account got a little consolation from De Montamar. Henry had ridden ahead, and in his new mood of democracy nothing would serve him but that Mareel should ride with him wherever the width of the path gave space for two abreast, which in such a cramped country was but seldom. We others, therefore, hung together.

"How came you to lend yourself to such a mad prank as this?" asked I, sourly, as we joggled along

at a foot-pace. To go faster was to court a broken back or a cracked skull, so full of rolling stones was the steep road. "There in Vic a No, with a hint to Roquelaure to back it, meant more than it did an hour since on the slopes."

"What! Do you think he trusted me? No, not by so much as an inch. 'I have business at St Jannes, —come thou with me, De Montamar;' and I, with no second thought in my head but that it was well Madame Margot was elsewhere, went against his custom. He had no pity on horseflesh, and that of itself should have set me thinking; but I was a fool, and spurred on as hotly as himself. Twice, indeed, I spoke, but he only looked askew at me from the corners of his eyes, and spurred the harder, saying, 'The thing is urgent.'

"At St Jannes there were fresh beasts waiting us, and with no more delay than sufficed to fling ourselves from saddle to saddle, we rode on. 'I was wrong,' said he, with a queer twist of his mouth; 'the business was at Lescar.' But he left Lescar to the right and dashed through the Gave at the Grey ford, and never drew rein till we reached Oloron, nor for the last hour of the ride would he so much as let me get within five lengths of him. By that it was dusk, and as he rode through the town with a cloak about his face, he was as free from recognition as the Grand Turk. That night he told me his wild plan and swore me to silence, and when I dared remonstrate he gave his tongue as loose a rein as he had

given his horse all day, and played the King as none but he can play it. What could a man do, De Bernauld? It was like this,—

“‘It is madness, Sire.’

“‘It is sense, monsieur, and therefore beyond your comprehension.’

“‘I will ride back, Sire.’

“‘Who are you, monsieur, to fling I wills at your King? Be careful, I say, be careful.’

“‘I will raise Oloron, Sire.’

“‘And be the first De Montamar to break your pledged word. Go on, monsieur—lie, lie, and raise Oloron.’

“‘Oh, Sire, Sire, for Navarre’s sake.’

“‘God’s name, man, it is out and out for Navarre’s sake ~~if~~ but that thick head of thine could understand.’

“‘At least take a fitting guard.’

“‘Ay, and send a trumpeter ahead proclaiming—Here comes his most puissant and still more out-at-elbows Majesty the King of Navarre. You would ensure me a warm welcome!’

“‘But it is madness, Sire.’

“‘So you said before. I am no lover of parrots, De Montamar.’ Again I say, what could a man do?”

“‘Something,’ said I, still sourly, “surely something.”

“‘Something is own brother to nothing,’ answered he impatiently. “When a man is at his own wits’

end he always flings a 'something' at his neighbour. But this much I did without the King's knowledge. I warned Roquelaure from Oloron, and in two days he should be on our track."

"What? And you sworn to secrecy?"

"Secrecy? Who talked of secrecy? I said, silence, and a twist of paper has as quiet a tongue as Mornay himself. Do you call that breaking silence?"

To which I made no answer, for the King had halted and was waiting for us.

The gorge had suddenly forked, or rather another valley as cramped as that up which we had ridden opened to the right, with a narrow wedge of rock thrust between.

"Which path, De Bernauld?" cried Henry. "Thou art leader."

"Leader if you will," answered I, "but not guide; and since you, Sire, have led us by the nose thus far, you had better finish what you began."

For a moment he looked affronted at my blunt speech, and a bitter answer was on the tip of his tongue, but he checked himself and replied smoothly enough,—

"Tut, man, there is no need to ruffle your quills. Since it concerns us all alike, let us take counsel. What saith thy grey wisdom, Master Marcel?"

"That it is dinner-time, Monsieur D'Albret, and who knows but the jaws may help the brain. As for the roads, they are as like as two peas in a pod, so for

me the choice is a pulling of jackstraws and no more."

"Sound sense," cried Henry. "And did you hearken to his pat 'Monsieur d'Albret'? 'Tis more than I have got out of him this half hour past. Yes and No were the length of his tether, and not even praise of Madame Jeanne could win more than a sour smile. Let us dine, then, and if the further counsel be as close to the point we shall do well."

No dainty feeder was Henry of Navarre. Many a time I have seen a lump of bread torn from a two days' old loaf serve him as dinner, and without a grumble. What contented his soldiers contented him, and in that frank sharing of their haps, chances, and privations lay much of his power. Your jack-at-arms loves a leader who, while he checks impudent familiarity, can yet rub shoulders. Later he could hold ceremony and state with any king in Christendom, but that was rather for the honour of the nation than to puff his own pride.

In the end, so equally vile were the roads, and so similar the valleys in their rising curves and promise of a final outlet, we took Marcel's method, and the lot falling on the gorge to the right we followed it, the King and I leading the way.

What a ride that was, Paradise and Purgatory alternating, and between them broad glimpses of a dismal barrenness that might have passed for the very Hell of the great Italian. The asphodels were long passed, but in favoured spots the yellow and blue gentians,

the violet and purple saxifrages, and the great golden Pyrenean poppy, spread a garden that by its beauty set at nought the art of man. Then would come a dreary stretch of naked savagery, a veritable battle-field of fallen angels, piled with grey and formless rocks half-bedded in a troubled sea of splintered boulders wrenched from the upper heights. A vast sterility unrelieved by stunted shrub or tuft of grass; a voiceless silence, where the sullen booming of the distant torrent was an offence and an intrusion. A dozen times in an hour a slip was death, so smooth and narrow was the road, and so sheer and ragged the descent. From the risks of such a fall chance of escape there was none, and at the best it could have been but a tattered pulp of humanity that would have found a resting-place on the lower ledges when the keen teeth that fretted the swift slope like a saw had done their work.

But the weight of silence was the sorest trial. Little by little it wrought its will upon us all, as night works its will upon the world, slowly spreading, deepening, broadening, till it holds the whole wide earth for a possession. So it was with the spirit of solitude: chatter fell to slow and solemn talk, laughter died, talk drifted into desultory phrases, these to monosyllables, and presently we rode in grim unbroken silence, so burdened and oppressed that even thought itself almost became a blank. It was Henry who roused me to a dazed alertness by a cry and a sudden halt.

"Life at last," said he, pointing ahead. "Ventre St Gris! but I began to think we were no better than ghosts in the nether world, and done with time and change to all eternity. See, there is not only life but faith."

A turn of the road had opened up a fresh stretch of the valley, and there, solitary, upon a small strip of sun-dried and sandy turf that fronted a huge face of weedless rock, was a grey chapel with cross, chancel, and belfry tower, but all in miniature. Two unglazed rough-edged lancet windows pierced the side, and the door stood open, as if the door of the House of God should always stand by day or by night.

Involuntarily we had reined back to a slow walk, and for half the three hundred paces that lay between we rode in silence, curious and observant.

"Saw you ever such a place before?" said Henry at last. "Neither chisel nor hammer has touched a stone, and here and there, in the lower courses, are holes through which a man might thrust an arm. Mark the roof with its slatey slabs. I'll warrant these were split by the frost, and not by man's labour. Round boulders from the stream for the walls, and flat flags from some twisted schisty rock for the roof, and yet a noble house of prayer, for all its poor plainness. Note, too, the legend carved upon the lintel—the worker put his whole soul into that: 'MARLE PECCATORUM REFUGIO.' I warrant there is a full month's labour of love in these three words. A pity they are not truer! Ha! and see! there dwelt the sculptor—mason—priest, in that walled-up cleft in the rock."

"Why dwelt, Sire? Why not dwells?"

"Because men are not so common hereabout but that he would have left the Mass itself at the ring of hoofs on the stone. No, the priest is gone."

"Ay, but the sanctuary remains," answered I, "and thereby hangs a truth."

"Keep such truths for Brother Mark—he has the larger need to learn them," laughed Henry, as he dismounted at the chapel door; "and since the sanctuary remains, let us enter. To me, politics apart, altars are much akin. To the earnest soul there is the one God, the one main truth, the one—— Lord of mercy, what have we here? De Bernauld, De Bernauld, come quickly! what devilment has been at work?"

I had dismounted leisurely, and had paused at the door of the chapel for the coming up of Marcel and De Montamar, but at the King's excited cry I left the horses to their own keeping, and followed him with all haste. But, at first, to little purpose. In spite of the chapel's petty size, its windows were so narrow that the interior lay in such shadow as for the moment dulled the sight. There so dim was it that I stood, no more than two paces from the door, blinking and groping, and conscious of but one thing, that though the door stood open to invite to prayer, there were no lights ablaze upon the altar.

Presently the shadows took form and outline. Rough pillars of flat stones—unhewn, untrimmed—ran up to the slope of the roof, blocking a full third of the cramped space. Beyond these, and at the farther end,

was a ruined and dishonoured altar, its poor covering of stuff rent to tatters, and crusted thickly with smears of white wax from the candles flung upon it while still aflame. A litter of withered flowers and leaves was strewn upon the uneven clay floor, as if the decorations of the holy table had been trampled under foot, but there was no sign of any sacred vessel.

That was the harvest reaped by the first sweep of the eyes, for at such times the impulse is to look as far afield as may be, trusting to the instinct to grasp a danger that lies near at hand. Then I turned to the shadows which bulked so hugely at my feet as to seem to fill the whole intervening space.

There were two upon the floor. The one, the King on his knees and left hand, and bending low; the other, a thing stretched prone, the rigid lines of death showing clear under the arch of Henry's arm, despite the tumbled monk's frock—the face flat upon the clay, the shoulders eurved by the hollow to which they had shaped themselves, the arms flung out, the fingers bent talon-wise in a last unouseious clutch.

At the sound of my feet rasping their way across the floor, Henry raised himself, and the light from the side window, shining upon him as he turned, showed the gravely stern set of his face.

"Help here, De Bernauld," said he, "though I fear we are too late by thirty hours. Take thou the feet, and let us have him out into the air. Way, there, De Montamar. Nay, nay," he went on, testily, as Marcel sought to take the burden from him, "let me be Henry

d'Albret has no need to be as nice as the King in such things."

Though it was but five steps to the sunshine, I confess I was thankful from my heart when they were ended. To handle a corpse has ever been an abhorrence to me; and to grasp the poor soul's legs, as if they were no more than the wooden poles of a barrow, raised my gorge, so that I fairly shivered. That he had been dead anything from twelve to thirty-six hours was plain, for he hung between us as stiffly as a fence rail; and, as we turned him over in the sun, there was a horrible upward grip of the hands, as if he were alive, and craved our aid to set him on his feet again.

"H'm," said Marcel, critically, as, in the cold stolidness of an expert in such things, he stood staring down into the dead face, "all the wounds in front, and yet torn like a ravined sheep. God rest him for a brave man. My faith, but it is not the soldier's jerkin that makes the stout spirit. See how the wretches have mauled him, and then look at his hands, dust and dirt enough, but never a bruise or a spot of blood. I'll wager, if he had a thought beyond his rough rebuke of sin it was to save the altar, and not himself. A martyr for all his monkery, if ever there was one; ay, a martyr among martyrs, for to die alone is no easy thing. The smash on the temple finished him as it might have finished a Goliath of Gath; after that he spun round, twice maybe, and there was an end. I know the fashion of it, for I saw the thing thrice—once at Dreux and twice at Jarnac, and——"

"That will do, friend," broke in Henry, who had again gone down on his knees, and was gently drawing back the matted hair from the soiled forehead. "I know now what will loosen your cautious tongue, and I pray God you may never have as pitiful a prompting. The thing is clear enough. No doubt the wretches came upon him as he served the altar. No doubt, too, he faced round, and talked frank truth to them; little doubt, also, that he cursed them as thieves and breakers of sanctuary, and so showed them hell before their time. The rest was, for them, a half-minute's fury, and for him, at least, God's peace thereafter. And all for what? a few poor pewter vessels, and a couple of half-burnt candles!" Then he laid his hand on the dead man's breast, and looked round upon us, one by one.

"The Lord aiding me," said he, with stern solemnity, "I shall do such justice on these rogues as shall make the ears of whosoever hears it tingle. I am Huguenot—oh ay, I am Huguenot; but, before God, if I catch these slayers of priests, they will think, for all my Huguenotry, that the Pope of Rome has got his grip upon them." Then, as we stood round, with bared heads, a startling thing happened. The King had but done speaking when the head and the hands sank slowly back until they rested on the ground, and the appalling sharp rigidity smoothed away, so that he lay as if in slumber.

"A sign, a sign," cried Marcel, his face blanching, and indeed for the moment we all fell back. "The

Lord God hears, and will give the devils into our hands." But for my part I think it was that the rigour of death had passed, and also that the sudden shift from the cool of the chapel to the hot blaze of the sun had something to do with the miracle.

In the angle of rock, where he had lived unknown, unknown we buried him; building round and over him the smooth river stones which in life had formed his defence against the wolves. There he rests, a nameless and almost forgotten hero, a stout-hearted fighting man in that great army which the Lord God recruits from every creed. Their units and their thousands perish, but their march is unstayed, unstayable, and triumphant. They fall and rot by the waysides and ditches of life, but the heart of truth they champion under different banners beats on eternally. God rest him hereafter, for I trow he gave himself little of ease on earth.

Later, we came to closer quarters with some of these same brigands and masterless men such as had done the monk to death. The very identical villains, for aught we could tell. But by that time a thing had revealed itself to us which gave even stronger food for thought than the finding of a priest slain at his own altar-step.

Little by little the road had grown fainter and more rugged. With every ravine there had been the branching off of a petty track, no more than a smoothing of the stones in the rougher ways, or an almost invisible shortening of the wind-mown

grass, but still a sapping of the breadth of the path. This tapping of the stream was draining it dry, and presently what had been a doubt and a fear came home to us as a truth. We had lost our way. This uphill track was no open pass from Navarre to Spain. By the time that knowledge was ours beyond question, the day was too far worn through to let us dream of return. The path, since there was a path, such as it was, must lead to life somewhere, therefore better go forward and face the chances than turn back into the dusk already thickening in the lower valley.

The track led across the face of the slope, a mixture of rough ground and timber, broken by a half mile long slide of smooth rock set at a villainously steep angle. Three hundred feet it rose, and not an ell less; not sheer, but almost sheer, and as even in its lines as if Charlemagne's fabled sword had shorn it down. Here the road hugged the feet of the cliffs and for cause, as the other side was a dip, so sharp and so strewn with boulders that the beast which stumbled down would have had legs fit for nought but marrow bones within three minutes.

"Warily, warily," said Henry, as we left the cover of the timber and passed into the shadow of the great rock. "A loose stone here will take both man and horse a longer journey than fifty feet, and, my faith! how thick they lie. Why, 'tis a charnel house for the earth's bones! But what a place for a forlorn stand! Ten stout men could hold 500 in check, ay, and rout them too, if they had but a brace of cannon."

"See," he went on, and reining up as he spoke, "you would tumble a cart there, set half your men behind it, and the other half in that niche of shelter yonder. Your cannon you would place where they commanded the slope, and pouf-pouf——"

Suddenly he stopped, chopping his sentence in two as if it had been a radish, and, with one arm flung up across his face, sat staring at the crest of the rocks.

"Ventre St Gris! Spur, De Bernauld, spur!" he cried, himself setting me the example. "Nay, man, never ask why; though, by the Lord, since you ask the question, there's your answer."

From above there came a rumble and a clatter, and glancing up as I galloped, I saw upon the line of the ridge a dozen craning heads, no bigger against the sky than pin points, and a smoke of stones hurled roaring down the cliff. On they came, leaping a dozen feet into the air at every bound, each impact ripping loose a score of fragments as murderous as themselves, until it seemed as if the whole broad face of the rock had crumbled into life and was clamouring down upon our heads. The cause of the rubble over which we plunged was clear enough now, and yet the King was right, gallop we must, though for myself I know my heart was like so much water under my ribs from the stumbling and the sliding, until by nothing short of a miracle we all four had passed unscathed through the fusilade.

Once past the cliffs, and the length of where the

spoke, our men sheltered they in two a flung rocks. r!" he y, man, ou ask elatter, e line against stones eaping impact us as broad was se of ough must, ke so bling iracle the e the

piners once more sloped up, we were safe, and halting, turned in our saddles to look back; and as we did so, a thing happened that made us draw in the breath and stare our hardest. Not for long,—it all passed while a man might count a dozen,—but long enough to bring time and eternity into the one gasp.

The cliff was still alive, and seeming to creep valleywards with the belated trickle of the lighter stones, when above the sullen rattle there came a cry: one cry only, but in it terror, wrath, despair, and agony were blent. It was the voice of a man, but with the man's desperation there was the fear of the brute. A single cry, no more, for on its heels there came a horrible dull crunch, and through the wreath of dust that curled slowly earthward like the drifting spray of a cascade down the cliff, pitching heavily from ledge to ledge, tumbled a sprawling mass that whirled its poor helpless flails of broken limbs as it circled in the air, and presently fell with a thud upon the roadway not twenty paces from us, and slowly rolled on into the ravine. Whether it was accident or design,—whether he had toppled in the hot excitement of his murderous eagerness, or been flung headlong in some mad quarrel,—we could not guess. Nor, for all the horror of it, could we honestly say, "God pity him."

"One!" said Marcel, shaking up his beast and taking the road again. "One, and were it twenty and one it would be no great harm."

CHAPTER XII.

THE RAT'S HOLE.

It was some twenty minutes later that Marcel, who had been leading, turned round and trotted sharply back to us. By this time the night was grey in the valleys, and even the great square-pointed peak of Ossau itself had no more than a tooth of gold to show that the sun had not yet gone to bed for the night. Let the gold fade into dull copper, and the copper grow grey cold, and the night would be on us with all the silence and haste of slipped feet!

"A shelter, Master Blaise, a shelter," he shouted as he came pounding down the path. "I caught the loom of its shape beyond the bend yonder,— a poor place, but a shelter."

"A roof and four walls," answered I, rousing myself out of a sour brooding, "let them be as poor as they may, are God's mercy when such neighbours as live above there are within arm's length. What did you make of it?"

"'Twas but a glance and no more," said he, shaking

his head; "but it stands so flush with the road that I fear it is an inn or a wineshop, though I will vouch for neither the fare nor the welcome."

"Hark to the man," cried Henry, as Marcel turned in behind us. "Here are we with nothing better to stay the crave of our stomachs but a wallet of stale food and he fears 'tis a wine-shop; fears, forsooth! What has come to thee, friend, that thou turnest up thy nose at honest wine?"

"If the wine be honest," answered Marcel glumly, "it must be strong in spirit indeed that its morals are not wrecked, for I'll wager it will be the only honest thing in the house."

"And why?" asked De Montamar who rode by his side. "In my country, the poorer the folk the honester; it is the half way man that is a rogue."

"Ay," replied Marcel shrewdly, "because the poorer the folk the longer the arm of the law, and the sharper its claws. As for this place—tell me, monsieur, what manner of guests would empty the stoups and fill the tills of a wine-shop in such lawless wilds as these? Such rogues as played ball with us below there, or folk who are not only honest but fools to boot, and so lose their way? Why, the rogues for certain, and to-day you have twice tasted their quality. Now, it is like this. If one coward makes many, as the proverb says, I'll warrant many thieves will make one; and if our host of the inn yonder—for inn it is, d'ye mark the black square of the sign?—if our host, I say, doth not add the trades of

cut-throat and thief to that of wine-selling, and thrive more by the first than the last, never trust grey hairs again."

"But," cried Henry, turning round in his saddle, "if it be such a nest of hornets why so cock-a-whoop at the sight of it?"

"Because," answered Marcel, "we are not of the sheep that go sleeping to slaughter, and four men can guard a closed door better than they can an open hill-side. With all respect, I thought Monsieur d'Albret knew enough of war to know that."

"Monsieur d'Albret knows more of war in the field than of murder indoors," replied the King. "Though it is borne in upon him that before he sees Pau again he may have been taught much he did not set out to learn. Now, De Bernauld, down with you, and let us smell supper."

"No names, I beseech you, sire," said I; "and let Monsieur d'Albret set me the example of caution, lest I forget."

"Faith! Monsieur Zéro, I think thou'rt right," he replied, laughing. "If the worst event befalls there is no need for these brigands of the rock to know that in fishing for gudgeon they have netted salmon."

The auberge lay to the left-hand side of the road, in a minute curve of the hill that held it sheltered as in a hollowed palm turned on edge. The roughly squared logs of which it was built were weather-patched in browns and greys of many shades, while

the huge projecting eaves, the high-pitched roof, and lumbering porch had their own tale to tell of winter's snow-drifts. The house fronted on the road, its door being midway along the wall, with a small square window flanking it on either side. Thrust out from the hood of the porch was a sign, but in the dusk its fall was a blank.

"Batter at the door," cried Henry impatiently. "Ventre St Gris! custom does not come so often their way that—— Ha! a light at last. Batter again to put a little quicksilver into their heels."

But there was no need. From within came the rumble of a heavy step, the door was pulled back, and in its gaping mouth a man appeared sheltering a guttering candle with his fingers.

"What's your will, gentles?" said he, thrusting his head forward to see the better, and thereby flinging the light upon his face. A sturdy fellow he was—broad-shouldered and burly, coarse jowled, and with little pig's eyes peering from a fat face of a most unwholesome pastiness, a big nose, heavy full lips and red bristle of moustache, beard, and whisker running together. "We mountain folk get to bed early, and so, d'ye see——"

"Ta, ta, ta," I broke in, "we excuse the excuses. As to our will, what's any man's will after a nine hours' ride? Supper and bed for ourselves, a feed and litter-down for the beasts."

"One, two, three, four," said he, craning his neck round the door jamb to count us. "How many more

are there behind? You can see for yourselves, gentles, that there is no space here for a troop."

"Four, man, four and no more," cried Henry impatiently; "and if the troop comes, why, we four will help you keep the door barred."

He had cocked his head as the King spoke, and now a twinkle took fire in his little eyes, and his great face wrinkled with a grin.

"Good, messire, good," and he nodded; "if ill folks come in the night you will hold me scatheless? It's a bargain. There's a shed behind, gentles, where the beasts will be as snug as a cat in a basket. As for supper the good wife will see to that. Marie, Marie," he roared across his shoulder, "art thou and the old witch both gone deaf? Blow up the fire, slut, and set thy stewpan briskly to work."

Leaving Marcel and our host to see to the horses, we entered and found ourselves in what served for kitchen, common room, and tapster's parlour. A huge fireplace—black as a cavern, but filled six inches deep with grey ash and half-charred faggots above which a great pot swung by a chain—yawned at the farther end; at either side were shelves and cupboards. Broad settles of time-stained wood lined the walls, their edges hacked, and the flatness of the seat almost lost in a bewilderment of rude carvings. In the centre of the room was a stout bench, along which were set unbacked forms, with a stool at either end. On this stood a smoky lantern, above which stared a wizened old witch of a woman leaning upon two sticks, while

by the fireplace knelt a stout-waisted younger dame, whose deep breaths as she made the flaky ash fly in dust testified to her depth of chest. To the right was the window, its sliding shutter in its groove beside it; and presently from the left, and behind the house, we heard the grumble of voices and the stumbling tramp of horses on an unaccustomed floorway. Beyond the window a ten-rung ladder was propped, sloping, in the corner.

Even at our entrance the woman never turned from her task, nor did she budge until she had a corner of the ashen gulf in a red glow that presently broke into a crackling blaze. Then she looked up and showed us a frank and comely face, broad-browed, and firm in the mouth.

"Give me ten minutes, monsieur," panted she to De Montamar, who stood nearest. "A little ten minutes, no more, and you must be well served where you come from if you look awry on the supper of The Rat's Hole."

"The Rat's Hole?" echoed Henry, caught by the comely face and pushing to the front; "faith, dame, the rat-catcher has my compliments on his taste. But where got the place such a name?"

"There be mountain rats as well as valley rats," answered she, rising; "and wheresoever the poor are there must be some hole for them to slink to, and we are the only burrow hereabouts. Fetch some wood, mother, to keep the blaze alive; and sit you down, gentles. Pierre will fetch a skin of wine with him.

When a man waits for supper, time is like a shod wheel, and goes the faster for being wet."

As she spoke she bustled about over her preparations, and soon a savoury smell spread itself abroad, sharpening the already keen tooth of our hunger. As for the crone, having brought the fuel she seated herself by the opposite corner of the fire and watched us across the tops of her crutches, her withered lips and chin twitching and wagging in the palsy of age.

"The sooner the better, dame," answered Henry, thrusting out a dusty leg as he spoke, "for our throats are about as dry as our boots, and both will take a deal of washing. But to a tired man supper is no more than half the entertainment. What of the night's rest?"

"I'll warrant the rest, messire," answered she. "Folks who sleep here sleep sound."

"Sleep sound," chuckled the crone, breaking into a cackle of laughter. "Oh, Saints! yes, folks who sleep here sleep sound."

"Ay!" said Henry, turning on the bench to face her corner, "but where?"

"Why, there, there." Lifting a staff she pointed waveringly upward at the smoked ceiling, and laughed anew, "Could a man ask better?"

"She means in the garret above, messires," said Marie, shaking up her pan till its contents sang and spluttered in the heat. "We have but three rooms here. The one you see, which is over foul with wine

and the reek of meat for gentles like you, though some have used it at a pinch. Our own lies behind you, yonder. It is like what you see, but smaller, and there we three sleep. The third is the garret above, and runs from end to end, so that a score could stretch themselves in it and never jostle. Call me pig if you have aught to grumble at in the morning."

At that Marcel came in, with Pierre at his heels bearing the promised skin of wine under his arm. This he set on the table, together with four wooden tankards that might have held a pint apiece.

"What kind of beast have we here?" cried Henry, moving the lantern the better to look at the wine vessel. "'Tis a kid of the goats, and, by my faith, well nourished, though it is long since he filled his belly with meat. Mark his fatness, Master Mareel. Wilt thou have a rib to thy share or a piece off the haunch?"

"The blood for me," answered Marcel, falling into the King's humour; "I have bones enough of my own."

Truly it was a quaint flagon, if flagon such a vessel could be called. Saving that it lacked the head and the four hoofs, it stood upon its stumps on the table a three-months' kid, shaggy hide, tail, and smell complete. The neck and legs were bound fast with whipcord, and the rip in its belly had been so cunningly sown that not a drop oozed through.

"If it be not better than it looks——" began De Montamar, but our friend of the red bristles cut him short.

"Never judge a bottle or a woman by the outside

messire," said he, whipping the beast off the bench and running a knife-point under the knot at one leg point. "You must kiss their lips before you can judge either. Taste that!" he added, with a mighty ring of pride in his voice.

Lifting his beaker to his nose, Henry smelt the contents.

"I could wish her breath were sweeter," said he, and put his lips to it cautiously. "That wine and women are much alike, I grant," he went on, setting down the vessel with a wry face. "Some are over green for a man's palate and some go sour with age. Some put spirit in a man, some turn him to a brute-beast, and some are to be avoided like the very devil. This wine of yours, my friend, is the last, but as even a she-tartar is more endurable when the stomach is full, we will be just, and defer final judgment."

"Meanwhile," said I, "let us see this famous garret of yours."

"For sure, messire, for sure," and lifting the ladder from its corner, he dragged it into the space between the bench and the window. "The trap is there," said he, pointing to a square in the grimy roof where the spiders had been disturbed in their spinning. Then he poised the ladder carefully, and thrust it strongly upward until the end ran a full foot beyond the plane of the ceiling. "By your leave, gentles," and he lifted the lantern from the table, "'tis but for a minnte, and the fire will give you light. It is as pitely as the night above here."

Up the ladder he rose nimbly for all his bulk, and pushed the trap-door upward until it fell back with a bang that sent the dust flying in a fine cloud from the cracks in the boards.

"A noble room, messeigne; why, the King in his palace is not better housed. Look," and he swung the light above his head.

"Right," cried Henry, who had followed us. "I will wager we shall sleep as well as the King himself. Leave us the light, Master Pierre, and while thou and madame set out the supper we will give an eye to our lodging."

For a moment the fellow hesitated, but I ended his doubts by snatching the lantern from his hand and pushing him towards the ladder head, with "We give thee three minutes, but not a tick longer, so make haste."

As his head disappeared below, the King gripped me by the elbow.

"'The Rat's Hole' they call it," said he softly, "but I say the rat's trap. What do you think, De Verneuil?"

"Let us first make our rounds, Sire, then I will answer."

The garret stretched not only, as the woman had said, from end to end of the house, but also from back to front, so that, so far as floor space went, it could have given barrack space to the whole troop that Master Pierre declared he had no room for. A second trap-door lay towards the farther end, and opened, as

we judged, over our host's sleeping-room. To the front was a window closed by a sliding shutter; to the back a great two-winged wooden gate that at its fullest must have opened a space of ten feet breadth, and at each end there were two doors of about half that width. All these, except the window, were fast barred, but what was strange was that though the slope of the roof came mid-way down the walls, these doors and gates were so built that they ran a more than common height, the sides being cased like dormer windows. Except for half a dozen straw mattresses scattered here and there upon the floor, the place was without furnishings.

"H'm," said Henry, as, having made our tour, we stood by the great gate to the rear. "It has an honest enough look. It may be that I have belied our genial host. If so, the blame is with his scoundrel face, not with me."

"Let us first see what lies behind," replied I, handing the lantern to Monsieur d'Albret, and seizing the knob of the huge iron bar that held together the two leaves of the gateway.

Wrestle with it as I would, it refused to budge, when of a sudden, as I tugged and twisted, the whole socket slipped off in my hand and the gate opened with a rush, flinging me staggering back against the King. In a trice he had the left hand leaf pushed to again and the lantern at its edge.

"A snare, a snare," he cried softly; "the nails are no more than mock nails, and were never driven home.

And see, De Bernauld, the corbels that project beyond the sill of the door, and yonder gangway propped against the bank there! Why, man, for all the fifteen feet of distance, it is a drawbridge, a veritable draw-bridge. Mark, too, how the lie of the hill favours the rogues—a smooth run of sod no more than a foot above the level of the floor. Let them thrust their plank bridge across in the night, and what man who has ridden nine hours would hear the gate swing on its hinges? *Ventre St Gris!* but I smell the trick! Redbeard and his women-folk go to their rest and we to ours; then out sneaks Redbeard and brings down upon us these gentry who kill priests and for sport roll down rocks on innocent travellers. A pretty plan, my faith! but it's a very pretty plan. I'll warrant the beldam was right, and folks who sleep here sleep sound! How many have slept, who still sleep, and will to all eternity?"

"But we, Sire, have slipped the snare, being forewarned. You know the proverb?"

"Ay. But how slipped it?"

"We are four to one, Sire, and to bind Redbeard is easy enough."

"What! and the women too? That is a thing my gullet finds it hard to swallow."

"Better swallow that than never swallow aught again."

"And what if this leaks out. What answer would Blaise de Bernauld give to him who twits him with being one of four men to bind two women? Four

men, d'you mark, and the women alone in the house. So the story would run, for who would credit the tale of the rogues upon the hill-top?"

"Such an answer, Sire, that I can promise he would not twit a second time."

"Ay, I understand. But can Henry of Navarre cut his subjects' throats because they tell truth? Do you not see, De Bernauld, that we would put ourselves in the wrong? Why, man, what would France say to a king who trussed women up for fear of the Lord knows what? No, no, thrust-to the door as if it had never been stirred, and leave this thing to me. I have a plan in my head, and your part is to do nothing to botch it. Now, then, to supper."

But it was with a heart ill at ease, and ready to curse afresh these doubtful plans and plots of Henry of Navarre, that I followed the King down the ladder. His great idea of Vic had led us into a hornet's nest, and this second thought might well set them stinging.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE KING'S WAGER.

THE room below was in the intermittent darkness of a flickering fire, De Montamar and Marcel casting huge shadows that bulked sharply against the wall, and then were gulfed in the gathered blackness. By the foot of the ladder stood Redbeard, staring up towards the trap and with his foot on the first rung; and as the embers shot into flame I caught a look of eager intent suspicion in the malevolent good nature of his face.

"A plaguy long three minutes, gentles," he growled as he shouldered the ladder back into its corner, while Henry set the lantern upon the bench. "But that it was no business of mine if your supper spoiled, I would have cried you down long ago."

"Lay the blame on the size of your room, friend, and not on us," answered Henry carelessly. "Why, man, it would house a troop; ay, and defy a troop, too, which is a comforting thing, even though no disturbance is possible in such a placid quietness as reigns here. Now, dame, supper, and let us taste the goat's milk a second time; mayhap it improves on

acquaintance. Certes! no knowledge could make it grow worse!"

What all was in the savoury mess she poured into the great wooden bowl which was now set before us I know not. There were shreds of more than one kind of flesh of beasts, tags and scraps stewed almost to a pulp and tender as jelly; wings and legs of wild birds; beans, carrots, cabbage, onions, olive oil, grated cheese, garlic,—and all brought cunningly to the thickness of a porridge, so that a hungry man might sup it with a spoon and yet eat solids. This much I know, it touched the palate delicately, and warmed the stomach with a generous contentment that is not often found in king's banquets. As for the wine, it was execrable and smelt like stale vitals.

"This will never do!" cried Henry, setting down his measure. "There must be better wine than this in some corner of The Rat's Hole, else would the rats die of thirst. Have it out, friend, and if it be a question of cost never fear but we can pay the shot. For, d'ye see, it is not only a man's pleasure but a man's sleep, and a night's rest is well worth an extra crown or two. To drink such stuff as that would be to ride a nightmare and start broad awake at every creak. Come, search thy cellars again, and Marcel will lend thee a hand."

"What ails the drink, messire?" said the fellow, with a grin; "has it not body enough?"

"Body enough!" echoed De Montamar; "ay, but

not the body of grapes. It is the quintessence of a herd of goats."

"'Tis a man's drink, stout and full-blooded, and so I gave it to your worships," answered the innkeeper impudently; "but since it is over-heavy for you I must try you with what we of the mountains call babes' liquor. This," and he slapped the goat's hide on the flank with the familiarity of old friendship, "is from the south, and has the stout blood that comes of a southern sun; the other is from the north, and is as thin as whey."

Binding up the vent in the skin, he tucked the beast under his arm and disappeared, returning immediately with a small cask of the capacity of about seven gallons upon his shoulder. This he set down upon the edge of the bench, and having drawn forward the settle he placed a wide-mouthed earthenware crock under the vent.

"Now, messire," said he to Henry, who was seated nearest him, "do you tilt forward the crock while I knock out the bung. Good, good; you are fit to be a master cellarer, messire. Put your nose down to that; how does that smell to your dainty worships?"

Rolling back the cask until it lay bung uppermost on the bench, he threw the dregs of the Spanish wine upon the floor and dipped the tankard into the crock.

"Blood of Spain and blood of Navarre," said he with a grin, as the wine ran into veins and splashes in the sand, "and as I'm an honest man I love to spill them both, but all in the way of business."

"How else does any man spill blood?" said the King carelessly, and lifting the tankard to his mouth as he spoke. "Soldier, rogue, or innkeeper, 'tis all in the way of business, is it not? Though if there be aught in a jest it is Spanish blood that will run waste to-night, and not that of Navarre—an omen, friend, an omen; so if you stand for Spain, look to yourself."

With an excess of caution born of sorrowful remembrance, he sipped the contents of the tankard, smelt them, dipped in a finger-point and eyed the red drop critically, then sipped again. Then he set down the tankard and turned upon Redbeard.

"Babes' liquor in truth, and none should know it better than I," said he. "Which art thou, rogue, fool, or jester, that thou revilest good Jurançon wine and pratest of it as babes' liquor? Look you, master host, here are we four gentlemen stranded without so much as a dicebox to pass the time, and so to give us all sport I will play a wager with thee. Ten crowns to nothing that tankard for tankard I will drink thee drunk with this same babes' liquor of which thou art so contemptuous. Ten crowns, host, and I will pay thee for the wine beforehand, both of thy drinking and mine, lest hereafter my wit be too sodden. Is it a bargain? See here."

Pulling out a pouch he shook a heap of coins out upon the table, and ran his finger-tips through them, playing with them till they jingled and rang like the clatter of a silver bell.

"Was there ever such a madcap offer made

before!" he went on, laughing as he spoke, and still jangling the money. "Here is a chance for a man to drink his own liquor and be paid for the drinking, and, mayhap, reap ten crowns in addition. It is business and pleasure in one, the spilling of much Navarre blood, but all in the way of trade! What sayest thou, host. By the way, what is thy name, friend?"

"Pierre Salces, messire," answered Redbeard, eyeing the shining heap wistfully as he bent across the end of the bench.

"Good. Fetch a measure for thyself, Pierre Salces, that we may drink fair. My faith! but it is long since I drank myself drunken with Jurançon wine, but the morrow's repentance will be cheaply bought by the night's rest. Come, man, to our wager."

But from two quarters there came protests,—De Montamar across the table and the hag from her corner both alike cried out upon the folly.

"No drink, Pierre," she screamed shrilly, scrambling to her tottering feet and pounding her way upon her sticks to where we sat. "For the love of God, gentles, keep the wine from him, for he goes fair mad with it. Pierre, Pierre, bethink thee, man, wouldst thou give thyself to the devil again as thou didst before?"

Nor was De Montamar less importunate, though the poor lad was sorely at a loss how to bring the King to a remembrance of his dignity, and yet not betray him. Under cover of the woman's passion

he leaned across the table and caught Henry by the sleeve.

"Monsieur, monsieur, this is not the place nor time for such a jest. Do you forget how much hangs upon——" But the King shook him off, and turned upon him as he had once turned upon me at Vic, and before the wrath of his look De Montamar slipped stammering back to his seat. Few men cared to face the lightning passion of Henry of Navarre.

"Jest?" he snarled, still staring and smiting the table with his open palm as he spoke. "Who thinks of jesting? Am I a buffoon, monsieur, to play antics for a hare-brained whim? More hangs upon it than you dream, and it is your ignorance wins your presumption pardon." Then like the sudden flash of the sun from a thunder cloud his dark mood passed. "What? May a man not play himself once in a while when the freakish humour takes him? If thou hast a mind to keep sober, then keep sober: who prevents thee? As for me, I have a mind to be drunken for once."

But though De Montamar was silenced the hag was more persistent. Thrusting herself between Redbeard and the table she pushed him back, and levelled a palsied stick at his face.

"There shall be no drink," she cried quaveringly. "For thee, Pierre Salces, drink is blood. Shall I tell the gentles of the last time thou wentest mad drunk? Shali I bring them through the door

yonder, and show them the stain on the floor? Eh, ye may well look, hangdog, and ye may well curse in your beard. But better you be hangdog than I a corpse, and if no other way will stop you, and needs must, I'll tell the truth. I'm o'er old to die in a hurry, and so——"

It was Marie, the wife, who stopped the outburst. She had been busied here and there about the great presses that flanked the fire, but at Henry's challenge she had ceased all work. Standing midway between us and the whitening ashes, she watched the scene with troubled eyes, gnawing her lip, her nervous fingers crimping and twisting the edge of her soiled apron. Now she broke in.

"For shame, mother, for shame," said she sharply, but watching her husband all the while with dread and terror plain to be seen. "My man's a good man. Let him do his work his own way."

"Ay," answered the other, lowering her stick, "a good man enough when the drink's not in him, but how's a sodden log to do his work, tell me that?"

"Ha!" cried Henry, resting his palms on the edge of the table, and pushing himself back upon the settle. "Why, the house is a very Cerberus; it has three heads. But what of this stain, master innkeeper?"

At the King's question the wife's face suddenly blanched, and I saw her hand fly up to her throat as if a sob choked her.

"It was but a lamb, messire," said she, breaking in before her husband could answer, but speaking with

a queer catch in her breath. "My man was in his cups and it angered him, and so—and so——"

"Ay, ay; a pet of the house? Men are brutes at times. Let the tale rest, dame, let it rest."

"Yes, let it rest," cried Pierre Salces furiously, his fat face aflame with anger, and the little pig's eyes of him no more than pins' points in the pucker of his brows. "Take your chatter to bed. Is a man's one fault to be for ever flung in his face? Let it rest, I say, lest I show you what manner of man I can be out of my cups as well as in them." Striding to the door of communication, he flung it open. "Begone to your kennels the two of you; and you, woman, cease your mewling, lest I give you fresh cause to howl; what's done is done, and there's an end of it."

At that they went, but their going seemed to me to savour more of the discipline of a heavy hand than goodwill, for even at the threshold the elder woman paused and faced him anew.

"There be no more lambs," said she, with more stern solemnity than had seemed possible to one so palsied; "and so, lest a greater evil befall, I conjure you——"

But with scant ceremony he thrust her into the black vacuity of the unlit room beyond the partition, and banged the door behind her. Then, with a deprecatory shrug of the shoulders, he turned back to us.

"A man must be master in his own house,

gentles: a pretty thing it is that the likes of her should seek to keep such a man as I in leading-strings as if I were a new-breeched boy. Ten crowns you said, messire," and his little eyes flashed with greed—"ten crowns and the price of the wine; that'll be, um—um—three crowns more."

"Three kingdoms!" cried Henry. "Thou art extortionate, master host, but for the sake of the jest I'll not haggle with you. Thirteen pieces; it is a sign of ill fortune that same thirteen, and, mark you, it goes from me to you, and follows the omen of the Spanish blood."

"Let the morning read its own omens, messire," answered he sullenly, and dipping his tankard in the pitcher as he spoke; "our business is with the wager."

In a life prolonged far beyond that of the average of men, especially in these times when battle and bloody death have laid my fellows in swathes as mowers do the grass of a field, I have rarely borne a part in a stranger scene. It was a picture that would have taxed the powers of a Buonarrotti, supposing he had left his saints and angels and condescended to common men, and a half-possession of the devil. For though it was a jest in name, tragedy lurked so near that its shadows were flung across the laughter, and the desperate game of life and death was slowly played to its eternal close where outwardly there was the light-hearted banter of an hour.

Of us all, De Montamar, in spite of his smooth face, was the most serious. Henry and I knew our parts, and to play them out was no hard matter. Marcel knew nought and cared nought. It was enough for him that Master Blaise was content, the King's freakish folly was none of his care. Or if a thought troubled him, it was that he himself was not chosen to champion the hard heads of Navarre, since how could a mere court-bred King compare with a seasoned squire of the camps? Pierre Salces, on his part, was well content. Whoever lost, his wine was drunk and paid for at thrice its value, and from the grim smile on his square jaw I judged he thought it would be a bold messire who emptied his pouch of the ten crowns. Besides, he doubtless looked upon the wager as already won, and behind it all his thoughts, I take it, were busy with what manner of scene the morning light would show in the chamber above. But De Montamar was in the dark, and saw nothing but another mad folly which would give good cause to the enemies of Henry of Navarre to sneer and gibe. So that it was with knitted brow and unceasingly gnawed under-lip that he sat, and, all unknowing, watched the King play the fool and risk the sot for four men's lives, of which one was his own.

"Right," cried the King, answering the fellow's last words. "Our business is with to-night and not with to-morrow. Gentlemen, to your duty !

Do you measure the weapons and let us fall to work."

Pouring back Redbeard's wine into the crock, I carefully refilled his tankard so that the contents lipped the brim; then, taking the King's beaker, I gravely tumbled the liquor from the one vessel to the other. Again the wine came level with the brim, a thin chain of ruddy beads stringing the very line of the wooden edge.

"Ay, ay," said Redbeard, grinning as he watched me. "I give honest and full measure, messire; maybe the little gentleman will find it too full before the night is out."

"Fill his tankard and let us see to that, Monsieur Zén," answered Henry. "Here's a toast, friend; success to the King."

"Success to the King!" answered Pierre Salces as he set down his empty beaker; "but, perched as we are between Philip and Henry, which King, messire?"

"What?" said I, "is not this Navarre?"

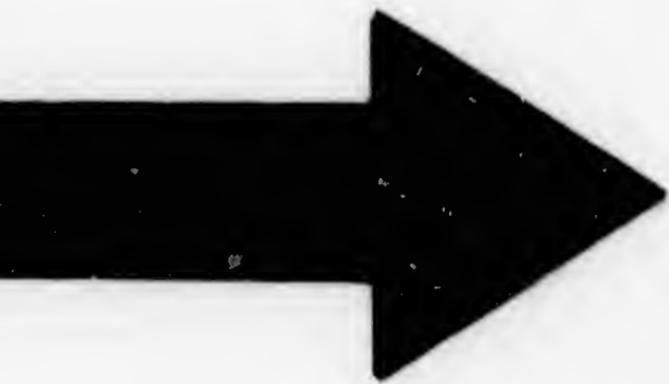
"By the saints, messire," replied he, "this is no-man's-land, or the land of the strongest arm, which you will."

"But the laws are the laws of Navarre?"

"The laws are the laws of Navarre, France, Spain, or the Popedom," answered he, banging his vessel on the bench; "that he who can take, takes; and he who can keep, keeps."

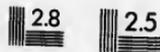
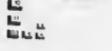
Then he plunged his tankard into the crock, and drawing it out dripping full, cried, "My toast,





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messire. To the laws of The Rat's Hole, and God send us a quiet to-morrow!"

"A proper toast," answered Henry, filling his measure in his turn; "and, for the time, the laws of The Rat's Hole please me well enough."

Though they both set down their beakers empty it was the last of their deep draughts. So far it had been the sharp onslaught of thrust and parry, a trying, as it were, of the adversary's temper, a gauging of his powers and endurance. Thenceforward it was rather the wary fence of men who by feints and watchfulness sought to weary the foe into a fatal folly; and I have no mind to write a catalogue of sips and gulps and eggings-on to filthy drunkenness that would have been sordid and despicable, but that it was the weapon wherewith we fought for our lives. Strange how wine varies in its effects! I speak not now as to its potency in drugging or maddening the brain, though some will grow owlish or a fool with what will no more than quicken another man's wit, but rather of its lighter effects. This one will sing, that one grow sullen, the other amorous, maudlin, quarrelsome, obstinate, spendthrift, cautious, reckless. There is not a vein of good or evil hidden in all the deep complexity of nature but in one man or another wine will open it up, though, to be honest, it is chiefly the evil that comes to the surface. As for Pierre Salces, he ran through half the gamut of human passions.

With the dregs of his fifth tankard his tongue loosened; tags of meaningless talk, snatches of song, amorous and bacchanalian, all poured out as if he sat alone at the soaking of a solitary drinking-bout, and kept his heart merry with the sound of his own voice. Then he turned moody, blinking at us malevolently, and sucking down his wine in sullen silence. But not for long: as the wine got second wind of him and double heated his brain, his tongue took afresh to wagging. Dark, boasting hints of his own powers, shifting into coarse vituperation, until at last he roundly cursed the King for a presumptuous popinjay in matching himself at anything, but more especially at a drinking-bout with such a man of parts as Pierre Salces. Then in his exultation he grew so foul-mouthed that De Montamar took him by the collar and swore that if he did not mend his language he would thrust him head foremost into his own wine crock and so stop his tongue, wager or no wager.

That silenced him, for he was coward at bottom for all his hulking bulk, and thenceforward he sat mouthing and muttering, and drinking down his liquor in great gulps, so that all that was needful was to fill his beaker and let him drink himself drunk at his own pleasure. It may be that some will cry out upon us for false play, but let these remember that the wager was no more than a pretence; and surely when the man's folly and thirsty

humour opened up a door of safety, there was no need that the King should degrade himself for a spurious nicety of honour: as to the ten crowns, they remained in Redbeard's pouch, as it was intended from the first they should.

Once only were we interrupted. In the silence that followed De Montamar's firm protest the door between the two rooms creaked, and, in the slit of darkness, two white faces appeared, staring, open-mouthed, out at us like masks of terror. But Pierre Salces was sober enough to know whom he might safely curse, and at the oath he spat out upon them the vision faded in a swift eclipse.

As to the King, he played him fairly move for move so long as the bestial soul of the fellow had sense in it, humouring him with all the wily skill of a practised court hand; soothing, spurring, praising, belittling, curbing, egging, as the occasion needed, so that, in all his wild twists of moodiness, his mind was ever turned back to the business afoot. Nor was this a light thing to do, for time and again the man's suspicions were alert to take offence, and it was nothing but the King's ready tact that kept him from seeing that he was selling himself for nought; nor, until the swaying head dived forward on the bench, with a crash, was I sure that the wit of Henry of Navarre had saved from death the heir of France.

CHAPTER XIV.

— AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

FOR a time we sat silent, watching the fellow's shoulders shake and heave in his stertorous breathing; but presently the King pushed back the settle, and rose to his feet.

"The rest is your affair, De Bernauld," said he; "take what precaution you think fit, but, for my part, I think we shall sleep undisturbed."

"First, then," answered I, "we must have this hog to bed, lest he waken in the night, and set the house ablaze in his owliness."

"Trust him to sleep sound!" replied the King, rubbing his forehead roughly with the flat of his hand; "my own head hums like a hive, and had he driven me to the bottom of another tankard I had been as great a fool as himself, and so taken to singing—

'Notre Dame, du bout du pont,
Aidez-moi à cette heure!'

Let him be; he will snore these ten hours."

But I would not. The women's talk of his reckless temper was in my mind, and for all that we were four to one, I had no wish that a madman, still half-sodden

and his brain afire with the lees of drink, should let himself loose, baresark, upon us, when by handing him over to the care of the women we might count on a night's quiet. Therefore I bade Marcel rap at the door, and rouse them.

Nor had he long to wait for an answer. With a quickness that hinted at an uneasy watchfulness the door was opened, and the transition from frank terror to unrestrained relief as they saw Pierre Salces log-drunk, and prone against the bench, told a sorrowful tale. They had made no change in their dress, and at once both bustled forward; nor was the old witch provident in the expression of her satisfaction.

"The saints in their goodness grant it's a sound soaking," cried she, in a shrill whisper. "A sober man's any man's man, a drunk man's no man's man, not even his own self; but a man half-drunk is the devil's soul and body. We're thankful to ye, gentles, that ye did your work so well; and," she added, with a hardening of her voice that told of smothered resentment, "maybe you've more cause to be thankful than we have. The soaked hog! Let us get him to bed, Marie."

"Tut, tut, mother, we will see to that," said Henry, good-humouredly; "to drag such a weight as his is beyond your withered strength."

But the slur on her decayed powers nettled her.

"I'd have you know," she snarled, striking her staff wrathfully on the floor, "that what you call my withered strength has many a time dragged a better man than

you a longer journey than from here to a night's bed ; ay, and may again, if the saints be good to us. As for him, take him an' you will ; I have no love for handling drunken beasts."

"Would you have said 'drunken beast' an hour ago, and him listening," said Marcel shrewdly.

"Nay ; and why should I," she snapped, "seeing he was sober then. But, your pardon, gentles"—and the shrill wrath died away in a whine—"I mean no offence, but my old tongue runs faster than my will at times, and many a brown bruise it has earned me."

Suiting the action to his words, the King had seized Pierre Salces by the shoulders, and drawn him back, so that the helpless head rolled round like that of a slaughtered sheep, while De Montamar had caught him by the feet. As they lifted him between them we formed a procession, and truly no soldier, dead on the field of honour, could have had a more noble attendance than this swinish rogue of a cut-throat inn-keeper—the heir of France and a Moutamar of Arros as bearers, with Blaise de Bernauld to play linkman !

Except for its size, the sleeping-room was the counterpart of that we had left. At the farther end was the same deep fireplace, and the windows were identical ; but there was no bench in the centre, and in one corner was spread a broad mattress, over which a coarse blanket was thrown. Beyond this, and running from the back wall to the middle of the room, was a wattle screen which, I suppose, hid the elder woman's sleeping-place. Of furnishing there was little, but above the head

of the mattress a woodman's axe hung by leather thongs.

The women entered first, I next, lantern in hand, and on my heels came De Montamar bearing Redbeard's feet, with as ill a grace as was possible in a kindly man. Back in the darkened room we had left Marcel was groping in the corner for the ladder. It was then that a thing occurred which, small as it was in itself, I have never forgotten.

Stepping back from the line of march, I took no heed where I walked. The floor was clear of hindrances, and that was enough for me. But, suddenly, the younger woman turned upon me fiercely, and gripping my arm, with a strength which might have been a man's pride she flung me staggering back.

"Have you no heart in you that you stand on blood?" said she, gasping, and pressing the other hand hard against her bosom.

For a moment, in my bewilderment, I gaped, and did no more; then, half mechanically, lowered the lantern to the floor. There, sure enough, was a broad, brown stain, rough edged, and with veins from it like streams trickling from a central pool.

"Blood?" said I stupidly, for the abruptness of it confounded me; "blood?"

"Ay," she wailed, wringing her hands; "blood of my heart, and yet you trample it under foot."

"Give no heed to her chatter, messire," broke in the old witch, plucking at me from the other side as I still stood staring; "she's over-wrought. 'Tis the

blood of the lamb I spoke of yonder. Have done, woman, have done, and see to this man of thine. Saints! how the pig snores!”

“I know, I know,” answered the other; “but when I saw his heavy boots stamping *there*, my heart went fair broken. I ask your pardon, messire, and I thank you, gentles, for troubling with such cattle as——”

“Ventre St Gris!” said the King, stopping her short, “he is a man of weight and substance if ever there was one. Loosen his collar and have his boots off, and I’ll wager Navarre against Spain he will not so much as turn on his elbow before morning. And remember this, dame, if the churl wakens and grows outrageous, you have a voice in your throat, and we are not far away, you understand? With your leave, though, we will take the lantern. As you may have perceived by this time, we are not men to be left in the dark.”

With a significant nod he led the way back to the common room. There we found Marcel slowly clanking his way up the ladder he had thrust through the gaping square hole in the ceiling. Him we followed with all speed, for the hour was late, and then set ourselves with all our skill of defence to guard against surprise.

Drawing our stairway after us, we angled it against the great door at the back, jamming the upper end against the edges of the heavy cross-piece that topped the panels, while the lower we pushed below the side of the mattress assigned to De Montamar. That secured

our rear, since who-so drove in the door must needs waken the sleeper. As to the flanks, by which I mean the doors at either end, these we found secured with the same mock show of honest bars, but with doors ready to swing at a touch. Here the distance from the hill was only four feet, and there had been a levelling of the slope so that to cross was no more than a step. But there were no corbels, and as the doors hung flush with the perpendicular of the wall they seemed to me intended for escape rather than attack. These we secured with wedges, and having dragged a mattress above each closed trap-door we held that we might sleep in peace and without a watch. To me was assigned the post of drowsy sentinel above the family room, while Marcel stretched his lean length on the bed that guarded the kitchen trap.

Even though all this is long in the telling, and dry in the reading, it is needful to a right understanding of what befell later on, therefore I make no excuses for its length.

That we slept as dreamlessly as only babes and tired men can sleep is no marvel. No marvel, either, that I was the first who woke. The King and De Montamar were as yet happily short of that alert middle age upon which responsibility weighs like a pack on a pedlar's back. As to Marcel, the affair was none of his. Let the others treat him as they might, he was no leader of men. His business was to serve and obey, and when five-and-sixty has lived

a hard and healthy life it is glad enough to fill up its full measure of sleep.

With me it was different. This freak of the King was to me life and death, the setting of both faith and nation as upon a turn of the dice, and the burden of it weighed on me like a millstone even in sleep. Therefore, when I awoke it was to that nimble sense of watchfulness which in an unaccustomed place is bed-fellow to every man of affairs. To such a one the transition from dreamless stupor to heedful vigilance is no more than a tick of time, and my awakening had none of that dim voluptuous sense of rest and ease which is the crowning of a quiet slumber.

The hour I could do no more than guess at, but the sun was high and cloudless; for here and there, through chinks and knot-holes, yellow shafts of light shot level from wall and roof, and the whole chamber was aglow with a mellow haze. The great rear gate and the flanking doors were fast closed, and in their several places my three comrades were stretched like so many figures of the dead. All that I gleaned in the first swift look round as I lay propped upon my elbow.

But to the ministry of sight was joined the ministry of hearing, and before my eyes had made the circuit of the garret I knew that I was not the only one awake in The Rat's Hole. From beneath me came the gruff and grumbling rumble of a dead level monologue—speech that suppressed itself and yet would not be silent. Not question and answer, for there

was no variation in the pitch of voice; not soliloquy, for there was no intermission, no break in the steady flow of words.

Rising on my knees, I stepped cautiously from my bed with naked feet, and lifting up the mattress in my arms, as one might a truss of straw, laid it gently aside, making neither creak nor rustle. Then grasping the iron ring which served as handle to the door, I warily opened the trap three or four inches, and again kneeling set my ear to the crack.

That there are many who, for such an act, will denounce one as spy, eavesdropper, and what not, I know; but a wiser than these has said, "Be not righteous overmuch."

There are times when a man must pouch his niceties, and this was one of them. We were, so to speak, in the enemy's country, and had aught happened to the King it would have been a poor answer to bereaved Navarre that in a question of his saving I had set my own small honour against the nation's weal. That the thing went against the grain I grant, and had the talk been the common talk of wife and husband I had closed the trap as gently as I had opened it, and taken myself to my bed again.

But the first words held me, and that I might listen the better I thrust my boot-toe into the open space and craned lower. It was the elder woman who spoke.

"Ay, groan my man, groan; truly thou hast cause; only for thy life's sake groan softly, lest the folks

above grow curious. Let them but get wind of thy night's handiwork and thou art shent. They would hang thee, for sure, hang thee, and with thine own porch for a gallows; and then who would give me bite and sup in what you fool called my withered age, and keep a roof over me! Withered age! quotha; by the saints my withered age is like to see thy sappiness nought but bones! Why the plague didst thou meddle with drink? Had the stain yonder no tongue to bid thee keep sober? Saints! What a blow, what a blow! Thou wert drunk? ay, I know, and so have a word to say on that. Thou wert drunk, and so did what thou didst do. Harken to me now, Pierre Salces, and hearken well, for all that there is a buzz in thy brain. Let me but see thee so much as grow drowsed with wine, and there will be an end of thee. You may curse, you may curse, but life's life, and no sot's madness 'll send me to my grave before my time; there's fair warning."

While she spoke, I had slowly turned back the trap so that at last the hole gaped its widest, and with every inch of greater space the sharp weak voice waxed clearer and clearer, until in the end it shrilled out like the high-pitched note of a flute. What I saw, as I bent forward, was this:

Hunched up upon the bed, his folded arms on his crooked knees, and his head upon his arms, was Redbeard, one puffed cheek showing white in the angle of an elbow. By him, leaning on one staff, while with the other she waveringly empha-

sised her meaning so that not a point was lost, stood the elder dame; and beyond him, half hidden by his bulk, and with the blanket clinging from the waist downward, was his wife, dead; stone dead, by the terrible stillness and the rigid line of her twisted body. The axe was gone from the wall, and lay across the bed-foot.

Pierre Salces lifted up his head to answer.

"I never meant——" he began hoarsely, and stretching out a shaking hand as he spoke. But his eye caught the thing that lay by him under the one quilt, and as his voice lowered the woman cut him short.

"Never meant!" she snarled, shaking the stick in his face, and working herself up into a fretful passion; "poor comfort that to me if you stretch me like my girl there. Never meant! and but for the mercy of God it might have been me instead of her. Never meant! I'll risk no such never meaning, my man."

Leaning upon the two sticks, she ambled tottering round the bed, and throwing back the blanket felt the feet of the dead woman.

"Saints! how quickly one grows cold," she muttered. "She's stone to the knee already, and it might ha' been me. Lord! to think that it might ha' been me! No, no, I'll risk no never meanings, not I, not I. Your next drunkenness is your last, my man, for I'll take no risks." Shooting out a lean brown hand she gripped him by the shoulder. "Y've ground,

and bullied, and hectored me, Pierre Salces, and I've kept the hard answer back from my mouth because I durst not risk bite and sup, but I have ye now, I have ye now, ye slaving dog. What oath'll bind ye? Eh?" and she shook him roughly. "Swear me by St James, by all the saints, ay, by the Lord God Himself, that come what may, and though ye starve yourself, ye'll tend and keep and cherish me, winter and summer, till I die. Swear it, ye dog, or I'll cry out and make an end of you, ye swinish beast. Swear, now, swear!"

Lifting up his blotched and twitching face to hers, he swore, his great hulking bulk cowering and shivering under her frail touch.

"You'll stand by me?" said he pleadingly; "you'll lie for me, and face it these folks presently? Curse the chance that brought them, curse the luckless wager, curse——"

"Come nearer home and curse yourself, Pierre Salces," said she. "But a life's a life, and so I'll stand by you, for all that it's my girl lies there, my girl, born of my own body; but a life's a life, and that's so long ago."

On that she went down on her knees and half callously, half curiously, began streaking the dead woman, with the fellow who had done her to death staring stupidly on, and very softly I closed down the trap.

CHAPTER XV.

A DESCENT ON SPAIN.

SITTING cross-legged on my doubled-up mattress I weighed the chances. That the fellow below was that most dangerous of all scoundrels, a weak, unbalanced rogue, and therefore a standing menace to all decent folk, was clear. Clear, too, that the King, egged on by that morning repentance which is so full of stern virtue and is such a stickler for morality, would insist on giving the scoundrel his due. But the realisation of ideal justice was not my affair. My business was to see four men safe rather than one man hung, and the more I pondered the more I became convinced that to the general good Pierre Salces alive was of more value than Pierre Salces dead, let the strict justice be what it might.

The point was this. There were we, meshed in the network of the hills and far astray from our straight road. Not lost, since we knew where the true road lay a league or two down the valley. No, not lost, but with a certain shelving rock between

us and the right path, the very thought of which gave me the shivers, for I had no mind to be pelted a second time. Go on we must, and saving Pierre Salces who could show us the way? No one. Ergo, Pierre Salces, for all his red-handed villainy, must not hang at his own porch for that time. The syllogism was plain, and would have been eminently comforting to our host had he but known of it.

Therefore I kept my own counsel when presently I wakened the King, and, in spite of hot repugnance, drew a solemn and stolid face when later Pierre Salces, his eyes and hands tremulous with worse than drink, told a halting tale of the sudden illness that had seized upon his wife in the night.

"Nought catching?" I asked concernedly, laying a firm grasp upon his shoulder; "are such sudden attacks common in this inn of thine, Master Host?"

Whereupon he stammered and went white, and would have played the fool to his own undoing but for the ready wit of the old beldam. He was not an easy liar, Pierre Salces, for all his experience, and his drunken bout had shaken his nerve.

"'Tis but a common thing," answered she smartly. "I've seen its like many a time. To be left in peace, poor soul, is all she asks for."

"Does she sleep, dame?" asked the King out of that kindness of heart which won him so many friends both with high and low. "If so, we will walk softly."

"Ay," answered she, "she sleeps, messire, but have no fear, she's ill to waken."

"Then give us breakfast, dame, and let us away on our journey. The sooner this buzzing head of mine makes fresh acquaintance with the morning air the sooner I will forget that I played the fool last night. What, friend," and he turned on Redbeard who stood eyeing us shiftily, his restless fingers plucking uneasily at the seams of his breeches, "art thou ready for another wager?"

"No, not for a hundred crowns!" answered he huskily. "A man can buy silver over dearly, messire."

It was the remains of the over-night's olla that they set before us; but for me its toothsome-ness had vanished, and I had no better stomach for the food than had the King, though from a different cause. Never once while we ate, or made pretence at eating, did either Pierre Salces or the old dame leave us, and that he at least should be shy of what lay behind the door was no more than common nature. That he was on hot coals to be rid of us was also to be expected, and the fawning eagerness with which he sought to anticipate our wants, and so hasten our departure, was in sharp contrast to his over-night surliness.

At last De Montamar and Marcel had satisfied their hunger, and turning to the latter I bade him get ready our beasts. "And do thou, friend," I added, "saddle thine own when thou hast done helping him. We have need of a guide, and so thou must make a trip to Spain to-day."

But Pierre Salces shook his head vigorously.

Better even than I, he knew there was work waiting him that left no room for delay. For all its dumbness there was no safety for him until earth had gaped and swallowed up his night's wickedness.

"No, no, messire! no Spain for me," said he, with more decision than had seemed possible in such a quaking wreck. "Horses are scarce things in Navarre. How would such as I own one?"

"Then come afoot," answered I carelessly. "There will be no great hardship in that, since the road is hilly and we can but go at a crawl."

"No, messire, neither afoot nor ahorse. How could I leave——" and though his face blanched he clenched his teeth and waved his hand bravely towards the closed door.

"Ay," broke in the old dame, "would you have him leave two helpless women to the Lord knows what mishandling? He must bide at home for our sakes, messire."

"He must go abroad for ours and his own," answered I. "I'll vouch for it his wife has nought to say against it. Ask her."

"And tell her," said Henry, "that we shall pay him well."

"By your leave," replied I, "we shall pay him nothing; but all the same he will come."

"By your leave, in my turn," cried Pierre Salces roughly, and raising his voice for the first time that day to its common harsh level, "I shall not go, pay or no pay. Are you answered, messire?"

"Hush, man, hush," and I held up a warning hand, "wouldst thou waken the sleeper?"

"There is no sleeper," said he angrily; "and you, where are you pushing to, messire?"

While we were speaking I had moved forward to the door, and now stood by it with head bent as if listening for a movement within, and at his last words I gripped the latch.

"No sleeper? Why, then, we shall hear what madame has to say. If she objects, good and well, thou mayest bide here and comfort her; if not——" and I pressed the latch down with a rattle and flung the door a foot open, but did not cross the threshold. "For the last time, Pierre Salces, wilt thou guide us to Spain?"

"To the devil rather, for the last time, No," he roared, and with his bleared eyes aflame with terror and rage he rushed upon me.

But I was ready for him, and dropping the latch, stopped his rush with such a grip on the throat that must have made him think the noose had caught him at last, for he staggered back, panting, his great bulk quivering like a jelly. His clumsy wit was numbed, but there was still the beldam to deal with.

"For shame," she cried shrilly, "for shame, to force a woman's door. Stop him, gentles, for the good name of your wives and mothers, stop him!"

Dropping her crutches, she shuffled at me with her ten talons crooked to the scratching, and had not Marcel — understanding nothing but that Master

Blaise must be in the right whatever he did—had not Marcel, I say, held her back, I was like to have been routed, but with all my wounds in front.

“She is right, De Bernauld,” said the King gravely. “This is pushing your point over far. *Ventre St Gris!* let the dog bide in his kennel.”

“By your leave, monsieur,” cried I, turning on him sharply, but still holding my place by the half-open door, “are you leader, or am I? Last night you had your plan in your head, and we let you play it unhindered. More came of it than you wot of. To-day it is my turn, and Blaise de Bernauld is over old in the world to have the honour of his acts questioned. Free the woman, Marcel. Do thou, fellow, follow me; ay, and thou, too, mother. Wait for me, gentlemen, I beg; but believe me I am neither fool nor bully, nor yet one to insult a helpless woman.”

With that I whipped through the door with the two clamouring at my heels, and had I not left behind me three strong reasons for my safety Pierre Salces would have had a second murder on his soul that day. As it was, his wrath had melted into cold fear, and of the two upon whom I closed the door the woman was by much the stouter-hearted. For an instant she tried to brazen it out.

“For the Lord’s sake speak low, messire,” she whispered, laying a shaking hand on my arm, while with the other she pointed half behind her at a rigid something stretched beneath the coverlid. “Would you waken——” Then, as her eyes met the hard-

ness of my look her voice rose into a wail, "He knows! he knows! God's curse on you for a black murderer, Pierre Salces; you swine, you sot, you drunken slayer of women in their sleep! Do you hear? He knows, I tell you, he knows; you coward, beast, you wolf with a hare's heart! It was him that did it, messire, him only. What?" and she gripped me by the hand and shook me in her eager excitement. "Would I hurt my girl, the very child of my body, and dearer than myself? No, messire, no. 'Twas him only in his sottish passion, and she sleeping like a lamb."

"A lamb!" said I, shaking her off, for her craven and callous selfishness sickened me. "Was the lamb you spoke of——"

"Ay, messire, his own child, his only bairn. See it in his face! We hushed it up, though the Lord knows a life more or less counts for little round here. But I'll hush up no more murders lest I go next. Your rope is spun, Pierre Salces—spun to the very noose, and a blessing it is, God's blessing! You'll not leave me to his mercy, messire? When he could do *that* with the stain yonder crying out against him, it's little chance I will have. His own bairn, the coward, the coward!"

"And what of his oath, dame? St James, the saints, and all the rest of it?"

For a moment she stood staring, then she said slowly: "So it was then you heard? The Lord forgive me for a fool, but I forgot the trap. Never

heard his oath, messire; what's an oath more or less to a man like Pierre Salces?"

And truly I thought it would be a thing of small account.

"The choice is his," said I, turning to him and looking him up and down; "either he guides us into Spain as I said, or I cry 'Hulloa,' and what will happen then, he can guess for himself."

Since I had closed the door, and he had found himself shut in with his dead, Pierre Salces had stood stolidly silent, his sullen heavy eyes following every move unwinkingly, but his tongue he held quiet behind his teeth. There was an apish wistfulness about him that moved me to compassion for all his villainy. It was the attitude of some dumb beast caught red-fanged and with no hope of mercy, but yet hungry after life with a piteous hunger. I have seen the same pathetic and yet apathetic questioning in the eyes of a poaching dog as it lay upon its back and watched the whip it knew it merited, and now, as then, the inarticulate pleading touched me.

With my last words Pierre Salces woke into alertness of life. The pathetic uncertainty became a fawning hope, and his moody face lightened.

"It's a bargain," he said eagerly; "a man knows when he is beaten, and I as well as another. As for what's yonder, messire," and he looked aslant at the corner, "a fellow may be rough in his way at times, and yet not be a bad sort at the bottom. Have no fear of me; it's a bargain."

"Ay," said I slowly, "a bargain for to-day, and you may be very sure I have no fear of you."

For a moment his face fell, then his look grew cunning—"There be few who travel by The Rat's Hole a second time. Let to-day go by, and to-day is as good as for ever, messire."

But his cunning grew into submission as speedily as thunder over-head follows the flash, for I turned upon him.

"Mind that you try no tricks, fool! I know your sort, and the company you keep. Your friends on the hill-tops played ninepins with us yesterday, but let a pebble so much as cross the road to-day and there's an end of Pierre Salces and his playful ways. Is that plain? Now make ready."

"But what of me, messire?" cried the old witch shrilly, wringing her hands as she spoke. "Here have I denounced him to his face, and now," with a shrug, "you leave me to his mercies as if I counted for nought. Hang him, messire, for the love of God hang him, for 'tis either him or me. See,"—hobbling hastily to the bed-side she flung the coverlet back from the staring face, with its ghastly dint above the temple and half-dried slime of blood across the cheek, and pointed down with a shaking hand,—“will that not move your gall? No, not even that? Saints! Had you ever a mother, man, that you can look at such a sight and not throttle the rogue who did it?” Then she fell a-whimpering, “’Tis either him or me, messire, for he’ll kill me sure, ay, kill me, and if I

had not thought you'd hang him out of hand I'd have lied, and lied, and lied."

"For shame and pity's sake cover her up, woman," said I sternly. "And do you, Pierre Salees, remember this: the King of Navarre has a longer arm than you dream of, and if ill comes to——"

"Little he cares for the King of Navarre," she broke in contemptuously, "and small comfort his hanging hereafter will be to me in my grave. But thou'rt not safe yet, Pierre Salees. I'll not die like a sheep to pleasure his cold-blooded worship who rates his little finger higher than justice for a slain woman. The other gentles will have a word to say first. Ha! that chokes you, does it? He with the curly beard has a kindly face for all his fool's wagering."

But I had no mind to have justice and expediency set a-tilting in the King's brain, and so, sorely against the grain, had a hand upon her mouth before she could cry out. He might hold himself in part to blame for Redbeard's evil work, seeing the women had warned him, though, for my part, I acquit him since there were four lives in the balance against what seemed a whim, or little better. But an aching head is own brother to compunction, and there is no denying that, for all her silence, Marie Salees pled potently for vengeance.

"Hold thy tongue, woman," said I between my teeth, "lest we make a clean sweep once and for all. The whole nest of thieves would be sweeter for a torch under the caves."

That silenced her, and though in face of both the dead and the living I loathed the part I played, I hold I could have done no less. The King's safety was my first necessity. Besides, I had this as a salve. The old hag was as foul with crime as Pierre Salces, and I reckon few were ever deeper in the devil's mire than he, so come what evil might to her she would, at its worst, get no more than justice.

"Well?" cried the King as we two men returned to the common room. "Is she content to be left?"

"She made no demur," replied I grimly, as I set a hand on Pierre Salces; "nay, more, we may thank her for removing thy scruples, eh?"

But Pierre Salces answered never a word.

How, and by what route, we passed from Navarre of France to Navarre of Spain, and how the King for the first time set eyes on his lost provinces, may be left untold, saving for a thing that happened as we bade adieu to our guide. The journey lives in my memory as a bewilderment and a delight, a marvellous alternative of barren wilds, fertile ravines, deep woods, and naked rock; of sparse and stunted pines growing swiftly tall and sappy in our abrupt descent; of oak forests, chestnut groves, and fig-yards sinking slowly downwards into slopes of sun-steeped vines and fields of corn; of prodigious curves and sheer depths sickening in their appalling silences; of clamouring turbulent white streams, and living silver threads that in their fall wore themselves to dust, or drifted valley-wards in smoke; of heights as black as the

bosom of the thunderbolt, and flashing waters that lay along the vales like shimmering satin robes down thick with jewels; of beauty and magnificence, terror and charm, a vision of God Almighty's paradise intermingled and cut across with swart suggestions of the very pit.

For league after league we travelled hemmed in by the mountains, our horizon at times no farther than a stone's cast in any direction; then, of a sudden, we rounded a spur, and swine though he was a kind of dignity flushed even the face of Pierre Salces. All Spain lay before us, and at the sight, for all that I hate all bred of Spain as I hate the devil, my heart leaped within me.

As for Henry, he stood upon his toes in the stirrups, and while one might count fifty slowly looked downward and outward with kindling eyes, gnawing his nether lip the while. Then he drew a deep breath, half sigh, half vow, and laid a hand upon my elbow.

"Let a man come with *that* in his hand, and what will France say to him, Huguenot or not Huguenot; tell me that, De Bernauld? Are the stakes not worth the playing for? Ay are they, though a man was ten times a king!"

Nor with that valley of beauty and promise spread out in front of me could I find it in my heart to answer "No."

Thenceforward our path was clear before us.

"To the right, gentles, as far as the river's bank, then follow the water down to that great walnut

lying beyond the pines. After that it's a blind-man's road, and by the height of the sun you have two hours in which to find a roof."

It was the longest speech the fellow had yet put together, but doubtless the relief at being rid of us in peace and safety inspired him.

"Right," said Henry, who had again been feasting his gaze on the landscape as if, with his eyes at least, he would devour all Spain,—“that roof is well thought of. What village or town is there, or, better still, what great house that would give four strangers lodging and a welcome?”

But before Pierre Salces could answer Marcel had his word to say.

“Tell me, friend, dost thou know ought of one, Teresa Saumarez?” said he in a tone of a monk who asked did one, perchance, know aught of the foul fiend, from whom all saints defend us! Pierre Salces had had his great mouth open to reply to the King, but of a sudden his eyes twinkled as if with a new thought, and he turned on Marcel curiously.

“Know aught of—— Your pardon, messire; aught of whom?”

“Aught of one, Teresa Saumarez.”

“How should he?” said I sharply, for to my mind the less said of Teresa Saumarez the better. “As well ask does he know aught of a burr in a cornfield.”

“So I pray,” answered Marcel, shaking his head

soberly; "but I ask because when a man knows the whereabouts of a thing he can give it the go-by."

"I know nought, I know nought," cried Redbeard, with more haste than was needful. "As messire says, how could I know? But for a night's lodging," and he turned eagerly to the King, stretching out before him a shaking hand—"follow my finger, messire. See you grey pile to the left of the blaze of the sun. It stands like a shoulder hunched up from the flat of the plain. No, messire, not this side of the river, but beyond. Ay, now you have it. They have space there and to spare, and you will find as warm a welcome as in all Spain."

"And the name? To give your host his dignities is no more than a beggar's courtesy."

"Name?" and Pierre Salees' face grew sober, "De la Vega? Azevedo? Mendoza? how should I know? Bite, sup, and bed are our patents of nobility, messire. Let the name be what it may, you can trust me for the welcome."

But remembering what lay in the inn behind us, it seemed to me the security offered was none of the best.

CHAPTER XVI.

CHÂTEAU LIGNAC.

To the fact that we were in the very pitch of summer thanks may be given that we were able to ford the river so easily. Bridge there was none, and with the high banks brimming full a man must either have bided where he was, staring at the spate, or taken his life in his hand. As it was, we crossed but little worse than wet-shod. Thence to the castle of Red-beard's choosing was no more than a half-hour's trot, and with the sun still giving a promise of ample daylight we set ourselves to do the distance leisurely.

To arrive with too broad a margin of time for curious questioning was none of our plan, seeing that our business in Spain was to learn much and tell nothing. And because of this, that we knew the name of neither place nor person whither we went troubled the King.

"To fire a volley of who's, what's, and why's in the first five minutes," said he, checking his beast to a walk, "is to draw their fire in return, and argues us strangers and therefore suspicious."

"Let me tap yon clodpole, Sire," said De Montamar, pointing to a peasant at his labour in the fields; "a fool can sometimes tell more than a wise man."

"Let Marcel go," said Henry curtly. "He knows the breed better than you. See that thou pickest his brains, man, and clean picked, too. The more we learn of that of which we know nothing the better."

But it was soon clear that if pantomime went for anything Marcel would return as ignorant as he went, for we saw his arms fly about his head like flails while the other leant stolidly on his tool, putting in a word or two at times but replying mostly by a shake of the head. At the last, still judging by gesture and attitude, Marcel expressed himself in French more vigorous than complimentary, and made his way back to us.

"Well?" cried Henry impatiently; "what says the fellow?"

"More than I can understand," replied Marcel, ignoring the King and speaking to me as was his way, not through impudence but sheer uncertainty how to rightly answer one who was comrade, King, and equal all in one. "It was this way, Master Blaise. I bade him good day in honest French, and he stared as if I had been a ranting Turk. Then I tried him with the Basque of Bigorre, and he gibbered at me like an ape, nor did the Basque of Spain fare better, so that at the last I cursed him

in all three for a pagan dog, and the louder I cursed the broader he grinned and the more he nodded. God send us a Christian next time; this fellow, I take it, was pure Spain."

"If his patois baffles Marcel, Sire," said I, "the rest of us need waste no time upon him."

"Then let him mount," answered the King sourly. "It means a more cautious playing of our cards, that is all."

But presently he drew up close to my side and said: "This creates a difficulty not foreseen. I had counted, De Bernauld, that Basque would serve our turn throughout the lost provinces, and none been the wiser. That has failed. What now?"

"Plain French, Sire," replied I bluntly, and with difficulty keeping back an anathema on the whole misbegotten business. "There is a treaty between France and Spain, and the two are at peace; why should four plain gentlemen not polish their manners on Spanish courtliness?"

"For two reasons: first, because there is no need, our manners are well enough; second, because four gentlemen on such an errand would have four lackeys to fetch and carry."

"The second weighs more than the first, Sire, but our lackeys are behind, and if they miss their way whose fault is that? Not ours."

"A lie, De Bernauld? What would Marmet say?"

"A half-truth, Sire, for behind they are—some twenty or thirty leagues, maybe. As to Marmet:

show me the churchman who never quibbles. Life is a patchwork at the best, and if folly makes a hole what can we do but darn it?"

Whereat he looked at me sharply, but in the end his eyes twinkled. He knew better than I that for him to cry out against half-truths was to fault the policy of his life.

Up from the undulating slope of the broad valley, broad almost as a plain, was thrust a huge spur of rock. It was as if nature in her travail flung up an arm to heaven, and, dying, held it there frozen into stone. In three directions the sides fell away in smooth cliffs, but towards the north the ascent, though abrupt, was more gradual. Up this slope—a bewilderment of titanic toppling boulders that seemed forever ready to fall and yet forever held their place, and would hold while the world endured—a corkscrew path wound with slow curves to where, grey as its eternal foundations, the Castle stood with walls so closely knit to the ascending rock as to seem its pinnacle and crown.

It lay four-square, a pointed turret at every corner, and deep machicolations running beneath the battlements. From each angle that overtopped the plain, and from the upper centre of each wall, stout iron cages were thrust out still further to dominate the approaches; and that the pious folk might pray as well as fight, the ridge of a chapel roof abutted upon the eastern tower.

As we rode onwards Henry scanned its every

particular with eager interest. His were the searchings of a keen critic, and I will wager that not a detail of the sharp outline that lay like a grey silhouette against the mellow light, nor of the more confused bulk that frowned down the slope, escaped his notice.

"It is mine by right, De Bernauld," he said at last, his flashing eyes never shifting their gaze. "Mine by right, and if nought miscarries it will be mine again. Why, with such defences five score men could flout an army."

"True, Sire," replied I, rubbing my beard thoughtfully; "as ill a place to get into as to get out of. Let them bolt the door, and nought but a bird——"

He gave me no time to finish.

"Let me bolt a door in Pau," he broke in with a gesture of impatience, "and my word for it, nought but a rat would win its way out. A door is no more than a door here or there. A moment since you said there is a treaty with Spain. There lies your guarantee."

"Guarantee!" I echoed; "Philip would break through fifty treaties to lay hands on the heir of France. Then there is Teresa Saumarez——"

Again he interrupted me.

"Plague take your forebodings," he cried angrily. "Are you turned coward or madman, Monsieur de Bernauld, that you harp so on the one string?"

What I would have answered I know not, but at that moment there came a great clatter of hoofs behind, and De Montamar, whom we had not missed, galloped up, with Marcel two lengths behind.

"The name at last," he cried as he came abreast. "We shall have no host to-night, but a hostess; the Castle belongs to Mademoiselle de Lignac."

"De Lignac? De Lignac smacks more of France than Spain."

"Ay," said the King, "and more of Navarre than either. Is this certain, De Montamar?"

"Unless the fellow we questioned lied, Sire. 'De Lignac,' said he, 'and a demoiselle to boot.' We stopped to learn no more, for you were at the foot of the ascent."

"De Lignac? De Lignac? Ay: I have it now. There are Lignacs west there by Clairence. Honest Huguenots and true men. My faith! but if this is a scion of that root, fortune has met us with both hands full. It was in my bones, De Bernauld, that good would come of this for all thy croaking. Let us ride on, gentlemen, and do thou, my friend, think shame of thyself and thy whinings of Teresa Saumarez. Our *rôle* is now frank boldness."

"But no names, Sire."

"I grant you that; no names, at least not yet;" and as we rode up the winding slope I promised myself there should be none until the frontier lay once more to the south of us.

The ascent was steep, and at every angle of the curve there stood a sodded battery of two guns commanding the approach, while on either side were enormous boulders whose huge bulk afforded ample and impregnable shelter for arquebusiers. Famine,

thirst, or pestilence might make a prey of Château Lignac, but never the assault of man, unless aided by treachery from within, or that incaution which in a captain is as criminal as treachery.

That mademoiselle, our hostess who was to be, ran no risks from this last we soon had full evidence. A turn of the road while yet we were little better than half-way up the incline brought in view a massive gateway flung across the path from one gigantic boulder to its opposite fellow,—a gateway in the upper shadows of which hung the iron teeth of a portecullis, and before whose gaping mouth there lounged three men-at-arms.

“Now comes the pinch,” said the King across his shoulder, but never shifting the straight poise of his head. “Bustle them, De Bernauld, as if it were the Duke of Salamanca, or the Prince of the Asturias himself come to pay a visit incognito.”

Which was very well said, but advice easier to give than to follow for a man who knew dimly that a certain Mademoiselle de Lignac already had him in her grip, and knew no more save that he was in an enemy's country, in spite of all treaties to the contrary. Still, it was very well said, and, even admitting the pitfalls, the best advice to follow.

“Good day, men,” said I, in Basque, and speaking with the nonchalance of their mistress's best-beloved first cousin. “Are the guest-chambers empty? We seek the grace of a night's lodgment at the hands of Madame the Chatelaine,” and would have passed on

with a patronising gesture but that two of them lowered their long pikes across the entrance.

"You have the password, seigneur?"

"Password, fellow? Where should I find a password save the password of common courtesy? Are we of your castle trencher-serapers? Best turn aside these toothpicks of yours lest you bring a heavier censure than mine on your heads?"

"Your pardon, seigneur," answered one, civilly enough, and with a hesitancy I was swift to note; "we had our orders."

"Ay, ay, but not touching us," and with a prick of the spur I pressed forward, leaving them staring and in doubt.

"Well hector'd," whispered the King softly; "but 'tis no more than the first trick of the game. *Ventre St Gris!* look what lies ahead. Where is there in all Navarre, even in Pau itself, a fortress as well watched as this plain demoiselle's!"

He might well exclaim. For there, at the head of the next turn, was another gateway, own brother in strength to that we had passed through, and with a similar trio of guardians standing between its jaws. Nor was this the last of them. Later we were to come upon a third, identical in all particulars with its forerunners, but having a castellated turret at either angle.

Neither of these, however, proved any barrier; for in place of levelled pikes and inconvenient questionings, we were met by respectful salutes, and as strict

a standing at arms as if the rank of him who went by had been truly guessed. I take it that, having passed the first line of defence without commotion, it was no longer any one's duty to interpose an obstruction.

Gardens, parterres, and pleasaunces there were none at Château Lignac. The narrow path, with its rough flankings of naked rock, ran unchanged to the great door. There was not even a broad court fronting the façade. Mademoiselle's forebears had been cautious men, and had built with such care that an enemy would find no foothold even under the sturdiest defences of the castle, and that these defences were rooted in skill and experience was clear.

"Mark," said Henry, as we topped the lip of the last ascent—"mark how the walls are honeycombed with loopholes, and how each loophole slopes so that it commands the road. Mark, too, how thickly the echauguettes are set. Why, they are as plentiful as the cotes in a columbary. Look how the merlons are pierced, and how wide the machicolation. Every window grated! There is reason in that, but to set a bar where nought but a bird can reach out-reasons reason. Nor are the pigeons wanting for the dove-cotes; look, man, look, as I live there is a fellow in every one of them! 'Tis a hornet's hive, De Bernauld, a hornet's hive, and I'll warrant with every sting sharpened!"

"The more need to be wary, Monsieur d'Albret," replied I, shortly, pulling up at the foot of the fan of steps in front of the great door, where already a

yellow-faced major-domo and two or three lackeys were in waiting.

The "Monsieur d'Albret" sobered him, for I saw him bite his lip as he climbed down, and thenceforward, for a time, he was as circumspect as a prude in questionable company.

"The Château de Lignac?" said I, interrogatively, and dropping my reins with the air of an expectant guest as I spoke. "Ay? then the fellow we met told us truth. We are strangers, friend; that much my speech will have shown you. Being strangers, then, we seek a night's hospitality where, we are assured, none ever sought it in vain."

"Your Excellency is French?" said he gravely, and coming down a step or two.

"No hard guess that," replied I, with a laugh. "If I am as right as to lodgings as thou art as to nation, the thing is settled."

"And your Excellencies' servants?" said he, coming down another step or two and looking from me to the King, who was already on his feet, patting and fondling his beast's head.

"They are behind," answered I, giving my head a backward toss; "nor have I seen them for more than two hours past. House us, friend, and, since they are the Lord knows where, let them fend for themselves."

On that he turned to one of the serving-men behind him and spoke in a low voice, pointing his instructions with a sharp tapping on his finger-tips, one, two, three, four.

"Two rooms will suffice," said I, guessing at his pantomime. "We are no Paris gallants. Besides, being without servants, we can the better truss one another's points. For a soldier to do a soldier's valeting is no hardship."

Which was what Henry would have called another half-truth, since my uppermost thought was that we should be two and two, instead of one and one, if events went askew.

"It shall be as your Excellency pleases," answered our friend of the yellow face, with a bow that was Castilian in its depth. "Follow me, messieurs; these fellows will see to your beasts and your own travelling gear."

If the hall into which he led us was sombre to obscurity, it was at least nobly proportioned and richly furnished, though the meagre light prevented any full grasp of its details. The hangings were of crimson velvet, looped, braided and fringed with gold cord, while curtains of the same material, lavishly embroidered, were drawn across the doors to right and left. Brocaded silks and work of elaborate tapestry covered the seats and backs of the antique settles, and bear- and wolf-skin mats were strewn upon the flagged floor.

Crossing the hall, which at the side opposite the entrance opened upon a corridor running the length of the façade, we mounted a broad but ill-lit and well-worn stairway hung with arras; turned down a gallery to the left, and were ushered into two rooms still aglow with the brightness of the setting sun.

"Good!" cried Henry, slapping our guide upon the shoulder. "Give us but our saddle-bags, that we may make a brief toilet before presenting ourselves to our hostess; after that I care not how soon we sup. You and I, my friend," and he turned to me, "are housed here like princes; De Montamar and Marcel will bide yonder."

"Then your Excellencies are pleased to be pleased?"

"Our Excellencies are more than pleased, and—ay, here come the bags."

"Since your Excellencies have travelled far, it would, perhaps, be more convenient to sup first and be presented to My Lady after?"

"A good thought, my friend; and 'tis the right order—duty and pleasure. Besides, we can then bide in your lady's company until she wearies of us, and we are not given to wearying women. A very good thought, and by what name, Master Seneschal, shall we call the thinker of such a very good thought."

Yellow-face had by this time bowed himself to the door, and it was with a final lowest of all low reverences that he replied—

"Miguel Zarresco, Excellency," and shut himself without.

CHAPTER XVII.

MADEMOISELLE DE LIGNAC.

"MIGUEL ZARRESCO! Zarresco!" said the King, looking up from the strap and buckle at which he had been tugging. "Now, where the plague did we hear of a Zarresco? And what, man, has dumbfounded you all of a sudden? The plot moves well, and yet you look as dreary as if the hangman was fumbling at your neck ruffles."

"It was Bernard Zarresco who died of a split skull there at the tryst," answered I. "This fellow must be his brother."

"And what of that? In Navarre it would be no hard thing to stumble against two Albrets in a day's journey, or thrice two, for that matter."

"But she who was mistress to the one may well be mistress to the other," I persisted.

"Chut!" replied he, turning again to his strap, "there your logic goes off at a gallop. Let them be brothers if it pleases you to think so; what that proves is this: Cracked-skull travelled to Navarre by way of Lignac that he might foregather with Yellow-

face, therefore he took the pass onward by Oloron. To my mind Zarresco number two counts in our favour, since it gives a good and sufficient reason why Zarresco number one came to be in these parts. Only, say nothing of this to Marcel. The fellow would so use his jaws chattering that he would have no leisure to eat."

Then he fell to whistling, and not another word could I get out of him but nonsense. It was—

"Supper first, De Bernauld, supper first. If you stuff a man full of windy words where shall he find room for honest meat?" Or, "I wonder if this De Lignae damsel will be as hard of capture as this prison-house of hers. Will she have a fair face, d'ye think?" Or, "I would I had my mulberry and silver here, since with our scant leisure the assault must be a sharp one; yet, after all," and he curled his moustache upwards with both hands, "it is the man the wenches look to, not the trappings," and upon that point he had a right to speak, since few had a greater experience than Henry of Navarre!

In spite of the frugality of his wardrobe—he had but one spare doublet, a ceremonial set of laces, a ruffle or two, and a change of linen—I had done my grooming long before him, the reason being that he prinked himself like a woman, changing the set of his slender adornments a dozen times before they hit off his fastidious taste.

"It is all very well for you," said he, with a touch of malice, as looking up suddenly he caught my eye

upon him. "You and Marcel are our solid sobriety, who must play decorum with the dowagers, and mourn the degenerateness of the age. I and De Montamar have another part to play, and, by my faith, I will throw away no point of the game. Why, man, a ruffle awry might affront this De Lignac, and to win her may win Spanish Navarre, which would win France."

But if I read his care aright he thought more of the conquest of Henry d'Albret than of the King of Navarre.

During this toilet I had leisure to look about me and schedule our surroundings, no useless waste of spare time in strange quarters. Our room was some seven paces square, lofty, and, for the Château Lignac, well lit, although both its windows were heavily barred. On the floor, and surrounding a table placed in the centre of the chamber, were scattered rugs and unlined wolf-skins. The settles and chairs, of which there were six or eight, were of polished oak, dark as bronze with its hundred years of service, and were covered in stout leather; a metal basin and ewer stood upon a table to one side. In either corner, flanking the door, was a carved bedstead of the same wood draped by bell-shaped brocade curtains hung from hooks in the ceiling. The door, which stood in the inner thickness of the yard-deep wall, was strongly bolted, and bore a lock of ponderous, reassuring proportions. Shutters of the ladder pattern hung beside the windows. Let a man set his back

to the window and he would echo the King's phrase, "we are housed like princes"; but let him turn, and the uncompromising heaviness of the grating, together with the hideous depth that fell sheer at his feet, would force to his lips that other phrase, "this prison-house," for it was as truly a dungeon as any in the Bastille.

All this I read as the King pulled out his laces, curled his beard, flattened his bows, and sprinkled himself daintily with perfume. But, at last, he was ready, and, having given his moustache a final twist in the oval mirror which hung between the windows, he turned to me:

"Let us march to victory, De Bernauld. Ventre St Gris! but it is a double conquest. A good supper and a pretty woman, and, on my faith as a gentleman, I do not know which prospect pleases me better."

In the gallery, not only was a lackey in readiness to be our escort, but De Montamar and Marcel were waiting, the former stamping upon the flags in his impatience, the latter leaning against the window that pierced the end of the passage

"A glorious outlook, eh?" said Henry, with a swift gesture of his hand towards the broad stretch of country now darkening in the twilight.

"Maybe, monsieur," answered Marcel, with a shrug of his shoulders. "For my part, I was calculating how far a man would have to fall if he were in one of these bird-cages I see thrust out yonder, and the bottom gave way under him!"

The great dining-hall of the Château was on the ground-floor, in the angle underneath our lodgings. We, therefore, made our way to it by a staircase that opened downwards in that corner. It was a mere shaft, some four feet wide, with the wall and the narrow pillar round which it curved worn smooth as polished marble by the friction of many generations.

"I trust, my friend," said Henry, tapping on the shoulder the lackey who preceded us, "that your mistress is less ancient than her castle? though, faith, she can scarcely be more dangerous; and I would rather break my heart over the one than my neck over the other!"

"My lady's father, who is two years dead, would have been but fifty this very month, señor," answered he. "She, God bless her, was born in '61."

"And so is three-and-twenty. By my faith, a very pretty age; for, though still in the flush of her youth, she has outgrown her giggling, and is a man's mate. Are there no men in Spain, or is she vowed to a convent, that she is still Mademoiselle de Lignac?"

The man stopped short in a turn of the stairs, and looked up:

"Monsieur is French?"

"Monsieur is French!" echoed the King; "and thou, friend, thou too hast a French tongue."

"I am of the Lignac side," said he simply.

"Oh, ho! so there are two sides, are there? A French and a Spanish, I'll wager. But what has this to do with mademoiselle being still mademoiselle?"

"Nothing, monsieur, for that is not my affair; but as to the convent: we of our side have no love for convents."

"Then am I also of thy side! for I, in my turn, have no love for convents. What! Plague take it; a pretty woman has no business in such a place. If it were only the old, the ugly, and the shrews they cloistered, it would be another matter. I myself would build them a cat's home!" and he broke into a laugh that rumbled up and down the hollow shaft like far-off thunder.

"But with us, monsieur, it is a thing of conscience."

"Conscience!" repeated Henry contemptuously; "a lackey with a conscience, and in Spain, too!"

But, leaning down, I whispered in his ear, "What if the man be Huguenot, Sire, and Mademoiselle de Lignac also? This is no jest."

In an instant, as he grasped the scope and possibilities of the suggestion, the King's face sobered.

"Thy pardon, friend," said he, with that grave courtesy which became him so well, "I did wrong to laugh, since oftentimes conscience is God upon earth, and I myself admit no higher guide. Speak openly. We, thou knowest, are French gentlemen. Are there, by chance, two creeds in the sides thou speakest of? I ask no secrets; still, be frank, I warrant thee safe?"

Which was a large promise from a man who could not warrant his own safety; no, not for a day nor an hour! Something of this must have passed through

the other's mind, for he stood a moment eyeing the King keenly, then he recommenced the descent.

"There are some things, monsieur," said he across his shoulder, but with all respect, "that Lignac keeps behind Lignac's teeth. This much is true: I am of Navarre, and you know the proverb, 'No man carries charcoal in a flour sack.' Is there need to say more? There is Señor Miguel calling me. Let us hasten, monsieur."

"And Señor Miguel," asked the King softly, "of what side is Señor Miguel?"

"Reverse the proverb, monsieur," said the fellow, with a shrug; "'No man carries flour in a charcoal sack.' Señor Miguel is Spanish of the Spanish, and came to Lignac with the Donna—— But we have arrived, señor. The hall is yonder."

With a bow he stood aside, and pointed to where the major-domo waited for us by an open door. Plainly, Señor Miguel had ears like a fox for all his august courtesy.

Leaving the others to pass on, I set my foot upon the three-inch deep black oak moulding which ran above the skirting-board, and motioned to the attendant to set right a bow which had not gone wrong.

"In a word," whispered I, bending over him as if to direct his movements, "is Mademoiselle de Lignac for The Religion or against? Is she Huguenot or Catholic?"

"The first, monsieur, the first," said he under his breath, and smoothing the ribbon with shaking fingers;

"but, for the Lord's sake, be cautious. We live but on sufferance, every one of us—both mistress and man—and my dead lady's family have never forgiven her for turning heretic like her husband. They suck the revenues of Lignac, these Spaniards, and therefore we are tolerated; but may God have mercy upon us if the old cat takes to scratching!"

"Thou art certain of this, friend?"

"I was my Lord's body-servant, monsieur," replied he simply, as if to say, "Who should know better than I!"

Lifting my foot from the beading, I examined it critically, nodded my thanks, and leisurely followed the King and his companions. They were already at table, and if I was more silent than they it was because my mind had something to chew as well as my teeth.

The prospects of success appeared brighter than at any time since the first mootings of the King's hare-brained scheme, and, with Mademoiselle de Lignac to guide us, we might hope to traverse Spanish Navarre not only in safety, but with some assurance of a tolerable welcome. Let us find a dozen great families who still clung to the proscribed faith, and Henry's dream might yet become a reality. Nor should this be impossible. There are none more clannish than the Basques. The currents of other nationalities flow round about them, but do not penetrate. The Basque of Spain intermarried with the Basque of France, and so the principles of Marguerite d'Angoulême and Jeanne d'Albret would travel south. Nor, again,

were the seventy-two years which had passed since Ferdinand and Isabella had rent in twain The Little Kingdom so long a period as to have destroyed the sentiment of ancient loyalty.

The room in which we were served was not the great hall, as I had expected, but a small anteroom opening off it. It was plainly furnished, the hangings being of dark claret-coloured cloth, while in each corner a full suit of armour was set up, a great trophy of weapons of all ages being hung between the windows and above the door. These gave the chamber a masculine air rather than that of a lady's boudoir, and, indeed, it presently appeared that it had been the justice-room of the late lord of Lignac.

But if the room was warlike the supper was eminently peaceable, and the King, whose catholic palate could appreciate alike truffles or garlic, was lavish in his praise.

"If mademoiselle were but a man," said he, emptying his glass as the last cover was removed, "I could promise him some return of hospitality for all this, but as it is——"

"As it is," I broke in, "we had better keep our heads clear to pay courtesy to the woman. Do us the kindness, friend," I continued, turning to Señor Miguel, who stood gravely at the head of the table, directing all things with vigilant courtesy, "to inform Mademoiselle de Lignac that four gentlemen from France crave permission to present themselves and return thanks in person for her hospitality."

"She already knows of your coming, messieurs," replied he, looking down the table at us, "and bids me say that our poor house is at your disposal. By what names shall I have the honour——"

Fearful lest the King's loosened tongue should forget caution I cut in quickly, not allowing Zarresco to finish.

"Name to mademoiselle," said I, pointing round the table, "Monsieur d'Albret, the Count de Montamar, and Monsieur Clairret."

Señor Miguel bowed to each in turn with solemn gravity, but giving to De Montamar a full half foot greater depth of reverence than to either of the others.

"Monsieur d'Albret, the Count de Montamar, Monsieur Clairret," he repeated, "and his Excellency himself?"

"Monsieur de Zéro," replied I shortly, and rising as I spoke, so as to cut short the inquisition. "If mademoiselle will honour us, we are ready."

As we followed the major-domo down the broad passage and round the south-west angle of the castle, I found time to whisper in the King's ear what I had learned from De Lignac's valet. For a moment he made no reply in words, but the light that flashed into his eyes and the sudden firmer set of the mouth told me that he, too, fully understood the importance of the news. Then he said—

"It hangs upon the stuff the girl is made of, but"—and then came the squaring of the shoulders and the

inevitable upward twist of the moustache—"if she be worth the winning she shall be won; be easy as to that."

Lest too many descriptions become tedious, I omit the portrayal of the enormous dreary room in which we were received by Claire de Lignac. Such a catalogue belongs rather to the house-milliner. It is sufficient that the air was so stuffed with formalities that even the King's buoyancy was pricked. A well-filled mausoleum was about as cheerful a place as the great réception-room of Château Lignac! Nor can I tell aught either of Mademoiselle Claire's costume, save that it was of some shimmering stuff caught in low at the waist and falling down to the feet, and that on her head was the flat French hood of the period. My one thought was of her face. Not, the Lord knows, because she was a woman and pleasant to look upon. No, not that. Since my Lady came into my life there has been but one woman in the world for me, and though we both grew old, it was enough that we grew old together. It was rather to see, as the King said, what manner of stuff she was made of, and what I saw contented me.

Strangely, too, of her looks, as a woman's looks are commonly reckoned, I saw little. Later the King raved of grey eyes, level brows, red lips, tawny brown hair, and I know not what else. I, for my part, saw nothing but a clear firm gaze, a resolute set mouth, a broad purposeful forehead, and an upright carriage that told of health, strength, and activity.

De Montamar, being in Señor Miguel's eyes the most important of the party, was presented first; then came Mareel, followed by myself. The King came last of all. Now, as I have said, my one thought was Mademoiselle de Lignac's face, and whereas we three were greeted with the frank courtesy common to any well-bred hostess, a flattering change swept across her face as she rose from the courtsey which acknowledged the King's bow. Her eyes dilated, and a sudden flush reddened her to the very temples—a thing which Henry was as swift to note as I.

But it was no more than the emotion of an instant, and before even the King's ready tongue could cloak a compliment, her smiling face was set anew in its polite mask.

"I have but waited, messieurs," said she—and her voice being strong and clear matched her face—"to thank you, before retiring for the night, for the honour done to Lignac; and to say that I beg you will command my people as you would your own. To-morrow I hope to play the hostess to better purpose."

"To-morrow?" cried Henry, his face falling; "does the moon always set with the sun at Lignac?"

"It were but a quenched and lifeless orb if it did," broke in De Montamar. "Monsieur d'Albret must rather mean Venus."

"Monsieur d'Albret can explain his own meanings," answered the King tartly. "You push pre-

sumption over-far, Monsieur le Comte." The slip in his compliment had nettled him, and it was a new thing to have another openly offer incense at the same shrine as himself. Then he went on: "If it be a point in Spanish etiquette——"

"I am mistress in my own house, monsieur," she broke in with a touch of hauteur that became her well. "To be frank, and as an excuse to cover the discourtesy, my grand-dam has need of me. She is ailing to-night."

"Ah, mademoiselle!" cried Henry, "is the entertaining of strangers not also a charity?"

"Do you hint at angels unawares, monsieur?" replied she, looking him full in the face, but making him no other answer. "Miguel, lights; and see to it that these gentlemen want for nothing."

"Then to-morrow, mademoiselle," said I, "may we hope to be presented to Madame de Lignac?"

"To-morrow," replied she, pausing to curtsy as she swept to the door, "madame will see you, gout or no gout, rest assured of that."

"Peste!" said Henry as the door shut, "but these Spanish dames of the antique school are courtesy incarnate. 'Gout or no gout,' saith she, and we but chance guests. 'Tis a dull place, this Lignac; let us get to bed, De Bernauld, and dream that to-morrow is better than to-day."

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CHAPTER XVIII.

"TO THE VENGEANCE OF TERESA SAUMAREZ."

THAT we slept without so much as turning was no marvel. Thanks to Pierre Salces, I, at least, had passed but a broken night in the mountain inn, and the descent into Spain had been a succession of fatigues. But habit binds with even stronger chains than weariness, and my Bernauld custom of early rising wakened me while there were as yet few astir in the castle.

I quarrel with no man who sleeps out his night. Nineteen times in twenty nature's measure is wisest, but to be a waking slug-a-bed is intolerable. I therefore rose and dressed softly, and shooting back the bolts with care made my way out into the corridor. As I expected it was deserted, but from below there came that muffled hum and stir of life which belong to a great household, and which suggest the ceaseless turmoil of busy streets heard from far off.

Being in no mood for servants' gossip I made my way up the spiral staircase, past two upper floors, and out by a narrow doorway to the battlements. Heavens! what a prospect spread itself in the cloud-

less glory of the early morning! I had seen more of the world in my time than falls to the common lot of men, but never had I been so moved. Doubtless the isolated position of Lignac, perched upon its solitary rock, aided the imagination, but with such a prize to be won as spread itself in all directions it was little wonder that the King set small store on the pawus of the game.

As I stood looking out to the west with shaded brows Marcel joined me. The night's rest had left its mark upon the old squire, and never since I cut short his singing in the Juraçon vineyards had I seen his eye so bright.

"Well?" cried I, sweeping an arm round me. "Is that not worth ten times the labours and risks?"

He glanced carelessly from west to east and pushed out his nether lip.

"Well enough, oh ay, well enough," he answered, looking down through a crenelle; "but to my mind, the woods as you look out from Madame Jeanne's sewing-room at Bernauld are better worth the seeing. To what use, d'you suppose, Master Blaise, they put these bird-cages yonder?" and as he spoke he pointed below to two railed projections thrust out from the wall, and whose airy absence of solidity fully warranted his description.

"They are echauguettes," answered I; "and though they are commonly more substantial, you may see the same at Blois."

"The Lord forbid that I should ever play sentinel

in one of them," said he, with a shake of his head. "Honest brick and mortar for me, and not a half-inch bar and a four-inch space, and maybe a hundred and fifty feet of air between me and the nearest solid. A man would want the nerve of a cat for such work as that, and since you fellow stabbed me with his stick at Pau I have been as timorsome as a hare."

Nor, in the face of the sheer and awful drop that fell away at our feet, could I find courage to laugh at him.

In such a place as Lignac, with its hollow court in the centre, its brass carronades, its splayed embrasures, its fighting turrets with their stands of antique petronels, there were a score of things to delight men whose trade at the best had been the art of maintaining peace by being ever ready for war; so that time slipped by us unnoted, and we were summoned to breakfast before we were well aware that we were hungry.

Having been joined by the King and De Montamar we made our way once more down the winding stairs, but this time we were ushered into the great banquetting hall, of which the previous night I had caught no more than a glimpse. It was a T-shaped room, down the centre of which ran a huge table of dull oak, black with time, stained with use, its edges hacked and notched by many generations of careless feasters. At the head of the T stood a dais some three feet high. Across this another table extended, at whose centre, facing the entire length of the hall, were set two

high-backed chairs embellished with quaint and fantastic carvings. Flanking these were two stuffed settles, while down either side of the long table were ranged lines of stools and wooden benches.

These last were two-thirds occupied by just such a motley crowd as was a strange relic of feudal days. Retainers of different degrees, begging friars, wandering chapmen, a few stray soldiers of fortune, filled the seats as their forerunners might have done any time in five centuries. In Navarre such a gathering would have been a nine days' wonder, but in Spain a custom dies hard. Before each was placed a deep wooden vessel—half bowl, half platter—an iron-bladed knife, a wooden spoon, a metal cup, and a huge trencher of bread to serve both as food and napkin. The dais was unoccupied.

"My faith!" whispered Henry in my ear, as standing in the hollow of the doorway we looked round the room; "a style like this would fit badly with the revenues of The Little Kingdom!" Then he turned to the major-domo, "And we, friend, are we above or below the salt?"

"Your places lie this way, messieurs," said Señor Miguel, who having met us at the door now preceded us up the four steps leading to the raised platform. "My two mistresses will be here presently."

So saying he placed us on either side the carved chairs, De Montamar having the place of honour to the right with Marcel by him, and I on the left with the King next me.

"Then Madame de Lignac is recovered?" said Henry, seating himself carelessly; "should we not pay her our respects in some more formal way than is possible here?"

"Madame de Lignac?" replied the major-domo, questioningly; "ah yes, I understand. These are her orders, monsieur."

Even while he was speaking there was a bustle in the room behind—the ante-chamber where we had supped the previous night—the dividing curtain masking the doorway was thrown back, and a lackey entered with a long white wand in his hand.

"Mademoiselle de Lignac," he cried loudly.

At the sound of the metal rings rasping on the curtain bar the buzz and chatter which had rumbled continuously down the hall ceased, and every face was turned towards the dais. It was as if his Most Catholic Majesty Philip the Second were about to make his *entrée*. Nor was the illusion dispelled when Claire de Lignac appeared in the doorway, an elder woman leaning upon her shoulder. With the gravity of a Turk, and the stiff precision of an automaton, each individual in the long lines on either side the table—soldier, stranger, jack-at-arms, and whatnot—bent in a ceremonious bow. The salutations being returned with an equal gravity, all resumed their seats, and the hum of conversation buzzed slowly down the hall.

At mademoiselle's entrance we too had risen, and were by her presented with due form and ceremony

in turn to the elder lady. Rarely had I seen a nobler figure, a more charming type of how to grow old gracefully. Taller than mademoiselle by half-a-foot, she so bore herself that not a hair's-breadth of her height was lost. Slender without meagreness, her upright carriage gave her grace and dignity notwithstanding the feebleness of her gait. Nor did her face mar the charm of the picture. In spite of age her skin retained a delicate softness, and but for a furrow or two upon the forehead she was as unwrinkled as any woman of half her years need wish to be. Alert black eyes, that still held much of the fire of youth, looked keenly out from under level brows; her cheeks were full, and with a touch of colour upon their faint sallowness; her nose was straight, aquiline, and finely chiselled; her mouth and chin as resolute as mademoiselle's own. It was a great face, a noble face, but over it was a transparent veil of sorrow, and that pathetic hardness which comes only of much brooding upon grief.

As to her dress, it was notable for sombre mournfulness. From head to foot she was draped in black, the robe being of a stiff and rustling silk, unrelieved by jewel or ornament of any kind, while a filmy shawl of Spanish lace served her as cap, the ends being carried behind the ears and tied beneath the chin.

"Peste!" whispered the King in my ear pettishly as we again took the places allotted to us, De Montamar being on Claire's right hand, and I on the

left of the elder lady; "there is such a thing as being too modest. I should have called myself the Duke of Bigorre, or wheresoever you will. That chattering coxcomb will weary her to death. As for you, my friend, I would as soon rub shoulders with the devil as with that malignant witch, with her flaming coals of eyes and hawk's beak."

For my part, as I looked down the length of the dais, it seemed to me that mademoiselle was well enough pleased with her neighbour; and when it came to hawk's beaks the King laid himself open to a palpable *tu quoque*!

But I had little leisure to listen to his ill-humour.

"Monsieur is French?" said my neighbour, turning on me abruptly, and speaking with little of the weakness of age in her voice.

"Yes, madame, I and my companions are of France."

"Of France, but not French, ay, I catch your meaning, and your accent tells its own tale. You are Béarnnois, and to be Béarnnois is not to be French. Well, so much the better, monsieur, for Béarn and Navarre interest me."

"We are honoured, madame, and anything that I——"

"We will come to that presently," answered she, cutting me short with small ceremony. "As to Monsieur D'Albret, his name betrays him. There are Albrets and Albrets, some far off cousin of the King's, no doubt?"

"As to that, madame," said I cautiously, "I never heard my friend claim any such cousinship."

"So much the better for him," cried she, her mouth curling in a fine contempt. "Are you kin to that pitiful rogue, Monsieur d'Albret? If so, pray accept my regrets beforehand if I wound your feelings."

"Meaning the King of Navarre, madame?" said Henry, leaning forward.

"Meaning that beggarly renegade who has turned his coat not once, but twice, and who I doubt not would do it a third time for a single crown."

"True, for a crown, he might do so," answered he coolly. "As to kin. We had the same ancestor, madame, but it would puzzle Mountjoy himself to count our cousinship."

At this moment there came an interruption from the lower end of the great hall, and a hush fell upon the universal chatter. The door was flung open and three brethren of St Dominic filed in, their hands crossed upon the bosoms of their black robes. Ranging themselves in line at the end of the table, they bent their heads and sang a prolonged grace with sonorous solemnity, bowed at its close, and turning, filed out in the same silence as they had entered.

With the first note thus struck, all present, we upon the dais amongst the rest, rose to their feet and stood listening with bowed heads, nor until the last black skirt had fluttered out of sight was there as much sound as the rustle of a sleeve. Then all

repeated themselves, and the rasping of the wooden bowls upon the table told that at last the business of the hour was about to begin. But this much was plain, and during the singing of the grace I sought to convey it to the King by a pressure of the knee: let Mademoiselle de Lignac be as Huguenot as she liked, she was politic in her Huguenotism.

"Monsieur is very devout," said madame to me as we sat down, nor was there any disguise in the sneer; "monsieur, perhaps, is Catholic?"

"I have fought side by side with Coligny, madame," I replied gravely; "but I hold, as he held, that a man may reach God by many roads, therefore I am tolerant."

"By St Peter of Rome," cried she, rounding upon me with bent brows and striking her open hand noisily on the table, "that is not my idea. Plague take your tolerance! I neither want it nor grant it. Tolerant, quotha! thou tolerant? and to the mother of churches! Why! it is as if a lackey whom I splashed with my carriage mud was pleased to be tolerant."

"True, madame," said Henry, bending forward and combing at his beard; "we grant the splashing of mud."

What she would have answered I know not. Nothing peaceable, I am sure, for her bigotry and her wrath were alike roused, but Mademoiselle de Lignac intervened with a strange mixture of firmness and respect.

"Your pardon, madame ma grand'mère, but these gentlemen are our guests."

"Ay," answered the other sourly, "but not of our invitation." Then, as I was about to start to my feet, the thunder-cloud passed from her face, and its sudden stern malignancy gave place to a smile in which pride struggled hard with courtesy. "You, Monsieur de Zéro, you, Monsieur d'Albret, all you four gentlemen, pardon, I pray, an ill-tempered and gouty old woman whose gall has been so stirred by the buffetings of the world that its bitterness lies very ready to the tongue. I talk too much at times; but you know the proverb, 'A south wind that freezes, a north wind that thaws, and a woman who speaks little, are all three very rare.' Is my peace made, or must I crave your pardon and forgetfulness in some more setly ceremonious form? It is a terrible thing to have hot blood still in the heart in spite of the snows of age."

Such an amend from one of her weight of years left no answer in words but one, though for all her civil assurances the sting of her contempt rankled sorely.

Meanwhile course after course had come and gone. Boiled and baked fish of an indifferent softness, ollas, pasties, roasts, ragouts of formidable size, and so seasoned with garlic and strong tasting cheese as to be almost nauseating. But numerous as they were, the appetites that lined the lower table were equal to the task set them. Of every dish a portion found its way to each wooden bowl, and from thence was transferred with spoon, knife, or fingers to as many sets of

sturdy jaws. Wine, too, was not lacking; but while to us it was served in ordinary flagons, the goat-skin of "The Rat's Hole" was the only vessel in use at the lower table. If there is a constellation of Bacchus, it cannot be more regular in its orbit than were the two lackeys who ministered to the thirst of those below. Commencing at the dais, one on either side the table, and bearing the skin beneath the left arm, they revolved slowly in reverse directions. The right thumb and forefinger grasped the projecting leg of the beast, and at the smallest relaxation of the pressure the liquor squirted noisily into the tin drinking-vessel.

But now there was a pause. The hollow chatter, which had sunk into almost silence in the business of eating, again rose, loud and universal. An understood period in the feast had been reached, and the entry of two servants bearing enormous platters seemed to mark it. These dishes, so broad that the men's arms, extended to their fullest, no more than overlapped by the finger tips the outer edge, while the inner rested against the breast, contained each a well-grown pig, roasted whole and embedded in a mountain of prunes, and as the lackeys travelled down the lines I noted that there was no guest but carved his portion and ate, whether it were much or little.

Presently one mounted the dais, and as he halted beside the King I saw Henry eye the mangled, greasy ruin with manifest repugnancy.

"Taste it, Monsieur d'Albret," said madame, "though

with you it be but for form's sake. It is a test and custom of Lignac, and I ask no more than the bare compliance. We can be tolerant as well as Monsieur de Zéro, and welcome Catholic and Huguenot alike, ay, or even Pagan, asking no question for conscience' sake. But dogs of Jews we will not have, and so who sits at the board of Lignac must eat swine's flesh."

"And now," she went on as the lackey retired down the room, "we come to a second custom of Lignac, and for the honouring of which I beg you, gentlemen, one and all, to charge your glasses."

"It is a toast, then, madame?"

"A toast, Monsieur de Zéro."

Rising from her chair she rapped loudly on the table, and it was clear the signal was expected, for in an instant there was a great stillness.

"Are you ready?" cried she; "then to your feet, and in silence."

"But, madame," said I, as I rose in common with all the rest, "you have nothing but water;" nor, indeed, had she drunk anything else throughout the meal.

"Oh, believe me, monsieur," answered she bitterly, "while I have life I thank the saints I need no wine-heated blood to warm my hate. Are you ready, my friends? Well, then—To the vengeance of Teresa Saumarez!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DEBIT ACCOUNT OF TERESA SAUMAREZ.

TERESA SAUMAREZ!

For all the profound silence that followed her words—a silence as of the solemn memory of the dead—there was a thunderous booming in my ears as the blood rushed to my head, and I take credit to myself that I emptied my glass with the rest and set it down soundlessly before me. Not with enthusiasm, no; a man's complacency stops short of riotous delight in toasting his own sudden end.

But if I was tranquil, not so Marcel. As the words came home to him I saw him so sway upon his feet that he would have fallen if De Montamar had not grasped him by the arm. As it was, a full half of his wine splashed upon the table, and the glass not only rattled against his teeth but rang a tattoo upon the wood as he replaced it: Once rid of it, he leaned with both hands on the edge of the board as a man might in a mortal spasm; and when, in the same grim silence, we all once more sat down, his face was aged by ten years. What the effect would have been had

he known that not alone was Teresa Saumarez within arm's length, but that the brother of Bernardino Zarresco stood behind his settle, can only be guessed.

It was the King who broke the silence.

"Teresa Saumarez?" said he inquiringly; "who, if to ask be not an impropriety, is this Teresa Saumarez to whose vengeance we have drunk with so much pleasure, and what may the vengeance be?"

With our knowledge the question was a piece of supreme impertinence, but in our supposed ignorance it was not unnatural, seeing that we had spoken of the elder woman, without challenge, as Madame de Lignac. How should we guess that the relationship to mademoiselle was on the mother's side? The thing was clear enough now. The daughter of a Spanish Catholic had married a French Huguenot, the husband and wife had alike died, and the bitter-blooded Catholic grandmother had quartered herself upon her Huguenot grand-daughter, and that grandmother was Teresa Saumarez.

She had flung herself back in her carved chair, and was staring with blind eyes down the room, her lips moving soundlessly. Verily I believe she had forgotten us, and that for her time and space were annihilated. There was no longer a dingy, far off wall limiting her gaze, but the sunlit woods and hills of Florida lay before her, stripped of distance and all astir with the final scene of a long tragedy: the onset of Christian and heathen against

Christian worse than heather, the furrowed greenery of the quaking morass, and Diego Saumarez slipping inch by inch to his martyr's doom—to her a hero, to me a treacherous cur.

At the King's question she roused herself, her eyes still ablaze with wrath and hatred.

"Teresa Saumarez, monsieur? I am Teresa Saumarez."

It was as if she had said, I am Alecto, I am Atropos.

"Ah!" said he suavely, "had we but known that! Let us drink again, my friend." Steadily he filled his glass to the brim, emptied it at a draught, and bowed formally, "To the end of the vengeance of Teresa Saumarez!"

"And why to the end, monsieur?"

"Why the end?" he echoed. "Is it not the finish of a thing that is sought?"

"No! by all the saints, no, a thousand times, no! I would keep it half-wreaked to all eternity, with the other half for ever waiting on my nod. I would taste it, pamper it, fondle it, feed it; but devour it at a gulp and end it, no, no, no; that were sheer waste! Monsieur is of Béarn?"

"Of Béarn, madame,"

"Monsieur is of——of——the new religion?"

"Of the new religion, madame."

"Monsieur knows well his compatriots and his co-religionists?"

"I know both, madame, and well."

"Monsieur knows a certain Blaise de Bernauld?"

"I know him, madame."

"A petty gentleman?"

"Something more, madame, something more."

"Ay," she burst out, flinging out her right hand before her, its fist hard clenched, "that is God's truth; a double-tongued villain, a traitorous hound, an ignoble, cowardly slayer of prisoners, a pitiful perfidious wretch, the very accursed spawn of the devil. Something more? Ay, that much more and still much more than that."

"All this is very strange to me," began the King quietly; "Monsieur de Bernauld——"

"Monsieur me no monsieurs; call him bloody De Bernauld."

"Then this De Bernauld has offended you, madame?"

"Offended!" she echoed scornfully; "are we school children that we talk milk and water? Offended? Lord God, yes! have it so, he has offended me."

"How has he injured you, madame?"

"Injured is better; you improve, monsieur," replied she with a bitter sneer. "As to the how, you shall see for yourselves, gentlemen, all of you. Bring the Bernauld account-book, Miguel, and quickly."

However rapid had been her talk with the King it had lasted long enough for the meal to come to an end, and the gesture with which she sent the major-domo on his errand was taken as a dismissal

by those in the lower room. With one accord all rose, bowed as they had bowed at the first, and filed quietly out of the farther door.

Meanwhile we on the dais retained our seats in silence. Even mademoiselle and De Montamar had ceased their chatter, a chatter which had grown lower and more confidential as the hour wore on. As to Marcel, he sat hunched up on the settle like a paralytic, and except that his finger tips caught nervously at the fragments of his trencher of bread, and that from time to time he gnawed at his upper stubble of beard, one would have pronounced him in a trance. Henry, on the other hand, was full of life and movement; stroking his chin and twisting his moustaches as a man does who, though he sits in silence, knows that he has his due and is observed.

For myself, a dozen wild schemes were churning in my head, and I know that I fumbled uneasily at my sword-hilt, for, according to the custom of the day, we all four carried our side-arms. To strike down the steward on his return and make a dash for the great door; to seize mademoiselle and her incarnate fiend of a grandmother and hold them hostages for our safety; to spur ourselves into a feigned and clamorous indignation against this De Bernauld, and so make to ourselves friends of this mammon of unrighteousness; to take De Bernauld's part, force a quarrel on his behalf, and so ride off in a dudgeon of injured hospitality,—these, and I know not what else, contradictory and impossible,

played hare and hounds in my brain, each fresh scheme driving its predecessor scurrying before it. In the end I let them all go, since there was no possibility of concerted action, and turned an anxious eye on Marcel.

Marcel was the weak point in our defence. We three were wary, cool, expectant, and on guard. Not so Marcel. His nerve was broken, and when a man's nerve is broken he can neither lie straight nor tell the truth straight, but in his pitiful incertitude he tries to run a midway course and so ruins all. Nine times out of ten when it is unwise to babble out the whole truth it is doubly foolish to tell a half lie. Therefore in his present palsy of sense I trembled for Marcel's imprudence, and sought, though vainly, to put him on his guard with a gesture.

For a terrible five minutes the silence lasted. Then Zarresco returned bringing with him a long narrow book of perhaps fifty leaves' thickness. It was bound in yellow parchment, broad mourning lines running up the outer edge on either side, and along both top and bottom. Two clasps of silver held it closely fastened, though to judge by the soiled creases on its back it passed its days open rather than shut. Placing the volume before his mistress the majordomo would have retired, but at the first jingle of the curtain rings upon the rod Donna Teresa stopped him.

"Bide thou, Miguel," she said harshly; "this is

a family affair, and in a fashion touches thee as well as me."

"Is Señor Miguel, then, a relative?" asked Henry in his smoothest voice.

"He is more," replied she. "He is a friend, and a friend born for adversity is at times nearer kin than kindred."

The side glance she shot at Mademoiselle Claire not alone gave point to the remark but was a rebuke, nay, more, it was a challenge, and as the girl's mouth stiffened into firmness I half forgot my own danger, and thought with an odd sense of complacency that I had read her character aright.

"Kindred for love," said she, looking down the table towards us two, "and there is little love in keeping the ashes of hate ablaze, and little friendliness either. The story we heard was at best but half a story, and my uncle Diego——"

"Yes?" said the elder woman softly, as the younger paused, "thy uncle Diego?"

"Madame, it is hard upon twenty years ago, and I was no more than a child of five, but I am told that among stern men my uncle Diego——"

"Was sternest?—Be it so. That was to his foes. To them he was of the fibre Spain has need of, but to me he was the only son of his mother, and may God forget me when I forget the son of my love. What? Do we bear children so easily, we mothers, that we can give God thanks for their loss? and when a crafty, pitiless villain

traps them to their death shall we cringe and fawn and forgive like nuns who know no motherhood? Let who will do so, not Teresa Saumarez."

She was leaning forward against the table, bolt upright, and in the silence that followed she sat tapping the book gently with her finger tips in the mechanical fashion of one whose thoughts are leagues away. Then she slowly unhooked the clasps and spread out the book, face upwards, on the table, resting her open hands upon its pages.

"And this, madame," said the King, when at last waiting had grown into an itch of weariness, "this is——"

"The account due by Blaise de Bernauld of Bernauld in Bigorre to Teresa Saumarez, and by the Lord God who made us both, he shall pay it!"

"See," she went on, lifting her hands and laying a steady forefinger on the right-hand page. "Here is the bald statement:—

Feb. 1567.	DIEGO SAUMAREZ.	
May 1568.	Fee to Denis La Hake to slay the coward Blaise de Bernauld	One hundred crowns.
Sept. 1568.	Denis La Hake; and may the Lord have mercy on his soul	One hundred crowns.
Sept. 1572.	Fee to Marco of Pavia, to the same end	One hundred crowns.
April 1580.	Juan the Dominican; to advance God's glory is reward enough, therefore he would take no fee.	

Dec. 1582.	Fee to Carlos d'Albuquerque	One hundred and fifty crowns.
July 1584.	Fee to Bernardino Zarresco. A like amount to be paid to him on full proof that the said Blaise de Ber- nauld has gone to his own place	One hundred and fifty crowns."

The other side of the book was blank.

"With such a record, messieurs, would any one of you say 'God be praised'?"

"But, madame," said De Montamar, "I do not understand."

"Not understand?" she echoed, flaming up, and turning on him with hands trembling and her face all aglow with passion. "By my faith! it is very simple. See, monsieur, see. On this date Blaise de Bernauld murdered Diego Saumarez, son to Teresa Saumarez, murdered him in cold blood and by cowardly treachery—murdered him, murdered him, I say. Therefore it is set down to be paid for by Blaise de Bernauld, but since not all the ingots of the Indies can be weighed against a son's life I leave the money column blank. But have no fear, Blaise de Bernauld shall pay for it. Note now the second line. Can I avenge myself? Can I track this wolf to its den and slay it? It is my curse that I am a woman and helpless; therefore Denis La Hake for a fee acts as the hand in Navarre of her who must bide in Spain, fretting out her heart, and I set down to the account one hundred crowns. By what hapless chance I do

not know, but the wolf slew the hunter; therefore, as his fee was his valuation of himself, I set down another hundred crowns against De Bernauld. Then comes Marco of Pavia with a like sum, and of him I never heard again; it may be that the wolf trapped him too. After him followed Juan the Dominican, and this time I held the debt as good as paid. Let a man have the terror of eternity upon him and he will stick at nought. To him the corpse of Blaise de Bernauld was but a stepping-stone to grace. But Torriano, the General of the Dominicans, must needs have a use for him, and so Juan works out his salvation by another road than that of my vengeance. Carlos of Albuquerque was Marco over again, and so there are another hundred and fifty crowns due to me. Lastly, and this very month, this very month, monsieur, judge by that if my hate slackens, —lastly, I say, there is Bernardino Zarresco. A week to go, two weeks to hunt, a fourth to return; not long in days, and yet, and yet, delay gnaws and tears me to the very soul. Do you understand now, monsieur?"

René de Montamar had been a duller man than I ever found him if he had failed of comprehension. Apart from the words, the fierce wrath of the old fury told its own tale, and that she held her passion leashed in a certain restraint only added force and venom to the reality of her purpose. Had she frothed and raved and cursed it had been less dangerous than this savage concentration of abhorrence, this

cool controlled intentness upon vengeance. Did he understand? Verily, he did; but he knew not what to say, and so answered, half at random—

“And the other side of the account, madame, what is on it?”

“Nought as yet,” cried she, striking the open page with her hand. “Nothing that I call vengeance; a brat there was, a paltry whining babe that La Hake set his heel upon—a nothing, a nothing, but through no fault of mine.”

“Son for son, madame,” said I between my teeth, for even after all these years I could not bear to hear the little lad reviled; “son for son, it is quits.”

“Quits!” and she laughed aloud, such a laugh as might fill the mouth of devils in hell. “As well set Spain against the mud-heap they call Navarre. Quits? No, by the Lord God! nor will be until I can write on the blank there and in letters an inch long, ‘Blaise de Bernauld, gone to his own place; and may God have no mercy on his soul!’ Then I am quits with him, but not till then.”

Of a sudden her voice fell into a quaver. For all her implacability of passion the spirit was stronger than the flesh, and she was outworn by her own vehemence. In a breath the burden of threescore years and ten was upon her, and it was a broken and a tremulous voice that said—

“You will pardon a frail old woman, messieurs,

will you not ? a poor, weak, frail old woman. Claire, child, take me to my room, and bid Anita bring the cordial and the salts ; I am overwrought, overwrought. A frail old woman, messieurs, a frail old woman."

"May the Lord never send us such a one in her strength," said Henry, looking after her. "I hope, for his comfort's sake, that his excellency Don Saumarez died young!"

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CHAPTER XX.

MISCHIEF.

HAD I had my will, that glimpse we caught of Donna Saumarez as, leaning on her grand-daughter's arm, she faltered out of the great hall, would have been our last, but the King was obstinate, and would not budge. He had come to Spain for a set purpose, and it would take more than an old woman's ill-tempered ravings to turn him back.

"Why, man, what do you fear?" said he, as we wound our way up the narrow staircase in single file; "the witch has blabbed her secret while we have kept ours. As for her threats, I value them not a hair. More than that. You know this De Bernauld, do you not? Ay; none better! Well, your part is to have an edge against the fellow, and so let another line be added to the account. It would run like this: 'July 1584.—Blaise de Zéro no fee, save a Christian woman's blessing, seeing that to kill the wretch is a good deed, and he has his own private grudge to settle.' Why, the hag's gratitude would be worth a hundred men to our side when the rupture

comes—as come it will, if I can wheedle that little hussy who has hooked De Montamar.”

“But that is jest,” he went on hastily, seeing the sour look on my face; for certes, it was a little thing for him, who was not daunted, to set small value on her threats. “What is serious is, that we would have all Navarre, ay, and all France, too, singing scurrilous ballads of the four knights who fled from a woman’s tongue. To fail would be injury enough, but to be ridiculous in failure would be fatal. A lampoon is, to a man’s reputation, what a dagger is to his life.”

Passing by our sleeping chambers, we had mounted to the ramparts, where we three gentlemen walked abreast, while Marcel, with an odd kind of fascination, returned to his old scrutiny of the watch-out cages.

“What is your opinion, De Montamar?”

“My opinion!” said he, nervously curling his moustache. “I—oh, I—I agree with De Bernauld; and yet, Sire, there is a great deal also in the view you take. In short, I think that to leave in haste while we can stay in safety——” and between his will and his wit he broke down stammering.

“I understand,” said the King gravely; “your words are at odds, but your meaning is crystal clear. You would have us ride post to Oloron, but take Mademoiselle de Lignac with us.”

“I would save the girl from that she-wolf of a grand-dam.”

"And who told you that she wished to be saved?" asked Henry tartly; "or, for that matter, that there was aught of saving in it? *Ventre St Gris!* but you take too much upon you, monsieur; and all because of an hour's courtesy under a false conception."

"No falsehood upon my part, Sire," he began hotly.

"*Ta, ta, ta,*" broke in the King, waving his hand in front of him impatiently; "we know well enough what women are, and mademoiselle is no exception. You were the Count de Montamar, the rest of us plain Monsieur This or That; and she flew at what she thought the biggest game."

"The question," said I, "is riding home to Pan."

"What itch have you for Pan?" cried Henry petulantly. "Would it not be enough to be clear of Lignac? Ay; and you, De Montamar, if the girl rode with us—with her maid and who else she would—would not you, too, be content? Ay, again. Well, give me but an hour's talk with her, and I warrant that we will all three have our will. *Ventre St Gris!* there is by that farther turret. Now, gentlemen, give me my hour, and if I win not you shy bird I am not Henry of Navarre."

"Win her to what, Sire?" asked De Montamar fiercely; "are these politics, or some accursed —"

"The one or other, or maybe both," answered he lightly; "whichever mood comes uppermost. Nay, nay, De Bernauld, let me be; cannot you see she is lonely in the sunlight yonder."

Breaking loose from my arm, he hastened along the rampart to where Mademoiselle de Lignac stood, as he said, at the foot of the south-east turret, but facing away from us out towards the land of the sun-rising. With an angry exclamation De Montamar sprang forward, and would have followed, but that I held him back.

"Let him be," said I; "if she is a true woman an hour will not wheedle her to her own hurt—no, nor a week of hours. If she is a light-o'-mind it were better you knew it now than later."

"But if he plays the King, the glamour——"

"Still let him be," said I again, stopping him short in his heresy. "Where a king can wheedle in one hour a plain man can in two; and again, it is better that you should know it first than last. But have no fear; for all his vanity he has a close affection for Henry of Navarre, and will put himself in the hollow of no girl's palm, however soft and rosy it may be."

At the same time I told myself the trial was a hard one: a country girl pitted against the greatest gallant of his generation! and that, in an age of gallants, is a large word. That he was not handsome went for little. Few women, I think, unless they be themselves animal, set that in the forefront. He was better—he was comely; and for all that his inches were not great, it would be no hard thing for a woman to look kindly on such a sunny-faced man as the King. From his bare, curly head, as he strode along, hat in hand, to his silver-buckled and be-ribboned shoes, there was not a slack muscle in his

straight, supple, hard-bitten frame. Add to that a shrewd wit, a winning manner, a gay assurance, and he had small need of a pink-and-white perfection.

"It is very well for you, De Bernauld, to say let him be," replied De Montamar, "but if Madame Jeanne were in question you might be less philosophical."

"What? My poor lad, art thou bitten so deep as all that?" and, taking him by the arm, I walked him slowly up and down. "That is the unreason of the boy that clothes his mistress in every perfection but common-sense and constancy. Wait till thou art grown a man in loving—that is to say, when thou hast added to thy passion adoration, to thy adoration devotion, to thy devotion sacrifice, to thy sacrifice reverence, and to thy reverence assurance of faith—then it will be no longer mere flesh and blood that thou art in love with, but mind, soul, and spirit, not forgetting the frame they tenant; womanhood as it truly is, and not as thou thinkest it to be. When that day comes thou wilt be as philosophical as I am over Madame Jeanne."

But it was a waste of words, and as if a man talked of the stars to the blind. He was as yet a puppy with his eyes but one day opened, and so could see no farther than Mademoiselle de Lignac and the King leaning together upon the parapet in all the glory of the sunshine.

"To smother me in words is easy enough," he said glumly, twisting his head over his shoulder to watch the two; "but twenty years ago your blood was

hotter, and you would have cared as little as I do for another man's wise saws."

Which was so true that I had no answer ready, and so tried him on another scent.

"Let us hold council, we two. How shall we overcome the King's stubbornness? That we are better out of this is plain."

"There are two words to that," said he, shaking his head with an air of cunning. "It would be an ill return to such frank hospitality if we rode off in the night like churls. After such a discourtesy no man of us would dare show face at Lignac again."

"The frank hospitality of Donna Saumarez? You would have another word to say if your name was in her books."

"No, no, no, you forget mademoiselle is our hostess," cried he; then he added with a sigh, "I would give ten years of my life to be as much in the thoughts of one lady of Lignac as you are of the other!"

After that I tried the coming of Roquelaure, D'Epéron's visit to Vic, the last escapade of Madame Margot, the rough and arid slope of the hills to the north—nay, even the sweet crispness of the day; but one and all came back, and in three sentences, to Mademoiselle de Lignac, her charm, her graces, and her perfections. In the end I let him talk, and so for ten minutes he lived in a kind of reflected paradise, though where the fellow found such wealth of sugared words puzzled me.

But the paradise was ruthlessly broken into.

Mademoiselle had greeted the King with a curtsey as deep as his own bow, and the two had quickly plunged into close talk. Cool headed, and with a clear eye upon the purpose of his visit to Spain, Henry at the first talked the common jargon of the day's gallantry, a subtle compliment, a hint of admiration, a half-veiled flattery, phrases that sound pleasant in any woman's ear be she drudge or duchess, but which on such occasions are so much breath and no more. From grace of person to grace of mind was but a step, from that to grace of spirit but another; and lo! in ten minutes he had linked her sympathies by their common creed.

In those days, as in these, religion and politics were so near akin that one was often mistaken for the other. The truth is, one was the soil from which the other grew; therefore, after creed, politics. Who, like Henry, could paint the villainy of the theft that robbed Navarre of half her strength? Who, like him, could renew to fresh life the glories of the ancient freedom, or steep the unhappy stolen province in the dark shadows of the Inquisition ever creeping northwards, northwards, till their advance was stayed by the unquenched light of free Navarre? In another ten minutes he had her eyes aglow with the rapture of enthusiasm, and her moist lips tremulous to ask, "What must I do?" Then, fired by the very mood his cunning had compelled, he played the fool and flung away his gains.

Misreading her generous heart, and caught in his quick fancy by the new beauty that broke upon her face, he faltered in his impassioned speech. But only for an instant, and before the girl was aware of his new thought the patriot was lost in the lover. Spain, France, Navarre, went to the winds, and for the King the world had shrunk to a yard of bare stone and no more. We were out of common earshot, therefore what he said I know not; but his gesture told its own tale as, oblivious of our very existence, he sought to take her in his arms, as also did hers as she thrust him back. But we were near enough to hear her cry of anger, and De Montamar waited for no second call.

Dropping his glorification in mid sentence, round he swung on his heel and raced at full speed towards them, gripping his dangling scabbard in his left hand as he ran. Peste! What a pace he went! If there is one thing that can outrun fear it is love, and so De Montamar had pushed himself between Mademoiselle de Lignac and the King while the latter still staggered from the unexpected repulse.

For a moment there was silence, but though for no more than a moment it was long enough to permit me to join the play of comedy turned tragedy. Then the King broke out—

“God’s wounds, Monsieur de Montamar, what impertinence is this? You not alone intrude yourself, but you dare, you dare to touch your sword? Have a care, monsieur, have a care I say, lest you be taught

to mend your manners after a fashion you will never forget."

De Montamar had gone very white even before the King spoke, but he met the hot outpouring of wrath unflinchingly, giving him back stare for stare; nor, for all his whiteness, did his voice shake.

"Mademoiselle de Lignac called, monsieur, therefore I am here. As to manners, I am more accustomed giving lessons than receiving them."

With an effort the King controlled himself, and though the hard look never left his eyes, his mouth smiled.

"You forget yourself," he said coldly. "Mademoiselle de Lignac no longer calls you. You can go, monsieur, and I will try to forget your folly."

For answer De Montamar turned to the girl,— "I am at your command, mademoiselle," he said softly, the colour coming back into his face as he spoke.

"Oh go, monsieur, go," she cried, putting out her hands appealingly. "I am already ashamed of my foolishness. Go, I beg of you, and now, now, at once."

"You hear, monsieur," said Henry, twisting his moustache; "as I said, you intruded."

"Then you wish," replied De Montamar, deliberately turning his back on the King, and speaking to mademoiselle as if she alone were within hearing,— "you wish that I should leave you with Monsieur d'Albret?"

Up went the girl's hands to her face, and for a

moment she stood rocking herself and sobbing as if her heart was broken. Then locking her fingers behind her back she turned to the King, the tears still running down her cheeks—

“Have you no shame, no pity, no common courtesy, monsieur? No reverence, that you hold us women to be but soulless toys and playthings of a foolish hour? You trick us with the thought that we are your fellows in the building and the bettering of the world, and it is all a lie, a cheat. Some vice of nature trips you, and to your dishonour the true thought flashes out, and we are no more than the puppets of your pleasures. Your talk of common faith, Navarre, the sorrows and the saving of a nation, was but another lie, another cheat, to cover a base purpose. Oh, shame upon you, monsieur; shame, I say, shame, shame!”

Slipping past the King, who all this time stood gnawing his lip, she walked quickly to the turret door that opened upon the stair-head. But once there she turned sharply as if a new thought struck her, and she made as if to come back.

“There is evil enough done already, messieurs. For God’s sake let there be no ill-blood between you two. I do not say for my sake, for who am I to bring about or stay a quarrel between——” and she stopped short, looking from one to the other.

“Be easy, mademoiselle,” said I. “This quarrel has already gone too far, and will go no further. I pledge my word to that.”

For a moment she stood as if still unsatisfied; then she turned into the doorway without another word, and we heard the ring of her heels grow fainter on the stone steps.

"Well, monsieur?" and the King, setting his hands upon his hips, faced De Montamar angrily. "If you have excuses to offer I will hear them. To grant pardon will be more difficult."

"Excuses!" echoed the other, tapping his foot upon the stone, and every whit as wrathful as the King. "Rather, monsieur, I wait yours."

Round upon his heel swung Henry.

"Plague take the meddlesome squire of dames!" he cried. "Is the fellow mad, De Bernauld, that he prates of excuses to me—to me!"

"Either that," said De Montamar, "or——" and he shifted his sword hilt nearer to his right hand significantly. "Monsieur de Bernauld may find he has promised more than he can fulfil."

"Bah, you rave, man, you rave," answered Henry contemptuously. "As I said a moment since, you forget yourself. How can I stoop to cross swords with the Count de Montamar?"

"Whatsoever I forget," he replied sullenly, "I remember that here you are no more than Henry d'Albret, and Henry d'Albret may well answer René de Montamar. Here it is a question not of king and subject, nor of man's allegiance, but of two gentlemen and an insulted woman."

"Sits the bird on that tree?" cried Henry, his face

clearing. "There I grant you are within your rights, but plague take me if I know how Henry d'Albret is to fight, and yet not risk the King of Navarre, a thing he has no right to do. Come, man, I will be frank with you. I was wrong, and if mademoiselle desires I will crave her pardon in a white sheet, and taper in hand. Can I say more, De Montamar? My faith, if she only understood it aright all this is the prettiest compliment Mademoiselle de Lignac has had paid her in a twelvemonth."

For a moment De Montamar hung in the wind; then he caught the King's extended hand in both of his.

"Oh, Sire, Sire," he cried, "the pity of it that you should ever forget that you are a king!"

Before Henry could answer—and I doubt not it would have been with a jest—Miguel Zarresco appeared in the dark hollow of the turret door.

So softly had he climbed the stairs, and so intent had we been upon the quarrel and its reconciliation, that we had heard no sound, and as I saw the eager questioning look on his yellow face I fairly gasped to think that he had caught De Montamar's last words.

"Your pardon, Excellencies," said he, with, it seemed to me, an exaggeration of his cringing, servile manner. "My lady begs that you will honour her with your presence."

"All four of us?"

"All four, Excellency."

"Ha! Mademoiselle is sceptical of your powers as peacemaker, De Bernauld! We will follow you, friend. Ho! Master Marcel! Here, here! To set her mind at ease, gentlemen, let us leave these lumbering blades behind us. They are more fit for a stricken field than for a lady's presence-chamber. Master Marcel, do thou fling these and that great skewer of thine into our own sleeping-rooms. This time, De Montamar, the word lies with you. We three will talk sport with Yellowface. Nay, man, never blush like that! Why, he is sweating like a boy at his first tilting-match! Art thou behind, Marcel? Good. What, friend? The smaller chamber beyond the dining-hall? Again, good. Faith! they make a gallant show of their ceremony in Lignac. No less than five of them bowing at the door. You first, Monsieur de Zéro; then we two at your heels like lambs. Peste! We have reckoned without our hostess. It is the old devil of a grand-dam!"

As the last whispered words were spoken in my ear the door closed behind us with a crash; there was the sharp rasp of bolts shot home in their sockets, the click of a key in its lock, and Teresa Saumarez, leaning forward on her crutched stick, asked—

"And now, gentlemen, which of you four is Monsieur Blaise de Bernauld?"

CHAPTER XXI.

BREAD AND SALT, SPANISH FASHION.

WITH an accord more natural than comforting all three turned to me, and for a moment there was silence. The King was the first to recover from the thrust.

"De Bernauld?" said he, with an admirable note of interrogation in his voice; "is this some jest?"

"Jest," echoed Donna Teresa with a laugh even more disquieting than her malignancy,—“if, when I am done with him, this De Bernauld still thinks it is a jest, then, by the saints, he must have a strange taste in pleasantries. Let him trust me for that, whichever he is. You may spare your lies, messieurs, and let the three who will live remember this: not to clack as they say a woman does, for a secret is only a secret while it is behind the teeth. Let one of you say—as you did—‘Hulloa! De Bernauld!’ and the secret is out. Now; again I say, Which of you four is Blaise de Bernauld?”

We were alone in the small salon, we five, not even Miguel Zarresco having entered behind us, and

as the mocking old witch baited us, the one obvious thought filled our minds—to seize her and hold her hostage for our safety. But as Marcel, who was ever foremost in action when Master Blaise was threatened, pushed to the front, his hand upon his dagger, she wagged her mocking fingers in his face so complacently that he halted and fell back a pace.

“Chut!” she cried, divining our thought but still smiling, “Navarre truly must be the paradise of fools if ye think I am trapped as easily as that! See there, and there, and there; the walls are honey-combed with loopholes, and in every hole there is a musketoon. I grant you can kill me, you being the noble gentlemen you are and I a weak old woman, but the killing will cost four lives instead of one.” Then the laugh flickered to a snarl, and she burst out, “And, by the saints, I would pay the price to damn all four before your time. Kill, ye dogs, kill; I bid ye do it—bid ye, I say. What? Ye hang back? Well, ye have a kind of wisdom after all, though it be but a coward’s wisdom. Were I Blaise de Bernauld and you Teresa Saumarez I would have ere this throttled the old beldam, though I died with her.”

And verily I believe she would!

That no one answered her tirade was but reasonable, seeing that speech was beset with pitfalls, not alone to me, but to all. For as I dreaded lest an incautious word should betray me to be the man she hunted, the others feared that a like careless slip would excuse themselves, and so by elimination re-

duce the uncertainty. But Donna Teresa had wit enough to clear the doubt as to two.

"Well?" she went on as we stood silent, "you were glib enough the other side of the door there."

"Madame," began De Montamar, "you will understand——"

"I understand," said she, turning on him sharply, "that you are not the man; no, nor you," and she pointed a shaking finger at the King. "Seventeen years ago you, and you, were but miching schoolboys. The luring Diego Saumarez to his death was the work of a grown man."

"Then," said Marcel, speaking his gruffest, "let these two go, since they are out of court."

"No, by the saints, not I; and seeing I have you so fast by the leg, I will tell you why. Caution is now no virtue, and you may have seen that I love plain speaking. One of you is forfeit, but the other three are guests of bread and salt, and heretics and all as you are, Teresa Saumarez can honour hospitality; therefore these three are safe. Oh, spare your jubilancy; you came unasked, and I have no mind to feed unbidden guests. You understand?"

"What?" cried Henry, "you would starve us? Why, 'tis rank murder."

"There is one forfeit," answered she coolly; "let him pay his forfeit, that the three may eat. For the rest it is very simple—whoso will starve, must starve; but I keep by bread and salt, and so will lay no hand upon him."

"And," said De Montamar, asking a question that was burning my own tongue, "if you lay hands on De Bernauld?"

"If," she cried, stiffening herself in the chair and striking the floor with her stick. "If? Plague take the fool! Why, I have him there," and she thrust out a hollowed hand and snapped the fingers down across the palm. "Are you so blind not to see that if he speaks I have him, and if he and you stay dumb he starves, and so I still have him? He is so safe either way that I am in two ways which to pray for."

"Then," said he, altering his phrase, "when you have laid hands on him and singled him out, what then?"

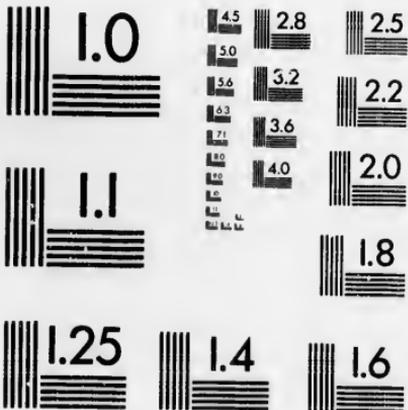
She drew in a long breath, so that it hissed between her lips, and her eyes lit up.

"Better not ask, monsieur. When a woman has kept her vengeance for seventeen years she is in no haste to squander it." Then she flashed a keen look upon us all, and went on: "That you will say nothing now, I know; three of you because as gentlemen you may not, and one because as coward, dastard, and cur, he dares not; but the patience of seventeen years may well wait seven days. Disarm, messieurs, if you please: tut, tut, hesitation is a folly, a vice; have you forgotten the musketoons? Right! one dagger, two, three, four: so, that is well. Now, see how I trust you, faith of a gentleman, have you any other arms? No? and you three will



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answer for De Bernauld? Ha! by the saints I nearly caught you then. I will take your paroles, gentlemen, you may retire to your chambers. Your swords will be in safe keeping, and on my honour I have not played the spy in your baggage. There was no need. Farewell, gentlemen, farewell; and whether it be by day or by night, when you wish to tell me which is Blaise de Bernauld, I am at your service. Ho! Miguel Zarresco; Miguel, I say, unbolt the door and attend our guests."

"Miguel Zarresco!" cried Marcel, falling back a step; "not brother to Bernardino?"

"Ha, friend, where gottest thou that white face in such haste? And what knowest thou of Bernardino Zarresco? Ah! I see. You remember my little account book, do you? Are the toils closing in, Master Blaise de Bernauld? Ha?"

Marcel made no reply, and as by this time the door stood open behind us, I bade him begone under my breath, and we four tramped back to the corridor with, as you may guess, none of the buoyant gaiety of half an hour before. But at the door Henry turned back.

"You spoke of paroles," said he; "understand we give none that we will not escape."

"Fly through the windows and welcome," scoffed she; "the paroles I meant were as to your arms."

"We give you our word on that."

It was a silent procession that wound its way up the stairs we had descended in the morning with

such complaisant chattering; Miguel Zarresco headed it, with Marcel shivering at his back. To him it was as if the man who slept so peaceably in Jean Minet's pasture had risen from his grave to threaten Bernauld. A true son of the hills, Marcel was crammed with superstitious fancies, and that a Zarresco should meet him face to face at Lignac was nothing less than a visitation of God by the road of the devil. Behind him were two men-at-arms; then walked De Montamar, followed by two more of the she-fiend's retainers. I was next with a like attendance, and last of us all was Henry, the rear being brought up by a couple of pikemen. My faith! but it was like the crawling of a gigantic serpent, and the major-domo was fussing at our doors when the last joint of the tail was still in the corri'or below!

To my surprise this time Marcel made no attempt to join me, but tramped into the room he shared with De Montamar without so much as turning round for a farewell. He seemed bewildered by the double surprise, and I looked for nothing less than that he should break down. At the doors, which were side by side, with nothing more than the thickness of the wall between, De Montamar paused and waited for the King to join us.

"We are friends and at peace, are we not?" said he, holding out a hand to each of us, but with his eyes on the King. "Thank God for that."

"Friends and lovers, and without a shadow," answered Henry, grasping his hand in both his.

That was all, but it shook my nerve more than all Donna Teresa's wrath and threats, for they spoke as men speak who bury their quarrel before the very face of the dead, and because they look for nothing less than never to cross hands again in this world.

When the door had clanged behind us, and the ponderous lock, which had been such a comfort and reassurance the night before, turned against us, I think it no shame to admit that I flung myself upon the bed and dropped my head upon my hands in utter dejection. That a man should fight down despair, and, sword in hand, go smiling to his death, is nothing, no, not though the odds are hopeless fifty times over. The briskness of action stirs his blood and blots cool thought from his brain, and pride in playing the man stiffens his courage. There is glory to be gained, or that loud-tongued notoriety in a man's small world of life which passes for glory, and for the moment he thinks himself the centre and pivot of the universe. In such a case to be brave to folly's length, and even to heroism, is easy, and the man who fails to play a man's part must be a coward in grain.

But change the scene; shut him up in a corner away from the world's eye, and with nothing but his own soul to hearten him, and the man who does not gnaw his lip must be a Roland, or such another as that Bertrand who is the glory of Rennes. Not that the fear of death turns him cur—no: nineteen times in twenty it is the loneliness, the isolation, the

seeming waste and uselessness of the sacrifice, that devour his fortitude. Death and God are terrible realities, but at times they are less awful than the grave, with its tremendous silences, its dissolutions, its oblivion.

It was the King who roused me. On the closing of the door he had taken to tramping up and down the room with bent head, his hands behind his back, the left hand gripping the right wrist. Presently he halted by me, and took me firmly by the shoulder.

"My fault, old friend," he said sorrowfully; "but who could have guessed we would thrust our heads into the one wasp's nest in all the province? Is that not like a man," he went on with a laugh that choked dismally in his throat, "to blame himself for a clear folly, and then excuse the blame all in the one breath!"

"No, Sire, no," I cried, ashamed of my weakness; "the fault rather is mine that I did not frankly say, 'I am he,' and so let the hell-cat flesh her claws as she lusted. But my wit went numb in the suddenness of it all." Then in a flush of determination I started to my feet. "'Tis a fault easily mended, and the sooner the better. Three words are enough," and I sprang for the door, my hand raised to hammer on the panel. But the King pushed me back.

"Time enough for that," said he, keeping his open hand on my breast lest I should push past him. "Silence is a saving virtue, and the night brings counsel. No, no," he continued, as I still fought against his opposition, his voice hardening and growing

authoritative, so that it was no longer simply the friend who spoke. "I forbid it. What, man? here am I a king with but one subject. Am I fallen so low that even he rebels?"

"Counsel is well enough, Sire, where there is hope. Remember the woman's bitter gibe, 'Fly through the windows and welcome,' said she."

"Tut, man, there is always hope. If the lion is netted a mouse may gnaw the cord."

"But it is starvation!"

"Well? What of that? Do you call the loss of one meal starvation? You would risk that any day for a stag hunt. Besides, it will not be the first time I have dined off two holes of a leather belt; I pray God it may not be the last."

After that what was to be said? Nought, nought. So we set ourselves to pass the long day as best we might. My God! how we sickened of the sunshine as we stood staring out between the bars while the glory of the day wore on. Never before had the world seemed so bubbling full of life and strength. Every field of corn, every acre of green vineyard, every giant chestnut that shaded the pastures, nay, every pine-mottled slope of the hills where the woods lay like the broad shadows of clouds dappling a landscape, was a voice that preached the power and splendid sufficiency of a man's being.

Had we had dice we might have played, but I think not for long. I have heard—more than that, I have known—of men who thus gamed away their

dregs of time, and earned thereby a reputation for coolness and calm fortitude. But to me that was a courage that aped the brute, a warped mind that knew not how to appraise truly time and eternity; nor could the clear, shrewd head of the King have found either pleasure or forgetfulness in such a puerility. Mostly we talked, fitfully it is true and with little animation, but it brought the kindly and healing warmth of fellowship. Then the night fell, and as the swift twilight looked in at the window and was gone, Henry, with a laugh, supped off his boasted two inches of broad belt.

From the tawny orange of the west there grew and flared a smoky conflagration; crimson fireships a-sail on a sea of olive; dusky continents that flamed molten red their splendid three minutes of time, as if the eternal fires smouldered in their heart, then hardened to an inky purple that shifted in a wink to a sullen grey as though the breath of death had blown across them. Out of I know not how many long months of forgetfulness some words of Marmet, the words of a greater than he, came back to me: "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in;" and lo! the King of Glory was the great King of shadow and eternal peace.

Later I slept, and the night slipped away like so much dry sand from a bony fist.

The rasping of the bolt in the lock woke me, and

as I lay on my elbow, blinking, Miguel Zarreco entered, gravely servile, and obsequious as ever.

"My lady bids me say, Excellencies, that Monsieur Blaise de Bernauld having declared himself, you are at liberty to come and go as you list."

Miguel Zarresco
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 himself, you are

CHAPTER XXII.

“THAT A MAN LAY DOWN HIS LIFE FOR HIS FRIEND.”

STILL heavy with sleep, I sat up, dazed and gaping. What fool's talk was this, that I had, as he put it, declared myself? and how, if I had chattered in my sleep, was the door open that we might come or go as we listed? Then the thought flashed into my sluggish brain that this was some cunning trick to lure us, one or other, into a disclosure by a chance word. Therefore I sat up, rubbing my eyes like a man still half in a dream, and said to test him:

“Hulloa, friend, what is De Bernauld to a starving man? after such a fast as ours, meat and wine count for more to us than an open door.”

“For that reason I have brought them, Excellency; see, they are here on this stool.”

That, I confess, staggered me, and left me with no other thought than that Donna Teresa was minded to take a short cut to her vengeance by the road of poison. That she should have foregone it was incredible. But as I sat looking from the tray

of food to Miguel Zarresco's impassive yellow face, and back again to the tray, Henry struck in:

"We will dispense with attendance, friend, and though we thank thy mistress our gratitude would have been livelier twelve hours ago."

"What madness is this, Sire?" cried I, rising from the bed as the door closed behind the major-domo. "Has the woman relented? or is there some cursed Borgia's drug in the meat and drink? and why this talk of De Bernauld declaring himself? Is it a wile, a juggle?"

Drawing the stool nearer to where he sat on the bedside, the King helped himself leisurely to both food and wine; ate a mouthful or two of the one and drank a glassful of the other, nodding his satisfaction.

"*That* for your poison!" said he, and went on eating with stolid discrimination of the daintier morsels.

"Then what, Sire?"

"Eat, man, eat," he replied, continuing his example. "Ventre St Gris! is it your habit at Bernauld to live on a meal a day? That is not my way, and when God gives a man the good gift of an appetite He means him to use it—in reason. Eat, I say, and be thankful."

Knowing that he had his silent as well as his loquacious moods, and that the one was as hard to penetrate as the other to curb, I drew a stool to the opposite side of the tray, and set myself to fill

up the blanks of the previous day. But, alas! a supper is like last month, and once wasted it can never be recalled.

At last, our hunger being satisfied, I returned to my questionings, but at first could draw no answer from the King. Then he rose, went to the door softly, opened it an inch or two, muttered to himself, "Yes, yes, I thought the fellow spoke truth," closed it without noise, and returning, stood over me.

"So the thing is a mystery?"

"An utter mystery, Sire."

"Did I not say well that you grow rusty," answered he, shaking his head and looking at me with a strange pathetic merriment in his eyes. "The mystery is plain enough. Marcel is a servant who knows his duty and has done it. Marcel has my respect."

"Marcel?" said I, stupidly; "Marcel?"

"Marcel, Marcel," he echoed, growing testy in his impatience at my slowness; "did not that old witch say that it lay between you two? and Marcel has done that which, if I had but had his ear a minute, I would have bidden him do."

"Then he has lied——"

"Oh! Good Lord, have it so, if you will; he has lied. But your body-servant, who lies fifty times a day to his own advantage, may well lie once to yours."

"Marcel is no servant, Sire."

"Ay, I know. He is Bernauld's bone and sinew; but we breed such fellows for just such a time as this."

"But, Sire, it is intolerable; I would be shamed for ever before the whole world and in my own conscience," and I struggled hard to get my feet under me. But he set his hands on my shoulders and held me down, as he could easily enough, for no man ever called Henry of Navarre a weakling.

"Be quiet, man, be quiet. Set Blaise de Bernauld and this Marcel of thine in a scale, and which weighs the heavier? Be quiet, I say."

"But it is an infamy."

"Tut, it is his plain duty, and Marcel himself would be the first to say so. Have reason. Who has the better head, he or you?"

"Mine is poor enough," said I, humbly; "see how I could not guess the truth of all this."

"Oh, that," answered the King coolly, "was a thing of cunning, and your wisdom, my friend, does not lie that way. Now, in the pinch of action, which is the better man? Why, you, twenty times over. Therefore it is plain policy that until we are outside Lignac it is for the general weal that as between you two Blaise de Bernauld should have the free hand, and Marcel be laid by the heels."

"But, Sire, once we are clear of Lignac, what is to become of Marcel laid by the heels?"

"That is the point, man, that is the point," said he, hastily. "We must have you untrammelled, so that we may free Marcel—therefore, say nothing, say nothing; and since the door is open, let us join De Montamar and hear from him what has happened through the night."

"But, Sire," I objected again, "if in the meantime Marcel should be mishandled?"

"But!" he cried, "but, but, but; your spirit is as full of butts as most butts are of spirit. Trust me, they will be in no haste to mishandle him. What? has a woman chewed her vengeance all these years only to bolt it in one swallow at the first touch of sweet on the palate? No, by the Lord, no! You have lived over much with Madame Jeanne to be versed in the ways of women. Now I, who owe you a dozen years, know more—but there, Margot herself is a full education. Trust me, I say again, Donna Teresa will dandle her joy before she hugs it to death, though meanwhile Marcel must take his chance of the caresses. Now, then, let us find De Montamar."

That there was a grain of truth in the King's bushel of chaff I knew, since I, being free, could serve Marcel better than, in a reversed case, Marcel could have served Blaise de Bernauld, but neither then nor later was I clear as to the King's good faith. To him Marcel's sacrifice was but the duty of a soldier, and I half believe that if he could have got me clear of Lignae he would have given no second thought to the squire's fate.

De Montamar we found pacing his room from end to end, an untouched tray of food being, as with us, on a stool by the door. His healthy bronze had faded to a dull brown, and the soft smoothness of youth was overlaid with that haggard care which it is as rare as lamentable to see upon the face of a man under

middle age. By his looks he had passed his night waking, or slept only in worthless snatches. At the sound of the door closing behind us he halted in his walk, and cried—

“Is there hope, Sire, is there hope? Can Roquelaure come in time?”

“Roquelaure? Are you mad?”

“Ah,” and he pressed his open hand across his eyes, “I forgot. You know nothing of Roquelaure. I thank God that I disobeyed you, Sire, and sent him word from Oloron. I pray from my heart he may come in time.”

With a quick jerk of the shoulders the King drew himself up, and I saw his hands clench in a spasm of passion, but at the sight of the hope that sprang into my face he swallowed his anger.

“That the end justifies the means is a Spanish heresy,” he said gravely. “I suppose our necessity excuses the treachery, but a treachery it was none the less. More than that, it is a useless treachery, since Roquelaure could not be here for two days, and how is he, out of all the province, to set his finger on Lignac?”

“But, Sire,” cried I, “you said but ten minutes since there would be no haste, and as for finding Lignac, surely God Himself will point the way?”

“Nor will there be haste, but are we fools to play with edged tools two days in Lignac? My faith in God is as firm as your own, Monsieur de Bernauld, but He works through men, and God’s providences and

men's follies will not pull in the one harness. 'Tis no hope on Roquelaure; we must fend for ourselves. What of Marcel, De Montamar?"

"What? Did you not hear?"

"We guess," answered the King curtly—"we guess, but we know nothing for certain."

"I would give my left arm to have him back, and we four clear of this accursed place. Three days we have been comrades, and there is no truer gentleman on God's earth than old Marcel."

"Granted," said the King, "granted. We know all that; but what we do not know is what happened after the bolts were shot upon us yesterday."

"I, you will remember, waited at the door, but Marcel went straight to the window there, and never so much as turned his head. Later, when they shut us in, I found him gripping the bars with both hands, and staring out into the great hollow of the dip below the wall. Three times I spoke to him, and three times he answered me at random. After that I let him be, for I saw his trouble was more than brain deep—a thing of soul and spirit; and there, for a full hour, he stood like a statue. Then he turned:

"'Will the woman keep faith, monsieur?'"

"'Trust her for that,' I answered bitterly; 'she is devil enough.'"

"'Oh! Your pardon, monsieur; not her threats—a man were a fool past mending to doubt them—but her promises. Will she let go you—that is, we three, if—if—if, Master Blaise—you understand?'"

“‘I think so,’ answered I slowly; ‘I think so. Yes, there is reason for it; I think she would.’

“‘I pray the Lord she will,’ said he earnestly; ‘but we must risk it.’

“‘Then you think Monsieur de Bernauld will speak?’

“‘Why,’ replied he with a briskness as unlike his depression of an hour back as laughing is unlike crying, ‘the thing’s as good as done, and by this time to-morrow it will be boot and saddle for three if my advice is taken.’

“‘What!’ cried I in hot contempt, ‘you have been Bernauld’s man and eaten their bread these sixty years, and yet would leave your master to this hell-cat’s claws without a qualm?’

“‘You may say five - and - sixty, monsieur,’ he answered; ‘and if I have no chance to speak to-morrow, I pray you now for God’s sake not to dawdle nor waste time on useless scheming, but to ride north with all haste.’

“‘After sixty - five years you would save your wretched worn-out carcass at the cost of—— God pity you, man, but I think the Donna’s notion of bread and salt is not much worse than yours!’

“‘Then you would stand by Master Blaise, let come what might?’

“‘Ay would I.’

“‘Let us shake hands on that, monsieur.’

“‘But I would not, and cursed him for a soulless, selfish scoundrel.

"After that you may guess there was not much talk between us, and the day wore away heavily enough. Nor did the night bring rest. Neither of us slept, but both sat and watched the stars in a kind of sullen silence that was ten times worse than a solitary vigil. One hour was like another, except that presently the stars were blotted out, and there fell such a deluge of rain as falls nowhere except under the shadow of the mountains. It was the outpouring of a cataract. At last, when the dawn in the east showed yellow in the hollow of the west, he roused himself, and had his hand raised to strike upon the door, when I, scenting treachery, flung him back. But only for a moment; then he was at my throat like a wolf.

"You may gibe me,' he cried; 'you may sneer, you may treat me with the contempt of a dog, but, by the Lord, you shall not hold me back.'

"'Judas!' cried I in answer; 'Judas! You would betray your master.'

"'Tut!' and for all that I am the bigger man he fairly shook me, his bony hands never slackening their grip. 'Do you not see? I am Blaise de Bernauld, monsieur—I am Blaise de Bernauld.'

"'You? You?'

"'Why not? They know no better.'

"Then I understood.

"'Leave go my throat,' I said, 'and let us talk.'

"Grudgingly he loosed his grasp, but not until he had edged himself between me and the door.

“‘Time for talk is past,’ said he; ‘now it is a man’s time to work.’

“‘But this is self-murder,’ I cried—‘self-murder, and no less.’

“‘Tell me, monsieur,’ he answered very quietly, ‘if it were a question of you and the King, would not you do the same?’

“That staggered me, and I hummed and cleared my throat a while; then at last:

“‘I would never have thought of it,’ I said.

“‘Ay, would you,’ replied he, giving me credit, out of his own great soul, for being nobler than I am; ‘and having thought of it, you would have done it. Now, Master Blaise is ten times more my king than Henry of Navarre is yours. What need is there for talk?’

“Then he turned and hammered on the door with his clenched fist as if the dearest wish of his heart lay behind it, until one of the fellows without hammered back.

“‘Tell Donna Teresa,’ said he, speaking quietly, lest the sound carry farther than he meant and waken those it should not, ‘that Blaise de Bernauld bids her good morning and is at her service.’

“At which there was the buzz of some whispered talk and a voice called out:

“‘Are you Blaise de Bernauld?’

“‘Have I not said so,’ he answered; ‘what need to rouse the whole house?’

“Then there was another buzz of talk and the scurrying of feet down the length of the passage.

"'But,' said I as we waited in the greyness, 'when this was in your mind last night, why not have said so to these fellows?'

"'And give Master Blaise the chance to call out that it was a lie? No, no. My faith! but that would have been a fool's move. Now, d'ye see, they will have five or six hours to—to—do their will in. And when they're done wi' me Master Blaise may keep his tongue quiet, since no good could come of talking.'

"Again there came the echo of feet from the corridor, this time a steady tramp.

"'Must it be?' said I, not very clearly, I think, for my throat had gone dry; 'must it be?'

"'What other way is there, monsieur?' he answered simply; 'and say to Master Blaise——'

"But what I was to say to Master Blaise was lost in the creak of the door as it was thrown open, and there was no time for more talk, except that I asked him, humbly enough, to give me before we parted the hand-grip I had denied him last night.

"That is the end of it, Sir."

"No, God helping me, it is not the end," I cried. "I will denounce the trick rather than that a hair of him should come to harm."

"Gently, De Bernauld, gently," said the King. "Let there be no foolish haste. Take my word again for it, Marcell is for the moment in no great danger. Now, the first thing is to make a friend within the garrison."

"Mademoiselle de Lignac," I began.

"Mademoiselle is excellent; but after yesterday, I fear"—and the rueful look on Henry's face was belied by the twinkle in his eye—"I fear she will have small confidence in my protests. De Montamar," he went on maliciously, "is too young; therefore on you, De Bernauld, devolves the duty of persuading Mademoiselle de Lignac. De Montamar and I must ferret out his whereabouts—some dismal hole in the very bowels of the rock, I fear. The pity of it is that we have no lackey! Your true lackey has a nose for a secret like a dog for a scent."

In my search for Mademoiselle de Lignac fortune so favoured me that I could not but believe that she, on her part, had set herself to seek me out. This her first words confirmed.

"Oh, monsieur, monsieur," she cried, giving me no greeting, good or bad; "what evil chance brought the King to Spain, and here of all places in Spain?"

"The King?" I gasped, "the King?"

"Let us have done with pretexts, monsieur. I could not live a year with the Lignacs of Navarre and not know the King."

"And knowing him, you could still berate him as you did yesterday?"

"Why not, monsieur? In the King is the greater power for good because he is King, and so the greater sin and shame for its misuse."

"Your logic is not the logic of courts," answered I drily. "As to why he is here, your ear, if it taught

you to know the King, should also have taught you this: when he says 'I will,' there is an end to argument. Tell me, mademoiselle, is it common knowledge that the so-called D'Albret----"

"No, monsieur, no; and if we are circumspect, all may yet go well."

"Not may, but must," said I; "though, to be honest, I am more troubled about----"

"Monsieur de Bernauld?"

"Ah! You know, then, mademoiselle? But listen; since you know and can keep one secret, I will tell you a second. I am Blaise de Bernauld."

"You, you!" she cried, stepping back a pace or two; "then who is caged yonder?"

"The bravest soul in all Spain, and the most devoted."

In as few words as possible I told her the history of the night, and as I did so her eyes kindled and moistened, and her bosom rose and fell with the quickened breath.

"And he did that for you—for you? Then, Monsieur de Bernauld, for all men say of you here you cannot be utterly vile. There must surely be something of nobility in a man to win a love like that? And yet, my grand-dam----"

"They were lies, mademoiselle, lies," I cried, as she hesitated; "but the question is not now the honour of Blaise de Bernauld, but the saving of Marcel from his self-sacrifice. Where have they placed him?"

"Come," said she, "I will show you." Then as I followed her down the passage, she turned. "On your faith, monsieur, you are not playing on my sympathy?"

"Ask De Montamar," answered I shortly. "You will at least believe him. Marcel shared his prison. Ask him, too, of the debt I owed Diego Saumarez, and how it was paid. He knows the story."

She nodded gravely and led on again towards the turret stairs up which she turned, and I congratulated myself that I had done both De Montamar and myself a grace at one stroke.

I had expected that she would have followed the stairs up to some crow's nest in the very ultimate height of the turret, but to my surprise she passed through the narrow door that led out upon the battlements, and without a pause made for the southern wall. There, leaning against the parapet, musketoon in hand, were two of what we had come to call the Spanish faction: ill-looking cut-throat fellows they seemed, though that may have been the jaundiced prejudice of the hour. Their backs were toward us, and as each leaned out of his crenelle gazing down into space I caught a louder chatter of voices than seemed called for by their eight feet of distance one from the other.

At the ring of our feet upon the stone they raised themselves, and the fellow nearest, jumping forward a step, pushed out his weapon horizontally across his body as if he would have blocked Mademoiselle de

Lignac's advance. But she went boldly on and thrust both him and it aside.

"What?" she cried, as arrogantly as the King himself. "You dare? You dare? Take care, fellow, or there shall be more birds caged than one."

"But," he stammered, "I have Señor Miguel's orders. Said he, 'Let none come——'"

"Señor Miguel's orders!" cried she contemptuously; "and who, pray, is mistress in Lignac? He takes too much upon him, does Señor Miguel, and risks a whipping, or worse, for his impudence."

"But——"

"But? Wilt thou have me call Lignac's men and make a sweep of you lazy good-for-noughts once and for all? Stand aside, fellow, and learn now, if thou didst not know it before, that I am mistress in Lignac."

With a grudging obedience, that was almost as galling as their open resistance, the two retired to the nearest corner, whence, after a brief talk, one disappeared within the stair-head, doubtless to report his rout to his master. The other stood sentinel but kept his distance.

Leaning across the parapet Mademoiselle de Lignac beckoned to me to do the like, but before I caught her meaning she had faced me again.

"The cowards, the cruel cowards," she cried, her eyes ablaze and her whole body shaking with passion. "Let them kill the man if they must, but to torture him as some savage wretch might a rat in a trap is

devilish. Spain's work, Spain's work. Oh, that I were a man to give Miguel Zarresco his deserts! See monsieur, see, is it not infamous?"

Still uncomprehending, I bent across the coping of the parapet and looked down. Thrust out from the face of the wall was one of the cages we had scanned so closely the previous morning. It was some five feet square and a little over six feet in height, closely barred on every side and top and bottom by iron rods of about an inch thickness, with a four-inch space between each rod. Stout iron stays set in the wall below and running to the outer corners held it in place. In it, his arms thrust between the side bars and hugging them hard to his breast, was Marcel.

Though the awful depth of the sheer profundity appalled me, I was at a loss to understand the squire's terrified attitude. It was no mere striving for support, but a grappling as if for life itself. Into the hollow of either crooked elbow a bar was drawn, while the hands, meeting outside, clutched the upright rod which ran nearest the centre of his chest with a grim tenacity. So hard had he drawn himself to the railing that his face was turned sidelong and upward, and the set whiteness of it was terrible to see.

"Look, look," said mademoiselle hoarsely, pointing downwards as she spoke; "the brutal cruelty of it!"

Then I saw that some four or five of the bars forming the floor of the cage had been removed, so that behind Marcel's very heels there was a two-foot gap opening plumb into the abyss. Let him stagger,

let his cramped limbs relax, let him grow giddy in the fierce heat of the noon sun, and he was flung helpless, hopeless to his death.

"Mareel! Mareel!" cried I, ready to weep with rage and pity that he should bear such torment for me. "For God's sake keep your hold, old friend; in ten minutes I will have you out of that."

Half-dazed, and with his faculties keenly alert to nothing but his necessities, he had not recognised the change of voices above him. But as I spoke he looked upward, never shifting his cheek from the bars, but screwing his face round to see the better; and oh, the agony in his eyes!

"What? Are you not gone, Master Blaise?" he answered hoarsely, but his face lighting up as he saw me. "Make haste, make haste, for then it will make no matter if I——" and he jerked his head backward significantly.

"You are mistress here," and I turned roughly on mademoiselle. "In the Lord's name stop this torturing of soul and body."

"I am mistress," answered she between her set teeth, "mistress of such fellows as him in the corner there. To use brave words to such scum is easy enough, but with Donna Teresa it is another matter. Daughter's daughter though I am, she would turn the Inquisition on me—ay, and on you all—rather than let her prey escape. To my shame, to my sorrow, my bitter sorrow, mistress though I am there is no hope in me."

"Then I must act. Hold fast, Marcel, hold fast; I am going now to tell that she-devil the truth. In ten minutes we will have you out of that; courage, old friend."

"No, no, no," he cried, a terror shooting across his face; "listen, Master Blaise, listen. It would be useless, useless, a sacrifice of yourself for no gain to me. I am doomed."

"Chut," answered I, turning from the wall. "Let her hear the cheat and she will have you out of that. She has no quarrel with you."

"Stop him, mademoiselle, for the Lord's sake stop him!" he cried across his shoulder. "One minute, Master Blaise, one, one, no more; then do what you think fit."

"Well?" said I impatiently, for it was a coward thing to leave him hanging there in suffering for my sake; "briefly now, but I warn you I will not be moved."

"They searched me," said he, speaking quickly, "and found that confounded bone charm which was in Bernardino Zarresco's pocket, and that ill-looking knife of his, so his villain of a brother will have it that I have slain him. Were you twenty times Blaise de Bernauld I am doomed. It was he, the hound, who drew out the bars, and he has sworn to draw out one every third hour until ~~until~~— But that's past mending; for Navarre's sake, for the King's sake, for Madame Jeanne's sake, ride north, Master Blaise, and let the thought warm my heart

at the last that we have cheated not our devil, but two."

Then he turned his head from us as a man who had said his say; and giving him such words of comfort as I could I left him for the time to seek the King, that with Mademoiselle de Lignac and De Montamar we might hold counsel.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BETWIXT HEAVEN AND EARTH.

THERE is no need to spin out the story of that day: how we plotted and planned, how we pled with Donna Teresa, how we cried shame upon the cruelty of Miguel Zarresco. Though as to this last she was candid enough. "These are none of my orders," said she, "but since he is where he is, let him bide. Mayhap it will be to his gain if he slips through the bars, and by letting him be where Miguel has placed him I show the villain a kindness: as to pity for him, we will talk of that when I have balanced my book."

Us she gave leave to depart, but when we begged permission to remain till the cool of the next morning she made no demur. Nay, she rather played the guest. Who was she to say go or stay to any stranger in Lignac? Was she not herself there on the loving sufferance of her best beloved grandchild? That she had but one gave the adjective a point and truth which it might otherwise have lacked. Nor did she hinder our free going and coming. Her prey was fast lamed, and with bars above and all round,

and the entrance to the cage thrice padlocked, she was under no alarm. None but a bird could fly out of the echauguettes of Château Lignac! One grace we obtained for him, he was not left to starve. Food and drink were pushed between the bars as to a wild beast, and in spite of the terrible gulf behind him, a gulf which yawned wider every third hour, Marcel contrived to eat and quench his thirst.

Still uncertain of my good faith, Mademoiselle de Lignac took me at my word, and that De Montamar's story of France in Florida, and Diego Saumarez's treachery and punishment, differed widely from that told by Donna Teresa I presently had signal proof. More than that. It is probable that to serve his own ends De Montamar was over kind to my virtues and dumb to my faults; while of Madame Jeanne—of whom he knew but little—his praise might well have excited jealousy had he not the forethought to add that she was more than forty years old.

Following this explanation we held council as to setting Marcel at liberty with an openness that was itself an admission of our impotence; and that Teresa Saumarez left us undisturbed was ample evidence of her just sense of security, and the contempt in which she held our scheming. Hit upon a project which promised success we could not. Devices there were in plenty, both of force and craft; but each, when in turn well considered, was marred by some fatal blemish, and so in turn discarded. In the end we parted in a kind of despair; nor was it any comfort

that each was to think out the problem silently for himself and in his own fashion. What had defied four wits acting in concert was little likely to yield to one. And yet it was by the one the problem was solved.

It was late in the afternoon, as I was restlessly pacing the corridor upon which opened our apartments, that Mademoiselle de Lignac joined me.

"What would you say to me," cried she, laying a hand upon my arm, "if I told you I had cut the knot? Would you believe me? And if I said, 'have faith and wait,' could you trust me?"

"Mademoiselle," answered I slowly and in great perplexity, for this was a hard thing she asked, "if it were for myself I could believe and trust and wait. But when it is for another, and the hindrances are so great, the risks so tremendous, it is asking a man too much to say 'have blind faith.' To-morrow will be too late."

"Then, monsieur, I will compromise—you know we women love half measures." The first smile I had seen upon her face that day flickered into her eyes as she spoke; a poor, pitiful smile, but that she could relax the tension of gravity even by so much warmed my heart with hope. "I will tell you my plan, but you must not tell MM. d'Albret and de Montamar."

"And why?" cried I in astonishment; "their trouble is but little short of my own."

"Because," answered she with another flicker of a smile, "I have never found that men could keep a

secret much closer than a woman. Besides, the King has a fashion of bettering other people's plans, and being who he is it is hard to say him no, even though the bettering is for the worse. We will walk up and down if you please, Monsieur de Bernauld, and round here by the gallery that lies to the south. I have your promise?"

"Readily, mademoiselle, for I am sure that if I can show good cause you will give me back my word. You are too shrewd to hold to a yea or nay for a mere caprice."

"*Merci, monsieur,*" and in her new found gaiety she dropped a mock curtsey, "I like your compliments better than Monsieur d'Albret's—they at least go to the point. Now," and as if to hoodwink I know not whom, the light banter of her tone never faltered, "follow what I say. The cage where Marcel is confined is set between the machicolations of the south wall, and projects, as you know, some five feet. The entrance to it is up a few stone steps that rise from the corridor of the top storey. It is a heavy gate of open bars such as form the cage itself, and is padlocked not once but thrice. That way there is no approach. The top of the cage is some seven feet below the opening of the crenelles, and is as impenetrable as this flag under our feet. Besides, there are the guards by the parapet."

"You see," said I despondingly, as she paused, "Donna Teresa is justified in her security. The thing is hopeless."

"Wait, monsieur, wait. We eliminate the door and the top, and what remains? The bottom."

"True," answered I grimly; "and a hundred and fifty feet of nothing below it!"

"And a window ten feet below it, by means of which we shall hoist Miguel Zarresco with his own petard. The cruelty of the day shall be Marcel's salvation by night. To fling a light cord up through the hole so thoughtfully made will be no hard matter. At the end of the cord Marcel will find a stout rope, which you, monsieur, shall hold steady, that he may climb down. That is simple, is it not?"

"But that is not all," answered I, "there is the great door."

"Of which I, as mistress, keep the key when once the rounds have been made and all fast shut for the night. That also is simple."

"And shall we, mademoiselle, clamber down the rocks like so many rabbits?"

"Lignac's men keep the stables, Monsieur de Bernaud. Oh, have no fear! For all that I am a woman I know a man's needs as well as another."

"Then what of arms? We would be fools to seek to pass bare-handed through such a country, and we have not even a two-inch blade amongst the four of us."

"That, too, I have thought of. Have no fear for arms."

"But what of you?" I cried. "That Marcel might slip his prison by our help is possible; possible,

also, that we might bribe your grooms and so find horses; but the door, mademoiselle, the door, that betrays your part, and how can we leave you to the vengeance of such a one as—pardon the discourtesy—your mother's mother. Not even to save Marcel, no, nor us all, can we sacrifice you."

For a moment or two she made no answer, and we paced up and down the corridor side by side in silence; then she looked up from the broad square stones under our feet, and her cheeks were rosy as a peach.

"There is but one way, Monsieur de Bernauld. If madame, your wife——"

"Dolt that I am! Now I understand: we shall ride five instead of four, and Jeanne will love and welcome you as a sister. Make no doubt of that, mademoiselle. Trust me,—nay, not me alone, trust us each one that——"

"I do, I do," she broke in, interrupting me in her turn, her face flaming still hotter; "and believe, monsieur, that if there was any other way I would not thus thrust myself upon you. But I am a coward, a miserable coward, and face my grand-dam's anger I dare not."

"Then let us say no more, mademoiselle. The plan is made, and all that remains is to carry it out. If it fails——"

"Oh, you men, you men! Is it thus a captain heartens his soldiers? Shame, monsieur, shame, to talk of failure. There shall, there must be none.

There can be none if we keep our own counsel and are resolute. But that we run no more risks than we need we must have done with conferences, so one last word. The guard will be changed at nine and then again at midnight, every third hour, that they may draw out another bar—oh, that I could make Miguel Zarresco pay for that!—therefore at half-past twelve be ready. Let the King and Monsieur de Montamar await us in the hall. You, monsieur, will find me in the room I tell you of.”

“And the five horses will be ready?”

“Eight, mousieur, eight. I have three faithful servants. God pity them if they fell into Donna Teresa's hands! Oh! that gives me a thought. Continue your protestations, Monsieur de Bernauld, lest your apathy bring a suspicion, but be not importunate overmuch, for a touch of pity would ruin all. Therefore, while you protest, irritate, and let every plea for mercy have the crime as its echo; you understand?”

Oh, yes, I understood! For all the rustiness at which the King gibed I was no such fool but that her meaning and its sense were clear. But as I watched her turn the corner of the gallery my admiration for her shrewd wit was dashed with pity that she should already have been compelled by desperate need to learn the wisdom of the serpent.

If there was little to be said of the night, so is there little to be said of the day. Of Mademoiselle de Lignac we saw nothing; she had a migraine or

some such convenient femininity, and so kept her room. Donna Teresa we met twice, once at dinner and once again at supper, when we four dined and supped with two vacant places set gaping at us with a kind of ironical ostentation. That we sat at meat with Donna Teresa may seem strange; but we had reasons, and at the moment policy over-rode nicety of feeling: firstly, it gave us opportunity to seem to move her compassion while we played upon her hate; secondly, it allayed suspicion; and thirdly, in her then temper the old witch might well have told us that beggars could not be choosers and we must dine where she willed or not at all, and to face a night's ride upon empty stomachs would have risked the whole enterprise and so been a folly.

That the banquets were of the dullest is no marvel: so dull were they that even the long lines at either side the common table used their tongues but in whispers. Indeed, no funeral feast could have been as melancholy, for the shadow death casts forward at his coming is ever deeper than that flung behind, since a dread mingles with the certainty of sorrow. Later, even grief has a numbness.

With us on the dais the talk turned on Blaise de Bernauld in his cage on the south wall.

"Show grace, madame," said I, pleadingly. "To forgive is Christian, and doubly so to forgive a heretic."

"Ay," said she smartly, "when he repents and amends. I have not yet heard of the first, and he is like to have scant time for the second."

"But, madame, consider," struck in the King and speaking across me, "it is so long since he slew Don Diego."

"Ay," she replied, her lips tightening across the still sound teeth. "Yet is my son slain."

"But the time, madame, the time is so long ago."

"Never yet did I hear that time pardoned crime," answered she, "and in Spain we have long memories."

Then she broke out with a hot vilification in which coward, traitor, murderer, jostled one another like idlers in a crowd. But the King stopped her.

"The man is our friend," cried he, striking his open hand loudly on the table, "and by the Lord we will not sit here to hear him blackened! Your enemy is within arm's length, madame; let that suffice you. What? Are you lost to all womanliness that you not only kill, but curse like a Bordeaux fish-wife?"

A rebuke which I thought would have cost us dear; but she only drew a deeper breath or two, and sat silent, glaring at him.

So the day wore away. Time and again the curiosity of the King sought to penetrate the secret of our plan; but firm in my promise to Mademoiselle de Lignac, and confident of her power to carry out that which she had devised, I put him off. At last he took the very ground I had taken, or something like it—that he who was bearing a share of the risks should not act blindfold. Upon which I compromised, and told him the part he and De Montamar were to play.

"And now, Sire," I went on, "may we not keep our own counsel seeing the risks are ours, or rather chiefly mademoiselle's, since what danger is there in lying *perdu* in the shadows of the great hall?"

"But why mademoiselle's?" cried he. "The place of danger is no place for a woman."

"Because mademoiselle is loyal to the King of Navarre, Sire," replied I; "and I never yet knew a true woman who shrunk from danger if duty lay that way."

"Then you told her, Monsieur de Bernauld? Was that well done?"

"I told her nothing, Sire; she knew from the first."

"What? even on the ramparts?"

"Even on the ramparts, Sire."

De Montamar had stood silently by; but now he laid both hands upon my shoulders:

"I said I would give an arm to save Marcel, and so I would; but to risk mademoiselle is another thing. As friend to friend, De Bernauld, is there no other way?"

"None! None that I see."

"Then I trust her to you," said he and said no more. Nor, to use his own phrase, as friend to friend was there any need that he should.

On the stroke of half an hour past midnight I gave the King and De Montamar their final instructions.

"This thing will take us some twenty minutes. Wait you, therefore, a quarter of an hour; then slip

off your shoes, and carrying your great riding-boots in your hands, go down barefooted. The corridors are dark as midnight, and for the Lord's sake let there be no stumbling; no, nor a whisper either. In the great hall pick out the darkest corner, and think it no shame to hide. This is no time for bravado. Ten minutes later we shall join you."

"But to skulk behind curtains, De Bernauld! *Ventre St Gris!* that is not to my taste."

"I am leader, Sire," answered I; "and, by your leave, taste has nought to do with it," and so left him grumbling.

I had said the corridors were dark as midnight, but that was an under statement. They were dark rather with the weighty oppressiveness which comes of a confined space. Up the spiral stairs and along the south gallery I fumbled my way, boots in hand, and would have overshot the open door had not Claire de Lignac called me softly. Even then I halted in doubt, she stood in such a misty, uncertain greyness.

"This way," she whispered, and groping forwards I caught her outstretched hand. "Set your boots by the wall, and look out, Marcel is just above. God be thanked for such a night of wind and cloud."

The window lay like a patch of shadow on the dense garment of the night, and mounting the one high step which lay beneath it, I pushed myself, head and shoulders, out into the air, and looked up. So dark had been the corridor, so grey the gloom, that even the faintly lesser swartness of the external

air dimmed my sight, and for a moment my eyes were blurred. Then slowly, slowly, the huge mass of the castle wall grew into ponderous bulk, and thrust from it, out against the blackness of the vault of eloud, the interlacing of Marcel's prison bars took shape and outline, with a foreshortened pillar of more intense darkness clinging to their edge. It was the man himself. As for the depths below and beyond, they were Eternity!

Mademoiselle de Lignac was right as to the night. There was no rain, but a sudden storm had swept in from the south-west, such a storm as Spain knows well, and we on our pinnacle of rock felt its every gusty breath. They did wisely that they had built well, these old builders, else would that howling tempest, which set the stout bars wailing like an Æolian harp, and flattened Marcel against his prison bounds like a hare on a gridiron, have toppled us down into the bottomless gulf of blackness that gaped at our feet. Well, let it howl, there would be the fewer sounds heard on the ramparts above, the fewer ears open.

Though all this took me not three minutes, yet mademoiselle was impatient, and I felt her plucking at my doublet.

"Rouse him, monsieur," she whispered. "He cannot be asleep, but he may be dazed and cramped.

"Marcel!" called I, softly; "Marcel! Hulloo! Marcel, old friend!" Then to mademoiselle—"Does he know the plan?"

"Ay, ay, he knows; for the Lord's sake hasten!"

"Marcel! Marcel!" cried I, more insistently; and the dim figure stirred, and my quickened sight caught the loom of his head as he looked down.

"Praise the Lord!" I heard him say, in a kind of a groan. Then to me—"But it's no use, Master Blaise; no manner of use at all. I'm stiff as a wooden post, and if I loose my grip, why, there is a three-foot hole behind me, and I'm a dead man."

"Nonsense!" cried I cheerily, more cheerily than I felt at heart, for the awful depth chilled me. "Make the trial, man; wait, I will fling up the cord."

Groping into the room, I grasped a ball of fine cord, a ball of about the size of a hen's egg, from which hung a loose end of several yards length, with the stouter cord knotted fast. This ball I flung upwards, but, though it passed through the bottom of the cage, it struck one of the outer upright bars, and fell back. Again this happened, but the third effort was successful, and the ball, passing between the bars, flew out in the wind.

"Now, man," I cried, "you have nothing to do but draw up the cord, and make fast the rope which is——"

"Nothing!" interrupted he, bitterly. "Had you hung here these eighteen hours, Master Blaise, you would know better than that. My nerve is broken, and I dare not budge."

"Try," I urged; "try, for the Lord's sake, try."

"No," he answered, groaning dismally; "I dare not,

and that's the last word. I can die like a man, let that she-wolf kill me how she may; but go to my death down that black hole like a dog I cannot. Get you away, Master Blaise; for the love of Madame Jeanne, get you away."

Nor did I wonder that such a trial should have shattered the nerve of even as stout-hearted a man as Marcel; and, as I stared out into the darkness, grinding my teeth at our impotence, a thought came to me.

The ball of twine, caught by the eddying gusts, swung now into sight, now out into the gloom, and curving through a long ellipse in its flight. Cautiously paying out the slack of the string, I gave it the wider swing, and presently a more furious blast drove it within my reach, and I slipped back into the little chamber, holding it in my hand. To draw the rope upwards, through the outer bars of the cage, and back again to my hand, was easy. Less easy the next step in my plan; and so I stood at a loss, thinking.

"What is it, monsieur?" whispered Mademoiselle Claire, setting her hand on my arm; "will he not come?"

"It is not will that he wants," answered I, "but power; he cannot stir."

"And you?"

"It is Mohammed and the mountain," I replied lightly, "only——"

"Only, monsieur?"

"Only who will steady the rope with two men swinging over—that?" and I pointed out and downwards.

"I will, monsieur."

"You, mademoiselle? But——"

"Oh, I am stronger than you think! Besides, there is a sconce here in the wall, and by passing the rope through the ring and pulling against it I can bear the strain."

"There are two men's lives, mademoiselle."

"Yes, and he has risked his for yours. There is no time to waste, Monsieur de Bernauld."

After that there was no more to be said, and slipping the rope through the ring as she suggested, I set myself to my task. God! how the black abyss swung under me as my feet slipped from the last inch of the stone sill, and I hung cringing in the blast. Swung, I say, swung, for the huge bulk of the great wall, with the infinitely small blur of the window lying like a grey splash on its immensity, reeled and tottered as if the last great day of the Lord had come. With a sickening jerk the short slack of the rope ran out, and it needed all the grip of my unaccustomed stockinged feet to keep me from sprawling in mid-air by the hands alone. Then I set my will to forget what lay below, and inch by inch crept up to the uncertain shadow that seemed so illimitably far away. Inch by inch, while my sinews strained and cracked, and my breath came in uneasy gasps, till but for shame's sake despair would have given up the fight and slipped back to that dim blot where safety lay, and which, for all my slowness, grew so quickly faint and distant. But shame gained

the battle, and inch by inch I climbed, and at last grasped the stout flat bar that served as socket for the outer rods of the cage.

Then came the hardest part of my task, to turn myself so as to climb not upon the outer side of the cage, but the inner; but the sense of solidness in the iron gave me strength and courage, and with almost infinite slowness I pulled myself up inside the hole that Miguel Zarresco's malignity had made for his own undoing. After that I hugged the bars as Marcel did, and stood panting.

Feeling the strain gone from the rope, Mademoiselle de Lignac came to the window, and looking down I saw her face white against the intense dark, like a gull on the hollow of the night. Calling softly to her, I bade her loose one end of the rope. This I drew to me, and passing it up through the hollow of the floor, made it fast to the upper cross-bar of the cage, where it would fall almost at a perpendicular. In spite of the delay it caused this was essential, since to have clambered with Marcel on my back down from where the rope originally hung would have been impossible. Nor was the loss of time all lost, for in the interval I regained both breath and coolness, while Marcel, with me beside him, took heart of grace to face the descent.

Grasping the rope with both hands, and bidding him grip me round the neck, as for eighteen hours he had gripped the bars, bidding him also twine his legs about my hips and hold me fast, I swung off,

and for one sickening minute groped bluntly with my feet for the rope. Then inch by inch we slid into the void, my hands burning and tingling with the friction, and Marcel's weight growing double with every yard. Inch by inch until my toes rested on the stone sill, and a thank God choked in my throat for very want of breath. Then inch by inch I sidled round and slipped Marcel sitting upon the stone.

"Tumble off, man, for the Lord's sake tumble off," I groaned; "I'm clean spent."

"But the noise, Master Blaise."

"I'm spent, I tell you."

Then his hands relaxed, and backwards into the cavity he fell, making, as it seemed to me, such a thunder of a racket above the howl of the wind as would set the whole castle agog. As it was it roused one person, and but one alone. To clamber after him was comparatively easy, nor was it a time to reckon up small scratches and bruises of which there were enough and to spare. If thereafter we all three gave five full minutes to a gasping after breath and a rubbing of chafed and cramped limbs, I think there is none but will admit that the rest was well earned.

It was Mademoiselle de Lignac who at length started us into activity.

"Are your limbs your own again?" said she to Marcel, who had been rubbing his numbed joints with his no less numbed hands. "Can you walk? Can you sit a horse? Good! Then let us go down, but barefooted, friend, as is Monsieur de Bernauld."

Then she turned to me, "Descend by the corner stairway on the left, monsieur, it is farthest from Donna Teresa's quarters. I must return to my own room for the key of the great door."

With that she slipped out into the corridor and was swallowed up in the night, and Marcel and I, so soon as the squire was ready, followed her. Now, whether she meant the left as one entered the room or as one returned to the passage I was uncertain. The former, I now think, since that was the natural form of speech for one who had lived there all her life; but to me the left was the left, and without a pause I turned down the passage in that direction, Marcel at my heels. At the stairs' head, however, I halted to search my pockets for my purse and such like things, since I had no mind to make Donna Teresa's lackeys a larger present than needs must, and in the bare half minute Marcel passed me and went forward down the steps.

Not for far. Presently, at the first half turn of the stairs, I found him clinging to the outer edge and staring down into the vault.

"Look," he whispered hoarsely, pointing below.

Of a sudden eye and ear were alike alert. Into the darkness flashed a faint yellow light, flashed like a wink and went out. Up the shaft there came the rasp of slow feet, and at defined intervals the louder and growing ring of metal upon stone, the echo as of an iron heel advancing at a death's pace. Craning my head above his upper shoulder, we leaned

outward, every nerve on the stretch. Again the light swung into sight, stronger this time, hung steady an instant, and flashed out as quickly as it had come. The rustle and the tapping on the pavement grew clearer.

"They are in the corridor below, and are making their rounds," I whispered. "They may pass on; if not——"

"What then, Master Blaise?"

Marcel's voice shook so that I looked at him with a kind of astonishment. Even in the darkness I could see that his face had gone white, and the shoulder against which I leaned trembled as if with the palsy.

"We must act as the minute bids us; it will be some sort of a patrol. Look, the light again, and steady this time; now we shall see. Great God! it is Donna Teresa herself, and she is coming full upon us!"

For all that no more than a minute segment of the lower passage was visible, there was no mistaking the heavy skirt and the lean white hand that held the crutched-stick whose iron-shod end rang sharply on the stone with every second step. The briefest of spaces she paused on the first stair to take breath, then the rustling of the stiff silk recommenced, and the light crept slowly round the upward bend.

Curious how some scenes are burnt into the brain, never to lose the clear boldness of their outline,

while others, no less vital at the moment, blur and grow sloven with the years. This was no more than a look while one might count ten, but that foreshortened upright figure, sombre as the incarnation of a pestilence, and swinging in its hand a two-flamed Italian lamp of polished brass, the small tools on which clicked and clattered on their chains as she walked, stands living before my shut eyes, as clean cut as when for five seconds we watched it that night. Five seconds, no more, then I whispered in Marcel's ear—

“Follow softly; for your life let there be no noise,” and turning crept swiftly upstairs.

At the outlet into the corridor I looked down, but Marcel had not moved except to flatten himself against the farther side of the step on which he stood. There he hugged the bareness of the wall as best he might, his shoulders squared back, his arms by his side, and his face ghastly in the growing light, as he stared fixedly at the climbing figure. It was the horrible fascination of blank, unreasoning terror, and as I watched him I saw his jaw shake and glistening points of sweat start upon his forehead. Higher came Donna Teresa, the head bent in the unaccustomed effort—higher, higher—until the two were but four steps apart, and the trembling had crept down to Marcel's knees. Then the stockinged feet came within her range, and raising the lamp level with her head she looked up. An instant the two stood staring, the glare aglow upon their faces, and as in a mirror the agony of fear above was

reflected below. Swiftly the consternation deepened and broadened. With a clang the lamp swung against the wall once, twice, and fell jangling at her feet; flickered dully an instant and went out.

Instantly, from above and below, the darkness rushed in upon us with the living force of a cold breath, and out of it came a cry, a scream, a calling upon God in terror, and the crash of a body pitching backward upon the steep steps, the sound of splintered bones, and the muffled rustle of a dead mass tumbling down the incline—then silence!

With the noise of the catastrophe Marcel's nervous terror vanished.

"A judgment," I heard him whisper, his voice dry and harsh—"a plain judgment. Truly the Lord fights for us! This way, Master Blaise, and quickly—such a clatter will send a dozen at our heels; but her day for harm is done." And I heard him run down the stairs with but little thought of quietness. A pause and smothered cry followed, and I judged he had stumbled blindly upon his enemy; then again came the heavy wispy patter of feet, and this time I was not far behind.

In the hall by the great door was a startled group of some three or four—no more than shadows in the gloom—but I brushed aside all talk, and bade them see to the horses, while Marcel and I made ready, and for all its wildness the first sweep of the gale in my face was the sweetest welcome that had greeted me for many a day.

CHAPTER XXIV.

NORTHWARDS !

FROM a huddled mass gathered under the shelter of the wall to the right of the fan of steps came the stamping of hoofs and the rattle of chain-bridles and bits. Lignac's faction was true to Lignac's mistress, and as I fumbled for the reins of my beast my spirits rose into a wildness that matched the fury of the night. My horse, honest brute, whinnied as it recognised its master, and what with this one backing in its terror of the darkness and that one pawing in its restless impatience at the long delay, there was a turmoil that broke down even the rough crash of the wind and warned us to begone with all speed.

De Montamar had squired Mademoiselle Claire to her saddle ; Marcel, groaning at his cramped stiffness, had climbed uneasily to his, when, like an ice douche, the thought of the three barrier gates came upon me. To have forgotten them was a grievous blunder, a crime even, and my shame was heavy on me as I pushed through the press to where mademoiselle and De Montamar were turning down the slope of the

path. As I ranged alongside she checked her horse and leaned towards me to listen.

"Oh! that?" she cried back across the blast. "One of our own men holds the first gate, and as for the others——"

"As for the others," broke in De Montamar, "with the first gate locked behind us, and the key in our pocket, we will have time to win the other two."

"It will not be locked for long," answered she; "there is a duplicate key in the castle, but it is in Miguel Zarresco's keeping, and I could not have asked for it without rousing suspicion."

"Still," he persisted, "it gives us another fifteen minutes, and at such a time fifteen minutes may be worth as many hours."

How Lignac's man had contrived it I never asked—it is an easy and a very human thing to take your blessings without question—but we found the porteullis of the first barrier swung to its top notch, and the broad wings of the gate stretched to their widest. The former we slid into its groove, and so down with a rasp; the latter we fast locked, and with the addition of one to our troop we rode on to the middle guard. Here our key was mademoiselle's authority, and though the fellow was but half awake, or maybe because of that, he only gaped and let us through without question. So was it also at the lowest keep, save that when the key had but turned in the lock there came such a shout down the wind as made him pause, and with freedom before us we might have been

penned as in a trap had not De Montamar spurred forward. That settled the doubt. The gate flew open with a clatter, and the fellow was flung sprawling into the thickest of the shadows where we heard him cursing his hardest as we rode by.

"Where now?" cried I, for in the dark the twist of the path had moidered me.

"Let Louis guide. Ride thou on, Louis, and ride fast. No fear but we will match the pace."

"Taen let him head for the pass by which we travelled hither. I have my reasons."

"All that is settled," called back mademoiselle, who, bridle to bridle with De Montamar, was already no more than a shadow; "have no fear."

Much need was there to ride fast! The shouts above had died away, but in their place, jangled on the wind, came the ring of horse hoofs clanging in desperate haste over the stony path, and we knew Miguel Zarreseco had not lost those fifteen minutes, but, like a prudent steward, had carried the key of the great keep with him. Mechanically I groped about the pommel of my saddle. Ay! there was the sword as Mademoiselle Claire had promised, and my own Florida blade to boot; even in the dark the handle was as familiar as my own pocket. Dropping the reins, but never slackening pace, I buckled the strap round my waist and drew in the buckle of the loop by which the scabbard hung so as to lessen the play of the yard of steel. So; that was to rights. If those behind gained ground, they—and in

my exultation of freedom I half laughed at the paradox—gained it to their loss!

With that I edged up to De Montamar and whispered in his ear,—the whisper being a hoarse roar, which the wind swept into silence before it had travelled two yards. But he understood, and almost insensibly we two slipped back and left the King to ride up to mademoiselle at the heels of Louis the guide. It was our place to secure the retreat.

On we pounded, hugging our beasts with our knees and our heads bent to their very crests, while fitfully up the wind, swelling and sinking as the road curved, came the roar of the pursuit. They were gaining, they were gaining; the speed of the flight was no more than the speed of Louis' horse, he being the leader. It was none of the fastest, and there are times when hate has even a redder spur than fear. Yes, they were gaining: perhaps we should make a stand, and so give the King time; perhaps—and then I heard De Montamar on my left cursing under his breath; under his breath, be it understood, when the welter of wind is considered. Looking sharply round, I saw him with his hand flung up towards the sky, and at the same moment was aware the heavens had in part blown clear, and that the night was bright about us.

“An ill chance,” he shouted, “for in the dark the few have a haphazard luck which they lose in the light, and if mademoiselle be right, there may be fifteen or twenty at our heels.”

"An ill chance indeed," I answered, standing up in my stirrups and looking back. "Ay, there they are on the bend of the road, strung out like black beads on a string, and nearer the score than fifteen. It is one of two things, ride back or ride harder."

Rising in his turn, he took a long look behind and then ahead.

"Ride harder," said he; "there is always the river."

Peste! I had forgotten the river. Rusty! I was worse than rusty, I was time-worn and rust eaten, and once safe in Navarre, Blaise de Bernauld had better lay himself on the shelf for the rest of his days! The river! Let me see? Ay; there was the loom of the hills, and that dark ridge that lay betwixt us and them must be the cutting where the stream ran. It was no great distance now, not half a mile, and De Montamar was right; better ride on.

In our reckoning of chances we had insensibly slackened pace, and Miguel Zarresco and his crew had closed in upon us, or their leaders had, for they had tailed - off sadly. A bare six-score paces lay between us and them, and for the sake of those ahead I had no mind to increase the distance. If the fording of the river caused the King delay, a demonstration to check the advance might be necessary; and he is an unskilful general who makes his stand with a double bank under his horse's hind legs. We were, therefore, divided into two groups: the King, mademoiselle, and a couple of

Lignac's men ahead; De Montamar, Marcel, I, and a man-at-arms or two behind.

As we thus hung in the wind, riding the last furlong at but a half-pace, I saw Louis the guide break away to the right and disappear, closely followed by the other three. They, then, were safe for the moment. To lead the pursuit astray that the moment might become all time was my affair. Drawing sharply to the left, I quitted the track and plunged hotly across the pasture. De Montamar and Mareel followed, but the others, crying out I knew not what, kept the road and held on. Here the light stood us in stead. Miguel Zarresco cared little for a pair of cross-bred Huguenots, much for Blaise de Bernauld. Therefore, quitting the road as we had done, he and the three or four with him made after us, saving the angle thereby.

Now was the issue knit. It was ride Navarre, ride Spain, and God have mercy on him who lost, for there was no mercy in man! On we drove, the breath hard held, heads bent and elbows glued to the ribs, our wits half behind and half before, when Marcel, two yards on my left, startled me bolt upright with a mighty shout.

"Look, look, look!" he roared; "the river's in flood, and the devils have us netted!"

In the last few strides we had drawn fast in towards the line of the bank, and now rising in my stirrups I groaned in despair at what I saw. The land fell away sharply to the left along the face

of the hills, and, thanks to the thunder-burst of the night, a wild tumble of swollen waters filled the channel we had crossed two days before with no more than a splash. So deep they ran, so lip-high along the soft grass of the slope, that for all their swirl and turbulence they ran as silently as the very river of death. Curdled frothy ropes and elotted cakes of foam curled in the drift, and each small space of embayed slaek water glistened with yeasty seum. The dark margins were piled inches higher than the centre by the force of the flow, and for all its silence, its face was barred and wrinkled by the fierce pulsations welling up from underneath. It was the world's artery rushing in fever heat.

There was scant time for brooding. Miguel Zarreseco was no more than a dozen lengths behind.

"God for Navarre!" I cried, drove my spurs home, shook the reins loose on my beast's neck, and plunged in, nose up stream. A splash on my right told me De Montamar had followed, but in such a bewilderment of broken currents I did not dare so much as glance aside. Not that I did aught, for, with the instinct that feels a nicher wisdom than its own, I left my salvation to my beast. But the man could aid the brute, and he needed all my watchfulness lest the roll of the spate be too strong for him, and so needs must that I swim. Therefore, for I know not how many minutes or how few, I was blind not alone to the passage of time, but to everything else save the deadly peril of Blaise de Bernauld, and of the noble

beast that carried him. Thrice he faltered in his stroke, and thrice a word and a touch steadied him as at a time of desperate need a word and a touch steady a man. Once his fore-quarters swerved down stream, and for a horrible half-minute all seemed lost; then I edged him round, and, by the mercy of God, he struck a shelf in the bank, and so clambered to land, dripping, and trembling like a scared child.

Once there my wit came back, and, turning in the saddle, I searched the river and the bank beyond. The distance across was short, you understand—not more than forty, or may be fifty, feet—but for all our upward swimming the drift had carried us down stream a hundred yards or thereabouts. First I scanned the water, but that was clear. Neither man nor beast broke the dull lead of its swollen, heavy surface. Then De Montamar, not much more than midway higher up the bank, caught my eye. He was safe, and with a lighter heart I hunted for Marcel. Ay, there was where we had plunged in, and—yes—yes—like shadows against a grey cloth there were Marcel and Lignac's rogues still in a confusion upon the bank.

At last his nerve must have failed him, as it had failed him in the iron cage, or—and it would be like his devotion—he had again given himself to the wolves that Master Blaise might save his skin. At this last thought I shook up my horse, and rode frantically up stream, shouting as I galloped:

“Ho! Marcel! Marcel! Come, man, come!
Marcel! I say, Marcel!”

As if to prove that my second thought had been the truer, I saw him as I spoke draw his beast sidelong to the river, and, still carrying his naked sword on guard, force it into the flood. But not alone. Like a dog at a deer's throat Zarresco flung himself upon the squire while he was yet in mid-air, and with such a force that he still swayed from the shock as the horse struck the water. Then came such a combat as I pray I may never see again. Mad with passion against the man who was to him not alone the slayer of his master but also the murderer of his brother, Miguel Zarresco paid no heed to his own safety, but bent his every effort on the destruction of his enemy. He had aimed to spring upon the saddle behind him, but had missed his leap, and so hung trailing waist-deep in the water, one desperate grip round Marcel's bridle-arm, and one clenched in the fold of the squire's doublet. To hold his balance in the saddle needs must that Marcel fling his weight to the right, and so neutralise the odds given him by a bare blade. Strike he could not; thrust he dare not, lest the shifting of the balance play his foe's game, and so both drift to death together. Therefore, flinging his weight on the right stirrup, he gripped his beast with his knees, while his foe clutched and clawed at him with the venom of a wild cat. Round they spun in the swirl and eddy of the spate as if in some wild

drunken dance. Now Zarresco's weight streamed downwards in the force of the current, now the rush of water sucked him beneath the horse's belly, and ever braced against him, the naked steel held rigidly up, Marcel kept his place. Then—Zarresco was up stream at the time—I saw the Spaniard loosen his left hand, and, rising in the water to his hips, make a dash for Marcel's throat. It was the crisis of the struggle. Let him get his grip on the squire's gorge, and the end had come! But the mad clutch failed, and with the freed bridle arm Marcel pulled his beast round so that the other's whole weight was flung upon his right hand as he floundered down stream. A moment it held, but as the reaction of the spring sank him lower in the water his grasp failed, and the last we saw of Miguel Zarresco was one clenched hand flung up out of the yeasty silver of the water, then it, too, sank. Fifty yards lower down Marcel's horse found footing.

"Are you hurt, old friend?"

"Not a jot, not a jot," answered he heartily, while his beast stood between us, its head drooped and its flanks heaving with the breathlessness of the fight for life. "Oaly we have no time for words. Look there"—and he pointed to a broken string of horsemen on the farther bank—"let them get their dazed wits sound again, and they will be on our heels. The ford is a furlong or two higher up."

"Let your beast blow," answered I; "time enough to move when it gets its wind. Tell us what happened."

"There's nought to tell," replied he roughly. "You saw for yourselves."

"Yes, after I called. But what of before?"

"Oh! That? That, too, is nought. You and monsieur dived, and I, well, I found them round me and so drew steel to keep them at arm's length. With that"—and he nodded at the silent current—"with that behind and half a dozen in front they could have made an end of me quickly enough, but Zarresco had no use for a dead man. I was still Blaise de Bernauld, d'ye see, and so," he added with a grin, "you saved my life! But if they spared me, they spared themselves too, and I never got a thrust home, no, not once. Then you called, and—and—you know the rest."

"And you have no hurt?"

"Not so much as a scratch. And here's a queer thing, Master Blaise. In all that jumble of waters I was never even scared, no, nor in that accursed cage either, though I did cling to the bars as if they were my very bones. D'you know why, monsieur? No credit to me. You remember that old warlock at Pau? 'There,' said he, with a touch on the breast, 'there's the spot,' and so neither water nor that great gap into nothing could do me hurt. Truly, faith is a comforting thing."

"Come," answered I, rousing myself. "Navarre lies beyond the ridge, and where Navarre is there is safety and an end to all these qualms. Let us find the King and ride on."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE GREATEST THING UPON EARTH.

"Oh! the King, the King," exclaimed De Montamar.

"To find the King is easily enough said; but how find him in such a wilderness?"

"Have no fear, we shall find him," answered I.

"There is no more loyal man than Henry of Navarre.

This way," and I spurred up stream, but headed to the left towards the slope of the hill.

"And what of those fellows yonder?" and De Montamar pointed to the string of horsemen keeping pace with us on the farther bank.

"They are no affair of ours as yet. Whether they follow us or ride back is the turn of a chance. Our business is with the King and not to borrow trouble."

Nor had we to go far to find him. Neither then nor ever was it Henry of Navarre's way to climb to safety over another man's back. If he had left us to ourselves on the thither side of the stream it was for one of two reasons, or for both. There was made-moiselle's retreat to secure; and how, until he was in

mid-water, could he tell that we were not hard at his heels? All this I was saying to De Montamar, when there came a cry from the shadows on the left, and the King himself rode across the grass to meet us.

"Thank God you are safe!" he cried, as he came nearer; "my heart has been in my throat ever since I found you had not followed us. What? Old war-horse; this is not the first time thou hast cheated the Dons, eh? Nor the last, either, I hope. What shall we do, De Bernauld? Rest? Mademoiselle is spent. She is there in that grove beyond the great rock," he added, turning to De Montamar. "I excuse you, monsieur."

"Rest, but not yet, Sire," replied I, as De Montamar rode off, with a muttering that was half thanks and half shame-faced apology, for your new-fledged lover is a shy bird. "Let us first put a mile between ourselves and——"

"Miguel Zarresco? A pretty scoundrel he is! He is the wolf, Pierre Salces the jackal, and between the two a man is fortunate if he pass to Navarre by this road and lose no more than his purse. So much I have learned in the last ten minutes. Let me lay hands on Miguel Zarresco, and he hangs. You will not say 'No' to that, Master Marcel?"

"Nor 'Yes' either," answered I. "Zarresco has ended his villainies in this world. He and his mistress are dead."

Very briefly, as we walked our horses across the broken boulder-scattered pasture towards the break in

the hillside, I told the tale of Lignac and the fording of the stream; a dozen bald sentences, no more, but enough for the time and place. Too bald it seemed they must have been, for the King rode on in silence, his chin on his chest and his hands crossed upon his saddle-point, like a man who heard, but heard so dully that words were no more sense than the moaning of the wind. Then, with a start, he roused himself and turned half to me who rode by his side, and half to Marcel two lengths behind.

"God be thanked for such men," said he slowly, and with a shake in his voice that was no common thing with him; "and may Navarre never lack the breed, nor France either in the days to come. It was men's work done like men. Are you quits now, Marcel, with your life for a life?"

"No, monsieur," answered he bluntly—a bad courtier was Marcel—"there is still one owing, and by the looks of things it won't be paid this journey."

"Owing by me, then," said I, "since you took a score of risks, I but one. But what of you, Sire? Is there a ford yonder?"

"The river broadens so we were but girth-deep, and as the channel banks up we crossed in slack water. That was right enough, but, plague take it, I never met such a girl! It was 'Monsieur de Montamar this,' 'Monsieur de Montamar that,' till I was sick of Monsieur de Montamar. Look at them there! How he strokes and pets the beast she sits on as the next best thing to petting the mistress, and she, cunning

wench, knows his thought as well as if he spoke it. A lucky man, De Montamar—the only one of us all who had nought to gain by this wild cast of the net, and the only one of us all who comes out the gainer!”

“You will not spoil his happiness, Sire? Think how much the honest love of a good woman means. Think what misery——”

“Have no fear for me, De Bernauld; I am no woman-hunter, and love nought but love. God knows I am at times too sick at heart for want of that same honest—— But there; let it rest! A king’s true love is his people, and so France shall yet see.”

“Now,” he went on as he rode up to the others, “what of rest? It must be three o’clock, and Mademoiselle de Lignac has had no sleep to-night.”

“Wait, Sire, wait; give us a mile of hill-country between us and Spain and then we shall see. By this the horses are well breathed; let us ride on, rather, and quickly.”

“Be it so; for another four-and-twenty hours you are leader. Canst thou keep thy eyes open, friend Marcel? This is the second night thy brain has gone fasting.”

“I can do better, monsieur,” answered he; “I can sleep sitting. That is an old trick of the mareh.”

“My faith! there will be rocking enough!” laughed Henry, as we swayed and staggered uphill after Louis. “He who sleeps on this jolting road would dream through an earthquake.”

An hour later we halted in the shelter of a small lateral valley where the growth overhead was almost thick enough to shut out the grey of the morning. There was grass in plenty, and such an abundance of moss as would seem to our weariness a bed of down. Here we picketed the beasts, loosening their girths but not removing the saddles, and having set one of Lignac's men as sentinel we lay down, bidding him call us in two hours' time.

For myself I slept. To obey like a dog, eat like a wolf, and sleep like a child, are three prime necessities to the man of camps, and in any one of the three I could have held my own with most. How long I slept was another matter. To him who has no dreams five hours and five minutes are much alike. But at the first heavy touch of a hand upon the shoulder I was broad awake, blinking at the gathered strength of the sun and groping for the loosened buckle of my sword-belt.

"They are after us, monsieur,"—it was Lignac's man who spoke; "I hear them pushing through the brush below."

"Have you seen them?"

"No, monsieur."

"Then why may they not be travellers?"

"Because of the hour, monsieur, and because, too, of their curses at the vileness of the path. He who travels at his own will takes that as a thing of course, and so——"

"Good. Waken your fellows, but let there be

neither noise nor confusion; speed is own child to quietness. Then see to the horses; we will leave mademoiselle to her rest as long as may be."

But mademoiselle was not to be left. At almost my first move she was up on her elbow, peering about with no sign of sleep in her eyes.

"Is there danger, Monsieur de Bernauld?"

"No; but there is need of precaution. Have you slept?"

"No," said she, rising, and speaking with a half apology as one does who confesses a fault. "It was all too strange. For a time I stared at the tree-trunks lest I knew not what might lurk behind them. Then when nothing stirred I closed my eyes and tried to sleep, but in an instant the wood was alive upon either side with hideous things; so I started up and stared afresh. That happened thrice, and each time it seemed to me they came nearer. Then the grasshoppers awoke, and every inch of moss, every tuft of grass, every drifted leaf, was creeping full of life and sound, so I lay awake and watched and listened. But indeed, indeed I am rested. Have no fear for me, Monsieur de Bernauld."

After all, that was no more than might have been expected, and it was to her credit that, face to face with the noisy forest solitudes and the terror of the new and unknown, she had not shrieked aloud, and so not only lost her own rest but robbed others of theirs.

While she was speaking I had roused the rest of

the sleepers, and such was our speed, and so few our preparations, that in five minutes from the first touch on my shoulder we were once more on the road.

Then came a strange ordeal, a snail's-pace flight followed by a snail's-pace pursuit, since for all our haste speed was impossible. It was a cat-like clamber, a scrambling up abrupt and little used paths, now strewn with loose stones where secure foothold there was none, now of a pasty clay still sodden from the night's deluge, the sticky face of which our beasts' feet scored like strokes from an iron mattock. In either case a dozen times an hour death lurked an arm's length off.

So for three hours we fought, nature our foe rather than man, and yet man no more than a furlong off striving his hardest to come to nature's aid. With every long slope of hill Lignac's Spanish faction came in sight, with every twist we lost them, and at the end of the three hours we knew to our comfort that for all our hide-and-seek they had not gained a single rod—nay, for the time we outdistanced some of them. But the speed of advance was the speed of our slowest members, and it was plain that the men-at-arms hampered us.

By that time—that is three hours from the halt—we had reached the watershed, and were in a country where the going was better. It was no longer the trend of a confined valley that held us, for, from the crest of the pass, a fan of declivities spread out like the spokes of a great wheel. By any of these safety

lay, and therefore I had no scruple in bidding Lignac's men God-speed by another road than ours, having first given them a rendezvous at Bernauld. Then at our best pace we turned down the slope in the direction of the inn.

Scant as had been our farewells, they had given the pursuit time to close, and again we learned to our chagrin that the slowness of one was the pace of all. This time it was Mademoiselle Claire who failed us. As was natural, fatigue had told upon her, and in the descent there was a scope for reckless riding and blind haste of which those behind were not slow to avail themselves. On they came, driving their tired and staggering beasts at a cruel pace, while we, bitter-hearted and almost despairing, dared do no more than keep together and plod forward. At last we turned into the slope where lay the wayside inn, and at the sight of the more familiar hill I pushed on stirrup to stirrup with the King.

"We must make a stand and fight for it," I cried, as we swayed and jolted. "The garret of The Rat's Hole is the place. Do you and Marcel ride ahead and see that the way is clear."

For an instant he hesitated, looking backwards over his shoulder. Doubtless he thought it a ruse to gain time to his saving, but had that been so mademoiselle had been his companion, not Marcel. What he saw decided him. In another half-mile they would be within pistol range, and so, if so armed, might make an end of us at their leisure.

"Why Marcel?"

"Who else? Would De Montamar go? Not for a dozen kings."

"Why not yourself?"

"I command, and my place is here. For God's sake waste no time but ride on, Sire. Off with you, Marcel."

This time he nodded, and—too old a soldier to disobey—Marcel too spurred on. Then I reined back to De Montamar, and for fifty paces we rode all three side by side in silence.

"We shall do it," said he at last, with a glance behind. "It will be a near thing, and we must lose the horses, but we shall do it."

But even as he spoke Mademoiselle de Lignac swayed in her saddle as her beast lurched suddenly forward on his knees with a crash, and but for De Montamar's ready arm she would have fallen heavily. As it was she was dragged clear and lighted on her feet, spinning with the force of the shock.

"Bide where you are," cried I, flinging myself to the ground; "and you, mademoiselle, there is no way but this."

Grasping her with small ceremony, I lifted her, still dazed and panting, on to De Montamar's crupper. "Hold him hard by the waist. Closer, closer yet. So, that is brave. Now, on with you."

"And you?"

"At your heels. Have no fear, there is still time." But I was wrong. The double weight was too

great a burden for the wearied beast, and had we ridden round by the last curve of the path we would have been overtaken before reaching our goal. There was one hope left, and one only.

"To the right," I cried, and leaving the slope I dashed ahead, galloping my hardest along the face of the hill towards where the russet brown of the inn roof showed above the cutting in the sod. "Let your beast go and jump for it," I went on, reining sharply up ten feet from the gable. Too sharply indeed, for at the sudden jerk my horse slid upon the soft turf on all fours as upon ice, and stumbling, flung me sprawling.

But with the on-coming patter of hoofs so loud in my ears I was up as soon as down. That the gable door though shut was unbolted I knew of old, and my purpose was to spring across the gap, and send the wood flying with my weight. But the fall spoiled the plan, and De Montamar was before me. Jumping down, he had caught mademoiselle in his arms, then, with head and shoulder down, he flung himself with all his power against the door, and as I reached the bank's edge I saw him stagger on the floor inside, and fall heavily, undermost. To follow him was but a six-foot leap into the well of the door, and when Lignac's men rode up it was to find a steel point looking out at them across the hollow. That gave them pause, and knowing they held us safe they turned, and rode off to join their fellows who kept to the road.

"Are you hurt, De Montamar?" cried I, too intent on keeping watch to look back.

The answer was such a cry as makes a man shiver,—a woman's wail, half-fear, half-pain, and all despair; a cry that, through terror and agony of spirit, is beyond tears. God keep us from such cries!

"He is dead, he is dead! quick, Monsieur de Bernauld. Dead, dead, and for me, for me!"

"Dead?" and I turned with a start, a start that was repeated as I saw the poor fellow's white face and huddled limbs. "Nonsense, it takes more than such a fall as that to kill a man like De Montamar. Go you to the door, and watch while I see to him."

"No," answered she, setting her mouth obstinately; "this is my doing, and I must——"

"Go and watch as you are bid, girl. If these fellows steal a march on us he will be dead in full earnest. For his sake as well as our own, go and watch."

With a pitiful look that was a sharp reproach to my roughness—a roughness assumed for the moment, since there was no time to waste on whimsies—she rose from her knees, and, leaning against one of the swinging leaves of the door, watched me rather than the slope outside. The briefest touch told me the man was but in a faint, so leaving him I raised the trap, and peered below. The safety of the King troubled me more than the swoon.

"Are you there, Sire? Marcel! Marcel!"

Both answered, but it was Marcel who appeared on the floor beneath.

"God be praised you are safe, Master Blaise! What of the lady?"

"We are all here, but Monsieur de Montamar is hurt—an arm broken, I think. Hasten!"

"We only stayed that we might barricade the door after you," replied he. "Give us three minutes."

"Good. If you can lay hands on bread and wine, bring some. What of Pierre Salces?"

"We have seen no hair of him, nor of the crone either. Three minutes, Master Blaise, three minutes."

Then came the rasping of benches on the sanded floor, the crash of an overturned table, and all the medley of making the door siege-proof, and in the midst of the hubbub De Montamar opened his eyes, and turning on his left side groaned in his distress.

"Claire—is Claire safe?" he whispered, as soon as his dazed wits had fixed my identity. Then, reading the answer in my face, he gasped a "Thank God," and rolled over on his back still groaning.

With that a ladder was thrust up the trap, and the King appeared, followed by Marcel with a loaf under one arm and a great jug of wine in his hand. Him we set to keep watch while we saw to De Montamar. As I had supposed, his arm—the left—was broken, but it seemed a clear break, and he was more shaken than hurt. For all its evil smell a gulp or two of the rough wine brought back the colour to his cheeks. Then having laid him in a corner—like, as he said,

so much battered lumber!—we left him to Mademoiselle de Lignac's nursing, and saw to our defence.

The prospect was of the worst. There were three doors to guard, and but as many men to see to their guarding. Therefore, following our old tactics, we drew up the ladder and jammed the great gate to the rear as we best could; and angling a bench, brought from below, edgewise against the further gable door, we took counsel.

The quiet troubled us. After the first dash the Spaniards had drawn off, and though they doubtless had their sentries posted, we never saw nor heard sign of them. A battering at the door had pleased me better, for such silence smelt of some scurvy trick. The King would have it that they would burn us out, but this I did not believe.

"What was it Louis told you of Miguel Zarresco, Sire? That he was in league with Pierre Salces? Well, if he is, then not he alone but his jackals also. To burn The Rat's Hole is to burn their trade, and that there is no need to do since they have us in a cleft stick. Why burn when they can starve?"

"That's very well, Master Blaise," said Marcel shrewdly; "but if we starve, they starve too—ay, and sooner, since we have food, and bread and wine don't grow on thorn bushes."

"Then they will try assault," answered I, sticking to my point that no Spaniard would burn his profit for bare spite; "and if it comes to that, and if they have no pistols——"

"And, and, and," broke in the King. "Ventre St Gris! are we to sit on our thumbs and wait your orders? Whether it be fire, famine, or sword, what chance have we against so many?"

"None but one, Sire."

"And what is that? for, by the Lord, I see none!"

Marcel's grip on my knee stopped the answer. Again there came the thud of hoofs upon the tough mountain turf, but this time there rose above it the rumble of rough voices too contemptuously sure of their prey to disguise approach. Then a fellow, one of Lignac's Spanish faction, rode frankly up before the open door and jumped from his horse.

"You know the place," said he, grinning as he came forward to the very edge of the bank; "The Rat's Hole and the outlet guarded! There you have the point in a word. The five of you are as if you lay there," and he tapped his hollowed hand noisily, then closed his fingers down and shook his fist in the air. "You are there, my gentlemen, do you see? What? You look uncertain? Well, I will prove it. A mat of dried bracken to the farther end, a spurt of fire, and—pouf! The wind will do the rest!"

"We are not afraid," answered I, though that was hardly the whole truth. "The Rat's Hole is Lignac's decoy; you will not burn trade."

"Good!" and he showed his white teeth genially. "The señor is shrewd. To burn trade without need would be foolish. To another point, then; we can starve you."

"And yourselves," answered I. "Besides, time is on our side. Again, we are not afraid."

"Saints! but the señor truly is shrewd. Food we have in plenty, but I grant we have no wish to bide here. The night air is not always healthy to men of our present trade. Lastly, then, and this time it will puzzle your wit to pick a hole. We are many, you are few; you understand?"

"We are four men"—there was no need to tell him that one was a cripple! "You are, perhaps, twelve. Three to one are fair odds. Again, and for the last time, we are not afraid."

"Ah!" and he laughed. "Twelve! No, no; twenty-five or thirty. Our good friends of the hills have come to our aid. Now do you feel the fingers closing over you, señor? Good; you are safe there, there, all five of you; and yet I say, give us two and the rest may go. Give us our mademoiselle and him facing you there, him of the lantern jaws and grizzled beard, and we will call quits. Eh? Is it a bargain?"

It was the King who answered.

"Neither one nor the other. We stand or fall together."

"That is your last word? Buenos! then, by the saints! it is fall;" and linking his bridle over his arm he disappeared up the hill.

Then there came to me an inspiration. The breaking of the rear door would be but a matter of time once the gangway was firm fixed on the corbels, nor could we oppose the fixing and guard the gable door.

Why not block the smaller door with the ladder, open the larger, and let us three hold the breach?

"Be it so," said the King, when I had hastily explained my thought. "As the fellow said, it will be 'fall'; but at least it will be fair fighting, and not dying like dogs pent in a kennel."

After that be sure there was no waste of time. In a trice the ladder points were jammed into the lower edge of the gable head-board, and the wings of the rear door flung open. But for all our haste we ran no more than neck and neck with those outside, for the rasp of the wood grating over the uneven floor had its echo in the crash of the gangway as it settled on the corbels. Parley was past, and within and without there was the grimmest promise of men's work.

The great door had, as has been said, a width of about ten feet; three men, therefore, so long as they held their feet, were as good as three hundred. Nay, we had an advantage, for the gangway being some two feet narrower, and having an ugly drop at the edge, gave room to no more than two abreast. The fighting odds were three to two, with a score or more to relieve the two, and the three to face the brawn of them all.

My faith! but when it came to biting the dogs were loth to risk their teeth! The sight of the three naked blades and the faces that looked across their points cooled the ardour, and the rush which was already halfway across the bridge reeled back. To roll stones down two hundred feet of rock upon help-

less travellers was safer murder than to engage two swords to three; and there was cold comfort in the thought that when they were dead in the kennel the tenth man back would take what they missed! Back they staggered, and for a time we all stood in silence, reckoning chances.

But not for long. The rogues behind lurched forward, driving on the rogues in front, inch by inch, foot by foot, till for very desperation they flung themselves upon us. For a breath the air was ablaze with the white lightning of bare steel. A breath, no more. A thrust, a parry, a rasp of blade on blade, a swift lunge, and with a sob and a groan the two foremost tottered on their heels, grasping at the air, and stumbled sidelong upon the cobbles below.

"God for Navarre!" cried the King, setting afresh his toe-point to his satisfaction. "God for Navarre!" and again with right elbow on hip, upturned knuckles, and sword point level with the eyes, we waited the second attack.

This time the two were Lignac's men, and so trained to arms. Bidding with a curse those behind stand back and give them room, they came on warily. Point to point, and inch by inch, they fenced us, till it was plain their plan was to tire us out and run no risks. To wait was to play their game and give ourselves as sheep to the slaughter. Therefore I drew back, and, taking their cue from me, Marcel in the centre and the King at the extreme left drew back also—not with haste, but inch by inch. Inch by inch they followed us, those behind striking impotently at us

above their fellows' shoulders; inch by inch until I judged we had them lamed. With a swift touch on the shoulder I warned Marcel, and in a flash we two were upon them. Taken unawares, the fellows never so much as parried the attack, and but for the odds behind, the thrust I gave would have been sheer butchery.

That sobered the rogues. The spilling of blood, even though not their own, was a marvellous cooler. No barber-surgeon's lancet ever so quickly brought down a fever, for no man was in haste to lay his cheek alongside the ghastly white and twisted faces which looked up so blindly from the shadow of the bridge!

"God for Navarre!" cried the King a second time, as we again faced them, unhurt but breathing heavier than was comforting.

During the struggle a silence had fallen upon the reserve on the hillside, though they breathed harder, as if they themselves bore the brunt of the fight. But as the second pair went down a yell broke from behind, a storm of wild threats and wilder curses, above which the harsh voice of Pierre Salces could be heard roaring out from the rear—

"Bow down there in front, and by the saints I will open such a breach as will let us all in! What? You slayers of women! You who killed my poor wench no more than four days back! do ye dare face the Red Rat a second time? 'Tis once too often. Bow down, comrades, lower, lower, and now follow hard on the heels of this."

Leaping on a point of rock, the ruffian poised a huge stone against his shoulder and slung it full at the door-mouth with all his might,—such a stone and such a strength as would have dinged a hole in the very wall, to say nought of a man's frail ribs. By the mercy of God his foot slid as he launched the missile. Turning on his palm it left his hand askew, and falling between Marcel and the King bounded across the floor until the farther wall stayed its progress. But in the event the miss was no gain to us. Twisting aside that the stone might pass, Marcel slipped his foot, staggered, and fell upon his knees, snapping his blade short off at the hilt as he fell.

On the instant the King and I stepped inwards to cover him.

"De Montamar's sword, quick," I cried; but the mischief was done. The rabble was on us with a savage rush that meant murder, and in a flash murder was wrought, but not on us.

Seeing the two blades ready, the fellow who faced me in the second rank thrust the man in front of him sheer upon my point, and with such force that the hilt jarred against his ribs. With a piteous scream the poor wretch flung his arms in the air, and falling forward, hung his whole dead weight upon me, bearing down my arm. That was the opportunity looked for. In a wink the fellow behind drove his point full at my exposed breast.

"One!" he cried, baring his teeth in a grin.
"One!"

"Ay, one!" cried Mareel back, flinging himself forward and taking the thrust; "but not that one! God for Bernauld—God—God——" and he went down upon his knees in a heap, swayed, frothing redly at the mouth, and rolled back upon the floor.

"Two!" cried Henry, lunging aslant, and striking the villain in the throat with such force that he drove him off the bridge, still standing: "two; God for Navarre!"

On this there came such a battering at the inn door as shook the very house, and above the din rose the clatter of horse-hoofs on the stony road.

"What?" he went on bitterly; "both behind and before? Well, we two are men, and can take our turn as well as Mareel. God for Navarre!"

As for me, I was shaking in every limb, and nigh upon cursing in my bitter despair and forlorn helplessness to succour the man who had given his life for mine.

But others had heard the clatter of horses as well as we. For a moment a silence fell upon the mob; then with a roar of fear and disappointed rage they turned, and every man fled up hill for his life.

"Has their master, the devil——" began the King. But he checked himself. "Nay, it is worse," and all unwiped he pushed his sword back into its sheath. "Ha! Roquelaure, you are welcome, as you ever are. How many men have you?"

"Merely of God! What is the meaning of this, Sire?" I heard Roquelaure's rough voice reply. See

him I did not, for I had Marcel in my arms and was cutting open his doublet at the breast.

God! What a vicious thrust it had been, and clean where the warlock had laid his stick's point, a thrust to let out a man's life were he as vital as Goliath or Gath.

"Marcel!" I cried, bending low. "Marcel! a word, old friend, a word, one!"

The lids flickered over the already dull eyes, the mouth quivered, and I saw his finger-tips twitch, but it was the last of life. The tears that fell from me like rain fell on a dead face, and the great unselfish soul had gone back to the God who gave it.

At my cry the King had turned to me, and that his eyes, too, were wet, was, as it were, another cord of love to bind me to him. Now laying Marcel gently down I rose upon my knees.

"Bid Monsieur de Roquelaure lend me a horse, Sire. There is vengeance to be taken."

"Not so," answered he, turning once more to the open doorway. "Not vengeance, but the King's justice. Again, man, how many have you with you?"

Roquelaure was still sitting his panting horse, and staring at the gangway, red to the edge with blood. Now he roused himself.

"Thirty men, Sire; but what is the meaning——"

"Take twenty and follow the rogues. Especially mark one, a fat-cheeked, ruddy-faced giant with a wild tangle of red hair. Mark him well, I say, but

let none escape. The ten you leave will serve as our escort, for I must needs ride on. Stay, we must have five horses."

"I have your own, Sire. It was meeting them grazing near a sheer face of rock that——"

"Ay, ay," broke in Henry. "That rock has its story. It is the sport hereabouts to play nine-pins down it at folks who pass. Now begone, and join me at Pau with all speed."

"But when I have caught these fellows, Sire, what then? I am no hangman."

"Then leave them unhung. Do what you choose with them, man; what you see is warrant enough. Play nine-pins if you will."

"One moment and I am with you, Monsieur de Roquelaure," said I rising.

But the King laid his hand upon my shoulder.

"No, no, De Bernauld. Come you with me. We rode up the hill as brother and brother; so shall we ride down. Besides, there is Mademoiselle de Lignac to see safe to Madame Jeanne's care."

"But, Sire——" and I looked at Marcel lying at my feet.

"He goes with us; and that my heart is sore, both for him and for you, is God's truth. The game is lost, De Bernauld, but believe this: the King does not so soon forget his pawns."

That ends the story of the King's great idea. Its cost was the life of a gallant man; and yet I believe

from my soul that Marcel's death was the death he craved—a sacrifice for his beloved Master Blaise.

Of the other pawns in the King's game little need be said. De Montamar fell at Ivry six years later, but Claire de Montamar and her three great sons are still alive in this year of grace 1618. Pierre Salces met the end he and his fellows deserved, for Roquelauze took the King's hint and flung them headlong down the cliff, so that the name of that place is the rock of the King's justice till this day. The only man lost on our side was Jacques Gobineau. The old witch of The Rat's Hole was never again heard of. My guess is, that Redbeard had put her under the sod before our return to the thieves' den. The inn itself was burnt to the ground.

THE END.

