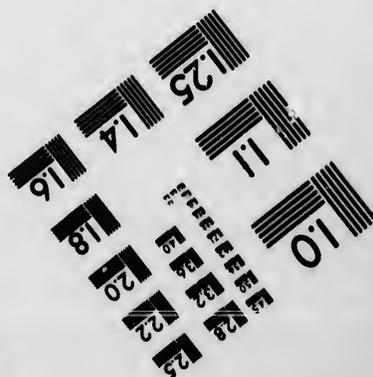
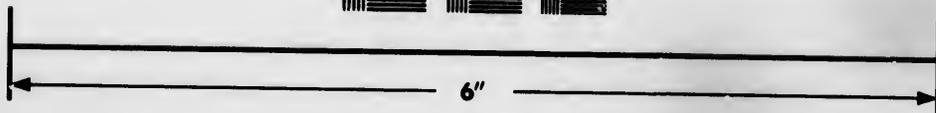
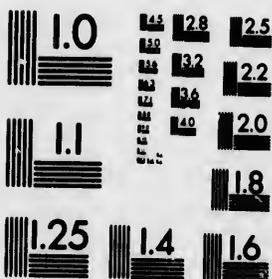


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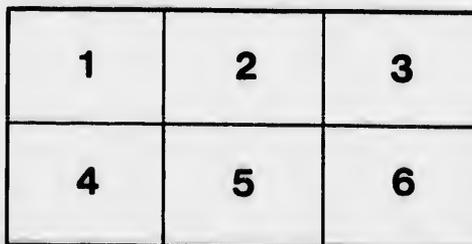
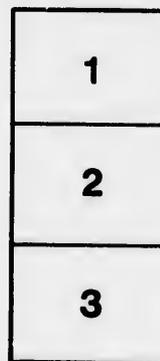
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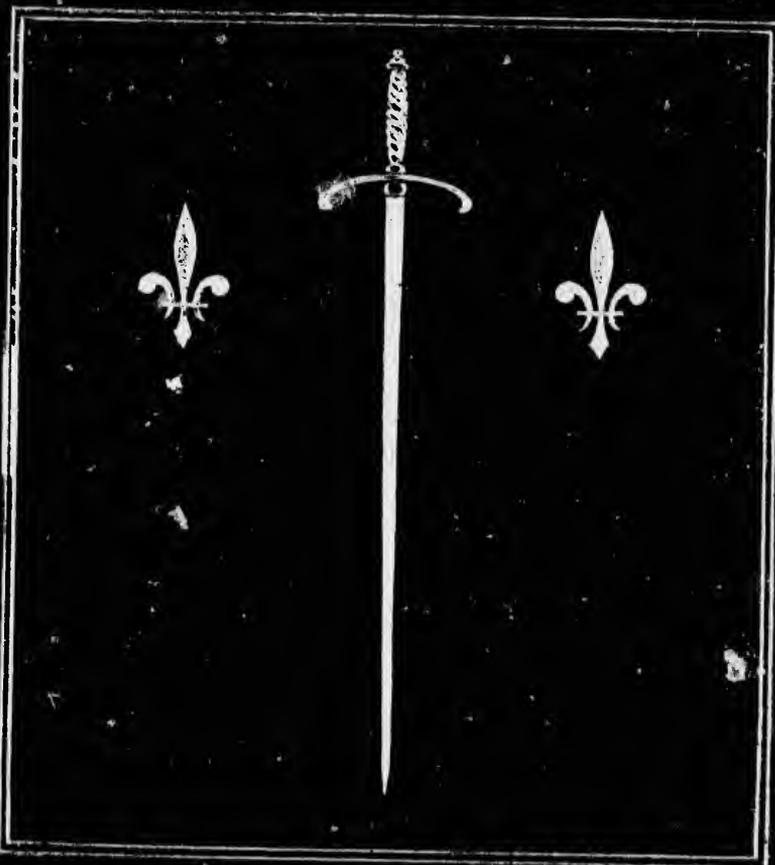
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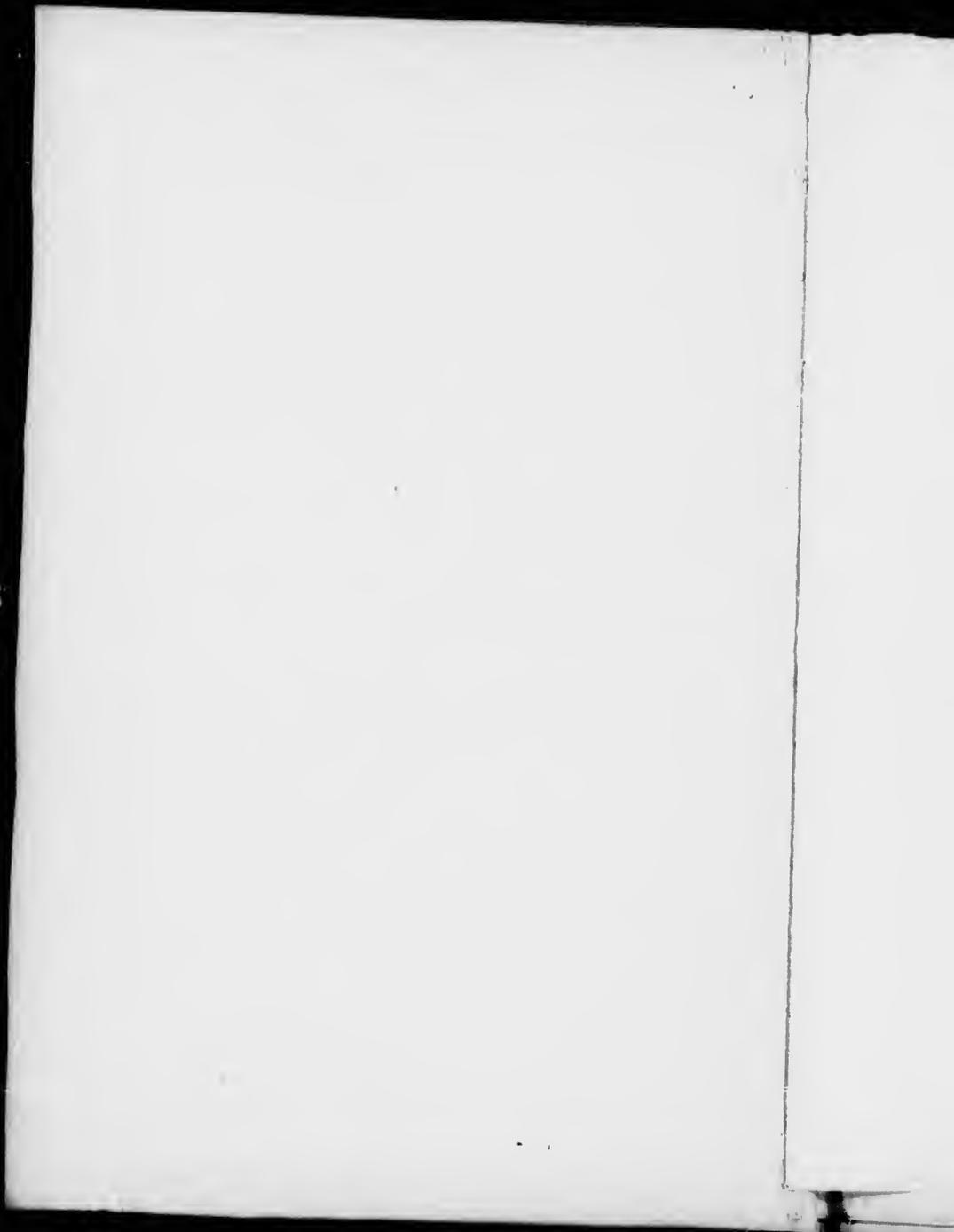
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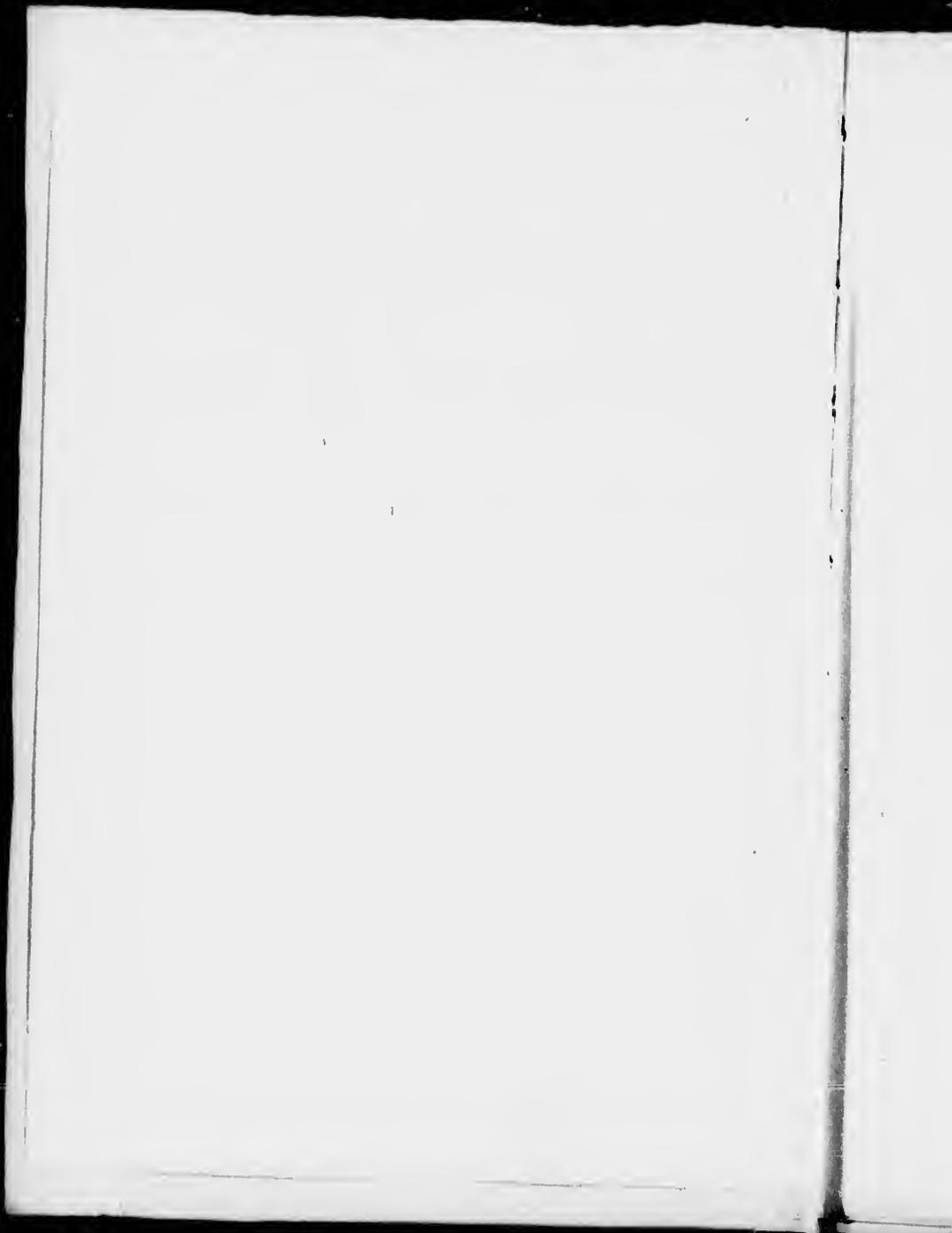
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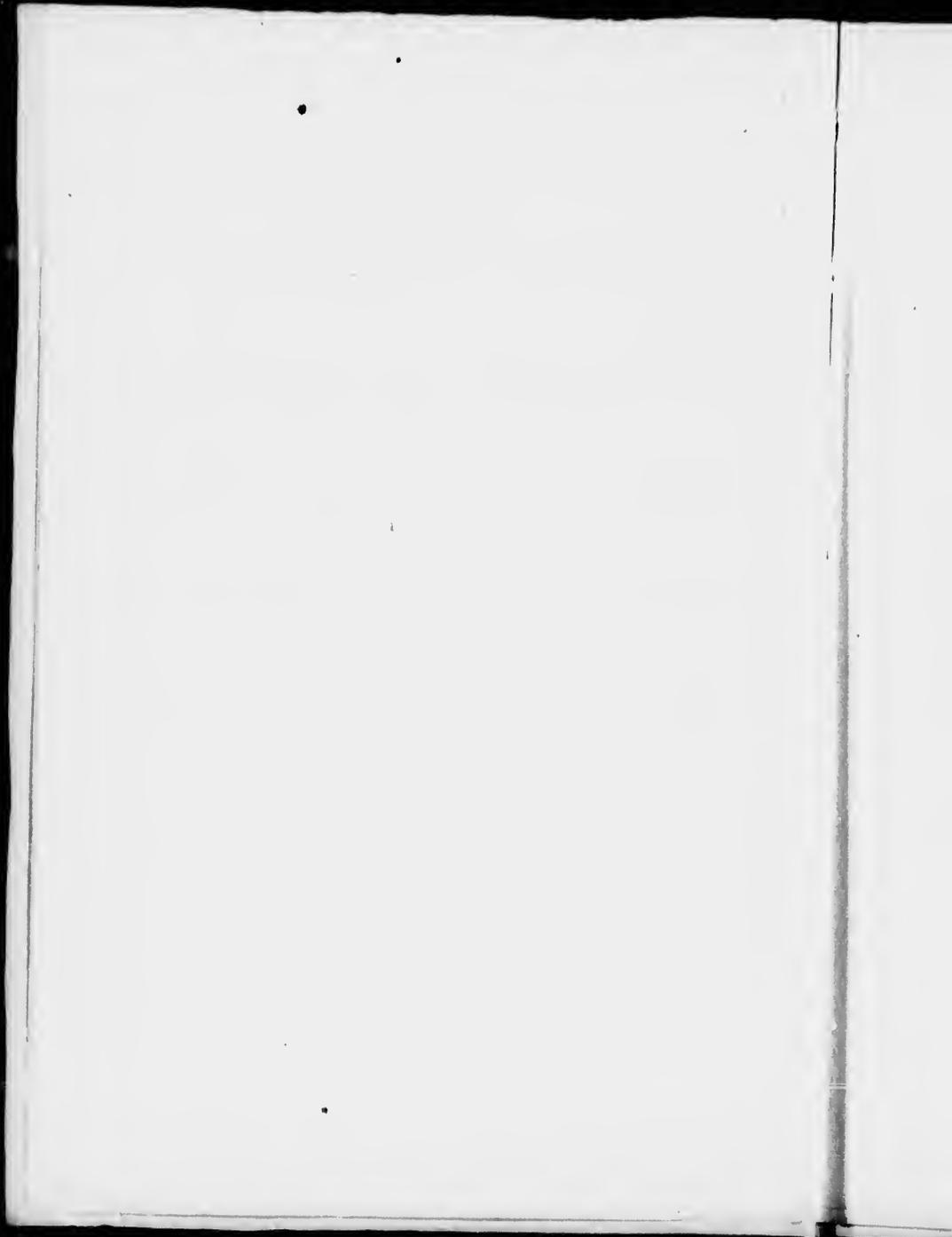


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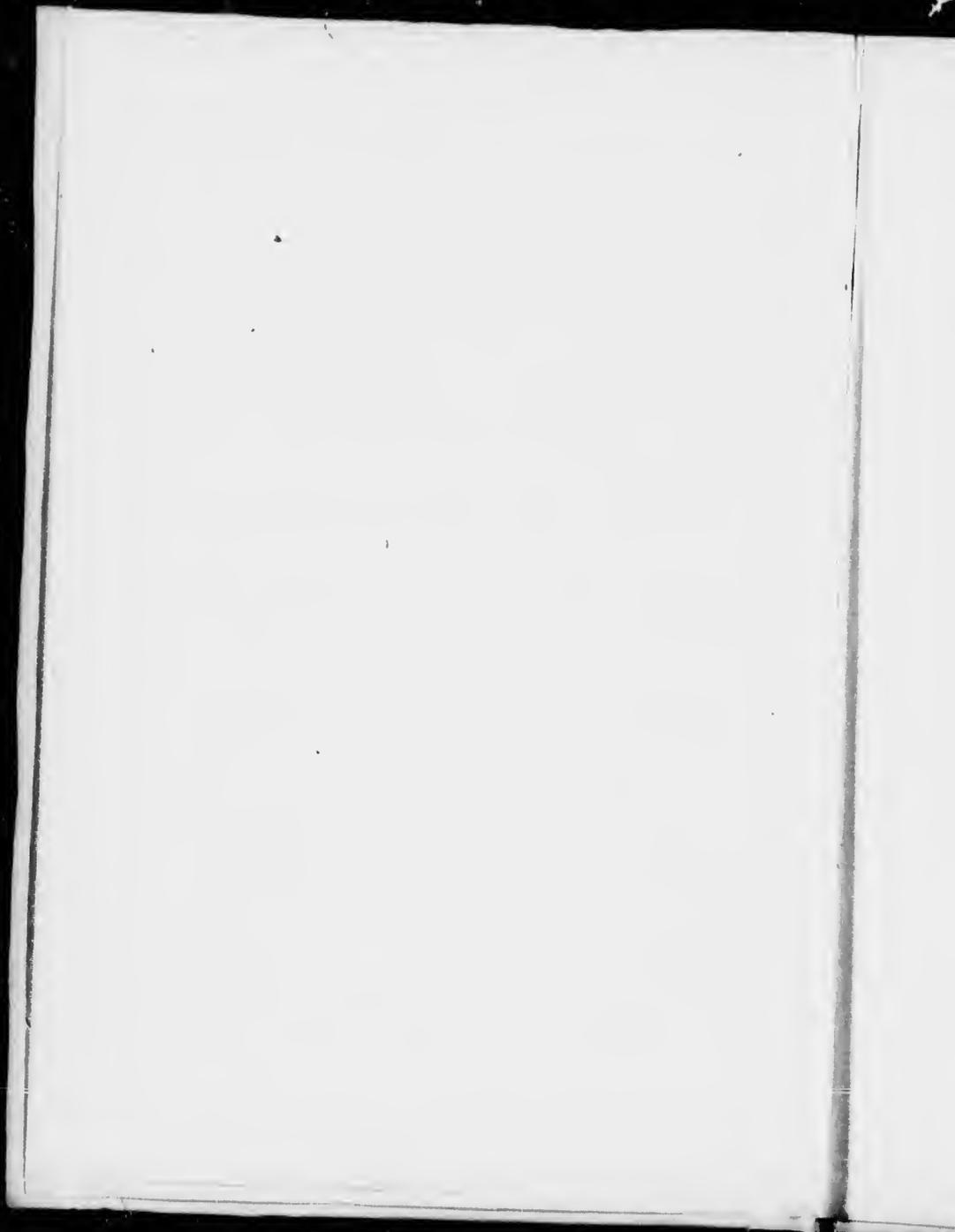


C. L. B. Chamberlain

June 1900



A MAN OF HIS AGE







(Page 105)

"HE HACKED VICIOUSLY AT THE ARMS OF NAVARRE"

A MAN OF HIS AGE

BY
HAMILTON DRUMMOND

ILLUSTRATED BY
J. AMBROSE WALTON



TORONTO
GEORGE J. McLEOD PUBLISHER
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A MAN OF HIS AGE

CHAPTER I

BLAISE DE BERNAULD SPEAKS

THERE are those who tell us that a man lives his youth over again in his children. A truth, doubtless, but a half truth only, else would I, dead from the waist these five years, live in a world but little broader than the grave. To my thinking the other half, which makes up the whole of truth, is this; at fourscore one's thoughts spend the heritage of memory life has laid by, and—thank the Lord—I, at least, can neither go bankrupt nor dwell alone.

You will say there is Gaspard, the son of Gaspard, to keep me company, and you will say truly. A good lad Gaspard, as is natural, seeing he has been trained by his grandsire; but when it comes to cheery company, and the forgetfulness of infirmities, through these waxen hours of the night that fourscore knows so well, Blaise de Bernauld trusts to the children of his memory rather than to those of his name.

My faith! but they are a goodly family, and being

A Man of His Age

born of many mothers they have but little likeness, and so never weary me through their sameness. This one first knew life where so many good Frenchmen found death, on the field of Dreux, and so had but bitter milk to strengthen its existence, and is a sturdy memory for all that, since nothing abides in a man's mind with such a power as failure and defeat. That had the Florida woods as its nursing mother, and is the child of solitude and that peace, or at least tranquillity, which is sister to despair. This other is of Jarnac, where Condé left his cause the poorer by his death, and the world the richer by his legacy of devotion, and so is a son of a stirred and fiery blood.

Thus, through fifty years of bustle in camps, courts, and councils, they come for the cheering of my loneliness, and to people my solitude of almost death with a fuller life than ever I knew in the stir and heat of the abundant powers of youth. For then, look you, the hour had but its plans, its unfledged purposes, or their fulfilment through a dozen twists of policy, and these, mayhap, were long a-ripening or botched in the doing. Now, in a flash of thought, they are all with me in their full perfection of accomplishment, not as they were, but as they might have been, and so in sixty seconds I live seven crowded days.

Nor is that all. Then I knew a man but dimly, seeing, as it were, but a fraction of a side of him at a time, for the soul and spirit of a man—which alone are the worth knowing—have an infinite variety according to the sunshine or the cloud, the storm or the calm in which they are. Now, having pieced together those separate fragments gleaned and learned in

Blaise de Bernauld Speaks

peace and war, in love and hate, and, not weighing the evil overmuch, nor overpraising the good, I know my dead fellows of life as I never knew them even when we were knit together by every bond of union in common interest wherewith selfishness can bind men; nor for the common ruck of humanity is there a stronger bond. And this I see: there is not one of them but was greater than he seemed. We hold the divinity in ourselves overcheaply, and the flesh of a man must at times be half dead ere he find out the truth. As for the divinity in others, we are blind to that; since, for the most part, the Lord made but one man.

Ay, ay, Grandson Gaspard, talk as thou wilt, or rather think as thou wilt, for thou knowest my temper and thy duty of a quiet tongue too well to put contradiction into words; age is truly a greater and a finer thing than youth or manhood. Just as a full granary, packed with the harvest of the world, is, when understood by a mind of grasp and capacity, truly a grander and a finer thing than the green blade or the yellow ear. I grant you the beauty to the eye, I grant you even the sense of vigor and strength, and the tickling of vanity, but there is always this: the one is garnered, the other may rot and perish ere the gathering!

The gathering! Ay, and there come in wit and memory; and of these, I tell thee, Gaspard, memory is like one of those huge snowballs the children roll upon the slopes above Bernauld in the first of the thaw. It grows with every turn of energy, and whatsoever it touches it picks up—rotteness of leaves, de-

A Man of His Age

cayed twigs of growth, smirches of earthiness—and so bears with it its heritage of purity or of foulness. I, truly, have rolled my ball to some purpose, and through many ups and downs; or, to go back to the other thought, have crammed my granary almost to the girders!

Then it was that Gaspard, who is a shrewd lad and has much of his grandsire in him, for it is no unusual thing that wit jumps a generation, put his finger on my bubble of pleasant philosophy and boasting, and flicked it, iridescence and all, out of existence.

“What,” said he, “if eighty years’ garnering, its wit, its wisdom, and its life, crumble to dust in a night?”

It was a smart stroke. But I hold it to be one sign of a true man that he can take a thrust, whether in his pride, his love, his ambition, or his ribs without wincing. So, though I shivered till the very deadness of my limbs felt the chill, I never showed that I shivered, but answered back as if the loss were his, not mine.

“Crumbling there must be, so much the greater pity for the world, but that all may not be lost to you I tell you these tales of our race, though”—for I owed him a sting for the rough shattering of my complacency—“with but little hope of your profit, since a smooth chin ever holds it the highest wisdom to learn nothing from white hairs. Tell a child the kettle is hot and he will put his finger on the spout for proof and howl after comfort for an hour. Your two years in the schools at Cahors have taught you more, have they not, than I have learned while rubbing shoulders

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Blaise de Bernauld Speaks

with half France through hard on three generations?"

Being a wise lad he said no more, but when he was gone the bitter in his words troubled me, for it seemed as if the gnat dancing in the sunshine would leave the world as large a legacy as I.

The bitterness was not that the cold which gripped to the waist would presently strike to the heart, and so make an end. With such a terror alive in him a man is no better than the slave of his own contempt. No, thank the Lord, not that. Since death and I have come to understand each other we are, if not friends, at least tolerant. But rather it is that the gnat and I would alike leave nought behind of all that we had garnered, winnowed, sifted, proved in a lifetime; and the world be none the richer except for the clay thrust into its bosom. In that much, at least, my value outpriced the gnat!

But if that were true then Condé, Henri de Navarre, Jean d'Albret, ay, even Coligny himself, had lived for nothing more than their day of life, which to believe would be a heresy and, worse than a heresy, a blasphemy. In this my faith is simple. Not even the devil himself can keep a man from bettering his generation. The pity of it is that when the page is folded down, and the seal of the eternal set at the end, so much that was written upon it with sore labor and agony of soul is blotted into oblivion. I can conceive nothing to stir a man's spirit to rebellion and the kicking at the pricks of death more than this, for it is the destruction of the toil and anguish of a lifetime.

A Man of His Age

As to these records themselves, which I hand down to Grandson Gaspard and his brother, my namesake, they are the records of men I have known, and affairs of state whose eddies have touched me, rather than the personal history of Blaise de Bernauld himself. The reason being that I hold no man is a righteous judge of his own actions. The greatness of the purpose underlying a failure touches it at times with the glory that was in its conception, and so the fact of failure is palliated and its cause forgotten. Or else the triumph itself falling short—as the best triumph will—of the fulness of its possibility, despair writes “waste and folly” where truth had stamped “success.”

Therefore, though my fingers have been scalded by the bubbling over of every political pot that France has heated these threescore years, I do not write so much of Blaise de Bernauld, whom I know from the inside only, as I do of men whom I have known both from the inside and the out, and who, by turning over in the cabinet of my mind, as a collector does his jewels, I have come to understand in their completeness both of flaws and perfections.

Of these I take Henri de Crussenay, and, for all his faults and blemishes, I would, I think, be well pleased if Blaise or Gaspard were such another.

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CHAPTER II

HOW ROGER CAME HOME TO CRUSSEY

Who can say where the story of a man begins? With some, such as these later Valois kings of ours, the follies and the frailties—some would say the vices and the crimes—of a dozen generations have gone to their shaping; and their doom of impotence and failure has been upon them before the drawing of their first breath. A warped soul or a debauched mind is as direct an inheritance as a weakened frame, and is an evil harder to heal and trebly destructive to its generation.

As for Henri de Crussenay, I have always held that neither in the pains of birth, nor later with the first creeping in of self-consciousness, were his true beginnings of life. No; nor even when his father's squire rode post to Crussenay with such news of the sack of Rouen as flung the fourteen-year-old lad a waif on the world, with more sorrow to bear than comes to most in a lifetime.

That the tale he then heard was never dulled in his memory I knew from his manner of telling it at Chatillon four years later, but the Marquise—Coligny's wife—had used her time so well that the blind rage and passionate vindictiveness of the boy were

A Man of His Age

held by the grown lad in full control, and in their place had sprung up a calmness of judgment not altogether in keeping with the savage turbulence of the age.

"We come of a broken race, we Crussenays, in spite of our far-off cousinship with Chatillon," said he, as we wandered round the girdle of grass that lay between the moat and the Château; "a race with more ancestors of noble blood than acres of corn-land and vineyard—a race broken in power, broken in prospects, broken even in numbers, seeing that I am the last of them all. Crussenay itself is as fallen as our fortunes: alike they are the victims of fire, siege, and restless court ambition.

"What the Crussenay of St. Louis's time built through the spoils of war, has been shattered by war. Little by little, or much by much, according to the needs of the generation, the lands of Crussenay have shrunk and dwindled till of castle and soil there is but a ruin and a remnant.

"Devoured by our necessities as we have been, we Crussenays have nowadays but little use for parks and pleasaunces. Every rood that remains to us is for use. Every tree, then, because it made the pasture thinner beneath it, or because its timber spelled silver or warmth, has disappeared from the slopes, and so there was neither oak nor poplar to hide old Roger as he rode, as if for his life, through the closing gray of that October night.

"Mathilde, my nurse, and my father's before me, and the one serving-wench left to the poverty of Crussenay, had seen the black speck while it was yet

How Roger Came Home to Crussenay

a mile away, and together we watched it grow larger and yet fainter in the falling dusk.

"'If fifty rode yonder,' said she, 'we might bide the evil as we are. If five, we might thrust to the door in the evil's face and make the best stand we could. Seeing there is but one, Master Henri, let's go and meet the evil, for the sooner known the sooner done with.'

"'Why evil at all?' cried I, with a boy's healthy optimism. 'Why not good?'

"'When did good ever ride post to Crussenay? Never in my day, and I've known it fifty years,' answered Mathilde, grimly; and then, though we bided where we were, we both fell silent.

"'Good or bad, this news is worth the telling,' said she, as Roger drew near; 'horses are none so plentiful at Crussenay that one can founder them for gossip's sake, and no one knows that better than yon sour crab.'

"The speck grew into a blur, and the blur took form and outline while yet fifty yards from the mouldered gateway of the Château, and Roger was on us with a rush. So spent was the beast that he pulled himself up with a jerk at the mere sight of us standing like ghosts in the gloom, and, with head down and nostrils puffing gray vapor into the gray air, he stood panting, while Roger, silent after the first exclamation, climbed stiffly down.

"Without greeting, and craning forward to see him the better, Mathilde, witchlike, read ill tidings in his face, and cried:

"'What evil's afoot, man? Fewest words are kind-

A Man of His Age

est. Cannot you see the knife's at our throat?' And in her eagerness she struck him on the wrist as he still grasped the bridle.

"For all my ignorant optimism I could see, even through the darkness, the trouble on his face as he looked at me.

"'The cause is lost,' he began. 'Rouen—'

"'The cause, the cause! Rouen!' echoed Mathilde, shrilly. 'Crussenay has more at stake than creeds and cities, and the lesser woes can wait. What of the Sieur? What of Madame? It was like one of her blood to go with him to that wasps' nest; but, oh, it was a sore folly!'

"His hand flew up to his chin with a gesture I knew, and again I saw the troubled look, and my optimism, which had long been fading, gave place to a dread that was the greater for its very formlessness.

"'The Sieur,' stammered Roger. 'The Sieur—' and stopped with a crack in his voice such as a woman has before she falls a-weeping. I have heard and shivered at the sound here at Chatillon many a time, for more men march out with the Admiral than march back again, and the home-coming is ever an evil day for wives and mothers.

"But Mathilde caught up the cry. 'The Sieur? The Sieur?' and flung her arms about me as if to shield me from hurt. 'It is death, and nothing less. Oh, my heart, my heart, thou alone are left of all the Crussenays! The race runs as dry as the milk that fed it. God blight the Guisards for this. God bring them to a bloody end, every one, whether king, duke, or gutter ruffian. God—God—'

How Roger Came Home to Crussenay

"And then she fell to sobbing, as much, I think, from overwrought passion that could no longer frame words as from grief, since the old know overmuch of sorrow to be easily moved. Be that as it may, her breath was choked, and as she clasped me with arms that gripped and slackened in the tempest of her passion, she shook so that she would have fallen, but that I held her fast.

"Presently she straightened herself and cried, 'Madame? What of Madame?' forgetting that as yet Roger had told us nothing of my father. 'Surely it was no better than a coward's part to ride post to refuge at Crussenay, and leave Crussenay's mistress to fend for herself in her sorrow. What of Madame—runaway?'

"This time Roger did not so much as glance at me, but, turning, he bowed himself on the withers of his beast.

"'Am I a traitor to bread and salt, woman?' said he, looking at neither of us. 'Madame was in sure refuge a full hour before I rode out of the smoke of Rouen. A sure refuge, Master Henri; take that for comfort. May God give us all as sure a one in His own time.'

"At that I began to tremble, for, dear as my father had been, my mother, for her love and tenderness, was dearer yet; as, at my age, was, I think, but common nature.

"'Who has her in keeping?' I asked. 'It was an ill thing to leave her in her grief, ay, even though she was safeguarded by the Admiral at Chatillon itself.'

"'When was I unfaithful to Crussenay, root or branch, stock or graft?' cried Roger. 'A greater

A Man of His Age

than Coligny has her in care. Will you have it in plain words? My lady is in God's refuge; and as for her grief, if she has any, 'tis not at the parting with the *Sieur*.'

"'Dead, both dead?' said Mathilde, and said no more, while I, too, stood by in silence, dazed beyond words.

"'You have the worst of it now,' answered Roger; 'and 'tis your fault, woman, that the words, coming curtly, cut deeper than I meant. Let us in, for it strikes cold, and to chill us all to the marrow will serve neither them that's here nor them that's gone.'

"He spoke sober truth when he said it struck cold; but for all that it was kindlier in God's air without, and the bitter chill of the damp night wind made me shiver less than the silence of the black and empty hall. Nowhere in the desolate house was there a glimmer of light, and the darkened air seemed heavy with the smell of death.

"That this heaviness was only from the mouldered hangings on the dusty walls I know now, and might have known then had I thought; but, as I say, I was dazed, and all that was borne in upon me was a knowledge of loss, and a sense of darkness lying within and before.

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CHAPTER III

HOW THE SIEUR DE CRUSSENAY SAVED HIS WIFE

"PRESENTLY, murmuring and moaning to herself, Mathilde came in with a rush-lamp, and as the flickers set the shadows dancing it seemed as if the ghosts of all the dead De Crussenays were closing in upon me, and, sturdy boy though I was, I shrieked in the suddenness of the terror. It may be that the sharpness of my fear as I stood, shaking, turned the current of her thought, for she left off her incoherent muttering, and fell to comforting me, and in the midst of her words and fondlings Roger joined us.

"Then it was that I first truly realized one of the changes that had befallen. To him I had hitherto been Master Henri, half pride and half plague, a thing of much love, some chastisement, and scant respect. In everything that the stout old soldier valued—everything of the education of arms, I mean, and all other learning Roger heartily despised—he had been the master and the fountain of wisdom, I the pupil to be shaped by his teaching, and to know the weight of a buffet when I failed to learn.

"Now I was the Sieur de Crussenay, and he nothing more than my chattel; for Roger was as feudal as if he had lived under St. Louis, and would have

A Man of His Age

thrust his hand into the fire at his *Sieur's* bidding, without whys or wherefores. That I was but a lad mattered little, for it was as much the tradition as the person that Roger followed. The thought of the change had come to him as he had busied himself, like the wary soldier he was, seeing to his horse's comfort before his own, and the air of equality and frank sorrow with which he had told his evil tidings had vanished. As a servant to Crussenay, he would not so much as presume to grieve with its *Sieur*.

"All this showed itself in his changed manner; but while by me his deference and silence were easily enough read, they seemed to old Mathilde but some whim of taciturnity, and it was she who first spoke.

"Since when were you dumb, man, that you stand there as shamefaced as a sheep? Bitter news never yet grew sweeter for the keeping. What is there of disgrace in the tale that you boggle at the telling?"

"A gleam of wrath shone under Roger's shaggy eyebrows, but he kept his temper better than was his wont.

"Let the *Sieur* bid me speak, and speak I will fast enough,' he said. 'And as for your gibes, there is overmuch heaviness at Crussenay to-night for a man to give heed to a clacking tongue.'

"The *Sieur!*" burst out Mathilde. 'Why thou saidst he—' Then, catching his meaning, she checked herself suddenly. 'Ay, God be praised there is still a *Sieur* of Crussenay; but he who is gone will ever be the one *Sieur* to me, who nursed him at my breast. Bid him speak, Master Henri; though before the face of death is no place to parade nice ceremonies.'

How the Sieur de Crussenay Saved His Wife

"A weird group we made in the middle of the huge hall, so ill lit by the rush-light that its walls, with their tattered arras and unlooped curtains, were but a play of gray and black. The great door behind me had indeed been shut, but under its shrunk and splintered edge the wind still swept with force enough to puff and sway the flame, and at times thin it down to no more than a yellow spark.

"At such moments the gloom closed in upon us, and our world dwindled to a six-foot circle wherein was my sole possession of love and life; for beyond all was uncertainty and the shadow of death. By my side stood Mathilde, with one arm still across my neck, where she had flung it for comfort; and in front Roger, caked with mud and grime and powdered white with the dust of the road.

"'Will you be pleased to sit?' said he, with a note in his voice such as in the days of our play and work I had never known. 'The tale is a tale of many days, and will be long in the telling.'

"'God send the man sense,' cried Mathilde, testily. 'What have we to do with tales of many days? Tell us of the Sieur and my lady.'

"For answer Roger hitched his steel bonnet higher under his left arm, but by word of mouth gave no more heed to her than if she had been at the world's end. What right had a serving-wench to come between him and the Sieur?

"'The longer tale will keep,' said I. 'Tell us briefly of—' and I stopped; for my throat closed in with a spasm, so that a sob broke off the words.

A Man of His Age

“‘Ay, ay, poor lad, poor lad! Shortest is best,’ I heard him mutter under his breath.

“‘My mother, first.’

“‘Why,’ he answered, ‘that will be a hard thing, and the tale will run haltingly, since Madame, as it were, comes in midway.’

“‘Then, in Heaven’s name, tell it your own fashion,’ cried Mathilde, ‘but tell it to the point.’ Again he paid her no heed, but, as I nodded, he went on—

“‘Say what the Sieur would—and again and again he besought her to return home—Madame was fixed in her purpose to hold by him through good or evil hap; and the Lord knows the evil came thickly enough; and that it so came was, perhaps, her reason for biding with him. “There is always a woman’s work to be done,” said she; and, by my faith, it was thrice one woman’s work of tenderness and mercy that she did in those black days when the Guisards were battering Rouen about our ears, and gapping our ranks in a fashion that brought despair even to stout Montgommery. Had there been a hundred in the city such as my lady, many a poor soul that died like a dog would have gone comforted to his God; but be they lord or dame, there are few De Crusse-nays in the world, and there were fewer still in that devil’s pit of Rouen.

“‘You see,’ he broke off, ‘I leave untold the haps and chances of the weeks that led us there, the weary, long-spun agony of the siege—ay, and even the eight days of devilment that followed the forcing of the breach. They would take a day in the telling, and, by your leave, are no fit tale for woman or bairn, nor

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How the Sieur de Crussenay Saved His Wife

for honest man either, so I come to the sixth day after the city fell. It is enough for comprehension if I say this: these days had been days of pillage, fire, slaughter, and devil's work. The word to those accursed wretches was, "Do your will and your worst on the dogs of Huguenots, man, woman, or child; and do it well." May the Almighty bear it in mind against Guise and Navarre. May His blight follow them, and the devil, their master, fail them. May they go down to the grave in blood with their days but half spent. May they—'

"How long he would have cursed I know not, but I stopped him, and bid him go on with his tale. He was out of his wits for the moment, I think, for though he fell silent he still shook in his passion, and his eyes had that light that I have since learned is ill to see when looked at over a sword's point.

"If the Sieur knew all,' he said, when he had at length calmed again, 'he would bid me curse my fill an' welcome, and then curse myself empty again; but I will leave all that and come to the sixth day of the sack.

"Montgommery had escaped down the river and the bulk of our men with him, leaving behind, for the most part, the wounded, the women, the children, and those unfortunates too feeble to travel, or such fools as trusted a Guisard might show pity for Christ's sake, and so be content with robbery. A score of times the Sieur and I could have broken through, but he would not leave my lady, and I would not leave neither one nor other. She, being overworn with half-starvation and tending of the sick, could not have tramped a mile,

A Man of His Age

and to seek to smuggle a litter through that girde of fire and riot was to frankly give us all three to death.

“To be just, it was not death the Sieur feared; no, nor she either—the end proved that; but rather that my lady might fall alive into their hands, and what that meant both she and we knew, for Rouen had worse sights to show than murder and hanging. So, through the six days we waited with some kind of a hope that the Admiral might come to our aid, or, mayhap, the English levees march up from Havre and draw the devils from their work; but neither one nor the other came, and the ring of fire and ruin closed in upon us steadily, and the horror hourly drew closer. On the morning of the sixth day the end was upon us.

“Through the days of the siege, and after, we had dwelt together, we three; and many a time the Sieur had honored me by seeking my counsel, and now he sought it for the last time.

““As friend to friend, Roger, and as soldier to soldier,” said he, “tell me the truth. No smooth lies for kindness’ sake, but the very truth. Is there, can there be, hope of deliverance?”

“My lady was out of ear-shot in an inner room of the battered house, and as we were alone, man to man, and servant to lord, I told him bluntly that, if it were not blasphemy to say so, we were beyond the succor of even an angel from heaven. He looked at me fixedly, like a man who waits for life or death, while I spoke; and for the first time I saw his lips tremble and his eyes grow dim. When I ended he stood staring me down in silence, but, I think, not seeing me very clearly, then drew a sigh that shook him like an ague, and

How the Sieur de Crussenay Saved His Wife

nodded his head gravely twice or thrice, as a man does who hears what he knew in his soul he needs must hear.

““ Thanks for thy honesty, friend Roger. That is my thought too,” he said ; “and that we agree makes the way clearer. I have somewhat to say to Madame which will be best said in an empty house. Go thou down the street, Roger, and wait for me some twenty paces or so towards where the breach lieth. Thou and I will have work to do presently, and, by the Lord, we’ll do it. Go and wait.”

““ He put his hand upon my shoulder as if to steady himself, and so stood a minute, trembling. Then suddenly he drew himself up, and the muscles of his face stiffened.

““ Go, old friend, and bide for me without,” and he swung on his heel, and as firmly as if he marched to battle he went to seek my lady, while I passed into the street and waited, as I was bid to wait, wondering. When the Sieur followed me ten minutes later his tread was still the tread of a soldier, but his face was the face of one dead—and of one who had died in an agony, so white was it and so rigid. But it was not his face that turned my heart sick for all its hardness, but rather the naked blade in his right hand—a blade unwiped, and down which there was still a vein of blood trickling.

““ Come,” he said, and his voice never broke from its steady level. A grand man was the Sieur, and one whose spirit held the flesh in a grip of steel. “Come. To our work.”

““ Neither then nor after durst I ask of my lady,

A Man of His Age

for I knew in my heart he had done all that love could do for her, and I held that he had done right. I think he was grateful for my silence, for he pressed my shoulder with his left hand, pressed it hard, and then patted me as one does a child one is pleased with, but he spoke no further word.

“‘To match his blade I drew mine, and so with despair in our hearts, but a bold show, we two marched down the littered streets to look for death. Suddenly he checked his walk and looked me in the face.

“‘“There is but one end for me,” said he; “but remember, thou, there is still a De Crussenay. See to it, Roger, that you do not fling away your life for the dead branch; who knows but the living shoot may need it yet?” And that,’ said Roger, ‘is why I am not at Rouen with the Sieur.’

“So far we had let him speak without a break, only Mathilde, who had set down the lamp, was weeping silently. As for me, I was past tears, and could do naught but stand and stare, seeing Rouen in its ruins and my father with that stained sword in his hand, rather than the shadows that had steadied in around us three.

“But now, when Roger ceased in his tale, the spell was broken, and I cried:

“‘But my mother, my mother! Did he say naught of my mother? Was there nothing that can come to me as a memory and a comfort?’

“‘Nay,’ said Roger, slowly. ‘There was nothing. At such a time there is little room for words, and a man’s thought is on the thing in hand. Once after, indeed, he spoke of my lady, but there was no message.’

How the Sieur de Crussenay Saved His Wife

"Tell me of that,' I begged, almost weeping. 'Bate nothing, not a word,' and in my heart I still hoped that something might come to me as a message.

"That was later,' he went on. 'By keeping to side streets, and tramping across the wreck of battered houses, threading our way always through the poorer quarters, too squalid to attract the plunderers, we got within dash of one of the smaller breaches, and had we had our mind set on it we could have got clear. Thrice, or oftener, we met gangs of Guisards in eights and tens and twenties, but in our soiled dress, and with naked steel in our hands, none took us for what we were, but rather for ruffians like themselves, and with the thought of the last Crussenay in his mind the Sieur did not undeceive them, but let them pass unchallenged. He could afford to wait, since he knew the end was his any moment for the seeking.

"So, side by side and in silence, we made our way to the walls. By the breach he halted. On this side the camp had been struck, and, save for the watch and a few idlers, the dregs and dross that cling to the heels of an army, there was no hindrance between us and the open country.

"Twenty paces townwards, where the street forked, was a thick-built blind wall with a doorway two steps up from the road—a doorway with a barred door set in the inner face of the wall and having a broad flag at its foot, thus giving a vantage and a shelter. Beyond that were half a score of Guisards, swaggering, laughing, chattering, and every one telling his tale by

A Man of His Age

gesture. It did not need a soured imagination to guess why they swaggered and at what they laughed.

““There,” said the Sieur, nodding up the street—
“there lies my way of escape from Rouen. Yours is through the breach. Let there be no folly, Roger. Your life is worth more than your death, and if you are athirst for blood, take a man or two of the guard as you pass. See to it that you obey me, man. I am still the Sieur, and will be for some ten minutes longer, if only the Lord spares me. Let there be no farewells lest they smell us out, and, falling on us oversoon, spoil our vengeance. To your duty, old friend, and I to mine.”

““Then, as he ran his eye, soldier-like, along his blade, a thought struck him, and he drew a kerchief from his breast. It was one of my lady’s, and as he opened it there was a broad stain upon it in more places than one.

““There must be no fouling of her blood,” I heard him mutter, and with steady, scrupulous care he wiped the steel from hilt to point, then pushed back the kerchief into his breast again.

““To me he spoke nothing more, but with shoulders squared, left hand upon the hip, and sword’s-point level with his eyes, he marched steadily up the street and halted three or four paces short of the doorway.

““Messieurs les Guisards,” he cried, “ravishers of women and murderers of babes, thieves and common scum, I am the Sieur de Crussenay. Vive Condé! God save Coligny!” Then he mounted the two steps up to the broad flag of the doorway and waited.

How the Sieur de Crussenay Saved His Wife

“To do these others justice, he had not long to wait. At his first words the chattering had ceased, and a silence fell upon the group; nor were his taunts fairly out of his mouth before the five or six nearest had their weapons bare in their hands. After that, my Sieur, I who had been noted as his companion, had little leisure to use my eyes except for my own defence, nor was it needful that for the letting of blood I should go to those at the breach. They were ready enough, and came to me, meeting me more than half-way, so that the clash of the Sieur's sword with the steel of the Guisards up the street had a full and a prompt echo.

“This much I saw, then or later I scarce know which, for all went in a whirl—three of their men on their backs in the kennel, and one gasping and groaning as he leaned against the wall with his hand to his side, after a fashion that tells an old soldier its own tale. As for the Sieur, he held his vantage as long as I was within the walls, but for all that I knew by the time I was clear that he and my lady were not far apart. The Guisards were over-many, and the Sieur overbent on making an end. For myself, I held them in check as best I could, and having cool blood, a steady eye, and no thought to kill when there was risk in the killing, I came off scatheless.’

“Ay!’ cried Mathilde, ‘scatheless! While the Sieur died. A fine thing, truly, for a soldier to boast that he lost his captain and saved his own skin.’

“For answer, Roger looked me straight in the eyes and said:

A Man of His Age

“I did as I was bid, and took a man's risk in the doing of it. If the young Sieur holds I was right he will bid thee be silent and keep thy breath for gossiping with other old wives. What does a woman know of a man's straits and a man's duty?”

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CHAPTER IV

FROM CHATILLON TO CARMEUSE

"THAT," said the lad, "was the tale brought to Crussenay after Rouen fell, and a week later Roger, Mathilde, and Père Batigne held a council as to the future of their Sieur.

"Père Batigne, fresh from his handling of our new wine, and with his arms red to the elbows, would not so much as sit in my presence, but he had a shrewd brain under his grizzled hair, and for all its slowness his tongue could speak its thought.

"What Roger had been to my father, and old Mathilde to my mother, Père Batigne was to Crussenay. In all matters pertaining to the land his word was law, and, therefore, being in a sense the head of one of the departments of my suzerainty, he had his place at the council, and from his devotion to Crussenay he could be trusted to give his best service of heart, hand, and head.

"'Let us bide as we are,' said Mathilde. 'From his own hall a Crussenay can look the world in the face: and there will ever be bite and sup.'

"'Bide and moulder,' answered Roger. 'As well be Crussenay's dog as Crussenay's Sieur if bite and sup are to be the end-all and be-all of life. Let us

A Man of His Age

rather to Louis of Condé, that the Sieur may learn war under some of the great captains. Here, saving his presence, he will grow up no better than a lout, and fit to handle a cudgel rather than a sword.'

"'War!' cried Mathilde. 'Is the rumble of battle always in your brain? Pest upon you and your bloody mind! Has not Crussenay suffered enough by war that you must needs put another curse upon us?'

"'The Sieur is the Sieur,' replied Roger, doggedly, 'and he must live and grow as such, and not as a dull plough-boy. For the training of a man, the world has no school like a camp.'

"'Ay,' answered back Mathilde; 'training enough of a kind, since in these days the camp is but a nursery to hell. Such a school may fit well the likes of you, but for my lad—'

"The council was like to have broken up in strife, when Père Batigne intervened.

"'Ye are both right, and both wrong,' he said. 'Here the Sieur cannot stay, and under Monsieur le Prince empty pockets will find but a hard school, for all its good blood. Take him to Chatillon, Mathilde and thou. He is a kinsman on the mother's side to the Marquise, and on the father's to Coligny himself. Far enough off I grant, but neither the Admiral nor Madame will deny their blood at its hour of pinch. At Chatillon there is a mistress, here there is none; and at Chatillon there will be captains enough, unless the cause is a ruin. God grant there be not wars enough also; for, being a man of peace, the blood of Burgundy grapes is the only blood I would willingly see shed.'

From Chatillon to Carmeuse

"'Chatillon!' cried Mathilde. 'That means Charlotte de Laval! My faith, Père Batigne, but thou hast a heart in thy breast!'

"'Chatillon!' cried Roger. 'That means Coligny, Condé, Andelot! My faith, Père Batigne, but thou hast a head on thy shoulders!'

"'A heart and a head,' answered Père Batigne, slowly; 'and both for Crussenay, now and always.'

"Thus it came that three days later, with Mathilde and I hoisted on Roger's horse, and the Squire himself trudging in the mud by its head, we three left Crussenay; nor, to my sorrow, have I seen its walls since. I were a very cuckoo if I were not grateful to Chatillon, but"—and the lad of eighteen squared his shoulders as his father might have done that day in Rouen—"Crussenay comes first."

All that was told in the autumn of '66 on one of these days when I went back and forth between Chatillon and Carmeuse, planning out a raid to Florida which presently held me in the west hard upon two years, and during which time my own dear lady, who had been Jeanne la Carmeuse, but was then made Jeanne de Bernauld, also found succor and hospitality at Chatillon. Of these two years abroad in which we harried Spain the tale has been already told, and nothing need be said here except that in them Chatillon became the poorer by a mistress, and I the richer by a son, whom, in gratitude to the Admiral for his protection to the mother, we named Gaspard.

Not the Gaspard who is sire to my grandsons. He

A Man of His Age

came later to fill a blank for the making of which I owed a fresh score to the Guisards, as shall be told in its place. Though when it comes to reckoning scores, as I lie here and think my debts over, I can thank the Lord there is but little due either to Spain or the House of Guise.

The good Charlotte de Laval, then, was dead, and the Admiral the poorer by such a counsellor, comforter, and friend as has not fallen to the lot of many husbands in France in that or any other generation. She being gone, and I home from the Indies, there was no need that Blaise de Bernauld's wife and child should longer trespass on the love and bounty of Coligny; and one day in early April (this was in 68, you understand) I craved the Admiral's leave that I and mine should depart.

He was in the hall that looked out over the Italian garden, and where, in such times of peace as were allowed him, it was his wont to sit with his back to the great hunting trophy spread above the huge mantel, and his books littering the table within easy arm's-length. Even after fifty years of life it is sorrow and thought that age a man rather than the ticks of time. Small wonder, then, that Coligny bereft of wife and son in one half-year, baffled by smaller minds in his great national policy, crushed in his hopes of peace and toleration, and compelled to bear the burden of thought for a hundred thousand others, was aged immeasurably beyond his years. The slight figure was bowed and shrunken, the narrow shoulders more sloping in the increased gauntness of the frame, the hollows in the cheeks were deepened,

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From Chatillon to Carmeuse

and the thin, grave lips compressed as by a never-lifting weight of grief.

Across the whole face, from the firm chin to where the high, square forehead met the line of close-cut, grizzled hair, was written a tale of sorrow and care plainly to be read. Yet, for all his disappointments, the steadfast look in the eyes shut out despair from any place in the tale.

The last things to die in a man's face are the eyes. They are the index of power, whether of purpose or virility. The hair may whiten, the mouth palsy, the cheeks wither, and, as with me, half nature go dead, but leave the eyes their alertness and their fire, and the man is still a power in the world for good or evil.

So it was with the Admiral. The look that met mine was as full of calm strength, and flashed with equal fire, as when, twenty-five years earlier, side by side with François de Joinville, the brother in love of his youth, the Guise of his later hatred, he fought Frances's battles in the Low Countries.

To my request that I might have leave to go, I tried to add something of the fulness of gratitude that was in my heart; but, as is ever the case at such times as a man is moved to thank a man, I made but a stammering speech of it, and even that was cut short.

"My friend," said the Admiral, with his hand pressed on my knee as I sat by him. "Talk not to me of debts. To avenge us of The Religion, and to uphold France against Spain, Blaise de Bernauld set both life and fortune at stake there in the west. Weighed against that the safeguarding of one who grew into our love as did Madame Jeanne in these

A Man of His Age

eighteen months is but a small matter. Nay, rather that we have had her comfort is gratitude due to her and to you, and that you should thank me makes me almost halt in a request which is in my mind, lest by asking I seem to suggest a debt and seek its payment.

"Nay, wait," and the sorrowful hardness of his face softened as he motioned my protestation to silence. "I know you overwell to pause in any honest request, debt or no debt. The world would indeed be the devil's plaything some fools say it is if a man might not trust his friend. This is what troubles me. This peace of Longoumeau that the Queen Mother has so cunningly thrust upon us may blind Monsieur le Prince de Condé, for whom, as a soldier, I have the liveliest respect. But for my part, I, who am not willingly a man of war, would this once have kept my sword unsheathed. It is no true peace, Monsieur de Bernauld—it is but the feigned sleep of the cat to tempt the mouse to a more certain destruction. It is but a breathing-time wherein they may gather strength, and we weaken through inaction.

"Mark this truth for use in the days of strife you have yet before you. He who fights from underneath and strikes upward is weakened by a truce. Presently, when the Guisards think the time is ripe—that is to say, when we are least prepared—Longoumeau will go the way of all the other treaties, and our case will be still more evil than it has been.

"The conviction is borne in upon me that next time they will take Alva's counsel to heart. 'One salmon,' said he to the Queen at Bayonne, 'is worth more than the heads of a thousand frogs'; and Cathe-

From Chatillon to Carneuse

rine de Medici knows who are the salmon of us Huguenots. It is an assured thing that Navarre, Condé, Rohan, Montclar, and Chatillon will be struck at.

"For myself," and he stiffened in his chair, his fingers biting the palms of his hands, "I can guard my own, though were it not that my life belongs to the cause of Christ in France, and that it is a shame for a soldier to desert his post, even through the gates of death, I would thank them for the blow that brought me peace.

"But what Coligny in his grizzled age risks for himself and his own, there is neither justice nor wisdom in risking for another. When you go hence, Monsieur de Bernauld, take, I beg of you, young Henri de Cruseenay with you. My word for it, he will prove faithful to any trust you give him in charge."

"But—" said I.

The Admiral rounded on me sharply, and his lips tightened so that his crisp mustache knit over them into his close-cut beard.

"But!—but!" he said. "Since there are buts to the answer, let us forget the request was ever made. You are wise to be cautious, very wise, since to give house-room to a ward of Coligny's might bring a danger in the troublous days to come."

There was a time when for such a pointed speech my hot southern blood would have answered even the Admiral roughly. But in the woods of Florida I had at least learned patience.

"Surely, my lord," I answered, "a man has a right to be heard to the end. What was in my mind was this. If the evil be so near, and the danger so great

A Man of His Age

will not you, who are the brain and heart of our hopes, have need—”

Again he interrupted me. “Your pardon, Monsieur de Bernauld, a man who has been so many times deceived in the faith of kings grows suspicious even of his friends. As for De Crussenay, keep him for a year or two, then I will claim him from you again, and perhaps yourself with him, if Madame Jeanne will spare you.”

“My lord,” I cried, “either now, or next week, or next year, by day or by night, I and mine are yours for the lifting of a finger, and when you call me Jeanne will be the first to bid me go.”

“Who talks of Jeanne?” said my lady from the door. “Or, rather, what have my two lords to say to their servant?”

It was Coligny who answered.

“Are there not more Jeannes than one?” he asked, half smiling.

“But one in the world for Blaise, so please you,” she replied, with a mock courtesy, for, in spite of his stern sadness, none who knew and loved the Admiral feared him. No sour austere recluse was he, and in his days of leisure not even the court of Charles himself showed more wealth of color and brightness than did Chatillon.

“But one in the world, as there was once one Charlotte,” said he, and as he spoke of his dead wife the lighter look faded out of the hollowed eyes.

With his change of mood my lady’s mood changed too. Ever quick to sympathy, in an instant she was down on her knees by his chair, with her hands on his, stroking them.

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From Chatillon to Carmeuse

"My father," she cried, softly; "my father!" and said no more, but knelt there in silence with her head against his arm, knowing well that the love in her touch would comfort more than a torrent of words.

Those who only saw Coligny braced to danger and watchfulness in the field, or else at the council-board, alert, determined, courteous, but resolute of will and stern in justice, saw but the mind and outward form of the man. Here there was a dropping of the veil.

"My daughter," he said, taking her head between his hands, and, turning her face up towards his—"my daughter in works and love. The Lord bless thee tenfold for the loving service shown my dead. But," he went on more lightly, "we are forgetting that a certain Jeanne was spoken of. My rash friend, Blaise, here, has but now given me himself, and has vouched for it that you joined in the gift. What does Madame Jeanne say to such recklessness?"

Across his knees she reached out one hand to me, her face grown very grave and tender.

"I think," she said, simply, "that neither you, nor he, nor any one of us in these times of threat belongs unto himself, and I would be no true wife to my Blaise if I put a drag on his devotion."

What passed after that may go for nothing, only when we rode out of Chatillon three days later Henri de Crussenay rode with us, little loath. The truth was the lad was full of a boyish chivalry which, now that Madame la Marquise was dead, spent itself upon Jeanne and me. For Jeanne he had the enthusiasm of a devotee for a saint, while some tales told by Marcel, my Squire, of how we dealt with Spain's men

A Man of His Age

in the west — tales that lost nothing in the telling — had fired his admiration until, for want of a better object, his ignorance worshipped me as one of the captains of the age. For Coligny he had more reverence than love, and a shadow of fear darkened his admiration. A restrained nature such as the Admiral's was as yet beyond his comprehension.

From Chatillon to Carmeuse is but little more than a hard day's ride for men, but with women and a babe, and the times being times of peace, we spun our journey out so that it was the afternoon of the third day before the gray towers of Carmeuse showed above the young April green of the woods.

As we rode through Dreux, the memory of the battle fought six years before brought back Rouen to my mind, and I turned to De Crussenay.

"This peace of Longoumeau strikes you as hard, or harder, perhaps, than any of us, since it puts back the clock of vengeance. But, lad, vengeance is like sound wine, and ripens with the keeping, and, with the Admiral, I think the time for breaking of bottles is not far off."

From where he rode, two lengths behind us, old Roger pricked up his ears, and out of the tail of my eye I saw him lean forward as if to catch his master's answer. When it came it was not one likely to please the hot-blooded war-dog. Whoever might, with time, forgive the Guisards the crime of Rouen, the Squire of De Crussenay nursed his hate too well to let it grow cold.

"Vengeance on whom, Monsieur de Bernauld? Those who slew my father were but men who did

From Chatillon to Carmeuse

their duty with their swords, as he with his, and whether they fought for pay or honor matters nothing. As well lop a twig for bearing bad fruit when the fault's in the roots. Guise and Navarre have gone as their god the devil listed, and are out of reach. But there are others, and to strike down such savage beasts as Tavannes or Montluc, whether there be a peace of Longoumeau or no, is another thing. We gentlemen kill a wolf because he is a wolf, and not as the churl does, for the bounty on his head, and the killing is a good deed well done; but to slaughter a maybe honest hound for the tearing down of a home stag, and call it 'vengeance'—no, Monsieur de Bernauld, that was not the teaching of Madame la Marquise."

Glancing back I saw old Roger's grizzled jaw wagging as if with a palsy, and though no words came that I could hear, I guessed by the cock of Marcel's eye that for once Sieur and Squire were in disagreement.

"Then," I cried, "you would play to Montluc the part Poltrot de Méré played to Guise, and so have the planning of another murder laid at Coligny's door?"

"Monsieur de Bernauld," said the lad, flushing red to the hair, "those who for no bounty kill wild beasts in our woods beyond the Loing take their lives in their hands; and I would do no less."

"My poor boy," said I, "do you think the bloody Montluc would cross swords with such as you? He would fling you to his pikemen first, and bid them slay you for sport. If you will not fly at lesser game,

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then you must needs bide at Carmeuse when the rest of us go a-hunting."

"As for that, that is another affair," he cried. "Let Monseigneur, or Monsieur l'Amiral, or Monsieur de Bernauld wind the horn, and he will find me hard at his heels, as hard as you ever rode at Dreux in the wake of Condé. But to slay I know not whom as a vengeance for he knows not what, is pagan rather than Christian, and a thing I have no mind to." Whereupon old Roger's beard wagged harder than ever.

On that Carmeuse showed round the bend of the road, and at the sight of its gray towers I reined back to where my lady rode by the side of Nannette, her serving-wench and sometime nurse, and who, perched behind a man-at-arms, bore young Gaspard as many a time she had borne his mother.

"Ay!" said Jeanne, when I told her what had passed with De Crussenay. "That is the lad all over, and the teaching of the Marquise. He is born some three hundred years too late, and should have been a crusader of St. Louis's rather than a penniless gentleman under Charles of Valois. His law of life is at edge with the age, for the one person he forgets in the world is Henri de Crussenay."

There my lady hit him off as she had a trick of hitting us all off. Therein lies the power of a shrewd, good woman over us men. She so strips our faults and follies bare to our own gaze that, for very shame's sake, and to bring the light to her eyes, we take to mending them, while what is good we nurse and nourish into something nearer perfection for the

From Chatillon to Carmeuse

sweetness of her praise. No very high aim that! Who is talking of high aims? I speak of the truth as I have found it in the world, and, high aim or low aim, better a man tend upwards for a woman's sake than downwards to pleasure the devil.

That she knew De Crussenay, as a man knows the bottom of his pocket, I came to believe in these two months of quiet at Carmeuse, which were all the fruits I and mine ever gathered from the peace of Longoumeau.

To me, fresh from privations in the western seas, and wearied of that warfare which left a man's sword so great a stranger to its sheath that they had scarce a kissing acquaintance, the days were full of all heart could desire. Both without and within the world was at its fullest and its best; but its blessings were those which you, Grandson Gaspard, and such as you, set little store by. Of the love of wife you know naught as yet, and to you a woman is but a thing that claims a larger courtesy than your careless ways have at all times a mind to give. Presently that will change, and the world, which is now so vast, will contract to some sixty-four inches of clay. When that day comes, and, out of its experience, age prays for blessings upon youth, it can pray for none greater than the love and counsel of a good woman.

As for the other joys of these two months, what does a lad whose soul is still like the sense of a seven days' puppy care for the sunshine in the young wood, the resin in the scattered pine pollen, the wind across the tender corn, the smell of the vine blossom drifted from the still spreading vineyards, the bud-

A Man of His Age

ding and fall of the apple bloom, the thousand things that fill the pulses when the world is gay with the early wine of summer? Nothing! If these were things to eat or to drink, or to kill, or to try the spring of the muscles on, you would be brimming full of your tales of them.

For you such talk is so much madness. Therefore, though those two months lie like a jewel on the string of the years, I pass them by and come to the breaking of their quiet.

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CHAPTER V

MARCEL AND I FALL OUT

BE it remembered that we De Bernaulds are of the south, Navarre our kingdom, Béarn our province, and in those days of which I speak we were subjects of Queen Jeanne first and King Charles afterwards.

To be frank. We were loyal subjects to France rather than to Charles, knowing that when all was said and done, and southern pride apart, the fortunes of Navarre were bound up in the bundle with those of the larger kingdom. Whoever struck France shook Navarre, and Navarre would join France in striking back. But let France lay so much as a finger on Navarre, or filch away the least of our rights, and our loyalty to the greater kingdom was forgotten in our love to the less.

It followed, then, that though, to pleasure my lady, we dwelt in the north—Carmeuse was in Maine, where it draws towards the Ile de France above the Orléanais—I was not ignorant of how affairs moved in the south. Nor did Carmeuse, which came to me as my lady's portion, and which is now lost to us, ever hold my love as do these more barren lands of Bernauld. The fat corn-fields and rich pastures of my lady's plains were well enough, but let a man be cradled among

A Man of His Age

valleys, and the sight of a rough hill slope, however wild and desolate, will bring the light dancing to his eyes quicker than will all the flat wealth of the low country.

Twice had Marcel ridden south, and the second time, being himself as hot a Béarnnais as I, he knew not whether to be glad or sorry at his tale which, useless words aside, was this :

Charles of France, having failed to lay hold of Queen Jeanne's person by policy and fair promises, had, all for kinship, love, and a hungry eye on the Little Kingdom, made a bold bid to secure her by force, and had been outwitted. Warned in time, she had escaped the treachery ; but all Navarre that was not more Catholic than Spain was in arms at the insult, and the very beggars in the street talked war.

"See you, Master Blaise," said Marcel, between a grin and a frown—the one because he foresaw a prospect of return to Béarn where Madame Marcel, who was a comely person for her years, lamented and yet encouraged his devotion to me ; the other because if France dared be so bold as to strike, Navarre could but feebly defend herself—"see you, men are sorely wanted down there, and, to speak my mind, a Béarnnais born who takes his ease and grows fat here in the north, while his brethren starve and fight at home, had best ever after keep himself out of the Little Kingdom lest they call him 'traitor' and 'coward.' Oh, ay, I know ; let a man say so, or even so much as look askew, and you will do France's work on him for the salving of your honor. That's a Bernauld's way, and right enough, but, by your leave, a woman whose

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sons are slain, and lands harried, has a voice that will make itself heard from St. Girons to Bayonne, and all Navarre will hearken when she cries after us. To be blunt, I have no mind to listen to the cry; and by my thinking it's either turn French and Catholic, and so bide in Carmeuse as humble as a priest's dog, or ride south to Bernauld with a bloody spur and bear a man's part, whatever comes of it."

"Let them talk, ay, or let them cry," said I, "there is a thing yet harder to bear than to be cried shame on from without, and that is to be cried shame on from within. My word is passed to the Admiral, and to it I'll hold, though every woman in Navarre cry cōward."

"To speak my mind again, Master Blaise," answered Marcel, doggedly, "service in war is well enough, but in times of peace it is an ill thing that a De Bernauld cannot budge but by license. I hold the Admiral in as much reverence as any man, but I had liefer he did not carry me in his pocket to be spent, like a brass token, on the first whim."

There was a sort of truth in his words, and, since an unpalatable truth is ever harder to bear than the lie direct, I waxed hot.

"What?" I cried. "Has it come to this, that I am to be schooled like a new-breeched boy? Thou hast had overmuch privilege these last four years, and now thou pushest privilege too far. Ride thou to Béarn as hot-spurred as thou wilt, but see to it that thou ridest not to Bernauld. There is room for no more than one master, here or there, and, by the Lord, I am that one!"

A Man of His Age

For answer Marcel shrugged his shoulders. "Lash away," he said, "I and mine have borne strokes for Bernauld for too many generations to heed a wound more or less. Is it because no blood follows that you think there is no hurt in a tongue-thrust? Or is it that now you have Carmeuse and its corn-lands, the rougher hills of the south, and all born on them, are out of favor? My faith, I had thought a De Bernauld was deeper rooted in his soil than that!"

Had my lady not called me just then, we two who loved each other as brother and brother had surely slipped from words to blows, so full of wrath was I and so sore was he. But that folly was spared us, and, bidding him be silent as to his news from Navarre, I left him until we both were cooler; nor did I see him again till far past mid-day. Then he came in to what was once the justice-room of the dead lords of Carmeuse, but which was then my study.

A study! Ay, why not? And though the walls were innocent of well-lined shelves and nice adornments of tinselled leather, stamped and arabesqued into a thousand such delights as Coligny loved in his hours of peace; though the walls, I say, were bare of calf-skin and vellum, they had other sober teaching and food for thought covering their gray nakedness—musketoons, pistolets and dags, broadswords, lances, pikes, and poniards, the literature of nineteen-twentieths of all France, gentle or simple, and brave tales of life and death, and the setting up and tumbling down of crowns they told the man who had wit to read their broken locks and notched edges.

Here Marcel found me as I was spelling out the

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story of Pavia from an Italian lance-head, and finding little to nurse my pride in the tale, for if our love to France was lukewarm, our hate to Germany was hot. A leathern bonnet swung by the chin-straps from his left hand, and when he entered he bowed lower than his wont ; but for all his respect there was but scant repentance in his looks.

"If thou hast come to crave pardon," said I, sharply, flinging down the steel head on the oak table by which I sat, "it is thine for the sake of all that hath come and gone between us."

I had it in my mind to read him a lecture in true camp fashion, when the sorrow in his face touched me with a sudden sense of shame, and I stopped short and looked him in the eyes, waiting.

"What has come and gone between us might have been thought on earlier, Master Blaise," he replied, bitterly. "If a mongrel hound had served you as many days as I have years you would not have lashed it as you lashed me, and all for showing you a true scent. If I had naught to crave I had kept to my kennel, till the sting of my whipping was somewhat duller than it is, but what I seek is not pardon for telling honest truth. Thank the Lord that was never the way of De Bernauld, nor of De Bernauld's men, whether of king or priest. Give me three days' leave ; who knows but by then you and I will be able to forget."

"Three days' leave?" I cried. "Why, man, what dost thou want with three days' leave?"

"Who knows," he answered, with a sour laugh so full of sorrow in its note, that I fairly winced at the

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sound of it. "To curry favor, perchance, with the Guisards in Dreux yonder, and bury our hate where we buried our dead. Would you not have us at peace with those we shall shortly doff hats to?"

"Begone for a churl," I cried, angrily; "and if three days do not sweeten thy temper, then take three weeks, or thrice three weeks."

With never another word he bowed and went out, and presently I heard the quick hoof-beats of his horse. He had lost no time in turning his back on Carmeuse, and as I listened to the hammer on the dry road I tried to piece Pavia together again, but with ill success, for I was plagued with an uneasy consciousness that it was I who had played the churl and not Marcel.

That night De Crussenay brought us news of him. The times being peaceable, the lad had been out for a ride by the Chartres road, with Roger as escort, and broke in on us as we sat at supper with the sun still high in the west.

"What mystery's afoot?" cried he, forgetting his manners in his eagerness, in true boyish fashion for all his twenty years. "We met Monsieur Marcel two hours back pounding along the road like a madman, and he not a day in from the south. He hailed Roger as he passed and bade him see to it for the next three days that our beasts were fresh, but gave us neither why nor wherefore."

"A pity," I answered, "he does not follow his own counsel. Here he has made fifteen leagues in the cool of the morning, and is hard at work making I know not how many more in the cool of the night."

Marcel and I Fall Out

Then, to stop the lad's mouth, I added, with a significant nod, "If he has as much dust in his throat as you on your boots, I would rather he did the riding than I, let what may be his errand."

That, as you may suppose, drove my young gentleman from the room with more color in his face than came from the setting sun.

But what he had gained in ruddiness Jeanne had lost.

"Thou art keeping something from me," she said, with her eyes graver than I had seen them in two months. "Since when have I been such a coward that I cannot be trusted to hear of evil? A wife who shares no burdens is but half a wife."

"When evil is certain," answered I, "there is none shall know it sooner than thou; but to plague thee with bogies of another man's raising were a folly."

Then, lest she should fret herself, as a woman will, by creating terrors to her own disquieting, I told her of Marcel's news and the quarrel which had been so near a white heat in the morning that it still was hot between us in the afternoon.

"A pretty pass," I cried at the end, "when one's body-servant apes the master."

"Yet," she answered, thoughtfully, "Marcel has keen ears and open eyes, and has been to Béarn, and thou hast not."

"Tut, tut," said I, "Marcel has a wife and sons in Béarn, and so would have us ride south post-haste."

"The more shame to him if it were not so," cried my lady. "Since when, tell me, have wife and son counted for nothing?"

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To that there was but one answer, since, for all our months of marriage, we were still lovers, nor was there then, or ever, a time when the light in my lady's eyes could not set my heart a-leaping.

But when her mouth was her own again, she went back to her point.

"If Marcel be right, there is nothing for it but an appeal to Coligny. We"—and what an air of assumption it was which said that "we"—"must risk nothing doubtful for our honor's sake, even though it spun out our peace to a lifetime."

Whereon I kissed her again, and so set going the wisdom of the heart in place of that of the head. But my lady's half-chance word had given me a clew my grosser thought had missed, so that the major part of the next day was passed in my study, not polishing my learning, but rather my books themselves.

Every man who has occasion to live by the sword, and if need be die by it, has one that wins his fancy and his faith as no other does. It is his companion, his friend, his confidant, a thing of parts and almost consciousness; and if it were in metal to understand it would know more of the man in spirit and mind than he knows himself. He may coquette with this blade or with that, as some fools, having wives that they love, do with women whom they do not love; but, like these same fools come to their senses, he ever returns to the blade of his affections. So was it with me.

Of all the many weapons I had used there was none that, for its weight, lay so light in the hand, and yet so truly answered eye and instinct as a Paris-made

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blade that had gone west with me, and, for all its service, come home without a notch. This, in times when a man wore a sword not for use, but as a kind of courtesy to himself, I hung in the centre of the fan of blades covering the end wall of the justice-room, but now I unhooked it from its place.

As a woman goes lovingly over the jewels in her necklet, fondling them one by one, and eyeing each lest a flaw should have struck it even in its casket sanctuary, so, with better reason, did I go over every inch of the blade. If there was a dulness, I polished it like a mirror; if there was a speck of rust, I grieved as at a flaw in a gem, and gave my zeal no rest until the reproach had vanished; and in the midst of my labor of love in came my lady with little Gaspard in her arms.

Often as I had kissed her hands I knew her rings less surely than she my blades. When a man has the white fingers ready to his lips he cares little whether pearls or rubies are set in the gold bands. Not so a woman. All that belongs to the man of her love belongs to her thought and care, and has a special preciousness in her eyes; and so, be it but the point of a truss, she knows him as he need never dream to know himself.

At the sight of the sword she set down the child on the floor, and, dear as he was, left him there unheeded.

"The Paris blade," she cried. "There must be indeed something afoot when you take that from its place. Tell me, and without concealment; your fears are mine by right of a wife."

"There is neither fear nor certainty," I answered,

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setting down the blade with care, so as not to risk its edge; "but De Crussenay met Marcel on the Chartres road, as you know, and the Chartres road is the road to Chatillon. If Marcel, who has learned a trick of thinking for himself, has laid his tale before the Admiral, he and I may—"

"Where you go, I go," she broke in; "I have not married a Bernauld of Béarn to live all my life at Carmeuse with two hundred leagues and more between us—"

"But," I cried, "these are times—"

"These are times, if ever there were times," she said, with a set of the mouth I had learned to know, "when a wife should cleave to her husband, come what may."

Gaspard, tugging at her skirts and striving desperately to stagger to his feet, gave me a thought.

"Would you risk the little lad? It is the mother's place to see him safe."

Up into her arms she caught him, rubbing his cheek into hers and fondling him with her lips, but never taking her eyes from mine.

"That is the common talk," she cried. "Always the mother, the mother, the mother, and never the wife. Yet a woman is first wife and mother afterwards. Besides, who would harm the boy?" And looking into his innocent, laughing face, as he pursed his lips up to his mother's, what could I answer but, who indeed?

Thus, without so many words, it came to be understood that if Marcel had appealed to the Admiral, and if the Admiral bade us ride south for the sake of the cause, ride south we would—not one, but all.

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Marcel and I Fall Out

On the evening of the third day the doubt was solved, for Marcel, a pillar of dust from spur to crown, cantered up between the rows of pollarded poplars bordering the avenue, and, leaving his beast to blow itself into breath again in front of the great porch, tramped across the grass to where my lady and I sat in the rose-garden.

Stiff as a lance-shaft, and with no softening in the stern set of his face, he halted two paces off, and saluted more like a camp-bred sergeant-of-arms than my body-servant for eight-and-twenty years.

"From Chatillon," he said, curtly, taking a packet from under his leather coat, and handing it to me, with a second salute.

"Chatillon!" I cried; "who gave thee leave to go to Chatillon?"

"With all respect," he answered, "I was my own man for three days, and had business with the Marquis."

"Whose business," I asked, "thine or mine?"

"By your leave," he said again, "the two are one. Since I could crawl on all fours I can mind no time when I was not on the business of Bernauld in some fashion or another."

"What?" said my lady, grieved that we should be at odds, and trying to draw us together again with a half jest. "Even when on hands and knees?"

"Ay," replied he, with, for the first time these three days, a twinkle in his eyes. "My business was to eat my fill for the future good of the house, and if my mother spoke truth, I did my duty well, as" and his face darkened again—"I hold in conscience I still do."

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Meanwhile I had been reading the Admiral's letter, and found it not altogether to my liking. Have us to go south he would—therein he and Marcel were at one to, no doubt, my Squire's honest pride—but me he would have to go to Orthez direct to the Queen.

"She knows not which way to turn," he wrote, "she is so beset with secret traitors and frank foes. What with the plottings and subornings of France and Spain, half Navarre must be in the pay of her enemies!"

"Go thou, then, to Orthez, my friend. There are, thank God, loyal hearts there already, but add thou another to the number, only—and I grieve for my daughter Jeanne's sake—while there is so much mischief in the air, Orthez is no safe place for women and babes."

At first my lady would have naught to do with a plan that held us apart, even by so small a space as a few leagues of the Little Kingdom. But when she came to understand that to ride to Orthez was one thing, and to bide there another, since the Queen's business might take me far enough afield and thus compel a separation, she gave way.

"'Twill be something better than fretting my life out at Carmeuse," she said; "though, dear heart, when I am beyond touch of thy hand and sound of thy voice, it is as if the space and silence of the Florida woods had come again between us."

For the next week there was much bustle, and, though day by day Marcel did the work and gave the thought of two men, the heaviness never left his face. At last I could stand the chill of estrangement no

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longer, and for a day watched the chance of salving my pride by catching him alone, and found it in the dusk in the armory.

He was lifting from the wall a blade that brought some story to his mind, some tale of danger and companionship linking us two together, and as I entered I caught such a dumb dog's-look of pain on his face that I took him fairly round the neck, so moved was I.

"Will nothing please thy stubborn heart but that thy master must go upon his knees to thee? Well, no man ever yet lost caste by telling truth. I was wrong, old friend, to speak as I did, and, above all, to thee. Only," for even the hour of self-reproach pride has a fashion of seeking to save the situation, "thy tongue can sting as well as another's."

Not a word he answered, only his jaw began to quake and his eyes to fill, until, for all his manhood and tough fibre, he blubbered like a whipped urchin.

"Is it over?" he cried, at last. "Over forever? If not, I'd rather, Master Blaise, that you put a dagger into me and so make an end at once. The Lord knows I and mine have loved you and yours well, and if blood be wanted for the proof never doubt but that you shall have it and welcome; mine, or my lads' in Bernauld yonder."

"Marcel, Marcel," I answered, "I have said once I was wrong. Must I say it a dozen times to make my peace?"

"Not twice, nor ever again, Master Blaise. Where is there room for such words from you to me?" and the good fellow set himself to wipe his cheeks dry with the sleeve of his doublet.

A Man of His Age

Thenceforward he was more than ever my slave, and I verily believe that he viewed with secret satisfaction that at Auch he and I would part company from the rest, since thereafter he would have his beloved Master Blaise to himself.

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CHAPTER VI

CARMEUSE AND PARIS MEET

THE petty events of the three days' travel from Carmeuse to Orleans may be set aside in a sentence, seeing they were neither more nor less than the discomforts inseparable from such a journey. A mired road in the hollows of the woods, a swollen ford at the crossing of the Eure, or else, where the May sun had worked its will, dust a full inch above our horses' fetlocks were the incidents of the days.

Travelling by the main roads we found the inns tolerable enough, and, as to company, we fought shy of strangers—and for cause. Catholic and Huguenot were at a kind of a dog's truce; a snarling, ill-tempered, and untrustful peace one with the other; but France and Navarre were as near odds as ever were cat and rat, and it might have fared ill with a gentleman of Béarn if it were known that he rode south to take service under Jeanne d'Albret. In doubtful times the thirst for knowledge of your neighbor's affairs is a suspicious virtue, but as it may be hard to stifle the curiosity of a swaggering bully without giving undesired offence, we kept our fellow-travellers of the road-sides and inns at arm's-length. Nor was this hard, since, one party aside, we never saw

A Man of His Age

the same faces twice, and so gave small excuse for striking up an acquaintance.

These we first met on the third day of our journey at Orleans, where the road from Paris joins that from Chartres. There were five in the party, and the second glance showed me only one reason why a man should look a third time. The four men-at-arms were a common type enough of camp-bred bullies, too common, indeed, for the welfare and peace of France, but the girl who was the fifth of their number was one who could tangle the thought even of a man in love with his wife.

Small, slender, and alert as a bird, her vivacity was, as is the way with women, her first fascination. Then came the charm of her face, and, were it not that to give the color of a woman's eyes and hair, the shape and poise of her chin, the peach in her cheeks and the crimson in her lips, is at best to write a cold catalogue, I could, for all my sluggish blood and withered age, paint you such a picture as would set your veins on fire. They will burn soon enough for flesh and blood, and until then the woman who is now but a few handfuls of dust may leave you in peace.

It is enough that I, who was no amateur in women's looks, did what some might think a valorous thing and bade my lady note how rare and bright was the gem that was in such rough keeping. Yet, after all, there was little valor in my admiration, since there is more lie than truth in the common chatter of the day that one woman likes ill to hear another praised. Praise, say I, and welcome, only for your peace' sake see that

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you draw no comparisons, even by the slenderest inferences, unless they are pleasant ones.

"More than you have eyes in their heads," was my lady's answer. "Look yonder. One would think the lad had his first glimpse of an angel."

"Then," I cried, "he has been blind these two years." Whereupon she bade me be silent, since the father of such a lad as Gaspard had no business paying compliments; but the flash in her eye gave the reproof the lie direct.

Truly, if the damsel had hooked my regard, she had caught De Crussenay as it were with a gaff, for he stood by the door eying her so hard that I looked to hear the fellow seated by her at the table bid him shift his gaze for his health's sake, if not for politeness.

But it was the girl who first caught his stare, and in place of being disconcerted she stared him back with so much laughter in her eyes that the lad reddened to the hair and, I doubt not, grew hot from head to foot after the manner of his kind when smitten with a wholesome shame. Then, not content with her victory, but laughing outright, she leaned forward and whispered some jest at his expense, for her companion turned in his seat and between the two De Crussenay was well scanned as he crossed the room to the corner where we sat.

"'Tis a shame," said my lady, "to roast the lad so. Where, at her age, got the girl such effrontery?"

"I never found that age had ought to do with it," answered I. "The boldest damsel I ever met was but three and a half. As to the shame, why, Master

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Henri here stared, his hardest and she but caught the trick from him. For my part I blame neither, and at his age I would have stared too."

"Pay no heed to him or to her," cried my lady to De Crussenay; "she is a brazen-faced hussy for all his jests."

"Is she, Madame?" answered De Crussenay, simply.

"I saw naught but her looks."

"Her looks," echoed my lady; and in her vexation her voice shot up higher than she thought. "Why, 'twas her looks I meant. There is no more shame in them than—"

It was De Crussenay who stopped her, though; seeing the change on the girl's face, I, too, broke in.

"Your pardon, Madame," said he, and as he went on I thought that he, too, raised his voice, but with a purpose. "The fault is mine if fault there is, but I had been less than a man if so much sweetness had not held me as the sun a flower."

"Where got the lad his fine words in such a hurry?" said my lady, still unconscious of her louder tone. "Sweetness and suns, and flowers, quotha! A pretty flower and a pretty sun. Ten minutes since and I and Nannette were the only women in the world."

From the time my lady first spoke the two at the farther table had sat silent, watching us with an amused interest. Then, at her outburst, a gust of wrath had blown across their faces, and but that the girl held back her companion, I would have had to answer for Jeanne's unconscious offence. At De Crussenay's reply, so solemnly bombastic and yet so

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sincere, the smile came back to the girl's face, though her hand never left the sleeve of the fellow who sat by her, but at my lady's last words I saw them laugh and nod to each other as if they guessed that a pique was the cause of all this petulance. What we knew to be jests they took for earnest, and the misread words were seeds that bore fruit of sorrow before many weeks.

Presently, to my great satisfaction, the girl rose, and, attended to the door by her cavalier, went without and was seen no more that night, while he, with one hand on his hip and one on his sword-hilt, swaggered back to his place.

For all his outward resemblance to his fellows, the man carried himself with a difference. There was that assurance in his looks which goes neither with poverty nor menial service. An easy insolence, a careless swing of the shoulders, a ruffling gait that belonged to silks and velvets rather than leather and Nantes cloth. His hands, too, were whiter, and his fingers, in spite of their strength, finer than those of a common pikeman or hireling swashbuckler. His very gestures smoothing down his beard were of the court rather than the cabaret, and though he wore no rings there was that set in his fingers twisting his mustache which hinted gems and gewgaws. But, as if to give the lie to all this, he called loudly for four bottles of wine, and seating himself with his fellows plunged into such a loud medley of coarse talk as drove my lady to her chamber before the thirstiest had emptied his first glass.

The next day we were earliest on the road, and

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saving for my friend of the peaked beard I neither saw nor heard of any one of the five until Orleans was a full league behind.

As for him, he was leaning against the gateway of the court-yard as we made ready to mount, and, had I been in other than my lady's company, no errand of King, Queen, or party, nay, nor even of faith, would have withheld me from calling him to account for his insolent looks. With the impudent stare of a feed bully he searched us up and down, but me chiefly, stroking his chin or twisting his mustache with his right hand while his left rested on his sword-hilt.

At the last he overmastered both my caution and my patience, and as we rode out—my lady being out of sight ahead—I halted by him and gave him stare for stare.

Except to cross his legs, and stiffen himself against the gate-post, he never moved a muscle as I leaned sideways and downward to him, but looked me in the eyes with that half-laugh that stirs a man's wrath like a blow.

"For the present," said I, very slowly, but with an elaborate courtesy, "I have business on hand that permits no delay. Later, if it pleases you—"

"Nothing," he broke in—"nothing, believe me, Monsieur, would give me greater pleasure than a closer acquaintanceship, and when I seek a pleasure I have a trick of finding it, let what may stand in the way. To-day it suits my pleasure to wait. I also have affairs to see to, and had I not, I think your business must needs have stood aside. As it is, we will know one another again, and it seems to me your

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party waits you, for I no longer hear the beat of their horse-hoofs."

He was swinging away on his heel when I stopped him with a touch of my riding-whip on the shoulder which made him start as if stung, as, indeed, it was meant it should.

"Take care!" he cried; "you presume overmuch on my having that to do which holds me back from even a paltry risk."

"You have a name, I suppose," said I, letting his outburst pass, by giving him back insolence for insolence. "Mayhap you have a dozen. By which of the many shall I seek you when—"

"Leave the seeking to me," he retorted; "I'll wager I will be first to find. As for names, mine is as good as that of any cockerel of Béarn with or without a wedded estate;" and with his fists on his hips he turned into the inn, whistling softly.

While I was in two minds whether or not to have the affair out then and there in spite of my lady, De Crussenay came clattering up the street and put an end to my doubt.

"What is amiss?" he cried. "In five minutes you will have Madame herself at my heels. She thinks already that you and yon fellow in the rusty brown have come to blows."

"There's a woman all over," said I, with a laugh. "Let a man but look crooked at me, and she sees blood in the air."

"And that is a man all over," answered De Crussenay, "to gibe at a fear that is neither more nor less than the shadow of love."

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"What dost thou know of men and women," said I, laughing again as I put spurs to my beast—"ay, or of love either?"

"I know this much," said he, soberly, and drawing up on my bridle side, "though whether it be love or not is another thing. There are some women who, for a man, make an end of all other women in the world, once and forever."

"Some women," I echoed. "Plague take the Turk: how many?"

"For me, one since last night," he answered, with no break in his gravity, and neither shame nor pride in his voice, and, for all that he was only a lad, his words, spoken soberly as they were, lent him a kind of dignity and set me thinking.

When a man speaks of a woman with a laugh, he is but caught by the eyes and it is an ill thing for him and for her, since he holds her lightly and she has given him cause to so hold her; when he breaks into a gust of hot passion he is perchance struck in the heart, and it may be good or ill according to the man or the woman; but let him suppress himself and grow grave as he speaks and the thing is beyond jest. She has netted him neither in the eyes nor in the heart but in the spirit, and netted he is like to stay so long as he lives. Therefore it was that he set me thinking.

So soon as she saw us cantering down the long, narrow street behind them, Jeanne had given orders to ride on, for the cool of the forenoon held the sweetest travelling hours of the day. Seeing the train in motion, and having no mind to stand a raking fire of questions, I checked my beast to a walk,

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and, with De Crussenay, played the part of rear-guard.

Presently I saw Marcel turn his horse into a pasture-field on the left, and ride to the crest of a small slope that commanded an outlook in all directions. There he halted, and from under his open palm scanned, not the path ahead as would have been rational in a cautious soldier, but that already traversed. For full five minutes he sat staring his hardest, then, turning his beast with a jerk of the reins, trotted down the slope to where we stood by the road-side.

"Is Carmeuse to Orthez not far enough for thee that thou must needs add a furlong or two to the journey?" said I, jestingly; "or, mayhap, the peace of Longoumeau is at an end, and the Guisards close at our heels!"

"The last, perchance," answered he, and there was no ring of jest in either tone or words. "Tell me, Master Blaise, what is like to follow when the French of Paris foregathers with the Basque of Spain spoken with a Navarrese patois?"

"No good to us," replied I, "though you talk riddles."

"No good to us," he echoed. "No good to the cause, no good to Queen Jeanne, and the riddle is soon unriddled. Yon fellow with the peaked beard has been turning Roger inside out like a ripe fig, something in this fashion: 'Good-morrow,' saith he. 'Good-morrow,' answers Roger, stiffly enough if one may take his word for it. 'Thy master travels with a brave train,' saith he. 'My master travels with no

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train save a train of one,' answers Roger, 'and I am that one.' The thing touched his pride, d'ye see, for he holds he is De Crussenay's man and no other, and would almost as lief, saving your presence, call the devil master as De Bernauld. Had he held his tongue then all might have been well, since the fellow had run his wit into a corner and had no way to turn it, but in his cursed pride the old fool must needs add, 'that a De Crussenay needed not even one, but held his own wherever he went.' 'De Crussenay?' saith the other, like a man thinking hard; 'De Crussenay? Where have I— Ay, it was at Rouen. He was as gallant a man as ever—' 'You knew him?' cries Roger, touched in his love as well as his pride, for, like many another, he holds the dead to be even worthier than the living. 'You knew the Sieur?' 'Why,' saith the other, 'there were few in Rouen but knew De Crussenay, and now, doubtless, the young cock is off to join Condé that he may win his spurs in the same pit as his sire?' 'Nay,' answers Roger, 'to Bernauld first; Condé perhaps later.' 'Bernauld!' cries the other, with his face of a sudden the color of Nanrette's red kerchief. 'I would to the Lord I could meet De Bernauld; but he'll be safe stowed at Carmeuse.' 'Why, no,' answers Roger. 'Since you know so much, you may know a little more. Yon was Monsieur De Bernauld, who supped last night at the table in the corner.' Whereat the fellow rapped out an oath. 'He De Bernauld? Let there be no mistakes over this, my man: the De Bernauld who played catspaw for Coligny in the west?' 'I know naught of catspaws,' answers Roger, 'but yon's Monsieur de

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Bernauld.' Whereat the fellow turned on his heel, and went up-stairs three at a time."

"Roger had better have held his tongue," said I, when Marcel gave me time to edge in a word; "but where in all this are the Basques of Navarre and the French of Paris?"

"They came before and after," answered Marcel. "The fellow with the peaked beard talked last night to his three lesser scoundrels. I missed the sense of the words through being too far off, and more's the pity, but I have lived too long in sight of Maladetta not to know the twang though it be but the ghost of a syllable.

"As to the Paris French, I was up-stairs seeing to the pack baggage when he of the rusty suit strode along the passage after leaving Roger, and flung into the damsel's room with less ceremony—"

"How?" cried De Crussenay, swinging round in his saddle and thrusting out an angry arm towards Marcel. "Thou hadst best speak no ill of her."

"Oh, ay, he knocked, and the door was locked fast enough," said Marcel; "but for all that he whipped into her chamber with a scant 'by your leave.' 'Twas then they spoke French, and to hear her clip the words said not alone 'Paris,' but 'Paris of the court,' as plainly as tongue talks."

"A pretty story," said De Crussenay, contemptuously, and willing to vent his wrath. "Thy fears have run away with thee, man. Thou heardest all this, and thou seeing to the baggage? 'Tis rank folly."

"'Twill be a larger fear than this that runs far with me when a Guisard's concerned, whether he be

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of Paris or Navarre," said Marcel. "As to the hearing, to be honest, the doors are thin, and, thank God, I have always had a keen ear."

"Then you listened," I cried; "played the eavesdropper, and at a woman's chamber?"

"By your leave, Master Blaise," he answered, in a huff, "let us leave eavesdropping and women's chambers aside; I heard, and that is the chief point. She talked the French of Paris, and he the Basque of Navarre, and the rest is your affair, not mine. I had a mind to see if they were on our heels, so I went up the hill yonder, but there is no stir on the road."

"But," said De Crussenay, "why should they not be as honest as ourselves?"

It was Marcel who answered. "If you knew as much of the quarrels of France, Monsieur, as you are like to know ere you are three years older, you would hold every man a foe but a known friend. And why," he went on, "should Peaked-beard cry 'De Bernauld, De Bernauld' so often in Mademoiselle's chamber, as if seeking something she would not grant? Tell me that."

"Did he so?" cried I. "Why, then, the thing may be serious."

"Did he so?" cried Marcel back. "Ay, did he, and the thing is serious. D'ye think that had it not been Bernauld's affair I had cared a jackstraw how they chattered?"

"Then why not have told me that an hour ago?"

For a moment Marcel hesitated. "There was Madame Jeanne," he said, cautiously; "and then, who knows but later we might catch them unawares."

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"What!" I cried, "and murder them, belike?"

"Why, no," replied Marcel; "you put too hard a name to it, Master Blaise. Only the odds would be on our side for once, and, my faith, it's no lie that they are due to us."

There the matter ended for that time, and I had wellnigh forgotten the affair when, at Auch, where I was to part from Jeanne, Marcel broke in on me with—

"The scent is still hot, Master Blaise, though the chief hound is off on some other slot. Peak-beard's three rascals and the damsel are in the court below, and the young Sieur is playing squire to her with more grace than wisdom."

"Well," said I, "let him squire her while he may. I'll warrant that fourth fellow will soon put a stay on his courtesy. If they want De Bernauld, Marcel, they can find him from to-day, and welcome, since Madame Jeanne will be safe out of the road."

"Four to two," said Marcel, "were not the odds I had in my mind."

"They have the woman to see to," said I. "That takes one, and three to two is fair enough."

"Faith, but they might let the woman fend for herself," answered he, dryly.

To say truth, I fought shy of them all for the two hours I had yet remaining. To force quarrel would have served no purpose, since the convenience of time was not ripe. When Jeanne was once on her road to the south, in the safe-keeping of her guard, headed by De Crussenay, I could shake a free arm. Till then patience cost nothing. As to De Crussenay, he held

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his tongue; though without having looked out o' window, the glisten in his eye told its own tale; a woman from the lengthening of her skirts and a man from nigh thirty can keep certain secrets, but a lad of twenty is a veritable blabber for all his silence.

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CHAPTER VII

WHY ROGER RODE POST TO ORTHEZ

To give La Hake (as I afterwards learned was Peak-beard's name) his chance of picking up with me, we lingered an extra day on the road from Auch to Orthez, but to no purpose. Neither of him, nor of the damsel who had so bewitched De Crussenay, did we catch so much as a glimpse. Our paths had parted for the time, and the next news we heard of him came through Roger, as shall be told presently in its own place.

The two days of our ride may, therefore, be put aside as adding nothing to the story, and though Coligny's letter to the Queen of Navarre earned me such a reception as plain Blaise de Bernauld had no claim to, and one which might well flatter a man's vanity in the telling, I leave it also untold. Indeed, these first days at Orthez are outside the borders of my tale except for this—that in them I won both a place in the Queen's counsels, and a confidence which afterwards stood me in stead.

Let me clear myself of the imputation of boasting, once and for all. The Queen was in sore need of loyal gentlemen other than, on the one hand mere schoolmen, and on the other simple soldiers. Of the

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former she had enough and to spare, to my thinking, at least, since black cassocks have a fashion of claiming, ay, and forcing, an influence the brain under the broad brim does not always warrant. Had they stuck to affairs of spirit, and been less bitterly dogmatic even in these, and left politics alone, they had served the cause better, for it is given to few men to have the sense of this world and the grace of the next.

Of the others, she had room, doubtless, for more than came to her flag, for, as the Admiral had said, half Navarre seemed in the pay of France or Spain. But, after all, it was not so much swords that were lacking as leaders of men, and here it was that I earned a place which under Coligny or Condé I could have laid no claim to. I had not alone fought, but had seen fighting, which is quite another thing. You know the saying, one eye that half sees is worth two whole blind, and I can honestly say that I was at least a half-seeing man.

Understand; I by no means belittle Queen Jeanne's Viscounts, able men for the most, and devoted men one and all. They were, in a broad sense, the very salvation of Navarre, and their names are written large where that of De Bernauld is effaced, but I knew France and French methods, and so at the moment I had my value.

We were in the Queen's antechamber, a dozen of us, chattering of this and that: Fénelon's mission to Jeanne d'Albret, Condé's folly in trusting the court at Paris, young Henry of Béarn's precocious ways, both in the field and elsewhere, where precocity was less admirable, the dozen hints of gossip and intrigue

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which are forever floating about a palace, when De Montamar, looking into the room, called out—

"Hullo, De Bernauld, there's a fellow below with more rents and rags to his clothing than De Lory there has hairs to his chin, and nothing will please him but that he must have thee out to him, and at once. 'The Sieur de Bernauld,' says he in a kind of a howl—'the Sieur de Bernauld, for the Lord's sake,' and, good or bad, he will say no more. He keeps so hard at it that in another ten minutes he will have the whole castle agog for the Sieur de Bernauld."

"Come closer to it," said I; "apart from the rags, what do you make of the fellow? My purse is too thin and my wants too many to welcome the dip of a beggar's fingers."

"Apart from the rags there is as much mud and dust as humanity, but inside of all three there is, I take it, an antique fighting man. He bears himself like a soldier, and sticks to his point like a war machine. For the rest, he is gray enough under the dust, and from his tongue has more in him of the north than the south, though, as I tell you, he is chary enough of his words. It's 'The Sieur de Bernauld, for the Lord's sake,' and there's an end of it. Hark to him now! My faith, but he has tracked you, and if he be a beggar your pocket will sweat."

As the sounds of an altercation in the passage below came faintly up the stairway, all gathered in a group round the door, laughing and jesting. Had the Queen suddenly come in by the farther entrance she would have met but a sorry reception. A fine study of backs had been her only greeting.

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Suddenly, through a lull in the clash of chatter I heard Roger's voice.

"The Sieur I must have, and no three of you shall stay me; no, nor your talk of guard-houses either. For the Lord's sake, fetch me to the Sieur de Bernauld."

"By your leave, gentlemen," cried I, from my place at the back of the laughing group. "I know the man, and this thing is no jest;" and I pushed my way through the press, calling out, "Peace, Roger, peace! Bid him be quiet, Monsieur de Montamar; I will be with him this instant."

As I ran down the stone steps three at a time, and caught sight of the old Squire at the bottom, I ceased to marvel either at De Montamar's laughter or the lackeys' surprise. His doublet hung on him in so many tongues and tags of cloth, showing a dusty skin through not a few of the holes. Torn open at the throat, it had been refastened with a piece of coarse cord, whose frayed edges stuck out in bristles on either side of his chin. Bonnet he had none, and from bald crown to grizzled beard-point his face was gray with dust, or seamed by dust turned mud by the flow of sweat.

"How now, fellows?" cried I, from the stair-foot. "Who taught you to so mishandle an honest man? If nothing else, his age might have held him scatheless."

"Let them come one by one," said Roger, wrathfully, "and my age will account for their youth. Leave go, you hounds, when the Sieur bids you, else, three to one as it is, and my age thrown in, I may

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Why Roger Rode Post to Orthez

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Very grumblingly the fellows relaxed their grip, and one muttered that if such scarecrows had the free run of the court-yard there would be no holding the rest of the rabble in check outside.

"Keep thou to thy rabble," cried I, sharply, for an impertinent lackey is a thing for no man's toleration; "thou wilt find them none so uncongenial; and hark ye to this, all three. When Monsieur de Bernauld is sought, next time see that the seeker has more courtesy shown him, lest ye suffer for your violence. Come, old friend," I went on, taking Roger by the arm with a larger show of consideration than ordinary, for the further rebuke of the gaping lackeys and the salving of the Squire's ruffled feelings, "these fellows will know their place and yours in future, and we can count on there being no more torn doublets."

Even under the dust and grime I could see the shadows deepen on his face as he looked up towards me with troubled eyes.

"That was none of their doing, Monsieur, but is another story; and where to begin and how to tell you the tale of the last six days is a thing beyond me."

"Six days!" cried I, stopping in my walk, and with scant courtesy swinging him round by the elbow so that he faced me. "Why, man, it is no more than six days since I rode out of Auch. First, and in a word, how are all at Bernauld?"

"As to that, Monsieur, I could not tell you in a thousand words, since I have never yet set eyes on Bernauld."

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"Then Madame has not sent you?"

"Why, ay, she has," said he, slowly, and dragging out his words one by one, as if choosing them, and yet not knowing which to choose, "but not from Bernaud."

"Then from where, man?" cried I, impatiently; "and there is at least this—since Madame has sent you there is nought amiss with her?"

"Madame was well enough in health," said he "and as to the where, that's part of the tale; and to say I rode post from where you will is so many words and no more."

"Ha!" said I, with a sudden thought. "Monsieur de Crussenay—has aught befallen him, that you are so plaguily dumfounded?"

"Had aught befallen the Sieur," answered Roger, with a new set of the lips, "I would, so please you, have seen to the business myself, and not wasted so many hours over it as were lost riding to Orthez. It was never my way to leave Crussenay's affairs for another's settling."

"Then, since Madame and the Sieur are in health, you may nurse your mystery and tell your tale in your own fashion."

"But," said Roger, with a return to his old faltering, "there was yet a third that—"

"What, man! The babe? The boy Gaspard? What could hurt so sturdy a lad in so few hours?"

"Madame bade me say this," answered Roger, speaking laboriously, like a school-boy out of a sluggish memory. "There are times when the Lord God takes back His gifts, and His is a safer keeping than

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Why Roger Rode Post to Orthez

ours. As to what could hurt, the hands that slew babes at Vassy or Rouen can surely slay in Béarn; and there you have the tale out, and it has been a sorely hard one to put in words. To tell how a man died with a sword in his hand fighting for faith and nation, is at times a hard enough thing, but to say bluntly that a laughing innocent has gone down to its tiny grave in blood pulls roughly at a man's heart-strings, grizzled and all though he be—"

How much longer he prattled on I know not, for, forgetful of the dozens of on-lookers from doors and windows, I had him by the shoulders and was slowly shaking him in a dazed fashion, striving hard to think it out and understand.

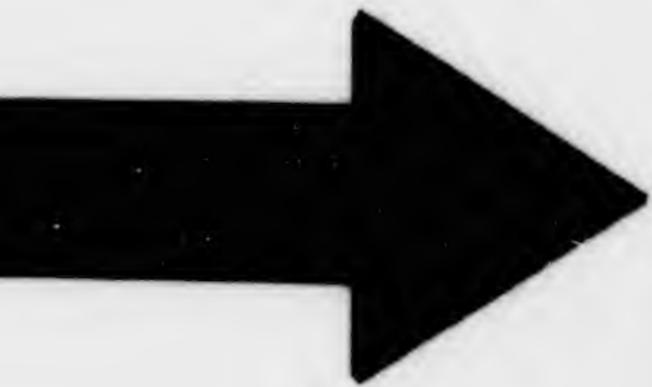
"Dead," I said at last, slowly. "Our little lad dead? What is all this talk of Vassy and Rouen? That which was done there was done in heat and wrath, and with men's passions in a ferment; but who would lay a finger on the lad to hurt him in cold blood?"

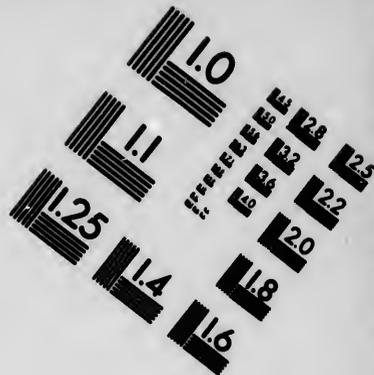
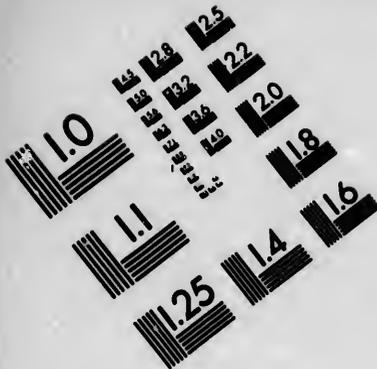
Then I broke into a passion. "Where wert thou? Where was De Crussenay? Was there not one man's heart among you all, that you could stand quietly by and see a babe slaughtered? Curse you both for cowards! I had not thought that there was a thing in all France calling itself a man that could have seen such an infamy, and would not rather have died first!"

On this De Montamar, who had watched me from the doorway, joined us, and, seeing my rage, put his arm in mine to stay me, for I made as if to strike Roger to the flags, in spite of his gray hairs.

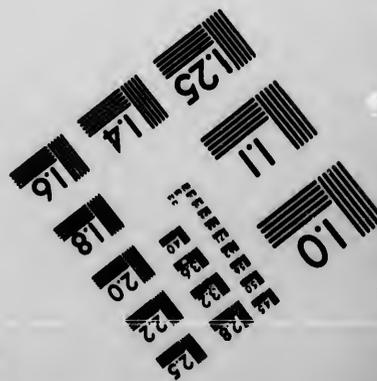
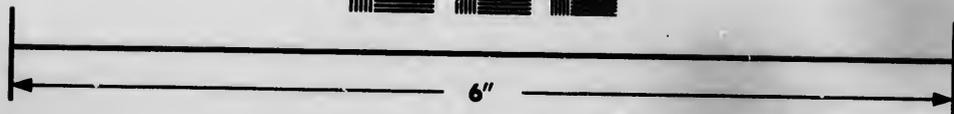
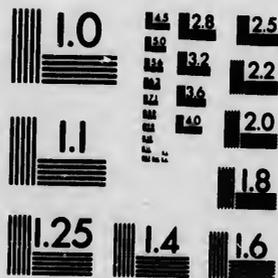
"You have had bad news, Monsieur de Bernauld?"







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A Man of His Age

'Tis always bad news when a man rides post. May a friend—"

"News that in the Queen's dominions murder can be done, and none lift a hand to stay it. See this fellow? He looks like a man, doth he not?"

"Murder?" cried De Montamar. "And on one of your blood?"

"On the last of my race, Monsieur de Montamar; on a weakling babe. On—on—my little lad, who lay so warm in my heart that I never dreamed death could strike him. On a babe, I say, on a babe. These be the Queen's protections to those who serve her."

How much longer I would have raved in my wrath and agony I know not had not De Montamar, pushing Roger aside, led me across the court-yard and out into the street beyond.

"For the Lord's sake be calm, Monsieur de Bernaud!" said he. "All Béarn and Navarre are in a ferment, and a chance word might set the blood of a thousand babes aflowing. This thing touches the State, and I beg your leave to hear with you the tale of yon fellow following. And further, I pray you, father though you are, hear the man patiently, and curb your natural anger."

"Father that was," answered I, with a break in my voice, "but father no longer. Come with us and welcome, Monsieur de Montamar, and if in my pain I have said or done aught unbecoming a loyal gentleman, I pray you forget it and forgive me. Had the lad but been a man grown, and the Queen had claimed him, he was hers to the very death; but—

Why Roger Rode Post to Orthez

but—" and I fairly broke into weeping, and so, with my teeth set and the tears running into my beard, I went through the streets of Orthez, looking neither to right nor left, and never noting who turned to stare at the strange sight of a man with a blade by his side and tears on his cheeks.

My lodging was no great distance from the palace, château, fortress, call it which you will, for it partook of all three, and was all three by turns; but had it been a league away it would have been no more to me than a score of paces, for all my knowledge of time and distance. The streets were a blank, and the first thing that came consciously into my thought was the sight of Marcel putting together such few things as even a man in haste must needs take with him on a ride of both night and day.

"We saved an hour, Master Blaise," said he, simply, "by sending on Roger to ferret you out by himself," and though there was no more feeling in the words than what you hear, yet a man understands the reservation of a man, and I knew his heart was sore for the little lad. Besides, at such a time action is the best sympathy, and in his haste to get to saddle Marcel offered me the surest comfort.

I was not the only one who understood what Marcel would be at. De Montamar noted the preparations at a glance, and turned to me with his hand upon my arm.

"Monsieur de Bernauld, Monsieur de Bernauld, this must not be; at least not without first learning the Queen's pleasure. You have no right, Monsieur, to put yourself to your own service when you have

A Man of His Age

taken that of the Queen in hand; and this, for all my sincere sorrow, I tell you to your face."

"Monsieur de Montamar, Monsieur de Montamar," I cried back, "if you had a son's blood crying for vengeance, you would be less of the politician and more of the man."

"Ay, faith," said Marcel. "If Monsieur—"

"Silence, fellow," said De Montamar, sternly. "This is a question of a man's honor, and therefore not one for lackeys to meddle in. Monsieur de Bernauld, you have your duty to fulfil, and to follow your private quarrel is to pleasure yourself and nothing else, gloze it how you may. Think—what if all the Queen's servants went this way and that on their private feuds—and the Lord knows there are feuds enough—there would be a speedy end to Navarre, I trow."

In my heart I knew he was right, though for all that I argued it out at length and bravely enough, tramping restlessly up and down the room in the heat of debate as a man does under the goad of wrathful sorrow. At last he set a period to it all by saying—

"Hear the story out to the end, and by your leave I will carry all that is needful to the Queen. Jeanne d'Albret has suffered much both in body and mind, and, though to some she is hard enough, to those who love her she has but grown more tender through her suffering. Trust the Queen, Monsieur de Bernauld, trust the Queen, and believe me that in saying so I speak both as a friend to you and a lover of Navarre."

Then it was that I bade Roger give his tongue rein.

Why Roger Rode Post to Orthez

"Tell thy tale from the very beginning," said De Montamar, "lest unwittingly thou droppest out something which might serve as a clew. Monsieur de Bernauld hath given me leave to join in the listening, and of the chain of circumstances I, at least, know nothing."

"Then," answered Roger, "needs must that I begin with the turning of the Sieur's back as he rode out of Auch."

"Begin where thou wilt," cried I; "only, for the Lord's sake, make a start. An hour now may put the villain beyond my arm's reach for a year."

"Nay," said De Montamar, "not if I read aright the little I know. You, my friend, are the game struck at, and with the true quarry still afoot the hunter will not be far away. As for thee, to thy tale, my friend."

CHAPTER VIII

MADemoiselle SUZANNE

ALTHOUGH Roger's story was clear enough for our purposes, yet I do not set it down in his own words, as there were many circumstances and details of which he, of necessity, was ignorant. These were gathered later from my lady and De Crussenay, and what is told is thus rather the narrative of all three, eked out by certain hints and bruitings which came to me from various quarters.

Piecing all these together, what followed my departure from Auch was this :

De Crussenay had ridden out with us to set us fairly on our way, and on his return, as he neared the inn, there met him the damsel of Orleans with a couple of men-at-arms slouching at her heels six paces away. There must have been that in her looks which heartened his courage, since no man learned boldness towards women from Charlotte de Laval, for at the first sight of her he slipped from his horse and, with bridle in one hand and hat in the other, was by her side before she could affect astonishment, even had she thought it necessary to make such a pretence. That she did not was clear, for she was quickest with her tongue, and there was no rebuke either in words or tone.

Mademoiselle Suzanne

"How I wish I were a man," she cried, with a pretty toss of her head, and careless who of all in Auch heard her lie. "Here have I to trot the streets with a pair of watch-dogs trotting behind, and all because I'm a woman," and she eyed De Crussenay with a hard laugh, and a look behind the laugh that was a fair challenge to set his heart at the gallop.

To such a speech what could the poor lad answer but some blundering compliment coupled with a wish that he might be happy enough to share their guard, though but for too brief a time.

"What!" said she, "and have three dogs trot behind in place of two? If thou hadst rather be there than here, Monsieur, thou canst take thy choice," and she stopped, and slipped aside with the least dip of a courtesy, as if to let him join the two who followed.

"Either there or here, Mademoiselle," answered the great sheep, "if there was danger, either place."

"I have heard men say," said she, with a laugh and a swift look straight in his eyes, "that the danger here was the greater of the two when faced alone, yet worth the risk, and thou, if thou art hard pressed, can call in Monsieur de Bernauld's aid."

"Nay," said he, taking her seriously, like the simpleton he was; "Monsieur de Bernauld has ridden—" and stopped, remembering in time that under no provocation should he divulge my mission to Orthez.

"Ay," said she, touching him lightly on the arm with the slender twig of a cane she carried. "Monsieur de Bernauld has ridden—"

"Out of Auch, Mademoiselle; he has some affairs elsewhere."

A Man of His Age

"A pretty answer to a lady's question," cried she, petulantly. "Monsieur de Bernauld has ridden—elsewhere! Monsieur de Bernauld has affairs—elsewhere! For Monsieur de Bernauld, whom I have seen but once, I care nothing, but, being a woman, I care much that a whim should be thwarted, and, though the whole thing is a folly, I will take no denial. To give me back my belief in myself, tell me, Monsieur, Monsieur de Bernauld has ridden to— What? No answer? Since when is it the custom of a French gentleman to flout a lady's wishes? 'Tis some country pleasantry, no doubt, since I have never found it so these two years in Paris!"

"Mademoiselle," cried De Crussenay in despair, and with his face red with the double shame of her gibes and his denial, "since when is it the custom to drive a man to tell that which he is pledged not to tell? If this were my affair you should have it out to the last word with my grateful thanks that you were good enough to listen. If you scorn me already, would you not double your scathing if I broke my word to Monsieur de Bernauld?"

For a moment her face darkened, and a sharp reply was slipping from her tongue.

"If it were thy affair, I doubt not the town fool might—" then she curbed herself. "Thou art the first man," she went on, with an odd note in her voice between vexation and extorted praise, "who hath refused me aught in two years, and we women like a new thing, even though it hurts our pride."

"Then you forgive my refusal?" cried he. "Mademoiselle, you are an angel; which is to tell you no

Mademoiselle Suzanne

more than they have told you in Paris a score of times"; which was no bad stroke for one who was taking his first hand in the game.

"Chut!" said she, smiling; "a pest on this Monsieur de Bernauld who has so nearly made us two quarrel who should be friends, since we are travellers by the same road."

"Towards Tarbes, Mademoiselle? That is good news indeed."

"Ay, towards Tarbes," replied she; "though whether Madame de Bernauld will think it good news is another thing."

"I will answer for Madame de Bernauld," said De Crussenay. "She is goodness itself."

"Answer for no woman where another woman is concerned, and, least of all, proclaim your answering to all the world," replied she, dryly. "Best leave Madame to me."

This brought them to the inn, and straight to my lady's room went the damsel, knocked, and, being bid to come in, entered with a courtesy Mary of Scotland might have envied.

"I have learned by chance, Madame," she began, without a word of preface or explanation, "that your journey lies through Tarbes. Might one, who is a stranger to Béarn, and in terror of the dangers of the unfrequented ways, be granted leave to join your train for protection's sake?"

"That we go through Tarbes is true," answered my lady, eying the girl with no greater favor for being taken aback by the directness of the unexpected request, "but I have yet to learn that the roads of Béarn

A Man of His Age

or Navarre are more dangerous than those of Berry, La Marche, or Limousin. These you have found safe enough."

"Oh, Madame," said the damsel, "the nearer to Spain the further from peace, is a proverb with us." Then she drew herself up with a pretty air of pride that sat well upon her. "Understand, I beg you, I do not seek to force myself upon your friendship. All that I ask is the help which I have never yet known one woman refuse another."

Even then she might have been met with an objection, for my lady still resented the turning De Crusenay into a jest at Orleans, and held the girl in something more than suspicion, but the little lad Gaspard settled the question. He had been clinging to his mother's skirt while the two women stood facing each other. Now, quitting his hold, he ran staggering across the floor to the girl, and at the last would have fallen had she not caught him up.

"The heart of the child," said she, fondling him, "might plead for me in my need. Where lies the fault, Madame, in being friendless, poor, and almost alone?"

"As far as Tarbes, then," said Jeanne, ungraciously, and with reluctance; "but we leave within the hour, and can make no delay."

"Within the hour we will be ready, Madame," replied the girl, setting down Gaspard and adding no word of thanks, except that at the door she turned and made my lady as deep a reverence as when she entered, and so left her to a medley of conflicting moods and uncertain whether she was mocked or not.

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Mademoiselle Suzanne

She gave my lady no cause to pick a fault in her alertness. Within half the limit of time she and her three men-at-arms were in the saddle in the courtyard, waiting; and when Jeanne and the rest rode out they formed in behind some thirty paces in the rear.

Thus they rode down the steep hill from the town, across the narrow bridge spanning the muddy Gers, and on for an hour, the gap between them being neither lessened nor crossed, until at last, for very shame's sake, my lady turned back, and thence forward till the halt for supper Paris and Carmeuse rode side by side.

It was then that the girl told her story.

She was from Artois, she said, the daughter of a poor gentleman who had ruined himself utterly, fighting at his own cost against Spain in Flanders. Of Alva and his wickedness she could tell more stories than was good for a woman to know, and these were mostly true. For these two last years she had been in Paris at the charges of a far-off cousin, and was now packed off to Béarn that some other relative might share the burden of her maintenance. As for her name, it was Suzanne Lavardère, and at nineteen she was both penniless and parentless. As to having men-at-arms to guard her, since the happy peace of Longoumeau had put a stop to war between Catholic and Huguenot men were plentiful enough, and her cousin thought 'twas cheaper to pay their cost for a month than bear the burden of her meat and drink for a year.

Such, in brief, was her story, told with much detail and an abundant pathos of orphaned loneliness and

A Man of His Age

pinch of poverty which moved my lady to a self-chastisement of spirit that opened her heart the wider because of the closeness with which it had been shut before.

As the whole tale was a lie from Artois to Béarn—saving, perhaps, her age, since she had a woman to deal with, and her stay in Paris—these details are not set down here, but they so touched Jeanne that, in spite of her smothered repugnance, she promised herself to make full reparation for her coldness before handing Mademoiselle Suzanne over to her unfamiliar relative.

"Ah, Madame," said the girl, when my lady spoke in frank contrition of her uncordial reception, "that you should be suspicious of a stranger was natural, yet I guessed that one with so much happiness in her life would let a little overflow into another's emptiness. Truly you must have a surplus indeed, and to spare. Here you are riding to home and the love of husband. I, to I know not whom or what."

"To home for all that Bernauld is strange to me," replied my lady; "but not to husband, and so the home-coming is robbed of its sweetness."

"Then Monsieur de Bernauld has not ridden on in advance?" cried the girl. "I made sure that we should meet him at Merande or Tarbes."

"No," said Jeanne, with a touch of pride in her voice. "Monsieur de Bernauld is honored with—" Then she checked herself, and went on lamely, "He has been absent from the Kingdom so long that he has many matters to see to."

"But," persisted Mademoiselle Suzanne, "do Monsieur de Bernauld's affairs not lie at Bernauld?"

Mademoiselle Suzanne

"There," said my lady—"there, and—elsewhere."

"Why, there is a stange thing," said the girl, with a laugh. "That was Monsieur de Crussenay's word too—elsewhere? Now here is a mystery, and we women love a mystery."

"No mystery," answered my lady, also smiling, since nothing pleased her better than to talk of me, and exalt me a little beyond where my deserts placed me, as the way of women is with the man they love.

"Only that Monsieur de Bernauld is honored with a certain mission which takes him—elsewhere."

There must have been more than the smile on my lady's face, something, perhaps, of a set firmness that set a period to curiosity, for Mademoiselle Suzanne asked no more questions, but for a time rode on in silence.

When she next spoke it was of Chatillon. My lady had made no secret of her eighteen months' sojourn with the Admiral, and had spoken of her friendship with De Crussenay with a freedom of which she now repented. That she should show this daughter of a ruined race a kindness was well enough, but that De Crussenay should risk an entanglement through a boy's worship of a pretty face was not to be endured for all the penniless damsels in or out of Artois. So when talk of Chatillon slipped into talk of De Crussenay she took alarm, and thenceforward used all her woman's wit to keep the two apart, both on the road and presently at Mirande, where they halted for the night.

If Mademoiselle Suzanne—who, out of her Paris training, soon wearied of having none but another

A Man of His Age

woman within arm's-length — cried, "Monsieur de Crussenay, what is that town I see through the trees yonder?" or some such question on a stock or stone of which she cared nothing, Madame Jeanne had, on the instant, a message to Roger forty paces ahead, and so parried the attack. If the lad drew in abreast of them, which he did about thrice in half an hour, she complained that the way was too narrow for the comfort of three, and so drove him behind. Even when Mademoiselle Suzanne, with her eyes full of mischief, begged Monsieur de Crussenay to be so good as to set her stirrup-leather straight, showing, as she spoke, rather more of a pretty foot than a woman need, Madame Jeanne called up a lackey and bade him put that right which had never been wrong, never budging herself from her place by the girl's side. For every attack of Mademoiselle Suzanne Madame Jeanne had a defence, and with every success of Carmeuse the deeper grew the mischief, and at last the malice, of Paris.

At first it had been a spoiled woman's thought to play herself with her accustomed toy, but before the day was over it grew into a battle betwixt the two, and, out of the evil of her Paris wisdom, Mademoiselle Suzanne made a bold guess at the cause of my lady's persistent watchfulness.

At Miellan they halted for the night, and there began the suggestions of misfortune, for when, next morning, the time came to start for Tarbes, Mademoiselle Lavardère's guards had shrunk from three to two.

"Had I been a man," cried she, "I had known yon

Mademoiselle Suzanne

fellow lied when he came last night seeking an advance of pay. 'I have lost at play,' said he, for all the world as a gentleman might; 'and a debt of honor, Mademoiselle, a debt of honor, must perforce be paid'; and I, like a fool, and out of my girl's ignorance, believed him. The honor of the off-scouring of a camp forsooth!"

"If the man is gone," said Roger, who had his eyes about him and his suspicions awake, "he has left his beast behind."

"How?" cried Mademoiselle, rounding on the two who sat their saddles behind her as stolidly as a pair of clay images. "You never told me that. Are you, too, in league to fool me?"

"A beast like his," said one of the fellows, with the flicker of a grin about his mouth; "like his, but not his. Am I a fool not to know a horse my own beast has rubbed shoulders with so many days together?"

"Ay," persisted Roger, "but it is his, for I am no more fool than either of you, and knew a horse while you sucked thumbs."

"It is and it isn't will bring us no nearer if we talk for an hour," said Mademoiselle. "Call the knave innkeeper, and you, Master Roger, bring out the beast this evil is about. Friend, who owns yon four-legged skeleton in the brown hide?"

"A man must be honest to himself," said the host, with a grave shake of the head. "I would not take fifteen crowns for the horse."

"Right, fellow," said De Crussenay, who stood by, "since no honest man takes what he is not offered, and never will be, save by a lunatic. This is no ques-

A Man of His Age

tion of purchase; but a straight answer now: Are you its owner?"

"Since there is no question of sale, then a straight answer, Monsieur. To my sorrow, I am."

That ended the matter, but as they rode out of the court-yard, Roger said to De Crussenay, loud enough for the most part to hear—

"A straight answer enough, it was only the truth that was crooked. A thousand crowns to one, I say still, that is yon other fellow's horse."

That day there fell such a summer deluge as we of the south know too well to our cost. For four hours it fell, and so thickly that it lay white against the gray rim of the horizon. By reason of the heavy downpour and the increasing hilliness of the road, but little progress was made. Nor was the day following much more to their liking; but in the afternoon the border between Gascony and Bigorre was passed, and my lady was at last fairly in the Queen's dominions.

Thereafter, with every mile, it became more abundantly clear that Mademoiselle Suzanne's fears of turbulence were well founded. The Little Kingdom was in a ferment, and a party of three, of which one was a woman, might readily have met with rough handling. The very peasants by the way-side were split into an intolerant antagonism, and every commune was the scene of a miniature struggle between France and Navarre—Catholic and Huguenot.

As yet the war was for the most part one of words and gestures, though collisions had already taken place, and with the daily strengthening of faction

Mademoiselle Suzanne

on both sides a violent outbreak was imminent. Whether in love or in war, propinquity is a powerful factor, and naturally the heat and passion were greatest in the towns where personal jealousy and private hate lent a fire and a whet, and it was at Tarbes that the spirit of revolt was seen at its worst.

Tarbes was the halting-place for the night, and as De Crussenay, at the head of the now closely packed troop, with the three women in the centre, pushed his way through the streets, he found it no easy matter to avoid embroiling himself with one or other of the factions. Then, as ever, neutrals were out of favor and courted attack from both sides.

From the street to the court-yard of "The Crown of the Two Provinces" was but the exchange of a storm for a tempest.

"Rooms, Monsieur!" cried little Jean Caron, the innkeeper, with his shoulders to his ears and his palms outspread in deprecation of wrath. "All Navarre has wanted rooms since mid-day, and now all France is at my throat. What can a man do? There is a loft above the stable—"

"By your leave, my Sieur," said Roger, "let me deal with this fellow; I know the kind of cattle better. Hark you! what fool's talk is this of a stable loft for ladies of the Queen's court? If your ears are oversmall to listen, we will pull them larger, so that you may hear the better. A room for these ladies and another for the Sieur de Crussenay, and at once. For the night we others can fend for ourselves."

A Man of His Age

"For your threats—that!" said the innkeeper, snapping his fingers. "A man has not sold good wine in Tarbes for so many years without making friends for a pinch. If it comes to the pulling of ears, other ears might suffer as well as Jean Caron's, Master Bully, and with the temper abroad there are those who would not stop at the pulling. But ladies of the Queen's household—that's another story; and I remember now there are two small rooms above the porch which, by good fortune, are empty."

Small enough they were; so small—one of them being but a cock-loft—that De Crussenay would have naught to say to them.

"By your leave, Madame, a chair in the common room will serve my turn better. If I but stretch myself here the walls would crack. Mademoiselle, having so many fewer inches, might perhaps make shift for a night."

On which Mademoiselle Suzanne played a bold stroke.

"My thanks," said she, with a laugh and a look that gave the lie to the gravity of her courtesy; "I agree, Monsieur, but only provided that you share our quiet here until such time as it is imperative that you go to your discomfort of half-drunken babble and the smell of spilled wine."

"But," he began, looking first at my lady and then round the room, "this is—"

"No time for over-niceness," ended Mademoiselle; "and Madame de Bernauld has no mind, I am sure, to condemn you to premature misery on my account. In such a case," she added, with a glance at Jeanne,

Mademoiselle Suzanne

"I think I would find it in my conscience needful to bear you company"; and though she spoke in jest, it was a jest which my lady thought might very well have slipped into earnest.

CHAPTER IX

MADEMOISELLE SUZANNE HAS A REMINISCENCE

THE hour which Master Jean Caron made his guests in the little room over the porch wait for supper passed lightly enough, and even Mademoiselle Paris found a diversion in the excited stir and constant bustle of the crowded square facing the inn.

"The Crown of the Two Provinces" stood not far from the centre of the northern side of the city market-place, and full in face of the unimposing municipality of Tarbes and its still less impressive watch-house. Round these two points of outward authority, as if in derision of the actual helplessness of the apparent power, the mob was chiefly concentrated, so that from the windows above the porch the play, which at any moment might be a tragedy, was in full view.

"There will be no outbreak to-night," said De Crusenay, confidently, in answer to a fear of my lady's, and quoting Roger's experience rather than his own. "You see the women and children, how freely they mingle with the men? That they are there in such numbers is of itself a guarantee of peace."

But out of her knowledge of Paris, Mademoiselle Suzanne had a word to say to that.

Mademoiselle Suzanne Has a Reminiscence

"Let the blood-fever stir in a man," said she, "and neither woman nor child, though they were wife and babe, will put a stay on the unreason of his passion. Down they will go into the mud under his feet without a second thought. Five times I have seen it in my two years, and five times it has been as I say, and unless these men of Navarre are of different blood from those of Paris, there wants but a spark and a breath to set the blaze roaring."

"Five times?" said Jeanne; "five times?"

"Paris is not Carmeuse, Madame," answered the girl, carelessly, and even with a touch of contempt; "such things made a break in our lives, and therefore we remember them. Once it was as you have it here. A broad place walled in except at the corners just in front of—the balcony where by chance I was.

"It was winter, and had been bitter cold for all the sunshine. Bread was dear, too, and the people would have it that the King's taxes and Monseigneur the Cardinal de Lorraine's exactions had so robbed them that they must starve. That was the unreason of the people, since needs must that the King and Cardinal live. They would have it, too, that the King, being the father of his people, and especially of the good citizens of Paris, who are forever striking a blow at whoever is uppermost, would feed, clothe, and warm them all if he but knew their need. So they came together by the hundred, and for an hour howled themselves hoarse for that which they were as little likely to get as I the throne of France. Out of what could he feed and clothe them, since, by their own showing, he robbed them to feed and clothe himself?"

A Man of His Age

"My faith, what a scene it was! At first, in their expectancy, they were pleasant-humored enough for all their hunger and pinch of cold, and so played the pitiful, holding up their white-faced, half-naked babes to the windows, while the mothers stood by clinging to the men, and for the most part too dispirited to do more than weep softly. For the most part, I say, but not all of them, for some had hot blood in their veins for all their starvation, and when a woman takes to playing a man's part, she can teach the boldest scoundrel upon earth something he had never so much as dreamed of.

"For an hour they clamored so, and we who sat by the windows began to weary of the sameness of the cry, when in a flash it was all changed. One of these same women whom you call the guarantee of peace had set the whole square in a blaze.

"They were, as I have said, for the most part mere lookers-on, these women, but while some had wailed, clamored, shrieked, wept, she, through it all, had not so much as cursed. There she stood, moving neither hand nor foot of herself, but simply swaying with the swaying of the crowd. Nothing in her showed life but her eyes, and they ranged from window to window without rest, and with such a look of curbed wrath, hunger, and despair in them as I never saw but once before, and never since. It was in the eyes of a caged wolf caught in the woods beyond Vincennes, and brought after a day of famishing to be baited before the ladies of the court. There it sat on its haunches staring dumbly between the bars, its eyes shifting ceaselessly from face to face with a hungry passion in

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Mademoiselle Suzanne Has a Reminiscence

them, and now, as I watched her, the woman seemed to me the very own sister to the wolf.

"By her side was one who might have been her husband—they have husbands, have they not, these people? On one arm he carried a wailing infant a half-year old, the other arm rested across the woman's shoulder, as much, on my life, as a prop to him as a protection to her. Of the crowd he was the noisiest, but through all his clamoring her lips never moved from their thin line of compression, and but for the shifting of her eyes and the wolfish crave in them, one would have said she was as good as dead.

"One would have said wrong. Presently there fell a calm upon the mob. Why, who can say, but there comes at times, even upon the wildest sea of passion, an interval of silence. So it was now. The discordant cries ceased and the very surging of the crowd was stayed. But only for an instant. From a lower window and across the silence there came a laugh, a woman's laugh, and in the middle of its peal this wolf of the people came to life.

"Suddenly she stirred herself, flinging off the man's arm. 'They can jeer our misery, can they?' she cried. 'Then, since they have taken our children's bread, let them take our children too,' and she snatched the babe from the arm of the man and hurled it full at the window whence the woman had laughed.

"Her words fell on the mob like a whip-stroke. From every throat came the roar of a beast, and under the sting of the lash the whole mass of men surged and swayed across the square, trampling their

A Man of His Age

weakest underfoot in the unreason of their mad passion, and with such a threat in their white faces and clinched hands that more than one in the palace lost color; ay, even some with swords by their sides. It was as if these famished wretches would devour the very monarchy and make an end at the one meal of King and noble. As for me, I leaned another half-foot out of the window to see the better, and laughed again."

"You?" said De Crussenay. "You were there?"

"Ay," said she; "why not? Such things were new to me then. It was worth the seeing, if for nothing more than that the memory of the rage and rush makes my blood dance even now."

"But the child," asked my lady, who at the telling of the tale had gone very white in the cheeks. "What of the babe?"

"Oh, it?" said Mademoiselle, carelessly. "How should I know? It was naught to me, and since wives and children went down alike in the mad struggle, one more or less mattered little," and she held out her arms to young Gaspard who shook himself free from his mother's nursing and staggered across the space between with a shout of laughter.

"And was that the end?" said De Crussenay, who had followed the story with eyes that had a spark in them of Mademoiselle Suzanne's fire.

"Not altogether," said she, with a look at my lady's face that had something of derision in it; "but some have no liking for hearing of such things. There was some little matter of the clearing of the square by Monsieur de Guise's guard which prolonged the play

Mademoiselle Suzanne Has a Reminiscence

another fifteen minutes; but that has naught to do with the tale."

"A play?" said Jeanne. "Why not say a tragedy?"

"Because, Madame," answered the girl, flippantly, "I never heard that a tragedy was aught else but a play. It was a poor thing at the best, since what could bare palms do against naked steel. What I said at the first was: let a spark and a puff of wind touch those there in front, and all will go in a blaze in spite of wife or child, and careles who bears the hurt. There you have the truth of the people, whether of Paris or Tarbes. They are but unreasoning beasts that will leap and strike at the first prick. Come, little one, thou and I will play ourselves while that slug of an innkeeper sends us supper"; and catching up the lad in her arms she went into the little room De Crusenay had given up to her use.

"My faith!" said he, looking after her and then back to Jeanne, "I would give something to have the pleasure of meeting Monsieur de Guise face to face, with or without his guards at his back."

"The woman who gibed the misery of her fellow-women was the harder of the two," said my lady, bitterly. "At her door lay the slaughter, and yet you would strike the man and forgive her, and all for a sidelong look in the eyes. That is a man all over."

"She was no more than a child," answered De Crusenay, with a certain loftiness begotten of his twenty years. "All that is changed. Listen to her now."

From the inner room came a shout from Gaspard, and through it a ripple of the girl's laughter.

"Ay," said my lady, still bitterly. "She laughed

A Man of His Age

then and she laughs now, and how soon would she say, 'The child is naught to me; what matters one more or less?'

On that Master Jean Caron and two serving-wenches came in to lay covers for supper, and so put a stop to De Crussenay's defence. But though he was silent, Gaspard, as once before, put in a plea greater than any of De Crussenay's. The sound of his glee rang through the closed door with such unrestrained heartiness that the mother in my lady was stirred in spite of herself.

Softly she opened the door and looked in; then, turning, beckoned to De Crussenay, whose curiosity was no less keen than hers though centred elsewhere. Looking over her shoulder he saw what was to him the prettiest sight of his life. Mademoiselle Suzanne was full length upon the floor with a heavy riding-cloak spread out beneath her, and a bundle of some soft, gay-colored stuff under her head. In her play with the boy her hair had broken from its ribbons and was tossed in a tangle about her face and shoulders, after a fashion that was a revelation to De Crussenay. One arm was doubled back under her head, and the other, stretched up towards the boy astride her body, was bare to the elbow where the loose sleeve had fallen back.

"Kiss me, Monsieur Gaspard," said she, shaking the hair from her face and pushing up her lips. But when the little lad, who was no anchorite, leaned forward to the pursed mouth her hand would thrust him back to his seat again, shaking and fondling him till he shouted in his merriment.

Mademoiselle Suzanne Has a Reminiscence

Looking backward across her shoulder, my lady caught a look in De Crussenay's face which told her that she had better have left the door unopened, and in her vexation the latch slipped from her hand with a rasp.

At the sound Mademoiselle Suzanne started, and setting Gaspard on the floor, she sat up, with all the laughter gone from her face.

"For how long, Madame, has it been your pleasure to make me a spectacle for Monsieur de Crussenay's amusement?" she said, sharply. "And what would Jeanne de Bernauld have said if Suzanne Lavardère had turned her chamber into a jest for a man? A fine lesson you would have read me."

For answer my lady pulled the door behind her, and De Crussenay heard the bolt shot in the socket. What passed behind it he could guess, for when next it opened it was to show that the nail of Mademoiselle's anger had driven out the nail of her story of the Paris mob, and that peace was made between the two.

As they supped, the crowd in the square thickened, but with the greater numbers there came a silence rather than an added uproar. As this sullenness grew apparent, Mademoiselle nodded her head significantly. Paris had made her wise, and out of her wisdom she spoke.

"The beast is getting dangerous," said she. "While it growls it is safe, but let it fall to thinking and the time has come to look to one's self. Let a spark blow upon them and we shall see something to-night. Ha! Master Landlord, am I right?"

A Man of His Age

"Mademoiselle," said Jean Caron, with a bow, "where there are men there are fools, and where there are fools not even a wise man can foretell an hour ahead. But, Madame and Mademoiselle, there need be no fear, for both sides have thirsts to slake, and one of my trade is of no party save that of a purse and a dry throat."

"How?" cried De Crussenay. "Have we lighted by chance on a rebel, or, what is little better, a fellow who shifts his loyalty with every stoup of liquor? Thou hadst best know there is but one Queen of Navarre, and I counsel thee—"

Jean Caron closed the door softly.

"It is true, Monsieur," said he, "there is but one Queen, but what with France on one side and Spain on the other, it is well not to say so over-loudly, lest one have no tongue left to say it a second time, and our Queen lose a subject. See you those beyond there, Monsieur?" and the little man swept the square with a gesture. "Four-fifths there are for France, or Spain, or their own gain, let it come by what dirty road it may, and care not whether the one Queen be Jeanne or Catherine if they are but filled with meat and drink, and be given two coins to jingle. Among such-like scum what chance for life would a man have who deals in flagons and pint-pots an' he ran counter to them? Just as much as a rat in a pit full of terrier curs, and not a whit more. I would serve neither the Queen's cause nor my own throat—there is but one of each, and I have a love for them both—by shouting 'God save Navarre!' over-loudly."

"What of the barracks yonder?" said De Crus-

Mademoiselle Suzanne Has a Reminiscence

senay. "Has the Queen of Navarre no soldiers to teach these rogues their place, and bid them either keep civil tongues in their heads or get themselves whence they came, or anywhere out of Tarbes?"

"Soldiers!" cried Jean Caron, contemptuously. "Never a soldier. There are some half-dozen of a watch, stout enough with a man in his cups, but who would no more look crooked at the mob yonder than put their naked hands in the fire. As for an outburst, Mademoiselle is perhaps right. France has her spies and stirrers-up of sedition strewn thickly through this Little Kingdom, and it might please them to try the temper of— See, Monsieur, by the Lord who made us, they are at it in earnest."

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CHAPTER X

HOW DE CRUSSEY FACING THE CITY OF TARRES

THE crowd had separated into two distinct groups, of which much the larger was collected at the farther side of the square. Both were composed, for the most part, of peasants, with a sprinkling of the townspeople with their womenfolk and children drawn by curiosity, but there was one distinct difference, and De Crussenay had enough of the soldier's instinct in him to notice it on the instant. In the one there was an element of preparation and forethought, in the other none, and whereas the smaller crowd carried but bare fists, or at best cudgels or rude tools, the larger had a leavening of armed men scattered through the smocks and blouses. These were not all soldiers, but mostly fellows who bore their weapons awkwardly, carrying their scabbardless swords, or handling their half-pikes, with an air of pride and respect that told of a novel experience.

That there had not already been a collision was in part because the attention of the larger crowd was drawn elsewhere.

Perched on the very sill of the watch-house window, to the bars of which he clung with one hand, while with the other he gave force to his harangue,

How De Crussenay Faced the City of Tarbes

was a man in a garb something better than the common. If faded and worn, it had, at least, been of richer material than was to be found in the crowd at his feet, and, in addition, its cut smacked of the city. There were touches of lace, too, about his wrists and throat, and a dash of color in the feathers in his bonnet, which spoke the man given to ruffling it on a larger stage than that of an obscure provincial capital. Paris has such fellows by the score: broken adventurers of the tongue, whose glib advocacy is to be hired for something more than a stoup of wine, and to whom sedition and disaffection are but the road to a full stomach.

No sooner did the fellow plunge into his address than Mademoiselle Suzanne was at the open window, with De Crussenay leaning out by her side and looking with all his eyes like a child at his first play.

"Ha! an *agent provocateur*," said Jean Caron, craning his neck behind him. "A beast that fattens himself by feeding the passions of others. I'll wager he is telling more lies in a minute than there are months in the year. I know their sort. There was one here a month ago who swore the Queen was no better than any one of Catherine's dames of honor, and all the world knows he could go no lower than that for a slur."

"Thou hadst better keep a civil tongue when thou speakest of the Queen of France and her ladies, Master Innkeeper!" said Mademoiselle, sharply. "If one told such lies as that in Paris, he would hang for it."

"If that be so, and all be true one hears," answered

A Man of His Age

Jean Caron, coolly, "Paris would have more in air than on earth."

"Nay, but," said De Crussenay, "yonder fellow had best keep a civil tongue in his head when he speaks of Queen Jeanne. If he talks such a foulness as that, there is at least one in Tarbes will give him the lie, and push the gift home with his sword's point."

"Then best close the window, Monsieur, and hear nothing," said Mademoiselle, with a laugh, "and so earn an easy conscience by a deaf ear. Why, my poor boy, these fellows would swallow you down as easily as I a lark, and with little more heed for your bones. Nay, close the window, I say again, and run no risks for a chance word."

"Boy or man," answered De Crussenay, with a face as red as the knot of ribbon in Mademoiselle's hair, "I think I would stick in some of their throats."

"By your leave," said Jean, "if that prating parrot's orders are to rouse Tarbes, he will need a stronger goad than common lies to stir the swine."

"Swine!" cried Mademoiselle; "thine own town-folk, Master Innkeeper!"

"Nay, Mademoiselle, but, by your leave again, Catholic scum of France and Spain, and not true bears of Béarn and Navarre. See, Monsieur, was I not right? They need a stronger lash than words, these dross, and, by my faith, he's going to give it them."

Through the noise of the raspings of wooden shoes on the cobble pavement as the crowd shifted in its jostling curiosity, the rustle of clothing, and the sibilance of many whispers, broken words had come at

How De Crussenay Faced the City of Tarbes

intervals. Between these were silences, but silences full of the power of language, and, for all their dumbness, linking phrase to phrase with the skill of rhetoric.

To piece together, "The greatness of France," "Eldest son of the Church," "Philip of Spain, Emperor of Germany," "Navarre, Béarn," "Our Holy Father the Pope," "Anathema and excommunication," "The fold of the Church," and a score more such, was simple enough, and had he of the faded doublet contented himself with alternate mouthfuls of blessings and cursings small harm had been done. Unwilling to provoke a riot, and so, perhaps, play the enemy's game, De Crussenay would, for all Made-moiselle's gibes, have let the broken words pass unchallenged because of their uncertainty. So far as the mob went they were so much good breath badly wasted. The steel-caps cheered and waved their swords as they had been paid to do; those with blades and pikes or without, gaped and whispered and made no move. If Tarbes was to commit itself it would be for sharper goading than mere words.

As Jean Caron spoke the spy in the faded doublet changed his tactics. Leaping to the ground, he snatched a hand-axe from a peasant on the inner fringe of the crowd; then swinging himself up on a bench that stood by the door of the watch-house, he hacked viciously at the arms of Navarre and the cipher of Jeanne d'Albret carved above the entrance.

"A blow for France!" cried he, striking vigorously as a man does when he has a majority at his back. "A blow for the Emperor Philip of Spain! A blow

A Man of His Age

for the old religion! A blow for the true faith! Up Rome and down Navarre, up Rome and down with heresy!" and with every sentence the wood and plaster flew in splinters.

At the first stroke of the axe De Crussenay gave a roar of anger.

"Long live Navarre!" he shouted at the full pitch of his voice, and leaning his longest stretch out of the window. "Long live Navarre!" then drew back into the chamber with so much haste and such scant ceremony that while a spur ripped Mademoiselle's skirt from hem to waist, a thrust of his shoulder sent Jean Caron sprawling. Across the room he ran, tugging at his sword as he went, and as he clattered along the corridor and down the stairs they could hear him shouting, "Up with Navarre, and down with Spain!" at every stride.

"Peste!" said Jean Caron, picking himself up; "what right has he, or any man, to embroil 'The Crown' in such a quarrel? There will be a fine breaking of glass presently, and who will pay me my loss, I would like to know?"

"Peste!" said Mademoiselle, in her turn; "could he not make an end of himself without making an end of my poor clothing? Half-grown boys are common enough, but who is to get a Paris skirt in such God-forsaken wilds as these?"

In his rush for the entrance De Crussenay paused long enough to fling open the door of the common room and to shout, "To me, De Bernauld's men and men of Navarre, to me, I say! Long live Queen Jeanne, and down with Spain!" Then, without wait-

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How De Crussenay Faced the City of Tarbes

ing to see who followed, he whipped out into the square, still shouting.

By evil hap there were at the time but four of our men in the room, and these, having supped and being as nothing in numbers to the fellows outside, were prudently keeping themselves clear of the quarrel at the inner end of the room. At De Crussenay's call they looked at one another once or twice, for, after all, a man has but one life, and the risking of it for the Lord knows what is worth a second thought; and then followed him readily enough.

But so far as lending aid to the lad was concerned they might as well have stayed in peace over their wine. He was on the outer fringe of the crowd at the farther side of the square before they were fairly on their feet groping for their laid-by arms, and once there, the affair went to the end in a flash.

At the cry of "Up Navarre, and down Spain!" the fellow on the bench had ceased plying his axe, but when he saw the solitary figure flying across the open space, and how the crowd behind hung back unmoved, he returned to his work of demolition, saying, "See to the fool there, some of you," with a contempt that would have wakened afresh the lad's fury had he but noted it.

Had De Crussenay had to do with trained soldiers he would have been safe enough, for though they would, with great promptitude, have stifled the attack, the very shame of the disparity of numbers would have held him harmless; but with such a crowd as that into which he plunged it was a different affair.

A Man of His Age

There is no beast more bloodthirsty than your amateur soldier, to whom the luxury of shedding blood comes not every day of the week. To return to his dunghill in the wilds with an unwiped pike, and boast how he had thrust through a man in the square of Tarbes was to be dubbed hero to his children's children. Add that there was no risk in the slaying, and the luxury of the lust trebled, though when it came to the glorying there would be no need to tell that a dozen others had their points in the same corpse.

It would, therefore, have gone ill with De Crussenay—how ill he had already read in the eyes of those about him—had not La Hake, the man of Auch, and some three or four of his fellows, sprung whence the lad knew not, ranged themselves alongside him.

"Bravo, Monsieur de Crussenay!" cried La Hake, whipping his sword out as he spoke. "Like father like son. Keep your distance, swine. Ha! Keep your distance, I say," as a fellow lowered his pike for a thrust. "What! thou wilt not? Take it, then," and with a sweep of his sword he shored the weapon short by the head. "'Twill be thy wrist next time, rascal, or thy fool-head if thou showest not greater caution. And you, sir, fling down that axe and think shame to have spoiled so much good handicraft work for a drunken frolic."

By this time my fellows were in the open with—now that the fight was stayed—the mob by the inn door at their heels, clamoring and howling like a kennel of newly unleashed dogs.

"Now, Monsieur de Crussenay," said La Hake, "to

How De Crussenay Faced the City of Tarbes

the man of courage add the man of wit. Hold back those yelping hounds lest to-day they start all France a-hunting with Navarre for quarry. To us, De Bernauld's men, to us! How many are we? Eight? And a mob to right and left. Enough, perhaps, though another dozen had brought a speedier end. Hark you, rascals all, whether of France or Navarre, there'll be hangings over this affair if it be not hushed up. You, Monsieur, with the notched hatchet, stand in danger of a cool noose in the quiet of the morning. A stretch of legs, my friend, may save a stretch of neck. Go for thy life's sake, and go quickly."

"Nay, but," cried De Crussenay, "the rogue must not slip away so easily. What? Can a man hew down the Queen's arms in the Queen's own province and take not so much as a scratch for his villany?"

"Faith, Monsieur, and he can, if he be a wise man and have wise men to deal with," answered La Hake. "Better a free rogue than a kingdom ablaze. Besides," and he raised his voice, "the time has not yet come. There are things to be done first which allow no delay. I know whereof I speak. Now fellows, disperse, disperse!"

If your peasant heats slowly, even to his own quarrel, he cools quickly to that of another man. The sight of eight blades where there had been but one was an appeal to peace that touched the mob where it could most easily be moved. As La Hake spoke they had leisure to think, and where there is a risk to be run, thinking, to a man of the field, means leisure to repent. To be laid on one's own dunghill with a hole in the ribs, and go down to children's children as

A Man of His Age

the man who died for he knew not what in the square of Tarbes was to be a hero at an over-high price. The disappearance through the crowd of the man in the faded finery lent a spur to the zeal for peace, and by every corner of the square there was a trickling which presently grew into a stream.

"Monsieur," said La Hake, as he thrust his sword into its scabbard with a force that made it ring, and so aided the swiftness of the current, "we have conquered in the one ten minutes both France and Navarre, and have compelled a peace by force of arms, which is more than Tavannes or Montluc, Coligny or Condé, has accomplished."

"Ay," said De Crussenay, with his sword still naked in his hand, "that is well enough, but it wounds me to think that after all his bombast yon fellow escaped with a whole skin."

"A word in your ear," said La Hake. "He is not the only one who within the last fifteen minutes has looked death in the whites of the eyes."

"You do well to remind me," cried De Crussenay, sheathing his sword and holding out his hand. "But for your aid there would be an end of the De Crussenays once and for all."

"Tut," said La Hake, with a laugh, and looking up at the window where sat Mademoiselle Suzanne, "the cause had need of you. Credit the cause, Monsieur, and not me."

"Ay," cried Mademoiselle, who caught the words, "credit whom or what you will, but not Monsieur La Hake."

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CHAPTER XI

THE ROADS OF BIGORRE AND THE WAYS OF PARIS NEED MENDING

THAT night there must have been more than one council held in Tarbes, if not within the walls of "The Crown" itself.

Of what passed between La Hake and the man of the soiled finery there is no record, and I leave guesses aside, though doubtless they had their explanations. He who lists may form his own judgment.

The conference of which one knows something assuredly was held in Jeanne's chamber, once the door to the inner room was fast shut on Mademoiselle Suzanne : and there were present at it De Crussenay and old Roger. It is mentioned at all, not for the importance of its deliberation—for, indeed, there seems to have been but little else than some desultory talk—but because of the inference which later on was drawn from it in spite of my lady's first words.

"Sit down near me," said she to De Crussenay, "and thou, Roger, modulate that hoarse voice of thine. There is no need my neighbor should let her fancy riot, or guess how small my faith is."

"In what has she offended, Madame?" answered

A Man of His Age

De Crussenay, seating himself, while Roger, bolt upright as a pike, stood behind his *Sieur's* chair.

"Offended?" said my lady, sharply; "that is too large a word. Who spoke of offence? I said faith. She has seen overmuch of Paris, and has caught too many of the ways of Paris to please me."

"The more misfortune hers," replied De Crussenay, "that she has not a Carmeuse and a Chatillon at her back; but I fail to see it is a fault."

"You fail to see aught but a pretty face," cried my lady. "First it was Blaise, now it is you." Then her eyes flashed up at Roger, "You, too, are bewitched, perchance?"

For answer Roger spread out an open hand, broad in its sinewy strength for all its leanness, and as hard as a leather glove.

"No man with eyes can deny her winsomeness," he said; "but if she came between the *Sieur* and good I would crush her like an egg." And as he spoke he folded in his bony fingers on the tough palm and shook his clinched fist slowly.

"By the Lord," said De Crussenay, swinging round in his chair, "if thou so much as liftest a finger—"

"Not I, for all that she has come between us," said Roger. "Let it pass that I am last who was once first, and she first who came from the Lord knows where. Only—"

"Only let us rather talk of to-morrow," broke in my lady. "Now that yon fellow who squired *Made-moiselle Lavardère* to Orleans, with so much plain satisfaction to them both, is back to his duty, there is no need for us to quit the straight line to *Bernauld*.

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The Roads of Bigorre

This Parisian of Artois will be guarded to her liking, and we can end our journey by two easy stages in place of two long ones."

"I grieve, Madame," answered De Crussenay, with less sorrow in his voice than in his words, "that either Mademoiselle must take the risks of the road or else the old promise must hold. Monsieur La Hake, who came so opportunely to my aid, was only in Tarbes, as he told me, for a bare hour, and was detained beyond his time by the simmering of the outbreak. He has been on the road this hour past, with his two fellows hard after him. The two who rode into Tarbes with Mademoiselle are all she has to ride out with her. If they were too few when the risks of the road were but shadows, are they too many, or enough even, when the realities have put on flesh and blood after the fashion of to-day?"

"'Tis a strange thing to me," said my lady, petulant in her disappointment, "that the courage which could laugh at the wrath of a famished mob should fail at the shadow of it knows not what."

"Why, Madame," answered Roger, "there you have it. For myself, I had rather face six wolves in the open than one cat in the dark. And, after all, what is it? By this time to-morrow your charge is ended."

"No charge of mine," said my lady, sharply, "or, at least, none of my seeking and none of my keeping. But since you both will have it so, let the plan hold. Be so good as to send me Nannette. The day will be a long one, and she has as much need of rest as I." And with something more than a touch of temper my lady broke up the council.

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The next day showed no softening of address either to De Crussenay or Mademoiselle Suzanne, though, to give the latter her due, she paid scant heed to my lady's mood.

Not so De Crussenay. Since Charlotte de Laval had died, and until Mademoiselle came into his life at Orleans, my lady and Coligny had owned him body and spirit; and even now, for all his new-found devotion, the old bonds bound him fast.

Half a dozen times in the first hour from Tarbes he was backward and forward between my lady and the other, earning thanks from neither. Ride that day with Mademoiselle my lady would not, but held fast by the side of the safe-footed, lumbering beast that carried Nannette and little Gaspard. Spur on to the level of my lady Mademoiselle would not, and between the two De Crussenay swung like a pendulum, and was exceedingly ill at his ease. Such antagonisms going so far and no further, neither ripening nor falling into frank forgottenness, puzzle a man's comprehension, and are but one of those ways of women that drive him to despair.

Had there been two men in a like case, they had ridden side by side till sundown, talking with the fullest cordiality of the swaying of parties, vintages, arms, or what not, and then have politely cut one another's throats at the first halting-place. If women had other weapons to fight with beyond their tongues, it may be there would be a larger toleration. But the itch of the poisoned prick keeps the strife always upon edge.

Therefore, rein back my lady would not, and when

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De Crussenay, with all a man's courage, and even more than a man's common folly, begged Mademoiselle to ride on, he met with a curt reply.

"I have denied myself to overmanly, Monsieur de Crussenay, to thrust myself on the jealous temper of a provincial dame. Ride on thou, if thou hast a liking for sour moods."

Whereupon the lad, out of his loyalty to the one and his desire for the other, rode midway, and so, after the fashion of trimmers, pleased neither.

At Chernex, a mere handful of poor houses, and cursed with an inn where there was but one thing worse than the eating, and that was the drinking, they halted to dine.

Some three leagues beyond and to the left lay Mademoiselle's destination; thence by a circuit of four leagues to the right was Arcizac, where, quit of her charge, my lady promised herself to sleep in peace. For such a journey in an afternoon, encumbered as they were, an early start was needful if they would not have Master Gaspard howling himself hoarse for want of his rest.

But it was one thing to bid the host of the "Red Dragon" make haste and another to spur him on. When there is a party of ten or a dozen to serve, and a man is host, cook, scullion, and drawer of wine in one, there is but small progress in any of the score of things to be done. Nor did the whims of Mademoiselle aid him much. Hitherto the journey had been to her no more than a jest, and the petty trials and deprivations things for laughter. Now, of a sudden, she was fastidious.

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For haste's sake my lady would have made shift with eggs and milk, but Mademoiselle was as nice as at a Paris banquet, and nothing less than a chicken on the spit would content her. That caught and slain, needs must that the plucking be set aside while wine was brought her. Whereupon she made a wry face, and sent the host packing to seek something better. This, being called by a different name, for all that it came from the same vat, contented her, and so the cellarer became once more scullion and cook.

All this time my lady sat apart, fuming, but too proud to seek to soften matters, though the ones to pay the ultimate cost of the discomfort would be Gaspard and herself. Roger would have had De Crussenay interfere, but within these last days the lad had learned the beginnings of wisdom, and shook his head.

"They are at odds, these two," said he, "but let a man seek to come between them, and they will each rend him with a most admirable accord; a woman's gust of temper is like a mountain storm, and a man can do no better than lie snug till the passion of it blows over."

"But," persisted Roger, "these way-side roads are a heart-break after last night's rain, and no beast can travel them faster than a walk. 'Twill be gone sundown before we see Arcizac, and with two women and a babe in charge it's ill riding an unknown road in the dark."

De Crussenay looked from one to the other, and again shook his head. The boy, who had fallen asleep, had been laid snugly aside, and my lady sat

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by him in the corner with her face set and hard. Mademoiselle had gone without, and through the window he could see her in the sunshine flicking the dust from her tumbled skirts. Her face was hidden, but the viciously sharp ring of the switch on the stretched cloth needed no translation.

"Though we ride till cockcrow," he said, "things must be as they are unless thou wouldst have me make them yet worse."

So for half an hour they sat in silence, until the clatter of the tin dishes on the wooden table brought a promise of relief to more than hunger.

It was a dull enough meal, and not even the eccentricities of the "Red Dragon's" cooking could shake its gravity. In vain De Crussenay drew a laughing comparison between the service of Carmeuse and that of my host of many offices.

My lady had no other comment to make out of her vexation and cold wrath, but that amid so many discomforts a boorish entertainment more or less was a small matter.

"Ay," struck in Mademoiselle, "and 'tis true, is it not, that the provinces, whether it be the Orléannais or Bigorre, while they vary, are not so very different, after all? Besides," she added, turning to De Crussenay, with a laugh infinitely vexing, "it is well you should grow early accustomed to Navarre fare. You and I are in the one boat, and, as beggars, cannot be choosers."

Why she should have so sought to drive my lady into an outburst of passion has always been to me a thing of doubt and question. It might have been

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simple malice, and a retaliation for the suspicion and thinly hidden contempt in which Jeanne held her ; or—and for the most part I inclined to this—she thought to goad my lady into the saying of something, anything, no matter what, which would serve as a justification to her own conscience for the evil turn she had planned. Not even Cain would have slain Abel had he not first cozened himself with a lie. Whatever the purpose was it received no comfort from my lady, who kept word and voice in careful subjection.

“There are many in Navarre who fare worse,” said she, rising, “and now, Mademoiselle, our way is longer than yours, and already the little lad will lose his rest.”

But even then they were not done with delays. One of Mademoiselle's remaining men-at-arms was missing, and a further twenty precious minutes were lost before he was found in the straw of the loft, three-parts drunk. Wait for him to grow sober again De Crussenay would not.

“No fear,” said he, “but the fellow will smell out the road to his pay. Though,” he added to Roger, “how he lost his head over the thing they call wine at the ‘Red Dragon’ is past my understanding.”

“He drank like one of Jean Caron's wine-casks at Tarbes, and never so much as ruffled a hair in his beard,” answered Roger. “There it was stout wine of Guienne, here it is the washings of a vinegar-tub. Had he fallen ill of a stomach-ache it had been rational enough, but to go drunk !”

“He'll be the sooner in his wits again,” said De Crussenay. “And now to the road and push on. It is a clear road, Master Host, to Vatan ?”

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"To Vatan, your nobility?" answered the innkeeper, who ranked De Crussenay to match his liberal fee. "I have the country-side at my finger-ends, as becomes my trade, but of a Vatan I know naught. It is a village perchance, a town, a château even? If it be any of the three and within ten leagues it must needs have been new christened."

"Now here's a fault in the hunt," cried De Crussenay; "a pretty business for Madame if we had to lie here all night, and all for want of a little common knowledge. I made sure this fellow could have put his hand on the place."

"Perhaps," said my lady, looking straight at De Crussenay, "Mademoiselle Lavardère can waken his memory with some hint of its whereabouts. She can scarce have set out from Paris to ride to no-man's-land."

As she was but five paces away Mademoiselle Suzanne heard every word, but she sat her beast with no more motion than an image hath until De Crussenay, turning, put his hand upon its neck, when she said:

"Doubtless Vatan is less splendid than Carmeuse, and so fits the misfortunes of a broken gentlewoman. That our friend yonder is ignorant goes for little. The Château de Bernauld may well be known a score of miles round, but those I go to drink but little wine. Its whereabouts is in the St. Aignan direction. Once there—"

"St. Aignan direction? That is another thing," cried the innkeeper. "St. Aignan is some four leagues to the east. Ride straight through the wood for a

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short league, then, where the road forks go to the left, skirting a round hill with a fringe of pines on the top, and you will find Le Pallet. A poor place, Monseigneur, with a cabaret the most abominable in all Navarre—a poor place, even in a country of poor places. Avoid it, Monseigneur, avoid it as you would the plague, for 'tis about as dangerous. At Le Pallet any one will tell you the road to St. Aignan, but it lies to the left, and by way of a pine-wood a half league through and no less in breadth."

"And the travelling?" said Roger. "Hard roads, eh?"

"Um, hard roads for the beasts," answered the innkeeper, rubbing the thick brush of hair on his skull in a kind of perplexity. "For a hill country, the travelling's good enough, though as to speed I had as soon walk as ride."

When the fellow spoke Mademoiselle had walked her horse across the sodden yard towards the stable, and as she reined her beast round she cried:

"We can prove the roads for ourselves. The pith of it is this, and is the thing to be remembered: first through the woods, then to the left by way of Le Pallet, and after that by a pine-wood, still to the left. Let there be no forgetting. As for yon drunken rascal," and she pointed to the man-at-arms blinking in a corner in the sunlight where Roger had flung him with more rage than ceremony, "he can ride after when his wits are clear, or bide here as he lists. Set on, Monsieur de Crussenay, I am as eager for the end of the day as you or any one."

Once fairly on the road Roger's fears were more

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than justified. Master Red Dragon's powers of walking would not have been overtaxed keeping pace with the horses. At best the track was innocent of a made foundation and through the winter it had been cut and hacked by hoofs and rutted by wheels, so that no ploughed field was furrowed half so deep. This, even the scanty traffic in the heat of summer had powdered into dust, which, in turn, the night's downpour had so soaked that it was no better than a quag a full foot deep.

So long as there was an open space at either hand progress was possible, though the frequent breaks of brush and the thick-strewn bowlders said nay to any hope of speed; but when fairly into the wood there came a change for the worse.

Here, untouched by the sun, under the drip of the trees, and with sloping banks draining the moisture in from either side, the road seemed little better than a bottomless morass, and a slow foot's pace was the utmost speed to which, for all my lady's impatience, the beasts could be driven. Even when clear of the wood there was but small improvement. Down from the round-topped hill had swept the deluge of the night, seaming the path into such slippery clefts and chasms that there was no safety except in caution.

They were a weary party enough when they straggled into the hamlet of Le Pallet. All hope of making Arcizac, even by long past sun-down, was gone, and had the wretched auberge set in the centre of the handful of poor cottages smelled less villanously, my lady would gladly have made the best of a bad business, and halted for the night. But three min-

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utes inside its doors told their own tale. For all that it was July, the walls reeked with moisture, and the air was heavy with the smell of rotting wood and mouldering hangings uncleaned from the first day they had been set up.

"My faith, but your Navarre is charming!" said Mademoiselle, who had followed Jeanne into the dingy passage. "Its mobs, its roads, and its inns are a pattern to all France, though when it comes to killing I would back the will and the venom of the two latter rather than the first. Of the three the inn is the surest and most swift! Your mob, Monsieur de Crussenay, is an angel of mercy in comparison! Rather than bide here I would ride alone to Vatan, night or no night"; and she turned and whipped out to the miry road again.

"For all her malice, she is right," said my lady. "There is nothing for it but to ride on to St. Aignan, unless we can fall in with a decent house on the way."

"For the Lord's sake, Madame," answered De Crussenay, "get out into the air again. The place reeks like a vault. Come, Master Landlord, some wine for my fellows yonder, and, as they drink it, a word or two with you. How far to St. Aignan?"

"Three leagues."

"Three leagues, man! What foolery is this? Why, they told us three leagues two hours back."

"Three full leagues," persisted the innkeeper; "and a worse road than that you've come by."

"Ah! I smell the trick," said De Crussenay, "but, fellow, thou'lt win no guests by thy lies. See here," and he drew a crown from his pocket. "Canst thou

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tell the truth for pay? Bide here we would not, though it was black night and twenty leagues to St. Aignan, thou understandest? Here then," and he threw the coin on the table. "Now, how many leagues to St. Aignan?"

"Three," answered the other, with a grin, as he picked up the coin. "Not all the crowns in Navarre will make three leagues less than three leagues, and mayhap you will believe the truth now that it has cost you something."

"Then it's saddle and spur," said De Crussenay, rising. "There's for thy wine, friend, and I would to the Lord thy house had been even one degree more wholesome than a graveyard. Stay! Is there a roof, good or bad, between us and St. Aignan, and which way lies the road?"

"The road lies there," answered the landlord, pointing between the huts to a break in the face of the pine-wood lying below the village, "and you'll find more use for saddle than spur, I'm thinking. As to the roof," and he looked from Jeanne to Mademoiselle as he spoke, "if one does not fear solitude, there is always 'The Black Cat.'"

"Solitude!" answered Mademoiselle Suzanne, with an edge of bitterness in her voice. "How could such a merry party as ours be solitary!"

"'The Black Cat'?" said De Crussenay as he mounted. "What and where is the beast?"

"Eight rooms and a roof calling itself an inn," replied the other; "and its whereabouts is midway through the wood yonder."

"Come, things might be worse," cried De Crus-

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senay, "and if needs must the black cat will have her fill of mice for supper to-night. Eight rooms and a roof! Why, Madame, it's a palace, and if the cat hath claws we are men enough, I think, to clip them."

"Mice and men all in a breath," said Jeanne, with a laugh that told how great was her relief. "The black cat must have her witch in the cellar."

"Supper and sound wine, Madame," answered De Crussenay as they rode on, "will turn us from one to the other, and that will be witchcraft enough for us."

"The wineshop for a handful of poverty-ridden woodmen is not like to give us much of one or the other," said Roger, who rode at his Sieur's heels, "but it will at least be a shelter for Madame, and to starve for a night will do the rest of us no harm."

The sun was well behind the tops of the nearest trees when they turned into the wood, and thence on it darkened rapidly. The vileness of the path admirably warranted the abuse lavished upon it, and eager as they were to push on, their impatience was of no service as a spur. To plod at a walk was to go at top speed. Twice Roger, who had been sent on ahead, called a halt where the road had been washed into a wreckage of slime-coated stones, the picking of a way through which caused vexatious delays. Once a newly fallen tree lost a precious half hour while they fumbled their way round the tangle of battered branches, and by the time they were on the march again night was overhead, and the stars showing as the sky purpled.

With the closing in of the darkness a silence fell upon them—a silence that seemed the heavier for

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the intense black of the pines on either hand. They rode, as it were, between walls of midnight, and, soldiers though they were for the most part, there was not one but drew a breath of relief at the sight of a single point of light woven low down into the web of the gloom.

"At last!" cried De Crussenay, as the loom of a low, flat-roofed house showed through the shadows. "Madame and Mademoiselle, the troubles of the road are over. You may well be weary to-night, but by this time to-morrow you will be laughing at our misadventures. Hulloo, there! Black Cat, open, and quickly. Down with thee, Roger, and hammer at the door. Hulloo, within there, I say!"

From behind the fast-closed shutters came the rasping sound of a bench pushed back over a sanded floor, the tramp of feet, and the undoing of bolts and bars.

"Make haste, for the Lord's sake!" cried Roger, beating on the panels with his sword-hilt, as a voice called out, "Who's there?" "Madame de Bernauld and the Sieur de Crussenay have need of lodging. Make more speed with your fingers, friend."

As he spoke the door swung outward, and in its framework was a man holding a lantern above his head.

It was La Hake.

CHAPTER XII

THE BLACK CAT CATCHES MICE

"SOFTLY," said the man of the peaked beard and russet brown suit, shading his eyes with his left hand as he spoke. "'Tis easier to say honest than be honest in these times. Ha! it is thou, my old fire-eater of Rouen. That is another matter. Within there, some of you, bring lights, and quickly. Welcome, Monsieur de Crussenay, and welcome, Madame; even the roof of the 'Cat's' cellars is better than the open sky on a black night like this. Take thou this, my friend," and he thrust the lamp into Roger's hand. "Now, Madame, with your permission. So, the ground feels pleasant under the feet after so many hours of the saddle as must have been yours, and over such wearisome roads. Now, Mademoiselle; nay, Monsieur de Crussenay is beforehand with me. Then, dame, it is thy turn. Give me thy charge. Nay, nay, he is as safe here on my left arm as in a cradle. Now, lean thou on the right. Heavier, dame, heavier. What! thou art not so free in the joints as once upon a time? My faith, but that's a disease that catches us all sooner or later. So. Here is the boy again, and I'll wager he hath not so much as opened an eye. Hulloo, within there, rascals! Bring in these ladies, and then

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take your company elsewhere, and see to supper, while some of you look to their horses. These honest fellows will have enough to do to litter down their own."

"How, Monsieur," said De Crussenay, the first moment there was room to slip in a word. "Have you, perchance, turned innkeeper? Where are the wenches of the place that you so see to our comfort?"

"Faith, 'twould be but a new trade added to many old," said La Hake, carelessly. "As for the innsfolk, they are packed away in their own cellar. They pelted me with over-many questions, and turned saucy when it was not convenient to answer. A man on the Queen's business must, as you know, learn to keep a quiet tongue. There were but three of the rascals, so I triced them out of the road and turned on my fellows as cooks and what not. Old soldiers can handle anything from a spit to a musketoon, and whether they steal, cook, or fight the best, is a thing uncertain. Happily the larder is full, and if the game is out of its best season we will neither question nor complain for our stomach's sake."

Entering the inn De Crussenay found Jeanne in a long, narrow, unceiled room, dimly lit by two or three lamps. The small, square windows were high placed, and deep set in the thick wall. Beneath them, except where broken by two doorways, a stout bench, notched and hacked by generations of idlers, ran round the entire of three sides of the room, the fourth being mainly occupied by a huge fireplace built out beyond the line of the wall. Empty but for its pair of iron dogs, its great depth yawned like a cavern in the

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feeble light. Movables were few. Across the breadth of the room were drawn three narrow tables with stools at either end and benches, which could be shifted at will, running down their length. Half a dozen sconces and a few rings for flambeaux set at intervals along the walls completed the furnishing.

At the door La Hake paused, and, with a gesture of apology, looked round the room.

"'Tis better than the open sky, as I say, Madame; and when that's said, all's said, though that we are in sole possession for the night is also something. The 'Cat' has its share of rough guests at times, and, if I read aright the records of the floor stains, more has been spilled here than good wine."

"But where, Monsieur, is the landlord, that we may give our orders?" said my lady.

"That, Madame, I have already explained to Monsieur de Crussenay," answered La Hake. "When a man of his sort is at once useless and impertinent, there is but one thing to be done with him. He wearied me with his chatter, so I have given him a night's repose elsewhere. Oh! have no fear, Madame, we will pay him well between us, and in the morning he will be grateful for the enforced rest. For a summer night a cool cellar is pleasant enough, and as my rascals made certain to secure an ample number of flagons there is no need to disturb him. If our good friend there will lay young master in this corner, she can see to the arranging of your rooms. The passage opens through the door yonder."

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by the wall, La Hake spread it, with a double fold underneath, in the angle of the floor near the great fireplace.

"Now, with this flap over him," he went on, "his lordship will sleep till after supper as snugly as in his cradle. Let him rest, Madame, until you have eaten and are less wearied. Happily there is no hunger in sleep."

"Surely, Monsieur," said my lady, as Nannette left the room in company with one of La Hake's men-at-arms, "you must have sons of your own, you deal so gently with children."

For a moment he gave no answer, but with his hand upon the door-post he turned. "I take the world as the world takes me, rough to the rough and smooth to the smooth," he said, "and except upon occasions, Madame, and through plain necessity, I would be loath indeed to hurt a child. But we must see to supper."

As the door shut behind him Jeanne turned to Mademoiselle Suzanne, who, with De Crussenay sat by the table next to the great fireplace.

"It is not my way to force confidences," said she, "nor am I over-curious; yet, if it is no secret, who is this gentleman who seems at once so blunt, so courteous, so masterful, and so gentle?"

"Like you, Madame," answered Mademoiselle, "I also am not curious. Those who sent me south from Paris, sent Monsieur La Hake to set us on our way. He amused me on the road, or at least," with a glance at De Crussenay, "until we reached Orleans. Beyond what I tell you, and his mission, I know no more of him than you do."

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"Those who chose him," said my lady, "must needs have had great confidence in—"

"In me, and my discretion, Madame," broke in Mademoiselle, with a laugh and a bow from where she sat; "for, after all, these things—we understand each other, I think—lie rather with the woman than the man." Then she swung round to De Crussenay, seated beside and half behind her—"You think so, Monsieur, do you not?"

"Eh? Ah—upon my word," he stammered, taken all aback. "I know but little of these things, yet surely the man counts for something."

"Oh!" and Mademoiselle Suzanne looked him in the eyes and down and up, "you think so? But, as you say, you know little of these things. Madame," and she turned and looked at my lady over her shoulder with a half-veiled impertinence—"Madame knows better, and will bear me out. If we are but set upon it, the man is—that!" and she rubbed one palm over the other, blowing on them as she did so, as if scattering dust.

A sharp retort was on Jeanne's lips, but the flinging open of the door stifled it, and La Hake entered, followed by some three or four of his men and ours carrying drinking vessels, plates, dishes, and such-like.

"With your permission, Madame," said he, with a bow, "we shall lay for you, Mademoiselle, and Monsieur de Crussenay at this table," and he pointed to the one nearest to the open fireplace, and most remote from the door by which he had come in. "I and some of my fellows—again with your permission

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—will sup at these others. The kitchen yonder is a thought overcrowded.”

“But, Monsieur,” replied my lady, “will our host not do us the honor of supping—”

“Nay, Madame,” he said, with a laugh and a profound reverence. “It would be unseemly for a poor innkeeper to eat of the same salt as Madame de Bernauld. And,” he added, going nearer and dropping his voice as he spoke, “my rascals are somewhat rough at times. They will be the quieter for having me by their side.”

“Let him have his way,” cried Mademoiselle. “Monsieur La Hake at least is old enough to know his own mind.”

“As for that, 'tis a man's right,” said he, bowing mockingly, “as 'tis that of a woman not to know hers. Now then, fellows, about your business, and smartly.”

Whereupon they set to work, with more clatter, perhaps, than need have been, but deftly enough, as if to prove La Hake's boast of an old soldier's many-sidedness to be no empty one. In a very few minutes the tables were prepared, and in his character of host of “The Black Cat,” La Hake announced, “Madame is served,” and directed two of his fellows to play attendant. But here he reckoned without Roger.

“By your leave, Monsieur, and no offence. This tomfoolery of a gentleman's masquerade as a trencher scraper is beyond me, and so I leave it aside; but to serve the Sieur is my place, and mine alone, and I have no mind to stand by and see another man fill my shoes.”

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For a moment La Hake's face darkened, and a sharp retort was on the edge of his tongue; but he turned off his vexation with a laugh.

"What?" said he, "not content with serving the father with the sword, thou must needs serve the son with a napkin? Have it as thou wilt, my friend, though it somewhat spoils the flavor of the jest."

For all my lady's weariness they were a merry, and at times a boisterous enough party, La Hake being the very life of the three tables. A man alike familiar with camp and court, he had tales for all hearers and to suit all moods. More than once he made no scruple to turn the jest upon himself—a thing which few men care to do in a mixed company, lest some misunderstanding fool take the jest for earnest. Of boasting there was nothing, and if La Hake more than once was both top, centre, and bottom of the tale, it seemed a thing of course and accident rather than design.

Towards the end of the meal De Crussenay turned on the bench to where Roger stood behind him, and bade him go and see to his own needs. But the old Squire was obstinate and would not budge.

"When all's done here is time enough for me," said he.

"Right," cried La Hake from his place at the end of the next table; "and what is more, it will not be the first De Crussenay thou hast waited to see make an end; eh, my friend?"

"This is the sixth time, Monsieur, you have spoken of Rouen," answered Roger, with his fingers twisting in his beard. "But at the hour you hint of there were

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none present saving Guisards and us two—the Sieur, that is, and myself.”

“Were there not?” said La Hake. “What of Navarre? Surely Navarre and Béarn sent some to follow their good but somewhat credulous King Antony? To prove my words I will presently tell you the tale to the finish; or will you have it now? Madame permits? Mademoiselle, I know, has always her ears open for stories of a man.”

“Monsieur,” cried De Crussenay, springing from his seat, “do you truly know how my father died? Was it well to hold back the telling of it so long? Madame, I beseech you!”

“Monsieur de Crussenay is too much my friend,” said my lady, “and I too much bound up with the cause for which his father died, for me to hold you back a single instant. Speak on, Monsieur La Hake, we are all eager to hear.”

“If it be a story that touches Monsieur de Crussenay,” said Mademoiselle Suzanne, softly, “I make no doubt it will indeed be the story of a man, and so better worth the listening to than some other tales we have heard to-night. We wait for you, Monsieur.”

But now that it came to the point La Hake seemed restless and ill at ease.

“When I saw you at ‘The Black Cat’s’ door an hour ago,” he said to De Crussenay, “it came upon me like a flash to tell you the tale of Rouen to-night. There were reasons, as you will understand presently, why it was not told earlier.”

Pausing, he leaned across to the man seated at the

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corner on his left, a kind of squire's squire, and an underling somewhat better than the rest, speaking to him in an undertone, rapidly and with insistence. The other nodded and replied, and rising left the room after a rough salute to my lady.

"Your pardon," La Hake went on, turning on his stool so as to face De Crussenay; "there are matters to be seen to without there, but Blonay can set them going as well as I. As to Rouen, Master Roger," and La Hake, who had never laid by his weapons, hitched his sword in front of him, and, resting the point of the scabbard on the floor, leaned his arms on the hilt; "in that group which thou wilt remember at the street corner hard by the breach there was a sprinkling of Navarrese and Béarnnois, who for the most part followed Antony of Vendôme rather than Henry of Guise, so it is not strange that I, whose tongue tells of the south, know what passed when thou hadst a soldier's reasons for keeping eyes elsewhere.

"My word for it, he was a fine figure of a man, was the Sieur de Crussenay, as he tramped up the street into the very teeth of a dozen men as hot of blood and as stout-hearted as himself. I can give the son no higher praise than to say that when five years have filled him out he will be the very image of the father. Up the road he strode, his sword at the level of his breast, and ready for come what might, more like the arbiter of peace or war than the last and almost outworn shred of a routed and demoralized army. 'Messieurs les Guisards,' he cried, adding some touches of his fancy which, though lacking truth, stung where they were meant to sting, 'I am the

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Sieur de Crussenay! Vive Condé! Vive Coligny! My word on it, every man who heard that cry remembered it to his dying day, or will remember it, so sharp was it, and so like the lash of a whip on naked flesh.

"There, I think, Master Roger, thy knowledge ends and mine begins. Thenceforward those fellows on guard by the breach had a claim on thy attention, and would take no denial. That you honored their claim I learned later.

"Not Bayard himself, nor Du Guesclin, was ever foolhardy, so, like the good soldier and shrewd strategist that he was, Monsieur de Crussenay had his eyes on a point of vantage, and, remembering the disparity of numbers, not one, even of the dogs of Guisards whom he lashed and scorned, grudged him his niche in the wall, and its foot of added height.

"His was an ill look to face. When a man plays with naked steel, and his life the stake of the game, the glint of hot wrath in the eyes looking at you over the blade is a frank warning. Worse still is the storm of reckless fury born of a clear knowledge of despair, for then there is no nicety of fence, and a chance blow may get home where skill fails. But capping all, and bidding a man be as circumspect as if he wrestled with death himself, and felt the very grind of the dry bones on his ribs, is that cruel coldness that neither looks for nor desires life, and has but one hunger—to bring as many to the grave as may be ere it goes its own bloody road.

"That was De Crussenay all over. He who could read his face could see that here was a man whose hope was not in life but in death, but who had his

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heart set on goodly companionship. Some who missed that look and saw no more than a single man at bay to a dozen, paid for their blindness and saw no more in this world. In almost as many passes he had four on the ground, and was untouched himself but for a scratch across the left ribs. That blunted the appetite, and the attack grew more wary, so that in three minutes he got home but a single thrust, but it went home, indeed, and the point was back to the guard in a flash, and the eyes looking above it as cruelly cold and deliberate as at the first.

"By this time, friend Roger, thou wert beyond the breach, though from the ring of steel and the growl of epithets, the interchange of compliments betwixt thee and the guard was still warm and sincere.

"After his challenge, and once fairly settled on the broad flag of the doorway, De Crussenay kept his breath for better use than bitter words. Indeed, but for the life in the eyes and the death in the blade, his was the face of a corpse rather than of a living man, unless when he got home a stroke. Then there came a flicker of ghastly merriment, not a laugh, but a thickening of the wrinkles round the eyes, and a spasm of the mouth till the teeth showed white between the tightened lips. A thing of an instant, a grim p'ry of light and shadow on a mask of death, and it was gone, and the old horror of the set calm was in its place.

"Then—it was when the fifth had been pushed aside out of the way of the feet of the rest—one of those dogs of Guisards had a thought. Doubtless, had he been less of a dog, and not so cursed a Guisard, the

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thought would have come earlier, but let it be to his credit that it came at all. Leaping back out of touch of that long reach, he cried:

"'Enough of this, gentlemen. We hamper one another to our own hurt, neither is there any honor in such a fight.'

"'No,' struck in De Crussenay from his door-step; 'and, thank the Lord, but little profit.'

"What had been said was true enough; with so many pressing to the front there was a constant jostling, and no free play for the sword-arm. In such cramped quarters skill went for nothing, and the very boldness of the attack was its ruin.

"'One by one, Messieurs, if you please,' said the dog of a Guisard, 'and as the thought is mine, I claim first right.'

"From the first word Monsieur de Crussenay had stood solely on the defensive, though in the unwary breaking off of the attack he could have taken heavy toll, and risked no scathe in return. Now he saluted as one salutes in the nice punctillio of the duel, and stepped down to the level of the road.

"'As a Frenchman, Monsieur,' said he, 'I looked for no less from men of my nation, though what I have seen behind there made me doubt whether honor had not altogether fled the country. You understand, I neither take nor give quarter. On guard, Monsieur!'"

La Hake, who had spoken throughout with slow deliberation, paused and threw back his head as if listening, and while one might count twenty there was a silence. It was Roger who broke it.

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"Yes, Monsieur," he said, impatiently; "'On guard!" said the Sieur, and then—"

While La Hake was speaking his men had risen, and now they stood singly or in little groups about the room, leaning against the walls or kneeling on the benches all silent and watchful.

"And then," went on La Hake slowly, dropping his words one by one, "the end could not be far off. Both were masters of fence. Both, for all that one was a dog of a Guisard, were as brave as men need be even in a rough and turbulent age, when a man's courage is his safety and his advancement. Both were at the flood of life, but Monsieur de Crussenay was the more exhausted of the two; nor, after the siege, was his strength at its best. Hate and a tight belt will carry a man far, but bread and meat will wear them down in the long run, and the wearing down had commenced. That much was plain, and so the dog of a Guisard, having a dog's love for his life, forced the fight, giving his man no rest. Presently the thrusts were wilder, the parries not so sure, the recovery to guard slower and less perfect. The point of the blade took on the tremor that tells of faltering strength. The end was surely very near, very certain, and yet that dog of a Guisard took no risks until assurance was past doubt. I think, too, he had a spice of the devil in him, or else the five on the roadway moved him, for the agony of the other fighting famine within him and death before was no more than a play."

Hitherto young De Crussenay had borne his torture in silence, but now he broke out:

"Make an end! for the Lord's sake, make an end!"

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burst out the lad ; " the man you are killing by inches was my father, and I loved him."

As he spoke there came a sudden clamor from across the passage, the war of wrathful voices, cries, oaths, and the heavy scuffle of feet on the wooden floor.

" There is some mischief afoot," cried my lady, turning from La Hake to De Crussenay and back again to La Hake as to the strongest personality. " See what it may be, I beg of you, Monsieur."

Louder grew the uproar, swelling to its noisiest with the opening of the door. On the threshold, making a sign with his hand, stood the fellow who was missing at Auch, and at sight of him Roger's hand flew to his sword-hilt.

" Treachery!" he cried. " Am I a fool not to know a man's beast when I see it, and we riding thigh by thigh for half a month?"

At sight of the man-at-arms La Hake had risen.

" The trap is closed," he cried, " and the ' Black Cat ' has the mice in her claws. Madame," and he turned to Jeanne with a reverence that had lost none of its respect, " I have the honor to ask you, where is Monsieur de Bernauld?"

" On guard!"

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CHAPTER XIII

"COWARD!" SAID MY LADY—"COWARD, TO TOUCH THE
BOY!"

THE rising of La Hake was plainly a signal to his followers, and one they acted on promptly, for though Roger's fingers gripped his belt, his sword never so much as left its sheath. With a stride the two nearest men-at-arms were upon him, and had him in such a hold as would have defied even the strength of his prime to dislodge. Struggle he did, being the man he was, and with such good will that his stout garments were rent like paper in the efforts to prevent him drawing; but his rage and force were all to no purpose. Budge his blade he could not, they held him in too fast a grip.

As for De Crussenay, he was weaponless save for a short dagger hung at his right hip, and with a naked blade a foot from his breast there was nothing for it but submission. The surprise had been complete.

"No violence, fellows," cried La Hake, "or at least no more than must be for peace' sake. And thou, Master Roger, unclasp that hand of thine, for thine own health; and that thou mayest live long and learn watchfulness we will relieve thee of that sword. Tut, man, no foolishness; what use hast thou for it? 'Tis

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"Coward, to Touch the Boy!"

but an edged tool, and like to cut thine own fingers. So, that is safer; now that poniard there. Leave them in the corner behind thee, fellow; nay, that is young master's corner, and his time for man's work is not for twenty years. Stand them rather at the end of the room, where our old friend can see them, since no good soldier willingly has his weapons out of sight. Now, Master Roger, as thou must needs thrust thyself into this airy, that empty space beyond the fireplace is thine, and for consolation these two bold fellows will bear thee company. Understand me once and for all"—and the good-humor in La Hake's voice hardened into a harsh sternness—"move but a single foot, whatever happens, and my word for it thou wilt never move two feet afterwards. These fellows have their orders, and will skewer thee like a rabbit. Thou art warned."

After his first burst of rage, the old Squire submitted to the inevitable quietly enough. To skin his knuckles against a stone wall would serve no purpose.

"Your turn to-day, ours to-morrow," he said; "and when ours comes—then—"

"Ah, bah!" answered La Hake, with a return of his lighter mood. "Thou knowest the proverb, 'To-morrow never comes.'"

But De Crussenay was less philosophical, and, threatened though he was, he shook his clinched fist at either side of the bare steel, and would have railed like a passionate shrew had not his wrath choked him.

"Thou art a cur, La Hake—a treacherous, cowardly cur!" he shouted, and then fell silent, panting and mouthing in his rage.

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"That was not your father's thought that day in Rouen he and I crossed swords together," answered the other, coolly; "no, not even when he followed in the wake of the five who lay in the kennel."

"What!" cried Roger, stung out of his phlegm, yet wary enough to make no move. "Thou—thou?"

"I, I," answered La Hake. "I, whom thou hast had at thy elbow a score of times, and into whose ribs thou couldst have comfortably sent that blade of thine and thought it no murder. I; why not?"

"Then," cried De Crussenay, "thou art no Queen's man and Mademoiselle Suzanne no Queen's woman?"

"Ay, but she is," said La Hake, with a laugh, "only there are more queens than one, and hers and mine is Queen of France; and who gave thee leave to call her Suzanne?"

At the seizure of Roger and his master the women had risen, my lady stepping instinctively in front of the corner where Gaspard lay, while Mademoiselle had drawn closer to La Hake's table, and almost up to his very side.

"That is, or has been, true," said she; "but henceforward I go to serve the Queen of Navarre."

"But," said De Crussenay, who, after all, had no more sense than a boy, "Jean Caron spoke of the maids of the Queen of France as—"

"What does an innkeeper at Tarbes know?" said Mademoiselle, scornfully. "I am what I am."

"Ay," mocked La Hake, "and what the devil knows to boot."

Then, for the first time since the noise of the scuffle had come from the other room, my lady spoke.

“Coward, to Touch the Boy!”

“Thou art what thou art, and that is such a thing as the Lord may forgive, but not I. Thy lies and wiles have brought us into this, and whatever comes of the night's work lies at thy door.”

“Let it lie,” answered Mademoiselle, with a snap of her fingers; “though, for that matter, hadst thou been more womanly and less curst with evil thinking, who knows but I had not lent myself to Monsieur La Hake's schemes. Remember”—and she rounded on him with an imperiousness one had not thought possible in so small a frame—“I hold your promise; there shall be no violence.”

“His promise!” cried Jeanne. “A promise of straw!”

“You have hit me off, Madame,” said he, with a bow. “Straw or steel, as men make me. To one person, at least, I am a man of my word, and that is to myself. To myself, for reasons known to myself, I have sworn that your husband's whereabouts shall be told myself; and by all the saints that ever have been, or ever are to be, I'll keep that oath whoever stands in my path! For the second time: Madame, where is Monsieur de Bernauld?”

“Monsieur,” said Jeanne, “it is more than three days since we parted, and had I such a conscience as yours I might quibble, and say that I do not know. But I will not lie to my own soul in fencing you in such a fashion. I know, but though I am a woman, I can keep my counsel!”

Not for an instant did La Hake ruffle his even temper. The slur upon his conscience was too small a matter to stir him. Nay, when a man has lived to

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middle age, and spent the best of his years at the beck and call of Catherine de Medici, it is something of a commendation to be supposed to have even the outworn rag of a conscience left.

"Madame," he said, slowly, and with apparent irrelevance, "I am a hard man — just such a man as, by your leave, you can know nothing of."

"Monsieur," she broke in, with just the faintest dip of a courtesy, "therein I count myself happy."

"I have fought too many men's battles, Madame," he answered, "to fly into a passion at the stroke of a woman's tongue."

"Ay," said she; "a whip were liker it."

"Faith," he answered, "it may be so, but no man has yet tried it. Let that pass. Gibes, flouts, and sharp words will serve neither your purpose nor mine, nor turn me aside. My meaning is this: So hard a man am I that when I have set my mind to a thing, neither life nor death, neither strength nor weakness, can turn me aside. For all that, I neither risk a life nor take a life lightly. Therefore, to make an end of this, and that no evil comes of it to you or yours, tell me, I beseech you, where I may find Monsieur de Bernauld."

"If you had no wish that worse may come to Monsieur de Bernauld," answered my lady, "you would be less insistent on an answer."

"Since when," said he, with a sneer, "has Monsieur de Bernauld grown coward that he must needs hide behind a woman's skirts to defend himself?"

"Rogues who trap women will stab a man in the back," replied my lady, with a contempt greater than

"Coward, to Touch the Boy!"

his. "Whether you or he be the poltroon let your acts judge."

"If that be all, Madame," cried La Hake, "I swear openly and before all here that if Monsieur de Bernauld takes harm from me it will be in fair fight."

"And your oath, Monsieur," answered Jeanne, "is as good as your promise, and both are straw. But to make an end of this, you have my word for it, I will tell you nothing, whether under promise or threat."

"If Monsieur de Crussenay is as unreasoning as you, Madame, we will see whether or not the last word is said. For my part I think not, seeing I have yet two cards to play while yours are on the table. My friend, put up that blade of thine that Monsieur de Crussenay and I may talk as man to man. It were a fool's hope to expect one of his race to give an answer with such a threat at his throat. To be brief, since a man to a man has needs of fewer words than a man to a woman, Monsieur de Bernauld and I have something to say to one another and which cannot be said for us. Where, then, shall I find him? Remember, he is no coward, and on my word I believe he is as keen on the hunt for me as I for him."

"Since you have crossed him once in the last month and could have crossed him twice," said De Crussenay, "what ailed you that you did not end your quarrel there and then?"

"Come, that's reasonable, and spoken as man to man," cried La Hake; "and as man to man I'll answer it. I had the Queen's business to see to, and, for the matter of that, still have; but three days will end that, and then I am free to bid Monsieur de Ber-

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nauld good-day. Are you answered? See, Monsieur de Crussenay, the cat jumps your way. Here am I seeking to make you a free present of Carmeuse and Bernauld, and you will not so much as aid me by a word. Would you have me put it blunter, and Madame by? Well, we have heard of Chatillon's friendship; a boy and a girl together, and a husband the Lord knows where. I say no more."

"For the love of God," cried my lady, "tell the liar nothing! no, not so much as a word, lest he twist its meaning to match his foul thought."

"Faith, Madame," said La Hake, "you play the game well, but the walls of Jean Caron's inn at Tarbes are thinner than you thought. Come, Monsieur de Crussenay, this is between you and me, and no stain of blood need rest on Madame's conscience. A fool who goes west to please himself should not complain if others please themselves in the east. Ha! Madame, do you see one of my cards? If Monsieur de Crussenay can keep a silent tongue with a sword at his throat, the same sword at the same throat may help you to speech when it comes to a choice 'twixt the two. A husband may surely go to save a—"

"Liar! liar! liar!" cried De Crussenay, furiously, and bare-handed as he was he would have sprung on La Hake had not the man-at-arms flung him back.

"Well played in your turn, my friend," said La Hake. "Had I not Mademoiselle and twenty years' knowledge of the world as witness I would almost believe you."

"Mademoiselle?" cried the lad. "Does she believe your monstrous lie?"

"Coward, to Touch the Boy!"

"What odds ay or nay since not one woman in ten knows what she believes?" answered La Hake, roughly. "Her part in the play is done, and, give her her due, she played it well. End yours, De Crussenay, and leave me to see the finish."

"Before God, La Hake," said the lad, earnestly, "what you hint is a lie, and so Mademoiselle knows in her heart. As to De Bernauld, I will tell you this much: He is on the Queen's business. The where I know, the what it is is none of my affair. Let this rest for to-night, La Hake; De Bernauld is not so small a man that he cannot be found when wanted."

"What are your Queen's affairs to me?" answered La Hake. "And as to dancing attendance on Monsieur de Bernauld's whims, that is a folly which suits neither my time nor my purse. My faith, but I have better things to do than wait his leisure, and the more so that the finding him can help me in the doing of them. As to what you call a hint being a lie, you do your comely face a wrong, and I have sifted the follies of the world overlong to be so easily blinded. Plainly, are you as obstinate as Madame yonder?"

"It is not my affair," said De Crussenay, "and of Monsieur de Bernauld I have said all I have to say. Let us leave De Bernauld and come to Rouen."

"Rouen?" La Hake drew his sword and let the flicker of the lamp play on the steel. "Have done with such folly. Tut, boy, you are not fit to tie your father's shoes, much less stand in them. Let us make an end of this business. Madame, your folly and his drive me to the question of the last word.

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Not willingly will I redden my blade with the blood of two generations, and not willingly will you lose a lover. That is blunt, but this is no time for smooth niceties and figures of speech. Because I have played the courteous, you have misread me and suppose I am a man of threat and froth, and no more. Now listen. By God! I must have what I seek."

"You can kill me, Monsieur," said my lady, white enough and shaking for all her bold front, "though I do not see how that will better you much, since, in your rogue's jargon, the dead have silent tongues."

"I am less a fool than you think, and can play a shrewder game than that," he said. "By your leave, Madame."

With a thrust of his hand he swept her aside so that she staggered against the wall by the great fireplace, and before she had her wits again he had lifted Gaspard from his corner and laid him across his left arm.

"The first of my two cards," said La Hake. "As De Crussenay is dearer than the child, I hold him back."

"The little lad!" cried Jeanne. "Coward, to touch the boy!" and heedless of any danger, she made as if to run forward and drag the child from La Hake's grip. But he still carried his naked sword in his hand, and sweeping its point backward and forward between them he kept her at bay.

"Hold her back there, one of you!" he cried; and as a man-at-arms seized my lady, he added, "Not so roughly, fellow! Madame is not one of your camp women. See that she has no play of her arms, that

“Coward, to Touch the Boy!”

will suffice; so, there you have it. Now, Madame, you understand what manner of man I am.”

“A coward!” said she, panting hard; “a coward, to touch the boy!”

From behind La Hake Mademoiselle Suzanne pushed to the front, but at the rustle of her skirt he turned on her savagely.

“Your promise, La Hake,” said she, facing him unflinchingly. “This thing has gone far enough—nay, too far. Give me the boy.”

“Promises are gauds to snare fools with; keep thou thy place,” he said, sternly. “These fellows will thrust thee without, ay, into the dark, too, if I but nod.”

“Let one so much as lay a finger on me,” she retorted, still fronting him, “and all this shall go to the Queen.”

“Oh, the Queen, the Queen! Faith, the Queen has as much need of La Hake as La Hake of the Queen. Carry thy tales to the Queen and welcome. As for the child, I doubt not Alva has whispered her something of these De Bernaulds and their war in the west, and if the race goes wreck, root and branch, the Queen will but give me greater thanks.”

For wrath's sake, for grief's sake, ay, and for humanity's sake, I dare not set down what followed. Even after fifty years the blood of a half-dead man grows too hot, and if my God bade me come into His presence this night, as I am full willing that He may, I would not have my soul fresh scarred with such a hot passion of unforgiving rage. May His curse light forever on La Hake, as I humbly pray and be-

A Man of His Age

lieve it does ; and if for naught else but that he might suffer his deserts, I hold this point of faith unwaveringly that there is an eternal damnation of fire.

When the mists cleared away from my lady's eyes she found herself upon her knees and freed from the soldier's grip, the little lad held tight to her breast, and La Hake, with a face as white as her own or the boy's, looking down on her not three feet away. This killing of babes was a new thing to him, but, though it shook him as no other slaughter could, it left him as fixed as ever in his purpose.

"You thought I lied," he said, and do what he would he could not keep the tremor out of his voice. "You thought I only played upon your terror. Do you understand now what manner of man I am? Listen," and he put out his hand and shook her, not roughly, but to give a point to his words. "It hangs on you or him whether or not the lover goes the way of the boy. Do you understand, Madame?"

From his touch she shrank farther along the wall to where the child had lain, but her eyes never shifted from his. "Devil!" she said thrice over ; "devil! devil!" and said no more.

La Hake straightened himself and swung round on his heel, halting midway between Jeanne and De Crussenay. Little blame to the lad if his cheeks, too, had gone colorless. To most men the first sight of the shedding of blood is bound up with the drunken exultation of battle when all that part of him that is slave to the devil and his legions of angels is broken loose into riot. So long as the fury of possession lasts he gives and takes, and, though he be red to the

“Coward, to Touch the Boy!”

wrist, has no thought beyond the point of his blade. But with De Crussenay there was no possession but that of a shameful sense of impotence and cowardice, and what he saw sickened him.

Still, for all the chalk in his cheeks, he had neither fear nor thought of saving himself, and but for Roger another crime would have gone to La Hake's long account.

“Hold there!” he cried, in a roar, and flinging aside the guard. With all eyes drawn to the farther corner of the room vigilance had relaxed, though even had it been wakeful as ever Roger was no man to count risks when his Sieur was in danger. “Hold there! Monsieur de Bernauld is—”

“Be silent! be silent, I say!” shouted De Crussenay, hoarsely. “In God's name, no treachery.”

“I am De Crussenay's man first and last, and the rest of the world may go hang,” answered Roger, doggedly. “What! Am I to see the end of my Sieur race, and all for want of a dozen words? To serve De Crussenay was I born, and Monsieur de Bernauld must fend for himself.” Then he turned to La Hake. “Question me, Monsieur, and let the ‘Black Cat’ pay back the life Rouen owes to Crussenay.”

“Why find your tongue so late,” said La Hake, “if all along you have known De Bernauld's whereabouts? Why not have spoken sooner and saved—that?”

“To be frank,” answered Roger, “your hand is quicker than my wit, and—and—why, 'tis but a babe, and I never dreamed—” and fearful of angering the other to his Sieur's hurt he stopped short.

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"Let what is done rest," answered La Hake, roughly. "What of De Bernauld? Where is he?"

"Hold thy peace," cried De Crussenay. "Tell the coward nothing."

"Monsieur de Bernauld is at Pau," said Roger between his teeth, and putting up an arm as if to hide himself from his master.

"At Pau? Take care, fellow," cried La Hake. "At Pau is a lie, for he rode from Auch by way of the southwest."

"Oh, by your leave, you ask me where is he," replied Roger. "He rode west on the Queen's business; that being done he is at Pau."

"Ay, that might be," said La Hake, eying Roger as a kite a sparrow. "Swear it, fellow, here, on the cross of the dagger-handle. 'I swear by my hope in God that I have told the truth, and may His eternal curse light on me if I lie.'"

"I swear by my hope in God that I have told the truth, and may His eternal curse light on me if I lie," repeated Roger, solemnly.

"Roger, Roger, what is this thou hast done?" cried De Crussenay.

"My duty, and no more," answered the Squire, stubbornly, "and if need be I would do it ten times over."

"To Pau?" said La Hake. "Then nine chances in ten Madame Vendôme is there also. Let that be as it may, it suits me to think so. You, fellows, see to the horses; I give you ten minutes to make ready, and no more. Three bid here—two with the squire and one with the master. 'Tis the reverse of courtesy,

"Coward, to Touch the Boy!"

but I value thee highly, Master Roger. Madame—and he looked at Jeanne with a forced assumption of his old effrontery. The Lord knows what he had to say to the stricken mother, but whatever it was it died on his tongue.

Since he had turned from her to De Crussenay she, unsobbing and dry-eyed, had bent above the little lad, kissing the face that was no whiter than her own, and running her fingers through his hair, matted and tangled in his last sleep. To all that passed she was deaf and blind, and neither old Nannette's wails and sobs, nor Mademoiselle Suzanne's quieter weeping touched her consciously. She was, for the moment, in a world apart, and alone with her babe.

As La Hake spoke she looked up, though her fingers never ceased from their tremulous stroking of the dead face. Callous as he was, and inured to misery, the agony and loathing in the mother's eyes silenced him, and he turned from her with a curse under his breath, leaving unsaid his excuses, if excuses they were.

A silence followed, broken by the uneasy shuffle of feet on the sanded floor, the crying of the two women, and the rattle of the heavy window casements in the shrunk setting. The wind had risen and was moaning and mourning under the heavy, overhanging eaves, so that the sobbing within found its echo in the sobbing without. At last, and to the unutterable relief of all, the strain of waiting was broken by the stamping of horse-hoofs on the cobble pavement of the courtyard, and La Hake roused himself.

"Mademoiselle," and he spoke without turning to

A Man of His Age

where she knelt by Jeanne, half clasping her by the knees, "see that the beasts are not kept waiting. There should be a moon by this, and we must make the most of it."

"Make what you will of it for me," said she; "I am done with you, and bide here with Madame," and she looked up at Jeanne and made as if to catch her by the hand.

For answer La Hake laughed, mirthlessly enough, God knows, but for all its hollowness the sound struck like a blow, so out of time and keeping was it.

"He who sets the trap has as much credit as he who kills the game," said he. "Have done with the parade of a new-found conscience. The beasts will be here in an instant; see to it that thou art ready."

"What dost thou know of a conscience, new or old?" she retorted. "I say again, I am done with you and bide here."

"And I say thou dost not," he cried, loudly, happy at the excuse for warming his blood with rage. "Hast thou done with the Queen Mother, perchance, as well as with me? Give a third thought to that, for Catherine de Medici has a long arm, and a longer memory. Cease this fooling. I have a charge given me that Mademoiselle de Romenay is to be delivered safe to Queen Jeanne, or Madame Vendôme, or whatsoever thou callest her, and, by the Lord, deliver her safe I will."

"Mademoiselle de Romenay?" said De Crussenay, looking from the one to the other, "but she told Madame—"

"Coward, to Touch the Boy!"

Again La Hake broke into his mirthless laugh.

"That was her jest," he said, bitterly, "and that"—pointing to my lady with little Gaspard in her arms—"is the outcome of her pleasantry. She told Madame many things, and she lied; she is Suzanne de Romenay, and one of Queen Catherine's women."

With a sweep of her arm my lady wrenched her skirts from the hands that clung to them, and shrunk into the corner.

"Murderess!" she said, her eyes blazing down on the kneeling girl. "Murderess!" The one word twice repeated; no more.

From without came the clatter of the horses, and the voices of the men-at-arms calling to one another by the inn door.

"You have your greeting, bide an' welcome, if it pleases you," said La Hake, striding across the room. "Now, fellows, to saddle. Stay a moment first; wrench open that window and pitch those weapons without, lest they lead to more mischief."

"Never fear I shall find them," cried De Crussenay, "and then—"

"Tut!" interrupted La Hake, turning contemptuously at the door; "remember Rouen."

At my lady's words Mademoiselle had risen, and with her hands so clinched that the nails must have bitten deep into the palms, she followed La Hake, and as he turned as if to speak, she too paused, but meeting my lady's eyes she faltered, and the two went out together, La Hake locking the door behind him.

With the shutting of the door the tension that had

A Man of His Age

braced Jeanne upslackened, and De Crussenay saw her grope with one hand, fumblingly, at the wall. For a moment she stood, her arm outstretched like that of one blind, then, sheltering the boy to the last, she fell forward on the floor.

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CHAPTER XIV

"SHALL IT BE WAR WITH FRANCE, MONSIEUR DE BERNAULD?"

THERE you have the story, not as told by Roger in my lodging at Orthez, but as pieced together afterwards. Roger's tale was full of fifty trivialities noted from his corner in the "Black Cat's" common room, but which, though at the time they stirred my rage and fired my blood, may now be passed over. Enough is told to make it but a thing, of course, that I should bid Marcel leave off cursing, and make hot speed to start, whether De Montamar would have it or not.

But that mood cooled, for with the calming of the first outburst of wrath came a casting out of that unreason which is inseparable from all passion. There was no slackening of hate, no dulling of the determination to kill La Hake, no abatement of grief. The edge of all this was as keen as ever, but into hatred, purpose, and sorrow came that strength of sober sense which makes a man master of himself and one infinitely more to be feared than in his blind rage.

In such a mood either of De Montamar's two arguments would have weighed with me.

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"Monsieur de Bernauld," said he, "of your sorrow I dare not speak. There are times when a man can but take his friend's hand in silence and leave comfort to God. Only believe this: I would give five years of my life to hang La Hake, and a sympathy in hate is a kind of solace. But above and beyond this sorrow and this right of vengeance, and larger in its claims than them both, there is Navarre. For Navarre's sake Monsieur de Bernauld must not ride out of Orthez except on the Queen's business. If they but dared, there are scores even in Orthez ready to do as that rascal did at Tarbes—hack down the Queen's escutcheon and set up the arms of France and Spain in its place. Beyond these scores there are hundreds who waver, hundreds who want but the blowing of a straw that they may cry, 'Long live Navarre!' or 'Down with the Queen!' as the straw leads them. Let Monsieur de Bernauld, who in one week has become the Queen's friend and counsellor, seem to desert her cause and ride off, the Lord knows whither, and the scores may take courage to hack, and that which was but the puffing of a straw will be a tempest strong enough to sweep Navarre into the grip of Philip and his Inquisition.

"Besides," he went on, "your revenge is sure, and a man who owns the future can afford to wait. La Hake seeks you as hotly as you seek La Hake, and but for Roger's well-meant lie we should have had him hot-foot in Orthez twelve hours ago. Have no fear of finding La Hake. The Queen has too few such gentlemen of such note as Monsieur de Bernauld in her train to keep his whereabouts a secret. All Pau

"Shall it be War with France?"

will tell the scoundrel you are with the court at Orthez, and to ride hence is but to miss what you go in search of. As for the reason of this man's dogging you, that I confess is a mystery, though I hold there is either revenge or religion behind it."

All of which was true beyond cavil, even down to La Hake's persistent animosity. What had passed between us, whether at Orleans or Auch, offered no sufficient reason for his savage eagerness.

"What you say is well enough," said I, "but I am in a strait between two things. On the one side is La Hake, who, if your reasoning be right, will reach Orthez within four-and-twenty hours. On the other is Madame my wife, alone with her bitter grief at Bernauld. How meet one to pay him his due, and yet not leave the other uncomforted?"

Before answering me De Montamar turned to Roger. "How long hast thou been on the road, my friend? That thou madest thy best haste we know, but there are times when a man's purpose and his powers are out of harmony."

"To be honest," said Roger, "it has taken me the better part of forty-six hours, though they tell me it is no more than twenty leagues of a crow-flight. To a man of the plains these plaguy hills are a bewilderment, and no better than a maze. More than once I found myself off the track and heading Heaven knows where."

"Thou art not the first," said De Montamar, with a laugh, "who has found it easier to ride into a Béarn valley than out again. There are some Spanish bones could tell the same tale, and, pray God,

A Man of His Age

there will be more. What start of thee had La Hake?"

"Hard on fourteen hours," answered Roger, "and we grudged the delay sorely. Never saw I a man so fretted as the Sieur; but what could he or any man of us do? To break open the doors and untruss the fellows from their own cellar cost but little time, but after that there was Madame little better than a breathing image of death for seven heart-breaking hours. Even when she came to life she was mazed—and small wonder, poor lady!—and Nannette would not let so much as a whisper come near her until almost noon. Then of a sudden Madame woke into a life with more of fever in it than strength, and would have the Sieur and me into her chamber in spite of Nannette, and—and, God forgive me, I have done little else but curse La Hake ever since.

"The night before there had been enough of a man's own risk, and the rush of action to blind one to the pity of it all, but to see Madame propped upon the pillows and with the dead babe still in her arms, and—"

"There, there," broke in De Montamar, with a side-long glance at me, who stood still and shivered as he spoke. "We have had the story, let it rest; the past is past, and the question now is how best to do a man's work. Forty-six and fourteen, that makes sixty hours since La Hake set out for Pau."

"Ay," said Roger, "but he had a woman to shackle him, and the hills that wasted my hours might well waste his."

"As to the woman," answered De Montamar, "La

“Shall it be War with France?”

Hake is no man to spare a woman to his own hindrance, and, saving his mistress of France, none of the sex is like to shackle him in the hunting his desires. Nor would the windings baffle him. In all this black business he has shown himself a shrewd scoundrel, and I'll wager that, like the clever soldier he is, he knows his enemy's country like his own pocket. Besides, from Pau to Orthez the high road is the best in the kingdom, and that is the greater part of his journey.

“As to your strait, Monsieur de Bernauld, I venture to advise that you send on yon fellow there who is so zealous with your saddle-bags.”

“Nay, your worship,” cried Marcel, “not me. Send Roger, and let me bide with you.”

Round swung De Montamar in high anger, and fixed him with a stare.

“Hold thou thy peace,” he said, sternly. “Once before I told thee this is no affair of lackeys. Send yon fellow with a letter, Monsieur de Bernauld. He knows Béarn and he knows Bernauld. Wait the four-and-twenty hours for La Hake, and lay the story meanwhile before the Queen. If need be—thy name, my friend? Ay; Roger—if need be Roger can give his testimony to La Hake's villany, though if it be in the Queen's presence I counsel the suppression of that little matter of the oath at the ‘Black Cat.’ Jeanne d'Albret has small toleration for expediency, and I doubt whether the saving of all Navarre would weigh a feather in the scale against a false oath. Now, Monsieur de Bernauld, is it settled?”

“Have it as you will,” I said. “I am still in two

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minds, and when that is the case a man had better follow a cool head than his own botched thought."

"Write your letter then," said he, "and bide here till I send word as to the Queen's receiving you. I may tell her, I think, that if you were Navarre's before, you—"

"Let the Queen set me work to do," cried I, "and I know little of the spirit of a man if La Hake has not struck an ill blow, not alone for himself but for those who sent him."

"Trust the Queen, Monsieur de Bernauld," said he, taking my hand in both his. "My first and last word is, trust Jeanne of Navarre." With that he left me and, Roger being sent to obtain a much-needed rest and refreshment, Marcel and I were left alone.

"'Tis very well, Master Blaise," said he, hotly, "for a fine gentleman like the Viscount de Montamar to cry lackey here and lackey there if a man dares so much as speak a word for his rights. But I am as much Bernauld as you are, bating the blood, and it's no more than my right to bide with you and see this thing out. Will La Hake fight fair? Never; not for a blink, trust him for that; and it's my business to keep that eye behind which your dignity cannot, seeing that it must needs look before. Let Roger ride east to his master, I'll bide west with mine."

Not once nor twice he came doggedly back to the same point, and in the end it was neither of De Montamar's arguments that convinced him, but a third reason which I flung into the scale, and which tickled his vanity into a grumbling consent. No

"Shall it be War with France?"

doubt I could have taken De Montamar's tone and so made an end of it with a curt "Do as thou'rt bid!" but that is poor wages to a soul that out of two risks is clamoring for the greater, and all for love's sake.

"Over and beyond my letter to Madame," said I, "there is a work to be done that Roger cannot do. There is Bernauld and the countryside to the hills to be roused, and thou art the man to do it. Though we pawn Carmeuse to Nathan the Jew, as we did once before to pay our way in the west, I must have at the very least a hundred men, armed and ready, to bring the Queen at the first lifting of her finger. No worn-out refuse of the field, but men who can fight; and who can pick and choose so well as thou, for who knows what goes to make a fighting man as thou dost? As for La Hake, his story is heard ahead of him, and, warned as I am, I would be a greater fool than even thou takest me for to be caught napping." That ended the matter, and though thereafter he grumbled, it was rather that he could not both be on the road to Bernauld and at my back in Orthez at the one moment.

It was only when I found myself staring, pen in hand, at the blank paper that I realized how hard a task De Montamar had set me. To write my lady was one thing, and a thing easily done since love pitches all formalities of word or thought out of window; but to write the stricken mother and bring her some peace and comfort out of my own rage and grief was no light thing.

Had the hand of God been clearer in the matter it

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had been less hard. Not so long before Coligny had written to the weeping mother, his wife, of the death of their Gaspard, "Remember, my well beloved, that he is happy in dying while still free from sin. It is God who has willed it, and in Him only is our hope"; but this in its black treachery seemed to me all of the will of the devil, and so with no ray of comfort in the darkness.

What I wrote in the end is neither here nor there, for the setting down of these blurred and broken sentences is a thing sacred and apart. I had as soon spread abroad the bones of my dear dead lady in the glare of the sun for all men who listed to see and handle, as loose the curtains that shut off from the common eye the secret places where our sorrows met.

But at last it was finished, and the afternoon saw Marcel started fairly on his way. To De Crussenay he bore other letters, easier written. One for his private eye, and one for public use in the furthering of the project Marcel had in hand. The lad had too much sense to be piqued at the committing of such an enterprise to an inferior in rank, but the courtesy of explanation was his due and is a marvellous smother of difficulties, and costs little. Though, to be frank, were he piqued or not, I would have risked no failure for a foolish politeness.

When it came to the parting, Marcel's warnings were so many, and so great his insistency for watchfulness, that one would have sworn that I was Squire and he Sieur; or, at the least, that I was still the raw lad he had tutored for so many years. But it was all love

“Shall it be War with France?”

for Master Blaise, and for love's sake I bore it with a good grace.

I was still with my foot on the door-step watching Marcel disappear behind a bend of the street when a messenger from De Montamar brought a letter saying that in an hour the Queen would receive me in private audience.

“Give no time to the story of your wrong,” he wrote. “Her indignation—I had almost written her grief—is a match for your own in depth and vehemence. Besides, her pride is wounded by the aggression at Tarbes at the very moment when Catherine speaks smooth counsel to her through Fénélon. My friend, for Navarre's sake, set no spur to the Queen's wrath; it is already over-impatient.”

De Montamar's words set the man of policy within me thinking, and ere I crossed the court-yard where Roger had waited me that morning, I had come to see that a man's honor might have a higher law than even avenging the murder of an innocent babe. Not that I was the less determined to call La Hake to account, but whereas an hour before he had stood for the very court and government of France he was now no more than a solitary scoundrel of whose callous and cruel villany the world would be well rid.

There were but two or three guards in the royal antechamber, and they had their instructions, for with no delay they ushered me in to where I had never before set foot, the private cabinet of the Queen. It was a simple, unpretentious room some twenty feet square, well lit from two sides and having a broad table set in the centre. Round the

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walls and between the windows were shelves fully lined with books such as Jeanne d'Albret dearly loved, but for the enjoyment of which she had all too little leisure. Theology they were for the most part, and the writings of the ancients, though that was a matter of common knowledge rather than my own observation. As to furnishings, there were none but the absolutely necessary, and these were plain even to austerity. It was the work-room of a student and a man of affairs rather than the painted and bedecked resting-place of a woman, and that woman a Queen.

By the table sat Jeanne, immersed in the reading of a lengthy report just presented to her by De Gourdon, perhaps the most trusted of all her nobles, and to whom from time to time she referred for explanation. At my entrance she rose and, with more of the woman and less of the Queen of Navarre than I had ever seen in her, came three steps to meet me. Down on one knee I went, but, touching me lightly on the shoulder, she bade me rise.

"That is for ceremony and the outer world, Monsieur de Bernauld. Here, a woman who is much harassed by foes, receives her friends. Monsieur de Montamar has been with me and told me of your suffering and your wrong, and I, who have lost two sons, know what vain things words are for the comforting of such a sorrow. But in the soreness of my grief I thank the Lord He sent me comfort, and for what bears so heavily upon you I can but say, God strengthen you to bear the cross and give you peace."

“Shall it be War with France?”

“Madame,” I began, but got no further than “your tenderness,” when my voice went from me in a choke, and with one hand clinched up against my chin I stood dumb before her.

“Words heal few wounds, but I have some with in action. Let us have done with the past, Monsieur de Bernauld,” said she. “The sorrows of Navarre are an ever-strengthening bond between me and my people, and I believe from my soul that in this blow France has but forged firmer the links that bind us. Never forget, Monsieur de Bernauld—never forget it is France that struck you, and through you, me; never forget that, I say.”

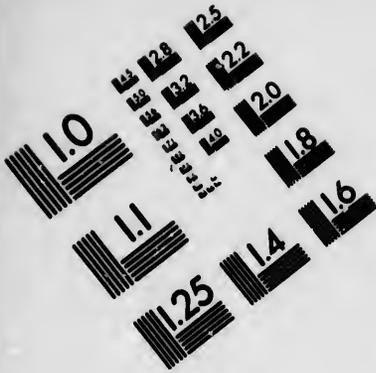
“When I forget it, Madame,” answered I, “may God forget me. But in front of France, and as the hand of France, there is La Hake.”

“Ay, I know,” said she, and then fell silent and took to walking up and down the scant space of the room, while De Gourdon and I looked at one another, waiting for what would come next.

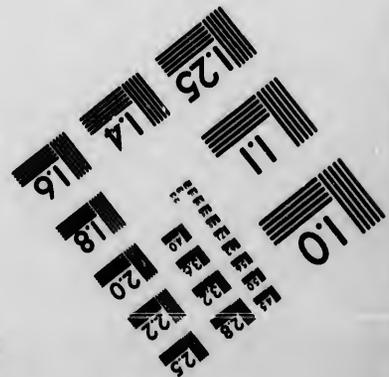
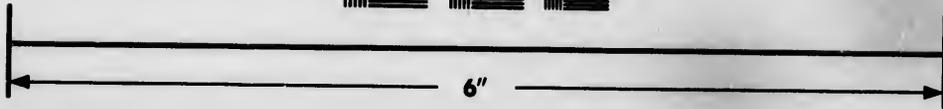
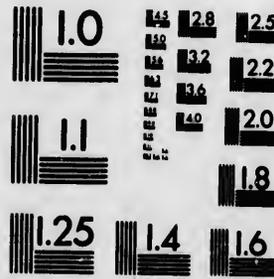
When she spoke one would have sworn that the current of her thought had changed, but De Gourdon, who knew her well—no one better—signed to me to wait and give attention.

“Spain to the south and France to the north: these are the two stones that grind Navarre. Unless the Lord work a miracle one or other will crush us into dust, and after Henri there will be no more kings of Navarre. Even though we set them by the ears, we ourselves would be the first sacrifice and the chief prize of the conqueror. Better, perhaps, hang the fellow and so risk Catherine’s wrath, and with





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it French tolerance, rather than Spain's Inquisition; and yet—and yet—while Coligny and Condé live, while Rochelle is open, and one-fourth of France is Huguenot, neither Charles nor Philip dares lay open hand on us. It would set the monarchy ablaze."

Again she fell silent, and had we not known that Jeanne d'Albret was no woman to speak her thought aloud without a purpose, we would have said she had forgotten us. Suddenly she turned round on me.

"Shall it be war with France, Monsieur de Bernauld? To hang La Hake is no more than his deserts, and to hang La Hake is war, since my smooth cousin of Medici sets a value on the rogue's head, doubtless because of his aptitude for devil's work. I am my cousin Catherine's very good friend, and so tender-hearted is she that Monsieur de la Mothe is with me from her on an errand of mercy for the rebels against my crown, but if we hang La Hake she will have no mercy on Navarre. What do you say, Monsieur de Bernauld?"

"Madame," answered I, "there is first the catching."

"Understand," cried Jeanne, striking the table by which she stood an angry blow with her open palm, "when the Queen of Navarre says, Shall we do this or that? it is because she knows the choice lies ready to her hand, and such a hint as yours is little better than an insult. You come, do you not, to prefer some request? So, at least, said Monsieur de Montamar when"—and she softened on the instant—"he told me a story over which I have not ceased to mourn."

"Shall it be War with France?"

"I have no thought, Madame," replied I, "that Navarre and France should be embroiled over what I hold to be a personal attack. Give me leave to ride hence on my own affairs; such a leave as shall make it clear that Blaise de Bernauld does not turn his back on his Queen when her foes threaten to turn their faces on her. Leave to ride hence to-morrow, Madame, is all I seek."

"Ay, I understand," said she, thoughtfully; "to Bernauld, doubtless. Is it so, Monsieur?"

"To Pau first, Madame—to Bernauld afterwards."

"Ay, I understand," said she a second time, and then fell to thinking again. "To-morrow is it, Monsieur de Bernauld? Well, be it so. There is a reception to-night in honor of Monsieur de la Mothe Fénelon, my cousin's ambassador, and my friend. Be present, Monsieur de Bernauld, and I will see to it that if to-morrow you desire to ride to Bernauld by way of Pau all men shall know that you ride on the Queen's business. See to it that you bring Monsieur de Crusenay's Squire with you. It may be we shall have some questions to ask him. So," and she turned to De Gourdon, who all this time had stood silent, watching us, "there is, after all, to be no war with France?"

"Not yet, Madame," he answered; "nor of Monsieur de Bernauld's making. I knew well that with such a man as he Navarre counted for more than private hate, or even private justice."

"It will come—it will come," said Jeanne, thoughtfully; "and in hanging La Hake we would at least have had justice on our side."

"Oh, Madame," replied De Gourdon, bitterly, "if

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it be but justification you want, have no fear but that at all time you will have ample cause. France will see well to that."

"But all this is incomprehensible to Monsieur de Bernauld. We have been so beset, Monsieur, by foes within and without," said the Queen, "men such as yon fellow at Tarbes, and a dozen others, high and low, sapping the loyalty of our people by lies, promises, and bribes, that it was a question whether an open rupture was not to be preferred. We therefore turned you into a kind of divination—*Sortes Sanctorum*, is it not, they call it?—as men seek guidance by a seeming haphazard text of Scripture. La Hake is deep in Catherine's counsels, and if I, as Queen, laid hands on him, even for a crime as black as this, it would cause, on some pretext or another, such a reprisal as would provoke war. Yet, had you maintained your common right and claim to public justice, hanged he would have been, and in the very square of Pau itself. It is not often, Monsieur, that the word of a simple gentleman can turn the destinies of nations, but so it has been to-day, and, as I have faith in God, it is for the best. The miracle will come. Now, my friend," and she turned to De Gourdon, "we must to work again. Monsieur de Bernauld, farewell until to-night."

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CHAPTER XV

HOW THE QUEEN ANSWERED THE INSULT OF TARBES

ONCE the replacing of Roger's torn and travel-soiled garments by something more fitting a Queen's presence had been seen to, the hours until evening passed wearily enough. The food for thought was doubtless abundant, but it was over-heavy for easy digestion, and to settle into peace was beyond me.

It is hard for a man to lay folded hands in his lap and do naught while a kind of witches' Sabbath is awhirl in the brain. For the time all control of thought had gone from me, and I was the prey of a score of elusive fancies that hunted my peace as dogs a hare. Fears for my lady, bitter hate to La Hake, grief for the little lad, repentance that I was not already on the road to Pau, wrath at the woman who had played liar and traitor: all these, and more, gnawed and tore me in turn, and not one could I put from me by sober thought.

Read I could not, and tramping the room till my blood quickened seemed but to give the demons a stronger life. In the end I bade Roger borrow me an axe, and for an hour I split wood in the cramped court behind the house, and toiled, hewed, and hacked till the sweat ran from me, and at the last found a kind

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of rest in the violence of labor as has many another troubled soul before me. Roger, I think, understood, but to the good dame, who had known me but four days, I seemed a madman, the common name in a wider world than hers for him who seeks to work out his salvation according to his lights.

The dusk was gathering in fast as I made my way to the Castle with Roger hard after me, three paces away. To suit the occasion, and match the dress that custom and necessity put upon me, I had changed my weapon for a light Spanish blade, good steel enough, but more a kind of a finish to a man's dress than a sword for hard use. Roger, too, carried a blade but little stouter than my own, and I remember well that the swing of it in his hand as he buckled it on puckered his face into a grim derision.

"My faith," said he, shaking it as a man would a cane, "'tis a good thing we go but to make a show of ourselves, for if it came to the keeping of my life whole within me I had liefer trust the mercies of a three-foot cudgel."

It was not alone because of the hour of the night that the dusk thickened, but also by reason of a heavy drift of clouds coming up from the south with that touch of dun in them that says thunder.

"We are like to have use for these cloaks, Master Blaise," said Roger to me over my shoulder, "and if the wind that's above there flattens, the street corners ere long will be black enough. Neither torch nor lamp will hold against it."

"As for that," answered I, "I know my way in the dark, but Marcel, I fear, is in for a soaked skin."

The Insult of Tarbes

"Trust Marcel to fend for himself," said Roger, with all one squire's optimism for the risks of another; "'twas La Hake I had in my mind, and not his skin but ours."

We were crossing the court-yard of the Castle as he spoke, and I had but time to turn at the doorway and say—

"God send him soon, whether by night or by day"; but as we climbed the stairs I heard him mutter—

"That's very well, but an open space and a little honest sunlight would be no harm."

Bearing in mind the Queen's command, I bade Roger leave our cloaks in charge of an attendant and follow me.

"By your leave, Monsieur," said he, peering past me through the doorway, "I would be but a crow among pigeons. Let me bide by myself here in the corner, though if any say to me, 'What dost thou here?' it's odds they'll put me out, for I'll but stare and stammer and have naught to answer."

Though in Roger's eyes there was brightness and animation enough to justify his diffidence, to the ambassador of France, had he not been a man holding such things in contempt, the display would be but poor and paltry. Many a great noble from Paris to Pau must have received him with a magnificence far outvying that of Jeanne d'Albret.

As wise a Queen as she was a woman, she knew Fénelon was not the man to be dazzled by any glitter of show, and Navarre had too sober a need for the careful husbanding of its scanty resources to warrant the unnecessary expenditure of a single crown.

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To all appearance, therefore, beyond a few added lights, the great hall was as if there had been no ambassador of France within the Château. There may have been a set and deliberate purpose in this absence of display, for in her astute knowledge of men, Jeanne d'Albret had her own method of moving the representative of the French court, and had no mind to spoil her plan by disconcerting or confusing his attention.

If Fénelon cared little for profusion, he could be touched by strength. Where common magnificence passed him by and was forgotten, what tended to real power stuck fast in the memory. Gilding, crystal, and silken hangings were but a matter of so much cost, and that was an end to them; but brains and men were a different merchandise, and Jeanne d'Albret's great hall of Orthez was notable for its guests. A significant show of power makes for peace, and could Queen Catherine have flung down the walls of Orthez that night she would have crushed in the one ruin three-fourths of the notables of Navarre, Béarn, Bigorre, Foix, and d'Albret, and not a few from Gascony and Guienne.

De Fontrailles of Castel-Jaloux, St. Maigrin of Bergerac, De Grammont from my own province of Béarn, d'Arros, the Queen's Viceroy of the same province and father to my friend De Montamar, De Bourniquil, Montclar, Rapin. To give a list would be to catalogue the loyal gentlemen of the Kingdom, but to them let me add the Scotchman, Montgommery, the slayer of King Henri at the tourney of the Rue Saint-Antoine in '59, the defender of Rouen, and the

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third soldier in France. In all setting of parties in a scale he was a man to be reckoned with.

That he should have been present at all was, perhaps, doubtful policy, but the Queen had a mind to show Fénélon two things. First, that she had the power to attract such a renowned soldier of fortune as was Montgomery; and next, that Navarre was not yet subservient to France. Both were suggestive, and in face of the two France might well take second thoughts; and seeing them, a man as shrewd as Fénélon would have somewhat to tell his mistress. I say his mistress, not his master, for on this occasion, at least, Fénélon represented Catharine the Queen Mother rather than Charles the Ninth.

De Montamar met me at the door and kept me in talk while we waited the coming of the Queen.

"Navarre owes you more than it knows," said he, when, in one of the pauses of the gossip with which, to avoid greater subjects, we filled up the time, I told him of my afternoon's interview. "Our organization is less complete than even De Gourdon dreams, and to plunge into war now is to plunge into a bottomless abyss. Three months hence it may be different, for by that time Coligny may be forced to fight for the very liberties the treaty of Lougoumeau is assumed to grant. It is not always the court that best knows the people."

"Bah," replied I, "I was but the voice of a day. Next week there may be some fresh outrage crying aloud—and then?"

"Next week," said he, "there may be no French ambassador in Navarre, and the thing will be less

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serious. See, the door is opening. Here comes the Queen, and there, to meet her, goes a man too good to be the mouthpiece of such a mistress as the Florentine."

Pausing a moment to welcome Fénélon, the Queen, with him at her side, passed slowly round the room. At almost every yard of the circuit there was a halt, and a greeting by name of some one or other of her nobles.

"'Tis a far ride from Nerac, Monsieur la Noue, but the King of France will understand the loyalty that prompts so warm a welcome to his ambassador. At last we have peace in Foix, Monsieur de Coumont; that rebel De Luxe will scarce unlearn his lesson in a hurry. The Count de Montgommery needs no presentation, I think, Monsieur l'Ambassadeur? Was it in England or in France that ye met? Ah! Monsieur de Piles, I hear strange things of Tarbes. There are some there who think there is no longer a Queen in Navarre. You, my lord, will teach them better if need be, though, indeed, the just punishment of even a single subject would grieve me. Monsieur de Bernauld," and she halted where I stood at the edge of the laneway cleared for her progress round the room, "with the permission of Monsieur de la Mothe, I would present you to the envoy of my good friend and cousin of France."

"Monsieur de Bernauld?" said Fénélon. "We have heard of Monsieur de Bernauld in Paris, and for my own part I can tell him that I love certain deeds of Spain no better than he does himself."

"Let Spain's deeds wait, Monsieur de la Mothe,"

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said Jeanne, dryly, "and let us rather talk of those of France. Tell Monsieur l'Ambassadeur how France hewed down Navarre's arms at Tarbes."

"Nay, Madame," cried Fénelon, "France could have no part in such an outrage."

"Tell me," said the Queen, "is Monsieur de Tavannes as well received at court as when he earned his marshal's staff in '52?"

"Why, yes, Madame, and rightly. The Marshal is a gallant soldier and a loyal gentleman."

"There are a thousand such in France," answered Jeanne, "but there are few marshals! Court favor counts for much, Monsieur l'Ambassadeur. Would Marshal Tavannes, do you think, risk his court favor by an attack on Navarre without full warrant? Never for an hour! Christopher Richarde, who did the hacking, is but the creature of the Toulouse Parliament and of this loyal gentleman! Had France, then, no part in the outrage?"

"My good cousin Catherine loves mercy, and so, through you, Monsieur, her gentle spirit begs me to forgive those traitors to their Queen, De Luxe, Monneins, d'Eschaux, and the rest, who have so long sapped our strength, but whose own strength is now, happily, broken. 'Tis a pity she loves not peace as well as mercy, 'tis pity, too, that she has mercy alone for Navarre's enemies, and none for Navarre. But let that pass. If it were not that I hold my prerogative of mercy from the King of kings, to whom we must all kneel for pardon, I might well reply to your petition: 'Tell Paris what things are done in Tarbes,' and so let that stand for answer.

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"But I have chosen another manner of reply. Look round you, Monsieur l'Ambassadeur, and in this hall find the answer Navarre sends France, not to your prayer for mercy alone, but also to the crime of Tarbes. As to De Luxe and the rest, let them within six weeks submit themselves and they have Jeanne de Navarre's word for safe conduct and pardon. Submission full, humble, and complete, Monsieur l'Ambassadeur. No Jesuitical reservations, you understand, for I call God to witness that a further treachery will find no forgiveness; no, not though the crown of France hung on the issue."

As the Queen spoke she raised her voice with the full purpose that all might hear, and throughout the hall there fell at first a silence, broken only by her words and the faint rustle of the women's skirts. Then, as she spoke of Richarde's outrage on the national honor, a murmur grew on every side, only to fall into quiet again at an imperious gesture of hand and arm. But at the proud appeal to the devotion of Navarre as proven by those present, there swelled out an acclamation that drowned all other sound, and that was infinitely comforting to all except Monsieur de la Mothe; and yet, perhaps, even to him also, since such a demonstration made for peace, and, in his personal attachment to Queen Jeanne, Fénelon desired nothing better than peace.

As to the pardoning of the rebel nobles, the outburst that followed the Queen's words might have been construed as satisfaction at her clemency, or have been no more than the exuberance of loyalty.

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The latter according to my thought, but it suited the ambassador of France to assume the former.

"It is in mercy, Madame," said he, bowing as low as ever upon one knee, "that kings of earth come likeliest to that King of kings of whom you spoke. To please the God of heaven and one's people upon earth," and with a gesture he drew the crowded room into the scope of his words, "is not given to every ruler."

"Ay, but," said Jeanne, looking him full in the face, and with a firm set of the mouth that became her well and brought out the man-likeness of her nature, "the King of kings has justice as well as mercy, and De Luxe will do well to see that that side of truth slips not his memory. As for this Christopher Richarde, let me but lay hands on him, and Monsieur de Tavannes may have my word for it, he hangs."

Again there was an outburst of acclamation, and while it was still at its loudest I felt a sudden pressure on the shoulder—a pressure that made me start and wince, man though I was.

"For the Lord's sake look beyond her," said Roger's voice in a hoarse whisper behind my ear. "As sure as you're living La Hake's in Orthez, and the Queen knows it."

Across my cheek a wrinkled lean brown hand shot out, and following the pointed finger I saw the girl of Orleans and Auch, but as changed from her sombre demureness as a butterfly from a grub. So close behind Jeanne was she that I must have seen her the instant the Queen entered the room

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had I not followed so eagerly the interview with Fénélon.

Though no more than a week had passed since I had seen her she had aged, whether from weariness or the scenes she had passed through, and all her wealth of courtly Paris finery but underlined her haggard looks. What that finery was I know not, being but a man, and to say truth the gust of passion that filled me left but little room for the noting of silks, satins, laces, and suchlike frippery.

"Ha! Monsieur de Bernauld," said the Queen, following my glance and misinterpreting its show of anger, "said I not, rightly, 'Wait till to-morrow!' Have you still need to ride to Pau?"

"Ay, Madame," answered I, bitterly forgetful of everything but the little lad and his stricken mother. "To Pau, or anywhere out of Orthez, lest I be a sharer in bloodguiltiness. The court that shelters the slayer of my son and joins hands with a murderer is no place for me."

So near was the Queen, and so great the stir of acclamation still filling the hall, that I doubt if any but she herself heard me. That she heard and understood I read in her face, though at first she made no direct reply. Turning to De Gourdon she spoke to him softly; then, to me:

"In twenty minutes, Monsieur de Bernauld," and passed on as if she spoke of some trivial thing of the court, leaving me staring and biting my lips.

The crowd closed in behind her, and in the crush an arm was linked in mine, and I was drawn through the press towards the daïs at the farther end of the hall.

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"Not that way," I cried, struggling to free myself, "but out into the open."

"It is the Queen's command, therefore it is this way," said the voice of De Gourdon; "and for the Lord's sake strike no note of confusion here."

"The Queen," I broke out, furiously, "the Queen—"

"Ay, the Queen," said he, "and when the Queen of Navarre bids you speak face to face with her in her cabinet, who are you to cry out, and in her own hall? Understand, Monsieur de Bernauld, there are many gentlemen of Navarre, but only one Queen."

"Do you threaten?" I cried.

"Peace, man, peace; what the pother is about I know not, and yet for all my ignorance I dare swear Queen Jeanne is in the right of it. If you hold yourself aggrieved by what I say I am a man not hard to find. See the Queen you shall, since 'tis her will, but, on my word, I think she pushes condescension overfar. There you have my thought frankly. Ha! the cabinet at last. 'Tis no easy thing forcing a passage through such a mob. Now, Monsieur de Bernauld, smooth out these black looks; here, at least, they are out of place."

There for ten minutes we sat in silence, listening to the mingled sounds borne through the closed door—the murmur of voices, swish of silks, tramp of feet—and eying each other like two dogs on the snarl for they know not what. Then the Queen entered by a door at the end of the room farther from the hall, and we both rose.

She wasted no time on ceremonies.

"Monsieur de Bernauld, there are three ways in

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which a queen might answer such words as yours. One is after the fashion of Philip of Spain, and of which we had best say no more. My cousin Catherine would have stared you down, and Besme, Monsieur de Guise's bully, would have seen to an eternal quittance for the insult!"

"You have always Monsieur La Hake, Madame," said I, smartly, as I thought.

At the words De Gourdon turned on me in wrath, but the Queen went on with not so much as a change in tone :

"For my part, in the school of suffering I have learned sympathy and patience, and so, setting aside the Queen, I speak as a mother to a father. The boy's murder is no more a murder than it was this afternoon when you yourself elected to take its avenging into your own hands. You chose your course ; abide by it, Monsieur de Bernauld ; to-night I have set you on the path.

"As for Mademoiselle de Romenay, are you so blind that you cannot see the Queen Mother of France wants but the shadow of a pretext to crush Navarre, while Condé and Coligny are still unprepared? For what other purpose was the treaty of Longoumeau signed but to tie us of The Religion hand and feet while they made ready at their leisure? Crush Navarre and Rochelle, and all Angoumois is half shorn of their strength. Now, mark : the pretext must come from us lest Elizabeth of England put out a hand and stay the iniquity. Who, then, suffers most, you or I? You with your single loss, heavy and grievous though it is, or I who bear insult and contumely in patience, be-

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cause I have faith that God will one day avenge His elect; and the times are His, not mine.

"Do you think one of my lineage can lightly bear the wrong of Tarbes? I have my answer ready, Monsieur de Bernauld, and it is this: hack down my d'Albret motto if they will, and though 'by the grace of God I still am what I am,' yet I put this new motto in its place; through all their treachery and plots 'I will either make or will find out a way' to safety.

"But there is worse behind, and yet, for Navarre's sake, and for the truth's sake, I bow to it. Worse, because it strikes the mother as well as the nation, because it strikes the soul rather than the body. Even more than you, Monsieur de Bernauld, I have reason to hate Mademoiselle de Romenay. It is not alone that she is thrust as a spy into the very heart of our court, and yet must needs be accepted smilingly lest worse come of it—that does not content my merciful cousin of Medici, but that subtle Florentine who plagues France for its sins, and through France the world, holds that fourteen is not overearly an age at which to debauch the Prince of Béarn. This, too, or at least the risk of it, I must needs endure lest the innocent of Navarre be made to suffer.

"To do her justice—I talk of Mademoiselle—I think she had no thought of La Hake's villany. Yet, even though she was with him hand and glove in his wickedness, which of us two has the greater cause to hate her? You, whose little lad is laid away in God's keeping, or I, who must face in silence this outrage on an eternal life? Dare you compare the two, and dare you again cry out against your Queen that she be-

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friends a murderess? This is no matter of common policy; this is no matter of base expediency. Policy! expediency! I hate the words; they are the whited egg-shell, hiding, perhaps, a rottenness within. This is no such thing, it is the very saving of a nation, the laying of a son of promise on an altar of sacrifice in the faith of the God of Abraham. The mother has spoken to the father, Monsieur de Bernauld—tomorrow let the subject give his answer to the Queen."

Leaving me no time to reply, she swept out of the room with a carriage and a gesture I have never forgotten in all the turbulent fifty years since then.

As the door closed De Gourdon turned to me:

"For all that I knew nothing of the business, said I not truly that the Queen was in the right of it?"

What answer I returned I know not, nor knew at the time, for my blood was on fire and roaring in my ears like a furnace. Hot as it was, it was cool enough before morning, for in the dark La Hake played barber-surgeon to quiet the fever by a sound bloodletting, and even in the heart of the summer a blind archway in Orthez is but a chilly resting-place with a sword-stroke as bedfellow.

CHAPTER XVI

LA HAKE MAKES A THRUST IN THE DARK

BETWEEN De Gourdon's closing of the door behind me, and the play of the air on my bare head as I stood in the court-yard, I have recollection of nothing. Needs must that I found my way down by the Queen's private stairway, but I have no memory of it, and if the sentry challenged me, as was his duty, that, too, and how I answered, is a blank. Had I sought entrance instead of exit I doubt not he would have brought me to my senses; but as it was I passed. The play of the wind on my temples I remember, and how it lifted my hair and seemed cool for all the night's sultriness.

The threatened storm was upon us, and except for the blaze of light from the windows the court-yard was as black as a tomb. No rain had fallen as yet, and the thunder was still playing with the echoes among the peaks above Roncesvalles, a dozen leagues away; with such a wind stirring it would be on us before long, and with it the deluge.

All that came into my thought in that curious consciousness in which a man has two beings alert and thinking within him at the one moment—call them which you will—the being of soul or of spirit, of reason,

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or of mind, or of instinct, and mingled with it all was the memory of the Queen's words, and a war as to the path to follow. Then I remembered Roger, and for an instant turned to the main entrance; but only for an instant. Let him find his way as best he could, the bare thought of seeking him out in the crowd, whose blurred shadows I saw cast upon the right, was abhorrent. Roger must fend for himself.

Back, then, to my lodging to think out my course in quiet; and hatless, cloakless, I crossed the courtyard and passed out into the street.

The wind had flattened as Roger had predicted, and was already howling through Orthez as only a summer storm can, and with its blast—as Roger, too, had predicted—the few dim lamps had given up the ghost, and the lanes and streets were vaults of blackness, wolves' gullets, into which a man entered and was swallowed up. But wind and gloom troubled me little. Storm and darkness were in my mood, and at such an hour few stirred abroad in Orthez, so that the roadways were my own.

In the few minutes I had lingered in the courtyard a change had come. The fore-promise of a vicious rain was falling in heavy, solitary drops, and already the thunder was rolling north to the Landes. With head bent, and taking the centre of the street, more from a soldier's instinct than heed of possible danger, I plodded through the growing downpour until a heavier gust, lashing the rough pavement as with a flail of water and scattering the spray like so much chaff, drove me to shelter. Such violence, I thought, must be short-lived, and so, to wait the better humor

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of the night, I turned into the black chasm of a cellar entrance, and stood listening in the darkness to the thunder roaring above me to the south, and the intermittent splash of water at my feet.

A turn of the street had hidden the Château and its lights, and of all Orthez I alone seemed alive. Right and left was the howl of the storm and the trickle of water from the sodden street, but no voice of man, nor sound of man's life. As I stood staring at the dark a grim thought sprung in my brain—a thought that jumped well with the wild nature of the night and my own solitariness. Orthez was a city of the dead, a place of tombs, and I the only ghost walking the silences!

At the thought I laughed aloud, as men do when their nerves are overwrought, and while the laugh was still on my lips there came sounds from down the street that gave the thought the lie—the sounds of men in haste, with feet splashing in the wet roadway, and speaking in smothered tones, as cowed by the dark and the wildness of the night.

There were five of them as I saw, more by their shadows on the film of rain coating the street than by their substance, and in pity for their forlornness I cried out:

"There is shelter here of a kind, poor enough, but better than the open on such a night."

As I spoke there fell the fullest flash of lightning of the storm, and in its glare I saw the five had halted, and that every one was armed with sword and dagger, and carried a steel bonnet on the head, then, in a wink, the blackness was on us again, folding us

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all the thicker by very reason of the sudden brightness.

While I waited, with a growing consciousness that there had been a rashness in my pity, a voice came out of the gloom that made my heart leap, though I had heard its sound but once. It was that of La Hake himself.

"By all the saints, it is the very man! So the woman of the lodging spoke truth, after all, and what we missed in the lair we have found in the open. After this who shall say the devil has no providences? At him, fellows, and make a speedy end, both for our skin's sake and lest there come a rescue."

Had I but had my Paris blade and a cloak for my left arm I would have had some heart and hope. What De Crussenay could do at Rouen in open day I might well do at Orthez in the pitchy dark of the blind arch, since they struck at they saw not what, while I had at least a faint grayness to guide eye and hand. But the courtly Spanish blade spoiled all, and as I stood a foot deep in the covered gloom, I cursed the finicky folly of fashion that disarmed a man of his honest weapon, and in its place mocked him with a plaything.

But presently, as I stood on guard, there came a touch of comfort. It was an easy thing enough for La Hake to cry "On fellows!" but there was not one of the rascals who did not sorrowfully remember that he had but one life, and so was loth to squander it. They had come out on an errand of pure murder, thinking to catch me unarmed and unawares in my lodging, and lo! it was a duel in the dark, with odds that

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more than one of them would lose that which he came to take.

"Ay," said I, seeking to drive home this knowledge by a wholesome suggestion, "ye had best take thought for your skin's sake. Blaise de Bernauld gives more than he takes. Come thou first, thou slaughterer of babes, thou Herod, thou cowardly, wolfish cur. Thou canst bravely murder an infant in its mother's arms, but when it comes to facing a man thou criest, 'On fellows!' and hangest back thyself."

If I thought to stir him by shame, I might as well have spared my breath, and for two reasons, since it moved him not so much as the wind. One was that a man's breath might presently be a man's life, the other that my voice told them my whereabouts, and brought a lunge across the blackness. For an instant the steel lay in a dim gray streak on the gloom, but I turned the thrust aside and had at least learned the length of the fellow's arm. Then there came another flash, followed hard by a roar overhead, and in the glare I saw La Hake behind, and his four hounds facing me in the arc of a circle, with the rain streaming from all five.

In the gross blackness that succeeded I got home a thrust, a prick at the best, for there was but a touch of pressure on the point and no one of the shadows as much as staggered; a prick at the best, but it served as a spur to caution, and I ran but little risk in the beating of the air which followed. All this delay without advantage jumped badly with La Hake's schemes, and, like the dog he was, he played

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a dog's trick on his own men, thinking by the sacrifice of one to make an end of me.

"Be ready, you fellows to right and left," he cried; and then, with all his strength, he thrust one of the centre rascals sheer into my arms.

Had the rogues known his plot, it might have gone hard with me, but all alike were taken by surprise, and my wit being the quicker of the two, and the shorter blade standing me in stead for once, I had him through the ribs and flung back, shrieking, to the kennel before the men at the sides closed in.

Round on La Hake swung the fellow left in the middle.

"No more such tricks," he cried. "By the Lord, if it were not for losing the pay I would run you through with less scruple than I would drown a rat. Come into the line and take your part like a man. I have more fear of you behind than of him in front."

"Tut," said La Hake, turning the body aside with his foot. "There are but three to share the pay—'tis four crowns apiece in place of three."

"Come thou to the front for all that," answered the fellow, "lest by some prank of thine I will pay for the rest and lose my own four crowns."

"What?" cried La Hake, with a sneer. "Ye are three, and yet afraid of one man in the dark?"

"Ay, because of the dark," answered the other, "let me but see the whites of his eyes, and I ask no more; yet, for all that, I fear you more within touch behind, rather than him in the dark before."

"Bah! close in, fellows, and make an end," cried

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La Hake, "lest the watch come upon us, and you lose both prey and pay."

In towards the mouth of the arch drew the four figures, thrusting blindly as they came. For a moment the thought flashed through me to leap full on La Hake, and at least rid the earth of his villany though I died on the instant; but the uncertainty of the stroke checked the impulse, and, fencing their point warily, I inched slowly back. But for the occasional blaze of lightning their eyes would have grown accustomed to the darkness, and I had not held out as many seconds as I did minutes, but the sudden glare dazed and blinded them, and for all its power the duration of light was overshoot to let them press in with safety.

Of rasp of steel there was but little. It was rather a fumbling in the gloom with every nerve tense, since no man knew when he might not stumble on death. There was, therefore, little noise, and at last, over the shuffle of the feet and the rare clang of metal, I heard what all through I had hearkened for—the tramp of feet on the sloppy street.

"Navarre! Navarre!" I shouted, and leaping forward whirled the blades aside with a circular sweep, following up the attack with a lunge so wofully misjudged, that, though it struck home, it snapped the Spanish steel short by the hilt.

"Navarre! Navarre!" I cried again, hurling the hilt at him whom I judged to be La Hake, and drawing back to avoid the returning thrusts.

Behind, unseen, the archway dropped by steps towards a cellar, and, slipping at the top, I stumbled and

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fell upon one knee as the lightning blazed out again. With a roar La Hake was upon me, and in the white glare I saw his arm drawn back to thrust, while behind, and out in the tempest, a new shadow, leaning forward, peered in from the street; a flash, a second of time, no more, but the glistening walls of the passage, the three black figures bending towards me as I lay half prone, the fourth leaning against the brickwork, his sword dropped, and one hand pressed hard on his ribs, and the fifth beyond the rest on the sopped and shining street, is burned, every line of it, into my brain, but chiefest the gleam of the fore-shortened blade two feet away from my throat. All that I remember, but I remember no more.

"Navarre! Navarre!" I cried for the third time, flinging my hands forward in a wild attempt to grapple with the bare steel as the darkness closed in—darkness not alone of the night, but a darkness that was the very shadow of death itself.

That he struck, and struck viciously, I know, and if any man doubt it, I have that to show him which I have carried ever since, and which it is hard to give the lie to.

But for the sound of the feet on the pavement, and the terror of the fifth shadow staring into the abyss of dark, La Hake would have repeated the blow, but as a master in the art of sword-strokes, he was, on the whole, well content; and well he might be. No man can desire a fairer mark than an upturned throat and breast, nor a weaker advantage than the weight of the body to follow the weight of the arm.

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CHAPTER XVII

ONE WAY OF CURING THE HEART-BREAK

HAD La Hake had the use of honest daylight, or even a groping in the sheer dark, I make no doubt the records of Blaise de Bernauld had ended that July night in Orthez. As it was, the alternation of white light and utter blackness shook his nerve, and for that time death passed me by, though not without a heavy stroke of his wing. Never, quite, has life been the same, and there have been few winters of the fifty flown since then that have not brought with them what I may call a tender recollection of that struggle in the dark.

What followed the spasm of pain as the blade went home is only known to me through another's telling, for I awoke no more to consciousness until I awoke to see my lady's face bent over mine; and a dim vision it was, by reason of sore weakness.

With so much of strangeness to fill his eyes, it is no wonder that an hour slipped past Roger unheeded. Though at Chatillon there had been much coming and going, and an abundance of hospitality, there had been but little gaiety. In those sorrowful, uncertain, and troublous days it would have seemed to Coligny both sin and crime to fling away on a vain show that which

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would hire defence for The Religion. The guests were, therefore, of the sterner sort, and their entertainment, ample as it was, without display. Had Queen Jeanne consulted only her own inclinations, her life at Pau or Orthez would have been as austere as that of the Admiral in Chatillon, but to seem a queen in the common eye one must live as a queen, and so the court, though rigid in its morality as that of Charles was lax, had its brighter side, with but little of splendor, indeed, but what was to the plain man-at-arms an undreamed-of beauty and magnificence.

The flare of the many lights, the faint breath of perfume on the air, the play and interchange of color, were a revelation and a delight. When the interest of these flagged there came the tags of talk with the bruitings of names known even so far away as in the Orléannais, and at some of which the old soldier pricked his ears and stared.

His undefined and almost unconscious contempt for this petty kingdom of Navarre was fast shifting into a kind of pride that the house of De Crussenay, fallen though its fortunes were, had its share and place together with men whose names carried a respect with them even into far-off Flanders. So the hour passed, and another might have followed at its back had not De Montamar roused him into wakefulness.

"Hulloa, friend," he cried, "hath Monsieur de Bernauld given thee the slip that thou art hunting the hall with thine eyes in such a fashion? Search, man, search, but thou wilt find nothing. Monsieur de Bernauld has made his bow and gone home to bed like

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the man of sense he is, and, my faith, I think by the look of those lines about the eyes, thou mightest do worse."

"The Sieur gone, and I not with him?" cried Roger.

"Gone! and alone?"

"How then?" said De Montamar, laughing. "Is Monsieur de Bernauld on dry nursing? A man who found his way twice to Florida and back, and banged the Dons in his going, is scarce likely to miss his road in Orthez on a summer's night."

"Ay, but, my lord, there is La Hake to reckon with," answered Roger, seriously. "La Hake is in Orthez, and if the Sieur meet him with no better weapon by his side than, saving your presence, the fool's toy your worship carries, the father is like to follow the son."

"La Hake in Orthez?" cried De Montamar. "How dost thou know that, my friend? He rode to Pau, thou by way of the south, and thou hadst no talk of La Hake in De Bernauld's lodgings."

"See, Monsieur," and Roger pointed to the daïs where was the Queen with her women, La Mothe Fénelon, and certain of the chiefs of Navarre and Béarn, "behind the Queen, and two to her right."

"Ay, Mademoiselle de Romenay, come south for her health, by the wish of Madame the Queen Mother."

"'Tis La Hake's Mademoiselle, for all that," answered Roger; "and since she is here, La Hake is here. Find one kite, and the other's not far off."

"Then, for the Lord's sake," said De Montamar, "get out of this, and in haste! I had thought this

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was some private feud, but if Catherine de Medici—nay, I have it: 'tis no affair of the Queen Mother's; a hundred to one 'tis Spain's answer to De Bernauld's raid in the west. I have heard that he showed Philip's men little ceremony and less courtesy, though, doubtless, as much as they deserved. If the guess be right, it will take a longer arm than thine, my friend, to parry the thrust. Tell him I have bid myself to breakfast, and as for thee, lose no time on the road. What? Thou knowest not Orthez? Why, it is thou who shouldst be dry nursed. Out of the court-yard by the right, then the first street to the left, and after that—plague on it, man, canst thou not hammer with thy sword-hilt on a door and ask the way? 'Tis not the first time thou hast set foot in a strange town, I will wager; and an old soldier is like a dog on a hot scent—he will nose his way straight as the line runs."

With his cloak up to his ears, and mine tucked under his arm, Roger drove headforemost into the storm. The swish of rain and whistle of the wind in his ears added to his confusion, and in his perplexity he grumbled at the vileness of the night and swore at La Hake alternately, and with impartial fervor. In such weather there would be few abroad to set him on his way, and though he knew the turn of the street as it approached the Château, all beyond was a blank.

'Twas very well to say hammer on the first door with a sword-hilt. De Montamar, one of the Queen's viscounts, and as well known in Orthez as the towered bridge, might rouse whom he would and be sure

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of courtesy, but for a battered soldier to waken honest folks out of sleep to ask a drunken-like question would earn more curses than straight answers. No, no, he must fend for himself.

Chut! if the south could do naught else, it could rain; ay, and blow too! Plague take Navarre— plague take Orthez and its wind-swept streets— plague take the sodden bewilderment of the night! Pausing in his little better than aimless tramp he flung my cloak above his own, and, as he stood in a lull in the blast waiting some divination to point his path, above the splash of the streets there came a cry, thin-pitched and eager, and after the silence the cry again, twice repeated.

Breaking into a dog-trot he ran down the empty street, his feet ringing and echoing on the washed stones, and his ears cocked for the next shout. What followed is told already. Passing the darker loom of an archway he heard the cry the third time, followed by the sound of a heavy fall and the jar of steel. Bending, he stared into the vault, and at the moment, as he stood with his hand to his brow, the lightning broke out afresh, flinging its glare full into my face. An instant of revelation only, then the night closed, and while still blinded by the sudden dark he was flung staggering back into the road behind, and three or four figures jostling past dashed down the street and disappeared.

Drawing his sword, Roger advanced the point well before him, and with slow caution entered the passage, groping his way along the wall with his left hand. Presently he half stumbled, and reaching

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down, found me flung forward on my face, though till the coming of the next flash he knew not that he had found the man whom he had set out to seek. Stir me he dared not, leave me he dared not, and his lungs had their full share of shouting ere help came. Of the two who at length answered his cries, he packed one to the Château praying for the Lord's sake to send a surgeon, for that Monsieur de Bernauld hadⁿ been done to death in the dark. The other he sent to seek a lantern, torch, anything to end the curse of darkness. The latter returned first, and under the glare of a flambeau the two kept vigil until the arrival of De Montamar and Desnœux, the surgeon in personal attendance on the Queen.

The story of a man with a sword's thrust in his ribs is one that needs no telling in these days, or, indeed, in any other that I have ever known. La Hake had been wellnigh as good as his purpose, and at first Desnœux despaired. There were, they told me, five days of a raving unconsciousness, during which I killed and was killed by La Hake a score of times, but in the end I woke to life to find my lady's eyes looking down into mine. Hard as Marcel had ridden, the messenger who followed him rode harder, and for all the ten hours' start there was not a third of that time between them at the finish.

See how good comes out of evil. From La Hake's murderous villany sprung a blessing to my lady and to me; and also, though I say it in all humility, to Navarre itself. With my lady the one nail helped drive out the other. Dear as had been the little lad, the father was dearer still, and in the labor and

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thought and self-forgetfulness compelled by nursing the one, Mother Nature brought solace and salve for the loss of the other. The lethargy of grief was broken up, and in place of a mumbness that bordered hard on denial of God came a passion of energy and an hourly communion of spirit with the Father of all mercies. Where had been a blank of life was a labor of love, and out of the unremitting watching and prayer there grew a peace which held possession even when the tension of thought was relieved.

For me the gain took another shape. Had the morning broken on me with the blood still hot in my veins, and the wrath unsubdued, I doubt not I would have ridden out of Orthez, and at last out of Navarre, once and for all. La Hake's barber-surgery was rough, but it was efficacious, and with time for thought came a cooler and more righteous judgment, so that I did not that in haste which, however leisurely repented of, pride would have fixed as irrevocable.

As to Navarre. It is not for me to enlarge upon its gain. It is enough to say that every soldier has his value, and if some count for more than others, why, the praise is not to them, since no man can give his country more than loyalty, devotion, his treasure, and his blood.

All that, you may take it, was not learned at the waking into consciousness, when, indeed, I was too weak to even marvel how my lady, who had been at Bernauld, was now in Orthez, and in no more—as it seemed—than the space of a night. Nor, in these first days, was there more than a lazy wonder at, and

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a devout thankfulness for, her presence, her soothing, and her cheerfulness.

Even when strength crept back, at first haltingly, but afterwards with steady increase, I spoke but once of the little lad. A sentence or two, as she sat by me, no more; for at the mention of his name the brave face fell a-trembling, and my lady's lips on mine, and the touch of her wet cheek, stopped the words.

"Not yet," said she—"not yet. God has given me a kind of a peace, but to speak of it is to break it."

That silence should move her to peace was no surprise, being, indeed, simple nature, for there is nothing more healing to the spirit than love poured out in wordless sympathy; but that she, in her sorrow of bereavement, should calmly endure to hear of the Queen's French guest was an astonishment. Yet, when I broke out bitter-tongued upon her, she prayed me to be silent, since it was possible the girl was less vile than we had thought.

"Why," said I, turning on my shoulder in the bed, "out of what fountain of a woman's mercy came that thought?"

"Out of no fountain of my mercy," said she, "but out of the Queen's justice. She abhorred the girl no less than I, and yet for that very abhorrence was the more bent on weighing her guilt fairly, lest prejudice should warp judgment."

"Abhorred, not abhor?" said I. "Has the cunning devil caught the Queen as she caught De Crussenay? I thought women had a keener eye to a woman than that."

"La Hake's treachery has swung the girl round,"

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said my lady, paling a shade at the mention of the villain's name, "and she is now all devotion to the Queen, and all remorse for having consented to play so vile a part."

"Pray God," I cried, striking the bed with my clinched hand, "the Queen trusts her with nothing that touches Navarre. Catharine de Medici chooses her tools well, and may be trusted to see that none of them rusts on her hands or cuts her fingers. Dost thou not see whence all this springs, and where it leads? Here was she at the Queen's court with her very skirts splashed with La Hake's crime, unmasked, discredited, and her mission foredoomed to failure. Yet out of the very crime that damned her she snatches not alone safety, but frank confidence and an open field of labor. Devotion, forsooth; devotion to the black devil, say I."

"Nay, but," said my lady, taking my hand in hers and smoothing out the fingers from their wrathful grip, "hadst thou but seen the sorrow in her face; hadst thou but heard her sobbing as she knelt, not alone to the Queen, but to me; hadst thou but heard the shame with which she openly confessed her errand to Navarre; hadst thou but heard her loathing of the court of France, of Catherine, ay, and of herself, her tearful submission to the Queen, her prayer for dismissal—"Though," said she, "the Queen of France has a long arm and a longer memory, and to leave Navarre against her will is to meet death I know not where and in what form. But let me go, Madame, let me go, since perhaps in death I can find your forgiveness!"—hadst thou heard all that, and ten

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times more than that, thou wouldst have been no sterner than the Queen."

"'A long arm, and a longer memory'; ay, there she quoted La Hake," said I. "By my faith, a fitting original. So, by a lie and a whine the spy of the Florentine has won all she had lost, and much more to boot! Said I not right that Catherine de Medici chooses her tools well."

"Since when have you found the Queen a fool?" said my lady, slowly. "And which will form the truer judgment—Madame Jeanne, who has spoken with her face to face, ay, and sifted her with ruthless completeness, or Monsieur Blaise, who has spoken with her not at all and has a hole in his ribs to the hurting of his temper? Yet, for your peace' sake, I may tell you that the Queen's confidences are but little likely to work Navarre harm, since she speaks of no purpose so far ahead of the act that Paris can hear of it until all's done."

"Then, in Heaven's name, why tell her aught?" cried I.

"For the same reason," said my lady, with a laugh, "that one gives a child a toy—to keep it out of mischief, and lest, empty-handed, it should work danger. The Queen holds the girl is honest in her repentance. Suppose the Queen is right, there is a friend gained; suppose the Queen is wrong, she has parried the thrust and holds an advantage at no cost."

"And what does De Crussenay say to all this?"

"Oh!" and my lady laughed again, "Monsieur de Crussenay is more a woman's bond-slave than ever was Monsieur de Bernauld; and yet I have known a

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time when his devotion would have stuck at little, and not even the opposition of a king could set a period to it."

"And since when," said I, slipping a hand up to her chin—"since when has that time passed?"

"Nay," she whispered, laying her cheek on mine, "in my heart I believe it never will be past, and that so long as I live I will ever be the first woman in the world to you."

God knows she was right. Even now I hold as a firm faith that she is still so near as to be the first and only woman. The dead are nearer than we think, and every pulse of time draws them closer; and were it not so, the world would be but a desolate place to us who grow old, and for whom the sacred spots on earth's breast multiply fast.

"But De Crussenay," said I again; "what of him?"

"He is half his time in Pau and half in Orthez," said my lady; "and is shamefaced every time he rides to the court, and sore-hearted every time he rides away. For the lad's sake, I pray the girl plays no part, for she turns him round her fingers like a woollen thread."

"At Pau? Is the court at Pau?"

"Why, yes," said Jeanne, bending and kissing my lips. "Affairs of state must move, even though Monsieur de Bernauld be stretched on his back. In three weeks' time De Luxe and the others make their submission, and the pacification of Navarre, being no small thing, must be prepared for."

"Then in three weeks' time," said I, "I must needs be in Pau; and take my word for this, he who looks

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for the pacification of Navarre by the submission of De Luxe leaves out of count the hatred of the Queen Mother and the zeal of Philip. Peace in Navarre is the salvation of The Religion, and that is a thing that neither the hate of France nor the bigotry of Spain will endure."

"Thou at Pau; and in three weeks?" cried my lady. "Thou, with a wound I could even now hide two fingers in? Truly, I think at times that Navarre comes first and the wife second."

Which was true enough in a sense, as it is of every man who calls himself the Queen's servant; and had I forgotten it, Jeanne, my wife, would not have been slack to put me in remembrance.

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CHAPTER XVIII

WE RIDE TO PAU

THANKS to nature, my lady's nursing, and Des-nœux' skill, less than the three weeks found me able to sit a horse once more; but though to Jeanne healing of spirit had come through self-forgetfulness, her unwearied watchings by day and by night had sorely sapped her strength. She therefore made the journey to Pau by litter, thus spinning out what is no more than a man's after-dinner ride to a two days' labor.

This time La Hake, unless he had had a troop at his back, could have caught us in no snare, for the Queen herself saw to it that we had guards enough. Although no woman was ever more free from superstition than Jeanne d'Albret, yet in some bizarre fashion my life stood in her eyes for the liberties of Navarre, an omen, as it were, of their loss or preservations. In her fancy the triumph of La Hake would have pre-saged the triumph of France and the Catholic party, while if, in the contest which was now between us, I prevailed, so likewise would the cause of Navarre and The Religion prevail. A kind of heathenish notion, perhaps, but in every age there is a groping after a sign, and there are few who have not at some

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crisis or another of life craved from the unseen a visible manifestation by which to prop their faith.

It was on this ride to Pau that the story of the four days from Auch was told.

"Man," said I to De Crussenay when it was ended, "how came it that through all that dastardly business you forgot you had a dagger by your side? Surely there must have been some slackening of the vigilance, some moment of unwatchfulness in which you could have got home a stroke! That you are in no haste to avenge your father I know, which is very Christian, though it goes against the grain of a common man. That you are no coward I also know, but there are times when it is as much a man's duty to take life as to save life."

"I remembered Rouen," answered he, "and so held my hand."

"You remembered Rouen," I cried, "and so spared your father's murderer for the father's sake! Now, of all the—"

"By your leave," said he. "For all that La Hake is a scoundrel, he killed my father in fair fight, and so I owe him no more than if they had fought foot to foot in that gap in the woods yonder. What I remembered of Rouen was my mother. Madame was too far off for a second stroke, and had I killed La Hake— They were an unholy crew, Monsieur de Bernauld, men with more and worse devils in them than the devil of blood, and so I kept my dagger for—" and he turned with a gesture to the litter which carried my lady.

I knew too much of the scum of camps to misunder-

We Ride to Pau

stand him; and to such lawless scoundrels as La Hake would by preference choose to ride under him, nothing on God's earth would be sacred.

"I do not ask you if I did right," De Crussenay went on as I sat silent, "for in such things a man must carry a conscience for himself."

"Ay," I answered, "you did right enough; and I have to ask your pardon for a bitter speech. But when it comes to a matter of conscience, what says Roger to the flat lie he set his oath to?"

"He has his answers, as what man would not?" said De Crussenay. "One, that for aught he knew you were at Pau, and therefore it was no lie, and, being no lie, no false oath. When that plea failed—as fail it does, being pure Jesuitry—he had a second. I am De Crussenay's born and bred, said he, and to fight for my Sieur with sword and tongue is no more than my duty. Was it not held for righteousness to Rahab the harlot that she lied to the saving of a stranger? How much the more, then, for the saving of the last of the Crussenays, whose bread I eat? Though," added De Crussenay, "he has eaten but little of mine this many a year."

Entering Pau by the western gate at the head of the long curve that sweeps up the slope from the river's bank, we found the city buzzing like a hive of its own bees. If the ambassador of France had drawn the nobles of Navarre to Orthez, the submission of De Luxe and his fellow-traitors had filled Pau with its bone and sinew, for the streets were thronged so that a man could but travel them at a foot's pace.

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While still under the city walls De Montamar met us, and took us in charge through the short, winding way that led from the gate to the Château, which we entered by the eastern drawbridge, having made a half-circle round the moat. Me he greeted as an old friend received back from death.

"On my word," said he, as we pushed our way through the throng, "I thought we were a head, a heart, and a hand the poorer when I saw you that black night under the cellar archway, and I was in sore doubt which of the three was the heaviest loss. More than you owe Madame and Desnoeux a debt."

"As for you, Monsieur," and he turned to De Crussenay, "'tis common gossip that between France and Navarre you are well served with friends at court. It is given to few men in the Little Kingdom to have both the lion and the bear on his side; but, with Tarbes in our mind, there are few of our party at least who grudge you your favor. Has he told you of all this?"

"Never a word," said I, "except that the Queen had received him, and had been—as indeed she is to all—more courteous than he deserved."

"No more than that?" cried De Montamar. "Why, there is not a man of our faction—at least of us who are younger—who would not have given his left hand for that same reception. It was at Orthez, the morning of the day the Queen set out for Pau, and therefore in the presence of a greater company than ordinarily suits the Queen's simplicity. There had been some talk, I think, between Queen Jeanne and that French damsel. Ha! Monsieur de Crussenay, why

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hang out the red signal so broadly? There are a score of men in Pau this moment who would risk bare steel for as good a title to so much color. Out before the whole court, noble and simple, black cassock and satin cloak, the Queen cried, 'We have heard much, Monsieur de Crussenay, though not too much, of the insult put upon us at Tarbes. But we have heard too little of the man who that day took his life in his hand, and for Navarre's cause stood against a thousand. You are a Frenchman born, are you not, Monsieur? What do you think, gentlemen: when our own held back, France took arms against France to defend the right, and, what is more, maintained it. That the manifest finger of God was with him makes us none the less indebted to Monsieur de Crussenay?' She said no more, but one who knows how chary Jeanne d'Albret is of praise in public are filled with envy ever since. And he never told you this? My faith, but I think he has a fine faculty for reticence, and can be discreet from more modesties than that of self-praise!

"Take my word for it," he went on, as we rode under the gray arch, "it is no small thing to have a queen for your hostess. I verily believe that, saving in the palace, there is not a chamber that can boast a free bed in all Pau. At the inns guests are five deep, and neither threats nor promises can wring out so much as floor space in an attic."

Whatever good cause for complaint others had, we were lodged beyond our deserts, having an apartment to the south looking down upon the river, and across the plain, with its wooded undulations and strong set-

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ting of peaks and ridges, Anie, Ossau, Néré, with the heights of Bigorre to the eastward. From Orthez their line is but a thread, but here they lean towards you, as it were; and after four years of absence the sight of their rough and honest faces, though still from such a distance, moved me like the loving welcome of a friend. Years, and the curse of circumstances, may crush loyalty out of a man, as I have seen a hundred times; but the land that has been the cradle of his race, and the nurse of his youth, will stir his heart to the day of his death, even though in his degeneracy his hand be turned against it.

The buzzing grew to its height the day after our arrival in the city. It was then, secretly as they had hoped but openly as it proved, that the rebel barons made their entry. How, none can tell, but likely enough with the good-will of the Council, if not of the Queen herself, wind of their coming had blown across Pau, and there was not a child of ten years old but was agog to see the troublers of the peace, and cry shame upon them.

Care was taken that they should come to no hurt; no, not even by a skin's scratch, seeing that they held the Queen's safe-conduct. But while they rode the street secure in life, I take it neither Queen nor Council had a mind to shield their pride of spirit, so, for the winding journey from the gate that lies eastward towards Foiz, and up and down the valley gap between the farther city and the Château, they had such a cross-fire of gibe, jeer, and revilement as should have brought their guilt home to them with an edge which even failure lacked.

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"De Luxe, indeed!" cried one of the rabble. "Faith, if he has no better idea of pomp he had best seek luxury in France."

"They are far apart now!" cried another; "as far as Faith and Foix, for all their common sound"; and at the jest at the Count's birthplace the rabble roared itself hoarse.

"Nay, but luxury makes a white liver," cried a third, "and there's your Foix over again."

"White it may be," called another from across the street, "but no whiter than the chalk in d'Eschaux' cheeks. Truly his name fits him. He to think of wrestling with the bear!"

"Here comes Sainte-Colombe," cried a woman from an upper window. "Where are now his fine feathers? He hath little of the saint that a body can see, and naught of the dove but his meekness!"

"Did Philip of Spain pay thee thy small change, Monneins?" roared a fellow clinging to a half-wrenched window-shutter; and again the crowd yelled approval at the feeble and far-fetched wit.

To bait a lord with impunity, nay, even with approval, comes perchance but once in a lifetime, and, to give the scum of Pau their due, they wasted none of their opportunities.

To give De Luxe and the rest also their due, they bore themselves as gentlemen should under such a provocation, and with a dignity that, traitors though they had been, warmed my pride of race. With the right fist doubled on the thigh they rode in silence, giving back the mob stare for stare, insolence for insolence, and I verily believe that if at the first there

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was a sense of shame and humiliation, it was early swallowed up by a wrath all the more fierce for its suppression.

Men may set their faces as rigidly as stone blocks, but to him who has seeing eyes, and that knowledge of the passions of nature which is part instinct and part experience, there are always signs—a tightening of the lips, a widening of the nostrils, a lowering of the eyelids, ay, or the very reverse of these, according to the nature of the man; one or other of them, even a dulling of the eyes at times, and the secret is out.

They strove their strongest, these men, to hide the stirrings of wrath under a mask of pride or contempt, but the bitterness of spirit peeped out in spite of them, and it was plain that the submission was but a name. Let France do no more than beckon these men with a finger, and Navarre might look to itself, if for nothing else than to wipe out the insults of Pau.

As for De Luxe, it is more than likely that his soul found comfort in the knowledge that Philip of Spain had already named him for the grand collar of Saint Michael, though, being a politic sovereign, he kept his good-will a secret until the Viscount's peace was fully made, lest, in her anger, Queen Jeanne left him no head to keep the collar in place.

That night they slept in the Château, as much as prisoners as guests, and though, once behind the walls of the court-yard, they met with nothing but respect, their hearts must have been sore within them.

Something of the sort I said to De Montamar.

"'Tis their own brew they drink," said he, "and few will pity the bitterness of the draught, but to-

We Ride to Pau

morrow will be the very dregs and refinings of gall. To-day it was the people—a beast to howl for you the one hour and at you the next. Their slaving and their baying go for little. But to-morrow it is the very essence of abasement : humiliation in the face of their own peers."

De Montamar was right in the main, but for my own part I hold that such contempt of the people as was his then, and is the nobles now, lies at the very root of disaffection, and is neither more nor less than a sowing of dragons' teeth.

CHAPTER XIX

DE LUXE MAKES HIS SUBMISSION TO THE QUEEN

THOUGH Fénelon had returned to his mistress in Paris five weeks before, curiosity to see what Beza called "the troublers of Israel," drew to Pau many of the notables who had gathered round Jeanne at Orthez. Not that the rebels were strangers to the most part. Navarre was not so large that men could have harassed its peace for so many months as De Luxe, Monneins, De Sus, Sainte-Colombe and the rest had harassed it, without making a more or less close acquaintance with Queen Jeanne's viscounts, and the bulk of her loyal gentlemen. But there are few men, and no women, so old that they do not love a spectacle, and when that spectacle was the humbling of an enemy who had many a time proved the stronger of the two in the open field, the zest of the enjoyment was doubly whetted.

In his brief day of power in Lower Navarre De Luxe, at least, had won their hatred by his arrogance, and since he had played the part of puppet both to Catherine of France and Philip of Spain, men saw in his dancing to Navarre's music the humiliation of the two powers which threatened The Religion. The gathering at Pau was, therefore, second in nothing to

De Luxe Makes His Submission

that of Orthez, and the scene had the added prestige of a setting more truly royal.

Here the court was at home, and here the taste and love of display, inseparable from such a daughter of France as Marguerite d'Angoulême, were to be seen at every turn. Orthez was the city of Jeanne d'Albret—a city of theology and learning, its greatest glory its college of the Queen's founding, and where Beza taught—but Pau was still the city of Marguerite d'Angoulême, in spite of the twenty years since her death, and so the salons of the castle in their wealth of color and brightness of decoration smacked more of Marguerite, Pearl of pearls, Marguerite of the Heptameron, Maguerite of the Joyous Life, than of Jeanne d'Albret the Calvinist, and of "the man's mind among women."

Fantastic mouldings of Cupids clothed in little more than gilding chased butterfly and bird from flower to flower along the cornices, or stretched threatening arrows from behind the scrolls that filled the angles of the ceiling. Loves and the Graces—creatures of an older growth who had learned no shame with age—fluttered overhead, scattering roses as they moved in the measures of a dance to which Pan, at the farther end, set the steps with more grace and freedom than suited the austerity of that later day decorum. Through crystal globes cut into fifty facets light shot in as many broken points, white, pink, and crimson, shaded from tint to tint, and in and out like the alternation of dawn and noon and flush of sunset. Across the windows and along the walls were hangings of crimson silks and velvets, as

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heavy with tinsel embroidery as was ever the pavilion of Marguerite's brother in the Field of the Cloth of Gold.

Well might Beza cry in a moment of controversial exasperation :

"What said the Lord? 'Sell all that thou hast and give to the poor, and thou shall have treasure in heaven.' But thou hoardest tinsel, and hast thy treasure here. The King of kings had not where to lay his head, whereas the devil himself is not better housed than thou."

He might as well have spoken to the wind. Jeanne d'Albret knew well that the doing of the will of God lay in the building up of a faith whereby the soul of a man may live, and not in the destruction of toys and frippery. For these trappings she cared little, but they belonged to the throne and were, in a sense, outward signs of the authority to which she laid such insistent claim.

That day I and some others had been summoned to her cabinet nominally as a kind of council, but actually to hear and approve, with the best grace we might, a decision the Queen had already arrived at. This was no less than that the Prince of Béarn should make a progress north and east through Béarn, Bigorre, and Foix, and by his presence win over to something more than a hollow and temporary peace the disaffected provinces.

Once before, in company with d'Arros and De Grammont, he had made such a progress through that part of Lower Navarre which Monneins was stirring to revolt, and never was a simmering of rebellion more quickly cooled.

De Luxe Makes His Submission

"But, Madame," said De Grammont, who, like the rest of us, held the scheme to be at best a barren risk, "Bigorre and Foix are already pacified. If there be a doubt of that we have hostages enough in Pau to compel quiet."

"Let there be no disguise," said the Queen. "Tonight's submission no more pacifies Bigorre and Foix than the consent to receive submission pacified the Queen of France. As to holding these men as hostages, am I a Valois, Monsieur de Grammont, that I should violate my safe-conduct?"

"I advocate nothing, Madame," answered the Viscount, "only, he who fails to extinguish a fire-brand may well look for burned fingers."

"The question," said Jeanne, sharply, "is the progress of the Prince of Béarn. There is no surer way to foster disaffection than to play the coward in its face. The prince who fears his people will soon have cause to fear his people, and I purpose that this progress shall aim for Foix itself. My word for it, the presence of the Prince, and De Luxe's submission, will win us the province."

"But, Madame," and De Grammont turned to me as he spoke, and then back to the Queen, "there are men in Béarn—"

"Oh, my Lord Viscount," cried Jeanne, "understand, I have no mind to advertise this move. Outside my Council and other trusted friends the project will be unknown, and though my cousin Catherine would sacrifice her dear friend the Duc de Guise to lay her hand upon the Prince, and think the price a small one, Paris shall know nothing of the move un-

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til he is again safe within the gates of Pau. No, no, my lords, this thing is secret until, as needs must happen, rumors spread abroad, and even these can work no harm since the line of travel will be known to only those whose faith is sure. Had Bernauld but been farther north, Monsieur," she went on, turning to me, "I would have claimed from you a first night's hospitality."

"If bluntness may be pardoned, Madame," said I, "then, bluntly, I do not like the project. The Prince is Prince of Béarn, but he is the possession of the whole kingdom without a limit, since the day the King, your father, claimed him in the name of all Navarre."

"And has the mother who sung him into life no right?" cried Jeanne; "and am I blind that I cannot see danger? But beyond the mother is the Queen, who before God is answerable for Navarre, and the mother within the Queen dares the risk for Navarre's sake. The thing is settled; let your wisdom, Messieurs, so arrange details that the Prince shall lie each night where neither treason nor surprise can touch him. Let his journeys not be overlong—the whole is not fifty leagues of a crowflight—and always in the broad of day. As to guard, let him have a guard as befits the Prince of Béarn, but no such troop as argues either terror or distrust. These things are for your arrangement, and let all remember that the truest safety of the Prince lies in silence. You have three days, Messieurs, in which to complete arrangements, and for that time, at least, we can all hold our peace; Monsieur de Bernauld, to

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you I have something to say in regard to your late illness."

In common with the rest I had risen at the Queen's dismissal, and now, as the others retired, stood by the table.

"You have need of a fuller repose, Monsieur de Bernauld," she went on, "than is to be found even at a court so serious as that of Pau, where we whet our leisure wits on study rather than on the follies of the world. When the Prince rides east, do you ride with him and break off at Bernauld. I am Béarnnoise enough to know that healing comes from the hills."

"Madame," said I, speaking my own thought rather than answering the Queen, "in face of your decision I dare not offer further advice as to this progress of the Prince of Béarn, but with all my soul I beg you to keep it secret from Mademoiselle de Romenay. She is no better than the open ear and eye of France."

"Not is, but was, Monsieur de Bernauld," answered the Queen, "but you have a sorrowful right to be prejudiced, and so on that point I say no more. Frankly, though, I hold it wise to tell her. Let her, if she will, despatch the news to Catherine—it argues my openness and faith, and as the Prince will travel by an unknown route no harm can come of it. And do you not see, Monsieur, that if Mademoiselle send no news she may be superseded in her office of spy by one more dangerous?"

That ended the matter, but the Queen's project was a cold shadow on the rest of the day, and was still heavy on my thought as the great reception-hall of the palace filled for the night's ceremonies.

A Man of His Age

De Montamar's hand upon my shoulder roused me.

"What new gnat in the brain has taken De Crussenay's lady-love?" said he. "She is dunning the lad with as many questions as if he were a school-boy and she his mistress. How far is it to Foix? What road went by the towns that lie along the hills to the south? How far will a sturdy boy ride betwixt breakfast and supper, going at his ease? And a dozen questions which the lad, knowing no more of Béarn than lies between Pau and Orthez, and nothing at all of Bigorre and Foix, answers but lamely, and so comes to me for help."

"No gnat, but rather the buzzing of a hornet," said I. "What reply gave you?"

"Faith, I turned it into a jest as the shortest way of saying nothing, and told him that of late the going to Foix had been shorter than the coming back; and that as to roads, Navarre was not so poor but that she had more roads than one, whether north or south."

"What men has she with her, De Montamar?"

"Not more than one if De Crussenay can help it," said he, with a laugh.

"No, no, I mean rogues, not fools. How many of La Hake's rascals, for instance?"

"Why," said De Montamar, "there comes in the Queen's folly. The girl must have her messengers to France, and so there are some half-dozen of the scoundrels hanging forever about the court-yard. Had I my way their hanging would be elsewhere."

"Then for the Lord's sake see to this, and more depends on it than you dream. If within four days

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two of the rogues ride out of Pau give me warning, even though you send to Bernauld after me. One is enough for France ; the other will be my affair."

On that there was a blaring of trumpets, and Queen Jeanne entered by a door at the upper end of the great hall, with all her ladies following, and attended by half a score of gentlemen, De Crussenay, as one might have sworn, being one of them.

Just within the doorway, and facing the great stairway, a daïs a foot or two in height had been set up with, over it, a huge canopy of state. Its royal purple, deeply edged and fringed with gold, and hung at the corners with gold tassels, was backed with hangings of the same color and richness, and being lit by a profusion of suspended crystal lamps was, as was the Queen's purpose, the focus of attention.

Once seated on the gilded chair set at the back of the daïs and underneath the canopy, Jeanne lost no time in commanding De Luxe and his companions to be admitted.

"They are," said she, with a touch of bitterness in her voice, "in a sense the representatives of our cousin Catherine, and it would be discourteous to delay their audience."

For an hour or more De Luxe and the rest had been waiting in the anteroom which lies at the head of the stairway, and as the Queen spoke the clatter of gossip and rustle of silks fell into a buzz of expectation, and along the length of the crowded reception-hall the guests drew back to right and left, leaving a laneway from the door of the anteroom to the foot of the daïs.

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Presently even the buzz quieted, and there was no sound heard but the tramp of feet, as the rebel barons marched in single file to face the Queen. A notable line of men they were in their quiet-colored, even sombre, garbs amid so much of gayety and such wealth of dress.

That, more than the gibes and jeers of the streets of Pau, more even than the cold wrath and scorn of the Queen, was, I take it, the bitterest moment of their shame. The cries of the mob were, to them, but the froth of the groundlings, the gutter splashing up at the foot that treads it. Presently their turn would come, and the mud be dust under their heel. Such gibes might sting for the hour, but they left no wound behind them that time and its revenges would not salve. The Queen was, after all, the Queen, and that they had outraged her justice, her laws, and her mercy they knew right well, and that they should pay the penalty of failure was but natural. That she should be wrathful and speak her wrath was her prerogative, and there was not a man of them that held the house of Albret in less respect because of the public submission imposed upon him, nor would have questioned her sovereign right had she ended their lives in blood.

These, the mob and the throne, were well enough, and in the course of nature, high or low, when a man meddles with affairs of state. But that their peers, men their fellows and admitted equals, should stand and laugh at their failure and abasement was wormwood which no pretence of pride could sweeten, and an insult for which no code of honor had a vengeance.

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To brew bitter drink for another's swallowing, and drain it yourself to the dregs while that other stands by in derision, is to bring a man so low that between him and the devil there is but the thickness of his skin.

'Twas but a march of some thirty or forty paces perhaps, but every step was like the turning of a dagger in a wound. At the foot of the dais all knelt; De Luxe, their spokesman, being in the middle, and even when he made the confession of treason, upon which the Queen insisted, the marble of her face never changed.

"Their crime was beyond clemency," said he, "but the Queen in her graciousness had sheathed the sword of justice and had promised mercy, therefore they were there."

"Ay," said Jeanne, bending forward so that one elbow leaned upon her knee, and looking down full into De Luxe's upturned face, "all that is true; but before pardon follows there must be something more than an avowal of misdeeds. There would be few rogues hung if that would save a neck. Neither God nor man, Monsieur, can rest content with a blunt 'I have sinned' flung in his face."

"Humbly, Madame," said De Luxe, in a hard voice that had little of humility in it, "and as you see, on bent knees, we crave of your mercy the pardon to which in justice we can lay no claim."

"Ay," said Jeanne a second time, the color rising to her face at the mockery underlying the other's words, and which he took so few pains to hide, "my cousin of France is well served. Confession and peti-

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tion are well enough, but there is a third step, and I and all these my loyal gentlemen of Navarre are waiting for it."

For the first time De Luxe looked ill at ease, and his face reddened. As he knelt there, silent, De Montamar whispered in my ear :

"Who would have thought he had grace enough to find a lie a hard thing. He has swallowed his deriding with but little visible straining, and now the lie, for the want of which all the rest goes for naught, sticks in his throat."

"Come, we are waiting," said Jeanne, as the silence grew heavier ; "we are waiting."

"We had hoped, Madame," said De Luxe, slowly, and with an effort, "that this frank submission would have been accepted as a demonstration of good faith."

"And it is so accepted," answered the Queen, coldly, "but as a demonstration of good faith in my safe-conduct, and no more. What? You are to receive your absolution without either repentance or a promise of amendment? You would have us give you back a life that you may use it a second—nay, a third time against us. What complacent priest taught you this theology? By my faith in the justice and anger of God, you ask too much."

To the right and left of him, down the line of kneeling men De Luxe looked, but not one of them so much as turned his eyes to answer him.

"Do you see?" again whispered De Montamar ; "they would cheat their consciences hereafter with the comfortable lie that they gave De Luxe no authority to pledge the future."

De Luxe Makes His Submission

"Madame," said the rebel of Foix, raising an open right hand above his head, "I call God to witness that I sincerely and fully repent my crimes against you and the state, and that hereafter I—"

"Stay," interrupted the Queen. "In this you speak only for yourself."

"Oh, Madame," he answered, bitterly, "who knoweth the heart of a man but the man himself? In this I vouch for Charles de Luxe of Foix and for no other." And with his hand still uplifted he swore his oath of obedience to the laws of Navarre, and of loyal faith to the Queen—swore it fully and roundly, omitting nothing of circumstance and solemnity. If it was a lie, it was a lie well told, and whatever mental reservation there was, the words were frank. This oath each, in turn, took for himself.

For a full minute after the last had spoken the Queen sat silent, thinking deeply.

"According to your faith, Messieurs," she said at last, "so be the issue. You have called not alone Almighty God, whom so many think far off, but also Navarre and France to witness. With these to hear me I, in my turn and in reply, pledge you my clemency. Yet know, Messieurs, that such crimes as yours are not easy of expiation, and they are only pardoned because of the grace and mercy which God your witness has so abundantly showed me. From past dangers, even of your making, He has rescued me, and it is for the furtherance of His honor that I show you clemency. The past is forgiven, Messieurs, in accordance with your prayer of contrition and promise of amendment. May this forgiveness produce to me the worthy fruit

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of good and faithful subjects. I desire in all sincerity to have a firm trust in your loyal service and fidelity, but if that trust be violated, then I call God and Navarre and France to witness that, come what may, I am innocent of your blood."

When the Queen ended the pardoned rebels rose to their feet, and filing before her kissed her hand in silence and with a low reverence, and departed as they came; nor, to my thinking, did one of them ever again see Jeanne d'Albret. For their next treachery they had Montgommery as judge, and though some blame both him and the Queen for these men's bloody end, I hold her innocent and him excused. The Queen, because she did not so much as know of their capture, being in Rochelle at the time, and so too far off to receive tidings of their capture and return her commands; and Montgommery because a three and four-fold traitor is but little better than a bloody-fanged wild beast, and with no more claim on mercy. Even if he promised them an amnesty, and broke his pledged word, as some say and more deny, it was, at the worst, but a meting out of the same measure as they gave the Queen; and so again I say I hold him excused.

But all this was a year later to the very month, and does not come into the present tale.

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CHAPTER XX

HOW THE PRINCE OF BÉARN SET OUT ON HIS PROGRESS

It was while the Queen was making her circuit of the great hall after the dismissal of De Luxe and the rest, that De Crussenay came to me with the questions in the answering of which De Montamar had given him so little satisfaction.

"What do I know of the roads after four years of absence?" said I; "and what can they matter to you whose business lies here at Pau with the Queen, or wherever her will sends you?"

"To me—nothing," said he; "but Mademoiselle—she—that is—" and he fell to stammering.

"Mademoiselle?" cried I. "Are doublet and hose her newest freak? My faith, but she would make a sturdy boy enough!"

Then a thought struck me. "Of the roads I know nothing, and of the greater loyal gentleman not much, but you can tell Mademoiselle this: Bernauld is no more than a boy's ride at the first of a journey and while the days are long; and further, it is none the less true, though I say it, the Queen has no more loyal servant than Blaise de Bernauld."

Nothing more passed at the time, but when he carried his message to the girl she turned and stared

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hard at me, and presently the two slipped away from the group gathered around the Queen and made their way to where I stood by the door into the ante-room.

To please the two Jeannes I had made my peace with her, and if our friendship was a hollow affair, it had, after all, as much heart to it as most court friendships. Forget the little lad I did not, trust Mademoiselle de Romenay I did not, but with fuller wealth, and the juster judgment that comes with it, I had come to acquit her of wilful evil in the past, and looked confidently to the future bringing its own vengeance for the doubtful part she had played.

Her talk at first, being but the polite smoothing of her way to the core of her purpose and the throwing dust in my eyes, may be passed over, though we soon came to close quarters.

"I hear you ride to Bernauld presently," said she. "Do you look for many changes in the four years, Monsieur?"

"The world takes a mighty interest in my affairs," answered I, with a laugh, "though, for the life of me, I cannot recall so much as telling even my lady that I was leaving Pau."

"Oh," said she, biting her lip over her slip of the tongue, "there was some court gossip."

"If we believe all court gossip," answered I, still laughing, "De Crussenay here is much to be envied. Is one piece of gossip as true as the other?"

The shaft went home, and, my word for it, for all her brazen coquetry, she reddened to the throat.

"Monsieur de Crussenay is my very good friend,"

How the Prince of Béarn Set Out

said she, with a greater gravity than I had thought was in her, "and Navarre has taught me more in two months than France in two years. I take it, then, Monsieur, that you go on shortly to Bernauld?"

"In three days, Mademoiselle. Now for your second question and the changes at Bernauld. Though they would not hold out an hour against a score of men, four years will have told but little on such walls as they built in the time of Saint Louis, and if the old Château be not fit for a palace, why, even a king might make shift in it for a night."

"So? Bernauld, then, must be worth the seeing," said she, and fell silent, looking me hard in the eyes. Then, after a moment, she went on, as if following a new train of thought, sprung, the Lord knows where, from a woman's variableness, and with a side glance at De Crussenay, who was fondling the puffs of her sleeves with his finger-tips as if he loved them, "The Queen's business comes first, does it not?"

"After God, Queen and country," answered I, not knowing in the least what lay behind her words.

"Ay," she persisted. "But if there be no God, nothing but the plain devil and a terror of death; then it is the Queen?"

"You talk riddles," said I, "and I can only answer again,—after God, the Queen." Then, thinking she had some scheme in her head to wheedle De Crussenay, I added, "Woe to him who, having a weapon ready in his hand, fails to strike his blow for faith and crown."

"You have said it," she cried. "Remember, Monsieur de Bernauld, you have said it, and not I." And

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without another word she took De Crussenay by the arm, and led him in the wake of the royal party.

As for me, I stood and stared after her, plucking my beard in my perplexity, but on the whole well content, for if she thought to touch the Prince of Béarn on his first night out from Pau her rogues were like to harry an empty nest. There was also this: If truly La Hake's lies had hoodwinked her once into being his unsuspecting accomplice, the remembrance of the wrong done me and mine might hold Bernauld sacred from attack, even though the prize were Henry of Navarre himself.

If hitherto I have said nothing of the Prince of Béarn, it has been through fear lest little would run into more, more to much, and much to everything, and so, to you to whom he is no more than a dead king, the telling would grow wearisome. To me he is Henry the Great, the man of Ivry, of Arques, and of Nantes; the maker of France, and the freer of the faith; the one true man in a line of sensualists and sots, and as much alive as the day before Ravailac's knife struck him down in the Rue de la Ferrière. He found religion shackled, and gave her liberty; he found the nation a rotting carcass, and gave it life, and health, and power. He held Spain in check in the south, and baffled Germany in the east. He raised the poor from the mire where the nobles had trodden them, and thrust back the Lorraines from the steps of the throne. He— Oh, ay, to you these are a dotard's maunderings, and in seven years France has had time to forget. But I who have known the before and the after can never forget, and to me

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Henry of Béarn is a man of God's choosing, and after thirty years of service under him who should know it better than I?

Of the Prince of Béarn I will, therefore, say no more than must be, lest, seeing your weariness, I give my temper rein after a fashion unbecoming an already half-dead man. It is enough, perhaps, to say this. Even at the time of which I speak the spirit of the man was astir in the boy, both for good and for evil, and Henry the Great at forty-five was but the larger growth of Henry the lad of fifteen—a shrewd wit, dashed with rashness, but shrewdest and boldest and wisest in the darkest hour of desperate failure. Generous to prodigality, his pocket was not alone ever the emptiest in the kingdom, but he was the cause of much generosity in others, for he thought it no shame to seek that help from others which he himself gave so freely.

In our family papers here at Bernauld is a letter which runs something in this fashion :

"Monsieur de Bernauld :

"MY FRIEND,—You who know our Navarre know that its necessities are greater than its riches, in which thing Navarre and I are at one, as I trust we ever will be, and in all things, for at the moment I have strong need of sixty crowns, for which, if you have them, I would give you much thanks, and in return pray you to keep this writing.

"If the time be not convenient, then I beg of you to return the letter, and to hold me still your friend,

"HENRI."

That was from the boy of fifteen, and it is simple truth, Grandson Gaspard, that the son's order on his

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treasury for sixty hundred crowns would not purchase the evidence of the father's frank faith in Blaise de Bernauld's friendship.

To say that the Prince was the merriest of us all when, three days after De Luxe's submission, we rode out of Pau by the west gate, is to say no more than that he was a light-hearted lad on his way to the next new thing, while we bore, heavily enough, the burden of doubt and responsibility.

De Montamar, and, indeed, half the court, Mademoiselle and De Crussenay among them, rode with us down the slope as far as the river bank; and a brave company we were, though, as it seemed to me, with an overscanty guard for such a charge as the Prince of Béarn. Some six or eight pikemen argued a faith in the loyalty of Foix and Bigorre which was as admirable as it was unjustified, and more flattering to them than comforting to us.

"'Tis very well for the Queen to shut her eyes to the truth," said I to De Montamar, who rode by my side; "but ours are open, and another score of stout fellows would have done no harm."

He looked back at Mademoiselle, thirty yards behind, before he answered.

"Faith without works is dead," said he, "and so behind the butt of the hill yonder you will find your stout score. There was no need that, for all our frankness, Pau and Paris should know everything."

"Then it is given out—"

"It is given out that the Prince of Béarn rides to the very borders of Languedoc, ay, even to the gates of Toulouse itself, with less of a guard than a simple

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baron who sets a proper value on his one life in the world. No great body of men can move, and De Grammont, who has the Prince in charge, not hear of it. Let some rogue with a handful, say your dear friend La Hake, strike a blow for Catherine of France, and, my word for it, the fellows in the shadow of the pines yonder will rid Navarre of a gadfly. Though," he went on, "if any one has set mischief afoot it is not Mademoiselle. Her rascals are still fattening at Pau."

This was good news enough, yet as we parted I urged him still to vigilance, and to spare neither man nor horse in sending post to Bernauld should even so much as a shadow stir his doubts.

At the river we parted company, my lady, Mademoiselle, and De Crussenay returning to Pau with the rest of the court, while we, no more than a weak dozen, turned our beasts across the bridge towards the south and east, holding as near as possible to the right bank of the Nay.

But any fault in numbers was soon mended by the troop in ambush behind the hill, and it was a satisfaction to see that De Montamar had underestimated the Queen's caution by a full half. Even from the Prince she had kept this reinforcement secret, nor was the spirit of the lad pleased at the addition to our strength.

"Back with these fellows to Pau," he cried, "what, my lord, cannot we ride through our own kingdom without an army at our heels? I marvel the Queen my mother had not added a nursemaid or two. By the Lord, Monsieur de Grammont, I will not go a foot farther with such a troop."

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But, as may be supposed, De Grammont was not so easily moved.

"That is spoken as it should be, Monseigneur," said he. "Nevertheless the Queen is right, for if courage is full brother to success, so also is discretion. Beyond all that, it is Madame's command, and as Queen and mother she must be obeyed. Let us compromise, my Prince. In this thing which, after all, is but policy, let the Queen have her way, and your next whim shall be yours for the asking. You have overmuch wit to seek a folly."

For a moment the Prince looked from De Grammont to the troop ranged up behind us on the Pau road, and then back to De Grammont, and a laugh flashed into his eyes.

"Have it so," he cried. "The present is yours and the future mine, and all the more that, in spite of your smooth words, I believe you hold the Queen too much in awe to abate a man-jack for all my prayers. My faith to it, Monsieur, I will get quits with you before the day's out, or I am not Henri de Béarn."

At Château Lys we halted for dinner, and right royally did the widowed Marquise entertain us. Had the Prince sought the whole manor at her hands it was his for the asking. A brave sight she made bareheaded in the sunshine, and lifting up a stirrup-cup with shaking hands to the frank-faced lad in front of the great fan steps.

"'Twould be an heirloom, that cup," said she. "A thing of pride and glory so long as a Lys dwelt in Château Lys."

Poor soul! she spoke more truth than she knew,

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and her pride and glory were alike short-lived. Within a year bloody Montluc had dinged the place down about her ears, and she and her two brave sons went down with it into fiery ruin: and so ended the race of Lys and the heirloom of Henry of Béarn.

More than once the Prince had heard not only of a certain wild ride to Dreux in the old days, but also of that disastrous but well-avenged foray to Florida, of which my former records have told; but as we rode from Château Lys nothing would please him but that once again I must tell him of Coligny's call, and how Marcel and I had answered it.

"'Twas a bold scheme," said he, when I ended—"a bold scheme, and boldly played. I would I could see the cradle of the man who planned it."

"Bernauld lies too far to the south, Monseigneur," said I, "and, believe me, it is no left-handed boasting when I say it is a poor place compared with Beauvoir, where you rest to-night."

"Ay, to the south?" said he; "and how far from Beauvoir?"

"Overfar for a circuit, Monsigneur," interposed De Grammont, hastily, "seeing that we are expected a full hour before sundown, and—I am right, am I not, Monsieur de Bernauld?—it is here our paths branch"; and he threw a warning look at me, which I, knowing more than he of Mademoiselle's inquiries, was at no loss to interpret.

"Ay, but how far, Monsieur de Bernauld?" persisted Henri, as I bent over his hand.

"Some three leagues by road, Monseigneur; and I

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pray God you may receive everywhere as loyal a greeting as would be yours at Bernauld."

"Three leagues by road? I warrant it is little more than half that by a crow-flight? Well, we are but guests ourselves at Beauvoir, Monsieur de Bernauld, and so cannot bid you welcome. Yet, I have a thought in my head that— There, it can rest unsaid for the present. It is no more than *au revoir*, Monsieur; God have you in his keeping till we meet again—and longer."

Twice he turned and waved to me as I sat my beast, bonnet in hand, by the fork of the roads; then a turn of the path hid them, and pulling my bridle to the right I set off at a trot towards Bernauld.

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CHAPTER XXI

BERNAULD REAPS MORE HONOR THAN IT SC'VED

OF two things which moved me greatly that day I will say but little, and for three reasons. First, they bear but lightly on the story; second, they were experience common to every man; third, it would be like pulling to pieces for the common gaze some dried flower, a long-dead woman's gift. The two things were these: the sight of Bernauld and its familiar fields; and the welcome given me by Marcel and his fellows.

Life must indeed be low and sour in a man if his heart does not leap, his nerves tingle, and his eyes brighten at the sight of his childhood's home after four years of haps and dangers. If such a thing stirs him not at all, then, to my thinking, the spirit within him is as good as dead, and the sooner the flesh follows the spirit the better. He is nothing but the death's-mask masquerade of a man.

On the honest love of Marcel and the rest, and how his patient wife wept for sheer gladness at having Master Blaise at Bernauld once again, I turn down the page. It is a memory which freshens even these withered ends of life that still cling to the world, but it belongs to the quiet, wakeful hours of the lonely

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night, and not to the loud clatter of the public day. A menial, a serving-man, and wench some would say with a touch of contempt; but I hold love a thing as sacred in the humble as the high, and worthy of the like gratitude and reverence.

Of Marie, Marcel's wife, nothing now need be said, nor, for the moment, of their children, save this: they were three—a curly-haired, slender lad of fifteen looking under his age, another of ten, and a girl of seven—and that all had alike been brought up in the creed of "love and serve God first, the house of Bernauld next, and at all times and in all ways." So well had they been taught, that, to be frank, had there been a conflict at any time between loyalty to Blaise de Bernauld and Jeanne d'Albret or her son and successor I doubt not the crown's claims would have gone to the mire.

Yet, for all the warmth of welcome a bitter sense of loneliness came over me as, supper being done with, I stood looking at the familiar stretch of mountain darkening in the close of the night. The voice of wife and child in my own home had been part of my dream of the Bernauld that should be, from the day we turned our backs on Carmeuse to that in which Roger rode into Orthez. Now my lady was at Pau, broken in strength, and the little lad laid away in the resting-place of many a generation of his forefathers, and the dream at an eternal end.

Who can tell why it should have been so? But, fuller and stronger than ever before, fuller of purpose and stronger of resolve, wrath and hate against La Hake possessed me. A man builds up the plan of

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his life, a set and a fixed thing which is to be at a settled and fixed time, and though change and death take his plan, and, tearing it into shreds, fling it into the grave, it is not until the fixed time of fruition is upon him that he is fully possessed of the sense of ruin. I was to ride into Bernauld to love of wife and chatter of child, and though I knew one was absent and the other stilled, it was only in the silence of the lonely rooms that the true edge of the sense of loss bit the soul.

With a curse in my heart I turned from the window, with its spread of overlapping hills and ultimate line of darkness bounding the horizon, to Marcel, silent behind me.

"May God's wrath light on me and mine if ever I turn my hand back from vengeance," and for all that I spoke no name Marcel understood and answered, "Amen, and my oath to that, Master Blaise; and when it comes to the hunting I have already twenty stout fellows to join the chase."

As I stood in the dark with his hand gripped in mine there was a sudden clatter of hoofs in the courtyard, and a voice rang gayly through the open door.

"Hulloa, there, Monsieur de Bernauld, is this the welcome you promised me not four hours ago? On my word, had we been foes, not friends, the Queen had been a castle the poorer."

"The Prince of Béarn himself!" I cried, aghast. "What wind of misfortune has blown him hither on this of all nights of the year? Now, if that accursed jade plays false we're ruined race and nation. Run, for the Lord's sake, Marcel, run and set up every

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bolt and bar, and batten every door. Nay, stop for no questions, man, but do as thou'rt bid. Stay! what of those twenty stout fellows?—but no, bolt the doors and make all fast first, then seek me below. Haste, man, haste!"

For a moment he stared as if I had of a sudden lost my wits, then swung round and, like the good soldier he was, made off at top speed to obey a command of which he understood nothing

Hastening below I met De Grammont in a temper worse than my own; and with good cause, since to him had been committed the care of the Prince.

"Heard one ever of a madder freak?" he cried. "You and I are close friends, De Bernauld, yet I would to the Lord you were fifty leagues anywhere out of Navarre. Here have we ridden from Beauvoir, secretly and in fear like so many scoundrel cattle-lifters. If but the old Baron gets wind of it he is lost to Navarre for good and all."

"Where is the Prince," said I, "that I may bid my Queen's son welcome to Bernauld?"

"Plague take your welcomings! Cannot you hear him chattering without there?"

It was De Grammont's ill-humor that spoke, and not the man, and so I passed his words by. In his case and with his provocation I had said no less and meant no more, and there are times when it is no credit to a man to be overready to take offence. At the threshold I met the Prince, and would have knelt and kissed his hand in acknowledgment of the honor done my poor house, but with a laugh he caught me by the shoulder and held me upright.

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"We leave these things for the court," he said, in almost his mother's words. "This is nothing more than friend and friend. What? Have I kept my word? My faith, but De Grammont is in a fine pucker, and all for nothing. We will ride back to breakfast in the cool of the morning, and if the old Baron hears of our gallop he may at the worst think some evil of me, but he will never guess De Bernauld."

"I would I had known, Monseigneur, that I might have made some fitting preparation—"

"But that's just it," he cried; "Navarre has other ways of squandering crowns than on a three-hours' supper. Besides," he added, laughing, "Monsieur de Beauvoir is my host to-night, and you must not grudge him the honor."

"That being so, Monseigneur, may I ask how—"

"How I come to be at Bernauld instead of Beauvoir? Why, in this fashion. First we supped. Such a supper as it was, with its endless string of courses. Did he think, d'ye suppose, that a prince has ten stomachs, and eats but once a year? It was: Monseigneur, this pasty; Monseigneur, this bird; Monseigneur, this roast; Monseigneur, this ragout; Monseigneur, this dish of creams, and Monseigneur all the time on thorns because of this idea of a flight to Bernauld simmering in his head.

"At last it was done with, and it was no lie to say I was wearied to death. It was surely no fault of mine if my Lord Baron thought I spoke of the ride from Pau! Then came a ceremony, as solemn and prolonged as if Philip of Spain were being put to bed

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by every grandee in the kingdom. De Grammont there will tell you that the Queen, my mother, observes no such state at Pau. But at last we were quit of it all, and you should have seen my lord's face of horror when I told him I had a mind for an hour's ride after such a weighty repast. 'It is madness,' cried he. 'It is sense,' answered I, 'lest I die of an indigestion.' 'We will affront the Baron,' said he. 'The Baron will know nothing,' said I. 'But I have passed my word to the Queen,' said he. 'But I hold your promise,' said I; and though he urged a dozen reasons I shook his pledged word in the face of them all, so, in the end, we crept down by the lackeys' stairway, and with the three or four fellows who are now drinking good wine in your kitchen, we set off across the fields. Some bribery has been done, and I fear me there is more yet to do; but I do not know how certain sixty crowns could be better spent than in a visit to Bernauld."

"Ay," said De Grammont, sourly; "there you have it. Monseigneur knows he can twist me how he wills, and yet I think if I had counted up the cost in cool blood I would have been iron, promise or no promise. Happily the worst that can come of it is that De Beauvoir may get wind of the freak and have his ancient gall stirred by the slight of his hospitality."

"Never a word shall he hear," cried Henri, "never a word, and— List a moment, Messieurs; ay, I thought I caught the batter of hoofs. We are not your only visitors to-night, Monsieur de Bernauld."

Out of the dark, as we listened, came the rhythmic

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sound of a horse hard-ridden on the dry road, and to me, at least, it was a relief that it was but a single beast, and the approach without concealment. La Hake would have had a score behind him, and have chosen some stealthier pace than a hand-gallop on the open highway; unless, indeed, he thought that a masked fraud would have a prompter success than force.

With this thought in my head I made my excuses to the Prince, and went myself to the door, where the horseman was already making himself heard with the butt-end of his riding-whip.

"My word for it," cried Henri, as I crossed the hall, "De Beauvoir has run us to earth, and we must put the best face on it we can."

"No need to wake the dead, friend," called I through the door. "Who art thou, and whom dost thou seek?"

"It seemed like a place of tombs," answered he. "I come from the Viscount de Montamar, and I seek Monsieur de Bernauld, thy master."

"From De Montamar?" I cried. "Hulloa, Marcel, your foot here, lest there be some trick in this. See that the door gives three inches, and no more; and thou, friend, hand me thy letter, or token, or speak thy message. I am Monsieur de Bernauld."

"My faith," grumbled he, "I've had many a strange welcome north and south, but this overtops them all. Is there a siege afoot, or have ye the plague within, or what?"

"The plague, fellow, the plague," laughed Henri at my back. "De Grammont has called me so in his

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heart a score of times since supper. Why so much mystery, Monsieur de Bernauld? Open the door and let the fellow in."

"His letter first, Monseigneur, and if that be right he shall have no complaint of his welcome thereafter. I would we had a hundred of his kind. So, that is De Montamar's seal. Round with you, my friend, to the postern there to the left. See thou to him and his beast, Marcel, and let them want for nothing. Now for the letter, with your permission, Monseigneur, and Monsieur le Viscomte. De Montamar does not waste good horseflesh so hard on my heels for nothing."

"Read away, Monsieur," said the Prince, eying me and the square of paper with all a healthy lad's curiosity. "By my faith, if my mother's court were aught but what it is, and Madame de Bernauld a little less than what all the world knows her to be, I would say— But read on, Monsieur—read on."

The *ipsissima verba* of what De Montamar wrote is gone from me, but the tenor was this, and in my heart I cursed louder than ever the boy's freak that had run us all into such a net: Midway up the slope from the river, as they rode back to Pau, two of Mademoiselle's rogues had met them, reining in to let the troop pass. No words had passed, nor any token either, unless a shifting of a kerchief from pocket to breast was to be so construed, but the men had turned on their way down the hill, making as if towards the south, and up to three hours later they had not shown face at the castle. If one was bound for France, as I had conjectured, then he was like to find it a long road to Paris by the way he headed.

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This might mean much or nothing, he added, but remembering your words I have thought the telling of it worth the cost of a tired horse.

"Well, Monsieur de Bernauld," cried the Prince, as, having finished the reading, I stood staring into nothing and thinking a way out of the tangle, "is Longoumeau set aside, as you foretold, or has Philip of Spain married the Queen, my mother, whether she would or no?"

"This is no jest, Monseigneur," I answered, gravely, "for if what De Montamar foreshadows comes to pass, not only Longoumeau, but all treaties, and all faith with our creed and nation are set aside forever. Monseigneur, Monseigneur, this honor to Bernauld is likely to be paid for at a dear price. Truly, it is ill for that land whose prince is a child."

"Monsieur de Bernauld," cried Henri, sharply, "you forget yourself."

"I forget all, Monseigneur, but the danger to Navarre," I answered. "Monsieur de Grammont, you and I must hold counsel. It is nine chances in ten that La Hake will have us all in his grip within three hours."

And with that, in as few words as might be, I told him of Mademoiselle's persistent question, and how I had sought to lead her astray with my talk of Bernauld and the honor to my house, meaning thus to hoodwink La Hake, or whomsoever she trafficked with, into a fruitless attack at the very outset, and so compel a special guard and watchfulness throughout the remainder of the progress. And now my lie had struck, not only at the honor of my house, but at the

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very life of the Prince, and through him at the peace of Navarre and the toleration of The Religion. With such a hostage as Henry of Béarn in her hands, the Queen of France would show scant ceremony in negotiations.

As I ended, and all sat in silence, the Prince looked curiously at me a moment, then said :

"For how long, Monsieur, can Bernauld stand siege against such a body as La Hake might bring against it?"

"Not an hour, Monseigneur," I answered, bitterly. "We have no hope in Bernauld."

"Once La Hake missed your life by a miracle," he went on. "I take it he is not the man to fail twice. It was a rash invitation, Monsieur de Bernauld, to give such a man, was it not?"

"On my word, Monseigneur," said I, looking, I suppose, a little of the fool I felt, "I had not thought of that."

Henry of Béarn put out his hand and gripped mine hard.

"I said, a moment ago, Monsieur, that you forgot yourself, and I said, truly, though my words had another meaning then. Your pardon for them, and if we all come out of this, may Navarre remember Bernauld as Bernauld has remembered Navarre."

That is hard on fifty years ago, and I shall die the simple gentleman I was then. Neither Henry of Navarre nor Henry of France forgot that when the time came when, as one or other, he had to give, there were too many open hands outstretched under his very eyes for him to see mine clinched in empty

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pockets. For that I bear him no grudge. In a court, as elsewhere, it is the loudest voice that calls out the loudest echo.

"Soft words are very well, Monseigneur," broke in De Grammont, "but if we are to slip unharmed out of the pinch of this cleft stick we must stir ourselves, and quickly too. How many men have we, Monsieur de Bernauld, and how will stand the odds?"

"Though La Hake has all Spain behind him," replied I, "he will scarce risk moving more than twenty to twenty-five men so far from the mountains, lest folk take to asking questions easier put than answered. As to our side of it, when another knows more than yourself it is well to ask him. For all that he is a plain soldier, Marcel has a hard head."

"Have whom you will," cried De Grammont, impatiently, "only, for the Lord's sake, waste no more time on words."

And so it came that Marcel presently joined the Prince's counsel, to his own grievous sorrow.

CHAPTER XXII

ONE GUEST MAKES MANY

MARCEL and De Montamar's messenger I found both hard at work, in different fashions but with equal earnestness; the one upon his belated supper, the other piecing together such patches of hints and facts as he could extract between the mouthfuls. It needs no great shrewdness to guess that a post would not have followed me so hard from Pau except with news that in some way touched Bernauld closely, and Marcel held that whatever touched Bernauld touched him and behooved him to know.

"My faith, but you fare better here than we at Pau," said the fellow, turning round the carcass of his fowl to see whence would come the sweetest picking, "and though it was a hard ride, I bear you no grudge for it. 'Thou knowest those russet-brown loafers of Mademoiselle de Romenay?' said my lord; 'there are two on the road somewhere betwixt this and the mountains. Keep open eyes for them, and tell Monsieur de Bernauld if thou seest one or other, but give them a wide berth, for this business admits neither risk nor delay.' Your wine, too, is stouter than ours. For myself, I love a rough wine that tickles not alone your palate, but also makes you thank God for a dry

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throat and a deep thirst; now, at Pau—oh, ay, these lads? No, neither one nor other did I see.”

“Did he say aught, perchance, of one, La Hake?” said Marcel.

“La Hake? La Hake? Not a word; though if I heard a tramp of horses in the dark I should learn all I could, going warily lest I be stopped; but not a sound did I hear save the wind and my own gallop. Your country-side is like the grave, and, now one comes to think of it, a man would need good feeding and a stout wine to keep his heart alive in such a tomb. After all, Pau and thin drink are better there—”

But I wasted no more time, and, breaking in on his chatter, bade Marcel see that the fellow's jug was full and then follow me.

“’Tis full enough, Master Blaise,” said he. “So please you we’ll have no hot wits in Bernauld tonight.”

“So?” said I, turning on him in the darkness of the passage; “you guess—”

“I guess that bloody Alva's wisdom may have a triple truth,” said he, “and the odds are La Hake may catch salmon heads before morning.”

That he understood was so much the better, since there would be less time wasted in explanation, but when we returned to the Prince and De Grammont it was to find that in the interval their mood had changed.

“We are too soon with plans and councils,” said De Grammont; “the night is wearing away, and the Prince must needs have rest if he is to ride on his

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journey to-morrow ; and, after all, this terror of La Hake is but the starting at the shadow of a chance."

"By your leave, my lord," answered I, "terror is not a word one man can lightly take from another. Lest there be other shadows than that of La Hake, I pray you to choose your speech with a nicer courtesy. Let the Prince rest himself, with all my heart. If watchfulness can bring him safety he may sleep in peace."

"On my word, Monsieur de Grammont is right," said Henri, stifling a yawn with a laugh, "and to tell the truth I think it will matter little to me whether the beds of Bernauld be soft or hard. Nay, my lord, never trouble yourself, Monsieur, my host, will see to me."

"Remember, Monseigneur," said De Grammont, who had risen from his chair and stood facing me at the door, "we must needs be at Beauvoir in the first of the dawn."

"Plague take it!" cried the lad; "there lies the blot on the whole prank; but we must pay for our whistle, my lord. Wake me betimes, and once in the saddle I will ask nothing better than a gallop in the dusk. Now, Monsieur de Bernauld, lights."

When I returned to De Grammont it was to find him pacing up and down the room, and Marcel bolt upright by the great mantel at the farther end.

"Your pardon, Monsieur de Bernauld," said the Viscount, stopping short in his walk. "On my word as a gentleman I had no thought of giving offence, nor, betwixt us two at least, of belittling the possible danger. My one intent was to get rid of the Prince,

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and so leave ourselves untrammelled. He is a mettlesome lad, with all his mother's fire and his father's obstinacy, and had he dreamed the danger was a live one we should never have been quit of him. Now to find out our strength—or is it, rather, our weakness? Which of us shall question our stiff-backed friend yonder?"

"In such cases as this, my lord, you have the greatest experience," replied I. "It is enough if I say you can rely on Marcel's word to the letter."

"The Lord forbid I should have experience in such plights," he answered, "but at least I have the gray-er hairs. Now, my friend, briefly and to the point. Your master says of you what I would be loath to say of any ten men at the Queen's court, but I take him at his word. What force have we?"

"There are us three," said Marcel, speaking in all good faith and meaning no offence by the bracketing of himself with De Grammont; "two more of Bernauld's men, the three that rode in with your lordship, and yon fellow from Pau."

"Ha!" said De Grammont. "Nine; and all good men?"

"As to that," answered Marcel, simply, "I can answer for five of them, but as for your lordship's men and him of Pau I can say nothing."

"My thanks to you," said the Viscount, smiling, "for taking me in with your voucher."

"Oh, as to that," said Marcel again, "all Navarre and Béarn, and I think all France to boot, knows your lordship."

Whereat De Grammont looked mightily pleased

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behind his laugh. He knew his own value as well as any man, but from soldier to soldier Marcel's phrase was worth a dozen court compliments.

"If I vouch the other four, that gives us nine good men. For how long could we hold Bernauld against thrice that number?"

"Not for an hour," said Marcel, "and if La Hake be against us, not for thirty minutes."

"Faith, this La Hake must be the very devil of a fellow," cried De Grammont, "that both your master and you hold him in such respect. Thirty minutes? What! nine men hold out no longer than a bare half-hour?"

"He who thinks his foe a fool is the greater fool of the two," answered Marcel, sententiously; "and as to the time, what stand can nine swords and half a dozen pikes make against a score of musketoons and the like? 'Tis a case of pure murder, and not of fair fight."

For an instant De Grammont looked grave, then he said:

"Bah! La Hake, not being a fool, will use steel and risk no noise."

"Faith, my lord," said Marcel, "he may well risk what there is none to hear."

"But the doors?"

"The doors are stout enough, but the winter's supply of wood, dry as the sun can make it, lies outside. Let La Hake stack a few faggots and set a torch to them, and with the wind that's blowing—"

"And this, fellow," broke in De Grammont—"this is the way Bernauld is guarded?"

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"By your leave," answered Marcel, with, for the first time, a roughness in his voice, "there is peace in Béarn."

"Peace in Béarn!" echoed De Grammont. "In the Lord's name, when was there ever peace in Béarn? Ha! now I remember, Monsieur de Bernauld, you spoke of a troop for the Queen's service. What chance, my friends, of laying hands on some of these fellows?"

"Give me but twenty-four hours," answered Marcel, "and I'll warrant we will hold Bernauld against six La Hakes."

"Twenty-four hours!" cried the Viscount, bitterly; "as well ask all time, and eternity to follow, since twenty-four hours are like to end one and set us afloat on the other. Why twenty-four hours?"

"Because one fellow is a mile in this direction, and the next two miles in that," answered Marcel, shortly, "and that's the why."

"Then let La Hake come and we're shent," said De Grammont. "For thee, my friend, the best thou canst do is to see that we are not taken unawares, and if thy sight and hearing are as clear as thy brain I will have no fears. Presently we may call thee again, for thou speakest to the point as a soldier should. Now, Monsieur de Bernauld," and he turned to me as the door closed behind Marcel, "what do you say to a dash in the darkness? This gnawing one's soul in a trap is little to my liking."

"And as little to mine," answered I, "but the point is the safety of the Prince, and a dash in the dark will hardly better the chances. 'Tis like this,

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my lord : La Hake is either there or he is not there. If not, let the boy have his rest. If the rogue is on the prowl, whether for him or for me, we would but bolt into his arms in the dark, and a chance musket-ball might put an end to the d'Albrets. The lad being worth more alive than dead, I cannot think La Hake would willingly lay violent hands on him."

"Then there is nothing for it," said he, "but to see that all are on the alert, though I pray God we are like children frightened at an empty darkness."

Though I well knew we could trust Marcel to see that no risks were added through careless folly, I led the way round the Château willingly enough. Few things fret a man's nerves sooner than idly waiting for the unknown, and, besides, it was a leader's place to make certain for himself that all was well. It is a poor consolation to a man that he has rightly trusted his underlings nineteen times out of a score, if the twentieth time he is caught napping.

At every turn De Grammont had nothing but praise; doors were barricaded, shutters barred, no lights showing, and at every outlook of vantage there was a watcher stationed, so that no point of view was uncommanded.

"So, so," said he, approvingly; "our friend can work. Give me the man who says no more than he must, and nine times out of ten he has the readiest hands and the shrewdest wit to guide them." Wherein Marcel differed from La Hake, as shall be told in its place.

This took a full half-hour, and was, as it were, a kind of crutch to the halting of the night, for, once

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back in our chamber with the table between us, time lagged heavily. Desire for talk had died out, though as for myself I can vouch for it that my thoughts were neither pleasant nor courtly company. 'Tis useless to say to you, "think these thoughts out for yourself," for unless a man has faced, as I in that hour, the ruin of his name, his creed, and his race, he cannot imagine their stings and goadings. Believe it as you may, there was almost a kind of grim thankfulness that La Hake had left no scion of my name to be pointed at as the son of the man whose foolish wisdom had destroyed Navarre.

Then came remembrance of my lady, not yet recovered from her sickness, and with her sorrow still uncomforted, and at the bitterness of the thought I must have groaned aloud, for De Grammont started from his reverie, and for a moment we looked at one another questioningly, but neither spoke.

Small wonder if it was a relief when there came at last a hurried warning from a sentinel, followed smartly by a hammering on the outer door, which told us that at length we had men to deal with, and were done with ghosts and shadows.

"At last!" cried De Grammont, jumping to his feet and stretching himself, while, with the instinct which is second nature in a soldier, he ran his fingers round his belt, and twitched his sword-hilt more frankly easy to his hand. "Let them hammer for a time, then one of your fellows can parley with them. The truth is always wise when it can be told with safety, and confirms no more than they know already. Let him own that you are here, but lie as to the Prince.

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Meanwhile, call Marcel, and we will hold our last council. Thank the Lord we are done with brooding, once for all."

"But the Prince?"

"Time enough for the Prince presently; let us first see our way a yard or two ahead. If my campaigning goes for aught, these fellows will not botch their work by overhaste. Why should they, seeing that with three leisure hours there is naught to press them?"

Of our talk there is little need be said, since not one of the three of us had more to suggest than that we should fence them with our words as long as possible, and after that take to steel. In war, as in every other game, the case is never so desperate but that the unexpected may turn the scale of chances. Time, for the present, was against us, but let La Hake dally, and time would change sides. So said De Grammont, but in our hearts we each one of us knew La Hake would not dally. Meanwhile from below there had come the sound of voices, Monnon's gruff tones answered by muffled speech, of which we did not catch the import, but within it passed from inquiry to expostulation and protests, and without ended in a still stronger assault on the stout panels, angry and loud enough though somewhat dulled by the defensive lumber piled behind.

"Well," cried De Grammont, as Monnon looked in at the door with a face whiter than one likes to see in a man to whom will presently come a tussle for life, "who is the rogue, and what says he?"

"Naught but 'Send me hither Monsieur de Bernaud!'—that, and that only," answered Monnon.

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"And what staggers thee in that, man, that thou shouldst halt and stammer so?" cried I, angrily. "Since when hast thou learned to be afraid of a voice in the dark?"

"If but one spoke there are fifty behind him," cried he, "for the whole air is astir with the jumble of their horse-hoofs."

"Terror counts double," said De Grammont. "That gives a score in front, and doubtless half as many behind. Hark to the importunity of the fellow; best go to him, Monsieur de Bernauld, while I rouse the Prince. God grant we be not all harder to waken an hour hence."

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CHAPTER XXIII

HOW MARCEL THE YOUNGER SAVED THE PRINCE OF BÉARN

THERE was, as yet, no attempt at breaking in the door, which was as stout as oak and iron could make it, only the rattle of blows dealt from a heavy sword-hilt, or the thunder of a thick-heeled riding-boot, with, above the clatter, La Hake's voice, "Bid thy master hasten, fellow, and beware of tricks, for I and mine are in no mood for fooling."

"Get you gone, La Hake!" cried I. "This is no place for such as you. Here there are no more babes for slaughter."

"Ha! the man himself," I heard him say; "then, by the Lord, the jade told truth." Then he went on in a louder tone, "Let that rest, Monsieur de Bernauld, so that what you and I have to settle between us may come the easier."

"There is but one thing that is at issue between us two," answered I, "and that is life and death. Give me but half an hour of daylight—"

"Chut, chut!" said he; "why rake up bygones, like a spoiled child? And besides, when one hunts the bear one does not turn aside even for a wolfslot. Let us leave off beating about the bush and come to

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plain words, and, that you may reckon your chances, on my faith as a gentleman I will tell you naked truth. I have here some thirty fellows who fear neither man nor devil, and who know no other gods than gold crowns and a full stomach. Of fear and pity they know as little as they do of law, and that is nothing; and nothing is what they care for all three. There are three hours yet to dawn, and with the timber piled outside your walls I can so fire Bernauld that the sun at its coming will find neither stick nor stone nor sound of life. If you doubt me, hark to the whistle of the wind in the pines beyond. If you bide in-doors you burn, if you break cover we shoot you down like dogs in the light of your own fire. There is an end to Bernauld's house, there is an end to Bernauld's master, there is an end to Bernauld's race. All that is brutal truth. Fence it how you may, kick at it how you may, brutal truth it will remain, and not all the plausible talk from this to Michaelmas will bate a jot of it."

"Burn away," answered I, to draw him on. "You did one infamy to find my whereabouts, now you have me trapped do another infamy and so make an end."

"Right!" he cried. "Trapped is the word—the very word; and that you neither bluster nor make denial shows Rumor told truth when she gave you a man's wit. To be frank with you. If Bernauld had no guests within its walls I would seek nothing better than, as you say, to burn and make an end. But even Alva would allow there are salmon and salmon, so for the sake of Henry of Béarn I am will-

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ing to let Blaise de Bernauld go scatheless. For aught I care he might burn, too, and welcome, but it chances he has a greater value with his life whole in him. Ha! Do you take me now? My faith, had a man told me but a day since that I would give De Bernauld life on any terms I would have cursed him for a fool and liar. Is it a bargain?"

What I would have said in my anger I know not, but Marcel, who had slipped in behind me unheard, whispered:

"Speak him fair, Master Blaise, and so gain time, then hasten up-stairs, for my lord is growing restless."

"Henry of Béarn?" said I. "What fool's talk is this of Henry of Béarn?"

"Tut!" answered La Hake, scornfully. "Art thou going to play such a raw fool's game as that, and so late in the day? Come now, Monsieur de Bernauld, on your word as a gentleman, is the Prince of Béarn not within there, with some bare half-dozen fellows who have not so much as one musketoon between them? Faith of a gentleman, Monsieur de Bernauld?"

To be honest, had I dreamed he would have believed my lie, faith of a gentleman, lied I would have; but I knew it would but draw his contempt and leave things where they were, so hung silent a minute, then said:

"Suppose we strike a bargain, what warrant have I that Monseigneur's life would be spared?"

"That is sense," cried La Hake, "and the more so that had Henry of Béarn not been within you had burned without mercy. Warrant? The warrant that

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his life is worth more than his death, and what better warrant than gold crowns can a man have?"

"So far I believe you," replied I; "but what warrant have I that, having got the Prince, you will not burn Bernauld about my ears in the end?"

That puzzled him as I thought it would, and through the silence I could hear him muttering to himself, and stamping his feet on the stones of the porch.

"Faith of a gentleman," he cried at last, "and what better warrant can you have?"

"The security is admirable, but by your leave," answered I, dryly, "where 'tis life and death, gold crowns are more to my mind. Think again."

"I will leave you half a dozen of my fellows as hostages, unarmed, or at least with but their pistolets for defence."

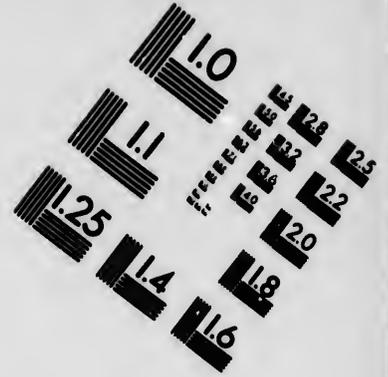
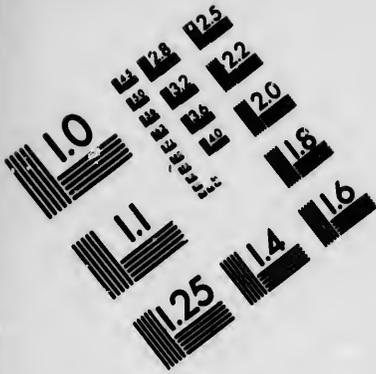
"By your leave," answered I again, "but the other two dozen who fear neither man nor devil, nor have other gods than gold crowns and a full stomach, might hold that the fewer the living, the better the pay, and so make an end of us all. Think yet again, for it behooves a man who has but one life to lose to bargain well for its safeguarding."

"Ay, I know," he said; "and I owe you no grudge for your care; yet, if you gave me your word to put the Prince in my hands with the first of the dawn, I almost think I would take the assurance."

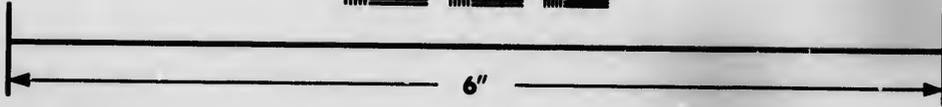
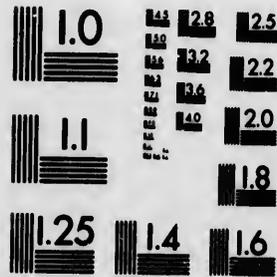
"That's not the point," answered I, "but the burning of Bernauld, and I and mine cooped behind closed doors."

Again there was a silence, except that I could hear





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him cursing softly, half under his breath as it were. If he had cursed for an hour it would have pleased me right well in spite of De Grammont's impatience, since it seemed to me that every frittered moment was a gain to us; but presently he broke out:

"This time at least there can be no cavil. See, Monsieur de Bernauld, I will covenant to hand you half our musketoons, with their powder and ball, and thereafter 'tis a fair fight, and whoever sets Bernauld aflame takes his life in his hands."

"That sounds more to the purpose," said I; and added, with a bitterness of meaning that touched him not at all, "And is this, too, faith of a gentleman?"

"My word of honor, and a cheap bargain for Bernauld," he answered.

"Then grant me half an hour to weigh it over. Think, man—if I say yes, this thing is my damning for all time."

"Half a hundred devils!" he answered, savagely; "think, man—if you say no 'tis between you and your conscience that it's the damning you for all eternity, for burn you will. Here it is in a nutshell. Say nay, and you and the Prince of Béarn, and De Grammont --I know the old fox is within—perish to a man; say ay, and all are as you were, except that the Prince goes south as hostage. My faith, but the terms are a fool's terms, and had I not pledged my word to them I would make them harder. As to time, you have while I count five hundred slowly, and I warn you the ten minutes will not be lost to us, for we will spend them piling faggots for your roasting, and at five

How Marcel the Younger Saved the Prince

hundred and ten you will smell the smoke of your death."

Monseigneur I found wakeful enough, and De Grammont by him, fuming, with Marcel, a silent sentinel outside their door. Taking him by the arm I brought him within, and as briefly as might be told them La Hake's terms.

"Twice," said De Grammont, "I have had it in my mind to muffle the hoofs of our beasts and make a bolt for it while you had that fellow in talk. The rogues were mostly to the front and keeping but a careless watch. The odds were we might have broken through, but the blackness of the treachery to you held me back. Now, with them buzzing like hornets on all sides, the chance has slipped."

"Then let us waste no thought on it," answered I, "but rather reckon the chances that remain."

"Then that is to make no attempt," cried he, bitterly; "for there is nothing left but to fling open the door and die like men, and not as badgers in a hole. Even then it is to leave the women and children shrieking behind."

At this I saw Marcel start, and fling his hand up into the air with a gesture I understood.

"Speak on," I said, "but waste no time."

"By your leave, then," and he looked from one to the other of us, "does this La Hake know Monseigneur? Know him by looks, I mean?"

"He may have seen him in Paris or St. Germain four years ago," said De Grammont, "but—out with your scheme, man, for the Lord's sake, if you have one."

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For answer Marcel turned on his heel, and we heard him running at top speed down the corridor. When he returned it was with young Marcel in his arms, naked as when snatched from bed, and still blinking with sleep.

Seating him on the couch by the side of the Prince, the father flung a coverlid across his shoulders, and then, with a gesture at both the lads, stepped back in silence. We caught his meaning on the moment. There was the same tossed and curly hair, the same thin face with the nose overlong for the breadth of the cheeks, the same alertness of spirit in the eyes, the same slender, sinewy young limbs. Dress Marcel in silks and lace, and belt a sword to his waist, and so long as he held his tongue he would pass for Henry of Béarn with one who had not seen the Prince for so many years.

"God for Navarre and the faith. We'll cheat the rogues yet," cried De Grammont. Then he turned on Marcel, standing rigid behind him: "Do you know the risks, friend? This is no play of puppets. Do you do this thing for Monseigneur with your eyes open?"

"Never a bit for Monseigneur," answered Marcel. "We are Bernaulds, the lad and I, and do it for Master Blaise. As to the risk, who should know La Hake better than we?"

"But can the lad play his part, and will he?"

"As to the can he, the Lord knows; and as to the will he, ask himself."

"I know nothing of it, nor what it is," said the boy, "but if it be for Master Blaise, why not?"

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As for me, I hid my face in my hands, and think it no shame that I fairly wept.

"What did I tell you at Carmeuse?" said Marcel, softly, while his hand stole up and gripped me by the elbow where none could see. "There are two more in the chamber behind there, but the sorrow of it is they can do naught."

Even then there was the Prince to win over, and, God forgive us, it was only by sheer and brazen lying as to the risks, lying as if there was no such thing as conscience or a God of truth in the world, that we at last forced a consent.

"Why should he hurt the lad?" said the father, whose face had gone whiter than Monnon's and with better cause. "When he finds out the cheat 'twill be no more, perchance, than a cut of a whip; and what's a whip-stroke to an idle lad? Why, naught."

All this had taken longer than the time of grace granted by La Hake, but without waiting its expiry I had hailed him from an upper window, and with much frankness told him that his limit was too short.

"There are more consents than one to gain in this thing, and for an ounce of haste you are like to lose a pound of profit. That you have us trapped I know as well as you, but at least give a man a chance of saving his honor with his life."

"There is some trick in this to gain time," he said, suspiciously.

"If to gain time were all," replied I. "I might have fenced you with words for half an hour, and I did not."

"You may have till the wood is piled to my liking,"

A Man of His Age

he said at last. "That, I calculate, will be some fifteen minutes; after that, not a second."

That we wasted no time you may believe, and never had a Prince of Béarn known less ceremony in his valeting.

"My faith," said he, as, in his rough homespun, he looked the mocked Monseigneur up and down, "if aught happens to me, palm him off on Navarre. I'll wager he has a royal spirit in him, and would wear the dignity without disgrace."

Then his face sobered down, and but that we had no leisure to spare to words, he would have given young Marcel more of gratitude and thanks than a half jest. Our first thought had been to take La Hake at his word, and cheat him with young Marcel in the dark, but the agony written across the father's face set me thinking whether even a loophole of escape could not be devised. He, at least, had no illusions. The moment of the discovery of the cheat would be the lad's last of life. In the end, and with few words—for to do him justice De Grammont saw eye to eye with me in this matter—what we settled was this:

Five of the horses which were in the inner courtyard should be saddled. On these I, Marcel and his lad, and two of the Queen's men-at-arms should make a bolt for the mountains, trusting to the half light to show La Hake—as he thought—the Prince, and to the half darkness to cover our flight. Touch the lad they would not except in a last desperation, and with the advantage of the surprise, and our knowledge of the paths, we should at least lead them a dance. Meanwhile, if we drew the rascals, as I counted we

How Marcel the Younger Saved the Prince

should, De Grammont and the prince would ride north to the open country, and if they got no more than ten minutes start La Hake might whistle for all he would ever see of them.

Bidding them make all speed in the court-yard I returned to the window, and again hailed La Hake, not alone to divert attention but also to cripple the attack.

"Hulloa, there, without; make ready with the musketoons, and let there be no delay at the last. I, on my part, am having four horses made ready that the Prince may be fittingly attended."

"Ha! you agree, then, Monsieur de Bernauld, you agree?" cried La Hake. "By the Lord, I thought a man's life was worth a twinge of conscience. As for the other four, I'll have none of them."

"Then the Prince hides here, and that's the last word," said I, sharply. "What, man! a gentleman must at least have some excuse to plead, and if the Prince has his guard with him—"

"Oh! as you will," he answered; "only they come at their peril and yours, and so had best keep civil tongues, for I will stand neither folly nor interference, come what may. Now, as to the musketoons, is it good faith, Monsieur de Bernauld?"

"Fifteen, full told," said I, "with their powder and ball. We will take them one by one at yonder door to the right. As to the faith, you can hear the trampling of the horses if you but listen."

With that, partly to save more questions and partly for the need of haste, I whipped my head within and made for the court-yard. My faith, but it was a wild night! A high wind with the promise of more

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wind coming, and great splashes of black and gray clouds drifting across the hollow of the upper sky. Here and there a star showed, but when one looked for it a second time it was lost in the wrack, and in its place another looked out half the heavens away. Light there was of a kind where the wind wore the clouds thin, but it was a light that helped us rather than hindered, because of the quick, disconcerting interchange of shadow. Even in absolute blackness a man may be a fair mark, but it is another thing to throw a ball straight when he looks now thirty yards away and now sixty.

Marcel knew this as well as I, and there was a slackening of the tense lines about the mouth. There was, at least, the promise of a chance of life. Detailed plan we had none, except that we three should hold together, and, once clear of La Hake's fellows, the two men-at-arms might scatter whither they would for safety's sake.

This time, at least, there were no toy weapons, and it was almost with a grim satisfaction that I shortened up the strap carrying the Paris blade. With the Prince out of the way, and no boy's life in peril, and a dag or two at the saddle-flap to equalize chances, the night's ride would have been no more than a man's risk.

Bidding all mount softly, and two fellows stand ready to open and slam to the gates behind us, I raised the hatch in the rear postern and peered out between its bars. If La Hake made ready in front, he also kept open eyes behind, for in the glimmer of the uncertain light I could see his fellows, some on

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horseback and some afoot, dotted here and there, but only two or three with musketoons.

Better chance we might never have if we waited an hour, and I turned to the Prince and De Grammont, standing in the darker shadow of the wall.

"The rest is your affair, my lord; God have you in His keeping, Monseigneur. Should we fall we leave to you that no man flings contempt on the name of Bernauld. Now, fellows," and I swung into the saddle, "smartly with the bars when I give the word. Keep the lad between us, Marcel, and you two hang on our flank. Naked steel now, give the beasts their heads and don't spare spur at the first. Farewell, Monseigneur, farewell De Grammont. Down with the bars, men, and no fumbling. Let the rascals in front hear us, 'God for the Queen and Navarre! Up Béarn, and down Spain!' Spur for your lives."

With a rush and a clatter we swept out into the gusty night, followed by an incoherent shout and the sound of the clanging gates.

The hunt was fairly afoot.

CHAPTER XXIV

HOW MARCEL PARTED LA HAKE AND BERNAULD

DOUBTLESS they thought the game already in the net, for, with all their seeming watchfulness, it was clear that we caught them unready. Those on horseback had their reins flung loose on their beasts' necks, and their hands tucked under their riding-cloaks for warmth, since, even in August, the core of the night is chilly when a north wind blows. Half asleep they were, too, hunched up with their collars about their ears, and even those afoot had more thought for their own discomfort than for the quarry trapped in Bernauld.

Drawing our beasts together, with the lad close packed between us, we three passed them in a flash, flinging one fellow sprawling on his back in the bushes. The two men-at-arms closed in behind as they had been bidden, and had a bullet followed us, I doubt it would have done no more than make a vacancy in the ranks of the Queen's servants. Some motion to fire I caught with the tail of my eye as we fled past, but these lumbering weapons are slow of use, and a man would need have the patient leisure of a siege to put them to good service. Even had they been as ready as an honest crossbow we were

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How Marcel Parted La Hake and Bernauld

safe, for I heard the attempt upon us cried sharply down. La Hake had plainly no mind to earn doubtful thanks for a dead prince, when honors and a full purse were to be had for the living.

Once through the ring, and with an insured lead, we reined back, since our policy was to draw pursuit, and not discourage it by an overgreat advantage. Besides, it was a prime necessity that La Hake should see the Prince, and so be certain for himself that his prey had slipped his grip.

We have never been rich, we De Bernaulds, but, as we slackened pace, the thought passed through me that I would have given the scoundrel half his blood-money but to see his face when he heard the tidings. That he had it in his mind to cheat us in the bargain in some fashion I was sure, and that such a crafty fox should himself be outwitted would gall him like a dagger-slash. 'Twas a full repayment for the debt of Orthez, and, laughing aloud, I turned back in my saddle to watch between the tree-trunks for his coming.

I had not long to wait. While our beasts were still tossing their heads and pulling hard in their impatience to be off, he tore at a rattling gallop round the bend of the wall, shouting commands as he rode. Once with his own fellows he slackened pace, and we could hear the sharp exchange of question and reply, and see dimly the shadowy gestures pointing the way we had gone. For a moment he hung irresolute, and had I not spurred him on with a gibe he might, deeming us lost, have turned back after all and wreaked his wrath and disappointment on those left behind.

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"Hath Philip of Spain none but fools that he sends such as thee on his errands?" I cried. "Dost hear thy crowns jingle, La Hake?" And I shook the bridle till the steel bit rang, laughing my loudest the while. "Sharpen thy wits, man, next time thou ridest to harry Bernauld."

Whether the jeer stung him, or the laugh, I know not. The latter, I think, for many a time a laugh will goad a cool man to a folly when a word, or even a blow, fails to stir his phlegm. Be it one or the other, stung he was as I had hoped, and answered me back wrathfully:

"Art thou there, cheat and liar, with thy prate of faith of a gentleman? Ye are sure, fellows, ye saw the lad? Tut! what time have we for chatter—ay or nay? Ay? Then God have mercy on thee, De Bernauld, for I'll have none. Ten crowns apiece for the lad or De Bernauld, twenty if ye take them alive. Ride, fellows, as if hell howled for you!"

"Now for it, Marcel," said I. "Catch the lad's rein if need be, lest he go wild," and with the thud of the hoofs beneath, and the third of the hoofs behind, we shot out into the black of the night.

No need to bid Marcel gallop. He knew the size of the stakes as well as I, and whereas I rode for one life, he rode for two, and so spared neither hand nor spur. Which had the better beasts none could tell, and at the first, at least, it seemed an even match. If they had ridden far since sundown, we had ridden farther, and with no great interval of rest. If, being Bernauld born and bred, we knew the country better, having the boy with us equalized the advantages,

How Marcel Parted La Hake and Bernauld

since a lad of fifteen knows not how to save his beast while, at the same time, using him to the last ounce. That is a man's knowledge, and not every man's knowledge either, since more can stick on horseback than can ride a horse. The need to hold together was also a curb on our speed, for, after all, the pace of the three must needs be the pace of the slowest horse. They, if they had the heart for it, might fall into a string with their fleetest beast creeping up while the others tailed off, but ready to join in if it came to grips. But what I most dreaded, and what kept my skin on the itch, was a chance shot in the dark, aimed not at us but at what carried us. This, I take it, they feared to risk lest the jolt of the gallop should throw the ball high, and so turn twenty crowns into ten, but the terror of it pounded hard at my heels every stride of that mad race in the dark.

With a wise discretion the two men-at-arms had given their beasts their head from the first. Where they rode to, east or west, I know not, but I owe them no grudge for leaving us. Their part of the play had been to swell the numbers of the supposed escort, and that done neither they nor we had aught to gain by their hanging back. To fight La Hake was no part of our purpose, unless to fight as the rat fights when pent in a corner and hopeless.

Such a corner seemed not far off, for the thud of the hoofs grew louder, and in the dusk Marcel's face, looking back across his shoulder, showed how great was his apprehension—apprehension, mind you, not fear. As I caught the stare in his eyes, and the rigid tightening of the lips, I understood how a man may

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have a clear and exact expectation of the worst that can befall, and yet have no terror. That he should already despair was a mystery, for our chances were, as yet, not much worse than ever, and how could I know that he had his mind resolved on one last sacrifice for Bernauld?

For all my knowledge of the country through which we rode, four years' absence and the changes wrought in them had dulled the edge of familiarity, and half unconsciously I leaned on Marcel for guidance. Not only had he from time to time visited Bernauld, but the carrying out of his recruiting mission these last few weeks had taken him over every foot of the countryside.

When, therefore, having taken another long look behind, he shortened his hold on the lad's rein and called to me softly, "To the left, and God bless you, Master Blaise," I swerved aside unhesitatingly, and, finding myself on soft turf, bent forward on the saddle and spurred harder than ever.

On my right, of a sudden, there was the loom of thick timber, solid to the ground with an undergrowth of brush, and lying on the night black and flat as a wall. Across this came the sharp clatter of hoofs on a stony road, and, to my wonder, Marcel's voice raised to a shout: "This way, Monseigneur, this way, and keep by me!" and then, and only then, I saw that I rode alone.

Reining my beast back with a jerk, I stood up in my stirrups, listening. Out of the gloom on the right front, faint through the wind for all their nearness, I heard Marcel and the lad, abreast, and, to my

How Marcel Parted La Hake and Bernauld

tense nerves, as if but a yard away was the loud scurry of the pursuit ; behind, silence, utter and complete ; then again from the front Marcel's voice in a hoarse shout that broke down even the opposition of the wind, " Hold by me, Monseigneur ! Up Navarre, and down Spain ! " Then I understood.

In the hurly - burly of the wind the thud of my gallop on the soft turf would pass unheard, and La Hake and his fellow-bloodhounds, following the decoy, would be led astray. To the last Marcel's thought was for Bernauld. On him and on his be the risk, me he had tricked into safety.

Nine times out of ten the first impulse in a man is the most generous and self-forgotten. Following it, and driven by an unreasoning sense of shame and cowardice, I swung my beast round, and set to work feeling my way back in the dark as best I might, and found it no easy task. The shadow of the timber on my left was but a blind guide, and every half - dozen strides plunged me into brush that choked all progress. To draw to the right was to lose the loom of the trees, and with it the line of advance. Do what I would, follow the curving of the wood I could not, and on the sixth check I drew bridle in sheer despair. In the gallop south from Bernauld I had left the reins loose on the horse's neck, and the brute's instinct had carried me straight and safely. Such a course was impracticable now, nor was the man's reason an adequate substitute for the brute's sagacity. There I sat, cursing my impotence, while from the other side of the timber belt came the clatter of belated stragglers coursing their blood-money with the dogged

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persistence that trusts to some turn in the chapter of accidents. Then, suddenly, born out of what twist in the brain I knew not, there came to my relief a sense of my own futility, and, sullenly enough, I headed once more towards the mountains, leaving my beast to pick its own path. To ride into the middle of La Hake's rogues, savage with the cheat put upon them, was but to fling away Marcel's sacrifice for naught, and turn the whole failure of the raid into a half triumph.

Truly the heart knoweth its own bitterness, and my chafings of spirit were sore enough as I rode on, as it were, into vacancy, cursing La Hake, cursing the Prince, cursing myself, and at times cursing even Marcel. What right had he to take the lead from my hands without yea or nay, making me play the puppet and dance to his whistle? Who in Pau, yonder, would believe but that when the pinch came I saved my skin by thrusting on others the burden of danger? When a captain escapes scatheless and his squire goes down, men say with a laugh the captain had the longer spur of the two, and so every velvet-scabbarded prater from Languedoc to the ocean would have his gibe ready barbed, and not a few would welcome the weapon, since few things make readier enemies than success and a queen's favor. Bitter thoughts, if they be but bitter enough, turn hours into minutes as fast as will any joys upon earth, and so the promise of morning was broad upon me before I so much as knew the east was gray. Left uncontrolled, my horse had fallen to a walk, and, when I roused myself, was cropping at such poor tufts of grass as the heat of the summer had spared.

How Marcel Parted La Hake and Bernauld

With the sun no lower than the tree-tops, the lie of the country was plain enough to me. There to the right was Mousté; further east, le Monné. Ger would be four or five leagues to the south, and Bernauld—and I turned on my saddle, leaning one hand on my beast's flank—Bernauld would be— But my thought got no further. Five hundred yards behind, and riding leisurely, as became a gentleman who had his whole day of pleasure before him, and nothing to hinder its perfect enjoyment, was La Hake.

As he saw me turn he clapped spurs to his horse, but once within speaking distance he dropped into a walk and shouted:

"Write me down a Calvinist henceforth, and a firm convert to predestination. Not even the devil, father of all lies though he is, could save the liar and cheat. Oh ho, Monsieur de Bernauld, I saw your back last night in the dark, and now by God's grace I see your face by daylight. I told you that, hide where you would in all France, I would find you out. Once it was in the city, once on your own dunghill, and now, and for the last time, in the open field. So much for your avoidances, Monsieur de Bernauld."

For myself, though my heart was hot enough within me, I answered nothing at the time, but gathered in the reins tighter, loosened my sword, and thanked God under my breath.

Three lengths from me he halted, and we two sat in silence, eying each other like a pair of fighting cocks reckoning up points and chances. A strange couple we made—things of laughter both of us, for all our deadly intent. The court gallants, whether

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of Paris or Navarre, would have cracked many a jest on our unkempt and bedraggled trim; collars awry, hair wisped and tangled, I hatless, since an overhanging branch had swept my head bare in the night's ride, both with points untrussed, both smirched and stained, and with tags and tatters of clothing flying in the wind. Proper scarecrows we were, for a man cannot ride breakneck through brush in the dark and come out of it curled and groomed as if for a queen's gathering.

"Faith of a gentleman!" he cried at last. "Faith of a gentleman! and, good Lord, to think that I believed it! I might have known from what they told me down in Spain there, that from Blaise de Bernauld I could look for nothing but black treason. Oh ay, I know you promised nothing, not in so many words, but to bid me make ready the tale of weapons was as much as to say the pact is settled, and I have always held that a gentleman's hint was worth his oath. Not many men have fooled Denis La Hake, and no man has fooled him twice, nor, by all the saints, will you! If there was aught of treachery between us—and some men might say there was, though I promised the hussy nothing that I remember—I hold it wiped out, and the debt on my side. Yet no; you owe me that thrust at Orthez, and that you'll never pay. My faith, what a fool you looked skulking in the black of the arch! Hulloo! cried the pigeon to the hawk. Had I guessed at this night's cheat, I would have had a second thrust though all Orthez was howling three yards away in the rain."

"All this is bluster," said I. "Quit words and come

How Marcel Parted La Hake and Bernauld

to work, for there is no longer room for thee and me in Béarn."

"Leave theeing aside, Monsieur de Bernauld," he answered; "that is for friend or lackey, and God knows I am neither one nor other. As for coming to work—presently, presently, a man nimble with his tongue is nimble with his eye and hand, therefore I love words. Nor is there any haste. 'Tis a good world—so good that not even the last of the De Bernaulds need be in a splutter to quit it. Oh ay, there are accidents; but accidents aside, you are as good as dead, and in your heart you know it. De Crussenay was twice the man you are, and yet—ay, faith," and he drew his sword leisurely, "and with this very blade—I cooled his fever for him. So let there be no haste; you and I will shortly be farther apart than even the breadth of Béarn."

"Ay," answered I, "as far apart as earth and hell!"

"As for that," said he, with the same jeering carelessness, "you know your own road best, and I have met many a man who found the one no more than a heart's-beat from the other."

I, too, had my blade out, but for all our rancor in words we were sluggish in action. The night dews had chilled our blood, and the drunkenness of passion, like that of Rhine wine, leaves a flatness after it, so that the hate within smoked and smouldered rather than burned hotly. The fanning of it came from La Hake.

"'Twill be a kind of comfort to you," said he, twisting his mouth in a sneer, "that Madame Jeanne will have De Crussenay as consoler. A fine thing for a

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penniless lad to fall heir to Carmeuse and Bernauld, and so stay the wagging of gossiping tongues. Complaisant in life, complaisant in death; my faith, Monsieur, but you are a model husband; ho, ho, ho, a model husband!"

The laugh woke me to fury, and without so much as a word in reply to his venomous lies, I shook my beast up, spurring him viciously, and as he had never been spurred even in the first dash from Bernauld. For all La Hake's chatter he had never relaxed watchfulness, and was ready for me, answering the attack, not by a slash at me, but at the muzzle of my horse just above the bit. A cruel and a dastard trick, and one that failed, since the edge caught the chain that lay along the brute's cheek and not the leather of the reins. With a wince the poor beast swerved to one side, and had not the reins held I would have been flung sprawling on the grass and at the scoundrel's mercy.

"'Twas a good stroke and a fair risk," he said, coolly. "I thought I could count on your provincialism. A man has to be Paris bred to foresee the unexpected. A little more readiness as I bent forward, and you had me through the ribs."

His contempt nettled me, as it was meant to do, but I kept my head.

"On guard, Monsieur."

"On guard!" he echoed; "but I think I was over-much on guard. More so than thou wert to leave Madame— Ha! that touches you, does it? Well, I will touch you closer presently. Steady, steady, or De Crussenay will come to his own a full minute

How Marcel Parted La Hake and Bernauld

sooner than I had counted. Why! a good stroke, on my word. Where learned a petty gentleman of Béarn such pretty play? Nay, I almost had you; a touch, I think, a touch. To lose the temper plays the very devil with a man's steadiness. Ha! by the saints, a stiff lunge, and a stronger wrist than I credited; no, no, no, 'tis my sleeve and nothing more, but the intent was good, and it's about time to make an end."

What I owned then in my heart I may own openly now. La Hake was the better man, and both he and I knew it. Not by much, perhaps, but in nicety of skill, alertness, ay, even in strength of arm, he held me at an advantage. If one could put such a thing into figures he had, as it were, ten points out of nineteen, and to a dead man the odd point counts for much.

As he once played with De Crussenay in Rouen, so now he played with me. But when he fell silent he dropped all such banter, and with lips set and teeth clinched, turned his play into grim earnest. Hitherto he had been content to stand on his defence, lunging only when a careless return to guard left a clear opening. Now it was I who had need of all my wits to evade attack. Never for an instant did his blade leave mine, but hugging it as fire hugs wood he pressed in hotly, giving me no rest.

Twice he beat me, and the laugh leaped to his eyes, twice a twist of the body saved me, and he fell to work again, holding me so close in hand that my breath was no better than a spasm of gasps. Then, of a sudden, he changed his tactics. Pushing his beast forward with his knee, he dropped his reins, and, as I

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bent half backward from his attack, swept down his left hand and gripped my bridle, dragging the bit to one side viciously.

If he meant to disconcert me and in the flurry of my confusion strike home at his ease, he succeeded at least in the first, and what followed after was none of my doing. Wrenched from between the teeth the steel bar slipped up, scoring afresh the wound in the cheek, and maddening the brute beyond all control. Rearing and plunging, it backed beyond the reach of his arm, pulling him forward on his beast's neck; then, snorting with pain, it dashed ahead, entangling the reins in La Hake's sword as it passed and forcing the hilt from his grip.

As I say, it was none of my doing, for the ring of the steel on the ground was the first I knew of the turn in affairs, and had La Hake but had his wits about him he might have secured his weapon, and been back in his saddle before I could have rounded on him.

But he made no such attempt. Without so much as the pause of a breath he clapped spurs to his horse and headed at a gallop for the hills, with me tearing behind him fifty yards in the rear.

At that time, I think, all the wild devils that can possess a man had me in a loose leash, and chiefest of all was a brutal exultation that La Hake should lap the bitter drink of his own brewing. My heart was afire with the rebound from the terror of death, and fairly sang within me as we raced along. As he had played with me, so would I play with him, thrusting him into the grave by inches, and not for a king's

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ransom would I have shortened by a tick of time the dragging out of triumph.

"Ride on, La Hake!" I shouted. "'Tis the very wind of life to me, for, by God, I have you safe."

Whereupon he looked back at me over his shoulder, and, to be honest, as one should be to a dead man, the quiet of his face killed the devilish exultation in me, for it left me no room for triumph. Whether the looking back worked his ruin, or whether his beast, driving into a mole-run, stumbled, I never knew, but with a stagger his horse lurched forward, flinging La Hake violently on his right shoulder and arm, and rolling him over on his face like a log.

For an instant he lay huddled in a heap, and, as I thought and feared, dead; then he stirred, moaning. Propping himself up with his left arm, he rose to his knees and looked round him, his dazed and white face twitching with agony. The right arm, broken above the elbow and crushed at the shoulder, hung limply as he swung, swaying on his hand, and across his forehead there were already broad trickles of blood. Even then, ghastly, wrecked, and helpless as he was, the rogue had a kind of dignity in him that held me, as it were, at arm's length, so that, shrinking from attack and settling back in the saddle, I sat and watched him, the blood growing colder in me every minute.

Slowly, and groaning under the compulsion of pain, he doubled a knee in front of him and staggered to his feet and again looked round him. By this time his eyes had cleared and he saw me, and as he saw me he laughed. Good Lord, what a laugh! It shivered me then and it shivers me now to the very soles

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of my dead feet. It was such a burst of ghastly merriment as might come from some dare-devil soul that had sold itself to the fiend, and been cozened of its price, and yet had enough of the man left to stiffen its courage—a laugh whose wrinkles struggled with the spasms of agony puckering the white face, and in the end were lost in the greatness of the pain. A laugh from the throat that touched neither heart nor lips and died in a choked groan.

Six yards away was a flat boulder, too large to be stirred in the laborious clearing of the pasture. To it he limped, and, with almost infinite pain, sat him down fronting me.

"Saints, how it hurts! I almost begin to believe there is a hell," he said under his breath and looking sideways at his shattered arm. Then to me: "The game is over, and I was never one to whine at a missed coup. Thank the Lord, chance has done it and not you. It will tax even the liar De Bernauld to make a story and a boast out of this day's murder. Come on, butcher, and do your killing."

Then passion wakened in him, and shaking in a paroxysm of impotent wrath he groaned behind his shut teeth, "Curse your rat-hole of a Navarre! Oh that I had both arms and the life whole in me. Between us two bare hands to naked steel would be but fair odds."

Slipping the reins over my arm I swung myself to the ground swiftly enough, and went near to him. That he should have no expectation of pity moved me to hardness, since what we call pity is often no better than a shamefaced fear lest the world cry out

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How Marcel Parted La Hake and Bernauld

upon us, and here La Hake and my sense of manhood were my sole world, and these were like to judge me with lenience. Had he craved mercy, as at times a brave man may in his straits, it would have gone hard to have answered by a cold-blooded thrust in the throat, but as it was I stiffened my hate and with the hilt of my sword the level of his eyes slanted the point to his breast so that he might see the full length of the steel, and taste it by anticipation.

"There is Gaspard," said I, "and Jeanne, and Orthez," and touched him on the naked skin with the point; "what have I ever done to thee that thou shouldst work two murders?"

"If I answer at all," said he, looking not at me but at the glint of the steel, and wincing as he spoke, for at last his nerve was broken, "it is to set you at your proper value. You were worth a hundred crowns to the widow of one Diego Saumarez, whom you slew in the Indies. The whole race of Bernauld for a hundred crowns," and, as I live, he broke again into his cackling laugh, even with the trickle of blood dropping from his throat, "a hundred crowns, and a fair price, too!"

"What!" I cried, trying to give him back contempt for contempt; "you could kill a babe for hire?"

"No, no, no," he answered, sharply, and waking again into a passion that shook him till he groaned, as much with rage as with distress of body, "but the woman was obstinate, and for my oath's sake and for them that stood by. D'ye think Herod killed John Baptist for love of Salome? Never a bit; but because of his oath; and who am I to be nicer than a

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king? Besides, she flouted me. As for you, in these rotting times of peace a man must still live like a gentleman, and ruffle it with the rest, though he earn his hire on carrion. You were worth a hundred crowns to me, and there you have the truth."

"Why not have claimed your blood-money by a glib lie?" said I, scornfully. "Not knowing you as I do, your widow would have been none the wiser."

"What?" and he brushed aside the point from his throat, and in his indignation made as if to struggle to his feet, but tumbled back again, groaning anew. "'Tis a brave thing to insult a broken man, and you with a sword to his throat! Am I a thief? Kill me, coward," then he added, slowly, and staring me straight in the eyes, "if you can."

But the time had gone by, and I could not, and he read in my face that I could not, for in spite of the suffering a light crept into his dull eyes.

"Have I kept you in talk long enough?" he cried, in a triumph. "By the saints, I guessed there was a weak spot in your nerve. Bah! what a pitiful rogue you are after all, De Bernauld, that you cannot kill a man without a sickening of conscience."

"Man, man!" I cried, "hast thou no fear—"

"Neither of thee, nor God, nor devil," he answered, not waiting for me to finish. "I know your sort, and I know this—you could no more kill me now than you could put a knife to your own throat."

Sullenly, half-repentant, and ashamed of my repentance, I sheathed my sword and turned to where my horse stood cropping the herbage, twenty feet away.

"Take your life for this time," I said. "God for-

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bid I should sink myself to your level!" and as I turned Marcel rode round by a knot of timber, and galloped up as hard as his tired beast could carry him.

Powdered with dust, and streaked with grime and sweat, the Squire's face was still whiter than La Hake's, and as he flung the reins from him and tumbled, rather than climbed, from the saddle, he cried, hoarsely:

"Leave the life in him for the Lord's sake, Master Blaise. My word for it, La Hake, you will kill no more lads!" and drawing his sword he rushed at the broken rogue, and would have cut him down had I not thrown myself between them and thrust him back.

"What folly is this, Marcel?" I cried, sternly. "If I, the lad's father, have spared him for this time—"

"The lad's father!" and his voice ran high and broken like a wrathful woman's—"the lad's father! 'Tis I am the lad's father, and, by the Lord who made me, I'll do no sparing! Stand aside, Master Blaise, stand aside, or, Bernauld though you are, I'll hack you down to get at him."

"The lad's father!" I echoed. "You—you? What madness has gotten you?"

"Look behind you for answer," said he. "Look at his coward face. There, in the wood beyond, as that bloody rogue rode upon us I lost the lad in the darkness, and he shouted for me—'Father, father!' 'What!' cried La Hake, reaching across the bridle that had slipped my grip, 'art thou not the Prince of Béarn?' 'Not I,' said the lad, with a laugh, and for answer, and while he still laughed, the villain cut him down, cursing him."

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Sullenly, and defiantly La Hake looked up from his place on the boulder. His face had gone gray with the premonition of death, and the slaver was dribbling from his mouth, but he held his impudence to the end.

"A pretty play," he said, though the chattering of his teeth so chopped the words that they could be but little better than guessed at. "The master gives his word that the man may break it. A pretty jest, and a pretty piece of Bernauld honor."

"Is this true?" said I, hoarsely, and not in much less stammering fashion than himself, for Marcel's passion set me shaking.

"It's true you passed your word," he answered, and then drawing his sleeve across his knee he played the pitiful with a parade of his helpless arm.

"True?" cried Marcel. "God's truth;" and thrusting me aside he rushed on La Hake, striking such a blow as shore through the uplifted arm, and let out the life below it. Again and again and again he struck in a blind fury, crying, "That for the lad!" at every blow, until there was little semblance to humanity in the mass at his feet. Then, of a sudden he ceased, and looked from the dead man to me and back again to the dead, and flung his sword on the grass.

"Thank the Lord!" he said in a deep breath, and going down on his knees he fell to weeping as if his heart would break.

CHAPTER XXV

"A MAN SHALL CLEAVE UNTO HIS WIFE"

OURS was, at the first, but a silent companionship as we rode home to Bernauld through the August sunshine, with the crisp breeze of the morning whistling in our ears. In the course of nature Marcel's thoughts were bitter and heavy enough, and a kind of shame for his savagery added to his dumbness. My own brain, too, was in a whirl, and I know not yet whether I was glad or wrathful that the Squire had thrust my will aside and taken the law of vengeance into his own hands.

So we rode in silence, and looked askance at one another as men do who are heavy at heart and fear to make bad worse by the wounding of an unweighed word; and what could I say? To blame Marcel was to condone the lad's murder, and what father would endure that? While to applaud him was to excuse in another what I had condemned in myself, so, in our war of thought, we rode in silence, and with a wall of restraint between us.

It was Marcel who broke it down.

"Don't think, Master Blaise, that I grudge him to Bernauld," said he, putting out a hand in a gesture of appeal. "No, nor will his mother when I tell

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her, though God help her with His comfort at the telling of it. But," and a catch came in his breath as his voice broke—"but that it should be through a coward stroke, and the lad with a laugh in his mouth. 'Father!' cried he twice—'father, father!' thinking I had slipped his bridle because all was well. That stung me, the savage hardness of the hound, and I crave pardon, Master Blaise, if I did aught that was unseemly to him, living or dead."

"'Tis a good riddance for Navarre," said I, slowly, "only, I wish to the Lord he had had his life whole in him and a sword in his grip."

"Amen to that," answered Marcel, "for then the going would have tasted the bitterer."

"The lad?" said I, looking over my shoulder with a question, after we had ridden another furlong in silence.

"That's seen to," replied Marcel, shortly, "and, by your leave, what's least talked of is soonest forgotten."

Of the grief of the mother I say little. When God set up chambers in the heart he put a mother's sorrow in the Holy of Holies where none may enter save himself, and he who seeks to thrust his comfort there is either a blundering fool or one who knows little of the world's grief. Dry-eyed and silent, and with a face hard set in its stern repression she received us, asking, at least at that time, nothing of how or when. Later on, still dry-eyed and silent, she took to her arms all that malice had left to her of love and pride. Dry-eyed and silent she went about the silent rooms doing her woman's duty as

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necessity called her, slipping back, as these duties permitted, to that other silent room with its silent tenant. But for the agony in her face one would have called her callous. We who knew her knew better, and knew also that time had rushed by her ten years, in a stride, in that one hour.

Hers was not only the heaviest grief, but that also to which nature gives the least assuaging. The bonds of circumstances held her fixed at Bernauld with but little of bustle and change to put a new and brighter color into life. With Marcel it was otherwise. He had, at least, his recruiting to see to, and presently—the very day we laid the lad to rest—there came tidings that set both our hearts a-leaping, and turned out thoughts abroad. France had wearied of her subtle policy of lies, and the peace of Longoumeau was at an end *de jure*, as it had long been *de facto*.

The news came from my lady, and the fellow who brought it of a certainty spared neither spur, whip, nor beast on the road, for he reached Bernauld with the first red to the boots and the two latter so broken as to be fit for little more in this world.

"DEAR LOVE" (she wrote),—"It grieves me much that my first letter should be one with heavy news. What the Admiral long foresaw has come to pass. All France is once more in a blaze, and this time the fire threatens not only Navarre, but the Queen herself.

"Marshal Tavannes is in open hunt for the Prince de Condé, but, please God, the stag will slip the toils. Coligny has fled from Chatillon and is in full retreat on Rochelle, whither the Queen intends presently to join him, though

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this quitting of the kingdom seems to my ignorance doubtful wisdom. Messengers have ridden post to recall the Prince of Béarn, and we count on his return to-morrow. Come thou to Pau with all speed, dear love—if thou art strong enough, as I pray God thou art—and let Marcel follow with his enrolment, losing no time on the way. Were it not that peace and truth are threatened, and that death and sorrow must possess both France and Navarre, I would thank God that thou art to come back to me so many days the sooner.

“Thy loving wife,

“JEANNE.”

There is the letter, word for word, as it lies in the muniment chest with the Prince of Béarn's letter, and such other papers as have the heart and pride of a man bound up in them. One other time only, since she had ceased to be Jeanne la Carmeuse, had my lady written me. Then it was a blurred and half heart-broken farewell ere I sailed for Florida, and if there is no abiding record of the words it is because they are written still deeper on my life.

It was late at night when my lady's letter reached Bernauld, and the first light of the morning found me riding out of the court-yard whence three days before we had made our burst on La Hake's men. Of the Prince I had heard nothing, and therefore argued—rightly, as it turned out—that he had made his way to Beauvoir in safety. But as I rode down the slope I thought, grimly enough, that Jeanne d'Albret had little notion how far the lad had been on a journey from the end of which not all the mothers or queens in Christendom could have recalled him. Our hopes and fortunes were low

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enough, but had that dead rogue's cast of the net meshed the royal salmon, Navarre would indeed have been in evil case, whether to fight or treat.

Small wonder that all Pau was in a ferment. Every corner had its knot of Parliamentarians, so that it was no smooth matter to push a way through the bustling streets; but saving in uproar the ferment differed from that of a week past.

Then it had been a roar of triumph, brutal in its frank rejoicing, and that cynical disregard of fallen fortunes so characteristic of bulked humanity. Now it was the ignorant and appreciative hysteria wherewith that same bulked humanity so lightly applauds the letting of blood not its own. All Pau was for war, but all Pau was not for fight. The time came, and that quickly, when not only all Pau, but all Béarn and Navarre, had enough not alone of fight, but of war also.

As was natural the ferment seethed thickest and hottest as I neared the Château, but once within the gates the stir of life, though it never slackened, was changed from riot to order. Queen Jeanne and her viscounts were alike intolerant of confusion.

Through the throng of men-at-arms Roger pushed his way to meet me and take my beast in charge. It struck me with a shiver to see how he had aged five years in the ten or a dozen weeks since we had left Carmeuse, and when one has turned his back on sixty, and lived a life of privation and hard labor in the field, such a leap of time lands a man hard by the edge of the grave.

“What of La Hake, Monsieur?” said he, eagerly,

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and putting a lean hand on my knee. "Did you give the rascal the slip?"

"La Hake?" said I, "La Hake? What knowest thou of La Hake?"

"No more than the Queen," answered he, with a grin, "but no less either, for what's whispered in a dog's ear comes out in the wag of its tail. The Prince of Béarn rode into Pau three hours ago, and you may trust a steel bonnet to skim the gossip and guess at what is left unsaid. But it's between us and the Queen, and these common lords and gentry know naught."

"But my lady?" I cried. "If she had heard—"

"Why, so she has, and stared out of window with her eyes fixed on the great gate ever since," said Roger. "What of La Hake?"

And there, truly, she was, with her fear still white in her face, and at the sight Roger got, as I dismounted, more hard words than thanks for his officiousness.

"That's the Sieur all over," he said, sourly, his face puckering into a frown. "The love of the woman blinds the service of the man. Good Lord, till a man's gone forty he takes a woman to be the whole of this world, and a little of the world to come."

"Why," said I, halting a moment, "what of Monsieur de Crussenay?"

"What of him?" he answered, angrily. "Naught. Naught but that the witch hath him fast, and La Hake and 'The Black Cat' are as if they never had been."

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The Queen was well served, for I had scarcely taken my lady in my arms when De Montamar came in such great haste to summon me to the private cabinet, dusty and dishevelled though I was, that we heard the scuffle of his footsteps on the boards before even he came in sight.

‘Let them bide, man; let them bide!’ cried he, as I stooped to flick the mud-spatters from my riding-boots. “The Queen is in no mood to give heed to niceties. The Angoulême blood is uppermost, and were she but a man she would be in a swearing rage. Madame,” and he turned to Jeanne, “you are also bidden, and I pray you hasten, Monsieur de Bernauld, for every minute’s delay is but a fresh sting in her anger. Never, since the devil gave King Antony over to Guise, have I seen her it such a passion.”

While De Montamar was speaking we had followed him quickly round the corridor to that northwestern angle of the palace where was the private cabinet.

“Hush!” said he, pausing while we were still twenty feet away from the curtained door; “De Grammont is with her, and I would not stand in his boots this moment for the county of Foix.”

“De Grammont? Who else?” asked I, pricking up my ears and catching some inkling of what lay in store.

“Not a soul,” answered De Montamar; “he bears the brunt of it all, horse, foot, and artillery, and I will wager the battle goes heavy against him.”

Whereat I girded up my soul, and pulling the drapery aside opened the door softly.

In an angle was De Grammont, as far removed

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from his mistress as it seemed to me, as the lines of the walls would let him go, and with such a craven look on his face as not Catherine, nor Philip, nor Alva, nor all three confederate, could have set there. As I entered he threw up his hands a half foot, but gave me no greeting, as neither did the Queen, who was marching up and down the cabinet keeping her passion well on foot.

"So, Monsieur de Bernauld," she cried, "you have heard that Longoumeau is like this and this and this!" and she tore across, and across, and yet again across, a paper she had been twisting in her hands, and flung the fragments from her angrily.

"By so much the better, Madame," answered I, with a bow, but taking her in her mood and giving her no greeting either. "By so much the better, as an open foe is better than a false friend."

"By so much the worse," answered she, testily; "and you would do well to remember, Monsieur, that because a thing is a platitude it is not necessarily the truth. The good-will of France we knew to a hair's-breadth, and so were under no illusions, but the treaty at least gave Coligny and The Religion breathing space. That is lost, though I grant you we lose nothing of good-will with it."

"But, Madame," cried I, "the treaty was in solemn form. What right has France—"

"God grant me patience," said she, with a gesture of her left hand as if she flung a folly from her; "who talks of rights and courtesies of nations when it is a question of France and Navarre—Catholic and Huguenot? The right is the right of a bloody mind and

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a strong arm, the right of intolerance and power, the right of the devil and his angels. Are you answered, and have you, perchance, a platitude to cap that, Monsieur de Bernauld?"

"Then, Madame," answered I, remembering the folly of the Prince of Béarn, and dreading what might lie behind all this, and so keeping my temper that I might provoke no greater irritation, "there is nothing left for us but to fight."

"Why," said she, with a bitter sting in her voice, "there is a platitude with some sense. Coligny and Condé are already on the road to Rochelle, and by the Lord's help I'll join them there and so concentrate our forces."

"Leave Navarre, Madame?" and as I spoke De Grammont shifted uneasily in his corner as one who would say, "Now comes the pinch." "Leave the kingdom with France in arms? Is that wise?"

"You are very ready with your advice, Monsieur de Bernauld," said Jeanne, sharply, "but on this point I have not asked it."

"I am no wiser than my fellows," replied I, nettled, and out of my soreness speaking unwarily, "but at least I advised against the progress of the Prince of Béarn."

"And well you might," she cried, "when you had given La Hake a rendezvous at Bernauld. Be in no haste to cast up the Prince of Béarn's progress. I'll warrant we will have enough of that when we come to it shortly. Let it pass for the present."

But it was not to be so easily let sleep. While she was speaking d'Arros, who was on guard without, knocked

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and entered, saying that Mademoiselle de Romenay was in waiting. For a moment the Queen stood irresolute, looking from me to the door, and from the door to De Montamar, then, half to herself, she said :

“She has come sooner than I had counted on, but all's one for that. Admit her, Monsieur d'Arros, and then to your duty again. Monsieur de Montamar, we will excuse your presence for the moment, but let the rest remain.”

One not in the secret might have seen but little difference in Mademoiselle Suzanne, but to me there was a subtle change. There was a new grace of womanliness, a softening of the lines of the mouth, a quenching of the malice in the eyes, and an added touch of pallor but made her face the sweeter.

“You sent for me, Madame,” said she, courtesying ; and then there was a silence, for at that moment not even the Queen knew what was to come next.

“In France,” said she, at last, speaking with studied slowness, and looking at Mademoiselle as if they two alone were in the room—“in France they break a murderess on the wheel, and a would-be killer of princes they tear asunder with cart-ropes—that is brutal, and in Navarre the sword and the block serve for either.”

“Is La Hake's crime still unpurged ?” answered Mademoiselle, turning from the Queen to my lady ; “or am I a scapegoat for the breaking of treaties ?”

“Answer for yourself, Mademoiselle de Romenay,” cried the Queen, furiously. “The Lord knows the count is heavy enough without adding to it the sins of others.”

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"But, Madame," said the girl, paling under the Queen's wrath, but still speaking to my lady, "you hold me innocent?"

"God send me patience," broke in the Queen, with her old gesture; "what has that innocence to do with this guilt? Is the Prince of Béarn to be likened to the killing of a year-old nobody?"

"Madame!" cried my lady, sharply—"Madame!"

"Ay, I know," answered the Queen; "but there are a thousand such, and but one Prince of Béarn."

"But," said Mademoiselle, "the Prince of Béarn rode into Pau four hours ago."

"For which no thanks to Mademoiselle de Romenay," said the Queen, loudly; and what more she would have said I do not know, for the door was opened softly and De Crussenay entered, his face white and as hard set in anger as that of Jeanne herself. Ranging himself by the side of Mademoiselle Suzanne, and a half pace behind, he bowed deeply, then, like a soldier at his post, stiffened himself, speaking never a word.

"This is an intrusion, Monsieur," said Jeanne, severely. "You are over-presumptuous and must learn to mend your manners. How came Monsieur d'Arros to pass you in without our orders?"

"I had relieved Monsieur d'Arros, Madame, and—and—I heard Mademoiselle's name," stammered De Crussenay, shaken a little in his nerves for all his bold front.

"So you are on guard, Monsieur?" cried the Queen. "Was it thus Monsieur de Coligny taught you your duty?"

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"Monsieur de Coligny taught me loyalty, Madame, and to protect the weak and defenceless."

"I take your meaning, Monsieur," said the Queen, sharply. "Never fear but I take your meaning. Loyalty, but not to me. Loyalty! A pretty loyalty that, to a vile wench who plots the killing of the Prince of Béarn."

"No, no, no!" cried Mademoiselle, passionately, and turning from Jeanne she put her hands upon his shoulder, raising her face to his. "Never believe it! never! never!"

Turning, he looked down at her, and a light leaped to his eyes—a light my lady, seeing, understood. "Thank the Lord," he said, under his breath, and slipping an arm round her he drew her close to him and then faced the Queen again.

"You hear, Madame," he said, simply.

"It is well, Monsieur de Crussenay," said Jeanne, gravely—"it is very well that I have not forgotten Tarbes, for it seems to me you give me the lie direct. Were I Catherine and De Grammont Tavannes that word had been your last. Come girl, the truth. You plotted with La Hake to seize the Prince of Béarn?"

"Not to his hurt, Madame."

"What? To his bettering? See thou hurt not the lamb, quoth the fox to the wolf; but rather let the kites of Paris do the rending! A pretty bettering that! Your own mouth condemns you, girl."

From the Queen Mademoiselle turned to De Crussenay, as if to convince him touched her more nearly.

"La Hake swore he would do the Prince no hurt," said she, earnestly. "It makes for peace, he said, for

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with the Prince in the keeping of Catherine at Paris there is no room for war in Navarre, and that—that kept you safe. You believe me? You, at least, believe me?"

"I believe you, my heart," answered he, tightening his hold, but never shifting his eyes from the Queen.

For a full minute Jeanne de Navarre looked at the two in silence.

"If I had but the brain and the hand," said she, at last. "If I had but La Hake, the tool might go. I have scant time for niceties of law, and no mind to take a life without law. La Hake, at least, is forfeit."

"And has paid forfeit, Madame," said I. "La Hake has gone to his own place."

"Dead?" cried the Queen, smiting one palm against the other. "La Hake dead? We owe you more than words for this, Monsieur de Bernauld!" and for the first time there was a softening in the harshness of her speech. "Down on your knees, girl, and thank your God as you never before thanked him. What now, Monsieur de Grammont? The man being dead, and we pressed for time, the girl may go, I think? Her venom is drawn. Monsieur de Crussenay, we ride for Nèrac in an hour, thence to Rochelle. As for you, girl, we give you twelve hours to get you where you will out of Navarre. After that you may seek mercy from the Lord, but none from me. I'll have no traitors behind my back."

"But, Madame," cried my lady, "where can she go, and how? By this time all Navarre is in arms, and a woman were better dead than face the roads alone. Her men-at-arms are gone."

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"I pray God they are dead with La Hake, to whom she sent them," answered Jeanne, bitterly. "Get her gone she must, as to the how and whither, that is her affair and not mine, nor can the roads of Navarre have many terrors for a tiring-damsel of Catherine de Medici. Monsieur de Crussenay, you who keep the door so well, bid some one without send for Monsieur de Montamar."

At the Queen's last words the lad's face had crimsoned, but now, except to draw the girl still closer to him, he moved neither hand nor foot, nor, saving for the tightening of his clasp, did he make any answer. Dumb as he was the motion was enough, and never have I seen Jeanne d'Albret's anger so moved.

"So, Monsieur," said she, and though her voice was lowered it shook as it had never shaken in her rebuke of De Luxe and his fellows, "you fling away faith, honor, service, duty, advancement; and all for a light woman?"

"No, no!" cried Mademoiselle, in a scream. "Never that, Henri! never that, by God above, never that."

Again he looked at her as he looked once before, then back to the Queen.

"You hear, Madame," he repeated. "As for me, you speak of duty and service. My duty and service are to hold my wife that is to be safe and sacred, or, if that fails, to make an end as my father did before me. And I humbly pray to God, Madame, I may show you later as to faith and honor. Come, my heart."

With his arm still fast round her and she clinging to him in a half faint, they passed out into the cor-

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ridor, and as the curtain fell behind them I had looked my last on Henri de Crussenay.

"For this shall a man leave father and mother, and cleave unto his wife," said my lady, softly, linking her arm in mine; and at her words the wrath died out of the Queen's face.

She had known but little of love with Antony of Vendôme.

THE END

