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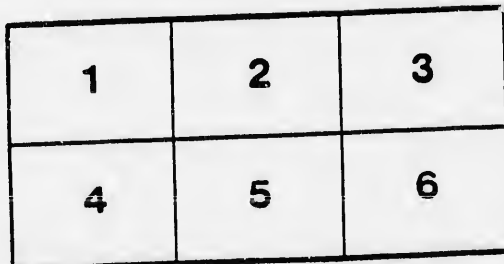
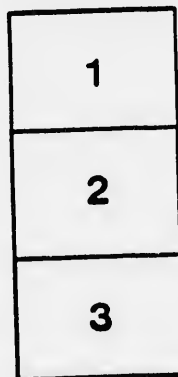
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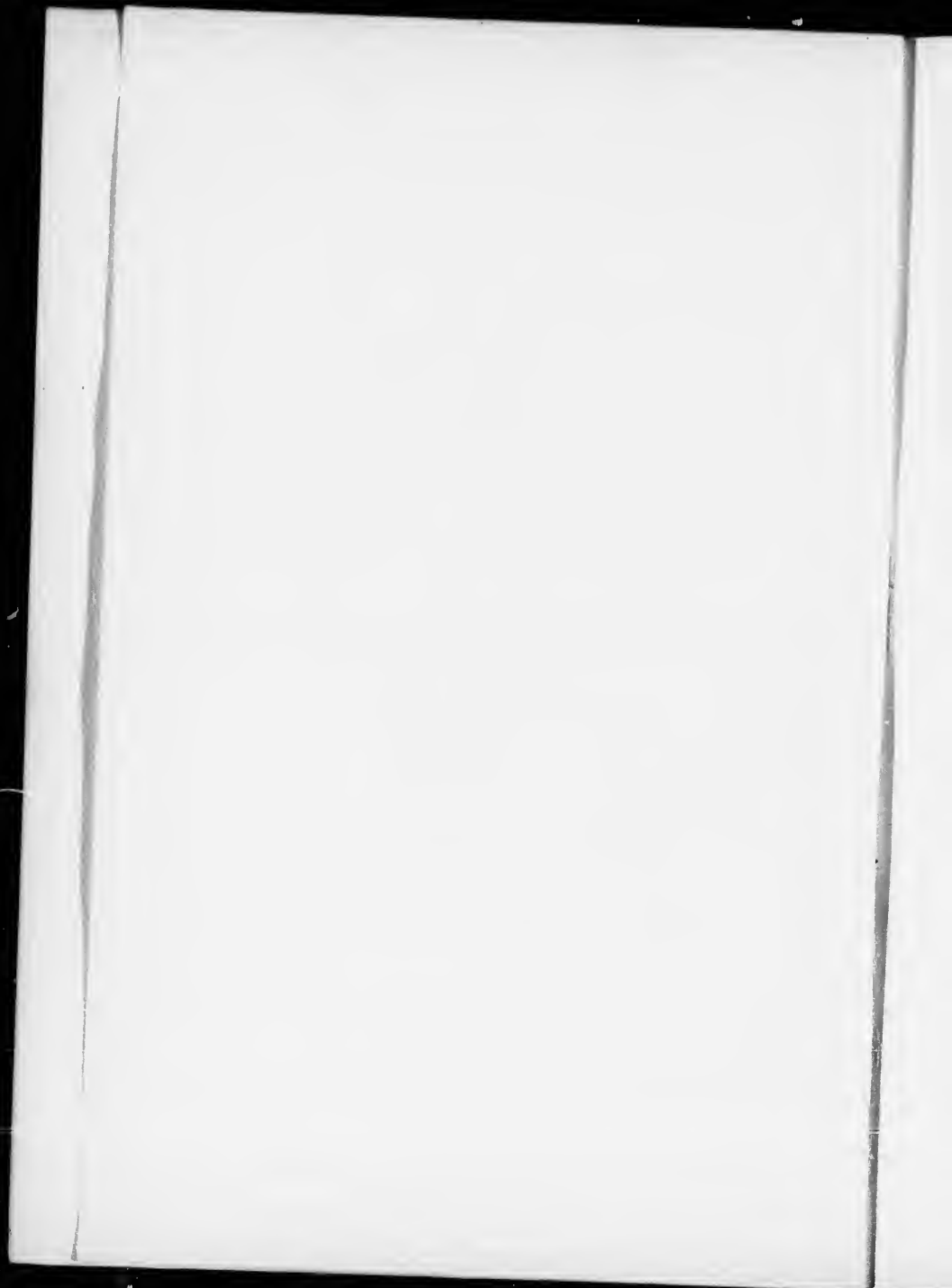
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A VISION OF THE NIGHT.

—Page 263.



A KENT SQUIRE
Being a record of certain Adventures of AMBROSE GWYNETT,
Esquire, of Thornhaugh

BY
FREDERICK W. HAYES

WITH SIXTEEN ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR

Toronto:
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To
MY WIFE

NOTE

WITH most of the personages and the incidents introduced into the following narrative the student of early eighteenth-century history will be familiar. For the rest, the writer is indebted to the family papers of the late Mr. Ambrose Dorrington, the last surviving representative of the Gwynetts of Thornhaugh.

Although these letters, diaries, and other documents have, for reasons valid enough in their day, remained unpublished, a certain publicity could hardly fail to attach to the connection of Mr. Ambrose Gwynett with the Collins affair, in 1712, and its curious sequel. Many years afterwards, when the circumstances of the case, so far as they were allowed to transpire, had had time to be forgotten, various garbled or utterly incorrect versions of the *cause célèbre* appear to have been published, one of which, "The Adventures of Ambrose Gwynett," etc., had a large circulation in the second half of the eighteenth century as a chapbook. In the British Museum catalogue this little work is attributed (apparently on the strength of an unsigned MS. note in their edition of 1770) to Isaac Bickerstaffe, the dramatist, and treated as a fiction—not without reason. A very pretentious history of the affair, written by L. Castilhon, and published at Bouillon, 1771, under the title of "Le Mendiant Boiteux," departs still more extravagantly from the real facts, and it is impossible to accept the author's statement that he obtained his information from Mr. Gwynett in person. How it happens that the pamphlet above mentioned assigns the Collins affair to the year 1709, while M. Castilhon mentions 1699, and a short account in *Chambers' Miscellany*, vol. iv., gives the date as 1720, the present chronicler is not in a position to explain.

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BOOK I
The Duke's Million

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CHAPTER I

AT WRAY MANOR

ONE warm afternoon towards the middle of October, 1711, squire Wray and his old friend Mr. Henry St. John sat on the terrace of Wray Manor, sipping their wine after the two o'clock dinner of the period.

For a week or more a sort of Indian summer had been reigning, and both days and nights had been as oppressive as in the hottest August. Mr. St. John had found the combination of official worry (in his capacity of foreign secretary), a fresh attack of gout, and the unseasonable heat of London, somewhat too much for his endurance. He had consequently come down on one of his occasional visits to the Manor, where he was always welcome in the four-fold character of a life-long friend, the finest of fine gentlemen, a man of the world *par excellence*, and a vivacious boon-companion. But an interval rather longer than usual had elapsed since the last meeting of host and guest, and the minister had found little or no time to bestow a share of his famous correspondence upon the squire. The latter rarely went to London, still more rarely read a broadsheet, and was thus always ready for portentous arrears of gossip, politics, and court scandal from the great Tory leader.

"This is rare claret, my dear fellow," observed St. John, as he attacked the second bottle.

"Thanks to you," replied the squire.

"Ah! is it some of Kermode's last run—the hogshead I sent you a month ago?"

"The same; I was lucky to get it. My wine-merchant swears he has given up all hope of laying a fresh stock down again."

"So they all say. But the peace will put that right. We must have claret, if everything else goes to the deuce."

A Kent Squire

"I can't make out why it's so dear and scarce now the duty is removed."

"Bless your innocent soul, squire! What did the duty matter? Nobody paid it so long as Kit Kermode and his friends were ready to run a cargo for us whenever our cellars got low. But we take off the duty, to please the clubs and the parsons and the ladies in the Strand, and what happens? Within a week the French government prohibits the export of their wines except in French vessels, and we're done."

"I didn't hear of that."

"Plague take them! You see, the job now is, not to land a cargo here, but to get it on board in France in the first instance. And the infernal wine-shippers have got the trick of giving information themselves against the smugglers every now and then. That's how Kit has got into trouble—lost his last cargo and the lugger into the bargain."

"That's a pity," said the squire, with whom claret stood next in importance to the Protestant succession and the supply of foxes.

"Yes. Just got his hold filled and putting to sea, when a revenue-cutter sends a shot across his bows, takes his boat and cargo to Maerdyk, and sells his wine for an old song back again to the very scoundrel he had bought it from, and that same scoundrel had given the tip to the coastguards himself. There's your son Noel, I see. Who is the lady?" and the secretary pointed to a young fellow of seventeen or eighteen who appeared at the end of the lawn, walking beside a girl of about the same age.

"My niece Avice—my sister's child. You haven't seen her lately."

"Not for three or four years. And a charming *demoiselle* she has become, if my eyes are of any use at this distance. I make you my compliments. Anything between her and Noel?"

"Plenty of time for that. They are only children."

"Stuff! You can't call a young fellow a child and worry me for a commission for him at the same time."

"Noel hasn't forgiven your refusing him one in the expedition to Quebec."

"The deuce! Do you think I'd put any friend of mine under that triple idiot, Jack Hill? You ought to know me better than that."

"But everybody credits you with getting Mrs. Masham's brother the appointment to the command."

St. John burst into a roar of laughter.

"Of course I did. But that was only because Bob Harley had been fool enough to refuse her, when she pressed him about it. Up to that time, as you know, the fair Abigail hated me like poison, and was as thick as thieves with her precious cousin. When I found general Jack sucking his thumb because Harley laughed at the idea of his having the expedition, I saw my time was come, soaped down Abigail, coaxed over the queen, and hey, presto! the trick's done. Now, if you please, Abigail is furious with Bob, blackguards him to the queen, and is quite loving to your humble servant, confound her!"

The three persons thus irreverently alluded to were the wielders of supreme political power in England at the period of which we write. Abigail Masham, *née* Hill, was queen Anne's bedchamber-woman, and had recently succeeded in ousting her imperious relative and early patron, the duchess of Marlborough, from the affections of her mistress and from all her court appointments. Simultaneously, Mrs. Masham's cousin and fellow-intriguer Robert Harley (just created earl of Oxford and Mortimer) had been put into office at the head of a Tory ministry, while the great Whig peers, with the single exception of the duke of Marlborough, had been dismissed from office to a man.

"All that hasn't prevented Harley getting his peerage," said the squire.

"Gad! I think he owes that to me, if you look at the thing properly. Your servant, mistress Avice. I don't know whether I have the good fortune to be recollected," and the minister raised his hat as the two young people came up the steps of the terrace.

"Surely I should not forget Mr. St. John," said Avice, shaking hands with the fascinating secretary, who had the knack of ingratiating himself with all ages, sorts, and conditions of women as well as of men.

"How do you do, Noel?" went on St. John. "I hear you have a crow to pluck with me."

"I was truly sorry, sir, to lose a chance of active service before the war is over," said Noel.

"Possibly. But it would have been sheer murder to let you go with such a born fool as general Hill; nothing would surprise me less than to hear of the loss of his whole force, ships and all."

"There is still Flanders, sir," went on the young man, "and if, as we hear, you are to be secretary for war——"

"Don't believe it. My lord Oxford wanted me to take it a year ago—a likely thing! To be secretary for war with the duke as lord-general! I would sooner lead a Bengal tiger about the Mall with a piece of packthread. Gad! no; the council is not a bed of roses, without that, as you know."

"We were very much alarmed for your safety when we heard of that outrage last April," said Avice.

"Ah!" said St. John, with one of his explosions of laughter, "that was a good thing for Harley—and all owing to me, as I tell him."

"Who was that marquis de Guiscard?" asked Noel.

"No marquis at all, to begin with, but only the heir of one. The father is, I believe, a man of excellent standing, who disowned his son. But poor de la Bourlie was an abbé, at all events—all the worse for his abbacy, I should say. I don't know whose throat he had cut to make it necessary for him to leave his country for his country's good. But I helped to get him a colonelcy when he came over to England, and we were devoted—well, let us say fellow-topers."

"An abbé a colonel?" asked Avice, puzzled.

"Oh! a lay abbé only—an *abbé commendataire*; court-patron of an abbey, in reality. It rains abbés nowadays. We have Gaultier—a lick-spittle of lord Jersey's—for another; and not long ago Ménagier brought over a certain abbé Dubois with him from Paris—used to be tutor to the duc de Chartres—a keen fox, if there ever was one."

"But about your friend de la Bourlie?" said the squire.

"You are right—*revenons*. His regiment got cut off at Almanza, and his pay with it, so when Abigail and Bob Harley had jockeyed the Whigs, he worried all of us to get him a pension. Finally, although he and I had quarrelled over—ahem!—over a lady, I got him a pension of five hundred a year from the queen. Bob at once cut it down to four hundred. De la Bourlie was disgusted beyond measure, entered into correspondence with the French court as a paid spy, and was fool enough to get found out."

"We heard something about that from Ambrose Gwynett—I mean," and Avice turned suddenly red, "from a friend in Spain."

"Hang Ambrose Gwynett!" roared the squire, with sudden fury.

"By all means, as I don't know him," replied the accommodating secretary.

"Go on with your story, my dear fellow," said the squire, cooling down as suddenly as he had boiled over.

"Some pet aversion, it appears," said St. John to himself. "Well, squire, our gentleman was arrested, with some compromising letters on him, in St. James's Park. They brought him straight to the Cockpit, where we were sitting late."

The reader may be reminded that the first lord of the treasury's house in Downing Street (built by Sir George Downing in 1564) occupied the site of the cockpit which was laid out by Henry VIII. for the palace of Whitehall, and was still popularly called by its old designation.

"He was as bold as brass till his letters were shown him," went on St. John. "Then he tried to snatch them out of Harcourt's hand. Finally, he asked to speak to me privately. I refused—didn't like the look of him; besides, he had had the infernal meanness to make use of some gossip of my own in his scoundrelly letters. He was standing close to Harley, and before you could say Jack Robinson he had stuck Bob in the breast with a penknife. Bob falling on the floor—the abbé jobbing at him with his penknife broken short off—everybody bawling—Gad, sir! you would have roared."

"And you saved his lordship?" said Avicé, with wide-open eyes.

"Not a bit of it," replied the candid secretary. "I felt bound to spit the abbé as soon as I could draw my sword, and the others threw him on the floor. But there was no real harm done at starting—a mere scratch—and none possible afterwards, because the blade broke at the first stroke. Nevertheless, Harley goes home to bed, and gives out he is dying, the queen gets the notion that he's a Protestant martyr, and behold! Bob wakes up one morning to find himself earl of Oxford and Mortimer. I saw the abbé in Newgate the next day, and asked him why the devil he didn't give me the chance of getting the strawberry leaves on the same terms—ungrateful blackguard!"

"What! Try to assassinate you?" exclaimed Avicé, horrified.

"Oh! if you call that assassination," demurred the secretary. "But poor de la Bourlie died a couple of days after. The turnkey at Newgate made a good thing out of him."

"How was that?" asked the squire.

"Kept him in pickle for a week and showed him to the public at sixpence a head. Why——"

But Avicé had fled at this last reminiscence, and Noel

followed her. Mr. St. John laughed and opened a fresh bottle.

"I ought to have recollected that the ladies are squeamish about these things," he said. "The queen heard of the exhibition, and sent down orders for my revered chum to be buried forthwith. Rather hard on the turnkey, I thought."

"Good-evening, squire," said a new voice behind them. The newcomer was a young girl of striking beauty, a brunette, tall and graceful, and of about seventeen years of age, who bowed slightly to St. John as she rested her hand on the squire's shoulder.

"Ah! my dear," said the old gentleman, turning round. "This is my friend Mr. St. John, from London. A neighbour of ours, Harry—mistress Muriel Dorrington."

The secretary raised his hat with immense *empressement*, pleading his gout as an apology for not rising.

"They said Avice was with you, squire," said the girl, acknowledging Mr. St. John's salute.

The squire pointed in the direction taken by his son and niece.

"She and Noel have only just left us," he said.

"I have a letter to show her. I will see you again." And the young lady went to seek her friend.

St. John looked after her, apparently speechless with astonishment. At last he found his voice.

"Heavens and earth, Wray! Who is that girl?"

"Dorrington's orphan child—you must have known Dorrington."

"Not I."

"Oh! yes, you must. A Devonshire man, hand-in-glove with Melfort and Middleton and all the Jacobite tribe in the nineties. Used to spend half his time backwards and forwards between London and St. Germain before the ex-king died. He disappeared—let me see—sixteen or seventeen years ago."

"Disappeared?"

"Yes; left home one day and was never heard of again. His wife died broken-hearted six months afterwards, when Muriel was only a week old. A sister of his took charge of the child and brought her up."

"A neighbour of yours?"

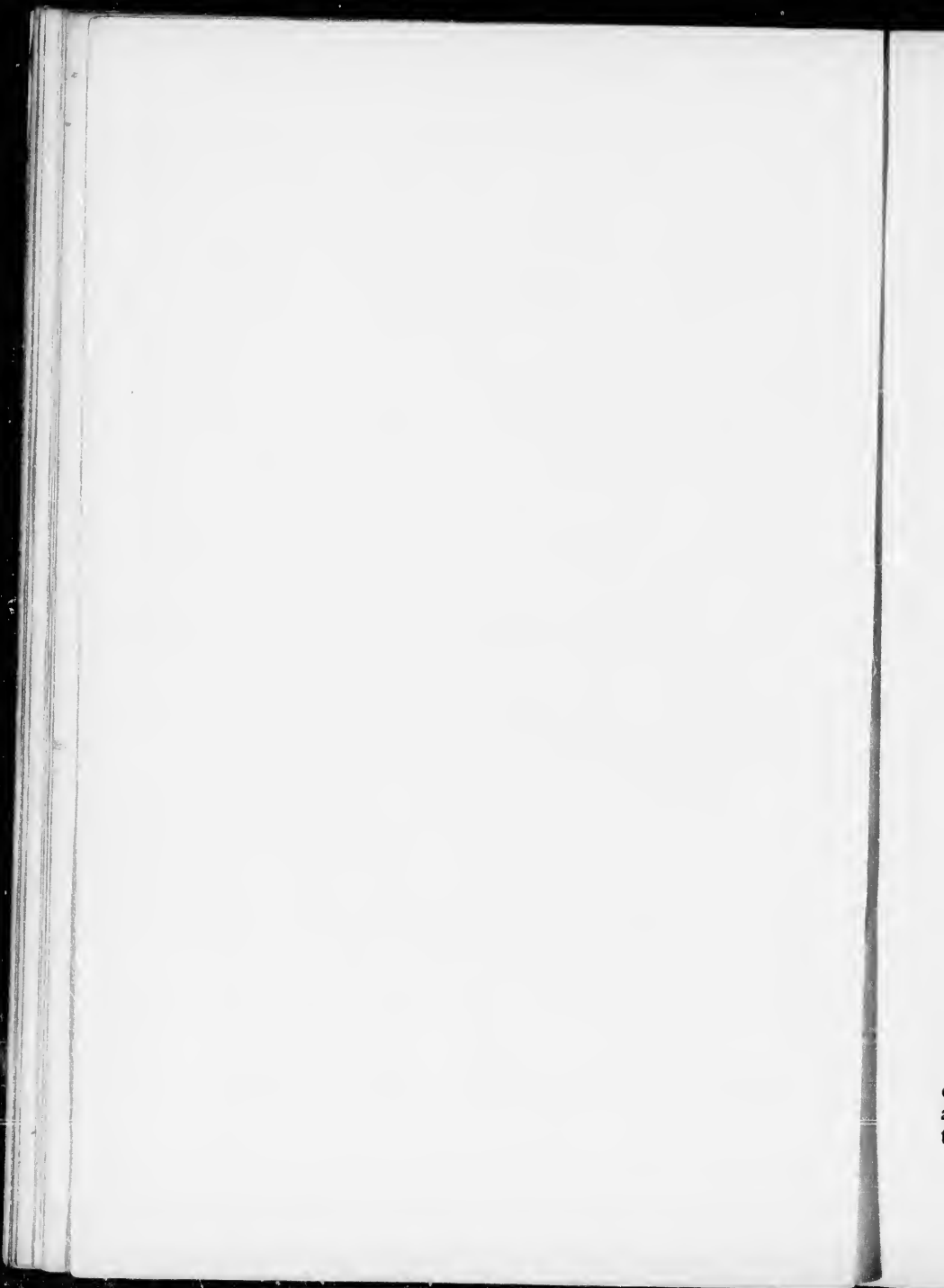
"After a fashion. Madam Rostherne rents our little dower-house across the park, Wray Cottage, and used to live half there and half in London. Latterly she has been very little in town."

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E.W. Hays

ON THE TERRACE AT WRAY MANOR.



"That accounts for it, I suppose."

"Accounts for what?"

"Why, my never hearing of her. Gad, sir! a face and figure like that would be known all over the town in a week. Never saw anything like it! A perfect Hebe—simply superb!"

The squire seemed rather amused at his guest's enthusiasm. "I am glad you are enjoying the claret," he said.

"Don't be a fool! I should be drunk indeed if I couldn't tell a pretty woman when I see one. Where are your eyes, man? There isn't such another beauty in the three kingdoms."

"Well," said the squire, rather staggered, "of course, anyone can see the girl's nice-looking——"

"Hear him!" remarked St. John, at large. "Nice-looking!"

"But we like her for her good-nature and her pleasant ways and her pluck—a rare girl after the hounds, Harry. Refuses nothing."

"Ah! Any fortune?"

"She takes the Devonshire property at twenty-one if her father doesn't turn up before then. There's no entail. She is a Chancery ward."

"Engaged yet?"

"Some cursed nonsense of that sort has been going on, but I won't hear of it, as far as I am concerned. Young Ambrose Gwynett, of Thornhaugh, on the other side of Wray Wood—a king James man, like his father."

"I knew him. He was killed in the siege of Londonderry."

"That's it. So Gwynett's an orphan, like Muriel, you see. Avice will have it that was what attracted them to each other when they used to meet at hounds. Luckily the old woman—the aunt—detests him as I do."

"Why?"

"Why? Because she's a stout friend to the succession, of course. She refuses her consent altogether to her niece marrying a rascally Jacobite."

"Quite right. Simply a sin to let a girl like that be put on the shelf in her teens by a nobody. I suppose the usual thing has occurred—this Gwynett is a misshapen oaf, just by way of keeping things at an average."

"There you're out, as it happens. To give the devil his due, a finer fellow to look at never trod in shoe-leather. I always said the women drove him out of the country with their fooling after him."

"Gone abroad?"

"He has an uncle in Austria, or Bavaria, or somewhere—his mother's brother. The last I heard—through Avice, of course—was that he was in Spain, with the French commander-in-chief. That's what your infernal pretender's men are good for."

"If you come to that, your Lothario has as good a right to serve under Vendôme as Jack Churchill had to serve under Turenne—so long as he isn't opposite British soldiers. What do you or I care for the Imperialist party in Spain? Not a brass farthing, and you know it. The Spaniards themselves back up the duke of Anjou, there's not a doubt of it."

"Then what have we been fighting for, the last ten years?"

"Good Lord! to enable prince Eugène to spite the king of France, and Jack Churchill to fill his pockets, I suppose. Who is Noel bringing this way? The abbé Gaultier, confound him! Why the deuce can't Harley leave me twenty-four hours in peace?"

The newcomer was a man of rather distinguished appearance, with features, complexion, and accent hailing from southern France. He was fashionably dressed in semi-military garb, carried himself with considerably more of the air of cavalier than of cleric, and spoke English fluently, with a certain marked peculiarity of voice which he would have been quite unable to disguise.

"Your obedient servant, Mr. Wray," he said, as he came up. "Good evening, Mr. St. John."

The squire shook hands, and St. John nodded.

"I am sorry to intrude on your retirement," proceeded the abbé, "but my lord Oxford thought it needful to send you these despatches. I am to hold myself at your disposal to communicate them to the proper quarters." And he handed St. John an official packet.

"Hang me if I'll look at them to-night," said the foreign secretary, with the freedom from cares of state inspired by his third bottle. "I can't write English after dinner, let alone French. To-morrow, my good sir, to-morrow—when 'the morn, in russet mantle clad, walks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill.' By the way, that reminds me. Any news of general Hill, M. Gaultier?"

"Yes," replied the abbé. "I heard, just before I left town, of the return of the Quebec forces. They had arrived at Portsmouth—that is, what is left of them. Half the ships were lost off the Canadian coast, and two-thirds of the men. The expedition has been a total failure. Unfortunately, also,

the admiral's ship blew up just as general Hill was entering port, three days ago."

"There!" said the secretary. "What did I tell you, Noel? Reverence me as a prophet in future, I beg of you. Squire, can you put the abbé up till to-morrow?"

"With great pleasure," replied the squire, with no very extravagant cordiality in his tone. "Noel, see to M. Gaultier's quarters."

"You are very good," said the abbé, bowing. "May I present my respects to the ladies, whom I saw at a distance just now?"

"We shall pass them," said Noel.

The abbé walked off with his companion, and St. John turned to the squire.

"I did not know Gaultier was a friend of yours," he observed, rather grimly.

"He made the acquaintance of Muriel and her aunt in town, and called upon them at the Cottage afterwards, passing through to Dover. I was there at the moment. I don't like him."

"Gad! you needn't—a greater scoundrel doesn't walk," observed the secretary.

"You seem to tolerate him yourself," said the squire, rather annoyed. "What is there against him, and who is he? You may as well say all there is to say, while you are about it."

"What there is isn't much. He's the son of a rich St. Germain merchant, who bought a little manor in Languedoc and set up as a lord of the soil. The son came over here years ago with *maréchal de Tallard's* embassy as a sort of tame chaplain. I saw him first when the king took *de Tallard* to the Newmarket spring meeting. The lot of us, royalty and all, just escaped being robbed by highwaymen by the skin of our teeth. On the road Gaultier made himself useful to lord Jersey in some disreputable way or other, and insinuated himself into the family—the countess is a Catholic, you know. Found his quarters comfortable, and stayed on, after *de Tallard* went home, to turn an honest penny as a French spy, eked out with what he got for reading prayers in *comte de Galas's* chapel."

"Pah!" said the squire.

"When Abigail and Harley got us into office, we wanted someone to go to *de Torcy* and open up negotiations for peace—someone too obscure to attract attention, you know,

A Kent Squire

and whom we could disown if things went wrong. Jersey recommended Gaultier."

"You are a nice lot, among you," commented the squire.

"Heaven bless you, my dear fellow! What would you have? Gaultier had had nothing to sell to de Torcy for long enough—nothing worth paying for, that is—and was delighted to get a job. He has been going backwards and forwards for us all this year. Of course, he doesn't actually negotiate. When it came to that, de Torcy sent over a certain M. Ménager to meet Matt Prior on our behalf, and Gaultier only takes messages and letters between London and Versailles. But Harley has quite fallen in love with him."

"At the same time, I don't see his special scoundrelism and your special virtue in all this," said the squire.

"It's the claret," explained the secretary, who was generally candour itself after his third bottle. "Tallard's people gave him quite a charming character as profligate, pimp, duellist, swindler, blackmailer, and so forth. Of course, all that might be only their way of putting things. But he certainly cheated at cards, and that is really atrocious. *Per contra*, he is useful to us; and then, you see, he is a man of the world, passably good-looking, and with lady Jersey's——"

"That will do," said the disgusted squire. "Shall we have another bottle?"

"Of course," replied the secretary.

CHAPTER II

THE ABBÉ GAULTIER BRINGS SOME NEWS

MURIEL DORRINGTON found Avice deep in confabulation with Noel when he came to the foreign secretary to be given a commission to serve with the British forces in the Low Countries.

"It is a shame," he was saying, "not to give a fellow a chance of seeing service before the war closes, and I don't take it at all friendly of Mr. St. John. What do you say, Muriel?"

"It appears to me," quoth that young lady, "that you are a bloodthirsty monster. In the meantime, it will be very nice of you if you will go away, because I've something to talk to Avice about."

At this moment a servant came up and delivered a message to Noel. He turned to the two girls.

"I'll be more than nice," said he. "I'll not only go away, but bring the abbé Gaultier back with me. He has just arrived."

"Do nothing of the sort," said Muriel. "He is a perfectly detestable man."

"That sounds promising," observed Avice. "I expect I shall find him charming. It will be quite pleasant to meet a man who is different to Noel."

"I'll bring him," said Noel, "so that I shall enjoy the double pleasure of providing Avice with one agreeable companion, and Muriel with another—to wit, myself—for the rest of the evening." And the young man, delivering this Parthian shaft, walked off after the retiring servant.

"Who is this abbé Gaultier?" asked Avice. "Do you know him? I don't."

"Aunt knows some relatives of lady Jersey's in town," replied Muriel. "Two or three times when we supped with them this gentleman was there. He fastened upon me at once—I suppose he had heard that I should have a little property some day."

"I don't see that that follows," said Avice, who cherished an unbounded admiration, tintured by a reasonable spice of envy, for her friend's attractions. "You didn't suppose anything of the sort in Ambrose's case."

"Ambrose!" repeated Muriel, with a scorn in the comparison too deep for words.

"It is just possible that the abbé admires you for yourself, you know," said Avice, laughing.

"That alternative is a little more hateful than the other. Anyway, he made several opportunities of seeing me; then he became complimentary, as I presume he considers it. Twice, when you were away in Devonshire, he called at the Cottage as he was riding to Dover—on his way to Paris, so he said."

"And still devoted?"

"Disgustingly so—and irrepressible. I charitably try to assume that he doesn't understand English girls. But enough of that. I came over to tell you I have had a letter."

"From Spain?"

"Yes, two months old. It came by way of France, through lady Jersey's friends. You know they get letters from St. Germain pretty regularly."

"Any particular news—that I may hear?"

A Kent Squire

Muriel produced a long and closely written epistle from the bosom of her dress, and opened it.

"Of course," said she, "Ambrose has had all sorts of adventures. You know he was serving with the Spanish army under the duc de Vendôme. Since then he has been staying at Madrid—at court—on account of some commission entrusted to him by the *princesse des Ursins*."

"Who is she?" asked Avice, who was not particularly *au courant* with continental politics.

"Everything and everybody," explained Muriel, comprehensively. "In name, she is *camerara mayor*—which means first woman of the bedchamber—to the queen; in reality, she is the ruler of Spain. It is very curious—is it not?—that England has been governed ever so long, first by a mistress of the robes, and second by a waiting-woman, France by a governess, and Spain by a chambermaid? Only the *princesse* is really a woman of birth—she is a Trémouille. Her first husband was the prince de Chalais, and her second Flavio Orsini, duc de Bracciano. That is a little different to duchess Sarah, and Mrs. Masham, or even the widow Scarron."

The fair critic, had she known, might have added a trooper's daughter to her quartett of famous political adventuresses, for in this same year, 1711, a certain Martha Rabe, daughter of a Livonian quartermaster, widow of a Swedish dragoon, and mistress of various other people, managed to get herself married to the czar Peter the Great, and became the empress Catharine of Russia.

"And what is this commission?" asked Avice.

"It seems to be a secret. But it involved his setting sail for Calais as soon as matters were arranged. This is what he says."

Muriel handed her companion part of the letter, and Avice read:

"As to this matter, sweetheart, I dare not trust any explanation to a letter, which might by chance reach the wrong person. I can only say it is of serious urgency, and one that I think ought not to have been placed in my hands. But these people—I mean the actual Royal party, that is to say the king, the queen, and madame des Ursins—seem to have absolutely no one upon whom they can rely except myself. This is partly because no one of the few Spaniards whom they can trust speaks French, which is necessary in the business, and partly because their own French friends were all sent back

to France a year ago, in order to make the court popular amongst the natives. I am not one, as you know, to trouble about a little danger. But if anything goes wrong in this affair, it may prevent your hearing from me for some time. Do not let my possible silence after this letter lead you to think I am any the less your faithful lover,

AMBROSE GWYNETT.

P.S.—If by any channel you can write to me to the care of the governor of Calais, I pray you to do so. But make no mention of this affair of mine.

A. G."

"Dear me!" said Avicé, "that sounds rather alarming. Surely he should have arrived before this."

"We do not know when he actually started. But I can't help feeling anxious."

"Of course he will come from Calais to see you?"

"That is one thing I wanted to talk to you about. My aunt is as much set against him as ever, and will not receive him; your uncle, of course, the same."

"It is not in the least his business."

"Perhaps not; but my aunt looks to him for advice in everything, and he has always been very good to me——"

"So he ought to be. Are you not my oldest friend?"

"What has that to do with him? Still, he is very kind—so kind that I don't want to vex him if I can help it. Now, if we go to join you at our Devonshire place next week, as we arranged——"

"As you promised."

"I can only hope to see Ambrose at the risk of some quarrel between him and your uncle, if they happened to meet."

"But you know it is always uncle who performs the quarrelling; Ambrose never does anything but put on a little more of his magnificent politeness."

"That is just the worst of it—it makes your uncle angrier than ever. If Ambrose lost his temper, I think there might be a chance of the squire being better pleased."

"Well, what is to be done?"

"Ask aunt to wait till you have been in Devonshire two or three weeks—that will give Ambrose time to come here first. Avicé, I have not seen him for two years!"

"That was your own fault."

"My fault?"

"He would not have gone away to baron von Starhemberg's

if you had not agreed with your aunt that there should be no regular betrothal between you till you were of age."

"That is true; but Ambrose himself said that aunt Rostherne had every claim upon me, and that some temporary sacrifice on our part was due to her—he knows I owe everything to her care and affection. But what do you say?"

"About your joining us? Don't trouble—we haven't gone yet, and goodness knows when we shall, if Mr. St. John chooses to stay on here. Here comes Noel, and your friend the abbé, I presume."

"I think I will go home now."

"How mean of you! Let me hear first if the abbé intends to stay."

Noel and Gaultier came up. The abbé, in spite of the mask of self-control acquired by a lifetime of intrigue, could not conceal an intensity of passion in the glance he cast upon Muriel, which made the latter tremble with dislike. She moved aside, so as to place Avice between Gaultier and herself. But the abbé, in the course of a few minutes' conversation, managed to get the party so divided that Muriel was practically *tête-à-tête* with him.

"Mademoiselle," said he, "I am delighted to meet you so opportunely. If it had been otherwise, I should have made haste to call upon you at the Cottage. I have some information to give which I am sure will interest you."

Muriel looked straight before her with a rigid face.

"That is hardly likely, M. l'abbé," she said.

"It concerns Mr. Dorrington, your father."

Muriel turned instantly. The abbé smiled an imperceptible smile.

"*Le premier pas*," he said to himself.

"My father?"

"Yes. The story of your father's strange disappearance made a profound impression upon me when I heard it, so much so that I made inquiries myself in every quarter that occurred to me."

"With any result, sir?"

"None, as it happened. But, curiously enough, a couple of days ago your father's name was mentioned quite accidentally by a man who formerly knew him—an old body-servant to the late general Talmash——"

"My father's foster-brother, I believe."

"The same. There was an extraordinary attachment between Mr. Dorrington and the general, it seems, and they lived

much together. May I ask if you know when your father was last seen or heard of?"

"On one of the first days in May, 1694."

"That agrees with what I heard. The conversation was turning upon some feat of strength, and this old soldier—a servant at the club—was asked about it. He said he had never known but one man who could perform the feat in question. That was squire Dorrington, and he had seen him do it a day or two before he went to France and never came back."

"Went to France? We never heard about that. Of course, I can only speak from hearsay."

"I thought not. You were not aware of his being about to undertake any journey—I mean, at that particular time?"

"No; I am quite sure. But then he had made several visits to France before—this soldier might have been referring to one of them."

"I asked him if he could fix the date in his mind, and he did so. It was at some May-day sports he saw Mr. Dorrington, and it was the year of general Talmash's death, after the Brest expedition. That would be 1694. Mr. Dorrington told him himself he was starting for France unexpectedly."

"That would be in war-time?"

"Yes—the peace of Ryswick did not come till three years after that."

"Do you think he might have been taken prisoner?"

"It is possible. Of course, all the ex-king's friends—and I understand Mr. Dorrington was one of them—would be safe, in the ordinary course of things. Still, a mistake might be made."

"But there were several years of peace—this was about the Spanish succession did not begin till eight or nine years ago. He would surely have been released if he had been a prisoner of war?"

"No doubt, if he were still alive. But he may have been imprisoned on other grounds; in fact, fifty things may have happened."

Muriel pondered over this unexpected item of news. She had hitherto shared the belief that her father must either have perished by some obscure accident, or fallen a victim to violence. But if Gaultier were correct, there seemed a possibility, although remote, of his still surviving. On the other hand, she had an invincible distrust of the abbé, and was inclined to suspect that this story had been either

invented, improved upon, or kept back, for the purpose of influencing her in his favour.

"If it were possible to make inquiries in France——" she murmured, half to herself.

"Nothing will give me greater pleasure," said the abbé eagerly. "My present journey to Paris—which, by the way, is a secret—affords me an immediate opportunity of, at all events, initiating some investigation."

Muriel did not feel justified in rejecting the proffered assistance.

"You are very good," she said reluctantly. "My aunt might be able to furnish you with some slight information about my father's appearance, and so forth, at that date, to supplement that of this old man in London."

"I will not fail to see her on the subject before I resume my journey. I hope most fervently, for your sake, that——"

A happy thought flashed through Muriel's mind simultaneously with a spasm of repulsion at the abbé's undisguised ardour. Ambrose would surely be at Calais in a few days, if he had not already arrived. She would endeavour to communicate with him by means of Mr. St. John's good offices, and urge him to undertake the quest. His letter seemed to make it probable that he could exercise some considerable influence, while she knew that his anxiety for success would be equal to her own. She turned to the abbé with a sudden chill in her manner, which stayed the words on the tip of his tongue.

"On second thoughts, M. l'abbé, I see that I ought not to trouble you in this matter—it is clearly one for a member or friend of our family to look into. At the same time, we are extremely obliged to you for the piece of information you have brought to us."

The tone and words were conclusive, and the abbé could only bow assentingly.

"I shall be overjoyed to hear that it has proved of service," said he, cursing under his breath, as they were joined by Noel and his cousin.

Muriel turned to Avice.

"We have not finished our gossip," said she. "I want to go to your room for a few minutes, Avice. I will say good evening, M. l'abbé."

Gaultier took his *congé* with a bow and the best smile he could manufacture for the occasion, and the two girls went off.

The abbé decided that it was a favourable opportunity to elicit some useful information.

"Am I to congratulate you?" he said to Noel, drawing a bow at a venture, and looking significantly after Muriel and Avice.

"Nothing is settled," replied Noel, who was not inclined to be confidential with a mere casual visitor.

"An heiress, I understand, as well as a beauty?"

"Who? Do you mean mistress Dorrington?"

"It is the other," reflected the abbé. "Let us see if the coast is clear for me." Then aloud, "Your fair cousin does not need a fortune to make her attractive, my dear M. Wray. As to mademoiselle Dorrington, she is already appropriated, if I understood the town gossip aright; but I am ashamed to say the gentleman's name has escaped my memory."

"There is no regular engagement," remarked Noel, falling into the trap.

"*Diable!*" said the abbé to himself. "Some yokel in the neighbourhood, I suppose, with a long rent-roll. Evidently I must be a little more *en évidence* if I am to carry this thing through." He offered his snuff-box to Noel, and proceeded blandly, "Your fair cousin will regret mademoiselle Dorrington's marriage, I fear?"

"Why?"

"Pardon—is it not a question of some *seigneur* in Brabant, where she would have to live? Unless I am mixing up matters——"

"Not at all—Gwynett's property lies alongside ours—at least, there is only Wray Common between us."

"Gwynett?" repeated the abbé, with his head on one side.

"Ambrose Gwynett, of Thornhaugh."

"Ah! I must have got hold of the wrong story. I thought it was someone abroad."

"Gwynett has been abroad some two or three years," said Noel innocently. "But we have just heard that he intends to return almost immediately."

"That is the 'friend of the family,'" thought the abbé, who had got all the information he wanted. "Well, my dear M. Noel, I will ask you to excuse me. I am very tired, and have writing to do before I can get to bed. Apologise for me to the ladies. I will just speak to Mr. St. John in passing."

"You will find him in my father's library," said Noel. "Good night, if you must go."

A Kent Squire

"Until to-morrow," said the abbé, bowing as he went off. "So!" he said to himself venomously, "it is M. Ambrose Gwynett, of Thornhaugh—what devils of names!—who is in the way. All the worse for M. Ambrose Gwynett, of Thornhaugh. Muriel Dorrington is for me, M. Gwynett—for me, Armand Gaultier, if a hundred of you stood in my path!" And the abbé disappeared in the entrance hall of the manor.

Meanwhile Muriel was seated at a little escritoire in Avicé's room, finishing a letter. The concluding sentences ran :

"Do not lose this opportunity, dear Ambrose, of doing what is possible to set at rest the sad uncertainty which has weighed upon us for so many years. Much as I long for your return, I should feel myself an unloving and unfaithful daughter if I did not urge upon you to undertake this task before anything else—even the happiness of seeing you again. Your loving

MURIEL."

"I suppose I must say nothing about Mr. St. John?" deliberated Muriel, with pen in hand.

"Good gracious, no! Do you want us to be all hung, drawn, and quartered for corresponding with the enemy?"

"If there has been any minister of state for the last twenty years who has not corresponded with the enemy, he must be quite a curiosity," said Muriel, who was not without a smattering of contemporary statecraft. "But can we ask him about it to-night?"

Avicé had a certain familiarity with the convivial habits of the secretary for foreign affairs—habits which, it is only fair to say, were shared by three-fourths of the public men of his day, and were at that period not regarded as in any way derogatory to good breeding.

"Not the least use in the world," she said. "About this time he has usually the best reasons for sitting in an arm-chair, and in an hour he will have equally good reasons for lying down. In the morning he will be perfectly himself again, and I will explain the whole matter to him. Finish with your letter, and I will take charge of it."

Muriel folded and sealed the letter, and addressed the cover, "To Ambrose Gwynett, esquire, to the care of his excellency the governor of the port of Calais."

"Impress upon Mr. St. John, dear," she said, "that it should go under a separate, private cover to the governor, and that I specially desire that M. Gaultier knows nothing

about it. And now I will go home. Say good night for me to the gentlemen."

The girls parted at the entrance to the gardens, and Noel escorted Muriel to the Cottage.

In the morning a servant brought over a note from Avice to the effect that the abbé Gaultier had departed for Calais, carrying Muriel's letter in a sealed cover from Mr. St. John to the governor.

CHAPTER III

IN THE CHANNEL

NIGHT was falling over the English Channel. Vast drifts of fog were swept across the sea by a gentle breeze from the west, and the pale disc of the moon, just rising, was reflected at rare intervals on the slopes of the ground-swell from the Atlantic.

Midway between Barfleur and the Isle of Wight a small brig was making its way towards the Straits of Dover. It was of foreign build, flying the French flag, and on the stern, in nearly obliterated letters of gold, could be distinguished the name

FLEUR DE LYS,

De Marseille.

The sails were dilapidated, and some of them partly carried away. A good deal of the standing rigging was damaged, and the maintop-gallant mast, with its yard and sail, lay across the deck in a confused heap. Part of the bulwarks on the port side had been swept away bodily, and another portion was hanging over the side and swinging with each roll of the ship.

On the poop-deck, close to the wheel, two motionless forms were extended. One of these was dressed in the garb of a Catalan sailor, the other in the uniform of a foreign cavalry officer. The latter seemed to be a tall young fellow of powerful build, and an Englishman in appearance, although, unlike most of his fashionable countrymen of that date, he wore his own hair instead of the portentous wig of the period.

A Kent Squire

His face was worn, haggard, and pallid, and his sunken eyes glittered as with incipient fever. He was lying on his side, his head resting uneasily on his arm, as if seeking in vain some short interval of sleep. The Catalan lay on his face, with one arm doubled under him and the other stretched out towards the officer.

As the moon rose higher and began to appear between the drifts of sea-fog, the officer raised himself slowly, leaned on his elbow, and looked at the Catalan. Then he got on his feet, took the sailor by the arm, and turned him over to look at his face. The Catalan was dead. The officer sat down on the deck, and buried his face in his hands.

Half an hour or more passed, and the night came on. The officer rose, and went to the binnacle to note the ship's course. It seemed to require no alteration. Then he looked about for some weight, and having found a small boat's anchor, fastened it to the sailor's feet with a piece of rope. This done, he dragged the body to the larboard bulwark of the poop and tried to lift it over. His strength was insufficient for this, so he pushed it down on to the main deck, and followed it slowly and with difficulty down the poop-ladder. There he was opposite the place where the rail was carried away, and it was easy to push the body overboard. It disappeared in an instant.

The officer—now alone on the vessel—entered the captain's cabin under the poop. Here he supplied himself with some ship's biscuits and a flask of wine, which he took back with him to the poop, together with a long military cloak. In this he wrapped himself, lay down under the weather bulwarks, and munched his biscuits. Every now and then he rose and went to examine the compass, the lamp of which had already been lighted. The wind blew steadily from the same quarter, and the ship kept on her course without deviation.

The night passed away, and the morning dawned. The wind moved round somewhat more to the south, and the fog cleared off, but nothing was visible on the sea. The officer stood to the wheel, with frequent intervals of rest, till mid-day, when a sail appeared on the western horizon. He went below for a meal, and returned with a telescope.

The newcomer was nearing rapidly, and about two o'clock he made her out to be a Dutch war-galiot of about 200 tons, with a crew apparently of thirty or forty men. He considered the position of matters for some minutes, and then fetched a bucket of paint out of the fore-castle. Taking a large yellow

signal flag from the cabin, he stretched it out flat and painted on it, in letters a foot high, the two Dutch words

PLAAG—HULP

—meaning respectively “plague” and “help.”

This task seemed to exhaust his feeble strength. He was barely able, after it was accomplished, to haul down the French flag flying at the peak. This done, he lay down on the deck, and waited events.

The galiot came up hand over hand. At four o'clock, just as the light was beginning to fade, it was abreast of the brig on the port side. A hail was heard, of which the officer took no notice. The Dutch crew crowded to the side of the galiot, which came nearer. The hail was repeated. Eliciting no response, a consultation seemed to take place on the galiot, which resulted in a flash from one of her ports and the passage of a round-shot across the bows of the *Fleur de Lys*. Still the officer remained passive, lying on the deck of the brig and watching the galiot from behind the bulwarks. In a couple of minutes the galiot steered direct for the brig, evidently with the intention of boarding her, and took in sail. This adjusted the speed of the galiot to that of the brig, and brought her within a third of a cable's length.

At this juncture the officer slowly rose, leaned over the bulwark, and waved his hat. Then he held out the signal-flag at the full stretch of his arms, allowing it to stream in the wind.

Cries of alarm among the Dutch crew followed this exhibition. The galiot ported her helm, passed under the stern of the brig, and came up on her starboard side. The officer took a package out of a satchet which hung round his neck under his vest, and held it in his hand, apparently in readiness to throw it into the sea.

The galiot overtook the *Fleur de Lys*, and swept by her bows so closely as barely to escape the bowsprit. As she passed, three sailors on her poop flung a heavy grapnel, which fell in the bows of the brig and held fast. The galiot forged ahead, and commenced to tow the *Fleur de Lys*.

This proceeding seemed to cause the officer a good deal of uneasiness. He went forward and brought a hatchet and saw out of the fore-castle, but after some consideration laid them aside. He then examined two six-pounder guns which were trained to ports close to the bows, and which, with a similar gun on the poop to act as a stern-chaser, constituted

the armament of the brig. With great effort he wedged these guns up to a level which, at the present distance of the galiot, would bring them to bear on her rudder-post, just where it began to be overhung by the stern-gallery. Next he carefully examined and replenished the vents, and replaced the aprons. This done, he lay down, panting and dizzy and evidently in a state of extreme exhaustion. The dark began to close in, and the air was murky.

In another hour the galiot was lost in the gloom, and only a faint gleam from her stern-lantern indicated her position. The officer took a little food, and replenished the oil in the binnacle-lamp. Then he went forward and sawed through the rope by which the galiot was towing him.

"They will be out of sight by morning," he soliloquised.

Unfortunately, within five minutes the wind changed a couple of points, the air cleared, and the galiot again appeared in sight. The full moon was rising. Figures and lights were moving on the galiot, and her way was suddenly checked in order to permit the brig to overtake her. The former manœuvres were repeated, another grapnel was successfully thrown, and the brig was once more in tow of the Dutchman.

The officer lay down, and watched the sky and the horizon for some hours. The moon rose high in the heavens. About midnight the horizon to windward suddenly thickened, and a thin veil of mist shot over the moon's disc. The officer rose, went to the fore-castle, got a match in readiness, and cut the grapnel rope a second time.

The brig fell astern. Then a flash came from the poop of the galiot, and a round-shot passed through the brig's foresail, just over the officer's head.

"The deuce! they have found me out," he said to himself.

The galiot shortened sail, and the *Fleur de Lys* began to overtake her. A second shot was fired, and struck the brig under the starboard catheads.

The officer now went with a match to the starboard gun. He sighted for the galiot's rudder, and after a moment's pause fired. The brig was already yawing, and in a couple of seconds the port gun was bearing on the same spot. This in its turn was fired. The brig came up to windward of the galiot, and the latter, firing another shot, fell off apparently helpless.

"Looks like a hit," muttered the officer. "They'll have to heave to till they can get their rudder repaired, and here comes the fog."

He went to the wheel and took his stand by it. The mist came up and covered the sea, and the galiot, now half a mile off, disappeared. Her course, when last seen, was in the direction of the mouth of the Somme. The brig headed up Channel for Calais.

The hours of the night wore slowly on. The officer, oppressed by a burning fever and an infinite weariness, passed the time between standing at the wheel and lying propped up against the taffrail.

About five o'clock he left the wheel to go down the poop-ladder. As he was descending his strength failed him, and he fell heavily to the deck. Here he lay motionless for twenty minutes or more, his face upturned to the canopy of impenetrable mist overhead. A little rain began to fall. The drops splashing on his face revived him. He rose with difficulty, reeled into the cabin, and sank into the arm-chair at the head of the little table which occupied the centre of the apartment.

It was several minutes before he could rise and go to the locker where his meagre provisions were stored. Here he found biscuits and another flask of wine. The former he found it impossible to swallow, but he took a drink of the Catalan wine, and turned to leave the cabin. Glancing through the port, something attracted his attention, and he looked out.

A ship, whose bulk loomed gigantic through the thick mist in the earliest dawn, was gliding abreast of the *Fleur de Lys*. She was so close that he wondered their yards had not locked. Over her side four faces appeared, all bent with eager and alarmed scrutiny upon the empty deck of the brig. It was not the galiot.

As the officer looked up, he saw the tallest of the men open his mouth to hail, when his neighbour stopped him with a terrified gesture, and went away. A minute afterwards the stranger's course was altered, and she passed away into the mist. At the moment of her disappearance the officer caught sight of the name, *Royal Mary*, on her stern.

He ascended the poop-ladder with infinite difficulty, and with a narrow escape from falling backwards, to resume his post at the wheel. From time to time he swayed and almost fell, and a sort of delirium began to steal over him.

A couple of hours after sunrise the fog lifted, and the sun shone brightly over the sea. Almost out of sight in the north-east, towards Dover, the sails of a ship gleamed white

against the blue horizon. This was probably the stranger which had passed just at dawn. The galiot was nowhere to be seen. A headland appeared opposite the starboard side of the brig, which the officer recognised as Cape Gris-Nez. About this time he fainted, fell on the deck, and lay for the best part of an hour unconscious.

When he came to himself the sun was high in the heavens. He made one or two ineffectual attempts to rise, and at last succeeded so far as to sit up and take a mouthful of wine from the flask he had put in his pocket. Then he lifted himself up to the wheel and looked forth over the sea. Calais lay about two miles off, and the brig was running direct for the port.

CHAPTER IV

HOW THE *FLEUR DE LYS* ARRIVED AT CALAIS

M. RAOUL DAGUERRE, governor of Calais, was sitting at breakfast with his friend père Anselme, curé of St. Antoine des Prés.

The governor was a Huguenot, a connection of the marquis de Seignelay, son of the great Colbert and minister of marine. The marquis had protected him during the events which followed the revocation of the edict of Nantes in 1685, and had commended him to the good offices of Colbert's nephew the marquis de Torcy, secretary of state for foreign affairs, of whom mention has already been made. To the latter M. Daguerre owed his post as governor, of which he had managed to keep tight hold, despite the pious fury of the chancellor Letellier and his son Louvois, and the solemn disapproval of madame de Maintenon.

The worthy governor's want of orthodoxy did not prevent his being very popular with his Catholic townsmen, and he had no closer friend than the curé, who had for a year past acted as tutor to his motherless daughter and only child, Victoire. For this young person, now emancipated from her convent school and placed at the head of the governor's household, the father and preceptor appeared to be waiting.

"Victoire is late; we will begin," said the governor, attacking a *pâté*. "No ceremony, père Anselme. I shall really have to be severe with her."

The curé was a man of about sixty years, with silvery hair, the physique of an athlete, and the face of an apostle. He had spent two-thirds of his life as a missionary, and when summoned home had been given his curacy through the agency of the aged Bossuet, who had a great esteem for him.

"That would be amusing," he said, in reply to the governor's sneer.

"Don't brag, père Anselme—you know you spoil her more disgracefully than I do. A word from you, and madame la procureuse du roi would have some moderation in her chaperonage of Victoire. As it is, it is a question of balls, concerts, fêtes, balls, concerts, fêtes, eight nights a week, I verily believe."

"*Per contra*, she works well at her studies, and your house is no worse off than before, I take it."

"There is a medium in everything, père Anselme."

"But we have only one youth, my dear governor."

"That is not the only reason," said a voice behind him.

"We cannot all be old beautifully, like you, père Anselme."

The newcomer was a rather pretty blonde, blue-eyed, *petite*, and plump, all of which characteristics, together with a certain estate, she had inherited from her mother, a Fleming of Brabant. She curtsied to the priest, kissed her father, and took her place at the head of the table.

"I am considering the question of your return to the convent," said the governor, with a very ineffective assumption of severity.

"I am sorry père Anselme has disappointed you," replied Victoire, carrying the war into the enemy's country.

The curé chuckled.

"Not at all—it is this inordinate pleasure-seeking which I find unsatisfactory, mademoiselle," said the governor, passing his cup for coffee.

"That is curious," remarked his daughter, in a philosophic tone. "It seems to me a three-fold compliment to yourself, my dear father."

"That theory has the disadvantage of being inconveniently profound, mademoiselle."

"Well, you see, you accept very few invitations, and M. le curé none. Hence, I am invited—under the protecting wing of madame la procureuse—for all three of us: first, by way of tribute to your popularity in the town; second, in recognition of the pains M. le curé has so successfully bestowed on the cultivation of my mind; and third, as a personal compliment

to the attractions I have the good fortune to inherit from my parents."

"*Quod erat demonstrandum*," said the curé.

Victoire bowed gravely.

"I fatigue myself to acknowledge these well-deserved compliments to you both," she went on, "and I am not even thanked for it."

"There is no doubt mademoiselle is hardly used," observed the curé. "To accept martyrdom, and to be criticised for accepting it, is doubly distressing."

"That is true. I see my position is even more meritorious than I had supposed."

All three of the party laughed. It was quite evident that Victoire was one of those persons who, at all events in certain quarters, can do no wrong. The governor rose from his seat.

"Well," he said, "I have some sense of responsibility left, in spite of the demoralising atmosphere in which I find myself, and I must get to work."

"You promised to take me with you some morning," said Victoire, looking up from her omelette. "It is lovely weather—why not to-day? M. le curé must come too."

"What is all that?" asked the curé.

"Two of my usual assistants, and also the harbour-master, are unfortunately ill," explained the governor. "As a result, I have to personally superintend the work of taking fresh soundings in the fairway of the port. The secretary of marine has been urging expedition in the drawing up of the new chart."

"Have the banks shifted?"

"A good deal. They seem to think it is the works at Maerdyk. There will be plenty of room in my galley, if you will give us the honour of your company, M. le curé."

"With pleasure, but for an hour only."

Breakfast over, the party drove down to the port. The governor's galley was waiting, and they were taken some quarter of a mile away from low-water mark. Two men-of-war's boats, under the command of a lieutenant, were busy casting the lead, taking bearings, and recording the depths indicated. Several small boats and fishing-smacks were scattered about at a short distance, and a brig was in the offing, making for the port. The wind had been blowing freshly during the morning, but was now falling; and in the neighbourhood of the galley it was almost a calm.

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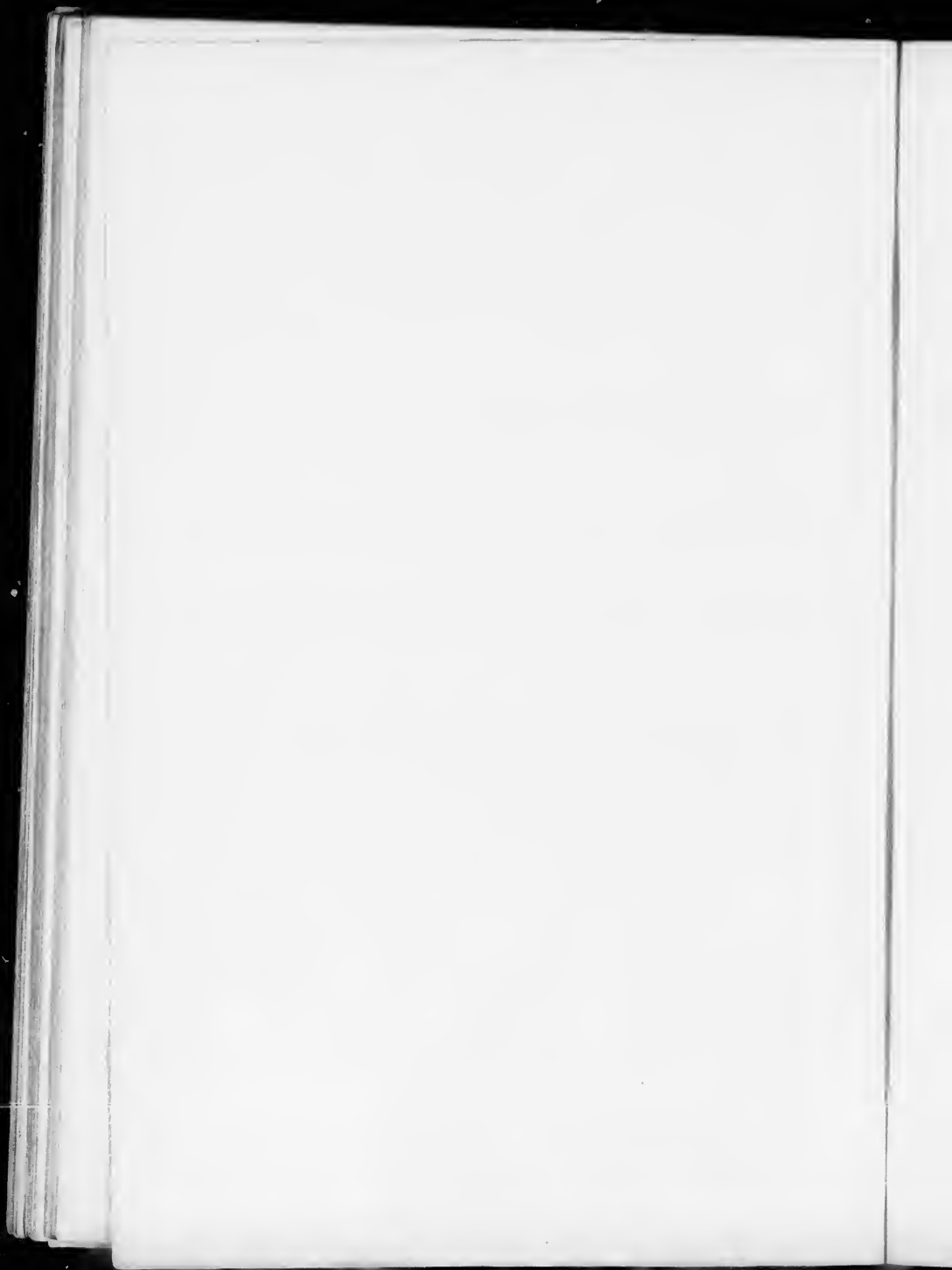
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"The plague!"



moorings," said the governor, looking at the approaching vessel. "She seems to have had rough weather."

The breeze carried the brig within a mile of the beach, and then almost died away. Her speed gradually lessened, and she finally appeared to be doing little more than drift inshore with the flow of the tide.

"Her people must be all asleep," said Victoire, who had very long eyesight. "I can't make out anyone moving."

"She will foul those trawlers if she keeps on," said the governor.

Several of the small boats seemed to notice something unusual about the brig, and began to close in round her. The governor ordered the boatswain to pull within hailing distance, and the rowers applied themselves to their oars accordingly.

The galley approached the brig, and her name, *Fleur de Lys*, could be made out on the headboards. The boatswain hailed, but there was no response to the summons.

"That's strange," remarked the governor. "Pull alongside, and hail again. If they don't answer, go on board."

As there was no reply to the boatswain's call, the galley went alongside the brig. The boatswain, followed by three men, clambered up into the main-chains, and disappeared.

In two minutes there was heard a howl of dismay, the rush of footsteps on the deck, and the plunge of three of the men into the sea. The boatswain tumbled over the brig's side into the galley, his eyes starting out of his head, and his face yellow with fright.

"The plague!" he gasped.

An epidemic of terror seemed to run through the crew of the galley. Without waiting for orders they instantly began to row away from the brig, despite the shouts of the sailors in the water. The governor was furious, and drew his sword.

"Stop, you scoundrels!" he roared. "Back, and pick these men up. Do you want me to have you all hung?"

The panic-stricken rowers, who had been pulling hard against the governor's steering, recovered their heads. They backed the galley, and the swimmers, puffing and blowing, climbed into their seats again. The governor, who, in the absence of the harbour-master, had to assume the responsibility for the quarantine arrangements of the port, turned to the boatswain.

"Who told you they had the plague on board?" said he.

"Your excellency, it is written in Dutch across a flag on the deck," replied the boatswain, who was a Fleming from Ostend.

"Did you see any of the crew?"

"Only one, your excellency—the man at the wheel. I think he is dead."

"And you did not think it worth while to find out?" demanded the curé, rising in his seat.

"Pardon, mon père," stammered the boatswain, "but the plague——"

"Pull alongside," thundered the curé, with indignation blazing from his grey eyes.

The governor thought it necessary to remonstrate.

"My dear père Anselme," said he, "we must fetch the doctor of the lazar-hospital, who will be provided with disinfectants."

"And in the meantime the man may die, even if he be still alive," said the curé.

"It will be running an unwarrantable risk——"

"None whatever, my friend. I ask no one to accompany me."

"Accompany you?" cried Victoire. "You are going on board, mon père?"

"Who else?" replied the curé.

The galley was now under the bows of the brig. The curé stood up, and turned to the governor.

"Wait for me within hail, my dear friend," said he.

"I ought to stop you," said the governor.

The curé smiled, and grasped the fore-chains. Then, amidst the admiring murmurs of the boat's crew, he swung himself over the rail and disappeared. Silence followed in the galley. Every man looked at his neighbour, and felt himself smaller in his own estimation. Victoire's eyes filled with tears.

The curé's head appeared over the side of the brig.

"He is unconscious, but not dead," he said. "I see no sign at all of pestilence, so do not be alarmed. But till we know more, keep a cordon round the ship. I will remain and attend to this man."

"We will fetch the doctor," said the governor.

"And some restoratives and food," added the curé. "The sooner the better."

The galley moved off. Half-way to the shore the governor stopped the two men-of-war's boats, ordered them to tow the brig to a mooring, and arranged for one of them to row round her and keep craft at a distance till further notice.

Half an hour later the galley returned with the doctor,

Victoire insisting upon remaining one of the party. The curé awaited them on the *Fleur de Lys*.

"He is somewhat recovered," said he to the governor, "and has spoken. There is no question of the plague, and you need have no fear. Send half a dozen of your men, and we'll get him down. He is the only person on board."

The assurance of the curé was received as gospel by the sailors, and their terrors were at once dissipated. There was a rush of volunteers up the sides of the brig, the gangway-ladder was adjusted, and the governor and the doctor went on deck. The curé took M. Daguerre aside, while the doctor proceeded to the poop.

"A curious affair," said père Anselme. "This brig appears to be on special service for the king. I think you had better put her under seal, and get this young fellow to your house. It is something of importance."

"A sailor?" asked the governor, as they ascended the poop.

"No—but an officer. I don't know whether he is German or French. Here he is."

The officer lay on the poop, his head supported by his rolled-up cloak, which had been placed there by the curé. The doctor had just examined him, so far as opportunity offered.

"I see no signs of infectious disease," said he. "He is very weak, and there is fever. It is a case of collapse at present. He has had a bad recent cut on the head."

The officer opened his eyes, and seemed about to speak.

"Don't trouble to talk, monsieur," said the curé. "Time for that later on. This is M. Daguerre, governor of Calais, so you are in just the right hands. Have no anxiety."

The governor raised his hat.

"Permit me to add, monsieur," said he, "that your ship will be placed under seal and guard on behalf of his majesty, until you are able to make other arrangements which may be preferable to you. We propose removing you to my house, which is very much at your service, to await your recovery."

An expression of relief passed over the officer's features.

"You are very good, monsieur," said he, in an almost inaudible voice, and his eyes closed again.

"Here, Lestraade!" said the governor to the boatswain. "You and four men will remain here on guard till relieved. Nothing must be touched, and no man must leave the deck. I will send to seal the hatches and cabin as soon as I get on shore. All craft must be warned off."

"Very good, your excellency."

"And now get this gentleman into the galley. Use every care—he may be injured in some way internally."

Three of the sailors carried out this order, and the invalid was placed in the stern of the galley, supported by the doctor. He was partly unconscious again, and took no notice of what was passing. Victoire availed herself of this from time to time to steal a glance, which, besides expressing pity for the stranger's unkempt hair, cadaverous cheeks, and beard of a week's growth, was fraught with exceeding interest and curiosity. The galley was rowed ashore, and the officer, by this time either asleep or in a state of coma, was lifted into the carriage, driven to the governor's house, and put to bed by the doctor and his assistant.

CHAPTER V

HOW AMBROSE GWYNETT HAD A GOOD SLEEP

As soon as the patient was safely ensconced between the sheets, M. Daguerre signed to the doctor to dismiss his assistant, and the latter retired.

"We had better see what papers this gentleman has about him, doctor," said the governor, when they were alone. "You are more of a linguist than I am, and may be able to help me."

The doctor expressed his readiness to be of service, and they proceeded to turn out the officer's pockets. Half a dozen letters first appeared, of which four were written in German, and had no covers. The doctor ran his eye over them, and found no names.

"They seem addressed by people in Munich to a friend in Spain," said he. "They tell us nothing."

"What are these?" asked the governor, handing him two letters in a lady's hand.

"Ah! English—now we have it," said the doctor, glancing at the covers and signatures. "Love-letters, my dear governor!"

"Put them back," said the governor, laughing. "We must not be indiscreet."

The doctor replaced the letters in the officer's coat-pocket. "The person addressed seems to be named Ambrose Gwynett,

and to be an officer recently in the army of M. de Vendôme in Spain. Anything else?"

The governor was examining a belt which had been worn by the patient. This proved to contain about eighty pistoles in gold, but no letters. A packet was then taken from an inner pocket of the vest and untied. A waterproof cover was wrapped round two letters, which the governor turned over and handed to the doctor.

"M. le curé was right, it seems. This affair is of consequence. I rely on your absolute discretion, my dear doctor."

The doctor looked curiously at the covers of the two letters. They were addressed in French, one to the marquise de Maintenon, and the other to the marquis de Torcy, secretary of state for foreign affairs. Both were sealed with the royal arms of Spain.

"A special envoy, without doubt," said the governor, rubbing his chin, and looking at the sleeping officer.

"A most extraordinary affair," remarked the doctor, making up the packet again, and replacing it in the vest-pocket. "We must pull him round, if it is only to hear his story. I will look in again in a couple of hours. He will not wake for some time, I fancy. When he does, give him a little soup."

"If you can conveniently remain here to-night, I shall esteem it a favour," said the governor.

"I daresay I can manage that," replied the doctor.

"Then you will sup with us?"

"With pleasure."

The doctor took his departure, leaving his assistant to keep an eye on the patient; and the governor, after locking up the officer's clothes, went down to his daughter. Victoire met him with a large letter in her hand.

"This has just been left for you; a gentleman brought it. He said he could not wait, as he was posting to Paris; but he desired me to give you his compliments and those of Mr. St. John, London."

"Did he mention his name?"

Victoire handed the governor a slip of paper on which was written, "M. l'abbé Gaultier du Fresne de Beauval."

"Do you know him?" she said.

"By name only, as an agent of the English ministry. He has a safe-conduct from M. de Torcy."

M. Daguerre opened the letter. It contained another, and the governor uttered an exclamation of surprise when he glanced at the address.

"A curious coincidence!" he muttered. "Look, my dear!" The letter was addressed "To Ambrose Gwynett, esquire, to the care of his excellency the governor of the port of Calais."

"That is the officer upstairs. We found out his name from his papers."

"A lady's hand," said Victoire, scrutinising the writing. "Really, this begins to be interesting. Did you learn anything more?"

"Yes, if I can rely on you to be discreet."

"Your 'if' is perfectly monstrous! When am I anything but discreet?" cried the young lady, with justifiable indignation.

"I will rely on you, if you will be good enough not to rely on other people."

"For instance?"

"Well—let us say madame la procureuse. To tell that good lady something as a profound secret always saves the expense of hiring the town-crier. This is not a lady's secret—of course, by a lady's secret I mean one that is to be told confidentially."

"I am not madame la procureuse," said Victoire, with a fine sense of distinction.

The governor accepted this assurance, and described the two letters of which the officer was the bearer, but did not consider it necessary to say anything about the others.

"I have asked the doctor to remain and watch the case," he said finally. "In a matter like this a little too much care is better than too little."

"We might have one of the *sœurs de la Miséricorde*."

"A good idea—do whatever is necessary. Now I must return to the port and put seals on the brig."

M. Daguerre went off, leaving Victoire to carry out the arrangements suggested, which she did with a good deal of speculation upon the past, present, and future of the individual who had been thrown upon their hands in so unexpected a manner.

When the doctor returned, in time for supper, the patient was still asleep, and his slumbers continued unbroken throughout the evening and night. In the morning, as he showed no signs of waking, the doctor decided that he should not be disturbed.

"The fever has decreased, and his pulse is firmer," he said to the governor. "Leave him alone. I will see him again at noon."

At mid-day the officer was still sleeping. By evening the governor began to be a little uneasy, but the doctor reassured him.

"He has probably been kept awake for several days and nights," said he; "in fact, he must have been, if he was alone on that brig. He is all right so far."

Late at night the officer moved slightly and seemed a little restless. The sister who was in attendance prepared some nourishment in readiness for his waking, but he sank again into his former profound slumber.

The governor came into the room about nine o'clock the next morning.

"No change?" he said to the sister.

"None, monsieur, except that he has no fever. He has not moved since midnight."

"He will have a rare appetite when he wakes," remarked the governor, who was something of a gourmet.

At this point the officer stretched his arms, opened his eyes, and gazed tranquilly upon his two companions.

"Thank you, monsieur—I am rather hungry," said he, in perfectly Parisian French.

The nurse hastened to pour out the *bouillon*, and the governor came to the bedside.

"I am glad to find you so much better, monsieur," said he. "Take some nourishment now, I beg of you, and do not fatigue yourself with talking."

"Two questions only, monsieur. This house——?"

"Is mine, monsieur. I am Raoul Daguerre, governor of Calais, and your very humble servant."

"I am infinitely indebted to you, monsieur. And the brig *Fleur de Lys*, on which I last recollect finding myself?"

"At her moorings in port, monsieur, under guard and seal. Here is your *bouillon*—let us see if you can sit up in bed."

The officer was bolstered up in a sitting position, and disposed of his soup with an avidity which delighted the sister.

"Monsieur is getting a little colour back again," said she.

The officer passed his hand over his chin, felt his growth of stubble, and smiled.

"I am afraid I must look an appalling ruffian," he said. "You will excuse any little shortcomings in my personal appearance. Circumstances have prevented proper attention to my toilet of late."

At this moment the doctor entered.

"Aha!" said he, "this is famous. Monsieur has had a nice little nap."

"M. Vidal insisted on your sleeping the sleep of Barbarossa, if necessary," said the governor, introducing the doctor.

"How long have I been asleep?" asked the officer.

"About forty hours, monsieur," replied the sister, quite proud of this prodigious feat of somnolence on the part of her patient.

"The fever is gone, and the pulse is good," said the doctor, after the usual routine of examination. "Do you feel any vertigo, monsieur?"

"None, monsieur."

"You have been excessively weakened. What has been wrong lately?"

"About a fortnight ago I lost a good deal of blood from a cut on the head, which made me unconscious for an hour or more. After that I had little or no sleep for I suppose ten days, and continuous fatigue."

"You have had no illness, strictly speaking?"

"None whatever."

"Then I need ask no more questions at present. You only require rest, food and sleep—take them."

"I must travel to Paris, monsieur, at once."

"Good Lord!" said the doctor, laughing. "Do you want me to begin to talk about a strait-waistcoat?"

"I can lie in a carriage, monsieur; the matter is urgent. By the way," and the officer gave a sudden start, "my letters! Are they—?"

"Perfectly safe, monsieur," said the governor, bowing. "It was desirable, of course, on your own account, to try and determine your identity by means of your papers. They have not left this room, and are under lock and key," and the governor pointed to the cabinet in which he had placed the officer's clothes after their examination by himself and the doctor. "Your belt is with them."

"You relieve me greatly," replied the officer. "But still, doctor, I must proceed on my journey."

"Impossible, monsieur. Another return of fever, and you might not reach Paris alive."

"Cannot your despatches be forwarded, monsieur?" asked the governor.

"They require personal explanation, which I alone can give. I would rather avoid asking for someone to come to me from

Paris, if it is at all possible. What is the best you can promise me, doctor?"

The doctor scratched his cheek, and felt the patient's pulse again.

"If you will lie on your back for another twenty-four hours, and rest quietly the day after that, I may consent to your then making a start in a suitably prepared carriage. Of course, you must travel slowly."

"I suppose I must submit," said the officer ruefully. "But it seems monstrous to be shelved in this way for nothing at all. I assure you I only feel a little flabby."

"That may be; but you have only escaped brain-fever by a miracle. Reconcile yourself to circumstances, monsieur; you might be worse off, I can tell you."

"It is not for want of recognition of your extreme goodness, M. le gouverneur," said the officer. "But I have trespassed upon that already, and——"

"Not a word, monsieur. Make yourself comfortable and regain your strength—that is your duty at present, both to his majesty (if I am not indiscreet) and your host. And now, au revoir. I hope to have the best reports of you on my return."

The governor shook hands with his guest and the doctor, and left the room. The nurse was duly instructed as to the proper dietary for the day, and the doctor in his turn took his departure. He found the governor waiting at the foot of the stairs with Victoire.

"Doctor," said he, "I have a letter for our friend upstairs—left yesterday by a messenger from England. Is he to have it?"

"Does he expect it?"

"Not that I know of."

"Has he asked for any letter?"

"Apparently not."

"Then leave it till this evening. If it is good news, it will keep; if bad, it will only worry him and throw him back." And the doctor went off.

"How is the patient?" asked Victoire of her father.

"Much better. He will keep his room to-day; to-morrow the doctor thinks he may come down. You will have to entertain him."

"Is he a gentleman?" questioned Victoire, in a dubious tone.

"Assuredly—one of distinction, if I mistake not. A tough

customer in other respects, or he would not be alive now. He speaks French perfectly, whatever nationality he may claim."

"That is lucky," said Victoire, whose linguistic studies had been confined to the dead languages, as was usual with well-educated women at that period. "I suppose he is a friend to the cause of the chevalier de St. George—no Englishmen come to France now who are not."

"We shall no doubt hear all about that in time. The main thing now is to feed him well, and leave him alone."

"You are horribly practical and commonplace," said Victoire, pouting, as she went off about her domestic duties.

The officer slept, with the exception of his meal-times, the greater part of the day. In the evening M. Daguerre returned, and found the nurse and the patient wrangling with a good deal of vigour.

"Monsieur insists upon writing a letter," complained the sister. "I am sure you will say he ought to wait for the doctor's sanction."

"And I, monsieur, am sure you will say that these precautions on my account are a little ridiculous. If it were not for the very admirable persistence with which this lady remains in the room, and also keeps the key of that wardrobe in her pocket, I should get up and dress."

"It is M. le gouverneur who has the key," said the sister triumphantly.

"*Mea culpa*," said the governor, laughing. "But before you write, monsieur, I had better hand you a letter which has arrived for you from England."

"From England!" cried the officer.

"That is, if we rightly take you to be M. Ambrose Gwynett."

"That is my name, monsieur."

The governor produced the letter, and handed it to the officer.

"Under cover from M. St. John," said he, dropping his voice so that the remark did not reach the sister.

The officer tore open the letter, and devoured its contents with an eagerness which brought a quiet smile to the face of the governor.

"I trust you have nothing but good news, monsieur," he remarked, from the depths of his easy-chair.

"All is well, I thank you. Curiously enough, my letter refers to a matter in which I may possibly find you able to give me a little assistance."

"That will give me great pleasure, monsieur. What is it?"

"Some friends of mine are endeavouring to trace a lost relative who, when last seen, was proposing to travel from England into France. May I ask how long you have held your present post, monsieur?"

"Twelve years."

"Ah! that is unfortunate."

"When did your friend disappear?"

"In 1694. Have any of your staff been here so long?"

"I think not. But M. le procureur du roi and the chief of police are senior to myself by half a dozen years. Either might assist you."

"I shall be extremely glad of your introduction and good offices with these gentlemen."

"They are quite at your service, monsieur."

"I will avail myself of them the moment I am at liberty—that is, after my commission is executed, which I hope will be in three days at farthest."

"Gently, my friend, gently—we are not out of the wood yet."

"Another night's rest, and I shall be perfectly well, I assure you. *A propos*, I will postpone my intended letter till I have had the opportunity of consulting the gentlemen you mentioned just now."

"I think you are wise, monsieur," said the governor, who usually found himself very much at a loss with a pen in his hand, and naturally concluded that letter-writing involved a similar mental strain upon other people. "And now, monsieur, I will retire, or the doctor will be scolding me for fatiguing you. Ah! here he is."

The doctor entered the room, and the patient presented his wrist *secundum artem*.

"Doctor," said he, "I defy you to invent any reason for keeping me a prisoner after to-day."

"*Peste!* my good sir, you forget I have a bill to make up. You have no idea how that stimulates a defective imagination. But nevertheless, I admit you have got on marvellously so far. If you will not do anything idiotic to-morrow, I think you will be fit to do anything sensible the day after."

"That is something to be thankful for," said the officer, with a resigned air. "At the same time, messieurs, I owe you both a thousand apologies for my impatience, and beg you to accept them. And mademoiselle also," he added, smiling at the sister.

A Kent Squire

"Monsieur has been only moderately unreasonable," remarked the sister, in a judicial tone.

"Good Lord!" said the doctor philosophically, "what more could any man desire to be said of him? Good evening, monsieur; come, M. le gouverneur, or I shall have you gossiping with my patient all night."

The two gentlemen went off, and the officer, after taking a light supper, fell asleep again for the night.

The next morning he awoke early, felt very much himself again, and made an excellent breakfast. The doctor, after seeing him, made no further difficulty about his leaving his room, and gave a conditional assent to his setting out on his journey the following day. This put the officer in excellent spirits. He asked for the attendance of a barber, whose razor, brush, and comb effected a change in his appearance which took the sister's breath away, and then rose. The governor's valet, who had carefully gone over the officer's clothes the previous day, and put them into presentable order, helped him to dress, and then left him to fetch the governor.

The latter opened his eyes when he entered the bedroom and found his guest waiting in readiness to descend.

"*Pardieu!*" he said to himself. "Here is a young fellow to whom M. de Lavalaye would object rather strongly, if I mistake not. It is perhaps lucky he is in such a hurry to get away. And how do you find yourself to-day, monsieur?" he asked aloud.

"Very well indeed," replied the officer heartily. "Certainly I have a little strength to make up yet, but that is all. I am quite at your service."

"Come along, then," said the governor. "But you must take my arm till we are safely downstairs. It would be humiliating to break your neck on dry land, after escaping heaven knows what on the ocean."

The pair descended the wide fourteenth-century staircase, and the governor led the way to the salon. Victoire was sitting on a low chair at the window, and rose as the two gentlemen entered.

"My dear, let me present to you the sieur Ambrose Gwynett, our guest. Monsieur, this is my only child, Victoire."

The officer responded with a bow worthy of St. James's or Versailles. Victoire curtsied before looking up. When she did so, her expression of astonishment was so obvious that the governor could not forbear to smile.

"Just as I expected," he chuckled ruefully to himself.

CHAPTER VI

HOW MADEMOISELLE DAGUERRE PLAYED THE HOSTESS

MADemoiselle VICTOIRE'S range of acquaintance amongst the opposite sex was perhaps as extensive as circumstances permitted—that is to say, she had had the opportunity of seeing nearly all the young men who belonged to the best available society of Calais and the district around. These comprised the officers of the garrison, the local seigneurs, the 'noblesse of the robe' of Picardy, and an occasional visitor from the court coming to the neighbourhood on business or pleasure. But she had never encountered so impressive a representative of the masculine gender as the person who now stood before her.

Ambrose Gwynett was rather more than six feet in height and of breadth to match, with a face and figure which had earned for him in three countries the sobriquet—borne thirty years earlier by John Churchill—of 'the handsome Englishman.' His bearing combined the alert vigour of the soldier with the grace and dignity of the old noblesse, the decision and self-reliance of the commander of armed men with the politeness and tact of the *habitué* of royal palaces. The two centuries preceding the Georgian era were remarkable for the early age at which men frequently became prominent in war, politics, and society, and the governor's guest seemed to be a notable illustration of this characteristic of the period. It was evident that he could not be more than twenty-four or twenty-five years of age; nevertheless his manner suggested the experience and formed mind of a man who had held his own in the world for a dozen years or more. It may be added that the officer's dress, in spite of the somewhat detrimental effect of his recent adventures, was quite in keeping with his personal appearance. There was, therefore, some excuse for Victoire's non-recognition of the dilapidated scarecrow, huddled up in a cloak, who had been hoisted out of the *Fleur de Lys* into her father's galley three days before. A second or two passed before she had sufficiently recovered from her surprise to speak, and Gwynett was the first to respond to the introduction.

"Mademoiselle," said he, "I cannot find words to express my gratitude for the kindness and care which I have received at the hands of M. le gouverneur and yourself, and to which

in all probability I owe my life. I can only hope that I may some day have the opportunity of making a return, however inadequate, for the obligation you have conferred upon me."

Victoire regained her usual self-possession, and received Gwynett's acknowledgments with due decorum and a little flutter of pleasure.

"Monsieur is very welcome to any little hospitality we may have had the happiness of offering him," said she. "I hope monsieur finds himself quite recovered?"

"If he says yes, don't believe him," said the governor, wheeling a large *fauteuil* towards the window. "Be seated, monsieur, and do not let my daughter tire you to death with her chatter. For myself, I have to go to the port, and must ask you to excuse me—we are both soldiers, monsieur, and know what duty means. I shall have the pleasure of rejoining you at luncheon."

"I shall be unhappy, monsieur, if in any way you permit me to interfere with your arrangements, or those of mademoiselle. I have sufficiently trespassed upon your consideration already."

"On the contrary, monsieur. We only regret that your haste to depart threatens to deprive us so soon of your society."

"Assuredly, monsieur," added Victoire, in a tone which imparted to these little amenities a flavour of sincerity sufficiently distinct to put the subject of them quite at his ease.

The governor withdrew, and Victoire provided herself with some indefinite kind of fancy-work wherewith to occupy herself in the intervals of conversation. But after a few common-places, intended on her part to lead up to a little catechising of her companion on the subject of his recent adventures, the interview was suddenly interrupted by a peremptory demand for Victoire's presence in the kitchen department. Some domestic *contretemps* in this region detained her till lunch was ready, and Gwynett occupied himself in the meanwhile with some books and a chart of the coast which he found on the table of the salon.

Victoire's return was followed a few minutes afterwards by that of the governor, who apologised profusely for the unavoidable neglect with which his guest had been treated during the morning.

"But I hope, monsieur," said he, as they sat down to lunch, "that you will return good for evil by telling us how you came to arrive at Calais under such unusual circumstances—that is, if my daughter has not already asked you the same question."

"I have not had the chance," said Victoire, smiling at Gwynett, who was ungallant enough to congratulate himself upon having escaped the necessity of saying the same things twice over.

"Hitherto, monsieur," proceeded the governor, "we have desired above all things not to fatigue you with unnecessary conversation. But I assure you I have been overwhelmed with inquiries about the *Fleur de Lys* and her crew, which I have of course been unable to answer."

Gwynett paused a moment before replying.

"As a matter of fact, monsieur, I find myself a little in a difficulty. A certain commission with which I have been charged, and the nature of the voyage I have made in connection with it, require me to make my report in the first instance to the persons to whom I am accredited; and I am not quite sure how far etiquette will permit me to say anything about it beforehand."

Victoire looked a whole volume of disappointment; but the governor interposed with a prompt approval of his guest's reserve.

"My dear M. Gwynett, you are perfectly right, and you must pardon an indiscretion on my part, committed in ignorance of the circumstances."

"You set me at my ease, monsieur. I was afraid my reticence would appear rather absurd, the more especially as there is nothing to conceal. But there is no reason why you should not hear how I came to be found in such an uncomfortable plight."

"Monsieur will interest us very much by anything he is at liberty to tell us," said Victoire, beginning to be hopeful again.

"In the first place, mademoiselle, there was nothing but ill-luck on our brig after the voyage was fairly commenced. We had very rough weather, and several of us were hurt by falling spars and rigging. All on board, except one seaman and myself, were eventually either swept overboard or died of injuries received in the storm. I was badly cut on the head, and lost so much blood that I could scarcely stand for a week, otherwise, I assure you, I should not have cut such a ridiculous figure as I did when your galley came upon the scene."

This view of the case made Victoire open her eyes.

"But monsieur must have had frightful labour to navigate that ship all alone—for you were alone, surely?"

"Yes; my only surviving companion died two or three days before I reached Calais. He had been very ill—dying, in fact—for more than a week before that."

"And of course unable to help you at all?"

"Entirely. You see, that prevented my getting any sleep. Of course, that is a common thing on a campaign, and one doesn't mind a week or so of it. But beyond that it is really very fatiguing, if one is weakened to start with."

"Good Lord!" said the governor, who had a most religious regard for the soundness of his nightly slumbers, "that is enough to account for anything. And how did you succeed in making port, monsieur?"

"Partly by good weather and partly by sheer luck. The wind was favourable, and all I had to do was to see I did not run ashore till I got opposite Calais. After that, you probably know more about my proceedings than I do, for I confess I recollect very little about the matter. Where did you board the brig?"

"About a mile from shore. You were running straight for a fleet of trawlers, and that attracted our attention. But you frightened our men to death when they climbed on deck."

"How was that?"

"They read the word 'plague' on the flag."

"True—I quite forgot I had left that flag there. It was rather a serious oversight."

"What did it mean, monsieur?" asked Victoire.

"Mademoiselle, it was a little ruse. I had a visit from a Dutch cruiser, and put that out to scare them away. Unfortunately, it only had the effect of inducing them to tow the brig, instead of sending a prize-crew on board."

"But you wrote 'help' on the flag as well?"

"That was to give an air of genuineness to the thing. I knew they wouldn't come, all the same."

"Then why did they tow you?"

"To take the brig as a prize to Ostend or Antwerp, probably."

"In spite of the plague?"

"Oh! yes. They would probably have scuttled her above low-water mark, and let her be disinfected by the sea for a few weeks. Then they would have plugged the holes, and floated her again."

"But how did you part company?"

Gwynett narrated the circumstances with which the reader has been made acquainted, to the great interest of the

governor, who had been an artillery officer himself when on active service.

"That must have been a clever shot of yours," said he.

"A pure chance, M. le gouverneur. In fact, I don't know what happened. The rudder might have been hit, or the wheel dismounted, or the chains carried away—any of these things would have stopped the steering for ten minutes. In that time the fog had come up, and I was safe. But for the fog the risk would not have been worth running. They could have disabled the brig quite easily if they had been able to see her."

After some further chat over the minor incidents of the voyage, the luncheon was brought to a close, and the governor's daughter resumed the task of entertaining Gwynett until the evening. A certain curiosity about the guest's feminine correspondent naturally resulted in Victoire's manœuvring the conversation in the direction of this interesting subject.

"You are still determined to leave us, monsieur?" she asked, after a little preliminary beating about the bush.

"It is imperative, mademoiselle, much as I regret terminating a visit which has laid me under such pleasant obligations."

"I am afraid your correspondence has altered your arrangements. You have had letters from England, I think my father said?"

"On the contrary, mademoiselle, I was bound to continue my journey to Paris in any case. But the letter you mention has made it probable that I shall have to return here, on some business in which M. Daguerre has kindly offered his assistance."

"Your friends were, of course, aware of your intended passage through Calais? The letter might easily have missed you."

"I had mentioned that I hoped to be here shortly. I have been more than two years away from England."

"Your family will be anxious to see you again."

"I have no relatives, mademoiselle, except one, an uncle. He lives in Munich."

Victoire decided that this was an important step gained in the catechism.

"We thought it was possibly your mother or your sister who wrote," she said, with extreme innocence of tone and countenance.

"I am unfortunately an only child, mademoiselle, and

I knew little of my father and mother. Both died in my infancy."

This statement touched a sympathetic chord in the heart of the listener, who had already gone a long way towards being tenderly interested in the guest of the house. At the same time, the mystery of the letter remained unsolved.

"That is very sad, I think. I myself, as perhaps you know, have only my father as a near relative. But it seems you have, at all events, friends who do not forget you. Sometimes friends are better worth having than relatives. I know some families who are ready to poison each other daily."

"There may be something in that," said Gwynett, laughing. "At the same time, I would like to run the risk, if I could. I have found life now and then rather solitary."

Victoire decided to hazard a bold stroke.

"Probably monsieur will marry in due course, and that will be a beginning."

"I am not without that hope, mademoiselle," said Gwynett, thinking it was getting time to be explicit.

Victoire experienced a little shock, which had the effect of enlightening her somewhat as to the feelings with which she had come to regard her companion.

"Monsieur has possibly more than a hope—perhaps an expectation," she said, looking away from Gwynett.

"That is true, mademoiselle."

"If monsieur is betrothed, he will permit me to felicitate him."

"You are exceedingly kind, mademoiselle."

"One may, then, perhaps guess at monsieur's correspondent."

"Mademoiselle is quite correct."

"Monsieur's *fiancée* is English, without doubt?"

"Yes, mademoiselle."

Victoire went on with her fancy-work for a few moments in silence, while Gwynett ungalantly forgot all about her, and travelled in thought to the Cottage at Wray Manor. Then she took up the ball again.

"One hears much of the beauty of the English ladies."

"I can assure you, mademoiselle, I have never been in any country where there were not beautiful women."

"Still, monsieur no doubt prefers the style of beauty of his own countrywomen."

"Perhaps that is natural, mademoiselle."

Victoire picked up a reel which had fallen, and restored it to her basket.

"Monsieur's *fiancée* is probably an example of English beauty," she said, with her eyes fixed on her work.

There was a little flutter in the voice, which made itself intelligible to Gwynett just as he was opening his mouth to confirm Victoire's supposition, and he stopped as if a gulf yawned suddenly in front of him.

"The deuce!" he said to himself. "My soup will be disagreeing with me, if I don't take care."

He paused a moment, and replied in a serious tone, "She has a very comfortable appearance, mademoiselle."

Victoire's face brightened. This verdict seemed rather to exclude the unduly romantic, and anything was better than a mental comparison by which she herself might suffer. She rose, and after a little further chat in a more cheerful tone, left the room. As she did so, M. Daguerre entered, and came forward to Gwynett.

"Your travelling-carriage will be ready for you in the morning, monsieur," said he. "I have seen to it myself. That is, if you are able to use it—I am unkind enough to hope the contrary."

Gwynett expressed his thanks for the trouble which had been taken, and his impression that he would be quite ready to travel on the morrow.

"I have also been making some inquiries for you," proceeded the governor. "M. le procureur du roi is absent on business, but the prefect of police will be happy to place himself at your disposal whenever you choose, and give you any assistance in his power."

"I am greatly indebted to you, monsieur. On my return from Paris I will go into the matter at once."

"It will be well for you to inquire at Paris also. Do you know M. d'Argenson?"

"Not at all."

"Or M. de Torcy?"

"I have to see him."

"He will help you. The Colberts are all great friends of ours—in fact, M. de Seignelay was good enough to secure me my present appointment. I may without indiscretion mention that our families will shortly be united by a closer tie than friendship."

Gwynett bowed, wondering whether the governor intended to give Victoire a step-mother.

"If you see M. de Torcy, you will also probably see his nephew and chief secretary, M. René de Lavalaye—a d'Estrées.

A marriage has recently been arranged between that gentleman and my daughter."

"Indeed? I offer you my congratulations, and wish mademoiselle every happiness. I trust you will not fail to let me know when the ceremony is about to take place."

"Nothing will give me greater pleasure, monsieur."

"A family arrangement, evidently," thought Gwynett, as he went to bed early in the evening. "And I am let into the secret as a precaution, I suppose. I hope the worthy M. de Lavalaye has sufficient sense to appreciate the goods the gods provide him, for it seems to me that mademoiselle Victoire's affections are somewhat at large."

In the morning Gwynett bade a grateful adieu to his hosts, and set off on his journey to Versailles.

CHAPTER VII

AT VERSAILLES

A DAY of leisurely travelling, which was all that Gwynett found it safe to attempt, brought him to Amiens. The next evening he reached Paris, and put up at an inn recommended to him by M. Daguerre. In the morning he felt well enough to dispense with his carriage, and departed on horseback for Versailles. Arriving at the palace, he inquired when it was likely he could have an audience of M. de Torcy, and learned that the minister would probably be able to see him about noon, after he had left the king.

As this gave plenty of time to spare, Gwynett placed his request for an audience in the hands of the minister's under-secretary, and decided to supplement his somewhat scanty and hurried breakfast in Paris by a further meal at some *cabaret* in the town. He returned to the porter's lodge of the principal entrance, where he had left his horse, and took occasion, before mounting, to adjust his stirrups. While doing this, he was within hearing of a colloquy between an official personage, who seemed to be an usher of the chambers, and the occupant of an open carriage with very restive horses, which had apparently just driven up. This occupant was a lady, who sat with her back to Gwynett. The official leaned over the carriage-door with a good deal of *empressement*.

"I do not know the name, madame," he was saying, in

reply to some question which Gwynett had not heard. "Are you quite sure he has arrived?"

"He was to have left Calais two or three days since," replied the lady, in a musical voice, and with the slightest possible Spanish accent.

"Calais? I heard something of that a few minutes ago. Ah!" as he caught sight of Gwynett, "this is the gentleman. Pardon, monsieur, but I believe this lady is inquiring for you."

Gwynett was rather surprised, but came forward to the off side of the carriage with his bridle over his arm, and raised his hat to the occupant. He was still more surprised when the lady turned her face towards him. She was a young woman of perhaps twenty-two or twenty-three years of age, distinguished by a beauty positively startling to Gwynett, who had seen not a few beautiful women in his travels, and had hitherto flattered himself that his *fiancée* had very few rivals between the Danube and the Thames. But the type in this case was totally different, and partook partly of the Tuscan and partly of the Provençal, combining the oval majesty of the one with the grace and vivacity of the other.

"What can I do for you, madame?" asked Gwynett, as he came in front of the carriage.

"A thousand pardons, monsieur—it is a mistake," replied the lady, with a ravishing smile of apology, and a glance of interest at Gwynett's herculean proportions. "I am expecting a relative to arrive at Versailles from Calais, and this gentleman thought that you were he."

"Permit me, madame, to regret that he is in error," replied Gwynett, accompanying the compliment with a bow as he prepared to get into the saddle.

"Will you descend, madame?" asked the official. "It is possible that your relative is in the palace already. I will inquire."

"I think I will," said the lady, rising from her seat.

As the other was about to turn the handle of the door a little cur, which had strayed into the courtyard, came yelping at the horses of the carriage. The official turned round to drive it away, when one of the horses, which had already been giving the coachman some trouble, took fright, plunged furiously, and kicked its companion. In another instant the carriage had been driven against the curbstone and violently overturned, while the two horses lay on their sides, kicking in all directions. The lady had been flung on the side walk, between the horses' feet and the door of the porter's

lodge, which at this moment was closed. The official was pinned against the lodge wall by the back of the overturned carriage, and the coachman lay on his face in the roadway apparently stunned.

Gwynett had one foot in the stirrup when he heard the crash of the overturn and looked round. The lady could only be reached by climbing either over the wreck of the carriage or over the plunging bodies of the horses. He saw that an instant's loss of time might be fatal, even if it were not too late already. His saddle, luckily, was a travelling one, with the usual pistol-holster on each side, and the butts protruding. It was the work of a second to draw both weapons, to cock, and to fire into the heads of the two struggling animals. Thanks to the punctiliousness of Gwynett's hotel people, each pistol was properly loaded and primed, and both shots were fatal. The two horses were killed instantly, but Gwynett's heart came into his mouth as he saw a hoof shoot past the lady's head and strike the oaken door with a blow that shook the very roof of the lodge. He was by her side at a bound, and raised her head on his knee just as the official released himself and hastened forward. The lady opened her eyes, smiled, and sat up.

"Thank you very much," she said, as if nothing had happened. "Your hand, monsieur, if you will be so good."

The official, who had scarcely recovered his breath, raised her to her feet, and looked at her speechlessly. Gwynett turned towards the door, where a lock of long hair had been cut off by the horse's shoe and driven into the wood of the oaken panel.

"You have had a miraculous escape, madame," said he, handing the lady her hat, which was cut through the brim.

"Thanks to your promptitude, monsieur."

"Hardly, madame. I was not in time to prevent *that*," and Gwynett pointed to the door. "How you were not killed by that last kick I cannot imagine."

The lady put up her hand to her head, and discovered the loss of half her back hair.

"That was an abominable animal," she said ruefully.

"I hope you have sustained no other injury, madame."

"I feel none, I thank you. But I must decidedly go indoors and get myself repaired. Where is the coachman?"

This functionary was sitting in the roadway, just recovering consciousness, and very much shaken, but otherwise none the worse for his fall. He got up and approached his mistress.

"See to all this," said the lady, pointing to the horses. "The carriage had better be taken back to Marly. I shall return with madame de Ventadour."

The coachman bowed, and went off in search of assistance at the stables. The lady turned to Gwynett, and looked at him with a certain earnestness.

"Monsieur," she said, in a voice full of feeling, "accept my thanks. If I escaped one kick, I should not have escaped the next. When I saw those brutes with all their legs in the air, I knew you could not reach me, and gave myself up for lost."

"It was a lucky chance that the pistols in my holsters were loaded, madame. I trust that you will experience no further inconvenience." Gwynett bowed, and raised his hat in token of withdrawal.

The lady curtsied, and placed her hand on the arm of the official, who was standing by.

"I am the comtesse de Valincour, monsieur," she said. "I am at Marly, and I hope we may meet again."

The palace of Marly was occupied by the dauphin, the duc de Bourgogne, and Gwynett understood that his interlocutor was in the household of the prince.

"Under happier auspices, I trust, madame," said he.

"Adieu, monsieur, and au revoir, I hope."

"You confer a great favour on me, madame."

The comtesse went away with the official, and Gwynett rode off into the town. The coachman presently returned with a couple of stablemen and hurdles, and began to remove the dead horses.

While this was being done, two gentlemen came up and stopped to watch the proceedings. One of these was the abbé Dubois, formerly tutor to the duc de Chartres (now the duc d'Orléans), and at present his factotum and general ill-adviser in chief. If the reader requires a description of him, he may learn from the famous 'Memoirs' of St. Simon that the abbé was "a little, pitiful, wizened, herring-gutted man, flaxen wig, weazel's face, brightened by some intellect." "The most impudent deceit had become natural to him, and was concealed under an air that was simple, upright, sincere, often bashful." His companion was the abbé Gaultier.

"Hallo! Pierre," exclaimed the latter, addressing the coachman, "what is all this?"

The coachman looked up, and made a very humble salute.

"Pardon, M. l'abbé," said he. "It is so many years since

we have seen you at the château de Beauval that I did not recognise you for the moment. We have had an accident."

"So I see. Whom were you driving?"

"Madame la comtesse, monsieur."

"Your sister, abbé?" asked Dubois.

"I suppose so. Where is she, Pierre?"

"She has retired into the palace, monsieur, but not seriously hurt, I believe."

"What has happened?"

The coachman briefly narrated the circumstances of the accident, and indicated the direction taken by the comtesse and her escort.

"Madame came here to inquire for you, I believe, M. l'abbé."

Gaultier turned to Dubois.

"You will excuse me, my dear abbé, I am sure. I was not aware my sister had left Languedoc."

"Assuredly," said Dubois. "If the comtesse does me the honour to recollect that I met her once or twice at Madrid when the duke was in Spain, please present my respectful homage to her."

"With pleasure." And Gaultier went off.

Dubois stood looking at the men engaged with the dead horses, and cogitating.

"What mischief is in the wind now?" he queried to himself. "Madame la comtesse is not here for nothing. If madame des Ursins had not taken time by the forelock and kicked my estimable pupil back from Madrid to the Palais-Royal, she would have bewitched him like Amelot and d'Estrées and the others. Lucky for la Parabère. She would have been extinguished in a snap of the finger. This is a Marly equipage, surely?"

The abbé scrutinised the arms on the panels, and then said to the coachman,

"They won't thank you for this at Marly, my friend?"

"It is a great misfortune, monsieur," said Pierre dolefully. "Monseigneur is very particular about the horses. Our first drive, as it happens."

"Ah?"

"You see, monsieur," proceeded Pierre, with a provincial readiness to gossip which Dubois found convenient, "although madame has been in office a week, she has been too busy to drive out. To-day, hearing that M. l'abbé Gaultier had arrived from England——"

"The duties of office are no doubt very exacting," put in the abbé, who never wasted time.

"Madame is already a great favourite with madame la dauphine," said Pierre proudly, as he returned to his colleagues.

"*Peste!*" thought the abbé, "la Valincour a lady-in-waiting at Marly! Now who managed that? Not the duke, or I should have heard. Not d'Estrées, surely—she snubbed him too hard at Madrid. Possibly Amelot. It would be well to find out."

The abbé looked thoughtfully at the coachman and his assistants, who, after clearing away the traces of the recent incident, were now taking away the horses and the equipage to the stables.

"I wonder," he said to himself as he walked off, "whether the comtesse recollects our little sparring. It helped to pass the time at Madrid. But here, on second thoughts, I think I should have cultivated an alliance. La Valincour at Marly could be a decided nuisance if she chose to be spiteful."

In the meantime Gaultier had made inquiries after the comtesse, and learned that she had gone to the rooms of the ladies-in-waiting. Here madame de Ventadour, governess to the 'petit dauphin,' the duc de Bretagne, was occupied with the little prince, whom she had brought over from Marly to make a regulation visit to his royal great-grand sire and spend the day at Versailles.

Sending in his name, Gaultier was asked into one of the private boudoirs, close to madame de Maintenon's apartments, until the comtesse de Valincour could see him.

Presently the door opened, and the comtesse entered, wearing a rich dressing-gown of Indian silk in place of her driving costume, and without her hat. She came forward quickly and kissed her brother with a certain amount of affection.

"How did you hear of me?" she asked.

"We came across the wreck of your carriage at the entrance," replied the abbé, looking at his sister with a critical air, and evidently a little surprised at something. "Pierre told us about the affair."

"Who are 'we'?"

"Dubois was with me. He begged to be remembered."

"Dubois? and the duke?"

"Oh! he is in Paris."

The comtesse considered a few moments, while her brother

continued to regard her steadfastly. Then she went to the door, locked it, and pointed to an easy-chair.

"Sit down, my dear Armand," she said. "I rather want to have a little chat with you—that was why I came here to-day. One of the equerries mentioned that you had come over to Versailles. Madame de Ventadour has lent me this room while they are repairing the damage done to my dress, so that we shall not be interrupted."

The abbé rolled up a *fauteuil* for the comtesse, and leisurely deposited himself in another near at hand.

"By all means," said he.

CHAPTER VIII

YVONNE DE VALINCOUR

"FIRST of all," said the comtesse, "did you get my last letter? I ask because, as usual, you omitted to answer it."

"Let us see," deliberated the abbé. "When was it sent?"

"A year ago—just after we had left Madrid."

The abbé cast about in his memory and fished up a reminiscence.

"I have some idea of a letter coming to me at my old lodgings. I was ill at the time, and there was a great fuss made. The scoundrelly landlord refused to entertain me any longer, and insisted that I had set fire to his house. I fancy that was pure invention."

The comtesse had evidently a certain familiarity with her brother's idiosyncracies.

"As you are not quite sure, I presume your illness was the usual one?" she asked.

"I called it fever," replied the abbé placidly. "The doctor called it *delirium tremens*. He was probably a quack. When I was sufficiently recovered to move, I found all my papers burnt, most of my clothes, and a good deal of the furniture—some careless serving-wench, no doubt. But I certainly never read your letter. I have heard nothing of you since you went to the Escorial, now I come to think of it—except at second-hand, through the de Noailles."

"That means that I have a good deal to tell you," said the comtesse, in a resigned tone.

"I am all attention, my dear Yvonne."

"To begin at the beginning, you recollect perfectly well how I resisted the marriage with M. de Valincour?"

"Perfectly well. But I assure you I did all I could—at your request—with my step-mother. Unfortunately, you had really no case, except that he was old, ugly, broken down with disease, and a maniac for ill-temper—nothing that could be considered a valid objection. The difficulty was that madame du Fresne de Beauval had become dissatisfied with being merely the wife of a little Languedoc seigneur like our father, and thought she had something to gain by being the mother-in-law of a comte—especially a comte de Valincour. In fact, we had a little quarrel over the matter."

"I know you had. I heard afterwards that your income had been cut off in consequence. I was very sorry."

"So was I, my dear Yvonne."

"I felt that I had done you an injury by asking your assistance; but then, you see, I was so accustomed to look to you for everything. You had always a good heart, Armand."

"An admirable heart," assented the abbé pensively; "in fact, my heart is my strong point."

The comtesse smiled, and refrained from making an obvious comment.

"At the same time, as your efforts were fruitless, and I had to marry the comte, you did me the next best service you could when you were clever enough to get the duchesse de Noailles to appoint me to the vacancy in the household at Madrid."

"Ah! the duchesse and I used to be very good friends," said the abbé. "Now we are not on terms. She says I am no longer respectable. Imagine that to yourself."

"I never told you why I wanted that appointment so particularly."

"It is no use quarrelling with people's tastes, my dear Yvonne. Personally, I should have thought even Valincour more civilised than Madrid."

"I saw an opportunity at Madrid which I could find nowhere else in Europe—at that time."

"An opportunity for what?"

"That is my secret," said the comtesse, after a pause.

"By all means," said the abbé serenely.

"Which I am going to tell you."

"Better late than never. But why late?"

"Because now you can help me only by understanding me ;

formerly it was not necessary. And by helping me you will help yourself."

"I see no objection to that," said the abbé.

The comtesse rose, stood in front of Gaultier, and slipped off her dressing-gown. She was without her dress and bodice, and her superb arms, shoulders, and bust, worthy of the Venus of Milo, were bare down to her corset of pale blue satin.

"Look at me well, my dear Armand," she said seriously. "It is some years since we met last, and I have changed a little, I think. I am desirous of having your unbiassed opinion on my personal appearance. It will be valuable to me as coming from a man of experience who is luckily only one's brother."

The abbé duly utilised the opportunity offered him. He leaned back in his chair, with his hands behind his head, and surveyed the face and figure of the comtesse for some seconds.

"Well, what is your verdict?"

"My dear Yvonne," said the abbé judicially, "there is no doubt you have developed marvellously since our old days together. I was amazed when I saw you. In my opinion, whatever it may be worth, you are probably the most beautiful woman in Europe."

"I have been under the same impression myself," said the comtesse, putting on her dressing-gown again. "But, at the same time, I might naturally be mistaken; and, of course, there is no one from whom to get impartial information in the ordinary course of things."

"Assuming that our joint verdict is correct," said the abbé, "what is the little secret that I am to hear?"

The comtesse resumed her seat, and looked fixedly at her brother.

"My secret, Armand, is that I have an ambition. I have had it ever since I became a woman. I opposed my marriage because it bid fair to frustrate my ambition."

The abbé stretched out his legs, and thrust his hands into his pockets.

"And what is this said ambition?" he asked.

"I wish to be the ruler of an empire," replied the comtesse calmly.

The abbé put his head on one side, and looked at his sister with a benevolent air.

"*Peste!*" said he, "that is a very fine idea. Your programme has one conspicuous advantage, if no other."

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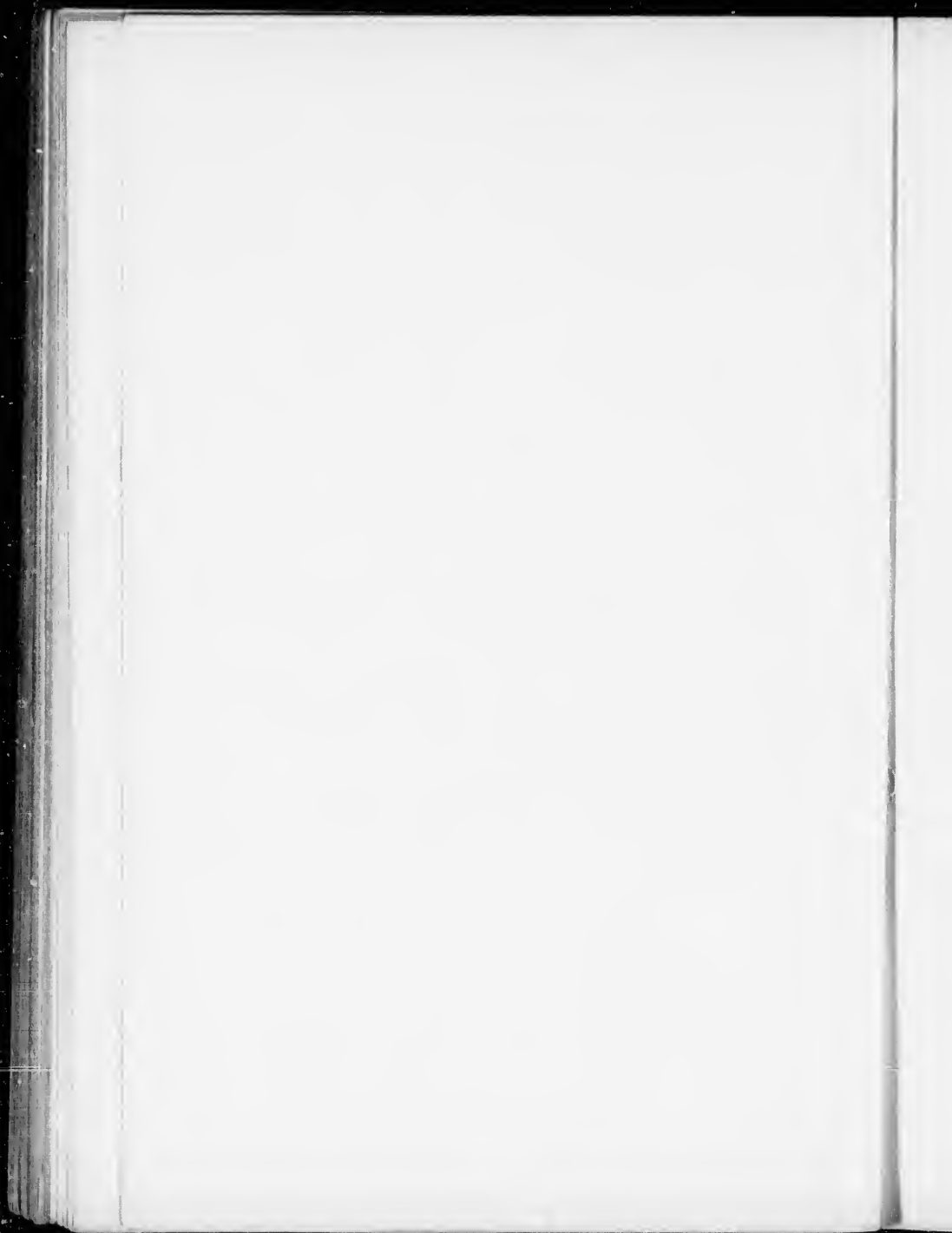
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"Look at me well, my dear Armand."

—Page 56.



"What is that?"

"Why, you are pretty safe against the risk of being bored to death by succeeding. Nothing is so annoying as to get what one wants—sometimes. What a field this ambition of yours presents for not being disappointed by anything of that sort!"

The comtesse was not in the least disturbed by this philosophy.

"I see you are a little in the dark yet," she said, "and quite naturally. You think I am seeking too much?"

"On the contrary. But I see some little difficulties."

"That is not the point. You have yourself known four women who were not without influence over empires—the duchess of Portsmouth, the duchess of Marlborough, madame de Maintenon, the princesse des Ursins."

"True. But each of these women had some advantage which you lack."

"For instance?"

"La Querouaille was sent by one ruler expressly to rule another ruler. No one wants the comtesse de Valincour to be a ruler—except you and me."

"Very true, so far."

"Sarah Jennings would have been nothing without John Churchill. What is M. de Valincour?"

"Go on."

"It took a dozen years of nursery drudgery to turn Françoise Scarron, governess, into the marquise de Maintenon, queen *sub rosa*."

"Without doubt."

"Marie-Anne de la Trémouille had to be twice widowed in the best possible style, to have a little court of her own at Rome, and to be sixty-three, before she became dictatress of Spain. Besides, she had to deal with a king of eighteen and a queen of scarcely fourteen—two babies, and one of them next door to an idiot."

"All that is true, my good Armand. On the other hand, none of these women were Yvonne de Valincour. That makes all the difference."

The abbé began to entertain a certain respect for this stupendous self-confidence, expressed with such unaffected directness.

"I do not contradict you," he said.

"Therefore, as all these women, without either my beauty or my brains—as I conceive—did a good deal of what I wish to do entirely, what do you find unreasonable in my idea?"

The abbé rubbed his chin meditatively.

"Suppose you go on," said he. "We got as far as your ambition, and your marriage with the comte de Valincour. What next?"

"I heard that madame des Ursins had asked the duchesse de Noailles to send her a lady-in-waiting. Then I saw my opportunity. Thanks to your assistance, I was nominated. Cannot you understand what I went to Madrid for?"

"Let us hear," said the abbé attentively.

"The comte was very much flattered by the appointment, and made no objection. It would not have mattered if he had. We travelled to Madrid in the suite of the duc d'Orléans, as you know."

"As to the duke?" asked the abbé curiously.

"Oh! everybody knew the duke's reputation about women. I simply kept out of his way, so that he saw little or nothing of me before he left to conduct the campaign against the Austrians. It would have been a mere waste of time—then."

"Certainly."

"The main thing was not to excite the suspicions of madame des Ursins."

"About what?"

"My dear Armand, you are affecting to be obtuse. About the king, of course."

"The king? I begin to comprehend. Well?"

"In six months I had managed to make the king's life a burden to him. He was madly in love with me, and dared not avow it, even to himself. He was terrified lest madame des Ursins should find him out, and he was miserable because he had ceased to care for his wife. I confined myself to being sympathetic. I knew I could do nothing safely while the queen was alive—the imbecile made it quite a matter of conscience."

"All this is very interesting," said the abbé seriously.

"And how did you propose to arrange matters?"

"Nothing was in the way but the queen. The queen meant madame des Ursins, and madame des Ursins meant the government of Spain. With the queen away, the king would have given himself to me body and soul. I should have got rid of madame des Ursins in twenty-four hours. Then I should have reigned over an empire in two worlds."

The abbé listened with absorbed attention and a dawning wonder.

"Nevertheless, the queen being there?" he asked.

"She is very delicate, and the Spanish doctors are miraculously stupid."

"Creaking gates hang long, I have always heard—even with Spanish doctors."

"I think the doctors could have been persuaded to be too stupid, even for that."

"And if their stupidity did not admit of exaggeration?"

"In that case, I daresay I could have managed to be passably stupid myself."

"*Parbleu!*" said the abbé, rubbing his chin. "Some fuss might have been made about that——"

"Not necessarily."

"To say nothing of the difficulty."

"It has been found easy enough before."

"For example?"

"Well, did not Madame die very conveniently for the chevalier de Lorraine, although he was as far away as Rome at the time, and what fuss did Charles II. of England make? None at all."

"That's very true."

"When Madame's daughter, the late queen of Spain, was got rid of by the Austrian party to make way for Marie-Anne of Bavaria, did anybody made a fuss?"

"Probably not. But you must recollect that the people who assisted Henrietta Stuart and Marie-Louise d'Orléans into a better world were a little too high to be criticised."

"That only means that more care would have been required in my case. As it happened, I had no opportunity of taking care. Madame des Ursins began to open her eyes."

"You quarrelled with her?"

"Not in the least. I was always her most devoted adherent and faithful echo. That made it difficult for her to get rid of me, or keep me out of the way of the king. Finally, she devised a great *coup*, and checkmated me."

"How was that?"

"Having no possible excuse for dismissing me individually from court, she determined upon sending back the whole French household in a body. This was on the pretext that it was necessary to throw the king entirely into the hands of the Spanish, and thus strengthen his position by dissipating the furious jealousy of the French which was entertained by the nation."

"That was it, was it?" said the abbé.

"Of course, it was useless to resist or protest. We all

left Madrid together, and my husband and myself retired to Valincour."

"I heard of your return from Amelot. By the way, why did he leave with the others? The excuse about the French household could not apply to the French ambassador?"

"He left because I left. I thought he might be useful here, so I did not discourage him."

"Ah! so he was another?"

"Yes. And I was right. Through him I am here to-day—he obtained me the nomination to a vacancy in the household of madame la dauphine only last week. In the meantime, I have lost a year, you see, vegetating at Valincour instead of getting forward."

"Then you still cherish this ambition of yours?" asked the abbé.

"I cherish two, naturally."

"Two?"

"Failing Spain, I look to France. Also, I have accounts to settle with madame des Ursins."

"Of course. And what is the programme now?"

"Have you not guessed?"

"*Pardieu!* no. The duc de Bourgogne is too respectable, and besides, he is too fond of the dauphine."

"That remains to be seen. At the same time, I do not reckon on it."

"The duc de Berri? but he is rather remote."

"He is a fool entirely of the wrong sort. He would allow his people to put me in the Bastille."

"If you intend to wait for the duc de Bretagne, madame des Ursins will have no particular advantage over you in the way of age."

* * * * *

The abbé's allusions may perhaps be conveniently elucidated for the reader by a few lines of genealogy.

At the period of which we write there were two royal families in France, one being that of Louis XIV., the other that of his deceased younger brother 'Monsieur,' otherwise Philippe, duc d'Orléans.

Louis XIV.'s only legitimate son, 'Monseigneur,' had died on April 14th, 1711, the year of our story, partly fulfilling the popular prophecy current long before his death of "*Fils de roi, père de roi, jamais roi.*"

Monseigneur left three sons.

The eldest of these was the duc de Bourgogne, now

dauphin. The duc de Bourgogne had two little sons, the elder of whom, the duc de Bretagne (called the 'petit dauphin') was at this date six years old, while the younger was not yet two.

Monseigneur's second son was now reigning in Spain as Philippe V., his right of succession to the throne of France having been already renounced by Louis XIV. in the pending negotiations for peace.

Monseigneur's third son was the duc de Berri.

The family of Orléans was represented by Philippe, duc d'Orléans, only son of 'Monsieur' (the brother of Louis XIV.) and his second wife, the princess Palatine. By his first wife, Henrietta Stuart (sister of our Charles II. and always spoken of as 'Madame'), Monsieur had had two daughters, of whom the elder, Marie-Louise, had married the late king Charles II. of Spain.*

The heirs-presumptive to the throne of France were thus, in order of claim—

The duc de Bourgogne, grandson of Louis XIV. ;

The duc de Bretagne and his baby brother, the duc d'Anjou, great-grandsons of the king ;

The duc de Berri (assuming Louis XIV.'s renunciation of the king of Spain's claim to hold good) ;

And finally, the duc d'Orléans, the king's nephew.

* * * * *

The comtesse nodded her head.

"You are getting nearer, my dear Armand, without knowing it," she said. "At the same time, I do not intend to wait till I am sixty-three."

"*Peste!* no. May one ask how you propose to achieve your purpose before attaining that fine age?"

"I have considered that—I mean as to answering your question. On the whole, I think it would be better not."

"Better for you or for me?"

"For both—but especially for you."

"Doubtless you are very considerate, my dear Yvonne; all the same, I fail to understand you."

"The fact is, Armand, we are a little differently situated in this affair. If matters went wrong——"

* Besides the above, it will be useful for the reader to recollect the two surviving sons of Louis XIV. and madame de Montespan. These were the duc du Maine and the comte de Toulouse, who had been brought up by the widow Scarron (*née* Françoise d'Aubigny and now marquise de Maintenon).

"What matters?"

"The matters I have in view——"

"Well?"

"I should hold my tongue. I am under the impression that you would not."

"Why should I not hold my tongue, my good sister?"

The comtesse looked at her brother for a second or two before answering.

"I take it," she said, "that as soon as you were in the Bastille, and a few remarks came to be made about the 'question extraordinaire'——"

"What on earth are you talking about?" asked the abbé.

"The Bastille and the 'question' are the two first things one has to consider in this sort of affair," replied the comtesse. "After that, there is the choice of being burnt alive or broken on the wheel—for me. I think it is only men whom they drag to pieces with stallions—so that would be your affair."

The abbé found the conversation taking a very disagreeable turn.

"Decidedly, my dear Yvonne," said he, "you have a curious way of encouraging people."

"I do not want to encourage you. I am only suggesting that, perhaps, it might be more convenient for you not to be in my confidence. I am sure it would distress you to feel obliged, at the first turn of the handle, to repeat all my little secrets to M. d'Argenson. That is why, on the whole, I propose to keep my plans to myself."

The abbé did not see any use in affecting the heroic. Moreover, the grapes seemed to grow a good deal out of reach; in fact, it was not quite certain whether there were any grapes at all.

"My dear Yvonne, curiosity is not in the least a failing of mine," he replied. "Only, if I am not to be favoured with your projects, what is the particular occasion for our present interview—apart, of course, from the pleasure of seeing each other again?"

"The principal point, my dear Armand, is to consider our finances, present and future. Are you in funds, or do you need money?"

"At present I have a few pistoles to spare—which does not happen very often. The other day his majesty paid the expenses of my recent journey, and made me a little present of six thousand livres. Do you want to borrow or lend?"

"Neither, at the moment. But I desire to urge upon you that the only way in which you can be of real assistance to me in future, and further your own interests as well, will be to raise as much money as you can for me. To secure this appointment of mine cost M. de Valincour a year's income. Not only that, but to carry out my plans, I may at any moment want to spend money freely."

"That is intelligible," said the abbé.

"Therefore, if by any means—*any*, you understand—you can lay your hands on a few hundred or thousand pistoles, don't drink or gamble or throw them away, but send them to me. This is urgent, and you know I do not make a fuss about nothing."

"I will do my utmost," said the abbé. "Anything else?"

"Yes. You are intimate with the abbé Dubois?"

"Passably so."

"He is still hand-in-glove with M. d'Orléans?"

"Absolutely."

"You know we saw a little of each other at Madrid—when the duke was commander-in-chief in Spain—"

"And ready to be king if opportunity offered?"

"People said so—when he was recalled. But as to the abbé, I want you to give him a little message from me."

"With pleasure."

"Tell him that very fine olives come from Spain—branches and all."

"Will he understand?"

"Probably."

"That is all?"

"Yes."

The abbé took his hat and stick.

"Then I will say adieu," said he. "I have to see M. de Torcy."

"Adieu, dear Armand," said the comtesse, kissing him affectionately.

The abbé received his sister's salute with a tolerant air, and moved towards the door. Arrived there, he stopped, and turned towards the comtesse.

"*A propos*," said he, "one question occurs to me in connection with your suggestion about funds. Have you any lovers? I don't want to waste time shearing the wrong sheep."

The comtesse smiled a little curiously.

"None," she replied. "That would be fatal."

"All the better," said the abbé, as he unlocked the door and went out.

The comtesse lay back in her chair and meditated. A half-smile parted her lips.

"Fatal?" she murmured to herself. "Perhaps so. I am sorry I forgot to ask his name."

CHAPTER IX

CONTAINING A SHORT HISTORICAL DIGRESSION

AFTER Gwynett had finished his breakfast, he returned to the palace, and proceeded to the wing pointed out to him as being occupied by madame de Maintenon, in order to deliver his letter to the princesse des Ursins.

The mention of the latter name elicited the information that the marquise was engaged at the moment, coupled with a respectful request that Gwynett would wait until his name could be sent in to her. He was ushered into a gorgeous ante-chamber leading to the marquise's reception-room, and a seat was offered him, which he was nothing loth to accept.

A stream of distinguished personages passed before him for half an hour or more, both arriving and departing. These were various ministers and officials making their reports to madame de Maintenon, who had long been for all practical purposes the actual ruler of France, and who at this time devoted all her energy and ingenuity to further a single object. That object was to keep her august protector and secretly wedded husband from being worried into his grave sooner than could possibly be helped.

Hence no business of state was allowed to be laid before the king till it had been examined into by the marquise, and then only if his personal attention to it was unavoidable. Above all, foreign affairs, with their myriad complexities, difficulties, and humiliations, were sedulously kept from him until the marquise and M. de Torcy had between them made things as intelligible, as easy, and as rose-coloured as circumstances would permit.

Thus the marquise's reception-room became every morning a sort of office-of-all-work for state affairs; and Gwynett saw pass and repass before him almost every head of a department other than those of mere routine.

Finally, a little middle-aged man, who walked with difficulty, emerged from between the *portières* of the salon door.

"Do you know M. de Torcy?" asked the usher of Gwynett.

As the latter shook his head, the usher approached de Torcy and said something in a low tone. The marquis came up to Gwynett and said very courteously,

"You come to us from madame des Ursins, M. Gwynett?" Gwynett bowed.

"I am on my way to the king at the moment, but I will see you as soon as I leave his majesty. In the meantime, your letter shall go in to the marquise at once. She may probably wish to see you. Perhaps you will be good enough to wait?"

The marquis signed to a chamberlain, and took the letter which Gwynett produced. He initialled the cover, and passed it to the official.

"At once," said he. "Au revoir, M. Gwynett."

The king's cabinet adjoined the salon of madame de Maintenon. As the marquis entered the ante-chamber which led to the royal sanctum, the abbé Gaultier stepped forward with a sweep of his hat and an air of considerable assurance. The abbé had, of course, previously delivered his not very important official despatch from St. John, who was the only member of the new English ministry able to speak or write French even decently. But the really important part of the peace negotiations with France were now being carried on by M. Ménager, deputy from the city of Rouen to the Board of Trade, and Gaultier was for the time being rather on the shelf. This he had recognised with a good deal of suppressed resentment.

"Pardon, M. le marquis," said he, "am I at liberty to return to London, or have you commands for me?"

The marquis, who would have felt rather a qualm at touching the speaker with a pair of tongs, assumed an expression of extreme blandness, and looked at the ceiling.

"If you can do me the favour to wait an hour, M. l'abbé," said he, "I shall be able to tell you. I am now on my way to his majesty," and the marquis passed on with his nose rather in the air.

The abbé gave a snort of disgust.

"Peste!" he growled, "I might as well have stayed in bed. But these brigands are always ungrateful."

The abbé would have proposed a main at dice with the groom of the chambers but for his recollection that, under the devout *régime* of madame de Maintenon, these resources—

in daylight, at least—were tabooed in the precincts of the palace. So he strolled round to the royal stables, and treated the stablemen to a display of the knowledge of horse-flesh he had picked up at Newmarket and elsewhere during his residence in England.

Before we follow the marquis into the august presence of Louis XIV., we will venture to refresh the reader's memory upon one or two of the subjects which were to enter into the impending consultation between the king and his minister.

The great war of the Spanish succession, following on the death in 1701 of Charles II. (the last king of the Austrian dynasty in Spain), was now drawing to a close.

It had been provoked by Louis, who had made use of a will, extorted by his ambassador from the imbecile and dying Charles, to place his own second grandson (then duke of Anjou) on the throne of Spain as Philippe V.

This was in flagrant violation of a previous treaty with England and the Dutch, by which the succession was assigned to the archduke Karl of Austria, second son of Leopold, emperor of Germany, who was a cousin of Charles II. of Spain, and had married his sister.

To further improve matters, Louis had taken occasion on the death of our ex-king James II. at St. Germain, in 1701, to recognise his son (queen Anne's brother) as king of England under the title of James III.

This united all the English parties, except the Jacobites, in a burst of patriotic fury. The old Grand Alliance with the Empire and the United Provinces was renewed, and in 1702 war was commenced with Louis and Philippe to expel the latter from his new sovereignty.

The operations of the Allies were directed, during the whole of the long struggle, by an inseparable triumvirate of three of the ablest men in Europe.

These were the duke of Marlborough, for a long time absolute dictator of England, but now the only survivor in office of the Whig party; Heinsius, grand pensionary of Holland, the old colleague of William III. in the States-General of the United Provinces; and prince Eugène of Savoy, generalissimo of the Imperial forces.

After nine years of warfare, in Spain and out of it, the powerful monarchy of Louis had been brought to the verge of utter ruin by an unparalleled series of military disasters and the enormous cost in blood and treasure of the protracted contest. On the other hand, king Philippe V.—thanks to

French generals and the Elizabethan statesmanship of his wife's *camerara mayor*, the princesse des Ursins—was firmly settled on his throne, while the cause of his Hapsburg rival, the archduke Karl, had become hopeless.

But the emperor Leopold had died in 1705, and had been succeeded by his eldest son Joseph. The emperor Joseph II. in his turn had died in April, 1711, and his brother the archduke Karl, the last of the Hapsburgs in the male line, was now emperor of Germany.

This altered everything.

The English and Dutch governments had to choose between a possibility and a certainty.

It was remotely possible that, if they left Philippe V. on his throne, he might at some time or other (by surviving his grandfather, his brother, and his two child-nephews) add the enormous possessions of Spain to those of France.

It was quite certain that the emperor Karl VI., if made king of Spain, would thereby at once secure its dominions for the house of Austria.

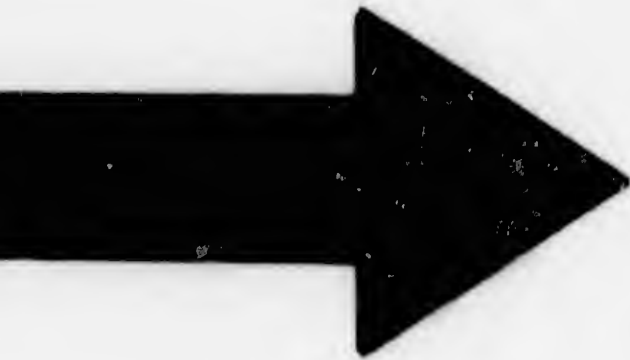
Moreover, Louis XIV. had just made a formal promise of renunciation (whatever that might be worth) of his grandson's rights to the French succession, whereas Karl VI. had made no renunciation at all, either of his Austrian, his German, or his Spanish claims.

Called upon to choose between the old bugbear of a Franco-Spanish colossus and the new bugbear of an Austro-Spanish one, the English Tory ministry had definitely decided in favour of the former. They had accordingly made secret arrangements to initiate negotiations for peace. But the Dutch, exasperated by the former oppressions of the French king, wanted exorbitant special terms for themselves; the emperor insisted on his own claims being maintained by the prosecution of the war to the bitter end; and the elector of Hanover (the designated Protestant successor to queen Anne) swore that a Tory peace with France meant the immediate return of the chevalier de St. George * to England as James III.

Meanwhile, the duke of Marlborough's ministerial and parliamentary power had passed away, his duchess was dismissed from office, his political friends were ostracised, and he himself was the best abused, denounced, and hated man in England. But he was, nevertheless, still the arbiter of the

* Usually styled the 'Old Pretender.'





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situation on the continent. It did not yet appear whether it would pay best to betray the queen, the elector, or the chevalier de St. George. So the duke watched and waited.

CHAPTER X

A PRIVY COUNCIL

THE king looked up from the perusal of a state paper when the marquis de Torcy was announced, and nodded silently.

Louis XIV. was now over seventy-three years old, broken in health and spirits, and bowed down with the burden of half a century of despotic sovereignty. But he was still, as ever during his reign, punctilious in his dress and bearing, allowing no sign of the invalid to appear in his attire, and very little in his manner. He was wearing the royal mourning of purple for the death of Monseigneur, his only legitimate son and the heir to the monarchy, in the preceding April.

The marquis saluted the king, seated himself at the table which stood near, and opened his portfolio of reports.

"The most important, sire," he said, "is a verbal one from the abbé Gaultier, who has come over with some letters from M. St. John, which really contain nothing at all."

The king looked rather disgusted.

"Can't you manage to do without that scoundrel?" he asked. "He has been well paid."

M. de Torcy shrugged his shoulders.

"He has been extremely useful so far, sire. Besides, he is none the worse spy for being called an envoy. One doesn't go to a pig-sty for attar of roses."

"Well, what is new?"

"It appears, sire, that lord Oxford's government show a disposition to make peace with us at all hazards, if they can override the House of Lords. This has been so obvious in London that MM. Kryenberg and Vrybergen have been furious, and M. de Galas has been warned that he may be deported unless he moderates the tone of his representations."

Kryenberg was the resident minister in London of the elector of Hanover. Vrybergen the envoy of the United Provinces, and the comte de Galas the ambassador of the new emperor of Germany, Karl VI. All of these were hand-in-

glove with Marlborough and the Whig leaders; and each of them, for his own separate reasons, was busy arguing that a peace with France at the present juncture was something too monstrous even for argument. In the meantime, Ménéger had practically come to an agreement with the Tory cabinet in England, behind the backs of the Allies.

"Then what is lord Oxford waiting for?" asked the king.

"They are all afraid of the duke, sire."

"*Peste!* have they not cut his claws sufficiently?"

"Sire, if they have cut his English claws pretty well, they have not cut his Dutch, Hanoverian, and German claws at all. From what Gaultier learns, if lord Oxford persuaded the queen to dismiss the duke from the lord-generaiship, the Dutch would in a week declare for an immediate invasion of England by the elector of Hanover."

"But we have offered to recognise the Act of Settlement and the Protestant succession for the last three years," said the king.

"True, sire; but the court party don't care a *sou* for the Protestant succession. Queen Anne herself hates the elector like poison, and would much rather be succeeded by the chevalier."

"The king, M. de Torcy," corrected Louis, with rather a frown.

"I thought we had got beyond all that," said the marquis curtly. "St. Germain has cost us enough already, sire. It is time your majesty had a cheaper almshouse."

The marquis was apt to lose his temper over the Stuart alliance and the misfortunes which had accompanied it.

"You forget yourself, marquis," said the king angrily.

"Well, sire, let neither of us forget the really important point—that it is Marlborough, and no one else, who can save us or undo us. If Oxford makes peace with us and recalls the English forces, Marlborough is laid on the shelf—and Marlborough on the shelf is worth at least a hundred and twenty thousand pounds a year less than Marlborough the lord general."

"Impossible!" cried Louis.

"Perfectly possible, sire—two or three salaries, commissions on all contracts and on all promotions, pickings everywhere, besides pocketing the pay of whole regiments of men kept on the muster-roll while they have been dead and buried the last dozen years. You see, sire, one loses a good deal by being only a secretary of state."

It will be observed that the duke's skill in finance was no secret to his contemporaries.

"But the duchess must be wealthy," said the king, ignoring de Torcy's last remark.

"No doubt. They say she and the duke used to make ninety thousand pounds a year out of their home appointments and the sale of offices. But all that is over, sire. Since the duchess was dismissed—all the worse for us——"

"Not altogether," said Louis. "It was then that M. Harley and his cousin the chambermaid sent your blackguard Gaultier to us. They, at all events, are ready to come to terms with us."

"Sire, these Marlboroughs are insatiable. They are the son and daughter of the horse-leech. Now that the duchess cannot make money, the duke must make all the more. If he cannot make it as an English general, he will want to make it as a Dutch, or Hanoverian, or Imperial general. It would have paid us, sire, to have let him make it as a French general."

Louis had refused to give Marlborough a commission in the French army when lord Lockhart, the English ambassador in Paris, asked for a colonelcy for him in May, 1674—a refusal extended to prince Eugène a few years later. The king recollected these two enormous blunders only too well, without any reminder from the marquis. The latter went on,

"Whatever the English ministry does, sire, the other Allies will continue the war, if Marlborough chooses. We shall still have Heinsius, the prince, and the duke to count with, and behind them all the forces of Hanover, the States-General, and the Empire."

"This is confirmed by all your other news?" asked the king, after a pause.

"Yes, sire. Peace with England, but with Marlborough, means the continuation of the war, with the duke at the head of our enemies."

"And the continuation of the war means ruin?"

"Ruin, and worse, sire—the dismemberment of the monarchy. The Dutch will take Flanders and the emperor Alsace and Lorraine—probably a slice of Gascony and Languedoc to tack on to Spain when he has expelled your majesty's grandson—and madame des Ursins."

The king seemed stupefied at this prophecy.

"A partition of France?" he muttered mechanically.

"Nothing less, sire."

"The whole country shall be laid waste first," said the king, trembling with rage.

"Impossible, sire."

"Why impossible?"

"Your majesty's farmers-general have done it already, for all practical purposes."

The marquis always felt sore at having had to take office after a series of predecessors who, in order to administer magnificently, had left the country so bankrupt that M. de Torcy could hardly administer at all. The king ignored the jibe.

"Well?" said he.

"Peace or no peace, sire, one thing is necessary."

"And that is——?"

"Marlborough must be bought, sire."

"We tried to buy him two years ago at the Hague."

"Well, after a fashion, sire. When I reached the Hague, by the skin of my teeth, and went to M. Heinsius—by the way, sire, did I tell you I was kept waiting in his ante-room nearly forty minutes?"

This seemed the last straw to Louis XIV.

"Kept waiting!" he exclaimed, as if his ears must have deceived him.

"Yes, sire. Tit for tat, probably."

"How, marquis?"

"Your majesty may recollect that when M. Heinsius came here once on an embassy from William III.—when things were rather different, sire——"

The marquis's reminiscences usually annoyed Louis.

"Well?" said he sharply.

"M. Louvois threatened to throw him into the Bastille."

"We are all liable to make mistakes occasionally, marquis."

"True, sire. We made a mistake when I went to M. Heinsius, and from him to the duke—we did not bid high enough."

"We offered him four millions of livres." *

"Yes, sire—two millions for a peace that would enable us either to keep Naples and Sicily for the king of Spain, or to keep Strasburg, or to keep Dunkirk; or three millions for both Naples and Dunkirk; or four millions for the Italian provinces, Dunkirk, and Strasburg altogether. But he would not nibble, sire. Naturally, for he and the duchess would

* About £300,000.

make that much in a year and a half of the war, and he would reckon on keeping up the war for three years at least."

In fact, the worthy marquis tells us in his "Mémoires" that, on the occasion referred to, the duke did not even take the trouble to refuse the bribe offered, but merely turned the conversation.

"We could not have afforded more," said the king.

"No, sire. And now we cannot afford as much."

The king bethought him of the royal manifesto circulated in 1709, which had brought in a considerable sum, in voluntary gifts, for the purpose of carrying on the war with the Allies.

"After the Hague negotiations failed," said he, "the nation responded nobly to my appeal for resources."

"Very true, sire. But it is one thing to ask Frenchmen for money to make war against a host of invaders, and another to ask them for money to make peace with a single man."

"What have we in the treasury?" asked the king, after a pause.

"Less than a million livres, sire."

"The king of France has not a paltry million to call his own!" cried Louis, exasperated by his humiliations and his poverty.

"No, sire."

"It appears, therefore, M. le marquis, that the king has no financiers either."

"Certainly no one who can squeeze juice out of a sucked orange, sire. The orange was juicy enough in the time of M. Colbert and M. Louvois—when I had not the honour of serving your majesty."

"I had able ministers in those days, M. le marquis," snapped the irate king.

The marquis lost his temper at this comparison.

"Doubtless, sire. But that did not prevent my uncle Colbert from dying of a broken heart at your majesty's way of recognising his ability, nor M. Louvois from expiring just in time to save your majesty the trouble of knocking his brains out with a poker."

Louis could never bear any allusion to the terrible interview with his imperious minister, in which the sudden entry of madame de Maintenon had alone checked an outbreak of perhaps fatal violence on the part of the king—all the more lamentable because Louvois, already dangerously ill, died soon afterwards.

"M. le marquis," said Louis angrily, "if you prefer the Bastille to my cabinet, you have only to say so."

"Sire," replied de Torcy, as angry as the king, "I should have preferred it any time the last five years."

"Let us make up for lost time, M. le marquis."

The marquis opened a drawer, took out a written paper, and handed it to the king.

"There is a *lettre de cachet*, sire. Overwhelm me with obligations by filling it up," and the marquis threw himself back in his chair with the air of a schoolboy receiving a holiday. "What! no more despatches, no more reports, no more negotiations, no more appeals, no more slavery! *Pardieu!* To think that to-night, for the first time for fifteen years, I shall be able to go to sleep without troubling myself about to-morrow morning! Verily, I see the gates of Paradise opening to me before my time!"

The king scrawled a furious signature to the *lettre de cachet*.

"M. de Bernaville is an excellent hand at picquet, and I know his chef well," went on the marquis. "I shall enjoy my evenings enormously. I have only one request to make, sire, and that is, that when M. de Marlborough enters Paris with his armies you will persuade him not to disturb me. My compliments to my numerous able successors, sire." And the marquis pushed his portfolio across the table, took a prolonged pinch of snuff, and proceeded to smooth the feather of his hat with extreme deliberation.

The king, struck to the heart with this bitter raillery, sank back in his chair. His head fell upon his breast. All the triumphs, the glories, the tragedies, and the enormous disasters of his long reign rose in his memory. He thought of the far away time when he had been powerful, wealthy, beloved, worshipped; when two successive kings of England had been his paid lackeys; when his word had been law in half Europe. Now he was old, weary, crushed, bankrupt, sick unto death, alone. Those who had loved him so well and served him so brilliantly were all dead. Maria di Mancini, Henrietta Stuart, Louise de la Vallière, Athenais de Montespan, Marie de Fontanges, were no more. His great ministers and generals, Colbert, Turenne, Louvois, Condé, Vauban, Luxembourg, all had passed away. His son, the heir to his throne, rested in a newly made grave. Only his enemies remained—Marlborough, Heinsius, the elector, Eugène, the emperor; and they were more powerful than ever. The monarchy was shaken to its foundations. All Europe was

thirsting to destroy it. Except the man who sat opposite him, he had not one faithful friend in the world.

The king lifted his head, swept the *lettre de cachet* on to the floor, and looked at de Torcy with eyes weary of everything in earth and heaven.

"M. le marquis," said he at length, "do you think it is amusing to have been king of France for eight-and-sixty years?"

The marquis melted in a moment at the unutterable mournfulness of the aged face before him, and the voice which seemed to come from a tomb.

"Pardon, sire, pardon! Blame my infirmities and the cursed worries of my office—not myself. I shall die, I trust, in your majesty's service."

"I hope not, marquis," said the king gently. "My grandson will want you no less than I. But to business again. You did not come to-day to propose nothing?"

"No, sire. But I wanted your majesty to see that there is absolutely nothing left for us but what I am going to propose."

"Well?"

"Your majesty sees that we must buy Marlborough. Now Marlborough will cost us about a million sterling—say twelve or thirteen millions of livres."

"And we have only a million livres in the treasury?"

"Less than a million, sire. And no possibility of raising any more by taxes. The people have nothing; the peasants are everywhere dying of starvation, the traders are bankrupt. Nevertheless, there is plenty of money, sire."

"Where, marquis?" asked the king uneasily.

"Sire, who own a third of all the property in France, and have never paid a *sou* of taxes or war-contributions? Who could buy Marlborough ten times over, and never miss the money?"

The king looked very much disturbed.

"Explain yourself, marquis."

"I speak of the clergy, sire."

"What, marquis!" whispered the king, in terrified tones. "Levy on the Church?"

"I said the clergy, sire. The Church, if you like."

"Impossible, marquis."

"Sire, the Church—the Gallican Church—has you for its head, and must come to the rescue of the country when its head summons it."

"Sacrilege, marquis."

"Is it sacrilege, sire, to save the Church from a Protestant conquest?"

"I tell you it is impossible. The marquis——"

The *portières* behind the king were parted, and a woman appeared in the opening.

"I am here, sire," she said.

The marquis rose, and bowed. The newcomer was madame de Maintenon.

CHAPTER XI

A STATE SECRET

"PARDON, sire, for interrupting you and M. de Torcy," said the marquise, "but I have a communication from Madrid too important to delay for a moment. This is what the *princesse* writes," and she handed a letter, bearing the seal of madame des Ursins, to the king.

The king took the letter rather indifferently. Madrid news was usually unpleasant, and he had long ago been sick of the very name of the Spanish succession.

"The messenger brings also a letter from the king of Spain to your majesty," proceeded the marquise. "He had proposed to present it through M. de Torcy. I ventured to relieve the marquis of the duty."

M. de Torcy looked rather uneasy. But the marquise, by a nod, gave him to understand that there was nothing to be feared, and laid the second letter before the king.

Louis broke the seal and read the letter. An expression of wonder and relief lit up his face.

"A miracle!" he murmured. "Read, marquis," and he passed the letter to de Torcy.

It ran:

"SIRE AND REVERED GRANDFATHER,

We have learnt with profound regret and anxiety that the conclusion of peace between France and the Allies is still delayed, and that it is possible the war may be continued with the States-General and the Empire, even if the English government withdraws from the coalition.

We urge, sire, that the present position of affairs is dangerous to Spain only through the danger it presents to France. Our

A Kent Squire

throne is so firmly established in the hearts of our people that our only perils are those attaching to the alliance with your majesty. If an enduring peace can be secured for France, nothing need be feared for our royal house in Spain.

To further this end, we have the happiness to be able to send you (in a private ship for greater security) the half of certain treasure this week safely received from the Indies, amounting to about a million and a half of pistoles. We place this sum in charge of the sieur Gwynett, an Englishman lately serving as volunteer with M. le duc de Vendôme, and recommended to us by madame des Ursins. This gentleman, an adherent of the exiled family, has been given to understand that only a small sum is in question, and that it is intended for St. Germain. We pray God to have you in His holy keeping.
PHILIPPE."

The marquis smiled at this diplomacy.

"One can easily imagine it would be somewhat difficult to persuade any Spaniard to carry that much good money out of Spain," said he.

"The princesse has taken good care to have no Frenchman within reach," observed the king, who had never relished madame des Ursins' astute policy of Spain for the Spaniards.

The marquis made some calculations *sotto voce*.

"Sixteen and a half million livres," said he. "Say a million pounds sterling for Marlborough, and your majesty will still have three and a half millions of livres left. We are saved, sire."

"What is all that?" asked the marquise.

The king gave an alarmed glance at de Torcy, which the minister understood perfectly well.

"Madame," said he, "we were lamenting that we had not a million sterling wherewith to buy the duke of Marlborough. Now, behold, you come as a *dea ex machinâ*, bearing it in your hand."

The marquise was divided between disgust at the idea of sacrificing so much ready money and satisfaction at the prospect of less worry for the king.

"Your duke will be rather expensive, M. de Torcy," she said finally. "Is he worth it?"

"Madame, when we buy Marlborough we buy Heinsius, the elector, the king of Prussia, and the emperor—five dictators in one lot, with a bagful of princelets thrown in. It is not dear—besides, we have no choice."

"Where is all this money?" asked the king.

"Sire, it is on board ship at Calais. M. Gwynett has had

some curious experiences while in charge of it, which deserve recognition at your majesty's hands. Would your majesty care to receive him? He is waiting in the palace."

The king was rather pleased to hear of some variation from his usual routine, which consisted of religious services and of bad news from every point of the compass in about equal parts.

"Bring him in by all means, marquise," he said, leaning back in his chair.

Madame de Maintenon disappeared through the *portières*.

The marquis had been busying himself in calculating how the three and a half millions of sprats could be made to look like whales in the eyes of the state creditors. Finally, he looked up, and said,

"Sire, it is of course possible that we may buy our pig and still find our poke empty. Suppose M. de Marlborough takes our money, and betrays us after all?"

"That would be too monstrous," said the king.

"Without doubt. Nevertheless, if the duke happens to behave too monstrously, what then?"

"Such a scoundrel is not fit to live," cried the king, quite innocently.

"Precisely my opinion, sire," agreed the marquis drily.

"Only we must find someone not so stupid as Grandval or Barclay."

The king looked keenly at de Torcy. Grandval was a French officer employed in 1792 by the marquis de Barbesieux (the son and successor of Louvois), at the instigation of Louis and James II., to assassinate William III. Grandval had secured, as he thought, a couple of accomplices—Dumont, a Walloon, and Leefdale, a Dutchman. These worthies promptly betrayed their employer, who was tried, convicted, and executed, leaving behind him a full confession of the plot, which had naturally annoyed Louis very much. On the other hand, the assassination plot of Barclay in 1796 (which was instigated by James II. and only winked at by Louis) had failed through being made an affair of quite twenty persons, with the inevitable result of being betrayed three times over.

"I said nothing about that," said Louis.

"Very good, sire. There is no hurry. But I wish I knew a man just fool enough to be ready to try, and not fool enough to fail."

A knock was heard at the outer door of the cabinet. The marquis rose, went out, and returned with Gwynett.

"Sire," said he, "this is the gentleman who has been good enough to execute the commission of madame des Ursins to your majesty."

Gwynett bowed profoundly. The king looked at him for a moment in silence, wondering at the power, courage, and dignity which seemed instinct in the magnificent form of the simple English gentleman who stood before him. Then he held out his hand.

"We are much in your debt, monsieur," said he, as Gwynett knelt to kiss his hand, and then stepped back. "Really, the princesse knows how to choose a messenger, marquis."

De Torcy just refrained from shrugging his shoulders. One 'handsome Englishman,' as Jack Churchill was called *par excellence*, had been enough for him, and he was not disposed to be enthusiastic over another. The king looked at the letter from madame des Ursins.

"You are well known to the princesse?" he asked Gwynett.

"Sire, I have had the good fortune to perform some trifling services for madame des Ursins, that is all."

"You have borne arms in Spain?"

"Sire, M. de Vendôme was so good as to offer me a company early in last winter——"

"Which you refused?" said Louis, referring to the letter.

"I did not care to accept, sire, while an English army was in the field. But the day after general Stanhope's surrender I went with the marshal as a volunteer."

General Stanhope, commanding the English contingent of the allied force in Spain, had been cut off from his Austrian colleague, general Starhemberg, and shut up in Brihuega by the duc de Vendôme, to whom he surrendered on December 10th, 1710, after fighting till all his ammunition was exhausted. The next day Vendôme and Starhemberg met in the battle of Villa Viciosa, which, although drawn, finally decided the fate of the archduke Karl, and left Philippe of Anjou undisputed master of Spain.

"And so you took part in our great victory of Villa Viciosa?" said the king.

"I was at Villa Viciosa, sire."

The marquis looked up, and took the liberty of continuing the king's catechism.

"And was it not a victory, monsieur?" he asked, with a warning intonation.

"Weil, M. le marquis," said Gwynett, who saw nothing to brag about in the affair, "we did not come off very well, in

my opinion. It is true general Starhemberg retreated to Barcelona after the fight, but I'm sure I never understood why."

The king looked curiously at this young man, who took so little trouble to speak smooth things in royal ears.

"Here is someone," he thought to himself, "whose opinion about my grandson will be worth having." He proceeded aloud,

"And how did you leave the duke? Was his appetite as good as ever?"

"Better, sire."

"*Peste!* he will burst himself before he comes back," said the king. As a matter of fact, the illustrious great-grandson of Henri IV. and Gabrielle d'Estrées killed himself by over-eating within six months of the king's prophecy, greatly to the grief of his soldiers, amongst whom he had distributed the half-million of livres given him by the grateful Philippe.

"You have been in Madrid as well as the provinces?" went on the king.

"Yes, sire."

"For long?"

"About five months, sire."

"And in the country altogether?"

"Nearly a year, sire."

"Is the king popular?"

"Thoroughly, sire."

"Everywhere?"

"Everywhere, sire."

"He has managed matters pretty well, you think?"

Gwynett cast about for a phrase that would not unduly compliment the half-witted Philippe V.

"Matters have been very well managed, sire—so far as I could judge."

The marquis smiled. The king caught the smile, and asked sharply,

"How, monsieur?"

"Sire, your majesty has always known how to find able servants."

"Good," said the marquis to himself.

Everybody knew that Louis had formerly not only detested madame des Ursins, but had peremptorily recalled her from Madrid on account of what he considered her officious meddling with affairs of state. It is true he had been won over by her irresistible manners, and had sent her back with

fuller powers than before. But this was only because he found his grandson's throne was not worth six weeks' purchase without her.

"Frenchmen are unfortunately not welcome in Spain," said the king, "except when they are killed in fighting Spanish battles."

"It was a great inspiration of your majesty to send a Frenchwoman, sire, who keeps very much alive," hazarded Gwynett.

"Very good," thought the marquis. "Decidedly this is a sharp fellow."

"You are a great champion of the princesse, it appears, monsieur," said the king, without any appearance of dissatisfaction.

"Her highness has always been extremely kind to me, sire."

The king referred again to the letter.

"She had you at court a short time, I hear."

"Yes, sire."

"Why?"

"Sire, when the princesse honoured me with this commission, the galleons had not yet arrived from Mexico, and I had to wait. Unfortunately, the Spaniards, while they dislike all foreigners, hate the English like poison, and it was troublesome to live in Madrid."

"Did they make you uncomfortable?"

"Very much so, sire. I was stabbed twice, shot at four times, and had to fight seven duels, in the first fortnight."

"Good Lord!" said the king, who began to be interested.

"How did you manage to come off with a whole skin?"

"Sire, after the first knife-thrust, which only scratched me, I always wore a very nice shirt of steel rings given me by an uncle of mine, who had received it as a present from Ferdinand Gonzaga. Then, it happened that the gentlemen who fired at me were very bad shots—at least, I presume so."

"Perhaps they got their powder from a government contractor," said de Torcy, *sotto voce*.

"And the duels?"

"Sire, in three of them I ran away as soon as I got the chance."

One of his rare smiles passed across the king's face.

"How was that?" he asked.

"Well, sire, I had no seconds—in fact, they were affairs on the spur of the moment; and my antagonists had friends who

had a habit of getting too much behind one. Unless there was a wall near, that was very inconvenient."

"Doubtless—and the other four?"

"As to the three first, sire, there was no trouble. In the last, I slipped on a stone as my opponent was making a pass, and received his thrust through my sword-arm."

"Ah! and then?"

"Before he could disengage, sire, I knocked him down with my left fist. Then I picked up my sword and went away. I understood he was found there afterwards, but whether he was killed with the blow or the fall I don't know. After this, the princesse was good enough to ask me to occupy a room at the Escorial, to prevent accidents."

"And how did you like living in the palace?"

"Well, sire," replied Gwynett, who had never felt so much bored in his life as during the period in question, "there is a medium in all things. On half a dozen occasions, for instance, I have had reason to be extremely thankful that the ditch I had to sleep in was a dry one."

"Do you hear that, de Torcy?" said Louis. "This gentleman and I have a good deal the advantage of you in experiences."

This was an allusion to the king's early youth, burnt in upon his memory, when Mazarin kept him in rags, without fires in winter, and provided with food just on a par with that of the royal scullions. Earlier in his reign this reminiscence used to fill him with fury. Now the sting of it seemed to have died out. He turned again to Gwynett, who was by this time beginning to be doubtful whether his weakness would permit him to keep on his legs much longer.

"Something has been said about your recent voyage, monsieur," said the king. "You had some difficulty in reaching Calais with this *Fleur de Lys* of yours?"

"Yes, sire," replied Gwynett, unable to help giving a lurch.

"What is the matter?" asked de Torcy, catching hold of him.

"A thousand pardons, sire—but if your majesty will kindly allow me to lean against M. de Torcy's chair——"

At this instant madame de Maintenon appeared between the *portières*. Perhaps she had been listening to the conversation.

"Sire," said she, "M. Gwynett has been at death's door, and is still very weak."

"Sit down, monsieur," said the king, not unkindly. "Some wine, de Torcy."

This was an extraordinary piece of consideration on the part of Louis XIV. Twenty years before, his majesty would have thought it simply monstrous if anyone should permit himself to be otherwise than perfectly well in the royal presence. Now that he had fallen upon evil days, the crust of his ineffable selfishness had been somewhat broken into, and it occasionally occurred to him to make allowance for infirmities which happened not to be his own. Nevertheless, the marquis could hardly believe his ears.

"Here is a young fellow who gets on quickly," he said to himself, as he reached over for the tall Venice-glass flagon which contained the king's favourite white Lachrymæ Christi, and poured out a glass for Gwynett. The latter had sunk into the nearest chair, nearly unconscious, but the rich sacramental wine revived him immediately.

"Perhaps M. Gwynett desires his majesty's permission to retire?" suggested the marquise, who, like madame des Ursins, was not too old to entertain a sneaking kindness for such a *preux chevalier* as our hero.

"Not at all, madame," replied Gwynett. "If his majesty will pardon a passing weakness, I am quite at his service." And he rose again to his feet.

"Sit down—sit down," said the king. "That is good wine, monsieur? The only good thing one gets from having the crown of Spain in one's family."

The reader who is learned in vintages will recollect that the wine in question comes from Monte Somma, near Vesuvius, and consequently in the kingdom of Naples, which constituted part of the Spanish empire till the treaty of Utrecht, in 1713, assigned it to the house of Austria.

"Well, what about your voyage?" proceeded the king, helping himself to a glass.

"It was very unlucky, sire. But for the fact that I was much accustomed to the sea as a boy, I certainly should have failed in my commission to your majesty."

Madame de Maintenon, who had seated herself a little behind the king, gave Gwynett a signal to go on. Our hero, who was very desirous not to bore the king before he had a chance of doing a little business on his own account, resumed his story.

"I was directed to join the brig at Cadiz, sire, and we set sail with a crew of six men and the captain, who belonged to her."

"Spaniards?"

"Impossible to say, sire. They belonged to any nationality that was convenient for their usual avocation."

"Ah! and that was——?"

"Smuggling, sire, when it was not piracy."

"Privateers, perhaps, monsieur?"

"That sounds better, sire, no doubt."

"Go on."

"Off Ferrol, sire, it began to blow a hurricane, and the crew took to praying before their principal madonna."

"Thus they could hardly have been pirates, monsieur," interpolated the marquise.

"Piety is to be lauded, in any walk of life," said the king, who felt obliged to be in the fashion.

"Without doubt, sire. At the same time, a little seamanship would not have been out of place. While they were on their knees, a tremendous sea came over the bows, and four men were swept overboard. The next day the captain and another man were so badly hurt by a falling spar that they died within twelve hours."

"Dear! dear! that's six out of seven," observed the king.

"Yes, sire. The mate and I had the ship on our hands for a couple of days, and then he fell sick. From that time I had to work the brig single-handed."

"But such a thing is impossible," said the king.

"Quite so, sire—therefore I did not attempt it. Luckily, the wind was steady from the south-west and not at all rough."

"The finger of Providence," remarked the marquise.

Gwynett bowed and went on.

"All I had to do, sire, was to leave the sails as they were, and stick to the wheel."

"With no help from the mate?"

"On the contrary, sire, he had to be nursed—in fact, he died when we were entering the Channel."

"And when did you sleep?"

"There was no opportunity of sleeping, sire."

"Bless my soul!" said the king. "And how long did that last?"

"About ten days, sire."

"And did you see no passing ship that could assist you?"

"Only one, sire, which I had any opportunity of speaking, and that was worse than nothing at all—except that I got half an hour's sleep."

Here Gwynett detailed his experiences with the Dutch galiot, of which mention has already been made in this

history, and wound up by narrating the circumstances of his arrival at Calais.

"Monsieur," said madame de Maintenon, with her air of *dévoté*, "your escape was miraculous, and due to a direct interposition of providence. I trust you have recognised that?"

"Certainly, madame," replied Gwynett, wondering what view the captain and crew of the *Fleur de Lys* took of the matter.

"We have a report from M. Daguerre, sire," said de Torcy, "but I have not yet opened it."

"It will keep," said Louis. "You have done well, M. Gwynett, and have laid us under greater obligations than we are at liberty to explain;" and the king bowed graciously.

"Wonders will never cease," thought de Torcy, who had had occasion to find out how rarely Louis XIV. had the grace to appreciate courage and endurance displayed in his service.

Gwynett returned the king's bow, and began to hope that these fine speeches might be taken as an encouragement to make the request he had *in petto*.

"If we can express our thanks in anything better than words, monsieur," proceeded the king, "you have only to show us how."

The marquis coughed, and looked at madame de Maintenon. He began to tremble lest the precious cargo of the *Fleur de Lys* should be diminished even by a handful of crowns. The marquise smiled imperceptibly in return.

"This is a man who will ask for nothing," she said to herself.

"Sire," replied Gwynett, "if your majesty permits me to ask a favour——"

"Speak, monsieur," said the king.

"About fifteen years ago, sire, some friends of mine in England experienced a great misfortune. The head of their family suddenly disappeared. On a certain day he was understood to have left Dover with the intention of visiting France, and he has not been heard of since. If anything could be learned of his fate, through any channels of inquiry open to your majesty's officials, it would be a great consolation to the surviving members of his family."

"What was his name?"

"Randolph Dorrington, sire."

"Marquis, will you see to this?" said the king. "But that is not all, M. Gwynett?"

This was evidently an invitation to put a price on a service rendered. The receipt of pay from the French court had

been quite the fashion amongst public men in England for the last forty years. But Gwynett's stomach had always been too squeamish to allow of him accepting anything of the sort from anybody. Consequently he cast about for a form of refusal which would avoid giving offence.

"Sire," said he, bowing, "when your majesty accords me your approbation, you have accorded me everything."

Madame de Maintenon perfectly divined this scruple, and was visited by an idea.

"It appears to me, your majesty," said she, "that M. Gwynett must at present have rather uncomfortable recollections of this vessel, the *Fleur de Lys*, which he has brought to your majesty from madame des Ursins. Will your majesty ask his acceptance of the ship he has navigated so skilfully and so courageously, so that in the future he may have some more agreeable associations connected with it?"

The king looked rather pleased at this cheap way of recompensing our hero, and probably guessed the reason of its being suggested.

"Marquise," said he, "if you were to offer it to monsieur yourself——" and he looked inquiringly at Gwynett.

The latter saw no reason why he should not take something which now apparently belonged to nobody, and which could be turned into cash at the first convenient opportunity.

"Sire," said he, "the marquise will overwhelm me with gratitude by enabling me to cherish a memento at once of herself, of your majesty, and of my good friend madame des Ursins."

"The princesse will please us every time she charges you with a commission to us, monsieur. And we will have every possible inquiry made about your missing compatriot."

Gwynett recognised this as a dismissal.

"I beg your majesty to accept my most earnest thanks," said he, kneeling to kiss the king's hand.

"Farewell, monsieur," said Louis very affably. Madame de Maintenon bowed and smiled pleasantly, and de Torcy led Gwynett out of the cabinet.

"Do me the favour to wait a few minutes for me, monsieur," he said.

Gwynett sat down in the ante-chamber, and de Torcy re-entered the cabinet.

"Marquis," said the king, "you must see the duke without losing a moment."

"Evidently, sire," replied de Torcy, groaning in spirit at

the prospect of a week's posting in November. "M. de Marlborough may leave the Hague any day. I shall set out in two hours, and take M. Gwynett with me. I must get him to bring the brig on to Dunkerque—it will be so much nearer Scheveningen, if we arrange matters."

The marquis gathered up his papers, saluted madame de Maintenon and the king, and made for the door.

"By the way, sire," he said, stopping, "I am somewhat curious about this missing M. Dorrington. Did your majesty by chance ever sign a *lettre de cachet* about him?"

The king, who had signed more than nine thousand in the course of his reign, looked rather surprised.

"Good Lord! how should I know?" said he.

"Very true," murmured de Torcy. "Well, good day, sire—wish me success."

And the marquis went out.

CHAPTER XII

IN WHICH M. DE TORCY ASKS A GOOD MANY QUESTIONS

GWYNETT rose as M. de Torcy entered the ante-chamber, and took up his hat and cloak.

"My dear M. Gwynett," said the marquis, "what are your arrangements at Versailles?"

"I have none, monsieur."

"You are at liberty to return to Calais?"

"I was about to do so, to pursue some inquiries of my own respecting Mr. Dorrington."

"Then do me two favours, monsieur."

"Anything in my power, M. le marquis."

"Dine with me, and give me your company between here and Calais. I am setting off in a couple of hours."

"With great pleasure, monsieur."

"Come to my apartments, then."

The marquis led Gwynett through the outer ante-chamber. Here they found Gaultier, returned from the stables, and kicking his heels in a very sulky frame of mind. The marquis met him as he came forward.

"I am afraid you have been kept waiting for nothing, M. l'abbé. Things seem to be at a standstill—so much so, in fact, that I have asked his majesty's permission to go and

spend a few days on my estates in Picardy, which I have been obliged to neglect a little of late. When I return, we may have occasion to ask your good offices—if you think of remaining so long in France?"

Gaultier bowed rather discontentedly.

"It is possible, M. le marquis," said he. "Unless——"

But the marquis had by this time passed on with Gwynett, who had not noticed the abbé. Gaultier looked after the pair with a suspicious glance.

"Who is this?" he muttered to himself. "A M. Mênager number two? The deuce take me if they are not putting me on the shelf altogether! Picardy estates? In November? *Dame!* no—it is some trick. I may as well report this to lord Oxford. It would not be amiss to go after him—if one could keep sufficiently out of sight."

When the marquis reached the wing of the palace which he occupied when not at his hôtel in Paris, he rang for his secretary and his major-domo. The latter appeared first.

"M. Gwynett dines with me," said the marquis. "Give us whatever you can in ten minutes. Let Moritz show monsieur to my dressing-room, give him what changes he requires, and fill a valise for him."

The major-domo put Gwynett in charge of the minister's Swiss valet, who helped him to make a refreshing toilet—the first since he had left Calais thirty hours before. In the meantime the secretary had arrived. This was M. René de Lavalaye, nephew to the marquis, a precise young man, who could hold his tongue in four or five languages, and was therefore particularly useful to a secretary of state for foreign affairs.

"Is the notary in the palace, René?" asked the marquis.

"I have just left him."

"Send for him."

The secretary opened the door, gave an order, and returned.

"I am going to Flanders, René. I shall want you to go in advance *ventre à terre*. How long can you keep in the saddle, with six hours' rest occasionally?"

"Say three days—you know I am rather rusty just now."

"That will be more than enough. You can be at the Hague in forty-eight hours—then you can go to bed for another forty-eight, if you like."

"I shall want a safe-conduct at the outposts."

"I have two ready in blank—they were intended for Polignac and d'Uxelles, if we had not broken off negotiations."

A Kent Squire

The abbé Polignac and the maréchal d'Uxelles were the two French envoys at the peace conferences which had been held not long before at Geertruidenberg, near Antwerp. But these gentlemen had been so sat upon by the Dutch negotiators that Louis XIV. had recalled them in high dudgeon, and refused to allow of their return.

"You will take a letter to M. de Marlborough at the Hague," went on the marquis, "asking him to meet me at Antwerp, if possible. I shall follow as fast as I can, by way of Calais—*incognito*, of course. If the duke cannot leave the Hague, you must arrange for me to see him somewhere in that neighbourhood. In any case, tell him it is desirable he should not leave for England till we have met."

"Suppose he has already left?"

"You must go after him."

"To London, for instance?"

"Certainly. Ah! here is the notary."

This functionary advanced to the table.

"M. le notaire, how long will it take you to draw up a deed of gift, bestowing one of his majesty's ships on a certain person, in blank?"

"I could have it ready by to-morrow, M. le marquis."

"I will give you three quarters of an hour—and with it you must bring a memorandum by which his majesty charters the ship for two months for a certain sum, in blank. Both to be properly sealed in full at the chancellerie. Here is an order."

The marquis scrawled a paper, and handed it across the table. The notary snatched it up, and made one bound for the door. At the same moment the major-domo returned.

"M. le marquis is served," said he, opening the door of the next room, in which a table was laid.

"Tell M. Gwynett—no, here he comes. Now, monsieur"—and the marquis motioned to his guest to be seated. The major-domo signed to a servant in attendance, and retired, closing the doors as he passed out.

"My dear M. Gwynett," said the marquis, "we have been rather in a hurry, and we are going to be much more in a hurry. But as I have a considerable regard for my life, I never hurry at meal-times. We have an hour before us, and my servant here is stone-deaf. Let us eat and chat at our ease, if only to prevent my mind dwelling on the poison I shall have to swallow for the next week or ten days."

"You are going a journey then, monsieur, beyond Calais?"

"Yes—as I told M. l'abbé. Do you know him?"

"Not at all—I did not happen even to look at him."

"An exceedingly choice scoundrel, in strict confidence. We can use him, but I'm afraid you could not—and he is only fit to be made use of. Don't be seen in the same street with him, if you can avoid it. Yes, I am running down to my estates, perhaps a little farther, if we have fine weather. And I shall not get a decent meal till I get back again. You are not old enough to know what that really means. Ostriches and young people have several things in common."

"There are worse things than horseflesh, monsieur," said Gwynett, "when the provision-convoys have been three days late in reaching camp."

"Horrible! I served three years with Luxembourg, and we did our share of fighting. But, thank heaven and M. Louvois, we always got something to eat and drink. I take off my hat to any man who can fight on an empty stomach. Your health, monsieur, and every good fortune," and the marquis bowed solemnly as he drank. "You must have travelled a good deal in France to speak our language so well?"

"Not at all, till now. But I had many friends in Germany and Spain who spoke nothing else."

"Still, in Spain that would not help you far."

"Spanish is not difficult to learn, monsieur."

"And in Germany?"

"One had to speak German altogether at Heidelberg."

"Ah! you were at Heidelberg? How did you like it?"

"I liked what there was left of it very well, M. le marquis." Gwynett had acquired the *esprit de corps* of his German university, and with it an entire inability to forgive the French for their almost complete destruction of the city in 1693, after having gutted it in 1688. The marquis nodded sympathetically.

"*Entre nous*, M. Gwynett, that devastation of the Palatinate was an infamous business. Louvois first, and Luxembourg afterwards, certainly made France feared. But we are paying now for the way they made us hated."

"I am not disposed to contradict you, monsieur."

"Well, well! And how long were you at Heidelberg?"

"Three years. I went there at seventeen."

"I suppose you fought?"

"Of course."

"How often?"

A Kent Squire

"I forget, monsieur. After the first year I lost count."

"*Peste!* you must be a fair blade. I don't see a scratch on you."

"It happened, M. le marquis, that I was brought up by an uncle, who was—and is, indeed—one of the first swordsmen in Europe. He made my fencing his principal hobby from the time I was a child—in fact, I scarcely recollect when I could not handle a sword."

"And who was this good uncle?"

"My mother's brother, the baron von Starhemberg—a cousin of the general."

The marquis pricked up his ears at this.

"Indeed! and may I ask what is your rank in England?"

"None, monsieur. I have a small patrimony—an estate which has been in my family since the Reformation."

"Then you are noble," said the marquis, accustomed to continental claims to that distinction.

"Not at all, monsieur—only what we call in England a squire."

"But your mother was noble, and you inherit the territorial estate of your family," objected the puzzled marquis.

"That does not count at all in England."

"So much the worse for you, my dear M. Gwynett. We have nobles like the sands of the sea for multitude with worse credentials than yours."

"My uncle has repeatedly pressed me to become a Bavarian subject, so that he could adopt me formally and thus secure me the title. But I have failed to see the inducement, so far."

The marquis shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps you are right," said he. "So you have been a great fighter?"

"Not in the least, monsieur. I studied to become an expert swordsman more to please my uncle than myself—I would have preferred to spend the time in a dozen other things."

"Nevertheless, I daresay you have found it a useful enough accomplishment at times. But how came you, as a relative of general von Starhemberg, to be with M. le duc de Vendôme?"

"Well, monsieur, after my three years at Heidelberg, and a year in England on my property, my uncle sent for me to hunt with him in the Black Forest. While I was living with him he had a great quarrel with his cousin the general, and a great reconciliation with his old enemy the elector of Bavaria."

"Ah! I recollect him now—he married some fortieth cousin of the elector. They used to talk of some demon of a fencer at Munich when I was there for the funeral of the electoral prince, but his name had slipped from my memory. And how did you fare with the baron?"

"Exceedingly well, monsieur. We made a compromise."

"A compromise?"

"Yes, monsieur. You see, my uncle had inherited a magnificent library, of which he thought nothing, and I everything. We usually spent the fine days in hunting, but he was always annoyed when I went to the library in rainy weather. So, to smooth matters, I agreed to fence with him every wet morning, in order to be free of the library every wet afternoon."

"And how did you come off with the foils on these wet mornings?"

"We were about equal, monsieur—perhaps, latterly, I had a little the advantage."

"*Pardieu!* And what did you do at night?"

"My uncle had a good workshop, and we used to work in iron and wood, turning, fitting, carpentering, and half a dozen trades. I found that very useful when we lost the two gunsmiths of my regiment at Villa Viciosa. When we were tired of the bench and the anvil, we had a little pistol practice, and fired at a candle at twenty, thirty, or fifty paces. Latterly we busied ourselves with chemistry."

The marquis stared, and then sighed.

"My dear M. Gwynett, there are very few people I envy, but, upon my soul, I think you are the most enviable young fellow on earth. To have health, youth, energy, and a small competence—to mix with all ranks, and belong to the most convenient—to have leisure, and be able to occupy it pleasantly—to do many things, and do them all well—why, I tell you——"

The marquis stopped and filled his glass.

"I drink to the postponement of your bad luck, my young friend—for, mark me, you are too fortunate. By all the rules of chance, some hideous disaster awaits you. *Salut!* M. Polycrates." And the marquis drained his glass with a philosophic air.

Gwynett acknowledged the compliment, which might have been a more exhilarating one, and asked, laughing,

"What am I to consign to the bottom of the sea, M. le marquis, as you take the part of king Amasis?"

"Anything but the *Fleur de Lys*, my friend—at least, until

we have done with her. By the way, you know what she carries, of course?"

"Cases of silver, I understand."

"Do you happen to know how many?"

"Forty."

"Where are they?"

"Behind the sheathing of the brig, below the captain's cabin. As a matter of fact, they are built into the ship's side."

"How are we to get them? Is there the usual hatch down into the after-hold?"

"It is at present made solid with the floor, monsieur. But there is also a door into the lazarette from the hold—a secret door. The cases were taken in that way to save disturbing the cabin floor."

"A secret door? Good Lord! what for?"

"It was a fancy of the captain's, monsieur. He was the owner of the brig before it was bought for this particular service."

"What on earth did the fellow want with a secret door? Did he want to perform melodramas in his hold?"

"It happened in this way, monsieur—at least, so he told me. In his profession——"

"Of what?"

"Smuggler, monsieur."

"To be sure—go on."

"He had occasion to carry French goods to Barcelona, and used to fly the French flag. One day, when he came into port as usual, he was boarded by the people of the archduke, who had occupied Barcelona while he was *en voyage*."

"Thanks to that inspired lunatic, your lord Peterborough, and not to the archduke," remarked the marquis parenthetically.

"The Austrians were very anxious to hang him as a spy, but he managed to escape by the skin of his teeth. As business was very brisk, he determined to keep up his voyages to Barcelona, but took care on his next visit to show Austrian colours. Unfortunately, without his knowing it, the king had just commenced to invest the town on the land side, and the padrone in the dark anchored alongside one of the ships of the comte de Toulouse, who was bombarding Barcelona from the sea. In the morning the Frenchmen fired on him. He hid in an empty barrel in the hold when the comte sent an officer on board. This officer could not

understand much Catalan, and the padrone's men had the address to bamboozle him completely and send him back satisfied. The padrone landed his cargo, and was about to set sail, flying French colours from stem to stern, when it came on a thick fog. As soon as it lifted a little, he started, but found himself alongside some warships he did not quite recognise. By ill luck, the comte had departed, and the newcomers were the English fleet under vice-admiral Leak. The vice-admiral sent a boat's crew to board him, and as he had no barrel to hide in this time, he slipped overboard and swam ashore, leaving his men to apologise for his absence on business in the least intelligible way they could. Fortunately, the admiral did not think the brig worth appropriating, and sailed the next day on the expedition to Minorca."

"*Peste!* it seems your padrone managed very well, on the whole."

"True, monsieur. Nevertheless, he found these political changes very embarrassing, so he at once set about making a little door in the bulkhead between the hold and the lazarette under his cabin. His idea was that the next time he was to be interviewed in a hostile spirit, he could hide in the hold while his cabin was searched, and get back to the cabin when they looked into the hold."

"And did he ever use it?" asked the marquis.

"I believe only once."

"Was it to escape the French or the Austrians?"

"Neither, monsieur. One day at Marseilles, when he was entertaining some lady friends, his wife came on board unexpectedly——"

A knock was heard at the door, and M. de Lavalaye entered, booted and spurred, and holding a sheaf of papers.

"These are the deed and the charter-memorandum, monsieur," said he.

"Good. Are you ready?"

"Quite, monsieur."

"Let me have one of those safe-conducts."

M. de Lavalaye took the keys which the marquis held out, went to a desk, and took out a document covered with seals of all colours. M. de Torcy filled in some blanks, signed his name, and handed the paper back to the secretary.

"Be sure to get someone who speaks Walloon, as soon as you are over the frontier," said he, "and let him do all the talking. I was within an ace of being shot last year on account of my Parisian accent. Some of these Dutch

sentinels have a trick of firing first and inquiring afterwards, so be modest and retiring, and send your man first when you come to an outpost. What money are you taking?"

"Half in louis d'or, and half in English guineas," replied Lavalaye, handing the marquis a memorandum.

"Very well. Before you go, I make you acquainted with the sieur Gwynett. At any time I am not in Paris do him what services you can. My nephew, René de Lavalaye, M. Gwynett."

"The *fiancé*, evidently," said Gwynett to himself, as he returned the other's bow. "I was charged, monsieur, to convey to you the compliments of M. Daguerre and of mademoiselle Victoire, when I left them to travel here."

"You are very obliging, monsieur," replied Lavalaye solemnly.

"Be off now, René," said the marquis, "and a lucky journey to you. We meet at Antwerp."

"The same place as before?"

"Yes, if they will condescend to entertain a mere minister of France," said the marquis, who was still sore at his snubbing in Holland.

"Good day, M. Gwynett; au revoir, M. le marquis." And the secretary departed.

"Now, will you kindly fill up these papers, M. Gwynett?" said the marquis, opening out the two documents prepared by the notary.

Gwynett looked over them. One was a formal transfer of the brig *Fleur de Lys*, the property of his most gracious, etc., etc., to the sieur Ambrose Gwynett, of etc., etc. The other was a contract to hire the said brig to his majesty for the term of two months, at a rate of fifty louis per month.

"Payable in advance, if you have no objection, monsieur?" said the marquis.

Gwynett felt as if he had been a little tricked into accepting what he had formally refused. But he thought it would appear churlish to make any more fuss about the matter, and therefore signified his acquiescence.

"Where shall the brig be delivered to you? at Calais?"

"Calais will do very well, monsieur, unless by chance peace should be made—of which, of course, you are the best judge."

"Then she shall be sent to Dover. Take the deeds, monsieur, and fill in the blanks. I have now only to set M. d'Argenson at work about your M. Dorrington. When that is done, if you are ready, we will make a start."

While Gwynett followed the minister's instructions, the latter wrote a note and rang his bell. The major-domo entered, and the marquis handed him the note.

"For M. d'Argenson, the lieutenant-general of police," he said.

The major-domo bowed, and took the note.

"The carriages ready?"

"They wait, M. le marquis."

"I am at your service, M. Gwynett."

The marquis and Gwynett descended to the courtyard, where two travelling-carriages were drawn up. In the first of these were seated the minister's assistant secretary, his valet, and his chef. M. de Torcy motioned Gwynett to a seat in the second carriage, and got in after him.

"*Ouf!*" said he ruefully, as he pulled the rug over his knees, and wrapped an enormous scarf round his neck, "my dear friend, if you are ever given the choice between being a minister of state or a galley-slave, go to the galleys. You will enjoy yourself quite as much, I give you my word of honour, and you will find it a good deal cheaper."

He nodded through the window to the major-domo, the coachman whipped up his horses, and the party started on their journey.

CHAPTER XIII

AMBROSE GWYNETT DOES A LITTLE CARPENTRY

As the marquis considered it injurious to the lungs to talk out of doors in November, and as Gwynett was still feeling his week's watch on the brig somewhat severely, both the travellers did very little else but eat and sleep on the way to Calais. It was morning when they entered the town, and the marquis drove direct to the house of the governor, M. Daguerra. Here they learned that the brig was still under seal and guard, and that nothing had transpired since Gwynett left for Versailles. The governor offered the hospitality of his house, and began by placing breakfast before his guests.

"Whom have you placed on board, my dear governor?" asked the marquis, as they sat down.

"A corporal and five of my Swiss, M. le marquis—the

safest half-dozen I could pick anywhere, as I understood from M. Gwynett the matter was of urgent consequence."

"Can you find a ship's carpenter for us without any fuss?"

"There is one on board now."

"That's lucky. By the way, M. Gwynett, can you, by exercising one of your accomplishments, enable us to keep this matter amongst ourselves?"

"In what way, monsieur?"

"Can you use the carpenter's tools to get at the consignment?"

"Certainly."

"Will you do us the great favour to do so?"

"With pleasure."

"Excellent! My dear Daguerre, our friend is a man of all the talents. I have yet to find out what he cannot do or doesn't know."

M. Daguerre looked rather surprised at the minister's eulogies. Gwynett laughed.

"At all events, M. Daguerre," said he, "I cannot forget your kindness, and do not know how to thank you sufficiently for it. I trust mademoiselle is quite well?"

"Perfectly. She is out at present, but I have ordered that she shall be told of your arrival when she returns."

At this moment the door opened, and Victoire entered. Gwynett rose, as the young girl looked at him rather hesitatingly.

"My dear," said the governor, "this is M. Gwynett returned from Versailles."

"And better able to thank you for your extreme goodness than he was before, mademoiselle," said Gwynett, bowing.

Victoire came forward with a little blush.

"Monsieur looks so much—so different, I mean—that I was not quite sure it was he," said she, turning to bow to de Torcy.

"My daughter Victoire, marquis," said the governor.

The marquis bowed with infinite grace and a highly appreciative smile.

"Mademoiselle is happily named," said he. "In peace or war she will be all-conquering."

"Tut! tut!" said the governor, not at all displeased at the rather broad compliment to his daughter, "don't turn her head, marquis. It spins all day, as it is."

"Wherever it turns it radiates sunshine, I am sure," said

the marquis, who was fairly well experienced in the art of getting himself liked at a cheap rate.

Victoire received these flowers of speech with the air of a person who had heard something of the sort before, but who thought there was no harm in a little repetition.

"Do you make any stay in Calais, monsieur?" she asked, turning to Gwynett.

"At present I am at the disposal of the marquis, mademoiselle."

"You will make this house your home, gentlemen, while you are here," said the governor, with his usual hospitality.

"I leave for Lille to-day, my dear governor," replied de Torcy. "But I may have occasion to ask M. Gwynett's good offices here for a day or two. In fact, with your permission, we will go to the port at once, to see about the matter."

"Shall I accompany you?"

"I was about to ask that favour."

Victoire promptly assumed the air of house-mistress.

"We dine at two, messieurs," said she. "Will that be early enough for you, M. le marquis?"

"You tempt me, mademoiselle, and I fall without hesitation—the more readily as I am bound, in any case, to be away from Eden for some little time."

"I gather from the marquis," said Gwynett, "that outside Paris and Versailles one dines on raw fish, roots, or grubs."

"Don't listen to him, mademoiselle. He has a digestion, and doesn't know what food is. Let him wait till he is fifty, and a dyspeptic. I kiss your hands, mademoiselle."

"Till two, M. le marquis."

The three gentlemen drove to the port in the governor's carriage, while the minister's equipages were put up. A long-boat with eight sailors rowed the party to the *Fleur de Lys*, which lay at anchor where Gwynett had left her. The corporal and his guard met them at the gangway, and saluted as they came on deck.

"A word with you, M. Gwynett," said the marquis, taking him aside. "You said you could get at those cases single-handed?"

"Certainly—if you are in no great hurry."

"Can you and I move them without assistance?"

"We could get them into the hold, I think. Then we should want a capstan or a pulley-block."

"The hold will be far enough. My dear governor," said the marquis, crossing over to him, "where is your carpenter?"

"Here, Mathurin!" shouted the governor to one of the guard. "Bring your tool-basket."

"To the hold," said Gwynett, in the marquis's ear.

"You are right," assented de Torcy. "M. Daguerre, please remove the seals from the hatches and have them lifted."

This was done, and the yawning gulf of the hold appeared in view, with the ladder hooked into rings in the coaming. The carpenter laid his basket down, and awaited orders.

"Now, my dear governor," said the marquis, "do me the favour to take your men into the long-boat. I will ask you to row round the brig at a hundred yards' distance till I signal for you. Nothing must be allowed to approach us on any pretext whatever."

The governor gave an order to the corporal, and the guard-party embarked in the boat.

"Are your instructions intended to apply to the case of your happening to set the brig on fire?" asked the governor, laughing, as he followed the corporal down the gangway.

"*Peste!* you remind me—we shall want a light, M. Gwynett?"

"Let us have a couple of lanterns."

The governor sent the corporal on deck again. This worthy promptly produced a couple of ship's lamps from the deck-cabin, lit them, and returned to the long-boat. The marquis waved his hand, and the crew pushed off.

"Now to business, my dear sir, as you are so obliging," said the marquis, approaching the open hatch. "Will you be good enough to descend, and I will hand you the lights?"

Gwynett climbed a few steps down the ladder, carrying the tool-basket on his arm, then took the lamps from the marquis, and descended to the floor. The marquis followed with many grunts and lamentations over his stiffened joints, which had never recovered from the wet weather during his cross-country journey in Flanders a couple of years previously.

"It is forty years since I was on board ship before," said he, looking about the gloomy recesses of the hold. "We were just commencing the war with the United Provinces, in alliance with your king Charles II., and I had to accompany my father to Ostend. We were all frightened to death lest de Ruyter should catch us. Lord, how sea-sick I was!"

Gwynett was making his way through a lot of lumber of various kinds towards the bulkhead which separated the hold from the lazarette.

"Where is this famous secret door of yours?" asked the marquis, groping his way after him.

"Here, M. le marquis," replied Gwynett, holding his lantern opposite the partition.

A dozen massive vertical timbers, reaching from the hold floor to the curved beam which supported the deck overhead, divided the partition into a series of recesses. Behind these timbers heavy twelve-inch planks were bolted, resting horizontally one on the other. Gwynett felt along the side of one of the uprights till he came to what might have been taken for a knot-hole, close to the back planking. Putting his finger in this, and pressing upward, a well-oiled bolt was displaced. On a vigorous push being applied to the planking on the left of the upright, a section of it swung back, revealing the magazine. The section was four planks deep, stretched from post to post, and commenced at five feet from the floor of the hold. This represented the difference in level between the hold and the lazarette. Gwynett put in the two lamps, entered the lazarette, and assisted the marquis to follow him.

The lazarette, or after-hold, was practically empty, save for a few coils of rope and a couple of kegs of spirits, the latter evidently reserved for the late padrone's private consumption. The sheathing of the ship's side extended without a break from floor to ceiling. In the latter, two hatches appeared, one about the centre, and the other in the farthest corner, where the rapid upward slope of the floor brought it close to the ceiling. Gwynett pointed to the hatch in the middle of the ceiling.

"That is the old hatch," said he. "The padrone had it nailed securely to the floor to prevent inquiry in that direction. The new one in the corner is under the bunk in his sleeping-cabin, where no one would think of looking for one. It was made at the same time as the door in the bulkhead."

"Your padrone had a good notion of hide-and-seek," said the marquis. "His arrangements happen to come in very usefully for us, as I particularly wish our little expedition to leave no trace behind it. Now where are the bullion-cases?"

Gwynett struck the sheathing with his hand.

"Here, M. le marquis."

"Behind that planking?"

"Yes."

"*Parbleu!* it will take a week to get at them."

"Do you want all of them out, monsieur?"

"No. How many cases did you say there were?"

"Forty."

"All the same size?"

"Practically."

"And weight?"

"I think so."

The marquis made a calculation.

"I may want eight," said he.

"That will not be difficult," said Gwynett, taking up his tools. "But it will take some few minutes, and you may as well be seated, monsieur."

"Very true," said the marquis, carefully dusting the top of a keg of brandy, and feeling if the sheathing of the side was likely to soil his surtout. "If my poor assistance can be of any use to you, pray command me."

"Thank you," said Gwynett, selecting the sharpest steel wedge he could find, and concealing a smile.

"On the contrary," said the marquis, producing his *taba* and offering it. "Do you take snuff?"

Gwynett politely declined, and proceeded to prise up one of the planks of the sheathing. This occupied some little time, as he was anxious not to make his operations obvious by unduly damaging the timber. Eventually the piece of sheathing was dislodged, and revealed the piles of iron-bound wooden cases, resting one upon another. But as they were deeper in size than the width of the plank, Gwynett prepared to remove another.

"My dear M. Gwynett," said the marquis, who had been looking on with profound interest, "no doubt your cases there are all very comfortably stowed away, but why the mischief was so much trouble taken? Could you not have put them on the floor here, and simply secured the magazine from intrusion?"

"Certainly, M. le marquis. But it was necessary to provide against contingencies. We might have been shipwrecked or captured."

"*Peste!* of what use would your precautions be if you had gone to the bottom of the sea?"

"None. I was thinking of being driven on shore, or on rocks which could be reached from the shore. On our English coasts the people have a habit of helping themselves, until they are stopped, to anything that arrives in that fashion."

"I fancy it is not very different in Bretagne or Normandy," observed the marquis.

"We are said to have affinities of race with both those provinces," said Gwynett. "Hence, probably, the deplorable circumstance I have mentioned."

"On the contrary," said the marquis, laughing, "let us assume that our people were demoralised by the English occupation of the west coast territories during the middle ages. But suppose you had been cast on shore—what then?"

"Well, monsieur, a good deal would have to be done in the way of plunder before they took to breaking up the ship, and by that time the hull could be rescued."

"But you spoke also of capture."

"That was a good deal more likely to happen than anything else."

"No doubt—but if the brig had been captured, the cases would have been captured."

"True, monsieur, but the captors would not have known it—at least, not at the time, perhaps not afterwards."

"That would be gratifying from one point of view. But they would be lost to us all the same."

"Not at all, monsieur."

"What is the difference?"

"All the difference in the world."

"How?"

"Because the ship would still be afloat, and the money would be perfectly safe so long as it was not discovered."

"Well?"

"Well, monsieur, the brig being necessarily somewhere, and in the hands of somebody, it would always be possible to trace her, to buy her back, to hire her, or to steal her. Then we get at the cases again."

The marquis looked at Gwynett for a moment in silence.

"Decidedly this young man has ideas," said he to himself, "or else I must be getting very stupid." Then aloud,

"That is a very important consideration, without doubt, monsieur. But how many people are in the secret?"

"Two, monsieur. You and I."

"How did you manage that?"

"In order to run as little risk as possible, I advised that the cases should not be landed from the galleons when they arrived at Cadiz from Acapulco, but kept on deck under guard. Then we bought the *Fleur de Lys*, keeping her crew and captain, and sent them all on shore. I covered up the name of the brig, got a company of sailors from the galleons, who

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had never seen her before and did not know her name, and navigated her to San Lucar. When there, a galleon followed with the chests, and transferred them to our hold. Their carpenter helped me to strip the sheathing and place the chests where you see them. Then they sailed away, I sent word to the padrone to bring his men to San Lucar, and we commenced our voyage."

"Rather a round-about business," said the marquis. "But it was well to take every precaution, and your forethought may still prove useful. In any case, we are under even greater obligations to you than appeared before, monsieur—and I, for one, will not forget it."

"It was mainly a question of luck, monsieur," said Gwynett, proceeding with his work. "Any one of a hundred trifling accidents might have brought the business to grief. As it happened, things went smoothly—except for the padrone and his men."

The marquis helped himself to snuff again.

"The deuce!" he muttered, *sotto voce*, "if that is the good youth's notion of things going smoothly, I would rather be out of the way when they go roughly."

By this time another plank had been taken off, and the uppermost chests of four piles were accessible. With the loose planks to use as a slide, the cases could be brought to the floor without much trouble, and Gwynett succeeded in removing the required number in the course of a few minutes.

"Do you wish them opened, M. le marquis?" he asked, wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

The marquis was somewhat anxious that Gwynett should not know too much about the value of the treasure, and especially that he should continue under the misapprehension that it consisted of silver, instead of gold.

"I shall be obliged if you will open two, to begin with," said he. "Then I shall have to throw myself upon your indulgence."

"In what way, M. le marquis?"

"It is *de rigueur* that the actual examination of these cases should be carried out by myself only, in private. I am sure you will excuse the necessity for this form?"

"Certainly, monsieur," replied Gwynett, who had by this time loosed the strips of iron which encircled the wood-work of the chests. "In fact, now that I insert these wedges, you can remove the lids themselves without trouble," and he handed de Torcy his mallet.

The marquis looked at this instrument rather dubiously.

"It is a mere piece of routine," he observed blandly. "If you will be so good as to separate the lids without actually uncovering the contents, it will meet the letter of the law, and I shall be infinitely obliged to you."

Gwynett did as he was requested, and then put on his coat.

"Now I will leave you, monsieur, and will await your summons. If you can manage with one lantern, I will look round the hold and see that all is safe."

"I am quite ashamed to put you to the trouble," said the marquis.

Gwynett let himself down through the door in the bulkhead, closed it after him, and commenced a tour of inspection amongst the miscellaneous lumber that littered the floor of the hold. This was a proceeding for which time and opportunity had hitherto been lacking. After going the round of the numerous kegs and barrels which lay about, Gwynett came to the conclusion that a considerable part of the late padrone's usual stock-in-trade, when on a smuggling expedition, was on board. This had been presumably with the idea of doing a stroke of business after the trip to Calais was brought to a conclusion. Now that the worthy padrone was at the bottom of the sea, Gwynett, who was ignorant even of his name, began to wonder if he was to look upon himself as his heir, successor, and assignee. He took a seat on a barrel to debate this point of law and ethics. While doing so, he amused himself by carving, with the sailor's knife he had the habit of carrying about with him, certain capital letters in the ship's side.

By the time the marquis called to him, saying that he was at his disposal, the initials M.D. were duly executed, six inches high and half an inch deep, in the dingy sheathing of the hold. Heaving a respectable lover's sigh at the thought of his prolonged absence from his betrothed, Gwynett kicked the chips in various directions, pocketed his knife, and re-entered the lazarette.

"I have kept you an unconscionable time, M. Gwynett," said de Torcy. "If you will kindly refasten these two cases, I think we can dispense with any present examination of the other six. Can you replace the planks without any indication of their having been interfered with?"

"Not altogether, I am afraid. But we will see."

In a short time the sheathing was made good again, but it was easy to detect where the tools had been used to force

the planks away from their fastenings. The marquis noticed this, and pointed it out.

"If I may make a suggestion, M. le marquis," said Gwynett, "it will be to leave things as they are till I can obtain some putty and paints, which will effectually conceal everything. No one need get in here in the meantime. The seals are on the cabin door, and can remain there till I return with your orders to have them removed."

"Excellent! And now as to these eight cases—they may have to go ashore."

"That is easy enough. We will get them into the main hold, and they can be picked up thence by the windlass."

Gwynett fastened up the two cases which had been opened, and looked about for some means of lowering the whole eight into the hold without accident. Finally, he unhooked the ladder, laid it against the edge of the after-hold floor, and slid the cases down it into the main hold. The marquis descended, Gwynett fastened the secret door, and after the ladder had been replaced, the pair climbed up on deck.

When the governor came alongside, in response to a signal from the marquis, he pointed to the offing, where a couple of large ships were emerging from a bank of sea-fog.

"New arrivals, M. le marquis," said he.

"What are they?"

"Two of our frigates from Dunkerque—the *Tonnerre* and the *Henri Quatre*."

"Coming into port?"

"No doubt."

"That's very fortunate," said the marquis. "To make sure, however, I will ask you to send your galley with a message to the senior captain to put in and wait instructions."

The marquis wrote a few lines in his note-book, tore out the page, and handed it to M. Daguerre.

"I will keep a couple of men to take us ashore in the brig's boat, and send the rest in the galley at once," said the governor. "You are ready, I suppose?"

"Quite," said de Torcy.

While the governor was giving his orders, the marquis turned to Gwynett.

"This slightly alters my plans, M. Gwynett. I had intended to trespass still further on your kindness, and ask you to complete your commission by taking the brig on to Dunkerque. Now I need not trouble you so far, as one of the frigates, if not both, will be at my disposal for the purpose. But I will

ask you to remain in actual charge of her, unsealed, till I can relieve you formally. You will hear from me within a week if I may venture to trouble you for so long."

"I am quite at your disposal, M. le marquis."

"Thank you. I should tell you it is possible a certain additional number of those cases may have to be removed into the hold. May I depend on you for that?"

"Certainly."

"Therefore you need not obliterate the marks of damage till you hear from me, lest it should require to be done all over again."

"As you please, monsieur."

"We are at your service, gentlemen," said the governor, coming up. "But do you wish the hatch sealed again, M. le marquis?"

De Torcy signified assent, the ceremony was duly completed, and the party were rowed ashore. A couple of hours later the marquis, leaving Gwynett to the warmly pressed hospitality of the governor, started on what was understood to be a visit to his estates in Picardy.

CHAPTER XIV

THE DUKE OF MARLBOROUGH TURNS AN HONEST PENNY

ON the morning of the second day after leaving Calais, M. de Torcy's travelling-carriage was approaching a little roadside inn about a mile from the village of Eekeren, half an hour's drive to the north of Antwerp. The marquis was alone, his secretary, who had met him a few hours before, having gone on in advance, while the rest of his party were at Antwerp awaiting his return. He was just awaking from a doze, and put his head out of the carriage window. At a little distance ahead a horseman appeared, coming up at a trot, who drew rein when he saw the carriage, and waited for it to come up to him.

"Well, René?" said the marquis, as they came within speaking distance.

"Everything is ready, M. le marquis," replied the horseman, who was the minister's secretary, somewhat disguised in a Flemish riding-coat.

"Good! let the postilion lead your horse, and you come inside."

De Lavalaye dismounted, handed his reins to the postilion, and entered the carriage.

"The duke is there, then?"

"Yes—he arrived an hour ago. He came from Eekeren, in order not to be seen at Antwerp."

"Anyone with him?"

"M. Cardonnel and a couple of troopers."

Master Adam Cardonnel was the duke's secretary and factotum, a member of parliament, and formerly secretary for war.

"Is there a suitable room at the inn?"

"One. I have secured it for the day."

"Quite safe? It would be the very mischief if we had any eavesdropping by the people there."

"I think so—at all events, M. Cardonnel and I can see to that."

By this time the carriage had come up to the inn. De Lavalaye helped the marquis out, and the two entered the porch. An elderly gentleman opened the door, and bowed profoundly.

"This is M. Cardonnel, M. le marquis," said de Lavalaye.

The marquis bowed, and the duke's secretary bowed again.

"You do us great honour, M. le marquis," said Cardonnel.

"The duke is waiting and at your disposal, whenever you please."

"Do me the favour to tell his grace I am quite ready."

"This way, then, M. le marquis."

Cardonnel turned down a passage, opened the door of a room, and ushered in the marquis and de Lavalaye.

The room had only one occupant—a tall man of about sixty years of age, somewhat portly in build, and with the remains of a magnificent appearance. This was John Churchill, duke of Marlborough, prince of the Holy Roman Empire, and generalissimo of the armies of the Allies. He bowed with infinite grace and dignity, and came forward to shake hands with M. de Torcy.

"Permit me to thank you for the visit of your able secretary, M. le marquis," said the duke.

"I am happy to reintroduce him, my dear duke, in his private capacity as my nephew, and a cadet of the house of d'Estrées," replied the marquis.

"I have met all the three marshals of your family, M. de

Lavalaye," said Marlborough, who never forgot a face or a name. "I saw the old duke just before I was in Flanders with M. de Turenne—a wonderful old man. He must have been more than a hundred years of age. Did he not have a child by his second marriage, when he was over ninety-three?"

"I have understood so, M. le duc," replied the secretary, feeling rather bewildered.

"It is not given to everyone to belong to two such houses as Colbert and d'Estrées," proceeded the duke, offering his snuff-box to de Torcy. "We shall expect great things from your nephew, marquis."

The marquis bowed, helped himself to a pinch, and muttered *sotto voce*, "If René does not keep his tail in, he will find salt on it before he knows where he is." Then aloud,

"If you are at liberty, M. le duc, I will ask M. de Lavalaye to see that we are not interrupted without occasion."

"I am entirely at your disposal," said the duke. "Mr. Cardonnel will feel honoured by M. de Lavalaye's acceptance of such hospitality as this hovel can afford."

The two secretaries took this hint of dismissal and retired. The duke motioned de Torcy to the solitary arm-chair in the room, seated himself at the opposite side of the carved oak table, and awaited events.

"Before we commence our conversation, M. le duc, let me thank you for your courtesy in according this interview—which, by the way, I hope has not inconvenienced you."

"Not in the least, my dear marquis. I am only sorry you did not suggest some meeting-place nearer the frontier, and thus lessen the trouble to yourself."

"You are very good, M. le duc. But we had the impression that your departure from the Hague was imminent, and we did not wish to lose an opportunity which might not occur again for some time."

"It is quite an accident I am not in London—but M. de Bothmar has asked me to wait for him. Hence the delay."

The baron von Bothmar was the envoy from the elector of Hanover to the English court.

"Convey my compliments to the baron," said the marquis.

"With great pleasure."

"Probably, M. le duc, you have in a measure anticipated the considerations which I wished to lay before you."

"In a measure only," replied Marlborough, who had exhausted himself in speculating as to what was in the wind.

"Things have, of course, somewhat changed since we met at the Hague a couple of years ago," observed the marquis, referring to his abortive negotiations in 1709 (which were followed by the crowning disaster of Malplaquet) and in 1710.

"Very unfortunately so for myself, marquis, as you are aware," replied the duke, in a plaintive tone.

"I need scarcely say, my dear duke, that France is no better off for the failure of our efforts on those occasions."

"No one regretted the failure more than myself, marquis. But our Dutch colleagues were quite impracticable; and, as you know, it was necessary to be unanimous."

"Probably—at that time," observed the marquis negligently.

The duke pricked up his ears. Everybody knew that the English ministry had opened up negotiations for peace behind the backs of the Allies, and that de Buys had hastened to London to remonstrate on the part of the States-General. A tremendous uproar had been caused by the precipitation of comte de Galas, the ambassador of the irate emperor of Germany, in giving to the London press a copy of the preliminary articles handed in to him confidentially. These articles were so unaccountably favourable to France that public opinion in England veered round furiously against the new Tory government. But the latter had kept their own counsel, and at this particular juncture no one outside the cabinets of St. James and Versailles knew whether matters were going forward or backward. The duke began to suspect that they had gone more than forward.

"Exactly," said he. "At that time—as you say. Fortunately, her majesty's new advisers can act with much greater freedom in that direction than we could ourselves. Nothing now stands in the way of a prompt settlement, at which I shall profoundly rejoice."

"I am sure of it," said the marquis.

"The deuce!" said the duke to himself, "they have come to terms."

"At the same time," proceeded de Torcy, "we can hardly expect your allies to be so well-disposed towards peace as Great Britain, which appreciates the changes brought about by the accession of the emperor."

"Naturally," said the duke.

"A separate peace would be of incalculable benefit to both our respective countries, even if we were not so fortunate as to secure the concurrence of the States-General and the Empire."

"I need not say, my dear marquis, that my best efforts shall be forthcoming to that end."

"I am convinced of it, M. le duc—although I am disposed to hope that no great need for them will arise, so far as her majesty's government are concerned. It is, of course, otherwise with your allies."

The duke began to see the coming move on the board.

"What is he going to offer me?" he thought. "They cannot have any money. A vicerealty would scarcely work, except, perhaps, in Flanders, and the prince expects that himself. Let us see." He answered aloud,

"It is, no doubt, difficult to see how the emperor can be satisfied without Spain and the Indies."

"We could, perhaps, make some arrangement for prince Eugène," said the marquis obliquely.

"That is possible. But his highness is somewhat of a partisan, as you know."

As prince Eugène's ruling passion was an inextinguishable personal hatred of Louis XIV., the marquis gathered from this remark of the duke's that he wished to be understood as drawing distinctions.

"Everyone admits the prince's military genius, M. le duc. He, like yourself, must necessarily see with regret the probable close of a career of activity."

"We are getting nearer," thought the duke. "On the contrary, my dear marquis," he said, with a profound sigh, "I have long looked forward to a period of repose from the toils and anxieties of the life of a soldier in the field. It is a little unfortunate that these aspirations have coincided with the loss of the opportunities I might formerly have expected of serving my country in a civil capacity."

"He is in the market," said the marquis to himself. "We left off bidding at three hundred thousand pounds last time. Let us try again at a quarter of a million, and thank Mrs. Masham." He proceeded aloud,

"Most men, my dear duke, would envy your lot in being able to retire from public life to the enjoyment of a princely fortune on your charming estate."

"Alas! marquis, the private means of a man in my position are always ridiculously overrated. If I may be perfectly candid with you——"

"*Pardieu!*" thought the marquis, "let me try and keep my countenance."

"I confess that I am full of uneasiness in many ways. I

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am an old man. My family is miserably provided for, and even my small savings——”

“Say three millions sterling,” interpolated the marquis mentally.

“May be in jeopardy at any moment through the unscrupulous hatred of my political opponents in England.”

“That is truly deplorable, M. le duc.”

“Is it not? Then an Englishman labours under great disadvantages, my dear marquis.”

“In what way?”

“Well, for example, on the continent nationality counts for very little when it is a question of assuming administrative responsibilities. Germany, Austria, Holland, Italy—all these can exchange governors, viceroys, vicars-general, in fact all high civil officers, without any inconvenience.”

“No doubt that is true to a considerable extent.”

“Whereas an Englishman, discarded in his own country, has no career open to him abroad except that of arms.”

“I am afraid, M. le duc, it is too late to attempt to repair the error made nearly forty years ago by my august master in not accepting your offer of service under the French flag. Nevertheless, if you cannot be with us, let us hope that the occasion has passed for you to be against us.”

“I think there is every probability of that, God be thanked!”

The duke, as we shall have further occasion to notice, was nothing if not pious.

“May we not have the assurance of its certainty, my dear duke?”

“Alas! marquis, what can I say? We cannot foresee the future. Nothing that I can do will be left undone to secure the adhesion of the Allies to a general peace. But it is, unfortunately, the case that the present proposals meet with vehement opposition from the emperor, and I fear my influence is unequal to the task of removing it.”

“You think that he may still maintain his claims in full?”

“That is my impression—to Spain, at all events.”

“And by force of arms?”

“I fear so.”

“In that case your assistance might still be desired by him?”

“His majesty has always shown the greatest appreciation of my poor services.”

“The Empire is not as wealthy as Great Britain, M. le duc.

That will be a disadvantage when it becomes a question of estimating the immense value of your co-operation."

"That is very true, my dear marquis. But beggars cannot be choosers. I must keep my duty to my family before me, regardless of my own inclinations."

"Still, M. le duc, if your own political attitude towards France is no longer hostile——"

"Quite the reverse, my dear marquis—quite the reverse."

"It might be, perhaps, possible to meet your views in another way. Your course of action would be dictated, as I gather, by purely prudential motives?"

"Purely prudential motives."

"My august master would not permit me to suggest any arrangement which would place you at a disadvantage, my dear duke. We cannot invite your good offices to secure a general peace without recognising the obligations we are under to guarantee you against loss in the matter—that is to say, if our disastrously limited resources place us in a position to do so. It would not be fair to ask you to sacrifice, perhaps, a quarter of a million for our exclusive benefit, without being prepared to offer a *quid pro quo*."

"You are very good, M. le marquis. It is true that I have been led to expect certain proposals—equivalent, perhaps, to a good deal more than the sum you name."

"Evidently we must go a little higher," thought the marquis regretfully. He paused a second, and went on,

"If the emperor thinks it worth half a million to retain your services, M. le duc, it seems to me he is not far wrong."

"His highness is not a very lavish paymaster, marquis. But the stake is a high one. He is playing for an empire in two worlds—and a good deal may be risked for that."

The marquis began to see his hoped-for savings diminish deplorably.

"What a cormorant this is!" he said to himself, as he occupied a few seconds in making a supposititious calculation on a scrap of paper. The duke waited with a vacuous expression of countenance.

"Many things might happen before the game was played out, my dear duke. In the meantime, even three quarters of a million would be a good deal of money to raise from a poor state like Austria."

"I believe you are right, marquis. It is true an expedition or two to Mexico and Peru might bring in a good deal of ready money. Still, a round million would go a long way

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towards representing anything that could be considered at all certain—from that or any other quarter."

The marquis gulped down his vexation.

"A million, M. le duc?"

"I think so—as you are so good as to interest yourself in my unfortunate affairs, my dear marquis."

"Let us, then, say a million, M. le duc. Such a sum would be a serious loss for you. We should feel bound to recoup that loss, in the event of your seeing your way to retire from any active part in the affairs of the Empire."

"You take a load off my heart, marquis," sighed the duke.

"My poor family! I have no ambitions left, except for those near and dear to me."

The marquis endeavoured to look sympathetic, while he wondered ruefully if any additional demands would be sprung upon him.

"Then we may take it you sheath your sword finally, M. le duc?"

"That is my intention, marquis—after your very considerate suggestion."

"I may assure his majesty explicitly that under no circumstances, even should the war be prolonged, will this intention be modified?"

"Explicitly, my dear marquis."

"*Parole d'honneur?*"

"*Parole d'honneur.*"

The marquis leaned back in his chair with a sigh of relief. The million was gone, but the monarchy was saved; and, after all, matters might have been worse. The duke might have stood out for the whole cargo of the *Fleur de Lys*. As it was, the cherished eight cases were safe.

"As regards the placing at your disposal of the sum we spoke of, M. le duc, it can be done in any way you please."

The duke waved his hand with a bland air of indifference.

"That is neither here nor there, M. le marquis."

"On the contrary," said the marquis, who was anxious to bind the duke, if he could be bound at all, by letting the hard cash speak for itself, "we may as well leave nothing unsettled. A portion of the amount is on board ship, at Calais, where the remainder can be lodged forthwith." This was to suggest that the magnitude of the duke's demand had not been foreseen.

"In louis d'or?" asked Marlborough negligently.

"Pistoles," replied the marquis, in a non-committal tone.

"That explains it," said the duke to himself. "Our dear

grandson comes to the rescue, because our dear grandpapa's leading-strings are getting amongst our legs, and will trip us up before long. That widow of Bracciani's is a deucedly clever woman."

"I suggest, my dear duke," continued the marquis, "that you furnish me with a ship's permit to enter Ostend, and a safe-conduct against British or Dutch cruisers. With these we can send the consignment by sea to Ostend, there to be at your disposal."

The duke considered a moment.

"That can be managed. But the delivery had better be made to a third person. May I ask how the money is to be carried?"

The marquis described the arrangements already known to the reader.

"That is a very good idea," said the duke. "Can you lend me the ship, so that the consignment may remain undisturbed and unknown?"

"I came prepared to make you that offer. But we are only hiring her, so I must ask you for a memorandum, to be given to the persons in charge when she is handed over to you. This is it," and the marquis passed a paper to the duke, which ran as follows:

"This is to certify that I hold the brig *Fleur de Lys*, at present of Ostend, the property of Ambrose Gwynett, gentleman, of Kent, at my risk and cost, to be delivered to the said Ambrose Gwynett within four weeks from the date hereof, at the port of Dover, or, in the event of peace being declared in the interval, at the port of Calais. (Signed)——"

"An Englishman? that's lucky," said the duke. "I need not say I rely on your discretion, marquis. When do you want the papers?"

"As soon as possible—I return instantly."

"I cannot well fill them up till I have found a consignee for the brig. But I believe the man I want is in Antwerp at the moment."

"Can you send them after me by mounted messenger?"

"Certainly. By Brussels or Ghent?"

"Ghent and Courtrai to Paris."

"Can I be of any further service to you?"

"None, I thank you."

"Then, to our next happy meeting, M. le marquis."

"The sooner the better, my dear duke."

Marlborough rang a little bell, and the two secretaries entered. The marquis muffled himself up in his cloak and scarf, and went to his carriage, attended by the duke.

"Get in, René," said de Torcy. "Adieu, M. Cardonnel—au revoir, M. le duc."

The duke raised his hat, the troopers saluted, and the carriage started at full gallop back to Antwerp.

CHAPTER XV

CAPTAIN KERMODE GETS A JOB

As soon as they were alone the duke turned to his secretary.

"You spoke of seeing the man Kermode in Antwerp," said he. "Did you speak to him?"

"Merely in reply to his 'good day.'"

"Where was that?"

"At the door of a little *cabaret* at the corner of the market-place."

"Do you suppose he was lodging there?"

"It is possible."

"Go at once, and find out. If he is not there, hunt him up. The police will help you if you are at fault. Take this note."

The duke scribbled a line, which Cardonnel pocketed.

"When you find him, bring him here on the instant. I take it he can't possibly ride, so hire a carriage."

"If I don't find him?"

"Then we post to Ostend, so make the necessary arrangements before you come back. I will dine while you are away; send the host here as you go out."

Cardonnel retired, and a couple of minutes afterwards his horse's hoofs could be heard clattering down the road. Meanwhile, the landlord of the inn, having appeared at Marlborough's summons, produced some rough fare and an unexpectedly passable bottle of wine. With the aid of these the duke made a leisurely meal, sipped his wine, and wondered how much more he could have squeezed out of de Torcy if he had suspected the assistance evidently given by the *Escorial*. Thence his thoughts went back to the almost identical mission upon which he himself had been sent to Charles XII. of Sweden in 1707, armed with very similar financial inducements.

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THE DUKE AND CAPTAIN KERMODE.



"That worthy de Torcy has a good deal to learn," he reflected complacently. "I wonder if he will be fool enough to confess to the million only?"

This was a reminiscence of the gratifying fact that in his interview with Charles XII. at the Schloss Alt-Ranstadt, near Leipzig, he had the good fortune to find that his skill as the first diplomatist, as well as the first soldier, in Europe was sufficient to render needless the expenditure of the money which he brought with him for the bribing of Charles's ministers. Consequently, he put it in his own pocket.

In about an hour a vehicle, behind which was tied the secretary's horse, drove up to the inn. The door of the duke's room opened, and Cardonnel entered.

"Well?"

"He is here."

"That's lucky. Where did you find him?"

"He was dining at the *cabaret*."

"What is he doing at Antwerp?"

"Nothing."

"Alone?"

"I think so."

"Send him in, and order some spirits."

Cardonnel opened the door, and signed to someone in the passage. The narrow doorway was immediately afterwards blocked by a short but enormously corpulent man, whose inconvenient bulk was further increased by the distension of his breeches pockets. It seemed rather doubtful whether the newcomer could effect an entrance.

"Try sideways, captain," suggested the duke.

"Haven't had any sideways these twenty years, your honour," replied the captain, as he succeeded, after some effort, in getting into the room.

"Take a seat, captain," said the duke.

The captain hoisted himself on to a chair, placed his sou'-wester on the table, and wiped his forehead with a bandanna of many colours. He was a man of about forty-five, with a keen grey eye, a resolute mouth, the air of one who has always to be on the watch, and a certain agility of movement which seemed rather out of keeping with his enormous stoutness. His accent was a mixture of south and west of England with something which had originally been Manx. As a matter of fact, captain Christopher Kermode (to whose affairs a cursory reference was made in our first chapter) had been born and bred in the Isle of Man, of a fisher family, and

had thence wandered first to Bristol and afterwards to the south-east coast. Here for several years he had made a living partly by fishing, partly by smuggling, and partly by conveying Jacobite passengers and letters across the Channel when occasion arose for such good offices. In this last way he had become well known to the leading supporters of the cause, and to others who, like Marlborough, were in more or less frequent communication with St. Germain.

"Will you take claret or spirits?" said Marlborough, waving his hand towards his second bottle.

"I thank your honour," said the captain, looking doubtfully at the claret-bottle, "Schnapps or Geneva for me, saving your presence. Never could see what the gentry can fancy in that rot-gut stuff."

A knock at the door heralded the appearance of the captain's choice of refreshment, to which, at a signal from the duke, he gratefully addressed himself.

"How is business?" said Marlborough affably.

"Good enough, your honour, if I could do it. But I can't."

"What's the matter?"

"Tried to get some claret over a month ago, your honour."

"Well?"

"Lost the lugger."

"How was that?"

"Fortune of war, your honour."

"A French coastguard, I suppose?"

The captain nodded.

"That's a pity. What are you doing here, then, if I may ask?"

"Heard of a job to run a big cargo from Maerdyk—but it fell through, your honour."

"I daresay I could put you in the way of something, if you cared to take it," said the duke. "That was why I asked you to come here."

"Glad to do anything just now, your honour. Government work?"

"No. I am rather out of the way of that sort of thing now, as you are probably aware."

The captain intimated by a nod his acquaintance with the duke's changed fortunes at court.

"In fact, I know very little of what is going on, outside my regiments. But there seems a good deal of talk of peace coming soon."

"Ay, ay, your honour."

"I daresay you hear more gossip than I do. The *assiento* seems to be considered quite a certain thing."

"That's what everybody says, your honour—glory be for that same! My old skipper at Bristol made all his money at it, and it broke his heart when the French cut in and stole the trade. Things would look up if that gets put right again."

The *assiento* was a great contract for supplying the whole of the Spanish possessions in the New World with slaves from Africa. This lucrative monopoly had been held by the English government from 1667 to 1676, but in 1702 had been assigned by the new king of Spain, at the instigation of his grandfather, to France. Its restoration to Great Britain was made an imperative condition of peace by the Tory ministry, and this was duly carried out by the treaty of Utrecht a year and a half later. It need scarcely be said that at the period with which we are dealing the slave-trade was looked upon as one of the highest respectability—so much so, indeed, that queen Anne reserved to herself a fourth share of the privileges of the contract when it was subsequently restored to this country.

"Some friends of mine in France," proceeded the duke, "attached to the chevalier, unfortunately—"

"You know, your honour, I never meddle with politics."

"You are quite right, captain. But these gentlemen seem to think that the business will be coming off very soon, and they have put their purses together to take out a licence directly the *assiento* is transferred to England."

"It will be a roaring trade, your honour. You see, the French clavers have been driven off the sea by our queen's ships and privateers, and the plantations and mines are quite short-handed—everybody knows that."

"So they say," said the duke. "In fact, my friends are picking up a few good seaworthy ships cheap wherever they can, so as to be ready."

"That's smart," observed the captain, getting interested. "Plenty of French ships to be got for an old song. They've no trade, and daren't go out of sight of land without a convoy—might as well be at the bottom for all the use they can put 'em to."

"I have just heard about one of these purchases," proceeded the duke, "and my friends want me to help them in the matter. But it's very awkward."

The captain helped himself to a fresh jorum, and awaited enlightenment. The duke affected to refer to de Torcy's memorandum.

"It seems they have just bought a brig," he went on, looking at the paper, "the *Fleur de Lys*, of Calais, and they want to have her fitted out in London, to be ready for the trade. Of course, if she sails from Calais they will run the risk of capture by our fleet. So they ask me to give them a safe-conduct and allow her to be consigned to me at Ostend. You may fancy what a handle my enemies in England would make out of that if the brig happened to be stopped."

"Ay, ay, your honour."

"It wouldn't do at all, as you see. I can't afford to be mixed up with that kind of thing. But when I heard of your being in Antwerp, it occurred to me there might be a way out of the difficulty. If it were made worth your while, would you be prepared to be the nominal consignee of the brig at Ostend, and take her over to England?"

"Lord love your honour! with pleasure. But I must have papers."

"Ship's papers, you mean?"

"Certain. If I haven't them, the first war-ship, English or French, that comes alongside will hang me as a pirate."

"You shall have papers."

"Ostend papers?"

"I suppose so."

"That wouldn't prevent me being captured by one of the French frigates. There are three at Dunkerque at this very moment, I happen to know."

"No doubt my friends can provide you with a French safe-conduct. Only you must be ready to swallow it if an English ship overhauls you."

The captain scratched his head, and looked very earnestly at the flagon of schnapps, as if seeking for guidance.

"A safe-conduct would be all right with a French ship-of-war, your honour," he said doubtfully. "But those cursed privateers are not so particular. 'Here's an Englishman,' says they, 'and English papers—d—— the safe-conduct.' And the first thing they does is to burn the paper——"

"And the next?"

"Run me up to the yard-arm, your honour—that is, if their tackle would stand my weight."

The duke smiled, and then considered for a minute. There was little or no foundation for the captain's apprehensions, but they suggested an excellent reason for keeping the *Fleur de Lys* under his own eye, which was what he had had in view all along.

"There is one of our gun-boats at Ostend," he said finally. "She is awaiting orders to join the *Mermaid* at Scheveningen. I daresay I can keep her back till this *Fleur de Lys* arrives, and she can convoy you. From Scheveningen you can sail with the *Mermaid* to London."

"That's all right, your honour," said the captain, in a relieved tone.

Marlborough rang his little bell, and Cardonnel entered. The duke opened his despatch-box, took out writing materials, and wrote as follows :

"MY DEAR MARQUIS,

In reply to your request to permit the brig *Fleur de Lys*, owned by Ambrose Gwynett, British subject, to enter Ostend as consigned to captain Christopher Kermode, British subject, I herewith enclose a safe-conduct to that effect.

Your obedient servant,
MARLBOROUGH."

He enclosed a safe-conduct with this, folded and sealed it, and addressed it to the marquis. He then wrote on a separate slip of paper,

"If you have a war-ship at Calais or Dunkerque, please let it convoy the brig within sight of Ostend. With all speed."

"To horse instantly," he said to Cardonnel. "You will overtake the marquis between Antwerp and Courtrai. Give him this letter, and show him this slip—when he has seen it, destroy it. Then come back to the Hague."

Cardonnel went out, and the duke turned to Kermode.

"You had better go at once to Ostend, captain," said he. "My friends shall be asked to send their brig to your charge. It would be as well for you to hang about outside the port, if the weather admits of it. Then you can board the brig when she comes in sight. How many men will you want to navigate her?"

"Say half a dozen, your honour."

"Hire them, and a small boat. I will give you an order to the burgomaster to make out ship's papers for you. Have you any money?"

"Nothing to speak of, your honour," replied the captain, who was well aware of Marlborough's reluctance to part with hard cash.

The duke turned to his despatch-box with a sigh, brought out a rouleau, and wrote a couple of orders. He then signed, folded, and sealed the memorandum given him by de Torcy.

A Kent Squire

"Here are twenty guineas," he said to the captain. "This sealed packet you will give to the person in charge of the brig. I recommend you, for your own sake, to show it to no one else, and to hold your tongue about it."

The captain promised, with sundry expletives, to be as secret as the grave.

"That is your affair," said the duke indifferently. "Deliver these two orders to the burgomaster and the captain of the gun-boat as soon as you arrive. That is all I can do for you, I think."

"I'm enormously obliged to your honour," said the captain gratefully.

"You can report to me when you get to Scheveningen."

"I will, your honour. Any other orders?"

"That is all," said the duke. "A lucky voyage to you. If things go well, I daresay my friends won't forget you."

The captain emptied the flagon with a sigh of regret, slid off his chair, and after a salute at the doorway, struggled through it and disappeared. The duke ordered his carriage. Five minutes afterwards he started on his return journey to the Hague.

* * * * *

About a week later a salute announced the arrival of an English gun-boat at Scheveningen, where her majesty's ship *Mermaid* was lying amongst a crowd of fishing-boats and coasting craft. The gun-boat was accompanied by the *Fleur de Lys*, in charge of the worthy Kermode, with half a dozen Dutchmen and a cabin-boy for crew.

When the brig had cast anchor and taken in sail, the captain left the cook on board and rowed ashore with the rest of the crew. Leaving them at the jetty, he went off to the Hague and inquired for the duke at his hôtel. Here he found Cardonnel, who told him that the duke was away, reviewing a new contingent of Hanoverians. The baron von Bothmar, for whom the duke was waiting, had not yet arrived, nor was there any news of him.

"We will report your safe arrival to the duke," said the secretary, "and you had better call again in the morning. If anything occurs in the meantime, we will let you know. Of course, the *Mermaid* is in readiness to sail at an hour's notice."

The captain pulled his forelock and retired. When he got back to Scheveningen and sought his crew at the jetty, he found the boat occupied by the cabin-boy alone. Inquiring after the others, he was told they had gone for a drink. This

information elicited a volley of imprecations from the captain, followed by an injunction to the cabin-boy to remain where he was, under blood-curdling penalties, till the miscreants came back.

After this the captain decided that it was due to the occasion to go for a drink himself. He accordingly proceeded in the direction of a certain tavern, familiar to him from former visits, and known as the 'Prinz van Oranje.' Just as he reached this hostelry, however, he suddenly stopped, slapped his thigh, and muttered to himself,

"Split me if to-day isn't my birthday! Clean forgot it—clean forgot it. Kit, my man, your wits must be going. To think I was going to bed sober on this night of all the nights in the year!"

The captain shook his head with acute self-reproach at his forgetfulness of a sacred duty, and entered the door of the tavern.

CHAPTER XVI

A FAMILY MEETING

THE parlour of the 'Prinz van Oranje' was a long, low room, with oak wainscoting all round, black with age and the nicotine from generations of smokers. Wide settees ran along each wall, and a table of Gargantuan weight and dimensions stood midway. Three hanging copper ship's lamps, of which two only were lit, hung from the carved beams of the ceiling. These lamps had polished reflectors, which focused the light on the table, and left the settees and their occupants in comparative darkness. The room was filled with tobacco-smoke of the density of a modern London fog when captain Kermode waddled in, took his seat, and proceeded to celebrate his birthday.

The captain's method of performing this function was one which did not unduly tax his powers of invention. It consisted mainly in getting drunk in the afternoon, instead of following his usual routine of waiting till evening. As a minor detail, he took some little trouble to get drunk on the best rum, while on ordinary occasions he was satisfied with any kind of spirit which was good enough to be smuggled. But to prevent misapprehension, it must be clearly understood that the worthy

A Kent Squire

captain never got drunk except on shore, or when occupying the irresponsible status of a passenger afloat.

He now took a seat opposite one of the lamps, lit his pipe, and mixed his grog with the deliberation of a man who has a serious undertaking before him. He leaned back as he alternately smoked and imbibed, and his bronzed face disappeared into the penumbra of shadow cast by the copper reflector.

The sound of uproarious revelry came in fitful gusts from the bar of the tavern, where half a dozen Rhine bargemen were getting rid of a month's wages. But for some time no one entered the parlour, and the captain, enveloped in an ever thickening cloud of tobacco-smoke, made steady progress towards his promised degree of inebriety.

Occasionally, after a fresh brew, he closed his eyes, and smoked for some minutes with rather less energy than before. These intervals signified that the captain's thoughts were dwelling upon certain distant members of his family. It happened that the birthday of three of his four half-brothers, who were triplets, fell upon the same day as his own. There was, therefore, a certain tender sentiment connected with the fact that in his family's far-away adopted home at Nantucket, or somewhere on the bosom of the Atlantic, his next-of-kin were carefully getting drunk at the same time in honour of the same occasion.

Once, after the captain's pipe had nearly gone out, he leaned forward to attend to its well-being and at the same time to mix a fresh glass of grog. This brought his face for the moment within the radius of the lamp-light. As he leaned back again, it seemed to his now somewhat obscured vision that a face emerged from the smoky gloom, on the opposite side of the table. The face, he thought, looked at him searchingly, and then, retiring, disappeared in the darkness. Upon this, the captain used the surviving intelligence at his disposal to philosophise.

"I must be getting drunk," he murmured softly to himself. "Always know I'm getting drunk when I see things. Here have I been thinking of brother Matthew and the rest for the last half-hour. Now, d'ye see, it's for all the world as if I really saw him just then. Wonderful, isn't it?"

Having in this way anticipated, by more than a century and a half, the theory of expectant attention as a source of hallucinations, the captain peacefully dozed for a few seconds. When he next opened his eyes, another face, rather higher from the floor than the former one, was visible in the foggy halo of lamp-light. This face, too, in its turn disappeared.

"I must be very drunk," meditated the captain. "I could have sworn that was brother Mark, in his own flesh and blood, though he's three thousand miles away on the cod-banks."

By this time a third face, still higher up than its predecessor, gleamed forth for a moment, and then was lost in the gloom. All this time the noise from the bar continued without intermission.

"Split me!" muttered the captain, "this must be rare good rum. If that had been brother Luke himself it couldn't have favoured him more. As like as two kippered herrings. Wonderful!"

At this moment a fourth face appeared. To all appearance it came from the ceiling, and, unlike the others, was directly over the captain's head. It was accompanied by a long arm and a hand like a shoulder of mutton, which slapped the captain's back with such vigour that the pipe flew out of his mouth across the table, while a hoarse voice roared through the smoky fog,

"How are ye, brother Kit?"

The captain looked up, speechless with astonishment. The three other faces re-emerged from the shade opposite, and three voices, hoarser than the former one, echoed the salutation,

"How are ye, brother Kit?"

"Brother John! Well, sink me!" said the captain at length. "Shake hands, brothers all."

The four strangers solemnly shook hands with their relative, one after the other.

"And how do you find yourselves?" asked the captain.

"Well, we're in our whole skins, and that's about all," replied John, in sepulchral tones of resignation.

"And what the mischief brings you all here?"

"An ill wind, brother. We're castaways—lost ship, cargo, and kit—we haven't a stiver or a rag but what we stand in."

A confirmatory grunt came from the rest of the brothers.

"That's bad news. What! lost the *Royal Mary*?"

"Ay! The new schooner we told you of—as neat a craft as ever wet keel—Nantucket to London with cod. Fair weather up to the Goodwins. Whole gale from sou'-west. Carried away rudder. Drove on to banks south of here. Broke up into matchwood. Got ashore on ship's timber and wreckage. Walked here."

"That's so," growled the brothers in chorus.

"Lord! Lord!" muttered the captain sympathetically. "Had anything to eat?"

"Not a mouthful. Chewed our last quid at mid-day. Couldn't speak a word of the lingo hereabouts."

The captain made a desperate effort to rise. After one or two failures he got upon his legs, and steered a devious course to the door of the bar. Here he bellowed an order in Dutch in such appalling tones that for a moment an awestruck silence took the place of the increasing uproar of the revellers. His behest was promptly followed by the appearance of a waiter bringing bread and cheese and a huge flagon of schnapps, together with mugs, wooden plates, and knives for the four brothers.

These worthies fell upon the provisions with the appetite of tigers in a menagerie. The captain looked on with approving eyes. When a clean sweep of the board had been made by the ravenous hunger of his kinsmen, he ordered in a second edition of the feast.

In a quarter of an hour this also had disappeared, and the four brothers leaned back in a state of blissful repletion. The captain examined each of his relatives in turn with serious attention.

"Have some more? Say the word!" said he.

"Not for me—thank ye kindly, brother," replied the gigantic John. Mark, Luke, and Matthew expressed their contentment by inarticulate murmurs.

The captain produced an enormous roll of twist, laid it on the table, and invited the brothers to help themselves. Pipes of weird pattern and capacious build were drawn from the recesses of their side-pockets, and five columns of smoke began to ascend and mingle on the ceiling.

"Well, boys," said the captain, "let's see how things stand. Any salvage?"

"Not a brass farthing," replied John, as spokesman for the party. "Matthew carried what little money we had in his belt. Got torn off him amongst the wreckage, swimming ashore. Stuck to the ship's papers myself, and that's all."

Here he produced an oilskin packet, neatly sewn up in sailor fashion.

"That's bad," muttered the captain. "Seven years' savings in the schooner, wasn't it?"

"Ay. And she earned a good living for all four of us ever since we launched her five years ago come Christmas. Now we're nought but paupers again."

The brothers grunted dolorously in sympathy.

"Well, boys," said the captain, "what's mine's yours—no need to say that."

"Ay, you've always been main good to us, brother Kit—dry-nursed us all from babbies, as you might say," remarked John. "Eh, boys?" turning to his companions in misfortune.

"That's so," assented Matthew. Mark and Luke nodded their heads approvingly.

"But I'm down on my luck a bit myself," resumed the captain. "My two last cargoes got nabbed by the coastguards, and I'm doing a job here under engagement while things pull round—taking a brig over to London. Jingo!" he ejaculated suddenly, bringing his fist down on the table, "you shall all ship with me."

"Have you no crew?" asked John.

"Ay—five Dutchies. But they're all getting blind drunk somewhere. We'll sail without them, and leave them to get sober when they choose. Come along and have a look at the craft," and the captain got upon his legs.

The four brothers rose also. When standing they formed a crescendo of stature, ascending from five feet three in the case of Matthew to John's six feet seven. The latter was, however, the leanest and boniest of the family, while the others successively gained in bulk what they missed in height. The captain's globular form of five feet one terminated the scale in the inverse direction.

The score having been paid when the viands were brought in, the party passed through the bar without stopping and emerged into the open air. The moon was shining brightly. The captain, leading the way with John, took the road through the port to the shipping anchorage. He ruminated in silence for several minutes, and the brothers walked along without word or comment.

A hundred paces from the water-side they came upon an open space where several ships' masts and other timbers lay on the ground. While passing some of these, the captain stopped so suddenly that Matthew, who was just behind, nearly fell over him.

"Boys!" said the captain, lifting his hat and scratching his head slowly, "wait a bit."

The four brothers came to a halt in an attitude of attention.

"Wait a bit," repeated the captain meditatively. "It's coming. I shall have it in a minute."

The brothers waited respectfully for the promised arrival,

and John whispered to Luke, whose ear was on the nearest level to his mouth,

"Let him alone. He's got summat in his head."

Luke agreed with a nod.

"He'd always a rare head, had Kit," said he.

The captain gazed abstractedly at the glittering line of the moon's reflection in the water, then at his companions, and then at nothing in particular. The four brothers, with a confidence in the inexhaustible resources of their kinsman which had characterised them all since childhood, exchanged looks of admiring wonder.

"That's it!" suddenly ejaculated the captain, with a slap of his leg that echoed like the report of a pistol—"that's it! Sit down, the lot of ye!" and he pointed to the nearest baulk of timber.

The brothers obediently sat down in a row. The captain stood facing them with as much steadiness as his recent potations permitted.

"Brother John," said he, with deliberation, "listen to me."

"I'm listening," replied John expectantly.

"You've been telling me a pack of lies—d—d lies—the d—dest lies I ever heard in my life."

"What!" roared John, getting up.

"Sh! sit down!" The captain put one hand on John's shoulder as the latter rather discontentedly resumed his seat, and laid a finger of the other solemnly against his nose. In the moonlight a wink of infinite meaning could be detected in his left eye. The brothers, taught by long experience, awaited some important development.

"Brother John," resumed the captain, with his finger still significantly pressed against his nose, "you're a liar, and you know it. You've been making game of me with this cock-and-bull story about your shipwreck and all the rest of it."

Luke was about to protest against this sudden incredulity on the part of his kinsman, but John at once put his hand over the other's mouth.

"Hold your jaw," said he, in his brother's ear. "Don't you see he's working it out?"

"Have you told anyone else this yarn about the loss of the schooner?" asked the captain.

"Hadn't a chance," replied John. "Only met two women and a boy, and couldn't make 'em understand a word."

"All the better. You might have bamboozled them, and had another sin on your souls. You won't bamboozle *me*."

John listened with all his ears.

"I don't believe a word from first to last. Lost the *Royal Mary*? Rubbish! Why, you infernal liar, you know she's riding at anchor, safe, sound, and trim, this very moment!"

John kept his eyes fixed on the captain, awaiting a clue to these cryptic utterances. The other brothers nudged each other, in token that matters had got a little beyond them.

"That's how you've left her," resumed the captain, "and you know it. I suppose you're having a look round, for a day or two, in these foreign parts. Quite right. Uncommon glad to see you all before you're homeward bound again. If you can spare a week or two before you slip cable, I'll take you over with me to London."

By this time John had realised more or less distinctly what suit he had to follow.

"We can manage that, I daresay," said he.

"And don't tell me or anyone else any more lies."

"We won't." And John looked significantly at his three brothers.

"You'd better stay at the 'Prinz van Oranje' till I'm ready to weigh anchor. If you meet any Englishman, and have to answer any questions, why, tell the truth and shame the devil. You've left the *Royal Mary* discharging part of her cargo at——?" and the captain looked expectantly at his half-brother.

John's imagination was not his strong point. However, he made a desperate effort to be equal to the occasion, and replied,

"Ostend."

"Of course," said the captain, in a pleased tone. "Now about that same craft. I want to see her. I'd like to know her cut, colour, and rig, so that if she happened to heave in sight some day, promiscuous-like, I should know her. What's her build, brother John?"

John pointed to a two-masted craft, moored about half a mile off, by way of illustration.

"Something like that," said he.

"That brig's the *Fleur de Lys*," said the captain. "I'm her skipper this voyage, and back again. Is she any bigger than your schooner?"

"About same tonnage, I expect."

"What's her paint?"

"Black hull, white stripe."

"What's her figure-head?"

"Woman, of course. Modelled after sister Sall. Fine figure. Crown and sceptre."

The captain looked long and earnestly at the *Fleur de Lys*, which at some time or other had been painted pale blue, and was now a leprous and faded green, while her figure-head represented a monstrous flower, unknown to botanical science, and held in a correspondingly monstrous fist. Then, as if satisfied with what was passing through his mind, he motioned to his kinsmen.

"Up, boys! Come to the jetty, and I'll see if our boat's there, waiting. I left her with the cabin-boy."

The party moved on until some water-side sheds came in view.

"Stay you all behind that wall a minute," said the captain. "I don't want you to be seen."

The brothers disappeared in the shadow of the sheds, and the captain waddled away in the direction of the jetty. Arrived there, he found his ship's boat, but empty.

"Lucky!" he muttered. "That young rascal has gone after his mates. All the better."

The captain stepped in, took up the sculls, and rowed off to the *Fleur de Lys*. Coming alongside, he hailed, and received no reply.

"Look-out drunk," he soliloquised. "All the better again."

He made fast, and climbed the gangway-ladder hanging over the ship's side. Arrived on deck he made for the fore-castle, and bellowed down the hatch. A smothered grunt was heard in response, and he descended to investigate.

After a minute he re-appeared, got into his boat again, pulled ashore, and rejoined his half-brothers.

"I've changed my mind," said he. "Instead of going back to the 'Prinz van Oranje,' you'd better come aboard the brig at once. There's only the cook there, and he's too drunk to take any notice of anything. I can stow you all away in my cabin, without anybody being a hap'orth the wiser. I must go ashore in the morning, and I'll turn key on you till I come back. There'll be rations for you, but you must hold your jaw while I'm gone. Nobody must know you're aboard. D'ye see?"

The brothers nodded their heads to save words, followed the captain to the dinghy, and rowed off towards the *Fleur de Lys*. A couple of minutes later, Luke, who was sitting in the bow, suddenly called to his brothers, in an alarmed tone, to stop rowing.

"What's the matter?" asked the captain.

"Brother Mark," said Luke, in a trembling voice, "haven't we seen that brig before?"

The three other brothers turned round to look at the *Fleur de Lys*.

"Lord save us!" ejaculated Mark, "you're right, brother Luke."

"It's that there Flying Dutchman we passed in the Channel," said Matthew.

"What are you all blethering about?" asked the captain impatiently.

"Brother Kit," said Luke solemnly, "it isn't the first time we've seen that craft."

"Well, if you've seen her twice, what of that?"

"We didn't like the looks of her," said Luke. "She'd had the plague on board, and there wasn't a soul to navigate her."

"How the blazes do you know?" asked the captain.

"We saw it written on a flag. She was steering herself, without any crew, unless she had boggarts aboard."

"That's so," echoed the others, with the earnestness of superstitious terror.

"Rot!" roared the captain angrily. "She came into my hands with a crew of live Frenchmen, all as healthy as you are, and not a word of your d—d plague, or boggarts, or anything. Pull ahead, and don't make d—d fools of yourselves."

The brothers hesitated. But after another exordium from the captain, ornamented with still more vigorous expletives, they plucked up sufficient courage to resume their oars, and rowed alongside the brig. The captain mounted first to the deck, saw that everything was clear, and then took his four guests into his cabin.

This, as we have already seen, was somewhat stinted in dimensions by reason of the sleeping-berths around it. But the latter point was to the advantage of the captain's plan, and the four brothers were soon sleeping the sleep of the just in their respective bunks.

The captain went on deck to keep a look-out, and to watch for the return on shore of the cabin-boy, who would presently come back to the jetty and find the boat missing. In view of this contingency, the captain carefully fastened the dinghy on the far side of the brig, out of sight from the shore, instead of letting it ride astern; and chuckled to himself as he pictured the despair of the unlucky truant.

CHAPTER XVII

CAPTAIN KERMODE MAKES READY TO SAIL

ON the following morning the captain rowed himself ashore early, in order to have two or three hours at his disposal before making his promised visit to the duke's lodgings. He found the cabin-boy waiting at the jetty, divided between joy at seeing that he was not to be accused of the loss of the dinghy, and apprehension at the possible consequences of his neglect the previous night.

These were promptly forthcoming in the shape of a moderate application of a rope's end; after which the captain proceeded to inquire after his missing crew. The cabin-boy's information enabled him to find all six of them, lying dead drunk and fast asleep, in an outhouse at the back of a tavern, where they had been kindly stowed away by the proprietor as soon as their room became more profitable than their company.

Satisfied that they were safe and within reach for the time being, the captain proceeded to do a little shopping.

He bought a considerable stock of tar in barrels, several kegs of white and other paints, and some powerful ship's carpentry tools, including a huge double-hand saw.

Then he went to two or three shipbuilding and wreckers' yards in succession, carefully examining the bows and figure-heads of various craft which were in course either of construction or of being pulled to pieces.

Eventually he appeared to find something he had been seeking, and had a little chat of an extremely confidential character with the owner of the ship-yard. As a result of this interview, the captain extracted a not very extravagant sum in Dutch money from his capacious pocket-book, paid it over to the shipwright, and went on his way to the duke's hôtel.

At the door, surrounded by a little crowd of gapers, stood a horse which was just being mounted by an equerry, and which had evidently already done a good day's work. Cardonnel was on the doorstep, and handed the equerry a letter as soon as he was in the saddle.

"To M. de Buys," said he.

This was the States-General agent to the English court, now at the Hague receiving instructions from Heinsius and the Council. The equerry bowed and rode off. Cardonnel turned to the captain.

"Come in, captain Kermode. The duke has been asking for you. That was the equerry of the baron de Bothmar," he observed as they mounted the stairs. "The baron will be here in half an hour. Here is the captain, my lord," he said to Marlborough, opening the door of the duke's private room.

The duke was just finishing a letter to the chevalier de St. George at St. Germain, assuring the Pretender of his continued and fervent devotion to the cause of the Stuarts, and his determination to leave no stone unturned to secure for the 'queen' (meaning thereby the widow of James II.) the dowry which the English government had taken care never to pay over. He further urged the king, as he called him, on no account to retire into Italy, which would probably be demanded by the Tory ministry as a condition of peace. To quote from this letter, as we find it in the Stuart Papers :

"The eyes of the people will be gradually opened. They will see their interest in restoring the King. . . . The French king and his ministers will sacrifice everything to their own views of peace. The earl of Oxford and his associates, in office, to take, as usual, the ground of their adversaries,* will probably insist upon the King's retiring to Italy. But he must never consent. . . . To retire to Italy, by the living God, is the same thing as to stab him to the heart. . . . I perceive such a change in his favour, that I think it impossible but he must succeed. . . . As for myself, I take God to witness that what I have done, for many years, was neither from spleen to the royal family, nor ill-will to their cause; but to humble the power of France; a service as useful to the King, as it is beneficial to his kingdom. . . . But peace, and all that has been done, favours the cause of the King. . . . God, Who rules above, seems visibly to dispose all for the best. . . . As for me, I have been treated unworthily; but God has blessed me with a great deal of temper and forbearance of mind. . . . As for the King's affairs, occasion is only wanting to my zeal. God Almighty has placed matters in such a train, that he must at any rate succeed," etc., etc.

As the duke was a shocking writer, and had not found time in the press of his military career to remedy his early neglect of the art of spelling, the letter from which we have just quoted was a severe tax upon his epistolary powers. However, he saved himself a certain amount of labour by copying the assurances of devotion and the various pious exordiums from an almost identical letter which he had written a fortnight

* The Whigs

before to the elector of Hanover, and of which a rough draft lay on the table before him.

Having finished, signed, and sealed up his letter, the duke handed it to Cardonnel.

"Let the chevalier's messenger return with this at once," said he.

Cardonnel addressed the cover of the letter and went out with it. The duke turned to Kermodé.

"Well, captain!" said he affably.

"Good day to your honour," responded the captain, pulling his forelock.

"The baron will be here in a few minutes. You had better wait. He may decide to sail to-day. Shall you be ready?"

"We could weigh anchor at five o'clock, your honour; the tide won't serve before then. But most of my men got drunk last night—I'm doubtful if they'll be fit for duty. I daresay I can make shift till morning with the cook and the boy. Wind and weather's as fair as can be."

The duke reflected that the cargo of the *Fleur de Lys* was not one to run any risks with. On the other hand, he was in a hurry.

"Better get some more men," said he.

This did not suit the captain's views at all.

"Lord bless your honour!" said he, "that would be sheer waste of wages and rations. Even if we had to wait a tide behind your honour, we should pick your honour up in the twelve hours. The brig will sail three knots an hour faster than the queen's ship."

Although this appealed to the duke's notions of economy, he was loth to entertain the idea of parting from his treasure. But he was afraid lest some suspicion should be excited by too obvious a reluctance to let the brig go out of sight. The Channel was so notoriously free from privateers, apart from the popular belief that peace was imminent, that it was absurd to affect concern for the brig's safety.

"Very well," said he, at length. "Be ready. Put your men under hatches if you can't keep them on board otherwise."

"Right, your honour. But——"

"Well?"

"Just now they're too drunk to be got aboard unless they're hoisted in."

"Then hoist them in."

"Easier said than done, your honour, with only a cabin-boy fit to bear a hand."

"Get a couple of men from the *Mermaid* to help you."

"Will your honour give me a letter to the captain?"

The duke scrawled a short note.

"Take this," said he, pushing it across the table.

Captain Kermode picked up the paper gingerly, saluted, and retired.

As he descended the stairs a great commotion was heard. Outriders galloped up to the hôtel, and the rumbling of half a dozen travelling-carriages became audible. Everybody ran to the doors and windows as a distinguished personage, with a gorgeous retinue, drove up to the door. This was the baron von Bothmar, envoy of the elector of Hanover at the court of St. James, and now *en route* to London.

The duke came down to receive the diplomatist as he got out of his carriage.

"A thousand thanks, my dear duke," said the baron.

"Delighted to see you again. My august master charges me with his warmest greetings to you."

"His highness knows that he has no more devoted servant than myself," replied the duke, as they went upstairs.

The baron sank into a *fauteuil*, and panted.

"*Ouf!* We get no younger," he remarked. "But you, my dear duke, have the elixir of perpetual youth."

"On the contrary," said the duke, "it is only my anxiety for the maintenance of the Protestant succession and for the security of the elector's interests that keeps me up at all. I should not have yielded to the pressure of prince Eugène and M. Heinsius, this last spring, to retain my command during the campaign, had it not been for her majesty's open leaning towards the Pretender." And the duke sighed dolorously.

"But this leaning must be combated," exclaimed the envoy.

"It is for that, and to urge the prosecution of the war, that I am here, my dear duke. I count on your assistance when we arrive in London. The peace negotiations must be broken off at all hazards."

"At all hazards," assented the duke.

"And—with all respect to her majesty—these intrigues with St. Germain must be exposed and denounced."

"They must."

"We shall be resolutely seconded by M. de Buys, I hope. A remarkably able man, M. de Buys!"

"Without doubt," said the duke, who privately considered the Dutch agent to be a born fool, or thereabouts.

"And now, as to our voyage—let me thank you again for your goodness in offering me a passage in her majesty's ship. You are quite sure I and my people will not inconvenience you?"

"Not in the least. But you must not look for luxurious quarters, my dear baron. I am afraid we shall be packed rather close. The *Mermaid* is only a small cruiser—not a ship of the line," explained the duke, who did not wish to be bored with more of the envoy's company than he could help. "I think I can promise you better accommodation in a week or so, if you like to wait for one of the frigates calling off the port."

The baron cogitated. He liked to be comfortable, and knew by experience that wherever Marlborough went other people in some indefinable way always found themselves very much in the background. But his instructions were to get to London with all possible speed, and the result of even a week's delay might be dangerous. So he made a virtue of necessity, and replied,

"That would deprive me of the pleasure of your company, my dear duke. No; let us get to work as soon as possible. When do you sail?"

"We are only awaiting your convenience, baron. This evening's tide will do for me, if it will do for you."

"At what hour?"

"Can you be on board at five?"

"Certainly. That will give me six hours' blessed sleep in the interval." And the baron yawned portentously.

Marlborough rang his bell, and Cardonnel entered.

"Make the baron comfortable in my room," said the duke, "and don't let him be disturbed till four o'clock."

"You are too good, duke," said the baron, rising, and yawning more widely than before. "You must pardon me—those horrible roads have prevented me getting a wink of sleep the last three nights."

Cardonnel took the baron off to the duke's bedroom. When he returned, he bore a letter which he handed to the duke.

"By a special messenger from the earl of Godolphin, in London," he said.

"Let him be well treated, and wait. Probably he will go back with us. And tell Kermode that the *Mermaid* sails this evening. He must keep company with us if he possibly can."

Cardonnel bowed and went out. The duke opened the letter and read,

"DEAR JACK,
Come back without delay. Medina has ratted, and the Tories
are on the scent of the army contracts.

GODOLPHIN."

"Gad! it's time I was off," said the duke to himself, as he burnt the letter in the stove behind his chair.

CHAPTER XVIII

CAPTAIN KERMODE CHANGES HIS CREW

CAPTAIN KERMODE paid a visit to a tobacconist's shop before looking up his truant crew. Here he inquired for the strongest snuff obtainable, and bought some rappee, warranted to coax a sneeze from the nose of a stone gargoyle.

Putting this in his pocket, he made his way to the tavern where he had left the sailors asleep in the outhouse. Four of them were now awake. Three were sitting up in the straw and bawling for liquor. The mate, actuated by a certain sense of his official responsibilities, was holding his head under the pump while an unkempt stable-boy pumped upon his bald skull. The fifth was beginning to stretch himself and to grunt snatches of uncouth melody.

The captain apostrophised his crew with all the objurgatory Dutch epithets at his command, while privately congratulating himself that they were still by no means inconveniently sober. He then invited them to come aboard without delay. This they positively refused to do, unless they had another drink first.

It suited the captain to wink at this very incomplete subordination.

"Bring a bottle of Schiedam and glasses," he called to the pot-boy.

The sailors cheered at this gratifying order, and the pot-boy vanished.

"Come to the bar, lads," said the captain, foreseeing difficulties in the way of carrying out his plans in the open daylight of the stable-yard.

The sailors followed him, with devious tracks and an

occasional stumble against the wall, into the gloom of the bar. The pot-boy put a huge flagon on the table, and retired. The captain held the flagon up to the light.

"Zounds!" said he, "the rascal has given us short measure. I'll teach him to cheat honest people." And he went into the passage.

Here he stopped, put a stiff dose of snuff into the bottle, and returned with an air of triumph.

"Told you so!" said he. "Now, boys, down with the liquor, and we'll be off."

The crew adopted the first suggestion with alacrity; the second involved some little difficulty. But by getting the six men to align themselves in a row, arm-in-arm, with the mate at one end and the captain at the other, a gradual approach was in course of time effected towards the jetty.

Arrived at the water-stairs, the captain and the mate, assisted by the cabin-boy, rowed the others over to the *Fleur de Lys*, two at a time.

With considerable trouble, but without accident, they were all got on board. The next step was to lower them into the forecastle. This was all the more difficult because all the seamen, except the mate, were beginning to feel the effects of the narcotic. But eventually they were all put below without any necks being broken. The cook, now awake and moderately sober, was persuaded to come on deck and make himself useful.

It was about three o'clock. The captain got the brig ready for putting to sea with the ebb-tide, and waited anxiously for the arrival of his purchases of the morning. These were sent on board shortly afterwards, and were followed within the hour by a large wooden crate or box, which was floated alongside. This case, it may be mentioned, contained the wooden figure, more than life-size, of a woman with a rough crown on her head. Doubtless the captain intended it to serve as a decoration for his garden at home in Deptford, after the manner of seafaring men with an establishment on shore.

Two men brought the crate, towed behind their boat. Prompted by the expectation of a glass of grog, they assisted the captain in getting it on deck and into the hold by means of the windlass and a block at the gaff-head. The mate served out the promised liquor, and the men rowed away.

At half-past four a gig came up from the *Mermaid* with an inquiry from Marlborough as to the brig's readiness to sail.

Nothing was said about the proffer of help made in the morning. Probably the duke had forgotten all about it.

The captain, who knew that the *Mermaid*, from her heavy draught, could only cross the bar at high tide, sent word that he hoped to start before seven o'clock.

Half an hour afterwards the *Mermaid* weighed anchor and passed slowly out into the darkness.

About eight o'clock the captain, for reasons of his own, got into a furious rage with the cabin-boy, paid him a week's wages, and had him put on shore by the mate. When the latter returned the captain hoisted sail, dropped down with the fag-end of the ebb, and steered out to sea in the direction taken by the *Mermaid*. The masthead lights of the latter could be seen on the horizon.

In less than an hour, to the captain's unspeakable satisfaction, a thick fog came rolling up from the North Sea. He went to the cook's cuddy and told him to make two bowls of hot coffee.

"Send the mate here," said he, "and stand by the wheel till he goes back."

The cook went off, and the captain hastily proceeded to dose the two bowls of coffee with snuff. The mate presented himself.

"Put this inside of you," remarked the captain. "No more grog, and no off-watches, till those blackguards below are sober enough to work the ship. This'll keep your eyes open."

The mate drank the coffee without much enthusiasm.

"Go back to the wheel, and send the cook here," continued the captain.

The mate went off, and the cook swallowed his coffee as his predecessor had done.

"Bring a big pot to my cabin, and then go forrard to look out," said the captain.

This was done. The captain locked the door as the cook retired, and made his half-brothers partake of the decoction in their cabins.

"We must be wide awake now, boys," he whispered. "You've slept the round of the clock, pretty near. I hope you feel fit—we've a big job ahead of us."

"Never better in my life," replied John, for himself and brothers.

"That's well. Here are your rations again. Stow 'em under hatches. I shall want you before long."

The captain went on deck. The cook was asleep under the bulwarks forward, and the mate was nodding and lurching as he stood by the wheel. The stars shone overhead, but the horizon was lost in mist and the wind was freshening. The captain kept an eye on the ship's course and waited.

A quarter of an hour later the mate sank to the deck, rolled over on his side, and snored stentoriously.

The captain left the helm, went to the cabin door, and called his half-brothers. The four men silently emerged upon deck.

"You must stow these two fellows in the fo'castle," said the captain, pointing to the recumbent forms of the cook and the mate.

The brothers laid hold of the two men and deposited them, heavily asleep, in the forecastle. The captain returned to the wheel, altered the brig's course, and steered for the north.

The fog came up in vast wreaths, cold and impenetrable. It swept over the *Fleur de Lys*, and the brig disappeared as if by enchantment.

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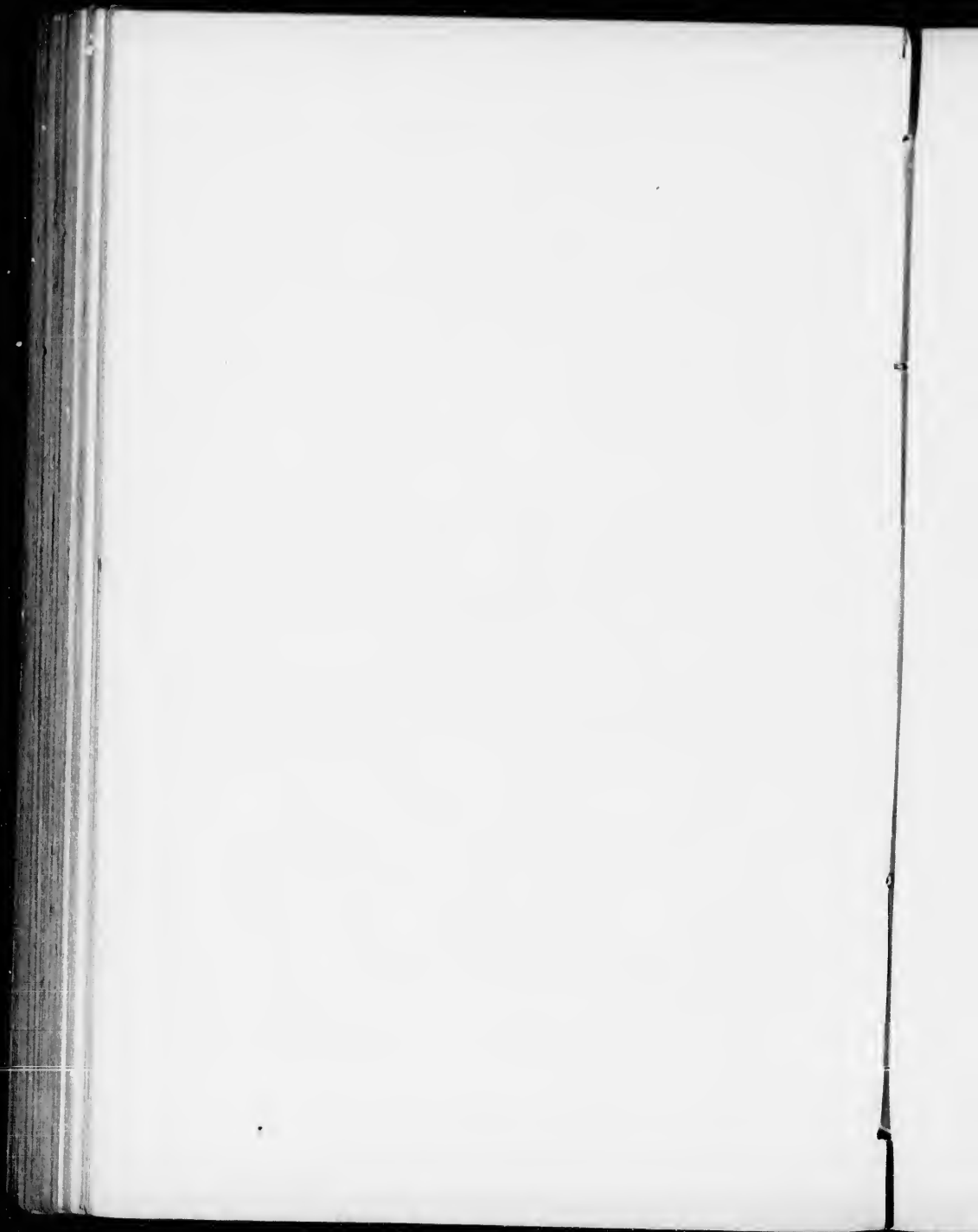


"The brig disappeared."

—Page 138.



BOOK II
A Great Treason



CHAPTER XIX

THE ABBÉ GAULTIER IS SUDDENLY INDISPOSED

THE two days which followed M. de Torcy's departure from Calais, on his journey to Antwerp, were spent by Gwynett in interviewing various officials to whom he was introduced by M. Daguerre. But his hopes of thereby learning something of Randolph Dorrington were disappointed. Neither the name nor the individual seemed to be recognised by any of his interlocutors, and there was no record which could be identified with the missing man in the police *dossiers* of the province. It became, therefore, a question of waiting the result of the inquiries at headquarters set on foot by the marquis.

Late in the evening of the second day a courier arrived hot-footed from Courtrai, bearing letters for M. Daguerre and Gwynett. The latter ran:

"MY DEAR M. GWYNETT,

I will ask you to do me the favour to make good all the marks of removal of the cases in the *Fleur de Lys*, as we arranged. M. Daguerre is instructed to afford you the necessary facilities for doing this alone and unobserved. When effected please advise him of the fact, as the brig will be required to leave Calais at once.

If you will honour me by staying a few days at my hôtel in Paris, we shall no doubt by that time hear all that is to be learned about your missing compatriot. The bearer of this will carry your reply, which I hope will be in the affirmative. Au revoir.

DE TORCY."

Gwynett decided at once to accept the invitation, and wrote a reply accordingly. This he proceeded to hand to M. Daguerre, whom he found in a state bordering on distraction at the contents of the letter he had received from the marquis.

"Was ever anything so unlucky?" he lamented to Gwynett. "I am completely at a loss; and the marquis makes it a matter of urgency."

"What is the matter?"

"First of all, he tells me to put you on the brig again, and leave you in strict privacy for as long as you find necessary——"

"Is that inconvenient?"

"Not at all. But I am to remove certain cases from the

hold of the brig, and forward them instantly to Paris under escort and in charge of a thoroughly experienced and capable officer, who will have a very grave responsibility in the matter, he says."

"I think he is quite right. But what is the difficulty?"

"My dear M. Gwynett, I haven't a soul to send. They robbed me of my only capable officers a month ago to take a couple of companies of the garrison to *maréchal de Villars*."

"An officer is not absolutely necessary, I suppose. One of your staff would do just as well."

"There is the misfortune. The two best men on my staff are ill—in fact, one is at death's door—and the only other subordinate I could trust has been sent on important business to Dunkerque."

"Cannot the *Tonnerre* or the *Henri Quatre* help you?"

"Both are short-handed, and in addition they have to find a crew for this *Fleur de Lys*. It appears they are under sealed orders to sail with her under their convoy as soon as you can place her in their hands. She has been refitted for the purpose."

Gwynett pondered a moment, and then passed the letter he had received from de Torcy over to the governor.

"Can I be of any service?" he asked.

The governor read the letter with attention.

"I gather from this," he remarked, "that the matter of these cases is fully known to you?"

"Decidedly. I may say that the whole affair has been in my sole charge from the beginning."

The governor looked infinitely relieved.

"Under the circumstances, monsieur," he said, "I think I am more than justified in accepting your very kind offer. Otherwise," he added, "it would be an unheard-of proceeding to delegate such a duty to anyone not in his majesty's service. When can you carry out the necessary arrangements?"

"If you will first remove the cases to your galley and then leave me alone on board, I shall have done all I want to do in an hour. We can then start at any time you choose."

"I will make the requisite arrangements to-night, so as to lose no time in the morning."

The governor rang for his servant and gave him a message for Lestraade, the boatswain of the galley, who lived a short distance from the governor's house.

The servant went off to execute his commission. It was about ten o'clock at night. Turning a corner sharply, he

nearly ran into a gentleman who was leading his horse by the bridle as he walked along.

"A thousand pardons, monsieur," exclaimed the servant.

"Who the deuce are you?" asked the gentleman. "I seem to know your voice."

The servant lifted his lantern and then hastily took off his hat.

"Why, it is M. l'abbé," said he respectfully. "I am Jacquot, monsieur—Pierre the coachman's brother, from Beauval—if monsieur does me the honour to recollect."

"That's it," said the other, who was the abbé Gaultier. "I am not often mistaken in a voice, or a face. What are you doing here, Jacquot? I saw Pierre the other day. He is at Marly with madame la comtesse."

"I am in the service of the governor, M. l'abbé. I came here with our sister Madelon three years ago. Monsieur's horse has cast a shoe," added Jacquot, turning his lantern on the abbé's steed.

"Yes. I have had to lead him the last hour, and it has made me late. They were full at two *auberges* I have called at, and I haven't found a lodging yet."

"Monsieur need not trouble about that if monsieur will excuse humble accommodation. My sister, madame Lestraade, where I am just going, has a nice little spare room, which will be entirely at monsieur's disposal. There is a stable also."

"That will do admirably," said the abbé. "I am tired to death. Lead on, my good Jacquot."

"It is only a few steps. I will go before monsieur with the lantern."

Jacquot took the abbé to a neat little house with a garden and stabling, close to the beach, and surrounded by fishermen's cottages. A light in the living-room indicated that the occupants had not yet gone to bed. Jacquot knocked at the door.

"Open, Madelon," he called out.

The bolt was withdrawn, and a buxom young woman stood in the doorway.

"Eh! Jacquot," said she; "what brings you here at this time of night?"

"This is Madelon, from Beauval, monsieur—but since you were living there. I have brought M. l'abbé Gaultier here, Madelon; I have promised him your spare room."

Madelon curtsied with all the peasant's reverence for the seigneur of the soil.

"M. l'abbé is welcome," said she. "Will monsieur do us the honour to enter?"

The abbé fastened his bridle at the porch and went in.

"Jacquot says you can accommodate both man and beast," said he. "Have you a corner of the stable for my horse?"

"Certainly, monsieur."

"And a bed for myself?"

"If monsieur will accept what he finds, he will do us great honour."

"On the contrary," said the abbé, seating himself in a great arm-chair before the fire, "it is a pleasant surprise to come across one's own people so far away from Beauval."

A door at the back of the living-room opened, and Lestraade the boatswain came in. He saluted the abbé, and Jacquot explained his double errand.

"M. le gouverneur wants the galley at eight o'clock," said he. "You must have her ready to land some heavy cases from the brig that came in the other day, and take tackle with you to hoist them out of the hold."

Lestraade nodded, and Jacquot turned to the abbé.

"I will put your horse in the stable, monsieur, and Lestraade will see to him. I have the honour to wish monsieur a very good night."

"Good night, my good Jacquot," said the abbé, with a nod, as he thrust his hands into his breeches pockets. "I will remember to tell the comtesse I have seen you."

"We are madame's most humble servants," said Jacquot, as he went out.

"Monsieur will probably take a little supper," suggested Madelon timidly.

"Probably is not the word, my good Madelon," said the abbé, divesting himself of his riding-coat and boots and stretching his legs out at full length towards the genial wood fire. "I am famishing, and ready to eat your baby, if you have one."

Lestraade sniggered solemnly at this pleasantry, while Madelon produced some plain but appetising fare and a bottle of *vin du pays*.

"Unless monsieur prefers schnapps or cognac?" she inquired.

Monsieur looked at the wine-bottle, decided in favour of the cognac, and despatched his supper with much gusto.

Lestraade took up the abbé's boots to clean them and put the riding-coat over his arm.

"Monsieur has had a long ride," said he.

"From Lille," said the abbé. "I must leave my horse somewhere for a short time, as I want to cross to Dover to-morrow, if I can. Is old Leroux in Calais?"

This was one of the fishermen who did a little occasional business in the way of conveying passengers and letters surreptitiously across the Channel.

"Yes, monsieur."

"When does the tide serve?"

"About ten o'clock, monsieur."

"That will do. I think I will go to bed now, if my room is ready."

"It is quite ready, monsieur," said Madelon, lighting a candle.

The abbé rose, took up his valise, and was duly inducted into his sleeping-chamber. In five minutes the walls were vibrating with his stertorous snores.

When he came down in the morning, having been summoned about eight o'clock by Madelon, he found an old sailor-looking fellow waiting for him.

"Ah! Leroux," said he, as he sat down to his breakfast, "they told you I was crossing, I suppose?"

"Yes, M. l'abbé."

"Can you manage it for me?"

"Certainly, monsieur. As it happens, we are taking letters from milord Middleton by the next tide."

"*Peste!*" said the abbé, laughing. "I know nothing about that, mark you. We are all for the Protestant succession at present. Be a little more discreet, my good friend."

Leroux grinned and picked up his hat.

"Monsieur can be ready at ten o'clock?" he asked. "There is very little wind, and we may have to row out into the offing."

"I shall be punctual," said the abbé. "Do your men know me?"

"Only one, monsieur—Lafargue."

"The elder?"

"No, monsieur, the younger. The other is in the crew of the governor's galley at present."

"Tell him to hold his tongue about me, if possible; he is rather a gossip, if I recollect right."

"Very good, monsieur."

Leroux took his departure, and the abbé finished his breakfast at his leisure.

"What does monsieur wish done about his horse?" asked Madelon when the meal was concluded.

"Can Lestraade do with him here? It is a good beast; I bought him the other day in Paris. I shall like to leave him where he will be taken care of."

"That can be managed, monsieur."

"All the better. I may be back again in a fortnight. This will serve to go on with."

The abbé handed a couple of pistoles to Madelon, slung his valise over his shoulder, and took up his hat.

"Have you any message for the comtesse?" he asked pleasantly as he went out. "I shall tell her, for my part, that the prettiest girl in Beauval is married to the best-looking fellow in Calais."

Madelon expressed her appreciation of this compliment by turning red all over.

"*A propos*, is there any little Lestraade?" asked the abbé at the door.

"One, sir—a boy," replied Madelon, curtsying.

"I swear I never heard a sound of him," said the abbé.

"It is a beautiful-tempered child," said Madelon fervently.

"*Dame!* he is clever, that child; he is teaching himself to be secretary of state," said the abbé. "When I am prime minister, bring him to me, my good Madelon, and he shall hold his tongue to some purpose. Adieu."

"A pleasant passage, monsieur."

When the abbé got down to the beach, there was nearly a calm, and it was clear the *Belle Jeannette* would require to be rowed out of port. Leroux carried the abbé on his back through the shallow water to the little lugger, and deposited him carefully in the stern-sheets. There were four men in the boat.

"Weigh anchor, lads," said Leroux. "Get out the sweeps, and you, Lafargue, take the tiller."

The sailor called Lafargue, who saluted the abbé as an old acquaintance and who seemed to be disabled from rowing by a sprained wrist, came aft and sat alongside the abbé. The other four men applied themselves to the long oars, and the *Belle Jeannette* began to leave the shore behind.

"Monsieur is quite comfortable?" asked Lafargue confidentially as he stowed away the abbé's valise under the seat. "I heard of monsieur from that good Lestraade this morning early. They were very busy at the brig."

Lafargue pointed to the *Fleur de Lys*, which had been put

to rights and was now in charge of a crew from the two frigates. All three were hoisting sail.

"My brother, whom monsieur perhaps remembers, was there too," went on Lafargue. "Rather a curious affair that, monsieur?"

"What is that?" asked the abbé.

"Perhaps monsieur has not heard of the strange circumstances about that brig?"

"Not I," said the abbé.

Lafargue plunged into a long and considerably ornamented account of the arrival of the *Fleur de Lys* and her solitary navigator, mentioning the unusual precautions taken to guard her from inspection, and the mysterious proceedings on the occasion of the marquis's visit to her.

"And they did the same this morning," went on the loquacious Lafargue. "The officer was there alone; not a soul allowed on board for an hour. Then the governor's galley came alongside, and the cases were hoisted in."

"What cases?" asked the abbé, who had not been able to make head or tail of the story.

"Eight heavy chests out of the brig's hold, monsieur. My brother said they had to be very careful. If one of them had slipped it would have gone clean through the bottom of the galley."

The abbé pricked up his ears.

"Heavy, eh?" said he. "Ah! lead for the bullet-factory, no doubt."

Lafargue shook his head with a smile of superior wisdom.

"No, monsieur. People don't take all that trouble about lead. They are going to send them to Paris."

At this stage of the conversation the abbé changed countenance and gave a little groan.

"Have you any brandy, my friend?" he said to Leroux, who was pulling stroke.

"There, monsieur," replied Leroux, pointing to a locker under the seat. "Get the flask, Lafargue. Monsieur feels the swell a little, eh? But monsieur is usually an excellent sailor."

"It is not that," said the abbé, taking a pull at the flask offered him. "So you think they are taking these cases to Paris?" he went on to Lafargue.

"I know it, monsieur. My brother told me the waggon was waiting, and the escort—six men and an officer."

The abbé groaned a second time, and clasped his hands over his stomach.

"Monsieur is not ill, I hope?" said Leroux.

The abbé really looked very unwell. He leaned against Lafargue and groaned again.

"My good Leroux," he said, speaking with apparent difficulty, "I cannot go on. You must put me ashore. I am afraid I am going to be very ill."

"At once, monsieur," said Leroux, backing water, and signing to Lafargue to put the tiller over. The boat was pulled back, and the abbé was carried ashore.

"You must take a letter for me instead," he said, as soon as he was landed on the beach. "I won't keep you a minute."

He sat down on an empty keg, and with many groans opened his valise. Taking paper and pencil, he wrote in cypher as follows:

"MY LORD,

M. de Torcy has gone suddenly to Flanders. I followed him to the frontier, but it was too dangerous to proceed farther. I wait instructions in Paris.

GAULTIER DU FRESNE DE BEAUVAL."

This he sealed, with the aid of a light struck for him by Lafargue. Then he addressed it to the earl of Oxford, in London, and handed it to Leroux with a pistole.

"I rely on you," he said.

"It shall be put in safe hands, M. l'abbé," said Leroux. "Shall Lafargue stay and attend to you? We can spare him."

"No, I thank you. I can crawl as far as Lestraade's. Don't wait, or you will lose your tide."

"Then good day, monsieur. We shall hope to hear better accounts of you when we come back."

Leroux and Lafargue returned to the boat, and it put off again. The abbé walked slowly and painfully up the beach and to Lestraade's house. He explained to the surprised Madelon why he had returned, and then retired to the room he had occupied the night before.

When he had entered and shut the door, he straightened himself, took a pinch of snuff, and seemed to be suddenly convalescent.

"What a chance!" he muttered to himself. "And to think I should have known nothing about it! Eight chests, he said. Gold or silver, I wonder?"

And the abbé sat down to have a little serious cogitation.

CHAPTER XX

THE CURÉ OF STE. MARIE GENESTE

A MILITARY waggon, drawn by eight horses, and escorted by half a dozen mounted troopers and an officer, was approaching the 'Lion d'Or' of Pont St. Michel, near Doullens, on the road to Amiens. Maître Jérôme, the host, had espied the *cortège* afar off in the dusk of the late November twilight, and was wondering if a little business was to be forthcoming, or otherwise. Standing beside him in the wide porch of the rambling old inn was a man in the dress of a priest, with a shovel-hat, and a wrapper round his neck and chin which covered nearly half his face. He wore enormous blue spectacles and a grey wig, and had a large black patch on one side of his mouth.

"Here are guests for you, maître Jérôme," said the priest. "I passed them half an hour ago."

"The Lord be thanked!" replied the host piously. "That is, if his majesty's soldiers have had any pay lately, which is doubtful."

"Take a cheerful view of things, my good host. If the troopers cannot pay themselves, they cause other people to pay. All the rustics will crowd in to drink with them."

"In any weather but this you would be quite right, mon père. But we have had so much rain the last week that half the peasants hereabouts are house-bound. Roads and lanes are impassable. In the valley on the other side of Doullens there are six feet of water on the high road, and the bridge has been carried away."

This information seemed to interest the priest.

"Then how are folks to get to Amiens?" said he.

"There is only one way till the water goes down," replied the host. "Along the hill-side through the wood of Serras, past Ste. Marie Geneste."

"A lonely place that, if I recollect right," said the priest. "Père Cermont used to be curé there years ago, I think."

"He is there still," said the host, as the waggon-party drove up to the door. "Will you alight, mon officier?" This was addressed to Gwynett, who was in command of the escort.

"Can you accommodate my men and their horses?" asked Gwynett.

"Twice as many," said the host. "Où! Mathieu! take *ces braves* to the stable."

An ostler ran out at the summons and led the cavalcade under an archway to the left. Gwynett followed the waggon as it was taken over the rough stones into the yard of the inn.

"*Parbleu!*" said the priest to himself, "now that I see him plainly, I recollect him. It is the fellow who was with de Torcy at Versailles. These things hang together, evidently."

The priest went out into the road to look at the western sky, and cautiously took off his blue spectacles in order to see better. Their removal revealed the abbé Gaultier, otherwise very well disguised by his patch and wig.

"More wet coming," he soliloquised. "Now if it will only rain a deluge to-night, something may be done with my dear friend Germont. That is a stupendous stroke of luck—perfectly providential, as they say in England."

He put on his spectacles again and returned to the porch. Gwynett was asking the landlord about the state of the roads to Paris, and maître Jérôme repeated the remark he had made to Gaultier respecting the by-road past Ste. Marie Geneste. The abbé got into the rear, and listened unobserved.

"How far is that from here?" asked Gwynett.

"About six leagues, monsieur."

"A bad road, probably?"

"Impossible to be worse. It would take monsieur all the day to get there."

"Is there any *cabaret* or tavern thereabouts where we could put up?"

"There was one till the other day—Jean Lorient's. But he died last week, and I believe it is shut up."

Gwynett shrugged his shoulders.

"Then we must go on to Amiens during the night," said he.

"In the meantime, let us have some supper."

"At once, monsieur."

The landlord went towards the kitchen, and in the passage met Gaultier.

"Maître Jérôme," said the latter, "I have changed my mind about my supper."

"But it is quite ready, M. le curé," said the host hastily.

"All the better. But you have laid it in the public room, I perceive, and there are fresh arrivals. I do not care for company, my good host, especially the company of troopers. Neither their manners nor their language usually conduces to the comfort of a man of my profession."

The host scratched his head.

"Will monsieur have his supper in the kitchen?" he

suggested doubtfully. "It is quite at monsieur's service. Only we have been curing bacon, and——"

"Pardon, maître Jérôme—all I meant to say was that I will take my supper in my own room, if you have one ready."

"Certainly, M. le curé. There is a charming room, which was used only last night by the bailiff of M. le comte de St. Pol, on his way to Ste. Marie Geneste. I assure you he is very particular, monsieur."

"That will do," said the abbé. "I will go to it at once. And I will get you to send my breakfast there also."

The host showed the way to the room in question, ushered the abbé into it, and returned to see after the supper.

"When do these people leave you?" asked the abbé, as the host reappeared.

"I heard the officer tell the men to be ready to start at eight o'clock in the morning, monsieur."

"What an unholy hour!" grumbled the abbé to himself. "But the less they see of me the better." Then he said aloud,

"That is quite lazy, my good maître Jérôme. I must be on my road before that. Let me have my breakfast at seven, and my horse ready at half-past. It is raining, I hear?"

"Heavily, monsieur." And the host went out, leaving Gaultier to finish his supper and go to bed.

* * * * *

About noon the following day, which happened to be fine, Gaultier pulled up his horse at a cross-road in the wood of Serras. A peasant was approaching from the lane on the left, and the abbé waited for the man to come up.

"My friend," said he, "does not the curé of Ste. Marie Geneste live somewhere about here?"

The hind, who was attired in what were evidently his fête-day clothes, doffed his cap.

"Yes, M. le curé," he said. "The house is up this lane. I am his servant."

"Does the lane lead anywhere else?"

"No, monsieur. But there is a track across the common afterwards."

"And this one opposite?"

"That goes to the farm of Grandpré, monsieur."

"And stops there, does it not?"

"Certainly, monsieur."

The abbé nodded a dismissal, and the hind went on his way

towards the farm. Gaultier rode forward a short distance, examining the forest through which the road took its course. It was rather dense at this point, and the trunks of the pines and oaks rose out of a tangled thicket of undergrowth, interrupted by deep gullies and pits, and stretching as far as the eye could reach. Several thick-branching larches of great size bordered the roadway and overhung it. On either side the thicket was practically impenetrable.

"It is all very much as I recollect it," soliloquised the abbé. "Nothing could be better, I think. It remains to be seen whether my sainted friend is also what he used to be. If not, I have still the two other strings to my bow—Beauvais and Sandricourt. Ah! what is this?"

A little farther on three or four trees lay felled on each side of the road. The fallen trunks were denuded of their branches, which had been sawn into short lengths and lay in piles at the edge of the thicket.

"Admirable!" said the abbé to himself.

He looked round for a few minutes, and then, turning his horse, rode back to the cross-ways and took the lane to the right. A quarter of a mile brought him to a group of buildings which had the appearance of an old manor-house turned into a farm. No traces of cultivation, however, appeared in its neighbourhood, and the only sign of occupation was a faint column of smoke ascending from one of the back chimneys.

The abbé rode into the courtyard, and knocked at the door of the main entrance without dismounting. No one attended to the summons, and he knocked again. After an interval, steps were heard inside. A bolt was withdrawn, the door swung backwards, and a man appeared on the threshold.

The newcomer was an ecclesiastic of slight, spare build, about sixty years old, with shoulders rounded as if by perpetual stooping, severely aquiline features, piercing eyes almost lost under thick eyebrows, and a mouth which was scarcely more than a line. He looked at the abbé without a trace of expression.

"*Peste!* my dear Germont," said the abbé, "anyone would think you had forgotten me."

At the words the curé lifted his eyebrows as if in recognition, and moved a step forwards.

"Come in," said he imperturbably. "Your patch and wig and spectacles are very successful."

The abbé dismounted, and was about to fasten his bridle to the porch.

"Put your beast in the stable," said the curé, "while I get you something to eat. You must excuse ceremony. I am alone to-day."

"All the better," said the abbé. He led his horse in the direction indicated, and after having provided for its comfort, so far as a mouthful of mouldy hay permitted, he returned to the porch and made his way to the back of the house. The curé awaited him in a sort of library, the walls of which were covered with bookshelves and cupboards, and which was lighted by a skylight. A pan of eggs was boiling on a charcoal stove in the corner, and a loaf and cheese stood on the table. The abbé sat down and looked round.

"Nothing seems changed," said he. "It must be ten years since I was here last."

"Possibly," replied the curé, in a tone which suggested that time did not exist.

"Your work goes on as usual?"

"As usual."

"Any results?"

"Some. Not expected ones."

"Am I interrupting any process?"

"Not at the moment. In half an hour I must attend to some preparations."

The curé put the eggs on the table, and motioned to his guest to fall to. Gaultier addressed himself to the modest meal, and ate with an admirable appetite. The curé took nothing, explaining that he had already dined, and waited till his guest had finished. He then led the way through a narrow door, between two crowded bookshelves, and ushered the abbé into a long, low room fitted out as a chemist's laboratory, furnished with a furnace and chimney, and lighted, like the other, by a skylight. Evidently the curé had an objection to people who peer through windows.

"You will wonder what brings me here," said Gaultier, seating himself in an ancient arm-chair which stood in a corner.

"An old friend is always welcome," replied the curé, examining a test-tube very intently.

"We have not seen much of each other of late," went on the abbé, gazing curiously into the recesses of the half-lighted apartment.

"Not of late—as you say."

"You have not yet discovered the philosopher's stone, my friend?"

"Not yet."

"You still keep up your researches?"

"For certain things—yes."

"Hampered a good deal, as of old, by a light purse, I presume?"

"Of course. Latterly I have managed somewhat better. I can sell some of my medicinal preparations in Paris. A niece of mine, a widow, has a herbalist's shop in the Rue Beauregard—Marie Latour—you saw her here before she married."

"I know her very well. She does quite a big trade with certain ladies of my acquaintance."

"I believe so. But my experiments are all more or less costly, and swallow everything."

"If such is the case—what the mischief is that?"

The abbé jumped up hastily as a confused scratching sound was heard behind him.

"Only my rabbits," explained the curé, pointing to a set of hutches on shelves, which Gaultier had not noticed in the obscurity.

"Why do you trouble to keep rabbits?" asked the abbé.

"The whole country is swarming with them."

"They are useful to take my medicines. I am obliged to keep them out of sight here, as you may suppose."

"I do not quite see why."

"Some of my preparations do not agree with them. It would discourage my customers if they had the opportunity of noticing that."

"*Certes*, that is reasonable," said the abbé meditatively.

"But I have some news for you, which you may find better worth your attention than giving rabbits preparations which do not agree with them."

"I am at your service," replied the curé.

"First of all," said Gaultier, "I see they are cutting the timber in the wood. Whose is it?"

"Everything hereabouts belongs to the comte de St. Pol. There has been a twenty years' law-suit about the wood, or the comte would have cleared it away before. His bailiff was here yesterday and to-day, making a start."

"To be sure—he slept at Pont St. Michel. They have begun at the roadside."

"Naturally. I helped the men for an hour this morning, while some of my preparations were brewing."

"How?"

"Guiding the trunks with a rope, so that they should not block the road in falling."

The abbé seemed lost in gratified surprise.

"That is curious," said he. "Do you think, my dear Germont, you could do just the reverse—if you tried?"

"In what way?"

"Supposing—mark, I only say supposing—you and I took an axe and a rope—probably you have both?"

"Yes."

"Supposing you and I took an axe and a rope, do you see any difficulty about our felling one of those trees so that it should fall across the road?"

"None. But why?"

"Good! so far. You said you were alone?"

"Gilles has gone to Grandpré, two miles off, to assist at the wedding-supper of his sister."

"I met him."

"He will not return till the morning."

"What neighbours have you?"

"There is a shepherd's cottage half-way to Grandpré. Nothing nearer."

"Good again," said the abbé. "I should like to look over the stables. I did not take much notice just now."

The curé opened a double door at the end of his laboratory. It led into the stable-yard of the house, and he went out with Gaultier.

The stables had stalls for a couple of dozen horses, a relic of long-past days of prosperity for the manor-house. Adjoining was a stone outhouse, divided into a coach-house and a shed by a massive oaken partition, each section having an equally massive oaken door opening outwards. The partition itself had a door between the coach-house and the shed. An old waggon stood in the yard, so close to the door of the shed that the latter could not be opened more than a couple of inches. This building was of one storey only, but the stables had a loft over them, reached by a ladder through a trap-door. On a shelf inside the shed stood a row of copper cans and a couple of kegs, from which emanated a certain pungent odour.

In the middle of the yard was a well, surrounded by a low, moss-grown wall, and covered with a rotting wooden lid. Near it lay a couple of planks, between which tall tufts of grass had grown undisturbed.

The abbé observed all these details with minute care.

"Where is your well-bucket and rope?" he asked.

"We don't use that well now. It gave out years ago, for some reason or other—probably a landslip. There is another in the orchard at the other side of the house which never fails us."

"The orchard with that bottomless pit of a carp-pond in the far corner?"

"Ah! you recollect the carp-pond? But the carp have all been poached, unfortunately, or I would have given you a fine supper."

The abbé looked at the shelf.

"What have you in your cans and kegs?" he asked.

"Turpentine and rape-oil. That is part of my stock-in-trade. I distil the turpentine and crush the rape-seed in my laboratory, and sell the oils to the farmers. That has the two-fold advantage of doubling my income and of accounting for my apparatus in an orthodox manner. Otherwise I should probably have been denounced to the 'chambre ardente' before this. The 'affaire Voysin' is still recollected hereabouts."

Of the 'chambre ardente' and the celebrated trial of La Voysin we shall have occasion to speak later.

"Have you any cider to spare?"

"Certainly. Our apples have always done well."

"And the poppies?"

The curé looked sharply at his guest. Gaultier laughed.

"My dear Germont, I am sure you do not neglect to include laudanum amongst the things you ask your rabbits to digest. But perhaps you are sold out?"

"Naturally I have laudanum," replied the curé, in a tone which implied nothing.

Gaultier took a final glance round, and turned back towards the house.

"I do not recollect having tried to fell a tree since I was a lad at Beauval," said he. "How long does it take two men to cut through such trunks as I saw over there?"

"Say an hour," replied the curé, as they re-entered the laboratory.

The abbé looked at his watch.

"Plenty of time," he remarked. "Your man was dressed in his best when I saw him. What has he done with his working-clothes?"

"Probably they are in his attic."

"You can show me the attic?"

"Of course."

The abbé rubbed his chin softly.

"My dear friend," he said, after a pause, "will you do me, for your and my joint benefit, two little favours?"

"What are they?"

"First, will you continue your recreation of this morning, and help me to cut down one more tree for the bailiff of M. de St. Pol? Secondly, will you immediately afterwards have an urgent call to a dying parishioner at about two leagues distance, who will keep you all night?"

The curé looked meditatively at Gaultier.

"Is it permitted to ask why all these things should happen?" said he.

"Certainly. But it may not be wise to know—yet."

The curé pondered, with his eye on the abbé.

"How much is in question?" he asked, after a pause.

"I have not the slightest idea," replied Gaultier.

"There is a certain vagueness about that."

"Without doubt. But there is no vagueness about eight heavy chests in a waggon, landed from a ship at Calais, and an escort of six troopers and an officer, bound for Paris."

The curé did not reply for a minute or two.

"My curiosity has evaporated," he said finally.

"Very good. As to M. de St. Pol's tree?"

"That can be managed."

"And your dying parishioner?"

"I know one ill enough for the purpose. But who is to bring the false summons?"

"I, of course."

"Whom I have never seen before?"

"Precisely."

CHAPTER XXI

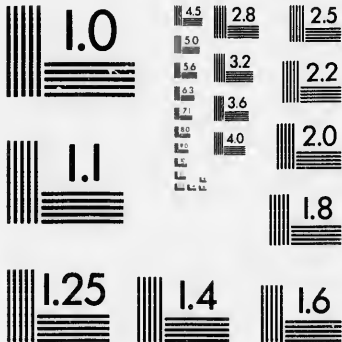
THE ABBÉ GAULTIER MAKES HIMSELF GENERALLY USEFUL

WHILE the abbé was renewing his acquaintance with the stable-yard of the presbytery of Ste. Marie Geneste, the waggon under Gwynett's charge was being laboriously dragged along the road towards the wood of Serras. The party passed the crossing of the lanes just as the sun was setting. A



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couple of hundred yards farther on a man stood at the roadside to let them pass. He was an unkempt fellow in the garb of a farm-labourer, with an exceedingly dirty face, matted hair which hung over his eyes, and hands stiff with clay.

"If you are for Amiens," said he to one of the troopers, "you will find the road blocked just beyond that bend."

"How is that, Jacques Bonhomme?" asked the trooper.

"You can see in a minute," replied the peasant, lounging after the escort as they proceeded at a snail's pace with the lumbering waggon.

A curve in the road revealed a huge fir-tree blocking the thoroughfare, with a mass of branches twenty feet high, and reaching a score of yards on either side into the thicket.

Gwynett reined in his horse, and the *cortège* came to a sudden halt.

"What does this mean, my man?" he asked of the peasant, who stood near, admiring the troopers' horses.

"Monsieur, it is the comte de St. Pol who has given orders to cut down some of the timber."

A certain marked peculiarity in the intonation of the peasant's voice struck Gwynett so forcibly that he said to himself,

"Really, that is a voice one could pick in the dark out of a whole army."

Then he asked,

"But why block the road?"

"It is only till the morning, monsieur. No one passes this way at night, and very few in the day."

"That does not prevent our wanting to pass this way to-night. Is there any track through the wood that is possible for the waggon?"

"None, monsieur."

"Where do those cross-lanes lead that we passed just now?"

The peasant gave the details with which the reader is already acquainted.

Gwynett looked at the fallen tree, and turned to the corporal of the troopers.

"We must bivouac here," he said. "It is too late to start clearing the road. Let your men see about making a fire, and give them their rations from the waggon. It is lucky the rain has stopped."

The peasant came forward as the corporal saluted in acknowledgment of the order.

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AT STE. MARIE GENESTE.



"Pardon, M. l'officier," said he, "it is going to be a wet night, for all that. If you like to take your party to the stables of M. le curé over yonder, you will have, at all events, a roof over your heads. There is room there for twice as many."

"You are sure of that?"

"Monsieur can easily satisfy himself."

Gwynett turned to the corporal.

"It is worth while finding out," he said. "I will go myself and see."

He returned to the cross-ways, and rode up the lane towards the presbytery. At the gate he was met by the curé, who wore his hat and cloak, and was evidently on the point of leaving home. Gwynett raised his hat.

"M. le curé of Ste. Marie Geneste?" he asked.

The curé returned the salute.

"The same, monsieur," said he. "Can I do anything for you?"

"I find, monsieur, that the way to Amiens is stopped by a fallen tree just past the cross-road. Can you conveniently allow my men and horses the shelter of your stables or outhouses during the night? We are upon his majesty's service."

"Assuredly, monsieur. I only regret that I cannot offer you any further hospitality. But, unfortunately, I am at this moment on the point of going away for the night to a distant parishioner, and I have had to shut up the house, as I am alone at present."

"We should not think of trespassing so far on your goodness, monsieur. All we want is a roof over us till morning."

"You are very welcome, monsieur. If you will follow me, I will show you what accommodation there is."

Gwynett dismounted, and walked with the curé into the yard.

"You will find the stables and the coach-house dry, I think," said the curé. "Over the stables, as you see, there is a good loft, with plenty of straw. Water you will get from the other well, in the orchard there—this one has been out of use for years. There is plenty of firewood in the outhouses. Have you any food?"

"We are amply provisioned, I thank you. You will permit me to recoup you for our horses' fodder and any fuel we may use?"

The curé waved his hand in dissent.

"By no means, monsieur. What is here belongs first to my poor, and secondly to his majesty."

"Let me, then, leave something with you for the poor of your parish, mon père," said Gwynett, tendering a couple of pistoles to the curé.

"I thank you in their name, monsieur," replied the curé, pocketing the coins. "If there is nothing in which I can be of any further service, I will ask you to excuse me, as the night is closing in."

"Nothing, I thank you. Should we have left in the morning before your return, accept our thanks for your hospitality."

"I regret that that means so very little, monsieur."

The curé bowed and walked off. Gwynett went back to his troop, and ordered them up to the house. The waggon was drawn into the middle of the yard, and the corporal asked Gwynett for further orders.

"If we are to mount guard over it, M. le capitaine," he said, pointing to the coach-house, "why not do it under cover?"

Gwynett looked at the sky and then at the coach-house, the door of which had just been opened by the peasant.

"Very good," he said. "Put a sentry till we turn in. I shall take the night."

"Pardon, mon capitaine," said the corporal apologetically, "but you have mounted guard every night. This is the third. People must sleep."

Gwynett laughed, and clapped the corporal on the shoulder.

"You see, corporal," said he, "if you were on guard, and happened to take a little nap while someone—say our friend in the blouse there—walked away with a chest under each arm, your apologies would not console me at all. On the one hand, I should have to have you hung, which I should regret, and on the other hand, when you were hung I should still be a couple of boxes short."

As the peasant had by no means the air of a Hercules, the corporal thought the idea of his eloping with the contents of the waggon a very good joke. He repeated the joke to the subject of it as soon as Gwynett's back was turned. The peasant grinned solemnly.

"All the better for you, mon officier," said he, looking round mysteriously, and then putting his mouth to the other's ear.

"Why?"

"There is a little barrel of cider in the loft," replied the peasant, in a confidential tone.

"Ah! M. le curé's?"

"No—it belongs to my cousin Gilles, the curé's other servant. He has gone to a wedding-supper. We'll drink the bride's health, if you don't mind."

"That would be only politeness," said the corporal affably. "But we must wait till the captain has settled everything for the night."

"What do you call your captain?" asked the peasant.

"M. Ambrose Gwynett," replied the corporal.

The peasant started.

"That sounds like a foreign name," he said, after a pause.

"They say he is English. But M. le gouverneur treats him like a brother."

"Who is that?" asked the peasant, with a stupid air.

"M. Daguerre, the governor of Calais, of course," replied the corporal.

The peasant looked at him vacantly.

"Ah!" said he, "that is a long way from here."

"You must be rather a stay-at-home, my friend," observed the corporal, in a patronising tone.

The peasant shook his head solemnly.

"I served in Flanders when I was young," he said. "But that is a good while ago."

"That is better than nothing. I thought from your voice you were not such a yokel as you looked. Certainly a little time with the colours polishes a man up wonderfully. But I see the captain wants me."

The corporal went after Gwynett, who was going to inspect the loft over the stables, where the troopers were putting the horses.

The peasant—who was, of course, the abbé Gaultier—looked after them with a serious air.

"I must be very careful," he said to himself. "Evidently my lout's twang is not as good as I thought. But that name—and an Englishman—it is impossible there can be two of such a name. What a wonderful stroke of luck! Truly, for once fortune favours the deserving."

The abbé went over to the coach-house and looked at the waggon, which had been backed into it. Then he was visited by a sudden idea. He took a spade and bucket from among a heap of tools which lay at the back of the coach-house, and went hurriedly to the curé's pig-sty round the corner in the orchard. He returned with a bucket full of manure, cast a glance around to see that no one was in sight, and quickly

distributed the contents of the bucket under the waggon and over the floor of the coach-house.

He then went into the shed adjoining, through the door in the partition. The floor of the shed was covered a foot deep with ling or litter of cut heather. The abbé took down one of the turpentine-cans from the shelf, sprinkled a couple of quarts over the litter in all directions, and restored the can to its place just as he heard the voice of Gwynett approaching the shed with the corporal. The abbé took care to be discovered in the coach-house as the others entered.

Gwynett looked round and turned to the corporal.

"Let me have a couple of bundles of straw in that corner," he said, "and then you and the others can turn in."

"Very good, M. le capitaine."

The corporal went off. Gwynett advanced a few steps into the coach-house and sniffed. His nose began to recognise something rather unendurable in the atmosphere.

"What a disgusting stench!" he said to the disguised peasant.

The abbé looked at him with an air of surprise.

"Does monsieur find it disagreeable?" he said.

"One could cut it with a knife," grumbled Gwynett, going towards the door into the shed.

The abbé followed him respectfully.

"You see, mon officier," said he, "M. le curé keeps his turpentine in this shed, and that really has a very bad odour."

"Tastes differ, my good fellow. I don't object to this at all. No one with an English nose could survive a night of that other bouquet. I shall lie down here."

A light flashed from the eyes of the abbé.

"Can I bring monsieur anything to drink?" he asked. "I think there is some cider in the stables."

Gwynett produced some bread and cheese out of his wallet.

"I will trouble you to show me the well," said he.

The abbé pressed his lips together as he preceded Gwynett to the gate leading into the orchard.

"Very good, my dear M. Ambrose Gwynett, of Thornhaugh," he said to himself. "That settles matters. You have had your chance. If you will not suit my convenience by sleeping till morning, you must sleep for ever. So much the worse for you."

Arrived at the well, he said,

"Shall I draw for monsieur?"

"I can do that. Just tell the corporal not to trouble about the straw—I shall lie on the heather."

"With pleasure, monsieur."

Returning hastily, the abbé met the corporal, who had already thrown the straw down behind the waggon, and was on his way to the stables. Gaultier rushed into the shed. In a few seconds he had emptied the remaining cans of turpentine over the heather, and had just replaced them on the shelf when Gwynett returned.

"Pardon, mon officier," said the abbé, "I usually sleep in this coach-house when M. le curé is from home. He prefers to lock the house up. If monsieur has any objection, I will go to the stables."

"Do as you please," replied Gwynett, going into the shed.

"Does monsieur find smoking annoy him?"

"Not at all."

"I will see if the horses are all right, and wish monsieur good-night. Ah, *dame!* I have dropped my pipe."

The abbé stooped, and his hand travelled close to the ground for a couple of feet round the door-post of the partition. As it did so, it was followed by a thin line of black powder, which ended in the coach-house. The abbé rose, and put something back in the front of his blouse.

"Will monsieur have the door here open or shut?" said he.

"You may as well shut it. Good night."

"Good night, monsieur."

Gwynett wrapped his cloak round him, chose a place where the ling made a comfortable heap near the inner wall, and sat down with his back against it. The abbé shut the door. As he did so, he withdrew the thumb-plate, which he had previously detached, and laid it on the floor.

The latch, a large and heavy one, was on the outside of the partition door. As the other door was blocked by the cart, Gwynett was now a prisoner. If the absence of the thumb-plate should be discovered too soon, it had, of course, fallen on the floor accidentally. Nothing could be simpler.

The abbé went to the stables and mounted the ladder to the loft. Here he found the troopers inbibing the contents of a small keg of cider with discreet cheerfulness. The corporal was nodding in a corner. Gaultier sat down on a truss of hay and affected to drink with the others till the keg was empty.

Ten minutes later all the troopers were lying amongst the hay, fast asleep, and snoring stertorously. The abbé waited

for a quarter of an hour, and then shook his nearest neighbour roughly by the arm. The man took no notice of the effort to disturb him, and continued to sleep heavily. Gaultier made the same experiment with the others, and with the same result. Then he descended the ladder.

"Now for the other," he said to himself.

He took an armful of hay, and went through the yard and orchard to a tumble-down piece of shedding amongst the trees at the edge of the wood. Here he had left his horse, ready saddled, with his valise strapped to the peak. He put the hay in a rough manger, and listened for any sounds in the surrounding fields and woods. Then he returned to the yard and listened again. Profound silence reigned, broken only by the barking of a dog at some cabin a mile or more away across the country.

The abbé went to the door between the coach-house and the shed. He thought he could distinguish a regular breathing, as of a man dozing or sleeping, on the other side of the partition.

He produced a lantern from the corner where the farm implements lay in a heap, lit it from his tinder-box, and set it down near the door of the partition. Next he took a pitch-fork and laid it by the lantern, filled and lit his pipe, and listened again.

Then he carefully put his pipe, bowl downwards, on the ground near the door-post, took up the pitch-fork, and waited.

A flash ran under the door, a hissing sound followed, and in an instant the shed was filled with a roaring sheet of flame. The abbé leaned forward, grasping the pitch-fork, with his eyes dilated and his teeth set. He heard a stifled exclamation, a sound as of some desperate struggle, and then a terrible cry.

Silence followed. Volumes of smoke poured out through the chinks of the door, and the abbé had to step back to avoid being suffocated. The outer door had apparently not caught fire, but the thinner wood of the top of the partition began to show red streaks.

Several minutes passed, during which no sound came from the shed except the roar of the flames and the hiss and crackle of the burning heather. The abbé opened wide the door of the coach-house, which was filled with smoke, and stood in the yard. The outer door of the shed, behind the cart, showed dazzling gleams of light between the ill-fitting timbers.

After a time these gleams began to grow dull and red, and the smoke to issue less thickly. Gaultier went back to the coach-house, took a long hop-pole, and lay down close to the partition door. There was comparatively little smoke so near the surface of the ground, and the abbé could breathe without difficulty. He called to Gwynett, but there was no reply. Then he unlatched the door, pulled it open, and lay down again.

The upper part of the shed was filled with dense smoke, but a foot or eighteen inches of clear air next the floor showed a smouldering area of ashes and red twigs. The abbé poked about with the pole as far as he could reach without meeting with any obstacle.

As the ashes died out and the smoke thinned, he advanced on his hands and knees farther into the shed. He then pushed the pole in all directions up to the walls.

In one corner at the back it met with a little resistance which suddenly yielded, as if the pole had passed through some soft substance. The abbé turned a little sick. This annoyed him.

"*Diable!*" he said to himself, "what is there to squirm about? Our *rôti* is a little overdone, that is all. So much the better."

He crawled back to the coach-house, took out his pipe, and blacked it all over with the smoke of the lantern. Then he tossed it carefully into the middle of the shed, replaced the thumb-plate of the latch, and shut the door.

"Let us hope the intelligence of our worthy friend the corporal will be equal to the occasion," he reflected. "Any fool ought to discover now that it is a very dangerous thing to take a nap with a lighted pipe in one's mouth."

He put the lantern, pole, and pitch-fork back in their corner, and took a deep breath.

"Now to business," he said to himself.

CHAPTER XXII

A DISCOVERY

At early dawn the next morning the peasant Gilles, returning from Grandpré, met père Germont entering the yard of the presbytery.

"Ah! Gilles," said the curé, "did all go well?"

"Admirably, M. le curé. We have only just left off dancing. Monsieur has been away?"

"I was sent for last evening to old mère Durand at La Tourette. I don't know exactly why—she did not seem any worse. By the way, a party of mounted troopers, under an officer, asked leave to put up in the stables last night. See if they have left."

At this point the corporal emerged from the stables looking dazed and only half awake. He saluted the curé, and turned towards the coach-house, the door of which was wide open. It was empty, and the corporal's jaw dropped as he gazed.

"What is the matter?" asked the curé.

"*Mille tonnerres!*" gasped the corporal. "Where is the waggon?"

"What waggon?" put in Gilles, who was evidently privileged.

"Did you put it in the coach-house?" asked the curé.

The corporal made no answer, but rushed back to the stables.

"The horses gone too!" he muttered, in a terrified tone, as he looked down the row of stalls.

"Where is your captain?" asked the curé, who had followed to the door.

"I left him in the shed, M. le curé, when we turned in for the night. I must tell him."

Gilles accompanied the curé and the corporal to the shed. A faint smoke was issuing from between the cracks of the door, and a strong smell of burning pervaded the air.

"What is all this?" asked the curé. "It seems to me you have been setting my shed on fire."

The corporal knocked at the door in the partition and called out, but there was no reply. Then he opened the door and looked in. Nothing was to be seen but blackened walls and a bed of ashes and charred twigs on the floor. The upper part of the partition was still smouldering, and spirals of smoke rose from it up to the rafters of the shed. The corporal gazed aghast.

"Holy Virgin!" cried he, "the captain has been burnt to a cinder."

The curé knitted his brows.

"My friend Armand does not stick at a trifle," he said to himself. "These little tricks are not too safe. We must not have any mistake made."

"Where is your man, M. le curé?" asked the corporal.
 "He slept in the coach-house."

"Do you mean Gilles? He was at Grandpré last night."

"No, his cousin, who was here—your servant."

"I have no cousin," said Gilles.

"I have no other servant," said the curé.

The corporal looked very much disturbed.

"There has been some foul play," he muttered, "and that yokel is at the bottom of it. I will call my comrades, and we will search."

"Here they come," said the curé, as the troopers, having discovered the absence of the waggon-horses, made their appearance at the door of the coach-house. The corporal showed the awe-stricken men the heaps of ashes in the half-lit shed. One of them removed his hat, and the rest followed his example, as they passed one by one into the shed and stood in a group against the outer door.

At this moment a voice, apparently coming from the bowels of the earth, shouted, "Corporal!"

"That's the captain," exclaimed the corporal, going forward. Gilles sprang after him.

"He is in the saw-pit," cried he. "Take care, corporal—the old planks must have rotted."

"Get the cart out of the way, and open the door," said the curé to the troopers, "then we can see what we are about. And fetch the ladder from the stables."

As the doors were flung wide open, the light entered, and revealed a hole in the floor about two feet square, close to the back wall. Its edges were of splintered timber, buried in black ashes, and the aperture indicated that two or three planks, constituting part of the floor, had given way and been broken downwards. Gilles and the corporal went up to it, testing the ground as they advanced. The earthen floor ended about six feet from the back of the shed, and was there replaced by planking, which extended from wall to wall. This planking, like the rest of the floor, was now covered with the ashes of the bed of ling which had formerly lain over it. The boards appeared to be sound everywhere except at the hole just mentioned, over which the corporal was now leaning.

"Is that you, mon capitaine?" he asked.

"Yes," replied the voice of Gwynett. "You must help me out of this."

"They are getting a ladder, monsieur. Are you hurt?"

"Something is wrong with my left arm. I don't know of anything else."

The troopers here entered with the ladder, which was at once put down between the broken planks. It descended about eight feet, and then rested on the bottom of what Gilles had called the saw-pit.

"Can you mount the ladder, mon capitaine?" asked the corporal.

"I think so," replied Gwynett, from below.

The ladder was held steady, and Gwynett began to ascend. When his head and shoulders came in view the corporal started back.

"*Mille tonnerres!*" he ejaculated. "What is this?"

Gwynett's head, face, and shoulders were covered with soot and ashes, and his features were scarcely distinguishable. The skin did not appear to have been burnt, but some of his hair was frizzled up close to the scalp. He used his right arm in mounting the ladder, and the left hung down uselessly in its sleeve.

"Clear these splinters out of my way first, corporal," said he, "and stare at me afterwards."

The corporal and Gilles extricated Gwynett from the hole in the planking, which fitted him pretty closely, and assisted him to his feet.

"Come out into the air, monsieur," said the curé. "You must have a glass of eau-de-vie. Fetch the flask from my shelf, Gilles."

Gilles went off, and returned with the cognac as Gwynett was seating himself on the shaft of the cart. The curé drew the stopper, and handed the flask to Gwynett.

"It is my own distilling," said he, as Gwynett took a pull. "I permit myself to recommend it as of the first quality."

"You are perfectly right, mon père," replied Gwynett appreciatively.

"You feel better, monsieur?"

"I thank you, yes. My head was stupid with the smoke in there, I fancy."

"And your arm, monsieur?"

Gwynett put his hand up to his left shoulder.

"As to that, monsieur, I don't know. This arm is of no use to me."

"Permit me," said the curé, passing his hand along the sleeve. "It is dislocated, evidently, monsieur. May I offer

my services to replace it? I am obliged to be a little of a surgeon, you know."

Gwynett reflected that he was still thirty or forty hours away from Paris, and decided that an amateur practitioner was better than none.

"If you will be so good, mon père," said he.

"Here or indoors, monsieur?"

"I prefer the fresh air, mon père."

The curé caused Gwynett's coat to be removed, and instructed the corporal how to assist him. In a few minutes he had reset the displaced joint with a good deal of dexterity and a minimum of pain to the patient. Then he sent Gilles to fetch materials for a bandage, and a basin of water wherewith to remove the dirt and soot from Gwynett's face and hands.

"While I bandage your shoulder, monsieur," said he, "you can perhaps explain what has happened. I presume the ling caught fire in some way?"

"Yes. But I don't know how. I was sitting with my eyes closed, leaning against the wall, when suddenly the whole place burst into a sheet of flame."

"Perhaps it was your pipe, mon officier," observed the corporal, presenting one which he had just picked up amongst the ashes.

"I was not smoking, and that is not my pipe."

"Monsieur was alone?" asked the curé, with a shade of curiosity in his tone.

"Your man was in the coach-house. He said he usually slept there."

"I have already mentioned to the corporal, monsieur, that the man you speak of is not a servant of mine. He is not known to me."

Gwynett stared at the curé.

"Not a servant of yours?"

"Not at all, monsieur."

"I am M. le curé's servant," observed Gilles, with dignity.

"He had the story very pat," observed Gwynett. "What did it all mean?"

"We know nothing of the man, except that he brought a message to me last evening from a distant parishioner just before I saw you. From what has happened, this message seems to have been intended to get me out of the way for the night."

"Had he any companions?"

"We have seen no one, monsieur."

"If it was not your pipe, mon capitaine," said the corporal, "that scoundrel must have set the place on fire himself."

"But why?"

"To steal the waggon, mon capitaine, after you were disposed of." And the corporal pointed to the empty coach-house.

Gwynett bounded up.

"What!" he cried. "The waggon gone?"

"Decidedly, mon capitaine. We have only just discovered it."

Gwynett stared at the coach-house with a bewildered air.

"Are the waggon-horses gone, too?" he asked.

"Yes, monsieur."

"Did you hear nothing of all this in the night?"

"Nothing, monsieur. We were all sound asleep—in fact——" and the corporal hesitated.

"Go on."

"Well, mon capitaine, I may as well confess it, that peasant gave us a keg of cider, and he must have hoccused it, for we slept like logs till a few minutes ago. Otherwise we should certainly have been awakened by the noise of the waggon and horses going off."

"Are our own horses gone, too?"

"Fortunately not, monsieur."

"Saddle at once."

The corporal and his men ran off to the stables. Gwynett examined the ground in front of the shed, and turned to the curé.

"Have you any explanation to suggest of this affair, M. le curé? It seems to have been carefully planned."

The curé shook his head.

"We have no thieves hereabouts," said he. "This is too audacious for rustics. I think you must have been followed from a distance by some clever fellows who know the country."

"It seems so. I am sorry that you are a sufferer as well as ourselves. But I will endeavour to secure you compensation for the damage done to your shed."

"That is not much of an affair. I have rather to congratulate you, monsieur, on coming no worse off. How did you escape the flames?"

"It was quite simple, monsieur. When I found the ling was on fire, I jumped up and began to push and kick it away, so as to clear the place where I was standing, close to the back

wall. At that moment the floor suddenly gave way under me, and I fell through."

"I am afraid the planks were rotten."

"Very luckily for me, it seems. However, in falling I struck my head against the wall, and recollect nothing more till I heard noises a few minutes ago. Then I came to myself, and shouted from the bottom of the hole."

"It is an old saw-pit, monsieur, which I planked over some years back, when we ceased to have any use for it. I did not think of mentioning it to you, not suspecting that the floor was insecure. But where is your cloak?"

"I saw a heap of black rags close to the hole. I am afraid that is my cloak. Probably I can get another at Amiens."

At this moment the corporal came back.

"Are we to fall in, mon capitaine?" said he.

Gwynett turned to Gilles.

"Did it rain in the night?" he asked.

"There was a shower about the time the moon set, monsieur," replied Gilles. "That was all."

"The moon sets at four," observed the curé.

Gwynett followed the trace of the waggon-wheels as they left the yard by way of the orchard.

"Does this lead anywhere, M. le curé?" he asked.

"There is a bridle-path across the common in the direction of Arras. The cart-road, as you see, stops at this farm, and we are shut in all round by the wood."

Gwynett stooped down to examine the ruts made by the waggon-wheels.

"That brigand has had four hours' start of us," he said to the corporal. "You see the rain has fallen on the tracks. Mount your men, and bring my horse. You and I will follow the track of the waggon, and the others must keep behind."

"Permit me to accompany you as far as the edge of the copse," said the curé, as the corporal executed Gwynett's orders. "It would not be easy to drag a waggon through that underwood. But your men would, of course, have overtaken it easily enough had it been removed by way of the road."

Gwynett made no reply, but cast a last glance, dictated by some indefinable suspicion, round the yard. No inspiration resulting therefrom, he gave the order to proceed, and the party left the yard. Gwynett and the corporal followed the traces of the waggon on foot, their horses being led by

the troopers behind, while the curé and Gilles took their own course across the orchard.

Gwynett's head, rather dazed by the experiences of the night, was getting clearer, and he began to be furious with himself at the disaster to the expedition.

"It appears to me, friend Ambrose," he reflected, "that nothing will teach you not to be an ass. It was no business of yours to do little jobs for madame des Ursins, and you might have gone to the bottom for your pains. Now you interfere to prevent M. Daguerre getting out of his messes his own way, and the first clodhopper in the road makes you ridiculous. The worst kind of fool is an obliging fool. In future, my dear fellow, learn to be a fool pure and simple."

CHAPTER XXIII

A GAME OF HIDE-AND-SEEK

THE direction taken by the wheel-tracks of the waggon was towards the thick copse which separated the presbytery farm and orchard from the common beyond. The ruts ran close to the carp-pond before mentioned. As Gwynett and the corporal, following the tracks on foot, reached this spot, they noticed a series of deep grooves leading from the waggon-ruts to the edge of the water. The corporal smiled sagaciously.

"Pardon, mon capitaine," said he, "but it looks as if we should find the cases in this pond."

Gwynett looked at the pond, the bottom of which could not be distinguished, and deliberated for a few seconds.

"It is so childish," he thought to himself, "that a very clever fellow might trust to our deciding it to be childish. We must not let any chance pass."

He turned to the corporal and remarked,

"Send a man back for that long pole I saw in the coach-house."

While the trooper went off, the curé came forward.

"I am afraid you will find this pond troublesome," he said.

"It goes by the name of the bottomless pit hereabouts, which, of course, is nonsense. But it is certainly very deep."

"Which is the steepest side, mon père?"

"Probably just opposite."

Gwynett ordered the troopers to keep away from the pond,

so that no confusion should arise from fresh footmarks mingling with the old. Then he made the round of the edge, scrutinising the ground as he did so, for a distance of twelve or fifteen feet outwards. He arrived back at the starting-point just as the trooper returned with the pole. Taking it from him, he poked about in every direction as far as he could reach. At that side the bottom sloped down at such an angle that the water deepened a foot for each two feet of distance. Nothing could be felt except the tough clay of the bed and masses of weed.

Gwynett then ordered one of the troopers to ride in carefully, sounding with the pole, and to feel with it for anything solid. This was done to a distance of four or five yards, without result.

"If the other side is much deeper, mon capitaine," said the corporal, in an aside to Gwynett, "they would throw the cases in as far as they could."

"Have you happened to lift one of those cases, corporal?"

"Yes—that is, two of us did."

"How far could the two of you swing one, if you tried? A yard and a half?" asked Gwynett.

"Not much more, if so much," replied the corporal doubtfully.

"Could four of you swing it any farther?"

"Very little—the cases are awkward to get hold of."

"Then why have we not touched one with the pole?"

"Perhaps they carried them right in."

"If you waded in with one, it seems to me you would sink up to the waist."

"It is possible they carried them round to the other side," observed the corporal perseveringly.

"It would have been easier to drive the waggon to that side in the first instance."

"Perhaps they hauled them in with our long rope."

"I see no footmarks, either of men or horses, anywhere but here. If the cases are in this pond, why take the waggon farther? You see, the track goes to the wood."

"To put us off the scent," explained the corporal, with a wise air.

"A good idea," observed Gwynett, who found the subject exhausted.

The corporal smiled with satisfaction.

"That is about what the thief expected," thought Gwynett. "He played for the gallery. We are no nearer than we were

before." Then he said to the corporal, "In any case, if the boxes are in this pond, they won't float away, and we must try and recover the waggon. Let us go on."

"Should we not put a sentry over the pond, mon capitaine?"

"The waggoner will do for that."

The party moved on, Gwynett and the corporal still following the ruts on foot, and the troopers bringing up the rear. The track came up to the edge of the wood.

"I am curious to see how the waggon was driven through the copse," said the curé to Gwynett. "A little farther on the path scarcely allows two persons to pass abreast, much less a waggon."

Arrived at the spot indicated by the curé, the waggon was found to have been driven by main force through a belt of underwood. This was attested by Gilles, who said he had passed along the narrow pathway only the previous evening, at which time the thick copse was untouched. Moreover, the waggon did not follow the path, which was here a perfect quagmire, but reached the copse over some more solid ground adjacent.

Gwynett halted the troopers, and went forward with the corporal to examine the pathway.

"What do you make of this, corporal?" said he.

"It is incredible, monsieur," replied the corporal. "Think of driving a team of horses through a wall of bushes like this!"

"How many yards of rope had we in the waggon?"

"More than thirty, monsieur."

"That accounts for it."

"How, monsieur?"

Gwynett pointed to the mud in the pathway.

"What do you see there?" he asked.

"Hoof-marks, mon capitaine, evidently—a crowd of them."

"Why? The waggon-ruts are not that way."

A light began to dawn upon the corporal.

"They took the horses round by the path," he said triumphantly, "and then pulled the waggon through the bushes by the rope. These people are no fools."

"I have been thinking the same," said Gwynett. "Forward again."

The curé here approached to take his leave.

"I think you are fairly off my ground now, monsieur," said he. "I am afraid I cannot assist you further, so I will say good day, wishing you every success. If Gilles can be of any use to you, take him, by all means."

The corporal, who thought that Gilles might have an accurate knowledge of any drinking-places in the backwoods, ventured to recommend Gwynett to accept the curé's offer.

"He may be able to tell us of some short cuts, monsieur," said he, "and how to keep clear of quagmires."

"That is true. I thank you, mon père, and will send him back whenever he chooses. Adieu, for the present."

The escort moved on, and shortly afterwards emerged upon the common. The ground fell away from the wood, and a considerable stretch of moor lay before the party. Nothing could be seen of the waggon or horses.

From this point Gwynett placed the troopers at wide distances from each other to the right and left, to advance as scouts, while he and the corporal followed the waggon-tracks on foot. Gilles led their two horses. In some places the waggon had travelled over close turf, tough and elastic, leaving little trace behind; in others, the ruts were deeply marked in wet sand or levels of stiff mud.

After half an hour's journey Gilles pointed to a slight rise in the ground just in front of them.

"We are quite close to the road to Arras, monsieur. It crosses the common in a hollow over there."

This proved to be correct. In a couple of minutes the road came into view. The wheel-tracks led to it, and after entering were lost. The surface hereabouts was mainly of loose pebbles and gravel, and the so-called road had more the appearance of the bed of a stream than anything else. If any slight traces of the wheels had been left, some recent local showers had effaced them. There were no indications that the waggon had crossed the road and entered upon the common on the other side. To seek further traces, Gwynett set off to walk along the road in one direction, while the corporal took the other.

At this moment the nearest trooper appeared on a ridge to the left, shouting and pointing to a spot in front of him.

Gwynett hastened to the ridge, and found himself over a little hollow close to the road, but out of sight therefrom. In it was the waggon, minus the horses. He ran forward and mounted the wheel to look inside. The cases were gone, and there was nothing in the waggon but the coil of rope before mentioned.

The troopers and the corporal came up, and looked with some curiosity at their leader, to see how this fresh disaster would be received. Gwynett's face, however, expressed

nothing whatever. He told the troopers to leave the waggon, and scout for the missing horses. Then he examined the surface of the soil, and the space—some sixty or eighty feet—between the hollow and the road. He found the traces of the waggon having been driven to its present position from the road, but no indications of any other vehicle or horses.

In a few minutes a trooper rode up with a couple of the waggon-horses, which he had found in one of the numerous hollows on the adjacent moor, nibbling at the scanty pasture therein. Five others were discovered immediately afterwards. All these carried their harness, which had been simply unhooked from the shafts. The eighth horse could not be found.

The recovery of the animals seemed to Gwynett to have a certain meaning. He turned to the corporal and asked, as an off chance,

“What is your opinion of this, corporal?”

“Evidently I was wrong about the pond, mon capitaine,” confessed the corporal candidly. “It is quite clear that was a blind, and the cases were brought here to meet some confederates with another vehicle. But we ought to catch them—they cannot have got very far yet with that load, even on the road.”

“True. But as to our waggon-horses, corporal—what is the matter with them?”

“The matter, mon capitaine?”

“Yes. It seems they are not worth stealing.”

The corporal looked puzzled.

“No doubt the brigands had their own team,” he said finally, “and did not want to be troubled.”

“You are probably right,” said Gwynett, deciding that the corporal was perfectly hopeless. “But now divide your men, and send them to the right and left along the road for ten miles as fast as they can go. If either party comes to a cross-road, detach a man to explore it, and rejoin the others if he finds nothing. Any discovery to be reported to me here, after the ten miles have been covered.”

“But shall we find you here, mon capitaine, if you have found anything in the meantime?”

“If I go, I will mark the direction—right, left, or back to the farm—on this broad stone. If you are in any doubt, go back to the farm. Now you had better be off. Use your eyes as you go along.”

The corporal despatched three of his men to the right, and galloped off himself with two others to the left. Gwynett

ordered Gilles to put the team of seven horses to the waggon, and to drive it back along its former track. On arriving at the first place on the moor where any very distinct ruts had been made on the first journey, Gwynett, who was leading his own horse by the bridle, caused Gilles to draw the waggon so that its wheels made ruts close alongside the old ones. Then he knelt down, and examined both of them minutely. When he rose, his face had a very satisfied air.

"Exactly," he said to himself. "Now if it is the same elsewhere, we are all right."

He went back to the stone he had shown the corporal, made a mark to indicate the direction of the presbytery, and returned to the waggon. As they proceeded, he repeated the former process of comparison at every suitable opportunity between the road and the copse. The waggon was being dragged with some difficulty through the crushed bushes when the corporal rode up with his troopers and saluted.

"Well, corporal?" said Gwynett.

"We have seen nothing, mon capitaine," replied the corporal, with a long face—"that is, except the missing horse, which we have here. There were no cross-roads, no houses, and no trees. The rascals must have divided the load, and got away quicker than we reckoned on."

As all this was precisely what Gwynett had expected, he did not disturb himself about the corporal's bootless errand.

"Put the horse with the rest of the team," he said, "and keep the men behind. I shall want to consult you in a few minutes."

The waggon was dragged through the copse close to its former route, and at every available point Gwynett carefully compared the old and the new ruts as they ran side by side. On passing the side of the pond, this examination was repeated with still greater minuteness, much to the bewilderment of the corporal. Gwynett took him to the point where the waggon had apparently stopped in its former journey close to the edge of the water.

"Look, corporal," said he, "at these tracks—one from the yard to the pond, and from the pond to the wood, and our last track back again alongside the old one."

"I see them, mon capitaine."

"Do you notice any difference between them?"

"In what way does monsieur mean?"

"Well, for instance, do the ruts of the old track sink any deeper than those of the new one?"

The corporal knelt down in several places, and came back to Gwynett.

"I see no difference, mon capitaine."

"Nor do I. Doesn't that strike you as curious?"

The corporal looked blank, and made no reply. Gwynett ordered the waggon to be driven back to the farm-yard.

"Corporal," said he, as they brought up the rear, "do those cases weigh nothing at all?"

"I don't understand, monsieur."

"If the waggon was full when it crossed the moor, and empty when it came back, why should the ruts be everywhere the same depth? Does the weight of the cases make no difference in the load?"

The corporal's mouth opened mechanically.

"But in that case, mon capitaine——"

"Well?"

"The cases have never left the yard."

Gwynett clapped the corporal on the shoulder with a laugh.

"I won't swear to that," said he. "But it seems to me you have made a very good guess. I have noticed that you have brilliant ideas, corporal."

The corporal swelled with gratified surprise.

"There is no doubt we have hit upon it, mon capitaine," said he. "But, after all, where are the cases?"

"That is another affair," replied Gwynett.

"Then why did they take the waggon over the moor?"

"You explained that before, corporal—to put us off the scent."

"Of course—I forgot that. The rascals have put us to a good deal of trouble with their tricks."

"Why do you say 'rascals'? Do you think there was a party?"

"Certainly, mon capitaine."

"One man can drive or lead a team of horses, I suppose?"

"No doubt, monsieur."

"What else has been done, so far?"

"Monsieur is quite right. May I ask if monsieur supposed so before?"

"Something of the sort."

"When we found the waggon?"

"No—when we found the horses."

"How was that, mon capitaine?"

"Well, corporal, I said to myself—just as you would have done—'these horses are well worth stealing, why have they

not been stolen? Because eight horses and (say) eight men are nothing out of the way; but eight horses and one man make people look twice.' And you would have argued—no doubt you did argue—that if the horses were left, it was because there was only one man concerned, and he had a horse already."

"A horse already, mon capitaine?"

"Certainly. I noticed the shoe-marks all along."

"But they did not come back?"

"You are right again—no, they did not come back. It is wonderful how you grasp a thing, corporal."

The party were by this time in the yard. The curé did not present himself, and Gilles reported that he had gone out.

Gwynett went straight to the two planks which lay near the well. The long grass was growing between and over them, and they seemed to have lain undisturbed for weeks. Gwynett raised one carefully, and found underneath a tuft of grass lying freshly flattened. He gave a sigh of relief.

"That is it," he said to himself.

He scrutinised the under side of each plank carefully. There was a certain amount of scraping and polishing visible on the surface of the wood. Laying them down, he asked Gilles for a piece of twine and a candle, and went forward to examine the wall of the well. Nothing could be detected in that quarter. The moss on the top of the stonework appeared untouched, and there were no marks of rubbing or scratching. He removed the wooden lid and looked down. About ten feet below the surface of the water reflected the sky in an unruffled disc. The candle brought by Gilles was lowered, and burned clearly.

"Let me have that long pole," said Gwynett to the corporal, as the men crowded round. When it was brought, he lowered it into the water, and turned to the corporal.

"Try yourself," he said, handing him the pole.

The corporal sounded as Gwynett had done.

"It feels to me like the cases," he said breathlessly, as he poked about.

"Fetch the ladder, buckets, and the rope," said Gwynett. The troopers scattered to execute this order.

"I need not tell you, corporal," proceeded Gwynett, "how this job has been managed. I daresay you have seen for yourself that that fellow with the blouse put a sack over the wall of the well, laid the planks, upside down, from the waggon

to the sack, and slid the cases one after the other into the well. All the rest was only to bamboozle us."

"Precisely, mon capitaine. In fact, I have had very much the same idea all along. He knew we should catch him if he tried to drive off with the cases themselves."

"You are quite right, corporal. Now all we have to do is to draw as much water out of the well as is needful, haul the cases up, and get on our way."

The corporal assented, thinking to himself that it was a pleasure to serve under an officer so ready to appreciate acuteness in a subordinate.

It is only necessary here to copy a letter from Gaultier received by the curé the evening of the same day, and the curé's reply.

"MY DEAR GERMONT,

I am on my way to England, at the enclosed address. I met M. de Torcy outside Arras, where he had been detained a couple of days by severe cold, and he gave me despatches for immediate delivery. Everything has gone splendidly.

A. G."

To which the curé replied,

"MY DEAR ARMAND,

The other evening some troopers came here to put up overnight. They pretended not to have set my shed on fire, in order to burn their captain alive, and made a pond in the stable-yard the next day by emptying the water out of the old well. You will admit this sort of thing is annoying and even dangerous. Unfortunately, I happened to be from home on both occasions. Your friend,

MAXIME GERMONT."

CHAPTER XXIV

AMBROSE GWYNETT SELECTS A LANDLORD

GWYNETT left his convoy at the hôtel of the Ministry of War in Paris, and went straight to Versailles to report the incidents of his journey to M. de Torcy.

"It appears to me, my dear M. Gwynett," said the marquis after listening to the story, "that we can hardly accept your curé at Ste. Marie Geneste for the innocent babe he pretended to be."

"It is quite impossible to say, M. le marquis. His *role of* genial, blank ignorance was quite beyond criticism, I assure you."

"But the thief, or thieves, must have relied on having access to the well?"

"Nothing would be easier than to get the curé out of the way when necessary. It took us less than half an hour to put things straight. Besides, even if he was in the plot to steal the cases, I am still doubtful if he knew of the well being used."

"Why, may I ask?"

"Because he did not suggest our examining the well in the first instance."

The marquis was silent for a minute while he considered this prodigious diplomacy.

"That would have been almost too clever," he said finally.

"I think I should have been bamboozled by it," replied Gwynett candidly. "Especially if he had not mentioned it before we got to the pond or thereabouts."

"You are the best judge, my dear M. Gwynett. All the same, I congratulate you on your success from first to last. I doubt if any of M. Daguerre's staff would have got out of the mess so well."

"I have rather the impression, M. le marquis, that none of M. Daguerre's staff would have got into the mess, to begin with."

"How so?"

"Without being egotistical, monsieur, I cannot help feeling that there was something distinctly personal in the attempt to burn me up in that shed. I don't see the necessity for it, unless there was some little animus to be gratified."

"But have you enemies, then?"

"None that I know of. But it is easy to annoy people without being aware of it."

"*Pardieu!* yes. However, all's well that ends well. Let us speak of another matter. I am much vexed to have to say that I cannot offer you the hospitality of my house in Paris. We have had a violent outbreak of measles there, and I have had to close it for the time being. My mother, the marquise de Croissy, has taken fright at the prevalence of this disease in Paris, and closed her town house also. But I will see to your being comfortably lodged either in Paris or here, as you may prefer."

Gwynett was aghast at the idea of being penned up in the

purgatory of etiquette, Jesuitism, and boredom into which Versailles had sunk at this period.

"I thank you very much, monsieur," he replied hastily. "But it would interest me to see a little of Paris, and I should prefer finding some lodging there from which I could explore the city while waiting news from you about Mr. Dorrington. You have none so far, I presume?"

"None, except of a negative sort. No one of that name has been at Vincennes, the Bastille, either of the Châtelets, the Temple, the Conciergerie, For l'Évêque, the Bicêtre, or the Abbaye. The same at Charenton—perhaps happily." Charenton was the gaol to which prisoners were drafted whose reason was affected. "We have heard also from Tours and Blois, but as regards Mont St. Michel, Ste. Marguerite, Pignerol, and half a dozen others, it will take another fortnight for information to reach us. In the meantime, I have a little suggestion to offer."

"What is that, monsieur?"

"You will permit me to remark that as you are an Englishman, and not present here as an avowed adherent of M. de St. George, the fact that we are unhappily still at war with your country imposes some little embarrassment upon me in introducing you into our society. I do not want to be always explaining that you are neither an envoy nor a spy; nor, on the other hand, do I wish you to be under the slightest restraint or disadvantage here or elsewhere."

"I can hardly imagine, monsieur, that an unknown stranger like myself would attract any inconvenient notice. At the same time, I am entirely in your hands. What would you wish me to do?"

"If not disagreeable to you, my dear M. Gwynett, I venture to suggest that you pass under the name of the German branch of your family as M. de Starhemberg—a course, I understand, which has already been urged upon you by your relative of that house."

Gwynett considered a moment, and then replied assentingly,

"I see no objection to that, M. le marquis. No one has any right to grumble except my uncle, and he will not, I am sure."

"Very good. That removes one or two trifling difficulties incidental to my official position—for, unlike yourself, I have plenty of enemies. And now I will give you a note to M. d'Argenson, for you to use in case of any difficulty."

The marquis wrote a few lines of introduction, and handed

them to Gwynett, who thereupon took his leave, promising to acquaint M. de Torcy with his new address.

On his return to Paris, Gwynett renovated his wardrobe, provided himself with a wig to conceal the partial loss of his own hair at the presbytery, and set out to seek a lodging. After some exploration he found an apartment to suit him in a large, old-fashioned house at the corner of the Rue des Poissoniers and the Rue d'Enfer. This, he was told, belonged to a family of the name of Dubut, who occupied the lower floor. The two floors above were unoccupied, and the upper one was empty. The second floor was roomy, light, and comfortably furnished, and had a stone staircase descending to a park-like garden of twelve acres with a fish-pond, which, even at the beginning of winter, was delightfully picturesque.

The mistress of the house, with whom he negotiated the hire of the apartment, was an old woman, the widow, as he learnt, of a master turner in the Rue Beauregard. The rest of the family appeared to consist of an invalid married daughter, who was not visible, her only child, a boy just learning to walk, and a bouncing, handsome girl of thirteen or fourteen, whom Gwynett understood to be a niece of the invalid.

The terms asked for the accommodation were quite within the margin Gwynett had proposed to himself. He accordingly paid for a week in advance, entered upon possession, and made arrangements for such meals as he required. The horse he had ridden from Calais was one of M. Daguerre's, and had gone back with the escort. But he found a livery-stable hard by his lodging, where a passable animal could be hired when necessary, and this met his requirements for the moment.

After making these various arrangements, he proceeded to dine at a respectable little *cabaret* at the end of the Rue Neuve St. Jean. The bench on which he sat, while waiting for his meal to be served, was in a corner against a partition. On the other side of this two persons were talking, apparently over their wine, and snatches of the conversation reached Gwynett's ear from time to time. His attention happened to be caught by a name let fall by one of the speakers, and he leaned his head against the wooden panel to listen.

"It is not my business, my dear Marie," a man was saying, "but I have heard people say queer things about père Germont, and as long as he is popping in and out of your shop in the Rue Beauregard——"

"What do they say of my uncle Germont?" interrupted a woman's voice.

"The lamp-maker in the Rue d'Enfer goes to Ste. Marie Geneste to buy colza now and then, and the people there tell him the père makes strange things in his distillery. They talk of curious coloured flames, and smoke such as one sees nowhere else, coming from his chimneys."

"Bah!" said the woman, "those yokels are always suspicious of what they don't understand. What has all that to do with your staying away from the Rue Beauregard?"

"Everything, my fair enchantress," replied the man, in a pompous tone. "My official position compels me to be a model of discretion, and——"

"It seems to me your official position means another woman," was the angry retort.

"Your jealousy is too ridiculous to be complimentary," observed the man, with patronising banter. "Now, on the other hand, my poor dear wife——"

"Stuff! You have treated her as shamefully as you treat me. I say so, though I hate her."

"Not the least in the world, my houri. I have the misfortune to be pleasing to various members of your charming sex, and therefore I am a monster—that goes without saying. At the same time, I cannot be harsh, you understand."

Then came the sound of a violent blow on a table.

"I feel very much disposed to kill you," said the woman, in furious tones.

"So you have remarked more than once, my little dove. Shall we have another bottle?"

At this stage Gwynett's dinner was served, and the remainder of the conversation, which had ceased to interest him, became inaudible.

After despatching his meal and paying the bill, he rose to leave the *cabaret*. As he approached the door, two persons passed out in front of him, a man and a woman, whose voices identified them with the dialogue he had overheard.

He had time to notice that the woman was a southerner, of the shop-keeping class, young and handsome, with a free bearing and a bold, vivacious expression. The man was perhaps five-and-forty years of age, fairly good-looking, got up as a dandy of the bourgeois type, and having an air of self-conscious conceit which struck Gwynett as somewhat amusing.

The pair strolled off in the direction of the Rue Beauregard.

Gwynett thought that information about père Germont might be useful, and followed them at a distance in the hope of acquiring it. Arrived at the Rue Beauregard, the man went off down a side street, while the woman entered the doorway of a little shop, which had behind it a dilapidated house of some dimensions. Gwynett passed the shop, and observed that it was a herbalist's, with the name of 'Latour' appearing over the door. He made a mental note of this, and strolled back to the Rue des Poissoniers.

As he rang the bell to obtain admission, a man came up, breathless with running, and stood waiting till the door opened. Turning round, Gwynett found it was the companion of the woman of the Rue Beauregard, but wearing a depressed expression, very different to his former one. The man took off his hat with great politeness.

"I beg monsieur's pardon," he said. "I believe monsieur is our new *locataire*."

"I have taken rooms here," replied Gwynett.

"My name is Sanson, at monsieur's service," said the newcomer. "Madame Dubut is my mother-in-law."

Gwynett acknowledged his salute, and the door was opened by the old woman.

"Well?" she said hurriedly to the man.

"Both the doctors were out," he replied. "I left word for them to come. How is he?"

"Worse," said the old woman, beginning to cry.

The man's face fell, and he ran down a passage.

"What is the matter, madame?" asked Gwynett.

"It is the child, monsieur," sobbed the old woman. "He has a high fever, and if he has convulsions nothing will save him. We have lost so many."

"Have you had a doctor?"

"We cannot get a doctor, monsieur. My son-in-law came home ten minutes ago, and at once ran off to find one. But you see he has been unsuccessful."

"May I see the child, madame?"

"Certainly, monsieur," replied the old woman, looking rather surprised, "if monsieur will pardon us being a little upset. My daughter is quite beside herself. If monsieur will kindly come this way——"

Gwynett followed madame Dubut down a passage into a large room at the back of the house, furnished as a bedroom and nursery. A little boy was lying in a carved wooden cradle near the window, and close to it was sitting a feeble-

looking, middle-aged woman, who was evidently the mother. M. Sanson was bending over the cradle, and looked up as Gwynett entered.

"Is monsieur by good chance a doctor?" he asked anxiously.

"I do not call myself one," replied Gwynett. "But it is possible I can relieve your little boy. How long has he been in this state?"

"Only two hours, monsieur. But he was not quite well before."

The child's face was nearly purple, his eyes were closed in a lethargy, and his breathing was hurried and short. Every few seconds his arms and legs moved convulsively. Gwynett placed his open hands on the skin round the fulness of the boy's thigh, and waited for a couple of minutes. His sensitive palm, taught by experience, enabled him by this means to recognise half a dozen degrees of fever.

As the room was comfortably warm, he removed the coverlet and blankets of the cot, and proceeded to pass his two open hands down the child's body from the shoulders to the feet. This operation he repeated steadily for a quarter of an hour. By that time the face of the sufferer had almost regained its normal colour, the breathing was easier, and the twitching movements had ceased. The Sansons and madame Dubut looked on breathlessly.

Gwynett sat down, and went on with his passes for some little time. Then he took the child's hands in his own, grasped them gently but firmly, and held them for nearly half an hour. At the end of this period the fever had practically disappeared, the colour and pulse were normal, and the skin was perspiring freely. The child slept calmly and profoundly. Gwynett covered him up carefully, and rose from his chair.

"I think he will do for the present," he said. "If you will allow me, I will look in again after I have written some letters."

"Monsieur," said the father, "I have no words to thank you. The boy is the apple of our eye. All the others are dead, and we hoped this one was going to be stronger."

The mother, who had not hitherto spoken, stammered forth some fervent expressions of gratitude.

"It is marvellous," said the old woman. "I cannot understand it."

"I do not understand it myself, madame," replied Gwynett. "But it is an art I learned when I was quite young from a very old friend of our family, then more than eighty years

of age. I have myself been very fortunate in using it successfully. With some of my friends, who have tried the experiment, it seems to be of no service at all—I do not know why.”

The reader must bear in mind that the old gentleman alluded to, Mr. Valentine Greatraks (the author of “Certain Wonderful Cures,” and the friend of Robert Boyle), anticipated by considerably over a century the discoveries of Mesmer, de Puységur, Cahagnet, du Potet, and their followers. The ignorance of himself and his pupil as to the nature of the phenomena they produced is, therefore, hardly a matter for surprise.

After returning from the nursery to his own room, Gwynett wrote an account of his recent proceedings to Muriel at Wray Cottage, and enclosed the letter in one to M. de Torcy, asking his good offices to have it sent across the Channel. He also mentioned where he had taken up his quarters.

The letter reached the minister the next morning just as he was receiving a visitor, who had been announced as the lieutenant-general of police of Paris.

This was the famous Marc-René, comte d’Argenson, perhaps the most skilful administrator of his time, who had certainly done more than any man in Europe at this period to render life and property secure within the area of his jurisdiction. He was now a man of about sixty, of a severe exterior, but the reverse of malignant in the execution of the duties of his office, and still hale and vigorous to a remarkable degree. He could boast the not very common distinction of having the republic of Venice for his godfather, and had had his first name bestowed upon him in that connection when his father was ambassador to the City of the Sea.

The marquis handed Gwynett’s letter to d’Argenson as he entered.

“This is the gentleman,” he said, “for whom we are making inquiries about that missing Englishman. Is there anything fresh in that matter?”

“Not as yet,” replied the lieutenant-general of police, taking the letter. “He is not at Mont St. Michel, we hear.”

He read the letter, and began to laugh.

“That is excellent,” he said, and he quoted a passage ending, “my landlord appears to be quite a lady-killer.”

“There you have the man exactly,” he said, laughing again, as he returned the letter to de Torcy.

“What is the matter?” asked the marquis.

"Your friend has made a curious selection of a lodging," replied d'Argenson. "Do you know what is this family of Dubut?"

"Not in the least."

"It is the wife and mother-in-law of Sanson."

"What Sanson?"

"Charles Sanson de Longval, if you want all his dilapidated titles. Son of the Charles Sanson who was appointed just after the Voysin affair."

"What! the——?"

"Yes. Did you ever hear the story of Sanson père?"

"Not that I recollect."

"They are people of excellent family, you know—de Longval of Abbeville. The grandfather entertained Louis XIII. there, and was pensioned by Richelieu. Sanson père fell in love with some girl at Rouen, about whose parents he knew nothing. Her father made his consent dependent on Sanson's becoming his assistant and adopting his profession."

"Bless my soul!"

"Sanson made a virtue of necessity, and acceded. Eventually Pontchartrain appointed him to Paris. This son of his acted as deputy for him for some years before he formally succeeded him. Then he married his step-mother's sister—these people have not much choice, of course—bought a fine house, and is now your friend's landlord."

"Good Lord! he cannot possibly know."

"I don't think you need trouble yourself, my dear marquis. They are perfectly respectable people. I fancy Sanson lives there very little himself. He has a lodging near La Grève, to save himself getting up too early in the morning."

The marquis shrugged his shoulders.

"Still, I must tell M. de Starhemberg," he observed.

"As you please," replied d'Argenson, addressing himself to his papers.

M. Charles Sanson de Longval, it may be explained, bore the official designation of 'Exécuteur des hautes œuvres du Roi'—in other words, he was the public executioner of the city of Paris.*

* M. Sanson père was the first of the seven successive generations of the same name (1688-1847) who held the above office. It was Sanson V. who executed Louis XVI. and Marie Antoinette.

CHAPTER XXV

THE BREST LETTER

GWYNETT found no further occasion for the exercise of his curative gifts upon M. Sanson's little son, as the latter was practically convalescent the morning after his seizure. A further acquaintance with the patient showed him to be an exceedingly engaging and intelligent little fellow, with a refinement of manner and appearance, even in his stage of babyhood, rather difficult to reconcile with descent from either of his parents. Gwynett had a considerable fondness for children, usually repaid on their part by an enthusiasm which was not without its inconveniences. But a special interest excited by little Charlot—the name of the heir of the house of Sanson—disposed him to take no particular notice of the communication respecting his landlord's profession which he duly received from M. de Torcy. He thus stayed on at his lodgings for nearly a month, during which he explored the ins and outs of Paris, and made use of various introductions furnished him by the marquis. From time to time reports concerning the inquiries after Randolph Dorrington, mainly of a negative character, continued to be furnished him by M. d'Argenson. Finally, the lieutenant-general of police informed him that the channels of inquiry open to the department were exhausted, and that no result was forthcoming. Gwynett accordingly decided to return to England forthwith.

On the evening before his intended departure, he availed himself of one of M. de Torcy's introductions which circumstances had hitherto prevented him using. This was to the Paris hôtel of the countess of Melfort, the wife of the famous (or infamous) James Drummond, earl of Melfort, for many years the prime minister in exile, and *à me damnée* in general, to the late king James II. The countess was a near relative of M. de Torcy, and had been a playmate of his in childhood. Since her marriage, at about seventeen years of age, she had invariably paid him the compliment of expecting his assistance to get her out of the continual scrapes into which she was brought by her extravagance, her passion for card-playing, and her genius for quarrelling with the Maintenon party at Versailles. The marquis was alternately filled with vexation

at her imbrolios and with admiration at the way she coaxed him into putting matters straight for her.

Gwynett had mentioned his intended call at the hôtel Melfort to M. de Torcy. The marquis decided to follow his example, and found the countess sitting with a lady who was unknown to him, but whose extraordinary beauty and distinction made him wonder at his ignorance.

"My cousin," said lady Melfort, as she came forward to greet him, "this is my dearest friend the comtesse de Valincour, of the household of madame la dauphine."

The comtesse and de Torcy exchanged salutations.

"It is an atrocity, my dear Athenais," said the marquis, "that having a dearest friend like the comtesse, you should never have given me the opportunity of being a friend at all."

"I have not been much more than a month at Marly," explained the comtesse graciously. "I have only made this one visit to Paris, and one to Versailles."

"Where she was nearly killed by way of welcome," put in lady Melfort.

The marquis expressed a polite curiosity as to the details, which the comtesse proceeded to furnish.

"I only regret that I did not learn the name of the gentleman who assisted me so promptly," she remarked, in concluding.

"That would not be difficult," said the marquis.

As he spoke, the door behind him opened. He noticed that his fair *vis-à-vis* gave a slight start, while a curious light flashed from her eyes.

"M. de Starhemberg," announced the major-domo.

De Torcy introduced Gwynett to the ladies.

"I think we have met before, monsieur," said the comtesse, with a dazzling smile. "Athenais, this is the gentleman of whom we were just speaking."

The marquis chuckled inaudibly.

"This young man seems to have a knack of being always *à propos*," he said to himself.

"How extraordinary!" cried lady Melfort, with enthusiasm.

"I trust madame has felt no ill effects from that mishap," said Gwynett.

"I thank you, none," replied the comtesse. "It was most fortunate that so little harm was done."

"Except to the poor horses," said Gwynett. "I have their assassination much on my conscience. But it was impossible

to do anything else—a single instant's delay would have almost certainly been fatal."

"*Mon Dieu!* yes," agreed lady Melfort. "With half one's hair sticking in the door, one must excuse ceremony. But monsieur may be fonder of horses than of anything else in the world? Marquis, as these two are quite *aux mieux* with each other, I am going to trouble you with a little matter of business. Your arm, if you please. Yvonne, you must entertain M. de Starhemberg till we come back."

The marquis groaned in spirit as he accompanied his relative to a little boudoir leading out of the salon. A woman was in this room, evidently finishing the putting away of numerous gallipots and phials of various sizes into an innocent-looking bonnet box.

"I thought you were gone, Marie," said lady Melfort.

"I was afraid I had lost a phial, madame," replied the woman, who was the herbalist of the Rue Beauregard. "But they are all here. I wish madame a good evening," and she left the room by a second door.

"The worthy lady seems rather at home here," observed the marquis.

"That is Latour—a pearl of great price, my cousin. Don't you know she sells the finest cosmetics out of Italy—or in it, for that matter?"

"I deplore my ignorance of the fact. It arises, probably, from my having rather neglected my complexion. But what is our little business, my dear Athenais?"

"Money, dear cousin, this time."

"That surprises me, of course. Let me hear the worst."

"There is no worst."

"That surprises me still more."

"On the contrary, I have a magnificent idea, my cousin."

"At whose expense, my dear Athenais?"

"Not yours, certainly."

"You take the rope off my neck. Tell me all about it."

The countess seated herself on a sofa, and motioned de Torcy to a low *fauteuil* with its back to the door by which madame Latour had gone out. The marquis sank into it with a resigned air.

"You must know, my cousin, that of late I have been miraculously unlucky at cards."

"I never knew you to be anything else, my dear Athenais."

You are too virtuous. I should cheat a little, if I were you."

"I have tried that, my cousin. But it is too fatiguing. Anyhow, I am bankrupt, and M. de Melfort simply laughs at me."

"I am glad he is still in the amused stage. But we have not yet heard about your magnificent idea."

"I am coming to that. Of course, you know that lord Melfort had an immense correspondence with our friends in England before lord Middleton succeeded to his official duties."

Melfort, it may be mentioned, had proved himself so ingeniously and inveterately injudicious as an adviser to the late ex-king James II., that Louis XIV. had finally insisted upon his being replaced by the earl of Middleton.

"Naturally," said the marquis.

"Equally, you of course know that the duke of Marlborough is in the worst possible odour with the English ministry, and that they are seeking high and low for means to ruin him utterly."

"One hears that sort of thing, of course."

"Well, all this brought to my recollection something that happened ages since—when I was first married."

"Let us see—when was that?"

"Seventeen years ago," replied the countess, with a sigh.

"And you are now——?"

"Silence, monster! My age is twenty-five, and I reckon twenty-four months in the year. But it happened, just after my marriage, that a note was brought to lord Melfort at St. Germain by a messenger from colonel Sackville in London, which my husband thought very important. It enclosed a letter from the earl of Marlborough—of course, he was called lord Churchill in Sackville's note*—to king James, warning him that the expedition fitting out at Portsmouth under admiral Russell and general Talmash was to sail to attack Brest."

"I was not in office then," observed the marquis, who had succeeded his father (the marquis de Croissy) as foreign secretary in 1696. "But I recollect the circumstance."

"It occurred to me that a letter from the duke, betraying an English fleet for the benefit of the king of France, would

* Naturally ignoring the earldom of Marlborough conferred upon baron Churchill by William III. for his desertion of king James in 1688.

be rather useful to his enemies just now—even more useful than the charges of corruption in connection with the army contracts, which are talked about.”

“Very likely,” said the marquis. “But were you in lord Melfort’s official confidence, may I ask?”

“I happened to see that particular letter,” replied the countess.

“Well, what about it?”

“I am going to sell it to lord Oxford.”

“*Pardieu!*”

“Why not? We are old friends, and he and my husband are on the best of terms. I am sure he would pay me more for them than a stranger.”

“I don’t see that that follows. Apart from your optimism, however, it occurs to me lord Melfort may object to giving you the letter—even if it is still extant.”

“My cousin, it is in my pocket.”

“Then, my dear Athenais, I distinctly decline to hear how you obtained it. I must draw the line somewhere.”

“Pooh! you need not put on airs. What ought I to ask for the letter? Is it worth twenty thousand livres?”

“Really, Athenais, your indiscretion amazes me.”

“Very well. I shall ask twenty thousand livres. The next thing is to find a reliable messenger—one does not like to trust this sort of affair to the ordinary channels.”

The marquis, despite his apparent nonchalance, had been considering this affair very seriously. It was not to the interest of France that Marlborough should be driven to extremity, so long as he adhered to the agreement made with de Torcy at Ekeren. The duke had served and betrayed so many masters that it was even yet possible he might be found on the side of France against the emperor. But he would be furious if he were attacked in parliament with a weapon which he would know must have come from a member of de Torcy’s family. The first question was obviously as to the exact importance of the letter itself.

“If you really want my advice,” he said finally, “I had better see this letter. It may be of less use than you imagine.”

Lady Melfort produced a packet from her pocket.

“This is it,” she said. “First of all, you see, there is a translation by my husband of colonel Sackville’s note in cypher, which enclosed lord Churchill’s letter.”

The translation of the note ran as follows:

"4th May, 1694.

I have just now received the enclosed for the king.* It is from lord Churchill, but no person except the queen † and you must know from whom it comes. Therefore, for the love of God, let it be kept a secret."

"The words you see interlined—'*even from lord Middleton,*'" said the countess, "are a memorandum of my husband's."

The marquis read on :

"I send it by an express, judging it to be of the utmost consequence for the service of the king, † my master; and consequently for the service of his most Christian Majesty. § You see, by the contents of this letter, that I am not deceived in the judgment I formed of admiral Russell; for that man has not acted sincerely, and I fear he will never act otherwise."

"Here is the letter," said the countess, handing him another. "You see it is in the duke's writing, endorsed by my husband, 'Lord Churchill's letter to the king of England' ||."

This is the famous "Brest letter," as the reader may find it copied in the Stuart Papers. ¶

"It is only to-day I have learned the news I now write to you; which is, that the bomb-ketches and the twelve regiments encamped at Portsmouth, with the two regiments of marines, all commanded by Talmash, are destined for burning the harbour of Brest, and destroying all the men-of-war which are there. This will be a great advantage to England. But no consideration can prevent, or ever shall prevent me, from informing you of all that I believe to be for your service. Therefore you may make your own use of this intelligence, which you may depend upon being exactly true. But I must conjure you, for your own interest, to let no one know it but the queen and the bearer of this letter.

Russell sails to-morrow, with forty ships, the rest being not yet paid; but it is said, that in ten days, the rest of the fleet will follow; and, at the same time, the land forces. I have endeavoured to learn this some time ago from admiral Russell. But he always denied it to me, though I am very sure that he knew of the design for more than six weeks. This gives me a bad sign of this man's intentions. I shall be very well pleased to learn that this letter comes safe to your hands."

The marquis laid down the letter with a disgusted air. "Good Lord!" he said, "if Melfort had only sent this

* James II., at St. Germain. † Maria Beatrice, queen of James II.

‡ James II.

§ Louis XIV.

|| James II.

¶ Vol. I., pp. 486-7.

over at once to William III., Marlborough would have been hung or beheaded, and we should have escaped Blenheim, Ramillies, Malplaquet, and the loss of men and treasure beyond calculation. It is lamentable to think of."

"All the same, I would rather have my twenty thousand livres," observed the countess, who did not pretend to be a politician.

The marquis looked at the letter again.

"Well," he said to himself, "since the letter is here, let us consider what can be done with it. It might be enormously useful—at the proper time. It is sheer waste to allow my dear cousin to handle it in such a trumpery fashion. We must manage matters better than that."

He handed the letter back to lady Melfort, who asked,

"What do you think of it, my cousin? Am I not right?"

"Perfectly, my dear Athenais, and I am quite at your service. You want a trusty messenger?"

"That is it."

"Your guest in the next room goes to England to-morrow. You could not find a better person."

"I will ask him at once."

"Heavens and earth! my dear Athenais, do you want to ruin me, chattering about an affair like this under my very nose?—I, a secretary of state! And with madame de Valincour there, to go straight to the dauphine. Do be reasonable, for once."

"By all means, if you will tell me how to be reasonable."

"Certainly. Have you written to lord Oxford?"

"I have a letter ready."

"Very good. Let me have it, duly sealed and addressed, with your enclosures inside, and I will speak to our young friend about it in private."

The countess went to an escritoire, and enclosed the two letters we have quoted in one to the earl of Oxford. After addressing the sealed packet to the minister in London, she brought it to de Torcy.

"That is it, is it?" asked the marquis, with his hands in his pockets.

"Yes."

"Do you expect me to take that?"

"Why not?"

"My dear Athenais, it is delightful to be young. But there is no use in being childish."

"What on earth is the matter now?"

"The matter is, that I refuse to know anything about a letter to lord Oxford. I am quite willing to know about a letter addressed to our gallant horse-knacker, which may contain anything or nothing, for all I can tell."

"Why could you not say so before?" retorted the countess pettishly.

"I am surprised to have to say so now," replied the marquis.

Lady Melfort enclosed the packet in another cover, addressed to M. de Starhemberg, and handed it to de Torcy.

"Will that do?" she asked.

"Admirably," replied the marquis, putting it in his pocket with one hand, while he raised the other to his shoulder. "And now, my dear Athenais, if you have no further commands for me, we will go back to the salon. This boudoir of yours has all the winds of heaven blowing about it. I shall have a stiff neck for a week."

"I see the door behind you is a little ajar," said the countess, as they left the room. "I am very sorry."

The marquis stopped and looked at the door with a suspicious air.

"Decidedly you have a genius for conspiracy, my dear Athenais. But it is a little too late to shut the door now."

As the marquis followed lady Melfort into the salon, the hall door of the hôtel opened and closed, and madame Latour appeared on the steps leading to the street. A gentleman was coming up, who stopped as he caught sight of her face in the light of the great lantern which hung in the portico.

"M. Gaultier!" she ejaculated. "The very person."

"No doubt, my dear Marie," said the abbé. "But why?"

The woman lowered her tone, and spoke close to the abbé's ear.

"Would you like to divide twenty thousand livres with me, M. l'abbé?"

"Very much indeed, my dear Marie. May I pay my respects to the countess of Melfort first, and take my sister home? You have been seeing her, I suppose?"

"Yes. But don't go in just yet. Come this way."

The woman led him to a dark porch on the other side of the street, pointed to the door of the hôtel Melfort, and conversed with him in a low tone for several minutes.

"It seems feasible," said Gaultier finally. "But when we have got the letter, why not sell it to the duke himself?"

"He is too stingy," replied madame Latour.

"There is something in that. What is the name of the messenger?"

"I did not catch it—if it was mentioned."

"Can you not find out?"

"You had better do that yourself, when you go in."

The door of the hôtel Melfort opened, and Gwynett stood upon the threshold.

"Look!" said Marie, as his face came into the light of the lantern. "That is the messenger."

Gaultier turned livid.

"Damnation!" he growled, under his breath.

CHAPTER XXVI

A LETTRE DE CACHET

As Gwynett was taking his leave of the countess of Melfort and madame de Valincour, the marquis asked him to call at the hôtel of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs before setting out on his journey the next day.

"I may venture to trouble you with a small commission," he said, "that is, if you have not had enough of doing little services for your acquaintances."

"I am quite at your disposal, M. le marquis. And I beg to tender you in advance the thanks of my friends in England for the trouble you have taken on their behalf."

"That is nothing. I am sorry we have been so unsuccessful. Should anything transpire later, I will not fail to let you know."

The next morning Gwynett called at the Ministry, received the packet addressed to him by the countess, and expressed his willingness to deliver the enclosure on his arrival in England. He gave the marquis the address of Will's Coffee-house in Russell Street, Covent Garden, as the place to which for the present it would be best to forward communications, and then set off on his journey to England.

M. de Torcy called upon lady Melfort in the course of a day or two to assure her of the despatch of her packet.

"Your friend is enchanting," said the countess. "Why did you not send him to us before? As it was, Yvonne had him all to herself the other night."

"That is an extraordinarily fine woman," observed the marquis.

"Oh! I suppose so. She is decidedly *éprise* with your M. de Starhemberg."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing."

"*Certes*, it is significant for a woman to say nothing. *A propos* of this affair, I have been admiring your excellent memory. It is remarkable that you should recollect the duke's letter so conveniently. Seventeen years is a long time."

"There was a little circumstance that impressed it on my mind. The messenger who brought it was such a handsome fellow——"

"That quite accounts for it."

"I did not mean that. But my husband took it into his head that this M. Collins, as he called himself—Richard Collins, if I recollect right—had tampered with the seal and read the despatch from lord Marlborough. It was not the sort of thing to be allowed to become known, so they at once got a *lettre de cachet* and put M. Collins in the Bastille."

"But no one would be employed as a messenger who was not perfectly reliable. The note said as much."

"You see, they were thinking of the regular messenger, captain Floyd."

"How was that?"

"The despatch had been carried to Dover in the usual way by captain Floyd, and he was taken dangerously ill when just on the point of starting across the Channel. Knowing the extreme urgency of the affair, he handed the letter to a friend—this M. Collins—who was with him, and who was quite willing to help him out of the difficulty. Unfortunately, it turned out that M. Collins was a close friend of general Talmash. Hence the *lettre de cachet*."

"There has been a most reckless misuse of these *lettres de cachet*," said the marquis discontentedly. "Melfort could have had the man knocked on the head in some quiet place for a couple of louis, and the matter would have been settled. It is shameful to put us to the expense of maintaining prisoners for nothing. Was the duke told of the affair?"

"Yes. I recollect he wrote thanking us. But as a matter of fact, although my husband was right in supposing that the despatch had been opened, it was not M. Collins who opened it."

"How do you know?"

"Because I opened it myself."

The marquis stared at the speaker.

"It happened this way, my cousin," explained the countess.

"At the time of my marriage, extraordinary as you may think it, I was desperately jealous of some girl over in England who used to correspond with my husband."

"You surprise me," said the marquis.

"It is quite true. Of course, lord Melfort said she was only a Jacobite agent. I had seen several covers addressed by her, and this one sent by colonel Sackville seemed to be in the same handwriting. I managed to make a fac-simile seal, and opened the letter. Naturally, there was nothing in it to interest me at the time, so I re-sealed it and put it back with the rest of lord Melfort's correspondence. I daresay my seal was rather clumsy, and they found it out."

"So Collins was imprisoned for your little tricks?"

"I suppose so."

"When was he released?"

"I never heard any more about him."

"Good Lord! then he may be in the Bastille still?"

"Now you mention it, it is very likely—unless, of course, he is dead."

"It is perfectly monstrous," cried the marquis angrily.

"Do you think we have gold-mines at Versailles, that we are to provide people with board and lodging for seventeen years without the slightest occasion? Every prisoner costs us five livres a day, at least. Was he a gentleman?"

"Decidedly—a man of good position, I should say."

"Heavens and earth! that would be fifteen livres. Saint Mars would take care of that, and so would de Bernaville. This is the way we are made bankrupt."

It may be mentioned that the scale of maintenance allowed to the governor of the Bastille for each prisoner was fifty livres a day for a prince of the blood, thirty-six for a maréchal, twenty-four for a lieutenant-general, fifteen for a person of quality or member of a parliament, ten for a judge, priest, or person in the finance, five for a decent bourgeois, and fifty sols for servants arrested or in attendance upon their masters.

"Really," said the countess, "I am very sorry. But this is the first time I have recollected it."

"Why on earth did you not put the matter right when you first knew of it?"

"Well, in the first place, I did not want to make myself ridiculous, and in the second, M. de Melfort would have scolded me. Then again, I thought it might be useful to leave things alone."

"How, may I ask?"

"Evidently lord Marlborough was concerned at the possibility of this M. Collins knowing the contents of the letter."

"Well?"

"Don't you think it might be convenient to us, some time or other, for lord Marlborough to be afraid of somebody, even in mistake?"

"Is my cousin beginning to display gleams of intelligence?" thought the marquis, with wonder. Then he said aloud,

"Unfortunately, my dear Athenais, you made M. de Marlborough perfectly comfortable when you allowed your M. Collins to be put in the Bastille."

"He could have been let out when it was wanted to do the duke a mischief," said the countess.

"But you have just explained that M. Collins was ignorant of the contents of the letter."

"Lord Marlborough did not know that, you see," said the countess, with a wise air.

The marquis looked at his relative, with his head on one side and his eyes half closed.

"Is this cleverness," he said to himself, "or is it merely a new phase of stupidity?"

"And then," went on the countess, "it would have been quite easy at any time to explain to M. Collins the exact reason of his imprisonment."

"Really, my cousin cannot be altogether a fool," thought the marquis. "Well, my dear Athenais, if you had mentioned all these fine ideas to me years ago, it might have been of some use."

"You see, I forgot all about it. You had better find out if M. Collins is in the Bastille still."

"It just occurs to me that d'Argenson has reported there is no Englishman in the Bastille or any of our prisons. So he is probably dead long since."

"That is a pity. He was a magnificent fellow, with a charming name—if I could remember it."

"I don't understand."

"His passport was in the name of Richard Collins, but that was not his real name."

"Why do you think so?"

"We had a little conversation together, and he told me. It has quite escaped my recollection."

"It would not make any difference," said the marquis. "He would be entered under the name in his passport. It might be worth while runmaging de Bernaville's registers to see what became of him."

"I wish you would," said the countess. "Oh! is it not wonderful?"

"What?"

"I have never thought of his name for seventeen years, and now it has come into my mind."

"Well, what is it?"

"Randolph Dorrington."

The marquis bounded from his chair.

"What on earth is the matter, my cousin?" asked the startled countess.

"We have been hunting for Randolph Dorrington over all France," said the marquis. "M. de Starhemberg came here expressly to make inquiries about him, and now he will be out of the country. You will excuse me, my dear Athenaïs—I must see to this without delay."

"Do," said the countess. "It will be so funny if M. Collins is still alive somewhere or other. Only don't tell him I was the culprit—he might be annoyed with me."

"That is possible," said the marquis, as he went down to his carriage.

"To the Bastille," he said to the coachman.

It was already dark when the carriage turned the angle of the Rue St. Antoine, and drove up to the wicket of the outlying group of buildings by which the house of the governor of the Bastille was approached. The eight towers of the vast and gloomy fortress, and the curtain-walls which connected them, rose in a black mass against a stormy sky. Over this the clouds were hurried by a blustering gale from the north-west, while the light of the moon broke fitfully through the masses of flying scud.

"Our friend Gwynett will have an uncomfortable passage," thought the marquis, as the footman knocked at the first gateway.

"Who goes there?" challenged the guard.

"The marquis de Torcy, on the king's service," replied the footman.

The guard opened the gate and admitted the carriage.

"Pass, on the king's service," said he, as he locked the gate behind them.

The carriage passed under the armoury, which was built over the outer gateway, and emerged into the first, or passage court.

On the left of this court were a row of sheds and sutlers' shops, built against the great wall which surrounded the enclosure of the Bastille. On the right were the stables and quarters of the guard. In front was the farther wall of the court, with its great gateway and the first drawbridge, not yet raised for the night.

At this gateway the same challenge was made, and the same reply given. The lieutenant of the guard came forward to inspect the occupant of the carriage.

"I do not know monsieur by sight," he said courteously, "but I will send word to M. le gouverneur. He is on the terrace."

"As soon as you can," replied the marquis, shivering, as he put up the window of the carriage again.

In a couple of minutes the officer received an answer to his message, came forward again, and the second gate was opened.

"Pass, on the king's service," he said to the coachman. The latter drove over the drawbridge into the second court.

This was called the Cour du Gouvernement, from having, on its right, the house of the governor. Beyond this house, on the same side, was a passage and gate leading to the garden of the Arsenal adjacent. Opposite the drawbridge was the terrace, stretching across the court, and approached by two flights of stone steps. It was planted with shrubs, and had a little arched pavilion or summer-house on the left. Facing the governor's house were the gateway and passage leading to the second drawbridge and the château itself.

The governor was trying the effect of some new lamps on the terrace, and came down the steps into the court as de Torcy's carriage stopped before the portico.

"Good evening, M. le marquis," said he, as he assisted the minister to alight. "This is an unexpected honour. It is quite a chance I had not already gone out."

"A sudden whim, my dear M. de Bernaville," replied the marquis, as they went indoors. "I have promised to make a little inquiry for my relative the countess of Melfort, and I shall not be allowed any peace till I have satisfied her curiosity."

"I shall be delighted to do anything to oblige madame de

Meliort," said the governor. "What do you wish to know, M. le marquis?"

"Do you recollect anything of an Englishman named Collins being here any time during your term of office?"

"Collins? Collins? We have a man here named Collin," replied de Bernaville, giving the name its French pronunciation. "I did not know he was English. No one could tell it from his accent."

"Perhaps that accounts for d'Argenson's report."

"What report?"

"That there was no Englishman in the Bastille."

"Very likely. We can ask him, if you like. He is the fourth Bazinière."

"I should rather like to see him. But have you his *lettre de cachet*?"

"I suppose it will be in the archive-room. He has been here a long time, I fancy—before M. de Saint Mars, even."

M. de Bernaville had succeeded M. de Saint Mars on the death of the latter in 1708, after a governorship of ten years.

"Can we look at it?" asked the marquis. "I am aware it is rather late."

"Certainly. We will go at once, if you like, before they raise the drawbridge."

"I shall be very much obliged to you."

The governor put on his hat and cloak, and led the marquis across the court. The drawbridge over the ditch, at the end of the short, covered way leading out of the court on the left, was just on the point of being raised for the night. The guard presented arms, and waited for the two gentlemen to pass over.

The marquis looked up as they crossed the bridge. On the other side stood the gateway and double doors of the Bastille, plunged in profound shadow, and making a vast cavern in the wall connecting the two terminal towers of the Bazinière on the left and the Comté on the right. From one or two of the window-gratings, separated by the whole thickness of the walls from the rooms inside the towers, a faint gleam strayed out into the inky darkness of the night. The storm was increasing, and the marquis drew his cloak around him more closely.

When the wicket, in response to the summons of M. de Bernaville, was opened, the governor and his visitor passed under the front offices of the château into the Grande Cour.

A Kent Squire

This court was the principal precinct of the château. On its right were the three towers of the Comté, the Trésor, and the Chapelle; on the left the Bazinière, the Bertaudière, and the curiously named Liberté—all connected by enormous curtain-walls with a fortified terrace on the top. The fourth side of the Grande Cour, opposite the entrance, was formed by a two-storey building which connected the third tower on each side, the Liberté and the Chapelle. This structure contained on the lower floor various offices and guard-rooms' and on the upper the council-chamber and the library (of some five hundred volumes) for the use of the prisoners.

Beyond this building was the Cour du Puits, so called from its cesspool of a well, with the two towers of the Puits and the Coin at its farther corners.

The eight towers were arranged somewhat after the plan of the double four of dominoes, only having the cross-bar uniting two of the spots instead of lying in the centre of the parallelogram.

Each tower consisted of a *cachot* (cellar or dungeon), four stories above, a fifth (called the *calotte*) under the roof, and a fortified terrace on the top of all. Each storey contained a single irregular-sided room, with the addition, in some cases, of a small closet taken from the thickness of the wall. The château could thus accommodate, irrespective of the *cachots*, forty prisoners, each having a separate room. The inmates were known, not by name, but by their towers and the number of their floors therein.

As the governor and the marquis entered the Grande Cour, they were met by the lieutenant du roi. This functionary was the person actually in charge of the château de la Bastille itself, living in it, and being responsible for the discipline of the garrison and the safe keeping of the persons committed to his custody. The governor, as has been said, lived outside the château, and was charged with the due entry and discharge of prisoners, their maintenance, and their health.

"M. de Launey,"* said the governor, "M. le marquis de Torcy desires to examine the *lettre de cachet* of the fourth Bazinière, and afterwards to have an interview with him."

The lieutenant du roi bowed.

"With pleasure, M. le marquis," he said. "But it may

* This M. de Launey succeeded de Bernaville as governor in 1718. His ill-fated son, born in the château in 1740, was the last governor of the Bastille, and was butchered by the mob after the surrender of the fortress, July 14th, 1789.

take some little time to find the order. I will fetch my keys, if you will pardon my keeping you waiting a moment."

"How is business with you, my dear governor?" asked the marquis, as the lieutenant went back to his quarters.

"Very good," replied de Bernaville cheerfully, rubbing his hands. "We have forty-one, and all except three on a good scale. Your M. Collins is one of the three—he is only a ten livre man."

"How do you manage with the odd man?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I am sending one to Vincennes to-morrow, by an order from M. le comte de Pontchartrain. You see, I have thirty-eight prisoners at fifteen livres and upwards, and three at ten livres. I cannot put any of these, you understand, two in a room. So I am getting rid of a ten livre man to allow a room each for the other forty."

The lieutenant du roi returned with his keys, took a lantern from the guard, and opened the door of the archive-room. This was part of a building at the foot of the curtain-wall which connected the Bazinière with the Bertaudière, the other and more distant portion being the chapel. By good luck, the document imprisoning Collins was found without difficulty. It spelt his name, by mistake, as Collin, made no mention of his offence or his nationality, was dated May 8th, 1694, and put him on the ten livre scale. It was countersigned by the secretary of state Letellier, son of the marquis de Louvois, both of whom had been dead several years.

"I will see this prisoner for a few minutes, M. le lieutenant," said the marquis, "but in strict incognito. Has he a light?"

"No doubt, M. le marquis," said the lieutenant du roi. "He spends most of his time reading. The turnkey can let you have more candles, if you like."

"A couple will do no harm," said the marquis.

"You will do me the honour to sup with me, M. le marquis, before you leave?" asked de Bernaville.

"I always yield to temptation, my dear governor. Everyone says your cook is worthy of the Palais-Royal—in fact, I wonder M. d'Orléans does not steal him from you."

"You flatter me," said the delighted governor. "But to-night you must take pot-luck—you should have given me an hour's notice. Here, Leblanc! conduct monsieur to the fourth Bazinière—incognito, recollect. Au revoir, my dear marquis."

"I shall not be long," nodded the marquis, as he followed the turnkey. The governor went back to his house, and the lieutenant du roi to his quarters.

In each tower the various floors were reached by a spiral stone staircase, built in the thickness of the walls, which diminished from over forty feet thick at the basement to about ten at the *calottes*. The irregular polygonal rooms were practically of the same size throughout. On each floor a little passage ran through the solid masonry from the staircase to the thick double doors of the prisoner's room. The staircase of the Bazinière started from the inside of the archive-room.

As de Torcy and the turnkey reached the landing of the fourth floor, the former stopped and said to his companion,

"It seems to me, Leblanc—if that is your name—that I remember your face."

"Possibly, M. le marquis," replied the turnkey respectfully.

"You have seen me before."

"When was that?"

"M. le marquis, I had the honour of showing you up these stairs, into the first floor, exactly thirteen years ago. If monsieur will recollect, it was the evening of the arrival of M. de Saint Mars with——" and the turnkey's voice sank to a whisper.

A slight shiver passed over the marquis as he replied,

"You are right, my good Leblanc. It was just such a storm as this."

The marquis stopped at the entrance of the passage to the fourth Bazinière. His thoughts went back to the night of September 18th, 1698, when M. de Saint Mars, arriving from Pignerol to take up his governorship of the Bastille, had brought with him, in a litter, a prisoner from the citadel of the Ile Ste. Marguerite. This prisoner was received by M. Dujonca, the then lieutenant du roi, and put for a couple of hours in the first Bazinière. At nine o'clock the same night he was transferred to the third Bertaudière, where he remained until his death. He was allowed everything that he asked for except his liberty, and even the governor did not sit in his presence. The face of this prisoner was never seen. It was covered with a black velvet visor, the lower part of which was furnished with steel springs to permit the wearer to eat and drink without inconvenience. Orders were given to kill the prisoner on the instant if the visor were removed. He died on November 19th, 1703, and was buried in the parish church of St. Paul, close at hand, under the name of Marchiergues. In his grave was hidden for ever the secret of the MAN IN THE IRON MASK.

A mist came before the eyes of the marquis, and the picture rose unbidden in his memory of the tall and graceful form, the costly raiment, and the veiled face of the man whom he had seen seated at the table of the first Bazinière, when Leblanc had opened the door for him thirteen years before. He made an effort to throw off the gloom which the reminiscence inspired in him, and motioned to the turnkey to proceed.

"You will admit me, and then leave us, my good Leblanc," said he.

"I must lock the doors after you, as you are aware, M. le marquis."

"Certainly. When I knock, you can let me out again."

Leblanc unlocked the ponderous outer and inner doors which separated the landing from the cell, and threw them open. He stood aside for the marquis to pass, and called out,

"A visitor for the fourth Bazinière."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE FOURTH BAZINIÈRE

THE marquis found himself in a six-sided room of about eighteen feet diameter and somewhat the same height. It had a large open fireplace, the chimney of which was obstructed by heavy iron grids placed at different distances in the flue. On the left was a glass casement, opening inwards. This casement gave access to a sort of tunnel about six feet high, which ran through the thickness of the wall—nearly eighteen feet at this point—to the open air. The tunnel was guarded at its outer extremity by an immensely strong iron grating, and a similar grating was placed about half way from the casement. Three steps ascended from the floor of the room to that of the tunnel. This was a model of most of the windows of the Bastille.

The room was furnished with a small bed hung with dingy green serge curtains, a table and arm-chair in rather dilapidated condition, a basin and ewer, a large earthen pot for water, a brass candlestick in which a lighted candle was burning, a tin goblet, a broom, tinder-box, and matches, and one or two other conveniences. The temperature of the room

was not uncomfortable. The enormous thickness of the walls of the Bastille was said to temper to a great extent any extremes of heat and cold which might prevail outside, and the masonry, except in the *cachots*, was always perfectly dry. A meagre fire of wood logs burned upon the stone hearth. There were no fire-dogs, tongs, poker, or shovel, these being evidently looked upon as superfluous luxuries.

The occupant of the room was seated in the arm-chair at the table, reading by the light of his candle. He looked up as the door opened and the visitor was announced.

The marquis saw before him a man of tall stature and apparently of great strength. His massive features were pale, a pair of brilliant eyes almost disappeared beneath overhanging eyebrows and forehead, and his nose was arched like the beak of an eagle. His hair fell upon his shoulders in long, thick waves, and his beard rested upon the table. The blackness of his hair and eyebrows formed a startling contrast to the pallor of his skin, etiolated by long confinement. He fixed his gaze in expectant silence upon the marquis. The latter bowed, and waited till Leblanc had placed a second candle on the table and closed the door behind him.

"I have the honour of speaking to M. Richard Collins?" asked de Torcy.

The prisoner rose and bowed.

"So I am called, I believe," he said.

"Otherwise M. Randolph Dorrington?"

The prisoner made a little movement of surprise and looked inquiringly at the speaker.

"That is my name, sir. It is a long while since I have heard it."

"I am sorry, M. Dorrington, that I cannot, without indiscretion, introduce myself to you by name. I will, however, ask you to believe that I wish you well, and that I have some little power to give effect to my good wishes. If you have no objection, I should like to have a little conversation with you."

The prisoner bowed with a certain calm indifference, and motioned with his hand from the bed to the chair.

"Do me the favour to be seated, sir," he said.

The marquis selected the bed, and the prisoner, after lighting the second candle, resumed his seat at the table.

"I may say, monsieur," began de Torcy, "that it is only within the last hour I have learned of your existence, your imprisonment, your supposed offence, and your innocence."

"My dear sir, you appear to have a good deal the advantage of me. Not having been informed of my offence, I do not even know whether I am innocent or not. Formerly I used to have a little curiosity on the point."

"I can explain that in a word, monsieur. You were the bearer, in May 1694, of a letter sent by colonel Sackville to lord Melfort, which had been tampered with before it reached his lordship's hands."

"Not by me, or to my knowledge."

"I am aware of that. But you got the credit of it—hence your imprisonment. It was a piece of injustice with which I had nothing to do, which I regret profoundly, and which I am here, I hope, to remedy."

The prisoner's smile sent a chill to the heart of the marquis.

"That is of course quite easy, my good sir. You have only to give me back the seventeen years I have spent between these walls, the family and friends to whom I am dead or forgotten, the sunshine, the winds of heaven, my man's life, and all that I have lost in the world outside by the piece of injustice—which you regret profoundly."

"Your rebuke is quite just, M. Dorrington. But I have come here to do what I can, and no man can do more."

Dorrington inclined his head and waited.

"Have you heard any news since your imprisonment, monsieur?"

"Not much of late. In the time of M. de Saint Mars and M. Dujonca there was occasionally a little gossip. Since they died no one speaks to us. I was told of the deaths of king James, king William, and the king of Spain, also about the recommencement of the war nine years ago. Very little since."

"The war, monsieur, still continues, but is, I hope, practically over. France has suffered much in this long contest, mainly through your duke of Marlborough."

"He is a duke, is he?"

"For some years past. Did you know him?"

"Slightly. A d—d hound."

This description very much interested the marquis.

"The seed appears to be already sown," he thought. He went on aloud, "I believe you also knew general Talmash?"

"He was my dearest friend. We were foster-brothers and inseparable. In fact, I had been brought up at his father's place—old sir Lionel's, at Helmingham."

"I regret to inform you that he died soon after your arrival here—in 1694."

"I have long since been resigned to all my losses, known and unknown; but you could not have told me of a greater one."

"I believe the general was a man of exceptional genius in his profession?"

"That was the opinion of all good judges, and no one knew it better than Jack Churchill. It was a toss up between the two for capacity, and there was no third."

"Probably there was no love lost between such able rivals?" hazarded the marquis.

"Tom Talmash had no ill-feeling in him for anyone. But Churchill had a poisonous jealousy of Talmash: there was no trick he would not have played to get him out of the way."

"Really, this is an invaluable fellow," said the marquis to himself. "This is very interesting, M. Dorrington," he went on, "because it throws some additional light upon the circumstances which led to your imprisonment. I understand you know nothing about the letter which you brought to lord Melfort?"

"Nothing whatever. A friend of mine—captain Floyd—was the intended messenger, but he broke a blood-vessel at Dover and could not go on. I offered to deliver the letter for him, as he had told me it was urgent. His safe-conduct was under the name of Richard Collins, which, of course, I adopted. I was accustomed to travel in France, and spoke the language passably, as you hear. That is all I know about it."

"I may tell you, M. Dorrington, that that letter was of great consequence to our government. It informed us of the intended destination of a considerable armament fitting out against us at Portsmouth under admiral Russell and general Talmash."

"I recollect that. I was with Talmash at the time. Some spy must have got hold of the secret, I suppose."

"As a result, monsieur, of your journey, we were warned just in time to make preparations to resist the attack on Brest, which was in question."

The marquis did not think it at all necessary to explain that the said preparations had been made by Vauban three weeks before the duke's letter arrived, in consequence of a previous warning sent to Louis XIV. by lord Godolphin, the latter being at the time, like Marlborough, in the service of William III.

"You may take it for granted, my dear sir," replied Dorrington, "that I should have burnt that letter if I had known of its contents—with all respect for your country, of course. What happened after, may I ask?"

"In the attack of June 8th, which followed, the English ships and troops were met by a considerable force when they had expected to find no resistance, and had to retire with heavy loss. Your friend Talmash received a fatal wound, and died a few days afterwards."

The prisoner sighed heavily.

"Poor Talmash," he muttered to himself. "Death is the fortune of war; but defeat is bitter, and defeat by treachery is the bitterest of all."

The marquis prepared to play his trump card.

"You will be interested, M. Dorrington, to learn who was the writer of the letter you bore. It was an Englishman."

"An Englishman! Who was the scoundrel?"

"The earl of Marlborough."

"Jack Churchill? Impossible, sir. Even he, thief and liar as he is, could not be such a villain."

"It is as I say."

"There must be some mistake. An English general in king William's service betray us to France!"

"Evidently the earl may have had several motives, from what you say. His asserted desire to be of service to king James need not have been the only one."

Dorrington brought his fist down on the table with a blow which split it across.

"Good heavens, sir!" he cried, "it was done to destroy Talmash—to ruin his reputation by a crushing failure, and perhaps get him killed out of hand. Was there ever such a reptile?"

"You can understand," proceeded the marquis, "that the earl would not like his letter read by any friend of the general's, such as yourself. That was why it was thought necessary to put you in the Bastille before you could warn Talmash."

"Did Churchill know it was I who had carried his letter?"

"He was told of that at once—also of your imprisonment. He had already urged that the greatest care should be taken to prevent the authorship of the letter transpiring. Of course, there was every disposition to oblige him. Thus you are here."

Dorrington folded his arms and leaned back in his chair.

"Well, sir, I can only say I am sorry for your visit and your news. You have embittered the remainder of a life to which I had become reconciled—first, because I learn that there is such a villainy to be punished, and second, because I am powerless to punish it."

The marquis began to see daylight. But he thought it well to make assurance doubly sure.

"As to that, monsieur," said he, "I hope you are mistaken. The irritation you naturally feel will doubtless soon pass away—one does not keep up grudges for ever. All this did not happen yesterday."

"Sir, you forget that your yesterday and mine are two different things. My yesterday was May 8th, 1694."

"Still, monsieur, if—I only suggest it as a possibility—if you obtained your release, you would scarcely jeopardise your liberty by taking any steps to resent this treachery of lord Marlborough's?"

"My liberty, sir, would be valueless to me if I could not use it to revenge my foster-brother."

"Monsieur, forgiveness is a Christian duty."

The marquis was quite pleased at the glibness with which he found himself enunciating this pious exordium. Dorrington looked at him for a moment in silence.

"I have the impression, sir," he said, "that you are hinting at some sort of a bargain with me."

"In what way, monsieur?"

"You have made it clear that monstrous and cruel wrongs have been committed, and at the same time you wish to screen the author of those wrongs. You seem to suggest that if I will let this Judas go scot-free I may hope to have that door opened for me."

The marquis began to feel a little anxious.

"I do not say you are right, monsieur," he remarked; "but if you are——"

Dorrington rose from his seat, and his mighty bulk towered over the diminutive marquis with a sternness almost menacing.

"If I am, sir," he said, "you have wasted your time. For seventeen years I have suffered wrong patiently, because it was useless to be impatient. But if you tell me in one breath to hope for liberty, and in the next to be patient under wrongs a thousandfold greater than I had ever dreamed of—then, sir, I say it is not in human nature to be patient."

This reply filled the marquis with satisfaction.
 "Then you refuse," he said, "to accept your release on condition of leaving M. de Marlborough alone?"

Dorrington sat down again.

"I refuse," he said.

The marquis cogitated for several seconds, during which Dorrington seemed himself busied in thought.

"If I set this man free now," reflected de Torcy, "he will go straight to the duke and cut his throat, before there is any absolute necessity. If I keep him here till necessity arises, he may bungle things through having been so long on the shelf, and finding himself entirely out of date about places and people. I think we must compromise matters a little. Let us try some more preaching."

"My dear M. Dorrington," he said at length, "I can assure you I had no idea of making any such proposal as you suggest. On the other hand, I confess that your conduct in one respect rather surprises me."

"What is that, sir?"

"Your readiness to believe a monstrous charge against M. de Marlborough upon the unsupported assertion of an absolute stranger."

Dorrington looked keenly at the marquis.

"I presumed, sir," he replied, "that two gentlemen were talking together."

The marquis would have blushed if he had not forgotten how.

"You do me honour," he said. "At the same time, it is due to the duke that such things should not be said without proof."

"You are right. I was hasty."

"Unfortunately I cannot at this moment furnish proof of what I have said."

"Does the proof exist?"

"Certainly. It is only a question of time when I can lay it before you."

"In what form, may I ask?"

"The letter you carried, of course."

Dorrington's eyes flashed.

"That is enough," said he. "In the meantime——"

"In the meantime, my dear M. Dorrington, it seems a pity that you should waste any more time in this place."

"You can release me?" asked the prisoner, with a slight tremor in his voice.

"Well, not exactly. To be candid, M. Dorrington, I am so situated that I might get into terribly hot water if you were known to be at large through any action or influence on my part—so much so, indeed, that I must beg of you to understand that I positively refuse to listen to any application that you or anyone else may make for your release. On the other hand——"

The marquis paused and produced his snuff-box.

"Well, sir?" asked the prisoner, in a tone of cold disappointment.

"On the other hand," continued the marquis, leaning forward to offer his snuff-box, "if you were in England, M. Dorrington, to what address would it be convenient to you for me to send M. de Marlborough's letter?"

Dorrington was too much bewildered to accept the proffered courtesy.

"What was your usual house of call in London, for instance?" asked the marquis urbanely, as he helped himself to a pinch.

"Will's Coffee-house," replied Dorrington, in a puzzled tone. "But it may have been closed or burnt down long ago."

"I think not," said the marquis, "because a friend of yours, or rather of your family, who has been inquiring after you, gave me that address only a couple of days ago."

"Inquiring after me? who?" asked Dorrington in amazement.

"M. Ambrose Gwynett, a gentleman of Kent."

"I have no recollection of the name. I don't understand it at all."

"You had better ask for him at the *café* you speak of."

"But you are speaking in riddles, sir."

"I will speak in parables for a change. Listen with all your ears, M. Dorrington, while I tell you a little story. *A propos*, are you familiar with the road between Paris and Vincennes?"

"Yes—that is, as it used to be."

"I don't think there is much change. Well, once upon a time—you are listening, M. Dorrington?"

"Go on, sir."

"Once upon a time there was a prisoner who was confined in a fortress—let us call it the Bastille. It happened that this prisoner was to be removed to another prison—let us say Vincennes. He was told of this intended removal the evening

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THE FOURTH BAZINIÈRE.



before by a friend, who furnished him with a purse containing—let us see—ten louis in gold.”

The marquis pulled out a purse of gold, counted ten louis back into it, put the rest in his pocket, and threw the purse under the bed on which he was sitting.

“By some accident or other,” he went on, “the carriage broke down on the journey to Vincennes. The prisoner was seated inside with only a turnkey in charge of him. The coachman being occupied with the horses and overturned carriage, the turnkey went to assist him. Curiously enough, a horse, ready saddled and bridled, was hitched to the back of the carriage. Probably it was intended for the turnkey to ride back again—I forget exactly. You can ride, M. Dorrington?”

“Of course,” replied Dorrington under his breath.

“By the way, the horse could scarcely have been for the turnkey, because there was a greatcoat strapped to the saddle, and a valise containing a passport, fifty louis d’or, scissors, a razor, and various odds and ends. I think there were pistol-holsters also. No doubt it was for someone going on a journey.”

Dorrington nodded.

“Scissors and a razor are very useful things, M. Dorrington?” asked the marquis, stroking his clean-shaven jaw and chin.

“To a man who might not have shaved lately,” replied Dorrington, with his eyes fixed on the marquis.

“Well, in the confusion of the moment the prisoner got out of the carriage, seized the horse, galloped off before the turnkey or the coachman could stop him, and made good his escape—possibly to England.”

“Did not his custodians fire at him?”

“Really I quite forget. Perhaps they did. But I presume the muskets missed fire or something—some people can always miss fire just at the wrong time. Well, I think that is the end of my story, M. Dorrington. Does it interest you?”

The prisoner held out his hand.

“I thank you from the bottom of my soul,” he said.

The marquis rose and grasped the proffered hand.

“It is understood that you wait for M. de Marlborough’s letter before—”

“I will wait.”

The marquis knocked on the door. Leblanc opened it.

“I wish you a very good evening, monsieur,” said the marquis negligently, as he turned towards the door.

"I am obliged for your visit, sir," replied Dorrington in a formal tone.

The door closed and the prisoner was left alone.

About ten minutes elapsed before the marquis and Leblanc emerged into the archive-room. The turnkey's fingers caressed certain louis d'or in his breeches pocket as they crossed the Grande Cour to the drawbridge.

"You may depend upon me, M. le marquis," he said earnestly.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SETTLING THINGS

THE lieutenant du roi, whose presence was necessary for the opening of the gate and the raising of the drawbridge, escorted the marquis back to the Cour du Gouvernement, and was invited by de Bernaville to join the supper-table. Then the marquis appeared to recollect something.

"*Peste!* my dear governor, it has just occurred to me that M. d'Argenson is expecting me. I quite forgot I had an appointment with him this evening."

The governor looked very much disappointed.

"Is it urgent, M. le marquis?" he asked plaintively.

"Well, no—if I could only have given him notice. But I think I must send him a line to say I cannot possibly come."

"That is well. I will have it sent at once," said de Bernaville, recovering his cheerfulness and opening an *escritoire* for the marquis.

"Not at all, my dear de Bernaville. My coachman has nothing to do, and he will get there sooner."

The marquis sat down and wrote:

"MY DEAR D'ARGENSON,

I must see you to-night—say in an hour and a half.

DE TORCY."

This was duly despatched by M. de Torcy's coachman, and the party sat down to supper.

"You had a long chat with the fourth Bazinière, M. le marquis," observed the lieutenant du roi.

"Yes; he is a rare gossip. I thought he could have enlightened me about some old scandals that have cropped up

again lately, but it was after his time. I think you said he was a ten livre man, M. de Bernaville?"

"He is. There are two more on that scale."

"M. Desmarets and I have been talking about overhauling the tariff lately. You will regret to hear that, my dear governor; but our expenses are enormous. I really can't imagine why this fourth Bazinière was ever put on the ten livre list. I see nothing in the case for anything over five livres, whatever your other two may be."

"Our own expenses are not light," said the governor, who began to feel alarmed.

"Well, I think it is the governor of Vincennes who has occasion to grumble. Whom are you sending him?"

"I had not decided," replied de Bernaville. "But if there is any chance of the fourth Bazinière being cut down to five livres, that settles it—he shall go."

"I think you are very prudent, my dear de Bernaville," said the marquis. "If I recollect right, a prisoner is usually removed in charge of the turnkey of his tower?"

"That is so," put in the lieutenant. "Naturally he knows more about him. Leblanc, whom you saw, has the Bazinière."

"A very trustworthy fellow, I should judge," said the marquis. "Have you a special coach on these occasions?"

"Necessarily—with shutters. We hire one, as the need arises so very seldom."

"Why go to that expense? I really think d'Argenson ought to lend you one of his. He must have half a dozen."

"I never thought of that," said the governor, who saw his way to a little economy in this arrangement. "But he may say it is not his department."

"Well, I suppose he would be right. But you may use my name in the matter, my dear governor; d'Argenson's bark is always worse than his bite."

"I will certainly do as you suggest, M. le marquis."

Supper was eventually over, and the marquis took his leave.

"Between ourselves, my dear de Bernaville," he said confidentially at parting, "Desmarets will certainly reduce that fourth Bazinière to the five livre list. For my part, I don't know why the deuce we keep such people at all."

The sieur Nicolas Desmarets was the controller-general of finances.

"I am immensely obliged to you for the hint, M. le marquis."

As soon as the carriage was out of the Rue St. Antoine

the marquis told the coachman to drive to the hôtel of the lieutenant-general of police. M. d'Argenson was at home, and the marquis went in. The carriage remained in the courtyard.

Half an hour afterwards the hall-door opened and the two ministers appeared upon the threshold.

"This is fearfully demoralising, marquis," said d'Argenson, laughing.

"*Peste!* my dear comte, think of the economy. Ten livres a day comes to three thousand six hundred and fifty livres a year—enough to pay the salary of another confidential secretary for you."

"Well, we will manage it somehow," replied the lieutenant-general of police as he shook hands with the marquis.

The next morning M. de Torcy entered the king's cabinet at Versailles at his usual hour.

"Sire," he said, as soon as they were alone, "does your majesty happen to recollect a little conversation we had on the occasion of receiving that letter from his majesty the king of Spain?"

"What about it?" asked the king.

"We spoke of what was to be done if M. de Marlborough took our money and played us false after all."

"It was you who spoke of it, marquis."

"Perhaps so, sire. I believe I expressed a desire to find somebody who would be just fool enough to attempt what might be necessary, and not fool enough to fail."

"I do not listen to these things, marquis," said the king.

"Very good, sire. But I think I have found our fool."

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BOOK III

The Affair at the 'Crown and Anchor'



CHAPTER XXIX

THE DUKE IN LONDON

ON the night of the departure of the *Mermaid* and the *Fleur de Lys* from Scheveningen a terrific hurricane arose in the English Channel and swept over the North Sea. The *Mermaid* was obliged to run before the gale for a couple of days, and only made the mouth of the Thames with the greatest difficulty. Nothing had been seen of the *Fleur de Lys*, and lord Marlborough was assured by the captain of the *Mermaid* that the brig might have been driven to make for the Elbe or the Frith of Forth. The duke was therefore in a fever of anxiety when, on November 17th, he landed at Greenwich.

Here he was met by a party of the Whig opposition, and pressed to associate himself with the great political demonstration to be held that day in London, when the ministers were to be challenged, after hostile processions through the city, by a great burning in effigy of the pope, the devil, and the Pretender, intended as a test of popular feeling in the matter of the Protestant succession. This, with his usual caution, he excused himself from doing, and went instead to wait upon the queen at Hampton Court, partly with the idea of recovering some of his lost influence with Anne, and partly to try and secure her promised contribution towards the completion of his palace of Blenheim, near Woodstock. The queen had undertaken, not only to build, but to furnish, this edifice; but of late the contractors had not been paid, and were in consequence pressing their claims upon the duke in person. Nothing satisfactory, however, came of the interview, and the duke returned very much annoyed to Marlborough House.

To this meeting-place all the Whig magnates resorted to discuss the political situation with their leader, whose personal interests were so much mixed up with their own. A fortnight passed in continuous conference with the Jacobite agents, the disaffected or weak-kneed Tory peers, and the representatives of the allied powers on the continent. These were, as has been said earlier, van Buys and baron von Bothmar, the envoys of the States-General and the elector; baron von Kreyenberg, the Hanoverian resident; and the comte de Galas, the ambassador of the emperor of Germany.

The duke's position was critical. The whole forces of the triumphant Tories were in the field against him. An army

of pamphleteers reviled him as the sole obstacle to an honourable peace, and it was an open secret that sweeping charges of corruption in connection with the administration of the army were being prepared against him. A large and compact majority in the Commons was ready to vote his impeachment at the impending opening of parliament, and, with the exception of St. John, every minister in office was his uncompromising opponent. His single protection was the slight Whig majority in the House of Lords, for, as a peer, he could only be dealt with judicially by his peers. We learn that at this juncture even his predominant passion was subordinated to his fears for his own safety, and that he spent considerable sums in trying to secure the votes of needy and venal members of the government party in the Upper House. To further strengthen the opposition side, prince Eugène had been urgently summoned to London, and the great imperialist had promised to come at once.

In the country the general desire for a cessation of the war was tempered by an angry suspicion that the Tories only sought peace to damage their Whig opponents, and were more than willing to sacrifice the interests of the country to their political hatreds. The queen herself oscillated from day to day between her resentment against the Marlboroughs, her dislike of her designated successor (the elector of Hanover), and her terror lest her Tory ministers should be secretly plotting to depose her in favour of her brother, the chevalier de St. George. The only person who held his tongue at this juncture was the earl of Oxford, who was almost as much suspected by his colleagues as by the queen, and whose chief associate at the time of the duke's arrival in England seemed to be his rising favourite, the abbé Gaultier. Meanwhile, every politician of every party accused his opponent of betraying the country in order to bring about a Catholic restoration.

Parliament met on December 7th. In the queen's speech, delivered in person, a direct challenge to Marlborough was conveyed in the sentence: "that notwithstanding the arts of those who delighted in war, both place and time were appointed for opening the treaty of a general peace." This innuendo the duke resented with his usual wealth of pious asseverations and with a complete abandonment of his habitual self-control, while his colleagues vied with him in denunciations of the ministerial perfidy.

The most obviously convenient way of damaging the govern-

ment was to insist that the intended peace involved a disgraceful surrender of all the objects for which Great Britain had contended during ten years of brilliantly successful war. Therefore the Whig majority in the Lords, reinforced by an influential Tory deserter in the person of the earl of Nottingham, moved an addition to the address, which represented "that no peace could be safe or honourable to Great Britain or Europe should Spain and the Indies be continued in any branch of the house of Bourbon."

This proposal was followed by a venomous debate, in which the whole weight of the government was employed against the Whigs. The duke amazed his friends and delighted his enemies by throwing aside all his wonted diplomacy and attacking the peace policy of the Tories with unsparing bitterness. Finally the address, with its addition, was carried by sixty-one votes to fifty-five, and presented to her majesty on December 11th.

The queen and her ministers had long before secretly agreed with Louis XIV. to recognise the sovereignty of his grandson, the king of Spain, to oppose which had been the sole object of the war. Nevertheless, in her reply to the address she remarked "that she should be sorry that anyone should suspect that she would not do her utmost to recover Spain and the Indies from the house of Bourbon."

This reply foiled for a moment the tactics of the Whigs in parliament, and they resumed their intrigues outside of it. It was the common talk that the States-General and the elector intended to fit out a fleet in order to repeat the *coup d'état* of 1688 and to depose the queen.

Meanwhile, the animosity of the Tories threatened to overreach itself by its very virulence. They freely threatened to behead the duke if his reported purchase of eight ministerial votes was proved, and pestered the queen so persistently to remove from office the Whig duke of Somerset, master of the horse, that her majesty became quite annoyed. Having been present at the debate in the Lords on December 15th, she was at its close asked by the Tory duke of Shrewsbury whether she would prefer being escorted out of the House by himself, as lord chancellor, or by lord Lindsay, as hereditary grand chamberlain. She curtly declined both and took the arm of the duke of Somerset.

This news was all over the town in an hour. The Tories were thunderstruck. St. John asked all his friends to recollect that for a week past he had declared the queen was not to

be relied on. Lord Oxford smoothed her majesty down by averring that he had not the least desire to remove Somerset or his duchess from court, and the lord chancellor went to call upon Marlborough with overtures of friendship. The duke sent out his profound apologies for being deeply engaged and unable to see him.

As a matter of fact, the duke was in the middle of a critical interview with the comte de Galas. The ambassador was pressing upon Marlborough the identical proposition predicted by de Torcy in a conversation with Louis XIV., which has already been reported to the reader. This was to promise to assume command of the imperial forces to carry on the war between the empire and France for the recovery of Spain in the event of the English government concluding a separate peace with Louis. The comte had, in fact, previously mooted the proposal, and was now urgently demanding a reply.

The duke was on the horns of a dilemma. To do him justice, he fully intended to keep his promise to de Torcy if he received his reward for doing so. But he was devoured by anxiety as to the whereabouts of the *Fleur de Lys*, now missing for nearly a month, and had to take into account the possibility of her being lost. If she was at the bottom of the sea or captured by a French or Spanish privateer, he might, by refusing the comte's offer, sacrifice his future career for nothing at all at a time when his position in England was perilous, if not desperate.

Cardonnel had of late been sent twice a day to inquire at Lloyd's Coffee-house (recently removed from Tower Street to the corner of Abchurch Lane and Lombard Street) for news of the brig. Hitherto this had been without result, and the secretary was at the moment absent on the same errand, which the duke did not care to delegate to anyone else. Until some tidings of the *Fleur de Lys* were forthcoming, the duke intended to exert all his diplomacy to avoid giving a final answer to the ambassador's overtures.

The comte was a man of considerable impatience and irascibility of temper, which had already nearly been the means of his being deported from England by the ministry. He was getting very much annoyed at Marlborough's tergiversation, to the motive of which he had, of course, no clue.

"My dear duke," he was saying, "permit me to urge that it is due to my imperial master that we should receive a definite reply to our suggestions. We are liable at any

moment to be confronted with the virtual conclusion of a separate peace on the part of lord Oxford, and it is of the utmost consequence that even before that juncture we should know exactly upon whom we may rely."

"With all deference, my dear comte," replied the duke, "I differ from you as to the imminence of peace between this country and France. Even if it were otherwise, I do not feel that I am sufficiently informed as to the probable policy of the elector and the States-General to justify me in assuming so serious a responsibility."

As both Buys and von Bothmar, to say nothing of Kreyenberg, were furious for the continuation of the war, this argument of the duke's failed to impress the ambassador.

"My dear duke," he retorted, "the enthusiasm of our respected allies is as great as it ever was."

"I have no doubt of that," replied Marlborough. "But hitherto Great Britain has paid for that enthusiasm, my dear comte, which makes all the difference. In the future it appears that their enthusiasm will have to be its own reward."

The ambassador began to lose his temper.

"Then, duke, I see very little use in prolonging our conversation. I shall, with regret, report to my imperial master that we must make other arrangements."

This was not what the duke desired. "Other arrangements" meant simply that prince Eugène would at once be offered the position and the emoluments at present open to his own acceptance. The prince was the last man in the world to put forward any claim to priority over his old companion-in-arms; but if he were appointed generalissimo of the continental Allies, it would be unreasonable to expect him to descend from this position hereafter merely because the duke might find occasion to change his mind. On the other hand, if he violated his promise to de Torcy, that worthy diplomatist would at once publish his treachery all over Europe, and he had the unfortunate conviction that the French minister's unsupported statement would be worth more than the longest string of oaths on his own part. In brief, the duke was no fonder of being found out than other people. Meanwhile it was evident that the ambassador's patience was exhausted, and the duke could scarcely see his way to avoid being cornered. At this moment Cardonnel's knock was heard at the door.

"Excuse me a moment, my dear comte," said the duke, and he called to the secretary to enter. Cardonnel came

in, laid a slip of paper on the table, and waited. On the slip was written :

"Fleur de Lys reported at Lloyd's off the Tower."

The duke gave a great sigh of relief.

"Send a messenger in a coach to bring the captain back with him at once," he said to Cardonnel.

The secretary retired, and the duke turned to Galas.

"My dear comte," he said, "believe that I am fully sensible of the honour done me by his majesty in all that you have laid before me. But I have the strongest feeling that only actual danger to the integrity of the present possessions of his imperial majesty would justify me, before the eyes of my countrymen, in taking the field against France if Great Britain itself were at peace."

"That is not the point in the least," cried the exasperated ambassador. "Nobody supposes the empire has a French invasion to fear. The thing is ridiculous."

"Precisely so, my dear comte," said the duke soothingly. "At the same time, you can see for yourself that such a contingency would be my sole valid excuse for accepting his majesty's very flattering offer."

"That is equivalent, duke, to a refusal."

"Do not say so, my dear comte. I only suggest that the occasion for my services appears very unlikely to arise. When it does, we can resume our conversation."

The comte rose in a rage.

"My offer will not be repeated, duke—let that be clearly understood. 'No' to-day is 'no' for ever. In a word, is it 'yes' or 'no'?"

The duke rose with the blindest possible expression of regret.

"If you put it that way, my dear comte, I am sorry that it is out of my power to say 'yes.'"

"That settles the matter, duke. I have the honour to wish you a very good morning."

The ambassador hurried to the door, banged it after him, and disappeared. The duke sat down with a cheerful smile.

"A bird in hand is worth two in a bush," he soliloquised; "and the emperor was always a shocking paymaster."

He occupied himself with his papers until the sound of carriage-wheels was heard in the courtyard. The door opened, and Cardonnel appeared, looking rather puzzled.

"The captain is here, your grace," he said, "but——"
 "Send him here," interrupted the duke, with an impatient wave of the hand.

Cardonnell went out and beckoned to someone in the hall.

"Come in, captain," he said.

An elderly seafaring man entered, pulled his forelock, and stood looking at the duke with a good deal of curiosity. It was not Kermode.

Marlborough looked at him speechlessly for a moment.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Jack Curwen, your honour—skipper of the schooner *Fleur de Lys*."

A sickening suspicion began to dawn upon the duke.

"What *Fleur de Lys*?" he asked.

"*Fleur de Lys* of Gravesend, your honour."

The duke fell back in his arm-chair as if shot.

"What's to do, your honour?" asked the sailor, coming forward sympathetically.

The duke glared at his visitor and seemed to gasp for breath. Then a torrent of imprecations burst from his lips, and he sprang up with such fury in his visage that the worthy skipper bolted to the door, tore across the hall, and was out of the house and running up Pall Mall at his top speed before the secretary or the porter could raise a hand or even open their mouths to stop him.

CHAPTER XXX

CHECKMATE

A DAY or two after the duke's interview with the comte de Galas, squire Wray and his household came up to London as the guests of Mr. St. John. Of late years the squire had found the air of Kent rather trying for his asthma during the first three months of the year, and he had usually gone down to the property of the Dorrington family (which was in his charge as trustee) on the coast of south Devon, passing through London on his way. The journey was accomplished by post through Salisbury and Exeter, and was considered at this period to be an expedition of quite an adventurous character.

As the squire was a Whig of the deepest dye, it required a

little diplomacy on the part of the secretary to answer the innumerable questions put to him by Avice and Noel without coming to loggerheads with his elder guest, more especially as the public interest in the political crisis of the hour almost excluded other topics of conversation. On the last day of their stay the young people wished to hear a debate in parliament, and the intense interest excited by the contest between the Whigs and the court on the question of the Hamilton peerage suggested the selection of the House of Lords for the purpose of a visit.

This was on the 20th of December. The streets in the neighbourhood of St. Stephen's were alive with eager politicians, canvassing the probable results of the party struggle, and the House of Lords, together with the galleries and other parts open to strangers, was crowded to inconvenience. This interested Avice immensely.

"Explain the whole matter to us, Mr. St. John," she had said comprehensively, as they were driving down to the House. "What is it all about?"

"It is a question of prerogative," replied St. John, having the fear of the squire before his eyes. "The queen has just created a peerage, which the Whig party in the House of Lords refuse to recognise. She has made lord Hamilton (who is a duke in the peerage of Scotland) duke of Brandon in the peerage of Great Britain."

"I don't see why," said Avice. "I think Hamilton is the prettier name of the two."

"I will tell the duke what you say. But his grace sits in the Lords at present as one of the sixteen representative peers of Scotland, under the Act of Union of 1705. As duke of Brandon, if the Lords recognise the patent, he will sit as a peer of Great Britain in his own right."

"Will he get a more comfortable seat in that case?" asked Noel with gravity.

"There isn't a comfortable seat in the building," said St. John feelingly. "I have never had a decent nap since I have been in parliament."

"I don't understand why he should want to sit as duke of Brandon, any more than why any one should want to stop him."

"It makes all the difference," explained the secretary. "If he can sit by his own right, the Scotch peers can elect another man in his place as one of their representatives."

"Why shouldn't they?" asked Avice.

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"You see our party——"

"You Tories, I presume," put in the squire.

"We Tories are in a minority of about half a dozen in the Lords, and consequently our big majority in the Commons is only of use to us in money matters. Ill-natured people pretend that the Brandon patent is simply intended to squeeze an extra Scotch Jacobite into the House to strengthen our own muster-roll. They argue that it is only the thin end of the wedge, and that half a dozen patents of the same sort would extinguish our opponents' majority. For myself, I don't understand mathematics."

"Of course it would," said Avice innocently.

"Another thing they say," proceeded the secretary, covering a yawn, "is that the bulk of these Scotch peerages are so infernally ancient, and the holders so infernally poor, that we of the court could always find an excuse for turning a Scotch peer into an English one, and always find means to buy his vote afterwards. This is a censorious world, mistress Avice."

"But I presume, sir," remarked Noel, "that there must be some legal or constitutional arguments on both sides."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated the secretary, "of course there are—enough to sicken one. Don't ask me to bore you with them now. You'll hear quite as much as you can stand in the House. Here we are."

The carriage stopped at Westminster Hall, and the party were escorted to their seats by St. John. The lord chancellor had just taken his seat on the woolsack, and the proceedings were commencing.

The Tory counsel, at the bar of the House, argued for about two hours, in an unspeakably dreary monotone, that the right of the sovereign to select the person of a new peer of Great Britain had no limitation, and that it would be monstrous if a Scotch representative peer were the only kind of Scotchman whom the sovereign could not honour. During these speeches the House half emptied, and the squire slumbered as peacefully as circumstances would permit.

Then there came a sudden rush of members, a buzz of excitement, and St. John whispered over Avice's shoulder,

"The queen is coming in."

Her majesty entered the House, looking cross and anxious, and took her seat in due form. Lord Oxford was in close attendance, and exchanged comments with her from time to time. The temper of the House rose, and the Opposition

seemed to resent the presence of the sovereign as an attempt to overawe them.

The Whig counsel were now heard. These urged that the sovereign could not override the Act of Parliament which constituted the Union, and which expressly limited the Scotch peers to sixteen seats in the House of Lords, to be filled by election; and they pointed out that for Scotch peers to enter the House by any mode except that of election was to violate the express intention of the Act by giving the Scotch peers the double privilege of being present once in their own persons and again in those of their representatives.

In the debate which followed, at which the queen remained present, the Whig lords gave free utterance to the additional considerations at which St. John had hinted, and the Jacobite peers resented the charges with all the rancour that might have been expected. The division was prepared for with the full consciousness on both sides that the result was a matter of life and death for the Opposition. Finally, amidst unexampled excitement, the votes of the assembled peers were demanded from the woolsack. As a result, the House refused by fifty-seven votes against fifty-two to recognise the Brandon patent. The queen left the House in a fury at the successful attack on her prerogative. From this time it was war to the knife between the court and the duke of Marlborough's party.

"Between ourselves, my dear Mr. St. John," said Noel as they left the House, "what will this end in?"

"My dear boy," said the secretary, with a momentary seriousness, "it means a revolution—of one sort or another. Only, as yet, I am not quite sure from which side it will come. I am rather glad that you are all going out of town. I will see you off in the morning—good-bye for the present."

The secretary, after sending his friends home, went to fulfil an engagement to dine with lord Oxford and afterwards hear read the draft report of the commissioners of public accounts, which was to be presented to the House of Commons the following day. These functionaries were Messrs. Lockhart and Shippen, both Tories and Jacobites, and it was Mr. Lockhart whom the ministers were expecting. St. John, as usual, attacked his colleague's claret with a vigour and perseverance which threatened to diminish considerably his utility as a critic. Oxford himself was a distressingly abstemious companion, and never quite knew whether it was

more politic to abet or discourage his colleague's bibulous tendencies. Finally, Mr. Lockhart was announced, and brought with him a formidable sheaf of papers.

"I am sorry, gentlemen," he said, "to be so late. But the accounts are excessively complicated."

"You have everything complete now?" asked Oxford.

"Everything. Of course the most important items arise out of the depositions of Medina and Machado. But we have also noted the complaints in the memorials to her majesty forwarded from the Low Countries, although they are not dealt with in our official report."

This rather tickled St. John.

"What do the Dutchmen say, my dear fellow?" he inquired.

"It is rather amusing to find them able to open their mouths at last."

"One of the memorials is from Ghent, complaining of the extortionate contributions levied by general Cadogan on behalf of the duke in return for their protection."

"What did the duke get out of them?" asked Oxford.

"Six thousand pistoles," replied Lockhart, referring to his memoranda.

"What next?"

"Then we have the affair of the treasonable surrender of Ghent and Bruges to the French by the city magistrates."

"Do they lay that to the duke and Cadogan?"

"Yes—but the memorial fails to adduce any adequate proof. What they do prove is that the duke, after the recapture of the two cities, was bribed by the magistrates to continue them in office."

"How much?"

"Cadogan received 10,000 pistoles as go-between. The duke himself received 200,000 guilders. There are a lot of other little things."

"After all, this is neither here nor there, Mr. Lockhart. Come to the contracts. What does Medina's statement amount to?"

Sir Solomon Medina had been the contractor for bread and bread-waggons to the allied army between 1707 and 1711, having been preceded in that capacity by one Antonio Alvarez Machado. Medina had recognised that his opportunities of making profit on these contracts were nearly, if not quite, exhausted, and was now posing as a virtuous witness against his patron the duke.

"He says," replied Lockhart, "that from 1707 down to

this last autumn he paid the duke personally 332,428 guilder in gratifications, besides one per cent. on all moneys paid to the duke's deputy at Amsterdam, Mr. Sweet—together with twelve or fourteen waggons of bread yearly. Cardonnel was paid 500 ducats on each contract."

"Is that all?"

"As far as Medina is concerned. The same thing more or less was the case with Machado."

"What total do you make out?"

"We calculate that in the ten years of the war the duke has received from the contractors 664,851 guilders and 4 stivers."

"Good Lord!" remarked St. John, with vinous solemnity, "those four stivers make the thing very serious—are you quite sure about them, my dear fellow?"

Oxford looked annoyed, and took up a pen.

"So that in sterling," he asked, "that would be —?"

"£63,319 3s. 7d.," replied Lockhart. "Besides the contracts, there is a separate question of two and a half per cent. which the duke has certainly deducted from all the money passing through his hands for the pay of the foreign regiments in her majesty's service. That amounts to about £40,000."

"Say £100,000 altogether," said Oxford.

"A flea-bite," hiccupped St. John. "But those four stivers are shocking! Ye gods and little fishes! to think Jack Churchill should condescend to pocket four stivers!" And the secretary shook his head sorrowfully.

The lord-treasurer had heard all that was necessary, and wanted to go to bed.

"I do not know that we need trouble you any further, Mr. Lockhart," he said. "Are you sure the report can be presented to-morrow?"

"Certainly. The clerks will be at it all night, but it will be ready before the House meets. I suppose his grace will hardly be taken by surprise?"

"I fancy not—in fact, his friends have been answering some of the charges already," replied Oxford, yawning.

The commissioner put on his cloak, and gathered his papers together.

"Everything depends upon the Lords, I suppose?" he said as he took up his hat and looked inquiringly at Oxford. But the earl kept his own counsel, and did not permit himself to be drawn.

"Good night, Mr. Lockhart," he said.

"Good night my dear fellow," echoed St. John. "For

heaven's sake don't let there be any mistake about those four stivers. I am going too, Bob—pleasant dreams."

A footman assisted the bibulous secretary downstairs to his carriage. At the first landing he stopped thoughtfully, and then shouted back,

"I say, Bob! what the deuce is a stiver?"

But as lord Oxford was by this time out of hearing, Mr. St. John resumed his descent to the hall, and stumbled into his carriage. As he did so, the duke of Marlborough's coach drove past. St. John yelled to the coachman to stop, and the coach was pulled up just within speaking distance. The duke put his head out of the window.

"Ah! my dear St. John," he said, recognising the secretary, "what is the matter?"

"Jack!" hiccupped St. John reproachfully, "they've caught you pocketing four stivers. I blush for you. You'll hear all about it to-morrow."

"Thank you for the warning, my dear friend," returned the duke, withdrawing his head.

"Heaven bless you! Good night," said the secretary, leaning back on the cushions and going to sleep.

The next day the commissioners presented their report to the Commons, and another storm of political passion arose. The duke and his friends made no attempt to deny the charges brought forward in the report. They took their stand on the assertion that the various perquisites in connection with the bread contracts were the established custom long before the duke's time, having been sanctioned to all previous commanders-in-chief, and that the money really constituted the secret service fund necessary for the campaigns. As regards the appropriation of the two and a half per cent. from the pay of the foreign regiments, the duke produced a warrant from the queen in the first year of her reign, assigning to him the percentage in question "for extraordinary contingent expenses."

Although these grounds of defence were not controverted, the popular uproar about the asserted peculations furnished the ministry with the pretext necessary for taking their final steps against the duke and his party majority in the Lords. A privy-council was held on December 30th, at which the queen intimated that certain charges having been made against the duke of Marlborough, she had resolved to dismiss him from all his employments, in order that being no longer in her service the charges in question might be more impartially examined.

All through the night of December 30th the Whig leaders sat deliberating at Marlborough House. A hint of the proceedings at the privy-council had reached the conclave late in the evening, and it was recognised that affairs had come to a crisis. The duke's chief supporters—lords Godolphin, Sunderland, Somers, Cowper, Halifax, and others—were compromised in the highest degree by their resistance to the ministry and the court, and they were prepared to resort to force rather than be crushed.

It was proposed to take instant advantage of the fact that the duke's commission was under the great seal, and that therefore his mere dismissal by the queen had no legal effect. They therefore urged him to use his powers as lord-general to anticipate attack, by assembling all the troops in London in the different squares, taking possession of St. James's, and securing the person of the queen. This could easily be done under the pretext of suppressing a pretended Jacobite rising, and of safe-guarding the sovereign against the dangers of a revolt in the capital.

The duke listened to these propositions, but arrived at no decision. Hour after hour went by as one plan after another was mooted, discussed, and abandoned. The duke passed to and fro between the council-room and the boudoir of duchess Sarah, whose rage against the queen and Mrs. Masham knew no bounds, and who would have precipitated a revolution with the greatest goodwill if she could have thereby gratified her resentment against her late mistress.

The night wore away and the last day of the year 1711 arrived. With the first dawn of morning a couple of letters were placed in the duke's hands. The first of these had been written after the privy-council at St. James's the previous night. It was in the queen's own handwriting, and informed him that she had no further occasion for his services. The second was from lord Melfort in Paris. It ran :

"MY DEAR LORD CHURCHILL,

We have just heard quite by accident that the messenger Randolph Dorrington, whom you will recollect in connection with the Brest expedition, has effected his escape while being transferred from the Bastille to Vincennes, and cannot be traced. It will be well for you therefore to be on your guard.

MELFORT."

The duke started at this new blow. He passed the letter to the duchess with a glance of suppressed anxiety

"Pooh!" said the duchess carelessly. "People have forgotten all that."

"It would be easy to bring it all up again," said the duke. "It would be worth a dozen contract reports to Harley."

"Yes, if there were any proof. But there is nothing except this man's word—if so much. And it can always be said to be a malignant invention of Harley's. Think no more about it." And the duchess tore the letter into shreds.

Nevertheless the duke's brow remained clouded. Years ago the betrayal of Russell and Talmash had passed from his recollection, and there seemed something ominous in the shadow of this old treason falling across his path on this day of all others. He went back to the council-room, where a straggling breakfast was being partaken of by his colleagues.

At ten o'clock a special messenger arrived from the Treasury. Oxford had got wind of the council of war at Marlborough House, and suspected something of what was transpiring there. He had hastily summoned a cabinet meeting to deal with the emergency on the instant. As a result, the messenger brought a formal dismissal of the duke, under the great seal, from all his appointments.

The conspirators were paralysed by this stroke. Instead of being everything in the army, the duke was now nothing. Probably his successor was already installed in command. Under these altered circumstances, the slightest attempt at force would not only be high treason and open rebellion, but would involve the instant despatch of the perpetrators to the Tower. Marlborough's characteristic political timidity, so curiously at variance with his limitless courage in the field, made any further discussion of the proposed programme useless. The Whig magnates took their leave one by one, consoling themselves with the fact that their numerical majority still left them masters of the House of Lords, and resolved that their whole political power should be used to repel the attack on their illustrious colleague.

Godolphin, Oxford's predecessor as lord-treasurer and the duke's most intimate friend, was the last peer to leave the conclave. He recommended Marlborough to remain within doors, and promised to bring him any fresh news.

As the earl passed out of the council-room, attended by Cardonnel, a footman came up to Marlborough.

"My lord, a man wishes to see you on most particular business—from Holland."

The duke was known for his invariable accessibility to all persons desirous of seeing him—a habit incidental to the necessity of interviewing anonymous personages during his campaigns. On this occasion he asked no questions, but replied in a dull tone,

"Send him here. After that, do not let me be disturbed—I shall see no one except lord Godolphin. Go to the duchess if any one calls."

The footman bowed, and retired to usher in the visitor. The duke looked up and recognised the newcomer with a start. It was captain Kermode.

"Good day, your honour," said the captain.

Something stuck in the duke's throat, and prevented him asking the only question that interested him.

"Ah," he said, "sit down, captain. Where do you come from?"

"Deal, your honour—got there in the *Royal Mary*."

The duke began to tremble.

"The *Royal Mary*, eh?"

"Yes, your honour. Schooner belonging to four half-brothers of mine, bound from Nantucket to Amsterdam with cod."

"And what have you done with the *Fleur de Lys*?"

"Very sorry, your honour, but——"

"Well?"

"Gone to the bottom, your honour."

A pang of despair passed through the duke at this confirmation of his worst forebodings. But he maintained his self-control by an immense effort, and turned an impassive face towards the captain.

"That is unlucky," he said, after a pause. "How did it happen?"

"Well, your honour, those blackguards I shipped at Ostend managed to set her on fire, just at the end of that gale. They were too drunk to help to save her, and we took to the boats. The brig burned to the water's edge, and then sank."

"You were all picked up, I hope?" asked the duke mechanically.

"Yes, your honour. The *Royal Mary* sighted us the next morning. Been driven out of her course by the gale. Landed the Dutchmen at Texel, and brought me on to Deal. Lying there now."

"A curious and fortunate coincidence," commented the duke, for the sake of saying something.

There was a sound of voices in the hall, and Godolphin burst into the room. He looked impatiently at Kermode, and Marlborough signed to the captain to leave them.

"Well?" exclaimed the duke, as the door closed upon Kermode.

"My dear friend, all is over—they have undone us. The queen has created twelve new Tory peers."

CHAPTER XXXI

NEW YEAR'S EVE AT WRAY COTTAGE

THE news of the fall of the great duke of Marlborough, and of the *coup d'état* which accompanied it, travelled far and wide, and on the eve of the New Year it reached Wray Cottage. The bearer of the intelligence was Mr. Peter Wrottesley, a solicitor of Canterbury, who was legal adviser to squire Wray, and by consequence to madam Rostherne. During the last few years he had also acted as agent for the Thornhaugh estate.

The lawyer was a little bullet-headed, round-paunched gentleman of about fifty years of age, with a twinkling eye and an expertness in retailing a joke which went a long way towards reconciling his clients to his bills of costs. He had known Gwynett from childhood, was a staunch admirer of Muriel Dorrington, and had lost no opportunity of pooh-poohing the prejudices entertained by the dame and the squire against her engagement to the young owner of Thornhaugh.

He had come down from Canterbury to bring madam Rostherne certain business documents requiring her signature, the delay attending this having prevented the dame and her niece accompanying the squire's party to Dorrington Hall, as had been previously arranged. The business was now completed, and the old lady's signatures had been affixed and attested. She had just gone into the village to make final calls upon certain of her *protégés*, in view of her departure with her niece next day in the wake of the Wray household to London and the west.

The lawyer stood in the porch of the house with Muriel, watching the last gleams of the afterglow. As soon as the dame's grenadier-like form had disappeared down the lane he asked,

"Have you heard anything lately from somebody we know in Paris, my dear?"

"Not for three weeks," replied Muriel.

"Had Ambrose met with any success?"

"Not up to that time."

"It is a long while ago," mused the lawyer. "It is almost a pity the matter was mooted at all. I am afraid, my dear, you will only be disappointed by a failure, whereas if things had been left alone——"

"Anything is better than uncertainty, dear Mr. Wrottesley."

"If Ambrose discovers nothing, you will be no more certain than you were before."

At this moment the young lady gave a little cry, and shot past the lawyer like an arrow from a bow. The worthy gentleman's balance was disturbed, and he forthwith found himself sitting half-buried in the low box-hedge, of a century's growth, which bordered the curved path to the gate. When he looked up, Muriel was hanging round the neck of a tall young fellow who had approached unheard, and in whom he recognised Ambrose Gwynett.

"Don't mind me, my dear boy," he remarked, as he sat with his nose between his knees. "Only if I am *de trop*, you must give me your hand a moment. I never expected mistress Muriel would throw an old friend over in this fashion."

Gwynett came forward laughing, helped the lawyer to his feet, and shook hands with him very heartily.

"I take my share of the blame," he said. "I should have heralded my arrival with a flourish of trumpets. But it is rather late to find you so far abroad—there is nothing wrong, I hope, about madam Restherne?"

"Bless your soul! no—except that you will get your head bitten off as usual, despite all my blandishments."

"I need not tell you Mr. Wrottesley has always taken your part, Ambrose," said Muriel, as she stood clasping Gwynett's arm with both her hands. "But aunt's bitterness against you seems as vigorous as ever."

"You will have to answer for all lord Oxford's sins as well as your own to-night," remarked the lawyer. "Muriel will tell you all the news. But as to your quest—any result?"

"None, I am sorry to say. I begin to doubt very much whether Mr. Dorrington went to France at all."

"It was a very off-chance. When did you part company with your uncle, baron von Starhemberg?"

"About fifteen months ago. He was very well, and spoke of you when I left him."

"I haven't seen him for twenty years—he was over here once in your mother's time. A remarkably tough customer he looked."

"You would find him a good deal changed. But we are said to be very much alike."

"Probably—from what I recollect of him. But I must be off—my horses have been ready an hour at the 'Red Lion,' and I've interfered with your billing and cooing too long already. Call on me as soon as you are at leisure, Ambrose—there's a sixty-acre plot on the other side of Thornhaugh home farm likely to be in the market soon, and it might suit you to tack it on to the property. Good-bye, my dear."

The lawyer went off through the gathering gloom, and the lovers entered the Cottage.

After half an hour's conversation, during which the night closed in, Gwynett rose to take his departure, congratulating himself that the dame's return had been so conveniently delayed.

"I have to go to Deal to-night, sweetheart," he said, "and my horse is waiting at the little tavern here. I heard when landing at Dover that lord Oxford is expected at Deal to-morrow, on some Cinque Ports business, and I have an important letter to deliver to him. Otherwise I should have gone on to London for that purpose."

"We shall be in London ourselves to-morrow night, at Mr. St. John's, leaving the morning after."

"I will try and call. If I don't see you, we must do what we can to meet at Dorrington. Noel will be there, of course?"

"Yes. But be cautious—the squire is furious just now about your party."

"To tell you the truth, sweetheart, I have forgotten most of my partisanship, if I ever had any. Only I still think it is monstrous that Englishmen should have to go to Holland or Hanover for a king, instead of taking the right man and licking him into shape."

"That process has ended rather badly of late," replied Muriel, "once at St. Germain, and once on a scaffold at Whitehall."

"That is better than a Versailles built on *lettres de cachet*," observed Gwynett. "One cannot have everything. By the

way, I had nearly forgotten a little parcel I have for you—some odds and ends of Moorish work from Seville.”

As Muriel was by no means a young lady with a soul above jewellery and knickknacks, she promptly lit a little lamp to examine the contents of the silver *cassette* which Gwynett produced from his valise.

“Here is something for madam Rostherne,” he added, unrolling a splendid piece of point lace from the factory at Alençon, “if you can manage to prevent the old lady throwing it on the fire in her first enthusiasm at hearing of my return. And now, sweetheart, I must say good-bye—if I miss the moon, I stand a chance of reaching Deal with my neck broken.”

Muriel laid down the trinkets she was trying on, and put her arms round Gwynett’s neck. Her lips were pressed to his when a pistol-shot was heard, followed by a crash of window-glass and a loud shout. Muriel flung herself between Gwynett and the casement, and the plaster fell from the ceiling in a shower. A second shot was accompanied by the sounds of a struggle between two persons, and stentorian curses from one of them. Then a horse was heard to gallop off, pursued by shouts from the loud-voiced combatant. Gwynett seized his sword, which he had laid aside with his cloak, and rushed out of the house.

A man was standing in the roadway looking after a horseman who was disappearing round a corner a couple of hundred yards off. He turned to Gwynett, and said,

“We are too late for the scoundrel. I hope no one is hurt indoors.”

“I think not. But what has happened?”

“Well, for one thing I have had my horse stolen,” replied the stranger. “For another, I rather think I have a bullet in my arm, which was probably intended for you. I shall be obliged if you will let me have a candle for a minute.”

“My dear sir, come indoors.”

The stranger followed Gwynett into the parlour of the Cottage, removed his hat, and bowed to Muriel with much courtesy. He was a man of great stature, taller if anything than Gwynett, with very aquiline features, and wearing his own black hair instead of the prevailing wig of the period. His outer garment was a *roquelauré* or greatcoat of the newest French fashion, fitting rather tightly in the sleeves at the elbow.

“I will ask you to help me off with this coat,” he said to

Gwynett, feeling his right elbow. "Perhaps this young lady had better amuse herself with those pretty things on the table for a couple of minutes," he added significantly.

"I beg your pardon, sir," replied Muriel promptly, "but you are quite mistaken. If you are wounded, it is quite as much my affair as—as anyone else's. One does not hunt and shoot without meeting with accidents, or knowing how to deal with them."

"All the better, madam," said the stranger. Gwynett and Muriel pulled his *roquelaure* off. The coat underneath showed blood-stains, and on removing it a profuse hæmorrhage was seen to be flowing from a shot-wound above the right elbow, which had evidently divided a small artery. The shirt was promptly cut away and the arm bandaged tightly above the wound. The bullet had passed through the flesh of the outer side of the arm and was of course not to be found. The wound was first bathed and then dressed, in a rapid but effective fashion. While this was being done, the stranger recounted his share in the occurrence which had led to it.

"I may explain, madam," he said, "that I landed at Greenwich early this morning from abroad. Having called at Will's Coffee-house in Covent Garden, I rode down to Wray Manor, close to this place, where I expected to find an old friend of mine, squire Wray. He may probably be known to you."

"Very intimately," said Muriel. "But he has gone to London, on his way to Devonshire."

"So I heard at the lodge. Deciding to go on to Deal, where I have another call to make, I found myself rather at a loss at the cross-roads close to this house. Seeing a light here, I hitched my horse to the paling, and walked up to your door to ask my way. I suppose I must have walked quietly, for I surprised a man just outside your little window in the act of levelling a pistol at someone in the room. I sprang upon him, and shouted at the same time to disturb his aim."

"We heard that," said Gwynett, "but nothing before."

"I was too late to prevent the weapon being discharged. Then he turned upon me, and before I could snatch the pistol he had fired the second barrel point-blank. I closed with him, but he succeeded in freeing himself, and rushed out into the lane. I tripped over one of your bushes, and just as you came out the fellow reached my horse, slung

himself on its back, and galloped off. That is all I know about it."

"It appears incredible," said Muriel.

"I don't understand it in the least," added Gwynett.

"You seem to have rather spiteful neighbours here," remarked the stranger.

"Impossible," said Muriel. "There is no one who has the slightest grudge against us."

"Some tramp, perhaps."

"A tramp might beg," replied Gwynett. "But why fire before begging?"

At this point Muriel left the room with the basin and sponge she had been using.

"May I ask, sir, if the young lady is your wife?" inquired the stranger, who had not been able to get a clear view of Muriel's left hand.

"Not yet," replied Gwynett, smiling.

"Does that fact suggest anything to you?"

"Scarcely. I have been away from England a couple of years, and only landed last night at Dover. I know of no one who would consider my presence a grievance."

"It would be well for you to find out, it seems to me. But I must try and continue my journey, if I can get some horse in the village. I thank you and your *fiancée*—if I may assume that much—very much for your assistance."

"It is we who are in your debt, sir—probably for our lives. May I take the liberty of asking your name?"

The stranger hesitated, and looked apologetically at Muriel, who entered with wine for the two guests.

"Perhaps you will excuse me," he said. "My presence in England requires me to exercise a certain amount of discretion, and just at the moment I am not desirous of being too much in evidence. At the same time I may assure you I am a person of passable respectability, and I shall be delighted later on to introduce myself in proper form through our mutual friend at the Manor."

"It will give us great pleasure," said Gwynett, bowing. "But as to your journey, I am afraid you will not be able to get a horse in the village. Did I understand you were bound for Deal?"

"Yes. Failing squire Wray, I wish to see some friends at Deal as soon as I conveniently can."

"I have myself business there in the morning, and was just starting when this *contretemps* occurred. If you would

care to walk and ride alternately with me, we shall reach Deal before the taverns close for the night. It is only eight miles off."

"That will not incommode you, I hope?"

"Not at all. In fact, until the moon rises, one can walk almost as fast as it is safe to ride. We have some very rough tracks to take for nearly five miles. I am quite at your service if you are ready to start."

Muriel offered wine to the two gentlemen. They touched glasses, and the stranger bowed to Muriel.

"I drink to your happiness, madam. Permit me to say that you remind me most curiously of one very dear to me, and whom I have not seen for more years than you yourself can number. I trust some day to make your better acquaintance."

The stranger made an attempt to put on his greatcoat, assisted by Gwynett. But the tight sleeve of the *roquelaure* seemed to find an obstacle in the bulging mass of the bandage.

"I am afraid you will find this a little uncomfortable," said Gwynett. "We are pretty much of a size. Will you take my loose cloak as far as Deal, and I will wear your greatcoat?"

"I thank you—it will certainly ease my arm, which is beginning to burn like fury. Luckily I remember a good surgeon in the town. Madam, I wish you a very good night."

Muriel curtsied, and the stranger rather tactfully went out in advance of Gwynett.

"Be careful, dear," whispered Muriel, as she put up her face to receive Gwynett's kiss. "If that was not some drunken poacher or a madman, you must have some enemy—it seems such an incredible thing to happen to either of us."

"I could have understood it at Ste. Marie Geneste," replied Gwynett, "but not here. Adieu, sweetheart."

He rejoined the stranger, and they walked to the village tavern, where Gwynett's horse had been put up. On the way they passed dame Rostherne, escorted by her serving-maid with a lantern, and returning to the Cottage. Gwynett stopped the old lady, who received him with more than usual stiffness, while he explained what had occurred during her absence.

The stranger in the meantime walked slowly on.

"I am very thankful, Mr. Gwynett," remarked the dame, "that we are leaving the Cottage for a time. Rest assured that I have not altered my mind in the least. When we return, the less we see of you the better, unless you can

arrange matters a little more comfortably. I have the honour to wish you good evening."

The good dame's evident implication was that Gwynett had arranged to be shot at out of malice prepense. As this was quite in keeping with her usual attitude of mind towards him, he contented himself with bidding her farewell, and rejoined his companion.

The tavern was close at hand, and the stranger having mounted Gwynett's horse, the two men set off on their way to Deal. For the first hour the darkness of the night and the roughness of the road made progress rather slow. Then the moon rose, a good road was entered upon, and the rate of travel was only limited by the speed of the pedestrian.

Four or five miles out of Wray, cross-roads were encountered which went off to the right and left in the directions of Dover and Sandwich. A few yards down the former of these a horse was grazing by the roadside in the moonlight.

"That looks like my horse," remarked the stranger, who happened to be on foot at the time. He went up to the animal and found that he was correct.

"It seems as if your friend of the pistol were in front of us somewhere," he said, coming back to Gwynett. "Evidently he is not a mere horse-thief."

"That road goes to Dover. Probably the fellow turned off in that direction on foot, in order not to be found with a stolen horse."

"As I only hired the beast, it is just as well I have found him again," said the stranger, getting into the saddle. "Now we shall be able to make headway, though I am rather out of training on horseback."

"It is lucky the night is clear and dry. The fog in the Channel seems to have cleared off," said Gwynett, pointing to the south-east. "That is the sea."

"We must have landed in England about the same time," commented the stranger. "The fog was just thickening when I came on shore. Have you been much of a traveller?"

"In this case I was only crossing from France," replied Gwynett. "I should have made the passage two or three days earlier, but for being detained in Calais while I was trying to help the authorities in connection with an attempted robbery."

"I used to make the passage often enough, years ago," said the stranger. Then he added, as if some train of thought had been revived by the reminiscence,

"Pardon me for what may appear an impertinent remark, but the face of your companion at the Cottage has been dwelling in my mind ever since we bade her adieu. It is a little unreasonable to ask for information which I have myself declined to give——"

Gwynnett at once anticipated the stranger's intended inquiry.

"There is no reason, my dear sir," he said, "why you should not know the persons whom you have laid under such an obligation. My own name is Ambrose Gwynnett, of Thornhaugh, at your service, and——"

"Ambrose Gwynnett!" ejaculated the stranger. "May I ask, sir, if you were lately in France, inquiring after——"

The stranger hesitated and left his question unfinished.

"After a Mr. Randolph Dorrington," replied Gwynnett.

The stranger looked at him for a moment without speaking.

"I am Randolph Dorrington," he said finally.

Gwynnett stopped as if thunderstruck.

"Good heavens!" he cried. "Why did you not say so at the Cottage?"

"Why at the Cottage?" asked Dorrington.

"Because that was your daughter Muriel whom you saw there."

"My daughter?" said Dorrington, in a puzzled tone.

"Born after your strange disappearance seventeen or eighteen years ago."

"And her mother?"

"She died soon after, I regret to say."

Dorrington was silent for several seconds.

"I feared it would be so," he said; "and yet, till you spoke, I had cherished some hope. She was a good wife—heaven rest her soul! It was her face I saw in the child."

"Think, sir, that you have still a daughter who loves you most dearly, without knowing you. It was her affectionate concern that sent me to seek news of you in France."

Dorrington's face lighted up.

"You console me, sir. I see I have not lost everything in the Bastille."

"The Bastille?"

"Yes. I will tell you my story when we are more at leisure. But is it too late to return to the Cottage?"

Gwynnett looked at his watch.

"I am afraid so. We are close to Deal now—those are the lights. We can go back the first thing in the morning. But did you not recognise madam Rostherne?"

"Who is madam Rostherne?"

"Muriel's aunt—your sister. We passed her in the road."

"Unfortunately I took no notice. My sister must have married since my departure from England. The name is new to me."

"Do you know Deal?" asked Gwynett, as they rode into the town.

"A little. There is a passable tavern—or used to be—close to the waterside and the jetty. If you have no better idea, we will put up there for the night—the sooner the better, for I feel raindrops."

"I know the place," replied Gwynett.

"*A propos*, let me suggest that, for a day or two, we drop the name of Dorrington—I will give my reasons when I tell you my story."

"What shall I call you?"

"Richard Collins will serve for a name. And now for the 'Crown and Anchor' and a bowl of punch."

CHAPTER XXXII

NEW YEAR'S EVE AT THE 'CROWN AND ANCHOR'

THE parlour of the 'Crown and Anchor' was a room of considerable size which had once been two, as was evidenced by the heavy cross-beam in the ceiling, the greater width of one portion of the apartment, and the pair of vast fireplaces. At the smaller of the two ends of the rooms, captain Kermode was sitting with the three younger of his half-brothers round a small table. All were smoking vigorously, and steaming glasses of grog were on the board before them. A short, active-looking woman of middle age, with a piercing eye and strident voice, was just leaving the party with a bunch of keys in her hand. The half-brothers looked after her with a dubious air as she disappeared through one of the doors.

"Well," said the captain, in continuation of some previous narrative, "when I went back to the room where the duke was sitting, he looked dumbfounded. I asked if he had any more commands for me, and he just waved his hand and says in a kind of choky voice—'Another time, captain—another time.' So then I came away."

"And no questions asked?" inquired Luke.

"No more than I tell you."

"That's a blessed good job," said Luke, in a relieved tone. "I can tell you I've been in a mortal funk ever since you started off for London."

"All's well that ends well," observed the captain. "Now, what's this about Matt?"

Luke looked at his brother Mark, who nodded back to him to tell his tale. He lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper, and said,

"Well, brother Kit, the fact is—you saw the landlady just now?" and he jerked his head in the direction taken by the retiring hostess.

"What of her?"

"She's got a little parlour—very snug."

"Well?"

"Matt's there. Been there every day—all day."

"The blazes!"

"She's at him. I tell you."

The captain's jaw dropped at this intelligence.

"That's bad news," he said, with a tremor in his voice.

"How does Matt take it?"

"Seems kind of satisfied," said Luke.

"Why didn't you take care of him?" asked the captain reproachfully. "It's awful. She'd talk the leg off an iron pot."

"Easy," assented Luke, replenishing his tumbler.

"Is he going to ask her?"

"Mayhap—if she doesn't ask him first."

"And live ashore in this bunk?"

"Expect so."

"It'll break up the family," said the captain pathetically, after a pause. "We must get him aboard, and weigh anchor for Portsmouth."

"Matt's hard to drive, brother Kit."

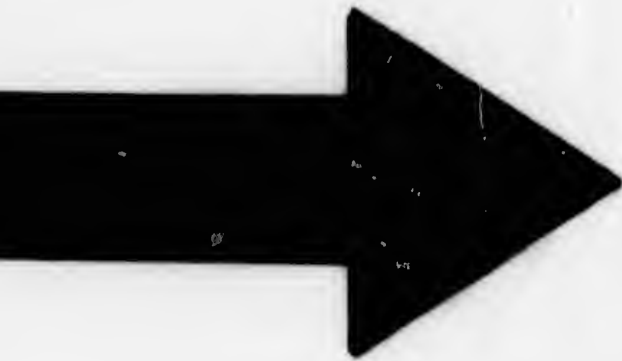
"A scarecrow in a beanfield would have had more sense," growled the captain angrily; "and after such a stroke of luck as the brig—"

"Hush! for Old Nick's sake keep a quiet tongue about that, brother Kit," said Luke, in an alarmed whisper.

"Make your mind easy, brother Luke. Hallo! here's Matt."

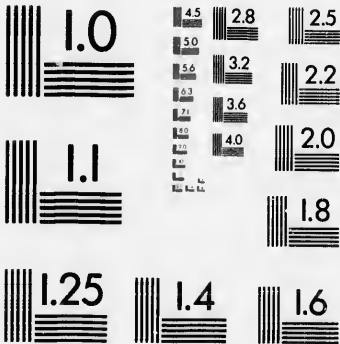
The eldest brother made his appearance at this moment, and approached the party with rather a hang-dog expression of countenance. The captain eyed him in reproachful silence.





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"Well, brother Kit," said the newcomer, as he shambled up, "how have you fared?"

"I haven't made a clam-headed idiot of myself, for one thing," responded the captain severely. "If you're not regularly moored in that parlour, we'll get aboard."

"That's it," acquiesced Matt unexpectedly. "Fact is, we had better show our heels for a day or two."

"Why?"

"D'ye recollect the *Mermaid*, at the Hague?"

"Of course."

"She's off the town there," said Matt, pointing seawards through the window. "The captain has just been ordered off to the North American station, and he's raging mad about it. Expected an easy time in port for a spell."

"What's that to do with us?"

"He's short-handed—half a dozen of the men deserted off Sandwich, and he couldn't catch them again. He's got to make up his company by to-morrow, and there's a press-gang out now. They may make a call here any moment if they can't get men off the fishing-boats. They say the captain's too drunk to look at the law of the matter. He'll get any one he can and make sail."

This news seriously disturbed the party. The system of the press-gang, discontinued for several years, had been recently put again into operation, and the reckless disregard of the legal limitations to the impressment of sea-faring men was a matter of notoriety. In fact, the gangs were by no means in the habit of confining their attentions to sailors if they came across a big and strong landsman who looked at all capable of being rope's-ended into heavy deck-work on one of her majesty's ships. A landsman kidnapped under these conditions and shipped for a two or three years' cruise might await release for the whole of the voyage if the ship happened to touch at no British possession near home. Thus there arose a pretty universal system of passing round warning, if a press-gang were known to be on shore in a district.

"Where's their boat?" asked the captain.

"Landed quietly a mile towards Dover. The ostler's boy happened to see them, and ran on."

"Is ours at the jetty?"

"Yes."

"Aboard we go," said the captain. "Pay the score, Matt, and hurry after us."

Matt disappeared by one door, and the rest of the party

by the other, which led to the porch. As they did so a visitor passed them, entering the parlour, and took a chair before the fire nearest to him. The newcomer was the abbé Gaultier. The potboy came after him for orders.

"Can I sleep here to-night?" asked the abbé.

"Yes, sir."

"I'll have some supper. Let me see my room, if it is ready."

"I'll tell the landlady, sir."

At the potboy's summons the hostess appeared, and led the abbé off to a room upstairs, while a serving-wench began to lay one of the tables for supper.

Five minutes afterwards the clatter of hoofs in the street was heard, and a couple of horsemen pulled up before the tavern. There was a little discussion at the porch, and one of the riders went off to the stables with the two horses. The other, who was Ambrose Gwynett, came into the parlour just as a shower of rain, which had been threatening for some time, began to fall with considerable violence.

"You are just in time, sir," said the girl who was laying Gaultier's supper.

"It seems so," said Gwynett. "I suppose you can give us a couple of beds?"

"There is only one bed left, sir," said the girl. "It is in this room."

She went to a door at the smaller end of the room, approached by two steps in the thickness of the doorway, and opened it. Within was a small room, hardly larger than a closet, containing a bed of moderate size, but luckily of sufficient length.

"It will be a tight fit," said Ambrose, after a minute's inspection, "but it will serve. Let us have some supper at this other table as soon as you can."

At this moment Dorrington entered from the porch, his cloak glistening with wet.

"I have seen to our beasts," he said. "It is a perfect deluge outside—you got indoors not a minute too soon. I beg your pardon."

This was said to Gaultier, who came in by the side door in front of which Dorrington happened to be standing. Gaultier bowed without looking at the speaker, and was going to his seat at his own table when he caught sight of Gwynett, and stopped short as if turned to stone. His eye next fell upon Dorrington, and he went a little pale.

Dorrington and Gwynett glanced slightly at him, and then

moved to the fire at their end of the room. The abbé, after a momentary pause, went to his table and seated himself.

"That was a near thing," he said to himself, recovering his composure. "Evidently they suspect nothing. But what brings them here? Is it my good luck returning?"

Gwynett took the cloak from Dorrington's shoulders, and spread it over a large chair in front of the log fire.

"It will be dry before morning," he said, removing his *roquelauze*, and displaying his valise slung from his shoulders by a strap.

The landlady came in, and confirmed the servant's offer of the little room at the end of the parlour. Gwynett accordingly took the greatcoat and valise within, and hung them up. The abbé watched all this out of the corner of his eye, and lamented his own shortcomings with much humility.

"I have muddled matters like an idiot," he said to himself. "I suppose this is the fellow who spoiled my shot—curse him! One deserves to lose the whole game by such bungling. Why couldn't I wait till this Ambrose Gwynett was comfortably outside in the dark, with no one to interfere?"

He commenced his supper, and kept an eye on the other table, at which Gwynett and Dorrington were conversing in tones sufficiently low to prevent any complete sentences reaching the abbé's ear. In the meantime the rain ceased, and the moon shone forth brightly. The night was mild, and almost warm, although the wind was rising.

"I must really have lost my head about that girl," mused the abbé. "I haven't had such a feeling for twenty years as came over me when I saw those arms of hers round his neck, her breast pressed against his, and her eyes—perdition!" The abbé nearly choked over his wine at the reminiscence, and his fingers closed round his knife with a clutch that whitened the knuckles.

"I mustn't miss this next *coup*," he said to himself. "No one could expect to get two such chances. If this gossip about lord Oxford coming here is correct, it will be fatal if I haven't secured the letter before morning. Triple ass that I was to let my cursed sentimentality set my fingers itching just at the wrong time!"

While the abbé was deploring his misplaced tenderheartedness, the pair at the other table were finishing their supper and preparing to smoke. Dorrington rose to use the cindertongs (an article which for more than a century and a quarter afterwards continued to supply the place of the modern

fusee-box), and looked out of the window before resuming his seat. The potboy brought in a bowl of punch which had been ordered.

"People sit up late hereabouts," remarked Dorrington. "There is a light in almost every house in the street."

"New Year's Eve, master," explained the potboy, grinning. "Seeing Old Year out and New Year in."

"Of course—I forgot that," said Dorrington. "I think I hear the glee-singers."

A faint sound of some part-music came down the street, which presently became louder as the vocalists took up their station outside the tavern.

"Ask them in," said Dorrington to the potboy. "This is a pretty custom," he went on to Gwynett. "I am glad they hold to it still."

The glee-singers trooped in, eight in number, and went through some madrigals with the precision and tunefulness now only heard amongst Welsh quarrymen and miners, but which was common in England during the two centuries preceding the date of our story. The landlady and some of the tavern servants stood within the doors to listen, and added their share to the applause when the performance was over. Dorrington called to the landlady.

"Hostess," said he, bringing out his purse, "provide a bowl of punch for them if they like it, and ask them to accept a half-crown each from me. Perhaps you will give me change."

He opened his purse under the eyes of the hostess, who looked rather sharply at it with the air of a person who had been victimised by this sort of generosity more than once. The purse was of fine knitted red silk, with two unusually handsome slide-rings of chased gold, which removed a good deal of the landlady's suspicion. Dorrington looked through the coins at both ends without finding any English gold, and finally tendered a couple of louis d'or to the hostess.

"I do not seem to have a guinea," he said. "But these are worth seventeen shillings apiece, as I daresay you know."

The landlady shook her head.

"We don't take foreign money," she said. "Folks say it was never as good as it ought to be, and that it's getting worse."

Gwynett pulled a handful of coin out of his pocket.

"Here is a guinea," he said to Dorrington.

Dorrington passed it to the landlady, who changed it and distributed the silver amongst the glee-singers. The latter

took their departure in great good humour, and the room emptied again.

"That is rather a nuisance," said Dorrington, within hearing of the abbé. "But it is my own fault. I got a little English money at Gravesend, intending to change the rest at Will's, and I quite forgot to do so."

"I had better do it for you now, as I am going back to town. How much do you want?"

Gaultier listened to all this without appearing to be interested in anything but his pipe and the soles of his boots toasting at the wood fire.

"I have about a score of louis here," said Dorrington, beginning to count. "Twenty-one," he said finally, passing the purse over to Gwynett. "Count yourself, my dear fellow."

"I can give you guineas and change for that much," said Gwynett, pushing the equivalent sum across the table, and taking up the purse.

"Keep the purse, or give it to my daughter," said Dorrington, noticing that Gwynett was examining it with some interest. "There is a little story attached to it, which will interest both of you when you hear it."

"With pleasure," said Gwynett. He handed his own leather pouch over to Dorrington, empty, and having put the balance of his money into the red silk purse he deposited the latter in his breeches pocket.

"I am scarcely disposed to follow the example of our friends the watchers to-night," remarked Dorrington, yawning sleepily. "If you care to see the Old Year out, my dear fellow, do so. For myself, the New Year must accept my snores as a respectful salutation. It is not eleven yet, and I am dead tired."

"I am of your mind," said Gwynett. "We can turn in at once if you like."

He rang the bell, and went to feel the cloak which was stretched before the fire.

"Call us at seven," he said to the potboy, "and ask the cook to let this hang before the kitchen fire during the night. Let us have our candles."

"Yes, sir."

"By the way," asked Dorrington, "is master Walton, the surgeon and apothecary, still at his old house over there?"

"Yes, sir. But his son does most of the work now. They've got a little party to-night," added the potboy con-

fidentially, as he pointed through the window to a red light appearing amongst others at a house close to the jetty.

"Will you have your arm dressed again to-night?" asked Gwynett.

"No—I think it will serve till morning. I do not feel very uncomfortable, and master Walton, junior, may be too jolly just now to handle it discreetly. Let us get to bed."

The potboy brought candles, and went off with the cloak, while the two friends entered the little room and shut the door.

Gautier heard the bolt shot into its socket, and cursed quietly to himself.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE ABBÉ IS VISITED BY AN INSPIRATION

THE abbé remained before the fire, his hands buried in his pockets, and his legs stretched out towards the hearth. He racked his brains for some scheme to get at Gwynett's pockets before his departure to meet lord Oxford in the morning, and again execrated his precipitancy in sacrificing the unique opportunity he had been afforded when he followed Gwynett to Wray Cottage. The principal stumbling-block now was of course the bolted door, which prevented him entering the little room after its inmates were fast asleep, in order to steal lady Melfort's letter under cover of the darkness. It was necessary that the door should be opened again from the inside either by Gwynett or his companion, as the little window of the room was closely barred, and so far as he could judge actually overhung the sea when the tide was in. The most feasible plan to secure this advantage seemed to be to wait till all was quiet in the house, and then raise an alarm of fire. The abbé put a fresh log on the hearth, and proceeded to speculate on the details of an impromptu conflagration.

There was very little about the parlour itself that could be made to break out into a notable kind of blaze within any reasonable space of time. The window-curtains were certainly inflammable enough, but their burning would be altogether too slight an affair for his purpose. The oak furniture, floor, and wainscoting of the parlour were of the most massive character, as hard as iron, and would take a long time to set on fire. He could not remain in the room with any plausibility

after the household should have retired, as they were already considerably later than usual. In the meantime he might be interrupted at any moment.

He could of course do what he liked in his own room, but it was rather far away, and he would have to frame some excuse for being in the parlour instead of making himself useful at the scene of the proposed disaster.

"*Diable !*" he remarked to himself, as he rose from his chair, "père Germont's stock-in-trade would be enormously useful here just now. And there are no wells to bungle with again."

He strolled off to his own room, in the vague hope of finding some suitable locality for a blaze in the passages leading to it. But nothing specially convenient came under his notice, and eventually he decided that he must set his own room on fire if he could light upon no other resource of a totally different character. As it was too early to take any active steps as yet, he went back to the parlour and resumed his seat before the hearth. Half an hour passed in cogitation, and no alternative plan of any value suggested itself to him. He got up, and looked out of the window.

His eye fell upon six or eight sailors, under a boatswain, who were stepping out of a ship's boat just being secured to the side of the jetty. Across the sea, in a broad streak of silver from the reflection of the moon, a war-ship rode at anchor. The sailors looked cautiously about them, and then walked off into the shadow of the over-hanging balcony of two or three houses close to the jetty. One of these was the surgeon and apothecary's. After this Gaultier lost sight of them.

"Those fellows are after no good, one would say," he thought. "Evidently they come from the *Mermaid* out there. They look sober, too, which is a shockingly bad sign for tars on shore. *Pardieu !*" he muttered, as a sudden thought struck him, "it is a press-gang, without doubt. Something was said about it by those fishermen in the taproom. I'll give them warning. They may just as well think I'm an excellent fellow as not, and my being a French subject is no affair of theirs."

At this moment Gaultier fancied he heard a slight movement in the little room, and he returned to his seat at the fire. The bolt was quietly put back, the door opened, and Dorrington came out. He had only removed his coat, boots, and waist-coat before lying down. The two latter had evidently just

been put on again, while he carried the coat on his left arm, and held the right one away from his side. The linen bandage round it was saturated with wet blood, and the hæmorrhage was sufficiently profuse to fall in rapid drops upon the floor.

"The deuce!" he said half aloud, as he came near the light, "this is worse than I thought."

"What have you there?" inquired Gaultier.

"A shot-wound, sir. But I thought it was better secured: I am bleeding like a stuck pig. Unfortunately some blood must have gone over my companion, for I found this arm against his chest when I awoke a minute ago."

"Can I do anything for you?" asked Gaultier, almost forgiving his marplot out of gratitude to him for unbolting the door.

"I should be extremely obliged if you would cut my left shirt-sleeve off, and make a temporary bandage round my damaged arm. I must go over at once to the surgeon yonder, and get it dressed. I was a fool not to go before."

"I am quite at your service," replied Gaultier.

The abbé took out his knife, cut off Dorrington's left sleeve, slit it so as to make a strip of double length, and began to place it over the old bandage.

"Wait a moment," said Dorrington. "If you will cut away this saturated linen and let it fall, I think you will be able to keep your fingers clean. Never mind the floor."

Gaultier did as was suggested. Dorrington had previously walked past the table so as to place himself more conveniently for the abbé to assist him. A copious fall of blood-drops had marked his track. The bandage was dripping, and made a little pool where it lay after being cut off. When the wound was bound round again, Dorrington put on his coat, thanked the abbé, and left the room on his way to the apothecary's. No one had come into the parlour, or apparently within hearing, during the interval, and all the household were evidently joining in the merrymaking in the bar and the kitchen.

Gaultier's eyes gleamed with satisfaction. It was now possible to get into the room, and if Gwynett's sleep only remained undisturbed, a minute would suffice to ransack his pockets. The abbé was listening for any sign of movement when his eye fell upon the bloodmarks on the floor.

"Curse the blood!" he grumbled. "If any one happens to come in and catch sight of that at the exact moment I am

relieving M. Ambrose Gwynett of his little commission, what a fuss there will be! The bandage at all events had better be out of the way, and I must put a little sand over the rest."

He took up the strip of linen with the tongs from his own fire, which was burning brightly, and was about to drop it on the flames, when he paused and said to himself,

"If I put it here, it will fizz for an hour, and attract attention. The other fire is about cold by this time."

He carried the bandage to the other hearth, covered it up with embers, and replaced his tongs. Then he stepped swiftly to the window.

"I had better see our friend safely into the apothecary's," he thought, "and then to work."

He looked out across the street. A fresh breeze had risen, and the waves dashed noisily against the jetty. The streets were empty, and more lights were to be seen in the houses. It was a little before the stroke of midnight.

Dorrington had almost reached the apothecary's when a sudden gust of wind blew his hat off. As he stooped to recover it a whistle sounded sharply. Three men rushed from the shadow of the houses upon Dorrington, flung him to the ground, and held a coat over his head. Gaultier started, and bent forward eagerly.

"*Parbleu!*" he said. "It is the press-gang. But where are the others?"

As he spoke, four other men came running round the corner to assist their comrades. Dorrington managed, by a superhuman effort, to struggle to his feet again, but the coat prevented him even seeing his assailants. His feet and hands were seized and tied, he was lifted from the ground, and four of the men carried him at a trot to the boat at the jetty. The other three jumped in, the oars were manned, and the boat disappeared beyond the range of the abbé's vision.

The whole episode had passed so rapidly that Gaultier could scarcely have reached the scene, even had he been so disposed, before the captive was placed in the boat. But the abbé, on the contrary, grasped the whole situation as facilitating his programme in the most gratifying manner.

"So much for people who are always *de trop*," he thought. "This little affair makes all the difference. Now I need not run any risk by hurrying. It will be easy to come back when everything is snug for the night. But let us first shut that door again."

He stepped slowly and gingerly towards the little room, listened again to hear if Gwynett had been disturbed by the recent conversation, and decided that he was fast asleep. He then closed and latched the door with the greatest precaution against noise, and returned to his post of observation at the window. The boat was pulling across the moonlit streak in which lay the *Mermaid*, gently rolling with the slight swell from the Goodwins. It reached the ship's side, and after a few minutes' delay Gaultier saw it drift to its place astern.

The streets were still deserted, and no one seemed to have heard, or at all events to have heeded, the struggle of a few minutes before. The moon lit up the open space before the apothecary's, and a black object rested in the centre. This was Dorrington's hat, which had been left behind in the confusion.

A distant church clock struck the first stroke of midnight. Half a dozen doors opened down the street, and several persons appeared on the respective thresholds.

All at once Gaultier, who had been standing near the window, fell back upon the bench by the wall. His face became suddenly pale, his eyes dilated, and his mouth remained open for several seconds. His breath came and went in short gasps, his arms lay outstretched, and the fingers of one hand worked convulsively.

"A miracle!" he panted. "A miracle! and I—I, Armand Gaultier—only think of it by accident. I am in my dotage, surely!"

The strokes of midnight rang through the air, and doors were heard to open in the inner regions of the tavern.

Gaultier bounded from his seat, tore his cravat to ribbons, dragged his waistcoat open, and pulled his hair over his forehead. He snatched up his knife, which still lay open on the table, and smeared it up to the handle with blood from the floor. Then he rushed into the front passage, slammed the outer door to with a bang that shook the house, and ran back again shouting at the top of his voice. Stamping down the length of the parlour he overturned one of the tables with a tremendous crash, sent a couple of chairs flying against the wainscot, broke the window with his glass as he passed, and finally, after throwing his knife on to the floor of Gwynett's room, shut the door again and leaned against it, yelling,

"Murder! murder! help! murder! help!"

Voices were heard in alarm, followed by the sound of

hurrying footsteps. A dozen people carrying either impromptu weapons or lanterns burst into the room, with the potboy and the landlady at their head, and assailed the still vociferating abbé with a torrent of questions.

"Murder?" screamed the hostess. "Who's been murdered?"

"One of the two gentlemen who came here a couple of hours ago—the elder," panted the abbé. "But I've got the villain safe!"

"Who's the murderer? Where is he?" came in a chorus from the servants and stable-helps.

"The young fellow who was with him. Fetch the watch—we must not let him escape!"

"But what has happened?" asked the landlady, while the men-servants helped themselves to the fire-irons.

Gaultier told his story in hurried gasps, as if exhausted and breathless.

"The two went out towards the jetty quarrelling about some question of money—then the younger man stabbed the other, and they had a struggle for a moment before the elder fell. The young fellow stooped over the other, took something out of his pockets, carried the body to the end of the jetty, and threw it into the sea. He got covered with his victim's blood while doing it."

One of the men here ran out to see if the corpse were still within sight.

"Well, go on, sir!" cried the hostess.

"I had rushed out when the elder man fell, but I slipped on the wet doorstep. When I reached the jetty, the young fellow was running back with his shirt dripping blood. He aimed a blow at me with his knife, dodged past me, and tore through the parlour into his room. See the blood on the floor!"

"Get out of the road, master," said one of the stablemen, who carried a heavy hammer. "I'll soon break the door in."

At the moment the abbé moved aside from the door it suddenly opened, and Gwynett stood in the doorway at the top of the two steps.

"What is this infernal noise about?" he asked angrily.

A scream of horror arose from the women.

"Oh! the wretch! the bloodthirsty monster! look at him!" was shrieked in chorus.

Gwynett presented, without knowing it, a tolerably gruesome spectacle. He was dressed merely in his shirt and breeches, and across his breast was a great stain of wet blood, which

ha. extended itself to his right hand and sleeve and the waist-band of his breeches. Noticing the direction of the pointed fingers of the crowd, he glanced down, and for the first time caught sight of his ensanguined garments.

"Search him!" cried the abbé, "before he has time to get rid of the stolen money."

A couple of men seized Gwynett by each arm, and the abbé thrust his hand eagerly into the left-hand pocket of the prisoner's breeches. He knew that the purse given by Dorrington ought to be in the other pocket, but it was of still greater importance to be the first in possession of the letter to lord Oxford. The pocket, however, was empty.

"Turn the other pocket inside out," he said to one of the men on Gwynett's right. The man did so, found the red silk purse, and threw it on the table with a heavy thud. There was no letter.

"That's it!" cried the landlady. "I saw the poor man take it out of his pocket with my own eyes."

"Somebody look for the knife inside there!" called out Gaultier, flinging the door wide open in order to see what Gwynett had done with the other clothes he wore on his arrival.

The potboy reached out his hand to the floor, and picked up the blood-smearred knife.

"Here it is, the murdering villain!" he shouted, shaking his fist in Gwynett's face.

The man who had gone out here returned at a run

"The tide has carried the body away, or else it has sunk," he said. "Here is a hat I found close to the jetty."

"It belonged to the poor fellow, no doubt," said Gaultier.

"I know it did," said the landlady. "I recollect it by the feather."

In the meantime Gwynett, at first only half awake, had been listening to the proceedings in a state of complete bewilderment, which was not diminished when the silk purse was brought out of his pocket.

"What is all this about?" he asked at length. "Is there no one of you that can speak a word of sense? Where is my companion?"

"Listen to that!" shrieked an hysterical housemaid.

"Take him to the lock-up till morning," cried the potboy "We'll see he doesn't break out of that. Come along, mister cut-throat," he added, pulling Gwynett down the steps into the room.

Gwynett freed himself from the stableman on his left by a sudden wrench, knocked the potboy heels-over-head into the fireplace, and cleared a half-circle around him by one furious sweep of a Windsor chair, which he picked up and brandished in the air with both hands.

"By heavens!" he roared, "I'll brain the first of you that comes within reach, if you can't speak out. Unless you are all mad, say what you have to say, and be d——d to you!"

"Oh! we can say it easy enough," screamed the landlady, who was entrenched behind the table. "You're a murderer, and you're going to swing for it!"

"Who has been murdered?" asked Gwynett, who had to use his loudest tones to be heard above the uproar.

"Why, the poor gentleman who was with you, as you know well enough; and may his blood stick on your black soul for ever, as it does on your white shirt!"

"I know nothing of what you say, nor do I know how this blood came here."

"Nor how your bloody knife was in your room?" bawled the potboy from amongst the ashes and embers of the fireplace.

"Nor how his purse of gold came in your pocket?" sneered the landlady.

"He gave it me," said Gwynett. "You saw and heard him," he added, turning to Gaultier.

"Not I, indeed," replied the abbé, who had moved a little down the room.

Gwynett gave a little start. He recollected the speaker's peculiar voice in an instant.

"Liar!" he shouted, making a bound towards Gaultier. "I know you! You are the scoundrel who tried to burn me alive at the presbytery!"

Before half the distance was covered which separated him from the abbé, the whole roomful of people had flung themselves upon Gwynett. The potboy rolled under the table and grasped his legs, his hair was seized from behind, and after half-a-dozen of his assailants had been sent rolling against the wainscot by a sweep of the chair, the rest of the party all came to the floor together in a heap, with Gwynett unconscious underneath them, his head cut open by a blow from a poker.

The victors picked themselves up, cursing and swearing, and presenting a lamentable array of broken noses, bleeding lips, black eyes, and damaged garments.

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who had lost a couple of front teeth in the course of the fray. "Let's tie him up tight, or we shall have all the trouble over again when he comes to himself."

Gwynett was securely bound and carried off, still unconscious, into the street. The whole population of the tavern, except the landlady and the abbé, attended the procession to the lock-up, and before it arrived at its destination half the New Year watchers in Deal had joined company with it.

The abbé waited till the landlady returned to the private parlour, and then rushed into the little room. No one had thought of removing Gwynett's clothes, and they still hung on nails in the wall. With furious haste and hands trembling with anxiety the abbé ransacked pocket after pocket of the *roquelaure*, the coat and the waistcoat, tore open the valise, flung the bedclothes right and left, and even searched the lining of the hat. But the letter from lady Melfort was nowhere to be found.

He staggered back into the parlour, overwhelmed with surprise and disappointment, just as the landlady entered to inquire if he wanted anything more for the night, and to apologise for the annoyance to which he had been subjected.

CHAPTER XXXIV

A VISION OF THE NIGHT

DORRINGTON HALL was a rambling old country house, lying in a hollow about half a mile from the sea-shore at Halcombe in Devonshire. The Dorrington property ran nearly as far as Holt Head, and extended back rather more than a mile amongst the hills. The little seaport of Halcombe, on an inlet of the sea which was found very convenient for smuggling, and occasionally for a little piracy, lay just out of sight of the Hall, behind a belt of fir-trees.

The squire's household had been established at Dorrington for about two months, madam Rostherne and her niece having arrived there three or four days after the New Year. Of the incidents of their journey from Wray Cottage nothing need be said, except that Muriel was disappointed to have seen nothing of Ambrose during their short stay in London, and considerably surprised to have heard nothing of him since.

Meanwhile, she and her friend Avice rode, hunted, shot, sailed, fished, and in other ways made themselves companions for Noel after a fashion that filled that young gentleman's soul with satisfaction. The squire's asthma improved; but, on the other hand, his intermittent foe the gout attacked him again with unusual virulence. His temper under these conditions became nearly that of a maniac, and his household came into his presence with fear and trembling, and an eye on everything that might serve conveniently for a missile.

One night at the beginning of February, Muriel and Avice, who occupied the same bed, had retired somewhat earlier than usual in order to escape the squire's rather sulphurous rhetoric. Avice had fallen asleep almost as soon as her head touched the pillow; but Muriel, who had felt during the evening a certain vague uneasiness for which she was at a loss to account, lay awake for some considerable time.

A dim red light from the fire of peat-blocks allowed the room to be seen indistinctly, and her eyes travelled dreamily over the elaborate plaster mouldings of the ceiling and the carved panels of the wainscot. She thought over the various circumstances that might have prevented a letter from Ambrose reaching her, wondering which one of these should be taken for granted in preference to the theory that he had not written at all. It first of all occurred to her that the business upon which he had been engaged for M. de Torcy, which he had only briefly described, might have again required his presence across the Channel. In this case communication by letter was always more or less uncertain. It was possible that the dame had intercepted some communication from Ambrose, in her recent access of ill-will against him; but, on the other hand, he was not in the least likely to have run the risk of writing to her direct. That the squire knew nothing of anything was quite conclusively evidenced by his non-allusion to it. Finally, she decided that on the morrow she would herself write both to Thornhaugh and to Will's Coffee-house, in order to terminate the suspense and anxiety which were weighing upon her. Soon after this she became a little more sleepy, and eventually sank into slumber.

About two o'clock she awoke suddenly, with the impression that her name had been called. Avice was fast asleep, and it did not appear that she had spoken. The house was wrapped in silence. A faint glow came from the peat fire. Muriel lay for some time, listening rather sleepily for a

repetition of the supposed summons. But no sound came, and her eyes gradually closed again.

An hour or so passed away, during which she once or twice started in her sleep, and partly opened her eyes. An expression of pain crossed her face, and a murmur of words came brokenly from her lips. Then she sank again into profound slumber.

Towards four o'clock she moved slightly, a sudden thrill seemed to pass through her, and a wave of cold air raised the curls from her forehead and temples. She raised herself, still asleep, upon her elbow, and turned her face towards the fireplace opposite. Then her lips parted, her eyes opened widely, and she became instantly and fully awake.

Before her, standing in the middle of the room, was the figure of Ambrose Gwynett.

She felt no fear or wonder, but an indescribable mingling of love, pity, and intense mental exaltation. She gazed at Gwynett almost without daring to breathe, lest the vision should fade and vanish. Her lover's face was turned towards her, and they looked into each other's eyes for several seconds. His features, illumined by some unknown source of light, were clearly visible. They were pale and haggard, his hair hung heavily over his forehead, and his shoulders were bowed as if with great pain or weakness. As she gazed steadfastly, he held out his hands towards her, and seemed to pass slowly towards the bedside till his form was bending over her. His whole face was instinct with so intense a yearning to convey some spoken message that Muriel, breaking through her breathless silence, whispered almost involuntarily,

"What is it, dear?"

The lips of her lover parted, and a single word came faintly to her straining ears.

"Innocent!"

As if released from some spell, Muriel half rose, and held forth her arms. On the instant the face and form of Gwynett grew dim, and with a faint echo of the same word, "Innocent," melted into air and disappeared.

Muriel sat waiting for some further sign until close upon dawn, but saw and heard nothing. She was quite calm, and felt neither terror nor grief. A sense of relief from suspense filled her mind.

"Ambrose is dead," she said to herself, as she finally lay down. "I am glad I have seen him once again."

Then she whispered softly to the empty air,

"I did not doubt you, Ambrose. I was only troubled at your silence. It was good of you to come. I shall know now that you are mine for ever."

She watched for the sunrise, considering whether she should tell Avice what had happened. But Avice presently woke up, and after lying silent for a few minutes, said,

"You are awake, Muriel?"

"Yes."

"Since when?"

"I do not quite know—some hours ago."

"How was that?"

Muriel made no immediate reply, and Avice went on,

"You have something to say to me, Muriel."

Muriel turned and looked at Avice with an air of surprise.

"That is true," she said. "But I scarcely know how to tell you. You will think I have only been dreaming."

"Very likely," said Avice. "Let us hear, at all events."

"I have seen a vision, Avice—a vision to warn me. It meant that Ambrose is dead."

"How do you know?"

"I saw his spirit last night. You may not believe it, but it was certainly he."

"I have no objection to believe it—quite the contrary."

"What do you mean?"

"My dear, I saw him myself."

"You! when?"

"Before you did—I was looking at him before you woke. If you had not woke when you did, I should have roused you myself."

Muriel was lost in wonder.

"Did you hear what he said?" she asked.

"No. I thought I saw his lips move, but I heard nothing."

"He spoke just one word—'innocent.' I think he said it again, just before he disappeared."

"I did not hear it."

"That is strange. But if you saw him, it cannot have been a dream."

"No."

"Then it was his spirit, and he is dead."

"Nothing of the sort," said Avice very positively.

"How can you reject the evidence of your own eyes?"

"What evidence? You think you have seen Ambrose's spirit—so do I, on the whole. There is nothing yet to show what it all means. But it does not in the least follow that he

is dead, or even that there is anything very much amiss—except, by the way, that he is probably ill.”

Muriel looked bewildered at her friend's matter-of-fact way of discussing an occurrence which had filled her own mind with awe.

“How strangely you speak, Avice!” she said finally. “I could understand you disbelieving in what has happened, but your way of believing it passes my comprehension.”

“It is quite simple,” replied Avice. “The fact is, although I never myself saw or heard anything like this before, the idea of it is not new to me. It was a subject my mother often discussed with me, and what she said impressed me more than anything else I can recollect. I think I had better tell you two or three of the things she used to mention to me, and then you will understand better.”

“I shall be very glad to hear,” said Muriel wonderingly.

“Well,” proceeded Avice, “when my mother lived at Wray Manor, in my grandfather's time, she had several curious experiences, of which she told me before she died, in order (as she said) that I might be prepared in case anything of the sort ever happened to me. Three of them interested me more than any of the others, and it is these three that seem to bear upon what we saw last night.”

“Tell me them.”

“I'll give you them in the order they happened. First—by the way, you know that my grandfather was paralysed and confined to his room during the last year or two of his life?”

“I recollect hearing of it.”

“That was at the time my mother was first engaged to colonel Elliott, my father, who was then living with his sister at Wray Cottage. Old squire Wray never liked my mother being out at night. If she stayed at mistress Elliott's after dusk, which was occasionally the case, the squire used to send over a groom to escort her back.”

“Why? It is such a short distance, and all through the park.”

“Oh! it was before the Boyne, and all sorts of stories used to be afloat about Irish marauders being landed to pillage the country.”

“Well, go on.”

“One evening, in the early summer, my mother left the Cottage to walk back through the park alone, because no one came to meet her as usual. It was eight o'clock—the time

the old squire used generally to be in bed and asleep. At the little foot-bridge—you know it was a wooden one then, and the bushes were not grown——”

“Yes.”

“At the bridge she caught sight of a man coming through the open field from the Manor, and stopped to see who it might be. She watched him approaching for some distance, and was amazed at last to recognise the old squire. He seemed to see her, and hastened his footsteps. She had a most distinct view of him till he came up to the bridge. Just as he reached it, he disappeared.”

“But how could——?”

“Wait a moment. My mother was very much frightened, and ran home as fast as she could. She found the squire comfortably asleep in bed as usual, and the groom drunk in the stables. What do you say to that?”

“It was very strange.”

“My mother said she always believed that the old squire, in his sleep, knew that the groom was neglecting his duty, and that in his anxiety for her, *something* of him—his mind, or his thoughts, or his spirit, or whatever you like—went out to meet her in bodily form.”

“Well, what was the next?”

“The next was after my mother was married, and I was a month old. We were at York at the time. My father was in command of the garrison, and had to go to London on some regimental business. My mother received no news of him for three weeks after his departure, and became very anxious. One night she woke up, and saw my father standing at the bedside, dressed in white, his head bound round with a linen cloth. He looked earnestly at her and at me—I was asleep by her side—and then disappeared. My mother made sure it was his disembodied spirit, and fainted away.”

“I do not wonder. It surprises me I did not do the same last night.”

“But that is not all the story. My father, it appears, caught a fever on his way to London, became delirious, and did not recover his senses for three weeks. He was at a friend's house, and they had got a nurse for him. This woman noticed his return to consciousness, and spoke to him. He said he felt sure his days were numbered, but that he could die happy if he could only see his wife and child once more. The nurse put a fresh wet bandage on his head, and he went to sleep again for a few minutes. When he woke up

he told the nurse he was quite contented, for he had been to his home and had seen his wife and the baby sleeping on her arm. This was at the exact time my mother saw him. I suppose you would call that a warning vision?"

"I am sure I should."

"Nevertheless, my father at once began to recover, and, as you know, lived for several years afterwards. Now for number three—a very trifling affair, but with a moral to it."

"What was that?"

"When I was five years old, we had a little party at Wray on my birthday, and my mother made me a delightful new frock with her own hands. It was just finished in time to put on before the other children came at five o'clock—in June, you recollect. A few minutes after I had gone down from the nursery to join the party below, a tremendous shower of rain came on. My mother happened to look out of the window, and was amazed to see me walking in the little side garden in my new frock, with the rain falling in torrents. She called to me from the casement to run in at once, but I walked off among the shrubs, and she lost sight of me. She ran downstairs to pass through the room opening on the garden, where the other children were, and there I was amongst them, perfectly dry, and never having left the room at all."

"That seems quite unaccountable."

"Yes—on your theory. But I want you to notice that in none of these cases of people appearing to be seen where they could not really be present was there any question of death or of calamity. In the first instance there might have been a little fidgetiness, but nothing more; in the second my father had certainly been passing through a serious crisis, but it was over, and things were on the mend; in the last, as you see, there was simply nothing the matter whatever. So, from the time my mother told me of these and other experiences of hers,* it has made me think of all that sort of thing quite differently."

"But do you understand it at all?"

"Not in the least. Only it seems to discourage jumping at conclusions too hurriedly."

"I see what you mean. I was perhaps wrong to be so certain about Ambrose. But do you really think that what we saw meant nothing at all?"

* Incidents practically identical with those narrated occurred to an intimate friend of the writer.

"I never said that. On the contrary, I am afraid it does mean something. I shouldn't be surprised if Ambrose is ill, or in some great trouble, although I see no occasion to suppose anything more. If I were you, I should write at once and inquire if anything is wrong."

"I had made up my mind to do that, last evening. You have taken a great load off my mind. But what could that word 'innocent' mean? and why did you not hear it?"

"Perhaps he did not really speak it aloud, only thought it, and you understood him. As to what it meant, I suppose you will hear sooner or later, and in the meantime it is no earthly use guessing. Don't worry, but get up."

At this stage Avice put her precepts into practice by commencing her toilet, and Muriel followed her example.

During the morning Noel rode into Dartmouth to see a certain Mr. Coverdale on some horse-dealing business of the squire's. He returned at a furious gallop in the afternoon, looking very pale and much disturbed, and was met by Muriel and Avice just as he came into the house from the stables.

"What on earth is the matter, Noel?" asked Avice. "Have you had a fall?"

"No," replied Noel, who seemed rather reluctant to be questioned; "it was something I heard. I should like to speak to you about it."

His tone distinctly suggested that his news was for Avice's ear alone. Muriel noticed it, and instantly cried out,

"You have some bad tidings about Ambrose—what is it? Don't be afraid to tell me. I have been expecting it."

Noel looked doubtfully at Avice.

"We had better hear," said Avice. "I will tell you why afterwards."

"Is he dead?" asked Muriel.

"No."

Muriel sank into the nearest seat, with a sob of relief. Avice took her hand.

"What is it?" she said to Noel.

"Tell me—I am ready now," added Muriel, with a little tremor in her voice.

"It is a terrible affair," said Noel slowly. "You must prepare your mind for a great shock."

"Go on—go on," said Avice impatiently.

"At the hotel in Dartmouth where I expected to meet Coverdale, I found one or two news-sheets, several days old. My eye caught a paragraph in one of them, and I brought it

back with me. I'll leave it with you. Call me if you want me afterwards."

Noel took a small printed sheet out of his pocket, handed it to Avice, and went off into the house with a very depressed countenance.

Avice unfolded the paper, and Muriel, in an agony of anxiety, devoured the half-dozen columns contained in the front page. There was nothing of any interest in it, and she turned over the sheet with trembling hands. Before her eyes was the following paragraph :

"THE DEAL MURDER.

We hear that Ambrose Gwynett, who was convicted at the recent Maidstone Assizes of robbing and murdering a fellow-traveller at the 'Crown and Anchor' Inn, Deal, on New Year's Eve, has been more or less ill with jail-fever during his imprisonment. This has naturally aggravated the effects of the serious injuries he sustained while resisting arrest. Nothing has transpired since the trial as to the identity of the victim. The murderer will be duly executed at Maidstone at eight o'clock in the morning of Tuesday next, February 6th."

"Good heavens!" cried Avice, letting the paper fall, "that is to-morrow morning!"

Muriel had fainted.

CHAPTER XXXV

A FRIEND IN NEED

As Noel entered the hall, he was greeted in rather noisily hearty tones by a man who was crossing it to enter the dining-room, and who stopped to shake hands with him.

This personage was a florid, horsey-looking individual of about forty years of age, by birth a Yorkshireman, and by station a small squireen near Doncaster. He had come into a heavily encumbered estate at his majority, found that it would barely secure him bread and cheese, and consequently determined to sink the country gentleman and become a trader. Going into horse-dealing and horse-breeding, he had prospered exceedingly, and for some years past had held lucrative contracts for supplying horses to the allied armies on the continent. At home he was beginning to be known

far and wide as a contractor for several lines of post-service for the government, and had been frequently employed by the postmaster-general's department, since its establishment by the Act of 1705, in reorganising the post-office establishments in the north and west of England. It will, of course, be remembered that the posting service, at this date and for a century previously, had included the provision of facilities for travelling as well as the mere distribution of private correspondence.

One branch of the business carried on by Mr. John Coverdale (of whom we have been speaking) was the purchase and training of Exmoor and Dartmoor ponies, which he attended to in person, and which brought him periodically to Devonshire. Here he had made the acquaintance some years ago of the Dorrington Hall household, and had from time to time dealings with the squire, who was himself a successful breeder of horses and cattle. As a lad, Noel had been a particular favourite of Coverdale's, and his earliest mount had been a present from the contractor.

"Aha! my young Trojan," said Coverdale, as he held out his immense fist, "we have very nearly missed each other. The squire told me you had gone over to Dartmouth."

"I found at the 'Nag's Head' that you had left only an hour before. You must have passed me when I turned in to speak to farmer Leigh at Alvington."

"Very likely. I am off to Plymouth as soon as I have had a mouthful of lunch which the squire has offered me."

Coverdale followed Noel into the dining-room, where lunch was laid, and commenced his meal without ceremony. Noel felt a good deal upset, and did not care to join him.

"We rather expected to see something of you earlier," he remarked, as he poured out some of the squire's famous claret for the guest. "At the Exeter posting-house they had been there twice since the new year."

"Quite true," said Coverdale, draining a bumper. "Did you hear why?"

"No."

"I have been busy all along the road since December; a very big affair—the contract for the whole post-service between London and Exeter. We are just now taking over the remainder of the route to Plymouth."

"Indeed! I congratulate you."

"It was time, I can tell you. There's nothing doing now with the army, as I daresay you know, and there's plenty to

be done with the posts—either in the way of swindling the government or of proper organisation. My idea at present is to choose the latter alternative. Anything worse than the roads and the cattle along this western route I never saw anywhere.”

“We escaped pretty well ourselves,” said Noel. “But we took our time, and by good luck there had been a fortnight’s dry weather.”

“That’s your one chance. A good shower will make some parts of the road nearly impassable. Of course, my concern is only with the establishments. But if I can’t bully some of the townships into filling up their quagmires, hang me if I won’t divert the traffic, and ruin them. It wouldn’t take much to do it.”

“We are certainly better off in Kent.”

“A different thing altogether. Everybody goes between London and Dover, and my lords this and that expect to find a Strand all the way.”

Coverdale helped himself to another glass, and then glanced at Lionel.

“You’re looking a little gloomy, my young friend. What’s the matter?”

Noel saw no use in affecting secrecy about what was sufficiently notorious to have found its way into a provincial news-sheet. He therefore acquainted Coverdale with the news he had brought from Dartmouth.

“You know mistress Dorrington,” he added. “I may say there is an engagement between her and Mr. Gwynett. It makes the matter doubly distressing to us, as you may suppose.”

“It is perfectly monstrous,” exclaimed Coverdale, in amazement. “‘Murder’ may mean anything—a duel, a scuffle, or some fellow killed in self-defence, if one knew all about it. But the ‘robbery’ is simply out of the question. What on earth should Mr. Gwynett of Thornhaugh want to rob anyone for? And the execution fixed for to-morrow, you say? Horrible! How is it you only hear of this now?”

“Impossible to say,” replied Noel. “The paragraph, you see, spoke of illness—but that could hardly account for it. Some letter may have miscarried—”

At this moment Avice burst into the room.

“Noel!” she cried, “come at once into the squire’s study. You will excuse him, Mr. Coverdale—”

Coverdale waved his hand in deprecation or any apology, and the young couple hurried out of the room.

"What is it?" asked Noel, as they crossed the hall.

"First of all," replied Avice, "Muriel fainted when she read that paper. Then, after madam Rostherne and I had brought her round again, she went straight to the squire and said she must go to Maidstone at once."

"To Maidstone!"

"Yes—but there! just listen to the squire."

There was no difficulty about listening to the squire, for his furious imprecations could be heard all over the building, and the house-servants were gathering at various corners in amazement at the outburst. The study was, in reality, a sort of office in which the squire transacted his business, and which Coverdale had left only a few minutes before. Seated in his great arm-chair, with his bandaged foot supported on a high footstool, Mr. Wray was shaking his fist at Muriel, who stood facing him across the table, while his face was purple with passion, and he almost choked himself by the haste with which he poured forth his objurgations. Madam Rostherne sat near him, looking angrily at Muriel, while at the same time endeavouring to temper the unmeasured violence of the squire.

"Innocent!" he was bellowing, as Avice and Noel came in—"innocent! How the devil can he be innocent when he's been convicted by a jury? And what else could be expected from an infernal, traitorous, foreigneering Jacobite? All thieves and murderers, every man jack of 'em—only waiting to be found out, like this scoundrel! and the sooner they're all at the end of a rope the better, curse 'em!"

Muriel stood pale and rigid, hearing but apparently unheeding the storm of coarse abuse hurled at her by the squire. Her eyes were fixed on vacancy, and she seemed only partly conscious of what was passing. When the squire stopped, in sheer want of breath, she repeated the words which had elicited his last outburst.

"He is innocent," she said, in a low, dreamy voice. "He told me so. I must go and see him."

"The girl's raving," roared the squire. "Be off, all of you! I won't hear a word more about Ambrose Gwynett, now or ever—he's got his deserts, and there's an end of it!"

Muriel shuddered slightly, and grasped a chair-back to support herself. Noel was boiling over with indignation.

"Father," he said, "have a little consideration. None of us can believe for a moment that Ambrose can be guilty of what they impute to him, and——"

"Curse you!" screamed the squire, twisting himself round towards his son, "who asked your opinion? Are you going to set yourself up against your father, you rebellious young dog?"

Muriel moved a step forward, and swept from her forehead the hair which had fallen over it when she had fainted.

"Mr. Wray," she said, as if unconscious of what had previously fallen from the squire, "I must go to Maidstone to see Ambrose before he dies. You will help me?" and she held out her hands imploringly.

The squire fell back in his chair, tugging at his neckcloth, and shaking his other fist in the air.

"Take away that idiot!" he yelled.

Noel was opening his mouth to make some violent protest, when Avice clapped her hand over it, and pulled him towards the door.

"Hold your tongue," she said. "It's no use. Let us get Muriel away from this, or I don't know what will happen."

Noel swore under his breath, but felt the force of his cousin's advice. He turned his back on the squire, and by a gesture begged Muriel to leave the room. She looked blankly at him, and Avice had to take her arm and lead her out into the hall. Here they encountered Coverdale.

"I've been listening at the door," said this worthy. "For the matter of that, I could have heard just as well at the lodge gates, so far as the squire is concerned. What is it that mistress Dorrington wants?"

Muriel turned to him with the same quiet and almost emotionless expression of face she had shown to the squire.

"I must go to Ambrose," she said. "I must see him before he dies."

Avice looked at her with a troubled air.

"Dear," she said, "it is impossible. You know it took us nearly four days to come here from Kent."

"I shall ride fast," replied Muriel impassively. "You will lend me your Arab, Noel. It will carry me better than either Avice's horse or mine."

"Ride her horse to Maidstone, and before to-morrow morning?" asked Coverdale, looking from Avice to Noel in bewilderment.

"You hear what she says," returned Noel, taking him aside.

"I am afraid the shock has confused her mind."

"Has she the least idea that it is about eighty leagues as the crow flies, and by any decent road it must be nearly two

hundred and fifty miles—to say nothing of its being dark at seven o'clock?"

Avice came forward as Muriel left the hall quickly.

"She has gone to the stables to order the horse to be saddled," she said. "I think we shall have to humour her, and let her start, or she may go perfectly distracted. You will go with her, Noel, as far as may be necessary?"

"Of course. We may get as far as Honiton or Axminster without our horses foundering, but after that, what can be done?"

At this point Muriel came back again, and was proceeding upstairs, when an idea seemed to strike her, and she turned to Coverdale, who was watching her with a great deal of sympathy.

"Mr. Coverdale," she said, "while I put on my habit, will you do me the great favour to write me some directions for the best route between here and Maidstone? It will save time, and there is none to lose."

"My dear madam," cried Coverdale, much moved, "I'll do anything in my power for you, and I have an idea. Go and dress."

Muriel flashed a look of gratitude upon him and sped upstairs, followed by Avice.

"I was an ass not to think of it before," muttered Coverdale to himself. "It might be done—a frightfully near thing—but not absolutely impossible——"

"What is not impossible?" asked Noel.

"Hold your tongue, and let me think," snapped Coverdale, pacing the hall excitedly. "Have you any money in the house? My cash is all at Bristol at the moment, and my drafts are on Plymouth."

"I have ten pounds or so," said Noel.

"I have about twenty in my pocket. That may not be enough. I must get back the forty pounds I have just paid the squire."

Coverdale ran back to the study, where the squire was still fuming over his recent interview, and madam Rostherne was trying to pour oil over the troubled waters.

"My dear sir," said Coverdale, "do me the favour to let me have back the forty pounds I paid you just now, and I'll give you a week's bill. I find I'm short of money."

"Hang your notes!" said the squire, who was in the mood to object to everything, although he had not the least doubt as to the security offered. "It was a cash bargain."

"I know—nevertheless, I am in a hurry, and can't get at my money at Plymouth and Bristol in time."

"In time for what?" asked the squire, with a suspicious glare.

"I'm going to escort your ward to Kent," replied Coverdale, who cared nothing for the squire's likes or dislikes, and thought that Muriel had been outrageously treated.

"With my money?" roared the squire. "I'm d——d if you shall."

"Very sorry to disagree with you, squire, but I must, and time presses. I think you put the cash in this desk?"

The desk was a heavy oak affair, resting on the study table in front of the squire's chair.

"I did, and here it stays," said the squire, bringing his fist down on the lid with a bang. "You're either drunk or mad, Coverdale."

The contractor did not waste time in argument, but wrenched the desk out of the squire's hands, and slewed it round in front of him just in time to prevent the key being turned in the lock.

"A thousand pardons, squire," he said, as he pocketed the two *rouleaux* of gold, and made for the door. "I owe you forty pounds, recollect, and you can keep the beasts till I pay up."

The squire nearly had an apoplectic fit.

"Stop the infernal thief!" he screamed, as the door closed behind Coverdale. The latter noticed that the key was in the outside of the lock, and took the precaution to turn it and put it in his pocket. Noel was waiting for him in amazement.

"Good, so far!" said Coverdale. "Now to saddle our three horses and be off."

"What on earth are you going to do?" asked Noel, as he hurried after Coverdale to the stables.

"Are you ready to ride till you drop from the saddle?"

"Of course."

"So am I."

"That is, if there is any use in it."

"I think it's just worth trying—I don't say more."

"What is?"

"To get mistress Dorrington to Maidstone before dawn."

"But it is impossible—you said as much yourself."

"Impossible for her to ride her own horse; impossible for her to get any other horses during the night, or even before

night, without money; impossible for anybody, with one exception, to help her, at such short notice and amongs strangers, over a distance of two hundred and forty or fifty miles. I am the lucky exception."

The horses were saddled, and Coverdale looked about the stables.

"Have you pistols?" he asked.

"Two pairs."

"Let us have them—I have my own here. Also a good hatchet—the sharpest you can find. And a horn, if you have such a thing."

"We pass the huntsman's cottage, and there is a hatchet ground this morning. What are we going to do, may I ask?"

"In one word, my dear fellow—post. I am going to convoy you past all the posting-houses between Exeter and London, and I am the only man in England who can do it for you—at night and against time, that is to say."

"That is a wonderful idea, and I shall never forget your kindness. But why through London? That detour will cost us thirty extra miles."

"It will cost us twelve extra hours to take any other route. As it is, I don't say it can be done—I only say it is not impossible. For myself, I shall break down on the way—I don't know exactly where. You are young, and light, and in training. As to the lady——"

Avice and Muriel entered the stable-yard just as the groom led out the three horses. Noel had gone for the pistols, and Coverdale was strapping the hatchet, wrapped in a cloth, to his saddle.

"My horse?" said Muriel, in a hurt tone, seeing that her saddle had not been put on Noel's Arab.

"By my advice, madam," said Coverdale, holding her stirrup. "We leave all three at Exeter, and it is no use making needless changes."

"Do you come with me, sir?"

"As far as I can keep in the saddle. After that, you and Noel must do the best you can. Mount, my dear madam—here is Noel, and we must lose no time."

Muriel was in the saddle before he had finished speaking, and Noel followed her example. Coverdale took a key out of his pocket, and handed it to Avice.

"I locked the squire in his study, to save any fuss, mistress Avice," he said, as he mounted. "Will you kindly let him

out, with my most humble apologies? Wish us God-speed, and good-bye to you!"

Avice nodded, and the three riders started at a gallop along the park drive leading to the Exeter road.

It was a quarter past two o'clock. In seventeen hours, far away on the other side of England, the light of the earliest dawn would fall upon grey prison walls, an expectant multitude, and a gallows.

CHAPTER XXXVI

A RIDE AGAINST TIME

THE travellers drew bridle at a cottage close to the boundary of the park, and Noel flung himself off his horse to run and fetch the huntsman's horn of which he had spoken. Half a minute sufficed for this. Coverdale took the horn, slung the strap over his shoulder, and the trio resumed their journey.

The day was clear and bright, the air dry and crisp, and it promised to be a fine night. The road, thanks to an exceptionally dry January and pretty constant wind, was in the best condition that could be expected in an age when Macadam was unknown, when family coaches were frequently overturned by the ruts in the main highways, and when prince George of Denmark, travelling by carriage over the forty miles between Windsor and Petworth, took fourteen hours to accomplish the journey.

"Everything depends upon the light," said Coverdale, as they galloped down towards Totnes. "We shall have twilight till long after six o'clock. Luckily, there is a capital stretch of road for ten miles on this side of Yeovil. If we only get a clear sky at night there could not be a luckier time. The moon is at the full some time to-day or this evening, and it will be aloft for more than twelve hours."

Very little conversation was exchanged during the first portion of the journey, which was the long and arduous ride to Exeter. The horses had been walked through Totnes, and the remainder of the distance had been ridden almost without drawing bridle. Coverdale had urged that the few remaining hours of daylight were so valuable that their beasts must be pressed to the utmost until the first relay of post-horses could be obtained at Exeter.

Four o'clock was striking as the county town was entered. Thirty-three miles had been covered since starting. But this had been by daylight, on first-class mounts, and represented a higher rate of progress than could be expected at subsequent stages of the journey. At the Exeter post-house, where all the ostlers recognised Noel and Muriel, as well as Coverdale, their saddles were transferred to three fresh horses in the twinkling of an eye. This was by Coverdale's advice, on the double ground that it would save time on the whole to take their own saddles with them, and that if they did not they might fail at some place or other to get a side-saddle at all. The journey was resumed with scarcely five minutes' delay.

Honiton was reached within the hour, and Coverdale, who found the wife of the postmaster at her tea, recommended Muriel to join her and take a little refreshment while the relay was being brought round.

"I could not swallow anything," replied Muriel, speaking for the first time since leaving Exeter.

"My dear madam," replied Coverdale promptly, "I consider this affair is in my hands, and I know what I am about. If you want to get beyond Salisbury, you must eat something. If not, say so, and I will wish you a good evening."

Muriel went very obediently into the landlady's parlour, and forced herself to swallow a cup of tea and a slice of bread and butter. Then the relay appeared, and the third start was made just as the sun was setting.

When they reached Axminster, half an hour afterwards, the moon was already showing itself above the eastern horizon, and a clear sky appeared everywhere. The road had been rather heavy.

"We had better change again here," remarked Coverdale to Noel. "These beasts are a poor set, and it is a good twenty miles to Yeovil."

The relay was obtained, and the two men had some bread and cheese while the saddles were removed. The first part of the road to Yeovil was decidedly bad, and neither the after-glow nor the low-lying moon afforded enough light to permit of anything like a rapid pace. The second half of the distance was better, and the light improved as the moon rose. Nevertheless, it was seven o'clock before they reached the post-house.

"We are behind time," said Coverdale, as he flung himself off his horse and ran into the inn.

The postmaster announced that his only horses were dead beat, having just come in with a coach from Dorchester.

"You had better try for a relay at Sherborne, sir," said he. "It's only five miles further on."

"But there is no post-house there," replied Coverdale, fuming at this check.

"The landlord of the 'Blue Pig' has a couple of hunters, and a pony or two."

"The landlord of the 'Blue Pig,' would be a born fool to lend his hunters to passing strangers," returned Coverdale, as he went out.

The postmaster followed him into the yard, and signed to him to give him a word in private.

"Hi!" said he mysteriously, as Coverdale put his foot in the stirrup. "I've thought of something."

"Well?"

"Take my advice," whispered the postmaster, "and let the lady ask him—in a good light, you understand."

Coverdale responded with a wink, and rode off with his companions.

"Let us hope the 'Blue Pig' is a bachelor, and passably sober," he said to himself. "It is a pity we haven't daylight for this kind of diplomacy."

The road to Sherborne, by good luck, was in excellent condition, and the party lost very little ground by the extra demand made upon their horses' endurance. As they pulled up at the 'Blue Pig,' which was a large and roomy hostelry, they could see that a long room over the stables was lighted up with a liberality which suggested some festive function. Coverdale dismounted, and said to Muriel,

"My dear madam, there is a fellow here who may be able to help us, and whom we shall have to take as we find him. If a little tact seems necessary, I rely on you to follow my lead."

Muriel nodded assentingly.

"May I ask how you have stood the journey so far? Do you feel as if you could go on?"

"I feel nothing—nothing whatever. Only let us hasten."

"Gad!" soliloquised Coverdale, as he entered the porch, "that is very curious. I could go to bed with a good deal of satisfaction myself."

He went into the broad hall of the inn, and found it deserted. Sounds of revelry and the scraping of a fiddle came from overhead, and he turned his steps upstairs. On

a landing he met a much-beribboned chambermaid passing with a tray of glasses. The girl noticed that he was a newcomer, and stopped.

"Has any one served you, sir?" she asked.

"Not yet. I see you have something going on. Is it a wedding, or a wake, or what?"

"A ball, sir," replied the maid, with dignity. "It is Mr. Marston's birthday. Will you come to the ball-room, and drink master's health? He will be very glad to see you."

"Evidently the landlord," thought Coverdale, as he followed the chambermaid. "I seem to have heard the name before."

At the end of a passage the girl opened a door, and displayed one of the large, low apartments frequently to be found in country inns, and constituting the assembly-rooms of the district for any function of a public character. A fiddler, seated on a table, was playing a country dance. A score of couples, dressed in their finest, were going through a figure with immense earnestness, while groups of spectators looked on from benches ranged along the walls. The chambermaid pointed to a young fellow who was standing not far off, giving some orders.

"That is the master," she said.

Coverdale recollected him as a person whom he had recently met at Newmarket, and who was said to have just come into a comfortable little landed property adjacent to his hotel. The young man at this moment turned round, recognised Coverdale in his turn, and came forward.

"Ah, Mr. Coverdale!" he said. "Well met—you are just in time. You must take a glass with me. What good fortune brings you here?"

He poured out glasses for the pair, and the usual salutations were exchanged.

"I wanted to see you on a little matter," said Coverdale, "but I did not know you had this festivity in progress. Many happy returns."

"Thank you. But hang business to-night—to-morrow, if you like. Shall I find you a partner? All the best people about are here to-night."

The young fellow looked round complacently, and seemed on excellent terms with himself.

"I've no doubt," replied Coverdale. "You're a catch, you know, Marston—unless, by the way, you're caught already?"

"Not yet—not yet, Mr. Coverdale."

"Quite right, no occasion to hurry. But you're a regular ladies' man, you know."

Mr. Marston seemed to relish this suggestion hugely.

"Lord! don't flatter a fellow, Mr. Coverdale. I'm well enough, I suppose."

Coverdale took him aside mysteriously.

"My dear fellow," he said, in his ear, "if you like, I'll give you the finest chance in the three kingdoms. I wouldn't do it for anyone else."

"What do you mean?" asked Marston, with his eyes like saucers.

"Hush! the most beautiful girl in England, and two thousand a year to her fortune."

"Bless my soul! Who? Where?"

"At the front door."

"Lord! you don't say so! Won't you bring her in?"

"Quite impossible—it's there where your chance is."

"Hang me if I understand you."

"Simplest thing in the world. Mistress Dorrington—don't forget the name, now——"

"I won't."

"Mistress Dorrington is riding to London to-night——"

"To-night? Good Lord!"

"Yes—sudden summons—dying father—only child and heiress, you understand?"

"Yes—yes!"

"No change of post-horses to be got at Yeovil——"

"I daresay. Most of them are here to-night."

"So we determined to try at your place for a relay on to Shaftesbury—money no object, as you may imagine. But I believe a service at this juncture would win her heart. She's terribly cut up about her father."

"My dear sir, don't say a word more. How many do you want?"

"Three. We have our own saddles."

"Three? Her maid, I suppose?"

"No—a young fellow."

"Oh! a young fellow, eh?"

"Her brother."

"You shall have them in a jiffy—you'll present me to the lady?"

"Of course. Tell your ostlers, and come along."

Marston ran off, gave some orders, and returned to Coverdale.

"Between ourselves," said the latter, "don't be too business-like—do the sympathetic. Beauty in distress, you know—a sprat to catch a whale, eh? You and I can settle the money matters afterwards."

"Don't mention it, Mr. Coverdale. I'm not such a Jew as all that comes to."

Coverdale went out, followed by the landlord. Muriel and Noel were still in the saddle, and Coverdale gave the latter a warning nudge.

"Mistress Dorrington, permit me to introduce to you my friend Mr. Marston, who has offered in the kindest manner to do us any service in his power. Marston, mistress Dorrington and Mr. Noel Dorrington."

Marston seemed struck speechless at the sight of Muriel, as she bowed her acknowledgments, and held out her hand to be helped to dismount.

"It is very good of Mr. Marston," she said. "We shall always be grateful to him for getting us out of our difficulty."

"'Pon my soul, madam," stammered Marston, "you're very welcome. Won't you come in?"

"Here come the horses," said Coverdale. "Look alive with the saddles, my lads! Excuse our being too much pressed to accept your hospitality, Marston—but every moment is precious. You'll do one more thing to oblige us, I'm sure—send our post-horses back to Yeovil."

"Certainly," said the landlord, unable to take his eyes off Muriel. "Leave mine anywhere you like—they're all fresh, and will carry you well."

"We shall hope to thank you more at leisure on our return, sir," said Noel, raising his hat.

"I shall be monstrous glad to see you, sir, and madam also. And I hope you will hear better news of your father."

"Are we ready?" interrupted Coverdale. "Marston, kindly give mistress Dorrington a lift. Now, Noel. Lads, there's half a guinea amongst you. Good night, Marston, and many thanks."

Muriel shook hands with the enraptured landlord, and the party started on the seventeen miles ride to Shaftesbury.

"We have lost nearly a quarter of an hour," said Coverdale. "But we might have done worse."

"What on earth have you been telling that fellow?" asked Noel.

"A pack of lies, for which I hope to be forgiven. The truth would have cost us half an hour, and we couldn't afford it."

A few miles further on the first difficulty with the turnpikes arose. Hitherto the gates had either been found open during the daylight and the dusk, or the pike-keepers had been on the alert and had heard Coverdale's horn as they galloped up. But at Milborne the gate was closed and locked, no light appeared in the keeper's house, and no response was made to the summons of the horn. Coverdale and Noel did not stop to waste further time, but dismounted and lifted the gate off its hinges. They were in the saddle again when a night-capped head was poked out of the window, and a quavering female voice asked what was doing. Coverdale threw the toll-money on the doorstep, threatened the pike-keeper with unheard-of penalties for obstructing her majesty's lieges, and galloped off after his companions.

The watershed between the Yeo and the Stour brooklets, one flowing to the river Parrett and the Severn estuary, and the other to the English Channel, was a foundrous piece of road, and the travellers congratulated themselves on having under their animals accustomed to any sort of cross-country rough riding. Shaftesbury was reached at half-past eight, and here a good relay of post-horses was found.

At this stage, notes were compared as to their respective powers of endurance during the journey. Noel confessed to a certain amount of fatigue, arising more from the incessant watchfulness required than from the mere physical exertion. Muriel disclaimed feeling any discomfort or weariness. The concentration of every faculty of her mind on the single thought of the doom overhanging her lover seemed to have deadened all sensibility to other considerations. She spoke only when addressed, and then with such obvious effort that her companions thought it better to leave her entirely alone. Coverdale himself was beginning to feel a good deal more uncomfortable than he cared about.

"We have covered about a hundred miles so far," he thought, "and taken over six hours to do it in. How I am to stick on past Bagshot and Hounslow I don't know. It's all very well for people of cast-iron, like these youngsters, who are at it every day and all day. But old fogies like myself are getting past that sort of thing."

Marston's hunters were left at the Shaftesbury post-house, the postmaster being specially fee'd to treat them well and send them back to Sherborne. A hasty meal was here partaken of by Noel and Coverdale, and with some reluctance by Muriel. The latter, after a peremptory remonstrance from

the contractor, took a glass of port before recommencing the journey, and Coverdale pocketed a large flask of the same wine for future use.

The road to Salisbury lay rather high, over the White Sheet Hill range. This, while a little rough, was, at all events, free from the mud which lay in all the lower highways in the same direction. At the cathedral city, which was reached just before nine o'clock, a disagreeable difficulty met the travellers. The postmaster, a surly boor, was just sufficiently drunk to refuse to attend to his business, and not sufficiently drunk to be helpless. The ostlers, in terror of his temper, refused to furnish a relay in defiance of his orders, which were accompanied by comprehensive curses upon all travellers who disturbed him at so late an hour. The matter was eventually settled by a pugilistic encounter between Coverdale and the postmaster, who was persuaded to listen to reason after three rounds in the stable-yard in the approved fashion of the ring, as taught at that period by the distinguished Mr. Figg of Adam and Eve Court, Oxford Street. The present of a couple of guineas each fortified the ostlers against their apprehensions of what might befall them on the morrow, and secured their assistance in picking out a good relay.

Nothing occurred on the road to Andover beyond five minutes' delay in cutting down the turnpike gate at the fork of the road to Stockbridge. This was kept by a blacksmith, who had so constructed the hinges of the gate—doubtless for reasons of his own—that it could not be removed without his professional assistance. He had locked the gate, and was apparently either asleep or too drunk to respond to Coverdale's summons. The latter at once brought his hatchet into use, demolished the lock-post, and flung the gate open just as the aroused blacksmith stumbled out of the doorway and poured a deluge of hiccupping execrations upon the travellers. By the time he had realised the exact position of matters, the subjects of his criticism were a mile away on the road past Bury Hill and over the little river Anton into Andover.

At the latter place another serious check was experienced. It was some time after eleven o'clock when the post-house was reached. The stables in the inn were crowded, but the ostler said there were no post-horses.

"It is Weyhill fair, sir," he explained. "All the beasts are over there."

"That is unfortunate," said Coverdale, turning to Noel. "I quite forgot the fair. It is the oldest and biggest in all

the south country, and sweeps the district. Whose are all these horses?" he asked the ostler.

"Mostly the farmers' hereabouts, sir."

Coverdale dismounted, and took the ostler to the stalls.

"Show me the three or four freshest," he said.

The ostler scratched his head, and finally pointed out a pair from Foxcott, and a big mare from Enham Knights.

"These have not done much," he said. "Went to fair this morning, and have only done the four miles here since. The rest are pretty well used up."

"Where are the owners of these three?"

"In the bar-parlour, sir."

"Sober?"

"Middling."

"Do you know them?"

"These twenty years."

"Will they sell?"

"You can try, sir. This way, if you like to ask them."

Coverdale followed the ostler into the inn. Five minutes afterwards he came out again and went to Noel.

"I have bought a couple of nags," he said, "but I can't get a third. Mistress Dorrington is the lightest weight amongst us, and her horse must go a little farther. We may get another mount at Whitchurch."

The two post-horses were left behind, and the journey was resumed. At Whitchurch, after a little delay, a post-horse was obtained for Muriel. After this good progress was made till the party reached Basingstoke, about half an hour after midnight.

The post establishment here was one of the largest in England, five great roads from all parts of the country meeting at this busy and important town. Coverdale was, of course, well known here, and the post-boys, after they were once aroused, flew to execute his orders. Three excellent horses, which had not been out the previous day, were promptly forthcoming, and Muriel's mount from Whitchurch was taken to the stables.

"What are you going to do with our purchases?" asked Noel.

Coverdale took him aside.

"We'll arm a convoy," he said. "We may get no relay at Bagshot, and there is the Heath before us. You need not say anything to disturb mistress Dorrington."

At this period, and, indeed, till long afterwards, many of

the wide moors which were crossed by great highways were infested with mounted brigands, whose depredations met with exceedingly little interference at the hands of the constituted authorities. So audacious, indeed, were these marauders, that William III., journeying in company with maréchal Tallard to the Newmarket races, was very nearly stopped on the way by a party of gentlemen of the road. Travellers were expected to secure their own safety the best way they could, and every family coach crossed Bagshot or Hounslow Heath with a small battery of muskets or blunderbusses alongside the coachman or protruding from the carriage windows. Those who were dependent upon the post for the means of locomotion had to trust for their protection to the very uncertain valour of the post-boys—a term indiscriminately applied to the employés of any age, from lads to greybeards, who rode or drove for hire between the different establishments of the service.

“What does that make, for our next stage?” asked Noel.

“Seven or eight and twenty miles, I should say—to Staines, that will be. How do you feel?”

“Fairly bad. But I’m not done up yet.”

“I wish I could say as much. I doubt whether I can keep in the saddle another hour. Mistress Dorrington simply confounds me. I don’t think she feels anything—I took care to notice that when she dismounted. A sort of semi-somnambulism, it seems to me.”

The horses were brought round, and Coverdale went into the stable-yard, where several men had collected on the chance of a job.

“I want two men with blunderbusses to ride to Staines,” he called out. “And I don’t want fellows who will shut their eyes if they have to let fly, and put their slugs into the small of my back by mistake—d’ye hear?”

Three stable-helpers promptly came forward and offered their services. One of these was a coloured man, who was very hearty in his expressions of readiness to stand target for any number of highwaymen; the next was an oldish man who said very little; and the third a rather weakly-looking young fellow, whom Coverdale set aside at once in favour of the other two. The weapons, loaded and primed, were fetched from the inn, and the party mounted. Noel’s stirrup was held by the younger ostler, and he pulled his forelock as the former rather painfully climbed into the saddle.

"Master Noel," he said, "don't you know me? 'Tim from the manor——"

Noel looked sharply at the lad, and recognised him as one of the former stable-boys at Wray Manor, who had gone to London to better his fortune.

"To be sure I do, Tim," he said. "What's the matter with you? You haven't got any better-looking since you took yourself off."

"I'm just getting over a fever," replied Tim, "and I'm a bit weak. But you'd better have taken me with you, master Noel," he added, in a whisper.

"Why?" asked Noel, bending over as if to settle his stirrup leather.

The lad cast a glance round, and noticed that the coloured man was within hearing. He stooped down to the stirrup, and then straightened himself, saying loudly,

"It's all right now, sir. Good night."

"Good night," said Noel, keeping his ears open.

The lad slapped the horse on the crupper, and whispered,

"Keep your eye on the nigger, sir."

Noel nodded, handed him a crown piece, and rejoined his companions, who were just starting from the yard.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE DAWN OF THE 6TH OF FEBRUARY

THE warning given to Noel did not altogether take him by surprise. It was a common practice with the road-robbers of the period to enter into friendly relations with the posting employés whenever practicable, and even to get certain of their members taken on as postilions and outriders. This had the double advantage of putting the gangs in the way of receiving useful information of various kinds, and also of securing the neutrality or active assistance of the very persons relied upon by travellers for their escort. Noel, therefore, took the first opportunity of communicating Tim's hint to Coverdale.

"You can rely on the lad?" asked the contractor.

"Oh, yes—a very honest fellow."

"He said nothing about the other?"

"No."

"He looks right enough—but 'birds of a feather,' etc. We need not trouble till we get to Bagshot and the Heath. But in case of accidents, have your hand ready for your pistol. We'll put these fellows in front as soon as we're out of the town."

Nothing transpired on the journey to Bagshot, which was reached some little time before two o'clock. The road was in good condition, the moon high and shining brilliantly from an unclouded sky, and the air invigorating. As had been anticipated, no relay was to be obtained at Bagshot, the place, in fact, not being a posting-station, although there was a good inn there. But the horses were not distressed, and the nine or ten miles further to Staines were quite within their powers.

As the party came upon the Heath, Coverdale took care that the post-boys were never out of his sight for an instant. The moonlight was almost as bright as day, and the moor could be scanned far and wide. Here and there groups of fir-trees, which thickened towards the dip between the hilly slopes at the north-east, afforded means of concealment to possible marauders. But these were passed without incident.

Towards Sunningdale, where the ground was undulating but without much cover, the contractor fell back for a moment, and called to the elder post-boy to pick up Muriel's whip, which had fallen. The coloured man was alongside Noel, a few yards in front.

"We have a very narrow strip of road just ahead, sir," he remarked. "Part of it has slipped towards the gravel-pit there. Will you go first, sir, or shall I?"

Noel saw a deep depression, surrounded by thick bushes, in the direction indicated, and at once had his suspicions aroused.

"You may as well go first," he said, lifting his holster-cap, and feeling for his pistol as the other passed in front.

A few yards further on the coloured man extracted a white handkerchief from his pocket, and blew his nose with a good deal of vigour. It struck Noel that the use of a handkerchief at all, and a white one to boot, was rather noteworthy, and he watched sharply while the man, instead of returning the handkerchief to his pocket, stuck it somewhere on his horse's head. Noel pulled up short, and called to him.

"Get down a minute, my good fellow," he said, "and see if my horse has a stone in his off forefoot. I'll hold your bridle."

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The man dismounted as requested, putting the handkerchief out of sight as he did so, and came forward. Noel made his horse fidget about till Coverdale and the two others were alongside. As the negro stooped, Noel disengaged his right foot from the stirrup, waited his opportunity, and sent the fellow flying into the ditch with a kick that broke two of his ribs.

"Spur past the gravel-pit!" he cried. "This scoundrel was going to signal to his friends there. All stoop as we go past, and let us be ready to fire."

The elder post-boy unslung his blunderbuss, and Noel snatched the negro's weapon from the saddle-bow of the riderless horse. The party passed the gravel-pit at a gallop, and were saluted by three or four shots, the marksmen being evidently taken by surprise. One of the bullets struck the post-boy just as he was firing at a horseman, who dashed out of the hollow to head off the party. The newcomer fell to the ground, and his horse trotted off across the common. In the meantime, another shot had broken the leg of the horse Noel was leading, and which he had placed between himself and the gravel-pit. He and Coverdale told Muriel to gallop on ahead, while they halted and fired at three men who were riding out of the hollow. The discharge apparently took effect, for one of the men fell, and the others stopped. Noel and the contractor spurred forward, rejoined Muriel and the post-boy, and led the whole party off at their top speed.

A couple of miles further they slackened rein, and Coverdale rode up to the post-boy.

"You were hit, my man, I think?" said he. "Whereabouts?"

"I felt something on the top of my left shoulder," replied the post-boy. "But it is nothing much."

"Strip, and let us see," said Coverdale.

The man was assisted to take off his coat and jacket, and a small flesh wound was found, which bled only very slightly and was of no real consequence. Coverdale quickly bound it up, remounted with some difficulty, and gave the word to proceed. Once off the Heath no further interruption occurred, and Staines was reached about twenty minutes past two.

At this place, by good luck, the ostlers were up and about, rehorsing a party who were posting by night from Reading to London. This helped matters, as the two groups of travellers at once united for their mutual protection across

Hounslow Heath. No incident marked the remainder of the journey to the capital, and the trio rode up to the "White Horse" in Piccadilly a little after half-past three. They had come from Devonshire in thirteen hours.

Coverdale was by this time very nearly prostrated, and he expressed a doubt as to whether he could be of much further use as a companion. While the saddles were being transferred, he rapidly scribbled two or three notes, and handed them to Muriel.

"I shall go with you as far as I can," he said, "but on the distinct understanding that whatever happens to me, you will not stop an instant. These notes will secure you prompt attention at Dartford and Rochester—also at Greenwich and Gravesend, if you have occasion to stop, which you must try and avoid. We are very well up to time so far, and you ought to be in Maidstone before seven o'clock, if the night keeps clear and all goes well. How do you feel, Noel?"

Noel shook his head.

"We had better give Muriel all the money we don't need," he said. "If I hold on more than another hour or so, I shall be agreeably surprised. I suppose a chaise-and-four or six would not help us?"

"Over these roads, not in the least. We should be flung about like eggs in a wheelbarrow, and get there an hour too late after all. Let us be off again."

At the moment the trio entered the western end of Pall Mall, the door of a house at the eastern end opened, and two men appeared upon the threshold. The house was lord Oxford's town residence, and the prime minister had been sitting up till the small hours in close conclave with Mr. Matthew Prior, the poet, and the abbé Gaultier, the two confidential agents for Great Britain to the peace conferences at Utrecht, which had been formally opened on January 29th. Since Ménager's return to Paris and Gaultier's sudden rise in the favour of lord Oxford, the abbé had been kept entirely in London, pending his intended departure to carry instructions to the bishop of Bristol, lord privy seal, who was the British plenipotentiary at Utrecht.

Mr. Prior, who was very much bored and still more sleepy, had already gone off home in a hackney carriage. The lord treasurer yawned as he shook hands with Gaultier, and complimented him upon his capacity for enduring long hours of business.

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shame, my dear

sir," he was saying. "For myself, I am thankful that that despatch is drafted in time to allow of one's getting between the sheets before sunrise."

"I have kept awake, my lord, because I am not going to bed at all," replied the abbé. "At the same time, I am glad to be released, as I have some forty odd miles to ride before eight o'clock."

"Good Lord! you have strange ways of amusing yourself, abbé," said the minister, with another yawn.

"I have a little matter to attend to at Maidstone," explained Gaultier. "But I can be back again in the afternoon."

"You need not hurry, my dear sir—I shall be at the House or at Downing Street all day, and after that I dine with the queen. There is nothing pressing for a day or two. May one ask if your journey is on business or pleasure?"

"Both," replied the abbé.

The lord treasurer cast a sleepy glance up the street, and yawned again.

"Here come three early birds," he remarked, as Muriel and her two companions galloped past. "Heavens! my dear abbé, is there nowhere that you can caper except on my little toe?"

"A thousand pardons, my lord," stammered Gaultier, with his eyes fixed on the retreating figures, "but I——"

"That pretty girl might have been Old Nick by the way you jumped," grumbled Oxford. "Or is it by chance your wife eloping with some intimate friend of yours?"

"Luckily, my lord, I possess neither. I thought I recognised some acquaintances, but I was probably mistaken. I wish you good night, my lord."

"Good night, and a pleasant ride," replied the minister, limping as he turned into the house.

The abbé, who had kept carefully away from Wray since the episode at the 'Crown and Anchor,' and was consequently not aware that the occupants of the Cottage had gone to Devonshire, was confounded at recognising Muriel and Noel in two of the riders who had passed. He walked off, lost in conjecture, to the stables in the Haymarket where he kept his horse.

"What on earth can she be doing in London at this hour and on this particular night?" he asked himself. "One would think she would be shut up at the Cottage—either from sentiment or from disgust."

Then a very disturbing idea struck him.

"*Sangdiou!*" he muttered. "Can they have been after a

pardon or a reprieve? St. John would do anything for a face like that. The queen is at St. James's, and they were coming from there. At a gallop, too—that looks like a successful appeal. Otherwise, why should they hurry?"

The abbé started to run.

"That must be stopped, at all hazards," he said to himself, "even if I have to take to the *rôle* of highwayman for the occasion. It is unlucky they have got such a start."

The breathless abbé managed to rouse the ostler at his livery stables without much delay, and ordered his horse to be instantly saddled and taken to his lodgings in the Strand. He ran on, in the meantime, to get out his pistols, and loaded them with unusual care. This was effected just as his horse appeared. He mounted, and set off at full gallop in the track of the three travellers.

The latter had, in the meantime, continued their journey with undiminished speed, although not without considerable discomfort both to Coverdale and Noel. Muriel alone seemed, as before, insensible alike to pain or fatigue. Half-way between Greenwich and Dartford Coverdale began to show signs of entire inability to proceed farther. Noel, whose exhaustion was not quite so complete, noticed him more than once reeling dangerously in the saddle. The next time this occurred he brought his own horse alongside by a touch of the spur, and found that Coverdale was lividly pale, and riding with his eyes closed. A couple of minutes later he lurched heavily against Noel, who was luckily near enough to prevent him falling. It was evidently useless to attempt to persevere farther, and Noel helped the contractor, in an almost unconscious state, to the ground.

It happened that some small farm-buildings lay close to the road, the nearest of these being an empty shed, with some straw lying about. Noel half led, half carried Coverdale through the yard gate, which Muriel opened, and round behind a long haystack into the shed. Here he laid him on the ground, and placed a couple of dry sacks over his feet and shoulders, while a bundle of straw was used to prop up his head. Muriel had followed, leading their two horses by their bridles. Coverdale's was fastened to one of the posts of the shed; and Noel, with a good deal of effort, managed to get into the saddle again.

While this was taking place, the sound of a horseman coming up at a gallop from the direction of London was heard. The clattering of hoofs on the hard road reached

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the point opposite the farm, went by without a pause, and was gradually lost in the distance. The rider was the abbé Gaultier, who had taken the northern road to Maidstone mainly on the chance of hearing something of his quarry at the different turnpikes and post-houses along the road.

It happened that a Crayford farmer with his wife and son were passing through Dartford on their way to Gravesend market about a quarter to five, and a reply from the pike-keeper there led the abbé to suppose that Muriel and her escort were in front of him. He therefore pressed on to Rochester, where he could learn nothing of the party. But thinking that in the dark they had probably passed unobserved, he decided to make the best of his way to Maidstone, and, if he did not come up with the three travellers on the road, to wait for them in any convenient place he could find on the outskirts of the town.

In the meantime, Muriel and Noel had resumed their journey at the best pace the latter could keep up. Thanks to Coverdale's letter, a good relay was promptly forthcoming at Dartford, where Noel took some port wine, and after a little pressure persuaded his companion to follow his example.

The immobility which had characterised Muriel since their departure was beginning to give place to a feverish excitement as the long and harassing journey drew towards its close. Noel, who had at first been quite sceptical as to the possibility of succeeding in their enterprise, had by this time changed his mind, and saw no reason why Muriel, at all events, should not be able to reach Maidstone in time. The moon was still high enough to afford light for travelling, and the road itself presented no particular obstacles.

Nothing of any note occurred on the way to Rochester. At this place, which was reached about a quarter-past six, no relay was to be obtained. All the post-horses, as Noel found, had been hired by persons going to Maidstone to be present at the approaching execution—a fact which he had some difficulty in keeping from Muriel's ears. Their mounts from Dartford were, however, in fair trim, and could cover the remaining eight or nine miles to Maidstone if they were eased on the ascent of the Downs. The two companions set off on the last stage of their journey.

The air seemed to have changed a little as they turned southwards. Hitherto the night had been brilliantly clear, with occasionally a little fresh breeze from the north. Now the sky thickened, the wind died away, and a murky stillness

began to steal over the land. When they emerged upon the higher stretches of country on the plateau of the Downs, then consisting of almost entirely unenclosed common, the moon was sinking fast into a thick stratum of mist. Although the sun was to rise about half-past seven, there was as yet no sign of dawn, and the light failed rapidly.

An impenetrable gloom settled down over the vast and desolate moorland, and no sound could be heard except the tread of the horses' feet as they fell upon the sandy track. The riders began to find a difficulty in distinguishing the roadway from the tracts of blackened heather which bordered it for several miles. The moon's disc struggled dimly through the low-lying murk, and then disappeared.

Five minutes later Noel noticed with apprehension that the roadway, which had become almost lost to sight in the gathering darkness, was no longer under their feet. The horses were quite evidently stepping on short turf.

"We have strayed from the track, I am afraid," he said. "I will get down and look about. This thickness is a pity. We ought to have had the light of the dawn before now."

He had scarcely spoken, when his horse stepped into some hole, and fell violently on his knees, flinging Noel to the ground head foremost. Muriel gave a little cry, leaned forward, and saw Noel lying doubled up, and apparently unconscious. She dismounted and knelt beside him. He was insensible, cold, breathing feebly, and nearly pulseless. Muriel had had some considerable experience of accidents in the hunting-field, and recognised that this was concussion of the brain. Noel might die at any moment, and was probably dying now.

She managed, with difficulty, to get him into a more comfortable position, and sat down with his head raised upon her knee. She realised, with a spasm of the heart, that this disaster was fatal. It was still very dark, and the road was nowhere to be seen. The nearest habitation was probably miles away, and they had not met a living being since leaving Rochester. It was equally impossible to leave Noel, to remove him from the spot, or to seek assistance. Nothing could be done.

Muriel took out her watch. It was too dark to see the time, but she opened the case and felt for the dial with the tips of her fingers. It was seven o'clock. Ambrose had one hour to live. Her hands fell, and she sat motionless, gazing before her with the calm of an infinite despair.

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The horses, released from their burdens, began to seek the scanty herbage, and slowly moved to and fro, with their noses to the ground, dragging their bridles as they went. Soon they strayed further, and were lost in the gloom. The sound of their hoofs as they crushed the heather-stems came more and more faintly, and then ceased altogether.

Now and again a heavy fluttering announced the passing of a horned owl or some other disturbed night-bird. Then, after a pause, came the cry of a peewit, alarmed by the browsing horses. Far away across the moorland there was heard at rare intervals the quack of wild ducks from some pond or bog in a hollow of the uplands. Once a curlew, wandering inland from the sea, startled Muriel for an instant by its shrill scream as it flew past overhead. Then all was silent again.

An hour went by. The darkness had given way to a grey twilight, and the face of the moor could be dimly seen for a few yards around. Some rabbits stole from their burrows close at hand, and began to nibble in fearless disregard of the two motionless forms. Noel had not moved since his fall, and lay where he had been placed, in scarcely animate torpor. Muriel sat unconscious of her surroundings, her face rigid and pale, and her wide-open eyes, with dilated pupils, fixed immovably on the slowly extending horizon.

All at once a passing breath of air, so slight as scarcely to lift the curls that rested on her shoulder, swept gently over the moorland from the south-west. Borne upon it came something that was more a tremor than a sound, infinitely faint and distant, but solemn and prolonged. After an interval of perfect stillness, the same vibration again trembled for a moment upon the air, and then died away into silence.

It was the tolling of a bell.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

MAIDSTONE EN FÊTE

ABOUT nine o'clock that morning the immense concourse of people which had thronged the streets of Maidstone since dawn, and made the neighbourhood of the gaol itself quite impassable for more than an hour, began to disperse. The morning had been so gloomy and the air so thick that not a

third of the crowd had been able to get a satisfactory view of the execution of Ambrose Gwynett. The disappointed remainder waited about in the hope that the day would clear sufficiently for them to catch a glimpse of the suspended body before the regulation sixty minutes expired and it was taken down. When this was at last done, and the hangman and the gaolers had disappeared with their burden inside the prison, the mass of spectators broke up and scattered in all directions to enjoy the rest of the holiday in the various ways which were congenial to them. The merry-go-rounds and swings were started, bands of music began to play, the booths of the conjurers and showmen filled up, and the mountebanks unrolled their carpets and beat their drums. The landlords of the ginshops stood at their doors and bawled incessantly the usual announcement of the period, that customers could get drunk for a penny, and dead drunk for twopence, and that straw to lie on would be furnished gratis. To take advantage of these privileges the good folks poured into the various taverns until they were so full that benches had to be placed outside to accommodate the overflow.

One group of persons thus provided for consisted of captain Kermode and his four half-brothers, who had come over from Deal in a post-chaise. They were joined by the parish clerk of the town and two or three local tradesmen, who were comparing notes on the events of the morning.

"For my part," observed the clerk, "I consider the whole affair very disappointing, and not what one had a right to expect. Don't you think so, sir?" he asked of captain Kermode.

"As how?" inquired Kermode, sipping his gin with a meditative air.

"Why, to have a gentleman hung, and no dying speech and confession—a real gentleman, mind you, and a man of property in the county. It's against all rules to have no dying speech, let alone a confession. A gentleman ought to have known better."

"We were a bit too far off to hear," said the captain.

"I was in an excellent place, gentlemen," explained the clerk patronisingly, "and I assure you he took no more notice of us than if we had not been there."

"Not a bit more," assented one of the listeners.

"This was a special occasion, too," proceeded the clerk.

"Not a two-penny half-penny sheep-stealing or coining affair, or even a highway robbery, but a real good straightforward

murder, and caught in the act. And to be hung in chains, too."

The speaker added this detail of the programme as if suggesting a further reason why the condemned man owed extra consideration to the persons who were good enough to come and see his sentence carried out.

"Where's that to be?" asked the captain.

"At some cross-roads on a common outside Deal, as I understand," replied the clerk. "They'll start with the body as soon as the smith gets the chains and bars riveted. It's a good day's journey to Deal from here, you see."

At this moment the voice of a pedlar became audible up the street, shouting the merits and prices of his wares, part of which consisted of ballads, chapbooks, and lives of celebrated criminals. Many of the crowd could be seen investing an odd penny or two in these specimens of the popular literature of the period. As he came nearer he could be heard calling, "Full account of the murder! Dying speech of the murderer! One penny!"

"D'ye hear that, master clerk?" asked a bystander.

"Buy a dying speech!" went on the pedlar. "Dying speech of Ambrose Gwynett! Only a penny! Just printed, fresh from the printer's office."

"Why! I never heard a word!" ejaculated the clerk.

"He must have said summat to the chaplain. Here, pedlar! give us a dying speech!"

The pedlar handed him a rough folded leaflet in return for his penny, and went slowly on. The clerk took the paper, which was a lurid account of the supposed crime, and turned it over twice without finding any reference to the execution.

"Hi!" he shouted after the pedlar, "where's the speech? There's nowt here."

"Well, he said nowt," bawled the pedlar in reply.

This was an example of wit susceptible of acute appreciation by the bucolic mind, and it was accordingly received with a guffaw from everybody except the clerk, who thrust the paper into his pocket and walked off very much disgusted. His friends followed him, and left the Kermodes alone on the bench. Matt turned towards the captain.

"I reckon we'd better get under way, brother Kit," he remarked tentatively, in a somewhat subdued tone.

The captain eyed him severely.

"I daresay you're right, brother Matt," he rejoined. "I daresay madam Matthew Kermode will have something to say

if you're away from her apron-string too long. And I daresay what she says will be infernally unpleasant, and plenty of it. That makes it agreeable to come out on a little holiday with you, brother Matt—monstrous agreeable—sink me if it doesn't!"

Matt thrust his hands into his breeches' pockets with a depressed air. His three brothers looked at him with gloomy disapproval, and nodded their sympathy with the captain's reproaches.

"Any fool could have seen how the land lay in that quarter," went on the captain, evidently nursing a grievance. "And why you took upon yourself to sign articles behind our backs, instead of coming to us to cut you loose, beats me—clean beats me, it does."

The unhappy Matt was driven by the severity of these criticisms to an attempt to defend himself.

"You see, brother Kit," he remarked deprecatingly, "she has a wonderful persuading sort of way with her. And she made out a lot about being so put about for want of a man to protect her——"

"Listen to that!" muttered the captain, waving his arms with a gesture of measureless contempt.

"And the berth seemed very comfortable, you'll admit," continued the culprit.

"Very comfortable for a customer, and all the more comfortable if he's a deaf customer," said the captain. "If you'd stopped at that, one needn't have said a word. But to go and get spliced, instead of calling for your liquor over the counter——"

At this stage words failed the speaker, and he got up to mingle with the crowd in the thoroughfare. His half-brothers followed him in sympathetic silence, with the much-enduring Matt bringing up the rear.

A gentleman, who had mounted his horse in the tavern-yard, was coming out of it as the brothers reached the centre of the street. He rode at a walking pace, and seemed to be awaiting some arrival from the direction of the gaol. His overcoat collar was turned up to his ears, and he wore his hat as low over his eyes as it could well be carried. This was the abbé Gaultier, who had completed his journey to Maidstone without encountering any of Coverdale's party. He had mingled with the crowd round the gallows until the drop fell, and had spent the intervening time, for reasons of his own, in hard drinking.

One or two of the passers-by noticed him, and nudged each other. The clerk was one of these, and he pointed out Gaultier to Kermode with a jerk of his thumb.

"That's the man he pointed at," said the clerk in the captain's ear. "I was standing close to him."

"I saw nothing," replied the captain.

"Didn't you? Why, when the prisoner came on to the gallows—or was carried, for he seemed more dead than alive, mark you—he took a sort of careless look round, and something seemed to catch his eye just behind me. Then he straightened himself up, and flung out his arm with his finger pointing—this sort of way, d'you see?"—and the clerk suited the action to the word—"his other hand stretched out to the sky, and his eye fixed in a way that made my blood run cold, I assure you."

"You don't say so?" said the captain, turning the quid in his cheek.

"Ay, it was," went on the clerk. "I turned round to see who he was pointing at, and that gentleman on the horse was just at my elbow. He had had a sort of grin on his face at first. Then he turned as yellow as putty, and half shut his eyes as if he was going to be sick. I looked back again at the gallows, and I saw the hangman holding up the other as if he was falling. When the drop fell the man alongside me had gone; but that's him again on the horse."

The captain pointed towards the gaol.

"Something's going on there," he said.

"Bringing the body out, very likely," replied the clerk. "Yes—there's the door opening."

There was a sudden movement of the crowd from all directions towards the gaol. The taverns and shops emptied, heads were put out of windows, and the various places of amusement were deserted in a trice. The cry had been raised that the body was coming, and the street became in a couple of minutes almost impassable.

The sheriff and four turnkeys emerged from the side door of the gaol-yard. The gaolers pushed before them a sort of bier, formed by a low four-wheeled truck with handles. On this lay something covered with a thick black cloth, and secured by certain iron bars and rings, which clanked as the vehicle jolted over the rough pavement. A couple of the town watchmen, with their double capes and staffs, walked before the representatives of justice, endeavouring to make an opening through the throng for the bier to pass.

The clerk, together with Kermode and the brothers, were soon hemmed in by the crowd, and Gaultier was obliged by the restiveness of his horse to dismount and wait till the way was clear again. Just as he did so, a horsewoman, coming from the direction of Rochester, rode up the street, and found herself compelled to draw rein in front of the swaying mass of spectators. It was Muriel Dorrington. The abbé caught sight of her, and looked hastily round to see if he could retire unnoticed. But the way was completely blocked at the moment and he could do nothing but screen himself behind his horse and pull his hat still lower over his eyes.

The clerk nudged Kermode, and whispered confidentially, "That's a pretty lass, eh?"

The captain looked round at Muriel, who was close to him, and grunted in reply,

"Pretty isn't the word. But she looks in a bad way—ready to drop, it seems to me."

Muriel's face was of a marble pallor, her lips were parted, and her darkly ringed eyes roamed over the crowd with an air of restless bewilderment. The concourse thickened, and the horse began to back nervously amongst the bystanders.

"You had better get down, mistress," said the clerk, "unless you can keep out of the road for a few minutes."

Muriel looked earnestly up the street towards the gaol.

"Is that the prison?" she asked, pointing with her whip.

"Yes, mistress," replied the clerk.

"I must go there."

"You will be able to manage it before long, mistress—but just now, you see, the road is fairly blocked."

"I must go there," repeated Muriel, her forehead furrowing with a sort of puzzled distress.

"The poor lass seems a little daft," remarked the clerk in an aside to Kermode. "May I ask your business, mistress?" he inquired of Muriel, patting her horse's neck to keep it quiet.

Muriel looked at him vaguely for a moment, and then fixed her gaze on the gaol.

"I must see Ambrose," she said discontentedly. "I wish these people would let me pass."

"Ambrose, mistress? what Ambrose?"

"Ambrose Gwynett, sir. Will you kindly ask these people to let me pass?"

Muriel glanced fretfully over the gathering throng, which

had been doubled within the last minute by various persons running round through the side streets and entering the main road a little ahead. The clerk looked aghast.

"Good Lord, ma'am!" he ejaculated, "you're the day after the fair—Ambrose Gwynett is——"

Kermode clapped his hand brusquely over the clerk's mouth.

"Hold your jaw, mate," he growled under his breath. Then he turned to Muriel, and asked commiseratingly,

"Do you happen to know Ambrose Gwynett, mistress?"

"He is my betrothed," replied Muriel. "I want to see him. I must see him."

"Lord! Lord!" muttered the captain, turning a lugubrious face towards his half-brothers. "This is a bad job—a terrible bad job. Let's get her out of the road, boys. She mustn't see anything of that trolley yonder, and it will be here in a couple of minutes."

The brothers grunted an assent, and the clerk nodded his head sympathetically.

"Oblige us, mistress," he said, taking the horse by the bridle, "by coming a little way out of the crowd. We're afraid of some accident, if you keep here, and in the saddle."

Muriel allowed the horse to be led, as quickly as the throng would permit, towards the stable-yard. Just then the pedlar, who had got into the tavern from the rear, elbowed his way out of the front door with a fresh sheaf of leaflets in his hands and a repetition of his former cry,

"Here you are! Here you are! Full account of the horrible murder at Deal! Execution of the murderer at eight o'clock this morning! Only a penny! Hi! mistress," he bawled to Muriel, who was at the moment close to him, "buy a dying speech? Only a penny! Dying speech of——"

Here his utterance died away in a gurgle as Kermode's fingers shot out and closed in a strangling grip round his throat.

"Stow your gab, you blethering idiot!" hissed the captain, as he shook the pedlar till his teeth rattled in his head, and then flung him from him against the wall of the tavern.

"Idiot yourself!" growled the pedlar sullenly, pulling his disordered neckcloth and looking round to see if he was likely to get any backers. "Is a man not to get an honest living?"

The sheriff's procession was now abreast of them. Muriel caught sight of it, and asked suddenly,

"What is that?"

A Kent Squire

A bystander, on the opposite side of the horse to where Kermode stood, turned round and replied with alacrity,

"That's the body, mistress—going to be hung in chains, you see—judge's sentence."

The pedlar saw his opportunity to get beyond Kermode's reach, and dodged round the horse, shouting at the top of his voice,

"This is the body of Ambrose Gwynett, ladies and gentlemen, hung this morning for robbery and murder! Buy a full account! Buy a dying speech! One penny—only a penny!"

Kermode devoted the pedlar to the infernal regions, and looked anxiously at Muriel, who seemed to have caught nothing but the name of her lover.

"Ambrose!" she asked quickly. "Is Ambrose there? I must see him," and she made a movement to urge her horse forward.

The captain hurriedly turned the horse towards the stable-yard, in the hope that Muriel's attention would thereby be distracted.

"This way, mistress—this way," he said.

In a moment she had slipped to the ground and handed the reins to a gipsy boy who stood close by.

"Is Ambrose here?" she asked of the bystanders in front. "Someone said he was here."

The interest of the crowd was instantly diverted from the bier to the remarkable beauty of the speaker. A dozen people standing directly in the way of the sheriff's party turned towards Muriel, and thereby brought the little procession to a sudden halt.

"D'ye mean Ambrose Gwynett, mistress?" asked the pedlar, officiously elbowing his way forward.

"Yes. Where is he?"

"Why, here, mistress—of course."

The pedlar waved his arm in the direction of the bier. Muriel looked perplexed, but went forward as the bystanders opened a way for her almost involuntarily. The sheriff stopped his remonstrances to the crowd which was blocking his advance, and stared open-mouthed at Muriel as she came towards him. The whisper was rapidly passed about that this was the murderer's sweetheart, and all within reach stood on their toes and craned their necks to see so interesting a personage.

"What can I do for you, mistress?" asked the sheriff, with a politeness born of mingled surprise and admiration.

"It is Ambrose, sir," replied Muriel, her eyes wandering round. "I want to see him."

"Certainly, mistress, if you've a fancy that way," replied the sheriff in an obliging tone.

He went to the front of the bier, raised the black cloth that lay over the body, and uncovered the head and shoulders of Ambrose Gwynett. A sudden silence followed, and a thrill ran through the bystanders at the sight of the marble features, splendid in their still repose, and wearing an expression of infinite calm. Not a whisper was heard as Muriel, with a little start, bent forward and seemed to call softly to her lover. The sheriff looked on rather puzzled, until he caught sight of Kermode winking at him and tapping his forehead. He took a step forward, as Muriel turned to him and said under her breath,

"He is asleep. Why is he asleep?"

The sheriff was rather disconcerted by this question, and scratched his head in the search for inspiration. The crowd looked at one another, and some women began to cry. The captain's attention was so fixed upon Muriel that the gipsy boy took the opportunity of leading her horse in an unobtrusive manner round the corner, after which they were no more seen. Finally the sheriff found it convenient to ignore the query put to him, and remarked,

"Now you've seen him, mistress, I think we must be getting on. By your leave——" and he made a movement to replace the cloth.

"Where are you carrying him?" asked Muriel, putting her hand on the cloth.

"Oh, just a bit down the road—we have a waggon at the town-bounds. And if you're quite ready, mistress——"

Muriel stayed him with a wave of her hand, and looked earnestly at her lover's face. Then she leaned over and kissed it.

Matt Kermode, who was standing close by, turned his back and blubbered loudly, and several of the crowd, men as well as women, followed his example. The sheriff gently replaced the cloth, and made a sign to his men. They began to push the bier forward, and Muriel, with a more contented but still puzzled expression upon her face, walked beside it. The crowd kept the party company, and the street was gradually left nearly empty.

One of the few spectators of the scene who remained behind was Gaultier. The abbé, livid and trembling all

over, ordered his horse to be put up again, and re-entered the tavern parlour. He was just ripening for one of his occasional bouts of furious drinking, and the events of the morning brought matters to a climax. He flung his hat down, fell into a seat, and ordered a bottle of brandy.

In the street captain Kermode was wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

"Thank the Lord! that's over," he said fervently. "It's spoiled my appetite for the next week, sink me if it hasn't. I've seen many a poor devil with his toes turned up, but hang me if anything ever cut me up like this. What a wench, boys! what a wench!"

Matt blew his nose, wiped his red eyes, and remarked,

"The poor lass must have had her wits turned by the news. It's a mortal pity."

The captain seized upon this opportunity of turning the conversation into a less lugubrious channel.

"There's one good job, Matt," said he. "*Your* widow wouldn't make anybody blubber with her goings on, if you were to be hung twice over. Let's all have a drink, and make sail. It will be dark before we get to port."

The family party made their way to the bar parlour, where Gaultier was sitting by the window with his bottle and glass before him. The abbé, a good deal disturbed by the incident on the scaffold, and still more shaken by the circumstances attending Muriel's appearance on the scene, had taken little or no notice of Kermode and the brothers. But as they entered, it recurred to his memory that these were the persons who had left the door of the 'Crown and Anchor' just as he arrived at it on New Year's Eve. He had taken care to beat a retreat from Deal the morning after Gwynett's arrest, without making himself known, and had also refrained from presenting himself as a witness at the trial—both these steps being a result of the belief that he had done enough to render Gwynett's conviction a foregone conclusion independently of his own testimony. This view had of course proved correct.

Every one of the jurymen had gone into the box primed with the widely circulated report of the abbé's original story, although it was not in the least in evidence; and had privately quite made up his mind on the strength of that ingenious narrative alone.

Gaultier's chief anxiety in all this had been to avoid the slightest overt connection with the fate of his rival, as being

more than likely to add to Muriel's prejudice against him, even if she were led by force of appearances to be convinced of Gwynett's guilt. He was therefore not at all desirous of being recognised by the Kermodes as a visitor to the 'Crown and Anchor' on the night of the supposed murder, and consequently kept his back to the party as they gave their order and sat emptying their glasses.

By and-by their chaise was brought round, and they took their departure. The abbé, more at his ease, proceeded with his bottle, and kept a careless eye on what was passing outside. About an hour later, after having entered upon another bottle, he noticed the clerk coming down the street from the gaol, walking alongside a chaise-and-pair in which sat an elderly gentleman who looked completely broken down by grief or illness. The clerk seemed to be giving him an account of the events of the morning, and they parted company just opposite the tavern. The landlord was at the door, and touched his hat. The gentleman nodded, signed to the postilion to drive on in the direction of Deal, and the chaise disappeared.

"Who was that in the chaise, host?" asked the abbé, as the landlord passed through the parlour a minute afterwards.

"Lawyer Wrottesley of Canterbury, sir," replied the host. "He is agent for the Thornhaugh estate—the property belonging to the man who was hung this morning. Everybody has been wondering why he was not at the trial."

This information did not particularly interest the abbé. He merely nodded in reply, and the landlord, not finding himself encouraged to gossip, retired to the society of his other customers in the bar.

Meanwhile the sheriff and his party had reached the outskirts of the town. They stopped at the workshop of the carpenter who had erected the gallows, and who had in readiness a light waggon carrying a gibbet. From this, Gwynett's body—secured in its iron frame—was to be suspended, after the custom of the age, as a warning to similar evil-doers.

The sheriff's men transferred their burden to the cart and made ready to start. Muriel seemed at first surprised and then terrified at their arrangements to separate her from her lover, and implored them to allow her to accompany them in the waggon. Their first demurs to this proposal were overcome by the offer of a guinea, and the vehicle was driven off towards Deal. The spectators of the morning, who had

accompanied the bier so far, returned at their leisure to Maidstone.

* * * * *

At about seven o'clock the same night, on a dreary waste of common near some cross-roads to the west of the outskirts of Deal, a gibbet rose darkly against the first faint light of the moon, glimmering through thick mists. From its outstretched arm hung a curious framing of rings and horizontal bars, in which was fixed the motionless form of Ambrose Gwynett, the head bent forwards and the face hidden by the long hair which had been blown over it by a passing breeze. On the ground beneath, covered with a black cloth, lay Muriel Dorrington. Her arms clasped the foot of the gibbet, and she seemed asleep, unconscious, or dead. The sky was heavy with low-lying clouds, and gusts of wind swept at intervals over the inky solitude. Then the gibbet creaked, and its burden swung slowly to and fro till the failing of the wind brought it to rest again.

CHAPTER XXXIX

AT THE CROSS-ROADS

CAPTAIN KERMODE and the four brothers arrived at the 'Crown and Anchor' a little before sunset. They had dined at Canterbury, lest a worse thing should befall them, and the captain—mollified by his meal and a jorum of excellent Schiedam—had volunteered to escort the truant Matt to the tavern, instead of betaking himself with the three juniors to the *Royal Mary*.

But it fortunately happened that madam Matthew Kermode was in a very amiable mood when the party presented themselves on their return, and there appeared to be no particular need for the sheltering ægis of the valiant captain. The latter had his own explanation of this fortunate circumstance, and he imparted it in an early aside to Matt.

"Your wife has had some old sweetheart spooning with her all day, brother Matt," said he pleasantly.

"D'ye think so, brother Kit?" asked Matt with earnestness.

"I do, lad," replied the captain.

"Let's find him, and stand treat," suggested Matt, in a burst of gratitude.

"Don't trouble about that, brother Matt. If he's kept sober up to now, he must be as big a fool as they make 'em. Come into the bar—we shall have no peace till we've spun our yarn and got done with it."

It is needless to state that the whole establishment of the 'Crown and Anchor,' together with a numerous contingent of outsiders who crowded the tap-room, were all agog to hear the details of the execution, and a certain amount of sympathy was elicited by the brothers' story of the events of the morning.

Since the trial, public opinion in Deal had rather receded from the first enthusiastic conviction of Gwynett's guilt.

After it had been found that the supposed assassin was a well-to-do landowner of the county, instead of an unknown passer-by, the theory that a flagrantly incautious crime had been committed for the sake of a few guineas appeared a little improbable. The accused's own version of his possession of the purse began, therefore, to be considered by the village gossips quite as likely an explanation as any other. Had Gwynett been assisted by counsel at his trial, the obvious absence both of motive and of the *corpus delicti*—the body of his supposed victim—might have been made to turn the scale in his favour. But this did not happen to be the case. When committed for trial, which was a proceeding despatched in a few minutes by the local justice of the peace, Gwynett was not sufficiently recovered from his serious injuries to reply to questions or even understand them. On his removal to Maidstone gaol he had given a few particulars about himself, and had requested that Mr. Wrottesley should be sent for to advise him about his defence.

But the Canterbury lawyer had never made any appearance. Gwynett forthwith caught gaol fever—a most common result of the insanitary condition of the prisons of the period—and was either prostrated, semi-unconscious, or delirious during his imprisonment and trial. The crown lawyers, therefore, had matters very much their own way. The judge of the circuit and the high sheriff of the county were both venomous Whigs. They had agreed over their twelfth bottle the night before that a pestilent foreigneering Jacobite like Gwynett was probably a Jesuit spy of the chevalier's, and had better be deprived of any chance of helping the traitorous Tory ministry in their machinations against the Protestant succession. The jury-box had been packed with Whig farmers, who thought the opportunity of hanging an absentee landlord was too good to be lost; and they promptly responded to the appeal of

the judge that they would not, by dawdling over their verdict of guilty, keep him from his dinner. The affair had thus been disposed of with the least possible waste of time and trouble to all concerned, and with quite as near an approximation to justice as was customary at the period.

It may as well be mentioned in this place that captain Kermodé had no idea that the supposed murderer and the owner of the *Fleur de Lys* were one and the same person. No name had been mentioned to him by Marlborough in their interview at Eekeren, and as neither he nor his half-brothers could read a single word, the ship's papers furnished at Ostend conveyed to them no information whatever. Had they, moreover, felt any curiosity concerning those documents—which did not happen to be the case—it is possible they had excellent reasons for not seeking outside assistance in deciphering them.

After the demand for news in the bar of the 'Crown and Anchor' had been adequately met by the newcomers, an adjournment was made by some of the regular customers to the now famous parlour. Here the captain and his half-brothers held a sort of reception with much dignity, and with a readiness to drink at other people's invitation which earned golden opinions from the landlady.

The conversation turned upon the addition to the sentence upon the condemned man which comprised the hanging in chains from a gibbet erected near the scene of the crime. This feature was at the time a frequent one in cases of offences against property, which then, even more than now, were punished with considerably greater severity than crimes of violence. The body of the executed criminal, instead of being interred, was suspended in a framework of rings, bars, and chains from the gibbet, and left there till time and the elements brought about its gradual decay and disappearance.

Amongst the company in the parlour were two respectable strangers who had rather the air of being bagmen or travelling mercers, and who listened to the details of Gwynett's execution and the removal of the body to the common with a good deal of interest. One of them asked several questions about the size and strength of the irons, to which the Kermodes were not in a position to reply.

"But they'll last out the poor fellow that's in 'em," remarked the captain. "For my part I don't see why children and folks passing by are to be faced with that kind of show for a dozen years or more. When a man's been scragged, there's

an end of it for him, and there ought to be an end of it for other people, say I."

"I've known a man hanging on Bagshot Heath for nearly twenty years," commented one of the bagmen.

"That's a goodish time," said the captain. "You're from those parts, I reckon?"

The bagman, after receiving a nudge from his companion, replied,

"No. I come from Portsmouth, like my friend here."

The captain nodded and filled his pipe.

"That's a lie," he said to himself. "Cockneys to the backbone, both of 'em."

"This fellow may be swinging there just as long, for all we know," remarked the bagman, lifting his glass to his lip.

The captain happened to have his tumbler of gin in the air at the same moment, and looking past his thumb his half-closed eye caught an unmistakable wink passing between the two strangers. The circumstance interested him a good deal.

"What the blazes does the fellow mean by winking when he's talking to me?" he asked himself with justifiable indignation. "Wonder if they're coastguard slops smelling after the *Royal Mary*?"

This conjecture did not disturb the captain's serenity of mind, as he knew that at this particular time—whatever might be the case later on—the *Royal Mary*, like Cæsar's wife, was above suspicion. The new lugger, which he and the brothers had just bought and were about to use in running a cargo of claret from the Somme to Sandwich, was also quite free from anything contraband, and swung at its anchor as virtuously as the schooner. Nevertheless the captain's habitual caution led him to entertain a certain amount of curiosity about anything that did not entirely satisfy him, and he thought a little further information about the strangers might not come amiss.

"I daresay you're right," he nodded assentingly to the bagman. "Did you happen to come that way to-day?"

"No," replied the stranger, apparently rather glad of the opening to put a question. "Whereabouts is the place?"

One of the company intimated that it was about a couple of miles out on the road to Tilmanstone, at an angle formed by a cross-road.

"A God-forsaken sort of hole," added the speaker. "There were some cottages there in old times, but they're level with the ground now. The folks all died in the great plague, and

no one lived there afterwards. The place has got a baddish name—they say boggarts * walk there."

"I wouldn't go nigh a hole like that at night for a hundred pounds," said the bagman.

The captain intercepted another wink, and decided in his own mind that the speaker was lying again.

"The fellow's trying to gammon us," he reflected. "Why, I should like to know? Unless it comes natural to him, perhaps, being a cockney."

It was now about half-past nine o'clock, and the usual practice of the tavern was to close about ten. The two bagmen seemed inclined to remain as long as they could, and the captain thought he might as well find out where they were going to spend the night.

"It's queer weather," he remarked, *à propos* of nothing. "The wind has gone down, and it seems getting muggy again."

"That's so," said the bagman.

"You gentlemen won't have much moon, if so be that you're travelling," hazarded the captain sleepily.

"Not we," said the bagman promptly. "We've got a lodging in the town. Going on to Sandwich to-morrow morning."

"Ay, ay," nodded the captain with a yawn.

A couple of minutes afterwards he lounged out of the parlour, leaving his hat ostentatiously on the table, and went into the stable-yard. He looked about and noticed a small cart, between the shafts of which a pony was being coaxed by the ostler.

"Bill," said the captain, "did you happen to notice a couple of bagmen-looking fellows come in an hour ago—both of 'em in the parlour now?"

The ostler touched his forelock to the landlady's brother-in-law, and nodded.

"Ay, captain," he replied, "this is their cart. I've just been giving the pony a feed—they want him again as soon as bar closes."

"They do, do they?" said the captain.

"Ay—said they'd got a goodish spell of a journey before 'em to-night."

"Just so," replied the captain meditatively.

He took the ostler's lantern, and looked into the cart. In the bottom was a large piece of tarpaulin, which covered a

* Ghosts.

sack. He put his hand on a bulging protuberance which distended the end of the sack, and felt several hard objects. These he drew out, and found to be a dark lantern and a set of tools, the latter comprising a file, hammers, cold chisel, and saw. He put these articles back, covered up the sack, and cogitated while the ostler went into the stables.

"Cockneys, from Portsmouth," he soliloquised. "Got to make a long journey in a pony-cart to their lodging in the town. Wouldn't go near a poor harmless devil on a gibbet for a hundred pounds. A dark lantern for a moonlight night. A set of blacksmith's tools, and regular white hands like a parson's—I saw 'em."

The captain looked again at the cart and its contents, and whistled softly. Then he suddenly slapped his thigh as if the solution of the problem had dawned upon him.

"That's it!" he ejaculated under his breath—"that's it! Snatchers, by the Lord!"

This was the term used at the period to denote the individuals whose avocation lay in supplying subjects for dissection to the medical men and students at the great hospitals in London and elsewhere, and who were popularly credited with an entire absence of inconvenient scruples as to the means they took to obtain their stock-in-trade.

"I've a mind to stop that little game," went on the captain, *sotto voce*. "It's bad enough for a poor devil not to have decent burial, without being sliced up and pickled by a crew of d——d sawbones. As fine a figger of a man as ever I clapped eyes on, too."

He went after the ostler, and addressed him in a low voice.

"Bill," he said, "d'ye know the place where that gibbet has been stuck up?"

"Course," replied Bill. "I was there seeing 'em at it."

"How far is it by the road?"

"Two mile; and as bad a bit as you like."

"Is there any shorter cut for a man on his legs?"

"Oh, ay; you can save ten minutes easy by crossing the common."

The captain inquired particulars, and was furnished with elaborate directions by the ostler. Promising the latter a half-pint to hold his tongue, he crossed the yard to the tavern, and entered the passage leading from the parlour to the kitchen. Here he encountered the chambermaid, a strapping west-country wench nearly six feet high.

"Whisht, Peggy!" he whispered mysteriously.

"What is it, captain?" asked the girl from close to the ceiling.

"Just pass your ear this way, Peggy, or else wait till I can get a few steps upstairs. I want a word with you."

The girl stooped somewhat after the manner of a giraffe feeding, and brought her ear alongside the captain's mouth. A whispered colloquy ensued, which ended in the chambermaid disappearing upstairs, while the captain waited in the passage. A minute or two afterwards the girl came down with a good-sized bundle, tied up in a dark shawl. The captain took the bundle, laid it for a moment under a table in the passage, and went back to the parlour.

The two supposed bagmen were still sitting before the fire, and evidently intended to stay until the tavern was closed for the night. The captain took up his hat and remarked to his half-brothers that they'd have the tide against them if they did not look sharp. Matt was about to point out that the ebb would run for an hour yet, but the captain silenced him by a furtive kick under the table. The other three brothers finished their liquor, put on their sou'-westers, and after nodding a good night to the other guests, followed their kinsman obediently out of the parlour.

The rest of the company remained a few minutes later, as if loth to leave the genial warmth of the two wood fires. But the landlady presently came in to announce the hour of closing, and the room gradually emptied.

The two bagmen were the last to leave, and they took a parting nip in the bar before sallying out into the yard. Then they put on their greatcoats, wrapped their necks up in thick mufflers, and got into their cart with many maledictions on the necessity for leaving such comfortable quarters. The vehicle drove off down the dark street, and the tavern people went to bed.

Twenty minutes later, the cart stopped at the cross-roads on the common. The night air had become mild and still, and the moonlight came in faint and fitful gleams through a thin mist which had floated in from the sea. The two men got down, took out their tools, and lit the lantern. Then they hitched the pony to a bush by the wayside, and began to stumble through the gorse and heather to the little rising ground, about a hundred and fifty yards off, on which stood the gibbet.

When they had gone about half the distance one of them,

looking up, noticed something which brought him to a sudden halt.

"Matey," he said, clutching his companion's arm, and pointing towards the gibbet, "what's that?"

The other stopped and looked in the direction indicated. In the foggy gloom something round and white, about five feet high, could be dimly seen under the pendent form of the executed man.

"Blowed if I know," he replied, in a puzzled tone. "It's going now—look!"

At this moment the white object began to diminish gradually in size, and seemed to remain suspended in air a few feet from the ground.

"That's queer," observed the first speaker. "Good Lord! see there!" he went on, in an alarmed tone, pointing to his left.

A little way off across the common, but nearer than the gibbet, another white form could be seen slowly rising from the dark moor. This extended upwards till it seemed about seven feet high, and began to move forwards.

"It's coming this way, hang me if it isn't," cried the second snatcher, his teeth beginning to chatter. "And that other's there again—look!"

The globular form by the gibbet re-appeared, and something like a pair of arms emerged from it, and waved slowly about. At the same moment a third shape became visible on the right, much nearer, and blocking the way of retreat to the pony-cart.

"I'm d——d if the place isn't alive with 'em," said the first man, in trembling tones, as he dropped the sack and the tools.

"Boggarts, Jack!" whispered the other, grasping his companion to prevent his legs giving way under him—"boggarts, as I'm a living sinner!"

While he was speaking, a fourth form came out of the darkness almost in their faces, and shot up to a height of about nine feet, while a low, smothered wail became audible. This was echoed by a blood-curdling squeal from the other spectres, which began to advance upon the two horrified spectators. The chains on the gibbet clanked, and the suspended body careered wildly to and fro in the still air.

This was the last straw. The paralysed snatchers suddenly recovered the use of their limbs and lungs, and fled with yells of terror across the common to the road, along which they tore at break-neck speed until they had left the cross-roads a

couple of miles behind in the darkness. The pony, meanwhile, stood peacefully in the shafts of the trap, nibbling at the turf by the wayside.

The three tall spectres went back to the gibbet, where captain Kermode was engaged in rolling up a sheet.

"How did you manage that trick, brother Kit?" asked Luke, as the brothers divested themselves of their white coverings.

"I just pulled the shawl over me from the ground up to my neck," explained the captain. "That walking-stick of yours came in uncommonly well, Luke. The way the sheet shot up was enough to scare our *Royal Mary's* figgerhead."

The captain took the hook of his own stick out of the right boot of the swinging body, and prepared to depart.

"What became of the pony-trap?" he asked. "Did they go off with it?"

"Not they," replied Luke. "It's in the road there."

"All the better," said the captain. "Finding's keeping. Fetch five pounds, I suppose. It'll pay our expenses to Maidstone."

He looked up at the gibbet, and took off his hat.

"Good night, skipper," he observed seriously. "We've done you a friendly turn, although you don't know it. Here's better luck to you, wherever you are. Come along, lads."

CHAPTER XL

THE ABBÉ VISITS WRAY COTTAGE

THE abbé Gaultier remained in the parlour of the tavern at Maidstone all day, drinking steadily. The landlord was anxious to show every respect to so estimable a customer, and came in from time to time to pay him the compliment of keeping him company. The abbé was at first somewhat slow to express any appreciation of this courtesy. But towards evening he seemed to become rather tired of his own society, and took the opportunity of ordering a fresh bottle of brandy to invite his host's company in attacking it.

The landlord was nothing loth. At the abbé's request he lit a candle, placed it on the table, and went out to fetch a glass for himself. During his absence Gaultier moved his arm-chair from the table to the fireplace, lit a fresh pipe with

a cinder, and took his seat again. Another arm-chair was drawn up to the farther end of the table. Something in the direction of this chair seemed to attract Gaultier's attention as he was pouring out a fresh glass, and the landlord, coming in, found him staring very intently at it. Then he shrugged his shoulders, emptied his glass, and motioned to the landlord to take a seat by the fire.

The host brought forward one of the chairs standing against the wall, and placed a tall stool between himself and the abbé, on which to rest the bottle of brandy, a jug he had brought with him, and their glasses. He helped himself to a mixture of spirit and water, and held out his glass towards the abbé.

"Sir, I have the honour to drink your very good health," he said ceremoniously.

The abbé touched glasses, and looked past the landlord towards the end of the table. His right hand fell slowly to his knee, and he pointed with the other to the arm-chair.

"Whom have you there?" he asked, in a low tone.

The host turned round, and then back again.

"Where, sir?" he asked, looking rather surprised.

The abbé's fixed gaze relaxed. He rubbed his eyes, and turned to the fire again.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I thought someone was sitting there. It was some flickering from the fire, no doubt."

The landlord remarked that it was curious what effects came from lights and shadows, and he poked the log on the hearth vigorously to make a blaze. The two companions drank and conversed for some little time. Presently the host noticed Gaultier staring at the arm-chair, much as he had done before.

"That fellow's there again," said the abbé, pointing with his pipe. "Wake him up, landlord."

The host turned round, and saw nothing.

"Who do you mean, sir?" he asked. "There's no one in the bar just now."

Gaultier took his eyes off the arm-chair, and looked at the landlord with rather a puzzled air.

"I could have sworn, for the moment, there was someone in that chair leaning over the table," he said. "It's very curious."

"Very, sir," agreed the host, who began to feel a little uncomfortable. "Perhaps you happen to be a bit short-sighted."

"Not I," replied the abbé, knocking the ashes out of his

pipe, and putting in a fresh charge. "But I'm accustomed to plenty of candles at night, and I find this light rather indifferent."

"We'll have another candle, sir, if you prefer it," said the host, rising.

"By all means," said the abbé.

The landlord went out, and did not return immediately. Gaultier looked once or twice at the table, but saw nothing, and rather wondered at his previous impression. He smoked his pipe and stared at the burning log on the hearth for several minutes. Then, urged by some irresistible impulse, he turned round and looked again at the arm-chair.

"*Sangéieu!*" he muttered. "I was right, after all."

Seated in the chair was a form—whether of a man or a woman he could not be quite sure—with the head buried in its arms, outstretched across the table. It seemed enveloped in a dark cloak. The abbé gazed fixedly at this figure for a few seconds, and then remarked to himself,

"That landlord is evidently blind drunk."

At this moment the host returned with another candle, which he placed on the table. Gaultier pointed to the figure, and said curtly,

"He's there, you see. Why don't you turn him out?"

This time the host was seriously disturbed.

"Hang it all, sir!" he complained, "you're enough to give a man the creeps. There's no one in the room but ourselves; I told you so before."

The abbé got up, and walked slowly towards the figure. As he approached the arm-chair, he became gradually aware that it was empty, and that there was nothing on the table. He stopped suddenly, and the landlord, who was watching him, observed,

"It seems to me, sir, you've had a little nap and been dreaming. If you're tired, and would like a bed here to-night, we can find you one with pleasure."

The abbé reseated himself, and looked at the empty chair with a dissatisfied expression.

"I think I will," he said. "And bring another bottle. Here's a guinea."

The host went out, and confided to his wife that if it were not a matter of business, he'd just as soon the gentleman in the parlour was at the deuce. But the guinea in hand, and the prospect of another or two in future, were not to be disregarded lightly. So having arranged for a bedroom for the guest, he

presently returned with a fresh bottle, and resumed his seat. The pair continued drinking for another hour or more, during which nothing particular occurred. Finally, the landlord got up, and apologised for withdrawing on the score of following the maxim, "Early to bed and early to rise."

"If you would like to see your room, sir," he went on, "I'll show it you."

The abbé had been cogitating while the landlord was speaking, and now responded,

"I shall not go to bed, landlord. This room is comfortable enough. Suppose you and I sit up all night?"

The landlord found nothing inviting in this proposal.

"You do me proud, sir," he replied. "But you must excuse me. I like my night's rest uncommonly, and it's getting late already."

Gaultier put his hand in his pocket and pulled out another guinea.

"Will that do instead of your feather-bed?" he asked, holding out the money.

The host looked at the coin, and hesitated. He liked his ease, but a guinea was a guinea. Moreover, if his guest was, as he strongly suspected, either a lunatic or in an early stage of *delirium tremens*, the programme of going to bed might involve some annoying disturbance during the night. He sighed, and pocketed the guinea.

"I'll fetch another log, and tell 'em to shut up the bar," he said, as he turned and left the room. The abbé addressed himself again to his bottle, and kept a defiant eye on the empty chair.

Presently the host came back with some firewood, which he placed in the hearth. He resumed his seat, and then got up again.

"By your leave, sir," he said, going to the table, "I think I'll take this arm-chair. If your friend comes back," he added facetiously, "let me know, and I'll apologise to him."

He brought the chair to the fireside, seated himself with his legs on the fender, and thrust his hands into his breeches' pocket. Gaultier went on drinking and smoking till the landlord's nodding head and stertorous snores announced that he was asleep. Shortly afterwards the abbé himself began to yield to drowsiness, and before long he had fallen into an uneasy slumber which lasted till dawn.

In the morning a sudden idea, born of his potations, came into the abbé's mind. He determined to make his way to

Wray Cottage, with the object of finding out how far and in what way Muriel had been affected by the fate of her *fiancé*. He had not been near enough to the group round the bier on the preceding day to see much, or hear anything, of what had passed. Being, moreover, entirely without a clue to Muriel's bearing and proceedings, her apparent quiet acceptance of the catastrophe had misled him. For all he knew, her arrival upon the scene might have been due less to any surviving faith in her lover's innocence than to some exaggerated or morbid sense of duty—possibly even to a desire to learn that he had not left the world with an unconfessed and unrepented crime on his conscience. Under any circumstances, it was not likely that the heroine of such an unpleasant episode would be overburdened with sympathy or companionship at this particular juncture, and the abbé's brandy-fed imagination readily pictured himself as receiving the welcome due to a friend found unexpectedly faithful in adversity.

After a late breakfast, therefore, he paid his score, and went to the post-house to obtain a conveyance to Sandwich, from which place he proposed to walk to Wray. In the yard he encountered the parish clerk. This man looked at the abbé curiously, and then took an opportunity of pointing him out to the driver of the chaise which the abbé had ordered. Probably the clerk's accompanying comments were not altogether flattering to the subject of them, as the driver looked somewhat askance at his fare when the latter took his seat beside him. The abbé gave the word to start, and they drove off.

Nothing particular occurred on the road to Canterbury, where the horses were changed. The abbé's breakfast, it may be mentioned, had consisted mainly of brandy, and he had furnished himself with a large bottle of the same fluid for consumption on the journey. This had been already emptied by the joint libations of himself and the post-boy, whose possible prejudice against his fare did not by any means extend to the latter's supply of refreshment. A fresh bottle was accordingly procured wherewith to beguile the few remaining miles to Sandwich.

It was getting dark as they left the cathedral city, not on account of the approach of evening, but from the change which had occurred in the weather. The air was perfectly still and almost close, and the canopy of cloud hung so thick and so low that there was all the effect of dusk coming on.

At a little distance from the road the fields and woods were quite lost to sight in the inky gloom which shrouded the horizon on all sides. The aspect of nature affected the abbé's spirits. He spoke seldom or not at all, drank continuously, and quite forgot to offer the post-boy an occasional glass, as formerly. At Wingham he finished the bottle, and bade the post-boy get another. This he discovered, not long after starting, to be very poor stuff, and in a sudden outbreak of fury he threw the bottle into the nearest ditch, cursed the driver for his ignorance of good liquor, and then relapsed into silence. The post-boy drove on very sulkily.

A mile or two outside Ash the abbé looked very earnestly at the roadside for several minutes, and then nudged the post-boy sharply.

"Who is that?" he asked, under his breath.

"Where?" returned the post-boy, looking round.

"There—walking just in front of us," said the abbé, pointing to the foot-path on their left.

The post-boy looked at the road and then at the abbé.

"There's no one, that I can see," he said curtly.

"The fellow in the black cloak with his head covered—can't you use your eyes, you fool?" snapped the abbé.

"Why the plague is he always in front of us?"

"Better ask him," growled the post-boy, as he gave the off-horse a flick.

The abbé half rose in his seat and clutched at the left rein.

"Drive over him!" he said savagely.

The post-boy pulled up short, snatched the rein from the abbé's shaking hand, and thrust him back into his seat.

"Look here, master!" he said angrily, "if you're to be driver, you must buy the chaise and pair. If not, leave my reins alone, or it will be the worse for you."

The abbé took no notice of this remark, but stared at the roadway.

"He's gone now," he remarked, with an air of relief.

"Drive on."

"Time somebody was gone," soliloquised the post-boy, as they started again. "It ought to be double wages for driving a man that's got the jumps in this fashion."

Just then his arm was violently seized by his companion.

"*Sangdieu!*" yelled the abbé, "the fellow's there again.

Stop! and let me get out."

The post-boy pulled the horses up on their haunches.

"You want to get out, do you?" he asked, in a fury.

The abbé did not stop to reply, but half leaped, half fell out of the chaise into the road, and reeled a few steps forward. The post-boy turned the chaise sharp round, fired a volley of expletives at his fare, and drove off at a gallop back towards Canterbury. In five minutes he was out of sight, and Gaultier was left on the roadway alone.

The abbé was just sober enough to philosophise on the disappearance of his bugbear in the black cloak, as he walked along towards Sandwich.

"This is a little new," he remarked to himself. "Certainly, one used to see very curious things after a good spell at the bottle. But that fellow last night in the chair, and now the same again—all this is a kind of thing that is infernally ridiculous. Evidently, I must make a good dinner at Sandwich. It all comes of drinking without eating—that is demonstrable."

The abbé arrived at Sandwich a little later, and ordered dinner at a tavern by the waterside. While waiting for his meal he watched the rising tide as it reached the fishing-boats and small craft lying near high-water mark. One of these was a small lugger, and he thought he recognised one of the Kermodes in a man who was lounging on the deck as the boat rocked on the ground swell from the Channel. He hastily withdrew his head from the window, and sat down by the fire. The capon which he had ordered was brought in presently, and he commenced his meal with a fresh accession of gloom. By the time it was finished, his mood had become decidedly pessimistic, and his confidence in the possible utility of his journey had nearly evaporated. Finally he rose with a sort of self-defying swagger, paid his score, and started through the gathering dusk on the road to Wray Cottage.

* * * * *

Night had fallen before his rather unsteady footsteps brought him to a grass road running through Wrayhurst Wood. The latter was one of the many examples, still surviving at the period, of the timbered lands which had remained uncleared since the period of the Roman occupation of Britain. The moon had not yet risen, and an almost impenetrable gloom shrouded the acres of the primeval forest. The air was thick, damp, and perfectly still. Profound silence reigned through the darkness, broken only by mutterings of distant

thunder. At long intervals waves of faint lightning rose from the eastern horizon and gleamed pallidly between the inky columns of the vast oaks and pines.

"A damnable hole!" growled the abbé, as he stooped to mop his forehead after half an hour's stumbling along the uneven track. "A damnable night. And a damnable errand!" he added despondently.

A transient opening in the canopy of cloud showed a huge fallen trunk lying a few feet from the path. Gaultier went to it and sat down, resting his chin on his hands, and looking vacantly at the dim pathway of turf he had just left.

"*Sangdieu!*" he muttered, "I wish I had been either too sober or too drunk to start on this fool's job. What is the use? She loathes me—hates me. A blind idiot could see that much."

His head sank, and tears of savage despair fell between his fingers upon the carpet of moss below. Several minutes passed. A murmur of wind rustled amongst the high branches, and died away. The silence deepened, and the gloom thickened into a darkness that might be felt.

Suddenly the abbé sat up, and listened. A sound like that of a branchlet broken under foot had reached his ear.

At this instant a feeble ray from the far-away lightning played over the open space in front of him. By its momentary gleam he fancied he saw a dark form pass slowly and disappear. There was no sound. He could not even be sure whether it was a man or a woman.

"*Diable!*" he growled. "There goes someone who seems pretty much at home in this infernal wood. Two's company. Let us see who's abroad on such a night as this."

He went out on to the path. The moon was just rising, and it was possible to see some little distance along the track. No one was in sight. Gaultier ran forward several yards, stopped, and then listened attentively. His previous dull torpor had vanished, and a preternatural acuteness of sight and hearing took its place. Not a leaf stirred. He shuddered, and for the first time felt a tremor of fear.

The moon continued to rise, but clouds completely obscured it, and the darkness returned. Gaultier went on.

A quarter of an hour passed. The path was now straight and level, and it was not difficult to walk quickly. The turf was full of moss, and the heaviest footfall made scarcely any sound. The track turned sharply, passed over a little ridge, and dropped into a hollow.

While crossing the bottom of this hollow, Gaultier thought he heard a slight sound in the direction of the ridge behind him. He instantly stepped aside from the path, lay flat down amongst some bracken, and waited.

In a couple of seconds the rift of moonlight over the ridge was blocked by a tall and shrouded figure, which disappeared in the intervening hollow a moment afterwards.

"What is this?" thought the abbé. "Have I managed to pass that night-bird by some accident?"

He held his breath, and peered keenly through the brake-fronds while the newcomer approached his hiding-place. The figure swept noiselessly past him. It was enveloped in some kind of cloak and cowl, and seemed to be that of a man. But he could see no face, and fancied that it was covered with something black. In a score of paces the form was lost in the shadows of the forest. The abbé began to tremble.

"It is that fellow again," he said to himself.

He waited some little time before he could summon up sufficient resolution to resume his journey. When he did, it was with a certain feeling of relief that, at all events, the unknown was somewhere in front and not behind him.

The curfew had tolled before he emerged from the forest and saw, by the passing gleams of moonlight, the gables and moulded chimneys of Wray Cottage rising over the willows which bordered the little river Wraybourne.

No light appeared in its windows. But only the bedrooms faced Wrayhurst Wood, and the wainscoted parlour, where Muriel usually sat of an evening, could not be seen from the hillside under the forest. Gaultier decided that it was not late enough for the dame and her niece to have retired for the night, and therefore went forward.

The high hedgerow prevented him from seeing anything of the front of the cottage till he had passed through the side lane and reached the wicket which gave entrance to the garden. The gate was wide open, and the Cottage in darkness.

This rather surprised the abbé, who had heard that the dame's town-bred habit of locking the wicket every night was a stock joke amongst the villagers. He entered cautiously, and observed that the door in the porch was wide open also. This surprised him still more, and he stepped into the shade of the spruces to reconnoitre.

The parlour of the Cottage had two casement windows, one facing him, and the other—into which the moon shone at intervals—round the corner to the left. The abbé waited till

the moon was obscured, and then made for the shadow of a holly-bush close to the nearest window. One thick branch of this holly touched the casement itself, and by creeping under the branch it was possible to bring his face close to the diamond-shaped panes without being seen from within.

The casement opened inwards, both frame and sill having a deep drip-groove to prevent rain entering. This had been an arrangement of some former occupant, in order to permit of keeping a number of pot-flowers on the broad sill outside. Muriel used it for this purpose, and the plants helped to make a further screen for prying eyes. Gaultier dropped on his knees and crawled to the window. Then, half raising himself, he gazed intently within.

At first he could distinguish nothing; but when the next broken gleam of moonlight flickered for a moment through the further casement, he saw a figure seated by the table in the dame's great arm-chair, its head buried in its outstretched arms. With a thrill of terror the abbé saw repeated over again the apparition of the tavern at Maidstone.

The moon was immediately afterwards hidden, but the lightning became more frequent and vivid, while the roll of thunder indicated that the centre of the storm was coming nearer. The figure remained motionless, and the abbé kept his eyes fixed upon it as if fascinated.

Suddenly he started and gasped, and his hair stood on end. A bright flash of lightning had lit up the room, and for a moment made the smallest object visible. The form at the table was that of a man, whose neck was bare, and who showed round his neck a livid purple band.

Even through the darkness that followed the flash the abbé continued to glare with dilated eyes upon the spot where the figure sat so silent and so still. In the intensity of his fixed gaze his vision seemed to gain power to penetrate the utter gloom in which the little room was shrouded, and he saw a slight movement in the form at the table.

Then the bowed head was slowly raised, and the arms were stretched aloft with a terrible gesture. The abbé's heart seemed to stop beating.

The next instant the sky was split from zenith to horizon by a river of lightning, followed by a thunder-crash as of the heavens and the earth coming together. The casement was driven in by the concussion, and Gaultier, paralysed with horror, saw the unknown turn his head and look directly towards the window.

Before him was a face, sombre, menacing, and awful in its livid pallor, whose eyes, glittering with unearthly fire, seemed to burn into his very soul. It was the face of Ambrose Gwynett.

The abbé's lips slowly parted. He drew a deep breath, staggered, and fell back unconscious.

There was a moment of profound darkness. Then a ray of moonlight played upon the empty chair, and a little puff of wind made the casement swing to again. The storm passed away, but large drops of rain began to fall. The body of the abbé remained lying in a heap under the window.

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"The face of Ambrose Gwynett."

-Page 324.



BOOK IV

A Bid for Empire



CHAPTER XLI

A CELEBRATED SNUFF-BOX

ON February 1st, 1712, the French court, which had been at Marly for nearly a fortnight, returned to Versailles. The dauphin (the duc de Bourgogne) and the dauphine were of the party, together with their two little sons, the ducs de Bretagne and d'Anjou, and the royal governesses, mesdames de Ventadour and de Villefort.

The first few days of the month were raw and cold, but the morning of the 5th was so warm and the sun shone so brilliantly that almost the whole court streamed out upon the terraces to enjoy the open air. Groups of courtiers, ministers, and officials formed and broke up again with quite a busy appearance, and the 'sanctuary,' as the king's own private circle was called, attended the promenade in considerable force.

Madame de Maintenon and the duchesse de Bourgogne walked with the king, the duc de Bretagne ran on in front, and the baby duc d'Anjou, who was a very backward, feeble, and sickly child, was carried by his Breton nurse in the rear. Behind were madame de Valincour and her cherished friend the duchesse de Ventadour.

The dauphine, Marie-Adelaide of Savoy, was the spoiled child of the 'sanctuary.' Brought to France at eleven years old to be married to a husband of thirteen, she had completely won the old king's heart by her lovable disposition, her admirable good sense, her irrepressible spirits, and her cheerful disregard of the monstrous etiquette which he exacted from everyone else at court. The less fortunate or less audacious members of the royal circle looked on with wonder when the duchesse de Bourgogne plumped herself down upon an arm of the king's chair, or shouted "ma tante" after the austere marquise de Maintenon. But the dauphine held her grandfather-in-law in sufficient awe to be terribly afraid lest he should hear of her fondness for taking snuff—a habit which, in a princess, would have scandalised the grand monarque almost as much as did the reckless manners and deplorable customs of the duchesse de Berri.

This last personage, a daughter of the duc d'Orléans and his wife mademoiselle de Blois, one of Louis XIV.'s children by madame de Montespan, was at once the king's grand

daughter and (through her marriage with the duc de Berri) granddaughter-in-law. On this particular morning the gossips of the court had had their appetites for scandal sufficiently whetted by the news that madame de Berri had become helplessly intoxicated at supper the night before, that the old princess Palatine had been scolding her granddaughter-in-law all morning, and that the king was understood to be furious about the affair.

Probably the dauphine found the royal temper a little discouraging during the promenade, for she fell back and walked with madame de Valincour.

"Comtesse," she said, pointing to the lower terrace, "is not that M. de Noailles talking to M. de St. Simon and the maréchal de Berwick?"

"Yes, madame," replied the comtesse.

"So he is returned, then. I thought he was at his estates in Languedoc. Do you know we had a great quarrel before he went away?"

"I rather fancy madame de Noailles told me he had had the misfortune to offend your highness in some way or other."

"I should think so, truly. I asked him what was the kind of snuff he thought most suitable for a lady. Guess what the monster replied."

"I have not the slightest idea, madame."

"He said he was not aware that such a thing existed. I told him it would be setting a bad example for me to continue the acquaintance of a person whose ignorance was so profound and so inexcusable. Then he went off to Nismes."

"I believe he returned last night, madame."

"Tell him, in the course of the morning, that I will give him an opportunity of displaying any little elementary knowledge he may have acquired during his absence, if he likes to come to supper."

The dauphine kept looking at the duc de Noailles and his friends.

"Those gentlemen seem very much interested about something," she went on, making way for the king, as he returned from the end of the terrace. "Go and see what it is, comtesse, and give my message."

The duc de Noailles, a good-natured looking person with the face of a country squire, was chatting with four gentlemen. One of these was a stout, elderly man, with a profoundly self-important expression, and the air—as was said of someone else later—of his own statue erected by national sub-

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scription. This was Louis de Rouvroi, duc de St. Simon, and author of the famous "Memoirs"; the second, a tall, soldierly looking wearer of a marshal's uniform, was the duke of Berwick, the natural son of James II. and Marlborough's sister, and consequently half-brother to the chevalier de St. George; another of the party was the duc de Chevreuse, who posed as amateur medical adviser to anyone about the court who would listen to him; and the fourth was M. Bondin, chief physician to the dauphine. He had just joined the group.

"Here is the very man," said de Noailles, turning towards the doctor. "Good day, my dear M. Bondin."

The physician bowed.

"I have just come back from Nismes, my dear doctor," went on the duke, "and I hear with wonder this little report about madame la dauphine. If I am not troubling you, what are the real facts?"

"Concerning what, M. le duc?" asked the doctor cautiously.

"*Peste!* my dear doctor," said the duke, "we are all discreet, I hope. I mean this threat of poisoning."

"I do not claim to be an authority in the matter, M. le duc."

The duke of Berwick slapped the doctor on the shoulder.

"I think we may speak freely, monsieur," said he, laughing.

"Madame la dauphine is not half as punctilious as you are. It is she who has given the affair publicity."

The doctor seemed somewhat relieved by this assurance.

"If that is the case, gentlemen," he said, "there is no reason for not telling the little that I have to tell. As a matter of fact, it is confined to the circumstance that on the day his majesty did us the honour of coming to Marly——"

"When was that?" asked de Noailles. "There is the worst of being out of the world for a month—one hears nothing."

"More than a fortnight ago," put in Berwick.

"It was the 18th of last month, M. le duc," replied the doctor. "That morning I received an anonymous letter warning me that an attempt would be made to poison madame la dauphine. There was absolutely no clue to the writer. After due consideration, I decided to inform M. le dauphin of the matter, and I did so. Curiously enough, within twenty-four hours he received a letter from the Spanish court containing precisely the same warning. That is really all I know."

"I see no sense in the affair," remarked de Noailles, who was amiability itself. "Who could possibly have any interest in getting rid of madame la dauphine?"

No one responded to this inquiry, because every one except the duke at once thought of the duchesse de Berri. This princess had always been desperately jealous of the precedence necessarily accorded to her husband's sister-in-law, and had frequently made herself insufferably disagreeable to her.

"That is quite true," put in St. Simon finally. "But as it was only yesterday that the matter got about, there has been time for further developments?"

As the duke looked inquiringly at the doctor, the latter replied,

"Nothing whatever has transpired, M. le duc, so far as I am aware."

It may be mentioned that the sources of the two warnings in question have always remained a mystery, and, moreover, that there does not appear to have been the slightest ground for either of them. But after the deaths of Henrietta Stuart and her daughter Marie-Louise d'Orléans, queen of Spain, people took possibilities of this sort rather seriously. The duc de Noailles seemed rather put out.

"Do you know, my dear M. Bondin," he said, "that your news comes very *mal à propos*?"

"In what way, M. le duc?"

"*Parbleu!* it is rather curious. You all know why madame la dauphine, with her usual charming vivacity, chose to visit me with her displeasure just before I started for Nismes."

The group nodded an acquiescence.

"Frankly," went on the duke, "I look forward with terror to a fashion of continuous sneezing setting in amongst the hours of our Paradise. Let us keep our illusions as long as we can."

"I do not dissent from you, my dear de Noailles," remarked the duc de St. Simon, finding he was expected to say something, and being, in truth, quite sufficiently scandalised himself at the dauphine's accomplishment.

"Nevertheless," said de Noailles, "on the principle of holding a candle to—ahem!—the angels, I ventured to bring back with me from Nismes a little peace-offering for madame de Bourgogne, intending to seek permission to present it this evening."

"But what has this to do with me, M. le duc?" asked the doctor.

"Patience, my dear doctor," replied de Noailles, struggling to get some parcel out of his coat-tail pocket, "the connection is confoundedly close, as you will perceive. *Voilà!*"

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The speaker produced a parcel, which, when divested of its silk wrapper, proved to be a very beautifully chased gold cassette or small box, which he handed to Berwick.

"This is a charming affair," observed the marshal. "A *bonbonnière*, I suppose?"

The duc de Noailles pressed a spring, and the lid flew open, revealing the inside filled with snuff.

"The very finest Spanish I could procure," he said. "I am not an expert myself, as I explained to madame la dauphine; but I believe all you gentlemen are connoisseurs—try for yourselves."

The duc de St. Simon appeared quite shocked when de Noailles tendered the box to him.

"My dear fellow," he said, "take a pinch out of a box intended for madame la dauphine? Impossible! What are you thinking of?"

"I am thinking of M. Bondin's little story, my dear friend. Here is something from Spain, a country which sends warnings to M. le dauphin, and I do not wish to be accused of anything, if anything goes wrong. I beg you all to observe that I take a pinch myself, and will abide by the consequences."

The duke elaborately helped himself to some of the snuff, and sneezed with tremendous energy.

"As a matter of self-devotion to the safety of madame, I am with you, duke," said St. Simon, taking a pinch. "It is certainly of the very finest quality," he added, after the effects of the stimulant had duly presented themselves.

The other gentlemen helped themselves in turn, and expressed their high appreciation of the contents of the cassette. At this moment madame de Valincour was seen to leave the dauphine and to make her way in the direction of the group.

"Who is this lady?" asked Berwick, who had only just arrived from camp, and had not seen anything of the Marly household for some time.

"*Pardieu!* my dear *maréchal*," cried Chevreuse, "what monastery have you been living in, not to know the most beautiful woman at court?"

"She must have come since I was at the frontier," replied Berwick.

"Certainly—I forgot that. It is madame de Valincour, from Marly—a friend of M. de Noailles."

"My wife has known her from childhood," explained de Noailles.

The comtesse came up, and was received by the four

gentlemen with salutations whose homage equalled anything that could have been accorded to the dauphine or the marquise de Maintenon. The duc de Noailles looked on rather amused.

"Comtesse," he said, taking her hand in quite a paternal fashion, "permit me to present to you M. de Berwick, who lays his many laurels at your feet."

The marshal bowed with the profoundest *empressement*, and the comtesse added a gracious smile to her curtsy.

"I meet M. le maréchal with all the more pleasure," she said, "because I have, I believe, some Stuart blood in my own veins also."

Berwick bowed again at this intimation, which happened to be a pure invention on the part of the comtesse.

"Madame does me infinite honour to claim me as a kinsman," he rejoined.

"A house that has sent us queen Marie, the princess Henrietta, and madame de Valincour, lays France under eternal obligations," remarked St. Simon, who did not wish to be out of the fashion.

The comtesse curtsied again, and turned to de Noailles.

"M. le duc," she said, "I have to tell you that madame has noticed your arrival."

"You alarm me terribly," said the duke. "I understand the Bastille is quite full, and unfortunately the air of Vincennes does not agree with me."

"Madame recognises that justice should be tempered with mercy," replied the comtesse. "She desires me to say that if your deplorable and culpable ignorance has been lessened during your absence, you will be accorded an opportunity of proving the fact at supper to-night."

"Madame la dauphine overwhelms me by her clemency. But I am in too great a hurry to display my improved taste to wait till evening, so I have a favour to beg of you, comtesse."

"Let me hear first, M. le duc. You are only on probation at present, and I must be cautious."

"Do me the service, comtesse, to ask madame la dauphine to deign to accept this sample of Seville snuff as being something highly attested by the gentlemen you see before you, and therefore a proof of my rapid advance as a connoisseur."

"Madame la comtesse," remarked Berwick, "may rest assured that if we have not amongst us a single other claim to distinction, we are, at least, good judges of snuff."

"You may depend upon me, M. le duc. Convey my most affectionate remembrances to the duchesse. Au revoir, gentlemen. You will understand that madame receives this evening, as usual."

The five gentlemen acknowledged the comtesse's sweeping curtsy with a half circle of bows, and stood watching her as she passed along the terrace.

"A perfectly superb woman!" commented Berwick. "Where has she been hidden all this time?"

The duc de Noailles was rather gratified at the sensation produced by his wife's *protégée*.

"We sent her to Madrid when madame des Ursins wrote for a lady of honour," he explained. "When all the French contingent returned to France, the Valincour retired with his wife to his estates in Langue. Her own people live there."

"What is the family?"

"They are rather new—Gaultier de Beauval."

"*Peste!*" exclaimed the marshal, "any relation of the abbé?"

"She is his sister," replied de Noailles, in a not very enthusiastic tone. "Do you know him?"

"In a fashion. I recollect him as sacristan at St. Germain, in very low water for some reason or other——"

"He was usually at loggerheads with his people," said de Noailles.

"Very likely. He asked the king* for a clerkship at the château—a matter of some three or four hundred livres a year. Du Vivier, the chapel-master, was annoyed at Gaultier going to the king behind his back, and reported rather blackly against him. The post was refused, and Gaultier went off with Tallard to England. I saw him again about a year ago."

The marshal discreetly refrained from explaining that Gaultier had been sent to him on the occasion in question by Harley, with the proposition that the Pretender should acquiesce in queen Anne's sovereignty till her death, and should then come over to succeed her. This move of the lord-treasurer's had the expected effect of securing for him, on Berwick's recommendation, the solid vote of the Jacobites in both Houses of Parliament.

"He is not exactly a man one can know," said de Noailles;

* James II.



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"but he is fond of his sister, and she is devotedly attached to him. He was finally disinherited by his father for opposing her marriage—at her request, of course."

"Where is the comte?"

"Nobody knows, or cares—probably at Valincour. A confirmed invalid, I fancy, and a perfect savage at that."

Meanwhile, madame de Valincour had returned to the grand terrace. The royal party were just going within doors, and the comtesse followed them at a little distance.

The suite of rooms at Versailles which were assigned to the dauphin and dauphine included a large boudoir and a little cabinet leading out of it. The dauphine was sitting in the boudoir, after returning from the terrace, and talking to the duc de Bourgogne, when the comtesse de Valincour entered and came forward to execute the commission entrusted to her by the duc de Noailles. The dauphine uttered a cry of delight when the cassette was unwrapped and placed in her hands.

"It is charming!" she cried. "Decidedly, the duke is a person worth quarrelling with. I see I must cultivate the habit. Look, monseigneur!"

The dauphine pressed the spring, and made the lid fly open. She smelt the snuff, and remarked to the dauphin, as she took up a pinch between her thumb and finger,

"If the king is going to catechise you this morning, monseigneur, you had better look out of the window."

The dauphin shrugged his shoulders amiably. His wife was a privileged person, and had long ago established her right to be exempt from criticism. She took the pinch, and sneezed very heartily.

"That is excellent," said the dauphine. "Where did M. de Noailles get it, comtesse?"

"From Seville, madame."

"I thought it was Spanish. Try, monseigneur," and the dauphine tendered the box to her husband.

The dauphin was not much of a snuff-taker, and declined the box.

"Excuse me, madame. I like a pinch for a headache, or when I feel even more stupid than usual, but——"

"Nonsense!" said the dauphine. "Just to oblige me, monseigneur," and she held out the box with a bewitching smile.

The dauphin did not trouble to contest the point, but took a pinch dutifully and returned the box.

The dauphine closed the lid of the cassette, and examined the chasing with renewed admiration.

"It is perfectly lovely," she said, turning it over several times. "Some of you good people will be stealing it from me if I do not take care. I am going to put it in my cabinet."

The dauphine rose, went into her little private room, and returned.

"Now, comtesse," she said, "we are ready to drive. Go and ask that good M. de Noailles to come with us. It is a heavenly morning, and I feel as if I were going to live for ever. Come, monseigneur!"

The party dispersed to rendezvous in the great courtyard, and the swarm of courtiers hastened to follow the royal example.

In the evening the dauphine felt a little indisposed. She was attacked with trembling fits and a certain amount of fever, and went to bed early. Madame de Maintenon came to see her, and took a seat beside the couch. The dauphine was not yet tired of the present of the morning, and extolled the duke's snuff-box and its contents in enthusiastic terms.

"I believe even his majesty would reconcile himself to my taking such snuff as that," she said, laughing.

The old marquise looked quite distressed.

"My dear," she exclaimed, "I beg you will believe nothing of the sort. Nothing would annoy the king more, as I have always told you. And after madame de Berri's conduct last night——"

The marquise had no words left to express her opinion of this appalling scandal.

"Well, ma tante," persisted the dauphine, "you shall try for yourself."

"Impossible, my dear!" said the decorous marquise, in an alarmed tone.

"Pooh! ma tante, I shall not tell tales," went on the dauphine. And disregarding the protests of her companion, she called to one of her women in the ante-chamber.

"Madame de Levi," she said, "take my key, and fetch me my gold snuff-box from my cabinet."

"Madame la duchesse has two or three," replied the chamberwoman.

"I mean my new one. I put it on the table—madame de Valincour will show you which it is."

Madame de Levi withdrew. After several minutes had elapsed, she came back, looking rather puzzled.

"There is no snuff-box on the table, madame," she said; "in fact, we cannot find any new snuff-box in madame's cabinet at all."

CHAPTER XLII

A TREATY OF ALLIANCE

THE disappearance of the dauphine's snuff-box aroused a good deal of interest at the court, although everyone understood that the circumstance was not to reach the ears of the king. St. Simon, in his "Memoirs," lays special stress upon the fact that the little cabinet, where the casket had been placed by the dauphine, was closed to everyone except herself. As the various rooms in the palace were practically all under the surveillance of the numberless officers, and as no person's absence from duty had been observed, the mystery remained without a solution.

But the court had speedily occasion to forget the dauphine's snuff-box in the excitement caused by the alarming development of her indisposition. On the nights of the Saturday and Sunday following the first attack, the fever returned with great violence, although during the daytime on Saturday the patient had felt better. On Sunday night intense pains in the head were felt, and the dauphine suffered so greatly that she begged the king would not come in to see her, as he wished. The doctors tried in vain to relieve the pain by tobacco, both chewed and smoked, quantities of opium, and two bleedings. Eventually the pain diminished, but an access of fever followed, and the patient fell into a sort of lethargy the Tuesday.

About ten o'clock that morning the comtesse de Valincour, who had been sitting up all night, went with her friend madame de Ventadour to get a little air upon the terrace. As they passed through the corridor looking out upon the courtyard, an equipage drove up which attracted madame de Ventadour's attention.

"Wait a moment, my dear Yvonne," she said. "Surely that carriage is from L'Étoile, and the duke inside? That is very curious."

"I do not happen to know their establishment at all," replied the comtesse.

L'Étoile was a little villa in the park of Versailles, which had been given by the king to his illegitimate daughter Françoise-Marie de Blois, wife of the duc d'Orléans. The duchesse d'Orléans used to receive extremely distinguished company there, and gave very *recherché* dinners. All this bored her husband to distraction, and it was rather unusual for him to be beguiled thither from the Palais-Royal in Paris. There was also a room kept for him at Marly, but he was scarcely ever seen at Versailles.

In fact, the duke's position at this period was more or less that of an exile from the French court. His military successes in Italy, and afterwards in Spain, had rather frightened Philippe V., who strongly suspected his cousin of purposing to snatch his crown from him. As Louis XIV. shared in this suspicion (which was probably quite unfounded), the duke had been somewhat summarily recalled to France. He now lived mostly in Paris, accompanied by his former tutor the abbé Dubois, and devoted his energies about equally to the pursuit of the fine arts, studying chemistry, and scandalising the court by the habits of his private life. These latter characteristics meant, in the mouths of his inveterate enemies the Maintenon party, that he was a drunkard, an atheist, and a profligate.

In these respects he undoubtedly laid himself open to the attacks of the marquise and to the severe disapproval of his august uncle. The duke got drunk very often, whereas the king had only the habit of over-eating himself, and had latterly been compelled to forego even that indulgence. In religious matters the duke believed very little, and said so, which naturally placed him at a disadvantage with the Versailles crowd, who believed nothing at all, but went to mass regularly at the behest of madame de Maintenon. Finally, the duke indulged himself in an endless succession of mistresses, got rid of them in turn with extreme rapidity, and concerned himself very little about his illegitimate children. This, of course, shocked the king, who had only made half a dozen additions to his harem in twenty-five years, was very particular in compelling his royal relatives the duke himself, and the dukes of Bourbon-Condé and Conti, to marry his bastard daughters, and had been equally punctilious in making wealthy peers, at the expense of his subjects, of his bastard sons.

Thus M. d'Orléans was in very bad odour at Versailles, while amongst the populace he and his chief chemist Humbert shared the fate of most mediæval savants, and were looked

upon as two necromancers openly in league with the devil. For the rest, the duke was a handsome man of thirty-eight years of age, courageous as a lion, good-natured to a proverb, and probably the only royal Frenchman in two centuries who occupied any part of his leisure with intellectual resources.

When the carriage from L'Étoile stopped in the courtyard, a companion of the duke's got out first, and stood at the door.

"There is the abbé Dubois, of course," commented madame de Ventadour. "Do you know him?"

"We met at Madrid," replied the comtesse.

"Probably they have come to inquire after madame la dauphine."

"If that is the case," suggested the comtesse, "we may as well meet them. One of us will probably be asked for."

"By all means," replied the gouvernante, as they descended the stairs. "But, do you know, I have an impression that the abbé has the evil eye—the *jettatore*, as they say at Naples. It makes me feel quite uncomfortable."

"Perhaps that is the eye he is said to keep open all night," said the comtesse, laughing. "Here they come."

The duke and the abbé made their appearance at this moment, preceded in rather a perfunctory manner by a groom of the chambers. All the other officials kept carefully out of sight, as a little tribute to the visitors' unpopularity at the palace. This was nothing new in the duke's experience, and he took notice of it in his own fashion.

"*Pardieu!* the place seems rather empty, abbé," he remarked, in a cheerfully loud tone, as they came along the great hall. "I am afraid the poor devils here find themselves obliged to retrench, and make shift with a reduced establishment. We must see if we cannot keep them on their legs, my dear friend—this is really deplorable. Ah! here is madame de Ventadour. Good day, duchesse! We have come to inquire after your patient."

The two ladies curtsied, and the abbé kept a little in the rear.

"Madame la duchesse de Bourgogne is very ill, M. le duc," replied the gouvernante.

"What is really the matter, duchesse?" inquired the duke.

"It is not yet certain, M. le duc. But M. Bondin, M. Cheverny, M. Maréchal, and M. Fagon are in consultation at the present moment at madame's bedside."

The three last-named gentlemen were respectively the king's first apothecary, first surgeon, and first physician.

"That is how madame de Valincour and myself are off duty for a few minutes," added the duchesse.

The duke bowed, and looked rather intently at the comtesse.

"Madame is of the household, then?" he asked politely.

"At Marly, M. le duc," replied the comtesse.

"It appears to me I have had the honour of meeting madame before," said the duke.

The abbé came forward, with an observant eye on madame de Valincour.

"M. le duc is probably thinking of the time when madame la comtesse was of the household at Madrid," he put in.

"Is that it?" asked the duke. "Then I congratulate madame de Bourgogne on her acquisition, as heartily as I condole with her majesty the Queen of Spain."

The comtesse curtsied, and the abbé looked serious.

"We will wait to learn the result of this consultation, abbé," proceeded the duke. "Au revoir, mesdames."

The party exchanged salutations, and the duke went on with his companion.

"Abbé," he said promptly, as soon as they were out of hearing of the ladies, "how on earth is it that I have missed the comtesse de Valincour? What was that about her being at Madrid?"

"She was a little in the background when we first arrived there, M. le duc. Then, if you recollect, you went directly to the field."

"How long has she been at court here?"

"Only since the winter."

"Did you know her at Madrid?"

"A little."

"Intimately?"

"Enough to quarrel a good deal."

"Abbé, this is the first time I have found you acting like an idiot."

"M. le duc is, of course, entitled to his opinion."

"If you don't go back now, abbé, and invent a little reconciliation, I shall think you have had some fish of your own to fry in this affair."

"There will be no difficulty about the reconciliation, M. le duc. For the rest, I may remind you of the tenth beatitude."

"What is that, my esteemed theologian?"

"Blessed are they who expect nothing, for they shall not be disappointed."

"That is my affair, if you do not botch it beforehand."

"I am off to execute your commission, M. le duc."

In the meantime, the two ladies had gone out upon the terrace.

"Why did you not notice the abbé, my dear Yvonne?" asked the gouvernante.

"We have not been quite on terms since I was at Madrid," replied the comtesse. "But in case he happens to come back within the next few minutes, my dear duchesse, try and have occasion to leave us together."

At this moment the abbé made his appearance, coming straight towards the pair. The duchesse laughed.

"Evidently you are a witch, dear Yvonne," she said. "I will go at once."

The abbé came up with a sweep of his hat.

"Madame is not curtailing her promenade, I hope?" he asked politely of the duchesse.

"I am sorry, M. l'abbé, that we cannot both play truant any longer. But madame de Valincour must take a little further respite. She has been a good deal confined this last day or two."

The gouvernante went off, and the abbé took her place beside the comtesse.

"Madame will permit me to report," said he, "that I had the pleasure of seeing her brother after that unfortunate accident to the carriage. He conveyed to me a sort of message, which madame had been so gracious as to send."

"Was the message intelligible, or worth understanding at all, M. l'abbé?" asked the comtesse placidly.

"Perfectly, madame; and I accept it as equally flattering and important. If I have not acted upon it before, it has been simply for want of opportunity. M. le duc and myself are awkwardly placed, as you probably know."

"Yes—at present."

"At present, as you observe, madame."

"Then I may take it, abbé, you do not at the moment discern any advantage in being an enemy to me?"

The abbé looked inexpressibly shocked.

"Heavens! my dear comtesse, what an atrocity you are suggesting! Be so obliging as to recollect that if we had any little differences at Madrid, it was always you who did me the honour of attacking me."

"Possibly you are right so far, abbé. You must remember the duke frightened the poor little king terribly, and you came in for some of the credit of it. Naturally, one had to abuse you. But all that is an old story now."

"On the contrary, madame. Anyone who imagines M. d'Orléans to be better liked at Versailles than he was at the Escorial must be blind and deaf. A leper, or a mad dog, or Beelzebub, would be quite popular here compared with the duke——"

"Or yourself, probably?"

"Truly I think I myself am about as much esteemed as those three bugbears rolled into one."

The comtesse looked up at the façade of the palace.

"Really, abbé," she remarked, "I think, from what you say, that we had better get behind some bush. It is quite evident that I compromise myself by being in front of those windows."

"On the contrary, madame, a lady of your exalted reputation will be assumed to be labouring to convert me to better ways."

"Abbé, what is really important is that you should convert the duke to better ways."

The abbé put on his most sanctimonious expression.

"Madame may rest assured that any little influence I may possess has always——"

"Abbé," interrupted the comtesse, "I am not here to talk nonsense. If it is to your interest that the duke should kill himself or become an imbecile before he is forty, I tell you quite frankly that it is not to my interest in the least—quite the contrary."

The abbé was helping himself to a pinch of snuff, and absolutely dropped it in his astonishment at this innuendo.

"Madame," said he, "if by some extraordinary chance you do not know it already, learn that all my interests, hopes, and ambitions are bound up with my august pupil. If he falls, madame, I shall be underneath—flattened out, extinguished."

"I am glad you use one word, abbé."

"Which, madame?"

"The word 'ambition.' It seems to me that that word has been a little on the shelf lately—in France."

"What would you have, dear comtesse? Our venerable sovereign himself has not been deficient in ambition, one would think. But the results have been discouraging."

"You invite me to talk politics, abbé."

"Madame, I am convinced that you can talk politics better than anyone at court. Unfortunately, that is not saying much. One may lament that it has not occurred to anybody to make one of the late M. de Richelieu's old boots into a prime minister."

"Let us imagine that you and I are a pair of M. de Richelieu's old boots, abbé, and talk politics accordingly."

"By all means, comtesse."

"We must come to the point at once, abbé, because I may be summoned at any moment. I will begin, and you can criticise as we go on."

The abbé took his pinch of snuff, and waved his hand with a deprecatory air.

"On the contrary, dear comtesse," said he.

"First, then, it occurs to me to remark that our country seems to cut a very poor figure at the present moment."

"True, madame. But not particularly new."

"Then I proceed to observe that there is nothing to prevent it sharing the empire of the globe."

"That is quite new, madame. I wish it were true."

"Consider, abbé, for a moment. Which state ought to be the wealthiest in the world?"

"Spain, no doubt—if it is merely a question of the gold and silver in its empire."

"Good. Which nation, without a single gold or silver mine in its territory, is the most powerful in the world?"

"Those cursed English, no doubt—at present."

"They will continue to be so, abbé."

"I do not contradict you, comtesse."

"Now listen, abbé, for this is of the utmost importance."

The abbé put his snuff-box in his pocket, and the expression of his face changed to one of profound attention. The comtesse thought for a moment, and then went on,

"Let us suppose, abbé, that we had in France a ruler who did not represent the hostility of Louis XIV. to the English—in other words, someone who could propose an alliance with Great Britain without being laughed at over there."

"Such as the duc de Bourgogne?"

"If you like. Then, as France has very clearly gained neither the Spanish colonies nor anything else whatever by putting a Bourbon at the Escorial, we owe the Escorial nothing. Is that granted?"

"*Certes*, comtesse," replied the abbé, almost with enthusiasm, "more especially as you and I and the duke have all three

been kicked out of Spain to please someone or other at the Escorial."

"Very good, then, abbé. Given a ruler of France who would be friendly with England, and a prime minister——"

The comtesse stopped, and looked at the ducks in the pond.

"A prime minister——?" repeated the abbé.

"A prime minister who would use all his ingenuity to embroil France with Spain and Portugal——"

"Portugal?"

"Portugal, sooner or later."

"What then, dear comtesse?"

"After all that, abbé, you, who understand politics, can explain to me what there is to prevent France from buying the English as our allies against Spain and Portugal?"

"What would you offer them?"

"The whole of North America—to include the West Indies, if necessary—on condition that they helped us to secure the whole of South America."

The abbé drew in his breath, and stared straight in front of him.

"You see, abbé," proceeded the comtesse, "it is clear that all the Spanish and Portuguese possessions in the New World are at the mercy of the English fleets, and the troops that can be transported in them, for the reason that in France and Spain matters have been so managed that we have no fleets at all. Therefore, I suggest that we should hire the English fleets—at the price mentioned."

"And as regards Spain and Portugal themselves?"

"Pooh! what are they without their possessions across the sea? I am talking of affairs of importance, not toys."

The abbé remained silent, digesting the comtesse's little programme.

"And who is your prime minister, madame?" he asked finally.

"If you do not know, abbé, I am sure I do not."

The abbé accepted this hint with a bow.

"But, madame," he remarked, "I think you are mistaken in hoping for the concurrence of the dauphin in such a scheme. He is avowedly a hater of wars of conquest."

"I did not say a word about the dauphin," said the comtesse calmly. "Do you happen by chance to imagine that he will ask you to be his prime minister when he becomes king?"

The abbé looked genuinely bewildered.

"Nothing is more impossible," he replied.

"That is exactly my impression," said the comtesse.

"Then, madame, I confess I am somewhat at a loss to see the precise utility of our amazingly interesting conversation."

"That is not the point, abbé. The question is, does my programme appeal to you, and are you willing to join hands in carrying it out?"

"Perfectly willing, my dear comtesse—when it is possible."

"And without any ridiculous jealousy of the share that I may have in making it possible?"

"Madame, I am not the one to grumble, if some soups require two cooks. But, naturally, one is curious about the recipe."

"For that you must wait, abbé. In the meantime, it is understood that we are allies?"

"I shall be a devoted one, madame. *À propos*, I am ashamed to say that, till this moment, I had quite forgotten the object I had in seeking you just now."

"You need not trouble about that—the duke sent you?"

The abbé bowed discreetly.

"That was so, madame, I confess."

"He saw me, and was, of course, struck with me?" asked the comtesse quite unaffectedly.

"Of course, madame."

"You may tell him, abbé, that you duly executed your commission, and that the answer you received was——"

"Yes?" asked the abbé, with some eagerness.

"That I have unfortunately got politics on the brain——"

"On the brain," repeated the abbé.

"And that, with the profoundest respect, I am not prepared to listen to a political nonentity."

The abbé chuckled.

"That will be a little new," he said. "I will give him your message with religious exactitude."

While he was speaking, the duchesse de Ventadour appeared upon the terrace and came up hurriedly.

"My dear Yvonne," she said, "there is very bad news. The doctors announce their opinion that madame is suffering from measles, and half the court are ordering their carriages."

During the winter of 1711-12 this disease had been virulently epidemic in Paris and other parts of France, and its spread was looked upon with the greatest apprehension by all classes of society. But hitherto it had not made its appearance at Versailles, and the result of the physicians' consultation was, therefore, sufficiently alarming.

"Has M. d'Orléans been told?" asked the abbé, looking rather uncomfortable.

"He was one of the first to hear," replied the gouvernante.

"What did he say?" asked the comtesse.

"He saw a crowd of the courtiers hurrying away from madame's salon, and he called out in a loud tone that if madame was not too much indisposed to receive him, he wished to pay his respects to her. Then M. de Bourgogne came and shook hands with him very earnestly."

The comtesse looked at the abbé, and the latter, saluting, went off murmuring to himself,

"That was rather clever of the duke."

CHAPTER XLIII

A POLITICAL CRISIS

DURING the remainder of Tuesday the dauphine's fever continued very high, and she was partly delirious. On the following day, however, the doctors announced that their anticipations of the symptoms turning out to be those of measles were not realised, and that the exact nature of the attack was still obscure.

But the satisfaction caused by this reassuring bulletin was of short duration, and on the Thursday the news got about that the dauphin himself was attacked by the fever, and that the doctors insisted upon his keeping his room. He appears, at this stage of matters, to have been designedly misled as to the real gravity of the dauphine's condition, which was now critical in the highest degree—so much so, indeed, that her Jesuit confessor, père de la Rue, recommended confession. The dauphine acquiesced in silence, and the reverend father, recognising in this a hint that she would prefer the offices of some other confessor, at once offered to give way. The dauphine then requested that M. Bailly, priest of the Versailles parish mission, should be sent for.

On inquiry, it appeared that M. Bailly had gone to Paris. The dauphine then asked for père Noel, who was instantly summoned. These circumstances aroused a great deal of excitement in the palace, which was not diminished by the news that the confession had been of prolonged duration.

Finally, the announcement was made that the dauphine had received extreme unction and the viaticum.

In the evening a consultation of no fewer than seven of the court physicians was held. The dauphine was bled again, and an emetic administered. Nevertheless, the fever returned at night with increased severity, and the symptoms during the night were of the most alarming character.

In the morning the king, who had gone over to Marly, came to make his usual visit of inquiry, but the dauphine was only partially conscious. The king stayed some little time and then returned, followed by a crowd of courtiers, to his carriage, in order to go back to Marly.

Five minutes afterwards M. Bondin came out of the dauphine's bedroom, and found the salon empty, save for a couple of grooms of the chambers. He stopped and spoke to one of them in a low voice.

"Announce that madame la duchesse de Bourgogne has just passed away," he said. "I am going to monseigneur."

At this moment M. de Torcy entered the salon and was met by the news of the dauphine's death. He went up to M. Bondin, and asked,

"Has monseigneur been informed, M. Bondin?"

"I am on my way to him, M. le marquis."

"It will be a terrible blow. Have you see him to-day yet?"

"Yes—two hours ago. He is decidedly ill, but it is too early yet to say what is the matter."

"Let me see you after your interview. The chancellor happens to be at Fontainebleau, and I must send a courier after his majesty to Marly."

The minister and the doctor parted, and the salon was left empty. Everyone had gone to give or send the news to other people, and the courtyard echoed with the clatter of mounted messengers departing at a gallop. Presently the marquis came back, and went towards the dauphin's room. Here he met M. Bondin coming out. The doctor stopped, and went back a pace or two into the room.

"He is here, monseigneur," he said to the duc de Bourgogne.

"Come in, M. de Torcy," called out the dauphin, in a hoarse voice.

The marquis went in rather reluctantly, and found the dauphin standing by the fireplace in his dressing-gown. It seemed to de Torcy that he had aged ten years since the

preceding day, and he looked dreadfully ill. Perhaps no one at court had been less prepared than himself for the doctor's news, and for the moment he was completely crushed by it. The most devoted attachment had always existed between the royal couple, and the dauphine's many excellent and valuable qualities had met with the warmest appreciation from her husband. While historians are agreed that no heir to the throne of France was ever characterised by the gifts of statesmanship, political wisdom, indefatigable industry, goodness of heart, and rectitude of principle in so remarkable a degree as the duc de Bourgogne, it is no less certain that there was only one voice as to the dauphine's qualifications for filling the place of consort to the future head of the monarchy.

The marquis bowed to the dauphin in silence, and the latter, looking at de Torcy with haggard eyes, asked,

"You have heard, marquis?"

"With the greatest grief, monseigneur."

"I cannot talk about it, marquis. But it is impossible for me to remain in this place. I always detested it, as you know, and now——"

He was silent for a moment, and then went on,

"I stay here to-day, to do what is necessary, and in the morning I return to Marly. His majesty will certainly require my presence, and my children are in perfectly safe hands with madame de Ventadour."

"I tell monseigneur he is by no means fit to leave the palace," said M. Bondin earnestly. "I have requested monseigneur to get the opinion of M. Fagon or M. Maréchal."

The dauphin waved his hand wearily.

"Enough, my dear doctor," he said. "I do not dispute your judgment. But having done your duty, let me do mine, while I am able. My place is with the king just now. Adieu, gentlemen."

The marquis and the doctor bowed and went out.

"How do you find him?" asked de Torcy, as they went along the corridor.

"Much as yesterday," grumbled the doctor. "There is no more fever than there was last night. But after a shock like this, a man should be careful."

"I am going direct to Marly, and I will tell his majesty what you say."

"Do," said the doctor. "If the king won't believe me, let him send that brute Fagon."

M. Fagon, it would appear, was a miracle of unpopularity,

not only with his professional brethren, but with everyone else at court except his august employer.

By this time the two gentlemen had entered the dauphin's salon, and found there the duc de Berri, brother of the dauphin, talking to mesdames de Valincour and de Ventadour. The latter held by the hand the dauphin's eldest son, the little duc de Bretagne, who was crying bitterly. The duc de Berri looked very doleful and very frightened.

"This is a terrible affair, doctor," he said nervously. "I am glad the duchesse did not accompany me this morning, and thus learn the news without the slightest preparation. We are none of us well. I, myself, feel much indisposed. Doctor, do me the favour to examine my tongue and pulse. I am sure I have a little fever."

M. Bondin went through the usual formalities.

"There is nothing much the matter with you, M. le duc," said he, "so far as I can see. How do you feel?"

"I feel enormously thirsty," replied the duke. "That convinces me that I have fever. And I dare not drink wine, lest it should raise the temperature."

"Water will not have that effect," said the doctor rather impatiently.

"M. de Chevreuse has been telling us all that the water of Versailles is very unwholesome, my dear doctor."

"Try milk or lemonade, M. le duc," said the doctor, going off without ceremony.

"Milk does not agree with me," observed the duc de Berri solemnly. "I think I might venture upon lemonade—it is cooling for fevers, without doubt."

There were no attendants present, and madame de Valincour offered to fetch a glass of lemonade for the duke.

"It is very good of you, comtesse," he said, smiling feebly. "I am ashamed to have to trouble you. Have you seen monseigneur my brother, M. le marquis?"

M. de Torcy was not anxious to listen to the duc de Berri's platitudes, so he made a move to the door.

"I have just left him, M. le duc, and am on my way to Marly. Adieu, monsieur—adieu, mesdames."

The marquis bowed to the group, and left the salon by one door as madame de Valincour disappeared by the other.

The next morning at seven o'clock the duc de Bourgogne, leaving his children behind in the care of their gouvernantes, mesdames de Ventadour and de Villefort, went away to Marly.

This country seat was a gulf into which millions of money had been flung by Louis XIV. When the king, looking out for a remote rustic hermitage, discovered Marly, it was a wretched village on the slope of some hills which enclosed a deep, narrow valley, filled with swamps. At first the royal habitation was a mere cottage, intended to accommodate the king and his party of not more than a dozen courtiers from Wednesday to Saturday, twice or thrice a year. Gradually it was turned into a place which endeavoured to rival Fouquet's magnificent château at Vaux. From Compiègne and farther, great trees were unceasingly brought, of which three quarters died the year they were transported. Plantations, basins, carp-ponds, terraces, and cascades were made and unmade a hundred times over, while forests had been changed into lakes, and lakes back again into forests, in half a dozen weeks.

For many years an invitation to Marly had represented the seventh heaven to the average *habitué* of Versailles or St. Germain; while the words, "Marly, sire!" had been the very first to start from the tongue of any courtier to whom the king seemed inclined to be exceptionally gracious. But since the château had been relegated to the use, first of the *fainéant* Monseigneur, and then of his son the duc de Bourgogne, much of its sacrosanct character had vanished, and a sojourn there was no longer regarded as a thing for which to sell one's soul.

Arrived at Marly the dauphin found his indisposition decidedly aggravated, and for the first time the serious elements in the situation began to be realised by the court and the public. Hitherto the duc de Bourgogne had enjoyed a robustness of health which he seemed to inherit rather from his grandfather than from his father, and the problem of a possible failure in the direct succession had scarcely presented itself for consideration. But now it was seen that the dynasty was liable to be faced by perils of the first magnitude. After the old king and the dauphin, the succession went directly to a lad of six years old. This would involve all the evils and risks of a long regency, not under the wise and beloved mother who now lay dead at Versailles, but under the fatuous duc de Berri, or possibly even under madame de Maintenon and her detested Jesuits. Thus the news of the dauphin's danger, and the alarm occasioned by it, spread far and wide and the popular excitement brought back to people's minds the paroxysm of emotion which swept over the country when

the king's life, in 1686, hung upon the single hair of a dangerous operation.

The dauphin got steadily worse. The fever increased, and he was devoured by a consuming fire. The same symptoms of measles exhibited themselves as had been noticed in the case of the dauphine, and again the doctors decided that that disease was not present. On the 17th M. Cheverny, who was apothecary both to the king and the duc de St. Simon, came to Versailles to tell the latter that the condition of the duc de Bourgogne was critical. Couriers constantly passed and repassed between Marly, Versailles, and Paris, and the gloomiest forebodings filled the court and the capital.

All through the night of February 17th the streets were thronged with citizens waiting to hear the latest news, and the churches held midnight services to pray for the patient's recovery.

At half-past eight on Thursday, the 18th, six days after his wife, the duc de Bourgogne died.

With the announcement of the dauphin's death came the news that the king was utterly prostrated by the events of the week, and could not be even approached on the subject of the future regency. Meanwhile, M. de Torcy, who had been constantly passing between Marly and Paris, was nearly beside himself with grief and anxiety.

Almost daily since the New Year his secret despatches from England had been full of disturbing statements and rumours concerning the action of the government and the Whig supporters of the duke of Marlborough. The peace negotiations at Utrecht were making no progress. This was mainly owing to the unpreparedness of lord Strafford and the bishop of Bristol, the British plenipotentiaries. These gentlemen had not sufficient instructions in regard to the vital article concerning Spain, and were waiting for Mr. Matthew Prior to bring them. In their absence, nothing of any real importance could be effected in the way of a settlement.

In the meantime, prince Eugène, long ago pressed to come over to England and support the war-party in their struggle with the Tory ministry, had delayed his arrival until it was too late to prevent the fall of the duke of Marlborough. He arrived at Gravesend on January 5th, prepared to embarrass lord Oxford with splendid offers from the emperor to induce the ministry to continue the war against France. Great Britain was to have an absolute monopoly of the commerce with Spain

and with Spanish America; the imperial army in Spain was to be raised to thirty thousand men; and a sum of a million crowns was to be at once added to the war-chest of the Allies. Coupled with these offers was the threat that if either House of Parliament, in opposition to the Tory ministry, accepted the emperor's terms, the elector of Hanover would forthwith pass over into England with an army, and a revolution would be got up in his favour in order to carry on a *guerre à l'outrance* against the house of Bourbon.

But the news by which the prince was met on his arrival made this programme of little avail. The war-party was now in a minority in both Houses, the duke of Marlborough was no longer in a position to second the emperor's views, and the Whigs were too much at variance amongst themselves to be able to agree upon any settled policy. The prince received an immense ovation from the people of London, due equally to his world-wide military reputation, his handsome person, and his gallant and genial bearing. But this did not at all make up for the cold politeness he met with at the audience given him by the queen, or for the impenetrable reserve of lord Oxford.

The prince was, therefore, grievously disappointed, and in his first conversations with Marlborough and baron von Bothmar he complained bitterly of the changed condition of affairs in England. This annoyed Marlborough, who was certainly the greatest sufferer by recent events.

"Permit me, prince, to remark," he said, "that all this would have been different if your visit had been made four or five weeks earlier. It is quite three months since the imperative necessity of it was represented to you. At that time we held the House of Lords, and could easily have sent a batch of the peace peers to the Tower. Now, it seems to me, we can do nothing without the elector, and it is for M. de Bothmar to speak on that point."

"I will ask you to lay your own views before the prince first, my dear duke," replied Bothmar, who did not enjoy solitary responsibilities.

"If you invite my opinion," said Marlborough, "the state of things appears to me very much on a par with that of 1688. The people detest popery just as much now as they did then, and have precisely the same idea that its restoration is in the air."

"Assuming all that, duke?" inquired Eugène, biting his nails.

"I am convinced," replied the duke, "that the elector—or the electoral prince,* if you prefer it—should issue a manifesto announcing that the Pretender is on his way to effect an invasion with a popish army. We should follow up this by his immediate presence in this country to support the protestant cause. The mob will be sufficiently enraged against the Jacobites and Tories to compel the queen to fly like her father. Then the way will be clear for a Whig government and the renewal of the war."

As this programme was a very obvious invitation to Bothmar and his master to pull the chestnuts out of the fire for the benefit of the Whigs, the baron did not receive it with any enthusiasm.

"I cannot agree with you, my dear duke," he said. "The people will not swallow the idea of a popish invading army without seeing or hearing more of it. They know, too, that whatever feeling the queen may have for her brother, whom she has never seen, she is herself fanatically protestant. Moreover, the slightest hitch or failure in such a scheme would load my august master with the popular hatred, and fatally prejudice the chances of the Guelph succession. What we want is something quite different."

"Let us hear your plan, then, baron," said Eugène impatiently.

"It seems to me, prince," replied Bothmar, "that as all our difficulties are caused by one or two persons in the government——"

"Well, baron?"

"The simplest course would be to get those persons out of the way."

"One objection to that," remarked Eugène, "is that we, as the obvious instigators of such a measure, would become detested at once."

"That need not quite follow," said Marlborough. "But, in any case, it would be better to hire a few score of ruffians and send them about the streets at night, insulting folks, raising disturbances, and exciting mobs. After people have got accustomed to these nightly scenes of violence, any little accident happening to our friends at Downing Street would be fathered upon the rowdies and not upon us."

"All this, gentlemen," objected Eugène, "appears to me to leave too much to mere chance. We must take the bull by the horns. I presume, duke, it will quite readily happen

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that the guards on duty at St. James's palace may some night
 be commanded by an officer favourable to our cause?"

"Without doubt," replied the duke. "I could name
 several."

"Very good. Then I suggest that on such a night we
 arrange to set fire to London in various places and to the
 palace. In the confusion, the duke shall arrive at the head
 of an armed party, seize the Tower, the Bank, and the person
 of the queen, compel her to dissolve the present parliament
 and summon another, and impeach the ministry for clandestine
 correspondence with France. What do you say to that,
 duke?"

Marlborough rose, as if to hint that the discussion might be
 adjourned.

"All this makes a considerable demand upon me, prince,"
 he said, "and I should like to consult my friends before
 replying."

The prince could not very well demur to this, and the
 conference broke up. But when some of the Whig leaders,
 notably lords Somers, Cowper, and Halifax, were informed of
 the prince's proposals, they absolutely refused to entertain
 them for a moment, and were only willing that Bothmar
 should issue a special representation, on the part of the
 elector, against the peace. The baron, who had the warmest
 approval for schemes of the Whigs in which he was not
 expected to take part, declined to move personally without
 express orders from the elector, on the ground that he would
 risk his head by so doing.

As Eugène found that nothing could be expected from the
 initiative of the Whigs or of the Hanoverian envoy, he made
 a fresh proposition. This was that the elector should be
 appointed generalissimo of the troops in Flanders and
 governor-general of the Netherlands, and that his eldest son,
 the electoral prince, should come over to England to place
 himself at the head of the Whigs.

Both Marlborough and his bosom friend Godolphin opposed
 this idea vehemently. They told Eugène that the Tories,
 whether Jacobites or not, were anti-Guelph to a man, and
 that for the electoral prince to come over while a Tory
 ministry was in office meant simply that the Act of Settlement
 would be at once abrogated, and the status of the elector
 under it would be extinguished for ever. All this was no
 doubt true; but it was an open secret that Marlborough's real
 objection to the prince's last programme was that it would

place the elector in precisely the place which the duke intended to reserve for himself in case of emergency.

The prince thus found himself repulsed on all sides, and angrily accused his fellow-conspirators of being at heart nothing but republicans who were determined to have no king at all, Guelph or Stuart.

It happened very conveniently for the ministry (and also for the historian) that these various conversations were reported to them regularly as they occurred. For some months past a certain Irish Jesuit named Plunket, who had been brought up at Vienna, and was an intimate friend of the comte de Galas' secretary, had extracted from that functionary copies of the ambassador's correspondence with the emperor. Obtaining an introduction to lord Oxford through William Penn, the Quaker, he laid these letters before him. The lord-treasurer took them to the queen, with the result that they at once settled with her the question of making a separate peace with France at all costs.

As Eugène promptly conveyed the details of his various conferences to the ambassador, who forthwith wrote about them to his imperial master, the information in question at once passed to his peccant secretary, then to Plunket, and finally to lord Oxford. The ministry were, therefore, perfectly familiar with all the stages of the intrigue, and in consequence took every precaution to guard against a *coup d'état*.

During the celebration of the queen's birthday, February 17th, the gates of St. James's palace were closed, the guards were doubled, and several detachments of cavalry were stationed in the neighbourhood. Under the pretext of safe-guarding prince Eugène against the expected pressure of the mob, some troops were appointed to attend him; but these were in reality intended to act as spies. The queen had been terribly frightened by one of the latest suggestions of the more reckless Whigs, who had proposed to raise a tumult in the crowded streets, to force a way into the treasury, and to assassinate Oxford, St. John, and the lord-chancellor Harcourt. To reassure her majesty, and also to be on the safe side himself, Oxford occupied apartments in the palace, while Harcourt and St. John took care not to leave their houses after dark. But all the three were careful to keep the cause of these precautions rigorously secret, and thus probably averted a serious popular outbreak.

While these more private matters were going on, the proceedings in parliament were not running altogether smoothly

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for the ministry. The Commons had taken up with eagerness the charges against Marlborough. They resolved that the duke had been guilty of unwarrantable and illegal practices, ordered the attorney-general to prosecute him, and expelled his secretary Cardonnel from his seat in the House. But in the Lords a new difficulty had arisen.

On January 17th the queen had sent the Peers a message, recommending the reconsideration of the duke of Hamilton's patent. But many of the government supporters were not particularly in love with these backstair patents, so long as a majority could be got out of direct English creations. The duke's peerage was, therefore, so often before the house, without any decision being come to, that the Scottish peers struck work in a body, declaring that they would no longer sit in an assembly which refused to recognise their constitutional rights. Thus the Whig opposition, to its amazement and delight, found itself once more in a majority. This it at once proceeded to utilise, and on the evening of February 15th the abbé Gaultier sent by an express messenger the following letter to M. de Torcy :

"M. LE MARQUIS,

I hasten to inform you that this afternoon the House of Lords carried, by a large majority, a motion brought forward by lord Halifax, to the effect that an address should be presented to her majesty 'signifying the indignation felt by the House at the specific terms offered by the French plenipotentiaries * at Utrecht on February 1st, on behalf of his majesty Louis XIV.'; and promising 'to stand by and assist her majesty with their lives and fortunes, in prosecuting the war with the utmost vigour.'

GAULTIER DE BEAUVAL."

This letter reached the marquis a few hours after the duc de Bourgogne had breathed his last. For some minutes he was overwhelmed with this new disaster, and remained in a stupor looking at the letter as it lay where he had dropped it on the floor. Then he picked it up, and went to the apartment of madame de Maintenon, who happened to be alone.

"Madame," he said, handing her the letter, "I am really afraid to tell the king of this. The very stars in their courses seem to be fighting against us."

The marquise, who had been a good deal upset by the

* Maréchal d'Uxelles and the abbé de Polignac.

deaths of the dauphine and the dauphin, read the letter with a haggard face.

"Say rather, M. le marquis," she replied, "that it is the hand of Providence, the judgment of Heaven upon us for tolerating in our midst that demon the duc d'Orléans. What can one expect otherwise?"

In his grief and anxiety the marquis quite lost patience at this diatribe.

"Pooh! madame," he snapped, taking the letter back brusquely, "there are worse people than M. d'Orléans. Let us talk a little sense."

The marquise drew herself up, and her eyes glittered malignantly.

"Do you then wish me to believe, M. le marquis, that you have no suspicions?"

"Suspicions, madame? What about?"

"As to the author of these fatalities?"

"You have just attributed them to Providence, madame."

"Providence may in its wisdom employ agents, M. le marquis."

"Agents, madame?"

"Yes, monsieur—willing agents, who are none the less accursed because they are willing."

"I do not understand you, madame. Be more explicit."

The marquis bit her lips.

"Since you prefer to ignore what is under your eyes, M. le marquis, I will point out to you that if M. le duc d'Orléans intends to make his daughter queen of France, he has undoubtedly made a very fine beginning."

CHAPTER XLIV

WHAT M. DE TORCY HEARD AT CALAIS

THE marquis could scarcely restrain his indignation at this innuendo.

"Good heavens! madame," he said, "that is a monstrous thing to say—if you are serious."

"If I am serious, monsieur? Is that the sort of thing that passes for a jest with you?"

"At all events, madame, jest or earnest, I beg that you will keep your theory to yourself till you have better grounds

for it. If M^r d'Orléans is to be credited with everything that brings M. de Berri nearer to the succession, you may as well accuse him of getting rid of the late king of Spain and of Monseigneur."

"Monsieur, you may think as you please. But what would you say if anything happened to the duc de Bretagne or the duc d'Anjou?"

"It is quite enough, madame, to lose two heirs to the monarchy in less than a twelvemonth, without speculating upon the utterly improbable contingency you mention. What is at present the only thing of consequence is the constitution of the regency which must, in the ordinary course of things, be called upon before very long to govern the country."

This was the first feeler the marquise had thrown out upon the subject to the marquis, and he hoped that she would give some hint of her own intentions in connection with it. Everybody knew that her devotion to the cause of the Jesuits was only rivalled by her determination to advance at all costs the interests of the two sons of the king whom she had brought up, and who supplied to her the place of children of her own. These were the surviving sons of madame de Montespan, the duc du Maine and the comte de Toulouse, who had been from the cradle so entirely in the hands of madame de Maintenon that their own mother had never at any time meant anything to them whatever. It was the common talk that, sooner or later, the marquise would succeed in squeezing her foster-children into the charmed circle of recognised royalty, and thereby make a counterweight to the claims of the duc de Berri and the duc d'Orléans. The death of the dauphin had immediately been followed by rumours that the two bastards were to be put upon a council of regency at the very least, and voices were not wanting to aver that the whole pressure of the king's Jesuit *entourage* would be exercised to secure for the duc du Maine the sole regency. On the other hand, this intrusion would be such an outrage on the legitimate princes in the direct line, to say nothing of the great princes of the blood, the duc de Bourbon-Condé, the prince de Conti, and the duc de Vendôme, that few people expected the king could be won over to consent to it. But, in either case, it was obvious that recent events had enormously added to the probable importance of the Maintenon party in the future politics of the monarchy.

The marquise, however, refused to be drawn by M. de Torcy's hint and contented herself with saying,

"As to that, M. le marquis, it is evident we must wait. You are aware that his majesty is quite unable to tolerate any allusion to the subject, much less take part in its discussion. I think M. Gaultier's letter must stand over for the moment, also."

"We must not forget, madame, that this Gaultier has become a much more important person of late. Lord Oxford seems to cherish him as the apple of his eye—why, I cannot imagine. But it is certain that he is much more behind the scenes than he used to be. Of course, it is quite understood that d'Uxelles and de Polignac have been bluffing egregiously at Utrecht."

"We were practically invited to do all that by lord Oxford," remarked the marquise.

"Without doubt. But if he cannot do better than get at loggerheads with these Scotch peers, and thus lose his majority at a most critical period, we must reconsider our tactics. It would be a fine thing to hear some morning that he had been impeached for accepting terms that we ourselves were laughing at. That, however, is not the worst."

"What else, M. le marquis?"

"It is the position of matters with regard to the regency. Suppose—which Heaven forbid!—that his majesty were to die to-morrow, is it not certain that the king of Spain, as head of the family, would at once put in a claim to be sole regent?"

"But that would be monstrous!" cried the marquise unguardedly.

"Precisely what they would say over in England, madame," rejoined the marquis. "After throwing over the Allies because the Austrian claimant to the throne of Spain has in the meantime actually become emperor of Germany, do you suppose for a moment that Oxford could persuade parliament to make terms with a regent of France who was at the same time king of Spain?"

The marquise promptly fell into this trap.

"M. le marquis," she said hastily, "you may rest assured his majesty will never nominate the king of Spain to the regency."

This was all the marquis had been fishing for.

"She is going to have the duc du Maine," he said to himself, as he rose to make his adieux.

"I hope you may prove a true prophet, madame," he

remarked aloud. "For, in spite of the ability of madame des Ursins, it would place us in a very awkward position. *A propos*, madame, it rather surprises me that you do not see the hand of the princesse in our deplorable bereavements—she has apparently the most to gain by them, so far. Adieu, madame."

With these Parthian shafts the marquis bowed himself out, leaving madame de Maintenon to fume over the bare idea of the Spanish *camerara mayor* coming back to Versailles to effect her former patron's political extinction.

The marquis went directly to the rooms he occupied at the château, where he found his secretary and nephew Lavalaye waiting for him.

"René," he said, "this news from England is very awkward, and there is so much time lost in going and coming between here and Calais that I think of staying there for a few days to intercept the despatches from London. Have you heard anything new?"

"People are whispering about the duc d'Orléans."

"*Pardieu!* the old woman has been blabbing already, then. Nothing else?"

"There is a good deal of talk of the duc du Maine as regent."

"That is another egg from the same nest—do your best to addle them while I am away. In any case, let me hear all the gossip. These reports are not set about for nothing, and Pontchartrain has a trick of being stone-deaf just when he ought to hear a fly walking."

Louis Phelippeaux, comte de Pontchartrain, was the chancellor. He had previously been secretary of state, was descended from a holder of the same office, and had a son who at this time held it. In fact, this function was filled by his family uninterruptedly during the hundred and sixty-five years between 1610 and 1775—in modest emulation of the Montmorencis, dukes of Luxembourg, who had furnished an almost unbroken series of marshals and constables of France since the eleventh century.

The marquis in due course arrived at Calais, and presented himself, as in duty bound, at the governor's house. He made arrangements to send over messages at once to London, informing Gaultier and other agents that despatches were to be addressed to Calais for the next few days, and inquiring for details of the deadlock with the Scotch peers. A little later he and M. Daguerre went into the salon, where they found

mademoiselle Victoire waiting for them. The marquis delivered the compliments of M. René de Lavalaye, which the young lady acknowledged with a curtsy.

"Have you told M. le marquis the news?" she asked of her father, as soon as the conventions had been duly attended to.

"What news, my dear?" inquired the governor, who had heard a good many things lately.

"About our guest of two months back, M. Gwynett."

"*Parbleu!* no—it had slipped my memory. A deplorable affair, M. le marquis. Did you happen to hear of it?"

"I have heard nothing of M. Gwynett since he left France," replied de Torcy. "What has happened?"

"Something incredible, monstrous, frightful!" cried Victoire. "M. Gwynett has been hung."

"What! murdered?" exclaimed the marquis.

"No—executed on the gallows!"

The marquis looked at Victoire with an air of stupefaction.

"Impossible!" he ejaculated finally.

"Unfortunately, there appears to be no doubt about it," said the governor. "My dear, find that newspaper for M. le marquis."

Victoire brought out a London broadsheet, dated February 7th, which contained an account of the execution at Maidstone, and gave all the known details of the supposed murder.

"This reached us with a parcel of others from England about a week ago," went on M. Daguerre. "I intended to inform you of the matter, but these terrible events at court put it out of my head. You see, it is quite circumstantial—Ambrose Gwynett of Thornhaugh. That was his name and place, was it not?"

The marquis perused the paper with amazement and indignation.

"It is perfectly scandalous," he said. "M. Gwynett murder a companion for the sake of a few louis d'or! Nothing will induce me to believe it. In fact, these people seem to have been in too much of a hurry. How could they be sure anybody was murdered at all?"

"That is rather a curious point, M. le marquis. We have had a man here who seemed to know a good deal about the affair. He was at this Deal inn on the night in question. There appears to have been an eye-witness of the actual encounter between the two men, and it was he who instigated

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the arrest of M. Gwynett. Nevertheless, this witness did not appear at the trial, or even at the examination before the magistrate."

"That seems remarkable. Who is your informant?"

"An English smuggler who does a little business now and again in carrying letters across the Channel. He is the man who has started with your letters."

The marquis looked mechanically at the paper for some moments, and then laid it down with a lugubrious sigh.

"This is really a shock to me, my dear governor. I had a great regard for that young fellow. He was one of the only two or three men that I have met in all Europe who gave me the instinctive feeling that they were equal to any conceivable emergency. It takes a great deal off one's mind to have that kind of person within reach, I can assure you—when it happens."

"We ourselves were greatly taken with him," remarked M. Daguerre, for himself and his daughter.

"It makes me quite uncomfortable to think of a little prophecy I made him the first day he came to Versailles," said the marquis. "I told him he was, like Polycrates, too lucky, and that some disaster was certainly awaiting him. We had a joke about that brig he brought from Cadiz, to the effect that he was not to sink it by way of conciliating fortune."

"Ah! the *Fleur de Lys*—that reminds me of something else I was going to tell you. We sent the brig under convoy to Ostend, as I daresay you recollect, and delivered her to a consignee there named by yourself in your instructions."

"Certainly," said the marquis.

"The boatswain of my galley, an Ostend man named Lestraade, has a cousin at that port, a sailor, who was engaged as one of the crew, to take this *Fleur de Lys* from Ostend to Scheveningen and thence to London."

"Well?" asked the marquis a little anxiously.

"It appears this cousin and his mates got very drunk, and set the brig on fire after leaving Scheveningen. She burnt to the water's edge, and then sank."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the marquis. "Was anything of the cargo saved?"

"I really do not recollect that she had any cargo," replied the governor. "In any case, I think that nothing could have been saved. The captain and crew were taken off in the nick

of time by a Nantucket cod-schooner, which landed the Flemish sailors at the Texel, and took the captain on to Deal. Curiously enough, the people of the schooner were some sort of relatives of the captain of the brig."

The marquis remained silent, thinking over the bearings of this new intelligence.

"Our disasters seem never to be ended," he said to himself. "It is just possible the duke transferred the chests to some other hiding-place before he left the Hague. But if he did not, then that million sterling is at the bottom of the sea, and we have beggared ourselves for nothing. He will betray us without scruple if he has lost the money. I should very much like to know if he had heard the news when he refused to close with Galas."

This latter piece of information, it may be said, had reached the marquis through the fourfold agency of the ambassador's secretary, Plunket, lord Oxford, and the abbé Gaultier, after the fashion detailed in the previous chapter.

"Where is this cousin of Lestraade's?" asked the marquis finally.

"I have no idea," replied M. Daguerre. "But Lestraade himself is downstairs, if you would like to see him."

"I should," said the marquis.

M. Daguerre sent for the boatswain, who promptly made his appearance, and answered M. de Torcy's questions to the best of his ability. But he could not recollect that his cousin, who had been in Calais and had since gone to Dunkerque, had spoken of any removal of cargo from the *Fleur de Lys* either at Ostend or Scheveningen.

"There is no doubt, M. le marquis," he said, "that they were all very drunk—so much so, indeed, that none of them recollect anything of the loss of the brig. It was lucky they were taken off, for they could not have helped themselves in the least. The Americans had to carry them off bodily—all, that is, except the captain—and they were still drunk when they were put on shore."

"Then how did you get to know the details?"

"From the captain, M. le marquis. He has been here twice lately."

"What is his name?"

"Kermode, the consignee of the brig at Ostend," put in the governor. "He is the smuggler I spoke of just now."

The marquis recollected that this was the person whose

name was brought to him by Cardonnel after he had parted from the duke at Ekeren.

"All this is curious," he cogitated to himself, "I rather wonder the duke has not thought fit to say something about it—after all, we only lent him the brig. Possibly he heard of the execution, and thought M. Gwynett had no further use for the ship. On the other hand, he is quite capable of removing those chests secretly, and afterwards sinking the brig to provide an excuse for jockeying us." Then he asked aloud,

"How often does this Kermode turn up here?"

"It is quite an accident, monsieur," replied Lestraade. "It depends upon business. He is well known to all the people of M. le chevalier de St. George, and sometimes he is fairly busy carrying letters and passengers across the channel. At other times one sees nothing of him for months."

"Let me know if he returns here before I leave," said the marquis, with a nod of dismissal.

Lestraade saluted and went out. Victoire, who had not found the later subjects of discussion very interesting, brought round the conversation to the recent events at Versailles and Marly, and catechised the marquis as exhaustively as she dared upon the various details of the circumstances in question. The marquis did his best to satisfy her curiosity, and then begged to be allowed to retire for the night.

The next morning he found himself suffering from an attack of jaundice, brought on, as he conjectured, by nothing but worry. But he thought the change of air at the seaside would be likely to do him good, and so decided not to cut short his visit. For several days he crawled about, not ill enough to be compelled to take to bed, and too unwell to throw off the gloom which the disastrous occurrences of the last few days had inspired in him. The tragic termination to Gwynett's short career had come upon him with a shock all the greater from its entire unexpectedness, while the utter uncertainty in which he was plunged regarding the duke of Marlborough's intended action depressed his spirits to zero.

One morning, about a week after his arrival, he was driving down to the port with M. Daguerre, when the governor drew his attention to a short and enormously stout man who had just landed on the beach from a small lugger.

"That is Kermode," he said. "Probably he has letters for you. Will you speak to him?"

The marquis signified assent, and the footman was sent to

fetch up the captain, who was just about to go to the governor's house with the expected despatches. When he came up to the carriage, he saluted and handed over a package of letters.

"Captain," said the governor, "you can say you delivered your letters at first hand. This is M. de Torcy, for whom we convoyed that brig to Ostend. M. le marquis would be interested to hear a few particulars of the rescue of yourself and the crew when the ship was lost."

A peculiar expression, which the marquis felt himself unable to interpret, flashed for a moment across the captain's face.

"Quite at his honour's service," he replied, touching his forelock.

"Had you any cargo to discharge at Ostend or anywhere else, captain Kermode?" asked the marquis, in a careless tone.

"No, your honour. There were a couple of dozen puncheons of wine and spirits in the hold when I took her over, but they stayed there."

"Ah! And how did your men manage to lose you the brig?"

"Couldn't say for certain, your honour. Guess they broached the liquor casks and took a supply to the fo'castle. Anyhow, she was in a blaze up to the cross-trees before we sighted assistance, and all those fellows as drunk as a boiled owl, lying about like logs."

"It was lucky help was forthcoming. Relatives of yours, M. Daguerre tells me."

"The *Royal Mary*, your honour, of Nantucket, owned by four half-brothers of mine."

"Where did she come across you?"

"Off Texel, your honour. It was no use taking the Dutchmen to England, so we watched our chance of tide and wind, and rowed them ashore near Koog. They all got home safely, I believe."

"Was the *Fleur de Lys* afloat then?"

"No, your honour. Sunk half an hour after we left her, about five leagues from shore."

"Of course, you reported your loss in England?"

"Yes, your honour. Went to London to lord Marlborough."

"Why?" asked the marquis, who was rather startled at the open connection of the duke's name with the affair.

"Because we were under convoy of his ship, the *Mermaid*, your honour, and had orders to keep close. But we got separated by fog."

This reply relieved the marquis. Not knowing what might have passed between Marlborough and Kermodé as to the ownership of the *Fleur de Lys*, he decided to make no reference to this last matter. But he was desirous of learning something about Gwynett's arrest, and accordingly remarked,

"There was a curious affair, captain, that I have heard about from M. Daguerre—that murder at Deal. You were in the inn at the time, he tells me?"

"A little before, your honour—an hour or so."

"What was that story about an eye-witness of the murder?"

"Some fellow had a yarn about seeing the scuffle, your honour, and it was he that gave the alarm. But next day he was gone."

"Has he not been seen since?"

"Well, your honour, some folks said he turned up at the hanging. I don't know that I ever saw him myself. The people at the inn put him down for a Frenchman."

It did not appear that the captain could elucidate matters very much further, so the marquis dismissed him, and returned to the governor's house to decipher his despatches. These contained the intelligence that after a good deal of coaxing the Scotch peers had been persuaded to make up matters with lord Oxford, and had returned to their party allegiance in the House of Lords. On the other hand, the death of the duc de Bourgogne had as yet made no difference in the avowed intentions of the Tory ministry. As the need for his absence from court seemed to M. de Torcy to have for the present passed away, he decided that he would rather be indisposed at Versailles than at Calais. He therefore took his leave of the governor and his daughter, and set out on his return to Paris.

During the journey he had occasion to notice the increasing uneasiness manifested by the public at the state of matters in the political world. Everywhere the most sinister rumours were in circulation. The king was said to be dying, and the Jesuits were only awaiting his last breath to seize upon the government. The peace negotiations were broken off, and the Allies were in full march for the frontier, determined this time to carry out an actual invasion. The duc d'Orléans had placed himself at the head of an armed revolt against madame de Maintenon's party. The duc du Maine was already at the head of affairs, and was going to put the duc d'Orléans in the Bastille. To these *canards* was added, nearer Paris, the charge against the duc d'Orléans of poisoning the dauphin

and the dauphine, and in every village on the road groups of excited country folk were waiting for news and rumours from the capital.

It was between dusk and dark when M. de Torcy reached Paris, and the carriage had some difficulty in passing through the crowds that filled the streets, swaying to and fro, and forming in menacing groups opposite the hôtels of leading political personages. The marquis had been struggling for the last dozen hours against his indisposition and his increasing fatigue, and only wanted to get home and to bed. But the uproar in the streets, as they drove through the capital, induced him to let down the windows and ask the coachman if any news was abroad.

"M. le marquis," replied the man, "everybody is shouting Down with the duc d'Orléans! Death to the poisoners!"

"Go on straight to Versailles," said the marquis angrily, as he put up the window again. "This is all that old she-devil's work," he growled to himself.

The dozen miles to Versailles were nearly covered when the marquis noticed a succession of horsemen pass the carriage at full gallop. As they entered the town he was alarmed to notice that the approach to the palace was rendered almost impassable by the throng of by-standers, and he let down the window to ascertain the cause. He was still more alarmed when he observed that the crowd was silent, and that every face, as the carriage-lights flashed upon it, expressed grief, amazement, or horror. This silence made the marquis tremble.

The carriage arrived at the palace, and was entering the great courtyard, when the tolling of a bell fell upon the ears of the assembled multitude. A vast sob seemed to arise from the darkness, and cries broke the stillness which had hitherto reigned.

"Good God!" exclaimed the terrified marquis, as the carriage stopped, and the door was opened by Lavalaye, "what does all this mean, René? Has some new misfortune befallen us?"

Lavalaye seemed for a moment unable to speak.

"Monsieur," he said at length, "the dauphin, the duc de Bretagne, died ten minutes ago."

CHAPTER XLV

UNCLE AND NEPHEW

THE marquis learned later that the little dauphin had been increasingly ill for several days past, and that, by a curious fatality, three successive bulletins to this effect had failed to reach him—the first messenger having fallen ill on the road, and the two later ones having passed the marquis on his return journey without knowing it.

The death of a third heir to the monarchy was the signal for a vehement renewal of the attacks upon the duc d'Orléans which emanated from the party of madame de Maintenon and the duc du Maine, and the court was assiduously plied with rumours that the '*chambre ardente*' was to be reconstituted to inquire into the unparalleled fatalities which had overtaken the royal family.

The '*chambre ardente*' was a renewal by Louis XIV. of an old tribunal, employed at intervals since the time of Francis I. for the discovery and extirpation of heresy. The last court had been established in 1677 to investigate the wide-spread crimes which had followed upon the career of the notorious marquise de Brinvilliers, and which were chiefly associated with the equally notorious Catherine Montvoysin, *née* Deshayes, usually called La Voysin. To this woman half of the court and the parliament seemed at one time or other to have resorted, either to obtain poisons, to get rid of children whose impending arrival was inconvenient, or to celebrate the famous '*messes noires*' which were to secure the good offices of the Power of Evil in furtherance of their ambitions, their jealousies, or their hatreds. A perfect epidemic of murder, sorcery, and sacrilege raged through the fashionable world at this period under the auspices of the La Voysin gang. The peeresses de Vivonne (sister-in-law of madame de Montespan), de Bouillon, de Soissons (mother of prince Eugène), de Vitry, de Polignac, de Tingry, de Roure, de la Ferté, de Duras, the ducs de Vendôme and de Luxembourg, and scores of equally distinguished personages, were shown by the court to have patronised La Voysin for purposes in almost every case criminal. The bodies of two thousand five hundred children were admitted to have been disposed of in a furnace at the back of her cabinet. The number of cases of poisoning shown to have been carried out with her

assistance alarmed Louis XIV. beyond measure, and when it was finally discovered that madame de Montespan had been having '*messes noires*' performed for nearly nine years (after a fashion to be described later in this history) the terrified king abruptly ordered the '*chambre*' to close its proceedings forthwith. This was done, after the court had held over eight hundred sittings and taken action against three hundred and nineteen persons. La Voysin, her associates La Filastre, La Vigoureux, the abbé Guibourg, and about a dozen other priests, together with several of her clients, were burnt alive or otherwise executed, and for a generation afterwards her profession was practically extinguished.

But of late rumours had been current that the rôle of poisoning, sacrilege, and sorcery had found fresh performers, and that it was beginning to resume its claims to be extremely fashionable. The duc d'Orléans was said to be devoted to the practice of magic, and was freely accused of setting the worst possible example to society by his fondness for chemistry, which to the ordinary public began and ended with the study of toxicology.

The unheard-of fatalities in the royal household swelled these rumours into a clamorous chorus. The death of the 'petit dauphin,' accompanied by the alarming illness of the baby duc d'Anjou, now the heir to the throne, roused the whole population of Versailles and Paris to a frenzy of suspicion and denunciation. Thanks to the assiduous hints and innuendos of madame de Maintenon and the duc du Maine, nearly everyone believed that the duc d'Orléans intended to get rid of all the members of the royal family who stood in the way of the succession of his son-in-law the duc de Berri.

Luckily for the little duc d'Anjou, who was still at the breast, his gouvernantes the duchesses de Ventadour and de Villefort took a different view of the matter. These ladies openly ascribed the deaths of the duc de Bretagne and his parents to the incapacity of the doctors, and positively refused to allow them to interfere with the patient at all. They kept him warm, and nursed him with the utmost care. When the royal surgeons insisted upon bleeding him, the two ladies set the whole of the medical staff at defiance, threatening to barricade themselves and their charge in their rooms if a finger were attempted to be laid upon him by anyone except themselves. Whether Louis XV. ever entertained or expressed any gratitude to these faithful guardians of his babyhood, history unfortunately does not record.

At Marly the court was in a state of the greatest confusion and consternation. Reports were circulated every few minutes that the new dauphin was dying or dead. No one could see the king, and it was whispered that there were the most sinister reasons for this seclusion. The accusations against the duc d'Orléans meanwhile gained ground, and the demand for a new '*chambre ardente*' was vehemently made by all the Maintenon party.

About noon on the day following the death of the duc de Bretagne the courtiers were petrified by the announcement that the duc d'Orléans was entering the château. In two minutes this intelligence emptied all the state apartments of the building. Not a courtier would stay to run the risk of being seen by the duke, much less spoken to, and even the officials ran and hid themselves. The duke noticed this, as he pursued his solitary way towards the king's rooms, and smiled sardonically.

"*Diable!*" he said to himself, "it is interesting to observe in one's own person, the effect a ferret produces when he is turned into a rabbit-warren."

At this moment M. de St. Simon, who had heard of the duke's arrival, came into the grand gallery and hastened forward to meet him.

"Keep away, my dear duke!" cried d'Orléans, at the top of his voice. "Do you not see that I have the plague or something?"

St. Simon ignored this pleasantry, and came up, looking very much disturbed.

"M. le duc," he said, "I am thankful you have come. There are some atrocious things being said about you, and I verily believe I am the only man here who has dared to contradict them."

The duke shook St. Simon by the hand very cordially. "It is immensely plucky of you, my dear duke," he said, "although, between ourselves, I think you will make yourself rather impossible at court by even looking at me round a corner. What are the last little matters people put down to me?"

"If I may speak freely, M. le duc——"

"Tut! tut! is this an occasion for ceremony?"

"Well, then, M. le duc, it is whispered——"

"*Pardieu!* only whispered? They bawled as I came along, I assure you."

"Bawled what, M. le duc?"

"How the deuce should I know? Something about my having poisoned the Bourgognes and their two youngsters, very likely. *A propos*, how is the duc d'Anjou?"

"No worse, we hear. But what are you doing in this place?"

"I am going to pay my respects to the king, of course. I may have poisoned his majesty, you see, for all I know. I don't pretend to be wiser than other people."

M. de St. Simon looked very much alarmed.

"Permit me to urge, M. le duc, that you must really be careful. They talk here of nothing but the Bastille for you."

"*Pardieu!* that is lucky, for I came here, as it happens, on purpose to ask for a *lettre de cachet*. It is pleasant to find everybody of the same mind."

"A *lettre de cachet*?" echoed St. Simon.

"Why not?"

"Think of the scandal!"

"Pooh! my dear duke, do you suppose I am going to let these people talk, and do nothing more than talk? I will compel them to do one of two things—either they shall make themselves ridiculous, or they shall put me in the Bastille."

"The king will never consent to it."

"My dear duke, if I do not manage, within the next half-hour, to get sent to the Bastille, I give you leave to call me an imbecile. In the meantime, do me the favour to tell all your friends who have run away that the coast is clear, and that I am sorry to have inconvenienced them."

"But really, M. le duc——"

"And let everybody know what I have come for. Adieu for the present."

The duke nodded to St. Simon, and went on past the duc de Charost and his gentlemen of the guard into the king's ante-room. Here the duc de Tresmes, first gentleman of the bedchamber, was in attendance.

"Good day, my dear M. de Tresmes," said the duke. "How is his majesty this morning?"

"The indisposition is grave, M. le duc," replied de Tresmes, staring in astonishment at the unexpected visitor.

"Naturally," remarked the duke. "Will you be good enough, monsieur, to ask if his majesty will do me the honour to receive me?"

De Tresmes appeared aghast at this suggestion.

"I am afraid it is impossible, M. le duc," he stammered. "The king is really very ill, and receives no one."

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"Quite right, my dear M. de Tresmes. But, you see, my case is different, and it is absolutely necessary I should see his majesty."

De Tresmes had the fear of madame de Maintenon before his eyes, and was at his wit's end. But finally he bethought him of transferring the difficulty to someone else's shoulders.

"I will inquire from M. Bloin, M. le duc, if you will be so good as to wait," he said, moving towards the inner ante-chamber, where the first valet of the king was on duty.

"By all means," agreed the duke, following de Tresmes before the latter could prevent him. "Ah! my good M. Bloin, you are the very man. I have come to pay his majesty a visit."

The first valet bowed profoundly to the duke, and cast a side-glance at M. de Tresmes for instructions.

"His majesty has given orders on no account to be disturbed, M. le duc," he said, in reply to a sign from his colleague.

"So I understand, my dear M. Bloin. But probably he will tell you, when you ask him, that he will make an exception in my favour."

"A thousand pardons, M. le duc, but really I dare not——"

The duke made a movement to the *portières* of the inner doorway.

"Am I to announce myself, then, gentlemen?" he asked blandly.

"Good heavens, M. le duc!" cried the two functionaries simultaneously, "have a little consideration. Do you want to ruin us?"

"Not at all. I only want one of you to announce me."

"Impossible, M. le duc!" exclaimed the valet, in a quavering voice.

"See how unreasonable you are, gentlemen," observed the duke. "However, I am the last man in the world to make difficulties. If, as I understand you, gentlemen, I am not to be admitted——"

"I am sure M. le duc will excuse us," said de Tresmes, beginning to reassure himself.

The duke waved his hand graciously.

"Assuredly, monsieur," he said. "But as I must speak to the king, I will ask you two gentlemen to shut the outer doors there, while I shout my business to his majesty from where I stand. I am afraid I shall make a deuce of a row," added the duke cheerfully.

De Tresmes and the valet clasped their hands in horror.

"Monsieur cannot be serious!" cried Bloin.

"Serious, *parbleu!* Do you expect me to carry on a conversation through a stone wall without making a noise? How unreasonable you are—as I had the honour of remarking before."

Bloin looked despairingly at M. de Tresmes. But the latter was too stupefied at the duke's obstinacy to make any sign of dissent, so the valet turned towards the king's door with the air of a man mounting the scaffold.

"If M. le duc insists——" he said hesitatingly, with a look of final appeal, as he stood with his fingers on the handle.

"Of course I do, my dear M. Bloin. But be easy—I will explain to his majesty that I threatened to cut your throat if you refused. One has to act up to one's reputation, you know."

The valet looked unutterable reproaches at de Tresmes, and muttered, as he turned the handle,

"This is really the end of the world."

He opened the door, and passed into the king's room. As he did so, the duke, ignoring a pathetic exclamation from de Tresmes, put his foot between the door and the doorpost. The unhappy valet, not daring to prevent this manoeuvre, said in a trembling voice,

"Your majesty, M. le duc d'Orléans requests an audience."

There was a moment's pause, and the king's voice replied, in a curt tone,

"I cannot receive M. le duc."

"I regret to hear that, your majesty," remarked the duke blandly, through the doorway, "because my business is really of pressing importance. If your majesty prefers me to say what I have to say from this room, it is not I who have any objection."

There was an amount of veiled significance in the duke's remark which made de Tresmes and the valet look about for a place to hide themselves. No reply came from the king for a second or two, and then he called out, in a tone full of suppressed annoyance,

"In that case, I am at your service, M. le duc. Do me the favour to enter."

The duke came in, and the valet retired, shutting the door behind him. The king, who looked very haggard and depressed, was half lying, half sitting in the bed, propped up with pillows, but fully dressed, and the coverlet was strewn

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with papers. A slight swaying of the *portières* in a doorway opposite suggested that someone had just retired and left his majesty alone. The duke came forward and bowed profoundly, saying,

"Sire, deplorable events have happened since I last had the honour of speaking to your majesty—events which, under ordinary circumstances, would have made me refrain from intruding here."

The king glared at his nephew, and replied slowly,

"M. le duc, our terrible bereavements have shaken me much. I have to reserve the little strength I still possess for those matters which urgently concern my government. I will, therefore, ask you to be brief."

"It is on one of those matters I desired to consult your majesty. It appears, sire, that great crimes have been committed."

"What crimes, M. le duc?"

"The assassinations of monsieur and madame de Bourgogne, and of the duc de Bretagne—perhaps also of the duc d'Anjou."

"Assassinations!" ejaculated the king, in a husky voice.

"That is a terrible word, M. le duc."

"It seems to me, sire, that the thing is more terrible than the word. But if it is only the word which annoys your majesty—"

"Good God! M. le duc, what are you saying?"

"I am saying, sire, that if there is a question of assassination, it seems to me a little strange that there is no question of the assassins."

"M. le duc, it is you who talk of assassinations."

"Only I, sire?"

"What do you mean, monsieur?"

"Sire, has no one but myself suggested to your majesty that these terrible deaths have not been natural?"

"M. le duc, these are serious matters—"

"Surely your majesty can say one way or the other."

"Am I to be questioned, M. le duc?" asked the king indignantly.

"It is not necessary, sire. I am answered already, and I venture to remark to your majesty that those who talk about a crime usually talk also about the criminal."

"What criminal, monsieur?"

"Myself, sire—I presume."

The king sat straight up in bed, and looked at the duke with amazement.

"Are you out of your senses, monsieur?" he asked.

"It is not for me to say, sire. But if your majesty does not choose to be interested in discovering the assassin of three members of our house, that does not prevent other people being interested."

The king fell back upon his pillows, with his hands trembling. The duke kept his eyes on the bed, and his ears on the door behind him.

"M. le duc," said the king, in a strangled voice, "I am not equal to talking in enigmas. If you have anything to say, be explicit."

"By all means, sire. I have come for a *lettre de cachet*."

"For whom, monsieur?"

"For myself, sire."

"For what reason, monsieur?"

"It appears, sire, that I am the assassin we have been talking about. That is, I presume, reason enough."

The duke heard the door behind him open and close.

"You the assassin, M. le duc?" stammered the king.

"So they say, sire."

"They say—who?"

"A good many people, I hear, sire. Madame de Maintenon and M. du Maine, for instance. Of course, it would not become me to contradict them."

"M. le duc," said the voice of the marquise behind him, "that is an outrageous assertion."

"Ah! good day, madame la marquise," said the duke, bowing. "Which is outrageous, madame? your assertion, or my assertion of your assertion?"

"You have listened to mischief-makers, M. le duc," said the marquise, with a virtuous air.

"I accept your statement, madame. Certainly, you ought to know."

"It is easy to be evasive, M. le duc," said the marquise angrily, and turning very red.

"You are an excellent judge, madame," replied the duke, who thought he saw his way to a serviceable explosion. "But all this does not bring me any nearer to my *lettre de cachet*. Use your good offices, madame, with his majesty to get me put in the Bastille and interrogated as a poisoner, on the accusation of yourself and M. du Maine. *Pardieu!* you may be right after all—who knows? It is difficult for the most estimable person to escape from the influence of his surroundings, and of the examples set before him from infancy."

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"What on earth are you talking about, monsieur?" cried the king unguardedly.

"Why, sire, is it not clear that M. de Bourgogne and his son stood in the way of my daughter becoming queen of France? and that the duc d'Anjou, whom it appears I have also poisoned, still stands in the way? Surely, when it is a question of getting rid of inconvenient people, it would not become me to affect greater scruples than the heads of my house?"

"I asked you to be explicit, M. le duc," said the king, in a tone of extreme irritation.

"Well, for instance, sire, after madame la marquise had abjured the reformed religion in order to marry the late esteemed M. Scarron, was it not quite natural that she should arrange to butcher forty thousand of your majesty's Cevennois subjects, because they had the bad taste to refuse to follow her example?"

"Sire," cried the marquise malignantly, "it is unhappily nothing new for M. d'Orléans to be impious."

"Or again, sire," proceeded the duke, "when her late majesty the queen, mademoiselle de Fontanges, and various other people were very much in the way of madame la marquise de Montespan, was it not a question of a good many '*messes noires*' being celebrated to put matters straight?"

"This is intolerable, M. le duc!" cried the king, turning pale at the reminiscence, and trembling all over.

"Then, sire, if I recollect right, you yourself thought fit to commission messieurs Grandval and Barclay to cut the throat of King William III.—though, to be sure, he was not exactly one of the family."

The blood rushed back to the king's face, and he became purple with fury.

"Enough, M. le duc—enough! What do you want?"

"I, sire? Nothing! It is madame la marquise and M. du Maine who want to have me comfortably disposed of at la Grève, and I have come here only to oblige them. Let all things be done decently and in order—as madame would say."

"You blaspheme, monsieur!" cried the exasperated marquise.

"Madame, you correct me. Sire, let things be done indecently—to please madame la marquise. Send me to the Bastille, sire, and then madame la marquise and my cousin

du Maine can prove to your majesty's satisfaction—whatever your majesty chooses to have proved."

"Retire to your house, M. le duc," said the king, hoarse with passion.

"At once, sire. And my *lettre de cachet*?"

"It shall follow you immediately."

"Your majesty lays me under infinite obligations. Adieu, sire—adieu, madame."

The duke bowed, and disappeared before either the king or the marquise could get the last word. He found St. Simon waiting in the gallery, with a face full of anxiety.

"I hope I have not been over the half-hour, my dear friend," he said.

"I have been on thorns, M. le duc," replied St. Simon. "What has happened?"

"Just what I expected."

"*Diable!* and as to the Bastille?"

"That is all right. I am on my way there now."

CHAPTER XLVI

HOW M. D'ORLÉANS RETURNED TO THE PALAIS-ROYAL

AT the instant that the duc d'Orléans was entering the king's room after his argument with de Tresmes and Bloin, a letter was placed in the hands of the comtesse de Valincour, who was sitting in her own room leading out of the late duchesse de Bourgogne's salon.

No arrangements had as yet been made for disposing of the *personnel* of the households of the dauphin and dauphine, and all the courtiers and others who had been on the Marly establishment looked to the goodwill of madame de Maintenon to find or make vacancies for them elsewhere. As the Bourgogne *entourage* had always been rigorously independent of that of the king, this state of things naturally went very much to strengthen the hands of the marquise, and to sweep away what little support might hitherto have been accorded to the duc d'Orléans at Marly. The result was made sufficiently obvious by the fashion in which the duke had just been received at the château.

The comtesse opened her letter, and read :

"MADAME,

M. le duc has just entered the château to demand a *lettre de cachet* for the purpose of compelling an investigation of the rumours set afloat which connect him with certain recent events. You, may, perhaps, have the opportunity of giving publicity to this initiative of M. d'Orléans. I kiss your hands.

G. DUBOIS."

"That is a good stroke of the abbé's," said the comtesse to herself. She burnt the letter, and went into the salon, which was full of members of the household and visitors from Versailles. Casting a rapid glance around, she noticed that madame de Maintenon was not present, and that the duc de St. Simon had just come in. She moved across the room towards him, and addressed him in tones which reached every ear in the room.

"Ah! M. le duc," she said, "have you brought us the latest news? Tell us if it is true, as we hear, that M. d'Orléans is perfectly furious?"

The duke felt rather uncomfortable at the sensation which this inquiry seemed to excite in the salon, where M. d'Orléans' arrival was already known.

"Really, madame la comtesse——" he began.

"They are saying everywhere that M. d'Orléans insists upon being arrested on account of certain horrible accusations against him. Do you know anything about it?"

"Madame, I may say that some rumours have undoubtedly reached M. d'Orléans, and——"

"Is he with the king now, M. le duc?"

"I believe so, madame."

"I suppose he will be asking for a *lettre de cachet*, then. Do you suppose the king will grant him one?"

"It is impossible for me to say, madame."

By this time the comtesse's manœuvre had met with all the success she desired. Everyone in the salon understood that the duke had come to carry the war into the enemy's country, and in five minutes the news was carried all over the palace. St. Simon, who felt that his friendship for M. d'Orléans was putting him in the position of the blackest of black sheep, glanced round the room, and remarked maliciously,

"If his majesty does not think fit to accede to the request of M. d'Orléans, and send him to the Bastille, it is, of course, possible that M. le duc may make another request."

"What is that, my dear M. de St. Simon?" inquired the comtesse, by way of keeping up the ball.

"It concerns the room here which was assigned for the use of M. d'Orléans by M. de Bourgogne. M. le duc has always found it rather small, and I am sure he would be very much obliged to any member of the household who would be so good as to exchange a better one with him."

The duke looked about him with the air of expecting a rush of volunteers for the proposed transaction, and the comtesse laughed outright.

"There is only one difficulty in the way of that, my dear duke," she said, becoming aware that madame de Maintenon had just entered the salon behind her.

"What is the difficulty, comtesse?" asked the marquise, who had obviously overheard the duke's sally.

"Madame," replied the comtesse very distinctly, "we have been told that there is an insufferable smell of brimstone in the room of M. d'Orléans."

"True—I forgot that," murmured St. Simon, as he made a precipitate retreat to return to the duc d'Orléans. "Adieu, madame la marquise—adieu, mesdames."

The marquise bowed to the duke, and looked suspiciously at madame de Valincour, but did not see her way to an effective retort. So she remarked in a sour tone,

"It appears, then, that there has been a discussion about M. d'Orléans?"

Nobody ventured to reply except the comtesse, who was nearest her.

"Naturally, madame," she said. "Since the late terrible events, it seems to be always M. d'Orléans that is in question. I am sure I do not know why. Perhaps you can tell us, madame."

"Madame la comtesse," returned the marquise, losing her temper, "there is one thing I can tell you, and that is that his majesty has decided to consign M. d'Orléans to the Bastille."

The marquise, not knowing that this announcement had been carefully discounted a few minutes before by madame de Valincour, looked round for signs of surprise in her audience.

"The duke is very lucky, then, madame," replied the comtesse.

"In what respect, madame?"

"To have his request—or I suppose I should say his demand—acceded to so promptly."

"His demand, madame?"

"That is the common talk, madame. Is it possible you are the last to hear of it?"

The marquise began to recognise that she was being set at defiance, and swept a threatening glance over the listening bystanders.

"There are some things, madame la comtesse," she went on, "that are better heard of last than first."

"Why, madame?"

"Because those who hear first are apt to be accomplices."

The comtesse assumed an air of ingenuous surprise.

"But, madame," she said, "when you speak of accomplices, you speak of crimes."

"That is possible, madame la comtesse."

"The crimes of M. d'Orléans, madame?"

"I did not say that."

"No, madame—because you never say anything ridiculous."

"Do you find assassination ridiculous, madame la comtesse?"

"If it is a question of M. d'Orléans assassinating anybody, I find it very ridiculous. But it would seem, madame, that you imply that the recent fatalities came from the hand of some assassin—by way of poison, perhaps?"

"That remains to be ascertained, madame la comtesse."

"I see no difficulty about that, madame la marquise."

"Explain yourself, madame la comtesse."

"Well, madame, if there are poisoners to be discovered, as you say, all that is necessary is to seek in the right place. As it is perfectly impossible that M. d'Orléans could be concerned in such a crime——"

"You think that, comtesse?"

"No, madame, I do not think—I know."

"Very good, comtesse. Perhaps also you do not think, but know, where is the right place you spoke of."

"Not altogether, madame. But I can guess."

"Let us hear, then, where you would look for the criminal."

"As to that, madame, I may, of course, be wrong. But I should begin by looking amongst those who accuse M. d'Orléans."

The comtesse accompanied this thrust with a curtsy, in which madame de Maintenon recognised a direct throwing down of the gauntlet, and the spectators a slap in the face.

The marquise turned pale with amazement and anger, and for a moment or two remained speechless. Then she remarked, with a poisonous glare at madame de Valincour,

"It appears, madame la comtesse, that M. d'Orléans knows how to secure a champion. Whether the champion will secure M. d'Orléans remains to be seen."

"Really, that is rather clever of the old woman," said the comtesse to herself. She replied aloud, with a most engaging smile,

"Madame, if it should ever be worth my while to secure M. d'Orléans or any similar person, I will endeavour to make sure of it by coming to you for lessons. Adieu, madame."

Before the marquise could reply, madame de Valincour curtsied herself out of the room. Madame de Maintenon looked vengefully round upon the silent bystanders, and then retreated to her own apartment, leaving the courtiers to expatiate in chorus upon the manner in which the comtesse de Valincour had extinguished for ever her prospects of court preferment.

Meanwhile, the duc d'Orléans had set out on his return to Paris. A mile from the barrier of the capital the front axle of his carriage gave way, and brought the vehicle to a standstill in the roadway. One or two persons passed who were unable to render any assistance. Then a carriage, driven by a very tall coachman, came in sight behind the duke's. This proved to be M. de Torcy's. The marquis was also on his way to Paris, and he at once volunteered to convey the duke home, leaving the disabled vehicle to be brought on afterwards. The duke promptly accepted the offer, and the minister's carriage proceeded on its way to the Palais-Royal.

The crowding of the thoroughfares and the excitement of the populace seemed to the marquis to be even greater than on the preceding evening. Some of the streets were quite blocked, and the detachments of M. d'Argenson's mounted patrols had quite a difficulty in keeping a way for the traffic.

In the neighbourhood of the Palais-Royal the attitude of the mob was menacing and even formidable, and the lieutenant-general of police had posted a cordon of guards round the approaches to the palace. Groans, yells, and denunciations filled the air, and it was dangerous for any member of the duke's household to be recognised out of doors.

For two or three hours in the afternoon the name of

M. Humbert, the duke's chief chemical expert, had been yelled through the streets with almost as much energy as that of the duke himself. Every now and then some unlucky passer-by was pointed out as the savant, and nearly murdered in consequence. At last a multitudinous roar was heard in the Rue St. Antoine, coming from the direction of the Bastille. One of the duke's carriages was seen approaching with the horses at full gallop, pursued by a howling mob of over a thousand persons. The carriage was overtaken in the Rue St. Honoré, close to the Palais-Royal, and the occupant had just been dragged out of it when a squad of mounted guards rode up, and forced their horses among the crowd. The captive, who was really M. Humbert this time, was rescued from his vengeful assailants covered with bruises and with his clothes torn to rags. But before he was escorted by his rescuers towards the gateway of the palace, he insisted upon addressing his foes from the roof of the carriage, and having climbed thereon, he endeavoured to make himself heard above the uproar. It was some time before the spectacle of this scarecrow, gesticulating wildly with his long arms, while the fragments of his clothes streamed in the wind, produced an astonished silence. When he found he was listened to, the savant bawled out,

"Gentlemen, you have been good enough to accuse me of all sorts of crimes, and to shout 'à la Bastille' to me."

A noisy assent came from the crowd, and a forest of fists were shaken at the speaker.

"Gentlemen," he proceeded, "let me tell you that when you stopped my carriage I had just been to the Bastille to demand to be imprisoned."

This statement produced a sudden hush, and everyone listened for what was coming next.

"When I presented myself there," went on the savant, "they positively refused to take me in. Thus I have returned. I hope, gentlemen, that you are now satisfied, and I wish you a good afternoon."

The idea of a man being refused admission at the Bastille struck the hearers as being rather funny. With the proverbial fickleness of a crowd, a roar of laughter spread in all directions, and the orator was saluted with a round of derisive cheers as he descended from his rostrum to re-enter the carriage. The guards escorted him as far as the cordon, and the carriage disappeared within the courtyard of the Palais-Royal.

In the meantime, the duke himself had been rather less

fortunate. About a quarter of a mile from the palace M. de Torcy's carriage had been stopped by a momentary rush of the crowd in front of the horses. One of the bystanders thrust his head in at the carriage-window, and recognised the duke by the light of a torch near the opposite window. He announced his discovery with a triumphant yell, and a general rush was made for the vehicle. The big coachman whipped up his horses, but before they had gone ten yards their heads were seized, and the coachman was dragged from his seat.

The horses, which were already almost unmanageable with the crowd and the uproar, took this opportunity of swerving suddenly towards the side-walk, and overturned the carriage upon two or three shrieking unfortunates who had not time to get out of the way. In a moment the vehicle was covered with rioters, and the door which came uppermost was wrenched open. Then half of the duke's body shot up like a jack-in-the-box, and his sword-arm was seen spitting his assailants in all directions. The coachman got among the wheels, and slashed at the crowd with his whip until it broke in pieces. But this defence only lasted a minute. The coachman was felled to the ground, and the duke's sword broke against the body of one of his opponents. In an instant he was seized, hoisted out of the carriage-window, and flung on the ground between the vehicle and the house-wall.

Just at this moment the nearest street-door, which belonged to a respectable lodging-house, opened suddenly. A tall man appeared upon the threshold, with a pistol in each hand, and with what looked like the leg of a table tucked under his left arm. Before the group of men who were flinging themselves upon the duke's body could realise what was occurring, two of their number were shot through the heart, and the wooden weapon had descended upon the heads of four others, with a sound as of someone sitting down upon a bandbox. The tall man shouted to some person behind him to drag the duke within doors, and sprang upon the overturned coach with a sweep of his club which sent half a dozen squealing ruffians in a heap into the street beyond. Then he jumped down, got the coachman on his feet, and hurried him into the house before the crowd could rally to the attack, or get near enough to prevent the escape of either rescued or rescuer.

A roar of disappointment followed the slamming and barricading of the door. A rush was made to break in the panels, and a volley of stones demolished the fanlight. A couple

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of minutes afterwards an arm appeared through the opening, a pistol was fired, and two of the crowd fell under the feet of their companions.

A fresh howl of fury followed this disaster. Then the pole of the carriage was seized, brought to the door, and used as a battering-ram. Three or four blows sufficed to drive in the two upper panels, but a mass of furniture, which had been rapidly piled behind the door, resisted for the moment the most vigorous efforts of the besiegers. Suddenly a murderous hail of brickbats, delivered from the parapet of the roof three stories above, came down upon the surging crowd round the door. Every moment a victim fell, and in his fall he brought down two or three others. The tall man, leaning over the parapet just over the doorway, could be seen hurling down his deadly missiles as fast as he could tear them from the chimney-stack beside him. Nothing could stand against this discharge, and the mob fled yelling until they were beyond the marksman's range, leaving the ground strewn with maimed and disabled victims.

At this juncture a company of mounted guards appeared at the upper end of the street, and advanced at a gallop. The mob did not wait to be charged, but melted away in the darkness, and the troopers drew rein around the carriage. Here their attention was attracted by a plaintive appeal for help, which was found to proceed from M. de Torcy. Thanks to his having tried to open the door of the carriage at the moment it was overturned, he had been caught by the coat-sleeve of his left arm between the vehicle and the curb-stone. He was a good deal bruised by the sudden upset, and his condition had not been improved by the duke inadvertently standing upon him while combating his assailants through the opposite window. However, when he had been extricated, and the carriage had been righted by the united efforts of the troopers, he expressed his conviction that no bones were broken, and took his seat to await the appearance of the duke, of whose more serious experiences he was not aware.

The tall man had left the roof as soon as the mob took to flight, and had descended to the hall. Here he found the master of the house and his wife attending to the duc d'Orléans. The latter, plastered with mud from head to foot, was sitting in a chair and ruefully contemplating his coat, which had been torn right up the back, and was being held up in two pieces by the coachman. The latter was in very little better plight, as his own coat and waistcoat were hanging

in ribbons, and his head was bleeding from the blow of a stone.

"*Parbleu!*" the duke was saying, as the tall man came downstairs. "These people have certainly parted my garments amongst them. I think, madame, I will ask you to be good enough to put a couple of stitches across the back of that deplorable rag, and then I will join my companion. As you tell me he is safe and sound, I will engage to offer his thanks, as well as my own, to the gentleman who so opportunely cracked the crowns of that *canaille* on the doorstep."

"This is he, monsieur," said the host, pointing to the tall man. The latter came forward, and remarked,

"I am glad to see monsieur is so little the worse for his adventure."

"Thanks to you, monsieur. I should have been a dead man by this time but for your very *à propos* sally. May I ask to whom I am indebted for so signal a service?"

"Monsieur, it is of no consequence. I am glad I was in time to be of use. But you cannot go out in those rags; it is bitterly cold, even in a carriage. I think I can find you a coat, monsieur, if you will do me the honour to use it."

Without waiting for a reply, the tall man went into the adjacent room, and brought back a thick overcoat, which he tendered to the duke.

"What is big enough for me will probably be big enough for you, monsieur," he said, "and this is a good warm sort of affair."

The duke, who was beginning to shiver in his shirt-sleeves, made no difficulty about accepting the offer. He allowed the host to induct him into the great-coat forthwith, and prepared to take his departure.

"Your obliging loan shall be returned at once, monsieur," he said, "and I thank you again for your timely help. I only hope you do not happen to share the sentiments of our friends in the street, who attacked me simply because I am unlucky enough to be the duc d'Orléans."

"On the contrary, monseigneur," replied the tall man, bowing.

"*Parbleu!* why that title, monsieur?" asked the duke quickly.

"M. le duc must excuse an Englishman's want of acquaintance with the French etiquette in this matter," replied the tall man, bowing again and disappearing up the stairs.

The duke walked out with a very thoughtful air, and found

M. de Torcy seated in the carriage and rubbing his contusions in a lugubrious manner. M. d'Orléans inspected his fellow-sufferer for a moment, and then got into the carriage.

"*Peste!* my dear marquis," said he, "it is quite evident from your appearance that if you are not the rose, you have been near the rose. I heartily deplore the results of your courtesy in offering me a lift, I assure you."

"There is no great mischief done," replied the marquis dismally. "That is lucky, for your footsteps are not exactly those of a fairy, M. le duc."

"Heavens! my dear marquis, was it you I was standing on? I thought it was one of the cushions. Why did you not say something?"

"Really, M. le duc, I found it quite impossible to be eloquent and serve as a pedestal at the same time."

"It is shocking, and I shall never forgive myself. I was so busy that I am afraid I jumped about a little."

"A little!" groaned the marquis. "However, M. le duc, it might have been worse for both of us. How did you fare after you were lifted off my unfortunate carcass?"

"I can tell you that as we go along, my dear marquis," said the duke. Then, turning to the guards, he added,

"Gentlemen, if your duty does not call you elsewhere, will you kindly escort M. de Torcy and myself to the Palais-Royal?"

"We were only awaiting your orders, M. le duc," replied the officer in command. "But here comes M. d'Argenson."

At this moment a horseman galloped up to the group, and checked his horse at the carriage-door. It was the lieutenant-general of police.

"M. le duc," he said hastily, "it is only a moment ago I heard of this outrage."

"We are quits for some mud and bruises, my dear d'Argenson," said the duke. "Let us be off. If you can spare yourself to come home with me, please oblige me by doing so."

"With pleasure, if I see things are looking quieter," replied the lieutenant-general of police, giving the guards the signal to start, as the carriage drove away towards the Palais-Royal.

The mobs near the palace had, in the meantime, been dispersed by the patrols, and the streets had regained their normal quietude. At the entrance M. d'Argenson dismounted, and the two others got out of the carriage.

"Let your coachman come inside, marquis," said the duke.

"He behaved like a paladin, and we must make him as comfortable as we can."

"Get down, Anatole," said the marquis, as some grooms ran forward to take charge of the equipage. The coachman got off his box, and came down with his rags fluttering in the wind.

"Your man is about as well dressed as myself, marquis," observed the duke. "He is such a Goliath that I doubt if we can find him a coat he can squeeze into, unless it is this one I am wearing. It is a mile too big for me, and he had better try it."

The duke was assisted off with his borrowed overcoat, and the garment was handed to the coachman, who was trembling with cold. He was just slipping his arm into the sleeve, when he suddenly stopped, stared at the coat, and then approached de Torcy.

"A thousand pardons, M. le marquis," he whispered, "but this is my own coat."

"What do you mean, Anatole?" asked the marquis.

"It is my own coat—or rather, it is the coat M. le marquis did me the honour to buy of me a couple of months ago or more."

"Impossible!" cried the marquis.

"With all respect to M. le marquis, it is certainly that one. I know it by half a dozen things."

"What is all that?" asked the duke.

"Nothing—nothing," said the marquis hastily. "We are detaining you, M. le duc—let us go in."

"Come, then, gentlemen," said the duke, signing to the grooms to attend to the coachman, and leading the way to his private rooms.

In the corridor the party were met by the marquis de Simiane, the duke's first gentleman of the bedchamber and confidential secretary.

"M. le duc," said this gentleman, "a courier has just arrived from Marly with a letter from his majesty. M. de Canillac, a'lo, is waiting to see you in your cabinet."

The marquis de Canillac was an old friend both of the duke and of his mother, the princess Palatine, and was, in consequence, looked severely askance upon at Versailles. The duke went on with his companions into his cabinet, where they found M. de Canillac. The latter was amazed at the spectacle presented by the duke, and in a lesser degree by M. de Torcy, and expressed a good deal of alarm when he learned the cause

of it. He looked rather doubtfully at de Torcy (who was at this time quite mistakenly supposed to be rather of the Maintenon party), and remarked,

"This is a dangerous state of things, M. le duc."

"Yes—especially for M. de Torcy," replied the duke, laughing. "He will be accused of holding a candle to the devil, and getting his fingers burnt for his pains. But, on the whole, it seems to me my *lettre de cachet* has come none too soon. I presume I shall, at all events, be secure from the attentions of these gentlemen of the pavement when I am in the Bastille."

"I heard of that, but did not believe it," said de Canillac. "It is the report that brings me here. I hope, M. le duc, that there is no truth in it."

"In what?" asked the duke.

"That you have asked for a *lettre de cachet*."

"It is not only true, my dear de Canillac, but my request has been granted. Here it is."

The duke took the sealed paper from the table, opened it, and handed it to de Canillac. The latter looked at it, and passed it back.

"This is nothing at all," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"It is not signed."

"Nonsense!"

"Look for yourself."

All crowded to examine the *lettre de cachet*, and saw at a glance that M. de Canillac was right. The document (whether intentionally or inadvertently has never been explained) was neither signed by the king nor countersigned by a secretary of state. Otherwise it was in the usual form, and ran as follows:

"MON COUSIN,

Etant peu satisfait de votre conduite, je vous faire cette lettre, pour vous dire, que mon intention est qu'aussitôt qu'elle vous aura été remise, vous ayez à vous rendre en mon château de la Bastille, pour y rester jusqu'à nouvel ordre de moi. Sur ce je prie Dieu qu'il vous ait, mon cousin, en sa sainte garde.

ÉCRIT À VERSAILLES le 9 Mars, 1712."

"That is curious," remarked the duke. "I think, gentlemen, before we go any further, I had better let you know exactly how matters stand."

He fully narrated the events of his visit to Marly and his interview with the king, and as soon as he had finished, M. de Canillac said promptly,

"M. le duc, whether you ask my opinion or not, I say you ought to ignore this document entirely. You have done everything in your power to secure a full inquiry, and the whole world knows it—or will know it by to-morrow morning. If people choose to send you pieces of waste paper, it is their affair and not yours. When they are ready to put you in the Bastille, let them set about it properly. Till they do, I recommend you to leave things alone. What do you say, gentlemen?"

"I am absolutely of your opinion," said d'Argenson; "and, speaking for myself, I should refuse to take M. le duc to the Bastille, either with or without this piece of paper, which de Bernaville would only laugh at."

"You and de Canillac and I are old friends, my dear d'Argenson," replied the duke, "and, therefore, I am bound to assume that you are a little prejudiced. I have not the honour of being on quite such intimate terms with M. de Torcy, and I shall esteem it a favour if he cares to express an opinion."

"M. le duc," returned the marquis, "I say what M. de Canillac says, and with all the emphasis at my disposal. These calumnies must be met out of doors, not behind the walls of a prison. Moreover, M. le duc, you owe something to your family and the nation, as well as to yourself."

The duke ruminated for a few moments, and said finally,

"Gentlemen, I confess that these attacks have hit me very hard, all the more because I had a deep attachment to M. de Bourgogne and his wife and child. Thus my impulse was, and is still, to endeavour to force the hands of my slanderers. But I am not such a fool as to disregard the judgment of three men of honour and experience, all speaking from different points of view, who tell me I am wrong. I will defer to your advice, gentlemen, and let matters stand—at all events, for the present. And now to supper, as soon as we are fit to be seen."

The marquis de Simiane withdrew to give the duke's orders, while the others went into the dressing-room. The duke went on to de Torcy,

"Do you know, marquis, that that Englishman addressed me as 'monseigneur' when he learnt who I was?"

"A very natural mistake," replied the marquis.

"That is not the point, marquis. It reminded me all at once of something that happened several years ago."

"What was that?" asked d'Argenson.

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"I am not going to tell you—just yet. But I say to all of you that whereas the circumstance in question only appeared to me curious and unaccountable at the time, it now strikes me as most remarkable. I give you my word, that if it ever becomes marvellous, as it may do, I will tell you all about it."

"Profoundly mysterious and unsatisfactory, M. le duc," said d'Argenson, laughing.

"Wait, and you may see," replied the duke. "In the meantime, there is one thing I should certainly like to know, and that is the name of my preserver in our recent adventure."

M. de Torcy gave a start, as if an idea had suddenly flashed into his mind.

"That is it!" he ejaculated.

"What?" asked the duke.

"I can tell the name of your big Englishman, M. le duc—in absolute confidence. I know he has good and imperative reasons for keeping his incognito."

"Certainly," replied the duke.

"The same with you, M. d'Argenson?"

"*Parole d'honneur*," replied the lieutenant-general of police.

"I will be equally discreet," added de Canillac.

"Well, then, M. le duc, it is a certain M. Randolph Dorrington."

"*Pardieu!*" exclaimed d'Argenson, "why, the man whom—"

"Exactly," interrupted the marquis. "I bought a coat for him from my coachman, as they were very much of a size, and gave it to you, as I daresay you recollect—"

"*Peste!* I understand nothing of all this," said the duke.

"M. le duc," replied d'Argenson, "you must get M. de Torcy to tell you that story. For myself, when I think of the turpitudes into which he has beguiled me, I blush down to the small of my back, I assure you."

CHAPTER XLVII

THE ABBÉ GAULTIER IS THE RECIPIENT OF A LITTLE
CONFIDENCE

THE following day M. de Torcy drove in person to the scene of the attack on his carriage, with the double object of returning the overcoat to Mr. Dorrington, and of inquiring how

that individual came to run the risk of showing himself in Paris. But the landlord of the lodging-house met him with the intelligence that the Englishman, as he was called for want of a more definite appellation, had paid his reckoning and departed at dawn for some unknown destination, without leaving any message behind him.

M. de Torcy was a good deal vexed at missing the duke's preserver, and asked several questions, in the hope of getting a clue to his whereabouts. But the host could tell nothing beyond the fact that his lodger, whose stay in the capital had only lasted a couple of days, had spoken of leaving France forthwith.

"Really," said the marquis to himself, as he drove away to Versailles, "these Englishmen seem to come off very badly when they do us a service. Here is M. Dorrington saving the life of a prince of the blood, and the only thanks he gets is to be robbed of his overcoat. On his previous visit he does his best to save us from an invasion, and we clap him in the Bastille for seventeen years. M. Gwynett brings us the ransom of the monarchy, and we give him a ship, which somebody sends to the bottom of the sea. Next he helps us to convey part of our treasure to Paris, and just misses being burnt alive. Then he takes a letter to England for us, and gets hung. And every time these gentlemen have put themselves out of the way, merely to be obliging. No wonder the rest of the world prefers to do nothing for nothing."

A couple of days afterwards, as the marquis had just finished breakfast, he was told that the abbé Gaultier was waiting to see him.

"Something is wrong, that is certain," he muttered discontentedly, as he went to his cabinet. "This fellow is too comfortable in London to come over for a trifle. It is the renunciation, without doubt."

The marquis proved to be correct. The death of the 'petit dauphin,' and the illness of the duc d'Anjou (whose life had never been considered to be worth a week's purchase since he had been born), had produced the greatest consternation amongst the English ministers, and the abbé had been despatched in hot haste to give M. de Torcy a private warning of the intention of the government. This was to make a formal demand for the immediate renunciation by king Philippe of Spain, for himself and his posterity, of his rights of succession to the throne of France, as an indispensable condition of any further negotiations for peace. The abbé's informal visit was

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to enable the French king and his ministers to anticipate this demand by putting at once the requisite pressure on the king of Spain, and thus save time in the more formal routine of diplomacy.

The marquis, who knew Louis XIV. better than most people, saw at once the necessity of a little hedging, and remarked, when Gaultier had explained his errand,

"M. l'abbé, I will not fail to lay lord Oxford's views before his majesty forthwith. But, at the same time, I must point out that, in the opinion both of his majesty and of the king of Spain, this question of a renunciation presents grave difficulties. Our jurists are unanimously agreed that, whatever renunciation a royal heir may make of his own rights in his own person, he cannot in the least prejudice the rights of his posterity, which belong to them by descent and are inalienable."

"But his majesty has already promised the renunciation this year past," objected Gaultier.

The marquis, of course, knew this perfectly well, and he also knew that Louis XIV. kept his promises so far as they suited him and no farther.

"I presume," he replied, "that his majesty's act only indicated his entire willingness that the two crowns should not be worn by the same person. He cannot make any demand upon a foreign monarch that would destroy the very basis of his own sovereignty, which is that of direct inheritance pure and simple."

"It appears then, M. le marquis, that lord Oxford has been induced to contemplate a peace through a complete misunderstanding?"

"Patience, my dear M. Gaultier. It is not his most Christian majesty, but his grandson, whose renunciation is in question, and that makes all the difference. I am bound to tell you that we are not in a position to do anything more than make representations at the Escorial. If lord Oxford thinks we can do what we like there, let him address himself to madame des Ursins, and he will find out his mistake."

"It is quite evident that lord Marlborough ought to have been at Villa Viciosa," said the abbé peevishly.

The marquis permitted himself the ghost of a smile.

"You have hit it exactly, M. l'abbé. But as he was not there, and as he is not to be in the Low Countries either—why, I am afraid this renunciation will be rather a stumbling-block."

"Then I am to tell lord Oxford, on the part of his majesty,

that we shall get along faster if the duke is restored to his command?"

"Heavens! my dear M. Gaultier, do not misunderstand me. I only wish to prepare you for delays over which we can exercise no control—that is, if lord Oxford finds this renunciation a *sine quâ non*. The Cortes must consent, in order that it should have even the semblance of validity—and even their consent could hardly bind a descendant of king Philippe's."

"If the English ministry has the king of Spain's renunciation, it will make very little account of the Cortes, M. le marquis. As to the king's descendants, it will be time enough to talk about them when they put in a claim. The point at present is, that the events of any twenty-four hours may make Philippe V. king of France."

"That is a deplorable fact, M. l'abbé."

"Why deplorable, M. le marquis?"

"For the best of reasons, M. l'abbé. You, as a Frenchman, can guess what would happen if France were attempted to be governed from Madrid. On the other hand, we know already, without guessing, what would happen if Spain were attempted to be governed from Paris. If you doubt it, ask madame la comtesse, your sister."

"I do not contradict you, M. le marquis. But all that is your affair and not lord Oxford's. He has parliament to deal with, and the public behind parliament. At present the current is on the point of running towards the Whigs again. Prince Eugène is enormously popular in London, and there is no saying how things will turn out."

The marquis thought of the *Fleur de Lys*, and decided that the abbé was probably a good deal nearer the truth than he suspected.

"Rest assured, M. l'abbé," he replied, "that his majesty will use every means at his disposal to carry out his declaration to the English government. When may we expect to hear officially from lord Oxford on this matter?"

"It will be impossible, M. le marquis, to delay the formal representation longer than a week or ten days. I start for London again to-day."

"The affair will be in your hands, M. l'abbé?"

"I believe so, M. le marquis. After my next interview with you I go straight from here to Utrecht. I may say that the instructions I shall carry to the British plenipotentiaries will depend upon the attitude of his majesty in this matter."

After a little further conversation the abbé rose to take

is restored to his

misunderstand me. Over which we can find this renunciation, in order that it may be a thing of Philippe's."

Spain's renunciation, M. le marquis. I have time enough to talk to you on the point at present. I shall be here in two hours may make

you, as a Frenchman, were attempted to do. On the other hand, we know that you will open if Spain were to do so. Do you doubt it, ask

me. But all that I have to say in parliament to deal

At present the Whigs again. I shall be in London, and there

Lys, and decided to tell the truth than

"that his majesty may carry out his declaration. I may expect to see you on the matter?"

"I shall delay the formal interview for a few days. I start for

Paris?"

Next interview with

I may say that I have plenipotentiaries in this matter."

The abbé rose to take

his leave, mentioning that he wished to see his sister at Marly before returning to London. The marquis bade him a polite adieu, expressing a hope that their next meeting might prove entirely satisfactory, and the abbé went off.

"It is perfectly amazing," muttered the marquis to himself, as soon as he was alone, "to think of this animal being pitchforked into such affairs. He goes about now as if he were d'Harcourt or Porto-Carero. And the mischief of it is that he has got hold of quite the right end of the stick."

Meanwhile, the abbé, who was inwardly much concerned at the new hitch in the peace negotiations, made his way to Marly. The comtesse de Valincour was out driving with her friend the duchesse de Noailles, who had called at the château, and the abbé heard a good deal of gossip about recent events while he was waiting. He was equally disappointed, alarmed, and irritated at what he heard, and he entered his sister's room, when she returned, with a temper the reverse of amiable. The comtesse gave him an affectionate greeting, which he received very much after the fashion of the proverbial bear with a sore head.

"You do not seem quite well, dear Armand," said the comtesse. "What is the matter? are things not going well?"

"Damnably," growled the abbé.

"Tell me all about it," said the comtesse, with solicitude.

"I thought you were in a pretty good groove."

"The groove is not bad," replied the abbé. "But it is empty. It is true lord Oxford treats me like a brother, but it is what they call over there a younger brother. I get a good deal of patting on the back, and plenty of stuffing of the stomach. But nobody seems to think of my pocket. Between ourselves, other people are finding the same thing about lord Oxford—lady Masham amongst them. It would have been better if I had attached myself to M. St. John. I have a suspicion that he is the better horse to back of the two."

"But you are well put forward. It ought to mean something some time, if not now."

"Everything hangs on the peace, and the peace hangs on the fire. These deaths have been the very deuce. Unless we can get the king of Spain to renounce the French succession, we shall have the war resumed in a month. Then I am nowhere."

"I am sorry to hear that. Nevertheless, in another way, these deaths you speak of may end in your advantage."

"*Peste!* my dear sister, it will be very strange if they do—thanks to you, it appears."

"To me?"

"*Certes.* Judging from the cackle of the folks here, you have been busy cutting your throat from ear to ear. You may perhaps claim the right to do that, if it amuses you. But, unfortunately, I see no use in it for me—and I see a good many disadvantages."

The comtesse settled herself in her chair and looked at her brother with a composed countenance.

"Ah!" she remarked. "And what have you heard?"

"It appears," said the abbé, "that, for want of something better to do, you have made an enemy of la Scarron, who is everything, and have tried to make a friend of the duc d'Orléans, who is a good deal worse than nothing."

"Probably it looks a little like that," said the comtesse.

"I met Dubois in Paris," proceeded the abbé, "and he seems to think that whatever sort of cloud the duke was under while M. de Bourgogne and the dauphine were alive, he will be simply in outer darkness now they are dead. If he is not, it will not be the fault of madame de Maintenon and M. du Maine, at all events."

"M. Dubois is right, without doubt."

"*Sangdieu!* then what demon possessed you to hook yourself on to the most useless person in France? The worst of it is that it is almost impossible to undo the mischief."

"How would you propose to undo it, my dear Armand?"

"There is nothing for it, I suppose, but for me to ask the good offices of M. de Torcy and M. de Berwick to smooth matters for you with la Scarron. For the next fortnight, at all events, I shall be a person who will be listened to. After that, the deuce only knows what can be done."

The comtesse smiled a little at her brother, and replied,

"Before you undertake the task of reinstating me in madame de Maintenon's good graces, dear Armand, let us go thoroughly into matters. It would be well for our ideas not to clash. Tell me, therefore, if you have any irons in the fire, and how they are heating. After that, I will say something on my own account."

The abbé looked doubtfully at madame de Valincour. He was in the habit of keeping his own counsel about his own affairs, and had hitherto said nothing whatever to his sister or anyone else in regard to certain of his recent enterprises.

Moreover, two of them, the attempted robberies of the treasure-waggon and of madame de Melfort's letter, had turned out deplorable failures, and represented nothing but a minus quantity.

"Practically I have nothing to report," he remarked finally. "Two or three likely eggs have addled. There was an affair of an English heiress, which promised well, but latterly it has stood still."

"Who and what is this heiress?" asked the comtesse.

"A certain mademoiselle Dorrington," replied the abbé. "There is an estate in Devonshire."

"Is she anything but an income? Young or pretty?"

This question rather embarrassed the abbé. His passion for Muriel had been from the beginning a fairly disinterested one, owing almost everything to her beauty and character, and little or nothing to her prospective wealth. It was, therefore, quite a creditable emotion, and he was consequently somewhat ashamed of owning to it.

"She is not yet out of the legal minority, I believe," he replied. "As to appearance, one must not be too particular when a comfortable rent-roll is in question. The real trouble has been that there was a *fiancé* in the way—a man named Gwynett."

This name represented nothing to the comtesse, its owner having been introduced to her as the chevalier de Starhemberg. So she asked,

"Why do you say, 'was in the way'?"

"Because he is not in the way now, I imagine."

"How is that?"

The abbé gave the required details, but omitted all reference to his connection with Gwynett's adventures in France. His account of the scene at the 'Crown and Anchor' took the fancy of the comtesse a little, and she remarked approvingly,

"Really, that was very well managed, my dear Armand."

Then she added, with a shrug of the shoulders,

"As to the rest of the story, I have more than once pointed out to you that if you insist upon taking brandy, you must take the consequences of the brandy."

"It is a very curious thing, my dear Yvonne," observed the abbe, reflectively, "that since that execution I have absolutely lost my relish for it."

"I wish I could expect that state of things to last," said the comtesse, with a good deal of fervour.

"That is a shocking sentiment," observed the abbé rebukingly. "To seek to deprive others of enjoyments you do not happen to share is contrary to all systems of ethics."

"Oh! if you enjoy your gentlemen who sit in empty chairs, walk along empty roads, and glare at you from empty rooms, I have nothing to say. But do you really think you may probably remain sober?"

"It looks deplorably like it, my dear Yvonne. I should tell you that I lay under that window in a heavy rain for an hour or so before I regained my senses. Then I woke up with a sort of ague about me, and I have never been the same man since. I have done my best to recover my taste for the bottle, but it is of no use—so far, at all events. Still, I have not given up hope yet."

The comtesse pondered for a moment, and then looked at her brother with a piercing intentness of gaze.

"Armand," she said suddenly, "I wish you to understand that your utterly imbecile habit of drinking may prove an inconvenience to me, or rather to my affairs. Is it in the least possible that, for the sake of great results to you, as well as to myself, you can manage to become a safe person to confide in?"

"That question suggests something serious, my dear Yvonne—as you put it."

"Serious is not the word for it. For what I have in view, discretion is so vital that all the risks of your ignorantly blundering into a line of action detrimental to my plans are better worth running than the risks of your knowing how to help me—and then blabbing."

"It appears, then, that I may interfere with you unwittingly?"

"I am afraid you are certain to do so. I cannot expect to be able to tell you in every case what I tell you in this case."

"What is that?"

"To leave my affairs alone. Any influence you may wish to exert to restore me to madame de Maintenon's favour is a mere waste of time. Do you suppose for a moment that I should put myself in her black books without an object?"

"I confess that did not occur to me," said the abbé. "It is true, as you say, that being in the dark, I may easily spike your guns without knowing it. But that is your affair, it seems to me."

"Are you disposed, for the sake of the interests—immense interests—I spoke of just now, to engage not to ruin everything by getting drunk again?"

"At present, my dear Yvonne, I have not the slightest objection—if it will be any satisfaction to you."

"My dear Armand, is there any possible oath or adjuration that you would consider absolutely binding upon your conscience—if you have a conscience?"

The abbé looked vacantly at the ceiling for some seconds, apparently searching in his memory or imagination for a formula that would meet his sister's requirements. Not being successful, he remarked, after a pause,

"Really, my dear Yvonne, I cannot say that such a thing occurs to me at the moment. But I will do my best to meet your wishes, if you will kindly state them."

"My wish—if you can make it possible—is to confide in you, with the double object of preventing you spoiling my game for want of knowing what it is, and of enabling you to assist me when opportunity offers. In fact, I think you could take a useful part, if I pointed it out to you."

"I shall be happy to consign myself to eternal perdition if I violate your confidence," remarked the abbé obligingly.

"I do not see that that will alter your prospects very much," said the comtesse. "I should prefer something quite different."

"For instance?"

"I should like you to pardon me beforehand, in case I found you were on the point of betraying me, and I had consequently to put you out of the way——"

"*Sang Dieu!*" ejaculated the abbé.

"Although, as you know, I am very fond of you, dear Armand."

The abbé scratched his chin reflectively, and then observed, "But this is serious, my dear Yvonne."

"I have been saying so the last half-hour," replied the comtesse. "On the whole, I am satisfied with my suggestion, if you are."

The abbé considered the matter in its various aspects, and finally decided that discretion was not an unreasonable price to pay for information which began to appear desirable in a high degree.

"It is a bargain," he said.

"You fully understand?"

"*Diable!* you make it plain enough, my dear Yvonne."

The comtesse came and knelt down by the abbé's side.

"Kiss me, brother," she said.

"Certainly," assented the abbé, suiting the action to the word. "But why?"

"In case you get drunk again, my dear Armand," explained the comtesse, rising and going back to her seat.

The abbé gave a little shudder at this piece of forethought. "It appears you are very much in earnest, my sister," he said. "Suppose, now that is settled, we address ourselves to business."

The comtesse went to the door and turned the key in the lock. Then she came back, moved her chair a little nearer to her brother, and sat down.

"Do you remember, Armand," she asked, "that when we met at Versailles, I told you I had certain ambitions?"

"*Certes*, I recollect very well."

"Since then I have made progress towards attaining them."

"I congratulate you, my dear Yvonne. Am I to know anything more about these said ambitions?"

"That is what I am about to explain to you."

"I am all attention."

"Listen, then. I intend to become the ruler of France."

"Good. And the means?"

"By putting on the throne, or over the throne, a ruler, whom I shall rule."

"Have you chosen the ruler, whom you are going to rule?"

"There is no question of choice, because there is only one person who fulfils the necessary conditions."

"And that is——?"

"M. d'Orléans."

"That is rather lucky. Certainly, he is not very near the succession, but he was a good deal further off a month ago. Fortune has decidedly smiled upon you."

The comtesse smoothed a fold out of her satin dress.

"You think it has been chance?" she asked placidly.

The abbé looked a little surprised.

"Let us say, then, a providential interposition in your favour," he said.

"You are not very fertile in alternatives, my good Armand," remarked the comtesse. "Try again."

"Really, I am at a loss."

"Think, Armand, for a moment. If the king had died a month ago—and he may die any moment—who would naturally have succeeded to the throne?"

"M. de Bourgogne, of course."

"Yes—and M. de Bourgogne is dead. Thus one of his sons would have succeeded. Who would then have been regent during the little king's minority?"

"The duchesse de Bourgogne, without doubt."

"Yes—and the duchesse de Bourgogne is dead. Who will be regent now, if things take the usual course?"

"The duc de Berri. But everybody knows that madame de Maintenon will have something to say about that."

"Never mind that just now. If the duc de Berri were dead, who would then be entitled to the regency?"

"M. d'Orléans, of course. But it happens that M. de Berri is not dead, and if there is one thing more likely than another, it is that M. de Berri will be king instead of regent. That poor little brat will never live to wear the crown, I should imagine."

"That is perfectly true, so far as it goes. But does it seem to you that there is nothing but chance in events which have brought M. d'Orléans within one life of the regency, and within two lives of the crown?"

"Ah! then you are one of those who accuse M. d'Orléans in this affair? You surprise me, for I thought it was exactly the reverse."

"The duke has had no more to do with these deaths than the man in the moon."

"Peste! that is a good deal to say, and with such confidence, my dear Yvonne. Anyone would suppose you knew all about it."

"Anyone but you probably would."

"But—do you know all about it?"

"I ought to know, certainly."

"You know who is concerned in the affair?"

"Yes."

"Someone who has had a hand in these deaths?"

"Exactly."

The abbé raised his eyebrows.

"That is rather an awkward thing to know," he said.

"Almost as awkward as making a mistake about it."

"It is impossible to make a mistake."

"Why impossible?"

"Ask yourself."

The abbé looked rather vacant, and then suddenly gave a little start.

"Good God!" he ejaculated, from force of habit, turning rather pale.

"Well, do you begin to understand?"

The abbé looked apprehensively at the door. Then he craned his neck forward, and asked in a whisper,

"It was you, Yvonne?"

"I."

There was a dead silence. The abbé trembled a little, and brought out his handkerchief to wipe his forehead. The comtesse contemplated him with a serene air. Finally he remarked, in a subdued voice,

"This takes me a little by surprise, I confess. But why the duc de Bretagne? If you want a long regency, he was the tougher of the two."

"That was a most unlucky *contretemps*. It should have been M. de Berri. But one cannot guard against everything."

"I should like to hear the details," said the abbé.

"It is quite simple," replied the comtesse. "You see, I got a few requisites at Madrid, intending them for the queen, but never had the chance of using them. When we were expelled from Spain, I decided at once on the next programme, and manoeuvred until I secured the appointment at Marly. There was no great difficulty about that, as madame de Bourgogne was glad to have someone who had lived with her sister. I always carried what was necessary about with me, so as to be ready for an opportunity. You heard of the dauphine's missing snuff-box?"

"Of course."

"That was my first real chance. I put a little snuff of my own in the box, before handing it to madame la dauphine. By good luck, it answered for monseigneur as well."

"But what about the disappearance of the box?"

"That is easily explained. The dauphine, as you doubtless heard, put it away in her cabinet, which no one was allowed to enter. But at night she told madame de Levi to fetch it for her, saying that I could point out which box it was. Naturally I took care to walk in first, and put it in my pocket under the nose of madame de Levi, who is very short-sighted. Afterwards I threw it into one of the ponds."

The abbé drew a deep breath.

"That was a near thing," he said.

"Yes. It would have been awkward if the box had been found, and afterwards tested. Luckily, four gentlemen of the court had taken pinches from it just before it was placed in my hands. That put them off the scent entirely."

"And the duc de Bretagne?"

"That was pure misadventure. M. de Berri was at Versailles the day of the dauphine's death, and asked for some lemonade. There was no one at hand to fetch it but myself, so I could

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ri was at Versailles or some lemonade. myself, so I could

easily put a drop or two of something into it before giving it to him. Then he fancied it would create acidity, and so changed his mind. Just as my back was turned the little dauphin asked for some, and madame de Ventadour handed him the glass. I was extremely sorry when I noticed it, but it would have looked suspicious if I had interfered."

The abbé mused a while over this narrative, and then remarked,

"The misfortune is that if this rickety duc d'Anjou survives the king, we may have his uncle from Madrid dropping in for the regency, even if the succession is waived."

"That is quite true. In any case, I regretted the death of the duc de Bretagne. He was a very healthy boy. But there is not the least doubt that they will make the king of Spain renounce his claims."

"Assuming that he does, there is still the duc de Berri, and I do not see how you are to deal with him."

The comtesse put her hand in her pocket, and brought out a letter, which she handed to the abbé.

"Perhaps that may suggest something to you," she said. The abbé read,

"MADAME,

I am desired by M. le duc d'Orléans to say that he trusts you will permit him to mention your name in connection with a vacancy which occurs in the household of madame la duchesse de Berri.

G. DUBOIS."

The abbé dropped the letter, and stared at his sister with amazement, and almost with veneration.

"This is stupendous—monumental!" he said finally. "Decidedly, my dear Yvonne, you have genius. For myself, I confess freely that I have never done you justice. Accept my apologies, and my respectful homage. I am proud to place myself in your hands—that is, if you see your way to making any use of me."

"I think you can be of considerable use, my dear Armand," said the comtesse.

"For instance?"

"To begin with, you can popularise in England the idea of an Orléans regency, and spread everywhere the report that the duke is at heart a friend to Great Britain and an enemy to the Stuarts. All that will be useful, if things go on well."

"Let us trust they will go on no worse than they have begun," said the abbé piously.

"Trust as much as you like, so long as we provide for things going on badly. It is there where you may be of real service."

"Explain, my dear Yvonne."

"Well, many things may happen that would be inconvenient to us. M. d'Orléans may manage to become imbecile, as madame de Maintenon prophesies; or he may find himself assassinated some fine morning by somebody who wants to oblige M. du Maine; or, in spite of my arrangements, M. de Berri may become regent or king."

"Is he impracticable for you?"

"I fear so—even if his wife were out of the way. There are some men so weak that they cannot even be led by the nose. At all events, I rely on nothing in that quarter."

"Then you are prepared to be checkmated?"

"Not altogether. One can usually resign, and begin another game."

"With whom?"

"The chevalier de St. George, of course."

The abbé whistled softly.

"Surely that is a very green gooseberry, my dear Yvonne. And even if it ripens, is it a big enough mouthful?"

"I see no reason why it should not be made so. Someone must step into queen Anne's shoes before long. No one over there cares a brass button for the elector, I imagine. Whereas I have the impression that I, as the right hand of the chevalier, could make a little following for him."

"That is quite possible. But what is my rôle in this?"

"Evidently you must attach yourself to the chevalier's party—secretly in England, openly here. You already know M. de Berwick?"

"A little. I went to him a year and a half ago with a letter from lord Oxford—Mr. Harley, he was then. *A propos*, there was one thing perhaps a little curious. Have you ever seen the chevalier de St. George?"

"No."

"Nor I. But M. de Berwick remarked, when I had my audience of him, that I was not altogether unlike the chevalier, both in face and figure—a little stouter, perhaps. Till now I had forgotten the circumstance. I only saw M. de Berwick twice, and scarcely in a way to permit of claiming acquaintance with him again."

"I will help you to improve on that. He is very important. Then, as soon as this peace business will permit you, you must go to Chalons, and begin to make yourself indispensable to the chevalier—M. de Berwick shall give you an opening. Thus you can do what I cannot do for myself—just yet. I cannot be both at Chalons and in Paris, unfortunately."

"I will develop all this in my mind. Is there anything else?"

"It might be well to spread reports that père le Tellier and his Jesuits caused the recent fatalities, in order to keep madame de Maintenon in power and to push forward M. du Maine."

"That will be easy."

"I do not think of anything more."

"Then I will be off. I return to London at once."

The abbé took up his hat, and the comtesse unlocked the door.

"You will remember our compact, Armand?" she asked, putting her hands on his shoulders.

"My dear Yvonne," replied the abbé, with an approach to genuine enthusiasm, "have no fear. By confiding in me you have made me worthy of your confidence. You have raised me to a higher level—I feel it. I go from this never-to-be-forgotten interview a new man. As regards drink, I forswear it for ever—especially as the cursed stuff obstinately refuses to be any longer agreeable to me. Adieu."

The abbé kissed his sister with effusion, and went away.

CHAPTER XLVIII

THE ABBÉ ASSISTS AT A DOMESTIC TRAGEDY

A LETTER despatched to M. de Torcy by Gaultier the day after his arrival in London conveyed the reassuring intelligence that prince Eugène, influenced partly by disgust at the inertness of the Whigs and partly by fear of expulsion at the hands of the ministry, had departed for the continent that morning. The letter also intimated that the writer would himself leave again for France within the week.

The abbé started upon his mission on March 23rd, and in a couple of days arrived at Versailles with his despatches.

After rather prolonged discussion, the promise of Louis XIV.'s influence with the king of Spain was formally given, and the abbé set out for Utrecht on April 4th.

Unfortunately, Philippe V. proved rather reluctant to concede the required renunciation of his French rights, and on April 18th Louis XIV. wrote in most peremptory terms to insist upon his settling the matter forthwith. Meanwhile, the negotiations at Utrecht were brought to a standstill, and the Allies took the field again, although the duke of Ormonde, who had succeeded Marlborough in the command of the British contingent, was hampered by secret instructions not to fight if he could possibly help it. The abbé Gaultier again went to Versailles in the course of May, and then crossed the Channel in order to obtain fresh instructions in England.

Here he found some little change in the political situation. The Whigs were quiet, and no further action had been taken against the duke of Marlborough in connection with the charges of malversation of public money. On the Tory side, lord Oxford's star seemed somewhat on the decline, while that of St. John was as obviously in the ascendant.

On July 7th the foreign secretary was raised to the peerage under the title of viscount Bolingbroke.

Not long after, it was decided, in spite of the queen's preference for the duke of Hamilton, that the new peer should proceed in person to France, in order to terminate, if possible, the inordinate delay in the conclusion of peace.

This delay was inspired in no small degree by the decisive victory of maréchal de Villars over prince Eugène at Denain, on July 24th—a victory which went a good deal to console the French for the loss of their great general the duc de Vendôme, who had managed at last to gorge himself to death the previous month.

It was now sufficiently obvious that the military success of the Allies would not survive the withdrawal of the duke of Marlborough, and as the king of Spain's renunciation had by this time been intimated to the British government, the latter had every reason for hastening the cessation of hostilities. Accordingly lord Bolingbroke set out for Paris at the end of August, and on his arrival accepted the hospitality of M. de Torcy's widowed mother, the marquise de Croissy. The viscount met with a most enthusiastic reception from the Parisians and the Versailles, and his visits to the opera were made the occasion for regular ovations. A little later he was received by Louis XIV. at Fontainebleau with marked

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cordiality. No particular difficulties presented themselves in settling all the principal provisions of the intended treaty of peace, including the registration of king Philippe's renunciation by the parliament of Paris, and Bolingbroke in due course returned to London. Messrs. Matthew Prior and Gaultier, who had been in his suite, remained behind to deal with minor details of the negotiations. But the abbé, after two or three weeks' further stay in Paris, was recalled to London.

Travelling by way of Calais, he secured a passage to Deal by a small English lugger which was returning after landing some Jacobite partisans on their road to Bar-le-duc, where the chevalier was now living. In the skipper and the two sailors, who formed the crew of the lugger, the abbé thought he recognised some of the party whom he had seen at the 'Crown and Anchor' and subsequently at the scene of Gwynett's execution, although the difference between their present and former costume made him a little uncertain. But as it was evident that the men themselves had no recollection of him, he ceased to concern himself about the matter, and settled himself down for the trip as comfortably as the accommodation of the lugger permitted.

When off Deal the skipper transferred his two fellow-sailors and certain trifles of smuggled goods to a schooner which lay at anchor in the offing, and then, at the abbé's request, rowed the latter to a point of the shore about a mile from the town. Here the boat was run up to the beach and made fast to one of the old groyne-posts in the shingle. The skipper helped his passenger ashore, took his valise, and followed him to a little roadside tavern about a couple of hundred yards inland.

Arrived here, the abbé pulled out his purse, and tendered the passage-money. This, somewhat to his surprise, the skipper hesitated about accepting.

"What is the matter, my good fellow?" asked Gaultier.

"Do you think I look clever enough to be a coiner?"
"Not at all, your honour," replied the skipper, intending to be complimentary. "But the fact is, I want to have a deal with your honour. I make no doubt your honour can write English?"

"I can manage that much, certainly," replied the abbé.

"If your honour is open to write a letter for me, we can set that against the passage-money and cry quits."

"I see no objection to that," said the abbé, who was not above reasonable economies.

"Is your honour ready for the job now?"

"No time like the present. I can get writing materials in the tavern here. Come inside."

The abbé and the skipper entered the parlour of the tavern and sat down. At the suggestion of the abbé, a glass of gin was ordered for his companion, writing materials were produced, and the landlord was requested to keep the room undisturbed till their business was transacted. The abbé mended his pen *secundum artem*, and asked his companion for instructions.

The skipper hung his hat on the handle of the door, in order to obstruct the eyes and ears of any curious eaves-dropper, came back gently, and whispered, in mysterious tones,

"I want a sort of dying letter."

"*Diable!*" said the astonished abbé, "what species of epistle is that?"

"A kind of message from the grave," explained the skipper, addressing himself sadly to his gin.

The abbé sucked the end of his quill, and looked inquiringly at his companion.

"It appears, then," he said, "that we are to be pathetic?"

"What's that?" asked the skipper.

"Pathetic? Why, something that will arouse a sort of tender melancholy in the person who receives the letter."

"Not at all," objected the skipper emphatically. "We must curdle her blood."

"Ah! so it is a 'her'?"

"It is my wife."

"That simplifies matters," remarked the abbé. "Perhaps you will give me a rough idea of what you wish said, and then we can put the thing into shape. May I ask the lady's name?"

"Madam Matthew Kermode."

"Ah! and you, then, are M. Matthew Kermode?"

"At your honour's service."

"And the address?"

"The 'Crown and Anchor' inn, Deal."

"*Pardieu!* I was right, then," reflected the abbé. Then he went on, aloud,

"Shall I commence, 'My adored wife'?"

"Lord bless your honour! no—it's not that way at all."

"It very seldom is," said the abbé. "But the phrase is popular. However, what will you have?"

"Begin 'Dear Bridget,' your honour."

"Dear Bridget," wrote the abbé.

"When this reaches you, I shall be in the silent tomb," dictated Matt slowly.

"Admirable!" remarked the abbé approvingly. "Where did you pick up that elegant sentence, my good friend?"

"It is on a gravestone at Deal—or something like it," explained Matt. "It struck me, and I bore it in mind."

"Well, go on, M. Kermode."

"Driven there by your everlasting jaw," continued Matt.

"Ah!" sighed the abbé sympathetically.

"If my drowned corpse is cast upon your threshold by the ocean billows——"

"Really, that is very fine," remarked the abbé. "Does that represent your average level of conversation, my dear M. Kermode?"

"I was never much of a talker," replied Matt. "But very often I think a lot. I've been thinking a lot over this letter."

"Doubtless that accounts for it. What follows?"

"Give me decent burial," dictated Matt.

"Excuse me," objected the abbé, "but, if you will recollect, you are already in the silent tomb."

"That's so," assented Matt, in a tone of considerable disappointment. "Still, doesn't your honour think it might do at a pinch?"

The abbé considered the point for a moment.

"We can treat the silent tomb as a metaphor," said he seriously. "Then the rest will pass muster, I think."

"If your honour is satisfied, I am," observed Matt, with an air of relief.

"What next?" asked the abbé.

"Take warning by my sad fate, and if you don't want to have a third husband's death on your conscience——"

"Ah!" interrupted the abbé. "So her tongue finished off your predecessor, it appears?"

"I guess so, from my experience," replied Matt confidently, "but I don't know for certain."

"I see—a delicate innuendo. Well, go on."

"Pick out a deaf man for your next miserable victim."

"That is crushing," commented the abbé. "Anything more?"

Matt cogitated for a moment, and then dictated,

"My dying hope is that Old Nick may not send me back to haunt you——"

"Very ingeniously put," remarked the abbé.

“‘But if he does,’” proceeded Matt, “‘I shall know how to do my duty.’”

“*Parbleu!* that will be sufficiently alarming, one would think,” said the abbé.

“That’s about all,” said Matt; “except ‘your much-enduring husband that was,

MATTHEW KERMODE.’”

“You will sign it?” asked the abbé, tendering the pen.

“I guess my mark will have to do,” replied Matt.

The abbé completed the letter, and handed it over to Matt to be decorated with a bloody cross before the signature. Then he folded and sealed the paper, and directed it to the name and address already specified.

“What is the next step, my good friend?” he asked, with a certain amount of interest.

“I was going to ask your honour to be good enough to find my hat and cloak on the beach, and this letter on top of them, with a stone to keep the wind from blowing it away.”

“With great pleasure,” said the abbé. “So the idea is that you commit suicide by drowning?”

“That’s it,” replied Matt.

“I am quite at your service. I will leave my valise here with the landlord, and go back with you now, if you like. Otherwise someone else may find your deposit.”

“I shall be very much obliged. They don’t know me here, but it would be safer.”

The abbé paid for the drink, left his bag with the host, and accompanied the skipper back to the boat on the beach, which was out of sight of the tavern. Matt went to the locker of the boat, brought out a dark heavy cloak, and rejoined the abbé on the shingle.

“I shall be rather sorry to part with it,” he remarked, tendering the cloak to the abbé. “It’s a rare one for cold nights, when it isn’t wet enough for oilskins.”

“No doubt,” assented the abbé, taking the garment; “although it is scarcely the sort of thing one expects to find with a sailor. It seems to me a military cloak.”

“Like enough,” replied Matt. “It was left at the ‘Crown and Anchor’ last winter by a stranger, and my wife made me take to it, to escort her to church in on Sundays and make the neighbours envious.”

The abbé deposited the cloak on the beach and inquired,

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"What are you going to do with your boat, by the way?"

"Get back to the schooner, your honour," replied Matt, looking rather surprised.

"*Parbleu!*" said the abbé, "is that necessary? I should have thought the water was deep enough here for your purpose—especially if you put some stones in your pockets."

"Hang me if I understand your honour," replied Matt, in a puzzled tone. Then, as if a sudden light dawned upon him, he asked,

"Does your honour think I'm such a born fool as to drown myself in reality?"

The abbé's face fell, and he looked very much disappointed.

"My good friend," he remarked, in an injured tone, "you certainly led me to expect it, and I came back here on purpose to be a sympathetic spectator of your tragic fate. But, of course, it is for you to decide. Then this letter is all humbug?"

"Of course it is, your honour. I hope that won't make any difference?"

"I suppose not," replied the abbé regretfully. "It was a slight misunderstanding, that was all. May I ask if this is to be a little joke till to-morrow, or are you going to keep it up longer?"

"Good Lord! your honour," affirmed Matt, with extreme earnestness, "if I don't escape for good this time, I'm a dead man. I hope your honour will keep my secret?"

"As to that, you may depend upon me. But am I to take these things up to the tavern here, or do you want them left at the 'Crown and Anchor'? I am going through Deal presently."

"I didn't like to ask your honour to take so much trouble, but if you could leave 'em at Deal——"

"I'll manage that," said the abbé, beginning to think he could extract some amusement from the widow's reception of the news of her bereavement.

"I thank your honour very much, and wish you good day, and good luck."

"I congratulate you on recovering your bachelor freedom," said the abbé.

"I am much obliged to your honour."

Matt laid his oilskin hat on the cloak, and pulled a woollen cap on his head. Then he shoved off the boat, leaped into her, and rowed away towards the schooner in the offing. The abbé sat on the groyne, with the cloak across his knee, watching

the little craft as she grew more and more distant. Finally, he cast a glance of examination at the cloak.

"This is certainly a little above the style of our suicide," he said to himself. "It is good enough for a cavalry officer."

He felt in the pockets, but found nothing. Then he turned it over to inspect the lining, which was stiffened with wadding round the shoulders and chest. His eye was caught by a sort of seam down the inside of the front, and a little button concealed under a flap close to the collar.

"A neat, out-of-the-way sort of pocket," he soliloquised. "Most pickpockets in a hurry would overlook this."

With some trouble he unbuttoned the flap, which covered the mouth of a deep, narrow pocket. When he inserted his fingers they just reached far enough to touch the edge of a folded paper, which could not be felt from the outside, owing to the thickness of the material of the cloak. After several unsuccessful attempts, he managed to extract the paper, and found it was a sealed letter, addressed to the earl of Oxford.

"*Peste!* it seems as if my lord misses some of his correspondence," remarked the abbé to himself. He looked closely at the seals, and recognised the crest and motto of the Melfort family.

"That is curious," he muttered. "And now I look closely, this is lady Melfort's handwriting. What does she want with lord Oxford this time?"

He looked from the letter to the cloak, and from the cloak to the letter again. Some dim reminiscence seemed struggling to arouse itself in his mind. Then he gave a great start.

"*Sang Dieu!*" he burst out excitedly, "it is the letter—the letter that that cursed Gwynett was carrying. This is the cloak he spread over the chair before the fire that night at the 'Crown and Anchor.' But I thought it belonged to the other man, and looked in the wrong place. Marvellous!"

CHAPTER XLIX

HOW LORD OXFORD LOOKED AT THINGS

THE abbé for a minute or two was quite overcome by his unexpected good fortune, and felt as if he already handled the comfortable sum which Marie Latour had assured him was to be the price of the precious epistle. Then he looked

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"It was a sealed letter."

—Page 410.



again at the seals. Of these there were four, two of them being cracked across, and the remainder intact. It happened that the abbé's varied experiences had never included any practice at tampering with letters by means of facsimile seals, and the limited resources of the period rendered the dexterous use of this art almost an entire monopoly of diplomatists' secretaries. He knew enough of the subject to feel assured that to bungle the restoration of the seals, after melting the wax to get at the contents of the letter, would at once invite detection. On the other hand, Marie Latour had only been able to tell him that the letter conveyed a warning of the Brest expedition of 1694, that it was seriously compromising to lord Marlborough, and that lady Melfort, without any contradiction from M. de Torcy, had spoken of its being worth twenty thousand livres to lord Oxford as a weapon against the great Whig leader.

This information was by no means a satisfactory substitute for an exact acquaintance with the letter itself, and the abbé cogitated seriously whether it would not be better to run the risk of tampering with the letter than to attempt to deal with it in ignorance of its exact significance. Finally, he decided to take the modest view that his own reputation as the depository of a secret was worth so little that no one would pay him for the letter if they had the slightest reason to suspect that he was in a position to sell a knowledge of its contents to someone else.

Acting upon this decision, he put the paper carefully in his breast-pocket, picked up Matt's bequests, and returned to the tavern. Here he made the fateful cloak, hat, and letter into a parcel, and engaged a lad to carry it, together with his valise, into Deal. He executed his commission at the 'Crown and Anchor,' and, without wasting any time in learning its results, hired a horse to carry him through Wray on his way to London.

On the occasion of the abbé's visit to Wray Cottage the day following the execution, he had found, after awaking to consciousness, that the place was in charge of an elderly caretaker, who had left the house for a few minutes' gossip with a neighbour and been detained by the thunderstorm. From this custodian he learned that nothing had been heard of madam Rostherne and her niece since their departure for Devonshire, and that Muriel had certainly not come into the neighbourhood. Later inquiry from the housekeeper at Wray Manor elicited no further information, and the abbé

had been compelled to return to London a good deal puzzled as to what could have become of Muriel after leaving Maidstone. He had since then, at intervals of a couple of months or so, made two visits to Wray, and been equally unsuccessful each time. The Wrays were still absent, and the housekeeper at the Manor had apparently been instructed to say as little about them as possible.

On this present journey the abbé hoped to find that the family had returned to the Manor for the summer, and that his pursuit of Muriel might be again resumed. But on arriving at Wray he found matters precisely as he had left them. The house was shut up, the housekeeper was not at home, and the serving-wench whom he found at the lodge knew nothing about anything.

The abbé resumed his ride to London with a good deal of vexation, and consequently paid no particular attention to the fragments of gossip which met his ears on the road. But at Gravesend, where he arrived too late to continue his journey that day, he became aware that a notable recent event was in everybody's mouth. This was the famous duel between the duke of Hamilton and lord Mohun, which had taken place a few days previously, and the news of which had missed him during a cross-country journey from Versailles.

After lord Bolingbroke's return from Paris the queen had insisted upon the carrying out of her original plan of sending the Jacobite duke of Hamilton to France, ostensibly as ambassador-extraordinary, but in reality to make secret arrangements for the succession of her brother, the chevalier de St. George, to the English throne after her own decease. The duke was on the point of setting out upon his mission, when some episode in an interminable lawsuit between himself and lord Mohun—an aristocratic rake, bully, and black-guard of the first water—led to a challenge from the latter. The disputants met in Kensington Gardens on November 15th, Mohun being seconded by a certain general Macartney, a Whig hanger-on of lord Marlborough. The duke of Hamilton, who received a severe wound in the early passes, killed his adversary on the spot. But immediately afterwards, according to the report of his second, colonel Hamilton, the duke was stabbed in the breast by Macartney, and died in a few minutes. The assassin escaped, a proclamation was issued against him by the Privy Council, and the Tory party with one voice accused the duke of Marlborough of having instigated both the challenge and the murder.

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This piece of news caused the abbé to pass a tolerably bad night. He exercised his mind for several hours in a vain attempt to decide whether the document he carried was likely to be worth less or more in consequence of the new charge against lord Marlborough. If the duke was seriously implicated in the assassination, he was probably already in the way of being ruined, without any extraneous assistance being necessary. On the other hand, his enemies might require to attach to him just the additional amount of odium which the abbé thought he was in a position to furnish. Finally, he decided to feel his way with lord Oxford before allowing anything about his *trouaille* to transpire, and composed himself to slumber.

The next morning he proceeded to report himself at Downing Street, and paid his first visit to the foreign secretary's office. There he was told that lord Bolingbroke was engaged, but hoped to see him in the course of an hour.

"Will that be convenient to you, M. l'abbé?" asked the clerk who brought the message.

"Quite," replied the abbé. "I will go and see lord Oxford in the meantime."

The clerk bowed politely, and turned to an usher at the other end of the room.

"His lordship will receive the baron von Starhemberg," he called out. "A cousin of the imperial general," he added for Gaultier's benefit.

The abbé glanced casually at the newcomer, as he was led by the usher from a side room into lord Bolingbroke's private office. He was a tall old man, bent nearly double, with a very swarthy complexion, and heavy white eyebrows and cavalry moustache. A few words addressed to the usher showed that he was conversant with English, although speaking with a strong south German accent. He passed on without noticing the abbé or the clerk, and disappeared into Bolingbroke's room. The abbé took his leave, and went to the Treasury, where he was received with his usual cordiality by lord Oxford.

"Have you made your report yet to lord Bolingbroke, M. l'abbé?" inquired the treasurer, as soon as his visitor was seated.

"He is engaged at the moment," replied the abbé. "I am to see him a little later."

"I will join him, then, to save you telling your tale twice over. Anything new in Paris?"

"Very little. The news of the confirmation of the king of Spain's renunciation by the Cortes arrived just as I left. But you have had something notable going on here. I only heard of the duke of Hamilton's affair last night."

"Ah?" said the treasurer, in a neutral tone.

"It seems awkward for lord Marlborough. Is there anything definite to connect him with the matter?"

"Nothing transpired before the Council," replied Oxford.

"All the better," thought the abbé. Then he went on,

"There is a little matter which I think ought to be mentioned to your lordship, if I may rely on its being treated as confidential."

"Certainly, my dear abbé."

"It concerns lord Marlborough, I believe. It has come to my knowledge, in a way I am not at liberty to disclose, that a certain person holds a letter of the duke's to St. Germain, written just before the Brest disaster in 1694, of a very compromising character—amounting, in fact, to a betrayal of the expedition."

The treasurer nodded acquiescingly.

"I am not aware of the actual wording of the letter, but the holder asserts that if produced it would convict the duke so conclusively that almost any proceedings against him would be authorised."

"That is saying a good deal," said the treasurer. "How does the holder of the letter propose to act in the matter?"

"So far as I can make out," replied the abbé, "it is really a question of the importance of such a letter to the interests of her majesty's government. For the holder to part with it would expose him to the enmity of lord Marlborough. The duke is not the sort of enemy an obscure person cares to make—without good reasons."

"The good reasons being financial ones, probably?"

"Probably."

The treasurer rapidly ran over in his mind the *pros* and *cons* of the proposed transaction. The problem presented was not altogether simple, and the chief difficulty lay in the probability that the asserted letter was quite as compromising to the duke as it was stated to be.

The fact was that the progress of events had rendered Oxford more afraid of his colleague Bolingbroke than of his opponent Marlborough. The rapid failing of the queen's health was beginning to imperil the position of the Tory ministry to a serious extent, and the treasurer had to take

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into account the risk of an imminent Guelph succession, and the consequent return of the Whigs to power. While he was extremely anxious that the duke of Marlborough should make matters temporarily comfortable by leaving the country, he was equally anxious to avoid being openly instrumental in driving him abroad. As regards action at home, he had all through the session taken care that the blows dealt at Marlborough should come from the queen, the privy council, and the majority in the Commons, and not directly from himself. But any action based upon this asserted letter would require to be taken by himself individually. In this case, whether the duke got out of the imbroglio or succumbed, it would equally be hopeless for the treasurer to expect any quarter under a Hanoverian succession from the enraged Whigs.

It also happened that he had been secretly busy in getting indirect pressure put upon the duke, by which he himself ran no risk at all. The Blenheim contractors, who had been left unpaid by the queen, had been egged on to sue the duke for their arrears of £30,000, and the Commons had revived the proceedings for the restoration of the $2\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. deduction from the war-chest, of which mention has already been made. The treasurer had reason to believe that these steps were already likely to induce Marlborough to retire to the continent, so that to put superfluous pressure might be as useless as it was dangerous. On the other hand, to lay out money on a purchase which might turn out not to be needed was the last thing in the world to commend itself to lord Oxford. On the whole, he decided that the abbé's bombshell had better not be thrown, for the present at all events, and that therefore he would decline to negotiate for the missile in question.

"Well, my dear abbé," he said finally, "I cannot say that any useful suggestion occurs to me to make in this affair. It is, of course, possible that your friend's letter may be everything that he supposes; but all these matters are nearly a score of years old, and we should look rather ridiculous if we pretended to make a fuss about them now. At least, that is my personal view of the affair—you must take it for what it is worth."

This speech came upon the abbé as an intensely disagreeable surprise. However, he gulped down his disappointment, and replied,

"Probably your lordship is quite right."

"At the same time," went on Oxford, "such a letter is not to be thrown away. The time may come when it would be uncommonly useful."

"I will mention what you say, my lord."

"As you please, my dear abbé. And now let us have some lunch."

As soon as this meal had been discussed, the treasurer and Gaultier went to Bolingbroke's office, and the abbé presented his formal report on the progress of the treaty negotiations. A desultory discussion followed, after which the abbé took his leave, and went off to his rooms in the Strand.

He was profoundly disgusted at the unexpected coldness with which his offer had been received by lord Oxford, and for the moment felt very much inclined to hand the letter to one of the Grub Street news-sheets out of pure spite. But this rash impulse did not survive a second thought, and he addressed himself to the problem of making his market somewhere else.

Lord Bolingbroke was probably hopeless, as he was personally on excellent terms with the duke of Marlborough, and his political opposition was notoriously a mere question of ambition and self-interest. As a possible purchaser of the letter, his motives would be very likely those of a friend to the duke rather than an enemy. But the abbé felt regretfully that his friendliness would not run to twenty thousand livres, or even twenty thousand brass buttons.

The queen herself was amongst the most bitter enemies of the duke. She was, however, scarcely accessible, and, in any case, would probably be too timid to deal independently with such a matter.

There remained lord Marlborough himself, and it was a question whether any possible degree of prospective unpleasantness or danger would seem to his lordship an adequate reason for parting with his cherished guineas. But the near approach of the elector's succession to the throne made much the same impression upon the abbé as it did upon lord Oxford. He saw at once that, in default of anything better, it might turn out a paying investment to pose as the duke's guardian angel and chivalrous defender, by making him a present of the letter. He therefore decided to call at Marlborough House as soon as he had fortified himself with a good dinner.

In the meantime, the duke's own affairs were causing him an infinity of worry and anxiety. He was not in good health, and he was, moreover, feeling acutely the loss he had sustained

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by the death of his closest friend Godolphin a few weeks previously. The lawsuit of the Blenheim contractors was a special source of exasperation, inasmuch as the queen had originally taken upon herself the whole responsibility of the outlay upon the palace. In view of a possible decision against him in the courts he was busy transferring certain of his interests to the Low Countries, and had already vested his estates in the trusteeship of his two sons-in-law, lords Spencer and Sunderland. But his principal occasion for anxiety lay in the fact that, nearly a month previously, he had received from lord Bolingbroke a passport for the continent, dated St. James's, October 30th. Meeting the foreign secretary a day or two afterwards, he had asked for an explanation. Bolingbroke in reply had merely remarked, with an hilarious guffaw, that it was a useful thing to have, and reminded Marlborough that he had latterly talked a good deal about going abroad. This was quite true; but the duke had a preference for going when he chose. He was extremely suspicious about this unsolicited assistance, and could only conjecture that Oxford had some scheme against him *in petto*, which Bolingbroke amiably desired to frustrate by getting the duke out of the country.

On this particular evening Marlborough had been closeted with his friend Cadogan, whom he was entrusting with £50,000 to convey to Antwerp, as a preliminary precaution against awkward eventualities. The general was to cross the next day from Dover to Ostend, and Cardonnel was arranging in his own room the details of the passage with captain Kermode, who had of late secured a good deal of the duke's business and recommendation for the *Royal Mary* and his brothers' lugger.

As general Cadogan was taking leave of the duke, Cardonnel brought in a note. Marlborough opened it, and read :

MY LORD,

" November 26th, 1712.

I beg the favour of a few minutes' conversation on a matter touching your grace's interests.

GAULTIER DU FRESNE DE BEAUVAL."

CHAPTER L

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THE duke passed the note back to Cardonnel, and asked,

"Who is this Gaultier, etc., etc.? Is not that the name of the agent they have been sending to Utrecht?"

"The same," replied Cardonnel. "He is hand in glove with lord Oxford. Do you think it safe to see him?"

"Why not?"

"These people are all perfectly furious about the Hamilton affair. You must not forget the marquis de Guiscard at the Cockpit last year."

"Pooh! do you suppose they would have the impudence to assassinate me?"

"They might find it very convenient if someone would do it for them."

"But why this fellow?"

"I don't know. Not knowing, I suspect. Anyhow, if you give him an interview, take precautions. People do not come here from lord Oxford for any good, I should fancy."

"That isn't his style, my dear fellow, at all."

"Possibly, but it may be this Gaultier's style. See him, if you choose, only allow me to make a little arrangement first."

The secretary went out, and returned with a couple of long double-barrelled pistols. He placed these on the duke's table, and covered them artistically with loose papers. The handles lay towards the duke's writing-chair, and were within a few inches of his hands as he sat. The muzzles pointed to the easy-chair in which callers usually sat, near the other side of the table. So arranged, the pistols were already aimed, and could be fired without taking them up.

"That will make things comfortable, I think," said the secretary. "*A propos*, something occurs to me which falls in with my suspicions. One of our last letters from Bar-le-duc mentioned that this Gaultier had been there lately with the duke of Berwick. Lord Hamilton is a frightful loss in that quarter, and, of course, you get the credit of it at present."

The duke was, in spite of himself, a little impressed by Cardonnel's warnings.

"I don't say your idea is impossible," he remarked; "but it would be ridiculous not to see him. Show him in, my dear fellow, and then leave us."

The secretary went out, and returned with the abbé. The duke rose, and bowed to his visitor.

"Do me the favour to be seated, M. Gaultier," said he. "I have not had the pleasure of meeting you before, but your name is not new to me."

The abbé bowed, took the easy-chair, and waited till the door had closed upon Cardonnel.

"My lord," he said, "I regret very much that if my name is known at all in this house, it can only be in a fashion somewhat distasteful to your lordship. As a person who has been entrusted with a share, although a humble one, in the pending negotiations for peace, I fear I come to you with very bad credentials."

The duke waved his hand politely.

"In politics, M. l'abbé," he said, "one must always allow for difference of opinion. I am the last person to drag public affairs into private ones."

"I am glad to hear your lordship say so. As a matter of fact, although my duty to my own country has seemed to make it incumbent upon me to assist in restoring peace on any terms, however disadvantageous——"

"To England or to France, M. l'abbé?" asked the duke.

"As to that, there has been a good deal of grumbling at Versailles," replied the abbé discreetly. "But in spite of this, my lord, as I hope to show you, I have not only always had an unbounded regard for your lordship personally, but have upon occasion gone a good deal out of my way to serve your lordship's interests."

"That is very good of you, M. l'abbé."

The abbé paused a moment, and then went on,

"Your lordship is accustomed to having enemies, I imagine."

"It is a good while since I had none, certainly."

"Nevertheless, your lordship has probably known neither the most malignant nor the most dangerous of them."

"Gad! are you any wiser then, my dear sir?"

"Certainly, my lord. It is because of that that I am here. I have had the good fortune to frustrate one of their designs against you, and within the last few hours have been lucky enough to acquire a tangible proof of what I assert. If I have not addressed myself to your lordship before, it was because this proof was lacking."

The duke listened to this exordium with a growing suspicion that there was not a word of truth in it, and wondered what was coming next.

"You interest me very much, my dear sir," he replied urbanely. "I presume you can go a little more into detail on the matters you have mentioned?"

"With your lordship's permission I will do so."

The abbé drew his chair rather closer, with a confidential air. The duke's hand strayed a little nearer to the pistol-butt, and he replied,

"I am all attention, M. l'abbé."

"Amongst your lordship's ill-wishers," asked the abbé, "do you happen to be aware of one Ambrose Gwynett?"

The duke recollected that this was the name of the owner of the *Fleur de Lys*, but it was otherwise unknown to him. He did not, however, see any use in telling the abbé this, so merely replied,

"You may assume that much, M. l'abbé."

The duke's affirmation took the abbé a good deal by surprise. For a moment or two he felt at a loss how to proceed without running the risk of inadvertently inventing some impossibility which would be at once obvious to his listener. Finally, he asked cautiously,

"Is your lordship acquainted with his whereabouts?"

"Not in the least," replied the duke.

"Good!" thought the abbé, "he has never heard of the execution." He went on aloud,

"May I ask how far back is your lordship's latest knowledge of his proceedings?"

"Probably a twelvemonth since," replied the duke, with an inward sigh for his vanished million.

"That would be about the time," hazarded the abbé, "of his somewhat equivocal connection with a certain vessel called the *Fleur de Lys*?"

It was now the duke's turn to be staggered.

"The deuce!" he said to himself, "is it possible this fellow knows anything?" Then he said aloud,

"Ah! the *Fleur de Lys*, was it?"

"Your lordship is probably informed of that affair?" observed the abbé.

The duke bowed assentingly, and remarked,

"Nevertheless, I should like to hear your version, M. l'abbé."

"It appears that this Gwynett, my lord, was aware of certain treasure-chests on board the brig, which had just arrived at Calais, and were to be removed to Paris."

"Ah!" thought the duke, with a good deal of relief, "this is the other end of the stick."

"He arranged a very daring plan to capture this treasure on its way to the capital," went on the abbé glibly, "a plan which I had the good fortune to be instrumental in defeating. At the time I did not know who the scoundrel was, and I lost sight of him for some weeks."

"Permit me to remark, my dear sir, that I do not precisely see how I am concerned in all this."

"I am coming to that, my lord. It was while aiding the police to trace this Gwynett that I lighted upon a most important piece of news. When I say that my informant was a lady, upon whose statement I can place every possible reliance, your lordship will, no doubt, excuse my being more explicit as to my authority."

"I applaud your discretion, M. l'abbé."

"The statement made to me, my lord, was that this Gwynett had assisted lady Melfort to abstract a certain letter of your lordship's from lord Melfort's rooms at St. Germain, and was setting out for England to sell it to lord Oxford as a weapon against your lordship."

The duke took this story rather seriously.

"Gad!" he said to himself, "if this fellow is not telling the truth, he has an uncommonly clever way of lying. It looks as if somebody were behind him."

"I may at once candidly confess to your lordship," proceeded Gaultier, "that had your lordship's political power at the time appeared sufficient to prevent the restoration of peace to my afflicted country, I might have hesitated at interfering with anything, however disreputable, which would tend to diminish that power. Your lordship may, perhaps, find it easier to understand that feeling than to forgive it."

"Decidedly this fellow is no fool," ruminated the duke. He waved his hand, and replied,

"On the contrary, M. l'abbé, your point of view is quite reasonable."

The abbé bowed, and went on,

"But it happened, my lord, that I had every reason to believe that peace was practically secured, and all my instincts rose in revolt at the idea of a base intrigue being carried out to ruin one of the greatest men of our own or any age—a disciple of my illustrious compatriot Turenne—for the sake of a paltry handful of guineas."

The abbé reeled off this speech with admirable fluency, and the duke bowed in gracious acceptance of the compliment, saying,

"I am, of course, flattered to hear that any specimen of my poor scribble is considered worth selling. But I am quite at a loss, M. l'abbé, to think of one that would be worth buying."

Gaultier cleared his throat, and drew his chair a little nearer. The duke negligently closed his fingers round the butt of the nearest pistol, and smiled blandly upon his visitor.

"My lord," said the abbé, in a low tone, "this letter was one concerning the expedition to Brest in 1694. It was sent to king James II. through colonel Sackville."

The duke's face continued to smile, but his heart seemed to stop beating. For a moment or two he was perfectly unable to utter a single word. Then he drew a long breath, and remarked slowly,

"I cannot say my memory serves me in the matter, M. l'abbé. But pray continue your story."

"Well, my lord, it seems that this Gwynett, who had apparently some extraordinary hatred of your lordship, had boasted of being about to receive twenty thousand livres from lord Oxford for this letter, and that its publication would bring your lordship to the Tower or even to Tower Hill. I instantly determined that, at all cost and risk to myself, I would safeguard your lordship against this piece of mercenary revenge."

"It was extremely good of you, M. l'abbé," said the duke. "And how did you act?"

"I set aside the private business which had taken me to Paris, and immediately followed in the track of this Gwynett to England. I was lucky enough to overtake him near Deal, a few hours before he was going to have the first opportunity of meeting lord Oxford. This was early on last New Year's Eve. I failed in my first attempt to secure the letter from his person, but was able to follow him, unrecognised, to an inn at Deal. The same evening, my lord, I was favoured by a wonderful opportunity of ridding you of your enemy for good, and I at once availed myself of it. Did your lordship hear of the occurrences that night at the 'Crown and Anchor'?"

"I have no recollection of anything of the sort."

"Not the robbery and murder by Ambrose Gwynett, and the subsequent execution of the murderer?"

"Not a word. You can quite understand that about that time I had my attention a little too much occupied to have any leisure for gossip. I can scarcely suppose the matter was

mentioned in my hearing, because I should certainly have been struck by the name. What were the circumstances?"

The abbé thrust his hand into his breast-pocket, and the watchful duke put his finger round the trigger of the pistol. But as Gaultier only pulled out an old news-sheet, the duke quietly withdrew his hand again.

"This paper, my lord, gives an account of the case, as detailed in evidence at the trial," said Gaultier, passing the sheet over to the duke. "It will save explanation if you will cast your eye over it."

The duke placed the paper so that he could watch the abbé over the top edge, and read the brief detail of the evidence brought forward against Gwynett, followed by the account of the execution. Then he returned it to the abbé.

"Certainly that disposes of Mr. Gwynett," he remarked. "It is gratifying to find that justice was so promptly vindicated. But is that all?"

"By no means," replied the abbé. "The arrest of your enemy, my lord, was not only the first step towards ridding you of him, but it furnished me with what I fully expected would prove the best and only opportunity of securing the letter he carried. I was able to search his person before he was removed in custody, but found nothing. Then I took instant advantage of the confusion to search the clothes and valise he had left behind in his bedroom. Unfortunately, the letter was not to be found anywhere."

The duke's lips were pressed together at this detail of the narrative.

"Evidently you were a little too late, my dear sir," he observed coldly. "That is, if there was any letter at all, which personally I venture to doubt."

"My lord, I was perfectly certain that there was a letter, and that Gwynett was carrying it. But its disappearance made it useless for me to think of addressing your lordship on the subject. You would naturally have been incredulous, and I should have only wasted my time."

"I think you are quite right, M. l'abbé," said the duke, who began to think this was, after all, a deplorably feeble story. "But in that case, to what am I indebted for the honour of your present visit?"

The abbé did not see the use of drawing upon his imagination any further, and so narrated the circumstances under which he had at last come into possession of lady Melfort's letter.



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"Thus, my lord," he concluded, "I am happily in a position to claim credence for the earlier details of my story, and I trust your lordship is satisfied of my good faith, and, what is more, of my devotion to your lordship's interests."

"Perfectly, my dear sir," replied the duke, whose interest was now fully aroused.

The abbé again put his hand in his pocket, and brought out a flat package with more than one sealed covering. While he was carefully undoing these, the duke watched him with close attention.

"Is it a trick or not?" he asked himself anxiously. "The letter may be genuine, and he will want to sell it. Or it may be a trap of Oxford's—no letter, or only a forgery—and they want me to commit myself. I wonder what he will ask?"

Meanwhile, the abbé was hurriedly making a final decision as to the course to adopt with lady Melfort's letter. He foresaw that the duke might consider it as dangerous to pay for the letter as to refuse to buy it. He could, without any great straining of probability, repudiate it as an impudent fabrication. But to buy it would be to admit its genuineness, and the abbé feared that this was almost too much to expect. On the other hand, by trying to drive a bargain and failing, he would shut himself out from all chance of affecting the magnanimous, and of thereby putting the duke under an obligation. Just as he broke the last seal of his extra cover, he reluctantly decided that it would be easier, wiser, and infinitely safer to offer the letter gratis. He unfolded a thin sheet of paper, took out the letter, and handed it to lord Marlborough.

"This is the letter of which we have been speaking, my lord," he said.

The duke took the letter, and recognised in an instant that the address was in lady Melfort's handwriting, and that the seal was the one she always employed. It was thus quite probable that, after all, the abbé was not lying. The duke began to feel that he was on very thin ice indeed. He speculated pleasantly for a moment on the expediency of putting a bullet through the abbé without more ado, but regretfully came to the conclusion that this comfortable solution of the difficulty could not be safely entertained. He made a real effort, and handed the letter back to the abbé with a bow.

"Certainly, this address seems to have been written by some lady using the Melfort seal," he remarked indifferently. "But as to the contents, my dear sir, you must excuse my being a little sceptical about my possible concern with them."

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The abbé was so taken aback at finding the letter in his own hands again, that it was a moment or two before it occurred to him to say,

"If there are any doubts still in your mind, my lord, they can easily be removed."

"How, M. l'abbé?"

"By opening the letter, my lord."

The duke leaned back in his chair, and looked blandly at the abbé.

"My dear M. Gaultier," he remarked, "if you are authorised by lord Oxford to open his private correspondence, it is, of course, no affair of mine. But you can understand that, under existing circumstances, I feel a delicacy about allowing you to do it in this house."

The abbé began to feel he was losing ground.

"My lord," he replied hastily, "you mistake me. This letter is at your service, to make what use you like of it. I place it in your lordship's hands unreservedly." And the abbé rose and laid the letter on the table again before the duke.

"On what terms, M. l'abbé?" asked the duke, who was determined to push the matter home.

"I make none, my lord," said the abbé, with a pang of regret.

"You put a certain amount of responsibility upon me, M. Gaultier," said the duke, negligently taking up the letter, as a new suspicion came into his mind. "If you are prepared yourself to withhold this document from lord Oxford——"

The duke affected to examine the seals closely, and then turned suddenly upon the abbé.

"These seals have been tampered with, sir!" he said sharply.

The abbé had had occasion to be so painfully aware of his entire innocence of this accusation that he felt exceedingly hurt at it.

"Certainly not by me, my lord!" he burst out, with virtuous indignation.

The duke had not been for forty years the most accomplished liar in Europe without learning to know when other people were telling the truth. He recognised the sincerity of the abbé's repudiation, and replied, in a suaver tone,

"I did not say that, M. l'abbé. Perhaps I may be mistaken about the seals. In any case, it is of no possible consequence. It only occurs to me to observe that the account you have

given me scarcely bears out your description of matters in the first instance. It is not, of course, your fault that I feel a little disappointed."

"In what way, my lord?" asked the abbé anxiously.

"I gathered, from your introductory remarks, that you took an active part in what you have called 'getting rid of one of my enemies,' and also in securing this letter. You will allow me to point out that, through no fault of yours, the letter seems to have been lighted upon by pure chance. And as to Mr. Gwynett, of whose ill-will to myself I have no evidence, his removal has been evidently due to the ordinary course of justice."

The abbé was thrown completely off his guard by the profound injustice of this complaint.

"Not at all, my lord!" he cried hastily. "Had it not been for me, Mr. Gwynett would have been alive and well, and would have carried out his project."

The duke recognised that a new note had been struck, and contemplated the abbé with some curiosity.

"Explain, my dear sir," said he.

"My lord," replied Gaultier, "I will ask you to recollect that severe diseases require severe remedies, as the justification for what I am about to tell you."

"Without doubt," assented the duke.

The abbé plunged at once *in medias res*. He was, of course, not unconscious of the fact that carping critics might take exception to the means by which he had secured Gwynett's arrest. But he opined—and probably correctly—that the duke was the last man in the world to affect harshness when an important end had to be gained. He therefore gave a full account of his own share in the proceedings at the 'Crown and Anchor,' modifying the episode at Wray Cottage into a personal struggle between himself and Gwynett for the possession of the letter. He concluded by remarking,

"I trust, my lord, you will now admit I am justified in claiming some share in relieving you of this unscrupulous villain."

The duke began to think he could see daylight in the whole business.

"That explains things," he said to himself. "It is some old score of his own he has been paying off. As to this letter, it must be some trap of Oxford's, or else this fellow would certainly have asked money for it. But I will give him one more chance." He went on aloud,

"Certainly, your account puts a different complexion on the affair, M. l'abbé. In regard to this letter——"

The duke hesitated, and the abbé put in promptly,

"I have said already, my lord, that that matter is at an end. By placing it in your hands I have, I hope, done you a service. If not, I have at all events fulfilled what I regarded as a sacred duty. I have no more to say, my lord."

The duke bowed, took up the letter, and put it in one of the drawers of the table. He shut and locked the drawer, and then turned to the abbé.

"It only remains for me, M. l'abbé," he remarked, "to express my sense of the way in which you have acted throughout this very interesting affair."

The abbé's hopes grew roseate at this exordium, and he prepared a modestly deprecatory smile.

"It appears to me, M. Gaultier," proceeded the duke, with extreme distinctness of utterance, "that you are the most damnable scoundrel I ever met in the whole course of my life."

The abbé was so petrified with astonishment that he could only stare at the duke in silence.

"As to this letter of yours," went on the duke, "it is either some childish trick or a clumsy forgery, and I do not believe a single word of your cock-and-bull story about it. But I fully accept your statement as to your share in Mr. Gwynett's disastrous fate, and I give you my word of honour that if we were over in Holland I would have you hung within a quarter of an hour."

The abbé rose from his chair, perfectly livid, and with his features working convulsively.

"My lord," he stammered, "this outrage——"

The duke got up in his turn, and struck the silver call-bell on the table.

"Leave the house, sir!" he thundered, as Cardonnel made a prompt appearance behind the abbé. "Mr. Cardonnel, be good enough to have this blackguard kicked into the street."

Gaultier glared murderously from the duke to the secretary, and seemed almost to gasp for breath. Then he picked up his hat, and Cardonnel, in a somewhat gingerly fashion, opened the door. The abbé's lips parted as if he were about to speak, but after a moment's pause he appeared to decide that it was useless. He turned slowly and went out, a mist before his blazing eyes, and his soul bursting

with fury and despair. Cardonnel followed, and closed the door behind him.

The duke sat down, and chuckled softly to himself. He took out his snuff-box, and helped himself to a pinch with an air of profound enjoyment.

"What an ass!" he soliloquised. "And really he had a very passable hand to play, if he had only known it."

A door opened and shut, and the duchess came up to him with a letter in her hand.

"This has just come from St. Germain," she said. "I heard you were engaged, or I would have brought it to you before."

The duke opened the letter, and read :

"MY DEAR LORD CHURCHILL,

I have just made a discovery, of which I think it well you should be informed. Thinking over the escape of Mr. Dorrington from the Bastille, which I reported to you at the time, I was led yesterday to look over our correspondence of 1694 in connection with the Brest affair. Very much to my surprise, I find your letter of May 4th is missing. It is some time since I went through these papers, and I have no explanation to suggest of the disappearance.

MELFORT."

"The devil!" commented the duke, passing the letter to the duchess, "the worthy abbé has been telling part of the truth, at all events."

"It must have been stolen!" cried the duchess, after perusing Melfort's epistle.

"I have no doubt of it," replied the duke, "and it happens, by a most charming coincidence, that the thief has just walked out of that door. The stolen letter has been the subject of our last half-hour's conversation."

"Good heavens!" gasped the duchess, "are you serious? What has become of it?"

"It is in this drawer," replied Marlborough, turning the key in the lock, and bringing out the packet. "My visitor kindly left it with me, as you see."

He broke the seals of lady Melfort's letter, and unfolded the cover. It contained a blank sheet of paper.

For several seconds the duke sat motionless and silent, looking at the paper with an air of complete stupefaction. The duchess took it from his unresisting fingers, and turned it over.

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"I do not understand this," she said, in a puzzled tone. "What does it mean?"

The duke did not seem to hear, but gazed vacantly before him. Then, with a little start, he drew a deep breath and raised his head.

"It is quite clear," he said hoarsely. "I don't know whether that abbé is duper or duped. But it is certain Oxford has the letter. That accounts for St. John sending me the passport."

"You think he knows?"

"Possibly not everything—but enough. Is Kermode gone?"

"I think so. Why?"

"I leave London within ten minutes—that is, if I am not arrested in the meantime. I shall go with Cadogan in the *Royal Mary*. You must follow me to Antwerp as soon as I arrive there."

"I think you are quite right," said the duchess.

CHAPTER LI

IN WHICH MR. WROTTESEY IS VERY MUCH SURPRISED

LORD BOLINGBROKE looked up with some little curiosity when the usher opened the door and announced the baron von Starhemberg. He wondered if, by any chance, the visitor would turn out to be bearer of some tentative proposals on the part of general von Starhemberg's master the emperor. The latter was, at the present time, vowing by all his gods that so far from agreeing to the peace which was being negotiated at Utrecht, he would fight all Europe sooner than give up his claims to the Spanish monarchy. Lord Bolingbroke rose, bowed politely, motioned the baron to a chair, and waited for him to commence the conversation.

"My lord," began the old gentleman, speaking in English slowly and with hesitation, "I must apologise for venturing to trespass upon your time in connection with my private affairs."

"I am quite at your service, baron. May I ask if you would prefer to use French in our conversation? I am sorry I myself do not speak German."

"If you will excuse my very rusty English, my lord," said

the baron, "I should prefer it. I may say that I address myself to you in this matter, rather than to lord Oxford, because I am under the impression that my business may perhaps in some trifling degree be more interesting to you than to him."

"Let us hear, at all events, my dear sir."

"Your lordship is acquainted, I believe, with the Wray family, of Wray Manor?"

"Very well indeed."

"You have also made the acquaintance of squire Wray's ward, mistress Muriel Dorrington?"

"I met her once only—a perfectly charming young lady. She has been disastrously unlucky in some engagement, if I recollect right. Was not her *fiancé* hung?"

"Unfortunately, yes. His name was Ambrose Gwynett."

"Did you know him?"

"I am his only surviving relative—his uncle."

"Dear! dear!" ejaculated the viscount sympathetically, and rather at a loss what else to say.

"It is in connection with his deplorable fate that I have ventured to ask your advice and assistance."

"What can I do for you, my dear baron?"

"My lord, in the ordinary course of things I should be heir to my nephew's estate of Thornhaugh. But being uncertain as to how far succession to real property in England would be permitted to an alien, my nephew made me his legatee by will. Unfortunately, it appears that in this country a conviction for felony involves escheatment of all the felon's property to the crown."

"That is so, of course."

"May I ask if the forfeiture takes effect *ipso facto*, or whether some procedure has to be set on foot to establish the claim of the crown?"

"The attorney-general would have to make a formal inquisition on the part of the crown."

"Could I learn whether that has been done?"

"I could find out, I think."

"I should be extremely obliged to you."

The viscount rang for his clerk, wrote a note, and ordered it to be delivered at once.

"Mr. Attorney-General happens to be at the Treasury," he said, resuming his conversation with the baron, "so that we may get his reply at once. Otherwise, there may be a little delay."

"Perhaps in the meantime, my lord, you will allow me to point out to you some features of this case of my nephew's which seem to have escaped notice. Did you happen to see or hear anything of the details of the supposed crime?"

"I read the news-sheets of the time. Why do you say 'supposed crime'?"

"Because, my lord, I am not only certain that my nephew did not commit the crime for which he was executed, but I am equally certain that no crime was committed at all. For anything we know, the supposed victim may be alive and well at the present moment—in fact, I believe he is."

"You amaze me."

"Your lordship will recollect that the evidence of murder at all was purely inferential. The body was not forthcoming, nor did any person swear to witnessing it put away, nor was there the slightest direct evidence of a personal encounter between the two men."

"I believe you are right, so far. But in that case, what about the sudden disappearance of the missing man?"

"That is very strange, without doubt. But a man ought not to be hung merely because something strange happens—which has been the case with my nephew."

"It looks rather like it, I confess."

"As to the missing man, many things might conceivably have happened. But my own impression is that he was kidnapped."

"Kidnapped?"

"Yes. I have had inquiries made, and I find that a press-gang was at work on the very spot, at the identical time."

"Good Lord! but they could be traced, surely?"

"I believe this gang belonged to the *Mermaid*, which sailed immediately afterwards for the West Indies."

"That is most unfortunate. She may be a couple of years away, and heaven only knows how to get at her. Really, this is a shocking affair."

"Do I gather that your lordship agrees with me that a doubt as to my nephew's guilt is possible?"

"God! I should say so—very grave doubt indeed. In fact, from the little I heard of Mr. Gwynett personally, the thing begins to seem monstrous."

The old gentleman bowed gravely.

"I thank you for that expression of opinion, my lord. But you embolden me to make a request."

"What is it, my dear sir?"

"I beg your lordship to use your influence to prevent or delay any proceedings for forfeiture against my nephew's estate, until it is possible to ascertain whether or not the supposed murder has actually been committed."

"Most certainly I will. In the meantime, I recommend you to act under your nephew's will, and take possession. There is a great deal in being in possession."

"I thank you for your good offices."

At this moment the clerk knocked, entered, and handed Bolingbroke a letter. The viscount opened it and passed it over to the baron. The paper contained the single word, '*Gavelkind.*'

"I was an idiot to forget that," remarked the viscount. "You may possibly not be aware, baron, that in several parts of this country, and especially in Kent, we have a peculiar Anglo-Saxon tenure of land called '*gavelkind.*' One of its features is that no escheatment follows on attainder for felony. As the local proverb says, '*the sire to the bough, the son to the plough.*' The father may get hanged, but the son goes on with his sowing and reaping."

"You relieve me considerably," said the baron. "If I ever knew of this tenure, I had certainly forgotten it."

"There is one risk occurs to me," remarked Bolingbroke.

"Who is your family lawyer over here?"

"Mr. Peter Wrottesley, of Canterbury."

"You had better go to him and ask if the property has, by any chance, been disgavelled by act of parliament. It is exceedingly unlikely. But if so, forfeiture is still open. In that case, rely on me to do my best."

The baron rose to take leave.

"You have laid me under great obligations, my lord, by your kindly reception, and still more kindly assistance."

"You are very welcome. I am afraid we have made a terrible blunder in this business. Shall you see mistress Dorrington?"

"Can you tell me where she is?"

"If not at Wray Cottage, I have no idea."

"I hear no one is there at present."

"The Wrays may know. But, unfortunately, they are in America."

"In America?"

"I believe so. There is a Virginian branch of the family, and they are paying a long-promised visit."

This information seemed to surprise the baron a good deal.

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"What is their address in Virginia, my lord?"

"There you have me. I recollect neither the people nor the place. At the moment I cannot think of anyone who could tell you."

The baron looked very much disappointed. But after a pause, he thanked the viscount again and took his leave.

The evening of the same day he arrived at Mr. Wrottesley's house in Canterbury, and sent in his name. The lawyer was in his study, smoking and brewing a night-cap of port negus, when he was told of the visitor.

"Baron von Starhemberg!" he muttered, in amazement. "Show him in."

The baron was ushered into the room and received very respectfully by the lawyer, who placed an easy-chair for his guest, and invited him to remove his thick fur overcoat.

"I am afraid I intrude upon your leisure somewhat late, sir," said the visitor, with his strong German accent.

"On the contrary, my dear sir, this is the best time to catch me. When did you arrive in England?"

"Last night. I had some business in London this morning, and came on thence by post."

"You received my letter of last February, I presume?"

"No. I was not aware you had written to me."

"God bless my soul! Then I am afraid you have some terrible news still to learn."

"If you mean my nephew's unfortunate fate, sir, I have heard about it, and it is that which brings me here. There are several matters respecting which the newspaper accounts I have seen gave no information, and I shall be extremely obliged if you can enlighten me about them."

"Anything in my power," replied the lawyer, thinking to himself that the old gentleman bore the recent tragedy in the family with remarkable fortitude.

"To begin with, my nephew appears to have had no legal assistance at any time between his arrest and his execution. Do you happen to know how that occurred?"

"It was a most unfortunate mischance. He wrote to me from gaol as soon as he was well enough to do so, but in the meantime, without knowing anything of his arrest, I had been summoned to Yorkshire on rather prolonged business. The letter followed me from one place to another, but never reached me till too late. I returned to London the night before the execution, and heard of the whole affair for the first time in the small hours of the morning. I posted off to Maidstone

as soon as I could hire a vehicle, but failed to reach the town till an hour after everything was over."

"That accounts for it, of course," said the baron.

"It happened that I was delayed on the way by a remarkable incident. You have doubtless heard of mistress Muriel Dorrington, to whom your nephew was betrothed?"

"Certainly."

"And of his friend, Noel Wray—son of the old squire at Wray Manor?"

"Yes."

"Well, sir, when I had got about half-way between Rochester and Maidstone, I met a medical friend of mine belonging to Chatham, who had a patient with him in his carriage. Judge of my amazement when I found it was Noel Wray, unconscious from concussion of the brain. My friend had found him lying on the moor, with mistress Dorrington watching him."

"Mistress Dorrington!"

"Herself. Noel had been flung from his horse in the dark of the early morning, and had been lying insensible for more than an hour. My friend and his coachman got him into the carriage, and caught the two horses which Noel and mistress Dorrington had been riding. But the young lady, as soon as she found that Noel would receive proper attention at Chatham, had insisted upon going on herself to Maidstone."

"To Maidstone? to the execution?"

"Yes. Of course, it was then long past eight o'clock, and too late to serve any purpose."

"But how came they to be there at all?" asked the baron, who seemed a good deal puzzled by these details.

"It is a curious story," went on the lawyer. "I heard it all from Noel and his friend Coverdale afterwards. A good fellow that Coverdale, I can assure you. He found Noel out the next day, and took him off to his Yorkshire stud-farm; the old squire, you see, wouldn't own him. This is what happened."

The baron listened to the narrative with breathless attention, and the lawyer saw that he was deeply moved at the disastrous termination to the long journey from Dorrington Hall.

"That, however, was not the worst of it," continued the lawyer. "The shock of the disappointment, and the knowledge that her lover's life was being ended while she sat helpless within a few miles of him, seemed to have thrown her mind off its balance. I drove on at once to Maidstone, and learned there that she had come up with the bier on

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which poor Ambrose's body was lying, as it was being removed from the gaol. She was quite distraught, the folks said, and was persuaded that Ambrose was only sleeping."

The baron's hands began to tremble at this recital, and he gulped something down his throat spasmodically.

"Go on, sir, I beg," he said hoarsely, in a voice which sounded strangely to his listener.

"Really," thought the lawyer, "the old gentleman has a good heart, after all. It struck me at first he took the affair infernally coolly." Then he went on aloud,

"The body, sir, as you may have heard, had been ordered to be hung in chains at a place outside Deal, and it was an hour on its way there when I reached Maidstone. They told me mistress Dorrington had been last seen accompanying the bier at the outskirts of the town. I could not learn any more of her, so went on to the cross-roads near Deal. I got there long after dark, and found the gibbet erected, the dead body suspended from it, and poor mistress Dorrington lying on the ground underneath it, unconscious, and to all appearance dying."

The baron's hand went to his heart with a convulsive clutch, and his eyes dilated as he gazed fixedly at the speaker.

"There wasn't a soul within a mile," went on the lawyer, not a little gratified at the impression produced by his narrative, "but after some trouble I and the driver managed to get the poor young lady, still insensible, into my post-chaise, and we drove on to Wray Cottage. When we got there, it was only to find both the Cottage and the Manor shut up. There was nothing for it but to bring her to this house, which we reached the next day."

"And then——?" asked the baron, in strangled tones.

"She was daft, sir—clean daft," replied the lawyer, with a tremor in his own voice, "and the Lord only knows whether she'll ever have her wits again."

"And where is she now?"

"A couple of weeks afterwards her aunt came down, in consequence of a letter of mine, and took her away. That's the last I saw of the poor young lady. It was the sorest job I ever had in hand, I assure you, and I've never been the same man since."

The baron heard nothing of the last sentence, for his head was buried in his hands, and he was sobbing convulsively. The lawyer looked at him with much sympathy, and blew his nose vigorously.

"Damme!" he remarked to himself, "I did the old gentleman injustice. He feels for the poor girl, I've no doubt, almost as much as I do."

He put his hand gently on the other's arm, and said, "I can assure you, my dear sir, if you had only known that young lady you would have taken her to your heart at once. She is worthy of any man in the world, and your nephew was worthy of her. He was the finest young fellow I ever met, and no more guilty of the crime he died for than I or you—I'll be d——d if he was!"

The baron raised his head, and looked at his host intently. Then he rose, stood erect before the amazed lawyer, and held out his hand.

"Mr. Wrottesley," he said, "I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your goodness to Muriel, and for the words you have this moment uttered."

At the voice, the lawyer's hair stood on end, and his eyes seemed to start from their sockets. He pushed his chair back, gasping, and looked as if he were going to have a fit.

"God in heaven!" he breathed, in a terrified whisper, "you are not—not——?"

"Yes—it is I."

"Ambrose Gwynett!"

CHAPTER LII

WHICH EXPLAINS CERTAIN MATTERS

IN the immensity of his surprise the lawyer gazed speechlessly upon his visitor for several seconds, and allowed the hand outstretched towards him to remain unshaken. Then he jumped up, and grasped it with such fervid enthusiasm that its owner began to think it would never be released.

"Gad! my dear boy," he shouted hilariously, "I see it all. A case of mistaken identity; they hung somebody else instead of you, eh?"

"Not at all, sir," replied Gwynett.

"The deuce! then how—— But stop! you'll join me in a bumper to celebrate this wonderful meeting?"

The lawyer rose to ring the bell, and Gwynett said warningly, "For the baron von Starhemberg, my dear sir, recollect."

"Of course—of course."

The materials for a further brew were duly forthcoming, and the lawyer, devoured by curiosity, locked the door, and sat down opposite his visitor.

"Now, my dear boy, tell me all about it. But first of all, where on earth did you get your mahogany skin and your white hair?"

"They come of several experiments in my uncle's laboratory."

"Ah! so you have been there all the time, eh? But let us hear your story from the beginning."

"There is not much to tell, sir. I daresay you know that I was desperately ill after my arrest, and had previously been rather roughly handled; so that, what with my injuries first and the gaol-fever afterwards, I was in a fair way to cheat the hangman in any case."

"So I learned the night of my return."

"I fancy I was off my head most of the time just previous to the execution, and I recollect very little, except finding myself assisted on to the gallows. But the moment I got there I saw a face among the crowd that went through me like a knife—the man who, for some devil's game of his own, fixed the supposed crime at the 'Crown and Anchor' upon me."

"I have heard nothing of all that. But go on."

"Within a moment of recognising the man I speak of, I felt suddenly faint, and must have had a sort of cataleptic seizure, for that is the last I recollect of the business. Of the execution itself and the rest of the proceedings, you know more than I do."

"This is amazing," said the lawyer. "And when did you come to yourself again?"

"About midnight, I fancy. My first consciousness was of being swung violently about, and the idea flashed through my mind that I was in the middle of being hung. A very unpleasant idea it was, I can assure you."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated the lawyer.

"Then I found, first of all, that I could breathe easily enough, and secondly, that I was suffering excruciating agony in every inch of my body—so much so that I yelled out at the top of my voice. At the same time I opened my eyes. It was moonlight, and I saw a group of four men standing close to the gibbet, nearly frightened to death."

"Gad! I don't wonder at that."

"When they had found their wits again they grasped the position of affairs, got me down from the gibbet, and extricated

me from the iron frame by means of some tools they happened to have found close by. Then I learned that, thanks to these men, I had had a double escape of the narrowest possible character."

Gwynett narrated the stratagem by which the body-snatchers' intended theft of his remains had been defeated, mention of which has already been made in this history.

"It happened," he went on, "that I felt very much better when I was rescued from the gibbet than I had felt for weeks. I fancy the change to the fresh sea-air after the pestilential stench of the gaol had a good deal to do with it. The worthy smugglers—that is their occupation, strictly between ourselves—primed me with some excellent liquor to start with, and then took me in a pony-trap to their lugger at Sandwich. There they gave me a salt-water bath, fed me like a fighting-cock, and played the good Samaritans to admiration. I think the pleasure of cheating both the hangman and the body-snatchers was one they found quite delightful in its novelty."

"I'll never hear another word against smugglers as long as I live," averred the lawyer. "And how long did you stay there?"

"They were running over to France a couple of days afterwards," proceeded Gwynett, "and offered to take me with them, as the safest thing for me. But some mixed-up story they told me, of a young lady who encountered the party with the bier in the streets of Maidstone, made me determine at all hazards to find out if it was Muriel whom they had seen. I need not tell you I had not heard a single word from anyone while in gaol."

"I don't quite understand that."

"For one thing, my letter to you was the only one I was able to write myself, and the gaolers could neither read nor write. Nor did I know whether Muriel had returned to Wray Cottage or not. The evening after my rescue I found myself able to walk without much difficulty, so I got the smugglers to drive me in their pony-trap within a mile of the Cottage, and then walked on."

"Of course, you found the place as we did—in charge of the caretaker?"

"No; the door was open, but there was nobody there. I went in, and sat down for a few minutes to rest, feeling rather done up. There was a sharp thunderstorm while I was there, and I waited till it was over. Then I went away, rejoined the trap at the entrance to the wood, and was taken

back to the lugger. The next morning they very kindly went and fetched some of my clothes from the 'Crown and Anchor,' where they had remained ever since the night when that infernal scoundrel raised the house on me."

"I should like to hear about that," said the lawyer, "for I could neither make head nor tail of the gossip that has reached me."

Gwynett detailed, in reply, the incidents of his commission from lady Melfort, the shots fired at Wray Cottage after the lawyer had left Muriel and himself together, the meeting with Dorrington, and the eventful night at the inn. The recital filled the lawyer with amazement and boundless indignation.

"I never heard of such a trick in all my born days," he fumed, after exhausting all the execrations in his vocabulary, "and I'd pay half my fortune to see the fellow swing for it. But go on."

"Unfortunately," proceeded Gwynett, "they brought me Dorrington's overcoat from the inn instead of my own cloak, misled by the fact of my having worn it that night. They could not tell me what had become of my cloak, which is a pity. The letter I was entrusted with must have been of some consequence, and it was stowed away in a little pocket of the cloak which I used for such purposes."

"Let that flea stick in the wall," remarked the lawyer philosophically. "It seems to me you may thank that letter for taking you to Deal, and getting you into all the trouble. What next about your smuggling friends?"

"They sailed for the Somme the following day, and the good fellows made me pocket ten pounds to start me in life across the water. Of course, I had been robbed in the course of justice of all the money I had had at the 'Crown and Anchor.' It appears that one of the brothers is now the landlord there, and he seemed to consider it a case for a little restitution."

"Had you any notion what to do or where to go?"

"Naturally, I thought in the first instance of going to my uncle, whom I could depend upon to accept my version of the story of the supposed murder. Knowing French better than Dutch, I preferred to reach Munich by way of France rather than by the Netherlands. I passed through Paris, walking most of the way, just after those deaths in the royal family. Things were a good deal upset there, and I had so narrow an escape of being recognised one night by M. de Torcy, that I left at dawn the next morning."

A portion of Gwynett's narrative at this point referred to the attack on the duc d'Oléans' carriage, and his own share in rescuing that gentleman from his assailants, together with details of the remainder of his journey to Bavaria, in which the reader would find nothing of interest.

"My uncle," he went on, "received me with open arms, and recommended me to resume my life with him as if nothing had happened. He argued that my rescue was so utterly improbable, that if the circumstances of the trial and execution transpired, everyone would take for granted it was a mere coincidence of name, and consequently never dream of suspecting my connection with the affair. On the other hand, I pointed out to him that I had no private income apart from my interest in Thornhaugh, and that if he did not claim the property as my heir, it would be lost altogether."

"A very neat quandary," commented the lawyer, with professional interest. "What did you decide?"

"Eventually we agreed to invent a supposititious cousin of mine of the same name, executed for a political offence, who would pass muster in Bavaria. But my uncle must claim Thornhaugh, in order to pass the income from it over to me, and this is partly the occasion of my visit."

"Then you propose to accept your own decease?"

"Is there any help for it?"

"I am afraid not. Luckily, there is no forfeiture."

"So lord Bolingbroke supposed—I came from him this morning. I had forgotten the gavelkind tenure, and went to him to ask for a stay of inquisition."

"You need not trouble about that. But we shall want papers from your uncle."

"I have brought a whole bundle from the electoral chancellerie."

"That is all right. But what on earth possessed you to run the risk of coming over here in person, even with this disguise of yours?"

"It was chiefly to obtain news of Muriel, and I am terribly disappointed by your account of matters. But I suppose we can ascertain her present whereabouts?"

"I doubt it. The aunt came here like a legion of furies, and I gathered from what she said that the old squire was, if possible, a little more outrageous than herself—swore he'd disinherit Noel, and the rest of it. As regards myself, the first I heard was that he had changed his solicitor, and the next that he had taken his niece out to Virginia. Of Noel

I have heard nothing since Coverdale walked off with him, and I don't know Coverdale's address."

"Who is the new Wray solicitor?"

"They won't tell me. I sent all the estate papers and books to the Manor, and that ended matters. You may not believe it, but I was so furious at the affair that I did not even send in my bill. I confess I scarcely see where you can begin your search—apart from the risk."

"There is no risk worth speaking of."

"Don't be so cock-sure. No man can keep up a part for ever. Some day you will straighten your back and talk like an Englishman, and it will be all up with you."

"Possibly. But I must run the risk, whatever it be."

"I beg your pardon. You may run the risk, if you choose. But if you are detected, and hung over again, how is that to benefit mistress Dorrington? Even if you found her, to approach her as a stranger would arouse inquiry, and any inquiry would be dangerous."

"Can you suggest anything better?"

"Certainly. Go back, and leave the matter in my hands—I will do whatever is possible, and I can do it quite safely."

"It is very good of you. I will, at all events, think over your offer. Now as to the property? I suppose you can proceed under my will, on behalf of my uncle?"

"Yes. There is no occasion to perjure myself about your decease, as the gaol record is sufficient. I will look through your uncle's papers, and see if they are complete. Then I strongly recommend you to get out of England at once—it is no use running utterly needless risks."

"There is one other thing I had in view."

"What is that?"

"To set on foot inquiries about Mr. Dorrington—especially in connection with the *Mermaid's* press-gang."

"Of course. That, again, I can see to much better than you."

After some further chat on business matters, Gwynett accepted the lawyer's offer of a bed, and a little later both retired for the night.

The next morning the baron von Starhemberg's papers were overhauled and found to be in order, so far as could be decided at that stage of the proceedings. The rest of the day was spent in a futile attempt to get news at Wray Manor and the Cottage, after which lawyer and client drove

to Dover, where they put up at a tavern till the following morning.

After breakfast the next day they directed their steps to the waterside to inquire about a passage to Calais. A boat containing a passenger was just putting off to a schooner which lay at anchor a little way out, her sails spread for an impending departure. Gwynett thought he recognised two of the *Kermodes* pulling the dinghy, and asked a fisherman standing near what was the schooner's name.

"They call her the *Royal Mary*, your honour. She's taking the duke of Marlborough to Antwerp—that's him in the dinghy. He came here yesterday, but couldn't start for the fog."

The dinghy reached the schooner, and the duke went on board. The *Royal Mary* weighed anchor, and before long was heading under a fresh breeze for the Dutch coast. About an hour later Gwynett found a fisherman who was willing to convey him across the Channel, and after a warm parting with the lawyer he took his seat in the lugger, and started on his passage to Calais. The *Royal Mary* was just sinking below the horizon.

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Five days afterwards M. de Torcy was in his cabinet, awaiting his usual summons from madame de Maintenon, when his secretary Lavalaye entered with despatches from the Low Countries and Vienna, where the French government had confidential agents.

At a sign from de Torcy he proceeded to open them and to intimate the contents to the marquis. After running his eye through the despatch from Vienna, the secretary said,

"It appears that Zinzindorff has announced the emperor's final determination to continue the war, and to ignore altogether any arrangement that may be come to at Utrecht between the other powers."

Zinzindorff was the imperial chancellor. The marquis shrugged his shoulders, and asked, as he took the paper handed to him by Lavalaye,

"Does the letter from Utrecht confirm that?"

Lavalaye opened the other despatch, glanced over it, and read aloud,

"The duke of Marlborough arrived at Antwerp this morning, quite unexpectedly and unattended."

"Nothing more?"

"That is all."

"And quite enough," said the marquis to himself. "Evidently these things hang together. He has sold us, after all. It is about time to spike that gun, I think."

He turned to Lavalaye, and asked,

"Where is that letter of the duke's?"

"The one we took from lady Melfort's enclosure to lord Oxford?"

"Yes."

Lavalaye went to a desk, brought out a letter, and handed it to the marquis.

"That is it," said de Torcy. "Enclose it to M. Randolph Dorrington, at the address in London I gave you. Let it be sent at once by a special messenger, and be sure to urge every possible precaution. It is impossible to say how much may depend on that scrawl reaching its destination safe and sound."

"You think it is of importance, then, monsieur?"

The marquis paused as he was lifting a pinch of snuff to his nose, and replied,

"I think it may alter history a little, my dear René."

L'Envoy

FROM a later portion of the records laid under contribution by the present chronicler, it would appear that M. de Torcy's prediction was somewhat notably fulfilled—although in a way that he was certainly very far from expecting.

But to these and many other matters affecting the various personages of this history, space does not admit of further reference.

For this reason nothing can be here said in detail of Gwynett's search (for a long time unavailing) after his lost betrothed and her father, of his arrival in Paris during the *coup d'état* which followed the death of Louis XIV., or of his subsequent relations with the regent Orléans and the Pretender, the chevalier de St. George.

It will suffice to hint that in the course of his connection

(not a very willing one) with the desperate intrigues set on foot after the establishment of the Hanoverian dynasty in Britain, and the regency in France, he was involved in a continuous series of adventures from which, on several occasions, he barely escaped with his life.

It may, perhaps, be added, that to his share in certain of these episodes the future of both the Guelph and Bourbon dynasties was measurably indebted—and none the less because in the affair of the Stuart rebellion of 1715, and in certain strange and terrible matters affecting the comtesse de Valincour, the woman Latour, Sanson the executioner, and the mysterious père Germont, his aid towards the safe-guarding of the state and the doing of justice was of a kind that did not admit of public avowal.

But although the bulk of the further records in question prevents them being here placed before the reader, he may reasonably expect to learn that, after much chequered fortune and misfortune, the houses of Gwynett and Wray found mistresses in the persons of Muriel and Avice, and that it was many long years before the manor of Dorrington passed, by the death of its venerable lord, to his son-in-law the squire of Thornhaugh.

With this announcement the chronicler makes his bow, and is gone.

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