St. Martin's Summer

by Rafael Sabatini

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By Rafael Sabatini

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SAINT MARTIN’S SUMMER

CHAPTER I. THE SENESCHAL OF DAUPHINY

My Lord of Tressan, His Majesty’s Seneschal of Dauphiny, sat at his ease, his purple doublet all undone, to yield greater freedom to his vast bulk, a yellow silken undergarment visible through the gap, as is visible the flesh of some fruit that, swollen with over-ripeness, has burst its skin.

His wig—imposed upon him by necessity, not fashion—lay on the table amid a confusion of dusty papers, and on his little fat nose, round and red as a cherry at its

end, rested the bridge of his horn-rimmed spectacles. His bald head—so bald and shining that it conveyed an unpleasant sense of nakedness, suggesting that its uncovering had been an act of indelicacy on the owner's part—rested on the back of his great chair, and hid from sight the gaudy escutcheon wrought upon the crimson leather. His eyes were closed, his mouth open, and whether from that mouth or from his nose—or, perhaps, conflicting for issue between both—there came a snorting, rumbling sound to proclaim that my Lord the Seneschal was hard at work upon the King's business.

Yonder, at a meaner table, in an angle between two windows, a pale-faced thread-bare secretary was performing for a yearly pittance the duties for which my Lord the Seneschal was rewarded by emoluments disproportionately large.

The air of that vast apartment was disturbed by the sounds of Monsieur de Tressan's slumbers, the scratch and splutter of the secretary's pen, and the occasional hiss and crackle of the logs that burned in the great, cavern-like fireplace. Suddenly to these another sound was added. With a rasp and rattle the heavy curtains of blue velvet flecked with silver fleurs-de-lys were swept from the doorway, and the master of Monsieur de Tressan's household, in a well filled suit of black relieved by his heavy chain of office, stepped pompously forward.

The secretary dropped his pen, and shot a frightened glance at his slumbering master; then raised his hands above his head, and shook them wildly at the head lackey.

"Sh!" he whispered tragically. "Doucement, Monsieur Anselme."

Anselme paused. He appreciated the gravity of the situation. His bearing lost some of its dignity; his face underwent a change. Then with a recovery of some part of his erstwhile resolution:

"Nevertheless, he must be awakened," he announced, but in an undertone, as if afraid to do the thing he said must needs be done.

The horror in the secretary's eyes increased, but Anselme's reflected none of it. It was a grave thing, he knew by former experience, to arouse His Majesty's Seneschal of Dauphiny from his after-dinner nap; but it was an almost graver thing to fail in obedience to that black-eyed woman below who was demanding an audience.

Anselme realized that he was between the sword and the wall. He was, however, a man of a deliberate habit that was begotten of inherent indolence and nurtured among the good things that fell to his share as master of the Tressan household. Thoughtfully he caressed his tuft of red beard, puffed out his cheeks, and raised his eyes to the ceiling in appeal or denunciation to the heaven which he believed was somewhere beyond it.

"Nevertheless, he must be awakened," he repeated.

And then Fate came to his assistance. Somewhere in the house a door banged like a cannon-shot. Perspiration broke upon the secretary's brow. He sank limply back in his chair, giving himself up for lost. Anselme started and bit the knuckle of his forefinger in a manner suggesting an inarticulate imprecation.

My Lord the Seneschal moved. The noise of his slumbers culminated in a sudden, choking grunt, and abruptly ceased. His eyelids rolled slowly back, like an owl's, revealing pale blue eyes, which fixed themselves first upon the ceiling, then upon Anselme. Instantly he sat up, puffing and scowling, his hands shuffling his papers.

"A thousand devils! Anselme, why am I interrupted?" he grumbled querulously, still half-asleep. "What the plague do you want? Have you no thought for the King's affairs? Babylas"—this to his secretary—"did I not tell you that I had much to do; that I must not be disturbed?"

It was the great vanity of the life of this man, who did nothing, to appear the busiest fellow in all France, and no audience—not even that of his own lackeys—was too mean for him to take the stage to in that predilect role.

"Monsieur le Comte," said Anselme, in tones of abject self-effacement, "I had never

dared intrude had the matter been of less urgency. But Madame the Dowager of Condillac is below. She begs to see Your Excellency instantly."

At once there was a change. Tressan became wide-awake upon the instant. His first act was to pass one hand over the wax-like surface of his bald head, whilst his other snatched at his wig. Then he heaved himself ponderously out of his great chair. He donned his wig, awry in his haste, and lurched forward towards Anselme, his fat fingers straining at his open doublet and drawing it together.

"Madame la Douairiere here?" he cried. "Make fast these buttons, rascal! Quick! Am I to receive a lady thus? Am I—? Babylas," he snapped, interrupting himself and turning aside even as Anselme put forth hands to do his bidding. "A mirror, from my closet! Dispatch!"

The secretary was gone in a flash, and in a flash returned, even as Anselme completed his master's toilet. But clearly Monsieur de Tressan had awakened in a peevish humour, for no sooner were the buttons of his doublet secured than with his own fingers he tore them loose again, cursing his majordomo the while with vigour.

"You dog, Anselme, have you no sense of fitness, no discrimination? Am I to appear in this garment of the mode of a half-century ago before Madame la Marquise? Take it off; take it off, man! Get me the coat that came last month from Paris—the yellow one with the hanging sleeves and the gold buttons, and a sash—the crimson sash I had from Taillemant. Can you move no quicker, animal? Are you still here?"

Anselme, thus enjoined, lent an unwonted alacrity to his movements, waddling grotesquely like a hastening waterfowl. Between him and the secretary they dressed my Lord the Seneschal, and decked him out till he was fit to compare with a bird of paradise for gorgeousness of colouring if not for harmony of hues and elegance of outline.

Babylas held the mirror, and Anselme adjusted the Seneschal's wig, whilst Tressan himself twisted his black mustachios—how they kept their colour was a mystery to

his acquaintance—and combed the tuft of beard that sprouted from one of his several chins.

He took a last look at his reflection, rehearsed a smile, and bade Anselme introduce his visitor. He desired his secretary to go to the devil, but, thinking better of it, he recalled him as he reached the door. His cherished vanity craved expression.

“Wait!” said he. “There is a letter must be written. The King’s business may not suffer postponement—not for all the dowagers in France. Sit down.”

Babylas obeyed him. Tressan stood with his back to the open door. His ears, strained to listen, had caught the swish of a woman’s gown. He cleared his throat, and began to dictate:

“To Her Majesty the Queen-Regent—” He paused, and stood with knitted brows, deep in thought. Then he ponderously repeated—“To Her Majesty the Queen Regent—Have you got that?”

“Yes, Monsieur le Comte. ‘To Her Majesty the Queen Regent.’”

There was a step, and a throat-clearing cough behind him.

“Monsieur de Tressan,” said a woman’s voice, a rich, melodious voice, if haughty and arrogant of intonation.

On the instant he turned, advanced a step, and bowed.

“Your humblest servant, madame,” said he, his hand upon his heart. “This is an honour which—”

“Which necessity thrusts upon you,” she broke in imperiously. “Dismiss that fellow.”

The secretary, pale and shy, had risen. His eyes dilated at the woman’s speech. He looked for a catastrophe as the natural result of her taking such a tone with this man who was the terror of his household and of all Grenoble. Instead, the Lord Seneschal’s meekness left him breathless with surprise.

“He is my secretary, madame. We were at work as you came. I was on the point of inditing a letter to Her Majesty. The office of Seneschal in a province such as Dauphiny is helas!—no sinecure.” He sighed like one whose brain is weary. “It leaves a man little time even to eat or sleep.”

“You will be needing a holiday, then,” said she, with cool insolence. “Take one for once, and let the King’s business give place for half an hour to mine.”

The secretary’s horror grew by leaps and bounds.

Surely the storm would burst at last about this audacious woman’s head. But the Lord Seneschal—usually so fiery and tempestuous—did no more than make her another of his absurd bows.

“You anticipate, madame, the very words I was about to utter. Babylas, vanish!” And he waved the scribbler doorwards with a contemptuous hand. “Take your papers with you—into my closet there. We will resume that letter to Her Majesty when madame shall have left me.”

The secretary gathered up his papers, his quills, and his inkhorn, and went his way, accounting the end of the world at hand.

When the door had closed upon him, the Seneschal, with another bow and a simper, placed a chair at his visitor’s disposal. She looked at the chair, then looked at the man much as she had looked at the chair, and turning her back contemptuously on both, she sauntered towards the fireplace. She stood before the blaze, with her whip tucked under her arm, drawing off her stout riding-gloves. She was a tall, splendidly proportioned woman, of a superb beauty of countenance, for all that she was well past the spring of life.

In the waning light of that October afternoon none would have guessed her age to be so much as thirty, though in the sunlight you might have set it at a little more. But in no light at all would you have guessed the truth, that her next would be her forty-second birthday. Her face was pale, of an ivory pallor that gleamed in sharp

contrast with the ebony of her lustrous hair. Under the long lashes of low lids a pair of eyes black and insolent set off the haughty lines of her scarlet lips. Her nose was thin and straight, her neck an ivory pillar splendidly upright upon her handsome shoulders.

She was dressed for riding, in a gown of sapphire velvet, handsomely laced in gold across the stomacher, and surmounted at the neck, where it was cut low and square, by the starched band of fine linen which in France was already replacing the more elaborate ruff. On her head, over a linen coif, she wore a tall-crowned grey beaver, swathed with a scarf of blue and gold.

Standing by the hearth, one foot on the stone kerb, one elbow leaning lightly on the overmantel, she proceeded leisurely to remove her gloves.

The Seneschal observed her with eyes that held an odd mixture of furtiveness and admiration, his fingers—plump, indolent-looking stumps—plucking at his beard.

“Did you but know, Marquise, with what joy, with what a—”

“I will imagine it, whatever it may be,” she broke in, with that brusque arrogance that marked her bearing. “The time for flowers of rhetoric is not now. There is trouble coming, man; trouble, dire trouble.”

Up went the Seneschal’s brows; his eyes grew wider.

“Trouble?” quoth he. And, having opened his mouth to give exit to that single word, open he left it.

She laughed lazily, her lip curling, her face twisting oddly, and mechanically she began to draw on again the glove she had drawn off.

“By your face I see how well you understand me,” she sneered. “The trouble concerns Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye.”

“From Paris—does it come from Court?” His voice was sunk.

She nodded. “You are a miracle of intuition today, Tressan.”

He thrust his tiny tuft of beard between his teeth—a trick he had when perplexed or thoughtful. “Ah!” he exclaimed at last, and it sounded like an indrawn breath of apprehension. “Tell me more.”

“What more is there to tell? You have the epitome of the story.”

“But what is the nature of the trouble? What form does it take, and by whom are you advised of it?”

“A friend in Paris sent me word, and his messenger did his work well, else had Monsieur de Garnache been here before him, and I had not so much as had the mercy of this forewarning.”

“Garnache?” quoth the Count. “Who is Garnache?”

“The emissary of the Queen-Regent. He has been dispatched hither by her to see that Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye has justice and enlargement.”

Tressan fell suddenly to groaning and wringing his hands a pathetic figure had it been less absurd.

“I warned you, madame! I warned you how it would end,” he cried. “I told you—”

“Oh, I remember the things you told me,” she cut in, scorn in her voice. “You may spare yourself their repetition. What is done is done, and I’ll not—I would not—have it undone. Queen-Regent or no Queen-Regent, I am mistress at Condillac; my word is the only law we know, and I intend that so it shall continue.”

Tressan looked at her in surprise. This unreasoning, feminine obstinacy so wrought upon him that he permitted himself a smile and a lapse into irony and banter.

“Parfaitement,” said he, spreading his hands, and bowing. “Why speak of trouble, then?”

She beat her whip impatiently against her gown, her eyes staring into the fire. “Because, my attitude being such as it is, trouble will there be.”

The Seneschal shrugged his shoulders, and moved a step towards her. He was cast

down to think that he might have spared himself the trouble of donning his beautiful yellow doublet from Paris. She had eyes for no finery that afternoon. He was cast down, too, to think how things might go with him when this trouble came. It entered his thoughts that he had lain long on a bed of roses in this pleasant corner of Dauphiny, and he was smitten now with fear lest of the roses he should find nothing remaining but the thorns.

“How came the Queen-Regent to hear of—of mademoiselle’s—ah—situation?” he inquired.

The Marquise swung round upon him in a passion.

“The girl found a dog of a traitor to bear a letter for her. That is enough. If ever chance or fate should bring him my way, by God! he shall hang without shrift.”

Then she put her anger from her; put from her, too, the insolence and scorn with which so lavishly she had addressed him hitherto. Instead she assumed a suppliant air, her beautiful eyes meltingly set upon his face.

“Tressan,” said she in her altered voice, “I am beset by enemies. But you will not forsake me? You will stand by me to the end—will you not, my friend? I can count upon you, at least?”

“In all things, madame,” he answered, under the spell of her gaze. “What force does this man Garnache bring with him? Have you ascertained?”

“He brings none,” she answered, triumph in her glance.

“None?” he echoed, horror in his. “None? Then—then—”

He tossed his arms to heaven, and stood a limp and shaken thing. She leaned forward, and regarded him stricken in surprise.

“Diable! What ails you?” she snapped. “Could I have given you better news?”

“If you could have given me worse, I cannot think what it might have been,” he groaned. Then, as if smitten by a sudden notion that flashed a gleam of hope into

this terrifying darkness that was settling down upon him, he suddenly looked up. “You mean to resist him?” he inquired.

She stared at him a second, then laughed, a thought unpleasantly.

“Pish! But you are mad,” she scorned him. “Do you need ask if I intend to resist—I, with the strongest castle in Dauphiny? By God! sir, if you need to hear me say it, hear me then say that I shall resist him and as many as the Queen may send after him, for as long as one stone of Condillac shall stand upon another.”

The Seneschal blew out his lips, and fell once more to the chewing of his beard.

“What did you mean when you said I could have given you no worse news than that of his coming alone?” she questioned suddenly.

“Madame,” said he, “if this man comes without force, and you resist the orders of which he is the bearer, what think you will betide?”

“He will appeal to you for the men he needs that he may batter down my walls,” she answered calmly.

He looked at her incredulously. “You realize it?” he ejaculated. “You realize it?”

“What is there in it that should puzzle a babe?”

Her callousness was like a gust of wind upon the living embers of his fears. It blew them into a blaze of wrath, sudden and terrific as that of such a man at bay could be. He advanced upon her with the rolling gait of the obese, his cheeks purple, his arms waving wildly, his dyed mustachios bristling.

“And what of me, madame?” he spluttered. “What of me? Am I to be ruined, gaoled, and hanged, maybe, for refusing him men?—for that is what is in your mind. Am I to make myself an outlaw? Am I, who have been Lord Seneschal of Dauphiny these fifteen years, to end my days in degradation in the cause of a woman’s matrimonial projects for a simpering school-girl? Seigneur du Ciel!” he roared, “I think you are gone mad—mad, mad! over this affair. You would not think it too much to set the

whole province in flames so that you could have your way with this wretched child. But, Ventregris! to ruin me—to—to—”

He fell silent for very want of words; just gaped and gasped, and then, with hands folded upon his paunch, he set himself to pace the chamber.

Madame de Condillac stood watching him, her face composed, her glance cold. She was like some stalwart oak, weathering with unshaken front a hurricane. When he had done, she moved away from the fireplace, and, beating her side gently with her whip, she stepped to the door.

“Au revoir, Monsieur de Tressan,” said she, mighty cool, her back towards him.

At that he halted in his feverish stride, stood still and threw up his head. His anger went out, as a candle is extinguished by a puff of wind. And in its place a new fear crept into his heart.

“Madame, madame!” he cried. “Wait! Hear me.”

She paused, half-turned, and looked at him over her shoulder, scorn in her glance, a sneer on her scarlet mouth, insolence in every line of her.

“I think, monsieur, that I have heard a little more than enough,” said she. “I am assured, at least, that in you I have but a fair-weather friend, a poor lipserver.”

“Ah, not that, madame,” he cried, and his voice was stricken. “Say not that. I would serve you as would none other in all this world—you know it, Marquise; you know it.”

She faced about, and confronted him, her smile a trifle broader, as if amusement were now blending with her scorn.

“It is easy to protest. Easy to say, ‘I will die for you,’ so long as the need for such a sacrifice be remote. But let me do no more than ask a favour, and it is, ‘What of my good name, madame? What of my seneschalship? Am I to be gaoled or hanged to pleasure you?’ Faugh!” she ended, with a toss of her splendid head. “The world is

peopled with your kind, and I—alas! for a woman's intuitions—had held you different from the rest."

Her words were to his soul as a sword of fire might have been to his flesh. They scorched and shrivelled it. He saw himself as she would have him see himself—a mean, contemptible craven; a coward who made big talk in times of peace, but faced about and vanished into hiding at the first sign of danger. He felt himself the meanest, vilest thing a-crawl upon this sinful earth, and she—dear God!—had thought him different from the ruck. She had held him in high esteem, and behold, how short had he not fallen of all her expectations! Shame and vanity combined to work a sudden, sharp revulsion in his feelings.

"Marquise," he cried, "you say no more than what is just. But punish me no further. I meant not what I said. I was beside myself. Let me atone—let my future actions make amends for that odious departure from my true self."

There was no scorn now in her smile; only an ineffable tenderness, beholding which he felt it in his heart to hang if need be that he might continue high in her regard. He sprang forward, and took the hand she extended to him.

"I knew, Tressan," said she, "that you were not yourself, and that when you bethought you of what you had said, my valiant, faithful friend would not desert me."

He stooped over her hand, and slobbered kisses upon her unresponsive glove.

"Madame," said he, "you may count upon me. This fellow out of Paris shall have no men from me, depend upon it."

She caught him by the shoulders, and held him so, before her. Her face was radiant, alluring; and her eyes dwelt on his with a kindness he had never seen there save in some wild daydream of his.

"I will not refuse a service you offer me so gallantly," said she. "It were an ill thing to wound you by so refusing it."

“Marquise,” he cried, “it is as nothing to what I would do did the occasion serve. But when this thing ‘tis done; when you have had your way with Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye, and the nuptials shall have been celebrated, then—dare I hope—?”

He said no more in words, but his little blue eyes had an eloquence that left nothing to mere speech.

Their glances met, she holding him always at arm’s length by that grip upon his shoulders, a grip that was firm and nervous.

In the Seneschal of Dauphiny, as she now gazed upon him, she beheld a very toad of a man, and the soul of her shuddered at the sight of him combining with the thing that he suggested. But her glance was steady and her lips maintained their smile, just as if that ugliness of his had been invested with some abstract beauty existing only to her gaze; a little colour crept into her cheeks, and red being the colour of love’s livery, Tressan misread its meaning.

She nodded to him across the little distance of her outstretched arms, then smothered a laugh that drove him crazed with hope, and breaking from him she sped swiftly, shyly it almost seemed to him, to the door.

There she paused a moment looking back at him with a coyness that might have become a girl of half her years, yet which her splendid beauty saved from being unbecoming even in her.

One adorable smile she gave him, and before he could advance to hold the door for her, she had opened it and passed out.

CHAPTER II. MONSIEUR DE GARNACHE

To promise rashly, particularly where a woman is the suppliant, and afterwards, if not positively to repent the promise, at least to regret that one did not hedge it with a few conditions, is a proceeding not uncommon to youth. In a man of advanced age,

such as Monsieur de Tressan, it never should have place; and, indeed, it seldom has, unless that man has come again under the sway of the influences by which youth, for good or ill, is governed.

Whilst the flush of his adoration was upon him, hot from the contact of her presence, he knew no repentance, found room in his mind for no regrets. He crossed to the window, and pressed his huge round face to the pane, in a futile effort to watch her mount and ride out of the courtyard with her little troop of attendants. Finding that he might not—the window being placed too high—gratify his wishes in that connection, he dropped into his chair, and sat in the fast-deepening gloom, reviewing, fondly here, hurriedly there, the interview that had but ended.

Thus night fell, and darkness settled down about him, relieved only by the red glow of the logs smouldering on the hearth. In the gloom inspiration visited him. He called for lights and Babylas. Both came, and he dispatched the lackey that lighted the tapers to summon Monsieur d'Aubran, the commander of the garrison of Grenoble.

In the interval before the soldier's coming he conferred with Babylas concerning what he had in mind, but he found his secretary singularly dull and unimaginative. So that, perforce, he must fall back upon himself. He sat glum and thoughtful, his mind in unproductive travail, until the captain was announced.

Still without any definite plan, he blundered headlong, nevertheless, into the necessary first step towards the fulfilment of his purpose.

"Captain," said he, looking mighty grave, "I have cause to believe that all is not as it should be in the hills in the district of Montelimar."

"Is there trouble, monsieur?" inquired the captain, startled.

"Maybe there is, maybe there is not," returned the Seneschal mysteriously. "You shall have your full orders in the morning. Meanwhile, make ready to repair to the neighbourhood of Montelimar to-morrow with a couple of hundred men."

“A couple of hundred, monsieur!” exclaimed d’Aubran. “But that will be to empty Grenoble of soldiers.”

“What of it? We are not likely to require them here. Let your orders for preparation go round tonight, so that your knaves may be ready to set out betimes to-morrow. If you will be so good as to wait upon me early you shall have your instructions.”

Mystified, Monsieur d’Aubran departed on his errand, and my Lord Seneschal went down to supper well pleased with the cunning device by which he was to leave Grenoble without a garrison. It was an astute way of escape from the awkward situation into which his attachment to the interests of the dowager of Condillac was likely to place him.

But when the morning came he was less pleased with the idea, chiefly because he had been unable to invent any details that should lend it the necessary colour, and d’Aubran—worse luck—was an intelligent officer who might evince a pardonable but embarrassing curiosity. A leader of soldiers has a right to know something at least of the enterprise upon which he leads them. By morning, too, Tressan found that the intervening space of the night, since he had seen Madame de Condillac, had cooled his ardour very considerably.

He had reached the incipient stages of regret of his rash promise.

When Captain d’Aubran was announced to him, he bade them ask him to come again in an hour’s time. From mere regrets he was passing now, through dismay, into utter repentance of his promise. He sat in his study, at his littered writing-table, his head in his hands, a confusion of thoughts, a wild, frenzied striving after invention in his brain.

Thus Anselme found him when he thrust aside the portiere to announce that a Monsieur de Garnache, from Paris, was below, demanding to see the Lord Seneschal at once upon an affair of State.

Tressan’s flesh trembled and his heart fainted. Then, suddenly, desperately, he took

his courage in both hands. He remembered who he was and what he was the King's Lord Seneschal of the Province of Dauphiny. Throughout that province, from the Rhone to the Alps, his word was law, his name a terror to evildoers—and to some others besides. Was he to blench and tremble at the mention of the name of a Court lackey out of Paris, who brought him a message from the Queen-Regent? Body of God! not he.

He heaved himself to his feet, warmed and heartened by the thought; his eye sparkled, and there was a deeper flush than usual upon his cheek.

"Admit this Monsieur de Garnache," said he with a fine loftiness, and in his heart he pondered what he would say and how he should say it; how he should stand, how move, and how look. His roving eye caught sight of his secretary. He remembered something—the cherished pose of being a man plunged fathoms-deep in business. Sharply he uttered his secretary's name.

Babylas raised his pale face; he knew what was coming; it had come so many times before. But there was no vestige of a smile on his drooping lips, no gleam of amusement in his patient eye. He thrust aside the papers on which he was at work, and drew towards him a fresh sheet on which to pen the letter which, he knew by experience, Tressan was about to indite to the Queen-mother. For these purposes Her Majesty was Tressan's only correspondent.

Then the door opened, the portiere was swept aside, and Anselme announced "Monsieur de Garnache."

Tressan turned as the newcomer stepped briskly into the room, and bowed, hat in hand, its long crimson feather sweeping the ground, then straightened himself and permitted the Seneschal to take his measure.

Tressan beheld a man of a good height, broad to the waist and spare thence to the ground, who at first glance appeared to be mainly clad in leather. A buff jerkin fitted his body; below it there was a glimpse of wine-coloured trunks, and hose of a

slightly deeper hue, which vanished immediately into a pair of huge thighboots of untanned leather. A leather swordbelt, gold-embroidered at the edges, carried a long steel-halted rapier in a leather scabbard chaped with steel. The sleeves of his doublet which protruded from his leather casing were of the same colour and material as his trunks. In one hand he carried his broad black hat with its crimson feather, in the other a little roll of parchment; and when he moved the creak of leather and jingle of his spurs made pleasant music for a martial spirit.

Above all, this man's head, well set upon his shoulders, claimed some attention. His nose was hooked and rather large, his eyes were blue, bright as steel, and set a trifle wide. Above a thin-lapped, delicate mouth his reddish mustachios, slightly streaked with grey, stood out, bristling like a cat's. His hair was darker—almost brown save at the temples, where age had faded it to an ashen colour. In general his aspect was one of rugged strength.

The Seneschal, measuring him with an adversary's eye, misliked his looks. But he bowed urbanely, washing his hands in the air, and murmuring:

"Your servant, Monsieur de—?"

"Garnache," came the other's crisp, metallic voice, and the name had a sound as of an oath on his lips. "Martin Marie Rigobert de Garnache. I come to you on an errand of Her Majesty's, as this my warrant will apprise you." And he proffered the paper he held, which Tressan accepted from his hand.

A change was visible in the wily Seneschal's fat countenance. Its round expanse had expressed interrogation until now; but at the Parisian's announcement that he was an emissary of the Queen's, Tressan insinuated into it just that look of surprise and of increased deference which would have been natural had he not already been forewarned of Monsieur de Garnache's mission and identity.

He placed a chair at his visitor's disposal, himself resuming his seat at his writing-table, and unfolding the paper Garnache had given him. The newcomer

seated himself, hitched his sword-belt round so that he could lean both hands upon the hilt, and sat, stiff and immovable, awaiting the Lord Seneschal's pleasure. From his desk across the room the secretary, idly chewing the feathered end of his goose-quill, took silent stock of the man from Paris, and wondered.

Tressan folded the paper carefully, and returned it to its owner. It was no more than a formal credential, setting forth that Garnache was travelling into Dauphiny on a State affair, and commanding Monsieur de Tressan to give him every assistance he might require in the performance of his errand.

"Parfaitement," purred the Lord Seneschal. "And now, monsieur, if you will communicate to me the nature of your affair, you shall find me entirely at your service."

"It goes without saying that you are acquainted with the Chateau de Condillac?" began Garnache, plunging straight into business.

"Perfectly." The Seneschal leaned back, and was concerned to feel his pulses throbbing a shade too quickly. But he controlled his features, and maintained a placid, bland expression.

"You are perhaps acquainted with its inhabitants?"

"Yes."

"Intimate with them?"

The Seneschal pursed his lips, arched his brows, and slowly waved his podgy hands, a combination of grimace and gesture that said much or nothing. But reflecting that Monsieur de Tressan had a tongue, Garnache apparently did not opine it worth his while to set a strain upon his own imagination, for—

"Intimate with them?" he repeated, and this time there was a sharper note in his voice.

Tressan leaned forward and brought his finger-tips together. His voice was as urbane

as it lay within its power to be.

“I understood that monsieur was proposing to state his business, not to question mine.”

Garnache sat back in his chair, and his eyes narrowed. He scented opposition, and the greatest stumbling-block in Garnache’s career had been that he could never learn to brook opposition from any man. That characteristic, evinced early in life, had all but been the ruin of him. He was a man of high intellectual gifts, of military skill and great resource; out of consideration for which had he been chosen by Marie de Medicis to come upon this errand. But he marred it all by a temper so ungovernable that in Paris there was current a byword, “Explosive as Garnache.”

Little did Tressan dream to what a cask of gunpowder he was applying the match of his smug pertness. Nor did Garnache let him dream it just yet. He controlled himself betimes, bethinking him that, after all, there might be some reason in what this fat fellow said.

“You misapprehend my purpose, sir,” said he, his lean brown hand stroking his long chin. “I but sought to learn how far already you may be informed of what is taking place up there, to the end that I may spare myself the pains of citing facts with which already you are acquainted. Still, monsieur, I am willing to proceed upon the lines which would appear to be more agreeable to yourself.

“This, then, is the sum of the affair that brings me: The late Marquis de Condillac left two sons. The elder, Florimond—who is the present marquis, and who has been and still continues absent, warring in Italy, since before his father’s death—is the stepson of the present Dowager, she being the mother of the younger son, Marius de Condillac.

“Should you observe me to be anywhere at error, I beg, monsieur, that you will have the complaisance to correct me.”

The Seneschal bowed gravely, and Monsieur de Garnache continued:

“Now this younger son—I believe that he is in his twenty-first year at present—has been something of a scapegrace.”

“A scapegrace? Bon Dieu, no. That is a harsh name to give him. A little indiscreet at times, a little rash, as is the way of youth.”

He would have said more, but the man from Paris was of no mind to waste time on quibbles.

“Very well,” he snapped, cutting in. “We will say, a little indiscreet. My errand is not concerned with Monsieur Marius’s morals or with his lack of them. These indiscretions which you belittle appear to have been enough to have estranged him from his father, a circumstance which but served the more to endear him to his mother. I am told that she is a very handsome woman, and that the boy favours her surprisingly.”

“Ah!” sighed the Seneschal in a rapture. “A beautiful woman—a noble, splendid woman.’

“Hum!” Garnache observed the ecstatic simper with a grim eye. Then he proceeded with his story.

“The late marquis possessed in his neighbour, the also deceased Monsieur de La Vauvraye, a very dear and valued friend. Monsieur de La Vauvraye had an only child, a daughter, to inherit his very considerable estates probably the wealthiest in all Dauphiny, so I am informed. It was the dearest wish of his heart to transform what had been a lifelong friendship in his own generation into a closer relationship in the next—a wish that found a very ready echo in the heart of Monsieur de Condillac. Florimond de Condillac was sixteen years of age at the time, and Valerie de La Vauvraye fourteen. For all their tender years, they were betrothed, and they grew up to love each other and to look forward to the consummation of the plans their fathers had laid for them.”

“Monsieur, monsieur,” the Seneschal protested, “how can you possibly infer so

much? How can you say that they loved each other? What authority can you have for pretending to know what was in their inmost hearts?"

"The authority of Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye," was the unanswerable rejoinder. "I am telling you, more or less, what she herself wrote to the Queen."

"Ah! Well, well—proceed, monsieur."

"This marriage should render Florimond de Condillac the wealthiest and most powerful gentleman in Dauphiny—one of the wealthiest in France; and the idea of it pleased the old marquis, inasmuch as the disparity there would be between the worldly possessions of his two sons would serve to mark his disapproval of the younger. But before settling down, Florimond signified a desire to see the world, as was fit and proper and becoming in a young man who was later to assume such wide responsibilities. His father, realizing the wisdom of such a step, made but slight objection, and at the age of twenty Florimond set out for the Italian wars. Two years afterwards, a little over six months ago, his father died, and was followed to the grave some weeks later by Monsieur de La Vauvraye. The latter, with a want of foresight which has given rise to the present trouble, misjudging the character of the Dowager of Condillac, entrusted to her care his daughter Valerie pending Florimond's return, when the nuptials would naturally be immediately celebrated. I am probably telling you no more than you already know. But you owe the infliction to your own unwillingness to answer my questions."

"No, no, monsieur; I assure you that in what you say there is much that is entirely new to me."

"I rejoice to hear it, Monsieur de Tressan," said Garnache very seriously, "for had you been in possession of all these facts, Her Majesty might have a right to learn how it chanced that you had nowise interfered in what is toward at Condillac.

"But to proceed: Madame de Condillac and her precious Benjamin—this Marius—finding themselves, in Florimond's absence, masters of the situation, have

set about turning it to their own best advantage. Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye, whilst being nominally under their guardianship, finds herself practically gaoled by them, and odious plans are set before her to marry Marius. Could the Dowager but accomplish this, it would seem that she would not only be assuring a future of ease and dignity for her son, but also be giving vent to all her pent-up hatred of her stepson.

“Mademoiselle, however, withstands them, and in this she is aided by a fortuitous circumstance which has arisen out of the overbearing arrogance that appears to be madame’s chief characteristic. Condillac after the marquis’s death had refused to pay tithes to Mother Church and has flouted and insulted the Bishop. This prelate, after finding remonstrance vain, has retorted by placing Condillac under an Interdict, depriving all within it of the benefit of clergy. Thus, they have been unable to find a priest to venture thither, so that even had they willed to marry mademoiselle by force to Marius, they lacked the actual means of doing so.

“Florimond continues absent. We have every reason to believe that he has been left in ignorance of his father’s death. Letters coming from him from time to time prove that he was alive and well at least until three months ago. A messenger has been dispatched to find him and urge him to return home at once. But pending his arrival the Queen has determined to take the necessary steps to ensure that Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye shall be released from her captivity, that she shall suffer no further molestation at the hands of Madame de Condillac and her son—enfin, that she shall run no further risks.

“My errand, monsieur, is to acquaint you with these facts, and to request you to proceed to Condillac and deliver thence Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye, whom I am subsequently to escort to Paris and place under Her Majesty’s protection until such time as the new marquis shall return to claim her.”

Having concluded, Monsieur de Garnache sat back in his chair, and threw one leg

over the other, fixing his eyes upon the Seneschal's face and awaiting his reply.

On that gross countenance before him he saw fall the shadow of perplexity. Tressan was monstrous ill-at-ease, and his face lost a good deal of its habitual plethora of colour. He sought to temporize.

"Does it not occur to you, monsieur, that perhaps too much importance may have been attached to the word of this child—this Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye?"

"Does it occur to you that such has been the case, that she has overstated it?" counter-questioned Monsieur de Garnache.

"No, no. I do not say that. But—but—would it not be better—more—ah—satisfactory to all concerned, if you yourself were to go to Condillac, and deliver your message in person, demanding mademoiselle?"

The man from Paris looked at him a moment, then stood up suddenly, and shifted the carriages of his sword back to their normal position. His brows came together in a frown, from which the Seneschal argued that his suggestion was not well received.

"Monsieur," said the Parisian very coldly, like a man who contains a rising anger, "let me tell you that this is the first time in my life that I have been concerned in anything that had to do with women and I am close upon forty years of age. The task, I can assure you, was little to my taste. I embarked upon it because, being a soldier and having received my orders, I was in the unfortunate position of being unable to help myself. But I intend, monsieur, to adhere rigidly to the letter of these commands. Already I have endured more than enough in the interests of this damsel. I have ridden from Paris, and that means close upon a week in the saddle—no little thing to a man who has acquired certain habits of life and developed a taste for certain minor comforts which he is very reluctant to forgo. I have fed and slept at inns, living on the worst of fares and sleeping on the hardest, and hardly the cleanest, of beds. Ventregris! Figure to yourself that last night we lay at Luzan, in the only inn the place contained—a hovel, Monsieur le Seneschal, a hovel in which I

would not kennel a dog I loved."

His face flushed, and his voice rose as he dwelt upon the things he had undergone.

"My servant and I slept in a dormitory'—a thousand devils! monsieur, in a dormitory! Do you realize it? We had for company a drunken vintner, a pedlar, a pilgrim on his way to Rome, and two peasant women; and they sent us to bed without candles, for modesty's sake. I ask you to conceive my feelings in such a case as that. I could tell you more; but that as a sample of what I have undergone could scarcely be surpassed."

"Truly-truly outrageous," sympathized the Seneschal; yet he grinned.

"I ask you—have I not suffered inconvenience enough already in the service of Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye that you can blame me if I refuse to go a single step further than my orders bid me?"

The Seneschal stared at him now in increasing dismay. Had his own interests been less at issue he could have indulged his mirth at the other's fiery indignation at the inconveniences he recited. As it was, he had nothing to say; no thought or feeling other than what concerned finding a way of escape from the net that seemed to be closing in about him—how to seem to serve the Queen without turning against the Dowager of Condillac; how to seem to serve the Dowager without opposing the wishes of the Queen.

"A plague on the girl!" he growled, unconsciously uttering his thoughts aloud. "The devil take her!"

Garnache smiled grimly. "That is a bond of sympathy between us," said he. "I have said those very words a hundred times—a thousand times, indeed—between Paris and Grenoble. Yet I scarcely see that you can damn her with as much justice as can I.

"But there, monsieur; all this is unprofitable. You have my message. I shall spend the day at Grenoble, and take a well-earned rest. By this time to-morrow I shall be

ready to start upon my return journey. I shall have then the honour to wait upon you again, to the end that I may receive from you the charge of Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye. I shall count upon your having her here, in readiness to set out with me, by noon to-morrow."

He bowed, with a flourish of his plumed hat, and would with that have taken his departure but that the Seneschal stayed him.

"Monsieur, monsieur," he cried, in piteous affright, "you do not know the Dowager of Condillac."

"Why, no. What of it?"

"What of it? Did you know her, you would understand that she is not the woman to be driven. I may order her in the Queen's name to deliver up Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye. But she will withstand me."

"Withstand you?" echoed Garnache, frowning into the face of this fat man, who had risen also, brought to his feet by excitement. "Withstand you—you, the Lord Seneschal of Dauphiny? You are amusing yourself at my expense."

"But I tell you that she will," the other insisted in a passion. "You may look for the girl in vain tomorrow unless you go to Condillac yourself and take her."

Garnache drew himself up and delivered his answer in a tone that was final.

"You are the governor of the province, monsieur, and in this matter you have in addition the Queen's particular authority—nay, her commands are imposed upon you. Those commands, as interpreted by me, you will execute in the manner I have indicated."

The Seneschal shrugged his shoulders, and chewed a second at his beard.

"It is an easy thing for you to tell me what to do. Tell me, rather, how to do it, how to overcome her opposition."

"You are very sure of opposition—strangely sure, monsieur," said Garnache,

looking him between the eyes. “In any case, you have soldiers.”

“And so has she, and the strongest castle in southern France—to say nothing of the most cursed obstinacy in the world. What she says, she does.”

“And what the Queen says her loyal servants do,” was Garnache’s rejoinder, in a withering tone. “I think there is nothing more to be said, monsieur,” he added. “By this time to-morrow I shall expect to receive from you, here, the charge of Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye. A demain, donc, Monsieur le Seneschal.”

And with another bow the man from Paris drew himself erect, turned on his heel, and went jingling and creaking from the room.

The Lord Seneschal sank back in his chair, and wondered to himself whether to die might not prove an easy way out of the horrid situation into which chance and his ill-starred tenderness for the Dowager of Condillac had thrust him.

At his desk sat his secretary, who had been a witness of the interview, lost in wonder almost as great as the Seneschal’s own.

For an hour Tressan remained where he was, deep in thought and gnawing at his beard. Then with a sudden burst of passion, expressed in a round oath or two, he rose, and called for his horse that he might ride to Condillac.

CHAPTER III. THE DOWAGER’S COMPLIANCE

Promptly at noon on the morrow Monsieur de Garnache presented himself once more at the Seneschal’s palace, and with him went Rabecque, his body-servant, a lean, swarthy, sharp-faced man, a trifle younger than his master.

Anselme, the obese master of the household, received them with profound respect, and at once conducted Garnache to Monsieur de Tressan’s presence.

On the stairs they met Captain d’Aubran, who was descending. The captain was not in the best of humours. For four-and-twenty hours he had kept two hundred of his

men under arms, ready to march as soon as he should receive his orders from the Lord Seneschal, yet those instructions were not forthcoming. He had been to seek them again that morning, only to be again put off.

Monsieur de Garnache had considerable doubt, born of his yesterday's interview with the Seneschal, that Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye would be delivered into his charge as he had stipulated. His relief was, therefore, considerable, upon being ushered into Tressan's presence, to find a lady in cloak and hat, dressed as for a journey, seated in a chair by the great fireplace.

Tressan advanced to meet him, a smile of cordial welcome on his lips, and they bowed to each other in formal greeting.

"You see, monsieur," said the Seneschal, waving a plump hand in the direction of the lady, "that you have been obeyed. Here is your charge."

Then to the lady: "This is Monsieur de Garnache," he announced, "of whom I have already told you, who is to conduct you to Paris by order of Her Majesty.

"And now, my good friends, however great the pleasure I derive from your company, I care not how soon you set out, for I have some prodigious arrears of work upon my hands."

Garnache bowed to the lady, who returned his greeting by an inclination of the head, and his keen eyes played briskly over her. She was a plump-faced, insipid child, with fair hair and pale blue eyes, stolid and bovine in their expressionlessness.

"I am quite ready, monsieur," said she, rising as she spoke, and gathering her cloak about her; and Garnache remarked that her voice had the southern drawl, her words the faintest suggestion of a patois. It was amazing how a lady born and bred could degenerate in the rusticity of Dauphiny. Pigs and cows, he made no doubt, had been her chief objectives. Yet, even so, he thought he might have expected that she would have had more to say to him than just those five words expressing her readiness to depart. He had looked for some acknowledgment of satisfaction at his presence,

some utterances of gratitude either to himself or to the Queen-Regent for the promptness with which she had been succoured. He was disappointed, but he showed nothing of it, as with a simple inclination of the head—

“Good!” said he. “Since you are ready and Monsieur le Seneschal is anxious to be rid of us, let us by all means be moving. You have a long and tedious journey before you, mademoiselle.”

“I—I am prepared for that,” she faltered.

He stood aside, and bending from the waist he made a sweeping gesture towards the door with the hand that held his hat. To the invitation to precede him she readily responded, and, with a bow to the Seneschal, she began to walk across the apartment.

Garnache’s eyes, narrowing slightly, followed her, like points of steel. Suddenly he shot a disturbing glance at Tressan’s face, and the corner of his wild-cat mustachios twitched. He stood erect, and called her very sharply.

“Mademoiselle!”

She stopped, and turned to face him, an incredible shyness seeming to cause her to avoid his gaze.

“You have, no doubt, Monsieur le Seneschal’s word for my identity. But I think it is as well that you should satisfy yourself. Before placing yourself entirely in my care, as you are about to do, you would be well advised to assure yourself, that I am indeed Her Majesty’s emissary. Will you be good enough to glance at this?”

He drew forth as he spoke the letter in the queen’s own hand, turned it upside down, and so presented it to her. The Seneschal looked on stolidly, a few paces distant.

“But certainly, mademoiselle, assure yourself that this gentleman is no other than I have told you.”

Thus enjoined, she took the letter; for a second her eyes met Garnache’s glittering

gaze, and she shivered. Then she bent her glance to the writing, and studied it a moment, what time the man from Paris watched her closely.

Presently she handed it back to him.

“Thank you, monsieur,” was all she said.

“You are satisfied that it is in order, mademoiselle?” he inquired, and a note of mockery too subtle for her or the Seneschal ran through his question.

“I am quite satisfied.”

Garnache turned to Tressan. His eyes were smiling, but unpleasantly, and in his voice when he spoke there was something akin to the distant rumble that heralds an approaching storm.

“Mademoiselle,” said he, “has received an eccentric education.”

“Eh?” quoth Tressan, perplexed.

“I have heard tell, monsieur, of a people somewhere in the East who read and write from right to left; but never yet have I heard tell of any—particularly in France—so oddly schooled as to do their reading upside down.”

Tressan caught the drift of the other’s meaning. He paled a little, and sucked his lip, his eyes wandering to the girl, who stood in stolid inapprehension of what was being said.

“Did she do that?” said he, and he scarcely knew what he was saying; all that he realized was that it urged him to explain this thing. “Mademoiselle’s education has been neglected—a by no means uncommon happening in these parts. She is sensitive of it; she seeks to hide the fact.”

Then the storm broke about their heads. And it crashed and thundered awfully in the next few minutes.

“O liar! O damned, audacious liar,” roared Garnache uncompromisingly, advancing a step upon the Seneschal, and shaking the parchment threateningly in his very face,

as though it were become a weapon of offence. “Was it to hide the fact that she had not been taught to write that she sent the Queen a letter pages-long? Who is this woman?” And the finger he pointed at the girl quivered with the rage that filled him at this trick they had thought to put upon him.

Tressan sought refuge in offended dignity. He drew himself up, threw back his head, and looked the Parisian fiercely in the eye.

“Since you take this tone with me, monsieur—”

“I take with you—as with any man—the tone that to me seems best. You miserable fool! As sure as you’re a rogue this affair shall cost you your position. You have waxed fat and sleek in your seneschalship; this easy life in Dauphiny appears to have been well suited to your health. But as your paunch has grown, so, of a truth, have your brains dwindled, else had you never thought to cheat me quite so easily.

“Am I some lout who has spent his days herding swine, think you, that you could trick me into believing this creature to be Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye—this creature with the mien of a peasant, with a breath reeking of garlic like a third-rate eating-house, and the walk of a woman who has never known footgear until this moment? Tell me, sir, for what manner of fool did you take me?”

The Seneschal stood with blanched face and gaping mouth, his fire all turned to ashes before the passion of this gaunt man.

Garnache paid no heed to him. He stepped to the girl, and roughly raised her chin with his hand so that she was forced to look him in the face.

“What is your name, wench?” he asked her.

“Margot,” she blubbered, bursting into tears.

He dropped her chin, and turned away with a gesture of disgust.

“Get you gone,” he bade her harshly. “Get you back to the kitchen or the onion-field from which they took you.”

And the girl, scarce believing her good fortune, departed with a speed that bordered on the ludicrous. Tressan had naught to say, no word to stay her with; pretence, he realized, was vain.

“Now, my Lord Seneschal,” quoth Garnache, arms akimbo, feet planted wide, and eyes upon the wretched man’s countenance, “what may you have to say to me?”

Tressan shifted his position; he avoided the other’s glance; he was visibly trembling, and when presently he spoke it was in faltering accents.

“It—it—seems, monsieur, that—ah—that I have been the victim of some imposture.”

“It had rather seemed to me that the victim chosen was myself.”

“Clearly we were both victims,” the Seneschal rejoined. Then he proceeded to explain. “I went to Condillac yesterday as you desired me, and after a stormy interview with the Marquise I obtained from her—as I believed—the person of Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye. You see I was not myself acquainted with the lady.”

Garnache looked at him. He did not believe him. He regretted almost that he had not further questioned the girl. But, after all, perhaps it might be easier and more expedient if he were to appear to accept the Seneschal’s statement. But he must provide against further fraud.

“Monsieur le Seneschal,” said he in calmer tones, putting his anger from him, “at the best you are a blunderer and an ass, at the worst a traitor. I will inquire no further at present; I’ll not seek to discriminate too finely.”

“Monsieur, these insults—” began the Seneschal, summoning dignity to his aid. But Garnache broke in:

“La, la! I speak in the Queen’s name. If you have thought to aid the Dowager of Condillac in this resistance of Her Majesty’s mandate, let me enjoin you, as you value your seneschalship—as you value your very neck—to harbour that thought no

longer.

“It seems that, after all, I must deal myself with the situation. I must go myself to Condillac. If they should resist me, I shall look to you for the necessary means to overcome that resistance.

“And bear you this in mind: I have chosen to leave it an open question whether you were a party to the trick it has been sought to put upon the Queen, through me, her representative. But it is a question that I have it in my power to resolve at any moment—to resolve as I choose. Unless, monsieur, I find you hereafter—as I trust—actuated by the most unswerving loyalty, I shall resolve that question by proclaiming you a traitor; and as a traitor I shall arrest you and carry you to Paris. Monsieur le Seneschal, I have the honour to give you good-day!”

When he was gone, Monsieur de Tressan flung off his wig, and mopped the perspiration from his brow. He went white as snow and red as fire by turns, as he paced the apartment in a frenzy. Never in the fifteen years that were sped since he had been raised to the governorship of the province had any man taken such a tone with him and harangued him in such terms.

A liar and a traitor had he been called that morning, a knave and a fool; he had been browbeaten and threatened; and he had swallowed it all, and almost turned to lick the hand that administered the dose. Dame! What manner of cur was he become? And the man who had done all this—a vulgar upstart out of Paris, reeking of leather and the barrack-room still lived!

Bloodshed was in his mind; murder beckoned him alluringly to take her as his ally. But he put the thought from him, frenzied though he might be. He must fight this knave with other weapons; frustrate his mission, and send him back to Paris and the Queen’s scorn, beaten and empty-handed.

“Babylas!” he shouted.

Immediately the secretary appeared.

“Have you given thought to the matter of Captain d’Aubran?” he asked, his voice an impatient snarl.

“Yes, monsieur, I have pondered it all morning.”

“Well? And what have you concluded?”

“Helas! monsieur, nothing.”

Tressan smote the table before him a blow that shook some of the dust out of the papers that cumbered it. “Ventregris! How am I served? For what do I pay you, and feed you, and house you, good-for-naught, if you are to fail me whenever I need the things you call your brains? Have you no intelligence, no thought, no imagination? Can you invent no plausible business, no likely rising, no possible disturbances that shall justify my sending Aubran and his men to Montelimar—to the very devil, if need be.”

The secretary trembled in his every limb; his eyes shunned his master’s as his master’s had shunned Garnache’s awhile ago. The Seneschal was enjoying himself. If he had been bullied and browbeaten, here, at least, was one upon whom he, in his turn, might taste the joys of bullying and browbeating.

“You lazy, miserable calf,” he stormed, “I might be better served by a wooden image. Go! It seems I must rely upon myself. It is always so. Wait!” he thundered; for the secretary, only too glad to obey his last order, had already reached the door. “Tell Anselme to bid the Captain attend me here at once.”

Babylas’s bowed and went his errand.

A certain amount of his ill-humour vented, Tressan made an effort to regain his self-control. He passed his handkerchief for the last time over face and head, and resumed his wig.

When d’Aubran entered, the Seneschal was composed and in his wonted habit of ponderous dignity. “Ah, d’Aubran,” said he, “your men are ready?”

“They have been ready these four-and-twenty hours, monsieur.”

“Good. You are a brisk soldier, d’Aubran. You are a man to be relied upon.”

D’Aubran bowed. He was a tall, active young fellow with a pleasant face and a pair of fine black eyes.

“Monsieur le Seneschal is very good.”

With a wave of the hand the Seneschal belittled his own goodness.

“You will march out of Grenoble within the hour, Captain, and you will lead your men to Montelimar. There you will quarter them, and await my further orders. Babylas will give you a letter to the authorities, charging them to find you suitable quarters. While there, d’Aubran, and until my further orders reach you, you will employ your time in probing the feeling in the hill district. You understand?”

“Imperfectly,” d’Aubran confessed.

“You will understand better when you have been in Montelimar a week or so. It may, of course, be a false alarm. Still, we must safeguard the King’s interests and be prepared. Perhaps we may afterwards be charged with starting at shadows; but it is better to be on the alert from the moment the shadow is perceived than to wait until the substance itself has overwhelmed us.”

It sounded so very much as if the Seneschal’s words really had some hidden meaning, that d’Aubran, if not content with going upon an errand of which he knew so little, was, at least, reconciled to obey the orders he received. He uttered words that conveyed some such idea to Tressan’s mind, and within a half-hour he was marching out of Grenoble with beating drums, on his two days’ journey to Montelimar.

CHAPTER IV. THE CHATEAU DE CONDILLAC

As Captain d’Aubran and his troop were speeding westwards from Grenoble,

Monsieur de Garnache, ever attended by his man, rode briskly in the opposite direction, towards the grey towers of Condillac, that reared themselves towards the greyer sky above the valley of the Isere. It was a chill, dull, autumnal day, with a raw wind blowing from the Alps; its breath was damp, and foretold of the rain that was likely to come anon, the rain with which the clouds hanging low about the distant hills were pregnant.

But Monsieur de Garnache was totally insensible to his surroundings; his mind was very busy with the interview from which he had come, and the interview to which he was speeding. Once he permitted himself a digression, that he might point a moral for the benefit of his servant.

“You see, Rebecque, what a plague it is to have to do with women. Are you sufficiently grateful to me for having quelled your matrimonial ardour of two months ago? No, you are not. Grateful you may be; sufficiently grateful, never; it would be impossible. No gratitude could be commensurate with the benefit I conferred upon you. Yet if you had married, and discovered for yourself the troubles that come from too close an association with that sex which some wag of old ironically called the weaker, and of which contemporary fools with no sense of irony continue so to speak in good faith, you could have blamed only yourself. You would have shrugged your shoulders and made the best of it, realizing that no other man had put this wrong upon you. But with me—thousand devils!—it is very different. I am a man who, in one particular at least, has chosen his way of life with care; I have seen to it that I should walk a road unencumbered by any petticoat. What happens? What comes of all my careful plans?

“Fate sends an infernal cut-throat to murder our good king—whose soul God rest eternally! And since his son is of an age too tender to wield the sceptre, the boy’s mother does it in his name. Thus, I, a soldier, being subject to the head of the State, find myself, by no devising of my own, subject to a woman.

“In itself that is bad enough. Too bad, indeed—Ventregris!—too bad. Yet Fate is not content. It must occur to this woman to select me—me of all men—to journey into Dauphiny, and release another woman from the clutches of yet a third. And to what shifts are we not put, to what discomforts not subjected? You know them, Rabecque, for you have shared them with me. But it begins to break upon my mind that what we have endured may be as nothing to what may lie before us. It is an ill thing to have to do with women. Yet you, Rabecque, would have deserted me for one of them!”

Rabecque was silent. Maybe he was ashamed of himself; or maybe that, not agreeing with his master, he had yet sufficient appreciation of his position to be discreetly silent where his opinions might be at variance. Thus Garnache was encouraged to continue.

“And what is all this trouble about, which they have sent me to set right? About a marriage. There is a girl wants to marry one man, and a woman who wants to marry her to another. Ponder the possibilities of tragedy in such a situation. Half this world’s upheavals have had their source in less. Yet you, Rabecque, would have married!”

Necessity at last turned his discourse to other matters.

“Tell me, now,” said he abruptly, in a different tone, “is there hereabouts a ford?”

“There is a bridge up yonder, monsieur,” returned the servant, thankful to have the conversation changed.

They rode towards it in silence, Garnache’s eyes set now upon the grey pile that crowned the hillock, a half-mile away, on the opposite bank of the stream. They crossed the bridge and rode up the gently rising, bare, and rugged ground towards Condillac. The place wore an entirely peaceful air, strong and massive though it appeared. It was encircled by a ditch, but the drawbridge was down, and the rust on its chains argued that long had it been so.

None coming to challenge them, the pair rode across the planks, and the dull thud of their hooves started into activity some one in the gatehouse.

A fellow rudely clad—a hybrid between man-at-arms and lackey—lounged on a musket to confront them in the gateway. Monsieur de Garnache announced his name, adding that he came to crave an audience of Madame la Marquise, and the man stood aside to admit him. Thus he and Rabecque rode forward into the roughly paved courtyard.

From several doorways other men emerged, some of martial bearing, showing that the place was garrisoned to some extent. Garnache took little heed of them. He flung his reins to the man whom he had first addressed—the fellow had kept pace beside him—and leapt nimbly to the ground, bidding Rabecque await him there.

The soldier lackey resigned the reins to Rabecque, and requested Monsieur de Garnache to follow him. He led the way through a door on the left, down a passage and across an anteroom, and ushered the visitor finally into a spacious, gloomy hall, panelled in black oak and lighted as much by the piled-up fire that flared on the noble hearth as by the grey daylight that filtered through the tall mullioned windows.

As they entered, a liver-coloured hound that lay stretched before the fire growled lazily, and showed the whites of his eyes. Paying little attention to the dog, Garnache looked about him. The apartment was handsome beyond praise, in a sombre, noble fashion. It was hung with pictures of departed Condillacs—some of them rudely wrought enough—with trophies of ancient armour, and with implements of the chase. In the centre stood an oblong table of black oak, very richly carved about its massive legs, and in a china bowl, on this, an armful of late roses filled the room with their sweet fragrance.

Then Garnache espied a page on the window-seat, industriously burnishing a cuirass. He pursued his task, indifferent to the newcomer’s advent, until the knave who had conducted thither the Parisian called the boy and bade him go tell the

Marquise that a Monsieur de Garnache, with a message from the Queen-Regent, begged an audience.

The boy rose, and simultaneously, out of a great chair by the hearth, whose tall back had hitherto concealed him, there rose another figure. This was a stripling of some twenty summers—twenty-one, in fact—of a pale, beautifully featured face, black hair and fine black eyes, and very sumptuously clad in a suit of shimmering silk whose colour shifted from green to purple as he moved.

Monsieur de Garnache assumed that he was in the presence of Marius de Condillac. He bowed a trifle stiffly, and was surprised to have his bow returned with a graciousness that amounted almost to cordiality.

“You are from Paris, monsieur?” said the young man, in a gentle, pleasant voice. “I fear you have had indifferent weather for your journey.”

Garnache thought of other things besides the weather that he had found indifferent, and he felt warmed almost to the point of anger at the very recollection. But he bowed again, and answered amiably enough.

The young man offered him a seat, assuring him that his mother would not keep him waiting long. The page had already gone upon his errand.

Garnache took the proffered chair, and sank down with creak and jingle to warm himself at the fire.

“From what you have said, I gather that you are Monsieur Marius de Condillac,” said he. “I, as you may have heard me announced by your servant, am Martin Marie Rigobert de Garnache—at your service.”

“We have heard of you, Monsieur de Garnache,” said the youth as he crossed his shapely legs of silken violet, and fingered the great pearl that depended from his ear. “But we had thought that by now you would be on your way to Paris.”

“No doubt—with Margot,” was the grim rejoinder.

But Marius either gathered no suggestion from its grimness, or did not know the name Garnache uttered, for he continued:

“We understood that you were to escort Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye to Paris, to place her under the tutelage of the Queen-Regent. I will not conceal from you that we were chagrined at the reflection cast upon Condillac; nevertheless, Her Majesty’s word is law in Dauphiny as much as it is in Paris.”

“Quite as much, and I am relieved to hear you confess it,” said Garnache drily, and he scanned more closely the face of this young man. He found cause to modify the excellent impression he had received at first. Marius’s eyebrows were finely pencilled, but they arched a shade too much, and his eyes were set a trifle too closely; the mouth, which had seemed beautiful at first, looked, in addition, on this closer inspection, weak, sensual, and cruel.

There fell upon the momentary silence the sound of an opening door, and both men rose simultaneously to their feet.

In the splendid woman that entered, Monsieur de Garnache saw a wonderful likeness to the boy who stood beside him. She received the emissary very graciously. Marius set a chair for her between the two they had been occupying, and thus interchanging phrases of agreeable greeting the three sat down about the hearth with every show of the greatest amity.

A younger man might have been put out of countenance; the woman’s surpassing beauty, her charm of manner, her melodious voice, falling on the ear soft and gentle as a caress, might have turned a man of less firmness a little from his purpose, a little perhaps from his loyalty and the duty that had brought him all the way from Paris. But Monsieur de Garnache was to her thousand graces as insensible as a man of stone. And he came to business briskly. He had no mind to spend the day at her fireside in pleasant, meaningless talk.

“Madame,” said he, “monsieur your son informs me that you have heard of me and

of the business that brings me into Dauphiny. I had not looked for the honour of journeying quite so far as Condillac; but since Monsieur de Tressan, whom I made my ambassador, appears to have failed so signally, I am constrained to inflict my presence upon you."

"Inflict?" quoth she, with a pretty look of make-believe dismay. "How harsh a word, monsieur!"

The smoothness of the implied compliment annoyed him.

"I will use any word you think more adequate, madame, if you will suggest it," he answered tartly.

"There are a dozen I might suggest that would better fit the case—and with more justice to yourself," she answered, with a smile that revealed a gleam of white teeth behind her scarlet lips. "Marcus, bid Benoit bring wine. Monsieur de Garnache will no doubt be thirsting after his ride."

Garnache said nothing. Acknowledge the courtesy he would not; refuse it he could not. So he sat, and waited for her to speak, his eyes upon the fire.

Madame had already set herself a course. Keener witted than her son, she had readily understood, upon Garnache's being announced to her, that his visit meant the failure of the imposture by which she had sought to be rid of him.

"I think, monsieur," she said presently, watching him from under her lids, "that we have, all of us who are concerned in Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye's affairs, been at cross-purposes. She is an impetuous, impulsive child, and it happened that some little time ago we had words—such things will happen in the most united families. Whilst the heat of her foolish anger was upon her, she wrote a letter to the Queen, in which she desired to be removed from my tutelage. Since then, monsieur, she has come to repent her of it. You, who no doubt understand a woman's mind—"

"Set out upon no such presumption, madame," he interrupted. "I know as little of a woman's mind as any man who thinks he knows a deal—and that is nothing."

She laughed as at an excellent jest, and Marius, overhearing Garnache's retort as he was returning to resume his seat, joined in her laugh.

"Paris is a fine whetstone for a man's wits," said he.

Garnache shrugged his shoulders.

"I take it, madame, that you wish me to understand that Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye, repenting of her letter, desires no longer to repair to Paris; desires, in fact, to remain here at Condillac in your excellent care."

"You apprehend the position exactly, monsieur."

"To my mind," said he, "it presents few features difficult of apprehension."

Marius's eyes flashed his mother a look of relief; but the Marquise, who had an ear more finely trained, caught the vibration of a second meaning in the emissary's words.

"All being as you say, madame," he continued, "will you tell me why, instead of some message to this purport, you sent Monsieur de Tressan back to me with a girl taken from some kitchen or barnyard, whom it was sought to pass off upon me as Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye?"

The Marquise laughed, and her son, who had shown signs of perturbation, taking his cue from her, laughed too.

"It was a jest, monsieur"—she told him, miserably conscious that the explanation could sound no lamer.

"My compliments, madame, upon the humour that prevails in Dauphiny. But your jest failed of its purpose. It did not amuse me, nor, so far as I could discern, was Monsieur de Tressan greatly taken with it. But all this is of little moment, madame," he continued. "Since you tell me that Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye is content to remain here, I am satisfied that it is so."

They were the very words that she desired to hear from him; yet his manner of

uttering them gave her little reassurance. The smile on her lips was forced; her watchful eyes smiled not at all.

“Still,” he continued, “you will be so good as to remember that I am not my own master in this affair. Were that so, I should not fail to relieve you at once of my unbidden presence.”

“Oh, monsieur—”

“But, being the Queen’s emissary, I have her orders to obey, and those orders are to convey Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye to Paris. They make no allowance for any change that may have occurred in mademoiselle’s inclinations. If the journey is now distasteful to her, she has but her own rashness to blame in having sought it herself. What imports is that she is bidden by the Queen to repair to Paris; as a loyal subject she must obey the Queen’s commands; you, as a loyal subject, must see to it that she obeys them. So, madame, I count upon your influence with mademoiselle to see that she is ready to set out by noon to-morrow. One day already has been wasted me by your—ah—jest, madame. The Queen likes her ambassadors to be brisk.”

The Dowager reclined in her chair, and bit her lip. This man was too keen for her. She had no illusions. He had seen through her as if she had been made of glass; he had penetrated her artifices and detected her falsehoods. Yet feigning to believe her and them, he had first neutralized her only weapons—other than offensive—then used them for her own defeat. Marius it was who took up the conversation.

“Monsieur,” he cried—and there was a frown drawing together his fine brows—“what you suggest amounts to a tyranny on the Queen’s part.”

Garnache was on his feet, his chair grating the polished floor.

“Monsieur says?” quoth he, his glittering eye challenging the rash boy to repeat his words.

But the Dowager intervened with a little trill of laughter.

“Bon Dieu! Marius, what are you saying? Foolish boy! And you, Monsieur de Garnache, do not heed him, I beg you. We are so far from Court in this little corner of Dauphiny, and my son has been reared in so free an atmosphere that he is sometimes betrayed into expressions whose impropriety he does not realize.”

Garnache bowed in token of his perfect satisfaction, and at that moment two servants entered bearing flagons and beakers, fruits and sweetmeats, which they placed upon the table. The Dowager rose, and went to do the honours of the board. The servants withdrew.

“You will taste our wine of Condillac, monsieur?”

He acquiesced, expressing thanks, and watched her fill a beaker for him, one for herself, and another for her son. She brought him the cup in her hands. He took it with a grave inclination of the head. Then she proffered him the sweetmeats. To take one, he set down the cup on the table, by which he had also come to stand. His left hand was gloved and held his beaver and whip.

She nibbled, herself, at one of the comfits, and he followed her example. The boy, a trifle sullen since the last words, stood on the hearth with his back to the fire, his hands clasped behind him.

“Monsieur,” she said, “do you think it would enable you to comply with what I have signified to be not only our own wishes, but those of Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye herself, if she were to state them to you?”

He looked up sharply, his lips parting in a smile that revealed his strong white teeth.

“Are you proposing another of your jests, madame?”

She laughed outright. A wonderful assurance was hers, thought Monsieur de Garnache. “Mon Dieu! no, monsieur,” she cried. “If you will, you may see the lady herself.”

He took a turn in the apartment, idly, as does a man in thought.

“Very well,” said he, at last. “I do not say that it will alter my determination. But perhaps—yes, I should be glad of an opportunity of the honour of making Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye’s acquaintance. But no impersonations, I beg, madame!” He said it half-laughingly, taking his cue from her.

“You need have no fear of any.”

She walked to the door, opened it, and called “Gaston!” In answer came the page whom Garnache had found in the room when he was admitted.

“Desire Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye to come to us here at once,” she bade the boy, and closed the door.

Garnache had been all eyes for some furtive sign, some whispered word; but he had surprised neither.

His pacing had brought him to the opposite end of the board, where stood the cup of wine madame had poured for Marius. His own, Garnache had left untouched. As if abstractedly, he now took up the beaker, pledged madame with his glance, and drank. She watched him, and suddenly a suspicion darted through her mind—a suspicion that he suspected them.

Dieu! What a man was this! He took no chances. Madame reflected that this augured ill for the success of the last resource upon which, should all else fail, she was counting to keep mademoiselle at Condillac. It seemed incredible that one so wary and watchful should have committed the rashness of venturing alone into Condillac without taking his precautions to ensure his ability to retreat.

In her heart she felt daunted by him. But in the matter of that wine—the faintest of smiles hovered on her lips, her eyebrows went up a shade. Then she took up the cup that had been poured for the Parisian, and bore it to her son.

“Marius, you are not drinking,” said she. And seeing a command in her eyes; he took the beaker from her hand and bore it to his lips, emptying the half of it, whilst with the faintest smile of scorn the Dowager swept Garnache a glance of protest, as

of one repudiating an unworthy challenge.

Then the door opened, and the eyes of all three were centred upon the girl that entered.

CHAPTER V. MONSIEUR DE GARNACHE LOSES HIS TEMPER

“You sent for me, madame,” said the girl, seeming to hesitate upon the threshold of the room, and her voice—a pleasant, boyish contralto—was very cold and conveyed a suggestion of disdain.

The Marquise detected that inauspicious note, and was moved by it to regret her already of having embarked upon so bold a game as to confront Monsieur de Garnache with Valerie. It was a step she had decided upon as a last means of convincing the Parisian of the truth of her statement touching the change that had taken place in mademoiselle’s inclinations. And she had provided for it as soon as she heard of Garnache’s arrival by informing mademoiselle that should she be sent for, she must tell the gentleman from Paris that it was her wish to remain at Condillac. Mademoiselle had incontinently refused, and madame, to win her compliance, had resorted to threats.

“You will do as you consider best, of course,” she had said, in a voice that was ominously sweet. “But I promise you that if you do otherwise than as I tell you, you shall be married before sunset to Marius, whether you be willing or not. Monsieur de Garnache comes alone, and if I so will it alone he shall depart or not at all. I have men enough at Condillac to see my orders carried out, no matter what they be.

“You may tell yourself that this fellow will return to help you. Perhaps he will; but when he does, it will be too late so far as you shall be concerned.”

Terrified by that threat, Valerie had blenched, and had felt her spirit deserting her.

“And if I comply, madame?” she had asked. “If I do as you wish, if I tell this gentleman that I no longer desire to go to Paris—what then?”

The Dowager’s manner had become more affectionate. She had patted the shrinking girl upon the shoulder. “In that case, Valerie, you shall suffer no constraint; you shall continue here as you have done.”

“And has there been no constraint hitherto?” had been the girl’s indignant rejoinder.

“Hardly, child,” the Dowager had returned. “We have sought to guide you to a wise choice—no more than that. Nor shall we do more hereafter if you do my pleasure now and give this Monsieur de Garnache the answer that I bid you. But if you fail me, remember—you marry Marius before nightfall.”

She had not waited for the girl to promise her compliance. She was too clever a woman to show anxiety on that score. She left her with that threat vibrating in her mind, confident that she would scare the girl into obedience by the very assurance she exhibited that Valerie would not dare to disobey.

But now, at the sound of that chill voice, at the sight of that calm, resolved countenance, madame was regretting that she had not stayed to receive the girl’s promise before she made so very sure of her pliability.

She glanced anxiously at Garnache. His eyes were upon the girl. He was remarking the slender, supple figure, moderately tall and looking taller in its black gown of mourning; the oval face, a trifle pale now from the agitation that stirred her, with its fine level brows, its clear, hazel eyes, and its crown of lustrous brown hair rolled back under the daintiest of white coifs. His glance dwelt appreciatively on the slender nose, with its delicate nostrils, the charming line of mouth and chin, the dazzling whiteness of her skin, conspicuous not only in neck and face but in the long, slender hands that were clasped before her.

These signs of breeding, everywhere proclaimed, left him content that here was no imposture; the girl before him was, indeed, Valerie de La Vauvraye.

At madame's invitation she came forward. Marius hastened to close the door and to set a chair for her, his manner an admirable suggestion of ardour restrained by deference.

She sat down with an outward calm under which none would have suspected the full extent of her agitation, and she bent her eyes upon the man whom the Queen had sent for her deliverance.

After all, Garnache's appearance was hardly suggestive of the role of Perseus which had been thrust upon him. She saw a tall, spare man, with prominent cheek-bones, a gaunt, high-bridged nose, very fierce mustachios, and a pair of eyes that were as keen as sword-blades and felt to her glance as penetrating. There was little about him like to take a woman's fancy or claim more than a moderate share of her attention, even when circumstances rendered her as interested in him as was now Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye.

There fell a silence, broken at last by Marius, who leaned, a supple, graceful figure, his elbow resting upon the summit of Valerie's chair.

"Monsieur de Garnache does us the injustice to find a difficulty in believing that you no longer wish to leave us."

That was by no means what Garnache had implied; still, since it really expressed his mind, he did not trouble to correct Marius.

Valerie said nothing, but her eyes travelled to madame's countenance, where she found a frown. Garnache observed the silence, and drew his own conclusions.

"So we have sent for you, Valerie," said the Dowager, taking up her son's sentence, "that you may yourself assure Monsieur de Garnache that it is so."

Her voice was stern; it bore to the girl's ears a subtle, unworded repetition of the threat the Marquise had already voiced. Mademoiselle caught it, and Garnache caught it too, although he failed to interpret it as precisely as he would have liked.

The girl seemed to experience a difficulty in answering. Her eyes roved to Garnache's, and fell away in affright before their glitter. That man's glance seemed to read her very mind, she thought; and suddenly the reflection that had terrified her became her hope. If it were as she deemed it, what matter what she said? He would know the truth, in spite of all.

"Yes, madame," she said at last, and her voice was wholly void of expression. "Yes, monsieur, it is as madame says. It is my wish to remain at Condillac."

From the Dowager, standing a pace or two away from Garnache, came the sound of a half-sigh. Garnache missed nothing. He caught the sound, and accepted it as an expression of relief. The Marquise stepped back a pace; idly, one might have thought; not so thought Garnache. It had this advantage: that it enabled her to stand where he might not watch her face without turning his head. He was content that such was her motive. To defeat her object, to show her that he had guessed it, he stepped back, too, also with that same idleness of air, so that he was once more in line with her. And then he spoke, addressing Valerie.

"Mademoiselle, that you should have written to the Queen in haste is deplorable now that your views have undergone this change. I am a stupid man, mademoiselle, just a blunt soldier with orders to obey and no authority to think. My orders are to conduct you to Paris. Your will was not taken into consideration. I know not how the Queen would have me act, seeing your reluctance; it may be that she would elect to leave you here, as you desire. But it is not for me to arrogate to determine the Queen's mind. I can but be guided by her orders, and those orders leave me no course but one—to ask you, mademoiselle, to make ready immediately to go with me."

The look of relief that swept into Valerie's face, the little flush of colour that warmed her cheeks, hitherto so pale, were all the confirmation that he needed of what he suspected.

“But, monsieur,” said Marius, “it must be plain to you that since the Queen’s orders are but a compliance with mademoiselle’s wishes, now that mademoiselle’s wishes have altered, so too would Her Majesty’s commands alter to comply with them once more.”

“That may be plain to you, monsieur; for me, unfortunately, there are my orders for only guide,” Garnache persisted. “Does not mademoiselle herself agree with me?”

She was about to speak; her glance had looked eager, her lips had parted. Then, of a sudden, the little colour faded from her cheeks again, and she seemed stricken with a silence. Garnache’s eyes, directed in a sidelong glance to the Marquise’s face, surprised there a frown that had prompted that sudden change.

He half-turned, his manner changing suddenly to a freezing civility.

“Madame la Marquise,” said he, “I beg with all deference to suggest that I am not allowed the interview you promised me with Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye.”

The ominous coldness with which he had begun to speak had had a disturbing effect upon the Dowager; the words he uttered, when she had weighed them, brought an immense relief. It seemed, then, that he but needed convincing that this was Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye. This argued that for the rest he was satisfied.

“There, monsieur, you are at fault,” she cried, and she was smiling into his grave eyes. “Because once I put that jest upon you, you imagine—”

“No, no,” he broke in. “You misapprehend me. I do not say that this is not Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye; I do not say that—”

He paused; he was at the end of his resources. He did not know how to put the thing without giving offence, and it had been his resolve—realizing the necessity for it—to conduct this matter with a grave courtesy.

To feel that after having carried the affair so far with a for him—commendable lightness of touch, he should be at a loss for a delicate word to convey a harsh

accusation began to anger him. And once Garnache began to be angered, the rest followed quickly. It was just that flaw in his character that had been the ruin of him, that had blighted what otherwise might have been a brilliant career. Astute and wily as a fox, brave as a lion, and active as a panther, gifted with intelligence, insight and resource, he had carried a dozen enterprises up to the very threshold of success, there to have ruined them all by giving way to some sudden excess of choler.

So was it now. His pause was but momentary. Yet in that moment, from calm and freezing that he had been, he became ruffled and hot. The change was visible in his heightened colour, in his flashing eyes, and in his twitching mustachios. For just a second he sought to smother his wrath; he had a glimmer of remembrance of the need for caution and diplomacy in the darkness of anger that was descending over him. Then, without further warning, he exploded.

His nervous, sinewy hand clenched itself and fell with a crash upon the table, overturning a flagon and sending a lake of wine across the board, to trickle over at a dozen points and form in puddles at the feet of Valerie. Startled, they all watched him, mademoiselle the most startled of the three.

“Madame,” he thundered, “I have been receiving dancing-lessons at your hands for long enough. It is time, I think, we did a little ordinary walking, else shall we get no farther along the road I mean to go and that is the road to Paris with mademoiselle for company.”

“Monsieur, monsieur!” cried the startled Marquise, placing herself intrepidly before him; and Marius trembled for her, for so wild did the man seem that he almost feared he might strike her.

“I have heard enough,” he blazed. “Not another word from any here in Condillac! I’ll take this lady with me now, at once; and if any here raises a finger to resist me, as Heaven is my witness, it will be the last resistance he will ever offer any man. Let a hand be laid upon me, or a sword bared before my eyes, and I swear, madame, that

I'll come back and burn this dunghill of rebellion to the ground."

In the blindness of his passion all his fine keenness was cast to the wind, his all-observing watchfulness was smothered in the cloud of anger that oppressed his brain. He never saw the sign that madame made to her son, never so much as noticed Marius's stealthy progress towards the door.

"Oh," he continued, a satirical note running now through his tempestuous voice, "it is a fine thing to cozen each other with honeyed words, with smirks and with grimaces. But we have done with that, madame." He towered grimly above her, shaking a threatening finger in her very face. "We have done with that. We shall resort to deeds, instead."

"Aye, monsieur," she answered very coldly, sneering upon his red-hot fury, "there shall be deeds enough to satisfy even your outrageous thirst for them."

That cold, sneering voice, with its note of threat, was like a hand of ice upon his overheated brain. It cooled him on the instant. He stiffened, and looked about him. He saw that Marius had disappeared, and that mademoiselle had risen and was regarding him with singularly imploring eyes.

He bit his lip in mortified chagrin. He cursed himself inwardly for a fool and a dolt—the more pitiable because he accounted himself cunning above others. Had he but kept his temper, had he done no more than maintain the happy pretence that he was a slave to the orders he had received—a mere machine—he might have gained his ends by sheer audacity. At least, his way of retreat would have remained open, and he might have gone, to return another day with force at his heels.

As it was, that pretty whelp, her son, had been sent, no doubt, for men. He stepped up to Valerie.

"Are you ready, mademoiselle?" said he; for little hope though he might still have of winning through, yet he must do the best to repair the damage that was of his making.

She saw that the storm of passion had passed, and she was infected by the sudden, desperate daring that prompted that question of his.

“I am ready, monsieur,” said she, and her boyish voice had an intrepid ring. “I will come with you as I am.”

“Then, in God’s name, let us be going.”

They moved together towards the door, with never another glance for the Dowager where she stood, patting the head of the hound that had risen and come to stand beside her. In silence she watched them, a sinister smile upon her beautiful, ivory face.

Then came a sound of feet and voices in the anteroom. The door was flung violently open, and a half-dozen men with naked swords came blundering into the room, Marius bringing up the rear.

With a cry of fear Valerie shrank back against the panelled wall, her little hands to her cheeks, her eyes dilating with alarm.

Garnache’s sword rasped out, an oath rattled from his clenched teeth, and he fell on guard. The men paused, and took his measure. Marius urged them on, as if they had been a pack of dogs.

“At him!” he snapped, his finger pointing, his handsome eyes flashing angrily. “Cut him down!”

They moved; but mademoiselle moved at the same moment. She sprang before them, between their swords and their prey.

“You shall not do it; you shall not do it!” she cried, and her face looked drawn, her eyes distraught. “It is murder—murder, you curs!” And the memory of how that dainty little lady stood undaunted before so much bared steel, to shield him from those assassins, was one that abode ever after with Garnache.

“Mademoiselle,” said he, in a quiet voice, “if you will but stand aside there will be

some murder done among them first."

But she did not move. Marius clenched his hands, fretted by the delay. The Dowager looked on and smiled and patted her dog's head. To her mademoiselle now turned in appeal.

"Madame," she exclaimed, "you'll not allow it. You'll not let them do this thing. Bid them put up their swords, madame. Bethink you that Monsieur de Garnache is here in the Queen's name."

Too well did madame bethink her of it. Garnache need not plague himself with vexation that his rash temper alone had wrought his ruin now. It had but accelerated it. It was just possible, perhaps, that suavity might have offered him opportunities; but, for the rest, from the moment that he showed himself firm in his resolve to carry mademoiselle to Paris, his doom was sealed. Madame would never willingly have allowed him to leave Condillac alive, for she realized that did she do so he would stir up trouble enough to have them outlawed. He must perish here, and be forgotten. If questions came to be asked later, Condillac would know nothing of him.

"Monsieur de Garnache promised us some fine deeds on his own account," she mocked him. "We but afford him the opportunity to perform them. If these be not enough for his exceeding valour, there are more men without whom we can summon."

A feeling of pity for mademoiselle—perhaps of no more than decency—now overcame Marius. He stepped forward.

"Valerie," he said, "it is not fitting you should remain."

"Aye, take her hence," the Dowager bade him, with a smile. "Her presence is unmanning our fine Parisian."

Eager to do so, over-eager, Marius came forward, past his men-at-arms, until he was but some three paces from the girl and just out of reach of a sudden dart of Garnache's sword.

Softly, very warily, Garnache slipped his right foot a little farther to the right. Suddenly he threw his weight upon it, so that he was clear of the girl. Before they understood what he was about, the thing had taken place. He had leaped forward, caught the young man by the breast of his shimmering doublet, leaped back to shelter beyond mademoiselle, hurled Marius to the ground, and planted his foot, shod as it was in his thickly mudded riding-boot, full upon the boy's long, shapely neck.

"Move so much as a finger, my pretty fellow," he snapped at him, "and I'll crush the life from you as from a toad."

There was a sudden forward movement on the part of the men; but if Garnache was vicious, he was calm. Were he again to lose his temper now, there would indeed be a speedy end to him. That much he knew, and kept repeating to himself, lest he should be tempted to forget it.

"Back!" he bade them in a voice so imperative that they stopped, and looked on with gaping mouths. "Back, or he perishes!" And dropping the point of his sword, he lightly rested it upon the young man's breast.

In dismay they looked to the Dowager for instruction. She craned forward, the smile gone from her lips, a horror in her eyes, her bosom heaving. A moment ago she had smiled upon mademoiselle's outward signs of fear; had mademoiselle been so minded, she might in her turn have smiled now at the terror written large upon the Dowager's own face. But her attention was all absorbed by the swiftly executed act by which Garnache had gained at least a temporary advantage.

She had turned and looked at the strange spectacle of that dauntless man, erect, his foot upon Marius's neck, like some fantastic figure of a contemporary Saint George and a contemporary dragon. She pressed her hands tighter upon her bosom; her eyes sparkled with an odd approval of that brisk deed.

But Garnache's watchful eyes were upon the Dowager. He read the anxious fear that

marred the beauty of her face, and he took heart at the sight, for he was dependent upon the extent to which he might work upon her feelings.

“You smiled just now, madame, when it was intended to butcher a man before your eyes. You smile no longer, I observe, at this the first of the fine deeds I promised you.”

“Let him go,” she said, and her voice was scarce louder than a whisper, horror-laden. “Let him go, monsieur, if you would save your own neck.”

“At that price, yes—though, believe me, you are paying too much for so poor a life as this. Still, you value the thing, and I hold it; and so you’ll forgive me if I am extortionate.”

“Release him, and, in God’s name, go your ways. None shall stay you,” she promised him.

He smiled. “I’ll need some security for that. I do not choose to take your word for it, Madame de Condillac.”

“What security can I give you?” she cried, wringing her hands, her eyes on the boy’s ashen face ashen from mingling fear and rage—where it showed beyond Garnache’s heavy boot.

“Bid one of your knaves summon my servant. I left him awaiting me in the courtyard.”

The order was given, and one of the cut-throats departed.

In a tense and anxious silence they awaited his return, though he kept them but an instant.

Rabecque’s eyes took on a startled look when he had viewed the situation. Garnache called to him to deprive those present of their weapons.

“And let none refuse, or offer him violence,” he added, “or your master’s life shall pay the price of it.”

The Dowager with a ready anxiety repeated to them his commands. Rabecque, understanding nothing, went from man to man, and received from each his weapons. He placed the armful on the windowseat, at the far end of the apartment, as Garnache bade him. At the other end of the long room, Garnache ordered the disarmed men to range themselves. When that was done, the Parisian removed his foot from his victim's neck.

"Stand up," he commanded, and Marius very readily obeyed him.

Garnache placed himself immediately behind the boy. "Madame," said he, "no harm shall come to your son if he is but wise. Let him disobey me, or let any man in Condillac lift a hand against us, and that shall be the signal for Monsieur de Condillac's death. Mademoiselle, it is your wish to accompany me to Paris?"

"Yes, monsieur," she answered fearlessly, her eyes sparkling now.

"We will be going then. Place yourself alongside of Monsieur de Condillac. Rabecque, follow me. Forward, Monsieur de Condillac. You will be so good as to conduct us to our horses in the courtyard."

They made an odd procession as they marched out of the hall, under the sullen eyes of the baulked cut-throats and their mistress. On the threshold Garnache paused, and looked over his shoulder.

"Are you content, madame? Have you seen fine deeds enough for one day?" he asked her, laughing. But, white to the lips with chagrin, she returned no answer.

Garnache and his party crossed the anteroom, after having taken the precaution to lock the door upon the Marquise and her men, and proceeding down a gloomy passage they gained the courtyard. Here Marius was consoled to find some men of the garrison of Condillac a half-score, or so—all more or less armed, surrounding the horses of Garnache and his lackey. At sight of the odd group that now appeared those ruffians stood at gaze, surprised, and with suspicions aroused by Garnache's naked sword, ready for anything their master might demand of them.

Marius had in that instant a gleam of hope. Thus far, Garnache had been master of the situation. But surely the position would be reversed when Garnache and his man came to mount their horses, particularly considering how hampered they must be by Valerie. This danger Garnache, however, was no less quick to perceive, and with a dismaying promptness did he take his measures.

“Remember,” he threatened Monsieur de Condillac, “if any of your men show their teeth it will be the worse for you.” They had come to a halt on the threshold of the courtyard. “You will be so good as to bid them retreat through that doorway across the yard yonder.”

Marius hesitated. “And if I refuse?” he demanded hardily, but keeping his back to Garnache. The men stirred, and stray words of mingling wonder and anger reached the Parisian.

“You will not,” said Garnache, with quiet confidence.

“I think you make too sure,” Marius replied, and dissembled his misgivings in a short laugh. Garnache became impatient. His position was not being improved by delay.

“Monsieur de Condillac,” said he, speaking quickly and yet with an incisiveness of tone that made his words sound deliberate, “I am a desperate man in a desperate position. Every moment that I tarry here increases my danger and shortens my temper. If you think to temporize in the hope of gaining an opportunity of turning the tables upon me, you must be mad to dream that I shall permit it. Monsieur, you will at once order those men to leave the courtyard by that doorway, or I give you my word of honour that I shall run you through as you stand.”

“That would be to destroy yourself,” said Marius with an attempted note of confidence.

“I should be no less destroyed by delay,” answered Garnache; and added more sharply, “Give the word, monsieur, or I will make an end.”

From the movement behind him Marius guessed almost by instinct that Garnache had drawn back for a lunge. At his side Valerie looked over her shoulder, with eyes that were startled but unafraid. For a second Marius considered whether he might not attempt to elude Garnache by a wild and sudden dash towards his men. But the consequences of failure were too fearful.

He shrugged his shoulders, and gave the order. The men hesitated a moment, then shuffled away in the direction indicated. But they went slowly, with much half-whispered, sullen conferring and many a backward glance at Marius and those with him.

“Bid them go faster,” snapped Garnache. Marius obeyed him, and the men obeyed Marius, and vanished into the gloom of the archway. After all, thought Monsieur de Condillac, they need go no farther than that doorway; they must have appreciated the situation by now; and he was confident they would have the sense to hold themselves in readiness for a rush in the moment of Garnache’s mounting.

But Garnache’s next order shattered that last hope.

“Rebecque,” said he, without turning his head, “go and lock them in.” Before bidding the men go that way, he had satisfied himself that there was a key on the outside of the door. “Monsieur de Condillac,” he resumed to Marius, “you will order your men in no way to hinder my servant. I shall act upon any menace of danger to my lackey precisely as I should were I, myself, in danger.”

Marius’s heart sank within him, as sinks a stone through water. He realized, as his mother had realized a little while before, that in Garnache they had an opponent who took no chances. In a voice thick with the torturing rage of impotence he gave the order upon which the grim Parisian insisted. There followed a silence broken by the fall of Rabecque’s heavily shod feet upon the stones of the yard, as he crossed it to do his master’s bidding. The door creaked on its hinges; the key grated screaming in its lock, and Rabecque returned to Garnache’s side even as Garnache tapped Marius

on the shoulder.

“This way, Monsieur de Condillac, if you please,” said he, and as Marius turned at last to face him, he stood aside and waved his left hand towards the door through which they had lately emerged. A moment stood the youth facing his stern conqueror; his hands were clenched until the knuckles showed white; his face was a dull crimson. Vainly he sought for words in which to vent some of the malicious chagrin that filled his soul almost to bursting-point. Then, despairing, with a shrug and an inarticulate mutter, he flung past the Parisian, obeying him as the cur obeys, with pendant tail and teeth-revealing snarl.

Garnache closed the door upon him with a bang, and smiled quietly as he turned to Valerie.

“I think we have won through, mademoiselle,” said he, with pardonable vanity. “The rest is easy, though you may be subjected to some slight discomfort between this and Grenoble.”

She smiled back at him, a pale, timid smile, like a gleam of sunshine from a wintry sky. “That matters nothing,” she assured him, and strove to make her voice sound brave.

There was need for speed, and compliments were set aside by Garnache, who, at his best, was not felicitous with them. Valerie felt herself caught by the wrist, a trifle roughly she remembered afterwards, and hurried across the cobbles to the tethered horses, with which Rabecque was already busy. She saw Garnache raise his foot to the stirrup and hoist himself to the saddle. Then he held down a hand to her, bade her set her foot on his, and called with an oath to Rabecque to lend her his assistance. A moment later she was perched in front of Garnache, almost on the withers of his horse. The cobbles rattled under its hooves, the timbers of the drawbridge sent up a booming sound, they were across—out of Condillac—and speeding at a gallop down the white road that led to the river; after them pounded

Rabecque, bumping horribly in his saddle, and attempting wildly, and with awful objurgations, to find his stirrups.

They crossed the bridge that spans the Isere and took the road to Grenoble at a sharp pace, with scarce a backward glance at the grey towers of Condillac. Valerie experienced an overwhelming inclination to weep and laugh, to cry and sing at one and the same time; but whether this odd emotion sprang from the happenings in which she had had her part, or from the exhilaration of that mad ride, she could not tell. No doubt it sprang from both, owing a part to each. She controlled herself, however. A shy, upward glance at the stern, set face of the man whose arm encircled and held her fast had a curiously sobering effect upon her. Their eyes met, and he smiled a friendly, reassuring smile, such as a father might have bestowed upon a daughter.

“I do not think that they will charge me with blundering this time,” he said.

“Charge you with blundering?” she echoed; and the inflection of the pronoun might have flattered him had he not reflected that it was impossible she could have understood his allusion. And now she bethought her that she had not thanked him—and the debt was a heavy one. He had come to her aid in an hour when hope seemed dead. He had come single-handed—save for his man Rabecque; and in a manner that was worthy of being made the subject of an epic, he had carried her out of Condillac, away from the terrible Dowager and her cut-throats. The thought of them sent a shiver through her.

“Do you feel the cold?” he asked concernedly; and that the wind might cut her less, he slackened speed.

“No, no,” she cried, her alarm waking again at the thought of the folk of Condillac. “Make haste! Go on, go on! Mon Dieu! if they should overtake us!”

He looked over his shoulder. The road ran straight for over a half-mile behind them, and not a living thing showed upon it.

“You need have no alarm,” he smiled. “We are not pursued. They must have realized the futility of attempting to overtake us. Courage, mademoiselle. We shall be in Grenoble presently, and once there, you will have nothing more to fear.”

“You are sure of that?” she asked, and there was doubt in her voice.

He smiled reassuringly again. “The Lord Seneschal shall supply us with an escort,” he promised confidently.

“Still,” she said, “we shall not stay there, I hope, monsieur.”

“No longer than may be necessary to procure a coach for you.”

“I am glad of that,” said she. “I shall know no peace until Grenoble is a good ten leagues behind us. The Marquise and her son are too powerful there.”

“Yet their might shall not prevail against the Queen’s,” he made reply. And as now they rode amain she fell to thanking him, shyly at first, then, as she gathered confidence in her subject, with a greater fervour. But he interrupted her ere she had gone far, “Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye,” said he, “you overstate the matter.” His tone was chilling almost; and she felt as she had been rebuked. “I am no more than the emissary of Her Majesty—it is to her that your thanks are due.”

“Ah, but, monsieur,” she returned to the assault, “I owe some thanks to you as well. What other in your place would have done what you have done?”

“I know not that, nor do I greatly care,” said he, and laughed, but with a laugh that jarred on her. “That which I did I must have done, no matter whom it was a question of saving. I am but an instrument in this matter, mademoiselle.”

His thought was to do no more than belittle the service he had rendered her, to stem her flow of gratitude, since, indeed, he felt, as he said, that it was to the Queen-Regent her thanks were due. All unwitting was it—out of his ignorance of the ways of thought of a sex with which he held the view that it is an ill thing to meddle—that he wounded her by his disclaimer, in which her sensitive maiden

fancy imagined a something that was almost contemptuous.

They rode in silence for a little spell, broken at last by Garnache in expression of the thoughts that had come to him as a consequence of what she had said.

“On this same subject of thanks,” said he—and as she raised her eyes again she found him smiling almost tenderly—“if any are due between us they are surely due from me to you.”

“From you to me?” she asked in wonder.

“Assuredly,” said he. “Had you not come between me and the Dowager’s assassins there had been an end to me in the hall of Condillac.”

Her hazel eyes were very round for a moment, then they narrowed, and little humorous lines formed at the corners of her lips.

“Monsieur de Garnache,” said she, with a mock coldness that was a faint echo of his own recent manner, “you overstate the case. That which I did I must have done, no matter whom it was a question of saving. I was but an instrument in this matter, monsieur.”

His brows went up. He stared at her a moment, gathering instruction from the shy mockery of her glance. Then he laughed with genuine amusement.

“True,” he said. “An instrument you were; but an instrument of Heaven, whereas in me you but behold the instrument of an earthly power. We are not quite quits, you see.”

But she felt, at least, that she was quits with him in the matter of his repudiation of her own thanks, and the feeling bridged the unfriendly gap that she had felt was opening out between them; and for no reason in the world that she could think of, she was glad that this was so.

CHAPTER VI. MONSIEUR DE GARNACHE KEEPS HIS

TEMPER

Night had fallen and it had begun to rain when Garnache and Valerie reached Grenoble. They entered the town afoot, the Parisian not desiring to attract attention by being seen in the streets with a lady on the withers of his horse.

With thought for her comfort, Monsieur de Garnache had divested himself of his heavy horseman's cloak and insisted upon her assuming it, so setting it about her that her head was covered as by a wimple. Thus was she protected not only from the rain, but from the gaze of the inquisitive.

They made their way in the drizzle, through the greasy, slippery streets ashine with the lights that fell from door and window, Rabecque following closely with the horses. Garnache made straight for his inn—the Auberge du Veau qui Tete—which enjoyed the advantage of facing the Palais Seneschal.

The ostler took charge of the nags, and the landlord conducted them to a room above-stairs, which he placed at mademoiselle's disposal. That done, Garnache left Rabecque on guard, and proceeded to make the necessary arrangements for the journey that lay before them. He began by what he conceived to be the more urgent measure, and stepping across to the Palais Seneschal, he demanded to see Monsieur de Tressan at once.

Ushered into the Lord Seneschal's presence, he startled that obese gentleman by the announcement that he had returned from Condillac with Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye, and that he would require an escort to accompany them to Paris.

"For I am by no means minded to be exposed to such measures as the tigress of Condillac and her cub may take to recover their victim," he explained with a grim smile.

The Seneschal combed his beard and screwed up his pale eyes until they vanished in the cushions of his cheeks. He was lost in amazement. He could only imagine that

the Queen's emissary had been duped more successfully this time.

"I am to gather, then," said he, dissembling what was passing through his mind, "that you delivered the lady by force or strategy."

"By both, monsieur," was the short answer.

Tressan continued to comb his beard, and pondered the situation. If things were so, indeed, they could not have fallen out more to his taste. He had had no hand in it, one way or the other. He had run with the hare and hunted with the hounds, and neither party could charge him with any lack of loyalty. His admiration and respect for Monsieur de Garnache grew enormously. When the rash Parisian had left him that afternoon for the purpose of carrying his message himself to Condillac, Tressan had entertained little hope of ever again seeing him alive. Yet there he stood, as calm and composed as ever, announcing that singlehanded he had carried out what another might well have hesitated to attempt with a regiment at his heels.

Tressan's curiosity urged him to beg for the details of this marvel, and Garnache entertained him with a brief recital of what had taken place, whereat, realizing that Garnache had indeed outwitted them, the Seneschal's wonder increased.

"But we are not out of the quagmire yet," cried Garnache; "and that is why I want an escort."

Tressan became uneasy. "How many men shall you require?" he asked, thinking that the Parisian would demand at least the half of a company.

"A half-dozen and a sergeant to command them."

Tressan's uneasiness was dissipated, and he found himself despising Garnache more for his rashness in being content with so small a number than he respected him for the boldness and courage he had so lately displayed. It was not for him to suggest that the force might prove insufficient; rather was it for him to be thankful that Garnache had not asked for more. An escort Tressan dared not refuse him, and yet refuse it him he must have done—or broken with the Condillacs—had he asked for a

greater number. But six men! Pooh! they would be of little account. So he very readily consented, inquiring how soon Garnache would require them.

“At once,” was the Parisian’s answer. “I leave Grenoble to-night. I hope to set out in an hour’s time. Meanwhile I’ll have the troopers form a guard of honour. I am lodged over the way.”

Tressan, but too glad to be quit of him, rose there and then to give the necessary orders, and within ten minutes Garnache was back at the Sucking Calf with six troopers and a sergeant, who had left their horses in the Seneschal’s stables until the time for setting out. Meanwhile Garnache placed them on duty in the common-room of the inn.

He called for refreshment for them, and bade them remain there at the orders of his man Rabecque. His reason for this step was that it became necessary that he should absent himself for a while to find a carriage suitable for the journey; for as the Sucking Calf was not a post-house he must seek one elsewhere—at the Auberge de France, in fact, which was situate on the eastern side of the town by the Porte de Savoie—and he was not minded to leave the person of Valerie unguarded during his absence. The half-dozen troopers he considered ample, as indeed they were.

On this errand he departed, wrapped tightly in his cloak, walking briskly through the now heavier rain.

But at the Auberge de France a disappointment awaited him. The host had no horses and no carriage, nor would he have until the following morning. He was sorrow-stricken that the circumstance should discompose Monsieur de Garnache; he was elaborate in his explanations of how it happened that he could place no vehicle at Monsieur de Garnache’s disposal—so elaborate that it is surprising Monsieur de Garnache’s suspicions should not have been aroused. For the truth of the matter was that the folk of Condillac had been at the Auberge de France before him—as they had been elsewhere in the town wherever a conveyance might be procurable—and

by promises of reward for obedience and threats of punishment for disobedience, they had contrived that Garnache should hear this same story on every hand. His mistake had lain in his eagerness to obtain a guard from the Seneschal. Had he begun by making sure of a conveyance, anticipating, as he should have done, this move on the part of the Condillacs—a move which he did not even now suspect—it is possible that he might have been spared much of the trouble that was to follow.

An hour or so later, after having vainly ransacked the town for the thing he needed, he returned wet and annoyed to the Veau qui Tote. In a corner of the spacious common-room—a corner by the door leading to the interior of the inn—he saw the six troopers at table, waxing a trifle noisy over cards. Their sergeant sat a little apart, in conversation with the landlord's wife, eyes upturned adoringly, oblivious of the increasing scowl that gathered about her watchful husband's brow.

At another table sat four gentlemen—seemingly travellers, by their air and garb—in a conversation that was hushed at Garnache's entrance. But he paid no heed to them as he stalked with ringing step across the rushstrewn floor, nor observed how covertly and watchfully their glances followed him as returning, in passing the sergeant's prompt salute he vanished through the doorway leading to the stairs.

He reappeared again a moment later, to call the host, and give him orders for the preparing of his own and Rabecque's supper.

On the landing above he found Rabecque awaiting him.

"Is all well?" he asked, and received from his lackey a reassuring answer.

Mademoiselle welcomed him gladly. His long absence, it appeared, had been giving her concern. He told her on what errand he had been, and alarm overspread her face upon hearing its result.

"But, monsieur," she cried, "you are not proposing that I should remain a night in Grenoble."

"What alternative have we?" he asked, and his brows met, impatient at what he

accounted no more than feminine whimsey.

“It is not safe,” she exclaimed, her fears increasing. “You do not know how powerful are the Condillacs.”

He strode to the fire, and the logs hissed under the pressure of his wet boot. He set his back to the blaze, and smiled down upon her.

“Nor do you know how powerful are we,” he answered easily. “I have below six troopers and a sergeant of the Seneschal’s regiment; with myself and Rabecque we are nine men in all. That should be a sufficient guard, mademoiselle. Nor do I think that with all their power the Condillacs will venture here to claim you at the sword point.”

“And yet,” she answered, for all that she was plainly reassured, at least in part, “I would rather you had got me a horse, that we might have ridden to Saint Marcellin, where no doubt a carriage might be obtained.”

“I did not see the need to put you to so much discomfort,” he returned. “It is raining heavily.”

“Oh, what of that?” she flung back impatiently.

“Besides,” he added, “it seems there are no horses at the post-house. A benighted place this Dauphiny of yours, mademoiselle.”

But she never heeded the gibe at her native province. “No horses?” she echoed, and her hazel eyes looked up sharply, the alarm returning to her face. She rose, and approached him. “Surely that is impossible.”

“I assure you that it is as I say—neither at the post-house nor at any of the inns I visited could I find me a spare horse.”

“Monsieur,” she cried, “I see the hand of Condillac in this.”

“As how?” he inquired, and his tone again was quickened by impatience.

“They have anticipated you. They seek to keep you here—to keep us in Grenoble.”

“But to what end?” he asked, his impatience growing. “The Auberge de France has promised me a carriage in the morning. What shall it avail them at Condillac to keep us here to-night?”

“They may have some project. Oh, monsieur! I am full of fears.”

“Dismiss them,” he answered lightly; and to reassure her he added, smiling: “Rest assured we shall keep good watch over you, Rabecque and I and the troopers. A guard shall remain in the passage throughout the night. Rabecque and I will take turn about at sentry-go. Will that give you peace?”

“You are very good,” she said, her voice quivering with feeling and real gratitude, and as he was departing she called after him. “You will be careful of yourself,” she said.

He paused under the lintel, and turned, surprised. “It is a habit of mine,” said he, with a glint of humour in his eye.

But there was no answering smile from her. Her face was all anxiety.

“Beware of pitfalls,” she bade him. “Go warily; they are cruelly cunning, those folk of Condillac. And if evil should befall you...”

“There would still remain Rabecque and the troopers,” he concluded.

She shrugged her shoulders. “I implore you to be careful,” she insisted.

“You may depend upon me,” he said, and closed the door.

Outside he called Rabecque, and together they went below. But mindful of her fears, he dispatched one of the troopers to stand sentry outside her door whilst he and his lackey supped. That done, he called the host, and set himself at table, Rabecque at his elbow in attendance to hand him the dishes and pour his wine.

Across the low-ceilinged room the four travellers still sat in talk, and as Garnache seated himself, one of them shouted for the host and asked in an impatient tone to know if his supper was soon to come.

“In a moment, sir,” answered the landlord respectfully, and he turned again to the Parisian. He went out to bring the latter’s meal, and whilst he was gone Rabecque heard from his master the reason of their remaining that night in Grenoble. The inference drawn by the astute lackey—and freely expressed by him—from the lack of horses or carriages in Grenoble that night, coincided oddly with Valerie’s. He too gave it as his opinion that his master had been forestalled by the Dowager’s people, and without presuming to advise Garnache to go warily—a piece of advice that Garnache would have resented, to the extent perhaps of boxing the fellow’s ears—he determined, there and then, to keep a close watch upon his master, and under no circumstances, if possible, permit him to leave the Sucking Calf that night.

The host returned, bearing a platter on which there steamed a ragout that gave out an appetizing odour; his wife followed with other dishes and a bottle of Armagnac under her arm. Rabecque busied himself at once, and his hungry master disposed himself to satisfy the healthiest appetite in France, when suddenly a shadow fell across the table. A man had come to stand beside it, his body screening the light of one of the lamps that hung from a rafter of the ceiling.

“At last!” he exclaimed, and his voice was harsh with ill-humour.

Garnache looked up, pausing in the very act of helping himself to that ragout. Rabecque looked up from behind his master, and his lips tightened. The host looked up from the act of drawing the cork of the flagon he had taken from his wife, and his eyes grew big as in his mind he prepared a judicious blend of apology and remonstrance wherewith to soothe this very impatient gentleman. But before he could speak, Garnache’s voice cut sharply into the silence. An interruption at such a moment vexed him sorely.

“Monsieur says?” quoth he.

“To you, sir—nothing,” answered the fellow impudently, and looked him straight between the eyes.

With a flush mounting to his cheeks, and his brows drawn together in perplexity, Garnache surveyed him. He was that same traveller who had lately clamoured to know when he might sup, a man of rather more than middle height, lithe and active of frame, yet with a breadth of shoulder and depth of chest that argued strength and endurance as well. He had fair, wavy hair, which he wore rather longer than was the mode, brown eyes, and a face which, without being handsome, was yet more than ordinarily engaging by virtue of its strength and frank ingenuousness. His dress was his worst feature. It was flamboyant and showy; cheap, and tawdrily pretentious. Yet he bore himself with the easy dignity of a man who counts more inferiors than superiors.

Despite the arrogant manner of his address, Garnache felt prepossessed in the newcomer's favour. But before he could answer him, the host was speaking.

"Monsieur mistakes..." he began.

"Mistakes?" thundered the other in an accent slightly foreign. "It is you who mistake if you propose to tell me that this is not my supper. Am I to wait all night, while every jackanapes who follows me into your pigsty is to be served before me?"

"Jackanapes?" said Garnache thoughtfully, and looked the man in the face again. Behind the stranger pressed his three companions now, whilst the troopers across the room forgot their card-play to watch the altercation that seemed to impend.

The foreigner—for such, indeed, his French proclaimed him—turned half-contemptuously to the host, ignoring Garnache with an air that was studiously offensive.

"Jackanapes?" murmured Garnache again, and he, too, turned to the host. "Tell me, Monsieur l'Hote," said he, "where do the jackanapes bury their dead in Grenoble? I may need the information."

Before the distressed landlord could utter a word, the stranger had wheeled about again to face Garnache. "What shall that mean?" he asked sharply, a great fierceness

in his glance.

“That Grenoble may be witnessing the funeral of a foreign bully by to-morrow, Monsieur l’Etranger,” said Garnache, showing his teeth in a pleasant smile. He became conscious in that moment of a pressure on his shoulder blade, but paid no heed to it, intent on watching the other’s countenance. It expressed surprise a moment, then grew dark with anger.

“Do you mean that for me, sir?” he growled.

Garnache spread his hands. “If monsieur feels that the cap fits him, I shall not stay him in the act of donning it.”

The stranger set one hand upon the table, and leaned forward towards Garnache. “May I ask monsieur to be a little more definite?” he begged.

Garnache sat back in his chair and surveyed the man, smiling. Quick though his temper usually might be, it was checked at present by amusement. He had seen in his time many quarrels spring from the flimsiest of motives, but surely never had he seen one quite so self-begotten. It was almost as if the fellow had come there of set purpose to pick it with him.

A suspicion flashed across his mind. He remembered the warning mademoiselle had given him. And he wondered. Was this a trick to lure him to some guet-apens? He surveyed his man more closely; but the inspection lent no colour to his suspicions. The stranger looked so frank and honest; then again his accent was foreign. It might very well be that he was some Savoyard lordling unused to being kept waiting, and that his hunger made him irritable and impatient. If that were so, assuredly the fellow deserved a lesson that should show him he was now in France, where different manners obtained to those that he displayed; yet, lest he should be something else, Garnache determined to pursue a policy of conciliation. It would be a madness to embroil himself just then, whether this fellow were of Condillac or not.

“I have asked you, monsieur,” the stranger insisted, “to be a little more definite.”

Garnache's smile broadened and grew more friendly. "Frankly," said he, "I experience difficulty. My remark was vague. I meant it so to be."

"But it offended me, monsieur," the other answered sharply.

The Parisian raised his eyebrows, and pursed his lips. "Then I deplore it," said he. And now he had to endure the hardest trial of all. The stranger's expression changed to one of wondering scorn.

"Do I understand that monsieur apologizes?"

Garnache felt himself crimsoning; his self-control was slipping from him; the pressure against his shoulder blade was renewed, and in time he became aware of it and knew it for a warning from Rabecque.

"I cannot conceive, sir, that I have offended," said he at length, keeping a tight hand upon his every instinct—which was to knock this impertinent stranger down. "But if I have, I beg that you will believe that I have done so unwittingly. I had no such intent."

The stranger removed his hand from the table and drew himself erect.

"So much for that, then," said he, provokingly contemptuous. "If you will be as amiable in the matter of the supper I shall be glad to terminate an acquaintance which I can see no honour to myself in pursuing."

This, Garnache felt, was more than he could endure. A spasm of passion crossed his face, another instant and despite Rabecque's frantic proddings he might have flung the ragout in the gentleman's face; when suddenly came the landlord unexpectedly to the rescue.

"Monsieur, here comes your supper now," he announced, as his wife reentered from the kitchen with a laden tray.

For a moment the stranger seemed out of countenance. Then he looked with cold insolence from the dishes set before Garnache to those which were being set for

himself.

“Ah,” said he, and his tone was an insult unsurpassable, “perhaps it is to be preferred. This ragout grows cold, I think.”

He sniffed, and turning on his heel, without word or sign of salutation to Garnache, he passed to the next table, and sat down with his companions. The Parisian’s eyes followed him, and they blazed with suppressed wrath. Never in all his life had he exercised such self-control as he was exercising then—which was the reason why he had failed to achieve greatness—and he was exercising it for the sake of that child above-stairs, and because he kept ever-present in his mind the thought that she must come to grievous harm if ill befell himself. But he controlled his passion at the cost of his appetite. He could not eat, so enraged was he. And so he pushed the platter from him, and rose.

He turned to Rabecque, and the sight of his face sent the lackey back a pace or two in very fear. He waved his hand to the table.

“Sup, Rabecque,” said he. “Then come to me above.”

And followed, as before, by the eyes of the stranger and his companions, Garnache strode out of the room, and mounting the stairs went to find solace in talk with Valerie. But however impossible he might find it to digest the affront he had swallowed, no word of the matter did he utter to the girl, lest it should cause her fears to reawaken.

CHAPTER VII. THE OPENING OF THE TRAP

Garnache spent a sleepless night at Grenoble, on guard throughout the greater part of it since nothing short of that would appease the fears of Valerie. Yet it passed without any bellicose manifestation on the part of the Condillacs such as Valerie feared and such as Garnache was satisfied would not—could not, indeed—take place.

Betimes next morning he dispatched Rabecque to the Auberge de France for the promised carriage, and broke his fast in the common-room what time he awaited his man's return. The chamber was again occupied by the stranger of yesternight, who sat apart, however, and seemed no longer disposed to interfere with the Parisian. Garnache wondered idly, might this be due to the circumstance that that same stranger was supported now by one single companion, and was therefore less valorous than when he had been in the company of three.

At another table were two gentlemen, sprung he knew not whence, quiet in dress and orderly in manner, to whom he paid little heed until one of them a slender, swarthy, hawk-faced fellow—looking up suddenly, started slightly at sight of the Parisian and addressed him instantly by name. Garnache paused in the act of rising from table, half-turned, and sharply scrutinized the swarthy gentleman, but failed to recognize him. He advanced towards him.

"I have the honour to be known to you, monsieur?" he half-stated, half-inquired.

"Parbleu, Monsieur de Garnache!" exclaimed the other with a ready smile, the more winning since it lighted up a face that at rest was very sombre. "Lives there a Parisian to whom you are not known? I have seen you often at the Hotel de Bourgogne."

Garnache acknowledged the courtesy by a slight inclination of the head.

"And once," continued the other, "I had the honour to be presented to you by Monsieur le Duc himself. My name is Gaubert—Fabre Gaubert." And as he introduced himself he rose out of respect for Garnache, who had remained standing. Garnache knew him not at all, yet never doubted that his tale was true; the fellow had a very courtly, winning air; moreover, Garnache was beginning to feel lonely in the wilds of Dauphiny, so that it rejoiced him to come into the company of one whom he might regard as something of a fellow-creature. He held out his hand.

"I am honoured in that you should have borne me in your memory, monsieur," said

he. He was about to add that he would be overjoyed if it should happen that Monsieur Gaubert was travelling to Paris, since he might give himself the pleasure of his company on that tedious journey; but he checked himself betimes. He had no reason to suspect this gentleman; and yet, all things considered, he bethought him suddenly that he would do well to observe the greatest circumspection. So with a pleasant but meaningless civility touching Monsieur Gaubert's presence in those parts, Garnache passed on and gained the door. He paused in the porch, above which the rebus-like sign of the Sucking Calf creaked and grated in each gust of the chill wind that was blowing from the Alps. The rain had ceased, but the sky was dark and heavy with great banks of scudding clouds. In the street the men of his escort sat their horses, having mounted at his bidding in readiness for the journey. A word or two he exchanged with the sergeant, and then with a great rumble the clumsy carriage from the Auberge de France heralded its approach. It rolled up the street, a vast machine of wood and leather, drawn by three horses, and drew up at the door of the inn. Out sprang Rabecque, to be immediately sent by his master to summon mademoiselle. They would set out upon the instant.

Rabecque turned to obey; but in that same moment he was thrust rudely aside by a man with the air of a servant, who issued from he inn carrying a valise; after him, following close upon his heels, with head held high and eyes that looked straight before him and took no heed of Garnache, came the foreigner of yesternight.

Rabecque, his shoulders touching the timbers of the porch, against which he had been thrust, remained at gaze, following with resentful eye the fellow who had so rudely used him. Garnache, on the other side, watched with some wonder the advent of the ingenuous-looking stranger, but as yet with no suspicion of his intent.

Not until the servant had thrown open the door of the coach and deposited within the valise he carried, did Garnache stir. Not, indeed, until the foreigner's foot was on the step preparatory to mounting did Garnache speak.

“Hi! monsieur,” he called to him, “what is your pleasure with my carriage?”

The stranger turned, and stared at Garnache with a look of wonder that artfully changed to one of disdainful recognition.

“Ah?” said he, and his eyebrows went up. “The apologetic gentleman! You said?”

Garnache approached him, followed a step not only by Rabecque, but also by Monsieur Gaubert, who had sauntered out a second earlier. Behind them, in the porch, lounged now the foreigner’s friend, and behind him again was to be seen the great face and staring, somewhat startled eyes of the landlord.

“I asked you, monsieur,” said Garnache, already at grips with that quick temper of his, “what might be your pleasure with my coach?”

“With your coach?” echoed the other, his superciliousness waxing more and more offensive. “Voyons! on! my apologetic friend, do all things in Grenoble belong to you?” He turned to the post-boy, who looked on stolidly. “You are from the Auberge de France, are you not?” quoth he.

“I am, monsieur,” replied the man. “This carriage was ordered last night by a gentleman lodging at the Veau qui Tete?”

“Perfectly,” replied the stranger, in a tone of finality. “It was ordered by me.” And he was about to turn away, when Garnache approached him by yet another step.

“I will ask you to observe, monsieur,” said he and for all that his tone and words were civil, that they were forcedly so was obvious from their quiver—“I will ask you to observe that the carriage was fetched by my own man there, who rode hither in it.”

The stranger looked him up and down with a curling lip.

“It seems, sir,” said he, with a broad sneer, “that you are one of those impertinent fellows who will be for ever thrusting themselves upon gentlemen with an eye to such profit as they can make.” He produced a purse and opened it. “Last night it was

my supper you usurped. I suffered that. Now you would do the same by my coach, and that I shall not suffer. But there is for your pains, and to be quit of your company." And he tossed a silver coin at the Parisian.

There was an exclamation of horror in the background, and Monsieur de Gaubert thrust himself forward.

"Sir, sir," he exclaimed in an agitated voice, "you cannot know whom you are addressing. This is Monsieur Martin Marie Rigobert de Garnache, Mestre-de-Champ in the army of the King."

"Of all those names the one I should opine might fit him best, but for his ugliness, is that of Marie," answered the foreigner, leering, and with a contemptuous shrug he turned again to mount the carriage.

At that all Garnache's self-control deserted him, and he did a thing deplorable. In one of his blind excesses of fury, heedless of the faithful and watchful Rabecque's arresting tug at his sleeve, he stepped forward, and brought a heavy hand down upon the supercilious gentleman's shoulder. He took him in the instant in which, with one foot off the ground and the other on the step of the carriage, the foreigner was easily thrown' off his balance; he dragged him violently backward, span him round and dropped him floundering in the mire of the street-kennel.

That done, there fell a pause—a hush that was ominous of things impending. A little crowd of idlers that had gathered was quickly augmenting now, and from some there came a cry of "Shame!" at Garnache's act of violence.

This is no moment at which to pause to moralize. And yet, how often is it not so? How often does not public sympathy go out to the man who has been assaulted without thought of the extent to which that man may have provoked and goaded his assailant.

That cry of "Shame!" did no more than increase the anger that was mastering Garnache. His mission in Grenoble was forgotten; mademoiselle above-stairs was

forgotten; the need for caution and the fear of the Condillacs were forgotten; everything was thrust from his mind but the situation of the moment.

Amid the hush that followed, the stranger picked himself slowly up, and sought to wipe the filth from his face and garments. His servant and his friend flew to his aid, but he waved them aside, and advanced towards Garnache, eyes blazing, lips sneering.

“Perhaps,” said he, in that soft, foreign tone of his, laden now with fierce mock-politeness, “perhaps monsieur proposes to apologize again.”

“Sir, you are mad,” interposed Gaubert. “You are a foreigner, I perceive, else you would—”

But Garnache thrust him quietly aside. “You are very kind, Monsieur Gaubert,” said he, and his manner now was one of frozen calm—a manner that betrayed none of the frenzy of seething passion underneath. “I think, sir,” said he to the stranger, adopting something of that gentleman’s sardonic manner, “that it will be a more peaceful world without you. It is that consideration restrains me from apologizing. And yet, if monsieur will express regret for having sought, and with such lack of manners, to appropriate my carriage—”

“Enough!” broke in the other. “We are wasting time, and I have a long journey before me. Courthon,” said he, addressing his friend, “will you bring me the length of this gentleman’s sword? My name, sir,” he added to Garnache, “is Sanguinetti.”

“Faith,” said Garnache, “it sorts well with your bloody spirit.”

“And will sort well, no doubt, with his condition presently,” put in hawk-faced Gaubert. “Monsieur de Garnache, if you have no friend at hand to act for you, I shall esteem myself honoured.” And he bowed.

“Why, thanks, sir. You are most opportunely met. You should be a gentleman since you frequent the Hotel de Bourgogne. My thanks.”

Gaubert went aside to confer with Monsieur Courthon. Sanguinetti stood apart, his manner haughty and impressive, his eye roaming scornfully through the ranks of what had by now become a crowd. Windows were opening in the street, and heads appearing, and across the way Garnache might have beheld the flabby face of Monsieur de Tressan among the spectators of that little scene.

Rabecque drew near his master.

“Have a care, monsieur,” he implored him. “If this should be a trap.”

Garnache started. The remark sobered him, and brought to his mind his own suspicions of yesternight, which his present anger had for the moment lulled. Still, he conceived that he had gone too far to extricate himself. But he could at least see to it that he was not drawn away from the place that sheltered mademoiselle. And so he stepped forward, joining Courthon and Gaubert, to insist that the combat should take place in the inn—either in the common room or in the yard. But the landlord, overhearing this, protested loudly that he could not consent to it. He had his house to think of. He swore that they should not fight on his premises, and implored them in the same breath not to attempt it.

At that Garnache, now thoroughly on his guard, was for putting off the encounter.

“Monsieur Courthon,” said he—and he felt a flush of shame mounting to his brow, and realized that it may need more courage to avoid an encounter than to engage in one—“there is something that in the heat of passion I forgot; something that renders it difficult for me to meet your friend at present.”

Courthon looked at him as he might look at an impertinent lackey.

“And what may that be?” he inquired, mightily contemptuous. There was a snigger from some in the crowd that pressed about them, and even Monsieur Gaubert looked askance.

“Surely, sir,” he began, “if I did not know you for Monsieur de Garnache—”

But Garnache did not let him finish.

“Give me air,” he cried, and cuffed out to right and left of him at the grinning spectators, who fell back and grinned less broadly. “My reason, Monsieur de Courthon,” said he, “is that I do not belong to my self at present. I am in Grenoble on business of the State, as the emissary of the Queen-Regent, and so it would hardly become me to engage in private quarrels.”

Courthon raised his brows.

“You should have thought of that before you rolled Monsieur Sanguinetti in the mud,” he answered coldly.

“I will tender him my apologies for that,” Garnache promised, swallowing hard, “and if he still insists upon a meeting he shall have it in, say, a month’s time.”

“I cannot permit—” began Courthon, very fiercely.

“You will be so good as to inform your friend of what I have said,” Garnache insisted, interrupting him.

Cowed, Courthon shrugged and went apart to confer with his friend.

“Ah!” came Sanguinetti’s soft voice, yet loud enough to be heard by all present. “He shall have a caning then for his impertinence.” And he called loudly to the post-boy for his whip. But at that insult Garnache’s brain seemed to take fire, and his cautious resolutions were reduced to ashes by the conflagration. He stepped forward, and, virulent of tone and terrific of mien, he announced that since Monsieur Sanguinetti took that tone with him, he would cut his throat for him at once and wherever they should please.

At last it was arranged that they should proceed there and then to the Champs aux Capuchins, a half-mile away behind the Franciscan convent.

Accordingly they set out, Sanguinetti and Courthon going first, and Garnache following with Gaubert; the rear being brought up by a regiment of rabble, idlers

and citizens, that must have represented a very considerable proportion of the population of Grenoble. This audience heartened Garnache, to whom some measure of reflection had again returned. Before such numbers it was unthinkable that these gentlemen—assuming them to be acting on behalf of Condillac—should dare to attempt foul measures with him. For the rest he had taken the precaution of leaving Rabecque at the Sucking Calf, and he had given the sergeant strict injunctions that he was not to allow any of his men to leave their posts during his absence, and that the troopers were to hold themselves entirely at the orders of Rabecque. Comparatively easy therefore in his mind, and but little exercised by any thought of the coming encounter, Garnache walked briskly along.

They came at last to the Champs aux Capuchins—a pleasant stretch of verdure covering perhaps half an acre and set about by a belt of beech-trees.

The crowd disposed itself on the fringe of the sward, and the duellists went forward, and set about the preparations. Principals and seconds threw off cloak and doublet, and Sanguinetti, Courthon, and Gaubert removed their heavy boots, whilst Garnache did no more than detach the spurs from his.

Sanguinetti, observing this, drew the attention of the others to it, and an altercation arose. It was Gaubert who came to beg Garnache that he should follow the example they had set him in that respect. But Garnache shook his head.

“The turf is sodden.”

“But it is precisely on that account, sir,” protested Gaubert very earnestly. “In your boots you will be unable to stand firm; you will run the risk of slipping every time that you break ground.”

“I venture to think, sir, that that is my affair,” said Garnache stiffly.

“But it is not,” the other cried. “If you fight in your boots, we must all do the same, and for myself—well, I have not come here to commit suicide.”

“Look you, Monsieur Gaubert,” said Garnache quietly, “your opponent will be

Monsieur Courthon, and since he is in his stockinged feet, there is no reason why you yourself should not remain so too. As for me, I retain my boots, and Monsieur Sanguinetti may have all the advantage that may give him. Since I am content, in Heaven's name let the fight go forward. I am in haste."

Gaubert bowed in submission; but Sanguinetti, who had overheard, turned with an oath.

"By God, no!" said he. "I need no such advantage, sir. Courthon, be so good as to help me on with my boots again." And there was a fresh delay whilst he resumed them.

At last, however, the four men came together, and proceeded to the measurement of swords. It was found that Sanguinetti's was two inches longer than any of the other three.

"It is the usual length in Italy," said Sanguinetti with a shrug.

"If monsieur had realized that he was no longer in Italy, we might perhaps have been spared this very foolish business," answered Garnache testily.

"But what are we to do?" cried the perplexed Gaubert.

"Fight," said Garnache impatiently. "Is there never to be an end to these preliminaries?"

"But I cannot permit you to oppose yourself to a sword two inches longer than your own," cried Gaubert, almost in a temper.

"Why not, if I am satisfied?" asked Garnache. "Mine is the longer reach; thus matters will stand equal."

"Equal?" roared Gaubert. "Your longer reach is an advantage that you had from God, his longer sword is one he had from an armourer. Is that equality?"

"He may have my sword, and I'll take his," cut in the Italian, also showing impatience. "I too am in haste."

“In haste to die, then,” snapped Gaubert.

“Monsieur, this is not seemly,” Courthon reproved him.

“You shall teach me manners when we engage,” snapped the hawk-faced gentleman.

“Sirs, sirs,” Garnache implored them, “are we to waste the day in words? Monsieur Gaubert, there are several gentlemen yonder wearing swords; I make no doubt that you will find one whose blade is of the same length as your own, sufficiently obliging to lend it to Monsieur Sanguinetti.”

“That is an office that my friend can do for me,” interposed Sanguinetti, and thereupon Courthon departed, to return presently with a borrowed weapon of the proper length.

At last it seemed that they might proceed with the business upon which they were come; but Garnache was wrong in so supposing. A discussion now arose between Gaubert and Courthon as to the choice of spot. The turf was drenched and slippery, and for all that they moved from place to place testing the ground, their principals following, nowhere could they find the conditions sufficiently improved to decide upon engaging. To Garnache the utility of this was apparent from the first. If these gentlemen had thought to avoid slippery ground, they should have elected to appoint the meeting elsewhere. But having chosen the Champs aux Capuchins, it was idle to expect that one stretch of turf would prove firmer than another.

Wearied at last by this delay, he gave expression to his thoughts.

“You are quite right, monsieur,” said Courthon. “But your second is over-fastidious. It would simplify matters so much if you would remove your boots.”

“Look you, sirs,” said Garnache, taking a firm stand, “I will engage in my boots and on this very spot or not at all. I have told you that I am in haste. As for the slipperiness of the ground, my opponent will run no greater risks than I. I am not the only impatient one. The spectators are beginning to jeer at us. We shall have every scullion in Grenoble presently saying that we are afraid of one another. Besides

which, sirs, I think I am taking cold."

"I am quite of monsieur's mind, myself," drawled Sanguinetti.

"You hear, sir," exclaimed Courthon, turning to Gaubert. "You can scarce persist in finding objections now."

"Why, since all are satisfied, so be it," said Gaubert, with a shrug. "I sought to do the best for my principal. As it is, I wash my hands of all responsibility, and by all means let us engage, sirs."

They disposed themselves accordingly, Gaubert engaging Courthon, on Garnache's right hand, and Garnache himself falling on guard to receive the attack of Sanguinetti. The jeers and murmurs that had been rising from the ever-growing crowd that swarmed about the outskirts of the place fell silent as the clatter of meeting swords rang out at last. And then, scarce were they engaged when a voice arose, calling angrily:

"Hold, Sanguinetti! Wait!"

A big, broad-shouldered man, in a suit of homespun and a featherless hat, thrust his way rudely trough the crowd and broke into the space within the belt of trees. The combatants had fallen apart at this commanding cry, and the newcomer now dashed forward, flushed and out of breath as if with running.

"Vertudieu! Sanguinetti," he swore, and his manner was half-angry, half-bantering; "do you call this friendship?"

"My dear Francois" returned the foreigner, "you arrive most inopportunely."

"And is that all the greeting you have for me?"

Looking more closely, Garnache thought that he recognized in him one of Sanguinetti's companions of yesternight.

"But do you not see that I am engaged?"

"Ay; and that is my grievance that you should be engaged upon such an affair, and

that I should have no share in it. It is to treat me like a lackey, and have the right to feel offended. Enfin! It seems I am not come too late."

Garnache cut in. He saw the drift of the fellow's intentions, and he was not minded to submit to fresh delays; already more than half an hour was sped since he had left the Sucking Calf. He put it plainly to them that more than enough delay had there been already and he begged the newcomer to stand aside and allow them to terminate the business on which they were met. But Monsieur Francois—as Sanguinetti had called him—would not hear of it. He proved, indeed, a very testy fellow, and he had, moreover, the support of the others, including even Monsieur Gaubert.

"Let me implore you not to spoil sport, sir," the latter begged Garnache. "I have a friend at the inn who would never forgive me if I permitted him to miss such a morning's diversion as this gentleman is willing to afford him. Suffer me to go for him."

"Look you, sir," answered Garnache sharply, "however you may view this meeting, it is not with me an affair of jest or sport. I am in a quarrel that has been forced upon me, and—"

"Surely not, sir," Courthon interrupted sweetly. "You forget that you rolled Monsieur Sanguinetti in the mud. That is hardly to have a quarrel forced upon you."

Garnache bit his lip to the blood in his vexation.

"However the quarrel may have originated," said Francois, with a great laugh, "I swear that it goes not forward until I am accommodated, too."

"You had better accede, monsieur," murmured Gaubert. "I shall not be gone five minutes, and it will save time in the end."

"Oh, very well," cried poor Garnache in his despair. "Anything to save time; anything! In God's name fetch your friend, and I hope you and he and every man here will get his fill of fighting for once."

Gaubert departed on his errand, and there were fresh murmurs in the mob until the reason of his going was understood. Five minutes sped; ten minutes, and yet he returned not. Grouped together were Sanguinetti and his two friends, in easy, whispered talk. At a little distance from them, Garnache paced up and down to keep himself warm. He had thrown his cloak over his shoulders again, and with sword tucked under arm and head thrust forward, he stamped backwards and forwards, the very picture of ill-humour. Fifteen minutes passed; twelve o'clock boomed from the Church of Saint Francois d'Assisi and still Monsieur Gaubert returned not. Garnache stood still a moment, in angry thought. This must not go on. There must be an end, and at once. The tastes and inclinations of brawlers were no concern of his. He had business of State—however unworthy—to dispatch. He turned, intending to demand of Monsieur Sanguinetti that they should engage at once and be done, when suddenly a fellow roughly dressed, with dirty face and a shock head of fair hair, pushed his way through the throng and advanced towards Monsieur Sanguinetti and his friends. Garnache checked in his movement to look at the fellow, for he recognized in him the ostler of the Auberge de France: He spoke at that moment, and Garnache overheard the words he uttered.

"Monsieur Sanguinetti," said he, addressing that gentleman, "my master sends to inquire if you shall want the carriage you ordered for to-day. It has been standing for an hour at the door of the Auberge de France, awaiting you, and if you don't want it—"

"Standing where?" asked Sanguinetti harshly.

"At the door of the Auberge de France."

"Peste, fool!" cried the foreigner, "why is it there, when I bade it be sent to the Sucking Calf?"

"I don't know, sir. I know no more than Monsieur l'Hote told me."

"Now, a plague on Monsieur l'Hote," swore Sanguinetti, and in that moment his eye

fell upon Garnache, standing there, attentive. At sight of the Parisian he seemed lost in confusion. He dropped his glance and appeared on the point of turning aside. Then to the ostler: “I shall want the carriage, and I shall come for it anon. Carry that message to your master.” And with that he turned and advanced to Garnache. His whilom arrogance was all fallen from him; he wore instead an air of extreme contrition.

“Monsieur, what shall I say to you?” he asked in a voice that was rather small. “It seems there has been an error. I am deeply grieved, believe me—”

“Say no more, I beg,” cried Garnache, immensely relieved that at last there should be a conclusion to an affair which had threatened to be interminable. “Let me but express my regrets for the treatment you received at my hands.”

“I accept your expressions, and I admire their generosity,” returned the other as courteous now as subservient, indeed, in his courtesy—as he had been erstwhile fierce and intractable. “As for the treatment I received, I confess that my mistake and my opinionativeness deserved it me. I deplore to deprive these gentlemen of the entertainment to which they were looking forward, but unless you should prove of an excessive amiability I am afraid they must suffer with me the consequences of my error.”

Garnache assured him very briefly, and none too politely that he did not intend to prove of any excessive amiability. He spoke whilst struggling into his doublet. He felt that he could cheerfully have caned the fellow for the inconvenience he had caused him, and yet he realized that he had other more pressing matters to attend to. He sheathed his sword, took up his cloak and hat, made those gentlemen the compliments that became the occasion, in terms a trifle more brief, perhaps, than were usual, and, still wondering why Monsieur de Gaubert had not yet returned, he stalked briskly away. Followed by the booings of the disappointed crowd, he set out for the Sucking Calf at a sharp pace, taking the shorter way behind the Church and

across the graveyard of Saint Francois.

CHAPTER VIII. THE CLOSING OF THE TRAP

Upon leaving the Champs aux Capuchins, hawk-faced Monsieur Gaubert had run every foot of the way to the Sucking Calf, and he had arrived there within some five minutes, out of breath and wearing every appearance of distress—of a distress rather greater than his haste to find his friend should warrant.

At the door of the inn he found the carriage still waiting; the post-boy, however, was in the porch, leaning in talk with one of the drawers. The troopers sat their horses in stolid patience, keeping guard, and awaiting, as they had been bidden, the return of Monsieur de Garnache. Rabecque, very watchful, lounged in the doorway, betraying in his air none of the anxiety and impatience with which he looked for his master.

At sight of Monsieur Gaubert, running so breathlessly, he started forward, wondering and uneasy. Across the street, from the Palais Seneschal, came at that same moment Monsieur de Tressan with rolling gait. He reached the door of the inn together with Monsieur Gaubert.

Full of evil forebodings, Rabecque hailed the runner.

“What has happened?” he cried. “Where is Monsieur de Garnache?”

Gaubert came to a staggering halt; he groaned and wrung his hands.

“Killed!” he panted, rocking himself in a passion of distress. “He has been butchered! Oh! it was horrible!”

Rabecque gripped him by the shoulder, and steadied him with a hand that hurt. “What do you say?” he gasped, his face white to the lips.

Tressan halted, too, and turned upon Gaubert, a look of incredulity in his fat countenance. “Who has been killed?” he asked. “Not Monsieur de Garnache?”

“Helas! yes,” groaned the other. “It was a snare, a guet-apens to which they led us.

Four of them set upon us in the Champs aux Capuchins. As long as he lived, I stood beside him. But seeing him fallen, I come for help."

"My God!" sobbed Rabecque, and loosed his grasp of Monsieur Gaubert's shoulder.

"Who did it?" inquired Tressan, and his voice rumbled fiercely.

"I know not who they were. The man who picked the quarrel with Monsieur de Garnache called himself Sanguinetti. There is a riot down there at present. There was a crowd to witness the combat, and they have fallen to fighting among themselves. Would to Heaven they had stirred in time to save that poor gentleman from being murdered."

"A riot, did you say?" cried Tressan, the official seeming to awaken in him.

"Aye," answered the other indifferently; "they are cutting one another's throats."

"But... But... Are you sure that he is dead, monsieur?" inquired Rabecque; and his tone was one that implored contradiction.

Gaubert looked and paused, seeming to give the matter a second's thought. "I saw him fall," said he. "It may be that he was no more than wounded."

"And you left him there?" roared the servant. "You left him there?"

Gaubert shrugged his shoulders. "What could I do against four? Besides, the crowd was interfering already, and it seemed best to me to come for help. These soldiers, now—"

"Aye," cut in Tressan, and he turned about and called the sergeant. "This becomes my affair." And he announced his quality to Monsieur Gaubert. "I am the Lord Seneschal of Dauphiny."

"I am fortunate in finding you," returned Gaubert, and bowed. "I could place the matter in no better hand."

But Tressan, without heeding him, was already ordering the sergeant to ride hard with his troopers for the Champs aux Capuchins. Rabecque, however, thrust himself

suddenly forward.

“Not so, Monsieur le Seneschal,” he interposed in fresh alarm, and mindful of his charge. “These men are here to guard Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye. Let them remain. I will go to Monsieur de Garnache.”

The Seneschal stared at him with contemptuously pouting underlip. “You will go?” said he. “And what can you do alone? Who are you?” he asked.

“I am Monsieur de Garnache’s servant.”

“A lackey? Ah!” And Tressan turned aside and resumed his orders as if Rabecque did not exist or had never spoken. “To the Champs aux Capuchins!” said he. “At the gallop, Pommier! I will send others after you.”

The sergeant rose in his stirrups and growled an order. The troopers wheeled about; another order, and they were off, their cantering hoofs thundering down the narrow street.

Rabecque clutched at the Lord Seneschal’s arm.

“Stop them, monsieur!” he almost screamed in his excitement. “Stop them! There is some snare, some trick in this.”

“Stop them?” quoth the Seneschal. “Are you mad?” He shook off Rabecque’s detaining hand, and left him, to cross the street again with ponderous and sluggish haste, no doubt to carry out his purpose of sending more troopers to the scene of the disturbance.

Rabecque swore angrily and bitterly, and his vexation had two entirely separate sources. On the one hand his anxiety and affection for his master urged him to run at once to his assistance, whilst Tressan’s removal of the troopers rendered it impossible for him to leave Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye unguarded—though what he should do with her if Garnache came not back at all, he did not at this stage pause to consider. On the other hand, an instinctive and growing suspicion of this

Monsieur Gaubert—who was now entering the inn—inspired him with the opinion that the fat Seneschal had been duped by a wild tale to send the troopers from the spot where they might presently become very necessary.

Full of fears, anxiety, and mistrust, it was a very dispirited Rabecque that now slowly followed Monsieur Gaubert into the inn. But as he set his foot across the threshold of the common-room, a sight met his eyes that brought him to a momentary standstill, and turned to certainty all his rising suspicions. He found it tenanted by a half-dozen fellows of very rude aspect, all armed and bearing an odd resemblance in air and accoutrements to the braves he had seen at Condillac the day before. As to how they came there, he could only surmise that they had entered through the stable-yard, as otherwise he must have observed their approach. They were grouped now at the other end of the long, low chamber, by the door leading to the interior of the inn. A few paces distant the landlord watched them with uneasy eyes.

But what dismayed Garnache's servant most of all was to see the man who called himself Gaubert standing in talk with a slender, handsome youth, magnificently arrayed, in whom he recognized Marius de Condillac.

Rabecque checked in his advance, and caught in that moment from Marius the words: "Let her be told that it is Monsieur de Garnache wishes her to descend."

At that Rabecque stepped towards them, very purposeful of mien. Gaubert turned at his approach, and smiled. Marius looked up quickly; then made a sign to the men. Instantly two of them went out by the door they guarded, and ere it swung back again Rabecque saw that they were making for the stairs. The remaining four ranged themselves shoulder to shoulder across the doorway, plainly with intent to bar the way. Gaubert, followed immediately by Marius, stepped aside and approached the landlord with arms akimbo and a truculent smile on his pale hawk face. What he and Marius said, Rabecque could not make out, but he distinctly heard the landlord's

answer delivered with a respectful bow to Marius:

“Bien, Monsieur de Condillac. I would not interfere in your concerns—not for the world. I will be blind and deaf.”

Marius acknowledged the servile protestation by a sneer, and Rabecque, stirring at last, went forward boldly towards the doorway and its ugly, human barrier.

“By your leave, sirs,” said he—and he made to thrust one of them aside.

“You cannot pass this way, sir,” he was answered, respectfully but firmly.

Rabecque stood still, clenching and unclenching his hands and quivering with anger. It was in that moment that he most fervently cursed Tressan and his stupid meddling. Had the troopers still been there, they could have made short work of these tatter-demalions. As it was, and with Monsieur de Garnache dead, or at least absent, everything seemed at an end. He might have contended that, his master being slain, it was no great matter what he did, for in the end the Condillacs must surely have their way with Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye. But he never paused to think of that just then. His sense of trust was strong; his duty to his master plain. He stepped back, and drew his sword.

“Let me pass!” he roared. But at the same instant there came the soft slither of another weapon drawn, and Rabecque was forced to turn to meet the onslaught of Monsieur Gaubert.

“You dirty traitor,” cried the angry lackey, and that was all they left him breath to say. Strong arms gripped him from behind. The sword was wrenched from his hand. He was flung down heavily, and pinned prone in a corner by one of those bullies who knelt on his spine. And then the door opened again, and poor Rabecque groaned in impotent anguish to behold Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye pause white-faced and wide-eyed on, the threshold at sight of Monsieur de Condillac bowing low before her.

She stood there a moment between the two ruffians who had been sent to fetch her,

and her eyes travelling round that room discovered Rabecque in his undignified and half; strangled condition.

“Where... Where is Monsieur de Garnache?” she faltered.

“He is where all those who cross the will of Condillac must sooner or later find themselves,” said Marius airily. “He is... disposed of.”

“Do you mean that he is dead?” she cried.

“I think it very probable by now,” he smiled. “So you see, mademoiselle, since the guardian the Queen appointed you has... deserted you, you would do well to return to my mother’s roof. Let me assure you that we shall very gladly welcome your return. We blame none but Garnache for your departure, and he has paid for the brutality of his abduction of you.”

She turned in despair from that mocking gentleman, and attempted to make appeal to the landlord, as though he could help her who could not help himself.

“Monsieur l’Hote—” she began, but Marius cut in sharply.

“Take her out that way,” he said, and pointed back down the passage by the stairs. “To the coach. Make haste.”

She sought to resist them now; but they dragged her back, and there was a rush of the others following through the doorway, the rear being brought up by Gaubert.

“Follow presently,” was his parting command to the man who still knelt upon Rabecque, and with that he vanished too.

Their steps died away in the passage; a door banged in the distance. There followed a silence, disturbed only by the sound of Rabecque’s laboured breathing; then came a stir outside the door of the inn; some one shouted an order. There was a movement of hoofs, a creak and crunch of wheels, and presently the rumble of a heavy carriage being driven rapidly away. But too well did Rabecque surmise what had taken place.

The ruffian released him at last, and, leaping to his feet, was gone before Rabecque

could rise. Once up, however, the lackey darted to the door. In the distance he saw his late assailant running hard; the coach had disappeared. He turned, and his smouldering eye fell upon the landlord.

“O pig!” he apostrophized him, snarling at him to vent some of his pent-up rage. “O cowardly pig.”

“What would you?” expostulated the frightened taverner. “They had cut my throat if I resisted them.”

Rabecque poured abuse upon him, until for very lack of words he was forced to cease, then, with a final bark of contempt, he went to recover his sword, which had been flung into a corner of the room. He was stooping in the act, when a quick step rang behind him on the threshold, an angry voice harsh and metallic pronounced his name:

“Rebecque!”

The sword clattered from Rabecque’s hand suddenly gone nerveless—nerveless with sheer joy, all else forgotten in the perception that there, safe and sound, stood his beloved master.

“Monsieur!” he cried, and the tears welled up to the rough servant’s eyes. “Monsieur!” he cried again, and then with the tears streaming down his cheeks, sallow and wrinkled as parchment, “Oh, thank God!” he blubbered. “Thank God!”

“For what?” asked Garnache, coming forward, a scowl like a thunder-cloud upon his brow. “Where is the coach, where the troopers? Where is mademoiselle? Answer me!”

He caught Rabecque’s wrist in a grip that threatened to snap it. His face was livid, his eyes aflame.

“They—they—” stammered Rabecque. He had not the courage to tell the thing that had happened. He feared Garnache would strike him dead.

And then out of his terror he gathered an odd daring. He spoke to Garnache as never he had dreamt to speak to him, and it may well be that by his tone and by what he said he saved his life just then.

“You fool,” he cried to him. “I told you to be on your guard. I warned you to go warily. But you would not heed me. You know better than Rabecque. You would have your way. You must go a-brawling. And they duped you, they fooled you to the very top of their bent, monsieur.”

Garnache dropped the servant’s hand and stood back a pace. That counter-blast of passion and that plain speaking from a quarter so unexpected served, in part at least, to sober him. He understood the thing that had happened, the thing that already he suspected must have happened; but he understood too that he alone was to blame for it—he and his cursed temper.

“Who—who fooled me?” he stammered.

“Gaubert—the fellow that calls himself Gaubert. He and his friends. They fooled you away. Then Gaubert returned with a tale that you had been killed and that there was a disturbance in the Champs aux Capuchins. Monsieur de Tressan was here, as ill-luck would have it, and Gaubert implored him to send soldiers thither to quell the riot. He dispatched the escort. I sought in vain to stay them. He would not listen to me. The troopers went, and then Monsieur Gaubert entered the inn, to join Monsieur de Condillac and six of his braves who were waiting there. They overpowered me, and carried mademoiselle off in the coach. I did what I could, but—”

“How long have they been gone?” Garnache interrupted him to inquire.

“But few minutes before you came.”

“It would be, then, the coach that passed me near the Porte de Savoie. We must go after them, Rabecque. I made a short cut across the graveyard of Saint Francis, or I must have met the escort. Oh, perdition!” he cried, smiting his clenched right hand into his open left. “To have so much good work undone by a moment’s

unguardedness." Then abruptly he turned on his heels. "I am going to Monsieur de Tressan," said he over his shoulder, and went out.

As he reached the threshold of the porch, the escort rode up the street, returned at last. At sight of him the sergeant broke into a cry of surprise.

"At least you are safe, monsieur," he said. "We had heard that you were dead, and I feared it must be so, for all that the rest of the story that was told us was clearly part of a very foolish jest."

"Jest? It was no jest, Vertudieu!" said Garnache grimly. "You had best return to the Palais Seneschal. I have no further need of an escort," he added bitterly. "I shall require a larger force."

And he stepped out into the rain, which had begun again a few minutes earlier, and was now falling in a steady downpour.

CHAPTER IX. THE SENESCHAL'S ADVICE

Straight across to the Palais Seneschal went Garnache. And sorely though his temper might already have been tried that day, tempestuously though it had been vented, there were fresh trials in store for him, fresh storms for Tressan.

"May I ask, Monsieur le Seneschal," he demanded arrogantly, "to what end it was that you permitted yourself to order from its post the escort you had placed under my command?"

"To what end?" returned the Seneschal, between sorrow and indignation. "Why, to the end that it might succour you if still in time. I had heard that if not dead already, you were in danger of your life."

The answer was one that disarmed Garnache, in spite of his mistrust of Tressan, and followed as it now was by the Seneschal's profuse expressions of joy at seeing Garnache safe and well, it left him clearly unable to pursue the subject of his

grievance in this particular connection. Instead, he passed on to entertain Tressan with the recital of the thing that had been done; and in reciting it his anger revived again, nor did the outward signs of sympathetic perturbation which the Seneschal thought it judicious to display do aught to mollify his feelings.

“And now, monsieur,” he concluded, “there remains but one course to be pursued—to return in force, and compel them at the sword-point to surrender me mademoiselle. That accomplished, I shall arrest the Dowager and her son and every jackanapes within that castle. Her men can lie in Grenoble gaol to be dealt with by yourself for supporting her in an attempt to resist the Queen’s authority. Madame and her son shall go with me to Paris to answer there for their offence.”

The Seneschal looked grave. He thoughtfully combed his beard with his forefinger, and his little eyes peered a shade fearfully at Garnache through his horn-rimmed spectacles—Garnache had found him at his never-failing pretence of work.

“Why, yes,” he agreed, speaking slowly, “that way lies your duty.”

“I rejoice, monsieur, to hear you say so. For I shall need your aid.”

“My aid?” The Seneschal’s face assumed a startled look.

“I shall require of you the necessary force to reduce that garrison.”

The Seneschal blew out his cheeks almost to bursting point, then wagged his head and smiled wistfully.

“And where,” he asked, “am I to find such a force?”

“You have upwards of ten score men in quarters at Grenoble.”

“If I had those men—which I have not—what, think you, could they do against a fortress such as Condillac? Monsieur deludes himself. If they resist, you’ll need ten times that number to bring them to their senses. They are well victualled; they have an excellent water-supply. My friend, they would just draw up the bridge, and laugh at you and your soldiers from the ramparts.”

Garnache looked at him from under lowering brows. But for all his mistrust of the man—a mistrust most excellently founded—he was forced to confess that there was wisdom in what Tressan said.

“I’ll sit down and besiege them if need be,” he announced.

Again the Seneschal wagged his head. “You would have to be prepared to spend your winter there in that case, and it can be cold in the valley of Isere. Their garrison is small—some twenty men at most; but it is sufficient for their defence, and not too many mouths to feed. No, no, monsieur, if you would win your way by force you must count upon more than ten score men.”

And now a flash of inspiration helped Tressan. It was his aim, as we know, to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. Break with Madame de Condillac his foolish hopeful heart would not permit him. Break with this man, who personified authority and the King, he dared not. He had sought—and it had given him much to do—to steer a middle course, serving the Dowager and appearing not to withstand the Parisian. Now it almost seemed to him as if he were come to an impasse beyond which he could no longer pursue that course, but must halt and declare his side. But the notion that now occurred to him helped him to win through this difficulty. For Madame de Condillac’s schemes he cared not a jot; whether they came safe to harbour or suffered shipwreck on the way was all one to him; whether Valerie de La Vauvraye married Marius de Condillac or the meanest cobbler in Grenoble was, similarly, a matter that never disturbed his mind. He would not even be concerned if he, himself, were to help the Dowager’s schemes to frustration, so long as she were to remain in ignorance of his defection, so long as outwardly he were to appear faithful to her interests.

“Monsieur,” said he gravely, “the only course that promises you success is to return to Paris, and, raising sufficient men, with guns and other modern siege appliances such as we possess not here, come back and batter down the walls of Condillac.”

There the Seneschal spoke good sense. Garnache realized it, so much so that he almost began to doubt whether he had not done the man an injustice in believing him allied to the other party. But, however fully he might perceive the wisdom of the advice, such a step was one that must wound his pride, must be an acknowledgment that his own resources, upon which the Queen had relied when she sent him single-handed to deal with this situation, had proved insufficient.

He took a turn in the apartment without answering, tugging at his mustachios and pondering the situation what time the Seneschal furtively watched him in the candle-light. At last he came abruptly to a standstill by the Seneschal's writing-table, immediately opposite Tressan. His hand fell to his side, his eyes took on a look of determination.

"As a last resource your good advice may guide me, Monsieur le Seneschal," said he. "But first I'll see what can be done with such men as you have here."

"But I have no men," answered Tressan, dismayed to see the failure of his effort.

Garnache stared at him in an unbelief that was fast growing to suspicion. "No men?" he echoed dully. "No men?"

"I might muster a score—no more than that."

"But, monsieur, it is within my knowledge that you have at least two hundred. I saw at least some fifty drawn up in the courtyard below here yesterday morning."

"I had them, monsieur," the Seneschal made haste to cry, his hands upheld, his body leaning forward over his table. "I had them. But, unfortunately, certain disturbances in the neighbourhood of Montelimar have forced me to part with them. They were on the point of setting out when you saw them."

Garnache looked at him a moment without speaking. Then, sharply:

"They must be recalled, monsieur," said he.

And now the Seneschal took refuge in a fine pretence of indignation.

“Recalled?” he cried, and besides indignation there was some horror in his voice. “Recalled? And for what? That they may assist you in obtaining charge of a wretched girl who is so headstrong as to wish to marry other than her guardians have determined. A pretty affair that, as God’s my life! And for the adjustment of such a family dispute as this, a whole province is to go to ruin, a conflagration of rebellion is to spread unquenched? On my soul, sir, I begin to think that this mission of yours has served to turn your head. You begin to see it out of all proportion to its size.”

“Monsieur, it may have turned my head, or it may not; but I shall not be amazed if in the end it be the means of losing you yours. Tell me now: What is the disturbance you speak of in Montelimar?” That was a question all Tressan’s ingenuity could not answer.

“What affair is it of yours?” he demanded. “Are you Seneschal of Dauphiny, or am I? If I tell you that there is a disturbance, let that suffice. In quelling it I do but attend to my own business. Do you attend to yours—which seems to be that of meddling in women’s matters.”

This was too much. There was such odious truth in it that the iron sank deep into Garnache’s soul. The very reflection that such a business should indeed be his, was of itself enough to put him in a rage, without having it cast in his teeth as Tressan had none too delicately done.

He stormed and raged; he waved his arms and thumped the table, and talked of cutting men to ribbons—among which men no doubt he counted my Lord the Seneschal of Dauphiny. But from the storm of fierce invective, of threats and promises with which he filled the air, the Seneschal gathered with satisfaction the one clear statement that he would take his advice.

“I’ll do as you say,” Garnache had ended. “I’ll get me back to Paris as fast as horse can carry me. When I return woe betide Condillac! And I shall send my emissaries into the district of Montelimar to inquire into these disturbances you tell of. Woe

betide you if they find the country quiet. You shall pay a heavy price for having dispatched your soldiers thither to the end that they might not be here to further the Queen's business."

With that he caught up his rain-sodden hat, flung it on his head, and stalked out of the room, and, so, out of the Palace.

He left Grenoble next morning, and it was a very tame and crestfallen Garnache who quitted the Auberge du Veau qui Tete and rode out of the town to take the road to Paris. How they would laugh at him at the Luxembourg! Not even an affair of this kind was he fit to carry through; not even as a meddler in women's matters as Tressan had called him—could he achieve success. Rabecque, reflecting his master's mood—as becomes a good lackey—rode silent and gloomy a pace or two in the rear.

By noon they had reached Voiron, and here, at a quiet hostelry, they descended to pause awhile for rest and refreshment. It was a chill, blustering day, and although the rain held off, the heavens were black with the promise of more to come. There was a fire burning in the general-room of the hostelry, and Garnache went to warm him at its cheerful blaze. Moodily he stood there, one hand on the high mantel shelf, one foot upon an andiron, his eyes upon the flames.

He was disconsolately considering his position; considering how utterly, how irrevocably he had failed; pondering the gibes he would have to stomach on his return to Paris, the ridicule it would incumb him to live down. It had been a fine thing to breathe fire and blood and vengeance to Tressan yesterday, to tell him of the great deeds he would perform on his return. It was odds he never would return. They would send another in his place, if indeed they sent at all. For, after all, before he could reach Paris and the force required be in Dauphiny, a fortnight must elapse, let them travel never so quickly. By that time they must be singularly sluggish at Condillac if they did not so contrive that no aid that came should come in time for

mademoiselle, now that they were warned that the Queen was stirring in the matter.

Oh! he had blundered it all most cursedly. Had he but kept his temper yesterday at Grenoble; had he but had the wit to thwart their plans, by preserving an unruffled front to insult, he might have won through and carried mademoiselle out of their hands. As it was—! he let his arms fall to his sides in his miserable despair.

“Your wine, monsieur,” said Rabecque at his elbow. He turned, and took the cup of mulled drink from his servant. The beverage warmed him in body; but it would need a butt of it to thaw the misery from his soul.

“Rabecque,” he said with a pathetic grimness, “I think I am the most cursed blunderer that ever was entrusted with an errand.”

The thing so obsessed his mind that he must speak of it, if it be only to his lackey. Rabecque’s sharp face assumed a chastened look. He sighed most dutifully. He sought for words of consolation. At last:

“At least, monsieur has made them fear him up there at Condillac,” said he.

“Fear me?” laughed Garnache. “Pish! Deride me, you would say.”

“Fear you, I repeat, monsieur. Else why are they at such pains to strengthen the garrison?”

“Eh?” he questioned. But his tone was not greatly interested. “Are they doing that? Are they strengthening it? How know you?”

“I had it from the ostler at the Veau qui Tete that a certain Captain Fortunio—an Italian soldier of fortune who commands the men at Condillac—was at the Auberge de France last night, offering wine to whomsoever would drink with him, and paying for it out of Madame la Marquise’s purse. To such as accepted his hospitality he talked of the glory of a military career, particularly a free-lance’s; and to those who showed interest in what he said he offered a pike in his company.”

“Enrolled he many, did you learn?”

“Not one, monsieur, the ostler told me; and it seems he spent the evening watching him weave his spider’s web. But the flies were over-wary. They knew whence he came; they knew the business for which he desired to enrol them—for a rumour had gone round that Condillac was in rebellion against the Queen’s commands—and there were none so desperate at the Auberge de France as to risk their necks by enlisting, no matter what the wage he offered.”

Garnache shrugged his shoulders. “No matter,” said he. “Get me another cup of wine.” But as Rabecque turned away to obey him there came a sudden gleam into the eye of Monsieur de Garnache which lightened the depression of his countenance.

CHAPTER X. THE RECRUIT

In the great hall of the Chateau de Condillac sat the Dowager, her son, and the Lord Seneschal, in conference.

It was early in the afternoon of the last Thursday in October, exactly a week since Monsieur de Garnache all but broken-hearted at the failure of his mission—had departed from Grenoble. They had dined, and the table was still strewn with vessels and the fragments of their meal, for the cloth had not yet been raised. But the three of them had left the board—the Seneschal with all that reluctance with which he was wont to part company with the table, no matter how perturbed in spirit he might be—and they had come to group themselves about the great open fireplace.

A shaft of pale October sunshine entering through the gules of an escutcheon on the mullioned windows struck a scarlet light into silver and glass upon the forsaken board.

Madame was speaking. She was repeating words that she had uttered at least twenty times a day during the past week.

“It was a madness to let that fellow go. Had we but put him and his servant out of the way, we should be able now to sleep tranquil in our beds. I know their ways at

Court. They might have marvelled a little at first that he should tarry so long upon his errand, that he should send them no word of its progress; but presently, seeing him no more, he would little by little have been forgotten, and with him the affair in which the Queen has been so cursedly ready to meddle.

“As it is, the fellow will go back hot with the outrage put upon him; there will be some fine talk of it in Paris; it will be spoken of as treason, as defiance of the King’s Majesty, as rebellion. The Parliament may be moved to make outlaws of us, and the end of it all—who shall foresee?”

“It is a long distance from Condillac to Paris, madame,” said her son, with a shrug.

“And you will find them none so ready to send soldiers all this way, Marquise,” the Seneschal comforted her.

“Bah! You make too sure of your security. You make too sure of what they will do, what leave undone. Time will show, my friends; and, mor-dieu! I am much at fault if you come not both to echo my regret that we did not dispose of Monsieur de Garnache and his lackey when we had them in our power.”

Her eye fell with sinister promise upon Tressan, who shivered slightly and spread his hands to the blaze, as though his shiver had been of cold. But Marius did not so readily grow afraid.

“Madame,” he said, “at the worst we can shut our gates and fling defiance at them. We are well-manned, and Fortunio is seeking fresh recruits.”

“Seeking them, yes,” she sneered. “For a week has the fellow been spending money like water, addling the brains of half Grenoble with the best wine at the Auberge de France, yet not a single recruit has come in, so far.”

Marius laughed. “Your pessimism leads you into rash conclusions,” he cried. “You are wrong. One recruit has come in.”

“One!” she echoed. “A thousand devils! A brave number that! A fine return for the

river of wine with which we have washed the stomachs of Grenoble."

"Still, it is a beginning," ventured the Seneschal.

"Aye, and, no doubt, an ending," she flashed back at him. "And what manner of fool may this one be, whose fortunes were so desperate that he could throw them in with ours?"

"He is an Italian—a Piedmontese who has tramped across Savoy and was on his way to Paris to make his fortune, when Fortunio caught him and made it clear to him that his fortune was made for him at Condillac. He is a lusty, stalwart fellow, speaking no word of French, who was drawn to Fortunio by discovering in him a fellow-countryman."

Mockery flashed from the Dowager's beautiful eyes.

"In that you have the reason of his enrolling himself. He knew no word of French, poor devil, so could not learn how rash his venture was. Could we find more such men as this one it might be well. But where shall we find them? Pish! my dear Marius, matters are little mended, nor ever will be, for the mistake we made in allowing Garnache to go his ways."

"Madame;" again ventured Tressan, "I think that you want for hopefulness."

"At least, I do not want for courage, Monsieur le Comte," she answered him; "and I promise you that while I live—to handle a sword if need be—no Paris men shall set foot in Condillac."

"Aye," grumbled Marius, "you can contemplate that, and it is all you do contemplate. You will not see, madame that our position is far from desperate; that, after all, there may be no need to resist the King. It is three months since we had news of Florimond. Much may happen in three months when a man is warring. It may well be that he is dead."

"I wish I knew he was—and damned," she snapped, with a tightening of her scarlet

lips.

“Yes,” agreed Marius, with a sigh, “that were an end to all our troubles.”

“I’m none so sure. There is still mademoiselle, with her new-formed friends in Paris—may a pestilence blight them all! There are still the lands of La Vauvraye to lose. The only true end to our troubles as they stand at present lies in your marrying this headstrong baggage.”

“That the step should be rendered impossible, you can but blame yourself,” Marius reminded her.

“How so?” she cried, turning sharply upon him.

“Had you kept friends with the Church, had you paid tithes and saved us from this cursed Interdict, we should have no difficulty in getting hither a priest, and settling the matter out of hand, be Valerie willing or not.”

She looked at him, scorn kindling in her glance. Then she swung round to appeal to Tressan.

“You hear him, Count,” said she. “There is a lover for you! He would wed his mistress whether she love him or not—and he has sworn to me that he loves the girl.”

“How else should the thing be done since she opposes it?” asked Marius, sulkily.

“How else? Do you ask me how else? God! Were I a man, and had I your shape and face, there is no woman in the world should withstand me if I set my heart on her. It is address you lack. You are clumsy as a lout where a woman is concerned. Were I in your place, I had taken her by storm three months ago, when first she came to us. I had carried her out of Condillac, out of France, over the border into Savoy, where there are no Interdicts to plague you, and there I would have married her.”

Marius frowned darkly, but before he could speak, Tressan was insinuating a compliment to the Marquise.

“True, Marius,” he said, with pursed lips. “Nature has been very good to you in that she has made you the very counterpart of your lady mother. You are as comely a gentleman as is to be found in France—or out of it.”

“Pish!” snapped Marius, too angered by the reflection cast upon his address, to be flattered by their praises of his beauty. “It is an easy thing to talk; an easy thing to set up arguments when we consider but the half of a question. You forget, madame, that Valerie is betrothed to Florimond and that she clings faithfully to her betrothal.”

“Vertudieu!” swore the Marquise, “and what is this betrothal, what this faithfulness? She has not seen her betrothed for three years. She was a child at the time of their fiancailles. Think you her faithfulness to him is the constancy of a woman to her lover? Go your ways, you foolish boy. It is but the constancy to a word, to the wishes of her father. Think you constancy that has no other base than that would stand between her and any man who—as you might do, had you the address—could make her love him?”

“I do say so,” answered Marius firmly.

She smiled the pitying smile of one equipped with superior knowledge when confronted with an obstinate, uninformed mind.

“There is a droll arrogance about you, Marius,” she told him, quietly. “You, a fledgling, would teach me, a woman, the ways of a woman’s heart! It is a thing you may live to regret.”

“As how?” he asked.

“Once already has mademoiselle contrived to corrupt one of our men, and send him to Paris with a letter. Out of that has sprung our present trouble. Another time she may do better. When she shall have bribed another to assist her to escape; when she, herself, shall have made off to the shelter of the Queen-mother, perhaps you will regret that my counsel should have fallen upon barren ground.”

“It is to prevent any such attempt that we have placed her under guard,” said he.

“You are forgetting that.”

“Forgetting it? Not I. But what assurance have you that she will not bribe her guard?”

Marius laughed, rose, and pushed back his chair.

“Madame,” said he, “you are back at your contemplation of the worst side of this affair; you are persisting in considering only how we may be thwarted. But set your mind at rest. Gilles is her sentinel. Every night he sleeps in her anteroom. He is Fortunio’s most trusted man. She will not corrupt him.”

The Dowager smiled pensively, her eyes upon the fire. Suddenly she raised them to his face. “Berthaud was none the less trusted. Yet, with no more than a promise of reward at some future time should she succeed in escaping from us, did she bribe him to carry her letter to the Queen. What happened to Berthaud that may not happen to Gilles?”

“You might change her sentry nightly,” put in the Seneschal.

“Yes, if we knew whom we could trust; who would be above corruption. As it is”—she shrugged her shoulders “that would be but to afford her opportunities to bribe them one by one until they were all ready to act in concert.”

“Why need she any sentinel at all?” asked Tressan, with some show of sense.

“To ward off possible traitors,” she told him, and Marius smiled and wagged his head.

“Madame is never done foreseeing the worst, monsieur.”

“Which shows my wisdom. The men in our garrison are mercenaries, all attached to us only because we pay them. They all know who she is and what her wealth.”

“Pity you have not a man who is deaf and dumb,” said Tressan, half in jest. But Marius looked up suddenly, his eyes serious.

“We have as good,” said he. “There is the Italian knave Fortunio enrolled yesterday,

as I have told you. He knows neither her wealth nor her identity; nor if he did could he enter into traffic with her, for he knows no French, and she no Italian."

The Dowager clapped her hands. "The very man!" she cried.

But Marius, either from sheer perverseness, or because he did not share her enthusiasm, made answer: "I have faith in Gilles."

"Yes," she mocked him, "and you had faith in Berthaud. Oh, if you have faith in Gilles, let him remain; let no more be said."

The obstinate boy took her advice, and shifted the subject, speaking to Tressan of some trivial business connected with the Seneschalship.

But madame, woman-like, returned to the matter whose abandoning she had herself suggested. Marius, for all his affected disdain of it, viewed it with a certain respect. And so in the end they sent for the recruit.

Fortunio—who was no other than the man Garnache had known as "Sanguinetti"—brought him, still clad in the clothes in which he had come. He was a tall, limber fellow, with a very swarthy skin and black, oily-looking hair that fell in short ringlets about his ears and neck, and a black, drooping mustache which gave him a rather hang-dog look. There was a thick stubble of beard of several days' growth about his chin and face; his eyes were furtive in their glances, but of a deep blue that contrasted oddly with his blackness when he momentarily raised them.

He wore a tattered jerkin, and his legs, in default of stockings, were swathed in soiled bandages and cross-gartered from ankle to knee. He stood in a pair of wooden shoes, from one of which peeped forth some wisps of straw, introduced, no doubt, to make the footgear fit. He slouched and shuffled in his walk, and he was unspeakably dirty. Nevertheless, he was girt with a sword in a ragged scabbard hanging from a frayed and shabby belt of leather.

Madame scanned him with interest. The fastidious Marius eyed him with disgust. The Seneschal peered at him curiously through shortsighted eyes.

“I do not think I have ever seen a dirtier ruffian,” said he.

“I like his nose,” said madame quietly. “It is the nose of an intrepid man.”

“It reminds me of Garnache’s,” laughed the Seneschal.

“You flatter the Parisian,” commented Marius.

The mercenary, meanwhile, stood blandly smiling at the party, showing at least a fine array of teeth, and wearing the patient, attentive air of one who realizes himself to be under discussion, yet does not understand what is being said.

“A countryman of yours, Fortunio?” sneered Marius.

The captain, whose open, ingenuous countenance dissembled as villainous a heart as ever beat in the breast of any man, disowned the compatriotism with a smile.

“Hardly, monsieur,” said he. “‘Battista’ is a Piedmontese.” Fortunio himself was a Venetian.

“Is he to be relied upon, think you?” asked madame. Fortunio shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands. It was not his habit to trust any man inordinately.

“He is an old soldier,” said he. “He has trailed a pike in the Neapolitan wars. I have cross-questioned him, and found his answers bore out the truth of what he said.”

“And what brings him to France?” asked Tressan. The captain smiled again, and there came again that expressive shrug of his. “A little over-ready with the steel,” said he.

They told Fortunio that they proposed to place him sentry over mademoiselle instead of Gilles, as the Italian’s absolute lack of French would ensure against corruption. The captain readily agreed with them. It would be a wise step. The Italian fingered his tattered hat, his eyes on the ground.

Suddenly madame spoke to him. She asked him for some account of himself and whence he came, using the Italian tongue, of which she had a passing knowledge. He followed her questions very attentively, at times with apparent difficulty, his

eyes on her face, his head craned a little forward.

Now and then Fortunio had to intervene, to make plainer to this ignorant Piedmontese mind the Marquise's questions. His answers came in a deep, hoarse voice, slurred by the accent of Piedmont, and madame—her knowledge of Italian being imperfect—had frequently to have recourse to Fortunio to discover the meaning of what he said.

At last she dismissed the pair of them, bidding the captain see that he was washed and more fittingly clothed.

An hour later, after the Seneschal had taken his departure to ride home to Grenoble, it was madame herself, accompanied by Marius and Fortunio, who conducted Battista—such was the name the Italian had given—to the apartments above, where mademoiselle was now confined practically a prisoner.

CHAPTER XI. VALERIE'S GAOLER

My child, said the Dowager, and her eyes dwelt on Valerie with a look of studied gentleness, "why will you not be reasonable?"

The constant reflection that Garnache was at large, making his way back to Paris to stir up vengeance for the outrage put upon him, was not without a certain chastening effect upon the Dowager. She had a way of saying that she had as good a stomach for a fight as any man in France, and a fight there should be if it came to it and Garnache should return to assail Condillac. Yet a certain pondering of the consequences, a certain counting of the cost—ordinarily unusual to her nature led her to have recourse to persuasion and to a gentleness no less unusual.

Valerie's eyes were raised to hers with a look that held more scorn than wonder. They were standing in the antechamber of Valerie's room. Yonder at his post lounged the recruit "Battista," looking a trifle cleaner than when first he had been presented to the Marquise, but still not clean enough for a lady's antechamber. He

was leaning stolidly against the sill of the window, his eyes on the distant waters of the Isere, which shone a dull copper colour in the afterglow of the October sunset. His face was vacant, his eyes pensive, as he stood there undisturbed by the flow of a language he did not understand.

Fortunio and Marius had departed, and the Marquise—played upon by her unusual tremors—had remained behind for a last word with the obstinate girl.

"In what, madame," asked Valerie, "does my conduct fall short of reasonableness?"

The Dowager made a movement of impatience. If at every step she were to be confronted by these questions, which had in them a savour of challenge, she was wasting time in remaining.

"You are unreasonable, in this foolish clinging to a promise given for you."

"Given by me, madame," the girl amended, knowing well to what promise the Dowager referred.

"Given by you, then; but given at an age when you could not understand the nature of it. They had no right to bind you so."

"If it is for any to question that right, it is for me," Valerie made answer, her eyes ever meeting the Dowager's unflinchingly. "And I am content to leave that right unquestioned. I am content to fill the promise given. In honour I could not do less."

"Ah! In honour!" The Dowager sighed. Then she came a step nearer, and her face grew sweetly wistful. "But your heart, child; what of your heart?"

"My heart concerns myself. I am the betrothed of Florimond—that is all that concerns the world and you. I respect and admire him more than any living man, and I shall be proud to become his wife when he returns, as his wife I shall become in spite of all that you and your son may do."

The Dowager laughed softly, as if to herself.

"And if I tell you that Florimond is dead?"

“When you give me proof of that, I shall believe it,” the girl replied. The Marquise looked at her, her face manifesting no offence at the almost insulting words.

“And if I were to lay that proof before you?” she inquired, sadly almost.

Valerie’s eyes opened a trifle wider, as if in apprehension. But her answer was prompt and her voice steady. “It still could have no effect upon my attitude towards your son.”

“This is foolishness, Valerie—”

“In you it is, madame,” the girl broke in; “a foolishness to think you can constrain a girl, compel her affections, command her love, by such means as you have employed towards me. You think that it predisposes me to be wooed, that it opens my heart to your son, to see myself gaoled that he may pay me his court.”

“Gaoled, child? Who gaols you?” the Dowager cried, as if the most surprising utterance had fallen from Valerie’s lips.

Mademoiselle smiled in sorrow and some scorn.

“Am I not gaoled, then?” she asked. “What call you this? What does that fellow there? He is to lie outside my door at nights to see that none holds communication with me. He is to go with me each morning to the garden, when, by your gracious charity I take the air. Sleeping and waking the man is ever within hearing of any word that I may utter—”

“But he has no French!” the Dowager protested.

“To ensure, no doubt, against any attempt of mine to win him to my side, to induce him to aid me escape from this prison. Oh, madame, I tell you you do but waste time, and you punish me and harass yourself to little purpose. Had Marius been such a man as I might have felt it in my nature to love—which Heaven forbid!—these means by which you have sought to bring that thing about could but have resulted in making me hate him as I do.”

The Dowager's fears were banished from her mind at that, and with them went all thought of conciliating Valerie. Anger gleamed in her eyes; the set of her lips grew suddenly sneering and cruel, so that the beauty of her face but served to render it hateful the more.

"So that you hate him, ma mie?" a ripple of mockery on the current of her voice, "and he a man such as any girl in France might be proud to wed. Well, well, you are not to be constrained, you say." And the Marquise's laugh was menacing and unpleasant. "Be not so sure, mademoiselle. Be not so sure of that. It may well betide that you shall come to beg upon your knees for this alliance with a man whom you tell me that you hate. Be not so sure you cannot be constrained."

Their eyes met; both women were white to the lips, but it was curbed passion in the one, and deadly fear in the other; for what the Dowager's words left unsaid her eyes most eloquently conveyed. The girl shrank back, her hands clenched, her lip caught in her teeth.

"There is a God in heaven, madame," she reminded the Marquise.

"Aye—in heaven," laughed the Marquise, turning to depart. She paused by the door, which the Italian had sprung forward to open for her.

"Marius shall take the air with you in the morning if it is fine. Ponder meanwhile what I have said."

"Does this man remain here, madame?" inquired the girl, vainly seeking to render her voice steady.

"In the outer anteroom is his place: but as the key of this room is on his side of the door, he may enter here when he so pleases, or when he thinks that he has reason to. If the sight of him displeases you, you may lock yourself from it in your own chamber yonder."

The same she said in Italian to the man, who bowed impassively, and followed the Dowager into the outer room, closing the door upon mademoiselle. It was a chamber

almost bare of furniture, save for a table and chair which had been placed there, so that the gaoler might take his meals.

The man followed the Marquise across the bare floor, their steps resounding as they went, and he held the outer door for her.

Without another word she left him, and where he stood he could hear her steps as she tripped down the winding staircase of stone. At last the door of the courtyard closed with a bang, and the grating of a key announced to the mercenary that he and his charge were both imprisoned in that tower of the Chateau de Condillac.

Left alone in the anteroom, mademoiselle crossed to the window and dropped limply into a chair. Her face was still very white, her heart beating tumultuously, for the horrid threat that had been conveyed in the Dowager's words had brought her her first thrill of real fear since the beginning of this wooing-by-force three months ago, a wooing which had become more insistent and less like a wooing day by day, until it had culminated in her present helpless position.

She was a strong-souled, high-spirited girl, but tonight hope seemed extinguished in her breast. Florimond, too, seemed to have abandoned her. Either he had forgotten her, or he was dead, as the Dowager said. Which might be the true state of things she did not greatly care. The realization of how utterly she was in the power of Madame de Condillac and her son, and the sudden chance discovery of how unscrupulously that power might be wielded, filled her mind to the exclusion of all else.

By the window she sat, watching, without heeding them, the fading colours in the sky. She was abandoned to these monsters, and it seemed they would devour her. She could hope for no help from outside since they had as she believed—slain Monsieur de Garnache. Her mind dwelt for a moment on that glimpse of rescue that had been hers a week ago, upon the few hours of liberty which she had enjoyed, but which only seemed now to increase the dark hopelessness of her imprisonment.

Again with the eyes of her mind she beheld that grim, stalwart figure, saw his great

nose, his greying hair, his fierce mustachios and his stern, quick eyes. Again she heard the rasp of his metallic voice with its brisk derision. She saw him in the hall below, his foot upon the neck of that popinjay of Condillac daring them all to draw a breath, should he forbid it; again in fancy she rode on the withers of his horse at the gallop towards Grenoble. A sigh escaped her. Surely that was the first man who was indeed a man she had ever set eyes on since her father died. Had Garnache been spared, she would have felt courage and she would have hoped, for there was something about him that suggested energy and resource such as it is good to lean upon in times of stress. Again she heard that brisk, metallic voice: “Are you content, madame? Have you had fine deeds enough for one day?”

And then, breaking in upon her musings came the very voice of her day-dream, so suddenly, sounding so natural and lifelike that she almost screamed, so startled was she.

“Mademoiselle,” it said, “I beg that you’ll not utterly lose heart. I have come back to the thing Her Majesty bade me do, and I’ll do it, in spite of that tigress and her cub.”

She sat still as a statue, scarce breathing, her eyes fixed upon the violet sky. The voice had ceased, but still she sat on. Then it was slowly borne in upon her that that was no dream-voice, no trick of her overburdened mind. A voice, a living, actual voice had uttered those words in this room, here at her elbow.

She turned, and again she almost screamed; for there, just behind her, his glittering eyes fixed upon her with singular intentness, stood the swarthy, black-haired Italian gaoler they had given her because he had no French.

He had come up so quietly behind her that she had not heard his approach, and he was leaning forward now, with an odd suggestion of crouching in his attitude, like a beast about to spring. Yet his gaze riveted hers as with a fascination. And so, while she looked, his lips moved, and from them, in that same voice of her dreams, came from this man who had no French, the words:

“Be not afraid, mademoiselle. I am that blunderer, Garnache, that unworthy fool whose temper ruined what chance of saving you he had a week ago.”

She stared like one going mad.

“Garnache!” said she, in a husky whisper. “You Garnache?”

Yet the voice, she knew, was Garnache’s and none other. It was a voice not easily mistaken. And now, as she looked and looked, she saw that the man’s nose was Garnache’s, though oddly stained, and those keen eyes, they were Garnache’s too. But the hair that had been brown and flecked with grey was black; the reddish mustachios that had bristled like a mountain cat’s were black, too, and they hung limp and hid from sight the fine lines of his mouth. A hideous stubble of unshorn beard defaced his chin and face, and altered its sharp outline; and the clear, healthy skin that she remembered was now a dirty brown.

Suddenly the face smiled, and it was a smile that reassured her and drove away the last doubt that she had. She was on her feet in an instant.

“Monsieur, monsieur,” was all that she could say; but her longing was to fling her arms about the neck of this man, as she might have flung them about the neck of a brother or a father, and sob out upon his shoulder the sudden relief and revulsion that his presence brought.

Garnache saw something of her agitation, and to relieve it he smiled and began to tell her the circumstances of his return and his presentation to Madame as a knave who had no French.

“Fortune was very good to me, mademoiselle,” said he. “I had little hope that such a face as mine could be disguised, but I take no pride in what you see. It is the handiwork of Rabecque, the most ingenious lackey that ever served a foolish master. It helped me that having been ten years in Italy when I was younger, I acquired the language so well as to be able to impose even upon Fortunio. In that lay a circumstance which at once disarmed suspicion, and if I stay not so long as it shall

take the dye to wear from my hair and beard and the staining from my face, I shall have little to fear."

"But, monsieur," she cried, "you have everything to fear!" And alarm grew in her eyes.

But he laughed again for answer. "I have faith in my luck, mademoiselle, and I think I am on the tide of it at present. I little hoped when I made my way into Condillac in this array that I should end, by virtue of my pretended ignorance of French, in being appointed gaoler to you. I had some ado to keep the joy from my eyes when I heard them planning it. It is a thing that has made all else easy."

"But what can you do alone, monsieur?" she asked him; and there was a note almost of petulance in her voice.

He moved to the window, and leaned his elbow on the sill. The light was fast fading. "I know not yet. But I am here to contrive a means. I shall think and watch."

"You know in what hourly peril I am placed," she cried, and suddenly remembering that he must have overheard and understood the Dowager's words, a sudden heat came to her cheeks to recede again and leave them marble-pale. And she thanked Heaven that in the dusk and in the shadow where she stood he could but ill make out her face.

"If you think that I have been rash in returning—"

"No, no, not rash, monsieur; noble and brave above all praise. I would indeed I could tell you how noble and brave I account your action."

"It is as nothing to the bravery required to let Rabecque do this hideous work upon a face for which I have ever entertained some measure of respect."

He jested, sooner than enlighten her that it was his egregious pride had fetched him back when he was but a few hours upon his journey Pariswards, his inability to brook the ridicule that would be his when he announced at the Luxembourg that

failure had attended him.

“Ah, but what can you do alone?” she repeated.

“Give me at least a day or two to devise some means; let me look round and take the measure of this gaol. Some way there must be. I have not come so far and so successfully to be beaten now. Still,” he continued, “if you think that I overrate my strength or my resource, if you would sooner that I sought men and made an assault upon Condillac, endeavouring to carry it and to let the Queen’s will prevail by force of arms, tell me so, and I am gone tomorrow.”

“Whither would you go?” she cried, her voice strained with sudden affright.

“I might seek help at Lyons or Moulins. I might find loyal soldiers who would be willing to follow me by virtue of my warrant to levy such help as I may require, if I but tell them that the help was refused me in Grenoble. I am not sure that it would be so, for, unfortunately, my warrant is for the Seneschal of Dauphiny only. Still, I might make the attempt.”

“No, no,” she implored him, and in her eagerness to have him put all thought of leaving her from his mind, she caught him by the arm and raised a pleading face to his. “Do not leave me here, monsieur; of your pity do not leave me alone amongst them. Think me a coward if you will, monsieur: I am no less. They have made a coward of me.”

He understood the thing she dreaded, and a great pity welled up from his generous heart for this poor unfriended girl at the mercy of the beautiful witch of Condillac and her beautiful rascally son. He patted the hand that clutched his arm.

“I think, myself, that it will be best if I remain, now that I have come so far,” he said. “Let me ponder things. It may well be that I shall devise some way.”

“May Heaven inspire you, monsieur. I shall spend the night in prayer, I think, imploring God and His saints to show you the way you seek.”

“Heaven, I think, should hear your prayers, mademoiselle,” he answered musingly, his glance upon the white, saintly face that seemed to shine in the deepening gloom. Then, suddenly he stirred and bent to listen.

“Sh! Some one is coming,” he whispered. And he sped quickly from her side and into the outer room, where he sank noiselessly on to his chair as the steps ascended the stone staircase and a glow of yellow light grew gradually in the doorway that opened on to it.

CHAPTER XII. A MATTER OF CONSCIENCE

That he might inspire the more confidence in the Dowager and her son Garnache organized and performed a little comedy at Condillac a couple of nights after his appointment as mademoiselle’s gaoler. He gave an alarm at dead midnight, and when half-clad men, followed presently by madame and Marian, rushed into the anteroom where he stood, a very picture of the wildest excitement, he drew their attention to two twisted sheets, tied end to end, hanging from the window which overlooked the moat; and in answer to the marquise’s questions he informed her that he had been disturbed by sounds of movements and upon entering the chamber he had discovered mademoiselle making these preparations for departure.

Valerie, locked in the inner chamber, refused to come forth as the Marquise bade her, but her voice reassured Madame de Condillac of her presence, and so, since her attempt had failed, madame was content to let her be.

“The little fool,” she said, peering down from the window into the night; “she would have been killed for certain. Her rope of sheets does not reach more than a third of the way down. She would have had over thirty feet to fall, and if that had not been enough to finish her, she would of a certainty have, been drowned in the moat.”

She signified her satisfaction with the faithful “Battista’s” vigilance by a present of some gold pieces in the morning, and since the height of the window and the moat

beneath it did not appear sufficient obstacles to mademoiselle's attempts at effecting her escape, the Dowager had the window nailed down. Thus, only by breaking it could egress be obtained, and the breaking of it could not be effected without such a noise as must arouse "Battista."

Under Garnache's instructions the comedy was carried a little further. Mademoiselle affected for her gaoler a most unconquerable aversion, and this she took pains to proclaim.

One morning, three days after her attempted escape, she was taking the air in the garden of Condillac, "Battista," ever watchful, a few paces behind her, when suddenly she was joined by Marius—a splendid, graceful figure in a riding-suit of brown velvet and biscuit-coloured hose, his points tipped with gold, his long boots of the finest marroquin leather, his liver-coloured hound at his heels. It was the last day of October, but the weather, from cold and wet that it had been for the past fortnight, had taken on a sudden improvement. The sun shone, the air was still and warm, and but for the strewn leaves and the faint smell of decay with which the breath of autumn is ever laden, one might have fancied it a day of early spring.

It was not Valerie's wont to pause when Marius approached. Since she might not prevent him from walking where he listed, she had long since abandoned the futility of bidding him begone when he came near her. But, at least, she had never stopped in her walk, never altered its pace; she had suffered what she might not avoid, but she had worn the outward air of suffering it with indifference. This morning, however, she made a departure from her long habit. Not only did she pause upon observing his approach, but she called to him as if she would have him hasten to her side. And hasten he did, a new light in his eyes that was mostly of surprise, but a little, also, of hope.

She was gracious to him for once, and gave him good morning in a manner that bordered upon the pleasant. Wondering, he fell into step beside her, and they paced

together the yew-bordered terrace, the ever-vigilant but discreet “Battista” following them, though keeping now a few paces farther in the rear.

For a little while they appeared constrained, and their talk was of the falling leaves and the grateful change that had so suddenly come upon the weather. Suddenly she stopped and faced him.

“Will you do me a favour, Marius?” she asked. He halted too, and turned to her, studying her gentle face, seeking to guess her mind in the clear hazel eyes she raised to his. His eyebrows lifted slightly with surprise. Nevertheless—

“There is in all the world, Valerie, nothing you could ask me that I would not do,” he protested.

She smiled wistfully. “How easy it is to utter words!” she sighed.

“Marry me,” he answered, leaning towards her, his eyes devouring her now, “and you shall find my words very quickly turned to deeds.”

“Ah,” said she, and her smile broadened and took on a scornful twist, “you make conditions now. If I will marry you, there is nothing you will not do for me; so that, conversely, I may take it that if I do not marry you, there is nothing you will do. But in the meantime, Marius, until I resolve me whether I will marry you or not, would you not do a little thing that I might ask of you?”

“Until you resolve?” he cried, and his face flushed with the sudden hope he gathered from those words. Hitherto there had been no suggestion of a possible modification of attitude towards his suit. It had been repulsion, definite and uncompromising. Again he studied her face. Was she fooling him, this girl with the angel-innocence of glance? The thought of such a possibility cooled him instantly. “What is it you want of me?” he asked, his voice ungracious.

“Only a little thing, Marius.” Her glance travelled back over her shoulder to the tall, limber fellow in leather jerkin and with cross-gartered legs who lounged a dozen steps behind them. “Rid me of that ruffian’s company,” said she.

Marius looked back at “Battista,” and from him to Valerie. Then he smiled and made a slight movement with his shoulders.

“But to what end?” he asked, as one who pleadingly opposes an argument that is unreasonable. “Another would replace him, and there is little to choose among the men that garrison Condillac.”

“Little, perhaps; but that little matters.” Sure of her ground, and gathering from his tone and manner that the more ardently she begged this thing the less likely would it be that she should prevail, she pursued her intercessions with a greater heat. “Oh,” she cried, in a pretended rage, “it is to insult me to give me that unclean knave for perpetual company. I loathe and detest him. The very sight of him is too much to endure.”

“You exaggerate,” said he coldly.

“I do not; indeed I do not,” she rejoined, looking frankly, pleadingly into his face. “You do not realize what it is to suffer the insolent vigilance of such as he; to feel that your every step is under surveillance; to feel his eyes ever upon you when you are within his sight. Oh, it is insufferable!”

Suddenly he gripped her arm, his face within a hand’s breadth of her own, his words falling hot and quickly on her ear.

“It is yours to end it when you will, Valerie,” he passionately reminded her. “Give yourself into my keeping. Let it be mine to watch over you henceforth. Let me—”

Abruptly he ceased. She had drawn back her head, her face was white to the lips, and in her eyes, as they dwelt on his at such close quarters, there appeared a look of terror, of loathing unutterable. He saw it, and releasing her arm he fell back as if she had struck him. The colour left his face too.

“Or is it,” he muttered thickly, “that I inspire you, with much the same feeling as does he?”

She stood before him with lowered eyelids, her bosom heaving still from the agitation of fear his closeness had aroused in her. He studied her in silence a moment, with narrowing eyes and tightening lips. Then anger stirred in him, and quenched the sorrow with which at first he had marked the signs of her repulsion. But anger in Marius de Condillac was a cold and deadly emotion that vented itself in no rantings, uttered no loud-voiced threats or denunciations, prompted no waving of arms or plucking forth of weapons.

He stooped towards her again from his stately, graceful height. The cruelty hidden in the beautiful lines of his mouth took instant prominence in the smile that flickered round it.

“I think that Battista makes a very excellent watchdog,” he said, and you would have thought him amused, as if at the foolish subterfuge of some little child. “You may be right to dislike him. He knows no French, so that it may not be yours to pervert and bribe him with promises of what you will do if he assists you to escape; but you will see that this very quality which renders him detestable to you renders him invaluable to us.”

He laughed softly, as one well pleased with his own astuteness, doffed his hat with a politeness almost exaggerated, and whistling his dog he abruptly left her.

Thus were Marius and his mother—to whom he bore the tale of Valerie’s request—tricked further into reposing the very fullest trust in the watchful, incorruptible “Battista.” Realizing that this would be so, Garnache now applied himself more unreservedly to putting into effect the plans he had been maturing. And he went about it with a zest that knew no flagging, with a relish that nothing could impair. Not that it was other than usual for Garnache to fling himself whole-heartedly into the conduct of any enterprise he might have upon his hands; but he had come into this affair at Condillac against his will; stress of circumstances it was had driven him on, step by step, to take a personal hand in the actual

deliverance of Valerie.

It was vanity and pride that had turned him back when already he was on the road to Paris; not without yet a further struggle would he accept defeat. To this end had he been driven, for the first time in his life, to the indignity of his foul disguise; and he, whose methods had ever been direct, had been forced to have recourse to the commonest of subterfuges. It was with anger in his heart that he had proceeded to play the part he had assumed. He felt it to be a thing unworthy of him, a thing that derogated from his self-respect. Had he but had the justification of some high political aim, he might have endured it with a better resignation; the momentous end to be served might have sanctioned the ignoble means adopted. But here was a task in itself almost as unworthy of him as the methods by which he now set about accomplishing it. He was to black his face and dye his beard and hair, stain his skin and garb himself in filthy rags, for no better end than that he might compass the enlargement of a girl from the captivity into which she had been forced by a designing lady of Dauphiny. Was that a task to set a soldier, a man of his years and birth and name? He had revolted at it; yet that stubborn pride of his that would not brook his return to Paris to confess himself defeated by a woman over this woman's business, held him relentlessly to his distasteful course.

And gradually the distaste of it had melted. It had begun to fall away five nights ago, when he had heard what passed between Madame de Condillac and Valerie. A great pity for this girl, a great indignation against those who would account no means too base to achieve their ends with her, a proper realization of the indignities she was suffering, caused him to shed some of his reluctance, some of his sense of injury to himself.

His innate chivalry, that fine spirit of his which had ever prompted him to defend the weak against the oppressor, stirred him now, and stirred him to such purpose that, in the end, from taking up the burden of his task reluctantly, he came to bear it

zestfully and almost gladly. He was rejoiced to discover himself equipped with histrionic gifts of which he had had no suspicion hitherto, and it delighted him to set them into activity.

Now it happened that at Condillac there was a fellow countryman of “Battista’s,” a mercenary from Northern Italy, a rascal named Arsenio, whom Fortunio had enlisted when first he began to increase the garrison a month ago. Upon this fellow’s honesty Garnache had formed designs. He had closely observed him, and in Arsenio’s countenance he thought he detected a sufficiency of villainy to augur well for the prosperity of any scheme of treachery that might be suggested to him provided the reward were adequate.

Garnache went about sounding the man with a wiliness peculiarly his own. Arsenio being his only compatriot at Condillac it was not wonderful that in his few daily hours of relief from his gaoler’s duty “Battista” should seek out the fellow and sit in talk with him. The pair became intimate, and intercourse between them grew more free and unrestrained. Garnache waited, wishing to risk nothing by precipitancy, and watched for his opportunity. It came on the morrow of All Saints. On that Day of the Dead, Arsenio, whose rearing had been that of a true son of Mother Church, was stirred by the memory of his earthly mother, who had died some three years before. He was silent and moody, and showed little responsiveness to Garnache’s jesting humour. Garnache, wondering what might be toward in the fellow’s mind, watched him closely.

Suddenly the little man—he was a short, bowlegged, sinewy fellow—heaved a great sigh as he plucked idly at a weed that grew between two stones of the inner courtyard, where they were seated on the chapel steps.

“You are a dull comrade to-day, compatriot,” said Garnache, clapping him on the shoulder.

“It is the Day of the Dead,” the fellow answered him, as though that were an ample

explanation. Garnache laughed.

“To those that are dead it no doubt is; so was yesterday, so will to-morrow be. But to us who sit here it is the day of the living.”

“You are a scoffer,” the other reproached him, and his rascally face was oddly grave. “You don’t understand.”

“Enlighten me, then. Convert me.”

“It is the day when our thoughts turn naturally to the dead, and mine are with my mother, who has lain in her grave these three years. I am thinking of what she reared me and of what I am.”

Garnache made a grimace which the other did not observe. He stared at the little cut-throat, and there was some dismay in his glance. What ailed the rogue? Was he about to repent him of his sins, and to have done with villainy and treachery; was he minded to slit no more gullets in the future, be faithful to the hand that paid him, and lead a godlier life? Peste! That was a thing that would nowise suit Monsieur de Garnache’s ends just then. If Arsenio had a mind to reform, let him postpone that reformation until Garnache should have done with him. So he opened his lips and let out a deep guffaw of mockery.

“We shall have you turning monk,” said he, “a candidate for canonization going barefoot, with flagellated back and shaven head. No more wine, no more dice, no more wenches, no more—”

“Peace!” snapped the other.

“Say ‘Pax,”’ suggested Garnache, “‘Pax tecum,’ or ‘vobiscum.’ It is thus you will be saying it later.”

“If my conscience pricks me, is it aught to you? Have you no conscience of your own?”

“None. Men wax lean on it in this vale of tears. It is a thing invented by the great to

enable them to pursue the grinding and oppression of the small. If your master pays you ill for the dirty work you do for him and another comes along to offer you some rich reward for an omission in that same service, you are warned that if you let yourself be tempted, your conscience will plague you afterwards. Pish! A clumsy, childish device that, to keep you faithful."

Arsenio looked up. Words that defamed the great were ever welcome to him; arguments that showed him he was oppressed and imposed upon sounded ever gratefully in his ears. He nodded his approval of "Battista's" dictum.

"Body of Bacchus!" he swore, "you are right in that, compatriot. But my case is different. I am thinking of the curse that Mother Church has put upon this house. Yesterday was All Saints, and never a Mass heard I. To-day is All Souls, and never a prayer may I offer up in this place of sin for the rest of my mother's soul."

"How so?" quoth Garnache, looking in wonder at this religiously minded cut-throat.

"How so? Is not the House of Condillac under excommunication, and every man who stays in it of his own free will? Prayers and Sacraments are alike forbidden here."

Garnache received a sudden inspiration. He leapt to his feet, his face convulsed as if at the horror of learning of a hitherto undreamt-of state of things. He never paused to give a moment's consideration to the cut-throat's mind, so wonderfully constituted as to enable him to break with impunity every one of the commandments every day of the week for the matter of a louis d'or or two, and yet be afflicted by qualms of conscience at living under a roof upon which the Church had hurled her malediction.

"What are you saying, compatriot? What is it that you tell me?"

"The truth," said Arsenio, with a shrug. "Any man who wilfully abides in the services of Condillac"—and instinctively he lowered his voice lest the Captain or the Marquise should be within earshot—, "is excommunicate."

"By the Host!" swore the false Piedmontese. "I am a Christian man myself, Arsenio,

and I have lived in ignorance of this thing?"

"That ignorance may be your excuse. But now that you know—" Arsenio shrugged his shoulders.

"Now that I know, I had best have a care of my soul and look about me for other employment."

"Alas!" sighed Arsenio; "it is none so easy to find."

Garnache looked at him. Garnache began to have in his luck a still greater faith than hitherto. He glanced stealthily around; then he sat down again, so that his mouth was close to Arsenio's ear.

"The pay is beggarly here, yet I have refused a fortune offered me by another that I might remain loyal to my masters at Condillac. But this thing that you tell me alters everything. By the Host! yes."

"A fortune?" sneered Arsenio.

"Aye, a fortune—at least, fifty pistoles. That is a fortune to some of us."

Arsenio whistled. "Tell me more," said he.

Garnache rose with the air of one about to depart.

"I must think of it," said he, and he made shift to go. But the other's hand fell with a clenching grip upon his arm.

"Of what must you think, fool?" said he. "Tell me this service you have been offered. I have a conscience that upbraids me. If you refuse these fifty pistoles, why should not I profit by your folly?"

"There would not be the need. Two men are required for the thing I speak of, and there are fifty pistoles for each. If I decide to undertake the task, I'll speak of you as a likely second."

He nodded gloomily to his companion, and shaking off his hold he set out to cross the yard. But Arsenio was after him and had fastened again upon his arm, detaining

him.

“You fool!” said he; “you’d not refuse this fortune?”

“It would mean treachery,” whispered Garnache.

“That is bad,” the other agreed, and his face fell. But remembering what Garnache had said, he was quick to brighten again. “Is it to these folk here at Condillac?” he asked. Garnache nodded. “And they would pay—these people that seek our service would pay you fifty pistoles?”

“They seek my service only, as yet. They might seek yours were I to speak for you.”

“And you will, compatriot. You will, will you not? We are comrades, we are friends, and we are fellow-countrymen in a strange land. There is nothing I would not do for you, Battista. Look, I would die for you if there should come the need! Body of Bacchus! I would. I am like that when I love a man.”

Garnache patted his shoulder. “You are a good fellow, Arsenio.”

“And you will speak for me?”

“But you do not know the nature of the service,” said Garnache. “You may refuse it when it is definitely offered you.”

“Refuse fifty pistoles? I should deserve to be the pauper that I am if such had been my habits. Be the service what it may, my conscience pricks me for serving Condillac. Tell me how the fifty pistoles are to be earned, and you may count upon me to put my hand to anything.”

Garnache was satisfied. But he told Arsenio no more that day, beyond assuring him he would speak for him and let him know upon the morrow. Nor on the morrow, when they returned to the subject at Arsenio’s eager demand, did Garnache tell him all, or even that the service was mademoiselle’s. Instead he pretended that it was some one in Grenoble who needed two such men as they.

“Word has been brought me,” he said mysteriously. “You must not ask me how.”

“But how the devil are we to reach Grenoble? The Captain will never let us go,” said Arsenio, in an ill-humour.

“On the night that you are of the watch, Arsenio, we will depart together without asking the Captain’s leave. You shall open the postern when I come to join you here in the courtyard.”

“But what of the man at the door yonder?” And he jerked his thumb towards the tower where mademoiselle was a captive, and where at night “Battista” was locked in with her. At the door leading to the courtyard a sentry was always posted for greater security. That door and that sentry were obstacles which Garnache saw the futility of attempting to overcome without aid. That was why he had been forced to enlist Arsenio’s assistance.

“You must account for him, Arsenio,” said he.

“Thus?” inquired Arsenio coolly, and he passed the edge of his hand significantly across his throat. Garnache shook his head.

“No,” said he; “there will be no need for that. A blow over the head will suffice. Besides, it may be quieter. You will find the key of the tower in his belt. When you have felled him, get it and unlock the door; then whistle for me. The rest will be easy.”

“You are sure he has the key?”

“I have it from madame herself. They were forced to leave it with him to provide for emergencies. Mademoiselle’s attempted escape by the window showed them the necessity for it.” He did not add that it was the implicit confidence they reposed in “Battista” himself that had overcome their reluctance to leave the key with the sentry.

To seal the bargain, and in earnest of all the gold to come, Garnache gave Arsenio a couple of gold louis as a loan to be repaid him when their nameless employer should pay him his fifty pistoles in Grenoble.

The sight and touch of the gold convinced Arsenio that the thing was no dream. He told Garnache that he believed he would be on guard-duty on the night of the following Wednesday—this was Friday—and so for Wednesday next they left the execution of their plans unless, meantime, a change should be effected in the disposition of the sentries.

CHAPTER XIII. THE COURIER

Monsieur de Garnache was pleased with the issue of his little affair with Arsenio.

“Mademoiselle,” he told Valerie that evening, “I was right to have faith in my luck, right to believe that the tide of it is flowing. All we need now is a little patience; everything has become easy.”

It was the hour of supper. Valerie was at table in her anteroom, and “Battista” was in attendance. It was an added duty they had imposed upon him, for, since her attempt to escape, mademoiselle’s imprisonment had been rendered more rigorous than ever. No servant of the chateau was allowed past the door of the outer anteroom, now commonly spoken of as the guardroom of the tower. Valerie dined daily in the salon with Madame de Condillac and Marius, but her other meals were served her in her own apartments. The servants who brought the meals from the kitchen delivered them to “Battista” in the guardroom, and he it was who laid the cloth and waited upon mademoiselle. At first this added duty had irritated him more than all that he had so far endured. Had he Martin Marie Rigobert de Garnache lived to discharge the duties of a lackey, to bear dishes to a lady’s table and to remain at hand to serve her? The very thought had all but set him in a rage. But presently he grew reconciled to it. It afforded him particular opportunities of being in mademoiselle’s presence and of conferring with her; and for the sake of such an advantage he might well belittle the unsavoury part of the affair.

A half-dozen candles burned in two gleaming silver sconces on the table; in her

tall-backed leather chair mademoiselle sat, and ate and drank but little, while Garnache told her of the preparations he had made.

“If my luck but holds until Wednesday next,” he concluded, “you may count upon being well out of Condillac. Arsenio does not dream that you come with us, so that even should he change his mind, at least we have no cause to fear a betrayal. But he will not change his mind. The prospect of fifty pistoles has rendered it immutable.”

She looked up at him with eyes brightened by hope and by the encouragement to count upon success which she gathered from his optimism.

“You have contrived it marvellously well,” she praised him. “If we succeed—”

“Say when we succeed, mademoiselle,” he laughingly corrected her.

“Very well, then—when we shall have succeeded in leaving Condillac, whither am I to go?”

“Why, with me, to Paris, as was determined. My man awaits me at Voiron with money and horses. No further obstacle shall rise to hamper us once our backs are turned upon the ugly walls of Condillac. The Queen shall make you welcome and keep you safe until Monsieur Florimond comes to claim his bride.”

She sipped her wine, then set down the glass and leaned her elbow on the table, taking her chin in her fine white hand. “Madame tells me that he is dead,” said she, and Garnache was shocked at the comparative calmness with which she said it. He looked at her sharply from under his sooted brows. Was she, after all, he wondered, no different from other women? Was she cold and calculating, and had she as little heart as he had come to believe was usual with her sex, that she could contemplate so calmly the possibility of her lover being dead? He had thought her better, more natural, more large-hearted and more pure. That had encouraged him to stand by her in these straits of hers, no matter at what loss of dignity to himself. It began to seem that his conclusions had been wrong.

His silence caused her to look up, and in his face she read something of what was

passing in his thoughts. She smiled rather wanly.

“You are thinking me heartless, Monsieur de Garnache?”

“I am thinking you—womanly.”

“The same thing, then, to your mind. Tell me, monsieur, do you know much of women?”

“God forbid! I have found trouble enough in my life.”

“And you pass judgment thus upon a sex with which you have no acquaintance?”

“Not by acquaintance only is it that we come to knowledge. There are ways of learning other than by the road of experience. One may learn of dangers by watching others perish. It is the fool who will be satisfied alone with the knowledge that comes to him from what he undergoes himself.”

“You are very wise, monsieur,” said she demurely, so demurely that he suspected her of laughing at him. “You were never wed?”

“Never, mademoiselle,” he answered stiffly, “nor ever in any danger of it.”

“Must you, indeed, account it a danger?”

“A deadly peril, mademoiselle,” said he; whereupon they both laughed.

She pushed back her chair and rose slowly. Slowly she passed from the table and stepped towards the window. Turning she set her back to it, and faced him.

“Monsieur de Garnache,” said she, “you are a good man, a true and noble gentleman. I would that you thought a little better of us. All women are not contemptible, believe me. I will pray that you may yet mate with one who will prove to you the truth of what I say.”

He smiled gently, and shook his head.

“My child,” said he, “I am not half the noble fellow you account me. I have a stubborn pride that stands me at times in the stead of virtue. It was pride brought me back here, for instance. I could not brook the laughter that would greet me in Paris

did I confess that I was beaten by the Dowager of Condillac. I tell you this to the end that, thinking less well of me, you may spare me prayers which I should dread to see fulfilled. I have told you before, mademoiselle, Heaven is likely to answer the prayers of such a heart as yours."

"Yet but a moment back you deemed me heartless," she reminded him.

"You seemed so indifferent to the fate of Florimond de Condillac."

"I must have seemed, then, what I am not," she told him, "for I am far from indifferent to Florimond's fate. The truth is, monsieur, I do not believe Madame de Condillac. Knowing me to be under a promise that naught can prevail upon me to break, she would have me believe that nature has dissolved the obligation for me. She thinks that were I persuaded of Florimond's death, I might turn an ear to the wooing of Marius. But she is mistaken, utterly mistaken; and so I sought to convince her. My father willed that I should wed Florimond. Florimond's father had been his dearest friend. I promised him that I would do his will, and by that promise I am bound. But were Florimond indeed dead, and were I free to choose, I should not choose Marius were he the only man in all the world."

Garnache moved nearer to her.

"You speak," said he, "as if you were indifferent in the matter of wedding Florimond, whilst I understand that your letter to the Queen professed you eager for the alliance. I may be impertinent, but, frankly, your attitude puzzles me."

"I am not indifferent," she answered him, but calmly, without enthusiasm. "Florimond and I were playmates, and as a little child I loved him and admired him as I might have loved and admired a brother perhaps. He is comely, honourable, and true. I believe he would be the kindest husband ever woman had, and so I am content to give my life into his keeping. What more can be needed?"

"Never ask me, mademoiselle; I am by no means an authority," said he. "But you appear to have been well schooled in a most excellent philosophy." And he laughed

outright. She reddened under his amusement.

“It was thus my father taught me,” said she, in quieter tones; “and he was the wisest man I ever knew, just as he was the noblest and the bravest.”

Garnache bowed his head. “God rest his soul!” said he with respectful fervour.

“Amen,” the girl replied, and they fell silent.

Presently she returned to the subject of her betrothed.

“If Florimond is living, this prolonged absence, this lack of news is very strange. It is three months since last we heard of him—four months, indeed. Yet he must have been apprised of his father’s death, and that should have occasioned his return.”

“Was he indeed apprised of it?” inquired Garnache. “Did you, yourself, communicate the news to him?”

“I?” she cried. “But no, monsieur. We do not correspond.”

“That is a pity,” said Garnache, “for I believe that the knowledge of the Marquis’s death was kept from him by his stepmother.”

“Mon Dieu!” she exclaimed, in horror. “Do you mean that he may still be in ignorance of it?”

“Not that. A month ago a courier was dispatched to him by the Queen-Mother. The last news of him some four months old, as you have said—reported him at Milan in the service of Spain. Thither was the courier sent to find him and to deliver him letters setting forth what was toward at Condillac.”

“A month ago?” she said. “And still we have no word. I am full of fears for him, monsieur.”

“And I,” said Garnache, “am full of hope that we shall have news of him at any moment.”

That he was well justified of his hope was to be proven before they were many days older. Meanwhile Garnache continued to play his part of gaoler to the entire

satisfaction and increased confidence of the Condillacs, what time he waited patiently for the appointed night when it should be his friend Arsenio's turn to take the guard.

On that fateful Wednesday "Battista" sought out—as had now become his invariable custom—his compatriot as soon as the time of his noontide rest was come, the hour at which they dined at Condillac. He found Arsenio sunning himself in the outer courtyard, for it seemed that year that as the winter approached the warmth increased. Never could man remember such a Saint Martin's Summer as was this.

In so far as the matter of their impending flight was concerned, "Battista" was as brief as he could be.

"Is all well?" he asked. "Shall you be on guard to-night?"

"Yes. It is my watch from sunset till dawn. At what hour shall we be stirring?"

Garnache pondered a moment, stroking that firm chin of his, on which the erstwhile stubble had now grown into a straggling, unkempt beard—and it plagued him not a little, for a close observer might have discovered that it was of a lighter colour at the roots. His hair, too, was beginning to lose its glossy blackness. It was turning dull, and presently, no doubt, it would begin to pale, so that it was high time he spread his wings and took flight from Condillac.

"We had best wait until midnight. It will give them time to be soundly in their slumbers. Though, should there be signs of any one stirring even then, you had better wait till later. It were foolish to risk having our going prevented for the sake of leaving a half-hour earlier."

"Depend upon me," Arsenio answered him. "When I open the door of your tower I shall whistle to you. The key of the postern hangs on the guardroom wall. I shall possess myself of that before I come."

"Good," said Garnache, "we understand each other."

And on that they might have parted there and then, but that there happened in that moment a commotion at the gate. Men hurried from the guardhouse, and Fortunio's voice sounded loud in command. A horseman had galloped up to Condillac, walked his horse across the bridge—which was raised only at night—and was knocking with the butt of his whip an imperative summons upon the timbers of the gate.

By Fortunio's orders it was opened, and a man covered with dust, astride a weary, foam-flecked horse, rode under the archway of the keep into the first courtyard of the chateau.

Garnache eyed him in surprise and inquiry, and he read in the man's appearance that he was a courier. The horseman had halted within a few paces of the spot where "Battista" and his companion stood, and seeing in the vilely clad Garnache a member of the Condillac household, he flung him his reins, then got down stiffly from his horse.

Fortunio, bristling with importance, his left hand on the hilt of his rapier, the fingers of his right twirling at his long fair mustachios, at once confronted him and craved his business.

"I am the bearer of letters for Madame the Dowager Marquise de Condillac," was the reply; whereupon, with an arrogant nod, Fortunio bade the fellow go with him, and issued an order that his horse should be cared for.

Arsenio was speaking in Garnache's ear. The man's nature was inquisitive, and he was indulging idle conjectures as to what might be the news this courier brought. Garnache's mind, actuated by very different motives, was engaged upon the same task, so much so that not a word heard he of what his supposed compatriot was whispering. Whence came this courier? Why had not that fool Fortunio asked him, so that Garnache might have overheard his answer? Was he from Paris and the Queen, or was he, perchance, from Italy and Florimond? These were questions to which it imported him to have the answers. He must know what letters the fellow

brought. The knowledge might guide him now; might even cause him to alter the plans he had formed.

He stood in thought whilst, unheeded by him, Arsenio prattled at his elbow. He bethought him of the old minstrel's gallery at the end of the hall in which the Condillacs were dining and whither the courier would be conducted. He knew the way to that gallery, for he had made a very close study of the chateau against the time when he might find himself in need of the knowledge.

With a hurried excuse to Arsenio he moved away, and, looking round to see that he was unobserved, he was on the point of making his way to the gallery when suddenly he checked himself. What went he there to do? To play the spy? To become fellow to the lackey who listens at keyholes? Ah, no! That was something no service could demand of him. He might owe a duty to the Queen, but there was also a duty that he owed himself, and this duty forbade him from going to such extremes. Thus spake his Pride, and he mistook its voice for that of Honour. Betide what might, it was not for Garnache to play the eavesdropper. Not that, Pardieu!

And so he turned away, his desires in conflict with that pride of his, and gloomily he paced the courtyard, Arsenio marvelling what might have come to him. And well was it for him that pride should have detained him; well would it seem as if his luck were indeed in the ascendant and had prompted his pride to save him from a deadly peril. For suddenly some one called "Battista!"

He heard, but for the moment, absorbed as he was in his own musings, he overlooked the fact that it was the name to which he answered at Condillac.

Not until it was repeated more loudly, and imperatively, did he turn to see Fortunio beckoning him. With a sudden dread anxiety, he stepped to the captain's side. Was he discovered? But Fortunio's words set his doubts to rest at once.

"You are to re-conduct Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye to her apartments at once."

Garnache bowed and followed the captain up the steps and into the chateau that he

might carry out the order; and as he went he shrewdly guessed that it was the arrival of that courier had occasioned the sudden removal of mademoiselle.

When they were alone together—he and she—in her anteroom in the Northern Tower, she turned to him before he had time to question her as he was intending.

“A courier has arrived,” said she.

“I know; I saw him in the courtyard. Whence is he? Did you learn it?”

“From Florimond.” She was white with agitation.

“From the Marquis de Condillac?” he cried, and he knew not whether to hope or fear. “From Italy?”

“No, monsieur. I do not think from Italy. From what was said I gathered that Florimond is already on his way to Condillac. Oh, it made a fine stir. It left them no more appetite for dinner, and they seem to have thought it could have left me none for mine, for they ordered my instant return to my apartments.”

“Then you know nothing—save that the courier is from the Marquis?”

“Nothing; nor am I likely to,” she answered, and her arms dropped limply to her sides, her eyes looked entreatingly up into his gloomy face.

But Garnache could do no more than rap out an oath. Then he stood still a moment, his eyes on the window, his chin in his hand, brooding. His pride and his desire to know more of that courier’s message were fighting it out again in his mind, just as they fought it out in the courtyard below. Suddenly his glance fell on her, standing there, so sweet, so frail, and so disconsolate. For her sake he must do the thing, repulsive though it might be.

“I must know more,” he exclaimed. “I must learn Florimond’s whereabouts, if only that we may go to meet him when we leave Condillac to-night.”

“You have arranged definitely for that?” she asked, her face lighting.

“All is in readiness,” he assured her. Then, lowering his voice without apparent

reason, and speaking quickly and intently, “I must go find out what I can,” he said. “There may be a risk, but it is as nothing to the risk we run of blundering matters through ignorance of what may be afoot. Should any one come—which is unlikely, for all those interested will be in the hall until the courier is dealt with—and should they inquire into my absence, you are to know nothing of it since you have no Italian and I no French. All that you will know will be that you believe I went but a moment since to fetch water. You understand?”

She nodded.

“Then lock yourself in your chamber till I return.”

He caught up a large earthenware vessel in which water was kept for his own and mademoiselle’s use, emptied it through the guard-room window into the moat below, then left the room and made his way down the steps to the courtyard.

He peered out. Not a soul was in sight. This inner courtyard was little tenanted at that time of day, and the sentry at the door of the tower was only placed there at nightfall. Alongside this there stood another door, opening into a passage from which access might be gained to any part of the chateau. Thrusting behind that door the earthenware vessel that he carried, Garnache sped swiftly down the corridor on his eavesdropping errand. Still his mind was in conflict. At times he cursed his slowness, at times his haste and readiness to undertake so dirty a business, wishing all women at the devil since by the work of women was he put to such a shift as this.

CHAPTER XIV. FLORIMOND’S LETTER

In the great hall of Condillac, where the Marquise, her son, and Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye had been at dinner, a sudden confusion had been spread by the arrival of that courier so soon as it was known that he bore letters from Florimond, Marquis de Condillac.

Madame had risen hastily, fear and defiance blending in her face, and she had at

once commanded mademoiselle's withdrawal. Valerie had wondered might there not be letters—or, leastways, messages—for herself from her betrothed. But her pride had suppressed the eager question that welled up to her lips. She would, too, have questioned the courier concerning Florimond's health; she would have asked him how the Marquis looked, and where the messenger had left him. But of all this that she craved to know, nothing could she bring herself to ask before the Marquise.

She rose in silence upon hearing the Dowager order Fortunio to summon Battista that he might re-conduct mademoiselle to her apartments, and she moved a few paces down the hall, towards the door, in proud, submissive readiness to depart. Yet she could not keep her eyes from the dust-stained courier, who, having flung his hat and whip upon the floor, was now opening his wallet, the Dowager standing before him to receive his papers.

Marius, affecting an insouciance he did not feel, remained at table, his page behind his chair, his hound stretched at his feet; and he now sipped his wine, now held it to the light that he might observe the beauty of its deep red colour.

At last Fortunio returned, and mademoiselle took her departure, head in the air and outwardly seeming nowise concerned in what was taking place. With her went Fortunio. And the Marquise, who now held the package she had received from the courier, bade the page depart also.

When the three were at last alone, she paused before opening the letter and turned again to the messenger. She made a brave figure in the flood of sunlight that poured through the gules and azures of the long blazoned windows, her tall, lissome figure clad in a close-fitting robe of black velvet, her abundant glossy black hair rolled back under its white coif, her black eyes and scarlet lips detaching from the ivory of her face, in which no trace of emotion showed, for all the anxiety that consumed her.

"Where left you the Marquis de Condillac?" she asked the fellow.

"At La Rochette, madame," the courier answered,' and his answer brought Marius to

his feet with an oath.

“So near?” he cried out. But the Dowager’s glance remained calm and untroubled.

“How does it happen that he did not hasten himself, to Condillac?” she asked.

“I do not know, madame. I did not see Monsieur le Marquis. It was his servant brought me that letter with orders to ride hither.”

Marius approached his mother, his brow clouded.

“Let us see what he says,” he suggested anxiously. But his mother did not heed him. She stood balancing the package in her hand.

“Can you tell us, then, nothing of Monsieur le Marquis?”

“Nothing more than I have told you, madame.”

She bade Marius call Fortunio, and then dismissed the courier, bidding her captain see to his refreshment.

Then, alone at last with her son, she hastily tore the covering from the letter, unfolded it and read. And Marius, moved by anxiety, came to stand beside and just behind her, where he too might read. The letter ran:

“MY VERY DEAR MARQUISE,—I do not doubt but that it will pleasure you to hear that I am on my way home, and that but for a touch of fever that has detained us here at La Rochette, I should be at Condillac as soon as the messenger who is the bearer of these presents. A courier from Paris found me a fortnight since in Milan, with letters setting forth that my father had been dead six months, and that it was considered expedient at Court that I should return home forthwith to assume the administration of Condillac. I am lost in wonder that a communication of this nature should have been addressed to me from Paris instead of from you, as surely it must have been your duty to advise me of my father’s decease at the time of that untoward event. I am cast down by grief at this evil news, and the summons from Court has brought me in all haste from Milan. The lack of news from Condillac has

been for months a matter of surprise to me. My father's death may be some explanation of this, but scarcely explanation enough. However, madame, I count upon it that you will be able to dispel such doubts as I am fostering. I count too, upon being at Condillac by the end of week, but I beg that neither you nor my dear Marius will allow this circumstance to make any difference to yourselves, just as, although I am returning to assume the government of Condillac as the Court has suggested to me, I hope that yourself and my dear brother will continue to make it your home for as long as it shall pleasure you. So long shall it pleasure me.

"I am, my dear marquise, your very humble and very affectionate servant and stepson,

"FLORIMOND"

When she had read to the end, the Dowager turned back and read aloud the passage: "However, madame, I count upon it that you will be able to dispel such doubts as I am fostering." She looked at her son, who had shifted his position, so that he was now confronting her.

"He has his suspicions that all is not as it should be," sneered Marius.

"Yet his tone is amiable throughout. It cannot be that they said too much in that letter from Paris." A little trill of bitter laughter escaped her. "We are to continue to make this our home for as long as it shall pleasure us. So long shall it pleasure him!"

Then, with a sudden seriousness, she folded the letter and, putting her hands behind her, looked up into her son's face.

"Well?" she asked. "What are you going to do?"

"Strange that he makes no mention of Valerie" said Marius pensively.

"Pooh! A Condillac thinks lightly of his women. What are you going to do?"

His handsome countenance, so marvellously like her own, was overcast. He looked gloomily at his mother for a moment; then with a slight twitch of the shoulders he

turned and moved past her slowly in the direction of the hearth. He leaned his elbow on the overmantel and rested his brow against his clenched right hand, and stood so awhile in moody thought. She watched him, a frown between her arrogant eyes.

“Aye, ponder it,” said she. “He is at La Rochette, within a day’s ride, and only detained there by a touch of fever. In any case he promises to be here by the end of the week. By Saturday, then, Condillac will have passed out of our power; it will be lost to you irretrievably. Will you lose La Vauvraye as well?”

He let his hand fall to his side, and turned, fully to face her.

“What can I do? What can we do?” he asked, a shade of petulance in his question.

She stepped close up to him and rested her hand lightly upon his shoulder.

“You have had three months in which to woo that girl, and you have tarried sadly over it, Marius. You have now at most three days in which to accomplish it. What will you do?”

“I have been maladroit perhaps,” he said, with bitterness. “I have been over-patient with her. I have counted too much upon the chance of Florimond’s being dead, as seemed from the utter lack of news of him. Yet what could I do? Carry her off by force and compel at the dagger’s point some priest to marry us?”

She moved her hand from his shoulder and smiled, as if she derided him and his heat.

“You want for invention, Marius,” said she. “And yet I beg that you will exert your mind, or Sunday next shall find us well-nigh homeless. I’ll take no charity from the Marquis de Condillac, nor, I think, will you.”

“If all fails,” said he, “we have still your house in Touraine.”

“My house?” she echoed, her voice shrill with scorn. “My hovel, you would say. Could you abide there—in such a sty?”

“Vertudieu! If all else failed, we might be glad of it.”

“Glad of it? Not I, for one. Yet all else will fail unless you bestir yourself in the next three days. Condillac is as good as lost to you already, since Florimond is upon the threshold. La Vauvraye most certainly will be lost to you as well unless you make haste to snatch it in the little moment that is left you.”

“Can I achieve the impossible, madame?” he cried, and his impatience waxed beneath this unreasonable insistence of his mother’s.

“Who asks it of you?”

“Do not you, madame?”

“I? Pish! All that I urge is that you take Valerie across the border into Savoy where you can find a priest to marry you, and get it done this side of Saturday.”

“And is not that the impossible? She will not go with me, as you well know, madame.”

There was a moment’s silence. The Dowager shot him a glance; then her eyes fell. Her bosom stirred as if some strange excitement moved her. Fear and shame were her emotions; for a way she knew by which mademoiselle might be induced to go with him—not only willingly, but eagerly, she thought—to the altar. But she was his mother, and even her harsh nature shuddered before the task of instructing him in this vile thing. Why had the fool not wit enough to see it for himself?

Observing her silence Marius smiled sardonically.

“You may well ponder it,” said he. “It is an easy matter to tell me what I should do. Tell me, rather, how it should be done.”

His blindness stirred her anger, and her anger whelmed her hesitation.

“Were I in your place, Marius, I should find a way,” said she, in a voice utterly expressionless, her eyes averted ever from his own.

He scanned her curiously. Her agitation was plain to him, and it puzzled him, as did the downcast glance of eyes usually so bold and insolent in their gaze. Then he

pondered her tone, so laden with expression by its very expressionlessness, and suddenly a flood of light broke upon his mind, revealing very clearly and hideously her meaning. He caught his breath with a sudden gasp and blenched a little. Then his lips tightened suddenly.

“In that case, madame,” he said, after a pause, and speaking as if he were still without revelation of her meaning, “I can but regret that you are not in my place. For, as it is, I am thinking we shall have to make the best of the hovel in Touraine.”

She bit her lip in the intensity of her chagrin and shame. She was no fool, nor did she imagine from his words that her meaning had been lost upon him. She knew that he had understood, and that he chose to pretend that he had not. She looked up suddenly, her dark eyes blazing, a splash of colour in either cheek.

“Fool!” she snapped at him; “you lily-livered fool! Are you indeed my son? Are you—by God!—that you talk so lightly of yielding?” She advanced a step in his direction. “Through your cowardice you may be content to spend your days in beggary; not so am I; nor shall I be, so long as I have an arm and a voice. You may go hence if your courage fails you outright; but I’ll throw up the bridge and entrench myself within these walls. Florimond de Condillac sets no foot in here while I live; and if he should come within range of musket-shot, it will be the worse for him.”

“I think you are mad, madame—mad so to talk of resisting him, as you are mad to call me coward. I’ll leave you till you are come to a more tranquil frame of mind.” And turning upon his heel, his face on fire from the lash of her contempt, he strode down the hall and passed out, leaving her alone.

White again, with heaving bosom and clenched hands, she stood a moment where he had left her, then dropped into a chair, and taking her chin in her hand she rested her elbow on her knee. Thus she remained, the firelight tinting her perfect profile, on which little might be read of the storm that was raging in her soul. Another woman in her place would have sought relief in tears, but tears came rarely to the beautiful

eyes of the Marquise de Condillac.

She sat there until the sun had passed from the windows behind her and the corners of the room were lost in the quickening shadows. At last she was disturbed by the entrance of a lackey, who announced that Monsieur le Comte de Tressan, Lord Seneschal of Dauphiny, was come to Condillac.

She bade the fellow call help to clear the board, where still was set their interrupted noontide meal, and then to admit the Seneschal. With her back to the stirring, bustling servants she stood, pensively regarding the flames, and a smile that was mocking rather than aught else spread upon her face.

If all else failed her, she told herself, there would be no Touraine hovel for her. She could always be Comtesse de Tressan. Let Marius work out alone the punishment of his cowardice.

Away in the Northern Tower, where mademoiselle was lodged, she sat in eager talk with Garnache, who had returned unobserved and successful from his journey of espionage.

He had told her what from the conversation of Marius and his mother he had learned touching the contents of that letter. Florimond lay as near as La Rochette, detained there by a touch of fever, but promising to be at Condillac by the end of the week. Since that was so, Valerie opined there was no longer the need to put themselves to the trouble of the escape they had planned. Let them wait until Florimond came.

But Garnache shook his head. He had heard more; and for all that he accounted her at present safe from Marius, yet he made no false estimate of that supple gentleman’s character, was not deluded by his momentary show of niceness. As the time of Florimond’s arrival grew nearer, he thought it very possible that Marius might be rendered desperate. There was grave danger in remaining. He said naught of this, yet he convinced mademoiselle that it were best to go.

“Though there will no longer be the need of a toilsome journey as far as Paris,” he

concluded. “A four hours’ ride to La Rochette, and you may embrace your betrothed.”

“Did he speak of me in his letter, know you, monsieur?” she inquired.

“I heard them say that he did not,” Garnache replied. “But it may well be that he had good reason. He may suspect more than he has written.”

“In that case,” she asked—and there was a wounded note in her voice—“Why should a touch of fever keep him at La Rochette? Would a touch of fever keep you from the woman you loved, monsieur, if you knew, or even suspected, that she was in durance?”

“I do not know, mademoiselle. I am an old man who has never loved, and so it would be unfair of me to pass judgment upon lovers. That they think not as other folk is notorious; their minds are for the time disordered.”

Nevertheless he looked at her where she sat by the window, so gentle, so lissome, so sweet, and so frail, and he had a shrewd notion that were he Florimond de Condillac, whether he feared her in durance or not, not the fever, nor the plague itself should keep him for the best part of a week at La Rochette within easy ride of her.

She smiled gently at his words, and turned the conversation to the matter that imported most.

“Tonight then, it is determined that we are to go?”

“At midnight or a little after. Be in readiness, mademoiselle, and do not keep me waiting when I rap upon your door. Haste may be of importance.”

“You may count upon me, my friend,” she answered him, and stirred by a sudden impulse she held out her hand. “You have been very good to me, Monsieur de Garnache. You have made life very different for me since your coming. I had it in my mind to blame you once for your rashness in returning alone. I was a little fool. You can never know the peace that has come to me from having you at hand. The

fears, the terrors that possessed me before you came have all been dispelled in this last week that you have been my sentry in two senses."

He took the hand she held out to him, and looked down at her out of his grimy, disfigured face, an odd tenderness stirring him. He felt as might have felt a father towards his daughter—at least, so thought he then.

"Child," he answered her, "you overrate it. I have done no less than I could do, no more than any other would have done."

"Yet more than Florimond has done—and he my betrothed. A touch of fever was excuse enough to keep him at La Rochette, whilst the peril of death did not suffice to deter you from coming hither."

"You forget, mademoiselle, that, maybe, he does not know your circumstances."

"Maybe he does not," said she, with a half-sigh. Then she looked up into his face again. "I am sad at the thought of going, monsieur," she surprised him by saying.

"Sad?" he cried. Then he laughed. "But what can there be to sadden you?"

"This, monsieur: that after to-night it is odds I shall never see you more." She said it without hesitation and without coquetry, for her upbringing had been simple and natural in an atmosphere different far from that in which had been reared the courtly women he had known. "You will return to Paris and the great world, and I shall live out my life in this, little corner of Dauphiny. You will forget me in the bustle of your career, monsieur; but I shall always hold your memory very dear and very gratefully. You are the only friend I have ever known since my father died excepting Florimond, though it is so long since I have seen him, and he never came to me in times of stress as you have done."

"Mademoiselle," he answered, touched despite himself more touched than he could have believed possible to his callous, world-worn nature—"you make me very proud; you make me feel a little better than I am, for if I have earned your regard and friendship, there must be some good in old Garnache. Believe me,

mademoiselle, I too shall not forget."

And thereafter they remained a spell in silence, she sitting by the window, gazing out into the bright October sky, he standing by her chair, thoughtfully considering her brown head so gracefully set upon her little shoulders. A feeling came to him that was odd and unusual; he sought to interpret it, and he supposed it to mean that he wished that at some time in the dim past he might have married some woman who would have borne him for daughter such a one as this.

CHAPTER XV. THE CONFERENCE

The matter that brought Monsieur de Tressan to Condillac—and brought him in most fearful haste—was the matter of the courier who had that day arrived at the chateau.

News of it had reached the ears of my Lord Seneschal. His mind had been a prey to uneasiness concerning this business of rebellion in which he had so rashly lent a hand, and he was anxious to know whence came this courier and what news he brought. But for all his haste he had paused—remembering it was the Marquise he went to visit—to don the gorgeous yellow suit with the hanging sleeves which he had had from Paris, and the crimson sash he had bought at Taillemant's, all in the very latest mode.

Thus arrayed, his wig well curled and a clump of it caught in ribbon of flame-coloured silk on the left side, his sword hanging from belt and carriages richly wrought with gold, and the general courtier-like effect rather marred by the heavy riding-boots which he would have liked to leave behind yet was constrained to wear, he presented himself before the Dowager, hiding his anxiety in a melting smile, and the latter in the profoundest of bows.

The graciousness of his reception overwhelmed him almost, for in his supreme vanity he lacked the wit to see that this cordiality might be dictated by no more than

the need they had of him at Condillac. A lackey placed a great chair for him by the fire that he might warm himself after his evening ride, and the Dowager, having ordered lights, sat herself opposite him with the hearth between them.

He simpered awhile and toyed with trivialities of speech before he gave utterance to the matter that absorbed him. Then, at last, when they were alone, he loosed the question that was bubbling on his lips.

“I hear a courier came to Condillac to-day.”

For answer she told him what he sought to learn, whence came that courier, and what the message that he brought.

“And so, Monsieur de Tressan,” she ended, “my days at Condillac are numbered.”

“Why so?” he asked, “since you say that Florimond has adopted towards you a friendly tone. Surely he would not drive his father’s widow hence?”

She smiled at the fire in a dreamy, pensive manner.

“No,” said she, “he would not drive me hence. He has offered me the shelter of Condillac for as long as it may pleasure me to make it my home.”

“Excellent!” he exclaimed, rubbing his little fat hands and screwing the little features of his huge red face into the grotesque semblance of a smile. “What need to talk of going, then?”

“What need?” she echoed, in a voice dull and concentrated. “Do you ask that, Tressan? Do you think I should elect to live upon the charity of this man?”

For all that the Lord Seneschal may have been dull-witted, yet he had wit enough to penetrate to the very marrow of her meaning.

“You must hate Florimond very bitterly,” said he. She shrugged her shoulders.

“I possess, I think, the faculty of feeling strongly. I can love well, monsieur, and I can hate well. It is one or the other with me. And as cordially as I love my own son Marius, as cordially do I detest this coxcomb Florimond.”

She expressed no reasons for her hatred of her late husband's elder son. Hers were not reasons that could easily be put into words. They were little reasons, trivial grains of offence which through long years had accumulated into a mountain. They had their beginning in the foolish grievance that had its birth with her own son, when she had realized that but for that rosy-cheeked, well-grown boy borne to the Marquis by his first wife, Marius would have been heir to Condillac. Her love of her own child and her ambitions for him, her keen desire to see him fill an exalted position in the world, caused her a thousand times a day to wish his half-brother dead. Yet Florimond had flourished and grown, and as he grew he manifested a character which, with all its imperfections, was more lovable than the nature of her own offspring. And their common father had never seen aught but the faults of Marius and the virtues of Florimond. She had resented this, and Marius had resented it; and Marius, having inherited with his mother's beauty his mother's arrogant, dominant spirit, had returned with insolence such admonitions as from time to time his father gave him, and thus the breach had grown. Later, since he could not be heir to Condillac, the Marquise's eyes, greedy of advancement for him, had fallen covetously upon the richer La Vauvraye, whose lord had then no son, whose heiress was a little girl.

By an alliance easy to compass, since the lords of Condillac and La Vauvraye were lifelong friends, Marius's fortunes might handsomely have been mended. Yet when she herself bore the suggestion of it to the Marquis, he had seized upon it, approved it, but adopted it for Florimond's benefit instead.

Thereafter war had raged fiercely in the family of Condillac—a war between the Marquis and Florimond on the one side, and the Marquise and Marius on the other. And so bitterly was it waged that it was by the old Marquis's suggestion that at last Florimond had gone upon his travels to see the world and carry arms in foreign service.

Her hopes that he would take his death, as was a common thing when warring, rose high—so high as to become almost assurance, a thing to be reckoned with. Florimond would return no more, and her son should fill the place to which he was entitled by his beauty of person and the high mental gifts his doting mother saw in him.

Yet the months grew into years, and at long intervals full of hope for the Marquise news came of Florimond, and the news was ever that he was well and thriving, gathering honours and drinking deep of life.

And now, at last, when matters seemed to have been tumbled into her lap that she might dispose of them as she listed; now, when in her anxiety to see her son supplant his step-brother in the possession of La Vauvraye—if not, perhaps, in that of Condillac as well she had done a rashness which might end in making her and Marius outlaws, news came that this hated Florimond was at the door; tardily returned, yet returned in time to overthrow her schemes and to make her son the pauper that her husband's will had seemed to aim at rendering him.

Her mind skimmed lightly over all these matters, seeking somewhere some wrong that should stand out stark and glaring, upon which she might seize, and offer it to the Seneschal as an explanation of her hatred. But nowhere could she find the thing she sought. Her hatred had for foundation a material too impalpable to be fashioned into words. Tressan's voice aroused her from her thoughts.

"Have you laid no plans, madame?" he asked her. "It were surely a madness now to attempt to withstand the Marquis."

"The Marquis? Ah yes—Florimond." She sat forward out of the shadows in which her great chair enveloped her, and let candle and firelight play about the matchless beauty of her perfect face. There was a flush upon it, the flush of battle; and she was about to tell the Seneschal that not while one stone of Condillac should stand upon another, not while a gasp of breath remained in her frail body, would she surrender.

But she checked her rashness. Well might it be that in the end she should abandon such a purpose. Tressan was ugly as a toad, the most absurd, ridiculous bridegroom that ever led woman to the altar. Yet rumour ran that he was rich, and as a last resource, for the sake of his possessions she might bring herself to endure his signal shortcomings.

“I have taken no resolve as yet,” said she, in a wistful voice. “I founded hopes upon Marius which Marius threatens to frustrate. I think I had best resign myself to the poverty of my Touraine home.”

And then the Seneschal realized that the time was now. The opportunity he might have sought in vain was almost thrust upon him. In the spirit he blessed Florimond for returning so opportunely; in the flesh he rose from the chair and, without more ado, he cast himself upon his knees before the Dowager. He cast himself down, and the Dowager experienced a faint stirring of surprise that she heard no flop such as must attend the violent falling of so fat a body. But the next instant, realizing the purpose of his absurd posture, she shrank back with a faint gasp, and her face was mercifully blurred to his sight once more amid the shadows of her chair. Thus was he spared the look of utter loathing, of unconquerable, irrepressible disgust that leapt into her countenance.

His voice quivered with ridiculous emotion, his little fat red fingers trembled as he outheld them in a theatrical gesture of supplication.

“Never contemplate poverty, madame, until you have discarded me,” he implored her. “Say but that you will, and you shall be lady of Tressan. All that I have would prove but poor adornment to a beauty such as yours, and I should shrink from offering it you, were it not that, with it all, I can offer you the fondest heart in France. Marquise—Clotilde, I cast myself humbly at your feet. Do with me as you will. I love you.”

By an effort she crushed down her loathing of him—a loathing that grew a

hundredfold as she beheld him now transformed by his amorousness into the semblance almost of a satyr—and listened to his foolish rantings.

As Marquise de Condillac it hurt her pride to listen and not have him whipped for his audacity; as a woman it insulted her. Yet the Marquise and the woman she alike repressed. She would give him no answer—she could not, so near was she to fainting with disdain of him—yet must she give him hope against the time when, should all else fail, she might have to swallow the bitter draught he was now holding to her lips. So she temporized.

She controlled her voice into a tone of gentle sadness; she set a mask of sorrow upon her insolent face.

“Monsieur, monsieur,” she sighed, and so far overcame her nausea as for an instant to touch his hand in a little gesture of caress, “you must not speak so to a widow of six months, nor must I listen.”

The quivering grew in his hands and voice; but no longer did they shake through fear of a rebuff: they trembled now in the eager strength of the hope he gathered from her words. She was so beautiful, so peerless, so noble, so proud—and he so utterly unworthy—that naught but her plight had given him courage to utter his proposal. And she answered him in such terms!

“You give me hope, Marquise? If I come again—?”

She sighed, and her face, which was once more within the light, showed a look of sad inquiry.

“If I thought that what you have said, you have said out of pity, because you fear lest my necessities should hurt me, I could give you no hope at all. I have my pride, mon ami. But if what you have said you would still have said though I had continued mistress of Condillac, then, Tressan, you may repeat it to me hereafter, at a season when I may listen.”

His joy welled up and overflowed in him as overflows a river in time of spate.

He bent forward, caught her hand, and bore it to his lips.

“Clotilde!” he cried, in a smothered voice; then the door opened, and Marius stepped into the long chamber.

At the creaking sound of the opening door the Seneschal bestirred himself to rise. Even the very young care not so to be surprised, how much less, then, a man well past the prime of life? He came up laboriously—the more laboriously by virtue of his very efforts to show himself still nimble in his mistress’s eyes. Upon the intruder he turned a crimson, furious face, perspiration gleaming like varnish on brow and nose. At sight of Marius, who stood arrested, scowling villainously upon the pair, the fire died suddenly from his glance.

“Ah, my dear Marius,” said he, with a flourish and an air of being mightily at his ease. But the young man’s eyes went over and beyond him to rest in a look of scrutiny upon his mother. She had risen too, and he had been in time to see the startled manner of her rising. In her cheeks there was a guilty flush, but her eyes boldly met and threw back her son’s regard.

Marius came slowly down the room, and no word was spoken. The Seneschal cleared his throat with noisy nervousness. Madame stood hand on hip, the flush fading slowly, her glance resuming its habitual lazy insolence. By the fire Marius paused and kicked the logs into a blaze, regardless of the delicate fabric of his rosetted shoes.

“Monsieur le Seneschal,” said madame calmly, “came to see us in the matter of the courier.”

“Ah!” said Marius, with an insolent lifting of his brows and a sidelong look at Tressan; and Tressan registered in his heart a vow that when he should have come to wed the mother, he would not forget to take payment for that glance from her pert son.

“Monsieur le Comte will remain and sup with us before riding back to Grenoble,”

she added.

“Ah!” said he again, in the same tone. And that for the moment was all he said. He remained by the fire, standing between them where he had planted himself in the flesh, as if to symbolize the attitude he intended in the spirit.

But one chance he had, before supper was laid, of a word alone with his mother, in her own closet.

“Madame,” he said, his sternness mingling with alarm, “are you mad that you encourage the suit of this hedgehog Tressan?”

She looked him up and down with a deliberate eye, her lip curling a little.

“Surely, Marius, it is my own concern.”

“Not so,” he answered her, and his grasp fastened almost viciously on her wrist. “I think that it is mine as well. Mother, bethink you,” and his tone changed to an imploring key, “bethink you what you would do! Would you—you—mate with such a thing as that?”

His emphasis of the pronoun was very eloquent. Not in all the words of the French language could he have told her better how high he placed her in his thoughts, how utterly she must fall, how unutterably be soiled by an alliance with Tressan.

“I had hoped you would have saved me from it, Marius,” she answered him, her eyes seeming to gaze down into the depths of his. “At La Vauvraye I had hoped to live out my widowhood in tranquil dignity. But—” She let her arms fall sharply to her sides, and uttered a little sneering laugh.

“But, mother,” he cried, “between the dignity of La Vauvraye and the indignity of Tressan, surely there is some middle course?”

“Aye,” she answered scornfully, “starvation on a dunghill in Touraine—or something near akin to it, for which I have no stomach.”

He released her wrist and stood with bent head, clenching and unclenching his long

white hands, and she watched him, watching in him the working of his proud and stubborn spirit.

“Mother,” he cried at last, and the word sounded absurd between them, by so little did he seem the younger of the twain, “mother, you shall not do it you must not!”

“You leave me little alternative—alas!” sighed she. “Had you been more adroit you had been wed by now, Marius, and the future would give us no concern. As it is, Florimond comes home, and we—” She spread her hands and thrust out her nether lip in a grimace that was almost ugly. Then: “Come,” she said briskly. “Supper is laid, and my Lord Seneschal will be awaiting us.”

And before he could reply she had swept past him and taken her way below. He followed gloomily, and in gloom sat he at table, never heeding the reckless gaiety of the Seneschal and the forced mirth of the Marquise. He well understood the sort of tacit bargain that his mother had made with him. She had seen her advantage in his loathing of the proposed union with Tressan, and she had used it to the full. Either he must compel Valerie to wed him this side of Saturday or resign himself to see his mother—his beautiful, peerless mother—married to this skin of lard that called itself a man.

Living, he had never entertained for his father a son’s respect, nor, dead, did he now reverence his memory as becomes a son. But in that hour, as he sat at table, facing this gross wooer of his mother’s, his eyes were raised to the portrait of the florid-visaged haughty Marquis de Condillac, where it looked down upon them from the panelled wall, and from his soul he offered up to that portrait of his dead sire an apology for the successor whom his widow destined him.

He ate little, but drank great draughts, as men will when their mood is sullen and dejected, and the heat of the wine, warming his veins and lifting from him some of the gloom that had settled over him, lent him anon a certain recklessness very different from the manner of his sober moments.

Chancing suddenly to raise his eyes from the cup into which he had been gazing, absorbed as gazes a seer into his crystal, he caught on the Seneschal's lips so odious a smile, in the man's eyes so greedy, hateful a leer as he bent them on the Marquise, that he had much ado not to alter the expression of that flabby face by hurling at it the cup he held.

He curbed himself; he smiled sardonically upon the pair; and in that moment he swore that be the cost what it might, he would frustrate the union of those two. His thoughts flew to Valerie, and the road they took was fouled with the mud of ugly deeds. A despair, grim at first, then mocking, took possession of him. He loved Valerie to distraction. Loved her for herself, apart from all worldly advantages that must accrue to him from an alliance with her. His mother saw in that projected marriage no more than the acquisition of the lands of La Vauvraye, and she may even have thought that he himself saw no more. In that she was wrong; but because of it she may have been justified of her impatience with him at the tardiness, the very clumsiness with which he urged his suit. How was she to know that it was just the sincerity of his passion made him clumsy? For like many another, normally glib, self-assured, and graceful, Marius grew halting, shy, and clumsy only where he loved.

But in the despair that took him now the quality of his passion seemed to change. Partly it was the wine, partly the sight of this other lover—of whom there must be an end—whose very glance seemed to him an insult to his mother. His imagination had taken fire that night, and it had ripened him for any villainy. The Seneschal and the wine, between them, had opened the floodgates of all that was evil in his nature, and that evil thundered out in a great torrent that bid fair to sweep all before it.

And suddenly, unexpectedly for the others, who were by now resigned to his moody silence, the evil found expression. The Marquise had spoken of something—something of slight importance—that must be done before Florimond

returned. Abruptly Marius swung round in his seat to face his mother. “Must this Florimond return?” he asked, and for all that he uttered no more words, so ample in their expression were those four that he had uttered and the tone of them, that his meaning left little work to the imagination.

Madame turned to stare at him, surprise ineffable in her glance—not at the thing that he suggested, but at the abruptness with which the suggestion came. The cynical, sneering tone rang in her ears after the words were spoken, and she looked in his face for a confirmation of their full purport.

She observed the wine-flush on his cheek, the wine-glitter in his eye, and she remarked the slight smile on his lips and the cynical assumption of nonchalance with which he fingered the jewel in his ear as he returned her gaze. She beheld now in her son a man more purposeful than she had ever known before.

A tense silence had followed his words, and the Lord Seneschal gaped at him, some of the colour fading from his plethoric countenance, suspecting as he did the true drift of Marius’s suggestion. At last it was madame who spoke—very softly, with a narrowing of the eyes.

“Call Fortunio,” was all she said, but Marius understood full well the purpose for which she would have Fortunio called.

With a half-smile he rose, and going to the door he bade his page who was idling in the anteroom go summon the captain. Then he paced slowly back, not to the place he had lately occupied at table, but to the hearth, where he took his stand with his shoulders squared to the overmantel.

Fortunio came, fair-haired and fresh-complexioned as a babe, his supple, not ungraceful figure tawdrily clad in showy clothes of poor material the worse for hard usage and spilt wine. The Countess bade him sit, and with her own hands she poured a cup of Anjou for him.

In some wonder, and, for all his ordinary self-possession, with a little awkwardness,

the captain did her bidding, and with an apologetic air he took the seat she offered him.

He drank this wine, and here was a spell of silence till Marius, grown impatient, brutally put the thing for which the Marquise sought delicate words.

“We have sent for you, Fortunio,” said he, in a blustering tone, “to inquire of you what price you’d ask to cut the throat of my brother, the Marquis de Condillac.”

The Seneschal sank back in his chair with a gasp. The captain, a frown between his frank-seeming, wide-set eyes, started round to look at the boy. The business was by no means too strong for the ruffler’s stomach, but the words in which it was conveyed to him most emphatically were.

“Monsieur de Condillac,” said he, with an odd assumption of dignity, “I think you have mistaken your man. I am a soldier, not a cut-throat.”

“But yes,” the Marquise soothed him, throwing herself instantly into the breach, and laying a long, slender hand upon the frayed green velvet of the captain’s sleeve. “What my son means and what he says are vastly different things.”

“It will sorely tax your wits, madame,” laughed Marius brutally, “to make clear that difference.”

And then the Seneschal nervously cleared his throat and muttering that it waxed late and he must be riding home, made shift to rise. Him, too, the Marquise at once subdued. She was not minded that he should go just yet. It might be useful to her hereafter to have had him present at this conference, into which she meant to draw him until she should have made him one with them, a party to their guilt. For the task she needed not over many words: just one or two and a melting glance or so, and the rebellion in his bosom was quelled at once.

But with the captain her wiles were not so readily successful. He had no hopes of winning her to wife—haply no desire, since he was not a man of very great ambitions. On the other hand, he had against him the very worst record in France,

and for all that he might embark upon this business under the auspices of the Lord Seneschal himself, he knew not how far the Lord Seneschal might dare to go thereafter to save him from a hanging, should it come to that.

He said as much in words. In a business of this kind, he knew from experience, the more difficulties he advanced, the better a bargain he drove in the end; and if he was to be persuaded to risk his neck in this, he should want good payment. But even for good payment on this occasion he was none too sure as yet that he would let himself be persuaded.

“Monsieur Fortunio,” the Marquise said, very softly, “heed not Monsieur Marius’s words. Attend to me. The Marquis de Condillac, as no doubt you will have learned for yourself, is lying at La Rochette. Now it happens that he is noxious to us—let the reasons be what they may. We need a friend to put him out of our way. Will you be that friend?”

“You will observe,” sneered Marius, “how wide a difference there is between what the Marquise suggests and my own frank question of what price you would take to cut my brother’s throat.”

“I observe no difference, which is what you would say,” Fortunio answered truculently, his head well back, his brown eyes resentful of offence—for none can be so resentful of imputed villainy as your villain who is thorough-paced. “And,” he concluded, “I return you the same answer, madame—that I am no cut-throat.”

She repressed her anger at Marius’s sneering interference, and made a little gesture of dismay with her eloquent white hands.

“But we do not ask you to cut a throat.”

“I have heard amiss, then,” said he, his insolence abating nothing.

“You have heard aright, but you have understood amiss. There are other ways of doing these things. If it were but the cutting of a throat, should we have sent for you? There are a dozen in the garrison would have sufficed for our purpose.”

“What is it, then, you need?” quoth he.

“We want an affair contrived with all decency. The Marquis is at the Sanglier Noir at La Rochette. You can have no difficulty in finding him, and having found him, less difficulty still in giving or provoking insult.”

“Excellent,” murmured Marius from the background. “It is such an enterprise as should please a ready swordsman of your calibre, Fortunio.”

“A duel?” quoth the fellow, and his insolence went out of him, thrust out by sheer dismay; his mouth fell open. A duel was another affair altogether. “But, Sangdieu! what if he should slay me? Have you thought of that?”

“Slay you?” cried the Marquise, her eyes resting on his face with an expression as of wonder at such a question. “You jest, Fortunio.”

“And he with the fever,” put in Marius, sneering.

“Ah!” muttered Fortunio. “He has the fever? The fever is something. But—but—accidents will happen.”

“Florimond was ever an indifferent swordsman,” murmured Marius dreamily, as if communing with himself.

The captain wheeled upon him once more.

“Why, then, Monsieur Marius,” said he, “since that is so and you are skilled—as skilled as am I, or more—and he has a fever, where is the need to hire me to the task?”

“Where?” echoed Marius. “What affair may that be of yours? We ask you to name a price on which you will do this thing. Have done with counter-questions.”

Marius was skilled with the foils, as Fortunio said, but he cared not for unbaited steel, and he was conscious of it, so that the captain’s half-sneer had touched him on the raw. But he was foolish to take that tone in answer. There was a truculent, Southern pride in the ruffler which sprang immediately into life and which naught

that they could say thereafter would stamp out.

“Must I say again that you mistake your man?” was his retort, and as he spoke he rose, as though to signify that the subject wearied him and that his remaining to pursue it must be idle. “I am not of those to whom you can say: ‘I need such a one killed, name me the price at which you’ll be his butcher’.”

The Marquise wrung her hands in pretty mimicry of despair, and poured out soothing words, as one might pour oil upon stormy waters. The Seneschal sat in stolid silence, a half-scared spectator of this odd scene, what time the Marquise talked and talked until she had brought Fortunio back to some measure of subjection.

Such reasoning as she made use of she climaxed by an offer of no less a sum than a hundred pistoles. The captain licked his lips and pulled at his mustachios. For all his vaunted scorn of being a butcher at a price, now that he heard the price he seemed not half so scornful.

“Tell me again the thing that you need doing and the manner of it,” said he, as one who was moved to reconsider. She told him, and when she had done he made a compromise.

“If I go upon this business, madame, I go not alone.”

“Oh, as for that,” said Marius, “it shall be as you will. Take what men you want with you.”

“And hang with them afterwards, maybe,” he sneered, his insolence returning. “The hundred pistoles would avail me little then. Look you, Monsieur de Condillac, and you, madame, if I go, I’ll need to take with me a better hostage than the whole garrison of this place. I’ll need for shield some one who will see to it that he is not hurt himself, just as I shall see to it that he is hurt before I am.”

“What do you mean? Speak out, Fortunio,” the Marquise bade him.

“I mean, madame, that I will go, not to do this thing, but to stand by and render help if help be needed. Let Monsieur de Condillac go, and I will go with him, and I will undertake to see to it that he returns unhurt and that we leave the other stark.”

Both started, and the Seneschal leaned heavily upon the table. He was not, with all his faults, a man of blood, and this talk of butchery turned him sick and faint.

Vainly now did the Marquise seek to alter the captain’s resolution; but in this she received a sudden check from Marius himself. He cut in upon her arguments to ask the captain:

“How can you promise so much? Do you mean that you and I must fall upon him? You forget that he will have men about him. A duel is one thing, a rough-and-tumble another, and we shall fare none so well in this, I’m thinking.”

The captain closed one eye, and a leer of subtle cunning overspread his face.

“I’ve thought of that,” said he. “Neither a duel nor a rough-and-tumble do I propose, but something between the two; something that shall seem a duel yet be a rough-and-tumble.”

“Explain yourself.”

“What further explanation does it ask? We come upon Monsieur le Marquis where his men are not. We penetrate, let us say, into his chamber. I turn the key in the door. We are alone with him and you provoke him. He is angry, and must fight you there and then. I am your friend; I must fill the office of second for both sides. You engage, and I stand aside and let you fight it out. You say he is indifferently skilled with the sword, and, in addition, that he has a fever. Thus you should contrive to put your steel through him, and a duel it will have been. But if by luck or skill he should have you in danger, I shall be at hand to flick in my sword at the right moment and make an opening through which you may send yours home.”

“Believe me it were better—” began the Dowager. But Marius, who of a sudden was much taken with the notion, again broke in.

“Are you to be depended upon to make no mistake, Fortunio?”

“Per Bacco!” swore the ruffler. “A mistake must cost me a hundred pistoles. I think you may depend upon me there. If I err at all, it will be on the side of eagerness to see you make short work of him. You have my answer now, monsieur. If we talk all night, you shall not move me further. But if my proposal suits you, I am your man.”

“And I yours, Fortunio,” answered Marius, and there was a ring almost of exultation in his voice.

The Dowager looked from one to the other, as if she were weighing the men and satisfying herself that Marius ran no risk. She put a question or two to her son, another to the captain; then, seeming satisfied with what had been agreed, she nodded her head and told them they had best be stirring with the dawn.

“You will have light enough by half-past six. Do not delay later in taking the road. And see that you are back here by nightfall; I shall be anxious till you are returned.”

She poured wine again for the captain, and Marius coming up to the table filled himself a glass, which he tossed off. The Marquise was speaking to Tressan.

“Will you not drink to the success of the venture?” she asked him, in a coaxing tone, her eyes upon his own. “I think we are like to see the end of our troubles now, monsieur, and Marius shall be lord both of Condillac and La Vauvraye.”

And the gross, foolish Seneschal, under the spell of her magnificent eyes, slowly raised his cup to his lips and drank to the success of that murderous business. Marius stood still, a frown between his eyes haled thither by the mention of La Vauvraye. He might be winning it, as his mother said, but he would have preferred to have won it differently. Then the frown was smoothed away; a sardonic smile replaced it; another cup of wine he poured himself. Then, without word to any there, he turned on his heel and went from the room, a trifle unsteady in his gait, yet with such lines of purposefulness in the way he bore himself that the three of them stared after him in dull surprise.

CHAPTER XVI. THE UNEXPECTED

In her apartments in the Northern Tower Valerie had supped, and—to spare Monsieur de Garnache the full indignity of that part of the offices he was charged with—she had herself removed the cloth and set the things in the guard-room, where they might lie till morning. When that was done—and despite her protests, Garnache had insisted upon lending a hand—the Parisian reminded her that it was already after nine, and urged her to make such preparations as incumbed her for their journey.

“My preparations are soon made,” she assured him with a smile. “I need but what I may carry in a cloak.”

They fell to talking of their impending flight, and they laughed together at the discomfiture that would be the Dowager’s and her son’s when, in the morning, they came to discover the empty cage. From that they passed on to talk of Valerie herself, of her earlier life at La Vauvraye, and later the conversation shifted to Garnache, and she questioned him touching the warring he had seen in early youth, and afterwards asked him for particulars of Paris—that wonderful city which to her mind was the only earthly parallel of Paradise—and of the life at Court.

Thus in intimate talk did they while away the time of waiting, and in the hour that sped they came, perhaps, to know more of each other than they had done hitherto. Intimate, indeed, had they unconsciously become already. Their singular position, locked together in that tower—a position utterly impossible under any but the conditions that attended it—had conduced to that good-fellowship, whilst the girl’s trust and dependence upon the man, the man’s observance of that trust, and his determination to show her that it had not been misplaced, had done the rest.

But to-night they seemed to have drawn nearer in spirit to each other, and that, maybe, it was that prompted Valerie to sigh, and in her sweet, unthinking innocence to say again:

“I am truly sorry, Monsieur de Garnache, that our sojourn here is coming to an end.”

He was no coxcomb, and he set no false value on the words. He laughed for answer, as he rejoined:

“Not so am I, mademoiselle. Nor shall I know peace of mind again until this ill-omened chateau is a good three leagues or so behind us. Sh! What was that?”

He came instantly to his feet, his face intent and serious. He had been sitting at his ease in an armchair, over the back of which he had tossed the baldric from which his sword depended. The clang of the heavy door below, striking the wall as it was pushed open, had reached his ears.

“Can it be time already?” asked mademoiselle; yet a panic took her, and she blenched a little.

He shook his head.

“Impossible,” said he; “it is not more than ten o’clock. Unless that fool Arsenio has blundered—” He stopped. “Sh!” he whispered. “Some one is coming here.”

And suddenly he realized the peril that might lie in being found thus in her company. It alarmed him more than did the visit itself, so unusual at this hour. He saw that he had not time to reach the guard-room; he would be caught in the act of coming forth, and that might be interpreted by the Dowager or her son—if it should happen to be one or the other of them—as a hurried act of flight such as guilt might prompt. Perhaps he exaggerated the risk; but their fortunes at Condillac had reached a point where they must not be jeopardized by any chance however slight.

“To your chamber, mademoiselle,” he whispered fearfully, and he pointed to the door of the inner room. “Lock yourself in. Quick! Sh!” And he signed frantically to her to go silently.

Swift and quietly as a mouse she glided from the room and softly closed the door of her chamber and turned the key in a lock, which Garnache had had the foresight to

keep well oiled. He breathed more freely when it was done.

A step sounded in the guard-room. He sank without a rustle into the chair from which he had risen, rested his head against the back of it, closed his eyes, opened his mouth, and dissembled sleep.

The steps came swiftly across the guard-room floor, soft, as of one lightly shod; and Garnache wondered was it the mother or the son, just as he wondered what this ill-come visitor might be seeking.

The door of the antechamber was pushed gently open—it had stood ajar—and under the lintel appeared the slender figure of Marius, still in his brown velvet suit as Garnache last had seen him. He paused a moment to peer into the chamber. Then he stepped forward, frowning to behold “Battista” so cosily ensconced.

“Ola there!” he cried, and kicked the sentry’s outstretched legs, the more speedily to wake him. “Is this the watch you keep?”

Garnache opened his eyes and stared a second dully at the disturber of his feigned slumbers. Then, as if being more fully awakened he recognized his master, he heaved himself suddenly to his feet and bowed.

“Is this the watch you keep?” quoth Marius again, and Garnache, scanning the youth’s face with foolishly smiling eyes, noted the flush on his cheek, the odd glitter in his handsome eyes, and even caught a whiff of wine upon his breath. Alarm grew in Garnache’s mind, but his face maintained its foolish vacancy, its inane smile. He bowed again and, with a wave of the hands towards the inner chamber,

“La damigella a la,” said he.

For all that Marius had no Italian he understood the drift of the words, assisted as they were by the man’s expressive gesture. He sneered cruelly.

“It would be an ugly thing for you, my ugly friend, if she were not,” he answered. “Away with you. I shall call you when I need you.” And he pointed to the door.

Garnache experienced some dismay, some fear even. He plied his wits, and he determined that he had best seem to apprehend from his gestures Marius's meaning; but apprehend it in part only, and go no further than the other side of that door.

He bowed, therefore, for the third time, and with another of his foolish grins he shuffled out of the chamber, pulling the door after him, so that Marius should not see how near at hand he stayed.

Marius, without further heeding him, stepped to mademoiselle's door and rapped on a panel with brisk knuckles.

"Who is there?" she inquired from within.

"It is I—Marius. Open, I have something I must say to you."

"Will it not keep till morning?"

"I shall be gone by then," he answered impatiently, "and much depends upon my seeing you ere I go. So open. Come!"

There followed a pause, and Garnache in the outer room set his teeth and prayed she might not anger Marius. He must be handled skillfully, lest their flight should be frustrated at the last moment. He prayed, too, that there might be no need for his intervention. That would indeed be the end of all—a shipwreck within sight of harbour. He promised himself that he would not lightly intervene. For the rest this news of Marius's intended departure filled him with a desire to know something of the journey on which he was bound:

Slowly mademoiselle's door opened. White and timid she appeared.

"What do you want, Marius?"

"Now and always and above all things the sight of you, Valerie," said he, and the flushed cheek, the glittering eye, and wine-laden breath were as plain to her as they had been to Garnache, and they filled her with a deeper terror. Nevertheless she came forth at his bidding.

“I see that you were not yet abed,” said he. “It is as well. We must have a talk.” He set a chair for her and begged her to be seated; then he perched himself on the table, his hands gripping the edges of it on either side of him, and he turned his eyes upon her.

“Valerie,” he said slowly, “the Marquis de Condillac, my brother, is at La Rochette.”

“He is coming home!” she cried, clasping her hands and feigning surprise in word and glance.

Marius shook his head and smiled grimly.

“No,” said he. “He is not coming home. That is—not unless you wish it.”

“Not unless I wish it? But naturally I wish it!”

“Then, Valerie, if you would have what you wish, so must I. If Florimond is ever to come to Condillac again, you must be my wife.”

He leaned towards her now, supported by his elbow, so that his face was close to hers, a deeper flush upon it, a brighter glitter in his black eyes, his vinous breath enveloping and suffocating her. She shrank back, her hands locking themselves one in the other till the knuckles showed white.

“What—what is it you mean?” she faltered.

“No more than I have said; no less. If you love him well enough to sacrifice yourself,” and his lips curled sardonically at the word, “then marry me and save him from his doom.”

“What doom?” Her voice came mechanically, her lips seeming scarce to move.

He swung down from the table and stood before her.

“I will tell you,” he said, in a voice very full of promise. “I love you, Valerie, above all else on earth or, I think, in heaven; and I’ll not yield you to him. Say ‘No’ to me now, and at daybreak I start for La Rochette to win you from him at point of sword.”

Despite her fears she could not repress a little smile of scorn.

“Is that all?” said she. “Why, if you are so rash, it is yourself, assuredly, will be slain.”

He smiled tranquilly at that reflection upon his courage and his skill.

“So might it befall if I went alone,” said he. She understood. Her eyes dilated with horror, with loathing of him. The angry words that sprang to her lips were not to be denied.

“You cur, you cowardly assassin!” she blazed at him. “I might have guessed that in some such cutthroat manner would your vaunt of winning me at the sword-point be accomplished.”

She watched the colour fade from his cheeks, and the ugly, livid hue that spread in its room to his very lips. Yet it did not daunt her. She was on her feet, confronting him ere he had time to speak again. Her eyes flashed, and her arm pointed quivering to the door.

“Go!” she bade him, her voice harsh for once. “Out of my sight! Go! Do your worst, so that you leave me. I’ll hold no traffic with you.”

“Will you not?” said he, through setting teeth, and suddenly he caught the wrist of that outstretched arm. But she saw nothing of immediate danger. The only danger that she knew was the danger that threatened Florimond, and little did that matter since at midnight she was to leave Condillac to reach La Rochette in time to warn her betrothed. The knowledge gave her confidence and an added courage.

“You have offered me your bargain,” she told him. “You have named your price and you have heard my refusal. Now go.”

“Not yet awhile,” said he, in a voice so odiously sweet that Garnache caught his breath.

He drew her towards him. Despite her wild struggles he held her fast against his breast. Do what she would, he rained his hot kisses on her face and hair, till at last,

freeing a hand, she smote him with all her might across the face.

He let her go then. He fell back with an oath, a patch of fingermarks showing red on his white countenance.

“That blow has killed Florimond de Condillac,” he told her viciously. “He dies at noon to-morrow. Ponder it, my pretty.”

“I care not what you do so that you leave me,” she answered defiantly, restraining by a brave effort the tears of angry distress that welled up from her stricken heart. And no less stricken, no less angry was Garnache where he listened. It was by an effort that he had restrained himself from bursting in upon them when Marius had seized her. The reflection that were he to do so all would irretrievably be ruined alone had stayed him.

Marius eyed the girl a moment, his face distorted by the rage that was in him.

“By God!” he swore, “if I cannot have your love, I’ll give you cause enough to hate me.”

“Already have you done that most thoroughly,” said she. And Garnache cursed this pertness of hers which was serving to dare him on.

The next moment there broke from her a startled cry. Marius had seized her again and was crushing her frail body in his arms.

“I shall kiss your lips before I go, ma mie,” said he, his voice thick now with a passion that was not all of anger. And then, while he still struggled to have his way with her, a pair of arms took him about the waist like hoops of steel.

In his surprise he let her free, and in that moment he was swung back and round and cast a good six paces down the room.

He came to a standstill by the table, at which he clutched to save himself from falling, and turned bewildered, furious eyes upon “Battista,” by whom he now dimly realized that he had been assailed.

Garnache's senses had all left him in that moment when Valerie had cried out. He cast discretion to the winds; reason went out of him, and only blind anger remained to drive him into immediate action. And as suddenly as that flood of rage had leaped, as suddenly did it ebb now that he found himself face to face with the outraged Condillac and began to understand the magnitude of the folly he had committed.

Everything was lost now, utterly and irretrievably—lost as a dozen other fine emprises had been by his sudden and ungoverned frenzy. God! What a fool he was! What a cursed, drivelling fool! What, after all, was a kiss or two, compared with all the evil that might now result from his interference? Haply Marius would have taken them and departed, and at midnight they would have been free to go from Condillac.

The future would not have been lacking in opportunities to seek out and kill Marius for that insult.

Why could he not have left the matter to the future? But now, with Florimond to be murdered on the morrow at La Rochette, himself likely to be murdered within the hour at Condillac, Valerie was at their mercy utterly.

Wildly and vainly did he strive even then to cover up the foolish thing that he had done. He bowed apologetically to Marius; he waved his hands and filled the air with Italian phrases, frenziedly uttered, as if by the very vigour of them he sought to drive explanation into his master's brain. Marius watched and listened, but his rage nowise abated; it grew, instead, as if that farrago of a language he did not understand were but an added insult. An oath was all he uttered. Then he swung round and caught Garnache's sword from the chair beside him, where it still rested, and Garnache in that moment cursed the oversight. Whipping the long, keen blade from its sheath, Marius bore down upon the rash meddler.

"Par Dieu!" he swore between his teeth. "We'll see the colour of your dirty blood, you that lay hands upon a gentleman."

But before he could send home the weapon, before Garnache could move to defend himself, Valerie had slipped between them. Marius looked into her white, determined face, and was smitten with surprise. What was this hind to her that she should interfere at the risk of taking the sword herself?

Then a slow smile spread upon his face. He was smarting still under her disdain and resistance, as well as under a certain sense of the discomfiture this fellow had put upon him. He saw a way to hurt her, to abase her pride, and cut her to the very soul with shame.

“You are singularly concerned in this man’s life,” said he, an odious undercurrent of meaning in his voice.

“I would not have you murder him,” she answered, “for doing no more than madame your mother bade him.”

“I make no doubt he has proved a very excellent guard,” he sneered.

Even now all might have been well. With that insult Marius might consider that he had taken payment for the discomfiture he had suffered. He might have bethought him that, perhaps, as she said, “Battista” had done no more than observe the orders he had received—a trifle excessively, maybe, yet faithfully nevertheless. Thinking thus, he might even have been content to go his ways and take his fill of vengeance by slaying Florimond upon the morrow. But Garnache’s rash temper, rising anew, tore that last flimsy chance to shreds.

The insult that mademoiselle might overlook might even not have fully understood—set him afire with indignation for her sake. He forgot his role, forgot even that he had no French.

“Mademoiselle,” he cried, and she gasped in her affright at this ruinous indiscretion, “I beg that you will stand aside.” His voice was low and threatening, but his words were woefully distinct.

“Par la mort Dieu!” swore Marius, taken utterly aback. “What may your name

be—you who hitherto have had no French?"

Almost thrusting mademoiselle aside, Garnache stood out to face him, the flush of hot anger showing through the dye on his cheeks.

"My name," said he, "is Martin Marie Rigobert de Garnache, and my business now to make an end of one at least of this obscene brood of Condillac."

And, without more ado, he caught up a chair and held it before him in readiness to receive the other's onslaught.

But Marius hung back an instant—at first in sheer surprise, later in fear. He had some knowledge of the fellow's methods. Even the sword he wielded gave him little confidence opposed to Garnache with a chair. He must have help. His eyes sought the door, measuring the distance. Ere he could reach it Garnache would cut him off. There was nothing for it but to attempt to drive the Parisian back. And so with a sudden rush he advanced to the attack. Garnache fell back and raised his chair, and in that instant mademoiselle once more intervened between them.

"Stand aside, mademoiselle," cried Garnache, who now, grown cool, as was his way when once he was engaged, saw clearly through the purpose formed by Marius. "Stand aside, or we shall have him giving the alarm."

He leapt clear of her to stop Marius's sudden rush for the door. On the very threshold the young man was forced to turn and defend himself, lest his brains be dashed out by that ponderous weapon Garnache was handling with a rare facility. But the mischief was done, in that he had reached the threshold. Backing, he defended himself and gained the anteroom. Garnache followed, but the clumsy chair was defensive rather than offensive, and Marius's sword meanwhile darted above it and below it, forcing him to keep a certain distance.

And now Marius raised his voice and shouted with all the power of his lungs:

"To me! To me! Fortunio! Abdon! To me, you dogs! I am beset."

From the courtyard below rose an echo of his words, repeated in a shout by the sentinel, who had overheard them, and they caught the swift fall of the fellow's feet as he ran for help. Furious, picturing to himself how the alarm would spread like a conflagration through the chateau, cursing his headstrong folly yet determined that Marius at least should not escape him, Garnache put forth his energies to hinder him from gaining the door that opened on to the stairs. From the doorway of the antechamber mademoiselle, with a white face and terrified eyes, watched the unequal combat and heard the shouts for help. Anon despair might whelm her at the thought of how they had lost their opportunity of escaping; but for the present she had no thought save for the life of that brave man who was defending himself with an unwieldy chair.

Garnache leapt suddenly aside to take his opponent in the flank and thus turn him from his backward progress towards the outer door. The manoeuvre succeeded, and gradually, always defending himself, Garnache circled farther round him until he was between Marius and the threshold.

And now there came a sound of running feet on the uneven stones of the courtyard. Light gleamed on the staircase, and breathless voices were wafted up to the two men. Garnache bethought him that his last hour was assuredly at hand. Well, if he must take his death, he might as well take it here upon Marius's sword as upon another's. So he would risk it for the sake of leaving upon Marius some token by which he might remember him. He swung his chair aloft, uncovering himself for a second. The young man's sword darted in like a shaft of light. Nimbly Garnache stepped aside to avoid it, and moved nearer his opponent. Down crashed the chair, and down went Marius, stunned and bleeding, under its terrific blow. The sword clattered from his hand and rolled, with a pendulum-like movement, to the feet of Garnache.

The Parisian flung aside his chair and stooped to seize that very welcome blade. He

rose, grasping the hilt and gathering confidence from the touch of that excellently balanced weapon, and he swung round even as Fortunio and two of his braves appeared in the doorway.

CHAPTER XVII. HOW MONSIEUR DE GARNACHE LEFT CONDILLAC

Never was there a man with a better stomach for a fight than Martin de Garnache, nor did he stop to consider that here his appetite in that direction was likely to be indulged to a surfeit. The sight of those three men opposing him, swords drawn and Fortunio armed in addition with a dagger, drove from his mind every other thought, every other consideration but that of the impending battle.

He fell on guard to receive their onslaught, his eyes alert, his lips tight set, his knees like springs of steel, slightly flexed to support his well-poised body.

But they paused a moment in the extremity of their surprise, and Fortunio called to him in Italian to know the meaning of this attitude of his as well as that of Marius, who lay huddled where he had fallen.

Garnache, reckless now, disdaining further subterfuge nor seeking to have recourse to subtleties that could avail him nothing, retorted in French with the announcement of his true name. At that, perceiving that here was some deep treachery at work, they hesitated no longer.

Led by Fortunio they attacked him, and the din they made in the next few minutes with their heavy breathing, their frequent oaths, their stamping and springing this way and that, and, ringing above all, the clash and clatter of sword on sword, filled the chamber and could be heard in the courtyard below.

Minutes sped, yet they gained no advantage on this single man; not one, but a dozen swords did he appear to wield, so rapid were his passes, so ubiquitous his point. Had

he but stood his ground there might have been a speedy end to him, but he retreated slowly towards the door of the antechamber. Valerie still stood there, watching with fearful eyes and bated breath that tremendous struggle which at any moment she expected to see terminate in the death of her only friend.

In her way she was helping Garnache, though she little realized it. The six tapers in the candle-branch she held aloft afforded the only light for that stormy scene, and that light was in the eyes of Garnache's assailants, showing him their faces yet leaving his own in shadow.

He fell back steadily towards that door. He could not see it; but there was not the need. He knew that it was in a direct line with the one that opened upon the stairs, and by the latter he steered his backward course. His aim was to gain the antechamber, although they guessed it not, thinking that he did but retreat through inability to stand his ground. His reasons were that here in this guardroom the best he could do would be to put his back to the wall, where he might pick off one or two before they made an end of him. The place was too bare to suit his urgent, fearful need. Within the inner room there was furniture to spare, with which he might contrive to hamper his opponents and give them such a lusty fight as would live in the memory of those who might survive it for as long as they should chance to live thereafter.

He had no thought of perishing himself, although, to any less concerned, his death, sooner or later, must seem inevitable—the only possible conclusion to this affray, taken as he was. His mind was concerned only with this fight; his business to kill, and not himself to be slain. He knew that presently others would come to support these three. Already, perhaps, they were on their way, and he husbanded his strength against their coming. He was proudly conscious of his own superior skill, for he had studied the art of fence in Italy—its home—during his earlier years, and there was no trick of sword-play with which he was not acquainted, no ruse of service in a

rough-and-tumble in which he was unversed. He was proudly conscious, too, of his supple strength, his endurance, and his great length of reach, and upon all these he counted to help him make a decent fight.

Valerie, watching him, guessed his purpose to be the gaining of the inner chamber, the crossing of the threshold on which she was standing. She drew back a pace or two, almost mechanically, to give him room. The movement went near to costing him his life. The light no longer falling so pitilessly upon Fortunio's eyes, the captain saw more clearly than hitherto, and shot a swift, deadly stroke straight at the region of Garnache's heart. The Parisian leapt back when it was within an inch of his breast; one of the bravoes followed up, springing a pace in advance of his companions and lengthening his arm in a powerful lunge. Garnache caught the blade almost on his hilt, and by the slightest turn of the wrist made a simultaneous presentment of his point at the other's outstretched throat. It took the fellow just above the Adam's apple, and with a horrid, gurgling cry he sank, stretched as he still was in the attitude of that murderous lunge that had proved fatal only to himself.

Garnache had come on guard again upon the instant. Yet in the briefest of seconds during which his sword had been about its work of death, Fortunio's rapier came at him a second time. He beat the blade aside with his bare left hand and stopped with his point the rush of the other bravo. Then he leapt back again, and his leap brought him to the threshold of the anteroom. He retreated quickly a pace, and then another. He was a sword's length within the chamber, and now he stood, firm as a rock and engaged Fortunio's blade which had followed him through the doorway. But he was more at his ease. The doorway was narrow. Two men abreast could not beset him, since one must cumber the movements of the other. If they came at him one at a time, he felt that he could continue that fight till morning, should there still by then be any left to face him.

A wild exultation took him, an insane desire to laugh. Surely was sword-play the

merriest game that was ever devised for man's entertainment. He straightened his arm, and his steel went out like a streak of lightning. But for the dagger on which he caught its edge, the blade had assuredly pierced the captain's heart. And now, fighting still, Garnache called to Valerie. He had need of her assistance to make his preparations ere others came.

"Set down your tapers, mademoiselle," he bade her, "on the mantel shelf at my back. Place the other candle branch there too."

Swiftly, yet with half-swimming senses, everything dim to her as to one in a nightmare, she ran to do his bidding; and now the light placed so at his back, gave him over his opponents the same slight advantage that he had enjoyed before. In brisk tones he issued his fresh orders.

"Can you move the table, mademoiselle?" he asked her. "Try to drag it here, to the wall on my left, as close to the door as you can bring it."

"I will try, monsieur," she panted through dry lips; and again she moved to do his bidding. Quickened by the need there was, her limbs, which awhile ago had seemed on the point of refusing their office, appeared to gather more than ordinary strength. She was unconsciously sobbing in her passionate anxiety to render him what help was possible. Frenziedly she caught at the heavy oaken table, and began to drag it across the room as Garnache had begged her. And now, Fortunio seeing what was toward, and guessing Garnache's intentions, sought by a rush to force his way into the Chamber. But Garnache was ready for him. There was a harsh grind of steel on steel, culminating in a resounding rush, and Fortunio was back in the guard-room, whither he had leapt to save his skin. A pause fell at that, and Garnache lowered his point to rest his arm until they should again come at him. From beyond the doorway the captain called upon him to yield. He took the summons as an insult, and flew into a momentary passion.

"Yield?" he roared. "Yield to you, you cut-throat scum? You shall have my sword if

you will come for it, but you shall have it in your throat."

Angered in his turn, Fortunio inclined his head to his companion's ear, issuing an order. In obedience to it, it was the bravo now who advanced and engaged Garnache. Suddenly he dropped on to his knees, and over his head Garnache found his blade suddenly opposed by Fortunio's. It was a clever trick, and it all but did Garnache's business then. Yet together with the surprise of it there came to him the understanding of what was intended. Under his guard the kneeling man's sword was to be thrust up into his vitals. As a cry of alarm broke from mademoiselle, he leapt aside and towards the wall, where he was covered from Fortunio's weapon, and turning suddenly he passed his sword from side to side through the body of the kneeling mercenary.

The whole thing he had performed mechanically, more by instinct than by reason; and when it was done, and the tables were thus effectively turned upon his assailants, he scarcely realized how he had accomplished it.

The man's body cumbered now the doorway, and behind him Fortunio stood, never daring to advance lest a thrust of that sword which he could not see—Garnache still standing close against the wall—should serve him likewise.

Garnache leaned there, in that friendly shelter, to breathe, and he smiled grimly under cover of his mustache. So long as he had to deal with a single assailant he saw no need to move from so excellent a position. Close beside him, leaning heavily against the table she had dragged thus far, stood Valerie, her face livid as death, her heart sick within her at the horror inspired her by that thing lying on the threshold. She could not take her eyes from the crimson stain that spread slowly on the floor, coming from under that limply huddled mass of arms and legs.

"Do not look, mademoiselle," Garnache implored her softly. "Be brave, child; try to be brave."

She sought to brace her flagging courage, and by an effort she averted her eyes from

that horrid heap and fixed them upon Garnache's calm, intrepid face. The sight of his quietly watchful eyes, his grimly smiling lips, seemed to infuse courage into her anew.

"I have the table, monsieur," she told him. "I can bring it no nearer to the wall."

He understood that this was not because her courage or her strength might be exhausted, but because he now occupied the spot where he had bidden her place it. He motioned her away, and when she had moved he darted suddenly and swiftly aside and caught the table, his sword still fast in his two first fingers, which he had locked over the quillons. He had pushed its massive weight halfway across the door before Fortunio grasped the situation. Instantly the captain sought to take advantage of it, thinking to catch Garnache unawares. But no sooner did he show his nose inside the doorpost than Garnache's sword flashed before his eyes, driving him back with a bloody furrow in his cheek.

"Have a care, Monsieur le Capitaine," Garnache mocked him. "Had you come an inch farther it might have been the death of you."

A clatter of steps sounded upon the stairs, and the Parisian bent once more to his task, and thrust the table across the open doorway. He had a moment's respite now, for Fortunio stung—though lightly—was not likely to come again until he had others to support him. And while the others came, while the hum of their voices rose higher, and finally their steps clattered over the bare boards of the guard-room floor, Garnache had caught up and flung a chair under the table to protect him from an attack from below, while he had piled another on top to increase and further strengthen the barricade.

Valerie watched him agonizedly, leaning now against the wall, her hands pressed across her bosom, as if to keep down its tempestuous heaving. Yet her anguish was tempered by a great wonder and a great admiration of this man who could keep such calm eyes and such smiling lips in the face of the dreadful odds by which he was

beset, in the face of the certain death that must ultimately reach him before he was many minutes older. And in her imagination she conjured up a picture of him lying there torn by their angry swords and drenched in blood, his life gone out of him, his brave spirit, quenched for ever—and all for her unworthy sake. Because she— little, worthless thing that she was—would not marry as they listed, this fine, chivalrous soul was to be driven from its stalwart body.

An agony of grief took her now, and she fell once more to those awful sobs that awhile ago had shaken her. She had refused to marry Marius that Florimond's life should be spared, knowing that before Marius could reach him she herself would have warned her betrothed. Yet even had that circumstance not existed, she was sure that still she would have refused to do the will of Marius. But equally sure was she that she would not so refuse him were he now to offer as the price of her compliance the life of Garnache, which she accounted irrevocably doomed.

Suddenly his steady, soothing voice penetrated her anguished musings.

"Calm yourself, mademoiselle; all is far from lost as yet."

She thought that he but spoke so to comfort her; she did not follow the working of his warlike mind, concentrated entirely upon the business of the moment, with little thought—or care, for that matter—for what might betide anon. Yet she made an effort to repress her sobs. She would be brave, if only to show herself worthy of the companionship and friendship of so brave a man.

Across his barricade he peered into the outer room to ascertain with what fresh opponents he might have to reckon, and he was surprised to see but four men standing by Fortunio, whilst behind them among the thicker shadows, he dimly made out a woman's figure and, beside her, another man who was short and squat.

He bethought him that the hour, and the circumstance that most of the mercenaries would be in their beds, accounted for the reinforcement not being greater.

The woman moved forward, and he saw as he had suspected, that it was the

Dowager herself. The squat figure beside her, moving with her into the shaft of light that fell from the doorway Garnache defended, revealed to him the features of Monsieur de Tressan. If any doubt he had still entertained concerning the Seneschal's loyalty, that doubt was now dispelled.

And now the Dowager uttered a sudden cry of fear. She had caught sight of the fallen Marius, and she hurried to his side. Tressan sped after her and between them they raised the boy and helped him to a chair, where he now sat, passing a heavy hand across his no doubt aching brow. Clearly he was recovering, from which Garnache opined with regret that his blow had been too light. The Dowager turned to Fortunio, who had approached her, and her eyes seemed to take fire at something that he told her.

"Garnache?" the Parisian heard her say, and he saw Fortunio jerk his thumb in the direction of the barricade.

She appeared to forget her son; she stepped suddenly from his side, and peered through the doorway at the stalwart figure of Garnache, dimly to be seen through the pile of furniture that protected him to the height of his breast. No word said she to the Parisian. She stood regarding him a moment with lips compressed and a white, startled, angry face. Then:

"It was by Marius's contrivance that he was placed sentry over the girl," he heard her tell Fortunio, and he thought she sneered.

She looked at the two bodies on the floor, one almost at her feet, the other just inside the doorway, now almost hidden in the shadows of the table. Then she issued her commands to the men, and fiercely she bade them pull down that barricade and take the dog alive.

But before they could move to do her bidding, Garnache's voice rang imperatively through the chamber.

"A word with you ere they begin, Monsieur de Tressan," he shouted, and such was

the note of command he assumed that the men stood arrested, looking to the Dowager for fresh orders. Tressan changed colour, for all that there was surely naught to fear, and he fingered his beard perplexedly, looking to the Marquise for direction. She flashed him a glance, lifted one shoulder disdainfully, and to the men:

"Fetch him out," said she, and she pointed to Garnache. But again Garnache stayed them.

"Monsieur de Tressan," he called impressively, "to your dying day—and that will be none so distant—shall you regret it if you do not hear me."

The Seneschal was stirred by those words and the half-threat, half-warning; they seemed to cover. He paused a moment, and this time his eyes avoided the Marquise's. At last, taking a step forward,

"Knave," said he, "I do not know you."

"You know me well enough. You have heard my name. I am Martin Marie Rigobert de Garnache, Her Majesty's emissary into Dauphiny to procure the enlargement of Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye from the Chateau de Condillac, where she is detained by force and for the serving of unscrupulous ends. Now you know me and my quality."

The Dowager stamped her foot.

"Fetch him out!" she commanded harshly.

"Hear me first, Monsieur le Seneschal, or it will be the worse for you." And the Seneschal, moved by that confident promise of evil, threw himself before the men-at-arms.

"A moment, I beseech you, Marquise," he cried, and the men, seeing his earnestness and knowing his quality, stood undecided, buffeted as they were between his will and the Marquise's. "What have you to say to me?" Tressan demanded, seeking to render arrogant his tone.

“This: That my servant knows where I am, and that should I fail within a very few days to come forth safe and sound from Condillac to rejoin him, he is to ride to Paris with certain letters I have given him. Those letters incriminate you to the full in this infamous matter here at Condillac. I have set forth in them how you refused me help, how you ignored the Queen’s commands of which I was the bearer; and should it be proved, in addition, that through your treachery and insubordination my life has been lost, I promise you that nothing in all this world will save you from a hanging.”

“Never listen, monsieur,” cried the Dowager, seeing Tressan start back like a man in sudden fear. “It is no more than the ruse of a desperate man.”

“Heed me or not, at your choice,” Garnache retorted, addressing himself ever to Tressan. “You have had your warning. I little thought to see you here to-night. But seeing you confirms my worst suspicions, and if I am to die, I can die easy in my conscience at the thought that in sacrificing you to Her Majesty’s wrath I have certainly not sacrificed an innocent man.”

“Madame—” the Seneschal began, turning to the Dowager. But she broke in impatiently upon his intended words, upon the prayer that bubbled to his lips that she should pause a while ere she made an end of this Parisian.

“Monsieur,” said she, “you may bargain with him when he is taken. We will have him alive. Go in,” she bade her men, her voice so resolute now that none dared tarry longer. “Fetch the knave out—alive.”

Garnache smiled at mademoiselle as the words were uttered.

“They want me alive,” said he. “That is a hopeful state of things. Bear up, child; I may need your help ere we are through.”

“You shall find me ready, monsieur,” she assured him for all her tremors. He looked at the pale face, composed now by an effort of her will, and at the beautiful hazel eyes which strove to meet his with calm and to reflect his smile, and he marvelled at her courage as much as did she at his.

Then the assault began, and he could have laughed at the way in which a couple of those cut-throats—neither wishing to have the honour of meeting him singly—hindered each other by seeking to attack him at once.

At last the Dowager commanded one of them to go in. The fellow came, and he was driven back by the sword that darted at him from above the barricade.

There matters might have come to a deadlock, but that Fortunio came forward with one of his men to repeat the tactics which had cost him a life already. His fellow went down on his knees, and drove his sword under the table and through the frame of the chair, seeking to prick Garnache in the legs. Simultaneously the captain laid hold of an arm of the chair above and sought to engage Garnache across it. The ruse succeeded to the extent of compelling the Parisian to retreat. The table seemed likely to be his undoing instead of helping him. He dropped like lightning to one knee, seeking to force the fellow out from underneath. But the obstacles which should have hindered his assailants hindered Garnache even more at this juncture. In that instant Fortunio whipped the chair from the table-top, and flung it forward. One of its legs caught Garnache on the sword arm, deadening it for a second. The sword fell from his hand, and Valerie shrieked aloud, thinking the battle at an end. But the next moment he was on his feet, his rapier firmly gripped once more, for all that his arm still felt a trifle numbed. As seconds passed the numbness wore away, but before that had taken place the table had been thrust forward, and the man beneath it had made it impossible for Garnache to hinder this. Suddenly he called to Valerie.

“A cloak, mademoiselle! Get me a cloak!” he begged. And she, stemming her fears once more, ran to do his bidding.

She caught up a cloak that lay on a chair by the door of her bed-chamber, and brought it to him. He twisted it twice round his left arm, letting its folds hang loose, and advanced again to try conclusions with the gentleman underneath. He cast the garment so that it enmeshed the sword when next it was advanced. Stepping briskly

aside, he was up to the table, and his busy blade drove back the man who assailed him across it. He threw his weight against it, and thrust it back till it was jammed hard once more against the doorposts, leaving the chair at his very feet. The man beneath had recovered his sword by this, and again he sought to use it. That was the end of him. Again Garnache enmeshed it, kicked away the chair, or, rather, thrust it aside with his foot, stooped suddenly, and driving his blade under the table felt it sink into the body of his tormentor.

There was a groan and a spluttering cough, and then before Garnache could recover he heard mademoiselle crying out to him to beware. The table was thrust suddenly forward almost on top of him; its edge caught his left shoulder, and sent him back a full yard, sprawling upon the ground.

To rise again, gasping for air—for the fall had shaken him—was the work of an instant. But in that instant Fortunio had thrust the table clear of the doorway, and his men were pouring into the room.

They came at Garnache in a body, with wild shouts and fierce mockery, and he hurriedly fell on guard and gave way before them until his shoulders were against the wainscot and he had at least the assurance that none could take him in the rear. Three blades engaged his own. Fortunio had come no farther than the doorway, where he stood his torn cheek drenched in blood, watching the scene the Marquise beside him, and Tressan standing just behind them, very pale and scared.

Yet Garnache’s first thought even in that moment of dire peril was for Valerie. He would spare her the sight that must before many moments be spread to view within that shambles.

“To your chamber, mademoiselle,” he cried to her. “You hinder me,” he added by way of compelling her obedience. She did his bidding, but only in part. No farther went she than the doorway of her room, where she remained standing, watching the fray as earlier she had stood and watched it from the door of the antechamber.

Suddenly she was moved by inspiration. He had gained an advantage before, by retreating through a doorway into an inner room. Might he not do the same again, and be in better case if he were to retreat now to her own chamber? Impulsively she called to him.

“In here, Monsieur de Garnache. In here.”

The Marquise looked across at her, and smiled in mockery. Garnache was too well occupied, she thought, to attempt any such rashness. If he but dared remove his shoulders from the wall there would be a speedier end to him than as things were.

Not so, however, thought Garnache. The cloak twisted about his left arm gave him some advantage, and he used it to the full. He flicked the slack of it in the face of one, and followed it up by stabbing the fellow in the stomach before he could recover guard, whilst with another wave of that cloak he enmeshed the sword that shot readily into the opening he had left.

Madame cursed, and Fortunio echoed her imprecations. The Seneschal gasped, his fears lost in amazement at so much valour and dexterity.

Garnache swung away from the wall now, and set his back to mademoiselle, determined to act upon her advice. But even in that moment he asked himself for the first time since the commencement of that carnage—to what purpose? His arms were growing heavy with fatigue, his mouth was parched, and great beads of perspiration stood upon his brow. Soon he would be spent, and they would not fail to take a very full advantage of it.

Hitherto his mind had been taken up with the battle only, and if he had thought of retreating, it was but to the end that he might gain a position of some vantage. Now, conscious of his growing fatigue, his thoughts turned them at last to the consideration of flight. Was there no way out of it? Must he kill every man in Condillac before he could hope to escape?

Whimsically, and almost mechanically, he set himself, in his mind, to count the

men. There were twenty mercenaries all told, excluding Fortunio and himself. On Arsenio he might rely not to attack him, perhaps even to come to his assistance at the finish. That left nineteen. Four he had already either killed outright or effectively disabled; so that fifteen remained him. The task of dealing with those other fifteen was utterly beyond him. Presently, no doubt, the two now opposing him would be reinforced by others. So that if any possible way out existed, he had best set about finding it at once.

He wondered could he cut down these two, make an end of Fortunio, and, running for it, attempt to escape through the postern before the rest of the garrison had time to come up with him or guess his purpose. But the notion was too wild, its accomplishment too impossible.

He was fighting now with his back to mademoiselle and his face to the tall window, through the leaded panes of which he caught the distorted shape of a crescent moon. Suddenly the idea came to him. Through that window must lie his way. It was a good fifty feet above the moat, he knew, and if he essayed to leap it, it must be an even chance that he would be killed in leaping. But the chance of death was a certain one if he tarried where he was until others came to support his present opponents. And so he briskly determined upon the lesser risk.

He remembered that the window was nailed down, as it had remained since mademoiselle’s pretended attempt at flight. But surely that should prove no formidable obstacle.

And now that his resolve was taken his tactics abruptly changed. Hitherto he had been sparing of his movements, husbanding his strength against the long battle that seemed promised him. Suddenly he assumed the offensive where hitherto he had but acted in self-defence, and a most deadly offensive was it. He plied his cloak, untwisting it from his arm and flinging it over the head and body of one of his assailants, so that he was enmeshed and blinded by it. Leaping to the fellow’s flank,

Garnache, with a terrific kick, knocked his legs from under him so that he fell heavily. Then, stooping suddenly, the Parisian ran his blade under the other brave's guard and through the fellow's thigh. The man cried out, staggered, and then went down utterly disabled.

One swift downward thrust Garnache made at the mass that wriggled under his cloak. The activity of its wriggles increased in the next few seconds, then ceased altogether.

Tressan felt wet from head to foot with a sweat provoked by horror of what he saw. The Dowager's lips were pouring forth a horrid litany of guard-room oaths, and meanwhile Garnache had swung round to meet Fortunio, the last of all who had stood with him.

The captain came on boldly, armed with sword and dagger, and in that moment, feeling himself spent, Garnache bitterly repented having relinquished his cloak. Yet he made a stubborn fight, and whilst they fenced and stamped about that room, Marius came to watch them, staggering to his mother's side and leaning heavily upon Tressan's shoulder. The Marquise turned to him, her face livid to the lips.

"That man must be the very fiend," Garnache heard her tell her son. "Run for help, Tressan, or, God knows, he may escape us yet. Go for men, or we shall have Fortunio killed as well. Bid them bring muskets."

Tressan, moving like one bereft of wits, went her errand, while the two men fought on, stamping and panting, circling and lunging, their breath coming in gasps, their swords grinding and clashing till sparks leapt from them.

The dust rose up to envelop and almost choke them, and more than once they slipped in the blood with which the floor was spattered, whilst presently Garnache barely recovered and saved himself from stumbling over the body of one of his victims against which his swiftly moving feet had hurtled.

And the Dowager, who watched the conflict and who knew something of

sword-play, realized that, tired though Garnache might be, unless help came soon or some strange chance gave the captain the advantage, Fortunio would be laid low with the others.

His circling had brought the Parisian round, so that his back was now to the window, his face to the door of the bedchamber, where mademoiselle still watched in ever-growing horror. His right shoulder was in line with the door of the antechamber, which madame occupied, and he never saw her quit Marius's side and creep slyly into the room to speed swiftly round behind him.

The only one from whom he thought that he might have cause to fear treachery was the man whom he had dropped with a thigh wound, and he was careful to keep beyond the reach of any sudden sword-thrust from that fellow.

But if he did not see the woman's movements, mademoiselle saw them, and the sight set her eyes dilating with a new fear. She guessed the Dowager's treacherous purpose. And no sooner had she guessed it than, with a choking sob, she told herself that what madame could do that could she also.

Suddenly Garnache saw an opening; Fortunio's eyes, caught by the Dowager's movements, strayed for a moment past his opponent, and the thing would have been fatal to the captain but that in that moment, as Garnache was on the point of lunging, he felt himself caught from behind, his arms pinioned to his sides by a pair of slender ones that twined themselves about him, and over his shoulder, the breath of it fanning his hot cheek, came a vicious voice—

"Stab now, Fortunio!"

The captain asked nothing better. He raised his weary sword-arm and brought his point to the level of Garnache's breast, but in that instant its weight became leaden. Imitating the Marquise, Valerie had been in time. She seized Fortunio's half-lifted arm and flung all her weight upon it.

The captain cursed her horridly in a frenzy of fear, for he saw that did Garnache

shake off the Marquise there would be an end of himself. He sought to wrench himself free of her detaining grasp, and the exertion brought him down, weary as he was, and with her weight hanging to him. He sank to his knees, and the girl, still clinging valiantly, sank with him, calling to Garnache that she held the captain fast.

Putting forth all his remaining strength, the Parisian twisted from the Dowager's encircling grasp and hurled her from him with a violence he nowise intended.

"Yours, madame, are the first woman's arms that ever Martin de Garnache has known," said he. "And never could embrace of beauty have been less welcome."

Panting, he caught up one of the overturned chairs. Holding it by the back he made for the window. He had dropped his sword, and he called to mademoiselle to hold the captain yet an instant longer. He swung his chair aloft and dashed it against the window. There was a thundering crash of shivered glass and a cool draught of that November night came to sweeten the air that had been fouled by the stamping of the fighters.

Again he swung up his chair and dashed it at the window, and yet again, until no window remained, but a great, gaping opening with a fringe of ragged glass and twisted leadwork.

In that moment Fortunio struggled to his feet, free of the girl, who sank, almost in a swoon. He sprang towards Garnache. The Parisian turned and flung his now shattered chair toward the advancing captain. It dropped at his feet, and his flying shins struck against an edge of it, bringing him, hurt and sprawling, to the ground. Before he could recover, a figure was flying through the open gap that lately had been a window.

Mademoiselle sat up and screamed.

"You will be killed, Monsieur de Garnache! Dear God, you will be killed!" and the anguish in her voice was awful.

It was the last thing that reached the ears of Monsieur de Garnache as he tumbled

headlong through the darkness of the chill November night.

CHAPTER XVIII. IN THE MOAT

Fortunio and the Marquise reached the window side by side, and they were in time to hear a dull splash in the waters fifty feet below them. There was a cloud over the little sickle of moon, and to their eyes, fresh from the blaze of candle-light, the darkness was impenetrable.

“He is in the moat,” cried the Marquise excitedly, and Valerie, who sat on the floor whither she had slipped when Fortunio shook her off, rocked herself in an agony of fear.

To the horrors about her—the huddled bodies lying so still upon the floor, the bloody footprints everywhere, the shattered furniture, and the groans of the man with the wounded thigh—to all this she was insensible. Garnache was dead, she told herself; he was surely dead; and it seemed as if the very thought of it were killing, too, a part of her own self.

Unconsciously she sobbed her fears aloud. “He is dead,” she moaned; “he is dead.”

The Marquise overheard that piteous cry, and turned to survey the girl, her brows lifting, her lips parting in an astonishment that for a second effaced the horrors of that night. Suspicion spread like an oil stain in her evil mind. She stepped forward and caught the girl by one of her limp arms. Marius, paler than his stunning had left him, leaned more heavily against the door-post, and looked on with bloodshot eyes. If ever maiden avowed the secret of her heart, it seemed to him that Valerie avowed it then.

The Marquise shook her angrily.

“What was he to you, girl? What was he to you?” she demanded shrilly.

And the girl, no more than half conscious of what she was saying, made answer:

“The bravest gentleman, the noblest friend I have ever known.”

Pah! The Dowager dropped her arm and turned to issue a command to Fortunio. But already the fellow had departed. His concern was not with women, but with the man who had escaped him. He must make certain that the fall had killed Garnache.

Breathless and worn as he was, all spattered now with blood from the scratch in his cheek, which lent him a terrific aspect, he dashed from that shambles and across the guard-room. He snatched up a lighted lantern that had been left in the doorway and leapt down the stairs and into the courtyard. Here he came upon Monsieur de Tressan with a half-dozen fellows at his heels, all more or less half clad, but all very fully armed with swords and knives, and one or two with muskets.

Roughly, with little thought for the dignity of his high office, he thrust the Lord Seneschal aside and turned the men. Some he ordered off to the stables to get horses, for if Garnache had survived his leap and swum the moat, they must give chase. Whatever betide, the Parisian must not get away. He feared the consequences of that as much for himself as for Condillac. Some five or six of the men he bade follow him, and never pausing to answer any of Tressan’s fearful questions, he sped across the courtyard, through the kitchens—which was the nearest way—into the outer quadrangle. Never pausing to draw breath, spent though he was, he pursued his flight under the great archway of the keep and across the drawbridge, the raising of which had been that night postponed to await the Lord Seneschal’s departure.

Here on the bridge he paused and turned in a frenzy to scream to his followers that they should fetch more torches. Meanwhile he snatched the only one at hand from the man-at-arms that carried it.

His men sprang into the guard-room of the keep, realizing from his almost hysterical manner the urgent need for haste. And while he waited for them, standing there on the bridge, his torch held high, he scanned by its lurid red light the water as far as eye could reach on either side of him.

There was a faint movement on the dark, oily surface for all that no wind stirred. Not more than four or five minutes could have elapsed since Garnache's leap, and it would seem as if the last ripple from the disturbance of his plunge had not yet rolled itself out. But otherwise there was nothing here, nor did Fortunio expect aught. The window of the Northern Tower abutted on to the other side of the chateau, and it was there he must look for traces of the fugitive or for his body.

"Hasten!" he shouted over his shoulder. "Follow me!" And without waiting for them he ran across the bridge and darted round the building, his torch scattering a shower of sparks behind him on the night, and sending little rills of blood-red light down the sword which he still carried.

He gained the spot where Garnache must have fallen, and he stood below the radiance that clove the night from the shattered window fifty feet above, casting the light of his torch this way and that over the black bosom of the moat. Not a ripple moved now upon that even, steely surface. Voices sounded behind him, and with them a great glare of ruddy light came to herald the arrival of his men. He turned to them and pointed with his sword away from the chateau.

"Spread yourselves!" he shouted. "Make search yonder. He cannot have gone far."

And they, but dimly realizing whom they sought, yet realizing that they sought a man, dashed off and spread themselves as he had bidden them, to search the stretch of meadowland, where ill must betide any fugitive, since no cover offered.

Fortunio remained where he was at the edge of the moat. He stooped, and waving his torch along the ground he moved to the far angle of the chateau, examining the soft, oozy clay. It was impossible that a man could have clambered out over that without leaving some impression. He reached the corner and found the clay intact; at least, nowhere could he discover a mark of hands or a footprint set as would be that of a man emerging from the water.

He retraced his steps and went back until he had reached the eastern angle of the

chateau, yet always with the same result. He straightened himself at last, and his manner was more calm; his frenzied haste was gone, and deliberately he now raised his torch and let its light shine again over the waters. He pondered them a moment, his dark eyes musing almost regretfully.

“Drowned!” he said aloud, and sheathed his sword.

From the window overhead a voice hailed him. He looked up and saw the Dowager, and, behind her, the figure of her son. Away in the meadows the lights of his men’s torches darted hither and thither like playful jack-o’-lanterns.

“Have you got him, Fortunio?”

“Yes, madame,” he answered with assurance. “You may have his body when you will. He is underneath here.” And he pointed to the water.

They appeared to take his word for it, for they questioned him no further. The Marquise turned to mademoiselle, who was still sitting on the floor.

“He is drowned, Valerie,” she said slowly, watching the girl’s face.

Valerie looked up. Her eyes were very wide, and her lips moved for a second. Then she fell forward without a word. This last horror, treading on the heels of all those that already had assailed her, proved too great a strain for her brave spirit. She had swooned.

Tressan entered at that moment, full of questions as to what might be toward, for he had understood nothing in the courtyard. The Marquise called to him to help her with the girl, Marius being still too faint, and between them they bore her to her chamber, laid her on the bed, and, withdrawing, closed the door upon her. Then she signed to Marius and the Seneschal.

“Come,” she said; “let us go. The sight and smell of the place are turning me sick, although my stomach is strong enough to endure most horrors.”

She took up one of the candle-branches to light them, and they went below and

made their way to the hall, where they found Marius's page, Gaston, looking very pale and scared at the din that had filled the chateau during the past half-hour or so. With him was Marius's hound, which the poor boy had kept by him for company and protection in that dreadful time.

The Marquise spoke to him kindly, and she stooped to pat the dog's glossy head. Then she bade Gaston set wine for them, and when it was fetched the three of them drank in brooding, gloomy silence.

The draught invigorated Marius, it cheered Tressan's drooping spirits, and it quenched the Dowager's thirst. The Seneschal turned to her again with his unanswered questions touching the end of that butchery above-stairs. She told him what Fortunio had said that Garnache was drowned as a consequence of his mad leap from the window.

Into Tressan's mind there sprang the memory of the thing Garnache had promised should befall him in such a case. It drove the colour from his cheeks and brought great lines of fearful care into sharp relief about his mouth and eyes.

"Madame, we are ruined!" he groaned.

"Tressan," she answered him contemptuously, "you are chicken-hearted. Listen to me. Did he not say that he had left his man behind him when he came to Condillac? Where think you that he left his man?"

"Maybe in Grenoble," answered the Seneschal, staring.

"Find out," she told him impressively, her eyes on his, and calm as though they had never looked upon such sights as that very night had offered them. "If not in Grenoble, certainly, at least, somewhere in this Dauphiny of which you are the King's Lord Seneschal. Turn the whole province inside out, man, but find the fellow. Yours is the power to do it. Do it, then, and you will have no consequences to fear. You have seen the man?"

"Ay, I have seen him. I remember him; and his name, I bethink me, is Rabecque."

He took courage; his face looked less dejected.

“You overlook nothing, madame,” he murmured. “You are truly wonderful. I will start the search this very night. My men are almost all at Montelimar awaiting my commands. I’ll dispatch a messenger with orders that they are to spread themselves throughout Dauphiny upon this quest.”

The door opened, and Fortunio entered. He was still unwashed and terrible to look upon, all blood-bespattered. The sight of him drove a shudder through Tressan. The Marquise grew solicitous.

“How is your wound, Fortunio?” was her first question.

He made a gesture that dismissed the matter.

“It is nothing. I am over full-blooded, and if I am scratched, I bleed, without perceiving it, enough to drain another man.”

“Here, drink, mon capitaine,” she urged him, very friendly, filling him a cup with her own hands. “And you, Marius?” she asked. “Are you recovering strength?”

“I am well,” answered Marius sullenly. His defeat that evening had left him glum and morose. He felt that he had cut a sorry figure in the affair, and his vanity was wounded. “I deplore I had so little share in the fight,” he muttered.

“The lustiest fight ever I or any man beheld,” swore Fortunio. “Dieu! But he was a fighter, that Monsieur de Garnache, and he deserved a better end than drowning.”

“You are quite sure that he is drowned?”

Fortunio replied by giving his reasons for that conclusion, and they convinced both the Marquise and her son indeed they had never deemed it possible that the Parisian could have survived that awful leap. The Dowager looked at Marius, and from him to the captain.

“Do you think, you two, that you will be fit for tomorrow’s business?”

“For myself,” laughed Fortunio, “I am ready for it now.”

“And I shall be when I have rested,” answered Marius grimly.

“Then get you both to rest, you will be needing it,” she bade them.

“And I, too, madame,” said the Seneschal, bending over the hand she held out to him. “Good-night to you all.” He would have added a word to wish them luck in the morrow’s venture; but for the life of him he dared not. He turned, made another of his bows, and rolled out of the room.

Five minutes later the drawbridge was being raised after his departure, and Fortunio was issuing orders to the men he had recalled from their futile search to go clear the guard-room and antechamber of the Northern Tower, and to bear the dead to the chapel, which must serve as a mortuary for the time. That done he went off to bed, and soon after the lights were extinguished in Condillac; and save for Arsenio, who was, on guard, sorely perturbed by all that had befallen and marvelling at the rashness of his friend “Battista”—for he had no full particulars of the business—the place was wrapped in sleep.

Had they been less sure that Garnache was drowned, maybe they had slumbered less tranquilly that night at Condillac. Fortunio had been shrewd in his conclusions, yet a trifle hasty; for whilst, as a matter of fact, he was correct in assuming that the Parisian had not crawled out of the moat—neither at the point he had searched, nor elsewhere—yet was he utterly wrong to assume him at the bottom of it.

Garnache had gone through that window prepared to leap into another—and, he hoped, a better world. He had spun round twice in the air and shot feet foremost through the chill waters of the moat, and down until his toes came in contact with a less yielding substance, yet yielding nevertheless. Marvelling that he should have retained until now his senses, he realized betimes that he was touching mud—that he was really ankle deep in it. A vigorous, frantic kick with both legs at once released him, and he felt himself slowly re-ascending to the surface.

It has been often said that a drowning man in his struggles sees his whole life

mirrored before him. In the instants of Garnache's ascent through the half stagnant waters of that moat he had reviewed the entire situation and determined upon the course he should pursue. When he reached the surface, he must see to it that he broke it gently, for at the window above were sure to be watchers, looking to see how he had fared. Madame, he remembered, had sent Tressan for muskets. If he had returned with them and they should perceive him from above, a bullet would be sent to dispose of him, and it were a pity to be shot now after having come through so much.

His head broke the surface and emerged into the chill darkness of the night. He took a deep breath of cold but very welcome air, and moving his arms gently under water, he swam quietly, not to the edge of the moat but to the chateau wall, close under which he thought he would be secure from observation. He found by good fortune a crevice between two stones; he did not see it, his fingers found it for him as they groped along that granite surface. He clung there a moment and pondered the situation. He heard voices above, and looking up he saw the glare of light through the opening he had battered.

And now he was surprised to feel new vigour running through him. He had hurled himself from that window with scarce the power to leap, bathed in perspiration and deeming his strength utterly spent. The ice-cold waters of the moat had served, it would seem, to brace him, to wash away his fatigue, and to renew his energies. His mind was singularly clear and his senses rendered superacute, and he set himself to consider what he had best do.

Swim to the edge of the moat and, clambering out, take to his legs was naturally the first impulse. But, reflecting upon the open nature of the ground, he realized that that must mean his ruin. Presently they would come to see how he had fared, and failing to find him in the water they would search the country round about. He set himself in their place. He tried to think as they would think, the better that he might realize

how they would act, and then an idea came to him that might be worth heeding. In any case his situation was still very desperate; on that score he allowed himself no illusions. That they would take his drowning for granted, and never come to satisfy themselves, he was not optimist enough to assume.

He abandoned his grip of the wall and began to swim gently toward the eastern angle. If they came out, they must lower the bridge; he would place himself so that in falling it should cover him and screen him from their sight. He rounded the angle of the building, and now the friendly cloud that had hung across the moon moved by, and a faint, silver radiance was upon the water under his eyes. But yonder, ahead of him, something black lay athwart the moat. At once he knew it for the bridge. It was down. And he had the explanation in that he remembered that the Lord Seneschal had not yet left Condillac. It mattered little to him one way or the other. The bridge was there, and he made the best of it.

A few swift, silent strokes brought him to it. He hesitated a moment before venturing into the darkness underneath; then, bethinking him that it was that or discovery, he passed under. He made for the wall, and as he groped along he found a chain depending and reaching down into the water. He caught at it with both hands and hung by it to await events.

And now, for the first time that night, his pulses really quickened. There in the dark he waited, and the moments that sped seemed very long to him, and they were very anxious. He had no good sword wherewith to defend himself were he attacked, no good, solid ground on which to take his stand. If he were discovered, he was helpless, at their mercy, to shoot, or take, or beat to death as best they listed. And so he waited, his pulses throbbing, his breath coming short and fast. The cold water that had invigorated him some minutes ago was numbing him now, and seemed to be freezing his courage as it froze the blood in his veins, the very marrow in his bones.

Presently his ears caught a rush of feet, a sound of voices, and Fortunio’s raised

above the others. Heavy steps rang on the bridge over his head, and the thud of their fall was like thunder to the man beneath. A crimson splash of light fell on the moat on either side of him. The fellow on the bridge had halted. Then the steps went on. The light flared this way and that, and Garnache almost trembled, expecting at every moment that its rays would penetrate the spot where he was hanging and reveal him cowering there like a frightened water-rat. But the man moved on, and his light flared no longer.

Then others followed him. Garnache heard the sounds of their search. So overwrought was he that there was a moment when he thought of swimming to the edge and making across the country to the north while they were hunting the meadows to the east; but he repressed the impulse and stayed on. An eternity did it seem before those men returned and marched once more over his head. A further eternity was it until the clatter of hoofs on the courtyard stones and their thunder on the planks above him brought him the news that Tressan was riding home. He heard the hoofs quicken, and their loud rattle on the road that led down to the Isere, a half-mile away; and then, when the hoof-beats grew more distant, there came again the echo of voices up above.

Was it not over yet? Dear God! would it never end? He felt that a few moments more of this immersion and he should be done for utterly; his numbness must rob him of the power to cross the moat.

Suddenly the first welcome sound he had heard that night came to his ears. Chains creaked, hinges groaned, and the great black pall above him began gradually to rise. Faster it went, till, at last, it fell back into position, flat with the wall of the chateau, and such little light as there was from the moon was beating down upon his frozen face.

He let the chain go, and, with strokes swift and silent as he could contrive, he crossed the water. He clambered up the bank, almost bereft of strength. A moment

he crouched there listening. Had he moved too soon? Had he been incautious?

Nothing stirred behind him to confirm his fears. He crept softly across the hard ground of the road where he had landed. Then, when the yielding, silent turf was under his feet, he gave not another thought for his numbness, but started to run as a man runs in a nightmare, so little did the speed of his movements match the pace of his desire to set a distance between himself and Condillac.

CHAPTER XIX. THROUGH THE NIGHT

It wanted something over an hour to midnight when Monsieur de Garnache started out in his sodden clothes to run from Condillac. He bore away to the north, and continued running until he had covered a mile or so, when perforce he must slacken his pace lest presently he should have to give way to utter exhaustion. He trudged on bravely thereafter, at a good, swinging pace, realizing that in moving briskly lay his salvation from such ill effects as might otherwise attend his too long immersion. His run had set a pleasant glow upon his skin and seemed to have thawed the frozen condition of his joints. Yet he could not disguise from himself that he was sorely worn by that night’s happenings, and that, if he would reach his goal, he must carefully husband such strength as yet remained him.

That goal of his was Voiron, some four leagues distant to the north, where, at the inn of the Beau Paon, his man, Rabecque, should be lodged, ready for his coming at any time. Once already, when repairing to Condillac, he had travelled by that road, and it was so direct that there seemed scant fear of his mistaking it. On he plodded through the night, his way lighted for him by the crescent moon, the air so still that, despite his wet garments, being warmed as he was by his brisk movements, he never felt the cold of it.

He had overheard enough of what had been said by Marius to Valerie to understand the business that was afoot for the morrow, and he doubted him that he had not

sufficiently injured the Dowager's son to make him refrain from or adjourn his murderous ride across the border into Savoy.

Garnache's purpose now was to reach Voiron, there to snatch a brief rest, and then, equipped anew to set out with his man for La Rochette and anticipate the fell plans of Marius and Fortunio.

He might have experienced elation at his almost miraculous escape and at the circumstance that he was still at large to carry this duel with the Condillacs to a fitting finish, were it not for the reflection that but for his besetting sin of hastiness he might now be travelling in dry garments toward La Rochette, with mademoiselle beside him. Once again that rash temper of his had marred an enterprise that was on the point of succeeding. And yet, even as he regretted his rashness, rage stirred him again at the thought of Marius crushing that slender shape against him and seeking to force his odious kisses upon her pure, immaculate lips. And then the thought of her, left behind at Condillac at the mercy of Marius and that she-devil the Marquise, and the fears that of a sudden leapt up in his mind, brought him to a standstill, as though he were contemplating the incomparable folly of a return. He beat his hands together for a moment in a frenzy of anguish; he threw back his head and raised his eyes to the sky above with a burst of imprecations on his lips. And then reflection brought him peace. No, no; they dare offer her no hurt. To do so must irrevocably lose them La Vauvraye; and it was their covetousness had made them villains. Upon that covetousness did their villainy rest, and he need fear from them no wanton ruthlessness that should endanger their chance of profit.

He trudged on, reassured. He had been a fool so to give way to fear; as great a fool as he had been when he had laid hands on Marius to quell his excessive amorousness. Dieu! Was he bewitched? What ailed him? Again he paused there in the night to think the situation out.

A dozen thoughts, all centering about Valerie, came crowding in upon his brain, till

in the end a great burst of laughter—the laughter of a madman almost, eerie and terrific as it rang upon the silent night broke from his parted lips. That brief moment of introspection had revealed him to himself, and the revelation had fetched that peal of mocking laughter from him.

He realized now, at last, that not because the Queen had ordered him to procure Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye's enlargement had he submitted to assume a filthy travesty, to set his neck in jeopardy, to play the lackey and the spy. It was because something in Valerie's eyes, something in her pure, lily face had moved him to it; and simultaneously had come the thought of the relation in which she stood to that man at La Rochette whose life he now sought to save for her, and it had stabbed him with a bitterness no misfortune, no failure yet had brought him.

He trudged on, knowing himself for what he was a fool who, after close upon forty years of a strenuous life in which no petticoat had played a part, was come under the spell of a pair of innocent eyes belonging to a child almost young enough to have been his daughter.

He despised himself a little for his weakness; he despised himself for his apostasy from the faith that had governed his life—the faith to keep himself immune from the folly to which womanhood had driven so many a stout man.

And yet, mock himself, despise himself as he would, a great tenderness, a great desire grew strong in his soul that night as he trudged on toward distant Voiron. Mile after mile her image kept him company, and once, when he had left Voreppe behind him, the greater portion of his journey done, some devil whispered in his ear that he was weary; that he would be over-weary on the morrow for any ride to La Rochette. He had done all that mortal man could do; let him rest to-morrow whilst Marius and Fortunio accomplished by Florimond what the fever had begun.

A cold perspiration broke on him as he wrestled with that grim temptation. Valerie was his; she belonged to him by the right of dangers shared; never had mother in her

labours been nearer death for the offspring's sake than had he for Valerie during the days that were sped and the hours that were but gone. She belonged to him by the title of those dangers he had been through. What had Florimond done to establish his claim to her? He had remained absent during long years, a-warring in a foreign land. With how many banal loves might not the fellow in that time have strewn his soldier's path! Garnache knew well how close does Cupid stalk in the wake of Mars, knew well the way of these gay soldiers and the lightness of their loves.

Was, then, this fellow to come now and claim her, when perils were past, when there was naught left to do but lead her to the altar? Could he be worthy of such a pearl of womanhood, this laggard who, because a fever touched him, sat him down in an inn within a few hours' ride of her to rest him, as though the world held no such woman as Valerie?

And she, herself, by what ties was she bound to him? By the ties of an old promise, given at an age when she knew not what love meant. He had talked of it with her, and he knew how dispassionately she awaited Florimond's return. Florimond might be betrothed to her—her father and his had encompassed that between them—but no lover of hers was he.

Thus far did his thoughts journey, and temptation gripped him ever more and more strongly. And then his manhood and his honour awoke with a shudder, as awakens a man from an ugly dream. What manner of fool was he? he asked himself again. Upon what presumptions did he base his silly musings? Did he suppose that even were there no Florimond, it would be left for a harsh, war-worn old greybeard such as he to awaken tenderness in the bosom of that child? The tenderness of friendship perhaps—she had confessed to that; but the tenderness of her sweet love must be won by a younger, comelier man.

If love had indeed touched him at last, let him be worthy of it and of her who inspired it. Let him strain every sinew in her service, asking no guerdon; let him

save the life of the man to whom she was affianced; let him save her from the clutches of the Marquise de Condillac and her beautiful, unscrupulous son.

He put his folly from him and-went on, seeking to hold his mind to the planning of his to-morrow's journey and its business. He had no means to know that at that very hour Valerie was on her knees by her little white bed, in the Northern Tower of Condillac, praying for the repose of the soul of Monsieur de Garnache—the bravest gentleman, the noblest friend she had ever known. For she accounted him dead, and she thought with horror of his body lying in the slime under the cold waters of the moat beneath the window of her antechamber. A change seemed to have come upon her. Her soul was numb, her courage seemed dead, and little care had she in that hour of what might betide her now.

Florimond was coming, she remembered: coming to wed her. Ah, well! It mattered little, since Monsieur de Garnache was dead—as though it could have mattered had he been living!

Three hours of his long striding brought Garnache at last to Voiron, and the echo of his footsteps rang through the silent streets and scared a stray cat or two that were preying out of doors. There was no watch in the little township and no lights, but by the moon's faint glimmer Garnache sought the inn of the Beau Paon, and found it at the end of a little wandering. A gaudy peacock, with tail spread wide, was the sign above the door on which he thumped and kicked as if he would have beaten it down.

It opened after some delay, and a man, half clad, candle in hand, a night-cap on his hoary locks, showed an angry face at the opening.

At sight of the gaunt, bedraggled figure that craved admittance, the landlord would have shut the door again, fearing that he had to do with some wild bandit from the hills. But Garnache thrust his foot in the way.

"There is a man named Rabecque, from Paris, lodging here. I must have instant speech with him," said he; and his words, together with the crisp, commanding tones

in which they were uttered, had their effect upon the host.

Rabecque had been playing the great lord during the week he had spent at Voiron, and had known how to command a certain deference and regard. That this tatterdemalion, with the haughty voice, should demand to see him at that hour of the night, with such scant unconcern of how far he might incommode the great Monsieur Rabecque, earned for him too a certain measure of regard, though still alloyed with some suspicion.

The landlord bade him enter. He did not know whether Monsieur Rabecque would forgive him for being disturbed; he could not say whether Monsieur Rabecque would consent to see this visitor at such an hour; very probably he would not. Still, monsieur might enter.

Garnache cut him short before he had half done, announced his name and bade him convey it to Rabecque. The alacrity with which the lackey stirred from his bed upon hearing who it was that had arrived impressed the host not a little, but not half so much as it impressed him presently to observe the deference with which this great Monsieur Rabecque of Paris confronted the scarecrow below stairs when he was brought into its presence.

“You are safe and sound, monsieur?” he cried, in deferential joy.

“Aye, by a miracle, mon fils,” Garnache answered him, with a short laugh. “Help me to bed; then bring me a cup of spiced wine. I have swum a moat and done other wonders in these clothes.”

The host and Rabecque bustled now to minister to his wants between them, and when, jaded and worn, Garnache lay at last between good-smelling sheets with the feeling in him that he was like to sleep until the day of judgment, he issued his final orders.

“Awake me at daybreak, Rabecque,” said he drowsily. “We must be stirring then. Have horse ready and clothes for me. I shall need you to wash me clean and shave

me and make me what I was before your tricks and dyes turned me into what I have been this week and more. Take away the light. At daybreak! Don't let me sleep beyond that as you value your place with me. We shall have brisk work to-morrow. At—daybreak—Rabecque!"

CHAPTER XX. FLORIMOND DE CONDILLAC

It was noon of the next day when two horsemen gained the heights above La Rochette and paused to breathe their nags and take a survey of the little township in the plain at their feet. One of these was Monsieur de Garnache, the other was his man Rabecque. But it was no longer the travestied Garnache that Condillac had known as "Battista" during the past days, it was that gentleman as he had been when first he presented himself at the chateau. Rabecque had shaved him, and by means of certain unguents had cleansed his skin and hair of the dyes with which he had earlier overlaid them.

That metamorphosis, of itself, was enough to set Garnache in a good humour; he felt himself again, and the feeling gave him confidence. His mustachios bristled as fiercely as of old, his skin was clear and healthy, and his dark brown hair showed ashen at the temples. He was becomingly arrayed in a suit of dark brown camlet, with rows of close-set gold buttons running up his hanging sleeves; a leather jerkin hid much of his finery, and his great boots encased his legs. He wore a brown hat, with a tallish crown and a red feather, and Rabecque carried his cloak for him, for the persistent Saint Martin's summer rendered that day of November rather as one of early autumn.

A flood of sunshine descended from a cloudless sky to drench the country at their feet, and all about them the trees preserved a green that was but little touched by autumnal browning.

Awhile he paused there on the heights; then he gave his horse a touch of the spur,

and they started down the winding road that led into La Rochette. A half-hour later they were riding under the porte cochere of the inn of the Black Boar. Of the ostler who hastened forward to take their reins Monsieur de Garnache inquired if the Marquis de Condillac were lodged there. He was answered in the affirmative, and he got down at once from his horse. Indeed, but for the formality of the thing, he might have spared himself the question, for lounging about the courtyard were a score of stalwart weather-tanned fellows, whose air and accoutrements proclaimed them soldiers. It required little shrewdness to guess in them the personal followers of the Marquis, the remainder of the little troop that had followed the young seigneur to the wars when, some three years ago, he had set out from Condillac.

Garnache gave orders for the horses to be cared for, and bade Rabecque get himself fed in the common room. Heralded by the host, the Parisian then mounted the stairs to Monsieur de Condillac's apartments.

The landlord led the way to the inn's best room, turned the handle, and, throwing wide the door, stood aside for Monsieur de Garnache to enter.

From within the chamber came the sounds of a scuffle, a man's soft laugh, and a girl's softer intercession.

"Let me go, monsieur. Of your pity, let me go. Some one is coming."

"And what care I who comes?" answered a voice that seemed oppressed by laughter.

Garnache strode into the chamber—spacious and handsomely furnished as became the best room of the Auberge du Sanglier Noir—to find a meal spread on the table, steaming with an odour promising of good things, but neglected by the guest for the charms of the serving-wench, whose waist he had imprisoned. As Garnache's tall figure loomed before him he let the girl go and turned a half-laughing, half-startled face upon the intruder.

"Who the devil may you be?" he inquired, and a brown eye, rakish and roving in its glance, played briskly over the Parisian, whilst Garnache himself returned the

compliment, and calmly surveyed this florid gentleman of middle height with the fair hair and regular features.

The girl scurried by and darted from the room, dodging the smiting hand which the host raised as she flew past him. The Parisian felt his gorge rising. Was this the sort of fever that had kept Monsieur le Marquis at La Rochette, whilst mademoiselle was suffering in durance at Condillac? His last night's jealous speculations touching a man he did not know had leastways led him into no exaggeration. He found just such a man as he had pictured—a lightly-loving, pleasure-taking roysterer, with never a thought beyond the amusement which the hour afforded him.

With curling lip Garnache bowed stiffly, and in a cold, formal voice he announced himself.

"My name is Martin Marie Rigobert de Garnache. I am an emissary dispatched from Paris by her Majesty the Queen-mother to procure the enlargement of Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye from the durance in which she is held by madame your stepmother."

The pleasant gentleman's eyebrows went up; a smile that was almost insolent broke on his face.

"That being so, monsieur, why the devil are you here?"

"I am here, monsieur," answered him Garnache, throwing back his head, his nostrils quivering, "because you are not at Condillac."

The tone was truculent to the point of defiance, for despite the firm resolve he had taken last night never again to let his temper overmaster him, already Garnache's self-control was slipping away.

The Marquis noted the tone, and observed the man. In their way he liked both; in their way he disliked both. But he clearly saw that this peppery gentleman must be treated less cavalierly, or trouble would come of it. So he waved him gracefully to the table, where a brace of flagons stood amid the steaming viands.

“You will dine with me, monsieur,” said he, the utmost politeness marking his utterance now. “I take it that since you have come here in quest of me you have something to tell me. Shall we talk as we eat? I detest a lonely meal.”

The florid gentleman’s tone and manner were mollifying in the extreme. Garnache had risen early and ridden far; the smell of the viands had quickened an appetite already very keen; moreover, since he and this gentleman were to be allies, it was as well they should not begin by quarrelling.

He bowed less stiffly, expressed his willingness and his thanks, laid hat and whip and cloak aside, unbuckled and set down his sword, and, that done, took at table the place which his host himself prepared him.

Garnache took more careful stock of the Marquis now. He found much to like in his countenance. It was frank and jovial; obviously that of a sensualist, but, leastways, an honest sensualist. He was dressed in black, as became a man who mourned his father, yet with a striking richness of material, whilst his broad collar of fine point and the lace cuffs of his doublet were worth a fortune.

What time they ate Monsieur de Garnache told of his journey from Paris and of his dealings with Tressan and his subsequent adventures at Condillac. He dwelt passingly upon the manner in which they had treated him, and found it difficult to choose words to express the reason for his returning in disguise to play the knight-errant to Valerie. He passed on to speak of last night’s happenings and of his escape. Throughout, the Marquis heard him with a grave countenance and a sober, attentive glance, yet, when he had finished a smile crept round the sensual lips.

“The letter that I had at Milan prepared me for some such trouble as this,” said he, and Garnache was amazed at the lightness of his tone, just as he had been amazed to see the fellow keep his countenance at the narrative of mademoiselle’s position. “I guessed that my beautiful stepmother intended me some such scurviness from the circumstance of her having kept me in ignorance of my father’s death. But frankly,

sir, your tale by far outstrips my wildest imaginings. You have behaved very—very bravely in this affair. You seem, in fact, to have taken a greater interest in Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye's enlargement than the Queen could have a right to expect of you." And he smiled, a world of suggestion in his eyes. Garnache sat back in his chair and stared at the man.

"This levity, monsieur, on such a subject, leaves me thunderstruck," he said at last.

"Diable!" laughed the other. "You are too prone, after your trials; to view its tragic rather than its comic side. Forgive me if I am smitten only with the humour of the thing."

"The humour of the thing!" gurgled Garnache, his eyes starting from his head. Then out leapt that temper of his like an eager hound that has been suddenly unleashed. He brought down his clenched hand upon the table, caught in passing a flagon, and sent it crashing to the floor. If there was a table near at hand when his temper went, he never failed to treat it so.

"Par la mort Dieu! monsieur, you see but the humour of it, do you? And what of that poor child who is lying there, suffering this incarceration because of her fidelity to a promise given you?"

The statement was hardly fully accurate. But it served its purpose. The other's face became instantly, grave.

"Calm yourself, I beg, monsieur," he cried, raising a soothing hand. "I have offended you somewhere; that is plain. There is something here that I do not altogether understand. You say that Valerie has suffered on account of a promise given me? To what are you referring?"

"They hold her a prisoner, monsieur, because they wish to wed her to Marius," answered Garnache, striving hard to cool his anger.

"Parfaitement! That much I understood."

“Well, then, monsieur, is the rest not plain? Because she is betrothed to you—” He paused. He saw, at last, that he was stating something not altogether accurate. But the other took his meaning there and then, lay back in his chair, and burst out laughing.

The blood hummed through Garnache’s head as he tightened his lips and watched this gentleman indulge his inexplicable mirth. Surely Monsieur de Condillac was possessed of the keenest sense of humour in all France. He laughed with a will, and Garnache sent up a devout prayer that the laugh might choke him. The noise of it filled the hostelry.

“Sir,” said Garnache, with an ever-increasing tartness, “there is a by-word has it ‘Much laughter, little wit.’ In confidence won, is that your case, monsieur?”

The other looked at him soberly a moment, then went off again.

“Monsieur, monsieur!” he gasped, “you’ll be the death of me. For the love of Heaven look less fierce. Is it my fault that I must laugh? The folly of it all is so colossal. Three years from home, yet there is a woman keeps faithful and holds to a promise given for her. Come, monsieur, you who have seen the world, you must agree that there is in this something that is passing singular, extravagantly amusing. My poor little Valerie!” he spluttered through his half-checked mirth, “does she wait for me still? does she count me still betrothed to her? And because of that, says ‘No’ to brother Marius! Death of my life! I shall die of it.”

“I have a notion that you may, monsieur,” rasped Garnache’s voice, and with it rasped Garnache’s chair upon the boards. He had risen, and he was confronting his merry host very fiercely, white to the lips, his eyes aflame. There was no mistaking his attitude, no mistaking his words.

“Eh?” gasped the other, recovering himself at last to envisage what appeared to develop into a serious situation.

“Monsieur,” said Garnache, his voice very cold, “do I understand that you no longer

intend to carry out your engagement and wed Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye?"

A dull flush spread upon the Marquis's face. He rose too, and across the table he confronted his guest, his mien haughty, his eyes imperious.

"I thought, monsieur," said he, with a great dignity, "I thought when I invited you to sit at my table that your business was to serve me, however little I might be conscious of having merited the honour. It seems instead that you are come hither to affront me. You are my guest, monsieur. Let me beg that you will depart before I resent a question on a matter which concerns myself alone."

The man was right, and Garnache was wrong. He had no title to take up the affairs of Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye. But he was past reason now, and he was not the man to brook haughtiness, however courteously it might be cloaked. He eyed the Marquis's flushed ace across the board, and his lip curled.

"Monsieur," said he, "I take your meaning very fully. Half a word with me is as good as a whole sentence with another. You have dubbed me in polite phrases an impertinent. That I am not; and I resent the imputation."

"Oh, that!" said the Marquis, with a half-laugh and a shrug. "If you resent it—" His smile and his gesture made the rest plain.

"Exactly, monsieur," was Garnache's answer. "But I do not fight sick men."

Florimond's brows grew wrinkled, his eyes puzzled.

"Sick men!" he echoed. "Awhile ago, monsieur, you appeared to cast a doubt upon my sanity. Is it a case of the drunkard who thinks all the world drunk but himself?"

Garnache gazed at him. That doubt he had entertained grew now into something like assurance.

"I know not whether it is the fever makes your tongue run so—" he began, when the other broke in, a sudden light of understanding in his eyes.

"You are at fault," he cried. "I have no fever."

“But then your letter to Condillac?” demanded Garnache, lost now in utter amazement.

“What of it? I’ll swear I never said I had a fever.”

“I’ll swear you did.”

“You give me the lie, then?”

But Garnache waved his hands as if he implored the other, to have done with giving and taking offence. There was some misunderstanding somewhere, he realized, and sheer astonishment had cooled his anger. His only aim now was to have this obscure thing made clear.

“No, no,” he cried. “I am seeking enlightenment.”

Florimond smiled.

“I may have said that we were detained by a fever; but I never said the patient was myself.”

“Who then? Who else?” cried Garnache.

“Why, now I understand, monsieur. But it is my wife who has the fever.”

“Your—!” Garnache dared not trust himself to utter the word.

“My wife, monsieur,” the Marquis repeated. “The journey proved too much for her, travelling at the rate she did.”

A silence fell. Garnache’s long chin sank on to his breast, and he stood there, his eyes upon the tablecloth, his thoughts with the poor innocent child who waited at Condillac, so full of trust and faith and loyalty to this betrothed of hers who had come home with a wife out of Italy.

And then, while he stood so and Florimond was regarding him curiously, the door opened, and the host appeared.

“Monsieur le Marquis,” said he, “there are two gentlemen below asking to see you. One of them is Monsieur Marius de Condillac.”

“Marius?” cried the Marquis, and he started round with a frown.

“Marius?” breathed Garnache, and then, realizing that the assassins had followed so close upon his heels, he put all thoughts from his mind other than that of the immediate business. He had, himself, a score to settle with them. The time was now. He swung round on his heel, and before he knew what he had said the words were out:

“Bring them up, Monsieur l’Hote.”

Florimond looked at him in surprise.

“Oh, by all means, if monsieur wishes it,” said he, with a fine irony.

Garnache looked at him, then back at the hesitating host.

“You have heard,” said he coolly. “Bring them up.”

“Bien, monsieur,” replied the host, withdrawing and closing the door after him.

“Your interference in my affairs grows really droll, monsieur,” said the Marquis tartly.

“When you shall have learned to what purpose I am interfering, you’ll find it, possibly, not quite so droll,” was the answer, no less tart. “We have but a moment, monsieur. Listen while I tell you the nature of their errand.”

CHAPTER XXI. THE GHOST IN THE CUPBOARD

Garnache had but a few minutes in which to unfold his story, and he needed, in addition, a second or two in which to ponder the situation as he now found it.

His first reflection was that Florimond, since he was now married, might perhaps, instead of proving Valerie’s saviour from Marius, join forces with his brother in coercing her into this alliance with him. But from what Valerie herself had told him he was inclined to think more favourably of Florimond and to suppress such doubts as these. Still he could incur no risks; his business was to serve Valerie and Valerie

only; to procure at all costs her permanent liberation from the power of the Condillacs. To make sure of this he must play upon Florimond's anger, letting him know that Marius had journeyed to La Rochette for the purpose of murdering his half-brother. That he but sought to murder him to the end that he might be removed from his path to Valerie, was a circumstance that need not too prominently be presented. Still, presented it must be, for Florimond would require to know by what motive his brother was impelled ere he could credit him capable of such villainy.

Succinctly, but tellingly, Garnache brought out the story of the plot that had been laid for Florimond's assassination, and it joyed him to see the anger rising in the Marquis's face and flashing from his eyes.

"What reason have they for so damnable a deed?" he cried, between incredulity and indignation.

"Their overweening ambition. Marius covets Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye's estates."

"And to gain his ends he would not stop at murdering me? Is it, indeed, the truth you tell me?"

"I pledge my honour for the truth of it," answered Garnache, watching him closely. Florimond looked at him a moment. The steady glance of those blue eyes and the steady tone of that crisp voice scattered his last doubt.

"The villains!" cried the Marquis. "The fools!" he added. "For me, Marius had been welcome to Valerie. He might have found in me an ally to aid him in the urging of his suit. But now—" He raised his clenched hand and shook it in the air, as if in promise of the battle he would deliver.

"Good," said Garnache, reassured. "I hear their steps upon the stairs. They must not find me with you."

A moment later the door opened, and Marius, very bravely arrayed, entered the room, followed closely by Fortunio. Neither showed much ill effects of last night's

happenings, save for a long dark-brown scar that ran athwart the captain's cheek, where Garnache's sword had ploughed it.

They found Florimond seated quietly at table, and as they entered he rose and came forward with a friendly smile to greet his brother. His sense of humour was being excited; he was something of an actor, and the role he had adopted in the comedy to be played gave him a certain grim satisfaction. He would test for himself the truth of what Monsieur de Garnache had told him concerning his brother's intentions. Marius received his advances very coolly. He took his brother's hand, submitted to his brother's kiss; but neither kiss nor hand-pressure did he return. Florimond affected not to notice this.

"You are well, my dear Marius, I hope," said he, and thrusting him out at arms' length, he held him by the shoulders and regarded him critically. "Ma foi, but you are changed into a comely well-grown man. And your mother—she is well, too, I trust."

"I thank you, Florimond, she is well," said Marius stiffly.

The Marquis took his hands from his brother's shoulders; his florid, good-natured face smiling ever, as if this were the happiest moment of his life.

"It is good to see France again, my dear Marius," he told his brother. "I was a fool to have remained away so long. I am pining to be at Condillac once more."

Marius eyeing him, looked in vain for signs of the fever. He had expected to find a debilitated, emaciated man; instead, he saw a very lusty, healthy, hearty fellow, full of good humour, and seemingly full of strength. He began to like his purpose less, despite such encouragement as he gathered from the support of Fortunio. Still, it must be gone through with.

"You wrote us that you had the fever," he said, half inquiringly.

"Pooh! That is naught." And Florimond snapped a strong finger against a stronger thumb. "But whom have you with you?" he asked, and his eyes took the measure of

Fortunio, standing a pace or two behind his master.

Marius presented his bravo.

“This is Captain Fortunio, the commander of our garrison of Condillac.”

The Marquis nodded good-humouredly towards the captain.

“Captain Fortunio? He is well named for a soldier of fortune. My brother, no doubt, will have family matters to tell me of. If you will step below, Monsieur le Capitaine, and drink a health or so while you wait, I shall be honoured.”

The captain, nonplussed, looked at Marius, and Florimond surprised the look. But Marius’s manner became still chillier.

“Fortunio here,” said he, and he half turned and let his hand fall on the captain’s shoulder, “is my very good friend. I have no secrets from him.”

The instant lift of Florimond’s eyebrows was full of insolent, supercilious disdain. Yet Marius did not fasten his quarrel upon that. He had come to La Rochette resolved that any pretext would serve his turn. But the sight of his brother so inflamed his jealousy that he had now determined that the quarrel should be picked on the actual ground in which it had its roots.

“Oh, as you will,” said the Marquis coolly. “Perhaps your friend will be seated, and you, too, my dear Marius.” And he played the host to them with a brisk charm. Setting chairs, he forced them to sit, and pressed wine upon them.

Marius cast his hat and cloak on the chair where Garnache’s had been left. The Parisian’s hat and cloak, he naturally assumed to belong to his brother. The smashed flagon and the mess of wine upon the floor he scarce observed, setting it down to some clumsiness, either his brother’s or a servant’s. They both drank, Marius in silence, the captain with a toast.

“Your good return, Monsieur le Marquis,” said he, and Florimond thanked him by an inclination of the head. Then, turning to Marius:

“And so,” he said, “you have a garrison at Condillac. What the devil has been taking place there? I have had some odd news of you. It would almost seem as if you were setting up as rebels in our quiet little corner of Dauphiny.”

Marius shrugged his shoulders; his face suggested that he was ill-humoured.

“Madame the Queen-Regent has seen fit to interfere in our concerns. We Condillacs do not lightly brook interference.”

Florimond showed his teeth in a pleasant smile.

“That is true, that is very true, Pardieu! But what warranted this action of Her Majesty’s?”

Marius felt that the time for deeds was come. This fatuous conversation was but a futile waste of time. He set down his glass, and sitting back in his chair he fixed his sullen black eyes full upon his half-brother’s smiling brown ones.

“I think we have exchanged compliments enough,” said he, and Fortunio wagged his head approvingly. There were too many men in the courtyard for his liking, and the more time they waited, the more likely were they to suffer interruption. Their aim must be to get the thing done quickly, and then quickly to depart before an alarm could be raised. “Our trouble at Condillac concerns Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye.”

Florimond started forward, with a ready assumption of lover-like solicitude.

“No harm has come to her?” he cried. “Tell me that no harm has come to her.”

“Reassure yourself,” answered Marius, with a sneer, a greyness that was of jealous rage overspreading his face. “No harm has come to her whatever. The trouble was that I sought to wed her, and she, because she is betrothed to you, would have none of me. So we brought her to Condillac, hoping always to persuade her. You will remember that she was under my mother’s tutelage. The girl, however, could not be constrained. She suborned one of our men to bear a letter to Paris for her, and in answer to it the Queen sent a hot-headed, rash blunderer down to Dauphiny to

procure her liberation. He lies now at the bottom of the moat of Condillac."

Florimond's face had assumed a look of horror and indignation.

"Do you dare tell me this?" he cried.

"Dare?" answered Marius, with an ugly laugh. "Men enough have died over this affair already. That fellow Garnache left some bodies on our hands last night before he set out for another world himself. You little dream how far my daring goes in this matter. I'll add as many more as need be to the death roll that we have already, before you set foot in Condillac."

"Ah!" said Florimond, as one upon whose mind a light breaks suddenly. "So, that is the business on which you come to me. I doubted your brotherliness, I must confess, my dear Marius. But tell me, brother mine, what of our father's wishes in this matter? Have you no respect for those?"

"What respect had you?" flashed back Marius, his voice now raised in anger. "Was it like a lover to remain away for three years—to let all that time go by without ever a word from you to your betrothed? What have you done to make good your claim to her?"

"Nothing, I confess; yet—"

"Well, you shall do something now," exclaimed Marius, rising. "I am here to afford you the opportunity. If you would still win Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye, you shall win her from me—at point of sword. Fortunio, see to the door."

"Wait, Marius!" cried Florimond, and he looked genuinely aghast. "Do not forget that we are brothers, men of the same blood; that my father was your father."

"I choose to remember rather that we are rivals," answered Marius, and he drew his rapier. Fortunio turned the key in the lock. Florimond gave his brother a long searching look, then with a sigh he picked up his sword where it lay ready to his hand and thoughtfully unsheathed it. Holding the hilt in one hand and the blade in

the other he stood, bending the weapon like a whip, whilst again he searchingly regarded his brother.

“Hear me a moment,” said he. “If you will force this unnatural quarrel upon me, at least let the thing be decently done. Not here, not in these cramped quarters, but out in the open let our meeting take place. If the captain, there, will act for you, I’ll find a friend to do me the like service.”

“We settle this matter here and now,” Marius answered him, in a tone of calm finality.

“But if I were to kill you—” Florimond began.

“Reassure yourself,” said Marius with an ugly smile.

“Very well, then; either alternative will suit the case I wish to put. If you were to kill me—it may be ranked as murder. The irregularity of it could not be overlooked.”

“The captain, here, will act for both of us.”

“I am entirely at your service, gentlemen,” replied Fortunio pleasantly, bowing to each in turn.

Florimond considered him. “I do not like his looks,” he objected. “He may be the friend of your bosom, Marius; you may have no secrets from him; but for my part, frankly, I should prefer the presence of some friend of my own to keep his blade engaged.”

The Marquis’s manner was affable in the extreme. Now that it was settled that they must fight, he appeared to have cast aside all scruples based upon their consanguinity, and he discussed the affair with the greatest bonhomie, as though he were disposing of a matter of how they should sit down to table.

It gave them pause. The change was too abrupt. They did not like it. It was as the calm that screens some surprise. Yet it was impossible he should have been forewarned; impossible he could have had word of how they proposed to deal with

him.

Marius shrugged his shoulders.

“There is reason in what you say,” he acknowledged; “but I am in haste. I cannot wait while you go in search of a friend.”

“Why then,” he answered, with a careless laugh, “I must raise one from the dead.”

Both stared at him. Was he mad? Had the fever touched his brain? Was that healthy colour but the brand of a malady that rendered him delirious?

“Dieu! How you stare!” he continued, laughing in their faces. “You shall see something to compensate you for your journey, messieurs. I have learnt some odd tricks in Italy; they are a curious people beyond the Alps. What did you say was the name of the man the Queen had sent from Paris?—he who lies at the bottom of the moat of Condillac?”

“Let there be an end to this jesting,” growled Marius. “On guard, Monsieur le Marquis!”

“Patience! patience!” Florimond implored him. “You shall have your way with me, I promise you. But of your charity, messieurs, tell me first the name of that man.”

“It was Garnache,” said Fortunio, “and if the information will serve you, it was I who slew him.”

“You?” cried Florimond. “Tell me of it, I beg you.”

“Do you fool us?” questioned Marius in a rage that overmastered his astonishment, his growing suspicion that here all was not quite as it seemed.

“Fool you? But no. I do but wish to show you something that I learned in Italy. Tell me how you slew him, Monsieur le Capitaine.”

“I think we are wasting time,” said the captain, angry too. He felt that this smiling gentleman was deriding the pair of them; it crossed his mind that for some purpose of his own the Marquis was seeking to gain time. He drew his sword.

Florimond saw the act, watched it, and his eyes twinkled. Suddenly Marius's sword shot out at him. He leapt back beyond the table, and threw himself on guard, his lips still wreathed in their mysterious smile.

"The time has come, messieurs," said he. "I should have preferred to know more of how you slew that Monsieur de Garnache; but since you deny me the information, I shall do my best without it. I'll try to conjure up his ghost, to keep you entertained, Monsieur le Capitaine." And then, raising his voice, his sword, engaging now his brother's:

"Ola, Monsieur de Garnache!" he cried. "To me!"

And then it seemed to those assassins that the Marquis had been neither mad nor boastful when he had spoken of strange things he had learned beyond the Alps, or else it was they themselves were turned light-headed, for the doors of a cupboard at the far end of the room flew open suddenly, and from between them stepped the stalwart figure of Martin de Garnache, a grim smile lifting the corners of his mustachios, a naked sword in his hand flashing back the sunlight that flooded through the window.

They paused, aghast, and they turned ashen; and then in the mind of each arose the same explanation of this phenomenon. This Garnache wore the appearance of the man who had announced himself by that name when he came to Condillac a fortnight ago. Then, the sallow, black-haired knave who had last night proclaimed himself as Garnache in disguise was some impostor. That was the conclusion they promptly arrived at, and however greatly they might be dismayed by the appearance of this ally of Florimond's, yet the conclusion heartened them anew. But scarce had they arrived at it when Monsieur de Garnache's crisp voice came swiftly to dispel it.

"Monsieur le Capitaine," it said, and Fortunio shivered at the sound, for it was the voice he had heard but a few hours ago, "I welcome the opportunity of resuming our last night's interrupted sword-play." And he advanced deliberately.

Marius's sword had fallen away from his brother's, and the two combatants stood pausing. Fortunio without more ado made for the door. But Garnache crossed the intervening space in a bound.

"Turn!" he cried. "Turn, or I'll put my sword through your back. The door shall serve you presently, but it is odds that it will need a couple of men to bear you through it. Look to your dirty skin!"

CHAPTER XXII. THE OFFICES OF MOTHER CHURCH

A couple of hours after the engagement in the Marquis de Condillac's apartments at the Sanglier Noir at La Rochette, Monsieur de Garnache, attended only by Rabecque, rode briskly into France once more and made for the little town of Cheylas, which is on the road that leads down to the valley of the Isere and to Condillac. But not as far as the township did he journey. On a hill, the slopes all cultivated into an opulent vineyard, some two miles east of Cheylas, stood the low, square grey building of the Convent of Saint Francis. Thither did Monsieur de Garnache bend his horse's steps. Up the long white road that crept zigzag through the Franciscans' vineyards rode the Parisian and his servant under the welcome sunshine of that November afternoon.

Garnache's face was gloomy and his eyes sad, for his thoughts were all of Valerie, and he was prey to a hundred anxieties regarding her.

They gained the heights at last, and Rabecque got down to beat with his whip upon the convent gates.

A lay-brother came to open, and in reply to Garnache's request that he might have a word with the Father Abbot, invited him to enter.

Through the cloisters about the great quadrangle, where a couple of monks, their

habits girt high as their knees, were busy at gardeners' work, Garnache followed his conductor, and up the steps to the Abbot's chamber.

The master of the Convent of Saint Francis of Cheylas a tall, lean man with an ascetic face, prominent cheekbones, and a nose not unlike Garnache's own—the nose of a man of action rather than of prayer—bowed gravely to this stalwart stranger, and in courteous accents begged to be informed in what he might serve him.

Hat in hand, Garnache took a step forward in that bare, scantily furnished little room, permeated by the faint, waxlike odour that is peculiar to the abode of conventuals. Without hesitation he stated the reason of his visit.

"Father," said he, "a son of the house of Condillac met his end this morning at La Rochette."

The monk's eyes seemed to quicken, as though his interest in the outer world had suddenly revived.

"It is the Hand of God," he cried. "Their evil ways have provoked at last the anger of Heaven. How did this unfortunate meet his death?"

Garnache shrugged his shoulders.

"De mortuis nil nisi bonum," said he. His air was grave, his blue eyes solemn, and the Abbot had little cause to suspect the closeness with which that pair of eyes was watching him. He coloured faintly at the implied rebuke, but he inclined his head as if submissive to the correction, and waited for the other to proceed.

"There is the need, Father, to give his body burial," said Garnache gently.

But at that the monk raised his head, and a deeper flush the flush of anger—spread now upon his sallow cheeks. Garnache observed it, and was glad.

"Why do you come to me?" he asked.

"Why?" echoed Garnache, and there was hesitancy now in his voice. "Is not the

burial of the dead enjoined by Mother Church? Is it not a part of your sacred office?"

"You ask me this as you would challenge my reply," said the monk, shaking his head. "It is as you say, but it is not within our office to bury the impious dead, nor those who in life were excommunicate and died without repentance."

"How can you assume he died without repentance?"

"I do not; but I assume he died without absolution, for there is no priest who, knowing his name, would dare to shrive him, and if one should do it in ignorance of his name and excommunication, why then it is not done at all. Bid others bury this son of the house of Condillac; it matters no more by what hands or in what ground he be buried than if he were the horse he rode or the hound that followed him."

"The Church is very harsh, Father," said Garnache sternly.

"The Church is very just," the priest answered him, more sternly still, a holy wrath kindling his sombre eyes.

"He was in life a powerful noble," said Garnache thoughtfully. "It is but fitting that, being dead, honour and reverence should be shown his body."

"Then let those who have themselves been honoured by the Condillacs honour this dead Condillac now. The Church is not of that number, monsieur. Since the late Marquis's death the house of Condillac has been in rebellion against us; our priests have been maltreated, our authority flouted; they paid no tithes, approached no sacraments. Weary of their ungodliness the Church placed its ban upon them; under this ban it seems they die. My heart grieves for them; but—"

He spread his hands, long and almost transparent in their leanness, and on his face a cloud of sorrow rested.

"Nevertheless, Father," said Garnache, "twenty brothers of Saint Francis shall bear the body home to Condillac, and you yourself shall head this grim procession."

“I?” The monk shrank back before him, and his figure seemed to grow taller. “Who are you, sir, that say to me what I shall do, the Church’s law despite?”

Garnache took the Abbot by the sleeve of his rough habit and drew him gently towards the window. There was a persuasive smile on his lips and in his keen eyes which the monk, almost unconsciously, obeyed.

“I will tell you,” said Garnache, “and at the same time I shall seek to turn you from your harsh purpose.”

At the hour at which Monsieur de Garnache was seeking to persuade the Abbot of Saint Francis of Cheylas to adopt a point of view more kindly towards a dead man, Madame de Condillac was at dinner, and with her was Valerie de La Vauvraye. Neither woman ate appreciably. The one was oppressed by sorrow, the other by anxiety, and the circumstance that they were both afflicted served perhaps to render the Dowager gentler in her manner towards the girl.

She watched the pale face and troubled eyes of Valerie; she observed the almost lifeless manner in which she came and went as she was bidden, as though a part of her had ceased to exist, and that part the part that matters most. It did cross her mind that in this condition mademoiselle might the more readily be bent to their will, but she dwelt not overlong upon that reflection. Rather was her mood charitable, no doubt because she felt herself the need of charity, the want of sympathy.

She was tormented by fears altogether disproportionate to their cause. A hundred times she told herself that no ill could befall Marius. Florimond was a sick man, and were he otherwise, there was still Fortunio to stand by and see to it that the right sword pierced the right heart, else would his pistoles be lost to him.

Nevertheless she was fretted by anxiety, and she waited impatiently for news, fuming at the delay, yet knowing full well that news could not yet reach her.

Once she reproved Valerie for her lack of appetite, and there was in her voice a kindness Valerie had not heard for months—not since the old Marquis died, nor did

she hear it now, or, hearing it, she did not heed it.

“You are not eating, child,” the Dowager said, and her eyes were gentle.

Valerie looked up like one suddenly awakened; and in that moment her eyes filled with tears. It was as if the Dowager’s voice had opened the floodgates of her sorrow and let out the tears that hitherto had been repressed. The Marquise rose and waved the page and an attendant lackey from the room. She crossed to Valerie’s side and put her arm about the girl’s shoulder.

“What ails you, child?” she asked. For a moment the girl suffered the caress; almost she seemed to nestle closer to the Dowager’s shoulder. Then, as if understanding had come to her suddenly, she drew back and quietly disengaged herself from the other’s arms. Her tears ceased; the quiver passed from her lip.

“You are very good, madame,” she said, with a coldness that rendered the courteous words almost insulting, “but nothing ails me save a wish to be alone.”

“You have been alone too much of late,” the Dowager answered, persisting in her wish to show kindness to Valerie; for all that, had she looked into her own heart, she might have been puzzled to find a reason for her mood—unless the reason lay in her own affliction of anxiety for Marius.

“Perhaps I have,” said the girl, in the same cold, almost strained voice. “It was not by my own contriving.”

“Ah, but it was, child; indeed it was. Had you been reasonable you had found us kinder. We had never treated you as we have done, never made a prisoner of you.”

Valerie looked up into the beautiful ivory-white face, with its black eyes and singularly scarlet lips, and a wan smile raised the corners of her gentle mouth.

“You had no right—none ever gave it you—to set constraint and restraint upon me.”

“I had—indeed, indeed I had,” the Marquise answered her, in a tone of sad protest. “Your father gave me such a right when he gave me charge of you.”

“Was it a part of your charge to seek to turn me from my loyalty to Florimond, and endeavour to compel me by means gentle or ungentle into marriage with Marius?”

“We thought Florimond dead; or, if not dead, then certainly unworthy of you to leave you without news of him for years together. And if he was not dead then, it is odds he will be dead by now.” The words slipped out almost unconsciously, and the Marquise bit her lip and straightened herself, fearing an explosion. But none came. The girl looked across the table at the fire that smouldered on the hearth in need of being replenished.

“What do you mean, madame?” she asked; but her tone was listless, apathetic, as of one who though uttering a question is incurious as to what the answer may be.

“We had news some days ago that he was journeying homewards, but that he was detained by fever at La Rochette. We have since heard that his fever has grown so serious that there is little hope of his recovery.”

“And it was to solace his last moments that Monsieur Marius left Condillac this morning?”

The Dowager looked sharply at the girl; but Valerie’s face continued averted, her gaze resting on the fire. Her tone suggested nothing beyond a natural curiosity.

“Yes,” said the Dowager.

“And lest his own efforts to help his brother out of this world should prove insufficient he took Captain Fortunio with him?” said Valerie, in the same indifferent voice.

“What do you mean?” the Marquise almost hissed into the girl’s ear.

Valerie turned to her, a faint colour stirring in her white face.

“Just what I have said, madame. Would you know what I have prayed? All night was I upon my knees from the moment that I recovered consciousness, and my prayers were that Heaven might see fit to let Florimond destroy your son. Not that I

desire Florimond's return, for I care not if I never set eyes on him again. There is a curse upon this house, madame," the girl continued, rising from her chair and speaking now with a greater animation, whilst the Marquise recoiled a step, her face strangely altered and suddenly gone grey, "and I have prayed that that curse might be worked out upon that assassin, Marius. A fine husband, madame, you would thrust upon the daughter of Gaston de La Vauvraye."

And turning, without waiting for an answer, she moved slowly down the room, and took her way to her own desolate apartments, so full of memories of him she mourned—of him, it seemed to her, she must always mourn; of him who lay dead in the black waters of the moat beneath her window.

Stricken with a sudden, inexplicable terror, the Dowager, who for all her spirit was not without a certain superstition, felt her knees loosen, and she sank limply into a chair. She was amazed at the extent of Valerie's knowledge, and puzzled by it; she was amazed, too, at the seeming apathy of Valerie for the danger in which Florimond stood, and at her avowal that she did not care if she never again beheld him. But such amazement as came to her was whelmed fathoms-deep in her sudden fears for Marius. If he should die! She grew cold at the thought, and she sat there, her hands folded in her lap, her face grey. That mention of the curse the Church had put upon them had frozen her quick blood and turned her stout spirit to mere water.

At last she rose and went out into the open to inquire if no messenger had yet arrived, for all that she knew there was not yet time for any messenger to have reached the chateau. She mounted the winding staircase of stone that led to the ramparts, and there alone, in the November sunshine, she paced to and fro for hours, waiting for news, straining her eyes to gaze up the valley of the Isere, watching for the horseman that must come that way. Then, as time sped on and the sun approached its setting and still no one came, she bethought her that if harm had befallen Marius, none would ride that night to Condillac. This very delay seemed

pregnant with news of disaster. And then she shook off her fears and tried to comfort herself. There was not yet time. Besides, what had she to fear for Marius? He was strong and quick, and Fortunio was by his side. A man was surely dead by now at La Rochette; but that man could not be Marius.

At last, in the distance, she espied a moving object, and down on the silent air of eventide came the far-off rattle of a horse's hoofs. Some one was riding, galloping that way. He was returned at last. She leaned on the battlements, her breath coming in quick, short gasps, and watched the horseman growing larger with every stride of his horse.

A mist was rising from the river, and it dimmed the figure; and she cursed the mist for heightening her anxiety, for straining further her impatience. Then a new fear was begotten in her mind. Why came one horseman only where two should have ridden? Who was it that returned, and what had befallen his companion? God send, at least, it might be Marius who rode thus, at such a breakneck pace.

At last she could make him out. He was close to the chateau now, and she noticed that his right arm was bandaged and hanging in a sling. And then a scream broke from her, and she bit her lip hard to keep another in check, for she had seen the horseman's face, and it was Fortunio's. Fortunio—and wounded! Then, assuredly, Marius was dead!

She swayed where she stood. She set her hand on her bosom, above her heart, as if she would have repressed the beating of the one, the heaving of the other; her soul sickened, and her mind seemed to turn numb, as she waited there for the news that should confirm her fears.

The hoofs of his horse thundered over the planks of the drawbridge, and came clatteringly to halt as he harshly drew rein in the courtyard below. There was a sound of running feet and men sprang to his assistance. Madame would have gone below to meet him; but her limbs seemed to refuse their office. She leaned against

one of the merlons of the embattled parapet, her eyes on the spot where he should emerge from the stairs, and thus she waited, her eyes haggard, her face drawn.

He came at last, lurching in his walk, being overstiff from his long ride. She took a step forward to meet him. Her lips parted.

“Well?” she asked him, and her voice sounded harsh and strained. “How has the venture sped?”

“The only way it could,” he answered. “As you would wish it.”

At that she thought that she must faint. Her lungs seemed to writhe for air, and she opened her lips and took long draughts of the rising mist, never speaking for a moment or two until she had sufficiently recovered from this tremendous revulsion from her fears.

“Then, where is Marius?” she asked at last.

“He has remained behind to accompany the body home. They are bringing it here.”

“They?” she echoed. “Who are they?”

“The monks of Saint Francis of Cheylas,” he answered.

A something in his tone, a something in his shifty eyes, a cloud upon his fair and usually so ingenuous looking countenance aroused her suspicions and gave her resurrected courage pause.

She caught him viciously by the arms, and forced his glance to meet her own in the fading daylight.

“It is the truth you are telling me, Fortunio?” she snapped, and her voice was half-angry, half-fearful.

He faced her now, his eyes bold. He raised a hand to lend emphasis to his words.

“I swear, madame, by my salvation, that Monsieur Marius is sound and well.”

She was satisfied. She released his arm.

“Does he come to-night?” she asked.

“They will be here to-morrow, madame. I rode on to tell you so.”

“An odd fancy, this of his. But”—and a sudden smile overspread her face—“we may find a more useful purpose for one of these monks.”

An hour ago she would willingly have set mademoiselle at liberty in exchange for the assurance that Marius had been successful in the business that had taken him over the border into Savoy. She would have done it gladly, content that Marius should be heir to Condillac. But now that Condillac was assured her son, she must have more for him; her insatiable greed for his advancement and prosperity was again upon her. Now, more than ever—now that Florimond was dead—must she have La Vauvraye for Marius, and she thought that mademoiselle would no longer be difficult to bend. The child had fallen in love with that mad Garnache, and when a woman is crossed in love, while her grief lasts it matters little to her where she weds. Did she not know it out of the fund of her own bitter experience? Was it not that—the compulsion her own father had employed to make her find a mate in a man so much older than herself as Condillac—that had warped her own nature, and done much to make her what she was?

A lover she had had, and whilst he lived she had resisted them, and stood out against this odious marriage that for convenience’ sake they forced upon her. He was killed in Paris in a duel, and when the news of it came to her, she had folded her hands and let them wed her to whom they listed.

Of just such a dejection of spirit had she observed the signs in Valerie; let them profit by it while it lasted. They had been long enough without Church ceremonies at Condillac. There should be two to-morrow to make up for the empty time—a wedding and a burial.

She was going down the stairs, Fortunio a step behind her, when her mind reverted to the happening at La Rochette.

“Was it well done?” she asked.

“It made some stir,” said he. “The Marquis had men with him, and had the affair taken place in France ill might have come of it.”

“You shall give me a full account of it,” said she, rightly thinking that there was still something to be explained. Then she laughed softly. “Yes, it was a lucky chance for us, his staying at La Rochette. Florimond was born under an unlucky star, I think, and you under a lucky one, Fortunio.”

“I think so, too, as regards myself,” he answered grimly, and he thought of the sword that had ploughed his cheek last night and pierced his sword-arm that morning, and he thanked such gods as in his godlessness he owned for the luck that had kept that sword from finding out his heart.

CHAPTER XXIII. THE JUDGMENT OF GARNACHE

On the morrow, which was a Friday and the tenth of November—a date to be hereafter graven on the memory of all concerned in the affairs of Condillac—the Dowager rose betimes, and, for decency’s sake, having in mind the business of the day, she gowned herself in black.

Betimes, too, the Lord Seneschal rode out of Grenoble, attended by a couple of grooms, and headed for Condillac, in doing which—little though he suspected it—he was serving nobody’s interests more thoroughly than Monsieur de Garnache’s.

Madame received him courteously. She was in a blithe and happy mood that morning—the reaction from her yesterday’s distress of mind. The world was full of promise, and all things had prospered with her and Marius. Her boy was lord of Condillac; Florimond, whom she had hated and who had stood in the way of her boy’s advancement, was dead and on his way to burial; Garnache, the man from Paris who might have made trouble for them had he ridden home again with the tale

of their resistance, was silenced for all time, and the carp in the moat would be feasting by now upon what was left of him; Valerie de La Vauvraye was in a dejected frame of mind that augured well for the success of the Dowager's plans concerning her, and by noon at latest there would be priests at Condillac, and, if Marius still wished to marry the obstinate baggage, there would be no difficulty as to that.

It was a glorious morning, mild and sunny as an April day, as though Nature took a hand in the Dowager's triumph and wished to make the best of its wintry garb in honour of it.

The presence of this gross suitor of hers afforded her another source of satisfaction. There would no longer be the necessity she once had dreaded of listening to his suit for longer than it should be her pleasure to be amused by him. But when Tressan spoke, he struck the first note of discord in the perfect harmony which the Dowager imagined existed.

"Madame," said he, "I am desolated that I am not a bearer of better tidings. But for all that we have made the most diligent search, the man Rabecque has not yet been apprehended. Still, we have not abandoned hope," he added, by way of showing that there was a silver lining to his cloud of danger.

For just a moment madame's brows were knitted. She had forgotten Rabecque until now; but an instant's reflection assured her that in forgetting him she had done him no more than such honour as he deserved. She laughed, as she led the way down the garden steps—the mildness of the day and the brightness of her mood had moved her there to receive the Seneschal.

"From the sombreness of your tone one might fear your news to be of the nature of some catastrophe. What shall it signify that Rabecque eludes your men? He is but a lackey after all."

"True," said the Seneschal, very soberly; "but do not forget, I beg, that he is the

bearer of letters from one who is not a lackey."

The laughter went out of her face at that. Here was something that had been lost sight of in the all-absorbing joy of other things. In calling the forgotten Rabecque to mind she had but imagined that it was no more than a matter of the tale he might tell—a tale not difficult to refute, she thought. Her word should always weigh against a lackey's. But that letter was a vastly different matter.

"He must be found, Tressan," she said sharply.

Tressan smiled uneasily, and chewed at his beard.

"No effort shall be spared," he promised her. "Of that you may be very sure. The affairs of the province are at a standstill," he added, that vanity of his for appearing a man of infinite business rising even in an hour of such anxiety, for to himself, no less than to her, was there danger should Rabecque ever reach his destination with the papers Garnache had said he carried.

"The affairs of the province are at a standstill," he repeated, "while all my energies are bent upon this quest. Should we fail to have news of his capture in Dauphiny, we need not, nevertheless, despond. I have sent men after him along the three roads that lead to Paris. They are to spare neither money nor horses in picking up his trail and effecting his capture. After all, I think we shall have him."

"He is our only danger now," the Marquise answered, "for Florimond is dead—of the fever," she added, with a sneering smile which gave Tressan sensations as of cold water on his spine. "It were an irony of fate if that miserable lackey were to reach Paris now and spoil the triumph for which we have worked so hard."

"It were, indeed," Tressan agreed with her, "and we must see that he does not."

"But if he does," she returned, "then we must stand together." And with that she set her mind at ease once more, her mood that morning being very optimistic.

"Always, I hope, Clotilde," he answered, and his little eyes leered up out of the

dimples of fat in which they were embedded. “I have stood by you like a true friend in this affair; is it not so?”

“Indeed; do I deny it?” she answered half scornfully.

“As I shall stand by you always when the need arises. You are a little in my debt concerning Monsieur de Garnache.”

“I—I realize it,” said she, and she felt again as if the sunshine were gone from the day, the blitheness from her heart. She was moved to bid him cease leering at her and to take himself and his wooing to the devil. But she bethought her that the need for him might not yet utterly be passed. Not only in the affair of Garnache—in which he stood implicated as deeply as herself—might she require his loyalty, but also in the matter of what had befallen yesterday at La Rochette; for despite Fortunio’s assurances that things had gone smoothly, his tale hung none too convincingly together; and whilst she did not entertain any serious fear of subsequent trouble, yet it might be well not utterly to banish the consideration of such a possibility, and to keep the Seneschal her ally against it. So she told him now, with as much graciousness as she could command, that she fully realized her debt, and when, encouraged, he spoke of his reward, she smiled upon him as might a girl smile upon too impetuous a wooer whose impetuosity she deprecates yet cannot wholly withstand.

“I am a widow of six months,” she reminded him, as she had reminded him once before. Her widowhood was proving a most convenient refuge. “It is not for me to listen to a suitor, however my foolish heart may incline. Come to me in another six months’ time.”

“And you will wed me then?” he bleated.

By an effort her eyes smiled down upon him, although her face was a trifle drawn.

“Have I not said that I will listen to no suitor? and what is that but a suitor’s question?”

He caught her hand; he would have fallen on his knees there and then, at her feet, on the grass still wet with the night's mist, but that he in time bethought him of how sadly his fine apparel would be the sufferer.

"Yet I shall not sleep, I shall know no rest, no peace until you have given me an answer. Just an answer is all I ask. I will set a curb upon my impatience afterwards, and go through my period of ah—probation without murmuring. Say that you, will marry me in six months' time—at Easter, say."

She saw that an answer she must give, and so she gave him the answer that he craved. And he—poor fool!—never caught the ring of her voice, as false as the ring of a base coin; never guessed that in promising she told herself it would be safe to break that promise six months hence, when the need of him and his loyalty would be passed.

A man approached them briskly from the chateau. He brought news that a numerous company of monks was descending the valley of the Isere towards Condillac. A faint excitement stirred her, and accompanied by Tressan she retraced her steps and made for the battlements, whence she might overlook their arrival.

As they went Tressan asked for an explanation of this cortege, and she answered him with Fortunio's story of how things had sped yesterday at La Rochette.

Up the steps leading to the battlements she went ahead of him, with a youthful, eager haste that took no thought for the corpulence and short-windedness of the following Seneschal. From the heights she looked eastwards, shading her eyes from the light of the morning sun, and surveyed the procession which with slow dignity paced down the valley towards Condillac.

At its head walked the tall, lean figure of the Abbot of Saint Francis of Cheylas, bearing on high a silvered crucifix that flashed and scintillated in the sunlight. His cowl was thrown back, revealing his pale, ascetic countenance and shaven head. Behind him came a coffin covered by a black pall, and borne on the shoulders of six

black-robed, black cowled monks, and behind these again walked, two by two, some fourteen cowled brothers of the order of Saint Francis, their heads bowed, their arms folded, and their hands tucked away in their capacious sleeves.

It was a numerous cortege, and as she watched its approach the Marquise was moved to wonder by what arguments had the proud Abbot been induced to do so much honour to a dead Condillac and bear his body home to this excommunicated roof.

Behind the monks a closed carriage lumbered down the uneven mountain way, and behind this rode four mounted grooms in the livery of Condillac. Of Marius she saw nowhere any sign, and she inferred him to be travelling in that vehicle, the attendant servants being those of the dead Marquis.

In silence, with the Seneschal at her elbow, she watched the procession advance until it was at the foot of the drawbridge. Then, while the solemn rhythm of their feet sounded across the planks that spanned the moat, she turned, and, signing to the Seneschal to follow her, she went below to meet them. But when she reached the courtyard she was surprised to find they had not paused, as surely would have been seemly. Unbidden, the Abbot had gone forward through the great doorway and down the gallery that led to the hall of Condillac. Already, when she arrived below, the coffin and its bearers had disappeared, and the last of the monks was passing from sight in its wake. Leaning against the doorway through which they were vanishing stood Fortunio, idly watching that procession and thoughtfully stroking his mustachios. About the yard lounged a dozen or so men-at-arms, practically all the garrison that was left them since the fight with Garnache two nights ago.

After the last monk had disappeared, she still remained there, expectantly; and when she saw that neither the carriage nor the grooms made their appearance, she stepped up to Fortunio to inquire into the reason of it.

“Surely Monsieur de Condillac rides in that coach,” said she.

“Surely,” Fortunio answered, himself looking puzzled. “I will go seek the reason, madame. Meanwhile will you receive the Abbot? The monks will have deposited their burden.”

She composed her features into a fitting solemnity, and passed briskly through to the hall, Tressan ever at her heels. Here she found the coffin deposited on the table, its great black pall of velvet, silver-edged, sweeping down to the floor. No fire had been lighted that morning nor had the sun yet reached the windows, so that the place wore a chill and gloomy air that was perhaps well attuned to the purpose that it was being made to serve.

With a rare dignity, her head held high, she swept down the length of that noble chamber towards the Abbot, who stood erect as a pikestaff: at the tablehead, awaiting her. And well was it for him that he was a man of austere habit of mind, else might her majestic, incomparable beauty have softened his heart and melted the harshness of his purpose.

He raised his hand when she was within a sword’s length of him, and with startling words, delivered in ringing tones, he broke the ponderous silence.

“Wretched woman,” he denounced her, “your sins have found you out. Justice is to be done, and your neck shall be bent despite your stubborn pride. Derider of priests, despoiler of purity, mocker of Holy Church, your impious reign is at an end.”

Tressan fell back aghast, his face blenching to the lips; for if justice was at hand for her, as the Abbot said, then was justice at hand for him as well. Where had their plans miscarried? What flaw was there that hitherto she had not perceived? Thus he questioned himself in his sudden panic.

But the Marquise was no sharer in his tremors. Her eyes opened a trifle wider; a faint colour crept into her cheeks; but her only emotions were of amazement and indignation. Was he mad, this shaveling monk? That was the question that leapt into her mind, the very question with which she coldly answered his outburst.

“For madness only,” she thought fit to add, “could excuse such rash temerity as yours.”

“Not madness, madame,” he answered, with chill haughtiness—“not madness, but righteous indignation. You have defied the power of Holy Church as you have defied the power of our sovereign lady, and justice is upon you. We are here to present the reckoning, and see its payment made in full.”

She fancied he alluded to the body in the coffin—the body of her stepson—and she could have laughed at his foolish conclusions that she must account Florimond’s death an act of justice upon her for her impiety. But her rising anger left her no room for laughter.

“I thought, sir priest, you were come to bury the dead. But it rather seems you are come to talk.”

He looked at her long and sternly. Then he shook his head, and the faintest shadow of a smile haunted his ascetic face.

“Not to talk, madame; oh, not to talk,” he answered slowly. “But to act, I have come, madame, to liberate from this shambles the gentle lamb you hold here prisoned.”

At that some of the colour left her cheeks; her eyes grew startled: at last she began to realize that all was not as she had thought—as she had been given to understand.—Still, she sought to hector it, from very instinct.

“Vertudieu!” she thundered at him. “What mean you?”

Behind her Tressan’s great plump knees were knocking one against the other. Fool that he had been to come to Condillac that day, and to be trapped thus in her company, a partner in her guilt. This proud Abbot who stood there uttering denunciations had some power behind him, else had he never dared to raise his voice in Condillac within call of desperate men who would give little thought to the sacredness, of his office.

“What mean you?” she repeated—adding with a sinister smile, “in your zeal, Sir Abbot, you are forgetting that my men are within call.”

“So, madame, are mine,” was his astounding answer, and he waved a hand towards the array of monks, all standing with bowed heads and folded arms.

At that her laughter rang shrill through the chamber. “These poor shavelings?” she questioned.

“Just these poor shavelings, madame,” he answered, and he raised his hand again and made a sign. And then an odd thing happened, and it struck a real terror into the heart of the Marquise and heightened that which was already afflicting her fat lover, Tressan.

The monks drew themselves erect. It was as if a sudden gust of wind had swept through their ranks and set them all in motion. Cowls fell back and habits were swept aside, and where twenty monks had stood, there were standing now a score of nimble, stalwart men in the livery of Condillac, all fully armed, all grinning in enjoyment of her and Tressan’s dismay.

One of them turned aside and locked the door of the chamber. But his movement went unheeded by the Dowager, whose beautiful eyes, starting with horror, were now back upon the grim figure of the Abbot, marvelling almost to see no transformation wrought in him.

“Treachery!” she breathed, in an awful voice, that was no louder than a whisper, and again her eyes travelled round the company, and suddenly they fastened upon Fortunio, standing six paces from her to the right, pulling thoughtfully at his mustachios, and manifesting no surprise at what had taken place.

In a sudden, blind choler, she swept round, plucked the dagger from Tressan’s belt and flung herself upon the treacherous captain. He had betrayed her in some way; he had delivered up Condillac—into whose power she had yet had no time to think. She caught him by the throat with a hand of such nervous strength as one would little

have suspected from its white and delicate contour. Her dagger was poised in the air, and the captain, taken thus suddenly, was palsied with amazement and could raise no hand to defend himself from the blow impending.

But the Abbot stepped suddenly to her side and caught her wrist in his thin, transparent hand.

“Forbear,” he bade her. “The man is but a tool.”

She fell back—dragged back almost by the Abbot—panting with rage and grief; and then she noticed that during the moment that her back had been turned the pall had been swept from the coffin. The sight of the bare deal box arrested her attention, and for the moment turned aside her anger. What fresh surprise did they prepare her?

No sooner had she asked herself the question than herself she answered it, and an icy hand seemed to close about her heart. It was Marius who was dead. They had lied to her. Marius’s was the body they had borne to Condillac—those men in the livery of her stepson.

With a sudden sob in her throat she took a step towards the coffin. She must see for herself. One way or the other she must at once dispel this torturing doubt. But ere she had taken three paces, she stood arrested again, her hands jerked suddenly to the height of her breast, her lips parting to let out a scream of terror. For the coffin-lid had slowly raised and clattered over. And as if to pile terror for her, a figure rose from the box, and, sitting up, looked round with a grim smile; and the figure was the figure of a man whom she knew to be dead, a man who had died by her contriving—it was the figure of Garnache. It was Garnache as he had been on the occasion of his first coming to Condillac, as he had been on the day they had sought his life in this very room. How well she knew that great hooked nose and the bright, steely blue eyes, the dark brown hair, ash-coloured at the temples where age had paled it, and the fierce, reddish mustachios, bristling above the firm mouth and long, square chin.

She stared and stared, her beautiful face livid and distorted, till there was no beauty to be seen in it, what time the Abbot regarded her coldly and Tressan, behind her, turned almost sick with terror. But not the terror of ghosts was it afflicted him. He saw in Garnache a man who was still of the quick—a man who by some miracle had escaped the fate to which they supposed him to have succumbed; and his terror was the terror of the reckoning which that man would ask.

After a moment's pause, as if relishing the sensation he had created, Garnache rose to his feet and leapt briskly to the ground. There was nothing ghostly about the thud with which he alighted on his feet before her. A part of her terror left her; yet not quite all. She saw that she had but a man to deal with, yet she began to realize that this man was very terrible.

"Garnache again!" she gasped.

He bowed serenely, his lips smiling.

"Aye, madame," he told her pleasantly, "always Garnache. Tenacious as a leech, madame; and like a leech come hither to do a little work of purification."

Her eyes, now kindling again as she recovered from her recent fears, sought Fortunio's shifty glance. Garnache followed it and read what was in her mind.

"What Fortunio has done," said he, "he has done by your son's authority and sanction."

"Marius?" she inquired, and she was almost fearful lest she should hear that by her son he meant her stepson, and that Marius was dead.

"Yes, Marius," he answered her. "I bent him to my will. I threatened him that he and this fellow of his, this comrade in arms so worthy of his master, should be broken on the wheel together unless I were implicitly obeyed. If they would save their lives, this was their chance. They were wise, and they took it, and thus afforded me the means of penetrating into Condillac and rescuing Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye."

“Then Marius—?” She left her question unfinished, her hand clutching nervously at the bosom of her gown.

“Is sound and well, as Fortunio truthfully will have told you. But he is not yet out of my grasp, nor will be until the affairs of Condillac are settled. For if I meet with further opposition here, broken on the wheel he shall be yet, I promise you.”

Still she made a last attempt at hectoring it. The long habit of mastership dies hard. She threw back her head; her courage revived now that she knew Marius to be alive and sound.

“Fine words,” she sneered. “But who are you that you can threaten so and promise so?”

“I am the Queen-Regent’s humble mouthpiece, madame. What I threaten, I threaten in her name. Ruffle it no longer, I beseech you. It will prove little worth your while. You are deposed, madame, and you had best take your deposition with dignity and calm—in all friendliness do I advise it.”

“I am not yet come so low that I need your advice,” she answered sourly.

“You may before the sun sets,” he answered, with his quiet smile. “The Marquis de Condillac and his wife are still at La Rochette, waiting until my business here is done that they may come home.”

“His wife?” she cried.

“His wife, madame. He has brought home a wife from Italy.”

“Then—then—Marius?” She said no more than that. Maybe she had no intention of muttering even so much of her thoughts aloud. But Garnache caught the trend of her mind, and he marvelled to see how strong a habit of thought can be. At once upon hearing of the Marquis’s marriage her mind had flown back to its wonted pondering of the possibilities of Marius’s wedding Valerie.

But Garnache dispelled such speculations.

“No, madame,” said he. “Marius looks elsewhere for a wife—unless mademoiselle of her own free will should elect to wed him—a thing unlikely.” Then, with a sudden change to sternness—“Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye is well, madame?” he asked.

She nodded her head, but made no answer in words. He turned to Fortunio.

“Go fetch her,” he bade the captain, and one of the men unlocked the door to let Fortunio out upon that errand.

The Parisian took a turn in the apartment, and came close to Tressan. He nodded to the Seneschal with a friendliness that turned him sick with fright.

“Well met, my dear Lord Seneschal. I am rejoiced to find you here. Had it been otherwise I must have sent for you. There is a little matter to be settled between us. You may depend upon me to settle it to your present satisfaction, if to your future grief.” And, with a smile, he passed on, leaving the Seneschal too palsied to answer him, too stricken to disclaim his share in what had taken place at Condillac.

“You have terms to make with me?” the Marquise questioned proudly.

“Certainly,” he answered, with his grim courtesy. “Upon your acceptance of those terms shall depend Marius’s life and your own future liberty.”

“What are they?”

“That within the hour all your people—to the last scullion—shall have laid down their arms and vacated Condillac.”

It was beyond her power to refuse.

“The Marquis will not drive me forth?” she half affirmed, half asked.

“The Marquis, madame, has no power in this matter. It is for the Queen to deal with your insubordination—for me as the Queen’s emissary.”

“If I consent, monsieur, what then?”

He shrugged his shoulders, and smiled quietly.

“There is no ‘if,’ madame. Consent you must, willingly or unwillingly. To make sure of that have I come back thus and with force. But should you deliver battle, you will be worsted—and it will be very ill for you. Bid your men depart, as I have told you, and you also shall have liberty to go hence.”

“Aye, but whither?” she cried, in a sudden frenzy of anger.

“I realize, madame, from what I know of your circumstances that you will be well-nigh homeless. You should have thought of how one day you might come to be dependent upon the Marquis de Condillac’s generosity before you set yourself to conspire against him, before you sought to encompass his death. You can hardly look for generosity at his hands now, and so you will be all but homeless, unless—” He paused, and his eyes strayed to Tressan and were laden with a sardonic look.

“You take a very daring tone with me,” she told him. “You speak to me as no man has ever dared to speak.”

“When the power was yours, madame, you dealt with me as none has ever dared to deal. The advantage now is mine. Behold how I use it in your own interests; observe how generously I shall deal with you who deal in murder. Monsieur de Tressan,” he called briskly. The Seneschal started forward as if some one had prodded him suddenly.

“Mu—monsieur?” said he.

“With you, too, will I return good for evil. Come hither.”

The Seneschal approached, wondering what was about to take place. The Marquise watched his coming, a cold glitter in her eye, for—keener of mental vision than Tressan—she already knew the hideous purpose that was in Garnache’s mind.

The soldiers grinned; the Abbot looked on with an impassive face.

“The Marquise de Condillac is likely to be homeless henceforth,” said the Parisian, addressing the Seneschal. “Will you not be gallant enough to offer her a home,

Monsieur de Tressan?"

"Will I?" gasped Tressan, scarce daring to believe his own ears, his eyes staring with a look that was almost one of vacancy. "Madame well knows how readily."

"Oho?" crowed Garnache, who had been observing madame's face. "She knows? Then do so, monsieur; and on that condition I will forget your indiscretions here. I pledge you my word that you shall not be called to further account for the lives that have been lost through your treachery and want of loyalty, provided that of your own free will you lay down your Seneschalship of Dauphiny—an office which I cannot consent to see you filling hereafter."

Tressan stared from the Dowager to Garnache and back to the Dowager. She stood there as if Garnache's words had turned her into marble, bereft of speech through very rage. And then the door opened, and Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye entered, followed closely by Fortunio.

At sight of Garnache she stood still, set her hand on her heart, and uttered a low cry. Was it indeed Garnache she saw—Garnache, her brave knight-errant? He looked no longer as he had looked during those days when he had been her gaoler; but he looked as she liked to think of him since she had accounted him dead. He advanced to meet her, a smile in his eyes that had something wistful in it. He held out both hands to her, and she took them, and there, under the eyes of all, before he could snatch them away, she had stooped and kissed them, whilst a murmur of "Thank God! Thank God!" escaped from her lips to heaven.

"Mademoiselle, mademoiselle!" he remonstrated, when it was too late to stay her. "You must not; it is not seemly in me to allow it."

He saw in the act no more than an expression of the gratitude for what he had done to serve her, and for the risk in which his life had been so willingly placed in that service. Under the suasion of his words she grew calm again; then, suddenly, a fear stirred her once more in that place where she had known naught but fears.

“Why are you here, monsieur? You have come into danger again?”

“No, no,” he laughed. “These are my own men, at least for the time being. I am come in power this time, to administer justice. What shall be done with this lady, mademoiselle?” he asked; and knowing well the merciful sweetness of the girl’s soul, he added, “Speak, now. Her fate shall rest in your hands.”

Valerie looked at her enemy, and then her eyes strayed round the room and took stock of the men standing there in silence, of the Abbot who still remained at the table-head, a pale, scarce-interested spectator of this odd scene.

The change had come so abruptly. A few minutes ago she had been still a prisoner, suffering tortures at having heard that Marius was to return that day, and that, willy-nilly, she must wed him now. And now she was free it seemed: her champion was returned in power, and he stood bidding her decide the fate of her late oppressors.

Madame’s face was ashen. She judged the girl by her own self; she had no knowledge of any such infinite sweetness as that of this child’s nature, a sweetness that could do no hurt to any. Death was what the Marquise expected, since she knew that death would she herself have pronounced had the positions been reversed. But—

“Let her go in peace, monsieur,” she heard mademoiselle say, and she could not believe but that she was being mocked. And as if mockery were at issue, Garnache laughed.

“We will let her go, mademoiselle—yet not quite her own way. You must not longer remain unrestrained, madame,” he told the Marquise. “Natures such as yours need a man’s guidance. I think you will be sufficiently punished if you wed this rash Monsieur de Tressan, just as he will be sufficiently punished later when disillusionment follows his present youthful ardour. Make each other happy, then,” and he waved his arms from one to the other. “Our good Father, here, will tie the

knot at once, and then, my Lord Seneschal, you may bear home your bride. Her son shall follow you."

But the Marquise blazed out now. She stamped her foot, and her eyes seemed to have taken fire.

"Never, sir! Never in life!" she cried. "I will not be so constrained. I am the Marquise de Condillac, monsieur. Do not forget it!"

"I am hardly in danger of doing that. It is because I remember it that I urge you to change your estate with all dispatch; and cease to be the Marquise de Condillac. That same Marquise has a heavy score against her. Let her evade payment by this metamorphosis. I have opened for you, madame, a door through which you may escape."

"You are insolent," she told him. "By God, sir! I am no baggage to be disposed of by the will of any man."

At that Garnache himself took fire. Her anger proved as the steel smiting the flint of his own nature, and one of his fierce bursts of blazing passion whirled about her head.

"And what of this child, here?" he thundered. "What of her, madame? Was she a baggage to be disposed of by the will of any man or woman? Yet you sought to dispose of her against her heart, against her nature, against her plighted word. Enough said!" he barked, and so terrific was his mien and voice that the stout-spirited Dowager was cowed, and recoiled as he advanced a step in her direction. "Get you married. Take you this man to husband, you who with such calmness sought to drive others into unwilling wedlock. Do it, madame, and do it now, or by the Heaven above us, you shall come to Paris with me, and you'll not find them nice there. It will avail you little to storm and shout at them that you are Marquise de Condillac. As a murderess and a rebel shall you be tried, and as both or either it is odds you will be broken on the wheel—and your son with you. So make

your choice, madame."

He ceased. Valerie had caught him by the arm. At once his fury fell from him. He turned to her.

"What is it, child?"

"Do not compel her, if she will not wed him," said she. "I know—and—she did not—how terrible a thing it is."

"Nay, patience, child," he soothed her, smiling now, his smile as the sunshine that succeeds a thunderstorm.

"It is none so bad with her. She is but coy. They had plighted their troth already, so it seems. Besides, I do not compel her. She shall marry him of her own free will—or else go to Paris and stand her trial and the consequences."

"They had plighted their troth, do you say?"

"Well—had you not, Monsieur le Seneschal?"

"We had, monsieur," said Tressan, with conscious pride; "and for myself I am ready for these immediate nuptials."

"Then, in God's name, let Madame give us her answer now. We have not the day to waste."

She stood looking at him, her toe tapping the ground, her eyes sullenly angry. And in the end, half-fainting in her great disdain, she consented to do his will. Paris and the wheel formed too horrible an alternative; besides, even if that were spared her, there was but a hovel in Touraine for her, and Tressan, for all his fat ugliness, was wealthy.

So the Abbot, who had lent himself to the mummery of coming there to read a burial service, made ready now, by order of the Queen's emissary, to solemnize a wedding.

It was soon done. Fortunio stood sponsor for Tressan, and Garnache himself insisted upon handing the Lord Seneschal his bride, a stroke of irony which hurt the proud

lady of Condillac more than all her sufferings of the past half-hour.

When it was over and the Dowager Marquise de Condillac had been converted into the Comtesse de Tressan, Garnache bade them depart in peace and at once.

“As I have promised, you shall be spared all prosecution, Monsieur de Tressan,” he assured the Seneschal at parting. “But you must resign at once the King’s Seneschalship of Dauphiny, else will you put me to the necessity of having you deprived of your office—and that might entail unpleasant consequences.”

They went, madame with bowed head, her stubborn pride broken at last as the Abbot of Saint Francis had so confidently promised her. After them went the Abbot and the lackeys of Florimond, and Fortunio went with these to carry out Garnache’s orders that the men of the Dowager’s garrison be sent packing at once, leaving with the Parisian, in the great hall, just Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye.

CHAPTER XXIV. SAINT MARTIN’S EVE

Uneasy in his mind, seeking some way to tell the thing and acquit himself of the painful task before him, Garnache took a turn in the apartment.

Mademoiselle leaned against the table, which was still burdened by the empty coffin, and observed him. His ponderings were vain; he could find no way to tell, his story. She had said that she did not exactly love this Florimond, that her loyalty to him was no more than her loyalty to her father’s wishes. Nevertheless, he thought, what manner of hurt must not her pride receive when she learned that Florimond had brought him home a wife? Garnache was full of pity for her and for the loneliness that must be hers hereafter, mistress of a vast estate in Dauphiny, alone and friendless. And he was a little sorry for himself and the loneliness which, he felt, would be his hereafter; but that was by the way.

At last it was she herself who broke the silence.

“Monsieur,” she asked him, and her voice was strained and husky, “were you in time to save Florimond?”

“Yes, mademoiselle,” he answered readily, glad that by that question she should have introduced the subject. “I was in time.”

“And Marius?” she inquired. “From what I heard you say, I take it that he has suffered no harm.”

“He has suffered none. I have spared him that he might participate in the joy of his mother at her union with Monsieur de Tressan.”

“I am glad it was so, monsieur. Tell me of it.” Her voice sounded formal and constrained.

But either he did not hear or did not heed the question.

“Mademoiselle,” he said slowly. “Florimond is coming—”

“Florimond?” she broke in, and her voice went shrill, as if with a sudden fear, her cheeks turned white as chalk. The thing that for months she had hoped and prayed for was come at last, and it struck her almost dead with terror.

He remarked the change, and set it down to a natural excitement. He paused a moment. Then:

“He is still at La Rochette. But he does no more than wait until he shall have learned that his stepmother has departed from Condillac.”

“But—why—why—? Was he then in no haste to come to me?” she inquired, her voice faltering.

“He is—” He stopped and tugged at his mustachios, his eyes regarding her sombrely. He was close beside her now, where he had halted, and he set his hand gently upon her shoulder, looked down into that winsome little oval face she raised to his.

“Mademoiselle,” he inquired, “would it afflict you very sorely if you were not

destined, after all, to wed the Lord of Condillac?"

"Afflict me?" she echoed. The very question set her gasping with hope. "No—no, monsieur; it would not afflict me."

"That is true? That is really, really true?" he cried, and his tone seemed less despondent.

"Don't you know how true it is?" she said, in such accents and with such a shy upward look that something seemed suddenly to take Garnache by the throat. The blood flew to his cheeks. He fancied an odd meaning in those words of hers—a meaning that set his pulses throbbing faster than joy or peril had ever set them yet. Then he checked himself, and deep down in his soul he seemed to hear a peal of mocking laughter—just such a burst of sardonic mirth as had broken from his lips two nights ago when on his way to Voiron. Then he went back to the business he had in hand.

"I am glad it is so with you," he said quietly. "Because Florimond has brought him home a wife."

The words were out, and he stood back as stands a man who, having cast an insult, prepares to ward the blow he expects in answer. He had looked for a storm, a wild, frantic outburst; the lightning of flashing, angry eyes; the thunder of outraged pride. Instead, here was a gentle calm, a wan smile overspreading her sweet, pale face, and then she hid that face in her hands, buried face and hands upon his shoulder and fell to weeping very quietly.

This, he thought, was almost worse than the tempest he had looked for. How was he to know that these tears were the overflow of a heart that was on the point of bursting from sheer joy? He patted her shoulder; he soothed her.

"Little child," he whispered in her ear. "What does it matter? You did not really love him. He was all unworthy of you. Do not grieve, child. So, so, that is better."

She was looking up at him, smiling through the tears that suffused er eyes.

“I am weeping for joy, monsieur,” said she.

“For joy?” quoth he. “Vertudieu! There is no end to the things a woman weeps for!”

Unconsciously, instinctively almost, she nestled closer to him, and again his pulses throbbed, again that flush came to overspread his lean countenance. Very softly he whispered in her ear:

“Will you go to Paris with me, mademoiselle?”

He meant by that question no more than to ask whether, now that here in Dauphiny she would be friendless and alone, it were not better for her to place herself under the care of the Queen-Regent. But what blame to her if she misunderstood the question, if she read in it the very words her heart was longing to hear from him? The very gentleness of his tone implied his meaning to be the one she desired. She raised her hazel eyes again to his, she nestled closer to him, and then, with a shy fluttering of her lids, a delicious red suffusing her virgin cheek, she answered very softly:

“I will go anywhere with you, monsieur—anywhere.”

With a cry he broke from her. There was no fancying now; no possibility of misunderstanding. He saw how she had misread his question, how she had delivered herself up to him in answer. His almost roughness startled her, and she stared at him as he stamped down the apartment and back to where she stood, seeking in vain to master the turbulence of his feelings. He stood still again. He took her by the shoulders and held her at arms’ length, before him, thus surveying her, and there was trouble in his keen eyes.

“Mademoiselle, mademoiselle!” he cried. “Valerie, my child, what are you saying to me?”

“What would you have me say?” she asked, her eyes upon the floor. “Was I too forward? It seemed to me there could not be question of such a thing between us now. I belong to you. What man has ever served a woman as you have served me?

What better friend, what nobler lover did ever woman have? Why then need I take shame at confessing my devotion?"

He swallowed hard, and there was a mist before his eyes—eyes that had looked unmoved on many a scene of carnage.

"You know not what you do," he cried out, and his voice was as the voice of one in pain. "I am old."

"Old?" she echoed in deep surprise, and she looked up at him, as if she sought evidence of what he stated.

"Aye, old," he assured her bitterly. "Look at the grey in my hair, the wrinkles in my face. I am no likely lover for you, child. You'll need a lusty, comely young gallant."

She looked at him, and a faint smile flickered at the corners of her lips. She observed his straight, handsome figure; his fine air of dignity and of strength. Every inch a man was he; never lived there one who was more a man; and what more than such a man could any maid desire?

"You are all that I would have you," she answered him, and in his mind he almost cursed her stubbornness, her want of reason.

"I am peevish and cross-grained," he informed her, "and I have grown old in ignorance of woman's ways. Love has never come to me until now. What manner of lover, think you, can I make?"

Her eyes were on the windows at his back. The sunshine striking through them seemed to give her the reply she sought.

"To-morrow will be Saint Martin's Day," she told him; "yet see with a warmth the sun is shining."

"A poor, make-believe Saint Martin's Summer," said he. "I am fitly answered by your allegory."

"Oh, not make-believe, not make-believe," she exclaimed. "There is no

make-believe in the sun’s brightness and its warmth. We see it and we feel it, and we are none the less glad of it because the time of year should be November; rather do we take the greater joy in it. And it is not yet November in your life, not yet by many months.”

“What you say is apt, perhaps,” said he, “and may seem more apt than it is since my name is Martin, though I am no saint.” Then he shook off this mood that he accounted selfish; this mood that would take her—as the wolf takes the lamb—with no thought but for his own hunger.

“No, no!” he cried out. “It were unworthy in me!”

“When I love you, Martin?” she asked him gently.

A moment he stared at her, as if through those clear eyes he would penetrate to the very depths of her maiden soul. Then he sank on to his knees before her as any stripling lover might have done, and kissed her hands in token of the fact that he was conquered.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ST. MARTIN'S SUMMER ***

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