

BARING-GOULD SABINE

NOÉMI

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Noémi

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Noémi

CHAPTER I. THE STAIR PERILOUS

Jean del' Peyra was standing scraping a staff to form a lance-shaft. The sun shone hot upon him, and at his feet lay his shadow as a blot.

He was too much engrossed in his work to look about him, till he heard a voice call from somewhere above his head —

"Out of the way, clown!"

Then there crashed down by him a log of wood that rolled to his feet and was followed by another piece.

Now only did Jean look up, and what he saw made him drop his half-finished shaft and forget it. What Jean saw was this: a girl at some distance above him on the face of the rock, swaying a long-handled hammer, with which she was striking at, and dislodging, the steps by which she had ascended, and by means of which alone could she return.

The cliff was of white limestone, or rather chalk, not such as Dover headlands are composed of, and which have given their name to Albion, but infinitely more compact and hard, though scarcely less white. The appearance of the stone was that of fine-grained white limestone. A modern geologist peering among its fossils would say it was chalk. But the period of this tale far antedates the hatching out of the first geologist.

The cliff was that of La Roque Gageac, that shoots up from the Dordogne to the height of four hundred and sixty feet above the river. The lower portion is, however, not perpendicular; it consists of a series of ledges and rapid inclines, on which stands clustered, clinging to the rock, the town of Gageac. But two thirds of the height is not merely a sheer precipice, it overhangs. Half-way up this sheer precipice the weather has gnawed into the rock, where was a bed of softer stone, forming a horizontal cavern, open to the wind and rain, with a roof extending some forty feet, unsupported, above the hard bed that served as floor.

At some time unknown a stair had been contrived in the face of the rock, to reach this terrace a hundred feet above the roofs of the houses below; and then a castle had been built in the cave, consisting of towers and guard-rooms, halls and kitchens; a well had been sunk in the heart of the mountain, and this impregnable fastness had been made into a habitation for man.

It could be reached in but one way, by the stair from below. It could not be reached from above, for the rock overhung the castle walls.

But the stair itself was a perilous path, and its construction a work of ingenuity. To make the position — the eagle nest in the rock — absolutely inaccessible to an enemy, the stair had been contrived so that it could be wrecked by those flying up it, with facility, and that thereby they might cut off possibility of pursuit.

The method adopted was this.

Holes had been bored into the rock-face in gradual ascent from the platform at the foot of the rock to the gate-tower of the castle, nestled on the platform in the precipice. In each such hole a balk or billet of wood was planted, sliced away below where it entered, and this end was then made fast by a wedge driven in under it. From each step, when once secured, that above it could next be made firm. To release the steps a tap from underneath sufficed to loosen the wedge and send it and the balk it supported clattering down.

And now the girl was striking away these steps. What was her purpose? Had she considered what she was doing? To destroy the means of ascent was easy enough; to replace it a labour exacting time and patience. Was she a fool? was she mad?

There was some method in her madness, for she had not knocked away a succession of steps, but two only, with one left in position between.

"Ware, fool!"

And down the face of the rock and clattering to his feet fell a third.

This was too much.

Jean ran to the foot of the stair and hastened up it till he reached the gap. Further he could not proceed – a step had been dislodged; the next remained intact. Then came another break, a second step in place, and then the third break. Above that stood the girl, swinging the long-handled mallet with which she had loosened the wedges and struck down the steps they held up. She was a handsome girl with dusky skin, but warm with blood under it, dark loose hair, and large deep brown eyes. She stood, athletic, graceful, poised on her stage, swaying the hammer, looking defiantly, insolently, at the youth, with lips half open and pouting.

"Do you know what you are about, madcap?" said he.

"Perfectly. Making you keep your distance, fool."

"Keep distance!" said the youth. "I had no thought of you. I was not pursuing you – I did not know you were here!"

"And now I have woke you to see me."

"What of that? You had acted like a mad thing. I cannot help you, I cannot leap to you. Nothing would make me do so."

"Nothing? Not if I said, 'Come, assist me down'?"

"I could not leap the space. See you – if one step only were thrown down I might venture, but not when every alternate one between us is missing. To leap up were to ensure my fall at the next gap."

"I do not need your help. I can descend. I can spring from one step to the next over the gaps."

"And risk a fall and a broken neck?"

"Then there is one madcap the less in this world."

"For what have you done this?"

"A prank."

"A prank! Yes; but to replace the steps takes time and pains."

"I shall expend neither on them."

"It will give trouble to others."

"If it amuses me, what care I?"

The young man looked at the strange girl with perplexity.

"If every peg of wood were away," said she, "I could yet descend."

"How? Are you a bird – can you fly? Not a cat, not a squirrel could run up or down this rock."

"Fool! I should slip down by the rope. Do you not know that there is a windlass? Do you suppose they take their kegs of wine, their meat, their bread, their fuel up this spider stair? I tell you that there is a rope, and at the end of it a bar of wood. They let this down and bring up what they want affixed to the bar. At pleasure, any man may go up or down that way. Do you not see? It must be so. If they were fast and all the ladders were gone, how should they ever descend? Why, they could not mend the stairs from aloft. It must be done step by step from below. Do you see that, fool?"

"I see that perfectly."

"Very well; I have but to run up, make love to the custodian, and he would swing me down. There; it is easy done!"

"You had best cast down the hammer and let me replace the steps."

"I'll come down without them and without a rope. I can leap. If I cannot creep up as a cat, I can spring down like one – aye! and like a squirrel, too, from one lodging place to another. Stand back and see me."

"Stay!" said Jean. "Why run the risk when not needed?"

"Because I like the risk – it is pepper and mustard to my meat of life. Stand back, clown, or I will spring and strike you over – and down you go and crack your foolish pate."

"If I go – you go also – do you not see that?"

"Look aloft!" said the girl. "Up in that nest – whenever the English are about, up goes into it the Bishop of Sarlat, and he takes with him all his treasure, his gold cups and patens, his shrines for holy bones all set with gems, and his bags of coin. There he sits like an old grey owl, Towhit! towahoo – towhit! towahoo! and he looks out this way, that – to see where houses are burning and smoke rises, and when at night the whole world is besprent with red fires – as the sky is with stars, where farms and homesteads are burning. And he says 'Towhit! towahoo! I have my cups and my patens and my coin-bags, and my dear little holy bones, all safe here. Towhit! towahoo! And best of all – I am safe – my unholy old bones also, whoo! whoo! whoo! Nobody can touch me – whoo! whoo! whoo!'"

"Is he there now?"

"No, he is not. There is no immediate danger. Only a few as guard, that is all. If I were a man, I'd take the place and smoke the old owl out, and rob him of his plunder. I'd keep the shrines, and throw the holy rubbish away!"

"How would you do that?"

"I have been considering. I'd be let down over the edge of the cliff and throw in fireballs, till I had set the castle blazing."

"And then?"

"Then I'd have grappling-irons and crook them to the walls, and swing in under the ledge, and leap on the top of the battlements, and the place would fall. I'd cast the old bishop out if he would not go, and carry off all his cups and shrines and coin."

"It would be sacrilege!"

"Bah! What care I?" Then, after enjoying the astonishment of the lad, she said: "With two or three bold spirits it might be done. Will you join me? Be my mate, and we will divide the plunder." She burst into a merry laugh. "It would be sport to smoke out the old owl and send him flying down through the air, blinking and towahooing, to break his wings, or his neck, or his crown there – on those stones below."

"I'm not English – I'm no brigand!" answered the young man vehemently.

"I'm English!" said the girl.

"What? An English woman or devil?"

"I'm English – I'm Gascon. I'm anything where there is diversion to be got and plunder to be obtained. Oh, but we live in good times! Deliver me from others where there is nothing doing, no sport, no *chevauchée*¹ no spoil, no fighting."

Then suddenly she threw away the hammer and spread her arms as might a bird preparing to fly, bent her lithe form as might a cricket to leap.

"Stand aside! Go back! 'Ware, I am coming!"

The lad hastily beat a retreat down the steps. He could do no other. Each step was but two feet in length from the rock. There was no handrail; no two persons could pass on it. Moreover, the impetus of the girl, if she leaped from one foothold to the next, and the next, and then again to the stair where undamaged, would be prodigious; she would require the way clear that she might descend bounding,

¹ A *chevauchée* was an expedition to ravage a tract of country. Originally it signified a feudal service due from a vassal to his seigneur in private wars.

swinging down the steep flight, two stages at a leap, till she reached the bottom. An obstruction would be fatal to her, and fatal to him who stood in her way.

No word of caution, no dissuasion was of avail. In her attitude, in the flash of her eyes, in the tone of her voice, in the thrill that went through her agile frame, Jean saw that the leap was inevitable. He therefore hastened to descend, and when he reached the bottom, turned to see her bound.

He held his breath. The blood in his arteries stood still. He set his teeth, and all the muscles of his body contracted as with the cramp.

He saw her leap.

Once started, nothing could arrest her.

On her left hand was the smooth face of the rock, without even a blade of grass, a harebell, a tuft of juniper growing out of it. On her right was void. If she tripped, if she missed her perch, if she miscalculated her weight, if she lost confidence for one instant, if her nerve gave way in the slightest, if she was not true of eye, nimble of foot, certain in judging distance, then she would shoot down just as had the logs she had cast below.

As certainly as he saw her fall would Jean spring forward in the vain hope of breaking her fall, as certainly to be struck down and perish with her.

One – a whirl before his eyes. As well calculate her leaps as count the spokes in a wheel as it revolves on the road.

One – two – three – thirty – a thousand – nothing!

"There, clown!"

She was at the bottom, her hands extended, her face flushed with excitement and pleasure.

"You see – what I can dare and do."

CHAPTER II. WHO IS THE FOOL NOW?

There boiled up in the youth's heart a feeling of wrath and indignation against the girl who in sheer wantonness had imperiled her life and had given to him a moment of spasm of apprehension.

Looking full into her glittering brown eyes, he said —

"You have cast at me ill names. I have been to you but clown and fool; I have done nothing to merit such titles; I should never have thrown a thought away on you, but have gone on scraping my shaft, had not you done a silly thing – a silly thing. Acted like a fool, and a fool only!"

"You dare not do what I have done."

"If there be a need I will do it. If I do it for a purpose there is no folly in it. That is folly where there is recklessness for no purpose."

"I had a purpose!"

"A purpose? – what? To call my attention to you, to make me admire your daring, all to no end. Or was it in mere inconsiderate prank? A man is not brave merely because he is so stupid that he does not see the consequences before him. A blind man may walk where I should shrink from treading. And stupidity blinds some eyes that they run into danger and neither see nor care for the danger or for the consequences that will ensue on their rashness."

The girl flushed with anger.

"I am not accustomed to be spoken to thus," she said, and stamped her foot on the pavement of the platform.

"All the better for you that it is spoken at last."

"And who are you that dare say it?"

"I – I am Jean del' Peyra."

The girl laughed contemptuously. "I never heard the name."

"I have told you my name, what is yours?" asked the boy, and he picked up his staff and began once more to point it.

There was indifference in his tone, indifference in the act, that exasperated the girl.

"You do not care – I will not say."

"No," he answered, scraping leisurely at the wood. "I do not greatly care. Why should I? You have shown me to-day that you do not value yourself, and you do not suppose, then, that I can esteem one who does not esteem herself."

"You dare say that!" The girl flared into fury. She stooped to pick up the hammer. Jean put his foot on it.

"No," said he. "You would use that, I suppose, to knock out my brains, because I show you no homage, because I say that you have acted as a fool, that your bravery is that of a fool, that your thoughts – aye, your thoughts of plunder and murder against the Bishop of Sarlat, your old owl – towhit, towahoo! are the thoughts of a fool. No – I do not care for the name of a fool."

"Why did you run up the steps? Why did you cry to me to desist from knocking out the posts? Why concern yourself a mite about me, if you so despise me?" gasped the girl, and it seemed as though the words shot like flames from her lips.

"Because we are of like blood – that is all!" answered Jean, coolly.

"Like blood! Hear him – hear him! He and I —*he*– he and I of like blood, and he a del' Peyra! And I – I am a Noémi!"

"So – Noémi! That is your name?"

"And I," continued the girl in her raging wrath, "I – learn this – I am the child of Le Gros Guillem. Have you ever heard of the Gros Guillem?" she asked in a tone of triumph, like the blast of a victor's trumpet.

Jean lowered his staff, and looked steadily at her. His brows were contracted, his lips were set firm.

"So!" he said, after a pause. "The daughter of Gros Guillem?"

"Aye – have you heard of him?"

"Of course I have heard of him."

"And of the del' Peyras who ever heard?" asked the girl with mockery and scorn, and snapped her fingers.

"No – God be thanked! – of the del' Peyras you have never heard as of the Gros Guillem."

"The grapes – the grapes are sour!" scoffed the girl.

"I wonder at nothing you have done," said the boy sternly, "since you have told me whence you come. Of the thorn – thorns; of the nettle – stings; of the thistle – thistles – all after their kind. No! God be praised!" The boy took off his cap and looked up. "The Gros Guillem and my father, Ogier del' Peyra, are not to be spoken of in one sentence here, nor will be from the White Throne on the Day of Doom."

Looking steadily at the girl seething with anger, with mortified pride, and with desire to exasperate him, he said —

"I should never have thought that you sprang from the Gros Guillem. The likeness must be in the heart, it is not in the face."

"Have you seen my father?" asked the girl.

"I have never seen him, but I have heard of him."

"What have you heard?"

"That he is very tall and spider-like in build; they call him 'le gros' in jest, for he is not stout, but very meagre. He has long hands and feet, and a long head with red hair, and pale face with sunspots, and very faint blue eyes, under thick red brows. That is what I am told Le Gros Guillem is like. But you – "

"Describe me – go on!"

"No!" answered Jean. "There is no need. You see yourself every day in the glass. When there is no glass you look at yourself in the water; when no water, you look at yourself in your nails."

"When there is no water, I look at myself in your eyes, and see a little brown creature there – that is me. *Allons!*"

She began to laugh. Much of her bad temper had flown; she was a girl of rapidly changing moods.

It was true that she was mirrored in Jean del' Peyra's eyes. He was observing her attentively. Never before had he seen so handsome a girl, with olive, transparent skin, through which the flush of colour ran like summer lightning in a summer cloud – such red lips, such rounded cheek and chin; such an easy, graceful figure! The magnificent burnished black hair was loose and flowing over her shoulders; and her eyes! – they had the fire of ten thousand flints lurking in them and flashing out at a word.

"How come you here?" asked Jean, in a voice less hard and in a tone less indifferent than before. "This place, La Roque Gageac, is not one for a daughter of Le Gros Guillem. Here we are French. At Domme they are English, and that is the place for your father."

"Ah!" said the girl in reply, "among us women French or English are all the same. We are both and we are neither. I suppose you are French?"

"Yes, I am French."

"And a Bishop's man?"

"I live on our own land – Del Peyraland, at Ste. Soure."

"And I am with my aunt here. My father considers Domme a little too rough a place for a girl. He has sent me hither. At the gates they did not ask me if I were French or English. They let me through, but not my father's men. They had to ride back to Domme."

"He cannot come and see you here?"

The girl laughed. "If he were to venture here, they would hang him – not give him half an hour to make his peace with Heaven! – hang him – hang him as a dog!"

"So! – and you are even proud of such a father!"

"So! – and even I am proud to belong to one whose name is known. I thank my good star I do not belong to a nobody of whom none talk, even as an Ogier del' Peyra."

"You are proud of your father – of Le Gros Guillem!" exclaimed Jean; and now his brow flushed with anger, and his eye sparkled. "Proud of that *routier* and *rouffien*,² who is the scourge, the curse of the country round! Proud of the man that has desolated our land, has made happy wives into wailing widows, and glad children into despairing orphans; who has wrecked churches, and drunk – blaspheming God at the time – out of the gold chalices; who has driven his sword into the bowels of his own Mother Country, and has scorched her beautiful face with his firebrands! I know of Le Gros Guillem – who does not? – know of him by the curses that are raised by his ill deeds, the hatred he has sown, the vows of vengeance that are registered – "

"Which he laughs at," interrupted Noémi.

"Which he laughs at now," pursued the boy angrily, and anger gave fluency to his tongue. "But do you not suppose that a day of reckoning will arrive? Is Heaven deaf to the cries of the sufferers? Is Humanity all-enduring, and never likely to revolt – and, when she does, to exact a terrible revenge? The labourer asks for naught but to plough his land in peace, the merchant nothing but to be allowed to go on his journey unmolested, the priest has no higher desire than to say his Mass in tranquillity. And all this might be but for Le Gros Guillem and the like of him. Let the English keep their cities and their provinces; they belong to them by right. But is Le Gros Guillem English? Was Perducat d'Albret English? What of Le petit Mesquin? of the Archpriest? of Cervolle? Were they English? Are those real English faces that we fear and hate? Are they not the faces of our own countrymen, who call themselves English, that they may plunder and murder their fellow-countrymen and soak with blood and blast with fire the soil that reared them?"

Noémi was somewhat awed by his vehemence, but she said —

"Rather something to be talked about than a nothing at all."

"Wrong, utterly wrong!" said Jean. "Rather be the storm that bursts and wrecks all things than be still beneficent Nature in her order which brings to perfection? Any fool can destroy; it takes a wise man to build up. You – you fair and gay young spirit, tell me have you ever seen that of which you speak so lightly, of which you jest as if it were a matter of pastime? Have you gone tripping after your father, treading in his bloody footprints, holding up your skirts lest they should touch the festering carcases on either side the path he has trod?"

"No," answered the girl, and some of the colour went out of her face, leaving it the finest, purest olive in tint.

"Then say no more about your wish to have a name as a *routier* and to be the terror of the countryside, till you have experienced what it is that terrorises the land."

"One must live," said Noémi.

"One may live by helping others to live – as does the peasant, and the artisan, as the merchant; or by destroying the life of others – as does the *routier* and the vulgar robber," answered Jean.

Then Noémi caught his wrist and drew him aside under an archway. Her quick eye had seen the castellan coming that way; he had not been in the castle in the face of the rock, but in the town; and

² A *routier*, a brigand who harassed the roads; a *rouffien*, a dweller in the rocks, *rouffes*.

he was now on his way back. He would find the means of ascent broken, and must repair it before reaching his eyrie.

"Who is the fool now?" said Jean del' Peyra. "You, who were knocking away the steps below you, calculating that if you destroyed that stair, you could still descend by the custodian's rope and windlass. See – he was not there. You would have been fast as a prisoner till the ladder was restored; and small bones would have been made of you, Gros Guillem's daughter, for playing such a prank as that!"

Unseen they watched the man storming, swearing, angrily gathering up the pegs and wedges and the hammer, and ascending the riskful flight of steps to replace the missing pieces of wood in their sockets, and peg them firmly and sustainingly with their wedges.

"What you did in your thoughtlessness, that your father and the like of him do in their viciousness, and do on a grander scale," said Jean. "They are knocking away the pegs in the great human ladder, destroying the sower with his harvest, the merchant with his trade, the mason, the carpenter, the weaver with their crafts, the scholar with his learning, the man of God with his lessons of peace and goodwill. And at last Le Gros Guillem and such as he will be left alone, above a ruined world on the wreckage of which he has mounted, to starve, when there is nothing more to be got, because the honest getters have all been struck down. Who is the fool now?"

"Have done!" said the girl impatiently. "You have moralised enough – you should be a clerk!"

"We are all made moralists when we see honesty trampled under foot. Well for you, Noémi, with your light head and bad heart – "

"My bad heart!"

"Aye, your bad heart. Well for you that you are a harmless girl and not a boy, or you would have followed quick in your father's steps and built yourself up as hateful a name."

"I, a harmless girl?"

"Yes, a harmless girl. Your hands are feeble, and however malicious your heart, you can do none a mischief, save your own self."

"You are sure of that?"

"Mercifully it is so. The will to hurt and ruin may be present, but you are weak and powerless to do the harm you would."

"Is a woman so powerless?"

"Certainly."

She ran up a couple of steps, caught him by the shoulders, stooped, and kissed him on the lips, before he was aware what she was about to do.

"Say that again! A woman is weak! A woman cannot ravage and burn, and madden and wound – not with a sword and a firebrand, but – "

She stooped. The boy was bewildered – his pulses leaping, his eye on fire, his head reeling. She kissed him again.

"These are her weapons!" said Noémi. "Who is the fool now?"

CHAPTER III. THE WOLVES OUT

Jean del' Peyra was riding home, a distance of some fifteen miles from La Roque Gageac. His way led through forests of oak clothing the slopes and plateau of chalk. The road was bad – to be more exact, there was no road; there was but a track.

In times of civil broil, when the roads were beset by brigands, travellers formed or found ways for themselves through the bush, over the waste land, away from the old and neglected arteries of traffic. The highways were no longer kept up – there was no one to maintain them in repair, and if they were sound no one would travel on them who could avoid them by a *détour*, when exposed to be waylaid, plundered, carried off to a dungeon, and put to ransom.

To understand the condition of affairs, a brief sketch of the English domination in Guyenne is necessary.

By the marriage of Eleanor, daughter and heiress of William X., Earl of Poitou and Duke of Aquitaine, with Henry of Anjou, afterwards Henry II. of England, in 1152, the vast possessions of her family were united to those of the Angevin house, which claimed the English crown.

By this union the house of Anjou suddenly rose to be a power, superior to that of the French crown on the Gaulish soil, which it cut off entirely from the mouths of the Seine and the Loire, and nipped between its Norman and Aquitanian fingers. The natives of the South – speaking their own language, of different race, aspirations, character, from those in the North – had no traditional attachment to the French throne, and no ideal of national concentration about it into one great unity. Here and there, dotted about as islets in the midst of the English possessions in the South, were feudal or ecclesiastical baronies, or townships, that were subject immediately to the French crown, and exempt from allegiance to the English King; and these acted as germs, fermenting in the country, and gradually but surely influencing the minds of all, and drawing all to the thought that for the good of the land it were better that it should belong to France than to England. Such was the diocese and county of Sarlat. This had belonged to a monastic church founded in the eighth century, but it had been raised to an episcopal see in 1317, and had never wavered in its adherence to the French interest. Sarlat was not on the Dordogne, but lay buried, concealed in the depths of oak-woods, accessible only along narrow defiles commanded at every point by rocky headlands; and the key to the episcopal city was La Roque Gageac, the impregnable fortress and town on the pellucid, rippling Dordogne – the town cramped to the steep slope, the castle nestling into an excavation in the face of the abrupt scarp.

Nearly opposite La Roque stood an insulated block of chalk, with precipices on all sides, and to secure this, in 1280, Philip III. of France built on it a free town, exempt from all taxes save a trifling house-charge due to himself; which town he hoped would become a great commercial centre, and a focus whence French influence might radiate to the south of the Dordogne. Unhappily the importance of Domme made it a prize to be coveted by the English, and in 1347 they took it. They were expelled in 1369, but John Chandos laid siege to it in 1380 and took it again, and from that date it remained uninterruptedly in their hands till the end of the English power in Aquitaine. For three hundred years had Guyenne pertained to the English crown, many of the towns and most of the nobility had no aspirations beyond serving the Leopards. The common people were supremely indifferent whether the Fleur-de-lys or the Leopards waved above them, so long as they were left undisturbed. It was precisely because they had not the boon of tranquillity afforded them by subjection to the English that they turned at last with a sigh of despair to the French. But it was to the Leopards, the hereditary coat of Guyenne, that they looked first, and it was only when the Leopard devoured them that they inclined to the Lilies.

The reason for this general dissatisfaction and alienation was the violence of the nobility, and the freebooters, who professed to act for the Crown of England, and to have patents warranting them to act licentiously. These men, caring only for their own interests, doing nothing to advance the prosperity of the land, used their position, their power, to undermine and ruin it. They attacked the towns whether under the English or French allegiance – that mattered nothing – and forced the corporations to enter into compacts with them, whereby they undertook to pay them an annual subvention, not to ensure protection, but merely to escape pillage. But even these *patis*, as they were called, were precarious, and did not cover a multitude of excuses for infringement of the peace. If, for instance, a merchant of Sarlat was in debt to a man of Domme, the latter appealed to his feudal master, who, in spite of any *patis* granted, swooped down on such members of the community of Sarlat as he could lay hold of, and held them in durance till not only was the debt paid, but he was himself indemnified for the trouble he had taken in obtaining its discharge.

If these things were done in the green tree, what in the dry?

In addition to the feudal seigneurs in their castles, ruling over their seigneuries, and nominally amenable to the English crown, there were the *routiers*, captains of free companies, younger sons of noble houses, bastards, runaway prisoners: any idle and vicious rascal who could collect thirty men of like kidney constituted himself a captain, made for himself and his men a habitation by boring into the limestone or chalk rock, in an inaccessible position, whence he came down at pleasure and ravaged and robbed, burned and murdered indiscriminately, the lands and houses and persons of those, whether French or English, who had anything to attract his greed, or who had incurred his resentment.

When Arnaud Amanieu, Sire d'Albret, transferred his allegiance from the English King to the King of France, he was seen by Froissart in Paris, sad of countenance, and he gave this as his reason: "Thank God! I am well in health, but my purse was fuller when I warred on behalf of the King of England. Then when we rode on adventures, there were always some rich merchants of Toulouse, of Condom, of La Réole, or Bergerac for us to squeeze. Every day we got some spoil to stuff our superfluities and jollities – alack! now all is dead and dull." That was the saying of a great Prince, whom the King of France delighted to honour. Now hear the words of a common *routier*: "How rejoiced were we when we rode abroad and captured many a rich prior or merchant, or a train of mules laden with Brussels cloths, or furs from the fair of Landit, or spices from Bruges, or silks from Damascus! All was ours, and we ransomed men at our good pleasure. Every day fresh spoil. The villages purveyed to us, and the rustics brought us corn, flour, bread, litter, wines, meat, and fowl; we were waited on as kings, we were clothed as princes, and when we rode abroad the earth quaked before us."

In this terrible time agriculture languished, trade was at a standstill. Bells were forbidden to be rung in churches from vespers till full day, lest they should direct the freebooters to villages that they might ravage. The towns fortified themselves, the villagers converted their churches into castles, and surrounded them with moats. Children were planted on all high points to keep watch, and give warning at the flash of a helmet. Wretched peasants spent their nights in islands in mid-river or in caves underground.

No one who has not visited the country swept and re-swept by these marauders can have any conception of the agony through which the country passed. It is furrowed, torn, to the present day by the picks of the ruffians who sought for themselves nests whence they might survey the land and swoop down on it, but above all by the efforts of the tortured to hide themselves – here burrowing underground like moles in mid-field, there boring out chambers in clefts of the rock, there constructing for themselves cabins in the midst of mosquito-haunted marshes, and there, again, ensconcing themselves in profound depths of trackless forests.

As Jean del' Peyra rode along, he shook his head and passed his hand over his face, as though to free it from cobwebs that had gathered about his eyes and were irritating him. But these were no spider-threads: what teased and confused him were other fibres, spun by that brown witch, Noémi.

He was angry, indignant with her, but his anger and indignation were, as it were, trowel and prong that dug and forked the thoughts of her deep into his mind. He thought of her standing before him, quivering with wrath, the fire flashing and changing hue in her opalescent brown eyes, and the hectic flame running through her veins and tinging cheek and brow. He thought of her voice, so full of tone, so flexible, as opalescent in melodious change as her eyes iridescent of light.

That she – she with such a smooth face, such slim fingers – should talk of crime as a joke, exult over the misery of her fellows! A very leopard in liveness and in beauty, and a very leopard in heart.

Jean del' Peyra's way led down the head stream of the Lesser Beune. The valley was broad – one level marsh – and, in the evening, herons were quivering in it, stooping to pick up an eft or a young roach.

"Ah! you vile creature!" sang forth Jean, as a black hare rose on his left and darted past him into the wood. "Prophet of evil! But what else in these untoward times and in this evil world can one expect but omens of ill?"

The track by which Jean descended emerged from the dense woods upon open ground. As the Beune slid to a lower level, it passed under precipices of rock, about a hundred or a hundred and fifty feet high; and these cliffs, composed of beds of various softness, were horizontally channelled, constituting terraces, each terrace unsupported below, or rather thrown forward over a vault. Moreover, there was not one of these platforms of rock that was not tenanted. In the evening, peasants returning from their work were ascending to their quarters by scrambling up the rocks where vertical, by means of notches cut in the stone, into which they thrust their hands and feet. Where the ledges overhung, the men were drawn up by ropes to the platforms above.

But not only was this the case with men, but with their oxen. Jean passed and saluted a farmer who was in process of placing his beasts in a position of security for the night. His wife was above, in the rock, and was working a windlass by means of which an ox was being gradually lifted from the ground by broad bands passed under its belly, and so was raised to the height of some thirty feet, where the beast, accustomed to this proceeding, quickly stepped on to a narrow path cut in the rock, and walked to its stable, also rock-hewn in the face of the cliff.

In another place was a woman with her children closing up the opening of a grotto that was level with the soil. This was effected by a board which fitted into a rebate in the rock, and then the woman, after putting her children within, heaped stones and sods against the board to disguise it; and when this had been done to her satisfaction, she crawled in by a hole that had been left for the purpose, and by a cord pulled after her a bunch of brambles that served to plug and disguise this hole.

Bitterness welled up in the heart of Jean as he noticed all these efforts made by the poor creatures to place themselves in security during the hours of darkness.

"Ah, Fontaineya!" called Jean to the farmer who was superintending the elevation of his second ox. "How goes the world with you?"

"Bad, but might be worse – even as with you."

"With me things are not ill."

"Whence come you, then?"

"From La Roque."

"Aha! Not from Ste. Soure?"

"No, I have been from home these fourteen days."

"Then do not say things are not ill with you till you have been home," remarked the peasant dryly.

"What has happened?" asked Jean, his blood standing still with alarm.

"The wolves have been hunting!"

"What wolves?"

"The red. Le Gros Guillem."

"He has been to Ste. Soure?"

"He has been to where Ste. Soure *was*."

CHAPTER IV. IN NOMINE BEELZEBUB

It was strange. The first recoil wave of the shock caused by this tidings broke into foam and fury against Noémi. Jean del' Peyra did not think of his loss, of the ruin of his home, of the sufferings of his people, but of Noémi laughing, making light of these things.

It was strange. Instead of striking spurs into his steed's flank and galloping forward to the scene of desolation, involuntarily, unconsciously, he turned his horse's head round, so that he faced the far-off Gageac, and with set teeth and flashing eye and lowering brow, wiped his lips with the sleeve of his right arm – wiped them not once nor twice, but many times as to wipe off and wipe away for ever the sensation, the taint, the fire that had been kindled there by the kisses he had received.

Then only did he wheel his horse about and gallop – where galloping was possible – down the valley of the Beune. The Beune is a stream rather than a river, that flows into the Vézère. It has a singular quality: so charged are the waters with lime that they petrify, or rather encrust, the roots of all plants growing in the morass through which they flow, by this means forming dams for itself, which it gradually surmounts to form others. The original bottom of the ravine must be at a considerable depth under the flat marsh of living and dead waterweed, of active and paralysed marsh plants, of growing and petrified moss that encumbers it, and extends to the very faces of the rocks.

At the present day a road laboriously constructed, and where it crossed the valley perpetually sinking and perpetually renovated, gives access to the springs of the Beune. It was not so in the fifteenth century. Then a track lay along the sides where the ground was solid – that is to say, where it consisted of rubble from the hill-sides; but where the marsh reached the abrupt walls of cliff, there the track clambered up the side of the valley, and surmounted the escarpments.

Consequently progress in former ages in that part was not as facile as it is at present.

Jean was constrained speedily to relax the pace at which he was proceeding.

As long as he was in forest and rough place he was secure: the brigands did not care to penetrate, at all events at nightfall, into out-of-the-way places, and where they might fall into ambushes.

It was otherwise when he came to where the Beune distilled from its sponge of moss into the rapidly flowing Vézère. Here was a great amphitheatre of scarped sides of rock, all more or less honeycombed with habitations and refuges.

Here, on his left-hand side, looking north, scowling over the pleasant and smiling basin of the Vézère, was the castle of the Great Guillem. It consisted of a range of caves or overhanging ledges of rock, the faces of which had been built up with walls, windows, and crenelations, and a gate-house had been constructed to command the only thread of a path by which the stronghold could be reached.

From this castle watch was kept, and no one could ascend or descend the valley unobserved. Jean was on the same bank as the fortress of Guillem, though considerably above it. He must cross the river, and to do this, ascend it to the ford.

He moved along carefully and watchfully. The dusk of evening concealed his movements, and he was able, unnoticed, or at all events unmolested, to traverse the Vézère and pass on the further side of the river down stream, in face of the strong place of Le Gros Guillem.

A couple of leagues further down was a hamlet, or rather village, called Le Peuch Ste. Soure, clustered at the foot of a cliff or series of cliffs that rose out of a steep incline of rubble. The houses were gathered about a little church dedicated to Ste. Soure. The white crags above were perforated with habitations. A scent of fire was in the air, and in the gloaming Jean could see the twinkle of sparks running, dying out, reappearing where something had been consumed by flames, but was still glowing in places, and sparks were wandering among its ashes. As he drew nearer he heard wailing, and with the wailing voices raised in cursing.

A sickness came on the lad's heart; he knew but too well what this all signified – desolation to many homes, ruin to many families.

"Hold! Who goes?"

"It is I – Jean del' Peyra."

"Well – pass. You will find your father. He is with the Rossignols."

Jean rode on. There were tokens of confusion on all sides. Here a rick was smouldering, and there a house was wrecked, the door broken, and the contents of the dwelling thrown out in the way before it. Pigs that had escaped from their styes ran about rooting after food, and dogs snarled and carried off fragments of meat. A few peasants were creeping about timidly, but, alarmed at the appearance in their midst of a man on horseback, and unable in the dusk to distinguish who he was, they fled to conceal themselves. Jean leaped from his horse, hitched it up, and strode on, with beating heart and bounding pulse, to a house which he knew was that of the Rossignols.

He entered the door. A light shone through the low window. It was characteristic of the times that in every village and hamlet the windows – the only windows – were so turned inwards on a street or yard that they revealed no light at night when a candle was kindled or a fire burned brightly on the hearth, lest the light should betray to a passing marauder the presence of a house which might be looted.

Jean bowed his head and entered at the low door. The fire was flashing in the large open chimney. A bundle of vine faggots had been thrown on, and the light filled the chamber with its orange glare.

By this light Jean saw a bed with a man lying on it; and a woman crying, beating her head and uttering wild words – her children clinging to her, sobbing, frightened, imploring her to desist.

Erect, with a staff in his hand, stood a grey-headed, thick-bearded man, with dark eyes shadowed under heavy brows.

He turned sharply as the lad entered.

"Hah! Jean, you are back. It is well. It is well you were not here this day earlier. If they had taken you, there would have been a heavy ransom to pay, by the Holy Napkin of Cadouin! And how to redeem those already taken I know not."

"What has been done to Rossignol, father?" asked Jean, going to the bed.

"What will be done to the rest unless the ransom be forthcoming in fourteen days. They have left him thus, to show us what will be the fate of the seven others."

"Seven others, father?"

"Aye; they have taken off seven of the men of Ste. Soure. We must find the ransom, or they will send them back to us, even after the fashion of this poor man."

"Is he dead, father?"

The man lying on the bed moved, and, raising himself on his elbow, said —

"Young master, I am worse than dead. Dead, I would be no burden. Living, I shall drag my darlings underground with me."

Then the woman, frantic with grief, turned on her knees, threw up her hands, and uttered a stream of mingled prayer and imprecation – prayer to Heaven and prayer to Hell; to Heaven to blast and torture the destroyers of her house, to Hell to hear her cry if Heaven were deaf. It was not possible for Jean to learn details from her in this fury and paroxysm. He drew his father outside the door and shut it.

"Father," said he, "tell me what has taken place. It was Le Gros Guillem, was it not?"

"Aye, Le Gros Guillem. We did not know he was in his church, we thought he was in Domme, and would be occupied there, and we gave less heed and kept less close watch. You see there were, we knew or supposed, but three men in the church, and so long as they were supplied with food and wine, we had little fear. But we had not reckoned right on Guillem. He came back in the night with a score of men, and they rushed down on us; they crossed the river during the day, when the men were

in the fields and about their work, and the women and children alone in the houses. When it was seen that the *routiers* were coming, then the church bell was rung, but we had little or no time to prepare; they were on us and in every house, breaking up the coffers, sacking the closets."

"Did they get into Le Peuch, father?"

"No; when we heard the bell, then we shut the gates and barricaded; but there were not four men in the castle, myself included. What could we do? We could only look on and witness the destruction; and one of the men in the castle was Limping Gaston, who was no good at all; and another was Blind Bartholomew, who could not see an enemy and distinguish him from a friend. When the men in the fields heard the bell, they came running home, to save what might be saved; but it was too late. The ruffians were there robbing, maltreating, and they took them as they came on – seven of them – and bound their hands behind them, and these they have carried off. They have burned the stack of corn of Jean Grano. The wife of Mussidan was baking. They have carried off all her loaves, and when she entreated them to spare some they swore at another word they would throw one of her babes into the oven. They have ransacked every house, and spoiled what they could not carry away. And the rest of the men, when they saw how those who came near Ste. Soure were taken, fled and hid themselves. Some of the women, carrying their children, came up the steep slope before the *routiers* arrived, and we received them into the castle; but others remained, hoping to save some of their stuff, and not thinking that the enemy was so nigh. So they were beaten to tell where any money was hidden. The wife of Drax – she has had her soles so cut with vine-rods that she cannot walk; but she was clever – she told where some old Roman coins were hid in a pot, and not where were her silver livres of French money."

"How long were they here?"

"I cannot tell, Jean. It seemed a century. It may have been an hour."

"They have carried off seven men."

"Yes, to Domme, or to the church. I cannot say where. And we must send the ransom in fourteen days, or Le Gros Guillem swears he will return them all to us tied on the backs of mules, treated as he has treated Rossignol. He said he left us Rossignol as a refresher."

"But what has he done to Rossignol?"

"Hamstrung him. He can never walk again. From his thighs down he is powerless – helpless as a babe in arms."

Jean uttered an exclamation of horror.

"Father, there must be an end put to these things! We must rouse the country."

"We must pay the ransom first, or all those poor fellows will be sent back to us like as is Rossignol."

"Let us go into the house," said Jean, and threw open the door. "We must do something for these unhappy creatures."

"Aye," said his father, "and something must be done to save seven other houses from being put in the same condition. Where shall we get the money?"

"We will consider that presently – first to this man."

A strange spectacle met their eyes when they re-entered the house of the Rossignols.

The woman had suspended something dark to a crook in the ceiling, had brought glowing ashes from the hearth, and had placed them in a circle on the floor below this dark object, and had spilled tallow over the red cinders, and the tallow having melted, had become ignited, so that a flicker of blue flame shot about the ring, and now and then sent up a jet of yellow flame like a long tongue that licked the suspended object. The woman held back her children, and in one hand she had a long steel pin or skewer, with a silver head to it, wherewith she had been wont to fasten up her hair. She had withdrawn this from her head, and all her black hair was flowing about her face and shoulders.

"See!" yelled she, and the glitter of her eyes was terrible. "See! it is the heart of Le Gros Guillem. I will punish him for all he has done to me. This for my man's nerves that he has cut." She

made a stab with her pin at the suspended object, which Jean and his father now saw was a bullock's heart. "This for all the woe he has brought on me!" She stabbed again. "See, see, my children, how he twists and tosses! Ha! ha! Gros Guillem, am I paining you? Do you turn to escape me? Do I strike spasms of terror into your heart? Ha! ha! the Rossignol is a song-bird, but her beak is sharp."

Jean caught the woman's hand.

"Stand back!" he cried, "this is devilry. This will bring you to the stake."

"What care I – so long as I torture and stab and burn Le Gros Guillem! And who will denounce me for harming him? Will the Church – which he has pillaged? Will you – whom he has robbed? Let me alone – see – see how the flames burn him! Ha! ha! Le Gros Guillem! Am I swinging you! Dance, dance in fire! Swing, swing in anguish! For my children this!" and she stabbed at the heart again.

The woman was mad with despair and hate and terror. Jean stood back, put his hand to his mouth, and said with a groan —

"My God! would Noémi were here!"

"In Nomine Beelzebub!" shrieked the woman, and struck the heart down into the melted flaming fat on the floor.

CHAPTER V. RAISING THE RANSOM

A heavy sum of money had to be raised, and that within a fortnight.

The Del' Peyra family was far from wealthy. It owned a little seigneurie, Ste. Soure, little else. It took its name from the rocks among which it had its habitation, from the rocks among which its land lay in brown patches, and from which a scanty harvest was reaped. Only in the valley where there was alluvial soil were there pastures for cattle, and on the slopes vineyards whence wine could be expressed. The arable land on the plateaus above the valley of the Vézère was thin and poor enough. A little grain could be grown among the flints and chips of chalk, but it was scanty and poor in quality. If the territories owned by the Del' Peyras had been extensive, then vastness of domain might have compensated for its poor quality. But such was not the case.

The Castle of Le Peuch above Ste. Soure was but small; it consisted of a cluster of buildings leaning against the upright cliff at the summit of a steep incline. This natural glacis of rubble, at an inclination so rapid that the ascent was a matter of difficulty, was in itself a considerable protection to it. The castle could not be captured at a rush, for no rush could be made up a slope which was surmountable only with loss of wind. But supposing the main buildings were stormed, still the inhabitants were sure of escape, for from the roof of the castle they could escalate the precipices to a series of chambers scooped out of the rock, at several successive elevations, each stage being defensible, and only to be surmounted by a ladder. The castle itself was hardly so big as a modern farmhouse. It consisted of but three or four small chambers, one of which served as kitchen and hall. Le Peuch was not a place to stand much of a siege; it was rather what was called in those times a *place-forte*, a stronghold in which people could take temporary refuge from the freebooters who swept the open country, and had no engines for the destruction of walls, nor time to expend in a regular siege. To the poor at that period, the church-tower was the one hold of security, where they put their chests in which were all their little treasures; and it was one of the bitterest complaints against a rapacious Bishop of Rodez, that he levied a fee for his own pocket on all these cypress and ashen boxes confided to the sanctuary of the parish church. When the signal was given that an enemy was in sight, then men and women crowded to the church and barred its doors. A visitor to the Périgord will this day see many a village church which bears tokens of having been a fortress. The lowest storey is church; the floors above are so contrived as to serve as places of refuge, with all appliances for a residence in them. When Louis VII. was ravaging the territories of his indocile vassal, the Count of Champagne, he set fire to the church of the little town of Vitry, in which all the citizens, their wives and children, had taken refuge, and thirteen hundred persons perished in the flames. Such was war in the Middle Ages. When Henry V. of England was entreated not to burn the towns and villages through which he passed, "Bah!" said he, "would you have me eat my meat without mustard?"

At Ste. Soure there was no church-tower, the place of refuge of the villagers was Le Peuch; but the attack of the marauders had been too sudden and unexpected for them to reach it.

What was to be done? The ransom demanded for the seven men was a hundred livres of Bergerac – that is to say, a sum equivalent at the present time to about one thousand nine hundred pounds. Unless the men were redeemed, the Sieur of Le Peuch would be ruined. No men would remain under his protection when he could neither protect nor deliver them. If he raised the sum, it must be at a ruinous rate, that would impoverish him for years. He was stunned with the magnitude of the disaster. There was but a fortnight in which not only must he resolve what to do, but have the money forthcoming.

After the first stupefaction was over, the old man's heart was full of wrath.

Ogier del' Peyra had been a peaceable man, a good landlord, never oppressing his men, rather dull in head and slow of thought, but right-minded and straightforward. No little seigneur in all the district was so respected. Perhaps it was for this reason that his lands had hitherto been spared by the ravagers. He was not one who had been a hot partisan of the French and a fiery opponent of the English, or rather of those who called themselves English. He had wished for nothing so much as to remain neutral.

But now Le Gros Guillem, who respected nothing and nobody, had suddenly dealt him a staggering blow from which he could hardly recover.

The effect when the first numbness was passed was such as is often the case with dull men, slow to move. Once roused and thoroughly exasperated, he became implacable and resolute.

"We will recover our men," said Ogier to his son, "and then repay Guillem in his own coin."

"How shall we get the money?" asked Jean.

"You must go to Sarlat, and see if any can be procured there. See the Bishop; he may help."

Accordingly Jean del' Peyra rode back a good part of the way he had traced the previous day, but half-way turned left to Sarlat instead of right to La Roque.

The little city of Sarlat occupies a basin at the juncture of some insignificant streams, and was chosen by the first settlers – monks – as being in an almost inaccessible position, when Périgord was covered with forest. It was to be reached only through difficult and tortuous glens. A flourishing town it never was, and never could be, as it had no fertile country round to feed it. It was a town that struggled on – and drew its main importance from the fact of its serving as a centre of French influence against the all-pervading English power. It had another source of life in that, being under the pastoral staff instead of under the sword, it had better chance of peace than had a town owing duty, military and pecuniary, to a lay lord. The baron, if not on the defensive, was not happy unless levying war, whereas the ecclesiastical chief acted solely in the defensive.

The protection of the district ruled by the Bishop of Sarlat was no easy or inexpensive matter, hemmed in as it was by insolent seigneurs, who pretended to serve the English when wronging their French neighbours. Moreover the strong town of Domme, on the Dordogne, facing La Roque, was in the hands of the English, and was garrisoned for them under the command of the notorious Captain, Le Gros Guillem.

This man had his own fastness above the Vézère, on the left bank, below the juncture of the Beune with the river, a place called by the people "L'Eglise de Guillem," in bitterness of heart and loathing, because there, according to the popular belief, he had his sanctuary in which he worshipped the devil. Few, if any, of the peasants had been suffered to enter this fortress, half-natural, half-artificial. Such as had gained a closer view than could be obtained from two hundred feet below by the river bank said that it consisted of a series of chambers, partly natural, scooped in the rock, and of a cavern of unknown depth with winding entrance, that led, it was rumoured, into the place of torment; and at the entrance, excavated in a projecting piece of rock, was a holy-water stoup such as is seen in churches. This, however, it was whispered, was filled with blood, and Le Gros Guillem, when he entered the cave to adore the fiend, dipped his finger therein, and signed himself with some cabalistic figure, of which none save he knew the significance.

Between his own stronghold of L'Eglise and the walled town of Domme, Guillem was often on the move.

Without much difficulty, Jean del' Peyra obtained access to the Bishop, an amiable, frightened, and feeble man, little suited to cope with the difficulties of his situation. Jean told him the reason why he had come.

"But," said the Bishop, "you are not my vassal. I am not bound to sustain you." And he put his hands to his head and pressed it.

"I know that, Monseigneur; but you are French, and so is my father; and we French must hold together and help each other."

"You must go to the French Governor of Guyenne."

"Where is he! What can he do? There is no time to be lost to save the men."

The Bishop squeezed his head. "I am unable to do anything. A hundred livres of Bergerac – that is a large sum. If it had been livres of Tours, it would have been better. Here!" – he signed to his treasurer – "How much have I? Is there anything in my store?"

"Nothing," answered the official. "Monseigneur has had to pay the garrison of La Roque, and all the money is out."

"You hear what he says," said the Bishop dispiritedly. "I have nothing!"

"Then the seven men must be mutilated."

"It is too horrible! And the poor wives and children! Ah! we are in terrible times. I pray the Lord daily to take me out of it into the Rest there remains for the people of God; or, better still, to translate me to another see."

"Yes, Monseigneur; but whilst we are here we must do what we can for our fellows, and to save them from further miseries."

"That is true, boy, very true. I wish I had money. But it comes in in trickles and goes out in floods. I will tell you what to do. Go to the Saint Suaire at Cadouin and pray that the Holy Napkin may help."

"I am afraid the help may come too late! The Napkin, I hear, is slow in answering prayer."

"Not if you threaten it with the Saint Suaire at Cahors. Those two Holy Napkins are so near that they are as jealous of each other as two handsome girls; and if they met would tear each other as cats. Tell the Saint Suaire at Cadouin that if you are not helped at once you will apply to her sister at Cahors."

"I have been told that it costs money to make the Saint Suaire listen to one's addresses, and I want to receive and not to pay."

"Not much, not much!" protested the Bishop.

"Besides, Monseigneur," said the youth, "there might be delay while the two Holy Napkins were fighting out the question which was to help us. And then – to have such a squabble might not be conducive to religion."

"There is something in that," said the Bishop. "Oh, my head! my poor head!" He considered a while, and then with a sigh said – "I'll indulge butter. I will!"

"I do not understand, my lord."

"I'll allow the faithful to eat butter in Lent, if they will pay a few *sols* for the privilege. That will raise a good sum."

"Yes, but Lent is six months hence, and the men will be mutilated in twelve days."

"Besides, I want the butter money for the cathedral, which is a shabby building! What a world of woe we live in!"

"Monseigneur, can you not help me? Must seven homes be rendered desolate for lack of a hundred livres?"

"Oh, my head! it will burst! I have no money, but I will do all in my power to assist you. Ogier del' Peyra is a good man, and good men are few. Go to Levi in the Market Place. He is the only man in Sarlat who grows rich in the general impoverishment. He must help you. Tell him that I will guarantee the sum. If he will give you the money, then he shall make me pay a denier every time I light my fire and warm my old bones at it. He can see my chimney from his house, and whenever he notices smoke rise from it, let him come in and demand his denier."

"It will take a hundred years like that to clear off the principal and meet the interest."

The Bishop raised his hands and clasped them despairingly. "I have done my utmost!"

"Then I am to carry the tidings to seven wives that the Church cannot help them?"

"No – no! Try Levi with the butter-money. I did desire to have a beautiful tower to my cathedral, but seven poor homes is better than fine carving, and I will promise him the butter-money. Try him

with that – if that fails, then I am helpless. My head! my head! It will never rest till laid in the grave. O sacred Napkins of Cadouin and Cahors! Take care of yourselves and be more indulgent to us miserable creatures, or I will publish a mandment recommending the Napkin of Compiègne, or that of Besançon, and then where will you be?"

CHAPTER VI. THE JEW

Jean del' Peyra left the Bishop's castle, which stood on rising ground above the town, and was well fortified against attack, and entered the city to find Levi. The Jew lived in the little square before the cathedral.

The Bishop might well say that his episcopal seat was shabby, for the minster was small and rude in structure, a building of the Romanesque period such as delighted the monks to erect, and of which many superb examples exist in Guyenne. The monastic body at Sarlat had not been rich enough or sufficiently skilled in building to give themselves as stately a church as Souillac, Moissac, or Cadouin. It consisted, like nearly every other sacred dwelling of the period, of an oblong domed building, consisting of three squares raised on arches surmounted by Oriental cupolas, with an unfinished tower at the west end. The visitor to Sarlat at the present day will see a cathedral erected a century and more after the date of our story, in a debased but not unpicturesque style.

The Jew was not at home. His wife informed Jean that he had gone to La Roque to gather in a few *sols* that were owing to him there for money advanced to needy personages, and that she did not expect him home till the morrow. Christians were ready enough to come to her husband for loans, but were very reluctant to pay interest, and it cost Levi much pains and vexation to extract what was his due from those whom he had obliged. Accordingly Jean remounted his horse, and rode over the hills due south, in the direction of the Dordogne.

About halfway between Sarlat and La Roque, at the highest point of the road, where the soil is too thin even to sustain a growth of oak coppice, and produces only juniper, Jean passed a singular congeries of stones; it consisted of several blocks set on end, forming an oblong chamber, and covered by an immense slab, in which were numerous cup-like holes, formed by the weather, or whence lumps of flint had been extracted. It was a prehistoric tomb – a dolmen, and went by the name of the Devil's Table. To the present day, the women coming to the market at Sarlat from La Roque rest on it, and if they put their fish which they have to sell into the cups on the table, are sure of selling them at a good price. Yet such action is not thought to bring a blessing with it, and the money got by the sale of the fish thus placed in the Devil's cups rarely does good to those who receive it. The monument is now in almost total ruin: the supports have been removed or are fallen, but at the time of this tale it was intact.

Jean did not pay it any attention, but rode forwards as hastily as he could on his somewhat fatigued horse.

On reaching the little town of La Roque, Jean was constrained to put up his horse outside the gates. There was not a street in the place along which a horse could go. The inhabitants partook of the nature of goats, they scrambled from one house to another when visiting their neighbours. Only by the river-side was there a level space, and this was occupied by strong walls as a protection against assault from the water.

Jean inquired whether the Jew had been seen, and where, and was told that he had been to several houses, and was now in that of the Tardes. The family of Tarde was one of some consequence in the little place, and had its scutcheon over the door. It was noble – about three other families in the place had the same pretensions, or, to be more exact, right. Jean, without scruple, went to the house of the Tardes and asked for admission, and was at once ushered into the little hall.

The Jew was there along with Jean and Jacques Tarde, and they were counting money. To Del' Peyra's surprise, Noémi was also present and looking on.

Jean del' Peyra gave his name, and asked leave to have a word with the Jew. He stated the circumstances openly. There was no need for concealment. Le Gros Guillem had fallen on Ste. Soure, and after committing the usual depredations, had carried off seven men, and held them to ransom.

The sum demanded was a hundred Bergerac livres. Unless that sum was produced immediately, the men would be mutilated – hamstrung.

As Jean spoke, with bitterness welling up in his heart, he looked straight in the eyes of Noémi. She winced, changed colour, but resolved not to show that she felt what was said, and returned Jean's look with equal steadiness.

"And you want the money?" said the Jew. "On what security?"

"The Bishop will grant an indulgence to eat butter in Lent at a fee. That will raise more than is required."

"The Bishop!" Levi shook his head. "You Christians are not men of your word. You will promise it – and never pay."

"You lie, Jewish dog!" said Jacques Tarde. "Have I not paid you what was owing?"

"Ah, you – but the Bishop!"

"Is he false?"

"He may think it righteous to cheat the Jew."

"He will give you what security you require that the money be forthcoming," said Jean.

"Will not the Christians eat butter without paying for the dispensation?" asked the Jew. "If they think that the butter-money is coming to me they will not scruple. I do not like the security. The Bishop is old; he may die before Lent; and then what chance shall I have of getting my money? The next Bishop will not allow butter, or, if he does, will pocket the money it brings in. He will not be tied by this Bishop's engagement. I will not have the butter-money."

"Will you take a mortgage on Ste. Soure?" asked Jean.

"I don't know. It is not on the Bishop's lands. It is face to face with the stronghold of the big Guillem. If I wanted to sell and realise, who would buy in such proximity? Whom are you under? The King of France? He is a long way off and his arm is weak. No, I will not have a mortgage on Ste. Soure. Besides, I am poor; I have no money."

"You lying cur!" exclaimed Jacques Tarde; "we have paid you up all the capital lent us. We would no longer have our blood sucked at twenty-eight per cent, and we have sold the little land at Vézac to pay you."

"That was easy land to sell," said the Jew. "With Beynac Castle on one side and La Roque on the other! But Ste. Soure" – he shook his head. "It is under the claw of Guillem. He has but to put down his hand from the Church and he scratches through the roofs, and picks out all that he desires."

"And you refuse the Bishop's guarantee?"

The Jew looked furtively at the two Tardes and at Jean and said – "Who is to guarantee the Bishop? On his lands he sees that I draw in my little *sols*, but then I pay him for that, I pay heavily, and for that heavy price he allows me to lend moneys and pick up interests. But I do not pay the King of France to ensure me against the Bishop. That is why I will not let him be in debt to me."

"Our land is devoured by two evils," said Jacques Tarde. "The *routier* and Jew, and I do not know which is worst! We shake ourselves, and kick out, and for a moment are free, and then they settle on us again. The carrion crow and the worm – and so we die."

"Ah, Monsoo Tarde!" answered Levi. "Why do you speak like this? You wished to build you a grand house and paint it and carve and gild – and for that must have moneys. Did I come and force you to borrow of me my poor pennies? Did you not come and beg me to furnish what you needed? I did not say to you, 'Your old house is not worthy of a Tarde. It is mean and not half fine enough for a fine man like you!' It was your own pride and vanity sent you to me. And now, if I could find the moneys would not this young gentleman bless me, and the seven families I might be the saving of, call down the benediction of the skies on me and mine? Here has he come all the way from Ste. Soure to seek me, and he is in despair because I am so poor."

"You poor! Levi! you thief!"

"I am poor. I lay by grain on grain; and such as you scatter and destroy. Why should I spend my painfully gathered pennies to save some of your villains, young Sir? What if there was a riot in Sarlat as there was fifteen years ago – and the mob fell on the Jews? How was it then? Did you not fire our houses, and throw our children into the flames, and run your pikes into the hearts of our mothers and wives? You think we care for you after that! Let your own Christian thieves hamstring their own brothers. Why do you come to poor Levi to help you – to Levi who is helpless among you, and is only suffered to live because he is necessary to you? You cannot do without him, as now – now, amidst the violences of Le Gros Guillem!"

"And you will not help me," said Jean, despairingly. He had no thought for the wrongs endured by the Jews, no thought for what made them a necessity, no thought of the incongruity that while the Church denounced usury, the usurers were only able to carry on their trade by the Pope and the prelates extending their protection to them – for a consideration in hard cash, paid annually.

Again Jean's eyes met those of Noémi; he was pale, his brow clouded, his lips trembled, as though about to address some words to her.

"What would you say?" she asked. "Speak out. I am not afraid to hear. Levi has been making my father responsible for his bloodsucking."

"I would," said Jean sullenly, "I would to Heaven you could come with me and see the work wrought at Ste. Soure; and if after that you were able to laugh and lightly talk of your father as a great man and one to be proud of because he is in every mouth – then, God help you!"

"I will come!" answered the girl impulsively. "When? At once?"

Jean looked at her incredulously.

"Aye!" said she. "Jacques Tarde has nothing to engage him now that he has shaken off the horse-leech. He will ride with me, and we will take another, though I reckon my presence would suffice as a protection. None will lay hands on the daughter of Le Gros Guillem." She reared her head in pride.

"Be not so sure of that," said Jean. "At Ste. Soure they would tear you to pieces if they knew who you were."

"And you – would look on and let it be?"

"No; on my lands, whilst under my protection, you are safe."

"Under your protection!" jeered the girl! "Bah! If I stood among a thousand, and shouted, 'Ware! Le Gros Guillem is on you!' they would fly on all sides as minnows when I throw a stone into the water." She altered her tone and said: "There, I go to do good. I will see my father if he is at his church, and I will whisper good thoughts unto him, and get him to reduce the ransom. Now, will you take me with you?"

"You will trust yourself with me?"

"Jacques Tarde shall come also. Let anyone dare to touch Noémi! I will come. When shall we start?"

"At once," answered Jean.

"So be it; at once."

CHAPTER VII. THE NEW COMPANION

One of the strangest features of a strange time was the manner in which families were broken up and neighbours were at feud. The same individuals shifted sides and were one day boozing together at table and the next meeting in deadly conflict. Discord was in families. In the house of Limeuil the father was French, the son English; and the son was English merely because he desired to turn his father out of the ancestral heritage and lord it in his room. Limeuil was stormed by the son, then retaken by the father; now sacked by English troops, and then sacked again by French troops, who cared nothing for the national causes of France or England. Prevost de la Force and Perducat d'Albret had castles facing each other on opposite sides of the Dordogne. Each desired to draw some money out of the commercial town of Bergerac on the plea that he was empowered to protect it from the other. Accordingly, one called himself French, the other English; and Perducat, when it suited his convenience, after having been English, became French. Domestic broils determined the policy of the turbulent seigneurs. If they coveted a bit of land, or a village, or a castle that belonged to a brother or a cousin of one persuasion, they went over to the opposed to supply them with an excuse for falling on their kinsmen. The Seigneur de Pons, because his marriage settlement with his wife did not allow him sufficient liberty to handle her means, turned French, and his wife threw open her gates to the Duke of Lancaster. Whereupon the seigneur fought the English, to whom he had formerly been devoted, retook his town, and chastised his wife. The man who was French to-day was English to-morrow, and French again the day after. Some were very weathercocks, turning with every wind, always with an eye to their own advantage.

Consequently, families were much mixed up with both parties. Unless a seigneur was out on a raid, he would associate on terms of friendliness with the very men whom he would hang on the next occasion. Kinsfolk were in every camp. The seigneurs had allies everywhere; but their kinsfolk were not always their allies – were often their deadliest enemies.

The mother of Noémi was akin to the family of Tarde. Indeed, her aunt was the mother of Jean and Jacques, who were, accordingly, her first cousins. The Tarde family were French; no one in Gageac was English. By interest, by tradition, the place was true to the Lilies.

A little way up the river, on the further side, was Domme, which was held by the English. Noémi passed from the English to the French town, and nothing was thought of it that she was as much at home with her cousins in La Roque Gageac as among her mother's attendants at Domme. Even the young Tardes might have gone to the market in the English town and have returned unmolested.

The bullies of Guillem in like manner swaggered where they listed, penetrated to Gageac, when there was a dance or a drinking bout; and, so long as they came unarmed, were allowed admittance.

No one could say whether there was peace or war. There was a little of one and a little of the other. Whenever a roysterer was weary of doing nothing, he gathered his men together and made a raid; whenever a captain wanted to pay his men, he plundered a village. Otherwise, all went on tolerably quietly. There was no marching across the country of great bodies of armed men, no protracted sieges, no battles in which whole hosts were engaged. But there was incessant fear, there were small violences, there was no certainty of safety. There was no central power to control the wrong-doers, no justice to mete out to them the reward of their deeds. When the lion and the wolf and the bear are hungry, then they raven for food; when glutted, they lie down and sleep. The barons and free captains and little seigneurs were the lions, wolves, and bears that infested Guyenne and Périgord. They were now on the alert and rending, then ensued a period of quietude.

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