

ЭЖЕН СЮ

THE ABBATIAL CROSIER;
OR, BONAİK AND
SEPTIMINE. A TALE OF A
MEDIÉVAL ABBESS

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Eugène Sue

The Abbatial Crosier; or, Bonaik and Septimine. A Tale of a Medieval Abbess

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

The turbulent epoch that rocked the cradle of the Carolingian dynasty, the dynasty from which issued the colossal historic figure of Charlemagne, is the epoch of this touching story – the eighth of the series of Eugene Sue's historic novels known collectively under the title "*The Mysteries of the People; or, History of a Proletarian Family Across the Ages.*" From the seething caldron of the valleys of the western Rhine, inundated by the Arabs from the south, the Frisians from the north, the Saxons from the west, and in which the chants of Moslems, of Christians and of barbarians mixed into the one common cry of desolating war, the feudal social system, previously introduced by Clovis, and now threatened to be engulfed, emerged from the chaos as a social institution. Many a characteristic of feudalism would be missed if this, a crucial period of its existence, is not properly apprehended. As in all the others of this series of Eugene Sue's stories, the information is imparted without the reader's knowledge. What may be termed the plot seizes and keeps the interest from start to finish, steadily enriching the mind with knowledge historically inestimable, besides connecting with the era described in the previous story —*The Branding Needle; or, The Monastery of Charolles*— and preparing the ground for the thrilling events that are the subject of the succeeding narrative —*The Carolingian Coins; or, The Daughters of Charlemagne.*

DANIEL DE LEON.

New York, 1904.

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER I. NARBONNE

Cruel intestine wars between the descendants of the Frankish conquerors were devastating Gaul when the Arab invasion took place in 719. The invaders poured down from the Pyrenees and drove back or subjugated the Visigoths. The exchange of masters was almost a gain to the inhabitants of the region. The conquerors from the south were more civilized than those from the north. Many of the Gauls, – either freemen, or colonists or slaves – took so strongly to the southern invader that they even embraced his religion, the religion of Mahomet, allured thereto by the promises of a paradise peopled with houris. "The virtuous believer," declared the Koran, "will be taken to the delicious home of Eden, enchanted gardens, through which well-shaded rivers flow. There, ornamented with bracelets of gold, clad in green clothes of woven silk and resplendent with glory, the faithful will recline upon nuptial beds, the happy prize in the dwelling of delights." Preferring, accordingly, the white houris promised by the Koran to the winged seraphs of the Christian paradise, many Gauls embraced Mohamedanism with ardor. Mosques rose in Languedoc beside Christian churches. More tolerant than the bishops, the Arabs allowed the Christians to follow their own religion. Moreover, Mohamedanism, founded by Mahomet during the previous century, 608, acknowledged the divinity of the Scriptures and recognized Moses and the Jewish prophets as beings chosen by God, only it did not recognize the godship of Jesus. "Oh, ye, who have received the Scriptures, keep within the bounds of the faith. Speak only the truth about God. Jesus is the son of Mary, and he was sent by the All-High, but is not his son. Say not that God is a trinity. God is one. Jesus will not blush at being the servant of God. The angels that surround the throne of God obey God!" – thus spoke the Koran.

The town of Narbonne, capital of Languedoc under the dominion of the Arabs, had in 737 quite an Oriental aspect, due as much to the clearness of the sky as to the dress and customs of a large number of its inhabitants. The laurel shrubs, the green oaks and palm trees recalled the vegetation of Africa. Saracen women were seen going to or coming from the fountains with earthen vessels nicely balanced on their heads, and draped in their white clothes like the women of the time of Abraham, or of the young master of Nazareth. Camels with their long necks and loaded with merchandise left the town for Nimes, Beziers, Toulouse or Marseilles. The caravans passed on these journeys, along the fields, a great variety of settlements – mud hovels thatched with straw and inhabited by Gallic peasants, who were successively the slaves of the Visigoths and of the Musselmen; tents of a Barbary tribe, Arabian mountaineers who had descended to the plains from the peak of Mt. Atlas, and who preserved in Gaul the nomad habits of their old home, warriors, ever ready to mount their tireless and swift horses in answer to the first call of battle from the emir of the province; finally, and at long distances apart, on the crests of the mountains, high towers where, during war, the Saracens lighted fires for the purpose of signaling the approach of the enemy to one another.

In the almost Musselman town of Narbonne, the same as in all the other towns of Gaul under the sway of the Franks and the bishops, there were, sad to say, public market-places where slaves were set up for sale. But that which imparted a peculiar character to the market of Narbonne was the diversity of the races of the captives that were offered to purchasers. There were seen negroes and negresses in large numbers, as well as Ethiopians of ebony blackness; copper-colored mestizos; handsome young Greek girls and boys brought from Athens, Crete or Samos and taken prisoner on some of the frequent maritime raids made by the Arabs. A skilful politician, Mahomet, their prophet, had incited in his sectarians a passion for maritime expeditions. "The believer who dies on land feels

a pain that is hardly comparable with the bite of an ant," says the Koran, "but the believer who dies at sea, feels on the contrary the delicious sensation of a man, who, a prey to burning thirst, is offered iced water mixed with citron and honey." Around the slave market stood numerous Arabian shops filled with merchandise mainly manufactured at Cordova or Granada, centers, at the time, of Saracen art and civilization: brilliant arms inlaid in arabesques with gold and silver, coffers of chiseled ivory, crystal cups, rich silk fabrics, embroidered hose, precious collars and bracelets. Around the shops pressed a crowd of as various races as costumes: aboriginal Gauls in their wide hose, an article that gave this section of Gaul the name of "Bracciata" with the Romans; descendants of the Visigoths who remained faithful to their old Germanic dress, the furred coat, despite the warmth of the climate; Arabians with turbans of all colors. From time to time, the cry of the Musselman priests, calling the believers to prayer from the height of the minarets, mixed with the chimes of basilicas that summoned the Christians to their devotions.

"Christian dogs!" said the Arabs or Musselman Gauls. "Accursed heathens, damned degenerates!" answered the Christians; whereupon both proceeded to exercise their own cult in peace. More tolerant than the bishops of Rome, Mahomet said in the Koran: "Do not do violence upon men for reason of their religion."

CHAPTER II. ABD-EL-KADER AND ROSEN-AER

Abd-el-Kader, one of the bravest chiefs of the warriors of Abd-el-Rhaman during the life of this emir, who was killed five years before on the field of Poitiers where he delivered a great battle to Charles Martel (the Hammer) – Abd-el-Kader, after ravaging and pillaging the country and the churches of Tours and of Blois, occupied one of the handsomest dwellings in Narbonne. He had the house arranged in Oriental fashion – the outside windows were closed up, and laurels were planted in the inner courtyard, from the center of which a fountain jetted its steady stream. His harem occupied one of the wings of the house. In one of the chambers of this harem, covered with rich carpets of gay colors, furnished with silk divans, and lighted by a window with gilded bars, sat a woman of rare beauty, although about forty years of age. It was easy to recognize by the whiteness of her skin, the blondness of her hair and the blue of her eyes that she was not of Arabian stock. Her pale and sad face revealed a settled and profound sorrow. The curtain that covered the door of the chamber was pushed aside and Abd-el-Kader entered. The swarthy-complexioned warrior was about fifty years of age; his beard and moustache were grizzled; his face, calm and grave, expressed dignity and mildness. He stepped slowly towards the woman and said to her: "Rosen-Aër, we meet to-day for the last time, perhaps."

The Gallic matron seemed surprised and replied: "If I am not to see you again, I still shall remember you. I am your slave, but you have been kind and generous to me. I shall never forget that six years ago, when the Arabians invaded Burgundy and raided the valley of Charolles, where my family lived in happiness for more than a century, you respected me when I was taken to your tent. I declared to you then that at the first act of violence on your part, I would kill myself ... you ever treated me as a free woman – "

"Mercy is the badge of the believer. I only obeyed the voice of the prophet. But you, Rosen-Aër, did you not, shortly after you were brought here a prisoner and Ibrahim, my youngest son, was nearly dying, did you not ask to take care of him the same as a mother would? Did you not watch at his bedside during the long nights of his illness as if he were your own son? It was, accordingly, in recompense for your services, as well as in obedience to the behest of the Koran —*deliver your brothers from bondage*— that I offered you your freedom."

"What else could I have done with my freedom? I am all alone in the world... I saw my brother and husband killed under my own eyes in a desperate fight with your soldiers when they invaded the valley of Charolles; and before those days I wept my son Amael, who had disappeared six years before. I wept him then, as I do still every day, inconsolable at his absence."

Rosen-Aër spoke these words and could not keep back the tears that welled in her eyes and inundated her face. Abd-el-Kader looked at her sadly and replied: "Your motherly sorrow has often touched me. I can neither console you, nor give you hope. How could your son now be found, seeing he disappeared when barely fifteen years of age! It is a question whether he still lives."

"He would now be twenty-five; but," added Rosen-Aër drying her tears, "let us not now talk of my son; I am afraid he is lost to me forever... But why say you that we see each other to-day, perhaps, for the last time?"

"Charles Martel, the chief of the Franks, is advancing with forced marches at the head of a formidable army to drive us out of Gaul. I was notified yesterday of his approach. Within two days, perhaps, the Franks will be upon the walls of Narbonne. Abd-el-Malek, our new emir, is of the opinion that our troops should go out and meet Charles... We are about to depart. The battle will be bloody. God may wish to send me death. That is why I came to tell you we may never meet again... If God should will it so, what will become of you?"

"You have several times generously offered me freedom, money and a guide to travel through Gaul and look for my child. But I lacked the courage and strength, or rather my reason told me how insane such an undertaking would be in the midst of the civil wars that are desolating our unhappy country. If I am not to see you again and I must leave this house, where at least I have been able to weep in peace, free from the shame and the trials of slavery, there will be nothing left to me but to die."

"I do not like to see you despair, Rosen-Aër. This is my plan for you. During my absence you shall leave Narbonne. My forces are to take the field against the Franks; my army is brave, but the will of God is immovable. If it be his pleasure that victory fall to Charles and that the Franks prevail over the Crescent, they may lay siege to this town and take it. In that event you and all its inhabitants will be exposed to the fate of people in a place carried by assault – death or slavery. It is with an eye to withdrawing you from so sad a fate that I would induce you to leave the town, and to take temporary shelter in one of the Gallic colonies nearby that cultivate my fields."

"Your fields!" exclaimed Rosen-Aër with bitterness; "you should rather say the fields that your soldiers seized by force and rapine, the inseparable companions of conquest."

"Such was the will of God."

"Oh, for the sake of your race and of yourself, Abd-el-Kader, I hope the will of God may save you the pain of some day seeing the fields of your fathers at the mercy of conquerors!"

"God ordains ... Man submits. If God decrees against Charles Martel at the approaching battle and we are victorious, you can return here to Narbonne; if we are vanquished, if I am killed in the battle, if we are driven out of Gaul, you shall have nothing to fear in the retreat that I am providing for you. You can remain with the family of my servant. Here is a little purse with enough gold pieces to supply your wants."

"I shall remember you, Abd-el-Kader, as a generous man, despite the wrong your race has done mine."

"God sent us hither to cause the religion preached by Mahomet to triumph, the only true religion. May his name be glorified."

"But the Christian bishops, priests and monks also pretend that their religion is the only true one."

"Let them prove it ... we leave them free to preach their belief. Barely a century since its foundation, the Musselman faith has subjugated the Orient almost entirely, Spain and a portion of Gaul. We are instruments of the divine will. If God has decided that I shall die in the approaching battle, then we shall not meet again. Should I die and yet our arms triumph, my sons, if they survive me, will take care of you... Ibrahim venerates you as his own mother."

"Do you take Ibrahim to battle?"

"The youth who can manage a steed and hold a sword is of battle age... Do you accept my offer, Rosen-Aër?"

"Yes; I tremble at the very thought of falling into the hands of the Franks! Sad days these are for us. We have only the choice of servitudes. Happy, at least, are those who, like myself, meet among their masters compassionate hearts."

"Make yourself ready... I myself shall depart in an hour at the head of a part of my troops. I shall come for you. We shall leave the house together; you to proceed to the colonist who occupies my country house, and I to march against the Frankish army."

When Abd-el-Kader returned for Rosen-Aër, he had donned his battle costume. He wore a brilliant steel cuirass, and a red turban wrapped around his gilded casque. A scimitar of marvelous workmanship hung from his belt; its sheath as well as its handle of massive gold was ornamented with arabesques of corals and diamonds. The Arab warrior said to Rosen-Aër with suppressed emotion: "Allow me to embrace you as a daughter."

Rosen-Aër gave Abd-el-Kader her forehead, saying: "I pray that your children may long retain their father."

The Arab and the Gallic woman left the harem together. Outside they met the five sons of the chief – Abd-Allah, Hasam, Abul-Casem, Mahomet and Ibrahim, the youngest, all in full armor, on horseback and carrying over their arms long and light white woolen cloaks with black tufts. The youngest of the family, a lad of barely fifteen, alighted from his horse when he saw Rosen-Aër, took her hand, kissed it respectfully and said: "You have been a mother to me; before departing for battle I greet you as a son."

The Gallic woman thought of her son Amael, who also was fifteen years when he departed from the valley of Charolles, and answered the young man: "May God protect you, you who are now to incur the risk of war for the first time!"

"'Believers, when you march upon the enemy, be unshakable,' says the prophet," the lad replied with mild yet grave voice. "We are going to deliver battle to the infidel Franks. I shall fight bravely under the eyes of my father... God alone disposes of our lives. His will be done."

Once more kissing the hand of Rosen-Aër, the young Arab helped her mount her mule that was led by a black slave. From the distance the martial bray of the Saracen clarions was heard. Abd-el-Kader waved his last adieu to Rosen-Aër, and the Arab, with whom age had not weakened the martial ardor of younger years, leaped upon his horse and galloped off, followed by his five sons. For a few moments longer the Gallic woman followed with her eyes the long white cloaks that the rapid course of the Arab and his five children raised to the wind. When they had disappeared in a cloud of dust at a turning of the street, Rosen-Aër ordered the black slave to lead the mule towards the main gate of the town in order to ride out and reach the colonist's house.

PART I. THE CONVENT OF ST. SATURNINE

CHAPTER I. THE LAST OF THE MEROVINGIANS

About a month had elapsed since the departure of Abd-el-Kader and his five sons to meet Charles Martel in battle.

A boy of eleven or twelve years, confined in the convent of St. Saturnine in Anjou, was leaning on his elbows at the sill of a narrow window on the first floor of one of the buildings of the abbey, and looking out upon the fields. The vaulted room in which the boy was kept was cold, spacious, bare and floored with stone. In a corner stood a little bed, and on a table a few toys roughly cut out of coarse wood. A few stools and a trunk were its only furniture. The boy himself, dressed in a threadbare and patched black serge, had a sickly appearance. His face, biliously pale, expressed profound sadness. He looked at the distant fields, and tears ran down his hollow cheeks. While he was dreaming awake, the door of the room opened and a young girl of about sixteen stepped in softly. Her complexion was dark brown but extremely fresh, her lips were red, her hair as well as her eyes jetty black, and her eyebrows were exquisitely arched. A more comely figure could ill be imagined, despite her drugged petticoat and coarse apron, the ends of which were tucked under her belt and which was full of hemp ready to be spun. Septimine held her distaff in one hand and in the other a little wooden casket. At the sight of the boy, who remained sadly leaning on his elbows at the window, the young girl sighed and said to herself: "Poor little fellow ... always sorry ... I do not know whether the news I bring will be good or bad for him... If he accepts, may he never have cause to look back with regret to this convent." She softly approached the child without being heard, placed her hand upon his shoulder with gentle familiarity and said playfully: "What are you thinking about, my dear prince?"

The child was startled. He turned his face bathed in tears towards Septimine, and letting himself down with an air of utter dejection on a stool near the window, said: "Oh, I am weary!.. I am weary to death!" and the tears flowed anew from his fixed and red eyes.

"Come now, dry those ugly tears," the young maid replied affectionately. "I came to entertain you. I brought along a large supply of hemp to spin in your company while talking to you, unless you prefer a game of huckle-bones – "

"Nothing amuses me. Everything tires me."

"That is sad for those who love you; nothing amuses you, nothing pleases you. You are always downcast and silent. You take no care of your person. Your hair is unkempt ... and your clothes in rags! If your hair were well combed over your forehead, instead of falling in disorder, you would not look like a little savage... It is now three days since you have allowed me to arrange it, but to-day, will ye, nill ye, I shall comb it."

"No; no; I won't have it!" said the boy stamping his foot with feverish impatience. "Leave me alone; your attentions annoy me."

"Oh, oh! You can not frighten me with your stamping," Septimine replied mirthfully. "I have brought along in this box all that I need to comb you. Be wise and docile."

"Septimine... Leave me in peace!"

But the young girl was not to be discouraged. With the authority of a "big sister" she turned around the chair of the recalcitrant boy and forced him to let her disentangle his disordered hair. While thus giving him her care with as much affection as grace, Septimine, standing behind him said: "Are you not a hundred times better looking this way, my dear prince?"

"What is the difference, good looking or not?.. I am not allowed to leave this convent... What have I done to be so wretched?"

"Alack, poor little one ... you are the son of a king!"

The boy made no answer, but he hid his face in his hands and fell to weeping, from time to time crying in a smothered voice: "My father... Oh, my father... Alas!.. He is dead!"

"Oh, if you again start crying, and, worst of all, to speak of your father, you will make me also cry. Although I scold you for your negligence, I do pity you. I came to give you some hope, perhaps."

"What do you mean, Septimine?"

Having finished dressing the boy's hair, the young girl sat down near him on a stool, took up her distaff, began to spin and said in a low and mysterious voice: "Do you promise to be discreet?"

"Whom do you expect I can talk to? Whom could I reveal secrets to? I have an aversion to all the people in this place."

"Excepting myself... Not true?"

"Yes, excepting you, Septimine... You are the only one who inspires me with some little confidence."

"What distrust could a little girl, born in Septimany, inspire you with? Am not I as well as my mother, the wife of the outside porter of this convent, a slave? When eighteen months ago you were brought to this place and I was not yet fifteen, I was assigned to you, to entertain you and play with you. Since then we have grown up together. You became accustomed to me... Is it not of course that you should have some confidence in me?"

"You just told me you had some hope to give me... What hope can you give me? I want to hear?"

"Do you first promise to be discreet?"

"Be easy on that score. I shall be discreet."

"Promise me also not to begin to weep again, because I shall have to speak about your father, a painful subject to you."

"I shall not weep, Septimine."

"It is now eighteen months since your father, King Thierry, died on his domain in Compiègne, and the steward of the palace, that wicked Charles Martel, had you taken to this place and kept imprisoned ... poor dear innocent boy!"

"My father always said to me: 'My little Childeric, you will be a king like myself, you will have dogs and falcons to hunt with, handsome horses, chariots to ride in, slaves to serve you'; and yet I have none of these things here. Oh, God! Oh, God! How unhappy I am!"

"Are you going to start weeping again?"

"No, Septimine; no, my little friend."

"That wicked Charles Martel had you brought to this convent, as I was saying, in order to reign in your place, as he virtually reigned in the place of your father, King Thierry."

"But there are in this country of Gaul enough dogs, falcons, horses and slaves for that Charles to have an abundance and I also. Is it not so?"

"Yes ... if to reign means simply to have all these things ... but I, poor girl, do not understand these things. I only know that your father had friends who are enemies of Charles Martel, and that they would like to see you out of this convent. That is the secret that I had for you."

"And I, Septimine, would also like to be out of here! The devil take the monks and their convent."

After a moment's hesitation, the young girl stopped spinning and said to the young prince in a still lower voice and looking around as if fearing to be heard: "It depends upon you to get out of this convent."

"Upon me!" cried Childeric. "That would be quickly done on my part. But how?"

"Mercy! Do not speak so loud," replied Septimine uneasily and casting her eyes towards the door. "I always fear some one is there listening." She rose and went on tip-toe to listen at the door and peep through the keyhole. Feeling reassured by the examination, Septimine returned to her seat, again started to spin, and went on talking with Childeric: "You can walk in the garden during the day?"

"Yes, but the garden is surrounded by a high wall, and I am always accompanied by one of the monks. That is why I prefer to remain in this room to walking in such company."

"They lock you up at night – "

"And a monk sleeps outside before my door."

"Just look out of this window."

"What for?"

"To see whether the height of the window above the ground would frighten you."

Childeric looked out of the window. "It is very high, Septimine; it is really very high."

"You little coward! It is only eight or ten feet at most. Suppose a rope with large knots were fastened to that iron bar yonder, would you have the courage to descend by the rope, helping yourself with your feet and hands?"

"Oh, I never could do that!"

"You would be afraid? Great God, is it possible!"

"The attempt looks to me above my strength."

"I would not be afraid, and I am only a girl... Come, have courage, my prince."

The boy looked once more out of the window, reflected and proceeded to say: "You are right... It is not as high as it looked at first. But the rope, Septimine, how am I to get it? And then, when I am down there, at night... What shall I do then?"

"At the bottom of the window you will find my father. He will throw upon your shoulders the caped cloak that I usually wear. I am not really much taller than you. If you wrap the mantle well around you and lower the cape well over your face, my father could, with the help of the night, make you pass for me, traverse the interior of the convent, and reach his lodge outside. There, friends of your father would be waiting on horseback. You would depart quickly. You would have the whole night before you, and in the morning, when your flight was discovered, it would be too late to start in your pursuit... Now answer, Childeric, will you have the courage to descend from this window in order to regain your freedom?"

"Septimine, I have a strong desire to do so ... but – "

"But you are afraid... Fie! A big boy like you! It is shameful!"

"And who will give me a rope?"

"I... Are you decided? You will have to hurry; your father's friends are in the neighborhood... To-night and to-morrow night they will be waiting with horses not far from the walls of the convent ... to take you away – "

"Septimine, I shall have the courage to descend, yes ... I promise you."

"Forget not, Childeric, that my mother, my father and I are exposing ourselves to terrible punishment, even death perhaps, by favoring your flight. When the proposition was made to my father to help in your escape, he was offered money. He refused, saying: 'I want no other reward than the satisfaction of having contributed in the deliverance of the poor little fellow, who is always sad and weepful all these eighteen months, and who is dying of grief.'"

"Oh, be easy. When I shall be king, like my father, I shall make you handsome presents; I shall give you fine clothes, jewelry – "

"I do not need your presents. You are a child that one must sympathize with. That is all that concerns me. 'It is not because the poor little fellow is the son of a king that I take an interest in him,' my father has said to me, 'because, after all, he is of the race of those Franks who have held us in bondage, us the Gauls, ever since Clovis. No, I wish to help the poor little fellow because I pity him.'"

Now, remember, Childeric, the slightest indiscretion on your part would draw terrible misfortunes upon my family."

"Septimine, I shall say nothing to anybody, I shall have courage, and this very night I shall descend by the window to join my father's friends. Oh! What happiness!" the child added, clapping his hands, "what happiness! I shall be free to-morrow!.. I shall be a king like my father!"

"Wait till you are away to rejoice!.. And now, listen to me carefully. You are always locked in after evening prayers. The night is quite dark by that time. You will have to wait about half an hour. Then tie the rope and let yourself down into the garden. My father will be at the foot of the window – "

"Agreed... But where is the rope?"

"Here," said Septimine, taking from amidst the flax that she held in her apron a roll of thin but strong rope, furnished with knots at intervals. "There is at the end, as you see, an iron hook; you will fasten that to this bar, and you will then let yourself down from knot to knot till you reach the ground."

"Oh! I am no longer afraid! But where shall I hide the rope? Where shall I keep it until evening?"

"Under the mattress of your bed."

"Good! Give it to me!" and the young prince, helped by Septimine, hid the rope well under the mattress. Hardly had they re-covered the bed when trumpets were heard blowing at a distance. Septimine and Childeric looked at each other for a moment in astonishment. The young girl returned to her seat, took up her distaff and observed in great excitement:

"Something unusual is going on outside of the abbey... They may come here... Take up your huckle-bones and play with them."

Childeric mechanically obeyed the orders of the young girl, sat down on the floor, and began to play huckle-bones, while Septimine, with apparent unconcern, spun at her distaff near the window. A few minutes later the door of the room opened. Father Clement, the abbot of the convent, came in and said to the young girl: "You can go away; I shall call you back if I want you."

Septimine hastened to leave; but thinking she could profit by a moment when the monk did not see her, she placed her finger to her lips in order to convey to Childeric a last warning of discretion. The abbot happening to turn around suddenly, the girl hardly had time to carry her hand to her hair in order to conceal the meaning of her first gesture. Septimine feared she had aroused the suspicion of Father Clement, who followed her with penetrating eyes, and her apprehensions ripened into certainty when, having arrived at the threshold of the door and turning a last time to salute the Father, her eyes met his scrutinizing gaze fixed upon her.

"May God help us," said the poor girl seized with mortal anxiety and leaving the room. "At the sight of the monk the unhappy prince became purple in the face... He did not take his eyes from the bed where we hid the rope. Oh, I tremble for the little fellow and for us!.. Oh! What will come of it?"

CHAPTER II. CHARLES MARTEL

Charles the Hammer, or Martel, had arrived at the convent of St. Saturnine escorted by only about a hundred armed men. He was on the way to join a detachment of his army that lay encamped at a little distance from the abbey. The steward of the palace and one of the officers of the squad that accompanied him were installed in a room that served as the refectory of Father Clement, while the latter went for the little prince.

At this period in the full vigor of his age, Charles Martel exaggerated in his language and costume the rudeness of his Germanic stock. His beard and hair, which were of a reddish blonde, were kept untrimmed and shaggy, and framed in a face of high color, that bore the imprint of rare energy coupled with a good nature that was at times both jovial and sly. His keen eyes revealed an intelligence of superior order. Like the lowest of his soldiers, he wore a coat of goat-skin over his tarnished armor. His boots, made of heavy leather, were armed with rusty iron spurs. From his leather baldric hung a long sword of Bordeaux, a town renowned for its manufacture of arms.

The officer who accompanied Charles Martel seemed to be twenty-five years of age – tall, slender, powerfully built. He wore his brilliant steel armor with military ease, half-hidden under a long white cloak with black tufts, after the Arabian fashion. His magnificent scimitar, with both handle and scabbard of solid gold and ornamented with arabesques of coral and diamonds, likewise was of Arabian origin. The young man's face was of rare manly beauty. He had placed his casque upon a table. His wavy black hair, divided in the middle of his head, fell in ringlets on both sides of his forehead, which was furrowed by a deep scar, and shaded his manly face that bore a slight brown beard. His eyes of the blue of the sea, usually mild and proud, seemed however to reveal a secret sorrow or remorse. At times a nervous twitch brought his eyebrows together, and his features would for a while become somber. Soon, however, thanks to the mobility of his impressions, the ardor of his blood, and the impetuosity of his character, his face would again resume its normal expression.

Charles, who for a while had been silently contemplating his young companion with a kind and sly satisfaction, at last broke the silence, saying in his hoarse voice:

"Berthoald, how do you like this abbey and the fields that we have just traversed?"

"The abbey seems to me large, the fields fertile. Why do you ask?"

"Because I would like to make you a present to your taste, my lad."

The young man looked at the Frankish chief with profound astonishment.

Charles Martel proceeded: "In 732, it is now nearly six years ago, at the time that those heathens from Arabia, who had settled in Gaul, pushed forward as far as Tours and Blois, I marched against them. One day I saw arrive at my camp a young chief followed by fifty daring devils. It was you, the son, as you told me, of a Frankish seigneur, who was dead and had been dispossessed of his benefice, like so many others. I cared nothing about your birth. When the blade is well tempered I care little about the name of the armorer," Charles explained as he noticed a slight quiver in the eyelashes of Berthoald whose forehead swiftly mantled with a blush and whose eyes dropped in involuntary confusion. "You searched your fortune in war and had assembled a band of determined men. You came to offer me your sword and your services. The next day, on the plains of Poitiers, you and your men fought so bravely against the Arabs that you lost three-fourths of your little troop. With your own hands you killed Abd-el-Rhaman, the general of those heathens, and you received two wounds in disengaging me from a group of horsemen who were about to kill me, and would thereby have ended the war to the lasting injury of the Franks."

"It was my duty as a soldier to defend my chief. I deserve no praise for that."

"And it is now my duty as your chief to reward your soldierly courage. I shall never forget that I owe my life to your valor. Neither will my children. They will read in some notes I have left on my

campaign: 'At the battle of Poitiers, Charles owed his life to Berthoald; let my children remember it every time they see the scar that the brave warrior carries on his forehead.'

"Charles, your praises embarrass me."

"I love you sincerely. Since the battle of Poitiers I have looked upon you as one of my best companions in arms, although at times you are as stubborn as a mule and quite odd in your tastes. If the matter in hand is a war in the east or the north against the Frisians or the Saxons, or in the south against the Arabs, there is no more rageful hammerer on the enemies' heads than yourself; but when we had to suppress some revolts of the Gauls you fought gingerly, almost against your will... You no longer were the same daring champion... Your sword did not leave its scabbard."

"Charles, tastes differ," answered Berthoald laughing with so obvious an effort that it betrayed some poignant recollection. "In matters of battle it is as in matters of women, tastes differ. Some like blondes, others brunettes; they are all fire for the one, and all ice for the other. And so my preference is for war against the Frisians, Saxons and Arabs."

"I have no such predilections. As true as I have been surnamed Martel, so long as I can strike and crush what stands in my way, all enemies are equally to my taste... I believed that those Arabian dogs who had been so roughly hammered would recross the Pyrenees in a hurry after their rout at Poitiers. I was mistaken. They still hold their ground firmly in Languedoc. Despite the success of our last battle we have not been able to seize Narbonne, the place of refuge of those heathens. I am now called back to the north of Gaul to resist the Saxons who are returning with more threatening forces. I regret to have to leave Narbonne in the hands of the Saracens. But we have at least ravaged the neighborhood of that large town, made an immense booty, carried away a large number of slaves, and devastated in our retreat the countries of Nimes, of Toulouse and of Beziers. It will be a good lesson for the populations who took the side of the Arabs. They will long remember what is to be gained by leaving the Gospels for the Koran, or rather, because, after all, I care as little for the Pope as I do for Mahomet, what is to be gained by an alliance with the Arabs against the Franks. For the rest, although they remain masters of Narbonne, these pagans worry me little. Travelers from Spain have informed me that civil war has broken out between the Caliphs of Granada and of Cordova. Busy with their own internal strifes, they will not send fresh troops into Gaul, and the accursed Saracens will not dare to advance beyond Languedoc, whence I shall drive them away later. At rest about the south, I now return north. But before doing so I wish to provide, to their own taste and mine, for a large number of soldiers, who, like yourself, have served me valiantly, and turn them into fat abbots, rich bishops or other large beneficiaries."

"Charles, would you make out of me an abbot or a bishop? You are surely joking."

"Why not? It is the abbey and the bishopric that make the abbot and the bishop, whoever be the incumbent."

"Please explain yourself more clearly."

"I have been able to sustain my great wars in the north and south only by constantly recruiting my forces from the German tribes on the other side of the Rhine. The descendants of the seigneurs who were the beneficiaries of Clovis and his sons have degenerated. They have become do-nothings like their kings. They seek to escape their obligations of leading their columns to war, under the pretext that they need hands to cultivate the soil. Apart from a few fighting bishops, old men with the devil in them, who changed the casque for the mitre, and who, redonning their cuirasses brought their men to my camp, the Church has not wished and does not wish to contribute to the expenses of the war. Now, upon the word of Martel, that will not do! My brave warriors, fresh from Germany, the chiefs of the bands that have served me faithfully, have a right to a share of the lands of Gaul. They have more right thereto than the rapacious bishops and the debauched abbots who keep harems like the Caliphs of the Arabs. I want to restore order in the matter; to reward the brave and to punish the cowards and do-nothings. I propose to distribute a part of the goods of the Church among my men who have recently arrived from Germany. I shall in that manner provide for my chiefs and their

men, and instead of leaving so much land and so many slaves in the hands of the tonsured brothers, I shall form a strong reserve army of veterans, ever ready to take the field at the first signal. And to begin, I present this abbey to you, its lands, buildings, slaves, with no other charge upon you than to contribute a certain sum into my treasury and to turn out with your men at my first call."

"I a count of this country! I the possessor of such broad estates!" the young chief cried with joy, hardly believing so magnificent a gift possible. "But the goods of this abbey are immense! Its lands and forests extend more than two leagues in a circle!"

"So much the better, my lad! You and your men will settle down here. Handsome female slaves are sure to abound on the place. You will raise a good breed of soldiers. Moreover this abbey is bound, due to its situation, to become an important military post. I shall grant to the abbot of this convent some more land ... if any is left. And that is not all, Berthoald; I entertain as much affection for [you] as I place confidence in you. I make the gift to you out of affection; now, as to my confidence. I shall give you a strong proof of it by establishing you here and charging you with so important a duty ... that, in the end, it will be I who remain your debtor..."

"Why do you halt, Charles?" asked Berthoald noticing the chief of the Franks reflect instead of continuing.

After a few seconds of silence, Charles resumed: "During the century and a half and more that we have reigned in fact, we the stewards of the palace ... of what earthly use have the kings been, the descendants of Clovis?"

"Have I not heard you say a hundred times that those do-nothings spend their time drinking, eating, playing, hunting, sleeping in the arms of their concubines, going to church and building churches in atonement for some crime committed in the fury of their drunkenness?"

"Such has been the life of those 'do-nothing' kings – well named such. We the stewards of the palace govern in fact. At every assembly of the Field of May, we pulled one of our royal mannikins out of his residence of Compiègne, of Kersey-on-the-Oise, or of Braine. We had him set up in a gilded chariot drawn by four oxen according to the old Germanic custom, and, with a crown upon his head, a scepter in his hand, purple on his back, his face ornamented with a long artificial beard, if he had no beard, so as to impart to him a certain degree of majesty, the image was promenaded around the Field of May, and received the pledge of homage from the dukes, counts and bishops, gathered at the assembly from all parts of Gaul... The comedy over, the idol was thrust back into its box until the next year. But what useful purpose can these mummeries serve? He only should be king who governs and fights. Consequently, as I have no taste for what is superfluous, I have suppressed the royalty... I confiscated the King."

"You deserve to be praised for that, Charles; the Frankish kings descended from Clovis, have inspired me with hatred and contempt – "

"But whence the hate?"

Berthoald blushed and puckered up his brows: "I have always hated idleness and cruelty."

"The last one of these kings, Thierry IV, dead now eighteen months, left a son behind ... a child of about nine years... I had him deported to this abbey – "

"What do you purpose to do with him?"

"To keep him... We Franks are fickle folks. For a century and a half we fell into the habit of despising the kings that one time we worshipped... Accordingly, when the first Field of May took place without the royal mummery, not one of the dukes and bishops missed the idol that was absent from the feast. This year, however, some did ask where was the king; and others answered: 'What is the use of the king?' It may, nevertheless, happen that one of these days they may demand to see the royal mannikin make the tour of the Field of May according to the old custom... I do not care, provided I reign. Accordingly, I keep in reserve for them the child that is here. With the aid of a false beard on his chin and a crown on his head, the little monkey will play his role in the chariot neither

better nor worse than so many other kings of twelve or fifteen years who preceded him. In case of need, next year he will be Childeric III, if I think it advisable."

"Kings of twelve!.. How low can royalty fall!.. How low the degradation of the people!"

"The stewardship of the palace, a post that became hereditary, came very near dropping to the same level... Did I not have a brother of eleven who was the steward of the palace to a king of ten?"

"You joke, Charles!"

"No, indeed, I do not, because those days were far from pleasant for me... My step-mother, Plectrude, had me cast into prison after the death of my father Pepin of Heristal... According to the dame, I was only a bastard, good either for the gibbet or the priest's frock, while my father left to my brother Theobald the post of steward of the palace; hereditary in our family... And so it happened that my brother, then only eleven, became the steward of the palace of the then king, who was only ten, and who became the grandfather of this little Childeric, who is a prisoner in this convent. That king and steward could exercise no rivalry over each other except at tops or huckle-bones. Thus the good dame Plectrude expected to rule in the place of the two urchins, while they would be at play. Such audacity and folly aroused the Frankish seigneurs. At the end of a few years Plectrude was driven away with her son, while I, Charles, for whom she had only bad names, came out of prison, and now became steward of the palace of Dagobert III. Since then I have made so much noise in the world, hammering here and yonder upon the heads of Saxons, Frisians and Saracens, that the name of Martel has stuck to me. Dagobert III left a son, Thierry IV, who died eighteen months ago, and he was the father of little Childeric, the prisoner of this place. While having to cross the region, I wished to pay a visit to the royal brat and learn how he stood his captivity. I said I had a token of confidence to give... I confide to you the keeping of that child, the last scion of the stock of Clovis, of the Merovingian conquerors of Gaul."

"I shall keep this last scion of Clovis?" cried Berthoald, at first stupefied, but immediately thrilled with savage joy. "I shall keep him? The boy who has among his ancestors a Clotaire, the murderer of children! a Chilperic, the Nero of the Gauls! a Fredegonde, a second Messalina! a Clotaire II, the executioner of Brunhild, and so many other crowned monsters! Shall I be the jailor of their last issue?.. The fate of man is often strange... I to be the guardian of the last descendant of that conqueror of Gaul so much abhorred by my fathers!.. Oh, the gods are just!"

"Berthoald, are you going crazy? What is there so astonishing in your becoming the watcher of this child?"

"Excuse me, Charles," answered Berthoald recollecting and fearing to betray himself. "I was greatly struck with the thought that I, an obscure soldier, should watch and hold as a prisoner the last scion of so many kings! Is it not a strange fate?"

"Indeed this stock of Clovis, once so valiant, ends miserably!.. But how else could it be! These kinglets – fathers before fifteen, decayed at thirty, brutified by wine, dulled by idleness, unnerved by youthful debauchery, emaciated, stunted, and stupid – could not choose but end this-wise... The stewards of the palace, on the contrary – rough men, always on the march from north to south, from east to west, and back again, always on horseback, always fighting, always governing – they run out into a Charles, and he is not frail, he is not stunted! Not he! His beard is not artificial; he will be able to raise a breed of true kings... Upon the word of Martel, this second breed of kings will not allow themselves to be exhibited in carts neither before nor after the assemblies of the Field of May by any stewards of palaces!"

"Who can tell, Charles! It may happen that if you raise a breed of kings, their stock will run down just as that of Clovis has done, whose last scion you wish to put under my charge."

"By the devil! By the navel of the Pope! Do you see any sign of decay in us, the sons of Pepin of Old, who have been the hereditary stewards of the palace since the reign of Queen Brunhild?"

"You were not kings, Charles; and royalty carries with it a poison that in the long run enervates and kills the most virile stock – "

At this moment Father Clement came tumbling into the room in great excitement, and broke the thread of the conversation between Charles Martel and Berthoald.

CHAPTER III. FATHER CLEMENT'S REFECTORY

"Seigneur," said Father Clement to Charles, as he precipitately broke into the room, "I have just discovered a plot! The young prince obstinately refused to accompany me hither – "

"A plot! Ho, ho! The folks of your abbey indulge in conspiracies!"

"Thanks be to heaven, seigneur, myself and brothers are utter strangers to the unworthy treason. The guilty ones are the miserable slaves who will be punished as they deserve!"

"Explain yourself! And stop circumlocutions!"

"I must first of all inform you, sir, that when the young prince first arrived at this convent, Count Hugh who brought him, recommended to me to place near the child some young female slave, a pretty girl, if possible, above all one that would provoke love ... and who would be willing to submit to the consequences – "

"In order, I suppose, that he be educated after the fashion that old Queen Brunhild followed towards her own grandchildren... Count Hugh exceeded my orders; and you, holy man, did you not blush at the role of coupler in the infamous scheme?"

"Oh, seigneur! What an abomination! The two children remained pure as angels... To make it short, I placed a young female slave near the prince. The girl, an innocent creature, together with her father and mother took pity on the fate of Childeric. They listened to detestable propositions, and this very night and by means of a rope, the child was to slip from his room with the connivance of the porter slave, and join some faithful adherents of the deceased King Thierry who are lying in hiding near the convent. That was the plot."

"Ha! Ha! The old royal party is stirring! They thought I would be long kept busy with the Arabs! They planned to restore the royalty in my absence!"

"A minute ago, as I entered the room of the young prince, my suspicions were awakened. The confusion he was in and the redness in his face told of his guilt. He would not take his eyes from his bed. A sudden idea occurred to me. I raised the mattress, and there I found a rope carefully stowed away. I pressed the child with questions, and amidst tears he confessed to me the full project of escape."

"Treason!" cried the chief of the Franks, affecting more rage than he really felt. "How came I to confide this child to the care of monks who are either traitors or incapable of defending their prisoner!"

"Oh, seigneur!.. We traitors!"

"How many men did this abbey contribute to the army?"

"Seigneur, our colonists and slaves are hardly enough to cultivate the land; our vines are neglected; our fields lie fallow. We could not spare a single man for the army."

"How much did you pay into the treasury towards the expenses of the war?"

"All our revenues were employed in charitable works ... in pious foundations."

"You extend fat charities to yourselves. Such are these churchmen! Always receiving and taking, never giving or returning! Ye are a race of vipers! Under whom does this old abbey hold the land?"

"From the liberalities of the pious King Dagobert. The charter of our endowment is of the year 640 of our Lord Jesus Christ."

"Do you, monk, believe that the Frankish kings made these endowments to you of the tonsured fraternity to the end that you might grow fat in idleness and abundance, and without ever contributing towards the expenses of the war with either men or money?"

"Seigneur ... remember the obligations of the monastery ... keep in mind the expenses of the cult!"

"I confide an important prisoner to you and you prove unable to watch him ... you miserable tonsured idlers ... toppers and do-nothings!"

"Seigneur, we are innocent and incapable of betraying you!"

"That will never do. I shall settle soldiers on the domain ... men who will be able to watch the prisoner, and, when need be, defend the abbey, if the folks of the royal party should attempt to carry off the prince by force," and turning to Berthoald, Charles said: "You and your men will take possession of this abbey. I present it to you!"

The abbot raised his hands to heaven in sign of mute desolation, while Berthoald, who had pensively stood near, said to Charles Martel:

"Charles, the commission of jailor is repugnant to my character of a soldier. I feel thankful to you, but I must decline the gift."

"Your refusal afflicts me. You have heard the monk. I need here a vigilant guardian. This abbey is, by its position, an important military post."

"Charles, there are other soldiers in your army whom you can charge with the child and to whom you can confide the defence of the post. You will find men enough who will not be restrained by any scruples such as restrain me."

For a few minutes the chief of the Franks remained silent and thoughtful, then he said: "Monk, how much land, how many colonists and slaves have you?"

"Seigneur, we have five thousand eight hundred acres of land, seven hundred colonists, and nineteen hundred slaves."

"Berthoald ... you hear it! That is what you decline for yourself and your men. Moreover, I would have created you count of the domain."

"Reserve for others than myself the favor you meant to bestow upon me. I absolutely refuse the function of jailor."

"Seigneur," put in Father Clement with a holy resignation that, however, but ill-concealed his anger at Charles: "You are the chief of the Franks and all-powerful. If you establish your armed men on this domain, we shall have to obey, but what will become of us?"

"And what will become of my companions in arms, who have valiantly served me during the war while you were counting your beads?.. Are they to steal or beg their bread along the roads?"

"Seigneur ... there is a way of satisfying both your companions in arms and ourselves. You wish to change this abbey into a military post. I admit it, your armed men would be better keepers of the young prince than we poor monks. But since you dispose of this abbey, deign, illustrious seigneur, to bestow another one upon us. There is near Nantes the abbey of Meriadek. One of our brothers, who died recently, lived there several years as the intendant. He left with us an inventory containing an exact list of the goods and persons of that abbey. It was at the time under the rule of St. Benoit. We have learned that later it was changed into a community of women. But we have no positive information on that head. But that would matter little."

"And that abbey," Charles asked, rubbing his beard with a sly look, "you ask me for it as a charity to you and your monks?"

"Yes, seigneur; since you dispossess us of this one, we solicit indemnity."

"And what is to become of the present holders of the abbey of Meriadek?"

"Alack! what we would have become. The will of God be done. Charity begins at home."

"Yes, provided the will of God turn in your favor. Is the abbey rich?"

"Seigneur, with the aid of God, we could live there humbly and in seclusion and prayer and with a little privation."

"Monk, no false pretences! Is that abbey worth more or is it worth less than this one? I wish to know whether it is a cow or a goat I am giving away. If you deceive me, I may some day go back upon my gift. Moreover, you just said you had an exact inventory of the abbey's havings. Come, speak up, you old dotard!"

"Yes, seigneur," answered the abbot biting his lips and proceeding to look in a drawer among several rolls of parchment for the inventory of the abbey of Meriadek. "Here," said he, producing the document, "you will see from this that the revenues of Meriadek are worth about as much as those that we draw here... We may even, by retrenching upon our good works, by reducing our charities, contribute two hundred gold sous annually to your treasury."

"You say that rather late," replied Charles turning the leaves of the inventory which did, indeed, accurately set forth the extent and limits of the domain of Meriadek. "Have you parchments to write on? I wish to make the bequest in due form."

"Yes, seigneur," cried the monk in great glee, running to his trunk and believing himself in full possession of the abbey of Meriadek. "Here is a roll of parchment, gracious seigneur. Be kind enough to dictate the terms of the bequest ... unless you prefer to adopt the usual formula."

Saying this the abbot was about to sit down and take pen in hand, when, pushing him away from the table, Charles said: "Monk, I am not like the do-nothing and ignorant kings; I know how to write; and I like to transact my business myself."

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