

ЭЖЕН СЮ

THE CASQUE'S LARK;
OR, VICTORIA, THE
MOTHER OF THE CAMPS

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the Mother of the Camps**

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Eugène Sue

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INTRODUCTION

I, Schanvoch, a descendant of Joel, the brenn of the tribe of Karnak; I, Schanvoch, now a freeman, thanks to the valor of my father Ralf and the bold Gallic insurrections that continued unabated from century to century; I, Schanvoch, write the following narrative two hundred and sixty-four years after my ancestress Genevieve, the wife of Fergan, witnessed in Judea the death of the poor carpenter Jesus of Nazareth.

I write the following account thirty-four years after Gomer, the son of Judicaël and grandson of Fergan, who was a slave like his father and grandfather, wrote to his son Mederik that he had nothing to add to the family annals but the monotonous account of his life as a slave.

Neither did my ancestor Mederik contribute aught to our family history, and his son Justin contented himself with having a stranger's hand enter these short lines:

"My father Mederik died a slave, fighting as a Son of the Mistletoe for the freedom of Gaul; he told me that he was driven to revolt against the foreign oppression by the narrative of the bravery of our free ancestors and by the description of the sufferance of our enslaved fathers. I, his son Justin, a colonist, and no longer a slave of the fisc, have caused this fact to be entered upon our family parchments, which I shall faithfully transmit to my son Aurel, together with their accompanying emblems, the gold sickle, the little brass bell, the fragment of the iron collar and the little silver cross, all of which I have carefully preserved."

Aurel, Justin's son and a colonist like his father, was not any more literate than the latter, and left no record whatever. After him, again a stranger's hand inserted these lines in our family annals:

"Ralf, the son of Aurel the colonist, fought for the freedom of his country. Ralf having become absolutely free, thanks to the Gallic arms and the holy war preached by our venerable druids, found himself obliged to resort to a friend's help in order to enter the death of his father Aurel upon our family parchments. Happier than myself, my son Schanvoch will not be forced to avail himself of a stranger in order to enter in our family's archives the death of myself, the first male descendant of Joel, the brenn of the tribe of Karnak, who again regained complete freedom. As several of my ancestors have done before me, I here declare that it was the history of our ancestors' valor and martyrdom that induced me to take up arms against the Romans, our masters and secular oppressors."

These family scrolls, together with their accompanying relics, I shall leave to you, my dear little Alguen, the son of my beloved wife Ellen, who gave you birth this day four years ago.

I choose this day, the anniversary of your birth, as a day of happy augury, in order to start, for your benefit and the benefit of our descendants, the narrative of my life and my battles, my joys and my sorrows, obedient to the last wishes of our ancestor Joel, the brenn of the tribe of Karnak.

You will grieve, my son, when you learn from these archives that, from the death of Joel down to that of my great-grandfather Justin, seven generations, aye, seven whole generations, were subjected to intolerable slavery. But your heart will be cheered when you learn that my great-grandfather had, from a slave, become a colonist or serf attached to the glebe of Gaul – still a servile condition but greatly above that of slavery. My own father, having regained his full freedom, thanks to the formidable insurrections of the Sons of the Mistletoe that from century to century were conjured up at the voice of the druids, the tireless and heroic defenders of the freedom of oppressed Gaul, has bequeathed to me freedom, that most precious of all wealth. I shall, in turn, transmit it to you.

By dint of constantly struggling for it, and also of stubborn resistance, we Gauls have succeeded in successively reconquering almost our full former freedom. A last and frail bond still holds us to Rome, now our ally, after having formerly been our pitiless master. When that last and frail bond will be snapped, we shall have regained our absolute independence, and we shall resume our former place at the head of the great nations of the world.

Before acquainting you with the details of my life and time, my son, I must fill certain voids that are left in the history of our family through the omissions of those of our ancestors, who, either through illiteracy or the hardness of the times, were prevented from joining their respective accounts to our archives. Their lives must have been the life of all the other Gauls, who, the fetters of slavery notwithstanding, have, step by step and from century to century, conquered through revolt and battle the deliverance of our country.

You will find in the last lines written by our ancestor Fergan, the husband of Genevieve, that despite the vows taken by the Sons of the Mistletoe and despite innumerable uprisings, one of the most formidable of which was chieftained by Sacrovir, the worthy emulator of the Chief of the Hundred Valleys, the Roman yoke that Caesar imposed upon Gaul remained unshaken. In vain did Jesus, the carpenter of Nazareth, prophesy that the chains of the slave would be broken. The slaves still dragged their blood-stained chains. Nevertheless, our old race, weakened, mutilated, unnerved or corrupted though it was by slavery, never once was submissive, and allowed only short intervals to pass without endeavoring to shake off the yoke. The secret associations of the Sons of the Mistletoe covered the country, and furnished intrepid soldiers to each succeeding revolt against Rome.

After the heroic attempt of Sacrovir, the account of whose sublime death you will find in the narrative of our ancestor Fergan, the weak and timid weaver-slave, other insurrections broke out during the reigns of the Emperors Tiberius and Claudius; they increased in force during the civil wars that rent Italy under the reign of Nero. At about that time, one of our heroes, Vindex, as intrepid a patriot as Sacrovir or the Chief of the Hundred Valleys, long held the Roman arms in check. Civilis, another Gallic patriot, taking his stand upon the prophecies of Velleda – one of our female druids, a virile woman, wise in council and worthy compeer of our brave and wise mothers – roused almost all Gaul to revolt and gave the first serious wound to the power of Rome. Finally, during the reign of the Emperor Vitellius, a poor field slave like our ancestor Guilhern set himself up as the messiah and liberator of Gaul, just as Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed himself the Messiah of Judea, and pursued with patriotic ardor the task of liberation that was started by the Chief of the Hundred Valleys and continued after him by Sacrovir, Vindex, Civilis and so many other heroes. That field slave's name was Marik. He was then barely twenty-five years of age; robust, intelligent and gifted with heroic bravery he joined the Sons of the Mistletoe. Our venerable druids, always persecuted, had traversed Gaul inciting the lukewarm, restraining the impatient, and preparing all for the hour of the insurrection. It broke out. At the head of ten thousand slaves, field laborers like himself and armed with their scythes and forks, Marik engaged the Roman troops of Vitellius under the walls of Lyons. That first attempt miscarried; the insurgents were cut to pieces by the Roman army that greatly exceeded them in numbers. But so far from feeling overwhelmed, this defeat intensified the ardor of the revolted people. Whole populations rose in rebellion at the voice of the druids that called them to the holy war. The combatants seemed to spring out of the entrails of the earth, and Marik saw himself again at the head of a numerous army. Endowed by the gods with a military instinct, he disciplined his troops, inspired them with courage and a blind confidence in him, and marched at their head towards the banks of the Rhine, where, sheltered behind its trenches, lay the reserve of the Roman army. Marik attacked it, beat it, and compelled whole legions that he took prisoner to drop their own ensigns and substitute them with our ancient Gallic cock. Those Roman legions had, due to their long sojourn in our country, virtually become Gauls; carried away by the military ascendancy of Marik, they readily joined him, combatted under him against the fresh Roman columns that were sent from Italy, and either annihilated or dispersed them. The hour of Gaul's deliverance was about to sound – but at that

moment Marik fell through cowardly treason into the hands of the monster Vespasian, then Emperor of Rome. Riddled with wounds the hero of Gaul was delivered to the wild beasts in the circus, like our own ancestor Sylvest.

The martyr's death exasperated the population. Fresh insurrections broke out forthwith all over Gaul. The words of Jesus of Nazareth, declaring that the slave is the equal of his master, began to penetrate our own country, filtering through on the lips of itinerant preachers. The flames of hatred for the foreign domination shot up with renewed vigor. Attacked from all sides in Gaul, harrassed on the other side of the Rhine by innumerable hordes of Franks, barbarous warriors that issued from the depths of the northern forests and seemed but to await the propitious moment to pour into Gaul, the Romans finally capitulated to us. At last we harvested the fruits of so many heroic sacrifices! The blood shed by our fathers for the previous three centuries watered our deliverance. Indeed, the words of the Chief of the Hundred Valleys were prophetic:

"Flow, flow thou blood of the captive!
Drop, drop thou dew of gore!
Germinate, sprout up, thou avenging harvest!"

Yes, my son, those words were prophetic. It was with that refrain on their lips that our fathers fought and overcame the foreign oppressor. Rome, at last, yielded back to us a part of our ancient freedom. We formed Gallic legions commanded by our own officers; our provinces were once more governed by magistrates of our own choice. Rome reserved only the right to appoint a "Principal" over Gaul, the suzerainty over which she was to retain. We accepted, while waiting and striving for better things – and these better things were not long in coming. Frightened by our continual revolts, our tyrants had been slowly moderating the rigor of our slavery. Terror was to force from them that which they relentlessly refused as a matter of right and justice to the voice of suppliant humanity. First the master was no longer allowed, as he was in the days of Sylvest and several of his descendants, to dispose over the life of his slaves as one disposes over the life of an animal. Later, as their fear increased, the masters were forbidden from inflicting corporal punishments upon their slaves, except with the express authorization of a magistrate. Finally, my child, that horrible Roman law, that, at the time of our ancestor Sylvest and of the five generations that followed him, declared in its ferocious language that the slave does not exist, that "he has no head" (*non caput habet*) that shocking law was, thanks to the dread inspired by our unceasing revolts, modified to the point that the Justinian code declared:

"Freedom is a natural right; it is the statute law that has created slavery; it has also created enfranchisement, which is the return to natural freedom."

Alack! It is distressing to notice that the sacred rights of humanity can not triumph except at the cost of torrents of blood and of unnumbered disasters! But who is to be cursed as the true cause of all such evils? Is it not the oppressor, seeing that he bends his fellow-men under the yoke of a frightful slavery, lives on the sweat of the brow of his fellow-men, depraves, debases and martyrizes his fellow-beings, kills them to satisfy a whim or out of sheer cruelty, and thus compels them to reconquer by force the freedom that they have been deprived of? Never forget this, my son, if, once subjugated, the whole Gallic race had shown itself as patient, as timid, as resigned as did our poor ancestor Fergan the weaver, our slavery never would have been abolished! After vain appeals to the heart and reason of the oppressor, there is but one means left to overthrow tyranny – revolt – energetic, stubborn, unceasing revolt. Sooner or later right triumphs, as it triumphed with us! Let the blood that our triumph has cost fall upon the heads of those who enslaved us.

Accordingly, my son, thanks to our innumerable insurrections, slavery was at first replaced by the state of the colonist, or serfdom, the regime under which my great-grandfather Justin and my grandfather Aurel lived. Under that system, instead of being forced to cultivate under the whip and

for the exclusive benefit of the Roman masters the lands that they had plundered us of by conquest, the colonist had a small share of the harvest that he gathered. He could no longer be sold as a draft horse, along with his children; he could no longer be submitted to the torture or killed; but they were, from father to children, compelled to remain attached to the same domain. If the domain was sold, the colonist likewise changed hands under the identical conditions of toil. Later the condition of the colonists was further improved; they were granted the rights of citizenship. When the Gallic legions were formed, the soldiers that composed them became completely free. My father Ralf, the son of a colonist, gained his freedom in that manner; I, the son of a soldier, brought up in camp, was born free; and I shall bequeath that freedom to you, as my father bequeathed it to me together with the duty to preserve it for your descendants.

When you will read this narrative, my son, after you will have become acquainted with the manifold sufferings of our ancestors, who were slaves for so many generations, you will appreciate the wisdom of the wish expressed by our ancestor Joel, the brenn of the tribe of Karnak. You will admire his sagacity in expecting that, by piously preserving the memory of its bravery and of the independence that it once enjoyed, the Gallic race would be able to draw from the horror for Roman oppression the strength to overthrow it.

At this writing I am thirty-eight years of age. My parents are long dead. Ralf, my father, a soldier in one of our Gallic legions, in which he enrolled at the age of eighteen in the south of Gaul, came into this region, near the western banks of the Rhine, along with the army. He was in all the battles that were fought with the ferocious hordes of the Franks, who, attracted by the fertility of our Gaul and by the wealth contained in our borders, encamped on the opposite shore of the river, ever ready to attempt a new invasion.

About four years ago a descent of the insular population of England was feared in Brittany. On that occasion several legions, the one in which my father enlisted among them, were ordered into that province. During several months he was quartered in the city of Vannes, not far from Karnak, the cradle of our family. Having had one of his friends read to him the narratives of our ancestors, Ralf visited with pious respect the battle field of Vannes, the sacred stones of Karnak, and the lands that we were plundered of in Caesar's time by the Roman conquerors. The lands were held by a Roman family; colonists, sons of the Breton Gauls of our tribe and who had formerly been in bondage, now cultivated the lands that their ancestors one time owned. The daughter of one of those colonists loved my father; her love was reciprocated; her name was Madalene; she was one of those proud and virile Gallic women, that our ancestress Margarid, the wife of Joel, was a type of. She followed my father when his legion left Brittany to return to the banks of the Rhine, where I was born in the fortified camp of Mayence, a military city that our troops occupied. The chief of the legion to which my father belonged was the son of a field laborer. His bravery won him the post. On the day after my birth that chief's wife died in child-bed of a baby girl – a girl who, some day perhaps, may yet, from the retreat of her humble home, reign over the world as she reigns to-day over Gaul. To-day, at the time that I write, Victoria, by virtue of her distinguished wisdom, her eminent qualities, the benign influence that she exercises over her son Victorin and over our whole army, is, in point of fact, empress of Gaul.

Victoria is my foster-sister. Prizing the solid qualities of mind and heart that my mother was endowed with, when Victoria's father became a widower, he requested my mother to nurse his little babe. Accordingly, she and I grew up like brother and sister. We never since failed in the fraternal affection of our childhood. From her earliest age Victoria was serious and gentle, although she greatly delighted in the blare of trumpets and the sight of arms. She gave promise to be some day of that august beauty that mingles calmness, grace and energy, and that is peculiar to certain women of Gaul. You will see medals that have been struck in her honor when she was still a young maid. She is there represented as Diana the huntress, with a bow in one hand and a torch in the other. On a later medal, struck about two years ago, Victoria is represented with her son Victorin in the guise of Minerva accompanied by Mars. At the age of ten she was sent by her father to a college of female druids. Being

now again freed from Roman persecution, thanks to the new birth of Gallic freedom, the druids, male and female, again attended to the education of children as they did of yore.

Victoria remained with these venerable women until her fifteenth year. She drew from that patriotic and strict tuition an ardent love for her country, and information on all subjects. She left the college equipped with the secrets of former times, and, it is said, possessing, like Velleda and other female druids, the power of seeing into the future. At that period of her life the proud and virile beauty of Victoria was sublime. When she met me again she was happy and she did not conceal her joy. So far from declining through our long separation from each other, her affection for me, her foster-brother, had increased.

I must at this point make an admission to you, my son; I am free to make it because you will not read these lines until after you will be a man. You will find a good example of courage and abnegation in my confession.

When Victoria returned in her dazzling beauty of fifteen years I was of the same age and although hardly of the age of puberty myself, I fell distractedly in love with her. I carefully concealed my feelings, out of friendship as well as by reason of the respect that, despite the fraternal attachment of which she every day gave me fresh proof, that serious young maid, who brought with her from the college of the female druids an indescribably imposing, pensive and mysterious appearance, inspired in me. I then underwent a cruel trial. Ignorant of the feelings of my heart, as she ever will be, at fifteen and a half Victoria gave her hand to a young military chief. I came near dying of a slow consuming illness caused by my secret despair. So long as my life seemed in danger, Victoria did not leave the head of my couch. A tender sister could not have attended me with more devoted and touching care. She became a mother. Although a mother, she ever accompanied her husband, to whom she was passionately devoted, whenever called to war. By force of reflection I succeeded at last in overcoming, if not my love, at least its violent manifestations, the pain it gave me, the senselessness of the passion. But there remained in me a sense of boundless devotion towards my foster-sister. She asked me to remain near her and her husband as a horseman in the body of cavalrymen that ordinarily act as escorts to the Gallic chiefs, and either take down in writing or convey their military orders. My foster-sister was barely eighteen years of age when, in a severe battle with the Franks, she lost on the same day both her father and her husband. A widow with her son, for whom she foresaw a glorious future, bravely verified by himself since then, Victoria never left the camp. The soldiers, accustomed ever to see her in their midst, with her child in her arms, and walking between her father and her husband, knew that more than once her profoundly wise advice prevailed in the councils of the chiefs as the advice of our mothers of old often prevailed in the councils of our forefathers. They came to look as a good omen upon the presence of this young woman, who was trained in the mysterious science of the druids. At the death of her father and husband they begged her not to leave the army, declaring to her with naïve affection that thenceforth her son Victorin should be "Son of the Camps" and she the "Mother of the Camps." Touched by so much affection, Victoria remained with the troops, preserving her influence over the chiefs, directing them in the government of Gaul, sedulous in imparting a manly education to her son, and living as modestly as the wife of an officer.

Shortly after her husband's death, my foster-sister told me that she would never marry again, it being her intention to consecrate her life entirely to Victorin. The last and insane hope that I nursed when I saw her a widow and free again, was dashed. With time I recovered my senses. I suppressed my ill-starred love and gave no thought but to the service of Victoria and her son. A simple horseman in the army, I served my foster-sister as her secretary. Often she confided important state secrets to me. At times she even charged me with confidential embassies to the military chiefs of Gaul.

I taught Victorin to ride, to handle the lance and the sword. Soon I came to love him as an own son. A kinder and more generous disposition than that of the lad could not be imagined. Thus he grew up among the soldiers, who became attached to him by a thousand bonds of habit and of affection. At the age of fourteen he made his first campaign against the franks, who were fast becoming as

dangerous enemies to us as the Romans once were. I accompanied him. Like a true Gallic woman his mother remained on horseback and surrounded by the officers, on a hill from which the battle field could be seen on which her son was engaged. He comported himself bravely and was wounded. Being thus from early youth habituated to the life of war, the youth developed great military talents. Intrepid as the bravest of the soldiers, skilful and cautious as a veteran captain, generous to the full extent that his purse allowed it, of a joyful disposition, open and kind to all, he gained ever more the attachment of the army that soon divided with him its adoration for his mother.

The day finally arrived when Gaul, already almost independent, demanded to share with Rome the government of our country. The power was then divided between a Gallic and a Roman chief. Rome appointed Posthumus, and our troops unanimously acclaimed Victorin as the Gallic chief and general of the army. Shortly after, he married a young girl by whom he was dearly loved. Unfortunately she died within the year, leaving him a son. Victoria, now a grandmother, devoted herself to her son's child as she had done before to himself, and surrounded the babe with all the cares that the tenderest solicitude could inspire.

My early resolve was never to marry. I was nevertheless gradually attracted by the modest graces and the virtue of the daughter of one of the centurions of our army. She was your mother, Ellen, whom I married five years ago.

Such has been my life until this day, when I start the narrative that is to follow. Certain remarks of Victoria decided me to write it both for your benefit and the benefit of our descendants. If the expectations of my foster-sister, concerning several incidents in this narrative, are eventually realized, those of our relatives who in the centuries to come may happen to read this story will discover that Victoria, the Mother of the Camps, was gifted, like Hena, the Virgin of the Isle of Sen, and Velleda, the female druid and companion of Civilis, with the holy gift of prevision.

What I am here about to narrate happened a week ago. In order to fix the date with greater accuracy I certify that it is written in the city of Mayence, defended by our fortified camp on the borders of the Rhine, on the fifth day of the month of June, as the Romans reckon, of the seventh year of the joint principality of Posthumus and Victorin in Gaul, two hundred and sixty-four years after the death of Jesus of Nazareth, the friend of the poor, who was crucified in Jerusalem under the eyes of our ancestress Genevieve.

The Gallic camp, composed of tents and light but solid barracks, is massed around Mayence, which dominates it. Victoria lodges in the city; I occupy a little house not far from the one that she inhabits.

PART I FOREIGN FOES

CHAPTER I SCHANVOCH AND SAMPSO

The morning of the day that I am telling of, I quitted my bed with the dawn, leaving my beloved wife Ellen soundly asleep. I contemplated her for an instant. Her long loose hair partly covered her bosom; her sweet and beautiful head rested upon one of her folded arms, while the other reclined on your cradle, my son, as if to protect you even during her sleep. I lightly kissed both your foreheads, fearing to awake you. It required an effort on my part to refrain from tenderly embracing you both again and again. I was bound upon a venturesome expedition; perchance, the kiss that I hardly dared to give you was the last you were ever to receive from me. I left the room where you slept and repaired to the contiguous one to arm myself, to don my cuirass over my blouse, and take my casque and sword. I then left the house. At our threshold I met Sampso, my wife's sister, as gentle and beautiful as herself. She held her apron filled with flowers of different colors; they were still wet with the dew. She had just gathered them in our little garden. Seeing me, she smiled and blushed surprised.

"Up so early, Sampso?" I said to her. "I thought I was the first one stirring. But what is the purpose of these flowers?"

"Is it not to-day a year ago that I came to live with my sister Ellen and you – you forgetful Schanvoch?" she answered with an affectionate smile. "I wish to celebrate the day in our old Gallic fashion. I went out for the flowers in order to garland the house-door, the cradle of your little Alguen, and his mother's head. But you, where are you bound to this morning in full armor?"

At the thought that this holiday might turn into a day of mourning for my family I suppressed a sigh, and answered my wife's sister with a smile that was intended to allay suspicion.

"Victoria and her son charged me yesterday with some military orders for the chief of a detachment that lies encamped some two leagues from here. It is the military custom to be armed when one has such orders in charge."

"Do you know, Schanvoch, that you must arouse jealousy in many a breast?"

"Because my foster-sister employs my soldier's sword during war and my pen during truces?"

"You forget to say that that foster-sister is Victoria the Great, and that Victorin, her son, entertains for you the respect that he would have for his mother's brother. Hardly a day goes by without Victoria's calling upon you. These are favors that many should envy."

"Have I ever sought to profit by these favors, Sampso? Have I not remained a simple horseman, ever declining to be an officer, and requesting the only favor of fighting at Victorin's side?"

"Whose life you have already twice saved when he was at the point of perishing under the blows of those barbarous Franks!"

"I did but my duty as a soldier and a Gaul. Should I not sacrifice my life to that of a man who is so necessary to our country?"

"Schanvoch, we must not quarrel; you know how much I admire Victoria; but –"

"But I know your uncharitableness towards her son," I put in with a smile, "you austere and severe Sampso!"

"Is it any fault of mine if disorderly conduct finds no favor in my eyes – if I even consider it disgraceful?"

"Certes, you are right. Nevertheless I can not avoid being somewhat indulgent towards the foibles of Victorin. A widower at twenty, should he not be excused for yielding at times to the impulses

of his age? Dear but implacable Sampso, I let you read the narrative of my ancestress Genevieve. You are gentle and good as Jesus of Nazareth, why do you not imitate his charity towards sinners? He forgave Magdalen because she had loved much. In the name of the same sentiment pardon Victorin!"

"There is nothing more worthy of forgiveness than love, when it is sincere. But debauchery has nothing in common with love. Schanvoch, it is as if you were to say to me that my sister and I could be compared with those Bohemian girls who recently arrived in Mayence."

"In point of looks they might be compared with you or Ellen, seeing that they are said to be ravishingly beautiful. But the comparison ends there, Sampso. I trust but little the virtue of those strollers, however charming, however brilliantly arrayed they may be, who travel from town to town singing and dancing for public amusement – even if they indulge not in worse practices."

"And for all that, I make no doubt that, when you least expect it, you will see Victorin the general of the army, one of the two Chiefs of Gaul, accompany on horseback the chariot in which these Bohemian girls promenade every evening along the borders of the Rhine. And if I should feel indignant at the sight of the son of Victoria serving as escort to such creatures, you would surely say to me: 'Forgive the sinner, just as Jesus forgave Magdalen the sinner.' Go to, Schanvoch, the man who can delight in unworthy amours is capable of –"

But Sampso suddenly broke off.

"Finish your sentence," I said to her, "express yourself in full, I pray you."

"No," she answered after reflecting a moment; "the time has not yet come for that. I would not like to risk a hasty word."

"See here," I said to her, "I am sure that what you have in mind is one of those ridiculous stories about Victorin that for some time have been floating about in the army, without its being possible to trace the slanders to their source. Can you, Sampso, you, with all your good sense and good heart, make yourself the echo of such gossip, such unworthy calumnies?"

"Adieu, Schanvoch; I told you I was not going to quarrel with you, dear brother, on the subject of the hero whom you defend against all comers."

"What would you have me do? It is my foible. I love his mother as an own sister. I love her son as if he were my own. Are you not as guilty as myself, Sampso? Is not my little Alguen, your sister's son, as dear to you as if he were your own child? Take my word for it, when Alguen will be twenty and you hear him accused of some youthful indiscretion, you will, I feel quite sure, defend him with even more warmth than I defend Victorin. But we need not wait so long, have you not begun your role of pleader for him, already? When the rascal is guilty of some misconduct, is it not his aunt Sampso whom he fetches to intercede in his behalf? He knows how you love him!"

"Is not my sister's son mine?"

"Is that the reason you do not wish to marry?"

"Surely, brother," she answered with a blush and a slight embarrassment. After a moment's silence she resumed:

"I hope you will be back home at noon to complete our little feast?"

"The moment my mission is fulfilled I shall return. Adieu, Sampso!"

"Adieu, Schanvoch!"

And leaving his wife's sister engaged in her work of garlanding the house-door, Schanvoch walked rapidly away, revolving in his mind the topic of the conversation that Sampso had just broached.

CHAPTER II ON THE RHINE

I had often asked myself why Sampso, who was a year older than Ellen, and as beautiful and virtuous as my wife, had until then rejected several offers of marriage. At times I suspected that she entertained some secret love, other times I surmised she might belong to one of the Christian societies that began to spread over Gaul and in which the women took the vow of virginity, as did several of our female druids. I also pondered the reason for Sampso's reticence when I asked her to be more explicit concerning Victorin. Soon, however, I dropped all these subjects and turned my mind upon the expedition that I had in charge.

I wended my way towards the advance posts of the camp and addressed myself to an officer under whose eyes I placed a scroll with a few lines written by Victorin. The officer immediately put four picked soldiers at my disposal. They were chosen from among a number whose special department was to manoeuvre the craft of the military flotilla that was used in ascending or descending the Rhine in order, whenever occasion required, to defend the fortified camp. Upon my recommendation the four soldiers left their arms behind. I alone was armed. As we passed a clump of oak trees I cut down a few branches to be placed at the prow of the bark that was to transport us. We soon arrived at the river bank, where we found several boats that were reserved for the service of the army, tied to their stakes. While two of the soldiers fastened on the prow of the boat the oak branches that I had furnished them with, the other two examined the oars with expert eyes in order to assure themselves that they were in fit condition for use. I took the rudder, and we left the shore.

The four soldiers rowed in silence for a while. Presently the oldest of them, a veteran with a grey moustache and white hair, said to me:

"There is nothing like a Gallic song to make time pass quickly and the oars strike in rhythm. I should say that some old national refrain, sung in chorus, renders the sculls lighter and the water more easy to cleave through. Are we allowed to sing, friend Schanvoch?"

"You seem to know me, comrade?"

"Who in the army does not know the foster-brother of the Mother of the Camps?"

"Being a simple horseman I thought my name was more obscure than it seems to be."

"You have remained a simple horseman despite our Victoria's friendship for you. That is why, Schanvoch, everybody knows and esteems you."

"You certainly make me feel happy by saying so. What is your name?"

"Douarne." "

"You must be a Breton!"

"From the neighborhood of Vannes."

"My family also comes from that neighborhood."

"I thought as much, your name being a Breton name. Well, friend Schanvoch, may we sing a song? Our officer gave us orders to obey you as we would himself. I know not whither you are taking us, but a song is heard far away, especially when it is struck up in chorus by vigorous and broad-chested lads. Perhaps we must not draw attention upon our bark?"

"Just now you may sing – later not – we shall have to advance without making any noise."

"Well, boys, what shall we sing?" said the veteran without either himself or his companions intermitting the regular strokes of their oars, and only slightly turning his head towards them, seeing that, seated as he was on the first bench, he sat opposite to me. "Come, make your choice!"

"The song of the mariners, will that suit you?" answered one of the soldiers.

"That is rather long," replied Douarne.

"The song of the Chief of the Hundred Valleys?"

"That is very beautiful," again replied Douarneke, "but it is a song of slaves who await their deliverance; by the bones of our fathers, we are now free in old Gaul!"

"Friend Douarneke," said I, "it was to the refrain of that slaves' song – 'Flow, flow, thou blood of the captive! Drop, drop, thou dew of gore!' that our fathers, arms in hand, reconquered the freedom that we enjoy to-day."

"That is true, Schanvoch, but that song is very long, and you warned us that we were soon to become silent as fishes."

"Douarneke," one of the soldiers spoke up, "sing to us the song of Hena the Virgin of the Isle of Sen. It always brings tears to my eyes. She is my favorite saint, the beautiful and sweet Hena, who lived centuries and centuries ago."

"Yes, yes," said the other soldiers, "sing the song of Hena, Douarneke! That song predicts the victory of Gaul – and Gaul is to-day triumphant!"

Hearing these words I was greatly moved, I felt happy and, I confess it, proud at seeing that the name of Hena, dead more than three hundred years, had remained in Gaul as popular as it was at the time of Sylvest.

"Very well, the song of Hena it shall be!" replied the veteran. "I also love the sweet and saintly girl, who offered her blood to Hesus for the deliverance of Gaul. And you, Schanvoch, do you know the song?"

"Yes – quite well – I have heard it sung – "

"You will know it enough to repeat the refrain with us."

Saying this Douarneke struck up the song in a full and sonorous voice that reached far over the waters of the Rhine:

"She was young, she was fair,
And holy was she.
To Hesus her blood gave
That Gaul might be free.
Hena her name!
Hena, the Maid of the Island of Sen!

" – Blessed be the gods, my sweet daughter, —
Said her father Joel,
The brenn of the tribe of Karnak.
– Blessed be the gods, my sweet daughter,
Since you are at home this night
To celebrate the day of your birth! —

" – Blessed be the gods, my sweet girl, —
Said Margarid, her mother.
– Blessed be your coming!
But why is your face so sad? —

" – My face is sad, my good mother;
My face is sad, my good father,
Because Hena your daughter
Comes to bid you Adieu,
Till we meet again. —

" – And where are you going, my sweet daughter?"

Will your journey, then, be long?
Whither thus are you going? —

" — I go to those worlds
So mysterious, above,
That no one yet knows,
But that all will yet know.
Where living ne'er traveled,
Where all will yet travel,
To live there again
With those we have loved. — "

And myself and the three other oarsmen replied in chorus:

"She was young, she was fair,
And holy was she.
To Hesus her blood gave,
That Gaul might be free.
Hena her name!
Hena, the Maid of the Island of Sen!"

Douarneq then proceeded with the song:

"Hearing Hena speak these words,
Sadly gazed upon her her father
And her mother, aye, all the family,
Even the little children,
For Hena loved them very dearly.

" — But why, dear daughter,
Why now quit this world,
And travel away beyond
Without the Angel of Death having called you? —

" — Good father, good mother,
Hesus is angry.
The stranger now threatens our Gaul so beloved.
The innocent blood of a virgin
Offered by her to the gods
May their anger well soften.
Adieu, then, till we meet again,
Good father, good mother,
Adieu till we meet again,
All, my dear ones and friends.
These collars preserve, and these rings
As mementoes of me.
Let me kiss for the last time your blonde heads,
Dear little ones. Good bye till we meet.
Remember your Hena, she waits for you yonder,

In the worlds yet unknown. – "

And the other oarsmen and I replied in chorus to the rythmical sound of the oars:

"She was young, she was fair,
And holy was she.
To Hesus her blood gave
That Gaul might be free.
Hena her name.
Hena, the Maid of the Island of Sen!"

Douarneк proceeded:

"Bright is the moon, high is the pyre
Which rises near the sacred stones of Karnak;
Vast is the gathering of the tribes
Which presses 'round the funeral pile.

"Behold her, it is she, it is Hena!
She mounts the pyre, her golden harp in hand,
And singeth thus:

" – Take my blood, O Hesus,
And deliver my land from the stranger.
Take my blood, O Hesus,
Pity for Gaul! Victory to our arms! —
And it flowed, the blood of Hena.

"O, holy Virgin, in vain 'twill not have been,
The shedding of your innocent and generous blood.
Bowed beneath the yoke, Gaul will some day rise erect,
Free and proud, and crying, like thee,
– Victory and Freedom!"

And Douarneк, along with the three other soldiers, repeated in a low voice, vibrating with pious admiration, this last refrain:

"So it was that she offered her blood to Hesus,
To Hesus for the deliverance of Gaul!
She was young, she was fair,
And holy was she,
Hena her name!
Hena, the Maid of the Island of Sen!"

I alone did not join in the last refrain of the song. I was too deeply moved!

Noticing my emotion and my silence, Douarneк said to me surprised:

"What, Schanvoch, have you lost your voice? You remain silent at the close of so glorious a song?"

"Your speech is sooth, Douarne; it is just because that song is particularly glorious to me – that you see me so deeply moved."

"That song is particularly glorious to you? I do not understand you."

"Hena was the daughter of one of my ancestors."

"What say you!"

"Hena was the daughter of Joel, the brenn of the tribe of Karnak, who died, together with his wife and almost all his family, at the great battle of Vannes – a battle that was fought on land and water nearly three centuries ago. From father to son, I descend from Joel."

"Do you know, Schanvoch," replied Douarne, "that even kings would be proud of such an ancestry?"

"The blood shed for our country and for liberty by all of us Gauls is our national patent of nobility," I said to him. "It is for that reason that our old songs are so popular among us."

"When one considers," put in one of the younger soldiers, "that it is now more than three hundred years since Hena, the saintly maid, surrendered her own life for the deliverance of the country, and that her name still reaches us!"

"Although it took the young virgin's voice more than two centuries to rise to the ears of Hesus," replied Douarne, "her voice did finally reach him, seeing that to-day we can say – Victory to our arms! Victory and freedom!"

We had now arrived at about the middle of the river, where the stream is very rapid.

Raising his oar, Douarne asked me:

"Shall we enter the strong current? That would be a waste of strength, unless we are either to ascend or descend the river a distance equal to that that now separates us from the shore."

"We are to cross the Rhine in its full breadth, friend Douarne."

"Cross it!" cried the veteran with amazement. "Cross the Rhine! And what for?"

"To land on the opposite shore."

"Do you know what that means, Schanvoch? Is not the army of those Frankish bandits, if one can honor those savage hordes with the name of army, encamped on the opposite shore?"

"It is to those very barbarians that I am bound."

For a few moments all the four oars rested motionless in their oarlocks. The soldiers looked at one another speechless, as if they could not believe what they heard me say.

Douarne was the first to break the silence. With a soldier's unconcern he said to me:

"Is it, then, a sacrifice that we are to offer to Hesus by delivering our hides to those hide-tanners? If such be the orders, forward! Bend to your oars, my lads!"

"Have you forgotten, Douarne, that we have a truce of eight days with the Franks?"

"There is no such thing as a truce to those brigands."

"As you will notice, I have made the signal of peace by ornamenting the prow of our bark with green boughs. I shall proceed alone into the enemy's camp, with an oak branch in my hand."

"And they will slay you despite all your oak branches, as they have slain other envoys during previous truces."

"That may happen, Douarne; but when the chief commands, the soldier obeys. Victoria and her son have ordered me to proceed to the Frankish camp. So thither I go!"

"It surely was not out of fear that I spoke, Schanvoch, when I said that those savages would not leave our heads on our shoulders, nor our skins on our bodies. I only spoke from the old habit of sincerity. Well, then, my lads, fall to with a will! Bend to your oars! We have the order from our mother – the Mother of the Camps – and we obey. Forward! even if we are to be flayed alive by the barbarians, a cruel sport that they often indulge in at the expense of their prisoners."

"And it is also said," put in the young soldier with a less unperturbed voice than Douarne's, "it is also said that the priestesses of the nether world who follow the Frankish hordes drop their prisoners into large brass caldrons, and boil them alive with certain magic herbs."

"Ha! Ha!" replied Douarneke merrily, "the one of us who may be boiled in that way will at least enjoy the advantage of being the first to taste his own soup – that's some consolation. Forward! Ply your oars! We are obeying orders from the Mother of the Camps."

"Oh! We would row straight into an abyss, if Victoria so ordered!"

"She has been well named, the Mother of the Camps and of the soldiers. It is a treat to see her visiting the wounded after each battle."

"And addressing them with her kind words, that almost make the whole ones regret that they have not been wounded, too."

"And then she is so beautiful. Oh, so beautiful!"

"Oh! When she rides through the camp, mounted on her white steed, clad in her long black robe, her bold face looking out from under her casque, and yet her eyes shining with so much mildness, and her smile so motherly! It is like a vision!"

"It is said for certain that our Victoria knows the future as well as she knows the present."

"She must have some charm about her. Who would believe, seeing her, that she is the mother of a son of twenty-two?"

"Oh! If the son had only fulfilled the promise that his younger years gave!"

"Victorin will always be loved as he has been."

"Yes, but it is a great pity!" remarked Douarneke shaking his head sadly, after the other soldiers had thus given vent to their thoughts and feelings. "Yes, it is a great pity! Oh! Victorin is no longer the child of the camps that we, old soldiers with grey moustaches, knew as a baby, rode on our knees, and, down to only recently, looked upon with pride and friendship!"

The words of these soldiers struck me with deeper apprehension than Sampso's words did a few hours before. Not only did I often have to defend Victorin with the severe Sampso, but I had latterly noticed in the army a silent feeling of resentment towards my foster-sister's son, who until then, was the idol of the soldiers.

"What have you to reproach Victorin with?" I asked Douarneke and his companions. "Is he not brave among the bravest? Have you not watched his conduct in war?"

"Oh! If a battle is on, he fights bravely, as bravely as yourself, Schanvoch, when you are at his side, on your large bay horse, and more intent upon defending the son of your foster-sister than upon defending yourself. '*Your scars would declare it, if they could speak through the mouths of your wounds,*' as our old proverb says!"

"I fight as a soldier; Victorin fights as a captain. And has not that young captain of only twenty-two years already won five great battles against the Germans and the Franks?"

"His mother, well named Victoria, must have contributed with her counsel towards his victories. He confers with her upon his plans of campaign. But, anyhow, it is true, Victorin is a brave soldier and good captain."

"And is not his purse open to all, so long as there is anything in it? Do you know of any invalid who ever vainly applied to him?"

"Victorin is generous – that also is true."

"Is he not the friend and comrade of the soldiers? Is he ever haughty?"

"No, he is a good comrade, and always cheerful. Besides, what should he be proud about? Are not his father, his glorious mother and himself from the Gallic plebs, like the rest of us?"

"Do you not know, Douarneke, that often it happens that the proudest people are the very ones who have risen from the lowest ranks?"

"Victorin is not proud!"

"Does he not, during war, sleep unsheltered with his head upon the saddle of his horse, like the rest of us horsemen?"

"Brought up by so virile a mother as his, he was bound to grow up a rough soldier, as he is."

"Are you not aware that in council he displays a maturity of judgment that many men of our age do not possess? In short, is it not his bravery, his kindness, his good judgment, his rare military qualities as a soldier and captain that caused him to be acclaimed general by the army, and one of the two Chiefs of Gaul?"

"Yes, but in electing him, all of us knew that his mother Victoria would always be near him, guiding him, instructing him, schooling him in the art of governing men, without neglecting, worthy matron that she is, to sew her linen near the cradle of her grandson, as is her thrifty habit."

"No one knows better than I how precious the advices of Victoria to her son are to our country. But what is it, then, that has changed? Is she not always there, watching over Victorin and Gaul that she loves with equal and paternal devotion? Come, now, Douarnek, answer me with a soldier's frankness. Whence comes the hostility that, I fear, is ever spreading and deepening against Victorin, our young and brave general?"

"Listen, Schanvoch. I am, like yourself, a seasoned soldier. Your moustache, although younger than mine, begins to show grey streaks. Do you want to know the truth? Here it is: We are all aware that the life of the camp does not make people chaste and reserved like young girls who are brought up by our venerated female druids. We also know, because we have emptied many a cup, that our Gallic wines throw us into a merry and riotous humor. We know, furthermore, that when he is in a garrison, the young soldier who proudly carries a cockade on his casque and caresses his brown or blonde moustache, does not long preserve the friendship of fathers who have handsome daughters, or of husbands who have handsome wives. But, for all that, you will have to admit, Schanvoch, that a soldier who is habitually intoxicated like a brute, and takes cowardly advantage of women, would deserve to be treated to a hundred or more stripes laid on well upon his back, and to be ignominiously driven from camp. Is not that so?"

"That is all very true, but what connection has it with Victorin?"

"Listen, friend Schanvoch, and then answer me. If an obscure soldier deserves such treatment for his shameful conduct, what should be done to an army chief who disgraces himself in such fashion?"

"Do you venture to say that Victorin has offered violence to women and that he is daily drunk?" I cried indignantly. "I say that you lie, or those who carried such tales to you lied. So, these are the unworthy rumors that circulate in the camp against Victorin! And can you be credulous enough to attach faith to them?"

"Soldiers are not quite so credulous, friend Schanvoch, but they are aware of the old Gallic proverb – 'The lost sheep are charged to the shepherd.' Now, for instance, you know Captain Marion, the old blacksmith?"

"Yes, I know the brave fellow to be one of the best officers in the army."

"The famous Captain Marion, who can carry an ox on his shoulders," put in one of the soldiers, "and who can knock down the same ox with a blow of his fist – his arm is as heavy as the iron mace of a butcher."

"And Captain Marion," added another oarsman, "is a good comrade, for all that, despite his strength and military renown. He took a simple soldier, a former fellow blacksmith, for his 'friend in war,' or, as they used to say in olden times, took the 'pledge of brotherhood' with him."

"I am aware of the bravery, modesty, good judgment and austerity of Captain Marion," I answered him, "but why do you now bring in his name?"

"Have a little patience, friend Schanvoch, I shall satisfy you in a minute. Did you see the two Bohemian girls enter Mayence a few days ago in a wagon drawn by mules covered with tinkling bells and led by a Negro lad?"

"I did not see the women, but have heard them mentioned. But I must insist upon it, what has all this got to do with Victorin?"

"I have reminded you of the proverb – 'The lost sheep are charged to the shepherd.' It would be idle to attribute habits of drunkenness and incontinence to Captain Marion, would it not? Despite all his simpleness, the soldier would not believe a word of such slanders; not so? While, on the other hand, the soldier would be ready to believe any story of debauchery about the said Bohemian strollers, and he would trust the narrator of the tale, do you understand?"

"I understand you, Douarnek, and I shall be frank in turn. Yes, Victorin loves wine and indulges in it with some of his companions in arms. Yes, having been left a widower at the age of twenty, only a few months after his marriage, Victorin has occasionally yielded to the headlong impulses of youth. Often did his mother, as well as myself, regret that he was not endowed with greater austerity in morals, a virtue, however, that is extremely rare at his age. But, by the anger of the gods! I, who have never been from Victorin's side since his earliest childhood, deny that drunkenness is habitual with him; above all I deny that he ever was base enough to do violence to a woman!"

"Schanvoch, you defend the son of your foster-sister out of the goodness of your heart, although you know him to be guilty – unless you really are ignorant of what you deny – "

"What am I ignorant of?"

"An adventure that has raised a great scandal, and that everybody in camp knows."

"What adventure?"

"A short time ago Victorin and several officers of the army went to a tavern on one of the isles near the border of the Rhine to drink and make merry. In the evening, being by that time drunk as usual, Victorin violated the tavern-keeper's wife, who, in her despair, threw herself into the river and was drowned."

"The soldier who misdemeaned himself in that manner," remarked one of the oarsmen, "would speedily have his head cut off by a strict chief."

"And he would have deserved the punishment," added another oarsman. "As much as the next man, I would find pleasure in bantering with the tavern-keeper's wife. But to offer her violence, that is an act of savagery worthy only of those Frankish butchers, whose priestesses, veritable devil's cooks, boil their prisoners alive in their caldrons."

I was so stupefied by the accusation made against Victorin that I remained silent for a moment. But my voice soon came to me and I cried:

"Calumny! A calumny as infamous as the act would have been. Who is it dares accuse Victoria's son of such a crime?"

"A well informed man," Douarnek answered me.

"His name! Give me the liar's name!"

"His name is Morix. He was the secretary of one of Victoria's relatives. He came to the camp about a month ago to confer upon grave matters."

"The relative is Tetric, the Governor of Gascony," I said with increased stupefaction. "The man is the incarnation of kindness and loyalty; he is one of Victoria's oldest and most faithful friends."

"All of which renders the man's testimony all the more reliable."

"What! He, Tetric! Did Tetric confirm what you have just said?"

"He communicated it to his secretary, and confirmed the occurrence, while deploring the shocking excesses of Victorin's dissoluteness."

"Calumny! Tetric has only words of kindness and esteem for Victoria's son."

"Schanvoch, I have served in the army for the last twenty-five years. Ask my officers whether Douarnek is a liar."

"I believe you to be sincere; only you have been shamefully imposed upon."

"Morix, the secretary of Tetric, narrated the occurrence not to me only but to other soldiers in the camp for whose wine he was paying. We all placed confidence in his words, because more than once did I myself and several others of my companions see Victorin and his friends heated with wine and indulging in crazy feats of arms."

"Does not the ardor of courage heat up young heads as much as wine?"

"Listen, Schanvoch, I have seen – with my own eyes – Victorin drive his steed into the Rhine saying that he would cross the river on horseback; and he would certainly have been drowned had not another soldier and I rushed into a boat and fished him half drunk out of the water, while the current carried his horse away. And do you know what Victorin then said to us? 'You should have let me drink; the white wine of Bezier runs in this stream.' What I am telling you now is no calumny, Schanvoch, I saw it with my own eyes, heard it with my own ears."

Despite my attachment to Victorin I could not but reply to the soldier's testimony, saying: "I knew him to be incapable of an act of cowardice and infamy; but I also knew him to be capable of certain acts of extravagance and hotheadedness."

"As to myself," replied another soldier, "more than once, as I mounted guard near Victorin's house which is separated from Victoria's by a little plot of flowers, have I seen veiled women leave his place at early dawn. They were of all colors and sizes, blondes and brunettes, tall and short, some robust and stout, others slender and thin. At least, that was the impression that the women left upon me, unless the gloaming deceived my sight, and it was always the same woman."

"I notice that you are too sincere to make any answer to that, friend Schanvoch," Douarnek said to me; indeed, I could raise no objection against the latter accusation. "You must, therefore, not feel surprised at our trust in the words of Tetric's secretary. You must admit that the man who in a drunken fit takes the Rhine for a stream of Bezier's wine, and from whose house a procession of women is seen to issue in the morning, is quite capable, in a fit of inebriety, of doing violence to a tavern-keeper's wife."

"No!" I cried. "A man may be afflicted with the faults of his years in an aggravated degree, without therefore being an infamous fellow, a criminal!"

"See here, Schanvoch, you are the personal friend of our mother Victoria. You love Victorin as if he were your own son. Say to him – 'The soldiers, even the grossest and most dissolute among them, do not like to see their own vices reproduced in the chief whom they have chosen. By your conduct, the army's affection is daily withdrawn more and more from you and is centering wholly upon Victoria.'"

"Yes," I answered thoughtfully, "and the process started since Tetric, the Governor of Gascony, the relative and friend of Victoria, made his last visit to our camp. Until then our young chief was generally beloved, despite his little foibles."

"That is true. He is so good, so brave, so kind to all! He sat his horse so well! He had so bold a military bearing! We loved the young captain as an own child! We knew him as a babe, and rode him on our knees when still a little fellow, during the watches in the camp! Later we shut our eyes to his foibles, because parents are ever indulgent! But there can be no room for indulgence towards baseness!"

"And of this baseness," I replied, now more and more forcibly struck by the circumstance, which, recalling certain incidents to my mind, awakened a vague suspicion in me, "and of these acts of baseness there is no evidence other than the word of Tetric's secretary?"

"The secretary repeated to us his own master's words."

During this conversation, to which I lent increasing attention, our bark, ever moving forward under the vigorous strokes of the four oarsmen, had traversed the Rhine and reached the opposite shore. The soldier's backs were turned to the bank on which we were about to land. I was so wholly absorbed in what I had just learned regarding the army's increasing disaffection towards Victorin, that I never once thought of casting my eyes upon the shore to which we were drawing near. Suddenly a sharp whizz struck our ears. I cried out: "Throw yourselves down flat upon your benches!"

It was too late. A volley of long arrows flew over our boat. One of the oarsmen was instantly killed, while Douarnek, whose back was still turned to the shore received one of the arrows in the back.

"This is the way the Franks receive parliamentarians during a truce," remarked the veteran without dropping his oar, and even without turning around. "This is the first time I have been hit in the back. An arrow in the back does not become a soldier. Pull it out quick, comrade," he added, addressing the oarsman who sat behind him.

But despite his intrepidity, Douarnek managed his oar with less vigor. Although the wound that he received was not serious, his face betrayed the pain that he felt; the blood flowed copiously.

"I told you so, Schanvoch," he proceeded to say. "I told you that your foliage of peace would prove a poor rampart against the treachery of the Frankish barbarians. Fall to, my lads! We must now row all the harder, seeing we are only three left. Our comrade yonder, who is bumping his nose against his bench, with his limbs stiffened, can no longer count as an oarsman!"

Douarnek had not finished his sentence before I dashed forward to the prow of the bark, and passing over the corpse of the soldier who lay dead across his bench seized one of the oak branches and waved it over my head as a signal of peace.

A second volley of arrows, that came flying from behind an embankment of the river, was the only answer to my appeal. One of the missiles grazed my arm, another broke off its point against my iron casque; but none of the soldiers was hit. We were then only a short distance from the shore. I threw myself into the water, swam a little distance, and as soon as my feet struck ground called out to Douarnek:

"Pull the bark safely beyond the reach of the arrows and drop anchor, then wait for me. If I am not back after sunset, return to camp and inform Victoria that I have either been made prisoner or killed by the Franks. She will take my wife Ellen and my son Alguen under her protection."

"I do not at all like the idea of leaving you alone in the hands of those barbarians, friend Schanvoch," answered Douarnek; "but to stay where we can be killed would be to deprive you of all possible means of return to our camp, should you be lucky enough to escape with your life. Courage, Schanvoch! We shall await the evening!"

And the bark pulled away, while I clambered up the embankment.

CHAPTER III

THE HORDES OF THE FRANKS

I had hardly reached the shore, always holding the green oak branch aloft, when I saw a large number of Franks, belonging to the hordes of their army, rush forward from behind the rocks where they had lain in ambush. They carried black bucklers and wore casques made of black calves' skin. Their arms, legs and faces were dyed black in order to escape detection when they march in the shadow of the forests or contemplate an attack in the night. Their appearance was rendered all the more hideous and strange, seeing that their chiefs were tattooed with a bright red on their foreheads, their cheeks and around their eyes. My long sojourn along the Rhine enabled me to speak the Frankish tongue with sufficient fluency.

The black warriors emitted savage yells, surrounded me from all sides and threatened me with their long knives, the blades of which also were blackened in the fire.

"A truce has been concluded, several days ago," I cried out to them; "I have come in the name of the chief of the Gallic army with a message to the chiefs of your hordes. Lead me to them. You surely will not kill an unarmed man?"

Saying this I drew my sword and threw it away. The barbarians immediately precipitated themselves upon me, redoubling their cries for my blood. Some of them unwound the cords of their bows, and, despite all my remonstrances, threw me to the ground and bound me fast.

"Let us flay him," said one. "We shall carry his skin to the chief Neroweg, the Terrible Eagle. It will serve him as a bandage to wrap his legs in."

I was well aware that the Franks often skinned their enemies alive with great dexterity, and that the chiefs of their hordes decked themselves triumphantly with such human spoils. The proposition that I be skinned alive was received with shouts of approval; those who held me down began to cast about for a convenient place to perform the operation; others started to sharpen their knives upon the pebbles.

At this juncture, the warrior in command of the band approached me. The man was horrible to behold. A bright red tattoo encircled his eyes and streaked his cheeks. The marks looked like bleeding wounds, standing off strongly against his blackened face. His hair, raised after the Frankish style over his forehead and tied in a knot on top of his head, fell back like the plume of a helmet over his shoulders, and was of a coppery yellow, due to the lime-water that those barbarians used in order to impart a warm bright color to their hair and beard.¹ Around his neck and his wrists he wore a necklace and bracelets of rough wrought tin. His raiment consisted of a casque of black calfskin; strips of black calfskin fastened with criss-cross bandelets, covered his thighs and lower extremities. A sword and a long knife hung from his belt. After fixedly looking at me for a moment, he raised his hand and letting it down on my shoulder said:

"I shall take and keep this Gaul for Elwig. He is my prisoner."

Muffled growls from several of the other black warriors greeted these words of their chief, who, raising his voice, proceeded to say:

"I, Riowag, will take this Gaul to the priestess Elwig. Elwig needs a prisoner for her auguries."

The chief's decision was acquiesced in by the majority of the black warriors; the growls ceased; and a mob of voices repeated in chorus:

"Yes, yes; the Gaul must be kept for Elwig!"

"He must be taken to Elwig!"

"It is many days since she consulted our tutelary deities!"

¹ The Frankish chiefs, at the time of the conquest, daubed their hair with tallow mixed with crushed limestone, to make their hair a glaring reddish-yellow. Such was the beauty of the period.

"And we," cried one of the black warriors who had bound me, "we object to having the prisoner delivered to Elwig. We want to flay him and present his skin in token of homage to the chief Neroweg, the Terrible Eagle; he will reward us with some present."

There is small choice between being skinned alive and being boiled in a brass caldron. I did not feel called upon to manifest my preferences, and took no part whatever in the debate. Already those who wished to flay me cast savage glances at those who insisted that I be boiled, and carried their hands to their knives, when one of the black warriors proposed a compromise to the chief:

"Riowag, do you want to deliver the Gaul to the priestess Elwig?"

"Yes," answered the chief; "yes, I want to, and it shall be done as I order!"

"And the rest of you," proceeded the conciliatory black warrior, "you wish to offer the Gaul's skin to the chief Neroweg?"

"That is what we propose to do!"

"Very well, you can be accommodated, both."

A profound silence fell all around at these conciliatory words. The black warrior proceeded:

"First, flay him alive, you will then have his skin; after that Elwig will boil his body in her caldron."

The compromise seemed at first to satisfy both parties, but Riowag, the captain of the band, objected:

"Do you not know that Elwig needs a living prisoner to render her auguries certain? You would be giving her only a corpse if you first flay the Gaul."

And he added in a terrific voice:

"Would you expose yourselves to the anger of the gods of the nether world by depriving them of a victim?"

At this threat a shudder ran through the surrounding black warriors, and the party that demanded my skin seemed about to yield to a superstitious terror.

The peacemaker, the warrior who had proposed that I be first flayed and then boiled, now spoke again:

"Some of you wish to present the Gaul as an offering to the great Neroweg, others of you wish to present him to the priestess Elwig. Now do you not see that to give to the one is to give to the other also? Is not Elwig Neroweg's sister?"

"And he would be the first to surrender the Gaul to the gods of the nether world, in order to render them propitious to our arms!" put in Riowag.

The captain of the black warriors pointed thereupon at me, and added imperiously:

"Take the Gaul on your shoulders and follow me!"

"We want to have his spoils," said one of the black warriors who were the first to seize me. "We want his casque, his cuirass, his blouse, his belt, his shirt. We want everything, down to his shoes!"

"The booty belongs to you," answered Riowag. "You will have it so soon as Elwig will have stripped the Gaul preparatorily to throwing him into her caldron."

"We shall go with you, Riowag," replied the black warriors who made the arrest, "otherwise others than ourselves will take possession of the plunder from the Gaul."

My perplexity was now at an end. I knew my fate. I was to be boiled alive. I would have gladly looked a useful or brave death in the face; but the death that awaited me seemed so barren and absurd, that I decided to make one more effort to save my life. Addressing the captain of the black warriors, I said:

"Your conduct is unjust. Frankish warriors have often come to the Gallic camp to solicit an exchange of prisoners. Those Franks have always been respected. A truce is now in force between us, during a truce only spies who furtively enter the camp are put to death. I have come in open daylight, with a green bough in my hand, and in the name of Victorin, the son of Victoria. I am the carrier of a message from them for the chiefs of the Frankish army. Take care! If you act without

orders from them, they will be sorry for not having heard me, and they may make you pay dearly for your treachery towards a soldier, who comes unarmed, during a truce, and in broad daylight, with the bough of peace in his hand."

Riowag's answer to my words was a sign to his band. I was immediately raised up by four black warriors who placed me on their shoulders and carried me off in the tracks of their captain, who marched with a solemn air in the direction of the Frankish camp.

At the moment when the barbarians raised me on their shoulders, I overheard one of those who wished to flay me alive say to one of his companions in a mocking tone:

"Riowag is Elwig's lover; he wishes to make a present of the prisoner to his mistress."

These words enabled me to realize that Riowag, the captain of the band of black warriors, being the lover of the priestess Elwig, gallantly made her a present of my person, just as in our country bridegrooms offer a dove or a sheep to the young girl whom they love.

You will be astonished, my child, to find in this narrative that I have used words that sound almost droll in describing events that were so threatening to my life. Do not imagine that this is due to the circumstance that at the hour when I write these lines, I had escaped all danger. No. Even when the danger was most imminent – a danger from which I was almost miraculously delivered – I had full control of my spirit, and the old Gallic sense of humor, a thing so natural to our race, however long it lay torpid under the weight of the shame and the trials of slavery, revived in me as it did with so many others when we once more tasted the boon of freedom. The observations that you will encounter, and which I have reproduced as they occurred to me at times when death seemed inevitable, were sincere, they proceeded from my faith in that belief of our fathers that man never dies, that when he leaves this world he enters others in which he proceeds to live.

Carried upon the shoulders of the four black warriors, I traversed a section of the Frankish camp. The vast bivouac which was arranged without order, consisted of huts for the chiefs and tents for the soldiers. It was a sort of gigantic village of savages. Here and there lay their innumerable war chariots sheltered under rude sheds made of the trunks of trees. Their indefatigable small, lean, rough-coated and shaggy-maned horses, that they managed with a halter of cord for only bridle, were, as is the custom with these barbarians, tied to the wheels of the chariots or to the trunks of trees, the bark of which they gnawed at. The Franks themselves, barely clad in skins of animals, their hair and beard greasy with suet, presented an aspect that was repulsive, stupid and ferocious. Some of them were stretched out at full length in the warm rays of that sun that they started in search of from the depths of their dark northern forests. Others found amusement in the hunt for vermin over their hairy bodies; these barbarians lived in such filth that, although they were in the open air, their encampment exhaled a fetid odor.

At the sight of these undisciplined hordes, ill armed but innumerable, and whose forces were incessantly recruited by fresh migrations that poured down in mass from the glacial regions of the north to swoop upon the fertile and laughing fields of our Gaul as upon a prey, certain words of sinister omen that escaped the lips of Victoria came to my mind. Nevertheless supreme contempt speedily filled me for those barbarians, who, three or four times superior to our own armies in point of numbers, never had been able, despite many a bloody battle delivered for a number of years, to invade our soil, but found themselves every time driven back to the other side of the Rhine, our natural frontier.

While crossing a section of the encampment on the shoulders of the four black warriors who carried me, I was pursued by insults, threats and cries for my blood from the Franks who saw me pass. Several times was the escort that accompanied me obliged, upon orders from Riowag, to use their arms in order to prevent my being slain on the spot.

Thus we arrived at last near a thick wood. I observed in passing a large and more carefully constructed hut than the others, before which a yellow and red banner was planted. A large number of horsemen clad in bearskins, some in the saddle, others on foot near their mounts and leaning on

their long lances, were posted around the habitation, thereby indicating clearly enough that it was occupied by one of the leading chiefs of their hordes. Again I sought to persuade Riowag, who now marched beside me, but still grave, silent and solemn, to conduct me first to that one of the chiefs whose banner I saw, after which, I said to him, they might kill me if they so pleased. My requests were vain. We entered the thick wood, and arrived at a large clearing, to the center of which I was taken. At a little distance I noticed a natural grotto, formed of large blocks of grey rock, from between which saplings and stately chestnut trees shot upwards. A stream of living water that trickled over the ledges of rock fell into a sort of natural basin. Not far from the cavern stood a brass pan, rather narrow and of about the length of a man. The opening or mouth of the infernal caldron was furnished with a net of iron chains. The latter was undoubtedly meant to keep the victim, who was thrown in to be boiled alive, from jumping out. Four large boulders supported the pan, under which a bundle of large logs of kindling wood lay ready. Human bones, bleached and strewn hither and thither over the ground, imparted to the spot the appearance of a charnel house. Finally, in the center of the clearing, rose a colossal statue; it was surmounted with three heads rudely carved with axes and adjusted to the enormous tree-trunk that, though shapeless, was intended to represent a gigantic body. The aspect of the statue was grotesque and repulsive.

Riowag made a sign to the four black warriors who carried me to stop and deposit me at the foot of the statue. He thereupon entered the grotto alone while the warriors of the escort called out aloud:

"Elwig! Elwig!"

"Elwig! Priestess of the underground gods!"

"Rejoice, Elwig, we bring you a prisoner for your caldron!"

"You will now be able to prophesy to us!"

CHAPTER IV

THE PRIESTESS ELWIG

I expected to see some hideous old hag; I was mistaken. Elwig was young, tall and endowed with savage beauty. Her grey eyes, shielded under a pair of naturally reddish eyebrows of the same color as her hair, glistened like the steel of the long knife that she was armed with. Her eagle-beaked nose and high forehead imparted to her an aspect at once savage and imposing. She was clad in a long tunic of a somber hue. Her bare neck and arms were heavily laden with copper necklaces and bracelets, that clinked upon one another as she walked, and upon which she cast coquettish glances as she approached me. On her thick reddish hair, that fell upon and parted on both sides of her shoulders, she wore a scarlet coif that was a ridiculous imitation of the charming headgear used by the women of Gaul. In short, I thought I noticed in the strange creature the evidence of that mixture of puerile pride and vanity so peculiar to barbarous peoples.

Standing a few paces from her, Riowag seemed to contemplate the priestess with profound admiration. Despite his black dye and the red tattoo under which his face disappeared, his features seemed to me to betoken a violent love, and his eyes sparkled with joy when, twice in succession, pointing at me, Elwig turned her face to her lover with a smile upon her lips, in token, no doubt, of thankfulness for the offering that he brought her. I also noticed on the bare arms of the infernal priestess two tattoo marks that brought back to my mind some reminiscences of the war we had been waging with the Franks.

One of the two marks represented two talons of a bird of prey; the other, a red serpent.

With her knife in her hand, Elwig again turned towards me and fastened her large grey eyes upon me with ferocious satisfaction, while the black warriors contemplated her with looks of fear and superstition.

"Woman," I said to the priestess, "I came here unarmed, an oak branch in my hand, and bearing a message of peace to the grand chiefs of your hordes. – I was fallen upon and bound fast. – I am in your power – you can kill me – if such be your pleasure – but before you do, have me presented to one of your chiefs. – The interview that I request is of as much importance to the Franks as to the Gauls. It is Victorin himself and his mother Victoria the Great who have sent me hither."

"You are sent by Victoria?" cried the priestess with a singular air. "Victoria, who is said to be so very beautiful?"

"Yes, I am sent by her who is called the Mother of the Camps."

Elwig reflected, and after a long silence she raised her hands over her head, brandished her knife, and pronounced some mysterious words in a voice that sounded at once threatening and inspired. Thereupon she motioned to the black warriors to retire.

They all obeyed, walking slowly back towards the thicket that surrounded the clearing.

Only Riowag remained a few steps from the priestess. Turning towards him she pointed with an imperious gesture towards the wood in which the other black warriors had disappeared. Seeing that the captain did not obey her summons, she raised her voice, and again pointed to the wood.

Riowag then obeyed and left in turn.

I remained alone with the priestess. I was left bound, lying at the foot of the statue of the under gods. Elwig squatted down upon her haunches near me and asked:

"You were sent by Victoria to speak with the Frankish chiefs?"

"I said so before."

"You are one of Victoria's officers?"

"I am one of her soldiers."

"Does she cherish you?"

"She is my foster-sister, I am as a brother to her."

These words seemed to cause Elwig to reflect anew. She remained silent for a while, and then resumed:

"Would Victoria weep over your death?"

"As one would weep over the death of a faithful servant."

"She surely would give much to save your life?"

"Is it ransom you want?"

Elwig again relapsed into silence, and resumed with a mixture of embarrassment and cunning that struck me forcibly:

"Let Victoria come and ask my brother for your life. He will grant it to her. – But listen, Victoria has a great reputation for beauty; handsome women love to deck themselves with the Gallic jewelry that is so celebrated. – Victoria must have superb ornaments, seeing she is the mother of the chief of your country. – Tell her to cover herself with her richest jewelry; it will please my brother's eyes. – He will be all the more gracious, and will grant your life to her."

I immediately surmised the snare that the priestess of hell was laying for me with the clumsy cunning natural to barbarians. Wishing to make certain, I observed without referring to her last words:

"It seems that your brother is a powerful chief."

"He is more than a chief," Elwig answered proudly; "he is a king."

"We also, in the days of our barbarism, had kings. What is your brother's name?"

"Neroweg, surnamed the Terrible Eagle."

"You carry on your arms two figures, one representing a red serpent, the other the talons of a bird of prey. What do those emblems mean?"

"The fathers of our fathers in our royal family have always worn these signs of valor and subtlety. The eagle's talons denote valor; the serpent subtlety. But let us drop my brother," added Elwig with somber impatience. My digression seemed to displease her. "Will you induce Victoria to come here?"

"One word more on your royal brother. – Does he not carry on his forehead the identical symbols that you carry on your arms?"

"Yes," she replied with increasing impatience. "Yes, my brother carries an eagle's talon over each eye-brow, and the red serpent on a head-band over his forehead. Kings wear a head-band. But we have spoken enough of Neroweg – quite enough –"

I thought I noticed on Elwig's features an ill dissembled sentiment of hatred when she pronounced his name. She proceeded:

"If you do not wish to die, write to Victoria to come to our camp ornamented with her most precious jewels. She shall repair alone to a place that I shall designate to you – a secluded spot that I know – I shall come for her and shall lead her to my brother to solicit your life from him –"

"Victoria to come alone to this camp? – I have come hither, relying upon the sacredness of the truce; – I carried the bough of peace in my hand, and yet one of my companions was killed, another was wounded, and to cap the climax of treachery, I am delivered to you bound hand and foot to be put to death –"

"Victoria may bring a small escort with her."

"Which would be unquestionably massacred by your men! – The scheme is too transparent!"

"You, then, wish to die!" cried the priestess gnashing her teeth in actual or simulated rage, and threatening me with her knife. "The fire will be shortly kindled under the caldron. – I shall have you plunged alive into the magic water, and you shall boil in it until you are dead. – Once more, and for the last time, make your choice. – Either you shall die in tortures, or you will write to Victoria to repair to our camp decked in her richest ornaments! – Choose!" she added with redoubled fury and again threatening me with her knife. "Choose – or you die!"

I knew there was no more thievish, covetous or vainglorious race than this breed of Franks. I noticed that Elwig's large grey eyes glistened with cupidity every time she mentioned the magnificent ornaments, that, as she imagined, the Mother of the Camps surely possessed. The ridiculous

accoutrement of the priestess; the profusion of valueless gewgaws that she wore with a savage woman's coquetry, in order, no doubt, to appear pleasing to the eye of Riowag, the captain of the black warriors; above all, her persistence in demanding of me that Victoria come to the Frankish camp covered with rich jewels; – everything justified the conclusion that Elwig aimed at drawing my foster-sister into an ambush in order to slay her and rob her of her jewels. The clumsy scheme did not do credit to the ingenuity of the priestess of the nether regions. Nevertheless, her cupidity might be turned to my service. I answered her in a tone of indifference:

"Woman, you mean to kill me if I do not induce Victoria to come here? You are free to kill me – boil my flesh and bones – you will thereby lose more than you think for, seeing that you are the sister of Neroweg, the Terrible Eagle, one of the greatest kings of all your hordes!"

"What would I lose? – "

"Magnificent Gallic ornaments!"

"Ornaments! – What ornaments?" cried Elwig doubtfully, although her eyes snapped with greed.

"Do you imagine that, in sending her foster-brother to convey a message to the kings of the Franks, Victoria the Great did not prepare, as a pledge of truce, rich presents for the wives and sisters who accompany them, and for those whom they left behind in Germany?"

Elwig leaped to her feet with one bound, hurled her knife away, clapped her hands, and emitted loud peals of laughter that sounded like a crazy woman's transports. Thereupon she crouched down again beside me, and said in a voice broken with childish breathlessness:

"Presents? You bring presents with you? – Where are they?"

"Yes, I bring with me presents fit to dazzle an empress – gold necklaces studded with carbuncles, ear pendants of pearls and rubies, gold bracelets, belts and crowns that are so loaded with precious stones that they glitter in all the colors of the rainbow. – All these masterpieces of our most skilled Gallic goldsmiths I have brought with me for presents. – And seeing that your brother Neroweg, the Terrible Eagle, is the most powerful king of all your hordes, the bulk of all those riches – those bracelets, those necklaces and other jewels – would have fallen to you."

Elwig listened to me open-mouthed, her hands clasped together, without endeavoring to hide either the admiration or unbridled greed that the enumeration of such treasures kindled in her breast. Suddenly, however, her features assumed an expression of mingled doubt and anger. She rose, ran to her knife, and returning with it in her hands, raised it over me crying:

"You either lie, or you are mocking me! – Where are those treasures?"

"In a safe place. – I foresaw that I might be killed and plundered before I was able to fulfil the orders of Victoria and her son."

"Where did you put that treasure in safety?"

"It remained in the bark that brought me to this side of the river. – My companions rowed back from the shore and cast anchor beyond the reach of the arrows of your hordes."

"We also have barks moored at the other end of the camp. I shall order your companions to be pursued – I shall have the treasures!"

"You deceive yourself! – As soon as my companions see the enemy's barks approach from a distance, they will suspect foul play. Seeing that they have a long lead, they will be able to regain the opposite shore of the Rhine without any danger whatever. – Such will be the only fruit of the treachery practiced by your people upon me. – Come, woman! Have me boiled for your infernal auguries! Perhaps my bones, bleached in your caldron, may be transformed into magnificent ornaments!"

"I want the treasures!" replied Elwig struggling against her lingering suspicions. "Since you did not carry the jewels about you, when would you have given them to the kings of our hordes?"

"When I left the jewels in the bark I expected I would be received as an envoy of peace, and that as such I would be escorted back to the river bank. My companions would then have returned

to the shore to receive me, and I would have taken the presents out of the bark and distributed them among the kings in the name of Victoria and her son."

The priestess looked upon me for a while with darkling eyes. She seemed to yield alternately to mistrust and to the promptings of cupidity. Finally, however, the latter sentiment evidently prevailed. She took a few steps away, and with a strong voice pronounced the bizarre name of a person who was not until then upon the scene.

Almost instantly a hideous old hag with grey hair and clad in a blood-bespattered robe issued from the cavern. She was, no doubt, the active priestess at the inhuman sacrifices. She exchanged a few words in a low voice with Elwig and forthwith vanished in the surrounding wood, in the direction that the black warriors had followed.

Again dropping on her haunches beside me, the priestess said in a low and muffled voice:

"Since you wish to speak with my brother, King Neroweg, I have sent for him. – He will soon be here – but you shall not mention a word to him concerning the jewels."

"Why keep him in the dark concerning them?"

"Because he would keep them to himself."

"What! – He! – Your own brother! – Would he not share the jewels with you, his sister?"

A bitter smile contracted Elwig's lips. She resumed:

"My brother came near cutting off my arm with a blow of his axe a few weeks ago, simply because I merely wished to touch part of his booty."

"Is that the way brothers and sisters behave towards one another among the Franks?"

"Among the Franks," Elwig answered with a face of deepening rancor, "the mother, sister and wives of a warrior are his first slaves."

"His wives! – Has he, then, several?"

"As many as he can capture and feed – the same as he has as many horses as he can buy."

"What! Does not a sacred and eternal union join the husband to the mother of his children, as with us Gauls? – What! Sisters, wives and mothers – all are slaves? Blessed of the gods is Gaul, my own country, where our mothers and wives, venerated by all, proudly take their seat in the nation's councils and where their advice, often wiser than that of their husbands and sons, not infrequently prevails."

Palpitating with cupidity, Elwig made no answer to me, and resumed the thread of her dominant thoughts.

"You will, accordingly, not mention the jewels to Neroweg. He would keep them all for himself. You will wait until it is dark to leave the camp. I shall accompany you. You will give me the jewels, all the presents – to me alone!"

And again bursting into almost insane peals of laughter, she added:

"Gold bracelets! Necklaces of pearls! Ear pendants studded with rubies! Diadems full of precious stones! I shall look grand as an empress! Oh, how beautiful I shall be in the eye of Riowag!"

Elwig thereupon cast disdainful glances at the copper bracelets that she rattled as she shook her arms, and repeated:

"I shall look very beautiful to Riowag!"

"Woman," I said to her, "your advice is prudent. We shall have to wait until it is night for us to leave the camp together and regain the river bank."

And, to the end of still further enlisting Elwig's confidence in me by seeming to take an interest in her vainglorious greed, I added:

"But if your brother sees you decked with such magnificent ornaments, will he not take them away from you?"

"No," she promptly answered with a strange and sinister look. "No, he will not take them!"

"If Neroweg the Terrible Eagle is of as violent a temperament as you claim, if he came near cutting off your arm for having wished merely to touch part of his booty," I suggested, surprised at her answer, and anxious to fathom her thoughts, "what will prevent your brother from seizing the jewels?"

Elwig held up to me her large knife with an expression of calm ferocity that made me shiver, as she answered:

"When I shall have the treasure – to-night, I shall enter my brother's hut – I shall share his bed, as usual – and when he is asleep I shall kill him – "

"Your own brother!" I cried with a shudder and hardly believing what I heard, although the insight that the priestess gave into the shocking immorality prevalent among the Franks was nothing new to me. "How! You share your own brother's bed?"

The priestess seemed no wise disconcerted by my question, and answered with a somber mien:

"I have shared my brother's bed since the day that he violated me. It is the fate of almost all the sisters of the Frankish kings who follow them in war. Did I not tell you that their wives, their sisters and their mothers are the first slaves of the warriors? What female slave is there who, willingly or unwillingly, does not share her master's bed?"

"Hold your tongue, woman!" I cried interrupting her. "Hold your tongue! Your monstrous words might draw a thunderbolt upon our heads!"

And without being able to add another word I contemplated the creature with horror. Such a mixture of debauchery, greed, barbarism and, withal, stupid frankness, seeing that Elwig unbosomed herself to me, a man whom she then saw for the first time in her life, upon her fratricidal intentions – that fratricide, preceded by incest, which this priestess of a sanguinary cult was subjected to and who shared her brother's bed while she at the same time surrendered herself to another man – all that filled me with horror, notwithstanding I had often heard accounts of the abominable morals of the barbarians beyond the Rhine.

Elwig seemed not to concern herself about the cause of my silence nor of the evident disgust that she filled me with. She mumbled some unintelligible words, and counted the copper bracelets that her arms were loaded with. She presently said to me pensively:

"Do you think I shall have nine fine bracelets studded with precious stones to replace these? Could they all go into a little bag that I shall keep concealed under my robe when I return to the hut of the king, my brother? Why do you not answer my questions?"

The cold, I should almost say naïve, ferocity of the woman redoubled the disgust that the monster inspired in me. Again I remained silent, and she cried aloud:

"Why do you not answer me? You promised me the jewels!"

But seeming to be suddenly struck by a new thought she added with terror:

"I told him all! Suppose he tells it all again to Neroweg! My brother would kill us both, me and Riowag! The thought of the treasure bereft me of my senses!"

And again she started to call, turning her face towards the cavern.

A second old hag, no less hideous than the first, hobbled out holding in her hand the bone of an ox from which hung a partly boiled shred of meat at which she gnawed with her toothless gums.

"Come quick to me," the priestess said to her, "and leave your bone there."

The old hag obeyed unwillingly, grumbling like a dog whose meat is taken away from him. She laid the bone on one of the projecting rocks at the entrance of the grotto, and drew near, wiping her lips.

"Gather some dry, good branches and roots of trees and kindle a fire with them under the brass caldron," the priestess said to the old woman.

The latter returned into the cavern, and brought out all the things that she was ordered. Soon a bright fire burned under the caldron.

"Now," Elwig said to the old woman, pointing her finger at me as I lay stretched out upon the earth at the feet of the statue of the subterranean deity, with my hands pinioned behind my back and my feet bound fast, "kneel down upon him."

I could make not the slightest motion. The old hag planted herself on her knees upon my breast-plate, and said to the priestess:

"What must I do next?"

"Make him put out his tongue."

I then understood that, carried away at first by her savage greed into making dangerous confidences to me, Elwig now reproached herself for having heedlessly mentioned her amours and her fratricidal intentions, and could think of no better way to compel my silence on these subjects towards her brother than to cut off my tongue. The project was more easily conceived than it could be executed. I clenched my teeth with all my might.

"Tighten your fingers on his throat!" Elwig commanded the hag. "He will then open his mouth and stick his tongue out. I shall then cut it off."

With her knees firmly planted upon my cuirass, the hag leaned forward so close to me that her hideous face almost touched mine. I shut my eyes with disgust. Presently I felt the crooked yet nervous fingers of the priestess' assistant tighten at my throat. For a while I struggled against suffocation and did not unlock my teeth; but, as Elwig had foreseen, I soon felt almost smothered and unconsciously opened my mouth. Elwig immediately thrust in her fingers in order to seize my tongue. I bit her so savagely that she withdrew her hand screaming with pain. At that moment I saw the black warriors and Riowag reissue from the wood whither they had withdrawn at the priestess' orders. Riowag approached on a run, but he stopped undecided what to do at the sight of a troop of Franks who arrived from the opposite side and stepped into the clearing. One of these called out in a hoarse and imperious voice:

"Elwig! Elwig!"

"The king, my brother!" gasped the priestess, who was on her knees beside me.

It seemed to me that she looked for the knife that she had dropped during her struggle with me.

"Fear not! I shall be dumb. You shall have the treasure all for yourself," I whispered to Elwig, fearing lest, in her terror, the woman plunge the knife into my throat. I sought to secure her support at all hazard, and to contrive a means of escape by inciting her cupidity.

Whether Elwig trusted my word, or whether her brother's presence stayed her hand, she cast a significant glance at me, and remained on her knees at my side, with her head drooping upon her chest as if absorbed in revery. The old hag having risen to her feet, my breast-plate was relieved of her weight; I could again breathe freely; and I saw the Terrible Eagle standing before me, escorted by several other Frankish kings, as the chiefs of those marauding hordes styled themselves.

CHAPTER V

NEROWEG THE TERRIBLE EAGLE

The Frankish chief who stood before me was a man of colossal stature. Due to the use of lime-water, his beard as well as his greasy hair, that rose in a knot over his forehead, had turned coppery red. His hair, tied with a leather thong on the top of his head, fell behind his shoulders like the flowing crest of a casque. Above each of his bushy red eyebrows I saw an eagle's talon tattooed in blue, while another scarlet tattoo mark, representing the undulations of a serpent, spanned his forehead. His left cheek was also ornamented with a red and blue tattoo that consisted of transverse rays. On his right cheek, however, the savage ornament disappeared almost wholly in the cavity of a deep scar that began below the eye and was finally lost under his shaggy beard. Heavy and coarsely-wrought gold medals, that hung from and distended his ears, dropped upon his shoulders. A heavy silver chain, wound three times around his neck, reached down to his semi-bare breast. Above his cloth tunic he wore a jacket of some animal's hide. His hose, of the same quality and as soiled as his tunic, were fastened by a leather belt from which, on one side, hung a long sword, on the other an axe of sharp stone. Wide strips of tanned skin criss-crossed upward over his hose, from the ankle to the knees. He leaned upon a short pike that ended in a sharp point. The other kings who accompanied Neroweg were tattooed, clad and armed more or less after the same fashion. The features of all bore the stamp of savage gravity.

Elwig, who remained on her knees at my side, sought to conceal her face from Neroweg. He rudely touched his sister's shoulder with the point of his pike, and addressed her harshly:

"Why did you send for me before boiling the Gallic dog for your auguries? My flayers have promised me his skin."

"The hour is not favorable," answered the priestess abruptly with a mysterious air. "The hour of night – of dark night is preferable to sacrifice to the gods of the nether world. The Gaul, moreover, says, oh mighty king, that he has a message from Victoria and her son."

Neroweg drew nearer and looked at me. At first his mien was one of disdainful indifference; presently, however, as he examined me more attentively, his features assumed an expression of hatred and of triumphant rage; at last he cried as if he could not believe his own eyes:

"It is he! He is the horseman of the bay steed! It is himself!"

"Do you know him?" Elwig asked her brother. "Do you know this prisoner?"

"Off with you!" was Neroweg's brusque answer. "Get you gone!"

He then proceeded to contemplate me with renewed interest and repeated:

"Yes, it is he; the horseman of the bay steed!"

"Did you ever meet him in battle?" again asked Elwig. "Answer me. Do answer me!"

"Will you be gone!" repeated Neroweg now raising his pike over the head of the priestess. "I told you before, be gone!"

My eyes at that moment caught sight of the group of black warriors. I saw that their captain Riowag could hardly be restrained by his men from drawing his sword, and revenging the insult offered to Elwig by Neroweg.

But so far from obeying her brother, and no doubt fearing that in her absence I might reveal to the Terrible Eagle both her own fratricidal projects and the secret of Victoria's presents which she coveted, Elwig cried:

"No! No! I remain here! The prisoner belongs to me for my auguries. I shall not go away. I shall keep him – "

The only answer that Neroweg vouchsafed his sister were several blows with the handle of his pike, delivered over her back. He thereupon made a sign, and several of the warriors who accompanied

him violently drove the priestess, together with the haggish old assistant, back into the cavern at the mouth of which they posted themselves on guard, sword in hand.

The black warriors who surrounded Riowag were put to their mettle in order to prevent their captain from precipitating himself with drawn sword upon the Terrible Eagle. The latter, thinking only of me, failed to notice the fury of his rival, and addressed me in a voice trembling with rage, while he kicked me with his feet:

"Do you recognize me, dog?"

"I recognize you, rapacious wolf."

"This wound," resumed Neroweg carrying his finger to the deep scar that furrowed his cheek, "do you know who made this wound?"

"Yes, it is my handiwork. I fought you as a soldier."

"You lie! You fought me like a coward! You were two against one!"

"You were making a furious onset on the son of Victoria the Great. He was wounded – his hand could hardly hold his sword – I dashed to his help – and struck in Gallic fashion."

"You marked my face with your Gallic sword – dog!"

Saying this Neroweg struck me repeatedly with the handle of his pike, to the great amusement of the other kings.

I remembered my ancestor Guilhern, chained like a slave and supporting with dignity the cruel treatment of the Romans after the battle of Vannes. I emulated his example. I merely said to Neroweg:

"You are striking an unarmed soldier who is bound fast and who, relying upon the truce, came to you on an errand of peace – that is a coward's act. You would not dare to raise your stick at me if I stood on my feet and sword in hand."

The Frankish chief laughed, struck me again and said:

"He is a fool who, able to kill his enemy disarmed, does not exterminate him. I would like to kill you twice over. You are doubly my enemy. I hate you because you are a Gaul, I hate you because your race holds Gaul, the country of sunshine, of good wine and beautiful women; then also I hate you because you marked my face with a wound that is my eternal shame. I shall therefore make you suffer so much that your pain will be equal to two deaths, a thousand deaths, if I only could – you Gallic dog!"

"The Gallic dog is a noble animal for war and for the hunt," I replied to him; "the Frankish wolf, however, is an animal of rapine and carnage. But it will not be long before the brave Gallic dogs will have chased from their frontiers this pack of voracious wolves that have come prowling from the northern forests. Be careful! If you refuse to listen to the message that I have for you from Victoria and her valiant son – be careful! Our army is numerous. It will be a war to the death that will be waged between the Gallic dog and the Frankish wolf – a war of extermination – and the Frankish wolf will be devoured by the Gallic dog."

Grinding his teeth with rage, Neroweg seized the axe that hung from his belt, and raising it in both hands was about to let it come crashing down upon my head. I believed my last hour had come, but two of the other kings held the arm of Elwig's brother, into whose ears they whispered a few words that seemed to calm him. He held a short conference with his companions and returned to me:

"What is the message that you bring from Victoria for the Frankish kings?"

"The messenger of Victorin and Victoria can only speak on his feet, unfettered, his head high – not stretched down on the ground, and bound fast like the ox that expects the butcher's knife. Order my bonds to be removed, and I shall speak – if not, not. You have heard me, brute that you are!"

"Speak on the spot – unconditionally, you Gallic dog! – or tremble before my anger!"

"No; I shall not speak!"

"I shall know how to make you speak!"

"Try it! You will find me unshakeable!"

Neroweg ordered one of the other kings to fetch a firebrand from under the brass caldron. I was held down by the shoulders and feet, so as to prevent me from making the slightest motion, while the Terrible Eagle placed the firebrand upon my iron cuirass and heaped up others about it. The brasier that he thus built upon my body seemed to amuse him greatly. He laughed out aloud and said to me:

"You shall speak, or be broiled like a tortoise in its shell."

The iron of my cuirass soon began to heat under the coals which two of the Frankish kings kept alive by blowing upon them. I suffered greatly and cried:

"Oh! Neroweg! Neroweg! Cowardly assassin! I would gladly endure these tortures, if I only could see myself once more sword in hand before you, and put my mark upon your other cheek. Oh! You have said it – there is room only for hatred and death between our two races!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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