

Levett Yeats Sidney

The Chevalier d'Auriac



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S. Sidney Levett Yeats

The Chevalier d'Auriac

PREFACE

This story, like its predecessor, has been written in those rare moments of leisure that an Indian official can afford. Bits of time were snatched here and there, and much, perhaps too much, reliance has had to be placed on memory, for books there were few or none to refer to. Occasionally, too, inspiration was somewhat rudely interrupted. Notably in one instance, in the Traveller's Bungalow at Hassan Abdal (Moore's Lalla Rookh was buried hard by), when a bat, after making an ineffectual swoop at a cockroach, fell into the very hungry author's soup and put an end to dinner and to fancy. There is an anachronism in the tale, in which the writer finds he has sinned with M. C. de Remusat in "Le Saint-Barthélemy." The only excuse the writer has for not making the correction is that his object is simply to enable a reader to pass away a dull hour.

*Umballa Cantonments,
March 16, 1896.*

PRELUDE

I

In no secret shrine doth my Lady sleep,
But is ever before mine eyes;
By well or ill, by wrong or right —
By the burning sun, or the moon's pale light —
Where the tropics fire or the fulmar flies,
In rest or stormful fight.

II

Good hap with the strong fierce winds that blow;
Man holdeth the world in fee.
By the light of her face, by my Lady's grace,
Spread we our sails to the sea.
With God above and our hearts below,
Fight we the fight for weal or woe.

III

Good hap with the strong fierce winds that blow,
God rest their souls who die!
By my Lady's grace, by her pure, pale face
My pennon flies in its pride of place;
Where my pennon flies am I.

IV

Nor wind nor storm may turn me back,
For I see the beacon fire.
And time shall yield a hard fought field,
And, with God's help, an unstained shield
I win my heart's desire.

S. L. Y.
(Vanity Fair.)

CHAPTER I

THE JUSTICE OF M. DE RÔNE

'Mille diables!' Lost again! The devil runs in those dice!' and de Gomeron, with an impatient sweep of his hand, scattered the little spotted cubes on to the floor of the deserted and half-ruined hut, wherein we were beguiling the weariness of our picket duty before La Fère, with a shake of our elbows, and a few flagons of wine, captured from Monsieur the King of Navarre, as we, in our folly, called him still.

A few days before we had cut out a convoy which the Béarnais was sending into the beleaguered town. Some of the good things the convoy bore found their way to the outposts; and on the night I speak of we had made such play with our goblets that it was as if a swarm of bees buzzed in my head. As for de Gomeron, he was in no better case, and his sun-tanned face was burning a purple red with anger at his losses and the strength of the d'Arbois, both of which combined to give a more than usually sinister look to his grim and lowering features. In short, we were each of us in a condition ripe for any mischief: I hot with wine and the fire of five-and-twenty years, and de Gomeron sullenly drunk, a restrained fury smouldering in his eyes.

We had been playing by the light of a horn lantern, and as the flame of it flickered to and fro in the wind, which bustled

in unchecked through a wide gap in the wall of the hut, where the remains of a door clung to a bent and twisted hinge, the shadow of de Gomeron on the wall behind him moved its huge outlines uneasily, although the man himself sat silent and still, and there was no word spoken between us. Hideous and distorted, this phantom on the wall may have been the soul of de Gomeron, stolen out of the man's body and now hovering behind him, instinct with evil; and this conceit of mine began to appear a reality, when I turned my glance at the still figure of my companion, showing no sign of life, except in the sombre glitter of the eyes that gazed at me steadily.

I knew little of de Gomeron, except that he was of the Camargue, and had followed the fortunes of d'Aumale from Arques to Ivry, from Ivry to the Exile in the Low Countries, and that he held a commission from the duke as captain in his guards. He carried a 'de' before his name, but none of us could say where his lands lay, or of what family he came; and it was shrewdly suspected that he was one of those weeds tossed up by the storms of the times from the deep where they should have rotted for ever. There were many such as he, *canaille* who had risen from the ranks; but none who bore de Gomeron's reputation for intrepid courage and pitiless cruelty, and even the hardened veterans of Velasco spoke with lower tones when they told of his deeds at the sack of Dourlens and the pillage of Ham. Of our personal relations it is enough to say that we hated each other, and would have crossed swords ere now but for the iron discipline

maintained by de Rône – a discipline the bouquet of which I had already scented, having escaped by the skin of my teeth after my affair with de Gonnor, who trod on my toe at the General's levée, and was run through the ribs at sunrise the next morning, near the pollard elms, hard by the Red Mill on the left bank of the Serre.

Up to the time this occurred I had been attached to de Rône's staff, with ten or twelve other young gentlemen whose pedigrees were as long as their swords; but after the accident to de Gonnor – my foot slipped and I thrust a half inch too low – I was sent with the stormers to Laon, and then banished to the outposts, thinking myself lucky to escape with that.

At any rate, the outpost was under my command. Imagine, therefore, my disgust when I found that de Gomeron had been detached to examine into and report upon my charge. He did this moreover in so offensive a manner, hectoring here and hectoring there, that I could barely restrain myself from parading him on the stretch of turf behind the thorn hedge that fenced in the enclosure to the hovel. The very sight of that turf used to tempt me. It was so soft and springy, so level and true, with no cross shadows of tree trunks or mottled reflections of foliage to spoil a thrust in tierce.

Our feelings towards each other being as they were, it would seem odd that we should have dined and drunk together; but the situation was one of armed peace; and, besides, time had to be killed, as for the past week M. de Réthelois, formerly as lively as a cricket, had kept himself close as a nun of Port Royal behind

the walls of La Fère, and affairs were ineffably dull. I was certain, however, that we should soon break into open quarrel, and on this night, whether it was de Gomeron's manner of losing or whether it was the d'Arbois I cannot tell, but I felt a mad anger against the man as he sat staring at me, and it was all I could do to restrain myself from flinging the lees of the wine in my glass in his face and abiding the result. I held myself in with an effort, drumming with my fingers on the table the while, and at last he spoke in an abrupt and jarring voice:

'What says the score?'

I looked at the once blank card on which I had jotted down the points and passed it to him with the answer: 'One hundred and twenty livres of Paris, M. Gomeron.'

'*De Gomeron*, if you please, M. d'Auriac. Here is your money, see it is not *Tournois*,' and he slid a rouleau across the table towards me. I made no effort to take it; but, looking at the man with a sneer, gave answer: 'I was not aware that they used the *de* in the Camargue, monsieur.'

'Young fool!' I heard him mutter between his teeth, and then aloud, 'Your education needs extension, Chevalier.'

'There is space enough without.' I answered hotly, laying my hand on my sword, 'and no time like the present; the moon is at her full and stands perfectly.' We sprang to our feet at these words and stood facing each other. All thought of de Rhône had flown from my mind, my one desire was to be face to face with the man on that patch of turf. *Peste!* I had much to learn in those days!

We stood thus for a second, and then a short mirthless 'Ha! ha!' burst from de Gomeron, and he made a turn to the corner of the room where his rapier leaned against the wall. It was at the moment of this action that we heard the quick challenge of the sentry outside, the password as sharply answered, and the tramp of feet.

The same idea flashed through both our minds – it must be the General, and de Gomeron gave expression to the thought.

'*Corbleu!* de Rhône perhaps – the old bat on the wing. We must defer the lesson, Chevalier.'

I bowed and bit my lips in silence; there followed a shuffling of feet, and before a man could count two, Nicholas, the sergeant of our picket, with a file of men entered the hut, thrusting a couple of prisoners, a man and a woman, before them.

'Two birds from La Fère, my captain,' and Nicholas with a salute to de Gomeron pointed to his prize. 'We took them,' he ran on, 'at the ford near the Red Mill, and but for the moon they would have gone free; spies no doubt. The old one is M. le Mouchard, I swear. There is fox in every line of his face; and as for Madame there – so the old gentleman calls her – in time I warrant she will learn to love the camp of the Holy League,' and the sergeant pushed the lantern so that it shone full on the lady's face. A curious light came into de Gomeron's eyes as he looked at her, and she shrank back at the sergeant's words and action, whilst the old man strained at the cords that bound his wrists till the lines of the blue veins stood high out on his forehead. The

soldiers had shown Madame this kindness, that she was unbound; but her hood had fallen back, loosening in its fall a mass of chestnut hair, and from this framework her eyes glanced from one to another of us, half in fear and half in anger.

'Messieurs!' There was a tremble in the sweet voice, and there was light enough to see her colour come and go. 'Messieurs! That man,' she made a little gesture of infinite disdain towards Nicholas, 'is lying. We are no spies. It is true we are from La Fère, but all that we did was to try and escape thence – '

'To the camp of the Béarnais – eh, madame?' interrupted de Gomeron.

'To the camp of the King of France,' she flashed back at him, a red spot rising on each cheek. 'Messieurs!' she went on, 'you are gentlemen, are you not? You will let us go. Surely the Holy League wars not with women and old men?'

The mention of the League stirred her companion and he gave tongue:

'The Holy League!' he exclaimed with a savage scorn. 'Madame, though we stand delivered unto these sons of Belial, I must speak, for my heart is full. Yea! Shall my lips be sealed before the enemies of the Lord! The Holy League! Ha! ha! There is no Holy League. It died at Ivry. There did the Lord God break it clean, as of old. He shattered the Amorites of the mountains. Lo! Even now His own champion is at hand, and ere the morrow's sun sets he shall smite these men of sin hip and thigh, as when the Chosen slew His enemies in Gibeon.'

'*Corps du diable!* A rope for the old Huguenot!' exclaimed Nicholas.

'Thou swearest rightly, villain,' and the fanatic glared at the sergeant with fierce eyes. 'Swear ever so by thy master, for thou art in truth a limb of the body of Sin.'

'Thou shalt roast like a chestnut over a log fire for this,' roared Nicholas, shaking his halberd at his adversary. 'And thou in Hell,' was the undaunted reply; 'and the smell of thy burning will be as the scent of a savoury bakemeat to the Lord my God.'

So savagely prophetic was his tone; so fierce a glance did the bound Huguenot cast at Nicholas that it burnt to cinders any reply he might have had ready and reduced him to a speechless fury.

Madame shivered slightly; but meeting my eyes and the repressed laugh in them, a faint smile parted her lips. This was for an instant only, and her face was grave enough as she turned to her companion, speaking with a quiet dignity, 'There is a time for everything, *mon père* – at present your speech is a trifle out of place.'

The beetle brows of the Huguenot met together as he gave reply —

'There is no place which is out of place to testify – ' but here de Gomeron cut in with his quick stern voice, 'Be silent, sir! or else a gag will stop your tongue,' and then with a bow, 'Madame, it goes to my heart to detain you; but war is war, and we have no option. Will you not be seated? All that this poor hut affords is yours,' and he bent low again, perhaps to hide the expression

in his eyes.

She made no effort to take the chair he offered, but burst out passionately:

'Monsieur, I see you command here, and it is to you to whom I must appeal. Monsieur, I give you my word of honour we are no spies. The rules of war allow the ransom of prisoners, and anything you name will be paid. Monsieur, I pray you let us go.'

Whilst she spoke my glance rested on de Gomeron's face, and I saw that his eyes were drinking in her beauty greedily, and there was a look in them that recalled to my mind the stories of the sack of Ham.

As she finished her appeal Madame turned towards the captain with a gesture of entreaty; but in this movement she too saw that in his voice and manner which paled her cheek to marble, and she made a half-irresolute step towards her companion as if for protection. De Gomeron observed this, and laughed under his heavy black moustache, and I felt that the strong wine and his evil heart were moving him to an atrocious deed.

'*Vertu de Dieu!* Madame, but there are some things which have no price! And there is no ransom you could name which would tempt Adam de Gomeron to part with his prisoners – with *one* of them at any rate. You are no spy, I know: such eyes as yours were never made to count the strength of battalions. As for your friend there, we have means to make him tell us all about himself to-morrow; and you, *ma mignonne*, must not bruise your tender feet

by walking through the night to the camp of Monsieur – the King of France. In a day or so, perhaps,' he went on with a horrible smile, 'but not to-night. Come! and he stepped up to her. Come, taste the d'Arbois – it is from your friends – and learn to love the poor soldiers of the Holy League.'

Saying this he attempted to pass his arm round her waist, but slipping from his grasp, and her cheeks aflame, Madame struck him across the face with the back of her hand, such a stroke as the wing of an angry dove might give.

The rest was done in a flash, and de Gomeron reeled back with bleeding lips, staggered back to the very end of the room, where he would have fallen but for the support of the wall. It was in me to follow up my blow by passing my sword through the man, so mad was I in my fury; but luckily for him Nicholas hung on my arm and saved the villain's life. He righted himself at once, and passing his hand across his mouth, spoke to me quite coolly and collectedly, but with livid features.

'We finish this outside, sir; follow me,' and picking up his rapier, which lay on the table, where he had thrown it on the entrance of the prisoners, de Gomeron stepped out of the door. In the excitement of the moment the men poured after him, and I was the last to follow. It came to me like lightning that the prisoners were unguarded, and slipping my dagger from its sheath, I thrust its haft into Madame's hand, and I saw that she understood from the thanks in her eyes. As I went out I heard the voice of the Huguenot: 'They shall die as they have lived – by the

edge of the sword; and the Lord shall confound His enemies.'

It was but a stone-throw to the stretch of green, which extended as level as a tennis-court for a hundred paces or so, and then sloped gently downward towards the junction of the Serre and the Oise. Beyond rose the walls of La Fère, whose grey outlines, lit up here and there by the flare of a lamp or fire, were clearly visible in the bright moonlight. So clear was this light, that I could distinctly make out the blue flowers of the patch of borage, which lay between the hut and the thorn hedge, beyond which de Gomeron was awaiting me. When I came up I found him standing with his back to the moon. He had thrown off his doublet, and was in his shirt sleeves, which were rolled up to his elbows, and Nicholas and the men stood a little on one side, utterly forgetful of the prisoners, and eager as bloodhounds to witness the coming fight. It took but a half minute to make myself ready, and borrowing a poniard from Nicholas to help me to parry, for de Gomeron held one in his left hand, and I was determined to give him no further advantage – he already had the light – I took my position. Then there was an angry little clash and our blades met, looking for all the world like two thin streaks of fire in the moonlight. I began the attack at once in the lower lines, but soon found that my adversary was a master of his weapon, and his defence was complete. We were both sober enough now, besides being in deadly earnest, and de Gomeron began to change his tactics and attack in his turn. He was more than cunning of fence, thrusting high at my throat to get as much

of the reflection of the moon as possible on his blade, and so dazzle my eyes; but this was a game I had played before, and seeing this he disengaged, and making a beautiful feint, thrust low in tierce. The parry was just in time, but the point of his blade ripped me exactly over the heart, and dyed my shirt red with the blood of a flesh wound. The discipline of Nicholas and his men went to shreds at the sight of this, and there was a shout: '*Croix Dieu!* He is lost!'

But a man's knowledge is not to be counted by his years, and Maître Touchet had himself placed a foil in my hand ere I was seven. The hair that stood between me and death as de Gomeron's point touched me cooled me to ice, and knowing that in a long-continued contest youth must tell, I began to feign retreat, and give back slowly, meaning to wind my opponent, and work him round to get a little of the moon in his eyes. De Gomeron took the bait and pressed his attack, with the result that he shifted his position of vantage, and in a while began to breathe heavily. At this point a cloud obscured the moonlight, and my opponent, springing back, called out: 'Hold! hold till the cloud passes! We cannot see.'

'But I can, messieurs,' answered a deep voice to our right. 'What means this fool's work?' and a tall figure, the white line of a drawn sword shining in its hand, stepped between us, coming, as it were, from nowhere. The cloud passed, and the moon was again brilliant and clear. The light fell on the commanding form before us, showing the high aquiline features and grizzled hair of

de Rône himself. Nicholas and his men melted into thin air at the sight, and de Gomeron and I stood speechless. The wind caught the black plumes in the General's hat, waving them silently in the air, and brought to us the faint clink of a chain-bit – de Rône had evidently stolen upon us on foot, leaving his horse at a distance.

'So this is how my outposts are kept?' he said. 'M. de Gomeron, you are the senior officer here, and I await your explanation. *Mordieu!* It is something that I do this.'

'I command the guards of the Duc d'Aumale,' began de Gomeron sullenly, but de Rône interrupted him in the same deep measured voice.

'I know that. Your explanation, or,' and in fierce anger, 'by God! you will hang like a common thief by sunrise.'

'A gentleman must defend his honour. Orders or no orders. General, there are times when one must fight. There was a matter in connection with some prisoners, and I was struck by M. d'Auriac. I have nothing further to say.'

'Now, M. d'Auriac, what have you to say?'

'The prisoners will, perhaps, explain to your Excellency why I struck this man.'

'Take me to them.'

We gathered up our belongings, and, hastily dressing, led the way back to the hut. What de Gomeron's thoughts were I know not, but my own reflections were none of the most cheerful. We all knew de Rône, and knew that, his mind once made up, nothing could turn him. De Gomeron had some chance of escape, as of

a certainty I was the open aggressor; but for myself, I saw poor de Gonnor lying under the elm trees, taking his last look at the sunlight, and my heart became like lead. But we had no great time for thought, as a few steps brought us to the door of the hut, where Nicholas and his men stood at the salute with scared faces. Another step took us in, and de Rône, with a curling lip, cast a glance around the room, at the emptied wine flasks and the dice, which latter one of the men had doubtless picked up, and placed in a small heap beside the rouleau I had won. But chairs, table, wine flasks, and dice were all the room contained, and there was reason enough for the extra length of visage that master Nicholas and his knaves had pulled.

'I do not see the prisoners,' said de Rône quietly.

It was not likely, I thought to myself. They were gone – not a doubt of that. On the floor, near my feet, were some cut cords, and, lying on them, a knot of black and white ribbon, that had fallen there as if by chance. I had seen it last at the shoulder of Madame's dress, and something told me it was not there by accident. There was, at any rate, no hope for me from the prisoners, but a sudden impulse I could not understand, nor, indeed, did I try to, urged me to get the knot of ribbon, so, stooping low, I picked up the bow and the cut cords, and, with a careless movement, flung the latter on the table, saying quietly, 'They have escaped, your Excellency.'

'And with them your explanation, M. d'Auriac, eh? *Corbleu!* But the camp-marshal will have his hands full to-morrow;' and

Nicholas' halberd all but fell from his hands as the General's eye rested on him. I had nothing to say; and de Rône went on. 'M. de Gomeron, you have given me a reason for your conduct that will hold good this once. Further orders will reach you at daylight about your neglect of your prisoners. As for you,' and he turned on me with the sharp command, 'Follow me. You – knaves! fetch me my horse – he is tethered to the clump of elms to the right there.'

Two men vanished from the door to do his bidding, and I adjusted my attire as well as I might, taking the opportunity to secrete the knot of ribbon. In a minute or so we heard the sound of horses' hoofs, and as we went out, I saw there were two beasts at the door, and, from the whinny of welcome that came to me, that one was mine, and Nicholas was at his head.

As I sprang into the saddle the good fellow leaned forward and whispered, 'Make a dash for it. Chevalier, and change the flag.'

I shook my head and followed de Rône, who had already moved a few paces onwards. And yet, as I rode on, Nicholas' words came back to me with an insistent force. It was not possible for me to expect any other issue than the worst, after what had happened. My big Norman horse was fleet and strong; but a turn of my wrist, a touch of my spur, and we should be a hundred yards away before de Rône could realise what had happened; and then the road was clear to the banks of the Lelle, where the King was himself; yes, the King. He was that to me, in my heart, although loyalty to my family and its chiefs had made me throw

in my lot with the little band of exiles who remained true to the dead legend of the League, and preferred to eat the bread of Spain rather than accept the great Frenchman who had fought his way to his birthright. Even now, whispers were stirring the air that the end was coming; that the Archduke was sick of the war; that d'Aumale pined for his stately park of Anet; that Mayenne had practically submitted, and the Guisard was himself unsteady. If so, why should not I, Alban de Breuil, whose crow's nest of Auriac was half in ruins, and who reckoned an income of a bare two hundred pistoles, see the error of my ways as well? Behind me was safety. In front, between the nodding ears of my horse, there dangled a vision of a rope with a noose at the end of it; and I a noble!

It was now midnight, and we distinctly heard the bells of Ste. Geneviève ringing the Sexts. They came to me with a refrain of 'Turn and ride, Turn and ride.' *Mordieu!* but I was sorely tempted. 'Gallop!'

De Rône's sharp command broke the thread of my thoughts, and ended all chance of escape. We set spurs to our horses and splashed through the ford of the Oise, a half mile from the outpost. On the other bank a picket challenged, and, giving them the word, we rode in the direction of the even white line of the camp. A few strides more and we reined in at the door of the General's tent. The guard presented arms and I received a brief order to dismount and follow de Rône.

I entered the tent, and stood patiently whilst he walked

backwards and forwards for a little time. Suddenly he stopped and, facing me, said,

'Well, M. d'Auriac?'

'It could not be helped, your Excellency,' I stammered.

'You said that of de Gonnor, and promised it should never occur again –'

'But there were circumstances –'

'Pshaw!' he exclaimed, 'I guess them all – wine – dice – women. One of the prisoners was a woman. I saw you pick up that knot of ribbon. There is no excuse —*Croix Dieu!* None.'

'I had the honour to be the first man behind your Excellency at the storm of Laon,' I said, with a happy recollection.

'And saved my life, you were going to say,' he cut in. I bowed, and de Rône began again to pace up and down, tugging at his short pointed beard. I was determined to seize the three hairs occasion offered, and continued:

'And that was after M. de Gonnor's unfortunate accident.'

'Accident!' he laughed shortly. 'And that accident having been condoned, you want to set off saving my life against breaking the orders of the General?'

'It will not occur again.'

'*Croix Dieu!* I will take care of that. It will not occur again with you, M. d'Auriac. See here, I will pay my debt; but first ask if I have your parole not to attempt escape. If you do not give it – and he laid his hand on a call-bell, with an inquiring look towards me.

'I will not attempt escape.'

'Then you will not have to complain of the justice of de Rône. To-morrow some things will happen, and amongst them will be the lamented death of the Sieur d'Auriac. This much I will tell you. To-morrow the King and I meet once more – you must die on the field. Win or lose, if I catch you alive at the close of the day, I will hang you as high as Haman; and now go.'

CHAPTER II

M. DE RÔNE CANNOT READ A CYPHER

My first thought on leaving de Rône was to make my way direct to the quarters of the staff, where I felt sure of welcome and accommodation for the rest of the night. These lay a hundred toises or so from the General's pavilion, facing from me; but as I came near to them I saw a pennon of light streaming from the partly open door of the largest tent, and from within burst a chorus of voices singing an old *chanson* of Guienne.

Frère Jacques, dormez-vous?

Dormez-vous? Dormez-vous?

Sonnez les matines, sonnez les matines —

Bim! Baum! Baum!

Bim! Baum! Baum! The last line was repeated amidst peals of laughter, followed by the crashing of glass. It was enough for me. I was in no mood for any further folly, or any more d'Arbois, and resolved to make the best of it in the open, as at this hour it was worse than useless to attempt to find my lackey Jacques, whom I had left behind in the camp with my belongings when I went on to the outposts. This man, I may note, was a faithful servant

of our house, rough of manner, perhaps, but one who could be trusted to the end of his sword; and it was annoying to know that any search for him would be useless, as I had a message or so to send to Auriac, in the event of the worst happening. But resigning myself to what could not be helped I found a spot under some peach trees, which was convenient enough for my purpose. Tethering my horse to a stump, I removed the saddle, which I made shift to use as a cushion, and, leaning my back against it, was soon as comfortable as circumstances would permit. Enough had happened to drive from my head any of the fumes of the d'Arbois that may have been lurking there. In short, I was as sober as MM. of the High Court of Paris, and as wide awake as a cat on the look out for a mouse. Do what I could, sleep would not come, and I began, for want of a better thing, to reflect on my position. To act on Nicholas' advice and desert was out of the question; my private honour was not to be smirched, and the few hours I had yet to live were not to be spent in the breaking of my faith. A few hours to live! Involuntarily I stretched out my arm and drew it back, feeling the muscle rise at the movement. Good Lord! It was cruel! When one is five-and-twenty, and strong as a bull, it is hard to die. One death, that on the field, I could face with an equal mind; but if the chances of to-morrow were not kind, then there was the other matter, and the last of the d'Auriacs would swing like a *croquemort* from the branch of a tree. *Morbleu!* It was not to be borne, and I swore that my own hand should free my soul, rather than it should choke its way

out to eternity at the end of a greased rope. The slight flesh wound I had received from de Gomeron beginning to sting at this moment, I thrust my hand into my pocket, and pulling out my kerchief, placed it over the spot. With the kerchief I drew out the knot of ribbon, and the sight of this, as I picked it up and held it between my fingers, changed the current of my thoughts. Almost in spite of myself I began to think of Madame, as I called her, by the only name I knew. It was a strangely formal title for one so young! Who was she? Some great lady of the court, perhaps. The wife – the thought jarred on me, and I put it aside, and then grew cold all over at the recollection of the danger she had escaped. At any rate, it was my hand that had rescued her from her peril. If we met again, it must surely be as friends, and it was pleasant to dwell on that. As my mind ran on in this way, I noticed a pin attached to the dainty bow, and at first I had a mind to fasten the token to the side of my hat, saying half aloud to myself, '*Par Dieu!* But I will bear this favour to the King to-morrow,' and then I felt I had no right to wear the ribbon, and, changing my intention to do so, thrust it back with a half smile at my folly.

Gradually the moonlight faded into a shimmering mist, through which purple shadows came and went; gradually the mist grew darker and darker, and I fell asleep. My sleep could not have lasted much more than an hour; but so profound was it that ages seemed to have passed when I awoke with a start, and the consciousness of movement around me. The moon was on the wane; but I saw that the camp was astir, and that the men were

being mustered as silently as possible.

'So things are about to happen,' I said to myself, recalling de Rône's words, and hastily saddling my horse, sprang on his back, and moved towards the General's tent. All around me was the muffled tramp of feet, the jingle of chain-bits and steel scabbards, the plunging of impatient horses, and a subdued hum of voices, above which rose now and again a hoarse word of command, as regiment after regiment wheeled into position on the level stretch before us. Three long black lines were moving noiselessly and rapidly towards the Oise. I knew they were de Leyva's brigade of Spanish infantry, veterans of the war of Flanders. To my right the occasional flash of a lance-head through the thick haze that was coming up, but which the morning sun would dissipate, showed me where the cuirassiers of Aumale were, and I thought of de Gomeron with regret that I had not finished him before de Rône's inopportune arrival. I had to die, and it might have been some consolation, in such mood was I, to have sent Adam de Gomeron on the dark way before me.

When I reached the General's pavilion de Rône was just mounting his horse, a lackey standing near with a sputtering torch, and his staff in a little clump, a few yards away. I saluted, and he gave me a keen look, saying:

'So you have come, M. d'Auriac – take your place with the staff. I will give you your work later on – and remember.'

'I am not likely to forget, M. le Marquis,' and I moved off in the direction indicated.

'Is that you, d'Auriac?' 'Why have you left the outposts?' '*Sangdieu!* but why did you not come to us last night?' 'How is M. de Réthelois, and have you seen the abbess of Ste. Geneviève?'

These and suchlike greetings met me as I was recognised and welcomed by de Belin, the young Tavannes, de Cosse-Brissac, and others of my acquaintance. I replied as best I might, but there was no time for much talk, as the General was moving onwards at a rapid pace, and we were compelled to follow at once. I dropped a little to the rear, to husband the strength of my horse as far as possible, and was joined by another rider.

^Is that you, Belin?'

'*Ma foi!* Yes. It is the devil being hustled up so early in the morning – I am yet but half awake.'

'I was surprised to find you here. I thought you were with the Archduke and de Mayenne.'

'What! have you not heard?'

'What in the devil's name could I hear on those cursed outposts?'

'Then in your ear – the Rémois have gone from us, and de Mayenne and the Guisard have passed over to the King. My news is certain, and the Archduke has sent a cypher to de Rône bidding him retreat at once on Amiens.'

'But this does not look like a retreat.'

'No; de Rône has lost the key of the cypher.'

We both laughed, and Belin went on: 'It was droll. I saw him receive the message, which the old fox must have read at a glance.'

But he turned it this way and that, and looking at Egmont, said as calmly as possible, "Ride back to Amiens and fetch me the key. I have lost mine and cannot follow the cypher" – but hark!' and Belin interrupted himself, 'there is de Réthelois' good morning.'

Even as he spoke three bright flashes came from the citadel of La Fère, and the big guns from the bastion of Ste. Geneviève boomed sullenly into the morning. Then a long streak of fire ran across the grey mist, followed by the angry crackle of the petronels, above which the reports of the bombards of the trench-masters, as they replied to de Réthelois' artillery, sounded like strokes on a war drum.

'*Ventre St. Gris!* The Spaniards have drawn first blood, Belin.'
'M. d'Auriac!'

De Rône's voice stopped any further talk, and I spurred to his side.

'My compliments to the Condé de Leyva and ask him not to waste time spitting at de Réthelois – tell him to leave a sufficient force to hold the garrison in check, and move across the river towards St. Gobains – report yourself to me at the ford.'

I galloped off, and when I reached the Spaniard, whom I found with some difficulty, I discovered that he had already anticipated de Rône's orders, and had besides almost cut off a sortie from the city. There was nothing for it, therefore, but to wish de Leyva a pleasant day and to go on to the ford.

And now a pale band of orange stretched across the east, and daylight rapidly came. A fair breeze sprang up with the sun,

blowing the vapour into long feathery clouds that rolled slowly to the west. So heavy was the fire de Réthelois kept up from the citadel that its square keep was entirely hidden by the smoke; but as I rode towards the ford down the long slope that ended in the Red Mill, I saw on my right the whole of de Rhône's army, advancing to the river in long even columns, and on my left, where they appeared to have sprung up by magic, two strong bodies of cavalry, whilst behind them, marching as rapidly as our own troops, and in as perfect order, came the men of Arques and Ivry, of Fontaine Française, and all the hundred fights of Henry of Navarre.

By this time I had come to the outpost, and found the thatched roof of the cottage in flames, the result of a stray shell that had dropped through it, and blown down half of the remaining walls. It was clearly empty, but as I trotted past the thorn hedge I saw, about fifty paces or so to my right, a single horseman under a tree. His hands were tied behind him, and a cord, which hung from a branch overhead, ended in a noose secured lightly but firmly round his neck. His position was such that if the horse moved away from beneath him he would hang, and the poor wretch was absorbed in coaxing the animal to remain steady; but the trooper he bestrode had already scented the coming battle. His ears were cocked, his tail held out in an arch, and he was pawing at the ground with his forefoot. I could not hear what the man was saying, but his lips were moving, I doubt not with mingled prayers and curses, and I could see that he was trying

to restrain the animal by the pressure of his knees. Another look showed me it was Nicholas, the sergeant, and knowing there was little leisure to lose if the knave was to be saved, I put spurs to my beast and headed towards him. I was just in time, for as I started the old trooper gave a loud neigh, flourished his heels in the air, and galloped off towards the enemy, with his mane and tail streaming in the wind. A touch of my sword freed Nicholas, but it was a narrow affair, and he lay gasping on the ground, and as he lay there I noticed that his ears had been cropped close to his head, and that the wounds were quite fresh. He recovered himself in about a minute, for the dog was tough as leather, and was about to pour forth his thanks and tell me how he came in such plight, but, sincerely sorry as I was, I had to cut him short.

'Keep the story for another day, Nicholas,' I said, 'and follow the example of your horse, who I see is a loyal subject, and has gone straight back to the King.'

With these words I spurred onwards, leaving Nicholas to follow my advice or not, as he listed. I had gathered enough, however, to find out that he was a victim to M. de Gomeron's ingenious humour. Little did I think, however, when I saved this poor fellow how amply I would be re-quited hereafter.

I reached the ford just before the General, and saw that our right flank had already crossed the river in the far distance. Opposite us the Royalists appeared to be in some confusion; but in a moment they were restored to order, and moved steadily on.

'The King is there,' burst out Belin, and a grim smile passed

over de Rône's features as he nodded his head slightly in token of assent. As Belin spoke a group of about half a dozen riders galloped from the enemy's van, and, coming straight towards us, halted a bare hundred paces or so from the river bank. The leading horseman was mounted on a bay charger, and it needed not a second glance, nor a look at the white plumes in his helmet, to tell that it was Henry himself. Close beside him was a short, dark, thick-set man, with the jewel of the Order of France at his neck. He managed the grey he rode with infinite skill, and with his drawn sword pointed towards us, seemed to be urging something on the King.

'Who is that?' I asked.

'The King's viper,' answered Belin, 'who will sting him some day: do you not know Biron? *Mordieu!*' he added, turning to de Rône, 'shall we end the war, General; we could do it with a bit of lead that wouldn't cost the tenth part of a tester?'

De Rône's brown cheek paled at the words, and for an instant he seemed to hesitate, and I could well understand his temptation.

'No,' he replied – '*drop that,*' he thundered to a musketeer who was poising his piece, and the man fell back with a disappointed air.

'*Peste!*' grumbled Belin, 'we might have all been in Paris within the week, whereas now it will take a fortnight at the least.'

'Or a month, or a year, or never – eh, Belin,' gibed de Tavannes.

'Do you think the fair Angelique will be constant?' asked

another.

Belin glanced at the laced favour in his hat with a smile, and answered: 'God bless our ladies! They know how to be constant – see there, messieurs,' and he pointed to a single figure, mounted on a barb, that rode out of the French lines and galloped forward, alone and unattended, to the side of the King. We saw as the barb approached that the figure was that of a woman, and, moreover, that of a very beautiful woman. She was dressed in a hunting habit of dark green, with a black hat and black feathers, under which we could see the light of her fair hair. As she reined up beside the King, Henry turned to her, as if expostulating, but she bent forward suddenly and kissed his hand, and then with charming courtesy took out her kerchief and waved it at us in dainty greeting.

"Tis Gabrielle, the Duchesse de Beaufort herself!" exclaimed de Tavannes, and then gave tongue in a ringing cheer, which was taken up by us all, and rolled down the long line of battle, till its echoes reached us from even the furthest wings.

De Rône lifted his plumed hat in response to Madame d'Estrées' greeting, and the King, bowing slightly to us from his saddle, put his hand on the barb's reins, and turning the horse's head, galloped his mistress to a place of safety. As they reached the mound whereon the royal guidon was displayed, we heard the opening bars of the Pont d'Audemer march, and as they ceased a red tongue of flame licked out from behind a cornfield and a masked battery opened on us.

CHAPTER III

THE RED CORNFIELD

'M. le Marquis, the Condé de Leyva begs for help urgently.'

'Tell him I have none to give,' de Rône made answer from his big black charger Couronne. '*Sangdieu!*' he added under his breath, 'had we been but three hours earlier the Béarnais was lost.'

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the cavalier to whom they were addressed threw up his arms with a scream, and falling forward from his horse, began to beat at the earth convulsively with his hands, whilst he gasped out his life. As the death glaze was covering his eyes, his empty saddle was filled by a figure that rose up like a sprite through the dim smoke, and Belin's even voice was heard.

'Poor Garabay! But my horse was shot under me an hour ago, and this one will do me excellently. Shall I carry your message, General?'

'I claim the honour. Marquis; do not deny me, Belin. I have been idle too long,' and I pressed forward as I spoke.

'Oh, I yield to you, d'Auriac! there is work enough for me at the other end; the bear of Aumale is dancing to a fine tune there,' and Belin reined back, whilst de Rône nodded assent, with a meaning in his look that I alone understood.

I needed no second bidding, but turning my Norman's rein, galloped down the blazing line of battle. If I escaped through the day, which to my mind was already lost, I knew full well that de Rône, smarting under disappointment and chagrin at defeat, would be in no temper for mercy, and would certainly keep his word to me.

There was not a doubt of it, but that the issue of the day was at a crisis. On our extreme right d'Aumale and the exiles of France were pitted against the Huguenot battalions, who went into battle with a hymn on their lips, and had sworn by the faith for which so many of them had died never to quit the field alive. Be sure they strove bitterly there, for the hatreds of sixty years had met face to face on their last field, and no quarter was asked or given. In the centre Bouillon, the Turenne of other days, and Biron – men whose very names were victory – led the attack, which was slowly but surely driving us back into the river. At one time indeed the fiery marshal, with the exception of the King perhaps the most brilliant cavalry leader of the age, had all but laid hands on our standard, and so close was he to me that I might have counted the jewels of the Order at his neck, and clearly heard his deep '*Mordieu!*' as he slowly gave way before the desperate rally that for the moment retrieved the day. But it was on our left that the greatest danger lay. Henry's rapid movement during the night had forestalled de Rône's plans, and had practically shut in the left wing of the Leaguer general between two fires. For although de Réthelois was penned into La Fère, yet his artillery

had a long reach and galled us in the rear, whilst the King, fully grasping the situation, opened a heavy fire on our front, and that terrible battery from the cornfield never ceased launching forth its messages of death. These guns, no longer hidden by the tall corn-stalks, now beaten and trampled down, and as red as the poppies that once starred them, were in reality deciding the fortune of the day. Twice had de Leyva in person brought the veteran regiments of Almagro and Algarve up to their very muzzles, until the men could have touched them with their Biscay pikes, and twice had they been flung back, but made good their retreat, beating off the charge of Schomberg's reiters in so savage a manner that the free commander was unable to rally his men for the rest of the day.

I let my beast go with a loose head, and there was no need of the spur to urge him to his utmost effort as he bore me to de Leyva. I found him bare-headed and on foot, his face black with smoke and bleeding from wounds. His *toison d'or* had been shot away, though its jewelled collar still clasped his neck, and his left arm hung useless by his side. He stared at me when I gave him de Rhône's answer, to which I added the news that Garabay was dead. Then he laughed through his cracked lips – a laugh that seemed to stick in the knot of his throat, and making me no further reply, waved his sword in the air with a cry on his men for yet another effort, and a forlorn hope at the guns. And they who had never known defeat before answered to his call and came up again – a line of men for whom the bitterness of death

was passed. I ought to have gone back to de Rône, but the lust of battle was on me, and for me there was nothing in the world but the black guns behind the continuous flashes, lightening through the thick smoke which the wind was blowing in our faces. My brave horse was killed by a round shot, and as I scrambled up and took my place by de Leyva's side, his features relaxed and he said with a thin smile:

'I have had both my horses killed, Chevalier, or would offer you a mount.'

'We will replace them from Schomberg's reiters,' and the bugles, sounding the attack, cut short all further talk. It was win or lose now – all was staked upon this hazard, and it was well for us that Schomberg was broken, for to protect the men as far as possible from the guns, de Leyva advanced in open files. There was to be no firing. The work was to be all cold steel, and Bayonne knife and Biscay pike were to make a last effort against the long, black, snarling guns, behind which d'Aussonville's ordnance men yelped and danced with glee as each discharge brought down its tale of the mangled and dead. But up the long slope, never flinching, never swerving, one man stepping where another fell, the veteran regiments marched, with their gallant chief at their head. When about fifty paces away, the drift was so thick that we could see nothing save the incessant flashes of light, which possessed but power enough to show themselves. At this moment the bugles rang out shrilly, the ranks closed up like magic, there was one tremendous roar of artillery, and the

half of us that were left were in the battery. Here, on the red and slippery corn-stalks, the devilry went on, and men fought more like beasts than human beings. As the heaving mass swayed backwards and forwards, the strong breeze lifted the smoke from the now speechless guns and showed that they were won, but it also showed us another sight, and that was de Rône's broken centre doubling back upon us in utter rout, and behind them a silver line of shining helmets as the King's House charged, led by Henry himself.

On they came, a dancing line of light, a gleam of shining swords, with the white plume of the bravest of them full three lengths in front.

'Vive le Roi!' The breeze flung us the deep-mouthed cheer as they broke through the mailed ranks of de Rône's own cuirassiers, and drove horse and foot, knight and knave, in a huddled mob before them.

It may have been fancy, but I thought I saw in the press a dark figure that suddenly turned the reins of a huge, black charger and flew at the King. For an instant two bright sword blades crossed in the air, and then the black horse plunged riderless into the grey spate of smoke that the wind was bearing westwards, and a groan as of despair fell on my ears.

'Vive le Roi!' Once again came the full-throated cry, and the bay horse was galloping towards us, followed by the line of swords, no longer shining, but dulled and red with the slaughter they had made.

From a heap of dead and dying that lay about two yards off me, a figure, so hideous with wounds that it seemed barely human, rose to a sitting posture, and then staggering to its feet, swayed backwards and forwards, with the fragment of a sword still clutched in its hand. With a supreme effort it steadied itself, and as the poor, mad eyes, alive with pain, caught sight of the enemy, they lit again with the fire of battle, and de Leyva's voice rang out strong and clear as of old:

'The guns – the guns – turn them on the King!'

'They are spiked,' someone gave answer, with a grim, hopeless laugh.

As he heard this reply, de Leyva slipped sideways, and would have fallen had I not sprang forward and supported him with my arm. He leaned his smitten frame against me for a moment, and something that was like a sob burst from him. But he recovered himself on the instant, and with the strength so often given to those who are about to die, pushed me aside with an oath, and shaking his broken blade in the face of the advancing line, fell forwards in a huddled mass, a dead man.

The next moment the enemy were on us. We met them with a row of pikes; but what could we do, for we were few in number, weary with the long struggle, and weak with wounds? The issue was never in doubt, and they broke us at once. I have a vague memory of fighting for dear life amidst a thunder of hoofs, and the hissing sweep of swords, but was ridden down by some one, and all became dark around me.

When my mind came back, it was with the consciousness of rain that was falling softly, and the cool drops plashed on my burning head with a sensation of relief that I cannot describe. I suffered from an intolerable thirst, and strove to rise that I might find means to quench it; but found I was powerless to move, and writhed in my agony in the rut amidst the corn-stalks wherein I had fallen. The rain was but a passing shower, and when it ceased a light but cool breeze sprang up. It was night, and a fitful moon shone through the uneasy clouds that hurried to and fro overhead in the uncertain breeze, which shifted its quarter as often as a child might change its mind. I seemed to be alive only in the head, and began to wonder to myself how long I was to lie there until death came, and with it the end of all things. I began to wish it would come quickly, and there was a secret whispering in my soul to pray – to pray to the God of whom I had never thought since childhood – to entreat that Invisible Being, at whose existence I had so often laughed, to stoop from above the stars and end my pain, and I cursed myself for a white-livered cur that forgot the Godhead in my strength, and in my weakness could almost have shrieked to him for help. I pulled my fainting courage up, as I thought that if there was no God, it was useless wasting my breath in calling on him, whilst if, on the other hand, there was one, no prayer of mine could go higher than my sword's point, were I to hold the blade out at arm's length above me – and now that the end was coming, I was not going to cringe and whimper. So my sinful pride caught me by the heel as I lay there in my dolour.

A half-hour or so may have passed thus, and the moon was now almost entirely obscured. Occasionally I could hear through the darkness around me the moaning of some poor wounded wretch, and now and again rose the shrill discordant shriek of a maimed horse, an awful cry of pain, the effect of which those only who may have heard it can understand. Soon a number of twinkling lights began to hover over the plain. Sometimes they moved forward rapidly, sometimes they were raised and lowered, and at other times stationary. Gradually two of these lanterns came closer to me, stopping about ten paces off, and when I saw who bore them I knew at once they were death-hunters, and that in a few moments the knife of one of these ghouls might end my suffering. There were two of these fiends, a man and a woman, and as they halted the man stooped: there was a choking cry for mercy, the blow of a dagger, and a groan. The robber busied himself in searching the dead man's person, and, in the silence that followed, the woman with him threw up her head and laughed a horrid shrill laugh. It pealed out with so eerie a sound that the death-hunter sprang to his feet; but finding who it was, burst into the foulest language.

'Sangdieu! Be still, fool,' he snarled, *'or you'll laugh another way if I tickle you with my knife.'*

'Oh, ho! The brave Mauginot,' answered the she-devil, *'you will tickle me with your butcher knife – will you? I, too, can make you skip,'* and she shook a bright dagger in her long lean arm, but suddenly changing her tone, *'Pouf!'* she said, *'there is*

no use in squabbling, partner. This is the sixth we have helped to hell to-night, and not a broad piece amongst them. Holy Virgin! This is a field of paupers – let us begone!' and to my joy she made as if to go.

'Stay Babette! what shines there?' and Mauginot ran forward a couple of paces, and bending low wrenched something from a body, and then stood up, holding it to the light.

I saw his face clearly, and saw also his prize. It was poor de Leyva's collar of the Golden Fleece, and the blood-stained hand of the *croquemort* held it up to the lantern, and clinked the jewelled links, whilst he feasted his eyes on the gold and gems. Over his shoulders peered the pitiless features of his partner, and in her eyes blazed all the bad light of avarice and murder. I almost held my breath as I watched the eyes of the woman leave the jewel and turn on the man with death in their look. As for him, he was unconscious of the knife quivering in the nervous fingers behind him, and he chuckled over his find.

'That is the collar of the *Toison d'Or*, Babette. *Sacre chien!* But I will wed you, and we will buy an estate and settle down, and you will be Madame de Mauginot – hey! That carrion there must have been a great prince – a field of paupers – bah! Give me more paupers like this. I am sorry he is dead, Babette, I would like to have – Ah, *mon Dieu!* – you devil! you devil!' for as he babbled on, his words were cut short by Babette's knife, which was buried to the hilt between his shoulder-blades, and he fell on his knees and then lurched on his face stone dead. The murderess

made a snatch at the jewel, which I saw her conceal, and then with a mocking 'Adieu, M. *de Mauginot*!' to her victim, stepped over my body and moved out of sight, swinging her lantern, and laughing low to herself.

As I watched this hideous scene, I for the moment forgot the pain of my hurts; but they soon began to assert themselves in such a manner that I longed for the relief that unconsciousness would afford, nor indeed would I have been sorry if the night-hag, Babette, had come back and put an end to me. My senses half failed me again, and I felt myself tottering on the brink of delirium. I caught myself shouting and speaking out aloud in a mad manner; but I had no power of stopping myself. So the long hours of the night passed, and at last it was dawn once more, and morning came.

Lying with my ear against the ground, I heard the dull beat of horses' hoofs, growing louder and more distinct as they approached, and in a little time the party, whoever they were, rode into the cornfield. For a second my eyes were dazzled by the reflection of the sun on the silver-plate of their armour; but I recovered myself with an effort, and watched eagerly, intending to cry out for help as they passed me, for my voice was too weak to reach where they were. There were two ladies amongst them, and all appeared to be looking with much concern and anxiety for some one. As they came closer I saw it was the King himself, with Madame Gabrielle and another lady, doubtless of the court, and a numerous retinue. Henry was mounted on his

famous bay charger; and, as he lifted his hat and looked silently around him, I had good opportunity of observing the man who was without doubt the most heroic figure of the age, and who united in himself the most opposite extremes of character. I saw before me a spare figure, the head covered with short black hair, a long hooked nose that fell over the upper lip, and a sharp protruding chin, half hidden in a beard tinged with grey. His long curled moustaches were white as snow, and the story went that they had become so on the night when the Edicts of Pacification were revoked by the last of the Valois. Under his bushy eyebrows his keen restless eyes glittered like two beads, but for the moment they seemed dilated with a soft light, and there was an infinite sadness in them as he looked round the bloody field.

'I am afraid we search in vain, madame,' and a tall cavalier mounted on a big bay addressed Madame de Beaufort. She nodded her head to him sadly, and turned to the King.

'It is useless, sire, and I can bear this no longer – it is too horrible – let us go.'

'*Mignonne*, you are right – this is no place for you. Roquelaure will see you and your little friend there back, and I will come to you soon – but now I have a letter to write – just a few lines to Béarn.' The King spoke with a strong southern accent, and as he spoke leaned forward and caressed Madame Gabrielle's hand. She, however, declined to go. 'I will wait, sire, but it shall be with my eyes shut,' and the King's mistress, whose cheeks were very pale, put her hand to her eyes as if to shut out the sight

around her. The lady with Madame de Beaufort coming nearer at this time, I recognised my unknown Madame of the outposts, who had evidently found her way back to her friends. But it was with a bitter disappointment that I saw her in the company of the duchess, and evidently in attendance on her. Madame was nothing to me I thought, but I could not associate her with the fallen woman who was the mistress of the King. I was learning the lesson that love comes on a man like a thief in the night, and, unconsciously to myself, Madame had climbed on a pinnacle in my heart, and the thought that I had deceived myself in my estimate of her moved me to sudden anger, and stilled the cry for help that was rising to my lips – I would have no help from her and her friends.

In the meantime the King was busily engaged in writing his despatch on a small tablet, which he rested on the pommel of his saddle, and as he wrote he repeated the words aloud, and the purport of the note, which was to de la Force at Pau, was to send him a dozen young peach-trees, carefully packed in mould, each in a tin case one foot long, these to be planted in his gardens of St. Germain.

As he was thus engaged, a little shrivelled old man pushed his horse beside Madame de Beaufort, and said in mincing tones as hard as steel. 'Come, madame, your brother has met a soldier's death, and no Frenchman can hope for a better – or he is safe and well somewhere. Dry your tears, and rejoice at the glorious victory we have won.' The duchess made some answer in a

broken voice, and the King, hearing her, stopped writing and put his tablet away.

'*M'amyé!* D'Ayen speaks rightly, though he speaks from the head. God keep us from more scenes like this. As for your brother, de Cœuvres, I will not rest till there is news of him; but now we can do no more. Come, then – open your pretty eyes and we will go – there is much on hand.'

I was a hot-headed fool and furious in those days, and I set my teeth together grimly as they made ready to start, swearing I would rather die than make the slightest signal for aid. They rode past quite close to me – Gabrielle weeping at the King's bridle hand, and his Majesty sucking at a nectarine he had pulled from his holster. Madame was immediately behind, and as she came up to me, our eyes met with an instant recognition. In a moment her cheek had crimsoned and paled, and she reined in with a cry:

'Stop – halt!'

'It is Louis – Louis – O God, no!' exclaimed Madame de Beaufort, swinging round, the glad note in her voice breaking as she saw I was not her brother, de Cœuvres; but Madame had already dismounted and was holding my head up, and gently passing a handkerchief over my face.

They had all surrounded me now, and I heard quick orders given.

'He is past mending,' said d'Ayen, bending over me from his saddle, 'a gentleman, too, it seems. Let him lie there – he will die very soon, poor devil!'

'*Mon Dieu!* No!' broke in the duchess, and Madame looked at the speaker with a cold contempt.

'He is the only man living here,' and the strong accent of the Béarnais came as from a distance; '*Ventre-saint-Gris!* But they fought like paladins, and Frenchman or foreigner, he shall be saved if it can be done.'

'Sire,' said a soft voice, 'you are the true King of the brave.'

Then two men-at-arms raised me with a rough gentleness on their crossed spears, and inflicted on me in their kindness the most infinite torture. The King himself pressed a flask of wine to my lips, and, as I drank greedily, two cool hands held up my head. Then we moved on slowly, Madame refusing to ride, but walking by my side, and supporting my burning head.

CHAPTER IV

THE CHATEAU DE LA BIDACHE

Months had passed since I shook hands with death in the cornfield by the banks of the Oise, and the grass was tall and green on the mounds around La Fère which marked the graves of those who had fought and died there, in reality for the hand of Spain, in spirit for the League that was dead. It was autumn now, and as I, well and strong again, walked down the long avenue of beeches that led to the park gates of Bidache, I let my memory run back to the days in the hospital of Ste. Geneviève, whither I was borne from the field; to the soft-voiced, gentle-handed sisters of mercy; to the physician Marescot, the King's own leech, with his acid face and kind heart, who doctored me; and above all to the tall, slight, black-robed figure that came to see me daily, and for whose coming I used to long, in the dreary hours of my pain, with an infinite desire. I argued with myself on the absurdity of the thing – here was I, hardened by ten years of campaigning which ought to have taught me the world, conquered out of hand by the glance of a pair of bright eyes, and the tones of a sweet voice. As the days wore on, I cursed myself for the unworthy suspicions that had come to me and tied my tongue when I lay wounded, and was rescued by chance, and her charity. Who or what she was I cared not, and recklessly abandoned myself to the

feelings that were aroused in my heart.

I shall not forget what happened one afternoon. A long gallery in the convent of Ste. Geneviève had been turned into a ward, and here the wounded lay on pallets with a walking space between. Owing to Madame's kindness I was comfortably quartered at the end of the gallery, and a screen had been set between me and the other patients. I was gaining strength daily, and, at the moment I speak of, was in a state between sleeping and waking, when I heard a laugh and the sound of footsteps, and saw through the partly open wing of the screen that my lady had come to make her daily rounds, not attended as usual only by her women, but by a gaily-dressed cavalier as well, and it was his laugh that I had heard. In this person, dressed in the extreme of fashion, I made out M. d'Ayen, the same who had so kindly suggested that I should be left to die in the field. He pattered along, holding a kerchief edged with gold lace to his nose, and ever and again waving it in the air, whilst he spoke in a loud tone, regardless of the looks cast at him by the sisters in attendance on the wounded. They came slowly towards me, for Madame stayed constantly to speak to some maimed wretch, and I saw her slip money into the hands of some, and there were kind words for all. I felt a strange pleasure in watching her, whilst at the same time I thought of my past, and how unfit I was even to nurse such a dream as my love for her. When within a yard or so of the screen, Madame bent over a sufferer, and d'Ayen exclaimed in his biting voice —

'Morbleu! Madame! But you are the Princess of Charity. Let

us hasten to your interesting patient, however. His Majesty is most anxious to hear of him.'

'His Majesty has never done me the honour to inquire,' she answered coldly.

'You could hardly expect that, madame. But it came about in this way. We were at flux, and as usual I held a bad cascade –'

But Madame, to whom his presence was unwelcome, waited to hear no more, and passing the screen, came to my side, and would have spoken; d'Ayen, however, cut in with a rudeness for which I could have run him through.

'My compliments, M. d'Auriac. You are a lucky man. The King takes so great an interest in you that he has charged me with a message to you. His Majesty bids me say,' and his bead-like eyes twinkled down on me from his painted cheeks, and then turned slily towards Madame.

I waited for him to continue, and he went on, talking as if his words were meant for Madame as well.

'His Majesty trusts you will soon be recovered, and relieve Madame de la Bidache from the strain of watching you, and begs me to add that he is of a temper that can brook no rival in war – or love. Let me say, on my own account, that it would be well if M. le Chevalier would take a change of air.'

I looked from one to another in blank amaze – at the little ape with his cruel eyes, and at Madame, who was still as a stone. Then she coloured to her eyelids, her hands fell clenched to her side, and she turned on d'Ayen.

'Such a message, monsieur, should not have been delivered before me. I will take care that M. d'Auriac has a change of air; and, monsieur, your presence oppresses me. I beg you will not trouble to escort me farther.'

Then she turned from us and passed down the ward, but d'Ayen remained.

'I will kill you for this,' I gasped.

He looked at me with a shrug of his lean shoulders.

'Perhaps – I am old. But you would do well to take my advice, monsieur,' and with a bow he too turned and went.

I was left lost in wonder, utterly in the dark as to what this all meant, but determined to find out and bring d'Ayen to book at the first chance. I made up my mind to ask the next day. The next day came; but Madame did not, and then another and yet another day of dreariness passed. At last someone, I forget who, told me she had gone with the court to Nantes, and that I would see her no more. Later on, when Marescot came to me, I begged the favour of his getting me the knot of ribbon he would find in the lefthand breast pocket of the doublet I wore on the day I was brought into the hospital.

'You are getting well,' he said, and turned away, but came back in a little with a wrinkled smile on his lips, 'I cannot find the cordial you want, Chevalier.'

I had half raised my head in expectancy as he returned, but sank back again at his words, and Marescot went on in his low voice that sounded like the humming of a bee. 'M. le Chevalier,

that bow of ribbon has gone away, so high up that a taller man than you could not reach it. Forget it. But I have news for you, which the clumsy fool who told you of Madame's departure should have given you: you are to go to Bidache shortly, and stay there until you are well again. It will not be for long. After that, try the tonic of the Italian war. France will be all ploughshares now that the King is king.'

I caught him by the sleeve of his soutane. 'Tell me,' I said weakly, 'who is Madame, where is Bidache?'

'Madame, as we all call her, is Claude de Rochemars, widow of Antoine de la Tremouille, and heiress of Bidache, Pelouse, and a quarter of the Cevennes. Bidache, where you go, is her chateau in Normandy. Madame,' he went on with a ghost of a smile on his thin lips, 'is kindness itself. Now no more talk for to-day.' Then he went, and I lay back, as sore in mind as in body.

In a day or so Madame's steward of Bidache arrived, bearing a letter from her, in which, as a poor return for the service I had done her – so she put it – she placed her Norman chateau at my disposal until I was well again. I had a mind to refuse; but in my state could summon up no such resolution, and, muttering my thanks to the steward, said they could do what they listed with me. They moved me here by easy stages, carrying me in a litter as I was too weak to ride, and when I came to Bidache, and was borne to my apartments, imagine my joy and surprise at seeing there my knave Jacques, whom I thought to be either dead or home again at Auriac; and not only Jacques, but hanging on the

wall my own sword, and the sight of it was like meeting a tried friend. Later on, Jacques informed me that after the rout he had made the best of his way back to the old rock, and stayed there, hoping for news of me. At last it came, with orders for him to hurry to Bidache, and he did so, bearing with him such things as he thought I needed, as well as a hundred pistoles of rents, the same being half the sum due to me for my rights over the fish in the bay of Auriac. As for the sword, it had been given to him on his arrival by Madame's orders to keep for me. I had come to a low ebb by this, and the money was trebly welcome, as it would furnish me with a couple of horses, and leave a round sum besides when I left Bidache, which I meant to do as soon as ever I was fit to travel. And now the time had come for me to depart, and I was to start that evening. For forty crowns Jacques had picked up a couple of stout cobs at Evreux, and we meant to leave an hour or so before sundown and make for Paris, where, if the King would accept an old leaguer's sword, we would stay; if not, the world was wide. I was as far as ever from understanding the strange message that M. d'Ayen had delivered to me, and felt myself safe in going to Paris, as a general amnesty covered all our sins of rebellion – so they were called now.

So absorbed was I in these thoughts, that I did not mark the rapid approach of a horseman, nor indeed was I aware of his presence until, when within a few yards of me, he reigned in his plunging beast, whose bit and neck were white with foam, and lifting his hat respectfully, inquired if I was the Chevalier

d'Auriac and on my reply exclaimed, 'Madame will be overjoyed. We heard that you had already left Bidache, and my lady arrives within the hour from Evreux. Pardon, monsieur – I go to give the news to the household,' and, saluting again, the lackey dashed onwards towards the chateau.

So I would meet her within the hour. Half unconsciously I glanced down to see if my doublet sat aright and my points were tied. Then I thought I would go back to the house and meet her there, and, as I did this, I looked at the fall of the plumes in my hat, and, finally, laughing at myself for a coxcomb, took my heart in both hands, and marched onwards towards the gates. The porter had already been warned, and on my coming I found him there with a crowd of yokels, all in a state of high excitement.

'It is three years since Madame was here, monsieur,' the honest fellow exclaimed to me as I came up, 'three years, and now she comes without a word of warning —*hola!* There they are, and there is Madame on the jennet she purchased from M. le duc de Sully – he was but the Sieur de Rosny then —*hola! hola!*'

The crowd joined with him in his cheers, although as yet the party was far off – not so far, however, that I could not easily make out the graceful figure on the jennet, and in the two riders who accompanied Madame, apart from the half-dozen servants behind, I recognised to my surprise d'Ayen, and guessed that the grey-beard in the tall-crowned, broad-brimmed hat, with the sad-coloured cloak over his shoulders, was no other than the old Huguenot, whose zeal had outrun his discretion on the night

when I saved Madame from a great peril.

This guess of mine I hazarded aloud to the gate-keeper, who replied:

'Yes, M. le Chevalier, that is Maître Palin, Madame's chaplain, and he was also chaplain to M. le Comte before he died.'

'When was it that M. le Comte died?'

'Let me see, monsieur – ah, yes – four years ago in Paris, at the time of the Plague. He was a great lord, as you may know, and brother of the duke, who they say has quarrelled with the King because of his conversion, and of Madame Charlotte, the Princess of Condé, who lives in the Rue Grenelle, and whom the King kept for long a close prisoner in the tower of St. Jean d'Angely – no one knows why; but it is buzzed that Monseigneur, the Prince of Condé, the King's cousin, died of a flask of wine, and that the Princess – but *hola! hola!* welcome to your own house, madame,' and he dropped on his knees as the cavalcade rode up, and presented the keys of the chateau gates slung on a silver chain to their mistress. She bent from the saddle and touched them with her hand, and the peasantry surrounded her with hearty greeting, hedging her in with cheerful red faces and broad smiles, so that she could not move. Meanwhile, I stood apart, tugging at my moustache, wondering by what right d'Ayen rode at her bridle hand, and feeling how true Marescot's words were, that the bow of ribbon was hung too high for me. Not that it was a question of birth – de Breuil of Auriac was a name that was old when Tremouille was unknown; but – there were other

things which made all the difference, and men and women of the world will understand what I mean when I say this.

As Madame lifted her head our eyes met, and, raising my hat, I advanced towards her, the people giving way respectfully. My ears were buzzing, and I was as shy and nervous as a schoolboy as I bowed over her gloved hand, and touched it with my lips.

'Let me welcome you back to health, Chevalier,' she said, 'and say how glad I am to be able, even for a short while, to do the honours of my poor house in person to you. News came to us that you had already left Bidache – without even a word to me;' her voice dropped a little as she said this, but the tone was cool and friendly, nothing more.

'I go to-night, madame.'

'So soon; but I understand why, and will not press you to stay – here is one who, like myself, has longed for an opportunity to thank you in person. *Mon père*,' and she turned to the Huguenot priest, 'this is our friend to whom we owe so much.'

'In the service of the Lord one would willingly lay down life,' said Palin, as he shook me warmly by the hand, 'nevertheless, a few hours more of the world for an old man is a grace not to be despised, and I thank the instrument that has bestowed this benefit upon me.'

D'Ayen, between whom and myself there had passed no greeting, now spoke in a voice that fairly trembled with anger.

'I was not aware that I should have the pleasure of meeting you here, M. le Chevalier. It will surprise the King,' he added,

in a lower tone to Madame.

I made no answer; but the memory of his warning and my determination to settle with him came up in full force. Madame, however, spoke.

'M. d'Ayen, when, by the order of the King, you were directed to escort me to Bidache, there was nothing said about your right to dictate to me who shall be my guests. Remember, monsieur, that your company is forced upon me, and let me add that you are a trifle too paternal.'

D'Ayen paled under his rouge, and, muttering something, reined back a pace, whilst Palin, looking him full in the eyes, said:

'Will you swallow that, too, M. d'Ayen? At your age one would have thought digestion hard.'

And there was no answer.

Madame had in the meantime signalled a lackey to dismount and offer me his beast.

'I cannot allow you to walk, and we will reach the house quicker in this way, besides, I want to hear all your news. My friends,' and she turned to the people, 'come to Bidache: it is long since we have met, and I would have you to make merry as of old – come, Chevalier.'

In the cheers which followed, she touched her horse lightly on the shoulder with her whip, and galloped on, Palin and I on either hand, and the suite behind. In a little while she slackened pace, saying with a laugh, 'We are going too fast to talk, Chevalier, and I am a woman, you know, and must hear my own voice, if

nothing else – so you are quite well and strong again?'

'I am, madame, thanks to your kindness, which Alban de Breuil can never forget.'

Her colour deepened slightly. 'It is the other way, Chevalier, the debt is on my side.'

'I have done nothing – and the repayment was too much.'

'I am sorry you think so,' looking straight between her horse's ears.

'I did not mean that – I have already said I can never requite your kindness, and if Madame ever needs a stout arm and a good sword, it is my hope she will call on that of Auriac.'

'Perhaps I may – some day,' she answered, 'for the blood of my fathers runs strong in me, but I think Maître Palin here will tell you that I am wrong, and that the sword is accursed.'

'Unless it be drawn in the service of God, madame,' put in the Huguenot gravely.

'*Mon père* Palin has been a man-at-arms in his day,' said Madame, 'and has fought at Jarnac and Moncontour. He is therefore of the church militant, as you see.'

'I am proud to meet so brave a soldier as I doubt not you were, Maître Palin. We took different sides; but all that is passed now, and Huguenot and Leaguer are merged in the common name of Frenchman.'

'Long live the King!' said Madame gaily; but Palin answered sadly:

'Would it were so. But to my eyes there are still dark clouds

ahead. We have no longer Henry of Navarre, but Henry of France; no longer a prince of the true faith, but a pervert.'

'His Majesty will be delighted to hear that,' put in d'Ayen; but Madame took no more notice of him than of a fly.

'Hush! *mon père*,' and she raised a warning hand, 'I will have no word against the King. M. le Chevalier is right, we are all one again, as France should ever be.'

'Amen!' answered Palin; 'but too much blood has been shed for this compromise to be accepted. The way is dark – but I will say no more,' and the old croaker dropped a half length behind.

A turn in the avenue at this moment brought us in full view of the grey walls of Bidache, and on the wide stone staircase that led to the great hall we saw the servants of the household assembled. Madame waved her hand in greeting, and the cheer which broke from them was drowned in the boom of the bombard from the keep. As the blue wreaths of smoke curled upwards a little ball ran to the top of the flagstaff on the keep, and the next moment the banner of Tremouille, with the arms of Rochemars of Bidache quartered thereon, spread out its folds to the morning, and Madame was come home once more.

We dined an hour or so later than usual, Madame, d'Ayen, Palin, and myself at the high table, and the rest of the household with all Bidache at the next. Madame, who seemed in nowise fatigued by her long ride, was in the gayest of spirits and rippled with talk. As if thinking she had punished d'Ayen enough, she directed all her conversation towards him, and the old beau was

in his element in discussing the intrigues of court life, and, let me add, interesting, for his memory went far back. Madame spoke of the Edict, but for which they would never have been at Bidache; of the surrender of Mercoeur, and of the betrothal of his daughter Françoise de Lorraine, the greatest heiress in France, to *César Monsieur*, the little Duc de Vendôme; of the Constable and his disappointment thereat; of the squabbles between M. de Bar and his wife, the King's sister; of court gossip and court scandal, until Palin's face grew sour, and I felt a disappointment within me, as she prattled on like some Paris beauty, whose sole thoughts were of masques at the Louvre and hunting parties at Vincennes. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes sparkled as she discussed with d'Ayen whether the ruff or the collar drooped in the Italian manner was the more becoming, and whether the *cinque pace* dance was more enjoyable than the minuet. *Pardieu!* Their speech was all frill and furbelows. But for a word thrown in here and there, I sipped my Romanée in silence, wondering at this flow of talk, and wondering, too, at this change of front, and if I was wrong in my estimate of Madame. As she talked, my head for a moment overcame my heart, and I began to judge her in that way, showing, in doing so, my ignorance of that complex thing – a woman.

At last the dinner came to a close, and Palin, rising, opened his lips with a long thanksgiving, to which all, Madame included, listened devoutly. Our hostess then retired, and we three were left together in an absolute silence. Had it been any other place I

would have felt bound to call d'Ayen to account, and ask him to name a proxy if he was unable to meet me by reason of his age. But as it was this was impossible, and I contented myself with a frigid reserve, in which I was joined by the Huguenot. He looked from one to the other of us with a satirical smile on his thin lips, and then rising made a slight bow and left us to ourselves. As we returned to our seats from our response to his greeting, I blurted out the questions:

'Who is M. d'Ayen? Why is he here?'

'Who is he? It is enough to say he is one of those men who live on the follies of kings. And it is enough to say that his company is forced upon us.'

'I have heard that before; but Madame seemed to like him well enough at dinner.' I felt I was wrong as I said this, but the words came out.

'He is here by the King's orders, by the orders of Henry the Great,' said Palin with bitterness. 'Monsieur, you seem a man of honour, what do you think of a king who would force a marriage on a woman to – ' and he whispered words in my ear which struck me speechless.

I could not believe him. It was incredible. Was this the hero king, the gallant soldier, the father of his people? It could not be true.

Palin saw the doubt on my face.

'Even you,' he said; 'well, go to Paris and see.'

'I shall go, I am going to-day.'

'It will be at the risk of your life.'

'Maître Palin, there is the King's Peace, and even if it were not so I will go.'

He looked at me long and attentively: 'Let it be so,' he muttered to himself, and then loudly, 'Well, Chevalier, I have warned you; if you go you will want a safe lodging – seek out Pantin in the Rue des Deux Mondes, and mention my name. The house faces the Pont Neuf, you can't miss it.'

'Thank you, I will do so.'

Then after a few minutes more of talk we wished each other good-bye and parted.

As for myself, I was on the cross with what I had heard. My mind was racked with doubt, and at last in despair I sought my own room to think over the matter. I could make nothing of it, turn it which way I would. To me Palin's story was incredible. But yet it explained and made clear so much! It was not to offer my sword only to the King that I would now go to Paris, it would be to save the woman I loved if possible. How I was to do this I had no definite idea, the one thing at present in my mind was Paris, Paris. I therefore gave the necessary orders to Jacques to make ready to start at once, and, descending the winding staircase of the tower wherein my room lay, sought the great hall with the view of either finding Madame there, or of sending some one with the request to permit my waiting on her to say good-bye. The staircase ended in a long dark corridor, hung on each side with trophies of the chase, old armour, and frayed and tattered

banners. At the end of this was an arched doorway hidden by a heavy curtain, and above the arch was a half-length portrait of a man. The painter had not flattered his subject; the long pointed face with its grey beard was bent forward slightly, there was a cynical curve to the lips, and the eyes looked down on me as if with a laugh in them. I had passed this picture fifty times before, but had never stayed to examine it. Somehow I did so on this occasion, and as I read the inscription 'Antoine de la Tremouille' on the frame, the thin lips appeared to lengthen out into a grin. For a moment a chill fell on me, and then, laughing at myself for a fool, I lifted the curtain and passed into the great hall. At first I thought it was empty, but a second glance showed me Madame, seated at a small table, in the recess of the bow window that overlooked the park. Her face, leaning on her hand, was half averted from me, and I caught, a glimpse of a small foot resting on one of the lions' heads in which the legs of the table finished. The foot was beating up and down as if in unison with the impatience of Madame's thoughts, but I could see nothing of her face beyond its contour. She was, as usual, robed in black, wearing no jewels except a gold collar round her neck. For a moment I stood in silence, looking at her, half thinking that here was a chance to speak out what was in my heart, and then stilling the words by the thought of how impossible it was for a poor man to woo a rich woman.

Through the open window I could see the woods, ruddy in their autumn foliage, and ever and again came the sound of

cheerful voices, marking where the good people of Bidache were holding revelry in honour of their mistress' return.

As I stood, hat in hand, Madame suddenly turned with a little start, and hastily concealed something as she caught sight of me. I went up at once, and she rose to meet me.

'I have come to say farewell, madame,' and I held out my hand.

'So soon,' she said, as she took it for a moment, her eyes not meeting mine.

'Yes – Paris is far – and it will be well for me to be there as quickly as possible.'

'Paris! You are surely not – ' and she stopped.

'Why not, madame?'

'Oh! I don't know,' and hastily, 'one sometimes says things that don't exactly convey one's meaning. But I can imagine why you go to Paris – you are tired of Bidache, and pine for the great city.'

'It is not that; but,' and I pointed to the rolling woods and wide lands that spread before us, 'I have no responsibilities like these – and Auriac, which stands by the sea, takes care of itself – besides, I have my way to make as yet.'

'You have friends?'

'One at any rate, and that was restored to me by you,' and I glanced to the hilt of my sword.

'Man does not want a better; but you have another – here at Bidache, and I shall be in Paris soon, too, and – this place is dull. It kills me.'

'And yet you have not been here for three years – madame,

are all the masques at the Louvre so attractive that you can desert your home, where your name is honoured as that of the King, for the follies of the court?"

I spoke with some bitterness, for I was sore at what I had heard at dinner, and she glanced up at me in a slight surprise. Then her lips parted in a half smile. 'Chevalier, will you answer me a question or so?'

'Why not?'

'You like gaiety, cheerfulness, light, do you not?'

'Assuredly.'

'You sometimes amuse yourself by gaming, do you not – and losing more than you can afford?'

I bowed in simple wonder.

'That friend of yours at your side has not been drawn only in battle, has it?'

De Gonnor's white face rose up before me, and I felt my forehead burn. I could make no answer. Madame looked at me for a moment, and then dropped a stately little courtesy. 'Monsieur, you are very good to advise me, and I take your reproof. But surely what is sauce for the gander is sauce for the goose. Is not the Chevalier d'Auriac a little hasty? How is it that he is not at home at Auriac, instead of hastening to Paris as fast as he can – to the masques at the Louvre, and the salons of Zamet?'

'It is different,' I stammered.

'Ah, yes, it is different,' with a superb scorn; 'I saw you pull a half league of face as I talked at dinner. Monsieur can go here.

Monsieur can go there. He may dance at a revel from curfew till cockcrow, he may stake his estates on a throw of the dice, he may run his friend through for a word spoken in jest – it is all *comme il faut*. But, Madame – she must sit at home with her distaff, her only relaxation a *prêche*, her amusement and joy to await Monsieur's return – is not that your idea, Chevalier?' She was laughing, but it was with a red spot on each cheek.

'Madame,' I replied, 'when I was but fifteen I joined the Cardinal de Joyeuse, and from that time to now my life has been passed in the field; I am therefore but a soldier, rough of speech, unused to argument, apt to say what is in my mind bluntly. I was wrong to make the remark I did, and ask your pardon; but, madame, brush away the idea that in this case the sauce for the gander is sauce for the goose – I use your own words – think what it would be if all womankind acted on what you have preached – think what would happen if the illusions that surround you, and which are now your strength, are dispelled. The worst of men have some memory of a home made happy by a woman, sister, mother, or wife, and the return to which was like a glimpse into heaven – the thought of which often made them better men – do not destroy this. And, madame, there is yet another thing – man is a fighting animal, and the final issues of an affair come to the sword – where would a struggle between this hand and mine end? – 'in my eagerness I took her small white fingers in mine as I spoke, and shut them within my palm – 'Madame,' I continued, 'rest assured that the glory and strength of a woman

is in her weakness, and when she puts aside that armour she is lost. Think not that you have no mission – it is at a mother's knee that empires have been lost and won, that generations have, and will be, cursed or blessed.'

I stood over her as I spoke; I was a tall man then and strong, and whether it was my speech or what I know not, but I felt the hand I held tremble in mine, and her eyes were turned from me.

'Let me say good-bye now,' I continued, 'and thank you again for what you have done.'

She shook her head in deprecation.

'Very well, then, I will not recall it to you; but I can never forget – life is sweet of savour, and you gave it back to me. We will meet again in Paris – till then good-bye.'

'At the Louvre?' As she glanced up at me, trying to smile, I saw her eyes were moist with tears, and then – but the wide lands of Bidache were before me, and I held myself in somehow.

'Good-bye.'

'Good-bye.'

I turned, and without another look passed out of the hall. As I went down the stairway I saw on the terrace to my right the figure of d'Ayen. He had changed his costume to the slashed and puffed dress which earned for the gay gentlemen of Henry's court the nickname of 'Bigarrets,' from M. de Savoye's caustic tongue, and his wizened face stood out of his snowy ruff in all the glow of its fresh paint. With one foot resting on the parapet, he was engaged in throwing crumbs to the peacocks that basked on the

turf beneath him. I would have passed, but he called out.

'M. le Chevalier – a word.'

'A word then only, sir, I am in haste.'

'A bad thing, haste,' he said, staring at me from head to foot; 'these woods would fetch a good price, would they not?' and he waved his hand towards the wide-stretching forest.

'You mistake, M. d'Ayen, I am not a timber merchant.'

'Oh! a good price,' he went on, not heeding my reply. 'M. le Chevalier, I was going to say I will have them down when I am master here. They obstruct the view.'

I could have flung him from the terrace, but held myself in and turned on my heel.

'Adieu! Chevalier,' he called out after me, 'and remember what I have said.'

I took no notice. The man was old, and his gibing tongue his only weapon. I ran down the steps to where Jacques was, ready for me with the horses. Springing into the saddle, I put spurs to the beast, and we dashed down the avenue, but as I did so I yielded to an impulse, and glanced up to the window – it was empty.

CHAPTER V

A GOOD DEED COMES HOME TO ROOST

We dashed through the streets of Bidache, arousing the village dogs asleep in the yellow-sunlight to a chorus of disapprobation. About a dozen sought to revenge their disturbed slumbers, and, following the horses, snapped viciously at their heels; but we soon distanced them, and flinging a curse or so after us, in dog language, they gave up the pursuit, and returned to blink away the afternoon. It was my intention to keep to the right of Ivry, and after crossing the Eure, head straight for Paris, which I would enter either by way of Versailles or St. Germain; it mattered little what road, and there was plenty of time to decide.

I have, however, to confess here to a weakness, and that was my disappointment that Madame had not stayed to see the last of me. Looking back upon it, I am perfectly aware that I had no right to have any feeling in the matter whatsoever; but let any one who has been placed similarly to myself be asked to lay bare his heart – I would stake my peregrine, Etoile, to a hedge crow on the result.

Madame knew I loved her. She must have seen the hunger in my eyes, as I watched her come and go, in the days when I lay at Ste. Geneviève, wounded to death. She must have felt the words I

crushed down, I know not how, when we parted. She knew it all. Every woman knows how a man stands towards her. I was going away. I might never see her again. It was little to have waved me Godspeed as I rode on my way, and yet that little was not given.

In this manner, like the fool I was, I rasped and fretted, easing my unhappy temper by letting the horse feel the rowels, and swearing at myself for a whining infant that wept for a slice of the moon.

For a league or so we galloped along the undulating ground which sloped towards the ford near Ezy; but as we began to approach the river, the country, studded with apple orchards, and trim with hedgerows of holly and hawthorn, broke into a wild and rugged moorland, intersected by ravines, whose depths were concealed by a tall undergrowth of Christ's Thorn and hornbeam, whilst beyond this, in russet, in sombre greens, and greys that faded into absolute blue, stretched the forests and woods of Anet and Croth-Sorel.

In the flood of the mellow sunlight the countless bells of heather enamelling the roadside were clothed in royal purple, and the brown tips of the bracken glistened like shafts of beaten gold. At times the track took its course over the edge of a steep bank, and here we slackened pace, picking our way over the crumbling earth, covered with grass, whose growth was choked by a network of twining cranesbill, gay with its crimson flowers, and listening to the dreamy humming of the restless bees, and the cheerful, if insistent, skirl of the grass crickets, from their

snug retreats amidst the yarrow and sweet-scented thyme.

As we slid rather than rode down one of these banks, my horse cast a shoe, and this put a stop to any further hard riding until the mishap could be repaired.

'There is a smith at Ezy, monsieur,' said Jacques, 'where we can get what we want done, and then push on to Rouvres, where there is good accommodation at the *Grand Cerf*.'

'I suppose Ezy can give us nothing in that way?'

'I doubt much, monsieur, for the place sank to nothing when Monseigneur the Duc d'Aumale was exiled, and the King, as monsieur is aware, has given the castle to Madame Gabrielle, for her son, little *César Monsieur*— the Duc de Vendôme.'

'*Morbleu!* It is well that Madame de Beaufort has not set eyes on Auriac – eh, Jacques?' and I laughed as I saw the huge grey outlines of Anet rising in the foreground, and thought how secure my barren, stormbeaten rock was from the rapacity of the King's mistress.

Jacques came of a rugged race, and my words roused him.

'But M. le Chevalier would never let Auriac fall into the hands of the King or his Madame? We could man the tower with a hundred stout hearts and – '

'Swing on the gibbet at the castle gates in two weeks, Jacques. But remember, we are loyal subjects now, and are going to Paris to serve the King.'

'As for me,' answered Jacques, obstinately, 'I serve my master, the Chevalier de Breuil d'Auriac, and none besides.'

In this manner we jogged along, making but slow progress, and the sun was setting when we came in view of the willow-lined banks of the Eure, and entered the walnut groves of the outlying forest in which Ezy lay. As we approached we saw that the village was three parts deserted, and the ruined orchards and smokeless chimneys told their own tale. Turning a bend of the grass-grown road we came upon a few children shaking walnuts from a tree, about two hundred paces from us, whilst a man and a woman stood hard by observing them. At the sight of us the woman turned to the man with an alarmed gesture, and he half drew a sword – we saw the white flash, and then, changing his mind, ran off into the forest. The children followed suit, sliding down the trunk of the tree, and fleeing into the brushwood, looking for all the world like little brown rabbits as they dashed into the gaps in the thorn.

As for the woman, she turned slowly and began to walk towards the village.

'They are very bashful here, Jacques,' I said, quickening my pace.

'Except the lady, monsieur,' and then we trotted up alongside her.

Reining in, I asked if she could direct me to the blacksmith's, for there seemed no sign of a forge about. She made no answer but stopped and stared at us through her hair, which fell in thick masses over her forehead and neck. As she did this I saw that she appeared to be of the superior peasant class, but evidently

sunk in poverty. She was young, and her features so correct that with circumstances a little altered she would have been more than ordinarily good-looking. At present, however, the face was wan with privation, and there was a frightened look in her eyes. I repeated my question in as gentle a tone as I could command, and she found tongue.

'There is none here, monsieur; but at Anet you will find everything. That is the way, see!' and she pointed down a winding glade, lit up here and there with bars of sunlight until it faded into a dark tunnel of over-arching trees. I felt convinced from her tone and manner that she was trying to put us off, and Jacques burst in.

'Nonsense, my girl, I know there is a smith at Ezy, for but two days back one of Madame of Bidache's horses was shod here. You don't know your own village – try and think.'

'There is none,' she said shortly.

'Very well,' said Jacques, 'we won't trouble you further, and we will find out for ourselves. It will not be difficult.'

We went on a pace or so, when she called out after us.

'Monsieur!'

'What is it?'

She stood twisting the ends of her apron between her fingers and then, suddenly,

'Monsieur, pardon, I will guide you.'

'Oh! that is all very well,' began Jacques; but I interrupted him, wondering a little to myself what this meant.

'Very well and thanks.'

She dropped a courtesy, and then asked with a timid eagerness,

'Monsieur does not come from the Blaisois?'

'*Ma foi!* No! This is hardly the way from the Orléannois; but lead on, please, it grows late.'

She glanced up again, a suspicion in her eyes, and then without another word went on before us. We followed her down the winding grass-grown lane, past a few straggling cottages where not a soul was visible, and up through the narrow street, where the sight of us drove the few wretched inhabitants into their tumble-down houses, as if we had the plague itself at our saddle bows. Finally we stopped before a cottage of some pretensions to size; but decayed and worn, as all else was in this village, which seemed but half alive. Over the entrance to the cottage hung a faded signboard, marking that it was the local hostelry, and to the right was a small shed, apparently used as a workshop; and here the smith was, seated on a rough bench, gazing into space.

He rose at our approach and made as if he would be off; but his daughter, as the young woman turned out to be, gave him a sign to stay, and he halted, muttering something I could not catch; and as I looked at the gloomy figure of the man, and the musty inn, I said out aloud, '*Morbleu!* But it is well we have time to mend our trouble and make Rouvres; thanks, my girl, you might have told us at once instead of making all this fuss,' and bending from the saddle I offered our guide a coin. She fairly snatched at it, and

then, colouring up, turned and ran into the inn. I threw another coin to the smith and bade him set about shoeing the horse.

He shuffled this way and that, and then answered dully that he would do the job willingly, but it would take time – two hours.

'But it will be night by then,' I expostulated, 'and I have to go on; I cannot stay here.'

'As monsieur chooses,' answered the clod; 'but, you see, I have nothing ready, and I am slow now; I cannot help it.'

'This is a devil of a place,' I exclaimed, resigning myself to circumstances, and, dismounting, handed the reins to Jacques. As I did so I heard voices from the inn, one apparently that of the girl, and the other that of a man, and it would seem that she was urging something; but what it was I could not catch, nor was I curious as to the point of discussion; but it struck me that as we had to wait here two hours it would be well to inquire if I could get some refreshment for ourselves and a feed for the beasts. For answer to my question I got a gruff 'Go and ask my daughter,' from the smith, who turned as he spoke and began to fumble with his tools. I felt my temper rising hotly, but stayed my arm, and bidding Jacques keep an eye on the horses, stepped towards the door of the inn. As I put my hand on it to press it open some one from within made an effort to keep it shut; but I was in no mood to be trifled with further, and, pushing back the door without further ceremony, stepped in. In doing so I thrust some one back a yard or so, and found that it was the girl who was trying to bar me out. Ashamed of the violence I had shown, I began to

apologise, whilst she stood before me rubbing her elbow, and her face flushed and red. The room was bare and drear beyond description. There were a couple of rough tables, a chair or so, an iron pot simmering over a fire of green wood whose pungent odour filled the chamber. In a corner a man lay apparently asleep, a tattered cloak drawn over his features so as to entirely conceal them. I felt in a moment that this was the stranger who had fled on our approach, and that he was playing fox. Guessing there was more behind this than appeared, but not showing any suspicions in the least, I addressed the girl.

'I am truly sorry, and hope you are not hurt; had I known it was you I should have been gentler. I have but come to ask if I can get some wine for ourselves and food for the horses.'

'It is nothing,' she stammered, 'I am not hurt. There is but a little soup here, and for the horses – the grass that grows outside.'

'There is some wine there at any rate,' and I rested my eye on a horn cup, down whose side a red drop was trickling, and then let it fall on the still figure in the corner of the room. 'There is no fear,' I continued, 'you will be paid. I do not look like a gentleman of the road, I trust?'

She shrank back at my words, and it appeared as if a hand moved suddenly under the cloak of the man who lay feigning sleep in the room, and the quick movement was as if he had clutched the haft of a dagger. I was never a brawler or blusterer, and least of all did I wish to worry these poor people; but the times were such that a man's safety lay chiefly in himself, for the

writ of the King ran weak in the outlying districts. The whole business, too, was so strange that I was determined to fathom it; and, unbuckling my sword, I placed it on a table so as to be ready on the instant, and then, seating myself on a stool beside it, said somewhat sharply,

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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