A MAID OF BRITTANY

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A MAID OF BRITTANY ***

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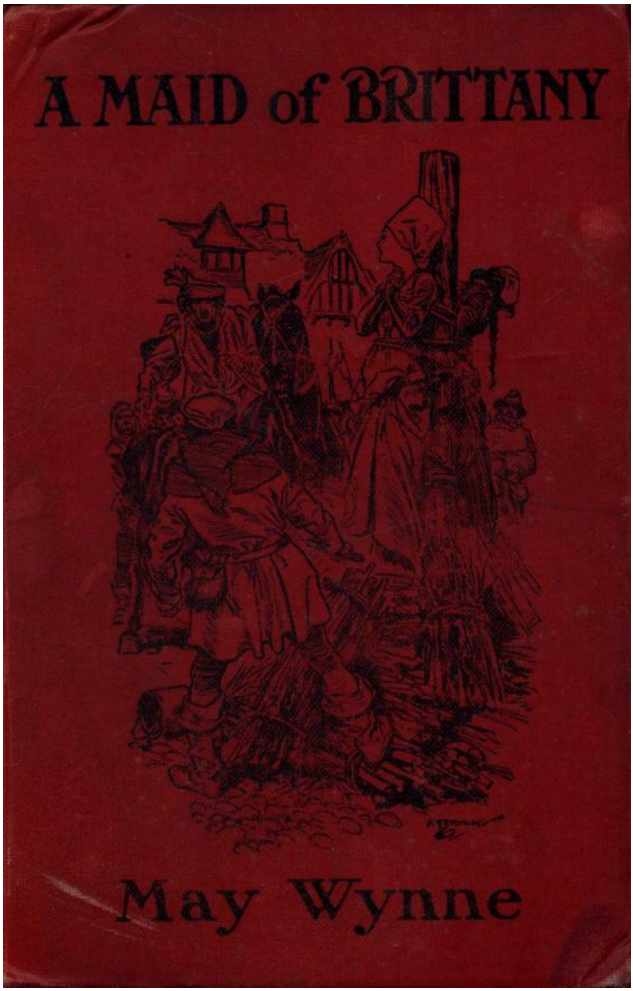
[Transcriber's note: Chapters 22, 23, and 24 are somewhat confusing. In 22, Guillaume de Coray is thrown from his horse and injured, but in 23 he's OK, then in 24 he's dying. I don't have access to another edition to see if perhaps there's something wrong with the source edition for this etext.]



Cover art

"Do your work knave, and quickly." (p. 282)

A MAID OF BRITTANY

A Romance

BY
MAY WYNNE
AUTHOR OF
"HENRY OF NAVARRE," "WHEN TERROR RULED," ETC.

POPULAR EDITION
with
FRONTISPIECE BY H. M. BROCK

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Dedicated
TO
MY MOTHER

MAID OF BRITTANY

CHAPTER I

"A spy—a French spy! tiens, monsieur! but it is assured." The speaker, a man of about thirty years of age, dressed in hunting costume, was standing by his horse's side, looking down, with flushed face and knitted brows, upon a figure which lay stretched on the ground before him, the figure of a man also young, but even in unconsciousness of far more prepossessing appearance than he who stood frowning over him. Gathered at a short distance and watching the scene with keen interest stood a hawking party, fresh from their chase, and consisting of a broad-shouldered, handsome old man of some seventy summers, a young girl, whose beautiful face wore a compassionate look as she bent forward on her palfrey to catch a glimpse at the unconscious stranger, and several attendants bearing trophies of the chase, and carrying hooded falcons on their wrists.

"Nay, then, Guillaume," interposed the girl, before her father could reply, "but wherefore such assurance? Surely he is no spy, for see, the golden spurs upon his heels proclaim his knighthood."

"Ay," replied her cousin mockingly, as he pointed to a horse standing with bent head and distended nostrils by the prostrate man's side. "As plainly, fair cousin, as yonder steed's docked ears and mane proclaim him Brittany's enemy."[#]

[#] It was the fashion at the time for French knights to cut off their horse's ears and manes, as also never to ride mares.

There was a sparkle of indignation in the girl's eyes as she turned to her father.

"At least," she urged, as if pleading against some unspoken verdict, "we judge no man unheard. See, my father, there may be many explanations of his presence here; it is surely so, for assured I am that he is no spy. Nay, cousin, your wits are too keen in this case, for a spy would not thus proclaim his nationality, if a horse's mane speaks so plainly."

"Tush, Gwennola!" reproved her father with a smile. "This is no matter for woman's interference that thou shouldst argue like a wandering scholar. Still, there is fairness in what thou sayest, and I would lief tender mercy with justice even to a Frenchman, though, if he be a spy, by the bones of St Yves, he shall hang as fast as any acorn to the nearest oak."

So saying, and in spite of his kinsman's obvious disapproval, he ordered two of his servants to dismount and raise the unconscious object of their argument.

It was clear that a fall from his horse had stunned the stranger, and the cause was not far to seek in the twisted roots of the trees partly concealed by grass and fern, which might well prove dangerous to an unwary rider.

As they raised him the young man moaned, half opening his dark eyes, then closing them again in a fresh swoon.

"He is hurt," said Gwennola compassionately. "See, he groans again: be careful how thou liftest him, Job. Yes—on thy shoulders—so, and bid them prepare the eastern room for his reception: I will myself attend to his hurts when I return."

"A good Samaritan, fair mistress," observed her cousin with a sneer, as he vaulted again into his saddle. "Yet, be warned, lest the hand that nourishes it is bitten by the viper of treachery."

"Nay," said her father, with a smile towards his daughter, "Gwennola is right, though over-forward for a maid, due, I fear me, to her old father's spoiling. Is it not so, my Nola? Methinks the stranger were best left to Father Ambrose's ministrations, so there shall be the less fear of the truth of Guillaume's ill prophecies."

Gwennola allowed her palfrey to draw even closer to her father's steed as she raised a smiling face to his.

"Nay, my father," she said tenderly. "'Tis but that I love justice as thou dost, and, moreover, my heart tells me that yon poor knight, even if he be a Frenchman, is no spy."

"Nevertheless," said her father sternly, "a Frenchman is the enemy of the Breton; he comes not by chance to the forest of Arteze, my child, and, though I fail not in hospitality to a sick man, yet scant welcome will the servant of the King of France find under the roof of a soldier of the Duchess Anne."

"Better the welcome of the halter for the spy, without more ado," said Guillaume de Coray with a malicious smile. "Remember St Aubin du Cormier, monsieur, and be warned by one who tells you that yonder false caitiff is a spy, for all his golden spurs and fair looks," he added, with another meaning look towards his cousin, "which have gone so far to soften the heart of my sweet mistress here."

"Nay," said the old man sternly, "I will abide by what I have said. The Frenchman shall have justice, but no more—the nearest tree for the spy, and short shrift too, if he cannot bring good account of his presence here."

Gwennola sighed. "He is no spy," she whispered to herself, but to her father she dared return no answer, but bent low over the beautiful bird attached to her wrist by a slender golden chain, to hide perchance the tears in her blue eyes rather than from any desire to gaze at her pet's bright plumage, or count the tiny golden bells on its hood. So in silence they rode through the forest glades and up through the long avenue of whispering oaks where the sunshine of a June evening shed slanting rays of golden glory through the rustling foliage overhead.

The Château de Mereac stood on the outskirts of the forest of Arteze, not many leagues distant from the little Breton town of Martigue. The country on this side of Rennes had from time immemorial been the debatable land between

Brittany and her overweening sister France; countless feuds raged constantly between the peoples, such as were fought in the Middle Ages, and even later, along our own Scottish border, and every Breton eyed his French neighbour as a natural and implacable enemy. But, in the year 1491, this natural animosity had grown from a smouldering antagonism into active flame of bitter hatred; for some years past the red angel of war had stood between the two countries with a blood-stained sword in her hand. Ever since the accession of Charles VIII., the rich prize of Brittany had been coveted by his ambitious sister and gouvernante, Anne of Beaujeu, now Duchesse de Bourbon, in all but name mistress of France. French armies had from time to time devastated the domain, but still Brittany, stubborn, gallant, untameable, had resisted the greedy hand outstretched to seize her. With enthusiastic loyalty the Bretons had rallied round their little Duchess, left an orphan at the age of thirteen, to face the perils of her exalted position alone. Her beauty, her helplessness, but above all her courage, appealed to the love and chivalry of her indomitable people. It is true that amongst the great nobles there were traitors to her cause, waverers who proffered allegiance first to one side then the other, disappointed suitors, who, like the Comte d'Albret, vented his spleen at a child's scorn by betraying his country; yet amongst the vast majority of her subjects Anne was worshipped, and her name inspired deeds of chivalry and devotion which had hitherto kept the all too greedy foe at bay. But her case was desperate, and well every Breton knew it; the armies of France might sweep across their borders at any moment, bringing destruction and devastation with them. What wonder that a Frenchman's name was poison to a Breton's ear? What wonder if those dwelling, as it were, under the shadow of the great and powerful enemy meted out scant mercy to their foes when opportunity arose?

Yet for the moment a lull had fallen on the strife; the attitude of France seemed, for the present, to be quiescent, if not friendly. It was rumoured that the Count Dunois, cousin to the French King, and friend of the Duchess Anne's, as he had been of her father, was striving to unite the two countries in bonds of peace. Already he had succeeded in bringing about the release of his friend Louis of Orleans, the bitter enemy of the Duchess of Bourbon, and some said the lover of the Duchess of Brittany, for all her tender years, and the fact that he was already the husband of Yeanne, the deformed younger daughter of Louis XI., whom her royal father had forced him to marry.

The air was, in fact, thick with rumours and intrigues, with the ominous thunder of war growling threateningly in the distance. It was said that the bond Dunois proposed was the holy one of matrimony between France's King and Brittany's Duchess, yet the rumour ran vaguely and doubtfully, and was scarcely credited by those who remembered that Anne was already married by proxy to the King of the Romans, whose little daughter was also affianced, at the tender

age of two, to Charles VIII.

It was a time, therefore, when men went warily, mistrustfully, with eyes glancing to right and left for fear of enemies, and ears open to listen to the breath of treachery. Above all, on the borders of Brittany was such watchfulness needed. What wonder then if the Sieur de Mereac, riding homewards from the chase with his daughter and kinsman beside him, pondered first on the counsel of one and then of the other, finally deciding that the Frenchman's fate must be tempered with justice, but small mercy, and that the rope end was the best meed for the enemy of the Duchess Anne?

CHAPTER II

With the vague wonderment of returning consciousness, Henri d'Estrailles lay striving, at first feebly, then with growing clearness, to recall the events which had preceded his fall. From out of the mists of elusive shadows, which seemed to paralyse his brain, he remembered how he had set out for Rennes in the train of the Count Dunois, who went on an embassy to the young Duchess from the King of France; of how he had lost his way on the preceding day, wandering aimlessly over vast heaths and landes, through valleys and forests, till the stumbling of his good horse Rollo brought a blank to his train of thought. Then, as the mists cleared still more from his weary brain, came the further wonderment of his present situation. He was lying on no mossy sward, with Rollo nozzling his face with dumb endearments, but instead, in a bed of which the fine linen and rich hangings bespoke a seigneur's castle rather than a peasant's hut, whilst, as the pain in his side caught his laboured breath, he became aware that he had been bandaged by no unskilled hand. Too weak to rise, he lay, still vaguely conning over those last hours of consciousness, and striving in vain to fit them in to the present, till at last, outwearied, he closed his eyes and would have slept, had he not been aroused by the soft withdrawal of the heavy curtain at the foot of the bed, and his eyes, in opening, fell, he told himself, on the fairest vision they had ever beheld. It was the figure of a young maiden, slim and tall; the high, heart-shaped headdress, with its long dependent veil, framing a beautiful, childish face, for the bloom of early youth was on the soft colouring of her cheeks and rosy lips, and a look of innocent bashfulness in the great blue eyes which looked down, half smiling, into his wondering brown ones; the red gold of the curls which peeped

beneath the stiff headdress contrasting with the dark green of her tight-fitting bodice and long hanging sleeves. For full a minute the sick man gazed with all the boldness of one whose brain had yet scarcely realised whether it were vision or substance that he saw, and as the blue eyes met his eager glance they drooped, the colour rose in a wave of soft crimson to the girl's cheeks, and the curtain was allowed to slip to its place.

He was alone once more, but no longer did Henri d'Estrailles desire sleep; his pulses still beat with the emotions created by the vision; more than ever he desired to know where fate had led him. 'Twas no unkindly destiny, he told himself, but verily the star of Venus herself which had so unwittingly guided him. His restless excitement boded ill for his hurts, as he tossed from side to side, and his face was already flushed with fever, when again the curtain was drawn aside, and he caught back his breath with disappointment, as this time, instead of the beautiful face of his dreams, there appeared the wrinkled, kindly face of a priest in the black robe of a Benedictine.

"Ah, my son," he murmured gently, as he drew back the curtain by the side of the patient's bed and seated himself by his side, "it is well. I see that you have already benefited by my salves and ointments, and perchance"—he paused, smiling, as he read the hundred questions in the eager face turned to him—"you are doubtless as anxious, my son," he added kindly, "to know under whose roof you are resting, as we are to inquire what brought a stranger to wander unattended in our forest of Arteze?"

There was no hiding the anxiety in the old man's eyes as he awaited the answer to his question, and the sick man smiled as he replied—

"Perchance you had e'en taken me for a spy of the King of France? No, no, father, the d'Estrailles of d'Estrailles have never yet stooped to so vile a task, and, by our Lady's help, will never so soil one of the proudest scutcheons in France; my errand here in Brittany was the Count Dunois' business, for I rode in his train to Rennes on an embassy to your Duchess from my master, but losing my way in this so dreary and perilous country, I had nearly met my fate at the hand of an unruly tree stump, had it not been, I ween, for the unknown benefactor who has played the good Samaritan."

Father Ambrose drew a sigh of relief. "'Twill be good news to my lord," he said heartily, "as also to the fair Demoiselle de Mereac, who pleaded so prettily with her father that you were no spy, that he was fain to spare you from the hanging which Monsieur de Coray deemed your fittest end."

A flush of anger deepened on the young man's cheek.

"Parbleu!" he cried softly, "Breton justice indeed, to hang an unconscious man because, forsooth! he rides unattended and cannot speak for himself! This monsieur——"

"Nay," interrupted the priest, laying a soothing hand upon the other's clenched fist. "Calm yourself, my son, or I fear you will suffer ill from fever to your hurts. Be patient, and I will tell you how it chanced, as the demoiselle herself told me," he added, smiling.

"And the demoiselle?" questioned d'Estrailles eagerly, as the priest concluded his tale of the brief episode which had been so near to terminating his career. "She is without doubt the angel who anon looked down upon me as I lay a-wondering, and who did so far entangle my thoughts that I deemed I must have reached Paradise itself?"

"She is a good maid and a beautiful," said the old priest, with a touch of asperity in his tones. "Moreover," he added, with a smiling glance askance at his interrogator, "she is betrothed to her kinsman, Monsieur Guillaume de Coray."

"De Coray?" echoed the young Frenchman with scorn. "What! the hound who would have strung me to the first tree because, parbleu! I had not the honour of his acquaintance? Nay, father, so sweet and gentle a maid would ill mate with so unknightly a spouse!"

Father Ambrose sighed. "It is the will of her father, monsieur," he said, "and therefore it is a thing that must be—though from small choice, I ween, on the part of the Lady Gwennola."

"Gwennola," murmured d'Estrailles, lingering tenderly over the syllables. "It is a name altogether suited to one so beautiful—Gwennola. Ah, my father, although I have but seen her for a moment, my heart grows bitter when I think of her betrothed to one whose knightly instincts can well be no higher than a butcher's scullion; but tell me, if you can indeed spare the time to a stranger such as I, hath this Sieur de Mereac no other child but this fair maid?"

The priest shook his head, sighing heavily. "Alas!" he replied, "none now, monsieur; although scarce three years since he rejoiced in the possession of as gallant a son as father might desire; handsome, noble-minded and brave, it seemed impossible but that Yvon de Mereac should become a great knight whose name should resound throughout Brittany; but, alas! alas! the holy saints had not so willed it—he fell, monsieur, this gallant youth, scarce twenty years of age, in the bloody battle of St Aubin du Cormier, and the hopes which had gathered so fondly round the budding promise of his noble manhood were quenched in the darkness of the grave; not even was it possible to recover his body, though long and terrible search was made amongst the mangled slain on the battle-field, and since that day when Guillaume de Coray brought news of his death, the Sieur de Mereac has been an old and heart-broken man, ever cherishing his anger in wrath and bitterness against the French who thus worked the ruin of his hopes."

"'Tis a sad tale," said d'Estrailles. "Yet, my father, after all, 'tis the risk all soldiers must run; some are born to fight a hundred battles and come scath-

less through all, whilst another, like yon poor boy, perishes ere he had dyed his maiden sword in the blood of his enemies. Such is Fate, and we must fain abye it. For the rest, it appears to me that this Monsieur de Mereac might well mourn his living heir rather than his dead son, if he is to be succeeded by this poltroon knave who would hang noble knights in cold blood."

"Yes," sighed the priest, "the inheritance falls indeed to this same Guillaume de Coray, and therefore it becomes plain to you, my son, that of necessity he marries Gwennola de Mereac; so the old inheritance comes back again to the child of her father, and in their turn his grandsons may yet rule over the lands of Mereac."

But to this d'Estrailles replied not, seeing that to him it was a thing impossible to dream of, that poltroon lips should touch those rosy ones that had smiled down so short a while since into his heart. The very thought kept him tossing feverishly upon his bed long after the old priest had left him and he lay in darkness.

"Gwennola," he whispered to himself, "Gwennola," and fell to wondering when he might see the vision of her beauty once more.

CHAPTER III

The Château de Mereac stood on a slight elevation, overlooking, on one side, the forest of Arteze, whilst far away on the other stretched vast heaths and landes covered with patches of gorse and whin, briars and thistles, whilst here and there huge boulders of rock lay scattered about. A very land of desolation this, yet grand and even beautiful in its rugged, mournful way, for there is a vein of poetry which runs throughout Brittany, even in its loneliest and most desolate parts, a poetry which finds its expression in the history of its people, set as it is to the music of its wild winds, waves, and rugged moorlands, music in a minor key wailing across wastes and through valleys and forests, music which sings of love and passion, the free untamable spirit of the Celt, with all its romance and love of the supernatural. Like their Scottish brethren, they revel, these people, in legend, folklore, and hero-worship, over which for ever reign King Arthur and his fairy Morgana to inspire chivalry, passion, and love ideals. The keen air and salt spray of their shores act, too, as an inspiration to these great-hearted men and women, bracing them up to deeds of heroism and glory—glory such as their ancestors

fought for and won in the olden days.

A river ran in front of the old Château de Mereac, with orchards and gardens sloping down to the water's edge, and it was here that, that June morning, walked the Demoiselle de Mereac with an attendant maiden, both, it would seem, intent on their devotions, seeing that they raised not their heads from their livres d'heures even when a man's shadow crossed the path of the young châtelaine. But when the shadow became stationary substance, she was fain to look up, though with a frown on her smooth white brow, and a most decidedly unfriendly glance in her blue eyes. The accompanying maiden discreetly withdrew to the distance as the cavalier made his obeisance before the lady.

"I crave thy pardon, sweet mistress," he observed, smiling, "for disturbing thy devotions. Methought I heard the very rustle of angels' wings on the air as I approached."

The Demoiselle de Mereac drew herself up stiffly, facing him with flashing eyes.

"You do well, monsieur," she retorted coldly, "to observe that they departed on your arrival."

Guillaume de Coray shrugged his shoulders.

"Nay, sweet," he observed coolly, "I came not to discourse on angels, though I ventured to intrude upon one, but rather because I would fain speak with you anent the stranger who lies so sorely sick yonder," and he pointed towards the château.

"My father, monsieur," replied Gwennola haughtily, "would, methinks, best reply to any questions concerning Monsieur d'Estrailles. Doubtless he has already informed you," she added scornfully, "that he is satisfied that he is no spy, this French knight, but a noble gentleman of the train of the Count Dunois."

"So I have heard," retorted her kinsman. "But it is also my habit, sweet mistress, to believe little that is not proved. Moreover, I am well assured that this fellow has less right than you dream of to your father's mercy. Were I," he added in a low, menacing tone, "to tell him all I knew, the nearest branch and short shrift would be the hospitality extended to him by the Sieur de Mereac."

"Indeed, monsieur," replied the girl, her face flushing crimson with anger, "you are very wise; but wherefore spare to strike so crushing a blow?—not for love, I trow, of the poor knight who lies sick yonder."

"Nay," he returned, trying to soften his tones, till they resembled the angry purr of a cat, "but rather for love of thee, sweet Gwennola, for well I know how grieved thy tender heart would be to see yon miscreant meet his just doom."

"Just doom!" she retorted, the crimson once more dyeing her cheeks. "Nay, monsieur, surely it comports not with knightly honour to hint at what it is difficult to assert or prove—nay, I will hear no more of your base insinuations against

a brave man. Begone, monsieur, and leave me to my devotions."

"Nay," he snarled, "surely, sweet, 'tis no time for devotions when the star of Venus is on high; let us walk together, and, since it pleases thee not to talk of sick traitors and spies, let us converse on sweeter themes: of our love, fair lady, and of the day when thou shalt be my bride."

She shuddered and drew back from his proffered arm as if he had stung her.

"No, monsieur," she replied, "have done with mockery; you know well my will with regard to our betrothal—as for marriage——"

She checked herself, startled by a sudden change of expression on his face; instead of the suave, mocking smile it had grown grave and hard, whilst the cruel mouth tightened over his gums till his teeth showed white below them, but into the eyes had crept an unmistakable look of fear, as he gazed across the river towards the forest beyond; then, with a quick side glance at her and her maiden, he murmured some excuse for leaving them to their prayers, and with a hurried bow turned and walked swiftly towards the castle.

"What can it be? Saw you aught, Marie?" asked Gwennola, as her maiden, seeing her alone, hastened towards her. "What was it that so startled Monsieur de Coray?—he turned as pale as if he had seen a spirit from the other world."

Both girls crossed themselves, Marie adding that she fancied she had seen a man's figure amongst the trees, but it had disappeared so swiftly that she could not be sure.

"At least it has rid us of an unwelcome intruder," smiled Gwennola. "See, Marie, let us gather some violets and then return to Mass; I would fain demand of the good father how his patient is this morning. Last night he feared fever from the wound in his side where the poor knight's own sword pierced him; only a hair's-breadth more and it would have entered his lung. I must in truth offer three candles at the shrine of our Blessed Lady for sparing so gallant a knight. Think then, my Marie, a hair's-breadth and he had been no more!"

The maid smiled slyly. "The saints be praised, mistress," she replied, adding beneath her breath that the hair's-breadth might well have been passed had the accident befallen *some* knights, whereat both laughed and fell to picking the violets with light hearts.

It was indeed a fair dawn, and the fragrance and sweetness of it seemed to have entered the turret room where Henri d'Estrailles lay, with the presence of the young châtelaine of the castle.. No fleeting vision this morning, but verily a living presence, stately, smiling, beautiful as she stood by his side, inquiring of Father Ambrose how his patient fared.

In spite of her childish appearance—she was scarce seventeen summers—Gwennola bore herself with all the stately airs befitting to the lady of a great house, for, since her mother's death, she had filled the post of châtelaine at

Mereac, and had grown, it must be confessed, from a spoilt child to a wilful maiden, whose self-importance sat so sweetly upon her that her father could find no word of chiding for his oft-times wayward darling. Only, alas! in one matter had he proved firm, and that concerned her betrothal to her kinsman, and even Gwennola, indulged as she was beyond the custom of those stern days of parental authority, dared not oppose herself against the decree, though, with all the strenuous force of her womanhood, she would fain have striven against it, had she dared, ever more too as the months showed her a lover so contrary to all her maiden dreams. How well she knew that for all his empty phrases and mocking vows this kinsman of hers had no love in his heart for her; his very endearments were an insult against which her hot, impetuous young nature revolted. Bitter were the tears shed in secret, and none to see or comfort her but Father Ambrose and her maiden, Marie Alloadec, her trusted friend and companion. And, after all, it was surprising how ill they comprehended, these two. The good father would strive to comfort her with a homily on the necessity of obedience and submission to Heaven, and would only shake his head gravely when she replied, weeping, that Heaven could have no share in breaking a maiden's heart, or else suggest, half hesitatingly, that perhaps her father might listen to her entreaties to enter the cloister. But this latter suggestion found small favour in the eyes of one whose warm young life shrank back appalled from the cold vocation of a nun's monotonous existence. Surely, she told herself, there was some other way, some other loophole of escape from the fate in store for her. Marie Alloadec's consolations were more congenial than the worthy father's, but even they fell short of Gwennola's need; sympathy was all her foster sister held out to her, hope there seemed none. With all the tragedy of youth and all the young girl's exaggerations of woe, Gwennola saw herself condemned to an early grave or broken heart. But somehow, as she stood there, glancing shyly from time to time towards the sick man, the rosy finger of hope seemed busy at the locked door of her heart, which beat swiftly at the messenger's knock, for all her outward calm. And so it came that she lingered in the turret-room, passing from questions of his wound to talk, hesitatingly at first, but with growing curiosity, of that distant home of his in fair Touraine, sunny, laughing Touraine, with its langorous breezes and fair meadows, its fruits and flowers, and the dancing waters of the Loire, so different to their own grey Vilaine. Then, as if half ashamed of her eagerness, or because the brown eyes that looked up into hers brought the blushes to her cheeks and a sudden inexplicable thrill to her beating heart, or because she had caught a grave reproof in Father Ambrose's face which seemed to warn her of unmaidenliness, she became of a sudden the quaintly-stiff little châtelaine once more, speaking to the priest instead of to the patient concerning salves and ointments and such like with the air of a matron of fifty.

"The wound heals favourably," said Father Ambrose, and for all his reverent estate there was a twinkle of amusement, or perhaps sympathy, in his kind old eyes as he glanced from the flushed, childish face, with its framing of red-gold curls and white headdress, to the eager one on the bed, which looked up with such an admiring gaze at the now averted face of his fair visitor. "Monsieur will doubtless be able to continue his journey in a week's time, but he must be careful, for the reopening of an old wound is ever more dangerous than a new one."

"Except the new one be at the heart," smiled d'Estrailles slyly.

Gwennola turned, answering the smile half shyly, half coquettishly, as she replied: "But Monsieur's heart is unscathed? The sword——"

"Truly, mademoiselle is right; the sword spared my heart, but nathless I fear it has not gone unscathed, for what is a sword point compared to a maiden's eyes—if," he added softly, "those eyes be cold?"

Gwennola's face flushed again, and the blue eyes in question drooped, to hide perchance a tell-tale light which shone in them, but Father Ambrose's gentle voice interrupted the conversation.

"Nay, nay, monsieur," he urged reprovingly, "French compliments suit ill to a Breton maiden's ears; for the rest, it is not well that you should talk too long, lest the threatened fever of last night overcome you; if you would be again in the saddle before a week has passed you must e'en be obedient."

"Verily," sighed Henri d'Estrailles with a faint grimace, "your words are doubtless golden, my father, though scarcely sweet to the ear, yet I must e'en obey, seeing that I do ill to grasp too greedily at hospitality which must needs be more pain than pleasure to bestow."

"Nay, monsieur," interrupted Gwennola gently, "we of Mereac grudge no man our hospitality, but——"

"Ay, the but," replied d'Estrailles wistfully. "Mademoiselle, believe me, my gratitude is unbounded, yet I cannot but comprehend how distasteful is the presence of a Frenchman to a family bereaved as the good father here has told me, nor would I linger one moment longer than it is necessary to my hurt; though," he added softly, "I must needs leave behind me for ever somewhat that I had dreamed to keep my own for all time."

She did not reply, only met his pleading glance with one which was half wonder, half glad comprehension, the look of a child who sees before it joys hitherto undreamt of, yet gazes, doubting whether they be for him. The look lingered in her eyes even when she had left the sick man's chamber, and gone slowly down the winding stairway into the great hall.

"Ah, my Nola, so there thou art. Comest thou not with thy old father to-day a-hawking?"

The Sieur de Mereac stood by the long table booted and spurred, his falcon

on his wrist, his cloak flung over his shoulder, a gallant figure, in brave attire, his kindly, keen grey eyes fixed questioningly on his daughter. She ran to him, curtsying and smiling, and slipped one slim arm round his caressingly.

"I knew not that it was your pleasure, monsieur my father," she replied, smiling up at him with loving eyes. He stroked back her ruddy curls fondly as he looked down into the beautiful face.

"Thy father always wants thee, little one," he said tenderly, "as thou knowest very well, spoilt child as thou art. And so thou dost not want to come and see me try my new gerfalcon! Donna Maria? tiens! look then how beautiful a bird she is!"

"She is altogether perfect," murmured Gwennola, stroking the bird's soft plumage, "and to-morrow thou shalt again take her hawking, my father, and I will accompany thee on my little Croisette. Say, is it not so?"

"But why not to-day, little bird?" he asked, half impatiently. "See, the sun shines, and the air is glorious. Fie, then! is it because Guillaume is not here?"

A shadow fell across the bright face, and she drew back with a sigh.

"No, my father," she said in a low voice; "that thou knowest very well,—oh, father!"—and once again she clung to him with a sudden, new-born tenderness—"thou knowest that I want none but thee,—only thee for always."

"Nay, child," he replied, patting her cheek kindly "that would never do; but see, when thou art married to Guillaume we shall still be together; there will come no stranger lord to carry my little sunbeam away from Mereac, leaving it cold and grey for ever. Say then, little one, is that not well?—thou and Guillaume, and the old father here? Tiens! give me a kiss, my Gwennola, for her Spanish Majesty waxes as impatient as my good Barbe without. Adieu, petite, and be kind to the poor Guillaume when he returns."

But Gwennola did not reply; perhaps her voice was too choked with tears just then to make answer to her father's words, but, if so, she quickly dashed the bright drops from her eyes as she met the curious gaze of a youth who sat perched on a stool by the side of the empty hearth: a narrow-faced, undersized lad clad in a fool's motley, his quick beady eyes roving restlessly from his young mistress to watch the gambols of a small ape, which, dressed in quaint imitation of his master, chattered and clambered about, first over the rush-strewn floor, then up the dark tapestries, finally alighting between the outstretched forms of two wolf-hounds, which lay dreaming doubtless of the chase, for, as the impudent little jester sprang to their side, they raised their heads with an ominous growl, and might in sleepy anger have terminated a mischievous career, had not the little creature with an agile bound sprung over their bodies on to the knee of his master, where he sat gibbering and chattering like some mocking imp of darkness, whilst the fool rocked himself backwards and forwards on his stool, chuckling shrilly.

"Silence, Pierre!" commanded Gwennola, the more sharply because she had with difficulty regained her composure; "and go quickly, bid Marie and Job Alloadec come hither; tell them that I would have them accompany me to Mereac to see old Mère Fanchonic. And bid Marie bring the warm wrap I promised the old woman."

Pierre obeyed sullenly enough, for it displeased him to have his sport thus interrupted, but Gwennola paid no heed to his frowns, but stood awaiting her attendants with a little smile hovering around her lips, though why she smiled she could not have told, unless it were that she recalled to mind Father Ambrose's shocked face when the Frenchman spoke of maidens' eyes. Tiens! what harm then was it? It was true,—so she supposed,—but could it also be true that her eyes——? She broke off, blushing crimson at the unmaidenly thought, then sighed as, instead of Henri d'Estrailles' handsome face, she recalled another face which had looked so mockingly into hers that very morn, yonder on the terrace, a cruel, evil face, with sallow cheeks and pale, cold eyes, the recollection of which started another train of thought. What had it been that had so startled Guillaume de Coray? Why had he been absent since that moment when he had parted from her so suddenly? She was still wondering vaguely when the entrance of Marie and Job Alloadec broke in on her meditations.

"Come," she said, a little impatiently, "I have been awaiting thee this long time, my Marie; it grows late, and I would fain be home before the twilight deepens; but, ma foi, what ails the good Jobik?"

It certainly appeared as if somewhat greatly ailed the poor retainer; his usually ruddy cheeks were flabby and pale, and his blue eyes glanced from side to side, with the nervous stare of one who has been badly frightened. Marie crossed herself, paling too as she replied—

"Ah, mademoiselle, pardon, it is true that I delayed, but poor Job was at first so fear-stricken that I deemed he would verily have become crazed outright."

Gwennola stamped her foot impatiently. "Foolish one!" she cried, though there was a ripple of laughter mingled with the anger in her tones. "Say then what has befallen? has the poor Jobik seen the same vision that affrighted Monsieur de Coray this morning?"

"Truly, I know not," replied Marie in a whisper. "But he says—nay, lady, he says—tiens, Job! tell the Lady Gwennola what thou sawest yonder in the forest."

For reply the poor Breton poured forth a mumbled string of vows and prayers, from amongst which Gwennola at last extracted the startling fact that, as he stood by the river bank, he had seen amongst the trees, on the other side, a vision of Yvon de Mereac, his young lord, who had perished on the bloody field of St Aubin du Cormier nearly three years since.

Even Gwennola grew pale as she devoutly crossed herself, murmuring a

prayer to her patron saint before she faltered out an inquiry as to the manner of the vision. It was this, it appeared, which had so puzzled the faithful Jobik, who had worshipped his young master with all a Breton's devotion: he had not stood before him clad in armour as he had fallen, but in ragged and poor attire, with wasted cheeks and eyes at once haunting and terrible, as if, so Job averred, the tortured spirit were in some great peril, from which it pleaded with Job to release it.

In vain Gwennola strove to convince the poor fellow that the vision could be naught but some phantasy of the brain, or that the figure seen was that of some wandering madman who bore a likeness to her dead brother. Job clung to his tale, at last breaking down utterly in his terror and perplexity, and sobbing out prayers to every saint in the calendar to enlighten him as to what the vision would have him do.

It was some time before all were sufficiently calm to set out on their expedition, an expedition from which Marie in vain strove to dissuade her mistress. The thought of so immediately entering the now horror-haunted forest was agony to the poor waiting woman; but in spite of her own inward qualms, Gwennola was firm in her purpose. Truth to tell, the young mistress was inclined to be of an obstinate and tenacious disposition, and, having decided on her plan of action, carried it through in spite of opposition, so that Marie, knowing well her wilful temper, was fain to yield to her wishes, and strive, if vainly, to conquer her fears.

Gwennola, on the contrary, gave no outward sign of her misgivings; some strange elation seemed suddenly to have over-mastered them, and her merry laugh rang cheerily through the sunlit glades as she challenged Marie to a race.

Mère Fanchonic's humble dwelling was reached at last, and the young châtelaine's gracious sympathy and kindly words brought many a blessing down on her head from the old woman ere they departed once more on their homeward way, Mère Fanchonic herself hobbling slowly to the door to scream shrill injunctions to Job to guard well his young mistress, for, though the way was short, there were perils on all sides.

That such was the case in those lawless times Gwennola knew only too well, but she possessed the daring spirit of her race, and her father had ever yielded to her more licence than was deemed fitting for a young girl in those days. Therefore Gwennola had been accustomed from childhood to wander in the woods around Mereac, accompanied only by the faithful Job and Marie, or perchance by her father, or brother. The thought of that brother, so dear and so long mourned, brought a sadness afresh to her bright face as she turned her steps towards the château. The thrill of elation had gone, and a sudden gloom seemed to have plunged her from unaccountable mirth to melancholy; neither could she altogether explain what oppressed her, unless indeed it could be Job Alloadec's

strange vision.

Twilight was creeping with stealthy footsteps upon them, in spite of their haste, as they passed swiftly along the narrow woodland path, and Marie had shrunk closer to her mistress's side, when a sudden crackling of boughs in a thicket close by caused both girls to scream aloud in fear, as a man leapt out from the wood on to the path in front of them. Flesh and blood without doubt was the intruder, no hollow-eyed apparition of the dead, such as they had half dreaded: a man, short, thick-set, with a red stubbly beard and hard, reckless eyes, which stared now into theirs with a fierce, yet frightened defiance.

"Monsieur de Coray?" he gasped, and looked eagerly behind the girls towards Job, who had hurried up to his young mistress's side.

"De Coray?" questioned Gwennola, who was the first of the three to regain her self-possession, signing at the same time to Job to keep by her side. "Is it then Monsieur de Coray with whom you desire speech?"

"Yes—no," stammered the man, glancing from right to left. "Pardon, mademoiselle, I feared—nay—methought——" And then, with the gasp of one who sees safety but in flight, he sprang once more into the brushwood, and disappeared, as suddenly as he had come, amongst the trees.

"Nay," said Gwennola de Mereac gently, as Job, with a suspicious grunt, made as though he would set off in pursuit, "there was no harm; the poor man is half crazed with fear or something worse. Besides," she added with a smile, "thou wouldest not leave us alone, good Job, to find our way home through these twilight woods. Parbleu! it was well that yon poor, frightened rogue had no business with us, for he wore an ugly look, and it is possible that he hath friends, beside Monsieur de Coray, in yon dark forest. Come, my Marie, tremble not now danger is past, but let us return the more quickly, seeing that perchance my father even now grows anxious."

"'Twas a strange knave," muttered Job as he followed his sister and her mistress on their way. "But, by the beard of the holy St Gildas! I had liefer meet two such than——" And the gallant Job crossed himself devoutly, though he did not complete his sentence.

CHAPTER IV

The shadows fell heavily in the great hall of the Château de Mereac. In one

corner the fool Pierre had lain himself down on the rushes to sleep, clasping his smaller namesake to his narrow chest. By the empty hearth Gaspard de Mereac leant back in his great chair, half dozing after his hawking, the gay gerfalcon perched on the back of the seat, preening herself with stately grace, as one who would say, "See one who has proved her worth and won the praises of all who beheld her prowess." At their master's feet lay the wolf-hounds, Gloire and Reine, the former raising his stately head from time to time to softly lick the hand which hung over the oaken chair. A step coming hastily across the hall roused the lord of the castle into a sudden, irritated wakefulness, for well he knew it was not the gentle tread of his little Gwennola, but instead, as one sleepy glance told him, his nephew Guillaume de Coray. Something however, in the latter's disordered dress and pale face roused him from his dreams of gallant hawks and screaming herons to demand abruptly what had chanced.

"Chanced?" echoed de Coray vaguely. "Chanced, monsieur my uncle? Nay, naught hath chanced, but——" He paused, as if striving to collect a train of wandering thoughts, leaning his chin on his hand as he sat down on a bench opposite to his interrogator.

"Where hast been all day?" demanded de Mereac, stretching out his legs with a sleepy yawn and pausing to pat Gloire's faithful head as he raised himself in his seat. "Verily thou hast missed as fair a day's sport as I have had for many a day. De Plöernic rated not his fair Spaniard too highly after all. Seldom have I seen so straight a flight; but thou shalt judge for thyself on the morrow, for I have promised to take the little Gwennola with me, and thou, too, Guillaume, wilt doubtless accompany us?"

"Doubtless," replied the younger man, but his listless tone and moody face drew fresh inquiries from his uncle as to his day's doings. De Coray replied evasively, still preserving the same gloomy manner, whilst his knitted brow seemed to speak of perplexity and indecision.

"What ails thee, man?" cried de Mereac heartily, "thou art as gloomy as any fat abbot on a fast day. Say then, has my lady been flouting thee? A plague on the little rogue, she hath scarce been near me this day!"

De Coray glanced sideways towards his uncle, then downwards, whilst a sinister smile played round his mouth.

"Perchance the French knight's wounds have needed too much of my fair mistress's care," he said maliciously, noting with satisfaction how the shaft went home, from the old man's sudden start and angry frown. Then, dropping his hesitating manner, he leant forward, speaking slowly but emphatically. "Monsieur," he said softly, "it is in my mind that I should tell you clearly that which I alone have knowledge of; perchance you will blame me for not having spoken sooner, but knightly honour forbade me. Now, however, the necessity seemeth

to me greater even than any false sense of magnanimity, seeing that we cross not swords with the viper, but rather crush him under heel before he does us mortal ill, and so——" He paused, to give perhaps greater weight to his words, narrowly watching the stern, set face opposite him, which seemed to have stiffened into an iron mask.

"Speak thy mind, man," demanded the old noble curtly. "If there is ill to tell, tell it me—the saints know I have borne such before—but cease to prate of that which is beside the purpose, as is the way with women and fools—not men."

"Nay," said de Coray, flushing under the reproof, "there is that to tell which will be hard for you to hear, monsieur, and I would but prepare you for the tale; as you may well guess, it concerneth this Frenchman whom fate, by strange trickery, cast at your gates."

De Mereac's jaw closed with a snap.

"He hath satisfied me that he is no spy," he replied sternly. "I have accepted his knightly word, and though it be bitter for me to extend hospitality to the enemy of my country and one of my son's slayers, still, by all the laws of knighthood and chivalry he goes free as soon as he is fit to travel."

"So," said de Coray, "he hath satisfied you, monsieur? That may well be, since he knew not the name of his victim, and yet I may well wonder how he trains his tongue to speak smooth words in a Breton's ear when he remembereth St Aubin du Cormier."

The old man's face paled. "St Aubin du Cormier?" he murmured.

"Yes, St Aubin du Cormier," repeated de Coray, moving a little nearer, as if he feared his words might be overheard. "Listen, monsieur, and you will understand why, at sight of yon dog lying under the greenwood, I cried to you to yield him no mercy, but to mete out to him the dog's death he deserved."

"Speak," said de Mereac hoarsely, "I can ill brook such preamble."

"The battle was a bloody one, as you may well remember," began de Coray. "We of Brittany fought gallantly, as we ever do, and the English archers of Lord Woodville yielded only to the French with their lives; for myself, I had escaped throughout the fight, and towards evening found myself driven back, close to a wood, by the side of the Prince of Orange, who, seeing the chances of the day had gone against us, tore from his breast the black cross of Brittany, urging us, his followers, to do the same, for that nothing remained to us but flight. His words were true, but, for all that, no true Breton amongst us tore the cross from his tunic, though we sought flight readily enough amongst the trees, and in so doing it chanced that I became separated from the rest, and, wandering alone through the wood, came suddenly in sight of a man clad in the armour of a Frenchman, who walked stealthily; for an instant I paused, and, alas! monsieur, before I could conceive the meaning of the situation, it was too late. A Breton knight, whom I

recognised on the instant as my cousin Yvon, was standing spent and weary by his horse's side, whilst the animal drank greedily of the water from a brook which ran hard by. Yvon's vizor was up, and I could see he was pale with excitement and exhaustion, though methinks unwounded. His back was turned towards his enemy, and before I could cry a word of warning, the cowardly traitor had sprung forward and cloven him from brow to chin, so that he fell dead by his horse's side. I sprang forward also, with a cry, but the Frenchman was true to his colours; for one instant he looked at me, then, fearing doubtless that friends of mine and the dead man's might be near, he drove fiercely at me with his sword, and fled, so that in the twilight I missed him, though, so thirsty grew my own good blade for his blood, that I searched till darkness fell and all hope of finding him was gone."

"And?" groaned de Mereac.

De Coray smiled pensively. "Monsieur," he added, "the French traitor's vizor was also raised, so that I read well the features which I saw not again till I beheld them yonder in the forest."

With a bitter curse the old man sprang to his feet with such vigour that Gloire and Reine raised their great heads with a short bark of excitement.

"He?" cried de Mereac, his voice quivering with fury, "he?—the man whose life I spared? the man who has partaken of my hospitality and eaten my salt? He? the base murderer of my Yvon?—my boy—my boy!" In spite of his anger his voice broke over the last words; then a fresh tempest seized him. "Fool!" he cried, gripping de Coray by the shoulder, "wherefore didst thou not tell me this when we found him yonder? wherefore prolong by an hour the life of so foul a thing?"

"Nay," faltered de Coray, paling before the storm he had evoked. "Methought—the Lady Gwennola——"

"Gwennola!" shouted the old man. "Thrice double fool! thinkest thou there would be one throb of pity in her pure maiden's heart for such an one as the murderer of her brother? Ay, murderer he is, and as such shall die. Hie thee, varlet, bid come hither on the instant Job and Henri. Ay! and bid them drag down yon foul thing from the chamber where he lieth so softly, and he shall learn what Breton justice is. Bah! the rope that should hang him would be for ever a thing dishonoured; rather would I give him to my good hounds yonder to tear limb from limb; though, by the bones of St Yves, such death even were too gentle and easy a thing for him."

Pierre the fool, thus roughly roused from slumber to be sent in search of Job and his comrade, stood gaping and gasping before his master's anger, whilst the ape from his shoulder grinned and gibbered in mocking imitation of its lord's wrath; but before de Mereac's fury could burst forth again upon the head of his witless retainer, a voice beside him turned the swift current of his thoughts into another channel. It was his daughter Gwennola who stood before him, pale but

resolute, with no look of fear in her blue eyes as they met his stormy frown, but rather returning look for look, boldly and bravely.

"My father," she said steadily, laying one white hand upon the sleeve of his long furred gown, "I have heard what"—her voice trembled—"what Monsieur de Coray has been saying, and," she added, turning a blazing face of indignation towards the younger man, who stood leaning against the tapestry near, "I call him coward and liar to his face!"

There was an instant's pause, de Mereac's brows drawn ominously down as he glanced from his daughter to de Coray, whose mocking smile seemed to sting the girl to fresh anger.

"Liar and coward!" she cried, stamping her little foot, her blue eyes still ablaze. "Ah, monsieur my father, it is incredible that you believe him."

"Incredible?" said the old man slowly, "and wherefore, child? More incredible to me that my daughter should take the part of a foul murderer, an enemy to her country and house, rather than the word of her betrothed husband."

De Coray's smile deepened. "Monsieur," he said, with a mocking bow, "you asked me why I told a traitor's secret now rather than yesterday—perhaps monsieur is answered."

De Mereac's eyes sought his daughter's face sternly, but again she met them with a glance almost defiant, then softening, as she read a dumb agony behind the anger, till her own blue eyes brimmed with tears.

"Oh, my father!" she cried, drawing nearer to his side with outstretched hands, "in the name of justice listen to me, and heed not the words of yon cruel man. See, my father, if Monsieur d'Estrailles has done this thing, willingly would my hands tie the knot which bound the rope round his coward's throat, but, my father, is it justice? is it a thing of honour to strike like the adder in the dark? I, yes, I, Gwennola de Mereac, challenge you, Guillaume de Coray, to repeat your lying tale before the man you accuse, and let my father judge between true knight and false."

De Coray's smile faded as he met her fearless gaze, then glanced sideways towards de Mereac, who stood hesitating, eagerly, it seemed, awaiting his answer.

"So be it, my fairest law-giver," he said at last, with a forced smile. "To-morrow will be as good a hanging day as to-night, and perchance, as you suggest, the office shall fall to your own fair hands."

She did not reply, but turned, curtsying gravely to her father as she quitted the hall.

Not another word was spoken between the two men left standing there amongst the shadows. De Mereac, whose transport of rage seemed to have died down, since his daughter's interference, into a sullen moodiness, soon strode away, leaving Guillaume alone. The young man's meditations seemed perchance

to be scarcely of a soothing nature, for, till darkness fell, he continued pacing up and down the hall, lost in thought, till a hand touching his roused him with a startled curse, and, looking down, he saw to his surprise the thin, shrewd face of Pierre the fool looking wistfully up into his.

"Monsieur," said the boy softly, "I am monsieur's slave; if I may be allowed to serve monsieur, perchance I can do much."

Guillaume de Coray looked thoughtfully down into the oblique, uncanny eyes, then he smiled. "A friend," he quoth lightly, "is at times a necessity, and should not be refused, mon Pierre, even when the friend is but a fool. Yes, I will accept, and," he added, drawing a piece of money from his pocket, and placing it in the lad's outstretched palm, "I will pay the price of true friendship, mon ami. See, there is already a service you can render me." He drew Pierre as he spoke into a recess, dropping his voice, as if fearing that the pictured figures on the tapestry had ears to hear. "Yonder in the forest," he said softly, "there wanders a man whom I would fain have speech with, a man, short, thick-set, with a red beard and black eyes; tell him," he added, speaking slowly and impressively, with both hands on Pierre's shoulders, "that his *friend*, his *friend*, mark you, boy, Guillaume de Coray, would have speech with him; that there is naught to fear and much to gain, and that to any rendezvous he may appoint I will come alone."

Pierre's black eyes shone as he looked up into de Coray's pale face, nodding slowly. "Pierre understands," he muttered. "Monsieur has trusted to Pierre the fool, who is now the friend of monsieur, and therefore it is understood that the man with the red beard shall be found. Is it not so, mon choux?" he added, caressing the ape, which he still carried in his arms. "Tiens! it is clear that Pierre the fool will soon be rich and great, and the little Gabrielle far away in the forest shall no more weep for hunger." And as he turned away, the boy looked lovingly down at the piece of leather money with its small centre of silver which de Coray had given him. "Without doubt monsieur has a great heart," he murmured softly. "As for the Lady Gwennola, I have no love for her, though she be fair as the dawn, for she has no love for monsieur, and none also for petit Pierre. Is it not so, mon petit? Bah! we shall be great soon, thou and I, mon Pierrot, very great."

CHAPTER V

"Ah, Marie, Marie, what shall I do? Tiens! petite, canst say no word to comfort

me? Bah! with thy great eyes thou hast no more sense than the owls which cry all night in the forest yonder. Nay! forgive me, Marie, and comfort me, because, because——"

"Nay, lady," sighed the waiting-maid, "I fear me there is little to be said, for see, you tell me that on the morrow Monsieur de Mereac——"

"Ah, listen then, Marie, and I will explain all to thee," said Gwennola, clasping her hands as she looked piteously across into Marie's sympathetic face.

"Monsieur de Coray, viper that he is, has for some reason I know not conceived a hatred for Monsieur d'Estrailles, therefore he has told to monsieur my father many false lies, saying that Monsieur d'Estrailles foully murdered the poor Yvon, whose soul rest in peace, at the battle of St Aubin du Cormier, three years since; but Marie, it is false Monsieur d'Estrailles could do no such unknightly deed—nay, I am assured of it."

"But wherefore, mistress?" demanded Marie stolidly. "We know nothing of this French monsieur; it may be that his tongue is no smoother than his heart false. Jobik hath ofttimes bid me beware if a Frenchman cross my path, for they are altogether children of the devil in their deceitful ways."

"Jobik is a fool!" declared his young mistress tartly, "and thou also art lacking in all sense, my Marie, to listen to him. See then how many noble Frenchmen have been true friends to Brittany; think of Monsieur d'Orléans and Monsieur the Count Dunois, who even now seeks to aid our sweet Duchess; but all such talk is foolishness. Be assured, Marie, that I, thy mistress, am convinced that Monsieur d'Estrailles is a good and true knight, and yet, alas! alas! to-morrow morn it may well chance that he will hang as if he were some cowardly traitor or foul murderer—for see then, Marie, it is the word of a Frenchman against a Breton, and though the latter be thrice times a traitor knave, yet well I know he hath the trick of lying with as smooth a brow as any guileless babe, and so—and so—my father will believe him. Alas! alas!" and the young girl broke down into a flood of tears.

Marie stood watching her mistress's distress, tears brimming in her own brown eyes, although in her heart was still some doubting of the Frenchman's honour. But, after all, what maid of any age is proof against romance? and the fact that Gwennola was deeply interested in the handsome stranger was apparent enough to the waiting-woman's eyes. And what wonder, seeing that fate had hitherto offered naught but so sorry a lover as Monsieur de Coray? There was no love for the latter in Marie's heart, which went the farther in his rival's favour.

"Alas! my lady," she murmured, with a sob, "'tis grievous to think of, and that he should die, this poor monsieur, at dawn, on the word of such an one as Monsieur de Coray! If it had been that he were not injured, we might even have helped him to escape, but alas——"

"Alas!" sobbed Gwennola, "with such a wound 'twere death to attempt it. No, Marie, he will die, and I, it may be, will find shelter in a convent, as Father Ambrose hath ofttimes suggested, for well I wot I would marry no murderer, liar and coward, such as Guillaume de Coray."

The passion of her hatred against her betrothed husband for the moment had roused Gwennola from her grief. Now she dried her tears, and, rising, began slowly to pace the room, her head thrown back, and a light gradually dawning in her blue eyes. The wild untamable spirit of daring which had raced so madly through the veins of countless generations of ancestors had lifted her from the weak and unavailing grief of womanhood.

"I will save him," she said slowly, as she faced Marie Alloadec; "yes, it is possible. See, little one," she added, pointing reverently to a small figure of the Madonna placed on a table near, "it is the Holy Mother herself who has shown me how to do it; but go, my Marie, for there is little time to lose, even in prayers, go, tell Father Ambrose that I would see him now, quickly, if may be, in the chapel."

Marie stared. "But, mademoiselle!" she gasped.

Gwennola laid both hands firmly on the other's shoulders, looking down kindly but commandingly into the frightened brown eyes upraised to hers.

"Listen, Marie," she said quietly; "thou must obey without questioning. A noble knight's life hangs perchance in the issue, therefore 'tis no time for woman's fears or weakness; but what I purpose doing I tell neither to thee nor any other, seeing that it were ill for any save myself alone to refuse to answer when my father commands; only this thing I ask thee: go, tell Father Ambrose that I await him in the chapel, see that he fails me not, and, for the rest, be silent. Nay," she added, as tears rose in the girl's eyes, "'tis not that I doubt thy faithfulness, child, but that I would spare thee pain, ay, and myself too, though one thing more there is I would ask of thee which I had well-nigh forgotten. Bid Job lead the stranger's horse from the stables in an hour's time and tether him within the wood close by the river's bank; let none see him do it, neither let him speak of what he does. Also, should he fancy he seeth a figure pass him by whilst he standeth on guard at the outer postern, let him cross himself and deem 'tis a spirit, such as he already dreamt to see to-day, and take heed that he goeth not to inquire too closely as to whether there is aught of flesh and blood about it, for to-morrow mayhap it will have been well for him to have been somewhat blind and deaf."

Marie curtsied, not daring to reply, as she saw the determination in her mistress's face. Nevertheless, as she sped on her errand, she muttered many an ave to her patron saint, knowing well what the fury of the lord of the château would be did his daughter succeed in her daring intention.

It may have been that even Gwennola's heart half failed her as she sank on

her knees in the dimly lighted chapel of the castle. Wrapped in a long hooded cloak, she might well have passed for a shadow amongst the shadows which the moonlight flung around. Involuntarily the young girl crossed herself as she watched the cold, clear beams which fell long and pale across the altar, streaming down in flickering waves of light towards where she knelt in one of the stalls; for, high-born as she was, the superstitions of the day ran riot in her mind, and well she knew the baneful influence of the moon on the destiny of the Breton, and yet—as she argued to herself—the evil omen of the ghostly light might be averted, seeing that he whom she would fain succour was no Breton; and with the thought came others, more mocking and bewildering. Why did she thus dare brave her father's anger, and outrage her maiden modesty for the sake of a stranger and an enemy? The burning blushes which overspread her cheeks at the thought of the plan she had conceived might have convinced her, but the mad whirl of her mind refused to be analysed too closely. In vain she argued with herself that it was but her own keen sense of justice, so certain was she that the tale of Guillaume de Coray was false. But why should it be false? That she could not reply to, except by the illogical, but all-convincing, sense of her woman's intuition. A false quantity that in a hall of justice. Gwennola shuddered as she felt the frailty of such an argument, shuddered as she saw how fast the net of fate had immeshed this stranger. There was a little sob in her throat as she bowed her head in her hands, a sob which, like her deeper thoughts, she refused to analyse. Surely it was but a note of pity for an innocent man whom jealous hatred or some passion she could not divine was condemning to death? A hand laid on her shoulder roused her, and with a little frightened cry she sprang to her feet, but it was only Father Ambrose, that good father who had known and loved her ever since she had first lisped out baby confessions of infantine sin and wickedness at his knee. Yes, it had been a happy thought to send for him, though for his own good she must deceive him as to her intentions.

"The hour is late, my daughter," said the old priest gently. "What wouldest thou with me, child? Surely 'tis no time," he added with a smile, "even for confessions?"

"Nay, my father," she said softly, "'tis no confession, but perchance more of pity for one unjustly condemned to death that moves me to crave thy help."

"To death?" he echoed, glancing keenly at her. "Nay, daughter, but what hath chanced? and who in the château of thy gallant father may dare to condemn unjustly?"

"Nay," she replied, "listen, my father, and thou shalt judge for thyself," and in a few hurried sentences she told her tale.

Father Ambrose listened with bent brows, narrowly watching the fair face of the narrator as she spoke.

"Yes," he said gently, when she had finished, "I too am of thy opinion, my child, for I have watched by this sick man's side for many hours, and methinks truly he is a brave and loyal knight, with no such cruel smirch of treachery lying at his heart; but for all that, daughter, we have scarce known him for two days, and it may well be that we are deceived, for wherefore should Guillaume de Coray conceive so terrible a tale in falseness?"

"Nay, that I know not," replied Gwennola, sighing, "except that he is false, father, false to the heart's core, and speaketh lies as easily as he who is the father of them. Nay, father, reprove me not, for never husband of mine shall he be, by the grace of St Enora herself I swear it; rather would I die, far, far rather bury myself behind convent walls than marry a traitor and coward."

"Nay, daughter," rebuked Father Ambrose, "talk not so wildly, though in the life of the convent there be much peace and happiness for those who find little without; but thou, my child," he added with a shrewd smile, "wert no more born to be a nun than to be the wife of a traitor. But see, the night grows apace, and methinks we do little good in speaking ill of thy kinsman; better it were to pray for the soul of this poor gentleman who dies with the morrow's sun, or rather, that if it please the holy saints to alter so sad a destiny, to send succour to one whom we, at least, do look upon as innocent of this black crime whereof he is accused."

"Pray for his soul?" murmured Gwennola with a sigh; then a half smile parted her lips. "Nay, father," she murmured, "surely 'twill be a fairer division between us if thou prayest for his soul and I for his body. But nay, look not reprovingly, dear father, but listen to the prayer of thy little Gwennola, who called thee hither to crave a favour, besides telling thee of this sad work of the morrow."

"And that, my daughter?" questioned the old priest with a whimsical smile, well knowing the coaxing tones with which she pleaded.

"That," she whispered, whilst the colour surged back into her pale cheeks, "is to bring hither Monsieur d'Estrailles, that I myself may tell him of his danger and—and bid him farewell, for I will not be present on the morrow to see a noble knight suffer such cruel injustice."

For a moment Father Ambrose was silent, eyeing her gravely and thoughtfully.

"Child," he said at last, "this knight is but a stranger who scarcely knoweth thee. Deemest thou it be seemly or maidenly on thy part thus to crave audience with such an one, alone, at night?"

With crimson cheeks but undaunted eyes Gwennola faced the old man.

"Nay, father," she said steadily, "deem me not unmaidenly. Hast ever found thy little Gwennola aught but discreet and jealous of her honour? Nay, father, had I known this poor knight better, I could not have craved such an interview,

but seeing he is but a stranger whom—whom I pity, surely there were no harm!"

"But wherein the good?" questioned the priest. "Surely it were best for me to seek Monsieur d'Estrailles' chamber and tell him all; then, when I have shriven him, we may well pass the night in prayer for his soul, and that the saints may give him fortitude for the morrow."

"Nay, father," whispered Gwennola pleadingly, "I too am praying for the good knight's body, as thou didst agree, and I would fain give him one word anent the preserving of it, which can be but for his ears alone. Nay, dear father, thy little Gwennola pleads with thee not to deny so trifling a boon. What ill can befall? A few simple words of comfort and farewell to a poor stranger who to-morrow must die, and then for the rest of the night thou mayest wrestle alone with him in needful prayer for his soul."

"Nay, child, but 'tis scarce seemly," sighed Father Ambrose. "And didst thy father hear of it, methinks my office of confessor would be held but a brief space. Still——"

"Still," urged Gwennola softly, "thou wilt not deny me so small a boon—but ten minutes, my father, and then thou and he may spend the hours that remain in making peace with Heaven."

"I fear me," sighed the priest heavily, "that thou hast inherited the spirit of our first mother, my daughter, and temptest man with fair words as she did with pleasant fruit. Yet—well I wot thou art discreet, child, and thy heart is soft and warm with pity, doubtless,—nay, there can be no warmer feeling in thy breast for this poor knight. 'Twere impossible that love can find an entrance in so brief a space." He looked curiously into the flushed, smiling face as he spoke.

"Nay, father," laughed Gwennola softly. "Fie on thee! Am I not betrothed to my cousin?"

Father Ambrose sighed as his keen ear caught the ring of defiance in the last words.

"I pray our Blessed Lady that I do no harm," he murmured, crossing himself devoutly. "Methinks there can be little ill in so kind a thought of pity, and it may be that the poor monsieur will regard more thy words than mine. Mary, Mother, have pity on his soul!"

"And his body," whispered Gwennola. "See, father, we say amen to both petitions; and now, haste thee quickly, for the time, as thou sayest, draws on apace."

Slowly shaking his head, as if still beset with doubts as to his wisdom in thus yielding to what he considered a wild, if generous whim, Father Ambrose went his way, leaving Gwennola to pace the chapel with eager steps, finally flinging herself down before the great crucifix which stood upon the little altar. But even prayers at that moment were little better than a wild, incoherent cry, so great

a turmoil raged in the young girl's heart. Now fears beset her as to the folly of an undertaking as perilous as it was daring; only the thought of de Goray's cruel triumph on the next day goaded her forward to persevere in what had been the impulse of a moment, and even this thought scarcely held her to a purpose which of a sudden seemed to grow impracticable, unmaidenly, almost unseemly. Girt round as the young girls of the period were with a host of restrictions and proprieties, the part she now proposed to play seemed almost impossible; only the daring blood of a Breton maid would have made such a thought conceivable, and now outraged modesty rang a host of warnings in her ears. This stranger knight, what would he think of such a suggestion? What would he deem her, thus boldly to seek an interview, herself unsought? She had been mad to have thought of such a possibility of escape, and now perhaps he would scorn her for her unmaidenly forwardness.

The burning blush which swept over her cheeks had scarce had time to cool when her quick ear caught the sound of footsteps, halting and slow, as if their owner walked with difficulty, and at the sound her woman's pity forgot the false sense of shame which had agonized within her. Ay, and she forgot too to question wherefore she took such interest in a stranger, as he stood before her, and her quick heart throb told her swiftly that it was more than pity and love of justice which had brought her to dare risk so much for his sake.

Only ten minutes, and a life weighing in the balances! Parbleu! was it a time for maiden coyness and false bashfulness? He stood still in the moonlight, looking towards her with an eager, questioning glance in his dark eyes. How handsome he was and noble, and yet how pale! Ah! that unhealed wound in his side—doubtless he suffered much, and yet——

She was at his side now, her hood slipping back from her flushed face; for even at that moment she was a woman, and the ill-omened moonlight had no grudge against the gleaming tresses of her hair.

"Monsieur," she whispered. "Ah, monsieur, think me not unmaidenly, but it was your life that was in danger, which is——"

"Unmaidenly?" he interrupted gently. "Nay, mademoiselle, to me, though, alas! I have known you so short a space, you must always be the embodiment of all that is most fair and lovely in womankind; but," he added, seeing that though the colour on her cheeks deepened, she had too much to say to listen to tender words, "you would fain have speech with me, mademoiselle, on a matter of much gravity, the good father saith?"

Rapidly she told the tale, with every now and then a catch in her breath of sheer excitement, but when she would have gone on to what was deepest in her heart, he checked her with a little imperative gesture of command.

"Nay, mademoiselle," he said firmly, "before aught else let me clear myself of

this foul calumny. Ma foi! that this accursed wound prevents me from driving the lie down the dog's throat. Pardon, mademoiselle, but it is hard for a d'Estrailles to listen to so deep an insult and yet wear his sword sheathed; but no—well I understand how matters lie—the word of a Frenchman is naught against that of a Breton whose face hath not yet been unmasked. Nay, mademoiselle, with your father there rests no blame save blindness of sight perhaps in not reading traitor in false eyes; but to you, whose pure heart hath read so truly, it were but right to tell the tale as it stands, though methinks 'tis no easy one to read in all its blackness. Yet at the battle of St Aubin du Cormier I saw that chance of which your kinsman has made so tangled a story; 'tis for you to help me to spell its meaning. The battle was over, and, as yon villain truly saith, the Prince of Orange was taken prisoner in a neighbouring wood, whilst Louis of Orleans was found wounded amongst the slain. It chanced, as we searched for other prisoners of less note, that in this self-same wood I lighted on a man who wore the black cross of Brittany struggling with a soldier of France, but as I came near the Frenchman was overcome, and the Breton knight was about to turn aside, when another, wearing the same black cross as himself, stole swiftly up behind and smote him a foul blow which caused him to fall, methinks a corpse, almost at my feet. Enraged at such treachery, I strove mightily with the murderer, inflicting, however, but a flesh wound on his left arm, and another of less import which clove his lower lip, his vizor being raised; but before I could slay or take him prisoner he dealt me a caitiff's blow which stunned me for a moment, and before I could recover he had fled through the trees."

Gwennola's face had grown white to the lips, as d'Estrailles told his tale, but her blue eyes blazed, as she cried with a sob—

"Monsieur, it is plain, the murderer was de Coray himself. Oh, mon Dieu! mon Dieu! and I might even have married him." Then, drawing her cloak round her, she signed to the young man to follow her. "There is no time for further speech," she whispered softly; "all explanations, monsieur, I must tell you afterwards; for though it is clear to me that your story needs must be true, yon viper with his crooked tongue may well ensnare my father's wit and cruel injustice be done. Yet it shall not be; I, Gwennola de Mereac, will save you, monsieur, because—because I love justice, and will not see foul murder done again by yon false and evil man."

"But, mademoiselle?" said d'Estrailles in surprise. "What is your will? The good father——"

"The good father knoweth not everything," she replied imperiously; "for the rest, monsieur, you may ask questions later, but at present we have but four minutes ere the too anxious father returns to bear you off to confession."

She smiled up at his questioning face, and the beauty of it, seen but dimly

from under the now close-drawn hood, set his pulses tingling and his heart throbbing in a way to which even the sense of his present perilous position had failed to stir them.

Silently, however, in obedience to her command, he followed the slender, cloaked figure, though his surprise deepened as the raising of a piece of heavy tapestry disclosed a small postern door.

"Do not speak," whispered Gwennola's soft voice in his ear, "until I bid you, and keep close beside me, monsieur, for your life."

Out into the moonlight they crept as she finished speaking, a waning light now as the great silver orb sank westwards, flinging more fickle shafts of pale glory over the shadowed landscape. Yet treacherous and fickle though she was, the Queen of Night smiled kindly for once on the two fugitives, and sent no searching rays to inquire wherefore those blacker shadows amongst shadows moved so haltingly down the broad terraces and across the little bridge which spanned the river. How still the night was and how beautiful!

So fascinating indeed had Job Alloadec found the contemplation of the starry heavens overhead that he had no eyes for shadows, stationary or otherwise, and so enchanting were the low, weird cries which filled the forest yonder, where bird and beast sought their nightly prey, that the good Job's ears were equally deaf to the sound of stealthy footsteps which passed him by, though, as the tail of one vaguely innocent eye glanced sideways towards the river, Job crossed himself, murmuring: "By our Blessed Lady, it cannot be that it is the little mademoiselle herself?" And thereafter his faithful ears listened the more keenly for any sound other than the distant cries of the wolves and low melancholy note of the owl which rose from time to time from the neighbouring woods.

"Tiens! monsieur," murmured Gwennola, as they paused at last under the safe shelter of the thicket. "Let us pause; your wound—ah, monsieur, it, I fear me, causes you much pain."

"Nay," muttered d'Estrailles with white lips. "'Tis only a passing spasm; but, mademoiselle, the pain is naught compared to my wonderment, my gratitude, yet——" He hesitated, as Gwennola, throwing back her hood, laughed merrily up into his astonished yet doubting face.

"See, monsieur," she cried, the dare-devil light of triumph dancing in her blue eyes. "You doubt! you wonder! You say to yourself, 'She is mad, this demoiselle of Brittany, who brings a sick man into a desolate forest, from whence it is impossible to flee from his enemies'; and yet, monsieur, though doubtless it is mad, this scheme of mine, it is more sensible than it appears. Yonder then is your horse, whom we must approach cautiously, for I would not that he proclaimed his master's presence. 'But,' you say to yourself, 'what use is even my good horse to me in this present plight? for, did I attempt to mount, my wound would give

me such pain that I should fall swooning to the ground.' Doubtless monsieur is right. But, see, I do not say, 'Mount, ride, monsieur, it is finished, my scheme.' No, I say instead, 'Let us hasten a little way through this dreary forest, you and I and the good steed, and it will chance that we come in time to a spot more lonely and desolate than any in all the region round; here we shall find shelter—poor and strange it may appear, but the gracious saints will have monsieur in their fair keeping, and so it shall be that he will be safe from his enemies until such time as he is able to mount and ride on his way.'"

"Mademoiselle," stammered d'Estrailles, as he raised her little hand to his lips. "Ah, mademoiselle, I am overwhelmed at such goodness, such generosity! Surely it is an angel in the garb of fairest womanhood whom the Blessed Mother hath sent to aid me from so black a snare!"

"Nay, monsieur," she cried softly, smiling through the tears which filled her soft eyes, "'tis no angel, but only a poor Breton maid who loveth justice and bravery, and who hateth a lie and a false coward. But," she added with a glance half coquettish, half doubtful, "monsieur thanks me too soon; it may be that he will find his refuge less to his liking than his prison, for truly if monsieur hath the fears of many——" She paused, smiling still as she looked at him, hesitating; but as his smile met hers the indecision in her manner passed. "See, monsieur," she said, "I will explain; though let us not delay, lest darkness fall too soon. This refuge to which I take monsieur is but a ruin at best, a ruin of what once was a chapel, very renowned, very beautiful, but for many years, ah! very many, it has ceased to be visited, save by the bats and owls, by reason of a very evil legend, which tells how one of the monks of a monastery hard by committed there a very evil and terrible deed, in punishment of which, seeing he escaped the justice of men, he is condemned to wander for ever in ghostly shape around the chapel where in his days on earth he served as the good God's servant, and so terrible is the sight of the poor brown friar that none dare pass within sight of the chapel walls, nay, not even in the broad light of day, for fear of encountering so dread a spectre; therefore monsieur will be safe if, if——"

"I fear the monk's spectre less than thy kinsman's treachery and thy father's rope," smiled Henri d'Estrailles. "Nay, mademoiselle, how can the sight of so harmless a spirit affright when I wear so sweet an amulet?"

"An amulet?" she questioned, looking with curious eyes into his.

"Ay," he replied softly, "the amulet, mademoiselle, of a brave maiden's aid and the tender memory of sweet eyes."

"Nay," she said hastily, drawing her hood over her hair again, with a shy bashfulness, to hide perchance her blushes, "monsieur must remember that I but aid him, because—because——"

"Ay—because?" he questioned eagerly, as he bent to look into the downcast

face. "Because?"

"See, monsieur," she said hastily, pointing towards an opening in the path which they were treading; "yonder is the place. Mary, Mother, protect us!" and she crossed herself rapidly as, with half-scared looks, she pointed to the rugged outline of a half-ruined chapel which stood on the very outskirts of the forest, sheltered only by a thick belt of trees from a wide stretch of moorland which lay, scarcely visible from where they stood, on their left. Behind them, in the rapidly darkening thicket, rose the murmurous cries of the forest creatures; but in the open space around the ruin the flickering rays of the waning moon shone clear. Wild and desolate was the spot, ghostly and weird the hour, yet Henri d'Estrailles smiled as he turned from scanning the refuge thus found to the trembling girl at his side.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "what can I say to tell you of my gratitude? how prove my devotion for one who has at such risk sought to save me from my enemies? Truly, methinks, I may safely abide in such a shelter without fear of too bold intruders; the very presence of monsieur the good priest, my friend, seems to haunt such a fitting dwelling-place. Nay, I do not jest, though I thank the saints I have not the fears which prove so strong a safeguard against my foes, for who could fear, I again demand, with such an amulet as you have given me?"

"Nay," she whispered fearfully, "speak not lightly, monsieur, for though I—I have little fear, seeing that the saints ever have the innocent, Father Ambrose saith, in their keeping, still, 'tis ill speaking thus at midnight of the spirits of the dead, be they good or ill, and, and," she continued, trying to speak more bravely, "I have yet to show you your lodging, monsieur." She stepped forward as she spoke, glancing back for him to follow, with a look in her blue eyes which might well have haunted those of martyr times, so brave yet so fearful it was.

"See," she whispered, as she led the way towards the ruin, "Yvon and I discovered the secret in our childhood's days, and none other know it, I ween, for Yvon, ever fearless of aught, would ofttimes make me play here with him against my will, and so it chanced one day that we lighted on a chamber beneath the ruined altar. 'Tis but a narrow, evil place, monsieur, but at least a safe one."

"And the horse?" questioned d'Estrailles eagerly, for now for the first time hope seemed verily to be opening a way of escape before him.

"Nay," sighed Gwennola, "'tis our chiefest difficulty; but there is beyond the chapel yonder a small shed, monsieur, a shed also ruined, it is true, as the chapel, but 'twill serve as shelter, and, should the poor beast be discovered, still you may well lie hid in safety and security."

The underground chamber, perchance in bygone days the chapel crypt, was, as the girl had said, small and ill lodging, but a man in extremity needs not to lie softly, and to Henri d'Estrailles it was more welcome in his need than a

palace chamber might have been. Yet the young man found it difficult with so full a heart to stammer forth his gratitude.

"Nay," smiled Gwennola, her courage returning as he held her hands in his and she met the glance of his dark eyes, "'tis small thanks I need, monsieur, seeing I owed it to my father to save him from a crime of which he wots little; but now, monsieur, I must say farewell, do I desire to return ere the moonlight fades from the forest," and she made a laughing grimace of misgiving as she pointed towards the gloomy path. "To-morrow e'en," she added, "food shall be brought to you, monsieur, if not by my hand, then by that of a faithful servant; till then I fear me your fare must be frugal, for Marie could bring me no more than this," and with an apologetic smile she laid upon the ground a small basket containing bread and a flask of wine, which she had carried beneath her cloak.

"Nay," exclaimed d'Estrailles vehemently, "mademoiselle, I cannot permit that you shall return alone and unattended through yon dark forest. Shame would it be on my knighthood and my honour to allow one who has already dared for me far beyond my deserts to run so terrible a risk."

"Indeed," she pleaded, "I have no fear. Nay, monsieur, I lay my commands upon you not to advance one step; already you faint with the pain of your wound, also it would be impossible that you should retrace your steps to this place. Adieu, monsieur, I shall have reached the château ere ten minutes have passed."

"Pardon, mademoiselle," he replied gently, but resolutely, holding her little hand so firmly in his that she could not escape him, "but it may not be; weak though I am, and but poor protection, I have at least my sword; as for finding my way, I have hunted too often in my own woods of d'Estrailles not to be able to follow any trail; for the rest, mademoiselle, I shall accompany you."

The power of his will overcame her, yet her red lips pouted rebelliously under her hood.

"I would fain return alone, monsieur," she reiterated with the persistence of a wilful child. "'Tis but a short distance, and little ill is likely to betide."

"The shorter to return," he replied coolly. "As for ill, there will, I ween, be less likelihood with me beside you, mademoiselle."

She yielded with an ill grace, though glad, as women ever are, to be mastered, for all her rebellion, and so, till they came to the river bank once more, there was silence between them.

"And now perchance it may be your pleasure to let me go forward alone, monsieur," she cried with a toss of her pretty head, as they halted within the shadow of the trees, "seeing that the good Job awaits me yonder by the bridge. Au revoir, therefore, monsieur, though methinks I had better say adieu, for small likelihood is there, I fear, that you will chance to retrace your footsteps in safety through yon black darkness."

"I have no fear, mademoiselle," replied d'Estrailles, bowing low over her hand, "seeing that the light of your eyes would guide a man safely, however gloomy his path. Nay," he said gently, still holding her hand in his, "pardon me, mademoiselle, if I allow the gratitude of an overfull heart too free a speech, or that I speak to the betrothed of another of what should remain for all time the secret of my heart."

"Nay," she said, "monsieur has already spoken too much of gratitude for a service which after all was but a duty; though," she added softly, as she withdrew her hand, "as for being betrothed to Monsieur de Coray, it is a thing no more to be spoken of; a de Mereac mates not with a murderer, monsieur, least of all the murderer of a brother; methinks rather the convent walls shall find shelter for one whose life seems destined to be shrouded in so much of sorrow."

"Nay," said d'Estrailles, still detaining her hand, "fairest lady, speak not of convent walls; too much of sunshine dwells in those tender eyes to be quenched in the gloomy grave of a convent life. Believe me, troubles are but as passing clouds, which come but to make the sun more joyous when it shines again, and methinks that very surely behind the clouds the sunshine of true love awaits one so gracious and beautiful; happy knight is he who shall inspire it: nay, could I but dream that such destiny might be mine for but one instant, it would be verily the opening of the gates of Paradise."

"Nay, monsieur," she laughed softly, a roguish dimple deepening in her cheek, though her eyes grew tender as they looked half shyly into his. "The gates of such a Paradise are ever on the latch for the gallant and the brave." And before he could reply, she had slipped her hand away and was gone, flitting like some dark shadow from out of the forest shade and across the little bridge which led through the orchard to the outer postern of the château, where Job still gazed in vague fascination towards the darkening sky with watchful ears and an anxious heart.

CHAPTER VI

Again at early morn Mademoiselle de Mereac walked in the château gardens with her maiden by her side. It was the same book of hours over which her head was bent in seeming devotion, whilst one hand strayed listlessly over the black rosary she wore; but the devotions were, alas! but in the seeming, the

words and illuminations which danced before her eyes conveyed not the slightest intelligence to the reader's mind.

How strange it was that only yesterday she had paced up and down this very path, read the same words, viewed the same flowers, breathed the same air, and yet between that day and this a whole lifetime seemed to yawn!

"Ah, Marie," the girl sighed, as at last, giving up the impossible task, she closed her book and flung herself down on the grassy sward which sloped riverwards, "I cannot read, nor certainly pray, to-day, except to say the same words which run like chariot wheels through my head, and which I fear me will shock poor Father Ambrose when I confess them. But come, let us talk!—sing!—laugh!—do somewhat! for if thou sittest with so grave a face I shall deem—nay, I know not what I shall deem," and, unclasping her hands, Gwennola began picking the pink-tipped daisies from the grass beside her, threading them into a fantastic chaplet with feverish fingers.

Marie Alloadec eyed her mistress with solemn, curious eyes. Of a temperament less excitable and impetuous, the slower train of her mind was seeking vainly to find a clue for this eccentric and wayward mood. Of her mistress's nocturnal adventure she had not ventured a question, though ever since Job's whispered hints concerning the shadow which had flitted by him in the moonlight, she had been devoured with curiosity. But for once Gwennola was reticent, and only gave evidence of the anxious stirrings of her mind by her variable and uncertain moods: now plunged in melancholy, now bursting forth into a wild hilarity which surprised, if it did not shock, her staid handmaiden.

"See!" cried Gwennola, holding up her chain for admiration. "Is it not altogether charming? I must e'en make another. Gather me some more flowerets thou idle wench, seeing that thy tongue seemeth somewhat tied this gay morn."

"Nay," sighed Marie lugubriously, "I thought, my mistress, rather of the fate of the poor knight in yonder turret room than of the sunshine."

"And wherefore shouldst thou think of him?" laughed Gwennola teasingly, as she bent forward, either to gather a more deeply-tinted daisy which caught her fancy, or to hide a sudden wave of colour which flushed her cheeks. "Fie on thee, Marie! heardest thou not that he is a foul traitor and murderer to boot?"

Marie gaped, but ere she could open her mouth for a reply, a shadow falling athwart the grass between them warned her of the reason for her mistress's high-pitched words of virtuous reproof.

"Ah, my cousin, a fair morrow to thee," cried Mademoiselle de Mereac, as she sprang lightly to her feet to face the new-comer. "What! another gloomy brow? 'Tis certain that you and Marie both must have walked on the weed of straying yesternight and seen more unwelcome visions in yonder forest."

De Coray's face grew more sullen than before at her mocking words, as he

glanced from one to the other.

"You do ill to jest, mademoiselle," he said sternly, "seeing what hath chanced."

"Chanced?" she echoed innocently, cutting short his speech with a gay little laugh. "Nay, mon ami, naught hath chanced to my knowledge this morn, save that I have made this chaplet of flowers to crown the head of wisdom, justice, and mercy." And she made as though she would have flung him the daisy wreath.

"A truce to such folly," he snarled. "Well enough you know, maiden, of what is in my mind, and dost strive therefore to hide knowledge behind the mask of foolery."

"Nay," she cried again, her blue eyes flashing at him, though she still smiled. "Truly, I forgot my reverence to so illustrious a personage. Marie, my child, thy best curtsy to monsieur, the high chief executioner and hangman of Mereac." And she swept a deep and mocking obeisance, her eyes still on his face.

"Ay," he retorted, scowling at her this time without disguise. "But better the executioner of a foul traitor and murderer than a——"

She checked him with an imperious gesture.

"Have a care, monsieur," she said in a low voice, which trembled nevertheless with anger as she read the insult in his eyes. "Have a care lest I tell my father your words, ay, and not only of words, monsieur, but of deeds done in that dark wood at St Aubin du Cormier."

He laughed aloud, though there was an ugly look in his eyes.

"Your opportunity has already come then, mademoiselle," he replied sneeringly, "for your father hath bidden me summons you to his presence."

Again she swept him a curtsy, but this time with statelier grace, as she turned and walked onwards alone towards the château, ignoring altogether his proffered arm. Her face had grown paler, but her blue eyes were bright and undaunted as her spirit rose to the ordeal before her; perhaps it was steeled as she glanced wistfully towards, the forest and stood once more in fancy under yonder oak tree, looking up with swiftly beating heart into dark eyes which told their tale so far more eloquently than their owner's halting words.

The Sieur de Mereac stood erect in the midst of the great hall, his tall form towering there like some giant figure of old as he swept an eagle glance over the little group of retainers who stood, scared and panic-stricken, in the background, and whom he waved aside with an imperious gesture as his daughter, as erect as himself, with her face upraised, pale, but proud, came slowly forward, curtsying silently as she stood before him, but without attempting to embrace or smile at him, as she had ever done before.

Unconsciously the old man sighed as his stern glance met hers. Was this his little Gwennola?—the child with the ruddy curls and laughing eyes, who so

short a time since would scramble up on to his knee, and, laying her shining head against his breast, plead with all a spoilt child's boldness for a tale of his battles with the cruel French.

Alas! the child had gone. For the first moment he realized it, and in her place stood this pale, defiant woman, who, he bitterly told himself, had deceived him so cruelly.

Perchance it was the memory of the blue-eyed child running to meet him, hand in hand with that tall, handsome youth, his lost Yvon, which steeled his proud, passionate heart against her; or perhaps it was that he read the reflection of his own indomitable will and dauntless courage in her clear eyes. To him it seemed more meet that womankind should bend, humbly and submissively, to his sovereign will, little dreaming that this slim girl from her cradle had, instead, bent him to hers, till the two imperious tempers had chanced to clash on so dire a field.

"Child," said the old man hoarsely, "what is it that thou hast done? that thou—daughter of mine—hast dared to do? Nay," he cried, his voice breaking in a cry of almost piteous entreaty, "'tis impossible that thou hast done so treacherously, my Gwennola, my little Gwennola! Tell me then, child, and I will believe thy word, though all the angels in heaven, ay, and the devils in hell witness against thee—tell me that thou hast not done this thing; that the escape of this thrice accursed murderer of thy brother is not known to thee; that thou hast had naught to do with so evil a deed."

"Father," cried the girl, clasping her hands, whilst her blue eyes brimmed with tears at the note of pleading anguish in his voice. "My father, listen to me. Verily, I have had naught to do with the escape of my brother's murderer, seeing that he standeth here, yet will I not deny that I, and I alone, aided the escape of a noble and gallant knight, whose life might well have been forfeit to the foul slander of his enemies."

As she spoke she would have drawn nearer to her father's side, have taken the trembling hand which played with the girdle of his long robe, but that he motioned her back with a fierce gesture, half despair, half loathing.

"A noble knight!" he cried furiously. "A noble knight indeed to blacken the honour not only of my daughter, but of his just accuser, for well I can guess the lies with which his viper's tongue hath filled thy foolish ears. Nay, girl, speak no more, but rather go from my presence ere my hand strike down the child who hath stooped so low to save the murderer of her only brother, and a lying traitor."

"Nay, monsieur," murmured de Coray smoothly, as he stepped forward, "surely you would not thus leave so grave a matter, painful as it must be to your noble heart to unveil so black a story; but it may be," he added softly, glancing towards the young girl's bowed figure, "that the righteous wrath of a just parent

hath brought remorse to a daughter's heart; perchance her eyes are opened to what may well have been but the foolish impulse of a generous heart, and now that she seeth her act in its true light, she may be able to guide us in our search for the traitor."

At the words, through whose silky softness it were easy for a keen ear to detect the note of bitter mockery, Gwennola flung back her head with a gesture of angry pride; her cheeks were flushed, and her blue eyes sparkled with an indignant fury.

"Liar and traitor!" she cried bitterly, "viper, monsieur, that you are, thus to strive to poison the fame of a noble knight, because, forsooth! he chanced to witness the foul deed whereof you accuse him; but be warned, monsieur, sin wings its homeward way to the heart that brought it forth, and foully shall perish the hand that sought thy kinsman's life, and the tongue that strove to tarnish his sister's name."

"Peace, woman!" snarled de Coray angrily, though his face grew pale as her words rang in the rhythm of a curse; then, turning to de Mereac with a shrug of his shoulders, "Monsieur my uncle sees," he said, his voice trembling with suppressed anger; "verily it would seem as though this Frenchman had bewitched the poor lady; perchance a little solitary confinement would best bring her to see the error of her ways, whilst we, monsieur, strive to undo what at worst might well be a foolish maiden's mad whim, by seeking in yonder forest for the murderer, who doubtless could scarce ride far, if it be true that his wound was so sore."

"Go to thy chamber, girl!" commanded de Mereac of his daughter sternly, "and seek repentance of thy waywardness and sin in prayer; it may be that if thy heart still remaineth obdurate, a convent cell shall be made to cure it."

"Nay," interrupted de Coray with a smile; "methinks 'twere wiser, mon oncle, to give to me the sweet task. When I have the felicity to call mademoiselle my wife, be assured that I shall take good care to teach her how much foolishness there is in such acts which leave even the shadow of reproach upon so fair a fame."

He looked for a tempest of anger or scorn doubtless from the girl beside him; but this time he was mistaken. White to the lips, Gwennola curtsied silently to her father, and without so much as a glance towards de Coray, walked with head erect and proud step down the long hall and up the narrow winding stairway which led to her own apartment. But coldness and pride vanished as, in a tempest of tears, she flung herself into Marie's arms.

"Would I were dead," she sobbed passionately. "Oh, Marie, Marie, such cruel words my father flung at me, and he scorned me, Marie—me, his little Gwennola, till I thought my very heart would break; and oh! the bitterness of it when that

foul traitor, my kinsman, stood near, pouring forth his venomous lies into my father's open ears; and he believed him, Marie. Ah! the shame of it, he believed him rather than trusting the fair honour of his daughter."

"Ah, mademoiselle," cried Marie, whose rosy face was pale also with fear, and whose eyelids were swollen with the tears of sympathy she had already shed for her young mistress, "how terrible a mischance is here! But, mademoiselle, 'tis, I warrant me, much the doing of that evil imp, Pierre the fool, for Job hath been telling me what chanced whilst we were out yonder plucking daisies and dreaming little of the ill in store for us."

"Pierre the fool?" echoed Gwennola, drying her tears and looking at her handmaiden in surprise. "Nay, what hath the saucy varlet to do in the brewing of such pickle?"

"He loveth well Monsieur de Coray," said Marie, nodding her head wisely, "and hath as little liking for thee, sweet lady, as he hath for aught that is good and true and unlike his own crooked person and soul; and so it chanced that last night, instead of sleeping beside Reine and Gloire, as any well-ordered Christian fool should have done, he poked and pryed into what concerned him not, and, creeping softly in the darkness down the chapel steps, because, forsooth! he thought to hear voices, he cometh so suddenly upon Father Ambrose—who, for some purpose of which the saints alone wot, was waiting there near the chapel door—that the poor priest fell backwards in his alarm down the two steps that remained, and so cracked his head that he hath lain unconscious ever since, and cannot be questioned, which perchance is well for him, as it may be that my lord's anger against him will have time to cool, as he suspects him of aiding you also, dear lady, seeing that the mischievous Pierre, not content with well-nigh killing the good father, goeth into the chapel, where, failing to find aught to account for voices, he further pryeth till it seemeth he picked up your kerchief on the very steps of the altar, and this with his lying tale he carries to his master at dawn, whereupon Monsieur de Coray laid his accusations upon you for the escape of the French monsieur."

"Nay," said Gwennola quietly. "That were a tale I must needs have told, were it but for the saving of the poor Father Ambrose, of whose sorry plight I grieve to hear. Fain would I to his side, Marie, but that even is forbidden me, for here must I bide a prisoner, whilst, alas! alas! it may be that even now they discover the hiding-place of—of——" She checked herself, meeting Marie's curious eyes. "Nay, wench," she said sharply, "heed not my foolish words; and yet, oh, Marie, Marie! my heart breaks with fears and sorrow. Was ever maid so unhappy as thy poor mistress?"

"Nay, dear lady," said the girl affectionately, laying her hand softly on her mistress's. "Courage! it may yet be that all will be well. See, we will pray to our

Blessed Lady, whose protection and aid will most surely be vouchsafed to the persecuted and innocent."

But in her distress and excitement even prayer proved small solace to the impatient spirit of the unhappy maiden. To and fro she paced with all the restless agony of a newly caged, wild creature, now weeping, now crying to Marie to aid her, though in what she neither said nor seemed to know. But presently the paroxysm of her passion passed, and after kneeling for a lengthy space before the carved figure of her patron saint, she rose and smiled more calmly into Marie's anxious face.

"I was distraught," she said simply, "methinks with very weariness as well as grief. Now go, Marie, leave me to compose myself in sleep; last night I rested little and my eyes are heavy for need of slumber. Go then, little one, and glean for me what news thou canst anent the return of my father; 'twill be a fruitless quest, I wot well, on which they ride, seeing that the holy saints have him I love in their keeping."

Her foster-sister, with wide eyes of wonder, not unmingled with dismay, echoed her last words.

Gwennola smiled, and though her colour rose, she replied quietly—

"Nay, Marie, thou art over-bold, wench, and yet, ah! there is none other to whom I may confess it, and by the love we bear each other, my Marie, well I know my secret is safe with thee. Yes," she added softly, whilst a glad light stole into her tired eyes; "yes, it is true, my Marie, I love him, this noble Frenchman, who is a true and noble knight, neither traitor nor murderer, but my faithful servant and lover."

"But," stammered Marie, forgetful of aught in her sheer amazement, "he is a Frenchman, mademoiselle! an enemy! one who would take away liberty from us of Brittany and bend our necks in the yoke of servitude."

"Tush, little foolish one!" replied her mistress severely. "Thou pratest of that of which thou knowest naught. Indeed," she added, with an air of knowledge which sat quaintly on her childish head, "the love of Breton maid to French knight may well be, since men say our Duchess herself would fain have given her heart to the Prince of Orleans, had he not been already wed."

"Nay," murmured Marie, abashed, yet persistent, "but Madame the Duchess is the bride of the noble King of the Romans."

"That goeth not to say that she loveth him," retorted Gwennola wisely; "indeed, poor Duchess! how can she, seeing she hath never seen him? And ill is it to wed without love, be a maid queen or peasant wench; and verily I will have none of it on such terms, though my father command me to take the veil in choice. Ah, Marie!" she cried, stretching out her hands towards the hesitating girl, "thou wilt help me, wilt thou not? For I love him, this poor, persecuted

knight, Frenchman though he be—ay, and shall love him and none other for all time: and love is sweet, my Marie, though as yet mayhap thou hast not tasted of its sweetness; but when it cometh——"

"Nay," retorted Marie tossing her head, "small love have I for any man, save only for my father and brother Job, for well I wot, as my mother hath oft told me, that they are but poor creatures at best, and little worth the tears and pains they put us foolish women to. Yet, sweet mistress," she added, laying her hand affectionately on Gwennola's, "I would aid *you* with my very life, ay, though my lord verily putteth me to the torture for so doing."

"Nay," murmured Gwennola, turning pale, "that my father would never do, as well thou knowest, foolish one."

"As for that," replied Marie with a shrug of her buxom shoulders, "I know little of the kind, for my lord is a terrible man in passion, and for the torture—did not my Lord of Quimperel so do to death one of his wife's maidens who refused to confess her mistress's secrets?"

"Nay," sighed Gwennola with a shudder, "my Lord of Quimperel is a man of bloodthirsty moods and evil repute, ever loving to inflict pain; but my father, changed though he be to his little Gwennola, by the poisoned tongue of lies, would never so forget his honour."

"Be that as it may, sweet mistress," replied Mane, smiling, "I am yours, to do your will, even to the death; command me then, and blithely will I obey!"

"I must e'en think," murmured Gwennola, pressing her hand to her forehead, "for well I can guess that at least my kinsman will leave no unguarded door of escape from his watchful eye. Yet methinks we may outwit even him, my Marie, with caution and daring, if so be that my father's search to-day is fruitless."

"Then monsieur lies yonder?" inquired Marie, eager, now that her scruples and surprise were overcome, to assist in this unexpected romance.

"Hush!" whispered her mistress with raised finger. "Better it were not to speak on such matters, seeing that even walls have ears; but hie thee, Marie, below, and see what news thou canst bring me of how matters go."

Those were days when the romance of love indeed reigned paramount in every woman's heart, from the lady who, from her casement, smiled down at her knight riding by with her favour in his helmet, to the serving wench who watched her swain go from her to the wars with a tear in her eye and a choking pride in her throat at sight of his gallant bearing and the bunch of bright ribbons she had herself pinned to his breast. And, alone now in her chamber, Gwennola was dreaming tenderly of the romance which had been borne so swiftly and unexpectedly into the grey gloom of her young life, flushing it with all the rosy dawn of love and beauty. She told herself, as her heart throbbed gladly to her thoughts, that she had loved him from the moment she had seen him lying all un-

conscious in the forest. And what wonder, seeing how empty of such dreams her heart had been before?—and yet how hungry for them, with the hunger for such romance as is dear to seventeen summers in any century! And she had found him, her knight, noble, handsome, surrounded with the glamour of strange and thrilling circumstances, chivalrous and devoted. Ah! it could not be that a foul lie and a hempen rope of shame should, rudely terminate so sweet an idyll? Her heart seemed to beat to suffocation as she strove against the thought, listening with anxious ears for the return of Marie.

How long the time seemed, and yet all too short, ere she heard the swift sound of returning feet! Was it possible that even now the news would be that all was over, and that guile had triumphed bloodily over innocence and truth?

"Mother of Help," she moaned, sinking once more on her knees before the little shrine—"Mother of Help, save him!"

"Nay, lady," whispered Marie's voice behind her. "Have no fear, I have no news but what is good to hear, although I fear me that my lord and Monsieur de Coray have returned in no holy frame of mind from their bootless search, and resignation to failure sits not placidly on either brow. I had speech with Jobik, poor fool! who, it seems, would fain have been cursing yon poor French monsieur for killing his young master, and perchance might have spoken evil words of you, had I not twitted him for a moon-faced oaf and told him all the truth."

"Mother of Mercies, I thank thee!" cried Gwennola softly, as she bowed her head in thanksgiving. Then, raising a radiant face to Marie, "Now," she cried softly, "cometh the time for brave hearts and wise heads, my Marie, for we must e'en find some mode of taking to monsieur both food and drink, for starvation were little better than the rope, though perchance more honourable."

"Nay, mademoiselle," said Marie earnestly; "you must leave such work to Jobik or to me. Tell me but where the noble knight lies, and, I warrant me, he shall not die of starvation."

But Gwennola shook her head, laughing and blushing as she replied—

"Nay, Marie, be not too ready with thy offers, for, alas! what would the poor Job say"—she dropped her voice to a whisper—"did I bid him go by moonlight to the Chapel of the Brown Friar?"

"Merciful saints!" gasped Marie, paling as she crossed herself. "Nay, lady, you do but jest; it is not possible that a noble knight could find so fearful a resting-place?"

"I say nothing," smiled Gwennola, "because, little curious one, it is better for thee not to be too wise; but verily it is truth that I must to the forest, this night, alone, to take food and wine to this gallant knight."

Marie hesitated; the thought of her young mistress going alone into the dark and lonely forest was terrible, but honest and steadfast as was the girl's

devotion, she would a hundred-fold rather have faced death itself than the grim spectre of the haunted chapel.

"I beseech you, sweet mistress," she murmured through rising tears—"nay, I implore you—it is not possible that you, Mademoiselle de Mereac, should go alone, at midnight, through yon forest, for the sake of—the sake of——"

"One whom I love," whispered Gwennola, half shyly, half defiantly. "Nay, maiden, chide me not; the name of Gwennola de Mereac shall lose none of its honour by so daring; and for cruel tongues, see you, my Marie, there will be none. Fie on thee, child! dost not know yet, or hast listened to minstrel lays in vain, that love hath no fear so long as it reigns in purity and virtue?—and therefore such love shall be my amulet, did the Brown Friar himself strive against me."

Again Marie crossed herself, with pale cheeks and frightened eyes, yet silenced by her mistress's glance more than her words, for well she knew by the compression of those small, rosy lips, and the sparkle in those bright eyes, that there was no resisting the proud young will.

"An this be love," murmured the handmaiden as she turned aside, "may the holy St Catherine protect me from such spells! for verily my lady is distraught with it to dream of so mad an enterprise. The saints preserve us from the wrath of my lord should some evil chance reveal it!"

CHAPTER VII

Softly the moonlight stole through the interlacing branches of the trees, like white-robed fairies who come earthward to kiss the sleeping flowers into fresh beauty for the morrow's sun. Darkly against the silver sheen stood out the rugged, ivy-grown walls of the forest chapel. It was a spot sufficiently romantic for the youngest and tenderest of lovers, and yet not without its thrill of that gloom and foreboding which seems to haunt the land of Brittany, where such stern shadows seem indissolubly mingled with the wild beauties of poetry and romance.

But, for the moment at least, shadows had fled into the darkness of the surrounding forest, and romance reigned clear and beautiful as the Queen of Heaven, who shed her silver beams down so softly on the two lovers sitting there amongst the ruins which superstition had clad with such terror and awe.

It was the third night that Gwennola had successfully stolen out from her

father's château, leaving two faithful hearts to beat in anxious fear for her safety until her return. So little dreamt any of such an undertaking, that the task had been less difficult than she had supposed, and so, night after night Job had watched with gloomy fear the dark, hooded figure slip past him and vanish like some grim shadow into the grimmer blackness of the forest, and there, divided betwixt love and the overpowering fear of superstition, he had been fain to watch for her return, whilst the moments dragged by leaden-footed, till more than once love overcame fear, and he started from his post in search of his young mistress, only to come to a halt midway down the terrace path, whilst the beads of perspiration stood thickly on his brow as he muttered aves and paters, and finally with a groan of terror fled back to his place as he recalled the dread vision which had already looked at him, hollow-eyed and beseeching, from amongst the trees, till his knees knocked together in a perfect frenzy of terror.

But no such fears now troubled Gwennola, for love had bidden such phantom terrors a mocking adieu. Yes, they were lovers now, not bowing and curtsying to each other, with eyes more bold and eloquent than the stiff phrases of their tongues; there was no more speech of gratitude or duty, or the many foolish subterfuges by which love must first hide himself, but instead all the glamour and passion of first love, which exaggerates itself and its dreams of sentiment and finds in itself so sweet a delirium that it forgets all else and mocks gaily at staid middle age, which shakes its head so wisely at such quaint fantasies and preaches truisms against its tender madness which are listened to with deaf ears; for youth must have its way and dream its dreams of love and fair ideals, which clothe it in all its springtide of beauty, little recking of the winter that must perchance disperse all, or sober them down to greyer tints.

"Ah, sweet," whispered d'Estrailles as he bent down to look into the blue eyes raised so happily to his; "what shall I say to prove to thee the devotion with which thou hast inspired me, or thank thee for the tender heroism which brings thee thus to me through such perils?"

"Nay," she replied gaily, "speak not of thanks, my Henri, but rather of our love. What fear have I, my beloved, save for thy safety? Ah," she cried, clasping her hands with a sudden gesture of pain, "every time my father rides forth my heart beats with terror for fear that by some unlucky chance he should discover thy hiding-place, for his heart is still bitter against thee, my Henri, for de Coray still distilleth his poisoned words into his ears; neither will he so much as look on me, his daughter; whilst for the poor Father Ambrose, he hath sworn to send him back to his monastery in disgrace so soon as his sickness is healed."

"Nay, weep not, little one," said d'Estrailles gently, as he drew her into his embrace, "but let us rather dream of the days when all this suffering and wrong be past, and when thou, sweet Gwennola, art my wife, and ridest with me to

our château on the gay Loire, where I will give thee sunshine and mirth, beauty and laughter instead of these dreary forests and grey gloom, which seem fitting surroundings for traitor hearts and sad forebodings."

"Nay," she said with a sigh, "it is of my Brittany thou speakest, dear heart, and I would not that thou shouldst find it so ill a place, for I love it dearly, ay, so dearly!" she whispered, clinging to him, "though perchance in time thy château of sunshine shall be more dear, my Henri, because of thy presence; but I would have thee also to love in some measure the Château of Mereac, and in time, it may be, my father, who is good—ah! so good, so noble, so brave!—although now it would seem his ears are closed and his eyes blinded by a treacherous foe."

"Nay," said her lover tenderly, "I was wrong, sweet, to speak of gloom where I found such sunshine as hath before never lighted the fairest spot of fair Touraine. See then, it shall be that which thou lovest, I love, and what thou hatest——"

He broke off to turn swiftly in the direction of the forest, his hand on his sword, as though he had caught a sound other than the constant murmur of cries from bird and beast which arose in plaintive cadences around.

"What is it?" breathed Gwennola, with a little gasp of fear, as she bent forward to gaze in the same direction as that in which his eyes were still turned.

"Methinks 'twas but a fancy," he replied softly; "and yet—see, sweet, what is that which moves yonder? Nay, 'tis naught, but some animal, or——"

But Gwennola's face had grown white with terror, as with horror-stricken eyes she gazed across the open space towards where, in a bright patch of moonlight, sat a small, wizened creature perched on its haunches, the very impersonation of some imp of darkness, which, after pausing one brief instant to mouth at them in seeming mockery, fled nimbly back into the forest with a shrill cry.

"Bah," murmured d'Estrailles, devoutly crossing himself, "'tis verily a spirit of evil, little one, that fled at the glance of thy sweet eyes."

"Nay, rather," faltered Gwennola tremulously, "'twas the ape of Pierre the fool, and verily the spirit of evil was doubtless lurking unseen in the shadows behind," and in a few brief words she told her lover of Marie's tale and the devotion of the fool to Guillaume de Coray.

"Fly, Henri, fly!" she pleaded. "Surely there is yet time; thy wound heals well, and methinks even at some pain 'twere better to fly before discovery overtakes us. Alas, alas, how evil grows our case when it seemed to promise so fairly!"

"Nay," laughed d'Estrailles undauntedly, "'twere better first to strive to teach fools their foolishness," and without awaiting her reply he plunged into the forest, only to emerge some moments later crestfallen and indignant. "Truly the knave is in league with de Coray's own master," he said with a grimace of discomfiture. "Not a trace of him is to be seen. But come, sweet, wear not so

troubled a brow; methinks the danger is as little pressing as heretofore, seeing that none know of yon snug chamber, where I may well mock their vigilance for many days."

"Nay, Henri," entreated Gwennola, as she clung afresh to him. "Go, I beseech thee, whilst there is yet time. Oh, what agony shall I endure till thou art in safety!"

But for all her pleading he refused to be turned from his purpose of lingering another day, yet less, perchance, from selfish motives as from fear of what might befall her did the fool's tale move her father's anger more mightily upon her.

"To-morrow eve," he cried, laughing at her fears, as he held her two white hands in his, and kissed her on her quivering lips. "Courage, little one, 'tis but a terror that will pass with the dawn, and if thou fearest the malice of this crooked fool, why, smile upon him with thy sweet eyes, and thou must needs make him thy slave for ever."

So, perforce, seeing he was a man and wilful, she was fain to yield, though her blue eyes still looked into his with wistful foreboding as she entreated him to be careful, and remain in the safe shelter of his hiding-place. So back through the forest they went together till they caught sight of Job Alloadec's broad figure standing stiff and straight by the outer postern of the wall, when they bade each other once more a tender adieu.

"Farewell, little one," whispered d'Estrailles, the more gaily as he felt his cheek wet with a stray teardrop which had fallen from her soft lashes. "Fear not yon impish fool, who dared thus insolently to look within the gates of Paradise; seal his tongue with sweet looks, and perchance a silver piece, and to-morrow——"

"Ah, to-morrow," she sighed. "Alas! to-morrow."

"Ay, alas indeed," he murmured, "since I must needs, it seems, bid farewell to my sweet lady, and yet not farewell, but only au revoir, dear love, for if thy father relents not, nor opens his eyes to treachery and falsehood, I shall very speedily return to steal thee away, since till thy coming there will be no sunshine in the Château d'Estrailles, and the hours will go slowly for the very weariness of the waiting."

She smiled sadly back into his face.

"Ah, my Henri," she murmured, "what lies between those days and these? Verily my heart groweth heavy in wondering whether they will ever be."

"Nay," he cried boldly, with all a man's insistence and scorn of danger's shadows, "they must needs be, sweet one, since love demands it."

"Our Lady grant it," said she, and passed on her way towards the gloomy château, leaving him to ponder on what lay so dimly and mysteriously before

them on the path of life; for verily it seemed that the course of true love was little likely to run smoothly for Breton maid and French noble in those days of bitter enmity and danger.

CHAPTER VIII

The next day was at last drawing to a close. All through the long hours Gwennola had sat waiting in torturing suspense for what news Marie might bring her. Still a prisoner in her chamber, she had seen none save her foster-sister and brother since the day of Henri d'Estrailles' mysterious disappearance. Had it not been for de Coray's insistent suggestions of ill, the Sieur de Mereac's heart would long since have softened towards his cherished daughter, and he would, perchance, after the fashion of love, have found some excuse for conduct which his inmost heart told him had some other motive than those maliciously suggested by de Coray's evil tongue; as it was, the latter so successfully kept the warmth of his anger stirred within him that he fiercely shunned any suggestion either of seeing or being reconciled to Gwennola, whilst upon Father Ambrose's innocent head were heaped the bitterest invectives of his fury.

But even the news of her father's unrelenting anger towards her failed to move Gwennola's heart. All thought, all feeling, was for the time being centred on her lover, after the manner of foolish and wayward maidens who, in the awakening of such passion, forget the love which has sheltered them from childhood; and in the case of Gwennola de Mereac such forgetfulness might in some measure be excused, seeing that love had been born with her twin-sister pity for a sick and innocent man, and such pity roused to the depths the finer fibres of her woman's heart. The instinctive feeling of protection towards one who was helpless had, even more than the vague, unnamed whisperings of love, steeled her to her purpose and inspired her courage in defiance of what she felt to be foul injustice to an innocent man. But now pity was forgotten—submerged, as it were, in her passionate love, for Gwennola was a true daughter of Brittany, strong to hate as to love, undaunted, brave with that powerful tenacity of purpose which seems inherent in these people whose whole lives are set, as it were, against the adverse forces of nature, which strive for the mastery of that grey, bleak shore. She had given her love to Henri d'Estrailles, and for that love's sake all ties were swept aside, save only those which upheld her own pure young soul and guarded

the honour which must ever be more cherished even than love itself in a noble woman's heart. Yet honour itself seemed to call her now to act the part she had set herself, honour not only her own but her father's, who little knew the part that fate was striving to force upon him.

So it was with a clear conscience that Gwennola knelt in prayer before the little shrine of the Virgin Mother, asking help in her secret enterprise.

"And oh, Blessed Mother of Heaven," she cried with a sob, as she buried her face in her hands, "grant that all may be well, and that the saints may have him in their good keeping till we meet again." But even with the words her heart grew chill as she pondered how that meeting might be, and how, even did he escape present danger, they, whom circumstances had called to enmity rather than love, might hope to meet to plight their troth in happier days. Instead, there uprose before her eyes the mocking, cruel face of Guillaume de Coray, and when she turned with loathing from it, there seemed to meet her only the sunless gloom of grey, convent walls.

"At least," whispered hope and youth, "there is still to-night; once more his arms shall hold thee in his tender embrace, and thou shalt read fresh vows of love in those dark eyes which speak only of faith and constancy; surely it will be that love hereafter shall find another way in the darkness of the future."

So she comforted herself, and listened also to Marie's cheering words of confidence with a smile on her lips; but the smile faded as amongst the dark shadows of the trees gloomy forebodings gathered once more and pressed their weight of sad presentiment on her beating heart as she hurried along the narrow path.

How foolish it was to pause with a fresh throb of fear as from the thicket near the rustle of a scurrying rabbit startled her ear! And why should she tremble so violently when a great white owl almost swept her cheek with its soft wings as it vanished into the darkness with a low melancholy hoot? So overstrung indeed were the poor girl's nerves that she must have fled homewards in sheer terror of she knew not what, did not a stronger emotion impel her forward.

At last, however, the outskirts of the wood were reached; yonder through the trees she caught a glimpse of the grey, ivy-covered walls. How still all seemed! Even for the moment the distant cries of birds and beasts were hushed; the sound of her own footsteps alone broke the silence—a silence which had oppressed her ever since she had left the slumber-bound château. Her heart bounded as she hurried forward, looking, with eager eyes, to see the tall figure standing there with outstretched arms and welcoming whispers of love. It was strange that he had not heard her approach and hurried forth to greet her, as he had before, but still——

The wondering thought was suddenly checked as she stepped from the

shadow of the trees into the moonlit space surrounding the forest chapel. All was as silent and untenanted as that first night when she and her lover had stood there glancing with half-scared looks towards the weird old ruin.

"Henri," she cried, and in the silence her voice seemed to ring shrill and clear, "Henri!"

A vague note of terror rang in the cry as she hurried with panting breath towards the ruin itself, telling herself that he might perchance have fallen asleep in his hiding-place. But no; no answer was returned to her cries; the chamber under the altar was empty and deserted. For a moment she stood there, paralyzed with fear, yet scarcely realizing what could have happened. It could not be that he was taken? She put the idea from her in agony. No, no, not that! How foolish she was!—how could he have been taken without the knowledge of Job or Marie? All day neither her father nor de Coray had left the castle, not even for their favourite hawking or boar hunting; no whisper of suspicion had been breathed in the hearing of either of her faithful servants; it had seemed, so Marie said, that all thought—if they thought at all—that the French knight had long since ridden away far beyond pursuit. Then a hundred eager suggestions filled her mind: he had gone to meet her as she came, and had missed his way; or perhaps, learning of some new danger, had been forced to fly without awaiting her coming. But a hurried search of the shed close by convinced her at least of the futility of this last idea, for Rollo still stood in his place, turning with a low whinny of inquiry to see if it was his master who had come with his evening meal.

"Alas! alas!" moaned Gwennola, fresh fears assailing her, as she turned once more towards the gloomy ruin, "what hath chanced? Oh, wherefore heeded he not my warning to fly yesternight? Ah, if——" She had stooped, with the last words on her lips, and, with the confirmation of her fears before her, raised from the ground a tiny cap decorated with one tiny bell—it was the cap of Petit Pierre, the fool's ape. "He is taken," whispered the girl to herself in a dull, unrealizing tone; "he is taken."

With dawning comprehension she gazed round with a shiver, picturing the scene which, like the vision of a crystal-gazer, began slowly but clearly to rise before her.

Here he had waited for her, unconscious of danger, with a smile on his lips and the love-light in his eyes, perchance in his folly humming the air of a ballad, as he had yesternight. Then through the trees treachery had stolen upon him, and where he had looked to see love, death himself had stalked grimly on the scene. She shuddered, covering her face with her hands, as if to shut out the sight of some terrible phantom. Yet for all that her restless brain conjured up before her unwilling eyes fresh scenes of terror; her father, stern, implacable, revengeful, as he remembered the fair-haired boy so cruelly done to death in that

far-off wood of St Aubin, and beside him the true perpetrator of the deed, smiling, triumphant, full of cruel and evil suggestions and words, with the cunning, vacant face of Pierre the fool, gleeful at the part he had been doubtless paid to play, at his elbow; whilst the background was filled up with grim, curious faces, pitiless, for the most part, save where Job and Marie Alloadec stood fearful, and perchance weeping, yet not for his sake, but for hers. Alas! not one there to pity *him*, to look kindly on *him*; he was alone, surrounded by cruel enemies, with death standing in the shadows beside him—death, in all its hideous garb, without even the golden glamour of glory to hide its mocking features. A resolve to hasten back to the château and to stand beside the man she loved overcame the sense of faintness which at first threatened her, but even as she rose, with that aching pain of sorrow, too deep for tears, at her heart, a cold touch on her hand sent the blood throbbing back with a sudden frenzy of fear. The memory of the unrepentant friar who so grimly strolled around the earthly scene of his sins came vividly before her, and as she bent her eyes she fully expected to see them rest upon the shadowy cowl of the chapel's ghostly inhabitant. Instead it was the lean, grey form of the wolf-hound Gloire on which her eyes fell, meeting the beast's dumb, affectionate gaze with the thrill which sympathy in distress ever brings, even if that sympathy is but a dog's—perchance at times a truer and more helpful one than his human master's.

"Gloire," she whispered, bending down with a sudden impulse to kiss the shaggy, faithful head. "Ah, Gloire, how camest thou hither? Was it because thou knewest—wise beast!—that thy mistress was in sore need of a comforter, and alone in this terrible place, with a heart which, I fear me, must break ere dawn?"

The great animal whined as it licked her face, then suddenly drew back with a low, ominous growl as a rustle of branches near caught their ears. In an instant Gloire was transformed from the sympathizer into the outraged guardian, his grey hairs bristling, his teeth gleaming white from drawn-back gums, his whole aspect one of angry antagonism. But the quick footsteps, instead of coming up the path towards them, had turned aside, as if their owner were hastening towards the open heath beyond the forest. But Gloire was not minded to let even an unseen intruder go without his passport of approval, and, breaking loose from the gentle, restraining hand of his mistress, leapt forward, with an angry bay, in pursuit.

"Gloire, Gloire, come back!" cried Gwennola softly, in much alarm, as she hastened forward in the direction which the great hound had taken. "Shame on thee, Gloire! return instantly."

But Gloire was little minded to obey the gentle command, for he had already reached the open, and his quarry was in view.

It was a wild, picturesque scene, with a weird grimness in it which was

to remain ever imprinted on Gwennola's memory. The clear moonlight shone over the vast tract of heath with the radiance of day, clumps of broom and gorse here and there casting black shadows in the white light. No sign of habitation was visible, naught seeming to flourish in this desolate region saving only briars and thistles. Here and there piles of stone, almost druidical in shape, lay scattered about, these, the people of the country affirming to be the houses of the Torrigans or Courils, wanton dwarfs, who at night bar your road, and force you to dance with them until you die of fatigue, whilst others declare that they are fairies, who, descending from the mountains, spinning, have brought away these rocks in their aprons. For the most part these shapeless monuments consisted of three or four standing stones with another laid flat on the top, and, seen by moonlight, presented a fantastic appearance, dotted as they were over the barren heath.

From the forest, where Gwennola stood, the ground stretched away in a sharp declivity, to rise again beyond, thus forming a small valley. It was down this valley that the figure of a man was seen flying, it would seem for very life, as indeed he was, though, perchance, scarcely yet aware of the fact, for behind him, swift upon his track, came Gloire, a gaunt, grey figure of doom, seen thus in the moonlight.

For a moment Gwennola stood uncertain, swiftly weighing in her mind what she had best do, but the man's peril decided her, and in imperious tones she called the hound to return. At the sound of her voice both man and dog paused, turning towards her for an instant, and with a throb of alarm the girl recognised in the clear moonlight the features of the man who had so suddenly sprung on to her path the day she returned through the forest from her visit to Mère Fanchonic.

It was not a face to be easily forgotten, with its red, stubbly beard, broad, flat nose, and bold, insolent eyes, and Gwennola, with an instinctive cry, had stepped back towards the shadow of the forest, when Gloire, with a sudden bay of fury, leapt forward, and, before he had time to spring aside or draw his sword, had borne the man backwards upon the ground, with his mighty fangs fixed firmly into his flesh.

Forgetful of herself at sight of the unexpected tragedy which was going forward before her eyes, Gwennola sped down the valley, crying frantically to Gloire to leave his unfortunate victim; but a very demon of rage seemed to have entered the great beast, and he continued furiously to rend his quarry, until, at Gwennola's approach, he crouched with a whine, which was half a growl, crept aside, and lay panting on the heath with gory jaws, and eyes which pleaded almost defiantly the excuse that he had done but his duty in defending her.

Meantime, with a shudder of horror, Gwennola knelt beside the mangled figure, even then her thoughts flying back in agony to that judgment hall at the

Château de Mereac. But torn as she was with the desire to be beside the man she loved, her womanly pity forbade her to forsake the obviously dying wretch who lay panting out his life before her.

With her dainty kerchief she softly wiped away the froth of blood upon his lips, and hastily fetched water from a pool close by to bathe his brow, for it was evident that, dying as the unfortunate man was, he fought stubbornly to regain power of speech before he passed out into the land of silence and mystery.

It was a terrible sight to the poor girl, scarcely more than a child, to witness this death-struggle of a strong man, brought thus swiftly to his end, and the terror was enhanced by the eeriness of both time and place. But Gwennola was no nervous, timorous woman to start at her own shadow; born of a hardy, undaunted race, in rough and warlike times she did not shrink from the spectacle of death, grim and terrible as it was. The nervous fears of superstition, too, which had haunted her an hour ago, had passed with this awful reality of suffering.

Presently the man's gasping breath became calmer, and though the death sweat stood out thickly on his brow, he appeared to be capable of both thought and speech.

"Mademoiselle?" he gasped with an upward look of inquiry.

"De Mereac," she said gently, raising his head and resting it upon her knee, whilst she, wiped the sweat from his brow. "Is there aught you would tell me, poor fellow? or shall we not rather pray together for your soul, since here is no priest to shrive you?"

"My soul," muttered the man with a groan. "He had that long since—my soul," and he smiled mockingly into the fair face bent over him. "Nay," he continued with another groan; "'tis ill to jest in death's own face, though I have laughed in outwitting him many a time before, but yon devil hath brought me to bay at last, though I'll not go without my revenge."

He muttered the last words over several times, as if trying to recollect something, then continued to speak rapidly and pantingly, as one who, having raced, would fain deliver his message without delay; and, verily, it was a grim race he ran, with death swift on his heels to cut the tale short.

"Guillaume de Coray," he muttered, "he was my master, I, his slave, body and soul, mistress—body and soul. Ah! I could tell you stories, but there is not time, suffice to say that he was the tool—the thing—of the tailor of Vitré[#]—and I—well, no matter, the past is dead, but there is still revenge..... It was the battle of St Aubin—the son of de Mereac was there—his heir—my master was the next in succession..... He slew young Yvon, as he thought, in the wood there .... by treachery, and came to Mereac to be welcomed as the heir, and to marry the sister of the slain youth. Is it not so, mademoiselle? Ah! I read it in your eyes that the bridegroom was not to your pleasing, for your eyes are true and his ....

Well, Guillaume de Coray rode to Mereac, but before he did so, it chanced that he had found that he had no more occasion for my services, therefore he had bidden another to hasten my departure to another land, from whence no tales return to inconvenience monsieur; but he who was so clever made a mistake..... The man was my friend..... He told me his mission..... We drank to each other's health and the confusion of our master. So it came to pass that when he fled from that wood at St Aubin with a murderer's fear in his heart, I sought the body of Yvon de Mereac. He was not dead .... nay, he was not dead. Merciful God! why then does he haunt me with those eyes? Nay .... was it not I who saved him, and tended him for months?—aye years?—for, for long the blow on his head had rendered him little better than a fool. Then, when understanding returned, he demanded many things..... Ah! but he was proud and impatient .... that youth .... perchance I pleased him not for a guardian..... He commanded to be set free .... he raved at times .... foolish one .... saying that I kept him prisoner to murder him .... I, who but bided my time till the fruit was ripe for the picking..... But he escaped from my safe shelter. I was angry .... I followed him quickly. What, mademoiselle, after these years was I to be robbed of my reward? Grand Dieu! not so, I arrived whilst he still wandered in the forest, so far still distraught that he had lost his way. I found him .... but ere I did so was myself seen by ill fate by my enemy, Guillaume de Coray. It became impossible that I should escape too hastily with my friend, therefore we concealed ourselves .... de Coray and his devil's imp seeking us all the time..... To-night"—the blood in his throat well-nigh choked him as he spoke—"to-night—we—we...."

[#] The nickname of Pierre Laudais, the hated and infamous minister of François II., Duke of Brittany. The angry nobles at last took justice into their own hands, and hanged the miscreant who had ruined their country.

He stared vaguely up at the moon—already the finger of death was resting on his shoulder.

"But my brother—Yvon—he lives? Oh, where—where is he?" cried Gwennola, whose emotions had scarcely been controlled during the gasping confession which seemed to foreshadow forth so grim a tragedy. "Speak!"

But already death had sealed those lips with his cold kiss, only with a convulsive effort the man raised his arm and pointed towards one of the heaps of piled stones which gleamed white in the moonlight halfway up the opposite slope. Then a spasm seized him, and he lay in the last dread struggle, with his black eyes fixed upwards in horror, as if around him he saw crowding the re-

proachful victims of a sinful life, gathering about to arraign him before the dread Judge Who awaited him beyond the veil.

Falling on her knees, Gwennola whispered a prayer into the dying ears, till, with one last gasping groan, the jaws relaxed, the dark eyes, still terror-haunted, became fixed, and a soul fled forth in shame and awe into the silence of eternity.

With a sob—the outcome of overwrought nerves—the young girl rose to her feet, and stood looking from the dead man at her feet towards the rude cairn which seemed to form so poor a clue to her search. And yet her heart beat rapidly as she thought of what that search might mean, and recalled that not only a brother's but a lover's life lay as a guerdon for success. Then with a low breathed prayer she hastened to turn and scramble up the slope towards the spot indicated by the dead man's finger.

CHAPTER IX

For a few minutes Gwennola's heart sank; in spite of a rapid but careful search, the possibility of a human presence anywhere in the neighbourhood of that rough pile of stones seemed impossible. But once again Gloire was to come to her assistance, and retrieve his lost character, which he seemed to feel instinctively had seriously suffered in the late encounter,—though why he should be reproached for thus ridding the world of one whom canine sagacity had recognised as a black-hearted villain, he could not altogether realize. Nevertheless, the sound of his mistress's reproving voice had damped poor Gloire's self-congratulations, and he had followed her with drooping tail and melancholy mien towards the reputed home of the mischievous dwarfs. Here, however, his spirit of inquiry was freshly aroused, and with a short yelp of excitement he proceeded to investigate a hole, partly concealed by gorse, partly by a slab of stone which had apparently slipped from the pile near.

Attracted by his excitement, Gwennola ran to his side, and, after some moments of desperate tugging and pulling, succeeded in rolling the stone aside.

Yes! the dead man's clue was a true one; the opening obviously led into one of those natural caves so often found in Brittany. Gloire, with cocked ears and wagging tail, stood by the side of the aperture, evidently only awaiting his mistress's bidding to continue his investigations. But Gwennola waved him back, and, bending low, looked down eagerly into the darkness.

"Yvon," she called softly, her voice trembling as she pronounced the long-unused name, "Yvon—brother—are you there?"

In the silence that followed she could hear only the panting of Gloire's breath close to her ear.

"Yvon," she cried again, "Yvon."

Then faint but clear came back the answer, in the voice of a man who answers as in a trance—

"Gwennola."

"Mother of Mercies, I thank thee!" cried the girl, tears of joy streaming down her cheeks, as without hesitation she scrambled quickly through the aperture. All was darkness within, although she gathered from the faint glimmer of moonlight at the cave's mouth that she was in a small subterranean chamber. In breathless suspense she called her brother's name again, and this time the reply came from somewhere close beside her, almost, it would seem, at her feet. But still the voice which spoke upwards through the darkness was that of a man who speaks as one who replies rather to some inward call than answering to his name from the lips of a fellow-creature.

"Where art thou, Yvon?" cried Gwennola, sinking on her knees and spreading forth her hands vaguely in the darkness. "Brother, brother, is it indeed thou?"

"Gwennola—my sister." This time the voice beside her rang with a sudden feeble exultation, as of one who, for the first time, realized that his name had verily been pronounced by a denizen of earth. "Gwennola, Gwennola! nay, it is impossible. Hence, mocking demon, and taunt me not in my last hours!"

But already, groping in the darkness, guided by the feeble voice, the girl had found the object of her search, and bent over the prostrate figure, weeping and laughing in a very paroxysm of joy.

"Yvon, Yvon!" she cried, as she clung to him, pressing her warm young lips to the damp brow. "Ah, my brother, whom for these past years we have mourned as dead, is it possible that thou livest? What mystery is here? what foul and terrible plot? But, what is this?—thou art bound and helpless? a prisoner! Oh, tell me, Yvon, tell me all! and yet no, we must not linger one instant in this terrible place, for already a still fouler wrong is being done to one altogether innocent."

"Nay," groaned Yvon de Mereac faintly, "in that thou speakest wisely, little sister, if it indeed be thou thyself, as these tears and kisses assure me, rather than one of the mocking fiends of delirium which ever haunt me, for truly the chief fiend himself will return anon, and then——"

Gwennola felt the shudder that ran through the gaunt frame, and the thought of Gloire's vengeance seemed to her less terrible than heretofore.

"He is dead!" she cried, divining swiftly of whom he spoke. "Gloire hath killed him but now, on the heath without; but ere he died methinks he repented

of the ill he did thee, which the rather took the form of vengeance to another, even blacker-hearted than himself, than from hatred to thee."

"Dead?" echoed Yvon with a sob of sudden joy. "François Kerden dead? and thou here, little Gwennola, to save me? Nay! tell me not it is a dream, but rather free me from these bonds, and let me breathe once more the pure air of heaven."

"These bonds?" cried Gwennola in dismay, as her slender hands felt the tight thongs which bound the helpless man beside her. "Nay, but how shall I unloose them, Yvon? They are too strong for me to break, and, alas! I have no dagger."

Yvon groaned. "Can naught be done?" he sighed. "I faint for very longing of the cool night breezes; for days have I lain here, little sister, waiting for death, but he delayed; yon fiend suffered me not to die, though he kept me looking ever down into the abyss, and now——" His voice quivered, as with the feeble insistence of a child he repeated his plea to be liberated.

"Ay, verily," cried Gwennola joyfully, a sudden inspiration coming to her, "and so thou shalt, my Yvon; tarry but one instant, and I wot well I shall find what we seek."

"Ah, go not," cried her brother in despair, "lest thou return not, but instead that evil one with his cruel eyes and sharp dagger."

"Nay," laughed the girl, stooping once more to smooth and kiss the clammy brow, "'tis indeed his dagger which lieth yonder on the hillside that I go to seek. Peace, brother, have no fear; he will return no more to fright thee, and speedily shall thy cruel bonds be cut and we will return home."

He echoed the last word softly, as one whose brain is too weary to take in its full meaning, but he did not again seek to detain her as she groped her way towards the glimmer of light which was already growing fainter as the moonlight faded. To her surprise, Gloire stood not at the cave's mouth as she emerged, and for a moment she looked round her with a thrill of fear, wondering what new foes might not have arisen to fight against. But Gloire's absence was not far to seek, seeing that the wolves from the forest had already scented their human feast, and had crept stealthily forth to rend it, and as Gwennola stood there in the dim light, she perceived two gaunt forms flit in swift pursuit of one another across the hill towards the shadow of the trees, and shuddered, well guessing what they meant.

Daggers there were in plenty in the dead man's leathern belt, and Gwennola hastened to draw a small keen weapon forth and hurry back, for it was ill work to bend so over a dead man's body, and feel the close stare of sightless eyes. But Gwennola's nerves were re-strung now to meet the desperate necessity of her case, for well she knew that the moments fled swiftly and already the sands of an innocent man's life were running low, and not only of one innocent of crime,

but her own true lover, without whom life must be as dark and gloomy as yon forest from whence came the yelping howls of beasts of prey, kept back by fear, for the nonce, from their evening feast.

One by one the tight leathern thongs were severed, and Yvon with a cry of thankfulness rose slowly to his knees, though so cramped were his limbs that even after the space of some minutes he could but crawl to the entrance of his prison on hands and knees. But the cool night air revived him, like a draught of wine, as he sank down on the heath without. Gwennola could ill repress a cry of dismay as the feeble moonlight revealed a face which, but for the eyes, it were difficult to recognise as that of the handsome boy who, but three short years ago, had left the château in all the pride and glory of youth and noble manhood. The rosy cheeks were sunken, and so emaciated that the skin seemed but drawn over the high cheek-bones; the smooth chin was covered with a short, unkempt beard; and the fair golden curls were long, matted, and discoloured; but the eyes, blue as Gwennola's own, were the same as they looked up into hers, and yet, with a sob in her throat, she realized they were not the same, for the glad, merry light with which youth faces life had gone, and instead there seemed to lurk within them an almost vacant look of terror, such as one sees in a frightened child. It was a face which told its own tragedy without need of words, and with a shudder of pity his sister bent, raising him tenderly as he struggled vainly to his feet, passing a strong, protecting young arm around him, and softly bidding him lean on her.

He gazed round vaguely, shivering as his glance fell on the forest.

"It was there I wandered," he said faintly. "I could not remember the way, but I had found it at last, and had stood already in sight of the château itself, when I saw him creeping upon me; then, like a mad fool, I fled once more into the forest, instead of crying for help from the soldier who stood sentry near the gateway."

"And who took thee for a spirit of the dead," smiled Gwennola, remembering Job Alloadec's terror, "and small blame, I trow; but dwell not on past years, my brother; yonder lies the miscreant dead, in just reward for the evil he did, and we may not delay seeing what passeth at the château."

The poor girl was indeed a prey to feverish emotion, the thought of what injustice might even now be doing weighing like lead upon her heart, and yet she might not speed on her way as she desired, seeing that salvation to the man she loved came only with halting and painful steps, stopping from time to time for very faintness and weakness. And not only was their progress slow, but dangerous, as Gwennola knew well, for the yelping howls from the forest grew ever more importunate. Did the wolves escape Gloire's vigilance and break in a pack into the open, death awaited them both, for Gloire, gallant hound as he was, could be no match against numbers on that bare heath side, whilst within the forest he

could dodge and worry his enemies, thus keeping many times his number at bay.

Yvon was walking more steadily as they came at length to the outskirts of the trees; his limbs were less cramped, his brain clearer, as the shadow of death, which had haunted him for so long, was dispelled by Gwennola's bright voice and tender care. Still, even so, he seemed little to realize their present danger, which grew ever more terrible.

Already Gwennola could see through the nearly total darkness the gleam of cruel eyes shining on them from out of the thicket, and once a dark, wolfish form leapt out on to the very path before them, only to be driven back by the faithful Gloire, who, bleeding but undaunted, kept gallant guard around them. Many of the beasts had gone unrestrainedly now to fight for the meal awaiting them on the heath, but with appetites whetted they would return anon, and then——

"Canst walk but a little faster, Yvon?" whispered Gwennola with a gasp, as the howls and yelps grew nearer and more insistent on every side. But Yvon shook his head; indeed, in the very attempt to obey her petition he nearly stumbled, and would have fallen, had it not been for her arm. "Alas!" she cried, with a sob of terror, "Yvon, we are lost—the wolves——"

A short bark of anger from Gloire changed suddenly into a glad yelp of welcome, and Gwennola echoed it with a little cry of surprise as a man bearing aloft a flaming torch came hurrying towards them, stopping indeed to echo her cry as he perceived the two figures standing before him.

"Job—ah! my good Jobik," cried Gwennola joyfully. "See, Yvon, we are saved—we are saved!"

"Yvon—Monsieur Yvon!" stammered Job, his eyes fixed in wonder, not unmixed with horror, on his young master's face. "Monsieur Yvon! Mother of Heaven! it is impossible!" And so violent was the fear that overcame the honest fellow, that he nearly let fall the torch, and with it their safety, for the wolves, scared, as they ever are, by the light, had fled, howling with disappointment, back into the forest.

"Nay," said Yvon, smiling faintly, "'tis I myself, good Job, though more in the bone than the flesh, I warrant me."

"Monsieur Yvon," still repeated Job, with undiminished wonder in his eyes—"Monsieur Yvon." Then, as he realized that in some miraculous way it was indeed his beloved master who stood before him, he fell a-weeping for very joy, repeating the name over and over again, as though to convince himself of what was apparently beyond reason or understanding.

"Nay, foolish fellow," cried Gwennola sharply, being in no mood just then, with nerves stretched to breaking, for idle tears. "Cease such maundering, or wait till fitter time and place to give vent to thy joy. Wouldst have tears verily to take the place of laughter by delaying, when—when——" She broke off abruptly,

adding in a lower key, "And Monsieur d'Estrailles?—the French knight—what of him? Nay, stand not gaping, there, as if thou awaitest the moon to swallow thee up, as she did poor Pierre Laroc, but take the arm of Monsieur Yvon, who is weak, as thou seest. There, support him well, good Job, and let us hasten onwards whilst thou tellest me."

Her heart beat fast as she waited, all eagerly, for the answer which she so dreaded to know that she was fain to stop her ears or fly from hearing into the forest. But Job's wits were still astray for very joy and wonder, as he felt Yvon's gaunt form lean against his stout arm, and read recognition in the great blue eyes, which had stared so despairingly into his, scarce a week back, from the forest shade.

It was not till Gwennola had impatiently repeated her question that the former events of that strange night came back to his slowly revolving brain.

"The French knight?" he repeated. "Ah, yes, mademoiselle, it was Marie herself who sent me in search of you, because, forsooth! it would seem you had gone to bid farewell to one in the forest who came instead, but sorely against his will, to the château to bid farewell to life."

"How chanced it? How came he thither? Who discovered his hiding-place? Nay, thou shalt not tell me he is already sped," cried Gwennola passionately.

"How chanced it?" echoed Job, clinging to the first question. "Nay, mistress, that I know not. I was on guard at the outer postern when, scarce two hours agone, Marie cometh to me, weeping. 'He is taken,' she cried. 'Alas! the poor monsieur is taken, and mademoiselle will die.' Thou knowest, mademoiselle, the foolish tongue of my sister. At first I could comprehend nothing, but at last it appeared that Monsieur de Coray had learnt, by some means, of which I know naught, that the French knight lay hidden in the forest; he divined also his hiding-place, but of this no word did he say to my lord, only commanding six soldiers, as by my lord's order, to be ready shortly before midnight to accompany him secretly, and without telling their comrades one word of what they did. It would appear then that Monsieur de Coray led them to this so secret hiding-place and captured the poor knight, whom they brought back to the château.

"The foolish Marie was distraught with grief, and for mademoiselle's sake, I will confess, my heart was also heavy, but a soldier hath his duty, and therefore I remained where I was until a short half hour ago, when Marie returneth to me, white and weeping still more sorely. 'Alas!' she saith, 'the poor monsieur—the lover of mademoiselle—is condemned to death; only hath he been given time for the good father to shrive him of his sins, and then, alas! he will be hanged, even ere dawn.' After which the foolish one wept upon my shoulder, and I—I also wept for the sake of mademoiselle, for of the sins of this monsieur I comprehended naught, except that he was falsely accused of murdering Monsieur Yvon. But

anon, Marie drieth her tears, and biddeth me light my torch speedily and go in search of you, mademoiselle, for she feared greatly for your safety, seeing that two hours had passed and you had not returned. At first I refused, for I am a soldier, mademoiselle, who must think of his post, but when Marie represented to me your danger, and promised to guard well my post till my return, I hesitated no longer, for, for myself, I also had my fears as I listened to the howlings of the wolves. And so, mademoiselle, I came, and the holy saints directed my footsteps in the way."

"And he is not dead?" whispered Gwennola, with a quick gasp for breath, as she hurried forward. "He is not dead?"

It was the only point which remained in her memory of all the honest Breton's preamble.

"Nay!" said Job slowly. "He was given time to be shriven, and Father Ambrose, being sick, had to be brought carefully from his bed, and methinks the good priest is little like to hurry over the last confessions of one who goes to death; nay, mistress, methinks he will surely yet live."

"Merciful Mother of God, grant it!" cried Gwennola in agony. "Ah, see, Yvon, we are near at last; there, yonder, is the château; a few minutes——"

No more was spoken as the three hurried swiftly onwards. Job almost bearing Yvon in his stalwart arms, whilst Gwennola held aloft the flaring torch. A strange trio truly the yellow light gleamed on: the sick man's thin, emaciated features and drooping form; the thickly-set, dark-browed Breton soldier with his honest, wondering eyes and bushy beard; and the slender, dark-robed figure with pale, agonized face, eager eyes, and a tumbled mass of red-gold curls, from which the hood had fallen.

No word was spoken even as they passed the outer postern, where the wondering Marie still held impatient guard, but swiftly onwards they sped through the darkness of the little chapel, till they stood at length to pause and listen in the shadow of the tapestries which hung around the great hall. The flaring light of the torches fastened in the iron cressets on the walls revealed a strange scene. By the long table sat the Sieur de Mereac, and close to his side Guillaume de Coray, the former, stern, implacable judge, the latter, mocking, triumphant accuser; in the foreground, a small group of soldiers surrounding the tall, slender figure of the condemned man, his hands bound tightly behind him, even now on his way to execution, and by his side the black-robed form of the old confessor.

Although d'Estrailles' back was towards them, those standing there in the shadows could see the proud bearing of his mien as he listened to his judges last words.

"Henri d'Estrailles," said the old man sternly, "you are found guilty and condemned to die; murderer and traitor that you are, the death of a felon is fitting

ending to such a life. My son's life you spared not to take by foul and cruel means, and still more, in reward for the hospitality I all unwittingly bestowed upon you, you have robbed me of a daughter's soul. Coward and villain! have you made your peace with God?—if so, it were well, for even in death the hand of every true and upright man shall be against you."

"Nay, my son," interrupted Father Ambrose gently, "beware how you pass unjust sentence on a man whom my soul telleth me is innocent. Nay, frown not, but listen to the warning of an old man, who from early youth hath learnt to read men's hearts. Have I not but now listened to the confessions of one about to pass to the judgment of One with Whom no deception is possible? and in the face of eternity itself would he look back upon his fellow-men with lies upon his lips? I tell thee, no, Sieur de Mereac, no, a hundred times! And so I tell thee, that having read the secrets of this man's soul, I find him innocent of the crime whereof he is accused."

"Nay, my father," interrupted de Coray with a sneer, "you speak well, but, bethink you, it was *I* who saw this man strike the very blow which he so glibly denies; *I* who saw him creep so treacherously behind my poor kinsman—the noble young Yvon—and cleave him from brow to chin ere he could turn to see his foe; *I*——"

"Liar!"

The single word rang down the hall like the challenging blast of a trumpet, as all turned to see standing there against the tapestry the tall, gaunt figure of a man.

CHAPTER X

For a few minutes there reigned a breathless silence. All eyes seemed indeed riveted on that strange, emaciated figure, which half leant, as if for support, against Gwennola's slender form as she stood beside him, her pale face flushed now rosy red with joy and triumph, as she glanced from the bound, helpless figure between the soldiers towards her father.

The Sieur de Mereac had risen, and was standing, one trembling hand clutching the back of his chair, the other shading his eyes, as if the flickering torchlight blinded his sight, as he gazed in mute wonder towards the speaker. Then, as the blue eyes met the black with an up-leaping light of recognition, an-

other cry, more faltering, yet trembling with a very wonderment of joy, rang out in the silence—

"Yvon! Yvon! my boy! my boy!"

For the time all were forgotten: prisoners, accusers, false and true; to the old man striding forwards with outstretched arms, the world, for the moment, contained nothing but that haggard, dishevelled figure, and the blue eyes of his long-lost, long-mourned son.

"Father," cried Yvon with a sob, as he staggered forward to meet him. "Father, at last!"

De Coray had sprung to his feet with an oath, half fury, half dismay, as Yvon de Mereac sent down his challenge through the hall.

Little as he had dreamt that his blow had not been fatal in that dark wood of St Aubin du Cormier, he was sufficiently keen-witted to vaguely guess the sequel, his conclusion being more easily drawn from the fact of the unexplained presence of his old comrade and late enemy, François Kerden. Without giving himself time or trouble to fit into its place every piece of the puzzle, he grasped the meaning of the whole, and realized that it was indeed Yvon de Mereac who stood before him, and also that his own position was one of imminent danger.

These calculations passed like lightning through his ready mind as he looked eagerly round for means of escape. None noticed him or his movements, all attention being fixed on the two central figures of the little drama. All indeed but one, for, as he turned, he encountered the sympathetic and comprehensive gaze of Pierre the fool. That the strange, dwarfed jester had evinced an unaccountable devotion for him had puzzled de Coray more than once, little used as he had ever been to be loved for his own sake, and he was more than half inclined to treat the little fellow's overtures with suspicion. But in the present crisis it would be well to have even a fool for a friend rather than an enemy, and de Coray, obeying Pierre's obvious signs, crept unseen behind the tapestry.

"Quick, monsieur!" whispered the boy in his ear. "You are as yet unperceived, but we must not delay. To your right, monsieur, so—there is a passage there which leadeth to the chapel. Methinks few know it but I myself. The outer postern is unguarded; we can escape to the forest."

Not unwilling to be guided by so ready an ally, de Coray followed, his hand, however, on his sword, ready to draw it should he have cause to suspect treachery. But Pierre had apparently no such intention, and ere many minutes had elapsed they had both reached the shelter of the forest.

Scarcely knowing whither he went, de Coray hurried along by the boy's side, black rage in his heart as he recalled how swiftly the tables had been turned upon him by the girl whom he had intended to force into marriage with him, and how complete had been her triumph. Only five minutes more, and at least one

witness against him would have been removed from his path, the only witness indeed that he need have feared, trusting to his ready wit to weave some fresh fiction to account for his error in supposing Yvon de Mereac dead. Now, he felt, even in the moment of flight, that by so escaping he was severing the last possibility of deceiving his uncle into disbelief of the Frenchman's word, coupled as it was by Yvon's reappearance. Yet he dared not stay, for behind all lay the risk of Kerden's discovery and subsequent confession, which might well damn him beyond hope of redress, and perchance bring him within reach of the noose which he had hoped to see tightening round the neck of an innocent man.

Well might de Coray feel blank despair clutching him as he began the more clearly to realize the hopelessness of his position were he captured—and yet such capture was imminent. Once persuaded of his treachery, he was assured that de Mereac would leave no stone unturned to find and bring him to justice, and that such persuasion would be easy he doubted not, seeing that his own flight sealed his guilt.

"Fool," he cried angrily, as he suddenly halted on the forest path which they were treading, "where dost thou lead me? I tell thee that there will be pursuit, and I, wandering on foot here, alone, must needs be captured without hope of escape." And in his fury he turned on the dwarfed lad, who stood looking up at him with a face on which cunning and fear were mingled with a strange, half-comic expression of dog-like devotion.

"Nay, monsieur," said Pierre deprecatingly, as he spread forth his hands as if to arrest the movement which de Coray made to draw his sword. "Fool though I be, monsieur shall find that I have yet some wisdom in this thick skull of mine." And he nodded his head gravely as he tapped his forehead. "Yes," he said thoughtfully, "Pierre the fool has eyes, also ears, and he says to monsieur, 'Hasten, quickly, for there is safety only in flight.'"

"Safety!" echoed de Coray bitterly; "ay, fool's safety, I trow, such as I merit for entrusting myself to thy guidance. How, forsooth, Sir Wise Fool, wouldst have me escape de Mereac's fleet steeds and keen blades? Thinkest thou that he and his retainers are as dull of wit and sight as thou art, thou ape of iniquity?"

The lad shrank back as if struck by a lash, putting up his thin hands as though to protect himself from a blow.

"Ah, monsieur, listen," he moaned, "and be not angry with one who would die for you. Nay!" he added eagerly, stung by de Coray's sneer, "monsieur *shall* believe. See, far in the depths of the forest is a hut, small but well sheltered; it is there that my sister Gabrielle dwells, who blesses monsieur's name nightly in her prayers for the money which saved us from misery when the hunger-wolf knocked loudly at the door but a few days since. In this hut monsieur will be safely hidden for, perchance, a few hours only, whilst Pierre the fool watcheth

to see whither his enemies ride; then, when danger lies with her back to him, monsieur will mount and ride to where he will be in safety."

De Coray's brow cleared, though he looked doubtfully into the puckered, upturned face, as if still suspicious.

"If thou betrayest me thou shalt die, boy," he said menacingly; then, in a kinder tone, "nevertheless, if all goes as thou sayest, and I escape, Guillaume de Coray shall be found neither an ungenerous nor forgetful master."

With a shrewd smile the jester stooped to kiss the hand outstretched to him, then, drawing himself up, said, with the simple dignity of his race, be they noble or peasant—

"Monsieur, I too am a Breton."

"Lead on," said de Coray peremptorily—-"for the rest, we shall see."

The wolves, which still howled dismally in distant parts of the forest, did not molest the two travellers as they hurried on their way, though from time to time de Coray started with all the nervousness of a guilty man as a bough or twig snapped under their feet or a night bird brushed their faces in the darkness with her wings.

Dawn was already faintly tinging the sky in the far east when Pierre halted before the door of a hut so quaintly built against an overhanging crag of rock as to be easily passed by unobserved.

"See, monsieur," he said thoughtfully, "it will not be well to enter now; it may be that ere long the enemies of monsieur will think of the hut of Pierre the fool, for there are those who know not only of it, but of the love I bear you; therefore it were best to seek shelter till day arrives in a secure hiding-place. Tenez, monsieur, behold such an one as will mock those who pursue!" And with pride the boy showed a deep fissure in the crag close by, so carefully concealed that a man might lie in perfect safety between the two high boulders without fear of detection. "Monsieur will rest here till danger has passed," observed Pierre, waving a lean hand towards the fissure of rock with the air of a host who invites his guest to partake of his sumptuous hospitality, "and afterwards the little Gabrielle will keep watch, as also she will tend to the needs of monsieur."

"And for yourself?" demanded de Coray sharply, even now distrustful.

The jester shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands with a gesture of self-importance.

"For myself, monsieur, I return to the château, for it were not well that I should be missed. Be assured, monsieur, that my ears and eyes will be open, so that in the evening when I return there may be news which will guide you on your journey."

"Journey!" exclaimed de Coray bitterly; "a long and safe journey, I trow, with neither horse nor provision for the way; 'twill be a journey into the arms of

my good uncle, I ween, and, by the beard of St Gildas, I trow his embrace will be scarce to my liking."

But Pierre shook his head with an air of superior wisdom.

"Monsieur misjudges me," he said reproachfully. "Pierre the fool is surely less fool than the words of monsieur imply. This evening when I return I will bring a horse fleet and sure-footed, also news of the pursuit of monsieur's enemies; the rest, if monsieur rides with caution, will be altogether easy."

The lad's words were reassuring, his manner simple and straightforward, and, in spite of the inward misgivings, which must ever haunt a man whose own ways are crooked when they are fain to entrust themselves to the honour of another, de Coray was forced, for very necessity, to accept Pierre's apparently honest promises of assistance. Yet, shut up in his gloomy hiding-place, the traitor felt the inward qualms and fears growing rapidly, coupled as they were with the dread of capture. A swift review of his broken schemes showed him how small a hope of mercy there must needs be did he fall into his outraged kinsman's hands.

The tissue of lies which he had woven around d'Estrailles and Gwennola de Mereac would now wing themselves against him and prove fresh voices of accusation as his true motives and own deadly deeds were brought to view. As he thought of all he could not but glance with some vague dread on that shrouded past of his. Little did any guess the traitor's way he had trodden so blithely since youth. With a shame which was yet half-mocking pride at his own shrewdness and cunning, he recalled how he, a noble of Brittany, had been content to become a tool in the hands of the infamous Landais, and yet, whilst earning a rich reward for his services, had escaped sharing his low-born master's fate, when an outraged and too long-suffering people had taken the law into their own hands and hanged the tyrant in defiance of their Sovereign Duke. Then he recalled, lying there looking back over the past, how he had bethought him of his kinsfolk of Mereac, and, riding westward, had come, like some ill-omened bird, to prey on an inheritance which he found well to his liking. The treacherous death of the young heir had seemed to him a master stroke of cunning, and no sooner had he deemed it safely accomplished than he set to work to ingratiate himself with the old Sieur and his daughter.

But Gwennola had proved a stumbling-block to his ambitions, and conceiving that her father, who was devoted to this sole surviving child, would be likely to leave her whatever fortune it was possible to divide from the inheritance of his lands, he decided to wed her—not that he loved her; but, bah! what did that matter? Neither did it concern him that the maiden took no pains to conceal her hatred of him. It pleased the inherent cruelty of his nature to cause pain, and it delighted him to watch the shudder that shook her when he alluded, with mock devotion, to their union. For the scorn he endured at her hands he promised

himself a charming and protracted revenge when she was his wife. Now, to his chagrin, his dreams were in an instant shattered, and, instead of the presumptive heir and honoured guest, he found himself a hunted murderer, condemned already without trial, and all, he bitterly told himself, through the machinations of a puling girl and her lover—a lover whom he had been on the brink of consigning to a felon's grave as reward for his inopportune presence at Mereac.

Thus pondering, de Coray fell into a heavy slumber, out-wearied by the events of a long and unpleasantly exciting day, nor did he awake till the warm rays of the sun struck downwards, sending long, bright shafts of light almost to the heart of the dark shadows of his hiding-place.

Consumed with hunger and thirst, still it was some time before he could summons up sufficient courage to creep forth from his lair. It was a day of dazzling sunshine, which illuminated even the depths of that grey and gloomy forest, and for a moment de Coray stood there, blinking, like some suddenly disturbed owl, before his sight grew accustomed to the brilliant glare. Presently, however, he became aware of a girl's slim figure seated in the doorway of the hut, beside her spinning wheel. A pretty enough picture was thus formed—the dark background of forest, the quaint and dilapidated woodland hut, and stray rays of golden glory lighting up the figure in the foreground, in its picturesque dress and cap of a Breton peasant girl, a dress which set off to perfection the beauty of the face bent low over the humming wheel. It was in fact the face rather of a Madonna than a mere peasant, for the beauty lay not only, or chiefly, in the delicate oval of her cheeks, the regularity of her features, or the glossy luxuriance of the long plaits of black hair which fell over her shoulders, but in the soft and tender expression of her lips and dark eyes, which were swiftly raised to meet de Coray's curious gaze.

A sudden flush of joy, rather than maidenly bashfulness, crimsoned the girl's cheeks as she rose hastily, and with a deep curtsy welcomed her visitor.

To his surprise, de Coray found himself treated with a respect and gratitude wholly unlocked for. It was evident that her brother had breathed no word of his patron's true character or the reason of his present difficulties, but instead had sung such praises into his simple sister's ears that she looked upon de Coray in the light of some poor, persecuted saint.

If is a strange experience thus to be taken for what one is too obviously not, and de Coray listened, half amused, half pleased, to her shy, faltering words of gratitude.

The suspicions which had lurked around his heart as to the trustworthiness of his little ally faded away before the clear truth of his sister's dark eyes, and involuntarily he made an effort to assume the rôle which she had given him so innocently. It was the wolf in sheep's clothing once more, but this time the wolf

was more anxious to hide his own dark skin than to devour the trusting lamb.

So, after the meal was over, they sat there together, those two ill-assorted companions, whilst in still shy but more confiding sentences Gabrielle related to her visitor the simple story of her life. It was so simple, so humble, yet, as he sat there by her side, watching the innocent beauty of her face and listening to her murmured words, interrupted as they were by an occasional burst of bird song from the whispering woodlands around, it seemed a very idyll of beauty.

The glamour of an entirely new experience had crept over the cruel, scheming man of many crimes as he sat there waiting for the twilight to fall, the glamour which hangs around the days of early childhood and innocence, and seems to whisper of things holy and beautiful. It thrilled him with a new sense of what life might be, and made him shrink back appalled from what his had already been.

It was shame, and yet not without its sweetness, to see himself mirrored in this peasant girl's eyes as a noble knight whose goodness and untarnished honour had been already the theme of her girlish thoughts, and he almost shivered as he pictured how the light of reverence and admiration would fade from her sweet face did she know the truth.

"Ah, monsieur," murmured Gabrielle as she paused in her busy work to look across to where he was sitting, "my heart aches to think of the cruelty of those who seek to do you harm, nor can I conceive how one so good and noble as the Sieur de Mereac could be so deceived by lying tongues."

De Coray shrugged his shoulders. "Nay, mademoiselle," he said carelessly, "doubtless in time the noble Sieur will find out his error and regret his hasty judgment; for the rest, if I can but ride in safety to my own château at Pontivy, I shall not forget the succour which you and your brother have bestowed."

"Nay," cried the girl softly, "monsieur must not speak of reward for what it has been our joy to give; monsieur has already saved us from want, for, see, I was sick—I could do but little spinning—and my brother had but small money to bestow on me, until monsieur, in the generosity of his heart, gave him much silver, for which may our Lady and all the saints for ever bless you, monsieur, and deliver you from the hands of cruel men."

"Nay," said de Coray gallantly, "methinks, fair maid, one of the sweetest saints hath already undertaken my deliverance."

She looked at him innocently, not comprehending the compliment he intended to convey, seeing that her thoughts were not of herself, but for him.

And so they sat there, talking softly, as the spell and glamour of the moment bade them, and she told him with the simplicity of a child how she lived here alone in the forest hut, all alone, spinning for the most part, for she was lame and could walk but little, and how her brother Pierre would come often to see her, when it was possible. And at Pierre's name her eyes grew tender, for her love for

him was great. Ah! the poor little Pierre!—he who would have been so gallant a soldier had it not been for his affliction. The poor Pierre! It had been long ago that the Sieur de Mereac, hunting in his forests, had passed the little hut where François Laurent lived with his wife and two children, and alas! the little Pierre, playing out there in the sunshine, had paused to gaze at the gay trappings of the cavalcade rather than run to the safe shelter of his mother's arms, so that one of the horses had struck him down underfoot and injured his spine.

That was the story of poor Pierre; that was why instead of a strong-limbed, gallant man, he must shuffle through life as the crooked, puny Pierre the fool. It is true the Sieur de Mereac regretted what had happened, and when Pierre was old enough he had taken him into his service, and finding the sharp-faced lad had a wit of his own, had made him jester, with Petit Pierre the ape for company.

But for herself? de Coray asked. Had she no fear dwelling alone in so desolate a hut, with nothing but the howlings of wolves and the wailings of the wind to keep her company?

The little Gabrielle smiled. Surely not! How could she fear, when the Blessed Mother of God and all the holy saints were near to protect her from evil? So simple, childish innocence argued with guilt and crime, which go ever hand in hand with fear and terror; and again, de Coray, looking into her great, dark eyes, felt a thrill of joy that she did not know him for what he was; for truly, had he spent that long day of secret fears and suspense with an angel from heaven, no softer or more purifying hand could have been lain on the hardened blackness of his heart, causing it to leap with a sudden vague, yet momentary yearning towards what was pure, noble, and good.

So the twilight fell, and neither Pierre nor his enemies had come; but as the dim, mysterious time of shadows passed into the darkness of night, the two watchers saw through the trees the approaching figure of a boy leading a horse by its bridle.

"It is Pierre!" cried Gabrielle joyfully, and rose from her work, though she waited still in the doorway till her brother came towards her, smiling his welcome first into her flushed, glad face, before he turned to de Coray.

"Monsieur," he said, bowing low with a sweep of his tall fool's cap, which seemed more mockery than deference, though perchance he meant it not—"monsieur, all is well. The enemies of monsieur ride towards Nantes and Angers; it is evident that they have forgotten so humble an abode as that of Pierre the fool. Moreover, methinks they scarce suspect me of assisting you, seeing that I was found sleeping this morning between the good hounds Gloire and Reine."

"And the forest?" questioned de Coray eagerly.

"That also they have searched, monsieur, though it is evident not yet with sufficient care; my lord indeed hath commanded that every corner of Brittany be

searched till you are found, and hath offered a goodly reward for your capture, but for the present he himself is too much occupied with attending upon Monsieur Yvon to direct the search in person."

De Coray smiled, casting a side glance towards Gabrielle, who had entered the hut to prepare supper, as he added in a lower key—

"Heardst aught, my friend, of one Kerden? In their search for me did they light, perchance, on a man who bears that name, who methinks might even now be haunting yon woods?"

Pierre glanced up to meet his patron's inquiry with a look as shrewd as de Coray's own.

"Monsieur," he said simply, "it appears that this Kerden will no longer haunt the forest of Arteze in the flesh, and if all be true of which men talk at the château, the devil will have been too swift in bearing off his spirit to its own place to leave it chance of roaming yonder at nightfall."

"Dead?" echoed de Coray, with a long-drawn sigh of relief. "Thou art sure of it?"

"Verily," retorted Pierre, "if the word of mademoiselle, and the bloody jaws of Gloire are sufficiently to be trusted. The hound killed him, so 'tis said, out yonder on the heath, where the courils dance on moonlit nights; but monsieur will be wise to delay no longer. See, the horse is a good one, and fresh too; there are also provisions for a journey, though methinks they were prepared for other jaws to consume than those of monsieur, but they will taste none the less sweet for that." And the strange lad chuckled gleefully over his jest.

"Nay, 'tis the steed of the Frenchman!" exclaimed de Coray, as his eye glanced over the bay horse which Pierre held by the bridle. "Tiens! my friend, I know it by its white star and cropped ears. But how came you by it, little knave? Methinks monsieur yonder would scarce have such ardent desire for my escape as to lend me his own steed?"

"Nay," replied Pierre wisely, "in that you speak truth, monsieur; but I will explain. The horse of the French knight I discovered two days since, when Petit Pierre and I went at midnight in the footsteps of mademoiselle; it was stabled close to the chapel of the brown friar, and hath there remained till the present. Methinks in his expected exit from the present life, monsieur's thoughts were too busy with the next to remember his poor steed; and so this morning, ere I returned to the château, I visited the shed and unloosed the poor beast, and, after giving him a meal, I led him to a distant part of the forest, where I tethered him, trusting in the saints that none should chance to pass that way. Also near the chapel I discovered a basket of provisions which the thoughtful care of the beautiful mademoiselle had prepared for her lover; these also I appropriated for the needs of monsieur, therefore methinks that for a fool I have done right well.

Is it not so, monsieur?"

"Nay," said de Coray warmly, "thou hast done right gallantly, my friend, and great shalt be thy reward in due time, though for the present an empty gratitude must be thy guerdon; but when fortune smiles once more on me, then there shall be golden smiles for thee too, my manikin, as also for thy sweet sister here."

"Ay," replied Pierre, drawing himself up proudly, as he led the way into his humble abode, "peasants though we be, monsieur, still there is nobility too in the blood of the Laurents of Arteze, for truly in the veins of our ancestors ran the blood of King Arthur himself, and the renowned Morgana. Is it not so, Gabrielle?"

The girl smiled from one to the other.

"Nay, my brother," she replied softly, "so our parents told us, but I wot well that there is better truth in the words of our father, that nobility is of the soul rather than the body, and it little matters who our ancestors were, so long as we ourselves wooed honour and virtue for our spouses."

"Mademoiselle is wise," said de Coray smoothly, as his glance met hers. And, to his shame perchance, his own fell not beneath the steadfast gaze, but met it, as if he too cherished the ideals imprinted on her pure young brow.

Nevertheless, perhaps his heart, false though it was, reproached him as he rode away into the darkness of the night, bearing with him the memory of an upturned face full of sweet, confiding trust and reverence, and eyes which hailed him by a name he had never known.

CHAPTER XI

"And so we say farewell, my Henri?" sighed Gwennola mournfully, and there were tears in the blue eyes raised to Henri d'Estrailles' dark, handsome face.

"Nay, rather, 'au revoir,' sweet," he replied tenderly, "though I trow that be hard enough to say."

They were standing, those two, on the terrace path close by the river side. Beyond them lay the grey gloom of the forest, with its air of tragedy and mystery, and behind them the château, standing on the outskirts of a dreary heath, grim and forbidding. But around them life took a gladder note; the sunshine of summer played amongst flowers and orchard blossoms, and birds sang sweetly in the boughs overhead. Above all youth and happiness smiled the glad story, old and for ever new, of love and devotion, into each other's eyes. Yet, even in the tender

beauty of the present, the music of joy struck a minor note in the sad word of farewell.

It was hard—so hard—to part, when love was but newly born, and yet part they must. The Sieur de Mereac was inflexible in his decision.

Convinced of d'Estrailles' innocence, he had offered his injured guest the courteous apologies due to him, apologies as sincere as they were hearty, though perchance small blame could be attached to his conduct, seeing what had passed; whilst apologies would have been of small value had Yvon de Mereac appeared in the hall of judgment a few moments later.

Great and bitter had been the old noble's anger and mortification at finding that his own kinsman should have played so base a part, and terrible was the retribution which he swore to repay him with.

But even in his desire to offer amends for an injustice so nearly consummated, Gaspard de Mereac turned a deaf ear to d'Estrailles' pleadings concerning his daughter. To him it was a thing altogether beyond comprehension that a Mereac should mate with the natural enemy of her country, for here, on the borderland of the distracted dukedom, hatred of France was drawn in with the first breath of life.

Only at last, yielding most unwillingly to his cherished darling's entreaties, did he agree to temporize. Did the mission of the Count Dunois meet with success, and the bond between mutual enemies be cemented in one of love and marriage, then perchance, if Gwennola were still unchanged, natural prejudice should give way and a betrothal between the two be permitted. Yet even this temporizing would scarce have been, had not de Mereac convinced himself of the certainty of his Duchess's rejection of any offer of union betwixt herself and the man whom she must needs regard as her bitterest foe, in defiance of the troth she had already plighted to the King of the Romans.

So the wily old Breton, yielding no whit in his purpose to mate his daughter to none but her own countryman, outwardly consented to conditions little likely of fulfilment, and so silenced the importunities of the child he adored and the man whom he had so nearly condemned unjustly to death. But to Yvon he confided his secret purpose.

"'Tis but the passing whim of a foolish maid," he said lightly, "and one not to be regarded seriously, my son; yet 'tis wisest to yield in outward seeming, for, did I oppose her will, the little Gwennola would sigh and weep as any love-lorn maiden of romance, such as our minstrels picture wherewith to turn the heads of other silly maids; but if she have her way, she will soon forget a stranger when another noble lover comes a-wooing. Nay, nay, the child is too true a Mereac to long love a French lover; another shall soon steal the fancy from her heart and leave a truer one in its place. Alain de Plöernic seeks a bride, and where shall he

find a fairer or a sweeter than the demoiselle of Mereac?"

So the old father built his schemes, all unwitting of his daughter's mind, dreaming; that maids, forsooth! must needs be all of one pattern, and ready enough to change lovers at a father's command, or because, perchance, the name of one sounded ill in a father's ear, little recking that here was a slip from his own stern, iron-willed stock, which, having found its mate, responded not to the call of any other, even at the command of a parent, however beloved.

So on the terrace walk the lovers, so ill assorted, yet so faithful, pledged undying constancy and truth, and in the hall of the château the Sieur de Mereac smiled at his new-found serpent's wisdom, then altogether dismissed from his mind the ill thought of Gwennola's unwelcome lover, to turn instead to think of the man to whom he had pledged his daughter's troth, and to swear vengeance on the subtle brain which had so nearly wrought the undoing of his house. Even in his racial hatred he could not but admit that Henri d'Estrailles claimed his gratitude in striving, even though vainly, against the coward hand which had struck the traitor's blow on his Yvon. And so, from thoughts of that scene in the wood of St Aubin, once more the old man's wandering reflections went back with a shuddering fury to the tale which Yvon himself had so haltingly told them as he stood there in the dim hall, with his father and sister beside him, his hands—such thin, trembling hands!—locked in theirs as he spoke.

And the tale itself! Ah! why had the chief actor in it gone so summarily from justice—his justice? Almost he could find it in his heart to quarrel with the faithful hound that had done its work of retribution so swiftly and so well. At first it had been almost impossible to believe that this broken, feeble-minded man with Yvon's eyes could really be the gallant youth on whom his fond hopes had been set. And then he had heard—yes, heard of the little cellar chamber in the old house at Rennes where his son had awaked from his long unconsciousness and found it so hard to struggle back through the shadowland of delirium into realization of where he was, and in whose keeping. And the realization, too, when it came, how terrible and how bitter! The father, conning over the tale, could well fit in the bare outline of it all, with lurid touches of imagination. As he stared, leaning his elbow on the table before him, with unseeing eyes on the faded tapestries of the wall, he could picture that dark cell, the sick, fevered man, whose youth struggled so madly within him for life; then the mocking, jeering face of his captor as he told him the truth which there was no need to hide—the truth that he was to lie there as this villain's trump card, the instrument with which he was to work on another's fears; how indeed that he was to be kept there to pine and languish, but not to die, until his kinsman should enter upon his inheritance, when his captor would be able to use him as a constant menace to the unlawful Sieur de Mereac, wherewith to extort gold and favour for himself. Oh, it was

a cunning scheme! and how gleefully the originator of it would have laughed as he unfolded it to his victim! And then the long waiting time, the dragging by of month after month, in which death indeed must have been yearned for as the best good, and yet came not at his call. Then the delirious fancy, born of that terrible captivity, that his gaoler was ever waiting an opportunity to come creeping into his cell with his murderous dagger. And even though he had prayed for death and longed for her restful kiss, yet the terror of this swift and bloody end must have become unendurable. Then, when hope seemed dead, the sudden fresh upleaping of it in the pity and friendship of the old crone who brought him food, and, on rare occasions, fresh garments—the resolve for flight, the breathless excitement of creeping up those long and winding flights of stairs, with the old hag muttering and sobbing out fears that her master would kill her when he heard the truth, then the mad joy of drawing in once more the pure draught of outer air, and finally the ill-timed escape—an escape so nearly successful, however, that he had reached the river side and stood in very view of the château, when the sight of his cruel captor had unbalanced the weak, cowed spirit once more, and he had incontinently fled into the forest, only to be easily overtaken and overpowered by Kerden, who with oaths and blows threatened torture and punishment for his temerity when once more he had brought him back to his prison. But here the ruffian had been himself outwitted, for, in his search for his victim, he had himself been seen and recognised by his late master, and anxious, not only to elude, but put the latter off his scent entirely, he had determined to lie low until de Coray's suspicions were allayed. Accordingly he had carried Yvon to the cave he had found on the hillside, and had secreted himself beside him, only to steal out at night in search of provisions, which he procured from the peasants of Mereac and the little town of Martigue close at hand. That very night he had told Yvon of his intention of fetching his horse and returning to Rennes, leaving his trembling prisoner in suspense as to his own fate. Whether he had changed his mind, or whether the vigilant search of Pierre the fool had alarmed him, it was impossible to say, seeing that death had so swiftly overtaken the heartless schemer; but as de Mereac recalled the terror-haunted face of his son as he told his story, he brought down his clenched fist on the table before him with a fierce curse on the soul of the man who had done this deed.

"My son," said a gentle voice at his side, "saith not the Holy Script, 'Forgive, as we forgive to others their trespasses'?"

De Mereac turned swiftly with outstretched hand towards the black-robed figure standing by his chair.

"Ambrose!" he cried softly. "Nay, it does me good to hear thee speak of forgiveness, seeing how much I need at thy hands."

The Benedictine smiled as he laid his slender hand on the other's broad

shoulder.

"Nay," he replied, "it is not for thee to crave my forgiveness, Gaspard, for in very truth methinks I was to blame for yielding to a maiden's whim, albeit a generous one."

"Bah!" laughed de Mereac heartily, as he drew forward a chair and gently pushed the old priest into it. "Thou wert not to blame for that, my friend. Gwennola, I fear me, is her father's own daughter, and when she setteth her mind to a thing there is no rest till it is performed. But truly all was ordered for the best, and my little maid's judgment was not ill, though whether she defied her father from love of justice, or because she so hated the man whom in my folly I would have had her wed, I know not."

Father Ambrose's smile was somewhat whimsical, for from his window he had seen the two figures by the river side.

"Nay, old friend," he said gently, "perchance 'twas neither altogether justice nor hatred that made a heroine of romance of the child, but a stronger power than both, namely, love, which ever moveth a maid to strange deeds and fancies."

De Mereac stared across at the priest for a moment with knitted brow, then, as he divined his meaning, he frowned.

"A foolish whim," he retorted shortly, "and one that I trow well will fade fast enough when this Frenchman hath taken his departure, which, thanks be to Mary! he doth speedily. I would sooner the maid became a dismal nun, all prayers and melancholy, than the wife of a French robber."

"Truly to be a bride of Heaven is a happy and exalted vocation," said Father Ambrose reprovingly, "though," he added, with a twinkle in his keen old eyes, "methinks scarcely fitted for our Gwennola."

"Nay," replied de Mereac bluffly, "the maid hath too high a spirit and too warm blood to endure the cramping life of a convent cell. A noble maid, father, a noble maid, and one who shall be as nobly wed. I have thought of young Alain de Plöernic or Count Maurice de la Ferrière, both worthy mates for the dove of Arteze, who, alas!" he added with a shrug of his shoulders, "was so nigh to falling a prey to yonder bloody hawk, whose neck I would fain wring ere the morrow's sun. False caitiff! Nay, father, speak not to me of forgiveness, when I remember yon lying tongue and think that I might have given my daughter's hand into the red one which had thought to slay my son."

"Peace, Gaspard," said the priest soothingly, as de Mereac leapt from his seat to stride wrathfully up and down the hall, "and rather than vengeance think of the mercies vouchsafed to thee in that thou hast son and daughter safely restored to thine arms."

"Restored!" cried de Mereac bitterly. "Nay, Ambrose, think of yon poor lad's face and drooping form, all haggard and terrible, and recall the morning

when young Yvon rode forth so blithely across the bridge, calling back to me, as I lay, cursing my ill luck in being unable to move with rheumatic pains, that he would bring back our banner in triumph with fresh laurels twined around it."

"It may yet be that he will recover," said Father Ambrose gently. "But now, I left him sleeping peacefully; he is young, and life still runs swiftly in his veins; here at Mereac, with love and friends surrounding him, we may well hope to blot out those years which would altogether have crazed one less strong and courageous."

"My poor Yvon! my poor son!" moaned the father. "My curses on these, his all but murderers. Nay, father, reprove me not, for curse them I must and will; I grow verily weary of delay when I think of de Coray even now escaping my justice. Nay, father, your pardon, for whilst I thus rave I forget to ask after thy hurts. Thou art still pale and worn; methinks it were not well to rise so soon from thy couch."

"Nay," said the priest with a smile, "'twas but a cracked pate, which truly somewhat acheth still, but which I trow will soon mend. Better a pain in the head, my son, than one at the heart; therefore listen to thy old friend's advice, and pray rather for thine enemies' souls than for the destruction of their bodies."

"Nay, that will I not," retorted de Mereac sturdily, "for I would not rob the devil of such choice morsels.—How now, Job, what news dost thou bring? Where is thy prisoner?"

"Nay, my lord," faltered Job Alloadec, as he advanced, sweating and abashed, towards his irate master, "I fear me that he hath escaped, for, though we searched the forest from the château walls to Martigue itself, we could find no trace of the miscreant."

"Curses on him!" growled de Mereac. "But I know thy searchings, knave, with one eye shut and the other gazing upwards, as if thou expectest thy quarry to drop like a ripe nut from the boughs overhead. Why, the fellow must needs be within reach, since he had no steed to carry him."

"Nay, monsieur," replied the soldier with a perplexed stare at his master, "craving your pardon, methinks he found a steed awaiting him yonder in the forest, for when we rode to the ruined chapel" (Job involuntarily crossed himself) "to fetch hitherward Monsieur d'Estrailles' steed, which he told us was harboured close by, we found no trace of it, though we searched not only the shed but the ruins too."

"By the beard of St Efflam, the villain hath escaped!" growled de Mereac furiously, "the fiends verily having assisted him, for else, how knew he where to find the Frenchman's horse?"

Job scratched his head doubtfully. It was to him altogether an affair of Satanic agencies, and as he left his lord's presence with fresh orders to continue

the search, however hopeless, he again crossed himself, little dreaming that he and his fellow-searchers had been more than once that day within a stone's throw not only of the Frenchman's horse, but of de Coray himself, sitting quietly within the sheltered hut of Pierre the fool.

It was a grief indeed to Henri d'Estrailles when he heard of the loss of his favourite horse—that the poor Rollo should be condemned to carry his master's would-be murderer out of reach of the hand of justice seemed a fate altogether unworthy of so gallant a beast, and one which filled d'Estrailles with so keen a sorrow as could not well be compensated by the generous gift of a splendid grey Arab from the Sieur de Mereac himself.

The old Breton noble bade his guest a characteristic adieu, bluff, hearty, yet in no way concealing his satisfaction at his departure.

But though Henri d'Estrailles found little encouragement from his host's evident, though courteously concealed antagonism, he still clung to hope as he bade a tender farewell to Gwennola. That love must triumph over all obstacles is the gospel of youth, and so thought those two as they looked their last into each other's eyes.

"I shall return," whispered Henri gently as he leant from his saddle bow to kiss the tears from the beautiful upturned face—"I shall return ere long, little one, to claim thy promises, and perchance remind thy father of his, and for troth I shall guard this ring which thou hast given me, and thy favour, which I shall bind in my helmet in the day of battle."

She smiled at him through her tears.

"Thou hast given me no guerdon," she whispered softly.

"Have I not?" he replied tenderly. "Nay, sweet, the only guerdon I have to give is myself, and the heart that thou hast already in thy keeping, and which I shall surely return anon to claim at thy hands."

"Thou shalt not have it then," she retorted, smiling again as she raised her blue eyes to meet his dark ones. "For thou hast given it me for all time, and in place—in place——"

"In place?" he echoed, bending still lower.

"Foolish one!" she cried, with a little laugh which ended in a sob, "thou knowest very well what heart thou hast in exchange—a heart of Brittany, monsieur, for whose sake thou must be tender of its countrymen."

"I swear it," he replied—"I swear it, little Gwennola," and so rode away

through the forest, and out over the wild heaths beyond, on the road to Rennes.

CHAPTER XII

The long-cherished dream of the astute and far-seeing François Dunois, Comte de Longueville, had apparently been brought to an untimely end by the imperious will of a young girl. In spite of the representations of her guardian and trusted councillors, as well as those of her faithful friend, the Count Dunois himself, Anne remained firm in her rejection of the proposal to unite herself with the King of France, and thus form an indissoluble bond of union between the kingdom and duchy.

"King Charles," she said, "is an unjust prince, who wishes to despoil me of the inheritance of my fathers. Has he not desolated my duchy, pillaged my subjects, destroyed my towns? Has he not entered into the most deceitful alliances with my allies, the Kings of Spain and England, endeavouring to overreach and ruin me? And have I not, by the advice of all of you who now counsel the contrary, just contracted anew a solemn alliance with the King of the Romans, approved by you and all my people? Do not believe that I will so falsify my word, nor that I will burthen my conscience with an act which I feel to be so reprehensible."

In vain her council urged upon her the necessity of yielding to their suggestions; in vain de Rieux, de Montauban, and the Prince of Orange joined with Dunois in pleading the state of Britanny, the impossibility of its defending itself, the certainty of its falling a prey to the first ambitious neighbour who attacked it, since their Duchess would be in a distant country, married to a man whose own subjects were continually in a state of rebellion.

Anne haughtily refused to listen to these arguments. In spite of her tender years, her will was indomitable, and her mind clear as to what her actions should be.

"Rather," she replied at length to her discomfited council, "than be found wanting in the honour and duty I owe to the King of the Romans, whom I look upon as my husband, I will set forth to join him, since he finds it impossible to come hither to fetch me."

Such a reply was decisive, and Dunois was fain to ride back chagrined and discomfited, but not yet baffled, to give Anne's answer of defiance to her royal

wooer.

So also seemed to terminate the vague hopes to which Gwennola de Mereac had clung during those summer days—days which were bringing, alas! fresh sorrows to the lonely maiden of the old Breton château. For, scarce two months after her lover's departure, a fall from his horse during a boar hunt had left her to mourn a father who had ever been tender and loving to his daughter, although for the past few weeks somewhat sterner than his wont at her—to him—obstinate refusal to listen to the command he laid on her to accept the hand—if not the heart—of the young Comte de Laferrière, a betrothal which might indeed have been forced upon her had not death intervened to save her from an unwelcome lover, at the same time that he deprived her of a tenderly loved parent.

The mourning of those days was long, and sufficiently trying even for those whose grief was the most sincere; etiquette demanding that a daughter should retire to bed for six weeks in a funereally draped chamber, at most only being permitted to rise and sit upon a couch, also hung with trappings of woe.

Deeply as she mourned her father, Gwennola could not but breathe a sigh of relief as she stole out into the September sunshine at the conclusion of the stated period of retirement. How dreary all seemed, she told herself, and yet,—why, the sun shone, and the birds sang, and after all life was young, and death,—she shuddered as she glanced down at her black robe; but even whilst the tears dimmed her eyes, her thoughts, with the inconsequence of youth, flew back to the lover from whom she had parted, and wondered when he would come again a-wooing, and what Yvon would say when he asked her hand of him. Those months of rest and peace had wrought a great change in her brother. Much of the lost beauty of youth had returned, and the attenuated limbs had regained their strength and vigour, but still in the blue eyes there lurked that vague terror which three years of haunting dread and suffering had indelibly stamped within them. Neither would Yvon de Mereac ever be the noble, gallant knight his boyhood had foreshadowed. Cruelty and mind-torture had crushed and enfeebled a strong, brave nature in their ruthless clutch, and Gwennola's own eyes would often fill with tears of sympathy as they met the restless, anxious glance of her brother's, which betokened a mind still clouded with nervous fears. Yet, in spite of weakness, Yvon possessed an obstinate determination, when once his mind was set, from which neither argument nor entreaty would move him, and it was this vein of obstinacy which Gwennola trembled to evoke by mention of her lover's name, seeing that her brother inherited all his father's implacable animosity to their natural foes of France. Still, the love of brother and sister for each other was strong, and it would often seem as if Yvon would lean on the stronger nature of Gwennola for guidance and advice, whilst her own sisterly affection had, at times, the motherly instinct of protection for one whose mind still became shadowed with dread of

an unseen, indefinable fear.

Accompanied by Marie and the faithful Gloire Gwennola was returning some few days later from her weekly visit to the now bed-ridden old peasant dame, Mère Fanchonic, when she was surprised to note the signs of an arrival at the gates of the château. Two strange men-at-arms were leading away horses, on the backs of which were pillions.

"See, Marie," Gwennola exclaimed, as she hurried forward, "what can it mean? It is without doubt visitors who have but lately arrived, and look, pillions also! Verily, what dames can so unexpectedly have honoured us, here at Arteze?"

"Some travellers doubtless who have lost their way," suggested Marie. "But see, lady, here cometh Job, with his foolish face all agog with news."

"Which we are as fain to hear as he to tell," cried Gwennola, laughing gaily, for her spirits had risen to hail any change which came to break the monotony of existence; besides, might this strange visit not be in some way connected with her absent lover?

"Perchance 'tis the Dame of Laferrière come hither with her noble son," suggested Marie slyly, as she watched the flush of annoyance which instantly rose to her young mistress's brow.

"'Tis little likely," retorted Gwennola with some asperity, "seeing that the good dame hath been as bed-ridden as Mère Fanchonic these past two years. An thou hast no better suggestion to give, wench, 'twere wisest to bear in mind the good Father Ambrose's homily on the virtue of silence, which he delivered last Sunday."

Marie did not reply to this rebuke, though she pursed her rosy mouth, round which the dimples played, and tossed her dark, comely head with an air of great sagacity, as one who knew well what lay in her mistress's thoughts behind the sharp speech.

But the maidens' curiosity was in no way gratified by the worthy Jobik, who conveyed only the intelligence that a dame had but lately arrived at the château, and that his master had bidden him speedily seek his mistress and acquaint her with the news.

"A dame? Alone and unattended?" queried Gwennola eagerly. "Tell me then, good Jobik, what name did she give? and what appearance hath she? Is she old or young? and hath knowledge of her features?"

To which Job Alloadec responded that to his knowledge the lady had given no name, and that so closely was she hooded that he had not seen her features, but that she was tall and slender, and spoke with the air of a great lady, very haughtily and proudly. For the rest, he knew naught save that she had come in company with a waiting damsel and three men-at-arms, and that the Sieur de Mereac had bidden him hasten.

Seeing that it was useless to waste time in further questions, Gwennola hastened on, wondering greatly what such a visit portended, and who the lady might be who thus rode in such troublous times with so small an escort and unattended by any cavalier.

The hall of the château was deserted, save for two men-at-arms who lounged near the lower end, and Pierre the fool, who lay on his stomach sporting with his ape, and emitting from time to time shrill screams of merriment in mimicry of his wizened little companion's cries of anger at being thus mocked, much to the amusement of little Henri, the page, who squatted opposite him. In reply to his mistress's inquiries, the page informed her that his master was awaiting her coming in the solar room, whilst he ran before her to raise the tapestries which hung before the inner apartment.

The solar room was one in which Gwennola most often sat with her maidens over her tapestry or embroidery work, and was more sumptuously furnished than the rest of the château; the floor being covered with a fine Flemish carpet, and the hangings of dark velvet, whilst in the corner stood a harp and embroidery frame.

Standing by the high, narrow window, his head leaning against the stone work, as if he strove to see beyond into the courtyard, was Yvon de Mereac, and Gwennola noted the restless, uneasy expression of his handsome face as he turned to greet her.

"Fair sister," he began nervously, as he bowed with the courtesy which in those days of chivalry even brothers paid to their sisters. "Pardon me for so hasty a summons, but—but——"

"Jobik bade me hasten to greet an unexpected guest," replied Gwennola, glancing round the room in surprise at seeing no other occupant saving her brother.

"Ay," replied Yvon with growing uneasiness. "I pray you, my Gwennola, of your courtesy, greet the lady graciously, for——"

"Nay," retorted his sister with some haughtiness. "Am I then accustomed to treat guests so unbecomingly, that thou needest to school me in my manners, Yvon?"

"Nay, nay," he replied anxiously. "Again thy pardon, little sister, but methought,—methought perchance the name might strike unpleasingly upon thine ear, did I not first explain."

"The name?" repeated Gwennola wonderingly. "In sooth, brother, I take not thy meaning."

"It is Mademoiselle de Coray," he muttered hurriedly. "Nay, sister, look not so angrily; she hath come, poor maid, on an errand of peace."

"Peace!" echoed Gwennola, her face hardening into lines so proud and cold

as to recall the stern look of her father, "a de Coray bound on peace? Sooner would I trust the serpent who spoke soft words to our Mother Eve to have come on an errand of love to mankind than the sister of Guillaume de Coray to be bound on such a mission."

"Nay, thy words are unjust," said Yvon hotly. "But stay, thou shalt not judge till thou hast seen her, for once look into her eyes and thou shalt read there such wells of innocence and truth as shall shame thee of suspicion."

"Innocence and truth!" replied Gwennola scornfully. "So perchance thought Adam when he looked into Eve's eyes and plucked the apple from her hand; but tell me, then, what hath brought this paragon of beauty and perfection to our poor Château of Mereac? There must e'en be good reason to bring so fair a dame across Brittany in these times."

"Thy mocking becomes thee not," retorted Yvon coldly. "As for the errand of Mademoiselle de Coray, thou shalt judge for thyself whether it augurs more of deceit than of such sweetness of disposition as I fear me thou wilt scarce appreciate in thy present wayward mood."

"Wayward mood!" echoed Gwennola indignantly, for a seventeen-year-old châtelaine could hardly thus calmly brook being chidden as a child. "Wayward mood, forsooth! but we shall see in good time who is the wise one. Yet mayhap thou wilt tell me, most wise and well-discerning brother, of what import the story was? Whereof it was made I wot I know already."

Perhaps Yvon did not hear the last few words, in his eagerness to convert his sister to a more amenable mood concerning their guest.

"She had heard," he said, "that our father was no more, and would, in spite of her brother's opposition, insist straightway on coming to Mereac, deeming the time a fitting one to heal a sore breach betwixt loving kinsmen, by an explanation which should have been made long since."

"Loving kinsmen!" murmured Gwennola, plucking at the girdle round her waist. "Bah! I would have little of such love, I trow."

"And so," continued Yvon, heeding her not, "she hath come to Mereac, and told me her story."

"Which thou hast believed with all the simplicity of a yearling babe."

"Tush! child, thou pratest of what thou knowest not; little like was I to be deceived. Yet verily there was no deception in the eyes of mademoiselle; whilst, as for the story, it is simplicity itself."

"As was the hearer," whispered Gwennola. "And the story, brother?"

"Truly for the most part I knew it before. My sole enemy was François Kerden, who himself stole upon me in the wood, and would have killed me, for no reason but wanton cruelty, had not the fouler scheme entered his head. Yet, even as it came to him, fate furthered the plot, for Guillaume de Coray, seeing in

part what was chancing, sprang to the spot, and would have revenged my death, as he supposed, on my murderer, had not the Frenchman intervened and robbed him of his prey and me." Yvon stopped with a groan as the memory of those three years of imprisonment returned to him.

"But," said Gwennola coldly, "the story scarce bears the light of truth, brother, seeing that Henri d'Estrailles saw the traitor blow struck; besides, if so innocent, why fled this so noble kinsman when he saw thee appear? and why did he strive to doom to death another, when he saw who had in reality struck thee down, according to this pretty fable?"

"Nay," said Yvon, knitting his brows, "it is easily explained, didst thou but listen, girl. It was in this way. Guillaume had already been wounded, and, faint with loss of blood, could scarce distinguish betwixt Frenchman or Breton. Both wore closed vizors, and both were near at the time of my fall; which had struck the blow Guillaume could scarce realize. The Breton fled, however, and whilst he turned to strike him down in the act, the Frenchman opened his vizor, and de Coray clearly saw his features. Methinks it was this that confused him in claiming that d'Estrailles had done the coward's act, for but one face was imprinted on his reeling memory, and surely 'twere easy thus to confuse which of the twain he had seen actually to perform the foul deed. That it was Kerden himself is shown by the part he afterwards played in so torturing me."

"Nay," said Gwennola shortly, "the story is false, my brother, and should not deceive a babe—false as the weaver of it. Did I not kneel beside this Kerden and listen to his dying words, which fitted so aptly with those of Monsieur d'Estrailles? It is impossible, Yvon, that for a moment thou couldest believe so lying a tale, or shelter beneath thy roof one who proves herself traitress with her first breath."

"Nay, mademoiselle," said a laughing voice in the doorway, and, turning, brother and sister perceived the object of their conversation standing there, the tapestry curtain half raised by one arm, as she smiled from one to the other, as if aware of the dainty picture she thus formed.

That Diane de Coray was beautiful there was no denying, but her beauty was not of the kind which perchance Gwennola had already imagined her to possess. No possibility of deceit seemed to lurk in her clear, hazel eyes, which shone with frankness and merriment. Her rosy cheeks, full red lips, and delicate features, all combined to give her an appearance of extreme youth, an embodiment of springtime, in truth, and a fair one to boot. The hair under the white head-dress was soft and wavy, and of a rich, dark brown; her figure was slender and tall, set off to advantage in a sleeveless gown of crimson velvet, edged with lettice, a fur much in vogue then amongst the fashionable, whilst round her waist she wore a handsome girdle with jewelled tassels.

As they turned to face her, Diane dropped the tapestry and with a deep curtsy towards her young hostess advanced with outstretched hands.

"Nay," she cried, still laughing, "thou shalt not thus judge me unheard, little one. Fie on thee! thy kinswoman a traitress? I pray thee tell me wherein? See! I come as a hostage for my brother's truth."

"And one that we shall hope to keep for long," responded Yvon courteously, as he placed a seat for her.

She laughed up at him, showing a set of small, pearly teeth as she did so.

"Thy sister would not too warmly echo thy words, fair kinsman," she replied with a sly glance towards Gwennola.

But Mademoiselle de Mereac was not to be moved by roguish glances, dimples, or sweet words. She had responded to her cousin's effusive greeting with a stiff curtsy, taking not the slightest notice of the outstretched hands.

"Mademoiselle," she replied icily, in answer to Diane's rallying words, "is as welcome as the sister of Guillaume de Coray is likely to be at Mereac."

Diane pouted her lips, with the sweet coquetry of a spoilt child; there would even seem to have been tears in the eyes which she raised first to Yvon and from him to Gwennola.

"It is cruel," she murmured softly, "that thou wilt not believe my word, but it is as Guillaume warned me, for oft he hath told me with sorrow of the hatred you bear him, sweet Gwennola. But no," she cried, springing from her seat and clasping her slim hands together with a pretty little air of supplication, "thou shalt be convinced, fair cousin. See, I swear to thee it is true. Wilt thou not believe me?"

"If Monsieur de Coray were innocent, why did he fly?" demanded Gwennola inexorably.

"Fly?" echoed Diane innocently. "Nay, cousin, scarcely fly! That he left in haste it is true; yet not so much from fear as from another sin—shall I confess it?" Her arch smile was met by Gwennola's grave, set face, which, however, seemed in no way to abash her. "It was jealousy," she murmured, glancing up towards Yvon and addressing him more than Gwennola. "Fie! it is an evil passion. Is it not, monsieur? but one to which poor mortals are prone. He had verily proved, as he thought, that Monsieur d'Es—d'Es—monsieur the Frenchman was guilty of his cousin's blood, and unworthy though it might be, he was the more glad to see him die as he fancied the lady of his love looked more kindly on him than he deemed befitting. So, when he found that his rival was like to be restored to liberty, in a foolish fit of unreasoning rage he hurried homewards, little dreaming how ill a construction so weak an act could have placed upon it."

"And how knew he of such construction, seeing he fled in such haste?" demanded Gwennola shrewdly; but Diane de Coray had suddenly become afflicted

with deafness.

"To such foolishness doth unrequited love lead us," she sighed, addressing Yvon solely now. "Alas! 'tis a cruel passion at best, is it not, monsieur? and one better eschewed by the wise."

"Nay," replied he slowly, looking down with undisguised admiration into her face. "Not when it cometh in the guise of an angel of peace and love, mademoiselle."

"Peace and love!" whispered Gwennola to herself as she withdrew. "Mary, Mother, grant that it be not strife and bitter hate; for, alas! she is false, this demoiselle, false to the heart's core, for all her beauty."

CHAPTER XIII

It would seem indeed that Diane de Coray had come,—if come for that purpose she had,—to play hostage for life against her brother's truth, for almost imperceptibly she slipped into her niche in the simple, family life at the Château of Mereac.

Not that her presence brought peace in its train, for it seemed that where she found peace she would fain leave a sword, and many and bitter were the tears that Gwennola shed in the solitude of her chamber as she watched her enemy gaining daily more undisputed sway over her pliable and weak-minded brother. Yes, it was tacitly agreed that it was to be warfare between these two kinswomen, yet such warfare as only women can play, the scratching of claws from velvet paws, and the sweet smile veiling bitter words. Not that Gwennola was an adept at such fencing; her nature was too straightforward, perhaps also too tempestuous, to repay veiled insult with veiled insult. She would reply hotly, even angrily, thus bringing the odium of a quarrel entirely on her own shoulders, leaving her rival to smile indulgently, as if at the stormy outburst of a child, till Gwennola could have wept for very mortification. These unequal trials of strength had, however, the effect at which Diane aimed; brother and sister grew gradually more estranged, for Yvon, hot with the infatuation with which his beautiful kinswoman had inspired him, hesitated not to rebuke his sister, ofttimes with anger, for replying indignantly to Diane's sugared taunts. So the days wore on, and Gwennola's heart grew ever heavier, and the hopes which summer had whispered in her ears faded before the shrill blasts of autumn.

It had been rumoured that King Charles had taken ill the refusal of the young Duchess to listen to his proposals, and was even now assembling a mighty army to march into Brittany and demand by force what could not be his by pleading.

In face of such rumours the bitter hatred of their overweening and powerful neighbours became intensified, and Gwennola knew that her rival would make use of such national indignation to crush her hopes that Yvon would allow of a betrothal between herself and Henri d'Estrailles.

Indeed, that such was in truth the case, Yvon, all too soon, took no pains to conceal, telling his sister coldly that since she so resented the thoughts of a betrothal with Guillaume de Coray, she must choose between a nun's veil and the bridegroom her father had already designed for her, Maurice de Laferrière.

In vain Gwennola pleaded her father's promise that, should peace at length bind the two countries together, her hand might follow the dictates of her heart. With an obstinacy which, when once aroused, was immovable, Yvon refused to listen to tears or entreaties, bidding her choose without delay, seeing that it was time that her destiny should be settled, and at the same time announcing his own betrothal to Diane de Coray.

Prepared as she was for this, still, the shock was terrible to the unhappy Gwennola. The prejudice she had conceived against the sister of de Coray had ripened during those past weeks into something akin to hatred, a feeling she felt to be heartily reciprocated by Diane herself. That young lady, however, was sufficiently mistress of her emotions to conceal her dislike under a very pretty show of friendship, which entirely deceived the love-sick Yvon, who felt that his sister only was to blame in the dissensions which rose from time to time between châtelaine and guest.

Thus matters stood that October morning, as Diane de Coray entered the hall of the château with her falcon on her wrist, and a smile of triumph in her hazel eyes.

"Come, Pierre," she said softly, as the fool, who had been crouched shivering over the fire, at her entrance rose to his feet. "I would talk with thee yonder, on the terrace path. The Sieur de Mereac will not yet be ready for the chase, and meantime I have somewhat to say to thee. Tell me," she added, still further lowering her voice, as she reached the broad terrace and stood facing her shivering companion, "hath thy master arrived?"

"He has been for some days past at the hut of Henri Lefroi," muttered the lad, eyeing his interrogator curiously.

"For some days?" echoed Diane in surprise. "Nay, 'tis strange; to what purport should he linger thus?"

"I know not," replied Pierre moodily, "that being my master's business, and

none of mine. But what is your will, lady? for methinks I hear monsieur's voice yonder, calling your name."

"No matter," said Diane lightly; "he can wait for the nonce. But attend then, little knave: thou must go this day to the house of this Lefroi, and bid my brother ride hitherward as if he had come from a journey. Tell him that his welcome is assured from all, except perchance the little fool Gwennola de Mereac; but tell him on no account to delay longer, for I am at a loss how to proceed without him." She repeated the last words emphatically, as if desirous of imprinting them on Pierre's mind, then with a brief nod she turned from him to welcome with sunny smiles the young lord of the château, who came striding towards her, his handsome face flushed with pleasure, his blue eyes aflame with love.

"Nay, sweetheart," he cried reproachfully, "didst not hear me call? See, I grow jealous even of a fool, who is thus overwhelmed with honour at receiving one smile from those sweet lips."

Perhaps Pierre the fool, slipping back to his corner by the fire, found the honour less burdensome than his lord supposed, seeing that he sat there chuckling at the merry flames that blazed and leapt on the open hearth. It was manifestly an effort to drag himself away from the warm glow, out once more into the keen air, yet, so pleasant seemed his thoughts, that he still chuckled softly, as he trotted along the forest path with Petit Pierre perched on his shoulder, chattering and scolding in unison.

The hut of Henri Lefroi bore almost as ill a reputation as the ruined chapel of the Brown Friar, for, folk said, this was the habitation of a wizard whose powers in the occult science were so great as to defy both heaven and hell, wherefore at the name men and women crossed themselves and repeated an ave, for very fear of incurring the wrath of so dread a personage.

But it was not to the hut of old Lefroi that Pierre turned his steps, but rather to the little dwelling-place where Gabrielle, his sister, would be sitting spinning.

It was two weeks since that her brother had also started spinning, but not in his case from flaxen thread, but the woof of romance, which had been born suddenly in his cunning mind. Why should Monsieur de Coray, he asked himself, come so many days before the time appointed by his sister? And why, instead of acquainting her with the fact of his presence, should he strive to conceal it? And also, why should he daily steal away from Henry Lefroi's dismal abode to spend the long hours of the autumn days beside the pretty Gabrielle? Aha! a pretty romance that was, which the little fool watched, safe hidden from prying eyes, amongst the undergrowth of the thicket. Yes, he told himself, without doubt Monsieur de Coray had lost his heart to Gabrielle, his sister, and without doubt the day would come when Gabrielle should be the mistress of a noble château, and he, Pierre the fool, would for ever doff the motley and play the rôle of Mon-

sieur Laurent. Ah! how grand it sounded, how distinguished! Yet for all that he kept jealous guard over those two, for not altogether did he trust the honour of Monsieur de Coray, although he marked shrewdly with what respect he spoke to the little sister, such respect as he had surely not even shown Mademoiselle de Mereac, the proud, haughty demoiselle of the château yonder.

And Pierre, for all his foolishness, was right, for the passion of a bad and evil man had become purified in the presence of this child of the forest. He loved her, not as he had loved others, but with a reverence, such as one has for saints, combined with the passion he felt for the woman, and, as he sat there, day by day, watching her as she span, or listening entranced when she sang to him a sweet, simple ballad of Brittany, filled with the romance and sadness of her land, in a voice such as the birds might have envied, he swore to himself that this peasant girl should be his wife, and that for her sake he would do all things. But the snake of old ever lurks in the fairest garden of dreams, and so the very purpose of his presence in these forests became one that he swore to fulfil, evil and cruel as it was, for the sake of this beautiful child, whose guileless glances had won his sin-hardened heart. So the devil tempts us. For the sake, we say, of one we love, however pure and good, we will do evil so that we may lavish its fruits on the object of our devotion, who, forsooth! would shrink back appalled if it knew from whence those fruits came.

So in the autumn woods three souls dreamed out their dreams. Pierre the fool strutting, in his mind's eye, in a suit of velvet and chain of gold, no longer the jester or object of jest, but "Monsieur Laurent," brother, honoured and esteemed, of Madame la Châtelaine. Guillaume de Coray clasping in his arms the lovely girl whose image had blotted out so many and so varied dreams of ambitions, and leading her with proud and triumphant steps to his Château of Mereac, won at last by means to which he involuntarily closed his eyes. And Gabrielle Laurent, seeing only the face of the man to whom she had given her heart, and whom she must love for all time, indifferent to whether he were great lord or simple peasant, with all the pure tenderness of her young heart. Whilst at night, as she knelt in prayer within her lonely hut, she would thank the good God and all her guardian saints, with child-like simplicity and gratitude, for sending into her life one so noble and so good as Guillaume de Coray, repeating the name softly and reverently to herself, as though it possessed some charm to drive away all dreams of ill, as she lay in her wooden bed, watching the flickering moonlight as it fell across the threshold—the white, beautiful moonlight, which was no purer than her thoughts as she fell to sleep murmuring her lover's name. Alas! the poor

little Gabrielle!

CHAPTER XIV

It was some three hours after Pierre the fool had delivered Diane de Coray's message that the brother and sister sat together in her chamber at the Château de Mereac.

"So thou hast succeeded?" inquired Guillaume, scanning with curiosity, not unmixed with admiration, his sister's beautiful face.

"Beyond our expectations."

There was a mocking intonation in her words which did not escape him.

"So," he said, crossing his legs and leaning his elbow against the table, so that his eyes were bent nearly opposite to hers. "Beyond our expectations? That is well. And so the poor fool, Yvon de Mereac, loves you?"

"As warmly as his sister hates me."

"Equally to their own destruction."

She laughed a trifle uneasily.

"The idea causes you amusement?"

His tone was not pleasant.

"Amusement," she said vaguely. Then, changing her tone, "Is it after all so necessary?"

"Altogether necessary. Remember your oath."

She changed colour, but clung to her point.

"Nay, but seeing—seeing he loves me?"

"Scarcely with such devotion that he would give up his inheritance to the brother of his adored."

She winced under the sneer.

"But will nothing else content you, mon frère? If I were his wife, I—I would arrange matters altogether to your will. You shall be lord in all but name. Consider, he is, after all, but a poor, weak fool, who will ever do my bidding."

Her words were rapid, and rang with a note of pleading, but Guillaume de Coray only frowned.

"It is necessary that he shall be altogether removed, or, if plain speaking be necessary, he must die. The means are already in our hands."

She shuddered involuntarily.

"Bah!" he said lightly. "Thou surely dost not love this weakling lover of thine, Diane? Grieve not for him, ma chère; the new Sieur de Mereac will wed thee to a nobler suitor when he comes to his own."

"I cannot do it," she moaned. "Nay, brother, I sicken at the very thought. 'Tis not in truth that I love him, but—but——"

"A foolish fancy," quoth her brother mockingly. "Nay, Diane, thou art not wont to blanch so easily, and bethink thee of thy sweet revenge on yon proud and scornful maid."

Her hazel eyes grew hard.

"Yes," she said, "I hate her; yes, hate her with all my soul, for she scorns me, Guillaume, and flouts me too, for all her brother's anger. Ay, revenge is sweet, and yet——"

"Courage," mocked Guillaume, leaning closer to her across the table—"courage, little sister. After all——"

He paused, watching her eyes dilate with sudden dread as she filled in the unspoken words.

"No," she cried at length, and her voice rose in a quick, decisive tone, "I cannot do it, Guillaume; sooner than be thy tool in this work I will—I will——"

"Die thyself belike," he said coolly, his eyes never leaving her changing face. "Think well, Diane, yes, very well, before thou breakest thine oath—remember the fate that awaits thee, did I so much as breathe one word concerning thy dealings in matters which have brought many a fairer maid than thee to the stake, or the torture chamber. Did I proclaim thee witch, what arm, even of love itself, would be strong enough in Brittany, ay, and in all France, to save thee?"

"I am no witch," she cried passionately, "as thou knowest well, liar and coward that thou art."

"No witch," he replied smoothly, "yet sufficiently akin to seal thy doom, were I to reveal thy secret dealings with one at whose name all Brittany shudders. And thou thyself hast been no mean pupil, my sister—therefore——"

The significant pause was sufficient, and the unfortunate girl covered her face in her hands as she moaned out—

"Nay, spare me the taunt, Guillaume. It is true I have sinned, and yet I am no witch, before Heaven I am no witch. Did I not flee from the beldame's accursed dwelling in very terror from such deeds as they would have me do? Nay, brother, little I knew with what black terror I played, I, a motherless girl, led astray by one whom I had deemed a friend."

"A fair friend," he sneered, "truly a fair friend; but enough. That thou didst flee is known to me; that thou wert *there* shall be known, ay, and proved to the world if thou art obstinate, and thou shalt pay the penalty as surely as if thou wert as truly a servant of Satan as any hag who gathers nightly on the sands of

Seville or around the nut tree of Benevento."

Diane crossed herself, white to the lips, whilst her eyes crept to his face with the fear of a dog who looks up in very terror of the lash he knows he shall see descending.

"What is thy will?" she whispered mechanically, as she read no sign of relenting in the hard face before her.

He smiled triumphantly.

"Thou wilt obey?"

"I will obey."

"That is well, but for the rest, thou knowest very well my will, and wherefore thou camest hither."

She shuddered.

"Still," continued her brother, "if thou wilt hear it again I will repeat our plan, *our* plan, thou mindest, Diane, which thou helpedst me to form so cleverly at Pontivy."

"I had not known him then," she cried with a little sob, "and—and he loves me well."

"So much the better; the less chance of suspicion falling upon us. See, child, have done with these foolish vapourings, and mark how all falls in with our purpose. The Sieur de Mereac loves thee—a love which he will doubtless in time extend in some measure to me, thy brother, seeing that thou hast set his mind at rest concerning the affair at St Aubin. All then are at peace and filled with content, saving only Mademoiselle de Mereac, who, for some unknown reason, is consumed with hatred and jealousy against her brother's beloved friends, a hatred which, indeed, also estranges her from her brother. Suddenly, without warning, the Sieur de Mereac falls ill, wasting away, in some strange and inexplicable sickness, till in due time it is apparent that death claims him for a comrade. A whisper is rumoured throughout the house coupling the name of Gwennola de Mereac with witchcraft; the whisper grows to an outcry; proofs of guilt are discovered in the maiden's chamber; she is condemned to death, but it is too late to save her ill-fated brother, who perishes, a victim to an execrated sister's malevolence, and Guillaume de Coray, his cousin, reigns in his stead over the broad lands of Mereac. Voilà, my sister, how charming and how simple a history! And the means, the *means*," he emphasized, "of its fulfilment lie here."

As he spoke he handed her a small phial containing a dark liquid, watching her, as the cat does the mouse, as she took it in her trembling hand.

"You comprehend?" he asked softly.

"I comprehend."

He smiled pensively.

"That is very well, and in due course my delightful history will unfold itself.

For the whisper of mademoiselle's guilt it would be well to employ the services of the good Jeanne. She is discreet, that girl, and worthy of reward."

But Diane did not answer; she was still staring in horror at the tiny phial she held in her hand—the phial that was the price of a life.

"A charming love potion, the dear Lefroi informed me," said de Coray, spreading out his hands with an airy gesture. "Ah, what a man is that, and what a dwelling!—a very charnel-house; and yet not without its amusement. Thou mightest have done worse, my Diane, than stay to listen to thy fair friend's discourse on the occult science, that night at Pontivy. But thou dost not agree? Bah! what foolishness!—'tis surely better to mix one's own potions rather than trust to the discretion of another. But, as for Lefroi, he is no gossip, and, if one foresaw danger, a dagger thrust is a sure seal to unruly lips. And now, my sister, I will bid thee au revoir, seeing that I go to greet the beautiful demoiselle who did me the honour not long since to become my betrothed bride. Parbleu! it may well be that ere long she shall regret having scorned the hand which was once offered her in love and friendship."

"Love and friendship!" echoed Diane drearily to herself, as with a bow her brother withdrew. "Thy love and friendship! Merciful heavens! methinks the love of such an one would but bring damnation in its train, and I——" A sob choked her whispered words.

"Ah, Yvon! poor Yvon!" she muttered softly, "and thou must die!" Then, shaking back her hair, which had partly fallen across her face, she drew herself up defiantly. "At least," she said softly, as she faced her mirror, and noted the haggard countenance reflected therein—"at least I shall have revenge on yon proud girl. For her I have no pity—the scornful one!"

Meantime, so strange is human nature, Guillaume de Coray was standing looking out from his turret chamber towards the forest with a look so softened and tender that his sister would have failed to recognise the man who but a short hour before had planned murder in mocking tones. Now he was dreaming of the time when he should lead his Gabrielle forth from those forest shades, a proud and happy bride. In that dream of the future, when he saw himself at last at the summit of ambition, lord of the surrounding lands, husband of a woman already adored, it was strange that he saw himself also attaining to an honour and nobility which he could never possess. The husband of Gabrielle Laurent, he told himself, should close for ever the gates of the past which shrouded Guillaume de Coray, the blood-stained, unprincipled villain who, from serving an evil master, had afterwards served, more evilly still, his own lusts, trampling underfoot on his way any who opposed his progress to his goal, only mindful of his ends, caring no jot by what villainy they were accomplished. Yes, the gates should be shut on this man, and in the Sieur de Mereac should arise a new creature, upright,

honourable, knightly, a phantom figure striving to be ever what the woman he loved had pictured him. Strange freak of complex human nature, seldom found so lost as to be beyond the pale of redemption; cruel and sin-hardened as this man was, there must needs have been a heart somewhere buried deeply within him, which afar off worshipped goodness and truth,—a heart which had been roused into life, amidst corruption, by a woman's pure touch. She had believed in him, this simple peasant girl, with the face and mind of a holy Madonna, and the trust had awakened within him that long silent chord of chivalry and honour from which love itself had sprung. In her presence he was no longer the Guillaume de Coray whom the world knew, but one who strove to cloak that evil presence in a garb of honour and nobility. And in the deception itself lay the very germ of a new-born nobler self, a desire to lay aside for ever that hidden being of sin and become that which he read himself to be in her pure eyes. He shuddered as he pictured her realization of himself as he was, and swore that sooner than that this should be he would cast the old self aside. Yet,—mark the insidious whisper of Satan,—such dreams of goodness and virtue were garments to be donned after he had accomplished his purpose. Sin was the necessary tool he must employ to win for his white dove the fair nest he coveted; therefore sin should be his boon companion till the work was done, and he almost forgot to shudder at her uncomely countenance or shrink from the foul whispers of her counsel in his haste to use her far his will. Afterwards he would spurn her—yes, afterwards, when Gabrielle reigned at Mereac—afterwards—but not now.

CHAPTER XV

The sound of revelry rose high in the great hall of Mereac. On the dais at the head of the table the young Sieur, with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, raised his goblet of wine and drank deeply as he looked into the hazel eyes of the beautiful woman beside him. The guests around the table whispered together that Yvon de Mereac's taste had not been amiss when he chose the lovely Diane de Coray for his betrothed, and toasts were freely drunk to the future châtelaine of the castle, and admiring glances flung towards the youthful beauty who sat there laughing and smiling so gaily and happily.

Guillaume de Coray laughed too as he pledged the fair dame beside him and quaffed the choice hippocras which filled his cup. All indeed went well with

those castles in the air which he was so intent on building. The first seeds were already sown, and his keen glance noted with a thrill of pleasurable excitement that the flushed cheek and sparkling eye of his young host wore anything but the bloom of health. His own eyes roamed slowly round the board as he followed the tenor of his thoughts, and fell at length on the face of Gwennola de Mereac.

The young girl was sitting silent and pale amongst her brother's guests, her listless eyes and apathetic replies to the cavalier beside her telling how far away were thoughts and heart. In vain the Comte de Laferrière whispered tender words in her unwilling ears. She replied in accents so cold that they must necessarily have chilled the warmest admirer; and at length the Count, weary of repulses, turned his attentions and compliments to a more sprightly damsel on his left, who seemed only too willing to respond to his wit and gallantry. If he had thought to chagrin his destined bride, the effect was quite contrary to his expectations, for Gwennola seemed entirely indifferent, if not oblivious, to his neglect, but sat in her place, pale, listless, and indifferent as before, except when for a moment's space she raised her blue eyes to encounter de Coray's mocking smile, when a flush of anger swept over her pale cheeks, and for a moment her eyes flashed with their old scorn and defiance.

In spite of her passionate indignation and pleading, this man had been welcomed as an honoured guest by her infatuated brother, who listened with ready ears to the lame and feeble excuses with which de Coray strove to explain the past. All was forgiven and forgotten to the brother of the lovely Diane, and it needed but a brief space for de Coray to attain a firm command over his future brother-in-law's weak and wavering will. That she should be forced into some hateful marriage or condemned to a convent cell was Gwennola's daily expectation, but so far the blow had not fallen. It is true that Maurice de Laferrière still wooed, but no formal betrothal had taken place. Yet all hopes of a marriage with her lover were shattered for ever, not only by reason of France's threatening attitude towards the persecuted duchy, but because of the bitter enmity of de Coray, who had successfully persuaded de Mereac that the Frenchman had been the ally of François Kerden.

No wonder, therefore, that Gwennola's heart was heavy as she sat, perforce, alone and solitary, amidst the revelry around.

"A new minstrel!" cried Yvon with a gay laugh. "Nay, my friend, by the bones of St Yves, thou comest in a fortunate hour. Thy name, good fellow? and a cup of wine to clear thy throat before thy song."

The stranger bowed as he accepted the cup and glanced towards the speaker.

"My name, monsieur," he replied in the Breton tongue, "is Jean Marcille, and my birthplace near to Cape Raz."

"Good," replied the host. "A true Breton; and a Breton ballad of Breton prowess is ever welcome at the Château de Mereac. Eh, old Antoine? A new strain will be as welcome to us as a rest is to thee; therefore sing us a stirring lay, Sir Minstrel, and see that its theme be of love and war, for of such things all true knights make their dreams and fair ladies welcome."

Again the minstrel bowed, and, taking his vielle in his hand, swept the chords ere he began his song, glancing as he did so round the long board, though his eye seemingly rested on none. He himself was a sufficiently striking figure to cause interest, especially at the lower end of the table, where the waiting-women eyed with appreciation the slight, well-formed figure in its corset of scarlet cloth and wide hanging sleeves, and the cap of velvet, nearly half a yard in height, set jauntily on the man's dark hair, which well matched his bronzed complexion and black, merry eyes, which seemed to promise a boon companion of a gay wit and keen tongue.

The visit of such a vielleur was not uncommon to the châteaux of the great; for although nearly all possessed a minstrel of their own, a fresh repertoire was always welcomed, music and singing being an almost necessary accompaniment to the meal.

Jean Marcille was evidently the possessor of a voice of no mean merit, and thunderous applause greeted song after song. Wild ballads of ancient Brittany he sang, telling of the fate of the wizard Myrddyn, who, for all his wisdom, was beguiled to tell his secret to the treacherous Vyvyan, knowing all the while of her cruel intention, yet unable to withstand the siren wiles of her woman's tongue, and so lies sleeping for ever in his tomb in the forest of Broceliande, under the fatal stone where his false love has enchanted him. Then, still pursuing the mournful themes with which Brittany seems to abound, and which her children hold so dear, he sang of the romantic loves of Abelard the sage and Helöise the beautiful—loves which, crushed and killed in sorrow and despair, bloomed immortally in poetry and song. But presently his voice rang with a more martial strain, as, sweeping the chords of his harp, he sang the inspiriting songs of valour—songs these, perchance, of his own weaving, for they told of the distresses of the fair young Duchess Anne, of her helpless condition amongst ravening enemies, of her gallant Bretons rallying around her, of the intrepidity of Breton heroes, of the siege of Gwengamp, where the brave Captains Chero and Gouicket defied the traitor Rohan's call, and declared that whilst there was a Duchess in Brittany they would not give up her towns; and of Tomina Al-Léan, the wife of Gouicket, who took her husband's place on the walls when he lay helpless and wounded below.

Such ballads, at such a time, when deeds of chivalry were brave men's daily acts, and ladies had no smiles for recreant knight or coward lover, never failed

to stir their listeners to a frenzy of enthusiasm, and knights drew their swords as they sprang to their feet, and, with goblets in their right hands, drank to their little Duchess, and flung the shivering glass to the ground.

Only, perhaps, the enthusiasm of Guillaume de Coray was a little forced, and his lips curved more than once into a mocking smile as he watched the ring of flushed faces, and reflected how small a concern it was of his did Duchess or King rule in Brittany, provided his own schemes went well.

The stranger minstrel needed little pressing to stay at the Château of Mereac, for truly it seemed that he fell almost naturally into his place in the household. A welcome addition, indeed, to enliven the shortening and gloomy days, for the voice of old Antoine was growing cracked and faltering, and his songs became wearisome by reason of oft repetition; nor had the elder man the facility in weaving new ones which his young rival seemed to possess—a fact which tended to jealousy, though Antoine was too wise to let such be apparent.

Meantime, Jean Marcille proved to have as soft and winning a tongue in speech as in song, and so Marie Alloadec found, as she sat busily employed in her needlework, whilst the minstrel sat on the wide ledge beside her with crossed legs and a face bent perhaps a little nearer to Marie's swiftly flying needle than was judicious.

He was telling her of his home, near the wild and mournful Cape Raz, and from time to time Marie would allow her work to fall as she listened to the graphic descriptions of that dreary and romantic coast. The very name of Raz causes the trembling sailor to pray aloud to his patron saints as he thinks of the time when his boat must glide by the red rocks where the hell of Plogoff yearns for its prey. No wonder the Breton proverbs say, "None pass the Raz without hurt or fright," and "Help me, great God, at Cape Raz;—my ship is so small, and the sea is so great."

A terrible dwelling-place this, with a brooding fear in the air and a melancholy mingled with every legend and fancy which haunts the coast around. Far away there beyond Dead Man's Bay lies the island of Sein, a desolate sandbank inhabited by a few compassionate families, who yearly strive to save the shipwrecked mariners. This[#] island was the abode of the sacred virgins, who gave the Celts fine weather or shipwreck. There they celebrated their gloomy and murderous orgies; and the seamen heard with terror, far off at sea, the clash of the barbaric cymbals. Yonder, too, watchers may see two ravens flying heavily on the shore: they are the souls of the dread King Grallo and his daughter; whilst the shrill whistling, which one would take for the voice of the tempest, is the *crierien*, or ghosts of the shipwrecked, clamouring for burial.

[#] See Michelet's *History of France.*

"But see," Marie exclaimed, with great eyes grown even greater with wonder and awe as she listened to the wild tales which Marcille poured into her ears, "they are gloomy, these tales, and very terrible; and yet, how is it that you laugh and are gay, and have altogether the air of joy and happiness?"

"A good conscience," quoth Jean lightly, as with absent fingers he twanged the strings of his vielle. "Also, mademoiselle, perchance the good gift of my mother, who came from laughing Touraine, where all sing and are gay, and where the waters of the Loire dance with the happy sunshine, instead of being grey with melancholy, as here in Brittany."

"Of Touraine?" questioned Marie, dropping her voice, whilst her bright eyes searched curiously the dark, smiling face of the minstrel. "And thy mother came from Touraine? But that perchance was long since, and thou hast never journeyed so far?"

"I?" laughed Jean Marcille. "Nay, mademoiselle, a minstrel wanders oft in many lands, and I have seen not only the orchards and meadows of Touraine, but the blue skies of Italy, and the white mountains of Switzerland in my day."

"But of Touraine?" persisted Marie. "If thy mother is of that country, thou knowest perchance much—almost as much as of thy native Brittany?"

"Verily," replied Marcille, with a shrug of his shoulders, "seeing that my father died long since, when I was but a little lad, and my mother, wearying of grey skies and the wails of lost spirits, was fain to return to the sunshine of her own land."

"And so," said Marie, her colour deepening as her eager eyes again sought his, "you have long dwelt in the land of our enemies, Sir Minstrel? Aha! but you told not that to our lord yesternight when he asked from whence you came."

Marcille spread out his hands with a careless gesture of indifference.

"Monsieur asked me only of my name and birthplace," he replied with a smile.

"But if perchance mademoiselle fears I am a spy——" He paused, watching her face as she turned it to him.

"Nay," she murmured, glancing around to be sure that they were unheard; "I asked,—I asked—because,—because I would have inquired of a noble monsieur from Touraine who journeyed hitherward in the early summer, and in whom my mistress took somewhat of an interest."

"For that matter," said her companion, "there is scarce a château in all Touraine whose lord I do not know; for there is ever a flagon of wine ready for the minstrel bard."

"But not ever for Breton ballads," slyly replied Marie, with a coquettish side-glance.

"Nay," he laughed, "I suit my songs to my company, mademoiselle, for 'tis a foolish bird that sings only on one note, and there are chansons and rondeaux of Touraine and Anjou with which I can woo the dimples to thy cheeks, sweet mistress, as well as ballads of Brittany, to bring tears to those bright eyes."

"But," she said, shaking her head at him with a dimpling smile to moderate her rebuke—"but you are foolish, altogether foolish, and I want no compliments of France, but rather listen to what I would ask of you. In this fair Touraine, where all laugh and are gay, have you perchance met one who is named Monsieur Henri d'Estrailles, whose château lies not far from the banks of the Loire?"

"So well I know him," replied Marcille, eyeing her steadily, as if he would fain read her very heart—"so well I know him, that at his bidding I am here; pretty maiden, to bring his message to thy fair mistress."

"A messenger from Monsieur d'Estrailles!" gasped Marie, whilst the work slipped from her hands and lay unheeded on the floor. "A messenger from Monsieur d'Estrailles!"

"Ay, verily," whispered the minstrel. "But speak not so loudly, mademoiselle, for, from what I gather, there were short shrift for me did some here suspect me or my errand."

"But I cannot believe it," murmured Marie, her eyes still round with wonder. "It is impossible."

For reply Marcille slipped his hand into his vest and brought forth a small ring which lay safely shrouded in his brown palm.

"It is the token," he said simply. "Do not fear, Mademoiselle Marie; all is as I say. I am in truth the servant of Monsieur d'Estrailles, who hath a message for his mistress's ear, but knew too well that he might not come hither in his own proper person to tell it, seeing that even now the French army crosses the Breton border, and he feared that his presence at such a time might be less than welcome."

"Less than welcome!" echoed Marie. "Nay, at the moment I ween it would be death itself to the gallant knight. But your message shall be delivered, monsieur, and at once. See, I go with haste to my mistress's chamber, and it shall be that I will return anon to summon you to her presence."

So saying, Marie Alloadec, without waiting to gather up her fallen embroidery, tripped quickly away, to return with haste in a few moments, softly calling to Marcille to follow her.

Neither of them noticed that close to the embrasure in which they had been seated knelt the figure of a woman, who withdrew almost behind the heavy tapestry hangings as they passed. But there was a smile on the face of Jeanne, the

dark-browed waiting-woman of Diane de Coray, as she watched furtively their departing figures.

CHAPTER XVI

The Sieur de Mereac was sick. No longer could there be any disguising of the fact; he had grown in the past week thin and emaciated, whilst his great blue eyes, so like his young sister's, looked out of his sunken face with a pathetic wistfulness which touched a chord of pity in the hardest heart.

Yet what the reason of so strange and deadly a sickness might be it seemed impossible to say. Vague suspicions, indeed, seemed to float like faint and evil breaths upon the air of the château; but so intangible were they, that men scarce dared to look into the thought which from time to time stirred within them. Gloom had suddenly seemed to fall upon the household which had before resounded with a mirth scarcely befitting, seeing that so short a time had elapsed since the death of the old Sieur. And now it would seem that death again stretched forth his hand, but not this time to gather to his full garner one whose head was already white with the snows of age, but to snatch greedily at youth, with its swift pulsations of joy and life. What did death here? What place had he at the betrothal board? What right had his shadow to fall between the sunshine of love and its fulfilment? Such questions were hard indeed to answer, and by reason of them the shadow of fear fell on those who pitied, whilst they loved, the young master, whose footsteps through life had led him in such tragic paths, and who now seemed, in the dawn of happiness, before unknown, to stand before the yawning chasm of a grave.

Yet, strangest and most mysterious of all did it seem that Gwennola de Mereac—she who, in past days, had been so tenderly attached to her brother—should scarcely heed the fact of his altered appearance, and, from brooding melancholy, herself assume all suddenly an aspect of content and happy expectation.

So the retainers of Mereac gazed at the mysterious march of events, whilst the whisper on the air grew clearer day by day. But Gwennola suspected none of these things. True, her heart ached for her brother as she noted his altered looks; yet so wide had grown the gulf which Diane de Coray had made between them, that her pride refused to allow her to show the anxious solicitude she felt; whilst

Diane herself strove secretly to make such solicitude the more impossible by her attitude towards the girl she hated. Yvon was made silently to know that he must choose between his sister and his lady-love; and there was no hesitation possible in his mind as Diane bent tenderly over his couch, whilst Gwennola held coldly aloof, allowing no one to guess the bursting grief and jealousy which raged in her heart.

But it was not altogether pride alone which set Gwennola's lips into a calm and serene smile of seeming unconcern for her brother's sickness; for, setting apart her anxiety for him,—and youth is skilful in persuading itself that such fears are groundless,—she was rejoicing secretly in the message brought to her by the hand of Jean Marcille.

Ah! what a joy it had been, and yet how fierce an anxiety brooded behind it! As she sat by her window, watching the brown leaves of the forest trees caught and whirled away in the autumn wind, her heart was singing, yet shuddering, as she thought of the time, but three days hence, when she should creep forth as she had done months ago and find, under that forest shade, the lover, faithful and true, who laughed at perils for the joy of clasping her once more in his arms. How sweet it was to rehearse over and over again that meeting—the terrors of the woodland path, the haunting dread of spying eyes, all forgotten and swallowed up in the glad moment when she should feel those strong arms holding her to him, and should look up to read the old, old story in eyes so full of love's deepest tenderness. Then the exquisite joy of the picture faded, as fears crowded with jeering, mocking faces around the dream. What if he should be discovered? This time there would, she knew, be no escape. No shadow of suspicion would be too faint to seal his doom. Revenge, she knew, was smouldering deeply in de Coray's heart, and the hatred and jealousy of his sister would but too eagerly seize upon this means of repaying her rival, whose influence, she knew, would fain have been exerted to drive her from the château gates.

But Marie Alloadec had no such fears. The faithful maiden rejoiced not only in her mistress's romance, but in one of her own which was being woven at the same time. The handsome face of Monsieur d'Estrailles' messenger had already made its impression on the Breton girl's susceptible heart; and Jean Marcille had been no backward wooer, finding it altogether to his own pleasure, as well as his master's interests, to make love to the pretty waiting-woman whilst he attended to her mistress's commands.

All three were keenly aware of the dangers that beset them; but love laughs at such dangers, and the happy optimism of Marie and Marcille comforted, if it did not convince, Gwennola. For Marie it was easy to be gay, for her lover was beside her; but for her own part, Gwennola shivered even whilst she smiled, so fearful of ill was she.

But at last the night had arrived, a night so calm, so peaceful, that it seemed as one born out of time in that wild month of November. True, there was but a dying moon to light the way through the forest path, and from time to time even her wavering light was dimmed by the scudding clouds which obscured her. But this time Gwennola went not to her tryst unattended; indeed, such a course was fraught with dangers, which had necessarily multiplied since the summer, for the hungry wolves grew more importunate than ever for their prey. Shielded, however, by the strong arm of Jean Marcille, and accompanied by Marie, who pleaded to be allowed to follow her mistress on her dangerous errand, she felt little fear of these four-footed enemies; whilst behind, she knew, Job Alloadec guarded faithfully the open postern gate.

It was, however, only discreet that Jean and Marie should remain behind in the shadow of the trees, whilst she advanced alone towards the ruined chapel.

Ah! the memories that thronged around the spot!—memories of terror long past, as also of that father, so dear and yet so imperious, whose anger she had braved, and whose forgiveness she had won, all for the sake of the man who stood now once more before her. No gallant knight was here, however, as in those other days when the warm summer breezes stirred the ivy round the grey walls, and the scent of the flowers was sweet on the night air. The very moonlight seemed to shrink at sight of the tall figure whose brown cowl was drawn so closely round its head, as it stood waiting there alone. But as Gwennola, with a little cry, ran forward, the cowl fell back from a dark head which was assuredly not that of any spirit of ill, and strong, human arms caught and held her in their warm embrace, whilst passionate kisses were pressed on the rosy, trembling lips which whispered over and over again his name. No wonder that the white owl who sheltered herself amongst the ivy of the ruin fled shrieking dismally against the sacrilege which thus desecrated with human love the haunt of her ghostly friends; no wonder that the lizard which crept up the crumbling wall paused to peep with cunning, glittering eyes at the scene which his forefathers had watched in the garden of man's innocence. But at that supreme moment what cared those two for watching eyes?—so oblivious were they of any other in the wide world than the ones into which each looked.

True eyes, brave eyes, eyes in which the story of love and faithfulness was so easy to read! And then once more down to earth and the perilous present they must come, and leave the all-absorbing joy of that first moment of oblivion to the past and to the dim, sweet future to which both were looking with eager longing, the more impatient for that brief moment of rapture.

But it was no time for love dreams then, with the keen winter wind whistling around, and the still colder fear of danger which whispered of separation.

There was so much to tell, so much to hear, so much to plan, and oh! so short a time for the speaking of it all.

Together they sat there amongst the ruins of a dead past, and built golden castles for the future; shining, gorgeous castles, all love-illumined and beautiful. But even as they built them, difficulties innumerable and insuperable blew them once more to their feet. The situation was indeed one which well might dismay lovers so devoted. The vast army of Charles was already advancing towards Rennes; and though it appeared to menace rather than to attack, still the danger to the duchy seemed imminent if the Duchess Anne held fast to her determination, as it seemed only too likely she would do.

In faltering tones Gwennola told the story of the past months: of her father's death, of the coming of Diane de Coray, of Yvon's fatal infatuation, of the return of Guillaume de Coray and of the complete sway he and his sister held over her brother's weak mind; of Yvon's illness and her own estrangement from him; finally, of Diane's veiled persecution and her fears for her own future.

A stormy picture, so dark that for the moment it held both lovers speechless; till, as he bent to look into the face half hidden on his shoulder, Henri caught sight of a bright tear which trembled on the drooping lashes.

"Nay, weep not, my darling," he whispered passionately. "Thou shalt not thus weep and fear such things; it shall not be permitted. Sooner than that I will mount thee on good Charlemagne yonder, and ride with thee to Touraine, where we will laugh together at these vile plotters—ay, and at thy brother too for bringing such unhappiness to his little sister's heart. Fie on him! hath he forgotten that but for thy bravery he would even now have been rotting in some foul dungeon?"

"Nay," she whispered, smiling, "but that also was more for thy sake, Henri, than for his, though well I loved him—ay, and love him still for all his harshness, for I know that his eyes are, for the time, blinded by reason of this woman."

"But, say," cried d'Estrailles pleadingly, "is it then so impossible to aid thee, little one? Would I might go boldly to yonder château and claim thee for my bride, for it seemeth to me but a coward's part to hide like any evil-doer in such a manner."

"Ah, Henri," she sighed, "what foolishness thou wouldest speak! Surely, little couldst thou aid me by entering the lion's den, or save me from a dreary fate by dying as a spy, as thou wouldst surely be dubbed if thou camest hitherward in thy proper guise."

"The lion's den!" he echoed scornfully. "Rather I would term them jackals, seeing that their ways are cowards' ways, and their thoughts the thoughts of traitors. But tell me, sweet, is then my plan so impossible? or wilt thou fear to trust all,—even thyself,—to my honour?"

"Fear?" she smiled; "fear!"—and she raised her lips to meet his caress. "Nay, Henri, 'tis no fear that causeth me to hesitate, but because—because——"

"Because?" he questioned, holding her hands in his. "Because, little one?"

"Truly, I know not," she whispered softly; "only, perchance 'tis foolishness, but my mind misgiveth me as to what is best. Let us wait, my Henri, till to-morrow, and I will ask the advice of dear Father Ambrose, who loves me well, and who, methinks, hath no more liking for these de Corays, brother and sister both, than have I. Moreover, I am assured that he pitieth me, and would fain see me happy, which he wotteth well I could never be in convent cell or other arms than thine. So till to-morrow, Henri, let us wait, and it may be—it may be I will come."

So again they sat there side by side, dreaming of all the bliss that coming would make, whilst he told her again of the happy, merry life of Touraine, so vividly that it seemed to Gwennola that she was already riding by his side through the laughing meadows and sunny orchards singing rondeaux and virelais gay and sweet as their surroundings, with no weird melancholy such as every song reverberated with in this grey, yet for ever dear, land of Brittany. But dreams must fade ofttimes before the dawn, and erelong they must say farewell, those foolish young lovers, who found the world so entirely made for them alone. And yet not farewell, but *au revoir—au revoir* until the morrow, with, perchance, Father Ambrose's approval, if not his blessing, on their flight from troubles and shadows, suspicions and jealousies.

"Au revoir! Au revoir!" The very sweetness of the words made a melody in Gwennola's heart as she and her attendants hurried homewards, and her lips trembled in a smiling happiness, warm with the memory of his kisses. As for Marcille and the rosy-faced little Marie, they also had found the waiting time less irksome than might have been supposed; for the example of one's betters, see you, is a fine thing to follow, and the atmosphere of love is so infectious that perchance it had even become wafted towards the shadow of the trees where the two waited; and that may explain, the reason why Marie's rosy lips dimpled too as she smiled in the darkness and a hand which should have been holding her cloak slid downwards to meet and be grasped by another hand, strong and tender, which held it so fast that the smile nearly overflowed into a merry laugh for the very happiness of youth.

CHAPTER XVII

"Alas, poor Yvon! Nay, rest thy head so,—yes, that seemeth better; and place thy hand in mine. Ah! how cold it is! and how thou shiverest, even before this warm blaze!"

"Ay, cold as grows my heart when I think of what this sickness portendeth," groaned Yvon, as he lay back wearily on his couch, looking up with loving yet wistful eyes into the glowing, beautiful face bent so close to his. An angel of light and grace did Diane de Coray appear in her graceful, clinging gown of heavy white material, the long sleeves and throat edged with gleaming gold, whilst the high head-dress framed a face fair enough to soothe and gladden any man, and soft hazel eyes filled with sympathy, tenderness—and perhaps some other vague, undefined expression impossible to read.

She repeated his name over softly many times as she stroked the thin hand which lay listlessly at his side.

"Thou wilt be better anon," she said gently at length, in reply to his weary sigh. "See, Yvon, for my sake thou *must* be better."

He shook his head sadly. "Nay," he replied, "I fear not, little Diane; for me there is naught but the grave—the grave in which shall be buried all the hopes and the great love with which thou hast inspired me. Yes, little one, weep not, for it is even so, bitter as it seemeth to say it,—and how bitter the holy saints only know; for death is a sorry guest when love has stepped in before him. And I love thee, my Diane, I love thee, with all this poor heart of mine—not worthy of thee, sweet, nay, not worthy, for suffering and fear have left but a sorry wreck of the Yvon de Mereac who once was. And yet, Diane, thou hast loved this poor, weak one, so unworthy of thee! See, thou shalt hold my hands in thine and say it softly,—thus,—'I love thee, Yvon de Mereac, I love thee, although thou art but a poor, unworthy lover at best for the sweetest, fairest damsel that the good God ever made.'"

"Nay!" she cried passionately, dashing away a tear, and bending to kiss the white, upturned face; "thou knowest well that I love thee, Yvon, the saints aid me! But thou shalt not die! Listen!—I will tell thee my secret thoughts, though I fear me thou wilt be angry."

"Angry?" he questioned, smiling; "angry with thee, Diane?"

"Yes," she said, turning a flushed, half-shamed face to him, and speaking in a hard, even voice; "thou wilt be angry, Yvon; and yet I will dare that anger for the love I bear thee."

She glanced around as she spoke, but none were near; only the tapestried faces met hers as they looked calmly down from the walls as if, lifeless as they were, they scorned this woman who knelt there, knowing and hailing her as liar and traitress.

But the swift pang of remorse and fear which held the words trembling on

her lips passed, and, steeling herself to her task, the girl drew close to the sick man's side.

"Listen," she said softly, "and judge, Yvon, my betrothed. Hath it not caused thee wonderment, this sore sickness of thine? None can tell its name; skilled leech as he is, Father Ambrose hath no knowledge of it; and yet, so deadly is its nature, that truly death seemeth near."

Yvon's blue eyes were fixed curiously on the speaker's face, a vague horror growing in them as she proceeded.

"Hath all this never struck thee, my Yvon? Hast thou not searched in vain for the cause of thy suffering?"

"Nay," he muttered, "I understand not what thou speakest of, Diane."

"Of witchcraft," she said softly but very clearly. "Of witchcraft, dearest love, which hath been brought to work so evilly upon thee that death stands already awaiting thee."

She crossed herself, shuddering as she saw the horror deepening in the wide eyes so close to hers.

"Witchcraft?" he echoed faintly. "But wherefore? and by whose hand should such spells be wrought?"

"By the cruel hand of Gwennola, thy sister!"

Instantly the blue eyes blazed, a red, angry flush swiftly dyeing the pale, sunken cheeks.

"Gwennola! my sister Gwennola a witch! Nay, Diane, thou ravest. Unsay such words, maiden! By my faith, they shall not be breathed again in my presence,—the honour of the house of Mereac may not lightly be bandied by careless lips."

She had expected his anger, and faced it coolly enough.

"I cannot unsay the truth, Yvon de Mereac, even when thy house's honour is at stake. Nay! blame not me, but rather her who so cruelly hath dragged it in the mire."

"But it is a lie," he cried passionately, "a foul and cruel lie. Who dared speak such words to thee, Diane? I will have him hanged to the nearest tree for thus smirching the fair name of a noble maiden."

Diane laid a soft, caressing hand on his clenched palm; the eyes she turned to his sparkling and indignant ones were full of tears.

"Alas! alas! my Yvon!" she whispered. "Should I have dared thus to speak of thy sister had I not for myself discovered the truth of the accusation?"

He lay back on his couch, panting and almost breathless with emotion; but his eyes dilated still with fear and horror as he listened to her smooth, softly spoken words.

"But for the love I bear thee, Yvon, no word should have crossed my lips;

but because even now it may not be too late to save thee, love hath unsealed my lips, and I hereby do solemnly declare to thee that thy sister Gwennola, and she alone, is answerable for this thy deadly sickness."

"Nay, I cannot believe it," he cried with a quick sob. "What! Gwennola try to slay me? my father's little Gwennola a witch? It is beyond reason, I tell thee, Diane."

"So said I at first," said Diane softly; "yet nevertheless it is truth."

"Gwennola!" he echoed dreamily, as on the instant all the old childish days seemed to surge forward in his memory—"little Gwennola!"

He was seeing her, a tiny, lovely maiden of five innocent summers, being held up in his own strong young arms to kiss the forehead of his horse; and remembering how she turned from loving the black steed to fling a pair of soft, baby arms round his neck and kiss him again and again. Then other pictures stole back to him in the darkening room: pictures of the same child grown into a slim little maiden, beautiful as the flowers which bent their fair heads to the summer breezes; with great blue eyes which were always watching for father and brother, whom she must ever run to greet, if but for the excuse of slipping away from the embroidery frame and her mother's rebukeful eye. But at the last the pictures faded, shrivelling up before a poisoned breath—and Diana's voice rang in his ears, "Gwennola is a witch!"

"No," he cried fiercely, as if to drown the accusing voice; "it is no truth, but a lie—a lie fashioned in the blackest hell!"

But Diane was not to be moved by his harsh words. She was playing for a stake, and knew she must win, though in her heart she was the more angry to find that the love she had hoped to have already destroyed had so strong a root.

"It is for thine own sake I spoke, my Yvon," she pleaded, with a break in her soft voice. "Alas! alas! I have but angered thee, and all to no purpose, seeing thou wilt neither believe nor strive to save thyself from her spells."

"Nay, sweet one, thou must forgive my angry words," said her lover, melting to tenderness as his ear caught the sob in the gentle tones. "Well I know that it is but thy zeal for my welfare which hath led thee astray in believing such false words. But bethink thee, my Diane, what proof can these evil tale-bearers bring? what knowledge have they?"

"Ah, me!" moaned Diana, "I must anger thee again, Yvon; and yet, so cruelly has she deceived and wronged thee, that I will have no pity—no, for so foul a wrong deserves none, and her sin be on her own head!"

"Speak," muttered Yvon hoarsely, as once more the fear crept into his eyes; "speak, Diane."

"When my maid, Jeanne Dubois, told me the tale," said Diane softly, "I bade her be silent; for, for evil tongues there was sharp punishment, and slanderers, to

my thinking, should have small mercy. But the wench persisted, and so perforce I listened, merely at first to point to her the danger of such lying falsehoods. Yet the story smacked so vividly of sincerity that I listened at length with more attention, whilst she told me that the Demoiselle de Mereac kept strange company, and that ofttimes passing her chamber door at nightfall she had had reason to cross herself for very fear of the weird chantings and voices she heard within. Yet knowing it was naught of her business, the girl said nothing till, chancing one day to be conversing with Pierre the fool, the knave whispered somewhat in her ear of his own suspicions, and told Jeanne that he could also prove to her how that the young châtelaine not only gathered evil company under the very roof of the château, but also went into the heart of the forest at the midnight hour to celebrate terrible orgies with her foul friends, and converse with her dread familiar, who appeareth to her in the garb of a brown friar, who, for his evil deeds on earth, hath been condemned to haunt the shades of a ruined chapel and assist still further those whose sins are as black as those of his own lost soul."

Again Diane looked steadily into Yvon's eyes, and with a thrill of triumph marked the look of dread which had stolen into them.

"I myself," she said sadly, "have already proved the truth of Jeanne's words; it remains with thee, Yvon, to also convince thyself of a guilt which, alas! shineth as clearly as noonday. In very truth, I beg thee thus to prove the words I have dared to speak, for little doubt is there in my mind that in this lost maiden's evil practices lies the secret of thy fatal illness. And because I love thee, Yvon, with all my heart and soul I pray thee strive to save thyself from these cruel spells, and even, if need be, tear from its parent-tree this smitten branch and cast it into the fire."

"Gwennola!—Gwennola!" moaned Yvon; "my father's darling,—his little Gwennola! Is it possible that thou hast so fallen—art become so lost? Diane," he cried, turning almost fiercely upon her, "I accept thy word. Prove to me my sister's guilt, and I will myself light the faggots which shall purify the honour of the house of Mereac. Yet I warn thee that if this tale be false, the very love I bear thee shall shrivel and burn away till nothing be left but the ashes of hatred."

"I will prove it," said Diane, returning his look unflinchingly. "This very night, with thine own eyes shalt thou behold thy sister clasped to the arms of one of hell's foulest shades, and with him plotting for thy destruction."

CHAPTER XVIII

It is difficult to realize how tremendous a hold the superstition of witchcraft had upon the minds of our ancestors from the earliest ages. And in the fifteenth century the fear of wizards and witches and belief in their supernatural powers was almost unlimited. Indeed, the repute of madness was not more fatal to dogs than that of witchcraft to human beings.[#] So destructive was it, that there is scarcely a hamlet of ancient date west of the Carpathians wherein crowds of witches have not been massacred during the middle ages. For a considerable period Cologne burnt four hundred of these wretches, Paris three hundred, and a multitude of second-rate towns two hundred a-piece every year. To be stigmatised as a witch was to be condemned, sooner or later, to the stake; and so well was this understood, that the malicious had only to fix that evil name on their victims in order to secure their execution. A list remains of some hundred and fifty witches slain in three years by that insignificant place, Wurzburg; and among the sufferers we find half-a-dozen vagrants, children, and others; a scold, a learned judge, a skilful linguist, several popular preachers, and "Goebel Babelin, the prettiest girl in Wurzburg."

[#] See *Witches and their Craft.*

It was a fundamental axiom of the witch-codes, as explained by Bodin, that no witch might be acquitted unless her innocence shone "as clear as the noontide sun"; and every care was taken to render that impossible. But by far the most powerful means of effecting their conviction—surpassing false witness and torture by an infinite length—was the infamous scrutiny to which the miserable creatures were subjected. The search for devil mark and amulet, as prescribed by the Church, was regarded as worse than death itself, and of the thousands who perished, a vast proportion died self-accused, preferring the deadly search of the flame to that of the monkish inquisitors.

Considering how fearfully and inevitably witches were punished, it seems astonishing that any, much less such myriads, should have professed them of the craft. But, on the other hand, it must be remembered that the acquisition of power to inflict storm and devastation, disease and death, was an irresistible temptation to the savage nature that then predominated in the lower classes. For everybody sought the fraternity. Those who suffered, or apprehended suffering, bought their services equally with those who desired to have suffering inflicted. The latter, however, were by far the more numerous, and the witches had a very singular way of gratifying them. One of the strangest was to fashion an image of the hated individual during the celebration of certain infernal rites. The sim-

ulacrum was usually of virgin wax; but when it was meant to make the work of vengeance thoroughly sure, the clay taken from the depth of a well-used grave was generally preferred. The image being moulded according to rule, and baptized by a properly qualified priest, whatever injury was inflicted on the model was believed to have a similar effect on the original. Did they tie up a member of the effigy, paralysis attacked the corresponding limb of the person represented. Intense pain and fearful mutilation were thus assumed to be produced; nor was even death itself beyond the wizard's power. To secure this fatal result there were several approved recipes. Some pierced the heart of the statuette with a new needle; others melted it slowly before a fire; a third set interred it at dead of night in consecrated ground with horrible burlesque of the burial service; and a fourth gathered the hair into the stomach of the model, and concealed it in the chamber—if possible under the pillow—of the intended victim. Such images were prepared by Robert of Artois for the destruction of his enemies. In this way Enguerrand de Marigny was said to have slain Philip the Fair. Thus, too, Eleanor Cobhan, wife of Duke Humphrey, was said to have attempted the life of Henry VI.

Many and varied were the powers and mischievous contrivances of the witches and wizards for every possible purpose. A decoction made of a toad baptized by the name of John, and fed on consecrated wafers, was thrown under a farmer's table by a witch at Soissons, and all who sat round the board died immediately. Every witch possessed her agent, or familiar imp, who on her inauguration into the sisterhood sucked her blood, thus leaving the fatal "devil-mark."

In Brittany, not more than fifty years before the opening of our tale, the far-famed and execrable Gilles de Retz had been led to the stake, there to pay the penalty of his horrible career as wizard, murderer, and devil-worshipper. The crimes of this fiend of iniquity are too many and too terrible to bear repetition. His chief delight, however, was to lure children to his castle by the agency of an old hag named la Meffraie, who went about the country enticing any children she met, with false promises, to her master's abode; and from that moment they were heard of no more. When, after fourteen years, his horrible practices were disclosed and search was made, there was found in the tower of Chantoce a tunnel of calcined bones—of children's bones in such number, that it was supposed there must have been full forty of them.[#] A like quantity was found in the castle of La Suze and in other places; in short, wherever he had been. The number of children destroyed by this exterminating brute was computed to be a hundred and forty, the motive of the destruction of these unfortunate innocents being more horrible than the manner of death. He offered them up to the devil, invoking the demons Barren, Orient, Beelzebub, Satan, and Belial to grant him in return gold, knowledge, and power. He had with him a young priest of Pis-

toia in Italy, who promised to show him these demons; and an Englishman, who helped to conjure them.[#] It was a difficult matter. One of the means essayed was to chant the service for All Saints' Day, in honour of evil spirits. And yet this blood-stained villain, who revelled in listening to the piteous death-cries of little children and gloated over their suffering, who from worship of demons had himself become more devil than man, commended his evil assistant and magician, who was condemned with him, to the grace of God—Whose living image he had murdered—in the following terms, "Adieu, François, my friend; may God grant you patience and knowledge, and rest assured, provided you have patience and hope in God, we shall meet in the joys of Paradise." The horror inspired by this blasphemous wretch still lingered in the hearts of the Bretons, and small wonder was it that wizardry or witchcraft found little mercy at the hands of an ignorant and fanatic people; although often wizards or witches were allowed to practise their craft unmolested for many years, the fear of suffering from their vengeance, even in death, keeping their enemies at bay, whilst they drove a profitable business with those patrons who desired their aid.

[#] *Depositions of Etienne Corillant.*

[#] Michelet's *History of France.*

It will be the more easily understood from these foregoing remarks how skilfully Diane de Coray had woven the web of her plot around her unfortunate victim, who remained in total ignorance of her danger, the retainers of the château having been before instructed by the wily Jeanne to breathe no word of their suspicions into the ears of those likely to warn her. Therefore it was with no presentiment of coming ill that Gwennola de Mereac stole forth to her lover's trysting-place once more, full of happy thoughts and a heart the lighter by very contrast with its weary heaviness of so many weeks past. Little did she or her attendants guess what sharp eyes had been watching their movements, or what stealthy feet had already crept after them through the forest shade.

It was the maid Jeanne Dubois who had been the first to discover the identity of the wandering minstrel whose advent had been hailed with so much joy by the young Sieur de Mereac. Hiding in the shadow of the heavy tapestries, she had heard what had passed between Marie Alloadec and her would-be lover, and had hastily carried the news to her mistress. The clue thus given had been carefully followed up, but it was Pierre the fool whose cunning had discovered the fatal rendezvous and pierced the disguise of the cowled figure. So the threads

of the web were gathered more surely around the weavers' fingers, and now the time drew near to prove their strength.

A cold wind whistled through the bare trees overhead, but so close grew the undergrowth of the thickets around the ruined chapel as to shelter any watchers not only from the keen blast but from curious or inquiring eyes. But Gwennola's eyes and thoughts were far from suspicion of treachery or evil. She was thinking, as she hurried on her way, of Father Ambrose's kind and tender counsel. He had promised, the good old man, to use his influence to the utmost with Yvon to persuade him either to allow his sister to wed the man she loved, or at least to leave her unmolested by unwelcome suggestions of betrothal till it could more clearly be seen how matters fell out between the two contending countries. If Yvon were still obdurate—well, it might be that Father Ambrose would be willing to risk the anger of his lord for the sake of the little maid he loved so tenderly; but she must be patient—very patient—whilst he prayed that his way might be made clear before his eyes.

So gentle, so loving had the old man been, with such tears of fatherly fondness had he besought her, that Gwennola had listened to his pleadings, and had promised to wait with patience for his further counsel, instead of lending an all too willing ear to her lover's importunity in urging the hasty flight which had appeared in so favourable a light to her eyes as he whispered eloquent reasons to the heart which readily responded to his entreaties. Yet her step grew slower as she neared her trysting-place, as if she found her promise weighing almost too heavily upon her as she pictured the disappointment in the dark eyes which would look down their eager inquiry into hers.

Marie and Jean Marcille lingered behind their mistress as they had done yesternight. They had their own concerns, these two, which perhaps—and who may blame?—dulled their ears and clouded the watchfulness of their eyes. Very certain it is that neither of them saw amidst a clump of trees not far from where they stood, four cloaked figures bending low, as if furtively watching those who already stood in the waning moonlight close by the ivied ruins.

"It is enough," whispered Yvon de Mereac in a low, stifled voice as he raised himself and stood facing the woman at his side. "It is enough."

Yes! he had been convinced where he felt conviction to be impossible, by the evidence of his own eyes; for, stooping there, he had seen, shuddering in horror, the shadowy outline of a tall, monkish figure, and even as he crossed himself in fear, he had seen another figure, slender and hooded, steal from amongst the trees to be clasped in the close embrace of the Brown Friar himself; and, as the feeble moonlight straggled downwards from behind a passing cloud, the hood had slipped back, revealing the red-gold curls and pale face of Gwennola.

Diane de Coray was a skilful conspirator. To linger there might speedily

reveal to the agonized brother that his sister's lover was verily in the flesh and no ghostly agent from the unseen world; and so, with murmurs of sympathy, she hastened back with him towards the château, followed by her brother and Pierre the fool. But to her whispered words Yvon de Mereac answered not at all; the blow had been so sudden, so overpowering, that his weak spirit reeled under it. To a Breton honour stands even before love itself, the Duchess Anne voicing the sentiments of her people in her chivalrous motto, "Death is preferable to dishonour." And now dishonour in its blackest form was to fall on the fairest flower of his house! No wonder that the poor, weak brother groaned in helpless bewilderment at such a fate. Paralysed with the horror of what he had seen, his failing brain refused at first to realize what his outer senses told him, and he allowed himself to be led back to the château by his apparently sympathizing friends; nor, till he sank down once more on his couch and drank from the goblet of wine which the tender Diane raised to his lips, did his mind become sufficiently clear to understand the full meaning of that midnight adventure.

"Gwennola a witch!" he whispered, with a hoarse sob, at length. "The little Gwennola a witch! Holy Mother of God! what shall I do? Alas! what shall I do? The little Gwennola!—the little Gwennola!"

"Nay," said Diane, speaking in a low, clear voice, as she bent over him where he lay moaning out his sister's name again and again, "she deserves no pity, Yvon. She is lost,—ay, lost,—bethink thee of her sins,—of the awful sin against thee, my Yvon. For my sake, since I live but for thee, she must pay the penalty of her crime, so that thou mayest once more be restored to health."

Her beautiful face was close to his; he could feel her warm breath stir his hair, which lay damp with sweat on his forehead; her hazel eyes seemed to burn her very will into his numbed brain and to force him to it as if with magnetic power. Weak and helpless, he was as utterly in her hands as if he had been indeed but a yearling babe; and as his eyes followed hers he slowly repeated her words as if she drew them from him.

"She is a witch, and as a witch she must die—for thy sake, Diane,—for thy sake."

CHAPTER XIX

"Thou, Marcille? In the name of the blessed saints, what dost thou here?—and

thus!"

The grey dawn of a November day was creeping slowly upwards in the east, but the air was damp and chill with frost and dew, and the men who stood there looked into each other's faces through a vaporous mist. The face of Jean Marcille was blanched with fear, and his dark eyes looked into his master's with an expression of terror and dismay.

"How now, varlet!" cried d'Estrailles anxiously, "hath aught of ill befallen the demoiselle? Why hast thou come thus with such fear in thy looks?"

"Alas, my master!" gasped the man. "Alas! how can I tell you? ill indeed has befallen the noble lady, such ill as men dread to speak of and Marie saith——"

"Peace, fool," cried d'Estrailles angrily, "what care I for the words of Marie or any other; tell me only, and instantly, what ill hath chanced to mademoiselle, or I will go without wasting more words on thee to the château."

"It was thus," muttered Marcille, as he stood, still panting for breath, and with head thrust forward, as if he were awaiting a blow. "We journeyed in safety through the forest, but as we neared the château, who should come running towards us, with wide eyes and mouth agape, but the honest fool, Job Alloadec, brother to the pretty Marie. 'Nay, mistress,' he cried, barring our progress, 'go no step forwards, for naught but evil awaits thee,' and, so saying, he fell a-sobbing like any foolish maid, so that his sister was fain to upbraid him roundly, and bid him tell his news in brief. But that was more than the good Jobik could essay, and it was some time ere we could gather from his tale what had chanced, and even then 'twas but a tale's shadow. The Sieur de Mereac, it appeared, had been ill at ease all day, but towards nightfall he had seemed calmer and bade all a good night's rest as he retired. But scarcely had the midnight hour struck than the great bell pealed forth a summons for all to assemble, and behold, there, in the hall, stood Monsieur de Coray, dressed and cloaked, with his sister, Pierre the fool, and Jeanne Dubois beside him. His face, the good Job added, was bent in a terrible frown, and as he spake to those around it grew still sterner. But for his words, monsieur, Job saith they were ten thousand times more terrible than his face, for he bade the retainers hear of how their master, whose sickness they had all watched with so much dread, had been seized with a fit, and that Father Ambrose, who was with him, despaired of his very life; then with smooth words and well-simulated horror and indignation, he told of how this sickness was the work of witchcraft, and of how such witchcraft, to the incredible dismay of his sister and himself, had been proved beyond all doubt to have been practised by Gwennola de Mereac, their mistress and châtelaine. And at his words there was a confusion of voices, for some cried this, and some that, and some called for death to the witch who had slain their master, and some that it was false and that the demoiselle was an angel of light and not of darkness. But the answer of Mon-

sieur de Coray—or rather I will say, Monsieur le Diable—was that all should be proved, and bade two of the maidens go with Jeanne Dubois to their mistress's room and fetch thither the lady and her waiting-woman, Marie Alloadec. On hearing which, Job came in haste to tell the news and to warn us of the danger ere we set foot in the château."

"And mademoiselle?" muttered d'Estrailles hoarsely.

Marcille groaned. "Alas, monsieur!" he said. "Mademoiselle has the courage of a man. She stood there, in the darkness, so that we who were near could scarce see her face; but her voice was steady and calm as she replied that, though she thanked the good Job with all her heart, her place was there, in the hall of the Château, to prove her innocence of the foul crime of which she had been so maliciously accused, and if possible to save her brother from the cruel clutches of his false friends. In vain Marie entreated her, whilst I also could not refrain from showing the many dangers to which she might be exposed; but she would not be shaken from her purpose by tears or warnings, protesting that a maid's innocence and honour were dearer to her than life itself, and that she would uphold them before the bitterest foes, knowing that God would not forsake her cause. Nevertheless, monsieur, she did not forget you, but bade me conceal myself in safety and return with the first streak of light to bid you escape before the cunning of your enemies discovered you; for well did she guess that soft-footed treachery must have long crept in her shadow. Also did she strive to persuade Marie to seek safety in flight with Job; for if the charge of witchcraft were truly brought against her, there might be much danger for her too, seeing that such fiends would be little likely to spare the torture they were at liberty to inflict in the hopes of wringing a false confession from lips which writhed in agony till twisted to their will. But the brave Marie was also firm, declaring that if her mistress were to die she would die with her, for it would be impossible that she should forsake her; but, as at length we went forward, she bade me wait close there by the river side, and that before dawn she would contrive to bring or send me news of her lady's case and her own. Therefore, monsieur, in much fear I waited, for it is little to an honest man's liking to thus skulk in safety behind trees when perchance the maid he loves is in danger of her life; but I knew it was no work then for muscles, but for wisdom, and so with sore heart I lay watching for dawn; and in due time from the shadow of the Château walls there stole forth a man who came swiftly to where I waited, and I perceived that it was once more the good friend Job, though by his distraught appearance I augured ill even before he spake. And ill it was, such ill that methought hell itself must be already yawning for the plotters of such villainy; for it appeared that they were clever, these devils, so clever that the plight of mademoiselle and the little Marie was terrible indeed. It was already rumoured throughout the Château

that Monsieur de Mereac was dead; and whether that were the case or not, Monsieur de Coray assumed very speedily his place, whilst the false demoiselle his sister, with the black-browed wench her maiden, and Pierre the fool, whose neck should long since have been wrung, told their lying tale. Ah! how he wept, the poor Job, monsieur, as he repeated it! Such a ring of evil, cruel faces, said he, full of Satan's own malice, and opposite them the Demoiselle de Mereac, beautiful, calm, innocent as an angel, looking at these her accusers with the proud scorn of a noble lady who sees the canaille howling execrations at her from below. And yet, calm and innocent as she was, even she blanched to hear the foul lies with which these slanderers blackened her fair name, and to see with what skill they had plotted for her life. It was the lying wench Jeanne Dubois who brought the first false statements against her, speaking of voices she had heard talking at midnight in mademoiselle's closet, of weird laughter and chantings and such-like foolishness, till even de Coray himself cut her short, seeing the discontent on the faces of the men around, who looked, Job said, little pleased to see their young mistress in such a plight, and on such slender grounds. But the next to speak was the devil's imp Pierre the fool; and when he told of the Brown Friar with whom the lady talked and walked at midnight by the chapel, there were many who looked askance and crossed themselves. But no word spoke mademoiselle herself, only standing there in all the purity and pride of her innocence, facing her accusers with contempt. But it was now the turn of Mademoiselle de Coray herself, and, as she spoke to those gathered around, even the heart of Job himself sank, for the very tones of her voice possessed the fascination which engenders belief. In mournful tones she dwelt on the love she had possessed not only for Monsieur de Mereac, but for his sister also; of how sorrow had filled her heart at the sudden and mysterious sickness which had laid so low the one to whom she was already betrothed; of Mademoiselle Gwennola's strange behaviour; of her own suspicions; of her scorn, however, of Jeanne's allegations and the story of Pierre the fool until she had proved the truth for herself. In a few vivid words she pictured the meeting of mademoiselle with you, monsieur, declaring you to be the agent of evil by whose aid she worked her hideous spells; the horror of her lover at discovering also for himself the infamous dealings of his sister; his fierce denunciation of her, and command that she should be brought to death, ere a fresh seizure robbed him of speech and, she feared, of life. Finally, amidst the murmured execrations from those around, she produced a small waxen figure, bearing a vague resemblance to Monsieur de Mereac, which had apparently been partly melted before a fire, and which she declared had been discovered in the accused's own chamber. Yet in spite of the loud murmurs of horror and loathing which now rilled the hall, Mademoiselle Gwennola flinched not at all. 'I am innocent,' she said once, loudly and clearly. 'May our Lord and Lady forgive

you, Diane and Guillaume de Coray, for the false tale you have brought against me.' But Mademoiselle Diane only laughed, pointing to the black hood and cloak which were damp with night dews. 'A lie!' she cried in mockery, so that Job would fain have struck her down as she stood there, mouthing and grinning. 'A lie, sayest thou?—witch and murderess that thou art. Whence comest thou, then, honest maiden, with the dews of night around thee, instead of from thy slumbers? Thy chamber was empty when they went to search for thee, and anon thou comest to us fresh from thy unholy revels, and darest thus to upbraid me with a lie! Nay! thou canst not thus hope to hoodwink justice, girl, with the signs of thy guilt clinging around thee, or turn outraged love from its righteous vengeance!' But mademoiselle replied not at all, only drawing her cloak more closely around her, as if to guard her secret the safer; and truly, as Job said, the words of Mademoiselle de Coray savoured of truth to those who knew not the sequel."

"Alas! alas!" cried d'Estrailles passionately, "why was I not there to proclaim that truth? Better a hundred deaths than that one breath of such shame should soil the purity of such a maiden's honour! But it is not too late,—fool that I was to delay! Let us hasten then, quickly, Jean, and tell to these foolish ones the truth."

"Nay, master," said Marcille, laying a detaining hand on his master's arm; "methinks 'twould little benefit the lady to run your head into a sure and certain noose. Moreover, even so the charge would still stand good, so craftily have they contrived it. Besides, already are the poor demoiselle and the pretty Marie on their way to Martigue under the escort of Monsieur de Coray himself, who declared that ere dawn they should be delivered to justice."

"To justice?" echoed d'Estrailles, whilst his eyes stared in horror before him, as if he were indeed viewing already the dread picture which the significant words brought before him. "To justice?"

"Ay," groaned Marcille with a sob; "they would fain burn her as a witch, my master; and alas! perchance also the little Marie beside her,—devils that they are!"

But Henri d'Estrailles had as yet scarcely grasped the full import of the stunning blow which had fallen so swiftly upon the sweetness of love's dream. As vaguely as Yvon de Mereac himself he repeated the words to himself, "Gwennola a witch!—to be burnt as a witch!—She!" His voice choked in a sudden wild rush of emotion and fury, as his imagination conjured up the terrible picture of his beloved standing alone and helpless amongst her enemies. He could see her, ah! so vividly, with her proud, girlish figure drawn to the utmost of its slender height, and the great, blue eyes challenging haughtily her false accusers,—those eyes which had so short a time ago looked with love and tenderness into his,

and which—Holy Mother of God shield him from the thought!—might ere long be staring in the agony of death from amidst the smoke and flames of the cruel stake.

But, though his blood leapt madly in his veins to ride in all the strength of his love and anger and wrench her single-handed from her enemies' hands, he knew the thought was too hopeless, such a scheme so impossible that it would but seal afresh her doom. Yes!—doom! For full well he knew how inexorably it was written already; well he knew that with such evidence to hand there would be short shrift for the noblest or the fairest, more especially with the powerful hand of the new Sieur de Mereac behind to push his victim forwards to the flames awaiting her. The situation was indeed desperate. So closely were the threads of the web woven that there was no breaking them. Did he come forward and reveal the identity of the Brown Friar, there would still be the deadly evidence of the waxen image and the unaccountable and mysterious death of Yvon de Mereac. Clear as the plot of de Coray was to him, its very boldness rendered the plotter's position impregnable, and all d'Estrailles might expect to gain by attempting to disclose his rival's perfidy and murderous schemes was the death of a French spy caught wandering in disguise within the borders of Brittany.

Only one last desperate hope there seemed, and to this hope he turned with the energy of despair. He would ride to Rennes with all speed, where, close to the city, lay the passive armies of the King of France. Seeking his master, the Count Dunois, he would pray to be allowed to take a body of French troops wherewith to ride to Martigue in the hopes that by threats, backed with military power, he might induce the authorities to deliver up their prisoners. A wild hope, so wild that he dared not glance too closely at its shadowy outline; yet the only one to which he might cling in his extremity.

"Farewell, Marcille," he cried, as, doffing robe and cowl, he sprang into his saddle. "Nay, my friend, I will not take thee, and short time I ween is there for instructions. All I can bid thee is to watch, and should immediate peril threaten thy lady, ride with loose rein towards Rennes. Thou shalt find me on the road, I warrant; and can I not beg a company from Dunois, I will e'en steal one, for, by the faith of a French knight, I swear to save her!"

But there were tears in the eyes of Jean Marcille as he watched his impetuous young master's retreating form, as with spurs struck deep into his horse's sides Henri d'Estrailles galloped madly away, over the heath where the morning mists still hung heavily.

"Alas!" he sighed, as he turned back towards the forest, "it is of no avail; and not only mademoiselle, but also the little Marie will perish; and for me there

will be nothing left but revenge."

CHAPTER XX

The wizard Lefroi lived alone in his little hut in the forest of Arteze. It was very lonely, that hut, and within it had an appearance altogether execrable. But that was the purpose of his trade; for, what! you would not go to inquire into mysteries from the grave, or seek means of conveying your enemies to the latter, in a parlour clean and bright and orderly, with the pure sunshine of heaven pouring in through the windows, and perchance flowers of purity and innocence blooming within? No! the abode of sorcery and evil must necessarily be dim and gloomy, with the usual accessories of the trade surrounding one. The hut of old Lefroi was not lacking in this way. The light of a taper burnt low and dim indeed that wild November night, as the wizard bent, absorbed, over his nocturnal incantations. He was wise, this old man, with the wisdom of many ages, learnt, some said, from his master the devil, and others that he had been taught by some of those wandering Bohemians and sorcerers who were so often to be met with at that time in France. These sons of Egypt had been kindly treated in the little forest hut, and for reward they had imparted to the owner, it was affirmed, not only knowledge of the stars, but the secrets of many wonderful and deadly drugs which were found often so useful by old Lefroi's customers, and did not always partake of the nature of love-philtres. Perhaps he was even now decocting some of his noxious draughts as he bent over his crucible, for his wizened old face was drawn together into a twisted mockery of a smile, which gave it still more the appearance of crinkled parchment. His costume was effective, being a long, loose wrapper embellished with numerous quaint cabalistic signs and hieroglyphics. On his head he wore the usual skull-cap; whilst by his side perched the familiar black cat, whose purrings played a suitable accompaniment to the bubbling of the pot into which a huge black raven peered with curious eyes from her master's shoulder. Altogether the picture was a familiar one, such as might have been seen in any abode of those jugglers and quacks of the age who practised the occult science and grew rich on the superstitions of the ignorant.

A tap at the wooden door roused the old man from his absorbing occupation, and with a muttered curse he hobbled across to withdraw the bolt and peer out into the darkness.

The visitor, however, waited for no invitation to enter, but pushed in almost rudely, as if fearing that the owner of the hut might wish to refuse admittance. It was a woman, who lost no time in flinging back her hood and facing her companion.

"I am Diane de Coray," she said briefly, "and have been sent in haste by my brother, whom you know, old man, to ask of you the antidote for the poison you gave to him some time since."

Lefroi peered curiously into the pale, beautiful face which looked down so anxiously into his. Then he nodded.

"It is very well," he observed shrewdly, "it is very well; but how am I to know, fair mistress, that you are indeed she whose name you give, for in truth you resemble monsieur, your noble brother, not at all?"

"Fool!" she cried impatiently, "I swear to you I am Diane de Coray—is that sufficient? Give me the antidote quickly, else it will be too late."

Still he eyed her furtively, hesitating to do her will.

"Indeed, I know not of what you speak, mistress," he whined at length. "Poison? I know of no poison. A love-philtre, mistress—a love-philtre or the prediction of the horoscope now——"

"Have done!" she cried angrily, and he noted the gleam of despair in her eyes. "Have done, old foolish one; I have no time to lose, and well thou knowest of what I speak: the poison that was to be administered drop by drop, which was so slowly yet so surely to do its work. What! should I know all this were I not indeed the sister of the man to whom you gave it?"

"But wherefore," he questioned, half convinced and yet still doubtful, "wherefore doth the noble lord require an antidote? Was the draught too slow, or too quick? did it not fulfil its purpose as I predicted?"

"Ay! but too surely," cried the girl, with a shudder. "But there is yet time, old man; quick, give me the antidote, and thou shalt have gold—yes, gold."

She drew forth a bag as she spoke, and in the dim light the wizard's keen eyes sparkled as he caught the gleam of the glittering coins. Yet still he held back another instant.

"Gold cannot purchase the secrets of life," he muttered with a grin.

"Can it not?" she pleaded, and in a moment was kneeling on the grimy floor pouring forth a stream of golden coins on to the seat near her.

The temptation was strong, yet its very strength made him hesitate again.

"But wherefore dost thou need the antidote?" he persisted. "And how know I that it is thy brother who sent thee? If there be a trick in this, he will have his revenge upon me, who am but a poor, innocent old man who——"

"Innocent!" she cried, rising to her feet; then changing her scornful tones, she turned a pleading face towards her companion.

"I swear to thee that there is no trick, I swear by all the saints in heaven, or"—she added bitterly as she noted the suspicion in his eye—"by all the devils of hell, if that be an oath more in keeping with this abode."

He laughed softly, turning a tender eye on the gold, then on the face above it, finally on the closed door.

As if divining a menace in the glance, the girl placed her hand within her dress, and the ominous glitter of steel warned the man that this was no occasion for foul play, did he meditate such.

"Nay," he said, as if suddenly yielding to the temptation which lay glittering before him, "I will trust thee, maiden; thou shalt have the phial. But the price is high."

He repeated the last words softly, glancing again from her face to the pile of gold.

"Gold!" she cried, flinging the word from her in scorn; "yes, you shall have gold—see, more gold than this,—much more; I have it here,—only hasten, hasten, else it will be too late."

He watched her with greedy eyes as she poured forth more money upon the already goodly pile. No leather money this, the impoverished coin of an impoverished land—but good gold,—French gold, warm-hued and glittering.

"And so he still liveth," quoth the wizard slowly, as he bent once more over his crucible. "I had heard—nay, what matter what I heard? The wind singeth strange songs in yon sere branches, and the night owls bring many a false tale. And so he lives?—and you, fair lady, are glad that death hath not yet taken him from your warm embrace? Ah! it is good to love in youth. See, once also I was young too, and I remember; that is why I prepare here my love-charms for the young and joyous, although for me the branches of the forest bear no green leaves and my arms are empty."

But Diane de Coray made no reply to the mocking words, only standing there, pale and fear-stricken, yet with a defiance in her dark eyes which seemed to challenge death itself to mortal combat.

"Love and hate," maundered the old man, half to himself, as he stirred the drugs he held in a tiny crystal bowl; "love and hate, love and hate, they are strong masters, mistress, strong masters, and lead by strange paths. It is I who know—aha! who so well? There have been secrets whispered in these ears—have they not, my Pedro? Yes, such secrets as might well blanch those fair cheeks yonder; but she shall not hear—no, no, for secrets have their price. Yes, a goodly price!"

The raven croaked dismally, as if in reply to its master's words, and rubbed its beak against the skull-cap in weird caress; whilst the cat, as though jealous, rose, purring, to push her sleek body against his legs. But Diane's eyes were fixed only on the dark drops of liquid which, with steady hand, were being slowly

poured into the phial.

"It is ready," said Lefroi, as he handed it to her. "Tell thy noble brother that I send it with my most humble salutations. Also, if later thou requirest a love-potion for thine own use, sweet maiden, thou wilt not forget Henri Lefroi, the magician."

"Forget," muttered the girl hysterically. "Forget!" She said no more, but seizing the phial eagerly, drew her cloak around her, quitting the hut with no further word of thanks or farewell.

CHAPTER XXI

"He lives?" whispered a soft voice, which trembled nevertheless with fear.

Father Ambrose raised a grave, anxious face, looking with some surprise into the pale one bent close beside him. But Diane de Coray's eyes were looking not at him for answer, but at the drawn, white face which lay back amongst the cushions of the great bed. There were ominous blue lines round the closed mouth and under the sunken eyes, whilst one burning spot of colour on each cheek but intensified their pallor. It was the face of a man who hovers on the brink of death, and already the curls which lay thick on the white forehead were damp with the death sweat, whilst the thin hands which strayed aimlessly over the coverlet plucked at it from time to time, as if some spasm contracted them.

"He lives," replied the Benedictine mournfully; "but already, daughter, is his soul winged for flight. Leave him in peace, so that, if consciousness return ere the last, his thoughts may be fixed rather on the confession of his sins and the eternal love to which he goes forth than to the perishing flame of human passion."

But Diane shrank back no whit at the reproof, or the priest's cold manner.

"Nay," she cried piteously, "he shall not die, father; see, I,—I have prayed to the holy saints, and it shall be that they will save him."

"Hush, my daughter," said Father Ambrose, in a sterner tone. "Rebel not at the Divine Will, nor bring in opposition to it thine own unavailing and perishing love. Yvon de Mereac is dying, and no power of thine shall prevail to drag him back from the grave to which he hastens."

"Will it not?" she cried softly, and the light of challenge and defiance which had shone in her eyes in the wizard's hut brightened them again, as they met the

rebukeful glance of the priest. Then, changing her tone to one of gentle pleading, "Father," she cried, "forgive one who is mad belike for very grief; and yet I pray thee not to say that Yvon shall die by the will of Heaven; for, see, he shall live in answer to my prayers. I——" her voice faltered—"I,—I have here a draught given me by a skilled and learned leech—a very elixir of life, father;—give it to him now,—now, ere it be too late, and truly thou shalt prove the truth of my words."

The old man took the tiny phial, gazing suspiciously the while from it to the pale, agonized face near his own. "Daughter," he said solemnly, "what meaneth this? Whence came this phial?"

"Nay, ask me not," she cried passionately, "but give it to him, now,—now! See, his eyes unclose, he knows me! Yvon! Yvon!"

The blue eyes of the sick man shone faintly with the light of recognition; then, even as she sank on her knees beside the bed, closed heavily again.

"Delay not, delay not, father!" cried the girl imploringly, "or it will be too late. See, he gasps for breath! he,—nay, he *shall* have it," and snatching the phial from the Benedictine's fingers, she raised Yvon's head and poured a few drops of the contents down his throat. Then, with a sigh, she let the sick man sink back amongst the supporting cushions, and turned with flushed face to meet the priest's stern look.

"Daughter," he said slowly, "what hast thou done?"

The accusing note rang out sharply in the quiet chamber, and involuntarily Diane glanced towards the bed; but the sufferer stirred not—even the restless fingers were still, his breathing came already more easily.

"He will live!" cried Diane, clasping her hands; "he will live, father!"

But Father Ambrose replied not; instead, he was looking with curious, thoughtful eyes into the half-emptied phial which the girl had yielded into his outstretched hand. But whatever the thoughts that stirred in the old man's brain, they were at present too intangible to resolve into words; the shadow of suspicion was too vague, his mind in too chaotic a whirl, for him to realize what this strange happening portended. He, the friend of the little Gwennola, who had loved her from a child with an affection almost paternal, had long watched with concern and suspicion the machinations of this woman against his darling. But with regard to her dealings with Yvon he was more perplexed; from the first he had doubted her love for the young Sieur de Mereac, and readily guessed that she acted a part under the influence of her brother. As for that brother, it is to be confessed that there was little of the spirit of charity in the gentle old man's breast towards this man whose presence had proved ever so baneful to those under whose roof he lived, and who had won his love. It was the same natural repulsion of a human creature to some gliding, treacherous snake, which he watched in fear and suspicion, knowing that where the reptile coils most lovingly

around its object it is but in preparation to strike a fatal blow. And now the blow had fallen, but so unexpectedly that it seemed impossible that it should have been struck by the serpent in question. That Gwennola was innocent Father Ambrose would have staked his soul; but who was the guilty, if guilty one there were? Was not this illness, perhaps, rather the finger of Heaven? Puzzled and bewildered by the very contrariety of his thoughts, this fresh development completely mystified the good man. If this woman were guilty of the apparently wanton act of poisoning her lover, wherefore this distress, this simulated agony of love and devotion? As for the draught, what was it? A fresh potion from the sorcerer? A love-philtre? or what? Did it bring death or healing with the quaffing? His experienced eye saw, to its infinite surprise, that already a change had stolen over his patient. The drawn, pinched look had gone; the blue lines, around lips, nose, and eyes, were fading into a more healthful white; the breathing was more regular and less laboured. And, whilst still wondering at the apparent miracle, Father Ambrose turned to speak to his strange visitor, behold! her place was empty, and he heard the soft swish of the tapestry curtain as it fell again into its place.

There was a smile on the lips of Diane de Coray as, a few hours later, she stood gazing out of her window in the chamber which had been set aside for her use. She was meditating deeply, it would seem, on things pleasant and joyful, for she did not hear the door softly open, nor was she aware that she was no longer alone till a hand grasped her shoulder.

"Guillaume!" she cried, facing him with the rich colour surging swiftly to her cheeks; but it had faded again, leaving them the paler by contrast, before he spoke.

"It is I, Diane."

"So I may well see for myself," she laughed, but the laugh flickered a little tremulously as her eyes fell before his.

"He is not dead," he said in a low, menacing tone; "what means it, Diane?"

"Means it?" she echoed vaguely. "What should it mean? Perchance the drug was less potent than Lefroi told thee, or Yvon too strong to succumb beneath its power."

"Thou knowest it is neither," he hissed. "Traitress and fool that thou art, but now Father Ambrose told me, with shrewd looks of suspicion, that the noble Sieur lay at the point of death, but that, since he had partaken of a draught given him by the lady, my sister, he had rallied in a manner truly miraculous."

She laughed merrily and stood there defying him, seeing that concealment of her act was useless.

"And the old man speaks truth," she cried gaily; "I have saved him—saved him! Ah! thanks be to the holy saints that I have done so!—saved him, Guillaume, my brother! And wherefore? askest thou. Why, because I love him—love him

with all my heart and soul; because riches, greatness—all—would be nothing to me if he lay cold and silent in the grave. Dost thou not understand? Cannot thy cold heart learn what such love is?—what fires it kindles in the breast, what passion it arouses? Nay! I care little for thy anger—I love him, I tell thee."

"Fool!" he snarled, "and thrice times fool for thy pains! Dost think that I shall be balked by thy puling fancy, now, on the eve of all my plans' fulfilment? Love! ay, perchance I also know the flame that burns within, and which shall consume all else which stands as barrier to its fulfilment. But to compare my love with thine——!" He broke off with a scornful laugh, changing his tone to one of cold sarcasm.

"And so thou lovest him, this weak fool whom thou plottedst to destroy? Nay, blanch not, but picture to thyself how great will be his love to thee when he knoweth the truth! Picture to yourself his rage, his despair, his agony, when he learns that his sister perished in innocence, and the woman who dragged her to the stake, the woman whose arms clung around his neck, whose warm kisses were passed to his lips, whose siren tongue whispered of faith and devotion, was also the one to pour into the betrothal cup the deadly drops that should send the proud bridegroom to keep festival with Death!"

She covered her face with her hands, shuddering.

"Would he love thee?" mocked Guillaume de Coray; "would his arms again seek to clasp so foul a bride to his heart? Would he woo thy kisses to his lips when the death-cries of his sister rang in his ears?"

"But it is not yet too late," cried Diane passionately. "Alas! alas! my sin hath been great,—the sin which thou didst conceive, cruel demon that thou art; but I will yet save her—I will tell all,—all; and it may be that he will forgive me, even though he cannot love me again."

"Not so," replied de Coray softly, as with a sudden spring he caught her in his arms; "not so, fair lady. Nay, struggle not with me, else will it be the worse for thee." And, clasping her with one arm, he placed his hand before her mouth, bearing, or rather dragging, her towards the bed as he did so. She was powerless in his grasp, and after a few vain attempts to free herself lay passive as he gagged and bound her.

"So," he said softly, as he stood over her, meeting the helpless glare of her eyes with a mocking smile, "thy wings are clipped for the present, my bird. So thou thoughtest to cross the path of thy dear and well-beloved brother, didst thou, sweetest maiden? Alas! I fear me 'twas rash—too rash. Adieu, little one, adieu! All will, I am assured, regret to hear of the sudden and dangerous sickness of mademoiselle; it will be altogether clear to them that she has been bewitched—alas! poor maid! In the meantime I must bid thee rest, Diane; thou art weary—so weary. 'Tis too long and too perilous a walk for one so tender and so innocent, to

Henri Lefroi's hut,—fie on thee for so forward and unmaidenly an undertaking! What wouldst have done hadst thou met the Brown Friar himself? Nevertheless, I will not distract thee with reproaches, but will leave thee to thy orisons, or perchance to still sweeter meditations,—of thy lover, it may be, or of thy brother. In the meantime, have no fear that the dear Yvon shall miss thy tender care; I will myself usurp thy place for very love's sake. Ah! I will tend him right well, my Diane; he also shall have rest, such peace and rest! Slumber is good for the sick, say the leeches; therefore he shall sleep—so long, so well, I fear me it will need warmer kisses than thine, my sister, to rouse him again. But I go at once, for it seemeth that thou carest little for my presence. Take comfort, for I swear none shall disturb thee, not even the worthy Jeanne, and anon I will myself bring thee food and wine; for if in truth thou art bewitched, the evil spirit may not leave thee till the hot flames have devoured her who had so ill a will upon thee."

With a sinking and agonized heart the unhappy girl saw the mocker turn away, heard the bolts shoot back into their places, and knew that she was as close a prisoner as any who languished in dungeon cell.

"Yvon!—Yvon!—Yvon!" It was the dumb cry of pain and terror which surged within her so helplessly, so passionately. Bound and gagged as she lay, she could neither move nor cry aloud; and, in the midst of all her agony, came the fatal intuition that even now, once again, death would be awaiting her lover. Terrible hours those; the limits of human endurance stretched to their utmost on the rack, not only of love's fears but the crudest torture of remorse. Vividly there came before the eyes of Diane de Coray the picture of her life,—a picture so sad, so melancholy, so pathetic, that the tears of self-pity and sympathy splashed down her pale cheeks.

An orphan from earliest youth, she had been left under the guardianship of a brother little fitted to govern so tender a maid. Himself the tool of an infamous scoundrel, his friends were little likely to be fitting companions to a young girl of gentle birth; and so Diane had grown up amidst wild and reckless surroundings, courted and flattered for her beauty and sparkling wit by men with whom she should never have been associated. For friends of her own sex she had neither taste nor inclination; and, of the few she possessed, one had so ill an influence over her as had successfully placed her in her brother's power. Ignorant girl that she was, she had yet shrunk back appalled from the practice of the black art of which she was invited to be a devotee; but, even in escaping from the peril, the smirch of contamination had sufficiently soiled the whiteness of her honour to lead her to believe that her brother, if he chose, might denounce her as a witch.

And so terrible had been the thought, that she had been willing to accede to any command of his which would insure his silence. Brought up to regard lightly all sorts of treachery, the plan conceived by de Coray for his own enrich-

ment and revenge struck her with no pangs of horror, and she had started on her journey comparatively light of heart. But all had fallen out so strangely beyond her expectations. The gentle, tender Yvon de Mereac, with his weak, wavering will, but chivalrous heart, had by degrees inflamed her with a passion hitherto unknown. From contempt at first had sprung pity, and, from pity, love itself; not the calm, sweet love of the smoothly-flowing stream, but the mad, tumultuous rush of the mountain torrent, which sweeps aside all obstructions, and dashing blindly over rocks and boulders flings itself with exhausted passion into the deep, still pool below. The mutual dislike between Gwennola and herself had risen, on her own part, from inborn jealousy. She hated instantly this proud, pure girl who had never looked on temptations such as had beset her path, or been lured into such danger as had nearly ended in her own destruction; and as she met the glance of the clear, blue eyes it seemed that Gwennola must read, perforce, her guilty secret. Yet she had hardened herself against shame or the first mysterious whisperings of her own heart. Goaded by Gwennola's cold contempt, she had for long continued to do her brother's will, and it was only the rush of the last few days' terrible events that had opened her eyes to the intensity of her passion, and inspired her with the resolution to save her lover at all risks—ay! even at the price of her own life; even,—and this was hardest of all,—even at the risk of losing for ever the love which had grown so precious a thing. And now,—now when she had seen hope burst radiant and glorious upon the darkness of night—hope, love, and life itself seemed as suddenly quenched; and all that she could do was to moan forth short, agonized prayers for succour, in her despair, to Him Who alone could still protect the doomed house of Mereac.

CHAPTER XXII

The chamber in which Diane de Coray lay had grown light at last,—light, at least, as the grey dawn of a November day could make it as it crept through the narrow slits which served as windows. Yet there were shadows everywhere; she could see them as she moved her weary eyes to look through the opening where her brother's hand had rudely torn aside the bed hangings. Half-fainting with suffocation and the strain on her over-burdened heart, she felt no throb of surprise or fear as she saw the feeble light swiftly blotted out by a dark-robed figure. Yet, as the figure moved, coming quickly to her side with a low exclamation of horror,

her senses began to return to her, and her eyes looked up in joyful recognition to meet the stern but puzzled glance of Father Ambrose.

"Daughter," said the old man gravely, "what meaneth this?"

He had severed her bonds and removed the gag, helping the poor girl, whose limbs at first were cramped and useless, to raise herself into a sitting posture.

For reply Diane stared vaguely into the troubled eyes bent upon her; her brain was cramped too with the long agony of those terrible hours, but at last comprehension slowly returned as the stinging blood began once more to circulate in her numbed members.

"How came you hither, father?" she questioned faintly, staring from her unexpected visitor to the closely barred door.

"Suffice that I am here," was the enigmatical reply. "Yet time presses, daughter, and I must have an answer to my question. Alas! it may even now be too late!"

"Too late?" she echoed, a fresh fear striking its chill to her heart. "Nay, tell me, father—he lives?—he is better?—he will recover?"

"I spake not of Yvon de Mereac," said the priest in a stifled tone, "but of the pure and innocent maid, his sister, who hath been condemned falsely by wicked men, to suffer death at noon; and yet," he added slowly, fixing a piercing glance on Diane's pale face,—"I can see already that there lieth much behind this. Speak, maiden, without delay—confess all thou knowest of this plot, and save thy soul from the blood of the innocent."

"To die!" whispered Diane slowly; "to die!"

On the instant the whole picture of her guilt flared before her eyes, and the words of her brother rang in her ears: "Picture to yourself his rage, his despair, his agony, when he learns that his sister perished in innocence, and the woman who dragged her to the stake, the woman whose warm kisses were pressed to his lips, whose siren tongue whispered of faith and devotion, was also the one to pour into the betrothal cup the deadly drops that should send the proud bridegroom to keep festival with Death."

"To die!" she cried again, flinging out her hands as if in supplication to the priest, who stood there stern, grave, and immovable. "To die!—and for my sin! Merciful Virgin, Mother of Help! save her!—save her!—for she is innocent!"

She had sunk on to the ground at the old man's feet, at the last words, and, clinging to his robe, sobbed out her terrible confession. In the remorse and shame of her agony she hid nothing; and as he listened, Father Ambrose's stern face relaxed into a softer expression of pity.

"Daughter," he said gently, as he raised the weeping girl from the floor, "Daughter, be of good comfort; to one also who had greatly sinned were words

of pardon spoken for love's sake, and it may be that repentance hath not come too late. But," he added, his face hardening, "we may not delay; come, child—see, I will trust thee to play thy part in the salvation, not only of the innocent, but of the man whom thou lovest. Come speedily, for it may be that that man of blood and treachery,—upon whose soul shall rest the curse of God and whose damnation shall be quick,—may come hither to bring thee food. But we shall yet escape the snare and pluck the innocent lamb in time from the cruel death prepared for her."

As he spoke he was supporting the weeping Diane across the room, pressing back an unseen door, cunningly secreted from view in the shape of a sliding panel, through which he passed, still guiding her carefully as they descended a winding, spiral stair which led downwards to another part of the château.

"Child," he said again softly, as they paused, close to the tapestry curtain which separated them from Yvon's room—"child, the way of repentance is no easy one. Confession must be made, not only to God, the Judge of all, but to him whom thou hast so injured, and against whom thou plannedst this ill. I leave to thee this task, so terrible yet so necessary, weak and sick though he be, for the sake of one whose life I go to save, if the will of the Lord and our Lady permit it, as I well wot shall be, seeing that they ever guard the innocent from the snares of the evil-doers."

"But it will kill him," moaned Diane; "it will kill him, father! Oh! say that I may wait until he grows stronger,—then I will confess all—yes, all, even to the uttermost!"

But the priest shook his head.

"Confession must be made without delay," he said gravely. "Thou thyself mayest well see the necessity, daughter; for, weak and sick though he be, Yvon de Mereac must know the truth of his sister's innocence, and also the guilt and evil intentions of the man who hath thus plotted against his life and who hath but used thee, poor maid, as his tool. But delay not, for I may not linger with the sweet voice of Gwennola calling me to hasten to her deliverance."

With a sob, Diane yielded to the old man's will, and with trembling fingers raised the curtain and entered her lover's room.

He was lying there, still, amongst his cushions; but even in those few, short hours the change in the emaciated face was marvellous. It was no longer the face of a dying man, drawn, blue-hued, and pinched with suffering. Haggard and gaunt still, yet the eyes which met Diane's were bright with recognition.

"Diane! Diane!" he whispered; "fairest love, with what an aching heart I have awaited thy coming! She is condemned, Diane—the little Gwennola is condemned to death; and yet so fair a dream I had of her but yesternight, for methought she was a child again, lily-crowned and laughing, and that she ran to

me, crying my name in joy, and, clinging to my neck, pressed her flowers upon me, saying she had gathered them for love's sake; and her eyes looked into mine with so sweet a tenderness that I awoke sobbing, calling to remembrance that she was a witch who had striven for my death."

"No witch!" cried Diane, as she knelt, weeping, at his side; "no witch, Yvon, but pure and innocent as the child of thy dreams. Alas! alas! that, for the sake of thy love for her, thy love for me must die; and yet I am unworthy of it, unworthy of aught but thy hatred, thy loathing, and thy scorn!"

"My hatred?" he whispered tenderly, whilst his feeble hands strayed fondly towards the tresses of her bowed head. "My hatred, little Diane? That could never be, wert thou—wert thou—ah! all that thou art not, my sweetest one!"

"Alas! alas! thou knowest not!" sobbed the girl. "Ah! the bitterness of telling thee, Yvon! Why may I not die the sooner, so that I shall not look into thine eyes and see the scorn and loathing which thou must needs feel towards a thing so foul?"

"Hush!" he whispered faintly, "thou shalt not say such words, Diane, my adored."

The very tenderness of his speech, the quiver in his voice, made the task more terrible; yet it had to be essayed, and with bowed head and sobbing breath she faltered it forth.

When it was finished there was silence in the room. Outside the wind moaned and shrieked; reproachful voices, they sounded, calling to those within that that very day innocence was suffering for the guilty. The raindrops that splattered against the grey walls without seemed to be fingers knocking for admittance, ghostly fingers which mocked and gibed whilst the wind voices wept and lamented the louder. And as she listened, Diane de Coray crouched the lower in a very agony of self-abasement and remorse, not daring to look up and find the eyes she had learnt to love so passionately grow hard and cruel as love died within them.

"Diane!"

The voice roused her, and in spite of her forebodings she slowly raised her head. The face on the pillows was deathly pale, and the poor lips quivered piteously in their pain and horror; but the eyes—ah! those eyes! love was not dead there, but so mortally wounded that his agony was the more terrible to witness.

"Yvon! Yvon!" she moaned. "Ah! why may I not die? Why may I not die? I may not ask thee to forgive me, but oh! for the sake of our sweet Lady of Pity, curse me not!"

"Curse thee?" he muttered faintly, "nay, myself the rather, seeing I love thee still, and as truly as ever; and yet the little Gwennola——"

A smothered sob choked him, and Diane knew that though love stood there calling to her with outstretched arms of forgiveness, there lay between them the irrevocable shadow of a sister's blood.

"Oh, merciful heavens!" she cried, clasping her hands, wringing them together in a paroxysm of grief and entreaty, "grant that they may be in time!"

"In time?" faintly whispered the sick man; "in time?"

"Ay," she sobbed, "ay, Yvon, there is yet a hope, for Father Ambrose and Alain Fanchonic ride at full speed to Martigue to proclaim her innocence."

"And—and thou hast told Father Ambrose all?" he murmured, and the thin hand on the coverlet strayed once more nearer to the bent figure at his side.

"All—all!" she cried passionately; "for thy sake, Yvon, for thy sake—and for love's!"

* * * * *

"For love's sake!" Yes, that was the goad which added wings to the good horse's feet as Alain Fanchonic, with Father Ambrose, seated on a pillion behind him clasping the stalwart man-at-arm's waist, rode forth into the tempest which shrieked raging through the forest. A wild ride, with the wind beating in their faces, and dead leaves whirling in a very hurricane around them; but neither of the two had thought for wind or weather, for ever before their eyes stood the slender figure of a young girl bound to a burning stake with arms outstretched in pleading, whilst her voice cried to them to hasten to her aid. It is true that Alain Fanchonic, grandson of the old dame upon whom Gwennola so often bestowed her bounty, had crossed himself in devout horror when he heard the story of the Brown Friar and the waxen image; but so severely had his grandmother upbraided him for his credulity in believing such slander against one of Heaven's own angels, that he had lived in a state of doubt and horror during the few days which had elapsed since Gwennola's arrest and condemnation. So that when Father Ambrose had come to him, telling him to saddle Barbe, the fleetest mare in the stables, and ride with him to Martigue to save his mistress and proclaim her innocence, he had lost little time in complying, muttering curses and prayers alike, whilst the tears ran down his brown cheeks as he sprang into the saddle, and, with the good priest clinging on for dear life behind, dashed out, across the drawbridge and away through the forest so madly that surely Providence only could have upheld the grey mare's feet as she sped along the narrow, dangerous path. But not once did she stumble as she galloped swiftly along, and Father Ambrose felt his heart beat with joy and gladness as they gradually neared their goal. Yet not without interruption were they thus to journey, for, as they rode, they were startled suddenly by another horseman who leapt unexpectedly on to

the path before them. It was Guillaume de Coray; and even as their glances met, the old priest felt a thrill of wonderment as he saw the traitor's face. It was not indeed that of a man who hastens from the scene of his triumph, and the consummation of his hopes and plots, but rather that of baffled hatred and anger. His fierce gaze met the Benedictine's for an instant only, as he reined back his horse, which trembled as it stood there, as if its master had spared it little in his ride. Then, even before either had time to speak, a blast of wind, sweeping through the forest, brought one of the mighty trees close by to the ground with a terrific crash. The noise so near and so unexpected startled de Coray's horse; rearing on its hind legs, it pawed the ground in terror, then, with a snort of fear it leapt forward so wildly as to unseat its rider, who, flung heavily against one of the trees, lay senseless and bleeding on the ground.

In a moment Father Ambrose was beside him; yet, even before he stooped to examine the injured man's hurts, he paused to address the man-at-arms.

"Ride on with speed, Alain Fanchonic," he cried authoritatively; "spare not thy steed, but ride for thy life, or rather for hers whom thou lovest; save thy mistress, ere it be too late."

Without hesitation, the man plunged his spurs into the good horse's sides, quickly disappearing amongst the trees; and Father Ambrose was left alone beside his unconsious enemy, struck down in the hour of his vengeance by what, to the simple faith of the priest, was nothing less than the finger of the Eternal Judge.

CHAPTER XXIII

It was a great day in the little town of Martigue, for they were out of the world, here on the borders of the forest of Arteze, and life was inclined to grow monotonous. True, there were the festivals and such-like mild excitements; but they could not bear comparison with the burning of a witch in the marketplace. And she was no ordinary witch, see you, but a beautiful and high-born demoiselle, whose evil practices no one had even dreamt of till they had been brought to light in so wonderful a manner. And she had murdered her own brother! Was it to be conceived? But it was terrible!—nevertheless, very interesting. Some said they did not believe it, and, that the new Sieur de Mereac was a foul fiend himself, and Pierre the fool his attendant imp; but these were only the foolish ones, for had

it not been quickly proved, and beyond all doubt, that this beautiful young witch had ofttimes attended Satanic meetings yonder in the forest, and had been seen dancing with the Brown Friar himself, whilst she and her dread partner chanted incantations so deadly that it was a wonder that all in the Château de Mereac had not fallen under their spell instead of only the unfortunate young Sieur?

It had been easy work, that condemnation of so terrible a malefactor; there had been no need of search or torture to prove the guilt both of mistress and maid. Justice moves quickly when there is a powerful arm behind to arrange the machinery, and Guillaume de Coray was already looked upon as Sieur de Mereac, seeing that Yvon was reported to have died in agonies, shrieking for vengeance against his guilty sister. And vengeance he should have; the good folk of Martigue and Mereac were determined on that, promising themselves a day's holiday and enjoyment into the bargain.

That the day itself should be so tempestuous was but another proof of the witches' guilt and malevolence; clearly it had been raised by demon power to arrest the course of justice. But justice should not be arrested. Pile high the faggots!—yes! higher,—higher! Parbleu! what a blaze there would be!—how they would shriek and curse!—how they would writhe and groan! The prospect, appealing to the savagery of ignorant natures, thrilled all with pleasurable excitement and delight. Some wondered if the fiend himself would appear to carry his devotees away; others looked forward to hearing hideous confessions wrung from writhing lips by the torture of the flames. Altogether there were few to pity two young and beautiful girls who were going forth to die a cruel death, so fiercely ran the passions and superstitions of the peasantry of the age. Yet there were those in the little town whose hearts beat in the agony of horror and suspense, and whose eyes were turned, not on the grim spectacle preparing in the market-place, but upon the wild heath which stretched away westwards, half hidden by the blinding rain and wind.

Close to the gates stood Job Alloadec and a small knot of men of Mereac who were loyal to their unfortunate young mistress. Even if the help for which they looked came not, Gwennola de Mereac and Marie his sister should not die alone that day in the market-place,—so Job had sworn, with hands held fast in the hands of those who promised to stand side by side with him. But out yonder, through the mist and rain, a man rode hastily along the road to Rennes. The peasants tramping towards Martigue wondered amongst themselves as they watched him gallop by. It was urgent business, they said one to another, which sent a man away from Martigue that day! and therewith they fell afresh to speculations on what would occur when the witches of Mereac met their doom. But on galloped the horseman, with spurs in his horse's flanks and his mouth tight set as if he rode on a matter of life and death. Yes! and life and death it was to be for some

that day in the little town behind him.

The hour of noon was approaching, already a bell tolled forth from the church close by, and in the market-place the people thronged so closely that they trod one on another in their eagerness to behold. By the gate Job Alloadec and his men waited, with an eye towards the market-place as the minutes crept by. In their prison cell two girls knelt in prayer. Marie was weeping, her head resting on her mistress's shoulder; but Gwennola was calm, a shadowy smile even seemed to flicker around her mouth as she raised her face towards the faint light which struggled in through the narrow slit above them.

The tolling bell, the roar of the crowd, came faintly to them, and sent fresh shudderings through Marie's frame.

"Courage, child," whispered Gwennola; "remember we are innocent, and the Holy Mother will not forsake us even in this our extremity. For myself I have no fears; if death indeed be our lot, grace shall be sent to strengthen us for the trial, and I will pray to die as Gwennola de Mereac should die, defying her accusers to the last. But I have hope so strong within my breast that it seemeth I can take little thought for death. Dry then those tears, my Marie; look into my eyes and fear not;—I tell thee it is life, not death, before us."

But though her foster-sister struggled bravely with her emotions, sobs of terror still shook her as at length their prison door was flung open and their guards appeared. A yell of fury greeted them as, a little later, the two unfortunate girls, tightly bound, were led forth to their doom. Yet, even as the outcry died, a fresh and more compassionate murmur arose from many at sight of the captives.

Innocence indeed seemed written on every lineament of the faces turned towards their enemies, and men and women pressed forward with exclamations in which pity mingled with admiration and indignation against the sentence about to be executed. But the guards around kept back the populace as the victims were fastened to the stakes prepared for them. Yet, even as the executioner stepped forward with lighted torch, a loud shout arose, the thunder of horses' hoofs was heard at the gate, and, turning, all beheld a strong body of soldiery riding at full speed towards the market-place.

"Do your work, knave, and quickly!" shouted a horseman, who, with his hat drawn closely over his eyes, had stood close to the centre of the crowd, near to the stakes. "Delay not an instant—fire the faggots!"

Recognising the voice, Gwennola turned, and, from her awful position looked into the face of Guillaume de Coray.

"Fire the faggots!" cried he again imperatively to the man, who stood, with flaming torch, hesitating as he watched, first the changing faces of the populace, and then the soldiers who were advancing at a gallop.

"The French! the French are upon us!" shouted a voice from the crowd, and

in an instant panic reigned. Yet still the guard around the stake drew close, the executioner still hesitated,—it was not too late.

With white face and furious looks de Coray, whose swift instinct had told him what the diversion meant, sprang to the ground and, snatching the brand from the executioner's hand, rushed forward. For an instant he stood opposite his victim, glaring at her with baffled hatred and malice as he stooped to thrust the flaming torch into the brushwood piled around her; but even as it seemed that his purpose was accomplished, a strong arm intervened, and Job Alloadec, with an oath, had snatched the torch from his grasp, and would have hurled de Coray to the ground had not one of the guard come quickly to his rescue. But the opportunity had gone, and de Coray knew, that, for the present at least, safety lay only in flight. He had seen that the French soldiers, with d'Estrailles at their head, far outnumbered the soldiers of the town guard; also he had watched the changing mood of the crowd, and foresaw that their rage might be quickly turned against him, the principal witness in procuring the sentence against the supposed witches. Therefore with creditable discretion the gallant knight leapt upon his horse's back, and by dint of some hard blows and many curses succeeded in struggling out of the seething crowd and gaining in safety the shelter of the forest.

But Gwennola had no thought to bestow on her enemies. Bound and helpless as she was, she had caught a glimpse from afar of a bronzed, flushed face under a raised vizor, had heard the shouts that arose on all sides, and knew that deliverance had indeed come.

Job Alloadec was sobbing at her side as he cut the bonds that bound her still to the cruel stake; whilst, close at hand, she was aware that Marie was already in her lover's arms. In a dazed, half-unconscious way she wondered why Henri delayed, and even as she did so she was aware of a tall, knightly form at her side, felt herself lifted into a close embrace and heard a voice whispering her name again and again in her ear: "Gwennola, Gwennola, thou art saved!"

Yes, he had come, this faithful lover—come, by the Providence of God, in time to save her from the death which had appeared so inevitable, and even now, as he held her in his arms, still loomed all too dangerously near. The garrison of the little town might indeed have proved a stubborn foe had it not been for Job Alloadec's presence at the gate; and d'Estrailles full well knew the peril he ran in thus snatching reputed witches from death, and that even his own men might turn against him for so doing. But one thing was in his favour: the peasantry had changed from their savage mood of the morning, and had welcomed at first the rescuers. It was an appeal to the romantic side of their natures, but an appeal which d'Estrailles knew would not last. All too soon their slow reasoning would put a different complexion on the affair. That the enemies of their country

should thus summarily snatch from them their lawful prey would not commend itself to stubborn Breton pride. The brief pity which the beauty of their victims had inspired would fade away as they remembered their dreaded vocation, and the pleasurable excitement they had anticipated from their sufferings. Therefore there was no time for delay; one brief kiss, one word of joyous assurance, and Henri d'Estrailles had raised Gwennola to his horse's back, and swinging himself into the saddle, turned to force his way back through the crowd, which already began to murmur as a pack of hungry wolves may howl when they see their prey borne from them into safety. Murmured execrations on the hated Frenchmen rose to a clamour, which, however, was partly subdued by the formidable array which gathered around their leader. At the gate the Breton captain of the guard called them to a halt. He could not understand what had occurred, poor man, so unexpectedly and so suddenly had this intervention of justice taken place. How had it been possible that the gates had been so readily opened? Why was it that these French desired to save a witch from her well-merited punishment? Altogether the mind of Captain Maurice d'Yvec was as chaotic as the crowd behind him.

It was easily explained: the demoiselle and her woman, whom the French captain carried away, were no witches; they were falsely accused, as doubtless monsieur would soon be informed. In the meantime, Monsieur d'Estrailles had commands to carry the demoiselle, and also her woman, to Rennes; surely Monsieur le Capitaine would raise no objection when he heard it was the command of Madame la Duchesse herself.

"Vive la Duchesse!" That was a cry that these Breton soldiers could understand. "Vive la Duchesse!"—and confusion to her enemies! Well, it was a thing most extraordinary that the Duchess should send enemies as her messengers to rescue reputed witches from burning; and yet—Captain Maurice d'Yvec hesitated, but there was a soft corner in this heart, which was not all of grey Breton flintstone, and perchance the beauty of Gwennola de Mereac had found it out, and perchance also the gallant captain had no great love for the new Sieur de Mereac. Moreover, the Sieur had unaccountably disappeared; and even did he himself oppose this fair-speaking, gallant enemy, it was probable that he and his soldiers would be out-numbered and killed. So at length the hesitation came to an end, and Henri d'Estrailles rode out of Martigue with Gwennola de Mereac clinging to his saddle-bow and the wild landes before them, where the wind howled its welcome and the rain beat in their faces as if laughing at their triumph over its rival element. But what cared Henri or Gwennola for wind or rain? Behind them lay their enemies, vanquished and overcome, and before them through the mists of wind and rain shone the sunshine of love and life—love, life, and each other.

"En avant—to Rennes!" cried d'Estrailles gaily, as he rode forward with one

arm round Gwennola's slender waist. "To Rennes!"

"To Rennes!" echoed Jean Marcille, and stooped with a merry laugh to kiss the rosy lips of little Marie, which pouted up at him from under the hood drawn tightly about her face. "To Rennes, little sweetheart—where thou and I wilt wed."

"Wed!" whispered Marie coyly, as she nestled closely to him. "How knowest thou that, great foolish one?—perchance I have no mind to wed at all; and as for wedding *thee*——" But he did not allow her to complete her sentence.

CHAPTER XXIV

Back through the vague shadowland of unconsciousness, back once more to a still vaguer, more terrible realization of life—life all drawn into one great and hideous contraction of pain, where thoughts became at first impossible, till, the mists clearing aside, recollections of the past claimed fresh tortures of the mind. It was so that Guillaume de Coray crept back once more into conscious existence, to find himself lying on a couch in a chamber of the Château de Mereac. What chamber it was his weary brain refused to realize: all he was aware of was the agony which shot through his body with the first attempt to move. Then swiftly came the unerring intuition that this was death—death, terrible, unrelenting, inexorable, come to claim him all unready, sin-stained, fear-stricken. A shudder passed through the quivering, broken body, which suffered now less than the man's soul. Clearly they stood out, those sins,—hideous sins, arraigning him before the judgment seat of One Whose Eyes must needs search deep to the heart's core. Was it all black within?—all black, irredeemable guilt? Far back in the secret chambers of his heart there flickered a feeble light; it was the inner shrine, so long empty, but filled now with the image, not of its Creator, but of His creature. Gabrielle Laurent, the humble peasant-girl of Arteze—it was she who alone had found that sanctuary and filled it so strangely. Cruel, evil, treacherous to all, his love for her had been the one pure spot in a shameless life. For her sake indeed he might have striven to become other than he was, had it not been for the devil-whisper which prompted him to win for her by foul and wicked means what she, had she known, would have shrunk from in horror. So the powers of evil twist us to their will, and Guillaume had plotted with no thought for the undoing of his soul, even whilst he felt stirring within him the birth of a pure love. And now——? Again the shiver ran through him. He had played for a high stake, and

he had lost. Death was the penalty. In solitude his lost soul must steal forth to its doom, and even in so going leave behind it a memory of shame which should be read in grief and horror by eyes from which he had striven so carefully to hide so horrible a story. What would she think of him when she knew him for what he was? What would she say when she learnt that her noble lover was but the phantom of her own pure spirit, and that the thing she had loved was that from which all true and upright men and women must turn shuddering away? Even in death the thought tormented him above all bodily sufferings. If only he could have explained,—if only he could have told her that his love at least was true,—if only he could have had time. But it was too late, all too late; never again would he see her as he had seen her that summer morning, innocent and beautiful, sitting there in the sunshine beside her spinning-wheel. The destiny she might have woven for him with those tender hands had been snapped by his own reckless touch, and love, life, and hope,—that purer life and hope of which he had vaguely dreamt,—were quenched in the utter gloom of death and sin.

With a groan his eyelids flickered and unclosed, staring out into the whirling darkness. But even as life seemed rushing from him in a mad agony of mind and body, a hand was laid on his, and a face bent close to his twisted, death-distorted one. Was it the face of an angel come to taunt him in those last moments with a glance into the Paradise he had lost? Somewhere near he fancied he heard a low, monotonous voice chanting prayers, but the words were lost in the tumultuous surgings of his brain.

Then suddenly mental vision and recollection became clear, with that strange, unearthly clearness which comes to the dying, and reveals past and present in the intense, mysterious light of summer moonlight. He remembered all, realizing that he lay a-dying in the great hall of the Château de Mereac. He realized that he was stretched on a low couch close to the blaze of the fire, although the heat failed to warm the chill of his body; as in a dream he saw Pierre the fool crouched at his feet, sobbing as if in pain, as he knelt there. He had often wondered what had made this strange, uncanny lad evince such affection to him; he wondered vaguely now as his languid eyes gazed into the wizened face of the ape, perched on the boy's shoulder. Then he became aware that there were other figures around him; that close by, gazing down at him in awed and pitying silence, were his sister and Yvon de Mereac—Yvon de Mereac, the man whose life he had so often and so vainly sought. He tried to wonder why he had sought it, tried to wonder why he looked at him so curiously,—was he spirit, or flesh and blood? He had heard that Yvon was dead, but that had been a lie—his own lie, perchance; but he was not dead, although he stood there so gaunt, so pale, so reproachful; he was alive, and it was he himself who was to die—not Yvon de Mereac. The chanting voice of the priest was clearer now—were those

the prayers for the dying he was saying? What mockery it was!—prayers for a lost soul—lost beyond redemption! Then the hand that held his closed again over his cold fingers in a warm, strong clasp. Whose was it? Once again his eyes fell on that other face which had floated before his half-conscious gaze.

"Gabrielle!" It was a cry of anguish, of pleading, of despair, though it rose little above a whisper. But she understood, for there is a language of the soul which but one other pair of eyes beside our own can read.

"Guillaume!" she said, and the soft utterance of his name seemed to stir within him that which he had thought already dead.

"I love thee," said the eyes that looked into his. "Yes, I know all, poor, broken, sin-stained soul, and yet I love thee—for love is of God and changeth never."

He was looking up into those eyes, reading all their message of pity and tenderness, till in his own there dawned something less than despair.

"Thou knowest, Gabrielle?" he whispered, and for answer she bent, kissing the trembling lips.

How fast rushed the voiceless chaos in his brain! Whirling faces long dead looked into his as they passed, voices were crying in his ears of the memories of old sins; and yet, through the mists and vanishing forms those tender eyes looked down into his; and beyond, far away in the distance, a Voice Which had calmed that other tempest of wind and waves called softly his name.

A lost soul!—a lost soul! What use was it to call? He had sinned too deeply for aught but damnation, swift and terrible, damnation to which he must turn his shuddering eyes as the hand of Death claimed him. And yet, those eyes which looked into his still spoke their message of hope. She, this angel of purity and goodness, knew all his guilty secrets, and yet—she loved him; her kiss of tender love and forgiveness still lingered on his parched lips. Was it then so impossible that he should find a forgiveness greater than that of earth? His eyes wandered involuntarily from the face above him to the pictured image of a Figure,—a Figure thorn-crowned, suffering, dying,—a Figure of Love incarnate, with wide-stretched Arms which seemed to invite him to Their embrace. The voice of Father Ambrose rose clearer and sweeter, but it was not the Latin prayers which held the dying man's attention, but a Voice, more sweet, more clear than all, which seemed to soothe the tempest of his soul.

Then with a lightning flash another memory stole upon him. Gwennola de Mereac,—the girl he had tried to wrong more cruelly than he had her brother, the innocent girl who perhaps had already suffered the last agony of death through his sin and treachery.

"Gwennola?" he whispered faintly, and the peace which had stolen over him seemed for the moment shaken to its foundation as he listened for the answer.

It was Diane who replied. Slipping from Yvon's side, she knelt beside him, looking gladly into his eyes.

"She is safe," she whispered, with a happy sob. which told the tale of the great joy that deliverance had brought to her; "she is safe!"

Guillaume de Coray's eyes closed. Yes! she was safe, and the golden gates of mercy which he had fancied to see slowly opening were not shut against him by reason of this deadly sin. And so the mocking, cruel voices sank slowly to rest—those voices which cried in his ears that terrible sentence of eternal death. And though the bodily pains grew ever more agonizing, he could smile once more into the beautiful face so close to his.

"Forgiven?" he whispered in a faint, yet awestruck tone, whilst with a last effort he strove to clasp his hands in prayer. "Forgiven?"

He saw her lips move in prayer too, as together they turned to look towards the great crucifix Father Ambrose held aloft. It was growing dark to the dying man—dark and cold; he did not hear the words of absolution which freed his penitent soul from its load of sin; he did not feel the purifying touch of the holy oil. All he saw was the bowed Head of a crucified Saviour; all he heard was the voice of the woman he had loved with so strange and passionate a devotion, as into the Unknown his soul passed forth, with the echo of her words to guide him on his last journey.

"For love's sake, my Guillaume,—for love's sake!"

CHAPTER XXV

Dark and gloomy had been those November days to the young Duchess of Brittany. Her defiant reply to her over-bearing Suzerain had brought the banners of France within the sight of the castle walls of her town of Rennes, and great had been not only the terror of Anne herself, but apparently that of her councillors and ladies.

But Charles had seemed strangely disinclined to show any hostilities, but instead had sent a deputation proposing a treaty. To this Anne had perforce to agree, and at the dictation of the King twelve persons were appointed on each side to examine the claims each had on the duchy of Brittany. Meanwhile, the city of Rennes was placed in sequestration, in the hands of the Dukes of Orleans and Bourbon, to be governed for the time by the Prince of Orange. The King,

on this being agreed to, promised to withdraw his troops, and allow passage and safe conduct to the Duchess and ambassadors of Maximilian to Germany, where she might join the husband who had been too impecunious to come in person for his bride.

All arrangements having been thus settled, the King had ordered his troops to retire from Brittany, and had, it was reported, himself returned to Touraine, whilst the Duke of Orleans, as Ambassador-Extraordinary, was despatched to the Duchess to confirm the treaty and compliment her on its conclusion.

Whilst these events of historical interest were occupying the minds of the chief actors in the destiny of Brittany, the lesser destinies of Gwennola de Mereac and Henri d'Estrailles were trembling in the balances.

To ride with his rescued bride to his château by the Loire was the first impulse of the young knight; but there is a power stronger even than, love, and duty called him inexorably to his master's side. The Count Dunois was not a man lightly to be disobeyed, and Dunois had bidden him take the Demoiselle de Mereac, if he succeeded in saving her from her threatened fate, to be placed under the care of the Duchess Anne. That in so doing Dunois had his own schemes at work, d'Estrailles did not doubt, for Dunois was one to hold carefully in his hand every thread of the slenderest fibre which might further the weaving of his darling scheme. Debarred by his enormous bulk from following in the warlike footsteps of his gallant father, there was no man in the kingdom of more service to Charles than François Dunois, Comte de Longueville, and for the present the heart of Dunois was set upon the uniting of his royal master to the heiress of Brittany, or, in other words, the binding of the refractory duchy by indissoluble bonds to its parent kingdom.

Anne had indeed welcomed to her persecuted little court one whose perils and misfortunes had been, in a different manner, even greater than her own. In former years Gwennola de Mereac had ofttimes stayed with her father and brother at the court of Francis II., and the little Anne had learnt to know and love the playmate who was scarcely three years her senior. Therefore it was with ready and sympathetic ears that she listened to Gwennola's tale of her misfortunes, and promised that when her own affairs gave her leisure she would not spare trouble in clearing her fair subject's fame and bringing to justice the wrongdoers, little knowing that justice had already been administered by a higher Power than even the Duchess of Brittany's.

But the kindly and generous protection of Anne meant for a time separation from her lover, and bitter such separation must needs be, seeing that neither knew when they should again meet; and Gwennola readily mingled her tears with those of the disconsolate Marie, who wept unrestrainedly at the thought of parting from the faithful Marcille. But duty was imperative, and it needs had to

be that Henri d'Estrailles and Jean Marcille must follow the retreating lilies of France, vowing to return as soon as it should be possible.

The possibility came sooner, indeed, than it was expected, seeing that Henri d'Estrailles, to his infinite delight, was chosen to accompany the Duke of Orleans himself on his mission to Rennes. Yet another disappointment awaited him, for, to his surprise, he was bidden to remain outside the city walls whilst Louis proceeded alone to his interview.

The Duchess Anne received her Ambassador but coldly, with all the proud haughtiness of one who feels herself to have been treated unjustly and tyrannically. Whatever her feelings were, when Louis of Orleans, apparently ignoring the fact that he had once pleaded his own cause into the same ears, urged with all the persuasive eloquence of which he was so complete a master that she should yield to the King's desire and the wishes of her most trusted councillors in becoming Queen of France, she was outwardly the same cold, inflexible girl who had refused to listen to the pleadings of Dunois and others, finally referring him, with a lofty and indifferent air, to her council, "who," she informed him, "were acquainted with her pleasure."

Seemingly defeated, Louis of Orleans quitted the presence chamber, but not before humbly begging, as a special favour, that his young attendant might have speech with his mistress, the Demoiselle de Mereac. The request was granted, and Louis went on his way more elated than apparently his audience had given him cause for.

That evening two interviews took place in the old Castle of Rennes, one of which only is recorded in history, and even that in so vague a way as to leave its purport and sequel shrouded for ever in mystery. Henri d'Estrailles did not enter the castle gates alone; neither was his companion, whose face was partly concealed by a cloak, the faithful Jean, for whose coming the little Marie looked in vain. And so it chanced that all unexpectedly there appeared before Anne the man whom she had pictured as a monster of cruelty—the man whom she had fondly thought to be in far-off Touraine. It was indeed Charles himself, the gentle, kindly king whom his people had nicknamed "le Petit Roy." Not perhaps the ideal lover to woo a beautiful but refractory maiden. Handsome, Charles was certainly not. His head was large,—as was also his aquiline nose,—with large, prominent eyes, round dimpled chin, thin flat lips, compressed body and long, thin legs; whilst his slow speech, nervous movements, and constantly open mouth added to his appearance of foolishness. His great charm, however, lay in a singularly sweet voice and an expression of gentle amiability which appealed instantly to the generous side of those around him. Such was the royal wooer, the very opposite indeed of the bride he so vainly sought. Scarcely more than a child in years, Anne had already proved herself of a high-spirited, resolute disposition. In out-

ward appearance she was undoubtedly beautiful, with black eyes, well-marked brows, dazzling complexion, dimpled chin, long, black hair, and fine features. Her carriage was majestic in spite of a slight lameness, and her manner somewhat haughty; but in spite of her pride and love of vengeance, she had many fine and noble qualities, being generous, truthful, and faithful to her friends.

Of what passed during that secret interview little has ever transpired; but it would seem that though Anne may have been softened to kindlier feelings towards the man she had formerly hated, she still remained firm in adhering to her resolution in considering her marriage to Maximilian binding, and Charles, perforce, had to retire as unsuccessful as his ambassadors. But the King did not go far; his friends in Rennes were many and powerful, or assuredly he would never have so dared to enter a hostile city practically alone and in disguise.

Meanwhile, the second interview was fraught with more happiness. There was so much that Gwennola had to tell—so much of joy and gladness, for a messenger had arrived from Mereac itself, a messenger who was no other than the faithful Job, who had watched his young mistress ride away through the mists and rain on that winter's day, across the wind-swept landes—away from the dangers and perils which had surrounded her, into safety. And yet the faithful Breton had sometimes misdoubted even that safety, for his jealous heart had rebelled against the fact that the protectors who surrounded her were Frenchmen—for it takes long to convince the obstinate nature of the Breton, whose ideas travel slowly, and all his life Job Alloadec had read "Frenchman" as "enemy." Therefore he had been glad enough to carry Father Ambrose's messages and letter to his mistress, and see how it fared with her and his sister, and whether they were truly safe under the protection of the Duchess. But the coming of Job was of less import to Gwennola than the good news he brought. Her innocence was proved. Diane had confessed, and the guilty brain that had planned all the evil against her and her brother was still for ever from such plots. Then, too, her brother was better,—far better; and though the betrothal between him and Diane de Coray had been cemented afresh by new bonds of a deeper and truer devotion, still there was no more to fear from such a love. Indeed, as Father Ambrose said, the unfortunate girl seemed only too eager to make reparation for the past and plead forgiveness from those she had injured. And so it had come to pass that, owing greatly to her influence, Yvon had given his sanction to his sister's marriage with Henri d'Estrailles.

How happy were the lovers as they sat together whispering of what joy and happiness this good news brought to them both! Yes, the dream was near to realization now; the tempest was past, and the sunshine shone across the path of youth and love without the shadow of a cloud between. But when would the time come when they should ride together, as they had so often done in fancy, and see

the grey walls of the Château d'Estrailles rise close to the laughing waters of the Loire? Ah! when? Perhaps even sooner than she thought—it was possible. Only, there was one word of whispered counsel for her ears ere he bade her farewell: should the Duchess claim her attendance for a sudden and unexpected journey, she must not hesitate to comply, strange as it might seem;—that was all that he might say. And so, with fresh vows of love, they parted, though Gwennola little guessed that neither lover nor cloaked attendant went so far that night as the city walls.

A deputation of her councillors waited the following morning upon the young Duchess. It would seem that they were filled with anxiety; in fact, truly a new danger appeared to have arisen. That they were cognizant to the secret interview of the night before they made no attempt to hide, pleading that in their Duchess's interests they had permitted it to take place. Finding her inexorable with regard to the French marriage, they apparently yielded to her wishes, yet urged her, by reason of the dangers of her position, to make at least a compromise. Charles was set upon a betrothal, by some means or other; and the councillors hinted that there would be small scruple in taking by force what was not yielded to request. He had sworn to make Anne his bride. The armies of France were at no great distance; Maximilian was far away. What they would suggest was that Anne should in fair seeming yield acquiescence to the importunities of the King and allow herself to be secretly betrothed. Then, his suspicions lulled to rest, Anne would, with the greater ease, escape from her town and fly with a small retinue, including the ambassadors of Maximilian, to her husband's protection. Such craft and duplicity were little suited to Anne's straightforward nature; but, beset as she was with enemies and difficulties, she yielded at length, and that very night, in the utmost secrecy, was celebrated in the church of Notre Dame, this strange and romantic betrothal of the King of France to the Duchess of Brittany, witnessed by the Duchess of Bourbon, the Count Dunois, Philippe de Montauban, and Louis of Orleans, who thus saw consummated the match he had both desired and dreaded.

The betrothal over, Anne retired in haste to her castle, with scant ceremony, there to await the development of events promised her so glibly by her Chancellor and council.

All had impressed on the young Duchess the strict necessity of making her flight secret—so secret, indeed, that it had been communicated to no one; in fact, the Chancellor told her that the ambassadors themselves would only be acquainted with her plans at the last moment.

In due time, however, the hour arrived, and, attended by Gwennola de Mereac, Marie Alloadec, and Madame de Laval, her gouvernante, Anne stole from her castle to commence a journey which she could not but foresee would be both

arduous and dangerous; and yet we are told, in minute detail, that the Duchess's travelling dress was of cloth of velvet, trimmed with one hundred and thirty-two sable skins, whilst her palfrey was adorned with three ells of crimson velvet!

But who can tell the anger and terror of this unfortunate girl, to find how craftily she had been duped, and how, instead of the ambassadors of Maximilian, the man who rode at her bridle rein, so closely cloaked and disguised, was no other than King Charles himself!

Morning had broken when the Duchess made the fatal discovery and perceived how hopeless was her case. To return, to explain, would be useless. The midnight betrothal, taken in conjunction with the secret flight, would appear in a light impossible to explain away to the outraged ambassadors of the husband to whom she had thought to go. To the high-spirited Anne even death itself were better than dishonour, and surely to return to Rennes after such an adventure would give rise to countless surmises and ill talking. Moreover, by her side rode one who could well plead his own cause; and though she wept and upbraided both him and the Breton nobles who surrounded her, Anne perforce had to yield to the exigencies of her position. And so forward they rode, a strange bridal party: a weeping bride, and a groom divided, perchance, 'twixt shame and triumph; whilst behind them came the men who had betrayed their mistress for the sake of their country—or for some more ulterior motive, amongst them being the Chancellor de Montauban, the Sieur de Pontbrient, and the Grand-Master Coetquen. A strange party indeed, but four at least of the company heeded it little. Close by the bridle of Gwennola de Mereac rode Henri d'Estrailles, whilst in the background Jean Marcille had already discovered the bright eyes of Marie Alloadec.

The clear, chill dawn of a December day was breaking in the east, as in the distance rose the grey turrets of Langeais, where Anne of Brittany was to become Queen of France.

"Touraine! Touraine!" whispered Henri d'Estrailles, as he bent his dark, handsome face down to meet the fair, flushed one so close beside him. "Welcome, my bride, welcome home!"

The sun rose high, illuminating a cold and cheerless world. Before them lay France and happiness; but above all, shining cloudless and imperishable in their hearts, rose the star of love. It was surely her welcome to his heart that Henri d'Estrailles whispered as their lips met in a lingering kiss.

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