

CARDILLAC



ROBERT BARR

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CARDILLAC

BY ROBERT BARR

AUTHOR OF "TEKLA," "THE VICTORS," "IN THE MIDST OF ALARMS," ETC.

*With a Coloured Frontispiece by
A. G. LEARNED*

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CARDILLAC



CHAPTER I

THE LETTER THAT WAS A JOKE

Victor de Cardillac had remained motionless so long that, in the gathering darkness, he seemed but a carved stone figure on the bridge. He was leaning forward, arms folded on the top of the parapet, gazing steadily at the swirling water below, which at last became invisible save for the quivering reflection of yellow lights from the windows of the palaces on either bank.

It is doubtful if in all Paris there was to be found another whose thoughts were more bitter than those of the young man who leaned against the parapet that July evening. It was not so much the loss of all his money, which was little enough to begin with, nor the waste of his time, which was of no particular value, nor even his disappointment at not getting a place in Paris, nor his chagrin at being kept uselessly loitering round the doors and in the antechambers of the great, without ever receiving a message or a word from the nobleman he sought, that wrought up this young man of twenty-four to the dangerous pitch in which we find him. That afternoon, at four o'clock, he had discovered that the letter which lured him to Paris had been but a joke, and, carrying it about in his pocket for nearly four months, he, a Gascon, had never seen the point of it.

The rigid, motionless posture of Cardillac was caused by the intensity of his thoughts, as he cast his mind backward over the past few months, and meditated savagely on the fool's errand which had brought him to Paris; on the weeks and weeks of humiliating dangling at the Luynes Palace; on the final stinging insult of the jocular letter.

The rise of Charles d'Albert of Luynes had been bewilderingly rapid, even for France, where favouritism, and not merit, was the elevating power. As a boy Luynes had come up from the south, from Aix in Provence, had obtained a place as page in the service of the Count de Lude, and had attracted the attention of Henri IV, who made young Luynes companion to his weakly son, Louis.

Over the infantile mind of the young Dauphin, Luynes attained complete ascendancy. When Louis was nine years old, that great King, his father, was assassinated, and the widowed Queen, Marie de Médicis, an Italian woman, became ruler of France as Regent. Marie became the most detested of the foreigners who from time to time had governed France. She appointed as her Prime Minister a worthless Florentine named Concini, and together these two Italians, woman and man, tyrannised the land for seven years.

All this time Charles d'Albert, the suave, sport-loving, plebeian young man from the south, was unknown to the world. No one paid the slightest attention to the influence he had obtained over the lad who, some day, would be King as Louis XIII, nor realised what this influence might mean in the future. The Italian man and the Italian woman seemed securely entrenched in absolute power. Concini swaggered about Paris with a retinue of fifty swordsmen to guard him, as if he were King in name as well as reality, when suddenly the unknown struck, and struck with finality.

Concini was shot dead in the midst of his fifty protectors, in the courtyard of the Louvre, and no defender drew a sword, as indeed would have been useless when their chief lay prone on the pavement. The Queen Mother was deported from Paris, and imprisoned in the royal château at Blois. Louis XIII, proclaimed King, set his sole favourite, d'Albert, in the saddle of power, as worthless and arrogant as the man he had eliminated, but French, nevertheless. If we must be ruled by scoundrels, let us choose our own countrymen.

The affair was bewildering in its speed and completeness; no one had time to hedge. If courtiers had but guessed what was going to happen, sycophant place-hunters might have made friends with this unheeded young man while he was in obscurity. As it was, d'Albert found himself under obligations to no one, except the assassin, and him he paid in gold and protection.

Then began a balmy period for poverty-stricken Provence. Up to Paris came troops of cousins, second cousins, fortieth cousins, and each of them got a place under the patronage of Charles d'Albert of Luynes.

It was at this time that the old lord of Cardillac, poor of purse, but proud of pedigree, looking about for a position that his son, aged twenty-four, might fill with profit, remembered that Charles d'Albert had been sent years before by his father to Bordeaux, and had received hospitality at Cardillac Castle. The Marquis of Cardillac had persuaded the youth not to blight his future prospects by engaging in commerce and immuring himself in a provincial city like Bordeaux, but

to journey north to Tours, at that moment occupied by the Court. He had given the boy a letter to his friend, the Count de Lude, which had secured him the post of page, and now it seemed that d'Albert, with whose name all France was ringing, was a man who believed that one good turn deserved another. Therefore old Cardillac caused his son to write to the new favourite, recounting these circumstances, and asking if Charles d'Albert of Luynes would counsel the young man to go to Paris, as the young man's father had counselled d'Albert himself to visit Tours. In due time the reply came:

Paris, by all means. It is a delightful city, where young men enjoy themselves, and become rich. I long to embrace the founder of my fortune.

LUYNES.

This letter appeared to be cordial enough, and on the strength of it young Cardillac went to Paris. If the truth be told, he was rather elated at possessing so intimate a communication from the most powerful man in France, and in the certainty of an early appointment he refused to give up the letter to any underling, demanding immediate admittance to the presence of Charles d'Albert of Luynes.

This pretence was ignored, and young Cardillac found himself left out in the cold, passed by and neglected, while his purse was running lower and lower, and his costume, which had never compared with the brilliancy of Paris wear, was becoming shabbier and shabbier.

Earlier in the afternoon on which we find Cardillac leaning over the parapet of the bridge, an old warder of the entrance hall, who had observed him there, day by day, for months, growing thinner and gaunter as time wore uselessly on, being from the country himself, and seeing plainly that the young man showed little knowledge of Paris, approached him and spoke.

"Sir, whence do you come?"

"From Cardillac, in Gascony."

"I am from Avignon. We are both of the south, although you live on the western border of France, and I on the eastern. Sir, can I serve you?"

"I should be delighted if you did, but, as a preamble, I must honestly say that I possess no money to part with."

"I knew that before you spoke," replied the other. "You wish to see my master, perhaps?"

"It is for that purpose I have been here these many days."

"May I examine your credentials?—for none get beyond this point who are not well provided with them. You seem to be ignorant of the customs at Court."

"Surely I am that, yet my credentials are the best that could be required, being no other than an invitation from Luynes himself, asking me to Paris."

"Sir, will you show me the document?"

"With pleasure," and Cardillac handed the old man his precious letter. The official read it over slowly, but gently shook his head as he returned it.

"I fear it will be of little use to you, sir. This document is not in the handwriting of Monsieur de Luynes."

The young man started to his feet.

"A forgery!" he cried.

"No, not a forgery. A communication sent under command of my master, but written by one of his secretaries."

"To an honourable man, and I trust Luynes is such, the obligation is the same."

"True, but there is much press of business since my master undertook the huge task which is before him. The moment he attained his present position, there sprang up in all quarters of France, and here in Paris itself, by the hundreds, people

who said they had been of assistance to him during his years of nonentity. I presume you preferred a similar claim."

"But my claim was a just one."

"Sir, I fully believe you, but the others held their claims were just also, and they demand compensation now that Monsieur de Luynes is in a position to requite."

"I demanded nothing," proclaimed the young man, hotly, "but merely reminded him of the introduction and advice my father had given him, which put his foot on the first rung of the ladder. I then asked if he advised me to proceed to Paris, and this is his answer. Do you say it means nothing?"

"It is not for me to pass judgment," said the old man slowly. "The secretaries of Monsieur de Luynes are very methodical. You may see at the top of the page the number 97, which means that ninety-six persons have received a similar letter previous to this one being sent to you. I advise you not to build upon the document. It is, indeed, nothing but a joke."

"Nothing but a joke?" cried the proud Cardillac. "Surely you yourself but jest. He would not dare!"

"Dare what?" asked the old man, lifting his eyebrows.

"Dare to jest with one of my name and house."

"I am ignorant of the standing of the house of Cardillac in Gascony," returned the ancient quietly, with nevertheless a trace of sarcasm in his tone, "but my master dares jest with representatives of the first families in France, and they have the courtesy to laugh heartily, even if the point is turned against them."

"If he turns the point of a witticism against me," cried Cardillac, "he'll meet the point of my sword in return."

"Tut-tut," cautioned the old man, "do not speak so loud."

"Why should I not speak at the top of my voice, here or elsewhere? The castle of Cardillac has been in the possession of my family for fourteen generations, and this man is but the son of a corn-chandler in Aix, who had saved enough money to buy the insignificant property of Luynes, from which he now names himself. This man was destined by his father to be a wine merchant in Bordeaux!"

"Sir," said the dignified official solemnly, "you are hot-headed and injudicious. I fear your career in Paris will be short."

"You would not say so if you knew how adept I am with the sword."

"Hush!" commanded the venerable. "You are attracting attention to us. If you refuse to take thought for yourself, at least show some consideration for me. You are in Paris for the purpose of advancing yourself. Day after day you have attended these assemblies. How many friends have you made?"

"Not one."

"How many enemies, then?"

"Not one, either. I have spoken to none."

"Then, sir, you have most vilely misused both time and opportunity. Being a man well on in years, my own inclination leans towards the making of friends, but, next to a friend, an enemy is useful for one who wishes to mount the ladder. If you are so good a swordsman as you hint, why have you let all these weeks pass without proving it? A man's word goes for nothing here in Paris. I dare swear there are ten thousand swords within a mile of the Court better than yours."

Cardillac drew himself up haughtily, but doubtless on second thought considered it better to make no remark.

"You may shout your prowess from the housetops, and no one will believe you. They will laugh at you."

"No man laughs twice at me," said Cardillac, "and your master will yet learn that I have not forgotten his epistolary joke."

"There is Denarac, for instance, accounted a pretty swordsman. It happens that my master looks upon him with suspicion,

for Denarac is supposed to favour the Queen Mother, now residing in Blois, when he should be a loyal subject of our most gracious King, Louis XIII, whom God preserve. Now, Denarac is ready enough with his laugh, and if you crossed his path would doubtless favour you with his merriment. If thereupon you issued your challenge, and ran him through at the hour appointed, Monsieur de Luynes would speedily send for you, instead of allowing you to cool your heels in his vestibule. If a man's sword is swift and sure, he needs no letter of introduction here in Paris."

"Sir, I am not a swashbuckler, swaggering round to find my enemies or friends. If a man insults me, why, that's a different thing. Let him then depend on his sword to defend him from the mistake made by his tongue."

"Well, young sir, good swords will be needed before long in this land of France. By the way, how stand you? For the Queen Mother, or for your lawful King?"

"I trust I am for my lawful King; otherwise what should I do here in Paris?"

"There are many in Paris who hold a contrary opinion, but the people of France as a whole will never again allow themselves to be ruled by an Italian woman. The young King is a Frenchman, whatever else may be said of him."

"Only half French, I think. His mother is the Italian woman you speak of."

The old man looked critically at his younger *vis-à-vis* before he replied:

"But his father was Henri the Great, and the son is Frenchman enough to imprison his Italian mother."

"It was Luynes did that."

"Young man," said the guard with asperity, "for one so little versed in the ways of the world, you are overfond of contradicting."

For the first time during their conversation the young man laughed lightly.

"Perhaps I am," he said. "Go on. I think you have something to propose. I shall not contradict you again. I am too anxious for work to do, and will not again jeopardise my chance."

"I am a distant cousin of Monsieur de Luynes. When there is any transaction to be carried through which requires secrecy, caution and dispatch, it is to me he entrusts its execution."

The old Provençal gave utterance to this statement with an air of gentle pride, not untainted by the boastfulness of the south. Cardillac, whose self-conceit had been grievously wounded by the revelation that the letter on which he had depended as a guide-post on the road to fortune was merely a trap to delude the gullible, looked his interlocutor up and down with a somewhat critical regard, not unmixed with incredulity. The young man was shrewd, even if he had been taken in by the apparent cordiality of this bogus letter, and it seemed to him rather odd that the dictator of France should entrust his secret schemes to a garrulous old braggart who conversed about them with a stranger of whom he knew nothing. It seemed to Cardillac that if the man in power had surrounded himself with country relatives so communicative as this official, he might soon expect a downfall as sudden and complete as his uprising. The old man saw the expression of disbelief that came into the younger's face.

"I see you do not believe me," he said, "but that is merely because you do not understand our situation here."

The old retainer drew him towards a corner of the hall that was deserted, and the two sat down on a bench far apart from the rapidly lessening throng in the waiting-chamber.

"Properly to understand the situation, you must know the manner of man my cousin Luynes is. You must estimate the effect of his upbringing and his education."

"I understand," interrupted Cardillac, "that he has had little education and no upbringing, while by birth he is a peasant."

The old man indulged in the superior smile of one who knows, but is indulgent to youthful ignorance and youthful hot-headedness.

"We should judge education by its results. As you yourself have several times pointed out, he is a man of no family; therefore, coming to Court in a menial position, he is entirely unheeded by those above him and around him. He comes,

as you say, from the peasant class: a class in which each individual is remarkable for his keen judgment of his fellows; a class whose livelihood depends on well-laid plans, unwaveringly carried out. Always he is unheeded, mind you that, and before this unaccounted lad, this youth, this growing man, there passes continually the pageant of the Court of France. In his mind, wax to receive and marble to retain, the human items of this procession are noted, estimated, and set down at their proper value, for he has seen them and heard them at unguarded moments. He knows thoroughly the pawns with which he will yet play the game of life when the proper moment arrives, and look you how he struck, my lord of Cardillac. The foolish Queen, drunk with seven years of unquestioned power, France groaning under her tyrannical sway, tightens her grip upon the unfortunate land."

"How?"

"By sending her strongest partisans here, there and everywhere, to suppress ruthlessly the slightest attempt at revolt. That strong man, the Duke d'Epernon, is made governor of the impregnable castle of Loches; his crafty son is promoted to the archbishopric of Toulouse. The father is sent west, the son is sent south. And so it is in other quarters of the realm. Her powerful champion in Paris is the Duke de Montreuil, who is so rich that he does not wish a distant governorship, but desires to remain in Paris. To all the world, inside or outside of Paris, the Regency seemed as solid as the Pyramids of Egypt; to all the world, that is, except one man—Charles d'Albert of Luynes, the peasant's son. With a wave of his wand the whole system collapses like a house of cards."

"With the shot of a musket, you mean," corrected Cardillac grimly.

"My young sir, the sound of the musket was but the trumpet blast before the walls of Jericho. A musket shot—an assassination, if you like to call it so—but brings confusion, unless the after-plans are perfected. Like armed warriors springing from the ground, as in the classic fable, that portion of the army on which Luynes knew he could depend emerges from the forest, and masses itself around the castle of Blois. That checkmates Epernon in his strong tower at Loches. Blois stands between him and Paris, and his strength is nullified. He dare not march to the succour of the Queen."

"And yet," said Cardillac, deeply interested in this exposition of Luynes's mentality, "and yet, when I came up to Paris from Bordeaux, more than two months ago, I sat on my horse and saw the young archbishop of Toulouse marching at the head of five hundred men, on his way to Loches, to reinforce his father's garrison. This junction you were unable to prevent."

Again the indulgent smile illuminated the gentle countenance of the veteran.

"The young archbishop, thank God, may have five hundred men, or five thousand, but he does not possess the brains of his father. Luynes had a messenger ride hot-haste to Toulouse from Blois. Arriving at the southern city, he, being a man of Loches, had no difficulty in persuading the archbishop that he came from the Duke d'Epernon, his father, with orders, verbal because he dare not trust them to writing, asking the archbishop to bring to Loches all the men he could gather round him, and thus we have imprisoned the archbishop and his five hundred men."

"Imprisoned? Surely that is not the word to use."

"They are as safely imprisoned in Loches as if we had them in the Bastille. What now think you is the key to the whole situation?"

"I do not know," replied Cardillac.

"Why, it is Paris; it is turbulent, uncertain Paris. Luynes and the young King must make sure of Paris, and the rest of the country may go hang, as has always been the case. Look you at the situation. There are Epernon and his son, with all their men, in Loches Castle, out of which they dare not move. They know the castle is impregnable, and once they leave it to fight in the open, Luynes has double their number of men at Blois waiting to meet them. Since then he has stationed five thousand men at Tours, within striking distance of Loches, and now, if the Duke d'Epernon dare leave that fortress, these men of Tours will not attempt to fight him, but will instantly occupy the town and castle he has abandoned, and that without taking a single man away from Blois, where they guard the imprisoned Queen.

"And look you now at the craft of Luynes's treatment of the Queen. Instead of placing her here in the Bastille, where she might at any time be rescued by an uprising in Paris, he moved her, just as if she were on a chess-board, down to Blois,

as near as possible to her principal supporter, Epernon, at Loches. Thus Paris is tranquil. An insurrection here could not help the Queen. Thus we have the Queen herself imprisoned in Blois; her favourite, Concini, always hated by the people, is dead; her only general with brains and knowledge of strategy holds the strongest castle in France, and his very strength is his weakness, because he dare not leave it and allow it to fall into our hands. If he leaves it, he is crushed in the field by our superior numbers; if he stays there, he is nullified."

"It seems to me," said Cardillac, "that there can be no other outcome than civil war."

"You but voice the general opinion," replied the old man complacently, "but those who hold that opinion do not know Luynes. He has decided that there shall be no civil war; he holds with Sully the belief that France's salvation rests with the plough and the cow. For the first time in the history of France, there comes to the head of its government a man with the intellect and knowledge of a peasant, who nevertheless knows every twist and turn of nobility's mind; of the minds of those who have hitherto ruled this kingdom. He regards the peasants, quite rightly, as producers; he regards the nobles, and quite rightly, too, as the spenders. His theory is that France needs but tranquillity to become prosperous. For barely three months he has been in the saddle, and what already is the condition of affairs? All over France the nobles, like Epernon in Loches, are hemmed up in this fortress or that, each with his handful of men. They cannot spend money, even if they had millions at their disposal, for it is only in Paris that fortunes are lost or won in a day. In France, then, peasants are producing wealth which nobles cannot spend. It needs only a few years of this condition, and France becomes the most wealthy and prosperous country in the world."

"A civil war will soon dissipate the prosperity and the wealth."

"You speak truly; but, as I told you, Luynes has determined there shall be no civil war."

"How can one man, and that man, as you admit, peasant-born, be assured that civil war will not break out?" cried Cardillac, with some impatience. "The aristocracy for centuries have been the governing body, just as the peasants have been the working body of the state. It is never the peasants who bring about a civil war. It is always some proud and rebellious noble who lights the torch of civil war, and the unhappy peasant, who is but a slave, must, perforce, follow to victory or to destruction, as the case may be."

"Sir, it astonishes me that one who can speak so sanely of the causes of turbulence should yet possess a mind biassed by the prejudice of his class to such an extent that he is unable to give proper weight to the epoch-making change that has taken place in the government. Monsieur de Luynes is providentially granted exactly the opportunity he requires. All he needs in addition is time. Every day that passes strengthens him, and when the aristocracy has awakened to its error, Charles d'Albert de Luynes will be in a position to crush every member of it back into the ranks of the proletariat from which the ancestors of the aristocracy originally sprung, if he chooses to do so."

"Well, he has his work cut out for him," said Cardillac, with an incredulous smile, "and you seem to forget that while Charles d'Albert of Luynes may, and doubtless will, inherit the corn traffic of his father, he has not inherited the crown of France, even though, for the moment, the Queen Mother is his prisoner."

"The crown of France," said the elder solemnly, bowing his grey head at the mention of this insignia, "rests on the head of its rightful heir, Louis XIII, whom God preserve, who in two months' time will be seventeen years old, who is infirm in body, and whose mind is what Monsieur de Luynes has made it. For a dozen years Luynes has been his constant companion, his only playmate, the one person on earth who has invariably been kind to him, and who was, furthermore, appointed by Henri IV, whose memory young Louis reveres. The crown, you say? How could the crown be placed to better advantage for Monsieur de Luynes than where it is? If it were offered to him, he would refuse it as that strong man Cæsar did. No. The safety of the aristocracy lies in the ambition of Charles d'Albert de Luynes. The stupidity of the nobles would cause their downfall, were it not for Monsieur de Luynes's determination to leave the ranks of the peasantry, and join the ranks of the aristocracy. He will found a house able to hold up its head amongst the proudest seigneurs of France."

Cardillac laughed scornfully, which seemed to irritate his elderly, loquacious friend.

"Look you, young sir: Luynes is betrothed to the daughter of the Duke de Montbazon, one of the heiresses of France, whose father is among the few who guess in what direction the wind is blowing. The King has promised Luynes the estate of Maille, on the Loire, seven miles below Tours, an estate which surrounds the most noble feudal castle in France. Laugh now, my Gascon lad."

"I hope you do not use the word Gascon otherwise than as a term of compliment and honour," said the young man with some asperity.

"No, oh, no!" responded the elder in haste.

"In like manner, when I employ the word Provençal, it is to bestow upon my phrase the quality of admiration."

The old gentleman bowed profoundly.

"It requires, then, the vivid imagination of a Provençal poet to see anything of stability in the position of Charles d'Albert de Luynes. The place he occupies was produced by a musket, and is supported by a prison. Of the former twin rulers of France, one is in the grave, the other in a cell. What a musket has done, a musket can do. He who lives by the sword shall die by the sword, and it is the fashion of prisons to release a victim that it may embrace that victim's jailor."

The elder set his hand lightly on the younger's shoulder, with a gesture that was fatherly.

"My eloquent lad," he said, "Gascony has produced poets which rival those of Provence. You and I are of the south and understand one another, yet I find it difficult to convey to your mind a true comprehension of the case. Monsieur de Luynes has put no one in prison."

"You hold me gullible indeed," cried the young man angrily, shaking the hand from his shoulder. "All France knows that Marie de Médicis, the Queen Mother, has been imprisoned in Blois these two months past."

"The Château of Blois is not a prison, but a palace. It has ever been the favourite residence of the kings of France. Louis XIII has bestowed upon his mother the most beautiful and the most luxurious house he possesses, and that there may be no diminution in the estate to which she has been accustomed, he has furnished her with retinue, with guards of honour, forming a pageant equal to that which surrounded her here in Paris."

"A pageant of jailors and spies!"

"Nonsense, my over-emphatic young friend. All courts are permeated by spies, and, in a manner, every court is a prison, with the king its chief inmate. Marie de Médicis has made no protest against her change of residence, and, indeed, why should she? Blois is a delightful place, Touraine one of the most charming provinces in France, and the château, as I have hinted, is even more luxurious than the Palace of the Louvre."

"If what you say is true," commented Cardillac, "why then all these military preparations by Luynes, of which you boasted a while since? Why is an army stationed at Blois, and another at Tours?"

The elder man shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes, and still another, that I have not mentioned, ready to pounce on Epernon the moment he quits his shelter at Loches. All these are simply Monsieur de Luynes's precautions, taken against disturbance; precautions rendered necessary by the fact that others besides yourself may imagine the Queen a prisoner. If such a delusion should cause activity among the Queen's partisans, we on our part must be ready to convince them of their error by annihilating them. Our good will towards Marie de Médicis is shown by our generous conduct to her. Oh, no, Monsieur de Cardillac, there is no Queen imprisoned in France. Indeed, the remarkable thing about this change of government is that it has furnished but one prisoner."

"And who is he?"

"I must not mention names, and, indeed, I exaggerate when I call her a prisoner, for she is merely sent to a convent, where I trust she will receive many advantages that will be of benefit to her, if she follow the example set before her by the noble ladies who are sisters of the order."

"Ah, another woman in jail! I am getting much insight into the character of Luynes. He is a brave fighter with women, and holds his place through the favour of an imbecile boy."

"My impetuous friend, you are skirting dangerously near to treason, if, indeed, you have not already trespassed upon perilous ground. Imbecility and royalty are not to be mentioned in the same sentence. Monsieur de Luynes is as brave as you are, and so you will find if you ever encounter him in anger."

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure."

"Then I shall see that you are given an early opportunity of meeting him, and making your words good."

"Again I say nothing would give me greater pleasure, and I shall remind you of your promise, if you are not the braggart you have hinted that I am. Indeed, I doubt if you have any influence at all with the usurper Luynes, the man of practical jokes and insincere letters."

"Ah, you haven't forgotten that yet. It seems to rankle. But, bless you, you should have seen him when he caused to be congregated in the courtyard some thirty-five men who held similar letters to yours. They thought he was about to receive them in audience, but he merely appeared at the grotesque gathering concealed among the curtains of one of the windows, and laughed until I thought his sides would split. The King, too, was highly amused at the spectacle."

Cardillac gritted his teeth, and his lips compressed to a thin line. His tormentor was watching him closely, but when the old man spoke it was in the suavest accents of the south.

"Pardon me," he said, "I spoke thoughtlessly. It is perhaps the case that you were one of the thirty-five?"

"Sir, you need no pardon. The honour of providing mirth for His Majesty and the favourite was not vouchsafed to me, and, truth to tell, I find it difficult to credit that this pair should be so heartless; therefore I fall back upon my first suspicion that you know little either of the King or Luynes."

"In that case, sir, I must present to you proof of their confidence in me. Know, then, that I was given charge of the Queen Mother's cavalcade from Paris to Blois, with a hundred soldiers under my command."

"Again I have only your word for that," objected the unconvinced Cardillac.

The other raised his eyebrows, and spread out his hands with a little gesture of protest.

"I thought so clever a young man as you would credit me because the truth or falsity of what I have stated is so easily ascertained. The cavalcade departed from Paris on the last day of April, in the most open manner, and practically all Paris was there to see. It was a gala occasion, for the Queen Mother was as unpopular as her favourite. My name is Tresor. If you make enquiry, all your misgivings will be dispelled, for there are thousands who saw me riding at the head of my troop.

"But, aside from this public mission, Monsieur de Luynes entrusted me with a private work of some delicacy, which was, without attracting attention, to detach from the Queen Mother's entourage the only capable lady-in-waiting she possessed; to deliver her to the care of the strictest convent in France, a convent worthily presided over by a lady of the blood royal, and to overtake the procession before my absence was detected. That I accomplished successfully, and Monsieur de Luynes complimented me by saying I was the only person he knew who could have done so."

"And what was the object of immuring a young lady in the cloisters?"

"The object was two-fold. Those who surround the Queen Mother are as stupid as herself; all of them are frivolous, most of them are beautiful, so there was no objection on the part of Monsieur de Luynes that these butterfly nonentities should share the Queen's exile, if you choose to call it so, at Blois. The young woman of whom I speak, besides being beautiful, is capable, and if your conjecture that the Queen Mother is a prisoner was true, you will easily see that we did not wish to place beside her one with ingenuity enough to help her to escape. The second reason was that this girl's father appears to be an important partisan of the Queen Mother. She is his only daughter, on whom he very foolishly dotes, which is a mistake if a man wishes to take an active part in French politics. Until he learns the fate of his daughter, we hold him helpless. He knows she is in our power, so he pretends affection for the new régime, and dare not openly take part with the supporters of Marie de Médicis."

"And the truth of this latter narrative I suppose I may learn by asking all Paris?"

"No," returned the old man, with the utmost suavity. It seemed impossible to anger him. "No; this, as I told you, was a secret mission, but, if you have the courage to question him, I shall indicate to you a man who can authoritatively corroborate my statements."

"Who is that man?"

"His name is Monsieur Charles d'Albert de Luynes, whom you have expressed a desire to meet on terms of hostility. I shall be pleased to put you in a position to ask your questions at the point of the sword, if—my former proviso—you have the courage."

"When?"

"To-night, at half-past ten o'clock."

"Where?"

"If I am permitted to preface my answer by a few words of explanation, you will then comprehend more accurately than you do now the manner of man you will meet, and if this knowledge causes you to avoid the encounter, I, for one, should be the last to dub you coward, for I warn you Monsieur de Luynes is probably the bravest man in Paris, as well as one of its most skilful swordsmen."

"Go on," commented Cardillac shortly.

"Aside from this bravery and skill, which, if I understand rightly, you share with him, he possesses another quality which you hold in common. He is deeply distrustful of what is said to him by any except his immediate friends and confidants. It is, therefore, his habit to learn for himself, at first hand, what the ever-changing opinions of Paris are regarding current events, and he has, therefore, committed himself to a practice which all his friends who know of it, and they are few, consider highly dangerous. Have you ever met Monsieur de Luynes?"

"Never."

"It would not much matter if you had. It is doubtful if you would recognise him in the circumstances at which I hint, for he disguises himself with some care. In one disguise or another he wanders about Paris alone at night, visiting taverns, wine-shops, cafés. Consequently no one has acquired such knowledge as Monsieur de Luynes of the capital of France. Never in its history has Paris been so quiet as since my master came into power, and this tranquillity is not understood, even by the police. But in whatever quarter of the city an insurrection is brewing, it is discovered that troops have silently taken possession of the street before the hour at which the outbreak was to have occurred, and more than one unfortunate wretch has been flung into the Seine because of the unjust suspicion that he has betrayed his comrades. You are of good family, a southerner, and therefore a man of honour, so I trust you with this secret in the utmost security, knowing you will not betray my confidence. Monsieur de Luynes is as merciful as he is expert and brave with his weapon, so I know I am not sending you to your death. He will merely run you through the arm."

Cardillac squared back his shoulders, and a smile of derision curled his moustached lip, but he said nothing. Tresor took no notice, but continued in level tones:

"If you examine the rear of these premises you will find that a narrow lane divides the grounds of our palace from the backs of the opposite houses. Midway up the lane on your left is a door in the wall. At half-past ten o'clock to-night I open that door, step out, and look up and down the lane. If the way is apparently clear, Monsieur de Luynes will emerge and walk off to the right. There are numerous back entrances on the right hand of the lane, in one of which you may conceal yourself. In coming up with Monsieur de Luynes, I ask you not to accost him if there is anyone in sight. I advise that the conference be amicable, but if you are determined to receive a lesson in the use of the blade, then encounter him in fair fight, and you will be satisfied."

"Monsieur, your confidences rather astound me, for we are not even acquaintances."

"We are both of the south, nevertheless," replied Monsieur Tresor ingratiatingly. "You fear that I am leading you into a trap?"

"Sir, I fear nothing."

"No; fear was not the word I should have used. I have not won your confidence as you have won mine. You apprehend, then, that I am laying a trap for you? I shall not protest, because that would be useless, but I venture to point out that if I desired your harm, I have but to give the word, and cause you to be arrested on this bench, or when you leave the palace, or at your own lodgings, and you would disappear instantly from human knowledge. I do not need to entrap you, Monsieur de Cardillac, for you are now, and have been ever since you entered, entirely at my mercy. That, of itself,

should quell your doubts. If it does not, then do not attend the rendezvous."

"I will think over it," said Cardillac, as he rose from the bench.

The hall was now deserted. Cardillac was the last man out, and with bowed head, pondering on what had been said to him, he wandered to the bridge, and, resting his arms on the parapet, gazed down at the water, until the late darkness of a midsummer night obscured his surroundings. Hunger would have tormented him had he allowed his mind to dwell upon it, but the rankling insults of the supposedly humorous letter obliterated all thoughts of anything else. Aside from this, there was scant use of his dwelling on the theme of hunger, because there was not a coin in his pocket with which to satisfy his craving.

Darker and darker grew the summer night, and at last the bells of Notre Dame, farther up the river, tolled the hour of ten. In thirty minutes, if what Tresor had said was true, this low-born night-walker would issue from his postern door, and Cardillac wished a word or two in private with the perambulating humourist. The young man drew himself up, and turned towards the direction of the palace.

"I shall run my blade through his jocular heart," he muttered.

CHAPTER II

THE ENCOUNTER IN THE DARK

Cardillac, alertly on his guard, walked cautiously the length of the lane and satisfied himself that no one else was lurking within its limits. He scrutinised the one door on the left-hand side that led to the palace grounds, and also examined with care the half-dozen or more entrances that communicated with the smaller houses ranged along the right-hand side. The alley was not as dark as he had expected, for the numerous lights in the upper stories of the rear of the palace threw a dim radiance upon the uneven cobble-stones that paved the farther side of the narrow thoroughfare, which in some measure mitigated the obscurity of that portion of the lane which ran along the foot of the palace wall.

Into the embrasure formed by one of the recessed doorways on the right-hand side Cardillac felt his way with noiseless care. Silently he tried the door itself, but found it barred or locked. He now placed his back against it, assured that if any treachery were intended, the door could not be opened suddenly without his shoulders giving him some hint of the unfastening within. Stealthily he drew his sword from its scabbard, placing the latter under his left arm, holding the blade in a horizontal position ready for instant attack or defence. In the gloom of his ambush, he was invisible to any passer-by, yet his eyes, now accustomed to the murk, could see the postern door dimly on the opposite side of the way. His only danger, as he fancied, was that some person with a key might attempt to enter from the lane the house at his back, and the young man smiled grimly as he thought of that person's astonishment as he met the point of a sword.

The stillness was complete; all Paris seemed to be asleep, and one by one the lights in the upper stories of the great building opposite him were going out. He stood there rigid, scarcely venturing to breathe deeply, and in his suspense it appeared that time had stopped, or else the guardians of it in the various church steeples had forgotten to mark its passing by the ringing of their bells.

Finally, however, the half-hour struck, and promptly to the moment the postern gate opened. The watcher recognised Tresor as he stepped across the threshold, looking up and down the lane. The old man made a slight motion with one hand, and Cardillac distinctly heard him whisper:

"Sir, the way is clear."

A cloaked figure stepped out into the lane.

"God be with you!" ejaculated the pious Tresor, in accents of the deepest respect.

The man in the cloak made no answer to the well-wishing so fervently expressed, but keeping close to the wall, surrounded by its shadow, he moved off in the direction from which Cardillac had entered the lane.

This impatient young man emerged from under the porch, stepped across into the shadow, and followed swiftly but cautiously. Tresor had withdrawn into the grounds of the palace; the door was closed, but the old man put his eye to the little wicket in the panel, and if Cardillac could have seen his face, he must have noticed that humble and ingratiating smile with which the man of Avignon had so often illumined his unimpassioned conversation of that afternoon.

Too intent on following the movements of his quarry to care who smiled and who did not, Cardillac kept the cloak in sight. It led him through devious and deserted ways, hitherto unknown to him. The man in front was evidently determined to avoid all public thoroughfares, preferring to run the risk of encounters with dangerous marauders who might be prowling about these dark, unpopular thoroughfares. Cardillac still carried his scabbard under his arm, so that it could not clatter upon the cobble-stones and give warning to the pedestrian in advance. It was evident that the latter was doing the same, or, a most unlikely supposition, was unarmed, for he traversed the deserted streets with the silence of a ghost. Seeing the way in front broaden somewhat at a place where a lamp hanging from an ornamental wrought-iron bracket fixed to the wall formed an oasis of light in a desert of darkness, Cardillac strode rapidly forward, and overtook the pursued directly under the lamp, which cast its rays impartially on each of them.

"Son of a corn-chandler!" he cried. "Low-born scion of an ignoble race! I would bestow a favour upon you. Although a sword in the hand of a king may confer nobility on even the vilest, yet this blade in the hands of a gentleman, when run through your body, will give you a better death than your origin deserves. Do not thank me, sir, but stand on guard!"

This speech, which Cardillac had spent the evening in composing, proved too long for the occasion. It rolled from his tongue with all the fluency of his eloquent Gascony, but his antagonist answered not a word. The stranger turned to the right-about-face with the celerity of a soldier at the word of command. His sword was in his right hand, and his sheath fell with a metallic clank upon the stones. Without a sound he immediately thrust forth with the venom of a viper.

The young man was taken completely by surprise. He had struck a pose picturesque to behold, had there been any onlookers—a pose well suited to the words he employed; but to avoid that vivid thrust he was compelled to abandon this attitude with such haste that legs and scabbard became intermixed, and he fell backwards just in time to escape being impaled through the breast.

Nimble as a wildcat, Cardillac scrambled to hands and knees, unhooking as he did so the scabbard from his belt, and flinging it clattering behind him on the stones. Erect once more, he tore the throat fastenings from his cloak, and allowed it to drop from him. Then he felt the red-hot sting of a gigantic wasp in his left arm between the shoulder and the elbow. The second onslaught of his adversary had not proved so futile as the first.

"*Ventre Saint Gris!*" cried the young man, once more springing back as the other pressed him. "You've done just what Tresor said you would."

This remark seemed to increase his enemy's fury, but Cardillac's legs were now firmly supporting his lithe body, unencumbered with cloak or scabbard, and the third angry lunge was easily parried.

"Stand back," he cried joyfully, "until I get the light in your face. I am going to reoccupy the ground I so hastily abandoned. Back, I say! Give way!" and as the other did not, he pricked him in the shoulder.

The man, who had not spoken since the encounter began, retreated a step.

"Another, if you please," demanded Cardillac, somewhat breathlessly, but with politeness.

That which the man with his back to the light refused to do voluntarily he, for the second time, did under compulsion. Another prick of the sword point, which made him wince, caused him to take the step backward that had been required of him. Cardillac was playing with him, and seemed determined to convince his victim of the contest's hopelessness ere he brought it to a termination.

"I beg of you, sir, to favour me by taking a third step to the rear," panted the young man. "You must admit that my proposal is quite a fair one, which is to distribute the light above us into two equal shares. Your face is still covered with darkness, while mine is in plain sight. I am convinced that another retreating step will give me the equality which I lost when you treacherously set upon me after I gave you the warning to be on guard."

For the first time the defeated man spoke.

"You talk of treachery, you dog, and servant of a dog!" he gasped, and bitter as were his words, his voice showed him to be approaching the last stages of exhaustion.

"Your language, sir, betrays your humble origin, but I will not cavil at it. The immediate point at issue between us is the third step backwards. Take it, I beg of you, otherwise it is your throat you must guard; and remember that an incision there is a much more delicate operation than a touch on either shoulder."

"Stop! A parley; a parley! I wish a word with you, sir!"

"Not so!" cried Cardillac. "A parley is all to my disadvantage, as well you know. The watch may interrupt us at any moment. Besides, you did me the honour to run me through the arm, and my sleeve is filled with blood. I have, therefore, on two counts not a moment to spare; to keep my promise to you, and run my blade through your treacherous heart."

"For the second time you speak of treachery. You are a cut-throat, or a cut-purse, which?"

"Neither, sir, but a more honourable adversary than you deserve. I implore you, sir, to compliment me by defending yourself with greater skill than you are doing. You seem determined to put upon me the taint of assassin that hangs over you. You are as helpless, sir, as if you were unarmed. I do not wish to kill you as you killed Concini."

As he spoke, the other's sword dropped ringing to the cobble-stones. The man spread out his empty arms.

"I do not understand your language, sir, but finish your work as quickly as you please, and get back for your hire. Allow me one offer, however, that may reach your covetous or necessitous soul. I will take your own word for the amount, and pay you within half an hour double the sum that Luynes gives you for my murder. Furthermore, within the half hour I shall supply you with one of the fastest horses in France. It is not yet midnight, and before daybreak you will have outdistanced all possible pursuers, and be free from the vengeance of Luynes. Once beyond Loches you are safe, if you take to the west.

"I do not underestimate the service I ask of you, nor the danger to which you would be committing yourself if you accept my offer; therefore double, treble or quadruple the sum I will pay you. Of course you make an enemy of Luynes, that treacherous hound, who dare not face his foes, but must use the musket or the blade of an assassin. But if you join the ranks of his enemies, I will give you letters to Epernon in Loches. You must keep to the north side of the Loire, make a wide circuit around Blois, cross the river between there and Tours, for in either town Luynes is strong; but once the river is crossed, make direct for Loches, and you are safe."

During this appeal, which was jerked forth in detached phrases, as if the speaker's breath were well-nigh exhausted, the unarmed man stepped back two paces, and the light fell on his face. It showed Cardillac the pallid, haggard countenance of one at least fifty years of age. No disguise that a young man could have used was sufficiently subtle to simulate the expression of age, fatigue and anxiety that met the Gascon's gaze, as he stood there with sword lowered until its point touched the ground.

"There is a mistake here," he cried, "and treachery to us both, as I surmise. I am no assassin, nor the tool of an assassin, unless it be unconsciously. My name is Cardillac of Gascony. Whom have I been fighting?"

"I am the Duke de Montreuil."

"But you came from the palace of Luynes at half-past ten to-night. Tresor saw you out by the postern door, and he blessed you with his benediction."

"That is true. Luynes has done me a foul wrong. He has placed me in a position out of which I seem unable to extricate myself. My appointment with him to-night was for the purpose of making terms with him, but his conditions are such that I could not accept them. The emissary of Luynes assured me safe conduct if I came in secret, unattended, entering and leaving by the back door. When you accosted and attacked me, I did him and you the injustice of thinking the encounter a planned assassination."

"I am not so sure that you are wrong," returned Cardillac, who had unfastened the cuff of his left sleeve, and, with a motion of the arm that caused him to grimace with pain, scattered the blood in crimson drops upon the pavement. "Tresor told me this afternoon that Luynes would leave the postern gate alone at half-past ten. He knew that the Dictator had insulted me, and that I desired nothing on earth so much as to meet him sword in hand. He made this meeting inevitable by assuring me, with that crafty smile of his, that Luynes would spare my life by running me through the arm. I have proved myself but a country imbecile in the hands of such a knave."

Cardillac staggered a little from weakness caused by hunger and loss of blood.

"You must come with me. It is but a step now to my house. My physician will attend to your wound."

"No, no, 'tis but a scratch."

"I think," said the duke, "that my sword passed through your arm."

"It is nothing, I assure you. You merely proved yourself a rough surgeon, my lord, and your diagnosis was right. I needed a little blood-letting. 'Twill do me good. All that remains is for me to beg your pardon, and take myself off to my lodgings. I hope to make sure of Monsieur de Luynes on the next occasion."

The nobleman thought his mind and body were beginning to wander, and that the young man was losing his grip on each.

"What are you looking for?" he asked, approaching him.

"My scabbard. I thought I had set it down here somewhere."

"'Tis there behind you, also your cloak."

The duke picked up his own discarded sword, and watched the young fellow narrowly, proffering no assistance. He was evidently still far from sure of him.

Cardillac attempted to secure his scabbard, but, stooping, fell forward on one knee. With a slight laugh, he made the pretence that this altitude was intended, as, with uncertain hand, and a large consumption of time, he hooked the scabbard to the belt. Without getting up, he reached for his cloak, then, with a sigh, rolled over upon it, and lay there.

The duke strode forward, and knelt by the side of the unconscious man. The hanging lamp shone down upon a youthful face of ghastly pallor; the parted lips were blue, the teeth clenched as if in agony when oblivion overtook him. His lordship brought forth a small flask, but, before attempting to administer the stimulant, became aware of a sound that startled him.

He sprang once more to his feet, concealed the flask, and listened. Up the narrow lane came the measured tramp of men. He turned as if to leave Cardillac to his fate—to the fate brought on by his own hot-blooded impetuosity; but marching men were coming down from the other end of the lane also, the two parties converging upon him. There flashed upon the nobleman's mind the King's recent edict against duels.

"*Mille diables!* Trapped, as I am a sinner!" muttered the duke. "Luynes has laid his plans well. If one treachery failed, the next was to succeed."

He wiped his red blade on the fallen man's cloak, thrust the sword into its sheath, and stood there awaiting the meeting of the two companies.

"I arrest you in the King's name!" cried the approaching officer loudly. "Attempt no resistance."

There were a dozen uniformed men in each squad. They came to a simultaneous halt, leaving between them a lamp-lit square of cobbled pavement, in the centre of which one man lay prone and bleeding, while the other stood beside him.

CHAPTER III

AN INVITATION AT MIDNIGHT

"I am the Duke de Montreuil," sternly announced the standing man. "I can be arrested only on a warrant signed by His Majesty the King, and if such an instrument were extant, which I refuse to believe, it would not be placed in the hands of a sergeant of police for execution."

The sergeant knew enough of the law to be aware that the duke spoke the truth. His net had enclosed a bigger fish than he had expected. The Duke of Montreuil's face and form were quite familiar to any denizen of Paris, and only a stranger like Cardillac, who came from a remote corner of France, could have been ignorant of the nobleman's identity when confronting him. The sergeant now recognised the duke, and he spoke with a cringing deference in marked contrast with his proclamation of arrest.

"My lord duke, what you say concerning your privilege is true; nevertheless, the incident that has occurred here is in direct contravention of the very precise edict of the King himself, and therefore amounts to high treason, which crime dissolves all privilege, save only that pertaining to the royal family itself. Who killed this man?"

"Officer, although you argue like an advocate, you jump at a hasty conclusion. The youth, so far as I am able to judge on brief and badly illuminated examination, is not dead, or even grievously wounded. There appears to be a scratch on the throat, and a sword wound through the arm. I judge him to have fainted from loss of blood, and what we need here is a surgeon, and not a sergeant. You are ill advised in assuming a duel. The truth is your streets are badly protected, and doubtless this unfortunate young man has been set upon by footpads; probably robbed. I think that all who know me in Paris, these many years, need not be told that, if I fought a duel, 'twould be in some more secluded spot, and during a properly lighted hour of the twenty-four. The accusation at which you hint, officer, is absurd, so far as it impinges upon me."

The officer presented a picture of bewilderment, His lordship had spoken with a quiet indifference that was singularly effective; yet there lay the man, wounded or dead, and the instructions which the officer had received from the Dictator's headquarters had informed him that he would come upon just such a scene at almost precisely the moment he arrived, in one or other of four lanes leading from the Dictator's house.

He had been told that he would see, entering these lanes, one man followed by another. He was not to interfere, even if he heard the sound of conflict, until the affray was over. Then he was to arrest the survivor, or both, if neither were killed, and was to collect evidence as to whether what had happened was a duel or an assassination. Apparently his superiors were in doubt as to the intentions of the two men under surveillance, and here, to his astonishment, he found that one of them was a noble of France, who but a few months before had been more powerful than any other, saving only the Queen Mother and her favourite, Concini. He was shrewd enough to know, also, that to-morrow this man might be in power again. Events followed one another rapidly in France.

"My lord duke, you entered this lane a few minutes ago, and the man lying there was pursuing you."

"If he pursued me, I am not aware of it. I was proceeding peaceably home after a private conference with Charles d'Albert de Luynes, in his own house, at his own invitation."

"But, my lord, since you entered this lane no one has emerged from it at either end. How, then, came this man wounded?"

The duke shrugged his shoulders.

"Really, sergeant, I have not the honour to belong to the detective force of the police. If you wish to find the culprit, I would suggest that you search the houses on either side. They are numerous enough and sinister enough to harbour a thousand criminals. A cut-throat thief of this locality does not need to emerge from either end of the lane. I make the further suggestion that, instead of standing talking foolishly there, you should get help for this man. He may, indeed, be dying on your hands, and, by the way, do you propose to attempt my arrest?"

"No, my lord duke, but I must take the victim into custody, and report the fact that I found your lordship with him."

Cardillac opened his eyes, and with an effort reached a sitting posture. The duke once more pulled forth the flask of

brandy, eager to stop the young man's mouth until he could give him some hint of the critical situation.

"Here, my poor fellow, drink this. You have been set on and wounded, I take it, by some footpads. Have they robbed you?"

"My pockets are empty," said Cardillac, promptly feeling with his right hand in one, while the duke held the flask to his lips.

"You see," said the nobleman, "what happened is exactly as I surmised. This unhappy youth has been maltreated and robbed, and, for all I know, he may be a friend of Monsieur de Luynes himself."

Cardillac, assisted to his feet by the duke and the sergeant, wincing when the latter caught too roughly his wounded arm, looked about him at the silent assembly of men.

"You seem to have arrived, officer, with plenty of assistance, but I wish you had been fewer in number and more prompt in appearing."

"Who are you, sir?" demanded the sergeant.

Cardillac was quick-witted enough in ordinary circumstances, although he had shown heretofore but little of that quality. He noted, nevertheless, the duke's emphasis on the suggestion that he was a friend of Luynes, and now knew enough of the character of the Dictator to realise that he must proceed with extreme caution if he was to circumvent him.

"I am called Victor de Cardillac, from Gascony; a stranger here in Paris, whither I have come on the personal invitation of my friend, Charles d'Albert de Luynes."

"The deuce you say!" gasped the astonished officer, who found himself becoming more and more involved with those whom he feared it was safer to leave alone. "If, as you state, you are a friend of the chief minister, I hope you will accompany me to his presence, and testify, perhaps, that I have treated you with courtesy."

"I'm willing to do that," agreed Cardillac, but the duke interposed.

"Nonsense, sergeant, nonsense! This young man is in no condition to meet anyone but a doctor, and Monsieur de Luynes will not thank you for disturbing him at this hour of night merely to convince him that you are an egregious blunderer. Doubtless the duel you are looking for has been taking place while you have been wasting time here. My word should have been sufficient, I think."

"Pardon me, my lord duke, but you said yourself that you knew nothing of this young man."

"Neither I do. I never met him before in my life, but I know the family of Cardillac in Gascony to be one of ancient and honourable rank, and if the word of a scion of that house is sufficient for me, it ought to be accepted by you; if it is not, you must be prepared to take the consequences when you meet my friend Charles d'Albert de Luynes, with whom, as I have told you, I spent the evening."

"My instructions were very definite, my lord duke, and I confess myself in a quandary. The family of Cardillac may be of the best, as you say, but as you are not personally acquainted with this young man, you cannot vouch that he bears any relationship to it."

"If I have not been robbed of my papers as well as my purse," said Cardillac mildly, "I can soon resolve your doubt. Kindly search inside my doublet. My arm seems stiff and unwieldy. You will find there documents that prove my identity, and also the letter of invitation from Monsieur de Luynes himself. I hope you know his handwriting."

The sergeant, with many apologies that the search was not a legal one, but carried out in fulfilment of Cardillac's own desire, came upon the papers, and read the letter of Luynes, which had been written on the official stationery of the King's palace.

DEAR MONSIEUR DE CARDILLAC:

Paris, by all means. It is a delightful city, where young men enjoy themselves, and become rich. I long to embrace the founder of my fortune.

Cardillac laughed as the sergeant read this letter.

"My experiences of to-night," he said, "do not bear out the statement of your master. I have found Paris anything but a delightful city, and so far from becoming rich, I stand at this moment penniless."

The sergeant was now profound and profuse in his apologies both to the duke and to the young stranger.

"I deeply regret what has happened," he said, "and shall make no attempt to detain you a moment longer. I hope my lord duke, and you, Monsieur de Cardillac, will testify that I have endeavoured to carry out my disagreeable duty as courteously as possible, and did not persist after I was satisfied of this young man's identity. I shall now withdraw my men, and you may proceed on your way unmolested. I sincerely regret having interrupted your progress, my lord duke."

"You may dismiss your men if you like, sergeant, but you yourself must accompany me to my house. Take with you whatever body-guard you deem sufficient to see us home in safety. I shall write a letter to Monsieur de Luynes, which will be entrusted to your care, sergeant. In that letter I shall explain that you have done your duty with vigilance, and you will find that no complaint has been lodged by me. In this I am sure Monsieur de Cardillac will join me."

The young man bowed an affirmative.

"The inconvenience to me has been trivial, but Monsieur de Cardillac's wound is a serious matter which deserves the attention of the authorities. As I said a short time since, I am certain a man so busy as Monsieur de Luynes will not thank you for arousing him at this hour of the night, so you may present my letter not later than an hour before audience time to-morrow. You may tell Monsieur de Luynes, or perhaps I had better state it in the letter, that Monsieur de Cardillac and myself will—if, indeed, Monsieur is able to be abroad—call upon him at the same hour to-morrow night as I have visited him this evening, and I trust that by that time, sergeant, you will have some satisfactory explanation to offer for the cruel attack which has been made upon Monsieur de Cardillac."

At this the officer bowed low. He selected four men from the ranks of his company, and dismissed the rest under charge of a subordinate. Thus escorted, the duke and Cardillac reached the palace of the former at a quarter before midnight.

CHAPTER IV

REFRESHMENTS AND AFFAIRS

The palace of the Duke de Montreuil proved to be one of those massive buildings, half fortress, half residence, without any claims to the architectural beauty the fourteenth century gave to certain quarters of Paris. It was built round a spacious courtyard, the arched entrance to which was protected by ponderous, well-nigh impregnable gates. Although the duke was deprived of his political power, he nevertheless relinquished nothing of that state which had surrounded him as a minister and great noble of the realm.

Late as was the hour, the number of retainers afoot surpassed that of Luynes himself even during his hours of public reception. As the master, with his following, approached and was recognised, it seemed to the sensitive Cardillac that a subtle sense of relief electrified those who were awaiting his return. The period, quiet as it appeared on the surface, possessed, nevertheless, the ominous tranquillity of a storm-cloud which, on a calm and sultry day, gradually overspreads the sky. No man knew when the lightning would flash forth, or whom it would strike when it descended.

As the party entered the courtyard, the great gates behind it clanged menacingly shut, and even the sergeant glanced apprehensively over his shoulder as he heard the sound which echoed from the four strong walls around him. The duke led Cardillac and the officer into a large, well-lighted room on the ground floor, plainly furnished in a manner that gave it the aspect of a business office. The four men of the sergeant's guard remained outside.

Once within the courtyard, with closed gates, a curt command from his lordship sent the servants scurrying to arouse the physician. Meanwhile the sergeant, himself no unskilled practitioner, for in his calling a rough-and-ready knowledge of surgery was necessary, helped Cardillac off with his outer clothing, and deftly scissored the arm of the shirt at the shoulder, gently tearing away the linen, and thus, in spite of his care, causing the wound to bleed afresh.

Cardillac sat impassive in his chair, his wan countenance giving no indication of the pain he suffered. It was typical of the times that when the ancient doctor bustled in, evidently newly awakened from sleep, he carried with him all the appliances for attending to a wound made by either gun-shot or sword. The washing and the salving of the wound proceeded, and the silence was broken only by the scratching of a quill pen which the duke, seated at his writing-table, was using. At last the wound was bandaged, the outer clothing replaced, and the arm hung in a sling. The physician drew a deep breath of satisfaction. The duke looked up from his writing.

"Well?" he ejaculated.

"As beautiful a cut as any man could desire to see; clean and true," said the enthusiastic doctor, wiping his hands on a towel that his assistant presented to him. "Indeed, it might have been accomplished by your own sword, for it is the exact size."

The duke frowned, but kept silence.

"The young man appears to be rather insufficiently nourished, but with proper food, and no wine, he will be fit as a farmer in a few days. The blade did not touch the bone."

"Thank you; good-night," said his lordship, in a tone of dismissal, and the loquacious doctor, with his assistant and paraphernalia, vanished.

Montreuil, with knitted brows, carefully perused what he had written. The letter ran:

MY LORD DUKE:

In addressing you thus, I have reason to believe that I anticipate by a short time only the honour His Majesty designs to bestow upon you; therefore, being the first to recognise you as one of us, I venture to offer some counsel which, though unasked, may not be unwelcome. When you become a member of the nobility, you may find it desirable, both for your comfort and your safety, that the class to which you will then belong believes you to be a peer of the realm in spirit as well as in name.

It will ultimately prove disastrous if throughout our ranks there filters a suspicion that a man of title, no matter how

highly placed, goes about in danger of an assassin's knife. To-night I visited you at your own request, and, also at your own request, I came unattended, entering your dwelling surreptitiously, leaving in the same manner, assured of secrecy and safe conduct. I have since learned that I was followed from your very door by an armed person whom I believe to be an expert swordsman, but, luckily, before I spoke to him he had received a wound in the arm, and was partially disabled. This wound was given by some individual whom the young man did not recognise, and who doubtless escaped undetected to his own home, wherever that may be, for your sergeant could give me no idea regarding the culprit's identity.

I confess at once that when I learned Cardillac, the wounded man, had followed me from your palace, I suspected that you had set him on my track, and in this I admit I did you an injustice, for he tells me it is you, and not myself, against whom he harbours feelings of injury, and it was you he expected to attack, being misled by one of your minions named Tresor into the belief that you, following the example of the caliph in the Oriental tale, roamed the city at night in disguise.

As I have myself conducted large affairs of state, I know by experience the inconvenience often caused by the injudicious zeal of an underling, and while personally I acquit you of all knowledge of this mysterious affair, I, nevertheless, venture to point out to you that such knowledge filters abroad often before the person who, like yourself, has the most at stake receives the faintest inkling of it.

I have myself to-night been able to do you a good turn in preventing publicity of an incident which, once it became known, with various exaggerations, might have produced unpleasant results. Luckily the police sergeant, by whom I forward this letter, to be given privately into your own hand, proved to be a man of discretion. I have imposed strict silence upon him, which command you will doubtless emphasise when you see him. One odd feature of the affair is that Cardillac, while professing the utmost enmity to yourself, nevertheless carried upon his person a most cordial and intimate letter from you. This letter I, knowing your handwriting, believe to be a forgery, in spite of the fact that it is written on palace paper.

I shall keep this young man under my own eye until such time as I receive instructions from you regarding his disposal.

My physician has been dressing his wounds, one in the arm, one in the neck, while I write, and at this moment reports them as being most serious. The young man is therefore safe, and cannot attempt to escape for several days at least.

I have the honour to be, my lord duke, with many compliments,

Your well-wisher, MONTREUIL.

The lengthy communication his lordship folded, and closed with his own seal. This done, he rose wearily to his feet, stretched out his arms, and yawned like a man tired of the day's exertions, with the air of one relaxed, knowing himself to be in the presence of his inferiors, and careless of their opinions concerning his manners.

The sergeant of police had been standing in a rigid, semi-military fashion since the doctor had left the room. Cardillac sat in a chair, his shapely legs stretched out, and his feet crossed, leaning back with eyes half closed, eyes which nevertheless had been fastened all the while on the duke, taking a quiet inventory of him, estimating the manner of man he was.

Apparently Cardillac was half asleep, and in this condition the duke judged him to be, although, as a matter of fact, he was never more alert in his life, kept on tension by his unceasing hunger and the equally unceasing sting of his wound. The duke addressed and questioned the officer in a spirit of languor and indifference, but the acute Cardillac saw, what the sergeant did not, that his lordship gathered a good deal of important information before the apparently careless colloquy was ended.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting, sergeant, at this late hour, when perhaps your superior in office is impatient for your report at police headquarters."

"Not so, my lord duke. In this case I am acting under instructions issued direct from the palace of Luynes, thus independent of my chief, and, indeed, under orders to report nothing to him of to-night's proceedings."

"Ah, in that case, sergeant, my anxiety departs. The palace of Luynes, like my own, is undoubtedly closed for the night. Would you give your men outside liberty to drink a flagon or two of wine before you depart? Meanwhile I shall order for yourself a vintage I think will please you."

As he said this he struck a bell, which being immediately answered, he gave his commands for a quantity of stout burgundy to be supplied to those outside, and some champagne of the year 1600 for the business room. As the sergeant returned, and the wine came in, the duke addressed Cardillac.

"In one respect, sir, I think I may contravene the orders of my excellent physician. I am quite sure that a measure of this delectable champagne will not injure you."

"Indeed, my lord," said Cardillac cheerfully, "I was about to make a similar suggestion. The advice of the physician was good so far as musket-shot wounds are concerned, for a large bullet, powder begrimed, may leave a jagged tunnel in a man's flesh that threatens inflammation; but a clean sword-thrust is a different matter, and of no importance at all, unless it touches a vital spot. I drink to your good health, my lord, and to the furtherance of your projects, whatever they may be."

The solemn nobleman bowed in response to this toast, but he himself, neither then nor later, tasted a drop of the beverage he had so highly commended. The sergeant smacked his lips in enthusiastic approval of the champagne, the like of which he had probably never enjoyed before.

The duke paced slowly up and down the room, his hands clasped behind his back, his head bowed. The sealed and addressed letter he had written still lay on his table. At last he spoke with the air of one who has nothing particular to say, but wishes to make conversation.

"I suppose Monsieur de Luynes will not be expecting you to return to the palace to-night?"

"Oh, I have never seen Monsieur de Luynes."

"Really? I understood you to say you received your instructions from him?"

"No, my lord; I said from the palace."

"Ah, I see! Then you shall not disappoint Monsieur de Luynes by neglecting to report there to-night?"

"I suppose not, my lord, though my commands may have come from him."

"True, true, I had not thought of that. Another flagon, sergeant: it is as mild as new milk. The champagne is mellowed by the flight of seventeen years. No, now that you mention it, the order may have come from Luynes; although it seems to me unlikely that he, with the affairs of the whole empire upon his mind, should trouble himself about a pair of brawlers in a Paris lane."

"That is very probable, my lord, and it is almost certain that monsieur knows no more of to-night's proceedings than yourself, Monsieur le Duc."

The duke nodded, and seemed to admire the perspicuity of the sergeant, who thrust out his manly chest at finding himself thus in confidential agreement and discussion with one of the mightiest nobles in the land.

The good man felt that he had underestimated himself heretofore, and the champagne, besides having the virtues of new milk, produced a cheering, encouraging effect, and was all in all a most delectable fluid.

"I know the entourage of Monsieur de Luynes reasonably well," continued the duke. "In selecting you for the mission, sergeant, they would naturally pick out the best and most discreet man. You are a keen judge of character, I take it. You mix with all, from the highest to the lowest, and form opinions, even if you keep them hidden in your own breast."

The sergeant smiled craftily, and now took the liberty of winking at his lordship, as who would say that each of them knew a thing or two of this world.

"Did the individual who instructed you appear to be a person of importance in the King's household?"

"Not of great importance, my lord. He was too polite to be of much account. His name is Monsieur Tresor, but I am

ignorant of his position in the household of monsieur."

"Ah, old Tresor!" replied the duke. "A very oily ancient. He was the menial who saw me to the door to-night."

"I enjoyed a long conversation with him this afternoon," interjected Cardillac. "In the daytime he is merely a guard in Luynes's ante-chamber, a person of no importance whatever, I should say."

The duke cast upon Cardillac a swift but sharp glance of appreciation. He saw that the young man was following keenly the trend of the enquiry, which the sergeant was not.

"I think," said the latter sagely, "that there is no need of going to the palace to-night."

"I quite agree with you," replied the duke. "Still, if I knew exactly what your instructions were, I should be the better able to offer advice."

"Oh, my instructions were precise enough," and here the sergeant related them, in much the same language as he had used in the lane.

CHAPTER V

THE MOST POTENT DOCUMENT IN FRANCE

"It seems to me," said the duke slowly, when the recital was finished, "that the guard Tresor, doubtless through his own ignorance of the police laws of Paris, and the general laws of France, placed you in great danger, sergeant."

"Danger?" cried the sergeant, valorously. "Why, my lord, I have been accustomed to meet danger all my life. I have been set on in my time by a mob of ruffians carrying bludgeons."

"And I doubt not you acquitted yourself most courageously," interjected the duke, "but this is danger of a more subtle kind. Suppose, for instance, that you had been ignorant of the law, and had insisted on arresting me, you ran the danger of being imprisoned for the rest of your life, or, indeed, you might have been taken out into the prison yard and shot."

"Ah, but I knew better than to molest a man of your lordship's privileges."

"Still, Tresor should have given you a warrant of some kind; something which you could fall back upon if you had made a mistake."

"Oh, he did that, of course."

"But you didn't show it to me, sergeant, when you called out that I was arrested in the King's name."

"No, because I recognised your lordship the moment you turned your face upon me."

"You have only Tresor's word for it, then, that this warrant is sufficient to protect you. Did you read it?"

"I glanced at it, my lord. It seemed to give me a good deal of power."

"Yes, but by whom was it signed? By himself, or by the chief of police?"

"Well, my lord, that I can't tell you. It's signed with a scrawl. I could not make out the man's name."

"Sergeant, you surprise me. Don't you know that the value of any document is concentrated in its signature? Would you regard with equal favour an order for a thousand pistoles signed by me, and a similar order signed by one of your men outside?"

The sergeant laughed boisterously.

"I'm not such a fool as that, your lordship."

"But the documents would be the same, all except the signature?"

"Certainly, your lordship; I see what you mean, and you yourself shall be the judge. It is likely old Tresor has taken me in."

With that he extracted a parchment from his pouch, and passed it over to the duke, who scrutinised it with impassive face, then flung it on the table beside the letter to Luynes.

"My poor fellow, I am sorry for you. The signature, as you say, is quite illegible. It was cruelly improper for Tresor to give you such an instrument as this. No wonder he did not wish you to communicate with the chief of police. Probably Tresor meant no wrong, being, as I have said, ignorant of the law. Still, he should not put an innocent man in jeopardy, as this so-called warrant does. Leave it with me, sergeant, and I will ask Luynes, next time I meet him, whose scrawl this is on the record."

"With all the good will in the world, my lord. As I have arrested nobody, it would, of course, be useless even if signed by the chief of police."

"Quite so. Now, sergeant, we all wish to get to bed. Here is the letter to Luynes. You will give it to him to-morrow between the mid-day meal and the beginning of his afternoon reception. You must insist on seeing Luynes himself, and

say to Tresor, if he questions you, that you were commanded to do so. Tell him, if he insists, that the letter is a private one to Luynes from the Duke de Montreuil. Show him my seal and my superscription here under the word 'Private.' Tresor will not dare break the seal, nor can he refuse you admission to Charles d'Albert de Luynes. If questioned about this warrant, say that you have lost it. Stick to that. Do not tell anyone you have given it to me. Do you understand, sergeant?"

"Perfectly, my lord."

The duke yawned again as the sergeant took his departure, pacing up and down the room until his major-domo entered and with a salute announced that the gates were closed.

"Has Pasquel retired for the night?"

"No, my lord."

"Tell him to investigate quietly, and learn whether or not this house is watched. He is to report to me as soon as his investigation is complete."

"Very good, my lord."

"Send Pierre here at once."

"Yes, my lord."

The major-domo departed. The duke opened a drawer, took out a bundle of papers, and selected one, as there entered to him a weather-beaten man of about forty, evidently of the Norman race, as was the duke himself. He was attired in a time-stained riding costume.

"Pierre, see to it that you do not lose this document. On it rests your safety for the next day or two. If you are stopped, I leave it to your own cunning to learn whether those who call 'Halt' are for the Queen Mother or Luynes. You can be stupid enough when you please, so do not answer readily. You are a man in the horse trade, you understand. If those who stop you are for Luynes, you may show them this paper: it will pass you through. If intercepted by the partisans of the Queen Mother, it will be enough if you mention that you ride for me. My steward will give you all the money you need, and don't spare it.

"You ride for Amboise. Your first stop is Rambouillet, which I expect you to reach by daylight. Stop at the Lion d'Or, and arrange for four horses to be in readiness for whoever gives the word 'Tresor.' Then on to Chartres, where you do the same at the Grand Monarque. Then to Châteaudun, to the Hôtel de la Place, then to Vendôme, to the Hôtel Lion d'Or. Lastly to Amboise, and the Hôtel Saint Vincent. Stop at Amboise until I arrive. Do you comprehend?"

"Yes, my lord."

The duke had been writing as he gave his rapid commands.

"Here," he said, "is written the word 'Tresor.' That pass-word is to be used at each hotel, and here is the list of places, and the name of the hotel in each town. Even if this is found on you, and investigation takes place, it will merely corroborate what you have said, that you are a horse-dealer.

"You may tell the proprietor in each case that one of the horses will be bought; all of them if they prove to be good. Now, away with you, and lose not a moment. Send in François. And, by the way, show this second paper at the barriers, and they will allow you to get quit of Paris. Once outside, do not spare horseflesh. Buy all the animals you need, and let nothing delay you."

When François entered, the duke went on as though reciting a lesson he had learnt by heart.

"Is the travelling carriage in readiness?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Take with you our carriage-smith, and have him look over the vehicle with the utmost care. See especially to the wheels and axles. We are undertaking a journey to-night, and you will bring him with you instead of a footman. Tell him to place

in the rumble all the tools he may need for any unexpected breakdown on the way. Besides this, he may as well know that I hold him responsible for the condition of the carriage before we begin our travels. See the cook, and lay in provisions for a three days' journey. Have everything ready in the courtyard by two o'clock. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my lord."

When the coachman had retired, the duke rose from the table, picking up the document which the sergeant had relinquished.

"Poor devil, poor devil," he murmured, "but one can't make an omelette without breaking eggs."

"To whom do you refer, my lord?" asked Cardillac, who was now the only other person in the room.

"To the sergeant. It shows the peasant origin of Luynes that he should give so potent a commission as this to such a stupid man. Do you recognise that signature?"

Cardillac took the warrant.

"No, my lord," he said.

"That is the sign manual of our new King, Louis XIII."

"*Cap de Dieu!* And what, then, is the document to which it is attached?"

"A *lettre de cachet* so formidable that through its aid you might consign to the Bastille the entire peerage of France, if the blank space contained room enough for their names."

Cardillac gave utterance to an exclamation of dismay. The duke continued soberly:

"Think of such a document being placed in the hands of an ignorant sergeant of police! For part of one night this product of the gutter had it in his power to bury alive half a dozen of the greatest nobles in France. Luynes, as I have said, proves that he possesses the mind and soul of a peasant when he places so terrible a weapon in the hands of a raw policeman. *Lettres de cachet* have never been put to such a use since they were introduced a little more than fifty years ago. That man Luynes is ignorant even of their form. A *lettre de cachet* is really a *lettre closes*. It should be closed in such a way that the letter cannot be opened without breaking the seal. Here it is tossed about as if it were of no more importance than the *addition* of an inn-keeper."

"But when the King learns of this use made of his signature," said Cardillac, "won't he——"

"Oh, the King!" cried Montreuil, with a hopeless shrug of his shoulders. "But come, Monsieur de Cardillac, we have talked enough of this. Are you ready for supper?"

"I confess to an appetite," said the young man indifferently. "It is some hours since I dined."

"I shall be very glad of your company," concluded his lordship, and they mounted the stairs together.

CHAPTER VI

THE GIRL WHO HAD DISAPPEARED

The days of the great *chefs* had not yet dawned upon Paris. It was during the next reign that a cook killed himself because the King added salt to a dish he composed. Yet if anyone had told Cardillac that night of the coming glories of the French cuisine, if anyone had prophesied to him that before he was an old man he would enjoy a banquet to which the supper of the Duke de Montreuil could not hold a candle, the youth would have called the prophet false.

He brought with him to this midnight meal the sauce which even the greatest of French *chefs* agree they cannot equal, a healthy, youthful hunger, not yet prolonged into actual starvation, but perilously close to the border.

The duke conducted his eager guest to a cabinet so small that it could hardly be dignified with the name of dining-room. It was somewhat fantastically decorated: the walls were of a very pure and dazzling white, divided into long panels by thin gilt mouldings. Cardillac, in the candle-light, could not be sure whether the ceiling was actually domed, or the painting of it produced that illusion.

The large picture above him represented the Goddess of Plenty, scattering with profusion her gifts down to the earth. In the centre of each white panel, very delicately painted, were fishes swimming in an azure sea; waterfowl rising into the air from the reeds of a mere; deer peering through a thicket in the forest; a flock of wild geese flying against a pale blue sky; a covey of partridges trying to hide themselves in the friendly grass; a leaping trout over a sparkling stream; a bunch of luscious grapes with the dew twinkling on them like diamond drops; and thus every panel displayed its picture.

A small square table occupied the centre of the room. On a broad sideboard were set out an enticing supply of cold viands, and flagons of champagne stood on the table.

The supper was eaten in silence. Host and guest were waited upon by two serving-men as silent as themselves. It seemed to Cardillac that life up to this juncture had not been worth while. He was now enjoying the climax of existence. When at last he pushed back his heavy chair, and looked across the table, he found the sombre eyes of the duke fixed intently upon him, from under a frowning brow; trying to fathom a problem; trying to resolve a doubt.

The expression on his host's face brought with a pang to Cardillac's mind the humiliating fact that he had enjoyed this hospitality upon no better introduction than an unprovoked attack, impetuous, heedless, inexcusable. Oppressed by this thought, and rendered somewhat uneasy by the intent scrutiny of the duke, Cardillac broke silence with a jauntiness of manner he was far from feeling.

"My lord duke, although we of the south are accustomed to fare daintily and well, I must confess that never before have I partaken of a repast with such enjoyment."

The duke, for one brief instant, allowed the faintest glimmer of a smile to mitigate the harshness of his expression at this reference to the abundance of the south; for the well-fed Norman knew that there was sometimes a lack of the loaves and fishes in Gascony; but the smile was so evanescent that it failed to attract the attention of Cardillac, who continued complacently, holding aloft his wine flagon:

"But there is a drop of bitter at the bottom of the cup."

"And what is that?" asked Montreuil.

"It is that my introduction to you should have been through the medium of my own rudeness."

By the gesture of his hand the duke seemed to wave the subject aside.

"We'll think no more of that," he said. "You made your assault under a misapprehension, taking me for another man, and you began the bout with so excellent a regard for fair play that you had reason to complain, not without cause, that I took advantage of your unreadiness. So, if any fault existed in your action, it has been neutralised by my impetuosity. You are an excellent swordsman, Monsieur de Cardillac."

"I have been so accounted, my lord."

"You have come to Paris, I take it, to live by the sword, and ultimately to die by the sword."

"The latter if I chance to meet a better man," returned Cardillac, with a smile of confident worth that hinted he would travel far before such a contingency arrived.

"It is not so much the better man you may fear as the man of treachery. Against a high-placed assassin courage and skill are useless. I surmise, monsieur, that to-morrow a very strict search will be made throughout Paris for you."

"Well, if you mean Luynes and Tresor, they know where to find me. Indeed," continued the young man, with an access of bravado, "I shall save them all trouble on that score. In the morning I propose to chastise Tresor with the flat of my sword, hoping to convince him that lying and intrigue bear penalties. He is too old and too iniquitous a man to receive a challenge from one of my descent, but with the point of my weapon I will spur him into action, and persuade him to conduct me into the presence of his master, whom I shall call upon to defend himself in fair fight."

The host leaned back in his chair and gazed across at his guest with an expression of annoyance bordering on despair. Cardillac reddened under the contempt with which he felt himself to be regarded. For some moments neither spoke, then the elder man said:

"I had some thought of making to you a proposal, but it seems a pity to interfere with a programme so excellent as that you have done me the honour to outline."

"I am quite prepared to receive any proposal you are pleased to suggest, my lord."

The duke shook his head.

"It would be useless. By this time to-morrow your body will be floating down the Seine. You are quite successfully striving to convince me that you lack judgment, and swordsmanship lacking judgment is a danger, and not a protection."

"You think Luynes will dare to arrest me?"

The duke shrugged his shoulders.

"If I, a powerful noble of the realm, possessing a semi-fortified house in Paris, garrisoned by at least a hundred of armed men, am compelled to fly at midnight from my palace, and once outside the gates of Paris to depend on speed and not on valour for safety until I reach the castle of Loches, what chance is there that you, an unknown lad from Gascony, can contrive to elude the clutches of the beast from whom I am trying to escape?"

"In other words," cried Cardillac, "I am an empty-headed fool, although you are too courteous to say so. I am a braggart, a simpleton, cozened by a few soft phrases from Tresor, and boasting of my prowess and strength against a man who even in swordsmanship outdoes me, running me through the arm, as I well deserved. My lord, I am ashamed of myself, and, thanking you for your hospitality, will now rid your palace of so unworthy an encumbrance."

Cardillac rose, bowed low, and picking up his cloak from the back of the chair flung it carelessly over his shoulder.

The duke raised his hand.

"Sit down, monsieur. You go to extremes, first in one direction, then in the other. That is a quality which time will modify, your great danger being that it may not allow time the opportunity. It is also a quality that in my experience goes with honesty, and at the present moment I have need of an honest man who is brave, and even a little reckless. You came to Paris seeking employment for your sword?"

"Yes, my lord."

"It was your first intention to offer it to Luynes?"

"Yes, and such is still my intention, but now I shall offer him the point, and not the hilt."

"That opportunity may come, but it is not yet. I offer you a chance of adventure which, if successful, will annoy Luynes much more than if you ran him through the arm. Your purse, I take it, following the example of purses that come to Paris, has been emptying, rather than filling, these weeks past."

Cardillac, who had again seated himself, replied with a grimace:

"That is very true, my lord."

"I offer you money enough to supply all your needs for, say, six months, in return for service of brain and sword, if you take service with me."

"Agreed."

"If you succeed in the task imposed, I will bestow upon you one thousand golden pistoles, and a further sum sufficient to cover all expenses, ordinary and extraordinary, to which you are put."

"Again agreed, my lord, and I shall not add the proviso that the work I am to do must be such as a gentleman may engage in, for I am sure, my lord, you would require nothing dishonourable from me."

The duke apparently did not consider it necessary to reassure his guest on this point, but continued in the same quiet voice he had used throughout the discourse:

"My only daughter, Mademoiselle Thérèse, was chief lady-in-waiting to the Queen Regent in Paris. When, some months ago, the Queen was sent a prisoner from Paris to Blois, her ladies-in-waiting accompanied her, and they all reached Touraine except my daughter. She was made a prisoner too, but never reached Blois."

"Ha!" cried Cardillac eagerly, resting his elbows on the table, his chin in his hands, and gazing earnestly across at the speaker.

"Did you speak?" asked the duke, pausing in his narration.

"No, my lord. Go on. You interest me greatly."

"Although anxious, I knew that those who had committed this tyrannical action would not harm Thérèse, for to do so would not only raise a storm of protest in France, but would also nullify the object of her abductors, which was first to deprive the Queen of the one person of intellect in her entourage, and second to paralyse all action on my part.

"Up to this moment these objects have been attained. My frequent conferences with Luynes had for their purpose the release of my daughter. Luynes did not deny that he had caused her to be kidnapped, and that he held her in custody, and he was equally frank in proclaiming his reasons for this outrage.

"As the price of her release, he demanded that I should go to the castle at Loches, and persuade the Duke d'Epernon to surrender it to the force which Luynes had stationed in Tours. Once Loches was given up, he said, all danger of civil war would be averted, his whole object, he averred, being the peace of the realm. I agreed to confer with Epernon, and to bring Luynes the duke's answer, and at first Luynes agreed to this, furnishing me with documents for the safe conduct of myself and another, and not more than ten servants, with power to requisition such horses as I might require. These documents I purpose using this morning, and so make my way to Loches.

"Somewhere between Paris and Orléans, or between Orléans and Blois, there may be found a clue which, if followed, will lead to the prison of my daughter. The route taken by the Queen was through Orléans to Blois. The deflection from this route which led my poor girl to her jail must have been very deftly accomplished, possibly at night, for the spies I have already sent over the road and back again are completely baffled.

"I have succeeded in getting a messenger through the guard to the imprisoned Queen, but neither she nor any of the feather-headed crew of women that surround her can remember at what point in the journey they saw my daughter last. That is to say, each one tells a different tale, and so one story cancels another. I suspect that Orléans, being the largest city through which they passed, and one of their stopping places for the night, is the spot where the abduction was carried out. There would be less danger of discovery there than in any of the numerous small villages through which the procession passed.

"The task that I set before you, therefore, is one which none but a man of the highest honour could be entrusted with. It is to find this clue, follow it to the end, and to rescue my daughter from her environment and bring her safely to me in the stronghold of Loches. I do not disguise from you the difficulty of the quest, because others have undertaken it and have failed. Every day that passes adds to that difficulty, and obliterates whatever traces may remain of the abduction.

"If you succeed, I will pay you the minimum sum I have named, and a much larger amount if you exercise great ingenuity, or run into extreme danger on my account. Will you accept my proposal?"

"Yes, my lord; I accept it with delight and gratitude."

"My men have been concentrating their attention chiefly on Orléans, and I regret to say have not found the slightest trace either of her or her captors. I suggest that you come with me as far as Vendôme, and then strike south the five and a half leagues to Blois, because all the guards that accompanied the Queen from Paris are still stationed there. Entering Blois from the north or from the west, as may be most convenient, there will be less suspicion of you than if you came from the direction of Paris.

"By seeking service in Blois you may become acquainted with one or other who followed the Queen on her journey, learning thus every stopping place, and perhaps obtaining other information that may be of value to you. As I have said, the episode is now several months old, and those who know anything about the affair will be less on the alert than was previously the case. This is merely a suggestion on my part, and may be adopted or discarded by you at your pleasure."

"It is discarded, my lord. I hold the clue now in my hand, and we will unravel it together without leaving this table, but you must answer a question or two that I shall ask you."



CHAPTER VII

THE QUEST IS BEGUN

The duke looked sternly at his *vis-à-vis* for a few moments, almost as if he suspected him of treating a serious subject with levity.

"Ask your questions," he commanded curtly.

"What convent between here and Blois is the strictest in its rule? In what community is all speech prohibited?—surely a severe burden to cast upon women!"

"You doubtless refer to the great Convent of the Sacred Heart on the outskirts of Beaugency, at the edge of the forest that extends to Blois."

"What convent is governed by an abbess of the blood royal, to which no novice is admitted unless she be of noble descent?"

"The Convent of the Sacred Heart at Beaugency."

"Then, my lord, your daughter is an inmate of the Convent of the Sacred Heart."

"How can you pronounce so certainly on that?"

"Because old Tresor, who nevertheless mentioned no names, told me he himself had conducted one of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting to the strictest convent in France; a convent ruled by an elderly relative of the King."

The Duke de Montreuil leaned back in his chair, plunged into deep thought, and half closed his eyes; then he murmured, more to himself than to his auditor:

"What object could that hound Tresor have in giving you such information?"

"It was merely his southern boastfulness. He was proving to me how clever he was, and how much Luynes depended on his ingenuity."

The duke shook his head.

"He was misleading you for some purpose of his own. What is that purpose?"

"You do not consider, my lord, that I am but an unknown youth, one of many hanging round the precincts of the palace. He could have no object in misleading me. 'Twas but the self-conceit of a southern man. Surely I should know the trait."

"You forget that that southern man was sending you to assassinate me. You and I were thus linked in his mind. You are too trustful, Monsieur de Cardillac, even after the bitter lesson you have just received under Tresor's tuition."

"Nevertheless, I adhere to my first opinion. It was but the garrulousness of an old man who loves to hear his own voice. So, with your concurrence, my lord, I will accompany you to Châteaudun, and proceed south to Beaugency instead of to Blois. In furtherance of my design, I ask you to give me that *lettre de cachet* which you got from the sergeant."

"What is your design? What do you propose to do with the *lettre de cachet*?"

"I shall proceed with all speed to the convent, reaching it before any news of our escape can have come to Beaugency. I shall at once call to my aid Luynes's men. I possess, as you know, a letter written in the most cordial terms, and signed by Luynes. That, with the *lettre de cachet*, will be my credentials. Obtaining a guard of Luynes's men, I shall proceed to the convent.

"Having inscribed on the *lettre de cachet* your daughter's name, I shall arrest her, and say it is the will of the King that she is to be imprisoned in the castle of Montrichard. Thither, escorted by this contingent of the King's army, we will proceed. We will make our way through the forest to the south of the Loire, avoiding Blois, taking with us a competent guide from Beaugency. The distance to Montrichard cannot be more than thirteen or fourteen leagues.

"Once at Montrichard, I will dismiss my body-guard, ordering the soldiers to return to Beaugency, and then I am safe, for I know everyone there, and when we cross the river Cher we are in the Duke d'Epernon's country, but five leagues or thereabouts to Loches, with the road free of King's men. Indeed, my lord, you must travel fast to reach Loches before mademoiselle your daughter does."

The young man spoke with an animated enthusiasm that was infectious. Several times during the recital the duke's sombre eyes lit up momentarily, to subside again into their customary gloom. The optimistic Cardillac accompanied his eloquence with gestures as vivid as those of a Sicilian, and so carried away was he by his own oratory that it was quite evident he regarded the deed as already done. The elder man adopted a more cautious attitude which proved him but half convinced, although he did not wish to damp the other's ardour.

"The plan may succeed from its very boldness, if it can be carried out without loss of time, but the slightest delay means ever-increasing danger for you. Suppose the officer in charge of the troops at Beaugency refuses to act until he has communicated with Paris, and holds you there awaiting the return of his messenger?"

"What officer in France dare delay executing an order bearing the signature of the King?"

"That is true."

"And in addition to that, I am vouched for by the most cordial invitation from Luynes, asking me to come to Paris."

"The two documents should be very effective, but what if the hue and cry is at Beaugency before you reach there?"

"That is impossible, my lord. Even if your horses are slow, and the roads bad, they can surely cover two leagues an hour. We will arrive at Rambouillet by six o'clock in the morning, breakfast there, and be in Chartres a little after nine. Châteaudun should be in sight between one and two. I am then ten leagues at farthest from Beaugency, and can accomplish the distance by six this evening. I shall be dining at Beaugency before Tresor learns I have taken the road to the west.

"Even if they discovered our flight as early as twelve o'clock, we would then be nearing Châteaudun, and it would be impossible to overtake us. A troop of their hardest riding cavalry couldn't do it. I arrive in Beaugency before six o'clock in the evening, engage a carriage and four horses, the warrant is executed say at seven, and we take the road to Montrichard, crossing the Loire by the old bridge at Beaugency. We reach Montrichard at two o'clock on Thursday morning; then we are safe. The century-old stone bridge allows us to cross the Cher, and we arrive at Loches by daybreak. No; pursuit is futile."

"You seem to know the country well, Monsieur de Cardillac, for a Gascon?"

"Yes, I spent two years in Touraine as a lad. I know that land, especially the part round Montrichard, like the palm of my hand."

The conference was here interrupted by a knock, and Pasquel entered.

"The house is not watched, my lord, and the road is clear to the western gate. The carriage is ready, and it lacks but a quarter of an hour of two o'clock."

"Good; send the major-domo here."

When Pasquel had gone, the duke and Cardillac rose simultaneously.

"There are one or two points we are forgetting," said the nobleman. "You are wounded. You have had no sleep to-night, and will have none to-morrow night, riding hard from now until Thursday morning. Will your endurance hold, do you think?"

Cardillac laughed heartily.

"Yes, for a week, if necessary, day and night on the road. When I feel a good horse under me, as I expect to do at Châteaudun, I laugh at either wounds or fatigue."

"You shall mount the best horse in France, if he happens to be in that town. Ah, here is the major-domo. Conduct

Monsieur de Cardillac to my wardrobe, and select for him whatever he needs on a long journey. There is but scant time in which to make your choice, Cardillac. I shall meet you in the courtyard as the clock strikes two."

"At two o'clock, my lord," said Cardillac, as joyfully as if he were bound for a picnic, striding after the magnificently uniformed major-domo.

CHAPTER VIII

A CONTEST OF WITS

The horses did even better than Cardillac had predicted, despite the indifference of the road, and at four o'clock that afternoon, bestriding a magnificent animal, splendidly accoutred, Cardillac came in sight of the great square tower of César, built in the eleventh century, that dominates the town of Beaugency on the Loire. The young man showed no sign of fatigue, and if his wound pained him it produced little effect on the self-confident swagger of the handsome young equestrian. Indeed, he rode into Beaugency like an armyless conqueror, for this town was one in which a Gascon might well hold up his head with pride. The Prince of Wales captured Beaugency in 1359, and two years later the Gascons wrested it from the English.

The streets showed many soldiers about; the town was evidently well garrisoned, but no one molested the stranger, although many looked curiously at him. He drew up in front of the Hôtel Ecu de Bretagne. So much magnificence obtains recognition everywhere, and no fewer than four ostlers ran out to take charge of the horse, while the landlord bowed low on the threshold. Cardillac gave minute instructions concerning the treatment of his horse, resolving, nevertheless, to see personally that they were carried out, as soon as certain formalities he had determined upon were completed.

At Châteaudun he had learned the name and rank of the officer in charge of the troops stationed at Beaugency, and had been told that he made his headquarters at the Ecu de Bretagne, so his first enquiry of the deferential inn-keeper was:

"Is Lieutenant Defour within? Good! Will you convey to him the compliments of Monsieur Victor de Cardillac, who begs a few words with him?"

"Assuredly, my lord, and meanwhile is there any other service I can proffer to your lordship?"

"Yes, a bottle of the best Beaugency wine. You used to be celebrated for your vintages."

"I own a wine of ten years, the like of which all France cannot show."

"Very well, very well," said Cardillac impatiently. "Provide also something to eat, and serve it in a private room, but first deliver the message I have given you."

Lieutenant Defour proved to be a young man but few years older than Cardillac himself, and as he approached he looked with some suspicion on the new-comer, as was to be expected from one who holds a main road and is responsible to his chiefs for the loyalty of those who travel upon it. Nevertheless, he greeted the stranger with that gentle courtesy which a Frenchman ever shows to another in the same rank of life, even if it becomes necessary within the hour to immure him in a dungeon.

"You are Lieutenant Defour?" enquired Cardillac.

"At your service, monsieur."

"In command, I was told, of the troops stationed at Beaugency."

The young officer bowed.

"I am travelling on a mission of some importance to your superiors and mine. It is an affair calling for delicacy and secrecy. I have therefore ordered a private room to be prepared, and if you will do me the honour to sup with me, I shall give myself the pleasure of unfolding to you the matter in question."

Again the lieutenant bowed, but this time not quite so profoundly as before. The unknown was taking a little too much for granted. An officer of the King does not break bread with any chance traveller who takes it upon himself to proffer an invitation. The perusal of a letter of introduction or the inspection of credentials should precede the extending of hospitality. Nevertheless, the refusal need not be harsh, for even an alert lieutenant could not judge definitely the importance of a man who might have arrived on the road from Paris.

"I am desolated, monsieur, by the circumstances of a previous engagement, which refuses me the advantage of being your guest this evening. If, therefore, monsieur, you will be so indulgent as to accompany me to my room, while your repast is

being prepared, I can assure you of the utmost privacy, and shall be delighted to learn in what manner I may further your purpose."

Beneath the graciousness with which these words were uttered, Cardillac was sensitive enough to feel the iron touch of a command. Indeed, the lieutenant did not await his acquiescence, but turning, proceeded up the stair, followed by the man with a mission. Cardillac began to perceive that the way he had mapped out for himself was not to be so easy as he had supposed.

He was conducted to a room which gave a view up and down the main road. A large table in the centre showed a map of the district spread out on its surface, while at either end lay a pile of official-looking documents. Lieutenant Defour closed and locked the door, then motioned his visitor into a chair on one side of the table and took a seat on the other, with his back towards the windows, and the light full on the face of Cardillac.

"How far have you travelled to-day?" asked the lieutenant carelessly.

"I left Paris this morning," replied Cardillac calmly.

"What, and are here in Beaugency by four in the afternoon? You must have set out early, monsieur."

"Very early, lieutenant."

"But I was informed that you entered by the north gate, and not by the eastern gate."

"That is true, lieutenant. I came by way of Rambouillet, Chartres, and Châteaudun, then came south from Châteaudun to this place."

"You must have been in haste, monsieur?"

"I was, lieutenant. My business admits of no delay."

The officer was watching him keenly, although pretending nonchalance.

"Then why, monsieur, choose a road thirty leagues in length, when there is a better road of twenty-six leagues which would have brought you here sooner, or at the same hour, with less waste of horseflesh?"

"Lieutenant, my road was chosen for me by my superiors, and not by myself. I travel under orders."

"I see. Do you know why the longer road was chosen?"

"I do, lieutenant."

"Do these orders forbid you to divulge the reason?"

"No, but only as a last resort."

"What do you mean by a last resort?"

"My orders are to tell you as little as possible, but still to secure your co-operation, which is essential to the execution of the plan I have in trust. By insisting, you may learn everything I know."

"Presumably, monsieur, you advise me not to insist?"

"I do."

The lieutenant smiled sweetly. His *vis-à-vis* remained an example of complete *insouciance*.

"In that case, monsieur, you need only hand to me, across the table, the orders of my superior officer at Orléans, and I shall promptly obey whatever commands are set down in the document."

"Lieutenant, I have just informed you that I came by Châteaudun, and not by Orléans."

"True, so you did. Am I to take it, then, that you carry no written orders for me?"

"None whatever, lieutenant."

"If that is so, monsieur, I deplore the necessity of ignoring your advice. I cannot move on a verbal communication from a stranger, and further than that, I shall be compelled, greatly to my grief, to detain you here, unless your explanation is both explicit and satisfactory."

Cardillac slightly inclined his head and made an eloquent gesture with his right hand.

"Your decision, lieutenant, is strictly in accordance with what I expected of you. The course you have outlined for yourself possesses the merit of extreme safety. The man who acts strictly as a subordinate shows his excellent qualifications for being always a subordinate, and he remains such. On the battlefield, the soldier who consults his own safety acquires a name which I shall not enunciate in your presence, but he fails to obtain promotion. He who serves his country may at times be called upon to take a risk——"

The lieutenant interrupted by holding up his hand.

"Monsieur," he said, with more abruptness than he had hitherto used, "spare me your platitudes about a soldier's duty, and trust me to order my conduct in such a way as seems best to serve the interests of our country. If time is an object, let us not misuse it. The point of this business turns on the question of your identity. Who are you, sir, and for whom do you act?"

"I am Victor de Cardillac of Gascony. For centuries my ancestors have been lords of Cardillac, as to-day my father is; as in future I shall probably be. My father was fortunate enough to do a great favour to Monsieur de Luynes at a time when he was poor and unknown. In other words, he put the foot of Luynes on the ladder which he has since ascended to the top. Some months ago Monsieur de Luynes, arriving at the position of Prime Minister to the King, invited me to Paris, where I placed myself and my sword at his disposal."

"He invited you to Paris, Monsieur de Cardillac?"

For answer the young man undid his doublet, took from it a packet of papers, chose one, and tossed it across the table.

"I hope you know the signature of Monsieur de Luynes, and failing that, I trust you will recognise the sign manual of His Majesty, the King. If you are not acquainted with one or the other, then I fear I must return to Paris with my mission unaccomplished."

The lieutenant read the letter with great care, but failed to say whether or not the signature was familiar to him. He looked up at last, and said genially:

"You have endured a long journey, Monsieur de Cardillac. May I offer you a flagon of wine? We pride ourselves on our vintages in Beaugency."

"I thank you, lieutenant. I know the wine of Beaugency well, and the landlord has promised me a draught that is ten years old, so I shall cherish my thirst until meal-time."

Lieutenant Defour did not press his invitation. He saw that the other was on his guard and dared not risk that loosening of the tongue which indulgence in a generous wine might produce. While the lieutenant mentally commended this discretion, he became the more assured that there was in the background a conspiracy of some sort designed to entrap him into dereliction of duty, so his suavity increased, causing him to ask his questions with all the courtesy of a courtier.

"You bring me, then, no orders from my chief, General Tissot, stationed at Orléans?"

"I bring orders to you from no one, lieutenant. I do not presume to give you an order myself. I merely desire to formulate a request, to which you will accede or not, as you choose."

"It seems strange, Monsieur de Cardillac, that your superiors—if, as I imagine, they are also the superiors of my general—should pass him by and prefer a request to his subordinate."

"Why does that seem strange to you, lieutenant? You must be profoundly ignorant of the working of the machinery pertaining to high politics if you do not know that there are many things done where it is desirable that no written record shall be left behind."

"But it was surely a simple matter to communicate verbally with the general, who could have sent forward a messenger, known and trusted by me, from whom I could have taken a communication by word of mouth."

"Does it not occur to you, lieutenant, that the government may not wish General Tissot to know anything about this affair? But aside from that, as I told you, time is of the greatest value in this instance. Suppose I had been sent to Orléans, had sought out General Tissot, had taken as long to convince him of my good faith as I have taken with you; suppose then he had found the trustworthy man, and suppose that man had come to you. There is then interjected into a most secret matter two quite unnecessary personages, and some valuable time is lost."

"Nonsense, Monsieur de Cardillac. You could have come by Orléans as quickly as by way of Châteaudun. You could have brought to me a note from General Tissot telling me to obey your orders, and to do this it would not have been necessary to inform General Tissot about your mission, nor to inform a messenger between the general and myself, nor to inform me. Thus, instead of adding three more to those who know the secret, you are actually eliminating one, which is myself. I have no desire to enquire into your plans, but would have done without question whatever was asked of me at a word from my general."

"My dear lieutenant, will you pardon me for pointing out to you that you are criticising, not me, but Monsieur de Luynes or Louis XIII—the Prime Minister or the King? Unless it is impossible for me to do otherwise, I shall not pass on to either of them your opinion of their strategy."

"Are you venturing to threaten me, Monsieur de Cardillac?"

"Oh, no; I am merely becoming a little impatient with you. May I ask how old this General Tissot is?"

"What has that to do with the question?"

"Even if it has nothing to do with it, would you mind answering me?"

"General Tissot is a man of about sixty, perhaps sixty-three or four."

"Quite so; just the reply I expected. I fear, lieutenant, you do not realise the significance of the recent change of government in Paris. There has come into power a government of young men. The King is younger than either you or I, and his Prime Minister is not much older. I suppose that Monsieur de Luynes—remember, I am advancing this merely as my own theory—sees ahead of him a struggle for supremacy. I venture again that the generals who will lead Luynes's army will not be men of sixty-four. I believe that before this struggle comes on, Monsieur de Luynes, in one way or another, will have discovered anywhere from a dozen to a score of capable young men; men not paralysed by precedent, men of brains, able to estimate and to act promptly when an unusual situation presents itself. Therefore in the coming contest Luynes will be victorious. If Luynes had wished your General Tissot to know about this transaction, he would assuredly have directed me to Orléans."

Cardillac was pleased to note that during this exposition of the advantages of youth under the existing régime the lieutenant's shoulders braced themselves slightly and a gleam of ambition came into his eyes. He had at last discovered a vulnerable spot in the armour of caution and reserve in which the young man had encased himself.

"Very well, Monsieur de Cardillac, tell me as briefly as may be what you wish with me."

"It is my intention to secure a carriage and four horses from the inn-keeper here, for a night's journey."

"That is easily done, Monsieur de Cardillac, if you have the money to pay for a conveyance."

"I am well supplied with money, lieutenant. When that carriage is secured, I wish you to drive in it with me to the entrance of the Convent of the Sacred Heart, which I am told is situated in this neighbourhood."

"Yes, at the edge of the great forest."

"Once there, I request you to enforce a warrant which comes direct from the King, and arrest a lady for whose use the carriage has been obtained."

"Not one of the holy sisters, I hope."

"No; this lady has been placed in the convent by order of Monsieur de Luynes. Once arrested, it will be my duty to convey her to the strong castle of Montrichard, which journey must be accomplished by daylight to-morrow. I request from you a written letter of safe conduct for the lady and myself, also a mounted escort of four men, to be placed under my control."

"You intend to proceed from here to Montrichard to-night, then?"

"Yes; the affair, as I told you, is one of some secrecy, so we travel by night and hope to reach the castle before daybreak."

"Is the lady, then, a state prisoner?"

Cardillac shrugged his shoulders.

"She might perhaps be called a state prisoner. She has been held rather as hostage for the good conduct of her father, whose only daughter she is."

"What is her name?"

"Mademoiselle de Montreuil, daughter of the Duke de Montreuil."

The lieutenant raised his eyebrows at this intelligence, and Cardillac surmised he had known nothing of the lady's detention in his neighbourhood.

"Will you show me the warrant for her arrest?"

Cardillac presented to him the *lettre de cachet*. The officer was not so ignorant but that he knew the drastic nature of this document, and his regard for the bearer of a power so potent visibly increased. Though nearly won over, some doubt evidently still remained in his mind.

CHAPTER IX

A DINNER SPOILED

"There are two or three points, Monsieur de Cardillac," the lieutenant continued, "on which I should like a little further enlightenment. First, if you intend to arrest this lady, why is her name not set down upon this document? Second, can you give me any reason for her transference to Montrichard, a castle situated on the borders of that district over which the Duke d'Epernon holds sway in the name of the Queen? The lady is quite safe in the Convent of the Sacred Heart, because Beaugency is garrisoned on all sides by the forces of the King, whereas the castle at Montrichard, while held by a nominee of Monsieur de Luynes, is not in a position to stand a siege, being neither well manned nor well provisioned. I understand it is usual to take a prisoner, arrested on a *lettre de cachet*, to the Bastille in Paris. Why do you convey her further from Paris, into a custody not nearly so secure as that in which she now rests? You will observe I do not deny the lady is in the convent, although I was given to understand that her detention there was to be kept secret."

"Well, lieutenant, I think such a fact should remove all your doubts. I have proved to you that I possess this secret, therefore it seems to me you might infer that I am in the confidence of Monsieur de Luynes."

"That is true. Your knowledge of the secret has not been without its influence upon my mind; still, secrets have leaked out before now, and a man in my position must take every precaution."

"Assuredly, lieutenant. The *lettre de cachet* was signed by the King and left blank, because it might have been my duty to arrest another in place of Mademoiselle de Montreuil."

"Another? Who, for instance?"

Cardillac smiled in his good-natured way, threw his right leg over his left to be more at his ease, and answered with an apparent jocularly that nevertheless contained a hint:

"It is quite possible to imagine circumstances which would cause me, to my infinite regret, to write the name of Lieutenant Defour in the blank space, and thus give that gallant officer the opportunity of proceeding to Paris, where he might criticise the plans of Monsieur de Luynes to that statesman's face."

"Do you seriously maintain, monsieur, that such a thought occurred to anyone in Paris? I am quite unknown to anyone in that city, and am so lacking in self-esteem that I venture to assert no one in authority there has ever heard of me."

"You are quite right, lieutenant. No one but myself ever thought of putting you under arrest, and I should do it only if you completely blocked the project which, if it is to produce the desired effect, must be carried out this evening."

Then, with an outspreading of the hands and a sudden burst of confidence, the young Gascon continued:

"You are too shrewd for me, lieutenant; I shall not attempt to fence with you any longer. Until noon to-day it was a toss-up whether the name of Mademoiselle de Montreuil should be inscribed on this warrant, or that of her noble father."

"You mean that the Duke de Montreuil was in danger of the Bastille? Then why was he not taken into custody in Paris, where he lives?"

"Because, lieutenant, he escaped from Paris sometime last night, and is now making his way to the stronghold of Loches and the protection of the Duke d'Epernon. If I had overtaken him before he reached Châteaudun, his name would have gone on that paper. Failing to overtake him there, my orders were to proceed south to Beaugency, and enlist the aid of the officer in charge. It was supposed in Paris that a *lettre de cachet* signed by the King would not be questioned by any officer of the King."

"Do you tell me that the Duke de Montreuil, flying from Paris, passed through Châteaudun this very day?"

"Yes, lieutenant; making his way by Vendôme and Amboise to Loches."

"But he should have been stopped. Châteaudun is in my district. Do you assert that he passed through?"

"Yes, lieutenant, an hour ahead of me. I may say his papers are all in order, and will carry him through to Loches. They

are signed by Luynes himself, and were given him for a different purpose, which was that he should go through from Paris to Loches, and persuade the Duke d'Epemon to relinquish that stronghold to the authority of the King. Thus his daughter was kept as hostage in the convent here. But yesterday the duke broke definitely with Luynes, and escaped before he could be arrested. Now you have the whole complication at your finger ends."

Lieutenant Defour sprang to his feet; the former impassiveness of his face vanished, giving way to a look of determination and sudden resolve.

"By the gods, then, I'll trap him. I'll send my fastest rider down the river to Blois, who will rouse the garrison there, dash on to Amboise, and nip him before he crosses the river."

"By whose orders will you do that, lieutenant?" asked Cardillac calmly.

"Orders? Orders? I need no orders for such a service to the state."

"You were very particular about them half an hour ago, lieutenant. Allow me to explain that what you propose is impossible, and, if it were possible, you would interfere with one of the cleverest schemes ever invented by Luynes."

"Why is it impossible?"

"Because the logic of the map is unanswerable. That map spread out before you says it is impossible. From Châteaudun to Amboise the distance is seventeen leagues."

"Yes, but the distance from Beaugency to Amboise is only fourteen leagues."

"As I informed you, lieutenant, the duke had already more than an hour the advantage of me at Châteaudun. At the rate he was going, he would cover about three leagues in that time, so when I left Châteaudun the duke was at that moment as near to the bridge of Amboise as you are at this moment. I travelled seven leagues from Châteaudun to Beaugency, arriving here at four o'clock. The duke rode at least an equal distance, for although during the early part of this day time was of immense value, it had ceased to be so when I reached Châteaudun and found the duke still ahead of me.

"There was, therefore, no need that I should hurry to reach Beaugency before dark, so I rode at leisure, and allowing the duke to have made the same speed that I did, he was seven leagues from Amboise Bridge when I dismounted in front of this tavern. It is now after five o'clock, and I do not doubt that Montreuil, fearing pursuit, is already a couple of leagues south of the Loire, and before your messenger could reach Blois the duke would be safe in the strong castle of Loches."

The lieutenant resumed his chair. Time and the map were too strong for him, and as the disappointed lieutenant sat down again, Cardillac's exultation rose in the belief that he had finally triumphed. But in this he was mistaken; one more crisis was reserved for him.

"What you have just told me of the destination of the Duke de Montreuil makes your mission seem an act of greater folly than ever. You propose to take the daughter from a place of safety, and put her into a castle poorly defended, within a few leagues of her father, while the country between Montrichard and Loches is under the control of her father's friend, the Duke d'Epemon. You will find it difficult to persuade me that the authorities in Paris sanctioned any such insane project."

Cardillac laughed heartily as he rose to his feet, bending over the table.

"Why, lieutenant, you amaze me. When even a civilian like myself fathoms the design, it seems to me a military man should not need the explanation you demand."

Pointing out the different places on the map, he continued:

"There is Loches, as you say, a few leagues away from Montrichard. Here is the girl, in an unprotected castle. We take pains to assure ourselves that the duke learns where his daughter is. Now, although Montrichard is known to be poorly defended, the duke is well aware that a considerable army is within easy call. He knows, then, if he is to rescue his daughter, he must bring an overwhelming force and do the trick in the shortest possible space of time. That force makes a quick march from Loches to Montrichard. Our spies inform us of every movement. The moment Loches Castle is denuded of its defenders, the commandant at Tours marches up the river and occupies Loches Castle.

"You see, the girl ceased to be a hostage the moment her father escaped from Paris, and so is made a decoy instead. When Loches Castle is occupied by the King's men, we have then placed the Duke d'Epernon and the Duke de Montreuil, with their men, between the upper and nether millstones. You will march on them from Beaugency, another detachment from Blois, a third from Tours, and a fourth from Loches itself. We hold them in a trap, and the threatened insurrection on behalf of the Queen is thus nipped in the bud after one battle."

"But," disputed the lieutenant, "the Duke d'Epernon will seize Montrichard Castle, and establish himself there."

"In that case the insurrection will be ended without even a battle. You yourself admit that Montrichard is badly provisioned. We surround Montrichard, and within a short time it falls without a stroke, through starvation."

"A very good plan," commented the lieutenant, nodding, seeing before him speedy hostilities, with glory to be won after long waiting. "And now, if you will forgive me for my extreme caution, I shall submit one of your statements to a test. You say the Duke de Montreuil passed through Châteaudun to-day, his papers all in order. As soon as I am assured that this transit actually occurred, I shall bring forward no further objections, but will hold myself subject to your commands."

"*Nom de Dieu!*" cried Cardillac, in despair. "I cannot submit to such a preposterous suggestion. Before even your swiftest horseman can ride the seven leagues and back, the time thus lost will ruin my plan. It would be more to the point to refuse altogether; then I should know what to do."

The lieutenant spoke soothingly.

"There will be no further time lost. The district entrusted to my care is a wide one, and from each important point a courier leaves every evening to bring me a report. I make no doubt the man from Châteaudun is now waiting to see me. I shall have him in and question him."

The officer unlocked the door and smote a bell. When a prompt attendant answered the summons, his master commanded the attendance of the courier from Châteaudun. Cardillac could make no further protest. He drew towards him the map, and bent over the table as if to examine the various routes from Beaugency to Montrichard, hoping thus to conceal his face from the incoming courier. After all this tedious talk, after his elation of the moment before at the success of his strategy, he was now reduced to the depths of despair.

He had entered Châteaudun in the carriage with the duke, and had been stretching his cramped limbs on the pavement when the officer in charge demanded the duke's papers and examined them. There had been no attempt at concealment, for neither the duke nor himself ever contemplated such a *contretemps* as this. A servant of the duke's had been sent on ahead, riding the saddle-horse procured for Cardillac's benefit, and had waited for the carriage a half-hour down the Vendôme road, where Cardillac, who had left the town as he had entered it, quite openly in attendance on the duke, mounted the horse and rode to the south, while the carriage continued its way westward.

He was therefore confronted by danger of detection from two directions: first, the courier himself might have seen him arrive in the duke's carriage, and might recognise him sitting at this table; second, if the lieutenant made enquiry regarding a horseman who arrived in Châteaudun from Paris and departed for Beaugency, there would be no record of such arrival and departure, and Defour, his suspicions thus re-aroused, would likely place him under arrest until further enquiries could be made at Châteaudun.

Cardillac had complained of the rapid passing of time, but the five minutes that elapsed before the courier entered the room were the longest and most bitter he had ever spent.

The man came in booted and spurred, raising hand to cap in salute. Cardillac glanced sideways at him from the corners of his eyes without raising his head, and saw the man stand rigid as a post, looking neither to the right nor the left, his gaze fastened steadily on his superior. The officer was evidently a strict disciplinarian.

"Did the Duke de Montreuil pass through Châteaudun to-day?"

"Yes, lieutenant."

"In the direction of Vendôme?"

"Yes, lieutenant."

"Were you there when his papers were examined?"

"Yes, lieutenant."

"How many people had he with him?"

"There were two postilions and two men on the box. One young man, said to be his secretary, was in the carriage with the duke."

"Give me your report."

The courier handed him the packet. The lieutenant broke the seal, glanced hastily at it, and placed it on the table before him.

"That will do," he said to the courier, who saluted stiffly and walked out of the room with the precise tread of an automaton.

"Monsieur de Cardillac," exclaimed the lieutenant, in a more genial tone than he had hitherto used, "I fear I have kept you so long that your dinner will be spoiled, but I hope the excellence of the wine will compensate for the over-cooking of the meat. I am sure you will pardon both the delay and my inquisitiveness, when you remember that I stand here astride the road between Paris, where the King reigns, and Blois, where the Queen, his mother, is imprisoned. I fear my superiors in Paris sometimes forget the stringency of the orders I have received from General Tissot of Orléans. However, you have set all my doubts at rest, and I shall be ready to accompany you to the convent as soon as you have refreshed yourself for your all-night journey."

"Can I not tempt you to the table with me, lieutenant?"

"No, I must see to the ordering of the carriage. Two horses or four, monsieur?"

"Four, if you please. This is a journey on which I wish to take no chances. Do I pay the inn-keeper?"

"Yes. I will see that he does not overcharge you. The men to escort you will await you here when we return from the convent."

"Thank you, lieutenant."

With a sigh of relief Victor de Cardillac went downstairs to his belated meal.

CHAPTER X

THE ROYAL ABBESS

It was nearly six o'clock when the hungry Cardillac sat down to his dinner. His throat was dry with talking, and his tongue almost parched, so he began the meal by emptying a flagon of the rich red wine of Beaugency, which fully justified the inn-keeper's eulogy. At last word came to him that the carriage was ready. On going outside he was somewhat surprised to see his own horse held by a servant of the inn, while the four mounted men, whom he judged to be his escort, sat their horses together behind the carriage. Lieutenant Defour approached.

"I thought it best," he said, "considering the secrecy of your mission, to drive right through the town and across the bridge without stopping, after we have done our business at the convent. I shall, however, defer to your wishes in the matter, but if you agree, I will order these four horsemen to await us at the southern end of the bridge. There is a chance that the lady may make some outcry, and Beaugency is equally celebrated for its wine and its piety. We are taking a person away from the Convent of the Sacred Heart, so we must proceed with some discretion and allow no tumult if we can prevent it."

"You are quite right, lieutenant, and I cordially agree with your plan."

"Of course I could call out my soldiers and speedily quell any public disturbance, but it seems to me better to avoid any chance of that. Should the lady prove obstreperous, we will drive as rapidly as may be along the streets and over the bridge, and from that point onwards she may scream as loud as she pleases."

With this he gave a sharp command to the four men, who wheeled their horses round and trotted away. The lieutenant entered the carriage, and Cardillac mounted his horse.

The convent stood to the westward, nearly a mile distant from the hotel they had left. It was a large, sombre building of stone, formed around an extensive square. It presented to the outside world, for the most part, the blank walls of the convent houses, which were windowless, except here and there, where a gable-end showed itself, and these were furnished with small high windows just under the roof, high above the ground.

The convent houses occupied three sides of the square, and were embraced by the great forest which at that time extended from Beaugency to Blois along the northern bank of the Loire. The front of the convent, facing the road, consisted of a tall, square gate-house, the open upper part containing bells, which, as the carriage approached, were ringing for compline, which marked seven o'clock of a beautiful summer evening. The gate-house was flanked on either side by a high stone wall, unclimbable and strong.

The lieutenant rang the bell at the entrance, and the two young men waited a long time before any notice was taken of their summons. At last the shutter behind the grille in the strong door was pushed back, and a woman's eyes gazed for a moment out at them. Apparently a recognition of the King's uniform satisfied the wardress of this royal convent, for there came a rattle of chains and a sudden withdrawing of bolts, then the door was thrown open by a woman in the semi-conventual garb of a servant of this religious house. The young men were permitted to enter a bare, whitewashed parlour, an oasis of neutral ground, where properly qualified people of the world might for a brief moment meet those who had renounced the world and all its works. Defour bowed low to the neat servitor of this saintly community.

"Will you present my reverence to our holy mother, the abbess, and ask if she will be gracious enough to receive me for a few moments? I am Lieutenant Defour of the guard, and commandant of this district. I bring with me Monsieur Victor de Cardillac, just arrived from Paris, an emissary from Monsieur de Luynes, who has an important communication to make to her royal highness, the abbess."

The doorkeeper made a humble obeisance, and departed in silence. As she opened the door leading to the cloisters, a confused murmur of singing could be heard.

The lady of royal blood made no haste to comply with the request so deferentially forwarded to her, and the young men were kept waiting for nearly half an hour. The cheerful Cardillac felt the chilling effect of the bare, sepulchre-like white walls that surrounded him. The only garniture was a pathetic life-size figure drooping from a huge cross.

The silence was intense, and seemed unnatural. He wished the bells would ring again, as he stood there, hat in hand, his

spirits sinking, sinking, sinking. Not even during his most despondent and anxious moments with the lieutenant at the inn had he experienced such depression of soul. For the first time his quest seemed futile, and the successful outcome something as absurd as a nightmare. The thought of this grim fortress, embraced by the sombre, darkening forest, as he first caught sight of it, was gloomy in the extreme.

There pressed down upon him the knowledge that by this day's work he, young, strong, standing on the very threshold of manhood, with life a boon of almost untasted sweetness, had forfeited it over and over again; first, by his illegal use of a *lettre de cachet*, which he knew to be fraudulently obtained; second, by his tampering with an officer of the guard; third, by this intrusion into a sacred enclave, at the head of which stood a venerable lady, a relative of the King. This latter remembrance held for him a disquieting element entirely unconnected with whatever punishment might ensue, for he himself was a good Catholic, and knew his trespass bore features of sacrilege.

Saints in heaven, would she never come!

He had already destroyed his body in this world, and condemned his soul in the next. In the deep silence his mind seemed to hear the clattering of hoofs on the highroad from Paris. He knew that somewhere those hurrying hoof-beats were echoing his doom. In imagination he saw the determined, dust-covered messenger of death fling himself from one horse, to leap astride of another, and so away to the west without a moment's delay except to gulp down a cup of wine.

What *was* keeping her?

Then he realised, with a nervous intake of the breath, that his face was telling tales, for he found the calm eyes of the lieutenant fixed upon him in wonder and in doubt. He must not again awaken the enquiring mind of this young officer. With an effort he pulled himself together. He yawned wearily.

"You are tired after your long ride," commented Defour.

"Yes, I am," admitted Cardillac.

At last the inner door opened on slow, silent hinges, and the abbess entered, followed by two sisters, whose faces in the gathering twilight seemed ghastly in their whiteness. The abbess proved to be a tall, stately lady, somewhere between sixty-five and seventy years of age. There was no pallor in her wrinkled face, and nothing of that humility, that downcast meekness of countenance, which is generally associated with the nun. Her clear, eagle eye looked upon the young men with imperious hauteur, and the high office she held was betokened by a nobility of bearing rather than by any of those gorgeous trappings which she was entitled to wear. Her garb was as simple, sombre and coarse as that of the humblest nun in the poorest convent of France; she, the head of the richest. From the leathern girdle around her waist hung an iron chain, from which depended a large cross of black wood.

Each of the young men dropped simultaneously on one knee, and bowed low their bare heads before this aged abbess with the demeanour of a queen. Cardillac, who feared no man living, found himself dismayed by this woman. His heart was beating wildly, and the pulsation in his ears as he bent his head seemed like the galloping of the approaching horse.

When the two rose to their feet again, the lieutenant, with great deference, introduced Cardillac as the envoy of Monsieur de Luynes.

The abbess stood as motionless as the statue on the wall, making no response, so Cardillac, nervously clearing his throat, began the fateful interview.

"Madame, you hold in custody here Thérèse de Montreuil, daughter of the Duke de Montreuil."

To this assertion the abbess made no response, but her piercing eyes seemed to read his very soul. After a pause, the young man moistened his lips, and continued:

"I am the bearer of a *lettre de cachet*. My instructions are to arrest Mademoiselle de Montreuil and convey her to imprisonment in the castle of Montrichard."

For the first time the abbess spoke, in a voice deep as that of a man.

"Give me the *lettre de cachet*."

Cardillac handed it to her.

"Yes," she said, "that is the signature of the King. Now let me see your own credentials."

Cardillac presented to her the letter of Luynes. She barely glanced at it, then allowed it to flutter from her fingers to the floor.

"Prove to me that you come from Monsieur de Luynes," said the abbess sternly.

"Does not this document prove it?" asked the young man, picking up the discarded letter.

"No, it does not. If Monsieur de Luynes commissioned you to remove Mademoiselle de Montreuil, he placed in your hands an unforgeable parchment. Give me that parchment."

Cardillac was thunderstruck. He realised in a flash what he should have known before: that Luynes was no such simpleton as to risk the spiriting away of so important a hostage as mademoiselle, should her father discover her place of detention.

It was evident that between Luynes and this grim figure in the darkening room some token had been agreed upon, whereby she would know, beyond peradventure, whether or not any messenger who appeared came authorised by him. This unexpected obstacle had the immediate effect of banishing Cardillac's trepidation and summoning up his departed courage.

"Madame," he said sternly, "do you venture to disobey a personal mandate from the King?"

"Yes," she replied.

"Yourself admitted the genuineness of the signature."

"I do not now dispute it, but I refuse to allow you to put it into operation."

"Then I shall require the commandant here to enter this convent by force and serve the King's warrant, who rules over convent as well as castle in this realm."

A sour smile came to the thin lips of the abbess, and her eyes in the gloom seemed to scintillate fire; but before she could reply, if she intended to do so, the lieutenant spoke with quick decision.

"I refuse to have any hand in such devil's work. Neither I nor any of my men shall set foot within the precincts of this convent without the invitation of our holy mother the abbess."

Cardillac knew he had played his last card and lost.

The abbess now turned to the lieutenant, but exhibited no gratitude for his assurance of immunity from search. When she addressed him, it was in a voice of ringing scorn.

"What has blinded you—an officer of the King and a man of the world? Can you not see that this poor fool is a charlatan and a mountebank, sailing under false colours?—aye, and a thief as well. He has stolen the *lettre de cachet*, and has forged the name of Luynes. Think you a young popinjay like this is sent to escort a noble lady through the forest to Montrichard? Out upon such stupidity! How has he befooled you?"

Turning to Cardillac, she went on:

"Know, then, convicted cut-purse, that when Thérèse de Montreuil is removed from these cloisters the venerable Monsieur Tresor must be one of the party that takes her away, and even he is required to bring the parchment I spoke of. Kneel on these boards, criminal, and beg pardon for your misdeeds before I give the order for your arrest."

"Madame," cried Cardillac, in tones as haughty as her own, "I do not object to kneeling at the feet of a woman, nor to confessing my sins to her, but not at the word of command."

"Lieutenant, arrest this man, and lay him by the heels to cool his hot head in the tower of César."

The lieutenant was in a quandary, and the gleaming eyes of the iron woman showed no appreciation of his difficulty. She

expected to be obeyed instantly, yet here was he alone with this desperado, whom she had placed practically with his back against the wall, and at this moment, forgetful of the fact that he stood in the presence of three ladies, his right hand sought the hilt of his sword, and his face was as uncompromising as that of the abbess. Bitterly did Defour regret that he had sent the mounted escort to the southern end of the bridge.

"Do you propose to arrest me?" asked Cardillac calmly.

"No. Although I refuse to countenance the violation of this sanctuary, even to execute the warrant of the King, on the other hand, I am not allowed to receive orders from any except my general in Orléans. Therefore, madame, I crave your pardon if I must unhappily disregard your command."

The abbess looked with profound contempt upon both of these specimens of manhood before her, but said nothing.

"I must return at once to Paris," said Cardillac.

"I was about to make that suggestion myself," returned the lieutenant, his eye lighting up. He could easily capture his man as they passed through the town, and he determined to do so.

"With your permission I go by way of Châteaudun."

"Why by way of Châteaudun? It is, as you know, the longer route, and if time was of value to you before, it is surely ten-fold more so now."

"I shall save time by returning along the route I came," persisted Cardillac firmly. "My relays of horses are at Chartres, Rambouillet, and other points along the road."

"You always furnish a reason for any action you wish to take, and, I must admit, a most excellent one. Still, if you go by way of the southern route, I can give you an order which will procure horses for you."

"Thank you, lieutenant, but as the horses I have already tested are waiting for me, I may as well make use of them."

"That is unanswerable, of course. Well, I do not envy you your journey."

"Are you such a craven as to let this man go?" demanded the abbess. "Shall I be compelled to order the alarm bell rung, and capture him with my nuns?"

"Dear madame, I beseech you! It is not a matter of cravenness, but of justice. Monsieur de Cardillac came from Paris, and he returns to Paris. If he insisted on proceeding to Blois, I might use my discretion and detain him, but as it is——" The helpless lieutenant shrugged his shoulders.

This colloquy was interrupted by the sudden ringing of the gate-bell, the iron handle of which had been pulled so strenuously that everyone present except the abbess was startled by the insistent clangour. The wardress seemed paralysed by fright; her terrified eyes turned upon the abbess, who merely looked at her and said coldly: "Open the door."

This command being obeyed disclosed standing on the threshold a soldier, who raised his hand in salute on seeing his chief.

"Well, Lesparent, what is it?" asked Defour, stepping forward.

"Pardon, lieutenant," exclaimed the man breathlessly, "but a messenger has just arrived from Paris with important orders."

"Yes, yes!"

"The Duke de Montreuil has escaped, and is supposed to be making his way to Loches. You are to intercept him if possible."

"I knew all that before. He is by this time across the Loire, and out of our reach. Why did not the messenger come here himself?"

"He was too exhausted, lieutenant, and had to be helped from his horse."

"Well, well, what else did he say?"

"There was with the Duke de Montreuil a Gascon renegade named Cardillac, and Monsieur de Luynes is even more anxious to catch him than to intercept the duke."

"Yes, yes, yes."

"From the description he gave, I thought the man you received this afternoon, and with whom you came here, might be Cardillac, and so I hurried after you."

"You thought!" cried the lieutenant in anger. "Why did you not think of bringing up with you a squad of men?"

The soldier bowed his head under the reproof, and again saluted.

"Lieutenant, I took the liberty of doing so. There are twelve men here behind me at the gate. The messenger said this Cardillac was supposed to bear a forged letter from Monsieur de Luynes."

"And that's a lie!" cried Cardillac, whipping out his sword and backing to the wall.

The sardonic abbess never flinched at the glitter of the steel, but indulged in a wry smile of contumely at the excitement of these puny men, whom it was only too palpable she despised. She forbade herself the small triumph of saying: "I told you so!"

But the new turn of affairs seemed to have added half a dozen inches to the stature of the lieutenant, who now, with irresistible power at his back, became once more a figure of courage and determination.

"Monsieur de Cardillac," he thundered, "I have the honour and pleasure of arresting you in the name of the King!"

CHAPTER XI

THE EAVESDROPPER

Victor de Cardillac had been brought up by honest parents in the ways of honesty. He had gone to Paris upheld by a determination to serve honestly a master who he supposed had written him an honest letter of invitation. With the natural uprightness of youth, still untainted by the touch of the gay Parisian world, he hated a crooked course, yet ever since reaching Beaugency he had schemed and lied, and even when speaking the truth had twisted it in a web of deceit from which apparently he could not extricate himself. With an honest purpose in view, he had enmeshed himself in a very network of chicanery, loathing himself while he uttered these untruths, trying to veil them under the name of diplomacy. And as the result of it all, he stood with his back against a whitewashed wall, caught like a rat in a trap.

By rights he should have been deeply depressed by the hopeless case in which he found himself, but instead a strange exhilarating enthusiasm possessed him, as if the very despair of his situation cancelled the falsehoods he told. He viewed with a sneer the sudden valour of the lieutenant, who, taking care to keep beyond the circumference of his sword's radius, became newly courageous when he found thirteen men at his back.

His brain became alert and clear. Purged by misfortune from the taint of mendacity, he felt himself infinitely superior to the lieutenant, and almost an equal of the abbess, although her bitter smile triumphed over him for the moment. He was to reap no benefit from all his turning and twisting, and now whatever he accomplished must be by the aid of his good right arm and straight-forward talk.

Never again, he resolved, would he allow himself to be involved in such a maze of deceit as had just come so disastrously to an end. He knew that it was suicide to attempt an escape by the outer gate, and saw at once that his only chance lay in making an exit through the door by which the abbess had entered.

In a flash his resourceful mind saw that if he took this risk he would attain the advantage of a few moments at least, while officer and soldiers hesitated about following him into the forbidden precincts of the inner convent. And yet he realised in another flash that the capable abbess would at once urge the guards to pursue him, even if the chase led them into the chapel. He was well aware there would be no hesitation on her part. Dimly he heard the bleating voice of the lieutenant, although his words carried no meaning to a mind intent on the inner door.

"Monsieur, surrender your sword. To resist is useless; to escape impossible."

As if the unheeded words were the signal he required, he made his dash to the rear of the room. The two white-faced nuns screamed and fled, thinking he meditated an attack upon them. The abbess was made of sterner, more capable stuff.

"The door!" she shouted. "The back door! Fling your shoulder against it, lieutenant."

But the lieutenant was too slow. Cardillac threw it open, and saw with a thrill of joy a great iron key on the outside.

"Ah," he cried, "the saints are good to me at last!"

The saints were even more favourably disposed towards him than he guessed. The convent had been built with the firm purpose of keeping out rather than of shutting in. The noble ladies who occupied this sombre pile needed neither key nor bar to hold them to their duties, but it was necessary that these duties should not be disturbed by unauthorised marauders; hence the single massive door of oak, iron-bound, bolt-riveted, opened into the waiting-room, and when it shut was closed against timbers so stout and embedded in masonry that the thick wall must rend before an entrance was forced. The fastened door might be battered into the room if there were power enough in the courtyard to shatter the bolt of the lock, but from within the room nothing could be effective but slow fire or quick gunpowder.

Drawing the door shut after him, he turned the huge key, and pulled it out, clasping it like a battle-axe. In his haste he almost overturned a bending woman who he correctly surmised had been listening at the keyhole, and who had unconsciously done him a service in turning the key round until its flange impinged upon the bolt, so that not a second was lost in locking the door. She had done this to leave a clear tunnel for the sound of voices to pass through. He pounced upon her like a hawk on a pigeon, grasping her by the wrist.

"Well, you listening hussy," he cried, "I'll warrant you heard no good of yourself."

The girl had not cried out, even when he tumbled her to the stone flags in his headlong exit, and now, standing upright, she defied him with blazing eyes.

"No," she cried, "I heard no good of myself, and less good of you, you sneak, you thief, you liar! Let go of my wrist!"

"Tut-tut, my girl, keep a civil tongue in your head, or I'll cuff your ears."

He saw by her dress that she was not a nun, but a servant of the convent, and yet amazingly beautiful, her defiant eyes of jet black showing not a trace of fear, although she must have known she was in the hands of a desperado. Cardillac had an eye for beauty.

"By Saint Elizabeth," he cried, "you are good to look upon! Why do you call me a thief, when you yourself are one, listening at a keyhole?"

"It is no business of yours! Let me go!"

"All in good time, my girl. Is there any other exit from this convent but that door through which I came?"

"I'll not tell you, you ruffian."

"Oh, yes, you will. Is that a well in the centre of the courtyard?"

She did not reply, and he dragged her to the stone curb that surrounded it, overarched by beautiful wrought-iron work, with pulley, rope and bucket.

"You'll not! Well, I'll find a way to make you speak. First let us find how deep the well is," and he flung in the heavy key, listening until after a long interval he heard it plunge into the water.

"Now, my girl, you'll help me to escape, or you'll follow that key."

As he spoke, the thunder at the door increased, and he knew instinctively what had happened. They had taken the pole from the carriage, and were using it as a battering ram. He marvelled that this smiting of the oaken door, which filled the courtyard with its reverberations, did not disturb the nuns in the chapel at their devotions, and that, amidst all the tumult, he could hear their sweet, placid voices singing.

The shattering blows at the door alarmed him, quite unnecessarily, as he afterwards learned, but he had come through the portal too hastily to estimate the strength of the barricade that stood between him and his enemies. The door could not be battered in, nor could the lock be tampered with, for its whole complicated iron structure was entirely on the courtyard side, with four inches of solid oak and metal between it and the futile impact of the carriage pole.

But the turmoil for one moment withdrew his attention from the girl whose wrist he held, and his grasp momentarily relaxed, a fact of which she took swift advantage. Wrenching herself free, she fled with the speed of a fawn across the grass of the courtyard, making for the cloisters at the end of the convent most deeply embowered in the forest, and farthest from the assaulted door.

CHAPTER XII

THE ESCAPE FROM THE CONVENT

It is to be regretted that the flying girl, who possessed an appreciation of the grotesque, could not have glanced over her shoulder and seen the immediate result of her defection. In her escape, she had sprung to one side, and then, speeding like a sylph, had placed the stone-curbed, iron-canopied well between her and him. He precipitated himself head first under the iron arch and across the well, like a circus-rider dashing through a hoop, but, alas! his toe touched the stone, and headlong he sprawled, all fours, on the sward. Springing erect, he voiced an oath all the more deplorable because of the sacred precincts in which it was uttered, and now all his alertness was needed if he was to overtake so fleet a fugitive.

She needed but two seconds to escape; one moment was accorded to her by the well-curb, the other was denied her by the small door she essayed to close, for ere she got it completely shut the foot that played traitor to him at the well now stood Cardillac's friend, and although the girl exerted all her strength, she could not shut him out. Rudely he pressed the door back upon her. She turned, and made for the stone stairs, but his forceful arms were round her before she reached the second step. Whirling round in their embrace, she struck him again and again with her small clenched fists—ineffectual blows which he took with the nonchalance of a stoic.

Dragging her towards the partially closed door, he kicked it shut with his foot; then, holding her helpless with one hand, thrust in the stout bolt, an act she had hoped to accomplish alone, with him on the outside. Next, he seized her by the shoulders, and pressed her back against the rough stone wall, and dim as was the light in that hallway, nevertheless he saw the star-like sparkle of indignation in those dark eyes which looked at him unafraid, and an emotion of admiration thrilled him as he remembered that during this assault not once had her beautiful red lips given breath to a scream for help.

When he spoke it was very quietly; manner and tone and words impressed the captive in spite of herself.

"My girl," he said, "ordinarily I am a gentleman, but at this moment I am a wild beast at bay. I am a wolf trapped, and however cowardly the animal may be when at liberty, beware of the wolf when the deadfall catches him. If I have hurt you, I am sorry, but believe me, girl, if you will not do exactly what I tell you, I shall crush you into pulp, or break you like a reed. Do you credit this from one who has just proclaimed himself a gentleman?"

"You are no gentleman, but a low-born *vaurien*, and because you are such, I quite believe you will treat me as you propose."

"I am no *vaurien*, as you would at once perceive if your eyes were as penetrating as they are beautiful. I am Victor de Cardillac of Gascony, and will be Marquis of Cardillac in succession to my father—long may he live! which is a remark I would not make of the King. And now, my girl, who are you?"

"I am Marie Duchamps, and will never be a marquise, because I could not bring myself to wed the title if such as you wear it."

"You are premature. Time enough to refuse when you are asked, *ma petite* Marie. But I have no time for amiable and complimentary conversation."

"Oh, yes, you have. They will never get down that door till they send to Beaugency for a petard, and they have not thought of that yet."

"You have told me who you are. What are you in this convent?"

"I am waiting-maid to Mademoiselle de Montreuil."

"Ah, my luck still holds! Where is she?"

"I shall not tell you."

His grip tightened on her plump shoulders, and she winced under his grasp.

"I think you underestimate your danger, Marie Duchamps."

"Oh, no; I am quite convinced that Monsieur de Cardillac possesses sufficient courage to murder a woman, especially when she is helpless and unarmed. I underestimate neither my peril nor your valour, monsieur."

"*Basta!*" snarled Cardillac, as he withdrew his hands from her shoulders. This time she made no attempt to escape, standing there shivering a little when his clutch was removed.

"Marie," he said, with a smile that should have given her some better knowledge of his character than she had heretofore acquired, "I see it is useless trying to frighten you, but consider, I beg of you, my dire dilemma. It is not so much the forfeit of my life—if I am caught—that I regret, as the failure of my plan, as to be discomfited by that fat-head of a lieutenant, who is not a tenth part the man the abbess is; indeed, I shrink from that grim woman myself, and am cowardly when I think of her gloating over me once they have me pinioned. Tell me, girl, is money any temptation to you?"

"Money is a temptation to all women, if they can but get within reach of a town where there are things to buy."

"Very well, Marie, I will give you more money than ever you saw before if you will but procure for me a meeting with your mistress, and that upon the instant, for I would take her and you to a place of safety."

"We are in a place of safety now, monsieur. It is you who are not in a place of safety. But, aside from that, my mistress will never receive you."

"How do you know? I am as noble as she."

"She would not believe that."

"But I am her father's friend and emissary."

"She would not believe that either."

"She must be a doubting creature."

"She is not a creature at all, but one of the highest ladies of the land, and I beg you, sir, to speak of her with respect."

"Oh, surely. I think of her and will speak of her with the greatest of respect. I am her father's friend, and hers, if she will but accept me as such, and I have come to her rescue."

"Monsieur, you hinted that time was precious, and I told you it would be two hours before they could gain an entrance. Nevertheless, I advise you not to waste time as you are doing."

"Very well. Conduct me to your mistress at once."

"I tell you it would be useless; she would not receive you."

"Why do you say this so confidently?"

"Because you forget I was listening at the keyhole, and forget that I know all about you. You are an emissary of the King and Luynes. You carry with you a *lettre de cachet* for the arrest of mademoiselle, with an object of placing her in a fortress."

"Now, the gods have patience with your brains, you simpleton! Think you if I were on the King's work I should stand here in jeopardy from the King's soldiers? What have I to fear if I hold commission from the King? The *lettre de cachet* of which you speak was intended for the arrest of the father of mademoiselle. He has escaped from Paris. I came with him as far as Châteaudun. He drove on to Loches, and at this moment is safely within its walls, I trust."

The girl seemed staggered by this declaration, and gazed at him with wide-open eyes, which now he had the better opportunity to admire.

"The Duke de Montreuil," she said at last, "would never have commissioned a young man like you to carry his daughter alone and unattended through the forest that surrounds this place, and in the depth of night."

"Oh, you heard the abbess say that, but neither you nor she realises the despair of a father who finds his only daughter

whisked away from all his knowledge, as if she had vanished from the face of the earth. A man in such plight will clutch at any straw. Not that I am a man of straw, as my simile would seem to indicate, but one whose lineage is as old as that of the duke himself. I have sat at the duke's table as equal with equal, and he entrusted me with this mission. It is maddening to think I have come within an ace of succeeding, to be baffled first by an ill-tempered old woman, and secondly by a chattering maid."

"Monsieur, it seems that you are doing most of the chattering yourself. I have remained silent. If, then, you hold any written testimony that will convince mademoiselle you come from her father, I will take it to her."

"*Vrai Dieu!* How little you know the folly you are speaking! To carry a written document from the Duke de Montreuil through the country of the King would mean my own arrest, and the nullification of my plans, the moment I was searched and the letter found. The Duke de Montreuil is a middle-aged man of experience, and he trusted me without any letters and without any credentials. If his daughter possesses but a tittle of his good sense, I shall convince her in half the time I have been talking to you."

"You profess great faith in your powers of persuasion, monsieur."

"If so, my faith is becoming less and less. If you object much longer, you will destroy it altogether."

The girl smiled, and the despairing Cardillac seemed to gather some hope from her change of expression.

"It would be a pity to diminish your self-confidence, monsieur. If you answer truthfully a question or two I shall put to you, I may succeed in re-establishing it. How long have you known the Duke de Montreuil?"

"Not two days yet."

"You are not a partisan of his, then?"

"I never saw him until yesterday."

"Then how came so conservative a man as he to entrust you with a mission so delicate?"

Cardillac shrugged his shoulders.

"—On such short acquaintance, and with no credentials from you, as I understood you to say?"

"You ignore a father's love and his anxiety for an only daughter."

"True, so I do; but you, monsieur, if you could confess no loyalty to his highness, and could scarcely claim acquaintance with him, how came it that you undertook an expedition so dangerous? Although you have spoken convincingly of a father's love for his daughter, and therefore persuaded me that the Duke de Montreuil might have acted as you say, on your part there was not even friendship to enlist you. How came you, then, to run your neck into the noose?"

"For two reasons, Marie Duchamps. First, I am a young man with a name to make, so I fairly jumped at the chance offered me; second, I am a poor man with my fortune to make, and the duke offered me a thousand pistoles in gold if I were successful."

"Ah!" cried the girl, in long-drawn-out intonation, her eyes lighting up with intelligence. "Now I understand! The money that tempts a woman tempts a man also."

"But certainly, Marie."

"I will see my mistress at once, and report to her what you have said. Will you trust me to return to you?"

"Yes, if you say you will return."

"After your treatment of me?"

"It is not my treatment, but your word, that I trust."

The girl laughed, and ran half-way up the stair, then, with her hand against the wall, she turned round and looked down at him.

"Monsieur," she said, "while I am absent rebuild speedily your faith in your powers of persuasion. You have so far convinced me that, whether you are genuine or not, I shall connive at your escape. Unbolt the door, therefore; go to the tall flag-pole that rises from the courtyard and overtops our highest building; cut the rope that is riven through the pulley at the top, draw it completely away, coil it up, return to this hall, and wait for me."

With that she disappeared. Cardillac did not wonder at the obscurity of the hall when he had once more emerged into the courtyard. Night was falling rapidly, and before many minutes were past complete darkness would be upon the landscape, but he knew that, once clear of the convent, the gloom would facilitate his escape. Correctly he surmised that the girl intended him to descend from one of the small gable windows in the third story, if such windows were in existence at the back of the convent, as they were at the sides. All sounds of battering at the door had ceased, and Cardillac conjectured that some other plan was about to be adopted, so the sooner he was quit of the place the better.

Taking with him the long rope, he passed under the cloisters and re-entered the hall, where, to his astonishment, he found Marie waiting for him. She had a cloak thrown over her arm, and some kind of covering on her head which the dimness rendered indistinct.

"You haven't been long away," he said in surprise.

"No; mademoiselle makes up her mind quickly. She refuses to see you."

"What nonsense!" cried Cardillac impatiently. "You have not had time fully to explain to her the situation. I must see her."

"That is impossible, monsieur. You cannot enter my lady's apartment without her permission, and in such a crisis it would be folly to make the attempt. You should know by this time that the doors of the convent are not so easily broken down as an outsider might think. Mademoiselle nevertheless asks a favour of you, which is that you escort me forthwith to Blois, where I am to take service with the Queen. This departure it was intended I should attempt, even had you not arrived, but my lady says if you will convey me faithfully and in safety to Blois, she will guarantee that when her father learns you have obeyed his daughter's wishes, you will be paid all the money he promised."

"Oh, the money! I'm not thinking of the money. The thing that troubles my mind is a father's disappointment and a daughter's wilfulness."

"A father may forget, monsieur, that a daughter like mademoiselle is quite capable of making plans of her own. Will you then accompany me to Blois, monsieur?"

"What you suggest is impossible, Marie," said Cardillac despondingly. "I could take you to Montrichard, or perhaps through to Loches, but Blois is overrun with King's men and contaminated with Luynes's spies."

"Mademoiselle de Montreuil does not minimise the danger of the expedition," said Marie, in very subdued tones, her eyes modestly cast down as the young man peered at her through the dusk. "I gave to mademoiselle so vivid an account of the bravery of Monsieur de Cardillac that she is quite confident he will accomplish the task if he promises to do so."

"My good girl, you haven't had time to give a vivid account of anything!"

"Monsieur has been longer in getting the rope than he supposes, and there was time for mademoiselle to say at least that she reposes perfect confidence in Monsieur de Cardillac, and entrusts me to his guardianship with the utmost belief in his honour as a gentleman."

Cardillac stood very erect, braced back his shoulders, and drew a long breath.

"I should like very much to see this young lady," he said at last.

"I was to tell you, monsieur, that she regrets the deprivation as much as you, but I was to add that she hopes soon to have the pleasure of meeting you in her father's house."

"Oh, well, if, as seems to be the case, you have depicted my good qualities, whatever they are, as faithfully as you have convinced me of mademoiselle's amiability, I have been lucky in my messenger."

"And now, monsieur, if you will be good enough to follow me, I may be able to show you a path to liberty."

The girl turned and began to mount the dark stairway.

"Mademoiselle," said the gallant Cardillac, "I will follow you with pleasure, even if you lead me in the opposite direction, to imprisonment."

"The saints are good to me at last," Cardillac had said when he locked the door, but he little dreamed how favourably they were inclined. He did not know that, under the stern rule of the Abbess, even so highly placed a lady as Mademoiselle de Montreuil was not allowed the luxury of a maid, and thus it was the daughter of the Duke whom he followed up the convent stairs.

CHAPTER XIII

A WILDERNESS FOR TWO

Marie Duchamps was evidently as familiar with every turn and corner of those corridors as was the blind girl with the darkened thoroughfares of Pompeii. Frequently she was compelled to pause and give directions to the stumbling young man in her wake. The vast building was oppressively silent, and seemed deserted. They mounted two more stairways, and finally a ladder, up which Cardillac preceded his guide, that he might push open the trap-door that led into a long attic. Here they found the obscurity less dense, because of a window at either gable end; the eastern one looking out upon a courtyard, while that to the westward gave a view over the dense forest. Towards the latter the two made their way.

The oblong aperture was unprovided with either sash or glass, and could be closed in stormy weather by a stout wooden door, which in summer, however, was left open for the sake of the light, for the rafted apex was used as a rough storehouse for odds and ends, boxes, bales and what-not. Cardillac, with his hand against the side of the opening, peered down the cliff to the sward beneath, then, turning, shook out the coils of his rope on the floor. Next he unbuckled his sword belt, wrapped belt and scabbard in his cloak, and flung the bundle to the ground. Picking up the end of the rope, he looked at the girl.

"You will not be frightened?" he asked.

"No, if the knot be securely tied."

"Where a handsome woman is concerned," laughed the young man, "I may be depended upon to tie a knot that will hold."

The girl laughed in company.

"It is to your skill that the handsome woman looks for security, monsieur."

Cardillac threw an end of the rope over one of the rafters, drawing on the cord until the two sections were of equal length. He flung wide the loose ends, and saw that they reached the ground with plenty to spare. The flag-pole from which he had taken it extended beyond the convent roof, and a double line had flapped against the pole. Pulling up the twin cords, he deftly and speedily tied their ends round the slim waist of the girl, while she held up her hands out of the way and watched him with a smile and a blush that were very attractive in the glimmering dusk.

"I think I shall toss my cloak to the winds also," said she when he had finished.

"And all fear with it," he suggested.

"And all fear with it," she repeated.

The cloak fluttered down to the ground, and Cardillac, picking up its owner, lowered her gently into space.

"The ledge is wide," he whispered, "and there is no danger of your striking the wall. Hold the rope tightly with your hands, and never mind if you whirl round two or three times."

An instant later she was safely on the ground, and had the knot unloosened before he could make the suggestion.

"A capable little person," muttered Cardillac to himself, and drawing on his stout leathern gauntlets, he slipped down the rope almost as if he were falling, checking the girl's little outcry of dismay by landing as lightly as if he were a feather from his own hat. He now pulled the rope down from the rafter, coiling it quickly as he did so.

"It is just as well," he said, "to leave no trace of our descent. The guessing how we escaped may add some interest to the monotony of conventual life. You wait here," he continued, "while I reconnoitre. I must get my horse if I can."

He tiptoed to the southwest corner of the convent, and holding his hat in his hand peered round. No one was in sight along the southern flank of the great building. Without relaxing his alertness in the least, he skirted the southern wall, and so came to the southeast corner. Here he surreptitiously scrutinised the eastern front of the convent, where, free of the forest, it was still twilight.

He could not understand the silence, and wondered what had become of the besiegers. A glance showed him that the carriage and four horses had disappeared, probably, to take the lieutenant back to Beaugency, that he might return with materials for forcing an entrance into the courtyard. A solitary sentry was pacing up and down, a light, short musketoon over his shoulder, which, with his uniform, showed that he was a dismounted cavalryman.

The young man surmised quite correctly that it was a squad of mounted men the sergeant had brought up from Beaugency on the arrival of the messenger from Paris. The galloping horses had saved time. This conjecture was confirmed, as his eyes became more accustomed to the obscurity, by seeing a group of horses far down the road that led to Châteaudun.

Evidently the lieutenant expected that if Cardillac escaped, he would make for Châteaudun and thus to Paris along the route by which he had come, and these men were stationed to intercept him, or to follow him if he broke into the road farther beyond. The young man was convinced that no thought had been given to the Blois route, nor to the road leading back into Beaugency, as the fugitive was not likely to make in either direction, knowing that the country swarmed with the enemy.

What was more to the purpose, Cardillac saw his own horse, unattended, cropping the grass in front of the convent, less than twenty yards from him, yet he dared not steal out into the open and capture it, because of the watchful sentry. The horse was a stranger to him, ridden for the first time by its new owner that morning, therefore he feared it would not come to his call, even if he ventured to break the stillness of the evening; still, like a good horseman, he had a way with animals, and they all liked him.

The case was desperate, for at any moment the carriage might return, and even in the shadow of the wall he was in danger of being recognised. He marched quickly to the south a dozen steps, and stood where he could see his horse, but where he could not be seen by the sentry at the gate-house. He whistled very slightly, and at first the horse took no notice, but by and by raised its head and pricked forward its ears. Cardillac held out his hand, and chirruped encouragingly.

The horse took a hesitating step forward, stood still again, then, with a little whinny that made cold chills run up Cardillac's back, it walked directly towards him, with signs of recognition and delight. He patted its neck affectionately, and led it round to the western side of the convent, and so to the waiting girl, where he shook out his cloak, buckled on his belt, then drew the cloak over the saddle.

"Do you think you can hold yourself on?"

"Oh, yes," replied the girl, "but aren't you going to ride? I can then sit behind you."

"I fear we cannot ride together through the forest. I will lead the horse."

With a little assistance, she sprang into place, sitting sideways on the somewhat difficult perch. He threw her own cloak over her shoulders, then, taking the bridle on his arm, led the way into the dark density of the wood.

The traversing of the forest proved to be not only formidable but sometimes dangerous. The great tract of timber land which extended from above Beaugency to Blois was no park-like pleasaunce through which horsemen might hunt the deer or the wild boar, but a primeval forest that seemed pathless, where great trees lay as they had fallen, blocking the way, whilst here and there were encountered extensive thickets of brushwood that seemed impenetrable.

The sword, not the axe, was claiming the attention of Frenchmen at this period, and the woodlands had grown wild. The place seemed desolate of either a chopper's hut or a charcoal burner's camp. High above them the foliage of the sombre pines shut out even an occasional glimpse of the summer night sky, and not a star could be seen. Now and then the girl made an outcry, as she was nearly swept from her horse by low-hanging branches, and ever and anon Cardillac had to stop the animal, and break through by another route.

But what troubled him most was that he had lost all sense of direction, and knew he might at any moment emerge once more near the convent. He said nothing to his frightened companion of his dilemma, but strode on as best he could.

At last she cried:

"I must get down and walk with you. Riding is impossible."

Horse and man stood still. Cardillac held out a hand to her which she could not see, as she sprang stumbling into the underbrush.

"I am afraid," he said, "we must stop here till daylight."

With an exclamation of dismay she said:

"How far do you think we have come from the convent?"

"I have not the remotest notion, Marie. You see, there has been little of woodcraft in my education, and while I could thread my way through Paris, these overgrown forest glades baffle me."

"You mean you have lost your way?"

"My dear sweetheart, there was no way to lose."

"Sir," she cried, with a note of anger in her voice, "you must address me respectfully. I cannot allow you to speak to me in that manner."

"Tush, tush!" cried the young man impatiently. "I wasn't thinking of you at all, but of our quandary. I daresay many a hind has spoken to you more familiarly than I did."

"Now you insult me, sir!" cried the girl, with great indignation.

"My excellent Marie," rejoined Cardillac wearily, "if you mean to arouse my sympathy in that you are here helpless and alone with a stranger, somewhere in the forest of Blois, then, charming girl, consider it done. You possess my sympathy, and if I assure you in addition you are as safe as in that ugly convent we left a while ago you would not believe me, neither would anybody else, nor would it be true. But for your consolation let me present you with the proper view of our situation, and the proportionate peril in which we stand, and, talking of standing, may I offer you a seat, Mademoiselle Marie?"

In the darkness, while he talked, Cardillac had been fumbling about his horse, and now he lifted the saddle from the animal's back, and placed it on the tangled, briar-grown ground.

"Marie Duchamps," he said, groping for her and not finding her, "is it possible that you have departed in dudgeon for your dungeon? I am searching the empty air for your hand, that may lead you a few steps to a place of comparative comfort in this bewildering wilderness."

There was a pause for a few moments, and at last the deep silence was broken by a contented sigh from the horse, who apparently accepted the situation with equanimity and sank in the crackling bushes to his night's rest.

"Marie!" cried Cardillac; then, after listening a while: "Marie!" he shouted more sharply. "*Ventre de ma vie!* has the girl vanished, and have I been wasting my eloquence unheard and unappreciated? This is the final calamity in a day of disasters!"

A ripple of laughter indicated that not only was the girl there, but that her critical mood had changed.

"I thought you were gone," he said.

"Are you sorry to find I am still on your hands, monsieur?"

"You are anything but that," he replied. "My hands are vainly searching the darkness for you. Ah, there you are! Just a step this way—be careful of the brambles. That's right! Here is my folded cloak for a cushion, the horse's saddle for a seat, and this ancient tree for the back of your chair. We are helpless for the night and must make the best of it. It would be folly to tire ourselves further by fighting against the odds that confront us, for until dawn indicates the east we cannot with surety travel to the west."

"In this gloomy circumstance you were about to offer me some consolation, monsieur?"

"Ah, yes, I had forgotten. If we were intercepted, surrounded, captured, our fates, Marie *carissima*, would differ. The stolen rope which, like a monk, I wear wound round me, would take on a smaller loop and a greater altitude. It would

encircle my neck instead of my waist. Then short shrift, and farewell France. Now, most beautiful Marie, you may not credit the fact, but from what I know of my own neck, it would certainly prefer to be encircled by the warm, soft arms of a fair girl than by the cold, taut environment of a rope. I hope my simile of the arms does not disturb that modesty which I have already received assurance you possess, mademoiselle?"

"Oh, no, monsieur; indeed, I am beginning to understand you. I am from the north, but you are from the south. You speak, therefore, with poetical license, and view events through a romantic haze which is denied to us more practical creatures of the colder region. I daresay a man from Normandy might feel more deeply than a poet of Gascony, but the language of the latter would be as a rich and beautiful flower-garden compared with the bleak granite cliffs by the sea. I devoutly trust, monsieur, that you will speedily return to that soft pressure whose delight you have often experienced."

Cardillac laughed drowsily, but with a certain indication of content.

"Now, Marie, if a man had said that! Suppose this man sat at a wooden table opposite me in a tavern. I would raise my flagon and wink at him, or I might smite him in confidential manner on the back. But with a woman one may speak the truth."

"Is that your idea of women, monsieur?"

CHAPTER XIV

BROKEN SOLITUDE

"Surely, surely. With women falsehood is impossible, and so I will confess to you what no man's sword could draw from me—that when I raised my flagon I would drink to the one woman in the world whose arms have been round my neck, and that woman is my poor mother, whom I left in tears but a few short months ago. In daylight, Marie, I swagger and pretend I am a man; woe to him who doubts it! But in the dark and in the silence I confess that after all I am but a boy, and when a short time since I spoke carelessly to you, my thoughts were far away at my home in Gascony, and for the moment I was wishing you and I were safe within its hospitable walls, instead of being immured in this dismal but enchanted wood."

"I am sorry I resented your phrase," said the girl very quietly. "As I told you, I am from the north. You must make allowances."

"Indeed, you treated me as I deserved, Marie, and it is to reassure your mind I am talking so much now about myself. I should like you to flatter me by believing that you are as safe in this forest as if you were in the Convent of the Sacred Heart."

"I am sure of it," she said almost inaudibly.

"You need not rest your confidence on anything so lofty and ethereal as my deep respect for women of all classes, but take it on the lower plane of my own safety. That is what I wish to show you. As I told you in the convent, I am a beast at bay. We are talking now in whispers. I dare not risk an outcry that might bring upon me an overwhelming force of my enemy. Do you not see, mademoiselle, that I dare not molest you if I would?"

"Will you pardon a woman's caprice, monsieur, that, even though she may be from the north, she prefers to rest her content upon the higher plane you have mentioned?"

"Well, I am glad of that," said Cardillac simply. "And now, to complete your further freedom from care, I predict that, if you are captured, your sole disadvantage will be a chuck under the chin, or perhaps a kiss snatched by a gallant officer, who will furnish you escort wherever you wish to go, or at worst send you back to mademoiselle at the Sacred Heart."

Cardillac was now treated to one of those swift changes of mood which ever, in later life, baffled him where women were concerned. The girl cried out with intense scorn:

"Sir, you spoil everything you have said by your vulgarity. You are disrespectful to hint that any man should dare to treat me thus!"

"Merciful heaven, Marie, what harm in a kiss?"

"Sir, you put me out of all patience, and furthermore, I would have you know that I am not one of those persons who, selfishly assured of their own safety, would thus lead a man to his death with indifference. I could not have such a catastrophe on my conscience; therefore, sir, we part company here."

He knew she had arisen, and now he likewise got on his feet, wondering what evil fate had changed the softness of her voice to the clear, hard ring of almost tyrannical decision.

"Your way lies to the south, mine to the west. Untrammelled by me, you can swim your horse across the Loire, and reach Montrichard, where you will be safe. 'Tis less than seven leagues from here to Blois, and, as you quite truthfully point out, I shall be unmolested on the road thither."

Cardillac laughed quietly, and he felt that his ill-timed merriment increased the resentment of Marie Duchamps.

"Tempestuous nymph of the north, prove to me that you are indeed from that region. Marie, point out the north to me, and do not shrink if I come close enough to recognise the direction of your arm."

"'Tis no matter for that, so long as we take separate ways. It is your risk to find the south, and mine to find the west. You would have gone in safety to Montrichard, had I not deflected your direction to Blois."

"You had nothing to do with the matter, my girl. I acted, not on your command, but under orders from Mademoiselle de Montreuil."

"True; but nevertheless on my account. All that mademoiselle cares is that I should reach Blois, and give her message to the Queen. I am to enter the service of the imprisoned Queen; that is mademoiselle's plan, and I hope to connive at Her Majesty's escape."

"How strange it is that a few moments ago we were speaking in whispers, and you seemed the most reasonable of women. Now you stand there, and actually command me as if I were your serf. I think you fail to remember that our positions are the reverse of what your manner betokens. I will entertain a request where I refuse to suffer a command. Pardon me for pointing out that I am a noble, and you are——"

"A servant," snapped Marie, with nevertheless a lowering of her tone.

"Precisely. Now, oblige me, Marie Duchamps, by not forcing such a comparison again. You are in my charge until you are safely within the walls of Blois. I shall take care of myself and you also. When I spoke of my danger it was not that I feared it, but merely to allay your own apprehension, and as I said in the convent, you will obey me, or——" He paused.

"You will crush me." Again she finished his sentence.

"You incorrigible termagant, you put me in the attitude of coercing a woman—a position I hate."

There was no answer to this, for the tense talk was interrupted by a deep boom like the report of a cannon, and the echo reverberated in low thunder through the arches of the forest. Man and maid stood there together a few moments in breathless silence.

"What was that?" whispered Marie, with a quaver of fear in her voice. "Is it a signal, do you think? Are they about to search the forest?"

Cardillac laughed quietly.

"I wish them luck of their task," he said. "No. I take it that at last they have blown in the convent door, and a long time they have been about it. They will search the convent before they attempt the forest. Marie, either it is getting lighter, or my eyes have become accustomed to the darkness. I see you much more plainly than I did half an hour ago, and I can even recognise what I did not notice in the daylight, that you are very beautiful, Marie."

"Thank you, monsieur," said the girl demurely, with a low curtsy, "but you are not doing justice to your own powers of observation. You did notice it before, and were kind enough to mention it. 'Handsome,' I think, was the word you used, and although you diluted your praise with such words as 'vixen,' 'termagant' and what-not, yet these expressions could not overcome my joy at your appreciation. But you should avoid committing yourself further until you have seen me in the daylight. This darkness which envelops us is very deceptive. I am beginning to see you quite plainly, and should be convinced by appearances that you are a noble and courteous young gentleman, did not my experience with you convince me of the contrary."

"Now, Marie Duchamps," cried the young man, piqued, "you let your tongue run away with you. You are too fond of hearing yourself talk. Your mistress should long ago have repressed this tendency to volubility, and not left to me that ungrateful task."

"Oh, monsieur, you are much more capable than she to effect such a transformation, because it is well known that Gascony is the province of silence. It is as difficult to cause a Gascon to speak as to provoke him to fight."

"Marie Duchamps, you are uncivil! The Gascons have their good points like other people."

"Monsieur, you astonish me. Pray mention even one of those good points, and remove your ban of silence, that I may proclaim it to the world. France will be overjoyed at the news."

"You spiteful little devil!" muttered Cardillac, with clenched teeth. "Your folly has almost driven from my head the important question I wished to ask you. From what direction did that sound come? Stretch forth your hand and indicate it."

The girl pondered with bowed head.

"I do not know," she said at last. "The report of the petard seemed to surround us; to come from every direction. All that I can be sure of is that we have not travelled so far from the convent as I had supposed."

Cardillac growled his disapproval of this inconclusive answer.

"If you did not scatter your wits in talk," he said, "but kept them about you, there might be some pleasure in your company and some assistance in your suggestions."

Marie raised her chin haughtily.

"As you have not spoken a word since we left the convent, perhaps you will be so condescending as to point out the direction from which the sound came."

Cardillac gazed around him helplessly, quite palpably nonplussed.

"If I could do that," he said, "I should not have needed to ask you."

"To ask me was perfectly proper, monsieur, but not to censure me because I am unable to do what you yourself cannot accomplish."

"True, true, Marie. You are in the right, and I beg your pardon. You do hit the mark sometimes."

The only reply from the offended girl was a contemptuous sniff, head held very high in the air.

"It is strange," muttered Cardillac, "that so loud a roar in the forest at night should give such little indication of direction. I suppose a true woodman could not only point towards the spot, but might estimate the distance as well. I seem to be a very fool of the forest."

A long, deep sigh came from Marie.

"At last, at last!" she murmured. "How cleverly you class yourself."

At this moment something engaged Cardillac's attention, causing him to ignore the uncomplimentary intimation and give utterance to a cry of astonishment.

"Look, look, Marie!" he shouted. "They have set the convent on fire! See the red light through the trees!"

"Oh, wise and excellent guide. What you see is merely a sign that I am in charge of a lunatic. That, monsieur, is the red and rising moon. I have watched it from our eastern window these three nights past. 'Tis Luna, come to look after her own, monsieur."

"Then indeed is she welcome, for she is at least a beautiful lady of silence. She gives us the east, Marie Duchamps, and if your guide is muddle-headed, the moon will show us unerringly on our way."

"I doubt that, monsieur. When the moon rises a little higher the rays cannot penetrate the foliage above us, and we will sink into darkness again."

"Nonsense, Marie, the forest became lighter even before the moon appeared above the horizon."

"Hush," whispered the girl. "Listen! What was that?"

It needed no necromancer to fathom the cause of her alarm, for they heard approaching the slow, measured tread of a man, not travelling through the forest, but pacing a hard highroad, and from the east came the distant, subdued clatter of horses' feet, also undoubtedly on the same thoroughfare. Cardillac grasped Marie by the wrist, but on this occasion his touch was gentle.

"Now, by the lead image that Louis XI worshipped," he said in a low voice, "we have come within a few yards of blundering upon the patrolled national road. We've wandered too far south. Do not breathe a word, Marie, I beg of you."

The girl shook his hand impatiently from her wrist, and sat down upon her saddle, with her back against the tree. The

horse, lying full length upon the ground, raised its head and inclined forward its ears. Cardillac sank down beside it, patted its neck, ran his hand along its forehead, and muzzled it so that it could not whinny.

The approaching man was whistling the bars of a drinking song. When, as Cardillac estimated, he was a dozen yards distant, whistling and tramping ceased, there was the rattle of a musketoon, and its butt for a moment touched the road's surface. The patrol was making ready for the rapidly nearing horsemen. Cardillac's own horse made a slight effort to move, but the young man leaned over upon him, and laid his cheek against the horse's head, and whispered in its ear. The horse subsided with a sigh of content. The red moon had climbed a tree. The girl, leaning back, seemed asleep.

CHAPTER XV

ROMANCES OF THE FOREST

"Halt, messieurs! Who goes there?"

The two horsemen instantly pulled up at the challenge.

"Friends," came the answer.

"Advance, friends, and give the word."

"The word for the night is 'Montoire.'"

Again the butt of the musketoon came to the ground.

"Pass, Montoire," said the patrol.

"How far westward does your beat extend, soldier?"

"About half a league, monsieur."

"How long have you been on duty?"

"Since compline, monsieur."

"Has any horseman passed you on the way to Blois?"

"Not one, monsieur."

"You have seen nothing of a young man rather gaily dressed; a gentleman with a sword by his side, slight moustache, from twenty to twenty-two years of age?"

"No, monsieur."

"Thank you, soldier, we will not detain you any longer."

The stolid footsteps retreated towards the east.

"I think I shan't go any farther with you, François. You have a clear road in front of you, a charming night around you, and a full moon at your back. I'll return to Beaugency, and if there's any news, a courier shall be sent to you at Blois. But I am sure you are quite wrong in thinking he would make for Blois. That would be a fool's trick, and Cardillac's no fool, as is shown by his treatment of Lieutenant Defour." And at the mention of this name both men laughed heartily.

"I wish I had seen the young devil!" cried the man called François. "Then I should be better able to describe him. The very fact that you are all convinced he will make for Paris, and the chance that he knows this, inclines me to think he will try either Blois or Montrichard, where he said he was going. I believe that if he'd once got the lady, he would have made off with her somewhere else."

"You forget, François, that he had demanded and obtained an escort of four of our men."

"That's no matter, Pol. The four men would have been under his command, and half-way to Montrichard he might have dismissed them, and struck off for Gascony with the girl. You surely don't swallow that father story, Pol? Why, no father in France is such a fool as to send a gay young spark after a raving beauty like Mademoiselle Thérèse."

In the darkness Cardillac saw that Marie Duchamps had abandoned her reclining attitude, and was sitting up very straight, listening intently. He could not see her features, but at times her eyes seemed to flash in the darkness like a pair of sparkling diamonds, and once or twice during the conversation a quivering gasp indicated a rising anger, until Cardillac feared the impulsive creature would speak out.

"Be careful," he whispered. "It is nothing to you. They are speaking of mademoiselle."

"I tell you, Pol, it's a love story. Mademoiselle Thérèse and this young gallant have met before. I've seen the girl in Paris, and, upon my word, Pol, I sympathise with young Cardillac, that he should risk his neck on so dangerous but delightful an enterprise. Why, you people at Beaugency are as credulous as school-boys. You are well led by a stick like Lieutenant Defour. To credit for a moment that the stern old Duke de Montreuil should allow his daughter to go dashing across the country at midnight with this young fellow, who knows all the villainies of Paris, from the slums to the Court, and is evidently the very devil among women——"

Cardillac sat up with a muttered oath, and now the girl leaned forward to him, pointing to his horse, which too evidently wished to greet the animals of whose neighbourhood it was aware. The young man reclined upon the prone horse just in time, soothing it to a continuance of its quietude.

"Oh, no, my son, this graduate from the court of Venus in Paris isn't taking midnight trips with a charming girl simply to please the old man. He is equally against King, and father, and abbess, and I'll wager my sword that if Cardillac has got out of that convent, and is once more in his saddle, she is riding behind him, right glad to hold herself there, with her arm around his waist, and a sweet kiss passed over his shoulder now and then, as an instalment on account of raptures that are to come later."

"Oh, the brute! Oh, the brute!" muttered the girl, clenching her little fists in rage.

"Hush, hush, hush!" pleaded Cardillac. "Close your ears and don't listen, you silly little jade, but in any case keep quiet. It has nothing to do with you, and I never saw mademoiselle in my life. I am the person they are slandering, so keep quiet!"

She leaned back against the tree, and put her hands up to her ears, but that seemed ineffective, for they came down very shortly after.

"You are romancing, François, and I have no doubt at all but that Cardillac is still within the walls of the convent. Your imagination runs away with you, or perhaps you did not know that just before we left Beaugency further information had come from Châteaudun that settles the question. Another messenger from Paris travelled by the Vendôme road, and we learned that Cardillac and the Duke de Montreuil left Paris in a carriage together; that Cardillac himself was on the most intimate terms with the duke, and the cross-examination of the duke's own servants, now imprisoned in Paris, has revealed that the duke showed the utmost friendliness towards Cardillac, and furnished him with money and horse to carry out the project.

"I imagine that something very definite is going to be done by the Queen's partisans, and that the duke will take any risk, no matter how desperate, to get his daughter out of the hands of the enemy, and into his own, before hostilities break out. There is no doubt that her father trusts Cardillac completely, and indeed, from the air of the young man as I saw him, that trust is not misplaced. Cardillac is a gentleman, and he is too recently from Gascony to have been yet contaminated by Paris. The Duke de Montreuil must have had some striking testimony in favour of his honesty, and if it hadn't been for that old abbess, Cardillac would have made off with the girl, and at this moment would have been somewhere between here and Montrichard. It is also known that Cardillac and Mademoiselle de Montreuil have never met so you see, my dear François, you will have to turn your romancing in another direction."

"You think he is still in the convent, then?"

"Yes, I do."

"Don't they know by this time whether he is or not?"

"I don't think they'll know anything definite until to-morrow. You see, her ancient royal highness, the abbess, is driving poor Defour to his wits' end. Defour wished her to take refuge for the night in the village, but she absolutely refused to budge. It was she who ordered the blowing in of the convent door, and he could hardly get her far enough away to be out of danger from the explosion.

"The moment the wood was rent, and the masonry crumbled down, she marched in over the smoking debris, like a conqueror entering a captured town, and she would not let Defour or any of his men come in to prosecute the search. She is going to have every nook and corner of the convent examined, and will herself take Cardillac, and march him through the breach to the custody of his executioners. It seems in her present temper she is like to hang the poor young man from

the iron-work above the well."

"I suppose, Pol, that, whatever happens, Cardillac is doomed. If he remains inside the convent, he falls into the hands of the abbess, and if he wins his way outside, he is sure to be taken by the military. If I were confronted by such alternatives, I'd surrender to the soldiers rather than to that sinister old woman. I'd then be sure of a quick and easy death; for I suspect Her Royal Highness of keeping a private torture chamber on the premises."

"Yes, and I'll warrant you she would enjoy putting it to use. By the way, François, did you ever hear the legend, which is quite in your romantic line, that in the days of her youth this lady was a special favourite with the late King?"

"Oh, yes, everyone knows that story, and it was the fickleness of Henri IV that turned her towards a religious life, and against all mankind."

"To look at her now, any love story seems incredible. Even you would find it impossible to weave a romance around her gaunt form."

"Oh, I am not so sure of that. When she was a young girl, I can imagine her very tall and dignified; yes, and I would not swear but she may have been beautiful. At any rate, Henri IV was a connoisseur, and he certainly succumbed to her charms. It is not for mere amateurs like us to question the decision of the great and amorous King. Cardillac is said to resemble him somewhat, but is much handsomer than ever Henri was. One might imagine that the old woman, seeing this resemblance, would be inclined towards mercy."

"Yes, or the reverse, if in the past the King deserted her."

"True, true. A woman is like a cat: you do not know which way she will jump. Whatever her former love-dreams may have been, I fancy poor Cardillac has little mercy to expect from that quarter. No, now that you have told me that he and Thérèse de Montreuil never met, I see another vision ending in tragedy."

"Out with it, François."

"Well, here we have Cardillac, fresh, as I have said, from the follies and frivolities of Paris; a youth who has already gone the pace; a cynic about women, crediting none of them with any good."

Cardillac, in his strained position, moved uneasily, muttering fierce imprecations under his breath. Marie, who had been regarding him intently, held up her hand in warning. François went dreamily on with his recital.

"And here, not twenty-four hours divorced from the boudoir of his gay Parisian demoiselle, he finds himself a prisoner in the strong courtyard of the convent. Instead of warm, soft, loving arms about his neck, he is environed by the death-cold embrace of stone walls. If he cannot unclasp this fatal grip, the remainder of his life is measured by minutes, rather than by hours. He searches hurriedly, but in vain, for an exit, and at last is interrupted by the footsteps of the nuns emerging from the chapel. He hides himself in a cell. Picture it, my dear Pol, and compare it with the luxurious, Orient-scented bower he has so lately left.

"Here are bare walls, and a flag pavement instead of a floor. There stands the narrow bed, with its clean but common coverlet, and at its head an iron crucifix, black against the whitewashed stone. Cardillac hears slow footsteps in the passage outside, and springs to the wall, standing with his back closely plastered against it, in such a position that when the door opens it will for the moment conceal him. The door does open, and there enters a nun, perhaps twenty years old, whose pale beauty the white band on her forehead cannot conceal, but rather seems to enhance. She is of noble family, otherwise she had not been there, and I fancy her immured in this convent, not from choice, not from religious enthusiasm, but for some reason known only to her own family; a girl, let us say, who has seen nothing of the world; one, perhaps, devoted from her birth to the conventual life.

"Cardillac closes the door, and places his back against it. She turns, a vague terror in her appealing eyes, while her open hand is laid upon her palpitating heart. They look at each other, a few steps apart, neither speaking. The contrast between the two is as great as the contrast between the cell and the boudoir in Paris, for her sombre, badly cut garment covers a gentle heart that has never harboured a wrong thought. His gaudy, gold-laced costume of silk and velvet, scarlet and blue, conceals a soul cankered with corruption."

"*Mille diables!*" groaned the real Cardillac in the wood.

"What was that? I thought I heard someone speak!" cried François.

"No, no," replied Pol, "it is your own vivid imagination. Go on with your story; you make me believe this thing actually happened. What becomes of your devil and your saint?"

All sense of his critical position vanishes from the mind of the young man. Here before him is something all Paris cannot supply. This fair flower of sanctity seems to him more precious than all the rest of the world. Her sweet, refined, wistful face makes Paris seem tawdry and valueless. As for the young man, some latent instinct tells her that here stands, concentrated in one man, the wickedness of earth, and this disquieting knowledge at once repels and fascinates her. Can it be possible that evil should wear so gracious an exterior? And what is this strange, subtle, hitherto undreamt-of influence which surrounds her—an influence that nullifies duty and prevents the outcry which she knows she should raise?

A term of endearment bursts from Cardillac's lips; he strides forward towards her with arms outstretched. She does not retreat. Those sympathetic eyes are filled with a sorrow that daunts him. Slowly she raises to her lips the little wooden crucifix that hangs from her girdle. When she speaks, her voice reminds him of the soft whisper of a mellow organ at vespers.

"Please!" she says, and then, 'I am safe in your courtesy and chivalry, monsieur.'

Cardillac's arms drop helpless to his side. He steps back to his former position against the door."

"Oh," muttered Pol, in accents of disappointment. "He is not so black as you have painted him, then?"

"No, there is good in the lad. He is at heart a Christian, and the emblem of his faith held thus aloft reminds him of his own peril. He breaks forth into self-accusation and entreaties for pardon. He tells his story to the listening nun, and sees a film of pity obscure the lustre of those entrancing eyes. Their colloquy is rent asunder by a shattering explosion that makes the very walls tremble."

"Ah, halt there, François, you are forgetting. It was long after dark before the explosion took place, and Cardillac could not have seen those fascinating eyes."

"That's no matter, Pol, and merely an impertinent interruption on your part. I did not think it necessary to describe the descending of night. The explosion has caused a terrified commotion throughout the convent.

"Is there a secret passage to the forest?' cries Cardillac.

"I know of none,' replies the girl.

The search for the young man has begun under the dominance of the relentless abbess.

"Stand behind the door: it is your only chance,' says the nun, and Cardillac obeys. The nun herself occupies a position on the threshold.

"Have you seen a man within the convent precincts?' demands the abbess.

The young nun's head is bowed.

"No,' she replies.

For one long moment the penetrating gaze of the abbess is upon her, then her wrist is seized, and she is jerked out into the hall. The abbess enters, and before Cardillac can even make a motion to draw his sword, her iron talons are sunk in his neck, and he is pressed, choking and breathless, against the wall, while the elder nuns rush in to the aid of their chieftainess.

In less than five minutes Cardillac is tied rigid as a post; the trembling young nun is haled in, and the two are placed back to back, and under the skilful manipulation of the old woman, they are tied firmly together like a double-faced mummy. They stand there as inflexible as a wooden statue, and as helpless. With a vehement push of her two sinewy hands, the abbess impels the breathing mummies with a crash to the floor. She draws the door shut, and sends for the masons who are already at work by torchlight repairing the breach at the convent entrance. There, under the stern

personal command of the abbess, the masons with stone and mortar seal the doorway, and plaster over their work until it takes on a semblance to the corridor wall. When the plastering is dry, there is painted on it in black letters, '*Mali principii malus finis.*'

"Thirty years later, when the cell is broken open during some convent repairs, two skeletons are found upon the floor, and rags of coarse serge are mingled with scraps of faded cloth-of-gold."

"Oh, Lord!" cried Pol, "I am glad I have to travel but a short league to the lights and sounds of Beaugency. What I need at the moment is a jovial crew in a wine-shop, a large full flagon in my hand. I shall dream of that story. What would you do, François, if to-night on your journey to Blois you encountered Cardillac and mademoiselle?"

"I should glance in every direction to see that no one was looking, and then I should help them to escape."

"So should I, by Saint Peter's keys. Adieu, François."

"Adieu, Pol."

CHAPTER XVI

THE COURAGE OF A MAID-SERVANT

The sound of hoof-beats lessened and lessened in either direction, until at last silence succeeded. Cardillac rose to his feet, stretched his arms above his head, and drew in a long breath.

"Well, of all outrageous liars!" he cried. "Did you listen to what was said, Marie?"

"I think I heard most of their conversation."

"I hope you didn't believe what you heard, then."

"Oh, no. I am not so credulous as you think."

"I am glad of that, for although you are but a humble serving-maid, I do not on such account undervalue your good opinion."

"Thanks for your condescension, Monsieur de Cardillac. It is very gracious of you, and you may be assured that this unbending is greatly appreciated by me."

"With your words there is no fault to find, Marie, yet you say them with an air that is somewhat difficult to define; an air that I do not exactly like."

"I am very sorry, monsieur, and if you would kindly give me some hint of what you complain, I shall endeavour to avoid my fault in the future."

"I do not say it rises to the dignity of a fault, Marie," replied the young man kindly, "yet there seemed to me a suspicion of scoffing in your tone, as if you did not mean exactly what you said."

"I fear, Monsieur de Cardillac, that you have been listening so long to mendacity that you are now in a mood to doubt everyone's good intentions."

"Well, so long as you know that these two men are liars, especially the long-winded one, it does not so much matter."

"Trust me, sir, I am sharper than you think. I at once detected the falsity of their statements. When they said you had come in the same carriage with the Duke de Montreuil, I knew that was an absurd saying, and when it was added that the Duke de Montreuil regarded you as a friend, why, the absurdity of such an allegation was evident even to a poor creature like myself."

"There, Marie, you are at it again. I hope, my good girl, you are not trying to be sarcastic. Sarcasm becomes a woman as ill as a badly fashioned gown. Yourself admitted that you believed me when I said the duke honoured me with his friendship, and I think you said that his daughter accepted my proclamation as true. You have selected as untrue the two accurate affirmations these men made."

"When Pol said you had never met Mademoiselle de Montreuil he was quite wrong, was he not?"

"No, that was a third veracious allegation that was made."

"If Pol and François are right in the instances I have cited, I shall save myself trouble by accepting everything else as true."

The girl rose wearily from the saddle, and stood before him.

"No, no," he cried. "Everything else they said was as false as——"

"Oh, do not let us discuss the matter any further! I am tired of the subject, and care not what they said. Do you propose to move on, monsieur?"

"Yes," said Cardillac, offended by her indifference, and annoyed at the turn she had given to the conversation, perversely

disbelieving the points that told in his favour, while willing to accept offhand all that had been alleged against him.

"What are your plans, monsieur?"

"I shall disclose them when we reach the highroad."

"Oh, thank you, monsieur."

He got the horse upon its feet, and strapped the saddle to its back. In spite of the fact that the moon was invisible from where they stood, the forest had become much less obscure, and he had little difficulty in leading the horse through the few yards of thicket that intervened between their resting place and the main road. Here it was nearly as light as day, for the moon shone full upon it, as it ran in a straight line from west to east.

"Now, mademoiselle, I propose——"

"Are you about to divulge your plans, monsieur?"

"Yes, Marie Duchamps. Are you not anxious to hear them?"

"Not in the least, monsieur, for they concern you alone, just as my own plans concern nobody but myself."

"Your own plans? They take you to Blois, I suppose?"

"Of a surety, monsieur. I shall not thank you for your aid, because I think I was of some service to you in pointing out a method of escape from the convent; therefore we bid one another good-bye, neither in the other's debt."

"Do you mean that you purpose going alone to Blois?"

"How clever you are, monsieur! That indeed is my meaning."

"Then you credit what those scoundrels said of me?"

"I fear, monsieur, that I was not listening. I think I was asleep most of the time they were talking."

"Not listening! Why, Marie, I'll warrant not a word escaped you. Your ears are as sharp as your tongue. Not listening? What were you doing when I nearly fell over you at the convent door?"

Marie drew herself up proudly, turning with quiet dignity towards him, the full moon shining now on her fair face, and, not for the first time, the young man, with a flutter of pleasure at the heart, realised how well-favoured she was.

"Monsieur," she said quietly, "as I am about to bid you good-bye, and as I hope never to see you again, wishing you a safe return to all the allurements of Paris, I shall not prevent you referring to my listening at the door as often as you like. If we were to be comrades further on our journey, I would say that your allusion was offensive to me. If there was any generosity in your nature, you would not again allude to the plight in which you caught me. You would know that a servant in my position must obey the commands of her mistress, and I have already told you that I listened at the door to obtain information that it might be vitally necessary Mademoiselle de Montreuil should know. She was kept a prisoner in the convent, and I, if I may be so bold as to say so, was her only friend. I think in the circumstances, monsieur, the listening was justified."

"Marie, I quite agree with you. Forgive me."

"I do so very willingly, monsieur; and now good-night and thank you."

"But you are not going alone?"

"Yes. I know the word; it is 'Montoire.' Everywhere the patrol will allow me to pass, and I shall be safe in Blois before daybreak."

"Oh, Marie, this is nonsense! I am in charge of you."

"Who put me in your charge, monsieur?"

"Why, Mademoiselle de Montreuil, so you said. It is my duty to see you safely within the walls of Blois."

"Monsieur is quite mistaken. Mademoiselle, it is true, wrote an order for your inspection, but when I returned to the stair it was too dark for you to read it. Now in this moonlight you may decipher the words. I beg your perusal of the message, monsieur."

Cardillac took the paper she handed to him, and read:

MONSIEUR VICTOR DE CARDILLAC:

If you will convey my servant, Marie Duchamps, safely to any destination she requires of you, and if you will obey her in all things that she requests, I will communicate with my father, and see that he sends the money he promised you to any address you give Marie on leaving.

THERÈSE DE MONTREUIL.

Cardillac looked at the girl, and looked at the letter, then looked back at the girl again, his brow wrinkled with perplexity.

"*Mon Dieu*, Marie, I cannot allow you to walk this road alone all night!"

"You must, monsieur, otherwise you shall not receive the money."

"*Morbleu!* Out upon the money. I was not thinking of the money, but of you. Still, I'm glad you mentioned the money."

"I thought it would influence you, monsieur."

"It does, Marie. It jumps into jeopardy from this moment. I shall disobey Mademoiselle de Montreuil."

"Monsieur!" cried the girl in alarm, drawing back.

"Let mademoiselle keep her money to buy finery with, the next time she visits Paris. I swear she is not half so enchanting as her maid-servant, in spite of the eulogy of François. Marie, you must mount this horse with me, and ride thus to Blois."

"Ah, and so give reality to the fancies of Monsieur François?"

"I see you were not asleep after all, Marie! Yes, we shall enact the drama by François, and I shall be delighted to kiss you over my shoulder as often as you are pleased to permit me, Marie. But we waste time. Come along."

"I shall not."

"Then I shall take you in my arms, place you on the horse, and hold you there, if necessary."

"Monsieur, I bid you beware," cried the girl warningly, stepping back as he approached.

Cardillac laughed joyously, and as he strode two steps nearer she drew from her bosom an Italian stiletto, whose hilt gleamed with jewels, and whose sharp blade flashed in the moonlight.

"Another step at your peril, monsieur! Mademoiselle gave me the means to defend myself."

Cardillac stood still, but continued his laugh of quiet enjoyment. The upheld stiletto did not flash more dangerously than her own dark eyes. The red lips were compressed till all colour had left them, and her face was white and set.

"You are an unfair highwayman, Marie. The robber of the road demands your money or your life, but you, lovely angel of danger, threaten both."

Marie did not reply, but held to her attitude of defence.

"Do you mean seriously to challenge to mortal combat the second best swordsman in France?"

"If you are he, yes."

"Well, for a maid-servant, Marie, you do not lack courage."

"I cannot return the compliment, monsieur, for I should not call that gentleman courageous who threatened a woman."

"*Vrai Dieu*, Marie, I do not threaten you! I am but anxious for your safety. It is you who threaten me. And now, to show you how much I fear that toy, or you either, I bid you strike!"

He clasped his hands behind him, and marched straight up to her, until their lips were not six inches apart.

"Strike, Marie, because if you do not, within ten minutes I shall gather you in my arms and place you on my horse. Now, mademoiselle, why do you hesitate? Why has all that high courage, which I admired a moment ago, left your face? Think how fitting your blow would be, and how poetical the justice that guided a woman's stiletto into a corrupt heart."

CHAPTER XVII

THE SWORD WOUND IN THE ARM

Marie maintained her attitude for a few moments, then her arm lowered, and tears of vexation came into her eyes. There was a tremble in her voice when she said:

"You know I did not believe that."

"Then why do you object to my escort, and why do you think that steel will protect you?"

"Monsieur, if I tell you the truth, will you let me go my own way? I assure you I am not accustomed to being thwarted, and am headstrong after a fashion."

"I should have thought, on the contrary, that you were disciplined to obedience. Do you oppose mademoiselle as you have opposed me?"

"Ah, mademoiselle! That is another matter. I obey mademoiselle in everything."

"Of course. Then tell me your truthful reason for refusing my assistance."

"I refuse for your sake, and not for my own. I shall be quite unmolested on the road to Blois, but you march there without disguise in the garments so familiar to Beaugency. Your description has gone ahead of you. François has told each patrol for whom to look, and before long he will have informed the military at Blois of your age, appearance, manner and bearing."

"You forget that François said he would help me to escape."

"Yes, if he met you alone, but you must remember he carries his instructions to Blois, and he also believes you will make for that town. The whole country to the north of the Loire is on the alert already, watching for you. I can get through to Blois, but you will be captured, and believing you to be a brave man and a gentleman, I cannot bear that you should be sacrificed on my account. There, at last you have the truth, monsieur."

Cardillac caught her by the two shoulders. The girl first shrank from him, then, seeing he made no attempt to draw her to his arms, she stood quiescent.

"Marie," he cried, "if Thérèse de Montreuil is half so fine a lady as you—and much as I admire your beauty, I am not referring to that—she has reason to be proud of herself. However obscure and humble your origin, Marie, at heart you are a lady, and a beautiful, brave and charming lady at that."

Marie smiled, and a mischievous twinkle chased away the moisture from her eyes.

"I am gratified to receive so flattering an opinion from one whom I must regard as a connoisseur."

Victor's hands rested more heavily on Marie's shoulders than she thought was necessary, and she made a slight movement to release herself. As they stood together on the highroad, his back was towards the moon, which shone full upon the lovely face of the girl. He seemed overpowered by this close view of her beauty, and she, feeling those heavy hands attempting to draw her still nearer, braced back, resisting their appeal. She spoke in a low voice.

"Please!" she said. "I rest secure in the courtesy and chivalry of Cardillac."

The young man's left hand swung down to his side with a certain pendulum-like helplessness. His right he drew across his brow, as if in perplexity. The girl stood free, watching him intently.

"Where—where," he murmured, with a new hesitancy in his speech, "where have I heard those words before?"

"Why," she said, "don't you remember? They were the words of the mythical nun to the mythical Cardillac."

"What nun?"

"The nun of François's story. It made an impression on my mind. Did it not on yours?"

"François? François? Ah, that was the horseman! But I did not harm the nun?"

"No, of course you did not. Monsieur, what is wrong with you? You speak strangely, as if you were talking in your sleep."

Cardillac laughed a little.

"I am asleep, or dizzy. I have had no sleep for weeks, I think. I don't know how long. I am rather tired."

Impulsively she stepped forward. He swayed as though he would fall, and held himself erect by a visible effort, drawing his hand again and again across his brow, as if to brush away bewilderment. She grasped him by the left arm, but he winced and spoke irritably.

"Don't do that," he said.

"Turn round into the moonlight," she commanded. "I want to see your face."

He leaned back against his patient horse, throwing the right arm over the animal's neck. The girl gave a little cry of dismay as she saw the ghastly whiteness of his face, with the pale moonlight now upon it. She felt warm moisture on her hand, and looking at her finger tips, saw them red with blood.

"You are wounded!" she cried.

"Oh, it is nothing—nothing at all," he answered impatiently, "but a sword thrust through the arm. It would have been all right but for my coming carelessly down the rope from the convent. I was showing off because you were there. I burst the bandages and reopened the wound."

"Who wounded you, and why?"

"It is of no importance, I tell you. The Duke de Montreuil ran his sword through my arm; that is all."

"The Duke de Montreuil?" cried the girl.

"Yes."

"But why, why, why?"

"Don't reiterate a silly word like that. Why do you ask so many questions? Curiosity is the bane of woman. Keep quiet, and let me gather my wits."

He was breathing hard, slipping slowly down along the horse's neck, hanging on his over-reaching right arm, but while his plight brought deep sympathy to the girl's eyes, her lips again demanded:

"Why? Why did the Duke de Montreuil do that?"

"Because—because I attacked him. I tried to assassinate him."

The right arm loosed its hold, and Cardillac fell prone upon the ground. The horse started back in fright, and the girl gazed down upon his white face.

"*Saints et saintes!*" she cried, trembling. "In what a web of falsehood am I involved! Who is this man? My father's friend, or my father's murderer? My father's friend, as the horseman said, and as Cardillac contended, or his vile assassin, as he himself admitted a moment since? Where is my father? A victim to this man's treachery, or safe at Loches? I shall go to Loches instead of to Blois. But no, that is impossible. Loches is eighteen leagues away, and Blois but six. If anything has happened to my father, I shall learn that at Blois, and there my duty calls me to the Queen."

She turned her face to the west, and took a step in that direction, but paused again.

"Oh, what is the truth! What is the truth? He seemed honest and brave, yes, and kind. A lad like him cannot bear murder in his heart, and yet his own words—and that wound in his arm! My father's sword! Tried to assassinate him! Delirium

has its truth as well as its madness.

"What am I to do? If I leave him here, it is death by exhaustion, or death by execution, and if he should be my father's friend after all, and my father safe in Loches—How am I to decide? My duty is to the Queen—to plan her escape and aid her; yet I stand here hesitating. Why have I allowed this man to come between me and my duty; to bring this hesitation, which was impossible half a dozen hours ago? In any case, guilty or innocent, what is the death of one man to the fate of a dynasty? To Blois, of course: there is no second choice."

This time she took five steps resolutely towards Blois, faltered, and looked back. The horse had moved forward; had bent its head affectionately over its master, snorting with alarm at the warm scent of blood.

"That dumb brute is more merciful than I. Cardillac guided me safely through the forest, bearing my petulance with patience. Thinking me servile, he called me a lady. Here, alone, and in his power, at my slightest command he retreated from me. One who was vile would not have done that, and all the while in pain and lessening strength, no word of complaint from his lips; a smile instead of a frown; and his last conscious words were used to persuade a woman to allow him, reckless of his own safety, to ward off danger from her, while she taunted him about money—a rich woman to a son of poverty, as he admitted himself to be! Merciful Saviour! what am I, to hold myself aloof from so great a soul as his? I cannot believe ill of him."

But when she returned once more, the former hesitation overcame her, as she looked down upon the insensible man. After all, his own words were witnesses against him.

"'I tried to assassinate him,' he said. If he has injured my father, I cannot touch him: I cannot bear to so much as place my hands upon him; and if he be a murderer, then must he lie there, and take whatever penalty comes. God of honesty, give me some inkling of the truth!"

She crossed her hands above her troubled breast, and raised a suppliant face to the blue sky.

"Mary, Queen of Heaven," she prayed, "look down in pity on thine erring daughter. Resolve her doubt. Is this man fair or foul? Has he raised hand against my father? Is he fit for my father's daughter to touch? If he is innocent, bid me to aid him. Obliterate that natural pity if he be unworthy. *Mère de Dieu*, send me some sign, however trivial, and I will accept it!"

For a moment she stood with face uplifted, as if expecting an answer from the skies, but the sound that reached her ears was entirely terrestrial. It was the measured tramp of the patrol, returning from the direction of Beaugency. A glance up the road showed him a silhouetted black figure against the white surface of the highway. He had evidently seen the horse and woman standing there, for his musketoon was not upon his shoulder, but held in readiness for attack or defence.

Instantly the girl was on her knees beside the wounded man. She drew the soaking sleeve from his arm, and saw with amazement that the wound was beautifully bound with the finest cambric, evidently the work of a surgeon who knew his business. The saturated bandage had been slightly displaced, but its very presence would contradict the story she had instantaneously resolved to tell.

This evidence must at once be done away with before the soldier arrived. She drew from her bosom the jewelled stiletto, and running its thin blade between bandage and arm, she deftly cut it away, staining the virgin blade with blood. For a moment, before she threw the bandage into the bushes, she examined the fineness of the cloth, with sudden remembrance that only in one place, her father's house, had she seen cambric of this special make. Holding a section of it between herself and the moon, she saw dimly reflected thereon, woven in the fabric, the letter "M," and knew immediately that this binding had been done by her father's physician, and therefore by her father's orders. However Cardillac had come by his wound, it was her father who had succoured him, as his daughter was now attempting to do.

"Mary, I adore thee and thank thee," she murmured, as she flung the sodden lump into the thicket. Rapidly unfastening his shirt and laying bare his breast, her small hands tremulously felt for the index of life. His heart was beating; feebly, slowly, but still beating. Down upon it sank her cheek.

"Poor lad! The nun lied for thee, and paid with her life. I shall do the same, if I pay with my soul."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DIALOGUE ON THE HIGHROAD

"God's wounds, mademoiselle, what have we here?"

The girl rose to her feet as if this interruption were unexpected; then she said, as if with an effort to control her emotion:

"Madame, not mademoiselle, monsieur."

"Well, whichever you please. Is this man dead?"

"No, monsieur, but grievously wounded."

"How came he wounded?"

"I struck him down, monsieur."

"You—you? A slip of a girl to strike down a man armed with a sword? I cannot believe that, madame."

"I took him unawares. He did not think I would do it. I struck him with my dagger through the arm."

"Had he been mistreating you?"

"He threatened to beat me."

"For what reason?"

"The reason that he is my husband."

"Oh, your husband! That puts a different face on the matter. If a husband meets cold steel merely for beating his wife, 'tis a strange pass the world has come to."

"True, monsieur, but I am ill-tempered, and would not have it so."

"This is a very serious matter, and by your own confession I must arrest you."

"But 'twas not maliciously done. It was in the height of a quarrel."

"No matter for that, madame. Is a man's life to be put in jeopardy for the mere threat of a beating, and because he marries a foolish woman? You are an obstreperous baggage, and I doubt not thoroughly deserved a beating."

She shifted her position till the grim old warrior could see her plainly. He paused in his denunciation.

"Nevertheless," he went on, "if I had a wife so comely to look upon as you, I'd think of kisses rather than blows. From whence do you come, madame?"

"From Blois."

"Do you live in Blois?"

"We live in Tours, and are on our way through to Beaugency; thence to Orléans and Paris."

"Are you making a wedding-trip of it? You seem young enough to be married."

"'Tis our first journey together, monsieur."

"If you come from Blois, what is the word for the night?"

"'Montoire,' monsieur."

"Right. The road, then, is free to you. Is this the dagger with which you struck him?"

He lifted the stiletto from the road, and his covetous eyes glistened as they saw the jewels in its hilt.

"I must retain the weapon as evidence," and saying this, he proceeded illogically to destroy part of the evidence by rubbing the blade clean on the sleeve of his tunic.

"Oh, not as evidence, monsieur," she pleaded.

"Why not? 'Tis most material, being the instrument of your crime."

"True, but I have repented my crime, and though I willingly ask you to retain the stiletto, which comes from Italy, I hope it will not need to be used as evidence against me, because in that case it will be confiscated by the court, whereas if the dagger remains in your possession, it will keep you for many a year. That ruby alone, if taken out and sold to a jeweller, will bring you a hundred pistoles, at least."

The girl was as sharp as her stiletto, and by the time she had got this far with the monologue, she saw that a mistake was being made. The look of covetousness had departed from the eyes of the old soldier, and grave suspicion had taken its place. A lady in the position of Thérèse de Montreuil knew that bribery was rampant throughout the empire. No one did anything for nothing, but the system of bribery, like everything else tending towards richness, was monopolised by the upper class. The peasantry neither looked for, nor got, any share in the distribution of *largesse*. If a noble wished any service from a peasant he did not tip him, but commanded him, and the latter's recompense was more apt to be blows from a cudgel than coins from a purse.

The veteran with the musketoen lowered his brows and looked menacingly at the fair woman before him. If such an expensive donation was given, the giver must be concealing something of the utmost importance. His stolid mind worked with almost visible slowness, and the quick intuition of the girl saw whither it was tending. In another minute he would be asking himself: "How do I know this is not Cardillac, of whom the whole country is in search?"

Now, Thérèse had become an excellent actress. Her gift of impersonation was so great that it formed one of the chief features which commended her to the Queen. There was never a dull moment in Court when Thérèse de Montreuil was present, and her mimicry of those whom Her Majesty disliked was the cause of much amusement to the Queen herself, and the Queen's entourage.

Thérèse became on the instant a wan, pathetic figure with tears streaming from her eyes.

"I can never bear," she said, with halting voice, "to look upon that deadly instrument again, 'Twas given me as a present on my marriage, and look what it has done! They say it is ill luck to receive without payment anything that is sharp, or will cut, and now I must be rid of it at all costs. I should have given payment for it, but it was sent to me from Italy, and I could not in time recompense the sender. 'Twill bring disaster to you or your family if I give it to you, and while I wish to be rid of it myself, I dare not bring down curses on you with such a fatal gift," and here the drooping girl began to weep outright.

The sentry, whose bronzed and seamed face turned as pale as it could, let the dagger, jewels and all, fall from his hand ringing to the road, then he piously crossed himself.

"Well, I must rouse this man, and learn what he has to say for himself."

The soldier, whose calling demanded a certain skill in rough surgery, and the carrying of materials necessary for it, drew from his wallet a narrow strip of coarse cloth and a flask of brandy. He knelt by the side of Cardillac, examined the wound, and placed his hand on the forehead of the unconscious man. The girl, her own anxious self again, watched him intently, for the critical moment that she feared was approaching.

"To learn what he would say for himself," had been the patrol's words. The danger was what he might say against himself in those moments between the regaining of his wits and the resuming of complete control over them. She realised, with despair at her heart, that she could not explain his danger to Cardillac while this suspicious man was within earshot. Perhaps when the soldier had bound up the wound, she might induce him to depart, and allow her to bring the stricken man back to a knowledge of his surroundings.

"If, good soldier, you will place a bandage on his arm, and pass on your way to Blois, I will revive my husband."

"Why?" demanded the soldier, looking up at her, suspicion once more his dominant expression.

"Because, soldier, it is said that people walking in their sleep, or after a faint, when aroused should see no stranger near them."

"That may be true or not," said the patrol, "but I must be here to listen when he wakes."

"Then, soldier, tell me who you are, and for whom you stand," cried the girl craftily, in real as well as pretended dismay. "If you are for the Queen Mother, then are we lost, for my husband is a strong partisan of the King, and it is to Paris that we are going, for he intends to offer his sword to His Majesty."

"Plague take it," growled the old soldier. "Have you come all the way from Tours, madame, through Blois, where the Queen is imprisoned, without learning that the north bank of the Loire is patrolled entirely by the King's men? If your husband, as you say, is a partisan of His Majesty, he has nothing to fear. He is among friends. But I must hear from his own lips what he has to say, because I know from experience that women do not always tell the truth."

"Do you impugn my veracity, monsieur?" demanded Thérèse, with indignation.

"I do not understand your language, madame. Plain talk is what I am accustomed to. There is something very strange about this case. The wound has stopped bleeding, and this man is not in a faint, but is asleep. He seems to me exhausted from much travelling, or lack of food, or both. 'Tis not within reason, madame, that a blow from your stiletto, ten minutes since, should have done what you say. This man has been bled white; the wound is not recent, madame."

"Recent? Of course it is not recent, nor did I make such allegation. The blow was struck hours ago, and here we have been quarrelling ever since. Seemingly he bled all the way, and so collapsed during our last dispute. Ten minutes ago he had his right arm over his horse's neck, using language that was frightful to hear. Suddenly he became incoherent, then slipped down and down, and fell as you see him."

"That may all be, madame, but I wish to hear his version of it before I leave this spot."

"Why do you doubt what I tell you, soldier?"

"Will you answer me a question, madame?"

"A thousand of them."

"I think I see how this was done. When he realised you were about to strike, he held his arm across his face to protect it, and you struck him near the left shoulder."

This seemed such a reasonable explanation that Thérèse was about to answer yes, when suddenly she remembered that a sword thrust would enter the front of the arm, whereas a stiletto stroke, delivered as the soldier had indicated, would enter the back of the arm and could not take the same direction as would have been the case had the arm been outstretched or hanging by his side.

"No, soldier," she said, "you are wrong. My husband had threatened to take me in his arms and place me on the horse against my will. I warned him that if he attempted to carry out his menace, I would strike him. He rushed at me with arms outstretched, and I struck."

CHAPTER XIX

A ROADSIDE COMEDY

The soldier grunted, but made no further comment. In a trice the wound was more effectively bandaged than she had expected. The amateur surgeon shook Cardillac roughly by grasping his right shoulder, and his prediction that the man was merely asleep proved correct. Cardillac blinked his eyes, then with an effort rose slowly to a sitting posture, muttering a malediction as the wounded arm gave him a twinge. The soldier was kneeling on his left side, with his left arm supporting the young man's head. Thérèse knelt quickly close to the right.

"Why, what a soft fool I am," said Cardillac, drawing his right hand across his brow, the same action he had taken just before he fell. "Any school-girl might show more stamina."

"Oh, Victor, Victor!" exclaimed Marie. "Do not talk till you have more strength, I beseech you!"

"Talking won't hurt him," said the soldier. "What is your name, monsieur?"

"I told you," snapped the girl, "that his name is Victor Duchamps. Do you still doubt my word, soldier?"

"I wish you would not interrupt, madame. I have already heard your story, and I want to hear his. What is your name, monsieur?"

"Victor Duchamps," replied Cardillac, dazed, but obedient to her glance. He closed his eyes wearily and leaned back heavily on the soldier's arm.

"I thank you, sir," continued Cardillac. "You have bandaged that wound as well as the doctor in——"

The girl hesitated no longer, but flung her arms round his neck.

"Oh, Victor, Victor!" she cried. "I was afraid I had killed you!"

"My dear, you had nothing——"

She stopped his lips with a kiss.

"Why don't you let the man speak?" cried the indignant and now thoroughly distrustful soldier.

She turned on him with all the virulence of the virago she pretended to be.

"How dare you interrupt the affection of a wife who has recovered her husband from the grave?"

"Affection!" protested the bewildered soldier. "You talk of affection, who sent your dagger through your husband's arm, and stormed till the poor man fainted through loss of blood! Affection, say you! God protect me from such affection."

"Why," cried Cardillac, "you beast! She never——"

But he was silenced by the embrace of the girl, who drew his head to her shoulder, and rapidly whispered in his ear:

"Gather your wits together, and listen. We are married. You are Victor Duchamps. We came from Tours through Blois, and are going to Beaugency; thence to Paris. You are a King's man. You tried to beat me, and I struck you with my dagger. Do you understand? Either keep quiet, or follow what I have said."

This was spoken so rapidly that even if the soldier had heard it he could not have understood, but no sound came to him. Apparently she was fondling her husband in an ecstasy of joy at his recovery.

"Now, madame," said the soldier, standing up, "will you rise and step aside, or shall I be forced to arrest you both?"

The girl rose, walked to the patient horse, and patted its neck.

"Monsieur, where are you from?"

"From Tours."

"Whither are you bound?"

"To-night to Beaugency. After that with a permit to Paris, there to take service with the King."

"Is this woman your wife?"

"Yes."

"What is her name?"

"Marie Duchamps."

"How came you by your wound?"

"I refuse to answer."

"Then in that case you must both return with me to Blois."

"Oh, Victor," cried the girl, "don't try to shield me. I have told him all about it."

"Madame, keep quiet. I have heard enough of your clack to-night."

"And I," said Cardillac, staggering to his feet, "have heard enough of yours. Curse you, sir, how dare you address my wife in such a manner! a lady born and bred, and you the scum of the earth! You think because I am weak I can be browbeaten by such as you. By Saint Martin of Tours, I'll run you through, like a spitted chicken, if you dare address this lady but in words of the deepest respect."

"Deepest respect!" muttered the soldier, endeavouring to edge towards his musketoon, which leaned against a tree. "Deepest respect, when she thrust a dagger through you!"

"Out upon that! 'Tis none of your affair, you carrion of the crow fields."

Cardillac, now all on the alert, stepped between the soldier and his chief weapon, his own sword gleaming in the moonlight.

"Oh, Victor, Victor!" warned the girl. But Victor understood better than she the type of man with whom he had to deal. The very fact that he had now encountered such language convinced the soldier more effectually than any cajoling would have done that these people had the right to travel on his road.

"I meant no harm, monsieur. I merely asked, as is my duty, certain questions which you have answered quite to my satisfaction. And now, monsieur, if you will oblige me with the word for the night—I implore madame not to speak—I shall be satisfied. If you are a King's man, you carry the King's word. I ask you, sir, what it is."

"The word is 'Montoire,' scullion."

"Right, monsieur, you are in the right; and hoping that I have bound the wound to your satisfaction, I bid you a very good-night."

"Oh, that's all right, my good fellow. You have bound the wound as excellently as the doctor——"

"Yes, as excellently as any doctor," cried Thérèse, interrupting.

"That was what I was saying," corrected Cardillac. "You have done it as well as any surgeon could. And now, my good man, apologise to the lady, and I will give you a surgeon's fee."

"Madame, I hope I have said nothing that offended you. You know my duty must be performed. I am one of the patrols of the road."

To this apology, such as it was, the lady made no reply.

Cardillac, hesitating whether or not to entrust him with the musketoon, yet not wishing to deprive him of it, said:

"Are you satisfied with your enquiries, soldier?"

"Passably so," growled the man, "but I must take this dagger with me as evidence when I make my report."

He gingerly raised the dagger from the roadway.

"Grasp the dagger by the blade, and hand it, hilt forward, to me."

With some hesitation the soldier did as he was commanded. If he had picked up the dagger as a weapon against the drawn sword, his own experience told him such dependence would be futile. Cardillac examined the stiletto with interest. On its hilt, mosaiced in jewels, was the crest of the House of Montreuil. That dagger would form a clue that must not get out of his possession.

"I'll take charge of this," said Cardillac.

"But madame said she never wished to see it again."

"I daresay. I shall conceal it about my person that she may be saved the displeasure of looking at it."

"But I must make my report, monsieur, and this is evidence of the crime."

"There was no crime and no evidence. Madame was cozening you, seeing you are a fool. She never struck me with her dagger."

"Then how came the wound, monsieur?"

"Oh, that's very simple. Tired of walking on foot, and also of horseback riding, I tried progression on my hands, neglecting to withdraw my sword when I stood on my head. The sword fell out and ran through my arm. Incorporate that in your report, and never be so ungallant in Touraine as to indict a lady."

The soldier growled.

"I cannot put a lie like that in my report."

"Then don't report at all, you monument of stupidity, for then you will save me from making a report when I reach Beaugency. Here are we, King's travellers on the King's highway, yet you dare to investigate as if you were one of His Majesty's magistrates. The moment the word was given you, and the correct word, you should have passed on. What private brawls my wife and I may indulge in are none of your business, nor the business of anyone like you. Are you going to report?"

"If you think it is not necessary, monsieur——"

"You should have done one thing or the other, which was either to allow us to pass, or to arrest us. If you do not arrest us, what is the use of your report? If you intend to arrest us, say so, and say it now, also tell me what reason you will give to your superiors for arresting a man who carries the pass-word."

The perplexed soldier removed his cap and scratched his head.

"Well, monsieur, if you say nothing, I'll say nothing."

"As you please; it doesn't matter to me. But in that case here is your musketoons and here are three gold pieces in payment of your bandaging."

The patrol accepted the gold pieces with some awkward expressions of gratitude, took his musketoons from Cardillac's hand, and throwing it over his shoulder marched stoutly away. For a few moments there was some anxiety between the two that he might, when at a safe distance, fire upon them, but the high moon beat down upon the soldier's back, and he never looked behind him.

"Well, thank Heaven we are rid of that fellow," said Cardillac.

"Yes," sighed the girl, "but my road to Blois is blocked."

CHAPTER XX

THE MIDNIGHT PICNIC IN THE WOODS

Cardillac stood with his back against the horse, not yet too steady on his feet. He gazed down the road, watching the disappearing patrol. Thérèse remained in the middle of the road, her face, in shadow, turned toward the west, her head bowed, waiting for the man to speak, yet fearing what he would say, feeling that his first words after such an episode would be vital; definite one way or another; a test of his quality as a gentleman, or rather of what the girl in her heart conceived a gentleman to be. Something different, she thought, from the men she had hitherto met. It would be deplorable if he treated as a joke the fact that she had endeavoured to save him by claiming to be his wife, and almost more deplorable if he regarded her action as binding her to anything.

Cardillac did not change his gaze from the west till the stalwart soldier had faded completely away, becoming indistinguishable in the slight haze, which seemed like thickened moonlight, far down the road. When at last the disappearance was complete, he, with a slight, joyful exclamation of relief to his brooding companion, looked at her for a moment, and noted a certain trace of dejection in her attitude. When he spoke, his voice took on all the cheeriness of a lad set free from some penalty.

"Well, Marie!" he cried, "I do like a question to be definitely settled."

The girl's heart seemed to leap into her throat, and her head bent lower, for she knew her face was reddening. So this was the way he proposed to take it; and there arose in her breast a sensation of pity, not so much for herself as for him.

"And what question has been definitely settled, monsieur?" she asked, striving to keep control of her voice.

"Why, I should think you knew that, if anyone did. You are quick to perceive any radical change in circumstances, Marie."

"I fear at times I am very slow, monsieur. Pray enlighten me regarding the question you speak of, and tell me plainly what is the nature of the settlement to which you refer."

"Marie, you bewilder me with your changes of mood. You are pretending now to be very dull, although I know you are never dull. Sometimes I am disquieted by a suspicion that you are treating me lightly."

"Oh, impossible, monsieur!"

"There is one thing, Marie, that a Gascon will not stand, whether it comes from man or woman, and that is to be esteemed a sort of immature joke. If a man attempted that, he should be instantly compelled to draw his sword, but with a woman I am at a loss."

"You are quite mistaken, Monsieur de Cardillac. I regard you as a very, very serious person, and thus I am chagrined that, instead of instructing one so much your inferior when she begs for information, you wander from the point. You were good enough to say that some question was definitely answered, and I wish to know what the question is."

"The question pertains to yourself and myself, Marie, and the answer, I thank your saint and mine, is entirely to my satisfaction."

Now the girl raised her head, and if a look could have frozen the jubilant youth, the smile he endeavoured to make ingratiating would have become fixed.

"I do not understand you, monsieur," and he had never heard her speak with such distant unfriendliness, even when he had been coercing her in the convent. "In what manner has our relationship been changed?"

"My dear Marie, do you mean to persist in ignoring circumstances, one of which you yourself but just now pointed out? 'The road to Blois,' you said, 'is blocked,' and that is absolutely true. I cannot go thither, neither can you, yet your very last words, before I so foolishly fainted like a school-girl, were to the effect that you would proceed alone to Blois, whereas I should take whatever direction pleased me. Now the road to Blois is closed to us.

"The road to Beaugency is impossible. The forest to the north is impossible. Thus east, west and north are banished from

our problem; only the south is left, and, dear girl, if you will allow me to call you so, you and I must travel to the south together."

Again the girl's head drooped.

"Yes, I understand, now that you point it out so clearly," she murmured.

"And look you, Marie, how providential this decision is which fate has made for us. You speak of my putting things clearly, but if my mind had not been wandering, I should have convinced you long ago that this was really the only plan. As a lad I lived at Montrichard for months, and also at a farm in the environs of Blois, to the south of the river. All this country on the left bank of the Loire is known to me. I am familiar with the roads and the paths, and the woodcutters' huts and the huntsmen's lodges, and once we cross the river, I am, as it were, in my own land.

"Aside from this, there are no King's soldiers over there. The forest across the flood is not in the unkempt condition of this impenetrable thicket, because the woodmen are unmolested by wandering soldiery. They have never been looted of their scanty possessions, with no redress from those in command. Why, Marie, I could defy Luynes and all his host over there, for, even at night, I can lead you through paths so intricate and so embowered with foliage that your eyes would sparkle at their beauty, rather than at your own danger. Danger? There isn't any, once we reach the farther bank. My mind was rather dazed, otherwise I had seen all these advantages before, and so persuaded you, Marie, instead of attempting to coerce you, for which, dear girl, I pray you forgive me.

"Then, a short league south of Blois, on the road to St. Aignan, stands the stout farm of Gaspard Maloche, who used to be a tenant on our estate until, when I was a boy, he went north, and settled in Touraine. His strong house is built round a courtyard, like a château or a monastery, and could stand a siege as well as any fortress in the land. Within its walls we will be welcome and safe, and you may reach Blois at your convenience from the fair south, instead of from the suspicious east.

"But a few short months ago I stopped with Maloche on my way to Paris. He has become more rich and prosperous than would ever have been the case had he remained in Gascony, for the Court at Blois is his customer. His lands are fertile, and being out of the beaten track have never been overrun by the military."

The girl looked up at him, with a rare smile on her enticing face. His own countenance was flushed by his enthusiastic declamation. In his fancy he was already safe within the farm stronghold.

"You paint a very alluring picture, monsieur, and, in truth, I wish I were there at this moment."

"I shall lead you there in perfect safety within a very few hours. Are you afraid, Marie?"

"Not in the least, but, at the risk of shocking your fanciful nature, I must make the plebeian confession that I am hungry. Your attack on our convent was ill-timed, monsieur, for you came half an hour before dinner, and I have had nothing to eat since mid-day. So when you spoke of the estimable Maloche becoming rich by feeding the Court, my appetite, as well as my affection, turned towards the homestead that is doubtless well provided with good things to eat."

"Now, out upon me for a selfish, thoughtless beast! Why did you not tell me you were hungry, Marie?"

"Why did you not tell me you were wounded, monsieur?"

"Oh, a wound is nothing, and you could not have removed it if you had known."

"Well, hunger is nothing, and you could not have removed it had you known."

"There you are mistaken, Marie. I shall gladly bestow upon you the supper of Mademoiselle de Montreuil."

The girl seemed startled.

"What do you mean by that, monsieur?" she asked breathlessly.

"At the Hôtel Ecu de Bretagne, in Beaugency, I made an excellent repast, so satisfying that until this moment I forgot such a thing as hunger existed in the world. Well, I thought that, as I should be escorting mademoiselle all night through the forest, she might require a little refreshment, so I had the host of the Bretagne place in my saddle-bags two measures of

wine, a cold, fat roasted *poulet*, most excellent bread, and other appetising provender. We shall picnic here by the roadside on the instant."

Cardillac turned to the saddle-bags, but she, approaching him, laid her hand lightly on his shoulder.

"No, not by the roadside, but on the other bank of the Loire. I am not so hungry as I was. I fear the return of that patrol with reinforcements. Let us plunge at once through the forest to the river, but first give me a sup of wine, and take a flagon for yourself, for the pallor has returned."

"Indeed, your suggestion is both wise and practicable, Marie; I had not thought that any woman, except my mother, could be so sensible."

The girl laughed, and he, undoing the fastenings of the saddle-bag nearest him, brought out two leathern cups, one inside the other, separated them, and poured into each the rich red wine of Beaugency.

"I drink," she said, raising aloft the cup, "to the success of that brave and resourceful man, Cardillac."

"And I," cried the youth, "pledge the health of the sweetest and most lovely princess in the world, courageous as a man, and charming as a child."

"Your mother, monsieur?" she asked, with an arch smile.

"Not this time, Marie, good woman as she is," and with that he drained the leathern goblet.

"And now for the river!" he cried.

"Wait one moment," suggested the girl. "You said I could not have helped your wound, and I said you could not assuage my hunger. We were both wrong, it seems, for I am about to set up my surgery against your catering."

She took from her neck a silken scarf, and threw it over his. Tying a knot in it, she put his arm through the loop.

"There," she said, "we must be careful of that arm during the rest of the journey."

He mounted the horse, held out a hand to the girl, and she sprang up behind him.

"I shall hold on," she said, "by your sword belt," and perhaps the quick blush that rose to her cheeks was caused by remembrance that the romancing François had placed her arm around the horseman's waist.

Thus the two bade farewell to the empty highroad, and entered the dense forest which lay south of it. It proved to be in little better condition than that to the north, but on this occasion the moon, although unseen, which rode high in the heavens, caused the forest to be light enough for all practical purposes.

Being now sure of their direction, they speedily traversed the scant league that separated the highroad from the river.

The young man viewed the broad valley of the Loire with an exultation that he attributed to the inspiring quality of the wine he had consumed, but, nevertheless, this river produced, in his heart certain sentimental emotions. It was the dividing line between the north and the south, and, indeed, he regarded the Loire more as an entirely southern river than as the boundary between two sections of France.

It was southern in its temper: quick to rise in wrath with devastating consequences, quick to subside into quiescence again; in spring a raging, resistless flood, spreading from bank to bank, but now, under the moonlight, seeming a serious and placid stream, separated by long stretches of gravel islands and peninsulas, white and gleaming between glittering stretches of blue water.

"The Loire! The Loire!" he murmured affectionately, as he set his horse to the task of fording it, an undertaking which the animal ventured upon with evident misgiving. It was the middle of summer, which meant a shallow river, so the crossing was easily made without wetting the boots of Cardillac or the skirts of mademoiselle. Mounting the bank on the other side, even the girl could see that here the forest resembled a park rather than the savage woodland they had left.

Cardillac halted his horse under the trees on a picturesque bluff, where they could see the Loire without danger of being themselves descried, for they were out of the moonlight under the trees, and here they took their first meal together, with

great content and talk and laughter, as if they had known each other for years instead of hours. The height of the moon showed that it was somewhere about midnight.

Cardillac, before sitting down on the sward, broke one of his loaves into pieces, and fed them to his horse, from whose head he had removed the bridle. Once again he removed the saddle from the animal's back, and was about to arrange it for the convenience of Marie, as he had done in the forest, when she laughingly protested that a picnic furnished with a chair was incongruous, neither chair nor table being allowable at such a festivity. So he spread his cloak as a carpet on the ground, and on this she ensconced herself, playing hostess with an admirable vivacity which he found most alluring.

He sprawled full length on the ground opposite her, and together they enjoyed the refecation provided by the inn-keeper of Beaugency. He reclined there with great content, enjoying a delicious sensation of drowsiness and complete rest, most pleasurable after the struggles through which he had come.

She, with her feet drawn up under her, leaning her elbow on the saddle, her fine eyes heavy with lack of sleep, murmured dreamily in what the young man thought was the most musical voice he had ever heard.

"It is now likely that we are quite safe from pursuit," he said, "and there is twice as much time as we need to reach Maloche's farm before he and his family are astir, so, all in all, a complicated situation has resolved itself into one of complete simplicity, and that's a comfort. I do dislike being hurried, and always prefer to face an enemy and get it over with, rather than allow him to chase me. I detest a flight from my foes, no matter how many they are, for such a contingency causes one to put on a speed that is inconvenient. I like to stroll through the world indolently, as a gentleman should."

"Then you ought to become a monk, monsieur, and lead the placid life."

"Indeed, Marie, I have often envied the monastic orders, but within twenty-four hours I have realised that such an existence is not for me."

"What caused you to change your mind?"

"The meeting with you, Marie Duchamps."

CHAPTER XXI

AVOWALS AND ADVICE

"But you met me in a convent, and that, one might think, should have given an impetus to your first resolution."

"Did you ever meditate upon taking the veil, Marie?"

"Often; but lately I have changed my mind."

"Ah," cried the young man with eagerness, "why was that?"

"Because," replied the girl languidly, "my recent experience of the cloisters shows that they are no protection against man. He breaks in and steals. He grasps one by the wrist; he shakes one by the shoulders; storms, threatens, makes uncomplimentary remarks, or, worse still, tries flattery. No, the convent was a disappointment towards the last."

"Well, Marie," demurred, Cardillac, "you were eager enough to leave it."

"I was commanded by a woman and coerced by a man, so what could a poor defenceless creature like myself do?"

"Do? Why, she could revenge herself on the man afterwards; threaten him with her stiletto, and torment him with a thousand uncertainties that sting worse than the sharpest steel. Nevertheless, I am sorry I treated you roughly, Marie, and I hope you will forgive me."

"Oh, I have forgiven you long since, monsieur. You did nothing very drastic after all, but for an indolent man you seemed to be in a tremendous hurry. I never saw one so breathless before. First you tumbled over me at the door, then, as I suspect, went headlong across the well-curb, and at last came heedlessly down that rope to the discomfiture of your wound, so now it is amusing to hear you speak of your love of leisure."

"You find nothing but comicality in my conversation, perhaps, mademoiselle," complained Cardillac.

"Be assured you have been very entertaining, monsieur. I never before spent so interesting an evening in my life; I am sure no companion of yours could justly complain of ennui while in your society."

"Are you ever serious, Marie?"

"Oh, very often, monsieur, sometimes intensely serious."

"It is possible, mademoiselle, that you find it difficult to take me seriously."

The girl pondered over this remark, and seemed half asleep, as he watched her closely. At last she said:

"I should be very unfair if I did not take you seriously now. At the request of the Duke de Montreuil, you undertook a task of extreme difficulty, which you have carried out with a persistence that is marvellous. You have shown determination, bravery and resource, and even at the last moment you snatched victory from defeat."

"Ah, yes, but I did not snatch mademoiselle from the convent."

The girl, with half-opened eyes, looked quizzically across at him.

"Do you so bitterly regret that mademoiselle is not here, monsieur?"

Cardillac sat up suddenly.

"Now and then, Marie, you say something that illuminates my mind as a torch lights up a dark chamber. Disappointed as I was at missing mademoiselle, I am now thrilled with a holy joy that she is absent; that there is no one here but yourself and myself."

"Am I to take that as a personal compliment, monsieur? Surely the company of such as I cannot be held the equivalent of a great lady's society?"

"Yes, Marie, it can. I'd rather be here alone with you than share the comradeship of Mademoiselle de Montreuil."

"You astonish me, monsieur. If what you say is true, then there is nothing in that distinction of class upon which you insisted so strongly when we first became acquainted. Respect for caste has been ingrained in me ever since I could walk, but you teach me that I am still very young, with many vital points of life yet to be unfolded to me."

"Marie, I speak with deep regard and a great respect for you when I say that mademoiselle would not have done what you did to save my life. I should like to put my admiration into words that would not offend you, and, unskilled as I am in language, I venture only this far, trusting that you may believe in the sincerity of my gratitude."

Marie's eyes were no longer visible to him; she spoke in a whisper that only the deep silence of the forest rendered audible.

"Monsieur de Cardillac, you are unjust to mademoiselle. Believe me, whatever I did to save a friend Mademoiselle Thérèse de Montreuil would have done. I thank you for your appreciation, and we must never speak of this again."

"The subject is banished forever, Marie, and now let me say that I am most anxious to earn your approbation. The moment you are safe within the château of Blois, I shall return to the convent at Beaugency, and this time I shall not fail, for I am inspired by another thought than that of money. I shall lead mademoiselle in safety to her father. I shall refuse his thousand pistoles, but, being selfish, will come to you for my reward. Will you form such a compact with me, Marie?"

The girl looked quickly up at him, with alarm in her eyes.

"No, no," she said. "'Twould be madness; 'twould be suicide. All that district is alive with enemies searching for you. I cannot permit it; I will not permit it."

"My enemies," cried Cardillac grandly, with a wave of his hand, "I shall brush aside. The only serious disadvantage of the task is that I may be compelled to make a night journey with mademoiselle, wishing all the time that you were in her stead."

"If you do not obey me," insisted the young lady, her former arrogance returning, "I shall never permit you to see me again."

"But—but think of that poor creature immured in such a grim prison. Think of her helpless and——"

"Monsieur, Mademoiselle de Montreuil remains where she is by her own desire. Your heedless intervention would frustrate all her plans."

"What are her plans?" demanded Cardillac, taken aback by her vehemence, yet flattered to think perhaps her motive was his own safety.

"It is not for me to disclose them without her permission, even if I know what they are, which I neither admit nor deny."

"But my word is pledged to her father, Marie."

"Your anxiety on that point, monsieur, will be speedily resolved. All I ask is that you shall wait until you hear from the Duke de Montreuil himself. I bear a letter from his daughter which will be forwarded to him. There only needs to be added to this letter a statement of your whereabouts, when the duke will communicate with you, and I shall be surprised if you do not find him entirely of his daughter's mind. I may add that although under the late régime the duke ruled France, mademoiselle rules the duke. You will be requested by the duke himself to forgo any further efforts towards the release of his daughter."

"You bear a letter from mademoiselle to her father? How can that be, Marie? The lady had no time to write more than that hurried scrawl which you gave to me on the highroad."

Marie's reply showed that she was far from pleased at the doubt thrown upon her veracity.

"I told you before, monsieur, that you were longer cutting the rope than you imagined. The question is, are you or are you not going to obey me?"

"I shall obey you in all things, Marie."

"Then why raise so many objections?"

"Because I regret that you take from me the one opportunity I possess of proving my devotion to you."

"Do you really desire to prove that?"

"Marie, you know I do."

"Then, instead of selfishly selecting your own path, why not act like a knight of olden time, and request the lady to present you with the opportunity presumably desired so much? It is possible she might be pleased if asked to name an emprise dearer to her heart than the rescue of Mademoiselle de Montreuil, and there is a likelihood—although of that I cannot at the moment speak positively—that she may reward you suitably if you are successful in your essay."

"Marie, name the adventure, and, always premising that the Duke de Montreuil releases me, I shall undertake it."

"Monsieur, you seem very desirous of flying to the aid of a young woman not yet twenty; one who is wealthy, said to be beautiful, and admittedly capricious."

"Marie," declared Cardillac earnestly, snapping his finger and thumb in the air, "I do not care that for Mademoiselle de Montreuil. It is only that my word is pledged to her father."

"Very well. Would it not be more chivalrous to assist an old woman who is in dire necessity, one imprisoned in a strong castle and not in a convent, one surrounded not, by nuns, but by ten thousand of the King's troops?"

"Oh, you mean the Queen?"

"Yes, I mean the Queen."

"But why are you so much interested in Her Majesty? I thought it was Mademoiselle de Montreuil herself who, according to what her father said, was absorbed in that enterprise. Are you so devoted to mademoiselle that you adopt every cause she favours?"

"Yes, monsieur, I am. She is tire-woman to the Queen; I am tire-woman to her; therefore, you see, I am but two steps from the throne. Mademoiselle and I are equally faithful to Marie de Médicis."

"Then, Marie, the question is settled. The Queen leaves Blois very shortly under my escort, and her ten thousand jailors may go hang."

Marie laughed quietly, but with a certain note of satisfaction.

"Monsieur, you are very confident."

"That is because the reward I promise myself is one very greatly desired by me."

"I make no doubt, monsieur, that your reward will be ample. I am sure that the Duke d'Epéron, the Duke de Montreuil, and all the wealthy adherents of the Queen will make you a rich man if you are successful in your undertaking."

"Marie, that is unkind. The knights of old whom you mention did not work for a wage in gold, neither shall the chink of coin urge me on, but rather the notes of a woman's voice."

"I hope the woman will prove worthy of a sentiment so lofty. In these days of bribery it is refreshing to meet a man uninfluenced by cupidity. Now listen to one woman's voice, and pay heed to her recommendation. You must do nothing recklessly, nor in that haste which you so much deplored a while since. I counsel you to rest until your wound is completely healed. The farm of Maloche seems a little too near Blois to be a safe residence for you at the present moment.

"I advise, therefore, that you retire to Montrichard, and stop there until the hue and cry for you has ended. By that time your arm will be well again, and if I have succeeded in gaining admittance to the castle, I shall have become acquainted with the situation and the guards, and so be in a position to aid you; I inside the walls, and you without. Perhaps we could arrange a meeting now and then, either in the town of Blois or on the farm of Maloche, which is like to prove the safer spot. There I can inform you minutely of the dangers to be encountered, and perhaps may be able to furnish some

hints of value."

"I see I am going to like this task," said Cardillac.

"I hope you will succeed in it, monsieur."

"Well, Marie, considering the warning I have given you, I am delighted to hear you express that hope."

"And now, monsieur, I think you are forgetting your horse. He is looking yearningly towards the remnants of our bread."

Cardillac sprang to his feet, gave the horse another feed, then led him down to the margin of the river that he might drink. On his return he saw that Marie had laid her head upon the saddle, and was already sound asleep. She had drawn her own cloak round her shoulders, and in the dim light looked very young, almost babyish. Cardillac sat down with his back against the tree, but, drowsy as he was, the throbbing in his arm, which had swelled considerably, banished sleep; therefore, like the knight of old, he kept vigil.

CHAPTER XXII

THE FARM OF MALOCHE

At daybreak the pair on horseback came out upon the St. Aignan road, a short distance south of the farmhouse that was their destination. Maloche and his industrious family of young men and women were at their morning's work, when the old farmer was astonished to see Cardillac come riding into the courtyard with a comely young woman behind him. Maloche had heard nothing from this youth since he had stopped with them some months before *en route* for Paris, but the splendour of the lad's costume seemed to indicate that he had met prosperity in the great city.

It had been agreed between the two travellers that nothing should be said of their coming from Beaugency, and, indeed, their arrival from the south caused the farmer to believe that the young man had been visiting his own home, and was once more on the way to Paris. Cardillac did not dispel this illusion, and introduced Marie Duchamps as a friend of his family who desired to take service with the Queen.

Maloche, who drove daily into Blois with supplies for both château and garrison, said that it would be difficult for the girl to get such a place unless she were well recommended, and her loyalty to the present régime fully established. To this Cardillac replied that he had been informed in Paris that all the Queen's ladies-in-waiting, with one or two exceptions, had been allowed to accompany her to Blois. This Maloche admitted was true; the Queen had been permitted to choose such of her former adherents as she wished to have in attendance during her imprisonment; but a girl coming from the south, like Marie Duchamps, could not hope to enter this inner circle unless she were personally acquainted with the Queen, and her name submitted to the authorities in Paris.

Aside from the Queen's personal body-guard, as one might term it, there were numerous other servants engaged who were selected because they were loyal to the King and unknown to the King's mother. They were chosen by the commander of the garrison, and it was well known that their presence was not primarily intended for the convenience of the Queen, but rather that they were expected to spy upon her and all who belonged to her. A stranger might possibly gain admittance to this outer circle of service, but, as a rule, those in charge of the Queen's safe-keeping selected servants personally known to them. Maloche said that one of his own daughters was employed in the palace, and he met her nearly every day.

Phyllis Maloche did work that required strength rather than mentality; work that came easy to a stalwart country girl, but which a fragile creature like Marie Duchamps could not accomplish. Maloche seemed to think that Marie was herself too much like a lady to obtain a position as servant, but Cardillac assured him that in the higher branches of service were many girls of beauty and culture whose manners were quite equal to those of their mistress. Maloche replied that he had heard such was the case, and added that the palace swarmed with servants of all grades, and that he did not doubt if patience and a little common-sense were used, a place might be found entirely to the satisfaction of Marie Duchamps. But being a practical, common-sense man himself, he stated quite emphatically that it would be futile for Marie to enter Blois alone and—without recommendation that could bear the strictest scrutiny—expect to gain admittance even to the precincts of the palace.

If, then, she would rest content at the farm for some days, he would make enquiries of his daughter that very morning, learn what positions were vacant, and then set about getting one suitable for Marie. It was quite possible, he said, that a girl so pretty and engaging might attract the attention of the Queen herself. But if she were thus singled out by such high favour, and if the authorities sanctioned the selection, Marie would then herself become a prisoner, for none of the Queen's coterie was allowed outside the palace—indeed, they were not suffered to leave the first floor, where the Queen's apartments were situated, in the wing of Francis I; whereas if Marie got a situation among the ordinary servants of the château, she would retain full liberty to come from castle to town or even into the country without hindrance, unless she became suspected of carrying information, in which case her speedy dismissal would take place.

Maloche had been told at Blois that emissaries of the Duke d'Epéron had time and again endeavoured to establish communication with the Queen, but these plans, he understood, had been discovered and frustrated, and it was believed that several executions had taken place, the victims being spies caught red-handed. All this information Cardillac gathered from Maloche in conversation during the first morning of his stay. Marie had disappeared in company with one of Maloche's daughters, and the old farmer talked quite freely with his young friend.

Maloche was a typical peasant of his time; a grave, stalwart old man, and an indefatigable worker, shrewd in making a bargain, greedy in the accumulation of money, living in the midst of plenty with great frugality, undisputed master of his own house, no member of his family daring to thwart him. For the nobility he possessed an inherited respect, and was flattered that a young scion of a noble house, like Cardillac, visited him now and then. Doubtless the son of his former landlord was the more welcome in that he was lavish with his money when he had any, and during this sojourn he seemed to be plentifully supplied with gold, which Maloche shared without troubling about its origin.

He supposed that directly or indirectly it came from the King, because when Cardillac, a few months before, had made the farm a point of call, the young man was then on his way to Paris with the avowed intention of entering the service of Luynes, the new head of the state. Maloche took it for granted that every member of the aristocracy who went well recommended to Paris became rich, and Cardillac had flaunted an invitation from no less a personage than the Prime Minister himself, so it never occurred to the farmer that Cardillac had changed his colours and was now an avowed partisan of the Queen Mother, and an enemy of her enemies, including her son, the King.

Like all agriculturists of that day, Maloche betrayed no interest in politics. All that he wished was to be left alone, and luck being his friend, he had chosen a farm most fortunately situated for his purposes. Less than a league south of Blois, the property was situated in that large wedge of country south of the Loire, which, by tacit consent of King's men and Queen's men, was regarded as neutral territory.

Although small parties of either faction might traverse it, they did so peacefully, for if either side had invaded it with a large body of men, the other would be bound to counteract that move, and so there would be danger of a battle being precipitated that might deliver over the country to the horrors of civil war.

Briefly, the situation was this. Every day that Luynes gained without a conflict was so much to the good, and as the eventless days went by, the King became more and more firmly seated on his throne. By a masterly arrangement of his forces Luynes had checkmated the opposition. Although all France was in a state of tension, nevertheless the tension would relax rather than increase with time, because there were continual desertions from the Queen's partisans to the party in actual power.

Luynes counted on the almost universal desire of human nature to be on the side that was apparently winning, and the side *de facto* in office, and events were proving him right. But once allow the passions of battle free rein, let Luynes lose an important battle, and the whole situation would be in the melting pot; a melting pot heated on the red furnace of war.

On the other hand, the Duke d'Epemon, commander of the Queen's forces, dare not risk a fight until he obtained possession of the Queen, because any hostile move on his part might result in the instant execution of Her Majesty, if Luynes possessed the courage to commit such an act. Luynes was as yet an unknown quantity, no man among the Queen's forces being aware whether he was brave or the reverse, therefore the strong force under the Duke d'Epemon lay for the moment nullified.

Thirty years before these events Europe had been given a drastic example of what a courageous monarch might do in similar circumstances, and Europe was thrilled with horror when the head of Mary, Queen of Scots, rolled bleeding to the dust. The results growing from this execution were such as to strengthen the hand of Luynes, and render d'Epemon still more cautious. Although all Europe execrated the deed, it was now a matter of history that it had brought peace to the island, and sixteen years after the execution, Elizabeth died admittedly the greatest monarch that had ever sat on the English throne, and well-nigh mistress of the world.

Why should not the French King do what the English Queen had done, and save his country from bloodshed by the sacrifice of one woman, whom at least half of France regarded as a foreigner, and an attempted usurper of power that rightfully belonged to her son? Once Marie de Médicis was eliminated, all opposition to the new King must of necessity cease, for there would then be no centre for the forces of an executed Queen to rally round; thus two armies, of nearly equal strength, stood on the alert, neither daring to fire a shot.

But this balanced situation made the adventure of Cardillac all the more exasperating to the authorities in Paris. He had done worse than win a battle: he had made Luynes the laughing stock of the country. All France was smiling in sympathy with the impetuous lad, who seemed to typify the dash, the bravery and the humour of his land.

The story of his exploits was permeating to the most remote districts, losing nothing as it travelled. It became known that

for months he had waited day by day with the utmost patience in the public hall of Luynes's own house, while that great man had never accorded him the favour of a word or an interview. The minions of Luynes undertook to trap the guileless youth, but he baffled the police of Paris, supposed to be the most acute in the world, leaping unscathed out of the capital, past all its guards, bringing with him the powerful noble Luynes wished to hold in his clutch, fooled the King's army as he had fooled the Parisian police, and actually entered the convent under the support of a King's officer in uniform while four of the King's soldiers were detailed for escort.

Defying alike those two almost omnipotent bodies, the church and state, he broke into the convent, barred his enemies out, and utterly disappeared with the girl who had been hostage for her father's good behaviour, while her father had safely attained the impregnable fortress of Loches.

One poet in Paris advised Luynes to search for Cardillac in the planet of Mars, for from thence such a war-like, resourceful youth must have come, or the planet Venus, for thither he must have taken the most beautiful young woman in France. As day followed day, and nothing whatever was heard of the pair, although innocent couples were arrested here and there all over the land, the good will of their countrymen and countrywomen went out to Cardillac, and the laughter at Luynes increased, while all the sleuth-hounds at his disposal searched every nook and cranny in vain.

CHAPTER XXIII

CIRCUMVENTING THE PEASANT

The young people had lived quietly for a week under the economical roof of the frugal farmer, paying a price for their accommodation that should have entitled them to a palace. Both had discarded their finery and adopted the peasant dress of host and hostess, not wishing to attract any undue attention from chance passers-by. Day by day Maloche had gone to Blois with his cartload of market produce, and each morning he saw his daughter in the palace, thus learning what progress was being made in the search for a situation that Marie Duchamps might fill. At last he was asked to bring the girl with him on his next visit to the town.

Having been promised a most satisfactory fee for his good offices in this matter, the old man left the palace door with some satisfaction. As he walked across the square, his attention was attracted by a troop of soldiers convulsed with boisterous laughter. Someone was telling a story, gesticulating dramatically, and his recital seemed to be very successful.

Maloche was not a humourous man, and was moving glumly on, when the name Cardillac caught his ear. He paused and listened with ever-deepening horror. This was the first he had heard of the escapade of which nearly everybody else was talking. Had he been sheltering a man whose head was forfeit to the state and whose soul was condemned by the church? It seemed incredible, and yet he must unconsciously have been harbouring the man for whom all France was in search; a villain guilty of rebellion and sacrilege. At first a cold anger rose slowly in the heart of the old man as he bethought him how selfishly this frivolous youth had placed his family and possessions in extreme jeopardy, for no one would believe his own assertion that sanctuary had been accorded to Cardillac in innocence. This, then, was the source of the gold that the young man had flung away so recklessly, and which the farmer had taken with no doubt of its loyal origin.

Maloche at once determined to lay information before the commander of the palace that would lead to Cardillac's capture, and he turned towards that officer's residence, his steps in no way impeded by the thought that a great reward would be his.

The soldier had said that the King was willing to give a prince's ransom for this culprit, dead or alive, and no harm could come to any who killed Cardillac, for he was already outlawed by the state, and banned by the bishop of Tours, while excommunication was expected from the Pope himself. It was bad enough to break into any convent, but to violate that of the Sacred Heart, held in the highest esteem by the church, and presided over by a princess of the blood royal, made his crime unforgivable by either church or state.

Arriving at the ante-chamber of the commander, he was gruffly ordered to seat himself on a bench along the wall, and there for half an hour he was allowed to cool his heels, and likewise his anger. Well he knew the tyrannical nature of these officers, and the brutality of the soldiers. Being a shrewd man, he began to estimate his own danger, and thus became more and more impressed by the fact that no one would believe he had visited Blois day by day for nearly a week, and yet knew nothing of this event about which all France was talking.

The commander might not take into account that he was a taciturn man who attended strictly to his own business and did not mix with gossips. His first anger had dulled his reasoning powers, which on ordinary occasions were very acute. If the King was so anxious to capture Cardillac, then it was certain that the commander was on that instant using all his efforts to secure so valuable a prize. Maloche's own cunning began to show him what the commander would do. He was more likely than not to throw the informer into a cell, and then gallop with a troop of horse to the farm, and himself capture Cardillac, taking all the credit, as well as all the cash.

There came to his mind the many conferences he had held with his daughter during the past week, and as these conferences were for the purpose of placing within the palace an unknown girl who doubtless was as bad as Cardillac himself, Maloche began to tremble as he realised the incredibility of the story he must tell if he stuck to the truth. The result would be loss of liberty and the confiscation of his property.

Inwardly cursing Cardillac, he rose, and cautiously made his way out into the open square unnoticed, the soldiers on guard paying little attention to him, supposing he had merely some complaint to make about the price he was paid for his cabbages. He hung about the town all day, haunting cheap drinking shops along the river, and getting bit by bit fuller

particulars of Cardillac's adventure. Gradually he made up his mind that he must get rid of his dangerous guests, but he would first threaten them with arrest, and thus wring from them full compensation for the danger he had run.

When Maloche reached his home, the last meal of the day was laid on the table, and his family, with their guests, were laughing and talking while they waited for him, as the repast could not begin until he arrived.

All present were struck to silence by the sight of the thunder-cloud on the old man's face. Not too genial at his best, each knew that something disastrous had happened. Maloche took his place at the head of the table saying no word, and the meal was eaten in silence, although the dark eyes of Thérèse de Montreuil flashed now and then with indignation at the pall which had fallen on the company through the incoming of an ill-natured man. When supper was finished, Maloche turned to his elder guest.

"Is there another man of your name, Monsieur de Cardillac?"

"Oh, yes, and a better man, namely my father."

"Did your father break into a convent?"

Cardillac laughed.

"Not to my knowledge," he replied. "My good Maloche, you've been hearing something."

"Yes, I have heard in what danger you have insolently placed me, and, by heavens, you shall pay for it! You have been condemned by the King, who has ordered his subjects to take you dead or alive. You have been banned by the bishop of Tours, and will be excommunicated by the Pope."

Cardillac, who heard unmoved the sentence of the King, became a little white around the lips when he heard the intention of the Pope. The girl watched him intently, her eyes ablaze, casting now and then a glance at the truculent old man. All the others were appalled into silence.

"I am sorry that I have brought danger to you," said Cardillac slowly. "If you will carry out your promise regarding the position that Mademoiselle Duchamps desires, I will relieve you of my presence instantly, and if captured, I give you my word that I shall say nothing of my residence here."

"I made no promise, and I will keep none."

"Then perhaps you will be good enough to give back to the lady the money you exacted."

"The lady!" growled Maloche with bitter contempt. "'Tis likely this Duchamps woman is as bad as yourself."

"Or much worse," snapped Marie.

All the Maloche family gasped with dismay at her temerity. The old man scowled across at her.

"Will you keep silent, hussy!" he roared.

Marie placed her elbows on the table, clenched her fists, and placed her little chin in them, as if forcibly to hold her mouth shut. Cardillac rose quietly, left the room, and presently returned with his sword in his right hand.

"Gaspard Maloche," he said, "I have never yet touched with my weapon an unarmed man, but if you do not address this lady with civility, I'll tickle your ribs with sharp steel."

Saying this he sat down on the bench again, his sword across his knees.

"You must not think to frighten me with the sight of a rapier," snarled Maloche, whose expression, nevertheless, showed that he was not too courageous. "There are plenty of armed men within call."

"Well, that is a pity," said Cardillac, "for whatever happens to me, I shall kill you before I am captured."

"This is strange requital for my hospitality," complained the farmer.

"Your hospitality was requited in gold. It is your treachery I requite in iron."

"There is no treachery on my part. You came to my house under false pretences."

"Nevertheless, if I had entered a heathen Arab's tent in the same circumstances, I had been safe; but you, I suppose, have surrounded this house with soldiers."

"No; I said nothing at Blois, and there are no soldiers nearer than that town, but if you are to escape, I must be well recompensed for the risk I have taken."

"That is but justice, and I am quite ready to make terms with you, so long as the terms are pleasing to the lady who accompanies me. But no one leaves this room until your promise this time has been registered on oath. Even if I am threatened with excommunication, you will nevertheless have charged your soul with perjury if you break your word to us."

"I shall make no terms with this man," said Marie decidedly.

"Keep silence, *fille de cuisine*," roared Maloche, bringing his huge fist down on the table; but the roar swelled into a howl as Cardillac gently pricked him in the elbow with the point of his sword.

The girl was standing up, her face flushed with anger, her eyes snapping black lightning.

"You base-born, grovelling peasant, do you dare to address me in such language? You talk of danger to us without the sense to realise the peril in which you yourself stand. At a word from me my father shall gallop across from Loches at the head of a thousand horsemen, and will burn down your homestead over your slit ears. Not all the ten thousand soldiers in Blois can save you, even if they consented to take the trouble, which they would not. They value you as little as they do their own swine.

"You dare taunt Victor de Cardillac with excommunication! I tell you he shall not be excommunicated, and the ban of the bishop of Tours will be dissolved by an edict from his superior, the archbishop of Toulouse, who is my friend, and my father's friend, and the son of the Duke d'Epéron. Pope Paul V, when he learns the truth, will issue no edict of excommunication, or if he does, it shall be against Luynes, who first violated the convent by placing therein a state prisoner.

"If Luynes was justified in placing me a prisoner in a convent, Cardillac was equally justified in breaking my prison and getting me out. If the captain of a troop make a garrison of a church in time of war, the enemy is held blameless who fires upon that church. But, apart from all this, Pope Paul V is a Borghese, a member of the wealthiest family in Italy, and he will launch no excommunication against a brave man who is partisan for his countrywoman, the De Médicis. My father, the Duke de Montreuil, is a favourite son of the church, and it is not possible that excommunication should be hurled at one of his followers."

She snapped her fingers in the air.

"That for your paltry bishop of Tours and his ban! I come of a family that deals with popes and cardinals!"

"In God's name, lady!" gasped Maloche, frightened out of his stolidity, "who are you?"

CHAPTER XXIV

A REVELATION

The question seemed to bring the girl to her senses, and the colour left her face as she stood staring across the table at him; then a faint smile came to her lips, as slowly she turned her head until she met Cardillac's astonished gaze.

"Ah, Victor de Cardillac," and now she spoke very softly, all impetuosity departed, "you see what a fate threatens you. But, good comrade, you have been warned in time. 'Twill be for you now to accuse me of false pretences, but in that you will be wrong."

She turned towards the old farmer.

"You wish to know who I am? I am Mademoiselle Thérèse Marie Duchamps de Montreuil, only daughter of the Duke de Montreuil, and if he at Loches had heard the words you dared address me, he were already in his saddle galloping hither. Victor," she turned to the young man again, "you will get to horse at once, and gallop through the night by way of Montrichard to Loches, carrying with you a letter I have written to my father. Ask him to send to Toulouse and acquaint the archbishop with the ban of Tours."

"There is no need of that," said Cardillac. "The archbishop with five hundred of his men is at Loches, having arrived there shortly after the Queen was imprisoned at Blois."

"Ah, I did not know. They kept all news from me at the convent. Then all the better, and no time lost. The archbishop must send a messenger to Rome, to acquaint Pope Paul with the facts. Shall you make your headquarters at Loches?"

"No, I must be nearer at hand. I shall find some method of acquainting you with my whereabouts."

"Tell my father of the compact you made with me in the forest of the Loire at midnight. He will give you the thousand pistoles."

"I cannot accept them, Marie—I mean Thérèse."

The girl gave him a friendly smile.

"Either or both names will do, but the money is yours, not my father's, and I command you to accept the sum."

"Very well, Thérèse Marie. Your commands are my law."

"My father will tell you more of the object we both have in view, so that you can act with a knowledge of what has already been accomplished, if anything. He will also give you the money for carrying out your plans."

"Ah, Marie, you must allow me to use my own money, as my heart is set on success."

Again Thérèse smiled at him, and nodded as though pleased that he made such a proviso.

"And now Farmer Maloche must write me a letter that I can give to his daughter in Blois."

"I cannot write," gruffly stated the farmer.

"Then Monsieur de Cardillac will write for you, and you may append your mark, or whatever symbol you use when your name is attached to a business document. This letter I shall take with me at once to Blois, for it is yet early in the evening."

"You do not propose to go there alone and unattended?" protested Cardillac.

"Yes, and I ask you to see that no one leaves this room until I have had time to reach there, and also to extract from this man an oath that he dare not break, and if he attempts to break it, I can assure him of the most drastic vengeance."

Maloche groaned dismally.

"Let us exact the oath now, and I will then accompany you."

"No, no. You must to Loches as quickly as you can. I am in no danger, even if detected. Luynes knows better than to harm me. If he did, 'twould all be to the good, for every noble partisan he possesses would desert him, and he would find himself with an army of leaderless men."

Cardillac took down the crucifix from the wall, and placed it before Maloche. The farmer reluctantly laid his great brown hand upon it, and his unwelcome guest administered to him an oath so sweeping in its everlasting penalties that even the bronzed face of the yeoman blanched to a sickly green as he pressed his lips against the sacred emblem.

"And now," said Mademoiselle de Montreuil, who had put on her hood for the journey, "remember that we have not coerced you, but have taken the only plan with you that provides safety for yourself and your family. If you faithfully carry out your avouchment I will see that you are made rich. Your danger arises in double measure through any tampering with your affirmation, for you will receive no mercy from the partisans of the King, and you are not likely to escape vengeance from the followers of the Queen.

"The fact that your daughter is in the château now, that you, for a week, have been endeavouring to place me in the service of the Queen, while all the time you were harbouring Cardillac, makes it impossible for you to convince the most credulous that you are not up to the lips in conspiracy; therefore be sure that confession will only bring the swifter punishment upon you from both sides. You will find yourself between the upper and nether millstones, and not much will be left of you when they cease revolving."

Cardillac replaced the crucifix.

"Marie," he said, "I wish a word with you in the next room. Maloche, see to it that no one moves until I return."

Once outside, the young man caught her by the elbows, pressing them closely to her. Marie made no effective resistance, but stood there smiling at him.

"Dear Marie," he said, "I wanted to tell you that I shall make Montrichard my home until I have perfected my plans. My headquarters there will be the Hotel of the Black Head, a hostelry with which I am already well acquainted.

"Montrichard is filled with my friends, and there I shall be quite safe. The hillsides of Montrichard are honeycombed with secret passages and cave dwellings, with every tenant of which I am acquainted, and no man need be captured who knows this labyrinth as I do. And now, dear girl, farewell, and God be with you. There is still one question I wish to ask you. Do you think I should be justified in accepting an advance of money for carrying out the liberation of the Queen?"

"Oh, surely, surely," cried the girl, although her face showed disappointment that he had thought better of his first proposal to use his own.

"I am glad you approve, though I shall not touch a stiver of the money. I merely wished your consent to the general principle that a man undertaking a task which he feels certain of accomplishing may be justified in seeking in advance a modest instalment of the reward he expects, if this instalment will encourage him to face the difficulties he may be called on to encounter; so, Thérèse——"

Twice he put his lips to a better purpose than that of speaking, and flattered himself he had taken her completely by surprise. She frowned and pushed him back with no great expenditure of strength, then laughed a little.

"I take it, monsieur, that there is nothing personal in what you have done. You merely wished to begin your campaign by settling your debt. I shall therefore regard this as the return of what was formerly bestowed."

"In that case, Thérèse, I have the instalment still to seek." But Thérèse merrily eluded him, not to be caught a second time.

"No, no," she cried, "too lavish an advance payment makes a careless workman, and on this employment I must enlist all your faculties. Now listen to me. Do you know the château at Blois?"

"I have seen it," replied Cardillac.

"I am well acquainted with every part of it," continued Thérèse, "for I lived there on several occasions while the Court was in residence. They tell me the Queen's present apartments are on the first floor. The side towards the courtyard is likely to be well guarded. The north façade, however, is very precipitous, and being without an exit, Her Majesty's

jailors are there probably less vigilant. At the northeast corner there is an open gallery. Every afternoon at four o'clock the Queen is asleep, and from four till half-past I shall walk in that gallery. You will doubtless venture into Blois as occasion may require."

"I am certain to do that," replied Cardillac.

"You will come disguised, but I think I shall recognise you. Still, to make sure, wear in some fashion the scarf I gave you to act as a sling for your arm, and which, honest man, you never returned to me."

"I had hoped, Thérèse, you would not miss it."

"I did not. I freely present it to you. But I must not chatter any longer. Time is passing. During the week we have spent here, I have obtained several unsuspecting articles that may be of use to me when I share the Queen's imprisonment, and among them is an ample length of thin cord. If I see you on the street below, and we are unobserved, I may pass down to you a letter, if there is anything to communicate, and you may tie to the cord any missive intended for me."

"I shall remember that. As an alternative means of communication with me, it might be well if you made friends with Maloche's daughter in the château; then a message given to her could be passed on to her father, and he might send one of his sons to me at Montrichard."

"You think we can trust Maloche?"

"Yes; first because of his fear, and second because of his cupidity. He has nothing to gain and everything to lose by betraying us. Still, it will all depend on the estimate you form of his daughter, but in any case I should not use this method except as a last resort. I am certain the old man will make no move against us, but the girl may have some confidant in the château to whom she tells everything, and thus, although staunch herself, she might prove the spark to the powder."

"You are very woman-wise, Monsieur de Cardillac."

"No, merely human-wise. For instance, I would tell you everything I know, and yet proclaim myself a man. However, it is not man nature or woman nature, but human nature, as I have said, and the fewer confidants we make the safer we are."

"That is true. As it is, I think we have told one another everything we know already. And now I must away."

She eluded his efforts to detain her, opened the door, and retreated into the room they had left. Every member of the family sat rigid as if they had not moved an eyelid since the two departed. The girl took her place upon a bench by the table, and poured out for herself a glass of milk, which she sipped. Cardillac sat down opposite her, beside the grim farmer, to whom he had still a few words to say. Before he could open his mouth, however, the room resounded with two sharp knocks, as if caused by a sword hilt, and next instant the door was flung open by an officer, who entered, followed by two troopers. Cardillac whisked his own sword out of sight under the table, and placed the point of it close against the body of Farmer Maloche.

CHAPTER XXV

INTO LOCHES

The first thought that occurred to Cardillac was that Maloche had betrayed him before he left Blois, and that the military party had been sent to effect the arrest of himself and his comrade. For a moment Maloche's life hung on the tip of the sword, and perhaps the old man himself never suspected that he sat cheek by jowl with death. The officer proved to be a good-natured, genial, talkative fellow, who did not express that contempt for the honest, industrious peasantry which all soldiers felt.

"Farmer Maloche?" enquired the officer.

"Yes."

"There is a girl here whom you offered in service to the château?"

"Yes."

"Is she an ordinary country wench, or ladylike and presentable?"

"There she sits," said Maloche.

The officer turned towards her.

"Oh, you'll do!" he cried. "Have you been used to waiting on ladies, mademoiselle?"

"Yes, monsieur," answered Marie.

"Ah, that's great good luck. There's been another frustrated plot to liberate the Queen, and two of her maids of honour are sleeping in stone cells to-night; therefore, mademoiselle, you will take your place in the direct service of Marie de Médicis, for we'll accept no more of those rips down from Paris. We've had enough of such conspiring minxes. I'd chop off the heads of the whole coterie if I had my way. Give me an honest, good-looking country girl like you, mademoiselle. And now, Farmer Maloche, a few questions. The commandant told me to give warning that you will be held to strict account if your words are not made good. What's the name of this girl?"

"My name is Marie Duchamps," quickly interpolated the person referred to.

"Thanks, mademoiselle, thanks. And now, Farmer Maloche, are you personally acquainted with this damsel?"

"Yes."

"You guarantee her honesty, good faith, and all that?"

"Yes."

"She is thoroughly loyal?"

"Yes."

"Do you think she can be bribed or cajoled into doing wrong?"

"No."

"You pledge your personal surety, forfeiting life and goods if she mixes with any of these treasonable conspiracies?"

This time Maloche hesitated for a moment, and the sword point penetrated his clothes and touched the bare skin.

"Yes," he said.

"That's very satisfactory, and I shall so report to the commandant. And now, mademoiselle, can you ride a horse?"

"Oh, yes, monsieur."

"Are you ready to go with us at once, or must you make some preparations?"

"I am ready now, monsieur," said the girl, rising.

"Good. I like you, and hope to see more of you at Blois, although I suppose you will not be allowed to leave the Queen's apartments."

"So I understand, monsieur."

"Anything you want, mademoiselle, can be got at Blois, or will be sent for to Paris. The pay is good, and the duties light. I rather think you'll like the situation, Marie."

"I am sure I shall, monsieur."

"Very well; this is all quite as it should be. And now, mademoiselle, latest maid of honour, may I present to myself the gratification of escorting you to your horse?"

"The pleasure is mine, monsieur," said Thérèse, extending the tips of her dainty fingers to the outstretched hand of the bowing lieutenant. And thus, as if about to engage in a minuet, the two disappeared through the doorway, followed by the sword-clanking, spur-jangling troopers, Thérèse throwing over her shoulder a sparkling smile at Cardillac, and a "Good-night, all" to the assemblage.

In the silence that followed they heard the clatter of horses' hoofs, and Cardillac wondered why their approach had not been noticed by any of the company.

"Maloche," said Cardillac, "even if you had not given me your oath, you understand, I hope, that there is only one course now possible for you. I need not say that I am very sorry to have been the cause of involving you in such a tangle, but that is a risk all must run who live in these troublous times. Many innocent people have been compelled to do something similar to what you are forced to do, but they have been without hope of reward. Now I give you my word that I shall be careful not to betray you by speech or action. I am determined to succeed, and will succeed, and when I do, you will be largely the gainer."

"There has been enough talk," growled the old farmer. "I shall do what I said I would do."

"Ah, which of the two things you said you would do? Give information to the King, or keep silence?"

"I shall hold by my oath."

"Very good. In that course you will find safety and profit." Cardillac took out his wallet, and poured a little mountain of gold upon the supper-table.

"Here is an earnest of more to come. I shall keep one pistole for emergencies to-night, and leave the rest with you. It is all I possess at the moment, but good luck standing my friend, I shall have a thousand more of these yellow tempters to-morrow."

The old man's sullen eyes gleamed greedily as he gloated on the little pile of wealth. Here at least was an argument he could understand. King or Queen were as nothing to him so long as he kept his clutch upon sufficient gold.

"It is really a very simple matter, Maloche," continued Cardillac with careless good humour, as he pushed the heap towards its new owner. "If the King wins, you will nevertheless be rich enough to slip out of this belt of danger, and return to Gascony, where you may live unmolested. If the Queen wins, you will receive abundance of wealth, and she will confirm you in possession of this farm. So long as you keep a close mouth, it matters not to you what happens, and thus I bid you good-night."

Cardillac, carrying his sword, departed to his own room, where he doffed his peasant garb and donned the costume of the courtier. Then to the stable, where, quickly accoutring his horse, he sprang astride, and turned the animal's head towards the west, taking the thoroughfare through Russy Forest that led to Montrichard, a road that was little more than a cart track and a woodman's way for the hauling of logs, but nevertheless a great improvement upon the path through the wilderness he had formerly traversed.

The moon was a week past the full, and therefore contributed little to the enlightenment of Cardillac's journey. At last he came to the end of the forest, and the road lay among cultivated fields and pastures where cattle lay at rest. In the belated waning moonlight, he saw standing high against the western sky the splendid square donjon-tower of the castle, constructed six hundred years before by that master-builder of fortresses, Foulques Nerra, Count of Anjou. A hundred years later it was captured by the English King, Richard Cœur de Lion; hence, the hill on which it stands, united with the name of the English King, gave title to the village and castle which it bears to this day.

Cardillac skirted the foot of the castle hill, and then, just before reaching the river Cher, turned to his left down the main street. The contrast between Montrichard and any of the northern towns was very striking. Beaugency and the rest swarmed with soldiers night and day; the streets paraded by sentinels; the air vocal with challenges and replies. Here all was still as Pompeii, not a light visible, no human being in sight, the town sound in a peaceful sleep.

He passed, on his right hand, that ancient hostelry, the Hôtel de la Tête Noire, to which he would return and stop, and well he knew its comfortable accommodation. He felt inclined to rouse the silent town with a shout, but repressed his boyish exultation, and rode on until he came to the church of Notre Dame de Nanteuil, to which Louis XI was accustomed to make pilgrimages. He rather expected to find this structure guarded, but no one disputed his crossing.

Once over the river, he rode a short distance up its left bank, until he came to the favourite swimming place of his youth. Unbridling his horse, he allowed the patient animal to feed on the lush grass by the river bank, and throwing off his clothes, he plunged shoulder first into the familiar crystal flood, and swam from Touraine to Blaisois and back, for the clear Cher forms the boundary between the two districts. Attiring himself once more, and feeling as if he had slipped off half a dozen years with his clothes, he made a supper of black bread and red wine. More than half of his journey had been accomplished, and the bells in the fortress were now ringing midnight across the still waters of the river. He did not wish to reach Loches before daybreak, and so stretched himself at full length in the tall grass, to sleep for a couple of hours. Young as he was, he already possessed Henri IV's knack of falling asleep at any moment he chose, and of arousing himself at any time he had set.

In two hours and a half he arose refreshed, and proceeded on his journey. Dawn lightened the forest and set the birds singing just before he arrived at Le Liège, and the sun appeared as he forded the river Indrois. Emerging from the forest into the lowlands near Beaulieu, there burst upon him, reddened by the rising sun, the full splendour of the strongest fortress in France, the massive, conglomerate structure built by half a dozen kings; supreme and impregnable; the royal château of Loches.

The young man drew in his horse, and sat there, hand on hip, regarding this aggregation of buildings with a sigh of content. The little picturesque town by the river-side huddled contentedly at the feet of this lordly castle, secure in its protection. Here, less than a century before, Scotland's most picturesque King, James V, was married to the daughter of Francis I, and now the doom of James's ill-fated daughter, Mary of Scotland, was in the minds of those who ruled Loches; men who were determined that another foreign Mary, whom they regarded as monarch of France, should not meet a similar catastrophe at the hands of her enemies.

Their very determination was bringing the tragedy within practical nearness, through their constantly frustrated attempts to liberate Marie de Médicis; and Cardillac, sobered by this thought, resolved to carry out his already half-formed project with a caution that seemed absent in more experienced heads than his own.

Crossing the Indre from Beaulieu to Loches, he found the town aswarm with armed men, the air musical with bugle calls from the heights on which the castle stood, the cobble-stoned streets asound with the tramp of marching troops. Into this fanfare the young man on the horse came modestly enough, and was challenged at the end of the bridge.

"Who are you? Whence do you come, and why?"

"My name is Cardillac. I come from Beaugency. I bear a message to the Duke de Montreuil."

And now, for the first time in his life, our young friend, who had hitherto met little but rebuffs and personal danger, was to drink a goblet of that intoxicating wine, popularity, a draught that had never touched his lips before. An officer stepped forward.

"You are surely not the man for whom all France is being searched; he who rescued the Duke de Montreuil's daughter from the convent at Beaugency?"

"Yes," said Cardillac.



CHAPTER XXVI

THE ARCH-PLOTTER OF THE KINGDOM

A dozen listeners heard the question and reply; and the news spread like the incoming tide on the shallow sands of the Normandy coast. "Cardillac! Cardillac!" passed from lip to lip, and men and women came running from every direction to catch a glimpse of this youth whom the King wanted, and was willing to pay his own ransom to secure.

"Monsieur de Cardillac, I shall consider it a great honour to be permitted to escort you to the gates of the palace," said the officer.

As Cardillac rode up the steep and winding street, the crowd on either side of the way increased as if the bugles were calling each individual from every corner of the town, and cheer after cheer arose as the tired horse made its ascent. Cardillac blushed like a school-girl, and, with the natural politeness and grace of a Gascon, he waved salutation to the enthusiastic multitude, but said to the officer, when the gates were closed upon him and he had dismounted from his horse:

"By our Lady of Loches, I'd rather meet a cavalry attack of as many enemies than ride the same distance among such jubilant friends."

The officer laughed, gave the horse in charge of a stableman, and sent word to the Duke de Montreuil that Cardillac awaited his commands.

It happened that the duke had not yet arisen from his bed. He sent, however, a cordial welcome to the young man, requested him to deliver to the messenger any letter he might carry, and invited him to breakfast half an hour later.

When at last Cardillac was summoned to the breakfast-room, he found an apartment small in size, but delightful in situation, giving a view over the roof-tops of the town, up and down the valley of the Indre, and away across the forest to the east. A table had been set for two, as was the case at that memorable supper in the duke's palace at Paris. When the duke entered, he grasped Cardillac warmly by the hand.

"My brave lad," he said, "I can never repay my indebtedness to you."

"Don't be too sure of that," laughed the ambitious youth, which remark passed unnoticed, for the nobleman's mind was concentrated on one subject alone.

"My daughter, then, has not come with you?"

"No; she went last night to the château at Blois, and this morning is doubtless waiting upon her Majesty."

"Ah!" said the duke, with contracted brow. "I wish she were here in Loches; but Thérèse is very determined, very determined, and loyal to the core. Sit down, my boy; I am sure you are hungry. Tell me all about it."

For some reason which is not explained in any of the chronicles of the time, Cardillac omitted several particulars of his night's excursion, and ignored one or two events that followed after. He said nothing of his faint and loss of blood; nothing of the repast on the south side of the Loire; nothing of the good-night at the manor farm near Blois: but he alluded to his compact with mademoiselle for the release of the Queen, saying nothing, however, of any reward he expected. The duke's brow clouded when he came to this question of her Majesty's projected escape.

"Mademoiselle told me, my lord, that I was to consult with the authorities in this castle regarding what had already been done, and counselled me to form my own plans accordingly."

For a time the duke did not reply, but his countenance showed that some trouble agitated his mind.

"I am in deep apprehension regarding that matter," he said at last. "Scheme after scheme has been formed, without the necessary forethought, it seems to me, and one after another has ended disastrously. The Duke d'Epéron, commander of the Queen's forces, is an admirable general rightly advised, but I fear his impetuous son, the archbishop of Toulouse, on whom the sanctity of his high and sacred office sits but lightly, will yet carry us all to destruction with his headstrong zeal. There is no doubt that the authorities at Tours are fully on the alert; our garrison here is permeated with their spies,

and they seem to learn of what is suggested before the plan is carried out. As a result, some of our men have been captured and executed.

"At the present moment my anxiety is intense, for the castle is in my charge. The Duke d'Epéron and his son, the archbishop of Toulouse, have been absent for three days, and during that time I have received no word from them. The duke, proud of his reputation as the best swordsman in France, cannot be made to see that such a thing as personal danger exists. He, therefore, takes risks which no man, commander of so important a garrison as ours, should accept, and some day he will be overpowered and captured. With the father so venturesome, you may understand that there is little advantage in speaking warningly to the son.

"They are both under the influence of Rucellai, abbé of Ligny, who is an Italian, and a born concocter of futile conspiracies. Rucellai is an adherent and a favourite of his countrywoman, the Queen Mother, and knowing him therefore to possess Her Majesty's confidence, it is but natural that the commander of her forces should place great confidence in the abbé.

"The plots of Rucellai are as intricate and subtle as an Italian's mind, and they have hitherto always ended in catastrophe. On this occasion the duke and the archbishop have gone with Rucellai, personally to superintend its execution, but I fear they may attend an execution of their own. I am awaiting with great anxiety their return, or some news of their adventure.

"If we continue this inane pestering of the Queen's jailors, the inevitable result will be that Luynes will order her executed in the courtyard, or perhaps assassinated in her apartments, which are under those where the Duke de Guise met his fate. She is lodged in a sinister building, Cardillac, and I fear that Italian subtilty will be met by French brutality."

"Pertaining to this latest plot, my lord, I am a messenger of evil omen. The garrulous lieutenant who was to escort your daughter to Blois told us that a conspiracy had been unmasked, and that two of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting had been arrested and imprisoned. To take their place your daughter was hurriedly commanded into attendance."

"You think," said the duke anxiously, "that they had no suspicion of her quality?"

"None in the least, and I further believe," cried the young man with increased enthusiasm, "that her arrival in the Queen's entourage will introduce some common sense into that assemblage."

The duke's brow cleared and his eyes brightened.

"Yes. Thérèse, from the time she was a little girl, ruled all who came near her, and I myself have often been astonished at the sedate wisdom of that sprightly creature. She made no complaint, I suppose, of her journey's hardness through the forest?"

"Oh, not the least; she enjoyed every hour of it, especially after our supper at midnight, for she had been compelled to leave the convent before their late hour for dinner, and from twelve noon to twelve night is rather a long fast. Luckily, I had filled my saddle-bags with an excellent repast furnished by the inn-keeper at Beaugency, and so our journey was carried through with little hardship beyond what the forest had to offer. Nevertheless, were it not for mademoiselle's resource and quick wit, I could not have brought our trip to a successful conclusion."

"It cheers my old heart to hear you speak so eulogistically of my dear child, and I recognise that your generosity is equal to your bravery. Yet I wish Thérèse had come to me, for if anything happens to the Duke d'Epéron, I shall be commander of the Queen's forces, despite the fact that I am a statesman rather than a warrior. If, therefore, Luynes discovers that my daughter is held prisoner with the Queen, he has me at a double disadvantage, with both my daughter and my royal mistress in his power."

"We must the sooner release them, my lord."

"True, true, but that is easier said than done, and if this meddling Italian continues to spin out his fantastic designs, and is backed by the commander of the forces, the inevitable result will be a tragedy. Although I realise quite as fully as does the Duke d'Epéron the immediate necessity for releasing the Queen, I also see the danger of stratagems that are continually brought to nought, which exasperate our enemies without effecting anything for our friends.

"When some days ago news arrived that you had succeeded in spiriting away my daughter from the convent, and that Luynes, with the resources of France at his disposal, had not captured you, I proposed to Epéron that we should wait

until you arrived at Loches, for I supposed that sooner or later you would report to me. I suggested that then, as you were young, and had proven yourself competent to cope with forces almost overwhelming, we should transfer to you the task of releasing the Queen. Epernon seemed favourable at first, but Rucellai would not hear of it, and speedily resumed his influence over the duke's mind, an influence which I hoped had been shaken by the Italian's numerous failures. So you see the same thought occurred to both my daughter's mind and my own. If I understand rightly, it is your intention to make Montrichard your base of operations?"

"Yes, my lord. Every man in Montrichard is my friend, and I have established two lines of communication with Blois, neither perfect, of course, and neither to be used except in cases of emergency. Then I am perfectly acquainted with Montrichard and the country round about, and I consider it much better as headquarters than a spot like Loches for whatever plan I may adopt, since Loches, safe as it may be, is alive, as you admit, with spies."

"I think, monsieur, you are quite in the right, and if I may venture a suggestion it is this: You have entered the castle amidst great acclaim. I thought, until I had your message, the clamour meant the return of Epernon and the archbishop. The news that you are here is doubtless already travelling to Blois, and it may be in Paris by to-morrow. It will seem perfectly natural that you should seek refuge in Loches, and they are likely to take it for granted that you will not soon quit so secure a sanctuary. As I am within these walls, it will also appear probable that by some means or other you have placed my daughter under my protection, and your public entry alone will seem to these crafty persons merely a ruse to delude them into the belief that she is elsewhere. An immediate consequence of this will be that the search for you will stop.

"I therefore recommend that you secretly leave Loches to-night, and return to Montrichard. I shall have it given forth that I have appointed you my secretary, and as I work in my own suite of apartments here, and appear seldom in public, this statement will doubtless be credited, and my appointment taken as simple gratitude for what you have done. But your great security is that no one will believe you foolhardy enough to leave Loches while the hue and cry for you is abroad in the land. Now I ask the privilege of paying you two thousand pistoles instead of the one I suggested at first."

"You are very generous, my lord duke, but I cannot accept more than the exact amount stipulated, and, indeed, I feel that mademoiselle, rather than myself, is deserving of the money. Your suggestion regarding the method of my return to Montrichard is not only an excellent one in itself, but it relieves me from the embarrassment of appearing again before this effervescent mob which appears to make up the population of Loches."

"Very good, monsieur, and I beg to say that the more I see of you, the more pleased I am with your capacity. I wish we had others like you in high places within this fortress. If agreeable to you, I propose two o'clock to-morrow morning as the hour of your departure; the same hour that we left Paris together."

"At two o'clock I shall be ready, my lord duke."

CHAPTER XXVII

INTO THE ENEMY'S CITADEL

Three months later Cardillac sat in the hospitable dining-room of the Tête Noire at Montrichard, the victim of black despair. All his efforts had been nullified by Italian finesse. The ever-fertile Rucellai had evolved *brouillon* after *brouillon*, each one proving more unworkable than those that had gone before. At last Cardillac came to the conclusion that the good abbé of Ligny was either in the pay of Luynes, or was feathering his own nest by the money the infatuated Duke d'Epernon bestowed upon him as capital for carrying out his machinations.

Cardillac communicated his suspicions to the Duke de Montreuil, who made careful investigations, but came to the conclusion that the Florentine was honest enough, and loyal enough, but merely an enthusiastic conspirator.

The result of all this folly was that the garrison at Blois had been increased by over five thousand men. It was almost impossible for a rat to get through the cordon that surrounded the Queen in prison. Several times during those three months, Cardillac had made his way into Blois, but each time with increased danger to his life.

His chief reason for performing these dangerous journeys was the delight of seeing Mademoiselle de Montreuil on her balcony; to play Romeo and Juliet in dumb show. On each occasion, by means of the twine, he had received down and sent up a written message. The last document that went up to the balcony he considered most important, for it requested mademoiselle to obtain from the Queen, under her sign manual, an order for Rucellai to cease his plots on her behalf, and a command to the Duke d'Epernon to furnish no more aid to the Italian conspirator. Cardillac added as a postscript that if Thérèse could persuade her Majesty to order Epernon to imprison the active abbé this would be so much to the good. Cardillac was quite certain Thérèse would accomplish this necessary task, but now, to his dismay, he found himself completely fenced out of Blois.

He had never used Maloche as a means of communication with the château; neither had mademoiselle; but he had visited the farmer once a month, and paid down a handsome instalment in gold. The peasant had kept his word, and respected the oath he had taken, but Cardillac never recovered his belief in the farmer's good faith. Now, however, grown reckless through despondency, he resolved to adventure himself under the mercies of Maloche, and so, one dark autumn night, he rode northward to the farm.

"Maloche," he said, "I am going to double your stipend, and here is your increased portion."

The farmer grunted, but gave no thanks for this new generosity.

"They are tightening things up more and more in Blois," said Maloche, "and soon I expect they will no longer allow me to cart my vegetables into that town. It is a dangerous business, Monsieur de Cardillac, that you have got me into, and what profit is gold if a man loses his head?"

"Oh, you won't lose your head," returned the young man carelessly, "so don't be disheartened. They'll merely hang you. No such aristocratic exit as decapitation awaits you, so listen to me. You will go in to-morrow, and see your daughter privately. Tell her—what is quite true—that I am a lover of Marie Duchamps. Ask her to arrange that I may have a word or two in secret with this girl. I have enjoyed no speech with her for three months, and I weary for the sight of her."

"How do you propose to enter Blois, Monsieur de Cardillac?"

"I will enter it in your cart, dressed as one of your sons."

"Humph!" grunted the farmer, in no way delighted at this new peril he was called to face, through the unreasonableness of amorous youth.

The farmer brought back from Blois the intelligence that if Cardillac were patient enough to wait three days, what he wished might possibly be accomplished. On the third day his daughter's young man would be on guard at the outer door of the Queen's corridor, and although none of the Queen's attendants were permitted to enter this corridor, the guard for the moment would turn his back, and Cardillac might enjoy the felicitation of embracing Marie Duchamps if he lingered not too long about it.

The three days passed with exasperating slowness, but at last this yokel, who was apparently a farmer's son, entered the château under the guidance of Phyllis Maloche. He was taken surreptitiously along passage and corridor, and commanded to stand in an embrasure some ten feet away from the perturbed guard, who, being a lover himself, may be supposed to have had compassion upon others in the same condition.

The farmer's daughter whispered a few words to the sentinel, then knocked at the door of the Queen's apartments, opened it, and disappeared, while the guard, ignoring Cardillac's presence, paced moodily up and down the corridor, keeping close to the windows, that anyone looking up from the outside might see he was on the alert. Presently Marie and her guide appeared. Cardillac dramatically held out his arms, and mademoiselle, who had been told by the girl that her lover wished to see her, enacted the part to perfection. She had on many occasions assumed the rôle in private theatricals, and now did herself justice; nevertheless the fervour of Cardillac proved embarrassing.

"You are overacting," she whispered.

"I am not acting at all," he replied.

"Such ardour as yours is impossible in any country, especially France, where all belief in true love has long since departed."

"Not from your heart, Thérèse."

"Oh, never mind my heart! What is it you came for?"

"Did the Queen sign that paper ordering the imprisonment of Rucellai?"

"She signed a document ordering Epernon, his son, and the abbé to cease their troubling, but she will not permit Rucellai to be imprisoned."

"Well, half a loaf if we can get no more. Do you carry the message with you?"

"Surely; everywhere I go."

"Then, during my next felicitous embrace, pass it to me if you can."

"Don't distract my attention too much," laughed mademoiselle. "Here it is. God send you may not be searched on leaving the place. And now, what chance for the Queen? She is becoming irritable and difficult to deal with, because of the long delay."

"That's the fool Rucellai's fault. I should not advise any attempt to be made before next February."

The girl gave an exclamation of dismay.

"The Queen will fret herself to death before that time."

"When all plots cease, discipline will relax, and then something may be accomplished. Now it is madness to try."

The guard was giving signs of uneasiness by coughing loudly, and at last Maloche's daughter timidly approached the pair.

"I am sorry, monsieur, but you must part. It is very dangerous."

"I know it," said Cardillac, looking full in the laughing eyes of mademoiselle. "And now two more, with no acting in them."

"One," said mademoiselle; but he took three, explaining hastily, as he tore himself away, that this was the sum total of two and one.

Cardillac was led by Phyllis Maloche through the mazes of the palace to the servants' door, and there, unsearched and unmolested, he mounted the farmer's cart, was driven down into the town, across the bridge, and on to the farm; old Maloche speaking not one word during the journey.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A CONFERENCE DECLINED

At the farm Cardillac mounted his horse, and set off for Montrichard, meaning to dine there and push on to Loches that night, with the warrant in his pocket that would render harmless the future activities of Rucellai, abbé of Ligny. But when he reached the Tête Noire his plans were disarranged by a cordial greeting from the father of the girl whom, that morning, he had so lovingly embraced.

An unwonted red mounted his cheek as he remembered that not once during the brief interview had either of them mentioned this distinguished nobleman of France. Even with mademoiselle the sentiment of youth had for the moment obliterated her daughterly affection.

"My lord, I am delighted to meet you, and little thought to find you in this humble hostelry. I have just arrived from Blois, where I had the pleasure this morning of being received by mademoiselle your daughter."

A look of amazement overspread the usually impassive face of the Duke de Montreuil.

"What you say shows how undependable are the reports of spies. We have been told that Blois is impregably sealed."

"The spies are quite correct, my lord; so far as is humanly practicable, such is the condition of the town. But I told you I had two methods of communication with the château. One having failed me after repeated attempts, I tried the other, and it proved so successful that the second avenue brought me to the outside of Her Majesty's door, and gave me the privilege of a few words with mademoiselle."

"Does her imprisonment seem to tell upon her, monsieur?"

"No, I thought she looked very well indeed. A little flushed perhaps, and anxious, naturally, and doubtless troubled,—she tells me the Queen is becoming more and more querulous and difficult to deal with,—but yet, as it seemed to me, in the most radiant health. By my first line of communication I had ventured the request that she use her influence with the Queen to obtain a document which would put an end to the intrigues of our reverend father, the abbé of Ligny. From her own hands I received this morning the document in question."

Cardillac drew from his doublet the royal warrant, and presented it to the Duke de Montreuil, who perused it with the habitual carefulness of a statesman.

"You intend this to reach the hands of the Duke d'Epernon?"

"Yes, my lord; and for such purpose I entrust it to you. I do not for a moment question that the Duke d'Epernon, commander of the Queen's forces, will see that this order is obeyed as faithfully, though it come from a prison, as if it came from the throne."

"Of a surety," concurred Montreuil.

"Nevertheless, my lord duke, I implore you to use your influence with Epernon, that he may take care there is no attempt on the part of the abbé to evade the restrictions herein set down. An Italian obeys a command with mental reservations."

The duke shrugged his shoulders.

"An Italian may *give* a command with mental reservations. What if the Queen privately countermands this document in a communication to the abbé himself? I know of old she had the utmost confidence in him."

"Well, thank Heaven, for a month or two she can get no message sent from Blois except through me."

The duke laid the parchment on the table.

"You shall yourself present this expression of royal pleasure to the Duke d'Epernon, and any observations you make to his lordship the commander I shall support with all the influence I possess. I am come from Loches with orders to take you back with me."

"For what purpose, my lord?"

"That the Duke d'Epéron and his son, the archbishop of Toulouse, may benefit by a conversation with you. I thought it best to let you know the particulars of the position. I am pleased to announce that the Duke d'Epéron, and more especially his son, have completely lost faith in the projects of the Abbé Rucellai, and so, even without this document, I think you will find the way clear. I have spoken on various occasions to the Duke d'Epéron regarding you, but I regret that the influence with which you credit me has not been sufficient to overcome his disbelief in your good faith."

"In what respect is my good faith impugned?"

"The duke knows you went to Paris as a partisan of the King, and he fears you may be in secret a minion of Luynes."

"That seems an improbable hypothesis, my lord."

"Yes, it is, but Epéron considers himself very shrewd. He thinks that once my escape from Paris became known, Luynes found himself embarrassed by the imprisonment of my daughter in the convent. You were therefore his emissary for her release. In other words, he did not know what to do with her, and so induced you to take an unwelcome burden off his hands."

"How then does he account for my taking service with you, my lord, or does he know the circumstances in which we left Paris together?"

"Yes; I told him all that, but with his superior intelligence he believes that you were actually set upon me to accomplish my assassination. He thinks you have hoodwinked me, and he cannot believe that, except with the connivance of Luynes and his confederates, you could have escaped alone and unattended through a country filled with King's men—as is the case with the Beaugency district. Epéron's own ineffective attempts to enter Blois have caused him to believe that neither you nor my daughter could have done so without the cognisance of Luynes. Therefore he wishes to question you face to face, that he may confirm or abolish the conclusions at which he has arrived."

"I shall not go," said Cardillac with decision.

"Why not?"

"I hold no converse with any man, high or low, who disputes my honour."

"But will you not, at my request, defend your honour?"

"No, my lord duke. If the Duke d'Epéron dares to say to my face what he has said to you, I will meet him sword in hand, but not otherwise."

The Duke de Montreuil smiled.

"My lad, I should not be too confident touching the outcome of such an encounter. He is willing to meet you in fair speech, and I give you my assurance that such a conference is safer than the other."

"Not my safety, but my honour, is in question. I am as proud as the Duke d'Epéron, and my lineage is as ancient as his. No peaceful meeting between us is possible after what he has said."

"But, Cardillac, will you not listen to me? Will you not accept my advice?"

"No, my lord duke. I say it regretfully, but on this point I am immovable."

"Look you, Cardillac, you are at the beginning of what I hope will be a most glorious career. Your qualities are those which I most admire, and your fortunes I am willing to further with my power."

"I thank you, my lord duke, and hope in the future to enlist your favour."

"Very well. You have broken completely with the King's party. In that direction your career is at an end. Is it wise, then, to block promotion through the only other avenue open to you, by refusing the request of the Duke d'Epéron, who asks you to come to him?"

"My lord duke, after I have released the Queen, and handed her over to the Duke d'Epernon, I turn my horse's head to the south. I am done with both parties. My experience teaches me that there are mostly knaves on one side, and mostly fools on the other. I ask favour from neither party."

"You estimate Luynes a knave?"

"I do, and Epernon a fool; and you may tell him so."

Again the duke smiled, but gave Cardillac no hint that enlightened him regarding his own opinion.

"Ah, Cardillac, I envy you that absolute confidence of youth. At your age I was similarly certain of everything. Now my judgments appear to have liquefied. I find no man completely a fool, and no man completely a knave."

The duke took up the parchment from the table, folded it, and placed it in his pocket.

"I shall rest here for the night, and deliver this to the commander to-morrow. And now, Cardillac, you must dine with me."

"Not so, my lord duke. It is my turn, and you are my guest at mine inn. I can assure you of a more creditable dinner than you might expect, and an exhilarating wine from Vouvray, whose bin I am gradually consuming."

The duke assented, and Cardillac took his leave, mounted the stairs, washed away the traces of his journey, and dressed himself with some care.



CHAPTER XXIX

THE TEST OF THE SWORD

The first of winter's fierce storms smote down upon Touraine, coming eastward from the Atlantic, and across the Bay of Biscay. The rain raged upon the Black Head Inn, and the wind rattled the stout shutters. The descending deluge and the roaring wind but accentuated the jollity within. A great fire blazed on the broad hearth of the tavern's long dining-room, which held a single main table and several smaller ones.

At the head of the chief table sat the radiant Cardillac, with his jovial friends, the silk-spinners, up and down each side. Cardillac was host for the evening, and the Vouvray he had commended flowed freely. Down the long centre of the table lay many strands of finely spun silk of various colours, and while the landlord, stout of body and rosy of face, saw that every flagon was kept full, Cardillac held forth eloquently on the merits of the various silks of the world, and the superiority of the Montrichard silk-spinners and weavers to all mankind elsewhere—a sentiment that was received with great applause and the pounding of flagons on the table.

"As you all know, my friends, I offered a prize, divided into three portions, for the three best, slimmest and strongest cords of silk, and to-night we celebrate the accomplishment of the task. I now sit in the seat of judgment, and I trust my award will be received as impartial, for I have scrupulously tested every strand submitted to me."

"Hurrah for the judge!" cried one of the spinners, and "Hurrah!" they all shouted in unison, drinking heartily to Cardillac, who bowed in response. "And I would say," continued the spinner who had spoken first, "that the verdict will be a just one, and this I announce before pronouncement is made. Any man who disputes it will meet my fist in his face."

The crowd clamoured and drank again. Cardillac sat silent, his eyes glowing upon the coloured strands of silk.

"Silence for the judge!" demanded one of the company, and the noise subsided. Cardillac rose to his feet.

"Landlord, fill the flagons," he said, "and then sit down. I cannot have this speech interrupted even by the pouring out of wine."

The landlord obeyed.

"Now, craftsmen in the most delicate and beautiful of all industries, I have with great care tested these various cords, and the result is, where all are so excellent, I cannot say that any one strand excels the others. Therefore, with your permission, I shall not divide the amount I have promised between so great a number of persons, but I shall take that amount, and deliver a similar sum to each man of you, the only condition being that I am to have and hold these cords, seemingly fragile as a spider's spinning, yet strong as the steel of Toledo."

At this there was tremendous cheering, the silk-spinners rising to their feet and making the blackened rafters ring. Such generosity had never before been known in Montrichard, for each spinner was to receive in a lump more than he could earn by a long winter's work. In the midst of the uproar caused by the storm without and the cheers within, Cardillac saw that the inn-keeper was gesticulating and trying to make himself heard.

"What is wrong with you?" he demanded.

"Monsieur, there is someone knocking at the door. Lord pity anyone out a night like this. Shall we admit them?"

"Certainly," replied Cardillac. "'Tis not a night for a dog to be abroad, let alone a man. Comrades, to your seats; and so that no stranger may intrude upon our mysteries, excuse me while I gather these cords and conceal them in my room. I pay the awards to-morrow morning, when my head is clear. To-night the wine flows within, as the rain pours without. Let the exhilaration of the one nullify the inconvenience of the other. When I return I shall relate to you more of my adventures, which you were good enough to commend the other night."

Quickly he gathered the silk from the table, and disappeared up the stairs. When he returned and took his seat again, the landlord was ushering in three men heavily cloaked and dripping. Ostlers were hurrying along the passage to attend to the storm-beaten horses outside. Cardillac gave but a glance at the three men, as the landlord took their sodden cloaks and spread them so that they might dry before the fire.

The youngest man, a fine-faced fellow of about thirty, wore a garb difficult to place, it being partly clerical, partly military. The next eldest, a foreigner with a crafty, furtive look, was undeniably a priest, and clothed as such. The oldest, the only one of the group whose hair was grey, stood tall and well-formed; a man, despite his age, in the very pink of condition. His calling was stamped indelibly upon him; erect, gaunt, a man of iron nerve, a soldier without hazard. He seemed leader of the party, and gave short, curt orders to the obsequious inn-keeper, whose experience told him that the three were gentlemen.

The military man ordered supper and wine, then, bowing to Cardillac, begged permission for himself and his friends to stand in front of the fire. Cardillac rose and bowed in return, giving them a Gascon's gesture of welcome, and the three warmed their stiffened fingers at the fire. The stout landlord bustled about with an activity astonishing in a man of his bulk, and set forth, on one of the small tables, an ample meal, with a generous supply of wine.

When all was ready the three strangers sat down to their supper, and consumed it in silence. It seemed as if the rigour of the weather without had penetrated to their bones, freezing that geniality which should always accompany a good meal earned by a long journey.

In striking contrast to this gloomy trio sat the large party at the long table. Cardillac entertained his guests by telling story after story. He related tales of adventure, current in the land of Gascony, that were new to his hearers, and upon occasion he broke forth into song, amidst generous applause. If the storm raged without, harmony prevailed within, at least till the moment when the senior of the strangers intervened.

Several times when the hilarity had become boisterous, the grey-haired man looked over his shoulder with a frown upon his brow. If Cardillac saw this sign of disapproval, he paid no attention to it, believing that in a public caravanserai a man was entitled to such entertainment as pleased him best, as long as he infringed none of the rules of the house, and paid his score when it was presented. One anecdote having been received with especial favour, the tall stranger turned round on his bench and said:

"Sir, you may have observed that one, at least, of those sitting round this table wears the cloth of the church. For your further information I may impart to you that another, though not in strictly clerical garb, occupies a position in Christian council equal to that of any peer of the realm. I myself am a serious man and a religious. Although we are the latest comers, it is not meet that our ears should be offended by such ribaldry as you have just pronounced, in a public room."

In response to this, Cardillac inclined his head very low, then brought it up to a straightness which he always assumed when his pride was touched. He spoke slowly in reply:

"Sir, it is my proudest boast that I am a faithful and devoted son of the church, and a respecter of all who act under her authority. Therefore I should be the last man in France to give utterance to a syllable that might not be heard with propriety even by the most devout. The incident with which I regaled my friends here was told to me in the first place by as good a priest as ever read his breviary."

"For nearly an hour," said the elder man quietly, "we have been compelled to listen to your frivolity. Sir, you are very juvenile, and there are older heads than yours around your table who should not have left to me the task of reproof."

"Reproof?" echoed Cardillac. "Reproof? May I persuade you, sir, to reconsider that word?"

"The word seems adequate to the circumstances. With your permission, therefore, we will allow it to remain."

"It is with deep regret, monsieur, that I find myself unable to grant that permission."

Cardillac rose to his feet, and continued in measured tones:

"If, unasked, you will assume the rôle of school-master—your companions being priests and therefore unequipped with any rod of correction to make a reproof effective—I now request you to use your instrument of coercion, or else instantly withdraw the word to which I have taken exception."

This ultimatum was delivered with a gracious inclination of the head, as Cardillac removed his rapier from its scabbard. The action caused some of his guests to move themselves to the other side of the table with more celerity than dignity.

The elder man courteously acknowledged his opponent's declaration, and drew forth his own blade. During the dialogue,

which was carried on in a low, conversational tone, the priest bent his eyes on the table, never looking up. The youngest of the party leaned back with an air of indifference, although at times a fleeting smile illumined his handsome countenance. Neither of the two spoke, nor made any effort to arrange a compromise.

The quarrel had risen so unexpectedly and upon such slight excuse that Cardillac, somewhat belated as he admitted to himself, began to think, and stood there irresolute, sword in hand. Suddenly he remembered his mission, and the national cause that hung upon his success and the personal issue involved in the completion of his task. How was he to know that these strangers were not disguised assassins sent by Luynes?

He stood practically at their mercy, for his own friends, although in the majority, were unarmed, and even if they possessed weapons could make little use of them. Yet he had allowed himself to be drawn into this brawl, and had actually been the first to show steel; so, whatever ensued, investigation would show that he had been the aggressor, changing the issue from one of words to one of weapons.

Mentally dubbing himself an impetuous fool, he tightened his grip on the hilt of his rapier, and, remembering how good a swordsman he was, would have entered the conflict untroubled were it not for his fear of a rearward attack from the other two, when he had disarmed or wounded his opponent.

The elder man stood with the knuckles of his left hand pressed against his hip; his right rested on the hilt of his sword, whose point impinged upon the floor, like a walking stick sported by a dandy. He noted Cardillac's hesitation, regarding him with a quizzical look, while his lip curled slightly, giving his face a disdainful expression. Cardillac, seeing this, roused himself from his momentary reverie, resentment at the unwarranted intrusion rising uppermost in his mind.

"At your pleasure, monsieur," said the young man.

"Monsieur, I await yours," replied the elder.

An unaccustomed thrill travelled up Cardillac's right arm as the sword-blades lay together in mid-air. He was conscious of a strength behind his opponent's weapon that he had never before encountered, but more ominous was the skill with which his own steel was held nerveless and immovable.

There was nothing spectacular about the contest; no clashing of metal, no thrusts, and consequently no parrying, but it seemed to the spectators that the two blades had become welded together, and that neither combatant could draw them apart.

But Cardillac was no spectator, ignorant of fence. He considered himself an expert at this play, but never before had he met a man whose sword seemed to be a magician's wand that, at a touch, completely paralysed his own blade. However, it occurred to him that this was a game at which he could hold out indefinitely, that could come to no conclusion, and that was as nullifying for his opponent as for himself.

Skill, however great, could not in the long run take the place of strength, and as Cardillac was the younger man, he must eventually win, even against a trick so unusual. So they held grimly on, each man standing his ground, giving way not an inch.

Suddenly the stranger's blade seemed to lose grip, and its point, like the sting of a serpent, passed under the quillon of Cardillac's guard, and deftly pricked his hand, causing a momentary relaxation of his grip. Next instant Cardillac's sword was whirled through the air, its point stuck in the timbered ceiling, with the pommel swaying to and fro in space like a pendulum.

CHAPTER XXX

AN ALLY OF NEITHER

Once more the stranger sported his weapon after the fashion of a dandy's cane, his open palm resting on the pommel, his cynical smile turned upon his discomfited antagonist, contemptuously pitiful, as a grown man regards the blundering of an untaught boy.

Cardillac did not move, but placed his arms akimbo, and stood there defenceless, although he might easily have reached forward and pulled his rapier from the ceiling, for the other was in no attitude instantly to prevent this.

"I think, sir," proposed the stranger deferentially, as if putting forward a statement which might be disputed, "that your life lies at my mercy."

"Take it," said Cardillac indifferently, but although he spoke nonchalantly, chagrin made his heart burn within him.

He remembered his unjustifiable fear that the other two would interfere, and although the thought was unspoken, he was humiliated that it had occurred to him. Neither of the other two had moved from his place: there was no need for them to do so. Cardillac had been helpless as a child from the first.

"I have no wish to take it, monsieur. Man's life decreases in value as man increases in years. My own life I hold as of small worth, but existence now opens to you its most advantageous period. I would therefore gladly bestow it on you, unless you compel me to deprive you of it."

"What are your conditions, monsieur?"

"There is but one condition, which is that you drink a toast with me."

"I am willing, so long as I am not asked to admit that any lady is more beautiful than she whom I have the honour to serve."

"There you see, monsieur, you prove my contention regarding the value of life. You would die rather than proclaim another fairer than the divinity you worship. I shall put your loyalty to no such test, for the beauty of woman is a subject indifferent to me."

"Very well, monsieur, then I am prepared to drink with you."

One of Cardillac's friends, delighted to see that wine, rather than blood, was to flow, filled the young man's flagon and handed it to him. The gentleman in semi-military garb did the same favour for the elder man, who, raising his measure aloft, cried:

"I give you his most gracious Majesty, King Louis, the thirteenth of that name!"

Cardillac gently laid down his filled cup upon the table.

"Monsieur," he said, "the number thirteen is unlucky."

"How so?"

"For me, I mean. I cannot drink to the King."

"Well, monsieur, you seem difficult to please, and apparently would force me to extremes—a course I am loth to follow in this instance—therefore I shall amend my proposition. As you do not care to accept my toast, give me one of your own. If I refuse, then it seems we are quits, and so again your life is spared. But you must propose a serious toast, suitable for a serious and aged man. I refuse to drink to any young lady."

"Sir, I could not have encountered a more generous opponent, whose nobility is only equalled by his skill of hand and strength of arm. I give you, sir, the Queen, wrongfully imprisoned by her enemies! I ask you all to stand and drink to her speedy release."

As he made this request, he looked towards his friends, who were instantly on their feet, but there arose also the two strangers seated at the smaller table.

"The Queen!" cried his late antagonist, raising aloft his goblet. "Health and liberty to the Queen, and confusion to her enemies!"

The stranger put down his drained tankard, and extended his hand.

"Monsieur de Cardillac, I am gratified to meet you. Allow me to introduce myself."

"My lord, there is no need. Your sword has been your sponsor. You must be the Duke d'Epéron, commander of the Queen's forces."

For the first time since he had arrived, the duke laughed; then, turning to his two companions, he introduced the military-clerical man as his son, the archbishop of Toulouse, and the other as Rucellai, the very reverend the abbé of Ligny.

"As a man of peace," said the abbé, "I beg to be allowed to draw this sword from the ceiling and restore it to its owner."

"I fear such a restitution is not in the interests of peace, abbé," commented the duke, "for although our contest seemed unexciting, Monsieur de Cardillac is nevertheless one of the best swordsmen I have ever met. And now, Monsieur de Cardillac, when you are at liberty, I should like you to join our party. We have come over from Loches especially to see you. I suppose the landlord can give us lodging for the night."

The landlord assured the duke that he had ample accommodation, but feared none of his rooms were worthy of holding so distinguished a guest. His lordship replied that he was an old campaigner, who looked upon the comforts of an inn as unnecessary luxuries.

The silk-spinners took their departure, going out, not by the front door, but down into the cellar, with their lighted lanterns, and so into underground passages until they came to their dwellings in the chalk cliff, thus avoiding the bitterness of a winter night. The small table was drawn up nearer to the fire, the landlord provided an ample supply of wine, and the four men seated themselves in front of the blazing logs. The commander of the Queen's forces was the first to speak, and he addressed Cardillac.

"When the Duke de Montreuil told me you refused a conference, except at the sword's point, I resolved on the first opportunity to oblige you, even if I was compelled to take a disagreeable journey for that purpose."

"My lord, I apologise for my boorishness in disobeying your command, and regret that I have put you to the inconvenience of a journey to Montrichard."

"Oh, that's no matter. Our ride hither has settled two questions, which perhaps would not have been resolved so well at Loches. The first pertains to your swordsmanship, and the second to your loyalty, which, as my friend Montreuil was injudicious enough to disclose to you, I doubted. For such disbelief I now apologise. In these troublous times true men should hold no misunderstandings with one another, and I trust all is now clear between us."

"So far as I am concerned, that is the case," replied Cardillac.

"Good. Well, we wish to enlist your assistance in liberating the queen, and Montreuil has for some time proclaimed your merits, which I did not accept at their proper valuation. We have been using every effort towards the Queen's escape, but up to the present time have been unsuccessful. Now a new difficulty has arisen, coming from a most unexpected quarter; a quarter so exalted that our criticism is stricken dumb. The Queen has caused to be sent to me an order forbidding the very reverend the abbé of Ligny from making any further efforts on her behalf. The Queen, poor lady, has been these months past cut off from all communication with her followers. She is surrounded by women, and naturally knows nothing of what is going on outside her prison walls. I daresay that the failure of our efforts has increased the rigour of her imprisonment, and this doubtless is partly to blame for the unfortunate proclamation—if I dare call it so, in all loyalty. In addition to this, someone must have poisoned the mind of Her Majesty against the abbé of Ligny."

"My lord duke, excuse my interruption, but if Her Majesty is cut off from all communication with the outside world, how could she know anything of the abbé's doings?"

"Of course, my dear Cardillac, a certain percentage of news filters through, but we have reason to doubt the genuineness

of this proclamation. The signature certainly resembles that of the Queen, but there are some expert forgers in the other camp, and the blow is so unexpected, and so contrary to Her Majesty's own interests, that without corroboration we hesitate to act upon it."

"From whom did you receive the proclamation?"

"From the Duke de Montreuil himself."

"And from whom did the duke receive it?"

"That he refused to disclose, but he assured me that the document came directly from the Queen."

"The Duke de Montreuil would never make such a statement unless he believed it to be true?"

"Certainly not. I am well aware that he credits it, but until I know the avenue through which it came, and so can add my own judgment to that of Montreuil's, I, as commander of the forces, hesitate to act upon it."

"Would you obey the document if you knew it to be genuine?"

"Of a certainty. How can you ask such a question?"

"Because in that case I shall tell you how it came into the Duke de Montreuil's hands."

"You? How can you possibly know anything about it?"

"I gave it to the duke, and asked him to present it to you. I am acquainted with one of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting, and asked her to persuade the Queen to sign such a proclamation. I myself got the document from the château at Blois, and finding the Duke de Montreuil here on my arrival, did not go through to Loches, as was at first my intention, but gave it instead to him."

"Do you mean to assert," said the Italian, speaking for the first time, and speaking very softly, although there was a dangerous glitter in his eyes, "that it was upon your advice—you, a man unknown in our ranks—that Her Majesty issued what was practically a sentence of dismissal against one of her most faithful servants?"

"Yes."

"May I ask why? Surely you feel no personal animus against me?"

"None in the least, reverend father. I took the course, of which doubtless you disapprove, because all your ingenuities had failed. Worse than that, you were keeping the town of Blois on the alert, and thus prevented my success. As well might a man endeavour to extract honey from a bee-hive while someone else was irritating the bees with a stick."

The abbé was about to reply, when the archbishop of Toulouse, his superior, motioned him to continue silent.

"There is little use in arguing the pros and cons of the proclamation," said the archbishop. "Let us talk of the future, rather than of the past. We are here for a practical purpose, Monsieur de Cardillac, and the proposal we offer you is this. You are a man with your way to make in the world. I suppose I may take that for granted?"

"Yes, my lord archbishop."

"You are young, energetic, fearless; exactly the man the abbé of Ligny needs to carry out his plans. If you return with us to Loches, and take service under the direction of the abbé, I make no doubt the next project will prove successful."

"I have been told, my lord archbishop, that there are many spies in Loches, and their presence may account for the failure of former schemes for the Queen's liberation, as I am sure the plans of the abbé of Ligny must be well laid. On account of the spies alone I should be compelled to refuse the invitation to Loches."

"Youth is ever confident. Perhaps you scorn my assistance, monsieur?" said the abbé placidly.

"Oh, no, reverend father. On any ordinary occasion I should welcome it, but a battle and a plot are two different things. The more men you can secure on your side in a battle, the better; the fewer there are in a plot, the better. In my plot there are two persons, and that is just double the ideal number."

"Young man, tell me your plot. We shall all treat what you say in the utmost confidence."

"My plot, abbé, is very simple. It consists in transferring Her Majesty the Queen from the château of Blois to the château of Loches."

"But the details, monsieur," persisted the abbé.

"Oh, the details! They are like the weather, and change day by day; often several times a day."

The Duke d'Epéron did not like the trend of the conversation. He thought his lesson in swordsmanship should have taught the young man a little more modesty than he appeared to possess. A dark frown was slowly gathering on his brow.

"I think, monsieur," he said, "you treat the abbé with less consideration than his high office, or his distinguished personal qualifications, deserve."

Cardillac rose to his feet.

"I regret, my lord duke, that what I have said has produced such an impression upon your mind. I assure both you and the abbé that I mean no disrespect to himself or the company. The misunderstanding is caused by my crude endeavours to be courteous.

"Ah, you may smile, but what I say is strictly true. I am usually very direct in my speech, and no man mistakes my meaning. Here I have made an attempt at verbal fencing, with the same result that followed my measuring swords with you, my lord duke. I shall now speak plainly. I belong to neither faction that divides France. As I told the Duke de Montreuil, I believe there are mostly knaves on one side, and mostly fools on the other."

"You hold a flattering opinion of your country, young man," said the duke.

"Oh, there is nothing wrong with the country. I am referring merely to those in high offices on either side. I refuse, then, to be labelled, and called King's man or Queen's man. I am in this contest for Victor de Cardillac, and I am going to fight as Victor de Cardillac orders. I ask no man's assistance, and I will assist no man. I refuse to disclose the particulars of my conspiracies to anyone.

"If I succeed, the Queen will reach Loches; if I fail, my head will reach the block. It is like to do so in any case, if I fall into the clutches of Luynes. If I fail, I pay the penalty; if I succeed, I ask no office in the gift of the Queen, and no money from the coffers of her supporters. And now, gentlemen, if I have made myself understood, I beg leave to bid you good-night."

"Good-night," responded the Duke d'Epéron shortly. The other two said nothing, and Cardillac, with a comprehensive bow to all three, went up the stairs, and so to bed.

CHAPTER XXXI

AN INTRIGUING VIS-À-VIS

When Cardillac awoke next morning he had no desire to proceed further with the acquaintance of the three men, so after an early breakfast he saddled his horse and rode northward. In spite of the severe contest he had had with old Maloche, he was, nevertheless, welcomed at the manor farm, because at the end of each visit he made the agriculturist a payment in gold. After the night's storm the day had dawned clear and cold.

Cardillac stopped on this occasion for nearly a week at the farmhouse, spending his days on foot, examining the defences of Blois, that is to say, the defences so far as the south was concerned, for the bridge was too well guarded to afford access to the town, and the late rain had filled the Loire from bank to bank, transforming the river into a raging, muddy torrent, which he found impossible to cross with such craft as was drawn up along its southern shore.

He waited a week for the river to subside, but there was no diminution of the flood, so, baffled in his numerous attempts to enter Blois, he got upon his horse and rode back to Montrichard, and to the comparative luxury of the Tête Noire, whose table far excelled that of the manor farm.

At Montrichard a disagreeable surprise awaited him. The fat and friendly landlord of the inn drew him aside and said:

"The abbé of Ligny is still here, monsieur. The other two returned to Loches the next morning. All three seemed at a loss when they found you had ridden away, and they questioned me shrewdly, trying to learn what had become of you. When they discovered I did not know, or would not tell, they held consultation together. The polite abbé then announced to me that his journey was in reality a pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of Nanteuil, whom he wished to supplicate on behalf of the imprisoned Queen. The abbé is a most kindly, courteous gentleman, and he speaks highly in praise of the Tête Noire. Its cuisine, he says, excels that of any place of entertainment in Loches."

"Yes, yes!" broke in Cardillac, with some impatience. "We all know your excellence as a landlord. Did the abbé say when he intended returning to Loches?"

"I believe he will continue to supplicate Notre Dame de Nanteuil until such time as the Queen is released."

"Good heavens! is the case so serious as that? Then we may be honoured by his presence for some time yet?"

"I hope so, Monsieur de Cardillac, for he is an estimable gentleman, and an amiable judge of good cooking and sound wine."

Cardillac turned away, trebly depressed, by the presence of the abbé, by the present impossibility of entering Blois, and therefore by the fact that he could not win a glimpse of his lady in the château.

As he walked despondently through the town, he met friend after friend, who greeted him cheerily. From each one he learned that the good abbé had been asking questions, and had shown much interest in the silk industry, and seemed particularly pleased when he induced people to talk of that gallant young man, Cardillac, for whom he professed much liking and friendship.

Disquieted by the fact that the abbé was spying on him, Cardillac walked to the middle of the bridge, leaned over the parapet, where he was alone, and looked down upon the swirling, swollen Cher. What was he to do with this meddlesome prelate, whose activity even a proclamation from the Queen was unable to subdue? Cardillac wrestled with the problem, made up his mind, then sought one of his friends, a tailor of lowering brow and massive jaw.

That night at dinner Cardillac found opposite him the beaming and benevolent face of the Abbé Rucellai, a face whose benign expression was belied by the crafty smile and the shifty eyes. Cardillac greeted him with the utmost good humour.

"I heard from the landlord that you proposed stopping with us for some time."

"Ah, yes," replied the abbé. "I have remained to implore the intercession of Our Lady of Nanteuil, who, you may remember, was a great favourite of Louis XI."

"The saint seems inclined towards those whose methods are subtle," commented Cardillac.

"True. Louis was indirect but often successful, and I thought that in dealing with enemies so cunning as those confronting us, Our Lady's help would be invaluable."

"I think you are in the right, abbé, and I am further persuaded that if the church attends strictly to the offering of prayer, leaving to the strong arm of the laity the efficiency of the sword, the cause favoured by such a combination must prove irresistible."

"But the laity should accept spiritual guidance, Monsieur de Cardillac."

"But certainly, monsieur, although not in military matters. The archbishop should supplicate, but let the general smite, without the archbishop dictating his ideas on warfare to the general, or the general allowing his private doctrine to mitigate the potency of the archbishop's petitions. I am for a separation of church and state when it comes to blows."

"I thoroughly agree with you, Monsieur de Cardillac. Still, there are affairs in life where a little advice may prove of the utmost service. Let me cite, for instance, your own undertaking. That is not an engagement in which blows are struck."

"It may come to blows as a last resort, abbé."

"In that case, then, you are defeated, Monsieur de Cardillac, because you are one man, and your enemies in Blois are fifteen thousand."

"Fifteen thousand enemies are there now, but only ten thousand garrisoned Blois when I undertook this task. I owe the extra five thousand to the advice you have given the Duke d'Epernon and his son."

The abbé smiled graciously, as one who has heard an offensive thing said, but is resolved to take no offense.

"You have just returned from Blois, perhaps?"

"Yes, and for a week I have been trying ineffectually to enter the town."

"Now in that case I could be of some assistance. I know a man thoroughly to be trusted——"

Cardillac interrupted by holding up his hand.

"Heaven preserve me," he cried, "from the man thoroughly to be trusted. It is such as he that baffle all plots, bringing men's necks to the axe."

"Ah, the impatience of youth," murmured the abbé forgivingly, shaking his head. "You do not even ask me to tell you his name, residence and quality, and so ignorantly put aside an assistant of great importance. He dwells on the environs of Blois, and he——"

"Spare me further particulars, abbé. I do not wish to know anything about the man, as there is no office in my gift which he could fill."

The abbé bent ingratiatingly across the table.

"Monsieur de Cardillac," he said, "it is impossible that one man should bring about the liberation of the Queen."

"Then, abbé, why trouble further about an unimportant person like myself, who is doomed to failure?"

"Because, Monsieur de Cardillac, I am desirous you should succeed."

"That cannot be the real reason, abbé."

"Why not, when you see how anxious I am to link myself, even remotely, with your success?"

To this the young man made no reply, but went on silently with his meal, the abbé's eager eyes scrutinising him the while. At last Rucellai continued, with a bluff assumption of candour:

"You are so modest a man, Cardillac, that you may not credit your influence with the great. There is the Duke de Montreuil, for instance, who swears by you, for you did him a great favour, and I assure you he appreciates it. There again is his highness, the Duke d'Epernon, who at first was prejudiced against you, but having had the advantage of

making your acquaintance, is now as warm an admirer as the Duke de Montreuil himself. I may say the same of his son, the archbishop of Toulouse. You greatly impressed him that evening we first met you.

"Monsieur, is it not natural that a politic person like myself should wish to ingratiate himself with one who exerts such influence with the great? You will call me selfish, perhaps, and so I am. The Duke d'Epernon proposed that you should be my assistant. Let me, now that I know and appreciate you better, make a less ambitious suggestion, which is that I shall be your helper."

"I thought I had made it perfectly plain, abbé, that I required no colleague?"

"But the very fact that you spent a week endeavouring to enter Blois shows that you need aid, and need it badly."

"Very well, I accept. Cause, then, the river Loire to subside until it reaches its summer level, and thus I may enter Blois from the north. Petition Our Lady of Nanteuil for an abatement of the flood, or, like Moses, divide the waters, and I'll walk as dry-shod into Blois as if I were a son of Israel."

"I regret to observe, my dear Cardillac—and I am sure you will pardon the reproof from a man in holy orders who is so much older than yourself—as I was about to say, there is a taint of scoffing in your language, and a dangerous approach to the line of blasphemy."

"I am sorry you think so, abbé. I was merely trying to show that my difficulty cannot be overcome by human agency at the present moment."

"Will you not disclose your plans to me, and listen at least to my comment upon them?"

"Did you not discover my plans during the enquiries you made in the village?"

The abbé laughed with happy geniality.

"Oh, I merely wished to learn all I could about you. You interest me, Monsieur de Cardillac, as you interest the Duke d'Epernon and his son; as, indeed, you interest the Duke de Montreuil. I do not wonder you refused to disclose your scheme to three persons, but you can give me the particulars in the assurance that they will be held strictly confidential, and from the fact that my own plans have hitherto failed, I think it likely I may be able to point out some fatal flaw which you may remedy while there is yet time."



CHAPTER XXXII

THE PRICE OF A SECRET

Cardillac leaned back, and looked steadily at his intriguing *vis-à-vis* with eyes that saw him not. He was arguing away the last doubt that remained in his mind. Drawing a deep sigh, he said wearily:

"Very well; have it as you wish. A determined man may get anything he wants in this world if he is willing to pay the price."

"The price? What price?"

"Why, in your case, abbé, the price of silence, which you have promised."

"Ah, that price I will cheerfully pay. I hope you now accept my word that I shall mention to no one what you may be good enough to tell me."

"Most certainly: I am sure you will keep silence till all need of silence is ended."

"I thank you for your faith, Monsieur de Cardillac."

"Then, abbé, excuse my absence for a few minutes."

The young man arose and went to his own room. When he returned he wore another doublet, and held something in his hand which he poured out on the table before the abbé.

"There," he said, "you have before you the whole secret."

The abbé's insidious eyes narrowed as he examined the materials Cardillac had brought. Reflectively he stirred the little pile with his finger, and took from it a piece of string.

"This," he said, "seems to be a parcel of sand, and the other a bit of silk cord."

"Exactly."

"I do not fathom your meaning," protested the abbé, looking up.

"You astonish me. I thought that one so artful would meet no difficulty—given these materials—in reconstructing the whole situation. I hoped this handful would elucidate the position, and thus save the necessity for further words, because we are here, in a public dining-room, where it is dangerous to speak about secrets, even though no listeners be visible. I may help you by saying that this heap looks like sand, but is not, whereas the cord looks like silk, and is silk."

The abbé sighed plaintively.

"After all, I seem to have had greater faith in your word than you show in mine. I thought you spoke truth when you said you would tell me what I wished to know, instead of which, you propound a riddle that I cannot solve."

"You mistake me, abbé. I merely overestimated your powers of divination. Of course, I am quite willing to present you with the most minute details, and repeat them and explain them until you understand, but, as I said, that cannot be done in a public room."

"Then, monsieur, take me to your own apartment."

"Its walls are no more sound-proof than these. We must retire to one of the chalk dwellings, where, when the door is shut, we need fear no listener. As an additional precaution, I will take you to the cliff-dwelling of a friend who, I think, already suspects my secret, for he has been one of my assistants. Even should he overhear it will be no matter, because he cannot write, and was born dumb."

The abbé laughed.

"For a young man you are the most cautious I have ever met. If you lead, I will follow."

Cardillac conducted the abbé by an underground passage to one of the cliff-dwellings, and there they found a room already prepared for them, rather cosily furnished, with a very comfortable armchair in which the abbé was invited to seat himself. The white walls were illuminated by a lamp.

"When I returned to my room," began Cardillac, "I put on a new coat, and a new pair of boots."

As he spoke, he raised his foot, and exhibited the sole. Let into the bottom of the boot was a rod of iron, which, bent at two angles, formed one long side and two ends of a parallelogram. At one end the rod of iron had been formed into a loop.

"This metal work," continued Cardillac, "was fashioned by the blacksmith of Montrichard after a design of my own, which design I drew from measurements taken by the lady-in-waiting to the Queen, who is my only colleague in this venture."

"Until now, my dear Cardillac, until now," interpolated the abbé, rubbing his hands together.

"Yes, until now. These measurements were taken from the window-sill of the last room to the west, on the first floor of the château at Blois. The room in question was once the library of Catherine de Médicis, and opens upon the balcony that runs round the Tour du Moulin.

"You will notice, abbé, that there is one of these irons in the sole of each boot, so that if, on entering Blois, I happen to be searched, there is a chance that these devices may not be discovered, but if discovered I would explain that they were put in to save the soles of my boots.

"Now, abbé, I shall take off my doublet, and will call your attention to the inside of it. What do you think of its lining, and the decorative effect thereof?"

"It is really very attractive," complimented the abbé. "It seems to be lined with silk cordage, which makes the jacket at once both warm and ornamental."

"It is everything you say," responded Cardillac, "and the silk cordage is the work of our local spinners, while the lining has been put in by our tailor, who is the dumb man that inhabits this rock cavern. But look you, by cutting this piece of thread, the cord comes bit by bit completely away, as you see."

Cardillac's right hand stretched out, pulling with it the cordage. The delighted abbé gave a cry of admiration.

"Why," he said, "'tis a rope ladder like a spider's web."

"An excellent simile, abbé. It resembles the spider's web of the fairy tale, delicate as gossamer and strong as steel. This ladder will bear up three men at one time, although it looks so flimsy. I have tested it, and therefore know what its capabilities are. Now, having unravelled it for your benefit, I must order it sewn up again."

Cardillac opened the door and shouted. The dumb tailor appeared, took the doublet and his instructions, and disappeared.

"A sinister-looking man, that," said the abbé.

"Yes, but an excellent tailor. And now, abbé, you perhaps observe that the sand, as you call it, is of the same colour as that rope ladder. The powder represents scrapings from the stone front, facing north, of the château at Blois. My lady-in-waiting lets down a cord; I attach to it the two iron instruments I have taken from my boots; I unravel the silk ladder which I take from the inside of my doublet, that also having escaped observation during the search, and this rope ladder I have first attached to the two cleats of iron. The lady-in-waiting fastens the iron upon the window-sill, letting down the silk ladder, then I run up to her window, and enter the château."

"But, monsieur, surely you never expect the Queen to come down such an aërial ladder as that?"

"If Her Majesty cares to entrust herself to me, I will carry her, but I think I shall have no difficulty in persuading her to make the descent alone. In any case, should I fail in the first attempt, the silk ladder may remain there all next day, and no one in the street will detect it, for it is the exact colour of the stone wall. Our dyers here in Montrichard are equally as skilful as those of Tyre."

"But Her Majesty is forty-five years old, and very stout, as is the habit of our Italian women when they reach that age."

"Nevertheless, abbé, I shall have her out of Blois were she double the age and twice the stoutness. And now, reverend father, are there any further questions you wish to ask?"

"Suppose you succeed in getting Her Majesty safely to the street, how are you to leave Blois?"

"I anticipate that in a month or two the rigour of her captivity will be relaxed. I understand that before you began your own arrangements for her release, the bridge over the Loire was not guarded, neither did a cordon of soldiers encircle the town. As time passes, these precautions will cease, one after another. Blois will resume its activity and its communication with the surrounding country, a condition much desired by every inhabitant. Luynes will not hold the tight rein longer than is needful, for he does not wish to turn the town against him, and there has already been much grumbling because of the state of siege."

"Then you mean to rest here for weeks?"

"There is nothing else to do, venerable abbé. The moment the tailor gets my jacket sewn up again——"

"Oh, I could never consent to such placid inactivity."

"I regret to differ with you, abbé, but I shall not permit myself to be hurried by anyone."

"You shall be hurried by the Duke d'Epernon the moment he hears from me, unless you consent to accept my advice. Such a delay is unthinkable."

"You forget, abbé, that you promised to communicate to no one what I divulged."

"I shall not tell what you have said, but I shall urge the duke to spur you on."

"I see. Well, it doesn't matter. Abbé, you will find yourself quite comfortable here. I have given orders that you will be waited upon with the utmost courtesy, for the tailor, who is unmarried, and attends to his own housework, his trade not being very brisk, is an excellent manager, in spite of his forbidding face. He is as gentle as a lamb, unless aroused by opposition to his wishes. If you attempt to bribe him, he is likely to knock you down, but during good behaviour you will be quite unmolested."

"Do you dare thus, without warrant, to imprison a friend of the Duke d'Epernon, commander of the Queen's forces, and the colleague of his son, the archbishop of Toulouse?"

"Well, if I dare to enter Blois, with its fifteen thousand men, where there is a price set on my head, it is not likely I shall be frightened by two, or three, counting yourself. Besides, abbé, a bargain is a bargain. I told you the price of my secret was silence. I have given you my secret, and I must secure the price. I will release you two days before the attempt is made to release the Queen. Meanwhile, your blessing, reverend father, and so good-night."

CHAPTER XXXIII

SAINT VALENTINE'S NIGHT

The day of blessed Saint Valentine, favourable to all true lovers, in the year of our Lord 1618 broke fair and clear; warmer than one has a right to expect in February, representing thus the passion the day commemorates.

Cardillac, in high spirits, found the bridge unguarded, and entered Blois without being even challenged.

The continued protests of the citizens had been listened to in Paris. They had implored Luynes either to remove the Queen to some fortress in the country, or else confine the guards to the palace itself, and leave the town to its former state of unrestricted freedom.

Like all other human actions, the numerous conspiracies of Rucellai produced two opposite effects. Only one of these effects had been visible to Cardillac, and he naturally supposed that this was the net result of the abbé's futile endeavours. That prelate had sealed up Blois so far as he was concerned, baffling him in his attempts to enter the town. But the other effect of the Italian's plots was to give the King's officers undue confidence. They came to believe that the palace-prison of Blois was impregnable, and so grew careless. Blois had long been a favourite residence of the Court, and the town contained many facilities for the dispersion of ennui. There were theatres, concert halls, circuses, balls, parties, entertainments of all sorts, and excellent restaurants with a cuisine which rivalled that of Paris.

The people of Blois were familiar with Court life, and knew the high officials on whom pressure might be brought to bear for the amelioration of the disabilities under which their town suffered. The consequence was that the shrewd Luynes, holder of power and craver of popularity, saw that two courses were open to him. First, to keep the town sealed up, with business dead, discontent seething, and a net result of hatred against himself, with local revolt against his government; or, second, to throw the town wide open, and concentrate his watch on the castle alone.

The mere presence of the garrison was enough to secure the prosperity of Blois, thus he would make every man within it his friend, and further, every man would become an amateur jailor, for they all recognised the advantage of the Queen's residence there, should the town be allowed to benefit from it.

Luynes, as always, was prompt to act, and in a manner that brought good will to himself. Orders were hurried down to Blois that all avenues leading to the town should be cleared of their guard, and all questioning, challenging, examining of travellers stopped. Officers were commanded to concentrate their attention solely on the château. The courtyard was to be closed to strangers, and no citizens were allowed within its precincts, but outside these limits the town became free.

Most of the officers regretted Paris, but made the best of their opportunities at Blois. The rich citizens of this wealthy town threw open their homes to the gay, pleasure-loving officers of the army, and every night brought its dinners and its dances. A stranger to the political situation would never have imagined that within sound of the sensuous music a Queen of France lay imprisoned.

Into this thronged city, devoted to Euterpe, to Orpheus, to Terpsichore, and to Bacchus, entered Cardillac, on this day of Venus. All his careful precautions against the discovery of his rope ladder were rendered unnecessary by the relaxed discipline of the town. Crossing the bridge, he made his way up the busy main street which, bending to the left, brought him to the imposing north façade of the castle, which at that time fronted open country, and therefore his actions were in no danger of being overlooked.

All he had to fear was the observation of some casual passer-by, of which there was little chance, as the upper classes frequented the main street, and the soldiery promenaded along the river-front. Yet Cardillac proceeded with as much caution as if carrying out his plans on the busy thoroughfare.

The sun set on the fourteenth of February a few minutes after five o'clock, and the winter twilight of Touraine came to an end about six. Cardillac's divinity appeared on the balcony shortly after four o'clock, her dark head bare, and her slender form enveloped in a robe of sable fur, giving the young girl a regal dignity that was new to Cardillac.

He stood in the middle of the street, struck silent with admiration. Thérèse recognised him at once, and wafted him a kiss from her finger tips. She leaned on the balustrade, her arms, concealed in the ample robe, resting on the stone. Although

her voice was scarcely above a whisper, the clear, still air carried it to him, and delighted him with its music.

"Come closer to the wall," she said. "I think we can speak without being overheard."

Promptly he obeyed her.

"What time do you dine?" he asked.

"At half-past seven."

"Can you get leave of absence?"

"Oh, yes, a headache will secure that."

"I hope your head suffers no such disadvantage."

The girl laughed.

"I admit that at present it does not, but it is a most serviceable head, and at any hour you name the torment shall begin."

"Let us say seven o'clock, then. By the way, where is your own room in the château?"

"Ah, that shows the clearness of my head, Victor. I have been enacting the selfish monopolist, securing for my sole use the library of Catherine de Médicis, which adjoins the balcony. Thus, when I bolt my door, I may appear in this gallery without fear of interruption. But I would not have you think me too selfish, either: the room is one of the smallest in the suite, in spite of the fact that it was a library. I fear me Catherine's literary tastes were limited."

"Why, that is an excellent arrangement. Very well; at seven throw down your cord, and then you may pull up the rope ladder, whose stanchions I hope you will be able to fasten on the window-sill. I intend to climb up there, unless the strength of my silk cordage——"

"Oh, really! I think you should ask my permission first. Do you imagine, monsieur, that if I do not allow a lady to enter by the door, I am likely to permit a gentleman to cross my window-sill? For all my lady-errant escapades, I still hold the proprieties in respect."

"I shall treat your window-sill, mademoiselle, with the utmost deference and courtesy, but it does seem to me that a girl whom I sent twirling down a rope from the highest convent window has grown very circumspect since her residence in Blois."

"You never twirled me down a rope, Victor de Cardillac. You are thinking of a certain Marie Duchamps, for whom you professed the greatest contempt because her position in the social scale was so much lower than your own. Your association with the servile, monsieur, unfits you for the society of a high-born lady like myself."

"Then, mademoiselle, I wish to amend that defect by further acquaintance with the high-born, so at seven o'clock, always with your permission, I shall ascend the social ladder, which in this instance is made of silk."

"I shall be enraptured to begin my lessons in etiquette for your benefit at seven o'clock, if the rope ladder doesn't break, but always with the window-sill between us."

"Put no dependence on the window-sill, Thérèse. It is more fragile as a protector than my silk rope. I intend to carry you in my arms down the ladder, with or without your permission, and take you out to dinner."

"Oh, madness! That is utterly impossible, Victor!"

Her ejaculation was interrupted by a deep sigh, which he heard from above. Then she went on again:

"But if it were possible, how entrancing! I have not felt the solid earth beneath my feet for more than six months, and my daily walks have been round this circumscribed tower. Well, Victor, you will come up, and we will discuss it."

"Yes, Thérèse, we will discuss it for the length of time it takes to get my arms round you."

There was little trace of fear in mademoiselle's laugh.

"You must go now," she said, "and not risk detection down there by talking impossibilities up a stone wall. *A sept heures, monsieur.*"

"A sept heures, Marie."

Cardillac departed, and made his way to that splendid restaurant, the Pavilion Henri IV, in the middle of the town. Here he reserved a table for two, to be occupied at half-past seven or thereabouts, and he spent half an hour with the urbane proprietor over one of the most important affairs in life, the judicious placing together of a menu that contained some excellent examples of the good living from Normandy, a number of the choicest delicacies of Gascony, united by a few of the delicious dishes that Touraine affords. Then some golden moments were devoted to the selection of the wines.

Making his way thence to the most fashionable tailor in Blois, where, two weeks before, he had left an order, he found himself fitted with a magnificent cloak, and left the *costumier* with a swagger that Blois had rarely seen equalled, even in its most palmy days, when the Court elegants from Paris ruffled it through the streets.

CHAPTER XXXIV

DINNER SURROUNDED BY THE FOE

A little before seven, Cardillac flung his minor ladder to the top coping of the terrace, and the iron cleat catching, he made his way to the foot of the wall. As the bells of the château were chiming the hour, he heard the window of the little room above him open, and coils of a cord fell at his feet. A minute sufficed to tie it to the bent iron, Cardillac having previously fastened the rope ladder thereto. The bundle ascended out of his sight, and a moment later the loose end of the ladder came fluttering down.

"These irons fit exactly," came the voice from above, and Cardillac ran up this aerial Jacob's ladder with the agility of a cat.

"Oh," cried Thérèse, taken by surprise, and then: "Be careful, be careful, Victor!" she pleaded.

"Arms round my neck, please!" he commanded.

"This ladder of moonbeams will never bear us," she protested, but before the sentence was finished, they stood together on the terrace, and a few seconds later on the main road.

"Oh," she cried, "what an adventure! How delicious it is to be on the land of France once more!"

It was not so dark but he could see her dancing eyes and her radiant smile. He drew back the lapels of her rich fur cloak, and stood in amazement, admiring her magnificent gown.

"Goddess of dressmakers, Thérèse," he exclaimed, "where did you get so splendid a costume? I thought all your belongings were left at the convent, and of course you could not have obtained them since coming here."

"Well, Victor, trust a woman for that. Even though we were not allowed out of our apartment, the seamstresses were permitted to enter. I should think from that new cloak you wear, which I cannot sufficiently commend, you should know that if Blois can do so well for men, it can dress a woman with equal advantage. I am glad my own modest dress seems to please you."

"Please me? Thérèse, I am lost in admiration. I never dreamt of anything like this. But then, you are peerless, whatever you wear."

This caused the joyous Thérèse to laugh, and placing her small hand on his arm, she accompanied him into the fashionable portion of the town, although she protested against the danger of their excursion.

The proprietor of the Pavilion Henri IV himself met them at the door, and conducted them in triumph to the table reserved. In the gallery an excellent orchestra was playing. The proprietor, like a true artist, was proud of a guest who had ordered the best dinner his establishment could provide. He greeted them audibly as Monsieur and Madame Duchamps, which covered Cardillac with confusion but brought a merry twinkle to the girl's eyes.

Two splendidly uniformed attendants with graceful courtesy drew back the sable cloak from the gleaming ivory shoulders and queenly neck of Mademoiselle de Montreuil, and she bestowed on Cardillac a friendly little smile in return for the look of rapt devotion that flashed into his eyes, as the servant bore away his own resplendent outer wrap.

They seated themselves at a table of pure white, on which glittered dishes of silver. The company in which they found themselves could hardly have been excelled in Paris itself, the military uniforms lending that dash of colour to the scene which only military uniforms can effect, while the gowns of the ladies left nothing to be desired.

When the two entered, the murmur of conversation, which mingled with the music of the band, gradually ceased, and all eyes were turned toward the strangers. The careless, handsome youth, and the tall, slender, beautiful girl, with eyes like dark diamonds, her midnight wealth of hair enhancing the snow-white purity of the face, relieved by the healthful flush of youth, like the afterglow on the pallid Alps, formed an attractive picture that called forth a universal murmur of approbation.

It was to her, rather than to him, that the major part of the attention was turned, for she walked down the long room with

the grace and ease of one accustomed to the highest circles, clothed in a dignity and charm not to be found elsewhere. The silence caused by the cessation of conversation left the air quivering with the soft music from the orchestra, giving something stately and ceremonial to their entrance.

"Who are they? Who are they?" ran the whisper, and the presence of the proprietor was requisitioned here and there, and he, speaking with hushed suavety, actually succeeded in allotting them to their proper provinces with nothing better than the menu to go upon.

"Ah, she! A lady from Normandy—of the highest, I assure you; he, as you can see, a noble of Gascony; Madame and Monsieur Duchamps by name."

"Oh, Victor," she whispered, for one slight moment letting her hand rest on his, "isn't our environment unbelievably enchanting? I have seen the grandest entertainments at the Louvre, but nothing has affected me like the fairy palace to which you have brought me. Think! I have been a prisoner for nearly a year, first at the convent, then at the château; and now, unexpectedly, to come into all this brightness, music and human intercourse,—oh, I shall never forget that selection they are playing! And then—and then to be——" she lost control of her voice for the moment, her eyes filling with unshed tears—"to be," she whispered, "with you!"

"Thérèse, Thérèse, Thérèse!" he murmured, and all the faith and love that man can feel toward woman were breathed into the word thrice repeated. But the warmth of her smile quickly dried the dew in her eyes.

"To think," she said, "that you and I stand alone against all this multitude. Every man and woman here is an enemy of ours, if they but knew. Would it not be delightful, Victor, in this hostile assemblage, to make the final arrangements for the Queen's escape?"

"Your voice is low enough for that fell purpose," said Cardillac, "but I do not trust my own. Did you speak to Her Majesty of our rope ladders?"

"Yes; she thinks such a manner of exit is undignified."

"Undignified!" cried Cardillac, so loudly that the girl whispered, "Hush! Hush!" Then he added in a lower tone: "Her Majesty should be thankful I did not expect her to climb the inside of the chimney, and so to the roof. Did you not tell her the ladders are made of the finest silk?"

"Yes; that somewhat mollified her, but I think you must give me a week to win her consent."

"This is the fourteenth; what do you say to the twentieth?"

"Give me till the twenty-first, Victor. That will be the even seven days."

"Very well. I shall come on the night of the twenty-first."

"At what hour? About midnight?"

"Isn't that rather too early for such a roustering town?"

"I don't know. Everyone is going home about that hour, and if once we got her down into the town, it would be safer with many people around us than if we were alone in the street."

Cardillac shook his head.

"Too great a risk! How would one o'clock in the morning do?"

"The morning of the twenty-second?"

"Yes."

"I don't know. You are the best judge, and as the responsibility rests on your shoulders——"

"The Queen also," said Cardillac with a laugh. "If she objects to walking down alone I must carry her as I did you."

"I was going to suggest that," laughed mademoiselle, "but I did not like to advise. I may add that you will find Her

Majesty a somewhat heavier burden than I proved to be. Now, what am I to do with that rope ladder?"

"Is there any place in your room where you can conceal it?"

"Yes. I have discovered a secret cupboard. Shall I pull up the ladder and place it there?"

"Yes, and on the morning of the twenty-second hang it out as you did to-night, and I shall come up at one o'clock as I did to-night."

Here the young people abandoned conspiracy, and made a merry meal of it, listening to the music, and talking about one another. It was nearly eleven o'clock when they left, and the gaiety of the great restaurant was now at its height. They walked slowly and joyously together, she nestling close to him; and thus under the wintry stars, through the almost deserted streets, reached the quietude of the square before the château.

Making sure that no one was near, Cardillac mounted to the terrace, and she followed him. Then he ran up to the first floor, pushed in the windows of Catherine de Médicis's room, that opened like double doors, and sat down on the stone sill, helping the lady across when, more slowly, she attained his altitude. Then he drew her down to the sill, she facing inwards, he outwards.

"Thérèse," he said, with more than usual solemnity, "do you know what this night has done for me?"

"Yes," she replied flippantly, "it has given you a very excellent dinner."

"I am glad it pleased your ladyship. But make another guess."

For answer the girl hummed very accurately, and in a most pleasing voice, a bar of the music she had said she would never forget.

"Mademoiselle, if you will not be serious, I will tell you seriously. It has given me the hope that even should I fail in my mission, I may, on other grounds, receive my reward."

"There speaks the self-confidence of the Gascon," said Thérèse, humming the tune once more.

"Am I right?" he asked, but the music continued. He tried to draw her towards him, but she resisted, then, suddenly:

"Perhaps," she said, and kissed him with surprising suddenness, of her own accord. Springing up, she closed the window, and almost precipitated her lover to the terrace.

CHAPTER XXXV

HOW THE RESCUE WAS ACCOMPLISHED

Next morning Cardillac mounted his horse and rode back to Montrichard. A day or two later he called on his tailor to show him the triumph of art which Blois had accomplished in the manufacture of his cloak. He then requested the tailor to lead him to his prisoner, who, after some weeks of unappeasable anger, had settled down to a month of melancholy. Now he was in the final state of patient resignation, with nevertheless a revengeful glitter in his eye that boded ill for the jailor, should he ever again meet his prisoner.

"Reverend father," said the Gascon, "you have had one secret out of me, and now I am going to tell you another."

"I hope I shall not be compelled to pay for the second the price that was exacted for the first," muttered the abbé, striving hard to maintain that humility which he had recently assumed.

"Oh, no, indeed. I have come to set you at liberty, and your horse is ready to carry you to Loches."

The abbé's eyes gleamed with a baleful light, but he said nothing.

"The secret which must have puzzled you is this. Why should I, an unknown, unimportant person, have dared to imprison a dear friend of the commander of the Queen's forces?—a man who even without such powerful support is quite strong enough to make a great deal of trouble for me."

"I should never think," returned the abbé, with pathetic meekness, "of indulging in so low a passion as revenge."

"Well, abbé, I should be the last man in the world to advise you to forgo revenge if you desire it, but I am quite sure you will say nothing of your imprisonment. I ask you now to mount your horse and speed to Loches. Tell the Duke d'Epernon, and his son the archbishop, to lead to Montrichard a mounted guard of importance suitable for the escorting of the Queen. The company must be at Montrichard by six o'clock on the morning of the twenty-second. There I, your assistant, abbé, shall hand over to their keeping Her Majesty the Queen. I could not ask a man of your position to indulge in falsehood."

"I should think not," muttered the abbé, eyeing Cardillac with doubt and misgiving, the glance, nevertheless, illumined with a ray of hope.

"But if I were you I should assume a distant, mysterious air. I should say to enquirers: 'You thought my plots weak, but you have not taken into account the untrustworthy material with which I have had to deal, therefore I prefer to say nothing about this latest development. I may mention, however, that I was able to distinguish certain capabilities in that young man, Cardillac, which the rest of you overlooked. I refuse to state in what way I have occupied my time since last I saw you. I prefer to be judged by results. Marshal your men, therefore, at Montrichard on the morning of the twenty-second at six o'clock. I do not ask you to believe that Her Majesty the Queen will be delivered into your hands, but I do ask you to be prepared for such a contingency.'

"If you say this, abbé, with an air of dignity and hauteur, you will find it most effective. You see, there is no desire on my part to pose as the rescuer of the Queen. I ask no reward from Epernon, his son, or yourself. I do not intend to offer my sword to Her Majesty, nor is there any office in her gift which I could possibly accept.

"Therefore, abbé, a word to the wise is sufficient. You are free. Make what use you like of that freedom. Divulge the secret of your unauthorised imprisonment or keep silence about it as best suits your convenience. Forgive me, and farewell until six o'clock on the morning of the twenty-second."

Thus it comes about that history is in a quandary to state who is justly entitled to the credit of rescuing Marie de Médicis.

On the night of the twenty-first of February, Cardillac left Montrichard on horseback, with a carriage and pair belonging to his host of the Tête Noire, driven by the stout landlord himself.

They arrived at the end of the bridge about one o'clock in the morning of the twenty-second, Cardillac ordering the carriage to wait in one of the side streets of the little village of Vienne, on the southern bank of the Loire. He left his horse also in charge of the inn-keeper, and crossed the bridge on foot. At half-past one he reached the castle, and found

the rope ladder in place.

The sight he saw on looking through the window, after climbing to the first floor, was not inspiring.

The Queen stood surrounded by her women, the very picture of irresolution. A maid, weeping bitterly, was engaged in collecting the numerous jewels and putting them away in boxes. Marie de Médicis had all but ruined Henri IV by indulging in her passion for collecting precious stones, that were now to provide the sinews of war for a contest against his son.

Thérèse de Montreuil seemed to be the only person in the room with dry eyes. All the others were persuading the Queen not to attempt so dangerous an excursion.

Cardillac tapped on the window and stepped inside. Marie de Médicis at once announced that the project must be abandoned, but Cardillac merely laughed. The carriage was waiting, he said, on the other side of the river, and three hundred horsemen were on their way from Loches to Montrichard, who would be ready in the morning to escort her into safety.

He made jocular remarks to those who wept, and soon changed the atmosphere of desolation into something almost approaching hilarity. The Queen's courage revived, but when she walked to the window and looked down the dark chasm, she shuddered and declared she could not venture.

Cardillac encouraged and cajoled without effect, until Thérèse, without a word, stepped across the sill and disappeared down the wall. Then the Queen gathered her skirts about her and tremblingly followed to the terrace. One after the other, all reached the platform high above the street.

Here was safety at last, but another difficulty arose. Marie flatly refused to descend the second ladder. She maintained that one such experience was enough. Thus they all stood huddled on the top of a steep embankment at two o'clock on a frigid February morning, with a monarch who would neither advance nor retreat.

Persuasion was without effect, and any attempt at coercion of royalty constituted high treason. The situation was ludicrous, but none the less dangerous. While the others held a consultation, Cardillac, in the darkness, investigated, as well as he could, the peculiarities of the terrace. He found that the recent heavy rains had formed a ravine down which the water had forced a passage to reach the road.

Hastily returning, he, like a second Raleigh, spread his beautiful new cloak on the ground, and urged the Queen to seat herself upon it. She did so after great hesitation, and the situation was saved at the expense of the cloak. Grasping his garment, Cardillac dragged it and its burden down the valley to the highroad, as anyone may learn who consults a detailed history of France.

The whole party passed through the Faubourg du Foix, Cardillac singing a roysterer's song, being jeered at as drunk by the King's guard, who made jokes, not too delicate, upon the party. The jokes, however, returned home to roost next morning.

Once across the bridge, Cardillac was dismayed to find the carriage missing. A hurried search of Vienne discovered the inn-keeper asleep, and the horses wandering about trying to find the road home. At last Marie and her party got inside, when a new obstacle presented itself. The Queen cried out that one of her packages had been lost, and that a servant must return in search of it. Cardillac protested against so perilous a delay. At any moment, said he, the escape might be discovered, and an alarm-cannon fired that would bring the inhabitants of Blois about them like a swarm of hornets; but the Queen would not budge until the box was found. The casket was discovered on the bridge, and contained gems that were afterwards sold for a hundred thousand crowns, so the persistence of Her Majesty was not without its excuse.

At Montrichard, Cardillac's party met the Duke d'Epéron, the Duke de Montreuil, the archbishop of Toulouse at the head of three hundred troopers, and above all the proud and exultant Rucellai, abbé of Ligny, easily hero of the occasion.

The good abbé had regained his lost influence over the commander of the Queen's army, so confident was he that, at last, Her Majesty would be released, and so successful in imparting this confidence to Epéron and his son. Rucellai was even so condescending as to speak of Cardillac with gracious commendation. The young man, it seemed, had quite fulfilled the abbé's anticipations.

Epernon, inspired by Rucellai's self-reliance, took the first step in the forthcoming civil war by marching his men to the gate of the castle that Richard Cœur de Lion had captured, and demanding its surrender.

It was held by less than a dozen men, whose officer, being without instruction touching such an unforeseen contingency, gave it up. His orders had been to avoid hostilities, therefore he marched out with his little company, and took the road to Blois, and thus the action of Epernon came within an ace of turning Cardillac's victory into defeat, had the officer suspected who travelled in the carriage he met.

The officer asked Cardillac if war had been declared, and was assured that it had not. This confirmed the officer in the belief that he had done right in surrendering the stronghold; a belief which he found was unshared by his superior in Blois, who, however, was now immersed in his own troubles, for Blois was panic-stricken in the morning, when it was learned that the Queen had escaped.

Her Majesty rested for several hours in the castle at Montrichard, and then the imposing procession crossed the bridge and rode for Loches, where it was received with great acclaim.



CHAPTER XXXVI

THE REWARD

Victor de Cardillac had been invited to the drawing-room of the Duke de Montreuil, in the château of Loches. The day was mild for February, and the windows were open. Up from the town rose the shouts of the people, who, although Her Majesty had disappeared from their view, kept up a joyous riot in honour of her release.

The Duke de Montreuil entered, followed by his daughter, who wore the same gown that had aroused Cardillac's admiration in Blois. Indeed, it was in this attire that she had for the second time left the château down the ladder of rope; for, that being an excursion on which no luggage was allowed, Thérèse had dressed in her best.

Her father warmly greeted Cardillac, and began to praise his bravery and resource, when, to his surprise, the girl intervened between the two men. She turned to her father, who was, for the moment, stricken dumb at her unexpected conduct.

"Dear father, you are easily hoodwinked, being not nearly such a capable judge of human nature as I am. Monsieur de Cardillac deserves no praise. What he did was done from the most selfish of motives."

"My dear daughter!" protested the duke, thinking she had become demented through imprisonment and anxiety.

"Oh, I know whereof I speak, and can fathom Monsieur de Cardillac's cunning much more accurately than you do. He rescued the Queen in hope of a reward."

"My dearest Thérèse, he has well earned a reward, and shall have it without stint. All the treasure——"

"That is extremely generous of you, father. You have said enough, and what you say is extremely satisfactory, for it pleases your daughter, as doubtless it pleases Monsieur de Cardillac. That night in the forest, after our escape from the convent, I practically promised to marry Monsieur de Cardillac if he succeeded in rescuing the Queen."

"You *what!*" gasped the duke, with darkened brow. The poor man had aspired to a royal alliance for his only daughter.

"Father, this is a very critical moment with you. Be careful what you say. I am sure you would like to secure the good will of your future son-in-law, and it will be futile coming to me afterwards pleading for my intercession if at this time you should make any statement we are unable to forgive."

"You are quite helpless, for you have already pledged your word. Victor was to receive his reward without stint, you said, and I am the reward. In addition to that, I have arranged with the Queen to issue, if necessary, her royal command that this marriage shall take place, so there you meet an obstacle that even you cannot surmount."

"I have just gained the consent of the archbishop of Toulouse to marry us in the Chapel Royal here at Loches, and I took the liberty in your name, Victor,"—she turned upon the young man her radiant smile, and put her hand in his,—"*to ask the abbé of Ligny to assist, and he has most graciously consented. The good abbé says he knows no young man so capable as Monsieur de Cardillac when there is a difficult task to perform.*"

"This I took as a gentle hint that the person who undertakes to manage me has his work cut out for him, therefore I cannot bear to disappoint a prince of the church like the archbishop, and a great though subtle prelate like the abbé of Ligny, who are looking forward to the ceremony with much interest. But what really settles everything is the fact that I desire the ceremony to take place."

There was a long pause, during which Thérèse edged closer and closer to Cardillac. Gradually the duke's brow cleared; then he said, in his usual quiet and definite tones:

"Monsieur de Cardillac, if I had searched all France, I could find no man more to my liking than you as a husband to my daughter."

The girl flew to him, and flung her arms around his neck.

"Oh, father, father!" she cried. "I knew you would not disappoint me. You are the greatest man in all France!"

"Oh, yes, he is, Victor," she continued, looking over her father's shoulder. "You come only second."

THE END

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[The end of *Cardillac* by Robert Barr]