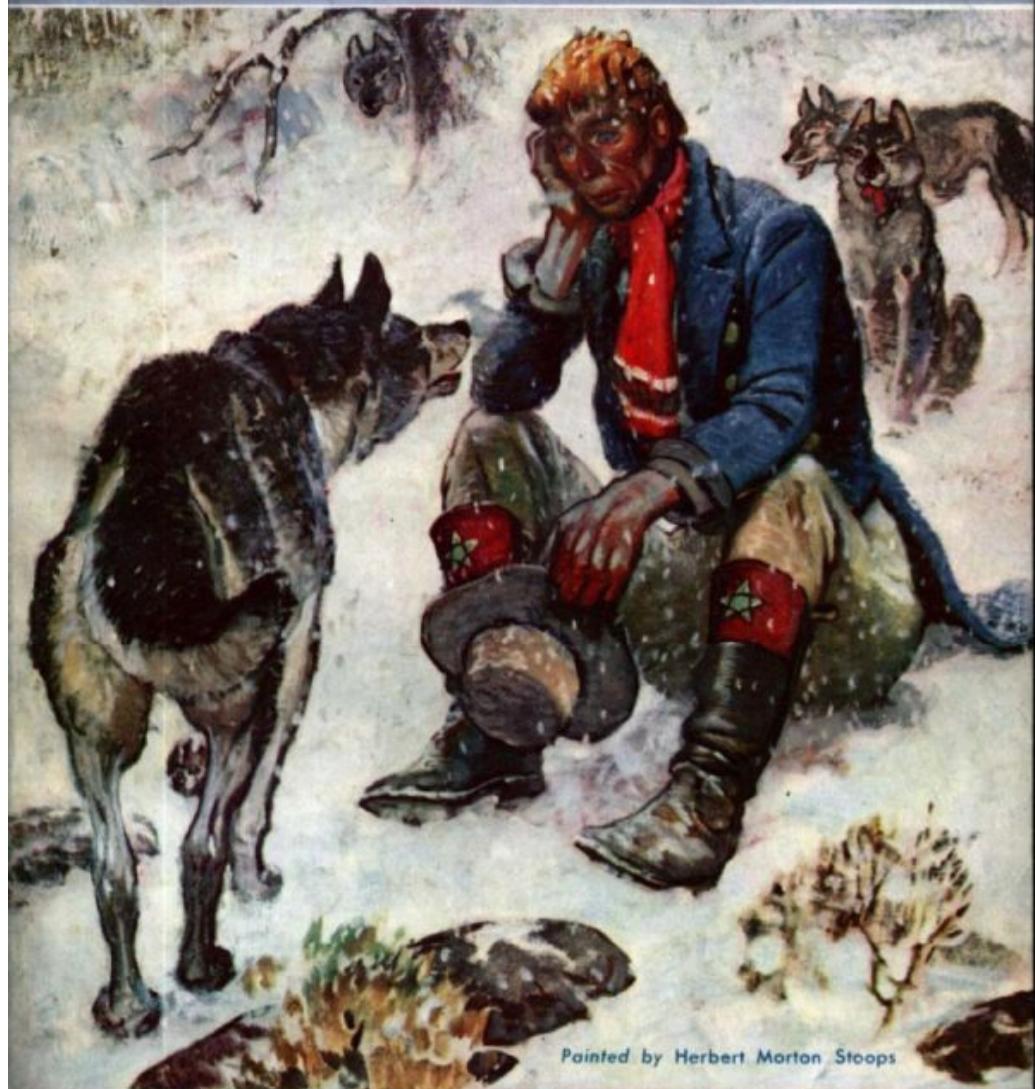


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KERRY O'NEIL • FULTON GRANT • H. BEDFORD-JONES

GEORGES SURDEZ • GORDON KEYNE • F. DRACO

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A France Forever!

By

H. BEDFORD-JONES

Pen drawings by

John Richard Flanagan

First published *Blue Book Magazine*, February 1941

Because this story is so timely and so impressive, we are interrupting the series "The World Was Their Stage," and offering this in its place.



"Now France will die. France is beaten. France is not immortal. France will become a little country, a far-off country to which nobody will ever pay any attention. Her voice will be halting and hoarse and no ear will ever be able to hear it."

—Il Popolo di Roma, Sept. 10, 1940.

When the alarm came, when the first bloody spray of war blew across the low hills beside the Meuse, Robert de Baudricourt was riding down the road through the oak forest. With him rode Brother Richard, a wandering fanatic preacher whom Baudricourt was firmly escorting out of his *villenie* or district, as a public menace. Behind him clattered along fifteen men-at-arms, in armor like himself.

Brother Richard was bearded, haggard, tattered, and had wild mad eyes, but he was no whit mad; he was just another man whom the awful desolation of France had driven to strange ways. Baudricourt found him mildly interesting. The stout captain had a humorous bent, though his humor could take an extremely grim turn at times.

Scarred, rock-jawed, massive, Baudricourt had outlived one wealthy wife and married another. For twenty years he had almost daily taken death in his stride, and his stride was still firm. He was more than a mere knightly butcher. He was a practical man and was proud of the fact. This was why he now commanded Vaucouleurs, ten miles to the north, and all this district along the Meuse, for France—when there was no France.

“I warn you, doom is close upon you, enemies ring you in!” cried Brother Richard as they rode. “Short are the days of man, that his nights may be long! Cracking kinglings from their thrones, the bolts fly on to strike at innocence; babes newborn set forth in life in spasmed rage and fear!”

“Preaching hellfire helps not,” Baudricourt said amiably. “That’s why I’m kicking you out of my lands. Can ye see nothing except utter ruin for us all?”

“Can you?” retorted the fanatic.

Baudricourt’s thin, wide lips split in a grin.

“No; but I’m not shouting it abroad in France. A defeatist, that’s what you are!”

“France? *Mort salut!*” came the reply. “Such a country no longer exists. The King’s dead, the Dauphin is disinherited and driven into the south, an Englishman holds Paris and is King of France. Burgundy, his ally, holds us crushed and bleeding. Why, these very lands of yours are surrounded by enemies on all sides!”

“True.” Baudricourt waved his hand at the trees. “Over yonder is a brook, and Lorraine the other side of it. Germans and English are all around; but the Lilies still fly over Vaucouleurs, my good fellow.”

“They’ll soon fall,” said Brother Richard. “The whole country is enslaved and dead and shall so remain, till all such bitterment is sweetened on the fuming mire that blood will make with tears—”

“Oh, dry up!” snapped the captain. “I’m sick of your whine.”

Still, it was all true. He was no fool, and he knew how horribly right this fanatic was.

The Valois king was dead. The Dauphin, implicated in the treacherous murder of the Duke of Burgundy, was a fugitive criminal holding only a little territory in the south. In this autumn of the year 1424, the English ruled in Paris, holding all the north and west; Burgundy had absorbed most of the other provinces. The French lords had largely turned traitor.

Over the entire country lay a confused welter of blood and ruin. Everywhere was massacre, treachery, assassination. The open lands were pillaged by wandering bands of mercenaries and vagrant soldiery. Law and justice had ceased; the conquerors were tyrants, looting everything that could be carried away. Even the art of war had descended to a murderous slaughter that knew no rules of chivalry or decency—for chivalry too was only a memory.

Yet, amid all this horror, there was one gleam of hope, as Baudricourt well knew! The Dauphin had raised one last army. Brave help had come from Scotland, the old ally of France. Breton nobles had come to the aid of the lost cause, troops had been hired from Italy. If one battle could be gained, a little corner of the land might yet be saved from conquest. For this, Baudricourt and a few others like him still endured.

For this, he had saved his few poor villages from rapine; his peasants were not enslaved, they had cattle and harvests, they were a step above the level of beasts. His heavy sword, his heavy hand, had protected them; but he knew how close was the end. He did not deny the facts, but he could not afford to have this wandering fanatic taking the heart out of his people and his soldiers. Hence, he was escorting Brother Richard elsewhere, after his firm fashion. Everything Robert de Baudricourt did was done firmly.

“Messire!” A shout lifted from the men-at-arms. “Messire! A courier!”



“There is no king, the Dauphin is a fugitive, the knights and nobles are dead or traitors, the people are enslaved, foreigners have divided the land, an enemy king rules in Paris. France has ceased to exist.”

—Guillaume d’Orly, 1426.

Baudricourt drew rein. He saw a man galloping toward them, but knew at once it was no courier—only a peasant from the villages ahead, a peasant mounted on a scarecrow horse close to foundering.

“Messire Robert!” Great-eyed with excitement, the peasant cried out his news. “A man is in Greux, a French knight! He is hurt. He says raiders are hard after him in pursuit. I rode to warn you. . . . Thanks to the saints that I met you so soon!”

“Well done.” And Baudricourt, turning calmly to Brother Richard, gave the fanatic one shove that rolled him half out of the saddle. “Dismount quickly . . . that’s right. Walk on to the village ahead. It’s only a mile. Rejoin us there.” He beckoned the peasant. “Here, man, take this horse. Ride on to Vaucouleurs. Order the seneschal to send fifty men to meet me, and to prepare the town for siege. Have the villages been warned?”

“Yes, messire. The kine are gathered and everyone is taking to the islands.”

The peasant scrambled into the saddle and spurred for Vaucouleurs. Baudricourt gestured to his men, pricked his steed, and plunged ahead at a gallop, leaving Brother Richard to trudge after.

The oak forest thinned ahead to disclose the roofs of houses; the two villages of Greux and Domrémy came into view. To the left was the broad sweep of the Meuse, splitting around several islets; and, swelled by the autumn rains, spreading out in shallow ponds beneath the hillside vineyards.



Files of cattle were splashing toward the islands, accompanied by men and women and children laden with bundles—peasants, quick to flee the bloody rapine boded by the advent of any armed men.

Baudricourt, ignoring these, pounded on into the deserted village of Greux, at full tilt.

A few belated peasants were on the run for the river. In the center of the hamlet was the village well; beside it stood a jaded horse, legs apart and head hanging, and in the saddle a man bare-headed, bandaged, most of his armor gone. A child, a village girl of twelve, was handing him a vessel of water from the well; she was apparently unafraid, for she was smiling up at him.



*“Messire Robert! A man—a French knight! He is hurt.
He says raiders are after him. I rode to warn you!”*

A shout of recognition burst from Baudricourt:

“Gard! Henri du Gard! By the saints, we’ve not met for six years! Alone?”

“Not for long,” said the stranger. “Baudricourt, as I live! Watch yourself, then! A dozen riders are after me, coming fast.”

Baudricourt twisted about in his saddle and gestured to his sergeant. “Jehan! Take four men, ride on, meet these gentry; bring back word of them. The rest of you take shelter among the houses and keep out of sight. You, child!” He snapped his fingers at the little girl. “Get out of here and take safety with your family.”

“But, messire, I am from St. Remy’s village,” she said. “I have to find my younger brother; he is somewhere among the trees with the pigs and—”

“Then for God’s love go find him and make yourself scarce!” broke in the captain. She turned and ran off toward the nearest trees.

Baudricourt rode up to the man on horseback and put out his hand. “Greeting, old friend! Come along, dismount from this jaded nag and—”

His words were checked, as he saw the haggard, death-white features beneath the unshaven stubble of beard.

Gard smiled faintly and shook his head.

“No use, Robert; if I got down, I’d never rise again. Dead from the waist down, and the rest of me is chilling fast. Leave me alone. Look to yourself; the enemy are after me.”

Baudricourt loosened a leather bottle of wine from his own saddle, a packet of bread and cheese, and held them to the hurt man. He offered no protest; a man must have his own way when death is upon him. The sergeant Jehan and four riders had clattered out of the village, the other men had disappeared.

“Enemy, you say?” he inquired. “What enemy? This is France!”

“Not for long,” said Henri du Gard, swigging at the wine with a sigh of relief. “Ah! That’s good stuff. . . . D’ye mean to say you haven’t heard the news?”

“What news? How the devil are we to get news, with all pilgrimages stopped, no more peddlers coming through, all travelers waylaid by murder? What news, I ask?”

“Why, news that the pleasant land of France is no more.” A grimace shook Gard; the red wine dribbled on his chin like blood. “I was with the Dauphin—a madman, disinherited, done for! We met them at Verneuil—”

“You were with the army!” cried Baudricourt eagerly. “Dear God! A battle, you say?”

“Aye. It was like Agincourt; scarcely a man escaped. Two of us got the Dauphin away. Where he is now, no one knows. The Scots were exterminated; I don’t think one of them remained alive. Those English arrows were terrible! The army’s gone. France is gone.”

He paused to drink again, and went on.

“I’d have reached here alive, but these raiders caught me up yesterday and have been hot after me ever since. They got an arrow into me this morning; it did the work.” And as he spoke, he tapped his surcoat. Then he sighed again and relaxed wearily.

Baudricourt scarcely heard. He stood stiffly, staring at nothing; this frightful news left him stunned. “Not for long!” The phrase, reiterated by Gard, was like a death-knell.

So the last hope was destroyed, France had collapsed utterly and finally!

It had been bound to come, of course. Torn by dissension, by treachery, by internecine strife, the country had gone to pieces. Utterly decadent, it had no rulers, no strong men, no leaders. The people were pillaged, the peasants were mere savages, towns and churches were burned or plundered on all sides; it was the end of the world, as many thought. Now, with the last little hope quite gone, it was certainly the end of France.

“Is there nothing I can do for you?” Baudricourt looked up and spoke quietly.

“Nothing,” replied Gard. “I’m in no pain; but I want to die like a knight in the saddle, not lying on the earth like a stricken animal.”

“No messages I might send?”

“To whom? I’ve nothing left. My wife, my family—all destroyed by the Burgundians. My home, my castle, everything. Now I’m passing, and it’s rather a relief.” The hurt man smiled a little. “I’ll bequeath you the task of rebuilding France, Robert.”

“You rightly said that France is gone.”

“Oh, that has happened before; and it will happen again!”

Baudricourt ignored the words; he thought that Gard’s mind must be wandering.

There was a shuffle of feet, and toward the well came Brother Richard, striding along strongly. As he approached, Baudricourt broke into a bitter laugh.

“Well, you’re free to go your ways, you ranting rogue! I’ve other matters afoot. Look at the fellow, Henri! He preaches hellfire and utter loss—and he’s right.”

Brother Richard halted at the well, drank from the bucket on the coping, and gave them a look that was like a sword.

"I preach only retribution," he said, "and the consuming vengeance that the lords of life bring upon a wicked people! Who is to save France? No one. Small men in great places throw long shadows, but bulk low on the horizon; only by the sun's sinking are they made fearsome. France is lost. None can save her now. She is only a memory."

Baudricourt laughed. "The rogue has a gift of gab, Henri! You have book-learning; make him some answer. Who's to save France?"

"Every question has an answer, if one only knew it," said Henri du Gard. "Perhaps I could tell you the answer to this question, good Robert; they say that the man who has lost everything except life, and is about to lose even that, sees very clearly."

Baudricourt peered up curiously. He knew that this Henri, Baron du Gard, had lived hard and had delved into many things; student, wild roistering knight, a chivalric fellow of the old school that was now dead, Gard had queerly strong abilities. Being himself a practical man of his hands and little able to read or write, Baudricourt had always held Gard in much respect. And now he was living on, and Gard was dying!

Then, all in an instant, every thought was swept away with the clash of armor and the ringing heels of a horse. Sergeant Jehan came riding hard, to draw rein before them.

"Messire! It is a parley. A knight called the Damoiseau de Craon and ten men-at-arms; he has halted a quarter-mile down the road. He demands permission to bring his men on here to speak with you."

"So! He demands!" Baudricourt's glance flitted about the little market-place and fastened on the village forge. It stood at the right, under two towering oaks. "Let him come, Jehan; his men are to halt yonder by the forge. You and your four men stay here by the well. Keep mounted; keep your swords loose. Go."

Jehan swung around and clattered off. Baudricourt called sharply; one of his hidden men came into sight. Baudricourt went toward him; they met and talked.

Brother Richard drank again from the well-bucket. Gard munched slowly at a crust of bread, and gulped occasionally at the wine-bottle. From somewhere over the oak forest came a thin distant sound of alarm bells from other villages; drifting across the autumn sunlight was the lowing of cattle from the river islets. Baudricourt came back, and his man vanished again from sight.

"Who's this Damoiseau de Craon?" Baudricourt growled. "I can't place him."

"A French knight in English service," said Gard. "He has a bad name for treachery, but he's an able man. Sorry I can't use a sword, Robert; afraid my strength's going."

"No need," Baudricourt rejoined. "Devil take it, I'm a good hand at bandaging wounds—"

"So am I," said Gard, smiling faintly. "Let me go my way in peace."

Baudricourt shrugged and complied. Brother Richard came to the foundered horse, took the leather wine-bottle—empty now—from Gard, filled it with water from the well-bucket, and handed it up again to the dying man. Baudricourt watched this, and wondered, because it was all done in silence, as though the tattered fanatic had read Gard's mind.

Now they were coming, hoof-beats reëchoing from the empty houses. Jehan and his four men, riding straight across to the well and remaining there in a clump of steel. Craon, alone, full-armed but with his vizor open, more slowly approaching the well—behind, his ten men-

at-arms grouping at the village smithy under the big oaks; but not dismounting as hard-riding men should. Instead, they held the saddle, waiting.

Baudricourt walked his horse forward. "A truce? I've heard of you, Craon."

"I've heard of you, Baudricourt." Craon showed white teeth in a smile, and drew rein. "Aye, a truce. . . . I want that man yonder; he's my prisoner. For ransom."

"Congratulations, messire! I thought I was dealing with the Damoiseau de Craon; pardon the error. Naturally, I failed to recognize the good God Himself!"

Craon bit his lip, then broke into a laugh. His face, framed in steel, showed long and narrow and intolerant, the pupils of his eyes surrounded by white: Cruel eyes.

"Aye, these are still your lands, I believe," he said. "Quite surprising, too; I didn't know there were any such lands left in France, with tilled fields, with real cattle and fat ones, and even the village houses unpillaged! It's a novelty, indeed!"

His gaze rested on the five men-at-arms, touched on Brother Richard and Gard, and came back to the steady eyes of Baudricourt. He relaxed, and spoke with sudden warmth.

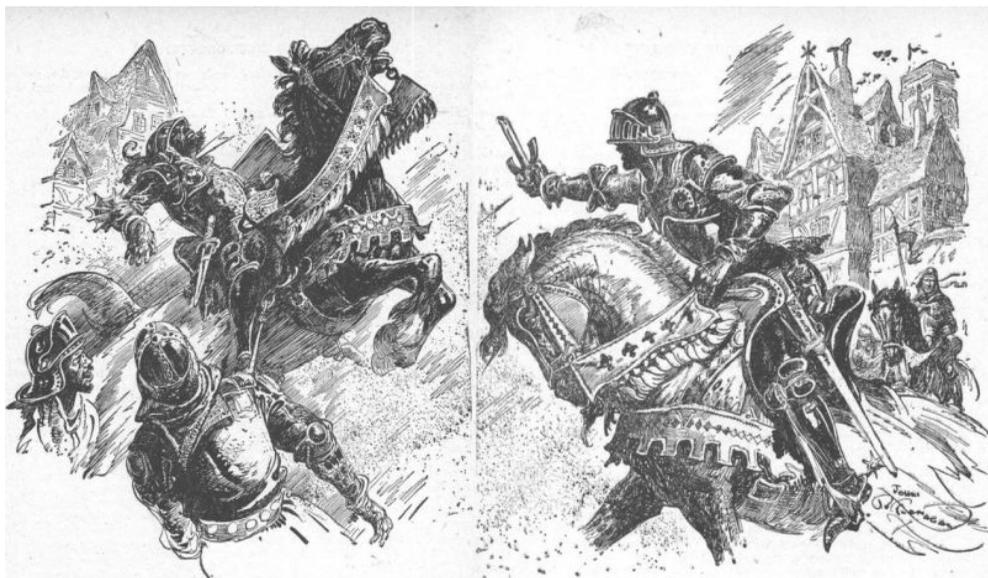
"Let the man go, then; there are greater things afoot. I've come to offer you friendliness and new allegiance, Baudricourt. You've heard that the Dauphin's army was entirely destroyed at Verneuil? You know what that means."

"You flatter me," said Baudricourt. "No one has told me, as yet."

"Well, it means that you're lost, surrounded as your district is by our territory! We'll probably make a treaty with your Dauphin, leave him a little strip to rule in the south, and take the rest. England and Burgundy are now supreme in Europe; they'll be so for the next five hundred years. France is no longer a country."

"Strange!" said Baudricourt. "Her flag was flying over Vaucouleurs this morning!"

"Don't be absurd," Craon said testily. "Henry of England rules France. We've given him allegiance; half the lords of France have done so, the rest are dead. The Dauphin has been declared a criminal, and all oaths given him are dissolved. So give me your hand on it, swear to support King Henry, and you'll not be disturbed in your fief. In fact, I can promise you an extension of your lands, and further rewards."



With the impact of Baudricourt's blow, the steel shivered in his hand; but he felt it drive home, deep through armor and flesh.

“Rewards? For what?” asked Baudricourt. “Is *reward* the proper word to use?”

Craon's face darkened. “No nonsense, Baudricourt,” he said crisply. “I'm offering you security.”

“Oh! This is my security.” As he spoke, the captain clapped his sword-hilt. “However, I'll grant there's sense in what you say. Eh, Henri? You heard. As a practical man, should I accept?”

They looked at Gard. His stubbled face was very white and beaded with sweat, but he could still smile.

“Why, yes!” he replied. “I think you should, undoubtedly. However, I'll make you an offer myself, Robert. May I bid against you, Sieur de Craon?”

“If you can,” said Craon curtly. His weary cruel eyes were dangerous.

Gard gestured slightly. “Perhaps, I offer you France, Baudricourt; a France that no longer exists, but that will exist none the less. She shall be yours to work upon and to rebuild. This is as certain as tomorrow's dawn.”

Baudricourt frowned. He did not understand these words at all; but he resolved to humor a dying friend.

“Explain,” he said. “There's no longer a France for which to fight; this is true. How, then, can France endure? Riddle me this, Henri of Gard, and I'll consider the matter.”

From Brother Richard, listening, came a harsh laugh.

“Aye! Play with tricky words, but what are the facts? Evil has ridden this land too long, and retribution is come. It cannot be fended off. France is now a place where shrinking shadows huddle at the shanks of clowns who stride the valley in which pigs wallow! Retribution has come, has come!”

“You are wrong,” said Gard, his voice firming. “Look! Here come two children. Bring the girl to me, friend. Lift her up, that I may show you something.”

As they turned, they saw that the little girl who had disappeared among the trees, was returning. She held by the hand a younger child—a boy; obviously, she had found the brother whom she sought.

Brother Richard called them to him, while Baudricourt looked on frowningly, and the scornful eyes of Craon touched them all, and the five men-at-arms who sat their horses beside the well.

Brother Richard spoke to the child. She smiled, and he lifted her in his arms, and stood beside the dying horseman.

“Robert, you forget something,” said Henri du Gard. “Perhaps it is something you do not know. In the days of the Gauls, France was a great nation. The Romans came, destroyed, and built again, built a greater civilization. This in turn was destroyed. France still existed. She became the home of chivalry and song and culture. This has all been wiped away today. But it cannot die. France cannot die. France is still yours, Robert, to fight for.”

“I don’t see why,” Baudricourt said bluntly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Gard smiled at the child, and gripped his saddle-bow to steady himself.

“Why, Robert, look into the eyes of this girl! Do you see nothing there? Purity, innocence—yes, but something more. A thing that cannot perish or change, a thing that must survive all blood and tears and injustice and torment and damnation! Look in her eyes, Robert; you must see it!”

Puzzled, Baudricourt looked at the child, met her eyes, met her smile.

“Devil take me if I can see anything! Here, here!” He caught Gard’s deathly face and swaying figure, urged his horse forward, and passed an arm about the hurt man’s shoulders. “Lean against me, Henri—”

“Oh, my stirrups aren’t broken yet!” Gard straightened a little, and his quavering voice took on strength. “Robert, you must see it, you must! The will of man to survive; the greatness of man’s spirit; the thing that cannot be crushed out of existence—the ideal! The ideal, the intellectual truth—”

He slumped all of a sudden, his voice was gone, and he fell over in Baudricourt’s arms. He was dead.

Brother Richard set the child down, reached up, and lowered the limp figure to the earth.

“Take those children to the islet! . . . Get out!” blared Baudricourt. “Quick, or I’ll have my men prick you on your way. Quick!”

Brother Richard gave a hand to each child, and strode away with them. Baudricourt looked down at the dead man, crossed himself, and muttered a prayer. In upon it broke the voice of Craon.

“A touching scene, my dear Baudricourt. Children, a tattered rascal, a dying man! Too bad I wasted so much effort chasing him; I wouldn’t have had any ransom after all, eh? Still, you and I have ceased to be impressed by death.”

“He was a great man, this Henri du Gard,” said Baudricourt slowly. “In his youth he did many foolish things; sometimes that makes a man wise in his later years.”

Craon shrugged. “No doubt. However, he’s now but a lump of clay, as we all shall be. The main thing is to reach that hopeless state as comfortably as possible, and not until it is

necessary.”

Baudricourt glowered at him. The man caused a savage resurgence within him, a feeling he could not help or understand.

“What are you driving at?” he growled.

“Your process of thought, if you have one,” Craon retorted. “Your reason—to put it on a practical basis that you may understand, Baudricourt, your own immediate future. Are you to live or die?”

The stout captain drew down his brows.

“Is that a threat?”

Craon shrugged as he replied:

“Give me your hand, swear to hold Vaucouleurs for Henry of France! That’s wisdom. It’s really the only thing you can do. The roads are all closed behind you; ride forward or die!”

Baudricourt grunted. He began to see what was coming, as he had foreseen its possibility long since, and it stirred all his lurking sense of humor. A humor, one must admit, peculiar to him and assuredly of a quaintly grim aspect; but none the less, humor. A smile curved his wide lips as he looked at Craon.

“What was it he was talking about, just now? Some sort of hope for France?”

“I don’t pretend to understand his ravings,” Craon said disdainfully.

“Well, I don’t myself; I was never much good at this sort of argument. Still, if he said it, then that’s enough for me,” Baudricourt declared amiably.

“Never mind all that. You have five men here; I have ten.” Craon smiled thinly and touched his sword-hilt. “Even to you, the implication must be obvious. Come, don’t be a stubborn fool, Baudricourt! I like you. Together, we might go far.”

“Ha! You spoke the truth there!” Baudricourt grinned. “What’s farther than hell?”

“Come, no nonsense!” Craon rapped out the words with sudden vehemence. “Your hand or your sword? Which shall it be?”

The stout captain affected to gape at him, round-eyed.

“Why, messire, you’d never break your truce? You, a noble knight, here on your pledged word?”

“Devil take you!” snarled the other. “You’re caught, and you know it! I’m giving you the chance to escape with life and honor. Take it, I advise you!”

“You should know,” said Baudricourt. “Your advice should be good, I admit. You swore fealty to your prince, and deserted him. You serve the enemy of your country and people; but, black with treachery as you are, you’d never break your knightly word and try to take advantage of a poor honest fellow like me!”

Craon lost his temper. An oath escaped him. He caught at his reins and sent his horse around in one wild plunge.

“Forward!” His voice drove out at his men, while he freed the blade at his saddle. “Forward! At them, on them, no quarter!”



Baudricourt pounded on into the village of Greux; a shout burst from him: "Gard! Henri du Gard!"

With a yell, his ten men-at-arms put in spurs and surged out into the market-place. A wild laugh burst from Baudricourt. He had his own big sword cleared, and he sent his steed straight at Craon.

"Forward!" he bellowed. "For St. Remy! Forward!"

His long sword clanged on Craon's armor. Blade met blade—huge, heavy, shearing steel that must meet and parry unless a man were to be cut asunder. Here was skill, the skill of years. Craon's edge hammered at the helm of Baudricourt, and he realized he had an opponent who knew his business. The two of them were wholly engaged with each other, blinded to all around, staking life or death on eye and wrist and arm.

But they were not deafened. Those yells had suddenly turned to shouts, to shrill and panicked screams! As the ten men-at-arms came driving at the five beside the well, other men erupted from among the houses—the hidden riders, hurtling out to take the attackers in the rear, cut them to pieces.

Now welled up a clangor of steel on steel, screams of horses and men as sword and dagger bit home, oaths and shouts and groans as man and beast fought in mad frenzy about the well-coping with no quarter asked or given. And, aside from the dusty flurry of the mass, fought the two captains.

For once, Baudricourt had met his match, a thing that seldom happened. Almost at the first onset, he cut the reins of Craon, but the latter had trained his steed to be guided by knee and spur; the strategy was lost work. The heavy swords clashed and sparkled; twice Baudricourt

reeled under blows that dented his helm, but the steel held. He hewed at the knight's armor-joints, hewed desperately and vainly, while he fended such a fury of attack as he had never before met.

Steel-sinewed as he was, the weight of armor and of sword began to tell. He called into play all his craft, all his shrewd experience; yet time and again death missed him by a hot breath. He was failing, and knew it. Not his spirit was yielding, but his body was giving down. . . .

Then, in a moment, in the very moment of disaster, came a slim chance.

Craon, finding himself fallen into his own trap, was a blazing madman; if this aided the frenzy of his attack, it left him unable to await certain victory. He brought down his blade, not at the man, but at the horse; the heavy edge sheared deep into the beast's neck.

And before he could free the sword, Baudricourt struck back—struck with a lift of his body in the stirrups, struck as his horse quivered and leaped in death, struck as he himself went pitching head-long. With the impact of that blow, the steel shivered in his hand; but he felt it drive home at last, deep, through armor and flesh!

Then he was down, crashing in the dust, rolling away from kicking heels and hoofs. Luckily, he was not full armed, else he had been unable to rise. He dragged himself up a little, fumbling for his dagger. His eyes cleared. There was his horse, its blood gushing, in the dust. There was Craon too, dragging in his stirrup, a shard of steel sticking out of his throat as the blood spurted. No need of the dagger now.

And here came a man running, another man—two of his own fellows, pulling him to his feet. Three or four of the enemy had broken clear and were in flight at full gallop, with half a dozen of his men pelting after them; the others were dying or dead. He had lost four men, no more, it proved.

He staggered to the well-coping and sank down there, ridding himself of the dented helm. He was farther gone than he cared to admit. Dully, he watched while the dead raiders were plundered; then, as Jehan brought up the steed of Craon, from whose body the armor was being stripped, Baudricourt nodded and smiled, and was himself.

"A good day's work, Jehan," said he, eying the horse. "A better steed than mine own, and better armor—damned good armor, in fact. Worth a small fortune—Milanese, if I'm any judge! It took all I had to give. . . . Thanks to St. Remy, the last blow won!"

"And a good sword," said Jehan, retrieving Craon's weapon. "Judging by what it did to your helm, it's a very worthy sword, messire!"

"Aye." Baudricourt hefted it with shrewd hand. "You say well. Look out for the body of my friend Henri du Gard! We must take him home for Christian burial. Cart the others out to the edge of the forest; the wolves will rid us of them tonight. Send word to the people that they can return to their villages."

He sighed and leaned back against the well-curb. He was horribly weary and a bit bruised too; even his iron body felt its hurts. His mind drifted; perhaps he had done a foolish thing this day. Perhaps it would have been better to accept what was offered, security and strength and rewards. . . .

"No, by St. Remy!" he muttered. "Gard was right. I don't know just why he was right, I don't know what the devil he saw in the child's eyes, but he was right. I swore fealty to France, and I'll keep the flag of France flying above Vaucouleurs until Satan himself comes to pull it down—and after!"

Presently he looked up. One of the villagers had come and wanted speech with him—not a man of Greux, but of the other village, named for St. Remy. Baudricourt nodded and looked at the fellow with dull gaze. His head hurt and his eyes hurt.

“Well, well, what is it?” he demanded.

“My children, messire!” came the agonized response. “I was away in the forest, came back to find everyone gone, my children not there. I have not seen them.”

“Eh? Eh?” Baudricourt passed a hand across his eyes and looked again. “Why, I should know you. . . . Of course! You’re Jacques, from Domrémy. . . . Your children? Yes, they’re safe. I sent them to the islet. The little girl—what’s her name?”

“Jeanne, messire.”

“Yes, I remember. A nice name, a nice name,” muttered Baudricourt. “Jeanne—and you’re Jacques d’Arc, of course. . . . Give me your arm, Jacques. That’s right. I must be getting along home. . . . A good day’s work, but I’m damned stiff all the same. . . . What he could see in her eyes, I don’t know.”

He mounted and rode away, mumbling. (A nice name, that of Jeanne d’Arc.)

[The end of *A France Forever!* by Henry Bedford-Jones]