Martin Valliant

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Chapter I

Brother Geraint pulled his black cowl forward over his head, and stepped out into the porch. Some one thrust the door to behind him, and there was the sound of an oak bar being dropped into the slots.

A full moon stared at Brother Geraint over the top of a thorn hedge. He stood there for a while in the deep shadow, licking his lips, and listening.

Somewhere down the valley a dog was baying the moon, a little trickle of discord running through the supreme silence of the night. Brother Geraint tucked his hands into his sleeves, grinned at the moon, and started down the path with his shadow following at his heels. He loitered a moment at the gate, glancing back over his shoulder at the house that blinked never a light at him, but stood solid and black and silent in the thick of a smother of apple trees.

The man at the gate nodded his head gloatingly.

"Peace be with you."

He gave a self-pleased, triumphant snuffle, swung the gate open, glanced up and down the path that crossed the meadows, and then turned homewards through the moonlight.

In Orchard Valley the dew lay like silver samite on the grass, and the boughs of the apple trees were white as snow. Between the willows the Rondel river ran toward the sea, sleek and still and glassy, save where it thundered over the weir beside the prior's mill. The bell-tower of Paradise cut the northern sky into two steel-bright halves. Over yonder beyond the river the Forest held up a cloak of mystery across the west. Its great beech trees were glimmering into green splendor and lifting a thousand crowded domes against the brilliance of the moon.

Brother Geraint had no care for any of these things. He swung along toward Paradise like a dog returning from an adventure, his fat chin showing white under his cowl, his arms folded across his chest. The cluster of hovels and cottages that stretched between the river and the priory gate was discreetly dark and silent, with no Peeping Tom to watch the devout figure moving between the hedges and under the orchard trees. Paradise slept

peacefully in its valley, and left the ordering of things spiritual to St. Benedict.

The priory, lying there in the midst of the smooth meadows, looked white and chaste and very beautiful. The night was so still that even the aspen trees that sheltered it on the north would not have fluttered their leaves had the month been June. The gold weathercock at the top of the flèche glittered in the moonlight. The bell-tower, with its four pinnacles, seemed up among the stars. Sanctity, calm, devout splendor! And yet the gargoyles ranged below the battlements of the gate opened their black mouths with a suggestion of obscene and gloating laughter. It was as though they hailed Brother Geraint as a boon comrade, a human hungry creature with wanton eyes and scoffing lips:

"Ho, you sly sinner! Hallo, you dog!"

The black holes in the stone masks up above mouthed at him in silent exultation.

Brother Geraint did not make his entry by the great gate. There was a door in the precinct wall that opened into the kitchen court, and this door served. The monk passed along the slope under the infirmary, and so into the cloisters. He had taken off his shoes, and went noiselessly on his stockinged feet.

Suddenly he paused like a big, black, listening bird, his head on one side. For some one was chanting in the priory church. Geraint knew the voice, and his teeth showed in the dark slit of his mouth.

"Brre—pious bastard!"

Hate gleamed under his black cowl. He crept noiselessly up the steps that led to the doorway, and along the transept, and craning his head around the pillar of the chancel arch, looked up into the choir. The great window was lit by the moon, its tracery dead black in a sheet of silver. The light shone on the lower half of Brother Geraint's face, but his eyes were in the shadow.

A man was kneeling in one of the choir stalls, a young man with his hood turned back and his hair shining like golden wire. He knelt very straight and erect, his head thrown back, his arms folded over his chest. He had ceased his chanting, and his eyes seemed to be looking at something a long way off.

There was a grotesque and ferocious sneer on Brother Geraint's face. Then his lips moved silently. He was speaking to his own heart.

“How bold the whelp is before God! A bladder of lard hung up in a shop could not look more innocent. Innocent! Damnation! This bit of green pork needs curing.”

He nodded his head significantly at the man in the choir, and crept back out of the church. In going from the cloisters toward the prior’s house he met a little old fellow carrying a leather bottle, and walking with his head thrust forward as though he were in a hurry.

“God’s speed, brother.”

They stood close together under the wall, leering at each other in the darkness.

“Is the prior abed yet?”

The little man held up the bottle.

“I have just been filling his jack for him.”

“Empty, is it?”

“Try, brother.”

Geraint took the bottle and drank.

“Burgundy.”

He licked his lips.

“Ale is all very well, Holt, but a stomachful of this red stuff is good after a night of prayer.”

The little man sniggered, and nodded his head.

“Warms up the blood again. Ssst—listen to that young dog yelping.”

They could hear Brother Martin chanting in the choir. Geraint’s hand shot out and gripped the cellarer’s shoulder.

“Assuredly you love him, friend Holt. Why, the young man is a saint; he brings us glory and reputation.”

“Stuffed glory and geese!”

Holt mouthed and jiggered like an angry ape.

“It was a bad day for us when old Valliant renounced the devil and dedicated his bastard to God. Why, the young hound is getting too big for his kennel.”

“Even preaches against the leather jack, my friend!”

“Aye, more than that. Sniffing at older men’s heels, hunting them when they go a-hunting.”

Geraint laughed.

“We’ll find a cure for that. He shall be one of us before Abbot Hilary comes poking his holy nose into Paradise. Why, the young fool is green as grass, but there must be some of old Valliant’s blood in him.”

“The blood of Simon Zelotes.”

“We shall see, Holt; we shall see.”

The prior’s parlor was a noble room carried upon arches, its three windows looking out on the prior’s garden and the fruit trees of the orchard. A roofed staircase, the roof carried by carved stone balustrades, led up to the vestibule. Geraint, still carrying his shoes, went up the stairway with the briskness of a man who did not vex his soul with ceremonious deliberations. Nor did he trouble to rap on the prior’s door, but thrust it open and walked in.

An old man was sitting in an oak chair before the fire, his paunch making a very visible outline, his feet cocked up so that their soles caught the blaze. His lower lip hung querulously. His bold, high forehead glistened in the fire-light, and his rather protuberant blue eyes had a bemused, dull look.

He turned, glanced at Brother Geraint, and grunted.

“So you are not abed.”

“No, I am here—as you see.”

“Shut the door, brother. What a man it is for draughts and windy adventures!”

Geraint closed the door, and throwing back his cowl, pulled a stool up to the fire. He was a lusty, lean, big-jawed creature, as unlike Prior Globulus as an eagle is unlike a fat farmyard cock. His eyes were restless and very shrewd. The backs of his hands were covered with black hair, and one guessed that his chest was like the chest of an ape. He had a trick of moistening his lower lip with his tongue, a big red lip that jutted out like the spout of a jug.

“It is passing cold, sir, when a man has to walk without his shoes.”

He thrust his gray-stockinged feet close to the fire.

“You observe, sir, I am a careful man. Our young house-dog is awake.”

He watched Prior Globulus with shrewd, sidelong attention; but the old man lay inert in his chair and blinked at the fire.

“Brother Martin is very careful for our reputation, sir. He has become the thorn in our mortal flesh. It is notorious that he eschews wine, fasts like a

saint, and has no eyes or ears for anything that is carnal—save, sir, when he discovers such frailties in others."

The prior turned on Geraint with peevish impatience.

"A pest on the fellow; he is no more than a vexatious fool. Let him be, brother."

Geraint leaned forward and spread his hands before the fire.

"Brother Martin is no fool, sir; I am beginning to believe that the fellow is very sly. He watches and says but little, yet there is a something in those eyes of his. He lives like a fanatic, while we, sir, are but mortal men."

He smiled and rubbed his hands together.

"As you know, sir, it was mooted that Abbot Hilary has his eyes on Paradise. Some one whispered shame of us, and Abbot Hilary is the devil."

Prior Globulus sat up straight in his chair, his face full of querulous anger and dismay.

"Foul lies, brother."

"Foul lies, sir."

Geraint's voice was ironical. His eyes met the older man's, and Prior Globulus could not meet the look.

"Well, well," and he grinned peevishly. "What does your wisdom say, my brother?"

Geraint edged his stool a little closer.

"Brother Martin must be taught to be mortal," he said; "he must become one of us."

"And how shall that befall?"

"I will tell you, sir. Is not the fellow old Valliant's son—old Valliant whose blood was like Spanish wine? Brother Martin is a young man, and the spring is here."

They talked together for a long while before the fire, their heads almost touching, their eyes watching the flames playing in the throat of the chimney.

Chapter II

White mist filled the valley, for there was no wind moving, and the night had been very still. The moon had sunk into the Forest, but though the sun had not yet climbed over the edge of the day a faint yellow radiance showed in the east. As for the birds, they had begun their piping, and the whole valley was filled with a mysterious exultation.

Into this world of white mist and of song walked Brother Martin, old Roger Valliant's son—old Valliant, the soldier of fortune who had fought for pay under all manner of kings and captains, and had come back to take his peace in England with an iron box full of silver and gold. Old Valliant was dead, with the flavor of sundry rude romances still clinging to his memory, for even when his hair was gray he had caught the eyes of the women. Then in his later years a sudden devoutness had fallen upon him; there had been a toddling boy in his house and no mother to care for the child. Old Valliant had made great efforts to escape the devil; that was what his neighbors had said of him. At all events, he had left the child and his money to the monks of Paradise, and had made a most comely and tranquil end.

Brother Martin was three-and-twenty, and the tallest man in Orchard Valley. The women whispered that it was a pity that such a man should be a monk and take his state so seriously. There was a tinge of red in his hair; his blue eyes looked at life with a bold mildness; men said that he was built more finely than his father, and old Valliant had been a mighty man-at-arms. Yet Brother Martin often had the look of a dreamer, though his flesh was so rich and admirable in its youth. He loved the forest, he loved the soft meadows and the orchards, the path beside the river where the willows trailed their branches in the water, his stall in the choir, the mill where the wheel thundered. The children could not let him be when he walked through the village. As for the white pigeons in the priory dovecot, they would perch on his hands and shoulders. And yet there was a mild severity about the man, a clear-sighted and unfoolish chastity that brooked no meanness. He was awake even though he could dream. He had had his wrestling matches with the devil.

Brother Martin went down to the river that May morning, stripped himself, piled his clothes on the trunk of a fallen pollard willow, and took his swim. He let himself drift within ten yards of the weir, and then struck back against the swiftly gliding water. There had been heavy rains on the

Forest ridge, and the Rondel was running fast—so fast that Martin had to fight hard to make headway against the stream. The youth in him had challenged the river; it was a favorite trick of his to let himself be carried close to the weir and then to fight back against the suck of the water.

And a woman was watching him. She had been standing all the while under a willow, leaning her body against the trunk of the tree, her gray cloak and hood part of the grayness of the dawn. Nothing could be seen of her face save the white curve of her chin. She kept absolutely still, so still that Martin did not notice her.

The Rondel river gave Martin a fair fight that morning. All his litheness and his strength were needed in the tussle; he conquered the river by inches, and drew away very slowly from the thundering weir. The woman hidden behind the willow leaned forward and watched him.

The sun had risen, a great yellow circle, when Martin reached the spot where he had left his clothes. The mist was rising, and long yellow slants of light struck the water and lined the scalloped ripples with gold. The water was very black under the near bank, and as Martin climbed out, holding to the trailing branches of a willow, he saw the dew-wet meadows shining like a sheet of silver. The birds were still exulting. The sunlight struck his dripping body and made it gleam like the body of a god.

Martin had frocked himself and was knotting his girdle when he heard the woman speak.

"Oh, Mother Mary, but I thought death had you!" She threw herself on her knees and seized one of his hands in both of hers. "The saints be thanked, holy father; but we in Paradise would be wrath with you for thinking so little of us."

Martin stared at her, and in his astonishment he suffered her to keep a hold upon his hand. Her hood had fallen back, and showed her ripe, audacious face, and her black-brown eyes that were full of a seeming innocence. Her hair was the color of polished bronze, and her teeth very white behind her soft, red lips.

"What are you doing here, child?"

He was austere, yet gentle, and strangely unembarrassed. The girl was a ward of Widow Greensleeve's, of Cherry Acre.

She made a show of confusion.

"I was out to gather herbs, holy father—herbs that must have the dew on them—and I saw you struggling in the river—and was afraid."

He smiled at her, and withdrew his hand.

“I thank you for your fear, child.”

“Sir, you are so well loved in the valley.”

She stood up, smoothing her gown, and looking shyly at the grass.

“You are not angry with me, Father Martin?”

“How should I be angry?”

“In truth, but my fear for you ran away with me.”

She gave him a quick and eloquent flash of the eyes, and turned to go.

“I must gather my herbs, holy father.”

“Peace be with you,” he said simply.

Martin went on his way, as though nothing singular had happened. The girl loitered under the willows, looking back at him with mischievous curiosity. He was very innocent, but somehow she liked him none the less for that.

“Maybe it is very pleasant to be so saintly,” she said; “yet he is a fine figure of a man. I wonder how long it will be before Father Satan comes stalking across the meadows.”

Kate Succory made a pretense of searching for herbs, so ordering her steps that she found herself on the path that led to the house at Cherry Acre. The path ran between high hawthorn hedges that sheltered the orchards, and since the hedges were in green leaf, the way was like a narrow winding alley between high walls. She did not hurry herself, and presently she heard some one following her along the path.

“Good-morrow, Kate.”

She halted and turned a mock-demure face.

“Good-morrow, holy father.”

Geraint was grinning under his cowl.

“You are up betimes, sweeting.”

She walked on with a shrug of the shoulders.

“I have been gathering herbs, and I have the cow to milk.”

“Excellent maid. And nothing wonderful has happened to you?”

“Oh, I have fallen in love with some one,” she said tartly; “it is a girl’s business to fall in love.”

Geraint sniggered.

“I commend such humanity.”

“It is not with you, holy father. Do not flatter yourself as to that.”

She tossed her head, and walked daintily, swinging her shoulders. And Geraint looked at her brown neck, and opened and shut his hairy hands.

"Perhaps Dame Greensleeve will give me a cup of hot milk?" he said.

"Oh, to be sure."

And she began to whistle like a boy.

Brother Martin was a mile away, brushing his feet through the dew of the upland meadows. He had crossed the footbridge at the mill, and spoken a few words with Gregory, the miller, who had thrust a shock of sandy hair out of an upper window. Rising like a black mound on the edge of the Forest purlieus stood a grove of yews, and it was toward these yews that Martin's footsteps tended.

The yews were very ancient, with huge red-black trunks and dense green spires crowded together against the blue. No grass grew under them, for the great trees starved all other growth and cheated it of sunlight. A path cut its way through the solemn gloom, but the yew boughs met overhead.

And yet there was life in the midst of this black wood, life that was grotesque and piteous. The path broadened to a spacious glade, and in the glade stood a little rude stone house thatched with heather. The dwellers here labored with their hands, for a great part of the glade was cultivated, and about the house itself were borders of herbs, roses, and flowering plants. A couple of goats were browsing outside the wattle fence that closed in the garden, and a blue pigeon strutted and cooed to its mate on the roof ridge of the house.

Martin stopped at the swinging hurdle that served as a gate. A man was hoeing between the rows of broad beans, an old man to judge by the stoop of his shoulders and the slow and careful way he used the hoe. He wore a coarse white smock with a hood to it; a kind of linen mask covered his face.

"You are working early, Master Christopher."

The man turned and straightened himself with curious deliberation. There was something ghastly about that white mask of his with its two black slits for eye-holes. He looked more like a piece of mummery than a man, a grotesque figure in some rustic play.

He lifted up a cracked voice and shouted:

"Giles, Peter—Brother Martin is at the gate."

Two be-cowled and masked creatures came out of the house. All three were so alike and so much of a size that a stranger would not have told one from the other. They formed themselves into a kind of procession, and shuffling to the gate, knelt down on a patch of grass inside it.

Martin's voice was very gentle.

"Shall I chant the Mass, brothers?"

The three lepers looked at him like lost souls gazing at Christ.

"The Lord be merciful to us and cast His blessing upon you," said one of them.

So Martin chanted the Mass.

The three bowed their heads before him, as though it gave them joy to listen to the sound of his voice, for Martin chanted like a priest and a soldier and a woman all in one. He had no fear of these poor creatures, did not shrink from them and hold aloof. When he brought them the Sacrament he did not pass God's body through a hole in the wall. The birds had ceased their singing, and the world was very still, and Martin's voice went up to heaven with a strong and valiant tenderness.

When he had ended the Mass the three lepers got up off their knees and began to talk like children.

"Can you smell my gillyflowers, Brother Martin?"

"The speckled hen has hatched out twelve chicks."

"You should see what Peter has been making; three maple cups all polished like glass."

"If the Lord keeps the frosts away there will be a power of fruit on the trees."

Martin opened the gate and walked into the garden, and the three followed him as though he had come straight out of heaven. No other living soul ever came nearer than the place where the path entered the yew wood. Alms were left there, and such goods as the lepers could buy. But Brother Martin had no fear of the horror that had fallen on them, and had such a fear shown itself he would have crushed it out of his heart. And so he had to see and smell Christopher's gillyflowers, handle the speckled hen's chicks, and admire the maple cups that Peter had made. Nature was beautiful and clean even though she had cast a foul blight upon these three poor creatures. They hung upon Martin's words, watched him with a kind of timid devotion. God walked with them in that lonely place when Brother Martin came from Paradise and through the wood of yews.

Meanwhile, Brother Geraint had followed Kate Succory to Widow Greensleeve's house in Cherry Acre, where the maze of high hedges and orchard trees hid his black frock completely. The girl had gone a-milking,

and Brother Geraint had certain things to say to the widow. He sat on a settle in the kitchen, and she moved to and fro before him, a big breeze of a woman, plump, voluble, very rosy, with roguish eyes and an incipient double chin. She laughed a great deal, nodded her head at him, and snapped her fingers, for she and Brother Geraint understood each other.

"Kate will dance to that tune. Bless me, she'll need no persuading."

Geraint spoke very solemnly.

"If she can cure the young man of his self-righteousness she shall be well remembered by us all. See to it, dame."

The widow curtsied, making a capacious lap.

"Your servant, holy father."

And then she fell a-laughing in a sly, shrewd way.

"God be merciful to us, my friend; yet I do believe that it is more pleasant to live with sinners than with saints. The over-pious man rides the poor ass to death. Now you—my friend——"

She laughed so that her bosom shook.

"We would all confess to Brother Geraint. I know the kind of penance that you would set me, good sir."

Geraint got up and kissed her, and her brown eyes challenged his.

"Leave it to me," she said; "I will physic the young man for you."

Chapter III

Martin had gone down the valley to watch the woodmen felling oaks in the Prior's Wood when old Holt rode out on a mule in search of him. He found Martin stripped like the men and working with them, for he loved laboring with his hands.

"Brother Martin—Brother Martin!"

Old Holt squeaked at him imperiously.

"Brother Martin, a word with you."

Martin passed the felling ax that he had been swinging to one of the men, and crossed over to Father Holt.

"The prior has been asking for you. Get you back at once. Brother Jude has been taken sick, and is lying in the infirmary."

Martin glanced up at old Holt's wrinkled, crab-apple of a face.

"Who has gone to the Black Moor in Jude's place?"

"I did not ride here to gossip, brother. See to it that you make haste home."

Martin let old Holt's testiness fly over his shoulders, and went and put on his black frock. The cellarer pushed his mule deeper into the wood where the men were barking one of the fallen trees, and Martin left him there and started alone for Paradise. The great oaks were just coming into leaf, the golden buds opening against the blue of the sky. The young bracken fronds were uncurling themselves from the brown tangle of last year's growth, and here and there masses of wild hyacinth made pools of blue. The gorse had begun to burn with a lessened splendor, but the broom had taken fire, and waved its yellow torches everywhere.

Martin found Prior Globulus in his parlor, sitting by a window with a book in his lap. The prior had been dozing; his eyes looked misty and dull.

"You have sent for me, sir."

"Come you here, Brother Martin. Assuredly—I have been asleep. Yes—I remember. Brother Jude has been taken sick. He rode in two hours ago, with a sharp fever. I have chosen you to take his place, my son."

His dull eyes watched Martin's face.

“The chapel on the Black Moor must have a priest. There are people, my son, who would not pardon us if we left that altar unserved even for a day. Get you a mule and ride there. To-morrow I will send two pack mules with food and wine and new altar cloths and vestments. No cell of ours shall be served in niggardly fashion. And remember, my son, that it is part of our trust to serve all wayfarers with bread and wine, should they ask for bread and wine. Holy St. Florence so ordered it before she died. And there is the little hostelry where wayfarers may lodge themselves for the night. All these matters will be in your keeping.”

He groped in a gypsire that lay on the window seat.

“Here is the key of the chapel, Brother Martin. Now speed you, and bear my blessing.”

Martin kissed the ring on the old man’s hand, and went forth to take up his trust.

The Forest was the great lord of all those parts. From Gawdy Town, by the sea, to Merlin Water it stretched ten leagues or more, a green, rolling wilderness, very mysterious and very beautiful. There were castles, little towns and villages hidden in it, and a stranger might never have known of them but for the sound of their bells. In the north the Great Ridge bounded the Forest like a huge vallum, and on one of the chalk hills stood Troy Castle, its towers gray against the northern sky. Gawdy Town, where the Rondel river reached the sea, held itself in no small esteem. It was a free town, boasted its own mayor and jurats, appointed its own port reeve, sent out its own ships, and hoarded much rich merchandise in its storehouses and cellars.

The day had an April waywardness when Martin mounted his mule and set out for the Black Moor. Masses of cloud moved across the sky, some of them trailing rain showers from the edges, and letting in wet floods of sunlight when they had passed. The Forest was just breaking into leaf; the birch trees had clothed themselves; so had the hazels; the beeches were greener than the oaks, whose domes varied from yellow to bronze; the ash buds were still black, promising a good season. The wild cherries were in flower. The hollies glistened after the rain, and the warm, wet smell of the earth was the smell of spring.

Not till Martin reached Heron Hill did the Forest show itself to him in all its mystery. The Black Moor hung like a thunder-cloud ahead of him, splashed to the south with sunlight after the passing of a shower. He could see the sea, covered with purple shadows and patches of gold. Below him, and stretching for miles, the wet green of the woods lost itself in a blue gray

haze, with the Rondel river a silver streak in the valleys. Here and there a wood of yews or firs made a blackness in the thick of the lighter foliage. Martin saw deer moving along the edge of Mogry Heath. Larks were in the air, and the green woodpecker laughed in the woods.

The sun was low in the west when the mule plodded up the sandy track that led over the Black Moor. The gorse had lost its freshness, but the yellow broom and the white of the stunted thorns lightened the heavy green of the heather. The chapelry stood on the top-most swell of the moor, marked by a big oak wayside cross, its heather-thatched roofs clustering close together like sheep in a pen. There were a chapel, a priest's cell, a little guest house, a stable, a small lodge or barn, and a stack of fagots standing together in a grassy space. Father Jude was a homely soul, a man of the soil; he had fought with the sour soil, made a small garden, and hedged it with thorns, though the apple trees that he had planted were all blown one way and looked stunted and grotesque. He had cut and stacked bracken for litter, and there was a small haystack in the hollow over the hill.

Martin stabled the mule, carried his saddle-bags into the cell, and took stock of his new home. He went first to the little chapel, unlocked the door, and saw that the holy vessels were safe in the aumbry beside the altar, and that no one had been tampering with the iron-bound alms-box that was fastened to the wall close to the holy water stoup. The chapel pleased him with its stone walls and the rough forest-hewn timber in its roof. He knelt down in front of the altar and prayed that in his lonely place he might not be found wanting.

There was the mule to be watered and fed, and Martin saw to the beast before he thought of his own supper. Father Jude's larder suggested to him that hunger was an excellent necessity. He found a stale loaf of bread, a big earthen jar full of salted meat, half a bowl of herrings, a pot of honey, a paper of spices, and the remains of a rabbit pie. Obviously Father Jude had been something of a cook, and Martin stared reflectively at the brick oven in the corner of the cell. Cooking was an art that he had not studied, but on the top of the Black Moor a man had a chance of completing a thoroughly practical education. For instance, there was the question of bread. How much yeast went to how much flour, and how long had the loaves to be left in the oven? Martin saw that life was full of housewifely problems. A man's body might be more importunate than his soul.

When he had made a meal and washed his hollywood cup and platter, he found that dusk was falling over the Forest like a purple veil. The wayside cross spread its black arms against a saffron afterglow. The world was very peaceful and very still, and a heavy dew was falling.

Martin went and sat at the foot of the cross, leaning his broad back against the massive post. His face grew dim in the dusk, and a kind of a sadness descended on him. There were times when a strange unrest stirred in him, when he yearned for something—he knew not what. The beauty of the earth, the wet scent of the woods, the singing of birds filled him with a vague emotion that was near to pain. It was like the spring stirring in his blood while a wind still blew keenly out of the north.

But Martin Valliant's faith was very simple as yet, and crowned with a tender severity.

"The Devil goeth about cunningly to tempt men."

His thoughts wandered back to Paradise, and set him frowning. He was not so young as not to know that all was not well with the world down yonder.

"Our Lord was tempted in the wilderness."

He stared up at the stars, and then watched the yellow face of the moon rise over Heron Hill.

"It is good for a man to be alone, to keep watch and to know his own heart. God does nothing blindly. When we are alone we are both very weak and very strong. There are voices that speak in the wilderness."

He felt comforted, and a great calm descended on him. Those taunting lights had died out of the western sky; the beauty of the earth no longer looked slantwise at him like a young girl whose eyes are tender and whose breasts are the breasts of a woman.

The pallet bed in the cell had a mattress of sacking filled with straw. It served Martin well enough. He slept soundly and without dreams.

But at Paradise Geraint had gone a-prowling through the orchards. He loitered outside Widow Greensleeve's gate till some one came out with smothered laughter and spoke to him under the apple boughs.

"The pan is on the fire, dame. Brother Martin has gone to the Black Moor."

"And the fat is ready for frying, my master."

"A few pinches of spice—eh!"

"And a pretty dish fit for a king."

Chapter IV

A tall ship, the Rose, came footing it toward Gawdy Town with a wash of foam at her bluff bows, and the green seas lifting her poop. Gawdy Town was very proud of the Rose, for she was fit to be a king's ship, and to carry an admiral's flag if needs be. Her towering poop and forecastle had their walls pierced for guns, and their little turrets loopholed for archers, and all her top gear was painted to match her name. She carried three masts and a fine spread of canvas, and Master Hamden, her captain, loved to come into port with streamers flying and all the gilding of her vanes and bulwarks shining like gold.

The Rose struck her canvas and dropped her tow ropes when she was under the shelter of the high ground west of the harbor. A couple of galleys came out to tow her in, and she was berthed at the Great Wharf under the walls.

She carried merchandise and wine from Spain and Bordeaux, also a few passengers; but the passengers were of small account. Two of them, a girl and a young man, were leaning over the poop rail and watching the people on the wharf below. The young man's face was yellow as a guinea; he was dressed like a strolling player, with bunches of ribbons at his elbows and bells in his cap. The girl looked the taller of the two, perhaps because the sea had not humbled her; she wore a light blue coat edged with fur, and a gown of apple green; her green hood had white strings tied under her chin.

"Holy saints, what an adventure!"

The man straightened himself, and managed to smile.

"I never knew what cowardice was like till I got aboard a ship. My courage came out of my mouth. And now an impudent tongue and a laughing eye are necessities——"

The girl's dark eyes were on the alert.

"There's old Adam Rick, or am I blind?"

"Master Port Reeve—so it is! The bridge is ashore. We had best be putting our fortune to the test. Have I anything of the gay devil left about me?"

He shook himself with the air of a bird that had been moping on a perch, but the girl did not laugh; she held her head high, and seemed to take life

with fierce seriousness.

They climbed down to the waist of the ship where Master Hamden stood by the gangway, talking to some of the fathers of Gawdy Town who were gathered on the wharf.

"News, sirs, what would you with news? If Crookback is still king, I have no news for you."

"There have been rumors of landings."

"Rumors of old wives' petticoats!"

The man and the girl were close at his elbow, ready to leave the ship. The man carried a leather-covered casket in one hand, and a viol under his arm, while the girl carried a lute. She kept her eyes fixed on the tower of the town church; they were very dark eyes, blue almost to blackness, her skin was softly browned like the skin of a Frenchwoman, but her lips were very red. The hair under her hood was the color of charcoal. Her attitude toward her neighbors seemed one of aloofness; men might have voted her a proud, fierce-tempered wench.

Master Hamden looked at the pair with his red-lidded, angry eyes. The man nodded to him.

"Good-day, master."

"Give you good-day, Jack Jester. Go and get some wine in you, and wash the yellow out of your skin."

He looked slantwise at the girl as she passed him, but he did not speak to her. Had she been all that she pretended to be she would not have left old Hamden's ship without a coarse jest of some kind.

Her brother was pushing his way toward a handsome, ruddy man in a black camlet cloak, and the man in the cloak was eying him intently.

"Sir Adam, a word with you."

The Port Reeve appeared lost in thought. He drew a quill from his girdle, and meditated while he picked his teeth. And very much at his leisure, he chose to notice the young man with the viol.

"Where have you come from, my friend?"

"France, sir. My sister and I are poor players, makers of music."

The Port Reeve scanned the pair with intelligent brown eyes.

"Queer that such a Jack and Jill should come out of France."

"We were in the service of my Lord of Dunster."

"And he sent you packing? How are you called?"

The young man answered in a low voice:

"Lambert Lovel."

The Port Reeve's eyelids flickered curiously.

"You would lodge in Gawdy Town?"

"If it pleases you, sir."

"Our laws are strict against vagabonds and strollers. Well, get you in, Lovel, my lad, and your sister with you. You make no tarrying, I gather."

"But to make a little money for the road, sir."

"Well, try the 'Painted Lady,' my man. It is the merchants' tavern."

He gave them something very like a solemn wink, and then turned aside to talk to a sea-captain who wanted to quarrel about the port dues.

The strolling singers entered Gawdy Town by the sea-gate, and chose a winding street that went up toward the castle. Lambert carried himself with a jaunty and half-insolent air, fluttering his ribbons and making grimaces at the people in the doorways.

"Do you remember your name, sweeting?"

"Am I a fool, Gilbert!"

"God save us," and he glanced at her impatiently, "but you have forgotten mine! Lambert Lovel, brother to Kate Lovel. Be wary; the Crookback has spies in every port."

"Why stay in the town—at all?"

"Oh, you wild falcon! Are there not things to be done here? Are we not hungry? Besides, the Forest is seven miles away."

"I know—but it is home."

Her brother laughed. He was built on lighter, gayer lines than the girl; he had not her strength. A sort of adventurous vanity carried him along, and life pleased him when it was not too grim.

"Robin, sweet Robin under the greenwood tree! A pile of stones and a few burnt beams! Scramble, you brats—scramble!"

With a lordly air he pretended to throw money to a number of children who seemed inclined to follow them.

"You will have to play your part, sweeting. Where the devil is that gaudy inn? Ha! we have it!"

A broad square paved with cobbles opened in front of them, its timber and plaster houses built out on brackets and pillars, many of them carrying painted signs hung out on poles. A stone cross stood in the center of the

square, and above the lichened roof of the town hall the great round tower of the castle showed like a crown resting on a cushion. The "Inn of the Painted Lady" stood by the guild house of the Armourers' Guild, a noisy, buxom, deep-chested house, its plaster-work painted green and red, its sign looking like a Roman mosaic. A white mule and a couple of palfreys were waiting outside the entry, and from an open window came the sound of some one singing:

"Cuckolds, cuckolds, list to my tale——"

It was a big, brawling voice that sang, the voice of a man who was hearty with liquor.

Lovel looked at the place a little doubtfully.

"Fat—and bountiful! I will go and beard my friend—the host."

The girl turned aside.

"I shall be there—on the steps of the cross."

"Be brave, sweeting." And he went off humming a song.

He reappeared shortly with a certain whimsical look.

"You will be suffered to sleep with the sluts, Kate."

"And you?"

"With the scullions! What men must stomach for the sake of—adventure!"

Her nostrils dilated.

"The Forest would be sweeter."

"True, dear sister; but shall we be frightened by having to sleep on musty straw with fellow Christians who wash under the pump but once a week? I trust not. Besides, I have to see the Flemming to-night."

Her pride was in revolt, the pride of a kestrel put to perch with flea-ridden hens.

"Had I known this I would have chosen to cross the sea in some other dress."

Her brother shrugged his shoulders, and then sat down beside her on the stone steps of the cross.

"I'm sorry, Kate, but what would you? We have begun this game in cap and bells, and we must go through with it—or pay forfeit. And the forfeit may be our lives. Crooked Dick shows no mercy."

He was right, and she knew it. There could be no turning back.

"What must be—must be. I shall not fail you, brother."

"That's brave; but one word more, Kate."

"Speak out."

"Your pride may be sorely touched in yonder, for you are a singing-girl, no more, no less. Take it not to heart, child, and do not let it anger you. I would stab the man who offered to do you harm, even though the dagger blow meant ruin for both of us. I, too, have my pride."

"Those are a man's words. You shall not be disappointed in me."

Half an hour later Mellis Dale stood at an attic window overlooking the inn yard. She had liked the part she was playing still less when she had seen the attic, but for the moment it was empty; the wenches who were to be her bedfellows were at their work below. She could see her brother Gilbert sitting on an overturned tub in the yard, twanging the strings of his viol, and making the ostlers and loiterers laugh with his whimsies. His color had come back to him; he was playing a man's game, even though it brought his feet very close to the gutter.

She caught some of her brother's spirit, some of his cynical and gay audacity. After all, they were not the sport of fools, but players who made the fools dance to their piping. Her pride caught a note of mockery. There were enemies to be outwitted; there was the thought of revenge.

The inn simmered with life like a kettle about to boil. She could feel the bubbling of its activities, the reverberations of its crude, animal energy. There was much clattering of pots and pans, and much loud talking in the kitchen. She could hear girls giggling, and a woman scolding somewhere with a voice that suggested the rending of linen. The gentleman with the big, brawling bass was still singing in the deeps of the house, and other voices took up the chorus. A knife-grinder appeared with his barrow and wheel and started to sharpen knives. Two dogs fell to fighting over a sheep's foot that had been flung out of the kitchen. A man rolled out from the guest-room and was sick in the kennel.

Mellis saw her brother draw his bow from its case, and begin playing his viol, and the music brought six bouncing girls from somewhere, all ready to dance. They footed it up and down the yard, holding up their gowns, and laughing to each other, while the men stood around and made jests. The windows of the inn filled with faces; all sorts of unsuspected folk poked out their heads to watch the fun. This living picture-show included a little old lawyer, blue and wrinkled, with a dewdrop hanging at the end of his nose; a red-faced widow with a headdress like a steeple; a couple of priests; a vintner from London who munched something as though he were chewing

the cud; a country squire with the eyes of an ox; a young bachelor who kept looking up at Mellis and showing off his slashed doublet and the jewel in his ear.

The members of one of the Merchant Guilds were supping together in the great guest-room, and servants began to go to and fro across the yard with dishes from the kitchen. Mellis saw a big man with a face as round and as sallow as a cream cheese come out and speak to her brother. Gilbert glanced up at her, and then beckoned her to come down.

She appeared in the yard, with her lute hanging from her shoulders by a cherry-colored ribbon. The man with the sallow face stared her over, and nodded his approval.

"If her voice prove as good as her face, my guests will have no cause to grumble. I will hire the two of you for the evening, for a silver groat and your suppers."

Mellis had to suffer the insolence of the fat fellow's eye. Her brother grimaced, and shook an empty gypsire.

"We shall not die of a surfeit of wealth."

"Take it or leave it," said the innkeeper roughly. "I have my choice of all the wastrels and wenches in Gawdy Town."

Mellis's face showed white and cold. The beast's churlishness roused such scorn in her that she soared above such a thing as anger.

And so for two hours she stood in the guest-room of the "Painted Lady," making music for men who over-ate and over-drank themselves, and who looked at her as none of them would have looked at their neighbors' daughters or wives. Her scorn filled her with a kind of devilry. She sang to see what manner of swine these men were; sang to them as though each had the soul of a Dan Chaucer. And not a few of them grew very silent, and sat and stared at her with a brutish wonder. An oldish man sniveled and wept. Her brother Gilbert was kept busy scraping at the strings of his viol, and all the passage-ways were crowded with servants and scullions who crowded to listen.

"That was famous, Kate," he said to her as he saw her safe to the stairs, "I passed around the cap and drew five pence out of the worthies."

"I think I would sooner have sung to lost souls in Hell," she answered him.

In the attic she stripped off her spencer and gown, and lay down on one of the straw pallets in her shift. Her bed-fellows came up anon, three rollicking girls who smelt of the kitchen.

Said one of them:

“That brother of thine is a pretty fellow. I warrant I’d tramp to Jerusalem with such a brother.”

They tittered, and squeaked like mice. Mellis sat up and looked at them by the glimmer of the rushlight.

“My dears,” she said, “I am very weary. Let me sleep. One may have to sing when one’s heart is heavy.”

And so she silenced them. They crept to bed as quietly as birds going to roost.

Chapter V

Brother Martin said matins to the sparrows who had built their nests in the thatch of the chapel, and having drunk a cup of spring water and eaten a crust of bread, he set out early to try to lose himself in the Forest.

For life on the Black Moor was not all that it had seemed, and a young man, however devout and determined he may be, cannot satisfy his soul with prayers and the planting of seeds in a garden. Martin had entered upon the life with methodical enthusiasm, tolled the chapel bell at matins and vespers, swept out his cell, set the little guest-house in order, and done to death all the weeds in Father Jude's garden. But a man must be fed, and it was in a struggle with this prime necessity that Martin suffered his first defeat. He started out cheerfully to bake bread, but the Devil was in the business; the oven was either too hot or too cold, and there were mysteries about such a simple thing as dough that Martin had not fathomed. He tore a great hole in his cassock in climbing up the woodstack to throw down fagots, and then discovered that he had no needle and thread for the mending of the rent. These trivial domestic humiliations were discouraging. He conceived a most human hatred of salt meat, herrings, and the obstinate and adhesive pulp that he produced in the place of bread. Milk and eggs, fresh meat and honey! He was carnally minded with regard to such simple desires.

Moreover, he was most abominably lonely—the more so, perhaps, because he had not realized his own loneliness. Paradise appeared to have melted into the dim distance; there might have been a conspiracy against him; Martin had not seen a human face since Prior Globulus had sent a servant to fetch away the mule, on the plea that the beast was needed. And Martin had taken the loss of the mule most unkindly. It was a confession, but he had found the beast good company; it had been alive; it had needed food and drink; had given signs of friendship; had been a warm, live thing that he could touch. The birds were very well in their way; but he was not necessary to them, and they were wild. He saw deer moving in the distance, but they were no more than the figures of beasts worked in thread upon a tapestry.

This morning restlessness of his was a kind of impulsive pilgrimage in quest of something that he lacked—a flight from that part of himself that remained unsatisfied. He went striding over the heather toward the beech woods in the valley. They were very green, and soft, and beautiful and had seemed mysteriously alive when seen from the brow of the Black Moor, but

even in the woods some essential thing was lacking. The great trees stood spaced at a distance, their branches rising from the huge gray trunks. The greenness and the listening gloom went on and on, promising him something that was never seen, never discovered.

More than once he came on an open glade where rabbits were feeding, and the little brown fellows went off at a scamper, showing the whites of their tails. Martin felt aggrieved, even like a child who wanted playmates. He leaned against a beech tree and consoled himself with asking ridiculous questions.

"Why should the beasts fear man?"

And yet he would have welcomed fresh venison!

"If the Lord Christ were here in my place, would not all the wild things come to Him?"

His simple faith could provide him with only one answer, and that was not flattering to his self-knowledge. He had not climbed to that state of complete purity; he was no St. Francis. Perhaps Original Sin was at the bottom of everything. And yet he had always mastered his own body.

Martin Valliant passed some hours in the woods before turning back across the heather of the Black Moor. A hawk, poised against the blue, took no more notice of him than if he had been a sheep, and for a while Martin stood watching the bird of prey. The hawk went boldly on with his hunting; he would have had no pity for a poor fool of a priest who was spending his powers in trying to contradict Nature.

A puzzled look came into Martin Valliant's eyes as he neared the chapelry. A little tuft of smoke was drifting from the chimney of his cell, and he knew that he had lit no sticks under the oven that morning.

"They have sent a servant from Paradise."

He quickened his steps, but saw no live thing moving about the place. He looked into the stable, and found it empty; but the garden hedge offered him his first surprise. Certainly the thing that he saw was nothing but a shirt spread on the hedge to dry, and looking as white and clean as one of the big clouds overhead.

His own cell offered further mysteries. The oven door stood open, and a couple of nicely browned loaves were waiting to be taken out. A meat pasty that smelled very fragrant had been left on the oven shelf. His cassock, neatly mended, hung over the back of Father Jude's oak chair.

Martin could make nothing of these mysteries. The loaves and the pasty were real enough—so real that he remembered the cup of water and the crust

of bread with which he had broken his fast soon after dawn.

He went and looked into the chapel and the guest-room, but there was no one there, nor could he see anything moving over the moor. The business puzzled him completely. It was possible that a servant had been sent from Paradise; but Paradise was three leagues away, and Martin would have expected to find a horse or a mule in the stable. Moreover it occurred to him that some one must have looked into the oven not so very long ago, lifted out the pasty, and put it on the shelf. The good creature might be hiding somewhere, but what need was there for such a game of hide and seek?

Martin returned to the cell, set the pasty on the table, took the loaves out of the oven, and his platter and cup from the shelf. Common sense suggested that the food was meant to be eaten. He pulled the stool up to the table, said grace, took the knife from the sheath at his girdle, and thrust the point of it through the pie-crust.

Then he sat rigid, listening, the blade of his knife still in the pie and his hand gripping the haft. Some one was singing on the moor among the yellow gorse and broom. The voice was a girl's voice, gay and birdlike and challenging.

Martin sat there with a face like a ghost's, his heart beating fast, his eyes staring through the open doorway. For the voice seemed to speak to him of all that he had sought in the Forest and had not found. It was youth calling to youth in the spring of the year.

The voice grew fainter and fainter; it seemed to be dying away over the moor. Martin Valliant's eyes dilated, his knees shook together. He started up, knocking over the stool, and rushed out of the cell like a madman, his eyes full of a fanatical fire.

The voice had ceased singing. He climbed to the place where the wooden cross stood, and looked fiercely about him. But he saw nothing, nothing but the gorse and broom and heather. He went down among the green gorse banks, searched, and found nothing.

Sweat stood on his forehead, and his heart was hammering under his ribs.

Then he crossed himself, fell on his knees, and prayed. The first thing he did on reaching his cell was to take the loaves and the cooked meat and throw them into the fire under the oven.

Chapter VI

When a man has done what he believes to be a good deed he is flushed for a while with a happy self-righteousness, and may forget the struggle he had with his own soul. So it was with Martin Valliant. He had no quarrel with himself or with his loneliness for the rest of that day. He had won a victory; he had been tempted of the Devil and had refused the meats that the Devil had cooked for him.

Strange—this fear of the white body or the lips of a woman, this naïve cowardice that dares not look into Nature's eyes. In it one beholds the despair of saints who see no hope for man save in the crushing of the body to save the soul. The few struggle toward a cold triumph, maimed, but half human. With holy ferocity they run about to persuade humanity that God is without sex. Men may listen to them; the deserts become filled with monks; Nature is flouted for a while. Then the thing becomes no more than a rotten shell; men obey their impulses but still wear their vows; cynicism and a lewd hypocrisy are born; the great realities are glozed over. Then comes the day when a more youthful and noble generation wakes to the horror of such a superstition. Gates are torn off their hinges; walls battered down; the slime and the refuse exposed to the sunlight. The new generation runs to the woods and the fields like a flock of children released from some abominable pedantry. They are no longer afraid. The world grows young and beautiful again. There is no sin in the sunset, no shame in the singing of birds.

Martin Valliant felt himself uplifted all that day; but the old Pagan people had gathered out of the woods and were lying hidden in the gorse and heather. There was Pan with his pipes; there were girls and young men who had danced in the Bacchic dances; Orpheus with his lute. Even the pale Christ looked down with compassionate eyes, the Great Lover who was human till the fanatics covered His face with a veil of lies.

Evening came, and the birds began their singing down in the beech woods under the hill. They sang their way into Martin Valliant's heart, made him hear again the voice of the girl singing on the moor. A great restlessness assailed him. He went forth and wandered under the stars, but there was no healing for him in their cold brightness. And that night he slept like a man in fear of the dawn.

Again, it was the birds which troubled him. He woke in the gray of the morning, to hear their faint orisons filling the valley. He arose, went to the chapel, and was long at his prayers. Moreover, he chose to fast that morning, contenting himself with a cup of cold water before he wandered out over the moor.

Yet in spite of all his carefulness Martin Valliant was not wholly his own master that morning. He made himself go forward, but a part of his soul kept looking back. There was a voice, too, that challenged him. "Of what are you afraid? Why are you trying to escape? A monk is a soldier. He should fight, and not hide himself."

This voice would not be silenced. It was like a scourge striking him continually.

"Go back," it said; "blind men are afraid of falling."

At last he obeyed it, vaguely conscious of the nearness of some new ordeal. He did not guess that the all-wise Mater Mundi had him by the hand, that he was one of her chosen children. She would try him with fire, teach him to be great through the power of his own compassion, so that his soul might burn more gloriously when the purer flame touched it.

Martin Valliant found the door of his cell standing open, and from within came the sound of the snapping of dry wood. A girl was kneeling by the oven, with a fagot lying on the floor at her side, and she was busy laying the fire for the baking of bread. She was dressed in a gown of apple green, and from the collar thereof her firm white neck curved to meet the bronze of her hair. So intent was she on breaking up the fagot wood and building her fire that she had not discovered the man standing in the doorway.

Life had never yet posed Martin with such a problem as this. He stood and stared at the girl, wondering how to begin the attack. Her back was turned toward him, and the initiative was his.

Then he became inspired. He would assume blindness, deafness, refuse to recognize her existence. He would not so much as speak to her, and behold! the problem would solve itself.

Kate Succory turned sharply at the sound of a man's footsteps. Her lashes half hid her roguish brown eyes; she held a hazel bough between her two hands; her green gown, cut low at the throat, showed the upper curves of her bosom.

She saw Martin Valliant take his Mass-book from the shelf, sit down in the chair, and begin to read. He was within two yards of her, but for all the notice he took of her she might have been less than a shadow.

She watched him for some moments and then went calmly on with her work, breaking the sticks to pieces and feeding the fire. Absolute silence reigned in the cell, save for the sound of the snapping of wood and the crackling of the flames in the oven.

Martin's eyes remained fixed on his book, but he was most acutely conscious of what was happening so close to him. The situation had taken on a sudden, unforeseen complexity. He felt himself growing hot about the face.

Presently the fire appeared to be burning to the girl's satisfaction. She rose, went to the larder, brought out the things that she required, and set them on the table. Then she turned up the sleeves of her gown, and her arms showed white and shapely.

Martin's face was growing the color of fire. He tried not to see the girl, to anchor his whole consciousness to the square of parchment in front of him. The dilemma shocked him. Was it possible that this creature in the green gown took his silence to be consenting?

Meanwhile she went on calmly with her work, hardly looking in his direction, her red lips parting now and again in a smile. Martin raised his eyes very cautiously and looked at her. The solid and comely reality of her shape, her purposeful composure, appalled him. This problem would have to be attacked somehow, desperately, and without delay.

The girl's intuition forestalled his gathering effort toward revolt.

"It was foolish of you to burn those loaves yesterday."

He stared at her with sudden, frank astonishment, but said nothing.

"Good food should not be wasted like that. Besides, I had come all that way to see what a pair of hands might do for you, Father Martin. No bread could have been cleaner; I always wash before baking."

Here was an amazing development! The girl was actually scolding him, reproving him for being wasteful, assuming control of the stores in his cupboard. He opened his mouth to speak, but again she forestalled him.

"Father Jude was a very careful soul. Rose Lorrimer had no trouble with him; she wept her eyes out when he had to go back to Paradise. She had just made him two new shirts. And she did not mind the loneliness up here, for Father Jude is an old man, and Rose has seen forty——"

Martin Valliant laid his Mass-book on the table. Kate Succory was talking so calmly and so naturally that he knew she was to be believed; yet here was a new and astonishing phase of monastic life thrust upon him without a moment's warning. Martin was no innocent, though he had led a

sheltered life; he knew that there were monks at Paradise who had broken their vows. But here was this girl coming all the way from Paradise village and turning up her sleeves to keep house for him as though she were doing the most natural thing in the world.

He floundered in the depths of his own simplicity.

"Who sent you here, child?" he asked her bluntly.

Kate's brown eyes met his.

"I just mounted the gray donkey and came. No one could have bidden me sweep your hearth for you. Rose Lorrimer was hearth-ward to Father Jude, and before Father Jude Father Nicholas was here, and old Marjory cared for him; but she was not old Marjory then."

She laughed, and began to mold the dough into shape, her arms all white with flour.

"Rose took Father Jude's sheets away with her, but if we can come by some good linen I will soon have things as they should be. Of course, if I do not please you——"

She gave him a quick, sidelong glance, her teeth showing between her red lips.

Martin Valliant had gone as white as the dough she was kneading. His knees were trembling. He could not escape from the knowledge of her green gown, her shining hair, and the sleekness of her skin. And her voice was very pleasant, with a sly lilt of playfulness and of youth in its tones.

He gripped the arms of his chair and stood up.

"My child—" he began.

She gave him the full, challenging frankness of her brown eyes, and Martin knew that he could not pretend that she was a child.

"It is very lonely here," she said, looking at her hands, "and a man cannot do a woman's work. Rose told me that travelers passed no more than once a month. And—and I——"

He pushed his chair back, and groped with one hand for the cross that hung at his girdle.

"It is not good that you should be here."

He saw her head droop a little. Her hands rested on the table. He strove with himself, and went on.

"But I thank you, my sister. What I bear must be borne for the sake of the vows I have taken. When I kneel in the chapel, you shall be in my prayers."

All the sly, provoking roguery had gone from her face. She did not speak for a moment, did not move. Then she lifted her head and looked at him, and her brown eyes were like the eyes of an animal in pain.

"I am not a bad woman, Father Martin, not evil at heart. But——"

She caught her breath, and pressed her hands to her breasts.

"Yes, I will go."

She turned suddenly and walked straight out of the cell into the glare of the sunlight. And Martin Valliant stood biting the sleeve of his frock, and thinking of the look her brown eyes had given him.

Chapter VII

Kate Succory went no farther than the nearest cluster of gorse on the slope of the moor. She threw herself face downwards on a patch of short, sweet turf, where rabbits had been feeding, and plucked at the grass with her fingers, twisting her body to and fro with the lithe and supple movements of a restless animal. Her hair came loose, and she shook it down upon her shoulders.

There was rebellion in her eyes.

"He is a good man. Why should he not have what other men crave for? And I love him. There is not a man so tall and fine in all the Forest."

She rested her elbows on the ground and her chin in her two hands, and stared at the gorse bushes.

"Geraint would not have hesitated. Pah! that black rat! How the girls would laugh at me! I don't care. Why did God make him a priest?"

She frowned fiercely and bit at her lower lip, the elemental passion in her refusing to be dominated by the rules of the Church.

"He is a good man. No; I will not go away. Priestcraft is all wrong. The Lollards say so; I could argue it out with him. As if living down there in a priory made men good! Bah! what nonsense! Father Geraint is a black villain, and the rest of them are not much better. I wonder if he knows?"

A note of tenderness sounded in the turmoil of her brooding. She smiled and caressed the grass, stroking it with her open hand.

"Perhaps it would hurt him if he knew. And he was as frightened of me as though I had walked naked into the cell! Oh, my heart!"

Martin Valliant had been praying, little guessing that the days would come when he would trust to his own heart, and not be forever falling on his knees and asking strength from God. He had thrown Kate's unbaked loaves into the fire, and made a meal from the scraps he had found in the cupboard. But he was in no mood to sit still and think. Father Jude's spade offered itself as an honest companion, and Martin went forth into the garden to dig.

He had not turned two spadefuls of soil when Kate Succory began singing. She was sitting hidden by the gorse, her arms hugging her knees, and her voice had no note of wayward exultation. It was as though she sang to herself plaintively, like a bird bewailing its lost mate.

Martin frowned, and stood listening, but her singing did not die away into the distance as he had expected. She was hidden somewhere, and her voice remained to trouble him.

He began to dig with fierce determination, jaw set, eyes staring at the brown soil. And presently he stopped, and lifted up his head like a rabbit that has crouched hidden in a tuft of grass. What a chance for a jester to have thrown a clod at him! The girl's singing had ceased.

Martin breathed hard, and lifted up his spade for a stroke, but the silence had fooled him.

"The moon shone full on my window
When Jock came down through the wood,
And I felt the wind in the trees blow
The springtime into my blood."

She gave the words with a kind of passionate recklessness, and all her youth seemed to thrill in her throat. Martin bowed his head and went on digging as though by sheer physical effort he could save himself from being a man.

Presently he found himself up against the hedge, with no more ground that he could attack with the spade. The hedge was in leaf, and hid the open moor from him. He fancied he heard some one moving on the other side of the green wall.

"Martin—Martin Valliant."

He started to walk toward the chapel, but the voice followed him along the hedge.

"Do not be angry with me, Martin Valliant; I want to speak with you. You are a good man and to be trusted; I am a grown woman and no fool."

Martin hesitated.

"What would you say to me?"

"Many things. I have the wit to know that all is not well with the world. We are heretics, Father Martin, heretics in our hearts. We—in Paradise—no longer believe what the monks teach us, for they are bad men, who laugh in their sleeves at God."

Martin's eyes hardened.

"Such words should not come from your lips, child."

She laughed recklessly.

“I speak of what I see. Is Father Geraint a holy man? Do the brothers keep their vows? And why should they—when they are but men? It is all a great mockery. And why did they send you away to this solitary place?”

He did not answer her at once, and his face was sad.

“No, it is no mockery,” he said at last, “nor is life easy for those who strive toward holiness. Get you gone, Kate. I will keep my faith with God.”

He could hear her plucking at the hedge with her fingers.

“I do not please you,” she said sullenly.

“God forgive you,” he answered her. “You are to me but a brown bird or a child. Shall I offend against God, and you, and my own soul because other men are base? No; and I will prove my faith.”

She heard him go to the cell, and a sudden awe of him awoke in her heart. She went and hid in the gorse and waited, expecting some strange and violent thing to happen. Presently she saw him come forth carrying an oak stool, a length of rope, and a knife. He went straight toward the great wooden cross on its mound, and for a moment panic seized her. Martin Valliant was going to hang himself!

She crouched, watching him, ready to rush out and strive with him for his life. She saw Martin set the oak stool at the foot of the cross, stand on it, cut the rope into two pieces, and fasten them to the two arms of the cross. He made a loop of each, and turning his back to the beam, thrust his hands through the loops. Then she understood.

Martin Valliant had only to thrust the stool away or take his feet from it, and he would hang by the arms—crucified. And that was what he did. He raised himself by drawing on the ropes, lifted his feet from the oak stool, and let himself drop so that he hung by the arms.

Kate knelt there, her arms folded across her bosom. Her brown eyes had grown big and solemn, more like the eyes of a child. She looked at Martin Valliant, and her awe of him was mingled with a strange, choking tenderness.

How long would he hang there? How long would he endure? He had only to place his feet upon the oak stool in order to rest himself to show some mercy to his body. But the soul of the man welcomed pain. His eyes looked steadily toward the sea with an obstinate tranquillity that made her marvel at his patience.

The day was far spent and the sun low in the west, and as the sun sank lower it fell behind the cross and showed like a halo about Martin Valliant’s

head. The glare was in Kate's eyes, so that the cross and the man hanging upon it were no more than a black outline.

How long would he endure? How would it end?

And then, of a sudden, the eyes of her soul were opened. She was no longer the laughing wench in love with the shape of a man. She saw something noble hanging there against the sunset, a figure that was like the figure of the Christ.

She flung herself on her face, and wept for Martin and her own heart. There was no escape from the truth. It was she who had crucified him, put him to this torment.

The sun had touched the hills and there was a wonderful golden radiance covering the earth as she rose up with wet eyes, and hastened toward the cross. She went on her knees, kissed the man's feet, and wiped away the mark of her kisses with her hair.

"I will go," she said, bowing her head. "If I have sinned against your holiness, Martin Valliant, forgive me—because I love you."

He looked down at her and smiled, though his arms felt as though they were being torn from their sockets.

"Who am I that I should forgive you, sister? Sometimes it is good to suffer. Go back to Paradise."

She rose up and left him, running wildly down the long slope of the moor, not daring to let herself look back.

"He shall suffer no more for my sake," she kept saying to herself, and all the while she was weeping and wishing herself dead.

Chapter VIII

Roger Bland, my Lord of Troy, rode back from hunting in the Forest. Dan Love, his huntsman, had sent word that morning that he had found the slot of a hart down by Darvel's Holt, and that the beast lay close in one of the thickets. My Lord of Troy had gone out with his hounds and gentlemen, hunted the hart, and slain him. He was riding home in the cool of the evening, the sunlight shining on his doublet of green cloth of gold, its slashed sleeves puffed with crimson, as though striped with blood.

Troy Castle loomed up above at the top of a steep and grassy hill, throwing a huge shadow across the valley. It was the crown of Roger Bland's pride, the sign and symbol of his greatness, for the Lord of Troy was a new man, a shrewd hound who had lapped up the blood of the old nobles butchered in the wars of Lancaster and York. Richard Crookback had been well served by Roger Bland. The fellow was a brain, an ear, a creature of the closet, bold in betraying, cautious in risking his own soul.

Yet the Lord of Troy had a presence, a certain lean dignity. His face narrowed to a long, outjutting chin. His mouth was very small, his pale eyes set somewhat close together. The man's nostrils were cruel, his forehead high and serene. When he spoke it was with a dry and playful shrewdness; he could be very debonair; his tongue wore silk; there was nothing of the butcher about him.

Roger Bland was a man of the new age, half merchant, half scholar, with some of the pride of a prince. He had caught the spirit of the Italians. Subtlety pleased him; he despised the stupid English bull. And up in Troy Castle he lived magnificently, and kept a quiet eye on the country for leagues around, a hawk ready to pounce on any stir or trouble in the land. And the Forest hated him with an exceeding bitter hatred, for it had suffered grimly at his hands, seeing that it had chosen to wear the Red Rose when the White had proved more fortunate. The Lord of Troy had ridden into it, and left great silences behind him. There were houses empty and ruinous, and no man dared go near them. There were people who had fled across the sea. There were graves in the Forest, shallow holes in the earth into which bodies had been tumbled and left hidden in the green glooms.

As Roger Bland's black horse lifted him out of the valley a man came down to meet him along the steep road that climbed the hill. It was Noble

Vance, the Forest Warden, a thick, coarse stub of a man who dressed to his own red color. The Forest folk feared him, and mocked at his parents who had christened him so sententiously. “Noble, forsooth!” He wore a doublet of scarlet and hose of green. His red hat looked as big as the wheel of a cart, and the face under it was the color of raw meat, and all black about the jowl.

He swept his hat to the Lord of Troy.

“My lord has had good sport,” and he nodded toward the hart lying across the back of a horse.

“Excellent, Master Vance.”

“There is other game, my lord, beyond the purlieus. I have ridden over to speak to you.”

Roger Bland glanced back over either shoulder.

“A good gossip, my friend——”

“As you say, sir, a good gossip——”

“Is best kept for the closet, and a cup of wine. Ride here beside me. Yes, we have made an excellent day of it; we turned that beast out by Darvel’s Holt and ran him three miles. I love a beast with a good heart, Vance, and a man who fights to the death.”

The Forest Warden grinned.

“Such men are growing scarce, my lord, in these parts. A few green youngsters perhaps, and an old badger or two deep down in their earths.”

“Like old Jack Falconer, I shall draw that badger some day.”

Trumpets sounded as they crossed the bridge over the dry moat, for my Lord of Troy had a love of ceremony and spacious, opulent magnificence. The guards at the gate-house presented their pikes. In the main court grooms and servants came hurrying in my lord’s livery of silver and green. A page stood uncovered beside Roger Bland’s horse, with a cup of wine ready on a silver salver.

My lord waved him aside.

“Bring two cups, child, to my closet, and let it be known that I am not to be troubled. Now, Master Vance.”

They entered by a little door in an angle of the courtyard, and a staircase led them to the great solar above and at the end of the hall. From the solar a passage cut in the thickness of the wall linked up my lord’s state chamber with his closet in one of the towers. It was a richly garnished room, its hangings of cloth of gold, its floor covered with skins and velvets. There

were books on the table. The open door of a great oak armoire showed ivory chessmen set ready on a board.

My lord chose one of the window-seats. He liked a stately perch, a noble view, and his back to the light. The subtler shades did not matter to Noble Vance; he let fate hang him where it pleased, like a joint of meat in a butcher's shop.

"It is wondrous hot for May, sir."

"The blood is hot in the spring, Vance. Here comes the wine."

The page served them, and had his orders.

"Stay in the gallery, Walter, and see that we are not disturbed."

The Forest Warden waited for my lord to raise his cup.

"Your good esteem, sir."

"I think you hold it, Vance. Do things ever happen in the Forest?"

"But little, sir. You have left no man fit to quarrel with you. But I have come upon a little business in Gawdy Town."

"Such places breed fleas—and adventures. What is it, Vance?"

"Young Gilbert Dale and the girl are there."

"What—those cubs?"

"They came in the ship Rose. The lad is a grown man, and the girl a fine, black-browed wench. Pimp Odgers spied them out, though they played the part of strollers."

"You are sure?"

"I have Odgers here, and another fellow who knew the Dales, and could swear to the son."

Roger Bland turned in his seat and looked out over the Forest. It was as noble a view as a man could desire, a world of green valleys and distant hills blue on the horizon. The lord of Troy Castle smiled as he sat there high up in the tower, a sly, cynical smile of self-congratulation. The Forest lay at his feet; he was its master. Even the thought of the cruel strength he had shown in taming it pleased him, for, like many men who lack brute physical courage, he was cleverly and shrewdly cruel.

"How many years, Vance, is it since that day when we smoked the Dales out of Woodmere?"

"Seven, this June, sir."

"Old Dale had sent his cubs away. What is the young gadfly doing in Gawdy Town?"

“Playing the viol and singing songs, with bells in his cap. He goes out of nights, I hear, but my men say that it is to Petticoat Lane.”

“Many things are hatched in a brothel, Vance. And the girl?”

“Plays the lute and sings. A haughty young madam, they say, with eyes quick to stab a man.”

“There is no whisper of secret work, no playing for Harry Richmond?”

Vance shook his big head solemnly.

“I keep my nose for that fox,” he said, “but have struck no scent as yet. What is your pleasure, sir?”

The Lord of Troy continued to gaze out over the Forest.

“Saw you ever anything more peaceful, Master Vance, than yon green country? It is I who have taught it to be peaceful, and much labor it gave me. I have cleared it of wolves; I have cowed its broken men. I choose that it shall remain at peace.”

The warden’s eyes glittered.

“The Dales were ever turbulent, hot-blooded folk. That young man might give us trouble.”

“Prevent it, Master Warden. You have a way of contriving these things. A quarrel in some low house, daggers, and a scuffle in the street.”

“My lord, it is as simple as eating pie. My men will manage it. And the girl?”

“Bring her here, Master Vance. We will question her. It is possible to learn things from a woman. Moreover, our good king loves a wildfire jade.”

The Forest Warden finished his wine, and wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

“By the rope that hanged Judas, sir,” he said, “it is a pleasure to serve a great man who knows his own mind!”

Chapter IX

Mellis and her brother had left Gawdy Town lying behind them on the blue edge of the sea. The day was very young, and a north wind came over the marshes about the mouth of the Rondel river, bending the reeds in the dykes and rousing ripples in the lengthening grass. Mellis was mounted on a modest nag whose brown coat and sleepy ears were more suited to the russet cloak she wore than to the brighter colors underneath it. Gilbert marched at her side. His eyes looked gray in the morning; the north wind had pinched his courage a little; and he and Mellis were to part for a while.

"Keep your heart up, sweet sister."

She looked down at him and smiled. Her eyes were steadier than his, and more determined, and she was less touched by the north wind. His nature was more mercurial, more restless, not so patient when life's adventure dragged.

"I feel near home, Gilbert. I think I could live in the Forest—like a wild thing."

"Woodmere must be all green, and the lilies white on the water. The house is but a shell, they say."

Her eyes filled with a great tenderness.

"My heart is there," she said, sighing.

A flock of sheep passed them, being driven to the river pastures. A great wood-wain came rumbling along, loaded high with brown fagots. Mellis's nostrils dilated, and her eyes shone.

"What a good ship, and what merchandise! I can smell the Forest."

He laughed, with a note of recklessness.

"Oh the merry, merry life, with the horn and the hound, and the bed under the greenwood tree. Why did our people wear the wrong color, sister? Our hearts were red, and the color beggared us."

"My heart is the color of fire," she answered him, "and I let it burn with the thought of vengeance. When will you begin to tell me your secrets?"

"Very soon, sister. I want no listeners within a mile of us. You see how discreet I am! Gawdy Town is a pest of a place; even the dogs do their spying; and there is always the chance of your getting a knife in your back. That is why I thought it better that you should go."

“Have you ever found me a coward?”

“Dear heart, you are too brave, and such courage may be dangerous.”

They were leaving the marshes behind them, and the Rondel had taken to itself glimmering green lines of pollard willows. Little farmsteads dotted the long northward slope of the hills. Here and there the Forest showed itself, thrusting a green headland into the cornlands and the meadows.

Gilbert was on the alert. Presently he pointed to an open beech wood that spread down close to the road.

“There is our council chamber, Mellis.”

“It should serve.”

“We can tie up the nag and see how my friend the cook has filled your saddle-bags.”

They turned aside into the beech wood, tethered the horse, and sat down under a tree. They were hidden from the road; the gray trunks hemmed them in.

Gilbert was examining the saddle-bags.

“That cook is a brave creature! Good slices of bread with meat in between. And a bottle of wine. There is enough stuff here to last you for days. Dear Lord, what trouble I was at to explain my buying of that sorry old nag!”

He set one of the bags between them.

“Now for dinner and a gossip. There are two words that you must never utter, Mellis, save when some one challenges you with the question, ‘What of Wales?’ ”

“And those words?”

“Are ‘Owen Tudor.’ They will win you friends where friends are to be had, but also they might hang you.”

“Of course.”

“Our plans have not gone so badly. Our king across the water is a shrewd gentleman. Our business is to stir up a hornets’ nest in these parts; others will play the same game elsewhere, so that Crooked Dick shall be stung in a hundred places while Lord Harry is crossing the sea. Roger Bland is our arch enemy.”

She drew in a deep breath.

“Do I forget it?”

“Tsst!—not too much fire! He is the very devil for cunning. We have got to hold him in these parts, so worry him that he cannot march and join the

Hunchback when spears will be precious to that king. They will find a dozen fires alight in every corner of the kingdom, and if our Harry wins the day, Woodmere will be ours again."

She uttered a fiercer cry.

"And blood shall pay for blood. Oh, I am no sweet saint, Gilbert. That man dragged our father at his horse's heels, and then——"

She broke off as though the words were too bitter to be spoken.

Gilbert's eyes had hardened.

"God forgive me for feeling merry at times. Well, sister, I stay on in Gawdy Town, as you know, to wait for news, and to watch for the men who will come over the sea. Old John Falconer is our watchdog in the Forest. The Blounts and the Ropers are with us; also a dozen more. We ought to muster three hundred men when the day comes. The Flemming is a jewel. His pack mules have smuggled war gear and stores into the Forest. There are three suits of armor, besides bills and salets and jacks hidden in our cellar under the south tower. There is a big beam, too, in the sluice ditch to throw across the gap in the trestle bridge."

He lay back against the tree, thinking deeply.

"This Father Jude on the Black Moor is a close-mouthed old worthy. He is a man who asks no questions, and there is money to be made by such people; a fellow who can mind his own business is worth his wage. There is not a wilder place in the Forest. You will lodge there in the pilgrim's house; the Benedictines of Paradise are bound to feed and lodge any traveler who passes that way. Besides, Father Jude is one of us; the man has some bitter grudge against the Lord of Troy."

She looked at him questioningly.

"And I am a pilgrim."

"Under a vow."

"And how shall I serve you, on the top of a moor? It seems foolishness."

"If a man goes to shrive himself or to pray at a holy place, can folk quarrel with him? That butcher villain of a Vance has his spies everywhere. A bird does not fly straight to its nest when a cat is about."

"True."

"And, sister, it would be well if you could steal your way to Woodmere, and see with your own eyes that things are as old Falconer and the Flemming say they are. The cellar trap is hidden under a pile of loose stones; a stout stake through the ring will raise it."

“I could find my way to Woodmere in the dark.”

“What a wench you are for wandering! You have that money safely? I might have my purse cut in Gawdy. You must play Jew.”

She put her hand to her bosom.

“It is here.”

They talked awhile of all that was in their hearts and of the great adventure that lay before them. Mellis was as serious as he was gay; his flippancy increased as the time slipped by.

“I shall have a tale to spin, oh false woman who passed as my sister! I am a Jack without a Jill.”

Yet his eyes were sad. A gradual melancholy took hold of him.

“Kiss me, child; we must be parting. Keep a brave heart.”

She kissed him with sudden tenderness.

“God guard you, my brother.”

“Oh, I have a cat’s lives!”

He jumped up and went to unfasten her nag.

“Remember, this good priest will ask no questions. He is a kind soul, and will swear to any lie, so they tell me. Up with you, sweetheart.”

He strapped on the saddle-bags, helped her to mount, and led her horse out of the wood. There was not a soul to be seen on the road, and still he seemed loth to leave her.

“I will go with you a little way.”

She looked at him dearly.

“No, I am brave. And there is no one here to see us part, and to gape and wonder concerning us.”

“True, oh queen! And so, farewell.”

He tossed his cap at her, laughed, and went off whistling.

And a sudden strange sadness assailed her. She held her horse in and sat there watching him. He was so gallant, so debonair, this brother of hers.

And she would never set eyes on him again. No prophetic instinct could tell her that.

Chapter X

Brother Geraint made his way through the dusk to Widow Greensleeve's house at Cherry Acre. It was a warm, still night, and the scent of the white thorn blossom in the hedges hung heavy on the air.

He came to the gate and stood listening. There was no sound to be heard save the rush of the river through the sluices of the mill.

Geraint pushed the gate open and peered about under the apple trees.

"Good evening to you, holy sir."

Some one was laughing close to him in the dusk.

"Who's there?"

"What, not know my voice?"

"It is you?"

"Come and see. Have you forgotten the seat by the hedge?"

He thrust the apple boughs aside, and saw the white kerchief that covered her shoulders.

"Where is the girl?"

"Saying her prayers somewhere. I have not seen her since noon. She is touched in the head, and goes wandering for hours together."

Geraint sat down on the bench beside the dame. He was in a sullen mood, and very bitter.

"The fool! Send her back to the moor."

"She swears she will not go."

"This Martin Valliant is the devil. She could make nothing of him?"

"Why, my good man, it was he who made a Magdalene of her. She came back crying, 'He is a saint. There is no man in Paradise fit to lace his shoes!' "

Geraint cursed under his breath.

"A pest take both of them!"

She rapped his shoulder sharply with her knuckles.

"A word of warning, Dom Geraint. If the man is dangerous, the girl may prove more so. I tell you he has worked a miracle with her, and women are

strange creatures. She says openly, ‘Some day Martin Valliant will come down from the moor, and make an end of the wickedness in Paradise.’ ”

“She says that!”

“Aye, and dreams of it. I tell you women are strange creatures when love has its way. She is all for turning anchoress, and praying all day to St. Martin. For half a cup of milk she would go running through the valley, screaming the truth. Be very careful, Dom Geraint.”

He leaned forward, glowering and biting his nails.

“We have made a poor throw, dame. And here is that pestilent pedant of an abbot threatening us with a visitation. We have heard of the storm he raised at Birchhanger; he trampled on the whole priory there, had one of the brothers hanged by the judge on circuit. Privilege of clergy, forsooth! The Church is to be regenerated!”

He rocked to and fro.

“And this Martin Valliant, the very man to play the holy sneak! A pretty pass indeed! A cub we took in and nurtured!”

The woman touched his sleeve.

“Some men are too good for this world. They are so much in love with the next world——”

He laughed discordantly.

“That they should be kicked into it! By my bones, there’s truth in that! It had entered my head, dame. And after all it is but doing a saint a service to help him to a halo.”

“Tsst—you are too noisy! Have a care.”

They drew closer together on the bench till their heads were nearly touching.

“Kate is not about?”

“She’ll come back singing a litany. We shall hear her.”

Yet the girl was nearer than either of them dreamed. She had come wandering silently along the path soon after Geraint had entered the garden, and their voices had warned her. She was standing on the other side of the hedge within two yards of the bench, her hands clenched, her face white and sharp.

She could hear all that they said to each other, and it was sufficient to make her wise as to what was in Geraint’s heart. She realized how his brethren at Paradise hated Martin, and how they wished him out of the way.

Kate heard Geraint stirring at last. There were sounds from the other side of the hedge, sounds that made her wince. She crept away, step by step, till a turn of the path hid her from view.

The gate shut with a clatter. She heard the monk give a great yawn, and then his heavy steps dying away beyond the orchard.

Kate stood very close to the hedge and shivered. Life had so changed for her; she was horrified at things that she had hardly understood before; men seemed contemptible creatures. She was thinking of what she had overheard, and of the treachery that threatened Martin Valliant.

Kate had kept her promise, and the very keeping of it had strengthened her heart; but that night she was persuaded to break it, nor could her conscience find fault with her.

There would be a moon in an hour. She crept around to the stable that stood some way from the house, put a halter on the old gray donkey, and got the beast out with scarcely a sound. He was as stubborn as any ass could be in most people's hands, but he had a liking for humoring Kate. She led him down the orchard, through the slip gate into the dame's meadow, and so away over the open country to the bridge at the mill. No one saw her cross the river, though the miller nudged his wife when he heard the donkey's hoofs on the timber of the bridge.

"Now who would you guess that to be?"

The good wife ran to the window, but saw nothing, since the moon was not up.

"An ass, by the sound."

"Two of them, more likely. And supposing it were Kate Succory, where would she be going?"

"It is best to mind one's business, John, when we live at the prior's mill."

"Remember it, dame, by all means," he said, somewhat sullenly, "there is not an honest man among them now that Martin Valliant is away on the moor."

His wife clapped her hands.

"Maybe that ass travels as far as the moor."

"Get you to bed. A woman's tongue stirs up too much mire."

Kate did not trouble her head as to whether anyone had seen her from the mill. She set the donkey's nose for the Forest, and helped him with her heels. Luckily, she knew the way, and soon the moon came over the hill to help her.

“A blessing on you, Master Moon,” she said quite solemnly, looking over the donkey’s tail.

The clock at Paradise was striking midnight when Kate saw the Black Moor lying dim and mysterious under the moon. More than once she had been shrewdly frightened in the deeps of the woods; but old Jock was the most stolid of mokes, and the beast’s steadiness had comforted her. She had stretched herself on his back, her arms about his neck, her face close to his flopping ears, and had talked to him.

“Who’s afraid, Jock? I can say a Mater Maria and a Pater. Besides, we are on a good errand, and the saints will watch over us.”

Jock, by his silence, most heartily agreed with her.

“Dom Geraint is a treacherous villain. The lean, black rat! Some day Abbot Hilary will send for Martin Valliant and will make him prior.”

She sat up straight on Jock’s back as the donkey climbed the moor. The place had a magic for her. She could imagine all sorts of miraculous things happening where Martin Valliant lived.

“Assuredly he will be a very great saint,” she said to herself, “and people will come to him to be healed.”

Presently she saw the cross standing out against the sky, and it stirred her almost to passionate tears. She slipped off Jock’s back, fastened him to a stunted thorn, and went on alone.

Everything was very still. In the far south the sea glimmered under the moon. Kate went forward with a strange, exultant awe in her heart. Martin would pardon her for breaking her promise when he knew why she had come.

The buildings were black and solemn, though a faint ray of light shone from the window of the chapel. It was the vigil of St. Florence, and Martin had left two candles burning on the altar while he slept for an hour.

Kate looked into the chapel and found it empty. She knelt on the threshold, put her hands together, and said a prayer.

Martin Valliant was sound asleep in his cell, but he awoke to the sound of some one knocking. He sat up on his pallet, and listened.

“Martin Valliant—Martin Valliant!”

He knew her voice, and for a moment he would not answer her.

“Martin Valliant, be not angry with me. I am not breaking my vow to you; no, not in the spirit. I have come to warn you.”

“Child, what mean you?”

“Beware of Brother Geraint, beware of the monks of Paradise. They go about to do you a great wrong.”

He rose to his knees.

“How should you know?”

“Listen. I speak what is true.”

She told him of the things she had heard Geraint whisper in the garden.

“They are evil men, and mean treachery toward you. I could not rest, Martin Valliant, because you are a good man, and taught me to see the Christ.”

There was silence.

Then she said, “Pray for me, Martin Valliant,” and was gone.

Martin rose up and opened the door of the cell, but she was out of sight over the edge of the moor.

He stood there a long while, rigid, wide-eyed, a young man amazed that older men should be so base.

Chapter XI

Mellis Dale had passed the night sleeping under a thorn tree in Bracknell Wood, with a pile of last year's bracken for a bed. The thorn tree had stood as a green and white pavilion, and there was a forest pool among the birch trees of Bracknell that had served her both as a labrum and a mirror. She broke her fast to the sound of the singing of the woodlarks, and with the sunlight playing through the delicate tracery of the birches. Her brown nag was cropping the wet grass in a little clearing where she had tethered him.

Mellis's eyes were full of a quiet tenderness that morning. She was a Forest child, and its sounds and scents and colors were very familiar and very dear. She was as forest-wise as any ranger or woodman, and was as much part of its life as the birds or the deer or the mysterious woodland streams and the brown pools where the dead leaves lay buried. A great content possessed her. She had no fear of the wild life or of a bed under the stars.

The sun had been up some hours before she saddled her nag and rode forward through Bracknell Deep. She knew all the ways, though Woodmere lay three leagues to the north-west, and the Black Moor two leagues to the east of it. She felt no need of hurrying. The deep woods delighted her; her dark eyes seemed to fill with their mystery; their silence soothed her heart. Life was a great adventure, a game of hide-and-seek in a garden where every path and nook and thicket were unknown. She was strong and comely and full of the pride of her youth; her breath was sweet, her black hair fell to her knees, her lips were as red as the berries on a briar.

Martin Valliant was hoeing weeds in Father Jude's garden when Mellis rode her brown nag up the southern slope of the Black Moor. There was no life in Martin's labor; his eyes had a dull look as though some pain gnawed at his vitals. His heart had discovered a new bitterness in life, for the words that Kate Succory had spoken to him in the night kept up a tumult in his brain. He had begun to understand many things that had seemed obscure and meaningless. He even realized why he was hoeing weeds on the top of a lonely moor. The very men whose life he had shared were filled with malice against him, and, like Joseph's brethren, were trying to sell him into bondage.

He heard the tramp of Mellis's horse, and his new-born mistrust stood on the alert.

"Why should I fear anything that walks the earth," he thought, "man, woman, or beast? They are but creatures of flesh."

And then he discovered himself standing straight as a young ash tree, resting his hands on the top of the handle of the hoe, and staring over the hedge into a woman's eyes. He could see her head, shoulders and bosom; the green hedge hid the rest of her. But if Martin had dared to scoff at Dame Nature, that good lady was quick and vigorous with her retort. She showed him this girl, black-haired, red-lipped, flushed with riding, sitting her horse with a certain haughtiness, her head held high, her white throat showing proudly.

"You are Father Jude?"

Martin could have stammered with a sudden, wondering awe of her. Her eyes were fixed on him questioningly, and with an intentness that heralded an incipient frown.

"Father Jude is no longer here."

"Not here!"

"He lies sick at Paradise."

The frown showed now on her forehead. Her eyes lifted and gazed beyond him, and Martin Valliant had never seen such eyes before. His mistrust of her had vanished, he knew not why. Paradise had no knowledge of such a creature as this. She had ridden out of the heart of a mystery, and her face was the face of June.

"Fools!"

She was angry, perplexed. And then she smiled down at Martin with quick subtlety.

"Your pardon, father."

She smiled whole-heartedly as she took stock of his youth.

"What am I saying! I have a vow of silence upon me, save that I may speak to such as you. I am a pilgrim. I had a fellow-pilgrim with me, but she fell sick at Burchester, and I rode on alone. Father Jude's name was put in my mouth by the prioress of Burchester. Is there not a pilgrim's rest-house here?"

Martin Valliant was still full of his wonder at her beauty.

"Assuredly. This is the chapelry of St. Florence. The good saint so willed it that all who passed this way should have food and lodging."

Her face had changed its expression. She showed a sudden reticence, a cold pride.

"St. Florence has my thanks. Will you send your servant to take my horse?"

He gaped at her, as though overcome by the thought that this creature of mystery was to move and breathe in the guest-house next his cell.

He tried to save his dignity by taking refuge in sententiousness.

"I am the servant of St. Florence and of all those who tarry here."

She glanced at him guardedly, and seemed to realize his unworldliness.

"I shall be no great burden. A stall for the horse and a roof for my own head. I can look to my own horse, if you will show me the stable."

Martin let the hoe drop out of his hands. He went striding along the hedge as though some enchantment had fallen upon him. But she was out of the saddle by the time he reached the gate, and, by the way she carried herself, more than fit to deal with her own affairs.

"That is the stable, there by the woodstack?"

"Yes."

"Is the door locked? No? I thank you, good father."

He loitered about there like a great boy, feeling that he ought to help her, but that she did not desire his help. She seemed to have a way of taking possession of things. He could see her removing the saddle and bridle from her horse, and presently she was at the haystack gathering up some of the loose hay in her arms. She had left her brown cloak in the stable, and her blue spencer and green gown made Martin think of some rich blue flower on a green stalk.

Next he saw her handling a bucket, and this time the spirit moved him. He went across to her with boyish gravity.

"The spring is down the hill. I will fetch the water."

She gave him the bucket with an air of unconcern. Her hand touched his, and thrilled him to the shoulder, but she did not so much as notice that she had touched him.

"Thank you, Father——"

"Martin."

"Martin."

"It would be too heavy for you to carry," he said bluntly.

But she turned back into the stable as though she had not heard him.

Martin Valliant went down to the spring with a most strange sense of self-dissatisfaction. He filled the bucket, balanced it on the rough stones that formed a wall around the spring, and stared at his own reflection in the water. The thought struck him that he had never looked at himself in that same way before, critically, with a personal inquisitiveness. A new self-consciousness was being born in him. He stood there brooding, wondering if other men——

Then he rebuked himself with fierce severity, and carried the bucket back up the hill. Mellis was not in the stable, so he watered the horse and stared at the saddle and bridle hanging on the wall as though they could tell him who she was and whence she came. It occurred to him that she might be hungry, and at the same time he remembered that the food in his larder was hardly fit for a sturdy beggar.

This struck him as an absolute disaster. He went guiltily to his cell, and took out what by courtesy he called bread. It was of his own baking, a detestable piece of alchemy.

He weighed it in his hand, and found himself thinking of the lithe way in which she moved.

"They bake good bread at Paradise," he said to himself.

A quite ridiculous anger attacked him.

"Mean hounds! This chapelry should be better served. A couple of mules with panniers——"

He went forth, stroking his chin dubiously, and looking at the bread he carried.

"Poor stuff for such a pilgrim."

The door of the little rest-house stood open, showing its oak table and benches, and the rude wooden pallets that served as beds. Mellis was standing behind the table, unpacking one of her saddle-bags.

"This bread——"

He felt his face growing hot. Her eyes regarded him with momentary amusement.

"Is that—bread?"

"It is as God made me make it."

She was smiling. His quaint humility touched her.

"I will take your bread, Father Martin, and in exchange you shall eat some of mine."

She took out a manchet wrapped in white butter cloth and held it out to him.

"Put your bread upon the table. I dare vow it cost you much honest—labor."

She had nearly said "cursing," but his solemn face chastened her.

Martin Valliant took her manchet, handling it as though it were something that would break. His eyes wandered around the room and noticed the wooden pallets.

"There should be some sweet hay spread there," he said to himself.

Mellis was watching him, but with no great interest. For the moment life called to her as a fierce and impetuous adventure. She had no use for a man who wore the dress of a priest.

"I will keep this bread for the altar," he said suddenly, feeling that he had no excuse for loitering any longer in the room.

For an hour or more Martin Valliant went about his work with grim thoroughness. He fetched more water from the spring, cut up wood for kindling, swept out the chapel and his cell, and looked into the press where he kept his vestments to see that the moths had not been at work. Yet all the while he had his mind's eye on the door of the rest-house; his thoughts wandered, no matter how busy he kept his hands.

He was standing at the doorway of the chapel, polishing one of the silver candlesticks that stood on the altar, when Mellis came out of the rest-house and turned her steps toward the great wooden cross. She passed close to the chapel in wandering toward the highest point of the moor, and her eyes rested for a moment on Martin Valliant and his silver candlestick.

It may have been that she asked herself what this tall fellow meant by living the life of an old woman when he was built for the trade of the sword. At all events, Martin Valliant saw a look in her eyes that was very like pity touched with scorn.

He watched her go to the cross and sit down on the mound. Her chin was raised, and she turned her head slowly from side to side, as though to bring all the Forest under her ken. There was something finely adventurous about her pose. She made Martin think of a wild-eyed bird surveying the world before spreading her wings for a flight.

He conceived a sudden distaste for polishing such a thing as a candlestick. He studied his own hands; they were big and brown, and he knew how strong they were. He remembered how he had straightened an iron crowbar across his knee, to the delight of the prior's woodcutters. And

when the big wain had got bogged by Lady's Brook, Martin Valliant had crawled under the axle beam and lifted it out.

The candlestick was returned to the altar, and Martin went down to the haystack to fetch hay for Mellis's bed. The hay knife was in the stack, and he cut out a good truss of fresh stuff and carried it to the rest-house. He had spread it on one of the wooden beds and was crossing the threshold, when he met Mellis face to face.

"I have brought some hay for a bed."

He colored like fire, but her voice was casual when she answered him.

"You vex yourself too much on my account, father. Last night I slept out under a tree."

Martin spent an hour walking up and down behind the chapel, raging with sudden self-humiliation. Why did she treat him as though he were an old man or a child?

Chapter XII

The next day came and went, a pageant of white clouds in a deep blue sky, and the earth all green to the purple of the distant hills.

Martin Valliant began the morning with a queer flush of excitement, even of trepidation. The woman with the dark hair and the wild woodland eyes would mount her horse and ride away out of his life. And somehow he did not want her to go, nor was he ashamed of the desire. He found himself in awe of her, but he did not fear her as he had feared poor Kate Succory. She was a mystery, a vision, a strange new world that made him stand wide-eyed with wonder. Her lips made him think of the holy wine, pure drink, red as blood, and undefiled.

His restlessness began with the dawn. He rang the chapel bell, went through the services, with his thoughts wandering out and waiting expectantly outside the rest-house door. For the very first time the spirit of dissimulation entered Brother Martin's life, prompting him to walk up and down the grassy space outside his cell, hands folded, head bent, as though in meditation.

He saw her door open. She came out, her black hair hanging loose, wished him a calm "good morning," and went down toward the spring. She had gone to wash herself there, to dabble her hands in the water. Martin paced up and down.

She returned, disappeared into the rest-house, and there was silence—suspense. Martin Valliant kept passing the open doorway, but he had not the courage to look in.

"Father Martin——"

He faced around with a guileless air, as though she had been very distant from his thoughts.

"Did you speak to me, Mistress——"

"And I have not told you my name! I am called Catharine Lovel. I wish to tarry here for some days, if St. Florence does not forbid it."

Martin looked grave.

"I never heard that St. Florence had set a boundary to his charity," he said.

“Then I am the more his debtor in the spirit. This is so sweet and calm a place. I come from a forest country, Father Martin.”

“It is a very wonderful country,” he agreed.

“And should be pleasant to one who has been vowed to a month’s silence?”

Again Martin agreed with her. She stood at gaze, her hands clasped in front of her.

“One cannot lose oneself with this moor as a guide post. I shall ride out, Father Martin, and go down into the woods.”

“In the valley there the beech trees are very noble,” he said; “I love them.”

“Sometimes, Father Martin, trees are nobler than men.”

He pondered those words of hers all day.

Dusk was falling before she returned. The brown horse’s ears hung limp, as though she had ridden him many miles, and his coat was stained with sweat. Martin Valliant had been standing in the doorway of his cell. He went forward to hold her horse.

“I so managed it that I lost myself,” she said.

Her face looked white in the dusk, and her eyes tired.

“I reached a river, a fine stream.”

“The Rondel. It runs a league away, and the woods are great and very thick.”

“That lured me on—perhaps. I found a ford, and pushed my horse over, there are wild grasslands beyond all full of flowers.”

“I have never been so far,” he confessed.

“It is a great country, even wilder than my own. I saw as splendid a hart as ever swam a stream come down and cross the river. And now I am as hungry as though I had followed the hounds.”

He saw that she was weary.

“I will look to the horse.”

She glided down from the saddle.

“The poor beast has had to suffer for my whims, father. He will bless you, no doubt. And so good night to you; I shall be asleep almost before I have supped.”

Martin Valliant led the horse to the stable, took off the saddle and bridle, and rubbed the beast down with a handful of hay. He found the animal

muddied above the knees, and there were other matters to set Martin thinking. The fords of the Roding were floored with sand, for the Roding was a clean river and ran at a good pace. Of course, the mud might have come from some piece of bog or a forest stream. He was the more astonished that she should have reached the river, and having reached it, found her way back again through one of the wildest and most savage parts of the Forest. The ways were few and treacherous, and known only to the forest folk, and yet what reason was there for her to lie?

The second day resembled the first in its happenings, save that Martin Valliant betrayed a more flagrant interest in this mysterious woman's pilgrimage. She rode out early, and he hid himself behind a thorn bush on the moor and watched her progress. She chose neither the path that led to the beech woods, nor the road going west, but turned aside along the track that made for Oakshot Bottom. Martin watched her till she was out of sight, hidden by the belt of birches that bounded the northern rim of the moor.

She returned earlier that day, and in a strange and sullen temper. She let Martin take the horse, but her eyes avoided his, and she had little to say to him.

"I struck a fool's country—all sand."

"That would be the White Plain."

" 'White' they call it! A good jest!"

"Because of the birch trees."

"Ah, the birch trees! I remember."

He looked at her curiously, but she went straight to the rest-house and shut herself in. Something seemed to have gone very amiss with her that day, and Martin was honestly perplexed. Were women made of such wayward stuff that some dust, a wood of birch trees, and perhaps a few flies, could stir such spirited discontent?

He took her horse to the stable, fed and groomed him as though he were my lady's servant. And again he examined the beast's feet, only to discover something that was singular. One of the hind hoofs had red clay balled in it, and Martin Valliant knew that red clay was not to be found in that part of the Forest.

He picked the stuff out and stared at it, holding it in one palm.

"Oakshot is yellow, Bracknell is black,
Troy is as white as a miller's sack,
The Paradise fields are as brown as wood,
But red is the color of Bloody Rood."

He called to mind the old Forest jingle, and the reddish-yellow lump in his hand rhymed with it.

"Bloody Rood? That is the Blount's lordship. Young Nigel holds the fee."

He frowned and tossed the clay into the stall.

Martin saw no more of Mellis that evening; she remained shut up in the rest-house, nor did he leave the limits of his cell. A new emotion had been born in Martin Valliant's heart—an emotion that was so utterly human that the saint was fast losing himself in the man. Mellis was growing more mysterious, more elusive, and Martin Valliant's imagination had carried him away at a gallop in pursuit of her.

Why had she ridden all the way to Bloody Rood? Chance could not have carried her there, and what reason had she for hiding the truth? The adventure had not gone smoothly, to judge by the temper of her return. And what sort of adventure could befall a woman in the Forest?

From the moment of that thought an utterly new look came into Martin Valliant's eyes. His nostrils dilated, he stared fixedly at some imaginary scene, his hands clenched themselves. Dame Nature had flicked him with her scourge of jealousy, set him thinking about a certain young Nigel Blount of Bloody Rood.

Martin Valliant discovered his own manhood that night. He had ceased to be an onlooker, a creature in petticoats, an impersonal, passionless saint. He was going to take a part in the adventure: to see for himself how life stood.

Chapter XIII

Mellis had little to say to him next morning when he carried her a bucket of water from the spring. She was standing in the doorway of the rest-house, a far-away look in her eyes, her black hair caught up by a piece of red ribbon and tied behind her shoulders.

Martin did not dare to question her as to what she purposed for the day. His own secret was too big for him, and he felt guilty toward her in his thoughts. He went back to his cell, filled a wallet with food, and laid it ready behind the door with a stout hollywood staff that had belonged to Father Jude. If the girl rode out that morning he had made up his mind to follow her and leave the chapelry to take care of itself.

Going out to reconnoiter, he saw Mellis in the stable saddling her horse. The hint was sufficient. He kept out of the way and bided his time.

She did not call to him that morning or offer him any explanation, but rode straight from the stable past the great cross and over the edge of the moor. Martin saw her go. He slung the wallet over his shoulder, took his staff, and followed, stopping at the rest-house door to see whether she had left her saddle-bags behind. They were lying on one of the wooden beds, so that he knew that she purposed to return.

As a boy, Martin Valliant had tracked the deer, and his following of Mellis was just as subtle a piece of hunting. The old brown horse was jaded and stale, but she pushed him to a trot down the slope of the moor, and Martin had to run to keep her well in view. Luckily she was too busy keeping a watch for rabbit holes to trouble about looking back. When she reached the place where the track branched she reined in, and Martin dropped down behind a furze bush. Her indecision lasted only for a few seconds, for when he raised his head cautiously to get sight of her she was already moving along the track that made for the Green Deeps. Martin's nostrils quivered, and his eyes lost some of their hardness. She had not chosen the track to Oakshot Bottom; Bloody Rood and the Blounts were out of court.

The brown horse appeared to be setting his own pace, and she had to humor him because of his age. A fair stride enabled Martin to keep his distance. He had to follow very cautiously over the moor, watching her like a hound, and ready to drop to earth should she waver or look back. There

was a moment when he thought that he had betrayed himself, for she reined in her horse and sat looking steadily back at the swell of the moor. Martin lay flat in the heather, and presently she rode on.

The Green Deeps opened before them, wild valleys choked with woodland, almost pathless, a region where outlaws sometimes hid themselves. A narrow ride almost choked with scrub and brambles followed the valleys, lifting itself now and again over the shoulder of a low hill. The woods towered against the blue, solemn and silent. Sometimes a stream broke the stillness with a thin, trickling murmur.

They were heading for the Rondel; Martin knew that much, though this wild country was all virgin to him. He had to keep in closer touch with her, for the track disappeared at times, and Mellis threaded her way among the oaks and beeches. He was astonished at the steady, unhesitating way she rode, choosing her path when the track branched, without any sign of faltering. The Deeps were a great green fog to Martin Valliant; he was utterly lost in them, save for the guesswork that they were traveling north. All his wits were centered on the girl, on keeping her in view, and pushing ahead quickly when he lost her behind some leafy screen, on saving himself from rushing into a betrayal.

The track climbed a hill, and then the ground fell steeply, almost like a green cliff. Martin saw the gleam of water shining below the crowded domes of the trees. It was the Rondel flashing in the sunlight between the green walls of the Forest.

Mellis was urging the brown horse into the water when Martin reached the underwood at the top of the bank. She had struck the ford, and he saw that the water was quite shallow, reaching just above the horse's knees. He dared not break cover until she was across, and there was every chance of his losing her if he fell too far behind, but she rode her horse straight out of the water and on into the Forest without glancing back. Martin tucked up his frock and splashed his way across like Atlas plowing through the ocean, scrambled up the far bank, and caught sight of her at the end of a colonnade of beeches, a green tunnel floored with brown leaves and bluebells. He started running, keeping close to the trunks of the trees, ready to dodge behind one of them if she so much as turned her head.

Martin's chase of her lasted another hour, and the farther she led him the more mysterious she became. He was utterly perplexed by the whole business, and astonished by her miraculous knowledge of the Forest ways. He became aware of a change in the green wilderness; the woods were more open, the glades more frequent, and stretches of grassland flowed here and

there, all yellow with buttercups and shining like cloth of gold. It was a more spacious country, more beautiful, less savage, lush, deep, and mysterious, sheltered from the winds. There were yews and hollies here more ancient than he had ever seen. Great sweeps of young bracken covered the open slopes of the hills.

They climbed a long rise where old beech trees grew. Its solemn aisles opened westwards on a little secret valley. Water glimmered in the green lap of the valley, and for a moment Martin thought that he had struck one of the reaches of the river. But something that happened ahead of him brought Martin Valliant to earth, with his chin resting on the mossy root of a beech tree. Mellis had dismounted, and was tying her horse to a drooping bough. They had come to the end of their journey.

He saw her go forward under the shade of the great trees. There was caution in her movements. She kept well in the shadows, gliding from trunk to trunk, not hurrying, as though she wished to make sure that no human thing moved in the valley below her. Presently she seemed satisfied. Martin saw her walk out boldly into the open and pass out of sight below the slope of the hill.

Not till he had crawled to the edge of the beech wood did Martin Valliant realize what the valley held. A broad mere lay in a grassy hollow, shaded toward the north by willows, and ringed about with yellow flags and water herbs. An island seemed to float upon the water, all white with old fruit trees in bloom. A gray turret and the bare stone gable-ends of a house showed above the apple blossom. There was a little gate-house close to the water, but its roof was gone, and the bridge that had led to it ruinous. The charred rafters of a barn showed beyond the sweep of an ivy-covered wall. Martin could trace the suggestions of a garden, with old yew trees, hornbeam hedges all gone to top, and a broad terrace walk that looked as though it were paved with stone. The place had a still, sweet, tragic look, lying there in the deeps of the Forest, its fruit trees white with blossom, although no one had pruned them, and the fruit they bore would rot in the grass or be eaten by the birds.

Martin Valliant was so astonished by what he saw, so bewitched by the desolate beauty of the place, that he had almost forgotten Mellis. She had reached the edge of the water and was standing by a willow, looking across at the ruined house. A sudden awe seemed to steal into Martin's eyes. Mystery! And she was the human part of it, wandering by Forest ways to this island of beautiful desolation. No chance quest had brought her to the place, and Martin, lying there with his chin on his hands, felt a strange stirring in his heart. Perhaps she had lied to him—but what then? The very

thought of it quickened his compassion. In following her he had stumbled upon the real woman—a woman whose eyes were deep with unforgettable things.

The truth came to him like the opening of a book. Tags of gossip tossed to and fro across the refectory table at Paradise pieced themselves together. Woodmere, the Dales' house, sacked and burned by Roger Bland of Troy Castle; old Dale with a spear through his body lying dead under an oak tree. Blood shed for the love of a red rose. Two children saved by a swineherd and shipped off in a fishing-boat from Gawdy Town. Woodmere rotting in the Forest, to please the Lord of Troy's sneering and whimsical pride!

Mellis had wandered along to what had been the bridge. Two spans of it still stood, but the center arch had been thrown down, leaving a gap of twelve feet or more. Young trees had taken possession of the broken walls, and the bridge-head was choked with brambles. There was no way of crossing the gap save by thrusting a big beam or the trunk of a tree across it, and such a piece of bridge mending was wholly beyond a woman's strength. Moreover, there was a second chasm to be crossed where the drawbridge had been worked from the gate-house, but the drawbridge was a thing of the past. Roger Bland had had it unchained and unbolted and dragged to Troy Castle as a trophy.

Martin Valliant saw her walk along the broken bridge and stand there baffled, and though there was the one obvious and most natural way of crossing the water, it never entered Martin's head that she would choose it. She came back to the landward side, and he lost sight of her in a little hollow beside the bridge-head that was hidden by bushes and young trees. He was still wondering what she would do, and whether he had the courage to go down and confess himself and help her, when he saw her rise out of the green foam of the foliage like Venus rising out of the sea.

She had thrown off her clothes, and went as Mother Nature had made her, a beautiful white creature crowned by her dark hair. In looking at her Martin forgot that he was a man, forgot his vows, forgot that there was such a thing as sin. For there seemed no shame in her beauty, and in that white shape of hers kissed by the sun.

Beyond the bridge a little grassy headland jutted into the mere where the water was clear of weeds. Mellis made her way toward it, like Eve walking the earth before sin was born. She stepped down into the water, waded a pace or two, and then glided forward on her bosom, the water rippling over her shoulders. Thirty breast strokes earned her across. She climbed out at what had been an old mooring stage for the big flat-bottomed boat that had

been used for fishing. For a moment Martin saw her stand white and straight in the sunlight; then her hands went up and her black hair came clouding down. It enveloped her like a cloak, hanging to the level of her knees, like night shrouding the day. She seemed to have no thought of being watched or spied upon; the place was a wilderness; she went as Nature made her.

Then she was lost among the orchard trees, whose bloom was as white as her body, and a great change came over Martin Valliant. He let his head drop on the root of a beech tree; he shut his eyes, spread his arms like a suppliant. In losing sight of her he had rediscovered himself, that striving, perplexed, mistrustful self nurtured on self-starvation and physical nothingness. A passion of wonder, shame, and doubt shook him. He lay prone at the feet of Nature, trying to see the face of his God through the smoke of a new sacrifice. Had he sinned, had he shamed himself? And yet a deep and passionate voice cried out in him, fiercely denying that he had erred. What wickedness was there in chancing to gaze upon a creature whom God had created, upon a beauty that was unsoiled? He strove with himself, with clenched hands and closed eyes.

And presently a great stillness seemed to fall upon his heart. It was like the silence of the dawn, born to be broken only by the singing of birds. He opened his eyes, looked about him at the green spaces, the blue sky, the water shining in the valley. What had happened to him? Why all this wrestling and anguish? Where was the thing that men called sin when earth and the heavens were so beautiful?

And what shame was there in the vision that he had seen?

He sat up, drew aside, and leaned against the trunk of the tree. The stillness still held in his heart, but somewhere a long way off he seemed to hear a voice singing. A great tenderness thrilled him. The earth was transfigured, bathed in a glory of a light. Never had he known such deep and mysterious exultation. He felt strong, stronger than death; he feared nothing; his heart was full of a sweet sound of singing.

Mellis never knew of the great thing that happened to Martin Valliant in that beech wood. She crossed the water, dressed herself, mounted her horse, and rode back through the Forest, followed by a man whose eyes shone and whose face had a kind of awed radiance. She never guessed that a great love haunted her through the green glooms, and that a man had discovered his own soul.

And when she reached the cross on the Black Moor, Martin Valliant was there, waiting. He had run three miles like a madman across country that he

knew. She looked at him and his face astonished her—it was so strangely luminous, so strong, so human.

Chapter XIV

Toward dusk the same day a beggar came trudging over the moor. He was a most unclean and grotesquely ragged creature, almost too ragged to be genuine, nor had he the characteristic and unstudied gestures of the true vagrant who cannot let ten minutes pass without scratching some part of him. The fellow wore a dirty old hood that once had been lined with scarlet cloth. A white bandage covered his mouth and chin as though he had some foul disease that had to be hidden. His brown smock hung in tatters around his knees, and his wallet was such a thing of patches that no one could have told what color it had been in the beginning.

This ragamuffin scouted his way toward the chapelry with stolid circumspection. He seemed to have a liking for the gorse and a hatred of the heather; his love of cover led him a somewhat devious but successful course, in that he reached the top of the moor without Martin Valliant seeing him. Once there he crawled into a patch of furze, and so fitted himself under the ragged stems that he could see the chapel, cell, and rest-house and anyone who came and went. Mellis was sitting on the bench outside the rest-house, looking at nothing with sad and vacant eyes. Martin Valliant stood reading in the doorway of his cell.

The beggar had a particular interest in Martin's movements, in that he wanted him out of the way. The afterglow had faded, and night was settling over the moor.

"The devil take that priest! They should have learned before that old Jude was sick. And this damnable business——"

The furze was pricking the back of his neck.

"A pest on the stuff! And I have to tell the poor wench——"

He saw Martin Valliant put down his book and come out of the cell with a bucket in his hand. He was going down to the spring for water. The man in the furze perked up like a bird.

"God bless him, he has a thirst, or believes in being clean."

He crawled out as soon as Martin had disappeared over the edge of the hill, and went quickly toward the rest-house, making signs with his hand.

Now Martin Valliant, being in a mood when a man walks with his head among the stars, had loitered just over the edge of the hill, staring at a broom

bush as though it were the miraculous bush of Moses. But Martin's eyes did not see the yellow flowers. He was looking inwards at himself, and at some wonderful vision that had painted itself upon his memory.

Therefore he was near enough to hear Mellis cry out as though some one had stabbed at her in the dark.

His dreams were gone in a moment. He turned, dropped the bucket, head in the air, nostrils quivering, and began to run with great strides across the heather.

Then the sound of voices reached him, one of them speaking in short, agonized jerks. The other voice was answering in a cautious and half-soothing murmur; the other voice was a man's.

Martin's stride shortened; he faltered, paused, stopped dead, and then went on again, skirting the thorn hedge of the garden. It led him close to the back of the rest-house, and he went no farther.

He heard Mellis cry out:

"My God! Oh! my God!"

The man tried to calm her.

"Softly, Mistress Mellis, or that priest fellow may hear you. A man would rather cut his tongue out than bring you such news."

"And you were with him?"

"Why, we had just turned out of the 'Cock' Tavern. The fellow dodged out of a dark alley behind us, and the knife was in before you could think of an oath. The bloody rogue went off at a run. I stayed with your brother."

There was silence for a moment—a tense silence.

"Did he die there—in the gutter?"

The words were like the limping movements of a wounded dog.

"He was dead," said the man softly, "before the watch came along. There will be a crowner's quest, but we can keep a secret—for your sake."

"My sake! What does it matter? Oh, if I but knew!"

"And that?"

"Who struck that blow."

"Some hired beast."

"I can guess that. But who ordered it—paid the blood money?"

The man seemed to hesitate.

"It has scared me, I grant you; one is afraid of a blank wall or a bush."

"Roger Bland of Troy?"

"It may be that you have said it."

He was in a hurry to go; his voice betrayed his restlessness.

"The Flemming is at work. Bide here for a day or two, Mistress Dale. It is time I disappeared."

"Yes, go. Let me try and think."

"Gawdy Town is too dangerous now."

"Man, I am not afraid, but I think my heart is broken."

He gabbled a few words of comfort, and by the silence that followed Martin guessed that he had fled.

The light in the west had faded to a steely grayness, and the stars were out. Martin Valliant stood there for a while, picking loose mortar from between the stones, his whole heart yearning to do something, he knew not what. He could hear no sound of weeping or of movement. The silence was utter, poignant, unbroken.

Suddenly he heard her speaking, and he knew that it was half to herself and half to God.

"So he is dead! Dear God—you have heard. Why did you suffer it? Oh, what a fool I am! Picked up in the gutter!"

Martin's hands were clenched.

"Did I see the old place to-day? The sun was shining. Oh, dear God, why am I all alone? The boy is dead; you let him die. And I cannot bear it—I cannot bear it."

Nor could Martin Valliant bear that lonely, wounded agony of hers. It was as though she were drowning in the waters of despair, and there was no one to leap in and save her.

Mellis stood leaning against the wall, her face turned toward it, her arms outspread against the rough stones. She did not hear Martin Valliant coming, but she felt a hand touch one of hers.

She twisted around with startled fierceness.

"Who touched me?"

She saw him recoil. It was so dark now that his face showed as a pale surface; she could not see his eyes.

"Martin Valliant."

His voice was awed, humble.

"Do not be angry with me. I will go away if you wish it. I heard you cry out—and——"

She guessed in an instant that he had overheard everything; that touch of his hand upon hers had been like the mute, tentative touch of a dog's cold muzzle. Her flash of anger melted away.

"It is you? How long——?"

"I was there—behind the rest-house. I had run up, hearing you cry out. I think it was God Who made me listen."

"Ah, God is a great listener!"

She was quivering with bitter emotion.

"He listens, but He does not help. He has no pity. Yes, it is quite true; you know all that should have been kept secret. You know that I lied to you ——"

Martin made the sign of the cross.

"I do not remember it," he said.

"That I called myself Catharine Lovel—that I was vowed to silence, and on a pilgrimage!"

"I forgot all those things," he answered, "when I heard the truth and your anguish."

She covered her face with her hands.

"Now you will begin preaching a sermon."

"God forbid," he said; "I think that this night is teaching me that I was not born to be a priest."

There was silence between them for a while. Martin Valliant did not move; he seemed set there like a statue. She could hear his deep breathing, a strangely human sound in the soft darkness.

She began to speak again.

"Perhaps you know that they murdered my father years ago, and now they have slain my brother. We were the Dales of Woodmere, and the Lord of Troy was our enemy. Why am I here? Why was my brother in Gawdy Town? Perhaps you can guess, if you are a man as well as a priest. We wanted our home and the lands that had been ours; we wanted revenge, we wanted a new king."

She looked at him challengingly in the darkness.

"Now you know all. We were traitors to Richard Hunchback. We serve Henry Tudor. Now you can go to Troy Castle—if it pleases you—and tell the truth."

His voice began to sound a deeper note.

“God’s curse be upon me if I do any such thing.”

He walked up and down, and then came back to her.

“Will you not sit down, Mistress Dale?”

“I have not the heart to feel weary.”

“It is very still and calm by the great cross up yonder. I will spread a cloak for you. We must speak of certain things, you and I.”

A new manhood spoke in him. She seemed to question it, and to wonder at the change in him.

“I am suspect, and have made you share my outlawry—is that it?”

He answered with sudden passion.

“No.”

She surrendered to him of a sudden.

“The cross? Oh, very well. What have you to say to me?”

“What a man with the heart of a man might say. Am I so poor a thing that I cannot take part in a quarrel?”

“Ah!”

He turned abruptly, went to the cell, and came back with a heavy winter cloak.

“The dew is heavy on such a night.”

“Yes.”

They walked side by side to the great cross, with a sudden and subtle sense of comradeship drawing them together.

Martin spread the cloak on the grass at the foot of the cross. She sat down with her back to the beam, and looked up at him in the darkness.

“You told me your man’s name—not the priest’s.”

“Valliant.”

“You are not the son of old Roger Valliant?”

“He was my father.”

Her eyes gave a gleam.

“Son of that old fire-eater! Strange!”

“He was a man of blood, my father.”

She looked at him with a new interest, a new curiosity. His bigness took on a different meaning.

“A great fighter and a fine man-at-arms, though he fought for pay. And he made a priest of you!”

Martin felt her veiled scorn of all men-women, and his flesh tingled.

"I have never questioned his wisdom."

"Never yet! Have you ever heard the trumpets calling? But what am I saying? Yet men must fight, Father Martin, sometimes, or be dishonored."

"It is possible," he confessed.

"Bishops and abbots have ridden into battle before now."

"True. The cause may sanctify the deed."

Her bitterness returned of a sudden. She seemed to clasp her grief, and press her lips to it with fanatical passion.

"Son of old Valliant—listen. Your father would have understood these words of mine. Why do I not lie down and weep? Why do I thirst to go on living? Because my heart cries out against a great wrong—my wrong. Yes, I am a wild wolf—an eagle. This is a world of teeth and talons; your father knew it, and lived by his sword. And I tell you, Martin Valliant, that I shall fight to the death—hate to the death. My holy wine is the blood of my brother—and I am not ashamed."

He stood swaying slightly, with a tumult, like the clashing of swords, in his brain.

"Does the soul of the father dwell in the son?" he asked himself.

He clenched his hands and answered her.

"You will tarry here, Mistress Dale, so long as you may please. No man shall lay a hand upon you. The Church can protect—with the sword of the spirit."

By her silence he knew that his words rang hollow.

"I would rather have old Valliant's sword," she said grimly; "but I thank you, Father Martin. My need may be fierce, God knows!"

Chapter XV

Noble Vance, the Forest Warden, came riding into Paradise on his black horse, with two archers in russet and green following at his heels. He crossed the Rondel at the mill, and his scarlet coat went burning through the orchards and over the fields. Such common folk as saw him louted very low to the man, for, though he rode over Church lands, he was a fellow to be feared, being merciless and very cunning. Poachers and laborers whom he caught chasing the deer had but one thing to hope for from Noble Vance. He loved tying a man to a tree and thrashing him with his own whip, and the fellows he caught red-handed would rather have it so than be sent to Roger Bland of Troy Castle.

About a furlong from the priory gate the Forest Warden overtook Dom Geraint.

"The best of a May morning to you, man of God."

"And God's grace be upon you, defender of the deer!"

They were gossips, these two, men of animal energy who understood each other, and looked at life with the same shrewd cynicism. Their eyes met whimsically. Neither had any solid respect for the dignity of the other. Their appetites and prejudices were alike; they met on common ground and made life a gloating, full-blooded jest.

"You ride early, Master Warden."

"All for the joy of being shrived by you, Dom Geraint."

"Tut-tut—I am busy to-day. It would be a long affair."

"Not so long, either; for you have only to name me any sin, good sir, and I will say that I have committed it."

"What a mass of guilt is here—riding in scarlet!"

"The black coat has its red in the lining!"

They laughed in each other's faces.

"You will come in and drink some of our ale?"

"Such brown Paradise is not to be despised. I have an hour to spare."

"I will give you a penance: not to look at a woman for two months."

"Fudge, good sir, I am out to tie one behind me on the saddle this very day."

The archers were sent to the buttery hatch, while the prior's parlor served Vance and Dom Geraint. Prior Globulus had ridden out on a white mule to visit one of his farms, and Geraint had no prejudices against sitting in the old man's chair.

Vance drank to him.

"May you have the filling of it, dear gossip. Then Paradise will lack nothing."

Geraint gave blow for blow.

"And no man will stay me when I go a-hunting, whether it be the red deer——"

"Or others. You have a park of your own, man."

"And you—the whole Forest."

"Thin, sir—very thin. Game is scarce, though I am trapping a fine young doe this very day. And here is the jest, gossip Geraint; she has taken cover in one of your thickets."

Geraint looked hard at Vance over the top of his mug.

"Here—in Paradise! Rabbits, man! I know everything that happens in Paradise."

"Who doubts it? But this is a great gibe, with that woolly-noddled saint of yours serving as father confessor!"

"I miss the scent, my friend."

"You and I can keep each other's secrets. There is some trouble brewing about here, though I have not got to the bottom of it as yet. Old Dale's cubs had sneaked back out of France; we sighted them in Gawdy Town. We have the young man's brush, and now I am after the girl. She is going to ride to Troy with me."

Geraint's black eyes were on the alert.

"I know nothing of all this, gossip. Where are you going to find the lady?"

"On the Black Moor."

"What!"

"Under the protection of St. Florence and Brother Martin, and taking her sleep in your rest-house."

Geraint gaped like a great bird.

"Blood and wounds, but this is—miraculous!"

He began to laugh—deep, gloating laughter.

“Dear gossip, I have not heard such monstrous good news for many months. Brother Martin playing the nurse to a woman! Why, sir, we sent him one, and he would have none of her, the pious fool!”

“I dare say Brother Martin could not help himself.”

“How so?”

“The young woman arrived, claimed St. Florence’s charity, and friend Martin had to give it. I could swear he has kept the door of his cell shut all the while, and only gone out after dark.”

Geraint’s mouth showed its typical snarl.

“It’s probable, most probable, but such a tale does not suit us, good sir.”

“What has the fool done that you hate him so heartily?”

“He is too good for this world, Vance; I would that you could help us to be rid of him.”

The red man grinned.

“Why, anything in reason! One bruises one’s toe against these incorruptible lumps. And your toe may be swollen, holy friend.”

“Have done. This is serious to us.”

“Speak out, then; confess to me, Dom Geraint; I am no suckling.”

Geraint poured out more ale.

“But for Abbot Hilary we should not care a snap of the fingers.”

“Every man has a man over him, gossip, even if it be only a grave-digger. My Lord of Troy—well, I would not lose Roger Bland’s good-will. I should be a broken man in a month, and I know it. You are afraid of this pup’s yelping?”

Geraint nodded, and sat biting the nail of his thumb.

“Teach him to gnaw bones.”

“We have tried it.”

“But here is a pretty tale that could be told. Why, souse me in vinegar, one only has to lie hard enough in this world—see things crooked! Supposing I and my two fellows dream that we found——”

He painted the picture with a few coarse flourishes, and Geraint wriggled in his chair.

“Great, sweet gossip—great! But supposing he calls for a court?”

“Let him have it. He can call no witnesses. Madame Mellis will not be forthcoming, and we shall be ready to swear—for the jest of it. Of course a

gold piece or two for my fellows! These little mazes please me, gossip; brains—brains! I'm tickled by a rebus! Now—what of it?"

Geraint stretched out one of his hairy paws.

"A bargain, Vance."

"I'll hold the debt over you, and call it some day. Prayers put up for me in Paradise—hey! No, a priest may be useful on occasions."

Half an hour later he called his men, mounted his horse, and set out for the Black Moor.

Chapter XVI

It was Martin Valliant who prayed for the soul of Gilbert Dale, and not Mellis his sister.

She was bitter and fierce, and wounded.

"I will not ask God or the saints for anything—no, nor Mother Mary. My brother had no sin upon him. Let them look to their own."

So Martin tolled the bell, lit candles, and chanted a death Mass, yet all the while he was thinking of the rebel woman out yonder and of the despair in her eyes. Nature was striking shrewd blows at Martin's simplicity, using the lecherous treachery of Geraint and the bloody heartlessness of the Lord of Troy to prove to him that there are great violences on earth, lusts and cruelties and loves that no mere saint can conquer. Even Mellis's wild words of revolt sounded more real and human than the patter of his prayers. He knelt a long while in silence, wondering, asking himself grim questions. How would his father, old Valliant, have acted? Would he have put up a prayer, or donned harness and taken the sword?

Mellis would not enter the chapel or kneel before the altar. She went wandering over the moor, recklessly, with that fever of anguish and hatred burning in her blood. She wanted to hurt those men who had killed her brother. She wanted to take the Lord of Troy and give him to some strong man to be throttled. All the love and tenderness that were in her were like perfumes thrown upon the flames.

Wearied at last, she came back to the great cross, passed under its shadow, and entering the rest-house, lay down upon her bed. The room was cool and silent, with its massive walls of stone and thickly thatched roof, and not a sound disturbed her; but she could neither sleep nor rest because of the knowledge of the peril that threatened her. Mellis felt herself betrayed, hunted, and her instincts warned her that she would be shown no mercy. She did not believe that her brother's death had come about casually, or that he had been stabbed wantonly or in error. The shadow of Troy Castle loomed over her. She was fey that morning; the Forest whispered a warning.

About noon Martin Valliant took his spade and went out to dig in the garden. He was shy of Mellis, shy of her despair, and the new manhood that had been born in him chafed and raged at the vows that held it. The blood of

old Roger Valliant was alive in him; he was more the son of his father than he knew.

The garden hedge shut Martin in upon himself, and he could see nothing of the moor, so that one of Noble Vance's archers was able to come scouting right to the foot of the great cross and creep away again unnoticed. The fellow went back to a heathy hollow where the Forest Warden waited, sitting on his black horse in the sun.

"The woman is there, lording. I saw her in the doorway of the rest-house."

"And the monk?"

"I heard the sound of a spade in the garden."

"Good. Now listen to me, you men. There is no cause to be too gentle with the jade; they say she is a fierce wench, and may carry a knife, and a knife in an angry woman's hands is not to be despised."

"Will you take her, or shall we, lording?"

"We'll see what we shall see."

Martin Valliant was just turning a new spit when he heard a sound that made him raise his head and listen. A horse was moving somewhere; he heard the thudding of hoofs and the jingle of a bridle. The horse came on at a canter, and a man's voice shouted an order.

"A view—a view! Run, Jack; head her off, or she'll have the door shut in our faces."

Then Martin heard Mellis cry out.

"Martin Valliant—Martin Valliant!"

Something seemed to twist itself in his head and snap like a broken bowstring. He plucked his spade out of the ground and went running, his nostrils agape, his eyes hard as blue glass.

And this was what Martin saw when he pushed through the gate and rounded the corner of the thorn hedge. Mellis had her back to the wall of the rest-house, and a light dagger in her hand. A man in red was sucking a bloody wrist, and two archers were crouching behind him like dogs waiting to be let loose.

Martin saw the man in red raise the butt of his riding whip and strike at Mellis, shouting savagely:

"Break the jade—break her!"

Then Martin Valliant went mad. He was no more than the male thing answering the wild call of its mate. He saw Noble Vance's whip strike

Mellis's arm.

It was all over in twenty seconds, for that spade was a grim weapon whirled like a battle-ax by old Valliant's son. The two archers had stood and gaped, too astonished to think of bending a bow. One of them, indeed, had plucked out a knife, but he was dead before he could use it.

Vance the Forest Warden lay all huddled up, grinning horribly, gashed to the brain pulp. The other archer had taken to his heels, mounted his master's horse, and galloped off with the fear of God in him. And Martin Valliant was standing leaning on his spade, his face deathly white, his eyes staring at the dead men on the grass.

Chapter XVII

For a long while Martin Valliant neither moved nor spoke, and Mellis watched him in silence. His rage had passed, and a kind of wondering horror dulled his eyes. He was afraid of his own handiwork, this death that he had brought into the world, these bloody things at his feet. And yet they fascinated him, for there were two men struggling in Martin Valliant—the poor monk and the soldier.

The monk in him, being the elder, stood shocked to the heart, and most tragically dismayed. Such a bloody deed as this seemed the end of everything, even though it had been done in generous wrath. Martin's monastic soul shrank away, horrified, covering its face with its hands. He had spilled blood, he was a murderer, he had sinned against the God Who had given him life.

For a while the monk in him possessed his whole consciousness, but there was a man stronger and fiercer than the monk waiting to be heard. The soul of old Valliant lived more nobly in his son, old Valliant who had looked on dead men with the pity of a soldier, but who would have had no pity for such a fellow as Noble Vance.

"Martin—Martin Valliant!"

He heard her voice, at first very soft and faint, like a voice from a distance. He had not looked at her since he had struck Vance down.

Slowly he seemed to drag himself from staring at his own handiwork. He turned his head, and her eyes met his.

Once more the soul of that tragic day astonished him, for there was a strange, shining light in Mellis's eyes. Her lips seemed to tremble; her throat showed proud and triumphant. Here was no shame, no horror, but a something that gloried, an exultation that was near to tears.

He stared at her as though he had been dead and she had called him back to life.

Mellis stretched out her hands as though to crown him.

"Martin Valliant—Martin Valliant."

Again the note of exultation sounded. He beheld a new and human glory in her eyes.

"God forgive me."

He dropped on his knees, and covered his face with his right arm.

The woman in her rushed instantly to comfort him.

"Martin—Martin Valliant, take it not to heart. God slays men sometimes; it is right and good that they should be slain."

She bent over him with infinite compassion.

"How can I lift this burden from you, you who have striven to love men?"

He dropped his arm and stared at the grass.

"What has happened to me? I do not understand. Yet that man there was an evil beast, and I struck him in clean wrath. What does God wish? I have lost the light in my soul."

He got up and began to walk to and fro with great strides, his forehead all knotted, his mouth awry. And Mellis watched him, keeping silent, but with a great pity in her eyes. He was like a blind man, groping his way, lost in the confusion of his own soul.

"Martin——"

He turned to her with dull anguish in his eyes.

"God will not speak to me. I hear no voice but yours. I will go and surrender myself."

"To whom?"

"What does it matter? There is blood on my hands. Let them do with me as they please."

A new light flashed in her eyes. She seemed to feel the struggle that was coming, the fight for the soul of this strong man. Either he would dash himself to ruin, or she would save him as he had saved her.

"Is there no other voice but mine?"

"None."

"Perhaps God is in my voice, speaking to you, Martin Valliant."

He looked at her strangely.

"Those men died by my hand."

"Good—very good—I grant it. There's death, lying at our feet. Let us look at it boldly, without shrinking, without shame. What were those men? One was an evil beast, you say, and I know it to be true. He was one of those who slew my father; I would charge him, too, with my brother's death, and by your hand I am avenged. There were three, and you were alone. There

was God's good wrath in your heart. And I call you proudly Martin Valliant. Yes, the song of the sword is yours."

The blood rose to his face.

"Is my sin the less?"

"What if there be no sin in the killing of such enemies? Think, why did you strike the man down?"

He avoided her eyes.

"To save me. Because your heart told you that these men brought me death—perhaps things that are worse than death. You killed them, but I live and am free."

She smiled bravely.

"Free—to be grateful—free to swear to you from my heart that the deed was done nobly. And now—what of the morrow?"

He could not rise to her rebel mood as yet; the old life still hung to him, though he realized that it was a thing of rags and tatters.

"To-morrow? I cannot think of a to-morrow. Life seems to end for me in a great cliff."

She made herself look at the dead man, pointed at him with her finger.

"You know whom you have killed?"

"Vance, the Forest Warden."

"Roger Bland's watchdog. And you will hang for it, Martin Valliant, in spite of twenty St. Benedicts. The Lord of Troy is not gentle with those who flout him."

He answered sullenly, "If I hang—I hang."

Mellis went closer, and looked steadily into his face.

"And I, Martin Valliant, I shall hang on the same gibbet."

He threw his head back, with a tightening of the mouth and a hardening of the eyes.

"God forbid!"

"Roger Bland of Troy will not forbid it. We shall hang, Martin Valliant, unless——"

He opened and shut his hands as though blindly striving to grip the truth.

"I am a broken man—but you——"

"Broken, say you? And before God—why? What are we but rebels, outlaws, so long as Crookback rules and such hounds as Bland hunt at his bidding? My troth is pledged to another king. Broken?—never! What, shall I

not fight for my life against my enemies—aye, and with a good heart? And you, Martin Valliant?"

"I—fight—to save myself?"

"Would you let them lead you off like an ox to be pole-axed?"

"I have vowed——"

"God have pity on you, Martin Valliant. Where are your vows now? Blown to the winds. No, I'll not suffer you to go with meek madness to your death. Answer me—will you not fight for your own life?"

He thought awhile, and then answered stubbornly, "No."

Mellis drew a deep breath.

"Before God, then, will you fight for mine?"

He faltered, looked at her, and his face flamed to her challenge.

"For you? To save you?"

He bowed his head.

"Yes—to the death, so that you may live."

She held out her hands to him, her eyes shining.

"Martin Valliant, let us be comrades, let us swear troth to each other."

But he looked at her hands as though he dared not touch them.

"I am a priest no more," he said, "but an outlaw. So be it, though God has dealt strangely with me."

He turned his head and looked at the great cross.

"The shape of a sword!"

"There is a noble spirit in it, Martin Valliant."

"It shall be a cross—and a sword," he answered her.

Chapter XVIII

So Martin Valliant became an outlaw, Nature being stronger than the ingenious folly of dead saints.

It was Mellis who captained the adventure, for she was quicker in thought than Martin, and the day's happenings had stunned him not a little.

She had her eyes on Woodmere, and both heart and head justified the choice. It was nearer to Troy Castle than the Black Moor, but this disadvantage was overbalanced by many virtues. The place lay in the thick of the woods; its broad mere made it very safe; and with but little labor the house itself could be put into a good state for defense. Arms and stores were hidden there. Moreover, it lay in the Red Rose country, where the Forest folk were most bitter against the Lord of Troy. John Falconer held Badger Hill; the Blounts were at Bloody Rood, just south of the Rondel toward the west. Mellis counted on the Forest rallying to her when the secret word went forth that Richmond was crossing the seas.

"To horse, good comrade; or rather you and I will have to march and load the baggage on my horse. Have you much store of food?"

"Half a sack of flour, and some yeast."

"Empty your cupboard into a couple of sacks. I will go and harness the horse."

Martin Valliant was looking at the dead men. He loitered a moment, as though he could not decide what should be done with them.

"No, I'll not touch them," he said to himself. "I am a man of blood; let others do what is right and good."

He locked up the chapel and left the key hanging on a nail in his cell, nor did he touch anything in the cell itself save the food in the cupboard and larder. A couple of sacks served for the stowing away of the flour, the yeast, a bottle or two of wine, a paper of dried herbs, and some salted meat. He tied up the mouths of the sacks and carried them down to the stable.

Mellis showed herself a very practical young woman.

"Fasten those two sacks together, and we can sling them like panniers. Now, what else would make useful plunder? A coil of rope, if you have such a thing."

Martin remembered seeing a coil hanging in Father Jude's tool-house.

“Wait—and a felling ax and a crowbar. I’ll come with you.”

They ransacked the tool-house, and Mellis blessed Father Jude.

“The rope, yes, and that felling ax. This is a treasury, good comrade. Take that saw, and the mattock and spade.”

“Here’s a crowbar.”

“Oh, brave man! We shall bless these tools to-morrow. That big maul, too, and the billhook, and that auger hanging there.”

“I can use the rope to lash them into a bundle.”

“Of course. Give me the saw, the auger, and the billhook.”

Martin laid the rest of the tools on the ground, and lashed them together by the handles. He tried the weight of the bundle.

“Your horse will not bless us. I could shoulder these things.”

“Seven miles?”

“It is not the weight, but an awkward bale to tie on a horse’s back.”

“Here’s a sack and some cord; wrap it around the handles; we can sling the food one side and the tools the other. The horse must make the best of it.”

Her word was law for the moment, both to Martin Valliant and the beast. She stood by while he loaded the things on to the horse’s back, watching him critically and the way he used his big brown hands.

“Can you ride a horse?” she asked him.

He smiled around at her gravely.

“I have broken in colts at Paradise.”

“Was that monk’s work?”

“I was young, and even a monk is none the worse for learning to handle an untamed thing and to keep his temper.”

She nodded approvingly.

“That may help us. Can you use a bow?”

“Passably. As a boy I used to carry a prodd and shoot at the crows.”

“The long bow for a forester; the arbalist is only for townsmen.”

“I could hit a sheaf of corn at fifty paces when I was younger.”

“You will have to grow young again. And traps—can you set a snare as a bird-trap?”

“No.”

"I am thinking of our larder," she explained. "Outlaws are not fed by ravens."

The sun had swung well into the west when they were ready to start upon their journey. Mellis went to the great cross, and from its knoll she scanned the moor, but could see no live thing moving anywhere. Martin stood by the horse, leaning on his hollywood staff and staring at the ground, trying to convince himself that he was not dreaming. He saw Mellis come back and turn her head so as not to see those dead things lying by the rest-house. Yes, the business was real enough. He had but to look at Mellis, and the knowledge leaped in him that the Martin Valliant of yesterday was dead.

"I can see no one moving. The sooner we are lost to view in the woods, the better it will be for us."

His tragic face touched her, but she let him alone, and taking the horse's bridle, started over the moor.

Martin followed her like a dog. He moved mechanically, watching her with a kind of sorrowful bewilderment, marching toward the new world with a heart that was very heavy. A man's whole life cannot be overturned and broken in a day without the shock of it leaving him dazed and full of a dull distrust. To have become a murderer, to find himself tramping at the heels of a young woman whose eyes bewitched him, to know that there was a likelihood of both of them being hanged—these amazing realities hung heavy about Martin Valliant's neck.

Once or twice Mellis glanced back over her shoulder. She had divined what was passing in Martin Valliant's heart; she half expected to find herself alone, or to see him stalking away over the moor. Had she suffered less herself, she might have reasoned with him, tried to spur him against the world; but her own heart was full of sadness, and sorrow is a great teacher. She had fought to save him from his own fanaticism, and she had won a victory; but she was too full of pity for the man to torture him with more grim home-truths. Fate seemed to have tossed them together into the unknown. She chose to let Fate settle the matter. The man should be free to repent and go.

They crossed the moor and reached the beech woods without adventure, and Mellis's heart beat with a lessened feeling of suspense when the green trees hid them. It was one of those soft, cloudy, windless days when the Forest seemed to gather an added mystery, and the great aisles looked more solemn, hiding strange secrets.

"It is good to be here."

She breathed the words like a prayer.

“There is no cleaner thing than the Forest. The trees have no sins to remember.”

Martin did not answer her. He was gazing along the green aisles and up into the tops of the great trees where a vague shimmer of light played above the black branches. The stillness was miraculous; not a leaf was moving; the huge gray trunks looked strong enough to carry the world.

Then he fell to watching the figure of the girl in front of him, with its gown of green that seemed part of the woodland. She walked lightly, bravely, the horse plodding placidly at her heels as though he recognized in her a wise power that was to be trusted and obeyed. And in watching her Martin Valliant was led toward a new humility, and an unforeseen conquest of his own perplexities.

It was her loneliness, and her courage in bearing it, that routed the scandalized selfishness of the monk and stirred the deeper compassion of the man. He remembered yesterday’s despair in her eyes and the words of anguish he had heard her utter. She seemed to stand alone in this great wilderness, a wounded thing at the mercy of some brutal chance, a white martyr to be torn and ravished by such ruffians as Noble Vance. What were his own sorrows compared with hers? How much more grim and real the dangers that threatened her!

A sudden shame seized him; his eyes lost their sullen, doubting look; his face became transfigured. He had been worshiping self all the while, and, like a Pharisee, he had broken into pious wailings because blood had spotted his precious robe. Yes, he had made an idol of his own sinlessness, bowed down to it, thought of it as the one great thing in the world.

The soft green light under the trees seemed like the light of a sanctuary, and an awed look stole into Martin’s eyes. He followed Mellis in silence, nor did she speak to him, and all the while that great change was working in his soul. Here was something to serve, a thing of flesh and blood, nobler than any altar of stone. He felt that he could lay down his life for her, and that God Himself would not turn from such a sacrifice.

From that moment Martin Valliant’s soul felt strong and calm in him. His eyes no longer looked back at the old life; he set his face steadily toward the future.

Now Mellis knew nothing of all this, of the man’s uprising from the wounded horror of his blood-stained self. They had come to the high ground, above the Rondel, and could see the river glimmering in the green deeps below. It was time to eat and rest, and she called a halt.

“Are you footsore, comrade?”

"No; nor sore at heart."

She gave him a quick, searching look, and his face surprised her. It was serene, steadfast, and its eyes were very gentle. All that tangle of doubt and self-horror had been wiped away.

She said nothing. He made a movement to take the horse's bridle from her.

"I will unload the horse and let him feed. There is a patch of grass there. Sit down and rest."

They looked into each other's eyes.

"Pain wearies the heart," she said.

"You shall ride the horse and I will carry the baggage."

"No, but you shall not."

"We will see," he answered her.

It was Martin who served. He unbuckled the horse's bridle and made a tether of it, so that the beast could feed. Then he unloaded the baggage, opened one of the sacks, and took out bread, meat, and some wine. Mellis had thrown herself down under a beech tree where the moss was like a green carpet, and Martin served her with wine and bread.

Her eyes met his with a new softness. Something had happened to Martin Valliant; he was a changed man. He offered her a new calm strength upon which she could lean, and in her loneliness her heart thanked him. She wanted to rest, to close her eyes for a moment, to let the burden of her fate lie for a moment on a man's shoulders.

He watched her eat, and forgot that he was hungry. She had to chide him.

"No man is strong enough to go hungry. And there is much work to be done."

They sat and looked at the river flowing in the valley at their feet. Martin's memories of yesterday were growing sacred; he hoarded them in his heart.

"Yonder is the ford."

She pointed with her poniard.

"It was wise of us to halt here. That might be a dangerous passage for us if enemies were near."

But no hostile thing showed itself; the river was like a silver dream in the green slumber of the woods.

When they had finished their meal and rested awhile, Martin roped up the baggage and untethered the horse.

“You will ride for an hour.”

Mellis rebelled.

“No; you cannot shoulder all that gear.”

“Let us see.”

He slung the sacks over one shoulder, one in front and one behind, and hoisted the tools on to the other.

“I am younger than the horse.”

Something in his eyes persuaded her to humor him.

“It is good to be strong,” she said.

And Martin felt strangely happy.

She mounted, and they went down to the ford. Mellis rode in to show the way, and Martin splashed after her, planting his feet carefully, for the bottom was full of pebbles.

She looked back.

“Remember the flour.”

For the first time he saw a gleam of laughter in her eyes, a glimmer of sweet youthfulness.

“It shall come to no harm,” he answered, smiling back, and thinking her the most beautiful thing in the world.

Chapter XIX

The day was far spent when they came to the valley in the heart of the woods where the ruined house of the Dales stood on that white blossoming island in the midst of the water. Mellis had dismounted half a league from the ford, and had refused to go forward until Martin had loaded the baggage again on the horse's back.

"I am rested," she had said, "and your strength is precious. Let the beast bear the burden for which he was born."

Martin Valliant had to hide the vivid memories of yesterday, but as he stood at Mellis's side on the edge of the beech wood and looked down upon Woodmere, he could but marvel at the strangeness of life. Here was he beside her, her comrade in arms, an outlaw, a man who had thrown the future into the melting-pot of fate. And as he watched a world of tenderness and yearning swim into her eyes, his soul stood stoutly to its outlawry. His muscles were made to serve her, and he thanked God for his strength.

"That was our home."

She looked long at it, her lips trembling, her bosom rising and falling with emotion.

"Gilbert will never see it again. We used to draw pictures in France, and in his fancy the apple trees were always pink and white, just as they are now."

Martin could find no words to utter. He wanted to touch her, to make her feel that he understood.

But she broke loose from these sad thoughts, rallied herself to face the fiercer issue.

"The valley looks empty."

They scanned it keenly.

"Not a soul."

"They will not leave us in peace for very long, and the hours will be precious. Come."

Martin shut his eyes for a moment. He could not forget that vision of her with her dark hair clouding about her body. But the vision was sacred.

"You see, the bridge is broken."

He had to pretend his innocence.

"And there is no boat?"

"It is rotting in the mud."

They went down to the water's edge, and Martin tied the horse to one of the willows. He paid homage to her forethought in the bringing of those tools.

"We shall have to build a bridge."

Already she was pushing her way through the scrub, and Martin followed her. There were two gaps to be dealt with, one where the arch had fallen, and a second where the drawbridge should have served.

"The trunks of a few young trees thrown across."

"Yes—but the horse."

"We could leave him on this side for the night."

She stared at the gate-house.

"Perhaps. But we shall want a bridge that can be drawn in, to keep out chance visitors. The gate, too, is off its hinges, and broken. I know where a beam is hidden, but I doubt whether we can lift it."

"There is the rope—and I am strong."

Her eyes looked him over with critical praise.

"Yes, you are bigger than your father. If we could throw a couple of young ash trees across the first gulf. There is a thicket of ashes down yonder."

Martin needed no second word from her. He had the tools off the horse's back, and the ax on his shoulder.

"Which way?"

"Over there. I'll take the billhook and lop off the boughs while you do the felling."

They started away like a couple of children, full of the adventure, and Martin was soon at work in a thicket of ash trees that had been planted some twenty years before. He chose a tree and had it down with six clean, slanting blows of the ax, so that the cuts clove wedgewise into the trunk.

"Oh, brave man! That was woodman's skill."

She fell to clearing the trunk of its top and side branches while Martin threw a second tree. He felled four, and shouldered them one by one up to the bridge end, and here his great strength served. These ash spars were no

broomsticks, and he had to spear them forward over the gap, and keep their ends from dropping into the water.

"Brave comrade! Well done!"

She cheered his triumph.

"And now a few willow withies."

He took the bill, lopped off some willow boughs, and then, straddling his way along the ash trunks, lashed them together with the withies. The thing made a very passable bridge. Martin tested it, and was happy.

"A few more trees, and some earth rammed on the top, and the horse will be safe across."

"Yes—to-morrow. It is growing late. Now for the beam I told you of."

It was lying in the sluice ditch under a smother of brambles and young thorns, a great balk of timber all sodden with damp, fifteen feet long, six inches thick, and a foot in breadth. Two men might have shirked carrying it twenty yards; but Martin, in that springtime of his love, dragged it out upon the grass.

"Good saints, but you are strong!"

She tossed him the rope.

"Throw a noose around it. I can help at pulling."

They got the beam to the bridge, across the platform of ash trees, and so to the place where the drawbridge should have been, and here the business baffled them. The thing was far too ponderous to be thrust across like a plank.

Martin solved the riddle. He had to fell two more small trees, lay them across, and straddle his way over. Then he climbed the stair to the broken gate-house and bade Mellis throw him the rope. The first two casts failed, but the third succeeded. They swung the great beam across between them, Martin keeping his end raised by straining the rope over the wall.

He saw Mellis run lightly across, and scrambling back along the wall and down the stone stairway built in the angle of the gate-house, he joined her in the courtyard. The sun hung low over the tops of the trees, and its level rays threw the blackened beams of the burned roof of the hall into grim relief. The whole place had been gutted, with the exception of the little octagonal tower to the south of the hall, and one or two outhouses lying beyond the garden. The gate-house was just a stone shell, the charred gate lying rotting in a bed of nettles.

The evening light played in Mellis's eyes, and Martin Valliant held his peace for the moment. Her lips moved as though she were repeating some promise she had made. It crossed his mind that she might wish to be alone, so he went back across the bridge and carried the two sacks and the tools over.

She called to him.

"Martin—Martin!"

She had opened a door that led from the courtyard into the garden, and stood waiting for him.

"Let us look everywhere. I want to be sure that no one has been here before us."

She wandered out into the garden, a sweet and tangled place, sloping toward the sunset. The walks had gone back to grass, and the rose bushes were smothered with brambles. The four clipped yews by the sundial had grown into shaggy trees, and the herbs in the borders lived the life of the woods. Wild flowers had taken possession, buttercups, ragged robin, purple vetches, and great white daisies. There was a nut walk that had grown into a green tunnel; and a stone seat on the terrace under the wall of the house was almost hidden by bushes that had sprung up between the stones.

"This was a garden, and that was my mother's seat. Men are very cruel."

"And yet the place is very beautiful," he said.

"With the beauty of sadness and of pain."

In one of the borders she found an old rose bush that was budding into bloom, and one red flower had opened its petals. Her eyes glimmered.

"Why—this is a miracle!"

She plucked the rose, kissed it, smelled its perfume.

"Red is our color."

And then a thought struck her.

"Comrade in arms, you are for Lancaster; here is your badge."

She gave him the rose, and Martin touched it with his lips as she passed on down the garden.

They had explored the whole island before the sun dropped below the trees. The only habitable place was the tower; it had escaped the fire, probably because the wind had been blowing from the south when Roger Bland's men had thrown their torches into the hall. A newel staircase led to an upper room, and though there was nothing but the boarded floor, the place was dry and habitable.

Martin did not enter the room, but stood on the threshold, as though some finer instinct held him back.

"There is plenty of old bracken in the beech wood," he said; "it would serve—for a night."

She was leaning her hands on the window ledge and looking down on the sea of white apple blossom below. Martin left her there, and, crossing himself, went out to the woods to gather bracken.

When he returned he found her watering the horse at the edge of the mere.

"We can let him lodge in one of the thickets for the night," she said, smiling at the great bundle of brown bracken on Martin's back.

A blackbird was singing in the orchard, and bats were beginning to flit against the yellow sky. Martin carried the bracken to the tower, and threw the bundle down on the floor of her room. The door still hung on its hinges, and he nodded his head approvingly when he saw that it could be bolted on the inside. It was fitting and right that she should feel secure in her chamber, since she was the queen of the place and more sacred to him than any lady in the land.

Martin went for more bracken, and when he returned with it he left the bundle on the flagstones at the foot of the stairs. Mellis had found a sheltered woodland stall for the horse, and had tethered him there with several lapfuls of grass for his supper. Dusk was falling over the Forest, and a great stillness prevailed. The surface of the mere was black and smooth as a magician's mirror.

Martin heard Mellis calling.

"Bread and wine—and then to bed."

She had found a rickety, worm-eaten oak bench, and carried it out to the terrace above the garden. They sat one at each end of the bench, using the space between them as a table.

"To-morrow there will be much work for you, Martin Valliant," she said, smiling.

"Work is the sap of life."

"Oh, sententious man! You will build me an oven, and I will bake bread. There are plenty of fish in the mere, and some venison would help to stock our larder. You will be a slave to-morrow, Martin Valliant; we have to victual our stronghold and stop the gaps in its defenses. Every day may be precious."

He could see that she was weary, and ready to yawn behind her hand.

“Go and sleep,” he said, when they had ended the meal; “I shall lie on guard, ready for an alarm.”

“Martin Valliant, man-at-arms!”

So Martin made his bed at the foot of the stairs, and slept across them, so that no one could pass save over his body.

Chapter XX

Mellis woke on her bed of bracken soon after the birds had broken into song. She went to the window of the tower room and found the valley full of white mist and the whole world all wet with dew. The day promised gloriously, heralded by such a dawn.

As she had said to Martin Valliant, every hour was precious, for the Lord of Troy's riders would be scouring the Forest, and Woodmere would not be forgotten. If she and Martin were to hold it as a strong rallying place for their friends of the Red Rose, then it behooved them to be up and doing before their ruinous stronghold was attacked.

She opened her door, and going softly down the stairs, found Martin Valliant still sleeping across them on his bed of fern. And for the moment she felt loth to rouse him, for he lay breathing as quietly as a child, one arm under his head.

"Martin Valliant——"

She touched him with her foot, and the result was miraculous. He sat up, clutching the billhook that lay on the step beside him, a most fierce and unpeaceful figure in the gray light of the dawn.

"Stand! Who's there?"

Mellis retreated a step or two, laughing, for he was a dangerous gentleman with that bill of his.

"A friend, Martin Valliant."

He got up, looking not a little angry with himself for having let her catch him asleep.

"What, daylight already!"

"I was loth to wake you, but there is much to be done."

"It is I who should have been awake, not you."

He looked in a temper that wanted to catch the day's work by the throat and throttle it. Mellis stepped over the pile of bracken and stood in the doorway that opened on the courtyard.

"One does not work well hungry," she said, "and we must talk over the day's needs."

Her hair hung loose, and she shook it down so that it fell like a black cloak about her green-sheathed body. The color and the richness of it thrilled Martin to the heart. Her throat looked as white as May blossom, and her eyes had all the mystery of the dawn. And of a sudden a swift exultation leaped in him at the thought that he was her man-at-arms, chosen to shield her with his body, her comrade in this great adventure.

"The day is ours," he said; "I feel stronger than ten men."

She turned her head, and her eyes held his.

"I think I am fortunate in you, comrade-in-arms."

He could have taken the hem of her gown and kissed it.

Mellis served the meal, and they broke their fast in the garden, sitting on the oak bench and watching the white mist lift and melt from the valley. The woods grew green, the sky became blue above them, the mere flashed gold, the flowers glowed like wet gems in the grass. And Martin Valliant's soul was full of the dawn, the mystery and freshness thereof; the smell of the sweet, wet world intoxicated him; the red rose that Mellis had given him lay over his heart. He looked at her with secret, tentative awe, and life seemed a strange and miraculous dream.

She began to speak of the day's needs.

"That bridge does not please me, comrade. We want a thing that can be dropped and kept raised at our pleasure. And then there is the gate."

"The hinges and nails are all that are left of it."

"I have it. There is some good timber in those out-houses; we could build a new gate. The curtain walls are still strong and good. Then there is the gate leading into the kitchen court; we could wall that up with stones. We must hope to keep the Lord of Troy's men from crossing the water, if they come before we have raised a garrison."

She grew more mysterious.

"I shall have other things to show you, but they can keep till the evening. And now—as to the horse."

The beast raised quite a debate between them, since he complicated the matter of the bridge. Martin was for leaving him tethered in one of the glades, and trusting to luck and to Roger Bland's men not discovering him if they rode to Woodmere within the next few days. And in the end Mellis agreed with him, since he was to be responsible for the contriving of a drawbridge.

"Your plan has it," she confessed. "I will go and tether Dobbin in one of the glades, and then come and serve as housewife. The man's part shall be

yours."

Martin went to work with fierce enthusiasm. He had a scheme in his head as to how the thing might be done, and he set about it when Mellis had crossed the water. He bored a hole through one end of the big beam, ran the rope through the hole and knotted it. At the other end he contrived a rough hinge by driving four stout stakes criss-cross into the ground, with a crossbar under them which could be pegged to the butt-end of the beam. The pulley wheels for the chains of the old bridge were still in the two chain holes of the gate-house, about ten feet from the ground. Martin piled some stones against the wall, climbed on them, and ran the rope through one of the chain holes. The trick worked very prettily. He found that he could raise and lower the beam from inside the gate-house, and all that was needed was a stake to which he could fasten the rope when the bridge was up.

Mellis came back from the woods as he was driving the stake into the ground under the gateway. He had rolled his cassock over his girdle, and turned the sleeves up nearly to his shoulders, so that the muscles showed. And he looked hot and masterful and triumphant as he turned to show her how his bridge worked.

"Well done, Martin Valliant. Let the beam down and I will come over and see if I am strong enough to raise it."

He lowered the beam, and she walked over to him.

"Now I understand why you did not want to build a bridge that would carry a horse. Let me see what I can do. I might have to play bridgeward some day."

She found that she was strong enough to raise the beam, for she was tall and lithe, with a beautiful breadth across the bosom.

Martin's eyes shone.

"Now I must build you a gate," he said, "a gate that nothing but a cannon shot can shiver."

It took him the rest of the morning to pull down one of the outhouses, sort out his timber, and get it cut to size and shape. He had dragged the charred mass of the old gate from its bed of nettles, and had stripped it of its great iron hinges when Mellis came to call him to dinner.

"I have done famously: hot meat, and new bread, and a dish of herbs. I found two old iron pots in the cellar, and I am quite kitchen proud."

Martin was loth to leave the work. He was hunting for the smith's nails that had fallen out of the burned wood of the old gate; they were more

precious than pieces of gold. She pretended to be hurt by his lack of gratitude.

"I have cooked for my comrade in arms, and he will not eat what I have cooked."

Martin straightened up, and left his hunting for nails among the trampled nettles.

"It was not churlishness on my part."

"I know. You must do things fiercely, Martin Valliant, with your whole heart, or not at all."

"My hunger is fierce," he confessed, smiling gravely. "No food could be sweeter than what your hands have prepared."

He was shy of her, and voiceless, all through that meal, and there was an answering silence in Mellis's heart, for though so short a time had passed since their lives had been linked together, she was forgetting Martin the monk in regarding Martin Valliant the man. She began to look at him with a vivid and self-surprised curiosity; his shyness infected her; she became conscious of the deep wonder light in his eyes. Hitherto she had been a creature of impulses, a wild thing blown along by the wind of necessity; but of a sudden she saw the man as a man, and her heart seemed to cease beating for a moment, and her thoughts to stand still.

He was the very contrast of herself, with his tawny hair tinged with red, and his frank, steadfast, trusting eyes. Regarded as a woman, Mellis was a fine, lithe, white-skinned creature, and Martin Valliant matched her in the matter of bodily beauty. There was no gnarled uncouthness about his strength. He carried himself like a king's son, and without any arrogance of conscious pride. The soul of the man seemed to show in his movements, a steady, gentle, unflurried soul, capable of great tendernesses, of great wraths, and of strange renunciations.

Her eyes grew wayward, more shadowy; they avoided his. A new subtlety of feeling stole into the hearts of both of them. The sun shone, the woods were green, the wild flowers were bright in the lush grass. When a blackbird sang Martin Valliant felt that the bird's song and his heart were one.

He broke away, for the grosser hunger was soon satisfied.

"I shall not sleep till that gate is up."

She brushed the crumbs from her lap.

"You will need me. I will come when you call."

He was walking away when she uttered his name.

"Martin."

Her voice had never sounded so strange and human in his ears.

"I have a secret to show you—presently—when the gate is up."

He went off, wondering, his eyes full of his new exultation.

Martin worked like a giant, with a fever of love in his blood. In three hours he had the gate finished and ready to be hung, but the hanging of it was the devil. The thing was monstrously massive and cumbersome to lift, and too broad for him to get a grip of it with spread arms.

He went in search of Mellis.

"I can build my gate—but as to hanging it——"

She smiled at his grim, baffled face.

"Women are cunning!"

She went to help him, and spoke of wedges and the crowbar.

"I can steady the thing while you heave it up, little by little, till the hinge straps are over the bolts."

He gave her a look from his blue eyes.

"A man rushes like a bull. While you——"

"Ah, as I told you, women are cunning."

Between them they got the gate on its hinges, and though it groaned and moved reluctantly, it was as strong as a man could wish.

"No spear truncheon will prise that up in a hurry."

She was flushed and breathing fast, and her quick beauty swept into Martin's heart like the wind. He stood still, gazing at her, till she looked at him, and then his eyes fell.

"See how strong that is," he said.

And his heart would have cried, "Strong as my love."

The main gate of Woodmere was safe now from a surprise, and no enemies could attack the place save by swimming the mere. Martin had made a round of the walls; they stood twelve feet high and were strongly built. The only other openings in them were the gate leading from the kitchen court and the wicket opening on the garden. The garden wicket still hung on its hinges, a stout oak door studded and banded with iron, and easily barred in case of an attack. The kitchen gateway they had decided to wall up, and Martin set to work upon the wall, using the big stones that had fallen from the battlements of the hall. They were so heavy that they wedged

and weighted each other in place, and stood as solidly as though they had been laid by a mason.

Martin had nearly closed the gap when Mellis called him.

"The sun is near the hills. You have done enough."

In spite of his youth and his strength Martin Valliant was very weary. He looked at the wall that he had built, and saw that it was strong enough to stand against a surprise.

Her voice came nearer.

"Are you ever hungry?"

He went whither her voice lured him. She had made a table in the garden out of some stones and pieces of wood, set flowers on it, and laid supper thereon.

Her dark eyes seemed to him to be deep with a new mystery. They broke bread together and drank their wine, and the meal had the flavor of a sacrament.

"There is yet work to be done," she had said to him, "before the daylight goes. And I shall show you a thing, Martin Valliant, that shall pledge me your honor."

When they had ended the meal she rose and looked at him with great steadfastness.

"Martin Valliant, is your heart still set on this life of the sword? Tell me the truth, and keep nothing hidden. God knows that a man must make his choice."

His eyes met hers without flinching.

"I have chosen," he said; "there shall be no turning back."

She went toward the tower, beckoning him to follow.

"I have not been idle, and here is my secret."

It was her brother's treasury that Mellis showed him, the vault at the base of the tower, filled with war gear and a store of food. She had raised the stone by thrusting a long pole through the iron ring. A stout leather sack lay on the ground beside the entry.

"There are bows and bills and war harness below there," she told him. "We have fooled the Lord of Troy, who swore that there should not be so much as a boar-spear left in the Forest. Take that sack, Martin Valliant, and carry it for me into the garden."

He shouldered the thing, and knew that he carried iron, both by the weight of it and by the way a sharp edge bit into his shoulder.

“Lay it on the grass—there.”

He obeyed her, wondering what was in her mind.

Mellis knelt and cut the leather thong that fastened the throat of the sack. The leather had kept out the damp, and her white hands drew out armor that was bright as the blade of her poniard. It was a suit of white mail beautifully wrought, yet noble in its clean simplicity. Salade, breast-plate, shoulder pieces, back-plate, tassets, loin-guard, vam-braces, rear-braces, elbow pieces, gauntlets, thigh plates, greaves, solerets and spurs, she laid them all upon the grass. And last of all she drew out a belt and sword, and a plain shield colored green.

She spread her hands, palms downwards, over them.

“This was to have been my brother’s harness.”

Martin Valliant was kneeling at her side.

“And now, God helping me, I have chosen the man who shall wear it—even you, Martin Valliant, my comrade in arms.”

Martin’s eyes seemed to catch the sunlight. He knelt for a while in silence, as though he were praying.

“May no shame come to it through me,” he said at last; “and though it may sit strange on me, my heart shall serve you to the death.”

She took the sword and rose from her knees.

“My hands shall gird you.”

He reached out, drew the pommel of the sword toward him, and kissed it.

“I swear troth to you, Mellis.”

He looked up, and her eyes held his.

“Martin Valliant you are called, and valiant shall you be. Stand, good comrade.”

She buckled the sword on him, knowing in her heart that he was her man.

Chapter XXI

Martin Valliant slept at the foot of the tower stairway with Mellis's sword beside him. He fell asleep with one hand gripping the hilt, like a child clutching a toy.

Mellis did not have to wake him that morning, for he was up before the birds had begun their orisons, his heart full of the great adventure that life had thrust upon him. He had taken it solemnly, like a young man before his knighthood, or a soldier setting forth on a Crusade, and all that he did that morning in the gray of the dawn betrayed the symbolical passion of the lover. He was to enter upon a new state before he touched that white harness, and so he went to the mere, stripped off his clothes, and bathed in the water. Then he knelt awhile, grave-eyed and strong, watching the sun rise on the new day, while the birds were a choir invisible.

When Mellis came down from her chamber she found him in the garden with the harness spread out upon the leather sack, so that the wet grass should not tarnish it. He had cut his cassock short above the knees, and was holding the salade in his hands and staring at it like a crystal gazer.

He flushed, and glanced at her with an air of bafflement.

"These iron clothes are new to me."

Mellis did not smile at his predicament, though she guessed that he had no knowledge of how to arm himself.

"You must try the feel of it," she said, "for a man should test himself with the weight of his harness. Four hands are needed for such a toilet. When we have eaten I will play the page to you."

She was as good as her word, and the arming of Martin Valliant was an event in the life of the garden. Mellis made him seat himself upon the bench, while she picked up the pieces one by one and taught him his lesson by buckling them on with her own hands. First came the breast- and back-plates, the pauldrons and gorget, the vam-braces and rear-braces. Then she made him stand up.

"You may call that half-harness; a man can move lightly and fight on foot, but when bowmen are about, a man-at-arms should be sheathed from top to toe."

Next she buckled on tassets, loin-guard, cuishes, greaves and solerets, set the salade on his head, and slung the green shield by its strap about his neck.

"Now, man of the sword!"

She stood back and surveyed him.

"Yes, it is better than I had hoped. You are a bigger man than my poor brother, but the harness covers you. Of course you should be wearing a wadded coat to save all chafing, and hose of good wool."

Her eyes lit up as she looked him over, and she held her head proudly.

"I have no spear to give you, though I doubt not that you will make a better beginning with the sword—if needs be. Try the joints, Martin."

He walked up and down before her, raised his arms, spread them wide, folded them over his chest. He seemed made for such heavy harness; the strong, sweeping movements of his limbs were not crabbed or clogged by it.

"The thing is like an iron skin."

"Ah! it was made by a fine armorer. The joints are perfect. And the weight of it?"

"I'll swear I could run or leap."

"You are fresh as yet. A man must wear such harness for a day to learn where it irks him. And so I am thinking that I will leave you to master it. There is work for me in the Forest."

He unhelmed himself, and his blue eyes looked at her questioningly.

"What! You are venturing abroad?"

"Yes; I shall take the horse, and your wallet full of food."

"Why must you go?"

"Why, brother-in-arms, because we are not the only people on God's earth who thirst to humble the Lord of Troy. We have friends in the Forest, and I must see them—take counsel, and plan what can be done. They were waiting for friends from France, and for poor Gilbert to give the word."

He answered her with sudden fire.

"I carry your brother's sword and wear his harness. It is my right to go."

She smiled at him with quiet eyes.

"Dear man, that would not help us; you could not prove, as yet, that you are in the secret. Besides, all the wheels of it are in my head. I shall ride to Badger Hill and see John Falconer; he holds the reins in the Forest."

"But what of the Lord of Troy? Those dead men——"

“What does he know as yet? He may send out riders, but I know the Forest better than any man that Roger Bland can count on. I shall not be caught in a snare. Moreover, Martin Valliant, I leave you to guard our stronghold and the precious gear in that cellar.”

He was very loth to let her go alone, and bitterly against it, though he saw the wisdom of her argument.

“My heart mislikes this venture.”

“You run to meet a ghost,” she said. “I shall come to no harm, believe me.”

She had her way, and he went to open the gate and lower the bridge while she put on a cloak and hood, and filled the wallet with food. She joined him on the causeway, where he stood scanning the woods mistrustfully.

“I would to God I might go with you.”

Her eyes looked into his.

“Your heart goes with me. Bear with that harness, for your bones will ache not a little. And keep good guard.”

He watched her cross the grassland toward the thicket where they had hidden the horse. Woodmere seemed to lack sunlight of a sudden, and his heart felt heavy when the trees hid her.

Nor were Martin’s fears for her safety the mere idle qualms of a man in love. There was a saddling of horses at Troy Castle, and Fulk de Lisle, Roger Bland’s bravo, was shut up with him in my lord’s closet.

Vance’s archer man, who had escaped Martin Valliant’s spade, had come in the night before, after losing his way in the Forest. His tale lost nothing in the telling. Mellis Dale had stabbed the Forest Warden with her poniard, and her paramour, the priest, had then beaten him, and John Bunce, to death. If my lord doubted it, let him send men to the Black Moor, and they would find the bodies.

So Fulk de Lisle had his orders. He was a gay, swashbuckling devil, very handsome, very debonair, a great man with his weapons. He stood before the Lord of Troy, leaning on his sword, his black hair curled under his flat red hat, his sword belt bossed with gold. He wore no armor save a cuirass, and light greaves; the blue sleeves of his doublet were puffed with crimson; his hose were striped red and blue.

“Take thirty men; let them ride in three troops. Go yourself with one troop to the Black Moor; send Peter Rich with ten men to Badger Hill, and Swartz with the rest to Woodmere. I have sent messengers to Gawdy Town.

I want the wench and the priest, both of them. And Vance's body had better be brought in."

Fulk de Lisle turned to go. This was work that pleased him. The Forest had been dull and law-abiding for many months.

"Wait!"

Fulk faced about.

"My lord?"

"How do you think to know the girl when you see her?"

"They say she is dark and vixenish, with eyes that bid a man stand back, a well-favored wench."

"Tush! Any pretty jade would do for you, man!"

"Oldham, the archer, can recognize them both."

"He cannot be in three places at once, Sir Fulk de Lisle."

"He shall go with me. Swartz and Rich shall have orders to take and bring in any likely looking damsel."

"Yes, leave it at that. Waste no time. I am not patient when such tricks are played me."

So Fulk de Lisle and his men rode out from Troy Castle. They were lightly armed for fast riding, and ten of them shouldered cross-bows instead of spears. They kept together till they reached Red Heath, where Peter Rich and Swartz broke off with their two troops with guides for Woodmere and Badger Hill.

Meanwhile Mellis was on her way to John Falconer's house at Badger Hill. She sighted it about nine o'clock, a great, low, black-beamed, white-plastered place, walled around with gray stone, on the side of a sandy hill. Fir woods, dark as midnight, climbed skywards behind it; the farm lands lay in the valley to the south, but elsewhere the soil was poor, and grew nothing but gorse and heather.

Mellis rode over the heath and up the hill to the house. A gawk of a boy, who was cleaning harness outside the stable doorway, stared at her with a face like sodden dough. She reined up in the courtyard and called to him.

"Is Master Falconer here?"

"Sure!"

The boy never budged.

"Tell Master Falconer that I am waiting."

"Who be—I?"

“Run, you dolt, or I will get you a whipping.”

He vanished down a slope that led under one wing of the house, and in half a minute John Falconer came out to her. He was like the hill he lived on —a gray badger of a man, grim, reticent, yet kindly. His short neck made the breadth of his shoulders more apparent. His legs were bowed and immensely strong. John Falconer was a piece of the Forest. His hair and beard were the color of beech mast, sanded with gray.

“Do you know me?”

His eyes brightened like a dog’s.

“God’s death! Is it you?”

“My own and very self. And poor Gilbert—you have heard?”

He looked grim.

“God hearten you, child! But what has happened?”

The boy reappeared, and proceeded to stare at them, while he picked his teeth with a straw. Nor was John Falconer aware of the youngster’s presence until he saw Mellis’s eyes prompting him to turn his head.

The man of Badger Hill gave a kind of growl, and the child disappeared with a flutter of brown legs.

“I had to find you, John, but I am loth to be seen here by any stray fool.”

“The men are in the fields.”

“But that boy?”

“He has no tongue when it pleases me.”

She glanced at the pine woods.

“If your dinner can wait I will talk to you up there.”

He nodded.

“Wise wench!”

Mellis fastened her horse to a tree, and she and John Falconer walked to and fro along one of the black aisles. She had much to tell him, and he seemed to grow grimmer the longer he listened. His comments were short, gruff growls and an occasional terse judgment.

“Vance dead! May he burn like pitch! The priest turned outlaw! What next? You have made him your man? Nay—I mislike that. A black Benedictine! Lord, but we are in for a storm!”

John Falconer frightened most people, but he did not frighten Mellis. She had known him since she was a toddler of three, to be picked up and carried on his shoulder.

“Whether you like it or not, John, these things cannot be helped. Vance has made us run when we would have walked. As to Martin Valliant, I would stake my right hand on his keeping faith with us. And now—will you rally to us? We can hold Woodmere till the whole Forest flaunts the Red Rose.”

“I would we had word from France.”

“It cannot be helped. If our people are loth to move—well, I will disappear, go and live in one of those old quarry holes by the Rondel.”

He answered her doggedly.

“No. I am with you, if I lose my old head for it. I am not so young as I was, and I would get my blow in at Roger Bland before I am stiff in the back. I will ride out to-night and warn our friends, and by to-morrow we shall be able to throw a garrison into Woodmere.”

“Stubborn, trusty oak!”

Falconer smiled grimly.

“There are many men who lust to feel their poniards in Roger Bland’s throat. I pray that mine may have that honor.”

Mellis did not tarry there much longer. Her work was done for the day; she could leave the Forest folk to John Falconer. She chose a different track for her homeward ride—a way that plunged through the pine woods and turned south again by Witch’s Cross. And she was saved by her caution, for half an hour after she had left Badger Hill Peter Rich and his men came riding along the track she had used in the morning.

They found John Falconer at his dinner, and well warned as to their business. He was bluff and easy with Peter Rich, had ale drawn for the men and water for their horses.

Rich did not beat about his business.

“This is a hanging job for any fool who meddles. We are after old Dale’s daughter.”

“Tut, man! She has been in France these seven years.”

“That is a good bit of brag, John Falconer. Come, now; I have no wish to ride the high horse; the girl has been here; let us have the truth.”

Falconer told his lie with square-faced hardihood.

“I have not seen Mellis Dale for seven years. You can search the house.”

Rich had it searched to salve his conscience. His men found nothing—not even the stable boy, who was shut up in the venison hutch in a dark

corner of the larder, and far too much in terror of John Falconer to betray himself.

Peter Rich drank ale while his men were at work. He took his failure philosophically, and got back into the saddle.

"It has saved me pulling you by the beard, John Falconer."

"My beard may be at your service—some day."

They grinned at each other like fierce dogs, and Peter Rich rode off. But he left two men in the woods to watch the place, which was a trick of no great moment, for John Falconer guessed that he would be watched.

"Thank God the girl left betimes, and by the other road. And God grant she may not find a trap at Woodmere House."

Chapter XXII

Martin Valliant was as restless as a dog whose master had gone out and left him chained to his kennel.

His activities were various and many that morning. He took off his arm-plates, covered his breast-plate with a sack, and completed the walling up of the kitchen gateway. The defense of the causeway and the bridge exercised him still further, and he built a rough ladder and stage to one of the loopholes of the gate-house, so that a man with a bow could command the bridge. The matter of archery piqued him to try what skill he had left. He raised the roof stone of the cellar, searched out a bow and some arrows, and going up on the leads of the tower, tried shooting at a bush on the far side of the mere. Five arrows missed the mark, but the sixth got home. And this testing of his skill taught him something of value, in that he discovered the tower to be the right and proper place for a watchman. He could scan the woods, the whole of the valley, and the island, and see into nearly every corner of the ruined house itself. The battlements were breast high, and gave good cover for a man with a bow.

His armor was beginning to sit heavy on him, for he was raw to it; but as to humoring his body, that was a surrender that he refused to make. He returned to the courtyard, took his sword, and practiced striking and thrusting at an imaginary mark. It was a “hand and a half” sword, heavy, and long in the blade, but very finely balanced. To Martin it felt no heavier than a willow wand; he played with it half the morning, cutting off the heads of nettles, learning to judge his distances and the sweep of a full-armed blow. From time to time he climbed the tower and took a view of the woods and the valley.

The sun stood at noon when Martin Valliant caught his first glimpse of the Lord of Troy’s gentry. He was on the leads of the tower and looking toward the great beech wood when he saw a man skulking under the trees. The fellow wore the Troy livery of green and silver, and carried a cross-bow on his shoulder.

Martin kept very still, and the steel of his helmet may have toned with the gray stone of the battlements, for the man with the cross-bow did not appear to see him. He came out from the wood shade into the open, and

stood awhile looking at the island and the house. Then he put a horn to his lips and blew a short blast.

Martin was still asking himself whether the man was an enemy or a friend, when Swartz and his troop came riding out of the beech wood. The sun flashed on their breast-plates and helmets, and on the points of their spears. Swartz, mounted on a roan horse, and wearing a tabard of green and silver, rode a little ahead of his men.

Martin crouched low, watching them. He had no doubt now as to whence these gentry had come and as to what their business was. They were from Troy Castle, adventurous rogues, the scum of the Yorkist armies, for Roger Bland had good cause to keep a crowd of bullies around him. He was no born lord; men had not served his father before him; the fealty sworn to him was lip service; he paid with gold for such faith as men would sell.

This bunch of spears came trotting across the grassland, their horses' hoofs beating the golden pollen from the flowers. They reined in about a hundred paces from the mere, and sat in a half circle, scanning the newly built gate and the bridge, things that betrayed that Woodmere was not deserted.

Swartz gave an order, and two men pricked away and posted themselves at either end of the mere. The rest dismounted; two who carried cross-bows wound up the winches and stood with the bolts ready on the cord. One of them marked down Martin on the tower, and calling to Swartz, pointed out what he saw.

Swartz rode nearer, staring upwards under his hand. Nor did Martin play at hide and seek. The men had seen him; the game had begun.

"Hullo, there! Open, in the name of the King!"

Martin kept silent.

"Hullo! You on the tower, let the bridge down and open the gate, or we shall have to break it for you."

Martin was not to be drawn. His eyes kept watch while his thought went racing through the woods toward Mellis. Had she been taken? And even if they had not taken her, her peril was still very desperate. She might come riding out of the beech wood and betray herself to these men. They were well mounted, and her old brown horse would stand no chance in such a chase. He sweated at the very thought of her being dragged down by this rough pack.

Swartz was still shouting, but his voice seemed a long way off. Martin caught the words, but they had no more significance than the scolding of a

fish-wife. If he could only get to Mellis, warn her! But the futility of such a plan was self-apparent directly he considered it. If he swam the mere he would have to swim it naked; he would be seen, and either be killed or captured. No; salvation did not lie that way. He remembered her charge to him, "Keep good guard," and the charge helped him to a decision. It was his affair to keep these men out of Woodmere, and to hold the place, if one man could hold it against ten.

Swartz had given over shouting. He shook his fist at the tower, and rode down boldly to examine the bridge. There was no passage that way without much labor; Swartz saw that plainly, and rode back again to his men.

But he was an old "free-lance," and very determined. He meant to enter Woodmere before sunset, or know the reason why.

"Pounds and Littlejohn, you two men can swim. Off with your harness and clothing; take poniards with you, and see what is to be found over yonder."

The men looked glum.

"Thunder, get to it, you dogs! Are you afraid of a girl and a monk? You can run fast enough naked, if the monk puts the fear of God into you."

The two fellows began to strip, and Martin saw how the first assault threatened him. He had his bow and half a dozen arrows with him, and there was no hesitation in his eyes.

He saw the two men come haltingly toward the mere, while their fellows roared jests at them.

"Lord, but Jack Pounds has last year's shirt on him."

"Yoicks, see Littlejohn mincing like a girl! More spunk, Thomas!"

"Don't frighten the lady, Jack! Be gentle."

The men waded into the shallows, and took the water together, swimming side by side with their poniards between their teeth. Martin had his chance and took it, though he shot rather to discourage than to kill. The arrow struck the water a yard from Littlejohn's head.

Shouts went up from the gentry who were watching. One of the cross-bowmen let fly, and the bolt struck the stone coping behind which Martin was sheltering himself.

He heard Swartz cursing, and shaking his fist, for the two swimmers had lost all stomach for so bald and naked an adventure. They had turned back, and were splashing toward the shallows.

Swartz met them on the bank, and threatened them with the flat of his sword.

"You craven swine!"

He was not loved because of his stern temper.

"Swim the foul pond yourself!" said one of them. "We are not paid to be speared like fish."

Swartz's blood was up and his ambition kindled. Roger Bland did not grudge gold to those who served him well, and Swartz saw that the luck was with him, and that he might capture the prize before De Lisle or Rich could come to share it. So he sat down before Woodmere, had the horses taken back into the shade, and posted his two cross-bowmen to mark the house. Swartz was an old campaigner, and always carried a hatchet slung to his saddle; it would serve in this crisis. He sent six of his men into the woods to fell trees, while he himself rode his horse at a walk around and around the mere, preferring to trust his own eyes when a trap had to be watched.

Martin could have shot at him, but he respected Swartz's courage. These gentlemen were not to be scared away by a few arrows; they were taking the business in hand with methodical seriousness, and the outlook was not hopeful. Yet Martin was conscious of a feeling of grim elation; his wits were taut as a bow string; he had thrown himself with a cool head and steady eyes into the great game of war.

Swartz's purpose soon explained itself. The men came down from the woods, carrying the trunks of young trees, till they had a dozen or more, stacked ready at the end of the causeway. They were going to throw a bridge across the gap, batter the gate down, and take the place by assault.

Martin knelt on the leads of the tower, rubbing his chin, and watching the menace taking shape. He was thinking hard, how he could best meet the attack; whether he should try to hold the gate against them, or make his stand in the tower.

Happening to glance at the great beech wood, he saw something that drove every other thought out of his head. Mellis was there, looking down on the place from behind the trunk of a beech tree. For a moment or two her white face and green gown remained in view, and then vanished into the wood's gloom.

Martin felt his heart beating hard under his ribs. He looked at Swartz and the men. They were intent on the work they had in hand; they had not seen Mellis.

Chapter XXIII

Martin Valliant did some mighty rapid thinking. That glimpse of Mellis's face had stirred his manhood to a kind of Norse frenzy. Yet he kept his wits unclouded; and this was the way he reasoned the thing out.

"They will build that bridge of theirs. I might shoot one or two of them through the loophole, but they have cross-bows and will mark the loop. When they have built their bridge they will be able to batter down the gate, and while I am busy there, one or two of them might swim the mere and come at me from behind. They are in light harness. This armor of mine should turn a cross-bow bolt. I will try to shoot one or two of them, and then open the gate, let down my bridge, and give them battle there or on the causeway."

The audacity of the plan pleased him, for Martin Valliant was discovering in himself the wit and daring of a great fighter. He hung his green shield about his neck, dropped the vizor of his salade, took the bow and arrows and his naked sword, and made straight for the gate-house. The ladder and stage he had built gave him command of the loophole. And his luck and his cunning shook hands, for he pinked two men, one in the body and the other in the throat, before a cross-bow bolt came stinging through the loophole.

"Two from ten leaves eight."

He scrambled down the ladder, leaving his bow on the stage, and quite calmly and at his leisure unbarred and opened the gate.

Mellis, lying in a patch of young fern on the edge of the beech wood, held her breath and watched him in amazement. For one moment a wild doubt stabbed her; he was a craven, he was going to surrender Woodmere and shirk a fight. The next moment she thought him mad, but she had torn all doubt of him from her heart and thrown it from her with hot scorn. She saw Martin let down his bridge, and take his stand just outside the gate, with the point of his sword on the ground and his hands resting on the pommel. He was a white and challenging figure holding the bridge and the gate, daring Swartz and his men to come at him and try their fortune.

One of the cross-bowmen fired a shot; the bolt struck Martin's pauldron and glanced harmlessly aside.

"Drop that—drop that!"

Swartz roared at the fellow. He was a tough old rogue, but he had a soldier's love of courage.

"One man against eight, and you want to fight him at fifty paces!"

He pushed his horse along the causeway, and looked curiously at Martin Valliant. The figure in white harness puzzled him; it did not seem to belong to a runaway monk.

"Who are you, my friend?"

Martin answered him.

"Come and see."

Swartz grinned.

"By God—and we will! Bid that Dale wench drop her bow, and my fellows shall not use their arbalists. We will make a straight fight of it, Master Greenshield."

The first man to try his luck was a little stunted fellow who had been a smith and was immensely strong in the arms and back, but a fool in the choice of his weapons. He came footing it cautiously along the narrow bridge, with his spear held pointed at Martin. He had some idea of feinting at Martin's throat, of dropping the point and getting the shaft between the taller man's legs and tripping him. The trick might have worked if Martin Valliant had not lopped off the spear-head with a sudden sweep of his sword, caught the staff in his left hand, and swung the fellow into the water. The smith could not swim, and was drowned; but Martin had no time to think of being merciful.

A tall fellow charged him while he was still on the beam, and it was a question of which man gave the bigger blow and knocked the other into the mere. Martin's sword had that honor. Swartz's second gentleman fell across the beam with a red wound in his throat, struggled for a few seconds, and then slipped dying into the mere.

Swartz was biting his beard.

"What—there is no man here who can stand up to a monk! Big Harry, there: have a swash at him with your pole-ax."

Big Harry had the face and temper of a bull. He made a rush along the bridge, swung his pole-ax, and struck at Martin's head. The salade threw the point aside, and the shaft struck Martin's shoulder. He had shortened his sword and thrust hard at the big man. The point went through Big Harry's midriff, and the mere hid a third victim.

Swartz rolled out of the saddle and drew his sword.

“Stand back! This fellow is too good for such raw cattle. I have fought many fights in my time.”

Then Martin did a knightly thing. He went to meet Swartz, crossing the beam, so that they met on the broad causeway where neither man could claim any advantage.

Swartz saluted him.

“I take that to heart, my friend. It was gallantly thought of. One word before we fight it out like gentlemen. Who the devil are you?”

Martin kept silent.

“You will not tell me? I must find it out for myself. Good. And so—to business.”

Swartz was lightly armed, and he trusted to his swordsmanship, for he was very clever with the sword. But his swashbuckling craftiness proved useless against a man harnessed as Martin Valliant was harnessed, and who fought like a young madman. It was like aiming delicate and cunning blows at a man of iron, a man who struck back furiously without troubling to defend himself. Swartz, with blood in his eyes, plunged to escape that whistling sword, closed with Martin, and tried to throw him; but Martin’s gadded fist beat him off and sent him heavily to the ground.

Swartz lay still, while the five men who had stood to watch this battle royal fumbled with their weapons and looked at each other out of the corners of their eyes.

“Try the cross-bow on him, Jack.”

“Shoot, man, and we’ll push at him with our spears.”

But Martin Valliant did not leave them the right to choose how and when they would attack him. His blood was on fire. He came leaping along the causeway, a white figure of shining wrath, and those five men turned tail and fled incontinently toward the woods. Martin did not follow them, but went back to the place where Swartz was lying. The old swashbuckler was sitting up, dazed, ghastly, trying to wipe the blood out of his eyes with his knuckles.

The man in Martin leaped out to the man he had wounded. This fellow with the black beard was made of finer stuff than the lousels who had taken to their heels. He grinned at Martin Valliant, and tried to rise.

“Lord, my friend; but am I also to feed the fishes?”

Martin helped him to his feet.

“That blood must be staunched. Those rogues should have stood and fought for you.”

“Let them run. Master Greenshield, methinks you have broken my brain pan with that blow of yours. Let me lie down on something soft. I feel sick as a dog that has eaten grass.”

Martin sheathed his sword, picked up Swartz in his arms, and carried him over the footbridge. He remembered his own bed of bracken at the foot of the stairs, and he bore the wounded man there and laid him on the fern.

“Thanks, Greenshield. My head’s full of molten metal. No—let me lie. I’ll just curse and burrow into the fern, I have had worse wounds than this in my time.”

He stretched out a hand suddenly.

“No bad blood—no grudges! I’m your prisoner; I play fair.”

Martin gripped his hand hard and went back to the gate.

Mellis had been lying in the bracken, listening to the rout of Swartz’s gentry in the wood behind her. For five men they made a fine noise and flutter in getting to horse, and it was like the flight of a small army, what with their shouting and their quarreling as to what should be done. She heard them galloping away into the Forest, for they were in frank agreement upon the main issue, and that was to have nothing more to do with that devil of a man in white harness who held the bridge at Woodmere.

Mellis rose up, and went down toward the mere, her heart full of Martin’s victory. He came out through the gate as she reached the causeway and crossed the footbridge to meet her. He had taken off his salade, and so came to her bare-headed, flushed, brave-eyed, and triumphant.

The sheen of her eyes opened the gates of heaven. She was exultant, glorious, a woman whose love had taken fire.

“Martin Valliant—oh, brave heart! What a fight was that! I thought you mad when you came out on the bridge.”

He could find nothing to say to her, but his eyes gave her an answer.

“You little thought that I was watching you.”

This made him smile.

“Yes, I knew that you were up yonder. I saw you looking down from behind a tree. I think I could have beaten twenty men—because you were watching me.”

“Am I so fierce?”

“No, it is not that,” he said, quite simply.

Mellis knew what was in his heart, and the cry that echoed to it in her own. She looked at him with a sudden, tremulous light in her eyes.

"I would have a man brave and staunch—for my sake. It is very sweet to a woman when she is lonely."

Martin dared not look at her for a moment. He was her man so utterly that he could have kissed the dust from her feet, for the love in him was great and passionate and holy.

"I did what my heart bade me," he said, "and not to shame this sword."

"Yes, give me the sword."

"It is all bloody."

"What matter. It is but a christening."

He drew the sword from its scabbard and gave it into her hands. And Mellis kissed the cross of the hilt, and held it for him to take.

"That is a second sacrament," he said; "I shall need no other crucifix."

They entered Woodmere, and Martin raised the bridge and closed the gate.

"You took a prisoner."

He remembered Swartz, brain-sick and groaning.

"Their captain! A good fighter—and a generous. I must wash his wound; and if I could find linen——"

"You shall have linen. I love that softness in you, comrade; good soldiers are made so."

She turned aside through the postern into the garden, and Martin went to look at Swartz. He was sitting up, holding his head between his hands, but the blood had ceased flowing.

"Ah, Brother Greenshield, get me out into the sunlight. I would rather lie on the green grass—under those apple trees. This place smells of the coffin."

Martin helped him up.

"That wound of yours must be dressed. Mistress Mellis is finding me linen."

Swartz put an arm around him.

"Deo gratias, but I guess I owe this crack of the poll to her. Well, I bear her no ill-will. And I have a liking for you, Greenshield, a man after my own heart."

"We were trying to kill each other half an hour ago."

"Lord, man, are we the worse for that?"

Martin helped Swartz out into the orchard and propped him against a tree. And there Mellis found them like brethren in arms when she brought linen and red wine.

"I have found you linen, Martin Valliant."

But she did not tell him that she had torn it from her own shift.

Swartz had a look at her as she turned to go.

"Saints, brother, but some things are well lost for a woman."

Martin's eyes grew grim.

"Tush, man, I did not speak lightly. Never flare out at Peter Swartz; he is too old a ruffian."

Martin fetched water from the mere in his salade and washed and dressed Swartz's head for him. He gave him wine to drink, and Swartz was glad of it.

"Zounds, that's good. Now, by my soul, I think I will spend the night here, out of the dew, and with the stars blinking above. I have a love of the green earth, Martin Valliant; I was not bred in a city. And look you here, man——"

Martin gazed at him steadily.

"You took me in fair fight, and here I shall stay, so long as you hold the place. I swear to keep faith, and to play no tricks on you. And here's the hand of a soldier."

Martin accepted the pledge.

"My heart trusts you," he said.

"One word, lad: never trust the man I serve—or did serve—Roger Bland, if you have him as you have me now. I am a war-dog, but he is a cold snake. Put your heel on his head, and spare no weight."

Chapter XXIV

The sun sank low in the west, and the whole world was very still. Peter Swartz had fallen asleep under his apple tree in the orchard, and the white blossom scattered itself on him as he slept.

A great wonder had overtaken Martin Valliant. He had eased himself of his harness and gone down to a little grassy place where willows cast a net of shadows over the brown water. He stood there, leaning against the trunk of a willow tree, listening to the birds singing in the valley that shone like a great bowl of magic gold. The west was all afire, and throwing a strange glory over the woods, so that the tall trees seemed topped with flame. Not a breath of wind stirred in the leaves or grasses.

And Martin Valliant's heart was full of a strange, listening awe. He looked at the still water, the burning trees, the glimmering meadows, and there seemed no sadness anywhere, but only deep exultation and a sob of wonder in the throat. His face shone under the soft green of the willows. This place was the new Paradise, and a woman's eyes looked out of the window of Heaven.

A voice called to him.

"Martin, Martin!"

A spasm of emotion shook Martin Valliant's soul. He spread his arms, and raised his face to the sunset. If to love a woman was sin, then God was a devil, and the Lord Christ had never walked the earth.

He heard Mellis come singing through the orchard where Peter Swartz slept under the apple trees. The sound of her voice quickened his love almost to anguish. He dared not go to her for the moment or meet those dark eyes of hers.

"Martin Valliant!"

She came out from the shadows of the orchard, and saw him standing there, his right arm covering his face. Her heart faltered for a beat or two, and then quickened with a rush of wonder and awe.

Mellis went toward him, her eyes mysterious and full of soft, tremulous light. Martin heard her footsteps and her gown sweeping the grass. He uncovered his face, and it was all white and strange and radiant.

For a moment they looked at each other with mute timidity. There seemed nothing that could be said, for the great mystery of life had touched them.

Then Mellis spoke, and her words were no louder than a light wind moving in the trees.

"I do not know what the day has done to me. But I could sit in the long grass and listen to the birds singing, and watch the sunset on the water, and never speak nor move."

"It is very wonderful," he said, "for all the joy of the world seems in this valley."

"I could touch no food to-night but honey and white bread, and moisten my lips with the dew."

She heard Martin draw in his breath.

"And presently the soft dusk will come, and the day will die. But there will be the stars, and a silver sheen on the water, and a silence that waits—and listens——"

Her face dreamed.

"Come."

He followed her, found himself at her side, moving through the long grass that rustled under their feet. He was no more a body, but a soul that burned with yearning and a great white glory. And Mellis's hair was as black as the night.

She led him into the garden, and there he saw their table strewn with flowers. She had set out bread, and wine, and honey. His helmet lay in the midst on a cushion of green leaves, and she had bound it about with a spray of red roses taken from the old rose bush.

Mellis pointed a finger.

"Even the roses bloomed for us to-day. And there is your crown of victory."

He stretched out a hand and touched hers timidly, as though he were afraid.

"Mellis——"

Her hand closed on his with a sudden thrill of tenderness.

"Is not life good? Do you fear to look at me, Martin?"

"You have stepped out of heaven," he said, "and the great light of you blinds my eyes."

They sat down at the board, but though the bread was white and the honey sweet, little of either passed their lips. It fell to old Swartz to make an end of the loaf, and to sweeten his black beard with the honey.

"Deo gratias," he said when Martin brought him his supper; "but I have been asleep and dreaming, and in my dreams I thought I heard a woman singing. You can leave me the wine bottle. I shall not play the swine with it."

He looked shrewdly at Martin Valliant's face, and saw that the green island had become a place of enchantment.

"Get you gone, Sir Greenshield. I shall be ready to sleep again, and this apple tree will serve as a tent. Black beards are not for such as you, and perhaps I was not dreaming when I slept."

He cut himself a great hunch of bread.

"Think of the blood I have to make good! Take your youth, man, and thank God for it. You are welcome to any glory you have got out of the bloodying of my poll!"

Swartz watched Martin Valliant walk back toward the garden.

"His head is in Paradise," he said to himself, "but he had the heart to remember my supper. May the wench be kind to him. It is all a midsummer madness—this love. Well, give me the madness, say I; good wine and a comely woman. The worms can have me when a wench will no longer give me a glint of the eye."

Mellis had brought her lute with her from the Black Moor, and she had not touched its strings since she had sung to the burgher revelers in the tavern at Gawdy Town. And somehow all her grief and travail and yearning seemed to melt into an exultation that was like the beauty of an April day, a race of sunlight and of shadow.

As the sunset reddened, and the black bats began to flutter around on noiseless wings, the sound of her lute went over the water. Old Swartz heard it, and then her voice, deep, and strange, and very sweet, warming the heart like wine.

She looked down at Martin lying in the grass at her feet.

"Is there sin in my singing—when my brother is dead? Am I forgetting because my mouth is not silent?"

The sunset lit up Martin's face. His eyes were gazing into the distance, eyes that questioned the earth and heaven—and life and the hypocrisies of men. It was as though the gates of a new wisdom had been opened to him. A man may think himself into hell, and feel himself into heaven.

"What is sin?"

She smiled at him.

"Such words from your lips!"

"I see a vision," he said slowly, "of the beauty of the earth and the mystery thereof. Shall I quarrel with the apple because it comes from the bloom of the tree? Do not the beasts fight for their mates, and is there not a nobleness in valor? The good knight rides out, and his strength is for the service of those who are oppressed. As for hiding in a cell and starving one's body—such a life begins to smell of cowardice."

She raised her head proudly.

"We are rebels, Master Valliant, you and I. Say, have I lost you your soul?"

"No, by God; but you have found it for me, and set it free. I am no longer afraid of the shadows of sick thoughts."

She swept her fingers over the strings, and began to sing to him as the dusk gathered. The woods melted into a cloud of blackness; the red of the sky changed to amber; moths came to feed from the white flowers in the grasses of the wild garden.

Between the snatches of song she leaned toward him, and he knelt to meet her.

"What if we die to-morrow? What can the Lord of Troy take from us?"

"No man shall take you while I live."

"And in the Forest the birds sing at dawn."

"And in the night I lie before your door to guard it with my body."

They looked long into each other's eyes.

"Martin Valliant," she said very softly, "Martin Valliant."

And he bowed himself and kissed her feet.

Chapter XXV

John Falconer of Badger Hill was too shrewd a gentleman to betray himself or his affairs to the lurkers whom John Rich had left in the woods to watch him. Falconer made no stir about the place, left his men working in the fields, and kept his own counsel.

"If the dogs have been busy about here," he said to himself, "we will give them no cause to hunt us. There are other parts of the Forest where men can muster and march to help Mellis Dale."

Yet he was much troubled about Mellis, and what might have happened at Woodmere in her absence. Roger Bland's men might have seized the place and made it a trap for her. John Falconer had no faith in any runaway monk, even though he happened to be old Valliant's son.

When night came he went quietly to the stable with a wallet full of food, saddled and bridled his horse, and rode out by the way of the pine woods. The moon would not be up for an hour; the woods were dark as a pit; he saw nothing of Rich's men, nor did they see anything of him. When he was well away from Badger Hill, John Falconer tied up his horse and sat down to wait for the moon.

Old forester though he was, Falconer missed his way that night, and the sun had been up an hour before he reached the hills above Woodmere Vale. Martin Valliant had been up and stirring before the dawn, for love and his harness had left him but little sleep.

Mellis had taken the watch, and had bidden him unbuckle his harness and sleep in the upper room; but Martin had refused to take off his breast and back plates, gorget and cuishes, lest Roger Bland's men should try to steal into the place at night and catch him unprepared.

"When your friends rally here," he had said, "then I can rest out of this iron skin."

He was minded to better his footbridge, and broaden it with two lighter pieces of planking so that a horse could be brought across. His forethought proved prophetic, for when the first grayness of the dawn spread over the valley he saw three horses quietly cropping the grass not fifty yards from the bridge-head. One of them was Swartz's roan; the others had been lost by the five men in the flurry of their flight.

Swartz's roan seemed to be a companionable beast. He came down to the bridge-head, and stood there whinnying and watching Martin at his work. He was still saddled and bridled, as were his two comrades who went on cropping the grass.

Martin Valliant looked at Swartz's horse as he had never looked at a horse before. The creature had a new meaning for him; it was no ambling pad, no fat palfrey, but a beast built to carry a man to battle, one of the strong things of the earth whose strength had to be mastered. Martin left his bridge-building for something more knightly. He wanted to ride Swartz's horse, to feel himself astride of that brown body, to know himself the creature's master.

The roan seemed as ready as Martin Valliant. He was playful, full of zest, and went off at a canter directly Martin was in the saddle. But the man was the lord. He made the beast drop to a trot, and then worked him to a gallop over the dew-wet grasslands between the water and the woods.

So when John Falconer came to the edge of the beech wood he saw a young man in half armor galloping a horse furiously up and down the valley, and handling him like no novice. Horse and man were in excellent temper, the one delighting in riding, the other in being ridden.

John Falconer kept himself in the shade, and looked down on Woodmere. He noticed the two horses feeding by the mere, that the bridge was down and the gate open, and for the moment he had good cause to fear that the Lord of Troy's men had taken the place, and that this galloper on the horse was one of them. Then he saw a woman appear on the leads of the tower, and knew her to be Mellis.

She watched Martin Valliant and the roan horse, and waved a hand to him as he came cantering back from the lower end of the valley. Falconer tugged at his beard with thumb and forefinger.

"So this is our outlaw monk! The fellow has learned to sit a horse."

He rode out from the beech wood, and the two horses converged upon the bridge, Martin feeling for his sword and calling himself a fool for galloping about unarmed, with the bridge down and the gate open.

He saw Mellis waving a scarf at the new-comer, and guessed that all was well. Falconer had reined in by the bridge-head and was waiting for the man on the roan horse. The master of Badger Hill had a shrewd eye for the shape of a man, the color of his eyes, and the set of his head. He could look inwards, judge without favor; and though he had no desire to be pleased, Martin Valliant pleased him.

These two men stared into each other's eyes with a certain searching and haughty curiosity.

"So this is Roger Valliant's son? You are overtrustful, young man, to go galloping up and down with that gate open. Had I been an enemy, I could have put a shaft into you."

Martin flushed.

"I have called myself a fool for it," he said bluntly, "but the horse came and whinnied at me, and I had to ride him."

"Then it is no horse of yours?"

"No, Peter Swartz's."

"Peter Swartz's! Such a tale hangs crooked!"

"He is wounded and a prisoner."

Then Mellis came out to them with eyes that smiled at old Falconer's grim and puzzled face. He had to be told everything, how Martin had fought with Peter Swartz and his men, beaten them, and taken Swartz prisoner. And still John Falconer was not pleased. He had ridden out with a fixed distrust of Martin Valliant in his heart, and being an obstinate and dogged gentleman, he was in no hurry to surrender his distrust. Martin had tied up Swartz's horse and gone back to his bridge-building.

"Very pretty—very pretty. But the fat's in the fire, thanks to our champion's valor. 'Twould have been almost better to have played fox and let them have the place."

"And what would you have said of Martin Valliant if he had made no fight for it?"

"Praised his cunning, no doubt!"

"No; you would have called him a coward and a traitor."

She was smiling, but there was a glitter of hot partisanship in her eyes, and she was ready to stand by her man and speak for him.

"This is not like you, John Falconer, to quibble and sneer!"

"Mistress, when our heads depend on the adventure, our wits are apt to fly out hot-temperedly. Nor am I pleased that we should owe yonder fellow a service."

"Then men are less generous than women. Why, I owe life and more to that man; I have taken his vows from him, made of him a murderer in the eyes of the law. Before he saw me—before I blundered into his life—he was God's man, with nothing to fear in the whole world. To-morrow he might hang, because the blood in him was generous."

Falconer looked like an old dog who was trying to take his scolding without a blink of the eyes. He knew that Mellis was in the right, and that it was his own heart that grudged Martin her gratitude.

"Well, well, he will either hang or be knighted. Nor have we any leisure to stand arguing here. I could bring no men with me, for my place is watched."

"Roger Bland is wise by now."

"That's the devil of it. We must get a garrison for Woodmere as soon as we may. Young Blount can call two or three score fellows together with good speed. You and I had better ride at once to Bloody Rood. Your face will count with young Nigel."

She gave him a shrewd look.

"And trust Woodmere to Martin Valliant? He is not so poor a comrade, after all!"

"I spoke hastily. The lad has brave eyes. We can trust him."

"To the death."

So Martin Valliant was left to hold Woodmere, while Mellis mounted her horse and rode with John Falconer to Bloody Rood.

Men called young Blount "Sir Nigel Head-in-air." He was a dark, hawk-faced stripling, very passionate and headstrong, vain, quarrelsome, the fool of any woman who could use her eyes. John Falconer would never have chosen such a fellow as a comrade, but the Blounts had a strong following and had to be considered. Moreover, young Nigel would be ready to gallop on any wild adventure; he had impudence and courage and a sense of his own splendor. Men were wanted at Woodmere. Nigel Blount could be packed off with Mellis to temper his recklessness, while he, John Falconer, went about to raise the Forest.

The morning proved propitious. They found Sir Nigel in the midst of his hounds and his men, ready to start out after a fine hart that had been spotted by his trackers. He was mounted on a black Arab, and his colors were crimson and green. He looked sulky when he saw John Falconer, but Mellis's face put him in a different humor.

"A good day's hunting spoiled, lording!"

"And well spoiled in such a service."

He was ready to tumble into his harness and ride out as Mellis's champion almost before John Falconer had said all he had to say.

“Nothing but a scurvy hedge priest left at Woodmere! Heart of Heaven, but that shall be altered. Leave Woodmere to me, sir.”

The hounds were sent back to the kennels. Young Blount had jacks and steel caps for some of his men, and a score or so bills and boar spears. The men took their bows with them. He mustered eighteen followers, a force that was strong enough to hold Woodmere till the Forest rose in arms.

John Falconer took Mellis aside.

“Watch that young jay. He screams too much. Remember to make him obey you. It should be easy.”

She knew how to queen it over young firebrands like Nigel Blount.

“I shall rule him, John, with one finger. And now, good-by. Woodmere waits for us.”

Chapter XXVI

Five men rode up to the gate of Troy Castle just as the sun was setting in a flare of yellow behind the black towers. These five gentlemen were a little ashamed of themselves, and had dressed up a tale between them to show to the Lord of Troy. Peter Swartz was dead and could not kick their scarecrow to pieces. That devil of a fellow in white harness bulked bigger and bigger in the romance, cutting men in two with one sweep of the sword, and tossing Swartz like a puppy dog into the moat.

"We have run, gossips, and there must be a reason for it, or we shall be damned."

Their unanimity was admirable. My Lord of Troy owed them six months' pay, a shrewd way he had of keeping men at his heels, but he did not concern himself with cowards. These five dogs knew better than to run home with their tails between their legs.

Roger Bland was at supper, a noble function in which all stateliness was properly and finely considered. He had a love of taking his meals in public, of playing at pageantry even among the plates. His wealth showed itself in his gold cups and dishes, his tapestries and dorsers, his linen and silver, the musicians, their coats of blue and green, his crowd of serving men, the profusion of food. All this peacocking had a purpose. Men's senses are conquered and led into subjection by the pomps that paint a picture of power.

Fulk de Lisle had returned and brought in the bodies of Vance and the archer. Rich and his men were back from Badger Hill. Neither of these captains had caught much; the Forest did not lightly surrender its secrets.

Meanwhile those five fugitive worthies had chosen a player and spokesman, a little Welshman with much language and fiery eyes. He was to tell their tale of the attack on Woodmere to Roger Bland, and dress up a few picturesque lies to give the tale a greater appearance of reality.

The news of their coming was brought to my Lord of Troy as he sat at the high table. The page who brought the news had been listening to the Welshman filling the guard-room with sound and fury.

"These fellows say, my lord, that Swartz is dead, and five more with him, and that they were beaten by one man."

My lord was cracking nuts, and picking them out of their shells with precise indifference.

"Who are the men, Ralph?"

It was De Lisle who asked the question.

"Morgan the Welshman, Part, and Simonsby, and fat Horner, and one more."

De Lisle laughed, and nodded at Roger Bland.

"I could have named the men, my lord; spunkless rogues all of them. Morgan would lie the hoofs off Satan."

My Lord of Troy went on cracking nuts.

"Ralph."

"My lord?"

"Bring the men in here, all of them, and let them line up in front of my table."

He was obeyed. The five bold "blades" found themselves standing in a row, while Roger Bland ate his nuts, and looked at them as though they were cattle to be judged. He did not speak, and the five tried not to fidget.

"Question these fellows for me, Sir Fulk de Lisle."

"My lord, with pleasure."

And Fulk de Lisle thrust the bright blade of truth into the belly of their invention.

"So you ran away, my friends?"

They denied it, Morgan the Welshman leading the chorus.

"Then, how is it that you are here?"

Roger Bland smiled like a cynical old priest listening to a confession.

"A very presentable question, sir. Let me amplify it. You found people at Woodmere, Morgan?"

The Welshman tried to get his imagination into its stride, but my lord would not let him gallop.

"You saw no more than one man?"

"A giant, sir, a devil of a fellow in white harness, plated from poll to toes."

"Ah, a paladin! You say that he killed Swartz and five more?"

"He was like an iron bull, my lord."

“And so you ran away! Yes, yes—I have no patience to waste, fool, on your paltry lies. You saw nothing of a woman?”

“Nothing, my lord.”

“Very well. Out with you—out of my sight! Master Rich, come here to me.”

The five slouched out, and John Rich, who was sitting at the far end of the dais table, came and stood behind Roger Bland’s chair.

“My lord?”

“Ah, Master Rich, bend your head nearer. You will take thirty men and such gear as you need, and ride at dawn. I must have this fabulous fellow in white harness. See to it that he does not frighten you all.”

Rich grinned.

“It shall be done, my lord.”

“Man, let it be done. I am beginning to be angry.”

Five minutes later my Lord of Troy took a last sip of sweet wine, washed his hands in perfumed water, and went to his closet. Fulk de Lisle followed at his heels, smiling humorously at the great man’s back.

“Fulk de Lisle.”

“My dear lord?”

“Is there more in this, think you, than meets the eye?”

“The slaying of Vance, sir, was very natural, and I take it that Swartz fell by the same hand. This bastard priest is something of an enigma. How did he come by armor and a sword? Such things do not grow in the Forest.”

Roger Bland’s pale eyelids seemed to flicker.

“We must see the end and bottom of this affair. I have given John Rich the adventure; I give you John Rich. Is that plain to you?”

“Most plain, my lord.”

“See that this business is carried through. I want the Forest’s secret—if it is keeping a secret. I care not how it is come by.”

Fulk de Lisle bowed.

“You have a spacious way, my lord, of sending a gentleman upon your business. We are not cramped and hindered by little abominations of the law. It is an honor to serve you.”

And he went out with the air of a man who knew himself to be shrewder than his master.

Such were the preparations that were maturing at Troy Castle on the night after Martin Valliant's defeat of Swartz and his men. John Rich took the road next morning, while Martin was improving his footbridge, and Mellis was chastening the hot vanities of young Nigel Blount. Martin had brought the three horses over the mere, stabled them in the old dining hall, pulled up the bridge and shut the gate. He took life with great seriousness, but his heart was full of a new song.

Martin was shaping a new oak bar for the garden postern when Peter Swartz came out of the orchard for a gossip. He had slept passably and eaten better, though his legs were none too steady under him.

He squatted on the grass, and watched Martin with a friendly glint in his eyes.

"My noddle still simmers like a boiling pot. What happens to-day, brother?"

"What God wills."

Swartz looked at him intently.

"Fine philosophy, Martin Valliant, but God may leave a man with a noose about his neck. You would say that this is no affair of mine, nor is it, save that I have no lust for a man's blood, or to see him kicking at the end of a rope. The Forest would be healthier than this sweet island."

Martin stood idle, the bill hanging in his hand.

"I am here to serve," he said.

"My friend, you have drunk of the magic cup. A man might wound you, and you would hardly feel it. But my Lord of Troy is no child of dreams. You are but a rat—to be sniffed out by terriers."

"I am not alone."

"Thunder—that's where the trouble lies. This child with the eyes of midnight wonder——"

He shook his fist at Martin.

"No frowns, no haughtiness, good comrade. Is she too miraculous to be spoken of by my lips? Why, by all the devils, have I no heart in me, and no liking for the gallant splendor of youth? You will be attacked to-day, not with ten men, but with fifty."

Martin answered him bluntly.

"She has gone for help. We are not alone."

He stared down at Swartz, and Swartz's eyes met his without flinching.

“So—that is the game! I guessed it. There is the color of a red rose in all this.”

“Guess what you please.”

“A Richmond—a Richmond! The Forest is stirring with the wind, eh? And I am Peter Noside for the moment. Yes, and let me tell you one thing, Martin Valliant, your friends will need to hurry if they are to make this place good. There are cannon at Raychester. Oh, this great and happy madness!”

He rose up, and walked to and fro.

“What an old fool I am, but I could change sides to get a blow at my dear master. Why must some of us always rush to help the man who has his back against the wall? Hallo—hallo!”

Shrill and clear came the scream of a trumpet from the valley. Martin Valliant and Peter Swartz stood looking at each other.

“Troy, by God! And a summons. What did I tell you, comrade?”

Martin dropped the billhook and took his sword, that was leaning against the wall. He stared hard at Swartz, as though to read the man’s soul.

Swartz smiled at him.

“No, I shall not stab you in the back, man; have no fear. Let us go up on the tower and look at the country.”

He followed Martin to the leads, but did not show himself above the wall. Martin was scanning the valley.

“What do you see, brother?”

“A man on a white horse with a green banner, and on it a silver key. There is another man with a trumpet.”

“Troy. What else?”

“A knight in black harness, on a black horse.”

“That would be John Rich. Nothing more?”

“There is a shining of something, back in the beech wood.”

“Steel, man, steel.”

The trumpeter blew a second blast, and John Rich and his banner-bearer rode down nearer to the water. They were scanning the island, and had sighted Martin on the tower.

“A summons, Greenshield.”

“I have nothing to say to them.”

“Then say nothing. They will take to other music.”

Swartz, raising his head to look, saw John Rich turn his horse and ride back slowly to the beech wood, followed by his trumpeter and the man who carried my Lord of Troy's banner.

"Ha, the old fox! John Rich takes his time. You will not see until you do see."

An hour passed, and nothing happened. The beech wood looked black, mysterious, and inscrutable, while Martin stood to arms upon the tower, feeling that the wood above was full of eyes that watched and waited. Swartz had grown restless. His heart was taking sides in the adventure.

"What is the old fox at? I mislike this silence."

Suddenly he heard Martin Valliant give a strange, sharp cry.

"Look!"

He stood rigid, his eyes shining like glass in the sunlight, his forehead all knotted up.

Swartz looked over the battlements, and uttered a robust and honest oath.

"What damnable fool is that?"

Away down the valley young Nigel Blount and Mellis had ridden out from the woods and were crossing the open grassland toward the mere, with Nigel's men straggling as they pleased half a furlong behind them. Young Blount was riding gallantly enough, making his horse cut capers, while he showed what manner of man he was in the saddle. His men were laughing and talking, their bows unstrung, not one of them troubling to keep watch.

"Peacock! Ape! Shout, man, shout! There is a trap set here, if I am not much mistaken."

Martin raised his sword, and flashed it to and fro. He saw Mellis draw rein, and knew that her eyes were on him. He pointed toward the beech wood, but even if she understood his warning it came too late.

Chapter XXVII

The beech wood filled with sudden movement, and its blackness was like a storm cloud sending out a vague and hollow muttering. Dark shapes came hurrying out of the gloom beyond the gray trunks, the shapes of men and horses that took on color, fierceness, life. There was the rattle of harness, the flashing of steel. John Rich and his riders came out at the gallop.

A piece of tapestry seemed unrolled, so swiftly did things happen. The very power of movement was taken away from Martin Valliant. He saw all that passed as though it were in a dream, the black figure of John Rich and his horse going at the gallop with spear leveled, the men behind him strung out in a half circle and all rushing like the wind. There was Mellis's white face, helpless, hesitating, like a piece of apple blossom floating on the blackness of a pool. Young Nigel Blount, sword in air, was shouting to his men, who had turned tail and were running for the shelter of the woods. Then Rich's spear smote right through Nigel Blount's body. Martin heard the lad's scream, saw him twist like a puppet on a wire, and tumble backwards, dragging the point of Rich's spear to the ground. The riders swept around Mellis; she seemed to sink out of sight in the thick of the crowd.

Martin Valliant awoke. He uttered a great cry, and rushed toward the little turret where the stairway opened upon the leads. As he reached it Peter Swartz caught him by the sword belt.

"Stay, you fool!"

Martin tried to thrust him off, but Swartz kept his hold.

"No, no, my friend, knock my teeth out if it pleases you, but if your head's on fire mine had better do the thinking."

"Let go, man."

"And see you rush out there and be ridden down and spitted like that poor popinjay! Thirty to one are heavy odds, Martin Valliant."

"Let go, curse you."

"And hold on, say I. Listen to reason, man, and use your wits. You'll not help that girl by getting yourself killed."

"The strength of God is in me."

“And the brains of a sheep! The game is not lost and won yet, but it will be if you go rushing out like a mad bull. Cunning, man—cunning and patience.”

Martin stood irresolute, his eyes full of wrath and yearning.

“If I must die, I’ll die now, Swartz.”

“Oh, good fool, set your teeth and bide your time! It is no time for dying. What use would a dead man be to the child out yonder? Set your teeth, Martin Valliant; play the grim dog who can watch and wait.”

He laid his arm across Martin’s shoulders and drew him aside.

“Why, man, I’m with you, and you will thank me to-morrow for this. And here are we squabbling and scuffling when we should be watching like hawks. Come—we must match John Rich for cunning.”

Martin Valliant surrendered, but he covered his face with his sword-arm and stood shaking like a man with the ague.

Meanwhile John Rich was riding back at his leisure, the bridle of Mellis’s horse over his wrist. Ten of his men had gone in pursuit of the foresters from Bloody Rood, and two more had dismounted, taken young Blount’s body by the heels, and were dragging it down to the mere. John Rich brought his horse close to the bridge head, and his trumpeter blew a summons.

“A parley, Valliant.”

Martin straightened himself, with a sudden shining of the eyes. He saw Mellis sitting her horse beside John Rich, pale, motionless, tragically calm. She looked up toward the tower, and Martin fancied that she smiled; he felt that his heart would break for her.

“If they would take me and let her go!”

Swartz scoffed at his madness.

“My Lord of Troy is no honey-pot, to catch flies and let them escape as they please. Have nothing to say to John Rich; let him blow his trumpet till the fellow’s cheeks burst.”

Martin stood forward, resting his hands on the pommel of his sword. John Rich hailed him.

“Hallo, there! Come down and open the gate. The game is played out.”

Martin Valliant’s eyes were fixed on Mellis’s face. He was wondering whether she despised him for not rushing out to strike a blow for her—whether she thought him a coward. Swartz had crouched down behind the wall, and was watching Martin narrowly.

“Steady, brother. That child has brave eyes and a fine heart. She will understand. Tell Rich to go to the devil.”

Martin stood like a statue, and Rich bellowed again:

“Have done with this fooling. Will you give us the place, or are we to take it?”

Martin was waiting for something, and that something came. He saw Mellis raise her head proudly; he saw her mouth open; her voice reached out to him across the water:

“Stand fast, Martin Valliant!”

He raised the cross of his sword and kissed it as a sign to her.

“To the death!” he called to her.

And John Rich, accepting the defiance, turned his horse and rode back with Mellis to the beech wood.

Now John Rich was a man of method. He posted a guard of ten men to cover the bridge, and two more to patrol the banks of the mere. The rest disappeared into the woods, shed their harness, and took to ax and saw, for John Rich had brought a tumbril laden with ropes, a ladder, tools, balks of timber, and such-like gear from Troy Castle. The matter was to be undertaken stolidly and with thoroughness. He set his men at building a couple of rafts or floats that could be dragged down to the mere after dark. Half his party would pole themselves over to attack the house, while the rest held the causeway.

Martin kept watch upon the tower, and Swartz remained with him out of a new-born spirit of comradeship. A great restlessness tormented Martin Valliant. He could no longer see his love, nor guess what might have befallen her, and his soul suffered in a lover’s purgatory. All the past years had been blotted out; he had lived just seven days since this woman had come into his life, with those eyes of hers dark as the forest and her lips red as the rose. Great storms of tenderness and wrath swept through him. He was tortured by vivid memories of her, flashes of her that hurt his soul, the miraculous way her dark eyes would fill with golden lights, her plaintive look when she was sad, the little dimple in her cheek, the way her lips moved, the shape of her fingers, the curve of her chin, the falling of her dark hair over her ears. These vivid flashes of her intoxicated, maddened him. He wanted to pour himself out, die for her, spend his great love, and make her feel it.

Swartz watched Martin closely as he went restlessly to and fro, or stood and stared at the beech wood as though it held both heaven and hell.

“Patience, brother.”

Martin turned on him with furious eyes.

“Patience! Man, man, I burn—I burn!”

“Keep your torch alight; there is no harm in it. With the night will come your hope.”

“Night?”

“Things may be done by a desperate man at night.”

“True. I can swim the moat.”

He stood and brooded with a face that spelled death for some one. His love and his helplessness scorched him like flame. He could have choked Swartz for telling him to wait, though in his heart he knew that Swartz was right.

Sometimes he would start, fancying that he had heard Mellis calling to him:

“Martin—Martin Valliant!”

He would turn on Swartz:

“Did you hear?”

“Nothing, my son—nothing.”

Swartz was laconic, implacable. He had made himself a little peephole by loosening some of the stones with his dagger and levering them out. This squint of his commanded the beech wood, and he watched it like a dog waiting for a rat.

“Thunder!”

Martin turned and saw him kneeling with his eye close to the hole. His lips were stretched tight over his teeth.

“Are you behind me, man? What do you see?”

Martin faced sharply toward the beech wood. A man had ridden out from the shade—a man in a red doublet slashed and puffed with blue, a red hat on his head, his legs and thighs cased in white armor. He was a very tall man, and he sat his horse with a certain swaggering grace. In his right hand he carried a light switch.

Swartz spat hate at him.

“Hell hound, swaggerer, bully.”

Martin looked puzzled.

“I have not seen that fellow before.”

“And I have seen him too often. What, you have lived in these parts and know not Messire Fulk de Lisle?”

Martin’s forehead wrinkled itself.

“Fulk de Lisle! A great gentleman in my Lord of Troy’s service.”

“A great gentleman! God help you, Martin Valliant, and God help— Enough. This clinches it. I have often itched to cut that man’s throat, though I have served with him.”

Martin Valliant’s eyes filled with a sudden fury of understanding.

“Why is he here?”

“To play any devil’s trick that pleases him. You do not know Messire Fulk de Lisle. Rich is a saint beside him. The debonair, filthy, malicious devil! Why, I could tell you— Oh! to hell with the beast!”

He twisted around and looked up into Martin Valliant’s face.

“Man, can you stand torture?”

“Speak out!”

“Supposing he brings the child—and tries to break you by—shaming her?”

Martin’s face was like a white flame.

“God! It’s beyond belief! Why should he?”

Swartz grimaced.

“Because he is Fulk de Lisle; because he has a foul cleverness and a liking for such things. My Lord of Troy would laugh at such a comedy. God and the Saints, I wonder now why I have lived with such men!”

Chapter XXVIII

Mellis lay in a patch of young bracken in a little glade among the beech trees. They had tied her feet together, but left her hands free, after searching her and taking away her poniard. Five paces away a man stood on guard—a man with the beard of a goat and stupid eyes hard as gray stones out of a brook.

Mellis lay very still, the fronds of the fern arching over her and throwing little flecks of shadow on her face. But though her bosom hardly betrayed her breathing, and her hands lay motionless among the bracken stems, all that was quick and vital in her lived in her eyes. The pupils were big and black and sensitive with fear, wild, tremulous eyes in a white and anguished face.

For a great fear gripped her—the nameless, instinctive fear of the wild creature caught in a trap, where struggling is of no avail. She waited, listened, counted the beats of her own heart, closed her eyes at times so that she might not see the imbecile face of the man who guarded her. But even a moment's blindness quickened her fear, her quivering dread of what might happen.

She was snared, helpless, and felt a great hand ready to close over her. The violence of young Nigel's death had shocked her horribly. She could not get the vision of the poor fool out of her head; he was still screaming and writhing on Rich's spear. The patches of blue sky between the trees seemed hard as steel; there was no softness in the sunlight on the bracken.

"Martin—Martin Valliant!"

She mouthed his name, but without sound. Her fingers quivered; she drew her breath with a deep, pleading misery. Her hands and her soul reached out to him; he seemed the one strong and loyal thing left her in the beginnings of her despair. For her despair was very real and no piece of cowardice; she had no illusions as to the temper of the men who served the Lord of Troy.

It was not death she feared so much as that other—nameless thing. She was herself as yet, clean, pure, virginal, and a man loved her. And even as her love reached out to him she clung with passionate, hoarding tenderness to her own chastity. It was hers—and it was his. She wanted it because he was what he was—her man, her life's mate. Such exaltations, such dear

prejudices rise from the sacred deeps of the heart. Without them flesh is but flesh, and love mere gluttony.

Hours seemed to pass. The man who guarded her yawned, spat in the bracken, and slouched around like a tired cur. Sometimes Mellis found him staring at her with a hungry, gloating glint in his eyes, a look for which she loathed him as she would have loathed some slimy thing that had touched her hand.

Presently she heard voices in the beech wood, voices that seemed on the edge of a quarrel. They came nearer, like two birds sparring and scolding at each other; one was gay and insolent and swift, the other sullen and toneless.

"Have your way, then! Damnation, such drolleries are not part of my harness."

"You are too gentle, good John Rich. What is life but a great hunting? And a plain, straight-forward gallop does not always please me. There is no wit, no cunning in it."

"No devilry, you mean."

"Have it that way. I like my wine well spiced, and a new spice tickles the palate. You dullards are content with rivers of beer."

The man with the goat's beard brisked up and stood stiffly on guard as Fulk de Lisle and John Rich came out from under the shade of the trees. Rich hung back, seeming to have no stomach for Fulk de Lisle's spiced devilries.

"Stand away, Bannister."

The guard saluted with his sword, and slunk off under the beeches.

Mellis sat up. Fulk de Lisle was standing within two paces of her, his hands on his hips, his red hat with its plume clapped on his head like a halo. His brown eyes stared at her boldly, and his red lips seemed on the point of smiling. She hated the man instantly, hated because she feared him.

"So this is the gentlewoman who turns quiet priests into turbulent traitors! Mistress Dale, is not the thing heavy on your conscience?"

His bantering air made her shiver, for it was like the gliding of a snake through the fern. She did not answer him.

"By my chastity, I feel sorry for that young man. For three days to eat of the forbidden fruit, and then——"

He watched the hot blood stain her face.

"Assuredly it is a case for a rescue. Being a faithful son of the Church, I must take it upon myself to deliver the young man from this enchantment,

that his eyes may be opened before some good Christian hangs him. How does it feel, madam, to have made a man a murderer?"

To John Rich her eyes would have cried, "Have pity," but Fulk de Lisle saw no more than a handsome wench whose pride struggled with her fear. Her pride won the victory. She remained mute before him, with a white stillness that refused to unbend.

Fulk de Lisle's brown eyes were smiling.

"Madam is sullen; she does not repent. Humility is good in a woman. It seems then that I must play the father to this poor fool of a monk; there are many ways of opening a man's eyes. Supposing, Mistress Dale, you were given the chance of saving this man's life, by making a sacrifice such as many women make with resignation, even with joy——"

She caught his meaning, and the blood seemed to congeal in her heart. She felt cold, so cold that she shivered.

"Did God make you?" she said, hanging her head.

He laughed.

"He chose a fine sire and a handsome woman, madam, and I myself am considered a presentable man. Even you may grant that I have my points, if I chose to prove them."

The power of speech died in her.

"Consider awhile. You shall be left in peace for an hour."

He swept his red hat to her, and moved backwards through the bracken to where John Rich stood biting his beard.

"Well, have you done?"

"I have but begun, good John; this wine is to my liking."

Fulk de Lisle wasted no time. Martin Valliant saw men come out of the beech wood carrying roughly shaped posts and the branches of trees, and for a while their labor puzzled him. They were setting up a shelter or bower halfway between the mere and the woodlands, digging the posts into the ground and lashing the branches of the trees to them. This forest lodge was left open toward the island, but closed in on all the other sides with a dense wall of green leaves. Four short stakes were driven into the floor of the lodge, and a bed of leaves and bracken made between them.

The thing was barely finished when Fulk de Lisle appeared on the hillside, followed by a trooper who carried a piece of white cloth fastened to the staff of his spear. De Lisle sighted Martin on the tower, pointed with his

riding switch to the white pennon, and came down at a leisurely pace toward the causeway.

Swartz had his eye to the loophole.

"Here comes the devil on a parley. Go down to the gate; I will keep watch here."

Fulk de Lisle made his way along the causeway as far as the raised footbridge, and stood there with an air of serene insolence, as though he had nothing to fear from arrow shot or cross-bow bolt. He was wearing no body armor, and carried no weapon save the dagger at his side.

"Brother Martin, a word with you."

Martin had climbed the ladder to the squint in the gate-house wall, and he could see Fulk de Lisle's red figure framed like a picture. The man had courage, and knew how to use a smiling audacity.

Martin answered him.

"I am Martin Valliant. What do you want with me?"

Fulk de Lisle raised his eyes to the loop.

"Is that you, Brother Martin? I have come to speak with you as man to man, and to reason with you over your madness. That a priest should shed blood is very shameful, that he should shed it for the sake of a woman——"

"I am no longer a priest."

"Listen awhile, good sir. My Lord of Troy is a devout gentleman. He would be willing to gloze over this midsummer madness, for the sake of St. Benedict, even to the point of sending you back to your cell—for discipline—and chastisement."

"I ask nothing from my Lord of Troy."

"You seem in a furious hurry to be hanged, Brother Martin. Listen a little further: I will put the matter with what grace I can, even though the thing is not as delicate as it should be. There is a certain young gentlewoman who is a prisoner in our hands. Is not that so?"

Martin set his teeth, and made no answer.

"Your silence is sufficient. Come now, let me tell you that this young gentlewoman is very loth to see you hanged, so loth that she is ready to offer that most inestimable thing—her virtue——"

He paused, looking up with an ironical grin at the loop in the wall.

"Consider this great sacrifice, Brother Martin, for though it is very flattering to myself——"

Martin's face was as gray as the stone. He turned, and went silently down the ladder, and began to unfasten the rope that kept the footbridge raised.

Fulk de Lisle's voice taunted him, but grew fainter, for he was withdrawing along the causeway.

"Tricks will not serve you, Brother Martin. I give you till nightfall to decide. Come out to us, unarmed, and wearing nothing but your cassock, and your neck may be saved. The lady will pay."

Martin let the bridge fall with a crash, and sprang to unbar the gate. His face was the face of a devil, mouth awry, nostrils agape, his forehead a knot of wrinkles; but by the time he had the gate open Fulk de Lisle was across the causeway, and walking back toward the woods, and several of Rich's men were moving down to meet him.

Martin Valliant stood there, breathing like a man who had run a mile uphill. He did not hear Swartz come quietly behind him and take hold of the rope to raise the footbridge.

"No, no, good comrade; that trick shall not work against you."

Martin turned with a sharp, fierce cry.

"Swartz! Let go of that rope! I must die out yonder—or win through."

But Swartz heaved the bridge up, fastened the rope, and stood to face his man.

"What! Will you be fooled by that rogue's tongue? I heard all that I needed to hear. He came down to try his wit on you; he prides himself on such pretty quips and villainies."

"Man, I am selling her, betraying her!"

Swartz struck him a blow on the chest.

"Wake—wake! Will that rouse you? To play with a man like Fulk de Lisle one wants a skin of iron and a brain of brass. He knew that he could cut you to the quick, drive you mad. Such things must not be."

He pushed Martin aside, and shut the gate.

"Gird up your soul, Martin Valliant, and set your teeth. Such a coil as this is not unwound by prayers and whimperings and such-like softness. Be hard, man, to win. You shall fight your fight—yet."

Chapter XXIX

Martin Valliant and Swartz went back to the tower, for a stage had been set and the play was about to begin with the wracking of a man's soul.

Martin leaned against the battlement, his face turned toward the great beech wood, and his eyes fixed on the green bower that Rich's men had built. He had taken Swartz's words to heart; he was hardening himself, preparing to bear his torture without flinching and without uttering a sound. He thought of the day when he had hung on the cross to prove himself stronger than Kate Succory's youth, and how the physical pain was as nothing to this torment of the soul. Swartz sat close to him with his back to the wall, and Swartz's face was very grim. He had changed sides, turned rebel; he was a good hound, and no cur.

Fulk de Lisle had vanished into the beech wood, but in a short while his red figure reappeared. He stood leaning with one hand against a tree trunk as though waiting for some order of his to be obeyed, and Martin Valliant watched him with steady eyes, letting his anger gather like deep water behind a dam.

Something white glimmered under the trees. It drew nearer, and was led forth into the sunlight close to where Fulk de Lisle stood waiting. Martin Valliant covered his eyes with his forearm, and Swartz, who had put his eye to his squint-hole, rolled aside, and stared at the sky.

Martin Valliant said never a word. A new and wonderful strength seemed to come to him; he uncovered his eyes, stood up calmly with a face that was like a great white light. His lips moved, but no sound came.

They had fastened a rope about Mellis's neck, and the man who held the end of the rope had crowned himself with a wreath of wild flowers. Another fellow who walked behind had a garland on his spear. Fulk de Lisle's allegory burned itself into Martin Valliant's brain. This beautiful nakedness was to be sacrificed to shame him.

Old Swartz was cursing to himself. He glanced up at Martin and stared in an awed way at the man's white and shining face.

He saw Martin cross himself.

"Some day I shall kill that man," he said, as though he were praying; "I shall not die till I have killed him."

Mellis was led through the long grass to the green bower. She looked at the ground, but once her eyes lifted to the tower with one tremulous glance of appeal. And Martin's soul struggled like a live thing in a cage.

"It shall not happen!" he said. "By the greatness of God, it shall not happen!"

The men led her into the bower and made her lie down upon the bed. One of them tossed a riding cloak over her. They cut the rope into four pieces, and tied her by her wrists and ankles to the four stakes. Their work was done; they threw their garlands on the ground, and went off laughing and looking mockingly at Woodmere tower.

Martin was watching Fulk de Lisle, who came pacing with all the airs of a great lord toward the place where Mellis lay.

"What a chance to shoot the red devil!"

Swartz rubbed his hands together.

"Ah! I thought so."

De Lisle was playing a part, and his swaggering was mere whimsical insolence. He marched up and down in front of the lodge of leaves, pointing his toes and cocking his head, the male thing in possession. A servant came down from the wood with a silver cup full of wine, and Fulk de Lisle made a great parade of his drinking. He walked into the bower and drank to Mellis, turned again, and drank to Martin on the tower. He was in high favor with himself. Life was a dissolute jest.

Martin Valliant heard Swartz whispering to him.

"Have you come by any plan, brother?"

"Only that I am going yonder to-night."

His face was gray and hard as a winter dawn.

"I can better that plan."

"How?"

"They will be too much on the alert to give you an honest chance. If you open the gate and cross the bridge they will be waiting for you. We must make them face two ways—scare them a little."

"Go on."

"I have my horn with me. Picture us stripped, comrade, you with a sharp knife, and I with my horn. We swim the moat after dark, and before the moon is up. I creep through the grass into the woods, get around behind the gentry, blow my horn like the last trump, and shout to my imaginary men to

cut the rogues to pieces. We must trust to them getting a trifle ruffled. You will have to take your chance of saving the child."

Martin stared at him fixedly.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Why? Why do we eat and sleep, man? Because we must. To cheat that red rogue over there is as natural as eating. Thunder! but I have forgotten one thing. The girl would not be able to swim."

Martin hid his knowledge.

"I could carry her over. That is nothing."

"Love could carry the moon! What say you to my plan, Martin Valliant?"

Martin stooped and caught Swartz by the shoulders.

"And I was near killing you two days ago!"

"Hard blows have begun many a good friendship. My heart's with you, Martin Valliant."

And so it was agreed between them, that they should try this desperate venture when darkness came.

To Martin Valliant it seemed very long in the coming, though the shadow of the tower lengthened itself across the water till it touched the grassland beyond the mere. He watched the fish leaping in the water, and the swallows skimming the surface and calling shrilly to each other. As for the sunset, it seemed to set the earth afire and make everything burn with miraculous color, so that the grasslands were a great green carpet dusted with precious stones, and the beech trees all glowing with yellow light. In that little shelter of leaves Mellis lay white and still like a sweet saint sleeping in a tomb cut out of crystal, while Martin Valliant's fierce restlessness longed for all this beauty to be blotted out. He could have pulled the sun down out of the sky, and thrown it into the mere for the quicker quenching of the day.

Fulk de Lisle had had a seat made of sods and branches on the edge of the wood, and he sat there like a great lord while the men built two fires, one for themselves and one for their captains, and with the coming of the darkness these two fires were like great red eyes under the black brow of the beech wood. A pot was slung over the flames, and a table set for Fulk de Lisle and John Rich, and covered with a white cloth. The shelter of leaves lay a hundred paces or more away from the fires and beyond the edge of the light. It showed as a dark blur on the open grassland.

Martin Valliant had been stripping off his harness, but Swartz was still on the watch.

“They are guarding the causeway. Fulk de Lisle would not lose his supper for any woman. It is time we made a beginning.”

Martin gathered up his armor, and they went down into the courtyard. Swartz was fumbling at the points of his hose.

“Curse these knots! Give me your knife, man.”

He cut himself out of his clothes, chuckling fiercely. Martin had laid his armor and his sword beside the postern leading into the garden; he had stripped himself of everything save his short cassock, for the thing would not spoil his swimming, and it hid the whiteness of his body. Old Swartz came out haired like an ape, his horn slung to his neck by a stout cord.

“Here is your knife, man. We had best take to the water on the farther side, and paddle across softly.”

They passed through the orchard where the grass and weeds brushed their knees, and Swartz talked in a whisper.

“Crawl around and get as near as you can to the child. Then, wait—and have patience. I shall have to make a wide sweep. When you hear me blowing my horn and shouting, you must be ready to make your dash.”

Martin Valliant was grimly cool.

“I shall waste no time,” he said.

They stood for a moment to look at the two fires and the men gathered around them. The blaze lit the trunks of the beech trees and made the lower branches shine like brass. A man was fishing meat out of the iron pot with a dagger. Fulk de Lisle’s red figure was the color of blood; he had a cup in his hand and was about to drink.

“While gluttons eat, wise men are up and doing. The hour is ripe for us.”

They struck the water on the far side of the island, where willows grew.

“Well, God’s good luck to us, comrade.”

Their hands met. Then Martin let himself down into the water, and Swartz followed him. They paddled slowly and softly across with hardly a splash, Martin swimming with his knife in his right hand. The mere was as black as a well, and the willows hid them from the men who watched the causeway.

When they reached the shallows under the farther bank they crouched and listened. There was no shouting; no alarm—not a sound save the faint lapping of a few ripples among the reeds and sedges. Martin climbed out, and gave Swartz his hand. There was a thorn tree growing within a few paces of the water, and they took cover under it before parting.

“Give me a minute’s start, Valliant. I shall make a track well out into the open, and then turn toward the woods. God grant the mud has not got into this horn of mine.”

He slipped away into the long grass, and Martin knew that all that he held most dear hung on the good faith of Peter Swartz.

Chapter XXX

Martin Valliant did not tarry long under the thorn tree. He knelt for a moment to listen, and then started on his way around the mere, crawling on hands and knees through the rich rank grass that grew near the water. It was wet with dew, and the brown sorrel and the great white daisies brushed against his face. The smell of the green growth touched him like a subtle, clinging memory. He did not think of death or wounds, but only of Mellis and what might happen to her if he failed.

Skirting the mere, he came to the sluice ditch, all choked with shrubs and brambles. The ditch was less than two hundred paces from the causeway, and about the same distance from the shelter of leaves, and Martin scrambled down and took cover in spite of the thorns and brambles. He half stood and half lay, with his head and shoulders above the bank, and a stunted thorn stretching a canopy above him. He could see the two fires, and Fulk de Lisle's red figure. Mellis's bower lay between the sluice ditch and the camp fires; Martin could not pick it out of the darkness, though he strained his eyes till the lids began to flicker.

Still, he knew where she lay, and there was nothing for him to do but to lie still and wait for Swartz's horn. He could feel his heart beating as he leaned against the grassy bank. Every nerve and muscle in him seemed a-quiver. He fingered the point and edge of his knife, and smiled.

Then a strange thought came to him. What if he failed—what if he found the adventure hopeless?

He would die—he meant to die in such a case—but Mellis would be living. He would go out into the great darkness leaving her alone. Rough hands might do what they pleased with her. Fulk de Lisle would come down full of his wine, violent and inflamed.

Martin fondled his knife. One blow, and all that would be saved. And yet he recoiled from the thought with a spasm of tenderness and horror. To strike that white body of hers, to hear her cry out, to know that her blood was flowing! The passion in him hardened to an iron frenzy. He would not fail; no strength should master him; nothing should say him nay.

Martin Valliant had fought through those moments of a man's strong anguish when Swartz's horn brayed in the deeps of the beech wood. Martin did not wait to see what would happen. He was out of the ditch and running

through the long grass like a greyhound loosed after a hare. He knew where the shelter of leaves should be; that was all that mattered.

And yet his senses were dimly aware of other things that were happening. Swartz was shouting like a madman, “At them! At them! Cut the swine to pieces!” Fulk de Lisle had sprung to his feet and was facing toward the beech wood; his men were rushing to arms. The fellows on the causeway had left their post and were trailing across the grass to join their comrades by the fires.

Martin went like the wind, conscious of a wild exultation. A black shape loomed in front of him, like a hay-cock in a field. He reached it, fell on his knees, and crawled into its shadow.

“Mellis!”

He heard her cry out.

“Martin—Martin—oh, my comrade!”

“Don’t speak, child. I must cut those ropes.”

He groped for her right arm, found it, and cut the thong that fastened her wrist to the stake. To free her left arm he had to lean over her body, but the second rope was cut, and of a sudden he felt her arms about him.

“Martin!”

Her great joy and her love would not be stifled. Her arms held him close, and for a moment he lay on her bosom, feeling her breath on his face, and the beating of her heart answering his.

“My own dear mate——”

“Child, it is life and death.”

He freed himself, and cut the ropes that bound her ankles.

“Come.”

She was up like a blown leaf, holding the cloak over her bosom with one hand, and running at his side. Martin looked back at the fires. Confusion still fooled Fulk de Lisle and his men. There was much running to and fro and shouting under the beech trees, and no grasping, as yet, of the trick that had been played them.

Martin felt himself touched upon the shoulder.

“You are all wet, dear comrade.”

“I had to swim across.”

She gave an exquisite, shy laugh.

“The mere is an old friend. You will not have to carry me.”

There flashed on Martin Valliant a swift new consciousness of her as a woman, a woman who trusted him as a bird flies to its mate. A great white light had blazed for him, lighting such an awe of her that the very thought of touching her had seemed sacrilege. And now a miraculous thing had happened. Her arms had held him; she was not afraid; and in the soft darkness her eyes sought his. His awe of her melted to a deep and exultant tenderness. He wanted to tell her how beautiful she was, that he was ready to die for her, that she was the most wonderful and adorable thing in the whole world.

He touched her hand.

"Have no fear," he said, "for no harm shall come to you."

"Fear! I have no fear of you."

"God be thanked. We have been close to the edge of hell, Mellis, you and I, to-day."

He heard her draw her breath as though in pain.

"Let me forget it—let me forget it."

The mere lay at their feet, black and still and welcoming. There was no pursuit as yet, though Fulk de Lisle was turning his eyes and his thoughts to Mellis and the shelter of leaves.

"Blessed water!"

She stepped confidently into the mere, and went forward till the water rose above her waist.

"S-sh! How sweet and cold it is! Martin—my cloak!"

She had folded it over her bosom and shoulders.

"There is no saving it," and she laughed softly; "the thing must get soaked."

"Give it to me. I can carry it above my head."

"No, no; something else must serve. Mother of Heaven—they are after us—at last!"

She let the cloak drop, and left it floating as she dipped to the water and struck out for the island. Martin caught it up and followed her, blessing the darkness for its friendliness. He glanced over his shoulder as he swam, and saw a dozen red lights tossing toward them over the grassland. Fulk de Lisle had sent a man to the shelter of leaves, and its emptiness had been discovered.

Mellis was swimming so swiftly that he had to strike out hard to overtake her. Her arm came out and cut the water like a silver sickle, each

stroke striking a little splash of foam. Martin drew to her, and they swam side by side.

"We shall beat them."

"Please God. The torches will not show the farther bank."

"How you can swim!"

"I always loved this side stroke. I could beat my brother in a race."

Her whiteness played near him under the black swirl of the water.

"This way. The bank is low by the orchard; we can land there. That man! I was forgetting him."

"Swartz?"

"Yes."

Her sudden, sensitive trepidation thrilled him. He found that he had forgotten Swartz.

"Swartz is in the woods over yonder. He swam across with me. It was his horn that you heard. We owe—this—to him."

"What! He is on our side now?"

"Yes."

"That is noble."

They reached the shallows just as Fulk de Lisle's torches came flaring to the landward bank. The men could see nothing but ripples; the light did not carry to the island. One of the fellows hurled his torch out into the darkness at a venture. It kissed the water, threw out a momentary radiance, and went out.

Martin was up the bank, and reaching for Mellis's hands. They heard Fulk de Lisle cursing.

"Martin, we have fooled them."

She came out to him like a child, dim, dripping, exultant. Her hands held his without shame.

"Mellis."

He threw the wet cloak over her, but she cast it off.

"Not that clammy thing. The night is warm, and I am all aglow."

She put up her hands, and in a second her hair came clouding down.

"What now? Dear man, they will be mad. You must get your harness and stand ready."

Martin was moving away when new sounds came out of the darkness of the night. A horn blared in the woods; a man screamed in agony; there was the noise of men running, and shouting as they ran.

Martin turned and looked across the water.

"Listen!"

Mellis was at his side.

"Did you hear that cry? 'Richmond! Richmond!' It is John Falconer."

A man in armor, whose horse was half unmanageable, blundered out into the light of the fires. It was John Rich. He waved his sword, and shouted to Fulk de Lisle,

"To us! To us! We are attacked."

Fulk de Lisle's torches went tossing up the hill; but before he and his men reached the beech wood, the fight came tumbling out like a drove of swine. John Rich was down with an arrow through his throat, and his horse went charging straight at the torches. Fulk de Lisle caught the beast by the bridle, swung himself into the saddle, and snatched a spear from one of his men.

"Troy! Troy! Hold together, lads!"

But that rough and tumble on the edge of the wood was no fitting stage for flamboyant feats of arms. Falconer's men poured out in a black swarm. The fighting was at close quarters, a wild swirl of jerking and grotesque figures, a tangle of men and horses, torches, flying embers, oaths and blows. The fires were kicked out, smothered by the bodies of men who fell on them, and rolled away—cursing. Torches were flung, tossed back again, trampled under foot. There was no knightliness in the game. It was a battle of wild beasts who were in a mad haste to kill. My Lord of Troy's men had raped and bullied the Forest, and the Forest was taking its vengeance.

Mellis's head was close to Martin's shoulder, and his arm had slipped about her body. Neither of them spoke. The work up yonder was too grim, too breathless. The fires were scattered; a few torches flared in the grass; the dance of death became a thing of darkness.

Then a horse went galloping down past the mere, a dim, hurrying shape.

"Who was that?"

Martin strained his eyes. A faint radiance was stealing over the grassland, the light of the rising moon. The horse became a gray ghost carrying a man who rode for safety.

"Who should it be?"

“Fulk de Lisle.”

“That devil!”

The bloody game under the black shadows of the beeches seemed to be losing its fury. Men were calling to each other in the darkness; there was a kind of whimpering murmur, a vague scattering of voices. Once a man shrieked aloud, and Martin felt Mellis shiver.

“It is over. Look, you can see men running. One, two, and another—over there, in the open.”

“Is it with us, or against us?”

“Troy is beaten. Hear them shouting—our people, ‘Richmond! Richmond!’ ”

“What a night, comrade, what a night!”

Chapter XXXI

A broad silver radiance spread above the black tops of the beech trees. It was the moon rising behind the wood, throwing long slants of light across the grasslands, and making a glimmer of mystery everywhere. The towering shadow of the beech wood still lay upon the island and the mere, leaving them all black in a world of tremulous white light.

Mellis drew aside suddenly, her arms over her bosom, her eyes looking toward the tops of the beech trees.

"Martin!"

A something in her voice kept him from looking at her.

"I must become a man. This adventure has shipwrecked me."

He was most desperately and dearly perplexed.

"Is there no cloth anywhere?"

She could not help laughing at his immense seriousness.

"Have you forgotten? Ah!"

The moon seemed to glide suddenly above the beech wood, huge, and yellow, and stealthy. The shadows slipped away from the island; the long grass glimmered like silver wire; the mere shone like a shield.

Mellis threw herself in the long grass.

"Have you forgotten all our gear in that cellar? If you love me, man—hasten."

"What shall I bring?"

"A suit of light armor, and a wadded coat—and—and—things to go under it."

He blundered off, calling himself the most imbecile fool that ever was; but before he had got across the orchard he heard Falconer hailing him.

"Martin Valliant—Martin Valliant!"

Martin had other matters to attend to. John Falconer could wait. But he gave him an answering shout,

"Is that Master Falconer?"

"Aye."

"All's well."

“Let down the bridge, man.”

“All in good season.”

Martin ran to the tower, groped for the ring of the great stone, found it, and then remembered that he would need a light. The tinder-box and the candles were in Mellis’s room. He was about to go for them when he heard a sound of soft footsteps, and some one glided up the stairs.

“Martin!”

“I need a light.”

“The tinder-box is above. Come to me in a moment.”

He lifted the stone out, rolled it aside, and waited. He could hear the ring of the flint against the steel, and then her voice calling to him softly,

“Here. It is lighted.”

Martin climbed the stairs and found a candle burning outside her door. He picked it up, holding it in one big hand and shading it as though that flame was one of the most precious things in the world. The light played upon his solemn face, and mirrored itself in his grave, intent eyes. He held his breath all the way down the stairs; the flame was a flickering soul, and he was guarding it.

So Martin lowered himself into the vault, and setting that precious candle on a stone bracket let into the wall, he made a great disorder among the stuff that was stored there. The idea of thoroughness obsessed him, of not letting Mellis lack for anything that might be of use in such a crisis. He made three journeys to the landing outside her chamber door, and the merchandise that was piled there testified to his sincerity. It included a suit of light mail; a woolen doublet and hose to be worn beneath it; a belt, sword and dagger; leather shoes; an odd piece of green cloth that bows had been wrapped in; some strips of leather; a green and blue banner rolled in a canvas bag. He left the candle burning there, and went down to lower the bridge for Falconer and his men.

John Falconer had torches with him, and the causeway was a glare of light. Martin lowered the bridge and swung the gate open; Falconer came across.

He stared at Martin Valliant.

“Hallo! This is a queer way to go harnessed.”

“There is much to be told.”

“Is the child safe?”

“She is in her chamber. Her men were ambushed this morning, and she was taken.”

Falconer nodded understandingly.

“You have been in the water, my friend?”

“Swartz and I swam across to rescue her.”

“Swartz? Peter Swartz?”

“He is with us now. He went into the woods to raise an alarm, while I saved Mellis. Warn your men that he is a friend.”

Martin and John Falconer passed on into the courtyard, and the Forest followed them with a tossing of torches, and much grim jubilation. The men were as diverse and rustic as their weapons. Oak clubs, scythe blades on poles, axes, spits, wooden mallets, all came dancing into the yard of Woodmere. Many of the men had bows on their backs and arrows stuck in their belts. Not a few were wounded. There were bloody faces, arms that hung limp, stockings soaked all red. But the crowd was hot, triumphant, and fiercely merry; they had tasted blood; many vile things had been avenged.

“Look to your wounds, lads. Lay a fire, some of you. We have come far, and no man is grudged his supper.”

Several of the Forest gentry gathered around Falconer, and looked curiously at Martin Valliant.

“Is this the fellow?”

“He has some limbs on him.”

“But a runaway priest, gentles, is black company. What say you?”

Falconer answered them gruffly:

“And what are we but traitors, so long as Crookback wears the crown! Men who can fight are the blood and muscle of such a venture as ours. Use your wits, gentlemen. We are not women to tilt our noses and screw up our mouths.”

Martin had drawn aside. He felt a stranger and almost an outcast under the eyes of these mesne lords who stared at him and did not lower their voices. The mysterious and solitary nights and days had vanished. He saw Mellis surrounded by a crowd of figures, knights, yeomen, foresters. They seemed to thrust him back into the darkness; he had served his purpose and no one held out a hand.

He gathered up his harness from the spot where he had left it by the gate that led into the garden, and made his way into the orchard. The life had gone out of him for the moment; this secret and love-enchanted island had

been seized by a hundred rough fellows who shouted and crowded in the courtyard. He did not belong to them; he was a thing to be eyed with distrust.

The moonlight flooded the orchard, and Martin sat down under an apple tree and began to arm himself, but there was no pride of purpose in his hands. Bitter thoughts crowded into his heart, and he sank in a slough of self-abasement. He had been in heaven, and suddenly he found himself in hell. What was he but an outcast, a murderer, a thing that was neither priest nor man? And he had believed for one short hour that Mellis loved him. What madness! What could he be to her, or she to him? He had mistaken a child's gratitude for the love of the woman. The danger was past, for she was in the midst of friends; he had played his part, and the dream was ended.

Into the melancholy circle of his thoughts drifted a sound of some one moving through the orchard grass. Martin was in the shadow of the tree, and the moonlight showed him a primeval figure scouting furtively toward the house. It was Swartz, naked, and very cold.

Martin hailed him, and the man of the horn joined him under the tree.

"God be blessed; all the devils in hell seem loose to-night! A dance I have had of it, everyone's enemy and no man's friend. These Forest worthies have been hunting me like a pig. I had to take to the water and sit with my chin in it under the bank."

He was shivering.

"My kingdom for a bit of lamb's wool, brother."

"Where did you leave your clothes, man?"

"On my lady's table in the garden, God forgive me! But if those wild devils get a sight of such a thing as I am—I shall have a scythe blade between my ribs."

Martin was in too grim and sad a mood to see the ludicrous in Peter Swartz. He rose, went into the garden, and returned with the soldier's clothes.

"Corn in Egypt!"

Swartz tumbled into them, his teeth chattering.

"Hallo! those fellows are lighting a fire; they must be taught to love Peter Swartz. And I would not quarrel with some wine and a bite of supper."

Martin's melancholy was not a thing that could be overlooked. Swartz discovered it, and ceased his prattling.

“Why, man, things did not go amiss?”

“No. She is safe.”

Swartz was trying to remedy the disastrous haste of his undressing.

“May the curse of the prophet fall on these tags and tatters! What ails you, man?”

“Nothing.”

“Then let it be nothing.”

He stared hard at Martin, puzzled by his strange sullenness, but too shrewd to vex it further.

“Old Falconer came in finely—like a pot boiling over. And Messire Fulk de Lisle has gone galloping home to Troy; he passed within five yards of me. Hallo—cheering! They are in great heart, yonder.”

Those rough men in the ruined court of Woodmere had seen a vision, for Mellis had come out to them, clad in bright harness, her dark hair pouring over it, a naked sword in her hands. Behind her walked John Falconer, carrying a green and blue banner fastened to the throat of a lance. The men crowded from the fire, and from every corner of the courtyard. And she stood and spoke to them in a clear, calm voice:

“Good gentlemen and comrades all, I thank you for coming to me. We have begun bravely. God speed King Harry!”

They cheered her.

“Shout, lads, for our captain.”

“Mistress Mellis—Mistress Mellis!”

“Let Roger Bland try to take ye from us.”

“Aye, and there be more of us a-comin’.”

Mellis’s eyes were restless, searching for something that she could not see. She turned and spoke to John Falconer.

“Martin Valliant——”

Falconer shook his head. She grew imperious.

“Call him. He must be here.”

“The man may have some shame, Mellis.”

“Shame!”

She flushed with sensitive wrath.

“Shame! God forgive you. Ah! I see how things have sped!”

Falconer’s eyes shirked meeting hers.

“There may be draughts that men are loth to swallow,” he said dourly; “I did not make the world or men’s hearts.”

She stood a moment, with dark, thinking eyes and a proud, hurt face.

“I am young—still. Oh, these jealous tangles that men weave! Must we be little and thankless for the sake of fools?”

Mellis made her way through the crowd of mesne lords and gentlemen, looking neither to the right hand nor the left. They stood back for her, for she was proud, more pure in her strength than they. The moon hung clear and white and splendid in the sky, shining on her face and the plated steel half hidden by her hair.

“So they would think him an outcast,” she said to herself. “My scorn is theirs for the asking.”

Some instinct led her through the garden into the orchard, where the long grass was all patterned with the black shadows of the trees. She stood in the moonlight, and called softly:

“Martin—Martin Valliant!”

Old Swartz crept away, a dog grown mute, and wise in his silence. Martin’s face was all twisted with a spasm of pain, for he was fey that night with a mysterious forefeeling of great sorrow and despair.

“Martin—Martin Valliant!”

She came down through the orchard, and Martin rose to his feet. The moonlight through the trees shone on his harness, and betrayed him to her. He stood absolutely still, waiting for her to draw near.

“Martin!”

Her voice had a soft, wounded plaintiveness.

“Why are you hiding here?”

His face was all somber in the shadows.

“I had a wish to be alone.”

He could not bring himself to look at her, because of the new bitterness in his heart, and because her voice was so soft and luring.

“What has happened to you, Martin?”

She went close, looking in his face.

“Tell me. Have I no right to know?”

He answered her with strange gentleness, but his eyes would not meet hers.

“Perhaps I have seen a vision, a glimpse of the world as it is. Some things are too beautiful to endure, for other men break them in pieces.”

She drew her breath deeply.

“Ah! Have these rough fools touched your pride? They can have my scorn for the asking. And are you nothing to me, or I to you? Have we not gone through the deeps together, and have you not carried my life in your hands? Man, what do these rough squires matter? Look into my eyes and see if there is shame in them.”

He bowed his head.

“Mellis—what am I but an outcast?”

“Then I am an outcast also. But for me you would be chanting your Masses. And you have been very noble and good to me. Oh, Martin, Martin! this wounds my heart.”

He gave a sudden cry, and fell on his knees before her.

“God help me, but there is nothing else in the world but you. I cannot bear that for my sake you should even suffer pain.”

She bent over him, her hands hovering close to his face.

“Pain! What pain is there? And were it real—should I not bear it?”

“God forbid! Child, I have a kind of dark forefeeling to-night. Yesterday was all sunlight, there was no fear or sorrow in my heart. I was Martin Valliant, a man who was ready to die for you. What has happened? I feel a menace, a threat, a shadow drifting toward us; we are not alone; other voices strike in on ours. This island is not the world; here—I could serve you; but beyond us there are shadows, the shadows of other men—other women; they whisper together against me.”

A great light transfigured her face. She was on her knees, her hands on his shoulders, her eyes wonderful to behold.

“Martin, what has come to us? Oh, my dear, must I speak out?”

He looked at her, awed, trembling, entranced.

“Mellis, Mellis!”

“Is not my fate yours—and yours mine? What is pain to you is pain to me. If there is a world of shadows before us, I go—where my man goes.”

He uttered a deep cry.

“Can I touch you? Is it possible? Will you not melt into the air? Oh, my God! but I dare hardly look at you.”

“Martin, I am a soul in a body. What am I but a woman? Guard me—hold me!”

His arms went around her, but they were all tremulous with awe. Her face was close to his, a white, yearning face, with parted lips and half-closed eyes.

“Mellis—oh, my heart!”

She lay in his arms and smiled at him as he kissed her.

Chapter XXXII

Fulk de Lisle rode all that night, a madman, inflamed, balked of the satisfaction of a violent desire. He had nothing but the stars and the moon to guide him; the Forest was no more than a pathless waste; he pushed northwards, raging like a torch burning in the wind. At dawn his horse died under him, driven by the spurs till its heart failed on the brow of a steep hill. Fulk de Lisle kicked the beast's body, and looked with red eyes at a gray and silent world.

But the luck was with him—the luck of the adventurer and the drunkard. Dim and sullen, Troy Castle stood less than two miles away on its great hill; the rising sun struck slantwise upon it, so that it looked like a huge turreted ship sailing above a sea of green.

Fulk de Lisle came on his own feet to Troy Castle. There was a sense of stir about the place although the day was still so young. A couple of dusty and sweat-streaked horses were waiting outside the gate-house; grooms and servants were gossiping, and on the battlements soldiers were unlashing the canvas covers of my lord's cannon.

Some one on the walls recognized Fulk de Lisle when he was a quarter of a mile from the dry fosse; there was some shouting and running to and fro; a man vaulted on to the back of one of the tired horses and went cantering down the road. He was a squire in Roger Bland's service, a youngster with red hair and an impudent mouth.

"Good morning to you, sir. Why this humility?"

Fulk de Lisle took him by the leg and pitched him out of the saddle.

"Thanks. I will ride the last furlong, and help you to mend your manners."

Red Head scrambled up and dusted his clothes. Fulk de Lisle was too soaring a bird for him to fly at, but his impudence refused to be chastened.

"I trust your news is better than your face, sir. Our dear lord has the ague this morning."

Fulk de Lisle rode on, without troubling to turn the lad's wit.

He clattered over the bridge and into the main court, and the men who saw him ride in stared at his savage face.

"Pride has had a fall," said some one.

“Or been balked of a woman.”

Fulk de Lisle called a page who was loitering on the steps of the chapel.

“Have you nothing but eyes, you brat? Where is my lord?”

“In his closet, sir.”

“Run and tell him that I am in the castle.”

Roger Bland already had the news, and his groom of the chamber came out with a haggard face.

“My lord would see you—instantly.”

“Damnation—may not a man eat?”

The Lord of Troy sat in his great padded chair with a writing-board on his knees, and quills and an inkhorn on the table at his side. He looked white about the gills, with that whiteness that tells of a faltering heart; his hand had lost its steady, clerkly niceness, and there were blots upon the paper. He had not been barbered, and still wore a gorgeous crimson bed-gown that made his thin face look all the yellower.

“What’s this—what’s this, man? Shut that door, Bennington. Not more bad news?”

He was petulant to the point of childishness. Fulk de Lisle’s red-brown eyes looked at him with veiled and subtle scorn.

“I could not make it worse, my lord. The Forest is up.”

“The Forest—in arms against us! Man—you are dreaming!”

“I am very wide awake, sir. We were ambushed last night as we lay outside Woodmere. They must have been a hundred to our thirty. We made a fight of it; that is all that can be said.”

Roger Bland’s face twitched.

“How many men came back with you?”

“None, my lord.”

There was a short silence. My Lord of Troy’s fingers were playing with his quill. He looked old and querulous.

“These swine! I thought we had tamed them. There is a deeper cunning in all this. I have had secret news this very morning. Richmond is on the sea. By now he may have landed.”

Fulk de Lisle took the news as a soldier of fortune takes his pay.

“The King will not grudge him a battle, my lord.”

“Bombast is so easy. But to say who are friends and who are enemies! Supposing I chose to have you hanged, sir?”

“A most unreasonable fancy, my lord.”

“And why?”

“I have risked my neck in your service. I have no quarrel with your generosity. And my pride is concerned in this—the pride of a soldier and a captain.”

“We shall see, sir; I may let you prove it. And now—we must strike, and strike quickly. These letters shall go at once; they must not miscarry. In three days we should muster a hundred spears and two hundred archers. The falconets and serpents are to come from Roychester; Sir Humphrey Heron will be master of the cannon. I have chosen my gallopers. Look to the garrison, and see that our tenants are fitly armed as they come in.”

Fulk de Lisle bowed.

“My heart is in this venture, my lord,” he said; “you can trust me, because my blood is up.”

So Roger Bland’s gallopers went out from Troy Castle, carrying letters to Sir Humphrey Heron at Roychester, to Sir Paul Scrooby at Granet, and to such lords and gentlemen as favored the White Rose. The rallying place was to be Troy Castle. Naught was said of the Earl of Richmond being upon the seas, for such news might have aroused a dubious loyalty among the gentry of those parts, where fear ruled and the King.

“I charge you to come to me with all your might—and within three days—for the chastening and humbling of certain rebels and traitors.”

So ran the Lord of Troy’s message. These smaller fires had to be quenched before the great beacon burst into a blaze.

My Lord of Troy had eyes in Gawdy Town to serve him, and men were watching to see the Rose come into port; but, seeing that she carried merchandise that was too precious to be fingered, her master elected to lower it overboard before making the land. The Rose came towering along about sunset, with a mild breeze behind her. The sea was a deep purplish blue, and the red west promised fair weather.

Her master had put the ship on a strange course. She hung out to sea till the land grew gray with the dusk, and then, turning her gilded bows shorewards, footed it solemnly toward the land. No one in Gawdy Town had seen her topsails. The gossips on the quay said that she would not make port before the morning.

Half a mile from the land the Rose backed her sails and lay to. The sky was all blue-green above, the sea black as pitch, and the land, with its Forest ridge, looked like a great cloud-bank. The Rose lowered two boats, each

manned by half a dozen seamen. Baggage was tumbled into them from the waist, and about a score of voyagers left the ship.

The master stood on the poop and lifted his hat to them as the boats pulled away.

"A good market to you, gentlemen," he shouted.

A deep voice answered him,

"God save the King."

The boats went shorewards at a good speed, looking like two gray beetles on the water crawling with white legs, the foam from the oars. They melted into the dusk, and the Rose veered and beat up against the breeze, to play mother till her boats returned.

The baggage and the twenty adventurers were landed in a horseshoe-shaped cove under the cliffs. Some one had been watching for them above, for a couple of men came scampering down the steep path, one of them waving a piece of red cloth.

"All's well."

The seamen pushed off and rowed back toward the Rose, but the men stood in a group on the shingle and talked.

"The King is at sea."

"Sure enough."

"And the Forest is up."

"So soon!"

"A woman as usual! They stabbed young Dale in Gawdy Town, and would have taken his sister. So Falconer raised the Forest. Bland's men came to beleaguer Woodmere; we ambushed thirty of them last night, so the fat is in the fire."

The man with the deep voice, who seemed to be the leader, betrayed a savage impatience. He had the hard, flat, high-cheeked face of a Mongol, with a brutal mouth, and cold blue eyes.

"The devil fly away with all women! Young Dale was a fool to take the wench with him, and Falconer was a fool to trouble his head about her."

"That is not the whole story, Sir Gregory."

"Damn your story! They have rushed matters too rashly. We may have to fight before we are ready. Now for the baggage. Have you any horses above?"

"Six."

“Bustle up, then. The sooner we are knee-deep in the Forest the better.”

The baggage was carried up the cliff and lashed on the backs of the pack-horses. The men who had landed were well armed under their cloaks. Sir Gregory took the lead, one of the foresters walking beside him.

“Now, man, this story of yours; let us hear it.”

The forester told all that he knew concerning Mellis and her championing by Martin Valliant.

The round-headed man was not pleased.

“Beelzebub—what a beginning! A blackguard monk is a pretty stormcock to open the hurly-burly for us. Fools are superstitious, and I am one of the fools.”

Chapter XXXIII

The Forest had sounded its war-horn, and the woods and heaths and leaf-hidden hamlets gave up their men. They gathered in Woodmere valley, foresters, laborers, charcoal burners, breeders of horses, swineherds, and a scattering of broken men. The gentry and their tenants were passably horsed and harnessed; the foresters had their bows; but there was many a fellow who had no more than an oak cudgel or a scythe blade lashed to a pole.

They brought cattle and sheep with them and tumbrils laden with sacks of flour. Booths were built, fires lit, scouts sent to watch the woodland ways and the gray menace of Troy Castle. The vault at Woodmere was emptied of its arms, and a new bridge built in place of Martin's single beam.

As for Martin Valliant, he held aloof from the mesne lords and slept at night across Mellis's door.

Now the Forest was superstitious, and devout with the devoutness of ignorance. There was no wild thing that could not happen, no marvel that might not be believed. God, the Virgin and the Saints, the devil and his progeny were part of the Forest life, mysterious beings to be prayed to and to be feared. There were holy wells, wonder-working images in more than one of the churches, places that were accursed, goblin stones, devil's hounds that ran by night, headless horsemen, ghosts, fairies, haunted trees. The people of the Forest were obstinate, credulous children. They believed all that the Church taught them, even though many a priest spat at his own conscience.

Martin Valliant had been a priest. He had shed blood, and he slept at night outside the door of a woman's bed-chamber. The facts were flagrant, fiercely honest. Your pious savage does not love honesty; he lives in a world of make-believe; he will not quarrel with imperfections that spue their slime in dark and hidden corners. He will even laugh and delight in the lewd tales that are told of priests. But let some priest be honest, shake off his vows, and declare himself a clean man, then he has committed the unforgivable sin, and any foul sot or filthy hag may sit in judgment upon him.

So it proved with these rough Forest gentry. Martin Valliant had sensed things truly. That sudden shadowy foreboding had heralded a real darkness that was spreading toward him from the mistrusts and prejudices of these common men. They looked at the facts baldly as they would have looked at

pigs in a sty. The strange, tragic, sacrificial beauty of the thing was lost on them. To them love was a giggling scrimmage. Their religion was so much bogey worship, a rude mysticism that was shaped to suit their lives.

Before a day had passed Martin Valliant found himself outlawed by a vague and reticent distrust. He cast a shadow. The common men looked askance at him and held aloof. The gentry were more open, and more brutal in their displeasure; with them it was not a mere matter of superstition; there were young men among them, and Mellis was very comely. And this fellow had the insolence to sleep across her door.

Falconer was the only man who spoke to Martin Valliant, and it was done grudgingly and with an ill grace.

The rest looked through him, over him, at his feet. There was no place for Martin at the table that had been set up under a shelter of boughs in the hall. Even Peter Swartz was better treated; he was half prisoner, half comrade, but he drank and ate with them, diced with them, told tales.

Martin took his meals on the leads of the tower or in the garden. His heart grew heavy in him, and a kind of fierce sadness showed in his eyes.

These English worthies were ready with their judgments as they sat at table.

"The wench is mad."

"The fellow is wearing her brother Gilbert's harness."

"Such a thing cannot be stomached, sirs. We lack godliness if we carry such an unclean vagabond with us. My men are grumbling already, and seeing a curse in the fellow."

"Send him back to Paradise."

"The prior will thank you for nothing. One kicks a mangy dog out of the gate, and that's the end of it."

Swartz listened and said nothing. He was a rough god compared with these boors; he had seen the world and tasted the wine of many countries, and he knew that it is mere foolishness to step in between a clown and his drink.

Falconer tried to speak up, but they were against him to a man.

"I choose to live with honest men, sir, not with vermin."

Such was the Forest's verdict.

On the second day the gentlemen of the Rose marched into Woodmere, Sir Gregory at their head. There was much cheering, much shaking of hands. "The King was upon the sea." That night they drank much ale. And women

had come from Gawdy Town, bold-eyed wenches dressed as men. Some of the wilder spirits made a rough night of it, shouting, quarreling, and singing songs, and Mellis was kept awake by their clowning. Nor did Martin Valliant get much sleep, for he had to take more than one drunken man by the shoulders and prove to him that the threshold of Mellis's chamber was sacred ground.

The coming of Sir Gregory and the gentlemen from France made matters more sinister for Martin Valliant. Sir Gregory was a man of violent self-pride, obstinate as sin, and far more cruel.

He bearded John Falconer.

"A pretty chaplain you have found us! This fellow must go, or I'll not answer for the men."

"We owe him some gratitude."

"And for what? Bloodying our game for us? Dale was a fool in the beginning, and you have been little better than his shadow. I'll have no women picking and choosing in my company."

Falconer owned as rough a temper as this crop-headed bully, but he knew that Sir Gregory had the crowd at his back.

"There is no harm done yet. I will speak to the girl."

"What claim has the wench to be considered?"

"The claim of courtesy—and compassion, sir. Look to it, Gregory, I will have none of the bully in you; my fist is as heavy as ever it was."

And there the matter rested for a while.

John Falconer did not deceive himself; these mesne lords and squirelings were no children of romance. The wars had bred a savage spirit in the land; the middle age was dying, cruel and brutish in its decadence, and the strong man was not there as yet to smite it down forever with his kingly club. Martin Valliant would have to go; these men of the Forest would not hesitate to sacrifice him.

But Mellis?

He hardened his heart, and went in search of her, and finding her in the tower room, he shut the door and spoke out.

"Child, this man cannot stay with us; he will bring us evil luck."

"Who sent you with that message, John?"

"The whole place is whispering it. It might have been born with the men, but our friends will have none of him."

She stood at her full height, calmly scorning him and them all.

“What an amazing thing is life! You come to me, and bid me turn on this man, and hound him out as an outcast. Am I so vile and heartless a thing, and are men so afraid of the devil that they must throw a sop to him?”

Falconer stood his ground.

“You should know the Forest, Mellis.”

“I know the trees and the glades, the blown leaves and the sunlight, the little streams and the deer—but its men! If these are they, I know them not!”

“Valliant has blackened himself in their eyes.”

She flung out her hands.

“And for whom, and for what purpose? I tell you that man has the heart of a child. I was in peril, and he succored me; I was lost, and he gave me his all. Nay, more than his all, for in saving me he lost the good will of God’s noble men. And you—you come to me and tell me to spurn him, desert him, because these fools are afraid of the devil. I would rather die than stoop to such shame.”

His face was clouded and stubborn.

“Your heart is too kind, because——”

“Ah! Speak out.”

She went nearer, her eyes dangerously shining.

“I am not afraid, John Falconer. Tell me I love this man. I do most dearly love him, with all my heart and soul. And who shall cast a reproach at me, or make me believe that there is any man who would have treated me with such sweet, strong faith? I care not what men say. God shall judge. If there is beauty and tenderness and truth in our poor hearts, will He throw us to the dogs?”

“You are mad!” he said miserably.

“Mad! Then I would that all the world were mad! And if your law is God’s law, then I am a rebel against God. Yes, and I would glory in it. I have no more to say to you, John Falconer.”

He left her, ashamed, angry, feeling that tragic things were about to happen.

As for Martin Valliant, he knew what he knew, and his heart was heavy. He thought of the lepers in the wood of yews at Paradise, and his lot seemed like unto theirs. Love had made him an outcast, a thing of evil omen to be thrust away into the darkness. No one was ready to call him brother or comrade in arms, or to pity him because the man had been stronger than the monk.

He strove bitterly with himself and with his love, but the truth showed him no mercy. It was like the great wooden cross on the Black Moor, standing bleak and clear against the sunset, bidding mortals remember that Christ suffered. He understood why these men hated and mistrusted him, and grudged him the right of guarding Mellis.

Words were spoken that were meant for his ears.

"The monks of Paradise have earned a foul name."

"They have reared a fine, upstanding rogue in that fellow."

"Old Valliant's son. A pretty mate for Mellis Dale! What shame for the woman!"

Martin Valliant could bear no more. If his homage meant shame for her, then it had better end.

He went in search of Mellis, but for a long time he could not find her, and the house and island seemed full of fools who stared at him. Martin Valliant's humility was in the dust. Had he been a fiercer and more carnal man, a strong and striving selfishness might have carried him through; but the rebel spirit faltered in him when voices whispered that the woman suffered shame because he loved her. Generous souls are always at the mercy of the meaner and more cunning spirits. A clever lie, like a snake crawling from the mouth of a sorcerer, has bitten many a strong man's heel.

Martin found his love in a far corner of the orchard where an old tree had been blown down, but still lived and threw out green leaves. Mellis was seated on the trunk and half among the boughs, so that she was hidden like a bird, and discoverable only by some one who came quite near, for the weeds and grass were rank and tall, and melted into the green of the tree.

He stood before her, sorrowful and heavy-eyed, and she knew why he had come to her and what was in his heart.

"Martin!"

Her eyes loved him.

"So these clowns have been pulling ugly faces."

He answered her simply and sadly.

"It may be that the clowns are right. We live our lives among clowns; we must not live too finely, or the clowns will be displeased. Is it not a sin to offend even against fools?"

She left her seat on the tree and stood facing him.

"So they would drive you out—send you to beggary or death."

"They think me accursed."

Her hands went to his shoulders, but his arms remained rigid, and he did not move.

"Martin Valliant, the rebel in me fights for you. Why should we truckle to this clowns' world? What does it know of my heart or of yours? Why, we could go on living to the mean level of the beasts, throwing our pearls in the troughs, forever and ever."

"But what I was—and what I am!"

"Man, man, I love you! Is there shame or sin in my eyes? Why, there was no true beauty in the world till we began to love each other. And am I to disown you, send you back to your death, because these lords and gentlemen have unclean, grudging hearts? No—by my God, I will not let you go."

He stood rigid, opening and shutting his hands. His eyes looked into hers appealingly.

"But, child, they speak shameful things."

"Let them call me all the foul names that ever were. Am I touched by them? It is for me to choose. And I say to you that they shall not part us. For if you love me, Martin——"

She gripped his arms, and her face lay close to his, her lips open, her eyes full of soft gleams. Her voice was quick, passionate, and challenging.

"For if you love me, dear——"

He stared at her, head thrown back, his eyes filling with a strange, wild light.

"Mellis!"

"Death—what would death be? But here is life and desire—and beauty. Oh, my heart, play me not false! They shall not take you from me!"

"Mellis—dear heart!"

He held her at arm's length, his face transfigured.

"God help me! If this is sin—then let them write it down against me. Why, all that I hold here, the most adorable thing in all the world——"

"Martin!"

"The beauty, the mystery of you, the white light in my soul!"

"Ah! ah! Can mortal men harm us? We will hold to each other, you and I. Is not the whole world open, and can these so-called comrades say us nay? Where you go, I go also."

"So be it, child," he said.

Chapter XXXIV

About dusk that day, as Martin was passing through the courtyard, some one touched him on the shoulder. He turned, and found himself looking into Peter Swartz's face. The soldier gave a significant jerk of the head, closed one eye, and lounged casually in the direction of the doorway opening on the garden. The courtyard was full of men who had been cooking and eating their supper; one side of it had been turned into a stable; the south-east corner had become a kitchen where a huge fire blazed. The men lay about on piles of bracken, their arms hanging from wooden pegs that had been driven into the wall. There seemed to be an abundance of ale. One of the women from Gawdy Town was sitting on a saddle and singing to the men, while she thrummed her lute. Martin had to pass close to her, and she looked at him insolently and laughed.

Martin followed Swartz into the garden. The place was so wild and overgrown and tangled that no one troubled to enter it, save when there was a reason for lying concealed. Swartz was waiting by the yews near the sundial, and Martin joined him.

"A word with you, man."

His eyes were restless and alert.

"Come this way, under the nut trees. Those sluts are still at supper, and not looking for dark corners."

They pushed into the tunnel of leaves and stood listening. Then Swartz began.

"The Forest is full of swine, and I go elsewhere. Look to yourself."

He jerked a thumb toward the house.

"Swine! I know the nature of the beasts. If I stayed here a day longer I should have my throat slit, just to make matters certain. Dead men need not be watched."

He drew Martin close to him.

"Guard yourself, my friend; the pigs do not love you. If you are wise you will come with me and leave these gentry to be hunted by my Lord of Troy. Thunder, but what a man-at-arms I could make of you! In France and in Italy a good sword wins much gold; they offer you a gay life, plenty of wine,

and honor to be won. These English have no souls; they are all butchers and brewers."

He looked into Martin's face.

"What say you? Would she come also? Three comrades in arms! I have money on me; you can buy any ship-master, and he will sail you to hell or heaven. Come—what do you say?"

Martin's answer showed on his face.

"Swartz, no man has been more brotherly to me——"

"Damnation, man, I have a sort of foolish liking for you. Good men are rare, men who can fight, and throw the whole world over for a bit of honor. And here they are ready to play some foul trick on you."

"Swartz—I cannot come."

"And why not, man? If——"

"I have a doom here to work out; I feel it in my blood. Nor would she go —as yet."

"Try her."

"No; the word would come from her—if it ever came. I stay here, on guard, her man-at-arms. I have set myself on this path, and I shall not leave it."

Swartz knew his man, and that he was not to be persuaded.

"One word. I shall make for Gawdy Town; I shall lie there for seven days; if your mind changes you will find Swartz at a tavern near the harbor, at the sign of the 'Crossed Keys.' Much may happen in seven days."

They gripped hands.

"Look to yourself, Martin."

"There are things a man never forgets."

"Tush! I have the soul of a soldier. Remember the 'Crossed Keys.' "

When Martin Valliant went to his post that night outside the door of Mellis's room he found a drunken man trying to open her door. It was barred on the inside, but the fellow was fumbling with the latch, sottishly enraged and babbling oaths. Martin took him by the shoulder, sent him rolling down the stairs, and followed to see whether he betrayed any desire to return. The man went down the newel stairway with absurd contortions, like a beetle rolling over and over and kicking as he rolled. He gathered himself up at the bottom, clasped his head between his hands, and disappeared unsteadily through the doorway.

Martin returned to the landing outside Mellis's room, and stood listening.

"Mellis!"

Her voice answered him from the other side of the door.

"I am here. What has happened?"

"Nothing. A clown had lost his way, and I showed it to him with some briskness. These knights and gentlemen keep but poor order among their men."

He heard her sigh.

"Martin!"

"Dear lady!"

"I have a feeling of strange restlessness to-night. I know not what ails me."

"What is there to fear?"

He spoke with calmness, but her voice had made him think of a wind blowing sadly in the distant woods at night, plaintive and forlorn. His own heart was heavy in him with deep foreboding, though he would not confess to it before her.

"Is John Falconer in the house?"

"I saw him an hour ago."

"One friend, please God. Where is Swartz?"

Martin hesitated, and then gave her the truth.

"Escaped—or on the verge of it. He does not trust to promises—fears to be treated as a traitor."

"Ah! he is right. Martin, I have come by a most evil fear of my own people; their eyes do not look straight into mine. That man, Sir Gregory, is no friend of ours. Oh, I know; we women are quick. I feel a shadow over us."

He heard her move the bar that closed the door, and the rustling of her dress.

"The shadow is mine," he said.

"No—no."

There was passion in her voice.

"It is the evil in the hearts of other men. I feel it—feel it like a fog creeping into my window. And I loved this place; we were so happy, even

though death was near; I was not afraid. But now—a dread of something seizes me."

The bar was in her hands, and the door moved so that Martin saw a little streak of light. His heart seemed to stand still, and then beat like the heart of a man who is afraid.

"Martin!"

He did not answer her.

"There is danger for you—there. They might creep up while you are sleeping. Oh! what am I saying, what is this dread that makes me a coward? But I am not a coward, and I love you. See—you can sleep here, across my door, so that no one can touch you."

She threw the door open, and the gray light from her room fell upon his face. She was all shadow, wrapped in a cloak that had been found for her—a vague, soft outline that seemed to yearn toward him, a dream begotten of the night, tender, mysterious.

He covered his face with his hands.

"Mellis!"

"Is there pride between us, and no sweet faith? Am I asking you to do a shameful thing? Why, this is no more than a simple room, where I breathe and move—and sleep. I have a great fear for you to-night; I want you near me."

He was silent.

"Martin, would you shame me, hold aloof as though I had tempted you?"

She caught his hands, and drew them from his face.

"Oh! I am wounded—if you have no faith!"

"Mellis!"

"Yes—wounded, to the heart! Oh! my dear love!"

He lifted her hands and kissed them almost fiercely.

"It shall be as you wish. This room is a chapel, its altar—where you sleep."

He was over the threshold, and freeing a hand, she softly closed the door. Her breath came quickly, with a flutter of exultation.

"Oh, my dear lord, my man, is this not a great sacrament between us? Now—you have made me happy; is it not strange? See—you will lie here; there is bracken, and I will spread it; and here—is a wallet for a pillow."

She glided about the room with innocent joy.

“Set your sword there. Now, we are in our castle, and I have no fear. Shall we pray, kneel down like children?”

She caught his hand, and they knelt down side by side. Their prayers were said in silence, such prayers as save this world of ours from the doom that it has earned.

She started up suddenly, took his face between her hands, and kissed him.

“Dear heart, good-night!”

Mellis stretched herself on the bed, and Martin went to his couch of bracken by the door. Neither of them spoke again, but they lay awake for a long while, listening to each other’s breathing.

Chapter XXXV

Martin Valliant was asleep when a man crawled up the stairs, groped his way to the closed door, lay there a moment listening, and then crawled back by the way he had come.

A number of figures showed black about a fire that had been lit in the center of the roofless hall. John Falconer was there, sullen, heavy-eyed—a man who found no pleasure in looking at his own thoughts; also Sir Gregory, skull-faced and ominous, with blue eyes that stared. A hot posset was going around in a big tankard. These gentlemen had but little to say to one another; they were waiting; the case had been heard, and judgment given.

The man who had gone a-spying up the tower came and stood before Sir Gregory.

"The priest is not this side of the door, lording."

John Falconer's sullen eyes seemed to catch the light of the fire.

"You lie!"

"See for yourself, Master Falconer. What's more, he is asleep across the door, for I could hear a sound of breathing."

A grim laugh went around the fire. Ironical looks were thrown at Falconer, who was frowning and biting his beard.

Sir Gregory spoke.

"Such insolence must be chastened; we must be rid of this bastard. Hallo, there! Axes for the breaking of a door."

A little man with a sallow face and bright black eyes stood forward.

"The room has a window, sir."

"Well?"

"Breaking the door is a clumsy device, and this Valliant is desperate strong. Why not use the window, gentlemen, and crawl in upon him while he is asleep?"

"Most excellent! But will God give us a ladder twenty feet long?"

"There is no need for a ladder. Strain a stout rope over the battlement so that it runs in front of the window, and men can slide down the rope."

"Well thought of."

John Falconer appeared to rouse himself from a sort of stupor.

"Wait, gentlemen. Let no violence be done this man. He has served us, and will suffer for it."

"What would you, John Falconer?"

"Let him be taken, mastered, stripped of his harness and his arms, and turned out into the woods. His blood should not be upon our hands."

"Plausible, very plausible!"

"I stand for that—or nothing."

Sir Gregory chuckled.

"By my soul, such a punishment is better than blows. There is a certain subtlety about it. I put my seal to the document. Some one fetch the rope."

The work was done noiselessly by men who crept about on bare feet, and without as much as a whisper. John Falconer and a dozen of his own fellows were ready on the stairs. Four men were to slide down the rope, enter by the window, and while three of them fell upon Martin Valliant, the fourth was to unbar the door.

Nature willed it that Mellis and her man should sleep heavily that night, solaced by the innocent sweetness of being so near each other, so full of a happy faith in their great love. They slept like children, Mellis on her bed, Martin lying across the door, his arms folded, his naked sword beside him.

He woke to a cry from Mellis.

"Martin—Martin! Guard yourself!"

The last man to enter by the window had slipped on the sill, and blundered against the man in front of him; and Mellis, opening her eyes, had seen him outlined dimly against the window.

Her warning came too late. The fellows had thrown themselves on Martin before he could rise, and had dragged him from the door. One of them pulled out the bar, and threw the door open.

He shouted to those on the stairs, and Falconer's voice took up the cry.

"Torches—torches! Forward! Up with you, and follow me."

Mellis had slipped out of bed and was trying to find the sword that Martin had brought her out of the vault. She could hear men struggling in the room, but the light was too dim for her to see what was passing. A horror of helplessness seized her; she shrank back against the wall, with her hands pressed to her ears.

"Help, there—help!"

Martin had broken free and was on his feet. One man lay writhing with a bone in his throat broken; another had been thrown against the wall and stunned. Martin had another fellow lying bent across his knees and was choking him, while the fourth man clung to his feet.

Then Falconer and his torches came up the stairs; the doorway filled with smoke and glare and steel.

A sudden palsy seemed to strike all the players in that tragedy. Valliant let go of the man whom he was throttling, while the fellow who had been clinging to Martin's ankles squirmed away toward the door. Martin stood motionless, like a wrestler touched by enchantment and turned into a statue; Mellis, her hands to her ears, her eyes two great black circles, leaned against the wall; Falconer, with torch and sword in the doorway, held back the men who were behind him.

Martin's sword lay close to Mellis's bed. His eyes looked at it, but he did not move.

Then Falconer spoke.

"Martin Valliant, no harm is meant you. Leave the sword lying there; it will not avail."

Mellis's lips moved, but no sound came from them. She moved forward into the room, and her eyes were on John Falconer's face.

"Traitor!"

His mouth twitched; he looked at Martin, and passed her over.

"Valliant, we captains have sworn not to keep you as one of us. It is our right to choose; we have our reasons. No harm shall be done you; you shall go out into the Forest—as you came from it. Take your life, man; this room is no place for you, and no place for brawls and violence."

Martin's face was gray and haggard. The muscles stood out like cords in his throat, and he drew his breath heavily. He gave one glance at Mellis, and moved suddenly toward the door.

"Explicit," he said, crossing his hands upon his chest. "God have mercy on us all, John Falconer."

The men seized him and hurried him down the stairway, nor did he resist. In the courtyard they stripped him of his armor, leaving him nothing but his old cassock, a girdle and a knife. He was taken across the bridge and through the camp to the beech wood. A knight in black harness was waiting there, leaning on his sword. One of the men gave Martin a wallet full of food.

The knight—it was Sir Gregory—went close to Martin, and stared into his face.

"Let us not see you again," he said. "Go—and take your shame and your sin away from us."

He pointed with his sword into the gloom of the beeches.

"Show your face again, and there shall be no mercy for you, you thing of evil omen. Go!"

And Martin Valliant went from them into the darkness like a broken man carrying a curse.

John Falconer had cleared the men from the room, and set his torch in a rusty bracket on the wall, where it threw a wayward, draughty flare upon his face. Mellis stood by the window with her back turned to him, rigid, motionless, her hands at her throat.

"There will come a time when you will thank me for this."

She was struggling for self-mastery, and against the bitter shame that they had thrust upon her, while her heart had gone out into the darkness with Martin Valliant, and in a way she was desperate, robbed of her love. She might have come through her anguish in silence had John Falconer been less of a dull and jealous fool.

"Now get you to bed, child; there will be peace in this house."

"Peace!"

She flashed around on him with generous fury.

"Peace—for me, when you have treated me as though I were a harlot? Oh, you blind fools, you souls full of foul imaginings! That man was a saint, white as God's own self. And you have robbed me of such a love as a man but seldom gives to a woman. Yes, he could have taken that sword and given death to many of your curs, but there was a nobleness, a humility, that did not touch you. He knew what was in your hearts, that you hated him, were jealous, breathed foul lies. He besought me to let him go. And I—I bade him stay. I would that he had taken all that a woman has to give; yes, my very body and soul. There is the truth; I fling it in your face, John Falconer, you sour and godly and grudging hound!"

Her anger scorched him like a flame. He answered her hoarsely.

"It was for your sake I did it. For you are precious to us."

"My sake! Ye gods! Is a woman's love to be put in pawn by gray fools and wiseacres? I tell you I am his; I shall die his; I would that he had taken all that I had to give. And I am precious to you? Never, by my soul! I cast

you off! I am your enemy henceforth, and every man here is my mortal foe. May disaster befall you all! May you be cut off, slain, trampled into the earth! Get you gone out of this room; my love has slept here, and you do foul it."

She advanced on him, and he went back before her, covering his face with his arm.

"You will thank me—yet," he said.

"Nay, I shall die before I thank you," and she closed the door on him as he went out.

Chapter XXXVI

Martin Valliant had fallen into great darkness of soul.

The Forest lay about him, vast, silent, and mysterious; the sky was overclouded, and the moon obscured; and life seemed like the Forest, all black and without a purpose, a wilderness where wild beasts wandered and outcast men hid themselves from the law.

For a while he wandered about among the beech trees like a blind man who had lost his way, for in very truth he was blind of soul, so smitten through with anguish that he could neither think nor pray. A stupor gripped him, a stupor of misery and helplessness. It was as though a great hand had swept down and put out the white light that had burned within him; blackness, nothingness, remained.

As he went to and fro under the great trees, Martin Valliant struggled to break through this human anguish and all this coil and tumult of loving and being loved. He tried to stand as his old self, calm, patient, gentle, a watcher of other men's lives. Things had been so quietly ordered in the old days; nothing had been able to master him, to send him like a blown leaf whirling with the wind.

But now—what had happened? Was God mocking him, or had he been cheated by the devil? Who was God, and who was the devil? What was this thing that men called sin? Was life only a huge fable, a piece of tapestry, behind which lay the burning, passionate reality, the being and becoming, the great glowing flux of fire?

He fell on his knees and clasped his head between his hands.

Who was calling him, and why did his heart answer?

"Mellis! Mellis! Mellis!"

She was in the darkness, she was among the stars, in the leaves of the trees, in the stillness of the night. She was light and shadow, sound and silence, colors and perfumes; she held the round world in her hands, and heaven was behind her eyes. He loved her, and her love was his. Where was the sin? Where was the shame?

Martin made a cloister of the beech wood all that night, pacing up and down between the black boles, sometimes lying prone in the dead leaves or the bracken. He saw nothing but Mellis—Mellis white and speechless,

stretching out her hands to him, looking at him with eyes of anguish. She was a white flame burning in the darkness, and he could see nothing, think of nothing but her.

So Dame Nature, Mother of all the gods, led Martin to the deep waters and showed him in their blackness the image of a woman. And into these waters a man must cast himself naked, madman and rebel, leaving his manifold hypocrisies behind him, stripped of the shreds and the patchwork and the cap of the moral fool. Before dawn came Martin Valliant had taken that great plunge. He was a rebel, naked and unashamed, most bitterly refusing to surrender the great thing that was his, and ready to fight for it with savage fierceness against saints and devils, priests and men.

With the first grayness of the dawn Martin turned his face toward Woodmere, and stealing from tree to tree, worked his way slowly through the beech wood. There were no more than three or four great trees left between him and the open sky, and he could see the mere lying in the valley and the tower where Mellis had slept; the birds were singing; the camp still seemed asleep.

Something whirred past him and struck the trunk of a tree away on his left, and Martin threw himself flat, for he knew that a cross-bow bolt had been loosed at him. Though he raised his head cautiously, and peered about him, he could see nothing but the bracken below, the green gloom of the branches above, the great gray trunks standing like the pillars of a church. But the man who had fired the shot could still see Martin. A second bolt whizzed over his head and buried itself in the ground.

“Run, you dog! Off with you, or the next shot shall be in your body.”

The voice came from the fork of a tree, and Martin was shrewd enough to believe in the man’s sincerity. He sprang up, and dashed back into the deeps of the wood, furious at the thought that Falconer had set men to watch for him. He tried another part of the wood, but with no better luck. This time an arrow from a long bow drove into the ground within a yard of his feet, warning him that he was shadowed and that the Forest’s eyes were wide awake.

Martin took the lesson to heart, and turned back sullenly into the deeps of the wood. His wits were at work, offering him all manner of wild hazards, and the more desperate and foolish they seemed, the more bitter and dogged grew his resolution. He passed through the beech wood, crossed a stretch of open grassland, and plunged into a thicket of hollies that trailed down from the slopes of an oak-covered hill. Once under cover, he stood at gaze to see if he had been followed, and his shrewdness had its reward. A man in a

doublet of Lincoln green showed himself for a moment on the edge of the beech wood, scanned the grassland, and then turned back into the woodshade as though he had no liking for following such a wild dog any farther.

Martin cut northwards into the oak wood where the trees stood well apart, with no scrub growing between them, their trunks rising from the green turf. He went at the double, keeping well in among the trees, bearing westwards along the hill that bounded Woodmere valley in the north. His need of a weapon asserted itself, for he had nothing but his knife, and coming across a young holly growing straight and clean, he felled it after five minutes' hacking with his knife. With its boughs and top trimmed off, it made a heavy and notable club, and he went on with it on his shoulder, and in a temper that boded ill for any man who should give him battle.

It took Martin Valliant the best part of an hour to cast a half circle around Woodmere valley and approach it from the other side. A hazel copse proved friendly; he crawled into it, and plowed his way cautiously through the green cloud of branches. The copse ended in a great bank of furze that poured down the hillside like a flood.

Martin Valliant had the whole valley spread before him, all wet and washed with the morning's dew, the sunlight slanting down on it with the calm beauty of a summer morning. Smoke rose straight and blue from the camp fires; the mere shone like glass; the tower, with its lichen-stained walls, was the color of gold. But if the woods and the valley breathed peace, man plotted war, and all the green hill beyond the water was astir with men running to arms.

Falconer and the Forest lords were preparing to march. Each captain was rallying his company, and there was much shouting and hurrying to and fro. The swarm of figures in their reds and greens, russets and blues, sorted themselves and gathered to their pennons and banners like a pattern of flowers. There were the archers, with bows on their backs, and bills in their hands; the common crowd of footmen with their pikes, partisans, scythes, axes, and oak cudgels; the gentry and their servants mounted and sheathed in steel, their lances rising straight and close together like pine trees in a wood.

Martin Valliant marked a little group of riders sitting their horses apart from the rest. They numbered about twenty lances, and a man in the midst of them carried a banner of blue and green. The sunlight splintered itself on their harness; they looked big men and stoutly armed, chosen for a purpose.

Two riders were crossing the grassland from the direction of the mere, and Martin Valliant's eyes filled with a hungry, yearning light as he watched them. One was a woman, the other a man. The woman was distinguishable by her hair, that hung loose upon the suit of light harness that she wore, and by the cloak or apron of green fastened about her waist. She rode a white horse. The man, John Falconer, had her bridle over his arm. She was a prisoner. The twenty lances were to serve as her guard.

Martin Valliant knelt and watched her, leaning on his holly staff, his eyes shining like steel.

The trumpets blew. A swarm of archers and mounted men went scattering into the beech wood and were swallowed up by its shadows. The massed "foot" began to move in columns, like fat, brightly colored caterpillars crawling up the hill. The gentlemen and men-at-arms followed, with jogging spears and a glittering of harness. Last of all rode John Falconer, Mellis, and her guard.

Martin Valliant sprang up, and held his staff aloft as though challenging them. Then he turned back into the woods, a divine madman hunting an army.

Chapter XXXVII

Sir Gregory's scouts had been watching Troy Castle, and my Lord of Troy's spies had had their eyes on Woodmere. Both parties were kept well victualed with news; but Sir Gregory was no better than a round-headed butcher, a mere bullying, blasting Englishman, ever ready to think his enemy a fool; whereas Roger Bland had an Italian shrewdness and an imagination that made him something of a coward. A clever coward is worth any number of bull-headed fools. And in this game of hide-and-seek my Lord of Troy was too subtle and too cunning for the Foresters. He saw to it that they had false news, and no real knowledge of the power that he could bring against them.

Scouts had galloped back to Woodmere, greatly exulting.

"Troy is on the march. Fifty archers and a hundred men-at-arms. They have cannon with them. We can eat them up, lordings all."

Such was the news, and the Forest captains rose to it, and set their trumpets blowing. But Roger Bland was no such facile fool. Sir Gregory's scouts had watched Troy Castle, and the roads leading to it; they had reported faithfully, counted their men with honest precision, accurately judged the enemy's strength. Yet no one appeared to remember that there might be another cloud in the sky, hidden from them by the tree-tops and the hills. My Lord of Troy had blundered, belittled the forces against him! He had marched out and camped for the night on Bracknell Plain with his cannon and a hundred and fifty men. That was how Sir Gregory and his captains viewed it, and they rushed out to attack my Lord of Troy, meaning to catch him on the march.

Roger Bland had not hurried himself. He was still camped on Bracknell Plain, though the sun had been up some hours. And that camp of his was very cunningly placed, with three great open woods sending out leafy capes within a quarter of a mile of it, good cover for an ambuscade. His camp had a rampart of brushwood and sharp stakes; his cannon were loaded and ready, the gunners lying beside them; his archers squatted behind the brushwood; gentlemen and men-at-arms were in full harness and ready to mass their spears. The horses were tethered outside the camp, half a furlong away; a sharp look-out was being kept. My Lord of Troy had baited his trap and sat down to wait for his prey.

It was a league and a half from Woodmere to the edge of Bracknell Plain, and Sir Gregory had halted his companies under cover of a heathy hill and waited for his riders to come in. John Falconer had the rear-guard, and Sir Gregory jogged back to speak with him, and to look with lustful eyes at a woman who was very beautiful.

"We should have good news, John. And how doth our sweet Mistress like the morning?"

Mellis had dismounted and was sitting in the heather, white, dark-eyed, and sullen, holding herself proudly because of these men and of the shame they had put upon her.

She did not look at Sir Gregory, or answer him.

"Tut, tut! Our sweet comrade is still wroth with us, John. Women are unreasonable."

Falconer growled at him.

"Let the wench be! We have flayed her pride, and she hates us."

A squire, very hot and dusty, came cantering down on them.

"News, sir—news!"

"Out with it."

"My Lord of Troy is still camped on Bracknell Plain. They have not stirred, sir. Their horses are unharnessed, their sentries pushed out no farther than a furlong."

"Ye gods! This Roger Bland was never a soldier. Why, we shall be on them before they can get to horse. Come, sirs, come."

Away in the woods Martin Valliant was seeing strange things. He had followed the march of Sir Gregory's men from Woodmere, and when they had reached the rolling heaths that led up to Bracknell Plain, he had drawn away among the pine thickets so that he could watch them without being seen. His course had led him toward one of those strips of woodland that jutted out into the plain toward my Lord of Troy's camp, an open wood of beeches and Scots firs. The place seemed silent and empty, full of deep shadows and splashes of sunlight that played on the bracken and the trunks of the trees.

Then of a sudden he saw something that made him drop down in the bracken like a bird when a hawk is hovering overhead. A knight in armor was riding his horse through the wood. He reined in and remained motionless, spear on thigh, red plume trailing under the branches. He wore a red tabard embroidered with gold; his horse's harness was of red leather

studded with brass; his spear was painted black, and a bunch of white roses had been tied to its throat.

Martin, lying flat on his belly, grew aware of a strange, tremulous stirring in the deeps of the wood. It was as though some great monster were moving, ponderous and slow, the earth and the trees quivering as it moved. There was a shrilling of steel and the snorting of horses. The knight in the red tabard held up his spear, and the wood seemed to grow silent.

Martin had blundered into the midst of a mystery. He crawled backwards through the bracken, keeping his eyes on the knight in the red tabard; but that gentleman was staring through a woodland window out upon Bracknell Plain, and Martin Valliant escaped unseen.

He lay for a while in a little dell, resting his chin on his hands, and staring at the seed pods of the wild hyacinths that had carpeted the ground. The wood remained silent, save for the screaming of a couple of jays, yet Martin guessed that the red knight was no solitary adventurer, but the leader of a great company that was lying hidden among the trees.

What of Sir Gregory and the men of the Red Rose? Were they pushing blindly into an ambush, and if so—what would come of it? A grim impartiality guided Martin's thoughts; he cared not which beast devoured the other, provided Mellis was not harmed; he was a thief ready to snatch the precious plunder while these gentry fought. The inspiration was obvious, and stirred him to action. He crawled to the edge of the wood, followed it southwards for a short distance, chose a tall fir, and swarmed up it, leaving his club lying in the grass.

The tree forked above thirty feet from the ground, and Martin wriggled up and out along one of the limbs till he was part of the pine needles, like a crow in its nest. The fir gave him a superb view. He could see nearly the whole of Bracknell Plain, my Lord of Troy's camp, even Sir Gregory's troops massed in the hollow behind the hill. This live map puzzled him for a moment; he was thinking of the red knight in the wood, a sinister figure, the wizard who could conjure forth a dragon of steel.

Martin had his eyes on Sir Gregory's forces, when he saw one of the columns push forward up the hill with a scattering of dark figures running on ahead. Sir Gregory was sending on his archers to sow arrows and disorder in my lord's sluggish camp. The gentry and men-at-arms followed at a walk, moving on the farther side of the footmen, and ready to break into a charge when the archers had done their work. Last of all came Mellis's guard, a knot of steel-clad figures with Falconer and Mellis in the midst.

Martin turned his eyes on my Lord of Troy's camp. It looked amazingly still and unconcerned, the sentries standing to their arms in the midst of the heather. This carelessness seemed astonishing to the man who was watching those armed masses surging up the blind side of the hill. But the very foolishness of that seemingly casual camp flashed the meaning of it all into Martin Valliant's mind. It was not my Lord of Troy who was in dire peril, but those hot heads who were streaming to the attack.

For many a year the Forest had good cause to remember the battle of Bracknell Plain. It began with the rush of Sir Gregory's archers over the hill, and a rattling shower of arrows into my Lord of Troy's camp. Yet these arrows did but little damage, for the White Rose bowmen had thrown up a wall of sods behind the line of brushwood and were lying under cover, while the heavily armed knights and gentry could trust in their harness. The foresters fired flight after flight of arrows into the camp, shouting and leaping like madmen, for not an arrow shot came in return.

Sir Gregory, who rode over the hill with his men-at-arms, saw his archers shooting furiously, and heard them cheering as though the victory were won. He did not pause to consider the question, but thinking my Lord of Troy's men too panic-stricken even to run to their horses, he set his riders at the gallop and charged down upon the camp. His footmen were to follow and to end the business when he and his "spears" had broken in and scattered the enemy.

Then Martin saw puffs of blue smoke belch out from behind the brushwood, and heard the roar of my lord's cannon. The archers sprang to their feet and poured a flight of arrows into the charging "horse." The cannon shot tore into the mass; the arrows struck the horses. A great confusion followed, as of a wave of water meeting a wall; horses and men were down; the whole company faltered, broke, tangled itself into a whirl of disorder. Arrows came stinging down on them, for the shooting was fast and easy so far as my Lord of Troy's archers were concerned.

A thunder of hoofs in the wood behind him, a screaming of trumpets, and out galloped the red knight with a torrent of steel at his back. The charge was superb, terrible, carried out like a whirlwind. It bore down on Sir Gregory's disorder, crashed through and over it, wheeled, and headed for the mass of footmen who had halted in a palsied crowd on the edge of the plain. My lord's archers and footmen were running out to complete the overthrow of Sir Gregory's horse, to cut throats and to take prisoners.

The battle was over in twenty minutes; it became a wild slaughter, a scattering of death and despair over Bracknell Plain. Sir Gregory's "foot"

had turned and run, throwing down their weapons as they fled over the heather. And Martin Valliant had come swarming down his tree, picked up his club, and started to run toward the rout as though he had lost his senses.

He had seen John Falconer and his men-at-arms halt on the open plain and stand watching the battle as though it was neither their business to fight nor to fly. None the less, the disastrous issue had pricked their consciences; they had moved forward tentatively, faltered, and thought better of such heroism; moreover, they had a prize to guard, and John Falconer had kept his head. But fate and Fulk de Lisle did not will it that they should escape the slaughter on Bracknell Plain, and Martin had seen the red knight and some fifty of his lances wheel and gallop down on Mellis's guards. De Lisle's men opened out and enveloped the little group before it could escape over the edge of the plain.

That was the reason of Martin Valliant's madness and his wild dash across the heather. Fortune was with him in a sense, for he came through the butchery and the turmoil without being struck down by my Lord of Troy's men. There was a space of calmness between the main rout and the fight that was going on between John Falconer and De Lisle, but the tussle was over before Martin drew near. Falconer lay dying from a spear thrust through the body; his men were down or had surrendered; De Lisle's riders tossed their spears and cheered.

Then Martin saw a sight that made him stand stone still and set his teeth. The group of steel-coated figures parted, and from the midst of them came riding the red knight, leading a white horse by the bridle. Martin Valliant saw Mellis drooping in the saddle, her hair falling over her face, her hands hanging as though she despaired.

The red knight did not turn toward my lord's camp, but rode calmly away over the plain toward the woods in the distance. No one followed him or the woman on the white horse. His men knew that Fulk de Lisle was not to be meddled with when he followed the chase and the game was a stag or a woman.

Martin Valliant started running again, his face all white and twisted. But a certain cunning saved him from throwing his life and his hope away. He doubled sharply under the brow of the hill, caught a riderless horse that was standing nosing the heather, mounted, and urged the beast to a canter, keeping to the lower ground out of sight of the riders from Troy.

When he was well clear he turned upwards on to Bracknell Plain, the reins in one hand, his hollywood staff in the other. The white horse and the

red tabard showed a mile away over the heather, and Martin followed them with the grimness of death.

Chapter XXXVIII

Fulk de Lisle rode for a mile without troubling to glance back. He was in great good humor, and trying to raise some color in the face of the girl beside him. She looked dazed, beaten, her eyes empty of all light, her hands gripping the pommel of her saddle.

"Why so sad, sweet mistress? Am I not as good a man as any fellow yonder, and better than our friend the monk? I have won you on a fair field."

Her eyes glanced at him with furtive dread.

"I know not who you are."

He put up his vizor and she knew him by his eyes, bold, brown, and merciless.

"Ah!"

Her frank horror angered him, and he reached out and twisted his hand into her hair.

"What! Shall I have to tame you, teach you what manner of man I am? What others have had I will have also."

"Beast!"

Her pride rose at his challenge.

"Let me go, or I will throw myself out of the saddle."

"And be dragged by the hair, my shrew! No, no; such tricks will not serve. I have taken my prize, and this time I shall not be balked of it."

She knew her own helplessness, and constrained herself to try other weapons.

"Let me go. You are hurting."

"Is the fault mine? Smile at me, you jade, and look not so sick and passionless."

She contrived to smile, hating him the more for it.

"That's better—much better. Why, I have taught many women to love me, but love does not last, wench; that is why men should marry for a month and no more."

He let her go, and glancing back over his shoulder, he reined in with sudden fierceness. The white horse, checked so roughly, swerved and showed temper.

“Stand still, you beast! Hallo! what have we here?”

Mellis saw what Fulk de Lisle saw, and her face flamed like a sunset. Martin Valliant had drawn up to within a quarter of a mile of them, but he was holding his horse in and following them with a certain grim leisureliness. This eastern part of Bracknell Plain was an utter wilderness; they had left victory and defeat far behind; nothing moved over the heather.

Fulk de Lisle caught a glimpse of Mellis’s face with its shining eyes and its rich rush of tenderness. The droop had gone out of her figure, and her throat had regained its pride.

He laughed with malicious insolence.

“What is this, my lady? A beggar in a black smock? I am in no temper to give alms to-day.”

He spurred on his horse, and jerked Mellis along with him. It was his spear that had broken itself in John Falconer’s body, and he felt to see that his sword was loose in its scabbard. Mellis noticed the act, and smiled strangely. Ahead of them towered the fir woods of Amber Holt, dark and silent, like a great green cloud across the blue. Dense gloom lay behind the tall straight trunks, and bracken foamed at their feet.

She glanced back over her shoulder, and realized that Martin had no harness. He had drawn nearer, and she could see that he carried some sort of weapon on his shoulder. Fear for him darkened her eyes. What chance had he, a naked man, against this steel-coated swashbuckler with his sword and dagger?

She hated Fulk de Lisle—hated him with such intensity that he turned his head sharply and met her eyes. Even his vanity could not misread the look in them.

“So! Madame has a tender heart? You white-bosomed jade!”

He drew the white horse in, hooked an arm around her neck, and forced her face close to his helmet.

“Look in my eyes, wench. Yes, our friend can see this pretty picture. If he meddles with me I shall kill him; somewhere over yonder in the fir woods. Then we shall be alone together, you and I, and you will give me all that I desire.”

She strained away from him.

“Beast! Be not so sure!”

He laughed.

“What—a fool of a monk with a club! I know that sort of clumsy savage. It will be mere murder.”

But she would not betray her fear.

“Have it so. Strange things happen—even to kings.”

Martin saw all this, and his wrath blew like a north wind. He had guessed the name of the red knight and knew the man with whom he had to deal. It would be no easy business, setting about this notable sworder and captain with nothing but a green holly stake, but somehow Martin had no doubts as to how the battle would end. His cold fury was so intense and so fanatical that it resembled a fate that was not to be stayed or turned back.

Fulk de Lisle and Mellis were nearing the fir woods, and Martin put his horse at a canter and drew up within fifty yards. De Lisle had no spear; that was something in Martin’s favor, though his long sword would be deadly enough in so strong and cunning a hand. Martin had a shrewd notion as to how he ought to fight the man; if he could dismount him and get to close grips De Lisle’s heavy armor would make him clumsy and slow.

The shadows of the firs swept over them, and they were in among the crowded trunks, riding down a narrow track that seemed to lose itself in the distant gloom. Martin drew closer, teeth set, his heavy truncheon ready on his shoulder.

Fulk de Lisle turned in the saddle and looked back at him. He had drawn his sword.

“My friend, be warned in time. Turn back, or I shall kill you.”

Martin said never a word, but drew closer, his eyes shining in a dead-white face.

De Lisle had every advantage, but there was a woman at his side, and he did not respect her courage or her hatred as he should have done. The white horse was close to his, and of a sudden Mellis twisted sideways, threw her arms about De Lisle’s body, and held to him desperately.

“Martin—Martin!”

Martin kicked his heels into his horse’s flanks, leaning forward and swinging his club. De Lisle had got an arm around Mellis’s body. He dragged her around on to his knees, struck her savagely in the breast with the pommel of his sword, and flung her down under her horse’s feet. He brought his horse around just as Martin charged him, and gave his enemy the point; but Martin had been waiting for such a trick, and slipping down under his horse’s flank, he let Fulk’s blade gash his shoulder.

His own horse blundered into De Lisle's and staggered the other beast. Martin slipped clear, and got in a blow that made the swashbuckler reel in the saddle. De Lisle struck back at him, and Martin, guarding, had his staff cut clean in two. He sprang in and up, got a grip of Fulk's swordbelt and wrist, and dragged him out of the saddle.

De Lisle's sword flew out of his hand, and the two men lay struggling like wild beasts under the horses' hoofs. De Lisle's harness bit into Martin's flesh, his spurs gashed him, but Martin felt no pain. The fight was for the swashbuckler's poniard, already half drawn from its sheath. Martin came uppermost, one hand gripping De Lisle's wrist, the other thrust under the vizor of his helmet. De Lisle struck at him furiously with his gadded glove, and then tried to tear Martin's hand away from his eyes.

But Martin was too strong for him; he had lived a cleaner life, and his muscles won in the tense balance of such a struggle. Neither man seemed to move for half a minute, both bodies rigid, straining against each other. Then De Lisle's hand was jerked from the handle of his poniard, and Martin had clutched it and drawn it from its sheath.

Fulk de Lisle knew what was coming. He rolled to and fro, lashed out with his mailed fists, tore at Martin with his spurs; but his heavy harness cumbered him, and his breath was gone. Martin struck three times at the man's gorget before the plates gave, and the poniard drove deep into the swashbuckler's throat.

Two more such blows, and Fulk de Lisle twitched, gave a wet cry, and lay still.

Martin struggled up, panting, battered, running with blood. He looked around for Mellis. She had been leaning against a tree trunk, her hands clasping her bruised bosom, watching that death struggle with eyes that saw love and life fighting for her and for her honor. Her man was wounded. He would need her now.

She ran to him, eyes full of soft lights and shadows, pitying his wounds, and not shrinking from his bloodiness.

"Martin! Oh, brave heart!"

She caught his face between her hands and kissed him.

"Mellis!"

"Was there ever so fine a man as mine? And your wounds, your poor shoulder! Now it is that my hands can be of use."

She made him lie down at the foot of a tree, spreading her own cloak for him. Her horse carried saddle bags, so did Fulk de Lisle's, and the two

beasts were nosing each other as though to protest that a man's quarrel was not theirs. Mellis took them by the bridles and tied them to a tree, unstrapped the bags, and laid them on the grass. In her own she found some clean linen, in Fulk de Lisle's a bottle of wine.

Martin Valliant lay on his back, white and faint, his eyes staring dreamily at the flickering sunlight in the fir boughs overhead. A great lassitude had fallen on him—a sweet indolence. His manhood surrendered itself into the hands of a woman.

She came and knelt by him.

"Now—your shoulder. That must be mended."

She had drawn the wooden spigot out of the stone bottle.

"Wine is clean and good. Lie still."

The wound was washed with red Bordeaux, wiped clean, and swathed in the bandages torn from her piece of linen. Then she raised Martin's head and made him drink, looking at him with eyes that glimmered mystery.

He caught a strand of her hair and laid it against his lips.

"What more could a man ask of life?"

She smiled, and brushed her cheek against his hand.

Presently Martin sat up and looked about him, at the dead man, the horses, his own ragged cassock, and his spur-torn legs. They were burning as though he had fallen into the fire, and he knew that his face had been cut by the gads on De Lisle's gloves. A pretty object he must look to her, and yet her love was like a soft light around him.

"A swim in the Rondel would not come amiss."

"To-night, perhaps."

He took the wine and the rest of the linen from her, and rising, went away among the trees. He bathed his face with the wine, swathed his legs with the linen, and put his hands ruefully through the rents in his cassock. It seemed to be hanging by shreds, and his skin showed in a dozen places.

"Martin!"

He rejoined her, looking very solemn, but she was holding up a rich red cloak that she had unstrapped from De Lisle's saddle.

"This will serve."

She tossed it to him, and he flung it over his shoulders and tied the laces.

"A new color."

"And no ill color either."

Mellis picked up her own green cloak and fastened it so that it made her look more of a woman. She blushed, and gave Martin a shy, laughing glance.

"This man's gear does not please me. I shall have to thieve or borrow. And, alas! all the world has gone against us."

De Lisle's red figure lying there stark and still made them remember the peril that threatened them. The Red Rose was in the dust; the Forest was but a hunting ground for my Lord of Troy and his riders; the gallows at Troy Castle would bear deadly fruit.

Mellis's eyes darkened, and her face lost some of its soft, rounded light.

"God help us! This has been an ill day for the Forest. And yet—they were my enemies!"

She stole a glance at Fulk's body.

"Let us go, dear comrade. We have no friends now—save each other. How dark this wood is!"

"Where would you go?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Ah! what a question! Where? Into the deep woods with the wild things, and so somewhere where our faces are not known. I would live a little while yet, Martin, for life can be sweet—now."

He looked at her strangely.

"Yes; you are too beautiful to die."

The horse that Martin had ridden had wandered off into the wood, but Fulk de Lisle's was at his service. Moreover, the dead man's sword and dagger might have their uses, and for the better carrying of them Martin took Fulk's belt and buckled it about him.

"I like it not," he said; "but necessity is our master."

He helped Mellis to her saddle, unfastened the horses, and mounted Fulk de Lisle's. Then he hesitated, looking into Mellis's eyes, for he knew not where to turn.

"Which way?"

"On through the wood. Thanks be to God, I was born in the Forest."

Chapter XXXIX

Mellis knew the ways, and through all the heat of the day she guided Martin southwards toward the Rondel river, picking up the wild tracks and never faltering in her choice. They kept to the woods, and avoided the open heaths, sometimes following a brown stream that flickered under the green shadows and leaving it when it left the woods. Not a living creature did they see save a few deer far down a deep glade, a hawk searching for food, and once, a gray-green snake basking on a bank in the sun.

A gloom seemed to have fallen on the Forest, and even the young foliage looked darker, heavier, less bright with the freshness of spring. The open woods were full of a listening sadness, a mysterious expectancy; for Death was out, Death and the Lord of Troy. Yet Mellis was touched by no such melancholy, no sinister forebodings; her man's life was in her hands, her eyes were keen and watchful; danger gave a sparkle to her beauty; the day's need steadied her heart.

Martin Valliant watched her, and marveled. He forgot his wounds in looking at her forest-shaded face with its clean, clear comeliness, its alert, proud self-trust. There was nothing more wonderful than her eyes and the way they filled with light when meeting his. Their color seemed so elusive, changing from blue to black, and sometimes they were all a-glimmer like water touched by the sun. He looked at her lips, her white throat, her hair, the hands that held the reins, and had to tell himself that she was his. Every part of her seemed a piece of enchantment. She was so fair in his eyes that the thought of touching her seemed sacrilege.

He found her smiling at him shyly.

"Have we lost our tongues, dear man?"

"So much has happened, and you——"

"And I?"

"Sometimes I think that you do not belong to this world, that you will vanish away."

She looked at him intently, curiously, for it seemed to her that his mood foreshadowed some solemn and subtle fancy that was working in his heart. He desired her, and yet did not desire her. The glamour of a mystical self-renunciation was not dead in Martin Valliant.

"I am flesh and blood, God be thanked for it."

He half closed his eyes.

"I see more than that."

She colored.

"See the woman in me. For it is the man in you that has made me dream dreams."

They rode in silence for a while, but both were conscious of a listening tenderness, a mysterious and unsolved unrest.

"Martin?"

He glanced at her gravely.

"Life and Death march on either side of us. We have to take thought for to-morrow and to-morrow's morrow. It will not be easy."

She saw his eyes grow dark and deep.

"Nor is life easy, child. I hold your soul in pledge, and this place is full of our enemies. And what am I but a broken man, an outcast?"

"You are my love," she said simply.

He did not speak for a moment, and there were lines on his forehead.

"Is God satisfied? Does He look on us as two children? I could show Him my heart—without fear—and yet——"

"Well?"

"I could die and not be afraid. But life is yours, and the beauty and the sweetness thereof, and where is the chalice for such wine? Are my hands fit to carry it?"

"I ask for no other hands. Let God judge."

Martin rode at her side, sunk in deep thought. He had not forgotten Peter Swartz and the inn of the Crossed Keys at Gawdy Town. Life and liberty might lie that way, escape from the vengeance of my Lord of Troy, and from the curses of the brethren of Paradise; but it would be at the cost of exile, of wanderings in a strange land. Was Mellis made for such a life? Was not her very beauty too rich and perilous? Moreover, all hope had not vanished for her out of England; Richmond was on the seas; the Red Rose might yet out-flower the White.

Mellis was waiting on his meditations. Her mind was most obstinately made up; she was no green child or the victim of fanciful tenors; life had taught her much; the rough wisdom begotten of her adventures had been wedded to the sure instincts of the woman. Martin Valliant was her man; he was strong, and could keep her from the hands of other men, for she had no

waywardness, no wish to change her lovers. Some women are born to be courtesans, but Mellis was not one of them.

"Still thinking, Martin?"

He hesitated, and then told her of Swartz, and the inn at Gawdy Town. Her eyes brightened.

"Good Swartz! Good comrade! Why, that is a plan worth trying when matters look so desperate. The men of Gawdy Town have no great love for my Lord of Troy."

Martin looked at her in astonishment, for the brave adventurousness of her face betrayed no fear of the future.

"Mellis. Have you considered?"

"Everything. More than you can guess, dear lad. Why, I am wiser than you are, and tougher in the ways of the world. We should find ourselves in France, taking the open road, sleeping in all manner of odd places, sometimes begging, sometimes singing for pay. The great vagabond life! But Swartz was right. Strong men soon jostle free, get a higher seat than their fellows. I have wandered; I know what can be done. Martin Valliant was born to fight and to rule."

But she had not won him yet. His mystical love still glimpsed self-sacrifice, renunciation.

It was before they came to the Rondel river that they sighted a forester's cottage in a deep hollow under the woods. Mellis knew the place, and after scanning it awhile turned her horse toward it.

"Jeremy Marvel lived there—a good fellow. He may sell us what we need."

She smiled at Martin's blank face.

"Yes. I have a little money. I am quite shrewd, good sir. I kept it under my bed at Woodmere, and a little money is the best friend in the world."

They rode down to the cottage and found it deserted, for Jeremy Marvel had sent his wife and babes across the river before marching to Woodmere with his bow. Martin had to force the door, and Mellis abetted him.

"The place will be burned or plundered, so let your conscience be easy. And Jeremy had many a good thing from my father."

Their needs were simple, food and raiment, and they found both. Mellis went smiling into the little bed-chamber, and the great cupboard there gave a plain russet gown, a hooded cloak, rough hose, and a pair of shoes. She flung a green doublet and gray woolen hose out to Martin, and shut herself

into the good folks' room. Fulk de Lisle's red cloak was stuffed up the stone chimney, and Martin found one of brown kersey to replace it, hanging on a nail beside an oak press.

When Mellis came out to him she was the laughing country wench in russet, her hair tied with a green ribbon, her feet in rough shoes. Martin's raiment kept hers company. He had discovered a green cloth cap with a raven's feather stuck into it, and the thing hid that still too obvious tonsure of his.

"Good-day to you, Goodman Martin."

He looked at her dearly.

"Fine clothes do not make the woman."

"That is rank heresy, dear man; but if it contents you, I will not complain."

The larder gave them bread and honey, and Martin went with a pitcher to the well. They sat down at Jeremy Marvel's table, and when they had ended the meal, Mellis left a piece of silver there to quiet her own conscience.

"I doubt whether it will ever reach the poor clown's pocket."

Which was true, for Jeremy Marvel lay dead on Bracknell Plain.

Before they sallied Mellis took some linen from the press for the dressing of Martin's wounds. Moreover, a loaf of bread was useful plunder, though Martin had found bread and meat and half a spiced cake in Fulk de Lisle's saddle bag. Mellis also insisted on his taking the pitcher.

"Sling it to your saddle. We may bless it to-night."

The sun was low in the west when they struck the Rondel flowing between two broad stretches of wild grassland—grassland that was all white with ox-eyed daisies. They had to follow the river for a while, searching for a ford where ruffled water marked the shallows. Mellis's eyes were watching for a cairn of stones that had been built by a hermit a century ago to show the depth of the river in winter.

She pointed it out at last.

"I thought that I had not strayed."

The stretch of sand below the bank was smooth and unscarred; no one had crossed by that ford for many days, and Mellis uttered a cry of relief.

"This is the nearest way to Gawdy Town, and we are the first over. We shall be there before the news of Bracknell Plain. That comes of being bred in these parts."

They splashed across, and let their horses drink before climbing the farther bank. The grassland south of the river rose in great green sweeps to touch the wild woods east of Bloody Rood. A soft breeze sent patches of wavering green moving over the silver of the feathered grass tops and the flowers. Here and there a lark rose from its nest, or a plover went wheeling and complaining.

A gradual silence had fallen on Martin Valliant. As the sun sank low and the light grew more mysterious, his mood seemed to deepen toward a passionate and wondering mysticism. He saw Mellis in a glamor of gold, and his love bent toward a solemn sadness. A deep pity for her touched him —an infinite tenderness. She became for him a symbol, a beautiful pure child too wonderful to be sacrificed to the common life of the world. A new awe of her stole over him, and he was afraid. What was he that he should take her and her love? What could he offer her? What had he to give? Surely she was not made for the rough pilgrimage that might be his, and he could not trade upon her generous courage.

Moreover, Martin Valliant fell to a sudden stroke of superstition. Would he not carry a curse? And would not Mellis be entangled in it? He might bring her a great unhappiness, dim all the radiance of her youth and desire. What right had he to join her life to his? There was such a thing as “right of sanctuary”; he could lodge here in some religious house where she would be safe till the times proved themselves, and the land turned again to peace. He would have been honest with her and with himself; bitter wounds would heal; God could not say that he had sinned against her.

The green half-light of the woods seemed in sympathy with this mood of his. He would not let himself look at Mellis, for he was afraid to meet her eyes.

“My man is weary?”

She challenged his silence, watching him with steady eyes. But he would not confess to her, and she had to puzzle out the meaning of his sudden melancholy. Mellis asked no questions, grew silent in turn, nor was she long in discovering to herself the thoughts and emotions that troubled him.

Perhaps she had foreseen this generous obstinacy of his, counted on having to combat it, for women fly from hill to hill while men labor through the valleys.

The woods thinned about them, and they found themselves in a soft, green glade on the brow of a high hill, with the sunset shining in on them, and bits of blue forest visible in the distance. Mellis reined in. She was beginning to gather the subtle threads of life into her own hands.

“Here is our camping ground. It will serve us for to-night. We passed a spring five minutes ago, a spring of clear water.”

She dismounted.

“To-morrow night we shall be in Gawdy Town, if no one says us nay.”

Chapter XL

Martin Valliant unsaddled and unbridled the horses while Mellis took the pitcher and went down to the spring.

She did not hurry herself, but walked slowly through the bracken and under the full shade of the trees, her eyes looking into the distance as though she were deep in thought. Once or twice she smiled, and pressed her hand over her heart. Her face had a soft white radiance, a mysterious glow beneath the skin.

The spring was the beginning of one of the forest streams, a brown pool that overflowed and trickled in a green and oozy dampness down the hillside. The clear water lay like a mirror, reflecting the branches and the fragments of blue sky overhead. Mellis knelt down and gazed at herself in the pool. She was very fair, with dark and desirous eyes, and she loved herself for Martin's sake. Her hair came falling from under her hood, and one strand touched the water, stirring a faint and transient ripple.

Mellis filled her pitcher and went back to the glade. The west was a glory of gold, the light smiting the trees and spreading a yellow glow upon the grass. The distant forest vistas were all purple, shading into a violet horizon. Somewhere a blackbird was singing to his mate.

She saw Martin Valliant sitting at the foot of a great oak, and staring at the sunset. The slanting light touched his face and made it shine with a strange yet somber fire. So absorbed was he that he did not see Mellis coming through the bracken. The two horses were cropping the grass; saddles, harness, and saddle-bags lay piled under Martin's oak tree.

Mellis caught a deep breath, and laid a hand upon her bosom.

"Martin—Martin Valliant!"

Her voice was very soft and challenging. Martin turned, looked at her strangely, and stood up.

"Dreams!"

Her eyes were full of light.

"Yet men must live by bread."

She set the pitcher on the grass, opened the saddle-bags, and spread their supper on the grass. Martin stood and watched her, mute, frowning, like a man breathless from a sudden pain at the heart.

"Mellis!"

"Dear lad?"

"I have been thinking."

She went on calmly with her work, cutting the bread with a knife she had brought from Marvel's cottage, and spreading honey upon the slices.

"What troubles you, Martin?"

He did not answer for a moment. She knelt, looking up at him; the obstinate anguish in his eyes betrayed to her all that was in his heart.

"Come, you are tired; you shall eat and sleep."

She spread a cloak and made a rest of one of the saddles, talking the while as though no love-crisis threatened them.

"I know what it is to be weary, to feel that death might take you, and you would not care. Then one falls down under a haystack and sleeps, and in the morning the sun is shining, and the world seems young again. Wine and water, cooked meat, bread and honey and a spiced cake! Let us be thankful."

He lay down some two paces from her, propping himself on one elbow and not using the saddle that she had fetched to serve as a rest. His eyes avoided hers. Mellis had spread the slices of meat on a great green dock leaf, and she held out the dish with both hands.

"Eat, and then you shall talk to me."

It was a silent meal, but Mellis had her way. She did not trouble him with words, or by watching him with questioning eyes. He was like a restive horse, or a thing in pain, to be soothed and calmed and rescued from its own restlessness. Her mood seemed as calm and as tranquil as the brown dusk that was beginning to fill the woods while the western sky still blazed.

When they had ended their meal she knelt up and drew the linen out of her saddle-bag.

"The light is going. Come here to me, Martin."

He looked at her almost with fear.

"What would you?"

"That wounded shoulder must be cared for. You will carry the mark of it, always, for my sake."

He did not move, and she went to him on her knees, reaching for the pitcher and the wine. He raised a hand as though to repulse her, but she put it gently aside.

Yet all the while that she was busy with his shoulder he sat with bowed head, silent, brooding, not even wincing when she cleaned the raw wound,

and poured in wine. His eyes stared at the grass; the only pain he felt was the mystical anguish that her soft hands caused him.

"There!"

She knelt facing him of a sudden, her eyes looking steadily into his face.

"Now, you may speak to me, Martin Valliant. There can be no silence between us. Tell me all that is in your heart."

His head seemed to sink lower.

"Are you afraid of me, Martin—you who would fear no man? What am I but a woman?"

"It is the woman I fear."

"Oh! man—man!"

He answered her sullenly.

"I was on the way to sin against you. What am I but an outcast? What can I give you?"

"What do I ask of life?"

"It is I who must ask for you, think for you, face God for you."

She caught his hands.

"Martin, look into my eyes."

He obeyed her.

"Tell me, what do you see in them?"

His face shone with a strange light.

"I see—something—something that is too good and great for me, a sacred thing that I must not touch."

She drew her breath deeply.

"Oh, my man, what has come to you? Will you not think of me as the woman, the woman to be saved from other men?"

"Mellis!"

His voice was hoarse, and she felt the muscles in his arms quivering.

"Yes, you cannot shirk that truth. But what is in your mind? You spoke of Swartz and Gawdy Town."

He steadied himself.

"That is ended. Is there no right of sanctuary in the land?"

"Sanctuary?"

She had begun to tremble a little.

“The nuns of Lilburn Minster are good women; you could take sanctuary there—till the times mended. No man could harm you.”

“Martin, you are offering me death!”

“Death?”

“Oh, man—man! Have we not suffered enough together? Are you turning to stone? Is it for my sake? I would rather die than do this thing! My heart will have none of it!”

He bowed his head over her hands.

“May I be strong—for your sake!”

“Strong—to wound me—to the death.”

She let go of his hands, drew aside, and knelt staring at the grass.

Presently she spoke, and her voice accused him.

“Are you but a child, Martin, soul blinded, the fool of visions? Life cannot go back. Things happen; it is like the dawn of the day, the birth of a flower. You cannot stay the sun from rising, or bid the sap not flow in the tree. And you have made me love you. I have spoken. Would you put the truth in me to shame?”

He rose up, leaving her kneeling there, and his face was a mist of pain.

“Mellis!”

“It is the truth. It is in your hands.”

He stood staring at the fading west.

“God, speak to me! Let me listen for a voice. Give me strength—strength.”

Chapter XLI

He began to walk up and down the glade as though he were in the cloisters at Paradise, and Mellis did not hinder him or try to persuade him any further.

She rose up, put the food that was left back into the saddle-bags, and took the horses down to the spring to drink. When she returned to the glade Martin Valliant was still walking up and down, his hands gripping the bosom of his smock. He did not look at her, and his face had grown gray in the dusk.

Mellis fastened the two horses to a tree for the night, and taking Fulk de Lisle's sword, she set about gathering bracken. The western sky was streaked with amber, and the light was growing dim; yet as Mellis used the sword a faint glimmer shone from it, like the glimmer of a star. The bracken was all feathery blackness under the great trees, falling to the sharp blade as she swung it from right to left. The sweet, wild scent of the fern was like a plaintive memory. The sword made hardly a sound as it cut through the tall stems.

Martin had paused, and was watching her. She showed as a dim figure in the dusk, with white face and hands. And even this strange labor of hers seemed part of the mystery of the Forest and of life, so much so that he felt enveloped by it, caught in some enchantment. What was she doing? And why did every act of hers take on a strange significance?

He saw Mellis set the sword in the ground, and gather up a bosomful of bracken. She came past him as he stood, and her eyes were dark and inscrutable. She threw the bracken down under the oak tree, and went back for more. Then Martin understood.

A shiver of emotion went through him; he found himself trembling at the knees. What a silence was this about them! What a falling of the night! What secrecy! What enchantment! The sunset had died on the hills; nothing but a faint afterglow remained, and above the trees the stars were beginning to shine.

Martin moved to and fro, but all his thoughts were with Mellis, and her gathering of the fern. She had taken the sword and had cut more bracken. The thick green riding-cloak that had been strapped behind her saddle served to carry the stuff; she spread the cloak on the ground, piled bracken on it,

drew the two ends together, and carried the bundle to the oak tree. Mellis made a dozen such journeys to and fro, till she had built up a deep bed of the soft green fronds.

Martin saw her spread her cloak on the bracken and set Fulk de Lisle's sword in the ground at the head thereof.

He turned away, and as he turned she called to him.

"Martin, are you still thinking?"

"Yes."

"And it is all so simple!"

He heard her sigh, and his heart smote him.

Then she said:

"I am lonely. And I still have a fear that in the night men will break in and take you away."

"If God wills it, it will be so," he answered her with obstinate sententiousness.

She sat down on the bracken, untied her hair, shook it free, and began to comb it with a little ivory comb that she took from her gypsire. It was growing very dark now, and the stars were bright between the trees. Martin strode up and down, discovering a new torment in her silence, and in the darkness that seemed to be taking her from him. He could see her white hands moving, but her face was hidden by her hair.

"Mellis!"

He spoke to her at last, but she did not answer him.

Martin went nearer, trying not to be troubled by her silence.

"Mellis!"

A passionate whisper came back to him.

"You are breaking my heart. What does it matter? You shall not hear me humble myself again."

He slunk away, threw himself flat on the grass, utterly shaken and distraught. The silence of the Forest seemed heavy in his ears, for he was listening for some sound from Mellis, and he could not even hear her breathing. A kind of fury seized him. He tore up handfuls of grass, pressed his mouth against the earth. Why was this agony being thrust upon him? Had he not tried to deal honestly with his own heart? And he had wounded Mellis, humbled her, turned away from her love as though it were a poor thing easily abandoned. She was beginning to hate him; or perhaps her pride would never forgive.

What could he say to her? Should he leave her while she slept? But that would be cowardly; he could not desert her till she was in the midst of friends.

He sat up, staring toward where she was, for he thought he had heard a rustling of the bracken. But it was so dark now that he could not see Mellis, only the vague outline of the great tree with the stars studding the sky over it.

Of a sudden Martin stopped breathing, every fiber of him tense and strained. It was not the rustling of the bracken that he had heard. The sound grew louder, less smothered, as though it was too bitter and poignant to be stifled. Mellis was weeping—weeping as though the pain could not be borne.

Martin began to tremble. All his blood seemed to be rising to his throat.

Then he uttered a strange, sharp cry, and went blindly through the darkness.

"Mellis!"

He was on his knees beside her. She was lying on her face, her arms spread out.

"Mellis, I can't bear it. Oh! my love!"

She twisted around, threw her arms around him, and cried:

"My man! My most dear!"

Chapter XLII

A brisk breeze blew from the sea over the marshes north of Gawdy Town, turning the willows that grew by the banks of the Rondel a soft gray, and making a great flutter among the aspen leaves. The reeds bowed and swayed in the dykes. The purple shadows of the clouds raced over the marshland meadows where the red cattle stood knee deep in the lush grass. Gawdy Town itself spread its ruddy roofs to the evening sunlight, and flashed its vanes and flèches against a summer sky.

Along the road between the dykes came Mellis and Martin Valliant, trudging it on foot, their horses left wandering in the Forest. They looked like a country couple, Mellis in her rough shoes and russet gown, Martin in Lincoln green, a cudgel on his shoulder, and a couple of saddle-bags slung from it. He had thrown Fulk de Lisle's sword and dagger into the Rondel, for such fine gear did not suit the cut of his clothes.

Mellis's face seemed to shine with an inward light, and when Martin looked at her it was with eyes that said that she was the most wonderful thing in the wide world. He marched with a slight swing of the shoulders and a more adventurous carriage of the head. His manhood had lost its monkish distemper. Mellis had rescued him, and made him the lord of his own youth.

So they came to Gawdy Town, just before sunset and the closing of the gates. Women and children were coming in from the meadows and gardens without the walls, carrying baskets of flowers and herbs; there were wenches, too, who had been out milking, stepping along with pails of milk hanging from the yoke chains. Old gaffers toddled along the road, gossiping about swine and the hay crop. Not a soul had heard a whisper of the battle of Bracknell Plain.

Mellis and her man entered the north gate with this stream of milkmaids, children, gardeners, and farmer folk, and no one said them nay. The porter had his face buried in a black jack as they passed, and Mellis laughed and glimmered her eyes at Martin.

"That fellow is a good Christian. He sees only that which God meant him to see."

Bells were ringing in Gawdy Town, bells great and small, for the people of Gawdy Town loved their bells. They were a folk, too, who delighted in

color, on the fronts of their houses, in their signs, and in their clothes, and there was not a richer town in all the south. The great street between the gates looked as though it had been garnished for a pageant; the plaster fronts of the houses were painted in reds and blues and greens and yellows; many of the barge-boards of the gables were gilded; the people who filled the streets were a chequer of moving color, a gay and buxom crowd delighting in scarlets and bright greens and blues. Women leaned out of the windows and gossiped across the street, showing off their stomachers and the sleeves of their gowns.

Martin Valliant had never seen such a sight before. He shouldered a way for Mellis, trying not to stare at all these strange people, and at the quaint signs, and the rich stuffs in the shops. Some one blundered against his wounded shoulder, and he was not so meek over it as he would have been a month ago.

"Are they holding a fair in Gawdy Town?"

Mellis glanced at him mischievously.

"I sent a herald forward, dear lad, and they are looking for us. This is but an ant-heap after all. Some day I will show you Rouen and Paris."

"A quieter street would please me. Where is this Inn of the 'Crossed Keys'?"

"I know it, down by the harbor. This way."

She turned aside into a dark and narrow lane, where the gables of the houses nearly met overhead. Lines festooned the alley, carrying all manner of garments hung out to dry. It was a lane of slatterns, and of dirty children playing in the gutters, and the smell of it was not sweet.

"How does this please my lord?"

"I would sooner sleep in the woods."

She drew close in under his arm.

"And so say I. A clean attic at the 'Crossed Keys' will serve. Pray God old Swartz is there."

The lane led them down toward the harbor, where the painted masts and tops of the ships showed above the town wall. Here were the shops of the ships' chandlers, and the place began to smell of tar and the sea. There were yards full of timber, spars, anchors, casks, old iron, chains, oars, gratings, lanterns, and pumps. A rope-walk ran along the town wall, with pent-roofs for the storage of cables. The taverns and inns were for the men of the sea, boisterous houses full of strong liquor and loose women and foreign ship-men who were handy with their knives.

The Inn of the “Crossed Keys” lay a little way from the harbor and next to “Little Spain.” It was a solid and orderly inn, and no “stew” house; men of substance and many merchants lodged there in their comings and goings, and for the ordering of their affairs. No man had ever been found stabbed in the “Crossed Keys,” nor had a robbery ever been committed there within the memory of any living gossip.

Dusk was falling when Martin walked into the inn yard and asked for the master. An old fellow with white hair and a lame leg came out of the parlor, buttoned up in a sober black cloak, and with a black velvet cap on his head. He looked more like an Oxford clerk than an innkeeper, but his eyes were shrewd enough in his smooth, debonair face.

Mellis was waiting in the shadow of the stairway leading to the gallery around the yard. The old man’s eyes did not fail to see her. He looked straight at Martin as though he had weighed him from shoe-latchet to cap.

“Next door, my lad. ‘Little Spain’ is the place for you, I gather.”

Martin knew nothing of “Little Spain,” and his soul took no offense.

“This is the ‘Crossed Keys’?”

“It has been called that these fifty years.”

“Is there a Peter Swartz in the house?”

The old man blinked his bright eyes, glanced right and left, and poked his nose into Martin’s face.

“Of the name of Valliant?”

“I am Valliant.”

“Tsst! Not so loud! I am at your service. Come this way, Master Valliant, and you, madam. Up the stairway; yes—yes—the gentleman is here; to the right, if you please, and down that passage. Let me pass, sir; I know the door.”

The room into which he showed them was a private chamber, hung with green arras and lit by a couple of candles set in tall pewter sticks on the oak table. A man sat at supper, with a meat pasty, a jug of wine, bread, cheese, and fresh fruit heaped up in a bowl before him. He was making himself a salad of herbs when the door opened and the old man poked his head into the room.

“Master Valliant, sir!”

Swartz threw the wooden spoon and fork on the table and stood up.

“Ye gods, this is magnificent!”

The old man closed the door on Mellis and Martin Valliant, and they stood before Peter Swartz like a couple of shy children. Then Martin's arm crept over Mellis's shoulders. She was red as a rose, but her eyes looked proudly at Peter Swartz.

That most magnanimous soldier of fortune scanned the faces of the pair before him, smiled, gave a wag of the head, and filled a glass with wine. He bowed to Mellis, raised the glass, and drank to her.

"Madam, I pledge you my homage. I am, and shall always be, your devoted servant. As for this fellow——"

He stepped up to Martin, smiling, and gave him a blow on the chest.

"Here is a man who has learned the greater wisdom. Good comrade, shake hands with me; the whole world is ours."

Swartz went to the door, and shouted for the old gentleman in the black gown.

"Mine host, mine ancient and most sweet angel, more wine here, and platters, and more light."

The wine came, also two more candles, and a rush-seated chair for Mellis. Swartz was in a joyous mood, and the shy yet exultant faces of these two young people filled him with an amused delight.

"Come—sit you down. The place of honor for Madam Mellis. Russet and green, two good colors; friend Martin there has been fighting, a sword-thrust through the shoulder—eh? Take off your cap, man; there are no spies here. And now for the news; I'll tell mine afterwards."

It was Mellis who told the tale of their adventures as far as the slaying of Fulk de Lisle, Martin watching her with a rapt look, and forgetting that there was food on his plate. She had nothing to say of the journey to Gawdy Town, but Swartz had but to look at their faces to know that Martin had played the man.

"So the old Fox of Troy was too cunning for your friends. Well, well—what is it to be—France and the open road, service with some fine Frenchman or a rich Italian, and our friend Martin here becoming a great captain with a helmet full of gold pieces? This wet island has wearied me. I can show you sunny lands and a world of adventure."

Martin's eyes watched Mellis's face.

"I am but a beggar," he said simply.

She looked at him dearly, and then at Swartz.

“We have twenty gold pieces, Martin and I. I carried them about with me, and hid them while we were at Woodmere. They are here—in a leather purse.”

“Shrewd wench—and great lady! Martin, my man, you may do the fighting, but you should leave all else to your wife. She will be wiser than any Lombard. Well, old Swartz can put his hand on fifty gold pieces, and I brought a little plunder away with me that night I left the island. These English drink too much, and some one must have missed a suit of harness and a couple of horses. Old Master Hilary here has bought the horses, and Martin can have the harness. Why, we are ripe and ready for sword-hire, and there is a ship sailing to-morrow for France.”

He leaned over and filled the drinking cups.

“Here’s to our good fortune, and the Knave of Hearts. Give me the gay, vagabond, generous, fighting life. Here’s to you, madam, and here’s to Martin Valliant, and here’s to old Peter Swartz! Martin, my lad, I’ll make you the finest sworder and swashbuckler this side of Rome.”

He grew quiet when he had had his jest with them, and it was Mellis who spoke for Martin and herself.

“The life will be rough, but I do not fear it. My man will guard me, and I shall be his mate. What are riches, and acres—and a lordly house? The sun and the green earth are for all, and youth goes where it pleases. Let the old folk count their cattle, and warm their hands at the fire.”

She looked at Martin, and he nodded.

“I will do good deeds—with the sword,” he said; “let us go out into the world and see the great cities. A man was given eyes to see with.”

Swartz raised his cup.

“And a heart—to love with! Oh, brave youth, never to grow old in the same bed, and to cross the same dull doorstep day by day! Here’s to the wander life—here’s to adventure! Assuredly I must get me a wife, and there shall be four of us. Peter Swartz is young again; God be praised!”

Transcriber’s Notes:

Obvious punctuation and typesetting errors have been corrected without note. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

[The end of *Martin Valliant* by Warwick Deeping]