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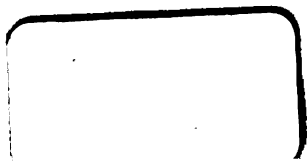


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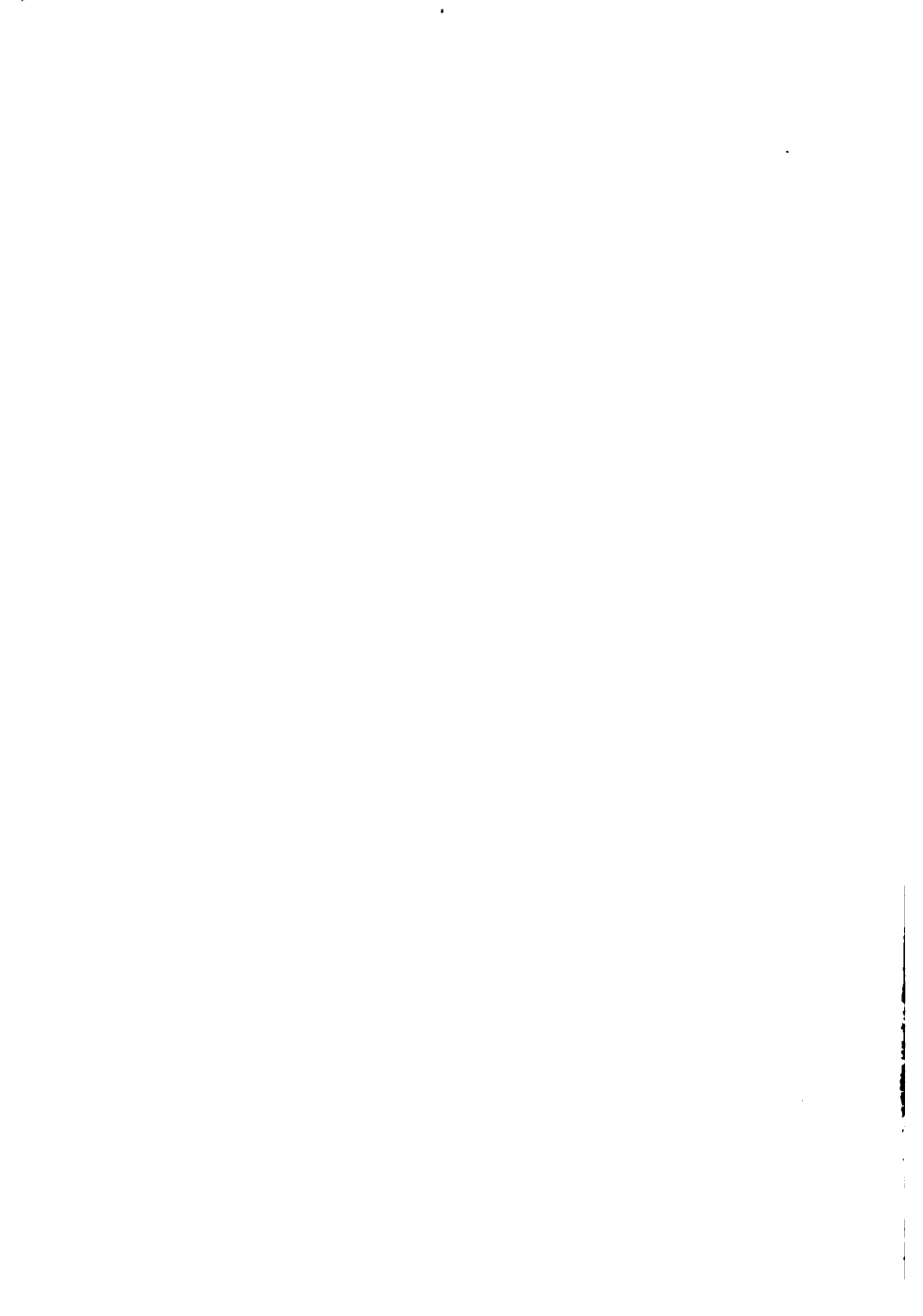
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OR

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"As De Montsoreau pushed Alain aside, that he might strike, she sprang upon him." (See page 314)

WORD OF BUSSY

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"A scene from the story of the blind men and the elephant." The illustration is from the book "The Story of the Blind Men and the Elephant" by the author of "The Story of the Blind Men and the Elephant".

THE SWORD OF BUSSY

or: The Word of a Gentleman

A Romance of the Time of Henry III

By

ROBERT NEILSON STEPHENS

*Author of "An Enemy to the King," "Philip Winwood,"
"A Soldier of Valley Forge," etc.*

and

HERMAN NICKERSON

With a frontispiece in full colour from a painting by
EDMUND H. GARRETT



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First Impression, October, 1912

THE COLONIAL PRESS

C. H. SIMONDS & CO., BOSTON, U. S. A.

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THE SWORD OF BUSSY



CHAPTER I

THE GRAND HUNTSMAN IS AMBITIOUS

BUSSY D'AMBOISE bore the well-earned reputation of a bravo; nor was this based upon an occasional brawl. Throughout France he was known as a man fearless and resourceful, tireless in his energy, who would face a mob as cheerfully as he accepted an invitation to dine. The sword he wore was as much a part of his physical self as was his arm, supple as the steel of the blade so many had tried to wrest from his vice-like grasp. As first gentleman to the Duke of Anjou he enjoyed the forced respect due one with whom it was well to agree openly, or else choose some quiet spot where dispute with him meant, possibly, a last look at the fair sky of France.

It was said that it required but a straw, blown across his path by a breath of wind, for his sword to leap from its scabbard. King Henry III and Monseigneur, while watching each other, found employment in the adjustment of brawls in which Bussy was the contention. The King fumed and fretted lest his brother seek honours other than those he enjoyed as the gift of the Crown. Jealous of his every move, seeing treason in the slightest thought expressed, he so harassed the Duke that he made several attempts to leave the palace, where he had been held practically a prisoner. The day was indeed dull when King Henry saw nothing sinister in the conduct of his brother.

The King's champions, well knowing the feelings of their master, made life miserable with their sly speeches, intended to irritate the Duke, against whom they dare not raise other than their voices.

With Bussy it was different. He was kept ever on the alert, defending the Duke, and with success, escaping the royal rage with a frequency that hinted of a charmed life.

Once he had felt the ground slipping from beneath his feet, the sunlight fade and darkness close in upon him, and his narrow escape always lingered in his memory.

The Duke had incurred the royal disfavour and sought the counsel of Bussy, who came to him at

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the palace. Their appointment was discovered and the culprit seized. As he was pulled from between two large mattresses in the cabinet of the Duke, Bussy would not have given the feather in his cap for his chance of life. Conducted to the apartments of the King, Bussy chose the manner of the penitent. King Henry's mood, however, was foreboding. He snarled in impotent rage.

"So, Monsieur Bussy, we find you an unbidden visitor at our palace!" cried the King.

"Unbidden, if it please you, Sire!" humbly replied Bussy, the situation being uncomfortable in the extreme. There was no avenue of escape.

"And plotting, too, I'll be bound!" the monarch snarled, searching the countenance of the man before him.

"Nay, plotting is out of my province. I find amusement in frustrating that bred in the ranks of your champions," he said boldly.

"Ay! You have more than ordinary success with the sword, Monsieur," remarked the King somewhat regretfully. "My gentlemen feel it keenly."

"Bussy and his sword are one and the same!" bowed the follower of the Duke. "Surely I would not cause them pain were it not necessary to uphold the dignity of the name I bear. A man set upon must fight, Sire."

“ No sooner are we freed from the affair with Grainmont, and the threatening battle of the champions over some trivial matter,” half whined the King, “ than we find you to have planned treason with your master. What say you, Bussy d’Amboise? ”

“ Plans and plots are not for me, Sire. I but follow the Duke of Anjou, who sorely needs me in times like these.”

“ But your presence here, Monsieur? ” demanded the King.

“ A servant answers the call of duty, Sire,” replied Bussy simply, finding himself facing a situation frequent in his young life. To have escaped thus far with his head gave his tongue full rein.

“ Sire,” he continued, “ your will is mine. If this poor head, by falling at the block, could blot from your memory my slightest offence, I pray you strike it off! ”

The King, well knowing the favour in which his brother held this daring swordsman, hesitated, thus giving Bussy the opening he had sought.

“ Of Monsieur de Quelus, Sire, your worthy champion, who so recently paid me the honour of storming my lodgings, — a foeman worthy of my steel, — let me assure your Majesty I hold him in the highest esteem.”

Bussy bowed low before the King, feathered

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cap in hand. "You have but to indicate the desire and Bussy d'Amboise will crave his pardon."

"So!" exclaimed the King, "we are to have peace and quiet once more. We shall see. Conduct Monsieur Bussy to the house of the Governor of the Bastile."

Once in the hall, Bussy fastened his cap upon his head, bearing himself more confidently than ever, and was led away, thus to escape apologizing to Monsieur de Quelus, whose tragic death, later, only prolonged the turmoil that kept the court in an uproar. The Duke of Anjou, through his weakness that bordered upon cowardice, clung to Bussy d'Amboise, who listened to his plans, guiding him in many an adventure upon which the swordsman entered with the enthusiasm and energy that marked his memorable career.

A light-hearted gentleman, merry with his jests, that cut as the edge of his good sword; kind to those whom position decreed his inferiors; jealous of a smile, and ever ready to battle for the excitement of the moment, a man who valued his life lightly, and whose adventures filled the court with fear, — such a man was Bussy d'Amboise, first gentleman of the Duke d'Anjou, smiling his way through life, and removing obstacles that would have baffled a less resourceful or less courageous man.

First gentlemen who wield their swords with wonderful skill are priceless to Dukes who plot and fail. They form the defence as well as offence of his following. But, as the pawn is sacrificed to make way for a strategic move, the life of Bussy d'Amboise was as checkered as the board upon which the chess men pass in play.

The chateau of Angers, in the Province of Anjou, furnished the quiet and solitude sought by the Duke of Anjou after his long period of bickering and strife. The castle, a majestic pile, occupied the summit of a high ragged rock, raising its head, straight as an arrow, from the banks of the river Mayenne. It was a veritable fortress, with its round towers standing like sentinels above the deep moat, cut from the rocky bed.

On an afternoon in March of 1579, the gates of the chateau of Angers lay invitingly open as the arms of a friend bidding one welcome. The bright sun had begun its westward journey, the shadows being long and less distinct. All seemed at peace with the world, the picture one of beauty. A discordant note was found in the presence of the guards of the Count de Montsoreau, bristling at the gates. A fountain played in the square, the ripple of the waters being sweet music to the ear. Close at hand, beneath the spreading limbs of a clump of trees, a rough rustic bench yawned lazily.

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Three pages of Bussy d'Amboise were making their way along the roadway leading to the square.

"Look yonder!" suddenly exclaimed Jacques, first to discover the guards on duty. "Look! There are the knaves of the Count de Montsoreau! Let us crowd them at the gate!"

"Not so fast," cautioned Vignon. "They are too many for us."

"What of that?" retorted Jacques, loosening his sword in the scabbard. "Bussy d'Amboise is a match for any four of the Duke's other gentlemen; so three of Bussy's pages must be worth any dozen of their lackeys."

"You're right," chimed in Francois, the third of the group, "particularly the lackeys of the Grand Huntsman."

"But we would as well be a little careful," again interposed Vignon. "Our master is losing the Duke's favour, while the Seigneur de Chanvallon is gaining it. Any one can see that."

"Oh, the devil!" cried Jacques in disgust. "A man who can fight like Bussy will always be in favour. Come on!"

The approach of the three pages wearing the colours of D'Amboise had been observed by the men of De Montsoreau. As the pages turned suddenly three abreast, swaggering toward the gate,

their hands upon their swords, the watch filed through to meet them, their attitude one of beligerence.

"Clear the way there!" shouted their leader loudly, waving his arm.

"For whom?" insultingly inquired Jacques.

"Your superiors," replied the guard.

"Oh, what a joke!" roared Jacques, turning to his friends.

"Yes, good enough to tell your master, Bussy d'Amboise; and here's a better one!" exclaimed De Montsoreau's man, calling upon the others to follow him in the attack.

De Montsoreau's lackeys drew swiftly, and set upon the pages, who were equally anxious for the clash of arms, and, be it said to their credit, the pages were holding their own against the odds when the hoarse roar from a guard beyond the gate broke upon their ears.

"Room for Monseigneur!" he cried.

The effect was magical. The combatants dropped their sword points in confusion, hurriedly sheathing their weapons as they bowed low before the Duke of Anjou, who, with the Seigneur Chavallon, passed through the gate into the square, being met at the fountain by the Count de Montsoreau, who had come by the road leading down toward the river's edge.

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The Duke glanced at the group of eight combatants and then at the Count.

"Monsieur de Montsoreau," said he slowly, "your men have been quarrelling with those of Bussy d'Amboise!" His voice was stern; his manner cold and brusque.

"I'll vouch the fault was not with my men, Monseigneur," replied the Count. "They had preceded me to the chateau, whither I was coming to beg audience of your Highness concerning the new deer park."

The Duke turned as if to consult with De Chanvallon, and the Count waved his men to proceed to the chateau. They obeyed with haste, passing through the gate. The men of D'Amboise, forgetting, for the moment, their thirst for glory, formed a willing group as well. They took great pains to bow low before the Duke ere they departed. One of De Montsoreau's men remained in answer to the Count's command, taking a position beside the wall.

The Duke paid scant attention to the little band as it withdrew. Facing the Count, one hand resting upon De Chanvallon's shoulder, he said:

"You may speak of it to Bussy d'Amboise, Monsieur le Comte. I am on my way to vespers. As for those turbulent fellows, they but imitate

my gentlemen themselves. The servants copy the quarrels of the masters."

"Your Highness will grant that I at least do not quarrel with Monsieur Bussy d'Amboise," said De Montsoreau, humbly.

"Would that more of my gentlemen could truly say that," replied the Duke. Then, as if thinking aloud, he added, "Bussy's pugnacity was a fine thing in Paris, when it could vent itself against the favourites of the King, my brother; but, now that it is exercised on the other gentlemen of my household, it is more troublesome than useful."

De Montsoreau started to speak, looking furtively at the Duke, and coughed slightly, touching his lips with his handkerchief. "And even if you should carry out your thought of returning to Paris —" he began.

The Duke of Anjou had paused to listen. As the Count showed no disposition to continue, he demanded:

"What then, De Montsoreau? Why do you hesitate?"

The Count's confusion was clearly artificial, still it passed as genuine in the eyes of the Duke.

"Nay, I would not speak to the prejudice of Bussy — your first gentleman, governor of your province, and my benefactor in having prayed

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you to make me Grand Huntsman," he stammered apologetically.

"Though Bussy is all that, and Abbot of Bourgeuil, too, are you not my servant and friend?" asked the Duke with a smile in which fear was lurking. "Come, Monsieur le Comte, when you can profit me by telling your thoughts, it is your duty to speak." The Duke paused expectantly.

The Count's spirits rose with a bound. Ambition spurred him on.

"Well, Monseigneur," said he, "since the King's chief favourite, and your chief enemy of old, De Quelus, is dead, what need of Bussy's sword to maintain your position in Paris?"

There was boldness in the stroke, and danger in its utterance, should the mood of the Duke change, as it was wont to upon the slightest pretext.

De Chanvallon, who up to this time had been an eager listener, came to the assistance of De Montsoreau. "Aye, Monseigneur!" he exclaimed, "and will not Bussy's turbulence hinder the King, your brother, from the reconciliation you are ready to accept?"

"By the mass, you're right, gentlemen!" gaily cried the Duke. "'Tis true Bussy's sword has made men fear me, but better had they trusted me than feared me. This swaggering Bussy

d'Amboise shall soon have had his day with me!"

The Duke paused, looking sharply at the men before him, wavering, fearing he might have spoken too frankly.

"But no hint of this to him, gentlemen!" he added earnestly.

"Monseigneur!" devotedly ejaculated De Montsoreau.

"Your Highness!" murmured De Chanvallon, with marked subservience.

"We'll discuss this at church, De Chanvallon," said the Duke, taking him by the arm. "Monsieur de Montsoreau, your candor shall lose you nothing."

The Grand Huntsman stood watching them as they went on their way to vespers, a smile playing about his mouth.

His lackey approached to attend him.

"If Bussy d'Amboise continues to lose favour at this rate, I shall yet be governor of Anjou in his place," said he. "The more fool he for having got me made Grand Huntsman."

CHAPTER II

THE GIRL IN THE HOSE

As De Montsoreau passed through the gate towards the chateau, followed by his lackey, the square, so recently the scene of strife, quieted to the silence of the forest whose borders were plainly visible in the distance beyond the wall. The guards on duty lounged about the entrance expectantly, for the period of quiet, and the absence of Bussy d'Amboise, were a novelty.

De Montsoreau's ambition was known to them, and his increasing favour with the Duke formed the topic in the guard-room. To attend the Grand Huntsman was some honour, yet to be in the service of the Governor of Anjou, and, perchance, first gentleman, was a possibility that deeply concerned them. Deer parks may interest the Duke of Anjou, still the gossip of the court clearly pointed toward other game.

De Montsoreau's dream of greatness absorbed his waking hours, while in his castle, tucked away safely, he fancied, rested his Countess, Marguerite.

There she remained, removed from the gay world of the court, the subject of comment in the obscurity to which she was forced by the jealous selfishness of the Count.

De Montsoreau had but passed within the walls of the chateau when, emerging stealthily from the opening beyond the square, two women approached, each closely masked. The foremost hurried her steps, sweeping her riding-habit closely about her well-turned limbs. She carried a dainty whip, as did her maid, who followed at a respectful distance. To one who might have observed them, it was clear that they had watched the scene of the meeting from a distance. Following the action of her mistress, the maid removed her mask, casting a rapid glance behind to assure herself that they were alone but for the guards, who paid no heed.

The Countess of Montsoreau, for it was she, looked cautiously through the gates, her profile in relief against the dark wall. She was tall for a woman, with the erect carriage that savoured of perfect health, a fact accentuated by her walk, which had the lithe spring and subdued power of self-possession. The roundness of her limbs, the trimness of her waist, snugly embraced by the dark green cloth, attracted the eye, while the abundance of hair coiled neatly beneath her flow-

ing hat, with its long brim fastened with a knot, set off the brightness of her cheeks, glowing from the hard ride she had but finished.

Eyes that looked from beneath drooping lashes, flashing in their brilliancy, held one; while the parted lips, crimson and generous in their thickness, spoke of the warmth that slumbered within her heart. There may have been reason for the Count's jealous care, yet the tongue of scandal had failed to reach her.

As the maid neared the gate, the Countess turned to meet her. With a gay snap of her whip, as she lowered it after pointing toward the chateau, she exclaimed with a smile which lighted her face, "Yonder he goes, little dreaming I am in Angers." There was the playful mirth of a child in the action, with the desperate, rebellious nature of a neglected woman to give it force and import.

"If he really thinks you stay penned up in the Chateau de Montsoreau as he has ordered," replied Finette, with the confidence of a maid who knew her position and feared not to express her mind, "it proves two things, — what fools husbands are, and what fools they think their wives are."

Marguerite nodded an emphatic approval, dropping her skirt to seize her whip, bending it nervously as she spoke. "Yet he really does think

so, for, if he knew I made these little excursions into Angers, harmless though they be, he would be furious. How strange it is that a man who neglects his wife should nevertheless wish to hide her from the rest of the world. Hide, no, imprison her, if she were to follow his instructions! Men are the most selfish of animals! There he goes — free as the air, while I must steal like a thief from his chateau to find amusement.”

Finette, with fine scorn, tossed her head high until her pretty nose was tilted toward the sky. For one so young, her knowledge of men was considerable. This she had gained through her association with the lackeys of the gentlemen of the court, who, in order to appear men of consequence, retailed the gossip second hand, and in her they found a ready listener.

“A man is a dog in the manger, Madame,” she snapped; “when he acquires a possession, whether it be a sword or a horse, or a pair of boots, or a wife, though he may find no time for it himself, he will yet keep it locked away from the eyes of others. ’Tis this greed, and a fear of the world’s laughter, that makes husbands jealous of wives they do not love. Depend on that, however loftily they prate of what they call their honour.”

This outburst amused the Countess, who, during the tirade, smiled quietly. One does not like to

be reminded that husbands are neglectful, even though that first blush of passion, which so many mistake for a great love, has worn away; but the honesty of the maid and her devotion to her mistress went a long way toward excusing her in the eyes of the Countess.

"Heavens! have wives neither minds nor hearts?" she demanded, "and must they be content to stay where they are put, like tapestry hangings, and pieces of furniture? Not if they be women such as I. The Count may fancy I am safe at Montsoreau. Let us guard against dispelling the thought."

Warming to her subject, enthused by the manner in which her mistress had borne her attack upon the Count, Finette continued to express her views upon matrimony in general, with an eye toward the specific case in point.

"But such husbands only defeat their own plans. The closer they keep a wife hidden away, the more value they seem to set on her, and the more curious they make the world to get a peep at her." The maid studied the effect of her words upon the Countess with a purpose soon disclosed.

"Alas," sighed the Countess, "I have not yet caught the world peeping in my direction, though thrice I have stolen thus to Angers in my husband's absence. Husband did I say, — I should

call him my jailer!" Marguerite paced back and forth, swishing at her skirts with her whip. "Oh, I shall go mad of sheer solitude. The man has driven me to hate him. He, with his ambition to seize upon an honour scarce within his dreams!"

"Patience, Madame," cried the maid comfortingly. "How often must I repeat what Monsieur Bussy d'Amboise said to the Duke the other day." She paused as if she had let fall that which she should have withheld from her mistress.

At the mention of D'Amboise's name the Countess stopped in her nervous walk and drew nearer Finette. Her interest was keenly aroused, and she made no effort at concealment.

"Well?" said she expectantly.

"He said," continued Finette, "that, if the Grand Huntsman continued to keep his wife in hiding, he had a mind to teach the Grand Huntsman a lesson. 'A pretty woman,' said he, 'is entitled to her share of admiration and devotion.'"

"Monsieur Bussy spoke truly," asserted Marguerite, to whom the words carried a meaning she fain would hug to her breast. "But he is overconfident." She paused for her maid to reply. Finette, with the shrewdness of her sex, sought to be urged. Once excite the curiosity of a woman, and, maid or countess, it is the same.

"And what did the Duke reply?" asked the

Countess with an attempted display of indifference.

"That the fawn of the Grand Huntsman, meaning you, was very shy," said Finette, smiling slyly, with averted face, as the Countess swished the dust from off her skirt.

"I was — once, and might be so still," the Countess asserted warmly, "were I not maddened by the restraint upon me. And what was Monsieur Bussy's impudent answer?"

The maid now needed no urging. "'Oh,' said Bussy, 'I think I can attract the fawn of the Grand Huntsman into the net.' Those were his words," Finette declared, watching their effect upon her mistress, "and, having uttered the boast before witnesses, he is bound for his credit to make it good. Bussy d'Amboise is a gentleman who holds his word sacred above all else."

The Countess de Montsoreau felt more interest than she had thought she could have experienced from the mere coupling of her name with the boast of the gallant. When she spoke, however, her manner was one of indignation. It would not do to display too deep an interest, nor appear too eager for such a meeting.

"Attract the fawn into the net, indeed!" she exclaimed. "No wonder they call Bussy d'Amboise a braggart. He thinks he can attract the

fawn — and he has seen me only twice! Well, just to baffle this boaster, I shall let him try! Yes — I shall put myself in his way!" The Countess lingered over the last words. Had she not sought for such a chance meeting? Now she was more resolved than ever that Bussy keep his word.

Finette had won her point. Curiosity had been gratified, and the Countess was about to run headlong into danger, for few women had failed to find that the acquaintance of Bussy d'Amboise brought its consequences and heartaches.

"Do, Madame!" declared the maid eagerly, "but take my counsel, and don't let him see how much you are in the mood to be attracted." Here the maid went a step too far in her urging.

"Finette! How dare you!" exclaimed the Countess with a ring in her voice that brought the maid to the realization that perhaps she had been indiscreet. Kneeling beside her mistress, Finette bowed her head, penitently craving pardon, though in her heart she felt she had given good advice.

"I show my devotion by my frankness, Madame," said she.

The Countess stroked her outstretched hand, and Finette read her pardon. "I have guessed from the first," she continued, "that your stolen rides to Angers have been to put yourself in Bussy's

way as relief from the weariness of your lonely life, and as a revolt against your husband's tyranny. Any woman would have done the same with less provocation than you have received."

Marguerite's eyes flashed and Finette hastened to explain. "They began the day after I told you what my friend the lackey overheard between the Duke and Bussy. And now I advise you to play the shy fawn. 'Twill put Monsieur Bussy on his mettle to gain your smiles. The Duke's first gentleman, I am told, takes pleasure in the stalking of his game!"

The maid's words were pleasing music to the ear of the Countess, who was carried forward toward the goal she sought and dreamed of. Having formed no definite plan, Marguerite again turned to the worldly-wise maid for advice.

"But how am I to meet him?" she asked. "Three times have I ridden secretly to Angers, thus, in hope to encounter him by chance, yet I have only risked the danger of discovery by my husband. One would think he knew of my coming and remained away, yet, if he be honest in his desire to make good his boast, such reasoning were false."

"All in good time," consolingly replied Finette. "Bussy d'Amboise never broke his word. We must eventually meet him coming from the gates

of the chateau. Then you will encounter him quite by chance. He will doubtless greet you, and the game will then take its course. Meanwhile, let us stroll yonder lest we be noticed haunting the gates. The guards have noted with suspicion our presence here, apparently purposeless."

The Countess looked longingly in the direction of the chateau. "Very well," said she, "come; but keep an eye on the gates."

Afternoon was fast fading as the Countess and her maid sauntered toward the glen, Finette glancing back toward the chateau as they proceeded. A turn in the path soon cut off the view of the road, or she would have seen two youthful figures headed toward the deserted square. One was enveloped in a cloak; the other, a mere boy, reluctantly followed, his steps displaying the fear that shook his whole being. They were strangely out of place.

Though she was clad in man's apparel, one from Maucourt would have recognized the figure with the cloak as Heloise, sister of Mlle. de Maucourt. The pale-faced lad was her brother Etienne, and it was clear he came as no willing escort. He followed his sister with dragging footsteps, nervously scanning the road behind, as fearing pursuit.

Heloise approached the fountain, anxiously looking at the towers just beyond. The boy

stumbled along, his knees knocking together in his fright.

"So that is the entrance to the chateau?" asked Heloise, turning to her brother.

"Yes," stammered the youth, "so the boy told me."

Heloise walked to the ledge by the fountain, wearily sitting, Etienne tumbling down beside her. "It is here we have to wait, then. How you tremble, Etienne!" said the girl.

The boy took his sister's hand in his, lovingly, as he spoke, "And you, my sister. Oh, Heloise, give up this project! Let us go back to Mau-court!"

"Never! Not though I tremble a thousand times more," bravely cried Heloise. "Let us rest here. I will save what strength I can."

Etienne grew thoughtful. A faint flush spread over his pale face. His lips set tightly. "If it must be done, let me do it, Heloise," he demanded, with some show of returned composure. The maid looked at the lad beside her with pride. After all, there was the spirit of the Maucourts in his words and tone. She patted his hand affectionately as he looked beseechingly up into her face.

"You!" replied his sister. "Why, as you are shaking now, you could not even hold the dagger!"

No, little brother, though you are the boy, and I the woman, I am the one with the man's heart. Besides, there will be enough for you to do. Above all, do not let yourself be caught! You must be free to act, or else my plan must fail!"

The boy's face grew deathly white, and he clung to Heloise. "But you," he cried, "you will surely be taken! And to think what they will do with you!" The picture was too horrible. He buried his face in his trembling hands.

It was, indeed, as she had said. Hers was the heart of the man, his courage and fearlessness; still, she was the soft, yielding, sympathetic woman. The boy's fear for her safety touched her and she comforted him.

Placing her arm about him, she said: "Why, they must hold me for trial. And, meanwhile, you will have slunk away as soon as the thing has been done, and you will have flown back to Mau-court and told our father and Alain, and they will have gone to Paris to plead with the King for my pardon. For everybody knows the King hates this Bussy d'Amboise, and will be glad to be rid of him."

The confidence expressed failed to find response in the lad's mind. He saw, alone, the death and desolation of the proposed adventure. Though he listened with apparent composure, his fingers

worked nervously, and his eyes bore the startled stare of an animal trapped. His mind worked slowly, stunted, as it were, through terror. Finding his voice, he pleaded, "You should have told Alain you were coming to do this. He would have sacrificed his life for you, of that I am sure."

Shaking her head, Heloise replied: "Why, he would have hindered me from coming. I alone can accomplish the purpose, so pray do not try to dissuade me further."

There was but one appeal left. Etienne's eyes beheld the picture of their home and the despair their absence caused. "Think of his grief at your leaving home, and his alarm at what may have befallen you," he begged. "And our poor father! Our absence may be his death. He may imagine us killed, or you abducted. Think of him and Alain searching the country for us in vain."

Determined in her mission, Heloise turned the boy's words to her defence. "That is why you must not fail to go swiftly back and relieve their anxiety," said she.

Etienne shuddered as he clung to her. How could he stand apart and see harm come to his sister; then fly for assistance, being the bearer of such terrible news?

"Relieve their anxiety with the news that you have slain the Duke of Anjou's first gentleman,

and been taken to prison, or killed!" he cried. "What relief for a lover and a father!"

Courage in the face of danger may falter when brought to realize the heart-hurt of the project; but Heloise remained steadfast in her purpose, though the lad's words rang strangely true.

"When my father knows that Henriette is avenged —"

She did not finish. Etienne interrupted with warmth.

"Aye," said he, "to lose a second daughter will much console him for the loss of a first! Oh, Heloise, it is madness! Abandon it! Leave Bussy d'Amboise to receive his punishment from God for what our sister has suffered. 'Tis not for us to deal punishment upon this earth."

"It is God whose instrument I am in this. Do not unnerve me, Etienne," she pleaded. "I am resolved, so let my arm have all the force it can. There is enough to weaken it. I fancy that every one who looks at me reads my purpose. Their faces seem to say: 'I know you, Mademoiselle de Maucourt. I know you are a woman dressed as a boy, that you have stolen secretly from your home to Angers to kill Bussy d'Amboise, the Duke of Anjou's bully, for having brought shame and sorrow upon your sister!' Along the roads on our journey here my heart sank, my blood froze,

at the thought of detection before I had met this heartless bravo. Roysterer! Braggart! Abductor!"

"Hush! Heloise, hush!" tearfully exclaimed the boy. "You may be heard. It is a deed beyond us, Heloise, to slay a man neither of us even knows by sight. We shall never carry it through. Our very attempts to learn which is Bussy d'Amboise will betray our purpose. We cannot remain long here unnoticed. When the guard questions us, we are lost!"

"Not so. We have but to note each gentleman that passes in or out of those gates, and lightly ask his name of some passer-by. Sooner or later it will be Bussy d'Amboise," replied the maiden, yet the lad's suggestion impressed her more than she would admit.

Etienne, in an effort to throw an obstacle in the way, cried: "But we might be wrongly told."

"There must be no mistake," declared his sister. "First we shall get some description of his looks, and then, when he is named, make sure the description fits. I will question the first person I can engage in talk." Etienne, despairing of turning his sister aside, sank back upon the ledge.

Heloise looked down the path toward the glen and quickly wound her cloak about her as she rose

from the ledge. "Yonder lady seems to be loitering in no haste. See, she moves toward us. Mayhap she is of the chateau, and can furnish what I require."

The Countess of Montsoreau had lingered in hope of meeting Bussy, and had then decided to visit once more the spot where she felt her mission might meet with success. She and her maid, seeing two boys beside the fountain, placed their masks upon their faces before entering the square.

As the Countess came upon them, Heloise accosted her with attempted bravado, her heart beating wildly as she spoke. Long had she schooled herself for the ordeal — now it was at hand. The heart of the man she so proudly boasted of refused to make itself felt. With faltering speech, she said: "Madame, pray pardon the question of a stranger. My brother and I are new to the sights and personages of Angers. Men rebuff us when we inquire of them, and so, for civil answers, we turn to your gentle sex."

Marguerite, puzzled at the strange manner of the youth, his evident suppressed emotion, pleasantly inquired: "What do you wish to know, my lad?"

Confidence restored, Heloise assumed the air of a courtier. "We," motioning toward Etienne, "have been disputing whether a gentleman we

saw a while ago is the famous Bussy d'Amboise." Etienne drew apart, his courage failing him. The glance of curious intent cast by the shorter of the two women, burned, he felt, into his very soul.

"Bussy d'Amboise!" exclaimed the Countess, startled to hear the name of the man who for hours had occupied her every thought.

"Aye, the Duke's first gentleman," repeated Heloise, "or, as some call him, the Duke's bravo. Will you tell us, Madame, what his appearance is?"

The Countess' confusion would not have escaped another less interested in the reply. Heloise, in her desire to secure the information, missed the telltale manner, as Marguerite faltered in her description.

She stammered, glancing at Finette, who stood watching the lad. "Why —" said she slowly, "he is a gentleman — young — handsome — bold —"

Finette's keen eye grasped the scene. She stole to her mistress' side and whispered, "This boy means Bussy harm. Note his tone and look, his trembling — the something clutched beneath the cloak —"

Marguerite saw the look, and marvelled at the lad, who hurriedly pressed her for further description.

“ But as to his size and figure and complexion? ” Heloise demanded.

The Countess' alarm at Finette's warning was intensified by the manner of the lad, whose pale, drawn face showed the desperate thoughts that possessed him.

“ Why — I — ” she faltered, “ I am not good at descriptions.”

“ Doubtless you could point him out if he passed,” persisted Heloise, not to be set aside by any such palpable evasion. The Countess hesitated, and again Finette came to her relief.

“ Why not point out some one else? ” whispered she, “ then we shall see what the lad does. If his intent is evil, so much the worse for some unfortunate. Surely you would not have harm befall Bussy? ”

The Countess nodded. Then, to Heloise, she said: “ Point him out? Certainly, my lad, if he passes this way.”

“ It would much oblige us by settling our dispute,” bowed Heloise.

Finette returned from the gate, having made a swift survey of the courtyard within. She spoke softly to the Countess, as Heloise and Etienne drew apart.

“ Your husband is returning from the chateau,” said she.

The Countess thought quickly. The plan startled her. There was terror crowding fear as she recklessly chose to act.

"Yes, indeed, my lad," said she. "Few are better acquainted with Bussy's face than I. Gladly would I point him out had I time to wait."

Moving to a point where she could look up toward the winding path within the portals, she beckoned Heloise to follow. With a wave of her arm, indicating the figure stepping briskly toward the gate, she said: "But we are fortunate, my boy. Look through the gates. Do you see that gentleman coming down the path followed by his lackeys?"

Finette read the motive. "A blow meant for the lover may strike the husband," was the thought that flashed through her mind.

"I see him!" exclaimed Heloise, excitedly tightening her hold upon the something beneath her cloak.

"That is Bussy d'Amboise," whispered the Countess softly.

Heloise watched the approaching figure. "I thank you, Madame," said she, never taking her eyes from the man.

"Good day, my lads. Come, Finette!" and the Countess hurried away.

CHAPTER III

BUSSY FREES A LADY

HELOISE stood watching the Count of Montsoreau, who, attended by a lackey, was approaching the square. There was little to indicate weakness in the lithe form that swayed slightly as she took a firm hold upon the dagger hidden beneath her cloak. The Countess and her maid had vanished. Etienne braced himself for one last appeal, and rushed to the side of his sister.

"Oh, Heloise!" he pleaded, "draw back before it is too late!"

He clutched at her arm through the cloak to stay her. The man was close upon them.

There was a moment of silence as Heloise measured with a glance the man she sought to slay. Nothing could have changed her in the resolve, and this the boy soon learned, for she resolutely shook him off.

"Silence! Go yonder, and watch that you may not be taken. Go, I say!" demanded the girl firmly.

Creeping back, crestfallen and in terror, the lad hid behind the fountain, which shut him from the gaze of those within, while he might watch what followed.

De Montsoreau looked at the silent figure curiously, then turned to his lackey, who anticipated his command with a polite: "Yes, Monsieur."

The Count turned away, his back to Heloise, and moved toward the road leading to the town. "Then bring the horses from the inn to the town gate," said he, as he strode along, suspecting nothing, forgetting the lads he had seen in the square.

There was a rush of feet, the cloak flew back, and Heloise sprang upon the retreating figure. Her voice sounded shrill and sharp as she plunged the dagger to its hilt.

"Death to the destroyer of women!" she screamed.

Etienne, behind the fountain, hid his face in his cloak.

With the outcry, the lackey ran to his master's side, as he fell back more startled than hurt. The tiny weapon had caused but a slight wound, and the Count had already plucked it from his shoulder as others of his following joined him.

Heloise had rushed past the fountain, crying to Etienne to fly, and the lad had taken to his heels

down the road and out across the wooded bank below.

"Ho! catch the assassin!" shouted the lackey, who held the Count in his arms, although there seemed no need of this service.

The cloaked figure was soon surrounded, the struggle brief. Heloise sought to defend herself, but fell senseless to the pavement of the square, felled by a blow from the staff of a lackey.

De Montsoreau shook himself free from the terrified grasp of his lackey.

"I am not much hurt," said he, with impatience. "Where is he who struck me?"

A lackey, bending over the prostrate form, replied, "Here, Monsieur!" The faint breathing assured him. "Not dead," he added, "but senseless."

The Count looked down upon the fallen figure with contempt, kicking at the heels of the lad.

"Secure the rascal and bring him along. I'll question him before I hang him," he cried in anger, for the wound, though trivial, smarted warmly.

There was, however, a sudden interruption.

"Not so fast with your hanging, Monsieur!"

The voice came from within the gates. Its tone, full, round and commanding, halted the little

party, as they began to lift the form from off the stone.

“Room for Monsieur Bussy d’Amboise!” demanded the guard at the gate.

Count de Montsoreau’s lackeys fell back upon either side of their master, who faced Bussy across the fallen figure of Heloise.

Bussy d’Amboise stepped briskly to the side of the youthful figure, whose face was hidden by the folds of the cloak, and confronted the Count, looking first at one, then at the other.

Bussy d’Amboise stood firmly upon his booted feet, tall, slender, lithe, with power in inaction. His poise was grace itself, born of perfection in his art and the fearlessness of one who had met no conqueror. His doublet fitted his strong shoulders, not snugly, but clung, setting forth the power that lay beneath. His hair, dark and straight, blended strikingly with the bronze of the skin, clear and firm. The small moustache turned slightly upward at the ends. His eye was a pale blue, the eye of one whom it is best to term friend.

The sudden appearance of the Duke’s first gentleman threw the Count off his guard. The thought of the honours he sought, and which he had so clearly betrayed when speaking of the hanging, vanished beneath the cold gaze of him who was master of the situation. Dogged in his manner,

De Montsoreau chafed beneath the glance he dared not oppose. Grace in retreat was the only way left for him.

“ Who is this whom you have taken upon yourself to judge and condemn so suddenly, Monsieur, the Grand Huntsman? ” There was the sting of the bee in the turn his tongue gave to the words, and his eye, keen and clear, held the gleam that bespoke danger.

De Montsoreau's confusion could not be hidden. “ I spoke in haste, Monsieur, ” he replied, bowing deeply. “ I meant but to secure him for trial. The man tried to assassinate me. ”

As he spoke, the Count handed Bussy the tiny dagger.

Bussy laughed lightly as he turned it over in his hand. “ What! with this toy? ” he asked. “ A *man*, you say? ” glancing at the senseless Heloise. “ Why, he is but a child. Would you heed the attack of a stripling? ”

Taunts from Bussy d'Amboise must be borne with grace, so the Count's lips framed themselves into the semblance of civility. He sought excuse for his action in the fear his words implied. “ He may be an instrument of others! ”

Disgust was clearly written upon the face of the Duke's first gentleman, and he failed not to show it. “ What fool would choose a boy like that

to strike a death-blow?" said he, bending over Heloise. "'Tis some rash youth, no doubt, who has pondered on a wrong, real or fancied. Why, had I been the object of his blow I'd hand the child back his dagger, and send him, with safe escort, home to his mother."

Clearly Bussy intended to offend. De Montsoreau took refuge in injured dignity. Still his temper grew a bit ruffled at this reference to children. He bit his lip, and shot an angry glance at Bussy, who stooped to pull the cloak from off Heloise's face.

"What you would do is your affair," he snarled. "I am entitled to my reparation."

Bussy caught the tone, and marvelled at the man's daring. One glance was enough to convince him that the Count was as putty in his hands.

Bussy straightened up to his full height and looked the Count in the eye insolently. "So? Reparation against a boy? Revenge upon the weak? You, the Count of Montsoreau, Grand Huntsman to the Duke of Anjou? No! no! For the honour of our rank, no! *Noblesse oblige*, Monsieur."

"Nobility does not oblige me to pardon an assassin," fretfully answered the Count, seeking some means to justify his demand.

Bussy's irritation grew. "No?" he sneered.

"Then, *pardieu*, I shall oblige you. Pass on, Monsieur le Comte, and leave this lad to me."

Bussy gazed at the lad lying senseless at his feet, a feeling of pity seizing him. "Surely, but a lad!" he murmured.

But one way was open for the Count de Montsoreau, and that to obey. He did so as gracefully as he could, but explained his action by one more excuse.

"You must have your way, Monsieur," said the Count sullenly. "You are the Duke's first gentleman, and governor of the province."

Bussy stepped toward De Montsoreau, his manner threatening. There was a sneer upon his lips, and his flashing eye caused the Count to cringe. "I shall have my way," cried Bussy proudly, "not because I am the Duke's first gentleman, Monsieur, nor because I am governor of the province; but because I am Bussy d'Amboise."

"As you will, Monsieur," declared the Count, with a politeness formal and abject. "I go, as you desire."

With his lackeys he backed away, while Bussy watched.

The figure upon the pavement lay as it had fallen. Bussy sought to discover the nature of the lad's injuries. Kneeling, he felt the breath come short and faint.

"This desperate and redoubtable youth seems in a bad way," he muttered, listening to the faint breathing.

Whipping out his dagger, he severed the lacing of the jerkin, and felt for the heartbeat to reassure him. He sat back upon his feet in astonishment.

"By the blue heavens!" he exclaimed, springing up, "it's a woman!"

Nervously he twisted the bit of lacing in his hand, as he glanced at the face above the folds of the cloak. It was one of great beauty in its silent innocence. The olive cheeks were well rounded and clear; the tiny mouth was parted, showing teeth small and pearl-like in their lustre; the nose was clean-cut and slender. A mass of nut-brown hair had fallen from beneath the cap, knocked from her shapely head by the ruffians in their attack.

"A maid of quality, I'll be bound," he muttered. "A dainty maid as ever I did have the good fortune to meet. But why should she be here, masquerading as a lad?"

"Barnabe!" he cried loudly. "Barnabe, my man!"

From behind the wall emerged an old soldier, companion in many an adventure of his young and dashing master. His face was lined and hardened from constant exposure; the grizzled beard,

coarse and thick, set off his jaw, firm and broad, the jaw of determination. Though well along in years, the soldier was as erect and alert as the younger man whom he followed with the devotion of more than an honoured servant.

The call from Bussy had borne with it the thought of danger. When he stepped into the square he expected to find action. To see his master standing beside the figure on the pavement puzzled him. A man of few words, Barnabe waited to be told.

"Yes, Monsieur," he said simply, saluting.

"Here's a most astonishing thing," cried Bussy, pointing to the figure at his feet. "A woman dressed as a boy attacks the Count de Montsoreau with a dagger, and is felled by the lackeys. Is she not sweetly beautiful?"

The soldier paid no heed to the allusion to the young girl's attractiveness. That he passed by with a smile. Bussy saw beauty in many, as Barnabe well knew; but the beauty of women never appealed to him.

"A thing is never astonishing if a woman does it, Monsieur," declared the soldier with rare reason.

Bussy paid no attention to the cynical reply of his servant. He knelt beside Heloise, taking her head upon his arm tenderly. His hands, vicelike

in their grasp when wielding the sword, softened to the tenderness of a woman's. His solicitude and evident anxiety for the young woman would have caused the painted puppets at the court to raise their brows. To them Bussy displayed but one side of his nature, the rough, bristling, blustering man of the sword; to those who knew him for the man he really was, this act of kindness would not have seemed unusual.

Looking up at Barnabe, Bussy smiled. "One thing will be astonishing, if it occurs when she comes to her senses," said he.

"You mean if she does not ask 'Where am I?'" grunted the soldier, wondering how far this latest adventure of his master would carry him. He had studied the face of the girl as she lay there, and could not remember having seen it before. "Some provincial maid, I'll be bound, fussing with affairs that bring their sorrow," said he to himself.

"Where the devil did you learn so much about women, Barnabe?" cried Bussy. "To look at you, one would never suspect you of having known many, and yet you talk by the card."

"Experience, Monsieur," replied Barnabe shortly.

Heloise partly opened her eyes and closed them again. Slowly she was regaining consciousness.

Bussy raised his hand. "Hush, she's coming to!" he said.

Heloise slowly opened her eyes, looking into the earnest face so close to hers. She spoke softly, and her lips trembled.

"Did I kill him?" she asked.

Strange words from so sweet lips, thought Bussy, studying the face that seemed so childish.

"The astonishing thing has occurred," said Barnabe, stroking his chin.

A scowl clouded Bussy's face as he heard the soldier's comment, and he hastened to relieve the troubled mind of the maid whose head still rested so lightly upon his arm.

"No, my child," said he, "much as it may annoy you, truth compels me to say the Count de Montsoreau still lives. I believe," he continued, with a twinkle in his eye, "you wounded him slightly in the doublet, but that was all."

Heloise gathered her scattered senses, sitting upright, staring about her in a frightened manner.

"The Count de Montsoreau, did you say?" she asked.

"Precisely," nodded Bussy. "Grand Huntsman to the Duke."

She had failed, — had been tricked. The thought was a crushing one to the young girl. She could hardly believe the words repeated with such

evident truth, so sure had she been of her victim.

"Was it he I struck?" she asked, bewildered.

"No other. Who did you think it was?" he smilingly asked, curious to know the name of him this fair maid would have slain.

Heloise attempted to rise, but slipped back into a sitting posture, her head resting upon her hands.

"Why, they told me it was — some one else," she said cautiously. "I shall be less trustful next time."

Bussy tried to keep a sober countenance. The humour of the scene; the dainty woman, clad in hose and jerkin, admitting she'd been tricked; while Barnabe's stolid person showed no interest, all added to his mirth.

"Now that's amusing," he laughed. "You wanted to kill some one else, and they told you the Count de Montsoreau was that some one?"

Barnabe caught the jest. "They must have been some of Monsieur de Montsoreau's dear friends!"

This was lost upon Heloise, crushed beneath the thought of failure. With laboured movement the young woman rose to her feet. Facing Bussy d'Amboise, with not the slightest tremor, she asked, "And when am I to be taken to prison?"

Bussy was charmed with the manner shown.

Here was a woman of blood and action, who would not faint at the thought of strife, and who, having lost in the game she played, was ready and willing to pay the price.

"You are not to be taken to prison," he stated, with a smile.

The young woman could not believe her ears.

"Why not?" she demanded shortly.

Bussy hastened to convince her all was well, though his reply left her more confused than ever.

"Because I have objected to your going there," said he.

"What?" exclaimed Heloise, advancing toward him. "Are you the Duke of Anjou?"

"No," replied Bussy, and there was no attempt at self-praise in what he said, merely the most natural explanation possible for him to make. "I am merely a gentleman whose sword, though apparently of the same length as any other man's, invariably happens to be two or three inches longer in an argument."

Heloise listened, and the picture of a combat appeared before her eyes. She saw herself lying upon the cold stone pavement, unconscious, while the man standing before her fought, driving the lackeys from the square. It was a delightful little dream; surely it was possible with such a champion. Her champion! For had he not stated it

was because he objected that she was not to go to prison? She flushed, faintly drawing her cloak about her limbs. Why was it she wished she were not clad in hose?

"Then you have saved me?" was what she found herself saying.

Out of the mists of the dream his voice came to her.

"It is equivalent to that, Mademoiselle," said Bussy, forgetting the hose.

Heloise started and blushed crimson.

"*Mademoiselle!*" she cried. "How did you penetrate my disguise?"

It was now Bussy's turn to explain. The question came so suddenly it took him unawares.

"Delicacy forbids my answering that question, Mademoiselle," he stammered.

Barnabe came to his side as if to speak, and Bussy turned to him. "*Mon Dieu*, what a charming blush!" muttered the young man.

Barnabe, fearful that Bussy might go too far, whispered, "She is very young and modest, Monsieur!"

"Have no fear, Barnabe," he replied, in the same tone, "a blush like that, though it be a temptation, is still more a protection."

The girl was puzzled by this dumb show, and started to move away.

"Whom have I the honour of serving, Mademoiselle?" politely asked Bussy, with a sweeping bow.

If blushes such as hers charmed, the frankness of her reply fairly captivated D'Amboise, who drank in the beauty of her pure face.

"I would rather not tell my name," Heloise said softly, "and, yet, I am so unreasonable, I would like to know whom I have to thank."

Bussy leaned upon Barnabe's shoulder, gazing at the girl. He thought aloud, yet none but the soldier heard. "If she knew it was the Duke's bully, so pure and sweet a child would recoil in horror. I wouldn't like that," he whispered.

And Barnabe understood.

"Mademoiselle, I, too, prefer to be unknown for the present. This plaything is yours," he added, handing her the dagger. "It's harmless enough in your hands. And now I will conduct you to your home, if it be near."

"No! No!" cried Heloise, frightened lest she should be discovered, for the failure of her first attempt had not changed her purpose. "I will go alone."

"But for your own safety," urged Bussy, earnestly.

"I will use by-ways," said the maid. "I can glide easily from danger."

"At least, let me call my men to escort you," persisted Bussy.

"No, Monsieur, I thank you," firmly replied Heloise. "You have shown yourself a friend, and I would not have you send any one with me. Indeed, I am able to take care of myself. I must go alone."

"Let my man, Barnabe, be your guide," said the man, intent on knowing, if possible, who she was.

"No one, Monsieur."

Here was a novel situation for the first gentleman of the Duke. Refusal of escort was a rare thing for him, and yet the experience was not without its pleasure. He admired her independence and self-reliance as she turned away to start her journey.

"Wait, Mademoiselle!" Bussy commanded. "This bit of lacing of your jerkin—it clung to my hand," he explained, holding it out to her.

"Nay, Monsieur," the girl replied. "Keep it."

"A thousand thanks," exclaimed D'Amboise, pressing the lacing to his lips. "Look, Mademoiselle! It has taken, of itself, the form of a love-knot."

Heloise saw the tangled knot lying in the open hand, and smiled shyly. It pleased her to find

her champion's invention turned so neatly to attract her. "Oh, Monsieur!" she murmured in confusion, with a wave of her hand. "Adieu!" And she was gone.

CHAPTER IV

THE FAWN IS NOT SO COY

“By St. Anthony! what divine blushes!” cried Bussy. “Ah, Barnabe! what a fool a man is, who wastes his days with the other kind of women, and cuts himself off from the love of such a one. A man sees his folly when it is too late for him to mend!”

Bussy d'Amboise had wasted many a day in the pursuit of happiness; had told many a tale of love; and fought many a fight for a bit of lace or a dainty glove. The opinion thus advanced came from one well qualified to speak. To Barnabe, his youthful master was no braggart in love or war. The old soldier had followed his master on many an adventure, yet never before had he observed such great interest upon the part of the Duke of Anjou's first gentleman, who usually played the game for the sport or excitement of the moment, getting both in liberal quantity.

The soldier sought to console him. The mood was one he rarely saw.

“ Why, Monsieur!” said he, “ you could win the love of such a woman.”

Bussy laughed softly, yet there was no mirth or music in the tone.

“ No doubt. But the woman I should reverence enough for a worthy love — do you suppose I would consent to sully her life by a union with such a man as myself — the Duke’s brawler?”

Barnabe shrugged his shoulders slightly. There was not the right ring to the words, and old servants do not care to be considered as strangers to whom one may say anything.

“ You are no brawler at heart, Monsieur!” he asserted. “ None know that better than I.”

D’Amboise smiled at the sulky look upon the face of Barnabe, whom he loved, and upon whom he leaned as the sole confidant in a maze of intrigue.

“ But who knows that, except God and you, Barnabe? So long I have had to play the ruffler’s part, none else would ever credit the simple gentleman beneath the skin of the swaggerer. I must carry my rôle to the end!”

Further admission of his other nature, so successfully hidden from the gaze of the world, was interrupted. Once more the flash came to the eyes; he had seen two figures among the trees.

"Look! Barnabe. Who comes yonder?" he cried, pointing toward the glen.

"By her figure," replied the soldier, "'tis Madame de Montsoreau. Ten crowns to a sou, her husband does not know she is in Angers. I remember when she was Marguerite de Maridos," he added.

"That was before De Montsoreau made her his prisoner," gaily remarked Bussy, moving to a position from which he could better command the view. Turning to Barnabe, he continued:

"I am under a kind of knightly vow to free that lady from her dungeon, by so much of a conquest as will prove her husband's folly in caging her so tight. I'll tarry here and greet her. Go you, Barnabe, and watch that girl from a distance 'til she is safe under roof. If De Montsoreau's knaves fell upon her she would need help."

Barnabe sprang into action at the thought of strife. Touching his sword, he said:

"And, a minute later, *they* would need help."

Bussy nodded approval as the soldier hastened away to follow Heloise.

Marguerite de Montsoreau's third secret visit to Angers was to be crowned with the success she hoped for. Finette had urged the danger of a return to the chateau, but the Countess would

not listen. Closely masked, secure in their disguise, they entered the square.

Bussy d'Amboise, in the presence of women, was the peer of the most accomplished gallant of the court of Henry III. Women admire the winner, in any event, and, when hearts are the stake, he who seizes the most is, to them, adorable. Add to this good looks, a dashing manner, and a title borne in a scabbard, and you have the appealing force of Bussy d'Amboise.

Marguerite pretended to pass toward the gateway.

"Good day, Madame de Montsoreau!" said he, swinging his plumed hat before him, while glancing upward at the Countess.

"Oh, Heaven, Monsieur!" cried she, startled. "I had hoped not to be recognized in Angers."

"What?" queried Bussy, in feigned astonishment. "Do you suppose any one who had once seen the Countess of Montsoreau could fail to recognize her?"

"I am sure that one would be very foolish to heed the gallant speeches of Monsieur Bussy d'Amboise," said she, retreating toward Finette, as if for support.

"Excellent, Madame!" whispered her maid.

Bussy noted the movement, and the slyness of

the girl. "Madame leans upon that hussy, 'tis plain to see," thought he.

"You are wrong there," he stated convincingly. "I never flatter. Flattery is craft, and a strong man disdains to be crafty. Thank God! I can afford to be truthful!"

Marguerite, at the suggestion of her maid, removed her mask with assumed carelessness. Her colour brightened beneath the gaze of the man before her. She lowered her eyes; the lashes, long and curving, trembled as he watched. Her beauty was not lost upon Bussy. He liked the game he played, and meant to win.

"I have read somewhere that the strong are always undermined by the crafty, at last," she began, looking Bussy full in the eyes. "Even Samson had his Delilah."

"Either Samson was an exceedingly susceptible gentleman," merrily replied Bussy, "or Delilah was — in her attractions only, I mean — the Madame de Montsoreau of her time."

This allusion to the lure of her charms passed unanswered. Marguerite must still play the fawn, and coyness is a marked characteristic. Her presence in Angers required explanation.

"I am sorry you recognized me, Monsieur," said she softly. "I did not wish any one to know I was in Angers."

"No one — not even your husband — shall ever know from me," he declared warmly, insinuatingly. "Had you been here earlier you might have witnessed a singular occurrence."

Marguerite held her maid's arm tightly as she listened. Well she knew what was to follow. Something told her the result of that meeting would be a crisis in her life.

"A person attacked your husband with a dagger!" declared D'Amboise.

The Countess de Montsoreau's confusion was evident, though what she expected to learn would not have caused her much distress. The solicitude she affected amused Finette.

"Oh, Heaven!" she cried. "Was my husband hurt?"

Finette's lips moved, and Bussy fancied he heard her say, "If he only had been!" Things were evidently playing into his hands, and he was not the man to close them, save upon the prize he sought.

The recovery from the shock such a statement should have caused was a rapid one. Bussy walked closer to the Countess, saying:

"Not at all. It seems the blow was intended for some other person. Some scoundrel, doubtless a secret enemy of your husband, had pointed him out as the person the assailant desired to kill."

Scoundrel! Secret enemy! The words stung the Countess, who stood rebuked and ashamed. Glancing about, she saw they were alone, and her curiosity grew.

"And what became of the assassin?" she asked eagerly.

"Saved from your husband's wrath and sent home," remarked Bussy simply.

"Saved?" doubtfully inquired the Countess. "And by whom?"

"By me, of course," replied Bussy.

"By you!"

The startled Countess feared to learn more, yet plunged into the danger, though the care Finette took to keep her from disclosing the true desire of the boy with the dagger prevented disaster.

"Why not?" demanded Bussy.

"Do you know whom the assassin meant to kill?" questioned the Countess, for it meant much to her.

"I did not press for that secret," he replied.

"If one should tell you—" began the Countess.

Finette pulled at the edge of her cloak, and Bussy wondered at the action.

"Who could tell me except the assassin, whom I did not question, and the wretch that falsely

caused the blow to fall upon your husband?" said he.

The man saw in the Countess' concern merely the interest that so many had shown in his numerous brawls, and excused her, realizing that one immured in the castle at Montsoreau could hardly be expected to realize the true meaning of his act.

"That is true," thoughtfully admitted Marguerite, "and, as that wretch is not like to betray himself, you probably will not know, until the blow falls, for whom it was first intended. It is a pity the chosen victim cannot be warned and saved."

"You have too kind a heart, Madame. I fancy, from certain facts about the assassin, that the chosen victim is some villain who deserves a much heavier dagger stroke than he is like to get."

The conversation recalled the face of Heloise, her purity and innocence, and he found himself comparing the two faces, each beautiful in its own attraction, but as opposite as the poles.

"That may be true," whispered Finette.

A frown wrinkled the Countess' forehead, which puzzled Bussy.

"But he may be some gentleman who does not deserve as ill as he appears to," argued Marguerite. "Some one whose reputation is worse than his

deeds. There are such in this world of ours, I know."

The thought found a responsive echo within the breast of Bussy, brought from his reverie.

"Some other Bussy d'Amboise, you might say, then; for, indeed, my ruffling reputation is but an armour I wear. But do not tell my enemies that, lest I should have to kill too many of them!" he added, with a fond caress of the sword dangling by his side.

"My swagger is but skin-deep. Because I am strong enough to father many offences, I have been made to figure as a worse sinner than I am. There was that last caprice of the Duke's, the abduction of Mademoiselle de Maucourt. With that affair — because in my absence the Duke used my men in it — I stand charged. I take that blame, and countless others that belong elsewhere, because I will fight any man that comes for satisfaction, but I will not condescend to clear myself. And yet, even for my true sins, no doubt I deserve killing. But where's the man to give me my deserts?"

Marguerite's infatuation, if such it might be called, was strengthened by the recital of this man's strength and weakness. Strength, to appeal to women, must be builded upon a weakness, for, with the instinct of the mother, they find enjoyment in ministering to the sterner sex.

"Perhaps, as you are invincible to men," she smiled artfully, "you may get your deserts through a woman."

"Then perchance I shall die kissing the hand that slays me — if it be a hand like that of Madame de Montsoreau," he said.

"Oh, Monsieur!" Marguerite protested, with pretended embarrassment. "Pray spare your gallantries. I am not used to them."

"Aye, gallantries are not flying around the lonely rooms of the Chateau de Montsoreau!" exclaimed Bussy with sympathetic interest. "But I could accustom your ears to merited praises if I might visit there. But I forget — the servants would report to Monsieur de Montsoreau."

After a moment's thought, Bussy continued, noting the Countess made no effort to prevent.

"There is your other chateau — La Contanciere — quite empty and deserted. If you should stroll in the park, there near the wall — what day, for example?"

"Why, Monsieur, I — perhaps —" faltered the Countess, turning toward Finette.

"Well, Madame?"

"Good day, Monsieur," murmured the Countess, walking away.

Bussy grasped the handkerchief she carried in her hand. "Nay, an answer!" he pleaded.

Marguerite released the bit of dainty silk and lace which D'Amboise held so tightly.

"Adieu, Monsieur!" she waved, as swiftly she moved away to mount and ride toward Montso-reau.

"She left me her handkerchief, at least," grumbled Bussy. "Is she, indeed, so coy? Shall the Duke have the laugh on me over my boast to attract the fawn of the Grand Huntsman? I'd best go after her."

Suiting the action to the word, he ran in the direction the Countess had passed. At the turn he encountered Barnabe returning.

"Monsieur!" saluted the soldier. "I watched her to the inn of the Golden Swan, where she is lodged."

"Ah, yes, the other," said Bussy, his manner changing to one of tenderness. The kerchief in his hand fell to the ground. A bit of lacing, tangled into a knot, found its way to his lips. He kissed it lovingly.

"I'm thirsty, Barnabe," said he. "I've heard there's very good wine at the inn of the Golden Swan."

CHAPTER V

DE MONTSOREAU FORMS A PLAN

WHEN the Duke of Anjou left in company with De Chanvallon, his piety and devotion formed the excuse. He was on his way to vespers, so he told the Count of Montsoreau, and, true to his word, he attended the service; but there were other things uppermost in his mind, one that changed as the weathervane swings in the varying breezes. His acts were continually worrying Henry III; but it is puzzling why a man so inconstant in everything, and of far from masterful design, should have been considered of sufficient consequence to worry about, as that unhappy monarch certainly did.

In Paris there were endless festivals. The public treasury might be empty, but there still were the people, who could be taxed to meet the extravagance of the monarch.

The Duke of Anjou had retired to his chateau, and, as a result, his royal brother was worried, for fear the act foreshadowed an assault upon his

throne. The importance in which the Duke was held might be explained by the weakness of the King, prodded by his sister, who had secretly vowed to make his reign a burden.

The King's cavaliers made merry at court with their broils, nothing being too sacred for them to refrain from assaulting. To amuse their master, they, at times, bedecked themselves in the robes of women, with perfumed hair and other attributes of the gentle sex, and spent the hours in feminine pursuits, relating tales that reflected to the credit and virtue of the King. The dogs of the royal household added to the clatter with their yelping, serving to detract from the trouble which surrounded the crowned head.

The Duke's escape had stirred the court, for escape it was, aided by Bussy d'Amboise. Time had passed, and he was weary of his stay at Angers, pining for the gaiety of the court and its possibilities for gratification.

De Chanvallon knew his weakness, and catered to it with the servility of one seeking favour, so easy to gain and still easier to lose. On the day when our story opens, they were riding through the country, and the Duke chanced to meet a youth whose face and figure caused him much thought. He could not reconcile the hose with

that of a lad, and had despatched De Chanvallon to investigate.

De Chanvallon traced the lad to the inn of the Golden Swan, so, after a perfunctory attendance at vespers, they had departed for that humble hostelry. A fair face had been the lure, and it promised no good to the owner, for the Duke's methods in affairs of the heart were forceful if not resourceful.

Diminutive in build, mincing in his walk, he was one of the ugliest men of his time. A brown complexion heightened the coarseness of his features; his cheeks were soft and spongy, and hung in creases on either side of a nose, the nostrils of which were as broad and offensive as the heavy lips which sagged to show teeth, huge and yellow. His face was marked with smallpox. The beard he wore was thin and worn in appearance, as was his hair, which grew high upon his forehead.

De Chanvallon was a strange contrast to his master, for he was lithe and supple, trim as an arrow, tall, erect, with commanding air. His eye was brown and clear. A reddish tint to his hair set off the features, clean-cut and pleasing.

Together they passed down the wooded road, unattended. Through the lean limbs of the trees the fading light played, dancing in the breeze that swept up the valley. Below, at the bend in

the road, the country's beauty filled the eye. Rolling plains, edged with tiny hills, gave promise of richness. Here and there appeared the quiet home of the peasant, content with his lord and master, his King and his daily toil.

The Duke was strangely silent, while his companion talked of the adventure just begun. To break with Bussy d'Amboise was a thing the Duke had long since contemplated in moments when the court called to him; but he had heretofore kept his own counsel. Carried to the point of open rupture, he turned the consequences over in his mind, one minute sure that he was safe in the undertaking, only to have that thought strangled by the fear that Bussy might turn and strike.

De Chanvallon grew weary of the mood, and stalked along as dumb as the Duke, only less troubled in mind. At the foot of the short hill they found themselves within a stone's throw of the inn, located at the crossroads, an ideal spot for the weary traveller to seek rest or refreshment.

The sun had sunk behind the hills and darkness was closing in. The courtyard of the inn was empty, as were the roads stretching for miles beyond. A curling smoke from the chimney spoke of preparations for the evening's meal.

.The inn of the Golden Swan was not inviting in

appearance. Its welcome was within. The main building was in the centre, where a door led into the hall reserved for the reception of people of quality, and many were there who had enjoyed its hospitality. At the right, the entrance was to the kitchen where the common herd were quartered. Facing this was an archway which led from the road to the stables at the rear.

Making a survey of the scene, the Duke and De Chanvallon entered beneath the archway, where they paused to listen. The window beside the kitchen door was fastened, but, through the blinds, there came the glow from the bright fire and from the many candles which the liberal host had lighted. The casement window above the entrance to the hall was open, inky darkness within. Stealing quietly to the kitchen window, De Chanvallon peered through the blinds, and beckoned the Duke to join him. A youthful band of roysterers were drinking at the wooden tables; but the lad they sought was sitting apart, with untasted wine cup.

Snatches of coarse songs came to those at the window, as they watched the silent figure amid the madness the wine produced.

"So you'll swear the boy is a girl," softly spoke the Duke, never taking his eyes off the object of his admiration.

“Aye, a girl,” replied De Chanvallon, “a real girl — not a man-girl or girl-man, like the fops that throng around your brother, the King.”

“It is curious,” said the Duke, straightening up from his awkward position. “Do you know whom she resembles? I was struck with the resemblance the first time I saw her.”

Well did De Chanvallon know to whom the Duke referred. “Mademoiselle de Maucourt,” said he quietly. Once to have seen her was to remember the delicate lines and beautiful eyes of the young woman so sadly wronged.

“One might think it was she, fled from the convent that she preferred to my favours,” remarked the Duke.

De Chanvallon nodded. “Yes, but this girl is younger, and, to me, prettier.”

The Duke, fond as he was, like the King, his brother, of mixing his piety with his enjoyment, forgot to whom he spoke, and raved as was his wont whenever a new face took his fancy.

“In any case she is as beautiful as the other, and of the kind of beauty that bewitches my eyes. My piety is rewarded to-day, De Chanvallon!” he cried. “On my way from church God sends me hither, and, through this window, I behold that vision of loveliness.”

De Chanvallon, accustomed to such outbursts,

bowed and smiled approval, flattering in its sincerity.

“ I could sit forever watching her sweet countenance as it varies with the shifts of mood and temper. But what the devil is she doing in boy's clothes? ”

When a question cannot be answered, as many put by the Duke were apt to be, 'twas best to frame some speech to carry the thought back to other things. De Chanvallon was an adept in this.

“ That is a mystery which makes her the more interesting,” said he. “ Do you wish her brought to the chateau? ”

The Duke was impatient. His passion had been excited, and fancy flew on the wings of the wind, building a delirium in which he saw himself the beloved of her he sought.

“ Yes, let her be brought. I shall waste no time with invitations that might be declined. Moreover, it interests me to see how ladies behave when carried off by compulsion. I mean them no harm, but love to observe their conduct in captivity. Whether it be stormy or docile, sullen or defiant, lamblike or tigerish, it is an irresistible pastime. 'Tis fit amusement for a prince of France, De Chanvallon.”

“ Shall I have her taken to-night? ” asked De

Chanvallon, desirous in every way to earn the much-sought favour of the Duke.

“No, not in Angers,” replied the Duke quickly. “It might arouse the inn and require tedious explanations. I mustn’t scandalize my faithful Angevines too much. Have her watched and seized when she is out of the town, where the road is lonely; then none will be the wiser. Let us return to the chateau now. She’ll not venture from the inn to-night, be sure.”

They crossed the courtyard, and were about to leave through the archway, when De Chanvallon seized the Duke’s arm.

“Hist! People are coming!” he whispered.

Hugging the side of the inn in the darkness, they hid beside the niche formed by the arch.

As De Montsoreau, for it was he and his lackeys, passed, deep in their own purpose, the Duke and De Chanvallon slipped into the archway and made off, not caring to be discovered, nor did they even glance to see who it was that broke in upon their little excursion.

De Montsoreau drew his men into a group for instruction. “I have led you in from the road to give you these orders,” said he. “If Bussy d’Amboise still deems assassination a trifle, as he did an hour ago, he cannot complain if it be tried against himself. You will therefore watch for

him near the chateau, follow him when he goes alone — ”

“ And make food of ourselves for that insatiable sword of his,” broke in the leader of the lackeys. “ Surely you fancy you have mighty swordsmen among your men to suggest such a method of laying him low.”

“ That is a matter to which I was just coming,” continued De Montsoreau. “ Without his sword, Bussy d’Amboise is much the same as another man. You, Ribou, who claim to be so skilful at easing other people of their possessions — ”

“ In Paris they used to call me the ‘ man with invisible fingers,’ ” smiled Ribou, “ and said that I could steal a man’s undershirt off his back while he stood talking to me in the street.”

“ Pah! ” sneered the leader of the lackeys, “ I don’t believe you know how to pick a pocket. You have talked much of your skill. Now is your chance to prove your oft boasted knack.”

“ Here’s a purse of crowns I just picked from yours,” laughed Ribou, flaunting the clinking purse in the other’s face.

“ So it is, you rascal! ” cried the leader, wrenching it from his grasp, while others in the group sought hurriedly to see if their stock of crowns had been depleted.

“ Excellent, Ribou! ” applauded De Montso-

reau. "I assign you, therefore, to the task of first relieving Bussy d'Amboise of his sword as quietly as you would filch a purse. That done, you others will fall upon him before he can get arms or aid. Then hasten all to Montsoreau, that I can prove I and my people were far from Angers at the time of Bussy's death. Come!"

Heloise de Maucourt had sought shelter at the inn of the Golden Swan until such time as fate might throw the man whose life she sought across her path. Her attire forbade her other than the common room of the inn, where she had tried to plan some means of action. The ribald jests and coarse songs of the crowd of merrymakers drove her distracted, and she chose the night air for her meditations.

Leaning against the post beside the archway, she looked off into the distance, faint of heart and low in spirit.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "the horrible talk of that tavern kitchen! And the frightful solitude of my sleepless chamber! Yet I must not leave Angers 'til the thing is done."

A youth who sits apart in an inn kitchen and drinks nothing, though he order his portion, who shudders at the stories, and covers his ears at the songs, fails not to interest the madmen in their

frolic. These roysterers in the inn had seen Heloise, and planned to have a joke at her expense.

Close upon Heloise followed the merry band, piling unsteadily out of the doorway. The roar of their exit from the inn kitchen caused Heloise to shudder.

"Hey, friend! you are melancholy!" cried one, staggering up to Heloise. "Cheer up, my lad! Life should be 'one sweet song' with you. Faith, you have the face a woman loves to look upon."

"Ah!" another shouted, feigning he had just recognized the lad. "'Tis the stranger boy that sat alone by the tavern fire, never touching the wine he ordered, thinking of his home and dear ones," this with a jeering laugh.

"Come, let us cheer you up," began the oldest in the party. "Join us. We're going for a frolic. That is what you need to shake off the cobwebs of homesickness."

"Aye, and we need another to complete the party. You are he. Hey, lads! What say you?"

Heloise timidly answered, drawing away as they crowded about her. "No, I thank you, friends."

"I see what's the matter," shouted the first spokesman in derision. "You're fresh from home and it makes you down-hearted. Come along to Madelon's house. We'll find a pretty face for you to cure your homesickness."

He slid his arm through hers, while another took the opposite side of the frightened girl.

"Aye, you shall be merry with the girls!" he cried. "Which do you more admire, blonde or brunette? You have but to choose."

"No! no!" screamed Heloise, drawing back in terror and disgust.

"What, don't you like the girls? Here's a marvel of an innocent!"

"Let me go," pleaded Heloise, struggling futilely with the young roysterers.

"By the mass! he shivers at the very thought of them, and pales as well from fright at the thought. What richness!"

"Here's a child, truly!" sang the first youth. "He's for neither wine nor women. From what abbey are you astray?"

"Such bashfulness will never do. It's time he overcame it. It's our duty, lads!"

"We should educate the young. Let's give him a lesson, in spite of himself. What say you?"

"Aye, a lesson upon the fair sex. Drag him along to school, gentlemen! Drag him along!"

This was the signal for a rush at Heloise. A lad seized each arm, while two pushed from behind, and they carried her, resisting stoutly, to the archway.

“Release me, I say!” screamed Heloise. “I will not go with you! Help!”

“Cry on, little one. 'Tis not often we have to force our company upon so likely a lad. But go you must, and shall!”

Swept from her feet, Heloise felt herself weak and fainting. The coarse jokes and drunken yells of her captors sickened her.

CHAPTER VI

AT THE INN OF THE GOLDEN SWAN

TWO forms blocked the passage as Heloise cried in frightened anger. Bussy d'Amboise and Barnabe, his attendant, had arrived at the inn at the opportune moment. Bussy might later have his fill of the wine he so conveniently remembered was stored away in the cellars of the Golden Swan; but, before he drank, there was other business to attend to, business that proved his luck was on the increase.

The fair Countess de Montsoreau had passed from his mind as quickly and as completely as had her handkerchief fallen from his hand, when he pressed the knotted lacing to his lips. He was drawn by an influence heretofore a stranger to this many-sided man. He sought to find and know the girl of the hose. The impulse was pure and strong, such as comes once to each man in his life, filling it with the happiness none else can bestow, and without which life fades into nothingness.

In the darkness of the archway Bussy could distinguish nothing, aside from a whirling, struggling mass. Barnabe, at his shoulder, formed an additional bulwark, against which the lads pushed, coming to a sudden stop.

"What's the matter?" cried Bussy, reaching for the nearest lad.

"Help, Monsieur!" exclaimed Heloise, who in her excitement only saw a friend in need; she could not have recognized the men in the thick darkness beneath the archway.

"Her voice!" cried Bussy, her appeal going to his soul, thrilling every fibre in his frame. He had figured upon meeting the girl at the inn, but never dreamed that fortune would so favour him as to allow him once more to be of service to her.

"The devil!" he cried, "what have we here, Barnabe? Send them to rout." Bussy worked rapidly and effectively. He seized the first youth by the collar and dragged him from Heloise, hurling him headlong into the courtyard below him, where he scrambled to his feet, beating a hasty retreat past the old soldier, who was too busily occupied to prevent his escape. Barnabe caught the other lad and cuffed him soundly as he ran to join his companion, racing away into the darkness.

Bussy slipped his arm about the fainting girl, and tenderly assisted her toward the door of the

inn. The two youths who, in their mad merriment, had brought up the rear of this forced escort, were soon wriggling beneath the vigorous shaking administered by Barnabe, who made their heels beat a tattoo upon the stone flagging of the courtyard.

The soldier paused for breath, holding them at arm's length, looking them over.

"You are a fine pair of young rascals," he grunted, with another vicious shake to punctuate his wrath.

"If you please, sir," gasped one, "we only wanted to take him along to Madelon's house for a frolic."

"To Madelon's house, you infants!" roared Barnabe, "you ought to be at home with your mothers instead of at Madelon's, swaggering before the girls." He shot one lad away as he finished, helping him along with his foot, his companion disappearing in a like manner. The exercise had warmed Barnabe, and he wiped his brow.

Bussy assured himself that the girl was unhurt, doing so with such marked interest that Heloise was glad of the night that hid her telltale colour.

"You see, Mademoiselle," said Bussy, convincingly, "what annoyances you must constantly suffer from your false position. You should have consented to my escort."

"Yet I cannot mend matters, Monsieur," replied the maiden. "I brought no other clothes with me to Angers."

"Leave Angers, I beg, before you bring too many perils round yourself," pleaded Bussy, the sincerity of his voice and manner never being doubted by Heloise, who felt a strange comfort in his company. Her thoughts lay along the pleasant fields of romance, building castles in the air, as maiden fancy prompts. It mattered not to her that the man by her side was unknown or unnamed; he was her champion, the man of her dreams, the security of his presence was a comfort and a caress.

From the mist of the dream she heard his voice, one of proprietorship, she fondly fancied.

"If De Montsoreau's men should find you," said Bussy, "the fact that your dagger stroke was meant for another would not serve you. They'd not believe you."

Heloise was aroused from the blissful dream she had enjoyed, with its picture of happiness and quiet. Once more she realized the purpose of her visit to Angers, and cast all else aside.

"Then I must elude De Montsoreau's men as best I can," said she firmly.

"By leaving Angers? 'Tis the only way, Mademoiselle," said Bussy positively.

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Heloise stubbornly clung to the mission. "I will not leave Angers until I've carried out my purpose," and there was fine fervour in the tone.

Barnabe listened with a shrug of the shoulder, muttering to himself: "There's woman's gentle, yielding nature for you! Appearances do not always tell the truth!"

To Bussy the remark had a different meaning. He saw a woman, firm in her belief that a great wrong had been committed, and that punishment for it was hers. While he would have preferred her in a different mood, he was drawn toward her. Her courage and tenacity of purpose appealed to him.

"You mean your purpose of killing some one," he smiled.

"Yes," replied the girl, who did not enjoy the doubt expressed by the tone. "You smile, Monsieur!"

"Because that hand was never meant for striking death-blows," replied Bussy, taking the girl's hand in his, "and yet it is no smiling matter, for in your attempt, though it must fail, you may bring death to yourself!"

No thought of failure had ever entered the mind of the maiden, nor could she be led to doubt her ability to cut the object of her vengeance down,

even by the man who had twice come to her assistance.

"My attempt shall not fail," she declared, with a toss of her pretty head. "God will direct it."

Barnabe's interest in the situation was increased. He saw Heloise slowly draw her hand from Bussy's grasp, as if resigning comfort and caress — all that life holds dear. "Huh!" he growled, "another Joan of Arc."

Bussy fancied the way to convince the girl was to point out the danger. Failing in this, he tried another manner of cutting through the armour of determination.

"Your attempt was hardly a success when you attacked De Montsoreau," he argued earnestly.

"I learned something in that attempt, however," replied Heloise. "When I strike the right person it will be when he is alone, and I will strike harder."

The tiny dagger, the delicate hand of the maiden, her slight figure, all pointed failure to Bussy d'Amboise, schooled in passages at arms. The spirit pleased him. He loved the light that flashed defiance, weak though the attack should be. Half in sport, he continued, only wishing to remain by her side to listen to her voice: "But you must know where to strike to reach, by an unprotected way, a vital place," he said.

Heloise faced him abruptly.

"Teach me where to strike, Monsieur," she pleaded.

The humour of the demand caused Bussy's smiles to broaden. "What?" laughed he, "do you think me capable of giving lessons in assassination? 'Tis a little out of my line!"

The maiden shook her head. "No, Monsieur, it is only we who are weak that must strike hidden blows in carrying out God's punishments. But you carry a sword and must know where to strike blows that will kill. Teach me, that I may not fail a second time."

Bussy's curiosity increased with the maiden's persistence. He marvelled at her courage. What great wrong could she or hers have suffered to warrant such heroic method?

"I could better teach you if I knew whom you wished to strike," he answered evasively.

"Then I will trust you with my secret," declared Heloise, whose confidence had long since been won, and who, with woman's weakness, longed for the strong arm of a man upon which she might lean in her distress. "It is —"

"Nay!" interrupted Bussy, "let me not know. It might be some enemy of mine, and then I could not in honour refrain from warning him, lest I might seem to be an accomplice

in the matter. I fight otherwise," he added proudly.

The maid was puzzled. First to demand to know whom she wished to avenge herself upon, and then to refuse to listen, fearing it might prove an enemy. What manner of man was this? Was he playing with her? The thought was unpleasant, and in alarm she cried:

"Or he might be one of your friends!"

"So much the better," mused Barnabe.

"Friends?" repeated Bussy regretfully. "Except Barnabe, here, I have none. Who has friends? The man who is below us we despise because he is inferior, avoid lest he may ask our aid, and fear because he envies us. The man who is above us, even though he be our benefactor, we hate for the very superiority that enables him to benefit us. The man who is our equal we mistrust for fear he may rise above or fall below us. But what have you, child, to do with the evil of men?"

"It is because I, and those I love, have been made to suffer by the evil of one man that I would now be taught how to strike a sure death-blow," she exclaimed.

As one would humour a child one could not readily control, Bussy entered into the spirit of the adventure.

"Well, I will give you a lesson."

Taking her dagger from her belt, he placed it in her hand, caressingly, his own lingering as it touched the delicate fingers.

“ You first grip your dagger thus,” he explained. “ Now then, let us suppose that I am the man you wish to slay.”

Heloise shuddered at the thought. “ Oh!” she exclaimed, “ but — I — I would rather not suppose that.”

Barnabe’s “ Oho!” caught Bussy’s ear.

“ Come, Mademoiselle!” said he, “ it is all play. Not that you may carry out your wild attempt and risk your life, but that you may know how to remove an enemy in case of need. Come! Sheath your dagger and practise with your empty hand. I am the man, then, you have come to slay.”

Bussy walked away that they might better play the game.

“ That your attitude may not betray you, your arm, though ready, must hang as if limp, the dagger concealed behind the wrist. Your eyes must seem to look elsewhere,” he explained. “ As I come abreast of you, you fix your glance upon this spot, swiftly raise your arm far back, and as swiftly strike.”

He approached her with an air of unconcern.

Heloise waited until he was upon her, follow-

ing his instructions up to the point when she was expected to send the death-thrust home. Then her hand fell to her side.

"It is of no use, Monsieur," she murmured. "I can never strike, with you the object of my blow."

The maiden with lowered head walked toward the window through which the Duke had seen her.

This frank and childlike admission threw Bussy into an ecstatic bliss. He stole to Barnabe's side.

"Did you hear, Barnabe?" he cried. "Twice she has said it, and with what simplicity! Heavens! if only I were worthy of such innocence! Barnabe, I will protect this girl while she is in Angers. Let my men keep near her night and day, relieving one another in pairs so that two be always ready to aid her at sign of danger. Go! bring them, while I wait with her."

Barnabe bowed. "Yes, Monsieur," said he, making off in haste to the chateau.

Bussy went to where Heloise stood, saying gaily, "You see, Mademoiselle, if you cannot strike the blow in pretence, how you must fail in the actual attempt."

She parried the thrust adroitly. "It will be an enemy, and not a friend, that I shall strike in the actual attempt," she said.

"A friend," quoth Bussy softly. "Faith, I gain in favour!" thought he.

An impulse to take the maiden in his arms, to tell her of his love, to plead as he never had thought to plead, seized him. The desire sprang from his heart, pure and strong.

Heloise, with downcast eyes, half guessed the thought that flashed through his brain.

A loud cry from the road aroused them.

"Whoa!" it came again.

"Alain's voice!" cried Heloise, startled.

"Alain's?" interrogated Bussy.

"Hostler! Landlord!" the voice cried, this time louder than before. "Where the devil is everybody?"

There was the rat-a-tat of the whip's butt against the stable door, the rapping of a man in a hurry.

"Who is Alain?" asked Bussy, curiously interested.

"He is a friend of my father's," replied Heloise, with some evasion. Then, noting the puzzled expression upon D'Amboise's face, she continued, "Alain de Mayenne. Our families for years have been the closest friends."

A hostler, answering the summons, crossed the courtyard, crying, "Coming, Monsieur! Coming!"

“A young friend?” further questioned Bussy, growing uncomfortable, despite an attempt to appear indifferent. Why should he care whether Alain were young or old?

“Yes,” admitted the maiden. “You will see him in a moment.”

“A lover, perhaps,” thought Bussy, pulling himself together with “The devil! Am I jealous?”

Heloise, watching the archway through which the hostler passed, noted the discomfiture her admission caused.

The hostler appeared bearing a portmanteau. With him came two persons, one but a youth, who clung to the arm of his companion.

He whose voice had disturbed Bussy's dream of bliss, was talking excitedly to the boy.

“And if we do not find her here?” said he.

Looking about, he saw the maid. With a joyous outcry, “Heloise! thank God!” he seized her hand and covered it with kisses.

Etienne, his companion, sobbed softly upon his sister's shoulder.

Bussy drew apart from them. “If I am not jealous,” he thought, “I am, at least, decidedly uncomfortable.”

The boy was first to find his speech in the joy of the meeting.

"Oh, sister!" he exclaimed, "I feared they had killed you, after you sent me away."

"I know not what they would have done had not this gentleman saved me," replied Heloise, waving her hand to Bussy.

"May God reward this gentleman!" fervently prayed Alain, bowing low before D'Amboise.

"And what of him you attacked?" he asked anxiously.

"I struck the wrong person by mistake," replied Heloise. "The Count de Montsoreau. I had been misinformed. The blow was harmless. How came you here?"

"I traced you to Angers. As I neared the city, at a gallop, I met Etienne hastening from it," explained Alain.

"God knows what grief it gave me to hasten from you in your danger, Heloise!" sobbed Etienne.

"I should think it would," muttered Bussy.

"When Etienne told me what you had done, confirming my fears of why you had come to Angers, I brought him back, so he might carry word to your father of what plight I should find you in," said Alain excitedly.

"You see, I am unhurt and free, thanks to this gentleman," said Heloise softly.

"I thank this gentleman from my deepest

heart!" declared Alain, bowing to Bussy. "Oh, Heloise, what joy to find you safe after my fears on the road!" he added, caressing the hand he held.

The tender tone brought Bussy to a realization of his position.

"I'm entirely superfluous here," thought he, and entered the kitchen.

CHAPTER VII

ALAIN ASSUMES A TASK

ALAIN DE MAYENNE had long wooed Heloise de Maucourt, following her with dogged devotion. The love he bore her was the first in his young life, and all else was nothing when he was not by her side. The lady could not fail to be flattered by such attention, yet there lacked that responsiveness that points the way to happiness. His persistent courtship marred her otherwise peaceful existence in Maucourt, where, with her father, sister, and brother, she had passed her days in tranquillity, hearing but the faint rumblings of the court and its reckless brawlers.

Few homes escaped for long the invasion of the gentlemen of the court, whose sport was not confined to the hunting fields. The blow fell when the sister disappeared mysteriously, borne away by masked men. M. de Maucourt, too old to undertake the pursuit, had raged in his impotence to avenge the wrong. Etienne was but a boy, though he would gladly have given his life for that of the

villain who had wrecked their happiness. Heloise had pondered long and carefully before attempting her mission; to her the honour of the house of De Maucourt was more than life itself. Discarding for a boy's attire the woman's garments that would have interfered with her wild and hopeless plan, she had escaped from the parental roof, firmly intending to take the life of the man who had tarnished the name she bore. All this was but a few days ago. Had she been told that anything could have turned her aside from the purpose, she would have doubted her senses, and yet, as she stood in the courtyard of the inn, listening to the pleadings of Alain, she found her heart had suddenly softened; but there still remained the desire to kill the man whose work had wrought sorrow. That would not be removed.

She found herself recalling the forceful manner and air of command of the man who had saved her from the followers of De Montsoreau. How kindly had been his touch; how tenderly he had cared for her throughout her trials; and there was that which spoke of his deeper interest. She had noted his hasty exit into the inn, and knew well the meaning; her heart beat wildly at the thought.

The swordsman had occupied her thoughts completely, though she tried hard to cast him from them. While there was murder in her heart, she

was unfit to even dream of happiness. He had as much as said so, for words are needless when the language of the heart finds expression in the eye. Heloise doubted her resolve for but a moment, as the blissful dream spread before her. She felt his strong arm about her, and heard the words of comfort. Her hand trembled.

Was there no avenue of escape? Once set upon the trail, must she follow it to the end, casting from her all weakness?

Alain felt the tremor of the pretty fingers, and fancied the terror of the scene had prompted it.

"I'll see you don't imperil yourself again, Heloise," he cried. "You shall leave Angers tomorrow. We cannot depart 'til then. The gates were closed just as we rode in. And meanwhile you may put on woman's attire again. Your maid had me bring it for you."

The bags bulged invitingly tempting to the girl, who stood undecided. Then the lesson in assassination flashed before her, and confidence returned. She had not been able to strike at the man who taught; but, holding possession of the art, how gladly would she slay the Duke's first gentleman!

"Alain," she began, turning aside from the desire to regain her feminine garb, "that which I came to Angers to do must be done. Why try

to turn me from it? Would I have risked so much, unless determined?"

"Heloise!" cried Etienne, pleadingly. "We know how you feel, and glory in the thought; still, the uselessness of it all!"

"Will the killing of Bussy d'Amboise undo his work, Heloise?" asked Alain. "Will it bring your sister back from her convent? Will it restore the peace of mind of your poor father? Why add to his unhappiness?"

"Alain, if you loved me as you say —" began Heloise.

"You know I love you ten thousand times more than I can say, though I know not how to make you love me," cried Alain. "And you know that this man's abduction of your sister, the enforced shame that drove her from the world, has stung me as deeply as it has yourself. You know that, if earthly vengeance could bring back the past, remedy the wrong, or do aught but bring greater sorrow on us all, I'd be the first to seek it. I am a student, and my philosophy teaches me the folly of revenge that costs the wronged ones further harm."

Heloise refused to listen to the reasoning of her lover, though her heart responded against her will. Bussy d'Amboise must pay the penalty of his deed!

" If I did not know that you are brave, Alain, I'd think — "

" What? " asked Alain.

" No matter. "

" That I fear Bussy d'Amboise? " continued Alain bitterly.

" You would not have *me* fear him, " she replied.

" Heavens! Heloise, you are a girl, a child. Your arm is not made to inflict vengeance, " declared Alain.

" And yours? "

The shot struck home. Alain drew back, hurt, shocked at the manner of his loved one. Did she think him cowardly, because of his appeal to her? Something must have changed the maid.

" Surely you don't think I have been idle in this matter because I fear that man? " he questioned. " Gladly would I lay down my life to give you the peace you deserve to enjoy. Nay, Heloise, trust me! "

" Oh, no! " said Heloise. " It is your philosophy, of course! " The sarcasm was cutting and bitter.

Etienne saw Alain wince beneath the lash of the girl's speech, and sought to help him.

" Heloise! " he cried, " why cause Alain pain? Surely you care too deeply for him to wound his pride. "

Alain, determined to prove his valour, broke in:

"I'll convince you I do not fear Bussy d'Amboise, ruffler! duellist! Duke's bully, that he is!"

"How?" asked Heloise.

"By going to him and throwing my glove in his face," he said softly, impassioned.

There was a smile upon the maiden's face as she replied, "Then he will kill you surely, Alain. You are but an ordinary swordsman, while he is master of the art."

"Very well," declared Alain quietly. "At least you will know I am not afraid of him."

"But I don't want you to be killed. Listen! You wish me to give up the task I have put upon myself?"

"Assuredly, for your own sake."

There was a pause, Alain waiting for the maid to speak. His fate hung upon her words.

"I will give it up," said Heloise slowly, measuring her words.

Etienne gave a glad cry, and rushed into her arms, to be put aside, gently, but firmly.

"But on this condition," she added, "that you, Alain, will undertake it in my stead!"

Etienne walked away, downcast.

"Have I not already said I would fight him?" demanded Alain.

Heloise grew restive. "But you are to perform

the task as I would have done! Take him by surprise; attack him covertly. In even contest you would prove but a child in his hands!"

"That would be assassination!" exclaimed Alain, in horror.

"It would be retribution," corrected Heloise. "Consider that it is the only way to punish him, for he is invincible to open attack. Consider what he has done to us. Consider what he is, — brawler! tyrant! Duke of Anjou's bully! Consider that I ask it — and that I will reward you."

Alain was puzzled.

"Reward! How?" he eagerly asked.

"You still wish me to be your wife?" said Heloise calmly.

"For the hundredth time I beg that unmerited happiness," cried her lover.

"Well, this time I consent, if you will do what I ask."

Heloise sighed deeply, for her heart was not in the troth she proposed. She had fancied herself as free as the air she breathed; free to cast her lot as she would; to sacrifice her life in the cause she espoused. All this was changed, and by the ardent glances of her champion. She wondered what he would think; if he would care, did he know what she was proposing. Her hands would remain unsullied by the blood of the brawler, only

because, instead of herself striking the blow, she had influenced another to take her place.

“ I will do it! ” cried Alain, “ and will thank God for making me the assassin of Bussy d’Amboise, if he make me the husband of Heloise de Maucourt. You shall see how persistently I will follow him until I can claim my reward! ”

“ Ah, Alain! — sister! ” wept Etienne. “ No good will come of this betrothal. Think — wed with murder in your heart! It is too horrible! ”

“ Hush, Etienne! ” said Alain. “ Is it not true, as she says, that Bussy d’Amboise is a tyrant and a swaggerer, a nuisance upon the earth, a menace to the peace of men and the happiness of women? Why should he live to wreck other homes, to drag others down? ”

The lad was crushed with the horror of it all. His sister saw his distress and pitied him.

“ You must go about it cautiously, ” she explained. “ Do not repeat my mistake. You, too, have never seen him. A fatal step would spoil all. ”

“ I’ll be sure ’tis Bussy I strike, rely on that, ” Alain assured her, with a fine display of courage. The reward was within his reach! “ Heloise! Heloise! how happy you have made me. Without a scruple will I pay the price of winning you! ”

Heloise looked toward the inn's main room, from which the voice of merrymaking floated out upon them.

"I, too, pay a price in giving myself to be your wife," said she, below her breath.

The hostler came to fetch the portmanteau he had placed near the main entrance to the inn.

"Your horses are put up, Monsieur," said he.

Alain threw him a coin, and, taking Heloise by the arm, replied, "Very well, fellow. Open the inn door for us."

"This way for gentlefolk, Monsieur!" the hostler cried, bowing as he opened wide the door.

"Come, Etienne," said Alain, "we shall sup together."

The hostler rubbed his bald head with its fringe of gray hair, puzzled.

"That young gentleman is either very happy, or a great spendthrift, to give so large a tip to such as I."

"Come, fellow! the portmanteau!" shouted Alain from within.

The hostler hastened in answer to the petulant demand.

Bussy d'Amboise had entered the inn kitchen in haste, which caused those at the tables to turn and gaze at the intruder, who strode, unconscious of their curiosity, to a seat beside the fire. He

threw himself dejectedly upon the rude bench, and stared into the flames as they played with the log that had been freshly placed within the fire-place.

The chill of the night air had penetrated, and the warmth of the blaze would have cheered, if bodily chill were all that troubled the swordsman. Kicking angrily at the log, his foot hit his scabbard, the hilt rapping loudly upon the wooden seat. Easing his sword belt, Bussy leaned his head upon his hand.

In the flames, with their attendant smoke curling fancifully upward, he saw the face of the young girl. Its beauty held him entranced, as he sought excuse for being in such a mood.

To have fled from the soft words of Alain was weakness; yet they jangled in his ears, and seemed to be the forerunner of a hopelessness he dared not contemplate. Truly he was jealous; jealous of the youth whose position made it possible for him honestly to woo the maid; jealous that he had stepped without the pale of such happiness.

There came trooping through his mind the fair women whose names had been coupled with his in the life at court. There was his boast to catch the fawn of the Grand Huntsman — where was that resolution? Surely, Marguerite had been

responsive. Her face faded from his mind, as he waited, hoping that the girl would soon seek the comfort of the room.

As Bussy dreamed beside the fire in the inn, the lackeys of De Montsoreau entered the courtyard, and halted to form a plan of action.

"God favours us in having sent the faithful Barnabe away!" cried the first of the party with fervour.

"We'd better hasten, then, lest that rascal come back for his master," advised another. "How shall we go about it?"

"First let us learn where he is," replied the spokesman of the band, who crept up to the window, peering in upon the room. He beckoned the others to remain quiet.

"There he is, in the common kitchen, for a wonder. How these noblemen enjoy coming down to our level, now and then. Ribou, you see him sitting there before the wine flask, staring into the fire, his back to us?"

Ribou looked beneath the lattice. "His sword hilt is just waiting for my fingers," he chuckled. "It will be an easy thing to do; too easy to display real skill."

"As soon as Ribou has the sword, you, Grougarde, will go in and tell Bussy that a lady desires to see him in the street. You need not attempt

description; if he should ask, reply that her face was hidden by her cloak."

"But that may not bring him out," doubted Grougarde.

"Fool! Would it bring you out?"

"But I am not a great gentleman, like Bussy d'Amboise."

"Pardieu!" exclaimed the leader, "the great fish and the small are alike when a woman's the bait. In fact, I think the nobility are easier than we are in that respect. Once Bussy hears your message, force of habit will bring him out so quickly he'll not think to feel if his sword's in place. Go, Ribou! and, mind you, do not fail! Your life depends upon your fingers' skill!"

Ribou adjusted his cloak so he might easily handle it, and, with the boastfulness of the expert, remarked, "Just keep watching through that window, if you wish to see a neat piece of work. I would it were one more difficult to accomplish!"

"That man's professional pride sickens me," scowled one of the party. "Listen to his boast."

The man addressed felt of his pockets carefully to assure himself that his crowns were safe.

"Indeed, it's most uncomfortable to have to associate constantly with a man of his trade. Still, here's hoping he succeeds! If failure attend, then it's death or luck if we escape. Bussy

d'Amboise never leaves a field while yet there is work to do."

"Faith! you make my flesh creep! Be still! and watch Ribou!"

CHAPTER VIII

BUSSY LOSES HIS SWORD

THE fact that another guest, half lackey, half soldier, sought a seat at the table behind him did not disturb Bussy's trend of thought. He was too engrossed in trying to figure how he in justice to the girl could venture to ask for her hand, fair as the lily of his France. Some there were who asserted that D'Amboise was without honour, but they whispered it quietly by themselves for fear lest, should the remark be brought to Bussy, the sun might set for ever for them.

Ribou was walking into the mouth of the lion, he knew, in testing his light-fingered skill against the alertness of the Duke's bravo. Fate figured in the subsequent events, proving that a charm follows him who battles fairly.

The Paris pickpocket could have chosen no better time for his work than at the moment when, seating himself behind Bussy, he threw open his cloak, the folds covering the hilt of the latter's sword.

Bussy was oblivious to his surroundings, haunted by visions of unexplainable adventures, any one of which stamped him in a false light. The excitement of the fray, the power of his sword, the joy of winning against odds, had sealed his lips. He explained to no man.

Josef, the innkeeper, brought the mug of wine Ribou ordered, and glanced at the untouched flask beside Bussy, whom he knew of old. It was an unusual sight to see him silent and alone, thirstless. Innkeepers ask nothing but the crowns in exchange for hospitality, and, being assured of a rich reward for any service rendered D'Amboise, he kept an eye upon the stranger who drained his mug at a single draught.

"More wine, fellow!" cried Ribou, whose cat-like eyes had scented the purpose of the man.

The innkeeper hastened to comply with the request, that he might more closely observe what was to follow.

As Josef turned, shuffling, to the counter, Ribou slipped his left hand beneath his cloak, and softly drew Bussy's sword from the scabbard. The lackeys at the window saw the flash of the steel as Ribou laid it gently beneath the table.

The innkeeper returned with the fresh mug of wine, setting it before Ribou.

"The finest I have tasted in many a moon, my

man!" declared Ribou. "Your health, and that of your family!"

"Yours is a familiar face, Monsieur!" replied Josef. "Why crack such jokes as that? Faith! there's mischief abroad, or I would not be honoured by your presence. Your gold is good, however; that I'll take, leaving your pleasantries for those who know you not."

"How's this!" cried Ribou. "You speak to affront me?"

"Nay, Monsieur Lackey, 'twere impossible," replied Josef, biting the coin Ribou had given him, thereby proving his knowledge of men and their manners.

Ribou's temper, heated by the wine, might have spoiled the plan so neatly laid by De Montsoreau, had not the inn door opened, Grougarde entering the kitchen.

Without, in the courtyard, the men had drawn back into the darkness of the inn, standing with swords drawn, ready to fall upon their victim. From the position they assumed, a retreat into the tavern would be impossible.

Grougarde winked slyly to Ribou, who pretended not to see him, burying his face in the mug, but kept his eyes and ears wide open, his feet set ready to make a dash should Bussy note his loss.

Bussy moved as Grougarde bowed before him.

"From the description furnished, Monsieur, you are the gentleman I was sent to fetch to meet a lady."

"What's that, fellow?" cried Bussy.

"A lady, Monsieur, begs that you come to her," replied Grougarde, backing away as Bussy gained his feet. "She is without."

"None but the girl of the hose could have sent such a message," thought Bussy, who grew impatient to see her once again. He crowded Grougarde at the door in his haste to leave the inn. By this time they were in the courtyard.

"Where is she waiting?" demanded Bussy, unsuspecting of the impending attack.

"In the street at the end of the archway," replied Grougarde, pointing.

Bussy crossed the yard rapidly toward the archway. As he did so the men hidden beside the inn rushed at him from behind. He heard their feet pounding upon the stone flagging, and guessed their purpose with the instinct of one often trapped, but never caught! He turned swiftly, eluding their sword points by stooping low.

As the would-be assassins rushed past him, carried on by their savage lunges, Bussy backed to the centre of the courtyard, and faced them as they were about to make a second assault.

“An ambush!” exclaimed Bussy, not at all displeased. His hand sought his sword. The scabbard was empty.

“My sword is gone! Treachery!” he yelled, the words echoing about the walls of the inn.

The dagger at his belt was the only weapon left with which to defend himself. He drew it and dashed for the door of the inn. There he was met by Grougarde and Ribou, while the others came up from the archway as Ribou and Grougarde closed in upon the other side.

“By the mass!” muttered Bussy. “I have my hands full now. ’Tis with lackeys I battle with, after all!”

The lackeys charged upon him. As they did so, Heloise, attracted by the uproar, appeared at the window above the entrance to the inn.

Bussy was too busy to notice the maiden. With a single sweep of his dagger he swept aside the sword thrusts, breaking through the line of their attack, turning again to face them as they came, this time spread out, each man cautiously advancing, for life was dear even to these paid assassins.

“Alain!” cried Heloise. “It is the gentleman who saved me! Look how he struggles against so great a force.”

The young man rushed to the window beside her, sword in hand.

From above they looked down as Bussy, as if bearing a charmed life, crashed through the line of steel. The thrusts had been met by the steel of his dagger, and Bussy stood with back against the door, unharmed, defiant.

"A thousand crowns for a sword!" he shouted loudly.

Alain reached down from the window over his head. "Here's one for nothing, Monsieur," said he.

"Ah!" cried Bussy, as his fingers closed about the handle. "Come on now, you hounds!"

The lackeys had anticipated the invitation, hoping to reach their man before the sword could be passed.

The rush was a fatal one for the men of De Montsoreau. Bussy's skill was equal to a dozen such as they. Two fell, run through the body. Grougarde's weapon flew from his hand, clanking off in a dark corner. Ribou fled through the archway, followed by Grougarde and the only lackey left able to use his legs.

As Bussy looked about him to make sure he was master of the field, Alain and Heloise rushed from the inn.

"You have scattered your foes like a giant, Monsieur!" said Alain, who had expected to be of service in the struggle.

"Thanks to your timely assistance," replied Bussy. "You saved me from death, perhaps, at the hands of hirelings — a death obnoxious to a gentleman."

Barnabe and six of D'Amboise's men came running through the archway, two carrying torches.

"Pardieu!" exclaimed Barnabe. "I see things have been happening here."

"And you, like the archers of the watch, arrive after the happenings are over," remarked Bussy, who never lost an opportunity to jest.

"What bad luck!" growled the soldier, looking at the lackeys as they lay upon the pavement.

Heloise moved to Bussy's side.

"I thank Heaven you were not killed, Monsieur!" she said passionately.

"Then I am doubly glad to have been reserved for a finer death, Mademoiselle," said he, taking her hand in his. "I kiss your hand."

Turning to Alain, but still holding the hand of the maiden, he extended the sword. "Monsieur, I return your sword. 'Tis a fine bit of steel."

Alain accepted with a slight show of uneasiness. He resented Heloise's permitting the swordsman to tarry close by her side.

"Never was gift more welcome than the use of that blade was to me. Ask me for something in my power to give, that I may show my gratitude.

Take time to choose it, and I promise, whatever it may be, short of my life itself, it shall be yours on the instant, for the asking, no matter what the time or place. To this I bind myself on the word of a gentleman, and the oath of a saint is a brittle pledge beside the word of Bussy d'Amboise."

"Bussy d'Amboise!" cried Heloise in horror, throwing from her the hand that held hers, and seeking Alain, who stared at the other in alarm. His hand sought the sword that had done so much in Bussy's hand. Heloise held his arm.

"Not now! His men," she whispered. "Another time. Take care!"

"I had, indeed, feared my name would startle you," said Bussy, pained to see the look of horror upon the young girl's face.

"Startle me!" exclaimed Heloise, with great loathing. "The name of Bussy d'Amboise—tyrant! brawler! braggart! bully of the Duke of Anjou! Startle is a soft word! The name of Bussy d'Amboise offends the ear; it is a challenge to men; an insult to women. I could cut off the hand those lips have touched!" she cried, rubbing the back of her hand vigorously.

"Come, Alain, Etienne! The very air is odious through the presence of this blood-stained villain!"

Before Bussy could prevent her, Heloise had fled into the inn, Alain following reluctantly.

"Sharp words, Monsieur!" ventured Barnabe.

Bussy was quiet and thoughtful.

"And that is the reputation I have let men spread of me, that my name might be a terror to the enemies of my prince. And pride too has made me careless to set myself right. Would I had been wiser. I never felt the weight of an ill name till now. You saw the look upon the maid's face. 'Twas bitter."

"Shall the men keep guard of her as you ordered?" asked Barnabe, to whom sentiment appealed not.

"Certainly! Why not?" demanded Bussy.

The soldier shrugged his shoulders.

"The young man with her would be small protection against De Montsoreau's men. See that she meets with no harm. 'Tis my command."

"I met three of De Montsoreau's men in the street yonder as I came hither," said Barnabe. "I knew not then that you had been attacked."

Bussy took a torch from the hand of one of his pages and held it over the body of one of the dead lackeys.

"Yes, the colours of De Montsoreau, and 'twas I that had him made Grand Huntsman. Well, this decides it. That girl loathes me as the swag-

gering brawler I have let myself appear. De Montsoreau sets his knaves to murder me in the dark. All points to one thing."

"And what is that?" asked Barnabe.

"I must find retaliation in rescuing Mme. de Montsoreau from ennui!" said he.

"The women will be your undoing, Monsieur!" cried the faithful servant.

"They've undone better men, Barnabe. I wonder whom that girl came to Angers to kill."

"God knows," snarled Barnabe.

"Well, it's none of our business. Come on!" cried Bussy.

If Bussy d'Amboise was puzzled as to the identity of the man Heloise was determined to slay, it worried him but little. Having lost in the game of hearts, as upon another occasion he remembered, the Duke's first gentleman bore himself as one entitled to that distinction. The world was his field, and sport of many kinds lay at hand. Secure in the thought that at least her safety was assured, he rode away to the Chateau Angers, Barnabe trailing behind his master on the watch for further attack from ambush.

Bussy never attempted to fathom the purpose of any move the Duke of Anjou might make. He realized the impulse that prompted them, and was only eager to be in action. Idleness alone he

could not suffer. The attack made by the lackeys of De Montsoreau opened his eyes to that side of the life at the chateau, and he was determined to fasten horns upon the head of the Count in addition to exacting full payment for his treachery.

The Duke had other plans, however, that in execution tried the patience and skill of his first gentleman.

CHAPTER IX

THE ABDUCTION

WHEN the Duke of Anjou's first gentleman, in thanking Alain de Mayenne for the sword he so opportunely lowered from the window, disclosed his identity, Heloise fled from his presence as from a pestilence. Josef had prepared a room for her reception, and to it the girl hurried with a sadness of heart she could not explain. Even the security she experienced within the inn's cheery walls carried a chill. It was the forerunner of disaster.

Alain de Mayenne, though fearful of the consequences of his oath to take up the work which Heloise had laid down, thought of the bliss in store for him when he might claim his reward. Life with her would be rarely sweet!

One comfort he hugged closely to his breast. She was safe, and that alone was reason for rejoicing. What was to come, the fates would attend to. He forced his courage with the thought; but, in assuming the task of ridding the world of

Bussy d'Amboise, his willingness spoke of good intentions rather than of strong hope of success.

Alain found Heloise with her head resting upon her hands, sadly quiet.

"You must remain here for the night," he said. "I will find room for Etienne and myself. The comfort of the inn will afford rest, which we all sorely need. On the morrow I will take you to your home, where in safety you can wait my return from my mission. I know the skill and courage of Bussy d'Amboise, but against him I must pit not only strength, but strategy and stealth. The power of my arm will increase as I think of you, Heloise."

"Aye, you must carry out your mission, Alain," replied the girl.

The young man glanced sharply at Heloise, struck by the tone of her voice. There was not the life and spirit in the declaration he had expected from her, who, but a moment ago, had been so enraged, so intent upon taking the life of a man.

Heloise, herself, could not have explained the change that had come over her. One moment she gave thanks that at last God had sent her aid in pointing out the man she believed to have so bitterly wronged her sister. Then came a sensation of regret that the object of her vengeance should have proven to be her benefactor. She

tried to find explanation in the great strain she had undergone, and listened absent-mindedly to the plan formed by Alain.

"It is now late, Heloise," said Alain, "and, much as I would love to hear your story of adventure, still, your rest is of more moment. As we ride along on the road to-morrow you shall tell me all."

"As you will, Alain," replied Heloise. "Etienne, summon the maid."

"Au revoir, Heloise!" cried Alain, kissing her hand. "Sweet dreams of peace and comfort. You have made me the happiest of men, and it shall ever be my pleasure to guard you from all harm."

Heloise lay upon the inn couch, sleepless and disturbed. "Why?" she kept propounding to herself. "Why should I care, now that I have discovered the identity of the villain? Why?"

The love she bore her sister, the honour she would avenge, her promise to Alain, all seemed to fade away when she thought of him who had been so tender in his strength, so kindly in his manner. Could this be he of whom the country spoke? Care? Yes, she found she did, and did not seek further explanation. Care she would still more, though many an obstacle appeared in the pathway of her love.

Alain and Etienne arose bright and early, the lad being sent to order that the horses should be ready as soon as the morning meal was finished.

Alain stood at the window of his room, looking out across the country, its rolling fields just showing the greenish tint of spring, though the wind still held a crispness that invigorated. The world looked bright to him. The sunlight, casting slanting rays through the trees, seemed to welcome the thought he nursed that soon all would be well at Maucourt. At last Heloise had consented to become his wife, the condition being as nothing in the joy of the thought. Still, to win this precious prize, he must live, and, to assure life, he must turn assassin! In no equal contest could he dare hope for victory. This came as a dark cloud across the bright morning sky. Alain was no coward. Life was dear to him, and, now that his love had consented, he longed to live. As he pondered, Etienne returned, bringing the news that Heloise awaited them at table below.

The meal was a silent one, each busy with his thoughts. Heloise wavered in her intent, and would have withdrawn her condition, only pride, wounded beyond repair, held her fast.

Alain's mind wandered in strange channels. He pictured the attack from behind, the dagger-

thrust that would spell his winning of the prize, and yet there was no joy in the thought.

Etienne ate little, content to gaze upon his sister, whom he had given up as lost.

Josef, the innkeeper, saw them off upon their journey, with a shake of the head.

"A pretty pair, but dismal! Faith! when I was his age, the meal would have been one of joyousness. Times have changed and, with them, the people. The gentleman was kind, however, or crazed. They do not throw many gold pieces my way these days," said he.

Beyond the gates of Angers the road toward Maucourt leads through a wooded country, with here and there a broken tract where the woodsmen had been at work. Sweeping below the dusty road, glimpses of the river could be gained, with here and there the quiet home of a peasant.

They had reached the brow of a hill, thick with its trees, the branches meeting, forming a darkened lane down a slope, the footing being rather dangerous for the steeds.

Alain's warning cry, "Hold fast!" as Heloise's horse slipped, echoed strangely.

A slight bend ahead shut off all view of the surrounding country. It was as if they had ridden into the thick of the forest.

Alain wheeled his horse to catch the girl as the

steed stumbled. As he did so, a band of men sprang from the brush beside the road. They were at the horses' heads in a trice. Before Alain could draw, he was felled by a blow from behind.

Etienne, boy though he was, fought the ruffians with his dagger.

"Hands off the girl!" yelled one hoarsely. "She must be unharmed; it is the order. Stop that youngster scratching! Quick!"

Etienne fell forward to the road, felled from a blow on his head.

"Come, we've no time to waste! Off with the girl!" commanded the leader. "She may ride. Seize the horses, and follow!"

As the men grasped at her horse's bridle, Heloise slashed vigorously with her whip.

"Let go, you villains!" she screamed. "This is more of Bussy d'Amboise's work!"

"Oh! Oh! It is, is it? Little Tempest! What say you to this, Mademoiselle?" cried another of the band, throwing a cloak about her head, muffling her cries. "Scream on, little spitfire! Your cries will not avail. Better save your strength for the journey.

"Come, let us have the litter. It will be easier to carry her thus. She'll fall from the horse and the orders were to bring her in unharmed."

"What about this fellow and the boy?" asked one of the crew. "Shall we finish them?"

"Nay, all that was needed we have. They'll sleep awhile from the knocks they received. Let's on to Angers."

"This is a deserted place!"

"So much the better; they will have no tales to tell."

"Poor Alain! Poor Etienne!" moaned Heloise, as she heard.

Leaving Alain and the boy senseless in the road, the men of De Chanvallon set off on their way back to the Castle of Angers.

Monsieur de Chanvallon's success in following the plans of the Duke, resulting in the abduction of Heloise, availed nothing to the brother of King Henry III. The Duke might as well have left the girl at the inn of the Golden Swan, where he had traced her, attracted by her beauty. Still, the capture of the maid led in rapid strides to further complications, wherein the skill and devotion of Bussy d'Amboise were put to the test.

When Heloise was borne away to Castle of Angers, the followers of De Chanvallon fancied that the man and boy, left senseless in the road, were fatally wounded, if not dead. In this they guessed poorly.

Etienne was the first to regain consciousness. He rolled over in the dirt, his head aching, his arm badly sprained from the fall. Raising himself upon his elbow, he looked about him. There, close beside him, lay Alain, face downward in the dirt, blood flowing from a wound in his head. The lad sprang weakly to his feet, and struggled to where the body lay.

Turning Alain over upon his back, Etienne sought to discover if life still remained. The face staring up at him was white as death.

"He's dead!" gasped Etienne. "And Heloise! Gone! Oh, why did she not listen to me? I shall never see her again. Poor Alain! He loved her so! Farewell!" wept the lad.

Staggering as he went, Etienne set out for Mau-court to report Alain as dead, Heloise missing, and the horses stolen, or frightened into a mad dash for liberty.

How long he lay beside the road, Alain never knew. It was dark when he came to himself and realized the full extent of the misfortune that had befallen him. Binding his wounded head with the linen from his shirt, he set out, faint and heart-sick. He felt his way through the inky darkness of the lonely road for a league or more, when, coming to an opening, he saw a faint light twinkling across the field. Toward this he made his way.

“Heloise is gone, taken no doubt by the men of Bussy. I now have more than one interest in having his life,” he muttered. “The ruffians struck hard; my head whirls. Pray God I have strength left to gain the cottage.”

With faltering footsteps, Alain groped through the fields, making straight for the light. He barely had strength to rap upon the door, when, fainting from loss of blood, he sank upon the ground.

The peasant, bearing a light, opened the door in response to the summons, and peered into the darkness, seeing nothing; but his good wife, at his side, glanced downward and saw the fallen man.

“Baptiste! Look! a man has been wounded. Quick! give me the light, and you bear him in. Poor lad!” she cried.

“It is all very well to bring him in!” cried Baptiste, “but who is to feed and give him succour? Surely the times are hard enough for us to feed ourselves without another mouth to provide for.”

“Never mind the food,” said Jeannette. “The lad needs care, and mayhap he can pay for it. His clothes are those of a gentleman.”

“True, wife. I had not thought,” replied Baptiste, lifting the senseless Alain in his arms. “You hold the light.”

“A pretty gentleman, is he not?” exclaimed Jeannette.

“Looks mean nothing. This lad has met more than his match. Some love affair, an ambush, and him left for dead! The road between here and Angers is a lonely spot. First let's see how heavy a purse he carries,” cried Baptiste. “You were right! The gentleman can pay, and richly, too! We'll put him in our bed; it is nearer the kitchen.”

“That he shall have, and all else I can do for him, the pretty dear!” cried Jeannette.

CHAPTER X

THE GAME OF GABBES

DE MONTSOREAU, slightly wounded from the attack upon him made by Heloise, stood before the fire in the hall of the Castle of Angers, upon the night of the day following the attempted assassination of Bussy d'Amboise. The Count had no hope of escape at the hands of D'Amboise. The latter knew that the men who had fallen had worn the Count's colours, and that pointed, as directly as a sign-post, to the author of the plan. It was not a pleasant thought to have incurred the enmity of Bussy d'Amboise; none had lived to tell of the sensation. Though no coward, the Count felt that chill of fear which comes to any man when confronting a disaster.

He stood in deep thought, his eyes raised now and then to the great door that opened into the huge hall from the inner court. The doors of the dining-hall were closed, as was that leading to a small room to his left, beyond the fireplace. The majestic staircase wound its way to the landing

above. The table held heavy silver candlesticks, whose light augmented that from the flames, shedding a mellow glare about the place. A lackey, showing the signs of the conflict in which he had engaged, stood at a respectful distance from his master. Being one of the fortunate to escape the thrusts of Bussy in the courtyard of the inn, he had sought the Count. Failure was more than half anticipated, so the warmth of greeting was not lessened.

De Montsoreau expected the arrival of the Duke, and also looked for Bussy to appear, both meetings that meant much to him. The first might mean the favour he desired, the latter, like as not, would end his life, for to measure swords with Bussy was certain death.

“It is very curious,” said he to the lackey. “He must have seen my colours on the two men he killed last night; yet he has said nothing, done nothing, concerning the attack. It is not like Bussy d’Amboise to let such matters pass.”

The lackey ventured an explanation, saying: “He may have spoken privately to Monseigneur, the Duke.”

De Montsoreau doubted this. “If he has, then Monseigneur, the Duke, has shown him rare disregard, in commanding me to reside here at the Castle of Angers, under the same roof with his

Highness. But I think Bussy has kept silent, bidding his time. It is a way he has. Half his pleasure in life is in the effect he produces by such acts."

"Madame, I suppose, will remain here with you?" said the lackey.

"Assuredly," exclaimed the Count; "you do not think I brought her here from Montsoreau merely to give her the pleasure of riding back again? I shall offer no man a chance to say that, while I am at Angers, such and such things go on at Montsoreau. They may laugh at me for keeping my wife under my eyes if they like!"

"It is better than being laughed at for what may be going on when a husband doesn't keep his wife under his eye," applauded the lackey.

"You are right," answered the Count, warming to his subject, finding even a lackey's approval most gratifying.

"Let him play the trustful man that will. I'll choose another part, in this age and country. But of Bussy d'Amboise," he cried, "I think this mission to Alençon, that the Duke starts him on to-night, is a pretext to get him out of the way while the Duke departs for Paris. Thus the Duke will avoid breaking openly with this violent, hot-tempered gentleman. The break is bound to come. God grant I be alive to see it!"

"The Duke is not like to depart for Paris until

Monsieur de Chanvallon returns," added the lackey.

The increasing favour shown De Chanvallon was marked. No news had come from court to warrant the Duke's departure at any given time; but his gentlemen had long looked forward to a reconciliation between the King and Duke, for 'twas common talk that all thoughts of warlike nature had been abandoned by the Duke. Bussy was still the contention, and the first gentleman knew it well.

"And there's a business," continued the Count, "that sets me wondering. Why should Monsieur de Chanvallon have left Angers with a score of armed men this morning?"

The tramp of feet was heard in the corridor back of the door leading to the staircase.

"Hist!" motioned the Count, "the Duke is coming."

The lackey bowed, leaving the hall through the small door to the Count's right. It closed as the Duke, followed by D'Angeau, La Ferte and Hal-lot, gentlemen of his suite, appeared at the head of the stairs.

"Good evening, Monsieur le Comte," said the Duke, with a wave of his hand to De Montsoreau. "Madame finds her apartments comfortable, I trust?"

Bowing low before the Duke, the Count replied: "Worthy of a guest of such a prince, Monseigneur."

The Duke and his gentlemen descended to the hall, grouping themselves about the fireplace, for the night air was chill, the March wind whistling about the corners, clattering the dry branches of the ivy against the window sashes.

The Duke fumbled about the table, picking up a volume that seemed carelessly thrown there. "Plutarch's Lives of Illustrious Men," he read.

"Monsieur Bussy cannot be far away," sneered D'Angeau.

"He is in the dining-hall yonder, mayhap," replied De Montsoreau, seeking to learn the spot, for he would have given a purse of crowns to know exactly. The Duke's reply assured him of that point, at least.

The Duke laid the book aside, viewing the Count's discomfiture, "Oh, yes, superintending preparations for a feast he gives certain of his friars of Bourgeuil to-night, before setting out for Alençon. The friars are his particular friends."

"Monsieur Bussy should be an abbot, much beloved of his Benedictines," smiled La Ferte. The Count, noting the evident freedom with which these gentlemen took the name of Bussy,

began to feel his courage return. Surely the Duke was about to break with him, in which event another attack might spell success.

“In that case,” said the Duke, turning to La Ferte, “his manners to his Benedictines should be milder than to the rest of the world — Eh, gentlemen?”

“Can one not see Bussy’s star declining?” whispered Hallot to La Ferte. The latter nodded assent.

What might have followed to further convince these gentlemen, attached to the person of the King’s brother, that he had lost his fondness for his favourite, was cut off shortly by the rather untimely appearance of D’Amboise and his servant, Barnabe, who came into the hall through the small door, and not by that which led to the dining-hall, as the Duke had indicated.

The Duke’s manner, which but a moment ago had been of a mocking character in reference to his first gentleman, changed to that of the polished master.

“Well, my dear Bussy,” he said, smiling hospitably, “is all ready for your hungry and thirsty friars?”

“All ready, my dear Prince,” replied Bussy, “and I’m ordering that my horses be saddled for the ride to Alençon, as you command.”

He glanced about at the gentlemen of the Duke's suite. Their faces told him nothing.

"You will leave, then, before your feast is over?" asked the Duke. "It is a pity to send you away from so interesting an affair."

"My dear Prince's service is more important than what pleasure my Benedictines may find in my company," replied Bussy, and turned to instruct his page to bring his horses to the chateau.

La Ferte's mirth was suppressed, though he was tempted to remark to Hallot: "He little knows his dear Prince's real feelings toward him."

Barnabe's eyes had missed this bit of byplay, for his instinct and training told him De Montsoreau was the man to watch, and from his entrance to the hall the soldier had noted the face of the Count. The Duke soon formed the centre of the group of gentlemen, and Barnabe had a chance to speak with his master.

"See how De Montsoreau watches you," he said eagerly.

"Aye, the furtive wretch. He wonders that I am inactive about last night's attack. He little dreams what revenge I mean to take, in time. De Chanvallon is not back yet, I see. Where the devil could the Duke have sent him this morning?"

The Duke's nervous manner was not lost upon

Bussy. It was not often that the Prince sought suggestion as to the form of amusement the gentlemen should enjoy, and yet this the Duke had just done. This little thing, to Bussy, was the straw which told the way of the wind.

"There's something bothering our Prince," thought he.

"How shall we pass the evening?" the Duke had asked, looking about for the answer, though Bussy fancied he was more eager for the footsteps of De Chanvallon than for any suggestion a gentleman might venture to make.

"If no one else will speak," cried D'Angeau, "I suggest that some one read from Monsieur Bussy's favourite book yonder, on the table."

The Duke looked bored.

"One gets a little bored at the admirable deeds of the Roman captains, wonderful as they are," he drawled.

"Admirable, Monseigneur!" cried Bussy, "but not wonderful. Though that is to me the pleasantest of books, I find in it no deed to wonder at. There is nothing there I could not do myself, if the occasion arose."

The smile upon La Ferte's face angered D'Amboise.

"You smile, Monsieur, at such words from a mere gentleman by birth. But I tell you," cried

Bussy, advancing with a bold stride, "though I was born a mere gentleman, I carry in my body the heart of an emperor."

La Ferte, moved by an impulse to gain the smiles of the Duke, replied with ironical courtesy.

"Monsieur Bussy has been good enough to give us that information more than once."

He had scarcely finished when Bussy was upon him. There was no mistaking his intent.

"By God's light, Monsieur, doubtless I have a hundred times, but it was true then as it is now, and as you'll find it wherever and whenever you please."

The Duke had no mind for brawling just then, and, raising his hand to Bussy, he cried:

"Softly, gentlemen. Bussy, my dear Monsieur, you take offence too quickly."

The Prince feared an outburst that would later lead to bloodshed, and adroitly turned the situation from a test of strength and skill to that of satire and impudence.

"What do you say, gentlemen, to a game of gabbes?"

"Excellent!" cried Hallot.

"Good!" agreed D'Angeau.

"The very thing!" said La Ferte, turning from Bussy, who still confronted him. Playing with

fire was an exhilarating sport; but it needed but a spark to fan D'Amboise's passion into a conflagration.

"You doubtless know the game, Monsieur de Montsoreau," said the Duke, seating himself at the table, while the gentlemen gathered about him, Bussy leaning on the mantel beside the fire, Barnabe close at hand. "The first gentleman taunts the second with one of the latter's defects, either of body or mind; the second retorts in kind. Whichever shows himself the harder hit is loser of the bout, and out of the game. The winner then taunts another gentleman, and so on, and the last survivor wins."

Surely a pleasant sport for gentlemen of the court, whose swords were lightly carried, and who were anxious to fight at the offence a smile might carry!

The Duke, knowing these gentlemen would not quarrel in his presence, had a mind to test their temper. The atmosphere was charged with the spark that makes the metal hot.

"Aye," muttered D'Amboise, "if the game do not become reality before that."

The Duke pretended not to hear. Calling upon D'Angeau, he said:

"Begin, Monsieur."

D'Angeau looked at De Montsoreau, who,

during the proceedings, kept a constant watch upon Bussy.

"I begin," cried D'Angeau, "by laughing at De Montsoreau for the jealousy with which he keeps his wife locked up."

De Montsoreau flushed crimson, and trembled in his anger, as he replied:

"And I retort by objecting to Monsieur d'Angeau's impertinence."

Just a faint smile came upon the features of the man addressed. He looked to the Duke for the decision.

"You lose, De Montsoreau," said the latter, "for want of practice in the game, I think. Go on, D'Angeau."

La Ferte was the next object of his derision.

"I address Monsieur de la Ferte, and call attention to his envy of those who are superior to him."

The calmness of La Ferte, his cool reply, stung.

"And I reply by reminding Monsieur d'Angeau of the colossal conceit that makes him think himself superior."

D'Angeau's smile vanished, and his embarrassment was complete.

"You lose in your second bout, D'Angeau," ruled the Duke. "You are now the challenger, La Ferte."

La Ferte could not escape from the position his victory placed him in, though he heartily wished D'Angeau had beaten him in the bout. To assail the Duke, keeping within the bounds of reason, and yet carry the smart of wit, set him cold. Men's minds refuse to work sometimes when at the test. La Ferte fell back upon the use one might make of flattery, while feigning offence.

"I challenge your Highness' self," said he slowly. "I crave you, then, name in me a defect equal to yours in tolerating us, your unworthy gentlemen."

Bussy bristled roughly at the insinuation, which included him.

"Speak for yourself, La Ferte!" he cried.

The Duke of Anjou, weak mortal though he was, despised the crawling nature of those who were about him. The reply of La Ferte, and Bussy's outburst, displeased him.

The sport of gabbes lies in the amount of venom one may show, the quickness of the retort, the aptness of the phrase, and the indifference shown after the assault.

"Well, La Ferte," said he, "what of the sycophancy you show in bestowing a stupid flattery instead of a taunt, in the hope of insinuating yourself into favour?"

The words fell hard upon the ears of the flatterer, who retreated crestfallen.

"You won that time, Monseigneur!" declared Bussy.

"Is it not a fine game, gentlemen?" exclaimed the Duke. "It is now my turn, Bussy."

D'Amboise started. There was a something in the tone of the Duke's voice that boded no good to him. He bowed as the prince picked him out as the object of his sport.

"So I lash you for your frightful, savage temper, which makes so many courteous people keep clear of your society!" cried the Duke. "What have you to say to that?"

The little group of gentlemen drew close to the table across which the Duke had flung his taunt.

Barnabe scowled, as Bussy replied quietly.

"Nothing, Monseigneur. You win."

La Ferte, at this, pricked up his ears. To have fallen from favour, so openly seeking to flatter the Duke, was a disaster to any man; but this was even worse! Here was D'Amboise, a man not only quick with the blade, but sharp of wit and keen of sarcasm! That he should lay the cards down, before the game was done, caused a flurry in which the Duke joined.

Barnabe alone guessed the reason for the eva-

sion. Bussy liked above all things to accomplish the unusual. There was a rare tingle of pleasure in the thought of surprising one's audience. The first gentleman enjoyed the effect of his words to the fullest.

Barnabe awaited the termination, confident in his master's wit.

The Duke was puzzled. Never had Bussy refused a chance to slyly throw a shot, even at the person of the Prince of France.

La Ferte drew near. Hallot was at his elbow, while D'Angeau stood beside De Montsoreau, all expecting the verbal explosion.

"But you must retort!" declared the Duke, "and give me an opportunity of showing as little vexation as you have shown. Come, Bussy, the game demands it."

"Excuse me from retorting, Monseigneur, I beg!" craved Bussy, bowing, while from beneath his lashes he enjoyed the effect his words produced upon the group of gentlemen.

"Oho!" cried La Ferte. "That is how he shows his vexation. He is too squarely hit to reply."

"That's it," said Hallot approvingly.

"He's too angry to play the game. That's why," laughed D'Angeau, a laugh in which all joined, save the Duke, who saw the steel-like

gleam in the eye that looked him straight and clear, and shuddered.

“Very well, Monseigneur, if you insist,” said Bussy, ignoring the slurs of the gentlemen.

“You say I am shunned because of my temper?”

The Duke bowed. His gentlemen stood silent and apprehensive. They had seen that expression upon Bussy's face before, and knew the meaning.

“True, Monseigneur,” added Bussy, straightening his supple form to its full height. “But I might be more shunned, for everybody would surely avoid me, if, in addition to my temper, I were afflicted with such a personal appearance as your own.”

As Bussy finished, he cast a glance at Barnabe, who sought to hide a smile.

The gentlemen of the Duke's suite were more stunned than the prince. He rose to his feet, avoiding the glance of Bussy, who was but warmed for a wordy warfare.

“This is a very stupid game, gentlemen!” said the Duke, dryly. “Let us go and refresh ourselves.”

The Duke and his gentlemen left the hall with as good a show of indifference as possible for beaten men to make.

Bussy d'Amboise leaned against the table, thumbing the book.

Barnabe faced him, his weather-scarred countenance reflecting the joyous thought of a victory for the house of D'Amboise.

"I think I won that game, Barnabe," declared Bussy, with a swing of his hat in the direction of the Duke.

Caution crept into Barnabe's heart, and he voiced it.

"I'm afraid you hit the Duke so hard he won't soon forget it," cried the soldier.

"Poh!" replied Bussy. "There's no reason to be afraid. You remember when I hit his brother, the King of France, somewhat harder?"

"Remember!" exclaimed Barnabe. "Will anybody ever forget? That will go down in history, that incident, how the King and his favourites were decked out in their gold and lace and feathers, and woman's frippery; how you came in, wearing a plain black doublet, but followed by your six pages, in just such cloth of gold, ruffs and plumes, as the King and his minions wore, and how, when this was noticed, you said, in the hearing of half the court, 'The time has come when rogues wear finer clothes than gentlemen!' You see, I remember the very words, Monsieur."

"Faith! your memory is of great value to me,

Barnabe," said Bussy. "It retains what pleases me to hear repeated, and discards that which would annoy. A retainer worthy of a prince!"

"No prince of France could command my homage, were he an enemy of yours, my master," proudly exclaimed Barnabe.

"Barnabe," said Bussy, "we know not for how long our favour may extend. This mission to Alençon bothers me a bit. I see no reason for its taking, and the Duke rarely has a purposeless task for me to perform."

"He may be ridding himself of your presence at a time when he might fear you, were you at hand," suggested Barnabe.

"The absence of De Chanvallon is further evidence that something is afoot."

"And De Montsoreau?" asked Barnabe.

"A poor tool, wracked with fear of losing his honour. Faith! I'll teach that gentleman a lesson the court may gossip about. 'Twill be a dainty morsel for the lips of the painted dandies!"

"Have a care, Monsieur. The Duke means trouble," cautioned Barnabe.

"To Bussy d'Amboise that is life!"

CHAPTER XI

BUSSY AND THE FRIARS

WHEN the Duke of Anjou made Bussy d'Amboise his first gentleman, he needed the swordsman's good right arm, his keen eye and fearless boldness. With such a man to lead in the affray, his position was secure. So long as a sword was required, Bussy's was to be retained. None in the kingdom equalled his cleverness; none could tame his ardent spirit. Bussy had been rewarded by the brother of the King, who, in moments of generosity, had made him Governor of Angers, and later, Abbot of Bourgeuil.

Much of the time spent by Bussy in the province, when not called upon to undertake a mission for the Duke, was at the Abbey, where in the cellars the friars busied themselves. To Bussy their life did not appeal. Strong, young, and full of rich red blood, he marvelled that any band of men could rest content, apart from action. More in sport than with any idea that they might at some future time be of assistance to their abbot, Bussy

proposed they learn the art of swordsmanship. He was their instructor, and apt pupils he found them. Noting the readiness with which the friars took to his idea, Bussy soon realized that in them he had a guard, all his own; a guard that could be depended upon to the last drop of blood in their veins, and he set to work with a will to bring his friars to a point of perfection.

Many hours Bussy spent, first taking a hand himself, to show them the various thrusts; then as the mentor watching others in their combats. The monks grew lean under the physical strain, but the spirit of competition spurred them on. The Abbot of Bourgeuil to them was more than mere abbot; he was, in addition, their friend, for whom they would lay down their lives. The tales borne to their ears by others from the court were politely listened to, and promptly forgotten. As a king who can do no wrong, so their abbot held his sway.

Once, during each visit the abbot made to Angers, the friars, some score or more, were expected, as the guests of Bussy, at the chateau. There, with their strong limbs tucked beneath the tables in the dining-hall, their cassocks hiding the belted waists, the soldier monks were soldiers in reality, casting aside the Benedictine atmosphere for potions of a different brew.

When the Duke and his gentlemen withdrew so unceremoniously from the hall, no one even so much as glancing at the winner of the bout in that pleasing game of gabbes, Bussy pondered for a moment as Barnabe waited for his orders. He felt that, within the next hour, things would take a turn, and meant to make his play as high as any stake the brother of the King might propose.

The large door was opened from without by two halberdiers, who stood at attention in the entrance.

“ Oh, Barnabe! ” cried Bussy, “ my friars. ”

He hastened to the door to welcome his Benedictine friars. Bussy was soon the centre of a group from the Abbey of Bourgeuil, each vying with the other in greeting the abbot.

Barnabe had swung open the doors of the dining-hall, where, rich in silver, sparkling beneath the many candles, heavy-laden tables spread before them; a cheering sight upon even a less blustering night.

“ Welcome, my sons, welcome! ” said Bussy, grasping the hand of each, and finding that hearty response that tells of true feeling. “ To the fire with you, and then to the supper table. ’Tis a blustering night! ”

“ Br-r-r! it makes one blow like this March

wind itself!" exclaimed Brother Antoine, rubbing his hands before the cheering blaze.

"We're a little late, Father, but it's a long mule-ride from Bourgeuil," said Brother Jean, as the monks crowded about the fireplace.

"So it is, my sons," admitted Bussy, "and your mules shall have a long rest. You shall not stir from this roof till noon, though I must leave to-night on a mission for Monseigneur, the Duke."

"What a pity you can't take us with you!" exclaimed Brother Antoine, whose martial appearance made his costume appear like a disguise.

Bussy looked the friars over with the trained eye of a man selecting a company for his guard.

"In truth, you'll make a brave escort, my sons," said he approvingly.

"None better, I'll vouch, since you've made swordsmanship and the bearing of arms the fashion among us," declared Brother Jean, whose hand sought the hilt of his sword, covered by the sombre cloth of the cassock.

Bussy was touched by the appeal, flattered by the tribute, for these were men, indeed!

"Then show your warlike training yonder," said he, waving toward the dining-hall. "Attack the roast meats and the wines."

"No second invitation is required!" cried Brother Antoine.

“ We know our enemy of old, and, faith, are fond of him, — or shall I say, them? — for roast and wine warm one.”

“ Would that this attack to which you so politely invite us were the extent of your warlike mission,” remarked Brother Jean.

“ Are we not to have our abbot with us? ” asked Brother Antoine, as Bussy hesitated.

Marguerite de Montsoreau had stepped upon the landing at the top of the staircase, and was watching the friars as they filed into their feast.

Bussy saw her, and drew apart.

“ Go in and start your feast,” said he. “ I will join you presently.”

Barnabe shrugged his shoulders, as he brought up the rear of the party.

There was a moment of silence, broken only by the thumping of the chairs as the friars drew up to their feast.

“ Some good angel, Madame, has brought you to the chateau!” declared Bussy, going to the foot of the staircase, and waiting as Marguerite descended slowly.

The Countess de Montsoreau was gowned in pink, the delicate fabric forming a screen over a body of white brocade, the lace at neck and wrist setting off the full, round throat and slender, tapering hand. Bussy noted the latter as it slid

along the rail, moving towards his own. He wondered if their hands would meet, by accident.

"My husband is the good angel, Monsieur," replied Marguerite, affecting innocence.

"Why does she attempt to play the innocent?" thought Bussy. "H'm!" he growled, "I see nothing angelic in your husband. One can easily perceive that you have been kept hidden from the world, or you would know that husbands are a subject now banished from cheerful conversation."

"Oh, Monsieur!" exclaimed the Countess, "what a wicked man you would be if you had said that in earnest!"

She passed him, moving toward the fire, resting, half-leaning against the table, the pose both studied and graceful. Marguerite was faltering in her resolve to ensnare the man who boasted he could "attract the fawn into his net."

"What if you were to become a husband, Monsieur?" she continued, a soft light flashing from her eyes.

Bussy noted the inflection the Countess gave to the word husband.

"That is not likely," promptly replied Bussy, "since Marguerite de Maridos has a husband already."

The Countess sighed.

"Nay, Madame," Bussy pleaded, "why waste

time sighing over an absent husband that might be better spent in smiling upon a present admirer?"

He placed his hand upon hers as it rested upon the table and drew close to her.

The fawn moved away in affected embarrassment.

"Really, you speak with an astonishing directness, Monsieur," said she.

"Directness, Madame," said Bussy, proudly, "is a form of honesty, and my chief virtue."

The Countess smiled approval.

"If there be no straight road to my purposes, I make one," continued Bussy, forcefully. "In dealing with men I sometimes make it with my sword. Directness, I admit, is a thing unusual in this temporizing, fog-loving, plot-making world; and my straightforwardness, which is but sense and truth and courage, shocks the fools and liars and cowards."

"From what I've heard, I should fancy such were the case," replied the Countess.

"I love to shock them!" added Bussy. "It does me good to tread upon the toes of the exquisites, to prod the posing young fops, important old ladies, pretenders, fawners, backbiters, and seekers of new sires. To be a something real in this age of sham, a something masculine among womanish men and mannish women."

"A swaggerer!" interrupted the Countess.

"Yes, Madame, but truth and reality are so rare in this prating, wool-pulling world that when they do appear, and wear the sword of Bussy d'Amboise, by God's light! they can afford to swagger. And now, Madame, let us speak of yourself."

"I shall be a dull subject, I fear," said she.

"A complex one, perhaps," insinuated Bussy. "One requiring careful consideration. We are like to be interrupted here. In the hall above — the window overlooking the courtyard — we shall be less spied upon."

This time, as he took her hand, Marguerite did not draw away. He held it firmly, tenderly, leading her to the staircase.

"But, Monsieur! my husband!" hesitatingly protested the Countess.

"Needs to have his eyes opened," shortly retorted Bussy. "Come!"

As Bussy d'Amboise led the Countess up the staircase, and into the hall above, the Duke of Anjou, followed by his gentlemen, returned to the scene of the recent conflict of wits.

The Duke observed the attentive manner of his first gentleman.

"By the mass! gentlemen," he exclaimed, "a fine sight! Monsieur Bussy and Madame de

Montsoreau! His time will be lost there, I fancy."

"And De Montsoreau is yonder!" declared La Ferte, pointing to the door beside the fireplace, making as if to go to inform him.

The Duke waved him back, saying, "Nay! don't let him know. If Bussy have no excuse for his failure with the lady, so much the better."

"You mean his boast concerning the 'fawn' of the Grand Huntsman, so much talked of at court?" knowingly remarked D'Angeau.

"Aye, the same," replied the Duke. "That is one boast Bussy will not make good. This reminds me of my own affair. I wonder why De Chanvallon has not returned. The girl must be leading him a long chase."

A lackey, wearing the colours of De Chanvallon, appeared at the door between the halberdiers.

"Ah, fellow!" cried the Duke, "the colours of your master are welcome."

"Monsieur de Chanvallon sent me ahead to tell your Highness that he has taken the prisoner, whom he brings with the utmost speed."

"That's good news!" exclaimed the Duke. "The lady — I mean, the prisoner — was not inconvenienced in the taking, I trust?"

"No, Monseigneur," replied De Chanvallon's lackey. "But the young gentleman and boy with

her were both wounded. We left them lying in the road."

"May they rest comfortably," the Duke remarked, spitefully, turning in impatience upon the lackey. "How soon will your master arrive with her — ah! with the prisoner?"

"I left him at the town gate. He should be here in five minutes."

"Go yonder!" indicated the Duke, pointing toward the servants' quarters. "There is supper ready for your master's men."

"Gentlemen!" cried the Duke, addressing the precious three, "when this pretty bird, caught for me by De Chanvallon, appears, you shall judge whether my taste in sweet faces be as correct as ever."

"Nay, do not think I ever doubted your taste!" cried D'Angeau.

"None in the kingdom know more of beauty than you," bowed Hallot.

"If you say she is a pretty bird, then do I wait expectantly, assured that my eyes are to feast upon beauty rare and delicate," declared La Ferte.

"Where found you this fair maid? Your good fortune will always be remembered by those less fortunate in affairs of the heart," declared D'Angeau.

"That sounds as though there were jealous motives back of your question, Monsieur," retorted La Ferte.

"Jealous only of your taste, in all things, Monseigneur," replied D'Angeau.

"A princely possession, and not for us," remarked Hallot.

These words were honeyed and delicious to the vanity of the prince.

Barnabe had entered the hall, unobserved by the Duke or his gentlemen, so absorbed in their flattering remarks upon the topic, for the moment, dear to the heart of the Duke. The old soldier had not long to wait for his master, whom he sought, for Bussy stole softly down the staircase, meeting him at the foot.

"Ha, Barnabe! the fawn grows a little more approachable," said he.

"The shyest fawns do, in time," commented the soldier gruffly.

"But for this journey to Alençon, I'd soon make my boast good," declared Bussy confidently.

"She'll doubtless live till you return," was the dry comment of Barnabe.

"I would I might forget that other face," said Bussy thoughtfully.

His servant was puzzled at the effect his words had upon his master.

"The girl in the hose?" he asked.

His master's reply came in anger.

"How dare you speak so rudely of her?" demanded Bussy, and the soldier bowed his apology.

"Well, she is far from Angers by this time. My pages saw her to the gates. Let us go to my friars."

"I came to say they were clamouring for you," stated Barnabe.

Bussy turned back, as he heard the Duke's joyous cry when De Chanvallon entered the hall.

"De Chanvallon, welcome!" cried the prince.

"Where is he from," asked Bussy, "that the Duke is so glad?"

The friars of Bourgeuil might clamour, their work was soon to be apart from the attack upon the roast and wine.

CHAPTER XII

UNMAKING OF THE ABBOT OF BOURGEUIL

DE CHANVALLON could not have been accorded a more joyous welcome by the Duke had he brought news of a more vital interest to the brother of the King.

Since Bussy's retort in the game of gabbes, the Duke had not been the best of company. His gentlemen had sought to interest him, but found him moody. The timely appearance of Monsieur de Chanvallon, following so soon upon the heels of the announcement that success had crowned his efforts, brought the Duke to his feet.

Those who prate may say that anticipation is greater far than realization. The Duke would have been a hard man to convince that such were true, now that his realization was in sight.

Approaching the prince, De Chanvallon, who had noted the interest taken in his appearance by Bussy, spoke softly, half afraid that the ears of D'Amboise might catch the words. The Duke, in his joy, did not attempt to conceal his elation.

"The prisoner is in the courtyard, Monseigneur," almost whispered De Chanvallon.

"In the litter?" exclaimed the Duke.

"Yes, your Highness, and awake. We could not make her take the sleeping draught," he added, displaying a small vial of liquid he held in his hand.

"So much the better," cried the Duke, "since she is safe. I had feared she might do some violence against herself. Conduct her in."

De Chanvallon bowed himself from the presence of the prince, while Bussy and Barnabe withdrew to a position at the foot of the staircase, where, in the shadow, they might witness the scene, and yet form no portion of the Duke's party. D'Amboise, however, had not realized that a person entering would see him first of all.

"A woman prisoner!" said he to Barnabe. "Who can it be?"

"Some more work of the Duke's in which it seems you were not pressed into service," replied Barnabe. "All the more reason why your trip to Alençon should be taken. Wait and see if I have not guessed the Duke's plan."

"It sounds well, Barnabe. We shall see," replied Bussy.

The gentlemen of the Duke's suite drew apart as De Chanvallon's footsteps could be heard re-

turning. The swish of skirts told he was accompanied by his prisoner.

Heloise stepped through the doorway proudly, and with not the slightest trace of fear. The Duke of Anjou was her prince. Surely, in his presence, there could be no danger! She meant to face him as bravely as she could, trusting him to rescue her from her threatened danger. The attack and capture were by her attributed to the attempt to slay De Montsoreau, for, upon the trip to the chateau, she received no word that would tell her why she was desired.

Curiosity caused Bussy to advance from the shadow of the high posts, and the glare of the torches, borne by the men of De Chanvallon, fell full upon his expectant face.

"It is she, Barnabe! the girl!" he cried aloud, clutching at his servant's arm.

At the sound of his voice, Heloise drew back as if stung. Scorn and loathing were in her every move.

"I knew this was your work!" she cried stoutly.

"My work!" gasped Bussy, in astonishment.

"Yours, Monsieur Bussy d'Amboise!" cried the maiden. "Would to God I had known it was you when I held the dagger yesterday. You should have paid for the sorrows of my sister, I warrant you."

"Your sister?" interrogated Bussy, completely at a loss to know the meaning of the maiden's accusation.

"Henriette de Maucourt, whom I came to avenge by killing you."

"Henriette de Maucourt," murmured the Duke in astonishment.

The gentlemen glanced at each other in alarm.

"Hush!" motioned the Duke, beckoning to De Chanvallon. "I have a plan."

Bussy's blood leaped warmly through his veins. To be accused of deeds not of his making was not a novelty, yet never in his life had he experienced the thrill that now coursed through his frame. The trick of fate that had thrown them together, only to erect an unsurmountable barrier, crushed him. His voice came low and strangely harsh:

"It was I that you would have killed?" he asked.

"And made the world better for your leaving it," replied Heloise hotly. "But, alas! God has let my plans be thwarted, and allowed me to become, not your slayer, but your captive."

"Mademoiselle!" explained Bussy, with convincing force, "you are no more my captive than you were my slayer."

"Captive, or call it what you please," defiantly replied Heloise, "I am seized by your command."

This proved too much for Bussy to endure, and, had the maid been less angry, she would have detected the honesty of his manner, the appeal in his voice. Heloise had found herself dreaming of the love of such a man as this champion who had saved her, and the thought had been very sweet to her; but, now, to her Bussy was the embodiment of evil.

"No more by my command," reiterated Bussy, "than your sister was."

"No more than my sister was?" repeated Heloise, smiling bitterly. "Quite true. A poor jest to mock me with!"

"But it was not I that had your sister taken," exclaimed Bussy, with firmness.

"Liar!" cried Heloise, beside herself. "The very method of her capture was the same as of mine. Her seizure and my own were the work of the same hand, as any one could see."

"Truly spoken, Mademoiselle!" admitted Bussy. "I, too, believe that her capture and yours were the work of the same hand," he added, looking at the Duke of Anjou, who failed to return the stare. "But that hand was not mine."

"There you convict yourself of lies," said Heloise hotly, "for I saw myself spied on and hounded by your men in Angers."

That his precaution to keep the maid from harm

should be turned against him hurt harder than a sword thrust.

"My God!" he pleaded. "They were there to protect you!"

Heloise laughed derisively. "'Protect me,'" she repeated, scorning the thought. "How can this mockery further serve you, Monsieur? Am I not already your prisoner, helpless in your hands, without a weapon or a protector?"

The Duke seized upon this as the point to make his presence felt.

"Not without a protector, Mademoiselle," he gallantly cried, advancing to her. "I, Duke of Anjou, will save you from this gentleman."

"Ah, Monseigneur!" cried Heloise with gratitude. "I thank you on my knees." She sank to the floor, the Duke taking her hands in his, drinking in the fair beauty in distress.

"Your chivalry is worthy of a prince of France!" cried the maid.

Bussy's rage overran the bounds of reason.

"He save you!" pointing at the Duke. "He! Why it is he that would hold you captive, as he did your sister!"

Heloise sank back upon the floor, looking up at the men, one defiant, the other clearly off his guard.

"Monsieur!" exclaimed the Duke, when he

could speak, so great was the surprise of the attack, "you are mad!"

Bussy paid no heed to the words of the Duke. He pleaded with the maiden. "I tell you, Mademoiselle, it is from him, not from me, that you need saving."

Heloise turned her back upon him.

"What, you don't believe me? You will cling to your destruction? By God's death! No! De Chanvallon, you, her captor, speak! Tell her by whose orders you arrested her. Tell her, or you shall answer for your silence!" he shouted.

A glance passed between the Duke and the Count, a glance of meaning, lost upon Bussy in his anger.

"Monsieur Bussy d'Amboise," replied De Chanvallon, with extreme politeness, conveying the thought that he disliked to speak the words, "when I engaged to serve you in this business, I did not engage to conceal your hand in it."

"Great God!" raged Bussy, "I might have known he would lie to curry favour with his prince!" Turning to Barnabe, he added, "and she believes him!"

The soldier shook his head. He scented trouble, and was ready for prompt action.

"Mademoiselle," begged Bussy, "for your honour's sake, listen to me. They would make me

appear your abductor that they might make you the more easily their victim."

"An end to this raving, Bussy d'Amboise!" cried the Duke, with fervour. "Come, Mademoiselle, I will lead you to a place of safety."

Heloise responded willingly, and was escorted by the Duke to the staircase.

Bussy confronted them.

"Monseigneur, I beg of you, consider this girl's youth and innocence," said he. "I will make you any service, any sacrifice, if you will yield her up to me."

Heloise trembled at the thought, clinging to the Duke's arm.

"Do not give me up to him, Monseigneur!" she pleaded.

"Heavens! She thinks I would harm her. Mademoiselle, hear me! Monseigneur! Gentlemen! I appeal to you! Had I any share in this girl's capture? Come, tell her the truth!" cried Bussy, pausing for a reply.

The Duke stroked the hand of Heloise that clutched his sleeve.

The gentlemen turned aside, silent and smilingly enjoying the impotence Bussy d'Amboise displayed.

"Ah! Liars! Sycophants! All!" roared Bussy. "Oh, for a gleam of honesty and truth. Ah, Barnabe, *you* speak! Tell her!"

The soldier's honest face brightened. He was not a man of many words; action was more in his line. "Mademoiselle," he said simply, "my master says the truth."

The Duke glared at Barnabe. "So you are his tool in falsehood as in other matters? Come, Mademoiselle, trust me," he said.

"I do, Monseigneur," confidently said Heloise. "Are you not my prince, the brother of my king?"

"My God! What can I do to save her?" exclaimed Bussy in despair.

The Duke motioned Bussy aside, and started to ascend the staircase, as one of Bussy's pages entered.

He addressed Bussy, saying:

"Your horses are ready to start for Alençon, Monsieur."

"Good!" cried the Duke. "Make haste for Alençon, Bussy d'Amboise. You're already late in setting out."

The moment was one of agony for D'Amboise. There he stood, the orders of his Duke ringing in his ears, while reading in the eyes of the maid of his dreams her unmistakable loathing.

"Ah!" he suddenly shouted, in triumph. "One instant, Mademoiselle. Does it seem likely I should have brought you hither when I had the Duke's orders to ride this night for Alençon?"

Heloise faltered, for the words rang strangely true, despite the damaging evidence. When a woman wishes to believe, even against her better judgment, the moment of indecision is a blissful one. Once again the thought of possible happiness came to her. She shrank away from the Duke, in doubt.

"Aha!" gleefully cried Bussy, "she begins to see the truth!"

"Nonsense, Mademoiselle!" interposed the Duke. "He may have thought to take you with him to Alençon, or to leave you here until his return."

"That is true, your Highness," replied Heloise. "Pardon me for one moment's doubt of you on the word of such as Bussy d'Amboise."

She once again accepted the Duke's arm, and turned, as if decided in her course of action.

"You hear, Monsieur?" demanded the Duke of Bussy. "An end of this madness, if you would have me forget it, — and ride forth for Alençon."

Bussy waved his page to depart, and glanced at Barnabe. The thought found a responsive chord within the soldier's breast. Already there had been too much talking to please him. "The girl must be Bussy's" was the thought alone possessed by him.

“ By God's death! ” cried Bussy, “ things have changed in the past ten minutes, Monseigneur. I shall not ride forth for Alençon! I shall stay here and save this lady, in spite of herself, and of you all.” He waved his hand defiantly to the gentlemen grouped behind the Duke.

The Duke's rage was violent. It was unlike D'Amboise to thus thwart him.

“ Villain! ” he cried. “ Do you rebel and brave me, your prince? ”

“ You are not my prince when you would harm that lady,” replied Bussy stoutly. “ Barnabe, call in my friars! ”

The soldier pushed aside the gentlemen, who had crowded about the Duke, and stepped within the dining-hall, his presence being the signal for the friars to rise, thinking he had but preceded their abbot.

The defiance of Bussy filled the Duke with fear. He looked around him nervously.

“ Monsieur de Chanvallon, arrest that traitor! ” he stammered.

Bussy drew his sword with a wild flourish, and faced the gentlemen, exclaiming:

“ Monsieur de Chanvallon, or any other gentleman here, will put hand on me at his peril.”

De Chanvallon did not stir. He had no liking for the turn of the affair.

The Duke raged savagely. "Bring in your troops, De Chanvallon!"

The latter hastened out of the hall in answer to the command. It was more to his liking to find hirelings to face the steel of Bussy's blade than to test it with his own.

Heloise read in the manner of Bussy that which she had hoped to find, and, for a moment, she forgot her doubts. She listened as he addressed her, his face flushed, his eye brilliant and flashing.

"Mademoiselle, I am determined to save you. I shall protect you here while I send a messenger to your people, summoning them to receive you safe from my care."

There was the convincing force of truth in the words, and Heloise stepped away from the Duke as Barnabe, followed by the band of friars, filed into the hall.

Friars are slow to scent trouble; theirs being more to pacify by argument than by force.

"Ah! my sons! I'm sorry to interrupt your frugal supper," cried Bussy, as they looked to him for explanation, and then beyond to the door through which De Chanvallon was entering with a body of troops.

"Soldiers!" cried the Duke, "seize Monsieur Bussy d'Amboise."

"Friars of St. Benedict, stand by your abbot!" exclaimed Bussy.

The troops rushed at D'Amboise. There was a clatter among the Benedictines. Robes fell from their shoulders, and stalwart men, fully armed with sword and dagger, surrounded Bussy, forming a protecting guard as resolutely as any company of the Duke's troops could have acted, and in less time, for the friars' hearts were in their work.

The troops ran against a wall-like defence, and fell back, De Chanvallon's pale face in the background.

"What! You rebellious monks!" shouted the Duke.

"They are not rebellious!" cried Bussy confidently, amused as the Duke stamped and swore. "The monks of Bourgeuil obey me, the abbot of Bourgeuil."

"Who made you abbot of Bourgeuil?" demanded the Duke.

"Your Highness had that inspiration," replied Bussy.

"Then I unmake you abbot of Bourgeuil!" shouted the Duke.

"Then these monks will obey the Governor of Angers!" declared Bussy.

"I unmake you Governor of Angers!"

“Then they will obey your Highness’ first gentleman.”

“Monsieur de Chanvallon!” cried the Duke, “I make you my first gentleman!”

“Very well, Monseigneur,” said Bussy. “But, with all your makings and unmakings, there is one thing you can’t make or unmake, and that is a man of steel with a heart of fire. I am still Bussy d’Amboise!”

“And we are still your friars!” exclaimed Brother Antoine.

“Yes!” shouted the band. “Long live Bussy d’Amboise!”

CHAPTER XIII

BUSSY GUARDS A DOOR

As the ringing cheers of the friars of Bourgeuil resounded through the hall, the Duke stepped back, surrounded by his gentlemen, who were so surprised by the sudden transformation of the Benedictine brothers that they hesitated to draw in defence of their prince, or it may have been they considered that to draw might be taken by Bussy to mean an answer to his challenge. There was none in the suite, that grouped itself bravely in the background, who cared to test his skill against that of Bussy, stripped of his titles, but stronger in his purpose than ever. The angry gleam that flashed from his eyes had spelled the death of many a man. The comfort and luxury of life with the Duke of Anjou were stronger temptations than any glory their death might lend to their names.

Bussy waved his arm in triumph toward the Duke, whose indecision was apparent. A clash of arms within the chateau would have raised a

cry throughout the kingdom, and, as the Duke was upon the point of a reconciliation with his royal brother, he dared not risk that the King, even for a moment, should think that he had surrounded himself with an armed force.

Much as the Duke felt the humiliation of the situation, he wisely put on as good a front as was possible, cautioning his gentlemen mildly to let the matter pass.

"Bussy is in a playful mood," said he, smiling a cold, hard smile. There were many reasons for no outward rupture with this impetuous gentleman.

Paying no heed to the troops held at bay by his friars, Bussy addressed himself to the Duke.

"There are enough of them," he cried, "to seize the chateau, and make all hostages ere your Highness could summon troops from elsewhere. Listen, then, to what I propose."

Any proposition that would mean a retreat with reasonable dignity was welcomed by the Duke, though he did not speak, Bussy really giving him no opportunity, so eager and confident was he.

Bussy's manner changed to that of inquisition.

"Your Highness is anxious for Mademoiselle's safety, and that she be restored in honour to her friends?" he began.

The Duke, under the eye of Heloise, replied:

“What other possible interest could I have, Monsieur?”

“Very well, then,” continued Bussy, ignoring the opening the Duke gave for a verbal thrust. “Barnabe and one of your men shall ride to the Chateau de Maucourt, and bring people of her own to escort her to her home. They can, with swift riding, be here by to-morrow’s dawn. Meanwhile, Mademoiselle shall pass the night in that room,” declared Bussy, going to the door beside the fireplace. “It has but one door, Mademoiselle, this that opens into the hall.”

Turning to the Duke he added:

“My friars shall return to their feast, your troops withdraw to that room across the hall, and no more soldiers be admitted to the chateau. In that manner, you and your troops on one side, I and my friars on the other, shall hinder any one from entering Mademoiselle’s room.”

Being forced into the position, the Duke could not retreat. Heloise, noting his hesitation, cried firmly: “For my part, I agree to that.”

“Then it is not I that should object, Mademoiselle,” replied the Duke, his annoyance ill-concealed.

Bussy, having won his point, drew apart, satisfied.

"First let me see the men start for my father's," declared Heloise, as the Duke was about to escort her to the room.

"Barnabe," cried Bussy, "you have heard. To the Chateau de Maucourt, beyond Saumur. Take one of my horses already saddled."

"I am off, Monsieur," exclaimed the soldier, glad to be once more in action.

The Duke's chagrin was visible to all, except Heloise. She still believed in him and his motives.

"De Chanvallon," said the Duke, "you, too, send a man."

"Do as you have heard, Beaujard," commanded the Count, sending one of his troopers close after Barnabe.

The despatching of the men pleased Heloise. Now at least she could feel that real help was at hand.

"I am not afraid, Monseigneur," she said bravely. "I know that you will be not far away."

With a sweeping courtesy she entered the room, closing the door behind her. In leaving she had ignored Bussy entirely, and even had she looked in his direction, she would have seen him busy with his friars.

"My sons, I thank you for your prompt response," said he. "Now that the maid is safe, I need you not, for the present. Return to your

poor table — the moment these troops withdraw," said he, half addressing the Duke, who up to that time had made no effort to send his men away.

Reluctantly the Duke was forced to take notice of the remark, hiding his discomfiture with poor grace. He was in a mood which, if Bussy had been less cautious in his acts, would have led him to order the soldiers to seize the rebellious gentleman. Treachery and lack of faith were well known characteristics of the brother of King Henry III.

Bussy stared him hard in the face, awaiting his command. The Duke responded:

"There is supper yonder for your men, De Chanvallon," said he.

The Count gathered his men together, and sent them where they would be within call, should Bussy change his mind and summon his friars.

The wine mugs, dropped in their haste by the friars, lay upon the hall floor, partly concealed by their gowns, thrown aside when called to the assistance of their abbot. Patiently the friars waited until the last of the Count's followers had vanished; they then gathered up their gowns and mugs and returned to their feast-hall.

The Duke, Bussy, and the gentlemen were left together, the latter awkwardly avoiding each other's glance. D'Amboise looked them over dis-

dainfully, as he strode to the table beside the fire, and, pulling a chair up to it, prepared to enter upon his self-imposed duty as guard at the door of the woman he loved. It mattered not to him whether she returned that love, and he told himself that to even dream of such a thing was madness. He was to stay until the men of Maucourt came to safely guard her to her home. The love he found within his breast grew fonder in its hopelessness. Never before had he sought for love so seriously, and never had his plight been so sorry. The proud girl firmly believed him to be what he was painted, and even worse; yet before she had known his name, he reasoned, she was fond, yes, even more perhaps. These thoughts trooped through his mind, as he settled himself to watch that no harm befell her.

The Duke was the first to speak. He had watched the man's preparations at the table with some misgivings. The word of Bussy, he knew, was better, stronger and more binding than any oath. To turn him aside from any position taken was impossible, save by persuasion.

"The troops are withdrawn; your friars are enjoying their meal," said he; "and of yourself, Monsieur Bussy?"

"I intend to keep guard before Mademoiselle's door until her people arrive," said he decisively.

“That was not in the agreement,” declared the Duke, vexed at the position taken by Bussy.

“Neither is it against the agreement,” retorted Bussy, calling his page, to whom he said: “Represent me at the supper, and, if I call, lead hither my friars.”

The page bowed, going to the dining-hall, Bussy making himself comfortable for his long watch. His favourite book lay open upon the table. To it he turned to pass the time. So far as he was concerned, the Duke and De Chanvallon might not have been in the hall. Bussy was there to guard Heloise, and there he would remain. The Duke knew this, for, once let Bussy take a stand, nothing but death could change him. It was useless to try to drive him away by force. The friars, Bussy’s own followers, trained men of the sword, were more than a match for the handful of men at the Duke’s immediate command.

He drew De Chanvallon to one side. “If we could but get him away by craft, there would be no one to call his friars, and we could hurry the girl elsewhere in his absence.”

But once before, in all the time De Chanvallon had followed the Duke, had he been called upon to devise a plan for the gratification of D’Anjou’s desire. His appointment as first gentleman had its obligations, beyond question, yet his brain was

sluggish. More than half to himself, half speaking to the prince, he said:

“Some way must be devised to lure him from this hall. Do you think he loves the girl?”

Long experience with Bussy d'Amboise had taught the Duke that his favourite was as fickle in his amours as the wind. This outburst of his had been in keeping with other manifestations of his disapproval of the Duke's methods; still, to carry it to such great length puzzled the prince, who endeavoured to belittle the offence that he might seem the stronger in having condoned it.

“No, 'tis but a caprice for playing the virtuous hero,” replied the Duke. “He loves De Montsoreau's wife.”

“If I were to insult him, he might go hence to fight me rather than refuse a challenge,” suggested the Count.

“Nay, he would fight you here, unless a lady were present,” replied the Duke thoughtfully. “Ah! I have it! Before De Montsoreau's wife he would not swallow an affront, nor would he draw sword in her presence. One moment, Count.”

The Duke left De Chanvallon, calling De Montsoreau.

D'Amboise, at the table, glanced up quickly as they spoke apart from the others. “I wonder

what they are planning," he thought, as De Montsoreau hastened from the hall.

"And if your challenge fails to draw him away, by Heavens! I have another bait to angle him hence withal," whispered the Duke, returning to De Chanvallon.

The confidences of a prince were novelties to the Count, who could not refrain from inquiring, "I wonder what it is, Monseigneur."

"Wait till we see how your plan works," replied the Duke, watching the door at the top of the staircase. "Here comes the lady."

Marguerite stepped lightly down, her hand in that of her husband, Finette following them.

The Duke greeted the Countess heartily.

"Madame," said he, "I have been so occupied with State affairs I have not, till this moment, had opportunity of acknowledging the honour your presence gives my chateau."

"Your Highness is too kind," bowed Marguerite, somewhat disturbed by the stateliness of her welcome. "This grand old chateau is a wonderful relief from the loneliness of my own."

De Chanvallon, forced to play his hand through to the end, strode to where Bussy sat absorbed in his book.

"Does your Plutarch, there, teach rebellion and insolence?" he hissed.

Marguerite stepped back against the high post at the base of the staircase, expectant of a scene of violence.

"Perhaps," replied Bussy, "but he does not teach falsehood and servility."

Failing to arouse the lion with that bit of insolence, De Chanvallon raised his voice so all might hear him.

"Pah!" he cried insultingly. "Monsieur d'Amboise, I no more heed your scurrilous words than I heed the drawing of your over-vaunted sword."

In astonishment D'Amboise sat back, staring at the man swaggering before him.

De Chanvallon had heretofore been the mildest-mannered of men when brought in touch with him. Bussy could hardly believe his senses. The strutting of the gentleman made clear the insult that the words failed fully to imply.

"What kind of wine have we drunk at dinner that we are so pot-valiant?" he cried sneeringly.

"Pot-valour and Bussy d'Amboise valour—what is the difference?" retorted De Chanvallon.

"God's death!" roared Bussy, now thoroughly angered. "I can soon show you!" With this he kicked his chair back, and with a bound had encircled the table confronting the Count.

The Duke, who had watched the pair, fearing

Bussy's anger might cause him to forget the presence of the Countess, slipped in between the men.

"Gentlemen!" said he, "this is not the place for demonstrations of valour. The Countess de Montsoreau is present!"

"Then I will accommodate the valorous Bussy on the terrace," said De Chanvallon, still with sneering insolence.

Bussy sprang to follow. "I'll rejoice to have you do so," said he. Suddenly he stopped short in his tracks, turning back to the table. "To-morrow," he added.

"To-morrow!" repeated De Chanvallon. "Hear it, Monseigneur! See how the formidable Bussy becomes Bussy the evasive."

"I will fight man or devil," screamed Bussy, drawing his sword, "here, Monsieur, before this door!"

"You know that is out of the question," declared De Chanvallon. The courage he had forced to the front now seemed slipping from him.

"Then the meanest scullion in the chateau may jeer at me with impunity to-night," declared Bussy; "he shall not draw me from this door."

"We shall see if that be true," remarked the

Duke, calling La Ferte to him, the latter then leaving the hall.

Bussy feared treachery, and was alive to every move made by those in the Duke's party.

Marguerite, in her bewilderment at the rapid turn the passage of words had taken, turned to her maid.

"I wonder what this means!" she exclaimed.

The Duke overhearing, drew her apart.

"Madame, I know your devotion to your husband," he whispered. "I promise you yet higher posts for him if you will do me a service."

"You have but to command," replied the Countess, wonderingly.

The Duke spoke rapidly, as one reciting a well-formed plan.

"In a few minutes send your maid hither to Bussy d'Amboise with word that you are waiting for him in the chapel of Yolande."

"Heavens! Monseigneur! an appointment!" gasped Marguerite.

The Duke answered the remark with an explanation.

"I know you do not love Bussy," said he, "but he loves you. It is necessary to beguile him quietly from this hall. You alone can do so. Afterward you can deny the appointment, which of course you will not have kept."

The Countess was undecided. To refuse was a fatal move, and there was pleasure in the thought of a meeting with Bussy.

"Oh, well," she said, "I dare not refuse your Highness."

"A thousand thanks, Madame!" cried the Duke, taking the Countess' hand.

To Bussy, this sudden interest of the Duke in Madame was even more of a problem than was the bantamlike attack of De Chanvallon. He had his watch to keep. His thoughts were pleasing ones to him. None should harm Heloise while he lived. Hopeless though his love for her might prove, some day in the future, when she was happy, apart from strife and intrigue, she might know that he, Bussy d'Amboise, bravo, was guiltless of the crimes she fancied. He grew suddenly very tender in the mellowing effects of his love sorrow. The Duke's presence and departure passed as in a dream from out of which he heard the Duke exclaim:

"Monsieur de Montsoreau, you will lead Madame to her apartments; then join us at supper yonder. Good night, Madame."

De Montsoreau obeyed the prince, leading the Countess up the stairway, the maid following, the Duke and his gentlemen bowing as Marguerite spoke:

“ Good night, your Highness, and gentlemen,” said she.

At any other time Bussy would have sought to catch her eye, for the desire to pay off his score with De Montsoreau was still keenly present. But Heloise had captured him. Her young face was before him. Her scorn hurt as the cut of a whip, yet there was pleasure in the pain.

“ Come, gentlemen!” cried the Duke. “ We shall leave Monsieur Bussy to sup on his Plutarch and his self-approbation.”

Loud above the voices of the gentlemen, who found their tongues, now there appeared no immediate danger of their being pressed into action against the sword of Bussy, came the derisive shouts from the soldiers stationed in the room chosen as their place to await the coming of the friends of Heloise.

“ Who’s afraid of Bussy d’Amboise!” came floating into the hall.

“ Down with Bussy!” followed closely, with even more vigour than the first.

“ A plague on all boasters!” rang out clearly, the Duke and his gentlemen halting to watch the effect these shouts would have upon the object of this attack.

“ La Ferte has egged on the soldiers,” explained the Duke in a low voice, taking De Chanvallon’s

arm, and leading him through the doorway, followed by D'Angeau and Hallot.

"What were those rascals shouting?" mused Bussy.

This time there could be no doubt as to the intended offence. The soldiers had burst into song. It ran thus:

"Barking dogs don't always bite,
Threatening men don't always smite;
Bussy's voice still keeps its ring,
But his sword has lost its sting."

"God's light!" exclaimed Bussy, enraged by the taunts, "those hounds are jeering me."

He rushed for the door, sword in hand; but the face of the maid was before his eyes and he stopped, once more taking his place on guard before her door.

"Softly, Bussy d'Amboise," he cautioned himself. "Jeers are sweet as angelic voices when borne for her sake," he mused.

De Montsoreau stalked down the stairs, haughtily ignoring Bussy, and proceeded to join the Duke at supper.

"That ingrate gloats because he sees my downfall in this affair," thought Bussy, half aloud. "I'll pay him for that, however. What will the Countess think of my meekness with De Chan-

vallon? Would that I might speak with her a moment."

He turned the leaves of his book listlessly.

The voices of the soldiers had ceased to cry out their insults.

Finette crept cautiously down the stairs, looking about her to be sure the gentleman was alone. She coughed slightly, and Bussy looked up, expecting to see Marguerite.

The maid motioned for him not to speak. She came to the table, over which she leaned, whispering.

"Monsieur, if you had a taste for solitary meditation in the chapel of Yolande —"

"Solitary meditation?" said Bussy, puzzled with the strangeness of the girl's manner.

Finette continued. "You might find there, at this moment, another with the same inclination," said she.

"What?" exclaimed Bussy, elated. "Your mistress?"

"Hush, Monsieur! Be discreet."

"Does she know you tell me this?" asked Bussy eagerly

The Duke and De Chanvallon stepped into the hall, behind the staircase, hearing what passed, unseen by either Bussy or Finette.

Finette's assumed chagrin at the doubt ex-

pressed by D'Amboise was beautiful to behold. The Duke chuckled slyly.

"Would I dare tell you without her knowledge?" she asked with offended innocence.

Bussy was pleased, his vanity touched. The Countess had understood his act in suffering insult for the sake of a duty self-imposed, and sought to console him. He arose and came across the hall to where Finette had moved.

"I will —" said he, slowly. His eye fell upon the oaken door. Shaking his head, he waved the girl aside.

From the guardroom came the roar of voices, as the soldiers burst forth in their carousing.

He seized a chair and sank into it before the room in which Heloise awaited the coming of her people.

"I have no taste for solitary meditation in the chapel of Yolande — to-night," he said dismally.

"What! You refuse Madame's appointments!" cried the maid in astonishment.

"For to-night, I must," said Bussy, as Finette moved away. "But another time — to-morrow. Stay — listen!"

"I know nothing of to-morrow, Monsieur," declared Finette, as she climbed the stairs.

"Won't my lady be furious!" said she to herself.

CHAPTER XIV

THE COUNTESS IS JEALOUS

BUSSY D'AMBOISE resumed his reading, resigned to his position. He would gladly have accepted the Countess' invitation had he thought less of the girl whom he had sworn to guard with his life. Men might unjustly accuse him of implication in the schemes of others; women might point to him as one who held their love lightly, yet to one he would be faithful, though she might never know or care.

Behind the staircase the Duke and De Chanvallon lingered. The failure of the message threw the plans of the prince into confusion. He despaired of success; but the thought only caused him to crave the more the success of his purpose.

De Chanvallon read his thoughts. From the folds of his cloak he drew the phial.

"If we could make him sleep," he said. "His friars would not fight without his leadership."

The Duke seized the phial eagerly.

"I'll send him wine to drink!" said he.
"Come!"

Together they left the darkness of the hall, as Marguerite came hurriedly down the stairs. Her manner was hardly dove-like, and she did not pretend to conceal her anger.

To the man reading by the fire, her appearance came as an apparition, which brought him from the land of ancient deeds to that of present doubt.

Bussy's eyes had followed the printed words, seeing them without grasping their meaning. His mind refused to respond to other thoughts than those which held him bound hand and foot. The face of Heloise appeared, and faded away only to reappear.

When the Countess de Montsoreau swept before him in her stately fury, one problem chased another, bewildering him. No one can fathom a woman's caprice, least of all that of a woman neglected, and then spurned, by the man whose boast was the gossip of the court.

Marguerite had her part to play, and she meant to play it, for it not only afforded her the means to teach the gallant Bussy a lesson, but it carried with it the reward promised by the Duke.

Bussy drew back his chair, rising as she passed

before him. For the lack of anything better to say, so suddenly had she appeared, he let his first thoughts find expression.

"What is this, Madame?" he inquired. "You are not in the chapel of Yolande?"

"The chapel of Yolande!" repeated Marguerite, pretending to be puzzled.

"Yes!" stammered Bussy. Then, to recall her message, he repeated Finette's words, "engaged in solitary meditation."

The Countess frowned, demanding, "What are you talking about, Monsieur?"

"Why, your servant said —" began Bussy. "No matter!"

"Finette!" exclaimed Marguerite. "I have not seen her since I was last in this hall. I am looking for Monsieur de Montsoreau."

"Oh, pardon, Madame!" declared Bussy. "I will call my page and send for him," he added, starting for the door.

"Thank you, no!" replied the Countess, poorly concealing the curiosity which had prompted her to come to the man who passed her invitation by. "There is no need of haste."

Marguerite leaned gracefully against the table where the open book lay.

"Monsieur," said she, "what a commendable taste for reading it is that holds you alone in this

hall! Or have you been placed here on guard-duty like a halberdier?"

There was sarcasm in the tone, which did not escape Bussy. Had he been less in love with the lady he guarded, he would have rejoiced in the display of temper. It told of more than ordinary interest, something he had hoped to be able to create. Now that it lay within his grasp, the prize had lost its lure.

"It is true, Madame," said he, glancing at the door that stood between him and his love. "I am on guard-duty, an honour of my own choice."

"You guard something in that room?" asked the Countess.

Her words were hardly spoken before the roystering soldiers broke forth once more in their derisive shouts.

"Who fears Bussy d'Amboise!"

"A plague on all boasters!"

"Down with dogs that only bark!"

These were the pleasantries that resounded through the hall.

"Why, the soldiers are taunting you!" cried Marguerite.

"So I perceive!" replied Bussy savagely.

"And you don't resent it? You — the fiery-tempered Bussy d'Amboise!" exclaimed the

Countess mockingly. "Great Heavens! it *must* be something precious you keep guard over."

Bussy bowed. "The most precious treasure in the world — a woman's innocence!" he declared.

The sting of the insults was hard to bear. Never in his life had he let a breath pass unchallenged, and he marvelled that he could remain inactive. The thought that Heloise, if she knew, would pity him, smoothed his ruffled temper.

"A woman?" jealously exclaimed the Countess.

"No less."

Marguerite then and there determined to take Bussy from his post at any cost.

A serving boy, bearing a flask of wine and a goblet on a tray, entered, placing them on the table beside the Countess.

"From Monseigneur the Duke, Monsieur, to cheer your loneliness," said the boy, addressing Bussy.

"My thanks to Monseigneur the Duke!" cried Bussy. "Will you taste the wine, Madame?"

He poured the wine into the goblet, offering it to the Countess.

"I'm not thirsty," shortly snapped Marguerite.

"By the mass, I am!" cried Bussy. "To you, Madame!" He drained the goblet, filling it again.

Marguerite had seated herself with her back to

the door of the room in which Heloise was practically a prisoner.

Bussy turned his chair carelessly about, as he pushed the goblet once more toward the Countess, seating himself opposite her.

“You would better have drunk to the other woman!” cried Marguerite.

Meanwhile, Heloise, curious to learn what was going on in the great hall, gently tried the door. It yielded to her pressure, and she opened it softly, slowly peering out. She saw Bussy and the Countess, while remaining unseen by them.

“I would deem it a sacrilege to do so,” said he warmly.

Furious at the admission, the Countess sought to conceal her true feelings behind the mask of playful irony.

“Heavens, Monsieur! How you must adore this angelic creature! What encouragement has she given you?” jealously demanded the Countess.

Bussy smiled sadly. “She came to Angers to kill me, for one thing; and, for another, she denounces me as the abductor of her sister, and now of herself. Thank God she is mistaken.”

Heloise heard the words in astonishment. It was a declaration repeated. When first she listened at the entrance to the hall, confronting the

favourite of the Duke, angry, worn and sore at heart, the words seemed a cloak to hide from her the true situation; words to blind her eyes, spoken to right himself before the Duke and his gentlemen, while pretending to care only that she believe in him. But now, the man, speaking without knowledge of her presence, would scarcely fail to tell the truth. She saw she had wrongly judged. She pushed the door a little wider open, and stood listening.

“And for these things you love her,” laughed the Countess derisively.

“I am too unworthy of her to presume to love her,” replied Bussy.

Fumbling in his doublet, he drew forth the bit of lacing given him by Heloise the night he saved her from the men of De Montsoreau, a sweet reminder of how he detected her masquerade.

“What is that?” asked the Countess with curiosity.

“It is the only favour I shall ever possess from her,” cried Bussy, touching his lips with it. “Only a bit of lacing, yet of all my treasures it to me is most highly prized.”

Heloise experienced a choking sensation. The blood rushed to her cheeks, and there was surging in her ears. The disclosure of Bussy’s innocence in the affair she had believed him guilty of, and his

ardent adoration for her, found a response within her breast. Fearing detection, she softly swung the door, closing it.

"What ideal devotion! It is worthy of the days of chivalry," sneered Marguerite, slowly leaning forward on the table.

Suddenly she snatched the lacing from Bussy's hand, looking at it with scorn.

"Give it back to me, Madame!" demanded Bussy, extending his hand, but the Countess pushed her chair back and rose swiftly, walking to the staircase.

"Nay, Monsieur, I wish to keep it as a talisman," said she.

Bussy was on his feet in an instant, following her.

"Madame, the talisman is mine. I'll not part with it."

"Not part with it?" replied Marguerite, with a laugh, as she sprang up the stairs. "Follow me, Monsieur. A talisman as valuable as this is worth the chase."

She disappeared into the room beyond the landing. Hesitating a moment, Bussy jumped up the stairs, about to follow her from the hall, when he realized his duty at the door, and slowly returned to his post.

"The devil take the woman!" he growled

sleepily. "What makes me so drowsy? Ah! the wine!"

He seized the goblet, sipping the wine. It had a peculiar taste. The odour was strange also. A few grains of sediment in the bottom of the goblet told the story.

"Drugged wine!" he cried. "A trick of the Duke's! By God's light! I must keep awake. Those friars would not fight without my example and command."

He felt his limbs grow strangely numb and walked a pace or two to try them. They held him firmly.

"My alarm was greater than the drug would warrant," said he, suppressing a yawn.

Sinking into his chair, his drowsiness increased; but he roused himself with an effort.

"Ha! Ha!" he laughed. "Bussy, my man, we must move about. The Duke meant to send me to rest. 'Tis not the first time I have battled with the fumes."

He began to stride about the hall, pacing off the ground much as a soldier strides when on guard duty. Sleep forced itself upon him, despite the fight he made, and his walk was staggering.

"What's this?" he muttered. "Is the Duke to win?"

Bussy was never beaten yet.

“ Oh! for one moment by the fire; sweet comfort is sleep. My limbs are as lead.”

He had paced back and forth for several moments, when, as he reached the door of Heloise's room, she opened it, stepping out before him.

“ Mademoiselle de Maucourt! ” he cried.

CHAPTER XV

BUSSY FINDS SLEEP A COMFORT

Bussy staggered away from Heloise, keeping up his weary march, fearing to stop lest the drug might overpower him.

Heloise was astonished at the change in the man's manner, and straightway sought a solution. The flask of wine with the goblet beside it upon the table was the answer, for she well knew the tendency of the gentlemen of the Duke of Anjou's suite. The incoherent greeting was set down to a too liberal indulgence in the wine glass.

Heloise's heart was full of regret. She felt guilty at having for a moment doubted the man who had twice saved her from peril, and who was in a position again to be of invaluable service. The little she had overheard, while she lingered at the door during the conversation between Bussy and the Countess de Montsoreau, had shown her how mistaken she had been.

She no longer feared the man. Her impulse was to beg forgiveness for doubting the word of

such a gentleman, bravo though he was, with many scores of deeds she had heard hints of; deeds the boldness of which had caused comment to penetrate even her quiet home in Maucourt.

How bravely he had battled, swordless, with the would-be assassins! How valiantly had he fought when furnished the sword! Even in the face of the Duke he had not hesitated, proud in his service for her, whom he had but chanced to meet.

Bussy d'Amboise, in the eyes of Heloise, had become transformed. Instead of the bravo, scouring the country in search of trouble, ready to follow the dictates of his master, no matter what it might be or where it might lead, she now saw a strong arm and a ready blade, for ever raised in the defence of the innocent.

The man had staggered slightly as he spoke, the fumes of the drugged wine seizing him. Strong wills take longer to overcome, and here was a will indomitable and fiery. He fought off the drowsiness as he would repel the attack of an ambuscade, spurred on by the face in which he saw the light he had longed for. Could she really have changed toward him, he wondered.

He struggled hard to keep his senses alert for her sake. The voice came to him as from a great distance, the form was surrounded by a haze.

"Monsieur!" said Heloise gently. "I have been thinking, since I accepted your suggestion to await the coming of my people, and I fear I have done you great wrong."

"Pray don't speak of it, Mademoiselle," replied Bussy, too much overcome by the drug to appreciate the frank avowal of the young girl. "Thank Heaven, if you have learned to mistrust others." He stifled a yawn.

With a clearer head, and his normal senses, Bussy could not have failed to note the change in the manner of the maid. There was that unmistakable something a woman displays to only one man in the world.

Truly Heloise had released the restraint upon the tender feelings she had entertained toward her champion, when he stood nameless before her. Now she knew, she believed in him, and with the frankness of youth desired that he should know it.

Bussy had fallen, ungallantly, into a chair, his head drooping to his chest, despite his efforts to shake off the spell.

Heloise was filled with misgivings. Why should he seem so unconcerned, now she had told him she had been in the wrong? Surely he must speak!

"But, Monsieur!" she said sweetly, "if there is anything you would like to say to me —"

"Nothing in the world, Mademoiselle," replied

Bussy, with much effort. "Would you not better go to your room and sleep?"

Where was the gallantry, the love, she had heard him profess under conditions no woman would fail to believe? She grew annoyed.

"It is impossible to sleep," said she, with an injured tone in her sweet voice.

"Great Heavens!" exclaimed Bussy, with a wonderful yawn, "I should think it would be very easy to sleep."

With this, he sprang to his feet, and paced the hall back and forth, his feet feeling as if encased in leaden shoes.

"Monsieur!" pleaded Heloise, not to be put aside through any motive her champion might have in pretending indifference, for such she believed his actions to mean. "How can I talk to you, if you continue to walk to and fro?"

"That's true," cried Bussy, struggling with himself manfully. "That's true, Mademoiselle. I must cease — walking — to and fro."

His head whirled, and a buzzing in his ears told of the progress of the drug. He stumbled to a chair, falling into it helplessly.

Heloise drew her chair to a position across the table from where he half lay, half sat. They occupied the same position he and the Countess had assumed during the confession of his love.

Bussy's head drooped upon his chest. Sleep almost overcame him.

"I dare not trust myself seated, Mademoiselle!" he muttered sleepily, rising, standing, leaning against the table. "'Tis no use; I must keep on the move," and off he started again upon his tramp through the hall.

"What is the matter with him!" cried Heloise in wonder, watching him pace off the ground as if measuring the distance from the fireplace to the door leading to the courtyard.

The Duke and De Chanvallon, confident that the drugged wine had accomplished its work by this time, slipped into the hall back of the staircase, hidden from Bussy and Heloise.

The Duke was first to speak. Seizing De Chanvallon's arm, he whispered, "Look there! It is Mademoiselle!"

"Aye, Monseigneur, and look at him!" replied De Chanvallon. "He has taken the wine!"

"'Twill be but a short time now," said the Duke. "Note how he staggers as he walks, struggling to keep his eyes open. Ah, Monsieur! the drug is the thing to produce yawns. Hist! Listen!"

"You look astonished," mumbled Bussy, "but, Mademoiselle, it's a habit of mine. I walk for my health — the Duke's physician recommends it."

"He little knows the Duke's physician really did cause him to walk," smiled the Duke.

"But I wished to tell you —" began Heloise.

Bussy had turned, and was now making for the rear of the hall.

"Heavens! if I only dared stop and listen," he muttered to himself. "My dear Mademoiselle!" he cried aloud. "Can't you tell me as I walk? Body of Bacchus! how can I hold out till morning!"

"Hold out till morning," puzzled Heloise. "What does he mean?"

"He can't hold out two minutes longer, De Chanvallon!" gleefully whispered the Duke.

The Count nodded. The situation was becoming exceedingly interesting.

Bussy felt himself slipping into dreamland. The objects in the hall danced before his eyes, and darkness, thick and dank, was closing in.

"Talk to me, Mademoiselle, I beg you!" cried Bussy. "I love to hear your voice. Oh! for one minute's sleep!"

Heloise was touched deeply. The despair in his cry wrung her heart.

"He loves to hear my voice," she softly repeated.

"Monsieur, I was going to say — What is the matter?" she screamed in alarm.

Bussy fell forward against the table, clutching at it for support, almost insensible. He spoke dreamily.

"Going to say — what is the matter?" he mumbled. "Matter — matter — going to say —"

He shook his head violently to wake himself.

"We have him now!" hissed the Duke, happy in the contemplation of his foul work.

"Monsieur! You are ill!" cried Heloise, alarmed at Bussy's half-swooning state. "You will fall! Have a care!"

She hastened around the table, taking his hand in hers.

"Ah, Mademoiselle!" he murmured, trying to lift the hand to his lips, but dropping it from sheer exhaustion.

The Duke and De Chanvallon turned the staircase and approached them.

Bussy saw them through the fog of sleep. Rallying himself with a supreme effort, he cried out:

"Ah! you were waiting yonder for your prey!" He staggered wildly forward.

Barnabe suddenly appeared through the open door leading to the courtyard. Seeing him, Bussy grew pale with anger.

“What, Barnabe! Rascal!” he cried. “Why didn’t you ride to Maucourt?”

“Because I met her people in search of her,” replied the soldier shortly, but with respectful mien. “Here is Monsieur de Maucourt,” he added, as that gentleman, followed by a number of armed servants, entered.

“Heloise!” cried Monsieur de Maucourt, joyfully. “Thank God! I have you back.”

Heloise returned her father’s embrace, but glanced at Bussy. She was fearful he would fare ill for his share in the night’s work. There was no joy in the prospect of leaving him.

“Thank God! I may now go to sleep!” moaned D’Amboise, falling back on a chair, in the stupor he had so long fought off.

Barnabe took his place beside his master, to guard him as he slumbered.

CHAPTER XVI

THE DUKE RETURNS TO PARIS

THE Duke of Anjou and De Chanvallon could do nothing in the face of the appearance of Monsieur de Maucourt and his servants. To attempt to prevent the country gentleman from taking his daughter from the chateau would have been the signal for a struggle, the outcome of which the Duke feared. True, Bussy d'Amboise lay soundly sleeping, thanks to the drugged wine, but Barnabe, his body-servant, was on watch. A word from him would bring the friars upon the scene.

It is hard to have the glass fall from one's grasp as the wine is about to be tasted; it is bitter to taste the tang of thwarted purpose; yet it were far better to let such be the case than to raise a hue and cry throughout the kingdom, at a time when the people fretted sorely.

The Duke put as bold a face upon the situation as he could command through his disappointment, while De Chanvallon's presence acted as a spur to egg him on.

Monsieur de Maucourt was too absorbed in the

'Where is Monseigneur?' she cried. 'Too ill to leave the citadel,' retorted I, as carelessly as I could, for I did enjoy her rage. So angry was the Queen she would not enter the castle, but lodged at the episcopal palace."

"Yea," added Barnabe. "I was sent to note her manner. She fairly choked during the day the Duke kept her in suspense."

"One cannot keep the Queen long inactive, Barnabe. I met her at the gate the day following. She came to discover the cause of the neglect shown her. Ah! the Duke played her a neat trick."

"How much do you fancy she lays at your door, Monsieur?"

"Mayhap all. I care not, it was worth the risk to see her mood," laughed Bussy gleefully. "The Duke's bandaged limb did the business. It was splendid!"

"Yes, Monsieur. They parted in a friendly spirit, but the exit from the castle was something she will never forget or forgive you for," replied Barnabe.

"By Heaven! I could take no chances," laughed Bussy. "The Duke grew warm toward me at the proposed plan. I could not fail, as Governor of Angers, to see suspicious circumstances in her acts. It would have been unwise to order the

fortress gates opened and the drawbridge thrown for her Majesty. They were perilous times, Barnabe, and I was on the safe side."

"You were," smiled Barnabe.

"The ladies attending Queen Catherine fretted beautifully as I led them through the small wicket."

"Still it was a slight that Queen Catherine has not forgotten," reminded Barnabe. "The Duke had double reasons for preventing your appearance at court."

"I think you are right," said Bussy thoughtfully. "Still, let us not permit the gentlemen of his suite to pass their days in comfort. Not De Montsoreau. Ah! he must be paid for that plan of his. I'll cut him down later. First let me send the sting that will smart. We shall hear from it later."

"You mean the boast concerning the fawn of the Grand Huntsman?" asked Barnabe.

"None else. Have a messenger bear this packet to the Duke. He surely will make use of it, and that is my desire. It will be short and to the point. The Duke will understand and believe! To keep such a morsel to himself would not be like him, judging from the past. Surely, if the Duke of Anjou retains me as Governor, I should send him word I am not idle."

"What would you send?" asked Barnabe.

"I shall say, 'I have completely lured the fawn of the Grand Huntsman into my net!' He will understand," replied Bussy.

"The messenger leaves straightway," replied Barnabe, summoning one of Bussy's pages. "But what of your friars? They have dined and drank heavily of the wine. They broke their fast but a while since, and await your presence before setting out for the abbey."

"Come with me, Barnabe. I will speak with them," said Bussy.

Barnabe followed his master to the hall below, where the friars, in their cloaks, stood awaiting their abbot.

"Good morrow, my sons!" cheerily cried Bussy, greeting them. "I trust your night was filled with pleasant dreams. I thank you for your support. None could have responded with heartier enthusiasm. I am proud of you."

"And we of our abbot," replied Brother Antoine. "But the journey is a long one, and we must start for the Abbey of Bourgeuil."

"So soon?" asked Bussy. "And is there nothing I can do to make you more comfortable ere you start?"

"Nay," replied Brother Antoine. "We have paid homage to our abbot, done justice to his

entertainment, and now must be back to our labours."

"As you will," replied Bussy, sending a lackey to fetch the mules for his friars.

"You have but to call upon us and we will respond as readily as you so kindly say we did last night," continued Brother Antoine.

CHAPTER XVIII

“ THE MAID HAS BEWITCHED HIM! ”

MARGUERITE DE MONTSOREAU had closed the door and bolted it before she realized that it had been her intention to cause Bussy d'Amboise to follow her. The Duke's plan to get the man away from the door he guarded had been forgotten through the impulsiveness of the woman, her pride being wounded by his devotion to a mere maid. For a moment she stood thinking what was best to do. She unbolted the door, and swung it partly open, looking down into the hall.

Bussy was battling with the drugged wine, walking about as one possessed.

“ It would serve no purpose, were I to call,” said she. “ He is too intent on guarding the maid to even give a thought to me. And yet he made the boast! Ah, gentlemen change! Another time we shall see, Monsieur. I will wait until your new face has left Angers; then mayhap you will turn to me, and if — Ah, we shall see! ”

She closed the door and sought her apartments.

Had she remained a moment longer she would have overheard what followed between Bussy and the maid. That would have been enough to show her, with her worldly wisdom, how hopeless was the thought of rivalry with Heloise de Maucourt. Being in ignorance, she formed her plan.

Finette was busy about the rooms, preparing for the return of her mistress, when the Countess burst into the apartment in a sorry temper. She expected her mistress would take her to task for her share in the attempted hoax of the “solitary meditation in the chapel of Yolande.” Finette resolved to fall back, for an excuse, upon the service to be rendered the Duke. Wisely she held her tongue as the Countess raged.

“Look, Finette,” cried the Countess, tossing the lacing upon the table, “this bit of string, falling in its tangle, holds our brave Bussy d’Amboise bound as by steel bands. ’Tis a love token, for he told me. Faith, he falls beneath the art of a maid more easily than before one who should know how to bring him to his knees! Men love little women, it would appear. Those tiny bits of feminine folly, wide-eyed and simple! By Heavens, are they as simple and innocent as they appear? One glance, a smile, and bold men fall — A lacing. Bah!”

“A lacing, to be sure,” remarked Finette,

handling it curiously. "But why a lacing, why not a flower, a bit of ribbon? A lacing, surely it is a queer token."

"Like the man who prizes it, useful when whole, but worthless when broken. We shall see how long this bravo remains in the service of the Duke. I've a mind to return it to him. Would it were a rope that he might hang himself!"

"Madame, you cannot mean that you would see him dead?" exclaimed Finette.

"He spurned me, and for this maid of the lacing. I tell you, he is mad! To affront the Duke in her behalf is beyond the bounds of reason," cried the Countess savagely.

"He's losing favour every day, so I am told, and my informants should know how the wind blows," declared the servant.

"Losing favour with the prince bothers him little," fumed the Countess. "He fancies himself an emperor at heart, and carries himself as such. Pah! He'd fight the Duke, or any man, for what I did just a moment since."

"You astonish me, Madame!"

"It is not often I listen to words of love. True, many are they who have sought to tell me of their love. Yet I have turned a deaf ear. The bragging, boasting bravo's words set me wild to teach him a lesson, as you know."

"A lesson, was it?" thought Finette.

"That invitation to the chapel was spurned, was it not?" demanded the Countess.

"Aye, but reluctantly, I am sure," replied Finette. "He would have followed in haste, but for some thought that came to him before he left the hall. It puzzled me to see him hesitate. When I but told him I could not have proposed such a meeting, had I not your confidence, his face fairly beamed, and off he went, only to stand as a statue, resolved."

"I know," remarked the Countess.

"'Another time,' said he. Then, when I hinted that there could be none like the present, he looked a bit disappointed, but refused to leave the hall."

"The maid has bewitched him. He told me squarely she had planned to kill him, and yet he loves her; of that I am sure!"

"The wife of Bussy d'Amboise!" laughed the girl. "A rich morsel for the court! Faith, 'tis the maid who is bewitched, I say, if she return his love."

"Nay, men like Bussy d'Amboise, when they are caught in the net of true love, stay hard and fast. I fear the Duke's plan will profit nothing, though he succeed with his drugged wine. Bussy is resourceful, and the Duke fears him more than any man alive."

“It is natural he should,” declared Finette. “Who, other than Bussy, knows the Duke’s inmost thoughts? The man is more a part of the prince than the Duke of Anjou dare admit. He may try to cast him aside, but I believe he never will dare to cut the ties that bind them. Who but Bussy could have strengthened the Duke’s position, at court? Who but Bussy has held the King in doubt what to do with his brother, the Duke? Each mad scheme, in its contemplation, was made perfect by the skill of Bussy. Dear Countess, fear not for him. He will live long to serve him.”

“Mayhap. Still, to my mind, the Duke would rid himself of him this very night if he could but find the instrument strong and willing enough to attempt it.”

“The jeers of the soldiers were prompted by the Duke, and yet he failed to resent them,” said the girl. “Surely you are right; he loves the maid he guards.”

“De Chanvallon lives because Bussy would not fight before me. Bussy will cherish those insults, and the day of reckoning will be a sorry one for all concerned. I wish I had the power to draw him from his post,” sorrowfully said the Countess.

“There will be other times, times when Bussy will be of different mind. Then we shall see how fondly he clings to the maid,” cried Finette.

“ He said another time, did he not? ” demanded the Countess.

“ Yes, and meant it, Madame. Bussy d’Amboise will gladly walk into the net, or I am no judge of men,” replied the girl.

“ There *shall* be another time, my brave Bussy, and, when it comes, there will be no chase like the one I lead you,” exclaimed the Countess.

“ And Monsieur de Montsoreau,” ventured the girl.

“ He follows the Duke. Of late there has been talk of a return to Paris. There I shall have the opportunity to send word and await results. If, as you fancied, his interest was keen, all will be well.”

“ There could be no doubt about his willingness to follow at your bidding,” explained Finette. “ You have but to raise your hand, once he is away from Mademoiselle, and he will come.”

“ Time will tell,” sighed the Countess. “ Ah me, it were better to be still caged as I was at Montsoreau, than given the freedom that but furnishes fresh annoyance. I am weary.”

The Countess slumbered as the exciting scene in the hall was enacted, dreaming she had ensnared the gallant. Had she but known how he fought for the maid’s safety, she would have turned back from her resolve to seek a meeting.

The morning dawned clear and bright. There was unusual activity for so early an hour. A page announced that the Count was about to leave for Montsoreau to attend affairs that required his presence ere he joined the Duke in Paris. She was to return with his men to the chateau which Bussy likened to a cage.

To gain the information she most needed, caution must be observed. The Countess simply replied to the Count that his command was her law. Then, summoning Finette, she set about to learn what had befallen Bussy d'Amboise. The sudden departure for Paris she viewed with apprehension. Had the Duke succeeded? Alone in her chamber she awaited, a thousand fancies crowding her brain. Although Finette had scarcely been absent an hour, to the anxious woman it seemed a day.

"You have returned at last," she cried petulantly, as Finette entered.

"Pray pardon, Madame, I worked as fast as I could, but the lackey of D'Amboise has been changed. The one I sought was off guard, so I was compelled to adopt different methods to discover the outcome of last night's affair."

"And what have you to relate?"

"The Duke and Monsieur de Chanvallon, with but a lackey or two, set out for Paris but a moment since —"

"Yes! yes! But of Bussy d'Amboise?" impatiently demanded the Countess.

"Soundly sleeping, I am told, and is to remain at Angers," replied the maid.

"So far fortune favours," remarked Marguerite, satisfied. "The Duke, beaten in his desire, seeks scenes more fruitful, it would seem. Yet, it is very strange that he should leave his first gentleman behind."

"Bussy is falling from grace," sneered the girl.

"And his fall is not to stop there, either," added the Countess. "The maid, what of her?"

"On her way to her home under escort of her father. Surely the fates favour Monsieur d'Amboise," replied Finette.

"We will depart straightway," said the Countess. "When time begins to hang heavily upon the hands of Bussy, we will send a message. It is well to let him think we left displeased. The change of manner will be all the more surprisingly tempting."

CHAPTER XIX

ETIENNE IS PUZZLED

MONSIEUR DE MAUCOURT escorted his daughter from the chateau with the tenderness of one who recovers a long lost child. His heart was sad, for his longing for his eldest daughter was stronger than his desire for life. The tragedy of his household had gripped him as a vice, and he felt feeble in strength, as well as in power to right the wrong. A country gentleman, battling against one of the court, was outmatched before he even set out upon his adventure. Sadly he reasoned that time would prove the only solace for his wounded heart.

At least Heloise was left to brighten his declining years. He held his daughter in his arms while waiting for his servants to bring the horses. The night was bright and clear, though the wind howled savagely about the chateau, and the air was biting cold.

"My child," said the old man, "I glory in the thought that you sought to avenge a great wrong. You fill my heart with pride. The spirit of the De

Maucourts, which I but feebly possess, finds in you an exponent worthy of the race. You could not have done more had you been a son; and Etienne, poor lad, he lies out there somewhere, an additional sacrifice to the methods of our lords. These are indeed bitter times."

"Better, by far, to die in the attempt to rid the world of a wretch, than to sit idly by while he roams the land, leaving ruin in his wake," said Heloise. The words came easily to her lips. They expressed a sentiment that found response in the breast of the old man. Still, there was no venom in the utterance, rather was it the simple statement of a maid who sought excuse for her mad act.

"Yes, daughter," replied Monsieur de Maucourt, "that may all be true; yet that tender arm and delicate hand were never intended to be raised against the life of another. They were moulded to entwine the neck of those you love, sending by their softness and warmth the thrill that holds. Ah, daughter, would that I might see you safely wed; my days are few upon this earth, and —"

"Father, speak not of leaving me," cried Heloise, with affectionate concern. "Already is my cup of sorrow brimming full. To you I must turn for comfort!"

“ And Alain? ” said the old man, looking into his daughter’s face.

“ Pray do not speak of him, father. Left for dead upon the road, unknown, without knowledge of the country! pray let us press on our journey. We may be in time to aid him. Etienne, poor boy, he, too, may have fallen, through a villain’s work. Ah, me! So soon may one’s life turn from gay to sad.”

Now that she knew Bussy d’Amboise in his true light, she sought to smother the emotion that surged upon her. Since not by him the evil work had been done, it must have been the work of the Prince, against whom none could raise a hand. The hopelessness of it all overpowered her.

They mounted and set off sadly for their home. Only the clatter of the horses’ hoofs broke the silence of the night.

“ Do you recall where it was you were set upon? ” asked the old man, his thought now being of his son and Alain.

“ We have yet a league to go before we enter that lonely spot. Recall! aye, I shall never forget the frightful sounds the blows made that felled them,” replied Heloise. “ It was but a flash, for they wound a cloak about my head before I could cry a second time. It was well timed! ”

"Why should my daughters be chosen for the sacrifice?" deplored the old man.

"Daughter, dear father," corrected Heloise. "I am with you, and shall always be, dear heart. Think no more of that which is past. Alain — we must find him."

"I know your feelings, daughter. Take heart, we will press on and surely find trace of him. He is a brave lad and worthy of you."

"Yes, yes, I know," said Heloise petulantly. "But I was not thinking of that; but of a mission he assumed, forced upon him by me, when I was sure of my ground, as I thought. He must be found, and told. He was to assume a task, which, if it is accomplished, will but add more to the already frightful tragedy of it all."

"You mean — ?" hesitated Monsieur de Mau-court.

"That we have wrongfully accused a brave and valiant gentleman, one who would not stoop to so low a level," replied Heloise warmly. "He battles openly and squarely, and his word is unbroken. I'd believe him in the face of all the world."

"Bussy d'Amboise? 'Twas he who acted so strangely at the chateau, but a little while since. It is of him you speak, daughter?" eagerly asked her father.

“ Yes, of Bussy d’Amboise, a noble gentleman, but for whom — ”

“ I was so joyous at seeing you alive and well, I heeded nothing but you, dear.”

“ It was but natural you should fail to note what followed, father. I am at a loss, myself, to know just what affected Monsieur d’Amboise. But for him I should be dead, or worse,” declared Heloise sadly.

“ I feared as much! ”

“ The tales one hears of his valour are none too boldly set forth; but he fights in the open, shunning the cloak of deceit and treachery, even though the odds against him would cause many a brave man to turn aside. His sword is invincible, his heart truly that of an emperor! ”

“ You speak with much feeling, Heloise; do not be too easily impressed. These gentlemen of the court, schooled in the world’s great playhouse, study the effect, and are but actors, after all. I grant you, Bussy d’Amboise may be all you say, and more, but, for your future peace of mind, do not raise your eyes to him. Your words ring strangely clear in his defence,” declared the old man earnestly.

“ And I will always speak of him in such a manner, when Bussy d’Amboise is assailed,” exclaimed the girl. “ Three times he saved me, and returned

me into your care, when I had blamed him beyond measure. Surely he had cause to shun me, to leave me to my blindness. He is a gentleman of France, one of whom the country may feel justly proud."

"I was not assailing your champion," replied her father tenderly, "nor would I have your gratitude one whit the less. I but sought to point out the danger of a maid's thinking too deeply of the gentlemen of the Duke of Anjou's suite."

"I cannot forget his service. No other could have done what I saw him accomplish!" replied Heloise.

"You interest me, daughter. Tell me all of your adventure. Surely Bussy d'Amboise must be many things to many people!"

Heloise related with much emotion the rescue from the hands of the Count de Montsoreau and his lackeys. Then of the mad roysterers in the inn, and the battle against the band of assassins, in which Alain's sword was borrowed with which to defend himself. The incidents leading to her return to her father were vividly set forth.

The old man listened intently, now and then stealing a glimpse of his daughter's earnest face, as they rode into an open space in the road.

"Truly Bussy d'Amboise is a man of spirit," he exclaimed. "Whatever else he may have done

in his turbulent career, his assistance to you was splendid in every way. To affront the Duke, and flaunt his friars in his face, was the boldest thing of all. It may mean serious trouble for him later. And he did it all for you! Ah, well, men of the type of Bussy d'Amboise are not often met with. I should have liked to thank him for his great kindness; still, much is said, whether proved or not, against his reputation."

"I am not thinking of his reputation," declared Heloise; "nor do I care to recall the tales I once hugged to my breast that they might give me added courage to continue in my pursuit of him. All I see is the man of courage and conviction."

"But his deeds —" interrupted the old man.

"To me they appear as those of others, which he has been too proud to disavow; for one so strong and so fond of his unbroken word would not be guilty of such deeds as those the tongue of scandal has ascribed to him. I have seen him silent, save when pushed to the wall; heard him belittle his own importance, or the skill of his act. Assailed upon all sides, he lets the buzzing pass, unless it touch, in slighting form, his word. No king was ever prouder of his throne than Bussy d'Amboise of his given word."

The old man remained silent as they rode, while Heloise dreamed of him she had defended.

She recalled his effort to overcome the effect of the wine, his frantic struggle to defend her, even when his senses were befogged, and gloried in the thought that, while their paths in life might never cross again, she once had occupied his thoughts. The confession of his love was the sweetest morsel life had held for her.

“ His servant will deliver my message, that is sure,” she thought fondly. “ What then? Will he seek me out? Ah, if he only would! Yes, he will come to me some day! ”

They were now nearing the spot where the ambush had been laid. Heloise felt strangely disturbed. Something had gone from her life, leaving an aching she found both cruel and sweet. To her father she spoke of her fear that Alain would not be found; but strangely she discovered that she, herself, was not as deeply affected at the thought of his danger as she should be. Of Alain de Mayenne she was fond, had even fancied she might love him; but, in pledging herself to him as a reward for the assumption of her task, she was urged by an impulse more powerful than any that had ever swayed her. It was with deep regret she recalled this rashness, bred of a passionate desire to avenge a wrong.

How soon the world changes! A sudden turn and all is different. Those one fancied enemies

grow dear, while loved ones pale beside the new-found face. Her anxiety to find Alain, the maid knew, was not through any great fear she had for his safety, but rather because of her desire to prevent his carrying out his promise to assassinate Bussy.

"There, beyond the bend in the road, is where we were set upon," said she as the light from the heavens sifted through, shedding a dim lustre.

Monsieur de Maucourt sent two of his servants ahead on foot to search the road, and the brush beside it, while he, himself, dismounted, to help Heloise to alight; but, throwing the reins to a servant, the girl slipped to the ground, and followed the men, who proceeded cautiously in their search. A servant followed, leading the mounts.

Not an inch of ground or brush was left unthrashed by the men, under direction of Monsieur de Maucourt, and this continued for many rods, even to the foot of the little hill, and into the open.

"It is no use," exclaimed Monsieur de Maucourt, "either Alain and your brother were taken by the followers of the Duke, or they have made their way back toward Maucourt. Let us proceed. We may overtake them. You say they must be on foot?"

"Yes, I heard the men give orders for our horses to be taken," said Heloise. "Etienne! He, surely,

must be on his way toward home. This is a lonely road and few have travelled it since our capture."

They pressed their horses to a faster pace, and rode well into the night before sighting the welcome lights of the chateau. Not a soul did they meet on the road.

The home-coming was a sad one, though joyous for the servants who crowded about Heloise.

Etienne had not returned, but on the morrow he appeared, worn and weak.

"I came to my senses only to find Heloise gone, and Alain slain," explained the lad. "I straightway set out for home. I must have fainted, for, when next I opened my eyes, I was in the home of a peasant, who had picked me from the road and taken me to his cottage."

"We must search the country for Alain," cried Monsieur de Maucourt, calling his servants. He chose a band, and dispatched them upon their errand. For days their search in various parts of the country, in and about the scene of the ambush, was devoid of success. They failed to find any trace of the young man.

Their quest had failed through the mistaken idea of Jeannette. The day the servants came upon the cottage in which Alain lay delirious from the fever brought on by his wounds, he had raved of being set upon by men of the court, and talked

incoherently of plots to ruin the name he held most dear. The kind-hearted peasant, fearing some gentleman of the court had employed the men to investigate and report, stoutly denied she had seen or heard of Alain.

Days grew into weeks, and soon months marked the absence of Alain. Monsieur de Maucourt never ceased his search, for he felt it was a debt he owed his daughter.

Heloise and Etienne rode far and wide, making guarded inquiries, lest they be suspected of intent to harm the man they looked for. The maid had comfort in the thought that somewhere he lived; but, crowding upon this, came the crushing fear that he might succeed in the blow against the man she loved.

It was easy to learn of Bussy d'Amboise. Travellers along the road to Angers told of the turn of affairs at court. The Duke had set out upon his mission to Elizabeth, while De Montsoreau had been called to Paris. The Duke's change of heart, his reconciliation with the King, had become an old story, while now, in the country about Angers, the gossips prated of the fallen favour of the Duke's First Gentleman. Much of his time was spent at the Castle of Angers, with an occasional visit to the Abbey of Bourgeuil. Since the meeting in the hall, where the friars gave so good an account

of themselves, Bussy had taken much pains to perfect them in the use of arms.

So ran the tales that Heloise picked up upon her rides about the country. For change of scene, D'Amboise rode to Saumur, always in company with Barnabe.

Although reassured by the constant news of her champion, Heloise felt that Alain was but waiting the time to strike, — still believing Bussy to be the man he was pledged to kill. Heavy were the days of anxious waiting for news of him. Sad the hours for the maiden, tortured with the fear of what might befall.

Etienne followed his sister with dogged devotion. He longed for the day when, with increased strength of arm and skill, he might go forth into the world and carve a name for himself.

“Surely Alain is but hiding for the time, to win his reward,” he ventured to say one day as they galloped along the road.

“That is what I most fear, my brother,” said Heloise sadly. “Would that we could find trace of him, that I might recall my promise.”

“Recall your promise, sister! How could you?” cried Etienne. “Alain's whole life is yours! To deprive him of his love were to kill him!”

“Ah, little brother, some day you may know what it is to love, to feel a longing for the one in

all the world; then you will know how hard it is for me to sit idly by, while he pursues his work of destruction."

"What has come over you, sister? You no longer mention Bussy d'Amboise. For weeks I have waited for you to speak of him. He was the one who brought sorrow upon our home!"

"Nay, brother, say not so," cried Heloise. "Bussy d'Amboise was as guiltless as you in that affair. Now you know why I am so sad. Alain's rashness will only mean his ruin, and to no purpose."

"Not Bussy d'Amboise!" exclaimed the lad in surprise. "That had never entered my poor head. I see it now; our father's silence, and your new interest."

"My new interest! I would but turn aside the dagger from the breast of an innocent man!" declared Heloise.

"And is that the reason you would recall your promise? Don't you love Alain?"

"Foolish boy. We all love Alain —"

"But he asked you to be his wife," asserted Etienne. "You must have cared deeply, even if you did place a condition upon your consent."

"One is not always master of one's feelings," declared the maid shortly, giving her horse the

lash. "Come, enough of this, let us hasten home."

"If Heloise loves not Alain, who has possessed her thoughts?" puzzled the lad.

CHAPTER XX

AN INVITATION SPURNED

A MONTH passed slowly for the Countess at the Chateau de Montsoreau. News had come of the reconciliation of the King and the Duke, and with it the peace that the country sought. The Count had made several trips from Paris to Montsoreau, only to be recalled by the Duke before the latter's departure for England, on a mission for his royal brother.

Being left to herself was no novelty for the Countess, and it gave her an opportunity to pursue her plan, but so far without success.

Upon her rides about the country she sought for news of Bussy, only to find him spending his time divided between the Castle of Angers, the Abbey of Bourgeuil, and his estate in Saumur. Twice had her lackeys returned without delivering her message. Failure in her plans spurred her to make a final effort to reach D'Amboise.

"By now he has forgotten there ever lived such a maiden," said she, "and it is sure he must remem-

ber me. Yet, there is no pleasure in the thought, for one who boasts, must remember."

"Why wait longer, Madame?" asked Finette. "I'll warrant the lackey I have chosen will deliver your invitation this time. Failure is impossible. I have just learned that Bussy has returned to Saumur. What better spot than the ruined Chateau La Coutancière?"

"The very spot, Finette!" exclaimed the Countess. "I'll have the message presently."

Entering her cabinet, she wrote the words that were to bring the gentleman to her tryst.

"The morrow should prove fair, and in the park I have chosen to meet him," she said, as she handed the maid the packet.

"The message shall be delivered," Finette declared, leaving.

Upon his estate in Saumur Bussy spent his time among the gardens. The change from the brawling of the court and the schemes of the Duke had a chastening effect upon him. At times he almost felt worthy of the great love that filled his heart. If he ever gave Marguerite de Montsoreau a thought, it was only that his hatred for the Count brought her to his mind. He had not given up his revenge; but the waiting was sweet, for it furnished time to plan how most easily it might be accomplished.

Upon the morning in question, he was about to start upon a ride across the country, Barnabe having had the horses brought from the stables, when a lackey, wearing the colours of De Montsoreau, rode into the courtyard.

Barnabe frowned savagely, recognizing the man as among those who had taken part in the attack.

"From Countess de Montsoreau," announced the servant, bowing. "She awaits an answer."

Bussy broke the packet, reading: "The fawn you once sought to ensnare, and boasted of its ease, would seek the shelter of the spreading trees within the park of La Coutancière, say upon the afternoon to-morrow."

"Ah, Barnabe! we hear from the fawn. It seems my message to the Duke was well-timed," cried Bussy.

"And the answer?" asked the messenger.

"Say what you will," growled Bussy. "Now for our ride!" He was off before Barnabe could mount.

"A true madman, surely!" muttered the lackey. "I had best report success, or Finette will never forgive me. Whatever the message was, it pleased Bussy d'Amboise; that much I can tell, in truth."

The Countess received the word brought by Finette with no concealment of her delight, and made preparations for the meeting.

"Four little weeks," she said. "How they may change a man's desire! He'll find his fawn far different from what he fancies."

"But, Madame, why go if you would but taunt him?" asked Finette.

"Think you my pride is naught?" cried the Countess. "Bussy shall learn better manners than to speak to me of his love for the maid."

"Yet he comes to meet you," said Finette.

"'Tis for the lacing, and I have lost it. How he will rave," cried Marguerite gleefully. "If he comes, it will be to demand it back, rest assured."

"You do not put full value upon your own charms, Madame," purred the girl.

Marguerite de Montsoreau played the fawn. She sought the shelter of the trees in the park of La Coutancière and waited well toward nightfall. Bussy d'Amboise did not appear!

Weeks later, within the frowning walls of the ruined chateau, they met, and there began once more the life of action Bussy d'Amboise craved.

CHAPTER XXI

FORTUNE FAVOURS ALAIN

FOR weeks Alain de Mayenne lay hovering between life and death in the cottage of the peasant. Jeannette, with motherly interest, gradually nursed him back to health, though his strength was slow in gaining. She took many a trip to Angers for what was needed for his comfort.

Alain lay upon the humble couch, staring up at the rude walls of the room for hours at a time. Faintly he sought to thank Jeannette, who quieted him by saying:

“When you are strong; when you are strong. Then tell me, my lad.”

Soon he grew strong enough to sit in the sunshine's warmth. The desire to avenge himself kept his spirit up.

Neither Baptiste nor Jeannette had questioned him of his adventure. They had lived long upon the road to Angers and heard the tales of brawls engaged in by the gentlemen attached to the Duke

of Anjou. Baptiste, being satisfied that he would be paid, left the care of the wounded man to his wife, while he worked the land upon which they lived.

One day in August, Alain, having for several days taken strolls through the woods in the cool of the afternoon, returned from his walk feeling that he was fit to set out upon his mission. He had sent no word to any one. During those weary days when he had almost despaired of life he had resolved never to return to Maucourt without first having earned his reward.

Jeannette was resting in the shade beside the cottage as Alain turned into the path.

"Monsieur has good colour to-day!" said the kindly woman. "Aye, I know, it is not the heat that makes those cheeks so rosy; it is the old woman's nursing."

"Yes, that is true," replied Alain. "None could have done more for me than you and your good husband. My gold may pay, yet still I am your debtor in gratitude."

"The season has been hard; still, in our loneliness, you have brightened the way," said Jeannette. "I have never heard you complain, never a word of what befell you. A gallant gentleman, say I, and Jeannette was never mistaken."

"It is useless to rave of that which you cannot

control," said Alain. "My work is before me; my strength has returned, and it is time I were on my way."

"We will be sorry to have you leave," said Jeannette. "No more patient sufferer have I seen. Surely you must win! Your return to life was a miracle, and God's work is always for the right."

"I am now ready to start upon my journey," said Alain. "You have been most kind, and there is now nothing to prevent my setting out upon my mission."

Promising to return some day to see them, Alain left, turning his face in the direction of the Chateau de Montsoreau. In the weeks that he had passed in the peasant's cottage he had not dared to ask concerning the movements of D'Amboise, and, lacking knowledge, he had no plan formed; but such gossip of the court as reached the cottage had told of the enmity of Bussy and the Count de Montsoreau, and who, more likely than the Count, could tell him of the movements of his enemy?

He trudged along the hot road until he came to a town where he was able to purchase a serviceable nag at a fair price. He did not waste time, but rode on.

Unfamiliar with the road to the Count's cha-

teau, he stopped often to inquire the way. On the morning of the next day he drew rein at the top of a hill that commanded a view of the roadway. In the distance he saw the cloud of dust that told of approaching horsemen. He sat watching it grow more distinct until he could count the number.

"A gentleman of the court, I'll be bound," said he, "travelling with a mounted escort. They should know the way. I will wait and ask them."

Pulling his horse's head around, he rode into the shade to await their arrival.

The gentleman rode in the centre of his men; the horses, advancing rapidly, were white with lather.

"Whoever he may be, he is in a hurry, and his errand urgent," thought Alain. "Not more so than mine, however. A civil question causes no offence."

The cavalcade was upon him. He rode out to meet the troop, which, at a command from the gentleman, halted.

"Your appearance is most sudden!" cried the gentleman. "Would you speak with me?"

"Aye, Monsieur," replied Alain. "Being a stranger in these parts, I would inquire if by chance you could indicate the way to the Chateau of Count de Montsoreau?"

“And when you found him, what then?” asked the stranger.

“You appear to be of the court, Monsieur, so I may speak freely. The business I have in hand rests with Bussy d’Amboise, and, as the Count de Montsoreau is reported to be at odds with him, I fancied he might best tell me where the gentleman I seek may be found.”

“So you seek an enemy of Bussy d’Amboise? Why, may I ask?”

“I fear not to tell you, for a friend of Bussy’s would not have listened so long in silence, Monsieur,” said Alain. “Therefore, I believe your love for Bussy is no greater than the Count’s.”

“True, Monsieur, you have it, for *I* am the Count de Montsoreau.”

“Monsieur, I am fortunate, indeed!” cried Alain.

“You would go to where Bussy d’Amboise may be found?” asked the Count. “Then join me. Still, my question is unanswered.”

“Bussy d’Amboise, roysterer, bravo, braggart!” cried Alain, “must pay the penalty for his crime! He brought shame upon a fair name, and I have sworn to kill him!”

The fearlessness of the youth pleased De Montsoreau, although at heart he pitied any one who spoke so confidently of doing violence to Bussy.

Yet, the more men he had in his escort who would follow his bidding, the better for his project. He applauded Alain's outburst, and cried:

"Well spoken, my young friend. Fate has thrown us together when but at the start of your journey. Follow with me. I promise you the chance you desire."

CHAPTER XXII

“ I GIVE YOU UP ! ”

AUGUST had crept around, and the sun beat down with fierce warmth upon the countryside. Few who had not urgent business on the road ventured out, so intense was the heat. Those who had started upon their ride in the early day sought the shelter of the trees, or lay upon shady banks overlooking the stream as it followed its course toward the sea, shimmering like molten silver as it lazily crept along.

The deserted Chateau of La Coutancière commanded a fine view of the surrounding country. For ages its ruined walls had stood, poking their decayed and crumbling fronts toward the heavens, abandoned by the Count de Montsoreau's ancestors.

Upon the afternoon of this day, a certain bare chamber within the chateau was to be the scene of stirring action, but now peace reigned supreme, and those who sought the cool of the chateau did so more to escape the feverish temperature than with any thought of action.

The chamber was worthy of regard, rich with its memories of the glorious days long past. The wainscoting was well-preserved, as was the plastering, as a whole, while a few tattered arras hangings decorated the walls here and there. A close inspection of the chamber showed that one door opened in from a large hall, having a huge bolt upon the outside; the massive timber stout enough to resist any onslaught. Opposite, a doorway led to an interior passage. A large key stood in the lock, poking its head out into the chamber, rich in rust. At the back of the room, facing the rear of the chateau, was a wide opening, leading into another chamber, the rooms having been used *en suite* by the gallant men of Montsoreau.

A casement window at the side of the room, opening on a small balcony, afforded a view of a wooded park. Near by, a third door gave access to a flight of stairs leading to the garden. The shutters of the window could be bolted from the inside. The wind, warm and light, failed to move them as they shut out the fading sunlight. Beneath this window rested a heavy oak table, close against the wall, scarred and stained, as was the bench beside it. A few old oak chairs, and three-legged stools completed the furnishings, left as they had stood long years ago. The cool within

the chamber was delightful, without the dampness that one finds in deserted places.

The chateau was a favourite resting-spot for those who rode by the river route to Saumur. The water was good, and the park trees gave ample space for the tethering of the horses.

The Countess of Montsoreau had for weeks ridden there in her loneliness. From the casement window she could overlook the park, where she had appointed the meeting with Bussy d'Amboise, a meeting long since forgotten by that gentleman, though fresh as ever in the mind of Marguerite. Almost daily had she ridden to the deserted chateau, not hoping to meet the gallant, but to pass the time in meditation.

The heat, this day, had driven her off the road, and into the chamber. The ride had been short, yet she felt the fatigue. Sinking into a chair, she turned to Finette.

"We ride quite often to this spot, Madame," Finette had said. To her the heat was torture, and the journey hardly one of pleasure.

"Yes, it suits me well," replied the Countess. "I know of what you think; the maid of the adventure some five months ago. Bussy d'Amboise loves her, and has forgotten my existence!"

"It would so seem," admitted the girl.

"It was my vanity, Finette. When Bussy

d'Amboise showed me, that night, that he loved the girl, then I resolved to captivate him. You know how I have failed. My return to Montso-reau; the word I sent him for the meeting here, all were ignored," deplored the Countess.

"It was queer that he never came, if for no other reason than to receive that which you took from him."

"The lacing from the girl's jacket?" replied Marguerite. "Had we met, I could not have given it to him, did I so desire. To think our talk that night before the fire in the hall of the Castle of Angers was to be the end of the affair!"

"But, consider his object, Madame," declared Finette. "As far as it concerned you, it was but to rouse your husband's jealousy. The Count was soon summoned to Paris by the King, so Monsieur Bussy had no reason for continuing."

"He would have continued, I'll warrant, but that his head was full of that girl!"

"It may be so, though we cannot find that he has seen her since that night five months ago."

"Well, surely, never was a woman's vanity flouted as mine was," cried the Countess. "I would do much to bring him to my feet, merely for his having preferred another when I was near; or, if I could not bring him to my feet, to deprive her of him, at least. Ah! well! life is full of an-

noyances, but I have one consolation, my husband gives no threat of soon returning from Paris."

"It is so," nodded the maid.

The grinding of a heavy tread upon the gravel path without caught their ears.

"Hark!" cried the Countess. "Some one is coming hither!"

Finette tiptoed to the door and looked out.

"Madame," she whispered, "it is Monsieur Bussy himself."

"Monsieur Bussy! What is he doing in this deserted place?"

D'Amboise stepped into the chamber, whipping the dust from his boots with his riding-whip. His face was flushed; his hair moist from the ride he had taken. His astonishment in facing the Countess and Finette for a moment deprived him of speech.

"Madame de Montsoreau!" he cried, puzzled. "What can have brought you to this ruined chateau?"

"Why, Monsieur, though it be deserted," replied the Countess, "La Coutancière is still my own chateau." Then, resenting the tone he had assumed, she added, "I know not that I need account for being in it."

Bussy recovered his poise, and sought to explain his own presence. The meeting he had ig-

nored, the evident resentment of the lady, all contributed to his amusement.

“ The fawn is angry! Sweet flattery!” he thought.

“ Nay, it is I who should account,” he declared humbly. “ I was riding back to Saumur, where I am now lodged. The day is very hot, even beneath the trees. Seeing these ruined gates open, I left my escort to water my horses at the brook, and came hither to rest under the roof.”

“ It is the same with me,” replied Marguerite. “ Had you come by the park, you would have found my lackeys and the horses at the postern.”

Bussy strolled over to the window, looking down upon the park’s thick wooded expanse. “ The garden postern,” he repeated, “ where we were to have met, that day.”

“ How you flatter me by remembering that we were to have met!” exclaimed Marguerite, with fine sarcasm. “ It seems that you made a boast concerning me to the Duke!”

“ You have heard of that?” smiled Bussy, coming toward her. “ Yes, a boast, by fulfilling which I sought only to give your husband a sense of his folly in treating his wife as a prisoner.”

“ Which you can scarcely have done, since he cannot have learned of our appointment,” declared the Countess.

“ Oh! I think he may have. I took measures by which it should go to his ears.”

“ Indeed! What measures? ” demanded Marguerite, not without fear.

“ You should know,” explained Bussy, “ that the Duke had agreed that the moment you should ask me for a private meeting, or give hint that such were possible, I should be considered to have made good my boast. Therefore, when your servant brought me the message of ‘ silent meditation in the chapel of Yolande,’ I did not need the further invitation, which you sent me later. I wrote the Duke — then in Paris — of my success.”

“ Success! Faith, you joke!” cried Marguerite.

“ Deny not that I had interested you,” answered Bussy. “ I had no other purpose!”

“ And the Duke would take your mere word as evidence? ” sneered Marguerite.

“ The mere word of Bussy d’Amboise, Madame? ” exclaimed that gentleman in surprise. “ Surely! But, Madame, you may have no fear of your reputation. That the letter might never compromise you to the world, I used terms that would be intelligible only to the Duke and to your husband. I said I had at last attracted the fawn of the Grand Huntsman into my net. I

foresaw that the Duke would show this letter to your husband. This would set the Count thinking, and the futility of keeping a wife in a cage would dawn upon him.”

Marguerite grew thoughtful. The boldness of Bussy in sending the note she believed to but preface strife.

“ Yet, the Duke has long since left for England to court Queen Elizabeth, and De Montsoreau remains in Paris, giving no sign.”

“ What of that? ” declared Bussy. “ Watch for results only in a gradual change toward you. The Duke would insist that your husband should not call you to account, and common prudence would counsel him not to seek to avenge himself on me. I will admit that, in all this, I had my own revenge to work upon your husband. I am not sorry, if I have given him a sleepless night or two. For, as I love my friends, I hate my enemies, and shall die so! ”

“ He sought your life in ambush. That is what you mean? ” asked Marguerite curiously.

“ That, and other things, Madame. Ambition is a good spur, yet it must be curbed. None may seek to tread upon the pathway before Bussy d’Amboise, and escape his resentment.”

“ Enemies are the penalty of fame, Monsieur, ” said the Countess. “ If you were not the great

Bussy d'Amboise, Governor of Angers, and the rest — ”

“ Well,” said Bussy, sadly, “ I would as lief the Duke had not afterward restored me to those honours from which he dismissed me that night. Were I no longer Governor of Angers, and the rest, I might return to my small estate, and — ”

“ And take to yourself a young wife, Monsieur,” continued Marguerite with bitterness, “ a certain daughter of the house of Maucourt.”

Bussy liked not the manner of the Countess. Her intention was evidently to cast a slur upon the fair name of Heloise. The venom of a woman's tongue knows no bounds when hatred is fed by ungratified desire.

“ Even if I dared lift my eyes to her,” said he sadly, “ she would not have me. I have not seen her since that night — when you stole the only souvenir — Madame, why do you not keep your promise, and give it back to me? ”

“ I know not where it is,” said Marguerite evasively. “ I think it is lost. You can surely get others where it came from! Her father's chateau is not many leagues from here.”

“ Madame, you are speaking of Mademoiselle de Maucourt!” cried Bussy, growing ugly at the taunting tone. He wheeled as if to go.

“ Aye, sweet innocence!” exclaimed Marguer-

ite, “ who gives a part of her attire to a strange gentleman to remember her by! ”

“ I’ll hear no more! ” exclaimed Bussy, starting for the door.

With ironical deference, as to a guest, the Countess bowed low. “ Nay, Monsieur, let me not drive you from my house. Rather let me retire to the garden, and leave you in possession. Come, Finette! ” she cried, as she swept past him without a look.

The maid followed her through the door leading to the garden, closing the door behind her.

“ H’m! ” muttered Bussy, stroking his chin. “ Some women would have remained upon the field. This one sees the value of a masterly retreat. ”

He looked out through the open door, leading to the hall beyond. Suddenly he started forward, exclaiming wonderingly, “ Who comes here? A gentleman, a lad, and — Heaven! it is *she!* She! What brings her to La Coutancière? Faith! I know not whether to accost them or retire. I’ll wait a bit. ”

With this he retired to a dark corner of the chamber, his eyes fixed upon the door for a glance of her he loved.

The party that entered was composed of Monsieur de Maucourt, Heloise, and the lad, Etienne.

They had ridden from some distance, as the riding-habit of the maid, and the dust-laden shoulders of the others, testified. They did not see Bussy in his dark corner.

"We will rest here till the heat of the day abates a little," said Monsieur de Maucourt. "But we must be home by night. Word may have come of Alain."

"Ah me!" sighed Heloise. "How often you have hoped for that, when upon one of these fruitless rides in search of him."

"When I am home in Maucourt, I feel I must be out seeking him," declared the old man. "We have searched the province over without avail. When I am out seeking him, as now, I am eager to return, lest he, or news of him, have come during our absence. Ah, Etienne! had you but stayed by his side that night they carried off Heloise!"

"Would I had but known, my father," replied the lad. "But when I came to my senses, and found Heloise gone, and Alain apparently dead, it seemed best I should fly to you for help. I could not foresee that Alain would disappear before I could return with you to the place."

"You did as you felt was the best, my lad, and I seek not to find fault. Poor Alain!" cried Monsieur de Maucourt. "I remember in this chateau a pleasant room looking toward the Loire. I will

go there and lie down awhile. I am worn out with long riding. Come!"

Etienne put his arm about his sister's waist affectionately, as they slowly followed their father from the room.

"Ah, sister!" he said softly. "I can see it is not Alain you are thinking of, but another."

"Hush, Etienne!" cried Heloise, blushing. "Do you imagine I have remembered him all these months?"

Together they left the chamber. Hardly they passed from Bussy's view when he rushed to the door, calling softly.

"Mademoiselle!"

The maiden heard, and, leaving Etienne to follow her father, she returned to the chamber.

"Monsieur Bussy!" she cried joyously.

"You have not forgotten me!" he exclaimed.

The confusion of the maid, in seeing the man whose name was but a moment before upon her lips, prompted her answer, in which truth rang clear and strong.

"To tell the truth, Monsieur, you have been much in my thoughts since that night."

"Mademoiselle," cried Bussy, rejoiced at the simple faith the maid had in him, "that your pure thoughts should have retained my image — it is incredible!"

"Yet true," said she, "although your own thoughts kept no trace of my image. But why, indeed, should a brave man of the court and the world have a thought for the poor daughter of an obscure country gentleman?"

Bussy felt his head swim as the blood rushed to his face.

"A thought, you say!" cried he. "Yes, but one thought, it is true — one thought lasting day and night, and never ending. Why had Leander such a thought for the daughter of Sestos? Because love fed it! Love, turned vestal to minister to a deathless flame!"

The maid drew back beneath his passionate utterance.

"Do not recoil, Mademoiselle, at that word, though it come from my lips. I swear to you that, whatever the rest of me be, my love for you is as pure as she who inspires it. Yet I dare not supplicate for its repayment."

Heloise felt the force of sincerity, and longed to tell him of her love.

"Why, Monsieur, is there anything that the fearless Bussy d'Amboise dare not do?" she asked, smiling up into his face, her eyes sweet and tender.

"Mademoiselle!" he cried, "do you mean — is it possible — that I may hope?"

“ Hope, it is said, is a gift that Heaven denies no one.”

“ But I, with my reputation — ”

“ It is you that I know — not your reputation,” said Heloise simply.

“ They call me the Duke of Anjou’s bravo — you called me so yourself!” he exclaimed.

“ I have forgotten that,” Heloise declared stoutly, “ and only remember what happened after — and before.”

“ Ah, yes! Our first meeting — when you let me keep that souvenir of you — the bit of lacing. How I treasured it!”

“ I remember,” cried Heloise. “ And you have it still? Let me see it.”

The extended hand, dainty as a child’s, its pink palm turned upward before his eyes, was a temptation for Bussy. He would have seized it, pressing kisses upon its tapering fingers, yet resisted.

The missing lacing! How could he explain? The thought chilled.

“ Why — ” he began, embarrassed. “ That is to say — I did have it — it was stolen from me.”

“ Stolen? By whom? ” demanded Heloise, her jealousy aroused.

“ By — a person, from whom I hope yet to recover it.”

"A person! I see. A woman!" cried the maid, with a frown.

"Yes, a woman — but not —"

Heloise interrupted. "And you hope to recover it?" she asked. "That will require visiting her, pleading with her! Monsieur, I forbid your recovering it! It is mine. I claim it back — and the woman shall keep it!"

Bussy watched the varying emotions reflected in the face of the maiden. The evident jealousy delighted him.

"Then give me another remembrance in its place," he begged.

"To be stolen by the same woman?"

"I will never see Madame de Montsoreau again," said he.

"Madame de Montsoreau!" cried Heloise doubtingly. "Why! this is her chateau!"

"But I came here by chance! I swear! Mademoiselle, listen to me."

He seized her hand, and found it yielding. His arm crept gently about her waist. Her eyes fell; still she did not resist.

Monsieur de Maucourt and Etienne came upon them at this moment. The old man hurled his hat on the table, his hand seeking his sword.

"Monsieur!" he cried angrily.

As the old man came toward them, and before

he could speak again, Bussy's hand was raised in warning.

"One moment, Monsieur de Maucourt. I am Louis de Clermont, Seigneur de Bussy, and I ask you for the hand of your daughter in marriage."

Monsieur de Maucourt's astonishment was but momentary. "Monsieur," said he calmly, "you do my fallen house a great honour, but what you ask is impossible."

He led his daughter away from Bussy's embrace, the maiden being reluctant to leave the strong arms of her lover.

"Why impossible, Monsieur?" questioned Bussy. "Surely, you do not still think —"

"I know we were mistaken in charging you with the misfortunes of my eldest daughter, and that I owe to you my second daughter's escape from a similar fate," declared the old man, kindly, but firmly. "My gratitude to you will end only with my life; but I must consider my daughter's happiness."

"There is nothing I so much desire in the world, Monsieur," replied Bussy. "Surely, such love as I bear her must inspire me with the power of making her happy."

"Ah, Monsieur!" said the old man sadly. "Many a marriage begun in love brings unhappiness."

"Why, Monsieur!" persisted Bussy. "Do you doubt my constancy in such love as I have for her?"

"No, Monsieur, I do not doubt your love for her; but, if you married her, you would still be Bussy d'Amboise. That means that your life would still be bold and turbulent, and, the more she loved you, the more she would suffer in anxieties and fears."

"But," cried Bussy feelingly, the thought of life with Heloise being very sweet, "if I should return to seclusion and peace?"

Monsieur de Maucourt shook his head slowly. "You might do so for a day, or a month, perhaps," he said; "but the lion cannot long remain the lamb. You have so long practised violence, it is now necessary to your very safety. Let Bussy d'Amboise once drop the sword, and how long will his enemies stay their hands? For your life you must continue the same Bussy d'Amboise as of yore — and that Bussy d'Amboise is no fit mate for a maid like mine. Do you not see, my daughter?" said the old man, holding Heloise at arm's length, looking into her sad face. "Speak, Heloise! that it may not seem that I would compel your wishes."

Heloise's heart grew cold within her breast. She dared not look at Bussy for fear of yielding

to the impulse to rush into his arms, defying all the world. She summoned all her courage to speak.

"My father cannot be other than right, Monsieur Bussy," said she in a low voice.

Bussy felt stunned; the room whirled before him, and he clutched at the chair as he stood. Straightening to his full height, he spoke regretfully.

"Alas! I was foolish enough to dream of Heaven for a moment. My child!" he cried, turning to Heloise, "if I loved you less, I would make you mine against the world; but, as I love you more, I give you up! I would rather know you happy, than mine. We must go our different ways, then. Monsieur, you are for Maucourt?"

"Presently, Monsieur," replied Monsieur de Maucourt. "I shall rest in the chateau till the shades of evening fall."

"And I am for Saumur," said Bussy, "and would best be going. Adieu, Monsieur! Adieu, lad! Mademoiselle — may God keep you ever in his charge, as I shall keep the sweet memory of you ever in my heart!"

He bowed low before Heloise. The maiden, sad of heart, would have bade him good-bye, but turned away that she might have courage at the parting. Another moment, and he was gone.

Monsieur de Maucourt had observed the sadness of his daughter, and it hurt him keenly.

"Heloise! Was I wrong? Does it affect you so? Speak, my child!" he cried, fondly. "We, in our worldly wisdom, make such terrible mistakes sometimes. I have seen the light of joy fade from one daughter's eyes. God knows, I would not, by some old man's folly on my part, blast the happiness of another! Tell me, child! Shall I call him back?"

"Father!" exclaimed Heloise, calling him back from the door. "No! Have we no pride?"

"But —" hesitated her father.

"Is my heart so soft a thing that a rejected suitor must be called back to heal it? Come!" said she, leading him toward the door which opened on the passageway. "We will rest till the cool evening comes; then shall we go home."

CHAPTER XXIII

WOMAN'S WILES

THE evening shades were falling, and a soft, cool breeze began to blow about the ruined castle. The delightful change revived those who had been upon the road in the sun's heat, refreshing them as a draught from a crystal spring.

Madame de Montsoreau, with her maid, had loitered beneath the trees in the park, where they could see any who chanced to visit the chateau. The Countess was disturbed by the encounter with Bussy d'Amboise. For weeks she had longed for such a meeting, and, now it had happened, there was naught but regret. Her hope of bringing the man to her feet now seemed pale and hollow. The day's decline was in keeping with her mood.

As Bussy left the chateau in haste, the Countess pondered. Had she possessed less resentment she might have called to him; but there was that in his manner as he mounted his horse and rode away that prevented such action.

Marguerite forsook the park for the chamber

she had chosen to relinquish in favour of the Duke's first gentleman.

"It was the Saumur road he took," said she to Finette. "But what made him wait here so long, I wonder. He did not even call his man, Barnabe, whom I saw but now with others of his escort."

"There is no telling the motive of that madman, Madame," replied Finette. "His pensive mood found a fitting setting in the deserted chamber, and he remained to dream of her he loves."

"Pah! Finette, I am jealous of the maid. Would that I could cause her pain!" cried the Countess.

Finette turned to the window, listening.

"One moment, Madame. Listen! Are those Bussy's horses moving off?"

"Nay, it were impossible. He is by this time out of hearing, and these are on the other road," said the Countess. "And they are coming this way, too!"

"Heavens! at this late hour?" exclaimed Finette nervously. "Are they people who might harm us? They have turned into the courtyard."

"So they have," added the Countess, looking over the girl's shoulder down upon the group of horsemen.

" Shall I call the lackeys? " eagerly asked Finette.

" No, stay with me," said the Countess, slightly paler than usual. She felt her limbs tremble. " I have a strange presentiment. We can call if there be danger! "

" Hear the footsteps! " cried the maid.

The Countess grasped Finette's hand, as if for support, fearing some approaching evil.

The steps grew nearer, and the Count de Montsoreau, his man Ferrier, and two armed lackeys entered the chamber.

The daylight had faded quite away, but the flaming torches, borne by the lackeys, which they fixed to sconces in the wall, furnished a dancing light, adding to the weirdness of the scene.

The Count did not even bow to his wife as he entered, but abruptly surveyed the room, as one who sought to discover if it were arranged as he remembered. The doors and windows were inspected, the Count then stepping in front of Marguerite.

" Madame," said he, " your lackeys told me you were here, so I hurried to find you. Our meeting in this old chateau is most opportune; it saves much explanation. There is nothing like having all parties on the ground when discussing a plan."

"Monsieur, you surprise me by your presence," said the startled Countess, for De Montsoreau was the last person in the world she expected to see. But a few moments before, she had congratulated herself upon being apart from him. "I thought you were in Paris."

"I was, and should be still," declared the Count, "but what the King showed me there has sent me in haste back to Anjou."

"What the King showed you?" began the Countess, assuming a puzzled expression, yet fearful of the truth. "What can it have been?" She guessed the meaning of his sudden return. D'Amboise had told her enough to cause her much anxiety.

"A letter given him by his brother, the Duke," replied the Count. "You may go," said he to the two armed men standing in the doorway.

"A letter? How puzzling!" exclaimed Marguerite.

"Puzzles you, does it? Ha! ha! That's good indeed, Madame! It was sent the Duke by Bussy d'Amboise, and its contents interested the King so much that he turned it over to me. In the letter were these words — 'I have at last attracted the fawn of the Grand Huntsman into the net.' Bussy wrote that — Bussy, who boasts, but never lies!" he snarled.

Marguerite trembled violently. Her husband's manner was threatening. "Well," said she, forcing a smile, "what does it mean? What possible interest could I have in it? Yet you seem disturbed, vexed, even worse. Why all this excitement, the presence of these armed men?"

"So you see no reason why I should feel interested? I, the Grand Huntsman of the Duke? I'll quote for you again: 'The fawn of the Grand Huntsman.' Think you that I could overlook the meaning, Madame?"

"I assure you he cannot allude to me," cried the Countess, boldly. "He will tell you so himself, and you will believe him, since, as you say, he never lies."

"Pah! Never lies to save himself, 'tis true," retorted the Count, an ugly look in his eyes; "but in such a case he would lie to save a woman. But be assured, Madame, his lie shall not avail. The King told me all that the Duke told him — of a boast made over the wine."

"Can't you see, Monsieur, or are you blinded by the kingly favour? They would but use you to bring about what they desire. It is a trick of the King and Duke. Now they are reconciled, they seek to rid themselves of Bussy d'Amboise," cried the Countess positively. "They would make you their instrument; that is plain as day-

light. They have this letter, alluding to Heaven knows what, and they invent a story of a boast, and you assume a fault, without convincing proof, after the fashion of jealous men."

"Listen, Madame," answered the Count harshly. "The time of this Bussy has come, and your penalty shall be to serve me to that end — serve me and another gentleman, whom chance happily threw in my way upon the road. You shall see for yourself how we have planned the end of the Duke's bravo!"

De Montsoreau went to the door, crying out, "Enter, Monsieur!"

Alain, flushed and expectant, stepped into the chamber, his eyes hunting the room eagerly. Seeing but the Countess and her maid, he bowed, awaiting the Count's instructions.

"This fellow-traveller of mine," declared the Count, "has opened his heart to me; he is a hater of Bussy d'Amboise also."

"Indeed, Monsieur!" said Marguerite, addressing the young man.

"Madame, I have but one thought — my hate of Bussy d'Amboise, and my resolve to see him paid," declared Alain hotly. "Five months ago his varlets left me for dead by the roadside when they carried off her I love, as they had before carried off her sister. I made my way to the cottage

of some good peasants, and they nursed me back to life in hiding, — warming myself to energy with the flames of hate and vengeance.”

“ And the woman you love — what of her? ” asked the Countess, with great interest, half suspecting the truth of the situation. It caused the blood to leap swiftly through her veins.

“ The maid was in some manner restored to her father, as my peasant friends learned for me, ” replied Alain. “ But I have sworn not to face her or reveal that I still live till I can tell her I have seen Bussy d’Amboise dead. ”

“ ’Tis a sight I promise you soon, Monsieur, ” declared the Count. “ This night, perhaps. I wished the Countess to hear your story, Monsieur, and, now that you have related it, you may note how it has impressed her, whether through sympathy for you, or fear for him, I leave you to judge. If you will wait for me in the hall, I’ll join you presently, ” said he, with a sidelong glance at the Countess, who winced beneath the sarcasm of his words. Never had she found the Count so bitter in his hatred.

“ I will await your coming with pleasure, Monsieur, ” bowed Alain. “ You have given me hope; something I had thought had fled. ”

“ God favours me, Madame, ” declared De Montsoreau as Alain left the room. “ He gave

me an ally in this young gentleman, who still believes it was Bussy that carried off the Demoiselles de Maucourt."

Marguerite was terrified. "And you have kept the truth from him! Why? What do you mean?" she cried. "What is this, your talk of seeing Bussy dead, perhaps to-night, and of my serving you?"

"Don't play the frightened innocent with me, Madame. It should be plain to you I mean to have his life. You have seen enough of my preparation to know I have sufficient men to overpower even Bussy d'Amboise!" exclaimed the Count. "What do I mean?" he hissed. "I mean that Bussy d'Amboise shall come here to-night upon his last love tryst!"

The Countess smiled sickly, her lips trembling as she spoke. "What shall bring him here?" she asked.

"That is your part, as you have guessed, though you affect not to know," replied her husband. "A message from you, bidding him meet you here alone, or with but a man or two at most. That will bring him, I'll be bound, and I shall be here with a dozen armed men at least."

"An ambush!" cried Marguerite, shuddering.

"Well planned, think you not?" retorted the Count. "The King suggested it when he urged me to avenge my honour."

"Cannot you see? The King, you say, urged it. He knows how little chance his men have with Bussy above ground, and through the Duke, who will do anything at this time to pacify his brother, he lays this bait before you," excitedly exclaimed the Countess, seeking to avert danger, not so much from Bussy as from herself. "If you accept this royal suggestion, I will not. I'll not do it."

"So!" replied the Count calmly. "Then you shall die here in his place, and I will trap him elsewhere. Bussy has trampled many beneath his heel, but he shall not live to point his finger at me as one whom he has fooled. As you are so fond of Monsieur d'Amboise, perhaps you prefer death to separation from him."

"My God! What shall I do?" cried the Countess. "You will not believe me, nor take the word of Bussy."

"Nay! It is his life or yours, Madame, this night in this room. Choose!"

"Bussy loves me not. He has spurned me upon more than one occasion. But now, he left with another image in his heart from whom none can turn him. Listen, Monsieur, he will not come at my bidding."

"So he was here but a short while ago? That interests me much. Do not stand there cringing in your guilty shame, but send for him. If he

has but just left, my man can easily overtake him by hard riding. It will make the matter all the easier."

"I know he will not come!" cried the Countess in despair. "Oh, why do you insist? Can you not read the innocence in my frightened look? Would I fear you if I had dishonoured you? Nay! I would hate you! spurn you! and fight for him I loved. There is naught in my life I would hide from you, Monsieur."

"Shameless woman! Did you not just say he saw you here?"

"It was quite by accident. The heat of the day had driven him to seek the cool of the chateau."

"If it be as you say, send for him, and let him walk into the trap. If you love him not, why hesitate to do my bidding?" questioned the Count.

"But if I send and he will not come?" asked the Countess, upon the verge of tears.

"It will be your misfortune!" calmly replied De Montsoreau.

"But — Oh, God!" screamed the Countess, frantically, as she realized the sinister threat, "I have no power over him. Pity me, Monsieur! How can I bring him here?"

"How you bring him here is your affair, Ma-

dame," declared the Count indifferently. "Only this — here is a lackey who knows Bussy, but is unknown to him. He will carry your message, — to Saumur if needs be. He rides well and has a fine mount. If you make haste he can overtake Bussy on the road. Make the message what you please. I go now to finish preparations."

The Countess had not minded his words. Her eyes roamed about the room of the deserted chateau, as if looking for an opening through which she might pass.

"Do not look about, seeking an avenue of escape, for there is none. My esquire has already placed guards in hiding at every opening of the chateau, and you shall leave this place only when Bussy is dead, or else — never!"

The Count turned abruptly upon his heel, and left the chamber. Finette and the Count's lackey Ferrier had been unwilling witnesses to the scene, remaining as far in the background as was possible.

When the Count had left, Marguerite turned helplessly to them.

"Oh, Finette!" she sobbed. "How can I attract him to La Coutancière? He cares nothing for me. You heard him here, in this room."

"If he loves not you, he truly loves Mademoiselle de Maucourt. Send after him in her name.

He will fly to any appointment of her making, I'll warrant," suggested Finette.

Marguerite knew Finette spoke wisely. A man in love will not hesitate to follow the command of her whom he loves, even though he be puzzled at the selection of the appointed place.

"But he will know it is not she," still doubted the Countess. "She would not bid him to La Coutancière."

"People make love appointments at the strangest places, Madame," asserted the girl. "Why should he suspect?"

"It sounds so strange to my ear," declared Marguerite; "perhaps because I would have him come. My God! he must be brought, or I am undone! Mayhap, it will be as you say. It is the only chance. God grant it suffice."

Ferrier had awaited his orders to start toward Saumur. So far as outward appearances showed, he had no interest other than to get the word to start. The doubt in the mind of the Countess, her desire to talk and not to act, spurred him to speak.

"You will pardon, Madame, but, if I am to overtake Monsieur Bussy d'Amboise, had I not better be on my way?" he asked.

"Listen, fellow!" replied Marguerite. "Monsieur Bussy is but a few minutes' ride from here on

the way to Saumur. Gallop after him. Tell him that Mademoiselle Heloise de Maucourt awaits him here in this room. He must come alone, and bid him not lose a moment. Tell him anything!" she added, in despair. "For the sake of God, bring him! I'll make your fortune if you succeed!"

"Trust me, Madame," declared Ferrier. "I am no fool, save when it profits me to be one!"

"Good! Be on your way, and success attend you," cried the Countess.

Ferrier left in haste. From the chamber they could hear the clatter of his horse's hoofs, as he galloped out through the park, and off toward Saumur.

"Monsieur Bussy was in no mood for fast riding," commented Finette. "Rather was he reluctant to leave the ruin. Ferrier will surely overtake him!"

"He seems clever," said the Countess, with some agitation. "Heaven grant he play the part well. But — Finette — what if Bussy question him? He may not know how to describe her."

"Then he will take refuge in seeming to be a fool!" replied Finette. "You heard him say so. Trust him, Madame. I think he is equal to the business, or he would not be in Monsieur's service."

"I hope so. I pray Heaven the Count's judgment of a trusty knave be not wrong this time."

The Countess threw herself down in a chair, despairing of success. She feared for her life; but one chance remained. "Would he come? Would he?" she questioned.

Finette had made an examination of the chamber in which she and the Countess were practically prisoners. She fancied that, in the drama about to be enacted, some portion of the blame might fall upon her shoulders. De Montsoreau's attitude was too clearly murderous to cause peace of mind. She tried the walls with her hands, the Countess watching her wonderingly.

"Madame," suddenly cried Finette, "is not this the very room?"

"What very room? What do you mean?" exclaimed the Countess.

"Why, the room the old chamber-woman showed us once. Old Mathilde, who lived and died here in the chateau."

"Ah! the room with the secret passage!" cried Marguerite.

"Yes. Where was it?" said Finette, looking closely at the wall. "Oh! I remember, — between the window and door."

Searching hurriedly, the maid fumbled about the carvings for the spring to release the panel.

For several minutes she ran her fingers quickly along the wainscot. With a stifled cry she found it. There was a click, and slowly the panel slid open, revealing a dark passage leading downward.

"Look, Madame! See! The secret passage!"

"Thank God!" cried the Countess. "Perhaps De Montsoreau does not know of it. If he does not, we may escape after all."

"Surely, Madame. Nothing could be easier," replied Finette. "The passage leads to one of the caves of the river. I recall old Mathilde's description of the ease with which one may make his way from here to the river. How little we realize, when we listen to such stories, how important the knowledge may become."

"Finette, you are a faithful friend!" said the Countess. "Without you I should be lost!"

Marguerite looked down into the darkness of the opening, shuddering. "It is so dark! It is like a tomb!"

"Still, it may serve as a last resource," declared Finette.

"Let us close the panel, Finette, slowly. Pray have care. Make note of the exact location of the spring. If we must resort to it to escape, there will be need of surety and haste."

"Never fear, Madame, I shall be able to open it in a trice."

So intent were they upon the panel that they did not hear Heloise as she came into the chamber from the passageway, in search of her father's hat, which he had thrown upon the table when he confronted Bussy d'Amboise.

The rustle of Heloise's skirts caught the Countess' quick ear, and she turned, recognizing the maiden.

"Mademoiselle de Maucourt!" she cried in surprise.

"You know me, Madame?" replied Heloise, disturbed.

"Yes," continued the Countess, with fine sarcasm in her tone. "Oh, yes. I took pains to have a glance at your face the night when Bussy d'Amboise stood guard so valiantly over your door in the Castle of Angers."

Heloise felt the cutting words, and her pride was aroused. The meaning the Countess meant to convey was too plain to overlook.

"And I had a glimpse of yours on that night," she replied. "From my room I saw you talking with him at the fire; but I did not learn your name."

"I am the Countess de Montsoreau."

"Then this is your chateau," said Heloise. "I must explain my presence here."

"Nay, since the place has been an empty

ruin it is any one's lodgings," replied the Countess.

"My father, my brother and myself were drawn hither this afternoon by the heat of the road," declared Heloise, insistent that the Countess should know the reason for her being there. "My father has found his oppression greater than he thought. He and my brother are asleep in the room at the end of the passage. I came from them to get the hat my father left here."

The maiden held the hat idly in her hand, while looking at the Countess.

"Why further explain, Mademoiselle? Have I not already said the ruined chateau is open to any who care to seek shelter? Pray make your father welcome," said the Countess.

Further conversation was interrupted by Ferrier, who came into the chamber briskly, elated with his success in overtaking Bussy d'Amboise, proud to be the bearer of good news for the Countess. He saw no one but Madame, and delivered his message with soldierly precision.

"Monsieur Bussy will be here within a few moments," said he.

"Monsieur Bussy!" gasped Heloise, amazed.

"He waited but to give his men orders to proceed to Saumur. He will come alone, as you wish," said Ferrier.

"Very well, go!" cried the Countess.

"He will come, and alone," said Ferrier, smiling, "as befits a love meeting. He has given his word."

Heloise's heart grew sick. She doubted that she were awake. Only such a tiny time ago had Bussy professed the true love of a gentleman, and asked her hand in marriage. True, it had been rejected, but the maid had believed he would still be faithful to the love that had seemed so pure and strong.

"Madame, have I heard aright?" she faltered.

Marguerite turned to her sharply. "Mademoiselle, you overheard?"

"Is it true Monsieur Bussy d'Amboise is coming here to meet you?" she demanded.

Marguerite replied after a moment's thought.

"Since you have overheard it, how can I deny? But why should it matter to you?"

The maiden spoke softly, as to herself, studying the Countess. "Yes, it was she who stole the lacing. He said he would never see her again. What duplicity! That he should be so false!"

The Countess caught the words, and understood the feelings of the maid. She proceeded relentlessly.

"Mademoiselle, you know little of the world, I fear. We must take men as we find them."

"And yet he saved me that night," murmured Heloise, gaining much comfort from the thought, in the face of such damaging evidence against the man her young heart went out to with all its strength.

"It was a fine action, I'll admit," replied the Countess. "Just like Bussy d'Amboise. Still, what will not some men do for effect!"

"For effect!" repeated the maid, slowly.

"It was emulating his favourite heroes in Plutarch," declared the Countess, sneering. "Effect? Yes, I have heard of them even offering marriage at critical moments, because it seemed fine to do so!"

"And he is coming here — to meet you?" again asked Heloise, doubtfully.

"Why should you doubt what you have heard? You must have more than a passing interest, to hope such be not true," replied the Countess, enjoying the maiden's distress. "But you will keep my secret, will you not?" pleaded the woman, her whole manner changing. There was fear that Bussy might meet the maid after all, and her plans might go sadly wrong. "And you will not spy upon our meeting?"

"Spy upon your meeting!" scornfully replied Heloise. "God forbid! Why should I wish to spy, if it is as you declare?"

But love makes man and maid do many things.

Steps were heard in the hall, the sturdy, steady stride of men hurrying.

"Whose steps are those?" eagerly asked the Countess, as Finette ran to the door, and looked out. The Countess followed, her blood tingling in her veins. For a moment the maid was forgotten.

Heloise was undecided, as she went to the door beside the window, opening it. To remain and face the man were what she felt she should and must do, yet to spy upon them were immodest.

"Why should I consider their feelings?" thought she. "Has he not professed great love for me? Now, when scarce the words are spoken, he flies to the arms of another. I'll taunt him with his lack of faith; it is no more than he deserves. His much-vaunted word — what is it worth? Nay, I'll stay and face him with his falsehood," she decided, as she closed the door with a bang, and lightly stepped upon the chair and table; thence through the window on to the balcony, from where she could note all that might pass within, while hidden from their view.

"It is De Montsoreau and his men. He is placing them about the corridors. Surely there will be no escape in that direction," cried Mar-

guerite, turning from the door and looking about the chamber.

“ The girl is gone! ”

“ Yes,” said Finette. “ I heard the door close while our backs were turned.”

Voices drifted in upon them from the hall.

“ Monsieur is returning! ” said Finette. Marguerite shuddered.

CHAPTER XXIV

BUSSY ENTERS A TRAP

MONSIEUR DE MONTSOREAU returned with the air of a man who had laid his trap well, and but awaited the coming of his prey. He had placed his guards about the ruined chateau, and stationed men within to leap out upon Bussy should he, by any chance, be able to withstand the attack upon him in the chamber. The Count in action, confident of the result, was a very different man from the Count when cast upon his own resources to face single-handed so redoubtable an adversary as Bussy d'Amboise.

With Alain and Ferrier he entered the room, paying little, if any, attention to the Countess and her maid. First he went to the door beside the window, locking it and removing the huge key, making sure the door was tightly fastened. Crossing the chamber to the door to the hall, he opened it, the door swinging inward. The bolt was strong and heavy, surely sufficient to withstand an attack, once it was shot from the hallway side.

The Count was taking no chances. He tried the bolt, and found it slid easily, there being little likelihood of a mishap should haste be required in shooting it into place.

Having assured himself that all was in readiness, he smiled confidently.

"Very good, we shall have our bird neatly caged!" he declared to Alain, who watched the operations with keen interest.

Looking about the chamber carefully, it being the first chance Alain had had of inspecting it, his eye caught sight of the half-open window.

"But that window, Monsieur!" he said. "Might it not furnish a means of escape?"

Heloise, listening upon the balcony, not daring to look within, drew back in terror at the sound of Alain's voice. The moments she spent out upon the narrow balcony were ones of agony for her. Once she started to step into the room, to face them all, demanding that fair play be shown the man for whom the trap was being baited. She longed to hear Alain's story, to learn from him the reason for his long absence. Why should he be with the Count? Then it flashed upon her that, in joining forces with De Montsoreau, he was but doing what he had sworn he would accomplish. Confident as she was that Bussy would prove a match for them all, she paled at the horrible

thought that perchance he might fail. "Would to God I could aid him!" she murmured.

De Montsoreau was slow to grasp the meaning of Alain regarding the window, due to his knowledge of the chateau, and the hopelessness of the casement as an avenue of escape. He, however, drew the casement shut, but did not shoot the bolt.

"It is a hundred feet from the balcony to the bottom of the empty moat!" said he ironically. "Let him escape that way if he likes. A broken neck would suit me full as well as a sword thrust."

"Madame!" he added, addressing the Countess, "I shall now send Ferrier to the outer gate to await the visitor."

Marguerite trembled violently in her agitation. "And when he arrives?" said she.

"This man will conduct him to you, and then return to the hall and bolt that door, the one with the bar upon the outside, while Monsieur is with you. You see, Madame, the courtyard and hall would give him too much room for my purpose. Moreover, I would not deprive you of a close view of all that may occur. You shall see the last of Bussy, rest assured. Ferrier! Go!"

Alain considered the situation carefully, for he was to be one of the actors in the drama, and his thirst for vengeance, long nourished, had grown

strong; but, with it all, came a sudden fear for his own safety. What would his efforts avail if, in the ridding of Bussy, he sacrificed himself? The reward was too precious not to claim.

"Then, with this door bolted from without, that one locked as it is, and the window so high above the moat, he will have no way of escape?" he questioned.

"None but this door," snarled the Count, pointing to the closed passage at the rear of the chamber.

"And that leads?" asked Alain.

"To this," cried De Montsoreau, throwing the door open wide.

In the hall stood a group of eight men, armed with swords and pistols, waiting to rush into the chamber when they were summoned.

The appearance of this formidable band filled the Countess with fear. In truth, the Count had planned it well. Only a miracle could save Bussy now.

"And when will they come forth?" she asked.

"When you shall open the door for us, after assuring yourself that the door to the hall is bolted on the outside, and after causing your guest to lay aside his sword," said the Count, coldly.

To Alain, the plan, though well-formed, was re-

volting. There was not a chance for their prey to give battle for his life. His country education, where men are given fair play, rebelled against the impending slaughter.

“What, Monsieur!” said he to the Count. “So many of us against one gentleman, and must we have him quite defenceless?”

“Quite!” shortly replied the Count. “For three reasons. First, I have learned by experience that one cannot be too sure in these matters. Second, if the gentleman should by chance run me through before he, himself, were killed, where should be my revenge? And then — the gentleman is Bussy d’Amboise!”

Marguerite’s part in the attack was an important one. Her own life hung in the balance. In the few moments the Count had been in the chamber she had striven to devise some scheme to cause the victim to lay his sword aside.

“But if I cannot make him lay aside his sword?” said she to the Count. “If he begins to suspect?”

“In that case, give up the attempt, and open the door at the most suitable moment. But I fancy your woman’s wit will stand you in good stead. I am confident Bussy will put his sword aside,” sneered the Count.

“Listen, Monsieur!” suddenly exclaimed Alain,

who had strained his ears to catch the sound of approaching footsteps.

They could be heard coming through the hall leading to the door that had its bolt upon the outer side.

"Come!" commanded De Montsoreau, after listening for a moment. He held back the door, once more showing the armed men, and waited until Alain and Finette had passed out into the hall. With an ugly glance at the Countess, he closed the door between them.

Marguerite, alone, felt her heart beating wildly with excitement, as the heavy steps neared the door. She leaned against the back of the chair, bracing herself for the meeting.

Ferrier opened the door, stepping far in, as Bussy advanced, his hand upon his sword, expectant.

He saw none but the Countess, and was disappointed. His momentary confusion gave De Montsoreau's lackey the time to step quietly back of him into the hall, closing and bolting the door.

"Heloise!" cried Bussy, looking about the almost empty chamber.

"My name is not Heloise," replied Marguerite, with a spiteful smile.

Bussy paused, confused, suspicious. There was

something in the air that told him he was trapped, and intuitively he backed toward the wall.

"Where is she?" he demanded. "Where is Mademoiselle de Maucourt?"

"How should I know?" the Countess declared, insolently looking the man over from head to foot. "She is free to come and go, is she not?"

From her position upon the balcony, Heloise had heard what had passed, being an unobserved witness. As she opened the casement window from without, the sash grated slightly, and she held it fast, the night wind rushing in cooling draughts past her fevered face.

"What is that?" cried Bussy sharply, turning about.

"A breeze has come up, I suppose," carelessly replied the Countess. "The window casement has long been out of use."

The noise, strange and sharp, the manner of the Countess, her presence in the chamber of the deserted chateau, did not appeal to Bussy as the effort of a woman to draw him to her. Their last meeting and its termination, the message supposed to be from Heloise, all flashed through his brain.

He looked the Countess intently in the face. There was nothing that showed hostility, yet he took care to guard himself from any surprise, as he made his way across the chamber to the door.

He found it locked. Next he went back to the one he had entered. That would not open. " Bolted, eh? " he murmured. As he advanced to the door at the back of the room, Marguerite, divining his purpose, rushed in between him and it, checking his advance.

" One moment, Monsieur! " said she, in a hoarse whisper. " I can save you yet."

" Save me? " answered Bussy, in puzzled inquiry. " Why should I need to be saved? "

" Yes, from the trap that is set for you," whispered the Countess.

" Trap! I had a suspicion when, but now, I saw that lackey's face! "

" You had a suspicion? " said Marguerite. " And yet you came on! "

" Because, after all, the message might have come from her, and I had given the lackey my word," said Bussy.

" Monsieur, the effect upon my husband of your effort to teach him a lesson was graver than you anticipated," said the Countess. " He is convinced there was real guilt, and he will not believe even you to the contrary. You would lie to save a woman — those are his words."

" He is back from Paris, then? " asked Bussy.

" He is here, with an armed force by which we are encircled. Every exit is closed or guarded.

You walked straight into an ambush. Nothing, no one, can save you, — but I."

"Indeed!" said Bussy quietly, putting his hand to his sword.

The Countess understood the meaning, for she smiled sadly. "Not even the sword of Bussy d'Amboise will avail against the force now opposed to him."

"And you speak of saving me!"

"I alone know a way out of the ambush that surrounds you. Without my aid you are lost!"

Bussy was puzzled. He saw no way to leave the chamber.

"And — the price I should have to pay in return? Surely, you would not do this for nothing?" he remarked quietly.

"My price, as you would call it, is easy to pay, Monsieur," replied Marguerite. "Give up Mademoiselle de Maucourt, and take me with you, that my husband may not kill me in your place."

"You speak of killing!" cried Bussy. "Surely, I am far from a dead man yet! And you? He would sacrifice you, if he failed in murdering me?"

"Aye, he gave me the choice," replied Marguerite. "What say you, Monsieur, will you give up Mademoiselle?"

"Alas! Mademoiselle de Maucourt is not mine to give up!" replied Bussy, sadly.

"Then, cease to love her! That you can do! Promise never to see her again!" cried the Countess.

Bussy grew sadly pensive, even in the face of the impending danger. "I could not cease to love her, if I would!" he declared. "As for the promise you ask, she is the only person who could exact it! To make it to another, even to save my life, would be treason to the image of her that fills my heart."

"Think how your enemies will rejoice at your death!" cried Marguerite, growing desperate at the obstinacy of the man.

"Yes, the hounds! They will make comic verses in Paris of how the invincible Bussy met a rat's death at last!"

"There is a way to escape, Monsieur," cried Marguerite, taking courage. "But, deny your love for that maid, and take me with you in your flight," she pleaded. "It is for me to call the storm that shall destroy you! I have but to move an arm!"

As she spoke, the Countess placed her back to the door leading to the passage behind which the armed men stood, as she well knew. She placed one hand upon the knob; the other rested against the wall, where lay the secret panel.

She faced Bussy, her manner strangely earnest.

"In one hand I hold life! In the other death! Shall I open to life, or let in death? Speak, Monsieur!" she exclaimed, her face flushed. It was the last stand.

Bussy marvelled at the woman, at once tender and defiant. She was tempting, gloriously beautiful in her excitement. But, he saw another face, and his resolve remained unshaken. That face, sweet in its simple love, filled his mind, and urged him onward. If die he must, at least his life would have been marked by one great love. He would carry that unsullied to the grave!

"Though my love for her is hopeless —" he began, but the Countess interrupted.

"Hopeless? You admit? Then you lose nothing by repudiating it. Think well, before you speak, for I swear, there is no other escape save through my aid."

"Hopeless, I repeat," returned Bussy, calmly. "Yet am I true to it!"

"Fool!" cried the Countess, in disgust. "Will you throw life away for a useless fidelity?"

"A gentleman does not deny his race, his word, or his love, Madame!" replied D'Amboise, proudly.

"Die for love, then!" exclaimed the Countess, turning quickly to throw open the door.

CHAPTER XXV

THE WORD OF A GENTLEMAN

HELOISE, from the window, had overheard, and no longer doubted the man who so ardently loved her, so boldly faced certain death, rather than retract a thought. How unjustly she had accused him! How ignorant, indeed, was she in the ways of the world, where truth lies hidden, and honesty is a stranger. The anguish she had suffered in doubting the word of Bussy was full payment for her lack of faith. Now her eyes were opened, and her heart went out to him, in love and anguish.

She feared the Countess would throw open the door before she could prevent. Her one thought was to save the man who so many times had been her champion, and now was dearer to her than life itself. Rather than that he should die, she would sacrifice herself. Resolved in her action, she stepped down upon the table, and sprang to the floor.

“Stay, Madame!” she cried loudly. “Stay your hand! Monsieur, save yourself! Accept her offer!”

The Countess and Bussy were startled. Both stood as if transfixed at the apparition of the maiden, her face flushed, her eyes sparkling.

Bussy's joy at seeing her soon found expression.

"Heloise! You did, then, send for me, after all! Nay, you could not be a party to the plot! Mayhap, you, too, are in the trap?" he cried.

"Nay, I am safe, Monsieur; but time is short. You must act quickly, if at all. All is as Madame says! Do as she bids you! Let her save you, Monsieur, if she can!" cried Heloise, imploringly.

"Heloise! dear heart! you have overheard?" exclaimed Bussy, joyously. "You know how dearly I love you, sweet? The world without you holds no charm for me, and I fear not death."

"I know, Monsieur. None doubt your courage or your valour; but, think! She offers you escape. I overheard, it is true, and, because of what I heard, I love you!"

"You love me, Heloise? Then I ask for nothing more!" he cried passionately.

The Countess, still holding fast the knob, awaited his answer. There was still a chance that he might accept. As she watched the lovers, she realized that naught would change his love. Only the savage desire to save herself, and yet be with him, taking him from the maid she hated with

the jealousy of a tigress, held her hand from opening the fatal door.

"I await my answer, Monsieur," said she, with such calm as she could command. "Little time remains!"

Bussy was about to speak, when Heloise, anticipating his reply, laid her hands upon his shoulder, beseechingly.

"Listen to my pleadings, I pray!" said she, fondly. "Save yourself, I say! Do what she asks! Go! Give me up, and take her with you!"

"But, Heloise! — if you love me —"

"It is because I do love you that you must live. Think what life means to you!"

"Without you it is nothing, sweet Heloise!"

"Did you not say, in this very room, that, because you loved me, you gave me up?"

"Aye, I would not bring you one moment's pain!"

"And shall not I, because I love you, *let* you give me up? Save yourself, for my sake!"

"I will not!" declared Bussy, positively.

"While I live I shall love you, dear one, and, as I die, if die I must, I shall carry your sweet words with me. Better to have died loving you, and being loved, than any life without you!"

Heloise looked imploringly from Bussy to Marguerite; but she saw that to plead with the

Countess for Bussy's release would be useless. The woman meant to sacrifice him if he refused her demand.

"I beg you — as you love me! No! no!" she cried, "not *that*, for you must pay this woman's price, and cease to love me! But as you loved me once!"

"As I loved you once, sweet Heloise," he exclaimed, "and love you now, and shall love you for ever, I will not give you up!"

He took her in his arms, the maiden clinging to him passionately, looking up into his face.

"But if you die?" said she, her hands fastening themselves tightly in his doublet, as if to hold him from death. "Dead, you cannot love me!"

"No, but better this one moment, loving you, and loved by you, though with death I purchase it!" said he, stroking her hair tenderly.

"But if I give up your love to save your life?" she pleaded.

"It but makes it easier, dear heart, for me to give up my life, rather than betray your love!" said Bussy, fondly. "I will never deny my love for you! I will not leave you while I live! I will not lie! I will not be false! Do you hear, Heloise? And you, Madame! 'Tis the word of Bussy d'Amboise, the word of a gentleman! — for there is one gentleman left in France who is not afraid

to face his foes, though they come by hundreds, and who counts his life as nothing beside the minute of love that he would forfeit, were he false to it. Heloise! Let death come! This moment is mine in which to love you!"

The Countess, maddened by the sight of Heloise in the arms of Bussy, stung by his words, clutched the door, exclaiming:

"Then let death be the price of that moment!"

Heloise broke from the arms of Bussy, and threw herself against the door.

"No! No! Madame!" she cried. "Wait! Listen! He gives me up. He does not love me! I do not permit him to love me! I command him to leave me! Save him!"

"It is in vain, Heloise," said Bussy. "The more you plead for life, the more you nerve me to be worthy of the love that bids you do it!"

"Then I do not love you, Monsieur!" she cried hysterically. "There is no love on my part to be worthy of! Oh, Louis, my love! Live! Live that, though I be for ever separated from you, I may know that the same world contains us, the same sky is over us."

"Rather let me die," he said, "that some day the same grave may hold us."

"It is enough; we waste time!" exclaimed the

Countess, pale with rage. "Your love shall pay its price. You have made your choice!"

"Oh, Madame! have pity! I throw myself on my knees before you. Wait! Give me time! I will persuade him!"

Heloise clutched at the Countess' skirts to detain her. Marguerite shook her off, leaving the maiden distraught with grief and terror.

Bussy bent over her tenderly.

"Humble yourself not, Heloise! You rob me of a last embrace!" he cried, taking her to his breast. "One kiss, beloved!"

Their lips met in a long caress. Marguerite, furious at the sight, threw open the door.

"And now for other work!" roared Bussy, putting the maiden behind him, out of harm's way, and drawing his sword and dagger.

There was a rush of armed men, led by Alain, the Count carefully locking the door before joining in the attack.

The onslaught was so precipitate that the shots from the pistols flew wide of their mark. The men knew the swordsman they faced, and steady nerve was lacking.

Bussy fought furiously against the odds. A blow from a pistol's butt knocked the dagger from his left hand, and it flew jangling upon the stone floor.

Hirelings battle in half-hearted manner, and the band proved no match for the resourceful Bussy, who ran two through the body while backing away toward the window, in whose embrasure he planned to make his stand.

The Count, confident that it were but a question of time when Bussy would be killed, led the attack from one side, while Alain pressed in upon D'Amboise from the other.

Heloise, dodging around the mass of struggling men, seized Alain, and dragged him back.

"Alain!" she screamed, above the din. "Do you not know me?"

"Heloise!" cried the young man, his arm falling to his side.

"Yes. Do not stare! It is I," cried she, clutching him. "How do I find you with these murderers?"

"To do your bidding! Yes, you shall see Henriette avenged!" he shouted, waving his sword, and returning to the fray.

The maid again caught his arm, and whirled him around. "But, oh, God!" screamed she. "He is not the guilty one! Help him, Alain, — for my sake!"

"For your sake?" gasped Alain.

"Yes, as you would have me live, help him! — I love him!"

“ Love him? You, Heloise? What witchcraft has he employed with you? ”

“ Alain, I love him! Save his life! ”

“ He has used some devil’s art to enthrall your soul! ” exclaimed the young man, pushing her from him. “ Now, more than ever, shall he die! ”

“ But, listen, Alain! Oh, Heaven! ” sobbed Heloise, staggering between him and the surging mass of men, held at bay by the skill of the swordsman.

“ He shall die, I tell you! You bade me slay him! I shall carry out your command! ”

“ My command! Oh, my God! ” moaned the girl, in anguish. “ I withdraw that command. Have I not told you it was not he whom we should have sought? ”

“ You were to be my wife for my killing him, and I shall so win you, ” doggedly replied Alain.

“ I take back that promise, Alain. Do you hear? If you help murder him, I will hate you! I will curse you! ”

“ You are mad, Heloise. When he is dead, you will be yourself again. ”

Alain tore himself from her grasp, and pushed forward in the attack upon Bussy, who still bravely defended himself. Three lay dead upon the floor, while two, so badly wounded they could not rise, swore madly, urging the others on.

Bussy threw the table in the way of the onrushing men, stopping the Count with a twist of his sword that disarmed him, sending the blade crashing against the wall. With his left hand he flung a chair into the mass in front of him, and a stool crushed in the skull of a lackey who had ventured too close. The empty pistols thrown at him struck him about the legs and arms, stinging, spurring him to mightier efforts.

Heloise watched, fascinated by the sight.

"Oh, Monsieur le Comte!" she screamed. "For God's sake, hear me! He has not injured you! Listen, Monsieur! He does not love your wife! It is I whom he loves! Hear me, I beg!"

She rushed to where De Montsoreau stooped to again seize his sword. He shook himself free.

"Away, Mademoiselle!" he cried. "This is no time or place for you."

"Oh, God in Heaven! can nothing save him?" she cried in anguish, as she ran to the door leading into the passage. Finding it locked, she pounded upon it with her fists, calling loudly.

"Father! Etienne! Help! Help! Oh, Holy Mother above! Is there no aid?"

She sank down exhausted, weeping.

Meanwhile, Bussy had fought his way to the table beneath the window. With a bound, he mounted it, clearing the space before it with his

sword. His assailants, tired and out of breath, fell back to recover. The fight came to a standstill.

"The man is superhuman!" yelled De Montsoreau, chagrined at his defeat.

Save for a slashed doublet and many bruises, Bussy stood looking down upon the murderous band, calm, self-possessed, unharmed.

"He is a fiend!" cried Alain.

"His sword is the Devil's own!" exclaimed one of the band, binding a wound in his arm.

"Could we but get his sword away!" cried the Count. "You, Madame, failed in that, as in other things. But think not he shall escape. He dies to-night, and here."

"Bussy and his sword are one flesh, one piece of steel, Monsieur!" gaily jeered D'Amboise, taunting the Count.

Alain listened, and recalled a similar scene, not many months before, when it was his sword in the hands of the gallant that had saved him from slaughter.

"Monsieur Bussy!" he exclaimed, suddenly waving the Count aside, as he strode to a position close to the Duke's first gentleman.

The men were motionless. Heloise and the Countess, wonderingly expectant, drew near, awaiting the answer.

"Well?" said Bussy, looking down at the young man.

"You speak of your sword, Monsieur, and of its power," said Alain.

"Aye," replied Bussy, bowing to Alain. "I recall your service to me once!" he added. "I regret to have had to turn my sword against you!"

"Your memory flatters me," replied Alain. "And do you recall your promise to repay me with what gift I might ask? Your promise, made on the word of a gentleman?"

"Well, Monsieur?" cried Bussy, proudly.

"The time has come for me to demand my gift!" cried Alain, shrilly, his excitement carrying him away. "Your sword, Monsieur!"

He advanced toward Bussy confidently, with extended hand.

The armed men fell back, as Heloise ran to Alain in horror.

"Oh, Alain!" she cried.

The young man did not turn. His hand, held to receive his gift, trembled in his eagerness.

Heloise looked down, caring not to witness what she knew would happen. There, upon the floor, lay Bussy's dagger. She stooped, picking it up.

The Countess smiled viciously, as she quoted Bussy's former words, reversing their order:

“ A gentleman does not deny his love, his race, or his word, Monsieur! ” said she.

“ Even to his assassin, Madame! ” added Bussy, proudly.

Holding his sword by its point, Bussy handed the hilt to Alain, who took it with hesitation, startled and shamed by Bussy's ready compliance.

The Count, watching with catlike alertness, crept up behind Alain, sword drawn, preparing to lunge at the unarmed, helpless Bussy.

When her fingers had closed around the dagger, Heloise had only thought to die with her love; but a sudden fury seized her.

As De Montsoreau pushed Alain aside, that he might strike, she sprang upon him, plunging the dagger into his heart. He fell at her feet, dead!

“ This time I struck better, Count de Montsoreau! ” she cried wildly. “ Bussy, your lesson was not given to me in vain! ”

The maiden ran to his side, the dagger tightly clutched. She meant to share his death, if death were his fate.

The murderous band stood still. There, at their feet, lay the dead Count. They had no heart to continue, and slowly, with many a fearful, backward glance, they left the hall, carrying their dead and wounded.

“ Aye, Alain! ” said Heloise. “ Hang your head

for shame, and thank God you have been saved from the stain of murder. You see those knaves have no mind to serve that assassin further, now that he is dead and cannot pay. Madame de Montsoreau, console yourself in knowing you are freed from a villain." She stood proudly watching them, till they, too, had left the hall. Then she turned slowly.

"Monsieur Bussy," said she, shyly, with downcast eyes, "if you should ask my hand again, my father would not —"

With a bound, Bussy leaped to the floor, joyously folding her to his heart.

"Heloise!" he cried. "Mine at last — and for ever!"

THE END.

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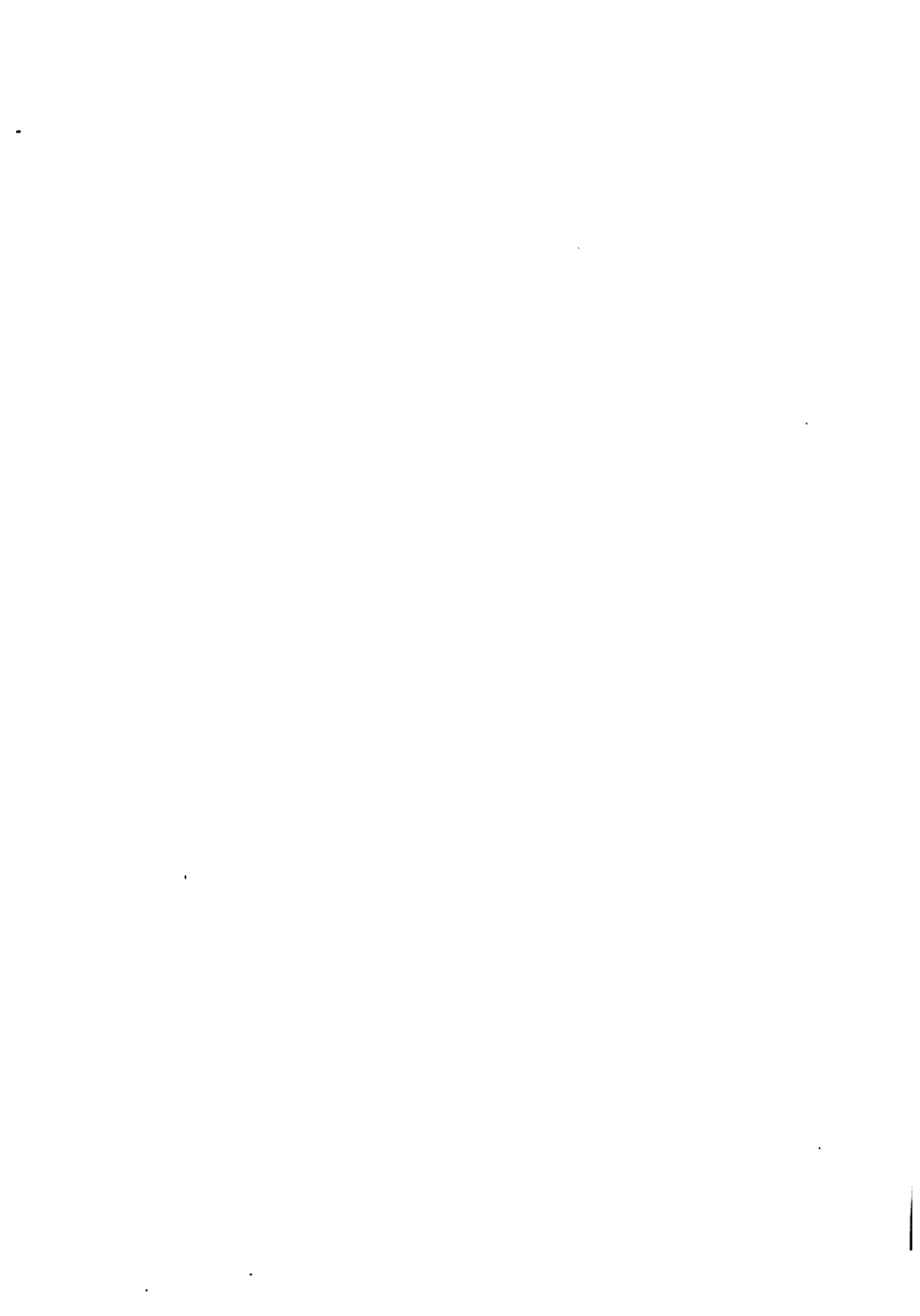
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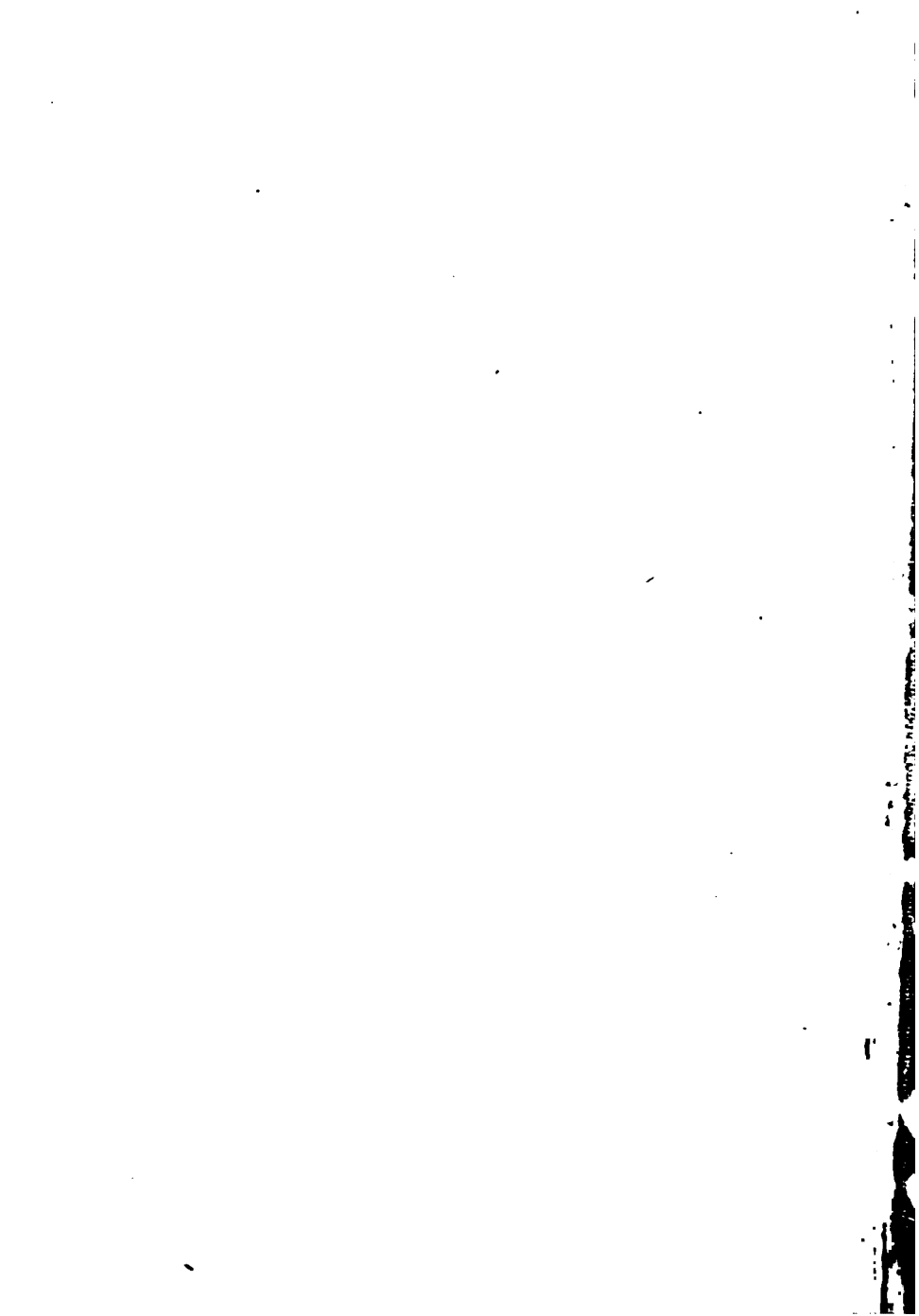
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