

Brebner Percy James

Vayenne



Percy Brebner
Vayenne

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CHAPTER I

THE TRAVELLER ARRIVES

A long, straight road, no hedge or ditch separating it from the fields on either side, but at intervals of fifty yards or so trees in pairs; tall, thin trees, but heavy-headed and with foliage spread out fussily near the ground, all bent forward in one direction, and looking for all the world like ancient dames with their petticoats held out of the mud as they struggled wearily homeward against a strong wind. In its season this road could be muddy, as many a traveller knew, the fierce storms which raged across the low country making it almost impassable for days together in winter-time. To-day the ancient diligence which traversed it at an even, jog-trot pace only left a long cloud of dust in its wake; and the driver, an old man who had driven along this road at regular intervals for more years than he could count, who possibly knew the exact number of trees which lined it, sat hunched upon his seat and had nothing to do. Perhaps he slept, for the horses knew the way well enough to have performed the journey without him. Earlier in the day there had been half a dozen passengers, but of these only one remained, and he had found the driver so taciturn, and his patois so difficult to understand when he did speak, that he had given up all attempt at conversation. He was weary of the long journey, and dozed whenever the jolting of the somewhat crazy vehicle would allow him to do so.

For two days he had waited in the little frontier town, for the diligence only performed this journey twice in the week, and he had been travelling since early morning. At the last moment, indeed, he had hesitated whether he should take the journey at all. It was an absurd fancy that had brought him to this Duchy of Montvilliers, a wonder and speculation which had lain latent in him since childhood. As a boy a few chance words, and an elderly woman's earnest looking into his face, had stirred his imagination. Since then the work of life had come to fire him with other ambitions, some partially realized, perhaps, some found to be unworthy of pursuit; and then, suddenly as it were, almost as though some compelling voice had spoken to his inner consciousness, the old wonder and speculation had sprung again into life, and at last he was nearing the end of a journey which as a lad he had promised himself one day to take.

The sun was fast sinking westward when the jolting of the vehicle again woke the traveller, and he saw that the aspect of the land had changed. The monotonous pairs of trees had gone, and the diligence was ascending a stiff incline between two swelling downs, part of a long line of hills which had risen mistily in the distance before them all day. It was a long climb and the horses stopped at intervals to rest without any suggestion from the driver; on their own initiative they went on again, and finally paused on the summit before beginning the long descent on the other side.

"Vayenne?" asked the traveller, suddenly leaning toward the driver and pointing down into the valley. The man looked at him with sleepy eyes and nodded. It seemed a foolish question to him. What place could it be but Vayenne?

It lay in the gathering twilight like the city of a dream, indefinite, unreal, mystical. The hills overshadowed it, keeping silent watch; and spanned by a stone bridge, a river, dotted with green islands like emeralds upon its bosom, swept around its southern and western sides, holding it in its arms. Over all was the diaphanous haze of evening and silence, save for the thin music of bell and chime from belfry or clock tower, joyous little cadences which rose and fell at short intervals. Indistinctly the eye could trace the direction of some of the wider streets, and toward the northern

side, dominating the city from rising ground, five gaunt, weather-beaten towers, with massive walls and battlements between, frowned over all below. There was menace in this castle, power, and perchance cruelty. It spoke of despotic government, of might as right, of stern repression, of feudal laws and the crushing of all liberty; and yet close to it, the crowning glory of a glorious church, a great spire pierced upward through the haze, telling of other things and a time to come.

They were complex thoughts which filled the mind of the traveller as the diligence swung rapidly down toward the town. To him, indeed, Vayenne was a dream city, an unknown city; yet somehow it had always seemed a part of himself. In an indefinite way he had always known that some day he would come to it, would have a part in its life, be of it; and now, as every moment brought him nearer to it, he forgot that he was a casual traveller merely, that only a few hours ago he had hesitated whether he should come at all. He was obliged to come. He was only fulfilling his destiny.

Lights began to blink in the houses as they crossed the old stone bridge and passed under a massive gateway on the city side of it. Lights swung at street corners as the lumbering vehicle passed over the cobblestones with much rattle and noise upward toward the castle. Even the driver roused a little from his lethargy, and cracked his whip. They had proceeded some distance when he suddenly drew to the side of the street, and the horses came to a standstill. They were evidently used to such pauses; for in these narrow thoroughfares traffic was difficult, and the diligence made no pretence of keeping time. There was the sound of horses' hoofs behind, and in a few moments a woman, followed by half a dozen horsemen, rode by. She checked her pace as she passed, and turned to look at the traveller, while the driver slowly raised his whip in salute. The light from a lamp swinging from a bracket on the wall fell upon her, and the traveller saw that she was young, two or three and twenty, her figure slight and supple. Her dark gray habit may have made her look smaller than she really was, and the mare, which she sat like an accomplished horsewoman, was a big and powerful animal, almost too much, it seemed, for those little gloved hands which held the reins to manage. Yet there was strength in those little hands. There was a suggestion of strength about her altogether, strength of will and purpose. It shone out of a pair of dark gray eyes set under gracefully curved brows and veiled with long lashes. The firm little mouth showed it, and there was just enough suspicion of squareness about the chin to emphasize it. She had nut-brown hair, a curl of which fell upon her forehead from underneath a gray astrakhan cap, and the little head was poised proudly on her shoulders. No ordinary woman this, not one to be easily swayed by love or any other passion, a woman to rule rather than be ruled.

"Who is that?" asked the traveller, leaning toward the driver as the cavalcade passed on.

"A beautiful woman," was the slow answer.

"But her name?"

The driver cracked his whip and the diligence began to rattle over the cobbles again.

"Some day she may be Duchess," he said, as though he was following his own train of thought rather than answering his companion's question.

There was no time to tempt him into being more explicit, for the horses turned a corner sharply, and with a shake of their harness stopped before a long, low building, on which the traveller could just decipher the words, Hôtel de la Croix Verte. It was an old house, redolent of the past, the lights within shining but faintly through the small windows. Its upper story projected over the narrow footway, and its lower walls bulged outward, as though they had grown tired of the load they had had to bear so long. Its age seemed to have infected its inhabitants, too, for some moments elapsed before the door opened, and a man came out leisurely to receive the parcels which the diligence had brought. That it had brought a traveller also did not excite him, nor was he in any hurry to welcome him. Perhaps the traveller was half dreaming, for he almost started when the man turned and spoke to him.

"Yes; it's a long journey," he answered, "and I am ready to do justice to the best you have."

He followed the landlord along a narrow passage and up a twisting staircase.

"The best room," said the landlord as he opened a door and lit a candle. "There's no one else staying in the house. Strangers do not come much to Vayenne."

"No?" said the traveller interrogatively.

"No," returned the landlord. "It's not an easy journey, and, besides, what can strangers want in Vayenne? By your accent you'll be –"

"Well, to what extent does my accent betray me?" asked the traveller, with a smile.

"English or German," was the answer.

"Englishman," said the traveller – "Roger Herrick by name, a casual visitor who may be interested enough to stay in Vayenne some time."

The landlord nodded, as though he were not surprised at anything an Englishman might do, and went out promising an excellent dinner forthwith.

"So I am in Vayenne at last!" Herrick exclaimed as he glanced around the old room, pleased with its panelled walls and low, beamed ceiling. "In Vayenne! I hardly thought when the time came that the fact would impress me so much."

He went to the window, opened it, and looked out. Like shadows in the darkness he could dimly discern the towers of the castle above the roofs opposite, and the slender spire with its top lost in the night. The chimes made little bursts of ecstatic music like the voices and laughter of spirits in the air. Somewhere there was the low rumble of a cart over the cobbles, but the street below him was empty. The diligence had gone; no pedestrian was on the narrow footway. It almost seemed as though he were deserted, left here for all time; that, however anxious he might be to leave Vayenne, he would not be able to do so. The city of his dreams had him fast, and already the first of her surprises was preparing for him. Could he have looked but for an instant into the near future, he might possibly have gone to dinner with less appetite than he did.

The long, low room had its windows toward the street, and was broken up by partitions. A waiter pointed to one of these separate retreats as Herrick entered, and he saw that his table was laid there. On the other side of the partition four men were sitting, a bottle of wine and glasses on the table between them. Herrick casually noticed that one was in uniform and that another wore the cassock of a priest, but took no further interest in them, and he had come into the room so quietly that they did not look up at his entrance, and were perhaps unconscious that any one was dining on the other side of the partition.

The landlord had been true to his word, and had provided an excellent dinner. It was good wine, too, that was set upon the table, and Herrick began to discover how hungry he really was. For a long time his attention was confined to the business in hand, and then he suddenly became conscious of the conversation on the other side of the partition. It seemed to have taken a more serious turn, the voices were dropped a little, and it was this fact, no doubt, which made Herrick listen unconsciously.

"Such men as he is die hard," said one man. "The old Duke may hold death at arm's length for years yet."

"Not so, my son. I know something of his disease, and naught but a miracle can help him. A few weeks perhaps, and then –"

It was evidently the priest who spoke. His voice was soft and persuasive, and Herrick thought that some suggestive gesture, explaining what must ensue, had probably finished the sentence.

There was silence for a few moments, and then the ring of a glass as it was placed on the table.

"When the reins fall from a strong hand there is always trouble," said another man.

"And opportunity, don't forget that," said the priest. "You have your ambitions; have we not talked of them before this? They are within a few short weeks of realization, if you will be guided by me."

"Ay, or I am within measurable distance of losing my head, if things go awry," was the answer. "There are always two sides to such a scheme as this."

"I hadn't thought to find a coward in Gaspard Lemasle," said the priest.

There was a sudden movement and quick shuffle of feet, then a laugh, the laugh of a strong man, deep-chested and resonant.

"Bah! I forgot. One cannot fight with a cassock. See here, Father Bertrand, granted I have ambitions, where it not better to stand by the stronger side? Count Felix is strong, even as his uncle. The old Duke looks upon him as his successor. Strong hands are ready to catch the reins as they fall. In the face of such a man will Vayenne shout for a pale-faced scholar it has little knowledge of, think you?"

"And what reward is Gaspard Lemasle to win from Count Felix?" asked the priest. "Is Gaspard Lemasle's support necessary to him? Rewards come only to those who struggle for them. For you they lie in the hands of that pale scholar at Passey. There will be many to shout for him, and, with a determined leader to fight for him, I can see enthusiastic crowds in the streets of Vayenne."

"Father Bertrand speaks nothing but the truth," said another man, and it seemed certain that only Lemasle's consent was wanting to complete a scheme which had long occupied the priest's attention.

"Maybe," Lemasle returned, "I care not overmuch which way it goes."

"And you have forgotten Mademoiselle de Liancourt," said the priest.

"A second time your cassock protects you, father," laughed the other. "It were a sin, indeed, to forget her. Pass the bottle, and let us have brimming glasses to drink her health. Christine de Liancourt, the most beautiful woman in Montvilliers."

"In the world," corrected the priest quietly. "She is heart and soul for this pale scholar, and she has mentioned Gaspard Lemasle to me."

"By the faith, you shall tell me what she said," the other cried, striking the table until the glasses rattled.

"Nay, nay, it was for no ears but mine; yet, mark you, she knows a brave man when she sees him, and –"

The priest stopped suddenly. The silent street had suddenly awoke. There were hurrying feet and men shouting to each other as they ran, then the sound of a gun which boomed in deep vibration and died slowly away in the distance.

With inarticulate and fragmentary exclamations the four men sprang up and hurried to the door. Herrick followed them more leisurely.

"The Duke is dead!" a man cried to them as they stood in the doorway, and as he ran he shouted the news to others who had been brought from their houses by the sound of the gun. "The Duke is dead!"

"Dead!" said the priest slowly, crossing himself, more by habit than intention it seemed, for other thoughts than of death were reflected in his face. He looked at his companions one after the other, deep meaning in his look, and last of all his eyes rested on Roger Herrick, standing a little in the rear, his face lit up by the light of a lamp hanging in the passage. For a moment the priest did not appear to realize that Herrick was a stranger, and then his eyes opened wider and remained fixed upon him.

"A sudden death," said Herrick. "I heard you say just now that he might live for weeks."

Father Bertrand glanced back into the room they had left, to the place where he and his companions had been sitting.

"Very sudden," he answered, and then after a pause he added, "Very strange."

CHAPTER II

THE CROIX VERTE LOSES ITS GUEST

"Does the death of a man prevent the living from finishing the bottle? It's a sin to waste good wine," said Lemasle, striding back into the room.

He spoke rather as a man who was perplexed than as one who was callous. Whatever scheme Father Bertrand was persuading him to, had been in the future a few moments ago; there was plenty of time to weigh it and digest it, to play with it and calculate the chances; that cannon booming out into the night had made a quick decision imperative, and Gaspard Lemasle was troubled.

"Leave him to me," said the priest to the other two men, and then as Herrick turned and went down the passage toward the stairs, Father Bertrand drew his companions closer to him, and talked eagerly to them for a few moments.

When Herrick descended the stairs a few minutes later the passage was empty, and only a waiter was in the long room. The conversation he had chanced to overhear had made little impression upon him. Was there ever a state yet in which every citizen was contented with his rulers? Here in Montvilliers there were contentions, and the coming demise of the Duke prompted men to talk. How dangerous such talk might be, Herrick had no means of judging. He had heard a few names which had little meaning for him – a count, a beautiful woman, and a scholar. Evidently they were of import in the Duchy, but of what interest could they be to him? Nor had he particularly noticed the priest's close scrutiny of his face. Father Bertrand had been astonished to see a stranger there, one who had certainly overheard something of what had been said, and, being a politician as well as a churchman, more loyal as the latter possibly than as the former, he had naturally sought to understand what manner of man this stranger might be. That was all.

So Herrick sought to dismiss the occurrence from his mind as he passed out of the inn, and, after standing on the narrow footway for a moment looking up and down the street, turned in the direction of the castle, bent on a short walk before bed.

There is ever a sense of mystery in an unknown city when it is traversed for the first time after nightfall. Seen over the intervening roofs, some tower or battlemented edifice, rising gray and ghost-like in the dim light of the moon as it did to-night, seems full of mystery; there is a secret in every street turning to right and left, leading we know not whither; in every narrow alley, looking dangerous betwixt frowning walls; in every dark window, from whence evil might peep out unseen. In Vayenne this sense of mystery was intensified since for long centuries history had been busy with it. Its interest lay in the folded mantle of the past rather than in the open lap of the present. Its foundations were in the days of Charlemagne, and in war and peace it had played a foremost part since then. Hate and ambition had fought out their deadly feuds around it and in its streets. Thrice it had closed its gates against the invader and stood a siege. Chivalry had held sway in it, and in cruel ages deeds unspeakable had been perpetrated within its walls. It had had its periods of great glory and of even greater neglect, of victory and defeat, yet it stood to-day as it ever had stood, the capital of the Duchy of Montvilliers, the centre of an independent state, the dukes of which could still link themselves with those Frankish pirates who had conquered and made their home here.

But to-day Vayenne had fallen behind in the march of modern civilization. For the most part its streets were old and ill-lighted. Men still inhabited houses which had stood for centuries, the castle still frowned over the city as it had done in the Middle Ages, and the ruling hand had still an iron grip in it. Perhaps nowhere in Europe had the ways of the foreigner made less progress. Travellers had not yet marked Vayenne as a place to visit. It was not easy of access, and no one had written eulogies concerning it. That it had fallen behind the times in this manner may have

been a potent factor in keeping it inviolate and independent. What wonder then if its rulers, and its people, too, were satisfied with things as they were?

Well might a traveller feel strangely alone and out of the world in this city, whose monuments of chiselled stone and sturdy oak had defied the ravages of the conqueror and of time. Yet no such strangeness took possession of Roger Herrick. Vayenne had been to him a dream city. He had known of it from earliest childhood, why and how he hardly understood; as a boy he had vowed one day to see and know it in reality; and to-night the sudden rushes of bell and chime music, the very cadences of the carillon, which came from the belfry of the great church whose spire rose high toward heaven, seemed familiar. They were not new, he had only forgotten them for a while. He seemed to have known these dark streets with their overhanging houses in some other life, and in this present existence the death of the Duke to-night seemed to hold some meaning for him.

This sense of familiarity with his surroundings was particularly strong as he stopped at a corner with the intention of turning and retracing his steps to the inn. Some distance down, the street was spanned by a deep archway, in the upper part of which was a great clock. By the light of a lamp swinging at the corner, Herrick saw that it was called the Rue de la Grosse Horloge. Its upper end, at least, was better lighted than most of the streets he had passed through, and he walked toward the archway, which was old and weather-worn, and must have been a familiar object in Vayenne long before any clock was placed there. There were small shops, part of the structure on either side of the road, and in the deep arch itself, above and on the sides, were bold reliefs, some past history of the city carved into permanence in stone. Herrick paused to look up at them, his action marking him for a foreigner, for who amongst those who passed daily through that familiar archway would give them a thought? Two men walking a dozen yards behind him stopped to watch him, and when he went on, they went on, too, quickening their pace a little and drawing closer to him. The street beyond the arch was darker, most of the shops there being closed for the night, and the fact reminded Herrick that it was time to return to the Croix Verte. He turned so suddenly that he almost collided with the two men who followed him, and had walked so lightly that he was quite unconscious of their presence. One stepped aside and passed on, the other stepped back and began a voluble apology.

"Pardon, monsieur, I did not see. I was walking with my eyes on the ground. It is a bad habit."

Raising his hat and bowing even as the other did, Herrick was explaining that if there were any fault it was his, and that no apology was necessary, when an arm was thrown suddenly across his throat from behind, and he was dragged violently backward. Immediately the man in front closed with him, endeavoring to prevent his using his hands; and the attack was so unexpected that for some moments it was all Herrick could do to keep his feet. He was, however, a strong man, a wrestler and a fighter of no mean skill. With the hand that he had succeeded in keeping free he gripped the arm about his throat, and with one great heave of his body threw the man over his head on to the roadway, where he lay motionless, as though all life were beaten out of him. In another moment it would have gone hard with his other assailant had the man not slipped to the ground, keeping his arms tightly clasped round Herrick's legs, however.

"A spy! Help! A spy!" he shouted. The effect of that cry was wonderful. Before Herrick could kick himself free, a score of men were upon him. He attempted to shout an explanation, but to no purpose. This way and that was he thrown, his arms were seized and twisted behind him, and then a noose was slipped over his wrists, rendering him helpless.

Hatless and with torn clothes he was hustled down the street, the crowd about him becoming larger every moment, those on the outer fringe of it loudly questioning who he was and what he had done.

"A spy!" some one shouted.

"A quick death to all spies," came the ready answer.

Herrick had been severely handled, and for a few moments was hardly conscious of what was happening about him. The reiterated cry of "Spy" served to rouse him. For these people the word appeared to have a special interpretation. They expected and feared spies, and were inclined to be merciless. Revenge was in their minds rather than justice. That the two men who had attacked him took him for a spy, Herrick did not believe; the man clasping his legs had only raised the cry to save himself, knowing full well how promptly assistance would come to such a shout. A quick death seemed likely to follow capture, and, one man as he was against a multitude, Herrick nerved himself for a last struggle. The cord that bound his wrists was not fastened in too workman-like a fashion, he could work his hands free, and it should go hard with some before they succeeded in stringing him to some lamp at a corner, which he imagined was their intention.

The cry, however, had gone farther than the street of the great clock. There was a spirit of excitement abroad in Vayenne to-night consequent on the death of the Duke, and the closing of the shops had only sent more men into the taverns and streets to talk and perchance to plot. The cry of "Spy" had leaped from lip to lip far beyond the man who had been the cause of it, and now as the excited crowd poured out of the street into a wide, open square, and Herrick was about to make a last struggle for his life, there came a sharp word of command, a ring of steel drawn from the scabbard, and the crowd halted in confusion before a body of soldiers.

"What have we here?" said a voice which sounded familiar to Herrick.

"A spy, captain," shouted a dozen voices.

"You may easily call a man that, but the proof?"

There was silence, each man expecting his neighbor to speak.

"You may well ask for the proof, since there is none," said Herrick. "Some scoundrels –"

"Ay, and the accusation is as easily denied," interrupted the soldier, turning toward Herrick. "There was never a spy yet but had plenty of lies ready to his tongue."

"I am a stranger in Vayenne – shall I seek justice in it in vain, Captain Lamasle?" For Herrick recognized him as the soldier who had been with the priest at the Croix Verte that evening.

An expression of astonishment crossed the captain's face at being known by this stranger. It was evident that he did not recognize Herrick, but perhaps he remembered what company he had been in not long since and what had been said over the wine.

"Being so ready with my name is not much in your favor," he said; "you'll get justice, I warrant." And then in obedience to a quick command, Herrick found himself a prisoner amongst soldiers instead of in the midst of a crowd. It would be useless now to attempt to escape, and at the word of command he marched forward.

Until this moment Herrick had taken little note of his surroundings. Now a sudden rush of music in the air above made him look around him. The square was of great size, misty and ghost-like in the pale, uncertain moonlight, but, in front of him there loomed a great gateway flanked by towers, and behind and on higher ground, there were other towers and frowning walls. It was the castle, and near it rose the stately pile of a great church, its spire piercing far into the night.

As they approached the castle the great gates were flung open, and Herrick saw that the courtyard within was full of men hurrying to and fro. Horses' hoofs impatiently beat the stones, which were rough and uneven. There was much jingling of harness and ring of spur and steel. Lights shone in narrow doorways, and there was the flame of a torch here and there. All was hurry and excitement; and in some silent chamber near, the Duke lay dead. Herrick remembered this, found himself speculating upon it, yet even as he passed through the gate he hardly felt strange in playing a part in this drama.

The word "Spy" seemed to have run before him even here. That grim gateway had not kept it out. Men paused a moment to look at him: some were silent, some uttered a sound of hatred and contempt, but all seemed convinced that the accusation was a just one.

The soldiers halted by the wall some twenty feet in height. Herrick concluded that there was a terrace or garden above, because several persons, women and pages among them, were leaning over the wall looking into the court-yard below. A flight of stone steps, placed sideways to the wall, led down from this terrace, and at the foot of these steps was a woman mounted upon a beautiful bay mare, which pawed the ground, impatient to be gone. At a little distance a group of horsemen waited for her signal, which she was in the act of giving when the soldiers, with their prisoner in their midst, came to a halt not a dozen yards from her. The light from two or three torches held by servants who stood on the lower steps lit up her face, and Herrick saw again the woman who had ridden past the diligence a few hours ago, the woman who was destined to play so great a part in his life.

Captain Lemasle stepped to her side and saluted.

"Are you not to ride with us?" she asked. "We are waiting."

"Pardon, mademoiselle. I have just been rescuing a spy. The crowd had caught him, and it would have gone hard with him had we not taken him."

"If he is a spy, would that have mattered?" she said, loud enough for Herrick to hear.

"There is justice in proving a man guilty before he is hanged," Lemasle answered.

"Since when have you been so fastidious? I have heard other things of Gaspard Lemasle. Let me look at this spy."

"I seem better known than I imagined," the soldier muttered as he stood aside.

She rode toward Herrick, the men about him falling back, until she was close upon him.

"Look up," she commanded, "and let me see the face of a spy."

"Not of a spy, mademoiselle, but of an honest man," he answered, looking her straight in the eyes.

"Spy, spy," she contradicted sharply, "or what do you in Vayenne at such a time as this?"

"I am a traveller."

"So are they all," she cried. "There is a guest-room within these walls for you. Vayenne knows how to welcome such travellers. Ah! I could honor an enemy, but a spy – " And there was such utter contempt in her face that Herrick could find no words to answer her.

As she tightened her reins, her riding whip slipped from her fingers and fell at his feet, and before any one could prevent him he had shaken the loosened cord from his wrists, and had stooped and picked it up. In an instant half a dozen soldiers sprang forward to prevent his attacking her. She did not flinch, but waving them back, held out her hand for the whip.

"Thank you, mademoiselle," said Herrick. "At least you have generosity enough to know that I am incapable of such a thing as that."

She looked at him for an instant as she took the whip, a new interest in her eyes, and a slight lowering of her proud head thanked him. Then she turned the mare round sharply.

"Captain Lemasle, I am ready," she said, and as the soldiers closed round Herrick again, she rode out through the grim gateway, followed by the troop of horsemen.

CHAPTER III

THE DWARF OF ST. ETIENNE

Along dark stone passages, through many a doorway, and across two or three rough courtyards, half a dozen soldiers conducted Herrick to his "guest-room." The woman's pleasantry had caught their fancy, and they laughed boisterously as they went, hoping, perhaps, to put fear into the heart of their prisoner.

They halted before a low door, which one man unlocked with a great key. The immense thickness of the wall formed a narrow passage, at the end of which some steps descended into a semicircular cell of no great size, but of considerable height.

"There's straw for a bed," said the jailer, pointing to a corner, "though how it came here I don't understand, and you've got heaven's light itself for a candle." And he nodded toward a patch of moonlight. "There are honest soldiers who are worse lodged, I warrant."

"It ill becomes a guest to complain of his treatment," Herrick answered.

"Ay; that idea of a guest-room was smartly thought of," the man returned, "but maybe you hardly see the full humor of it. This is the South Tower, and it's usually the last lodging a man needs this side the grave."

"Is that so?" And Herrick's attitude had interest in it, but little personal concern.

"Yes; and it's a short walk from here to the last yard we crossed. It usually happens there." And the jailer made a suggestive downward sweep with his arm.

"Axe or sword?" asked Herrick.

"Sword. Unless they decide to make an especial example in your case, then they're likely to hang you over the great gateway."

"Am I sufficiently important for that, think you?"

"I've known a dead sparrow on a string scare away much finer birds," the jailer answered; "but at any rate you're no white-livered man, and I shouldn't grieve to see you cheat both sword and rope."

"Thanks for your good will," said Herrick. "Who knows, I may live to speak a comforting word to you. I will be honest with you, I had not appreciated the full extent of the lady's humor."

With something like a salute, deference to the prisoner's courage, the jailer departed, and the key grated harshly in the lock as the bolts shot home.

High up near the roof there was a deep-set window through which the moonlight came. The tower could not be shut in by high walls, therefore, and probably was one of the outer towers of the castle. From that window possibly a prisoner might look into a free world, reach it, perhaps, if age had worn the bars loose in their stone sockets. A moment later Herrick felt certain that only this single wall held him from freedom, for the music of the carillon burst upon his ears. His fancy made the moonbeams the path along which the music travelled. But the window was unattainable. The rounded walls were almost as smooth as if the surface had been polished, and the cell was bare of everything but the heap of straw in the corner.

"My first night in Vayenne," he muttered, and some of the bravery with which he had addressed the jailer was wanting. The moonlight was upon his face as he spoke, a serious face just now, although neither hopelessness nor despair was in it. It could hardly be called a handsome face, yet it was one to remember. They were good, steady eyes, and if the nose and mouth were not an artist's ideals of beauty, in the whole face the artist would have found attraction. It was strong, forceful, fashioned in an uncommon mould; it was a face apart rather than one of a type, a strong family possession which to strangers had often marked him for a Herrick.

"My first night in Vayenne," he repeated as he began to pace his narrow cell slowly. How long ago it seemed since he had first seen the city from the brow of the hills. How much had happened in the few short hours since then, and yet one incident stood out more clearly than all the rest, the woman leaning from her horse to look into the face of a spy. Even now her contempt hurt him. It was hateful to appear mean in her eyes. All else that had happened to him seemed of little account beside this. The moment his eyes had rested upon her there had sprung a desire in his soul to serve her. In that service he felt himself capable of much, yet she despised him. A little touch of sympathy had shown in her face for a moment when he handed her the whip, but it had no power to obliterate the contempt. That was her true feeling toward him, the other was but the passing pity which a woman may have even for a coward.

The carillon had sounded several times, and the direction of the moon ray had changed, leaving the floor of the cell in darkness; but buried in thought Herrick took no notice of the little rushes of music, nor was he conscious of the deepening gloom around him until a sudden shadow seemed to flit through the chamber, and a new stealthy sound startled him. Instinctively he drew back to the wall, that whatever enemy might be near should have to face him and not be able to take him unawares. Once to-night already he had been seized from behind.

Standing on the outside ledge of the window, holding on to the bars and peering into the cell, was a figure that might well startle the bravest. The opening could not be more than four feet in height, yet it was sufficient to allow this figure to stand upright. Head, feet, and hands were at least normal in size, those of a full-grown and powerful man, the body was that of a child, though its curiously twisted form might have abnormal strength in it. His hair was long, and a thick, stubbly beard and whiskers completely surrounded his face. He was ugly in the extreme, and even Herrick was pleased to think that solid bars were between them.

For full five minutes the dwarf stood there, uttering no sound, but moving his head from side to side, trying to pierce the darkness, and once or twice he leant backward at arm's length to look down on the outside below him. Then he took hold of one bar with both hands, and, lifting it out of its socket, laid it carefully along the window-ledge. From the breast of the loose smock-like garment he wore he took a length of rope, knotted one end round one of the bars, and let the other end fall into the cell. For a moment he waited and listened; then, with the agility of a gorilla, he swung himself down, and stood on the floor of the cell, the rope still in his hand, as though he were prepared to spring upward to safety again at the first sign of danger.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" said Herrick suddenly.

The dwarf turned quickly toward him.

"Hush! It's only friend Jean."

"I have no such friend."

"You do not know it, but yes, from this moment you have. See here, my knife; watch, I fling it across the floor! Take it, it is for your protection – to show my good faith. I have no other weapon. Now, let's come close and look at each other."

The knife, a formidable blade, came skimming across the stone flags to Herrick's feet. He picked it up, and walked into the centre of the cell to meet his strange visitor.

"You must bend down to let me be sure that you are the man," said the dwarf.

"You have seen me before, then?"

"To-night when she rode across the court-yard to look at you. Ah, yes, you are the man. You were so quiet I thought they had put you elsewhere. Did I frighten you?"

"Well, you startled me, friend Jean."

The dwarf laughed a little, low chuckle, and, silently clapping his hands, stood on one foot and scratched the calf of his leg with the other.

"Ah! So I startled you, friend Spy."

"Stop! Not that word."

"I must needs call you by some name. Give me another."

"Roger Herrick."

"Friend Roger, good. It comes to my tongue easily. Let's sit, and I'll tell you who I am." And doubling his legs under him he sank cross-legged onto the floor.

"I will lean by the wall, Jean, I find it easier," said Herrick.

"Ah, there are compensations, after all, for a man like me. To know Vayenne is to know me; you can't help it. They call me an innocent; you know what that means?"

"Yes."

"But not all it means, I warrant," chuckled the dwarf. "I get pity; I am not supposed to do things like other men. Who cares where I go? In the castle, in the church, in a house where there's feasting – anywhere – I don't count. Who cares if I listen? It's only Jean; in at one ear, out at the other. No one looks to me for work, they'd sooner pay me for playing the fool, and I let 'em, I let 'em." And somewhere in his strange, loose garments he made the coins jingle. "So I go in and out as I will. If I curled up to sleep on the rug at the Duke's door they'd hardly trouble to disturb me, I count for such a little. Generally I sleep in the church."

"In the church?"

"Ay; in the porch. They call me the dwarf of St. Etienne. Listen! there's its music." And he remained silent with uplifted finger until the ripple of the carillon had died away into the night. "I'm a little fellow to have so large a church to myself, as I often do at nights; and, friend Roger, I see things in St. Etienne when the moonlight sends faint, colored beams through the painted windows. There are legends and superstitions about St. Etienne, and people are superstitious about me, too. They believe I know things, and so I do, but not of the sort they fancy."

A strange little madman, Herrick thought, yet one with a method surely, as the unbarred window showed.

"An innocent, that's what they call me," the dwarf went on, as though he answered his companion's thought, "and though I am no more one than you are, it suits my purpose. My wisdom would get any other man into trouble."

"That loose bar, for instance," said Herrick, pointing to the window.

"Yes; but I never thought of the use I should one day put it to. It is well to have more than one hole to creep into, and few would expect to find a man lodging in the South Tower of his own free will."

"I hear it has an evil reputation," said Herrick.

"Ay; the grave's anteroom. So I chose it as a hiding-place. There are times when I like to sleep here, to be alone and think of all I hear and see. I was many nights loosening that bar."

"And why have you come to-night – to sleep here?"

"No; to plot with friend Roger," the dwarf answered promptly. "The Duke died to-night; you know that? Out of his death will come trouble for many – for the woman you saw in the court-yard a little while since. Ah! That moves you. She is beautiful, friend Roger."

"Who is she?"

"Mademoiselle Christine de Liancourt, and might be ruler in Montvilliers, but that the law denies it to a woman. There are many who would overthrow that law if she would let them, but she will make no sign. The Duke is dead; his son must reign in his stead. This son is a poor sort of fellow, a lover of books instead of a man of affairs."

"The pale scholar of Passey," said Herrick.

"How learnt you that catch phrase?" asked the dwarf sharply.

"I overheard it to-night."

"Yes; they call him that," Jean went on slowly, "and in truth he may make us a poor Duke, but Mademoiselle de Liancourt thinks otherwise. Count Felix – maybe you overheard him mentioned to-night?"

"I did. He would be Duke, and the old Duke wished it so."

"You have great knowledge for a casual traveller in Vayenne, friend Roger," said the dwarf with some suspicion, "but you shall explain it to me presently. Count Felix would be Duke; more, would wed with Christine de Liancourt, and she loves not either of these ideas. To-night she rides to Passey to carry news of the Duke's death to his son, and to bring him to Vayenne."

"A strange office for a woman to perform; stranger still that Count Felix should let her go and jeopardize his schemes," Herrick said.

"She has influence with the scholar, who has no desire to be a Duke, that is why she was determined to go. Count Felix thought it wise not to thwart her, since he would stand well in her favor, but he has arranged that an accident shall prevent the scholar ever reaching Vayenne. The escort will be attacked, and it is arranged shall be beaten, and no effort will suffice to save the life of the scholar. It is cleverly conceived, eh, friend Roger? A man who can plot so prettily will go far toward success."

"But you could have warned her," Herrick exclaimed. "Why didn't you?"

"I am an innocent. Who would believe me?"

Herrick glanced at the window.

"Of what think you, friend Roger?"

"That Mademoiselle sorely needs a swift messenger to-night."

The dwarf sprang to his feet.

"Truly, by the way one man gets in another may well leave. But stay." And he put his hand on Herrick's arm. "I took you not for a spy when I saw you in the court-yard to-night, but how came you by your knowledge of the scholar of Passey?"

"As I dined to-night at the Croix Verte I heard a priest talk of him."

"A narrow, hatchet-faced priest, with never a smile, and eyes that look into you without blinking?"

"The same."

"Ah, Father Bertrand has his plot, too. When he talks, friend Roger, remember how easy it is for a man to lie. Come, you shall be the swift messenger Mademoiselle needs. That is why I came to-night. See, I have brought what shall pass you easily through the streets." And he produced a priest's cassock and cloak with a hood, which he had deftly fastened round him under the folds of his smock. "I borrowed them from St. Etienne." And then, as Herrick arrayed himself in the garments, he silently clapped his hands. "You are more like a priest than most of the real ones I know," he chuckled.

"I do not know how I am to travel to Passey, but, at least, I trust you, and there's the proof of it," said Herrick, handing the dwarf his knife.

"A little while ago you didn't know that the bar was loose in that window," said Jean, taking the weapon, "and you didn't know me. To-morrow is as far off as next year for all a man knows of it."

"That's true."

"There are those who would wed to-morrow, yet die to-night," the dwarf went on. "It's a world of minutes for us all. You come to understand these things when you roam through St. Etienne at nights. I'll set you on your way to Passey within an hour unless 'twixt now and then time ends for me. If so, you must needs shift for yourself."

He caught hold of the rope as he spoke, and swung himself to the window-ledge with the agility of an ape. Impeded by his unaccustomed garments, Herrick found it a more difficult matter; but he was strong and athletic, and in a few moments was crouching on his knees beside the dwarf.

The bars were placed midway in the thickness of the wall, so that on either side there was room for them both.

"We'll shut our door," whispered the dwarf when they had crawled through the opening, and he replaced the movable bar and drew up the rope. The next instant he had gripped his companion's arm to compel him to silence and to keep him motionless. Below was the sound of a heavy step, which came to a halt immediately beneath them, and from within the cell came a grating noise. It was the great key being thrust into the lock.

CHAPTER IV THE ROAD TO PASSEY

That intricate calculations occupied Father Bertrand's mind as he slowly paced his room from end to end was apparent in his face. Ascetic in appearance, wont to present a calm exterior under the most trying circumstances, the fact of his restlessness proved that he had reached some crisis, that some part of his scheme was on the point of settlement. Father Bertrand was a power in Vayenne. Not greatly beloved, perhaps – he was too stern and unbending for that – his priestly office, nevertheless, appealed strongly to a people naturally superstitious, while his learning and political acumen made him forceful with those who ruled. He held no office; but even the late Duke, strong as he was, had sometimes been guided by his opinion, and Count Felix recognized long ago, that, in his claim to the Dukedom, the support of Father Bertrand would be of very real value.

If he is a weak man who cannot refrain from speaking his thoughts, the priest was a very strong man, for to no one had he betrayed himself. Count Felix felt confident of his support; Mademoiselle de Liancourt believed that he heartily shared her ideas of right and justice; while, as a priest, he spoke with authority to the great mass of the people, who believed his policy based entirely upon his religion. A few who fondly believed themselves in his confidence, but were in reality little more than his tools, knew at least that other schemes were working in his mind, and that, as a member of a secret order, his information was invariably correct and reached him long before it was known in the castle. In a peculiar sense he was all things to all men, yet really known by none. Such a man must needs walk warily, for his path is beset with snares.

Father Bertrand, moreover, was a man of wealth. His charity was known in Vayenne, yet he fared simply himself, it was whispered; and there were those who could tell of the mean, poor room he occupied in his house in the Rue St. Romain, a room little removed as regards comfort from that of the ordinary toiler of the city. But there were other rooms in the house in the Rue St. Romain, and there was no lack of luxury in the large chamber on the upper floor which the priest paced slowly from end to end to-night. It was evidence not only of wealth, but of taste, too, and had they known of it, many in Vayenne would probably have formed a different estimate of Father Bertrand's character.

Absorbed as he was in his calculations, the priest was keenly alive to every new sound in the street or in the house. Several times he paused to listen, and once drew aside the heavy window curtains to look down into the street below. The Rue St. Romain lay along the north side of the Church of St. Etienne, and was little frequented after nightfall. Any excitement resulting from the death of the Duke would hardly penetrate here.

There was a knocking at the door at last, and Father Bertrand immediately took his seat at a large writing-table, and, drawing some of the papers with which it was covered toward him, began to study them carefully. No matter how agitated he might be in thought, his visitor would only see him calm and self-possessed, and doubtless be more impressed than ever with the priest's strength of character.

A man entered and closed the door behind him.

"We have failed, father."

"Only a weak man admits that, Monsieur Mercier. Where is Nicolas Pigou?"

"At death's door. He is still unconscious, and the surgeon I got to him declares that half of his ribs at least must be broken."

The priest did not speak, but by a gesture asked the reason of this catastrophe.

"Our opportunity came when the stranger had passed through the arch of the great clock into the dark street beyond," said Mercier. "We had approached close behind him when he suddenly

turned, coming into collision with us. We had planned to take him quickly, place him in a carriage which had followed us, and bring him here, but his unexpected action thwarted this. Pigou passed on, and to gain time I began to apologize. Then Pigou seized him from behind, and I immediately closed with the man. Pigou is strong, as you are aware, but he was a babe in the hands of this stranger, who, with a heave of his body threw him over his head into the roadway. I should have fared no better had I not slipped to the ground and, holding his legs, shouted 'Spy!' The street was alive in a minute; but I have bruises about me which will last for many a day to come."

"And then?" said the priest quietly.

"The crowd hustled him to the end of the street, and would have hanged him there, probably, but it seems they were met by a company of soldiers, and the stranger is now a prisoner in the castle."

"You saw the soldiers take him?"

"No; I heard that later," Mercier answered. "I slipped from the crowd, and went to look after poor Pigou. There might have been awkward questions asked had he been found in the street."

"I am sorry for Nicolas Pigou," said Father Bertrand, "but if a broken rib or two is all the payment, our enterprise is cheaply won. Why do you talk of failure, Monsieur Mercier?"

"Is it not failure then?"

"Surely not. There are more ways of reaching a place than by the high road. This stranger is no spy. I shall prove that to Count Felix, and we gain our end. Indeed, circumstances have favored us. The stranger will look upon me as his deliverer, and will be the more ready to be advised. I doubt not we shall have him in this house within a few hours. Were you recognized by the crowd to-night?"

"No. I am known to few in Vayenne."

"Then, my dear Monsieur Mercier, two desperate villains set upon this poor stranger in the streets; one is like to die, it is said – the other has succeeded in escaping. This is my story – a good and plausible one, eh?" said Father Bertrand, with a smile; "and since justice done quickly has the greater mercy in it, I will go to the castle at once."

"And Gaspard Lemasle?" said Mercier as the priest rose.

"He will dance to our piping, but we shall keep him always on the chain. Untrammelled he might be dangerous."

"Is the chain forged that will hold him?"

"My son, I never confide in a man of whom I am ignorant. My friends may rest assured that I treasure some knowledge of them, some episode, perhaps, which they have forgotten, but which in an emergency will compel them to remain my friends." And while he laid one hand on his companion's arm, he touched his own forehead significantly with the other. "Come with me into another room. My servant shall set before you wine of such a vintage that you shall forget your bruises. And do not leave, Monsieur Mercier, until you are rested. Indeed, if I find you asleep in your chair when I return, I will not quarrel with you."

As he followed the priest, Mercier's estimate of his companion possibly took a wider scope than it had done before, and he wondered which of the many episodes in his life which he was unlikely to talk of the priest knew most about.

It was conclusive proof of Father Bertrand's power with the late Duke and Count Felix that he was admitted to the castle without question at so late an hour; and that the soldiers bowed to his authority was apparent when his suggestion that he should see the spy before he saw the Count met with no opposition.

"Lodged in the South Tower?" he said as he followed the jailer.

"Ay, father; it's the safest cage we have."

"Too safe for an innocent bird, master jailer."

"Well, I know naught of his innocence," said the jailer as he thrust the great key into the lock, "but I'm not regretting that he should cheat death. There's no fear about him, and there's none too many brave men in the world that we should want to hurry them out of it."

The jailer had a torch, and he preceded the priest down the narrow passage in the thickness of the walls.

"Asleep, prisoner?" he called out. "Here's a reverend father to see you, and he comes as a friend."

There was no answer, and priest and jailer looked slowly round the cell, then at each other, and then at the barred window. No ray of moonlight came through it now, but the moonlit sky was clear without, and there was no one crouching on the ledge!

The measured tread halting suddenly below, and the sound of the grating key within, had had a paralyzing effect upon both fugitive and guide for a moment. Although prepared to make a fight for it, the position appeared hopeless to Herrick; but the dwarf, who had perhaps foreseen that they would have the sentry to deal with, was quick to grasp the situation and see the way out of the difficulty. The terrace, which was considerably above the level of the floor of the cell, was only some twelve or fourteen feet below them. It was comparatively narrow and bounded by a low, battlemented wall.

"That's our road," whispered the dwarf, pointing to a certain point in this wall a little to their right. "Jump, and make for it."

As he spoke he whipped out his knife, and tucking his legs under him suddenly let himself drop upon the sentry. The thud of the fall and a feeble, stifled groan were all Herrick heard as he, too, jumped from the ledge, and, trusting implicitly to his companion, ran to the spot he had indicated. As he looked back, the dwarf rose and came quickly after him, but the sentry lay under the window and did not move.

"You have killed him!" Herrick exclaimed.

"Sharp, after me," the dwarf said, springing onto the wall, and then, as Herrick followed him, he threw himself on his stomach, twisted himself round, and holding onto the rough stonework let his legs hang down on the outside of the wall. "That's it, do the same. There's a rope here. Go steady! I'll go first. Now let me catch hold of your feet, and get the rope between them. The stones are rough enough to lower yourself by until you get a grasp on the rope with your hands."

This was the outer wall of the castle, and in the angle formed by a buttress a stout rope had been fixed.

Herrick found it no easy matter to follow the dwarf's instructions, and had he paused to consider, might have declined to make the perilous descent at all. But with Jean's help from below he managed to get the rope between his knees, and the rest was comparatively easy.

Some distance below was the roof of a house which clung to the castle wall like a mussel to a rock. The dwarf caught Herrick to steady him as he landed on the roof, for it sloped at a sharp angle, and was dilapidated.

"Sit, and put your hand on my shoulder, and shuffle down after me," he said. "Now carefully. Catch hold of this rafter. Let yourself swing, and drop lightly. It's barely four feet fall for your length of body."

Herrick did as he was told, and dropped into a dark attic, followed by the dwarf.

"You please me, friend Roger," said Jean, chuckling quietly. "My private road is not an easy one to travel in a hurry, and the man who takes it is not likely to wear a scared face and feel his knees tremble when danger comes."

"I like not murder, friend Jean."

"You'd like being murdered less, I warrant," was the prompt answer. "Besides it wasn't murder, for two reasons. Killing a man in self-defence is not murder, and you're likely to do it yourself before many hours have passed if you would serve Mademoiselle; and secondly, the sentry

yonder isn't dead. I had to let his strength out of an artificial hole lest it should come through his mouth in a shout which would have betrayed us. He will be well on his way to recovery before a new moon, and, if not, there are plenty more sentries in the castle to take his place. Come, you are not out of Vayenne yet, and you must be on your way to Passey before the dawn."

The dwarf led the way down two flights of broken stairs, and through the door of the house, and passed into a narrow, deserted street.

"We'll go quickly," he whispered. "No one will suspect you in those garments. We shall meet few, and they will think that some one dying has need of a priest, and that I have fetched you. I have done it often before."

They passed through a perfect labyrinth of narrow streets in silence, and the two or three night wanderers they met took no notice of them.

Vayenne was asleep under the pale moon; that temporary death called sleep was in every habitation. The dead Duke in his chamber in the castle was hardly less silent than the sleeping thousands he had ruled.

Presently the dwarf stopped before the door of a house at the end of a blind alley.

"We go in here, friend Roger," he said, "but by a window. The door is locked, because they who own the place still hope for a tenant, which is a forlorn hope. The house grows more rotten every day, water rats make a retreat of it, and some mischievous person has said it is haunted by a horrible ghost."

"You are that mischievous person, I suppose."

"Why think so ill of me?" chuckled the dwarf. "When I don't wish to leave the city by the gates, this is the way I go."

He led the way to a room at the top of the house.

"From the roof we scramble onto the city wall, which is low here, and rough, for the river washes its base. Sometimes, I just drop into the water, and swim, but under a low arch there is an old boat, which we will use to-night. Have you money in your purse, friend Roger?"

"A little."

"You may want more. I came provided. Here is gold," he said, taking a small leathern bag from the folds of his blouse. "Put it away carefully. You can repay me another time. Remain a priest, it may serve you to get audience with Mademoiselle more easily, but although priest without, you must be soldier within."

The dwarf went to a corner of the room, and, wrenching up a board, knelt down, and thrust his long arm into the opening, from which he drew out a sword and a revolver.

"Strap this under your robe," he said, handing Herrick the sword, "and put the revolver where you may come at it easily. And listen, friend Roger. You must come at Mademoiselle de Liancourt as your wits serve you; tell her what I have told you. She will not easily believe the tale, but you must convince her; and for the rest, circumstances must guide you."

"Do you not come with me then?"

"A little way to show you the road, then I return to plot in the city. Were I a straight man as you are, I might not have come for you to-night. That's a dark saying – I wonder if you can read its meaning?"

"I cannot, friend Jean."

"Well, you'll want all your wits for your enterprise; it's a pity to waste them on riddles. But remember this, friend Roger: when I was made in this queer shape, an ordinary heart was put into me, and there was no strange twist given to my feelings. We are not so very different, you and I, after all. Come, we waste precious time."

There was no great difficulty in scrambling onto the wall from the roof of the house, and, bidding Herrick wait, the dwarf climbed down the face of the wall almost as easily as the rough stones of it had been steps. Working his way along a narrow stone course, or ledge, which was near

the bottom, he reached an iron ring let into the wall, and, supporting himself by this, managed to drag out a small, flat-bottomed boat from beneath a nearly submerged archway.

Having carefully watched the descent of his companion, Herrick attempted to make as little of the matter as he had done. The descent ended in a sudden and rather unsteady jump, which almost sank the rickety old craft, and Herrick would certainly have fallen sideways into the water had not his companion caught him.

A fairly strong stream was running, and they were carried down some two hundred yards in the process of crossing. A belt of trees in a thick undergrowth screened the landing-place.

"I have a friend here," said the dwarf. "We will not wake him to-night, but we will borrow his horse. I will explain to-morrow."

There was a small house nestling under a clump of trees, and on the opposite side of a roadway a shed at the corner of a field. To this the dwarf went, and it was evident that he knew every corner of it intimately, for in a few moments he had saddled the horse there and led it out.

"We don't want to wake the good man, so we'll walk the animal along the grass for a little way," he said. "There is a gate higher up. You follow this road, friend Roger; it runs without interruption for many miles. At a wayside Calvary it forks; take the right-hand road. Five miles will bring you to a deep wood, and I have heard of thieves there, so it would be well to have your revolver ready. Once out of the wood keep the lefthand road, and to your left you will presently see the Château of Passey on high ground. Perhaps it would be well to let your horse go free then, and enter the village on foot. A mounted priest might cause wonder, and the horse may find his way home. Here is the gate. Mount, friend Roger. Use your horse well, and you will be in Passey before noon."

"I may overtake Mademoiselle and her escort."

"You will be clever if you do, since they have gone by a different and a shorter road, one which might not be safe for you to travel. They will be in Passey by dawn."

"And how shall I let you know how I fare and where fortune may take me?"

"Success or failure, I shall hear soon enough," the dwarf answered. "Remember only that you serve Mademoiselle de Liancourt, and that all prison windows have not bars which may be lifted out. Farewell!" And without another word, he turned, and hurried back to the river-bank, where his boat lay.

So it happened that as Father Bertrand went back to the Rue St. Romain, and the alarm given by the jailer presently resulted in the finding of the wounded sentry, Roger Herrick was galloping through the night toward Passey and the woman he was destined to serve.

CHAPTER V THE SCHOLAR

The village of Passey, nestling in the shadow of its château, looked secure, had indeed been well protected in past times, but to-day little real resistance could have been offered to a determined enemy. The outer wall of the château had crumbled and fallen in pieces, no vigilant eyes kept ward and watch from its battlements, and the serving-men in its old guard-rooms and courts were not of the kind out of which stout soldiers are made. It had been in the hands of the Duprés for three centuries or more, given originally to an ancestor in return for good service, for the family had bred many a gallant warrior in the past; but in recent years misfortune and poverty had come, and the Duprés were too proud to make petitions in the Castle of Vayenne. Nothing is easier to forget than past service if there is no present need of favors, and the Dukes of Montvilliers had practically forgotten their once powerful subject of Passey. More and more the family had lived a retired life, and the last two heads of it had been confirmed invalids. The present owner was a man of weak physique also, barred from a life in the open and all manly sports. Thrown in upon himself he had found consolation in books and in study, and had little care how the world went so it left him in peace. The late Duke, a man of warlike character and iron will, had thoroughly despised the old man at Passey, and when his son evinced a love for dreaming over books, his father sent him to Viscount Dupré. The château would serve as a convenient place of isolation, the Duke argued, and the old fool might well be made useful as a jailer to the young one.

"I hold you responsible for him," the Duke had said to Dupré. "Teach him to hate the books you love and I will find means to thank you; let him become such a one as yourself, and rest assured the reins of government will never fall into his hands when they drop from mine. The good of Montvilliers is far more to me than any son."

The Duke rode away, hoping perhaps that banishment from Vayenne would cure his son, but the lad had been at Passey ever since. How far the old Viscount attempted to turn the boy from his studies, who can say? The fact remained that he did not succeed, and Maurice de Broux – now a youth of eighteen – had found peace and contentment in the crumbling old château and was as little concerned about the world as old Dupré himself.

To-day the quiet life had suddenly been broken in upon. With early dawn a company of horsemen, a woman riding in their midst, had clattered through the village street and in at the château gates. "The Duke is dead," one serving-man presently told another, and the news spread rapidly through the village, and out into the fields beyond, where bent-backed men and women hoed. One old man there looked toward the château, and pulling off a ragged cap cried feebly, "Long live the Duke!"

In a room in the château, a room of books and students' comforts, such a room as could not have been found in the length and breadth of the Castle of Vayenne, Maurice and Mademoiselle de Liancourt had been closeted for hours. There was no more important person in Montvilliers that day than the pale scholar of Passey, yet there was no excitement in his face. That he should mourn for a father who had been little more than a stranger to him was hardly to be expected. From time to time he moved restlessly about the room, letting his companion talk, and now and again her words brought a flush to his cheek. To no one would he have listened as quietly as he did to her, for, scholar though he was by nature, he had yet something of his father in him, a temper that might burst into fury were it pressed too far. No one knew this better than Christine de Liancourt, and if any words of hers would sting him into action she would certainly speak them. For this very purpose had she come in haste to Passey. In old days she had often stood between Maurice and his father's wrath. She had prophesied that when the hour came Maurice would rise to the occasion and

make a wise ruler. He was, besides, the heir, nothing could alter that, and justice, coupled with her half-formed fear of Count Felix, drove her to espouse the young Duke's cause with all the strength that was in her.

"My dear Christine, you easily get angry with me," he said presently. "Try and see the whole matter through my eyes. I am eighteen, and I have never done a single thing to fit myself for ruling Montvilliers; more shame to me, you may say, but we are not all born with a desire to rule. Ever since I came to Passey I have practically been a prisoner – a happy prisoner. I have easily forgotten how near I stood to a dukedom, and, I warrant, have been as easily forgotten. Why remember me now when I only desire to be left in peace? Believe me, as a duke I should be an utter failure, a breeder of dissension and revolution, no blessing to the land, but a curse. Let the power fall as my father wished it. Cousin Felix will make a much better duke than I."

"Have you no sense of duty?" she asked.

"Truly I think my duty to Montvilliers is to let some one else rule it," he said, with a smile.

"Duty is not a cloak a man can put off and on as he wills," Christine answered; "it is part of the man himself. He is called to fulfil certain conditions of his life, of his birth, and he cannot throw duty aside by saying he is unfitted to perform it. Are you a coward, Maurice, as well as a scholar?"

"No; I do not think I am a coward."

"It is only a coward who would not ride to Vayenne and claim his birthright."

"If we come to such close argument as that, this same birthright may be found to have little justice in it," he said quickly. "Did my father become Duke by right of birth? You know he didn't. He was a strong man, while those who should have ruled were weak. Montvilliers wanted a strong hand to guide her, and a bloodless revolution raised my father to power."

"Has Felix any greater right than you?" she asked.

"By birth, no; by capacity, yes. Let him be Duke. I will be the first to shout for him."

"Coward!" she said.

"Christine, there are bounds which even you must not pass," he said, turning a stern face to her.

She clapped her hands at his sudden anger, and stepped quickly to his side.

"There spoke a worthy Duke. I have seen the same anger rush blood-red into your father's face, and have trembled for his enemies. You cannot hide your real self; you cannot deny your real personality, even though you would."

"It lies in peace among these books of mine," he answered. "We have talked of this enough."

"Not yet. Listen, Maurice. Felix is hated by many, and if he seizes the crown, there will be bloodshed in the streets of Vayenne."

"He will be strong enough to suppress rebellion," was the answer.

"And wise enough perchance to shed blood in this peaceful Château of Passey," she went on quickly.

"Why here? Passey does not trouble itself with politics. The harvest of the fields is Passey's concern, and it is of small consequence who rules in Vayenne."

Christine laid her hand on his arm. "Think you the golden circle of sovereignty will rest easily on your cousin's brow while you live? Deny your birthright, Maurice, and then, like a coward, flee your country for safety, for I warrant you will die a violent death if you stay in it."

"I cannot think so – so much evil of Felix," he answered.

"I know him far better than you possibly can do," she said. "He let me come to you only because he is convinced that you will not come to Vayenne. He despises you, Maurice. He will use your refusal for his own purposes, and in his own manner. He will easily convince many that you are a danger to the state and that there is righteousness in judicial murder."

"Will not a kingdom satisfy him, but he must have my poor life as well?" Maurice muttered.

"Has it ever satisfied, in any age, in any history? Felix will seek to make himself secure in every possible way. Since there are many who love me, he wishes to wed me."

"Perhaps he loves you?"

"It may be," she answered, "but not as he loves himself."

"And you would marry him?"

"For the good of Montvilliers I might be persuaded."

She watched him as he walked slowly across the room. Perhaps there was a vague, half-formed desire in his heart that she should not marry his cousin. She would be less his friend if she were Felix's wife.

"Perhaps such a marriage might be good for Montvilliers," he said after a pause.

"I shall serve my country more directly by persuading you to do your duty, Maurice," she answered. "It is not only internal strife which is to be feared, but danger from without. In the past Montvilliers has fought for, and maintained, her independence, but our neighbors have not ceased to long for the possession of our fruitful soil, and our dissensions are their opportunity. Only last night a spy was caught in the streets and brought to the castle."

Maurice went to the window, and for some time stood looking down at the peaceful village he had loved so well. Here he had found happiness and the life he longed for. But beyond were the fruitful fields and green pastures of his native land, dearer to him than any other land, though he had no desire to rule it. Did it not rest with him to save this land from the enemies who had so long sought to lay a conquering hand upon it? Immediately below him, lounging in the courtyard, were some of the soldiers of Christine de Liancourt's escort, proof that there were men armed and ready to fight for their freedom as their fathers had done. Duty seemed to present itself with a new meaning to Maurice, and, as though Heaven itself would send him a messenger in this crisis of his life, just then a cassocked and hooded priest came slowly in at the gates.

"At least we will see what plots exist," he said presently, turning to Christine, "and also prove your cousin Felix. To-morrow I will ride with you to Vayenne. Leave me alone until then. A man does not break with so peaceful a life as mine has been without sorrow."

In an instant her manner changed. Stepping back she made a low curtsy. "Long live the Duke," she said quietly, and then left the room quickly.

She had conquered. He had promised to come to Vayenne. She could not tell which particular argument had forced him to this decision, she only knew that it had been far more difficult to persuade him than even she had expected. What would his answer have been had she told him that the fact of going to Vayenne was only one step toward success, and only a small one – if she had explained that he spoke no more than the truth when he had said that he had been forgotten? Vayenne was not going to open her arms and shout a welcome to him until he had proved himself a man. She was thrusting upon him a great task, would he be able to perform it? She could have wished him different to what he was, but at least right was his, and opposition might stir him to great things. Of herself she thought little. For Felix she had little love, yet, were it for the good of her country, she would marry him. She was ready to make any sacrifice for the land she loved.

At the foot of the stairs a soldier saluted, and said that a priest craved an audience with her.

"What should he want with me?"

"He would say no more than that he had a message of importance. He is not of Passey, and carries the dust of a long journey upon him."

"I will see him. Bring him to the small room yonder, and see that we are not disturbed."

Christine turned from the window as the priest entered. Much dust was upon his cassock and cloak, and the hood, which he did not remove, partially concealed his face.

"You have travelled far," she said.

"From Vayenne," he answered.

"From Father Bertrand?"

"No, mademoiselle; from one far humbler than Father Bertrand, yet one who is wiser, perhaps, in your interests."

"He chooses a strange messenger."

"No stranger surely than the messenger chosen to ride to Passey and bid the young Duke to Vayenne. Besides, a priest may enter where a soldier would be refused. These are perilous times, mademoiselle, and I come to tell you so."

"In this matter you can tell me little I do not know," she answered.

"Then you do not ride to Vayenne to-morrow?"

"Yes – with the Duke." And she watched the priest closely to see if he were astonished at this information.

"With the same escort as came with you to Passey?"

"I think I have sufficiently answered you," she said.

"Mademoiselle, I have travelled all night to serve you. You must not ride to Vayenne to-morrow. It has been arranged that your party is to be attacked by a strongly armed party of robbers, and defeated. Your soldiers will make a show of fight, but for the most part they are bought men. You will escape, there is no desire to hurt you, but the Duke will be slain."

"You shall tell this to the captain of our escort."

"One moment, mademoiselle," he said as she moved to the door.

"Ah! you are afraid to let the captain and his men hear your story," she said contemptuously.

"They would probably kill me, and that would hardly help you," answered the priest quietly.

"Count Felix has determined that the young Duke shall not enter Vayenne. I had the story from one who is well known to you, mademoiselle – from Jean, the dwarf of St. Etienne."

"A fitting story from such a madman," she laughed. "How came he to persuade a priest to be his ambassador?"

"I am not a priest." And Herrick threw back the hood from his head.

Christine took one step toward him, and gazed into his face.

"The spy!" she said.

"Mademoiselle, do I look like a spy? Do I act like one? Last night I was locked in the South Tower, a place of ill omen, as you know. To be his messenger the dwarf released me by a way known to him alone. I have ridden hard all night to bring this warning to you. All roads were open to me; I need not have taken that to Passey were I not desirous of serving you."

"You shall tell this story to the captain," she answered. "It is for him to weigh its merit."

"As you will, mademoiselle. Heaven grant he is an honest man."

She went to the door, and, calling a servant, bid him fetch the captain of the escort; nor did she speak to Herrick until the captain entered the room.

"Do you know this man, Captain Lemasle?" she asked.

Gaspard Lemasle was not a very observant man, and the priest's dress deceived him.

"No, mademoiselle," he answered.

"He comes to Passey with a strange story."

"I have no great love for priests," returned the captain, "and saving your presence, mademoiselle, have often known them to tell strange stories."

In as few words as possible, Herrick repeated his tale.

"Do you say that I and the men I command are traitors?" Lemasle burst out angrily when Herrick had finished.

"I say nothing against Captain Lemasle," said Herrick. "Not many hours since he toasted Mademoiselle de Liancourt with such enthusiasm at the Croix Verte, I could not believe him anything but an honest man."

"You are no priest, and there is something in your voice that I remember."

"No, I am not a priest; you took me for a spy last night."

"I thought you safely caged in the South Tower."

"I was, captain. I am here to try and save the Duke."

"But how could you escape?" said Lemasle in astonishment.

"That I can tell you at another time."

Lemasle was silent for a few moments.

"It is indeed a strange story, mademoiselle," he said presently, "and truth to tell there are some in our company who would not be in it had I had the choosing."

"If there is any worth in the story, you must judge," Christine said. "For myself, I do not believe such tales easily, and at all hazards we ride to Vayenne to-morrow. It might be well to take this man with us. Unless he can prove his honesty, the castle can surely hold him though he has escaped once."

"And from the South Tower," muttered Lemasle.

"I ask nothing better than to strike a blow in your defence, mademoiselle," said Herrick.

She looked at him curiously for a moment, as even she had looked at him last night when he had picked up the fallen whip.

"I have no mercy for spies and traitors," she said slowly, "but prove yourself honest, and I may find a way to reward you."

Herrick did not answer, but stood with bowed head as she passed out of the room.

CHAPTER VI

AT THE CLEARING IN THE FOREST

As soon as they were alone, Gaspard Lemasle shrugged his great shoulders and looked at his companion.

"I've always said that ugly little dwarf was not half such a fool as folk thought him," he remarked. "You're the first man I've ever known to get out of the South Tower. How did you manage it?"

"You would not have me betray the dwarf?"

"Faith, I'm at a loss to know what I would have you do, and for the matter of that what to do with you. You don't seem to have made much impression on Mademoiselle, and it's not often one finds an honest man masquerading as a priest. How do you call yourself?"

"Roger Herrick."

"Well, Monsieur Herrick, for the life of me I know not whether to treat you as friend or foe."

"Give me the benefit of the doubt and think me a friend. At least be friend enough to give me food and drink, for I have touched neither since I dined at the Croix Verte last night."

"Come with me," Lemasle answered. "I wouldn't starve my worst enemy."

Life without its dangers would have seemed a poor existence to Gaspard Lemasle, and a man who could make light of danger was a man he was inclined to take to his heart. Herrick appealed to him. Somehow he had got out of the South Tower, and he respected him for that. Last night he had carried himself well, and shown no sign of fear, even when an infuriated mob was bent on hanging him to the first convenient lamp bracket. Now he had voluntarily come to Passey to accuse a body of men of being traitors, knowing that he ran the risk of being delivered up to their tender mercies, which might reasonably result in a harder death than hanging would be. He was no common man this, and Gaspard Lemasle watched his companion anxiously as he ate and drank.

"You will not tell me how you escaped from the castle, will you tell me what you were doing at the Croix Verte last night?"

"I did nothing but dine, but I intended to sleep there, to stay there, a peaceful traveller, for some days. Going for a short walk after dinner I was attacked in the street, for the purpose of robbery I suppose, but finding the task beyond them, one villain shouted out, 'Spy!' and I was soon in the hands of an infuriated crowd. I believe I owe you my life, captain, for had you not been at the end of the street I doubt whether I should have escaped hanging."

"What were the men like who attempted to rob you?"

Herrick tried to give some idea of their appearance, and succeeded in making Lemasle thoughtful for a time.

"And you heard me get talkative over the wine in the Croix Verte," he said presently.

"There was only a partition between us, and Father Bertrand's voice, even when he speaks low, is penetrating. So long as I overheard the conversation his persuasion did not seem to appeal to you, Captain Lemasle."

"You left before the end then?"

"I did not return to the room after we all went into the passage to learn that the Duke was dead."

"You noticed the priest and me, did you take no note of the other men?"

"No. I judged that in Father Bertrand's eyes you were of most importance, and truly I thought little of what I had chanced to overhear until afterward. Being suddenly locked in the South Tower instead of sleeping in comfort at the Croix Verte is apt to set one thinking."

"And your conclusion, Monsieur Herrick?"

"We seem friends – need I deceive you?" Herrick answered. "I thought that Captain Lemasle's duty held him to Count Felix, but that in his heart he was desirous of serving the scholar of Passey because of Mademoiselle de Liancourt. His final decision I did not hear, nor do I know it now, yet Mademoiselle seems to trust him."

"And with reason," Lemasle answered. "I care not much whether we have Duke Maurice or Duke Felix, neither one nor the other can really fill the old Duke's place, but I would give my life in the defence of Christine de Liancourt."

"Then we are comrades, captain. I, too, am willing to die in her defence."

"In the name of all the gods, why should you be?" Lemasle exclaimed. "You have seen her twice, and she has scorned you twice. Do men sacrifice themselves for women who treat them so?"

"Some men, captain; some for love, some because it is in their blood. For myself, circumstance has forced me into this service. Long ago, perchance, my fathers were knights-errant, and their spirit lives in me."

"I'm inclined to think you a friend," said Lemasle slowly.

"Then treat me somewhat as a prisoner to-morrow, and for greater care keep me near you and Mademoiselle. You spoke of having men in your company whom you would not have chosen. You shall find me no laggard when the time for action comes."

"Very well, and I will arm you for that purpose; but mark you, if I find myself mistaken, if you are a traitor, I shall have no hesitation in running you through the back."

"Had I found Captain Lemasle a traitor, I should have had as little compunction. I go armed, you see." And Herrick drew aside his cassock to show his weapons.

Lemasle looked at him, measuring him with his eye from head to foot and from shoulder to shoulder.

"There would be a satisfaction in meeting you face to face and trying strength with you," he said. "For aught I know you may lack my skill, but I do not doubt your courage; and if your story be true we'll see what we can accomplish side by side to-morrow. You shall seem like a prisoner until then."

So that night the key was again turned upon Roger Herrick.

"For form's sake," Lemasle said by way of apology; "to the man who can escape from the South Tower in Vayenne there is no chamber in the Château of Passey that can really be a prison."

Did ever man find himself in stranger circumstances, Herrick wondered, as silence fell upon the château. A few hours since he had been free to direct his steps whither he would, even to-day he might have ridden toward safety, and yet he was here a prisoner, pledged if need be to draw sword to-morrow in defence of a youth he had never seen, and a girl who had treated him with contempt. That he, a man of peace, who had practised sword play merely as a healthy pastime, should draw in earnest, staking his own life against another's, was strange enough, yet this aspect of the case he hardly thought of; the reason for the action was uppermost in his mind, not the action itself. Would he have entered upon this perilous enterprise for any pale scholar in the world? What was it to him who ruled in Vayenne? He knew it was because of the woman that his whole heart and soul were in this venture. She had looked into his eyes, and in that moment had entered into his life as no other woman had ever done. It was more than the spirit of the knight-errant which prompted him, and he knew it, even when he thus answered Gaspard Lemasle. At some turning in Life's road, Fate waits for every man. Herrick had reached that turning, and had found his fate in a beautiful woman who despised him. As he lay down to sleep her face seemed to watch him out of the darkness, and in his dreams she seemed to smile.

The woman stood long at her window that night, looking across the silent, moonlit land which lay below and stretched peacefully away to the dim haziness of the horizon. She, too, had her dreams. Deep in her heart, dominating all the other impulses of her life, was the love of this fair land which lay at her feet. It had suffered invasion, blood had watered its fields, the wail of

misery had been heard in it, but it had never been wholly conquered. If for a time the invader had triumphed, some strong hero had risen and brought salvation. Its dukes to-day were independent rulers. What did it matter if in certain ways that rule was harsh? What did it matter if something were lacking in their civilization and manners when compared with other countries and courts she had visited? Was it not the very lack of certain luxury that fostered a warlike spirit in the people? To-day the country was in danger of civil strife, and that would be the opportunity its enemies waited for. Christine believed that only in the succession of the rightful duke was real trouble to be averted. In some ways Maurice was weak, she did not attempt to hide the fact from herself, but the love of his country was in him; while to Count Felix, love of country seemed second to his love of power. He was cruel, and had many enemies, not least among them the Church, and it was easy to believe that such a rule as his would be might drive the people to rebellion and to a petition for help from one or other of those states which, through the centuries, had looked upon Montvilliers with greedy eyes. To prevent this, should Felix become Duke, she was prepared to marry him so that the people's love might be strengthened. Of herself she thought not at all, and little of the prisoner whose dreams she filled. Had he come honestly to warn her, or was he but a unit in some great scheme against her hopes and ambitions? If he were an honest man, he was a brave one, but was he honest? This doubt was her last thought before she slept.

Morning came with a thin mist hanging over Passey and the low country around it, which the sun would scatter presently. There had been noise and clatter in the court-yard from an early hour, for Captain Lemasle had decided to start sooner than he had at first intended. But it was a morning of mishaps, first one man and then another finding something wrong with his horse or its harness, now a shoe loose which the smith must needs see to, or a saddle-girth which had worn to breaking-point and must be repaired before a start was made. At first Gaspard Lemasle cursed these ill chances as he cursed some such small matter every day, but presently he became suspicious, so piecemeal were the difficulties sprung upon him, nor did they cease until close upon the hour originally arranged for the start. This was surely more than mere coincidence, and Lemasle determined not to bring Herrick into their company until the last moment. When Christine de Liancourt came from the château ready for the journey Lemasle made an opportunity to speak to her apart for a moment.

"I fear, mademoiselle, that our friend brought us news which is only too true," he said.

"Our friend!"

"Indeed, I believe he has earned the name," Lemasle answered. "As I told you last night, I had intended to make an earlier start."

"True, and have kept us waiting, captain."

"So many little misfortunes have happened to delay us, that I cannot think they have chanced honestly," he answered. "The men did not intend to move until the time first named. Have you told the Duke of Monsieur Herrick's coming and his message?"

"Herrick, is that his name? Yes; I have told him, and, if possible, he is more incredulous than I am," she answered. "This masquerader goes with us – where is he?"

"I have thought it best not to let him join us until the last moment," said Lemasle. "Some of these fellows will grumble at having a priest in the company unless I mistake not. I pray, mademoiselle, that you will let me set the order of this march in my own way, and that you will pretend a regard for this same priest even if you do not feel it. I would have him beside me if the worst comes, as I fear it will."

"So be it, Captain Lemasle; you are responsible for our safety. I will tell the Duke."

"I shall do my best to bring you to Vayenne in safety," he said, saluting her.

The word to mount was given, and then Lemasle waited with his arm through his horse's bridle until the Duke and Christine were in their saddles, waited until they had bid farewell to old Viscount Dupré, who stood bareheaded upon the steps by the main door, and then he turned sharply.

"Where is this laggard priest?" he shouted.

"What priest?" said one man.

"We want none in our company," said another.

"That's true, comrades," Lemasle returned, with a pretence of grumbling with them, but speaking loud enough for Christine to hear. "Mademoiselle must needs carry a priest with us to Vayenne since we have not enough there already."

The sudden appearance of Herrick from an inner court-yard, mounted on a strong horse, prevented further words. His hood was drawn close over his head, and just raising one hand in a benediction, to emphasize his office, he rode to the side of Mademoiselle de Liancourt.

At a sign from Lemasle, Christine rode forward, the Duke and Herrick on either side of her, then vaulting to his saddle he placed himself at the head of the cavalcade, and followed them through the gates.

The old Viscount cried feebly "Long live the Duke!" and the cry was taken up by the few serving-men who were in the court-yard.

"Long live the Duke!" cried Lemasle in stentorian tones, and the company of horseman shouted in so genuine a fashion that Christine glanced at Herrick to see if this burst of loyalty had any effect upon him. He did not meet her glance and was apparently unconscious of it.

Most of the villagers, men and women, had already gone to their daily work in the fields, but the few who were in the streets also cried long life to the Duke, and bowed before him as he passed.

"It is a faint promise of what shall soon thunder out through the streets of Vayenne," Christine said, turning to him.

"It may be, yet my imagination does not seem to catch the sound of it," he answered. "In Passey they have learned to love me, that is why they shout, not because I am a Duke."

Once free of the village the pace was quickened, but the same order was maintained. Christine rode between the Duke and Roger Herrick, some little distance behind them rode Lemasle alone, the body of horsemen riding as many paces in the rear. However grave his suspicions might be, he showed nothing of it to his men.

"I ride 'twixt Church and State, comrades – a perilous position," he said to them, and he laughed as a man will laugh in a tavern when the wine flows freely and ribaldry is in the jests. He feigned a careless attitude that none might think him over-cautious.

It was Christine who really set the pace, and some miles had been traversed before the sun finally dispersed the mist. They went by the highroad, not by the way Herrick had travelled, but neither horseman nor pedestrian had been met. There were few who had business with Passey, and the road was ever a lonely one. At first it ran a straight and direct course across low, flat country, where there was no place for a lurking enemy to hide; then it wound round the foot of low hills to avoid steep ascents, and here were scattered trees, and undergrowths which descended to the roadway. Here it was that Lemasle lessened the distance between himself and the three leaders; and his eyes glanced sharply from side to side, while his ears were sharp set to catch any sound above the jingle of the harness of those who rode with him. Had he trusted a single man of his company, he would have sent him in front, but there was none he dared to send, nor could he go himself, since he alone was between the Duke and his companions and those whom Herrick had declared were traitors. If in truth the death of the Duke had been determined upon, it might most easily come from one of the traitors who rode behind him. Lemasle, indeed, feared his own men more than the robbers who were to attack them.

From underneath his hood, Roger Herrick's eyes kept sharp watch, too. The road dipped gently for half a mile or so, and then ran darkly into a deep forest which stretched away on either hand. Herrick glanced back at Lemasle, and noted that he rode as one ready for emergency. It was evident that he was prepared to find danger lurking in the forest, and Herrick made sure that the revolver was ready to his hand and his sword loose in its scabbard.

Christine saw that backward glance, and noted every movement of her companion.

"Is this where you would have us believe danger lies?" she asked, turning to Herrick.

"I know not, but it is a likely place," he answered. "It is well to be prepared."

It was twilight in the forest, so closely were the branches laced overhead. Here and there a ray of sunlight struck downward into the gloomy aisles carpeted with the successive leaves of many winters, but it only served to make darker the distance beyond. Silence reigned, too, save for the jingling harness; even the sound of the horses' hoofs was deadened almost to nothingness at times, so deep was the road in leaves in many places.

Christine pulled in her horse to a walking pace. She had put her question to Herrick in a contemptuous tone. She meant him to understand that she did not trust his story, and yet her sudden action seemed to indicate that she was not so incredulous as she appeared to be.

For some time they went forward in silence, and then, as though it were at the end of a long tunnel, there was a patch of sunlight before them – not the end of the forest, but a wide clearing in its midst. When they were within a dozen yards of the opening, Herrick suddenly made his horse bound forward that he might be the first to come out into that open space. He could not have explained why he did so. He saw no more indication of danger here than he had seen at any other point of the journey, but an overmastering impulse seemed to compel his action, even while he was conscious that it might be misconstrued by those he had promised to serve. He had just time to note that several roads met at this clearing, when a bullet sang past his ear, cutting a piece of cloth from his hood. In an instant Christine turned her horse sharply aside as though to throw herself before the Duke, while Lemasle with a great shout to his men charged into the open.

"Forward!" he cried, for the clearing was now alive with men, some on horse and some on foot; and then as the troopers thundered after him, he spurred his horse dexterously to one side and let them rush past him. The next moment he and Herrick were beside the Duke and Christine, while the robbers and the escort met in the centre of the clearing.

"Be ready!" Lemasle whispered a moment later. "You were right, Herrick. These scoundrels only make a pretence of fighting, and these are no robbers. This is rank treachery, and, by Heaven, some of them shall pay the price in full."

No shots were fired; in such a *mêlée* that would have been dangerous among men who had no desire to harm one another, and never a blow was struck until he who was struck at was ready to parry it. Lemasle cursed underneath his breath, and Herrick waited, his naked sword in his hand.

"It is the Duke's life you defend," whispered a voice behind him.

"I know, mademoiselle," he answered, without turning his head.

"Ready!" shouted Lemasle.

The troopers were beaten down, some sorely hurt to all seeming, while others fled into the woods. The robbers sprang forward toward the Duke and his companions, yet still they did not fire.

"Back, Christine – behind us!" the Duke cried. "We three may yet teach these scoundrels a lesson." And he struck the first earnest blow that had been dealt that day, and the foremost man who rushed upon them fell with scarce a groan.

"How long have you turned a thief on the highway?" shouted Lemasle as a horseman came at him. "You looked more honest when I last saw you in your soldiers' dress in the Castle of Vayenne than in this disguise, and, faith! I didn't love you even then."

The joy of fighting was upon Gaspard Lemasle, and he laughed as he furiously struck this man from his saddle.

For one instant Herrick hesitated as the rush came. The first man who jumped at him to drag him from his horse, he struck at with his sword hilt, even as though his hand held no sword – struck, as an Englishman will strike, with his fist. For a moment there was a reluctance to shed blood, but only for a moment. Not far below the surface lies the fighting instinct in every man, the greedy lust for it, once the blood is up. This first adversary fell back stunned, but would rise again; the next fell with his head nearly severed from his body. How long he struck, now to right, now to left,

hearing Lemasle's panting laugh as he got breathless with his work, and answering with laughter just as savage, he did not know; but suddenly there was a cry behind him – a cry, a shot, and an oath cut short in its utterance.

Some of their enemies had crept round to take them in the rear. One man had fallen on his knee, taking deliberate aim at the Duke, and even as his finger moved to pull the trigger, Christine saw him, and fired at him. The smoking revolver in her hand told the story.

"A dash for it and we may yet win through," said Lemasle in a hoarse whisper. "It's our one chance," and seizing Christine's bridle he spurred toward the road which lay opposite him.

The Duke and Roger Herrick spurred forward too, but a moment later, and in that moment the robbers managed to cut them off.

"The road to the right," Herrick whispered, wheeling his horse round sharply.

The manœuvre was unexpected by the robbers, and Herrick and the Duke found the road clear before them, and dashed along it. Then a shot rang out, and the Duke's sword fell from his hand.

"Are you hit, sir?" Herrick said.

"Yes. It's nothing," but even as he spoke he swayed in his saddle.

Herrick had caught his arm to hold him steady, when there was a second shot and the Duke's horse stumbled.

"Go on, and save yourself," Maurice said faintly.

The sound of galloping horses was now on the road behind them, the Duke's horse stumbled again, nearly to its knees. It was evident that it could go no farther. There was not a moment to lose. Slipping his arm round the wounded man, Herrick drew him from his saddle, and managed to lift him in front of him onto his own.

"We'll cheat them yet!" he cried as, in spite of its double burden, the good horse galloped forward.

CHAPTER VII

THE END OF A RACE FOR LIFE

The wounded man had fainted, and lay a dead weight in Herrick's arms. It was no easy task to hold him securely in his place and at the same time urge the horse forward at its topmost speed. Herrick knew that this must be a race for life, yet his heart leaped with excitement as the splendidly powerful animal he rode made light of its double burden, and with neck outstretched went on at a swinging gallop. To Herrick's surprise and relief no further shots were fired. The men who followed had only revolvers, probably, and the distance was too great for them to be effective. On they went, the trees by the wayside literally flashing past them, the long road before them with never a turning to right or left. Glancing back, Herrick saw that at least half a dozen men followed, all well mounted, and riding as though prepared for a long stern chase. For some time the distance between hunted and hunters did not seem to lessen at all. This was something, but it was not enough. There was no shortening in his horse's stride as yet, but the double burden would certainly tell its tale presently. How long was the race to last, and where was the goal of safety? Since they were upon a road at right angles to the one by which the cavalcade had entered the forest, Herrick knew that they might have many miles to traverse before they reached the open country. When they had entered the forest he had noted how it stretched away on either side, and that the chase should happen here instead of in the open had its advantages. If he could distance his pursuers sufficiently, he might chance upon some deep green glade down which safety might be found. In the open, it was true, some town, or village, or other place of refuge might present itself, but who could say that, for the young Duke, escape from one enemy might only mean falling into the hands of another? Though no fatalist, Roger Herrick had a creed that what was, was best; that come life or death, the circumstances mattered little so that honor was clean. Fear touches such a man with difficulty, and he is ever good friend or dangerous enemy, as the chance may be. And where there is no hampering fear, no vain longing for different circumstances and thought of what might be done in them, a man's resourcefulness has full play. This race was on a forest road, therefore Herrick's whole mind was concentrated on how this fact might be used to advantage. There was a turn in the road in the far distance that might be in his favor, since for a few moments, at least, he would be out of sight of his pursuers. Round such a bend in the road it might be possible to plunge suddenly into the depths of the forest. By the roadside, too, there was now a strip of turf, another point in his favor, for the sound of the beating hoofs of his horse would be deadened to those behind.

As Herrick turned his horse on to the turf he glanced back. It would seem that his pursuers were conscious that he had a chance of escape, for they were riding hard now, and the distance between hunters and hunted had lessened materially. One man, indeed, mounted upon a speedy animal, was overhauling him rapidly. In a few moments he would be close enough to fire. Such a risk must be avoided at all hazards. Herrick shifted the position of the unconscious man a little, so that he could have his right arm free, but the movement had the effect of slackening his horse's pace for an instant. The man behind noticed this and shouted to his companions in a triumph which was short-lived, for Herrick had turned and fired at the horse, which reared up suddenly, beating the air with its forelegs for a moment, and then rolled over with his rider. The shot startled his own horse, and he plunged forward, sweeping round the bend of the road with as gallant a stride as that with which he had begun the race. The road turned again to the left, then sharply around to the right to avoid a sudden shoulder of rising ground, and beyond there was a dip in the forest, a narrow, winding way going down into thick undergrowth. It was not a path Herrick would have chosen, but the winding road might lead the pursuers to suppose their quarry was still in front of them, and

he could feel that the double weight was beginning to tell upon his horse. His stride had quickly shortened after the sudden burst on being startled by the revolver shot.

As Herrick plunged deeper into the undergrowth, he heard his pursuers gallop past. There was no knowing for how long they would be deceived. Two hundred yards of straight road would betray his subterfuge at once, and how near that piece of straight road might be Herrick did not know. He rode his horse deeply into the thicket, and then turned along a narrow green glade which ran back parallel with the way they had come. For some while he followed this path, scheming as he went. When the disappointed hunters returned they would almost certainly discover this way. How could he deceive them? He urged his horse into a gallop again.

"We will win now, my gallant beauty," he whispered. He checked him presently, and turned sharply from the path in the direction of the road, letting the horse walk carefully among the fallen leaves. When he saw the road, Herrick halted and listened. Save for the murmur of wind in the trees there was no sound. He walked the horse to the edge of the road, and looked to right and left. There was no one in sight, so he crossed it and plunged quickly among the trees on the opposite side.

All this while, so far as he could tell, the wounded man had neither uttered a sound nor made a voluntary movement. Herrick now began to wonder whether he had been carrying a dead man before him. The roadway was left far behind them, for a time at least they were safe; and coming to a small opening, across which a little brook ran its narrow, bubbling course, Herrick dismounted, and, laying the young Duke on the grass, began to examine him. The bullet had passed through his arm and torn an ugly wound in his side. It had bled freely, and Herrick did not think the bullet had lodged in the body. He had laid him down upon the bank of the brook, and made shift to cleanse the wound as best he could, with naught to hold water but his hands, held cupwise. He bathed his face, too, and contrived to get a little trickle of water between his lips.

With a sigh Maurice opened his eyes presently, but did not speak. He looked at Herrick without any recognition in his look, and then he closed his eyes again. The horse had gone to a little distance, where a break in the bank enabled him to get at the water and drink; now he came back, and nosed the prostrate man, perhaps looking for a caress for his part in the day's work. The touch roused Maurice again.

"Where's Christine?" he murmured.

"Safe with Gaspard Lemasle."

"Who are you?"

"Roger Herrick."

"I don't seem to remember," he answered feebly.

"You have been wounded," Herrick answered. "I will dress it as best I can, and then –"

"Yes; then call Christine."

Herrick tore out the sleeve from his own shirt. He could bind up the wound after a fashion, but what was he to do then? It was evident that his companion was not in a state to be carried farther on horseback, and where was he to get succor? They could hardly hope to remain there long undiscovered, and which way to go for help Herrick did not know. They had no food, either, of any sort. Even if the wounded man became conscious enough to know the dire straits they were in, it was doubtful whether he knew anything about the forest roads. Had he not been a virtual prisoner at Passey for years?

As he was binding the linen round the wounded arm he glanced at Maurice to see if he winced with pain. His eyes were open, staring not at him, but beyond him, in that uncanny fashion which compels one to turn and see upon what such a look is fixed. Herrick was turning when his arms were suddenly seized from behind and a cord drawn tightly round them, while rough hands grasped his shoulders and pulled him on to his back.

"Tie his feet, too," said a man, suddenly springing across the brook. "Whom have we here?"

"A wounded man," said Herrick, without attempting to struggle. He might want all his strength for that presently.

"Ay; and for a priest you're a poor hand with a wounded man," was the answer.

For a moment Herrick thought they had fallen into the hands of their pursuers after all, but as a score of men surrounded them he saw they were not those who had attacked them at the clearing. This surely was a band of real robbers.

The man who had stooped down to look steadily into Maurice's face suddenly stood upright.

"Quick! Fetch the old mother," he said excitedly to a youth near him; and then looking down at Herrick he said, "Who is he?"

"A wounded man. I never saw him before to-day."

"How came he thus and how did you come into his company?"

"An attack in the forest, and I helped him to escape. It was a small affair; but if you have skill in such matters, pray bind up his wounds without delay. He is weak from loss of blood."

The youth returned, hurrying forward an old woman with bent form, and chin and nose which nearly met, as they seemed to peck at each other continually.

"Mother, look into this man's face," said the man who seemed chief of this forest band.

"Ay, sore hurt he is," said the old hag, bending over him, "but I have salves – I have salves."

"But his face, mother; who is he?"

"A wounded man
In a forest lay,
Who the fates decree
Shall be Duke one day,"

chanted the old woman in a piping key. "I saw it all as the flame died out of my fire last night. I have salves; let me fetch them. There is money, much money in this."

"Mother, is it not he of Passey?"

"Who the fates decree
Shall be Duke one day.

"Let me go. Would you have him die when there is so much money in the air?"

The robbers were evidently half afraid of this old beldame, who probably found her pretended witchcraft and doggerel rhymes profitable.

"The mother speaks truly," said Herrick. "It is he of Passey. Duke even now, and there is much money for those who help him."

"You said you never saw him before to-day."

"I spoke truly also."

The man turned away, and, beckoning the other men round him, talked eagerly for a few moments, and with many gesticulations. When the old woman returned, some of the men went quickly into the wood, and the chief turned to her.

"Quickly, mother, and so that he may travel."

"Whither?"

The man stretched out his arm.

"Cannot you see the money in that direction?"

"Ay, if you can reach it, plenty of it; but that is not the road to Vayenne, and there is money that way, too," said the woman, bending over her work.

"As much?" queried the man.

"Why ask? Is it not the Vayenne road he must take so that he may be Duke one day?"

"Make up another riddle against that time, mother, and read my fate."

"It would put the fear of God in thee, Simon; thou art best in ignorance."

The man turned away with an uneasy laugh. He, too, feared the old woman, although he would not have it appear so. He stopped to look down at Herrick.

"What can we do with the priest?" he murmured to himself, but not so softly that another behind him did not hear.

"Why not knife him?"

"Ay; why not?"

"The mother loves not such," urged the man, "and alive he will be dangerous."

"I like not knifing a man when the blood is cold in me," Simon answered.

"I'll do it, I have no such sentiment."

"Time enough," Simon said. "Besides, since he helps this scholar of Passey, he's no friend to him of Vayenne." And then, turning to Herrick, he went on: "I marked you when you came to the brook; you rode not like a priest."

"What matter how I rode so we have fallen among friends?" said Herrick.

"Friends? Hardly that; but at least we would not let the wounded man die. Dead he is but carrion as any other man; alive he is worth much gold. There are those beyond Montvilliers who will pay handsomely for him."

"Beyond Montvilliers! You would sell him into the hands of his country's enemies? That were traitor's work indeed!"

"The country's rulers would hang me to the first tree if they caught me. To-day the game is mine; to-morrow – " And he snapped his fingers and laughed.

He walked away, and soon afterward the men who had gone into the woods returned with a rough litter. Into this the young Duke was carefully lifted, and whether he were conscious or not Herrick could not tell. These traitors would keep him alive if they could; at least there was more hope with them than with those others who were bent on slaying him, and Herrick found what consolation he could in the thought.

Lifting his head to watch what was happening about the litter, he had not heard any one approach him until he found the old hag bending over him. Behind her stood the man who wished to knife him. They had come upon him stealthily, so that Simon should not stay their crime, Herrick supposed, and he gave himself up for lost. Indeed, he saw the knife in the man's hand.

"This one has no hurt," said the old woman, bending over him.

"Not yet, mother. Is he to live to tell of what we do?"

"Give me a moment, my son," she answered, and closed her eyes.

"Quickly, mother, or Simon will save him. He likes not the deed, but he will be glad enough when it is done."

Herrick was conscious that a shout might save him; yet he did not utter it. The face of the hag seemed to fascinate him with its closed eyes, so hollow that they were almost like empty sockets, and its mumbling mouth and pecking nose and chin.

"Quick, mother!" said the man impatiently.

"I cannot see him dead, my son, yet cannot I follow his course. Put up the knife. He must be left to chance."

"Curse the fates that mock you," said the man in a rage.

"Mock me!" screamed the hag, striking him across the face with her bony hand. "Mock me – me! Get you gone, or I'll set the finger of death on you or ever the year is out. Simon, I say, Simon! This sham priest must be left to the will of Fate. I have said it."

Simon, who had mounted Herrick's horse, made a sign and three men carried Herrick to a tree at the edge of the open. To this they bound him in an upright position, winding and knotting

the rope tightly from his feet upward – so tightly that he could not move an inch either way. The end of the rope they wound round his throat but loosely.

"Fate must set you free if she will," said the hag.

Simon did not look at him. It seemed to Herrick that he would not willingly have treated him thus, but that fear of the old woman compelled him. He set the man who had wished to use the knife to be one of the litter-bearers, that he might have no chance of returning and doing the captive harm.

"March!" he said, and placing himself at the head of the band he led them through the trees, following no path but in the direction he had pointed, the way where much money lay, and which did not lead to Vayenne.

The hag stood by the brook watching them go, stood there for some time after the last of them had disappeared among the trees; then she entered the forest in the opposite direction, mumbling and gesticulating as she went.

Save for the wind in the trees there was no sound, and even the wind sank presently into silence. Twilight came, then darkness. A numbness crept through Herrick's frame, and there was a strange singing in his head. His throat was parched, for in ministering to his wounded comrade he had forgotten to drink himself. Then came intervals of forgetfulness, then clear consciousness again, and a feeble effort to free himself. In the little patch of night sky overhead shone a star, the North Star surely. That way lay England – home – and in a moment all his life seemed to flash past him. Was it his throat that swelled, or was it that the rope was tightening? Then came oblivion!

CHAPTER VIII

INTO DEATH'S JAWS AGAIN

Into Herrick's oblivion there crept dreams presently. No longer was the rope tightening round his throat; his limbs began to lose their numbness, and a grateful sensation of warmth ran through them. There was movement about him; hands, gentle hands, touched him; and eyes looked steadily at him – not the eyes of one who was ready to strike with a knife, not the eyes of an old hag. These were beautiful eyes, with kindness in them, the eyes of a woman who had compassion. They were surely a woman's fingers, too, which had gently eased the rope tightening at his throat.

"His is more a weary sleep than exhaustion now."

The voice came suddenly to the dreamer's ears out of the darkness. Then for an instant there was light about him, dancing flames full of life, and huge, distorted shadows moving over him. Contentment was here, and sleep – sleep with no more dreams in it.

When he opened his eyes again, they fell upon a small square patch of daylight; then, turning his head, he saw a red glow a few paces from him, and the fragrance of burning peat was in his nostrils. He did not seem to be dreaming now, yet he knew not where he was, nor how he had come there. He remembered riding hard. Where? Why? Some run over difficult country with the hounds in full cry! He had been leading the field; that he recollected, and then – a rope at his throat. In a flash it came back to him – the escape, the recapture, the wounded man, the threatening knife, the bound, aching limbs, the star above him in the night sky. What had happened since? Where was he?

He raised himself on his elbow, and the movement disturbed a figure sitting near the peat fire.

"So you are awake at last?"

"Lemasle!" said Herrick as the man bent over him.

"Ay, the same; ready for another fight against odds, if need be, but sore weary of watching a sick man. The gods gave me not the gift of nursing."

"Is it the dawn coming in at the window yonder?" Herrick asked.

"Yes; and a plaguey wet dawn, too. You can hear the rain on the roof, hear it hissing as it falls down the chimney onto the peat. It rained all night and all yesterday."

"Yesterday? There was sunlight when we came upon the clearing, and –"

"That was the day before," Lemasle answered. "'Twixt fainting and sleeping you've lost full twice round the clock."

"Tell me," said Herrick.

"Have you all your wits?" Lemasle asked.

"Yes; and strength returning slowly. Let me lie here and listen."

"You remember how we dashed forward when the scoundrels began to creep up behind us?"

"Yes; and we were stopped from following you."

"For a time we were unconscious of that," said Lemasle. "There were galloping horses behind us, and without looking back I shouted to encourage you. When I did glance behind, I saw that we were pursued, but of you I saw nothing. I bade Mademoiselle ride on, and then I turned, firing upon those that followed. Faith, playing the traitor breeds cowardice in a man. There were four of them, yet they halted. If they wanted to make an end of me, now was their opportunity, I cried, and they hung back like curs from the challenge. One man I hit, his hand went suddenly to his face, where I think the bullet struck him, and he pitched into the ditch by the roadside, what soul he was possessed of going quickly to its judgment. The rest turned and galloped back the way they had come. Perchance they had no firearms, perhaps they saw that the Duke was not with me, but the laughter I sent after them should have made them fight had they been men. I did not know the country reared such curs as these. So I rode on to Mademoiselle. I would have taken her to safety

ere I returned to look for you, since I hold that a man's first duty is toward the woman he has in his keeping, but she would not. Faith, Herrick, I think she still believed you half a traitor, and I did you justice arguing your cause for full an hour as we went carefully among the trees in search of you. But I talk. It is you who should tell me your tale first."

"Finish, captain. I have wit enough to listen, but hardly to talk much yet."

"Is the Duke safe?" asked Lemasle.

"Wounded, but not to the death; and I saw his hurt attended to. Finish your tale, captain."

"We had to go carefully," Lemasle went on, "for the scoundrels were still searching in the forest. More than once we only just escaped their notice. Mademoiselle took courage from this, for she argued that they had not got the Duke. For none other of us would they have troubled to look so long. Toward evening we came upon a hag gathering sticks, and questioned her whether she had seen or heard aught. The old beldame muttered that her eyes were bad and her hearing worse and all she could see and hear were things that should happen in the future. She held out her dirty palm for silver that we might have our fortunes told, and I was minded to let her tell them, for love would certainly have been in them and perchance set Mademoiselle thinking in my direction. Mademoiselle would have none of it, however, and we got a shower of curses instead of a blessing. It was growing dark when we chanced upon the hut of a charcoal burner, this place where we now are. It was empty, but the peat was smouldering in the corner, so we waited, stabling our horses in the shed without. The man would return shortly, and he might have news. There were two men, and when they came they made us welcome, but of news they had none. They had been at a distance that day, had neither seen any armed men nor heard the sound of strife. But when I mentioned the hag, they immediately agreed that robbers had been in the neighborhood, for they knew this same old woman as being of their company, a sort of mother witch among them, and, more, knew the spot where they would most likely have camped. One of the men stayed with the horses lest in our absence they should be stolen, the other took a lantern and led us to the place. There had been a recent encampment, but we found nothing to help us, and were returning across a little clearing when the feeble light of the lantern fell upon a tree beside us, and there was a man tied – dead, we thought. Your head had fallen forward, Herrick, so that the rope, though loose about your neck, pressed on your throat. Had we not found you, I warrant you would have been past help before morning. They were tender hands that lifted your head and deft fingers that undid the rope about your neck. Faith, I was jealous of an unconscious man, and would fain have been in his place to have received such service. I quickly cut the cords that bound you, and the charcoal-burner and I carried you here; since when you have been faint and sleeping hour after hour till I wondered whether you would ever be yourself again."

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