

# IF I WERE KING

BY

JUSTIN HUNTLY McCARTHY



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DEDICATION

To Her  
Through Whom and For Whom  
This Book was Written  
“The Loveliest Lady this side of Heaven.”

XXI. XII. MCMI.

If I were king—ah love, if I were king!  
What tributary nations would I bring  
To stoop before your sceptre and to swear  
Allegiance to your lips and eyes and hair.  
Beneath your feet what treasures I would fling:—  
The stars should be your pearls upon a string,  
The world a ruby for your finger ring,  
And you should have the sun and moon to wear  
If I were king.

Let these wild dreams and wilder words take wing,  
Deep in the woods I hear a shepherd sing  
A simple ballad to a sylvan air,  
Of love that ever finds your face more fair.  
I could not give you any godlier thing  
If I were king.

# IF I WERE KING

## CHAPTER I

### IN THE FIRCONÉ TAVERN

IN the dark main room of the Fircone Tavern the warm June air seemed to have lost all its delicacy, like a degraded angel. It was sodden through and through, as with the lees of wine; it was stained and shamed with the smells of hams and cheeses; it was thick and heavy as if with the breaths of all the rogues and all the vagabonds that had haunted the hostelry from its evil dawn. Such guttering lights and glimmering flames as lit the place—for there was a small fire on the wide hearth in spite of the fine weather—peopled the gloom with fantastic quivering shadows as of lean fingers that unfolded themselves to filch, or clenched themselves to stab in the back. But its patrons seemed to like the place well enough in spite of its miasma, and Master Robin Turgis, the fat landlord, drowsy with his own wine and dripping from the heat, surveyed them complacently, and wallowed as it were in the rattle and clink of mug and can, the full-throated laughter and the shrill chatter, crisply emphasized by oaths, which assured him of the Fircone's popularity with its intimates. Master Robin's intelligence was limited; his wit was simple; the processes of his mind moved easily along the lines of least resistance. The Burgundians might be hammering with mailed fists at the walls of Paris; the fire-new crown of Louis the Eleventh might be falling from the royal forehead: it mattered not a jot to dishonest Robin so long as the Fircone brimmed with company.

There was enough company in the room on this evening to content even his wish. It was not the kind of company that a wise man would desire to keep, but it delighted the innkeeper, for it drank deeply and spent freely, and in Robin's view it was of no more concern to him how the money that changed hands was come by than it was how the profound potations might affect the brains and stomachs of his clients. If any officer of the law had questioned him as to his association with a certain mysterious Brotherhood of the Cockleshells whose plunderings and pilferings were the pride of the Court of Miracles and the fear of citizens with strong boxes, he would have shrugged his fat shoulders and shaken his round head and disowned all knowledge of any such unlawful corporation. Yet his face wrinkled with smiles as his glance rested amiably upon the bodily presences of certain illustrious members of the brotherhood, wild men in withered frippery, wine-stained to the very bones.

They were five in number, and four of them were huddled round a table in the cosiest corner of the room, the corner that was sheltered from the heat of the fire by the high-backed settle, the





















































































































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it pleases.

All history is certain of is that the girls gathered together, chatting like sparrows, each speaking rapidly:

“The gentleman is a wizard. Why, he told me—”

“Enné, a miracle; he reminded me—”

“Why, he knows—”

“What do you think he said?”

Each girl was whispering to the other what Villon had told her, when Villon interrupted them.

“Young women, young women, the world is a devil of a place for those who are poor. I could preach you a powerful sermon on your follies and frailties, but, somehow, the words stick in my gullet. Here is a gold coin apiece for you. Go and gather yourself roses, my roses, to take back to what, Heaven pity you! you call your homes.”

Jehanneton gave a little gasp of surprise.

“Are we free?”

Villon answered her sadly,

“Free? Poor children! Such as you are never free. Go and pray Heaven to make men better, for the sake of your daughter’s daughters.”

His extended hands were full of gold pieces, but they were soon emptied by the eager girls who pounced upon them. Then they left him with many curtsies and salutations and drifted away delightedly into the mazes of the rose garden.

Villon turned to look at the men prisoners, who were anxiously scanning his actions.

“As for these gentlemen,” he said to Noel, “let them go where they will, but first give them food and drink and a pocketful of money.”

The effect of his words was almost as paralyzing upon the rogues as it was upon Messire Noel. It pleased the one as much as it displeased the other.

Noel looked the contempt he did not venture to express. The men rushed forward, choking with gratitude.

“God save you, sir.”

“Your Excellency is of a most excellent excellence.”

“Long live the Grand Constable!”

“A most rare Constable.”

Villon waved them away.

“Go your ways,” he said, “and if you can, mend them.”

Shouting and dancing for joy, the men took advantage of his permission and disappeared in their turn among the alleys of the rose garden, seeking and finding the wandering women and vanishing with them in due course into the labyrinths of Paris.

Villon turned to Noel.

“You may dismiss your soldiers,” he said. “Attend me within call,” and as Noel obeyed him, he advanced to where Huguette was

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standing, with a smile of scornful indifference still on her fair face.

Villon asked, himself as he went; .

“Why, in God’s name, does the world appear so different to-day? Is it the thing they call the better self; or merely this purple and fine linen?”

What he said when he came to the girl was,

“Fair mistress, you have a comely face and you make it very plain that you have a comely figure. Why do you go thus?”

The girl shrugged her green shoulders and shifted the balance of her body from one green leg to the other, as she answered impudently,

“For ease and freedom, to please myself, and to show my fine shape to please others.”

Last night this girl had been his own familiar friend; to-day she lay leagues away from his fairy greatness. There was pity in his next speech.

“Are you a happy woman, mistress?”

“Happy enough,” she answered as she snapped her fingers defiantly, “when fools like you don’t clap me into prison for living my life in my own way.”

“I may be a fool, but I did not clap you into prison. Heaven forbid!”

A curious look came into the girl’s eyes, and she drew a little nearer to him. Her voice was a caress; the tenor of her hands was a caress; every supple curve of her alluring body caressed. She seemed to coax him, cat-like, as she whispered: “Your voice sounds familiar, Monseigneur. Had I ever the honour to serve you?”

Villon drew away from her. He felt suddenly body-sick and soul-sick; sorry for the woman, sorry for himself.

“Who knows?” he answered. The girl laughed and turned aside.

“Who cares? What are you going to do with me?”

“Set you free, my delicate bird of prey. Those wild wings were never meant for clipping and caging. Is there anything I can do to please you?”

On the instant her enticement shifted; all her being was a tremulous entreaty.

“What has come to Master François Villon?”

“Why do you ask?”

“He was with us when we were snared last night. But he did not share our prison and he is not with us now. Does he live?”

Villon hesitated for a moment before speaking. “He lives. He is banished from Paris, but he lives.”

Huguette clasped her hands in gratitude.

“The sweet saints be thanked!” she said; and there was that in her voice which made the simple words sound very sincere to Villon’s ears.

“What do you care for the fate of this fellow?”

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“As I am a fool, I believe I love him.”

“Heaven’s mercy! Why?”

“I cannot tell you, Messire. A look in his eyes, a trick of his voice—the something—the nothing that makes a woman’s heart run like wax in the fire. He never made woman happy yet, and I’ll swear no woman ever made him happy. If you gave him the moon, he would want the stars for a garnish. He believes nothing; he laughs at everything; he is a false monkey—and yet, I wish I had borne such a child.”

There was a sudden pain at Villon’s heart, as if the girl’s fingers had seized it and squeezed it, but he replied lightly:

“Let us speak no more of this rascal. He believes more and laughs less than he did. He is so glad to be alive that his forehead scrapes the sky and the stars fall at his feet in gold dust. Paris is well rid of such a jackanapes.”

“You are a merry gentleman.”

“I would be more gentle than merry with you. Will you wear this ring for my sake? Fancy that it comes from Master François Villon, who will always think kindly of your wild eyes.”

“Let me see your face,” she requested, but Villon denied her. He signed to Noel le Jolys, where he stood apart, and the young soldier came hurriedly to him.

“Captain,” he said, “give this lady honourable conduct.”

He moved away and left the pair together—the mannish woman and the womanish man, looking at each other, the man in admiration and the woman in veiled disdain.

“You are a comely girl,” Noel affirmed roundly.

Huguette laughed.

“This is news from no-man’s land.”

Noel spoke lower.

“Where do you lodge?”

Huguette was a woman of business in an instant. She flashed in Noel’s face the ring the Grand Constable had given her as she answered.

“At the sign of the Golden Scull, hard by the Fircone. Will you visit me?”

Noel clapped his hands together.

“As I am a man, I will.”

A good understanding being thus established, the pair drifted away together and were soon lost to sight. Villon looking after them mused:

“Heaven forgive me, I am becoming a most pitiful loud preacher. Every rogue there deserves the gallows, but so do I, no less, and I have not swallowed enough of this court air to make me a hypocrite. Well, all this justice is thirsty work, and, mad or sane, sleeping or waking, let me drink while I can.” He returned to the golden flagons, poured out a full cup of Burgundy, watched it glow in the sun-

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light, and lifted it to his lips.

“To the loveliest lady this side of heaven!” he said for a toast, but ere he touched his lips to the cup, he lowered it again.

Olivier le Dain had come on to the terrace, and with Olivier there came a lady.

“By heaven,” Villon cried, “my eyes dazzle, for I believe I see her!”

## CHAPTER VI

### GARDEN LOVE

ON the terrace the fair girl leaned and looked over at the garden and its golden occupant. To the eyes of Villon her beauty had never seemed rarer, and the wild passion which had prompted him to spin his very soul into song burnt with a new, delicious strength of hope. He stared at her as a worshipper might stare at some sudden vision of a long dreamed of goddess, and as he stared, Olivier descended the steps, soft-footed, and came and stood before him.

“My lord, there is a lady there who desires to speak with you.”

Villon turned his gaze unwillingly from the gracious apparition above him to the sombre servitor.

“I desire to speak with her,” he said earnestly, and again his eyes travelled in the direction of the lady.

Olivier came close to him and touched him respectfully on the wrist.

“Remember, my lord,” he said, very softly, “that you are François of Corbeuil, Lord of Montcorbier, Grand Constable of France, newly come to Paris from the Court of His Majesty of Provence. Remember this as if it were written in letters of gold upon tables of iron. Forget all else. The king commands it.”

The words sounded dully enough on Villon’s brain, absorbed as he was in the contemplation of his queen, but at least they served to convince him of what he had already begun to assure himself, that for some purpose or other King Louis wished him well and granted him golden chances.

François of Corbeuil, Count of Montcorbier, stood in a very different relation to the Lady Katherine from that of the lowly poet and gaol-bird who had rhymed and sighed and battled in the Fircone Tavern last night.

“The king shall be obeyed,” he said gravely, and Olivier, turning, made a sign to Katherine, who descended the steps slowly. As she reached the last step, Olivier saluted Villon and the lady profoundly and, mounting the steps, vanished within the palace.

The man and the woman were left alone in the rose garden. Villon felt a sudden strange sensation at his heart, exquisite pain and

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exquisite pleasure, and he clasped his hands together.

"I am awake," he assured himself; "no dream could be as fair as she."

Even at the thought, Katherine flung herself swiftly at his feet, divinely gracious in her surrender of dignity as she kneeled to him with uplifted imploring hands and eyes.

"My lord," she cried, "will you listen to a distressed lady?"

Villon stooped and caught her white fingers and drew her to her feet.

"Not while the lady kneels," he said gently, and he looked with a strange apprehension into the frank, bright eyes of Katherine. Would she know him for what he was, he wondered. He read no recognition in her sweet eyes. Katherine returned his gaze, unflinchingly regarding him as a great lady might regard some stranger her equal of whom she could ask a favour.

"She does not know me," Villon's delight cried in his heart, and at the thought his spirit fluttered with fierce exaltation. The Lord of Montcorbier, who was Grand Constable of France, might say many things that were denied to the lips of François Villon.

Katherine pleaded warmly:

"There is a man in prison at this hour for whom I would implore your clemency. His name is François Villon. Last night he wounded Thibaut d'Aussigny—"

Villon smiled a contented smile.

"Thereby making room for me," he suggested. Katherine went on unheeding:

"The penalty is death. But Thibaut was a traitor sold to Burgundy."

"Did this Villon fight him for his treason?"

"No. He fought for the sake of a woman. He risked his life with a light heart because a woman asked him."

"How do you know all this?"

"Because I was the woman. This man had seen me, thought he loved me, sent me verses—"

"How insolent!"

"It was insolence—and yet they were beautiful verses. I was in mortal fear of Thibaut d'Aussigny. I went to this Villon and begged him to kill my enemy. He backed his love tale with his sword—and he lies in the shadow of death. It is not just that he should suffer for my sin."

Villon turned suddenly upon the beautiful suppliant. A thought had come into his brain so whimsical and so fantastic that it made him as dizzy for an instant as if the smooth grass beneath him had yawned into a sheer and evil precipice.

"Do you by any chance love this Villon?"

A little wave of disdain rippled over the girl's calm face.

"Great ladies do not love tavern bravos. But I pity him, and I do

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not want him to die, though, indeed, life cannot be very dear to him if he would fling it away to please a woman."

She had held a rose in her hand, and as she spoke she flung it from her in dainty symbolism of the life which the poor tavern poet had risked so bravely for her sake. A mad resolve came into Villon's mind. If he was, indeed, all that this woman thought him to be, all that those with whom he had spoken had assured him he was, now was his chance to play the lover to his heart's desire. If the Grand Constable had the power to pardon, surely the Grand Constable had also the right to woo. She had drawn a little way from him and he followed her up, standing so close to her that with a little movement he might have kissed her on the cheek.

"Even when you are the woman? If I had stood in this rascal's shoes, I would have done as he did for your sake."

The girl gave a joyous cry.

"If you think this, you should grant the poor knave his freedom."

Villon flung his hands apart with a magnificent gesture of liberation.

"That broker of ballads shall go free. Your prayer unshackles him and we will do no more than banish him from Paris. Forget that such a slave ever came near you."

The lady dropped him a magnificent curtsy, and her cheeks glowed with gratitude.

"I shall remember your clemency."

She made as if she would leave his presence, but his boldness waxed within him as a fire waxes with new wood, and he caught her lightly by the wrist.

"By Saint Venus, I envy this fellow that he should have won your thoughts. For I am in his case and I, too, would die to serve you!"

Surprise flamed in the girl's eyes, surprise and amusement mingled.

"My lord, you do not know me," she laughed, and her laughter was as fresh and merry as a milkmaid's in the meadows.

"Did he know you? Yet when he saw you he loved you and made bold to tell you so."

Her forehead wrinkled prettily in a little protesting frown.

"His words were of no more account than the wind in the eaves. But you and I are peers and the words we change have meanings."

Villon caught his breath. The Lord of Montcorbier was, indeed, wardered by very different stars from the fellow of the Fircone. He saluted her banteringly.

"Though I be newly come to Paris I have heard much of the beauty and more of the pride of the Lady Katherine de Vaucelles."

A little fire burned in the girl's pale cheeks, and she flung her head back scornfully.

"I am humble enough as to my beauty, but I am very proud of

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my pride.”

Villon, leaning forward with entreating hands, pleaded with beseeching lips.

“Would you pity me if I told you that I loved you?”

Katherine laughed, and the music of her laughter seemed to wake faint echoes among the roses as if every blossom were a magic bell with a fairy hand at the clapper.

“Heaven’s mercy,” she said. “How fast your fancy gallops. I care little to be flattered and less to be wooed, and I swear that I should be very hard to win.”

She turned to mount the steps as she spoke, as if she had said all that she wanted to say, but Villon delayed her with imploring protest.

“I have more right to try than your taproom bandit. I see what he saw; I love what he loved.”

Again the girl’s laughter brightened the summer air.

“You are very inflammable.”

Villon caught at her words.

“My fire burns to the ashes. You can no more stay me from loving you than you can stay the flowers from loving the soft air, or true men from loving honour, or heroes from loving glory. I would rake the moon from heaven for you.”

The girl swayed her head daintily, as a queen rose might in a realm of roses. There was something like pity in her eyes, but laughter lingered on her lips.

“That promise has grown rusty since Adam first made it to Eve.” She eyed him in silence for a second time, deriding his sighs with a smile: then “There is a rhyme in my mind,” she cried, “about moons and lovers,” and she began to declaim, half muse, half minx, some lines that had pleased her, to tease the importunate stranger.

“Life is unstable,  
Love may uphold;  
Fear goes in sable,  
Courage in gold.  
Mystery covers  
Midnight and noon,  
Heroes and lovers  
Cry for the moon.”

As the first words of the verse fell from her lips, Villon’s heart leaped and his eyes brightened for he knew the sound. They were part of the rhymes himself had sent her on that very parchment which had cost him first a dinner and then a drubbing. He had fancied the words and the rhymes when he wrote them, but now they seemed to sound on his ears with the married music of all the falling waters and all the blowing winds of the world. It was a shining face that he turned to the girl as he jeered, denying the thought in his

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heart:

“What doggerel!”

The girl flashed scorn at him.

“Doggerel! It is divinity,” she insisted, flinging a kiss from her finger-tips in Godspeed, as it were, to the banished ballad-maker, as she moved a little further up the steps. Villon followed her. Let come what might come, he was the maid’s equal for the moment and would press his suit if he died for it.

“Tell me what I may do,” he said, “to win your favour.”

The girl’s smiling face grew graver as she looked down on the imploring poet.

“A trifle,” she said lightly, as a child might bid for a doll; and then, as Villon’s eyes glowed questions, her voice rang out like the call of a clarion. “Save France!” she trumpeted.

Villon caught fire from both her moods.

“No more?” he said, and though the sound of his voice jested, the look in his eyes was earnest.

The girl responded to jest and earnest royally.

“No less. Are you not Grand Constable, chief of the king’s army? There is an enemy at the gates of Paris, and none of the king’s men can frighten him away.” She pointed out where, in the distance, beyond the walls of Paris, the pitched tents of the enemy fluttered their hostile flags. Her bosom heaved with great desire. “Oh, that a man would come to court! For the man who shall trail the banners of Burgundy in the dust for the king of France to walk on, I may perhaps have favours.”

Villon looked at her as men must have looked at Joan of Arc when she bade them rise up and strike for France.

“You are hard to please,” he said, but his heart was full of joy at the thought of trying to please her. If he could do this thing!

The girl answered his words and not his thoughts.

“My hero must have every virtue for his wreath, every courage for his coronet. Farewell.”

By this time she had reached the terrace and she made to enter the palace. Villon called to her longingly:

“Stay! I have a thousand things to say to you.”

The girl smiled denial.

“I have but one,” she said, “and I have said it long since. Farewell.”

Villon made a dash for audacity.

“I will follow you,” he said, and he moved to do so, but the girl’s lifted finger stayed him.

“You may not,” she said peremptorily. “I go to the queen.” And so with a swift salutation, gracious as the dip of a dancing wave, she entered the palace and left him standing there, dazed and ardent, as a man might be who had just been vouchsafed the vision of an angel. He murmured to himself her words as he slowly descended the



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steps to the ground,

“Oh, that a man would come to court,” and on that text he wove the hopeful commentary of his thoughts.

“Why should I not deserve her? Last night I was only a poor devil with a rusty sword and a single suit. To-day all’s different. I am the king’s friend, it would seem, a court potentate, a man of mark. What may I not accomplish? This finery smiles like sunlight and the world will warm its hands at me.”

He was exquisitely pleased with himself, exquisitely pleased with the world that held him and Katherine. He forgot, as lovers always will forget, that there was any one else in the world save himself and his beloved, and he was so wrapped in his sweet contemplations that he did not hear the tower door gently open, did not hear the soft, creeping footsteps of the king as he came out of his hiding place and shuffled across the soft grass toward his plaything.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE ANSWER TO BURGUNDY

A TOUCH on the shoulder roused Villon from his honeyed meditations, and he turned with a start to find the sable figure of the king at his side and the sinister visage smiling upon him.

“Good afternoon, Lord Constable,” Louis said amiably, and as Villon dropped respectfully on his knee, he questioned:

“Does power taste well?”

“Nobly, sire. On my knees let me thank your majesty.”

“Nonsense, man; I’m pleasing myself. You sang yourself into splendour. ‘If François were the king of France,’ eh?”

Villon rose with voice and gesture of apologetic entreaty.

“Your majesty will understand”

Louis brushed his apologies aside blandly.

“Perfectly. My good friend, you captivated me. With what a flashing eye, with what a radiant forehead, with what a lofty carriage you thundered your verses at me. ‘There,’ I said to myself, ‘is a real man, a man with a mission, a man who may serve France.’”

“Sire, that has been my hunger’s dream of plenty.”

Louis clasped his thin arms across his chest and hugged himself affectionately.

“Well, I couldn’t very well make you king, you know, and I wouldn’t if I could, for I have a fancy for the task myself. But I owed you a good turn and your own words prompted the payment. ‘This poor devil shall taste power,’ I said. ‘I will make him my Grand Constable—’”

Villon’s joy was so great that he was unable to hear the king out, but interrupted him with enthusiastic promises.

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“Sire, I will serve you as never king was served.”

Louis went on unheeding, and his quiet, monotonous words fell on the hot brain of the poet and chilled it.

“I will make him my Grand Constable for a week.”

If Louis had jerked a dagger into Villon’s side, he could not have more surely hurt his victim.

“A week, sire?” Villon gasped, almost unable to realize the meaning of the king’s words.

Louis turned upon him and snarled at him:

“Good Lord, did your vanity credit a permanent appointment? Come, friend, come, that would be pushing the joke too far!”

All the sunlight seemed to have gone out of the world, all the scent out of the roses. Villon could only repeat to himself: “A week!” and stare vacantly at the king. The king emphasized his offer, lingering over it lovingly.

“Even so. One wonderful week, seven delirious days.” He paused for an instant as he counted. “One hundred and sixty-eight heavenly hours. It’s the chance of a lifetime. The world was made in seven days. Seven days of power, seven days of splendour, seven days of love.”

Villon gave a groan of despair for his golden hopes.

“And then go back to the garret and the kennel, the tavern and the brothel!”

Louis’ malign smile deepened. He came closer to the poet and tapped him on the chest with his lean forefinger. He was enjoying himself immensely.

“No, no, not exactly.” he hummed. “You don’t taste the full force of the joke yet. In a week’s time you will build me a big gibbet in the Place de Grève, and there your last task as Grand Constable will be to hang Master François Villon.”

If the world had been colourless and scentless before, it was now no better than a hideous heap of ashes. If Villon had run up a heavy reckoning with the king at the Fircone Tavern, must he wipe out the score with his life-blood? Villon fell at the king’s feet with extended hands and agonized, beseeching eyes.

“Sire, sire, have pity!”

The king looked down on him in disdain.

“Are you so fond of life? Are you so poor a thing that you prize your garret and your kennel, your tavern and your brothel so highly?”

Villon bowed his head.

“I was content yesterday.”

The king surveyed the cowering figure with growing contempt.

“Can you be content to-day? Please yourself. There is still a door open to you. You can go back to your garret this very moment if you choose. Say the word and my servants shall strip you of your smart feathers and drub you into the street.”

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Villon buried his face in his hands. "Your majesty, be merciful!" he implored.

The king's scorn blazed out:

"You read Louis of France a lesson, and Louis of France returns the compliment. I took you for true gold and I am afraid that you are only base metal. You mouthed your longing for the chance to show what you could do. Here is your chance! Take it or leave it. But remember that I never change my mind. You may have your week of wonder if you wish, but if you do, by my word as a king, you shall swing for it."

Villon rose to his feet and caught at his throat as if the grip of the rope were at that very moment closing about it. He choked as he spoke.

"In God's name, sire, what have I done that you should torture me thus?"

The king snapped his answer:

"You have mocked a king and maimed a minister. You can't get off scot free."

Villon's bewildered thoughts forced themselves into words. He spoke not so much to the king as to himself, desperately trying to decide.

"Heaven help me! Life, squalid, sordid, but still life, with its tavern corners and its brute pleasures of food and drink and warm sleep, living hands to hold and living laughter to gladden me—or a week of cloth of gold, of glory, of love—and then a shameful death!"

He flung himself on the marble seat and crouched there, shuddering.

The king patted him on the back.

"Pray, friend, pray, to help your judgment!"

He had taken off his black velvet cap and ran his eye over the little row of metal saints which encircled it as if he were meditating to which particular patron he should recommend his Grand Constable to address himself. As he did so, Olivier le Dain came through the garden and moved swiftly to the king's side.

"Sire," he said, "the Burgundian herald, Toison d'Or, attends under a flag of truce with a message for your majesty."

Louis turned to his barber.

"We will receive him here, Olivier, in this green audience chamber. We need the free air when we hold speech with Burgundy."

As Olivier left the royal presence a little thing happened which meant much to four people. Katherine came on to the terrace with Noel le Jolys. She had a lute in her hand and she touched its chords lightly, seeking to make an air for words as she idled the time with her wooer. Louis saw her, though Villon did not, for he was huddled in a heap on the marble seat with his head in his hands trying to control his whirling thoughts. A new demon of mischief entered

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the king's heart.

"How," he thought, "if my lady Virtue, who flouted me, could be lured to love this beggar-man?" He ambled across to where Villon lay and tapped him on the shoulder. Villon turned to him a face drawn and white with agony.

"One further chance, fellow," said the king. "If the Count of Montcorbier win the heart of Lady Katherine de Vaucelles within the week, he shall escape the gallows and carry his lady love where he pleases."

"On your word of honour, sire?"

"My word is my honour, Master François. Well?" At this very moment it pleased heaven that Katherine, sitting on the terrace and smiling at the adoration in Noel le Jolys' eyes, seemed to find the air she sought and began to sing. The tune was quaint and plaintive, tender as an ancient lullaby, the words were the words of the tortured poet, and as he heard them a new hope seemed to come into his heart

"Life is unstable,  
Love may uphold;  
Fear goes in sable,  
Courage in gold.  
Mystery covers  
Midnight and noon,  
Heroes and lovers  
Cry for the moon."

"Well," said the king; "you cried for the moon; I give it to you."

"And I take it at your hands!" Villon thundered. "Give me my week of wonders though I die a dog's death at the end of it. I will show France and her what lay in the heart of the poor rhymester."

Louis applauded, clapping his thin hands together gleefully.

"Spoken like a man! But remember, a bargain's a bargain. If you fail to win the lady, you must, with heaven's help, keep yourself for the gallows. No self-slaughter, no flinging away your life on some other fool's sword. I give you the moon, but I want my price for it."

Villon's blood now ran warm again in its channels, and he answered stoutly:

"Sire, I will keep my bargain. Give me my week of opportunity, and if I do not make the most of it I shall deserve the death to which you devote me."

Even as he spoke the air was stirred with a cheerful flourish of trumpets and the quiet garden was invaded by Tristan l'Hermite and a company of soldiers, escorting a tall and stately gentleman, whose gorgeous tabard proclaimed him to be Toison d'Or, the herald of the Duke of Burgundy. The news of his coming had run through the palace, and the terrace was suddenly flooded with courtiers and ladies eager to hear what the enemy's envoy had to say and what an-

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swer the king would send back to him. Louis seated himself on the marble seat anigh the image of Pan and drew Villon down beside him.

“Listen well to this man’s words, my Lord Constable,” he whispered, and then turning to the gleaming figure of the herald, he demanded: “Your message, sir?”

Toison d’Or advanced a few feet nearer to the monarch and spoke in a ringing voice.

“In the name of the Duke of Burgundy and of his allies and brothers-in-arms assembled in solemn leaguer outside the walls of Paris, I hereby summon you, Louis of France, to surrender this city unconditionally and to yield yourself in confidence to my master’s mercy.”

The king folded his hands over his knees and inclined his head a little, like an enquiring bird. “And if we refuse, Sir Herald?”

The herald answered promptly:

“The worst disasters of war, fire and sword and famine, much blood to shed and much gold to pay and for yourself no hope of pardon.”

“Great words,” the king sneered.

The herald replied proudly:

“The angels of great deeds.”

Villon had been sitting listening as a man listens in a dream, almost unconscious of what was taking place. Among the ladies on the terrace Katherine stood conspicuous in her youth and beauty, and to her his eyes were turned in worship. The quarrels of great princes, the destinies of France were for the moment indifferent to him. He forgot his high desires of empire, his swelling belief in his real mission. He was only conscious that a great prize lay temptingly within his grasp, that he might win his heart’s desire. Louis interrupted his reverie:

“The Count of Montcorbier, Constable of France, is my counsellor. His voice delivers my mind. Speak, friend, and give this messenger his answer.” He touched Villon on the arm and Villon turned to him in astonishment. “As I will, sire?”

The king caught him up impatiently.

“Yes, go on, go on. ‘If Villon were the king of France.’”

Villon leaped to his feet and advanced toward the herald. A wild exultation filled his veins with fire. He felt as if he were the lord of the world, as if his hands held the scales that decided the destinies of nations. He had always dreamed of the great deeds he would do, and now great deeds were possible to him, and at least he would try to do them. He looked straight into the herald’s changeless face, but his heart shrined Katherine as he spoke.

“Herald of Burgundy, in God’s name and the king’s, I bid you go back to your master and say this: Kings are great in the eyes of their people, but the people are great in the eyes of God, and it is

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the people of France who answer you in the name of this epitome. The people of Paris are not so poor of spirit that they fear the croak of the Burgundian ravens. We are well victualled, we are well armed; we lie snug and warm behind our stout walls; we laugh at your leaguer. But when we who eat are hungry, when we who drink are dry, when we who glow are frozen, when there is neither bite on the board nor sup in the pitcher nor spark upon the hearth, our answer to rebellious Burgundy will be the same. You are knocking at our doors, beware lest we open them and come forth to speak with our enemy at the gate. We give you back defiance for defiance, menace for menace, blow for blow. This is our answer—this and the drawn sword. God and St. Denis for the King of France!”

As he spoke, he drew his sword and flashed it aloft in the sunlight. There was contagion in his burning words, and every soldier present bared his blade and pointed it to heaven while Villon's cry was repeated upon a hundred lips. As Toison d'Or turned and left the presence, Katherine came swiftly down the steps and flung herself at Villon's feet.

“My Lord,” she said. “With my lips the women of France thank you for your words of flame.”

Louis leaned forward, smiling sardonically.

“Mistress, what does this mean?” he questioned.

The girl rose to her feet, looking into Villon's face with eyes that mirrored the admiration shining in his eyes.

“It means, sire, that a man has come to court!”

## CHAPTER VIII

### A WORD WITH DOM GREGORY

IT is a thousand pities that the materials for building up a practical presentment of the real life-story of Master François Villon are so slight, that in the historical sense they might almost be said to be nonexistent. We know, indeed, a little of Master François' early days, partly from some confessions which must at all times be interpreted with a liberal sense of humour and glossed with an infinite deal of good nature, and partly from stray records made by those who do not seem to have held the vagrant poet very warm in their hearts. But of his life in those days of which this chronicle deals, there is little to find where there is much to seek.

The silence of Commynes may be explained in a thousand ways, possibly professional jealousy of one minister for another, who in so short a space of time did so much and so well, possibly ignorance of the real facts of the case, for it is fairly certain that King Louis kept his jape and its sequel very much to himself, possibly because Commynes felt that his cold spirit was scarcely equal to the proper











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“My father,” said Poncet de Rivière, “told me often of the Maid of Orleans and her power with bearded men. He must be of her kindred, for he wins me against my will.”

As the sound of their feet died away in the depths of the tower, Villon turned to the king.

“If the Duke of Burgundy falls into my trap,” he said; “men will call me a great captain. Yet it is no more than remembering the shape of a meadow where I played in childhood. Strange that an urchin’s playground should become a Golgotha of graves and glories.”

The king clapped him playfully on the shoulder.

“Where did you learn wisdom?”

“In the school of hope deferred. When I was—what I was, I still believed that this dingy carcass swaddled a Roman spirit. In the pomp of my pallet I dreamed Olympian dreams. And the dreams have come true.”

“You are an amazing fellow. Here in a week, you have made me more popular than I made myself since my accession. In court, in camp, in council, men are pleased to call you paragon.”

“I am a man of the people and I know what the people need. A week ago the good people of Paris were disloyal enough. I repeal the tax on wine and to-day they clap their hands and cry ‘God save King Louis’ lustily. A week ago your soldiers were mutinous because they were ill fed, worse clothed, and never paid at all. I feed them full, clothe them warm, pay them well, and to-day your majesty has an army that would follow me to the devil if I whistled a marching tune.”

“But in the meantime, your sands are running out. Is your heart failing? Is your pulse flagging?”

“Not a whit. I have been translated without discredit from the tavern to the palace, and if the worse comes to the worst, I may say with the dying Caesar, ‘Applaud me.’”

The king grinned sardonically.

“Will the worse come to the worst?” he piped, “How is your suit with the Lady Katherine?”

Villon’s smile lingered still on his lips as he answered:

“Sire, no wise man boasts that he knows the heart of a woman, and yet, I hope for the best.”

“But if you fail,” the king persisted.

Villon’s smile grew more philosophical. In his heart he felt fairly confident, but spoke cautiously.

“Why, then, when the housewife moon kindles her pale fire on the hearth of heaven to-morrow, I shall be quiet enough. But either way you have given me a royal week, and I have made the most of it, lived a thousand lives, eaten my cake to the last sweet crumb and have known the meaning of kingship.”

Louis laughed.

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“You speak as if you had reigned for a century.”

Villon’s sententious mood deepened.

“A man might live a thousand years and yet be no more account at the last than as a great eater of dinners. Whereas to suck all the sweet and snuff all the perfume but of a single hour, to push all its possibilities to the edge of the chessboard, is to live greatly though it be not to live long, and an end is an end if it come on the winged heels of a week or the dull crutch of a century.”

Louis leaned back and looked at his companion in astonishment.

“Pray heaven this philosophy may sound as fine when your neck is in the halter.”

“Your majesty’s wit and my wish run nose and nose in a leash.”

Louis changed the subject as if there were more important matters in the world than the life, loves and death even of a Grand Constable.

“Messire Noel brings me a new astrologer to-night. The heavens seem in a conspiracy of confusion, the stars are all a tangle! My dream of a star falling from heaven defies divination.”

Villon looked at him pityingly.

“Do you never tire of these sky doctors?” he questioned.

Louis frowned, as he always frowned at any hint of disbelief in the science of the stars.

“Don’t jest, master poet,” he said, “but ply your suit with proud Kate, for I swear if you fail, you shall hang to-morrow. Now leave me, for I must work while you play,” and he bent over a chart and seemed to forget all else in his profound contemplation.

Villon looked at him for a moment in silence and then went out of the room and descended the steps, opened the little door, and passed into the garden. The summer sun was dying in a splendid riot of colour among the rose trees. Its last rays, falling on the face of the god Pan, illuminated his fantastic features and seemed to lend them the life of an ironic leer. The warm air was rich with the blended odours of a thousand blossoms, and from the palace, faint and far off, came the sound of joyous voices. It was almost the moment when the rose garden was to be thrown open to the royal guests.

Villon pulled a rose from a bush by his hand and gazed into its crimson heart as if he sought to read there the secret which all flowers hold but which no flower has ever yet betrayed to the longing eyes of a poet. He leaned against the statue of Pan and mused pensively.

“The petals of my reign are falling from me full of life, full of colour to the end. Shall I win this wonderful woman? Am I mad to hope it? If I lose, it is a short shrift and a long rope at the end of a dazzling dream.”

He shivered as he thought and cast the rose he held away from

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him.

“How cold the June air seems, and these roses smell of graves.” He paused a little till his hopes took heart again. “But if I win, how will it be, I wonder, to marry my heart’s desire, to grow old sedately, to live again with the children on my knee, a little François here more honest than his father, a little Katherine there less comely than her mother!” He flung out his hands as if he were dismissing the phantoms of his fancy.

“Run away, my dear dream children to your playground of shadows where you belong, for your father may be hanged to-morrow, and he fights for love and life to-night.”

Villon’s reflections were fluttered by a sudden blare of music, and a gaudy fellow in a pursuivant’s coat made his appearance on the top of the terrace and rattled blast after blast from his brazen trumpet. In obedience to the long-looked-for signal, a many-coloured crowd of revellers gushed from the palace and flowed like a glowing wave of merrymaking down the steps and into the walks and alleys of the rose garden. All the strange figures that a freakish fancy could suggest leaped and danced and shouted in a rapture of mirth—satyrs and follies, clowns and devils wheeled wildly by, waving torches, clashing cymbals, or screaming at the top of their voices, while sedater spirits, masked and muffled in mantles of sombre hue, moved through the tumultuous throng and found their abated pleasure in mystification and intrigues.

Villon had a mask in his girdle. He put it on and pushing into the press allowed himself to drift hither and thither with the eddying currents of pleasure. His fantastic imagination took fire from the strange shapes and sounds about him. The sense of being in a dream, which had never deserted him from the first moment of his awakened consciousness in the rose garden, clung closely about him on this night, and the jocund figures around him flitted by as unreal as the phantoms of a noon tide sleep.

Suddenly his attention was arrested by the sound of a voice that seemed familiar to him. A man habited like a pilgrim from the Holy Land, in long hood and gabardine of grey, and with the pilgrim’s cockleshell on his shoulder, had met another masker, habited like himself. The pair were exchanging salutations, in a speech that the speakers might well assume to be unknown to any person in the royal garden. The speech, however, jingled very familiarly on Villon’s ear, for the man was talking in the amazing jargon which the worshipful company of cockleshells had devised for the better furtherance of their thievish purposes, and it appealed to Villon as intimately as a song that is learned in childhood.

The first pilgrim questioned the other.

“What do you carry in your scrip?”

And the second answered:

“I carry a cockleshell.”

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The first pilgrim questioned again:  
“What do you carry in your hand?”

And the second responded:

“A foot of steel.”

Yet again the first speaker queried:

“Will you drink the king’s health?”

And the answer came decisively:

“In a flagon of Burgundy.”

Whereat the two pilgrims saluted and parted and went their several ways and were swallowed up in the motley masquerade.

Villon’s curiosity was piqued to the quick.

“How in heaven’s name,” he asked himself, “does it come to pass that people speaking the thieves’ lingo of the Court of Miracles find themselves at a feast in the rose garden of King Louis?”

He set himself to try and track down one or the other of the mysterious pilgrims, but neither of them was to be found. His wanderings brought him back to the fair space at the foot of the terrace protected by the image of the god Pan. The place was deserted; the revellers had drifted elsewhere. A lute lay on the marble seat. Villon seated himself and taking up the instrument was touching it carelessly, when a light step on the grass arrested him, the sweetest voice in the world sounded in his ears, and he found himself addressed by the Lady Katherine de Vaucelles, who was attended by a number of fair court ladies.

“I am the voice of these ladies to pray for a favour.”

Villon bowed low.

“My ear is all obedience,” he said, “and my heart all homage.”

“You are a poet, my lord,” said Katherine, “and this is an eve which should please a poet. Rhyme us a rhyme which shall match this night of summer.”

Villon sighed a little.

“No rhyme ever rhymed was worth a beam of summer sun or summer moon; but I have lingered in Provence where every man is a nightingale, and I caught there the fever of improvisation. What shall I rhyme about?”

Katherine laughed as she pointed to her attendant ladies.

“Your suitors are women; therefore, nothing better nor worse than love.”

“The burden of the world,” Villon said. “Sigh, my lute, sigh.”

He let his fingers ripple over the strings, waking the faint wail of a plaintive minor. In a moment or two he began to recite, touching every now and then a chord on his lute to emphasize the words he spoke:

“I wonder in what Isle of Bliss  
Apollo’s music fills the air;  
In what green valley Artemis  
For young Endymion spreads the snare:

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Where Venus lingers debonair:  
The Wind has blown them all away—  
And Pan lies piping in his lair—  
Where are the Gods of Yesterday?

“Say where the great Semiramis  
Sleeps in a rose-red tomb; and where  
The precious dust of Caesar is,  
Or Cleopatra’s yellow hair:  
Where Alexander Do-and-Dare;  
The Wind has blown them all away—  
And Redbeard of the Iron Chair;  
Where are the Dreams of Yesterday?”

“Where is the Queen of Herod’s kiss,  
And Phryne in her beauty bare;  
By what strange sea does Tomyris  
With Dido and Cassandra share  
Divine Proserpina’s despair;  
The Wind has blown them all away—  
For what poor ghost does Helen care?  
Where are the Girls of Yesterday?”

“Alas for lovers! Pair by pair  
The Wind has blown them all away:  
The young and yare, the fond and fair:  
Where are the Snows of Yesterday?”

The little group whom he addressed lingered in a gracious silence for a short space. Singer and listeners seemed to be in an exquisite isolation of moonlight and soft odours. Katherine murmured pensively to herself: “Where are the snows of yesterday?”

Her eyes were shining like summer stars, her parted lips made Villon think of ripe pomegranates, her mind was wandering in the Islands of the Blest with the lovers and ladies whom Villon had praised. Villon dismissed melancholy with a jest:

“Sweet ladies,” he said; “my song is sung. Do not let it dishearten you, for, believe me, it will snow again next year and lie white and light on the graves of dead lovers. Yesterday is dead, and tomorrow comes never.”

He drew very close to Katherine and whispered the end of his sentence in her ear:

“Let us live and love to-day.”

Katherine gave a little start as she dropped from cloudland and looked at him. He drew back and turned to the others.

“Fair ladies,” he said; “shall we go to the great hall where the Italian players gambol?”

The women gathered about him, thanking him for his song, and then fluttered away like brilliant birds, up the steps to the terrace. As they did so a figure in a pilgrim’s gown came from the scented gloom of one of the rose alleys, paused for a moment as if un-

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decided as to his course, and then proceeded to cross the space of moonlit grass. He did not heed Katherine, standing in the shadow, till he almost touched her. Then he glanced at her, and with a stifled exclamation hurried past, plunged into the darkness of an opposite alley, and disappeared. Katherine gave a little cry that was almost a cry of fear, and ran swiftly to where Villon stood apart at the foot of the steps awaiting her pleasure.

“My lord!” she cried, and he, turning, swiftly responded:

“My lady!”

“This masking kindles fancies. I thought but now that the eyes of Thibaut d’Aussigny glared on me from under a pilgrim’s hood.”

Villon frowned.

“A villainous apparition. For the news is that he lies dead in the camp of Burgundy.”

Katherine gave a little shudder.

“I always hated him; almost feared him. If he be dead, I hope he will not haunt me. Ah! I tingle to-night like a lute that is tuned too high.”

“Let us think of no evil things to-night,” Villon responded. “Will you watch the players?” Katherine shook her head.

“Nay, I am more in a mood for moonlight than candlelight.”

Villon looked at her in silence, a silence of seconds that seemed to both of them like the silence of hours. The hearts of both were houses of sweet hopes, and the brains of both were hives of happy thoughts.

“May I ask you a question?” Villon said, and the girl answered:

“Surely.”

“Are you content with me?”

“You have done much.”

“I have more to do. For seven days I have wrestled with greatness as Jacob wrestled with the angels; I have made the king popular, the Parisians loyal, the army faithful—”

“Then why do you linger here where courtiers feast and ladies dance?”

Villon’s voice swelled proudly as he answered:

“I want the Duke of Burgundy to believe that the king’s favourite is a zany, and the king’s court an orgy, where the king’s honour melts like a pearl in a pot of vinegar. But our swords are tempered in wine and sharpened to dance music, and to-night we ride.”

The girl sighed. “I would that I were a man that I might ride with you.”

Villon came close to her and peered into her eyes. “I ride in your honour. Heaven has been very good to me, and I serve France serving you. Perhaps I serve both for the last time.”

“For the last time?” she repeated.

“Even so, my sweet Lady Echo. Those far away lanterns warn me that I may die to-morrow. Some of us will be dreaming our last



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dreams by sunrise. I may be one of those heavy sleepers.”

“Why, you may die if you ride on the king’s business, but so may I who sit at home and eat my heart.”

“For whom?”

“I will tell you that to-morrow.”

Villon touched her lightly on the wrist and pointed to the grey tower on whose weather-beaten wall the quaint old dial showed plainly in the bright moonlight, with its wise Latin inscription: “Dum Spectas, Fugit Hora, Carpe Diem.”

“There is no time like now time. That dial there is as wise as the wisest.” And he rapidly rendered the antique maxim into a running rhyme:

“Observe how fast time hurries past,  
Then use each hour while in your power;  
For comes the sun but time flies on,  
Proceeding ever, returning never.”

Katherine tried to laugh.

“This was old wisdom when Noah sailed the seas,” she said, and drew a little apart from him. Villon followed her.

“Well, let to-morrow tell to-morrow’s story. Tonight I feel like a happy child in a world of make-believe. To-night we are immortal, you and I, wandering forever in this green garden under those indifferent stars, breathing this rose-scented air, spelling the secret of the world.”

“You may say what you please to-morrow,” she whispered, but Villon would not have it so.

“Alas, no! To-morrow I shall be mortally sober; to-night I am divinely drunk—drunk with star wine, flower wine, song wine. The stars burn my brain; the roses pierce my flesh; the songs trouble my soul. To-night, if I dared, I would ease my heart.”

The girl spoke so faintly that only a lover’s ears could hear the words:

“You may say what you please to-night.”

Villon caught at his heart as if to keep it in the compass of his breast.

“If I were to die to-morrow, I would tell you this to-night: I love you. These are easy words to say, yet my heart fails as I say them, for their meaning is as full and musical as the Bell of Doom. Men are such fools that they have but one name for a thousand meanings, and beggar the poor love-word to base kitchen usages and work-a-day desires. But I would keep it holy for the flame which it sometimes pleases heaven to light in one heart for the worship of another. I never knew what love was till I saw a girl’s face on a May morning and wisdom stripped the rind from my naked heart. The God in me leaped into being to greet the God in your eyes. I love you. This is what I would say if I were to die to-morrow.”

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He was very close to her now, and his eyes were looking into her eyes. She answered him frankly:

“If you were to die to-morrow, I might tell you this much to-night. A woman may love a man because he is brave, or because he is comely, or because he is wise, or gentle—for a thousand thousand reasons. But the best of all reasons for a woman loving a man is just because she loves him, without rhyme and without reason, because heaven wills it, because earth fulfils it, because his hand is of the right size to hold her heart in its hollow.”

The lovers’ hands were closely clasped, the lovers’ lips were very near to meeting. Only the god Pan smiled and sneered as if he knew that sometimes lovers’ lips fail to meet even when the space between fervent mouth and mouth is no bigger than a rose-leaf.

“Katherine,” Villon whispered, and drew her closer to him. Love, happiness, life were coming to his arms as to a shrine.

In the sudden bliss that had come upon both the lovers they paid no heed to a footstep upon the terrace, till a voice struck like a sword-stroke across their ecstasy, the voice of Noel le Jolys.

“Where are the lovers of yesterday?” Noel said mockingly as he slowly descended the steps to join them.

There was a red rage in Villon’s heart, but he bridled it as he turned upon the interloper contemptuously.

“Your pink and white lady-bird,” he said to Katherine, and then waving his hand at Noel with a gesture of disdain and dismissal, chanted at him:

“Lady bird, lady-bird, fly away home.”

Noel’s pink face flushed a poppy red and his white hand went to his sword hilt. There was courage in the foppish substance, and he would clearly have rejoiced to try his chance in a passage-at-arms.

“My lord,” he said, “I will measure word and sword with you at any season, but now I seek promised speech with this lady.”

Villon laughed at his menace.

“While I have better business in hand, you shall know only the smooth of my tongue and the flat of my falchion. Compass your swelling heart lest you play the lion before a lady.”

The two men eyed each other like angry dogs, eager to spring at each other’s throats. Katherine dropped her restraining hand on Villon’s arm.

“My lord,” she whispered, “he has importuned me for audience. I will speak with you again ere you ride.”

Villon turned to her.

“We ride at nine, remember,” he said in a low voice; and then in a louder tone, looking at Noel, he added mockingly, “Till then I shall busy myself in writing my last will and testament, and bequeathing a thousand nothings to a thousand nobodies to puzzle posterity. You shall taste of my bounty, Messire Noel,” and he began to improvise derisively:

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“To Messire Noel, named the neat  
By those who love him, I bequeath  
A helmless ship, a houseless street,  
A wordless book, a swordless sheath,  
An hourless clock, a leafless wreath,  
A bed sans sheet, a board sans meat,  
A bell sans tongue, a saw sans teeth,  
To make his nothingness complete.”

Noel shrugged his shoulders and turned his back. He was very irate, but he was resolved to show nothing but indifference.

“Do you leave me nothing?” Katherine whispered, and Villon answered:

“Now and always the heart of my heart.”

He turned on his heel and glided into the liquid darkness of the rose alley, alone with exquisite thoughts.

Katherine turned to Noel haughtily.

“Well?” she said.

“I have always to seek you nowadays,” Noel protested.

Katherine tossed her head, and her tresses trembled like leaves in the moonlight.

“The world is not yet so old that the wooing must be done by women.”

“I am out of favour,” Noel complained, “since a fellow from nowhere plays the fool in high places.”

Katherine’s eyes showered scorn upon him.

“I do not hate you for railing at him, but it does not help me to love you.”

Noel caught at the word.

“You loved me once,” he asserted.

She shook her head pityingly.

“We played with great words as children play with coloured balls. It is easy to say ‘I love you,’ and often very sweet; yet the coloured balls roll into the corner, and the child forgets them when the moon of childhood wanes.”

A wistful irritation puckered Noel’s smooth countenance.

“You have outgrown me?” he questioned.

Katherine drew away from him till the moonlight that shone between them lay wide and white. She answered quietly:

“My soul was in bud a week ago. To-day it is in blossom.”

Noel threw up his arms impatiently.

“God have mercy! What can this fellow do that is denied to me? Can he stride a horse, or fly a hawk better? show a brighter sword in quarrel, or tune a smoother lute in calm? Can he out-dance me, out-drink me, out-courtier me, out-soldier me? No, no, no! And must I now believe that he can out-love me?”

Katherine, weary of the controversy, began to ascend the steps to

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the palace. She spoke as she mounted:

“When a man comes to court, it is worth while to be a woman. You will learn that some day, Sir Noel, if you grow to be a man.”

Noel retorted:

“It is no great blazon to be the favourite of a king. Gentlemen who brag little may do much. The old love may outlast the new.”

Katherine frowned at his mystery.

“You speak like a scented Sphinx, but I am too idle for enigmas. Farewell!” and she vanished into the palace.

Noel looked after her fretfully:

“Why are the women all sunflowers to this scaramouch?” he asked himself querulously. “Well, there are other women, and a wise man gathers the nearest grapes.”

A flagon and cup stood on the table by the marble seat. Noel poured himself out some wine and drank it, seeking consolation. His duty called him shortly to the service of the king, but he lingered in the garden on the chance of a hoped-for meeting.

“I shall be revenged,” he said to himself, “if my astrologer plays his part and tells the weak king that this Lord of Montcorbier is his evil spirit.” His thoughts were busy with the events of the past week; if Katherine had been disdainful, the girl Huguette had been kind, and the Golden Scull had found the dainty soldier a frequent visitor. It was Huguette who, after listening to Noel’s complaints of the Grand Constable, had suggested to him, in apparent artlessness of heart, that he could play upon the king’s superstitions through a new astrologer and had promised to find him a star-gazer who would say anything and everything that Messire Noel wished to have said. The scheme had appealed to Noel, and this very evening he expected Huguette to bring the astrologer to him, to which end he had entrusted her with a password which would admit strangers into the royal garden.

As he mused, a figure in a pilgrim’s gown came cautiously out of the shadows into the moonlight behind him and stood for a moment watching him. The god Pan could see the face that smiled under the pilgrim’s hood—a girl’s face, with bright eyes framed in golden hair, but when the girl saw Noel, she slipped a mask over her face, drew her pilgrim’s gown closely about her slim body, and tip-toed lightly across the grass to touch Noel on the shoulder.

Noel turned with a start, and faced, as he believed, a masquerading palmer.

“May I vend you a benevolence, gentleman?” Huguette asked, disguising her voice in an unfamiliar gruffness.

Noel waved aside importunity.

“Pass your ways, pilgrim. I am in no mood for motley.”

He turned away, but the persistent pilgrim followed him.

“Are you in a maid’s mood, or a mood for a maid?”

Noel stopped impatiently.

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“Are you pander as well as pilgrim? I wait for a woman.”

The pilgrim’s pertinacity was not to be baffled.

“Is she tall or short, young or old, dark or fair, sweet or sour?”

Noel answered whimsically: “She is of the colour of the chameleon, of the age of the ancient world, of the height of any man’s heart, and as bitter-sweet as a crushed quince.”

. The girl pulled off her mask and threw back her hood.

“Is she of my feet, favour, years and savour?” The moment he saw her face Noel gave a cry of delight.

“You are welcome, witch,” he shouted, “for you bring the best love in the world!”

He sprang to catch the girl in his arms, but she repulsed him gently.

“Hush! I am no love-monger now, no gallantry girl, but a most politic plotter. The world spins like a potter’s wheel to shape the vessel of our enterprise. We have a wizard ready for your king. Will Louis come?”

Noel nodded decisively.

“As linnet to looking-glass. He is greedy of star-wisdom. Does your astrologer know his lesson?”

“He is parrot-perfect. When all is quiet, give an owl’s cry thrice, and a friend will bring him. He will warn the king against his Grand Constable; he will praise Tristan, applaud Olivier, and commend Messire Noel le Jolys.”

Noel chuckled.

“Then I shall be king of the castle, and you shall have a great gold chain and pearls as big as a virgin’s tears.”

Noel did not detect the scorn in Huguette’s voice, as she answered with apparent amiability:

“You know the way to win a woman.”

“I am no jingling rhyme-broker, I thank heaven!” Noel cried. “I pay my way.”

He caught Huguette in his arms as he spoke and sought to kiss her, but she avoided him dexterously. “I will kiss you when you win,” she cried.

Noel would have pushed his suit further, but at that moment the great clock of the palace chimed the half-hour and struck upon his memory as well as upon his ear. He knew that the king expected him and he abandoned his love-making reluctantly.

“You are indeed a politician,” he sighed. “I must wait on the king.”

He opened the door of the tower and stood for a moment looking regretfully at the girl, who smiled at him temptingly, then he passed in and drew the door behind him.

The moment he had disappeared, the girl’s bearing changed. Her face and gesture blazoned a world of contempt for her courtier lover.

## IF I WERE KING

“Fool, dunce, dolt, ass, peacock, buzzard, owl!” she stormed. Then her rage faded and she turned sadly on her heel as another man’s name came into her heart and fluttered to her lips. “The world is as sour as a rotten orange since François went into exile.”

Her glance fell on the lute which lay on the marble seat where Villon had left it. She took it up and began to thrum it pensively, whispering to herself the words of Villon’s song:

“Daughters of Pleasure, one and all,  
Of form and features delicate,”

she murmured to herself. As she did so, Villon, weary of wandering in the rose alleys, came into the moonlit space and saw the cloaked and hooded figure where it sat. In a moment his mind recalled the strange greetings he had overheard between the two pilgrims.

“There is another of those pilgrims,” he said to himself, determined now to solve the mystery. He crossed the grass quickly to the figure’s side and saluted it.

“Hail, little brother.”

Huguette leaped to her feet and answered lightly:

“Hail, little sister.”

“Why little sister?” Villon asked in some astonishment.

The masked pilgrim answered him smartly:

“If I am a brother of yours, you must need be a sister of mine. But you talk out of the litany.”

“What harm,” Villon retorted, “if you give me responses?”

Huguette shrugged her shoulders.

“I will give you no more than good-bye,” she said, and turned to leave him, but Villon caught her by the arm.

“You shall not show me your heels till I show myself your face,” he insisted.

Before the girl could prevent him, he had flung back her hood and snatched the mask from her face. To his amazement he found himself looking on the fair, familiar face of Huguette, and in astonishment he cried her name. The girl, astounded at being recognized, came close to him.

“Who are you?” she asked.

For answer, Villon unmasked.

Huguette looked closely into his face, at first without any sign of recognition, then suddenly the knowledge came to her and she caught him in her arms with a cry of joy.

“François, you dear devil, where have you been this thousand years? They said you were banished. How brave you are! Where did you steal so much splendour? Are you cutting purses? Are you plucking mantles?”

Villon tried to stay her questions.

“What are you doing here, Abbess?”

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"The fair fool Noel has taken a week-long fancy to me, and I am making an age-long fool of him. Kiss me," she urged, putting her face very near to Villon's. Villon drew back his head.

"You should keep your kisses for the fair fool Noel."

Huguette drew away from him angrily.

"When you were as lean as a cat and as ragged as a sparrow, you were not so nice a precisian. Has some great lady bewitched you? Can you only woo in silk and win in velvet? If the kernel be sweet, what does the husk matter? Heaven's pity! Why should a woman love you?"

Villon took no notice of her petulance but repeated his question:

"What are you doing here, Abbess?"

The girl's rage was as short as a summer's shower. She turned again to him, fondling him.

"Well, I cannot shut the door of my heart in your smooth face. René de Montigny has a great game afoot, and you are back in time to share in it."

"What game?" Villon asked.

Huguette answered:

"The fair fool Noel, advised by me, has persuaded the king to see an astrologer here to-night when the gardens are quiet. Noel believes that the astrologer will advise the king to fling his Grand Constable out of the window and call Messire Noel in at the door, but the comrades of the cockleshell really mean much more mischief. When once we get the king within reach of our fingers, we mean to snap him up and carry him out of Paris, willy nilly, and sell him to the Duke of Burgundy."

Villon caught his breath.

"A great game!" he cried. "But who is this astrologer?"

"Thibaut d'Aussigny," she answered, "who pretends to be dead, but who lives for this revenge." Villon leaped to his feet. He remembered what Katherine thought she had seen.

"Then it was he!" he said.

Huguette went on with her story.

"Noel is to give us the signal by crying an owl's cry thrice."

Villon was revolving many thoughts in his mind and he hardly heeded her.

"This adventure of the astrologer might be turned to my advantage. Here is a chance in a thousand," he muttered to himself, as he paced restlessly on the grass. "I have but to close my eyes and shut my ears and the good Thibaut carries the good Louis to the good Burgundy to-night, and there can be no hanging to-morrow."

The girl followed after him, catching at his sleeve to stay him.

"What are you talking about?"

Villon went on, unheeding her, whispering to himself:

"If they cut Gaffer Louis' throat between them, the world were

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rid of a crooked-witted king, and I free to win Katherine, hold Paris, be the first man in France ”

“François, speak to me,” Huguette pleaded, but she pleaded in vain.

“One would say I were a fool to let such occasion slip through my ten commandments. But I have learned a thing called honour, which I must not lose for the sake of my lady.”

Huguette flung herself in front of him and stopped his restless walk.

“François! François!”

“Yes, child, yes.”

“What does it matter to you what they do with the fool king?”

“Abbess, I must have a finger in this pie. Abbess, for the old sake’s sake, will you keep me a secret?”

The girl looked up at him lovingly.

“I will always do your bidding.”

“I have a mind to play my part in this enterprise. I am the king of the Cockleshells and I have returned to authority. Give me your pilgrim’s gown, girl, and mind, not a word to the brotherhood. I want to take friend Thibaut by surprise.”

As he spoke, he pulled off the pilgrim’s gown, and Huguette stood before him in her familiar boy’s dress of green.

“Hide among the roses until the sport begins,” he cried.

The girl flung her arms about him.

“Dear François!” she cried, and then ran swiftly away from him and disappeared into the rose-scented night.

Villon looked after the girl as she ran.

“The girl is as fleet as a hare and as wild witted,” he said to himself. Then he flung Huguette from his thoughts and faced the great problem.

“How does the balance go?” he asked himself, and he weighed the air with his hands as if their cups held the precious things he spoke of.

“In the one hand, a great king’s life; in the other, a poor poet’s honour. King, beggar, beggar, king.” He paused a moment, looking down the long lane of infinite possibilities. He owed nothing to Louis after all. Louis had made him the plaything of a shameless trick; had thrust honour upon him in mockery; had tantalized him with a dream of a dream. Ere another sunset, if a woman’s heart were not his for the winning, he would be swinging, grisly enough, with his tongue through his teeth, and the ravens wheeling about his ears, upon the Paris gallows. It was but to let Thibaut d’Aussigny play out his play and snare the old black fox, and then Villon had Paris to himself, was absolved from all penalty, might in the light of the new love the people had for him, do, or at least try to do, pretty much as he pleased with the kingless kingdom. It was a dazzling prospect.



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“Why not?” he asked himself. Then, in a moment, the reasons why not rose up against him—not to be cheated, not to be banished. He had given his word; he had sworn fealty to the fantastic monarch who had played with him and to whom he owed at least the realization of great dreams and the golden chance of winning his heart’s desire. He had given his word. That would not have meant much to him eight days ago when he lived in a sick atmosphere of lies and dodges and tricks and meannesses, where the lips were as ready to deceive as the fingers to filch, and where a successful falsehood was almost as much applauded as a successful theft. But now, as he had said, he had learned a thing called honour; the whole meaning of life had been changed for him in the sunshine of a fair girl’s favour, and what was but yesterday possible, probable, even pleasant, was to-day surely impossible. He murmured her name to himself “Katherine!”—as a charm against horrible temptation, and his heart strengthened under the spell:

He turned to enter the tower, but as he did so the tower door was pushed out against him and he found himself face to face with Noel le Jolys. Noel started in astonishment at the sight of his rival, but Villon caught him by the wrist. The poor popinjay was too brave a bird to be Thibaut d’Aussigny’s decoy-duck.

“Messire Noel,” he said; “I have a word to say in your ear,” and he drew him inside the tower and stood with him for a moment in the darkness, whispering speech that made Noel’s pulse beat fast. Then Villon left him and sped swiftly up the winding stairs that led to the king’s room, while Noel, left alone, pushed open the door again and passed out into the garden, his head dizzy with strange news. Placing his hands like a shell about his mouth, he gave the cry of an owl three times with a little interval between each cry, and then softly withdrew again into the tower, and in his turn raced with a throbbing heart up the narrow steps that led to the king’s chamber.

## CHAPTER X

### UNDER WHICH KING?

THE rose garden seemed to be as quiet as a church-yard. No sound was heard save the faint sighing of the evening wind among the rose bushes, no sight resembling humanity visible save the face of Pan looking down mockingly upon the crimson blossoms that girdled him. Yet in a few seconds it became plain that the god Pan was not the only occupant of the garden. Through quiet alleyways, cloaked and cowed figures came stealing, six in number—men with pilgrims’ cloaks about their shoulders, and pilgrims’ hoods upon their heads—men who carried cockleshells upon the sleeves of their gabardines—all converging through the dark walks of the garden to a

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common centre, and that centre the grassy space before the king's watch tower. The six figures huddled together at the base of the image of Pan. One of them who seemed to be their leader, a man of giant form, spoke, and the voice was the voice of Thibaut d'Aussigny.

"Are we all here?" he asked.

The nearest pilgrim to him answered with the voice of René de Montigny.

"Aye, and ready to gather the royal rose of this garden."

As he spoke there came a faint click at the latch of the tower door. Thibaut waved his companions apart.

"Keep close," he said, and four of the pilgrim forms disappeared swiftly into the spaces of shadow. Only Thibaut and René remained, standing masked and attentive, their eyes fixed upon the tower door. It opened and Noel le Jolys emerged, followed by the slight, hunched figure in faded black velvet for whom the eyes of the conspirators were so eager. Noel advanced questioning:

"Is the star-gazer here?"

René de Montigny answered him glibly as a showman patters the praise of his wares.

"Aye. He is the wonder of the world. He can read the stars more easily than a tapster the score on his shutter. He can spell you the high luck and the low. Bohemian, Egyptian, Arabian wisdom have no mysteries for him."

As René ceased, the royal figure with a sweeping gesture of his hand made a sign of dismissal to Noel, who bowed respectfully and withdrew into the tower. The king then beckoned to the mighty figure in the palmer's weed, and Thibaut advanced slowly until he was within touch of his prey, when he suddenly flung out his great hand and caught his enemy by the throat, gripping him into silence while his right hand bared and brandished a dagger. The figure in black dropped under his grasp, trembled and gasped, but the hand of Thibaut was too strong upon him and he could not speak or cry out. Thibaut hissed at him:

"Sire, I can decipher your destiny. Do not speak or I will kill you!"

He pressed the point of the dagger close to the captive's neck and smiled to see him shudder.

"I am Thibaut d'Aussigny, sire, whom you thought to be dead, but who lives to prison you."

As he spoke his companions emerged from the gloom and gathered around Thibaut and the king, a little menacing circle of determined men.

"You are in the toils. Silent you are still a man; give tongue and you are simple carrion. You must come to the knees of Burgundy. You shall be the Duke's footstool!"

The cowering black figure wriggled and quivered as if every one

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of Thibaut's words were a stroke of a whip that cut into his flesh; his eager hands clawed piteously at Thibaut's grasping arm, until his very agony of terror aroused the contempt of his captor.

He pushed the king from him contemptuously, and the king dropped on the ground a black and helpless heap of fear.

"Can a king be such a cur? Burgundy won't hurt you if you do as he bids you. I won't hurt you if you do as I bid you."

The black figure rocked, a pitiable bundle of terrors, apparently sobbing plaintively. Thibaut sickened at such shameless fear.

"Stop crying," he growled.

René de Montigny, who had been watching keenly the actions of the prisoner, interrupted:

"He seems to be laughing," he said.

Thibaut gave a cry of astonishment and stooped down over the prostrate man, who greeted him with a prolonged and hearty peal of laughter, which staggered the giant like a blow in the face. At that moment the tower door was flung open and Tristan appeared.

"The king!" he cried in a voice of thunder.

In another moment, as if by magic, the little garden space was girdled by the archers of the Scottish Guard, strong hands made sure of the baffled conspirators, and to their astonishment Louis himself made his appearance through the open doorway, his malign face smiling in the moonlight.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE DEATH OF A WANTON

THE sham king leaped to his feet, still laughing, flung off the black cap with its little row of leaden saints and the rusty black mantle which mimicked the king's habit, and stood delighted and defiant before Thibaut, the François Villon who thus a second time had crossed his path.

"Well, friend, what has the wizard told you?" Louis asked blandly.

Villon swayed with laughter as he pointed to the bewildered giant.

"Wonders, sire," he answered. "I have not laughed so heartily since I attained greatness." But even as he spoke Thibaut had recovered his wits. He might be defeated but he would not be unavenged.

"You shall laugh no more!" he shouted, wrenching himself free from restraint, and he sprang at his enemy with lifted dagger.

From behind the shadow of the statue of Pan there came a warning shriek, and swiftly between Villon and Thibaut a slim green figure darted and slim green arms clasped Villon around the neck.

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The dagger of Thibaut drove deep into the soft body of Huguette.

With a curse Thibaut turned and, sweeping aside the archers who tried to stop him, disappeared down the nearest alley. Noel le Jolys, drawing his sword, rushed in pursuit, followed by several soldiers. Villon held the bleeding body of the girl in his arms, and tried his best to stanch the wound which was staining the green jerkin a dull red, but the girl protested faintly, pushing his ministering hand away.

“Let me alone; I am done for,” she gasped.

Olivier was by her side in an instant, eyeing the wound with the professional interest of the surgeon-barber and looking from it to the girl’s pale face.

Villon’s gaze questioned him. Olivier shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. Villon knew that the wound was mortal, and his own blood seemed like water within him. He carried the girl across the grass to the marble seat and rested her on it, the red stain on the green coat growing wider and wider as they moved.

“Courage, Abbess, courage, lass,” he whispered, fighting with his horror and his sorrow as he moaned to himself: “That any one should die for me!”

The girl’s arms clung closer about his neck and her lips moved faintly. He stooped close to her to catch her words.

“This is a strange end, François. I always thought I should die in a bed. Here is another kind of battlefield. Give me drink.”

“Some water,” Villon cried to Olivier, who stood a little apart from the pair with the resigned look of the physician who knows that his art is of no avail. Huguette protested faintly.

“Not water. Wine. I have ever loved the taste of it, and ’tis too late to change now.”

Olivier filled a cup from the flagon on the table and was for lifting it to the girl’s lips, but her feeble hand repulsed him and she pleaded to Villon:

“Give it to me, François.”

Villon took the cup from the barber’s hand, lifted it to the dying girl’s lips, and she drank greedily. The strong wine gave her for a moment something of its own false strength, and she struggled to her feet, Villon rising with her and supporting her.

“Your health, François. I suppose I have been a great sinner. Will God forgive me?”

Villon stifled a heavy groan, but he was sworn to console her if he could, and, indeed, he believed his words of consolation.

“He understands his children.”

The heavy head drooped its golden curls upon his shoulder.

“You always were hopeful,” she said brokenly. Then suddenly clasping him tightly, she cried: “Many men have taken my body; only you ever took my heart. Give me your lips.”

Villon’s spirit was troubled. It seemed to him that his lips were

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bound to wait for that kiss of his lady's, and yet the dying girl loved him and he had loved the dying girl after a fashion, and he could not refuse her now. He bent to grant her prayer, when suddenly she shook herself free from his arms and began to sing faintly the words of the song he had made for her:

“Daughters of Pleasure, one and all,

Then she caught her breath with a sob and slipped to the last lines of the verse:

“Use your red lips before too late,  
Love ere love flies beyond recall.”

She shook her head back in a wild peal of laughter: then she gave a great cry and fell forward. Villon caught her, looked in her face and knew that she was dead, and that the best of his old bad life lay dead with her.

Olivier in obedience to an order of the king's, gave a signal and the girl's body was swiftly wrapped in a soldier's cloak and laid gently upon a pair of crossed halberds. As this was being done, Noel le Jolys came panting back with a red sword in his hand.

“Thibaut d'Aussigny is dead, sire,” he said; “my hand was the hand that finished him.”

Then as his eyes fell on the dead body, they shone with sudden tears. Villon went up to him and touched him on the shoulder.

“I leave this dead woman in your hands,” he said, “for I think you had a kindness for her. See that she has Christian burial.”

Noel bowed his head and followed in silence the girl's body. The garden was left to Louis and Villon, Tristan and Olivier, and the handful of captured rogues who stood apart, strongly guarded and stripped of their pilgrims' garb, gazing amazed at Louis and his double. Villon, silent too, looked after the little group that bore away the dead girl's body. His mind was a warfare of wild memories. Strange recollections of times and places with Huguette came crowding up and beating piteously upon his brain. He thought of what he had been, and groaned; of what he was now, and his soul cried out as in prayer in the name of Katherine.

## CHAPTER XII

### A VIRGIN'S TEARS

THE king's hand fell upon his shoulder and shattered his meditations.

“Are you so dashed by the death of a wanton?” the king asked

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mockingly.

Villon turned upon him in a noble rage.

"She had God's breath in her body, sire," he said. Then drawing his hand across his forehead as if to dissipate the sad fancies that oppressed him, he went on:

"I have been John-a-Nods for the moment, sire; now I am Jack-a-Deeds again. The hour for battle is at hand."

Louis shrugged his shoulders.

"You have done me a good turn, gossip," he said, "and may ask any grace of me except your life. That depends on your lady."

Villon looked over at the corner where his old boon companions were huddled together, the miserable centre of a circle of soldiers.

"Sire," he said; "grant me the lives of those rascals. They shall ride with me and fight for France to-night. It is better than making them play bob-apple on the evil tree."

The king whispered a few words to Tristan, and Tristan very reluctantly gave the order of liberation. The comrades of the Cockleshell were freed of their bonds and bade to stand apart, under guard and out of earshot, to wait on destiny for future commands. At this moment Louis, glancing upwards, caught sight between the flower vases on the terrace of a gleam of crimson, the crimson silk of a woman's robe. It betrayed the presence of Katherine de Vaucelles, who had come hard upon the hour of nine to seek for her lover, but who paused irresolute at the head of the stairs, noting the presence of the king. Louis beckoned to her amicably, and she began slowly to descend the staircase. Louis came over to Villon and whispered in his ear:

"Here comes your lady. I think your love-fruit is ripe and you need not stand on tip-toe to pick it." Villon answered him with burning eyes:

"Sire, I believe I have won the rose of the world."

Louis chuckled like an enraptured raven.

"The Count of Montcorbier is luckier than François Villon. But the lady has a high mind and a fierce spirit. She may not relish the deception, pardon the cheat his lie!"

Something in the king's words struck upon Villon's fiery hopes like a stream of ice-cold water and seemed to quench them. He was like a man who, long playing at blind-man's-buff, suddenly has the bandage plucked from his eyes and stands dazzled and blinking in the sunlight. After all, he was not the Count of Montcorbier; after all, he was not the Grand Constable of France; after all, he was only a masquerading beggar who had won the heart of a lady under false colours; who had triumphed by flying a false flag. In all those seven splendid days this simple thought had never come to him. His whole soul had been so taken captive by the fascination of the part he had been permitted to play that he forgot he was playing a part,

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and allowed his fancy to believe that a week-long dream would endure forever. Now he knew himself and what he had done and what he must do. A divine farce had turned to sudden tragedy. He turned to the king with a groan.

“Cheat, lie,” he repeated. “Sire, those words fling me from my fool’s paradise. Kill me if I fail to win her, but I will tear this mask from my face, this falsehood from my heart.”

Louis grinned at him.

“Please yourself. Win her or swing. Either way contents me.”

As he spoke, he turned away. Katherine had descended the steps and was moving across the grass to greet her hero, who stood with clasped hands in the moonlight like a man struck dumb. Katherine was carrying in her hands a crimson scarf fringed with gold, and she lifted it to him as she spoke.

“Wear this with my prayers. With it, I give you my hand and heart. You shall carry my plighted troth with you into the battle. Let me tell my love to all the world.”

Swiftly and lightly she threw it about his neck before he could find words, but now he spoke: “Wait, wait! You must say no more until you know me.”

The girl’s eyes widened with surprise.

“Do I not know you?”

Villon thrust his face forward very close to hers.

“Look into my face,” he said. “Look well. Do you see nothing there that reminds you of other hours?”

Katherine smiled divinely.

“Of happy hours in this rose garden.”

Villon insisted fiercely:

“No, no! Of a dark night, a tavern, a cloaked woman, a sordid fellow dreaming sottishly by the fire, a prayer, a love-tale and a promise, a crowd of bullies and wantons, a quarrel, a fight with sword and lantern in the dark, a breast knot of ribbon flung from a gallery—”

Katherine recoiled a little, with a horror in her eyes.

“What are you trying to tell me?” she asked.

Villon dropped on his knees with a groan.

“Here is the knot of ribbon which you flung to me in the Fircone Tavern. Oh, pity me! I am François Villon.”

Katherine pressed her hands to her forehead.

“I can hear what you say, but it makes no mark on my brain.”

Villon’s words ran fast from him:

“I am François Villon and yet no longer he, for my old evil self is dead. I am François Villon who served you with his sword, who praised you with his pen, and who loves you with all his soul.”

The girl’s whole body shook with fear as she answered:

“It isn’t true! It isn’t true! I don’t believe you.”

Villon sprang to his feet.

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"Whatever my fate is," he cried, "you shall know the truth."

Turning to where the released conspirators stood apart, he called to them peremptorily:

"Guy! René! All of you, come here!"

Amazed to be thus summoned in their own names by so great a personage as the Grand Constable of France, the thieves crept forward timidly and, in obedience to Villon's commanding gestures, gathered about him as he turned to them, pressing his face near to their faces, and cried:

"Look at me closer—closer. Don't you know François Villon in spite of this new spirit shining in his eyes?"

René de Montigny gave a cry of recognition.

"I should never have known you. You are so strangely changed."

Guy Tabarie endorsed him.

"Still, 'tis his dear old countenance."

Katherine watching the scene in sick despair, turned piteously to the king.

"Sire, sire, is this true?"

Louis, who had been watching all with unmitigated satisfaction, answered fleeringly:

"Most true, pretty mistress. You disdained me for this."

With blazing eyes and trembling hands Katherine moved across the grass to where Villon stood.

"Pitiful traitor, why did you live this lie?"

Villon pleaded desperately: "I loved you."

Katherine's anger flamed into a great fire.

"Do not shame the sweet word. I hate you! To think the face that I have learned to love should mask so base a heart!"

Then as Villon drew a little closer to her, in an agony of entreaty, she struck out at him with both hands, beating him on the breast in an unconquerable fury. Villon bowed beneath the blow while she raged at him:

"You have stolen my love like a thief, you have crucified my pride. I hate you! Go back to the dregs and lees of life, skulk in your tavern, forget, what I shall never forget, that so base a thing as you ever came near me!"

The king was by her side in an instant and whispering into her ear:

"Is this the course of true love?"

She swung upon him in scorn.

"Sire, you have wreaked a royal revenge upon a woman. There are no tears in my eyes yet, but I pray they will come that I may weep myself clean of this memory."

With clasped hands and set lips she moved away from Louis and stood apart in the moonlight, a fixed and rigid figure of despair. Louis stepped to where Villon stood in stricken anguish and whispered to him:



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“I am afraid you will hang to-morrow, Master Villon.”

Villon threw back his head defiantly.

“I should be glad to greet the gallows now, but I have a deed to do before I die.”

As he spoke the great bell of the palace beat out the first stroke of the hour of nine. It roused the wounded spirit in his soul. He moved to where Katherine stood and spoke to her:

“I dreamed that love through which I have been born again could lift me to your lips. The dream is over. But you bade me serve France, and I ride and fight for you to-night.”

While he spoke the Lords of Lau, of Rivière and of Nantoillet in panoply of war came from the palace with their immediate followers. The garden began to fill with the picked men of the enterprise hurrying on the summons of the warning bell to follow their leader on his sortie. Villon’s pages brought the armour of the Grand Constable and began to buckle it upon him. While this was being done, he turned and spoke to his brothers-in-arms: “Comrades, let each man carry himself to-night as if the fate of France depended upon his heart, his arm, his courage. Strike for the mothers that bore you, the wives that comfort you, the children that renew you—the women that love you.” For a moment his voice quailed and almost failed him. There were happy men there, no doubt, whom women loved. But he rallied in a breath and his voice rang out valiantly again: “Forward in God’s name and the king’s!”

And every soldier present echoed him:

“Forward in God’s name and the king’s!”

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE REDE OF FIVE RIDING ROGUES

THROUGH the silent streets of Paris a slender line of steel moved slowly—the thread of which Master François Villon was the needle pricked to sew the realm of France together. The Grand Constable rode at the head with the Lords of Lau, of Rivière, and of Nantoillet, and somewhere at the tail rode the five released rascals and babbled beneath their breaths as they rode. For the order to keep silence did not count until the gates of Paris were reached and began to turn on their hinges to let Villon’s adventurers forth. Every man of the ruffians had a stout sword swinging at his girdle; every man of them sported a steel cap upon his head; every man of them felt his heart pulsing with rare emotions and his brain busy with strange thoughts. René de Montigny spoke first the thing that filled his mind.

“It must be a devil of a business,” he reflected, “to be bullied like that by a beauty. Blood, but she is beautiful, and blood, but she can bellow.”

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Guy Tabarie chuckled fatly. "I have been bullied so many times by grey-faced drabs that I would take my trouncing patiently from such a pair of lips. It was meat and drink to look at her and think thoughts."

Jehan le Loup frowned sourly. "Had I been Master François and black Louis not been by I should have tried to mend my luck with a cudgel. At best and worst she would have had something to curse for after a lusty thumping."

Casin Cholet licked his lips. "I shall think of her," he said, "when next I meet with a sweetheart With a little wit your honest rascal can be as happy as a king. In the dark all fur is of the same colour." Colin de Cayeux yawned. "What are we going a-riding for?" he questioned. "I would sooner have stayed in the king's rose garden and filled my belly as we did last week when the great lord in gold tissue pitied us. And to think that it was no more than François after all! I could jam my dagger between his shoulder-blades for making such a ninny of me."

"I knew him all the time," Guy Tabarie was beginning when René de Montigny silenced him with a ringing clip on the nearest ear which nearly unsaddled the fat rogue. "You lie, Mountain, you lie," he whispered. "Do you think that if he cheated me your pig's eyes could read the riddle? No, no, he fooled us fairly and he fooled us well, but he treated us kindly and we can afford to cry quits."

"A strange thing," mused Colin, "that a trifle of hair less on a man's chin and a trifle of dirt less on a man's cheek, with some matter of clean linen and a smooth jerkin, can make such a difference."

"Not at all," said René de Montigny, "we are all the same at the core, every man-jack and woman-jill of us, hungering, thirsting, lusting, just after the same fashion. 'Tis only the coat that counts."

"'Tis you who lie now," grunted Tabarie. "There's no gold tissue in the world that would make you as cunning as François. You would never have done as he did if the king had made you the pick of the litter."

René whistled through his teeth. "May be so, may be not," he said. "No man can tell what he may do till he is given his chance to test his mettle. Oh opportunity, golden opportunity! If I were François Villon I would shape an image of gold in your name and praise you for a saint."

"I wonder what that girl will say," mused Tabarie, "if our François comes back with the Duke of Burgundy in his pocket!"

"I wonder what she will say," sneered Jehan le Loup, "if he trundles back feet foremost with a hole in his body and half a head."

"Whatever happens is sure to vex her," said Casin Cholet. "Women are made that way."

"Our poor minions will be lonely to-night," said Colin.

"I doubt it," said René de Montigny drily, and then he sighed a

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little. "Poor Abbess!"

Sudden tears smeared Tabarie's fat cheeks.

"She was a brave wench if ever," he snivelled. "Through well-fare or ill-fare she was always the same, and would share board and blanket with a friend though his pouch were as barren as Sarah's body."

"It was ten thousand pities," said René, "that she fell so love-sick for François. Did he give her some philtre, some elixir, do you think? François is a fine fellow though, I'll not deny it, but he's had the devil's own luck, and by our patron St. Nicholas there be others as fine as he."

As he spoke the great gate of the city yawned noiselessly, and stealthy and silent the hope of Paris glided into the darkness and was swallowed up by the night.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE BANNERS OF BURGUNDY

THE yellow dawn, rippling over Paris, found her streets strangely silent, strangely quiet. A few good citizens were abed, but most good citizens were abroad on that kindly June morning, for there was business doing outside the walls of Paris which tempted every man inside the walls to those walls, and that business was the battle that was raging, and had raged since nightfall, between the troops of King Louis on one side under the Grand Constable of France, and the troops of the Duke of Burgundy and his allies on the other. Paris might have been that strange city of slumber told of by the wanderer in the Arabian tale, or that poppied palace where the sleeping beauty and her court lay waiting the coming of the hero. If Asmodeus whisking his way on the wings of the wind with any astonished travelling companion in tow had paused over Paris and unroofed it for the benefit of his fellow-voyager, most of the rooms would have been found as empty as the streets.

But there was one spot in the city—an open place by the river, between an ancient gate and the church of the Celestins—which was alive and busy with a strange activity of its own. It was empty enough and the windows of its houses stared vacantly upon its emptiness, but there were two men in possession of its tranquillity who had been toiling hard at a singular piece of work. They were putting the finishing touches to the erection of a tall, gaunt gallows with its steps and platform, which occupied a space midway between the gateway and the grey old Gothic church. In curious contrast to the sinister grimness of the gibbet, there rose opposite to it on the side of the church a dais, richly draped with royal velvet, splendidly spangled with fleur-de-lis and brave with armourial bearings.

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The two men who were working at the gallows having finished their job, came out into the open space and stretched themselves. One was a tall, thin, grave, poplar-tree of a man, clad in sad-coloured clothes and conspicuous for a long rosary of enormous beads which he carried around his neck and which from time to time he handled with ostentatious sanctimony. The other was as complete a contrast to his companion as could be desired by the humorous painter. He was a plump, spry little fellow, brightly dressed and bubbling over with merry, roguish spirits, which formed the most fantastic foil to the lugubriousness of his fellow-worker. Any good citizen of Paris, arising belated, if any such there may have been, and hurrying to the walls to know how things went for the king's cause, would have recognized readily enough in these two strange opposites two of the most dreaded of the myrmidons of Tristan l'Hermite, no less than his two chief hangmen, Trois-Echelles and Petit-Jean. Trois-Echelles was the long, cadaverous hangman; Petit-Jean was the stout, droll hangman, but when it came to a push and a pinch, both were hangmen and hung in the same manner, if not with the same manners. Petit-Jean pulled a flagon of wine from under the platform of the gallows, lifted it to his lips, drained a mighty draught, sighed with satisfaction, and held out the bottle to his brother craftsman.

"Drink and be merry."

Trois-Echelles, making gestures of protestation with his head but taking the bottle with his hand none the less, drew a deep draught from its throttle and sighed as sadly as his friend sighed gladly.

"I will drink but I cannot be merry. What's the good of building a noble gallows if nobody looks at it? One might as well be building a church."

Petit-Jean laughed good-naturedly.

"All Paris is on the walls watching the battle. Lucky Paris!"

Trois-Echelles laughed ill-humoredly.

"Not so lucky if we don't win the battle."

Petit-Jean was complacent.

"Whichever wins will need us to hang the losers. Look at the bright side, man."

Trois-Echelles fumbled his beads furtively.

"I've lost heart, I tell you. I haven't hanged a man for a week."

As he mourned over this melancholy retrospect, the door of a little house hard by the church opened and an old woman, propping herself on a crutch stick, came hobbling slowly across the open space towards the church. Petit-Jean knew her well enough, for they both lodged in the same house and both on the same floor of attics. He knew she was the mother of the greatest scapegrace in all Paris, a rascal named François Villon, who had disappeared, Heaven alone knew where, to the old lady's great despair. He saluted her good humouredly.

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“Good morrow to your nightcap, mother. Have you found your lost sheep?”

Mother Villon shook her head wistfully.

“They say he is banished, but he has sent me money, bless him! though I touch none of it, lest it be badly come by.”

Trois-Echelles stopped fumbling his beads and advanced towards her, extending his hand.

“Give it to me to spend on masses?” he asked sanctimoniously.

Petit-Jean danced between them.

“Lend it to me for drink money,” he urged.

The old woman paid no heed to their proposals. Her tired eyes had caught sight of the grim structure in wood which usurped a place in a familiar scene. She shaded her eyes and peered at it, asking: “For whom do you build this gallows?”

The glum hangman answered gloomily:

“Oddly enough, we don’t know. ‘Make me a gallows here,’ says the Constable, ‘in the open place, and sieges for the king and his courtiers.’” Mother Villon, her simple curiosity easily satisfied, dropped her informant a curtsey and hobbled slowly up the steps into the church.

Petit-Jean stretched himself again and yawned.

“I’ll to sleep and dream of hanging a king.”

Trois-Echelles put a lean finger to his lean chin.

“Treason, friend, if Tristan heard you.”

Petit-Jean’s eyes twinkled.

“Well, let’s say an archbishop,” he said. Trois-Echelles nodded approvingly.

“An archbishop ought to make a good end.”

His mind pleased itself with the picture of so high a dignitary of the church in his full canonicals coming under his tender care and being exhorted by his pious counsels.

The two hangmen climbed on the platform of the grisly erection, and, calmly indifferent to the nature of their bed, were in a few moments fast asleep and snoring as merrily as if every man in the world had been hung and there was nothing else for them to do but to take it easy for the rest of their days.

The hard weariness of work and the easy weariness of wine had made them so heavy-headed that their slumbers were not disturbed by the sound of footfalls, though the footfalls echoed strangely loud in the lonely deserted place—the footfalls of a woman, swift and impatient, the footfalls of a man swiftly pursuing. In another moment the woman and the man came into the open space, now bright and shining with the risen sun. The woman was Katherine de Vaucelles; the man was Noel le Jolys.

As Katherine entered the silent square, she paused for a moment a few paces from the church, and turning, looked at her silent follower.

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"Why do you follow me?" she asked, and Noel le Jolys, who had dogged her footsteps from the palace, answered her briskly:

"You should not walk unguarded. Therefore I shadow you."

Katherine scorned him.

"You may well play the shadow, for you cast no shadow of your own. The streets are very idle—the streets are very quiet. I would sooner have my loneliness than your company. Let me pass to my prayers." For Noel had glided between her and the church, and stood barring her passage deferentially.

"For your lover?" he asked, and Katherine flashed at him:

"You have a small mind to ask, yet I have a great mind to answer. My prayers are for a brave gentleman whom I shall never see again."

As she spoke, the cup of her heart seemed to run over with red tears, and the bitter waters trembled in her eyes. Her thoughts wandered over the long white night and her sleepless sorrow, and her vigil by the window, looking out into the rose garden, and her tired eyes straining in vain through the dark for any sight, and her tired ears straining in vain for any sound of the battle in which the lord of her heart was risking his life. For she knew it now; she had learned it through those age-long hours of agony, that he whom she called her enemy was the lord of her heart, that in spite of all her rage at the cheat that had been put upon her, she loved, not the great noble who had done so much to save France—no, nor the ragged poet who had lent her his sword-arm and his sword, but just the man, by whatever name he might be called and in whatever way of life his wheel of fortune might spin, whose hand had proved to be of the right size to hold her heart in its hollow. The Katherine of yesterday seemed to be dead and buried, to have died a fiery death of fierce thoughts, fierce agonies, fierce exultations, and from that travail a new Katherine had come into being with cleansed eyes to see the world truly and with a cleansed soul to know a great soul's truth.

Noel watched her silence but it meant nothing to him, and he tripped into her high thoughts cheerfully.

"I am a brave gentleman," he said, patting himself approvingly upon the breast. "I slew Thibaut d'Aussigny last night. The king has taken me back into favour. If I played the fool's part yesterday, I can play the wise man's part to-morrow. I was a bubble and a gull and a dunce, if you like, but I meant no harm to the king, and the king smiles on me. Cannot you do the like?"

Katherine came out of her dream and stood upon the earth again, and disdained him.

"No, for you envy a great spirit and your envy makes you a base thing."

Noel protested pettishly:

"He is no man-angel. He is made of Adam's clay like the rest of us."

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Katherine's thoughts had wandered away from her escort; her mind's eyes were busy with waving banners, the shock of meeting lances, the glitter of steel coats and the beating of steel upon steel. Through all the melley, her fancy spied one shining figure in bright armour like, so it seemed to her, Archangel Michael or Archangel Gabriel, riding in the pride of the fight with a smile on his lips, sorrow in his heart, and a token of white ribbon between his breast-plate and his breast.

She answered, not Noel's words, but her thoughts: "My pride has the right to hate him, but I think he is still my soul's man."

Noel was about to speak again, when he suddenly fell back and doffed his bonnet. Perched on the steps of the church stood the stooped sable figure of the king, just coming from his matinal devotions. In the shadow behind him stood his shadows—Tristan and Olivier.

Katherine, her attention swerved by Noel's glance, turned and swayed a reverence to Louis as he slowly descended the steps. The king surveyed them sardonically.

"Good morning, friends," he said. Then turning to Noel, he ordered, "Take the top of your speed to St. Anthony's gate and bring hot news of the battle."

Noel bowed and sped on his errand. Katherine requested:

"Have I your majesty's leave?"

Tristan and Olivier withdrew themselves discreetly apart, under the shadow of the gallows, that building of all human buildings which was most dear to their hearts and most sacred in their eyes.

Louis came very close to the pale girl and whispered:

"Are you so hungry for your devotions that you cannot waste some worldly words on me? Are you still angry with me for the trick I played on you?" Katherine's pale face flushed a little as she answered:

"It is wasted spirit to be angry with a king."

Louis grinned.

"You are as pat with your answers as a clerk at matins. Could you give me your heart now if I bent my knee?"

Katherine stifled a great sigh.

"I lost my heart last night; I have not found it again."

Louis flung up his hands in contemptuous amusement.

"The fellow was a fool to blab so glibly. I would have carried the jest farther. But he stood on the punctilio and would not win you without confession."

The girl's heart swelled.

"I am glad he had so much honour," she said, and the shining figure in the bright armour seemed more archangel-like than ever.

Louis looked at her intently, tickling his chin with his forefinger.

"If you wait in the church for his homecoming, you will see how the jest ends," he said.

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Katherine made the king a profound reverence and slowly entered the church, every pulse of her body pleading in prayer for her lost lover. She scarcely heeded an old, bowed woman who tottered out, propped on a crutch stick, and who dropped the great lady a respectful curtsy as she passed and went her ways into the silent streets. So the two women in the world whom Villon loved met for the first time.

Louis, left alone, beckoned to Tristan and Olivier, who hurried down to him.

“There goes a brave lady, gossips, a fair lady, a chaste lady. She sails in the high latitudes of love and deserves to find the Fortunate Islands. Are there not better things to do with Master Villon than to hang him?”

Olivier protested:

“This Villon is such a damnable double dealer that the ass-headed populace loves him better than you.”

The king’s visage soured.

“That is enough to hang him. Yet I have a kind of liking for the fellow, and my dream troubles me—the star that fell from heaven.”

Tristan commented bluffly:

“Hang the rascal while you can and thank heaven you are well rid of him.”

Even as he spoke the world seemed suddenly to be full of many noises and many voices. From beyond the gate on the ways that led to the city walls came the clamour of hoarse shouts and cries and the thudding din of running feet. From the other side, from the street that led to the Louvre, came the ordered tramp of soldiers.

Olivier interpreting one interruption, said: “The people are coming from the walls.”

And Tristan interpreted the other.

“The queen, sire,” he announced.

Through the narrow space that led into the open square there came a line of soldiers escorting a number of splendidly caparisoned litters—the carriages of the queen and the queen’s chief ladies. Louis advanced to the first litter, and extending his hand, assisted the queen to descend and conducted her with an elaborate display of polite affection to the gorgeous dais by the side of the church, where they sat side by side on the small thrones that had been prepared for them. The ladies and gentlemen of the court ranged themselves in their places behind the royal pair and the Scottish archers formed a solid force in front. Through the open gateway came a few running, shouting enthusiasts, outstrippers of the mass of citizens who were returning from the walls. Even the heavy sleep of Trois-Echelles and Petit-Jean was not proof against all this tumult. They awoke, rubbed their eyes, then climbing briskly to their feet, leaned over the platform on the handrails of the gallows and surveyed the scene with interest.



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Noel le Jolys pushed his way through the crowd about the gateway and advanced to the king.

“Sire,” he said, “the latest message from the battle: The day is wholly ours. The Grand Constable returns in triumph. You can hear his music now.”

Louis nodded.

“It is very well,” he affirmed gravely.

Through the gateway the crowd of people was pouring thick and fast, shouting and cheering and filling the square in front of the dais with a throng of enthusiastic men, women and children, all waving their arms, flinging flowers and yelling welcomes at the topmost pitch of their lungs. The sound of military music and the tramp of marching men could be heard approaching louder and louder.

Five girls had forced their way to the very front row of the throne and were applauding and shouting with the rest. These were the light ladies of the Fircone, Isabeau, Jehanneton, Denise, and Blanche with Guillemette, fat Robin Turgis’ fat daughter. They were all in a state of great excitement, for their lovers had vanished over night and their Abbess had disappeared like a dream, and they knew not what had become of them. They had little fear for their lovers, for the good gentlemen of the Fellowship of the Cockleshell had a way of diving into the deep waters of existence at intervals in order to escape the too attentive eye and the too particular finger of the law, and the girls had a vague idea of some great scheme on hand which might easily result in trouble for the brotherhood. As for their Abbess, they were none too sorry to be free from her somewhat decisive authority, and they chattered and babbled like birds escaped from a cage.

By this time the advance guard of the army began to pour in through the narrow mouth of the gateway and to form a line in front of the populace, thus leaving a wide open space between the assembled people and the seated king. From every window heads were thrust and hands extended waving scarfs of silk or scattering flowers. The blare of the soldiers’ music grew louder and louder, the tramp of horse and men came nearer and nearer, and then, when the cheering was at its shrillest and the rain of flowers thickest, Villon rode in through the gateway on his great warhorse with his five ruffians close at his heels. Villon’s lifted hand gave the signal for a halt and he leaped lightly off his horse and advanced towards the king, a glorious figure to the eyes of the crowd in his shining armour with a scarlet coif upon his helmet. If for a moment his glance rested on the gaunt skeleton of the gallows there came no change in the proud composure of his face. Immediately behind him followed the faithful ragamuffins, each of whom bore vivid signs in slung arm, swathed leg or bandaged forehead of the lusty work he had done in the king’s name upon the king’s enemies. But the slings and swathes and bandages were of no common sort, but splendid bits of silk of

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many colours, bearing fantastic devices and rich in threads of gold and silver.

As Villon and his fantastic escort strode towards the presence, Noel interposed indignantly. He stretched a pair of protecting arms wide out to ward off from the king the approach of so singular a deputation, while he demanded angrily:

“In heaven’s name, sir, who are these scarecrows who flaunt their tatters in the presence of the king?”

The king nursed his chin with an amused smile as Villon answered:

“The scarecrows are rogues who have fought like gentlefolk and these rags are the banners of the enemy.”

Even as he spoke the rapsallions stripped the pieces of silk from arm and leg and forehead, shook them out into such semblance of their original shape as battle had left to them and flung them with a gesture of imperial pride on the ground at the foot of the dais.

“Well answered,” said Louis regally, while two pursuivants pounced swiftly upon the bits of silk, and gathering them up with reverential fingers, laid them upon the railing in front of the king’s chair to be examined with loving care by the queen.

Standing erect, Villon addressed the king:

“Louis of France, we bring you these silks for your carpet. An hour ago they wooed the wind from Burgundian staves and floated over Burgundian helmets. I will make no vain glory of their winning. Burgundy fought well, but France fought better, and these trophies trail in our triumph. To a mercer’s eyes these bits of tissue are but so many squares of damaged web. To a soldier’s eye, they cover crowded graves with honour. To a king’s eye, they deck one throne with lonely splendour. When we here, who breathe hard from fighting, and ye, who stand there and marvel, are dust, when the king’s name is but a golden space in chronicles grey with age, these banners shall hang from Cathedral arches and your children’s children’s children, lifted in reverent arms, shall peep through the dim air at the faded colours, and baby lips shall whisper an echo of our battle.”

## CHAPTER XV

### THE SHADOW OF THE GALLOWS

AS Villon ended a great peal of music came from the church, the magnificent music of a *Te Deum Laudamus*; while from the soldiers who choked the archway, a glowing sea of steel, there rose one common cry of “God save the Grand Constable!” Olivier leaned over and whispered to the king:

“They cheer him, sire.”

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Louis waved him impatiently aside, and leaning over the railing, spoke:

“My Lord Constable, and you, brave soldiers, the King of France thanks you for your gift. Victory was indeed assured you by the justice of our cause. My Lord of Montcorbier, you may promise these brave fellows that their sovereign will remember them.”

Swiftly Villon turned and addressed the motley throng behind him:

“In the king’s name, a gold coin to every man who fought and a cup of wine to every man, woman and child who wishes to drink the king’s health.”

The king smiled wryly.

“Ever generous,” he said.

“To the end, sire,” Villon answered, with an ironic salutation, which Louis answered by an ironic question.

“What have you now to do?”

Villon saluted the king again.

“My latest duty, sire,” he answered, and once again he turned to address the multitude:

“Soldiers who have served under me, friends who have fought with me, and you, people, whom I have striven to succour, listen to my amazing swan song. You know me a little as Count of Montcorbier, Grand Constable of France. I know myself indifferently well as François Villon, Master of Arts, broker of ballads and sometime bibber and brawler. It is now my task as Grand Constable of France to declare that the life of Master François Villon is forfeit and to pronounce on him this sentence, that he be straightway hanged upon yonder gibbet.”

His words fell like the beat of a passing bell upon the ears of an absolutely silent crowd and for some few year-long seconds the silence brooded over the place. The five wantons on the fringe of the crowd caught at each others’ fingers and gasped. Was that splendid gentleman their old friend, François Villon? As for the five rogues who knew the secret, they had begun to laugh at Villon’s first words, but the laughter dried upon their lips as he ended.

From the church suddenly the exultant music of the *Te Deum* ceased to swell and in its place crept forth upon the silent air the awful notes of a *Miserere*. The king had been at the ear of the organist that morning and had planned his effects well. The melancholy music stirred the people to murmurs of surprise and protest.

Guy Tabarie, flourishing his notched and bloody sword, thrust his round body forward.

“What jest is this?” he asked.

And Villon answered him:

“Such a jest as I would rather weep over to-morrow than laugh at to-day. For the pitcher breaks at the well’s mouth this very morning. Messire Noel, to you I surrender my sword. I like to believe that it

has scraped a little shame from its master's coat." He drew his great war-sword and handed it to Noel le Jolys, who, for one of the few times in his life, astonished into forgetfulness of courtly etiquette, had been staring, open-mouthed, at the astonishing revelation that had just been made to him. The gleam of the war-worn weapon recalled him to himself and he took it from the hands of the doomed man with a grave courtesy which meant something more than the official fulfillment of a formal duty. Noel le Jolys was a soldier and his eyes paid homage to a brave man.

Villon turned to Tristan.

"Master Tristan, perform your office upon this self-doomed felon."

With great alacrity, Tristan moved towards Villon, but his motion was met by such angry murmurs from the crowd, and not from the crowd alone, but from the soldiers who had followed Villon to victory, that even he shrank back instinctively before its menace. There came cries from a thousand throats, calling on the king to pardon the Grand Constable, calling upon those who loved him to rescue him.

"King, is this justice?" René de Montigny shouted, and his question evoked a roar of approval from the multitude.

The king's keen glance surveyed the scene with no sign of fear and no sign of annoyance. Leaning easily upon the railing, as a man might lean who surveyed an amusing farce or interlude, he addressed the crowd:

"Good people of Paris, you have heard your Grand Constable pronounce sentence upon a criminal. Has Master François Villon any reason to urge, any plea to offer, why the sentence should not be carried out?"

Villon waved his hand disdainfully.

"I have nothing whatever to say, sire. François Villon must die. It's bad luck for him, but he has worse luck and so—to business."

As he spoke he drew near to the line of Scottish archers and two of their number laid hands on him, one at either side. The sight of their hero thus in the very clutch of justice spurred the multitude to renewed exasperation. Angry demands for justice, for mercy, for rescue, shook the summer air. Unarmed citizens broke into an armourer's shop hard by, and, seizing whatever weapons they could lay their hands upon, flourished them aloft in significant assertion that their words were but the prefaces to deeds. Again Tabarie's bull voice bellowed to those about him:

"Kings must listen to the voice of the people. Shall the man who led us to victory die a rogue's death?"

And again his thunder heralded a storm. Soldiers and citizens alike seemed prepared to rescue Villon by force from the hands of his enemies. The Scottish archers with levelled arquebusses formed a line in front of the dais and every courtier drew his sword. Only

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the king seemed unmoved, only the king seemed entertained by the wind he had sowed, the whirlwind he had reaped. He asked quite quietly:

“Does Master François Villon ask his life?”

Villon shook his head.

“No, sire. Master François Villon played and Master François Villon pays.”

As he spoke the angry people, swaying like a sea, shouted new shouts of rescue, clamoured new cries for pardon. Olivier, green-pale, whispered eagerly to the king:

“Sire, the rogues are in a damnable temper. Can you not gain time, postpone, promise?”

Louis answered imperturbably:

“Are the fools so fond of the fellow? I know a way to stop their shouting.”

As he spoke, for the first time he rose from his seat, a frail, small, black figure, to dominate those raging waves of humanity, while Olivier, holding up his hand to order silence, shouted:

“Peace, peace! The king would speak with his good people of Paris.”

The noisy voices dropped slowly into silence to hear what the king said.

“Good people of Paris, I am no tyrant. But a king is the father of his people, and his ears can never be shut against the cries of his children. You all love this man? Hear, then, my judgment! This man’s life is forfeit. Which of you will redeem it? If there be one among you ready to take Master François Villon’s place on yonder gibbet, let that one speak now.”

There was a brief silence as the mob began to realize the meaning of the king’s words, a silence broken by angry cries.

“What does he mean? Take his place on the gallows! A trick—a trick!”

Louis grinned complacently.

“No trick, friends, but a simple bargain. Here is a man condemned to death; here is an idle gibbet. If ye prize him so highly, let one among you die for him. It has been said by the wise Apostle: ‘Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.’ On my word as a king, when such a splendid volunteer is swinging at the end of yonder rope that moment Master François Villon shall go free. Come, who will slip neck in noose for the sake of a hero?”

Villon protested haughtily:

“No man shall die for me.”

But, indeed, his protest was premature. The anger of the crowd dwindled into sullen clamours.

“The king laughs at us! ’Tis too much to ask.”

A faint, exultant smile flickered over the king’s face as he asked:

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“Now, friends, where is your idol’s supplement? Who will be his lieutenant, who will be heir to his heritage of a cross bar and a rope? You are not so brisk as you were. Does your devotion falter? Were you mocking me and him?”

Villon looked at the king with a kind of disdainful admiration.

“King of foxes!” he applauded, and the king heard him and smiled again.

“Tristan,” he said, “go into yonder church and bring me an inch of candle.”

Tristan bowed and entered the church. The king went on:

“Our royal mercy is mild, our royal mercy is patient. As it is our hope and our belief to live in history as a good and gracious sovereign, we would not have it said of us that we denied even a felon all due and reasonable opportunity.”

Even while he spoke, Tristan came out of the church carrying in his hand a great gold candlestick in whose socket a little piece of candle, scarce an inch high, still was burning. He gave it into the hands of one of the soldiers of the Scottish Guard, who held it in his strong grasp and stood as immovable as a statue, while the thin faint flame pointed spear-like towards heaven in the warm and windless air.

Louis stopped and whispered to a page behind him who bowed and entered the church. Then the king spoke again to the silent, wondering crowd:

“So long as this candle burns, so long François Villon lives. If while it burns, one of you is moved to take Master Villon’s place on the gallows, so much the better for Master Villon, and so much the worse for his substitute. Herald, proclaim our pleasure.” At a sign from Montjoye, the royal herald, two pursuivants stirred the air with the blast of golden trumpets. Then Montjoye spoke:

“The king’s grace and the king’s justice is ready to grant life and liberty to François Villon if anyone be found willing to take his place on the gallows and die his death that he may live his life!”

As Montjoye’s words died away a great silence fell upon the assembled people, a silence so still and cruel that men’s hearts grew cold and the warm June air seemed to be sighing over fields of ice. The king leaned over and addressed his prisoner confidentially:

“Master Villon, Master Villon, you see what human friendship means and the sweet voices of the multitude.”

Villon answered boldly:

“Sire, it is no news to me that men love the dear habit of living.”

Louis signalled to Montjoye.

“Proclaim again,” he said; and once more the pair of pursuivants blew their trumpets and once again Montjoye made his singular proposition of pardon to the assemblage.

CHAPTER XVI

“WE SPEAK TO MEN”

IT fell this time upon fresh ears, the ears of an old woman who was patiently pushing her way through the crowd in her effort to reach her humble lodging. She had succeeded in making her way to the open space as the last words of the herald's offer were being spoken, and suddenly her dulled brain caught the full significance of Montjoye's speech. Looking wildly around her, she saw where Villon stood, an armoured figure held captive, and without attempting to realize the meaning of what she beheld, she dropped her stick and tottered forward to the dais, where she fell on her knees with clasped, entreating hands.

“Sire, sire, I will die for him!”

Villon's heart leaped to his throat when he saw her.

“Mammy, mammy, go away!” he cried, and he made a vain attempt to move towards his mother, a movement instantly restrained by the crossed weapons of his captors. At the same moment Katherine de Vaucelles came out of the church door in obedience to the summons of a royal page, who had found her at her prayers, and who told her that the king desired her presence. She paused at the head of the steps in amazed survey of the crowded place and a scene that at first she could not understand.

“Who is this woman?” Louis asked, looking down at the poor old dame, who knelt before him and besought him. Olivier answered in his ear:

“The fellow's mother, sire.”

A very little tenderness came into Louis' eyes, a very little tenderness trembled on his lips.

“Woman, we cannot hear you,” he said. “By God's law you have given him life once and by my law you may not give him life again.”

“Sire, I beseech you,” Mother Villon entreated; but the king's pity was not to be purchased so.

“Take her away and use her gently,” he said.

Noel le Jolys stooped to obey the king's command, but the old woman, rising to her feet, repulsed him fiercely.

“No! no!” she said. “I will not leave my son,” and she flung her old body passionately upon the prisoner's neck and clasped with her lean arms his mailed shoulders.

Louis bade Montjoye proclaim for the last time, and once again the trumpets thundered and once again the cold, calm voice of Montjoye propounded the grim terms of the king's clemency.

The silence that followed was swiftly broken by the sweet, clear voice of a girl.

“I will,” said Katherine de Vaucelles from her stand on the church steps, and on the instant all eyes were turned to the spot

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where the maiden stood with face as white as pear-blossom and her hands tightly clenched by her sides. She moved slowly down the steps in the dead silence and paused before the king's throne.

"I will die for him, sire," she said quietly.

From Villon's lips there came a mighty cry of "Katherine!" and a faint spot of colour rose on the king's cheeks.

"Mistress, we speak to men," he said.

Tristan pressed his great hands together.

"By St. Denis, our women seem to make the best men," he grunted.

Katherine stood, tall and proud, facing the king. Mother Villon, stirred by this heavenly interference, left her son to fall at the feet of the angel lady and kiss the hem of her garment.

Katherine spoke bravely:

"Sire, I love this man and would be proud to die for him. It may chime with your pleasure to slay him; it cannot chime with your honour to deny me. Your word is given and a king must keep his word." The king made an impatient gesture.

"We speak to men."

Villon caught at his words.

"I speak to a woman," he cried, and gazing passionately at his love, he called to her: "Katherine, my Katherine, death is a little thing. For love is deathless and you give me a better thing than life." With unmoved voice, with unchanged face, Katherine persisted:

"Sire, I claim your promise."

Louis again denied her.

"We speak to men. Tristan, do your office."

At this moment the situation suddenly changed. Villon unexpectedly wrenched himself free from the control of the two soldiers beside him, whose hold had relaxed in their wonder at what was passing, and sprang towards Katherine. His act instantly inspired the hearts and hands of his sympathisers, and in a second he was caught up and encircled by a crowd of armed and determined men, who drove back the Scottish archers. Villon snatched a drawn sword from the hand of René de Montigny and held it high in the air while he shouted: "No, by God's rood, the candle of my grace has not yet burnt to the socket! People of Paris, shall I not speak to my lover before I die?"

The place was a raving bedlam of noise and menace. The Scottish archers did not dare to make any attempt to recapture their escaped prisoner, but kept their line in front of the royal dais, while Villon stood by the side of Katherine with drawn sword, an archangel of insurrection, ready at any moment to fling the forces behind him upon his adversaries. Yet the king remained as unmoved as if he had been witnessing a puppet show. In his thin, even voice, he commanded:

"Speak to her while the candle burns, not a second longer."



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With one accord, Villon's adherents drew back and Villon was left with Katherine alone in the open space.

Katherine whispered to him:

"François, will you not take life at my hands?"

Villon answered her tenderly:

"Dear child, if that crowned Judas there had taken you at your word, do you think I would have outlived you by the space of a second?"

She looked fixedly into his eyes.

"You are resolved?"

He smiled back at her.

"I am as stubborn as a mule and no pleadings will move me."

She looked over her shoulder with a shudder.

"Dearest, the candle flickers in the wind. There is a dagger in your girdle. Slay me and yourself."

"You mean it?" he gasped, and she answered firmly:

"By God's Mother and God's Son."

A sudden, wonderful thought flashed through Villon's mind. He had won love, he could not hope to win life, but at least he might so manage as to die a soldier's death and not a knave's. He whispered to her eagerly:

"Then we will spoil old Louis' pleasure yet. Love, will you marry me here at the foot of the gallows?"

She answered him:

"With all my heart."

Instantly he turned and left her and strode towards the throne.

"King, I crave your patience, but your sentence must tarry and turn, for I claim to marry this lady."

Louis smiled derisively.

"It is too late. Sing your neck-rhyme and have done, for your noose is too large for a wedding ring."

Villon gave him back smile for smile.

"Sire," he said, "I am a Master of Arts of the University of Paris and as such have the right in extremis to any sacrament of the church. I have lived a confirmed bachelor, but now I have a mind to change my state. Find me a priest, King Louis." Olivier stooped to the king.

"He speaks the truth, sire. He can claim this right."

Louis leaned forward interested.

"What do you hope to gain by this?"

Villon answered calmly:

"The right to die like a soldier by the sword, not like a rogue by the rope."

A murmur of approval stirred the silent crowd, but it died away as Katherine suddenly advanced and stood, a white figure like a fair lily, between the king and Villon.

"Nay, you gain more than this. I am the Lady Katherine de Vau-

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celles, kinswoman of the royal house, mistress of a hundred lands, Grand Seneschale of Gascony, Warden of the Marches of Poitou. In my own domains I exercise the High Justice and the Low. This man is of humble birth, and when I marry him he becomes my vassal. Over my vassals I hold the law of life and death.”

Villon dropped on his knees beside his lady.

Louis clapped his thin hands together as a man might applaud a play.

You are a bold minion and you have a quick wit. But if you marry this gaol bird you decline to his condition. Your high titles fall from you, your great estates are forfeit to the crown and you and he must go out into exile together; the beggar woman with the beggar man.”

Katherine turned to Villon where he knelt beside her.

“’Tis a little price to pay for my lover.”

Villon looking up into her eyes, questioned her:

“Do you think I’m worth it, Kate? ’Tis a big price to pay for this poor anatomy.”

She repeated her words.

“’Tis a little price to pay for my lover. Do you doubt me?”

Unheeded a man-at-arms pushed his way through the crowd to the king’s dais and whispered some words in the ear of Noel le Jolys, who in turn whispered in the ear of Olivier and Olivier hearing, grew paler than before. Villon caught Katherine by the hand.

“No, Kate, no! The world is wide, our hearts are light. For a star has fallen to me from heaven and it fills the earth with glory.”

His words fell on the king’s ears like the voice of an oracle. Standing in his place with staring eyes and trembling fingers, he repeated falteringly the mystic words.

“A star has fallen from heaven. My dream, my dream!”

Olivier plucked at his mantle, whispering with twitching lips:

“My liege, this story spreads like the plague in the city and every alley vomits mutiny.”

Louis pushed him aside.

“Rub your pale cheeks,” he said; “for all is well. Destiny has spoken.”

Then leaning over and stretching his thin hand towards the crowd, he cried:

“People of Paris, that man shall have his life; this woman her lover. I have tried a man’s heart and found it pure gold; a woman’s soul and found it all angel. True man and true woman, to each other’s arms!”

And Katherine and Villon obeyed the king.

## EPILOGUE

AT about this point in his narrative, Dom Gregory, as those happy few who are familiar with his manuscript in the Abbey of Bonne Aventure are aware, diverges from the full current of his story to indulge in some philosophical reflections upon the character of Louis XI.

What, Dom Gregory asks in cautious interrogation, were the real intentions of the monarch with regard to François Villon and the Lady Katherine de Vaucelles? His enemies no doubt assert that he played with their destinies for a purely malignant purpose and was only prevented from carrying his evil intentions into effect by the storm of popular indignation that threatened him. Others, again, who pretend to a more intimate acquaintance with the shifty character of the king, insist that he did indeed purpose to send Master Villon to the gallows, or at least and worse, into a beggar's exile, but that he was stayed by Master Villon's happy use of the phrase concerning a star fallen from heaven, which words, harping upon the superstitious wits of his majesty, made him believe that the dream which had puzzled him was interpreted and fulfilled. In this regard Dom Gregory records with a sly gravity how many suggest that Master François used those words of set purpose with the very intention of playing upon the strained strings of the king's mind. But there be those, too, Dom Gregory adds, and we gather from his manner that he is inclined to include himself in their number, there be those partisans of the king who maintain that the king's cruelty was from the start a mere mask for clemency, that he only intended a little malicious sport with the too outspoken lover and the too disdainful lass, and that it had never been in the scope of his thoughts seriously to punish either the broker of ballads or the valiant maid of Vaucelles.

Starting from this point, Dom Gregory indulges in a great many reflections upon kings and kingship and the consequences of kingly acts, all of which seemed perhaps more momentous at the time when they were written and in the sleepy Abbey where they lie enshrined, than in busier and more bustling times. One could have wished that Dom Gregory had let such philosophies go by the board and had given us instead some greater knowledge of what happened to François Villon and Katherine de Vaucelles after they fell upon each other's necks in that open place in Paris, with the mob huzzahing, the king staring and Tristan's strange satellites busily dismantling the useless gibbet. But here Dom Gregory is little less than dumb. Losses in the manuscript account for much of his silence; perhaps his ecclesiastical indifference to the wedded state may account for more. If we can gather vaguely from other sources that the poet and his mistress settled down on a small and quiet estate in Poitou, lived a peaceful country life for many years and died a peaceful country death at the end, it is the most we can hope to gain with surety. We

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are glad to believe in their happiness, for he was a true lover and she was a fair woman.