

ЭЖЕН СЮ

THE PILGRIM'S SHELL;
OR, FERGAN THE
QUARRYMAN: A TALE
FROM THE FEUDAL
TIMES

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Eugène Sue

The Pilgrim's Shell; Or, Fergan the Quarryman: A Tale from the Feudal Times

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

In my introduction to "The Silver Cross; or, The Carpenter of Nazareth," I said:

"Eugene Sue wrote in French a monumental work – the *Mysteries of the People; or, History of a Proletarian Family*. It is a 'work of fiction'; yet it is the best universal history extant. Better than any work, avowedly on history, it graphically traces the special features of the several systems of class-rule as they succeeded each other from epoch to epoch, together with the nature of the struggle between the contending classes. The 'Law,' 'Order,' 'Patriotism,' 'Religion,' etc., etc., that each successive tyrant class, despite its change of form, hysterically has sought refuge in in order to justify its criminal existence whenever threatened; the varying economic causes of the oppression of the toilers; the mistakes incurred by these in their struggles for redress; the varying fortunes of the conflict; – all these social dramas are therein reproduced in a majestic series of 'historic novels,' that cover leading and successive episodes in the history of the race."

The present story – *The Pilgrim's Shell; or, Fergan the Quarryman* – is one of that majestic series, among the most majestic of the set, and, with regard to the social period that it describes – its institutions, its classes, its manners, its virtues and its crimes, and the characters that it builds – the most instructive treatise on feudalism, at the very time when the bourgeois or capitalist class was struggling for a foot-hold, and beginning to break through the thick feudal incrustation above. More fully than Molière's plays, and strangely supplemental of the best passages on the subject in the novels of George Eliot, *The Pilgrim's Shell; or, Fergan the Quarryman* chisels the struggling bourgeois on the feudal groundwork and background, in lines so sharp and true that both the present fully developed and ruling capitalist, inheritor of the feudal attribute of plundering, is seen in the historic ancestor of his class, and his class' refuse, the modern middle class man, is foreshadowed, now also struggling like his prototype of feudal days, to keep his head above water, but, differently from his prototype, who had his future before him, now with his future behind. This double development, inestimable in the comprehension of the tactical laws that the Labor or Socialist Movement demands, stands out clear with the aid of this work.

Eugene Sue has been termed a colorist, the Titian of French literature. It does not detract from his merits, it rather adds thereto, that his brush was also photographic. The leading characters in the story – Fergan, the type of the physically and mentally clean workingman; Bezenecq the Rich, the type of the embryonic bourgeois, visionary, craven and grasping; Martin the Prudent, the type of the "conservative workingman"; the Bishop of Laon, the type of usurping power in the mantle of religion; the seigneur of Plouernel, the type of the ingrained stupidity and prejudices that characterize the class grounded on might; a dazzling procession of women – Joan the Hunchback and Azenor the Pale, Perrette the Ribald and the dame of Haut-Pourcin, Yolande and Simonne, etc. – types of the variations in the form of woman's crucifixion under social systems grounded on class rule; Walter the Pennyless, the type of dispositions too indolent to oppose the wrongs they perceive, and crafty enough to dupe both dupers and duped; Garin, the type of the master's human sleuth – are figures, clad in historic garb, that either hurry or stalk imposingly over the boards, followed by mobs of their respective classes, and presenting a picture that thrills the heart from stage to stage, and leaves upon the mind rich deposits of solid information and crystalline thought.

As a novel, *The Pilgrim's Shell; or, Fergan the Quarryman* pleases, entertains and elevates; as an imparter of historic information and knowledge, it incites to thought and intelligent action. Whether as literature of pleasure or of study, the work deserves the broader field of the Socialist or Labor Movements of the English-speaking world, hereby afforded to it; and inversely, the Socialist or Labor Movements of the English-speaking world, entitled to the best, and none too good, that the Movements in other languages produce, can not but profit by the work, hereby rendered accessible to them.

DANIEL DE LEON.

New York, January 1, 1904.

PART I. THE FEUDAL CASTLE

CHAPTER I. THE SERFS OF PLOUERNEL

The day touched its close. The autumn sun cast its last rays upon one of the villages of the seigniory of Plouernel. A large number of partly demolished houses bore testimony to having been recently set on fire during one of the wars, frequent during the eleventh century, between the feudal lords of France. The walls of the huts of the village, built in pisé, or of stones held together with clayish earth, were cracked or blackened by the flames. There were still in sight, half burnt out, the rafters of the roofings, replaced by a few poles wrapped in bundles of furze or reed-grass.

The aspect of the serfs, just returned from the fields, was no less wretched than that of their hovels. Wan, emaciated, barely dressed in rags, they huddled together, trembling and uneasy. The bailiff, justiciary of the seigniory, had just arrived at the village, accompanied with five or six armed men. Presently, to the number of about three hundred, the serfs gathered around him, a fellow so ill disposed towards the poor, that, to his name of Garin, the nick-name "Serf-eater" had been attached. This dreaded man wore a leather casque furnished with ribs of iron, and a coat of goatskin like his shoes. A long sword hung by his side. He was astride a reddish-brown horse, that looked as savage as its master. Men on foot, variously armed, who made up the escort of Garin the Serf-eater, kept watch over several serfs, bound hands and feet, who were brought in prisoners from other localities. Not far from them lay stretched on the ground a wretched fellow, fearfully mutilated, hideous and horrible to behold. His eyes were knocked in, his feet and hands cut off – a common punishment for rebels. This unfortunate being, hardly covered in rags, the stumps of his arms and legs wrapped in dirty bandages, was waiting for some of his companions in misery, back from the fields, to find time to transport him upon the litter which he shared with the beasts of burden. Blind, and without hands or feet, he found himself thrown upon the charity of his fellows, who now ten years helped him to eat and drink. Other serfs of Normandy and Brittany, had, at the time of the revolt against their lords, been blinded, mutilated like this wretched fellow, and left upon the spot of their punishment to perish in the tortures of hunger.

When the people of the village were gathered on the place, Garin the Serf-eater pulled a parchment out of his pocket and read as follows:

"Witness the order of the very high and very mighty Neroweg VI, lord of the county of Plouernel, by the grace of god. All his serfs and bondsmen, subject to mortmain and taille at his pleasure and mercy, are taxed by the will of the said lord count to pay into his treasury four copper sous per head before the last day of this month at the latest." The serfs, threatened with this fresh exaction, could not restrain their lamentations. Garin the Serf-eater rolled over the assemblage a wrathful eye and proceeded: "If the said sum of four copper pieces per head is not paid before the expiration of the time fixed, it will please the said high and mighty lord Neroweg VI, Count of Plouernel, to cause certain serfs to be seized, and they will be punished, or hanged by his prevost from his seigniorial gibbets. Neither the annual tax, nor the regular dues, is to be lowered in the least by this extraordinary levy of four sous of copper, which is intended to indemnify our said lord for the losses caused by the recent war which his neighbor, the Sire of Castel-Redon, declared against him."

The bailiff descended from his horse to speak to one of the men in his escort. Several serfs muttered to one another: "Where is Fergan? He alone would have the courage to humbly remonstrate

with the bailiff that we are wretched, that the taxes, the services, the regular and the extraordinary dues are crushing us, and that it will be impossible for us to pay this tax."

"Fergan must have remained behind in the quarry where he cuts stone," remarked another serf.

Presently, the bailiff continued to read as follows: "Lord Gonthram, eldest son of the very noble, very high and very mighty Neroweg VI, Count of Plouernel, having attained his eighteenth year, and being of knight's age, there shall be paid to him, according to the custom of Plouernel, one denier by each serf and villein of the domain, in honor and to the glory of the knighthood of the said Lord Gonthram. Payment to be made this month."

"Still more!" murmured several of the serfs with bitterness; "it is fortunate that our lord has no daughter, we would some day have to pay taxes in honor of her marriage, as we shall have to pay them in honor of the knighthood of the sons of Neroweg VI. May God have mercy upon us."

"Pay, my God! but wherewith?" interjected another serf in a low voice. "Oh, it is a great pity that Fergan is not around to speak for us."

The bailiff having finished his reading, beckoned to a serf named Peter the lame. Peter was not lame; but his father, by reason of that infirmity had received the nick-name which his son preserved. He advanced trembling before Garin the Serf-eater. "This is the third Sunday that you have not brought your bread to be baked at the seigniorial oven," said the bailiff; "nevertheless you have eaten bread these three weeks, seeing you are alive."

"Master Garin ... my misery is such..."

"You have had the impudence to have your bread baked under the ashes, you scurvy beggar!"

"Oh, good Master Garin, our village was set on fire and sacked by the men of the Sire of Castel-Redon; the little clothing that we had has been burnt or pillaged; our cattle stolen or driven off; our crops devastated during the war. Have mercy upon us!"

"I am talking to you about oven and not about war! You owe three deniers oven-dues; you shall pay three more as a fine."

"Six deniers! Poor me! Six deniers! And where do you expect me to find so much money?"

"I know your tricks, knaves that you are! You have hiding places, where you bury your deniers. Will you pay, yes or no, you earth-worm? Answer immediately!"

"We have not one obole ... the people of the Sire of Castel-Redon have left us only our eyes to weep over our disaster!"

Garin raised his shoulders and made a sign to one of the men in his suite. This one then took from his belt a coil of rope, and approached Peter the lame. The serf stretched out his hands to the man-at-arms: "Take me prisoner, if it pleases you to, I do not own a single denier. It will be impossible for me to satisfy you."

"That's just what we are about to ascertain," replied the bailiff; and, while one of his men bound the hands of Peter the lame without his offering the slightest resistance, another took from a pouch suspended from his belt some touch-wood, a tinderbox and a sulphurated wick, which he lighted. Garin the Serf-eater, turning to Peter the lame, who, at the sight of these preparations began to grow pale, said: "They will place this lighted wick between your two thumbs; if you have a hiding place where you bury your deniers, your pain will make you speak. Go ahead."

The serf answered not a word. His teeth chattered with fear. He fell upon his knees before the bailiff, stretching out to him his two bound hands in supplication. Suddenly a young girl jumped out of the group of the villagers. Her feet were bare, and for only cover she had a coarse skirt on. She was called Pierrine the Goat because, like her sheep, she was savage and fond of rugged solitudes. Her thick black hair half hid her savage face, burnt by the sun. Approaching the bailiff without lowering her eyes, she said bluntly to him: "I am the daughter of Peter the lame; if you want to torture someone, leave my father and take me."

"The wick!" impatiently called out Garin the Serf-eater to his men, without either looking at or listening to Pierrine the Goat. "The wick! And hurry up! Night approaches." Peter the lame,

despite his cries, despite the heart-rending entreaties of his daughter, was thrown upon the ground and held down by the men of the bailiff. The torture of the serf was conducted in sight of his companions in misery, who were brutified with terror, and by the habit of serfdom. Peter uttered fearful imprecations; Pierrine the Goat no longer screamed, no longer implored the tormentors of her father. Motionless, pale, sombre, her eyes fixed and drowned with tears, she alternately bit her fists in mute rage, and murmured: "If I only knew where his hiding-place was, I would tell it."

At last, Peter the Lame, vanquished by pain, said to his daughter in a broken voice: "Take the hoe, run to our field; rake up the earth at the foot of the large elm; you will there find nine deniers in a piece of hollow wood." Then, casting upon the bailiff a look of despair, the serf added: "That's my whole treasure, Sire Garin; I'm now ruined!"

"Oh, I was certain that you had a hiding place"; and turning to his men: "Stop the torture; one of you follow this girl and bring back the money. Let her not be lost sight of."

Pierrine the Goat went off quickly, followed by one of the men-at-arms, after having cast upon Garin a furtive and ferocious look. The serfs, terrified, silent, hardly dared to look at one another, while Peter, uttering plaintive moans, despite his punishment having ceased, murmured while he wept hot tears: "Oh, how shall I be able to till the ground with my poor hands wounded and sore!"

Accidentally the bailiff caught sight of the blind serf, mutilated of his four limbs. Pointing at the unhappy being, he cried out in a threatening voice:

"Profit by that example, ye people of the glebe! Behold how they are treated who dare rebel against their lords. Are you, or are you not subject to taille at the pleasure and mercy of your lord?"

"Oh, yes, we are serfs, Master Garin," replied the wretches, "we are serfs at the mercy of our master!"

"Seeing you are serfs, you and your race, why always stingy, cheating and pilfering on the taxes? How often have I not caught you in fraud and at fault. The one sharpens his plow-share without notifying me, that he may purloin the denier due to the seigniorie every time he sharpens his sock; the other pretends he is free from the horn-dues under the false claim that he owns no horned cattle; others carry their audacity to the point of marrying in a neighboring seigniorie; and so on, any number of enormities! Must you, then, miserable fellows, be reminded that you belong to your lord in life and death, body and goods? Must it be repeated to you that all there is of you belongs to him – the hair on your heads, the nails on your fingers, the skin on your vile carcasses, everything, including the virginity of your daughters?"

"Oh, good Master Garin," an old serf, named by reason of his subtlety, Martin the Prudent, ventured without daring to raise his eyes, "oh, we know it; the priests repeat to us incessantly that we belong, soul, body and goods, to the lords whom the will of God sets over us. But there are those who say ... oh, it is not we who dare to say aught ... things contrary to these declarations."

"And who is it dares contradict our holy priests? Give me the name of the infidel, the rashling."

"It is Fergan the Quarryman."

"Where is that knave, that miscreant? Why is he not here among you?"

"He must have remained cutting stone at his quarry," put in a timid voice; "he never quits work until dark."

"And what is it that Fergan the Quarryman says? Let's see how far his audacity goes," replied the bailiff.

"Master Garin," the old serf went on to say, "Fergan recognizes that we are serfs of our lord, that we are compelled to cultivate for his benefit the fields where it has pleased him to settle us forever, us and our children. Fergan says that we are bound to labor, to plant, to gather in the harvests on the lands of the castle, to mount guard at the strongholds of the seigniorie and to defend it."

"We know the rights of the seigniorie. But what else does Fergan say?"

"Fergan pretends that the taxes imposed upon us increase unceasingly, and that, after having paid our dues in products, the little we can draw from our harvests is insufficient to satisfy the ever

new demands of our lord. Oh, dear Master Garin, we drink water, we are clad in rags, for only nourishment we have chestnuts, berries, and, when in luck, a little bread of barley or oats."

"What!" exclaimed the bailiff in a threatening voice, "you have all the good things, and yet you dare complain!"

"No, no, Master Garin," replied the frightened serfs; "no, we do not complain! We are on the road to Paradise!"

"If, occasionally, we suffer a little, it is all the better for our salvation, as the parish priest tells us. We shall enjoy the pleasures of the next world."

"We do not complain. It is only Fergan who spoke that way the other day. We listened to him, but without approving his words."

"And we even found great fault with him for holding such language," added old Martin the Prudent, all in a tremble. "We are satisfied with our lot. We venerate, we love our lord, Neroweg VI, and also his helpful bailiff, Garin. May God preserve them long."

"Yes, yes," exclaimed the serfs in chorus, "that's the truth, the pure truth!"

"Vile slaves!" roared the bailiff in a rage mixed with disdain, "cowardly knaves! You basely lick the hand that scourges you. Don't I know that, among yourselves, you call the noble Lord Neroweg VI 'Worse than a Wolf,' and me, his helpful bailiff, 'Serf-eater!' These are our nick-names."

"Upon our eternal salvation, Master Garin, it is not we who have given you that nick-name, Master Garin."

"By my beard! We propose to deserve our surnames. Yes, Neroweg VI will be 'worse than a wolf' to you, you pack of idlers, thieves and traitors! And, as for me, I will eat you to the bone, villeins or serfs, if you try to cheat your lord of his rights. As to Fergan, that smooth talker, I'll come across him some other day, and I feel it in my bones that he will yet make acquaintance with the gibbet of the seignior of Plouernel. He will be hanged high and dry!"

"And we will not pity him, dear and good Master Garin. Let Fergan be accursed, if he has dared to speak ill of you and of our venerated lord!" answered the frightened serfs.

At this moment, Pierrine the Goat returned, accompanied by the man-at-arms, who had been charged by the bailiff to disinter the treasure of Peter the Lame. The young serf had a somberer and wilder look, her tears had dried, but her eyes shot lightning. Twice she threw her thick black hair back from her forehead with her left hand, as she held her right hand behind her. She drew nearer to the bailiff step by step, while the man-at-arms, delivering to Garin a round piece of hollow wood, said: "It contains nine copper deniers, but four of them are not of the mintage of our Lord Neroweg VI."

"Foreign coin in the seignior! And yet I have forbidden you to accept any under penalty of the whip!"

"Oh, Master Garin," explained Peter the Lame, still lying on the ground, and crying at the sight of his lacerated hands, "the foreign merchants who pass, and who occasionally buy a pig, a calf or a sheep, frequently have none but coin minted in other seignories. What are we to do? If we refuse to sell the little we have, where are we to find the money to pay the taxes with?"

The bailiff placed the deniers of Peter the Lame in a large leather pouch, and answered the serf: "You owe six deniers; among these nine pieces there are four of foreign coinage; I confiscate them. There remain five deniers of this seignior. I take them on account. You will give me the sixth when you pay the next taxes. If you don't, look out!"

"I propose to pay now!" shrieked Pierrine the Goat, striking the bailiff full in the face with a large stone that she had picked up on the road. Garin lost his balance with the violence of the blow, and the blood ran down his face; but he promptly recovered from the shock, and, rushing furiously upon the young serf, threw her down, trampled her under foot, and, half drawing his sword, was on the point of dispatching her, when, recollecting himself, he said to his men: "Bind her fast; take her to the castle; her eyes will be put out to-night; and, at dawn to-morrow, she shall be hanged from the patibulary forks."

"The punishment of Pierrine the Goat will be well merited," exclaimed the serfs, hoping to turn away from themselves the wrath of Garin the Serf-eater. "Bad luck to the accursed girl! She has spilled the blood of the good bailiff of our glorious seigneur! Let her be punished as she deserves!"

"You are a set of cowards!" cried Pierrine the Goat, her face and breast bruised and bleeding from the blows that Garin had given her while trampling on her. Then, turning to Peter the Lamé, who was sobbing but dared not defend his daughter, or raise his voice to implore mercy for her, she said: "Adieu; to-morrow you will see ravens circling on the side of the seigniorial gibbet; they will be the living shroud of your daughter"; and showing her fists to the dismayed serfs, she went on: "Cowards! you are three hundred, and you are afraid of six men-at-arms! There is among you all but one man truly brave; that's Fergan!"

"Oh!" yelled the bailiff, exasperated by the bold words of Pierrine the Goat, and staunching the blood that flowed from his face, "if I meet that Fergan on my route, he shall be your gibbet mate, the infamous blasphemer!" With that, Garin the Serf-eater remounted, and followed by his men, together with the serfs whom he had arrested, Pierrine the Goat among them, was soon lost to sight, leaving the inhabitants of the village struck with such terror, that on that evening they forgot to carry away the poor blind and mutilated old man, who was left to spend the night in the open.

CHAPTER II. FERGAN THE QUARRYMAN

It was long after the bailiff had led away his prisoners. The night grew rapidly darker. A young woman, pale, lean and deformed, clad in a tattered smock, her feet bare, her head half covered with a hood from which her hair escaped, held her face hidden in her hands, as she sat on a stone near the hearth of the hut which Fergan inhabited at the extremity of the village. A few chips of brush-wood were burning in the fire-place. Above rose the blackened walls, cracked by the recent conflagration; bunches of brush fastened on poles replaced the roof, through which here and there some brilliant star could be seen. A litter of straw in the best protected corner of the hovel, a trunk, a few wooden vessels – such was the furnishing of the home of a serf. The young woman, seated near the fire-place, was the wife of Fergan, Joan the Hunchback. Her forehead in her hands, crouching upon the stone which served her as a seat, Joan remained motionless. Only at intervals a slight tremor of the shoulders announced that she wept. A man entered the hut. It was Fergan the Quarryman. Thirty years of age, robust and large of frame, his dress consisted of a goat-skin kilt, of which the hair was almost worn off; his shabby hose left his legs and feet bare; on his shoulder he carried an iron pick and the heavy hammer which he used to break and extract the stones from the quarry. Joan the Hunchback raised her head at the sight of her husband. Although homely, her suffering and timid figure breathed an angelic kindness. Advancing quickly towards Fergan, her face bathed in tears, Joan said to him with an inexpressible mixture of hope and anxiety, while she interrogated him with her eyes: "Have you learned anything?"

"Nothing," answered the serf in despair, throwing down his pick and hammer; "nothing, nothing!"

Joan fell back upon the stone sobbing. She raised her hands to heaven and murmured: "I shall never again see Colombaik! My poor child is lost for ever!"

Fergan, no less distressed than his wife, sat down on another stone placed near the fire-place, his elbows on his knees, his chin in his hands. Thus he remained for a long spell, gloomy, silent. Suddenly rising, he started to walk uneasily, muttering in a muffled voice: "That cannot remain so – I shall go – Yes, I shall! I must find him!"

Joan, hearing the serf repeat: "I shall go! I shall go!" raised her head, wiped her tears with the back of her hand and asked: "Where is it you want to go?"

"To the castle!" roared the serf, continuing his agitated walk, his arms crossed over his chest. Trembling from head to foot, Joan clasped her hands, and tried to speak. In her terror, she could not at first utter a word; her teeth chattered. At last she said in a faint voice: "Fergan – you must have lost your wits when you say you will go to the castle."

"I shall go after the moon has set."

"Oh! I have lost my poor child," rejoined Joan moaning, "I am going to lose my husband also." She moaned again. The imprecations and the foot-falls of the serf alone interrupted the silence of the night. The fire went out in the fire-place, but the moon, just risen, threw her pale rays into the interior of the hut through the open spaces left by the pole and bunches of brush that took the place of the burnt-out roof. The silence lasted long. Joan the Hunchback taking courage anew, resumed in an accent that was almost confident: "You propose to go to-night – to the castle – fortunately that's impossible." And seeing that the serf did not intermit his silent walk, Joan took his hand as he moved toward her: "Why do you not answer? That frightens me." He roughly withdrew his hand, and thrusting his wife back, exclaimed in an irritated voice: "Leave me alone, woman, leave me alone."

The feeble creature fell down a few steps beyond among some rubbish, and her head having struck against a piece of wood, she could not hold back a cry of pain. Fergan walked back, and by

the light of the moon he saw Joan rising painfully. He ran to her, helped her to sit down on one of the stones of the fire-place, and asked anxiously: "Did you hurt yourself falling?"

"No, no, my dear husband."

"My poor Joan!" exclaimed the serf alarmed, having placed one of his hands on the forehead of his wife, "you bleed!"

"I have been weeping," she replied sweetly, staunching her wound with a lock of her long disheveled hair.

"You suffer? Answer me, dear wife!"

"No, no, I fell because I am feeble," answered Joan with her angelic mildness; "let's not think about that," and she added, smiling sadly and alluding to her deformity, "I need not fear being made ugly by a scar."

Fergan imagined that Joan the Hunchback meant he would have treated her with less rudeness if she had been handsome, and he felt deeply grieved. In a tone of kind reproach he replied: "Apart from the hastiness of my temper, have I not always treated you as the best of wives?"

"That's true, my dear Fergan, and my gratitude is great."

"Have I not freely taken you for wife?"

"Yes, notwithstanding you could have chosen from the serfs of the seigniorship a companion who would not have been deformed."

"Joan," replied the quarryman with sad bitterness, "if your countenance had been as beautiful as your heart is good, whose would have been the first night of our wedding? Would it not have belonged to Nerweg 'Worse than a Wolf,' or to one of his whelps?"

"Oh, Fergan, my ugliness saved us this supreme shame."

"The wife of Sylvest, one of my ancestors, a poor slave of the Romans, also escaped dishonor by disfiguring herself," was the thought that flashed through the quarryman's mind while he sighed, and pondered: "Oh, slavery and serfdom weigh upon our race for centuries. Will the day of deliverance, predicted by Victoria the Great,¹ ever come."

Joan, seeing her husband plunged in meditation, said to him: "Fergan, do you remember what Pierrine the Goat told us three days ago on the subject of our son? She had, as was her custom, led her sheep to the steepest heights of the great ravine, whence she saw one of the knights of the Count of Plouernel rush on a gallop out of a copse where our little Colombaik had gone to gather some dead wood. Pierrine was of the opinion that that knight carried off our child under his cloak."

"The suspicions of Pierrine were well founded."

"Good God! What is it you say?"

"A few hours ago, while I was at the quarry, several serfs, engaged in repairing the road of the castle which was partly destroyed during the last war, came for stone. For the last three days I have been like crazy. I have been telling everybody of the disappearance of Colombaik. I spoke about it to these serfs. One of them claimed to have seen the other evening, shortly before nightfall, a knight holding on his horse a child about seven or eight years, with blonde hair – "

"Unhappy we! That was Colombaik."

"The knight then climbed the hill that leads to the manor of Plouernel, and went in."

"But what can they do to our child?"

"What will they do!" exclaimed the serf shivering, "they'll strangle him, and use his blood for some infernal philter. There is a sorceress stopping at the castle."

Joan uttered a cry of fright, but rage swiftly followed upon her fright. Delirious and running to the door she cried out: "Fergan, let's go to the manor – we shall enter even if we have to tear up the stones with our nails – I shall have my child – the sorceress shall not throttle him – no! no!" The serf, holding her by the arm, drew her back. Almost immediately she fainted away in his arms. Still, in a

¹ A Gallic heroine of the second century.

muffled voice, the poor woman muttered: "It seems to me I see him die – if my heart were torn in a vice I could not suffer more – it is too late – the sorceress will have strangled the child – no – who knows!" Presently seizing her husband by the hand, "You meant to go to the castle – come – come!"

"I shall go alone when the moon is down."

"Oh, we are crazy, my poor man! Pain leads us astray. How can one penetrate into the lair of the count?"

"By a secret entrance."

"And who has informed you of it?"

"My grandfather Den-Brao accompanied his father Yvon the Forester in Anjou during the great famine in 1033. Den-Brao, a skillful mason, after having worked for more than a year in the castle of a lord of Anjou became his serf, and was exchanged by his master for an armorer of Neroweg IV, an ancestor of the present lord. My grandfather, now a serf of the lord of Plouernel, was engaged in the construction of a donjon which was attached to the castle. The work lasted many a year. My father, Nominoe, almost a child at the commencement of the structure, had grown to manhood when it was finished. He helped his father in his work, and became a mason himself. After his day's work, my grandfather used to trace upon a parchment the plan of the several parts of the donjon which he was to execute. One day my father asked him the explanation of certain structures, the purpose of which he could not understand. 'These separate stone works, connected by the work of the carpenter and the blacksmith,' answered my grandfather, 'will constitute a secret staircase made through the thick of the wall of the donjon, and it will ascend from the lowest depth of this edifice to the top, while it furnishes access to several reduts otherwise invisible. Thanks to this secret issue, the Lord of Plouernel, if besieged in his castle, and unable to resist his enemies, will be able to escape, and reach a long subterraneous gallery which comes out at the rocks that stretch to the north, at the foot of the mountain, where the seigniorial manor-house rises.' Indeed, Joan, during those days of continual wars, similar works were executed in all the strongholds: their owners always looked to preserving the means of escape from their enemies. About six months before the completion of the donjon, and when all that was left to do was the construction of the staircase and the secret issue, traced upon the plan of my grandfather, my father broke both of his legs by the fall of an enormous stone. That grave accident became the cause of a great piece of good fortune."

"What say you, Fergan!"

"My father remained here, at this hovel, unable to work by reason of his wounds. During that interval the donjon was finished. But the artisan serfs, instead of returning every evening to their respective villages, no longer left the castle. The seigneur of Plouernel wished, so it was said, to hasten the completion of the works and to save the time lost in the morning and evening by the traveling of the serfs. For about six months the people of the plain saw the movement of the workingmen gathered upon the last courses of the donjon, which rose ever higher. After that, when the platform and the turrets which crown it were finished, nothing more was seen. The serfs never re-appeared in their villages, and their bereaved families are still awaiting them."

"What became of them?"

"Neroweg IV, fearing they might reveal the secret issue constructed by themselves, had them locked up in the subterraneous place, that I stated to you. It is there that my grandfather, together with his fellow workingmen, twenty-seven in number, perished, a prey to the tortures of hunger."

"That's horrible! What barbarity!"

"Yes, it is horrible! My father, kept at home by his injuries, alone escaped this fearful death, overlooked, no doubt, by the seigneur of Plouernel. Trying to fathom the mystery of my grandfather's disappearance, my father recalled the information he had received from his father on the plan of the donjon and its secret issue. One night, accordingly, my father betook himself to that secluded spot, and succeeded in discovering an airhole concealed amid brushwood. He slid down this opening, and

after walking long in a narrow gallery, he was arrested by an enormous iron grating. Seeking to break it, he passed his arm through the bars. His hand touched a mass of bones – human bones and skulls –

"Good God! Poor victims!"

"It was the bones of the serfs, who, locked up in this subterraneous passage with my grandfather, had died of hunger. My father did not try to penetrate further. Certain of the fate of my grandfather, but lacking the energy to avenge him, he made to me this revelation on his death-bed. I went – it is a long time ago – to inspect the rocks. I discovered the subterraneous issue. Through it, to-night, will I enter the donjon and look for our child."

"Fergan, I shall not try to oppose your plan," observed Joan after a moment of silence and suppressing her apprehensions; "but how will you clear that grating which prevented your father from entering the underground passage? Is it not above your strength?"

"That grating has been fastened in the rock, it can be unfastened with my iron pick and hammer. I have the requisite strength for that job."

"Once in the passage, what will you do?"

"Last evening I took from the wooden casket, hidden yonder under the rubbish, a few strips of the parchment where Den-Brao had traced the plan of the buildings; I have posted myself on the localities. The secret gallery, in its ascent towards the castle, comes out, on the other side of the donjon, upon a secret staircase built in the thick of the wall. That leads, from the lowest of the three rows of subterranean dungeons, up to the turret that rises to the north of the platform."

"The turret," queried Joan, growing pale, "the turret, whence occasionally strange lights issue at night?"

"It is there that Azenor the Pale, the sorceress of Neroweg, carries on her witchcraft," answered the quarryman in a hollow voice. "It is in that turret that Colombaik must be, provided he still lives. It is there I shall go in search of our child."

"Oh, my poor man," murmured Joan, "I faint at the thought of the perils you are about to face!"

"Joan," suddenly interjected the serf, raising his hands towards the starry sky, visible through rifts in the roof, "before an hour the moon will have set; I must go now."

The quarryman's wife, after making a superhuman effort to overcome her terror, said in a voice that was almost firm: "I do not ask to accompany you, Fergan; I might be an encumbrance in this enterprise. But I believe, as you do, that at all costs we must try to save our child. If in three days you are not back –"

"It will mean that I have encountered death in the castle of Plouernel."

"I shall not be behind you a day, my dear husband. Have you weapons to defend yourself?"

"I have my iron pick and my hammer."

"And bread? You must have some provisions."

"I have still a big piece of bread in my wallet; you will fill my gourd with water; that will suffice me."

While his wife was attending to these charges, the serf provided himself with a long rope which he wound around him; he also placed a tinder-box in his wallet, a piece of punk, and a wick, steeped in resin, of the kind that quarrymen use to light their underground passages. These preparations being ended, Fergan silently stretched his arms towards his wife. The brave and sweet creature threw herself into them. The couple prolonged this painful embrace a few moments, as if it were a last adieu. The serf then, swinging his heavy hammer on his shoulder and taking up his iron pick, started towards the rocks where the secret issue of the seigniorial manor ran out.

CHAPTER III. AT THE CROSS-ROAD

The day after Fergan the Quarryman decided to penetrate into the castle of Plouernel, a considerable troop of travelers, men of all conditions, who had left Nantes the day before, were journeying towards the frontier of Anjou. Among them were found pilgrims, distinguishable by the cockle-shell attached to their clothes, vagabonds, beggars, peddlers loaded with their bundles of goods. Among the latter a man of tall stature, with light blonde hair and beard, carried on his back a bundle surmounted with a cross and covered with coarse pictures representing human bones, such as skulls, thighs, arms, and fingers. This man, named Harold the Norman, devoted himself, like many other descendants of the pirates of old Rolf,² to the trade of relics, selling to the faithful the bones which they stole at night from the seigniorial gibbets. By the sides of Harold marched two monks, who called each other Simon and Jeronimo. The cowl of the frock of Simon was pulled over his head and completely concealed his face; but that of Jeronimo, thrown back over his shoulder, exposed the monk's dark and lean visage, whose thick eye-brows, as black as his beard, imparted to it a savage hardness.

A few steps behind these priests, mounted on a fine white mule, of well-fed form and skin sleek and shining like silver, came a merchant of Nantes, named from his great wealth, Bezenecq the Rich. Still in the vigor of years, of open, intelligent and affable mien, he wore a hood of black felt, a robe of fine blue cloth, gathered around his waist by a leathern belt, from which hung an embroidered purse. Behind him, and on a part of the saddle contrived for such service, rode his daughter Isoline, a lass of about eighteen years, with blue eyes, brown hair, white teeth and a face like a rose of May, as pretty as she was attractive. Isoline's long pearl-grey robe hid her little feet; her traveling cloak, made of a soft green fabric, enveloped her elegant and supple waist; under the hood of the mantle, lined in red, her fresh visage was partially seen. The feelings of tender solicitude between father and daughter could be divined by the looks and smiles of affection that they often exchanged, as well as by the little attentions that they frequently bestowed upon each other. The serenity of unalloyed happiness, the sweet pleasures of the heart, could be read upon their visages, which bore the impress of radiant bliss. A well-clad servant, alert and vigorous, led on foot a second mule, loaded with the baggage of the merchant. On either side of the saddle hung a sword in its scabbard. In those days, one never traveled unarmed. Bezenecq the Rich had conformed to the usage, although that good and worthy townsman was of a nature little given to strife.

The travelers had arrived at a cross-road where the highway of Nantes to Angers forked off. At the juncture of the two roads there rose a seigniorial gibbet, symbol and speaking proof of the supreme jurisdiction exercised by the lords in their domains. That massive pile of stones bore at its top four iron forks fastened at right angles, gibbet-shaped. From the gibbet that rose over the western branch of the road three corpses hung by the neck. The first was reduced to the condition of a skeleton; the second was half putrified. The crows, disturbed in their bloody quarry by the approach of the travelers, still circled in the air over the third corpse, that of a young girl, completely stripped, without even the shred of a rag. It was the body of Pierrine the Goat, tortured and executed in the early morning of that day, as threatened by Garin the Serf-eater. The thick black hair of the victim fell over her face, pinched with agony and furrowed with long traces of clotted blood that had flowed from her eyeless sockets. Her teeth still held a little wax figure, two or three inches long, clad in a bishop's gown with a miniature mitre on its head, made out of a bit of gold foil. The witches, to carry out their diabolical incantations, often had several of these little figures placed between the teeth of the hanged

² A Norse chieftain who led a piratical invasion of France in the eighth century, and was pacified with the fief of Normandy where he and his followers in arms settled.

at the moment when they expired. They called this magic "spell throwing." Beside this gibbet rose the seigniorial post of Neroweg VI, lord and count of the lands of Plouernel. The post indicated the boundaries of the domain traversed by the western road, and was surmounted by a red escutcheon, in the middle of which were seen three eagle's talons painted in yellow – the device of the Nerowegs. Another post, bearing for emblem a dragon-serpent of green color painted on a white background, marked the eastern route which traversed the domains of Draco, Lord of Castel-Redon, and flanked another gibbet with four patibulary forks. Of these only two were furnished; from one hanged the corpse of a child of fourteen years at the most, from the other the corpse of an old man, both half pecked away by the crows. Isoline, the daughter of Bezenecq the Rich, uttered a cry of horror at the sight of these bodies, and huddling close to the merchant, behind whom she was on horseback, whispered in a low voice: "Father! oh, father! Look at those bodies. It's a horrible spectacle!"

"Look not in that direction, my child," answered sadly the townsman of Nantes, turning around to his daughter. "More than once on our road shall we make these mournful encounters. The patibulary forks are found on the confines of every seigniorial estate. Often even the trees are decked out with hanging bodies!"

"Oh, father," replied Isoline, whose face, so full of smiles a minute before, had painfully saddened, "I fear this encounter may be of sad omen to our voyage!"

"Beloved daughter," the merchant put in with suppressed agony, "be not so quick to take alarm. No doubt we live in days when it is impossible to leave the city and undertake a long trip with safety. It is that that kept me from paying a visit in the city of Laon to my good brother Gildas, whom I have not seen for many years. It is unfortunately a long way to Picardy, and I have not dared to venture on such a ride. But our trip will hardly take two days. We should not apprehend a sad issue to this visit to your grandmother, who wishes to see and embrace you before she dies. Your presence will sweeten her sorrow at the loss of your mother, whom she mourns as grievously to-day as when my beloved wife was taken from me. Pick up courage and calm your mind, my child."

"I shall pick up courage, father, as you wish. I shall surmount my idle terrors and my childish fears."

"Were it not for the imperious duty that made us undertake this journey, I would say to you: 'Let's return to our peaceful home in Nantes, where you are happy and gay from morning to evening.' If your smile cheers my soul," Bezenecq added in a voice deeply moved, "every tear you drop falls upon my heart!"

"Behold me," said Isoline. "Would you say I look apprehensive, alarmed?" And saying this she pressed against the merchant her charming face, that had recovered its serenity and confidence. The townsman contemplated for a moment in silence the beloved features of his daughter. A tear of joy then gathered in his eye, and endeavoring to subdue his emotion, he cried out: "The devil take these crupper saddles! They prevent one even from embracing his own child with ease!" Whereupon the young girl, with a movement full of gracefulness, threw her arms on her father's shoulders, and drew her rosy face so close to Bezenecq's that he had but to turn his head to kiss the lassie on her forehead and cheeks, which he did repeatedly with ineffable happiness.

During this tender exchange of words and carresses between the merchant and his daughter, the other travelers, before proceeding upon either of the two routes that opened before them, had gathered in the middle of the crossing to consider which to take. Both roads led to Angers. One of them, that marked by the post surmounted with a serpent-dragon, after making a wide circuit, traversed a sombre forest; it was twice as long as the other. Each of the two roads having its own advantages and disadvantages, several of the travelers insisted upon the road of the post with the three eagle's talons. Simon, the monk whose face was almost wholly concealed under his cowl, strove, on the contrary, to induce his companions to take the other road. "Dear brothers! I conjure you;" cried Simon, "believe me ... do not cross the territory of the seigneur of Plouernel... He has been nick-

named 'Worse than a Wolf' and the reprobate but too well justifies the name... Every day stories are heard of travelers whom he arrests and plunders while crossing his grounds."

"My dear brother," put in a townsman, "I can testify, like you, that the keeper of Plouernel is a wicked man, and his donjon a terrible donjon. More than once from the ramparts of our city of Nantes have we seen the men of the Count of Plouernel, bandits of the worst stripe, pillage, burn, and ravage the territory of our bishop, with whom Neroweg was at war over the possession of the ancient abbey of Meriadek."

"Is that the abbey where the prodigious miracle of about four hundred years ago happened?" inquired another bourgeois. "Saint Meroflede, abbess of the monastery, summoned by the soldiers of Charles Martel to surrender the place, invoked heaven, and the miscreants, overwhelmed by a shower of stones and fire, were asphyxiated in the fumes of burning sulphur and pitch, whither they were dragged by horned, clawed and hairy demons, frightful to behold. And so it happened that the venerable abbess died in the odor of sanctity."

"An ineffable odor that has lasted down to our own days. The common people entertain a particular devotion for the chapel of Saint Meroflede, which has been raised on the borders of a large lake, close by the very place where the miracle was accomplished."

"The chapel is never empty of the faithful. The offerings furnish a large revenue to the incumbent. As the abbess was of the house of the Nerowegs, the seigneur of Plouernel laid claim to, and sought to reacquire the property of the chapel. Hence the wars between the count and the Bishop of Nantes. Those were fearful wars, my friends. They happened at the season when the bishop was marrying his last daughter, whom he gave for a dower the benefice of Saint Paterne. It was a beautiful wedding. The wife and the daughter of his grace the bishop were beautifully ornamented. The young bride wore a necklace of inestimable value."

The moment the name of the Bishop of Nantes was mentioned, Simon the monk pulled down the cowl of his cloak, trying to hide his face completely.

"Sure enough, my beloved companions," interjected another townsman, "we know that the Sieur 'Worse than a Wolf' is a brigand. But do you imagine that the Sieur Draco, seigneur of Castel-Redon, is a lamb? It is as perilous to cross the territory of the one as of the other, and yet there is no other way out. The road to the east, barred by a river, runs out upon a bridge that is guarded by the men of the seigneur of Castel-Redon; the road to the west, bordered by vast swamps, runs out upon a path guarded by the men of the seigneur of Plouernel. By taking the shorter of the two routes we reduce by one-half the chances of danger."

"This worthy man is right," said several voices. "Let's follow his advice."

"Dear brothers, look out what you do!" cried Simon the monk. "The seigneur of Plouernel is a monster of ferocity. He is given up to sorcery with a female magician, his concubine ... a Jewess! He stands excommunicated; he is a pagan."

"To the devil with the Jews!" exclaimed Harold the Norman, merchant of relics. "The Jews have all been hanged, burned, drowned, strangled, quartered, when they were hunted down in all the provinces, like wild beasts. There can not be one of them left alive in our land of Gaul."

"Since the execution of the Orleans heretics, who perished by fire," resumed the monk Jeronimo, "never was an extermination of unclean animals more meritorious than that of those accursed Jews, who instigated the Saracens of Palestine to destroy the Temple of Solomon at Jerusalem. Death to the Jews!"

"What say you, dear brother?" inquired a townsman. "Did the Jews of this land of Gaul instigate the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem?"

"Yes, my brother. The abominable mischiefs of those Jews defy time and space. But patience! Soon will the day come when, by divine will, no longer will it be isolated pilgrims that will travel to Jerusalem to there mourn and pray at the tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ. It will be Christianity in

mass that will march under arms to the Holy Land, in order to exterminate the infidels and deliver the sepulchre of the Saviour of the world from their sacrilegious presence. Death to all miscreants!"

Bezenecq the Rich, who had just approached the group of debating travelers, and ascertained the subject of their discussion, apprehensive lest his daughter take new alarm, suggested: "Meseems we had better take the shorter route. As to your fears, they are exaggerated. When we shall have paid the toll-collectors of the seigneur of Plouernel for the right to travel over his roads and cross his burges and villages, what else can he demand of us? We are neither his serfs nor his villeins."

"Can you, a grey beard, talk like that?" interjected Simon the monk. "Do you imagine these devilish seigneurs care aught for justice or injustice?"

"But I do care a deal about that!" replied Bezenecq the Rich. "If the seigneur of Plouernel should do me violence, me a bourgeois of Nantes, I would appeal to William IX, Duke of Aquitaine, of whom the seigneur of Plouernel stands seized, the same as William IX holds of Philip I, King of the Franks. Each of these seigneurs has his suzerain."

"Which would be like appealing from the wolf to the tiger," replied Simon, shrugging his shoulders. "You can not know William, Duke of Aquitaine. That sacrilegious criminal sought to force Peter, the Bishop of Poitiers, to give him absolution for his crimes by putting a dagger to his throat. William abducted Malborgiane, the wife of the Viscount of Castellerault, a shameless creature, whose picture he dares to carry painted on his shield. William had the effrontery to answer Gerard, the Bishop of Angouleme, who reproached him with this new act of adultery: 'Bishop, I shall return Malborgiane when you frizzle your hair!' The prelate was bald. Such is the man to whom you would appeal from the violent acts of the seigneur of Plouernel."

"That William is certainly a deep-dyed criminal;" put in Jeronimo, "but that much justice must be done him that he approved himself the most implacable exterminator of the Jews. Not one of those who lived on his domains escaped death!"

"It is said that the mere sight of a Jew makes him pale with horror; and that, libertine though he is, a Jewess, be she never such a beauty, be she a maid like the Virgin Mary, would make him run away from her."

"But that does not prevent," insisted Simon the monk, "that if you rely upon the Duke of Aquitaine for redress against the seigneur of Plouernel, you will be acting like a lunatic. On that subject your judgment is at fault."

"If William IX does not do us justice," rejoined Bezenecq the Rich, "we shall appeal to King Philip. Oh! oh! we townsmen do not allow ourselves to be tyrannized without protest! We know how to draw up a petition!"

"And what will King Philip care for your petition? That Sardanapalus! that glutton! that idler! that double adulterer! and what's worse, that dullard, whom the seigneurs, his large vassals, laugh at openly! It is to him you will go for justice, if refused by the Duke of Aquitaine? Moreover, even if the latter were so inclined, as the suzerain of the seigneur of Plouernel, to punish him for wrongs done to you, would he have the power?"

"Certainly!" exclaimed Bezenecq. "He would enter the domain of the seigneur of Plouernel and besiege him in his castle."

Simon the monk shook his head sadly. "The seigneurs reserve their forces to round up their domains and to revenge their own wrongs. Never do they protect the cause of small folks, however just it be."

"We live, I know, in sad times; nor were the previous centuries much better," observed the townsman with a sigh, casting an uneasy look upon his daughter, who seemed again alarmed. "All the same, we should not exaggerate to ourselves the dangers of the situation. We have to choose between the two routes. Let's suppose the dangers of crossing them are equal. Common sense bids us to take the shorter, and that we hurry our steps."

"The shorter route is the more perilous," repeated Simon the monk, who, more than anyone else, seemed to dread crossing the territory of the seigneur of Plouernel.

"Oh! father," asked Isoline of the merchant, "have we really so many dangers to fear?"

"No, no, my dear child. That poor monk's mind is upset with fear."

The Norman dealer in relics, having overheard the last words of Isoline, approached her and said with much unction: "Pretty lassie, I have here in my box of relics a superb tooth, that comes from the blessed jaw of a holy man, who died in Jerusalem, a martyr to the Saracens. I shall let you have that tooth for three silver deniers. This sacred relic will protect you from all perils of the road." Saying which, Harold the Norman was about to exhibit the marvellous tooth, when Bezenecq said smiling to him, so as to reassure his daughter; "Not now, my friend; we shall look at your relic later on. Do you claim that it protects one against all the dangers of the road?"

"Yes, worshipful townsman. I swear it upon my eternal salvation; upon my share of Paradise."

"Seeing that you carry about you that holy relic, you will not be exposed to any accident; and seeing that we go with you, and are of your company, we shall profit by the miraculous protection. All of which should not hinder us, if you follow my advice, dear companions, to take the shorter route. Let those who share my views follow me," he added giving the spurs to his mule so as to put an end to the discussion, and with that he took the road that led over the territory of the seigneur of Plouernel. The majority of the travelers followed the example of Bezenecq, because, for one thing, he spoke wisely; then also, he was known to be rich, his daughter accompanied him, and he had too much at stake to take an imprudent resolution. Those who shared the apprehensions of the monk Simon, being reduced to a small number, dared not separate from the bulk of the troop, and joined it after a moment's hesitation. Likewise Simon the monk and Jeronimo, who feared risking themselves alone on the other road. Harold the Norman remained behind an instant, drew near one of the gibbets, pulled off the two legs and hands of a corpse, that was reduced to a mere skeleton, and placed them in his bag, counting upon selling them to the faithful for holy relics. He then rejoined the travelers, who were proceeding along the road of the seigniory of Plouernel.

CHAPTER IV. THE MANOR OF PLOUERNEL

The castle of Neroweg VI – a somber retreat, situated, like the eyrie of a bird of prey, on the brow of a steep mountain – dominated the country for many miles around. The moment the watchman, posted on the platform of the donjon, espied from afar a troop of travelers, he sounded his horn. Immediately the band of the count, thievish and ferocious, would sally from the manor. These bandits, not satisfied with demanding the dues of passage and traffic, habitually pillaged the travelers, often even massacred them, or took them to the castle to be tortured and compelled to pay ransom. The face of Gaul bristled with similar haunts, raised by the Frankish seigneurs under the reign of Charles the Great. They were impregnable fortresses, from the heights of which barons, counts, marquises and dukes defied the royal authority, and desolated the country. The history of the Count of Plouernel is that of all these seigneurs who issued from the race of the first conquerors of Gaul. In the year 818, a Neroweg, second son of the head of this Frankish family that had been richly endowed in Auvergne since Clovis, was one of the chieftains in the army of Louis the Pious, when he ravaged Brittany, then in revolt at the call of Morvan and Vortigern. That Neroweg, in reward for his services during that war, received from the King a fief of the lands and county of Plouernel, which had reverted to the crown by the death of its last beneficiary, who left no heirs. Neroweg, in return for the cession of the county of Plouernel, was to own himself a vassal of Louis the Pious, render him fealty and homage as to his king and suzerain seigneur, pay him tribute, and support him in his wars by marching at the head of the men of his seigniory. In the country of Plouernel, as in the other provinces of Gaul, certain colonists named villeins had succeeded in emancipating themselves and again became owners of parcels of land. Neroweg I. (the first of the name of this second branch of the family) did not revolt against the authority of the King. His son, however, Neroweg II., had a strong castle built on the summit of the mountain of Plouernel, assembled there a numerous band of determined men, and then, with most of the other seigneurs, he said to the King of the Franks: "I do not recognize your sovereignty; I will no longer be your vassal; I declare myself sovereign on my domain, like you are on yours. The serfs, villeins and townsmen of my county become my men; they, their lands, their property belong to me only; I shall tax them at my will and impose upon them tributes, rent and taille which they shall pay to me only; they will go to war for me alone, and against you, should you dare come and besiege me in my fortress of Plouernel." The King did not go, seeing that most of the seigneurs held the same language to the descendants of Charles the Great or of Hugh le Capet, whose kingdom was gradually reduced to the possession of the bare provinces that he was able to defend and preserve, arms in hand. Neroweg III. and Neroweg IV. did as their ancestor and remained independent, masters, absolute and hereditary, of the country of Plouernel. A large number of Frankish seigneurs seized in the same way other parts of the territory of Gaul. Robert thus became Count of (the country of) Paris; Milo, Count of (the country of) Tonnerre; Hugh, Count of (the country of) Maine; Burcharth, Sire of (the country of) Montmorency; Landry, Duke of (the country of) Nevers; Radulf, Count of (the country of) Beaugency; Enghilbert, Count of (the country of) Ponthieu; etc. These and a number of other seigneurs, descendants of the leudes of Clovis or of the chieftains of the bands of Charles Martel, dropping their Frankish names, or joining to them the Gaulish names of the regions that they took possession of, had themselves called "seigneurs," "sires," "dukes" or "counts," of Paris, of Plouernel, of Montmorency, of Nevers, of Tonnerre, of Ponthieu, etc., etc. During those centuries of wars and brigandage the Nerowegs had fortified their castle, while they lived on rapine and on the extortion of their villeins and their serfs. Neroweg V., surnamed "Towhead," from the color of his hair, and Neroweg VI., surnamed "Worse Than a Wolf" by the wretched people of his domains on account of his cruelty, proved themselves worthy of their ancestors.

The manor of Plouernel raises its front on the summit of a rocky and arid mountain, washed on its western slope by a swift running stream, while on the east it beetles over a narrow path constructed over immense marshes, drained by a canal that feeds the vast ponds of the abbey of Meriadek, located several leagues off, and one time part of the large holdings of the diocese of Nantes. If a traveler follows the overland route he is compelled to cross this jetty on his way from Angers to Nantes, unless he be willing to make a wide detour by journeying over the domains of the seigneur of Castel-Redon. The vessels that sail into the Loire through the river of Plouernel, whose waters bathe the foot of the hills, pass close under the castle. The location of the lair is skilfully chosen. It dominates the two only routes of communication between the most important towns of the region. A stockade half bars the river of Plouernel, and serves as a shelter for the barges of the seigneur. Merchant vessels being signaled from the top of the donjon, men in arms immediately embark, board the trader, collect navigation dues, and not infrequently pillage the cargo. No less dangerous is the overland route. A palisade, into which a gate is cut, bars the passage. It can be crossed only upon paying a toll, arbitrarily imposed upon the travelers by the count's men, who, moreover, sack the baggages at their ease. If they suspect a traveler of being able to pay ransom they drag him to prison and there torture him until he consents to ransom himself. The ill-starred ones who may be too poor to pay the toll demanded are, both men and women, forced to submit to obscene affronts, ridiculous or cruel, to the great amusement of the men of the seigneur. On one of the gentler slopes of the mountain, towards the north, the little city of Plouernel rises in tiers, built in a semi-circle and equidistant from the manor and the valley, where lie scattered the villages that the villeins and serfs inhabit. A narrow path, winding and steep, and bordered here and yonder by precipices, leads up to the first fortified enclosure, whose ramparts, thirty feet high by two feet thick and flanked with large towers of brick, constitute one mass with the rock that serves as their foundation, a rock hewn with the pick and surrounded by abysses. The dizzy path that winds above the precipices ends in a massive door covered with iron sheets and enormous nails. It is the only access to the interior of the first enclosure, a somber court, where the sun penetrates only at noon, being otherwise kept out by the height of the numerous structures that lean from within upon the ramparts. These structures are intended for the lodgement of the men-at-arms, for the masons, the chapel, the bakery, the forge and several other workshops – a mint among them. The Count of Plouernel coined money like the other feudal seigneurs, and, like them, he minted it to his liking. In the center of the court rises the principal donjon. That building, square, over a hundred feet high, crowned with a platform from which the country is far away disclosed, rests upon three tiers of subterraneous cells, surrounded by a ditch full of water furnished from springs that also serve as cisterns. The donjon seems to rise from the midst of a deep pit, in which half of this massive structure appears hidden, its upper part rising merely above the skirt of the ditch, over which falls a draw bridge. Few and narrow windows, irregularly cut into the four sides, and almost as narrow as mere loop-holes, yielded a gloomy light to the several stories and to the ground floor. The stonework of all these buildings, blackened by the inclemencies of the weather and by age, rendered still more dismal the aspect of this fortress.

CHAPTER V. AZENOR THE PALE

A narrow spiral staircase, built of stone, led from the bottom of the basement to the platform that surmounted the donjon of the manor of Plouernel. The men at arms, charged with the lookout on the platform, never failed to cross themselves when passing the door of an alcove, situated on the last story of the donjon, that had for its annex one of the turrets that rose from the four corners of the platform. It was whispered that the narrow window of that turret seemed internally illuminated at night by a glow of the color of blood, and these sinister lights were attributed to the sorceries of Azenor the Pale, the concubine of Neroweg VI. The seigneur of Plouernel had gathered in the chamber of his mistress a mass of precious objects, the fruits of his raids. A passage, concealed by a purple curtain, fringed with gold, gave admission to another turret, whose upper part, roofed on a level with the platform, served as the post for the lookout. Azenor the Pale, about twenty-five years of age, was of a perfect beauty. Her face was pale and her sensuous lips were the color of her skin, whence her surname. A turban of rich purple silk fabric in the shape of a chin-cloth, served as a frame for the visage of the sorceress, while it left exposed the strands of her hair, black like her eyebrows and her large eyes. Her tunic of silver cloth was negligently thrown over her shoulders. Her bosom and arms were worthy of figuring beside that beautiful Greek statue that has survived the centuries, and which, rumor has it, is still admired in the palace of the Dukes of Aquitaine. The tunic of Azenor, reaching only to her knees, left exposed below its silver folds the skirt of her dress, purple like her turban. The woman was at this moment engaged in molding a bit of pliable wax into two little figures similar to the one inserted that very morning between the teeth of Pierrine the Goat at the moment of her death agony. One of the puppets wore a bishop's robe, the other a species of armor represented by a dull-colored bit of cloth resembling iron. Azenor the Pale was inserting a certain number of needles, disposed in cabalistic order, on the left side of the breast of the two puppets, when the door of the alcove opened behind her. Neroweg VI. entered his mistress' retreat, carefully closing the door after him.

The Count of Plouernel, surnamed "Worse than a Wolf," and at that time about fifty years of age, was of athletic frame. His hair no longer was dressed after the fashion of his ancestor, the Neroweg, leude of Clovis, nor after that of Neroweg, the "Terrible Eagle," savage chief of a savage tribe. The red hair of Neroweg VI., already grizzled, was shaven smooth to the middle of the temples and the skull, and then fell square down his neck and behind his ears. The men of war had themselves thus shaven in front to prevent their hair from interfering with their casque and standing in the way of the visor. Instead of cultivating long moustaches, like his ancestors, Neroweg VI. allowed to grow at full length only his thick and coarse beard, which thus framed in his savage countenance and his hooked nose. His heavy eyebrows met over his falcon eyes, round and piercing. Always ready for war upon his neighbors, or upon those troops of travelers that, at times, attempted to offer forcible resistance to the brigandage of the seigneurs, Neroweg VI. wore a casque, which he laid by on entering. His jacket and buff hose disappeared under a hauberk or iron coat of mail, held to his waist by a leathern belt, from which hung two swords, the shorter one at his right, the longer at his left. The hauberk guarded his arms down to the gauntlets, and fell slightly below his knees, which, like his legs, were protected by iron greaves, held together with leathern thongs. The face of Neroweg VI. betrayed a gloomy and troubled mind. Azenor the Pale, still engaged in inserting the needles into the left sides of the wax figures, was murmuring certain words in a strange tongue, and seemed not to notice the arrival of the Count. He drew slowly near, and said in a hollow voice: "Well, now, Azenor, is the philter ready?"

Without answering, the sorceress continued her magic incantations, at the conclusion of which, holding up to Neroweg VI. the two puppets, representing a bishop and a warrior, she said: "Tell me again, which are the enemies whom you dread and hate the most?"

"The Bishop of Nantes and Draco, Sire of Castel-Redon. These are my worst enemies."

"Yesterday I shaped a figure like this. Has it been placed as I ordered, between the teeth of one about to expire on the gallows?"

"One of my serfs struck my bailiff. She was hanged this morning from my seigniorial forks. At the moment when she gave up the ghost, the executioner placed the wax puppet between her teeth. Your orders have been carried out."

"In keeping with my promise, your enemies will soon be in your power. Nevertheless, in order to complete the charm, these other two little figures will have to be buried under the root of a tree, that grows at the bank of a river, in which some man or woman was drowned."

"That's easily done. There are large old willows growing on the banks of my river, and often do my men drown in it the stubborn sailors, or the men or women who refuse to pay the toll for my rights of navigation."

"That magic spell must be cast by yourself. You will have to place these little figures in the designated place to-night, when the moon goes down, and you will pronounce three times the names of Jesus, of Astaroth and of Judas. The charm will then be at its full."

"I do not like to see the name of Christ mixed up in all this. Are you, perchance, seeking to lead me into some sacrilege?"

A sardonic smile played over the white lips of Azenor the Pale. "So far from that, I have placed the magic charm under the invocation of Christ; I pronounced a verse from the gospels with each needle that I buried in these puppets. The Lord will thus be our protector."

"Had you not driven me to kill my chaplain, I might have been able to consult him and learn from him whether I would be committing sacrilege."

"You killed the tonsured fellow because you suspected that holy man of improper relations with your wife, and of probably being the father of Guy – "

"Hold your tongue!" cried Neroweg, with a voice full of anger. "Hold your tongue, accursed woman! Since that murder I have had no chaplain. No priest, consents to dwell here. Enough of that. Is the philter ready?"

"Not yet. Have patience, seigneur Count."

"What else do you want to concoct it? You wanted the blood of a young child; the young son of one of my serfs has been delivered to you – "

"The child must be prepared for the sacrifice by magic formulas."

"In a word, can you tell me when will that marvelous philter, that you have promised me, be ready?"

"I shall work upon it this very night, during the hours between the rising and the going down of the moon; that's to say, for several hours."

"That's another delay! My ailment grows apace! I suspect you of having cast upon me the evil spell under which I struggle, and which drives me to deeds of furious folly."

"You are wrong in attributing to me such an influence over your fate."

"Was it not you who incited me to kill my eldest son Gonthram?"

"Your son tried to violate me. Of course I had to appeal to your intervention for protection against fresh outrages."

"Had not my equerry Eberhard the Tricky thrown himself between me and Gonthram, I would have killed my son on his return from the hunt. He has insisted that you offered to yield yourself to him if he consented to stab me to death."

"That was a dastardly calumny!"

"Perhaps I should have plunged my dagger in your heart and be done with you."

"And why did you not?"

"Because you read in the stars that our lives were bound together, and that your death would precede mine by only three days. But if I am to die of the distemper that oppresses me, a curse upon you, sorceress! You shall not survive me. Garin the Serf-eater is charged with my vengeance. Oh, you will not leave this castle alive!" Neroweg pressed his forehead with both hands and proceeded in a spirit more and more dejected as he spoke: "The philter – Will it heal me? Since you cast your diabolical spell upon me, the days seem endless. I am indifferent to everything. After I make the rounds of my domains, shut in among the seigniories of my neighbors, all of them my enemies; after I have ravaged their lands, burned their houses, killed their serfs; after I have levied ransom on the travelers, had justice executed by my bailiff, my provost and my hangman; after all that I feel sadder, wearier, more than ever tired of life. I have even surprised myself wishing for death!"

"You wage war, you eat, you drink, you hunt, you sleep and you take your female serfs to your bed when they marry. What is it you lack?"

"I am tired, cloyed with gross enjoyments. Wine tastes sour to me. I feel uneasy when I hunt in my forests, fearful of some ambush prepared by my neighbors. I find my donjon sepulchral like a tomb. I choke under its stone vaults. If I leave the manor, I have ever under my eyes the same saddening landscape."

"Leave the country, you stupid and savage wolf!"

"Whither shall I go and be happier? Here I am master. What would my fate be elsewhere? During my absence, my neighbors would descend upon my domains like a flock of vultures. The devil! I am bound to my seignior like my serfs to the glebe!"

"Your fate is that of all the nobles, your peers."

"But they are not weighed down by their existence like I. Only a few years ago, during the life of my wife Hermengarde, I attacked my neighbors as much for the pleasure of it as to appropriate their lands and to sack their castles. I went on the hunt for caravans of merchants with joy and spirit. I put the prisoners to the torture and delighted at their grimaces. In short, I felt that I lived; I was happy; I ate and drank enormously, and then fell asleep in the arms of one of my female serfs. The next morning I attended mass and departed for the chase, to battle or on a pillaging expedition; that is, on a new round of pleasures." After a moment's silence the seigneur of Plouernel added, with a sigh: "Those days I was a good Catholic! I practiced the faith of my fathers, and every morning, after mass, the chaplain gave me absolution for the deeds of the previous day! To-day, thanks to your wicked contrivances, all my beliefs are overthrown. I have become a pagan! – Aye, a pagan!"

"You, poor imbecile, who carry under your hauberk four relics blessed by the Pope!"

"Will you dare to mock me for my faith in relics?" bellowed Neroweg in a towering rage. "Without the relics that I carry about me you might by this time have dragged me to the bottom of hell, you worthy wife of Satan!"

"Maychance you speak truth, seigneur Count!"

"There is nothing human about you! Your lips are cold as marble; your kisses are frozen!"

"When a reciprocal love shall inflame my veins, then my lips will grow purple, and my kisses will be of fire!"

"Oh, I know it; you never loved me!"

"As well love a wolf of the forest as a Neroweg. You carried me off by force, and I have had to submit to your lust. The man whom I adore, whom I have long loved, even without seeing him, is William the Ninth, the handsome Duke of Aquitaine."

"William!" exclaimed Neroweg in an accent of ferocious jealousy. "That sacrilegious wretch, who carries on his shield the portrait of Malborgiane, his mistress!"

"William is a poet; he is young, handsome, bold, bright and gay. All women dream of, and all men dread him. You are his vassal. Woe unto you should you dare cross him! He would leave not one stone on the other in your castle. He would make you grovel on the ground on hands and knees; he

would clap a saddle on you and ride on your back a hundred steps at a stretch, agreeable to the right of a sovereign over his revolted vassal. You are as far removed from the handsome Duke of Aquitaine as the dull buzzard is from the noble falcon that darts towards the sun making its golden bells tinkle!"

Neroweg uttered a cry of rage, and, drawing his dagger, rushed upon Azenor. But her marble figure remained impassive, her white lips curled in disdainful smile. "Kill me, coward knight, assassin!"

After a moment of savage irresolution, Neroweg returned his dagger to the scabbard: "Oh, damned be the day I captured you on the road to Angers. It is you who brought down the curse that rests upon this castle. But will ye, nill ye, you shall yourself break the spell you have thrown upon me and my children, who, like their father, are becoming somber and silent."

"That's the business of the philter, which I am preparing."

The conversation was at this point interrupted by two raps on the door from without. Neroweg asked roughly: "Who's that?"

"Seigneur Count," a voice answered, "you are waited to open the session of the court in the stone hall!"

Neroweg made a gesture of impatience, and, donning the iron casque which he had laid on a settee, replied: "Once the homage of my vassals pleased my vanity. To-day everything annoys, everything is irksome to me. Oh, sad is my life!"

"To-morrow, thanks to my philter, nothing more will weigh upon you – nor upon yours," observed Azenor, and, placing in the Count's hands the two little wax images, she added: "Your two enemies – the Sire of Castel-Redon and the Bishop of Nantes – will soon fall into your hands, provided you yourself place these magic figures where I have told you, while you pronounce three times the names of Judas, of Astaroth and of Jesus."

"It is hard for me to pronounce the name of Jesus in connection with this sorcery," remarked Neroweg, raising his head and receiving almost fearfully the two little figures. "To-night the philter; if not, you die to-morrow!" Then, bethinking himself, "Where is the child?"

"In that alcove," answered Azenor.

Neroweg walked towards the turret, raised the curtain and saw little Colombaik, the son of Fergan the Quarryman, lying on the floor. The innocent creature was sound asleep at the foot of a stand loaded with vases of bizarre form. The walls of the turret, paneled with marble slabs, rose bare to the ceiling, the floor of whose upper story was on a level with the platform of the donjon. Neroweg, after contemplating the child for an instant, stepped out of the donjon, double-locking the door after him, and taking care to withdraw the key and place it in his jerkin.

CHAPTER VI. FEUDAL JUSTICE

Eberhard the Tricky, one of the equerries of the seigneur of Plouernel, awaited his master outside of the retreat of Azenor, in company with Thiebold, justiciary provost of the seignior. The latter addressed Neroweg, who was slowly descending the stone staircase.

"The chatelain of the fort of Ferte-Mehan signed the relinquishment of his fief of Haut-Menil at the third wedge struck into his knee by the gaoler. The Sire of Breuil-le-Haudoin died of the results of the torture. The Abbot Guilbert offers three hundred silver sous for his ransom. But he has not yet been put to the torture, and such offers mean nothing. We shall proceed in order."

"And then? What other cases are there?"

"That's all. There is to-day nothing else on hand."

While carrying on this conversation the Seigneur of Plouernel, his provost and his equerry, descended to the basement of the donjon-keep, at the corner where the staircase landed. A narrow window, guarded with enormous iron bars, alone lighted this vast hall, bare, somber and vaulted. In the inside yard several men-at-arms held themselves ready to mount their horses. Near the center of the hall, which served as a court of pleas, stood, according to custom, a large stone table, behind which ranged themselves the officers of the house of the Count – the master of the horse, the master of the chamber, the master of the dogs, of the falcons, of the table, and several other dignitaries. These people, instead of being paid by the seigneurs, bought from them these hereditary offices in their families, an inheritance that at times became odd by the contrast it presented between the function and the incumbent. It happened that a post of runner, sold in fief to an agile and vigorous man, often descended as the inheritance of a son, as unfit for the post as a broken-winded ox. The seigneurs, with an eye to revenue, multiplied these offices all they could, and the purchasers yielded, not so much to the pride of belonging to the seigniorial households as to the desire of sheltering themselves from the master's lawlessness, and of sharing the fruits of his brigandage. In those dark days, the choice was between oppressing or being oppressed; submitting to the horrors of serfdom, or becoming the instruments of the feudal tyrants; joining them in doing violence, robbing and torturing one's fellows, or resigning oneself to undergo all these sufferings himself. Such were the sad results of the Frankish conquest. The seigneurs imposed servitude, the friars preached resignation, and the people of Gaul became cowardly, selfish and cruel. They rent themselves with their own hands by turning accomplices to their gaoler.

Besides the head domestics of Neroweg, present at these law courts, – which took the place of the Germanic "malhs" of the reign of Clovis – there was also the provost, the bailiff and the scribe of the seignior. The latter, seated on a stool, his parchment rolls on his knees, his desk beside him, his pen between his teeth, awaited the opening of the session. The first domestics of the Count, respectful and timid, remained standing in a semi-circle behind their master. Since four of five centuries back, the class of the leudes, who, in the early days of the Frankish conquest, lived in common with and as equals of their chiefs, had ceased to exist. In the measure that the conquest became more firmly fixed, the titular and beneficiary seigneurs of the soil of Gaul, shocked at the idea of equality contracted by their old companions in arms, evicted them little by little from the domains where chiefs and leudes had lived in common. The descendants of these obscure Frankish warriors, sacrificed to the pride and cupidity of the beneficiaries, soon fell into misery, and from misery into a servitude equal to that of the Gauls. Since then, Franks and Gauls – the former disinherited by ingratitude, the latter by conquest, and now joined in misery and servitude – felt a common hatred towards the church and the seigneurs. There were then but two classes – the *common people*, serfs, peasants and bourgeois or townsmen; and *nobles*, knights and seigneurs. The latter, isolating themselves ever more, lived like

absolute sovereigns in their strongholds, having no equals, but only menials, the accomplices of their acts of brigandage; or serfs, stupefied by terror or besotted by the friars.

Gonthram and Guy, the two sons of Neroweg, the younger at the left, the elder at the right of their father, attended the court. The latter had just reached the age of knighthood, a glorious event, so dearly paid for by the serfs of the seignior. Gonthram resembled his father greatly. A look at the whelp told what he would be when age would have made of him a wolf. Guy, the younger, seventeen years of age, recalled the sardonic and vindictive features of his mother, Hermangarde. These two youths, brought up in the midst of this life of strife, of rapine and of debauchery, left to the violence of their passions, disposing as masters over an abject population, had none of the charms that are the attribute of adolescence. Away in a corner of the hall stood several bourgeois of the little town of Plouernel, who had come to complain of the exactions of the Count's men; or to excuse themselves for failure to pay the imposts in money and goods that it had pleased their seigneur to lay upon them; or to plead that the dues credited to the seigneur had long been met or exceeded; or yet to announce that they had removed from their roofs the weather-vanes, placed there in ignorance of the seigniorial rights, and taken down the pigeon houses they had started to raise in violation of the prescriptions of the feudal law.

The court was also attended by noble vassals of Neroweg, owners of smaller fortified places or of manors, held under the Count of Plouernel, the suzerain of these fiefs, the same as Neroweg, a vassal of William IX., Duke of Aquitaine, held under that suzerain, who, as vassal of Philip I., in turn held of that French King, the supreme sovereign. This hierarchy of all feudal seigniories existed in name only, never in fact. The great vassals, veritable sovereigns, entrenched in their duchies, laughed at the impotent authority of the King. In turn, the sovereignty of the dukes was almost despised, contested or attacked by their vassals, who were absolute masters in their seigniories, as the dukes in their duchies. The immediate vassalage, however, such as rested on the vassals of the seignior of Plouernel, was ever enforced in all its fullness and tyrannic severity. There, at any time, the implacable vengeance of the suzerain could reach directly the goods and chattels of the recalcitrant vassal. Among the people who had come from the city, from the fortified cities or from their manors, was a handsome young girl, accompanied by her mother. Sad and uneasy, the two exchanged alarmed looks when the seigneur of Plouernel, entering the law court with a somber mien, sat down on a throne, one son at his right, the other at his left, and ordered Garin the Serf-eater to call the roll of cases entered for the session.

The bailiff bore no further mark of the wound he had received from Pierrine the Goat than a plaster on his forehead. He took up a scroll and commenced calling up the list of cases:

"Gerhard, son of Hugh, who died last month, succeeds his father in the fief of Heute-Mont, held under the Count of Plouernel. He comes to acquit the right of relief, and to pledge fealty and homage to his suzerain."

Thereupon, a man still young, covered with a leather casque and carrying at his side a long sword, stepped forth from the group of persons who had come to the session of the court. He came forward holding in his hand a large purse filled with money, and placed it on the stone table, thus acquitting the right of relief due the seigneur by all vassals who take possession of their inheritance. Then, upon a sign of the bailiff, the new castellan of Heute-Mont, taking off his casque and unbuckling the belt of his sword, placed himself humbly on both knees before the seigneur of Plouernel. The bailiff, however, noticing that the country squire, having come on horseback, retained his spurs, addressed him in an angry tone: "Vassal, dare you take the pledge of fealty and homage to your seigneur with the spurs at your heels?"

The young castellan repaired the incongruity by removing his spurs and dropping back upon his knees at the feet of Neroweg, with hands joined and head lowered, he humbly waited for his seigneur to pronounce the consecrated formula: "You acknowledge yourself my liege as the holder of a fief in my seignior?"

"Yes, my seigneur."

"You swear upon your soul never to carry arms against me, and to serve and defend me against my enemies?"

"I swear it, my seigneur."

"Keep thy oath. At the first felonious infraction thy fief reverts to me!"

Gerhard rose, replaced his spurs and buckled on the belt of his sword, while casting a sad look upon the purse of money with which he had paid his right of relief.

After the lord of Heute-Mont, a richly dressed young girl stepped forward, uneasy, trembling and her eyes full of tears. Her mother, not less moved than herself, accompanied her. When both were a few steps from the stone table, the seigneur of Plouernel said to the damsel: "Have you decided to obey the orders of your suzerain?"

"Monseigneur," answered the young girl, in a feeble and suppliant voice, "it is impossible for me to resign myself to – "

She could not finish. Sobs smothered her words, and, breaking out in tears, she dropped her head upon the shoulder of her mother, who said to the Count: "My good seigneur, my daughter loves Eucher, one of your own vassals. Eucher loves my daughter Yolande no less tenderly. The union of these two children would make the happiness of my life – "

"No! no!" interrupted the seigneur of Plouernel, in a towering rage. "By the death of her father Yolande holds a fief under my seigniory. Mine alone is the right to dispose of her in marriage. She must choose a husband from among the three men whom, according to our usage, I have designated. They are three Franks, that is, nobles – Richard, Enquerrand and Conrad. The eldest of them not being yet sixty years old, the age limit is observed. Does Yolande accept one of my three lieges for her husband?"

"Oh, seigneur," replied the mother imploringly, while the young girl sobbed aloud, "Richard is mean looking and blind of one eye; Conrad is a murderer; he killed his first wife in a fit of passion; Enquerrand is lame, wicked and feared by all who come near him, moreover, he is too old for my daughter, he will be sixty years within two months. None of them is fit for Yolande."

"Your daughter, accordingly, refuses to wed one of the three men presented by me?"

"Seigneur, she wishes no other husband than Eucher; and I may assure you the lad is worthy of the love of my daughter."

"The devil! We have had words enough. If your daughter insists upon refusing to select from among my men, and marries Eucher, the fief reverts to me. It is my right. I shall enforce it."

"In the name of heaven, monseigneur, if you appropriate our lands what shall we live on? Are we to beg our bread? Have pity upon us!"

Yolande raised her beautiful face, pale and wet with tears, took a step towards Neroweg, and said, with dignity: "Keep the heritage of my father. I prefer to live in poverty with him whom I love than to wed any of these men of yours who inspire me with horror."

"My daughter!" exclaimed the distracted mother, "disobedience to the seigneur of Plouernel means misery for us!"

"Marriage with one of the three men proposed, means death to me," answered the poor child.

"Seigneur, good seigneur!" resumed the stricken mother, "deign to allow Yolande to remain a spinster. You would not force her to the choice between our ruin and a marriage that horrifies her?"

"No fief can remain in the possession of a woman," was the sententious utterance of the bailiff. "Usage is opposed to it."

"We have had enough of words!" cried out Neroweg, stamping the ground with rage. "This young woman refuses to wed one of my men. The fief is now mine. Bailiff, you will this evening send a force to take possession of the house and all its contents. You will eject the two women."

"Mother, let's depart," said Yolande, proudly. "We once were free and happy; now we are no better than serfs. But I prefer their sad lot to that reserved for me by Count Neroweg in delivering me to one of his bandits."

Undoubtedly the seigneur of Plouernel would have revenged himself for the bitter reproaches of Yolande had he not been prevented by the sudden arrival of one of his men, who, running in all out of breath, brought news of the arrest of the Bishop of Nantes, who had appeared at the toll gate disguised as a mendicant friar, and was recognized by one of the guards.

"The Bishop of Nantes in my power!" exclaimed Neroweg. "Azenor predicted it. Her magic charm begins to operate!" He rose precipitately from his throne, and, followed by his sons and several of his equerries, ran to meet the bishop, his enemy, who was being led a prisoner, together with the other travelers captured by the armed guards posted at the toll gate. Bezenecq the Rich and his daughter Isoline accompanied Simon, the Bishop of Nantes, and the monk Jeronimo, clad like a prelate. After his vain efforts to induce the travelers not to cross the seignior of Plouernel, the bishop had, nevertheless, joined them, not venturing to enter alone with Jeronimo upon the territory of the seigneur of Castel-Redon, and hoping he would pass unperceived amidst a numerous troop. Unhappily for him, among the guards at the gate was a soldier named Robin the Nantesian, who had lived in the city of Nantes, and where he had opportunity to see the leading personages among the inhabitants. He quickly pointed out Bezenecq the Rich as a townsman from whom it would be easy to extract a big ransom. Noticing, thereupon, a monk, who seemed anxious to keep his cowl over his head, he pulled the frock off the monk and recognized the Bishop of Nantes, a personal enemy of the Count. The men of Neroweg then seized the two friars, pinioned them, as well as Bezenecq and his daughter, and accepted the toll from the other passengers, whom they allowed to pursue their journey. The bourgeois of Nantes, bound upon his mule, with his daughter bathed in tears at the crupper, was carried to the castle, with the bishop and Jeronimo, their hands tied behind their backs, following on foot. When the captives arrived at the first court-yard of the castle, Bezenecq alighted from the saddle, and, freed from his bandages, he held up his daughter, ready to faint. The bishop, pale as death, leaned upon the arm of Jeronimo, whose resolute carriage betrayed no fears. Neroweg, accompanied by his sons, arrested his hurrying steps when he came close to the prisoners, and, addressing them, said, sardonically: "I greet you, Simon! I greet you, holy man, my father in Christ! I hardly looked for this joyful meeting!"

"I am at your mercy," answered the prelate; "the will of God be done. Do with me as you will."

"I shall avail myself of your leave," replied the seigneur of Plouernel. "Oh, this is a happy day to me!"

"I ask only one favor," rejoined the bishop, "the favor of keeping near me this poor monk until the moment of my death, that he may help me to die like a Christian."

"I do not mean to send you quite so soon to Paradise. I have other designs upon you," and beckoning to Garin the Serf-eater to draw near, the seigneur of Plouernel whispered a few words in his ear. The bailiff nodded affirmatively, crossed the drawbridge and entered the donjon.

During their father's brief dialogue with the bishop, Guy and Gonthram had not ceased to pursue Isoline with their lascivious looks, and the frightened young girl had hidden her face on the breast of her father. Robin the Nantesian, raising his voice, said to Neroweg, while placing his hand on the shoulder of the townsman: "This is one of the richest merchants of the city of Nantes. He is called Bezenecq the Rich. Forget not that he is worth his weight in gold."

The Count fastened his falcon eyes upon the captive, and, taking two steps toward him, said: "Your name is Bezenecq the Rich?"

"I am so called, noble seigneur," humbly answered the bourgeois. "If your men have arrested me in order to make me pay ransom, I only request not to be separated from my daughter. Hand me a parchment. I shall write to the depositary of my money to deliver a hundred gold sous to whomever of your men shall deliver my letter to him. You will have the sum upon the return of your

messenger, and you will then return our liberty to myself and my daughter." Seeing that the Count shrugged his shoulders with a sardonic smile, the merchant added: "Illustrious seigneur, instead of one hundred gold sous I will give you two hundred. But, I pray you, for mercy's sake, have me taken with my daughter to some apartment where the poor child may recover from her fright and the fatigues of the journey." Isoline, more and more alarmed at the ardent looks of the two whelps, trembled convulsively. Neroweg, silent as before, looked from time to time towards the donjon as if awaiting the return of the bailiff. Bezenecq resumed with an effort: "Seigneur, if two hundred pieces of gold do not yet suffice you, I shall go as far as three hundred. It means my ruin. But I resign myself to that, provided you set my daughter and myself free."

At that moment Garin the Serf-eater came out of the donjon, recrossed the draw bridge and spoke in an undertone to Neroweg, who, turning to the prisoners, said: "Come along, my guests! You will learn what I am to do with you. You are to have a chat with a certain dame of great powers of persuasion."

"Oh, you butcher! You mean to put me to the torture!" cried the bishop, horror stricken. "Jesus, my God, have pity upon me! Mercy! Mercy!"

"No weakness, Simon," whispered Jeronimo to him; "we must submit to the will of God. His ways are inscrutable."

"Let the bishop be taken to his lodging; the monk shall keep him company." The bishop emitted lamentable cries and essayed to resist the men who were dragging him into the donjon. "It is now your turn to step in, Bezenecq the Rich. Come, brother, resistance is useless."

"Have I not offered you three hundred gold sous for my ransom, Count of Plouernel?" asked the merchant. "If you do not find that sum enough I shall add another hundred gold pieces. I shall have given you my whole fortune!"

"Oh, worthy brother, in honor to the commerce of Nantes, I cannot admit that one of its wealthiest merchants is worth only four hundred gold sous!" Then, turning to his men: "Conduct my guest and his daughter to their quarters."

At the moment when the men of Neroweg were about to take hold of Bezenecq the Rich, Gonthram, brutally seizing the hand of Isoline, whom the merchant held fainting in his embrace, said: "I take this girl! She is my share of the ransom!"

"I also want her," cried out Guy, his eyes all aflame and advancing toward his brother with a menacing look. But Gonthram, little caring for the words and threats of his brother, made ready to seize the maid and carry her off. Guy then drew his sword. Gonthram in turn drew his, while the daughter of the townsman, distracted with terror, shrank within herself, inert, in a swoon.

"Guy! Gonthram! Put up your swords! This maid shall be none of yours," ordered Neroweg. "She shall not leave her father. In the presence of his daughter the bourgeois will prove more accommodating. Put back your swords! You, Garin," he went on, turning to the bailiff, "take this beauty in your arms, if she cannot walk, and carry her in with the old man."

Isoline, catching, despite her terror, the last words of Neroweg, rose to her feet with an effort and said to Garin in a suppliant voice: "For mercy's sake, my good seigneur, take me along with my father. I shall have strength to walk."

"Come," answered the bailiff, leading her to the draw bridge, while Guy and Gonthram, slowly returning their swords to their scabbards, exchanged such vindictive looks that the Count considered it necessary to remain near them in order to prevent a fresh outbreak.

Isoline, following Garin with unsteady step, crossed the draw bridge and entered the hall of the stone table, where still several vassals of the seigneur awaited the close of the session that had been interrupted by the arrival of the prisoners. At one of the corners of this hall was the stone staircase that led down in a spiral from the platform of the donjon to its lowest cells. Near the steps was a trap door. Two men of sinister figure, clad in goat skins and carrying lanterns in their hands, stood near the gaping opening. Bezenecq was loudly calling for his daughter, and resisting with all his force the

men who were dragging him in. Seeing, however, his daughter advancing towards him, he ceased to offer resistance, but broke down, weeping.

"Hurry up, my rich townsman!" said Garin the Serf-eater to him; "my seigneur wishes that you and your daughter remain together." Then, turning to the gaolers who carried the lanterns: "Go down first and light our way." The gaolers obeyed, and soon the merchant and Isoline disappeared with them in the depths of the subterranean donjon.

CHAPTER VII. ABBOT AND MONK

The donjon cells of the manor of Plouernel consisted of three vaulted stories, the only daylight into which penetrated through three narrow slits opening upon the gigantic ditch, out of which rose the donjon itself. Within, apart from a massive door studded with iron, these cells consisted of stone only – they were roofed with stone, floored with stone, and the walls were of stone, ten feet thick. The cell, whither the Bishop of Nantes and the monk Jeronimo were taken, was at the very bottom of this subterraneous structure. A narrow loophole barely filtered through a pale ray of light into that semi-Stygian darkness. The walls sweated a greenish moisture. In the center of the dungeon stood a stone bed, intended for torture or death. Chains and heavy iron rings fastened to the headpiece, to the sides and the feet of the long stone slab, that rose three feet above the floor, announced the purpose of that funereal couch, on which were now seated the monk and the Bishop of Nantes. The latter, a prey at first to agonizing despair, had by degrees recovered his composure. His face, now almost serene with a melancholic good nature, contrasted with the somber severity of his companion. "I am now resigned to death," the prelate was saying to Jeronimo, "yet I confess, I feel my heart fail me at the thought of leaving my wife and children without protection in days as dark as these are."

"There you have one of the consequences of the marriage of priests," the monk answered. "How justly did Gregory VII. reason when he forced the councils to interdict marriage to the clergy!"

After a moment's silence the Bishop of Nantes resumed with a melancholy smile: "Stoics, like the philosophers of antiquity, let's consider at this very moment of imminent torture and death the dogmas that bear upon our present situation."

"Let's commence with the great question of the spiritual and temporal dominion of the church."

"It is a grand subject. I listen."

"In our days, for every twenty abbots or bishops who are sovereign in their abbeys or bishoprics, are there not a hundred dukes, counts, marquises or seigneurs, sovereign masters in their dukedoms, counties or seigniories?"

"Sad to say, 'tis so!"

"Did not a large portion of the estates, that proceeded from the gifts of Charles Martel, return to the hands of the clergy at the time of the terror the people were seized with at the thought of the end of the world, – a terror ably fomented by the church down to the year 1000, and prolonged to 1033 by dint of able maneuvers?"

"That's true, too. The terrified seigneurs abandoned to the church a large part of their goods, thinking the day of judgment was at hand. Since then, however, the same seigneurs, or their descendants, retook their rich donations from the clergy. The hatred that the Count Neroweg pursues me with has no other cause than the recovery of the lands that his grandfather bequeathed to my predecessor, at the time when those brutes expected to see the end of the world. The Count wages war against me to re-enter upon domains that once belonged to his family. The lance is rising against the holy water sprinkler."

"It has been so in all the other provinces. One of the causes of the wars of the seigneurs against the bishops and abbots has, for the last fifty years, been the recovery of the goods given to the Church on the occasion of the end of the world. In these impious strifes the seigneurs have almost always come out on top. The church was vanquished."

"It is a sad fact."

"In order to recover its omnipotence, the Church must again become richer than the seigneurs. She must, above all, rid herself forever of those brigands who dare reach out a sacrilegious hand towards the goods of the Church, and assault the priests of our Lord, the ministers of God."

"Alack, Jeronimo, it is a far way from the wish to the fact! The sword gets the best of the bishop's crook!"

"The distance is simply the journey from here to Jerusalem. That's all!"

The bishop regarded the monk with amazement, repeating without understanding the words: "The journey from here to Jerusalem!"

"I am a legate of Pope Urban II." proceeded Jeronimo. "As such, I am initiated in the policies of Rome. The French Pope Gerbert, and, after him, Gregory VII., conceived a great idea – to submit the peoples of Europe to the papal will. In order, however, to habituate them to a passive obedience, an ostensible purpose had to be held out. Gerbert conceived the thought of the deliverance of the tomb of Christ, which had fallen into the hands of the Saracens, the masters of Syria and Jerusalem. This pregnant thought, conceived in the head of Gerbert and hatched out by Gregory VII., was the subject of long cogitations on the part of their successors. The Popes recommended to the faithful the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, to which they attached special indulgences and privileges. The people of Germany, of Spain, of Gaul, of England, gradually began to hear Jerusalem, the Holy City, talked about. The pilgrimages multiplied. Long though the voyage was, it did not seem impossible; moreover, it insured indulgences for all crimes, and, above all, it was a pleasure trip for the mendicants, the vagabonds, the runaway serfs from the domains of their masters. The pilgrims found good lodgings in the abbeys; they picked up some little money in the cities, and obtained free passage on the Genoese or Venetian vessels as far as Constantinople, where they then departed for Jerusalem, traversing Syria and lodging over night from convent to convent. Arrived at the Holy City, they paid their devotions."

"And all that without any interference on the part of the Saracens. We must admit it among ourselves, Jeronimo, those miscreants showed themselves quite tolerant! The churches rose in peace beside the mosques; the Christians lived in tranquility, and the pilgrims were never incommoded."

"And it remained so," continued Jeronimo, "until the Saracens, exasperated by the anathemas hurled at the sectarians of Mahomet by the Catholic priests of Jerusalem, brought their hammer down upon the holy Temple of Solomon and demolished it – a demolition, however, that we avenged upon Jews by massacring them in the several countries of Europe. But after all, we cared little about the destruction of the Temple, or the safety of the Sepulchre. Our end was attained. The people had learned to know the road to Jerusalem. The sandals of the pilgrims had smoothed the road to the Holy Land to the Catholic peoples. The number of pilgrims increased from year to year. Often seigneurs, certain to obtain by means of that pious voyage the absolution of their crimes, joined the pilgrim vagabonds and beggars. That perpetual flux and reflux of peoples of all stations drew ever more the eyes of Europe to the Orient. The marvels narrated by the pilgrims upon the return from their long voyage, the relics that they brought back, the respect with which the Church surrounded them, – everything affected more and more the spirit of credulity and the vulgar imagination of the masses. Gregory VII. foresaw these results. He considered it opportune to preach the Holy War. The Church raised her voice: 'Shame and sorrow upon the Catholic world! The Sepulchre of the Saviour of man is in the power of the Saracens! Kings and seigneurs, march at the head of your peoples to the deliverance of the Sepulchre of Christ and the extermination of the infidels.' To that premature appeal Europe remained indifferent. The hour of the Crusades had not yet sounded. Since then, however, the idea has made progress, and to-day we are certain to find the minds disposed to second the Pope in his projects. Accordingly, Urban II. has not hesitated to leave Rome and come to preach the Crusade in Gaul, the Catholic country *par excellence!*"

"What say you? The Pope himself is coming to preach the Crusade! Can that be true, oh, my God!"

"His Holiness is bound for Auvergne, and he sends his emissaries into the other provinces."

"And who are the men invested with the confidence of the Pope, and charged with leading such an undertaking to a successful end?"

"One of them, Peter the Hermit, vulgarly called 'Cuckoo Peter,' is a monk who has twice accomplished the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He is an ardent man, gifted with a savage eloquence that exercises upon the multitudes a powerful effect. Another emissary is Walter the Pennyles, a knight of adventure, bold Gascon, charged to seduce with the cheerfulness of his words and the exaggeration of his descriptions all those who might remain indifferent to the savage eloquence of Peter the Hermit."

"But what arguments will these emissaries advance in order to rouse the masses to these insensate migrations?"

"I shall answer that question presently. But let me remind you of the principal motives of the church to drive the people to the Crusades; to habituate Catholic Europe to rise at the voice of the Pope for the extermination of heretics; to switch off to Palestine a large number of the seigneurs who are contending with the Church for the goods of the earth and the dominion of the people, – to get rid of one's enemies."

"The idea is good, profound, politic. I can well see the object that the Pope has in view."

"Let me, furthermore, call your attention to a fact that renders necessary a large migration of the common people to the Holy Land. In Gaul, despite the private wars of the seigneurs and the sufferings of this century, the population of the serfs has multiplied to an extraordinary degree during the last fifty years."

"That is so. The serf population, decimated by the famines that reigned from 1000 to 1034, immediately began to recover with the years of plenty that followed upon those of dearth."

"Aided, above all, by the action of the Church when, desirous of re-peopling her domains, stripped of its agricultural serfs, she caused the 'Armistice of God' to be proclaimed, interdicting the seigneurs and the bishops from levying war during three days of each week under penalty of excommunication."

"That plebeian increase brought on the formidable revolts of the serfs of Normandy and Brittany, when doggerels were sung containing strophes of unheard-of audacity, as you may judge from this one:

Why allow we ourselves to be oppressed?
Are we not human like the seigneurs?
Have we not, as they, body and limbs?
Is not our heart as large as theirs?
Are we not one hundred serfs to a single knight?
Let's then be up striking with our pitchforks and our scythes!
For lack of arms, take the stones the roads are strewn with!
'Death to the friars!'

"And that's the truth, Jeronimo! Those songs of revolt gave the signal to terrible insurrections in Normandy and Brittany. But two or three millions of the rebels had their eyes put out, their feet and hands chopped off, and the revolt was stamped out. Those wicked people must be exterminated."

"In order to conjure away the return of similar uprisings, it is necessary to lead abroad the plebeian increase. The plebs grows threatening by reason of its numbers and the force that numbers carry with them. In order to weaken it, it will be enough to make it depart on the Crusade across Europe."

"Explain to me how the Crusades are expected to bring about the results that you consider needful, and that the exhortations of the papal emissaries are to invoke."

"Is it not evident that, for every thousand serfs who will leave Gaul to fight in Palestine, barely a hundred will arrive as far as Jerusalem? Those wretches, departing penniless, in rags, without provisions, carrying wife and children in their train, ravaging the regions they traverse – Germany, Hungary, Bohemia, Bulgaria, the countries of the Danube – because, in the course of so long a

voyage, such multitudes cannot live without pillage along the route, three-fourths of them will have been exterminated by the inhabitants of the countries that they must cross, or will die of hunger and fatigue before being able to reach Jerusalem. The small number of them that will arrive before the Holy City will be still further decimated by the Saracens. It is safe to say that hardly any of those who leave will return. Thus we shall be rid of this vile and dangerous populace that dares rise against its masters, especially against the Church."

"It remains to be seen, Jeronimo, whether this plebs mass will be senseless enough to venture upon so distant and perilous a journey."

The monk answered: "Is not the lot of the villeins and the serfs on the lay or ecclesiastical seignories the most wretched? And, of all the yokes, is not that of the glebe the heaviest, which forbids them to cross the boundaries of their own seignory. When the Church will say to those myriads of people, chained down to the glebe: 'Go! You are free! March off to fight the Saracens in Palestine, the country of miracles, where you will gather an immense booty! Take no heed of provisions for the journey, God will provide! Above all, you will accomplish your eternal salvation!' the serfs will depart in mass, drawn by the desire to be free, the thirst for booty, the spirit of adventure, and by the pious ardor to deliver the Holy Sepulchre from the defilement of the infidels!"

"Jeronimo," rejoined the Bishop of Nantes, "the craving after freedom, the spirit of adventure, the hope of booty, may, perhaps, drive those wretches to Palestine. But desire to avenge the tomb of the Saviour from the pretended defilement of the infidels, is, meseems, too feeble a motive. We shall fail there."

"When this holy cause, thrice holy and eloquently preached by the Church, is furthermore backed by the thirst for freedom, the hope of booty, the certainty of gaining Paradise, and curiosity regarding the future, that, though unknown, could not be worse than the present, the attraction of the populace for Palestine will become irresistible."

"I grant it. But will the seigneurs consent to have their lands thus depopulated by allowing the serfs to depart for the Crusades?"

"As much as ourselves do the seigneurs dread the revolt of the serfs. In that we two have a common interest. Moreover, that plebs overflow, which it is the part of wisdom to empty out abroad, constitutes, at the highest, only one-third of the serfs. Only that third will depart."

"And who guarantees that many more will not yield to the attraction, that you consider irresistible, and will not go along?"

"This plebs mass has become craven through the habit of slavery that weighs it down since the Frankish conquest. Only a part of the village and country populations is sufficiently disposed to revolt. It is those very ones who are most impatient of the yoke, the most intelligent, the most venturesome, the most daring, and, consequently, the most dangerous, who will be the first to start for Palestine. Thus shall we be rid of those inciters of rebellion."

"That reasoning is correct."

"Thus only one-third of the rustic plebs will emigrate. Those who remain behind will suffice to cultivate the land. Being fewer to the task, their toil will increase. The ox that is heavily burdened, the ass that is heavily laden, does not kick. The danger of a new revolt will have been conjured off. The Church will resume her preponderance over both the plebs and the seigneurs."

"I admire, Jeronimo, the powerful combinations of the politics of the papacy. But one of the most important results of this policy would be to deliver us from a large number of those accursed seigneurs, always at war against us. Oh, they will not, like the serfs, be driven by the desire to escape a fearful lot, or of enjoying freedom. They, I fear, will remain at home."

"A large number of them are as anxious as their serfs to change their condition. After all, what is the life of these seigneurs? Is it not that of chiefs of brigands? Always at war; always on the watch, fearing to be attacked or surprised by their neighbors; unable but rarely to leave their seignories except armed to the teeth; often not daring even to go on the hunt in their own domains; forced to

entrench themselves in their lairs; these ferocious men are tired of such monotonous life. They will follow the stream."

"I have, indeed, often been struck by the expression of mortal tiredness reflected upon the faces of the seigneurs."

"This will be the language of the friars to these men steeped in crime, brutified almost as much as their own serfs, and all of them nursing at the bottom of their hearts a more or less profound fear of the devil: 'You are smothering in your castles of stone; you here wrangle over the meager spoils of some traveler, or over the barren lands of the Occident – lands peopled with wretches resembling animals rather than human beings. Leave the ungrateful soil and somber sky of the Occident! Go to Palestine, go to the Orient, the land of azure and of sunshine, fertile, splendid, radiant, studded with magnificent cities, palaces of marble, gilded cupolas, delicious gardens! There you will find the treasures for centuries accumulated by the Saracens, treasures so prodigious that they suffice to pave with gold, rubies, pearls and diamonds the whole road from Gaul to Jerusalem! God delivers into your hands that teeming soil, its palaces, its beautiful women, its treasures. Depart on the Holy War!' A large number of seigneurs will bite with all the snap of their heavy jaws at that bait glittering with all the fires of the sun of the Orient."

"You are right, Jeronimo," observed the Bishop of Nantes. "But do you not fear that the seigniorial station, thus stripped, shrunk and ruined, will leave the place open for the royalty, to-day without power, and that that royalty will not endeavor to share with us the dominion of the people, and will not even strive to dominate the Church?"

"We need not fear the rivalry of the Kings. Even their private interests are to us a safe guarantee of their submission to the will of the Pope, the representative of God on earth, the dispenser of eternal rewards or punishments."

"Oh, Jeronimo, your words have opened a new horizon before me. I see now the future of the Catholic Church in all her formidable majesty. I now cleave to life, and would wish to assist at that magnificent spectacle."

"This topic has a close bearing upon our present position of prisoners of Neroweg VI, and you must inspire yourself with it, Simon, to the end that you may regulate your conduct accordingly."

"Tell me what I am to do, Jeronimo. I can take no more precious a guide than you in all matters concerning our holy religion."

"Neroweg relies upon your torture to extort from you the possession of the domains of your diocese, which he has long coveted. Accede to all that he may demand. Peter the Hermit and Walter the Pennyless will not be long in arriving in this region to preach the Crusade. Neroweg will depart for Jerusalem, and will not be able to profit from the concessions you will have granted."

"But say he insists upon putting me to the torture to glut his thirst for revenge upon me! I shudder at the prospect."

The conversation between the Bishop of Nantes and the monk was here interrupted by a rumbling and weird noise, that seemed to proceed from the interior of the thick wall. The two prelates trembled with affright, and looked at each other. Then, drawing near the wall in the direction from which the noise came, they applied their ears with bated breath. But the noise slowly receded, and a few minutes later died away completely.

CHAPTER VIII. THE CHAMBER OF TORTURE

The dungeon of Bezenecq the Rich and his daughter, vaulted and floored with stone slabs like the other subterranean cells, but located on the second story of that redoubtable structure, received a somewhat better light from its narrow loop-hole. In the center of the cell stood a gridiron, six feet long, three wide, raised a good deal above the floor, and constructed of iron bars placed slightly apart from each other. Chains and rings, fastened to the gridiron, served to keep the victim in position. Near this instrument of punishment rose two other engines of torture, devised with ingenious ferocity. The one consisted of a projecting iron bar, in the nature of a gibbet about seven or eight feet above the floor, and terminating in an iron carcan that opened and closed at will. A heavy stone, weighing about two tons, and furnished with a ring and a strap to hang it by, lay at the foot of the gibbet. The other engine had the appearance of a gigantic prong, sharp and turned back similar to those used by butchers to hang their quarters of beef on. The slabs of the flooring, covered everywhere else with greenish moisture, wore a blood-red tint under the prong. Opposite to this instrument of punishment, there was grossly sculptured on the wall, a sort of grinning mask, hideous, half beast, half human; its eyes and the cavity of its gaping mouth, resembled deep black holes. Finally, close to the door of the cell stood a wooden box full of straw, and there lay the daughter of the townsman of Nantes, colorless like a corpse, and frozen with terror. At times her body shook with convulsive shivers, other times she remained motionless, her eyes shut, without, therefore, however, her tears ceasing to stream down her cheeks. Bezenecq the Rich, seated on the edge of the straw bed, his elbows on his knees and his forehead hidden in his hands, was saying to himself: "The seigneur of Plouernel... A descendant of Neroweg!.. Strange, fatal encounter!.. Woe is us!"

"Oh, father," murmured the maid in a fainting voice, "this encounter is our sentence of death."

"The sentence of our ruin, but not of our death. Calm yourself, poor child, the seigneur of Plouernel knows not that our obscure family, descended from the Gallic chieftain Joel, who made a head against Cæsar, has been at strife with his own all through the past ages, since the Frankish conquest. But when that bailiff pronounced the name of Neroweg VI, which I had not heard mention during this ill-starred journey, and when, questioned by me, that man answered his master belonged to the ancient Frankish family of Neroweg, established in Auvergne since the conquest of Gaul by Clovis, I no longer had any doubts, and, despite myself, I shuddered at the recollection of our family records, which our father once read to us at Laon, and that have remained in that country, in the hands of Gildas, my elder brother."

"Oh, why did our grandfather leave Brittany. Our family lived there so happy."

"Dear child, our grandfather, who lived near the sacred stones of Karnac, the cradle of our family, could no longer endure the oppression of the Breton seigneurs, who had grown to be as cruel as their Frankish fellows. He sold his little havings, and embarked with his wife at Vannes on a merchant vessel bound for Abbeville. He settled down in that city, where he set up a modest trade. Later, my father moved into the province of Picardy, and settled at Laon, where my elder brother Gildas still carries on the currier's trade. Coming by sea from Abbeville to Nantes to traffic in the articles of our trade, manufactured in Laon, I became acquainted with your mother, the daughter of the merchant to whom I was directed. Her parents did not wish to part from her. They made me promise not to leave Nantes. I became the partner of my wife's father, and grew rich in the business. Your mother then died. You were still a child. Her death was the greatest sorrow of my life. But you were left to me. You grew in gracefulness and beauty. Everything smiled upon me again. I was happy. And behold us now, while yielding to the wishes of your grandmother – " and Bezenecq interrupted himself with a cry of despair: "Oh, it is frightful!"

"But how could we have merited the terrible punishment that seems reserved to us?"

"Oh," replied the bourgeois of Nantes with a sigh, "my happiness rendered me forgetful of the misfortune of our brothers! I was selfish!"

"Dear father, you surely exaggerate the faults or errors of your life."

"Millions of serfs and villeins people the lands of the seigneurs and the clergy. Among them, some drag along a painful existence, that ends in death from exhaustion and misery; others are hanged from the patibulary forks. Those unhappy people are Gauls like ourselves. If some townsmen live in tranquility in the cities, when they have for seigneur so gentle a master as Simon of Nantes, millions of serfs and villeins, on the other hand, are devoted to all the miseries of life, and victims to the seigniories and the Church."

"But, father, it did not depend upon you to alleviate the ills of these wretched folks."

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