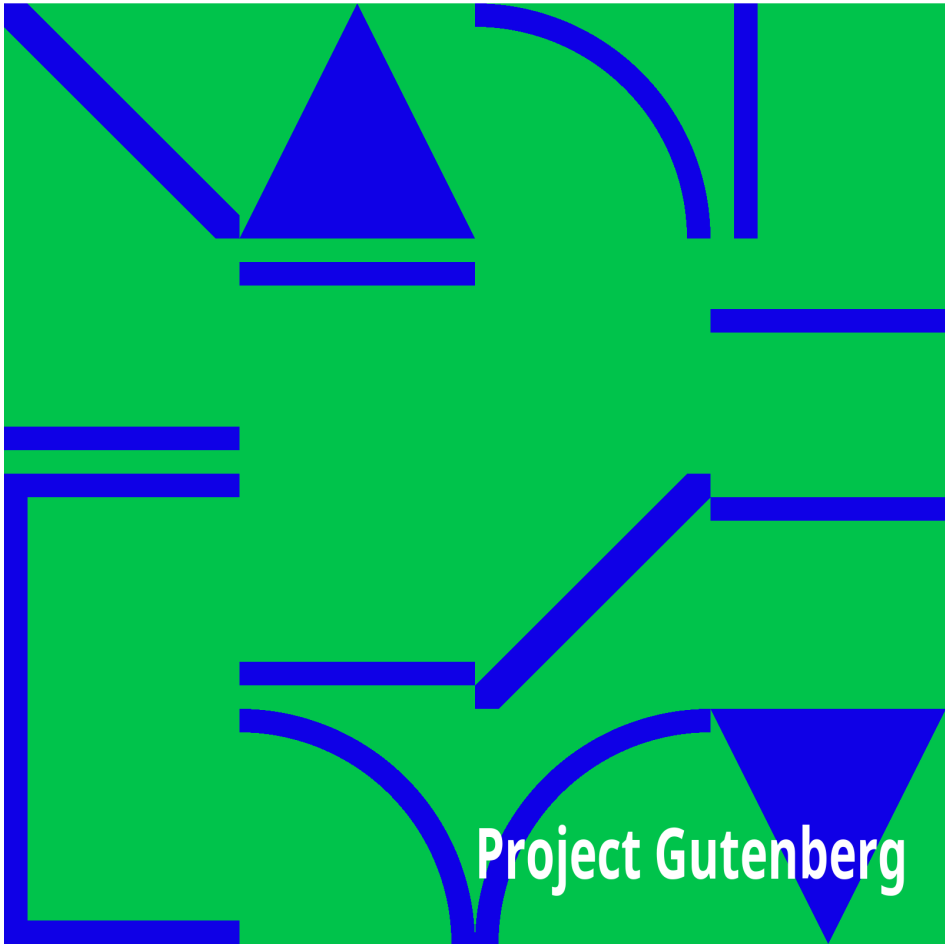
Maitre Cornelius

Honoré de Balzac



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MAITRE CORNELIUS

By Honore De Balzac

Translated by Katharine Prescott Wormeley

DEDICATION

To Monsieur le Comte Georges Mniszech:

Some envious being may think on seeing this page illustrated by one of the most illustrious of Sarmatian names, that I am striving, as the goldsmiths do, to enhance a modern work with an ancient jewel,—a fancy of the fashions of the day,—but you and a few others, dear count, will know that I am only seeking to pay my debt to Talent, Memory, and Friendship.

Contents

MAITRE CORNELIUS

CHAPTER I. A CHURCH SCENE OF THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

CHAPTER II. THE TORCONNIER

CHAPTER III. THE ROBBERY OF THE JEWELS OF THE DUKE OF BAVARIA

CHAPTER IV. THE HIDDEN TREASURE

MAITRE CORNELIUS

CHAPTER I. A CHURCH SCENE OF THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

In 1479, on All Saints' day, the moment at which this history begins, vespers were ending in the cathedral of Tours. The archbishop Helie de Bourdeilles was rising from his seat to give the benediction himself to the faithful. The sermon had been long; darkness had fallen during the service, and in certain parts of the noble church (the towers of which were not yet finished) the deepest obscurity prevailed. Nevertheless a goodly number of tapers were burning in honor of the saints on the triangular candle-trays destined to receive such pious offerings, the merit and signification of which have never been sufficiently explained. The lights on each altar and all the candelabra in the choir were burning. Irregularly shed among a forest of columns and arcades which supported the three naves of the cathedral, the gleam of these masses of candles barely lighted the immense building, because the strong shadows of the columns, projected among the galleries, produced fantastic forms which increased the darkness that already wrapped in gloom the arches, the vaulted ceilings, and the lateral chapels, always sombre, even at mid-day.

The crowd presented effects that were no less picturesque. Certain figures were so vaguely defined in the "chiaroscuro" that they seemed like phantoms; whereas others, standing in a full gleam of the scattered light, attracted attention like the principal heads in a picture. Some statues seemed animated, some men seemed petrified. Here and there eyes shone in the flutings of the columns, the floor reflected looks, the marbles spoke, the vaults re-echoed sighs, the edifice itself seemed endowed with life.

The existence of Peoples has no more solemn scenes, no moments more majestic. To mankind in the mass, movement is needed to make it poetical; but in these hours of religious thought, when human riches unite themselves with celestial grandeur, incredible sublimities are felt in the silence; there is fear in the bended knee, hope in the clasping hands. The concert of feelings in which all souls are rising heavenward produces an inexplicable phenomenon of spirituality. The mystical exaltation of the faithful reacts upon each of them; the feebler are no doubt borne upward by the waves of this ocean of faith and love. Prayer, a power electrical, draws our nature above itself. This involuntary union of all wills, equally prostrate on the earth, equally risen into heaven, contains, no doubt, the secret of the magic influences wielded by the chants of the priests, the harmonies of the organ, the perfumes and the pomps of the altar, the voices of the crowd and its silent contemplations. Consequently, we need not be surprised to see in the middle-ages so many tender passions begun in churches after long ecstasies,—passions ending often in little sanctity, and for which women, as usual, were the ones to do penance. Religious sentiment certainly had, in those days, an affinity with love; it was either the motive or the end of it. Love was still a religion, with its fine fanaticism, its naive superstitions, its sublime devotions, which sympathized with those of Christianity.

The manners of that period will also serve to explain this alliance between religion and love. In the first place society had no meeting-place except before the altar. Lords and vassals, men and women were equals nowhere else. There alone could lovers see each other and communicate. The festivals of the Church were the theatre of former times; the soul of woman was more keenly stirred in a cathedral than it is at a ball or the opera in our day; and do not strong emotions invariably bring women back to love? By dint of mingling with life and grasping it in all its acts and interests, religion had made itself a sharer of all virtues, the accomplice of all vices. Religion had passed into science, into politics, into eloquence, into crimes, into the flesh of the sick man and the poor man; it mounted thrones; it was everywhere. These semi-learned

observations will serve, perhaps, to vindicate the truth of this study, certain details of which may frighten the perfected morals of our age, which are, as everybody knows, a trifle straitlaced.

At the moment when the chanting ceased and the last notes of the organ, mingling with the vibrations of the loud “A-men” as it issued from the strong chests of the intoning clergy, sent a murmuring echo through the distant arches, and the hushed assembly were awaiting the beneficent words of the archbishop, a burgher, impatient to get home, or fearing for his purse in the tumult of the crowd when the worshippers dispersed, slipped quietly away, at the risk of being called a bad Catholic. On which, a nobleman, leaning against one of the enormous columns that surround the choir, hastened to take possession of the seat abandoned by the worthy Tourainean. Having done so, he quickly hid his face among the plumes of his tall gray cap, kneeling upon the chair with an air of contrition that even an inquisitor would have trusted.

Observing the new-comer attentively, his immediate neighbors seemed to recognize him; after which they returned to their prayers with a certain gesture by which they all expressed the same thought,—a caustic, jeering thought, a silent slander. Two old women shook their heads, and gave each other a glance that seemed to dive into futurity.

The chair into which the young man had slipped was close to a chapel placed between two columns and closed by an iron railing. It was customary for the chapter to lease at a handsome price to seignorial families, and even to rich burghers, the right to be present at the services, themselves and their servants exclusively, in the various lateral chapels of the long side-aisles of the cathedral. This simony is in practice to the present day. A woman had her chapel as she now has her opera-box. The families who hired these privileged places were required to decorate the altar of the chapel thus conceded to them, and each made it their pride to adorn their own sumptuously,—a vanity which the Church did not rebuke. In this particular chapel a lady was kneeling close to the railing on a handsome rug of red velvet with gold tassels, precisely opposite to the seat vacated of the burgher. A silver-gilt lamp, hanging

from the vaulted ceiling of the chapel before an altar magnificently decorated, cast its pale light upon a prayer-book held by the lady. The book trembled violently in her hand when the young man approached her.

“A-men!”

To that response, sung in a sweet low voice which was painfully agitated, though happily lost in the general clamor, she added rapidly in a whisper:—

“You will ruin me.”

The words were said in a tone of innocence which a man of any delicacy ought to have obeyed; they went to the heart and pierced it. But the stranger, carried away, no doubt, by one of those paroxysms of passion which stifle conscience, remained in his chair and raised his head slightly that he might look into the chapel.

“He sleeps!” he replied, in so low a voice that the words could be heard by the young woman only, as sound is heard in its echo.

The lady turned pale; her furtive glance left for a moment the vellum page of the prayer-book and turned to the old man whom the young man had designated. What terrible complicity was in that glance? When the young woman had cautiously examined the old seigneur, she drew a long breath and raised her forehead, adorned with a precious jewel, toward a picture of the Virgin; that simple movement, that attitude, the moistened glance, revealed her life with imprudent naivete; had she been wicked, she would certainly have dissimulated. The personage who thus alarmed the lovers was a little old man, hunchbacked, nearly bald, savage in expression, and wearing a long and discolored white beard cut in a fan-tail. The cross of Saint-Michel glittered on his breast; his coarse, strong hands, covered with gray hairs, which had been clasped, had now dropped slightly apart in the slumber to which he had imprudently yielded. The right hand seemed about to fall upon his dagger, the hilt of which was in the form of an iron shell. By the manner in which he had placed the weapon, this hilt was directly under his hand; if, unfortunately, the hand touched the iron, he would wake, no doubt,

instantly, and glance at his wife. His sardonic lips, his pointed chin aggressively pushed forward, presented the characteristic signs of a malignant spirit, a sagacity coldly cruel, that would surely enable him to divine all because he suspected everything. His yellow forehead was wrinkled like those of men whose habit it is to believe nothing, to weigh all things, and who, like misers chinking their gold, search out the meaning and the value of human actions. His bodily frame, though deformed, was bony and solid, and seemed both vigorous and excitable; in short, you might have thought him a stunted ogre. Consequently, an inevitable danger awaited the young lady whenever this terrible seigneur woke. That jealous husband would surely not fail to see the difference between a worthy old burgher who gave him no umbrage, and the new-comer, young, slender, and elegant.

"Libera nos a malo," she said, endeavoring to make the young man comprehend her fears.

The latter raised his head and looked at her. Tears were in his eyes; tears of love and of despair. At sight of them the lady trembled and betrayed herself. Both had, no doubt, long resisted and could resist no longer a love increasing day by day through invincible obstacles, nurtured by terror, strengthened by youth. The lady was moderately handsome; but her pallid skin told of secret sufferings that made her interesting. She had, moreover, an elegant figure, and the finest hair in the world. Guarded by a tiger, she risked her life in whispering a word, accepting a look, and permitting a mere pressure of the hand. Love may never have been more deeply felt than in those hearts, never more delightfully enjoyed, but certainly no passion was ever more perilous. It was easy to divine that to these two beings air, sound, foot-falls, etc., things indifferent to other men, presented hidden qualities, peculiar properties which they distinguished. Perhaps their love made them find faithful interpreters in the icy hands of the old priest to whom they confessed their sins, and from whom they received the Host at the holy table. Love profound! love gashed into the soul like a scar upon the body which we carry through life! When these two young people looked at

each other, the woman seemed to say to her lover, “Let us love each other and die!” To which the young knight answered, “Let us love each other and not die.” In reply, she showed him a sign her old duenna and two pages. The duenna slept; the pages were young and seemingly careless of what might happen, either of good or evil, to their masters.

“Do not be frightened as you leave the church; let yourself be managed.”

The young nobleman had scarcely said these words in a low voice, when the hand of the old seigneur dropped upon the hilt of his dagger. Feeling the cold iron he woke, and his yellow eyes fixed themselves instantly on his wife. By a privilege seldom granted even to men of genius, he awoke with his mind as clear, his ideas as lucid as though he had not slept at all. The man had the mania of jealousy. The lover, with one eye on his mistress, had watched the husband with the other, and he now rose quickly, effacing himself behind a column at the moment when the hand of the old man fell; after which he disappeared, swiftly as a bird. The lady lowered her eyes to her book and tried to seem calm; but she could not prevent her face from blushing and her heart from beating with unnatural violence. The old lord saw the unusual crimson on the cheeks, forehead, even the eyelids of his wife. He looked about him cautiously, but seeing no one to distrust, he said to his wife:—

“What are you thinking of, my dear?”

“The smell of the incense turns me sick,” she replied.

“It is particularly bad to-day?” he asked.

In spite of this sarcastic query, the wily old man pretended to believe in this excuse; but he suspected some treachery and he resolved to watch his treasure more carefully than before.

The benediction was given. Without waiting for the end of the “Soecula soeculorum,” the crowd rushed like a torrent to the doors of the church. Following his usual custom, the old seigneur waited till the general hurry was over; after which he left his chapel, placing the duenna and the youngest page, carrying a lantern, before him; then he gave his arm to his wife and told the other page to follow them.

As he made his way to the lateral door which opened on the west side of the cloister, through which it was his custom to pass, a stream of persons detached itself from the flood which obstructed the great portals, and poured through the side aisle around the old lord and his party. The mass was too compact to allow him to retrace his steps, and he and his wife were therefore pushed onward to the door by the pressure of the multitude behind them. The husband tried to pass out first, dragging the lady by the arm, but at that instant he was pulled vigorously into the street, and his wife was torn from him by a stranger. The terrible hunchback saw at once that he had fallen into a trap that was cleverly prepared. Repenting himself for having slept, he collected his whole strength, seized his wife once more by the sleeve of her gown, and strove with his other hand to cling to the gate of the church; but the ardor of love carried the day against jealous fury. The young man took his mistress round the waist, and carried her off so rapidly, with the strength of despair, that the brocaded stuff of silk and gold tore noisily apart, and the sleeve alone remained in the hand of the old man. A roar like that of a lion rose louder than the shouts of the multitude, and a terrible voice howled out the words:—

“To me, Poitiers! Servants of the Comte de Saint-Vallier, here! Help! help!”

And the Comte Aymar de Poitiers, sire de Saint-Vallier, attempted to draw his sword and clear a space around him. But he found himself surrounded and pressed upon by forty or fifty gentlemen whom it would be dangerous to wound. Several among them, especially those of the highest rank, answered him with jests as they dragged him along the cloisters.

With the rapidity of lightning the abductor carried the countess into an open chapel and seated her behind the confessional on a wooden bench. By the light of the tapers burning before the saint to whom the chapel was dedicated, they looked at each other for a moment in silence,

clasping hands, and amazed at their own audacity. The countess had not the cruel courage to reproach the young man for the boldness to which they owed this perilous and only instant of happiness.

"Will you fly with me into the adjoining States?" said the young man, eagerly. "Two English horses are awaiting us close by, able to do thirty leagues at a stretch."

"Ah!" she cried, softly, "in what corner of the world could you hide a daughter of King Louis XI.?"

"True," replied the young man, silenced by a difficulty he had not foreseen.

"Why did you tear me from my husband?" she asked in a sort of terror.

"Alas!" said her lover, "I did not reckon on the trouble I should feel in being near you, in hearing you speak to me. I have made plans,—two or three plans,—and now that I see you all seems accomplished."

"But I am lost!" said the countess.

"We are saved!" the young man cried in the blind enthusiasm of his love. "Listen to me carefully!"

"This will cost me my life!" she said, letting the tears that rolled in her eyes flow down her cheeks. "The count will kill me,—to-night, perhaps! But go to the king; tell him the tortures that his daughter has endured these five years. He loved me well when I was little; he called me 'Marie-full-of-grace,' because I was ugly. Ah! if he knew the man to whom he gave me, his anger would be terrible. I have not dared complain, out of pity for the count. Besides, how could I reach the king? My confessor himself is a spy of Saint-Vallier. That is why I have consented to this guilty meeting, to obtain a defender,—some one to tell the truth to the king. Can I rely on—Oh!" she cried, turning pale and interrupting herself, "here comes the page!"

The poor countess put her hands before her face as if to veil it.

"Fear nothing," said the young seigneur, "he is won! You can safely trust him; he belongs to me. When the count contrives to return for you he will warn us of his coming. In the confessional," he added, in a low

voice, “is a priest, a friend of mine, who will tell him that he drew you for safety out of the crowd, and placed you under his own protection in this chapel. Therefore, everything is arranged to deceive him.”

At these words the tears of the poor woman stopped, but an expression of sadness settled down on her face.

“No one can deceive him,” she said. “To-night he will know all. Save me from his blows! Go to Plessis, see the king, tell him—” she hesitated; then, some dreadful recollection giving her courage to confess the secrets of her marriage, she added: “Yes, tell him that to master me the count bleeds me in both arms—to exhaust me. Tell him that my husband drags me about by the hair of my head. Say that I am a prisoner; that—”

Her heart swelled, sobs choked her throat, tears fell from her eyes. In her agitation she allowed the young man, who was muttering broken words, to kiss her hands.

“Poor darling! no one can speak to the king. Though my uncle is grand-master of his archers, I could not gain admission to Plessis. My dear lady! my beautiful sovereign! oh, how she has suffered! Marie, let yourself say but two words, or we are lost!”

“What will become of us?” she murmured. Then, seeing on the dark wall a picture of the Virgin, on which the light from the lamp was falling, she cried out:—

“Holy Mother of God, give us counsel!”

“To-night,” said the young man, “I shall be with you in your room.”

“How?” she asked naively.

They were in such great peril that their tenderest words were devoid of love.

“This evening,” he replied, “I shall offer myself as apprentice to Maitre Cornelius, the king’s silversmith. I have obtained a letter of recommendation to him which will make him receive me. His house is next to yours. Once under the roof of that old thief, I can soon find my way to your apartment by the help of a silken ladder.”

“Oh!” she said, petrified with horror, “if you love me don’t go to Maitre Cornelius.”

“Ah!” he cried, pressing her to his heart with all the force of his youth, “you do indeed love me!”

“Yes,” she said; “are you not my hope? You are a gentleman, and I confide to you my honor. Besides,” she added, looking at him with dignity, “I am so unhappy that you would never betray my trust. But what is the good of all this? Go, let me die, sooner than that you should enter that house of Maitre Cornelius. Do you not know that all his apprentices—”

“Have been hanged,” said the young man, laughing.

“Oh, don’t go; you will be made the victim of some sorcery.”

“I cannot pay too dearly for the joy of serving you,” he said, with a look that made her drop her eyes.

“But my husband?” she said.

“Here is something to put him to sleep,” replied her lover, drawing from his belt a little vial.

“Not for always?” said the countess, trembling.

For all answer the young seigneur made a gesture of horror.

“I would long ago have defied him to mortal combat if he were not so old,” he said. “God preserve me from ridding you of him in any other way.”

“Forgive me,” said the countess, blushing. “I am cruelly punished for my sins. In a moment of despair I thought of killing him, and I feared you might have the same desire. My sorrow is great that I have never yet been able to confess that wicked thought; but I fear it would be repeated to him and he would avenge it. I have shamed you,” she continued, distressed by his silence, “I deserve your blame.”

And she broke the vial by flinging it on the floor violently.

“Do not come,” she said, “my husband sleeps lightly; my duty is to wait for the help of Heaven—that will I do!”

She tried to leave the chapel.

“Ah!” cried the young man, “order me to do so and I will kill him. You will see me to-night.”

“I was wise to destroy that drug,” she said in a voice that was faint with the pleasure of finding herself so loved. “The fear of awakening my husband will save us from ourselves.”

“I pledge you my life,” said the young man, pressing her hand.

“If the king is willing, the pope can annul my marriage. We will then be united,” she said, giving him a look that was full of delightful hopes.

“Monseigneur comes!” cried the page, rushing in.

Instantly the young nobleman, surprised at the short time he had gained with his mistress and wondering at the celerity of the count, snatched a kiss, which was not refused.

“To-night!” he said, slipping hastily from the chapel.

Thanks to the darkness, he reached the great portal safely, gliding from column to column in the long shadows which they cast athwart the nave. An old canon suddenly issued from the confessional, came to the side of the countess and closed the iron railing before which the page was marching gravely up and down with the air of a watchman.

A strong light now announced the coming of the count. Accompanied by several friends and by servants bearing torches, he hurried forward, a naked sword in hand. His gloomy eyes seemed to pierce the shadows and to rake even the darkest corners of the cathedral.

“Monseigneur, madame is there,” said the page, going forward to meet him.

The Comte de Saint-Vallier found his wife kneeling on the steps of the alter, the old priest standing beside her and reading his breviary. At that sight the count shook the iron railing violently as if to give vent to his rage.

“What do you want here, with a drawn sword in a church?” asked the priest.

“Father, that is my husband,” said the countess.

The priest took a key from his sleeve, and unlocked the railed door of the chapel. The count, almost in spite of himself, cast a look into the confessional, then he entered the chapel, and seemed to be listening attentively to the sounds in the cathedral.

"Monsieur," said his wife, "you owe many thanks to this venerable canon, who gave me a refuge here."

The count turned pale with anger; he dared not look at his friends, who had come there more to laugh at him than to help him. Then he answered curtly:

"Thank God, father, I shall find some way to repay you."

He took his wife by the arm and, without allowing her to finish her curtsey to the canon, he signed to his servants and left the church without a word to the others who had accompanied him. His silence had something savage and sullen about it. Impatient to reach his home and preoccupied in searching for means to discover the truth, he took his way through the tortuous streets which at that time separated the cathedral from the Chancellerie, a fine building recently erected by the Chancellor Juvenal des Ursins, on the site of an old fortification given by Charles VII. to that faithful servant as a reward for his glorious labors.

The count reached at last the rue du Murier, in which his dwelling, called the hotel de Poitiers, was situated. When his escort of servants had entered the courtyard and the heavy gates were closed, a deep silence fell on the narrow street, where other great seigneurs had their houses, for this new quarter of the town was near to Plessis, the usual residence of the king, to whom the courtiers, if sent for, could go in a moment. The last house in this street was also the last in the town. It belonged to Maitre Cornelius Hoogworst, an old Brabantian merchant, to whom King Louis XI. gave his utmost confidence in those financial transactions which his crafty policy induced him to undertake outside of his own kingdom.

Observing the outline of the houses occupied respectively by Maitre Cornelius and by the Comte de Poitiers, it was easy to believe that the same architect had built them both and destined them for the use of

tyrants. Each was sinister in aspect, resembling a small fortress, and both could be well defended against an angry populace. Their corners were upheld by towers like those which lovers of antiquities remark in towns where the hammer of the iconoclast has not yet prevailed. The bays, which had little depth, gave a great power of resistance to the iron shutters of the windows and doors. The riots and the civil wars so frequent in those tumultuous times were ample justification for these precautions.

As six o'clock was striking from the great tower of the Abbey Saint-Martin, the lover of the hapless countess passed in front of the hotel de Poitiers and paused for a moment to listen to the sounds made in the lower hall by the servants of the count, who were supping. Casting a glance at the window of the room where he supposed his love to be, he continued his way to the adjoining house. All along his way, the young man had heard the joyous uproar of many feasts given throughout the town in honor of the day. The ill-joined shutters sent out streaks of light, the chimneys smoked, and the comforting odor of roasted meats pervaded the town. After the conclusion of the church services, the inhabitants were regaling themselves, with murmurs of satisfaction which fancy can picture better than words can paint. But at this particular spot a deep silence reigned, because in these two houses lived two passions which never rejoiced. Beyond them stretched the silent country. Beneath the shadow of the steeples of Saint-Martin, these two mute dwellings, separated from the others in the same street and standing at the crooked end of it, seemed afflicted with leprosy. The building opposite to them, the home of the criminals of the State, was also under a ban. A young man would be readily impressed by this sudden contrast. About to fling himself into an enterprise that was horribly hazardous, it is no wonder that the daring young seigneur stopped short before the house of the silversmith, and called to mind the many tales furnished by the life of Maitre Cornelius,—tales which caused such singular horror to the countess. At this period a man of war, and even a lover, trembled at the mere word "magic." Few indeed were the minds and the imaginations which disbelieved in occult facts and tales of

the marvellous. The lover of the Comtesse de Saint-Vallier, one of the daughters whom Louis XI. had in Dauphine by Madame de Sassenage, however bold he might be in other respects, was likely to think twice before he finally entered the house of a so-called sorcerer.

The history of Maitre Cornelius Hoogworst will fully explain the security which the silversmith inspired in the Comte de Saint-Vallier, the terror of the countess, and the hesitation that now took possession of the lover. But, in order to make the readers of this nineteenth century understand how such commonplace events could be turned into anything supernatural, and to make them share the alarms of that olden time, it is necessary to interrupt the course of this narrative and cast a rapid glance on the preceding life and adventures of Maitre Cornelius.

CHAPTER II. THE TORCONNIER

Cornelius Hoogworst, one of the richest merchants in Ghent, having drawn upon himself the enmity of Charles, Duke of Burgundy, found refuge and protection at the court of Louis XI. The king was conscious of the advantages he could gain from a man connected with all the principal commercial houses of Flanders, Venice, and the Levant; he naturalized, ennobled, and flattered Maitre Cornelius; all of which was rarely done by Louis XI. The monarch pleased the Fleming as much as the Fleming pleased the monarch. Wily, distrustful, and miserly; equally politic, equally learned; superior, both of them, to their epoch; understanding each other marvellously; they discarded and resumed with equal facility, the one his conscience, the other his religion; they loved the same Virgin, one by conviction, the other by policy; in short, if we may believe the jealous tales of Olivier de Daim and Tristan, the king went to the house of the Fleming for those diversions with which King Louis XI. diverted himself. History has taken care to transmit to our knowledge the licentious tastes of a monarch who was not averse to debauchery. The old Fleming found, no doubt, both pleasure and profit in lending himself to the capricious pleasures of his royal client.

Cornelius had now lived nine years in the city of Tours. During those years extraordinary events had happened in his house, which had made him the object of general execration. On his first arrival, he had spent considerable sums in order to put the treasures he brought with him in safety. The strange inventions made for him secretly by the locksmiths of the town, the curious precautions taken in bringing those locksmiths to his house in a way to compel their silence, were long the subject of countless tales which enlivened the evening gatherings of the city. These singular artifices on the part of the old man made every one suppose him the possessor of Oriental riches. Consequently the *narrators* of that

region—the home of the tale in France—built rooms full of gold and precious tones in the Fleming's house, not omitting to attribute all this fabulous wealth to compacts with Magic.

Maitre Cornelius had brought with him from Ghent two Flemish valets, an old woman, and a young apprentice; the latter, a youth with a gentle, pleasing face, served him as secretary, cashier, factotum, and courier. During the first year of his settlement in Tours, a robbery of considerable amount took place in his house, and judicial inquiry showed that the crime must have been committed by one of its inmates. The old miser had his two valets and the secretary put in prison. The young man was feeble and he died under the sufferings of the "question" protesting his innocence. The valets confessed the crime to escape torture; but when the judge required them to say where the stolen property could be found, they kept silence, were again put to the torture, judged, condemned, and hanged. On their way to the scaffold they declared themselves innocent, according to the custom of all persons about to be executed.

The city of Tours talked much of this singular affair; but the criminals were Flemish, and the interest felt in their unhappy fate soon evaporated. In those days wars and seditions furnished endless excitements, and the drama of each day eclipsed that of the night before. More grieved by the loss he had met with than by the death of his three servants, Maitre Cornelius lived alone in his house with the old Flemish woman, his sister. He obtained permission from the king to use state couriers for his private affairs, sold his mules to a muleteer of the neighborhood, and lived from that moment in the deepest solitude, seeing no one but the king, doing his business by means of Jews, who, shrewd calculators, served him well in order to gain his all-powerful protection.

Some time after this affair, the king himself procured for his old "torconnier" a young orphan in whom he took an interest. Louis XI. called Maitre Cornelius familiarly by that obsolete term, which, under the reign of Saint-Louis, meant a usurer, a collector of imposts, a man

who pressed others by violent means. The epithet, “tortionnaire,” which remains to this day in our legal phraseology, explains the old word torconnier, which we often find spelt “tortionneur.” The poor young orphan devoted himself carefully to the affairs of the old Fleming, pleased him much, and was soon high in his good graces. During a winter’s night, certain diamonds deposited with Maitre Cornelius by the King of England as security for a sum of a hundred thousand crowns were stolen, and suspicion, of course, fell on the orphan. Louis XI. was all the more severe because he had answered for the youth’s fidelity. After a very brief and summary examination by the grand provost, the unfortunate secretary was hanged. After that no one dared for a long time to learn the arts of banking and exchange from Maitre Cornelius.

In course of time, however, two young men of the town, Touraineans, —men of honor, and eager to make their fortunes,—took service with the silversmith. Robberies coincided with the admission of the two young men into the house. The circumstances of these crimes, the manner in which they were perpetrated, showed plainly that the robbers had secret communication with its inmates. Become by this time more than ever suspicious and vindictive, the old Fleming laid the matter before Louis XI., who placed it in the hands of his grand provost. A trial was promptly had and promptly ended. The inhabitants of Tours blamed Tristan l’Hermite secretly for unseemly haste. Guilty or not guilty, the young Touraineans were looked upon as victims, and Cornelius as an executioner. The two families thus thrown into mourning were much respected; their complaints obtained a hearing, and little by little it came to be believed that all the victims whom the king’s silversmith had sent to the scaffold were innocent. Some persons declared that the cruel miser imitated the king, and sought to put terror and gibbets between himself and his fellow-men; others said that he had never been robbed at all,—that these melancholy executions were the result of cool calculations, and that their real object was to relieve him of all fear for his treasure.

The first effect of these rumors was to isolate Maitre Cornelius. The Touraineans treated him like a leper, called him the “tortionnaire,” and named his house Malemaison. If the Fleming had found strangers to the town bold enough to enter it, the inhabitants would have warned them against doing so. The most favorable opinion of Maitre Cornelius was that of persons who thought him merely baneful. Some he inspired with instinctive terror; others he impressed with the deep respect that most men feel for limitless power and money, while to a few he certainly possessed the attraction of mystery. His way of life, his countenance, and the favor of the king, justified all the tales of which he had now become the subject.

Cornelius travelled much in foreign lands after the death of his persecutor, the Duke of Burgundy; and during his absence the king caused his premises to be guarded by a detachment of his own Scottish guard. Such royal solicitude made the courtiers believe that the old miser had bequeathed his property to Louis XI. When at home, the torconnier went out but little; but the lords of the court paid him frequent visits. He lent them money rather liberally, though capricious in his manner of doing so. On certain days he refused to give them a penny; the next day he would offer them large sums,—always at high interest and on good security. A good Catholic, he went regularly to the services, always attending the earliest mass at Saint-Martin; and as he had purchased there, as elsewhere, a chapel in perpetuity, he was separated even in church from other Christians. A popular proverb of that day, long remembered in Tours, was the saying: “You passed in front of the Fleming; ill-luck will happen to you.” Passing in front of the Fleming explained all sudden pains and evils, involuntary sadness, ill-turns of fortune among the Touraineans. Even at court most persons attributed to Cornelius that fatal influence which Italian, Spanish, and Asiatic superstition has called the “evil eye.” Without the terrible power of Louis XI., which was stretched like a mantle over that house, the populace, on the slightest opportunity, would have demolished La Malemaison, that “evil house” in the rue du Murier. And yet Cornelius

had been the first to plant mulberries in Tours, and the Touraineans at that time regarded him as their good genius. Who shall reckon on popular favor!

A few seigneurs having met Maitre Cornelius on his journeys out of France were surprised at his friendliness and good-humor. At Tours he was gloomy and absorbed, yet always he returned there. Some inexplicable power brought him back to his dismal house in the rue du Murier. Like a snail, whose life is so firmly attached to its shell, he admitted to the king that he was never at ease except under the bolts and behind the vermiculated stones of his little bastille; yet he knew very well that whenever Louis XI. died, the place would be the most dangerous spot on earth for him.

“The devil is amusing himself at the expense of our crony, the torconnier,” said Louis XI. to his barber, a few days before the festival of All-Saints. “He says he has been robbed again, but he can’t hang anybody this time unless he hangs himself. The old vagabond came and asked me if, by chance, I had carried off a string of rubies he wanted to sell me. ‘Pasques-Dieu! I don’t steal what I can take,’ I said to him.”

“Was he frightened?” asked the barber.

“Misers are afraid of only one thing,” replied the king. “My crony the torconnier knows very well that I shall not plunder him unless for good reason; otherwise I should be unjust, and I have never done anything but what is just and necessary.”

“And yet that old brigand overcharges you,” said the barber.

“You wish he did, don’t you?” replied the king, with the malicious look at his barber.

“Ventre-Mahom, sire, the inheritance would be a fine one between you and the devil!”

“There, there!” said the king, “don’t put bad ideas into my head. My crony is a more faithful man than those whose fortunes I have made—perhaps because he owes me nothing.”

For the last two years Maitre Cornelius had lived entirely alone with his aged sister, who was thought a witch. A tailor in the neighborhood declared that he had often seen her at night, on the roof of the house, waiting for the hour of the witches' sabbath. This fact seemed the more extraordinary because it was known to be the miser's custom to lock up his sister at night in a bedroom with iron-barred windows.

As he grew older, Cornelius, constantly robbed, and always fearful of being duped by men, came to hate mankind, with the one exception of the king, whom he greatly respected. He fell into extreme misanthropy, but, like most misers, his passion for gold, the assimilation, as it were, of that metal with his own substance, became closer and closer, and age intensified it. His sister herself excited his suspicions, though she was perhaps more miserly, more rapacious than her brother whom she actually surpassed in penurious inventions. Their daily existence had something mysterious and problematical about it. The old woman rarely took bread from the baker; she appeared so seldom in the market, that the least credulous of the townspeople ended by attributing to these strange beings the knowledge of some secret for the maintenance of life. Those who dabbled in alchemy declared that Maitre Cornelius had the power of making gold. Men of science averred that he had found the Universal Panacea. According to many of the country-people to whom the townsfolk talked of him, Cornelius was a chimerical being, and many of them came into the town to look at his house out of mere curiosity.

The young seigneur whom we left in front of that house looked about him, first at the hotel de Poitiers, the home of his mistress, and then at the evil house. The moonbeams were creeping round their angles, and tinting with a mixture of light and shade the hollows and reliefs of the carvings. The caprices of this white light gave a sinister expression to both edifices; it seemed as if Nature herself encouraged the superstitions that hung about the miser's dwelling. The young man called to mind the many traditions which made Cornelius a personage both curious and formidable. Though quite decided through the violence of his love to enter that house, and stay there long enough to accomplish his design,

he hesitated to take the final step, all the while aware that he should certainly take it. But where is the man who, in a crisis of his life, does not willingly listen to presentiments as he hangs above the precipice? A lover worthy of being loved, the young man feared to die before he had been received for love's sake by the countess.

This mental deliberation was so painfully interesting that he did not feel the cold wind as it whistled round the corner of the building, and chilled his legs. On entering that house, he must lay aside his name, as already he had laid aside the handsome garments of nobility. In case of mishap, he could not claim the privileges of his rank nor the protection of his friends without bringing hopeless ruin on the Comtesse de Saint-Vallier. If her husband suspected the nocturnal visit of a lover, he was capable of roasting her alive in an iron cage, or of killing her by degrees in the dungeons of a fortified castle. Looking down at the shabby clothing in which he had disguised himself, the young nobleman felt ashamed. His black leather belt, his stout shoes, his ribbed socks, his linsey-woolsey breeches, and his gray woollen doublet made him look like the clerk of some poverty-stricken justice. To a noble of the fifteenth century it was like death itself to play the part of a beggarly burgher, and renounce the privileges of his rank. But—to climb the roof of the house where his mistress wept; to descend the chimney, or creep along from gutter to gutter to the window of her room; to risk his life to kneel beside her on a silken cushion before a glowing fire, during the sleep of a dangerous husband, whose snores would double their joy; to defy both heaven and earth in snatching the boldest of all kisses; to say no word that would not lead to death or at least to sanguinary combat if overheard,—all these voluptuous images and romantic dangers decided the young man. However slight might be the guerdon of his enterprise, could he only kiss once more the hand of his lady, he still resolved to venture all, impelled by the chivalrous and passionate spirit of those days. He never supposed for a moment that the countess would refuse him the soft happiness of love in the midst of such mortal danger. The adventure was too perilous, too impossible not to be attempted and carried out.

Suddenly all the bells in the town rang out the curfew,—a custom fallen elsewhere into desuetude, but still observed in the provinces, where venerable habits are abolished slowly. Though the lights were not put out, the watchmen of each quarter stretched the chains across the streets. Many doors were locked; the steps of a few belated burghers, attended by their servants, armed to the teeth and bearing lanterns, echoed in the distance. Soon the town, garroted as it were, seemed to be asleep, and safe from robbers and evil-doers, except through the roofs. In those days the roofs of houses were much frequented after dark. The streets were so narrow in the provincial towns, and even in Paris, that robbers could jump from the roofs on one side to those on the other. This perilous occupation was long the amusement of King Charles IX. in his youth, if we may believe the memoirs of his day.

Fearing to present himself too late to the old silversmith, the young nobleman now went up to the door of the Malemaison intending to knock, when, on looking at it, his attention was excited by a sort of vision, which the writers of those days would have called “cornue,”—perhaps with reference to horns and hoofs. He rubbed his eyes to clear his sight, and a thousand diverse sentiments passed through his mind at the spectacle before him. On each side of the door was a face framed in a species of loophole. At first he took these two faces for grotesque masks carved in stone, so angular, distorted, projecting, motionless, discolored were they; but the cold air and the moonlight presently enabled him to distinguish the faint white mist which living breath sent from two purplish noses; then he saw in each hollow face, beneath the shadow of the eyebrows, two eyes of porcelain blue casting clear fire, like those of a wolf crouching in the brushwood as it hears the baying of the hounds. The uneasy gleam of those eyes was turned on him so fixedly that, after receiving it for fully a minute, during which he examined the singular sight, he felt like a bird at which a setter points; a feverish tumult rose in his soul, but he quickly repressed it. The two faces, strained and suspicious, were doubtless those of Cornelius and his sister.

The young man feigned to be looking about him to see where he was, and whether this were the house named on a card which he drew from his pocket and pretended to read in the moonlight; then he walked straight to the door and struck three blows upon it, which echoed within the house as if it were the entrance to a cave. A faint light crept beneath the threshold, and an eye appeared at a small and very strong iron grating.

"Who is there?"

"A friend, sent by Oosterlinck, of Brussels."

"What do you want?"

"To enter."

"Your name?"

"Philippe Goulenoire."

"Have you brought credentials?"

"Here they are."

"Pass them through the box."

"Where is it?"

"To your left."

Philippe Goulenoire put the letter through the slit of an iron box above which was a loophole.

"The devil!" thought he, "plainly the king comes here, as they say he does; he couldn't take more precautions at Plessis."

He waited for more than a quarter of an hour in the street. After that lapse of time, he heard Cornelius saying to his sister, "Close the traps of the door."

A clinking of chains resounded from within. Philippe heard the bolts run, the locks creak, and presently a small low door, iron-bound, opened to the slightest distance through which a man could pass. At the risk of tearing off his clothing, Philippe squeezed himself rather than walked into La Malemaison. A toothless old woman with a hatchet face, the eyebrows projecting like the handles of a cauldron, the nose and chin so

near together that a nut could scarcely pass between them,—a pallid, haggard creature, her hollow temples composed apparently of only bones and nerves,—guided the “soi-disant” foreigner silently into a lower room, while Cornelius followed prudently behind him.

“Sit there,” she said to Philippe, showing him a three-legged stool placed at the corner of a carved stone fireplace, where there was no fire.

On the other side of the chimney-piece was a walnut table with twisted legs, on which was an egg in a plate and ten or a dozen little bread-sops, hard and dry and cut with studied parsimony. Two stools placed beside the table, on one of which the old woman sat down, showed that the miserly pair were eating their suppers. Cornelius went to the door and pushed two iron shutters into their place, closing, no doubt, the loopholes through which they had been gazing into the street; then he returned to his seat. Philippe Goulenoire (so called) next beheld the brother and sister dipping their sops into the egg in turn, and with the utmost gravity and the same precision with which soldiers dip their spoons in regular rotation into the mess-pot. This performance was done in silence. But as he ate, Cornelius examined the false apprentice with as much care and scrutiny as if he were weighing an old coin.

Philippe, feeling that an icy mantle had descended on his shoulders, was tempted to look about him; but, with the circumspection dictated by all amorous enterprises, he was careful not to glance, even furtively, at the walls; for he fully understood that if Cornelius detected him, he would not allow so inquisitive a person to remain in his house. He contented himself, therefore, by looking first at the egg and then at the old woman, occasionally contemplating his future master.

Louis XI.‘s silversmith resembled that monarch. He had even acquired the same gestures, as often happens where persons dwell together in a sort of intimacy. The thick eyebrows of the Fleming almost covered his eyes; but by raising them a little he could flash out a lucid, penetrating, powerful glance, the glance of men habituated to silence, and to whom the phenomenon of the concentration of inward forces has become familiar. His thin lips, vertically wrinkled, gave him an air of

indescribable craftiness. The lower part of his face bore a vague resemblance to the muzzle of a fox, but his lofty, projecting forehead, with many lines, showed great and splendid qualities and a nobility of soul, the springs of which had been lowered by experience until the cruel teachings of life had driven it back into the farthest recesses of this most singular human being. He was certainly not an ordinary miser; and his passion covered, no doubt, extreme enjoyments and secret conceptions.

"What is the present rate of Venetian sequins?" he said abruptly to his future apprentice.

"Three-quarters at Brussels; one in Ghent."

"What is the freight on the Scheldt?"

"Three sous parisis."

"Any news at Ghent?"

"The brother of Lieven d'Herde is ruined."

"Ah!"

After giving vent to that exclamation, the old man covered his knee with the skirt of his dalmatian, a species of robe made of black velvet, open in front, with large sleeves and no collar, the sumptuous material being defaced and shiny. These remains of a magnificent costume, formerly worn by him as president of the tribunal of the Parchons, functions which had won him the enmity of the Duke of Burgundy, was now a mere rag.

Philippe was not cold; he perspired in his harness, dreading further questions. Until then the brief information obtained that morning from a Jew whose life he had formerly saved, had sufficed him, thanks to his good memory and the perfect knowledge the Jew possessed of the manners and habits of Maitre Cornelius. But the young man who, in the first flush of his enterprise, had feared nothing was beginning to perceive the difficulties it presented. The solemn gravity of the terrible Fleming reacted upon him. He felt himself under lock and key, and remembered how the grand provost Tristan and his rope were at the orders of Maitre Cornelius.

“Have you supped?” asked the silversmith, in a tone which signified, “You are not to sup.”

The old maid trembled in spite of her brother’s tone; she looked at the new inmate as if to gauge the capacity of the stomach she might have to fill, and said with a specious smile:—

“You have not stolen your name; your hair and moustache are as black as the devil’s tail.”

“I have supped,” he said.

“Well then,” replied the miser, “you can come back and see me to-morrow. I have done without an apprentice for some years. Besides, I wish to sleep upon the matter.”

“Hey! by Saint-Bavon, monsieur, I am a Fleming; I don’t know a soul in this place; the chains are up in the streets, and I shall be put in prison. However,” he added, frightened at the eagerness he was showing in his words, “if it is your good pleasure, of course I will go.”

The oath seemed to affect the old man singularly.

“Come, come, by Saint-Bavon indeed, you shall sleep here.”

“But—” said his sister, alarmed.

“Silence,” replied Cornelius. “In his letter Oosterlinck tells me he will answer for this young man. You know,” he whispered in his sister’s ear, “we have a hundred thousand francs belonging to Oosterlinck? That’s a hostage, hey!”

“And suppose he steals those Bavarian jewels? Tiens, he looks more like a thief than a Fleming.”

“Hush!” exclaimed the old man, listening attentively to some sound.

Both misers listened. A moment after the “Hush!” uttered by Cornelius, a noise produced by the steps of several men echoed in the distance on the other side of the moat of the town.

“It is the Plessis guard on their rounds,” said the sister.

“Give me the key of the apprentice’s room,” said Cornelius.

The old woman made a gesture as if to take the lamp.

“Do you mean to leave us alone, without light?” cried Cornelius, in a meaning tone of voice. “At your age can’t you see in the dark? It isn’t difficult to find a key.”

The sister understood the meaning hidden beneath these words and left the room. Looking at this singular creature as she walked towards the door, Philippe Goulenoire was able to hide from Cornelius the glance which he hastily cast about the room. It was wainscoted in oak to the chair-strip, and the walls above were hung with yellow leather stamped with black arabesques; but what struck the young man most was a match-lock pistol with its formidable trigger. This new and terrible weapon lay close to Cornelius.

“How do you expect to earn your living with me?” said the latter.

“I have but little money,” replied Philippe, “but I know good tricks in business. If you will pay me a sou on every mark I earn for you, that will satisfy me.”

“A sou! a sou!” echoed the miser; “why, that’s a good deal!”

At this moment the old sibyl returned with the key.

“Come,” said Cornelius to Philippe.

The pair went out beneath the portico and mounted a spiral stone staircase, the round well of which rose through a high turret, beside the hall in which they had been sitting. At the first floor up the young man paused.

“No, no,” said Cornelius. “The devil! this nook is the place where the king takes his ease.”

The architect had constructed the room given to the apprentice under the pointed roof of the tower in which the staircase wound. It was a little room, all of stone, cold and without ornament of any kind. The tower stood in the middle of the facade on the courtyard, which, like the courtyards of all provincial houses, was narrow and dark. At the farther end, through an iron railing, could be seen a wretched garden in which nothing grew but the mulberries which Cornelius had introduced. The young nobleman took note of all this through the loopholes on the spiral

staircase, the moon casting, fortunately, a brilliant light. A cot, a stool, a mismatched pitcher and basin formed the entire furniture of the room. The light could enter only through square openings, placed at intervals in the outside wall of the tower, according, no doubt, to the exterior ornamentation.

"Here is your lodging," said Cornelius; "it is plain and solid and contains all that is needed for sleep. Good night! Do not leave this room as *the others* did."

After giving his apprentice a last look full of many meanings, Cornelius double-locked the door, took away the key and descended the staircase, leaving the young nobleman as much befooled as a bell-founder when on opening his mould he finds nothing. Alone, without light, seated on a stool, in a little garret from which so many of his predecessors had gone to the scaffold, the young fellow felt like a wild beast caught in a trap. He jumped upon the stool and raised himself to his full height in order to reach one of the little openings through which a faint light shone. Thence he saw the Loire, the beautiful slopes of Saint-Cyr, the gloomy marvels of Plessis, where lights were gleaming in the deep recesses of a few windows. Far in the distance lay the beautiful meadows of Touraine and the silvery stream of her river. Every point of this lovely nature had, at that moment, a mysterious grace; the windows, the waters, the roofs of the houses shone like diamonds in the trembling light of the moon. The soul of the young seigneur could not repress a sad and tender emotion.

"Suppose it is my last farewell!" he said to himself.

He stood there, feeling already the terrible emotions his adventure offered him, and yielding to the fears of a prisoner who, nevertheless, retains some glimmer of hope. His mistress illumined each difficulty. To him she was no longer a woman, but a supernatural being seen through the incense of his desires. A feeble cry, which he fancied came from the hotel de Poitiers, restored him to himself and to a sense of his true situation. Throwing himself on his pallet to reflect on his course, he heard a slight movement which echoed faintly from the spiral staircase.

He listened attentively, and the whispered words, “He has gone to bed,” said by the old woman, reached his ear. By an accident unknown probably to the architect, the slightest noise on the staircase sounded in the room of the apprentices, so that Philippe did not lose a single movement of the miser and his sister who were watching him. He undressed, lay down, pretended to sleep, and employed the time during which the pair remained on the staircase, in seeking means to get from his prison to the hotel de Poitiers.

About ten o’clock Cornelius and his sister, convinced that their new inmate was sleeping, retired to their rooms. The young man studied carefully the sounds they made in doing so, and thought he could recognize the position of their apartments; they must, he believed, occupy the whole second floor. Like all the houses of that period, this floor was next below the roof, from which its windows projected, adorned with spandrel tops that were richly sculptured. The roof itself was edged with a sort of balustrade, concealing the gutters for the rain water which gargoyles in the form of crocodile’s heads discharged into the street. The young seigneur, after studying this topography as carefully as a cat, believed he could make his way from the tower to the roof, and thence to Madame de Vallier’s by the gutters and the help of a gargoyle. But he did not count on the narrowness of the loopholes of the tower; it was impossible to pass through them. He then resolved to get out upon the roof of the house through the window of the staircase on the second floor. To accomplish this daring project he must leave his room, and Cornelius had carried off the key.

By way of precaution, the young man had brought with him, concealed under his clothes, one of those poignards formerly used to give the “coup de grace” in a duel when the vanquished adversary begged the victor to despatch him. This horrible weapon had on one side a blade sharpened like a razor, and on the other a blade that was toothed like a saw, but toothed in the reverse direction from that by which it would enter the body. The young man determined to use this latter blade to saw through the wood around the lock. Happily for him the staple of the lock was put

on to the outside of the door by four stout screws. By the help of his dagger he managed, not without great difficulty, to unscrew and remove it altogether, carefully laying it aside and the four screws with it. By midnight he was free, and he went down the stairs without his shoes to reconnoitre the localities.

He was not a little astonished to find a door wide open which led down a corridor to several chambers, at the end of which corridor was a window opening on a depression caused by the junction of the roofs of the hotel de Poitiers and that of the Malemaison which met there. Nothing could express his joy, unless it be the vow which he instantly made to the Blessed Virgin to found a mass in her honor in the celebrated parish church of the Escrignoles at Tours. After examining the tall broad chimneys of the hotel de Poitiers he returned upon his steps to fetch his dagger, when to his horror, he beheld a vivid light on the staircase and saw Maitre Cornelius himself in his dalmatian, carrying a lamp, his eyes open to their fullest extent and fixed upon the corridor, at the entrance of which he stood like a spectre.

“If I open the window and jump upon the roofs, he will hear me,” thought the young man.

The terrible old miser advanced, like the hour of death to a criminal. In this extremity Philippe, instigated by love, recovered his presence of mind; he slipped into a doorway, pressing himself back into the angle of it, and awaited the old man. When Cornelius, holding his lamp in advance of him, came into line with the current of air which the young man could send from his lungs, the lamp was blown out. Cornelius muttered vague words and swore a Dutch oath; but he turned and retraced his steps. The young man then rushed to his room, caught up his dagger and returned to the blessed window, opened it softly and jumped upon the roof.

Once at liberty under the open sky, he felt weak, so happy was he. Perhaps the extreme agitation of his danger of the boldness of the enterprise caused his emotion; victory is often as perilous as battle. He

leaned against the balustrade, quivering with joy and saying to himself: —

"By which chimney can I get to her?"

He looked at them all. With the instinct given by love, he went to all and felt them to discover in which there had been a fire. Having made up his mind on that point, the daring young fellow stuck his dagger securely in a joint between two stones, fastened a silken ladder to it, threw the ladder down the chimney and risked himself upon it, trusting to his good blade, and to the chance of not having mistaken his mistress's room. He knew not whether Saint-Vallier was asleep or awake, but one thing he was resolved upon, he would hold the countess in his arms if it cost the life of two men.

Presently his feet gently touched the warm embers; he bent more gently still and saw the countess seated in an armchair; and she saw him. Pale with joy and palpitating, the timid creature showed him, by the light of the lamp, Saint-Vallier lying in a bed about ten feet from her. We may well believe their burning silent kisses echoed only in their hearts.

CHAPTER III. THE ROBBERY OF THE JEWELS OF THE DUKE OF BAVARIA

The next day, about nine in the morning, as Louis XI. was leaving his chapel after hearing mass, he found Maitre Cornelius on his path.

“Good luck to you, crony,” he said, shoving up his cap in his hasty way.

“Sire, I would willingly pay a thousand gold crowns if I could have a moment’s talk with you; I have found the thief who stole the rubies and all the jewels of the Duke of—”

“Let us hear about that,” said Louis XI., going out into the courtyard of Plessis, followed by his silversmith, Coyctier his physician, Olivier de Daim, and the captain of his Scottish guard. “Tell me about it. Another man to hang for you! Hola, Tristan!”

The grand provost, who was walking up and down the courtyard, came with slow steps, like a dog who exhibits his fidelity. The group paused under a tree. The king sat down on a bench and the courtiers made a circle about him.

“Sire, a man who pretended to be a Fleming has got the better of me —” began Cornelius.

“He must be crafty indeed, that fellow!” exclaimed Louis, wagging his head.

“Oh, yes!” replied the silversmith, bitterly. “But methinks he’d have snared you yourself. How could I distrust a beggar recommended to me by Oosterlinck, one hundred thousand francs of whose money I hold in my hands. I will wager the Jew’s letter and seal were forged! In short, sire, I found myself this morning robbed of those jewels you admired so much. They have been ravished from me, sire! To steal the jewels of the

Elector of Bavaria! those scoundrels respect nothing! they'll steal your kingdom if you don't take care. As soon as I missed the jewels I went up to the room of that apprentice, who is, assuredly, a past-master in thieving. This time we don't lack proof. He had forced the lock of his door. But when he got back to his room, the moon was down and he couldn't find all the screws. Happily, I felt one under my feet when I entered the room. He was sound asleep, the beggar, tired out. Just fancy, gentlemen, he got down into my strong-room by the chimney. To-morrow, or to-night, rather, I'll roast him alive. He had a silk ladder, and his clothes were covered with marks of his clambering over the roof and down the chimney. He meant to stay with me, and ruin me, night after night, the bold wretch! But where are the jewels? The country-folks coming into town early saw him on the roof. He must have had accomplices, who waited for him by that embankment you have been making. Ah, sire, you are the accomplice of fellows who come in boats; crack! they get off with everything, and leave no traces! But we hold this fellow as a key, the bold scoundrel! ah! a fine morsel he'll be for the gallows. With a little bit of *questioning* beforehand, we shall know all. Why, the glory of your reign is concerned in it! there ought not to be robbers in the land under so great a king."

The king was not listening. He had fallen into one of those gloomy meditations which became so frequent during the last years of his life. A deep silence reigned.

"This is your business," he said at length to Tristan; "take you hold of it."

He rose, walked a few steps away, and the courtiers left him alone. Presently he saw Cornelius, mounted on his mule, riding away in company with the grand provost.

"Where are those thousand gold crowns?" he called to him.

"Ah! sire, you are too great a king! there is no sum that can pay for your justice."

Louis XI. smiled. The courtiers envied the frank speech and privileges of the old silversmith, who promptly disappeared down the avenue of young mulberries which led from Tours to Plessis.

Exhausted with fatigue, the young seigneur had indeed fallen soundly asleep. Returning from his gallant adventure, he no longer felt the same ardor and courage to defend himself against distant or imaginary dangers with which he had rushed into the perils of the night. He had even postponed till the morrow the cleaning of his soiled garments; a great blunder, in which all else conspired. It was true that, lacking the moonlight, he had missed finding all the screws of that cursed lock; he had no patience to look for them. With the “laisser-aller” of a tired man, he trusted to his luck, which had so far served him well. He did, however, make a sort of compact with himself to awake at daybreak, but the events of the day and the agitations of the night did not allow him to keep faith with himself. Happiness is forgetful. Cornelius no longer seemed formidable to the young man when he threw himself on the pallet where so many poor wretches had wakened to their doom; and this light-hearted heedlessness proved his ruin. While the king’s silversmith rode back from Plessis, accompanied by the grand provost and his redoubtable archers. The false Goulenoire was being watched by the old sister, seated on the corkscrew staircase oblivious of the cold, and knitting socks for Cornelius.

The young man continued to dream of the secret delights of that charming night, ignorant of the danger that was galloping towards him. He saw himself on a cushion at the feet of the countess, his head on her knees in the ardor of his love; he listened to the story of her persecutions and the details of the count’s tyranny; he grew pitiful over the poor lady, who was, in truth, the best-loved natural daughter of Louis XI. He promised her to go on the morrow and reveal her wrongs to that terrible father; everything, he assured her, should be settled as they wished, the marriage broken off, the husband banished,—and all this within reach of that husband’s sword, of which they might both be the victims if the slightest noise awakened him. But in the young man’s dream the gleam

of the lamp, the flame of their eyes, the colors of the stuffs and the tapestries were more vivid, more of love was in the air, more fire about them, than there had been in the actual scene. The Marie of his sleep resisted far less than the living Marie those adoring looks, those tender entreaties, those adroit silences, those voluptuous solicitations, those false generosities, which render the first moments of a passion so completely ardent, and shed into the soul a fresh delirium at each new step in love.

Following the amorous jurisprudence of the period, Marie de Saint-Vallier granted to her lover all the superficial rights of the tender passion. She willingly allowed him to kiss her foot, her robe, her hands, her throat; she avowed her love, she accepted the devotion and life of her lover; she permitted him to die for her; she yielded to an intoxication which the sternness of her semi-chastity increased; but farther than that she would not go; and she made her deliverance the price of the highest rewards of his love. In those days, in order to dissolve a marriage it was necessary to go to Rome; to obtain the help of certain cardinals, and to appear before the sovereign pontiff in person armed with the approval of the king. Marie was firm in maintaining her liberty to love, that she might sacrifice it to him later. Nearly every woman in those days had sufficient power to establish her empire over the heart of a man in a way to make that passion the history of his whole life, the spring and principle of his highest resolutions. Women were a power in France; they were so many sovereigns; they had forms of noble pride; their lovers belonged to them far more than they gave themselves to their lovers; often their love cost blood, and to be their lover it was necessary to incur great dangers. But the Marie of his dream made small defence against the young seigneur's ardent entreaties. Which of the two was the reality? Did the false apprentice in his dream see the true woman? Had he seen in the hotel de Poitiers a lady masked in virtue? The question is difficult to decide; and the honor of women demands that it be left, as it were, in litigation.

At the moment when the Marie of the dream may have been about to forget her high dignity as mistress, the lover felt himself seized by an iron hand, and the sour voice of the grand provost said to him:—

"Come, midnight Christian, who seeks God on the roofs, wake up!"

The young man saw the black face of Tristan l'Hermite above him, and recognized his sardonic smile; then, on the steps of the corkscrew staircase, he saw Cornelius, his sister, and behind them the provost guard. At that sight, and observing the diabolical faces expressing either hatred or curiosity of persons whose business it was to hang others, the so-called Philippe Goulenoire sat up on his pallet and rubbed his eyes.

"Mort-Dieu!" he cried, seizing his dagger, which was under the pillow. "Now is the time to play our knives."

"Ho, ho!" cried Tristan, "that's the speech of a noble. Methinks I see Georges d'Estouteville, the nephew of the grand master of the archers."

Hearing his real name uttered by Tristan, young d'Estouteville thought less of himself than of the dangers his recognition would bring upon his unfortunate mistress. To avert suspicion he cried out:—

"Ventre-Mahom! help, help to me, comrades!"

After that outcry, made by a man who was really in despair, the young courtier gave a bound, dagger in hand, and reached the landing. But the myrmidons of the grand provost were accustomed to such proceedings. When Georges d'Estouteville reached the stairs they seized him dexterously, not surprised by the vigorous thrust he made at them with his dagger, the blade of which fortunately slipped on the corselet of a guard; then, having disarmed him, they bound his hands, and threw him on the pallet before their leader, who stood motionless and thoughtful.

Tristan looked silently at the prisoner's hands, then he said to Cornelius, pointing to them:—

"Those are not the hands of a beggar, nor of an apprentice. He is a noble."

“Say a thief!” cried the torconnier. “My good Tristan, noble or serf, he has ruined me, the villain! I want to see his feet warmed in your pretty boots. He is, I don’t doubt it, the leader of that gang of devils, visible and invisible, who know all my secrets, open my locks, rob me, murder me! They have grown rich out of me, Tristan. Ha! this time we shall get back the treasure, for the fellow has the face of the king of Egypt. I shall recover my dear rubies, and all the sums I have lost; and our worthy king shall have his share in the harvest.”

“Oh, our hiding-places are much more secure than yours!” said Georges, smiling.

“Ha! the damned thief, he confesses!” cried the miser.

The grand provost was engaged in attentively examining Georges d’Estouteville’s clothes and the lock of the door.

“How did you get out those screws?”

Georges kept silence.

“Oh, very good, be silent if you choose. You will soon confess on the holy rack,” said Tristan.

“That’s what I call business!” cried Cornelius.

“Take him off,” said the grand provost to the guards.

Georges d’Estouteville asked permission to dress himself. On a sign from their chief, the men put on his clothing with the clever rapidity of a nurse who profits by the momentary tranquillity of her nursling.

An immense crowd cumbered the rue du Murier. The growls of the populace kept increasing, and seemed the precursors of a riot. From early morning the news of the robbery had spread through the town. On all sides the “apprentice,” said to be young and handsome, had awakened public sympathy, and revived the hatred felt against Cornelius; so that there was not a young man in the town, nor a young woman with a fresh face and pretty feet to exhibit, who was not determined to see the victim. When Georges issued from the house, led by one of the provost’s guard, who, after he had mounted his horse, kept the strong leathern thong that bound the prisoner tightly twisted round

his arm, a horrible uproar arose. Whether the populace merely wished to see this new victim, or whether it intended to rescue him, certain it is that those behind pressed those in front upon the little squad of cavalry posted around the Malemaison. At this moment, Cornelius, aided by his sister, closed the door, and slammed the iron shutters with the violence of panic terror. Tristan, who was not accustomed to respect the populace of those days (inasmuch as they were not yet the sovereign people), cared little for a probable riot.

"Push on! push on!" he said to his men.

At the voice of their leader the archers spurred their horses towards the end of the street. The crowd, seeing one or two of their number knocked down by the horses and trampled on, and some others pressed against the sides of the horses and nearly suffocated, took the wiser course of retreating to their homes.

"Make room for the king's justice!" cried Tristan. "What are you doing here? Do you want to be hanged too? Go home, my friends, go home; your dinner is getting burnt. Hey! my good woman, go and darn your husband's stockings; get back to your needles."

Though such speeches showed that the grand provost was in good humor, they made the most obstreperous fly as if he were flinging the plague upon them.

At the moment when the first movement of the crowd took place, Georges d'Estouteville was stupefied at seeing, at one of the windows of the hotel de Poitiers, his dear Marie de Saint-Vallier, laughing with the count. She was mocking at *him*, poor devoted lover, who was going to his death for her. But perhaps she was only amused at seeing the caps of the populace carried off on the spears of the archers. We must be twenty-three years old, rich in illusions, able to believe in a woman's love, loving ourselves with all the forces of our being, risking our life with delight on the faith of a kiss, and then betrayed, to understand the fury of hatred and despair which took possession of Georges d'Estouteville's heart at the sight of his laughing mistress, from whom he received a cold and indifferent glance. No doubt she had been there some time; she was

leaning from the window with her arms on a cushion; she was at her ease, and her old man seemed content. He, too, was laughing, the cursed hunchback! A few tears escaped the eyes of the young man; but when Marie de Saint-Vallier saw them she turned hastily away. Those tears were suddenly dried, however, when Georges beheld the red and white plumes of the page who was devoted to his interests. The count took no notice of this servitor, who advanced to his mistress on tiptoe. After the page had said a few words in her ear, Marie returned to the window. Escaping for a moment the perpetual watchfulness of her tyrant, she cast one glance upon Georges that was brilliant with the fires of love and hope, seeming to say:—

"I am watching over you."

Had she cried the words aloud, she could not have expressed their meaning more plainly than in that glance, full of a thousand thoughts, in which terror, hope, pleasure, the dangers of their mutual situation all took part. He had passed, in that one moment, from heaven to martyrdom and from martyrdom back to heaven! So then, the brave young seigneur, light-hearted and content, walked gaily to his doom; thinking that the horrors of the "question" were not sufficient payment for the delights of his love.

As Tristan was about leaving the rue du Murier, his people stopped him, seeing an officer of the Scottish guard riding towards them at full speed.

"What is it?" asked the provost.

"Nothing that concerns you," replied the officer, disdainfully. "The king has sent me to fetch the Comte and Comtesse de Saint-Vallier, whom he invites to dinner."

The grand provost had scarcely reached the embankment leading to Plessis, when the count and his wife, both mounted, she on her white mule, he on his horse, and followed by two pages, joined the archers, in order to enter Plessis-lez-Tours in company. All were moving slowly. Georges was on foot, between two guards on horseback, one of whom held him still by the leathern thong. Tristan, the count, and his wife were

naturally in advance; the criminal followed them. Mingling with the archers, the young page questioned them, speaking sometimes to the prisoner, so that he adroitly managed to say to him in a low voice:—

"I jumped the garden wall and took a letter to Plessis from madame to the king. She came near dying when she heard of the accusation against you. Take courage. She is going now to speak to the king about you."

Love had already given strength and wiliness to the countess. Her laughter was part of the heroism which women display in the great crises of life.

In spite of the singular fancy which possessed the author of "Quentin Durward" to place the royal castle of Plessis-lez-Tours upon a height, we must content ourselves by leaving it where it really was, namely on low land, protected on either side by the Cher and the Loire; also by the canal Sainte-Anne, so named by Louis XI. in honor of his beloved daughter, Madame de Beaujeu. By uniting the two rivers between the city of Tours and Plessis this canal not only served as a formidable protection to the castle, but it offered a most precious road to commerce. On the side towards Brehemont, a vast and fertile plain, the park was defended by a moat, the remains of which still show its enormous breadth and depth. At a period when the power of artillery was still in embryo, the position of Plessis, long since chosen by Louis XI. for his favorite retreat, might be considered impregnable. The castle, built of brick and stone, had nothing remarkable about it; but it was surrounded by noble trees, and from its windows could be seen, through vistas cut in the park (plexitium), the finest points of view in the world. No rival mansion rose near this solitary castle, standing in the very centre of the little plain reserved for the king and guarded by four streams of water.

If we may believe tradition, Louis XI. occupied the west wing, and from his chamber he could see, at a glance the course of the Loire, the opposite bank of the river, the pretty valley which the Croisille waters, and part of the slopes of Saint-Cyr. Also, from the windows that opened on the courtyard, he saw the entrance to his fortress and the embankment by which he had connected his favorite residence with the

city of Tours. If Louis XI. had bestowed upon the building of his castle the luxury of architecture which Francois I. displayed afterwards at Chambord, the dwelling of the kings of France would ever have remained in Touraine. It is enough to see this splendid position and its magical effects to be convinced of its superiority over the sites of all other royal residences.

Louis XI., now in the fifty-seventh year of his age, had scarcely more than three years longer to live; already he felt the coming on of death in the attacks of his mortal malady. Delivered from his enemies; on the point of increasing the territory of France by the possessions of the Dukes of Burgundy through the marriage of the Dauphin with Marguerite, heiress of Burgundy (brought about by means of Desquerdes, commander of his troops in Flanders); having established his authority everywhere, and now meditating ameliorations in his kingdom of all kinds, he saw time slipping past him rapidly with no further troubles than those of old age. Deceived by every one, even by the minions about him, experience had intensified his natural distrust. The desire to live became in him the egotism of a king who has incarnated himself in his people; he wished to prolong his life in order to carry out his vast designs.

All that the common-sense of publicists and the genius of revolutions has since introduced of change in the character of monarchy, Louis XI. had thought of and devised. Unity of taxation, equality of subjects before the law (the prince being then the law) were the objects of his bold endeavors. On All-Saints' eve he had gathered together the learned goldsmiths of his kingdom for the purpose of establishing in France a unity of weights and measures, as he had already established the unity of power. Thus, his vast spirit hovered like an eagle over his empire, joining in a singular manner the prudence of a king to the natural idiosyncracies of a man of lofty aims. At no period in our history has the great figure of Monarchy been finer or more poetic. Amazing assemblages of contrasts! a great power in a feeble body; a spirit unbelieving as to all things here below, devoutly believing in the practices of religion; a man struggling

with two powers greater than his own—the present and the future; the future in which he feared eternal punishment, a fear which led him to make so many sacrifices to the Church; the present, namely his life itself, for the saving of which he blindly obeyed Coyctier. This king, who crushed down all about him, was himself crushed down by remorse, and by disease in the midst of the great poem of defiant monarchy in which all power was concentrated. It was once more the gigantic and ever magnificent combat of Man in the highest manifestation of his forces tilting against Nature.

While awaiting his dinner, a repast which was taken in those days between eleven o'clock and mid-day, Louis XI., returning from a short promenade, sat down in a huge tapestried chair near the fireplace in his chamber. Olivier de Daim, and his doctor, Coyctier, looked at each other without a word, standing in the recess of a window and watching their master, who presently seemed asleep. The only sound that was heard were the steps of the two chamberlains on service, the Sire de Montresor, and Jean Dufou, Sire de Montbazon, who were walking up and down the adjoining hall. These two Tourainean seigneurs looked at the captain of the Scottish guard, who was sleeping in his chair, according to his usual custom. The king himself appeared to be dozing. His head had drooped upon his breast; his cap, pulled forward on his forehead, hid his eyes. Thus seated in his high chair, surmounted by the royal crown, he seemed crouched together like a man who had fallen asleep in the midst of some deep meditation.

At this moment Tristan and his cortege crossed the canal by the bridge of Sainte-Anne, about two hundred feet from the entrance to Plessis.

"Who is that?" said the king.

The two courtiers questioned each other with a look of surprise.

"He is dreaming," said Coyctier, in a low voice.

"Pasques-Dieu!" cried Louis XI., "do you think me mad? People are crossing the bridge. It is true I am near the chimney, and I may hear sounds more easily than you. That effect of nature might be utilized," he added thoughtfully.

“What a man!” said de Daim.

Louis XI. rose and went toward one of the windows that looked on the town. He saw the grand provost, and exclaimed:—

“Ha, ha! here’s my crony and his thief. And here comes my little Marie de Saint-Vallier; I’d forgotten all about it. Olivier,” he said, addressing the barber, “go and tell Monsieur de Montbazon to serve some good Bourgeuil wine at dinner, and see that the cook doesn’t forget the lampreys; Madame le comtesse likes both those things. Can I eat lampreys?” he added, after a pause, looking anxiously at Coyctier.

For all answer the physician began to examine his master’s face. The two men were a picture in themselves.

History and romance-writers have consecrated the brown camlet coat, and the breeches of the same stuff, worn by Louis XI. His cap, decorated with leaden medallions, and his collar of the order of Saint-Michel, are not less celebrated; but no writer, no painter has represented the face of that terrible monarch in his last years,—a sickly, hollow, yellow and brown face, all the features of which expressed a sour craftiness, a cold sarcasm. In that mask was the forehead of a great man, a brow furrowed with wrinkles, and weighty with high thoughts; but in his cheeks and on his lips there was something indescribably vulgar and common. Looking at certain details of that countenance you would have thought him a debauched husbandman, or a miserly peddler; and yet, above these vague resemblances and the decrepitude of a dying old man, the king, the man of power, rose supreme. His eyes, of a light yellow, seemed at first sight extinct; but a spark of courage and of anger lurked there, and at the slightest touch it could burst into flames and cast fire about him. The doctor was a stout burgher, with a florid face, dressed in black, peremptory, greedy of gain, and self-important. These two personages were framed, as it were, in that panelled chamber, hung with high-warped tapestries of Flanders, the ceiling of which, made of carved beams, was blackened by smoke. The furniture, the bed, all inlaid with

arabesques in pewter, would seem to-day more precious than they were at that period when the arts were beginning to produce their choicest masterpieces.

“Lampreys are not good for you,” replied the physician.

That title, recently substituted for the former term of “myrrh-master,” is still applied to the faculty in England. The name was at this period given to doctors everywhere.

“Then what may I eat?” asked the king, humbly.

“Salt mackerel. Otherwise, you have so much bile in motion that you may die on All-Souls’ Day.”

“To-day!” cried the king in terror.

“Compose yourself, sire,” replied Coyctier. “I am here. Try not to fret your mind; find some way to amuse yourself.”

“Ah!” said the king, “my daughter Marie used to succeed in that difficult business.”

As he spoke, Imbert de Bastarnay, sire of Montresor and Bridore, rapped softly on the royal door. On receiving the king’s permission he entered and announced the Comte and Comtesse de Saint-Vallier. Louis XI. made a sign. Marie appeared, followed by her old husband, who allowed her to pass in first.

“Good-day, my children,” said the king.

“Sire,” replied his daughter in a low voice, as she embraced him, “I want to speak to you in secret.”

Louis XI. appeared not to have heard her. He turned to the door and called out in a hollow voice, “Hola, Dufou!”

Dufou, seigneur of Montbazon and grand cup-bearer of France, entered in haste.

“Go to the maitre d’hotel, and tell him I must have salt mackerel for dinner. And go to Madame de Beaujeu, and let her know that I wish to dine alone to-day. Do you know, madame,” continued the king, pretending to be slightly angry, “that you neglect me? It is almost three years since I have seen you. Come, come here, my pretty,” he added,

sitting down and holding out his arms to her. “How thin you have grown! Why have you let her grow so thin?” said the king, roughly, addressing the Comte de Poitiers.

The jealous husband cast so frightened a look at his wife that she almost pitied him.

“Happiness, sire!” he stammered.

“Ah! you love each other too much,—is that it?” said the king, holding his daughter between his knees. “I did right to call you Mary-full-of-grace. Coyctier, leave us! Now, then, what do you want of me?” he said to his daughter the moment the doctor had gone. “After sending me your —”

In this danger, Marie boldly put her hand on the king’s lips and said in his ear,—

“I always thought you cautious and penetrating.”

“Saint-Vallier,” said the king, laughing, “I think that Bridore has something to say to you.”

The count left the room; but he made a gesture with his shoulders well known to his wife, who could guess the thoughts of the jealous man, and knew she must forestall his cruel designs.

“Tell me, my child, how do you think I am,—hey? Do I seem changed to you?”

“Sire, do you want me to tell you the real truth, or would you rather I deceived you?”

“No,” he said, in a low voice, “I want to know truly what to expect.”

“In that case, I think you look very ill to-day; but you will not let my truthfulness injure the success of my cause, will you?”

“What is your cause?” asked the king, frowning and passing a hand across his forehead.

“Ah, sire,” she replied, “the young man you have had arrested for robbing your silversmith Cornelius, and who is now in the hands of the grand provost, is innocent of the robbery.”

“How do you know that?” asked the king. Marie lowered her head and blushed.

“I need not ask if there is love in this business,” said the king, raising his daughter’s head gently and stroking her chin. “If you don’t confess every morning, my daughter, you will go to hell.”

“Cannot you oblige me without forcing me to tell my secret thoughts?”

“Where would be the pleasure?” cried the king, seeing only an amusement in this affair.

“Ah! do you want your pleasure to cost me grief?”

“Oh! you sly little girl, haven’t you any confidence in me?”

“Then, sire, set the young nobleman at liberty.”

“So! he is a nobleman, is he?” cried the king. “Then he is not an apprentice?”

“He is certainly innocent,” she said.

“I don’t see it so,” said the king, coldly. “I am the law and justice of my kingdom, and I must punish evil-doers.”

“Come, don’t put on that solemn face of yours! Give me the life of that young man.”

“Is it yours already?”

“Sire,” she said, “I am pure and virtuous. You are jesting at—”

“Then,” said Louis XI., interrupting her, “as I am not to know the truth, I think Tristan had better clear it up.”

Marie turned pale, but she made a violent effort and cried out:—

“Sire, I assure you, you will regret all this. The so-called thief stole nothing. If you will grant me his pardon, I will tell you everything, even though you may punish me.”

“Ho, ho! this is getting serious,” cried the king, shoving up his cap. “Speak out, my daughter.”

“Well,” she said, in a low voice, putting her lips to her father’s ear, “he was in my room all night.”

“He could be there, and yet rob Cornelius. Two robberies!”

“I have your blood in my veins, and I was not born to love a scoundrel. That young seigneur is the nephew of the captain-general of your archers.”

“Well, well!” cried the king; “you are hard to confess.”

With the words the king pushed his daughter from his knee, and hurried to the door of the room, but softly on tiptoe, making no noise. For the last moment or two, the light from a window in the adjoining hall, shining through a space below the door, had shown him the shadow of a listener’s foot projected on the floor of his chamber. He opened the door abruptly, and surprised the Comte de Saint-Vallier eavesdropping.

“Pasques-Dieu!” he cried; “here’s an audacity that deserves the axe.”

“Sire,” replied Saint-Vallier, haughtily, “I would prefer an axe at my throat to the ornament of marriage on my head.”

“You may have both,” said Louis XI. “None of you are safe from such infirmities, messieurs. Go into the farther hall. Conyngham,” continued the king, addressing the captain of the guard, “you are asleep! Where is Monsieur de Bridore? Why do you let me be approached in this way? Pasques-Dieu! the lowest burgher in Tours is better served than I am.”

After scolding thus, Louis re-entered his room; but he took care to draw the tapestried curtain, which made a second door, intended more to stifle the words of the king than the whistling of the harsh north wind.

“So, my daughter,” he said, liking to play with her as a cat plays with a mouse, “Georges d’Estouteville was your lover last night?”

“Oh, no, sire!”

“No! Ah! by Saint-Carpion, he deserves to die. Did the scamp not think my daughter beautiful?”

“Oh! that is not it,” she said. “He kissed my feet and hands with an ardor that might have touched the most virtuous of women. He loves me truly in all honor.”

“Do you take me for Saint-Louis, and suppose I should believe such nonsense? A young fellow, made like him, to have risked his life just to kiss your little slippers or your sleeves! Tell that to others.”

“But, sire, it is true. And he came for another purpose.”

Having said these words, Marie felt that she had risked the life of her husband, for Louis instantly demanded:

“What purpose?”

The adventure amused him immensely. But he did not expect the strange confidences his daughter now made to him after stipulating for the pardon of her husband.

“Ho, ho, Monsieur de Saint-Vallier! So you dare to shed the royal blood!” cried the king, his eyes lighting with anger.

At this moment the bell of Plessis sounded the hour of the king’s dinner. Leaning on the arm of his daughter, Louis XI. appeared with contracted brows on the threshold of his chamber, and found all his servitors in waiting. He cast an ambiguous look on the Comte de Saint-Vallier, thinking of the sentence he meant to pronounce upon him. The deep silence which reigned was presently broken by the steps of Tristan l’Hermite as he mounted the grand staircase. The grand provost entered the hall, and, advancing toward the king, said:—

“Sire, the affair is settled.”

“What! is it all over?” said the king.

“Our man is in the hands of the monks. He confessed the theft after a touch of the ‘question.’”

The countess gave a sign, and turned pale; she could not speak, but looked at the king. That look was observed by Saint-Vallier, who muttered in a low tone: “I am betrayed; that thief is an acquaintance of my wife.”

“Silence!” cried the king. “Some one is here who will wear out my patience. Go at once and put a stop to the execution,” he continued, addressing the grand provost. “You will answer with your own body for that of the criminal, my friend. This affair must be better sifted, and I reserve to myself the doing of it. Set the prisoner at liberty provisionally; I can always recover him; these robbers have retreats they frequent, lairs where they lurk. Let Cornelius know that I shall be at his house to-night

to begin the inquiry myself. Monsieur de Saint-Vallier," said the king, looking fixedly at the count, "I know about you. All your blood could not pay for one drop of mine; do you hear me? By our Lady of Clery! you have committed crimes of lese-majesty. Did I give you such a pretty wife to make her pale and weakly? Go back to your own house, and make your preparations for a long journey."

The king stopped at these words from a habit of cruelty; then he added:—

"You will leave to-night to attend to my affairs with the government of Venice. You need be under no anxiety about your wife; I shall take charge of her at Plessis; she will certainly be safe here. Henceforth I shall watch over her with greater care than I have done since I married her to you."

Hearing these words, Marie silently pressed her father's arm as if to thank him for his mercy and goodness. As for Louis XI., he was laughing to himself in his sleeve.

CHAPTER IV. THE HIDDEN TREASURE

Louis XI. was fond of intervening in the affairs of his subjects, and he was always ready to mingle his royal majesty with the burgher life. This taste, severely blamed by some historians, was really only a passion for the “incognito,” one of the greatest pleasures of princes,—a sort of momentary abdication, which enables them to put a little real life into their existence, made insipid by the lack of opposition. Louis XI., however, played the incognito openly. On these occasions he was always the good fellow, endeavoring to please the people of the middle classes, whom he made his allies against feudality. For some time past he had found no opportunity to “make himself populace” and espouse the domestic interests of some man “engarrie” (an old word still used in Tours, meaning engaged) in litigious affairs, so that he shouldered the anxieties of Maitre Cornelius eagerly, and also the secret sorrows of the Comtesse de Saint-Vallier. Several times during dinner he said to his daughter:—

“Who, think you, could have robbed my silversmith? The robberies now amount to over twelve hundred thousand crowns in eight years. Twelve hundred thousand crowns, messieurs!” he continued, looking at the seigneurs who were serving him. “Notre Dame! with a sum like that what absolutions could be bought in Rome! And I might, Pasques-Dieu! bank the Loire, or, better still, conquer Piedmont, a fine fortification ready-made for this kingdom.”

When dinner was over, Louis XI. took his daughter, his doctor, and the grand provost, with an escort of soldiers, and rode to the hotel de Poitiers in Tours, where he found, as he expected, the Comte de Saint-Vallier awaiting his wife, perhaps to make away with her life.

“Monsieur,” said the king, “I told you to start at once. Say farewell to your wife now, and go to the frontier; you will be accompanied by an escort of honor. As for your instructions and credentials, they will be in Venice before you get there.”

Louis then gave the order—not without adding certain secret instructions—to a lieutenant of the Scottish guard to take a squad of men and accompany the ambassador to Venice. Saint-Vallier departed in haste, after giving his wife a cold kiss which he would fain have made deadly. Louis XI. then crossed over to the Malemaison, eager to begin the unravelling of the melancholy comedy, lasting now for eight years, in the house of his silversmith; flattering himself that, in his quality of king, he had enough penetration to discover the secret of the robberies. Cornelius did not see the arrival of the escort of his royal master without uneasiness.

“Are all those persons to take part in the inquiry?” he said to the king.

Louis XI. could not help smiling as he saw the fright of the miser and his sister.

“No, my old crony,” he said; “don’t worry yourself. They will sup at Plessis, and you and I alone will make the investigation. I am so good in detecting criminals, that I will wager you ten thousand crowns I shall do so now.”

“Find him, sire, and make no wager.”

They went at once into the strong room, where the Fleming kept his treasure. There Louis, who asked to see, in the first place, the casket from which the jewels of the Duke of Burgundy had been taken, then the chimney down which the robber was supposed to have descended, easily convinced his silversmith of the falsity of the latter supposition, inasmuch as there was no soot on the hearth,—where, in truth, a fire was seldom made,—and no sign that any one had passed down the flue; and moreover that the chimney issued at a part of the roof which was almost inaccessible. At last, after two hours of close investigation, marked with that sagacity which distinguished the suspicious mind of Louis XI., it was clear to him, beyond all doubt, that no one had forced an entrance

into the strong-room of his silversmith. No marks of violence were on the locks, nor on the iron coffers which contained the gold, silver, and jewels deposited as securities by wealthy debtors.

"If the robber opened this box," said the king, "why did he take nothing out of it but the jewels of the Duke of Bavaria? What reason had he for leaving that pearl necklace which lay beside them? A queer robber!"

At that remark the unhappy miser turned pale: he and the king looked at each other for a moment.

"Then, sire, what did that robber whom you have taken under your protection come to do here, and why did he prowl about at night?"

"If you have not guessed why, my crony, I order you to remain in ignorance. That is one of my secrets."

"Then the devil is in my house!" cried the miser, piteously.

In any other circumstances the king would have laughed at his silversmith's cry; but he had suddenly become thoughtful, and was casting on the Fleming those glances peculiar to men of talent and power which seem to penetrate the brain. Cornelius was frightened, thinking he had in some way offended his dangerous master.

"Devil or angel, I have him, the guilty man!" cried Louis XI. abruptly. "If you are robbed again to-night, I shall know to-morrow who did it. Make that old hag you call your sister come here," he added.

Cornelius almost hesitated to leave the king alone in the room with his hoards; but the bitter smile on Louis's withered lips determined him. Nevertheless he hurried back, followed by the old woman.

"Have you any flour?" demanded the king.

"Oh yes; we have laid in our stock for the winter," she answered.

"Well, go and fetch some," said the king.

"What do you want to do with our flour, sire?" she cried, not the least impressed by his royal majesty.

"Old fool!" said Cornelius, "go and execute the orders of our gracious master. Shall the king lack flour?"

“Our good flour!” she grumbled, as she went downstairs. “Ah! my flour!”

Then she returned, and said to the king:—

“Sire, is it only a royal notion to examine my flour?”

At last she reappeared, bearing one of those stout linen bags which, from time immemorial, have been used in Touraine to carry or bring, to and from market, nuts, fruits, or wheat. The bag was half full of flour. The housekeeper opened it and showed it to the king, on whom she cast the rapid, savage look with which old maids appear to squirt venom upon men.

“It costs six sous the ‘septeree,’” she said.

“What does that matter?” said the king. “Spread it on the floor; but be careful to make an even layer of it—as if it had fallen like snow.”

The old maid did not comprehend. This proposal astonished her as though the end of the world had come.

“My flour, sire! on the ground! But—”

Maitre Cornelius, who was beginning to understand, though vaguely, the intentions of the king, seized the bag and gently poured its contents on the floor. The old woman quivered, but she held out her hand for the empty bag, and when her brother gave it back to her she disappeared with a heavy sigh.

Cornelius then took a feather broom and gently smoothed the flour till it looked like a fall of snow, retreating step by step as he did so, followed by the king, who seemed much amused by the operation. When they reached the door Louis XI. said to his silversmith, “Are there two keys to the lock?”

“No, sire.”

The king then examined the structure of the door, which was braced with large plates and bars of iron, all of which converged to a secret lock, the key of which was kept by Cornelius.

After examining everything, the king sent for Tristan, and ordered him to post several of his men for the night, and with the greatest secrecy, in the mulberry trees on the embankment and on the roofs of the adjoining houses, and to assemble at once the rest of his men and escort him back to Plessis, so as to give the idea in the town that he himself would not sup with Cornelius. Next, he told the miser to close his windows with the utmost care, that no single ray of light should escape from the house, and then he departed with much pomp for Plessis along the embankment; but there he secretly left his escort, and returned by a door in the ramparts to the house of the torconnier. All these precautions were so well taken that the people of Tours really thought the king had returned to Plessis, and would sup on the morrow with Cornelius.

Towards eight o'clock that evening, as the king was supping with his physician, Cornelius, and the captain of his guard, and holding much jovial converse, forgetting for the time being that he was ill and in danger of death, the deepest silence reigned without, and all passers, even the wariest robber, would have believed that the Malemaison was occupied as usual.

"I hope," said the king, laughing, "that my silversmith shall be robbed to-night, so that my curiosity may be satisfied. Therefore, messieurs, no one is to leave his chamber to-morrow morning without my order, under pain of grievous punishment."

Thereupon, all went to bed. The next morning, Louis XI. was the first to leave his apartment, and he went at once to the door of the strong-room. He was not a little astonished to see, as he went along, the marks of a large foot along the stairways and corridors of the house. Carefully avoiding those precious footprints, he followed them to the door of the treasure-room, which he found locked without a sign of fracture or defacement. Then he studied the direction of the steps; but as they grew gradually fainter, they finally left not the slightest trace, and it was impossible for him to discover where the robber had fled.

“Ho, crony!” called out the king, “you have been finely robbed this time.”

At these words the old Fleming hurried out of his chamber, visibly terrified. Louis XI. made him look at the foot-prints on the stairs and corridors, and while examining them himself for the second time, the king chanced to observe the miser’s slippers and recognized the type of sole that was printed in flour on the corridors. He said not a word, and checked his laughter, remembering the innocent men who had been hanged for the crime. The miser now hurried to his treasure. Once in the room the king ordered him to make a new mark with his foot beside those already existing, and easily convinced him that the robber of his treasure was no other than himself.

“The pearl necklace is gone!” cried Cornelius. “There is sorcery in this. I never left my room.”

“We’ll know all about it now,” said the king; the evident truthfulness of his silversmith making him still more thoughtful.

He immediately sent for the men he had stationed on the watch and asked:—

“What did you see during the night?”

“Oh, sire!” said the lieutenant, “an amazing sight! Your silversmith crept down the side of the wall like a cat; so lightly that he seemed to be a shadow.”

“I!” exclaimed Cornelius; after that one word, he remained silent, and stood stock-still like a man who has lost the use of his limbs.

“Go away, all of you,” said the king, addressing the archers, “and tell Messieurs Conyngham, Coyctier, Bridore, and also Tristan, to leave their rooms and come here to mine.—You have incurred the penalty of death,” he said to Cornelius, who, happily, did not hear him. “You have ten murders on your conscience!”

Thereupon Louis XI. gave a silent laugh, and made a pause. Presently, remarking the strange pallor on the Fleming’s face, he added:—

“You need not be uneasy; you are more valuable to bleed than to kill. You can get out of the claws of *my* justice by payment of a good round sum to my treasury, but if you don’t build at least one chapel in honor of the Virgin, you are likely to find things hot for you throughout eternity.”

“Twelve hundred and thirty, and eighty-seven thousand crowns, make thirteen hundred and seventeen thousand crowns,” replied Cornelius mechanically, absorbed in his calculations. “Thirteen hundred and seventeen thousand crowns hidden somewhere!”

“He must have buried them in some hiding-place,” muttered the king, beginning to think the sum royally magnificent. “That was the magnet that invariably brought him back to Tours. He felt his treasure.”

Coyctier entered at this moment. Noticing the attitude of Maitre Cornelius, he watched him narrowly while the king related the adventure.

“Sire,” replied the physician, “there is nothing supernatural in that. Your silversmith has the faculty of walking in his sleep. This is the third case I have seen of that singular malady. If you would give yourself the amusement of watching him at such times, you would see that old man stepping without danger at the very edge of the roof. I noticed in the two other cases I have already observed, a curious connection between the actions of that nocturnal existence and the interests and occupations of their daily life.”

“Ah! Maitre Coyctier, you are a wise man.”

“I am your physician,” replied the other, insolently.

At this answer, Louis XI. made the gesture which was customary with him when a good idea was presented to his mind; he shoved up his cap with a hasty motion.

“At such times,” continued Coyctier, “persons attend to their business while asleep. As this man is fond of hoarding, he has simply pursued his dearest habit. No doubt each of these attacks have come on after a day in which he has felt some fears about the safety of his treasure.”

“Pasques-Dieu! and such treasure!” cried the king.

“Where is it?” asked Cornelius, who, by a singular provision of nature, heard the remarks of the king and his physician, while continuing himself almost torpid with thought and the shock of this singular misfortune.

“Ha!” cried Coyctier, bursting into a diabolical, coarse laugh, “somnambulists never remember on their waking what they have done when asleep.”

“Leave us,” said the king.

When Louis XI. was alone with his silversmith, he looked at him and chuckled coldly.

“Messire Hoogworst,” he said, with a nod, “all treasures buried in France belong to the king.”

“Yes, sire, all is yours; you are the absolute master of our lives and fortunes; but, up to this moment, you have only taken what you need.”

“Listen to me, old crony; if I help you to recover this treasure, you can surely, and without fear, agree to divide it with me.”

“No, sire, I will not divide it; I will give it all to you, at my death. But what scheme have you for finding it?”

“I shall watch you myself when you are taking your nocturnal tramps. You might fear any one but me.”

“Ah, sire!” cried Cornelius, flinging himself at the king’s feet, “you are the only man in the kingdom whom I would trust for such a service; and I will try to prove my gratitude for your goodness, by doing my utmost to promote the marriage of the Burgundian heiress with Monseigneur. She will bring you a noble treasure, not of money, but of lands, which will round out the glory of your crown.”

“There, there, Dutchman, you are trying to hoodwink me,” said the king, with frowning brows, “or else you have already done so.”

“Sire! can you doubt my devotion? you, who are the only man I love!”

“All that is talk,” returned the king, looking the other in the eyes. “You need not have waited till this moment to do me that service. You are selling me your influence—Pasques-Dieu! to me, Louis XI.! Are you the

master, and am I your servant?"

"Ah, sire," said the old man, "I was waiting to surprise you agreeably with news of the arrangements I had made for you in Ghent; I was awaiting confirmation from Oosterlinck through that apprentice. What has become of that young man?"

"Enough!" said the king; "this is only one more blunder you have committed. I do not like persons to meddle in my affairs without my knowledge. Enough! leave me; I wish to reflect upon all this."

Maitre Cornelius found the agility of youth to run downstairs to the lower rooms where he was certain to find his sister.

"Ah! Jeanne, my dearest soul, a hoard is hidden in this house; I have put thirteen hundred thousand crowns and all the jewels somewhere. I, I, I am the robber!"

Jeanne Hoogworst rose from her stool and stood erect as if the seat she quitted were of red-hot iron. This shock was so violent for an old maid accustomed for years to reduce herself by voluntary fasts, that she trembled in every limb, and horrible pains were in her back. She turned pale by degrees, and her face,—the changes in which were difficult to decipher among its wrinkles,—became distorted while her brother explained to her the malady of which he was the victim, and the extraordinary situation in which he found himself.

"Louis XI. and I," he said in conclusion, "have just been lying to each other like two peddlers of coconuts. You understand, my girl, that if he follows me, he will get the secret of the hiding-place. The king alone can watch my wanderings at night. I don't feel sure that his conscience, near as he is to death, can resist thirteen hundred thousand crowns. We MUST be beforehand with him; we must find the hidden treasure and send it to Ghent, and you alone—"

Cornelius stopped suddenly, and seemed to be weighing the heart of the sovereign who had had thoughts of parricide at twenty-two years of age. When his judgment of Louis XI. was concluded, he rose abruptly

like a man in haste to escape a pressing danger. At this instant, his sister, too feeble or too strong for such a crisis, fell stark; she was dead. Maitre Cornelius seized her, and shook her violently, crying out:

"You cannot die now. There is time enough later—Oh! it is all over. The old hag never could do anything at the right time."

He closed her eyes and laid her on the floor. Then the good and noble feelings which lay at the bottom of his soul came back to him, and, half forgetting his hidden treasure, he cried out mournfully:—

"Oh! my poor companion, have I lost you?—you who understood me so well! Oh! you were my real treasure. There it lies, my treasure! With you, my peace of mind, my affections, all, are gone. If you had only known what good it would have done me to live two nights longer, you would have lived, solely to please me, my poor sister! Ah, Jeanne! thirteen hundred thousand crowns! Won't that wake you?—No, she is dead!"

Thereupon, he sat down, and said no more; but two great tears issued from his eyes and rolled down his hollow cheeks; then, with strange exclamations of grief, he locked up the room and returned to the king. Louis XI. was struck with the expression of sorrow on the moistened features of his old friend.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"Ah! sire, misfortunes never come singly. My sister is dead. She precedes me there below," he said, pointing to the floor with a dreadful gesture.

"Enough!" cried Louis XI., who did not like to hear of death.

"I make you my heir. I care for nothing now. Here are my keys. Hang me, if that's your good pleasure. Take all, ransack the house; it is full of gold. I give up all to you—"

"Come, come, crony," replied Louis XI., who was partly touched by the sight of this strange suffering, "we shall find your treasure some fine night, and the sight of such riches will give you heart to live. I will come back in the course of this week—"

“As you please, sire.”

At that answer the king, who had made a few steps toward the door of the chamber, turned round abruptly. The two men looked at each other with an expression that neither pen nor pencil can reproduce.

“Adieu, my crony,” said Louis XI. at last in a curt voice, pushing up his cap.

“May God and the Virgin keep you in their good graces!” replied the silversmith humbly, conducting the king to the door of the house.

After so long a friendship, the two men found a barrier raised between them by suspicion and gold; though they had always been like one man on the two points of gold and suspicion. But they knew each other so well, they had so completely the habit, one may say, of each other, that the king could divine, from the tone in which Cornelius uttered the words, “As you please, sire,” the repugnance that his visits would henceforth cause to the silversmith, just as the latter recognized a declaration of war in the “Adieu, my crony,” of the king.

Thus Louis XI. and his torconnier parted much in doubt as to the conduct they ought in future to hold to each other. The monarch possessed the secret of the Fleming; but on the other hand, the latter could, by his connections, bring about one of the finest acquisitions that any king of France had ever made; namely, that of the domains of the house of Burgundy, which the sovereigns of Europe were then coveting. The marriage of the celebrated Marguerite depended on the people of Ghent and the Flemings who surrounded her. The gold and the influence of Cornelius could powerfully support the negotiations now begun by Desquerdes, the general to whom Louis XI. had given the command of the army encamped on the frontiers of Belgium. These two master-foxes were, therefore, like two duellists, whose arms are paralyzed by chance.

So, whether it were that from that day the king’s health failed and went from bad to worse, or that Cornelius did assist in bringing into France Marguerite of Burgundy—who arrived at Ambroise in July, 1438, to marry the Dauphin to whom she was betrothed in the chapel of the castle—certain it is that the king took no steps in the matter of the

hidden treasure; he levied no tribute from his silversmith, and the pair remained in the cautious condition of an armed friendship. Happily for Cornelius a rumor was spread about Tours that his sister was the actual robber, and that she had been secretly put to death by Tristan. Otherwise, if the true history had been known, the whole town would have risen as one man to destroy the Malemaison before the king could have taken measures to protect it.

But, although these historical conjectures have some foundation so far as the inaction of Louis XI. is concerned, it is not so as regards Cornelius Hoogworst. There was no inaction there. The silversmith spent the first days which succeeded that fatal night in ceaseless occupation. Like carnivorous animals confined in cages, he went and came, smelling for gold in every corner of his house; he studied the cracks and crevices, he sounded the walls, he besought the trees of the garden, the foundations of the house, the roofs of the turrets, the earth and the heavens, to give him back his treasure. Often he stood motionless for hours, casting his eyes on all sides, plunging them into the void. Striving for the miracles of ecstasy and the powers of sorcery, he tried to see his riches through space and obstacles. He was constantly absorbed in one overwhelming thought, consumed with a single desire that burned his entrails, gnawed more cruelly still by the ever-increasing agony of the duel he was fighting with himself since his passion for gold had turned to his own injury,—a species of uncompleted suicide which kept him at once in the miseries of life and in those of death.

Never was a Vice more punished by itself. A miser, locked by accident into the subterranean strong-room that contains his treasures, has, like Sardanapalus, the happiness of dying in the midst of his wealth. But Cornelius, the robber and the robbed, knowing the secret of neither the one nor the other, possessed and did not possess his treasure,—a novel, fantastic, but continually terrible torture. Sometimes, becoming forgetful, he would leave the little gratings of his door wide open, and then the passers in the street could see that already wizened man, planted on his two legs in the midst of his untilled garden, absolutely

motionless, and casting on those who watched him a fixed gaze, the insupportable light of which froze them with terror. If, by chance, he walked through the streets of Tours, he seemed like a stranger in them; he knew not where he was, nor whether the sun or the moon were shining. Often he would ask his way of those who passed him, believing that he was still in Ghent, and seeming to be in search of something lost.

The most perennial and the best materialized of human ideas, the idea by which man reproduces himself by creating outside of himself the fictitious being called Property, that mental demon, drove its steel claws perpetually into his heart. Then, in the midst of this torture, Fear arose, with all its accompanying sentiments. Two men had his secret, the secret he did not know himself. Louis XI. or Coyctier could post men to watch him during his sleep and discover the unknown gulf into which he had cast his riches,—those riches he had watered with the blood of so many innocent men. And then, beside his fear, arose Remorse.

In order to prevent during his lifetime the abduction of his hidden treasure, he took the most cruel precautions against sleep; besides which, his commercial relations put him in the way of obtaining powerful anti-narcotics. His struggles to keep awake were awful—alone with night, silence, Remorse, and Fear, with all the thoughts that man, instinctively perhaps, has best embodied—obedient thus to a moral truth as yet devoid of actual proof.

At last this man so powerful, this heart so hardened by political and commercial life, this genius, obscure in history, succumbed to the horrors of the torture he had himself created. Maddened by certain thoughts more agonizing than those he had as yet resisted, he cut his throat with a razor.

This death coincided, almost, with that of Louis XI. Nothing then restrained the populace, and Malemaison, that Evil House, was pillaged. A tradition exists among the older inhabitants of Touraine that a contractor of public works, named Bohier, found the miser's treasure and used it in the construction of Chenonceaux, that marvellous chateau

which, in spite of the wealth of several kings and the taste of Diane de Poitiers and Catherine de' Medici for building, remains unfinished to the present day.

Happily for Marie de Sassenage, the Comte de Saint-Vallier died, as we know, in his embassy. The family did not become extinct. After the departure of the count, the countess gave birth to a son, whose career was famous in the history of France under the reign of Francois I. He was saved by his daughter, the celebrated Diane de Poitiers, the illegitimate great-granddaughter of Louis XI., who became the illegitimate wife, the beloved mistress of Henri II.—for bastardy and love were hereditary in that family of nobles.

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