WARWICK DEEPING

LOVE AMONG THE RUINS

HISTORICAL NOVEL

Warwick Deeping

Love Among the Ruins (Historical Novel)

Published by

MUSAICUM

Books

- Advanced Digital Solutions & High-Quality eBook Formatting -

musaicumbooks@okpublishing.info

EAN 4064066380045

Table of Contents

PART I

Table of Contents

I

Table of Contents

The branches of the forest invoked the sky with the supplications of their thousand hands. Black, tumultuous, terrible, the wilds billowed under the moon, stifled with the night, silent as a windless sea. Winter, like a pale Semiramis of gigantic mould, stood with her coronet touching the steely sky. A mighty company of stars stared frost-bright from the heavens.

A pillar of fire shone red amid the chaos of the woods. Like a great torch, a blazing tower hurled spears of light into the gloom. Shadows, vast and fantastic, struggled like Titans striving with Destiny in the silence of the night. Their substanceless limbs leapt and writhed through the gnarled alleys of the forest. Overhead, the moon looked down with thin and silver lethargy on the havoc kindled by the hand of man.

In a glade, all golden with the breath of the fire, blackened battlements waved a pennon of vermilion flame above the woods. Smoke, in eddying and gilded clouds, rolled heavenwards to be silvered into snow by the light of the moon. The grass of the glade shone a dusky, yet brilliant green; the tower's windows were red as rubies on a pall of sables. About its base, cottages were burning like faggots piled about a martyr's loins.

Tragedy had touched the place with her ruddy hand. There had been savage deeds done in the silence of the woods. Hirelings, a rough pack of mercenaries in the service of the Lord Flavian of Gambrevault, had stolen upon the tower of Rual of Cambremont, slain him before his own gate, and put his sons to the sword. A feud had inspired the event, a rotten shred of enmity woven on Stephen's Eve in a

tavern scuffle. The burning tower with its cracking walls bore witness to the extravagant malice of a rugged age.

Death, that flinty summoner, salves but the dead, yet wounds the living. It is sport with him to pile woe upon the shoulders of the weak, to crown with thorns the brows of those who mourn. Double-handed are his blessings--a balm for those who sleep, an iron scourge for the living. The quick bow down before his feet; only the dead fear him no more in the marble philosophy of silence.

On a patch of grass within the golden whirl of the fire lay the body of Rual of Cambremont, stiff and still. His face was turned to the heavens; his white beard tinctured with the dye of death. Beside him knelt a girl whose unloosed hair trailed on his body, dark and disastrous as a sable cloud. The girl's eyes were tearless, dry and dim. Her hands were at her throat, clenched in an ecstasy of despair. Her head was bowed down below her stooping shoulders, and she knelt like Thea over Saturn's shame.

Behind her in the shadow, his face grey in the uncertain gloom, an old man watched the scene with a wordless awe. He was a servant, thin and meagre, bowed under Time's burden, a dried wisp of manhood, living symbol of decay. There was something of the dog about his look, a dumb loyalty that grieved and gave no sound. Beneath the burning tower in the heat of the flames, these twain seemed to mimic the stillness of the dead.

There was other life in the glade none the less, a red relic evidencing the handiwork of the sword. A streak of shadow that had lain motionless in the yellow glare of the fire, stirred in the rank grass with a snuffling groan. There was a curt hint in the sound that brought Jaspar the harper round upon his heel. He moved two steps, went down on his knees in the ooze, turned the man's head towards the tower, and peered into his face. It was gashed from chin to brow, a grim mask of war, contorted the more by the uncertain palpitations of the flames.

Jaspar had a flask buckled at his girdle. He thrust his knee under the man's head, trickled wine between his lips, and waited. The limp hands began to twitch; the man jerked, drew a wet, stertorous breath, stared for a moment with flickering lids at the face above him. Jaspar craned down, put his mouth to the man's ear, and spoke to him.

The fellow's lips quivered; he stirred a little, strove to lift his head, mumbled thickly like a man with a palsied tongue. Jaspar put his ear to the bruised mouth and listened. He won words out of the grave, for his rough face hardened, his brows were knotted over the dying man's stumbling syllables. The harper shouted in his ear, and again waited.

"Gam--Gambrevault, Flavian's men, dead, all dead," ran the death utterance. "Ave Maria, my lips burn--St. Eulalie--St. Jude, defend me----"

A cough snapped the halting appeal. The man stiffened suddenly in Jaspar's arms, and thrust out his feet with a strong spasm. His hands clawed the grass; his jaw fell, leaving his mouth agape, a black circle of death. There was a last rattling stridor. Then the head fell back over Jaspar's knee with the neck extended, the eyes wide with a visionless stare.

A shadow fell athwart the dead man and the living, a shadow edged with the golden web of the fire. Looking up, Jaspar the harper saw the girl standing above him, staring down upon the dead man's body. The red tower framed her figure with flame, making an ebon cloud of her hair, her body a pillar of sombre stone. Her face was grey, pinched, and expressionless. Youth seemed frozen for the moment into bleak and premature age.

She bowed down suddenly, her hair falling forward like a cataract, her eyes large with a tearless hunger. Pointing to the man on Jaspar's knee, she looked into the harper's face, and spoke to him.

"Quick, the truth. I fear it no longer."

Her voice was toneless and hoarse as an untuned string. She beat her hands together, and then stood with her fists pressed over her heart.

"Quick, the truth."

The old man turned the body gently to the grass, and still knelt at the woman's feet.

"It is Jean," he said, with great quietness, "Jean the swineherd. He is dead. God rest his soul!"

She bent forward again with arm extended, her voice deep and hoarse in her throat.

"Tell me, who is it that has slain my father?"

"They of Gambrevault."

"Ah!"

Her eyes gleamed behind her hair as it fell dishevelled over her face.

"And the rest--Bertrand, my brothers?"

Her voice appealed him with a gradual fear. Jaspar the harper bowed his face, and pointed to the tower. The girl straightened, and stood quivering like a loosened bow.

"God! In there! And Roland?"

Again the harper's hand went up with the slow inevitableness of destiny. The flames, as beneath the incantations of a sibyl, leapt higher, roaring hungrily towards the heavens. The girl swayed away some paces, her lips moving silently, her hair fanned by the draught, blowing about her like a veil. She turned to the tower, thrust up her hands to it with a strong gesture of anguish and despair.

A long while she stood in silence as in a kind of torpor, gazing at this red pyre of the Past, where memories leapt heavenwards in a golden haze of smoke. The roar of the fire was as the voice of Fate. She heard it dim and distant like the far thunder of a sea. Beyond, around, above, the gaunt trees clawed at the stars with their leafless talons. Night and the shadow of it were very apparent to the girl's soul.

Jaspar the harper stood and watched her with a dumb and distant awe. Her rigid anguish cowed him into impotent silence. The woman's soul seemed to soar far above comfort, following the saffron smoke into the silver æther of the infinite. The man stood apart, holding aloof with the instinct of a dog, from a sorrow that he could not chasten. He was one of those dull yet happy souls, who carry eloquence in their eyes, whose tongues are clumsy, but whose hearts are warm. He stood aloof therefore from Yeoland, dead Rual's daughter, pulling his ragged beard, and calling in prayer to the Virgin and the saints.

Presently the girl turned very slowly, as one whose blood runs chill and heavy. Her eyes were still dry and crystal bright, her face like granite, or a mask of ice. The man Jaspar hid his glances from her, and stared at the sod. He was fearful in measure of gaping blankly upon so great a grief.

"Jaspar," she said, and her voice was clear now as the keen sweep of a sword.

He crooked the knee to her, stood shading his eyes with his wrinkled hand.

"We alone are left," she said.

"God's will, madame, God's will; He giveth, and taketh away. I, even I, am your servant."

Her eyes lightened an instant as though red wrath streamed strongly from her heart. Her mouth quivered. She chilled the mood, however, and stood motionless, save for her hands twining and twisting in her hair.

"Does Heaven mock me?" she asked him, with a level bitterness.

"How so, madame?" he answered her; "who would mock thee at such an hour?"

"Who indeed?"

"Not even Death. I pray you be comforted. There is a balm in years."

They stood silent again in the streaming heat and radiance of the fire. A sudden wind had risen. They heard it crying far away in the infinite vastness of the woods. It grew, rushed near, waxed with a gradual clamour till the bare wilds seemed to breathe one great gathering roar. The flames flew slanting from the blackened battlements. The trees clutched and swayed, making moan under the calm light of the moon.

The sound thrilled the girl. Her lips trembled, her form dilated.

"Listen," she said, thrusting up her hands into the night, "the cry of the forest, the voice of the winter wind. What say they but 'vengeance--vengeance--vengeance'?"

II

Table of Contents

Dawn came vaguely in a veil of mist. A heavy dew lay scintillant upon the grass; a great silence covered the woods. The trees stood grim and gigantic with dripping boughs in a vapoury atmosphere, and there seemed no augury of sunlight in the blind grey sky.

A rough hovel under a fir, used for the storing of wood, had given Yeoland and the harper shelter for the night. The sole refuge left to them by fire, the hut had served its purpose well enough, for grief is not given to grumbling over externals in the extremity of its distress.

The girl Yeoland was astir early with the first twitter of the birds in the boughs overhead. Jaspar had made her a couch of straw, and she had lain there tossing to and fro with no thought of sleep. The moon had sunk early over the edge of the world, and heavy darkness had wrapped her anguish close about her soul, mocking her with the staring of a dead face. The burning tower had ceased to torch her vigil towards dawn; yet there had been no fleeing from the pale candour of the night.

A slim, white-faced woman she stood shivering in the doorway of the hovel. Her eyes were black and lustrous--swift, darting eyes full of dusky fire and vivid unrest. Her mouth ran a red streak, firm above her white chin. Her hair gleamed like sable steel. The world was cold about her for the moment, dead and inert as her own heart. As she stood there, fine and fragile as gossamer, the very trees seemed to weep for her with the dawning day.

Some hundred paces from the hut, a cloud of smoke mingled with the mist that hung about the blackened walls of the forest tower. Its windows were blind and frameless to the sky; a zone of charred wood and reeking ashes circled

its base. The mist hung above it like a ghostly memory. The place looked desolate and pitiful enough in the meagre light.

The girl Yeoland watched the incense of smoke wreathing grey spirals overhead, melting symbolic--into nothingness. The pungent scent of the ruin floated down to her, and became a recollection for all time. This blackened shell had been a home to her, a bulwark, nay, a cradle. Sanguine life had run ruddy through its heart. How often had she seen its grey brow crowned with gold by the mystic hierarchy of heaven. She had found much joy there and little sorrow. A wrinkled face had taught her these many years to cherish the innocence of childhood. All this was past; the present found her bankrupt of such things. The place had become but a coffin, a charnel-house for the rotting bones of love.

As she brooded in the doorway, the smite of a spade came ringing to her on the misty air. Terse and rhythmic, it was like the sound of Time plucking the hours from the Tree of Life. She looked out over the glade, and saw Jaspar the harper digging a shallow grave under an oak.

She went and watched him, calmly, silently, with the utter quiet of a measureless grief. There was reason in this labour. It emphasised reality; helped her to grip the present. As the brown earth tumbled at her feet, she remembered how much she would bury in that narrow forest grave.

The man Jaspar was a ruddy soul, like a red apple in autumn. His strong point was his loyalty, a virtue that had stiffened with the fibres of his heart. He could boast neither of vast intelligence, nor of phenomenal courage, but he had a conscience that had made gold of his whole rough, stunted body. Your clever servant is often a rogue; in the respect of apt villainy, the harper was a fool.

He ceased now and again from his digging, hung his hooked chin over his spade, and snuffed the savour of the clean brown earth. He thrust curt, furtive glances up into

the girl's face as she watched him, as though desirous of reading her humour or her health.

"You are weary," she said to him anon, looking blankly into the trench.

The man wagged his head.

"Have ye broken fast? There is bread and dried fruit in the hut, and a pitcher of water."

"I cannot eat--yet," she answered him.

He sighed and continued his digging. The pile of russet earth increased on the green grass at her feet; the trench deepened. Jaspar moistened his palms, and toiled on, grunting as he hove his libations of soil over his shoulder. Presently he stood up again to rest.

"What will you do, madame?" he asked her, squinting at the clouds.

"Ride out."

"And whither?"

"Towards Gilderoy--as yet."

"Ah, ah, a fair town and strong. John of Brissac is madame's friend. Good. Have we money?"

"Some gold nobles."

They waxed silent again, and in a while the grave lay finished. 'Twas shallow, but what of that! It gave sanctuary enough for the dead.

They went together, and gazed on the sleeping man's face. It was grey, but very peaceful, with no hint of horror thereon. The eyes were closed, and dew had starred the white hair with a glistening web. Yeoland knelt and kissed the forehead. She shivered and her hands trembled, but she did not weep.

So they carried the Lord Rual between them, for he was a spare man and frugal of frame, and laid him in the grave beneath the oak. When they had smoothed his hair, and crossed his hands upon his breast, they knelt and prayed to the Virgin and the saints that in God's heaven he might have peace. The wind in the boughs sang a forest requiem.

When Yeoland had looked long at the white face in the trench, she rose from her knees, and pointed Jaspar to his spade. The harper took the measure of her mind. When she had passed into the shadows of the trees, he mopped his face, and entered on his last duty to the dead. It was soon sped, soon ended. A pile of clean earth covered the place. Jaspar banked the grave with turf, shouldered his spade, and returned to the hovel.

He found the girl Yeoland seated on a fallen tree in the forest, her ebon hair and apple-green gown gleaming under the sweeping boughs. Her cheeks were white as windflowers, her eyes full of a swimming gloom. She raised her chin, and questioned the man mutely with a look that smouldered under her arched brows.

"Jaspar?"

"Madame----"

"Have you entered the tower?"

The man's wrinkled face winced despite his years.

"Would you have me go?" he asked her in a hoarse undertone.

She looked into the vast mazes of the woods, shuddered in thought, and was silent. Her mouth hardened; the desire melted from her eyes.

"No," she said anon, turning her hood forward, and drawing a green cloak edged with sables about her, "what would it avail us? Let us sally at once."

A little distance away, their horses, that had been hobbled over night, stood grazing quietly on a patch of grass under the trees. One was a great grey mare, the other a bay jennet, glossy as silk. Jaspar caught them. He was long over the girths and bridles, for his hands were stiff, and his eyes dim. When he returned, Yeoland was still standing like a statue, staring at the blackened tower reeking amid the trees.

"Truly, they have burnt the anguish of it into my heart with fire," she said, as Jaspar held her stirrup.

"God comfort you, madame!"

"Let us go, Jaspar, let us go."

"And whither, lady?"

"Where revenge may lead."

The day brightened as they plunged down into the forest. A light breeze rent the vapours, and a shimmer of sunlight quivered through the haze. The tree-tops began to glisten gold; and there was life in the deepening promise of the sky. The empty woods rolled purple on the hills; the greensward shone with a veil of gossamer; the earth grew glad.

The pair had scant burden of speech upon their lips that morning. They were still benumbed by the violence of the night, and death still beckoned to their souls. Fate had smitten them with such incredible and ponderous brevity. On the dawn of yesterday, they had ridden out hawk on wrist into the wilds, lost the bird in a long flight, and turned homeward when evening was darkening the east. From a hill they had seen the tower lifting its flame like a red and revengeful finger to heaven. They had hastened on, with the glare of the fire spasmodic and lurid over the trees. In one short hour they had had speech with death, and came point to point with the bleak sword of eternity.

What wonder then that they rode like mutes to a burial, still of tongue and dull of heart? Life and the zest thereof were at low ebb, colourless as a wintry sea. Joy's crimson wings were smirched and broken; the lute of youth was unstrung. A granite sky had drawn low above their heads, and to the girl a devil ruled the heavens.

Before noon they had threaded the wild waste of woodland that girded the tower like a black lagoon. They came out from the trees to a heath, a track that struck green and purple into the west, and boasted nought that could infringe the blue monotony of the sky. It was a wild region, swept by a wind that sighed perpetually amid the gorse and heather. By the black rim of the forest they had dismounted and partaken of bread and water before

pushing on with a listless persistence that won many miles to their credit.

The man Jaspar was a phlegmatic soul in the hot sphere of action. He was a circumspect being who preferred heading for the blue calm of a haven in stormy weather, to thrusting out into the tossing spume of the unknown. The girl Yeoland, on the contrary, had an abundant spirit, and an untamed temper. Her black eyes roved restlessly over the world, and she tilted her chin in the face of Fate. Jaspar, knowing her fibre, feared for her moods with the more level prudence of stagnant blood. Her obstinacy was a hazardous virtue, hawk-like in sentiment, not given to perching on the boughs of reason. Moreover, being cumbered with a generous burden of pity, he was in mortal dread of wounding her pale proud grief.

By way of being diplomatic, he began by hinting that there were necessities in life, trivial no doubt, but inevitable, as sleep and supper.

"Lord John of Brissac is your friend," he meandered, "a strong lord, and a great; moreover, he hates those of Gambrevault, God chasten their souls! Fontenaye is no long ride from Gilderoy. Madame will lodge there till she can come by redress?"

Madame had no thought of being beholden to the gentleman in question. Jaspar understood as much from a very brief debate. Lord John of Brissac was forbidden favour, being as black a pard when justly blazoned as any seigneur of Gambrevault. The harper's chin wagged on maugre her contradiction.

"We have bread for a day," he chirped, dropping upon banalities by way of seeming wise. "The nights are cold, madame, damp as a marsh. As for the water-pot----"

"Water may be had--for the asking."

"And bread?"

"I have money."

"Then we ride for Gilderoy?"

The assumption was made with an excellent unction that betrayed the seeming sincerity of the philosopher. Yeoland stared ahead over her horse's ears, with a clear disregard for Jaspar and his discretion.

"We are like leaves blown about in autumn," she said to him, "wanderers with fortune. You have not grasped my temper. I warrant you, there is method in me."

Jaspar looked blank.

"Strange method, madame, to ride nowhere, to compass nothing."

She turned on him with a sudden rapid gleam out of her passionate eyes.

"Nothing! You call revenge nothing?"

The harper appealed to his favourite saint.

"St. Jude forfend that madame should follow such a marsh fire," he said.

They had drawn towards the margin of the heath. Southwards it sloped to the rim of a great pine forest, that seemed to clasp it with ebonian arms. The place was black, mysterious, impenetrable, fringed with a palisading of dark stiff trunks, but all else, a vast undulation of sombre plumes. Its spires waved with the wind. There was a soundless awe about its sable galleries, a saturnine gloom that hung like a curtain. In the vague distance, a misty height seemed to struggle above the ocean of trees, like the back of some great beast.

Yeoland, keen of face, reined in her jennet, and pointed Jaspar to this landscape of sombre hues. There was an alert lustre in her eyes; she drew her breath more quickly, like one whose courage kindles at the cry of a trumpet.

"The Black Wild," she said with a little hiss of eagerness, and a glance that was almost fierce under her coal-black brows.

Jaspar shook his head with the cumbersome wit of an ogre.

"Ha, yes, madame, a bloody region, packed with rumours, dark as its own trees; no stint of terror, I warrant ye. See yonder, the road to Gilderoy."

The girl in the green cloak seemed strongly stirred by her own thoughts. Her face had a wild elfin look for the moment, a beautiful and daring insolence that deified her figure.

"And Gilderoy?" she said abstractedly.

"Gilderoy lies south-east; Gambrevault south-west many leagues. Southwards, one would find the sea, in due season. Eastwards, we touch Geraint, and the Roman road."

Yeoland nodded as though her mind were already adamant in the matter.

"We will take to the forest," ran her decretal.

Here was crass sentiment extravagantly in the ascendant, mad wilfulness pinioning forth like a bat into gloom. Jaspar screwed his mouth into a red knot, blinked and waxed argumentative with a vehemence that did his circumspection credit.

"A mad scheme."

"What better harbour for the night than yonder trees?"

"Who will choose us a road? I pray you consider it."

Yeoland answered him quietly enough. She had set her will on the venture, was in a desperate mood, and could therefore scorn reason.

"Jaspar, my friend," she said, "I am in a wild humour, and ripe for the wild region. Peril pleases me. The unknown ever draweth the heart, making promise of greater, stranger things. What have I to lose? If you play the craven, I can go alone."

III

Table of Contents

The avenues of the pine forest engulfed the harper and the lady. The myriad crowded trunks hemmed them with a stubborn and impassive gloom. A faint wind moved in the tree-tops. Dim aisles struck into an ever-deepening mystery of shadow, as into the dark mazes of a dream.

The wild was as some primæval waste, desolate and terrible, a vast flood of sombre green rolling over hill and valley. Its thickets plunged midnight into the bosom of day. On the hills, the trees stood like traceried pinnacles, spears blood-red in the sunset, or splashed with the glittering magic of the moon. There were dells sunk deep beneath crags; choked with dense darkness, unsifted by the sun. Winding alleys white with pebbles as with the bones of the dead, wound through seething seas of gorse. In summer, heather sucked with purple lips at the tapestries of moss blazoning the ground, bronze, green, and gold. It was a wild region, and mysterious, a shadowland moaned over by the voice of a distressful wind.

Yeoland held southwards by the gilded vane of the sun. She had turned back her hood upon her shoulders, and fastened her black hair over her bosom with a brooch of amethysts. The girl was wise in woodlore and the philosophies of nature. The sounds and sights of the forest were like a gorgeous missal to her, blazoned with all manner of magic colours. She knew the moods of hawk and hound, had camped often under the steely stare of a winter sky, had watched the many phases of the dawn. Hers was a nature ripe for the hazardous intent of life. It was she who led, not Jaspar. The harper followed her with a martyred reason, having, for all his discontent, some faith in her keen eyes and the delicate decision of her chin.

There was a steady dejection in the girl's mood--a dejection starred, however, with red wrath like sparks glowing upon tinder. She was no Agnes, no Amorette, mere pillar of luscious beauty. Her eyes were as blue-black shields, flashing with many sheens in the face of day. The flaming tower, the dead figure in the forest grave, had thrust the gentler part out of her being. She was miserable, mute, yet full of a volcanic courage.

As for the harper, a rheumy dissatisfaction pervaded his temper. His blood ran cold as a toad's in winter weather. He blew upon his fingers, dreaming of inglenooks and hot posset, and the casual luxuries the forest did not promise. Yeoland considered not the old man's babblings. Her heart looked towards the dawn, and knew nothing of the twilight under the dark eaves of age.

They had pressed a mile or more into the waste, and the day was waxing sere and yellow in the west. Before them ran a huge thicket, its floor splashed with tawny splendours, the sable plumes touched with gold by the sun. Its deep bosom hung full of purple gloom, dusted with amber, wild and windless.

A sudden "hist" from his lady's lips made the harper start in the saddle. Her hand had snatched at his bridle. Both horses came to a halt. The man looked at her as they sat knee to knee; she was alert and vigilant, her eyes bright as the eyes of a hawk.

"Marked you that?" she said to him in a whisper.

Jaspar gave her a vacant stare and shook his head.

"Nothing?"

"Boughs swaying in the wind, no more."

Yeoland enlightened him.

"Tush. There's no wind moving. A glimmer of armour, yonder, up the slope."

"Holy Jude!"

"A flash, it has gone."

They held silent under the drooping boughs, listening, with noiseless breath. The breeze made mysterious murmurings with a vague unrest; now and again a twig cracked, or some forest sound floated down like a filmy moth on the quiet air. The trees were dumb and saturnine, as though resenting suspicion of their sable aisles.

Jaspar, peering over his shoulder, jerked out a word of warning. Yeoland, catching the monosyllable from his lips, and following his stare, glanced back into the eternal shadows of the place.

"I see nothing," she said.

Jaspar answered her slowly, his eyes still at gaze.

"A shadow slipping from trunk to trunk."

"Where?"

"I see it no longer. The saints succour us!"

Yeoland's face was dead white under her hair; her mouth gaped like a circle of jet. She listened constantly. Her head moved in stately fashion on her slim neck, as she shot glances hither and thither into the glooms, her eyes challenging the world. She felt peril, but was no craven in the matter--a contrast to Jaspar, who shook as with an ague.

The harper's distress broke forth into petulant declaiming.

"Trapped," he said; "I could have guessed as much, with all this fooling. These skulkers are like crows round carrion. Shall we lose much, madame?"

"Gold, Jaspar, if they are content with such. What if they should be of Gambrevault!"

The harper gave a quivering whistle, a shrill breath between his teeth, eloquent of the unpleasant savour of such a chance. It was beyond him for the moment whether he preferred being held up by a footpad, to being bullied by some ruffian of a feudatory. He had a mere bodkin of a dagger in his belt, and little lust for the letting of blood.

"'Tis a chance, madame," he said, with a certain lame sententiousness, "that had not challenged my attention. Say

nothing of Cambremont; one word would send us to the devil."

"Am I a fool? Since these gentlemen will not declare themselves, let us hold on and tempt their purpose."

Thinking to see the swirl of shadows under the trees, the glimmer of steel in the forest's murk, they rode on at a lifeless trot. Nothing echoed to their thoughts. The woods stood impassive, steeped in solitude. There was a strange atmosphere of peace about the place that failed to harmonise their fears. Yet like a prophecy of wind there stole in persistently above the muffled tramp of hoofs, a dull, characterless sound, touched with the crackling of rotten wood, that seemed to hint at movement in the shadows.

The pair pressed on vigilant and silent. Anon they came to a less multitudinous region, where the trees thinned, and a columned ride dwindled into infinite gloom. Betwixt the black stems of the trees flashed sudden a streak of scarlet, torchlike in the shadows. An armed rider in a red cloak, mounted on a sable horse, kept vigil silently between the boles of two great firs. He was immobile as rock, his spear set rigid on his thigh, his red plume sweeping the green fringes of the trees.

This solemn figure stood like a sanguinary challenge to Yeoland and the harper. Here at least was something tangible in the flesh, more than a mere shadow. The pair drew rein, questioning each other mutely with their eyes, finding no glimmer of hope on either face.

As they debated with their glances over the hazard, a voice came crying weirdly through the wood.

"Pass on," it said, "pass on. Pay ye the homage of the day."

This forest cry seemed to loosen the dilemma. Certainly it bore wisdom in its counsel, seeing that it advised the inevitable, and ordered action. Yeoland, bankrupt of resource, took the unseen herald at his word, and rode on slowly towards the knight on the black horse.

The man abode their coming like a statue, his red cloak shining sensuously under the sombre green of the boughs. A canopy of golden fire arched him in the west. He sat his horse with a certain splendid arrogance, that puzzled not a little the conjectures of Yeoland and the harper. This was neither the mood nor the equipment of a vagabond soul. The fine spirit of the picture hinted briskly at Gambrevault.

The pair came to a halt under the two firs. The man towered above them on his horse, grim and gigantic, a great statue in black and burnished steel. His salade with beaver lowered shone ruddy in the sun. His saddle was of scarlet leather, bossed with brass and fringed with sable cord. Gules flamed on his shield, devoid of all device, a strong wedge of colour, bare and brave.

The girl caught the gleam of the man's eyes through the grid of his vizor. He appeared to be considering her much at his leisure with a keen silence, that was not wholly comforting. Palpably he was in no mood for haste, or for such casual courtesies that might have ebbed from his soundless strength.

Full two minutes passed before a deep voice rolled sonorously from the cavern of the casque.

"Madame," it said, "be good enough to consider yourself my prisoner. Rest assured that I bring you no peril save the peril of an empty purse."

There was a certain powerful complacency in the voice, pealing with the deep clamour of a bell through the silence of the woods. The man seemed less ponderous and sinister, giant that he was. The girl's eyes fenced with him fearlessly under the trees.

"Presumably," she said to him, "you are a notorious fellow; I have the misfortune to be ignorant of these parts and their possessors. Be so courteous as to unhelm to me."

Her tone did not stir the man from his reserve of gravity. Her words were indeed like so many ripples breaking

against a rock. The voice retorted to her calmly from the helmet.

"Madame, leave matters to my discretion."

She smiled in his face despite herself, a smile half of petulance, half of relish.

"You pretend to wisdom, sir."

"Forethought, madame."

"Am I your prisoner?"

"No new thing, madame; I have possessed you since you ventured into these shadows."

He made a gesture with his spear, holding it at arm's length above his head, where it quivered like a reed in his staunch grip. A sound like the moving of a distant wind arose. The dark alleys of the wood grew silvered with a circlet of steel. The shafts of the sunset flickered on pike and bassinet, gleaming amid the verdured glooms. Again the man's spear shook, again the noise as of a wind, and the girdle of steel melted into the shadows.

"Madame is satisfied?"

She sucked in her breath through her red lips, and was mute.

"Leave matters to my discretion. You there, in the brown smock, fall back twenty paces. Madame, I wait for you. Let us go cheek by jowl."

The man wheeled his horse, shook his spear, hurled a glance backward over his shoulder into the woods. There was no gainsaying him for the moment. Yeoland, bending to necessity, sent Jaspar loitering, while she flanked the black destrier with her brown jennet. She debated keenly within herself whither this adventure could be leading her, as she rode on with this unknown rider into the wilds.

The man in the red cloak was wondrous mute at first, an iron pillar of silence gleaming under the trees. The girl knew that he was watching her from behind his salade, for she caught often the white glimmer of his stare. He bulked largely in the descending gloom, a big man deep of chest,

with shoulders like the broad ledges of some sea-washed rock. He was richly appointed both as to his armour and his trappings; to Yeoland his shield showed a blank face, and he carried no crest or token in his helmet.

They had ridden two furlongs or more before the man stepped from his pedestal of silence. He had been studying the girl with the mood of a philosopher, had seen her stark, strained look, the woe in her eyes, the firm closure of her lips. The strong pride of grief in her had pleased him; moreover he had had good leisure to determine the character of her courage. His first words were neither very welcome to the girl's ears nor productive of great comfort, so far as her apprehensions were concerned. Bluntly came the calm challenge from the casque.

"Daughter of Rual of Cambremont, you have changed little these five years."

Yeoland gave the man a stare. Seeing that his features were screened by his helmet, the glance won her little satisfaction. She knew that he was watching her to his own profit, and her discovery, for the reflex look she had flashed at him, must have told him all he desired, if he had any claim to being considered observant. There was that also in the tone and tenor of his words that implied that he had ventured no mere tentative statement, but had spoken to assure her that her name and person were not unknown to him. Acting on the impression, she tacitly confessed to the justice of his charge.

"Palpably," she said, "my face is known to you."

"Even so, madame."

"How long will you hold me at a disadvantage?"

"Is ignorance burdensome?"

She imagined of a sudden that the man was smiling behind his beaver. Being utterly serious herself, she discovered an illogical lack of sympathy in the stranger's humour. Moreover she was striving to spell Gambrevault

from the alphabet of word and gesture, and to come to an understanding with the doubts of the moment.

"Messire," she began.

"Madame," he retorted.

"Are you mere stone?"

For answer he lapsed into sudden reflection.

"It is five years ago this Junetide," he said, "since the King and the Court came to Gilderoy."

"Gilderoy?"

"You know the town, madame?"

She stared back upon a sudden vision of the past, a past gorgeous with the crimson fires of youth. That Junetide she had worn a new green gown, a silver girdle, a red rose in her hair. There had been jousting in the Gilderoy meadows, much braying of trumpets, much splendour, much pomp of arms. She remembered the scent and colour of it all; the blaze of tissues of gold and green, purple and azure. She remembered the flickering of a thousand pennons in the wind, the fair women thronging the galleries like flowers burdening a bowl. The vision came to her undefiled for the moment, a dream-memory, calm as the first pure pageant of spring.

"And you, messire?" she said, with more colour of face and soul.

"Rode in the King's train."

"A noble?"

"Do I bulk for a cook or a falconer?"

"No, no. Yet you remember me?"

"As it were yesterday, walking in the meadows at your father's side--your father, that Rual who carried the banner when the King's men stormed Gaerlent these forty years ago. Not, madame, that I followed that war; I was a mass of swaddling-clothes puking in a cradle. So we grow old."

The girl's face had darkened again on the instant. The man in the red cloak saw her eyes grow big of pupil, her lips straightened into a colourless line. She held her head high,

and stared into the purple gloom of the woods. Memories were with her. The present had an iron hand upon her heart.

"Time changes many things," he said, with a discretion that desired to soften the silence; "we go from cradle to throne in one score years, from life to clay in a moment. Pay no homage to circumstance. The wave covers the rock, but the granite shows again its glistening poll when the water has fallen. A Hercules can strangle Fate. As for me, I know not whether I have soared in the estimation of heaven; yet I can swear that I have lost much of the vagabond, sinful soul that straddled my shoulders in the past."

There was a warm ruggedness about the man, a flippant self-knowledge, that touched the girl's fancy. He was either a strong soul, or an utter charlatan, posing as a Diogenes. She preferred the former picture in her heart, and began to question him again with a species of picturesque insolence.

"I presume, messire," she said, "that you have some purpose in life. From my brief dealings with you, I should deem you a very superior footpad. I gather that it is your intention to rob me. I confess that you seem a gentleman at the business."

The man of the red cloak laughed in his helmet.

"To be frank, madame," he said, "you may dub me a gatherer of taxes."

"Explain."

"Being unfortunates and outcasts from the lawful ways of life, my men and I seek to remedy the injustice of the world by levying toll on folk more happy than ourselves."

"Then you condemn me as fortunate?"

"Your defence, madame."

The girl smiled with her lips, but her eyes were hard and bright as steel.

"I might convince you otherwise," she said, "but no matter. Why should I be frank with a thief, even though he be nobly born?"

"Because, madame, the thief may be of service to the lady."

"I have little silver for your wallet."

"Am I nothing but a money-bag!"

She looked up at him with a straight stare; her voice was level, even imperious.

"Put up your vizor," she said to him.

The man in the black harness hesitated, then obeyed her. She could see little of his face, however, save that it was bronzed, and that the eyes were very masterful. She ventured further in the argument, being bent on fathoming the baser instincts of the business.

"Knight of the red shield," she said.

"Madame?"

"I ask you an honest question. If you would serve me, speak the truth, and let me know my peril. Are you the Lord Flavian of Gambrevault, or no?"

The man never hesitated an instant. There was no wavering to cast doubt upon his sincerity, or upon his intelligence as a liar.

"No, madame," he answered her, "I am not the Lord of Gambrevault and Avalon, and may I, for the sake of my own neck, never come single-handed within his walls. I have an old feud with the lords of Gambrevault, and when the chance comes, I shall settle it heavily to my credit. If you have any ill to say of the gentleman, pray say it, and be happy in my sympathy."

"Ha," she said, with a sudden flash of malice, "I would give my soul for that fellow's head."

"So," quoth the man, with a keen look, "that would be a most delectable bargain."